

ARTISTS IN THOUGHT
FROM CLASSICAL RECEPTION TO CRITICISM AS A CREATIVE PRACTICE IN OSCAR WILDE'S
AND MICHEL FOUCAULT'S THEORIES ON ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

Fábio Waki

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UNIVERSIDADE DE
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Tese no âmbito do Programa de Doutoramento em Materialidades da Literatura,
orientada pelo Professor Doutor Osvaldo Manuel Silvestre e apresentada ao
Departamento de Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas da Faculdade de Letras da
Universidade de Coimbra

Fevereiro de 2021

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Contact: fabwaki@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines ‘classical reception’ in Oscar Wilde’s and Michel Foucault’s theories on ethics and aesthetics, particularly in Wilde’s conception of *art-criticism* and Foucault’s conception of *critique*, to suggest a form or perhaps a method of literary criticism more consistent with the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature.

In a few words, my main contention is that, if one of the basic goals of the Materialities of Literature is to investigate how different materialities of communication might creatively cooperate to deterritorialise our ordinary appreciation of literature and its relation to art in general—a process in which purely interpretative analyses tend to become insufficient for an effective appreciation of the literary art—, it is also the case for us to deterritorialise our ordinary understanding of *criticism* to make sure that we are not retreating, or at least confining ourselves, to a purely interpretative routine—a process in which performativity, creativity, and artistry seem to emerge as more consistent strategies for an effective appreciation of the literary art.

In this study, however, I do not simply examine this strategy; in order to clarify its theoretical relevance, I examine it against the backdrop of an overly Cartesian reasoning that tends to embarrass a proper post-hermeneutical thinking, a reasoning that, in a context of ‘classical reception’, can be connected to the subsumption of the ‘care of the self’ to the ‘knowledge of the self’.

Curiously, although it was not originally my intention to conduct this study as a study on artistic research, in the end I unwittingly touched on two subjects that, I believe, are of the greatest importance for artistic research today: the problem of *form* and *discourse* in studies conducted in a context of artistic research and the inclusion of *literature* into the very system of artistic research—which, I realise it now, might be one of the most promising potentials of the Materialities of Literature as a doctoral programme.

Keywords: Classical Reception; Creative Criticism; Artistic Research; Oscar Wilde; Michel Foucault.

Resumo

Este estudo examina a ‘recepção clássica’ nas teorias sobre ética e estética de Oscar Wilde e Michel Foucault, em particular a concepção de Wilde sobre *crítica de arte* e a concepção de Foucault sobre *crítica social*, a fim de sugerir uma forma ou talvez um método de crítica literária mais consistente com o enquadramento pós-hermenêutico das Materialidades da Literatura.

Em poucas palavras, meu principal argumento é o de que, se um dos objetivos fundamentais das Materialidades da Literatura é investigar como diferentes materialidades da comunicação podem cooperar de maneira criativa para desterritorializar nosso apreço comum pela literatura e por sua relação com as artes em geral—um processo no qual análises puramente interpretativas tendem a se mostrar insuficientes para um apreço efetivo da arte literária—, então também convém que desterritorializemos nosso entendimento comum de *crítica* a fim de garantir que não estamos retrocedendo, ou ao menos nos confinando, a uma rotina de simples interpretação—um processo no qual performatividade, criatividade e artifício parecem emergir como estratégias mais consistentes para um efetivo apreço da arte literária.

Neste estudo, porém, não examino essa estratégia, simplesmente; a fim de esclarecer sua relevância teórica, examino-a contra a luz de um raciocínio exageradamente cartesiano que tende a atrapalhar um pensamento propriamente pós-hermenêutico, um raciocínio que, em um contexto de ‘recepção clássica’, pode ser conectado à subsunção do ‘cuidado de si’ ao ‘conhecimento de si’.

Curiosamente, embora em princípio não tenha sido minha intenção conduzir este estudo como um estudo sobre investigação artística, por fim acabei por adentrar dois assuntos que, acredito, são da maior importância para a investigação artística hoje: o problema da *forma* e do *discurso* em estudos conduzidos em um contexto de investigação artística e a inclusão da *literatura* no sistema mesmo da investigação artística—o que, percebo agora, talvez seja um dos potenciais mais promissores das Materialidades da Literatura enquanto programa de doutoramento.

Palavras-chave: Recepção Clássica; Crítica Criativa; Investigação Artística; Oscar Wilde; Michel Foucault.

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Exercer a crítica, afigura-se a alguns que é uma fácil tarefa, como a outros parece igualmente fácil a tarefa do legislador; mas, para a representação literária, como para a representação política, é preciso ter alguma coisa mais que um simples desejo de falar à multidão.

- Machado de Assis

Introduction

I

We reason deeply, when we forcibly feel

Mary Wollstonecraft



If we had to place the Materialities of Literature in one field of thought, our best option would be *post-hermeneutics*.

It would be so because our primary objects of analysis, although literary in their essences, as linguistic products of a poetic creativity, are never examined in our research as exegetical surfaces whose meaning must be extracted or ascribed through interpretation; rather, our studies focus on how these objects' aesthetic properties, which may vary from prosody, semantics, and visuality to acoustics, intensity, and performance, affect us with the arousal of new sensations and thereby into the induction of new meanings. In other words, the Materialities of Literature are interested not only in the linguistic properties of a literary artwork, but also, and often most importantly, in how these properties interact with possible extra-linguistic mediations, mediations that elude or outrightly resist the extraction or ascription of meaning through interpretation.

The same way that we do not regard an artwork as an exegetical surface in need of a meaning to be extracted or ascribed through interpretation, we do not regard the person who enjoys this artwork as a Cartesian subject whose *cogito* transcends her *res extensa*, that is, as a subject whose rational capacities of attaining certain truths transcend the bodily sensuality of her material reality; rather, our research focuses precisely on how this person's thoughts, reasonings, curiosities, imaginations, and discourses are inevitably bound to and affected by the sometimes chaotic, sometimes organised surfaces of her

material and sensitive world, a world that often cannot be translated into a codified language and which therefore can only be realised somatically or aesthetically, a world that changes as social relations, communication patterns, and technological paradigms change, a world that constantly requires critical revisions in epistemological thinking by those who seek to grasp it in all its contingency. In other words, the Materialities of Literature are interested not only in how literature conveys meaning and arouses emotions as a textual medium, but also in how literary pleasure can be enhanced or complexified if literature is channelled through media somehow strange to the traditional textual form, media that might in fact appeal to our other senses in order to stimulate in us perceptions that a typical textuality simply will not.

It should be evident, then, that for the Materialities of Literature, *intertextuality* necessarily interweaves with *intermediality*, which in practice means that our objects of interest are normally media-hybrid or regarded as products of a conjugation of different means of expression: textuality; typography; imagery; writing and reading technologies; material culture; book history; book artistry and edition; ergodism and interactivity; archiving and archaeology; prosody and musicality; phonology and acoustics; digital poetics and new media resources; exhibitions and installations; body and voice; body and performance; body and power... among many other possibilities.

However, and this is the central issue in this thesis, no matter how different and atypical these objects of interest might be, most *criticisms* about them today still tend to glide back to some sort of “objectifying hermeneutics.”

I mean, although these objects frequently remove themselves from textuality, for example, completely deterritorialising literature from our ordinary sense of literary experience, most criticisms today still tend to assess and express the qualities of these objects through a prosaic discourse that sometimes even reterritorialises them into ordinary experiences. In general, even when a given criticism intersperses its discourse with other media, these media rarely perform some other task than just supplement the discussion, than just illustrate or reiterate a certain debate already made clear in the text. Of course, I am not suggesting that these “objective criticisms” are pointless, nor that they are missing the point—on the contrary: sometimes, if we want to understand how we are to open ourselves to the aesthetic experiences provided by a completely atypical artwork, it is no crime to resort to more trivial and mundane explanations about it; besides, art criticisms often debate epistemological issues that are so theoretical and abstract, so complex and thorough, that a more prosaic discourse might in fact be the most appropriate discursive

form—which, in fact, is the case of most of this thesis. But, even if this is true, I wonder whether such preoccupation with the connections between conceptual meaning and sensual perception, associated with such interest in so many multimedial objects of study, should not impact on the *form*, on the *expressive materiality of criticism* itself.

If the basic goal of the Materialities of Literature is to investigate how different materialities of communication might creatively cooperate to deterritorialise our ordinary appreciation of literature and its relation to art in general, is it not the case for us to also deterritorialise our ordinary understanding of *criticism* in order to make sure that we are not—even if involuntarily—retreating, or at least confining ourselves, to an objectifying hermeneutical cause?

Considering that the Materialities of Literature belong to a post-hermeneutical field of thought, and, accordingly, considering the perceptual-conceptual nature of their analytical procedures, in this thesis I would like to discuss some motivations for alternative criticism routines, for alternative ways of presupposing, systematising, and finally writing criticism so that the subjective impressions of the critic are integrated, at one time, as formal, creative, and evaluative parameters—a structure that might eventually safeguard the propositions in such criticism from being reterritorialised into the asceticism of an overly objectifying hermeneutical logic.

To a great extent it is fair to say that what I am suggesting here is a contemporary or, perhaps I should say, a MatLitean radicalisation of the contentions of at least other three thinkers: Theodor Adorno's main contention in "The Essay as Form" (1954-58), Susan Sontag's main contention in "Against Interpretation" (1966), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's main contention in "Why Intermediality—If at All?" (2003).

Adorno writes:

The essay [...] does not permit its domain to be prescribed. Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done. The essay mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, as *creatio ex nihilo*. Luck and play are essential to the essay. It does not begin with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete—not where nothing is left to say. Therefore it is classed among the oddities. Its concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle. Its interpretations are not philologically hardened and sober;

rather—according to the predictable verdict of that vigilant calculating reason that hires itself out to stupidity as a guard against intelligence—it overinterprets. (Adorno 1984:152)

Sontag writes:

What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable today? For I am not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased. They can be. The question is how. What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place? What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. [...] The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means. [...] In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art. (Sontag 2009:8-10; my emphasis in the beginning)

And Gumbrecht writes in a paragraph that echoes Sontag's text:

Seen from an historical angle, there was a hidden legacy of intellectual repression behind those humanistic dreams of universal readability and of multiple grammars. The motif of "readability" had first emerged at the dawn of Western modernity, when men abandoned the self-referential idea of inhabiting a cosmos that they had considered to be the work of divine creation and began to think of themselves as the eccentric observers of a world that was an ensemble of material objects. This very shift produced the subject/object-paradigm within which the subject would think of himself (or herself) as a disembodied entity capable of conveying meanings to the objects constituting the world. To the disembodied subject-interpreter of early Modernity, the world of objects must indeed have looked like a book. It was not before the early 19th century that the *world-observing* and *world-interpreting* Subject became obsessively self-reflexive; following a proposal by Niklas Luhmann, we can distinguish the early modern Subject as a "first order observer" from a 19th century "second order observer" who was privileged (or condemned) to observe himself or herself in the act of observation. *One of many consequences stemming from the new and seemingly unavoidable habit of self-observation was the re-discovery of the human body and of the human senses as a condition of self-observation, a condition which, since early Modernity, had been bracketed by the subject's self-image as a disembodied entity. (Gumbrecht 2003:174; my emphasis in the end)*

In a few words, Adorno's main contention in "The Essay as Form" is that the essay embodies an institutional and epistemological dissent from the German scholarly tradition of his time in that it tends to welcome in its form a conciliation between two

dimensions that this tradition hypostatizes as mutually exclusive: art and science. As he explains, one of the greatest problems of scholarly thinking—especially in the humanities, in his case, but in no way restricted to them—is that it systematically fools itself with a sense of intellectual freedom that is really a routine of intellectual repression. Sure of the primacy of the sciences over the arts, this thinking not only rejects as epistemologically illegitimate any reasoning that does not seek to determine universally valid truths, it also rejects as epistemologically inaccurate any discourse that does not formally contribute to this determination. In this context, the *essay* emerges as a subversive genre precisely because it invites the author to rely on the malleability of its *form* as a means to examine those truths that are not less legitimate because they are circumstantial, contingent, or transitory: insofar as the essay is an open form in which art and science are free to coalesce or at least to better cross-pollinate, it is likely to allow its author to explore not only a subjective dimension not really possible in an ordinary analytical discourse, but also a self-critical dimension in which the very process of working on thinking becomes an object of curiosity—an object, in fact, not rarely more important than any sense of conclusion to the inquiry that first motivated it. The essay, therefore, is not teleological, but autotelic: it does not rely on pre-established methods of scrutiny to try to explain phenomena in the terms of the purpose they serve; in fact, it decides its own rules so as to bring into question the nature of certain phenomena in the terms of the essayist's connection to them. Unlike an ordinary scholarly dissertation, for instance, which seeks to fit itself into an orthodoxy of thinking by relying on and repeating the methodologies and analytical discourses of previous studies, the essay seeks its own autonomy of thinking by relying on and experimenting with the originality of its own motivations, intentions, methodologies, and, of course, discourses. When an essayist writes an essay, she is free to take her subjective thoughts, beliefs, impressions, emotions, feelings, and life experiences regarding a central object as equally legitimate objects of analysis, and, in fact, she is truly encouraged to express these analyses through a creative use of language, that is, through a language that deliberately seeks its own independence from any discursive orthodoxy.

Now, from a more contemporary perspective, both Sontag and Gumbrecht advocate *art criticisms* that consciously try to avoid practices of meaning extraction or meaning ascription; what they suggest, instead, are art criticisms that try to examine how we can be more bodily—somatically, sensorially, aesthetically—affected by the more superficial and immediate aesthetic qualities of a given artwork—qualities that, in turn, arouse in us

new feelings, emotions, sensations, and intensities, and only thereby margins and dispositions for new reasonings. What neither of them discusses, however, is how these analyses should be conceived and expressed, how they should be planned and materialised, even if just generally, so that they can resist being crippled by the same objectifying hermeneutics they are trying to overcome. Just like J.R.R. Tolkien wondered what kind of alchemy would have been performed upon the story of Jack and the beanstalk if John Milton had recounted it in noble verses (Tolkien 2006:13), I wonder what kind of alchemy we might perform upon *criticism* if we articulate it in expressive forms that are strange to an ordinary critical discourse—particularly those essayistic forms that are consistent with the hybrid, intermedial natures of the objects that the Materialities of Literature are mostly interested in. In *The Will to Power*, Friedrich Nietzsche observes: “[to] what extent even our intellect is a consequence of conditions of existence?: we would not have it if we did not *need* to have it, and we would not have it *as it is* if we did not need to have it *as it is*, if we could live *otherwise*.” (Nietzsche 1968:273) Well, as I see it, *otherwiseness* in art criticism today—especially literary criticism, as is our case in the Materialities of Literature—might precisely be a new interweaving or a new cross-pollination between science and art, epistemology and aesthetics, reason and unreason, intertextuality and intermediality, content and form, particularly in a way so that the *impressions* that a critic has of an artwork are more eloquently and more creatively expressed if she makes use of atypical materialities of communication—materialities that eventually might help her not only expand and intensify these very impressions, but also more effectively convey them.

So, I wonder: what new criticism potentialities would we disclose, would we have access to, if we consciously employed new materialities of communication to mediate our rational insights, irrational perceptions, and enigmatical impressions?

Or, going back to Adorno’s, Sontag’s, and Gumbrecht’s contentions: if the aim of all commentary on art should be to make artworks more real to us by appealing to the erotics of their art, what new mediations at our disposal today can we explore to improve the expression of such commentaries and thereby improve the intensity or complexity of such erotics?

In this thesis I will try to debate these questions.

But they seem to bear three problems.

II

*Imagination would hardly be worth bothering about
if it did not create things that will remain
eternally problematic to reason*

J.W. Goethe



I must say that I am sceptical of any theory that might seek to provide totalising explanations about such criticism routine: on the whole, what I have suggested so far is a more radical and creative mode of *impressionistic criticism* that employs intermediality of contemporary media to both transmit and complexify the thoughts, reasonings, insights, emotions, feelings, sensations, and intensities that a critic might have when appreciating a given artwork; considering variables like the abundancy, complexity, and constant upgrade of the materialities of communication that such criticism is likely to employ, and considering how it tends to focus on those aesthetic qualities of an artwork that tend to reach us in our own physicality, sensuality, and emotiveness, it seems to me that counterintuitive practices are really at the base of its mechanics.

However, and this is the first problem that I would like to point out, this does not mean that an impressionistic critic, for suggesting an impressionistic criticism, is naturally disallowed to turn to more epistemological theories if she believes to be the case, that is, if she believes that these theories might somehow help her improve the very impressionistic potential of her criticism. Since, I believe, an *aesthetic experience* consists of a person's enjoyment of the tensions between reason, imagination, and sensuality triggered by every phenomenon in its own way artistic, *both meaning and materiality* seem

to take part in the arousal of this experience—and, needless to say, this seems to be a particular case of interest for the Materialities of Literature, for the study of literature in light of its potential deterritorialisations through or by means of different media. As long as the critic does not resort to these theories to ascribe meaning to an artwork that is supposedly faulty or meaningless otherwise, or to extract from its supposed depths some sort of absolute, indisputable propositional content, I can see no reason why she should not make use of theories that, as instrumental accessories, might help her make viable and expressible certain impressions that, without such help, are likely to remain buried, latent, shapeless, or silent.

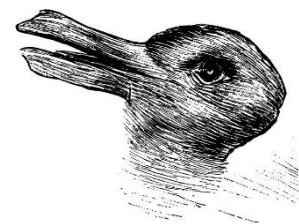
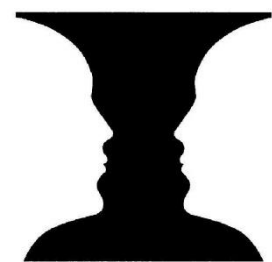
Perhaps I can clarify this with a metaphor.

Werner Heisenberg, then a beginner physicist, writes about a brief conversation he had with Albert Einstein in a conference in 1926:

[Einstein] said “whether you can observe a thing or not depends on the theory which you use. It is the theory which decides what can be observed”. His argument was like this: “Observation means that we construct some connection between a phenomenon and our realization of the phenomenon. There is something happening in the atom, the light is emitted, the light hits the photographic plate, we see the photographic plate and so on and so on. In this whole course of events between the atom and your eye and your consciousness you must assume that everything works as in the old physics. If you change the theory concerning this sequence of events then of course the observation would be altered.” (Eisenberg in Salam 2005:99-100)

So, in other words, different theories might help us perceive differently one same phenomenon, which means to say that meaning, concentrated in a given epistemological concept or principle, for example, may predispose a person to a specific form of perception, thus conditioning her possible impressions of such phenomenon.

Of course, a person does not need to be a scholar to be able to enjoy an artwork, and surely being a scholar is not a pre-requisite for this person to write a valid piece of impressionistic criticism on an artwork; in fact, one of the reasons why I believe a recovery of impressionistic criticism is so important today is the isolation of art criticism within the walls of specialised centres, particularly the universities—what happens for



many reasons: because art criticism is vulgarly considered an elitist practice of self-indulgence; because it is vulgarly considered a superfluous practice of self-indulgence; or, which I believe is the worst case, because it is considered by the scholars themselves an elitist practice of truth. However, even if all these scenarios are real, chances are that an impressionistic criticism such as the one I am suggesting will indeed remain chiefly a product of scholarly environments, where epistemological propositions are naturally at home—and, this being the case, it seems just as natural that a critic's impression of an artwork should be conditioned, should be brought to light, consciously or not, by the epistemologies that structure her scientific background.

As a matter of fact, I also believe that the very process of exploring certain epistemological principles extraneous to the artwork as instrumental accessories for the elicitation of a critic's impressions might even contribute to a complexification and embellishment of theory itself.

Take Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), for instance.

One does not need to be familiar with Jean-Paul Sartre's theories on *existence* and *essence* to feel Hari's anguish in face of her incapacity to understand who or what she is; but, if we consider the hypothesis that her anguish derives from the fact that Solaris brought her into *existence* taking as affective raw matter, as *essence*, the affective needs that Kelvin egotistically matured after the death of the real Hari, the visitor's existence becomes all the more tragic, and the abusive nature of their relationship becomes all the more palpable. Conversely, one does not need to be familiar with Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* to understand why an *essentialisation*, in the context of Jean-Paul Sartre's theories on Existentialism, is one of the worst acts of violence that a person can commit; but, if we take Hari and the fact that her *essence* precedes her *existence* as an imaginative worst-case scenario of Sartre's Existentialism, the violence intrinsic to an *essentialisation* seems all the more evident in all its intricacies, and, therefore, all the more prone to become object of an empathic critical scrutiny.





We must never neglect the fact that every good art criticism, particularly in the Materialities of Literature, depends on analyses of both meaning and materiality; so, it is my contention that, in order to complexify the impressions that a critic may have of an artwork in the writing of her criticism, meaning, with or without the deliberate orientation of an instrumental theory, must, whenever possible, be coherently reappreciated through radical changes in the materiality conveying this criticism. On a discursive level, a very simple but very clear example of how theoretical orientations may cooperate with basic materialities of communication to help a critic perceive and convey certain impressions of an aesthetic experience is a valuable piece of advice that Sontag gives to literary critics in “Against Interpretation”. In this essay, she suggests that a possible tactic to escape an art criticism purely based on interpretation—understood, it should always be clear, as an authoritative practice of meaning extraction or meaning ascription—is to employ *atypical vocabularies* that allow the critics to discern and explicit “erotics” impossible to be expressed through a typically analytical, hermeneutical discourse (Sontag 2009:8-9). She does not provide any examples, but, personally, and perhaps logically enough, I believe that *psychological terminologies* related to emotions, *meteorological terminologies* related to atmosphere and environment, *photographical terminologies* related to lighting and shadowing, *design terminologies* related to form, surface and perspective, *medical*



terminologies related to physical movements, sensations, palate, and even pathologies, and *musical terminologies* related to tempo, pitch, intensity, genre, and voice quality tend to be very helpful resources for a critic in search of more authentic analyses.

Of course, these are just some possibilities; I suspect that, as new conjugations between literature and other media are established, new vocabularies become available and effective.

For instance, I am not familiar with any deeply impressionistic criticisms on Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1891), so I can only wonder what kind of insights, images, textures, and scents can be evoked by a criticism on this play that makes use of dance and performance theories, or terminologies related to fragrance, synaesthesia, and scopophilia, to make more explicit those pleasures that can be so alluring as to affect a powerful king into yielding to a young girl's morbid wishes.

What should we make of Salomé's "dance of the seven veils" anyway?

SALOMÉ: I am waiting until my slaves bring perfumes to me and the seven veils, and take from off my feet my sandals. (Slaves bring perfumes and the seven veils, and take off the sandals of SALOMÉ.)

HEROD: Ah, thou art to dance with naked feet. 'Tis well! Tis well. Thy little feet will be like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees... No, no, she is going to dance on blood. There is blood spilt on the ground. She must not dance on blood. It were an evil omen.

(Wilde 2013:4225)



Now, and this is the second problem that I would like to point out, the fact that this mode of impressionistic criticism I am suggesting relies primarily on counterintuitive practices does not mean, either, that the critic is naturally disallowed to deliberately bring forth new epistemological developments if she believes to be the case—that is, if she

believes that her impressions of certain aesthetic experiences might somehow help her improve the very epistemological potency of theoretical propositions that might be related to these experiences. Considering an *aesthetic experience* as an enjoyment of the tensions between reason, imagination, and sensuality triggered by every phenomenon in its own way artistic, the basic premise behind this phenomenon and its aesthetic experience, it seems to me, is that they should affect us into sensing and imagining truths we did not know we were capable of, so that, if it is the case, we can also be affected into reasoning truths we did not know we were capable of, either. By “truth” I do not mean any kind of deeply philosophical truth, at least not in principle; I understand “truth,” here and throughout this entire study, simply as a phenomenon—a fact, an intensity, a feeling, an emotion, a thought, a doubt, an empathy—whose existence, possibility of existence, or nature of existence we ignored or conceived wrongly before going through a given aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experiences, therefore, allow us to envisage or establish contact with truths that formal theories, as purely logical chains of meaning, will not allow us to because these truths either cannot be properly translated into logical meaning—say, a linguistic meaning—or can only be translated into logical meaning *a posteriori*, as products of recognition or some cautious reflection upon the imaginative and sensual experiences themselves—what we can finally consider the first steps towards a new case of impressionistic criticism. What is important to notice about this conception of art and aesthetic experience is that, if their basic premise is to affect us into sensing, imagining, and reasoning truths we did not know we were capable of, then they bear in themselves the potential to provide us alternative conditions of possibility to our own material realities—which in turn means that, once a critic goes through an aesthetic experience, she can deliberately approach it as a “casuistics,” that is, as a heuristic mediation for new epistemological developments. This potential is intrinsic to virtually every aesthetic experience, but it seems particularly powerful, particularly creative, when the artwork examined radically deterritorialises the formation of meaning, that is, when *otherwiseness* in thought, as cited in Nietzsche’s aphorism above, is somehow grounded on conditions of possibility truly strange to the critic’s material reality: I am, of course, thinking about artworks produced in remote ages and remote cultures, as well as artworks in which fantasy—or “imagination,” as Goethe puts it—plays a major role in destabilising logics of meaning; but I am also thinking about artworks in which logics of meaning cannot be truly understood yet due to the recentness and unpredictability of their materialities, such as those conceived through new digital technologies.

A good example of a radical deterritorialisation of meaning is Michel Foucault's two-act criticism on Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) in *The Order of Things* (1966).

Written to prepare the readers for what he is going to discuss throughout the book—namely, that every historical period has its own rules of what is possible and acceptable to think and say, particularly in terms of epistemological reasonings dedicated to establishing the nature of people themselves—, the essay first suggests a broad ephrasis of Velázquez's painting,



and then takes it as basis for an increasingly epistemological description of the author's impressions of the painter's enigmatic works of perspective. If, in very simple terms, Foucault's initial impression of the painting is its bizarre treatment of viewpoints and reflection angles, his final impression is that the painting is somewhat "euhemeristic," that is, that it is critically self-conscious of its own tradition, what finally allows it to aestheticise its own subversion. So, although the main



goal of Foucault's essay is to introduce the general logic of his discussion, in the end it is also a meta-commentary: the same way *Las Meninas* radically breaks with a traditional way of looking at the world that conditions its representation, *The Order of Things* tries to show that the way we look at the world also determines the way we represent ourselves in it, as subjects and objects of its history, and, reciprocally, how the way we look at ourselves as subjects and objects of history determines the way we represent the world to ourselves.

In the second part of the essay, he explains:

But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax. (Foucault 2005:10)

This brief commentary is quite curious and comes in handy here because, although Foucault is not at all associated with impressionistic criticism—and, in fact, it is debatable whether this essay about *Las Meninas* is indeed a case of impressionistic criticism—he does provide here an interesting perspective on the relation of *language* to *image*. Foucault discusses specifically the cross-resistance and cross-pollination between the *meaningful* nature of language and *perceptual* nature of image, but of course we can go beyond this idea: the relation of *language* to *materiality*, I would say, particularly a materiality that excites in us some kind of aesthetic experience, is an infinite relation; and, if an *aesthetic experience* cannot be reduced to the *meaningfulness* of a language, this language should look within itself for its own splendour. That is, if aesthetic experiences allow us to envisage or get in contact with truths that either cannot be properly translated into logical meaning or can only be translated into logical meaning *a posteriori*, then this criticism should unfurl in search of its own splendour, in search of a life and brilliance of its own, in search of its own ability to trigger some kind of aesthetic experience in those who are enjoying it.

III

*Art is the intellectualisation of sensations through expression;
intellectualisation is given in, by, and through expression itself*

Fernando Pessoa



The last problem that I would like to point out is not so much a problem as an organisation of thought.

In the first essay, I suggested that the basic goal of the Materialities of Literature is to investigate how different materialities of communication might creatively cooperate to deterritorialise our ordinary enjoyment of literature and its relation to art in general. This means that, instead of concentrating its efforts on analyses of literature based solely on its textuality and readability, a criticism in the Materialities of Literature should also try to direct its efforts to analyses about how literature can be conveyed and improved by other media, media that normally appeal to human faculties other than the basic faculty of reading: I am talking about sight, hearing, touch, voice, movement, and even smell and taste, but I am also talking about our capacities of affection, which, on a bodily level, are normally manifested as feelings, emotions, sensations, and intensities—sometimes as clear impetuses to the recognition of new forms of truth, sometimes not so much. Criticism in the Materialities of Literature, therefore, is often concerned not only with the properly *linguistic* characteristics of literature, but also with the *ante* or *extra-linguistic* characteristics involved in the deterritorialisation of this literature, which means that, for this criticism, literary experience often intersperses or coalesces with a much broader and much more complex understanding of *aesthetic experience*. I believe this is, in fact, the main reason why I suggest a revision of an impressionistic criticism: as the Materialities

of Literature inevitably study the deterritorialisation of literature through materialities of communication that resist an ascription or extraction of meaning through interpretation, they are inevitably concerned with the boundaries between the typical literary experiences conveyed by *reading* and the atypical literary experiences conveyed by *other forms of enjoyment*; since these atypical experiences tend to resist purely intellectual cognition, a critic can only think them through after reflecting about how they affect *her* into feeling and sensing otherwise, that is, after minimally *systematising her own impressions* of these experiences. What I mean to say, therefore, is that, in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, impressionistic criticism seems to be one of the most appropriate modes of literary criticism, if not the most appropriate one: some criticisms might be more impressionistic while others might be more analytical, but, as long as the Materialities of Literature are concerned, they cannot, or at least should not, neglect the fact that *literary experience* will always be somehow conjugated with other forms of *aesthetic experience*.

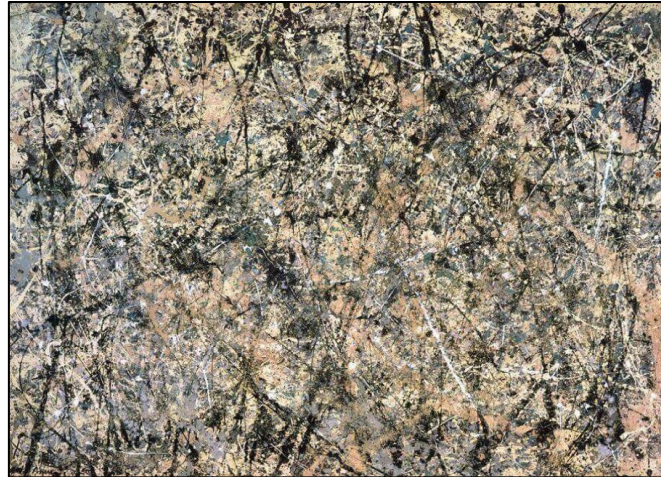
So far, I have referred to an *aesthetic experience* as an enjoyment of the tensions between reason, imagination, and sensuality triggered by every phenomenon in its own way artistic.

This conception is my own rearrangement of two other conceptions of “aesthetic experience”: the first one, by Hans Gumbrecht, is a post-hermeneutical perspective according to which an *aesthetic experience* consists of a person’s enjoyment of the tensions between *meaning* and *presence* aroused by a worldly phenomenon, which can be predominantly linguistic—like writing or reading a text—or predominantly extra-linguistic—like listening to a song or watching a film—, but always a process in which the cross-pollination between these two dimensions allows the person to feel some kind of *distinct pleasure* (Gumbrecht 2004:134-35, 138-39); the second one, by Stanley Corngold, is a predominantly hermeneutical perspective according to which a *literary pleasure*, a mode of aesthetic experience specific to literature, consists of a reader’s enjoyment of the tensions between *reason*—or logic—and *imagination*—or rhetoric—that arouse in her *distinct forms of feeling* as she deciphers a textual artwork and immerses herself in it. (Corngold 1998:xi-xviii)

Both conceptions are valid in their own terms, but I think we might also find a productive way of understanding *aesthetic experience* if we fit these two conceptions together to come up with a third one.

And I really mean to *fit them together*; I have no intention to try to supplant, correct, or deny them in any way, especially because, depending on the criticism, as well as on the objects and aesthetic experiences analysed, some dimensions might prove more pertinent than others.

The way I see it, the greatest quality of Gumbrecht's conception of *aesthetic experience* here is that he recognises the dimension of *meaning* apart from the dimension of *presence*: he recognises that we, as subjects in typically Cartesian cultures, constantly try to attenuate the impact of worldly phenomena



on our bodies and senses by endowing them with some kind of logical meaning, with some kind of explanatory significance; but he also recognises that not only are we perfectly capable of enjoying many worldly phenomena *without* any attribution of meaning or significance to them, this constant attribution of meaning and significance to the world also seems to excite in us desires for new sensations, for new experiences that, in all the complexity of their sensuousness, widely resist explanation through meaning or signifi-



cance. (see Gumbrecht 2004:xiv) Now, the way I see it, the greatest quality of Corngold's conception of *literary pleasure as aesthetic experience* here is that he recognises the dimension of *reason* apart from the dimension of *imagination*: he recognises our conscious ability to articulate meaning according to calculated principles in order to effectuate certain disclosures on an intellectual level, but he also

recognises our half-intellectual, half-sensuous ability to stretch out meaning to the point where it begins to fail and give way to an anxiety, to a desire for new disclosures—which might happen on a more intellectual level, and therefore have a more abstract and meaningful nature, or which might happen on a more sensuous level, and therefore have a more bodily and aesthetic nature. (see Corngold 1998:1-3)

This contrast between Gumbrecht's and Corngold's conceptions allows us to discern between them a conflict that is also a complementarity, an imbalance that my own conception of *aesthetic experience* tries to balance:

The main reason why I suggest an *aesthetic experience* as the enjoyment of the tensions between reason, imagination, and sensuality triggered by a phenomenon in its own way artistic is to try to emphasise the *subjective* nature of this experience—after all, every aesthetic experience is perceived *by* a subject, it depends *on* a subject, it happens *in* a subject.

In his theories, Gumbrecht does require an *agent*—a *second-order observer*, as he suggests in his essays (see Gumbrecht 2003:174, 2012:65)—to experience, identify, and qualify phenomenal dimensions such as *meaning*, *presence*, and *materiality*, but, if we look closely, in his theories these dimensions are more properly descriptive of *worldly objects* than of subjective impressions—he will normally discuss the meaning *of a text*, the effects of presence *of a song*, the materiality *of a painting*. Of course, I should make clear that this is not a clear-cut qualification, because the meaning of a text depends on a reader's interpretation, the effects of presence of a song depend on a listener's state of mind, and even the materiality of a painting, albeit a physicality or plasticity of the painting itself, will be perceived differently by different subjects in different moods, situations, or conditions. However, only a *subject* can reason, imagine, and sense new forms of truth as she enjoys a given artistic phenomenon in its materiality, effects of meaning, and effects of presence—which means to say that these dimensions, as they are specifically perceived by a *subject*, are the main responsible for triggering in her specific movements of reason, imagination, and sensuality.

Now, in his theories, Corngold does emphasise the *subjective* nature of an aesthetic experience—by accentuating our faculties of *reason* and *imagination*—, but he is only interested in how these faculties are activated by phenomena of properly *hermeneutical dimensions*—the dimension of *logic*, which is the dimension in which a reader rationally deciphers the basic meaning of a text, and the dimension of *rhetoric*, which is the dimension in which a reader imaginatively deciphers the deeper, aestheticised meaning of a text. As I have already mentioned, a great quality of Corngold's theory is that it is *predominantly* hermeneutical; based on his analyses of Friedrich Höderlin (59-61), Franz Kafka (121-25), and especially Friedrich Nietzsche (79-85), he suggests an idea of *literary pleasure* that is actually really akin to the aesthetical-philosophical idea of *Stimmung* that Gumbrecht himself suggests, that is, those effects of 'mood', 'ambience', or 'atmosphere'

that some texts produce in or around the reader as she reads them—effects that, albeit triggered by a textual medium, elude or resist a precise qualification through meaning. However, the fact that Corngold's theory is *predominantly* hermeneutical is for the Materialities of Literature also a deficiency, for this characteristic makes it insufficient for a scrutiny of those dimensions in an aesthetic experience that are effectively not connected to meaning—what in turn explains why I chose to associate his theory to Gumbrecht's theories on presence and materiality.

In a few words, then, in my own definition of *aesthetic experience* here, I try to emphasise, relying on Gumbrecht's perspective, that an efficient work of criticism today is one that strongly relies on an examination of both hermeneutical and non-hermeneutical phenomena, but, at the same time, I try to emphasise, relying on Corngold's perspective, that an efficient work of criticism is also one that clearly takes the subject as both a subject of pleasure and a subject capable of inductively thinking through pleasure.

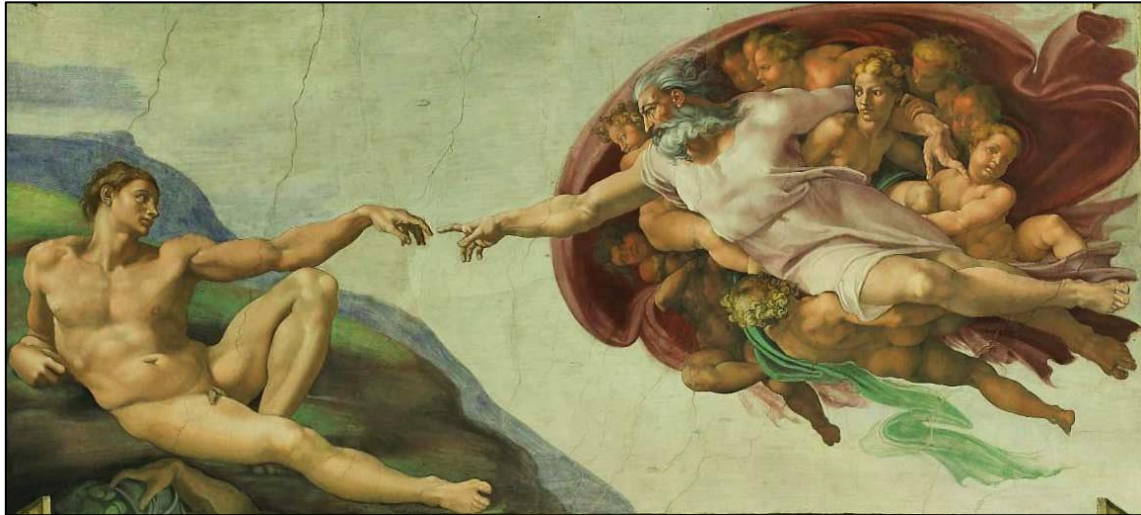
Finally, it should be noticed that in my definition of *aesthetic experience* I used the word *sensuality*, which neither of the other two authors uses; if *reason* refers to our capacities of logical abstraction and *imagination* refers to our ability to stretch logical abstraction to the point where it begins to fail and give way to illogical abstractions and thereby to more affective anxieties for disclosure, *sensuality* refers to our bodily faculties proper and broadly understood—our capacities of sensing and feeling, of experiencing intensities and going through emotions. There are basically two reasons why I prefer this word—even though it is not at all the only way to understand what I am suggesting: first, since I contend a mode of impressionistic criticism that tries to emphasise the *erotics* of aesthetic experiences, it seems to me that this word accentuates the libidinous nature of our search for pleasure, regardless of what the practical nature of this pleasure might eventually be; second, in the semantics of the word *sensuality* there seems to be a clear reference to a subject's affective disposition to pleasure as well as to the susceptibility of her body to different forms of physical stimuli.

I should anticipate that the reason why I provide this working definition of *aesthetic experience* is related to the fact that, not only is an impressionistic criticism a subjective mode of criticism that seeks to inductively think through different aspects of aesthetic experiences—often privileging those aspects that are not simply conveyed through meaning—, impressionistic criticism as I suggest it here is a more self-consciously *performative* or *creative* practice, in *intention*, *content* and *form*.

By emphasising the dimensions of *reason*, *imagination* and *sensuality*, I believe I am laying out those dimensions that must be more carefully explored and exercised in this particular mode of impressionistic criticism: by thinking through the *rational* aspects of an artwork, this criticism can be an *epistemological* contribution; by thinking through the *sensual* aspects of an artwork, it can be an *aesthetical* contribution; by materialising the critic's *imaginative impulses*, it is likely to become itself an *aesthetic*, *artistic*, *creative* contribution—what, in the end, as we will see, seems to be one of the most powerful strategies to safeguard an artwork from having some kind of meaning ascribed to or extracted from it through interpretation.

The idea of a creative impressionistic criticism as I conceive it here is not, then, that of a commentary that seeks to pacify the tensions excited by an artwork by interpreting them as thoroughly or as rationally or as viscerally as possible, but that of a creative attitude that seeks to strengthen, transform, and complexify these tensions by taking them as raw matter for the conception of criticisms that are themselves completely new artworks or which at least consciously aspire to this.

Chapter One
‘Classical Reception’:
Methodology and Metonymy



Since there is no stable definition of ‘classical reception’ still today, what allows this mode of art and cultural criticism to be associated to a great number of analytical practices that simply involve an appreciation of the classics in connection to cultures posterior to them, I will begin this chapter with a discussion about what ‘classical reception’ is effectively *not*, or at least *should not be*, and, from this, gradually develop an idea of what ‘classical reception’ *can be*, or in fact *should be*, especially in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature.

There are basically three reasons why I believe it is important to ground my methodology on a discussion about the situation of the classics and their ‘classical reception’ today.

First.

Although the classics are among the most influential literatures upon western thought, the remoteness of their origins also places them among those works that most diversely suffered some kind of *hermeneutical violence* throughout their history, what makes them, especially under the shadow of such violence, paradigmatic cases for understanding some of the motivations for post-hermeneutical thinking and some of the options for post-hermeneutical research today.

Second.

Although there are no stable definitions of ‘classical reception’ as a mode of art and cultural criticism, and, therefore, as an analytical method, most ‘classical reception’

studies today are generally divided in two larger groups: the first one, which we can consider a more traditional group, essentially consists of hermeneutical-historiographical analyses, that is, they are mostly concerned with how, by whom, and to what end a given work from the classics was read in a certain social context (see Graziosi 2008:26-37; Harrison 2008:113-26; Van Steen 2008:360-72; Tarrant 2012:72-95); the second one, which we can consider a more progressist group, and which is the focus of my discussion in this chapter, strongly relies on the Aesthetics of Reception to contend that, not only does the meaning of a classical text depend on the present-tense reading situation of its reader, this reader should also read this text through a modern one that is itself already a case of ‘classical reception’ of such text. (see Martindale 1993; Martindale and Thomas 2006) Of course, these two perspectives are not themselves a problem, not to say that they are really essential segments of the literary studies, but there seems to be in post-hermeneutical thinking, particularly as elaborated by the Materialities of Literature, an inevitable propensity to *creation*: if one of the most fundamental goals of a post-hermeneutical epistemology is to safeguard an artwork from having some kind of meaning ascribed to or extracted from it through interpretation, it seems a natural reaction that the investigative interest of a post-hermeneutical practice be associated with the *conception* of something entirely new, of something that somehow *springs from* the artworks initially examined in order to provide new possibilities of thought and affection—normally a new study or a new artwork that, as products of an investigative imagination experimenting with thought and affection through creativity, tend to be an endeavour into new epistemological hypotheses as much as into new aesthetic experimentations. These modes of criticism and enjoyment might be intuitive in the post-hermeneutical realm of the Materialities of Literature, but they are not at all common practices in the traditionally hermeneutical realm of the classics: so, in the following essays, including the ones in the next chapters, I will try to clarify how ‘classical reception’ can and should be a mode of art and cultural criticism that, due to its attention to safeguarding the classics from being subjected to different kinds of hermeneutical violence, especially historical positivisation and elitist presentism, bears a natural potential to unfold into creative practices that take the classics as ethical, aesthetical, and epistemological mediations.

Third.

If one of the most essential premises behind every post-hermeneutical study is to look for a fresh reconciliation between reason, imagination, and sensuality—or between meaning and presence, or meaning and materiality—through a renewed scrutiny of our

critical views of aesthetic experience, there seems to be in the classics a particular way of living and thinking, a particular way of grasping the world and examining how we are to conduct ourselves in it, that might in fact contribute to the improvement, or at least to an enlargement, of such reconciliation.

I will discuss the first and the second reasons in this **Chapter One**.

The third reason is a chiefly philosophical matter, and unfolds very slowly throughout my discussions in **Chapter Two** and **Chapter Three**.

As my title ‘**Classical Reception**’: **Methodology and Metonymy** indicates, this chapter collects essays whose main debate explains the epistemological grounds for the developments of the next two chapters, which focus on more contemporary cases of ‘classical reception’; however, these essays are also themselves particular surveys on the larger problem that I just mentioned above—that is, that ‘classical reception’, in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, should refer to a mode of art and cultural criticism that, in order to safeguard the classics from being subjected to some kind of hermeneutical violence, takes them as mediations for the conception of entirely new objects, normally new artworks or new criticisms proper.

Therefore, the readers can consider this chapter a minor thesis inside a major thesis, as it tries to shed a light of new colour on the very idea of ‘classical reception’; but, by surveying what I believe ‘classical reception’ *should be* in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, I also hope to lay out some of the mechanics that might explain the ‘classical receptions’ discussed in the next two chapters.

The readers may notice, then, that despite the progressive reasoning that assures them the quality of **Methodology**, the essays that follow, like the previous essays, have lives and ideas of their own, and therefore might discuss problems that, albeit enriching to the methodology itself, are not necessarily intrinsic to it.

I

*Take pity of me: stand back as a painter would,
and contemplate me in my sorrow*

Euripides

*I would define the poetic effect as the capacity that a text
displays for continuing to generate different readings,
without ever being completely consumed*

Umberto Eco



In 1989, a scholar named Richard Jenkyns published an article in *The Journal of Roman Studies* that opens with the following remark about what should be the appropriate way of reading Virgil's *Eclogues*:

There is an obstacle to our *natural appreciation* of Virgil's *Eclogues* which looms as large in their case as in that of any poetry whatever. The *Eclogues* form probably the most influential group of short poems ever written: though they themselves take Theocritus as a model, they were to become the fountainhead from which the vast and diverse tradition of pastoral in many European literatures was to spring. To use them as a model was in itself to distort their character: it is one of the greatest ironies of literary history that these elusive, various, eccentric poems should have become the pattern for hundreds of later writers. *Moreover, the growth of the later pastoral tradition meant that many things were attributed to Virgil which are not in Virgil. Sometimes they were derived from interpretations which were put upon Virgil in late antiquity but which we now believe to be mistaken; sometimes they are misinterpretations of a much later date; sometimes they originated from new developments in*

pastoral literature which their inventors had not meant to seem Virgilian, but which in the course of time got foisted back on to Virgil nevertheless. It is hard, therefore, to approach the *Eclogues* openly and *without preconceptions about what they contain, and even scholars who have devoted much time and learning to them have sometimes continued to hold views about them for which there are upon a dispassionate observation no good grounds at all.* No poems perhaps have become so encrusted by the barnacles of later tradition and interpretation as these, and *we need to scrape these away if we are to see them in their true shape.* My aim here is to do some of this scraping by examining the use of Arcadians and the name of Arcadia in Virgil's work. (Jenkyns 1989:26; my emphases)

Jenkyns's suggestion is so problematic, that I feel like emphasising the whole paragraph; in a few words, what he is trying to bring forth is the possibility of reading Virgil *as it was in its original social context*, as if the texts' earliest propositional content could be found intact if we brushed away all the layers of criticism written about them throughout its history. His argument belongs to an empiricist logic of literary studies according to which a classicist's task is to rectify the deformations of meaning that different works produced upon an artwork from the classics throughout its history, so that we can appreciate this artwork as it *really* was, as it was *originally* read, perceived, and assimilated by its native public. (see Wood 2012:163-64)

As a reaction to the abuses committed against the classics by readers of many traditions that valued interpretation precisely as the ascription or extraction of some kind of meaning, this empiricist method does not seem at all a bad alternative.

Take, for example, Sigmund Freud's reading of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* (VBC).

It is true, as Freud's studies progress and the hypothesis of the Oedipus Complex becomes more intricate, the whole theory detaches itself from the original literature—that is, from Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, as well as from the Oedipus myth itself. However, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899; 2010), the work in which he first formally suggests the idea of an Oedipus Complex, Freud does affirm that Oedipus *suffered* from a certain complex that was bound to be natural to all of us: "It is the *fate* of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father." (Freud 2010:280; my emphasis) For an ordinary reading, it seems a very common sense that Oedipus's tragic end results from the fact that he *suffered* from this sexual impulse, but both the myth and the tragedy hardly assume this: if Oedipus *suffered* from this impulse, as Freud contends, he would have directed it to King Polybus and Queen Merope, whom he believed were his real parents

and who were for him effectively the parental authorities. Oedipus's emancipation from King Polybus and Queen Merope, followed by his flee from Corinth, in fact suggests, from a psychoanalytical perspective, that he somewhat managed to control or overcome such sexual impulse—an impulse, we should always have in mind, proposed by a scientific research conducted in a capitalist, bourgeois, Judeo-Christian environment.

In contrast with interpretations like Freud's, Jenkyns's suggestion indeed looks like a truthful philological practice that, relying on the text and the text only, is able to decipher it in the essence of its configuration, removed from the defacements of readings or criticisms that followed it. What is important to notice about the criticisms written through the prism of this logic, however, is that, by trying to rectify a text's original meaning, they are eventually replacing one act of hermeneutical violence for another: it is true that many misreadings and many misinterpretations throughout the history of an artwork are likely to have ascribed to it meanings that, consciously or not, sought to fulfil teleological interests of a reader, an audience, a critic, or an institution, but it is also true that "original readings" like those Jenkyns suggests are themselves misinterpretations that ascribe meaning to these texts following an interest that is also teleological, only more discreet—namely, that of assuming the possibility of recovering the true, pristine meaning of a text as it was originally read and thereby writing a criticism that believes to be really doing this. Frequently this criticism falls into a hubristic, positivistic form of historical inquiry (Martindale 2006:2-5), and therefore into another, perhaps more complex, but also more subtle, form of hermeneutical violence; it is a criticism that brings itself forth as a means to rectify an artwork and protect it from having some kind of meaning ascribed to or extracted from it through the interpretation of other criticisms, but in practice it is itself a mode of interpretation that tries to teleologically redetermine not only an artwork's natural structure, but also aspects of the factual past that produced this structure in the first place. In other words, any attempt to reconstitute the *original* meaning of an ancient text—and virtually of any text, for that matter—is already a process of meaning ascription or extraction whose interest is teleologically pre-established by the infinite interpretations that first motivated this attempt. Of course, it is perfectly possible and legitimate to examine how, by whom, and to what end a given work from the classics was read in a certain social context, but precisely because this is not an attempt to rediscover in a text an innate and unspoilt meaning that was corrupted by subsequent interpretations. Rather, this is a historiography, a history of reading, a history of understanding, it is an attempt to figure out what social factors—from chaotic political

scenarios to the everyday use of the pencil—in fact led a given culture, social group, or even a poet to read a text differently from other cultures, other social groups, and other poets. Accordingly, this historiographical practice also seeks to understand how specific readings of a given text permitted new ways of thinking and thereby influenced the production of other works of many different natures; it seeks to understand how a given text travelled through the most diverse social contexts, impacting them as much as being impacted by them.

But, of course, Jenkyns's criticism is not the only practice of hermeneutical violence regularly committed against the classics.

Another common practice, much easier to come by, as it is more removed from the academic scenarios that effectively study the classics, follows a somewhat opposite movement.

In *The Future of the 'Classical'* (2004; 2006), the Italian classicist Salvatore Settis suggests that what for a very long time explained the *reiterability* of the classics throughout history was their seemingly transcendental vocation to work as a kind of consecrated cradle of the white European identity, and, from this, their vocation to justify and legitimate the prevalence of the supposedly natural dominance of this identity over any alterity, over any other identity. However, he explains that already in the 19th century, but more intensely in the 20th century, with the complexification of globalisation and cosmopolitanism, the reiterability of the classics began to turn into something curiously different: no longer an ethnical-cultural elitism, but a form of cultural *lingua franca*, an archive of epistemologies whose very natures, as primordial evidences of the expansion of a great number of cultures that derived from the Indo-European culture or which interbred with it, should work as means for these cultures to re-evaluate themselves, to grasp themselves anew. An ordinary example of this *lingua franca*, according to Settis, are the abundant references to the classics even in cultures very distant and different from the European—we can find a healthy influence of the classics upon Japanese, Caribbean, and Latin American cultures, for instance. (see Settis 2006:3; Kaufmann 2006:192-203; Goldwyn 2016:53-72) However, Settis emphasises the fact that still today many references to a 'classical' element tend to be nothing but a utilitarian *exemplum*, that is, a hollow citation still coated with the varnish of that old supposedly transcendental authority that seems to naturally emanate from the classics. Against this, he defends that, if different social contexts stubbornly recover the classics as a cultural and analytical standard, this is precisely the reason why they should be taken as references to alterity, what, in their own favour,

might also allow them to bring into light many flaws and deficiencies that are innate to them, but which those social contexts tend to disguise.

I should emphasise that this is Settis's most extreme case of an attack against an elitism of the classics; more broadly, and this is the question that really interests me, he defends that the 'classical' should be a democratic reference to multiculturalism, which is not only an examination of cultural contrasts and interbreeding, but, above all, the capacities that a rich cultural epistemology has of impregnating many others, and, from this, of producing new, historically-oriented, conditions of possibility.

In this study, I will talk about the classics proper, but it should be noted that Settis's remarks are obviously not a one-way street, and, the same way that the classics should be taken as a cultural *lingua franca* to work as a means for different cultures to re-evaluate themselves, epistemologies from different origins should also be aggregated by cultures influenced by the classics so that they can identify their own flaws, strangeness, and specificities—something that I already hinted at in my **Introduction**. (see Settis 2006:1-8; see also Sousa Santos 2018:9)

And, well, this is precisely the most elemental level of what I understand as 'classical reception' in this research: the vocation that certain classics have to recondition our current possibilities of thinking, and thereby alter our perception and comprehension of the world, including our perception, comprehension, and agency of ourselves in the material reality of this world.

I can provide here what I believe is a simple example of what Settis considers a misuse of the classics in contemporary culture, even though I must say that I do not completely agree with him on this situation specifically.

In his book, Settis mentions the interior decoration of the Café Bongo, in Tokyo, as a case of "bad reception" of the classics, that is, as an artistic production that ultimately relies on the classics just as an *exemplum* to guarantee itself cultural and aesthetic legitimacy (Settis 2006:6).

Designed by the British architect Nigel Coates in 1986, the interior design of the Café Bongo is a hectic assemblage of neon lights, airplane wreckage, industrial ruins, and downtown Rome.



I do agree with Settis that the modern structure is so overwhelming, so oppressive, that it feels as if the classics—represented by replicas of Roman sculptures—have been held captive or swallowed by it, so I do tend to agree with him that they seem to behave more like citations than properly as forces that should energise the creation of their surroundings.

However, I also believe that the classics have been used here for yet another reason, which, although not exactly a case of ‘classical reception’, at least does not seem to take them as a mantle of cultural and aesthetic propriety: considering the oppressiveness and overwhelmingness of the industrial architecture in relation to the punctual ‘classical’ elements, there seems to be an emphasis on the fact that they are indeed reminiscences, vestiges of a bygone age—an age that, although inextricable from our present and our present ways of thinking, cannot be truly fathomed, nor will ever be, as it seems to cradle a purity of thought that is doomed to be constantly engulfed by the turmoil of capitalism, by the helplessness infused by a capitalist realism.

Although this reasoning might not be a studious exploration of the classics like that suggested by Settis, at least it seems to establish with them a much more honest relation than the one suggested by Jenkyns in his commentary on Virgil.

In my investigations, I actually stumbled upon a commentary by Coates himself that somehow corroborates these impressions of mine:

The project itself [the Café Bongo interior design] freely mixes classical references like the giant column, and the aircraft wing with accumulated waste that was built into the rear walls.

The space was Piranesian but the storytelling and detail was more *Mad Max*. (Drawing Matter 2017)

Now, of course, Jenkyns's paragraph and Settis's commentaries are extreme cases, almost caricatures of what bad criticism can be in the classics and of how they can be misunderstood by contemporaneity; but how can we counter acts of hermeneutical and cultural violence such as these without retreating to a purely historiographical perspective and why is this so important anyway?

In 1993, in a book titled *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception*, a classicist named Charles Martindale came up with an idea that for us today might seem a bit obvious, but which in his time was truly ground-breaking: contrary to what Jenkyns defends in his article, but in consonance with what Settis defends in his essay, Martindale's contention is that a reader's interpretation of a 'classical' text is inextricable from her present-tense reading situation, and, indeed, not only should this reader embrace the fact that she cannot escape the influence of past readings of this text, she should also use this in her favour by trying to read it through modern ones, that is, through texts that somehow belong in the web of works that were first influenced by such text.

[Any] notion of a naked encounter between a text and a reader who is a sort of *tabula rasa* is absurd. We all approach the reading of texts with the baggage of our values and experience, with certain categories, assumptions, prejudices and 'fore-understandings.' To have such baggage is what it is to be a human being in history; *without it we could not read at all*. (Martindale 1993:5)

[Instead] of treating texts as having more or less fixed meanings located firmly within partly recoverable backgrounds, which help to explain them, we could negotiate the possible connections which can be constructed between texts, yet with an awareness that this involves a constantly moving 'fusion of horizons.' Every reading of a work becomes a fresh 'instantiation' with its own character (as we can see, for example, from our own re-reading of books at different periods of our lives). The process of *recontextualization* was already in motion with the text's first receivers, so that there never was an obviously fixed original context. Rather, each work becomes an intervention within an intertextual field, which, however much it tries to stake out a position, never wholly succeeds in doing so, and whose meanings are constantly realized anew at the point of reception. (Martindale 1993:16-17)

This clearly hermeneutical contention—Martindale’s colleagues literally call him a “hermeneuticist” (Wood 2012:165)—is grounded on two theories: the first one, quite obvious already, is the Aesthetics of Reception, a hermeneutical discipline largely organised around the studies of Hans Robert Jauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, whom, along with Jacques Derrida, Martindale mentions as the theoretical bases of his investigation; the second one, perhaps not so obvious, is what I will provisionally refer to as the “anxiety of influence,” a hermeneutical hypothesis suggested by Harold Bloom that Martindale adopts as a methodological blueprint for his investigation. All these names, especially put together like this, could have led Martindale to an extremely complex theory, but this is not what happens; in practice, what he does is cherry-pick from these theories those aspects that interest him most and patch them together into what becomes the considerably straightforward criticism routine that I mentioned a while ago—that is, that not only does the meaning of a classical text depend on the present-tense reading situation of its reader (Jauss, Gadamer, and Derrida), this reader should also read this text through a modern one that is itself already a case of ‘classical reception’ of this text (Derrida and Bloom).

In the next pages, I will try to synthesise and exemplify the theoretical substrate of Martindale’s idea of ‘classical reception’ using my own words and relying on my own theoretical perspectives.

I do this for two main reasons: first, if it is true that in a post-hermeneutical thinking there is a propensity to *creation*, as a strategy to safeguard an artwork from having some kind of meaning ascribed to or extracted from it by interpretation, then Martindale’s notion of *creativity* is faulty, or at least insufficient, from a post-hermeneutical perspective; second, and consequently, it should be clear that what I take as methodology here, therefore, *is not* Martindale’s idea of ‘classical reception’ pure and simple, but the possibility to *overcome* it, or at least the possibility to *enlarge* it, through the prism and the methods of a post-hermeneutical epistemology.

Martindale begins the discussion of his ‘classical reception’ hypothesis by suggesting that there are at least two greater views about the significance of artworks that are frequently set in opposition: a *humanistic view* and what I will describe as a *historical view*.

The *humanistic view* is somewhat the case of Jenkyns’s article, that is, it is the view according to which the whole meaning of an artwork is stable and transcendental: from this perspective, an artwork operates as a vehicle to eternally valid truths and experiences

that, therefore, will always be perceived, comprehended, and internalised in their true essences irrespective of who the person enjoying this artwork is and irrespective of her own present-tense reading situation. (see Martindale 1993:6)

The *historical view*, in turn, is somewhat the case of Settis's essay, that is, it is the view according to which the whole meaning of an artwork is fluid and probabilistic: from this perspective, an artwork operates as a trigger to and as a platform for historically-contingent truths and experiences that, therefore, will always be perceived, comprehended, and internalised in the specificity of the moment of encounter, a moment that is particular to the person enjoying the artwork and to her own present-tense reading situation. (see Martindale 1993:6-7)

It is not difficult to see, then, that Martindale's idea of 'classical reception' belongs to the *historical view*; it is a historical view of the meaning of the classics in the present, or at least from a contemporary perspective.

In his own words:

On Gadamer's view 'the truth of works of art is a contingent one: what they reveal is dependent on the lives, circumstances and views of the audience to whom they reveal it.' In Gadamer's words, 'It is part of the historical finiteness of our being that we are aware that after us others will understand in a different way.' *Understanding in which 'the dead trace of meaning' is 'transformed back into living experience' is always made within history*; indeed our historicity is a necessary concomitant of understanding of this kind. *Beliefs and fore-understandings ('prejudices' to use Gadamer's word) are not barriers to understanding but their precondition*. Interpretation also involves a constantly moving 'fusion of horizons' between past and present, text and interpreter. *Accordingly, to use a more Eliotic formulation, we have to learn to respect not only the presentness of the present, but also its pastness, and not only the pastness of the past but also its presentness*. (Martindale 1993:6-7; my emphases)

It should be noted, however, that with this idea of 'classical reception,' Martindale also seems to try to overcome another recurrent practice in the study of the classics, which we can roughly describe as a "philological practice"—in particular, a "philological practice" that scrutinises the classics through the prism of historical linguistics. Although he never really discusses this, Martindale does seem interested in escaping overly linguistic studies that, among many other possibilities, seek to trace a diachronic line that explains how certain phonemes, words, syntagmas, sentences, idioms, formulas, and themes mutate from one text to another throughout history. One reason for this, I believe, is the fact

that, as I have already mentioned, Martindale's idea of 'classical reception' is that of a mode of *art and cultural criticism*, a study that is greatly different from an *analytical scrutiny* dedicated to explaining how the linguistic structure of texts from the classical tradition changed as they were reabsorbed, reinterpreted, or even rewritten as historical contexts progressed into others, as literary traditions were supplanted by others. But, of course, this does not mean that Martindale completely ignores *language* in his idea of 'classical reception'; in fact, a great peculiarity of his theory in relation to Jaus's and Gadamer's theories, he openly contends, is that it tries to bring forth analyses that rely much more objectively on the text as a dynamic fabric of signs, a fabric in a process of perpetual differentiation:

I shall explore a historicized version of reception theory, associated above all with Hans Robert Jaus; but it will be one of a less positivistic character, which will concede rather more than he does to the operations of *différance*, the key term of Derrida's, which combine the idea of difference (meaning is an effect of the contrast between signs) and deferral (meaning always resist closure, a final—or originary—meaning, because signs never stand still). (Martindale 1993:7)

Now, going back to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Martindale suggests that in the broad idea of *literary influence* there are three hermeneutical levels in which *misreadings* can be effected: a misreading can be *tautological*, *reductive*, or *antithetical*. Martindale's use of the word *misreading*, instead of the basic word *reading*, is really deliberate here: for him, since every reading depends on the present-tense reading situation of the reader, every reading is already a misreading, and every interpretation already a misinterpretation; his preference for the prefix *mis-* is also connected to Bloom's recurrent use of the word *misprision*, which, in his own theories, normally describes a writer's deviational reading of a precursor—a somewhat Oedipal process in which the writer tries to break free from the influence of a precursor by trying to effect what in the end is a radicalisation of this very influence. Now, Bloom then describes *tautological* and *reductive* misreadings as parts of a *primary* level of misreading, so, logically, although he never uses this definition, we can say that an *antithetical* misreading belongs to a *secondary* level of misreading. I should emphasise that Bloom's expertise is anglophone poetry, so he often refers to the *writer* as a *poet* and to a *text* as a *poem*; however, it should be clear that Bloom's theory about literary influence is not restricted to poets and poems, and may comprise literature in its broad spectrum—poems, novels,

chronicles, essays etc. In the *tautological* misreading of a text, this text is and means itself—that is, the misreading that a person suggests of a text is an initial or primordial elucidation of the text based on its own structure—its lexicon, semantics, versification, prosody etc.—and, occasionally, based on its background—the line of influences that it belongs to, the context of its composition etc. In the *reductive* misreading of a text, this text means something that is not itself the text it is—that is, the misreading that a reader suggests of a text is a questioning of this text’s boundaries of meaning based on its structure and background, it is a questioning of what a text can be besides itself based on what it already is, in terms of structure as well as in terms of background. A *tautological* misreading can be effected by virtually any reader, but a *reductive* criticism is closer to an artistic, scholarly, or in some way experienced practice, and, according to Bloom, it can be divided into two other misreading—or misprision—practices: it can be a case of *clinamen* misreading, which happens when the readers influenced by a given text—that is, a text itself, but also its author, tradition, web of influences etc.—misread it in order to swerve away from it; or it can be a case of *tessera* misreading, which happens when the readers influenced by a given text misread it in order to provide an addition to its incompleteness, in order to provide substance to some of its supposed gaps. In *The Anxiety of Influence*—and elsewhere, in an article titled “Antithetical Criticism: an Introduction” (1971), which I believe is the real source of Martindale’s observations—, Bloom suggests yet a third form of misreading, an *antithetical* misreading, which is more properly a mode of *literary criticism*. An antithetical criticism, Bloom contends, is effected when a reader manages to go beyond *clinamen* and *tessera* misreadings by providing a misreading of a text that is itself another text (see Martindale 1993:37; Bloom 1971:45); the main intention behind this mode of criticism is perhaps best explained in a quotation by Ralph Waldo Emerson that Bloom provides in the beginning of his article—a quotation, I believe, not to be taken too literally: “In every work of genius, we recognize our own rejected thoughts—they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.” (Emerson *apud* Bloom 1971:40) Simply put, instead of swerving the meaning of a text to a better direction, and instead of filling supposed gaps in a text with new substances of meaning, an antithetical criticism seeks to give new meaning to a text, or seeks to expand and improve the meaning of a text, by reading it *through* another text or *in* another text—a text that will normally, not necessarily, clearly belong in the web of influences that motivated or culminated in such antithetical misreading.

We can take, for example, Borges's reading of Kafka through Zeno's paradox, Han Yu's apologues, and Soren Kierkegaard's religious parables (Borges 1974:710-11)—or, perhaps I should say, Borges's reading of all these texts through his own reading of Kafka's literature.

Whatever the case, what we can deduce from Emerson's quote is that, by misreading a text through the misreading of another text, we are likely to grasp in one of them, or even in both of them, reciprocally, meanings that we could have never been able to grasp otherwise, that is, if we had confined ourselves to the persistent reading of just the original text.

I can provide a very simple example that illustrates how this criticism routine generally operates in its most basic level.

In an article titled "The Streets of Rome: the Classical Dylan," Richard Thomas, one of the most vocal supporters of Martindale's idea of 'classical reception', discusses how Bob Dylan's misreading of Virgil's *Aeneid* (II BC) in "Lonesome Day Blues" (2001) boosts this song's political tone—particularly Dylan's aversion to what in the lyrics seems to be the American imperialism that strongly motivated the Vietnam War (1955-75). Dylan's ability as a writer and lyricist is self-evident, but, in his article, Thomas explores the less conspicuous facet of Dylan as a reader who is also a literary critic, as a composer who seems to notice that one of the most compelling ways to read the classics is by completely *misreading* them from a contemporary perspective, by trying to benefit from an appreciation of this literature that does not consist of some kind of *retreat* to its past, but of a *presentification* of some of its most remarkable qualities, so that we can use them to see our everyday worlds in a different way—in their qualities as much as in their flaws.

In a short introduction, Thomas explains that, although he is a Latinist and a huge fan of Dylan, it took him quite some time to realise such blatant influence of Virgil on Dylan—an influence that is probably a consequence of Dylan's two-year stint at Hibbing High Latin Club in his early student years. (Thomas 2012:134) From the perspective of Martindale and Thomas's idea of 'classical reception', what the classics do for Dylan in "Lonesome Day Blues" is give him voice to thoughts, feelings, and anguishes that probably would not have been so emotively expressed otherwise, that is, if he had not found in the classics the words, images, and ironies that eventually allowed him to so beautifully verbalise his views of the war. I use the verb *find* here in a very deliberate way: considering how the verses of the *Aeneid* differ in the verses of "Lonesome Day Blues," it is

very likely that Dylan was only able to verbalise such particular views about the Vietnam War *with* or *after* his reading of the poem; I mean, it is very likely that Dylan was only able to realise some of his most delicate or most ferocious sentiments about the war because he found in the *Aeneid* the words, images, ironies, tragedies, and cruelties that finally allowed him to give shape to these sentiments and thereby express them—sentiments that would have probably remained shapeless, maybe only latent, if he had not read the poem. We can say, then, that Dylan recognises in the warmongering discourse and images of Virgil’s verses, differentiated in the semantics of a 1971 translation by Allen Mandelbaum, what, going back to Emerson, we can describe as Dylan’s own rejected thoughts about the Vietnam War, which eventually came back to him with an alienated majesty that he was finally able to register in his lyrics.

More precisely, Thomas notices the following *differential connections* between Dylan’s lyrics and Virgil’s epic:

<p><i>Aeneid</i> 6.851-3 Virgil</p>	<p><i>tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento (hae tibi erunt artes) pacique imponere morem parcere subiectis et debellare superbos</i></p>
<p><i>Aeneid</i> 6.1134-1137 Mandelbaum</p>	<p>but yours will be the rulership of nations, remember Roman, these will be your arts: to teach the ways of peace to those you conquer, to spare defeated peoples, tame the proud</p>
<p><i>Lonesome Day</i> <i>Blues</i> Dylan</p>	<p>I’m gonna spare the defeated – I’m gonna speak to the crowd I’m gonna spare the defeated, boys, I’m going to speak to the crowd I am goin’ to teach peace to the conquered I’m gonna tame the proud</p>



I should emphasise that *translation* is also a mode of ‘classical reception’ as Martindale and Thomas understand it, and, in fact, considering how translation is a misprision, misreading, misinterpretation, and differentiation exercise par excellence, I dare say that it is indeed the most basic case of ‘classical reception’ as Martindale understands it in his book. (see Martindale 1993:92-95)

Strictly speaking, then, it is possible to argue that Dylan does not really ‘receive’ Virgil; what he ‘receives’ is Mandelbaum’s ‘reception’ of Virgil through his translation of the *Aeneid*. But, even if this hypothesis is accurate, Thomas seems to minimise it when confronted with the poetical intensity of Dylan’s lyrics, because he seems to believe that, if it is the case that ‘classical reception’ is being practiced as a mode of art criticism applied to the sincere creation of a new artwork, it is perfectly acceptable, in our analyses, to favour beauty over epistemological precision—something I tend to agree with. I mean, I am generally inclined to assume that epistemological precision and the preservation of culture go hand in hand, but, if it is the case that we have to neglect epistemological precision to make sure that we continue to defend art as an ultimate place for social redemption, then I believe there is really no reason for not doing this.



Whatever the case, Dylan’s reception of Mandelbaum, or Dylan’s reception of Virgil through Mandelbaum, does not deny the fact that Dylan recognised in Virgil’s narrative and narration—in its aggressive discourse, in the violence of its images, in its supremacist point of view—the imperialistic pattern that many of his songs, such as “Lonesome Day Blues,” so fiercely condemn. The general understanding that we should extract from Dylan’s reappreciation of Virgil is that the specificity of certain features that can

only be found in the classics—in this case, the supposedly civilising imperialism of Rome, a nation that sought “to rule over people with empire, to institute law in addition to peace, to spare the subjected, and to war down the proud” (Thomas 2012:135)—allow us to territorialise, to perceive, feel, think, and express, events whose cruelty, whose inhumanity, in all their unfathomableness, make them very difficult to be explained only through everyday words.

After this brief revision and evaluation of Dylan’s reading of Virgil, Thomas finally enters the first-person interpretative dimension of his analysis, which can be summarised in this paragraph:

What does it mean that Dylan incorporated these lines from a 2000-year-old poem into his 2001 song? *That depends on the reader. For me the verse activates the Roman poet’s conflict about empire: Aeneas fails to live up to his father’s urging that he tame the proud but spare the defeated, when at the end of the Aeneid he kills his wounded and suppliant enemy.* Further, the war in “Lonesome Day Blues” becomes—*again, for me*— not just the war of the *Aeneid*’s mythological frame, set 1000 years before Virgil’s time, but also the Roman civil wars, and the wars against Antony and others on which the empire of Augustus would be founded. Before the intertext emerges and as long as the singer of Dylan’s song seems to belong in the time of Robert Zimmerman, the war that has brought desolation to the singer is most naturally the Vietnam War, the defining war of ethically failed imperial aspiration of the last century. The two contexts—Rome and America—merge and make the song about no war and every war, as happens so often with time and place generally in Dylan. (Thomas 2012:136; my emphases)

As I anticipated a while ago, all those names and theories seem to tangle Martindale’s ‘classical reception’—and, by extension, Thomas’s ‘classical reception’—in a complex web of epistemologies, but, in practice, what he does is select some very specific suggestions of each theory to organise them in what in the end is a considerably simple—but consistently plausible—criticism routine.

We can see from Thomas’s article that his *antithetical criticism* is the triad comprised by Dylan’s “Lonesome Day Blues,” Mandelbaum’s *Aeneid* (1971), and Virgil’s *Aeneid* (II BC): by confronting Dylan’s lyrics with Virgil’s epic, he recognises the beauty and the cynicism of one in the other, reciprocally; he is able to see in Dylan’s lyrics how the megalomania that motivated the Roman administration in its imperialist expansion around the Mediterranean seems to explain much of the megalomania that motivated the North-American administration in its imperialist expansion in Southeast Asia. The

antithetical criticism of these two texts brings to surface the fact that the hypocritical excuse of peace that the North-American government propagandised as the real motive for an intervention in Vietnam is, literally, as old as Rome—and yet, tragically enough, it does seem to remain an efficient discourse in the country’s great capitalistic enterprise. Now, an important aspect of Thomas’s article is his emphasis on a *personal interpretation*—that is, on his own *present-tense reading situation*—that arises from this *antithetical criticism*: Thomas encourages us to see, in Virgil’s verses of the *Aeneid*, traces of the tragic irony that springs from Aeneas’s mercilessness towards his defeated enemies; but he also encourages us to see, in Dylan’s *differential misreading* of the *Aeneid*, that the language and the images that in this epic produced one tragic irony, in those lyrics produce another—namely, the refusal of the North-American administration to recognise its own failure. Virgil’s and Dylan’s poems extol the narrators’ desire to take peace and civilisation to supposedly belligerent and uncivilised peoples, but, in the end, the narrators seem to show that their own violent and barbaric natures are really what make them think that they are the references of civilisation; these narrators, they seem so invested in taming the proud that they are unable to see that a cruel pride is what really impels them in their actions.

But this is not all of Martindale’s idea of ‘classical reception’.

Further in his book, he provides one last contribution to Bloom’s conception of *antithetical criticism*: as we have seen, Bloom contends that an *antithetical criticism* is effected when a reader manages to go beyond *clinamen* and *tessera* misreadings by providing a misreading of a text that is itself another text; but, going back to what I assume is Derrida’s grammatology (see Derrida 1997:141-65), Martindale suggests that, in the framework of an *antithetical criticism*, we can also find a second and more radical mode of misreading or misprision, a secondary mode of antithetical criticism, which is the case of *supplementarity*:

The signifier is so charged with an excess of energy that it generates further fictions, fictions which serve to answer unanswered questions, fill ‘gaps,’ explain perceived ‘contradictions,’ provide sequels and allow for appropriations in view of new circumstances. (Martindale 1993:37)

Fictions always mean *more*. In that sense, the often-made distinction between ‘open,’ indeterminate texts and ‘closed,’ determinate ones can usefully be dissolved. Worries about closure have led to numerous attempts, in modern and postmodern fiction, to leave the story

‘open,’ but such fictions cannot escape being parasitic upon previous narrative patterns: *a refusal of a closure can itself be seen as a dialogue with closure*. The terms closed and open, in other words, are complicit with each other: no closure need be seen as complete, because a sequel is always possible and because gaps can be opened even in the most determinate structures, but equally no text can be treated as wholly open, since, if it were, it would be uninterpretable, meaningless.

This supplementarity can also help to account for the process of continued interpretative revision. [...] (Martindale 1993:38)

Great examples in art truly abound, and they speak for themselves.

Take Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005), a novel narrated by Penelope, Odysseus’s wife, from the timelessness of Hades’ underworld.

In order to confront the sexist structure of the *Odyssey* (VIII BC)—or perhaps precisely to elaborate a feminist perspective of this narrative, in which the female characters are often subordinated to the imposing nature of the male characters—, Atwood reads anew Penelope’s personality to use her voice to criticise, from the perspective of her feminine brilliance, not only events of the *Odyssey* itself, but also events of her own material reality—the material reality of a 21st century that, in spite of the many improvements in social relations since the time of the *Odyssey*, still fails at assuring women a respectable place in these very relations:

At the court of King Icarus, my father, they still retained the ancient custom of having contests to see who should marry a nobly born woman who was—so to speak—on the block. The man who won the contest got the woman and the wedding, and was then expected to stay at the bride’s father’s palace and contribute his share of male offspring. He obtained wealth through the marriage—gold cups, silver bowls, horses, robes, weapons, all that trash they valued so much back when I was alive. His family was expected to hand over a lot of this trash as well. [...]

I’ve sometimes thought that I may have been a sacrifice to the god of the sea, who was known to be thirsty of human life. Then the ducks rescued me, through no act of my father’s. I suppose my father could argue that he’d fulfilled his side of the bargain, if bargain it was, and that he hadn’t cheated, and that if the sea-god had failed to drag me down and devour me, that was his own tough luck. [...]

Picture me, then, as a clever but not overly beautiful girl of marriageable age, let’s say fifteen. Suppose I’m looking out the window of my room—which was on the second floor of the palace—down into the courtyard where the contestants are gathering: all those young hopefuls who wish to compete for my hand. [...]

I know it isn't me they're after, not Penelope the Duck. It's only what comes with me—the royal connection, the pile of glittering junk. No man will ever kill himself for love of me.
(Atwood 2005:33-35)

It is fair to say that Atwood's boldness in experimenting with *form* in her novel is not restricted to Penelope's subjective perspective delivered in a fantastic yet intimist *prose*; her speech is often interrupted by a *chorus* of women—surprisingly, the same handmaids that Odysseus violently hangs in his backyard for conspiracy (see *Od.*22.416-429)—who, instead of delivering *outside* opinions about the main narrative, as choruses normally do in Ancient Greek tragedies, frequently suggest acid criticisms on their *own* subservient positions in Odysseus's home.

we are the maids
the ones you killed
the ones you failed

we danced in air
our bare feet twitched
it was not fair

with every goddess, queen, and bitch
from there to here
you scratched your itch

we did much less
than what you did
you judged us bad

(Atwood 2005:11-12)

In the context of Martindale's discourse in his book, the reasons why he chooses to debate *supplementarity* right after his discussion about Bloom's *antithetical criticism* are actually a bit confusing, but, considering the logical sequence of his thoughts on Bloom's hypotheses of *misreading*—that is, *tautological*, *reductive*, and *antithetical* modes of misreading—, I believe that what Martindale wants to suggest, as I have already insinuated, is the possibility of thinking *supplementarity* as a special case of *antithetical criticism*: if an *antithetical criticism* is the search for the limits of meaning of a text in other

texts, what happens when these other texts do not exist yet, when they can only be foreshadowed or anxiously imagined by a reader who then lusts for new disclosures?

If the reader is an artist, like in Atwood's case, chances are that the supplementarity in question will be a new artwork.

But, what if the reader is formally a critic?

That is, what happens with supplementarity if the reader is someone who is not formally an artist, but who nevertheless is proficient enough in aesthetics to create something artistically new, to make her own contribution to the aesthetic potential of the artwork under scrutiny?

This is a question that Martindale's theory raises, but does not really answer—for our great disappointment, because, as might be evident by now, this is the question that really matters to us in the following chapters.

In the next essay, therefore, I will try to solve this impasse, at least in part, not so much because I am interested in making my own contribution to Martindale's thoughts, but because this attempt seems to conveniently open up a discussion about *art criticism* as a *creative* and *artistic practice*, a discussion that, in turn, might finally allow us to get into the heart of the matter: that is, if the basic goal of the Materialities of Literature is to investigate how different materialities of communication might creatively cooperate to deterritorialise our ordinary appreciation of literature and its relation to art in general, what should we have in mind, what should we be looking for, when dedicating ourselves to a more radical mode of impressionistic criticism that more consistently abides by the post-hermeneutical agenda of the Materialities of Literature?

II

All criticism must include in its discourse (even if it is in the most indirect and modest manner imaginable) an implicit reflection on itself; every criticism is a criticism of the work and a criticism of itself

Roland Barthes



Early in *Redeeming the Text*, to elucidate how the interpretation of every text is inalienable from the present-tense situation of its reader, or how texts are not rigid structures that bear in themselves stable propositional contents that persist through social changes, Martindale examines the singularity of the act of *reading* in the act of *musical performance* (Martindale 1993:8-9): as he suggests, different musicians will always read and interpret one same score in their own way, performing different songs, and no matter how many times one same musician might interpret one same score, her performance will always be somehow different from all her other performances.

Think, for instance, how J.S. Bach's *Prelude in G* to his *Cello Suites* is distinctly performed by Mstislav Rostropovich, Jacqueline du Pré, or Yo-Yo Ma.

The singularity of musical performances is not, of course, the product of changes in the scores being read, but in the many contingencies that somehow influence the musicians' present-tense reading situations: their backgrounds—such as their personal pasts, traits, and tastes, the tradition in which they were cultivated, their influences, adversaries, and aspirations, their anxieties for originality, perfection, and appreciation—, as well as the material quality of their instruments, the idiosyncrasies of the circumstances in which they are delivering their performances, and even the social, political, and cultural scenarios that are motivating them to deliver their performances in the first place.

Martindale provides this example to explain the “phenomenal mechanics” of the text and the acts of reading and interpreting it, but, the way I see it, there is a problem in his choice of study that is worthy of a more analytical attention, because it brings to surface a fundamental aspect of his idea of ‘classical reception’ that complicates its relation to his understanding of *criticism*: if the way a musician interprets a score through her performance is to music as ‘classical reception’ is to a modern reading of the classics, then ‘classical reception’, for Martindale, happens necessarily *in art*.

Richard Thomas’s article on Bob Dylan’s “Lonesome Day Blues” is a good example: the article itself is an *observation* or *constative* exercise that takes a modern reappreciation of the classics as its *object* of analysis—it observes or verifies how a contemporary musician critically reappreciates a work from the classics to use it as a creative mediation for the making of an entirely new text, of an entirely new literary artwork.

Another example that I would like to consider is the antithetical criticism that Martindale writes on Titian’s ‘classical reception’ of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (VIII AD) in two of his canvases: *Diana and Actaeon* (1559) and *The Death of Actaeon* (1575); however, in order to make this whole investigation easier and richer for us, I believe I should make some preliminary remarks about the main subject of Martindale’s commentary.

Philip II of Spain (1527-98), then a young prince, sat for Tiziano Vercellio (1488-1576), then an already elderly artist, in two occasions: first in Milan, where he painted *Philip’s Portrait in Sayo*, between December 1548 and January 1549, and then in Augsburg, where he painted *Philip’s Portrait in Armour*, this time between November 1550 and February 1551. (see Hale 2012:319; Prado Museum 2020) Apparently, Philip was so impressed by Titian’s paintings that he hired him to work as what was practically his



private artist, not only promising him a generous annual remuneration funded by the Spanish Treasure in Genoa, but also paying in advance for many of his canvases—five of which were to be inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, probably in an Italian translation by Titian’s close friend Ludovico Dolce (1508-1568). (Hale 2012:319-20) Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—whose original title, *Metamorphōseōn Librī*, means something like *The Books of Transformation*—is a very peculiar literary work: it is basically a historical



chronicle, but its almost 12 thousand verses vary a lot in style and also in genre, gathering mythological narratives as well as registers of factual events, such as Julius Caesar's bloody administration of Rome (approx. 49-44 BC). What mostly interests Titian in the *Metamorphoses*, however, are its mythological accounts, particularly the narratives about Diana, the Roman goddess of hunt, and Actaeon, a Theban hero, two characters who would become the dramatic epicentre of two of his most notorious paintings: the aforementioned *Diana and Actaeon* and *The Death of Actaeon*, both displayed today at the National Gallery of Scotland, in Edinburgh.

Sheila Hale, probably the greatest authority in Titian's works today, explains the following about his painting of Ovid's strange chronicle:

Titian—or Dolce, who may have written his first letters to Philip—called his mythological works for Philip *poesie*, or poems, a word in literary currency at the time to describe paintings taken from classical poets and *to indicate that painting could have a similar effect on the intellect and senses as poetry*. After Philip's *Danaë*, which is smaller than the others and which he did not consider part of the group, he would deliver five more: *Venus and Adonis* (Madrid, Prado), *Perseus and Andromeda* (London, Wallace Collection), *Diana and Actaeon* and its pair *Diana and Callisto* (shown together on a rotating basis in the London National Gallery and Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland) and the *Rape of Europa* (Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). Although not originally commissioned as a series or for a particular room—Philip, who did not yet have a permanent residence, may have intended them for his bedroom in one his many country palaces—they are all of roughly similar dimensions, loosely linked by narrative and thematic threads taken from the *Metamorphoses*, and Titian seems to have envisaged a notional room in which they would hang in pairs. [...] *And just as Ovid edited the much older and more detailed Greek myths in order to dramatize that underlying theme, so Titian took liberties with Ovid to convey, in a way that would be rivalled only by Shakespeare, the many manifestations of the most primitive and overwhelming of human emotions: the sadness of anticipated loss, the suspense, danger, cruelty and unfairness, and the sheer, anarchic fun. It was in these paintings that Titian, to paraphrase Marco Boschini, showed himself to be the dispenser of all emotions and the plenipotentiary of the senses.* (Hale 2012:320-21; my emphases in the beginning and in the end)

In the following pages I will examine what I believe are the most relevant aspects of Martindale’s criticism to our discussion—the aspects that focus on his idea of ‘classical reception’ proper and the ones that focus on the basic idea of *poesie*, which he debates rather *en passant* even though it is clearly a fundamental characteristic of Titian’s paintings—to try to begin an explanation of why I believe his understanding of *criticism* eventually results, from a post-hermeneutical perspective, in an *underperformance* of *criticism* as a *performative, artistic, creative* practice.

Martindale’s criticism goes like this:



Titian – Ovid – Titian

[0] Titian produced a series of Ovidian paintings, which he called *poesie* (i.e. free poetic evocations rather than illustrations) based on the *Metamorphoses* which he apparently read in Dolce’s translation (1553). Inter-art analogies are frequently regarded with suspicion, or treated as wholly invalid. The comparison of painting and poetry, while once serving to raise the status of pictures, is also, it can be argued, locked in a traditional hierarchy of semiotic value, whereby the word is privileged over the image. [1] Paintings, however, can usefully be represented as texts, which always have to be read (there is no ‘pure’ vision in that sense), according to certain semiotic conventions (though these conventions may be breached, extended or subverted in the process), and an ‘educated’ reader of Titian’s *poesie* could not be prevented from ‘completing’ the meaning through her knowledge of Titian’s ‘source’ in Ovid. Similarly, references to other works of art (like the use of Laocoon group in Titian’s ‘Bacchus and Ariadne’) operate in a way that is analogous to ‘allusion’ within literary texts. [2] At all events, Titian’s paintings can prompt readings of Ovid different from many current today. For example, the story of Actaeon, in Galinsky’s view of it, is treated by Ovid in an ultimately unserious way. ‘The subject,’ he writes, ‘cries out for a theodicy... but Ovid glosses over it in a glib transition.’ Any sympathy we might feel for Actaeon is, according to

him, dissipated by the distracting bravura catalogue of dogs, the paradoxical and over-graphic description of Actaeon's death, and the trivial discussion it provokes. This reading is substantially at odds with the reception of Ovid's story, both in literature and in art, where we continually encounter a response to its darker possibilities. Titian chose to paint what are arguably its two finest narrative moments. In *Diana and Actaeon* [...], Actaeon blunders, unsuspectingly, upon Diana and her nymphs in their grotto. In *The Death of Actaeon* [...], Actaeon, now transformed into a stag, or rather a stag/man, is torn to pieces by his own hounds, in the pitiless presence of the goddess. [3] In his *Diana and Actaeon*, Titian employs a richer colouring, and displays a greater interest in contrasted textures than in his previous work. These characteristics can be attributed to the influence of Veronese, but we might see them too as providing a painterly equivalent for aspects of Ovid's text (as Titian may have read it, and as we might read it). Ovidian virtuosity is evident in the catalogue of thirty-three dogs with inventively canine names (206-25), brought to an insouciant conclusion with the words *quoseque referre mora est* ('and others whom it would hold us up to mention'). The disproportionate length of this epic-style catalogue has a transgressive effect, as the confusion of the critics suggests. This is the artistry which proclaims artistry. [4] Titian's image too has been partly read as a 'manifesto for the art of painting'; for example, there is the way that the carvings are reflected in the water below, or that the whiteness of Diana's naked flesh is given emphasis by the contrast with the clothed body of her black attendant, or that her swerve away from Actaeon is represented by the 'unrealistic' fusion of two phases in that recoil so that back and breast are simultaneously seen by the viewer. But the drama of the event is not neglected amidst all this technical display. In particular the brilliant (and sinister?) red hanging, which isolates Actaeon, could be seen as increasing the sense of movement, and heightening the tension with its suggestion of violation. (Martindale 1993:60-1)

To be fair, I do not believe that Martindale's commentary here is an aggressive case of hermeneutical reterritorialisation—at least there are not enough verbal evidences in his text for me to think so—, but his overall project is in fact that of suggesting an analytical, constative, or descriptive *reading* of the canvases—that is, a contemplation of a pictorial or imagerial materiality through a hermeneutical reduction, as if these pictures or images were texts to be read—by means of a logic and a discourse that, albeit enriching, remain confined to their own ascetic technicality.

Although Martindale explores Jauss's and Gadamer's theories only superficially in his book, he does explore them deeply enough to guarantee that what he understands as 'classical reception' is an interpretation process that happens in the present-tense reading situation of the artist who 'receives' a classical work when producing a new artwork—a process that can finally be examined by a critic who is observing it from the outside. The problem of this criticism routine is that in the end all the objects criticised, irrespective

of their materialities, are reduced to *hermeneutical entities*, to *texts* potentially interesting to some kind of interpretative *reading*; this means that, for this criticism routine, aesthetic experience ultimately boils down to understandability, and understandability ultimately boils down to readability. It is probably no mystery that Martindale's analysis here follows very closely a common idea that the fundamental role of the Humanities is to explain the world precisely in its readability, according to "a grammar whose understanding would allow the observer to decipher the very objects/texts in question as surfaces, [so] that all these surfaces would ultimately yield some meaning." (Gumbrecht 2003:172) Of course, I am not saying that readability and understandability cannot or should not take part in aesthetic experiences, because some aesthetic experiences might in fact depend on or spring from readability and understandability at some point; the problem is when criticism *reduces* aesthetic experiences to readability and understandability *to the detriment* of a number of other forms of enjoyment that do not depend on the decipherment or clarity of meaning. One of the reasons why I chose to discuss Martindale's criticism on Titian's 'classical reception' is the fact that we can find in his very discourse evidences of how the materiality of painting resists a read-for-meaning interpretation, in contrast to the immateriality of literature in the ordinary sense, which requires that a reader carefully decipher its meaning so that she can enjoy it: in the context of our discussion, what Martindale suggests in the section that I indicated as [1] is consistent with his idea that every antithetical criticism should be grounded on a case of differentiation that somehow connects two texts—that is, if he wishes to provide, through the prism of his own understanding of 'classical reception', a commentary on Titian's 'reception' of Ovid, he must first make sure that Titian's paintings are texts to be read, so that they can offer *différences* of meaning to be investigated. But, of course, they are not texts, and therefore any attempt to specifically read them for meaning, although not necessarily a wrongful choice, does tend to be a clumsy and insufficient undertaking; and a good indication that meaning begins to fail in a read-for-meaning interpretation of a pictorial materiality such as Titian's works is Martindale's own change of analytical perspective between what I indicated as [2] and [3]: in [2], as he examines Karl Galinsky's interpretation of Ovid's treatment of the Diana and Actaeon myths in the *Metamorphoses*, Martindale eventually examines Ovid's *narratological* strategy in his *text* or *discourse*—what he specifies as "the *distracting* bravura *catalogue* of dogs, the *paradoxical* and *over-graphic description* of Actaeon's death, and the *trivial discussion* it provokes." (Martindale 1993:61; my emphases); in [3], however, as he discusses Titian's canvases more closely, he changes his

analytical perspective from the *textual* or *discursive* aspects of a set of *narratological* strategies to the *deictic*, *descriptive*, *haptic*, and *colorgraphic* aspects of an *imagerial narratology*—something we can see in his commentary that “[in] his *Diana and Actaeon*, Titian employs a *richer colouring*, and *displays* a greater interest in *contrasted textures* than in his previous work.” (Martindale 1993:61; my emphases). This attention to colour, texture, and lighting eventually progresses into a deeper examination of this *imagerial narratology* in Titian’s paintings, an examination of the more properly *affective* impact of the canvases on the overall myth of Diana and Actaeon—something that becomes evident in [4], when he observes, for example, that the reflections on the water at the bottom of the picture, Diana’s nudity associated to the purity of her fair skin, and the red piece of clothing that separates Actaeon from the rest of the scene finally produce a greater “atmosphere,” or, in his own words, a “heightening tension with its suggestion of violation.” (Martindale 1993:62) From this brief anatomical survey of mine, we should be able to see that perhaps the greatest problem of this criticism routine is the fact that, by assuming that aesthetic experiences ultimately boil down to understandability, and that understandability ultimately boils down to readability, even the most *perceptual* features of an artwork are bound to be reduced to often *overly conceptual* appreciations; and, by constantly reducing even the most perceptual features of an artwork to conceptual appreciations, literary criticisms such as Martindale’s—however enriching they might eventually be in terms of information about the artwork itself or in terms of epistemological advancements—tend to remain tied up to an objectification of aesthetic experiences, crippling an exploration of all those bodily dimensions that are more properly connected to our senses, emotions, and affections. In fact, in the beginning of his criticism [0], Martindale briefly informs us that he will discuss Titian’s *poesie*, what he defines, quite precisely actually, as “free poetic evocations rather than illustrations” (Martindale 1993:60)—that is, products of subjective inspiration or impression, as opposed to objective remediations of meaning. As Hale observes in her paragraph above, in Titian’s time, *poesie* referred to the idea that painting—particularly paintings based on works of classical poets—could have on the intellect and the senses an effect that was similar to that of poetry, that is, the idea that it could excite in a person an aesthetic pleasure that was closer to a sense of imaginable but intangible involvement than to a sense of categorical, exhaustive comprehension. She never makes this connection in her book, but, if her contention proceeds, then Titian’s idea of *poesie* is certainly related to the principle in art

and art criticism known as *ut pictura poesis*—which literally translates as “as is painting, so is poetry”—, a principle normally connected to Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (c.20 BC):

Poetry resembles painting. Some works will captivate you when you stand very close to them and others if you are at a greater distance. This one [the latter] prefers a darker vantage point, that one [the former] wants to be seen in the light since it feels no terror before the penetrating judgment of the critic. This pleases only once, That will give pleasure even if we go back to it ten times over. (*AP* 361-5)

I say Martindale’s reference to Titian’s *poesie* is curious because, if criticism, as he suggests, is ultimately a hermeneutical practice worried about the readability and understandability of an artwork, even the criticism of cases of transmedial *poesie* such as Titian’s paintings, however enlightening it might be, will ultimately lead to a reterritorialisation of this *poesie* into some kind of hermeneutical logic, into the objective linguistic grounds that first inspired an artist to transcend language through another medium, a medium whose materiality in fact allows her to physically bring into the world those evocations triggered by the hermeneutical immateriality of a poem—which means that Martindale’s logic of criticism here suggests a potential contradiction or antinomy, not to say a potential disservice, to the very principle of *poesie*. In fact, as I have just discussed, Martindale’s *reading* of Titian’s canvases eventually leads him to a *deictic enumeration* of what he can *see* in them, never to transcend into what kinds of *impact* all this that he can see eventually has *on him*, and surely he never transcends into a discussion of what he thinks about what he is feeling by seeing, what kinds of relation all this has with his own world, what he can do with all this now that he has experienced and understood it better. It is true, artworks can be enjoyed immediately, and many artworks can be enjoyed even more if the person who enjoys them is assisted by some kind of external criticism or theory—which I believe is somehow the case of Einstein’s metaphor in my **Introduction**—, but I would say that the whole problem of Martindale’s conception of *criticism* is that, as a read-for-meaning interpretative exercise, it is bound to remain a constative practice of *revision* and *evaluation*: that is, Martindale tends to consider that the role of criticism is to retrace the background, structure, and content of an artwork in order to explain it in other words, so that the tensions between what it basically means and what it can mean are made evident—and the problem is that this seems to be the case even when the artwork in question is itself an attempt to go beyond objective

interpretations, revisions, and evaluations. Again, I am not saying that interpretations based on revision and evaluation are themselves a natural problem, because they might in fact allow a person to have an aesthetic experience that she would not be able to have otherwise; but this method of criticism, if not improved into a better inquiry into the affective impacts of the artwork it is criticising, might ultimately lead to a retreat or at least to a confinement to an objectifying hermeneutical practice—a practice that, in fact, is ultimately also a retreat or a confinement to the Cartesian self-reference that so systematically overlooks more sensual, somatic, and aesthesic experiences in favour of an understanding of the world that is often too widely predicated on a person's consciousness, on the limits of her capacity of intellection of her material reality. For Martindale, then, since aesthetic experience ultimately boils down to understandability, and understandability ultimately boils down to readability, the impressions suggested in a criticism tend to consist of, or at least to objectively depend on, some clarity of meaning, even though in practice the real pleasure of many aesthetic experiences might in fact spring from an obscurity or an intangibility of meaning, from a complete unfathomableness of meaning. I emphasise, for the last time, that I am not saying that understandability, readability, and analytical discourses are problems that naturally invalidate all modes of criticism; but, if Martindale had gone further in his analysis, by going deeper into more subjective impressions of his own, his criticism would have already provided us a more emotional and stimulating appreciation of *both Titian and Ovid*: artworks are amazing creatures, but so are people; and, certainly, getting to admire artworks through other people, instead of just having them reconsidered through the objective revision and evaluation of its parts, is bound to be a much more alluring experience.

Take, for instance, what new impressions we might have of Ovid's treatment of the erotic relationship between Diana and Actaeon if we simply appreciate it through the prism of the tragic irony that seems to spring from the *Pathosformeln* that become visible when we place the two paintings side by side—an arrangement, Hale explains, that had probably been planned by Titian himself.

In *Diana and Actaeon*, we can see, on the left hand side of the canvas, Actaeon standing on a favourable position; probably seduced by the female voices coming from behind a large piece of cloth that is there precisely to shield these women's nudity, he surprises them, Diana in particular, in what becomes an enticingly voyeuristic display for him and for most of the painting itself: from his privileged position, Actaeon is able to have a thorough look at Diana's naked body, at the pearly white of her skin, at the singular

beauty that makes her unique even among all the nymphs bathing with her. However, we can see, on the right hand side of the canvas, that Diana sits on a completely vulnerable position; there is not yet, in this painting, any suggestion of Diana's ultimate reaction to Actaeon's audacity—her turning him into a stag—, but, if the painting emphasises the eroticism of the women's naked bodies through a light colouring and a subtle game of chiaroscuro in which the lit contours are precisely the contours of their flesh, so does it announce the hero's tragic end in the women's facial expressions and body language—Diana, in particular, seems outraged.

In *The Death of Actaeon*, we can see now, on the left hand side of the canvas, Diana standing on a favourable position; offended by the man's audacity in spying on her in a moment of vulnerability, she hunts him down as an animal even though he is still half a man, in what becomes an enticingly perverse display for her and for most of the painting itself: from her privileged position, Diana, the skilful bow woman that she is, is able to lock Actaeon in her aim and watch as he is violently chased by his own dogs—what we can also understand as a case of voyeurism, even if a sadistic one. Like in the first canvas, we can see a subtle game of chiaroscuro, but this time the pictorial symbology is completely inverted: whereas, in the first sequence, the illuminated surfaces sought to expose the women's beauty and nudity as an object of desire that is therefore also an object of violence, in the second sequence, the illuminated surface of Diana's torso and breast—this one a common symbol of feminine chastity and fertility—are actually what emphasises her in her position of power.

Martindale is so worried about scrutinising and enumerating all the supposedly *readable* details in Titian's paintings, that he literally does not see the big picture; for example, he does not pay attention to how, in the picture, the *disposition of its parts*—one of the most affective extra-linguistic characteristics of an image—in fact inspires a whole tragic irony set up upon a dichotomy between eroticism and vulnerability, on the one side, and death and dominance, on the other.

Martindale seems hugely interested in revising and evaluating Titian's *poesie*, and maybe even the whole idea of *poesie* itself, but, for him, it is clear that *poesie* is a faculty and an activity restricted to the artist, a faculty and an activity that, for a critic, are only items to be objectively revised and evaluated from a distance, from a constative angle (see Martindale 1993:35-39)—a really troublesome matter, considering how *poesie* seems to be a person's very clear affective reaction to aesthetic experiences, whether of linguistic or extra-linguistic nature, and aesthetic experiences are unquestionably

phenomena that every critic must open themselves to if they want to write an efficient art criticism.

In a few words: criticism should be more like *poesie* itself, and not an exhausting clarification of a case of *poesie*.

In fact, this conflict between objectivity and subjectivity brings me to one last problem to discuss before we can finally move on to the next chapter.

Further in his book, in a section suggestively titled “Prelude: the Critic as Artist,” Martindale, following in Bloom’s footsteps, contends that criticisms such as the ones he provides can also be considered *artistic practices* themselves:

One of the most characteristic strategies of poststructuralist criticism is to collapse traditional categories, and (usually) to follow this by the construction of fresh ones. [...] Deconstruction at its best is thus a mode of *defamiliarization*, designed to provoke us into fresh apprehensions of fresh possibilities of meaning and to rescue us from what George Steiner terms ‘the sloth we call common sense’ (at its worst it is rather a set of stock moves and tropes and repetitive gestures).

According to Bloom all readings are ‘*misreadings*,’ either ‘strong’ or ‘weak.’ Strong misreadings are principally effected by poets who both exploit and distort the work of their predecessors in a powerfully executed interpretative ‘swerve.’ [...] *On this view, criticism, necessarily ‘belated,’ can be redescribed as a sort of prose-poetry, and poetry as a sort of verse-criticism.* [...] Now a claim that all readings are misreadings, misprisions, certainly need not imply that ‘anything goes,’ or that all readings are purely subjective or of equal interest and value. [...] Rather it can point to a particular way of conceptualizing the interpretative process, namely that any interpretation, unless it is mere tautology, must be a *re-stating* and thus necessarily *different* from whatever is interpreted; it is in that sense that all criticism can be described as allegory, as a-saying-in-other-words. Often indeed criticism concerns itself, rather obviously, with filling the ‘gaps,’ with the ‘not-said’ of the text. [...] (Martindale 1993:35-7; my emphasis in the middle)

As we saw a while ago, if the way a musician interprets a score through her performance is to music as ‘classical reception’ is to a modern reading of the classics, then ‘classical reception’, for Martindale, happens necessarily *in art*—which, as we have seen, is the case of Dylan’s ‘classical reception’ of Virgil, Atwood’s ‘classical reception’ of Homer, and Titian’s ‘classical reception’ of Ovid.

But, well, if this is the case, how come Martindale’s criticisms in his book, which clearly take ‘classical reception’ as an *object* of analysis, can also be considered *artistic practices* themselves?

Considering these lines above, Martindale's answer seems considerably straightforward: criticisms such as Thomas's analysis of Dylan's 'classical reception' of Virgil and such as his own analysis of Titian's 'classical reception' of Ovid can be considered artistic practices because they are misreadings that, in their own belatedness, in their own present-tenseness, try to defamiliarise the meaning of an artistic text by carefully differentiating it into a new text—and, since this new text seeks to expand the meaning of that initial artistic text by collapsing traditional categories to build or open space to fresh ones, it can only be itself creative and artistic.

But can it?

I mean, are criticisms such as Martindale's and Thomas's—and even my own, on Titian's canvases—all that creative and *all that artistic* after all?

My contention, of course, is that, from a post-hermeneutical perspective, no, they are not.

But I do have some observations, and reservations.

It is a common sense in linguistics and literary studies that the Ancient Greek verb *poiein* means 'to make', 'to produce', or 'to create'; but it is rarely highlighted the fact that this verb was often formally used to tell apart those things produced by *nature*, which seek to favour nature itself, from those things produced by *people*, which seek to favour people in their human nature and in their human needs—including those things that appeal to these people in their senses, such as a song, a painting, a sculpture, an ornament, or, well, a poem.

The Ancient Greek verb *poiein* means, therefore, to *deliberately* bring into existence something that *intentionally* leads to changes *to* people, or *in* people, for the betterment *of people*.

I think this etymological precision helps us understand what Martindale, still following in Bloom's footsteps, wants to say when he refers to his own criticisms as *prose-poetries*.

I do believe, and I do not think that this is really a problematic matter, that Martindale's and Thomas's criticisms are perfectly *creative* exercises in their own, hermeneutical way:

Were it not for Thomas's criticism of Dylan's "Lonesome Day Blues," we would hardly be able to notice the tragic irony that binds this song—its lyrics, but also all that comes with it, from its creator and melody to what they represent to their social, political, and cultural contexts—to Virgil's *Aeneid*—again, the epic poem itself, but also what it

and its creator represented to a Roman society on its way to a hubristic clash with its own imperialistic ambitions.

Similarly, were it not for Martindale's criticism of Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* and *The Death of Actaeon*, we would hardly be able to notice that these two paintings, particularly as the exciting beginning and the agonistic end of what is eventually a sad story, might in fact be a much more heartbreaking treatment of a textual narrative that is itself mostly grounded on a comic discourse.

In other words, both Thomas's and Martindale's criticisms shed some light on new regions of interest in the original artwork, regions that were initially in the shadows, so that we can look at it from a new perspective—what, in turn, might allow us to work on new impressions on this original artwork.

However, as I anticipated a while ago, we must always have in mind the fact that Thomas's and Martindale's criticisms are fully oriented by a hermeneutical epistemology, so that what Martindale—and Thomas and all the other critics oriented by Martindale's idea of 'classical reception'—understands as *poetry*, or as *creativity*, can be sufficiently accepted as an *enlargement of meaning*, that is, as the defamiliarisation of one text by another text, as the differentiation of an original text in a derivative text, as the collapse of traditional categories natural to one text through the construction of new categories by an emerging text—and all this always through the words of an objective prosaic discourse invested in its own objectivity.

A post-hermeneutical epistemology does not presuppose, and surely does not seek, the destruction or the end of hermeneutics; what it presupposes is that there are dimensions of aesthetic experiences that are not activated by just a decipherment of meaning, dimensions that are affective precisely because they are ante or extra-linguistic, dimensions that are more properly impressionistic because they are not simply aroused by a person's intellectuality, but also, and more vehemently, by her sensuality.

Post-hermeneutics does not disregard the hermeneutical dimensions of an artwork; what it seeks is to try to fathom out the benefits—personal, social, cultural, political etc.—of being aware, and of being able to explain such awareness, that we are not simply moved by our conceptual movements of reason, but also, and more often than not, by our perceptual movements of unreason, by our affections, appetites, and desires.

And what is art if not the nodal point where all these conceptual and perceptual dimensions find themselves in tension?

In this sense, a hermeneutical understanding of *poetry* or *creativity* such as Martindale's is not naturally wrong, it is not naturally invalid, but it is likely to be insufficient for a more comprehensive appreciation of the literary art in our contemporaneity, especially if this art is being surveyed by a researcher in the Materialities of Literature; and, this being the case, *criticism*, as Martindale understands it, tends to *underperform* as criticism as a whole, for it does not account for all those dimensions of aesthetic experiences that, although likely to be in harmony or in tension with hermeneutical dimensions, are not themselves hermeneutical in nature.

Now, in a final nod to Bloom's influence on his thought, Martindale, as I have already mentioned, does seem to indicate that the criticisms he provides in his book are also in their own way *artistic*, but, truth be told, he subtly evades a firm conclusion to such a polemic claim by providing a commentary that is in practice dedicated to Bloom's theory, not to his own:

Attempts like Bloom's to dilute the difference between artistic and critic often arouse charges of arrogance. Traditionalists regard criticism as a second-hand, second-order activity, in no way comparable with the productions of artistic genius (though exceptions are often made in the case of a Dr. Johnson or a Coleridge). Indeed the matter is subject to a Bloomian analysis, in which the critic, anxious about his secondariness, his belatedness, tries to displace the artist, the envied or hated father-figure, who is the very source of his authority. But there are analogous dangers with traditional approaches too. The 'humble' critic, serving his master the transcendental creative artist, becomes priest or mystagogue, expounding *the* true meaning of the work to the community of the faithful, and not infrequently issuing fatwas or denunciations of the errors, or heresies, of rivals. (Martindale 1993:39)

I should make clear that I am not saying that I do not agree with Martindale's perspective in this commentary—I do generally agree with him; my unease is the fact that he does not make a stand: the reasons why criticisms such as Thomas's and his own can be considered *creative* seem considerably clear; but what *exactly* makes these criticisms *artistic exercises* themselves?

Or, for that matter, what should we assume, what should our premises be, in order to be able to *create* criticisms that are in their own way *artistic*?

Along with the logic of creativity in criticism, this is what I intend to discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Art Criticism



As I made clear in my **Introduction**, my main contention in this study is that, if the basic goal of the Materialities of Literature is to investigate how different materialities of communication might creatively cooperate to deterritorialise our ordinary appreciation of literature and its relation to art in general, perhaps it is also the case for us to deterritorialise our ordinary understanding of *criticism* in order to make sure that we are not—even if involuntarily—retreating, or at least confining ourselves, to an overly objectifying hermeneutical cause.

A good alternative, I believe, is a more radical and creative mode of *impressionistic criticism*, one that employs contemporary media and intermediality to both transmit and complexify the thoughts, reasonings, insights, emotions, feelings, and sensations that a critic might have when appreciating a given artwork, *impressions* that, in fact, would not or could not be consistently expressed through an ordinary textuality.

As my studies unfurled, I realised that the best way to champion a more contemporary mode of impressionistic criticism is precisely to reconsider what makes a criticism impressionistic in the first place; and, as I narrowed down the best cases to trust as paradigms for my argumentations, I realised that one thinker in particular wrote not only properly impressionistic criticisms on art and literature, but also impressionistic criticisms

whose form and content reflect upon the very nature of impressionism as criticism, or criticism by impressionism: Oscar Wilde.

Although Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) is probably the most famous name in Aestheticism today, his theories are by and large belated products of an artistic and philosophical movement that had already reached a considerably advanced stage by the time he arrived at the University of Oxford in 1874. Led by Walter Pater (1839-94), Matthew Arnold (1822-88), and John Addington Symonds (1840-93), three Hellenists, this movement had many different goals, goals that were not always in consonance with each other, but which nevertheless spread out from one basic intention: “preserve Greece as an imaginative resource and a model of right conduct amid the encroachments of industrialisation, utilitarianism, and mass culture.” (Ross 2013:3)—or, in my own words, revitalise the classics so that many of their ethical, aesthetical, and epistemological premises could be healthily reappreciated, healthily reapplied, as new conditions of possibility for freedom in a society increasingly marred by the morality and the materialism of newly aggressive stages of liberalism. As we can see, these three scholars, along with Oscar Wilde and also Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1907), Vernon Lee (Violet Paget (1853-1935)), and Michael Field (Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913)), were all precursors of the very idea of ‘classical reception’ that I debated in the previous chapter—that is, the idea that the best way to deal with the classics is not to try to decipher them in the primordial essence of their meaning, but to try to benefit from an approach that is rather a presentification of some of its most remarkable qualities so that we can use them to grasp our everyday worlds in a different way.

It should come as no surprise, then, that a favourite object of study for these thinkers was the Renaissance, that one moment in European history that witnessed a ‘classical reception’ in almost all segments of society, from the hard sciences to the humanities, from religion and politics to culture and the arts.

What makes Aestheticism so peculiar among other branches of the whole Decadent Movement in Europe, therefore, is precisely this constant appeal to and renovation of the classics, this systematic work of ‘classical reception’ in many sections of the authors’ material realities, from their ways of living their everyday lives to the most complex philosophies woven into their works—including, of course, their works of *criticism*, this typically classical attitude that one can have towards the arts, especially towards art in its highest form: the art of living.

In this **Chapter Two**, then, I will discuss the rise of Oscar Wilde’s impressionistic criticism, or what he refers to as *art-criticism*, a mode of criticism that, I believe, is the beating heart of his entire philosophy of aesthetics.

Luckily for us, most of the theoretical premises that influenced Wilde’s idea of impressionistic criticism are condensed in four essays—Matthew Arnold’s “Hebraism and Hellenism,” the fourth chapter of his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869); Walter Pater’s “Preface” and “Winckelmann,” the first and last chapters of the influential *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873); and John Addington Symonds’s additional “Conclusion” to his *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1876)—, so, in my first essay of this chapter, I will revise these four texts in order to trace a very simple genealogy of the paradigms that are at the base of this idea.

As I just observed, when Wilde arrived at the University of Oxford in 1874, he found the movement that would become known to history as Aestheticism in a rather advanced stage, and the recommendations put forward by Arnold, Pater, and Symonds in these four essays pretty much summarise this movement’s intentions.

However, it is not difficult to see from his writings that Wilde was not very good at simply following recommendations; he would always find in his influences loose ends or some controversial material to be taken as basis for a radical subversion of his own, and it was not different with these scholars’ suggestions in their essays: throughout his work, Wilde would modify or expand several aspects of their ideas of criticism, relying on ethical, aesthetical, and epistemological references taken from many different sources—but, above all, relying on a broad re-evaluation of Aristotle’s *theory of ethics*, as he discusses it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (c.350BC), and Plato’s *theory of forms*, as he discusses it in the *Republic* (c.380BC).

More specifically, then, I will try to synthesise how exactly these four essays at the same time inspire and lay out the mechanics of Wilde’s impressionistic criticism, and, from this, try to explain how his ‘classical reception’ of Aristotle’s and Plato’s philosophies finally helps him elaborate an idea of impressionistic criticism that is much more sophisticated than those initially suggested or adopted by his precursors—an idea that, in fact, seems to place his whole philosophy of aesthetics in a liminal position between a *fin-de-siècle* and a *modernist* appreciation of art.

But, before we carry on to the first essay, a brief clarification.

The readers might be wondering how Wilde’s philosophy of aesthetics, developed in the second half of the 19th century, can answer questions related to materialities of

communication that were not exactly or not at all typical of that time, such as photography, cinema, digital arts, electronic literature, or multimedia installations.

What I say is that, of course, it does not answer any of these questions.

Not directly.

If there is one thing that we can immediately learn about the idea of impressionistic criticism is that there is not just one way to do impressionistic criticism, especially when it tends towards creativity.

But there are, yes, general premises on which an impressionistic criticism is normally grounded, and I believe that, if we lay them out in orderly fashion, and if we accentuate some of their theoretical or philosophical aspects, we might be able to better understand the anatomy of Wilde's idea of impressionistic criticism as a whole—what, in turn, might allow us to explore this mode of criticism entirely anew, especially in ways that are more consistent with the post-hermeneutical framework of the *Materialities of Literature*.

I

*It is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness,
of the confusion, of Christianity and its consolations, of our own age*

Virginia Woolf



The fact that the University of Oxford was the epicentre of Aestheticism, a ‘classical reception’ movement par excellence, was not a random accident: one of the most important projects of the faculty there since the early 19th century was to make the curriculum of *Litterae Humaniores* relevant to the day by relating it to modern controversies; this means that those who wished to pursue a career in the humanities, especially a scholarly career at the University of Oxford, would have to learn how to “examine the past from modern analytical perspectives,” turning it into “a mirror for contemporary debates over theology, aesthetics, politics, and philosophy.” (Smith & Helfand 1989:6) The influence of the classical tradition on British society had already been largely mediated by German Romanticism, through the works of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), but Ancient Greece itself had remained a relatively uncharted territory in Britain until the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when a new wave of expeditions to some of the old corners of the world—such as Africa, Southeast Europe, and Asia Minor—brought to the country new evidences of the Ancient Greek material culture, in the form of relics and archaeological artefacts. This influx of vestiges from the Ancient Greek tradition, associated with the reforms in political, scholarly, cultural, and curatorial practices necessary to assure them a safe place in Britain—take, for instance, the colossal expansion of the British

Museum in Greek Revival style (1800-25)—, resurrected Ancient Greece as a linguistic and cultural mythology: to the eyes of British society, it appeared older yet more sophisticated, stranger yet more illuminating, than the Latin language and the Medieval culture that had prevailed there, partly through Romanticism, but chiefly through Christianity. (see Evangelista 2009:8)



However, these are the first decades of the 19th century we are talking about.

These expeditions to Africa, Southeast Europe, and Asia Minor, they were largely products of a new wave of the British *imperialism* to the South and the East.

It is true, this expansion did bring—or extract—to British culture epistemologies that were then peripheral, as is the case of those from the Ancient Greek tradition; but, in this imperialistic scenario, and in the liberalistic one that immediately sprang from it, it did not take long for even this illuminating “reception” of Ancient Greece to be turned into an “evidence” or a “corroboration” of social supremacy:

Not only for the advocates of Hellenism, but also for many scholars, intellectuals, and educated men and women, Ancient Greece came to function as the lost original for the nineteenth century’s own modernity, its cultural and artistic ambition, its humanism and enlightenment, its democracy, and its rational and scientific culture. [...] This myth of correspondence fed into British imperial rhetoric: like Victorian Britain, Ancient Greece had been a successful nation built on commerce and colonial enterprise. And just like the modern English gentleman, the ancient Greek had been a responsible citizen and a good sportsman, loyal to the Nation and to his friends, brave in war and generous in peace, educated, well-travelled and

clean living, a living pattern of the values of civilisation and an enemy of barbarism. *Victorian England, at the height of its prosperity and political primacy, came to see itself as a modern inheritor of the Hellenic values of civility and humanism.* (Evangelista 2009:9; my emphasis in the end)

I will discuss this more carefully in the following pages, but I should anticipate that, although the Ancient Greek tradition has handed down to us many amazing works of literature—lyric and heroic poems, hymns, tragedies, philosophical treatises, and also art and literary criticisms—, its *aesthetic temperament* was mostly based on the *immediacy of form*—something we can verify, for example, in its works of architecture, in its friezes, pediments, ceramics, and, above all, in the delicate ingeniousness of its sculptures. Considering this peculiar trait of the Ancient Greek tradition, then, it is an especially sordid irony the fact that, not only did many artefacts from this tradition end up as cheap adornments in the houses of members of the British aristocracy and the wealthy bourgeoisie (Evangelista 2009:9), one of its most important symbols—the Parthenon Marbles, also known as the Elgin Marbles—was very likely stolen from its original site in Athens to become an intrinsic part of the material culture of 19th century Britain. As the controversy surrounding the Parthenon Marbles are mostly related to the ambiguous authority of international law over the laws of cultural heritage, a dispute whose intricacies I have no competence to examine, I will not discuss it in details. (for more information, see Merryman 1985) The only thing that I would like to point out about the overall message of this controversy is that, as the Parthenon Marbles were very likely looted from their original site and eventually sold to the British government in the early 19th century in spite of the very solid suspicions of looting, and as they comfortably remain in the British Museum to this very day, then we can rather fairly conclude that the laws that indirectly and controversially protect the predatory nature of a wealthy nation's imperialism, however fossilised it might be, still tend to prevail over the laws that objectively protect the origins of a cultural heritage and its worth as the material memory of a subaltern people.





As I have already observed, it is true that the influx of the Ancient Greek tradition into British society eventually enriched many dimensions of its culture, particularly its material culture at first, but we must not neglect the fact that it began as part of an imperialistic enterprise that, supported by an increasingly aggressive stage of liberalism, largely *commodified* such tradition as it was adjusted into this society.

And I say we must not neglect this process of commodification because, of course, it was not confined to material culture in the strict sense.

It was, in more precise terms, spread through many subsections of this society's whole materiality of culture.

As Stefano Evangelista points out in the paragraph above, a dominant aspect of British society's self-identification with Ancient Greece was the supposed affinity between these two cultures' paradigms of civility and humanism, an affinity that was systematically legitimated by an imperialistic discourse.

In this context, it was just a matter of time until the study of Ancient Greece became a *cultural capital* in the formative grounds of the bourgeois individual—so that it was just a matter of time until the study of Ancient Greece became a precondition for intellectual authority, and, therefore, a token or a varnish of social distinction. (Evangelista 2009:11) But, of course, social segregation does not come without its own vices: to say that the study of Ancient Greece was a vital piece in the education of the bourgeois *individual* is in the end a false contention. It is more accurate to say that it was a vital piece in the education of the bourgeois *men*; the bourgeois *women* should, rather, focus their education on the study of modern languages, much easier to learn, and, like music and painting,

much more suitable to their lowlier domestic lives. In a similar movement, in scholarly circles, such as the University of Oxford, but also the University of Cambridge, the study of Ancient Greece would become a fundamental reference for telling apart the most skilled intellectuals from the least skilled ones: with the new authority of Ancient Greek tradition in the arts and the humanities, it soon became a consensus in British intelligentsia that those scholars who studied the Ancient Greek tradition and the intricacies of the Ancient Greek language were clearly more respectable than those scholars who preferred the Roman tradition and the regularity of the Latin language. (Evangelista 2009:9-10)

But, of course, there are not only negative sides to this cultural scenario.

And the positive sides are what truly interests me here.

The fact that the University of Oxford sought to modernise the curriculum of *Litterae Humaniores* by providing methods to examine the past from contemporary analytical perspectives would become a fortunate opportunity for those who believed that the classics were being somehow ill-treated by Victorian society—and, needless to say, this was especially the case of Aestheticism: being true to this conception, thinkers like Walter Pater, Matthew Arnold, J.A. Symonds, and Oscar Wilde would mobilise themselves to study the classics properly, to provide a fair ‘classical reception’ of these new cultural elements, freeing them from the commodification processes that they were often subjected to by precisely exposing the liberating epistemologies that guide most of them—epistemologies that, in fact, if examined from a contemporary perspective, might shed some light on the very vices that motivated this society to do something like commodifying the classics in the first place.

In a few words, then, although Aestheticism was never an organised school of thought, in its broad spectrum it was, yes, a counter-cultural movement whose main adversaries were the conservatism legitimated by the growing moralism of Victorian Britain and the consumer and mass cultures that tended to commodify everything in light of a newly aggressive stage of liberalism.

As we can see, then, in theoretical or philosophical terms, Aestheticism is a mammoth cultural movement—way too big and way too complex to be discussed in its entirety in this study alone; but this is not a problem for us, because, as it should become clear as this chapter unfolds, the most relevant aspects of Aestheticism’s subversive intentions are condensed in and manifested through *art criticism*, precisely: art criticism had, and has, many different goals, but, for the members of Aestheticism, it was a strategy to formally contest and intellectually challenge the despiritualisation of art and of Victorian society

itself—so, it is only natural that art criticism, in the context of Aestheticism, should mostly take the shape of an impressionistic criticism, a mode of criticism that, simply put, delves deep into the critic’s ability to think through emotiveness.

We can find evidences of this fight against liberalism and conservatism in at least four essays by thinkers who inspired Oscar Wilde:

In “Hebraism and Hellenism”, the fourth chapter of a book very suggestively titled *Culture and Anarchy* (1869; 2006), Matthew Arnold summarises one of the most relevant *moral premises* for a ‘classical reception’ of the Ancient Greek tradition in Victorian Britain—namely, the fact that this tradition provides strategies for an ethical and intellectual freedom that is largely impossible within the constraints of a Christian morality, one of the ruling moral codes in Victorian Britain.

In the “Conclusion” of his *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1876; 1879), John Addington Symonds synthesises one of the most important aesthetic aspects of Ancient Greek art, an aspect that, the way I see it, is deep at the base of the idea of criticism by impressionism—namely, what I will describe here as a “cult of the surface,” that is, the fact that the Ancient Greek *aesthetic temperament* seems to place the source, the limits, and the nature of pleasure in the physicality, plasticity, and immediacy of form of its artworks, including its literary artworks.

In “Winckelmann”, the last chapter of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; 1980), Walter Pater, whom we may consider as the leading figure in the basic idea of impressionistic criticism, provides more details of this “cult of the surface,” organising it more properly as an object or a paradigm of critical analysis. Now, while “Winckelmann” is a long biographical investigation, the “Preface” to this book is a very short text in which Pater practically lists the basic tasks of an impressionistic criticism, or, in other words, in which he lays out what exactly a critic should look for or should orient herself by when suggesting a criticism on a given artwork.

Hopefully, after we discuss these four essays, we will have a relatively stable idea of the bases of Wilde’s idea of impressionistic criticism; to be fair, Wilde’s idea is not very different from Pater’s, but he seems to take several steps further by improving the influence of form, performativity, creativity, dialectics, and open-endedness on the structure of his criticisms—that is, by improving the very *aesthetics* of his criticisms as a means to also improve the affective and, reciprocally, the propositional potential of these criticisms.

But, before we begin this discussion, there is something I believe I should make clear, precisely in order to get it out of our way—something that is not really important for our understanding of art criticism in the context of Aestheticism, but which nevertheless might raise a few doubts.

When Wilde began his studies at the University of Oxford, a very dominant conception there was the correlation between the *humanities*—particularly history, politics, and philosophy—and Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) then emerging studies on *natural selection* and the *evolution of the species*, an conception that, in the *Literae Humaniores* programme, was legitimated by the rather strange affinity that such studies seem to share with Georg Hegel’s (1770-1831) teleology of history. This connection between Darwin’s theories on the selective evolution of the species and Hegel’s theories on the teleological evolution of history largely operated as an epistemological compass by which the humanities at that university were to be oriented, and this so-called Oxonian Hegelianism is the main reason why we find in the works of the members of Aestheticism cases of what they describe as the “race” or the “heredity of the races,” expressions that often seem strange or misplaced in the context of their discussions. (see Wilde 2007:1013-15; Arnold 2006:96; Symonds 1879:2-5) Fortunately, these references are not all that frequent, they are not all that influential upon Wilde’s thought as a whole, and most of his discussions, like those by the other members of Aestheticism, indeed focus on ‘classical reception’ proper; the reason why I clarify beforehand this aspect of Oxonian Hegelianism and its presence in Wilde’s thought is just a red flag, a reminder that sometimes readers might bump into it when examining Wilde’s ideas, particularly those in his *Oxford Notebooks*. Of course, I am not saying that the influence of Oxonian Hegelianism on Wilde’s thoughts is completely unimportant, and that therefore one should completely ignore it; but, in the overall epistemology of his thoughts, especially as he progresses into his mature writings, which are our main objects of concern here, Oxonian Hegelianism becomes less and less influential, while his reading of works by his predecessors and his reconsideration of the classics become much more complex and much more consistent.

So, the first influence I would like to discuss is Matthew Arnold’s “Hebraism and Hellenism”; published in a book titled *Culture and Anarchy*, this essay gives Wilde one of the most important *moral premises* for a new idea of criticism in the sociocultural context of Victorian Britain.

Arnold’s main adversary in this essay is what he refers to as *Hebraism*, a Semitic way of thinking and living that eventually overpowered what he in turn refers to as

Hellenism, an Indo-European way of thinking and living that, because of its origins, because of its roots, seems much more suitable to the English people.

For what I believe are rather obvious reasons, I am not going to discuss culture as a genetic inheritance, as Arnold sometimes seems to do; but, for the sake of clarity, and also for the sake of justice, I should emphasise that, in spite of what they might seem at first, Arnold's ideas are not in any way segregational: following the Darwinian-Hegelian conception of his time, what Arnold does is simply try to reaffirm Hellenism as a—very literally—more natural way for the British people to think and act, and, therefore, a way of thinking and acting that should be rehabilitated into the present.

What Arnold notices as the *contrast* between Hebraism and Hellenism—which I will refer to as a “Christian morality” and a “Hellenic ethics,” respectively, to avoid further ideas of segregation—is what really matters to us here, and what really counts as the *moral premise* behind the idea of ‘classical reception’ generally followed by the members of Aestheticism.

Arnold's main contention in his essay is that, although Christian morality and Hellenic ethics are both admirable as spiritual disciplines, for their final aim is basically the same—that is, according to him, to reach out for “the salvation or perfection of men” (Arnold 2006:96)—, the problem of Christian morality is that it tries to achieve this goal by means of a *strictness of conscience*, a strategy that is the complete opposite of the one employed by Hellenic ethics, which tries to achieve this goal by means of a *spontaneity of consciousness*. (Arnold 2006:97) This idea of Christian morality is, of course, one of the ruling moralities in Victorian Britain, and thinkers like Arnold and Symonds, and also Wilde himself, see in the ‘classical reception’ defended by Aestheticism an opportunity, not to try to dismantle or deny this morality in any way, but to try to suggest, through art, culture, and criticism, that, although this is the morality that thrived in Europe, there are other ways, perhaps better ways, to think about the relationships that people establish with themselves and with each other—relationships that are perfectly possible and legitimate in spite of this ruling morality, or even within this ruling morality. The linguistic pun between these two expressions—*strictness of conscience* and *spontaneity of consciousness*—summarises very well Arnold's defence of Hellenic ethics over Christian morality: the great disadvantage of Christian morality, he explains, is that, by setting *doing* above *knowing*, or *action* above *cultivation*, it compels the person to abdicate herself from an improvement of her own self in order to favour her own obedience to God—and disobedience, very likely a case of sin, is punishable with a banishment from salvation, from

God Himself; in other words, the disadvantage of Christian morality is that it *prescribes* and *regulates* people's *actions* in the material world to the detriment of the freedom that these people may achieve through *culture*, and prescription and regulation not only essentialise all that is available to these people, they also do this by transferring any authority of truth from them to many other supposedly more competent authorities. The word *conscience*, therefore, is consistent with the idea of a *righteous abidance by pre-established truths*, it is a person's practice of care towards herself and towards her world that is administered by extraneous authorities that control all that can be attainable as truth. Now, the great advantage of Hellenic ethics, Arnold explains, is that, by setting *knowing* above *doing*, or *cultivation* above *action*, it incentivises the person to dedicate herself to an improvement of her own self in order to favour a *comprehension* of the world—and a *lack of comprehension*, which is never a case of *sin*, is only condemnable because it might lead to some sort of *hubris*, to an *excess* or an *intemperance* that is likely to harm the person herself and, worse, those around her; in other words, the advantage of Hellenic ethics is that it *encourages* and *assists* people's *cultivation* in their material world to the detriment of the restraint that these people tend to be subjected to through *action*, and encouragement and assistance not only turn all that is available to these people into potential objects of experience and comprehension, they also do this by assuming beforehand that these people, as people who are experimenting with themselves in their own realities, are themselves possible authorities of truth. The word *consciousness*, therefore, is consistent with the idea of an *investigation of what is yet unknown so that what can be known can also be determined*, so that what can be known can eventually be confirmed as truth; it is a person's practice of austerity towards herself and towards the world that is administered by herself so that she can control and thereby perfect all that she might be able to attain as truth.

Arnold synthesises the spiritual aspects of this contrast between the strictness of conscience typical of Christian morality and the spontaneity of consciousness typical of Hellenic ethics in the following words:

The discipline of the Old Testament may be summed up as a discipline teaching us to abhor and flee from sin; the discipline of the New Testament, as a discipline teaching us to die to it. As Hellenism speaks of thinking clearly, seeing things in their essence and beauty, as a grand and precious feat for man to achieve, so Hebraism speaks of becoming conscious of sin, of awakening to a sense of sin, as a feat of this kind. [...] As one passes and repasses from Hellenism to Hebraism, from Plato to St. Paul, one feels inclined to rub one's eyes and ask

oneself whether man is indeed a gentle and simple being, showing the traces of a noble and divine nature; or an unhappy chained captive, labouring with groanings that cannot be uttered to free himself from the body of this death. (Arnold 2006:100)

Based on these different goals of Christian morality and Hellenic ethics, we can therefore affirm that, whereas Christian morality is at the same time a process of bargain and threat, in which a person's salvation rules over her perfection in the world, and in which an obedience to certain prescriptions rules over her investigation of her own curiosities in this world, Hellenic ethics is at the same time a process of dedication and accomplishment, in which a person's perfection rules over her salvation—or in which perfection is equal to salvation—, and in which a dedication to new investigations rules over any pre-established truths, truths that this person might realise as wrong or obsolete as she delves deeper into her investigations, as she works on her own changing in this world and thereby changes this world itself.

In this context, the contrast between the semantics of the words *conscience* and *consciousness* might also be clarifying: whereas the moralistic word *conscience* seems to be connected to words such as obedience, abstinence, asceticism, discipline, punishment, and belief, the libertarian word *consciousness* seems to be connected to words such as dissent, curiosity, erotics, praxis, achievement, and knowledge.

This defence of Hellenic ethics over Christian morality finally leads Arnold to one of his most poignant ideas, registered in one of his most famous quotes—or, perhaps I should say, a quote that became famous because in 1891 it would become one of Wilde's best reworked ideas:

*To get rid of one's ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature; and from the simplicity and charm of this ideal, Hellenism, and human life in the hands of Hellenism, is invested with a kind of aerial ease, clearness, and radiancy; they are full of what we call sweetness and light. [...] 'The best man is he who most tries to perfect himself, and the happiest man is he who most feels that he is perfecting himself,'—this account of the matter by Socrates, the true Socrates of the *Memorabilia*, has something so simple, spontaneous, and unsophisticated about it, that it seems to fill us with clearness and hope when we hear it. (Arnold 2006:99; my emphasis in the beginning)*

Arnold's essay is fundamental for Wilde and for us because, by laying out what exactly *criticism* should try to *challenge*, it takes a solid first step into the larger project of an *impressionistic criticism*.

It should be clear that, although Arnold chooses Hebraism—or Christian morality—as his theoretical adversary, his real enemy in his essay is, in a much broader sense, what he describes as a *strictness of conscience*: it is the fact that certain “social mechanisms,” such as moral codes or political institutions, tend, by many different means, to restrict the conditions of possibility to be or think or feel otherwise in a given social context, a restriction that is often naturalised by these same mechanisms and which normally involves disallowing or forbidding the person to take responsibility for her cultivation of herself, for her cultivation of her own individuality.

In these circumstances, *criticism* should then be oriented by Hellenism—or Hellenic ethics—so that it can always work in, aspire to, and preserve or improve a *spontaneity of consciousness*: to see things as they really are is to be able to see things as free as possible from the restraints of certain “social mechanisms,” such as moral codes or political institutions; it is to be as free as possible to explore the conditions of possibility to be or think or feel otherwise in a given social context, an exploration that is often a dissent from the restrictions naturalised by such mechanisms and which normally involves allowing or enabling the person to take responsibility for her cultivation of herself, for her cultivation of her own individuality.

It is not difficult to see from this logic—that is, from the defence of Hellenic ethics over Christian morality—that Arnold already indicates one of the most fundamental principles of *criticism* for the Ancient Greek tradition and, by extension, for Aestheticism as a whole: the blurring of the boundaries between *criticism*, *art*, and *life*, a phenomenon that we can broadly understand as an ‘aesthetics of existence’ or an ‘art of living’—that is, a way of living as if life itself were an artwork in permanent perfection.

In very simple and contemporary terms, the idea of ‘living as a work of art’ is a philosophical precept of Ancient Greek origins that basically consists of a person's ability to consciously and self-examiningly practice ways of living in and by which what she can attain or realise as truth is indissociable from, and in fact subsumed to, her ethical and moral conducts in relation to this truth. An important aspect of this precept, therefore, is that, if it postulates abstract thinking as inextricable from ethical and moral mundane activities, then what a person can attain or realise as truth is necessarily bound to how she can interact with her material reality, which means that not only is this precept bound to

historical and social contingencies, the nature and complexity of the truths that a person can attain are also bound to the nature and complexity of her interactions—which, of course, can be of many orders, such as rational, imaginative, emotional, sensual, carnal, and performative, not rarely in very experimental ways. Consequently, this person tends to diversify the nature and expand the complexity of such truths when she consciously and self-examiningly experiments with the interactions that she can establish with her material reality: the more she deterritorialises her ethical and moral conducts in relation to her material reality, in whatever orders in her power, more chances she has to attain and realise truths of new nature and complexity—what, in turn, might allow her to envisage and deliberate new forms of deterritorialisation that might lead to the possibility of attaining and realising new forms of truth, and so on.

I should emphasise, then, that an important characteristic of this Ancient Greek precept, and, by extension, of *criticism* for the members of Aestheticism, is that in their defence of ethical and moral conducts as governing principles in the composition of abstract thinking—understood, as might be clear already, as a person’s capacity to attain or realise certain forms of truth—, there is a clear attention to the human condition as chiefly, or at least primarily, a bodily condition.

Going back to Arnold’s contention, we can conclude that, in the domain of art criticism, which is the domain of a self-aware assessment of an aesthetic experience aroused by the beauty, pleasure, or enjoyment of an artistic phenomenon, “to see things as they really are” is, therefore, a critic’s ability and freedom to appreciate this phenomenon as spontaneously and immediately as possible, from the best of her own perspectives; it is to research her own reactions to a given artistic quality in order to resolve with some precision what this quality consists of, why and how it excites in her some reactions and not others, and how thinking through and eventually writing about all this can improve the aesthetic experience that first motivated this research—a practice that, in the end, might itself become a new aesthetic experience of this phenomenon.

In other words, we can conclude that, in the context of what Arnold defines as a *spontaneity of consciousness*, *art criticism* is naturally a process of self-investigation, an analytical process that tries to determine why and how certain artistic phenomena produce in the critic certain reactions and not others, considering the whole context in which the critic finds herself in relation to the artwork she is enjoying and somehow studying.

Now, in the realm of the arts proper, and particularly of the arts from the Ancient Greek tradition, how exactly is this *spontaneity of consciousness* manifested, how is it materialised, expressed, and conveyed?

John Addington Symonds never mentions Matthew Arnold in his “Conclusion” to the *Studies of the Greek Poets*, but the first part of his essay certainly establishes a dialogue with Arnold’s idea that it is a ruling principle of Hellenic ethics—and, of course, of the Hellenic aesthetics—“to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty.” So much so, indeed, that, in the beginning of his “Conclusion,” Symonds explains that, when discussing the arts from the Ancient Greek tradition, the reason why he often subordinates the other arts to *sculpture*, or the reason why he often makes the other arts gravitate around it, is the fact that, in this tradition, *sculpture* seems to be the *canonical art* whose aesthetics governs the aesthetics of all the other arts—a phenomenon that we can also observe in other cultures: take, for instance, the ruling influence of painting on the other arts from the Italian tradition, particularly during the Renaissance (Symonds 1879:375); the ruling influence of drama on the other arts from the British tradition until the early 19th century, also particularly during the Renaissance (Wilde 2007:975; 1025); or, I should add, the ruling influence of music on the other arts from the German tradition, especially during the 18th century. The great advantage of recognising the canonical art of a tradition, Symonds contends, is that, by understanding it in the intricacies of its aesthetics, we are normally able to understand with considerable accuracy all the other arts from this tradition—that is, we are normally able to understand with considerable accuracy, above all, the *aesthetic temperament* that tends to coordinate all the arts from this tradition.

In a beautiful observation about what seems to us today to have been the Ancient Greek way of life, Symonds suggests that whatever knowledge that we might gain about the Ancient Greeks seems to strengthen our convictions about *sculpture* being their canonical art:

The national games, the religious pageants, the theatrical shows, and the gymnastic exercises of the Greeks were sculpturesque. The conditions of their speculative thought in the first dawn of civilised self-consciousness, when *spiritual energy was still conceived as incarnate only in a form of flesh*, and the soul was inseparable from the body except by an unfamiliar process of analysis, harmonised with *the art which interprets the mind in all its movements by the features and the limbs*. (Symonds 1879:376; my emphases)

I find absolutely mesmerising Symonds’s explanation of the Ancient Greeks’ aesthetic temperament—that is, the idea that they understood spiritual energy conceived as *incarnate* in a form of flesh and the idea that, for them, art should interpret the mind in all its *movement* by the *features and the body*.

Right in the first paragraph of his “Preface” to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Walter Pater suggests that one of the main goals of the true student of aesthetics is to find “the formula” that most adequately expresses the manifestation of beauty in its concreteness (Pater 1980:xix)—and, well, the way I see it, Symonds seems to very skillfully formulate the grounds of the Ancient Greeks’ aesthetic temperament with this brief commentary.

A good example of what Symonds is talking about is in fact provided by Pater in “Winckelmann,” the last chapter of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*.

In this essay, Pater compares Fra Angelico’s *Coronation of the Virgin* (c.1434) to the Aphrodite of Milos (130-100BC) to emphasise the *inwardness* and therefore *obscurity* of the painting’s capacity of affection and, conversely, the *outwardness* and therefore *clarity* of the sculpture’s capacity of affection.

The *Coronation of the Virgin* depicts the glory of St. Mary, a rather common motif in the paintings of the Middle Ages, but what is really interesting about it specifically is the disposition of its parts, its palette of colours, and the characters’ vestments. First of all, the focus of the action, the coronation of St. Mary by the hands of her son, is placed in the upper centre of the picture, into what resembles a crystal ball; St. Mary and Jesus are lit by an icy halo that bathes the entire scene in bright colours—especially the characters’ vestments, completely white. A golden-haired Jesus holds a crown of pearls above St. Mary’s head; St. Mary, in a humble gesture of acceptance, leans forward towards her son, her arms courteously folded against her chest. In the lower part of the painting, depicted in richer and more contrasting colours, we can see other six characters—from left to right, St. Thomas, St. Benedict, St. Dominic, St.



Thomas, St. Benedict, St. Dominic, St. John the Evangelist, St. Peter, and St. Paul. The figures are arranged in a semi-circle, looking towards the central figures of Mary and Jesus. The overall composition is balanced and harmonious, with a focus on the central figures and their interaction.

Francis, St. Peter the Martyr, and St. Mark—, who seem to follow the coronation with their presence, but do not really observe it, do not really watch it; kneeling before the scene, they all hold their hands out in adoration, in what seems to be a circle of intimacy and privilege, but, at the same time, a circle of subordination and detachment. In its totality, the scene is depicted in rather pale colours, endowing it with a peaceful, ethereal, and also meditative atmosphere—material characteristics that seem to be noticed by Pater himself, who, on the whole, is not as gentle as I am towards the painting:

Certainly, it cannot be said of Angelico's fresco that it throws into a sensible form our highest thoughts about man and his relation to the world; but it did not do this adequately even for Angelico. *For him, all that is outward or sensible in his work—the hair like wool, the rosy nimbus, the crown of pearl—is only the symbol or type of a really inexpressible world, to which he wishes to direct the thoughts; he would have shrunk from the notion that what the eye apprehended was all.* Such forms of art, then, are inadequate to the matter they clothe; they remain ever below its level. Something of this kind is true also of oriental art. As in the middle age from an exaggerated inwardness, so in the East from a vagueness, a want of definition, in thought, the matter presented to art is unmanageable, and the forms of sense struggle vainly with it. (Pater 1980:163; my emphasis)

In fact, one of the central characteristics of Angelico's fresco, which is also a very central characteristic in Christian art in general, is its general sense of *intangibility*: the crown, the nimbus, the vestments, and even the postures of the characters might provide an overall feel of beauty, but, in the end, they always announce the existence of deeper truths that are not to an ordinary person on Earth to attain.

St. Mary's purity and loyalty, Jesus's nobility and wisdom, the saints' devotion and adamant faith in both these characters, our painful and laboured access to the comfort and salvation of the Holy Spirit—all this information is suggested in Angelico's fresco, but precisely to emphasise the seclusion of all that is holy from our sinful earthly existence, and, therefore, to reaffirm the progressive retreat of this holiness, of this potential state of grace, into some kind of sublimity.

In "Odysseus' Scar," probably his most influential essay, Erich Auerbach comments about Abraham and Isaac's troublesome narrative in Genesis 22:1:

"And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said to him, Abraham! and he said, Behold, here I am." Even this opening startles us when we come to it from Homer. Where are the two speakers? We are not told. The reader, however, knows that they

are not normally to be found together in one place on earth, that one of them, God, in order to speak to Abraham, must come from somewhere, must enter the earthly realm from some unknown heights or depths. Whence does he come, whence does he call to Abraham? We are not told. He does not come, like Zeus or Poseidon, from the Aethiopians, where he has been enjoying a sacrificial feast. Nor are we told anything of his reasons for tempting Abraham so terribly. He has not, like Zeus, discussed them in set speeches with other gods gathered in council; nor have the deliberations in his own heart been presented to us; unexpected and mysterious, he enters the scene from some unknown height or depth and calls: Abraham! (Auerbach 2003:8)

We can see, then, a consistency between the topography and iconography of Angelico's portrayal of the coronation of St. Mary and the rhetoric of the biblical account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac: in both cases, we, the people who enjoy or somehow experience these artefacts aesthetically—whether we consider the Old Testament an artwork in the strict sense or not—are required to fill in gaps that, although deliberately left open to us, are bound to remain that way or to have any sense of completeness progressively deferred.

Now, our aesthetic experience is completely different if we find ourselves in the presence of the Aphrodite of Milos, this two-metre tall female figure whose main features are clearly her sensual nudity and, for us today, also her missing arms and the missing plinth upon which her left arm was probably resting. But, although these features might be those commonplaces that normally identify her today, in our age of mechanical reproduction, it seems evident that what best characterises her in the whole of her parts is the harmony and balance of her posture—the lightness with which she rests on her legs, the smoothness of her facial expression, and the unprotected skin of her torso, which is, of course, a



central element in the lustfulness that defines her. We can also notice that much of her bodily attraction, much of the concupiscence that characterises her as the goddess of fleshly love, is transmitted by a subtle game of haptics and scopophilia: she seems

perfectly in control of her own nudity, from the conspicuous firmness of her torso and her breasts—signs of sexual allure but also fertility—to the mystery of her sex and her lower limbs, concealed by a rather thin piece of clothing.

Compared to the hermeticism of Angelico's painting, the Aphrodite of Milos does not seem to deprive us from exploring our senses, she does not retreat herself to some kind of eternally deferred comprehension—on the contrary: her sensuality is visible and palpable on the surface of the marble, and even the suggestion of the carnality of her lower body springs from a tangible prohibition and a visible concealment. She is aware of her own sensuality and is not afraid to invite us to contemplate her in all the physicality of her feminine beauty.

In a much friendlier approach, Pater comments about this sculpture:

The mind begins and ends with the finite image, yet loses no part of the spiritual motive. This motive is not lightly and loosely attached to the sensuous form, as its meaning to an allegory, but saturates and is identical with it. The Greek mind had advanced to a particular stage of self-reflexion, but was careful not to pass beyond it. [...] In Greek thought, on the other hand, the “lordship of the soul” is recognised; that lordship gives authority and divinity to human eyes and hands and feet; inanimate nature is thrown into the background. But just there Greek thought finds its happy limit; it has not yet become too inward; the mind has not yet learned to boast its independence of the flesh; the spirit has not yet absorbed everything with its emotions, nor reflected its own colour everywhere. (Pater 1980:164; my emphasis)

In fact, one of the central characteristics of the Aphrodite of Milos, which, as Arnold, Pater, and Symonds observe, is also a very central characteristic in Ancient Greek art in general, is precisely its sense of *tangibility*: her serene expression, the nudity of her torso, front and back, the attractive secrecy of her flesh, the sweetness but also the eroticism that emanate from her posture—all these elements provide a complete feel of her beauty, of her wholesomeness, and they are very clearly an end in themselves, announcing the existence of worldly truths that virtually any person on Earth can attain if she invests herself in a search for them.

Her beauty, in other words, is not *allegorical*, it is not a shape whose substance is eternally deferred into some kind of truth alienated from itself; and her beauty is surely not *exegetical*, it is not some kind of empty or faulty surface always in need of deeper meanings to be attributed to or extracted from it so that it can be better apprehended by those who admire her.

Her beauty is indistinguishable from herself in her own presence, in her own form, plasticity, and physicality.

Earlier in “Odysseus’ Scar,” when still discussing Eurycleia’s recognition of the wound on Odysseus’s leg, Auerbach observes that, although this mark brings back to her long-forgotten memories of her master’s incident with a boar, this incident, in narratological terms, is not portrayed as a digression or a flashback. Contrary to what we would intuitively assume, this incident, in the narrative, is always depicted as a present-tense event, its narration is always a present-tense account of an action, regardless of the fact that this event happened long before the ruling chronotope of the *Odyssey* itself.

About this constant presentness of the narrative and its narration, Auerbach comments that:

To be sure, the aesthetic effect thus produced was soon noticed and thereafter consciously sought; but the more original cause must have lain in the basic impulse of the Homeric style: to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations. Nor do psychological processes receive any other treatment: here too nothing must remain hidden and unexpressed. With the utmost fullness, with an orderliness which even passion does not disturb, Homer's personages vent their inmost hearts in speech; what they do not say to others, they speak in their own minds, so that the reader is informed of it. (Auerbach 2003:6)

We can see, then, a consistency between the superficiality and immediacy of the Aphrodite of Milos and the rhetoric of the Homeric account of Eurycleia’s recognition of Odysseus’s scar: in both cases, we, the people who enjoy or somehow experience these artefacts aesthetically, are not really required to fill in any gaps, because there are not any gaps to be filled with some substance that is not already somehow prompted to our senses; every sense of completeness that we might experience when enjoying these artefacts is based on their proximity to us, so that any new sense of beauty that we might experience when enjoying them is a subjective process of difference and repetition triggered by the overtness of their eminently plastic aesthetics.

Symonds also takes the contrast between the *inwardness* of those artworks somehow influenced by a Christian morality and the *outwardness* of the Ancient Greek art as a paradigm for asserting the superiority of the latter, but his argument takes a slightly different turn in comparison to Arnold’s and Pater’s arguments.

Like Arnold, Symonds seems to recognise the conflict between the strictness of conscience typical of Christian morality and the spontaneity of consciousness typical of Hellenic ethics, and, like Pater, he seems to recognise these two qualities materialised in the aesthetics of their respective artistic traditions; however, although still favouring it, he does assume that Ancient Greek art has its own *sombre* or *painful* side that we, modern appreciators of this remote tradition, tend to overlook, that we often tend to take a bit too lightly. According to him, it is perfectly natural for us today to appreciate artworks objectively materialised from a substance of *pain*—such as Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (c.1499), Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (c.1599), Beethoven’s *Symphony in C minor* (1808), or Goethe’s *Faust* (1829)—, but, for the Ancient Greeks, also pain was a substance to be subordinated to the superficial, sensual, and tangible beauty that seemed to prevail in their aesthetic temperament. For the Ancient Greeks, pain was not the source of a melancholy that would taint in bile the whole aesthetics of an artwork because secluded or implicit in this pain is also the spiritual doom of man; for them, it was, rather, a force that was only unhealthy because it would disrupt a certain order in the world of men, and even the disruption of order, however unhealthy it might be to this world, can be taken as a substance to be harmonised into a clear and conspicuous aesthetics, into an immediate, superficial, sensual, tangible beauty.

He writes about the dynamics of *pain* within an aesthetics oriented by a *spontaneity of consciousness*:

The Greek artist, not having a background of Christian hope and expectation against which he could relieve the trials and afflictions of this life, aimed at keeping them in a strictly subordinate place. He sought to produce a harmony in his work which should correspond to health in the body and to temperance in the soul, to present a picture of human destiny, not darkened by the shadows of the tomb, but luminous beneath the light of day. It was his purpose, as indeed it is of all good craftsmen, not to weaken, but to fortify, not to dispirit and depress, but to exalt and animate. (Symonds 1879:378)

Or, to quote two great art critics at the same time:

The general characteristics of the Grecian masterpieces in Painting and Sculpture are held by Winckelmann to consist in a noble simplicity, and a majestic composure, both of attitude and expression. “As the depths of the ocean”, he observes, “remain always at rest, let the surface be ever so agitated, even so the expression in the figures of the Greeks denotes, through every variety of emotion, a great and tranquil soul.” (Lessing 1836:1-2)

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) writes this brief commentary in a book completely dedicated to an examination of the Laocoön (40-30BC), so a very good example for us here of what he—along with Winckelmann and Symonds—is talking about is this sculpture, precisely.

In Ancient Greek mythology, apparently the most significant account of the Laocoön myth is that of his fateful destiny in one of the final days of the Siege of Ilion—a battle he fought on the side of the resistance, the loyal Trojan that he was. Laocoön is perhaps best known in Ancient Greek mythology as that one character who tried to warn King Priam against accepting the Achaeans' wooden horse into the city walls, precisely because such gift seemed much more like a ruse, some kind of wicked stratagem devised by someone treacherous, probably Odysseus. Hoping to obtain Poseidon's support in fighting off whatever threat that could come with or out of the wooden horse, Laocoön takes leave of his post at the walls to pay libations to this god—and this is when his destiny painfully meets him. A few years before the Siege of Ilion, Laocoön had been chosen by his fellow Trojans as a surrogate priest to Apollo, but, lacking any real vocation to priesthood, he hubristically disrespected this god by breaking his vow of celibacy in the most insulting way possible: by lying with Antiope—who would become his wife and mother of his two sons—right in sight of the god's image in one of his altars. Already infuriated with Laocoön's impertinence, and now infuriated with these new libations to Poseidon, Apollo himself sends two sea-serpents to kill the Trojan's sons right in front of him. (see Graves 2017:683-84)

The sculpture of Laocoön and his children, housed today at the Vatican Museums, depicts the exact moment when the priest tries to save the two boys from being crushed to death by Apollo's giant serpents. The first characteristic of this sculpture that we should notice, and which is also its most conspicuous tragic effect, is Laocoön's agonising posture: unlike the Nike of Samothrace, who bears her chest open to the auspicious winds of future, or the Aphrodite of Milos, who exposes her nude torso in a welcoming gesture of seduction, Laocoön's body language expresses all his pitiful despair in trying to defeat two creatures that, he knows, are much stronger than him. There is no hope for the future and there is no self-assurance in his body language; all there is, is the reluctance to accept a fateful but nearing outcome, the misery of witnessing first-hand his failure to protect

his children from a horrible death. And, in fact, if we turn our attention from Laocoön himself to the facial and bodily expressions of his two sons, the scene becomes all the more heartbreaking: on the marble's right-hand side, one of them uselessly tries to disentangle the serpents from his foot, just while he stares up at his father in search for a help that only him, as a father, should be able to provide; on the marble's left-hand side, in an even



more distressing situation, his other son seems to have already accepted his harrowing death, tired and giving up as he seems to be. Now, hanging from a body in complete agony and in a bitter resistance to accept a painful conclusion, Laocoön's head deepens



his own misery: tilted back in exhaustion, his head, along with his facial expressions, emphasise the pain of his own incapacity to resist, to hold on any longer, which is also his own final resignation with the fact that *he will* have to let the creatures kill his children. What we see, therefore, is not just Laocoön's fight against the two serpents; what we see is very likely the final moments of this struggle, the end of his energies, the unwillingness to accept that the beasts will, eventually, overpower him, and that they will, eventually, slaughter his beloved children, right there in front of him, right there in face of his own powerlessness.

The reason why I give such emphasis to Symonds's "cult of the surface," that is, to his contention that the aesthetic temperament of the Ancient Greeks seemed to privilege a materiality of even the most abstract emotions in all the arts, is the fact that this immediacy of aesthetic experience, this appreciation of what is truly reachable in an artwork—what is visible, audible, and touchable—, will become a sort of analytical epicentre in the idea of impressionistic criticism followed by the members of Aestheticism.

Perhaps I can elaborate this situation in a more objective inquiry:

Considering how the classical tradition, especially the Ancient Greek tradition, seemed to privilege a materiality of even the most abstract phenomena in all of its artistic domains, how should a modern critic proceed in order to appreciate this aesthetic temperament with justice, that is, without subjecting it to some sort of hermeneutical violence, moralising judgment, or aesthetic sanitisation?

The answer, of course, is that this critic should do her best to provide a criticism that does not try to establish any kind of ultimate truth about the artworks from this tradition, that does not try to evaluate them on any grounds other than the refinement of their artistic qualities, and that openly and self-consciously investigates how they affect her in her intimacy and thereby invite her to question the limits of her own perceptual and conceptual experiences.

In other words, this critic should do her best to provide criticisms that are themselves strategies to improve the very impressions that these artworks arouse in her, criticisms that, ideally, are also themselves elements or modes of aesthetic experience.

What I mean to say with all this is that the idea of impressionistic criticism, particularly as it was explored by the members of Aestheticism, is largely a product of ‘classical reception.’

What I mean to say with all this, therefore, is that, if we understand how a basic notion of impressionistic criticism is related to an appreciation of the classics, we might be able to better understand how more complex notions of impressionistic criticism might be related to an appreciation of many other arts—including, of course, the broad spectrum of what we can understand as modern or contemporary art.



But, what does an impressionistic criticism look like?

What is its basic mechanics?

What does it look for?

In the brief “Preface” that he wrote to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Walter Pater synthesises the main responsibilities of an impressionistic critic—or, perhaps we can say, the main characteristics that provide a given criticism an impressionistic quality—, so I believe it is worth analysing it in some detail.

The logic of Pater's main argument in this essay is particularly interesting—perhaps because its apparent simplicity disguises its true complexity: he contends right from the start that it is impossible to define *beauty* in the abstract, and, since it is impossible to define *beauty* in the abstract, the value of most attempts to provide such definition actually lies on the *attempts* themselves, that is, on what is thought and said about *beauty* along the way in an effort to define it. (Pater 1893:xix) I say this is an argument that hides its own complexity because, if we examine it more closely, we can notice in it at least two particularly complex inferences: first, and more evidently, we can see that Pater entirely rejects an *ideal* nature of beauty, assuming, instead, that beauty has a *relative* and *material* nature, a nature that can be conveniently explored by means of a person's investment of her own conceptual and perceptual faculties in a subjective attempt to define it as accurately as possible in its particular features; second, and as a consequence of the first, we can see that Pater already seems to challenge the common sense that *criticism* is just a lowly accessory to the artwork it criticises, assuming, instead, that one of the greatest qualities of *criticism* is precisely the fact that, in its peculiar expression of peculiar impressions, it bears an aesthetic potential of its own, that it has a life of its own, and, therefore, that it should not be taken in any hierarchical relation to the artwork it criticises. Now, I should emphasise that, of course, Pater does not suggest this relativity and materiality of beauty out of the blue; we can already notice his position in the epistemological context of Aestheticism in his commentaries on Fra Angelico's fresco and on the Aphrodite of Milos, but, in his "Preface," he openly confirms this position by going back to Arnold's daring contention in "Hebraism and Hellenism":

'To see the object as in itself it really is,' has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever, and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. [...] What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, *to me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do; and, as in the study of light, of morals, of number, one must realise such primary data for one's self, or not at all. (Pater 1893:xix)

We can find an objective illustration of this hypothesis in a contemporary study.

In a recent interview, Hans Gumbrecht, when inquired about his intention to write a book on a “non-Husserlian phenomenology of the voice,” explains that he understands this phenomenology as a “precise description” of a voice, that is, his own “precise description” of a phenomenon whose materiality—whose effects of presence, in this case—naturally resists or naturally eludes an explanation through meaning. (Waki & Sabino 2019:225) A good example of what he refers to as a “non-Husserlian phenomenology of the voice” is the essay “The Freedom of Janis Joplin’s Voice,” the ninth chapter in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: on a Hidden Potential of Literature* (2012), a book in which he thoroughly discusses how arts expressed through different media—lyric poetry, realistic prose, pop music, light and colour on canvas—are always somehow endowed with the ability to create a sense of presence that, albeit intangible, feels real as a bodily manifestation of specific intensities—intensities that, amazingly enough, often seem to embody the feeling of an un-lived history. In this essay, Gumbrecht in fact tries to describe how Joplin’s carefree voice in “Me and Bobby McGee” (1969; 1971) epitomises the libertarian ethos that dominated much of the rebel youth of the 1960’s and 70’s, particularly through the hippie movements that grew as a reaction to the Vietnam War. The lyrics of “Me and Bobby McGee,” written by Kris Kristofferson, then Janis Joplin’s lover, narrate the fleeting relationship between the narrator, presumably a woman, and a certain Bobby McGee. After seeing the narrator broke and waiting for a train, Bobby offers her a ride that eventually becomes a long journey, a long road trip, throughout the US—Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Kentucky, California. However, the narrator soon reveals that, near Salinas, something happened to Bobby: “I let him slip away / He’s looking for that home, and I hope he finds it.” In the context of the two lovers’ adventure, it is difficult to say what exactly these verses mean; they can either refer to Bobby’s death, most likely by overdose, or simply to the fact that, the same way he entered the narrator’s life, he left her along the way to look for another adventure, somewhere else, with someone else. Whatever the case, the journey with Bobby across the US and their final break up lead the narrator to conclude: “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose,” a poignant verse that is also the core melody of the song’s chorus.

In this essay, which mostly gravitates around the connection between the carefree tone of Joplin’s voice and the carefree idea implicit in “freedom just another word for nothin’ left to lose,” Gumbrecht writes:

This is the tragedy that threatens all love and all happiness—the tragedy of seeking happiness in the first place—and, even, the tragedy of believing that happiness exists at all. Happiness, when it is possessed, undoes the great freedom of those who have nothing left to lose. Happiness makes you vulnerable. [...] [Joplin’s] voice sidles up to the music, unable to find further words. In the present, she dreams about the past; it is as if she were on a third journey—after the one between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and the other one, from Kentucky to California. On this final trip, Bobby’s name is invoked and takes on form and substance, like a song emerging from different sounds. Only one more time can the voice lay hold to more than a name; only once more does it find the words that make the singer into Bobby’s wife and widow; just once more does she sing—as if she were stumbling into the future—words that give form to her loss. (Gumbrecht 2012:97)

And concludes:

Four decades later, it is impossible for me to say if the feeling of having “nothing left to lose”—or, at any rate, “wanting to have nothing left to lose”—really reached me in its full power years ago. Perhaps a great part of our “generational experience” was, in fact, rather superficial adaptation to convention. Only now, when we have become a generation of often infantile old people—somewhere between our fading parents, against whom we wanted to rebel, and younger people, who have effortlessly surpassed us—only now do we really appreciate what the promises of those months were, which I think back to as if they had been a short, eternal summer. In Janis Joplin’s voice, we recall a freedom we did not sense in the present of the past. (Gumbrecht 2012:99)

So, as we can see, Gumbrecht’s essay illustrates very well much of Pater’s contention in his “Preface”: Gumbrecht’s text basically provides a second or secondary diegetic universe, delivered by the linguistic spontaneity of the essayistic form, which in its own way seeks to recreate and thereby try to describe and explain the *libertarian feeling* that emanates from Kristofferson’s *lyrics* and Joplin’s *singing*—a feeling that, although subjective to Gumbrecht himself, seems to be a fragment, a perspective, of a greater feeling that the song delivers through both the meaning of its lyrics and the effects of presence of its melody. Answering Pater’s questions in his “Preface,” then, we can see that Gumbrecht openly reveals in his essay how the song arouses in him a nostalgic longing for a moment when youth still seemed to be pregnant with promises—supported by the health, energy, and a certain naïveté of the young age, by the proximity with the previous generation, and by the prospect of a peaceful future—and, therefore, a moment that, from his current position as an elderly man, feels melancholically tender. Even Pater’s suggestion

of a formulaic explanation of beauty in its concreteness, an explanation that summarises the complex web of feelings and emotions aroused by an artwork, seems to be evident in Gumbrecht's essay; in the end, he writes: "only now do we [people who were young then] really appreciate what the promises of those months were, *which I think back to as if they had been a short, eternal summer.*" (Gumbrecht 2012:99; my emphasis) "A short, eternal summer" indeed seems to be a very good precise description, a very good formulaic explanation, of the beauty of a song whose dominating emotion is that of the ephemerality of youth, particularly in a moment in history when youth was objectively associated with the libertarian auspices of a peaceful future.

In the interview, when discussing the mechanics of his essay—that is, an emotional tone that does not seek to explain or orient the meaning of the song in any way—, Gumbrecht comments:

[In *The Freedom of Janis Joplin's Voice*] I'm not trying to unfold that philosophically; I'm trying, autobiographically, but without talking about my own life, to write about how that felt, in 1967 or 68, when I heard it for the first time. Its function is ultimately meant to be *deictic*. And, if you read that, and if you're interested in that experience, you expose yourself to Janis Joplin. (Waki & Sabino 2019:225)

In the context of Pater's contention, therefore, what should interest us in Gumbrecht's essay is the specificity of its relation to the way he is affected by "Me and Bobby McGee," it is how it territorialises the song's effects of presence through words, images, confessions, memories, political views etc., providing us, not a perspective about an ideal and transcendental nature of beauty, but a perspective about the fact that beauty might eventually lie in the most mundane and tangible idiosyncrasies.

Now, a much more complex illustration of Pater's hypothesis is his own essay on Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) works, particularly *La Gioconda*, or the *Mona Lisa* (1503).

However, instead of examining Pater's essay itself, in isolation, I would like to propose a truly simple exercise of comparative criticism, as I believe that a visible contrast between styles and intentions might prove more didactic and more interesting than just my own ruminations about the aesthetics of his writing.

Allison Lee Palmer, in her *Leonardo da Vinci: a Reference Guide to his Life and Works* (2019), explains that the *Mona Lisa* was probably commissioned to da Vinci by

Francesco del Giocondo, a wealthy cloth merchant from Florence. The painting portrays Lisa Ghierardini (1479-1542), del Giocondo's third wife, who was about 15 years old by the time of their marriage and about 24 by the time of the painting; Ghierardini, who was also about 20 years younger than del Giocondo, would give him five children, and would outlive him to spend the rest of her life with her sister, as a nun, at the Convent of Sant'Orsola in Florence. (Palmer 2019:102)



When investigating the painting itself, Palmer writes:

The portrait is, in many ways, consistent with others of the era, while it also shows Lisa gazing directly out at the viewer to provide a sense of familiarity and realism previously limited to male portraiture. It is her gaze, together with the subtle smile, that makes the Mona Lisa unique. Here we see a half-length figure, seated against a portico wall that opens to show an imaginary landscape. The bases of two columns are cropped out of the painting on either side of the wall. Lisa is seated slightly angled to the viewer's left, which breaks the frontal pose to provide greater depth. Her hands, softly modeled in a golden *sfumato*, rest in an elegant pose on the arm of a wooden chair. She wears a monochromatic dress with dark yellow sleeves beneath a dark robe trimmed in gold. A transparent veil covers her head and hangs down one shoulder. Lisa wears no jewelry—no necklace, no elaborate headpieces, and no rings, which is also unusual for the era. Her reddish-brown hair is parted in the middle and smoothed out beneath the veil, and falls in ringlets around her face to gather at her shoulders. Her face, which is what first attracts the viewer's eyes, is also softly modeled in a warm,

golden tone with subtle color gradations to show volume. She turns her head slightly toward the viewer and looks directly out of the painting with both of her eyes trained off to the left and out of the painting. She offers a smile of familiarity to the viewer, so we must know her. The background is a hazy landscape view of winding roads done in earth tones that lead the eye back to a land surrounded by jagged mountains fading into a slate blue atmosphere. This is called *atmospheric perspective*. (Palmer 2019: 103)

Now, in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, using roughly the same number of words, Pater writes the following commentary about the same painting:

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the world are come,” and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea. (Pater 1893:98-99)

The sober tone of Palmer’s commentary is not really a surprise.

As an entry in a *guidebook*, its programmatic and rather dispassionate argumentation is consistent with its responsibility to provide to a very general public rich but also accessible information about the essential characteristics of da Vinci’s life and works—particularly the *Mona Lisa*, in this case. However, in spite of this ascetic tone, the architecture of this commentary is actually very illuminating: we learn right from the start that this female face we are so familiar with was in reality a subversion, a treatment of women

in portraiture that did not correspond to the norms of its time; we learn to gaze at this female figure in a wholly different way by taking into account the creativity implicit in the refinement of da Vinci's techniques, such as his use of *sfumato* to give Lisa's hands a fairer look and thus improve her looks as that of a noblewoman; we learn to admire the character even more in her bodily presence, in her humbleness and in a sort of self-sufficiency of her presence, if we take into account the fact that, indeed, unlike most portraits of her time, she does not wear any jewellery—something that would deviate our attention from the real mystery that she personifies; finally, we learn that da Vinci's use of an atmospheric perspective does in fact create a sense of strangeness in the painting, an ethereal sense of atemporality that does not seem possible to achieve through a representation of the confinements of a closed room—the regular setting of most portraits of the time. What I mean to say with this cautious admiration for Palmer's analysis is that, in spite of its sobriety, in spite of its asceticism, its precise ephrasis does allow us to contemplate the painting with a renewed responsibility, with a renewed authority.

Now, the inebriated tone of Pater's essay is really a surprise.

Perhaps the first eccentricity we should notice about Pater's essay on da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is that it provides a perspective about this painting that might feel a bit strange for us today: in our age of aggressive mechanical reproduction, where the *Mona Lisa* often works as basis for internet memes and as an icon of pop culture merchandising, Pater's essay reminds us of her aura as a deeply emotional masterpiece from the heydays of Italian Renaissance. Palmer's commentary already helps us recover the painting's aura from the commodification that it is often subjected to, because it really educates us to recognise in its fine details that are frequently dissolved into the banalisation of the painting's mindless reproduction; but, in its programmatic tone, it reaches us more like an ordinary exhibition guide, as a discourse whose main goal is to inform, rather than provide grounds for more complex dialogues. Pater's essay, however, in all its inebriation, does invite us to get lost in the mysterious meanders of the painting: he does invite us to see in the painting the coming of social and ethical revolutions—the animalism of the Greeks, the lust of the Romans, the mysticism of the Middle Ages—, revolutions that are finally there, registered in every brushstroke that brought the painting into existence; he does incite us to look at her not just as the hypnotic image that she is, but as the epitome of a passing of time and history, as a mighty immortal who will forever be able to absorb and resist the turmoil and the changes of the world around her, as an entity that defies every hint of ephemerality; he invites us to consider the strangely plausible idea that she might

have known Leda and Hellen of Troy, Saint Anne and Saint Mary, because they are all there *in her*. What I mean to say with this open admiration for Pater's essay is that, in all its inebriation—in all its *ivresse*, as Charles Baudelaire would put it—, not only does it allow us to contemplate the painting with renewed responsibility and authority, it also invites us to search in it for less conspicuous poetics whose existence, whose possibility, is hardly assumed by an ascetic and protocolaire argumentation such as that in Palmer's commentary.

What I would like to suggest with this contrast between Palmer's and Pater's criticisms is that they are, of course, both entirely valid in their own terms; but I also would like to emphasise that, in the dynamics of this study in comparative criticism that I just proposed, much of the interesting features of Pater's essay is only visible because I examined, first, the informative nature of Palmer's commentary. Certainly, I am not saying that if Palmer's commentary paid more attention to language it would necessarily become a more poignant criticism, nor am I saying that if Pater's essay paid more attention to the material qualities of the painting it would naturally become a more consistent criticism—as I said, they are both valid in their own terms: chances are, indeed, that, if Palmer had used a more sophisticated language, her commentary would have become less accessible, and that, if Pater had added a more descriptive dimension to his essay, it would have probably lost much of its passionate tone.

However, it seems to me that, in the framework of the Materialities of Literature, a framework in which art, science, communication, and education naturally conflate, and in our contemporary scholarly circles, circles in which a typically Cartesian thinking is still dominant, a mode of art criticism that tries to balance these two dimensions—a more *epistemological* one and a more *aesthetic* one—might in fact be one of the most appropriate options.

As we shall see in my next essays, Oscar Wilde's conception of *art-criticism* really seems to praise this balance, or at least really seems to welcome it in its form—and this is why I myself often rely very much on it as a sort of ethical, aesthetical, and epistemological compass.

However, before we carry on to the next essays, I believe I should make a few remarks about the conflicts and similarities between Hans Gumbrecht's and Walter Pater's ideas of *criticism*, two ideas that seem so consanguine that it is practically impossible not to confront them, not to see one in the other.

One of the reasons why Pater's essay on the *Mona Lisa* feels so erudite to us is certainly the fact that he wrote it in the 1870's, when this painting had not yet become a favourite object of sales, selfies, and mediatic frenzy, but it is not difficult to see that this erudition is also a product of what I have called an *inebriated writing*—a very well-crafted writing that is conscious of its own aesthetic poignancy as a means to enhance the complexity of a critic's impressions and aesthetic experience of a certain phenomenon. Although art criticism should always seek to be *deictic*, as Gumbrecht suggests in the interview, it is clear that Pater's deictic routine in his essay soon glides from a more objective ephrasis of the painting to a subjective poetry of his own affections, or at least that this routine oscillates between these two dimensions with great refinement. Unlike Gumbrecht, who seeks to convey deixis through a precise description of the phenomena that first triggered certain aesthetic experiences in him, Pater seeks to convey deixis through a poetic effacement of the boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity, that is, between the material qualities of the artwork and the immaterial qualities of his own aesthetic experience of this artwork.

It should be clear that I do not wish to establish any hierarchies here, because both Gumbrecht's "objective" or "precise" analyses of his aesthetic experiences and Pater's "subjective" or "ambiguous" analyses of his aesthetic experiences are valid in their own terms; I should emphasise, however, that, although Gumbrecht's criticism might in practice turn out to be thoroughly impressionistic, it should not be formally or theoretically described as such—not if we want to take into account how consanguine it is to the true impressionistic criticism typical of Aestheticism: Pater's criticism, which is perfectly impressionistic, focuses on a phenomenology of the *subjective* dimension of an aesthetic experience and how this phenomenology can be expressed so as to potentialise this aesthetic experience; Gumbrecht's criticism focuses on a phenomenology of the *objective* dimension of that thing or event that can trigger a certain aesthetic experience and how this phenomenology can be expressed so as to accurately crystallise into language many of its non-linguistic characteristics. As I discussed in my **Introduction**, although Gumbrecht requires an agent, a second-order observer, to experience, identify, and qualify phenomenal dimensions such as a song's effect of presence through sound or a painting's effect of presence through plasticity, these dimensions are more properly descriptive of worldly things or events than of subjective impressions; in Pater's essay, however, we can see that presence and materiality, although influential upon the analysis itself, are actually taken as *outsets* for a much more complex or a much more profound matter of

interest—namely, the intricacies of aesthetic experience itself, an experience that is entirely personal and, therefore, entirely unique. Indeed, in his commentary about “The Freedom of Janis Joplin’s Voice,” we can see that Gumbrecht seems to resist a mode of criticism whose analytical axis is truly or too deeply impressionistic, as when he affirms: “I’m not trying to unfold that philosophically; *I’m trying, autobiographically, but without talking about my own life*, to write about how that felt, in 1967 or 68, when I heard it for the first time.” (Waki & Sabino 2019:225; my emphasis) In Pater’s essay, however, we can see that, although he does not literally talk about his own life, he does impregnate the analyses of his impressions of the *Mona Lisa* with a poetry of his own affections for her, as when he affirms that “[hers] is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions” or that “[she] is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her.” (Pater 1893:99) In fact, although Gumbrecht’s essay, like Pater’s essay, does rely on the many affective dimensions of an aesthetic experience to convey its criticism, the most blatant difference between these two essays is that Gumbrecht seems to write his essay *chiefly as a scholarly practice*, whereas Pater seems to write his essay in a way so that it can *deliberately aspire to the higher status of literature*. Also, and consequently, whereas Gumbrecht seems to praise for a certain *neutrality* of his essay in spite of its affective dimension, something that is consistent with the idea that his essay should remain chiefly a scholarly practice, Pater seems to praise for a *singularity* of his essay that is grounded precisely in its affective dimension, something that seems to raise this essay to the uniqueness of a literary artwork.

In my **Introduction**, when analysing Michel Foucault’s commentary on Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, I affirmed that the relation of language to materiality, particularly a materiality that excites in us some kind of aesthetic experience, is an infinite relation; I also affirmed that, if an aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to the meaningfulness of a language, this language should look in itself for its own splendour; and I finally affirmed that, if aesthetic experiences allow us to envisage or get in contact with truths that either cannot be properly translated into logical meaning or can only be translated into logical meaning *a posteriori*—what we can consider initial steps towards an impressionistic criticism—, then this criticism should unfurl in search of its own splendour, in search of a life and brilliance of its own, in search of its own ability to trigger some kind of aesthetic experience.

I hope that this basic reasoning that I tried to trace by relying on these essays by Richard Thomas, Charles Martindale, Allison Lee Palmer, Hans Gumbrecht, and Walter Pater was able to make clear that Pater's essay is finally what I understand as a language looking for its own "splendour," that is, a criticism that is looking for a life and brilliance of its own. But, at the same time, I hope I was able to make clear that, in the framework of the Materialities of Literature, in which art, science, communication, and education naturally conflate, possibly an efficient criticism strategy is one that takes into account all these dimensions, that takes into account the fact that these dimensions all impregnate, recreate, and potentialise each other.

Palmer's commentary on the *Mona Lisa* is clearly the most elementary of all criticisms, a simplicity that is consistent with the fact that it is an entry in a guidebook whose purpose is to assist a general public; still, though, the architecture of her ecphrasis is very cleverly thought, as it brings to the surface many layers of beauty in the painting that seem to have been obfuscated by its massive commodification. Thomas's analysis of Bob Dylan's "Lonesome Day Blues" and Martindale's analysis of Titian's reception of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in *Diana and Actaeon* and *The Death of Actaeon* are clearly the most scientific of all criticisms, an epistemological nature that is consistent with the fact that they seek to establish a connection between these artworks as objects of culture and culture itself, understood as a social domain that can also be examined through the prism of science and scholarship. Gumbrecht's semi-biographical investigation of Janis Joplin's "Me and Bobby McGee" is a sort of liminality, as the lack of more properly epistemological dimensions in its analyses is actually a reflection of a very well-studied epistemological tradition: in his attempt to resist the excesses of overly hermeneutical practices, so typical in our academic milieux, he provides what is eventually a reconsideration of an impressionistic criticism—a reconsideration that is consciously devoted to a phenomenology of presence, rather than to a phenomenology of the subjective impacts of this presence. Finally, Pater's inebriated essay is clearly the most complex of all these criticisms in terms of an association between ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology, as it relies on a very much self-aware spontaneity of consciousness, on a careful splendour of language, and on a sophisticated understanding of history of art to convey a criticism that is not only a form of cultural analysis, but also a thinking that is sure of its own ability to ascend to the higher status of literature.

Again, I do not wish to establish any hierarchies here, simply because I do not even think they suit the premises of this investigation.

What I wish to emphasise is rather a game of mutual elucidation.

If Palmer's, Thomas's, and Martindale's criticisms seem to lack an openly affective dimension, Gumbrecht's and Pater's criticisms seem to remind us that affections too mould our ways of thinking, and, therefore, that they should always be somehow examined. If Palmer's, Thomas's, Martindale's, and Gumbrecht's criticisms seem to lack a clear craft of language, Pater's criticism seems to remind us that one of the most powerful forces of affection is aesthetics itself, and, therefore, if we dedicate ourselves to the aesthetic dimension of our criticisms, we might be able to improve its propositional quality. If Pater's criticism seems to lack a more complex epistemological dimension—although, it is true, I only quoted one paragraph of the entire essay—and if the epistemological dimension of Gumbrecht's criticism is actually implicit—for the real scientific elements of his book are in the Introduction—, Palmer's, Thomas's, and Martindale's criticisms seem to remind us that, by situating our critical perspectives on a broader context of culture and academic thinking, we might in fact enhance the analytical potency of these perspectives.

The reason why I emphasise this game of mutual elucidation, to conclude, is that Oscar Wilde's conception of *art-criticism* actually seems to be a very eloquent answer to it.

In my next essays, then, I will gradually examine in details the *context of emergence* and the *text* of Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" (1891), this incredibly audacious art criticism that is itself both an artwork and a criticism, a dialogue that is itself an endeavour into aesthetic creativity and an inquiry into epistemological thinking, a high quality fiction whose main subject is precisely the highest qualities of art and literature as objects of pleasure as much as objects of knowledge.

I must anticipate, though, that, although I will certainly try to examine this essay as thoroughly as I can, it is one of these graciously stubborn works that grow more complex as we try to decipher them.

II

The ages live in history through their anachronisms

Oscar Wilde

*It is quite likely, as Homer has said, that the gods
send disasters to men so that they can tell of them, and that in
this possibility speech finds its infinite resourcefulness*

Michel Foucault

*To handle a language skilfully is to practice
a kind of evocative sorcery*

Charles Baudelaire



Oscar Wilde's earliest surviving letter is an ordinary but truly sweet message that he exchanged with his mother while still a schoolboy at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, present-day Northern Ireland; Wilde was 13 years old, and the conversation is completely trivial, but we can already recognise in his lines a flamboyancy that seems to anticipate much of the discourse that he would employ, with a much more lapidary zeal, in his mature writings.

5 September 1868

Portora School

Darling Mama,

The hamper came today, I never got such a jolly surprise, many thanks for it, it was more than kind of you to think of it. The grapes and pears are delicious and so cooling, but the blancmange got a little sour, I suppose by the knocking about, but the rest came all safe.

Don't forget please to send me the *National Review*, is it not issued today?

The flannel shirts you sent in the hamper are both Willie's, mine are one quite scarlet and the other lilac, but it is too early to wear them yet, the weather is so hot.

We went down to the horrid regatta on Thursday last. It was very jolly. There was a yacht race.

You never told me anything about the publisher in Glasgow. What does he say and have you written to Aunt Warren on the green note paper?

We played the officers of the 27th Regiment now stationed in Enniskillen, a few days ago and beat them hollow by about seventy runs.

You may imagine my delight this morning when I got Papa's letter saying he had sent a hamper.



'Ye delight of ye two boys at ye hamper and ye sorrow of ye hamperless boy.'

Now dear Mamma, I must bid you goodbye as the post goes very soon. Many thanks for letting me paint. With love to Papa, ever your affectionate son,

Oscar Wilde

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in 16 October 1854 in Dublin, Ireland, the second son of Jane Francesca Elgee (1821-96), a prolific writer, activist, and folklore researcher, and Sir William Robert Wills Wilde (1815-76), although formally a physician, also an independent archaeologist, historian, and, like his wife, a folklore

enthusiast. Wilde had an older brother, William Charles Kingsbury Wilde (1852-99)—the “Willie” in the letter—, and a younger sister, Isola Francesca Emily Wilde (1857-67). Although the youngest child, Isola died when she was nine years old, after a relentless high fever, a tragedy that seems to have touched the Wildes very deeply—particularly Lady Wilde and Oscar Wilde himself: Lady Wilde, who, as an artist and a notorious public figure, would spend much of her time at dinners, *soirées*, theatres, and concerts, would take some distance from such social gatherings after the death of her daughter; Oscar Wilde, who, apparently, would visit Isola’s grave very often when he still lived in Dublin, would become a slightly gloomier person after her death, and would even write a poem in her memory many years later—the poem “Requiescat”, which would be published in his anthology of *Poems* in 1881. (see Ellmann 1987:44-45) Now, if Oscar Wilde’s bond with his sister seems to have been very tender, the same cannot be said of his relationship with Willie Wilde: although the two brothers must have spent much of their time together, sharing rooms at Portora Royal School, Trinity College Dublin, and at the University of Oxford, this relationship seems to have constantly been disturbed by Willie’s erratic nature and heavy drinking habits, nature and habits that would terribly worsen by the mid-1880’s, the years of Oscar Wilde’s ascension to stardom. Wilde’s mourning of Isola might have followed him for many years after her death, but, allegedly, as he received, during his exile in Switzerland, the news of Willie’s death in 1899—as consequence of his drinking habits, precisely—, he just could not bring himself to mourn him. Reasons must have abounded: on the one side, a more public side, in face of Wilde’s ascension to stardom, Willie would write deliberately destructive criticisms against his brother’s works in the newspapers, only to discredit and make fun of him; on the other side, a more domestic side, Willie would constantly tangle himself in all sorts of problems, such as gambling, alcoholism, debt, adultery, failed marriages, and costly trips to America; but, apparently, a central issue in the two brothers’ final enmity was the fact that, due to his constant financial problems, Willie would frequently move in with a now elderly Lady Wilde in London, only to move out from her place a few months later, draining her energies and meagre economies. (see Ellmann 1987:451-52; 691)

I could not find it, but Richard Ellmann, one of Oscar Wilde’s most reliable biographers, refers to a letter sent by Lady Wilde to her son in March 1894 in which she harshly reprimands him for his attitudes towards his older brother; in this letter, according to Ellmann, she writes:

I am truly sorry to find that you and Willie meet as enemies. Is this to go on to my death? Not a cheering prospect for me, to have my two sons at enmity, and unable to meet at my deathbed. I think, to please me, you might write the 8 words I asked—"I forget the enmity. Let us be friends. Signed Oscar." 8 words! Can you do it to oblige me? There need be no intimacy between you but at least *social civility*. (Ellmann 1987:505)

Jane Francesca Elgee, who also went by the pen-name Speranza, was a remarkable woman: a politically-engaged artist, she would often publish her libertarian, inflammatory poetry in *The Nation*, a Dubliner newspaper oriented by an anti-British ideology; descendant of an influential family who had among their members Charles Robert Maturin (1780-1824)—author of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), a Gothic novel that would fascinate authors like Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), Charles Baudelaire, and Oscar Wilde himself—, she would work very hard to promote herself as a public character, often using her refined attires, jewellery, manners, and intellect as strategies to fashion herself as a glaring social icon in all the social events she attended to; it is no surprise, then, that hers was a constant dominating presence in many Dubliner circles, like the dinners, *soirées*, theatres, and concerts that I just mentioned—a social dexterity that, as we will see, Oscar Wilde seems to have learned incredibly well. (see Ellmann 1987:21-26) However, although Speranza was certainly the leading parental authority in Oscar Wilde's life—the fact that she died well into her 70's, when he was already in prison, surely contributed to this—, the impact of Sir William Wilde is not to be ignored: an accomplished physician, not only did he found the St. Mark's Hospital in Dublin (today part of the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital), he was also responsible for gathering and publishing a massive amount of new information on the diseases of eye and ear, his specialties; but his interests also went way beyond medicine, a rather personal curiosity that allowed him to publish works of travel literature and also about the history of Ireland; a nationalist like his wife, his interests in the history of Ireland often comprised Celtic folklore and the Celts' ancestry, subjects that would often lead him to search for evidences in the material culture of this people—or in the material culture of their supposed lineage, for that matter. (see Ellmann 1987:26-34)

Although the paths that led Oscar Wilde to become a Hellenist are not always clear, we can see that, as far as his upbringing was concerned, he was raised in a very cultured environment that seemed to naturally welcome both the arts and the sciences, a privilege that is likely to have contributed to his early interest in these two areas.

When examining Wilde's early talent for literature, Ellmann explains:

Not until his last two years at Portora, 1869-71, when he began to make deft and mellifluous oral translations from Thucydides, Plato, and Virgil, did his fellow students realize his talent. The classical work that caught his imagination was the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, which he must have studied with a master, J. F. Davies, who published a good edition of the play with commentary in 1868. At a viva voce on it, Wilde 'walked away' from all others, including Louis Claude Purser, later the distinguished professor of Latin at Trinity College. The *Agamemnon* stirred Wilde's sensibilities so that he never left off quoting from it. (Ellmann 1987:42)

However, and this is the subject that shall really interest me for the moment, Wilde's initiation in the arts was not without its accidents, eccentricities, and even financial mishaps—fortuities that we can find attested not in his works, but in the material memory that he left along the way.

For example, in an 1879 letter to Reverend Archibald Henry Sayce (1845-1933), a Professor of Comparative Philology at the University of Oxford and someone who would become a very close friend to the Wilde family, a recently-graduated and still job-seeking Oscar Wilde writes:

[Postmark 28 May 1879]

13 Salisbury Street

Dear Mr Sayce, Can you give me any idea how the archaeological studentships at Athens are to be assigned as I am anxious to obtain one. I think they would suit me so well. Pray excuse my troubling you in such busy season and believe me truly yours

Oscar Wilde

(Wilde 2000:68)

In another letter to Reverend Sayce, dated of seven months later, Wilde seems to have no choice but to insist:

[Postmark 8 December 1879]

Salisbury Street

Dear Sayce, will you give me the aid of your assistance in getting the archaeological studentship for which I have applied. I think it would suit me very well as I have done a good deal of travelling already, and from my boyhood have been accustomed, through my father, to

visiting and reporting on ancient sites, taking rubbings and measurements, and all the technique of ordinary *open air* archaeologia. It is of course a subject of intense interest to me, and I should give myself to it with a good deal of enthusiasm. Your support would of course be invaluable—I hear there are many competitors.

I hope to see you soon, and remain very truly yours

Oscar Wilde

(Wilde 2000:79)

In a way, it is truly refreshing to read these letters because we can recognise ourselves in them, we can easily identify ourselves with this young student, desperate to find a position in society or in the competitive chaos of the academic milieu; but they are also really important to us here because they give us evidence of *one* of Wilde's many personae—not the controversial *aesthete* who would impregnate society with his toxic literature and his supposedly immoral ways of living, but a *youthful scholar* keenly interested in a subject, in a science, that does not even quite fit into the great Oscar Wilde myth as we know it today: archaeology.

Perhaps I should put this in a different way: when we read Oscar Wilde's witty and controversial works, we tend to overlook the fact that many of his theories only are what they are, only are as refined as they are, because they somehow derive from a reasoning that is *archaeological* in its origins—a characteristic, I should anticipate, that seems to establish a relation of both restriction and construction with the arts and one's artistic temperament as a whole.

As might be evident from his letter to his mother, Wilde left Dublin for the first time in 1864, with his brother Willie, to begin his studies at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen; he would stay there for seven years, until 1871, when a new scholarship would allow him to study at Trinity College Dublin, back in his home town, under the supervision of one of the most reputable scholars working there at the time: Sir John Pentland Mahaffy (1839-1919).

Sir Mahaffy, a classicist, would become Wilde's first mentor, his first major intellectual influence in the scholarly universe, and would properly initiate him in the study of the Ancient Greek tradition; Sir Mahaffy, however, was not exactly a specialist in languages and literature—more of a historian, he was, in fact, more determined to study the ancient world as an enormous *archaeological site*, a view that, we can notice, he seemed to share with Sir William Wilde himself.

In simple terms, Sir Mahaffy and Sir Wilde's idea as *archaeologists* was to grasp the ancient world as a huge depository of different kinds of material culture, whose investigation would allow them to clarify how the ancient peoples *truly lived in the past*, and, of course, how their remote existence in this past was connected to one's active existence in the present.

However, we must remember that it is the mid-19th century we are talking about.

Iain Ross, a specialist in Oscar Wilde's Hellenism, provides the following anecdote concerning Sir Mahaffy, Sir William Wilde, Reverend Sayce, and their common interest in archaeology:

In 1864 William Wilde built a country house for his family at Moytura, the site of the Homeric battles for which he sought archaeological confirmation in its cairns. A.H. Sayce (1845-1933), the Assyriologist and Classical Fellow of Queen's College, Oxford, [...] was staying with J.P. Mahaffy in June 1876, and both men were shown the interior of the tumulus at Newgrange by Willie Wilde. Mahaffy, Oscar Wilde's iconoclastic tutor at Trinity College Dublin, followed Sir William Wilde in assimilating Newgrange to the Treasury of Atreus, Ireland to Greece, and when he took Oscar Wilde to Greece [1877] to examine the goldwork Schliemann had found at Mykenai, he also took Sir William's catalogue of the goldwork in the Royal Irish Academy for comparison, in implicit acceptance of the theory of 'identity of origin': George Macmillan wrote to his sister Olive from Athens that 'Mahaffy thinks from their [the treasures'] strong resemblance to various old Irish things they must belong to an early state of Aryan civilization before the Celts parted from the main stock.' *While historicism, with its emphasis on difference, could only discomfit the complacent English assumption of resemblance to classical Greece, it tended to give further warrant for the correspondences of pre-classical Greece with prehistoric Ireland that William Wilde's archaeological researches seemed to confirm. From his father Oscar Wilde would have learned to consider the country of his birth, with its Homeric bards and monuments, a second Greece, the Greeks literally his kin, and his encounter with them more an intuition of native affinity than a positivist examination of a culture radically separate in time and place.* (Ross 2013:17; my emphasis in the end)

A remarkable quality of this brief anecdote is that we can find in it another evidence of how the influx of vestiges from the Ancient Greek tradition reshaped the rationality of the British people—or the Irish people, in this case—and turned into a legitimate epistemological conception the idea that this people's supposed civility *directly* descended from the Ancient Greeks' also supposed civility. In fact, what we are looking at here is not an attempt to establish a genealogical connection between the Brits and the Ancient Greeks,

but between the Celts and the Ancient Greeks, a contrast that seems to confirm *nationalism* and *racism* as influential elements in the composition of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls a *cognitive empire*. (Santos 2018:19-43) In a way, we can excuse Sir Mahaffy, Sir Wilde, and Reverend Sayce's abrupt connections by taking into account the fact that they were working within the early stages of a much more complex phase of archaeology as a science, but, in practice, although they were mostly dealing with material culture, these connections seem to be consanguine with the idea of hermeneutical violence that I discussed in my **Methodology**. As we can see in this anecdote, these archaeologists' investigations seemed less oriented by the unfolding discoveries typical of an epistemological practice than by predetermined verifications bound to a teleological fascination: the battles of the *Iliad* were hardly fought on the hills of Moytura and the traces of the goldwork of the Insular Celts hardly derive from the traces of the goldwork produced by the Ancient Greeks the way Sir Mahaffy and Sir Wilde believed they did. But, then again, how powerful would not a cognitive empire be if it did not presuppose its own truths from many, deliberate or accidental, forms of hermeneutical violence? Whatever the case, this anecdote is really important to us here for basically two reasons: first, it seems to confirm Ancient Greece as a fundamental facet of Oscar Wilde's upbringing, what might explain his early knack for the Ancient Greek and Latin literatures, as we saw in Ellmann's brief reconstruction of his childhood at Portora Royal School; second, what I really want to make clear with this anecdote is that, considering the dominance of the archaeological episteme that permeated the British and Irish cultures of Oscar Wilde's time, and considering how his family, mentors, and closest friends were themselves intellectuals representative of such episteme—researchers that seemed rather eager to put it into practice—it is not really a surprise that his earliest way of thinking was, indeed, imbibed with an *archaeological reasoning*—or, perhaps I should say, imbibed with the idea of *materiality* intrinsic to every *archaeological reasoning*.

Another evidence of the young Oscar Wilde's inclination towards archaeology is a letter that he wrote to his father from Florence, during a research sojourn in Italy with Sir Mahaffy in 1875; the letter is too long to be transcribed in its entirety here, so I will just provide what I believe are its most significant elements:

Tuesday [Postmark 15 June 1875]

[Postmark Florence]

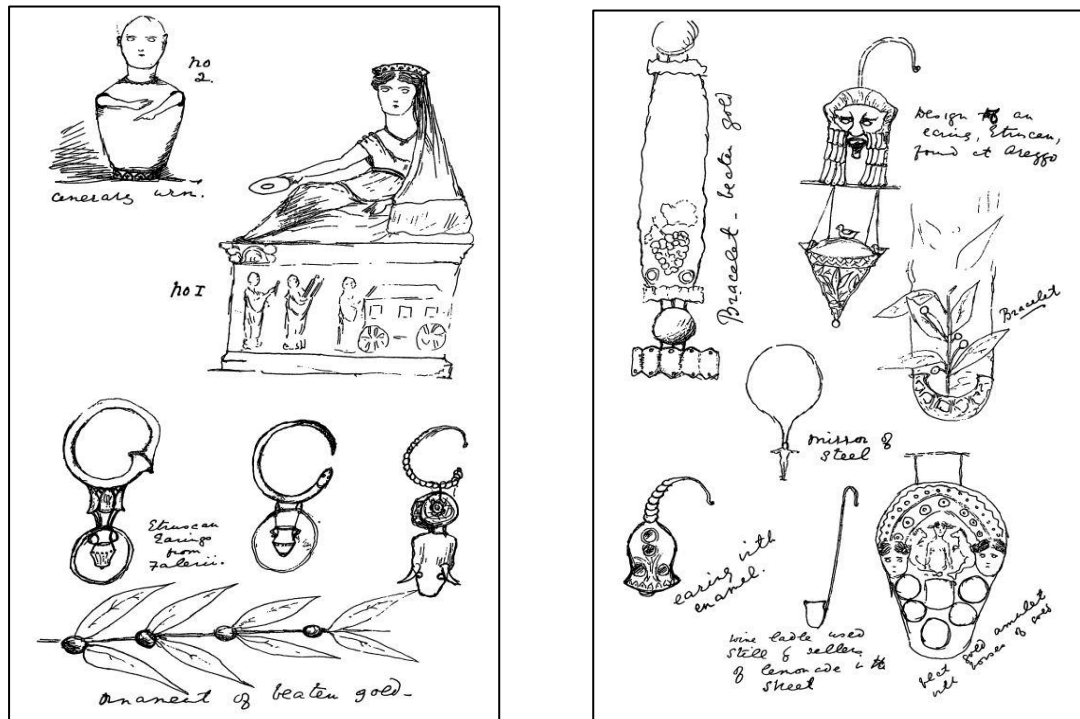
Went in the morning to see San Lorenzo, built in the usual Florentine way, cruciform: a long aisle supported by Grecian pillars: a *gorgeous* dome in the centre and three small aisled leading off it. Behind it are two Chapels of the Medici. *The first, the Burial Chapel, is magnificent; of enormous height, octagonal in shape.* Walls built entirely of *gorgeous* blocks of marble, all inlaid with various devices of different colours, polished like a looking-glass. Six great sarcophagi of granite and porphyry stand in six niches: on top of each of them a cushion of inlaid mosaic bearing a gold crown. Above the sarcophagi are statues in gilded bronze of the Medici; on the dome, of course, frescoes and gilded carving.

The other chapel is very small, built simply of white marble. Two mausoleums in it to two great Medici; one bearing Michael Angelo's statues of Night and Morning and the other those of Evening and Dawn.

Then to the *Biblioteca Laurenziana* in the cloisters of San Lorenzo, where I was shown wonderfully illuminated missals and unreadable manuscripts and autographs. I remarked the extreme clearness of the initial letters in the Italian missals and bibles, so different from those in the *Book of Kells* etc., which might stand for anything. The early illuminations are very beautiful in design and sentiment, but the later are mere mechanical tours de force of geometrical scroll-work and absurd designs.

(Wilde 2000:5-8; my emphases)

In this letter, Oscar Wilde also annexed some of his drawings, among which we can recognise his—not so readable—calligraphy:



One of the most interesting characteristics of this letter—apart from the fact that it is one of the very few surviving correspondences that Oscar Wilde exchanged with his father—is that, since it is a message that he wrote during a research sojourn in Italy with his mentor Mahaffy, we would expect to find in it more detailed, perhaps more intricate, archaeological analyses than we actually do; not that it completely lacks an archaeological dimension, for the drawings and the rather objective descriptions of the architecture and the artefacts’ outlines and use clearly contribute to that, but, in his discourse, which is eventually more narrative than scientific, Wilde seems much less concerned about why and how the buildings, spaces, interiors, and objects came to be what they are than about pointing out what sorts of emotions these same buildings, spaces, interiors, and objects stir in him, even if superficially.

In other words, in this letter, Wilde seems much less intrigued by the historical or scientific value of these places and artefacts—that is, by their nature as material evidences of a past that was once present—than by their artistic or aesthetic value—that is, by their condition to just be sensually appealing, or, in more complex cases, by their ability to convey history itself as an aesthetic experience.





But this is not all; as we will see in a while, although in this letter Wilde seems more worried about an immediacy of his affections, that is, about the more sensual, physical, or bodily dimension of a close encounter with art, in many of his other works he suggests that there are alternative ways, perhaps more sophisticated ways, to deal with art—less immediate ways, we could say: considering these archaeological artefacts' ability to preserve in matter an aesthetic sensibility that was once possible but which is now foreign to

the present, chances are that most attempts to grasp this sensibility from a contemporary perspective will naturally mediate a deterritorialisation of current aesthetic sensibilities, a process that, in turn, might provide conditions for the possibility of new ways of thinking and feeling in the present.

Mind, I am not suggesting that Wilde is insinuating any of these philosophical connections in his letter; what I am suggesting is that, by preferring an artistic appreciation of these places and artefacts over a historical investigation of them, he is naturally preferring this second movement of creating new conditions of possibility through aesthetic sensibility, through an exploration of his own aesthetic experiences—a movement that is a form of self-indulgency, yes, but which is also a contribution to the cultural richness of the present.

This attention to the affective dimension of the Florentine architecture and to the somewhat enigmatic nature of the Etruscan artefacts is already visible in the last paragraph that I quoted above—the paragraph in which Wilde recounts his close examination of bibles, missals, manuscripts, and autographs—, but we can find other traces of this more personal curiosity in other sections of the letter; for example, when reliving the details of his visit to the Etruscan Museum, he writes to his father:

The goldsmiths' work for beauty of design and delicacy of workmanship exceeds anything I have ever seen. As I was kept there for a long time by an awful thunderstorm I copied a few which I send you. I cannot of course give you the wonderful grace and delicacy of workmanship, only design. Goblets and bowls of jasper and all sorts of transparent pebbles—enamelled jars in abundance. Swords of the leaf shape, regular torques but somewhat same design, metal hand-mirrors, and household utensils of all kinds, and every thing, even the commonest plate or jug, done with greatest delicacy and of beautiful design. They must have been a people among whom artistic feeling and power was most widely spread. (Wilde 2000:8; my emphases)

The reason why I examine Wilde's letter here is to emphasise that, in spite of the early influence of archaeology on his life, thinking, and artistic sensibility, this is a discipline which he seems to have soon found himself at odds with—not so much because it ultimately boils down to an attempt to retrieve the supposed truths of history in light of new material findings as to the fact that, by doing this, it often neglects the possibility to take these evidences as bases for much more exciting experiments—as stylistic resources, creative inspirations, aesthetic exercises, aesthetic educations etc.

A good case to explore is Wilde's treatment of archaeology in "The Truth of Masks," an essay that he reworked on and republished in his *Intentions* in 1891, but which had previously appeared with the title "Shakespeare and Stage Costume" in the journal *Nineteenth Century* in 1885.

In a few words, in "The Truth of Masks" Wilde examines how William Shakespeare (c.1564-1616) seems to have improved the ability to use the stage costumes of his actors to convey messages, realism, and dramatic tensions that could not be conveyed otherwise, that is, that could not be conveyed simply through the media of dialogue, narrative, or even set decoration. Clearly, then, in this essay, Wilde examines a very specific case of archaeology—namely, the historical accuracy embedded in the realism, in the material precision of the actors' costumes: textiles and fabric, colour and texture, confection and adornments. Wilde contends that Shakespeare would pay close attention to every single one of these details for basically two reasons: upon the one hand, so that he would be able to bypass difficulties such as an occasional lack of space on the stage; upon the other hand, so that he would be able to create both an organicity and a historical atmosphere that would convey realism, veracity, dynamism, emotion, and narrative efficiency to his plays. (Wilde 2007:1019-1021)

In fact, Wilde first remarks two fundamental uses of costume to convey a sense of affection: the use of costumes to make explicit the intimate nature of a character and the use of costume to deliver or intensify a specific dramatic effect.

He writes about the connection between costumes and the intimate natures of the characters:

Many other dramatists have availed themselves of costume as a method of expressing directly to the audience the character of a person on his entrance, though hardly so brilliantly as Shakespeare has done in the case of the dandy Parolles, whose dress, by the way, only an archaeologist can understand; the fun of a master and servant exchanging coats in presence of the audience, of shipwrecked sailors squabbling over the division of a lot of fine clothes, and of a tinker dressed up like a duke while he is in his cups, may be regarded as part of that great career which costume has always played in comedy from the time of Aristophanes down to Mr. Gilbert; but nobody from the mere details of apparel and adornment has ever drawn such irony of contrast, such immediate and tragic effect, such pity and such pathos, as Shakespeare himself. Armed cap-à-pie, the dead King stalks on the battlements of Elsinore because all is not right with Denmark; Shylock's Jewish gaberdine is part of the stigma under which that wounded and embittered nature writhes; Arthur begging for his life can think of no better plea than the handkerchief he had given Hubert—

Have you the heart? when your head did but ache,
I knit my handkerchief about your brows,
(The best I had, a princess wrought it me)
And I did never ask it you again;

and Orlando's blood-stained napkin strikes the first sombre note in that exquisite woodland idyll, and shows us the depth of feeling that underlies Rosalind's fanciful wit and wilful jesting.

Last night 'twas on my arm; I kissed it;
I hope it be not gone to tell my lord
That I kiss aught but he,

says Imogen, jesting on the loss of the bracelet which was already on its way to Rome to rob her of her husband's faith; the little Prince passing to the Tower plays with the dagger in his uncle's girdle; Duncan sends a ring to Lady Macbeth on the night of his own murder, and the ring of Portia turns the tragedy of the merchant into a wife's comedy. (Wilde 2007:1020-21)

And writes about the connection between costumes and the dramatic effect that their material qualities might produce on the scene:

After the slaughter of Duncan, Macbeth appears in his night-gown as if aroused from sleep; Timon ends in rags the play he had begun in splendour; Richard flatters the London citizens in a suit of mean and shabby armour, and, as soon as he has stepped in blood to the throne, marches through the streets in crown and George and Garter; the climax of *The Tempest* is reached when Prospero, throwing off his enchanter's robes, sends Ariel for his hat and rapier, and reveals himself as the great Italian Duke; the very Ghost in *Hamlet* changes his mystical apparel to produce different effects; and as for Juliet, a modern playwright would probably have laid her out in her shroud, and made the scene a scene of horror merely, but Shakespeare arrays her in rich and gorgeous raiment, whose loveliness makes the vault 'a feasting presence full of light,' turns the tomb into a bridal chamber, and gives the cue and motive for Romeo's speech of the triumph of Beauty over Death. (Wilde 2007:1020)

As we can see, then, although "The Truth of Masks" was reworked and republished in his *Intentions*, a book that fundamentally organises several ideas on the philosophy of aesthetics, it is essentially a very technical essay, dedicated to exploring how the dramatic efficiency of Shakespeare's plays largely rely on archaeological research to determine the

historical accuracy of the actors' costumes. However, in spite of all its technicality, this text is clearly oriented by Wilde's own idea of archaeology as an *accessory*—we can say, an epistemological mediation—to an artistic, impressionistic, or aesthetic cause, which, for him, is a much nobler and much more complex cause, as it is inevitably also a truly creative and truly personal cause. Elsewhere in the text, he suggests that the age of Shakespeare was suffused with an “archaeological temperament,” which means to say that the archaeological thinking was a major episteme for the people who lived and built this age: as the Ancient Greek and Latin aesthetics were revived by a 16th century rediscovery of these traditions' literature, painting, architecture, and sculpture, a new interest in the costume and ornamentation typical of the people of these traditions also emerged, was also strengthened. (Wilde 2007:1025) However, Wilde explains, in the age of Shakespeare it was not exactly “for the learning” that people, especially the artists, would study, acquire, or just appreciate these material cultures, “but rather for the loveliness that they might create.” (Wilde 2007:1025)

In fact, in a commentary that reminds us of the tone of the letter that that he wrote to his father from Florence, Wilde firmly suggests:

The curious objects that were being constantly brought to light by excavations were not left to moulder in a museum, for the contemplation of a callous curator, and the ennui of a policeman bored by the absence of crime. They were used as motives for the production of a new art, which was to be not beautiful merely, but also strange. (Wilde 2007:1025)

He also adds:

Archaeology to them was not a mere science for the antiquarian; it was a means by which they could touch the dry dust of antiquity into the very breath and beauty of life, and fill with the new wine of romanticism forms that else had been old and outworn. From the pulpit of Niccola Pisano down to Mantegna's 'Triumph of Caesar,' and the service Cellini designed for King Francis, the influence of this spirit can be traced; nor was it confined merely to the immobile arts—the arts of arrested movement—but its influence was to be seen also in the great Graeco-Roman masques which were the constant amusement of the gay courts of the time, and in the public pomps and processions with which the citizens of big commercial towns were wont to greet the princes that chanced to visit them; pageants, by the way, which were considered so important that large prints were made of them and published—a fact which is a proof of the general interest at the time in matters of such kind.

And this use of archaeology in shows, so far from being a bit of priggish pedantry, is in every way legitimate and beautiful. For the stage is not merely the meeting-place of all the arts, but is also the return of art to life. Sometimes in an archaeological novel the use of strange and obsolete terms seems to hide the reality beneath the learning, and I dare say that many of the readers of [Victor Hugo's] *Notre Dame de Paris* have been much puzzled over the meaning of such expressions as *la casaque à mahoitres*, *les voolgiers*, *le gallimard taché d'encre*, *les craaquiniers*, and the like; but with the stage how different it is! (Wilde 2007:1025-26)

As we can see, then, archaeology, for Wilde, has its merits as a science that seeks to clarify how, when, and why certain elements of a material culture are able to crystallise in themselves immaterial elements of a past, but it is a science that has its flaws as an investigation process that, in its own epistemological focus, tends to neglect the artistic, affective, and, therefore, creative dimension of this material culture; for Wilde, archaeology is, in other words, a science invested in clarifying the past to the present, a practice that is perfectly legitimate, but which does not take many steps further in trying to use the past as an effectively imaginative force to the people living, building, and enjoying this present. For Wilde, archaeology is a valuable instrument because it helps us access the past and thereby establish more precise definitions of history, but only art can turn archaeology into beauty, only art can turn the past into present, only art can alchemise the material vestiges of bygone days into something truly apprehensible to our contemporary senses, to the limits of our contemporary ability to understand.

To conclude in Wilde's own words:

For archaeology, being a science, is neither good nor bad, but a fact simply. Its value depends entirely on how it is used, and only an artist can use it. We look to the archaeologist for the materials, to the artist for the method. (Wilde 2007:1028)

However, although Wilde might not have found in archaeology the affective depth that he expected or that he realised to be possible—the affective depth he would eventually find in art—, this discipline, or at least the frequent contact with elements of material culture that it stimulated, does seem to have played a significant role in the formation of his thoughts—as we can see in many of the notes in his college notebooks.

Between March and May 2018, the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) funded me for a research internship at the English Department of Stockholm University, in Sweden, under the supervision of Prof. Giles Whiteley, a specialist in Aestheticism and

British *fin-de-siècle*. My main goal there was to have access to a rare volume titled *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: a Portrait of Mind in the Making*, edited by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, and published only once, in 1989.

During his postgraduate years at the University of Oxford (1874-78), Wilde kept several notebooks, of which only three have been published: the *Historical Criticism Notebook*, the *Commonplace Book*, and the so-called *Notebook Kept at Oxford*.

The most recent of them, edited and published by Philip E. Smith II in 2016 with the title *Oscar Wilde's Historical Criticism Notebook*, collects the insights that Wilde noted down while studying for the Chancellor's English Essay Prize of 1879, an essay dedicated to *historical criticism*, another very dear topic of study at the University of Oxford at the time. The Chancellor's English Essay Prize was not formally a pre-requisite for those who wished to pursue a scholarly career at Oxford, but it was a very convincing proof that the author—the winner, that is—was up to the tasks demanded by such an intellectually challenging post. Although, ironically enough, Wilde was never admitted as a professor there, he did deliver for competition a final version of his essay, "The Rise of Historical Criticism," an amazing semi-genealogical study of 'classical reception' that would become a regular chapter in most editions of his collected works.

Now, as we can see from its title, *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks* compiles the other two notebooks that I just mentioned: the *Commonplace Book*—an ordinary title given by Wilde himself—and the *Notebook Kept at Oxford*—a shortened version of "Notebook Kept at Oxford Containing Entries Dealing Mostly with Philosophical, Historical and Literary Subjects," a title given to this volume probably during the auctions that followed Wilde's trial in 1895 to pay some of his debts. (Smith & Helfand 1989:1) Despite the different titles, both notebooks are really *commonplace books*, these handwritten journals or scrapbooks that many scholars of the time would carry around with them in case they wanted to gather or note down some information that they happened to find important, whether to their research or to themselves; the idea was to create a personally-organised and therefore individualised anthology of texts, arranged according to a certain logic and normally enriched with critical commentaries. A *commonplace book* can be seen, I believe, as a modern and more systematised version of the Ancient Greek *hypomnema*, a living archive of scrapped thoughts—personal or by others—that a researcher would assemble according to a certain principle in case she wanted to work on them later, or in case she wanted to use them to shed some light on yet other potentially troublesome subjects that she could come across in her everyday life. (see Foucault

1984a:363) Stephen Colclough, a specialist in book history, explains that a peculiar characteristic of *commonplacing*—something we do not really find in the hypomnemata—is that this practice often encourages the user to organise her notes according to specific *sententiae*, according to a series of predetermined headings, which can even be turned into an index to help her retrieve specific information. (Colclough 2007:56) Although both a hypomnema and a commonplace book generally work as archives for a more linear construction of thought, the commonplace book is a progress in relation to the hypomnema in that it contributes to a complexification of thought through a more careful delivery of information, through a use of space that is mostly coordinated by the compiler’s wish to keep track of the development of her own perspectives about a certain author, insight, or problem. In fact, as we will see in a while, one of the reasons why I know Symonds’s “cult of the surface” and Arnold’s and Pater’s wish to “see things as they really are” influenced much of Wilde’s thought is a group of fifteen entries in his *Commonplace Book* broadly dedicated to Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets*, particularly to his “Conclusion”; organised under the rubric “The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature,” these entries basically try to figure out how Symonds’s hypothesis about the Ancient Greek aesthetic temperament applies to their literature in general. (see Wilde 1989:137-40) As Colclough emphasises later in his article, by examining the topography of these commonplace books, we can roughly lay out how manuscript and print cultures interweaved in an age—the 19th century—whose material culture we already tend to associate with the rigidity of the page, print, and binding; technologies of study such as these commonplace books often show us, indeed, that many readers still experienced texts in or through *quotation*, “in forms dictated by the *reader as scribe* rather than by the *printer*.” (Colclough 2007:57; my emphases) Technologies of study such as the commonplace books show us, then, that, for many people and for a very long time in the past, the act of *reading* and the act of *writing* were truly indissociable, that they were really two dimensions of one same practice; they show us that, since the act of writing was implicit in the act of reading, for many readers the act of reading largely depended on the physical manipulation of their sources of information. The transcription of a text into another substrate, into another materiality or medium, therefore allowed the compiler-transcriber to reappraise this text through a process of selection, rewriting, and commentary, thereby mediating, according to her own interests, the deterritorialisation of an author’s crystallised thought into a basis for what was likely to become some kind of “creative

investigation”—that is, some kind of thinking without any teleological pretensions whatsoever. (see Plutarch 1939)

One of my intentions with this brief incursion into Wilde’s *Oxford Notebooks* is, of course, to show that material culture was a fundamental piece in the construction of his early thoughts; but I also hope to make clear that, by studying them, by verifying the refinement of these thoughts, we come to realise that it seems a smart move to consider the hypothesis that there is much more to the philosophical complexity of his fictional and poetic works than meets even a well-trained eye.

As Wilde himself writes in the first page of his *Commonplace Book*:

[2]

Thought

A wave of opinion reaching a certain height cannot be changed by any evidence or argument•
but has to spend itself in the gradual course of things before a reaction takes place•

(Wilde 1989:107)

My guiding object of study in this entire thesis is Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist,” arguably the most ambitious of all the creative criticisms compiled in his *Intentions* (1891); but, if it is true that there is more to the philosophical complexity of Wilde’s mature works than meets the eye, then I believe that the argumentation style that I have been employing so far—the weaving of “casuistic” analyses to build larger cases that bring to surface hidden spots and relativise what could otherwise be an overly teleological reasoning—seems all the more convenient.

As I dwelt deeper into Wilde’s theories, I realised that a productive way to think about “The Critic as Artist” is to contrast it with the insights—however chaotic they might be—that he registers in “The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature,” certainly one of the most intriguing sections of the *Oxford Notebooks*.

Although not all the entries and not all the information gathered in “The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature” are relevant to us here, I will paraphrase this section in its entirety; even if much of what Wilde writes is of no objective use for us, this supplementary information still helps us situate his main hypotheses in a clearer train of thought—which includes the materiality of his thoughts, registered in his writing style, in his vices and mistakes, as well as in the way he explores the body of the notebooks.

I should emphasise, then, that the same way Smith and Helfand did their best to mirror Wilde's original writing and use of the page in the *Oxford Notebooks*, so will I do my best to respect their choice of edition, following their strategies of spatiality and notation, and also keeping the corrections they made upon the original texts.

I will also provide my own translation of expressions in foreign languages right after the entry in which they appear; I will discuss them later, if necessary.

The section goes like this:

[153]

The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature

When Aristotle said the Platonic ideas were a mere doubling of the sensible world, he laid his finger on the weak point of the earlier Platonic metaphysics, but on the other hand he may be said to have touched unconsciously on the peculiar characteristic of the Greek spirit—its plastic character—it's Tendency to conceive ideas always under the form of images, and to give a sensible rendering to objects most removed from sense: this may be called the artistic spirit of Greek Literature, and may be paralleled by the attitude held by Keats towards Wordsworth who as Shelley always seemed to “awake a sort of thought in sense” and towards Shelley who dwelt chiefly on what was vague and spiritual, and for whom the sight of a Greek piece of sculpture touched “the most removed and divine of the chords which make music in our chords”

[154]

X

X

X

So also Euripides makes one of his characters say

“Stand off and see my sorrow as a painter might” though Euripides perhaps of all the Greeks had the most share of the modern vague spiritualistic tendency—the tendency of Werther, and René and Faust—the morbid analyzing faculty[.]

XX

Note in connection with this how the Furies of Orestes have a tangible visible shape—and are described with a sort of Pre-Raphaelite frankness of detail, as opposed to the Furies unseen of men which Hamlet bears within his heart[.]

[155]

So in Greek Literature we find from the outset a peculiar definiteness of conception, a clearness of outline which are the plastic conditions of art, so that Phidias when asked what conception of Zeus he would carve, contented himself with repeating three lines from Homer as the answer•

We may compare Shelleys Ode on the Cloud with the celebrated Cloud Chorus in Aristophanes—the latter full of the mythopoetic and sculptural power of vivid realisation, as well as of accurate observation even to the (πλαγια) the side long way clouds creep down a mountain—or compare again the Hero and Leander of Musaeus with that of Marlowe[.]

In the former the motive is presented as it were from the outside—images are given to us clear in their plasticity like a statue bathed in visible sunlight—There is very little psychology—a branch of knowledge in which the Greeks were always behind hand both in the drama and in philosophy.

[The following is written at a slant in the left margin between “Leander” and “clear”.] cf. also Shelley’s Adonais with the lament of Bion•

πλαγια: sideways or oblique

[156]

X

X

X

compare Aristophanes particularly [*sic*] for this peculiar sensible symbolism—the real scales in which AEschylus and Euripides are weighed, the mortar in which War and havoc bray up the states of Greece, are like Κρατος and Βια of the Prometheus, and entirely in accordance with the Greek attitude[.]

In modern times, Dante and Durer, Keats and Blake are the best representatives of the Greek spirit[.]

Ç how much is this due to the fact that Greek Literature was not meant to be read—but to be recited.

Κρατος: power or strength

Βια: violence

[157]

in fact the Greeks were always ‘hubsch objectif’ as Goethe said—and the wish expressed by one of the Euripidean characters that a mark of external sign could be put on people to show their character is in every way a symbol of their attitude.

Marlowe floods the subject with a flood of spiritual thought of passion—the details of the tower and the lamp either don't come in at all or incidentally—but to the Greeks the eye and not the ear or mind was chosen as the vehicle of passion•

Connected with this is their plastic rendering of Landscape scenery—the Faun of Praxiteles with all the mystery and wantonness of the woods about him, the river nymph of Scopos, ⁱⁿ whose tangled hair and melancholy eyes the restless sorrow of great waters fo[un]d its plastic utterance, these gave to the Greeks what the vague and misty splendour of Turner gives to us•

Hubsch objectif: beautifully objective or charmingly objective

[158]

XX

So the plastic arts determined the direction of idyllic poetry determining the name and suggesting models of compact concentrated treatment. The Idylls are in literature what the vases are in art•

[159]

and perhaps in the personification of abstract ideas, at once the germ and the weakness of early Greek philosophy, we may discern the workings of the same spirit—

And as regards the drama when Euripides say 'look on my sorrow as an artist' he touched the quality of the old aesthetic ideal—

Aristotle said of tragedy that it proceeds by action not by narration and a character in a Greek play is seen by his relation to others not by his soliloquies—that is[,] is viewed externality: so also Greek sculpture does not obtrude its muscular structure[.]

Between ancient and modern dramatic art there is as wide a gap in this respect as there is between the figures of the Medicean tomb—and the calm serenity of the Parthenon frieze—

[161]

Now all this may be connected with their exquisite sense of form, their dislike to *το απειρον*—to the *ερος των αδυνατων*, the sense of the infinite which is the legacy of mediaevalism to modern life, and which music the essentially modern art as sculpture was the essentially Greek art: they always sought to externalise, to realise, to remain within corporeal limits: in reading Greek mythology we are apt to forget that we are reading about beautiful natural objects, and spiritual conceptions submitted to corporeal conditions•

Modern art appeals directly to the emotions, aims at reading the spiritual reality of things, cares more for feelings than for form—Greek art remains on the surface and translates into marble the humanised aspects of the external world[.]

το απειρον: the boundless

ερωσ των αδυνατων: the love or the desire for impossible things

[163]

Art then may be regarded as the natural expression of the spirit of man projecting itself in the forms of beauty most characteristic of its nature•

So to the Egyptians architecture—for humanity had not yet become conscious of its own beauty—to the Greeks sculpture which corresponds to the unperplexed emphatic outlines of Greek humanism—painting to the mystic depth and intricacy of of [*sic*] the middle age—and music and poetry—the sense of the infinite, and the scientific spirit of criticism to modern life—

The hierarchy of the arts like the Philosophy of History must be founded on a psychological basis[.]

[165]

The bridge between Greek and modern life may be found in the conflict of Greek tragedy—and also in the colourless abstraction of the divine forms of Greek sculpture, which seem a premonition of the fleshless refinement of the pale mediaeval painter.

[167]

Of the quality and motive of Tragedy as opposed to sculpture the Greeks were keenly conscious—

The calm Gods of the Parthenon looked down impassively on the passion of the Dionysiac Theatre•

The Idyllic Tone•

appears first in the Homeric hymn to Pan—then perhaps in the Bacchae and Ion of Euripides and particularly in the opening chorus of The Cyclops—the most Theocritean passage in Gk Lit• before Theocritus[.]

And the Electra of Euripides is the first real recognition of the pathos of common life—

(Wilde 1989:137-40)

Although we cannot be sure of how Wilde interacted with his notebooks as physical objects in front of him, the construction of his thoughts is materially registered in his careless writing, in an impulsive discourse that feels really strange if we think that it was written by an author who, in the future, would almost obsessively work with a precision, elegance, and lightness of wordly expression.

Much of this carelessness is blatant: in practically every entry there is a clear disregard for punctuation, syntax, grammar, spelling, and cohesion and coherence; in these entries, he provides two quotations in foreign languages—one in German and others in Ancient Greek—, all of them misspelled, deliberately or not; his choice of words can sometimes be vague and confusing—such as his uses of the words “psychology” or “psychological” in entries [155] and [163], words that still were rather troublesome in the mid-19th century—; his references to objects of study outside the notebooks themselves can also be a bit reticent and nebulous—such as his lacunar reference to Phidias in entry [155], his deeper understanding of Euripides’s *Hecuba* in entries [154] and [159], or even his opinions about Dante, Durer, Keats, and Blake being the best representatives of the Ancient Greek spirit in his time, in entry [156]. Of course, I am not suggesting that this carelessness is pure neglect, nor that it registers the author’s inability to deal with such matters; on the contrary, I wish to emphasise that such carelessness actually gives us proof of the spontaneity of Wilde’s thoughts in dealing with a wide array of high quality information, that it gives us proof not only of his precocious erudition, but also, and very impressively, of how he seemed to understand and dominate this erudition well enough as to organise it into more consistent reasonings.

A curious idiosyncrasy that we can notice about Wilde’s way of *thinking through writing* is the fact that he rarely uses *final periods* [.] in his sentences—he either completely ignores them or prefers the modern notation of the Ancient Greek *semicolon* [•]; we can also notice that he uses *em-dashes* [—] very frequently, often in the end of a sentence, where we would normally expect to find a final period or even one of his semicolons. The reasons why Wilde chooses these semicolons over regular periods are not at all clear and are certainly not homogeneous; Smith and Helfand point out that he uses the semicolon for emphasis and internal divisions on the pages (Smith & Helfand 1989:2), but we can see from the entries above that he also uses the semicolon as a regular period, such as in the end of entry [167], and as what can even be read as a regular colon [:], such as the first semicolon in entry [157]. Now, perhaps more interesting than Wilde’s use of the Ancient Greek semicolon is his use of *em-dashes*—or at least of what Smith and

Helfand edited as *em-dashes*, because I am truly inclined to think that, in Wilde's original handwriting, his highly frequent use of such punctuation marks could just be confused with completely arbitrary lines, lines whose goal was just to establish some kind of chain or progression, or which could even signal the finishing of an idea, completed or not. Whatever the case, we can see in the entries above that the em-dashes in fact seldom indicate parenthetical ideas, as it happens in the second use of the em-dash in entry [157]; as I just suggested, in Wilde's writing style, em-dashes mostly have a "deictic function," I mean, they mostly seem to indicate just a spatial distribution of ideas, one often related to some kind of illustration (see [156] and [157]), addition (see [159] and [165]), or to a more complex enlargement of a reasoning (see [155], [159] and [161]). Sometimes, as I just anticipated, these em-dashes simply indicate the finishing of an idea, the complete or partial conclusion of a reasoning, such as the last em-dash in entry [163], the em-dash in entry [167], and the first em-dashes in entry [159].

But, truth be told, this is more guesswork than analysis.

As I discussed a while ago, without Wilde's original manuscripts it is not possible to establish any solid conclusions about how he explored writing and commonplacings; although there are some regularities, such as the ones about the Ancient Greek semicolon that I just detailed, even they are often elusive, and my recommendation is that, if the researcher is interested in Wilde's intention behind each one of these idiosyncrasies, then she should examine them in their specificities.

Now, despite this irregularity of Wilde's writing habits, one idiosyncrasy of his method of commonplacings does seem to give us a more precise idea that he in fact adopted it as a means to guarantee an *open-endedness* in his thoughts: in their introduction, Smith and Helfand explain that Wilde only registered his entries on the pages on the *right hand side* of the open notebooks, reserving the pages on the *left hand side* for additional observations about these entries. (Smith & Helfand 1989:2) The way I see it, if the often random idiosyncrasies of Wilde's writing style—the arbitrary use of punctuation for emphasis or spatial organisation of thought, the brief, lacunary, and gnomish nature of his sequencing of ideas—already seem to indicate a flexibility in the form and content of his hypotheses, the fact that he uses the pages on the left hand side of his notebooks to further commentaries really seems to confirm, in a material dimension, his wish to control the inconclusion of his own thoughts, to control the incompleteness and therefore the expansibility of his own conjectures.

I, for my part, have no intention and, what is truly the case, no conditions to investigate this philological-ethnographical dimension of Wilde's writing in any more depth; my goal here, as is surely clear by now, is to verify how much of the information in his notebooks back up or even prefigure the theories that he would develop in his works of maturity, especially in his *Intentions*.

There is, however, something truly beautiful, but also truly sad, that we should notice about this material register of Wilde's intellect—a personal opinion of mine that might be really naïve, but which is a genuine admiration for the fact that Wilde was in his early twenties when he wrote these notebooks.

Based on the entries collected in the *Oxford Notebooks*, we can tell that Wilde read or was at least familiar with the works of authors such as Arnold, Pater, Symonds, Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Shelley, Wordsworth, Goethe, Dante, Durer, Keats, Blake, Marlowe, and Hegel—not to say works from the Christian and Egyptian traditions—, but we can also tell that he read or somehow knew the works of Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Charles Darwin, Charles Baudelaire, George Berkeley, David Hume, Francis Bacon, John Milton, John Stewart Mill, and William Morris—to name but a very modest few. And we can tell that he was familiar with these authors not just because he mentions their names or copies some of their *sententiae*, but because he almost always provides very insightful opinions about many of their most stimulating or most controversial ideas, often using them as platform for his own theoretical developments. In entry [153], for example, we can see that he was already familiar not only with Plato's idealism and what we can therefore understand, by contrast, as Aristotle's materialism, but also with what we can assume as an ecology or a philosophy of affections implicit in the works of Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. And, when he mentions these authors, he is not just listing them, he is not just registering them as examples; by associating the supposed plastic spirit of the Ancient Greeks' aesthetic temperament with his more contemporary idea of a “theory of affections”—which he sees articulated in the artworks of these three poets—, he is playing with the possibility of using novelty in art as a mediation for a reconfiguration of philosophy, of using novelty in aesthetics as a mediation for a reconfiguration of epistemology—something that is not really self-evident, particularly for a student of his age, but which nevertheless seems to be there, suggested in those hasty and sketchy lines of a college notebook.

In fact, in another entry, this time in the *Notebook Kept at Oxford*, Wilde writes:

[43]

Use of the poetic faculty in science?

Rem• how the early Greeks had mystic anticipations of nearly all great modern scientific truths: the problem really is what place has imagination and the emotions in science: and primarily rem. that man must use all his faculties in the search for truth: in this age we are so inductive that our facts are outstripping our knowledge—there is so much observation, experiment, analysis—so few wide conceptions:

we want more ideas and less facts: the magnificent generalizations of Newton and Harvey cd. never have completed in this mod. age where eyes are turned to earth and particulars.

(Wilde 1989: 162)

Now, what I find truly tragic about this material memory of Wilde's precocious brilliance is that, although it registers the refinement of the intellectual progression of his thoughts, a progression that would culminate in amazing works such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *Intentions* (1891), and "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), it also registers much of the birth of his own ruin: Wilde's works, particularly *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—a remarkable criticism on the limits of Plato's theory of forms and resistance to the affective power of art—and "The Portrait of Mr. W.H."—a remarkable creative criticism on the possible homoerotic motivations behind many of Shakespeare's sonnets—, would be used as material and moral evidences for his criminal practices of sodomy, and would ultimately contribute to the jury's final decision to convict him of indecency. (Ross 2013:161; Ellmann 1987: 564-82) When we think about Oscar Wilde, we instinctively think about this *dandy* who made a point of being addicted to society as a drug, only to throw in its face the hypocrisy of its own immorality as if it were a compliment; we think about this *hedonist* who spent his days in public and intimate circles delighting himself with cigars, gossip, fashion, and the heights of his own brilliance, aware that, where ever he went, he would always have an audience to captivate through its own foolishness; we think about this *controversial author* of a poisonous novel whose uncanny homoerotic fragrance is as thick as decadence, as thick as his own decadence. But, those who read the *Oxford Notebooks* will hardly find this *dandy*, this *hedonist*, and this *controversial author*; they will find, rather, the *researcher* that existed before and lingered beneath these personae—they will find that, along with the *dandy*, the *hedonist*, and the *controversial author*, these supposedly pernicious men we find embodied in the myth of Oscar Wilde, also an *intellectual* of a truly rare acumen was outcast from society.

But, let us think about "The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature."

Why is this so important to our current analyses?

As I suggested a while ago, although archaeology was apparently a major influence in the construction of the young Wilde's thought, especially as the basis for an interest in material culture, this is a discipline which he seems to have soon found himself at odds with, mostly because it did not seem to provide enough affective depth to his idea of artistic pleasure, to his idea of aesthetic experience.

In the following pages, I will try to explain this conflict, taking it as a starting point for my future discussion of Wilde's idea of impressionistic criticism, which, as I have already hinted at, also tends to be a case of creative or artistic criticism.

The way I see it, Wilde's greatest insight in the entries of "The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature"—a core idea around which all other hypotheses seem to gravitate—is that, although *plasticity*, or *materiality*, can operate as a perfectly efficient source of aesthetic experience, it tends to perform even better if it is somehow deliberately connected to or reworked through *language*.

Clearly, in "The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature," Wilde tries to apply Symonds's hypothesis of *sculpture* being the canonical art in Ancient Greek tradition to its works of *literature*—and he arrives at an exciting conclusion: not only does Ancient Greek literature seem to be aware of this aesthetic logic of bringing forth into the world even the most subtle or most complex sentiments through the immediacy of *matter*—for we can find this logic articulated in the diegetic dimension of many narratives—, it is also *itself* a product of this logic—something we can verify in the fact that, without neglecting the immediacy of *matter*, this literature seems to be able to convey even more complex types of aesthetic experience through a more refined kind of worldly materiality: the materiality of *action*.

A good example is, of course, Hecuba's dispute with Agamemnon in Euripides's tragedy *Hecuba* (V BC), a dispute whose game of visuality, pathos, pity, and dignity seem to be of huge interest to Wilde.

This tragedy's plot is rather complex.

In this story, we follow the aftermath of the fall of Ilium to the hands of the Achaeans, a sequence of torpid events centred on Hecuba, the widow of King Priam and overthrown queen of the great walled city. After her people is defeated, Hecuba is held captive by Agamemnon, the Achaean leader, who has also turned her two daughters into hostages to the Achaeans' interests: he has turned Cassandra into his own private concubine and has chosen Polyxena to be sacrificed on the tomb of the recently-killed Achilles. Some

time before the events of the play, when the battle of Ilium was still raging, Hecuba and Priam had asked Polymestor, king of Thrace, to take Polydorus, their youngest son, into his palace as a refugee—a request that Polymestor, as an ally to Trojan people, gladly accepted; however, as the end of Ilium became imminent, Polymestor decided to murder Polydorus, hoping to find in this act an opportunity to associate Thrace with the winner side and thereby find better chances to seize some of the city's treasures. Right after Polyxena's sacrifice, Polydorus's body washes ashore, assassinated, and this discovery leads Hecuba to conclude that Polymestor too, an old associate of her husband's, has betrayed them in a moment of need—and, for her, possibly in the worst way imaginable: not only did Polymestor slaughter her son, what is cruel enough, he also dishonoured the boy himself by not properly burying his body. Hecuba, then, requires Agamemnon's presence, reveals to him Polymestor's betrayal, and asks him for his help to take revenge upon this man; she deserves it, she explains: she is a noblewoman of the highest kind who saw her entire people, her entire race, be ghastly decimated; she is a citizen who watched her home burn and fall before her eyes; she saw one of her daughters be turned into a spoil of war for the pleasures of the man who is holding her captive; she saw many of her closest allies betray her and her family in order to have access to the city's riches; she powerlessly survived her husband, daughter, and son, bloodily killed in a horrible chain of events.

This is the pain that Hecuba pleads Agamemnon to see in her, as a painter would.

HECUBA

[...] But let me tell you why I kneel
at your feet. And if my sufferings seem just,
then I must be content. But if otherwise,
give me my revenge on that treacherous friend
who flouted every god in heaven and in hell
to do this impious murder. At our table
he was our frequent guest; was counted first
among our friends, respected, honoured by me,
receiving every kindness that a man could meet—
and then, in cold deliberation, killed
my son. Murder may have its reasons, its motives,
but he even refused my son a grave and threw him
to the sea, unburied! I am a slave, I know,
and slaves are weak. But the gods are strong, and over them
there stands the law that governs all. It is
by virtue of this law that we believe

the gods exist, and by this law we live,
distinguishing good from evil. Apply that law
now. For if you flout it, so that those
who murder their own guests or defy the gods
go unpunished, then human justice withers,
corrupted at its source. *Honour my request,
Agamemnon. Punish this murder. Pity me.
Be like a painter. Stand back, see me
in perspective, see me whole, observe
my wretchedness—once a queen, and now
a slave; blessed with children, happy once,
now old, no children, no city, utterly alone,
unhappiest of mortals. O no! You turn away—
what can I do? My only hope is lost
O this helplessness! [...]*

(*Hec.* 788-814; transl. Arrowsmith; my emphases)

If we examine entries [154] and [159] rigorously, we will notice that Wilde, at least in the form of his argumentation, seems to make a “mistake,” even if an honourable one: in entry [154], he suggests that Euripides, among the Ancient Greek tragedians, seems to be the one who best articulates in his works a “modern vague spiritualistic tendency,” which is the “morbid analyzing faculty” of Werther, Faust, and René; when he suggests this, Wilde is probably referring to the *mal de siècle*, to that early 19th century melancholy whose bilious sense of weariness and exhaustion, whose uncanny sense of ennui and emptiness, was so consuming, so overwhelming, that people actually killed themselves to get rid of it. There are many conjectures about how the *mal de siècle* developed within this early 19th century society, but the central idea seems to be that it was a reaction to many propositions brought forth by the Enlightenment, particularly those that emphasised an individual interiority as the effective source, as the true paradigm, of the apprehension of the world: this idea of an interior life much more complex, independent, and dominant than previously imagined would lead to a disenchantment with the world—that is, it would lead to the idea that the material environment surrounding an individual was no longer a primary, legitimate, or even real source of feeling, and this scepticism, this disbelief, would eventually turn inwards, to the individual herself, most, if not all, attempts to find an affective connection with this world. Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and *Faust* (c.1775) do seem to prefigure much of this 19th century *mal de siècle*—

especially Werther's morbid inclinations after unrequited passions in a world that did not really seem to have anything spiritual to offer in the first place—, but it is François-René de Chateaubriand's (1768-1848) semibiographical novel *René* (1802) that formally inaugurates the *mal de siècle*, the *world-weariness*, as a topos in literature. In fact, already in the first pages of this novel we learn that René, the main character, has the habit of taking long strolls in the nature, not really to appreciate anything that nature has to offer to him, but to be able to isolate himself in his own thoughts, to be able to sink in his own analyses of his own miseries; the peace of nature, for him, is not really related to any spiritual or soothing, but to a sense of indifference that finally allows him to immerse himself in the true reality of his own thoughts—which, given his own past history, are naturally dark and bitter, naturally prone to become themselves bilious streams of melancholy.

When thinking about an incongruity between the unfathomableness of an individual's interior life and the emptiness of what we can understand as an ascension of a bourgeois materialism as a new sense of reality, René suggests:

We Europeans endlessly agitated are forced to build solitudes for ourselves. The more turbulent and noise-filled our hearts, the more silence and calm attract us. Those hospices in my land, which are open to the poor and weak, are often hidden in valleys which inspire in the heart vague feelings of distress and hope of shelter; sometimes one finds them placed on the heights where the religious soul, like a mountain plant, seems lifted to the sky to offer up its fragrance. (Chateaubriand 2010)

Of course, I am not suggesting that Wilde is objectively associating Euripides's tragedies with the 19th century *mal de siècle*—I find it hard to believe that he would commit such anachronism. In entry [154], what he does is suggest that Hecuba, like Werther, Faust, and René, has this amazing yet disturbing ability to grasp her own miseries as substrates for more ponderable analyses, for more calculated suppositions or conclusions—and my contention is that Wilde's "mistake," more like an argumentative imprecision, is that he does not make clear precisely the fact that, whereas the melancholy and the anguish typical of René's *mal de siècle* are greatly a consequence of his incapacity to give form to his darkest feelings, the pain and the distress personal to Hecuba's misfortunes are, on the contrary, greatly a consequence of her true capacity to give form to her darkest feelings—so much so, indeed, that she dares Agamemnon to *gaze upon her* as a painter would so that he can see her in the whole bodily manifestations of her suffering. What is more, whereas René's melancholy seems to flow in a vagueness of inner

thoughts, thoughts that indeed seem inwardly directed to his own self-doubts, anxieties, and anguishes, Hecuba's pain is delivered through the objectiveness of a *parrhesia*, of a *truth-telling* speech, a speech that is indeed outwardly directed to express her own certainties in face of the injustices, anxieties, and anguishes that she is going through. For René, then, not only is the outside world of the senses completely foreign to his inner world of thought, his inner world of thought cannot possibly be accurately transmuted into the materiality of the outside world, an impossibility that in fact aggravates his sense of incomprehensibility; for Hecuba, on the other hand, not only does the outside world seem to be coextensive with her inner world of thought, her inner world of thought can apparently be transmuted into the materiality of the outside world, into the physicality of her own expression, limbs, and movements, a possibility that in fact seems so practicable as to give rise to a poignant scene of pathos, agony, and catharsis.

Clearly, we should keep in mind that Wilde's hypothesis is registered in a commonplace book, so it would be a wise move for us to consider the informality and the skimpy nature of his argumentations, but it seems to me of great importance to notice that, lost in his comparison of Hecuba's pain, on one side, and Werther, Faust, and René's melancholy, on the other, there is an amazing opportunity for us to see with more precision how the Ancient Greek literature is so much more based on and conveyed through plasticity, through materiality, than those works that we can very broadly understand as works of "modern" literature—such as the ones that Wilde mentions in his entries.

As we can see, now focusing on both entries [154] and [159], Hecuba's strategy to turn herself into an outwardly directed object for artistic contemplation leads Agamemnon, anticipating the fact that he will very likely be touched by such distressing image, to turn away from her (*Hec.*812-814), a cowardly reaction that places him, a powerful ruler, in a submissive position before his weary captive. In other words, by daring Agamemnon to gaze upon her as a painter would, Hecuba dares him to recognise in her the unrest of a pain that, albeit private to her, that albeit particular to the violence that she has been subjected to, can be wholly harmonised in her as a person of mind, emotion, and flesh—just like Agamemnon himself. And, well, this is a common nature that ought to allow him to feel at least some sense of pity for her, that ought to encourage him, the wise ruler that he is, to gaze upon her as the sum of her misery in order to find her in himself and himself in her. Again, as Wilde observes, Hecuba's sorrowful plea only really makes sense, is only really as poignant as it is, because, in spite of its intimate complexity, it is externally directed to create an image of a pain that is common to most people in spite of their

differences—a dynamic image whose purpose is, first, to touch Agamemnon and thereby convince him to help her with her revenge, and, second, to regenerate the empathy of the public through the catharsis delivered by such literally spectacular burst of emotions.

And so this is true about Agamemnon, that he eventually grants her a rather intricate chance for revenge—a chance that she takes very gladly, but also in a terribly personal way: Agamemnon invites Polymestor, now his ally, for a last visit to the Achaean tents so that he can have his share of the spoils of war. During this visit, Polymestor and his sons are taken to Hecuba’s tent, where she should receive them as a member of the defeated party; after cheating Polymestor into believing that she knows nothing about his murder of Polydorus, Hecuba lures the men into an adjoining room, where they should find more of the spoils of war from Ilion, and finally takes this opportunity to slay the boys and stab their father in the eyes, thus quenching her thirst for revenge.

Curiously, then, Hecuba’s revenge, Hecuba’s bloodthirst, is the last image that Polymestor sees before going blind.

Although in these entries Wilde does not make any explicit reference to the works he is talking about, when he mentions Aristotle’s idea that Ancient Greek tragedy proceeds by “action” and not by “narration,” so that the characters in a play are mostly regarded in their “relation” to the other characters, he is probably talking about Aristotle’s *Poetics* 1448a, particularly his hypotheses on imitation through action.

Aristotle writes:

Since those doing the imitating imitate people **acting**, and it is necessary that the latter be people either of serious moral stature or of a low sort (for states of character pretty much always follow these sorts alone, since all people differentiate states of character by vice and virtue), they imitate either those better than we are or worse, or else of our sort, just as painters do. [...] Yet, a third of these differences is how one might imitate each of these things. For it is also possible to imitate the same things, in the same things, sometime by narrating—either becoming a particular other, as Homer does, or as the same [narrative voice] and not changing—or with all those doing the imitating performing deeds and being **in activity**. (Aristotle 2006:21-22, transl. Joe Sachs; my emphases)

As we can see, then, much of Arnold’s, Pater’s, and Symonds’s ideas are present in Wilde’s hypothesis that there is a dominant *plasticity*—we can say a dominant *materiality*—also in Ancient Greek literature, or intrinsic to Ancient Greek literature; of course, we can speculate that Wilde’s commentary is slightly reductive because it is mostly

restricted to the analyses of Ancient Greek *theatre*, but it is not difficult to see that, in his sketchy lines, he is widely concerned with the Ancient Greeks' use of *language*, and how this use is often at the same time consistent with and an investigation into what we see as their canonical aesthetic temperament.

For instance, in Hecuba's plea to Agamemnon, what she does is retrace the evolution of her pain and misery so that, by looking at her, he will be able to grasp her, in the whole of her bodiliness, as a physical epitome of her suffering; in this context, her plea, although not properly an ecphrasis, is imbued with an ecphrastic potency: she uses the intricacy of verbal language and verbal meaning to predispose a sort of empathic deixis, to convey an emotional imagery, to provide a pathological depth to the superficial expression of pain that her body, as a body, makes physically present. And an evidence of the pathological impact of her language is the fact that, as she reaches that one moment in her plea in which she makes her pain truly explicit—the pain of a disgraced queen, mother, and mortal (*Hec.*809-12)—, what Agamemnon does is *turn away from her* and from all these painful dimensions of her suffering. Agamemnon's avoidance of her is actually a very peculiar *anagnorisis*, a very peculiar scene of tragic *recognition*, because, instead of facing the agony in Hecuba's plea and the trauma that it is likely to excite in him, what he does is cowardly turn away from her; in other words, Agamemnon, anticipating his own recognition of Hecuba's pain and his weakness before it, just evades her image, he just turns his sight away from her, away from all the pain that she is both verbalising and materialising right there in front of him.

Now, in my own commentary about the Laocoön group a few pages back, what we saw was an analytical process, an affective and intellectual movement, that is somewhat the opposite of the analytical process that we see in Hecuba's plea in Euripides's tragedy. We saw that, in the balanced expression of the Laocoön group—Laocoön himself about to succumb to the serpents' strength, one of his sons already giving up beside him, the other pitiably looking at him for help, all of them witnessing the proximity of their tragic end—, there is the revolving agony of a powerless father doomed to watch his children die as consequence of his own hubristic actions. But, as Lessing points out through his reference to Winckelmann, the pain and endurance of this man, the affliction and helplessness of his children, their distress and exhaustion in their fight against the beasts—the nature of these emotions is commensurate with the extension of the marble, these emotions are just a visible fragment of a noble people's soul that remains in tranquillity in the depths of the sculpture's materiality. So, that the Laocoön group materialises the agony

of this character's struggle in a balanced harmony of facial expressions and bodily dynamism is quite evident, but just how intricate is this agony, really? How much of this agony is indeed commensurate with the extension of the marble from which it was materialised, and how much is it not the product of the verbalised impressions of the people—Lessing, Winckelmann, or myself—who contemplate or are in the presence of this agony? How many traces of this agony are not only perceptible in the marble because they are, first, worked impressions of another admirer—someone for whom the perception of life, pain, agony, and death is completely different, but equally valid?

Simply put, then, when I say that Hecuba's plea in face of her own misery and my commentary about the Laocoön group follow opposite analytical movements, what I mean to say is that, in Hecuba's plea, language precedes or is concomitant with effective action, whereas in my commentary—or in Lessing's or Winckelmann's commentaries, for that matter—, language succeeds or is concomitant with static action.

This might seem a silly verification, but my point is that, by examining these two cases, we are able to notice a strange phenomenon seeming to arise from the tensions between *matter* and *language*—namely, the strange power that matter has of creating language and that language has of creating matter.



And the greatest interest of these disputes is that the transition from matter to language or from language to matter is chiefly impressive, it is chiefly a liminality between a critic's affective intimacy and her material reality, a liminality that, of course, is not really possible in purely archaeological analyses, often overly focused on just the material reality.

Perhaps I can illustrate this movement with a simple example from British Romanticism, precisely.

Richard Holmes, a specialist in the life and works of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), writes the following anecdote about this poet's writing of "Ozymandias" (1818), possibly his best known sonnet:

Egyptian subjects were very much in vogue, for in the autumn of 1817 the British Museum had taken receipt of fragments and sculptures from the Empire of the Ramases, some dating from circa 2000 BC. Among these were the celebrated Rosetta Stone, and the massive figure of Ramases II taken from the King's Funerary Temple at Thebes and presented by Henry Salt and J. L. Burckhardt. This figure, perhaps the most famous of all Egyptian fragments, is carved in blue and white granite. Much was also being written in the press about the startling Egyptian finds, and when Walter Coulson, the editor, visited Marlow over Christmas it had been often discussed. Visits to the British Museum with Horace Smith prompted Shelley to suggest that they might both produce a sonnet on the subject. Smith, the stockbroker poet who had agreed to be Shelley's financial agent in London, faithfully produced a workmanlike poem. Shelley produced 'Ozymandias.' It is the finest sonnet he ever wrote: harsh, dramatic and deeply expressive of his eternal hatred of tyranny and his brooding philosophic scepticism. (Holmes 1994:554)

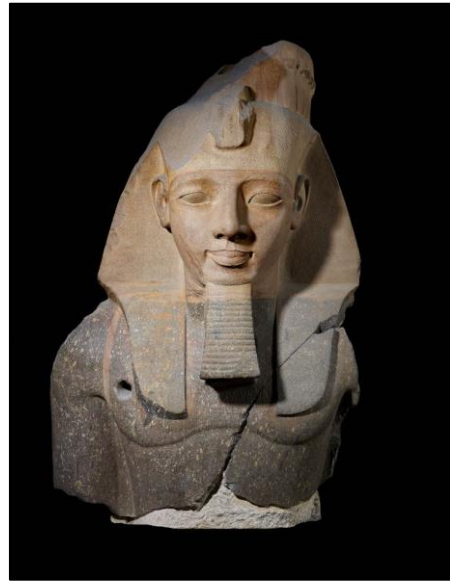
Shelley's sonnet is this:

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

(Shelley 2012:1132)

In the context of what we have been discussing, perhaps one of the most remarkable qualities of Shelley's poem, in relation to the original artefact that it poetises, is the fact that it does not even have much to work with; although, as Holmes observed, the bust of Ramses II, or Ozymandias, was part of a bigger collection of the material culture from the Ancient Egypt, the poem itself provides us a much richer perspective about the universe—space, time, aspect, topography etc.—from which this relic was taken than the relic itself. This means that, for Shelley,



the sense of history triggered by the bust of Ozymandias soon became an aesthetic experience, it soon became a tension between reason, imagination, and sensuality indeed so strong, that the product was another aestheticisation of history, this time through a richly imagerial and richly musical sonnet; for Shelley, then, one of the best understandings of history, of Ozymandias's history, is not merely archaeological—it is, rather, aesthetic, artistic, imagerial, musical, sensual; archaeology is just a premise, a substrate, an inspiration, only the glimpse of a truth.

I will discuss this in more details in the following essays, but Shelley's homage to Ramses and the history of Ancient Egypt allows me to anticipate one of the most important postulates that Wilde suggests in "The Critic as Artist":

GILBERT: *The one duty we owe to history is to re-write it. That is not the least of the tasks in store for the critical spirit. When we have fully discovered the scientific laws that govern life, we shall realise that the one person who has more illusions than the dreamer is the man of action. He, indeed, knows neither the origin of his deeds nor their results. From the field in which he thought that he had sown thorns, we have gathered our vintage, and the fig-tree that he planted for our pleasure is as barren as the thistle, and more bitter. It is because Humanity has never known where it was going that it has been able to find its way.* (Wilde 2013: 979; my emphases in the beginning and end)

It is not difficult to see that there is a conflict between Wilde's letters, on one side, and the entries from his notebooks, on the other: Wilde's letter to his father, written in June 1875—his second year at the University of Oxford, therefore—, clearly reveals an archaeological consciousness, even if in the end its overall tone is that of an artistic

interest; Wilde's letters to Sayce, written in May and December 1879—the first year of his life in London after graduating from the University of Oxford and failing to pursue an academic career there—, clearly reveal a lingering interest in archaeology, even though this interest might also be a resigned attempt to obtain a more stable financial income. The entries from his notebooks, however, reveal something considerably different; although he wrote them roughly at the same time of his letters—between 1874 and 1878—, they express a much more refined perspective of archaeology not so much as material vestiges of a past that was once present, but really as crystallisations of a huge ecology of sensibilities that were possible in the past and which changed throughout history. In entry [155], when he ponders about Phidias's massive sculpture of Zeus at Olympia (c.466 BC), he does so to speculate how Homer's verses in the *Iliad* might have actually influenced or worked as basis for its construction: "With that the son of Kronos nodded his dark brows, and the locks of ambrosial hair swung rippling from the Lord's immortal head: he made great Olympus tremble." (*Il.* 1.528-30) In entry [163], when he suggests architecture as the Egyptians' canonical art, an art still devoid of the subtleness of human emotions, he does so as an objective opposition to the hypothesis that sculpture was the Ancient Greeks' canonical art, an art whose greatest achievement was precisely to perfect the ability of giving physical form to even the most abstract emotions, to even the subtlest emotions. In a way, entry [158] might be an honourable nod to Keats, but it is also an insightful comparison, considering how many Ancient Greek ceramics indeed tend to concentrate in a minimal form scenes of domestic or ordinary life, like idylls often do.

Of course, those who read Wilde's *Oxford Notebooks* will find many other similar analyses, many other approximations between language and what we can very broadly understand as the plastic arts, but, clearly, considering the plastic spirit of all the Ancient Greek arts, these approximations are much more conspicuous and much more complex in these entries.

Whatever the case, what I want to make clear with my examination of this first part of Wilde's life is that, as we will see in a while, much of his philosophy of aesthetics derives from an initial archaeological epistemology, from an early naturalisation of the dialectics between language and material culture, so that this philosophy, although interspersed with truly complex layers of abstraction, is still very much grounded on perfectly worldly phenomena.

So much so, indeed, that, if my analysis of Wilde's youth was focused on a first contact between *language* and *materiality*, the second phase, the phase of his early adulthood, will focus on those who negotiate this contact: the *individuals* themselves.

An addendum before carrying on to the next essay.

Almost a year after finishing this essay, I found out what is probably an actual mistake in Wilde's use of the expression *hübsch objektiv* in entry [157].

In this essay, he attributes the expression *hübsch objektiv* 'beautifully objective'—an expression that synthesises the idea of a "cult of the surface"—to Goethe, but I think it actually belongs to Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), a German classicist largely influenced by Goethe. Wilde never mentions Heine in his notebooks or his published texts, but, as Thomas Wright points out, he was certainly familiar with his works: in his article, Wright discusses a rather unknown letter that Wilde wrote to Charles Godfrey Leland, a journalist whom he was close friends with and who became one of the main translators of Heine's works in England in the end of the 19th century; in this letter, written in the fall of 1879, we can see that Wilde probably knew Heine through Leland himself and also through his own mother, Lady Wilde, who seemed to be fond of Leland's translations of Heine's works. (Wright 2019:84-85)

The message is this:

Dear Mr Leland,

My mother, Lady Wilde, is very anxious to have the pleasure of knowing you and your charming wife: She has been always familiar with your name and would like to have the privilege of knowing the author, who has, in Heine's case at least, poured the wine of translation from "the golden into the silver cup" without losing any of the exquisite form, or aroma of the original.

She is at home on Saturdays at 1. Ovingdon [sic] Sq. S. Kensington.

In case you should be engaged she hopes to have the pleasure of calling herself on Mrs. Leland, some day next week.

I have not forgotten your kind offer about the Savile Club.

In case I am elected it will at least give me the opportunity of meeting you from time to time.

Believe me

Very Truly Yours

Oscar Wilde

(Wilde *apud* Wright 2019:84-85)

The expression *hübsch objektiv*, which I was not able to find in Goethe's works, can be found in Heine's *Reisebilder* (1826; 2011); he writes in an additional note to the 1830 edition:

[The distinguished ice-rind of reserve melts from my heart, a strange sorrow steals over me—is it love, and love for the German people? Or is it sickness?—my soul quivers and my eyes burn, and that is an unfortunate occurrence for a writer, who should command his material, and remain charmingly objective [*hübsch objektiv*], as the art school requires, and as Goethe has done—he has grown to be eighty years old in so doing, and a minister, and portly—poor German people! That is thy greatest man! (Heine 2011:45)

We can read in the original text:

Meine Seele bebt, und es brennt mir im Auge, und Das ist ein ungünstiger Zustand für einen Schriftsteller, der den Stoff beherrschen und *hübsch objektiv* bleiben soll, wie es die Kunstschule verlangt, und wie es auch Goethe gethan—er ist achtzig Jahr‘ dabei alt geworden und Minister und wohlhabend—armes Deutesches volk! Das ist dein grösster Mann! (Heine in Robert-Tornow 2013:40; my emphasis)

III

*One should either be a work of art,
or wear a work of art*

Oscar Wilde

*Color is an inborn gift, but appreciation of value is
merely training of the eye, which everyone
ought to be able to acquire*

John Singer Sargent



In the previous essay, I tried to retrace what I believe are fundamental peculiarities about the early formation of Oscar Wilde's thought, relying on information registered not in his works proper, but in some of his letters and especially in some of the entries in his college notebooks. My main purpose was to emphasise how archaeology broadly initiated him in a refined process of aesthetic education by putting him in systematic contact with the material culture of different traditions, thus becoming a crucial piece in the base of his ideas of both art and science, or of both aesthetics and epistemology, or, more properly, of how art and science can begin to dialogue—what we can finally consider a more thorough or complex practice of *art criticism*. In fact, it was also my intention to provide some evidence of how art criticism, for Wilde, seems to emerge from a liminality or a tension between matter and language, between sensuality and an investigation into the nature, limits, and potential of such sensuality through language: in his letter to his father and particularly in his observations about the plastic spirit of the Ancient Greek

literature, we can see that, for him, living and feeling, experience and pleasure, materiality and sensuality, action and affection, should always be central subjects of thought—for him, these ante or extra-linguistic dimensions should, in fact, motivate, mediate, and complexify the very act of thinking. In the context of this logic, therefore, one of the reasons why Wilde seems to have found himself at odds with archaeology is the fact that, as a method of study, it is often overly scientific, its way too often subsuming the artistic value of material culture to its purely evidential value, neglecting or even sanitising its sensual, affective, and imaginative potential; for Wilde, therefore, archaeology is absolutely fundamental as a method of study that provides the bases for an analysis of material culture, but, because of that which for him are often overly scientific intentions, it is also a method of study to be overcome, or, even better, to be conformed with or regulated by more artistic methods of study—methods that take into account the influence of affective, sensual, and also creative dimensions on the very process of epistemological reasoning.

In this essay, however, my analysis will follow a different movement.

First, if my analyses in the previous essay were more “autobiographical,” in that they prospected the formation of some of Wilde’s thoughts as they were registered in his own letters and college notebooks, in this essay my analyses will be more “biographical,” focusing on a small assortment of journalistic documents dedicated to his early years as a *celebrity*—documents that either register his opinions proper or that take him as an object of popular opinion—, as well as on one of his most important works of maturity—namely, “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891)—, texts that, I believe, will help us understand the complexity of “The Critic as Artist.”

Second, if in the previous essay I focused my discussions on Wilde’s troublesome relationship with *archaeology*, in this essay my discussions shall focus on his eccentric relationship with *society*: as they examined the events that happened roughly between the years 1854 and 1878, my discussions in the previous essay dealt mostly with Wilde’s *intellectual formation*—with some fragments of this formation, that is—, so that they mostly dealt with questions regarding the dialectics between *aesthetics and epistemology*; as they will now examine the events that happened roughly between the years 1878 and 1891, my discussions in this essay shall deal mostly with Wilde’s *individual formation*—again, with some fragments of this formation, that is—, so that they shall mostly deal with questions regarding the dialectics between *ethics and aesthetics*.

However, although my emphases might have changed—from a dialectics between aesthetics and epistemology to a dialectics between aesthetics and ethics—, this does not

mean that an ethical dimension did not exist in my previous discussions, and, certainly, nor does it mean that an epistemological dimension will be completely absent in my coming discussions.

In fact, as it should become clear as my analyses unfold, Wilde's idea of *art criticism* is a nodal point where ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology converge; for him, and for the other members of Aestheticism—and, by extension, also for us—, art criticism is a sort of hiper-liminal region where art, life, affection, and thought freely cross-pollinate, where these dimensions negotiate their mutual improvements—it is, indeed, a region where the boundaries between art, life, affection, and thought are so porous, so thin, that they barely seem to exist at all.

Considering our previous debates in this chapter, then, it might be evident already that in this essay I will focus my analyses on the philosophical precept of Ancient Greek origins normally referred to as 'aesthetics of existence,' 'art of living,' or 'living as a work of art.'

To be fair, much of what we can assume as the theoretical or philosophical premises behind a practice of an 'art of living' is already very well established in Matthew Arnold's idea of a *spontaneity of consciousness*; I dare say, indeed, that Arnold's idea of a spontaneity of consciousness is truly the distillation of a fine wine, truly a synthesis of the most relevant theoretical or philosophical premises that coordinate this practice of an 'art of living.'

What I will do, then, is very briefly revise Arnold's idea of a *spontaneity of consciousness*, as he discusses it in "Hebraism and Hellenism," and connect it to Wilde's idea of *individualism*, as he discusses it in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," an essay whose conjectures in fact concern the nature and, perhaps more importantly, the feasibility of the very idea of an 'art of living.'

So, back when I discussed Arnold's "Hebraism and Hellenism," I explained that, although he takes Hebraism—or Christian morality—as his theoretical adversary, his real enemy is, in a much broader sense, all that might contribute to a strictness of conscience: in practice, his real enemy are all those "social mechanisms"—for him, normally some kind of moral code or political institution—that tend, by many different means, to restrict the conditions of possibility to be, think, and feel differently in a given social context, restrictions that are often naturalised by these same "mechanisms" and which eventually disallow or outrightly forbid a person from taking responsibility for her cultivation of herself, for her cultivation of her own self.

I also explained that, in this scenario, in order to counter this strictness of conscience that cripples a person's ability to cultivate herself, it is fundamental that she adopt a form of criticism, a critical attitude, that is oriented by the spontaneity of consciousness typical of Hellenism—or Hellenic ethics: to see things as they really are is to be able to experience things as free as possible from the restraints of “social mechanisms” such as moral codes and political institutions; to see things as they really are is to be as free as possible to explore the conditions of possibility to be, think, and feel differently in a given social context, an exploration that is often a dissent from the restrictions naturalised by such “mechanisms” and which normally involves allowing or outrightly enabling the person to take responsibility for her cultivation of herself, for her cultivation of her own self.

At this point, I should make clear that, although Arnold, Wilde, and the other members of Aestheticism do not always make a precise distinction between the meanings of the words *ethics* and *morals*, the fact that their works contend and rely on a spontaneity of consciousness as a means to counter a strictness of conscience already confirms that these works are *ethical*, not *moral*, in their intentions—something that I already anticipated by opposing the hypernym idea of “Hellenic ethics” to the hypernym idea of “Christian morality.”

In theoretical terms, *morals* correspond to those sets of diffused or organised *prescriptions* that, by means of different “social mechanisms,” regulate, restrict, or condemn people's actions according to a logic of well-being determined by the ideologies of the context in which they live—ideologies that, of course, tend to correspond to the preferences of dominant groups that, therefore, seek to preserve the heteronomy of other groups; *ethics*, on the contrary, correspond to series of actions that are often *strategically creative responses* to the regulations, restrictions, and condemnations enforced by different *moral prescriptions*, responses that consist, therefore, of individual or collective expressions conditioned by these prescriptions, either in order to resist and defy them or in order to consciously conform with them.

It should be clear, then, that, although Arnold, Wilde, and the other members of Aestheticism do not always make a distinction between *ethics* and *morals*, or between *ethical* and *moral*, this is a distinction that I should inevitably make.

My reasons for this is this essay as a whole.

One of Wilde's best known texts—probably because it is also one of the most controversial ones—is his “Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890); anticipating the impact of this novel on a public that was sure to deem it “immoral,” he writes:

The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things. The highest, as the lowest, form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. *Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty. There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.*

[...]

The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.

No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. *No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.*

(Wilde 2007:4; my emphases)

This "Preface" that Wilde wrote to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is extremely problematic because, in it, his epigrammatic style often overpowers his real arguments; in a letter that he wrote to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) thanking him for his approval of such controversial novel, he confesses:

[? April 1891]

Between me and life there is a mist of words always. I throw probability out of the window for the sake of a phrase, and the chance of an epigram makes me desert truth. Still I do aim at making a work of art, and I am really delighted that you think my treatment subtle and artistically good. The newspapers seem to me to be written by the prurient for the Philistine. I cannot understand how they can treat *Dorian Gray* as immoral. My difficulty was to keep the inherent moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect, and it still seems to me that the moral is too obvious.

Oscar Wilde

(Wilde 2000:478)

So, as we can see, it is just not wise to take to the letter everything Wilde writes.

What I wish to make clear with this contrast between Wilde's "Preface" to his novel and the letter that he wrote to Conan Doyle is that it allows us to notice two important conflicts or imprecisions in his thinking in the context of his own art:

The first one, as might be evident already, is that, in his “Preface,” Wilde does not seem to make a clear distinction between *ethics* and *morals*: if art is a mediation through which people should try to attain some kind of spontaneity of consciousness, then it is fundamental that an artist have an *ethical sympathy* when creating his works; even if it is true that art should exist for its own sake—a logic that, we will see, Wilde himself seemed to “fail” at following—, in every attempt to create something beautiful the artist is already sympathising with the idea of exciting in himself and certainly also in others some new sense of pleasure and thereby some new sense of thinking, which is par excellence an ethical attitude; finally, if an artist explores art as a mediation to achieve an expression of a dimension of her own individuality, then her style is necessarily a form of ethical sympathy, it is necessarily an individualistic impulse to creation. In this case, art, as a mediation for new and often completely unpredictable forms of affection and thinking, tends to become unique, deviant, auratic, and, in extreme cases, it tends to become vanguardist. However, if we think about this same logic from a moral perspective, art becomes something entirely different: if art is a mediation through which people should try to attain some kind of strictness of conscience, then it is fundamental that an artist have a *moral sympathy*; by relying on some kind of moral sympathy for the creation of his works, an artist is sympathising with the idea of conditioning himself and by extension also conditioning others to experience some pre-established sense of pleasure—including, in some cases, the negation of certain forms of pleasure—and thereby some pre-established sense of thinking, which is par excellence a moral or moralising attitude; finally, if an artist explores art as a mediation to achieve an expression of a dimension in some way prescribed to her own individuality, then her style is necessarily a form of moral sympathy, it is necessarily a prescriptive and probably even institutional motivation to creation. In this case, art, as mediation for old and often largely predictable forms of affection and thinking, tends to become ordinary, conformist, utilitarian, and, in extreme cases, it tends to become kitsch or even authoritarian.

Anticipating my discussion of “The Soul of Man under Socialism” a little bit here, in this essay Wilde in fact writes:

[Whenever] a community or a powerful section of a community, or a government of any kind, attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do, Art either entirely vanishes, or becomes stereotyped, or degenerates into a low and ignoble form of craft. A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is.

It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Indeed, the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or a dishonest tradesman. (Wilde 2007:1052)

If a man approaches a work of art with any desire to exercise authority over it and the artist, he approaches it in such a spirit that he cannot receive any artistic impression from it at all. The work of art is to dominate the spectator: the spectator is not to dominate the work of art. The spectator is to be receptive. He is to be the violin on which the master is to play. And the more completely he can suppress his own silly views, his own foolish prejudices, his own absurd ideas of what Art should be, or should not be, the more likely he is to understand and appreciate the work of art in question. (Wilde 2007:1058-59)

The second conflict, perhaps not so evident, is that, in spite of Wilde's insistence that there are no such things as moral or immoral books—a contention that is consistent with the opposition between *ethics* and *moral* that I discussed in the previous paragraphs—, he does affirm in his letter that in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he tried to subordinate a moral dimension to the novel's artistic dimension. Wilde's use of the concepts of *ethics* and *morals* might be widely disputable, but his contention that a representation of morality in art does not naturally make this art a moralistic art actually does seem to proceed: ideally, if artworks should operate as mediations through which artists should try to express and the public should try to attain some kind of spontaneity of consciousness—if, in fact, artworks *are* aesthetic crystallisations of certain forms of spontaneity of consciousness—, then it is only natural that artworks—especially artworks grounded on action, like literature—should approach morality as an object to be systematically portrayed, so that it can be systematically examined, questioned, stood up against, and finally deconstructed.

In fact, Wilde writes further in his essay—not without new ambiguities:

Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.

Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type.

(Wilde 2007:4; my emphasis)

Considering this distinction between *ethics* and *morals*, or between *ethical* and *moral*, we can see that literature, as a form of art, naturally belongs—or at least should naturally belong—in the realm of *ethics*, not of *morals*; it is, ideally, an *ethical* practice, not a *moral* or *moralising* one, in the sense of a strictness of conscience: if art is the realm where and the medium through which personal expression and social redemption tend to be closest to some kind of perfection and to some kind of truth, then it should do its best to espouse, suggest, and disperse different strategies to attain a spontaneity of consciousness, not a strictness of conscience, whatever it takes.

Also, when I discussed Arnold's "Hebraism and Hellenism," I explained, in my own words, that an 'art of living' is a philosophical precept of Ancient Greek origins that basically consists of a person's ability to consciously and self-examiningly practice ways of living in and through which what she can attain or realise as truth is indissociable from, and in fact subsumed to, her ethical and moral conducts in relation to this truth.

This non-Cartesian logic—I think the correct term would be a counter-Cartesian logic, and this should become clearer in the next chapter—of subsuming all that a person can attain or realise as truth to her ethical and moral conducts in relation to this truth is absolutely fundamental for our understanding of *criticism*, because, if it postulates abstract thinking as inextricable from ethical and moral mundane activities, then what a person can attain or realise as truth is necessarily bound to how she can effectively interact with her own material reality—which means that not only is this precept bound to historical and social contingencies, the nature and complexity of the truths that a person can attain are also bound to the nature and complexity of her interactions.

A good example of this logic, as might be clear already, is Wilde's "The Soul of Man under Socialism," an essay that he eventually published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1891, but which he considered including in his *Intentions* (1891), precisely, given the similarity between its content and the content of the other essays in this book. (Danson 1997:80-81)

Despite the title, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" is really an *anarchist* manifesto, a libertarian treatise in which Wilde suggests a utopian society where spontaneity of consciousness—what he describes as *individualism*—is not only completely attainable, but also perfectly accessible to every citizen. In a few words, Wilde's main contention in this text is that the existence of people in the world should be politically coordinated in a way that enables them to perfect themselves by also allowing them to experience beauty freely and in all its conceivable forms: for him, the ideal society is one whose government,

whose State, provides all the means necessary for its entire population to spend their time and energy appreciating life without restrictions, enjoying themselves without restraints, cultivating their own body and mind without repression, contemplating and experimenting with the world around them so that novelties—in ways of living, feeling, thinking, imagining etc.—are irresistibly and even inevitably possible. It is not difficult to see, then, why Wilde's essay finally suggests an anarchist hypothesis: like Arnold, he takes as his main theoretical adversary all that might contribute to a strictness of conscience—in practice, that is, his real enemy are all those “social mechanisms,” typically moral codes or political institutions, that tend, by many different means, to restrict the conditions of possibility to be, feel, and think differently in a given social context; by conceiving a society without classes in which there are no such mechanisms, or in which they are always subservient to the people's needs, Wilde is naturally conceiving a society that is not regulated by a centralised government, nor by some kind of elite group that might be able to control, under the shadow of oppression, the means of production or any other means for the people's well-being—Wilde is suggesting, therefore, the hypothesis of living under an anarchic regime in which spontaneity of consciousness, centred on *individualism*, centred on *self-perfection*, is the highest paradigm of progress. Logically, then, in this essay, what Wilde sees as a main obstacle to a spontaneity of consciousness is not the strictness of conscience mediated by Christian morality, pure and simple; working from a much more materialist perspective, the main obstacle to a spontaneity of consciousness, for him, is rather the strictness of conscience mediated by *liberalism*—more specifically, the strictness of conscience mediated by the regime of *compulsory work intrinsic to liberalism*. Considering Wilde's main contention in this essay—that is, the idea that the existence of people in the world should be politically coordinated in a way that enables them to perfect themselves by also allowing them to experience beauty freely and in all its possible forms—, the reasons why he chooses compulsory work as a worst enemy to be confronted are actually pretty obvious: the fact that liberalism requires that people work in order for them to obtain their rights, sustenance, well-being, and some kind of social legitimacy leads them to systematically subject themselves to often demeaning activities that consume their time and energy in also one of the most depreciating ways imaginable—namely, by requiring that they invest their time and energy in the completion of tasks or in the production of goods that are essentially beneficial to others, mostly to an elite group, not to themselves. According to Wilde's logic, if we create a society in which distributive justice is perfect—that is, a society in which there are no classes, no private

properties, no compulsory works, no coercive authorities, and in which cooperation triumphs over competition—, poverty will be impossible, and, if poverty is impossible, people will not have to spend their time and energy struggling to survive, and, if people will not have to spend their time and energy struggling to survive, they will naturally be free and even inclined to explore their time and energy to accomplish all those beautiful things that make themselves better people, that make their society a better place to live in, and, finally, that make the very act of living a richer and much more seductive experience.

Back when I was discussing Arnold's "Hebraism and Hellenism," I explained that the greatest disadvantage of Christian morality, as opposed to Hellenic ethics, is that, by setting *doing* above *knowing*, or *action* above *cultivation*, it compels the person to abdicate herself from an improvement of her own self in order to favour an obedience to God. I also explained, in other words, that a chief disadvantage of Christian morality is, therefore, that it prescribes and regulates people's actions in their material reality to the detriment of the freedom that these people may achieve through culture, and prescription and regulation not only essentialise all that is available to these people, they also do this by transferring any authority of truth from them to many other supposedly more competent authorities.

In Wilde's "The Soul of Man under Socialism," we can notice that the greatest disadvantage of *compulsory work*, as opposed to *facultative work*, is also that, by setting *doing* above *knowing*, or *action* above *cultivation*, it compels the person to abdicate herself from an improvement of her own self in order to favour a compliance with liberalism. In other words, a chief disadvantage of compulsory work is, therefore, that it also prescribes and regulates people's actions in their material reality to the detriment of the freedom that these people may achieve through culture, and, as I have already made clear, prescription and regulation not only essentialise all that is available to these people, they also do this by transferring any authority of truth from them to many other supposedly more competent authorities.

Surely not a coincidence, this is a perspective that we can find anticipated in Wilde's *Oxford Notebooks*; there, he writes:

[3]

Culture•

The human spirit cannot live right if it lives by one point alone: it has a vital need for conduct and religion but also for beauty• social life• intellect• manners &c.

(Wilde 1989:108)

[172A-recto]

[inserted page from a smaller (7 3/8" x 8 3/4") notebook]

The end of life is not action but contemplation, not doing but being: to treat life in the spirit of life is to treat it as a thing in which means and end are identified—To witness the spectacle of life with appropriate emotions[.] To withdraw the thoughts of the machinery of life to fix them with appropriate emotions on the great facts of human life wh[ich] machinery does not affect[.]

The end of life must be realised through the means.

(Wilde 1989:141-42)

Now, a fundamental difference that we should pay attention to in Arnold's hypotheses, as opposed to Wilde's hypotheses, is that Arnold's resistance to a strictness of conscience is largely grounded on the *dogmatic* premises that underlie this way of thinking and living in the context of Christianity, whereas Wilde's resistance to a strictness of conscience is largely grounded on the *materialist* premises that underlie this way of thinking and living in the context of liberalism.

However, in spite of the differences between Arnold's and Wilde's hypotheses, their thoughts seem to realign as they come closer to a defence of a spontaneity of consciousness: both Arnold and Wilde seem to agree that, in opposition to the prescriptive and even authoritative nature of a strictness of conscience, a major advantage of a spontaneity of consciousness is that this way of living and thinking indeed assumes as valid—and invests itself in always trying to fathom why this assumption is itself valid—the idea that it is fundamental that people be free to cultivate themselves, to care for themselves, so that they can spend their time and energy not crudely abdicating of themselves in favour of others, but kindly perfecting themselves in their own favour, for the sake of their own pleasure of living in the world.

In his essay, Wilde finally provides a solution to a regime of compulsory work, a solution that for us today might seem truly naïve, but which only seems that way because we are already used to expecting the worst from living in society—we are already used to the idea that distributive justice will never happen, whereas social segregation and exploitation will actually be materially and morally encouraged.

Wilde's suggestion is this.

In order for people to be free to care for themselves, to be able to spend their time and energy perfecting themselves so that they can live and experiment with the world in progressively creative ways, it is necessary that all forms of work that are somehow exploitative—and which, therefore, somehow deprive people of their dignity—be replaced or done by *machinery* provided and controlled by the State. According to Wilde, in order to survive, every society requires some kind of exploitation, some kind of slavery, but, since every form of exploitation is naturally demeaning, every form of work that is somehow exploitative, that is somehow utilitarian, must be done by soulless servants—and the perfect soulless servant is, precisely, a machine.

Machinery should do all the heavy and degrading work, for people should be privileged with the freedom to cultivate themselves, to care for themselves and their living in the world, as the works of art that they were indeed born to be.

Wilde explains:

Now as the State is not to govern, it may be asked what the State is to do. *The State is to be a voluntary association that will organise labour, and be the manufacturer and distributor of necessary commodities. The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful.* And as I have mentioned the word labour, I cannot help saying that a great deal of nonsense is being written and talked nowadays about the dignity of manual labour. There is nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading. *It is mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure, and many forms of labour are quite pleasureless activities, and should be regarded as such.* To sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours, on a day when the east wind is blowing is a disgusting occupation. To sweep it with mental, moral, or physical dignity seems to me to be impossible. To sweep it with joy would be appalling. Man is made for something better than disturbing dirt. All work of that kind should be done by a machine. (Wilde 2007:1050-51; my emphases)

As I anticipated a while ago, when we read “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” it is not always easy to tell whether Wilde is being serious or ironic, and, at first sight, this paragraph does seem a huge irony, given its highly, almost absurdly utopian tone; however, apart from what I just said about the inconvenience of distributive justice and the convenience of social exploitation, Wilde himself provides an answer to the supposedly far-fetched propositions in his essay.

Elsewhere in the text, when thinking about King Louis XIV's reorganisation of France as a Modern State—something he seems to have done guided by the faulty conviction that human nature tends to remain the same—, Wilde explains:

But the past is of no importance. The present is of no importance. It is with the future that we have to deal. For the past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are.

It will, of course, be said that such a scheme [the scheme of his argumentation] as is set forth here is quite unpractical, and goes against human nature. This is perfectly true. It is unpractical, and it goes against human nature. This is why it is worth carrying out, and that is why one proposes it. For what is a practical scheme? A practical scheme is either a scheme that is already in existence, or a scheme that could be carried out under existing conditions. But it is exactly the existing conditions that one objects to; and any scheme that could accept these conditions is wrong and foolish. The conditions will be done away with, and human nature will change. The only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predicate of it. The systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature, and not on its growth and development. (Wilde 2007:1062; my emphases)

To put this in other words: if it is social equality what is at stake, it is preferable to seem absurd envisaging a more prosperous future than to think and act as a conformist in face of the malaises of the present; it is preferable to sound silly speculating about new conditions of possibility for the future than to conform with or surrender to the difficulties that stand between the misery of the present and the possibility of change.

Now, clearly, we could get into a very long and very complex discussion about the qualities and flaws of the political dimension of Wilde's essay—for instance, his conception of *utopia* is clearly Plato's conception of *utopia*, which is a calculated predisposition to progress—, but this is not what really interests me here; what really interests me here is Wilde's central contention, that is, his suggestion that people should always do their best to achieve a spontaneity of consciousness, that they should do everything in their power to elaborate some strategy of individualism, of self-perfection, that somehow allows them to relativise or, ideally, eliminate the boundaries that separate art from life, so that art may become a way of life and life may become a way of art.

And Oscar Wilde himself is a good example of this.

When we study Wilde's biography, we soon notice that there are three moments of his life that often seem a bit confusing—the very beginning (1854-70), the very middle (1877~81), and the very end (1899-1900).

The confusing events that mark his first and his last years of life are actually quite easy to understand: on one side, we have an individual still in formation, moving across Ireland and Northern Ireland, sometimes to remote places, often away from his family, to have access to the early bases of his education; on the other side, we have an individual running away from everything and everyone, moving across Britain and continental Europe, sometimes to remote places, often away from the press and the spotlights, to try to find a new life, a new dignity, a new story for himself.

The confusion in the events that mark the years 1877~81, however, are of a much different kind, and, in order to be able to carry on with my study, I will not even try to systematise them here; what we should know about these events, though, is that, irrespective of how confusing they might be, Wilde's actions between these years seem to gravitate around three major incidents: his failed attempt to become a regular scholar at the University of Oxford; his failed attempt to marry Florence Balcombe (1858-1937)—who would in turn marry Bram Stoker (1847-1912), then an already successful novelist; and, consequently, and most importantly for us, his decision to make a life as an offbeat artist and public figure in British society.

Since the beginning of this study, I have been discussing this countercultural movement known as Aestheticism, whose members were eventually called "aesthetes"; however, although these two terms might sound completely natural to us today, maybe even technical, back in the mid-19th century they were actually pejorative—particularly the word "aesthete."

Although being called an "aesthete" was not necessarily offensive, it was not exactly a compliment, either: an aesthete was basically an effeminate man who sought to heighten his senses to a richer experience of all the arts that life can provide; who dressed, talked, and behaved in very strange but always affected ways; who tended to subsume all dimensions of life—from politics and economy to the decoration of the bedchamber—to the pleasures of the senses and thought; who always tried to preside over a dinner table with the same wit, irony, elegance, and extravagance with which he would preside over an art exhibition or a fashion salon; who would surround himself with the most eccentric forms of art—from rare books and artefacts to clothes, tapestry, and even animals from the most curious places in the world; who would do his best to fulfil all of his curiosities,

all of his appeals to the senses, even if this included giving in to the most dangerous kinds of chemical substances or to the most sinful and outrageous kinds of erotic experience—all for the sake of pleasure, for the sake of sensing, feeling, thinking, and imagining otherwise in the very present.

It is not difficult to see, then, that being an “aesthete” was highly condemnable from the standpoint of morality and a strictness of conscience, but highly laudable from the standpoint of ethics and a spontaneity of consciousness.

Richard Ellmann gives us two evidences of Wilde’s life as an aesthete that is worth taking a look at: in the first one, we can see Wilde attending the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in Bond Street, in 1877; in the second one, we can see Wilde in 1878 attending a massive gala ball given by Herbert Morrell (1845-1906), a lawyer and politician, but also a preeminent Oxonian aristocrat.

Ellmann’s narration is quite amusing, so I will not edit out anything.

I apologise beforehand for such long fragments, but I believe they truly help us have a better perspective of *what* exactly Oscar Wilde was in social life.

Ellmann’s first account goes like this:

[Oscar Wilde] felt more comfortable with the visual arts, and the event of the season was the opening of the new Grosvenor Gallery by Sir Coutts Lindsay. *With artist friends such as Miles and Gower, Wilde had no trouble being invited to the private showing on 30 April 1877, and he was not one to shirk the official opening next day, when the Prince of Wales, Gladstone, Ruskin, Henry James, and other dignitaries were also present.*

The occasion was intended to be memorable. Lindsay’s gallery offered to present the contemporary art scene more fairly and vivaciously than the jealous Royal Academy. The year before, Sir Charles Dilke had complained on the floor of the House that the Academy excluded from its exhibitions certain important painters, chiefly Pre-Raphaelites. Lindsay intended his new gallery to present not only paintings of this school and others, but to constitute in itself a work of art. Accordingly, a new Palladian façade was imposed upon the front of 135–37 New Bond Street (now the Aeolian Hall). Whistler, with whom Wilde had struck up an acquaintance, was commissioned to do a frieze on the coved ceiling of the West Gallery, showing in silver, against a subdued blue ground, the moon in its phases and the accompanying stars. The gallery walls, as Wilde approvingly noted, were ‘hung with scarlet damask above a dado of dull green gold.’ Henry James’s fastidious eye observed that these strong colours, especially ‘the savage red,’ distracted the eye from the paintings, and Ruskin made the same objection, but Wilde rejoiced in the lavishness of the spectacle.

Part of this spectacle was himself. No ordinary clothing would serve for what he recognized to be his London debut, so he was pranked out in a new coat even more astonishing

than the yellow-brown one which had dazzled the Genovese. A contemporary diarist reports the answer he gave when questioned about this acquisition. He had had a dream, he said, in which a ghostly personage appeared in a coat of a shape and color that somehow reminded him of a violoncello. On waking, he hastily sketched out what he had seen and brought the drawing to his tailor. *The coat was cut to meet the dream specifications: in some lights it looked bronze, in others red, and the back of it (Wilde was proud of his back) resembled the outline of a cello.*

That anyone should care what a young man of twenty-three was wearing confirms that Wilde was becoming a wonder. It was his first rehearsal of the role of art critic at exhibitions, in which Frith was to paint him ironically a few years later, dominating a crowd. *The attention he drew with his cello coat he was able to hold with his wit and enthusiasm. He felt so enamoured of his newly revealed ability that he decided, virtually on the spot, to 'take up the critic's life.'*

(Ellmann 1984:112)

Ellmann's second account is this:

Neither now nor later did Wilde allow his uncertain future to interfere with present enjoyments. His mother's idea that he might live comfortably on the £200 annual interest from his inherited capital was not his. *Whether or not money came in, he spent it. Some went to enable him to dress magnificently. Not only were there the cello coats and the Super Fancy Angola suits, but on 1 May 1878 he dazzled an all-night fancy-dress ball, given by Mr and Mrs Herbert Morrell at Headington Hill Hall for three hundred guests, by wearing a Prince Rupert costume with plum-coloured breeches and silk stockings.* This finery pleased him so well that he bought it from the hiring firm and wore it playfully in his rooms. *Those rooms in turn were filled with exquisite objects, not only blue china but Tanagra statuettes brought back from Greece, Greek rugs bought with the help of William Ward, photographs of his favourite paintings, and his famous easel sporting its unfinished painting.* He would explain the easel by owning that he sometimes felt the need to 'find expression through the veiling medium of colour. Some artists feel their passion too intense to be expressed in the simplicity of language, and find in crimson and gold a mode of speech more congenial because not quite so translucent.' So, as Wilde informed *The Biograph*, he might some day become an artist.

[...]

Wilde was aware that aestheticism had a history which long preceded the coinage in 1750 of the word 'aesthetic' by the philosopher Baumgarten. In an article of 4 September 1880, he pointed out that in Plato's *Symposium* the host, Agathon, was 'the aesthetic poet of the Periclean age.' The proponent of the lily called attention to the title of Agathon's lost play, 'The Flower.' (Wilde confused Antheus with Anthos.) Not only Plato but also Aristophanes had portrayed Agathon in 'brilliant colours,' said Wilde. Actually the latter, in his

Thesmophoriazusae, mocked aesthetic effeminacy more sharply than Rhoda Broughton by having Agathon go among the women in drag.

If the classical world was divided about its 'aesthetic poet,' the nineteenth century was equally so. Aestheticism had been given a sanction by Kant when he spoke of art as disinterested, and as creating a second nature through human agency. Such ideas were absorbed by Théophile Gautier, a favourite of Wilde, and expressed in his celebrated preface to *Made-moiselle de Maupin*. Against conventional notions, Gautier announced that art was completely useless, amoral, and unnatural. His novel illustrated his views by nonchalantly presenting a heroine with bisexual tastes, which in the end she lavishly gratifies. The theme of variable sexuality was set by Gautier's heroine for the rest of the century. Wilde particularly liked a later manifestation of it in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*.

[...]

Oxford aestheticism, as developed by Wilde, proved to be of a peculiarly knowing kind. Self-parody was coeval with advocacy. Wilde could see by the time he reached Oxford that the movement was going out as much as it was coming in. Though he adopted some of its interests, such as tints and textures, he did so always with something of his mother's high-spiritedness, poking fun at his own excess.

(Ellmann 1984:123; my emphases)

It is true, although Ellmann's biography of Oscar Wilde (see Ellmann 1984) might be, still today, the most reliable source of information about this writer's life, we should by no means take it as an infallible truth; however, if we look for evidences of Wilde's life in other media, we will be able to notice that Ellmann's accounts might not be so distant from the truth after all.

By the time Wilde took rooms in London with his old friend Frank Miles (1852-91), in 1879, he had already become a popular face and a rather well-known name in the British social circles, even though, in practice, he still seemed to be going through a turmoil of financial difficulties.

His letters give proof of this; some of them we have already seen, like the ones he wrote to Reverend Sayce, but there are yet others, in which he indeed openly asks for an opportunity to apply for a job:

[Mid-February 1880]

Will you do me a good service, and write me a testimonial of what you think my ability for a position in the Education Officer or School Inspectorship would be? Rents being as extinct in Ireland as the dodo or moly, I want to get a position with an assured income, and any Education work would be very congenial to me, and I have here good opportunity for studying the systems of France and Germany. I think your name would carry a good deal of weight

with it in a matter of this kind. The Duke of Richmond is the President of the Council in whose hands the appointments rest.

Oscar Wilde

(Wilde 2000:87-88)

However, as we have seen in Ellmann's account of Wilde's extravagant attires, as well as his rich collection of vases, rugs, statuettes, and paintings, much of Wilde's financial problems were certainly a product of his madly expensive way of life; in fact, elsewhere in his narration of Wilde's life, Ellmann also registers the following episode—although this time I find the accuracy of the events a little bit doubtful:

His antics were sometimes remarkable. The artist Louise Jopling recalled opening the door to him, to find him with a large snake twisted around his neck. He assured her that its poison sac had been extracted. But it was his tongue, not his reptilian collar, that won attention. This was not always favourable. Frank Benson, meeting him at a theatre, heard someone say, 'There goes that bloody fool Oscar Wilde.' Wilde brightly remarked, 'It's extraordinary how soon one gets known in London.' More solemnly, he remarked to the wife of Julian Hawthorne, 'I should never have believed, had I not experienced it, how easy it is to become the most prominent figure in society.' (Ellmann 1984:148-49)

The reason why I emphasise this ironic coincidence between Wilde's ascension to fame as a popular figure in British social circles and his descent into debt as a wasteful aesthete in an increasingly materialistic society is that this was, eventually, what really motivated him to accept the idea of touring around Canada and the United States to deliver his lectures on Aestheticism.

Ellmann explains about the second semester of 1881:

While [Wilde] waited impatiently for Mrs Beere's rehearsals to begin [for her main role in *Vera*], he was unexpectedly approached from another quarter. A cablegram, knowledgeably addressed to him at his mother's house, proved to be from the producer Richard D'Oyly Carte in New York. Since September 1881, Carte had had *Patience* running in New York with as much success as in London. Another part of his enterprise was to manage lecture tours, and he snatched at a suggestion, possibly from Sarah Bernhardt (who was credited by Wilde with having initiated the idea), to give Americans a chance to see and hear the leading exponent of aestheticism. Carte expected *Patience* to give a fillip to Wilde's lectures, and the lectures to give a fillip to *Patience*. (Ellmann 1984:197)

What is truly curious to notice about Wilde's actions between the late 1870's and early 1880's is that they register the formation of a wholly new persona: of course, much of his stylised manners and extravagant ways of life were already there with him in Oxford, but, as he struggles to settle a new life in London as an artist and public figure, clearly his interests seem to shift from a more intellectual enthusiasm to a boastful attention to himself—either as a body of flesh, clothes, voice, speech, and manners, or as a name and image that carries with it all sorts of story, gossip, compliment, insult, and, most importantly, all sorts of myth. However, we must not ignore the fact that, although Wilde's new way of life in London was widely dedicated to exploring, through the ethical prism of Aestheticism, the increasingly materialistic, philistine, and gossipy yet moralising habits of a Victorian society now largely moved by the bourgeois euphoria of journalism and consumer culture, this new way of life did not erode the intellectual dimension he had so dearly worked on as a postgraduate student at the University of Oxford. In fact, as we can see in a letter written by Richard D'Oyly Carte (1844-1901)—an English *talent agent* whose main work then was basically to create these people whom we know today as *celebrities* and diffuse the idea of what we understand today as *stardom*—, Wilde's main objective in his tour around Canada and the United States, apart from exhibiting *himself* as a *product* of Aestheticism, was to deliver *lectures* about the critical, even philosophical dimensions of this cultural and artistic movement.

Carte writes:

R. D'Oyly Carte's Opera Companies,
Central Office, 1267 Broadway,
New York Nov. 8 1881
Dear Sir,

I have lately had a correspondence with Mr. Oscar Wilde, the new English Poet, with reference to a tour in the U.S. during the winter. *My attention was first drawn to him for the reason, that while we were preparing for the opera 'Patience' in New York, his name was often quoted as the originator of the aesthetic idea, and the author of a volume of poems lately published, which had made a profound sensation in English society.* It was suggested to me, that if Mr. Wilde were brought to this country with the view of illustrating in a public way his idea of the aesthetic, that *not only would society be glad to hear the man and receive him socially, but also that the general public would be interested in hearing from him a true and correct definition and explanation of this latest form of fashionable madness.... He advises me that he has prepared three lectures or essays, one of which is devoted to a*

consideration of 'The Beautiful' as seen in everyday life, another, illustrative of the poetical methods used by Shakespeare, and the third, a Lyric Poem.... Now, should he come, I should like to place him for a public reading or lecture in your city. He will be first announced, advertised, and worked up in N.Y. City (where he will probably speak three or four times) following which lectures he desires to visit other parts of the country. Can you find a place for him, for one or more nights, in the list of entertainments which you have in charge, at a moderate fee, or upon a basis of shares with me in the venture....

Very truly yours,

R. D'OYLY CARTE

per W. F. Morse

(Ellmann 1984:197-98; my emphases)

We should keep in mind, then, that, although Aestheticism might be for us today a very serious countercultural movement whose ideal of a spontaneity of consciousness improved the very practice of *art criticism*, and which, in some ways, even prefigured many epistemological elements of Modernism in Britain, in the 1880's it was largely regarded as a sort of social and cultural folly that had spread through an overly hedonistic and overly materialistic Victorian people.

And, yet, this was a preconception, a mythology, that Wilde would genuinely appreciate, for it would provide him the perfect substrate, the perfect environment, for the creation of an entirely new *persona*, an entirely new *mask*, an entirely new *lie* that was truer and more perfect than any factual truth about him.

In the article "Oscar Wilde's Arrival," published in the *New York World* in 3 January 1881, we read the following:

Mr. Wilde is fully six feet three inches in height, straight as an arrow, and with broad shoulders and long arms, indicating considerable strength. *His outer garment was a long ulster trimmed with two kinds of fur, which reached almost to his feet. He wore patent-leather shoes, a smoking-cap or turban, and his shirt might be termed ultra-Byronic, or perhaps—décolleté. A sky-blue cravat of the sailor style hung well down upon the chest. His hair flowed over his shoulders in dark-brown waves, curling slightly upwards at the ends.* His eyes were of a deep blue, but without that faraway expression that is popularly attributed to poets. In fact they seemed rather everyday and commonplace eyes. His teeth were large and regular, disproving a pleasing story which has gone the rounds of the English press that he has three tusks or protuberants far from agreeable to look at. He is beardless, and his complexion is almost colorless. *In manner, Mr. Wilde was easy and unconstrained, and his attitude as he conversed with the reporters and others was very graceful.* A peculiarity of Mr. Wilde's face is the exaggerated oval of the Italian face carried into the English type of countenance and tipped

with a long sharp chin. It does not, however, impress one as being a strong face. *His manner of talking is somewhat affected—judging from an American standpoint—his great peculiarity being a rhythmic chant in which every fourth syllable is accentuated.* Thus, when asked what was his mission in America, he replied in a singsong tone: “I came from *Eng-land* because I *thought* America was the best *place* to see.”

“I have come,” said the reporter, “to ask you as to your intention in visiting this country. The American public have imbibed an opinion (possibly from *Punch*) that you have visited this country in the interests of aestheticism. And, while we are about it, will you give me your definition of aestheticism?”

“Well,” replied Mr. Wilde, “aestheticism is a search after the signs of the beautiful. It is the science through which men look after the correlation which exists in the arts. It is, to speak more exactly, the search after the secret of life.”

“It has been said by some of our philosophers that aestheticism, instead of bringing forth principles, develops a certain marked line of individuality.”

“It has been noticed in all great movements,” replied Mr. Wilde, “that they bring out individuality. A movement that has not sufficient inherent force to develop individual characteristics would be of little or no worth to the world as a general movement of improvement.”

(Hofer & Scharnhorst 2010:13-14; my emphases)

In the article “Our New York Letter,” published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 4 January 1881, we read something else about Wilde and his intentions with his lectures around the United States:

Oscar Wilde, the young English poet and apostle of aestheticism, reached this city this morning. He came in the Arizona, which arrived last night but anchored off quarantine until this morning. *Mr. Wilde is a smooth-faced young man, twenty-six years of age and six feet, four inches, in height. His hair is long, his face is large and flat, and he dresses in an aesthetic costume, of which the most conspicuous parts this morning were a long bottle-green overcoat trimmed with fur, a sky-blue necktie, yellow kid gloves, patent leather boots, and a sealskin cap several sizes too small for him. The most noticeable peculiarities about his talk were a singsong division of words into a species of blank verse of his own, and a vacant smile which seemed to suggest that he looked upon the whole business as an absurd farce, and his arrival upon a lecturing tour as its most ridiculous incident.* He talked freely, and said among other things:

“My philosophy, about which I have been so grossly ridiculed, is the appreciation of the beautiful, and coarse, indeed, must be the intelligence of the man who will knowingly sneer at that which makes the world about us so glorious. I have always loved nature in its wild, magnificent beauty. When I can meet her in the wilderness amid towering cliffs and hanging

cataracts, then I love her and become her slave. I have since I can remember been impressed by the intensity of nature; but, alas, for the past few years I have been unable to gratify my longing. I have been a London man and have been surrounded by naught but smoke and fog. It is in the midst of the city life that I first saw all the follies of the present society and the grotesqueness of modern customs. I admire the Middle Ages, because their social life was natural and unharassed by petty rules. I approve of the mediæval costumes, because they are graceful, because they are beautiful. The surroundings of art, no one doubts, enhance one's existence and make life worth living. This talk about the sunflower and lily is nonsense, sir, especially as I am represented gazing fondly over it. I love flowers, sir, as every human being should love them. I enjoy their perfume and admire their beauty.”

(Hofer & Scharnhorst 2010:17-18; my emphasis)

Now, in another medium, in a letter that Wilde himself wrote to the actress Fanny Whitehead (1851-1915?)—normally referred to as Mrs. Bernard Beere—during his tour around the United States, we can read about his eccentricities from an entirely different perspective. Wilde and Beere became very close friends after she was cast to play the leading role in his *Vera* (1883), so I think we can assume in the letter a fair deal of honesty about what indeed happened during such strange chain of events.

The narrative is truly amazing:

[17 April 1882, Kansas City, Missouri]

[...]

I have also lectured at Leadville, the great mining city in the Rocky Mountains. We took a whole day to get up to it in a narrow-gauge railway 14.000 feet high. My audience was entirely miners; their make-up excellent, red shirts and blond beards, the whole of the three roles filled with McKee Rankins of every colour and dimension. *I spoke to them of the early Florentines, and they slept as though no crime had ever stained the raviners of their mountain home. I described to them the pictures of Botticelli, and the name, which seemed to them like a new drink, roused them from their dreams, but when I told them in my boyish eloquence of the 'secret Botticelli' the strong men wept like children.* Their sympathy touched me and I approached modern art and had almost won them over to a real reverence for what is beautiful when unluckily I described one of Jimmy Whistler's 'nocturnes in blue and gold'. Then they leaped to their feet and in their grand simple way swore that such things should not be. Some of the younger ones pulled their revolvers out and left hurriedly to see if Jimmy was 'prowling about the saloons' or 'wrestling a hash' at any eating shop. Had he been there I fear he would have been killed, their feeling was so bitter. Their enthusiasm satisfied me and I ended my lecture there. Then I found the Governor of the State waiting in a bullock wagon to bring me down the great silver-mine of the world, the Matchless. *So off we drove, the miners carrying torches before us till we came to the shaft and were shot down in buckets (I*

of course true to my principle being graceful even in a bucket) and down in the great gallery of the mine, the walls and ceiling glittering with metal ore, was spread a banquet before us.

The amazement of the miners when they saw that art and appetite could go hand in hand knew no bounds; when I lit a long cigar they cheered till the silver fell in dust from the roof on our plates; and when I quaffed a cocktail without flinching, they unanimously pronounced me in their grand simple way 'a bully boy with no glass eye'—artless and spontaneous praise which touched me more than the pompous panegyrics of literary critics ever did or could.

[...]

(Wilde 2003:22; my emphases)

As might be clear already, the reason why I have selected so many sources of information is to provide a plural, first-hand perspective of Wilde's persona as a *celebrity*, as this buffoonish, proto-camp character who would use his own body, image, voice, manners, and name to reaffirm the myth of Aestheticism as a folly of British bourgeois hedonists—highbrow intellectuals, artists, politicians, public figures etc.

A while ago, I affirmed that I would be working with a philosophical precept of Ancient Greek origins that is normally referred to as 'aesthetics of existence,' which in general I prefer to describe as 'living as a work of art' or just an 'art of living'; although these expressions are pretty much interchangeable, Wilde's attitude, as it is registered in these letters, journalism, and biographical accounts, seems to indicate that, in analytical terms at least, there might indeed be a difference between an 'aesthetics of existence' and an 'art of living'—and, clearly, what he does as a *celebrity* seems to be more properly the case of an 'aesthetics of existence'.

The way I see it, the expression 'aesthetics of existence', as opposed to the expression 'art of living', seems to imply a more concrete and circumstantial treatment of the self, of one's individuality, a treatment that is, therefore, not really a *habit* of self-cultivation that aims at self-perfection proper, but, rather, an *opportunity* for a self-creation focused on a self-distinction; now, the expression 'art of living', as opposed to the expression 'aesthetics of existence', seems to imply a more systematic and progressive *treatment* of the self, of one's individuality, a *treatment* that is, therefore, not really an *opportunity* for a self-creation focused on a self-distinction, but, rather, a *habit* of self-cultivation that aims at self-perfection proper.

This does not mean, of course, that these two practices cannot coexist: in fact, if this contrast is valid, it seems to me that a person who is adept of an 'art of living' will almost naturally experiment with some kind of 'aesthetics of existence' every once in a

while, for an ‘aesthetics of existence’ seems to be a strategic, an opportune and intensified treatment of an ‘art of living’—and, indeed, this seems to have been the case in Wilde’s lecturing tours around Canada and the United States.

Wilde’s ‘aesthetics of existence’, this flashy persona who sought to galvanise every audience into paying attention to him through the exquisiteness of his own wit, image, and manners, was—for the anger of some and amusement of others—a satirical delivery of the theories about the “science of the beautiful” that he formally suggested in his lectures; but, it is important to notice that, although Wilde himself, trying to synthesise the philosophy of what would become Aestheticism, described this movement as a “science of the beautiful,” much of his discussions were, in practice, about a modern conception, about a modern possibility, of the ‘art of living’.

This is particularly evident in “The English Renaissance of Art” (1881-82), a lecture that Wilde perfected as he delivered it to more than one hundred different audiences throughout his tour in America.

Although rather brief, this lecture is an amazing study of art, and, truth be told, much of what Wilde suggests in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and in his *Intentions* (1891) derives from this lecture, or was already prefigured in it.

What Wilde refers to as the “English Renaissance of Art” in this text is really what we understand today as Aestheticism.

According to Wilde, 19th century in Britain saw the rise of a new mode of *aesthetic temperament* of people in relation to the arts, a temperament that relied on a spontaneity of consciousness to try to realise beauty not in any metaphysical dimension as a form of ideal, spiritual, or transcendental truth—as the previous century had been trying to do—, but in the immediacy of its material and peculiar manifestations, an attitude that should finally allow those experiencing these manifestations to define them, to define beauty, in terms the most concrete possible. (see Wilde 2012:1579-80; 1588-89) In a way, this goal, this analytical paradigm of thinking through art, is very similar to Hans Gumbrecht’s understanding of a non-Husserlian phenomenology of aesthetic experience, that is, this attempt to provide, from a certain standpoint, a *precise description* of a worldly phenomenon in the peculiarity or eccentricity of its physical characteristics—in our case, an artistic or aesthetic phenomenon. (see Gumbrecht 2019:226) We can assume, then, from a more contemporary perspective, that a peculiar trait of this new aesthetic temperament that Wilde campaigns for is the primacy it gives to a phenomenological experience of art, to the detriment of any metaphysical considerations that might deprive art and aesthetic

experience of their sensuality, of their material or bodily natures, and thereby spiritualise them into some sort of otherworldly manifestation, a manifestation that should therefore only be accessible through some kind of detachment of the mind from the body. The main purpose of this spontaneous cult of form and matter, of this immediate contemplation of and true admiration for the definition and even tangibility of things, Wilde suggests, is to favour a more gracious and comely *way of life*, to favour the passion that the human spirit has for physical beauty, the attention that it pays to form, its increasing interest in seeking for new subjects for poetry, new forms of art, new intellectual and imaginative enjoyments. (see Wilde 2012:1579) Anticipating his ethical conjectures in “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” in this lecture he indeed contends that “[as] regards their origin, in art as in politics there is but one origin for all revolutions, *a desire on the part of man for a nobler form of life, for a freer method and opportunity of expression.*” (Wilde 2012:1579; my emphasis) Clearly, as Wilde himself points out, much of this rehabilitation of plasticity and immediacy, of the senses and the body, as nuclear elements in the analytical thinking of aesthetic experience is inspired by the Ancient Greeks’ modes of thought, deeply grounded on a clearness of vision, on a sustained calm, on a balance between the abstraction of elusive emotions and the attraction of solid matter; however, considering that its main purpose is to enable people to enjoy a more gracious and comely way of life, this aesthetic temperament should be perfected so as to welcome in its bosom virtually *all* sorts of art, including those arts that might even somehow contradict the aesthetic temperament typical of the Ancient Greeks’ modes of thought—such as the mediaeval arts, that is, arts whose motifs, media, aesthetics, and materiality suggest an inwardness of a romantic mystery of vision, rather than an outwardness of a humane clearness of seeing. (see Wilde 2012:1579)

This contrast might seem a bit inconsistent at first, but Wilde clarifies its logic already in the first paragraphs of his lecture:

Such expressions as ‘classical’ and ‘romantic’ are, it is true, often apt to become the mere catchwords of schools. *We must always remember that art has only one sentence to utter: there is for her only one high law, the law of form or harmony*—yet between the classical and romantic spirit we may say that there lies this difference at least, that the one deals with the type and the other with the exception. In the work produced under the modern romantic spirit it is no longer the permanent, the essential truths of life that are treated of; it is the momentary situation of the one, the momentary aspect of the other that art seeks to render. In sculpture, which is the type of one spirit, the subject predominates over the situation; in

painting, which is the type of the other, the situation predominates over the subject. (Wilde 2012:1579; my emphasis)

Relying on a more literary formula, he writes:

It is really from the union of Hellenism, in its breadth, its sanity of purpose, its calm possession of beauty, with the adventive, the intensified individualism, the passionate colour of the romantic spirit, that springs the art of the nineteenth century in England, as from the marriage of Faust and Helen of Troy sprang the beautiful boy Euphorion. (Wilde 2012:1579)

And this logic in fact leads him to conclude that the epistemology of this new aesthetic temperament is largely grounded on “two spirits, then: the Hellenic spirit and the spirit of romance may be taken as forming the essential elements of our conscious intellectual tradition, of our permanent standard of taste.” (Wilde 2012:1580)

In the previous pages, especially the ones in which I discussed Arnold’s, Symonds’s, and Pater’s essays, and the ones in which I examined Wilde’s “The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature,” I tried to determine some of the bases of Wilde’s idea of ‘classical reception’, which ultimately boils down to two great *intentions*: to champion a boundless spontaneity of consciousness focused on the realisation of an individualism—that is, on the possibility of self-experimentation, self-creation, self-perfection etc. as strategies to enrich the very act of living—, and to champion a rehabilitation of the affective dimension as a core analytical paradigm of art criticism, particularly literary criticism—a rehabilitation that, therefore, reevaluates the impact of form, plasticity, and materiality on the arousal of impressions and, thereby, on the conveyance of meaning. Considering these two initial intentions behind Wilde’s ‘classical reception,’ then, it is possible to accept that, at this point, with “The English Renaissance of Art,” Wilde formally confirms a third major *intention* of his—namely, to *go beyond* ‘classical reception’ by precisely taking its teachings as aesthetical and epistemological paradigms for the enjoyment and also for the study of other arts, including, of course, the highest form of art: life itself. But, as we can see in his lecture, Wilde seems to find the *modern spirit* tangled in a web woven by a *classical spirit*, by a *romantic spirit*, and, I should add, because he never clearly refers to this idea, also by a *materialistic spirit*: for Wilde, this new aesthetic temperament, typical of his modern times, is really a *science* in the sense of being an individual’s *training* of her mind, senses, and body to be susceptible to beauty in its most varied and surprising forms; but it should be a training that takes into account not only the fact that the world—

especially the modern world—will not always be easily accessible to the mind, the senses, and the body, but also the fact that beauty can be perfectly found in the ineffable, in the unfathomable, and in the ephemeral, not to say in the circumstantial; but this should also be a training that takes into account the fact that the new world is often an economically-aggressive world, a world where beauty might even be freely available to the admirers, but in which it is increasingly likely to be for them another item in a shop or marketplace. In other words, Wilde's aesthetic temperament, his science of the beautiful, is a *care of the self* in the shape of an individual's own *education* of the mind, senses, and body so that she can become more habitually affected, more easily impressionable, by virtually everything potentially beautiful available to her in her modern world—a very classical way of living that, in all its spontaneity of consciousness and sensitivity to pleasure, should now account for individuals often overwhelmed by the increasingly material encroachments of a new world: the chaos of social relations, the frantic pace of life in face of industrialism and technological improvements, the widening gap between misery and privilege in face of liberalism, the wasteful consumerist culture in face of a new abundance of shops, imports, and marketplaces, the vulgarisation of culture and information in face of a politically and economically-interested journalism, the emergence of new strategies of social distinction through a new cult of social image, the suffocation of individualism by the growing moralism of a conservative bourgeoisie, and so on.

In fact, in “House Decoration” (1881), another lecture he delivered during his tour in America, Wilde fiercely condemns the impersonal, standardised, and therefore despiritualised furniture that he saw in his hosts' houses, a purely utilitarian type of furniture produced by a soulless industrialism—what we can understand today as products of an early stage of an economy of scale. Accordingly, in this short lecture, Wilde's discussion gravitates around a defence of individualism, of an art of living, through the purchase, use, and enjoyment of attire and decorations that are not just commodities of some kind of mechanic production, but unique creations of a soul trained in beauty in order to recognise, devise, and finally conceive beauty.

He explains about the importance of handiwork for a good living:

[The] handicraftsman is dependent on your pleasure and opinion. He needs your encouragement and he must have beautiful surroundings. Your people love art but do not sufficiently honour the handicraftsman. (Wilde 2012:1600)

And what is the meaning of this beautiful decoration which we call art? In the first place, it means value to the workman and it means the pleasure which he must necessarily take in making a beautiful thing. The mark of all good art is not that the thing done is done exactly or finely, for machinery may do as much, but that it is worked out with the head and the workman's heart. (Wilde 2012:1600)

Now, what you must do is to bring artists and handicraftsmen together. Handicraftsmen cannot live, certainly cannot thrive, without such companionship. Separate these two and you rob art of all spiritual motive. Having done this, you must place your workman in the midst of beautiful surroundings. The artist is not dependent on the visible and the tangible. He has his visions and his dreams to feed on. But the workman must see lovely forms as he goes to his work in the morning and returns at eventide. And, in connection with this, I want to assure you that noble and beautiful designs are never the result of idle fancy or purposeless day-dreaming. They come only as the accumulation of habits of long and delightful observation. And yet such things may not be taught. Right ideas concerning them can certainly be obtained only by those who have been accustomed to rooms that are beautiful and colours that are satisfying. (Wilde 2012:1600-01)

And, perhaps what is most important for us here, in this lecture he also suggests that *attire*—in this case, *men's attire*—is another modern material element absolutely fundamental for one's individualism; it is curious to notice that Wilde briefly associates the aesthetic logic of *attire*, or *dress*, to the aesthetic logic of *sculpture*: the way I see it, considering what we have seen about the Ancient Greeks' acceptance of sculpture as their canonical form of art, whereas they sought to concentrate in the solid dynamism of the marble—one of the most perfect matters for artistic creation—the beauty of the most unfathomable emotions, the modern individual—himself one of the most perfect matters for artistic creation—should try to concentrate in him, or on him, through the materiality of his own body and of those charming things that he can adorn it with, the beauty of the fleeting needs, emotions, and intensities of living in the modern times.

Wilde suggests in this lecture:

Perhaps one of the most difficult things for us to do is to choose a notable and joyous dress for men. There would be more joy in life if we were to accustom ourselves to use all the beautiful colours we can in fashioning our own clothes. The dress of the future, I think, will use drapery to a great extent and will abound with joyous colour. At present we have lost all nobility of dress and, in doing so, have almost annihilated the modern sculptor. (Wilde 2012:1601)

And how shall men dress? Men say that they do not particularly care how they dress, and that it is little matter. I am bound to reply that I do not think that you do. In all my journeys through the country, the only well-dressed men that I saw—and in saying this I earnestly deprecate the polished indignation of your Fifth Avenue dandies—were the Western miners. Their wide-brimmed hats, which shaded their faces from the sun and protected them from the rain, and the cloak, which is by far the most beautiful piece of drapery ever invented, may well be dwelt on with admiration. Their high boots, too, were sensible and practical. They wore only what was comfortable, and therefore beautiful. As I looked at them I could not help thinking with regret of the time when these picturesque miners would have made their fortunes and would go East to assume again all the abominations of modern fashionable attire. Indeed, so concerned was I that I made some of them promise that when they again appeared in the more crowded scenes of Eastern civilisation they would still continue to wear their lovely costume. But I do not believe they will. (Wilde 2012:1601-02)

When I discussed Matthew Arnold's "Hebraism and Hellenism," I tried to summarise, relying on my own words and theoretical perspectives, that the 'art of living' is a philosophical precept of Ancient Greek origins that basically consists of a person's ability to consciously and self-examiningly practice ways of living in and through which what she can attain or realise as truth is indissociable from, and in fact subsumed to, her ethical and moral conducts in relation to this truth.

Surely, this is not a perfect formula, but it does seem to provide a rather reliable description of how this precept generally operates—and this strange connection between Wilde's celebrity persona and the refined content of his lectures seems, in turn, to provide a rather strong case for study.

In D'Oyly Carte's letter to W.F. Morse, we can see that, although he acknowledges Wilde's ability as a *poet* and as an *intellectual*—for most of his discourse focuses both on the impact that Wilde's *Poems* (1881) had been having on the English public for the past five months and on his interest in Wilde's skills as a literary critic, or maybe as a literary theoretician—, the main reason why he wanted to have Wilde in America was the fact that this Irishman seemed to epitomise, in Carte's own words in the letter, a "fashionable madness" that had been bleeding into English society for the past few years: by having Wilde touring around Canada and the United States, Carte would be able to *exhibit* this character as the *embodiment* of a fashionable madness worthy advertising, a sociocultural folly that this very character had helped idealise and of which he was himself a quintessential example. Now, from Ellmann's accounts of Wilde's flashy presence in social gatherings—his evenings wearing a hand-made yellow-brown coat outlined as a cello, his

Prince Rupert costume with plum-coloured breeches and silk stockings, completely inappropriate for an aristocratic gala ball—, we can see that Wilde seemed already very comfortable with his own eccentricities, which seemed to work not only as strategies of self-indulgence, but also as sardonic criticisms aimed at social life itself, for whatever reasons. In a way, then, Wilde's celebrity persona in America—his “aesthetic costume,” a flamboyant assemblage of “a long bottle-green overcoat trimmed with fur, a sky-blue necktie, yellow kid gloves, patent leather boots, and a sealskin cap several sizes too small for him” (Hofer and Scharnhorst 2010:17)—was surely positive for him insofar as it allowed him to indulge himself with being the centre of all public attention where ever he went, insofar as it allowed him to explore his own body as a means to create or at least to converge certain social, cultural, and aesthetic interests; but, at the same time, considering the refined content of his lectures, it seems to me that, beyond self-indulgence, Wilde's attires sought to materialise on his own skin the moralistic scorn that he, along with the whole movement that he championed, were systematically subjected to. I mean, although Wilde might have found an enormous pleasure in turning himself into an object of satire, laugh, and amazement—at least this is what he suggests in his private letter to Mrs. Bernard Beere—, his looks, his alluring but indefinable fashion, seemed to denounce the fact that, no matter how sophisticated his theoretical or philosophical discussions could be, public opinion—particularly the somewhat highbrow opinions favoured by the media, either in the United Kingdom or the United States—always seemed to prefer an *ad hominem* attack against him precisely for the rebellious tone and content of his discussions. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* in fact registers him saying: “My philosophy, about which I have been so grossly ridiculed, is the appreciation of the beautiful, and coarse, indeed, must be the intelligence of the man who will knowingly sneer at that which makes the world about us so glorious.” (Hofer & Scharnhorst 2010:17-18) In “The Critic as Artist,” written about ten years later, Wilde also has Gilbert, his alter-ego, say that “[the] public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius.” (Wilde 2007:965) Clearly, Wilde's caricatural image was not only dedicated to a self-indulgence and to this sort of reverse criticism of the moralistic values that led him to dress in such way in the first place: in his letter to Mrs. Bernard Beere, we can see that his image, particularly in association with his manners, truly contributed to a positive response from his audience—an audience of *miners* from a town called *Leadville*, incredibly enough; in an article published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1 February 1882, we can also read that a party of about sixty students showed up for his lecture at Harvard University “dressed in swallow-tail coats,

knee-breeches, and green ties, with lilies in their lapels and sunflowers in their hands.” (Hofer and Scharnhorst 2010:50)

What I mean to say with this revision of Wilde’s touring around America is that, not only did his strategy of an ‘art of living’—or, in this case, an ‘aesthetics of existence’—favour him directly by allowing him to explore new limits of his own image—that is, by allowing him to experiment with himself through his own body, senses, attire, manners, discourse etc.—, it also favoured him, by extension, by creating upon him a *mask*, a *lie* whose fictionality in practice bore a wholly new truth and thereby a wholly new authority over other wholly new truths. Considering the often moralistic and derogatory myth that had been created around him and that had been made of the countercultural movement that he advocated—and, eventually, also considering the public and mediatic frenzy that followed him like a shadow as he delivered his lectures throughout America—, it must have soon become clear that the best way, if not the only way, to be effectively heard about his philosophy was to embrace this myth and exploit it so as to use it in his own favour. In other words, considering how his aesthetic movement had been essentialised into a fashionable madness that had been impregnating Victorian society, perhaps the best way to have people take it *seriously*, as a *serious* cultural, artistic, and intellectual movement—I know that Wilde would probably disagree with my choice of words here—, was to have it promoted by a representative who knew how to use essentialisation against itself, who was able to deconstruct a lie with another lie, who would have all the skills necessary to show that fiction, in its distance from reality, might often be spiritually truer than any actual fact.

I wonder how seriously the American public would have taken Oscar Wilde the man had he shown up for his lectures wearing white collar shirts and black or grey suits, walking around his crowd as the highbrow Oxonian that he was in fact educated to be, delivering his theoretical perspectives in those monotonous discourses typical of abstract elucubrations.

He would not have been taken seriously at all.

Now, there is a second aspect of Wilde’s lectures that I would like to discuss, an aspect that is more properly related to the ‘art of living’.

Perhaps I should have said from the beginning, for the sake of clarity, that the ‘art of living’, irrespective of the historical scenario in which it is performed, is always an *educational* process: sometimes associated with other two philosophical precepts, the ‘care of the self’ (which roughly corresponds to the dimension of a person’s ethical and

moral conducts) and the ‘knowledge of the self’ (which roughly corresponds to the dimension of a person’s systematic examination of these ethical and moral conducts in order to fathom the reasons, means, and strategies to perfect them), the ‘art of living’ is really a *training* process, a *habituation* process, a *discipline and development* of sense, sensibility, empathy, and intellectuality in which this person is precisely the point of convergence that must be progressively perfected.

In his lectures, Wilde provides a very simple but truly compelling example of this ‘art of living’, which I will examine now for two main reasons: first, because, as it shall become clear as this analysis unfolds, it finally provides the groundwork for our coming discussion about *art criticism*; second, and connected to the first, because, ironically enough, it lays out the aesthetical and epistemological premises that, albeit enriching to his understanding of criticism, also ultimately led Wilde to his own downfall.

In “House Decoration,” Wilde offers the following web of thoughts:

The conditions of art should be simple. *A great deal more depends upon the heart than upon the head. Appreciation of art is not secured by any elaborate scheme of learning. Art requires a good healthy atmosphere.* The motives for art are still around about us as they were round about the ancients. And the subjects are also easily found by the earnest sculptor and the painter. Nothing is more picturesque and graceful than a man at work. The artist who goes to the children’s playground, watches them at their sport and sees the boy stoop to tie his shoe, will find the same themes that engaged the attention of the ancient Greeks, and *such observation and the illustrations which follow will do much to correct that foolish impression that mental and physical beauty are always divorced.* (Wilde 2012:1603; my emphases)

[The] handicraftsman is dependent on your pleasure and opinion. *He needs your encouragement and he must have beautiful surroundings.* Your people love art but do not sufficiently honour the handicraftsman. Of course, those millionaires who can pillage Europe for their pleasure need have no care to encourage such; but *I speak for those whose desire for beautiful things is larger than their means.* I find that one great trouble all over is that your workmen are not given to noble designs. You cannot be indifferent to this, because *Art is not something which you can take or leave. It is a necessity of human life.* (Wilde 2012:1600; my emphases)

I said in my last lecture that art would create a new brotherhood among men by furnishing a universal language. I said that under its beneficent influences war might pass away. Thinking this, what place can I ascribe to art in our education? *If children grow up among all fair and lovely things, they will grow to love beauty and detest ugliness before they know the reason why.* If you go into a house where everything is coarse, you find things chipped and broken

and unsightly. Nobody exercises any care. *If everything is dainty and delicate, gentleness and refinement of manner are unconsciously acquired.* (Wilde 2012:1604; my emphases)

From these paragraphs, then, we can see that, for Wilde, an *artistic temperament*, an individual's sensibility to all that is beautiful, is not something that can be taught in the abstract, like most disciplinary subjects—such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, or even language; for him, an *aesthetic temperament* is literally a *sensibility* that an individual perfects by being in the constant presence of or by being in systematic contact with the many forms that beauty can take in its whole materiality—such as dressing or house decoration, understood, as might be clear already, as some sort of eclectically healthy environment in which an individual's living is continually defied, modified, and thereby enriched by the affections, emotions, and intensities that can only be conveyed through the experience of beauty: all beautiful things belong to the same age, as Wilde himself writes. Another important aspect of Wilde's web of suggestions here is his emphasis on the fact that art is not just some method of thinking that an individual can simply “turn on” or “turn off” according to context: unlike certain disciplinary subjects, such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, or language, which are normally activated according to the specificity of an epistemological necessity, art is rather a *habit* that an individual lives by, it is an *apprehension* of the world that progressively perfects itself as it is practiced, a *relationship* that an individual establishes with herself and with her many universes as she crosses them. We can notice, then, that Wilde regards art as fundamentally *pragmatic* phenomena that, as such, should be primarily studied from a *pragmatic* perspective: it is essential that an individual learn the rudiments of all sorts of art—sound, rhythm, imagery, colour, texture, contour, harmony etc.—, but only to naturalise them into a sensibility, into a well-disposed vulnerability, into all that can be felt or perceived and thereby constructively thought about or thought through as beautiful.

In a way, what Wilde suggests is truly similar to certain pedagogical methods; further in this lecture, he actually narrates something that reminds us of the Waldorfian and Montessorian educations—a narration that, coherently enough, is permeated with subtle reproaches to industrialism:

The art systems of the past have been devised by philosophers who looked upon human beings as obstructions. They have tried to educate boys' minds before they had any. How much better it would be in these early years to teach children to use their hands in the rational service of mankind. I would have a workshop attached to every school, and one hour a day

given up to the teaching of simple decorative arts. It would be a golden hour to the children. And you would soon raise up a race of handicraftsmen who would transform the face of your country. I have seen only one such school in the United States, and this was in Philadelphia and was founded by my friend Mr. Leyland. I stopped there yesterday and have brought some of the work here this afternoon to show you. Here are two disks of beaten brass: the designs on them are beautiful, the workmanship is simple, and the entire result is satisfactory. The work was done by a little boy twelve years old. This is a wooden bowl decorated by a little girl of thirteen. The design is lovely and the colouring delicate and pretty. Here you see a piece of beautiful wood carving accomplished by a little boy of nine. In such work as this, children learn sincerity in art. They learn to abhor the liar in art—the man who paints wood to look like iron, or iron to look like stone. It is a practical school of morals. (Wilde 2012:1605)

Now, how can we connect this idea of an *aesthetic temperament* to an ‘art of living’ proper—that is, to an ‘art of living’ as the Ancient Greeks seemed to conceive it, as they seemed to practice it?

I should make clear that, although I have not really discussed the Ancient Greeks’ ‘art of living’ in more technical or philosophical terms, I have been discussing it since at least the first pages of this chapter, particularly since Matthew Arnold’s idea of a spontaneity of consciousness.

I, in fact, have provided many tentative descriptions for this practice—a “spontaneity of consciousness,” a “habitual procedure,” an “educational process,” an “ability to consciously and self-examiningly practice ways of living in and through which what she can attain or realise as truth is indissociable from, and in fact subsumed to, her ethical and moral conducts in relation to this truth”—, and all of them shall remain valid precisely because there is no stable, no absolute definition to this practice.

Socrates, however, as we can see in Plato’s *Apology* (IV BC), supposedly uttered a dictum that, with some reservations, explains rather well how this ‘art of living’ generally operates.

When confronted by his accusers with the possibility of going into exile, and therefore giving up his insistent interrogating of everyone about everything—particularly the Athenians about their cultural, political, ethical, and moral practices in society as a whole—, Socrates famously answers:

It is hardest of all to persuade some of you about this. For if I say that this is to disobey the god and that because of this it is impossible to keep quiet, you will not be persuaded by me

on the ground that I am being ironic. And on the other hand, if I say that this even happens to be the greatest good for a human being—to make speeches every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me conversing and examining both myself and others—and that *the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being*, you will be persuaded by me still less when I say these things. (*Apol.* 37e3-38a8)

If I had to summarise in really few words of my own the main purpose of Socrates's philosophy, particularly as it is suggested in this dictum—"the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being"—, I would say that this purpose is to train and accustom people to constantly interpellate themselves with the following question: How aware am I that what I am doing really contributes to my own ethical improvement and, thereby, to the ethical improvement of those with whom I live?

Clearly, if this hypothesis proceeds, then Socrates's dictum sounds much like a hypernym to many of the ideas implicit in the tentative descriptions that I have provided above: based on certain paradigms typical of a spontaneity of consciousness, and always seeking to enlarge it, people should habituate and educate themselves, and be habituated and educated by others, so that this spontaneity remains attainable to everyone, a process that should be perfected both in theoretical and practical terms, that is, that should be perfected in a way so that what can ideally be projected as truth remains in an indissociable connection to what can effectively be practiced as truth.

Although suffused with an asceticism and a rationalisation of the senses typical of Stoicism—as I explained a while ago, the 'art of living' is a self-examination practice, and, therefore, is inevitably bound to its historical context—, a very simple example of what we can understand, in Socratic fashion, as a practice of "life examination" or a practice that seeks to guarantee that life is conducted in a well-examined way, is Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* (161-80):

From Diognetus: to avoid empty enthusiasms; to disbelieve all that is talked by miracle-mongers and quacks about incantations, exorcism of demons, and the like; not to hold quail-fights or be excited by such sports; to tolerate plain speaking; to have an affinity for philosophy, and to attend the lectures first of Baccheius, then of Tandasis and Marcianus; to write essays from a young age; to love the camp-bed, the hide blanket, and all else involved in the Greek training. (*Med.* 6)

From Apollonius: moral freedom, the certainty to ignore the dice of fortune, and have no other perspective, even for a moment, than that of reason alone; to be always the same man,

unchanged in sudden pain, in the loss of a child, in lingering sickness; to see clearly in his living example that a man can combine intensity and relaxation; not to be impatient in explanation; the observance of a man who clearly regarded as the least of his gifts his experience and skill in communicating his philosophical insights; the lesson of how to take apparent favours from one's friends, neither compromised by them nor insensitive in their rejection. (*Med.* 8)

Written in aphorisms, in isolation and introspection, removed from the lack of privacy of the public spaces and from the lack of intimacy of the public administration, Marcus Aurelius's meditative notes are amazing evidences of what Socrates suggests as a well-examined life: relying on a seclusion of the individual to her own self permitted by the technology of writing, Marcus Aurelius systematises his thoughts on the paper in order to provide intellectual substrate to the perfection of his own daily actions—either on a more personal level, as we can see in his brief analysis of the affective dimension of private relations (*Med.* 8), or on a more political level, as we can see in the brief retrospective of his own learnings in education and administration (*Med.* 6). I find this a particularly curious example because the complex and dynamic dimension of *ethics*—the intellectual, spiritual, and bodily perfection of the self based on a certain principle of spontaneity of consciousness—is virtually indissociable from the mundane and material dimension of *writing*: this practice requires a convergence of the mind, the body, the physical space, the convenient time, and the necessary instruments into a single act of moulding an individual's relationship with herself and with the world that she lives in; in Marcus Aurelius's first meditation, we can see, for example, how he seems to find in schooling, in the exercise of philosophy, and in the habitual practice of essaying efficient mediations for a perfection of the self—and the annotations themselves are eventually a curious material evidence of all this; in his second meditation, we find him putting his essayistic abilities into practice, by systematising in written form certain conduct instructions for his own future use—so that his pencilled conjectures, his hypothetical anticipations, become pondered grounds for future moral questionings and occasional premises for future ethical creations.

However, if the conditions of possibility for an 'art of living' change as historical contexts change, then the theoretical and practical grounds upon which this 'art of living' can be presupposed, organised, and explained should also change.

And, in fact, the way I see it, in Wilde's annotations on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (IV BC), we can find some insights of his that, although never formally discussed

in his works of maturity, still seem to have some influence upon them—or, perhaps I should say, we can find some insights of his that, although never clearly proposed in his works of maturity, still seem to reverberate in them, and to do so in such an interesting way, that we can only benefit from taking a closer look into his original analyses.

In his *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (2013), Iain Ross goes back to Wilde's original annotations in his own copy of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*—in this case, *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea*, translated by J.E.T. Rogers and published by Rivington, in London, in 1865 (and housed today at the Rare Books Section of the British Library)—to show us that many of Aristotle's philosophical concepts seem to have played a major role in shaping Wilde's philosophy of art and philosophy of ethics, and two of these concepts seem to me of particular importance to us here: Aristotle's idea of *prohairesis* 'deliberate choice', 'volition', 'predisposition', or—which I believe is the most suitable translation here—'intention'; and his idea of *hexis* 'habit', 'regularity', 'character', or—which I believe are the most suitable translations here—'acquired practice' or 'developed nature'. (see Ross 2013:147, 151; Aristotle 2009:268-69)

Aristotle's reasoning in these sections (*NE* III.1 and III.3) of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are too syllogistic, and therefore too long and too intricate for us here, so I will try to synthesise it in my own words, already taking into account what Wilde suggests in his college annotations.

In a few words, in Book III.1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contends that in order for people to live in the world, either for themselves or in relation to others, they need to perform certain *actions*, and, in general, *actions* can be defined as *involuntary* or *voluntary*: *involuntary actions* are those actions that happen as the result of some kind of *chance*—for example, when we walk along a busy street and coincidentally bump into someone we know; *voluntary actions* are those actions that happen as the result of some kind of *deliberation*—for example, when we are looking for someone in a busy street and try to find her by going to specific spots where we know she is more likely to be. In an *involuntary action*, the result is not planned in advance and therefore is not expected by the individual who experiences this result, which means that this result is likely to surprise the individual in some way—either positively or negatively. In a *voluntary action*, in turn, the result is planned in advance and therefore is expected by the individual who seeks to experience this result, which means that this result is likely to fulfil the individual's wishes in some way—which is normally, not necessarily, a positive outcome for her. In Aristotle's reasoning, *prohairesis* is an individual's attitude that *anticipates* and therefore

regulates an action so that it is effected in a *voluntary* way: in etymological terms, one of the most objective translations of *prohairesis* is *pre-choice* or *predisposition* (*pro-*, a prefix that refers to anticipation, and *hairesis* ‘choice’) (see Beekes 2010:42; 1235), so we can logically assume that *prohairesis* refers to an individual’s careful examination of a given context so that she can deliberately take a specific course of action in order to rearrange this context and thereby achieve a certain goal. As it might be clear already, this idea of *prohairesis* is fundamental for Aristotle’s ethics because, in practice, it is very often the case that it is *prohairesis* itself, and not the *action* that results from a given *prohairesis*, what reveals the *character* of a person—the person who performs such *action*. Take the act of charity, for example: I can give money to a poor woman because I want to be seen as a generous man—which means that my action, however beneficial it can be to the woman, ultimately seeks to favour me in the first place—, or I can give money to this poor woman because I fear she might go hungry—which means that my action, however beneficial it can be to my reputation, ultimately seeks to favour her in the first place; I can refuse to give money to a poor woman because I am an avaricious man—which means that my action only seeks to benefit myself, to the detriment of whomever the woman might be—, or I can refuse to give money to this poor woman because I believe that, based on my studies, this might actually be a disservice to the eradication of poverty—which means that my action, although well-intended from a theoretical perspective, only benefits myself, and in a very dull way, while the poor woman goes hungry. We can also think about Wilde’s *celebrity persona*, about this *lie* or *mask* that he created to deliver his lectures in America: on the surface, his appearance might have seemed a cheap act of buffoonery, but how much of this act was not in itself an attempt to deconstruct the moralism and the sensationalism in which Victorian society and its new journalistic practices had involved Aestheticism? How much of this whole act was not premeditated by Wilde himself, specifically in order to potentialise the impact of his hypotheses? In “The Rise of Historical Criticism”—the essay he wrote about three years earlier to contend for the Chancellor’s English Essay Prize—, Wilde in fact seems to associate *will* to Aristotle’s idea of *prohairesis* (see also Ross 2013:147):

But while [Aristotle] rejected pure necessitarianism in its crude form as essentially a *reductio ad absurdum* of life, he was fully conscious of the fact that the will is *not* a mysterious and ultimate unit of force beyond which we cannot go and whose special characteristic is

inconsistency, but *a certain creative attitude of the mind which is, from the first, continually influenced by habits, education and circumstance [...]* (Wilde 2012:1553; my emphasis in the end)

Another important information that Ross provides in his book is a note that Wilde registered in the last page of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, a commentary that, although very simple, is also very delicately connected to Aristotle's idea of *prohairesis*; in Ross's book, we can read: "On a blank page at the end of his copy of the *Ethics* Wilde wrote 'φυσικη αρετη [*phusikê aretê*] = right action from instinct / κυρια αρετη. [*kuria aretê*] = principles'" (Ross 2013:148) And, right after this quotation, Ross explains: "*Phusikê aretê* therefore corresponds to the romantic ideal of 'natural simple instinct' that Wilde consistently opposed, *kuria aretê* to that 'self-conscious culture' which only the exercise of *proairesis* [sic] can enable." (Ross 2013:148) Ross's observation about Wilde's commentary clearly refers, in turn, to one of the most famous passages in Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," an only slightly gnomic passage in which Gilbert—Wilde's witty alter-ego—explains to Ernest—this character's naïve interlocutor—the true mechanism of artistic creation:

ERNEST. I should have said that great artists work unconsciously, that they were 'wiser than they knew,' as, I think, Emerson remarks somewhere.

GILBERT. It is really not so, Ernest. All fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate. No poet sings because he must sing. At least, no great poet does. A great poet sings because he chooses to sing. (Wilde 2007:976)

In other words, then, Ernest tries to suggest, via a supposed remark by Ralph Waldo Emerson, that the great poets, or the great artists in general, are themselves endowed with some kind of *phusikê aretê*—that is, that they seem to conceive their artworks out of an improvisation or creative burst, as if art had been trying to break free from inside them from the beginning; Gilbert, in turn, does not completely deny this possibility, but clearly contends that poets, or artists in general, should perfect a sense of *kuria aretê*—that is, they should train themselves in the principles of art and beauty so that, through practice and experience, they can recognise and realise beauty in new, increasingly compelling ways. Of course, in the context of our discussion, we can assume therefore that, the more an artist trains herself in certain principles of art—which can range from the abstract history of art to the practical use of a pencil—the more she tends to conceive, ideally or

materially, new possibilities of beauty: that is to say, the more an artist perfects her own *prohairesis*, the more chances she has to recognise what beauty can be made of, and, by perfecting her ability to recognise what beauty can be made of, the more refined shall ultimately be her courses of action—her new creations, that is.

In fact, in some editions of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* the word *aretê* is translated as 'virtue', a translation I am not completely comfortable with; take, for instance, these translations by Ross (2009) and by Bartlett & Collins (2011):

Since *virtue* [*aretê*] is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary ones praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary pardon, and sometimes also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying the nature of virtue, and useful also for legislators with a view to the assigning both of honours and of punishments. (Aristotle 2009:38; my emphasis and additional annotation)

Since *virtue* [*aretê*] concerns passions as well as actions, and voluntary [actions] elicit praise and blame, whereas involuntary ones elicit forgiveness and sometimes even pity, it is perhaps necessary for those who are examining virtue to define the voluntary and the involuntary. Doing so is useful also for lawgivers with a view to both honors and punishments. (Aristotle 2011:42; my emphasis and additional annotation)

Although Aristotle's reasoning in the *Nicomachean Ethics* soon makes clear that this is not the case, the word 'virtue', especially from a contemporary perspective, often seems to suggest some kind of an "innate" quality, as if a virtuous individual is born or naturally endowed with a certain quality, which she eventually practices or exposes according to the propriety of opportunity. In order to avoid this misconception, a translation that I find considerably efficient—in the English language at least—is 'excellence': considering that *aretê* is not a noble nature that an individual is naturally born or endowed with, but a trait of character that this individual can develop by different means—say, through formal education, practical experience, spiritual exercises, meditative writing, or even art itself—, the noun 'excellence' seems a good choice because implicit in it we can also find the idea of an individual's act of 'excelling at' something—that is, the idea that an individual's chances of healthily achieving something beneficial, either to herself or to others, is proportional to her investment in her own self-perfection. Now, although Aristotle and Wilde generally regard *prohairesis* as a consistently *healthy* process of choice and action—that is, a process of choice and action that seeks to produce results as

beneficial as possible to an individual, but without doing any harm to others that somehow might get involved along the way—, they both seem to recognise that there might be, indeed, a more sombre side to this philosophical concept. One of the facets of this sombre side is not difficult to discern: I am talking about the cases in which an individual explores her *prohairesis* specifically to do harm to others—take, for instance, the careful construction of some kind of misleading or destructive information, such as defamation, hate speech, fake news, or even just a cheap lie. Particularly in Book VII, however, Aristotle provides other two unwelcome uses of *prohairesis*: what we can understand, already relying on Wilde’s annotations, as the *akratês* individual and the *akolastos* individual. The *akratês* is an individual who lacks *enkrateia*, that is, who lacks ‘self-mastery’, ‘self-control’, or ‘self-restraint’; the *enkratês*, an individual who is the opposite of an *akratês* individual, is, therefore, that individual who is actually skilled at practising ‘self-mastery’, ‘self-control’, or ‘self-restraint’. What characterises an *akratês* individual, then, is the fact that she is generally skilled at exercising her *prohairesis*, but not so much at finally using it to regulate her actions: take, for example, the married person who is perfectly aware of her affective and legal obligations, but still lets herself be corrupted by a disloyal or unfaithful act; or take, for example, an ordinary person—say, a middle-class, well-educated person—who is perfectly aware of suffering or social injustice, but still prefers to eschew the matter to favour some kind of privilege. But, in Wilde’s annotations, what is truly curious is his particular interest, or particular defence, of an *akolastos* individual, that is, an individual who is characterised by her somewhat systematic attraction to exploring *akolasia* ‘unchastity’, ‘licentiousness’, or ‘self-indulgence’. The word *akolastos* means something like ‘unrebuked’, ‘unpunished’, or even ‘uncensored’—that is, it designates an individual who deliberately does not submit herself to some kind of rebuke, punishment, or censorship of her actions, particularly actions related to exploring some kind of pleasure. What characterises an *akolastos* individual, then, is the fact that she is generally skilled at exercising *prohairesis* to a somewhat unrestrained exploration of something, typically an unrestrained exploration of the senses—even if the fulfilment of this interest might lead to some kind of harm, such as self-destruction or, worse, the destruction of others. It is important to notice that, unlike the *akratês*, who is generally skilled at exercising her *prohairesis*, but not so much at finally using it to regulate her actions, the *akolastos* is actually skilled at exercising her *prohairesis*, but does so even if her regulated actions might lead to some sort of damage: take, for example, the married person who is perfectly aware of her affective and legal obligations and thereby uses this very

commitment to sadistically enhance her pleasure in betraying or cheating on her partner; or take, for example, an ordinary person—say, a middle-class, well-educated person—who is perfectly aware of suffering or social injustice and thereby uses this very awareness to act or speak precisely to favour segregation or even exploitation. Of course, these are crude and even caricatural examples, but what I want to make clear with them is that, although Aristotle's conception of *akolasia* might seem to have a healthy side, for it mostly refers to an individual's intense search for pleasure, this conception, for him, is finally unhealthy, for pleasure is mostly searched for to the detriment of the individual's moderation towards herself—what is serious enough—and, ultimately, towards others—what is already serious, but tends to be especially dreadful if the *akolastos* is in a position of power, such as that of a ruler or a politician.

However, these ideas of *prohairesis* and *akolasia* seem to gain a wholly new essence in the context of Wilde's life and work—I mean, in the modern context of Victorian society, Aestheticism, and Decadentism.

Clearly, as it is with most ideas of ethics in general, Aristotelean ethics is basically a constructive training of the self—through whatever means that might work, from, for example, healthy diets and physical exercises to schooling, deep meditation through writing, or even, as his *Poetics* shows us, through aesthetic experience, especially cathartic experiences—, but it is above all a training of the self through a constant process of self-moderation, self-control, self-restraint. A while ago, we saw that Arnold suggests a return to Hellenic ethics as a means to retrieve or improve a spontaneity of consciousness that might be able to help even the most different individuals to resist or outrightly escape the strictness of conscience typically legitimated and imposed by Christian morality; we also saw that Wilde, guided by a very similar idea of spontaneity of consciousness, an idea certainly inspired by Arnold's essay, suggests Hellenic ethics as a utopian horizon of individuality, of individual freedom, a freedom that in practice is largely hindered by the legal, moral, and material coercions of work, of liberalism. This means that, for them, spontaneity of consciousness is an ideal of freedom as opposed to the strictness of conscience enforced by the legal, moral, and material coercions of liberalism—for Wilde—and Christianity—for Arnold and Wilde. Obviously, the self-moderation, self-control, or self-restraint that we find in Aristotelean ethics—or in any other idea of ethics in the Ancient Greek tradition, for that matter—are not strategies to fight or resist the strictness of conscience enforced by the legal, moral, and material coercions of Christianity and liberalism; they often are, yes, strategies to fight or resist coercions inflicted by the law,

religion, or some economic privilege typical of Ancient Greek society, but, above all, they are strategies aimed at regulating themselves, aimed at regulating their own applicability, efficiency, and improvement. In other words, these strategies of spontaneity of consciousness are very often ideals as opposed to spontaneity of consciousness itself: in a perfectly ethical regime, individuals do not set as the horizon of their freedom some distant or exploitative ideal—such as spiritual salvation or limitless material profit—, but an accessible and constructive method of self-education whose main goal is precisely to try to make sure that the well-being—the needs, desires, curiosities, aspirations etc.—of every individual can be attained, can be healthily realised.

In this context, the problem of an *akolastos*, then, is that she purposely abuses her “right,” her access, to a spontaneity of consciousness, particularly in terms of a self-indulgent realisation of pleasure; the problem of an *akolastos*, then, is that her *prohairesis* is exploitative, it exploits the spontaneity of consciousness which it is part of, particularly in terms of a self-indulgent realisation of pleasure.

Now, the reason why I emphasise this connection between *spontaneity of consciousness*, *prohairesis*, and *akolasia* is the fact that Wilde seems to deliberately misread them—an aesthetical and epistemological strategy whose main goals seem to be, in turn, that of standing up against the moralism of Victorian society and that of favouring, that of abiding by the wishes of the poisonous aura of Decadentism.

Ross writes in his book:

Wilde summarised the distinction [between *akolastos* and *akratês*] thus: ‘the former deliberately chooses what is wrong, the latter knows what is right but does wrong... ἀκρατής [*akratês*] is like a state with good laws which does not enforce them: the totally intemperate like a state which makes bad laws and does enforce them [cf. 7.10.3]’. The *akratês* is someone with no control over himself, without *enkrateia*, ‘self-mastery’; the *akolastos*, ‘the unchastised’, exercises *proairesis* in deliberately choosing the bad; he is *enkratês*, ‘in control’: ‘The man who consistently chooses pleasure is better than the man who is the creature of impulse.’ Here Wilde is following Aristotle’s suggestion that because of his self-control the *akolastos*, the deliberate doer of wrong, may be preferable to the *akratês*, who does wrong out of weakness (7.2.10). (Ross 2013:148)

Based on these analyses, two literary examples of *akolastos* might be evident by now: Lord Henry Wotton, a witty but in the end incomplete *akolastos*, and his pupil

Dorian Gray, an *akolastos* so perfect, indeed, that his search for beauty, sensuality, and pleasure literally leads him to murder.

Although *The Picture of Dorian Gray* focuses on the *Bildungsgeschichte* of its leading character, Dorian Gray, perhaps the most dominating figure in the whole novel is in fact Lord Henry Wotton—clearly Wilde’s alter-ego—, this middle-aged upper-class snobbish man, full of “wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories” (Wilde 2007:56), who tutors and in the end unwillingly corrupts Dorian into becoming a deadly *akratês*, *enkratês*, and *akolastos*.

Based on a wide array of biographical material, a few pages back I suggested that Wilde probably conceived his celebrity persona, his buffoonish mask, as a means to improve the credibility of his discourse; that is, that he carefully aestheticised a certain existence so that the effectively plastic or material dimension of his public presence would provide him the necessary authority to a discourse that, albeit cultured and sophisticated, had been distorted by a moralistic society and the rising sensationalism of its media. In other words, his *ethos*, his *character*, was chiefly grounded on image and physicality, on his body and body language, so that his spoken discourse, in all its culture, sophistication, and even musicality, systematically depended on the eccentricities of his corporeal, motional, and gestural discourse—that is to say, it systematically depended on the eccentricities of his *pose*.

What is curious about Lord Henry is that, in him, this relation between spoken discourse and corporeal, motional, and gestural discourse, between verbal *speech* and non-verbal *pose*, is somewhat inverted—and, in fact, inverted in such a way that the latter seems to be completely subsumed to the former. In fact, if, following Pater’s suggestions, I had to synthesise the whole character of Lord Henry in a short formula, I would say that this is a character who lives his life to preside over every dinner table, particularly through the use of language: language, for Lord Henry, and apparently for Wilde from the late 1880’s on, is a perfect realm for a person’s constitution of *simulacra*—that is, for a person’s constitution of projections that, although by-products of an originary object, do not seek to establish with it a truthful *mimetic* relation, but, in fact, a biased relation of *disparity*, *differentiation*, and, therefore, *creativity*; language, in this sense, tends to envelop the individual who speaks in a verbal *mask*, in the progressive formulation of creative *lies* chiefly based on the quality of voice and wordly expression, so that the individual herself ultimately becomes indissociable from her own enunciation practices—so that, in other words, she ultimately adopts a strategy for an ‘art of living’ or for an ‘aesthetics of

existence' that is largely grounded on the creative quality of a certain *discursive ethos*. (see Maingueneau 2008:11-29) In sum, then, during his lectures in America, Wilde adopted a material or bodily simulacrum so that the consistency and the credibility of his *discourse* would be widely founded on the eccentricity of his *pose*; throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry adopts an immaterial or verbal simulacrum so that the consistency and the credibility of his *actions*—or lack thereof—are widely founded on the eccentricity of his *discourse*.

A good example of this logic is a commentary that Lord Henry himself—always as Wilde's spokesman—provides right in the first pages of the novel; when explaining his understanding of *language* to Basil Hallward—or at least of how he thinks *language* should be socially used—he says:

'Not at all,' answered Lord Henry, laying his hand upon his shoulder; 'not at all, my dear Basil. You seem to forget that I am married, and the *one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception necessary for both parties*. I never know where my wife is, and my wife never knows what I am doing. *When we meet,—we do meet occasionally, when we dine out together, or go down to the duke's,—we tell each other the most absurd stories with the most serious faces*. My wife is very good at it,—much better, in fact, than I am. She never gets confused over her dates, and I always do. *But when she does find me out, she makes no row at all. I sometimes wish she would; but she merely laughs at me.*' (Wilde 2007:7; my emphases all over)

Clearly, one of the first remarkable idiosyncrasies that we notice when reading this dialogue is how much Lord Henry's discourse sounds like Wilde's own discourse—at least in the way they have been registered in the biographical material we have at our disposal today—, a tone that also resonates in Wilde's other alter-ego characters, like the sharp Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" or the more discreet Vivian in "The Decay of Lying." This is particularly evident in Lord Henry's acidly ironic remark about his idea of the whole mechanics of married life, that is, the idea that "the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of *deception* necessary for both parties" (Wilde 2007:7; my emphasis), and, indeed, we can find similar discursive constructions elsewhere: in an interview after his return to England from America, Wilde supposedly said about his impressions of the new continent that "[we, the English people,] have really everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language." (Morris 2013:4); through the voice of Ernest, he scathingly suggests that the interest of English society in cheap literature comes

from the fact that “the English public always feels perfectly at its ease when a mediocrity is talking to it,” and, through the voice of Gilbert, promptly answers that “[yes;] the public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius.” (Wilde 2007:965) In the *Delphi Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, we can also read in the chapter “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young” several gnomic suggestions that seem to follow a similar logic of linguistic construction; among many others, we have: “The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet discovered.”; “Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for attractiveness of others”; “A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it.” (Wilde 2012:1668) A very common discursive strategy that Wilde employs, then, is the denunciation of an often accurately chosen negative content through a stylishly “self-eristic” expression, that is, the condemnation of a given problem—frequently how a moral issue affects an ethical issue—through linguistic constructions that not only rarely seek to suggest any final truth, but which also regularly seek to make fun of the very attempt to suggest a criticism in the first place. Considering this dialectical contradiction—that is, this systematic castigation of certain issues through the captivating wording of a self-critical criticism—in many of Wilde’s writings and declarations, it is only natural that the general tone of his discourses be that of some kind of fancy irony; this, of course, by no means weakens the critical value of his assertions—I dare say that this actually potentialises it—, but, whenever one examines them, it is wise that one take into account precisely the fact that such calculated paradoxes, that such dialectical contradictions, are also a strategy to avoid the suggestion of absolute or one-sided truths. In fact, as he emphasises in “The Critic as Artist,” again through the voice of Gilbert, “I am but too conscious of the fact that we are born in an age when only the dull are treated seriously, and I live in terror of not being misunderstood.” (Wilde 2007:978) In a way, then, the way I see it, with his witty and deliberately ambiguous commentaries, Wilde does not simply seek to provide criticisms or opinions of his own; more often than not, what he does is shed some light on terribly debatable problems that are normally taken for granted, that are normally taken to be natural and legitimate, and, by exposing their perniciousness, invite others to take part in the whole discussion—that is, the way I see it, his criticisms and opinions are calculatedly meant to be open to different interpretations, calculatedly meant to dissent from generally accepted truths and thereby instigate others to take part in some kind of similar action, preferably some kind of creative, artistic, self-indulgent, disruptive action.

Another remarkable quality of Lord Henry's dialogue is, of course, this brief narrative about his relationship with his wife—who never takes part in the story: as Lord Henry makes clear, one of the tightest erotic bonds that he seems to share with his wife is their common interest in indulging themselves and one another with lies, with fictional narratives about themselves. Instead of just exchanging information about their daily routines, as most couples do, Lord Henry and his wife seem to prefer to use their time apart as basis for the creation of fictional narratives about themselves, likely to be much more interesting than any factual account of the events of their own days, and thereby submit themselves to a sort of mind game of truth or dare in which the loser is scorned for their failed attempt to properly and charmingly lie. What Lord Henry and his wife do, then, is see how skilful they are in the art of creating *masks*, of creating *simulacra* of themselves to each other, masks that are not some kind of bodily or physical materiality, but masks that are dynamically articulated through language, both in its materiality—the fancy verbal narrations that they exchange over their dinner table—and immateriality—the diegetic narratives that they create to amuse one another as a couple. Lord Henry, of course, never explains the content of these mind and verbal games with his wife, but, if we take a look at his dialogues in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we might be able to imagine the general *tone* of such conversations; in a sequence in which Lord Henry quite literally tries to preside over a dinner table, we can see not just this tone of his discourses, but also, and most importantly, how these discourses seem, in turn, to preside over him, to dominate his behaviour, to dominate his character, by regulating most of his actions:

“Four husbands! Upon my word that is *trop de zele*.”

“*Trop d'audace*, I tell her,” said Dorian.

“Oh! she is audacious enough for anything, my dear. And what is Ferrol like? I don't know him.”

“The husbands of very beautiful women belong to the criminal classes,” said Lord Henry, sipping his wine.

Lady Narborough hit him with her fan. “Lord Henry, I am not at all surprised that the world says that you are extremely wicked.”

“But what world says that?” asked Lord Henry, elevating his eyebrows. “It can only be the next world. This world and I are on excellent terms.”

“Everybody I know says you are very wicked,” cried the old lady, shaking her head.

Lord Henry looked serious for some moments. “It is perfectly monstrous,” he said, at last, “the way people go about nowadays saying things against one behind one's back that are absolutely and entirely true.”

“Isn’t he incorrigible?” cried Dorian, leaning forward in his chair.

“I hope so,” said his hostess, laughing. “But really, if you all worship Madame de Ferrol in this ridiculous way, I shall have to marry again so as to be in the fashion.”

“You will never marry again, Lady Narborough,” broke in Lord Henry. “You were far too happy. When a woman marries again, it is because she detested her first husband. When a man marries again, it is because he adored his first wife. Women try their luck; men risk theirs.”

(Wilde 2007:123-24)

In this conversation, which Lord Henry, Dorian Gray, and Lady Narborough have at this woman’s table during lunch, we can see that what mostly defines Lord Henry to his friends—and to his enemies, certainly—is his sharp “wickedness,” particularly, as we can notice suggested in Dorian’s commentary, as it is articulated in his quick-witted, self-centred speeches. (It is curious to notice that, indeed, Lord Henry’s art of living through language is so consistent, so coherent in its ability to determine itself as a dominating trait of character, that I myself can instinctively imagine what sort of answer I would get from Lord Henry if he read my analyses. For example, I just wrote that “what mostly defines Lord Henry to his friends—and to his enemies, certainly—is his sharp “wickedness””; as soon as I wrote this, I could hear in the back of my mind Lord Henry himself confronting me, suggesting something like: “Surely I don’t want to disappoint my enemies, otherwise there would be no point in having them at all.”) This is what I mean by a “self-eristic” discourse: Lord Henry’s art of living through language is one that often has a solid object of criticism, but, perhaps above all, it is an art that, like every art should in fact be, seeks in itself its own realisation; Lord Henry often does not seek a firm resolution to his criticisms, he often prefers to scorn the objects he criticises by tangling them in the intricacies of his own exercise of language—an exercise particularly employed as a means to tighten social relations, relations in which he systematically tries to determine himself as a centre of attention. We can see, then, that Lord Henry—and probably Wilde himself from the late 1880’s on—frequently tries to live and find pleasure through language, suggesting, through a careful and self-indulgent articulation of language itself, all sorts of wicked thoughts. But, as I suggested a while ago, Lord Henry is really a deficient *akolastos*: although he deifies himself as wicked man at every dinner table by prescribing all sorts of wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories, he does not really put them into practice—the narrative, at least, gives us no proof of an effective misbehaviour, of an effective *akolasia*, from his part: as far as we can tell, in spite of his wicked theories about

life and the pursuit of pleasure, he ultimately proves himself to be an *enkratês*, to be an individual whose good exercise of *prohairesis* seems to arbitrate his ethical and moral conducts in relation to others. And, curiously enough, the narrative seems to provide a good evidence of this, I mean, an evidence that, in spite of his constant suggestion of *akolasia*, often through an exercise of language that is for himself an *akolasia*, Lord Henry seems to be in the end an *enkratês*, an individual who tends to keep a critical control over his own actions; elsewhere, in the beginning of the story, in a conversation that in a way is a meta-commentary about the narrative's own methodology, we can find Lord Henry expressing the following thoughts:

"Paradoxes are all very well in their way...." rejoined the baronet.

"Was that a paradox?" asked Mr. Erskine. "I did not think so. Perhaps it was. Well, the way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test reality we must see it on the tight rope. When the verities become acrobats, we can judge them."

"Dear me!" said Lady Agatha, "how you men argue! I am sure I never can make out what you are talking about. Oh! Harry, I am quite vexed with you. Why do you try to persuade our nice Mr. Dorian Gray to give up the East End? I assure you he would be quite invaluable. They would love his playing."

"I want him to play to me," cried Lord Henry, smiling, and he looked down the table and caught a bright answering glance.

"But they are so unhappy in Whitechapel," continued Lady Agatha.

"I can sympathize with everything except suffering," said Lord Henry, shrugging his shoulders. "I cannot sympathize with that. It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing. There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathize with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life. The less said about life's sores, the better."

"Still, the East End is a very important problem," remarked Sir Thomas with a grave shake of the head.

"Quite so," answered the young lord. "It is the problem of slavery, and we try to solve it by amusing the slaves."

The politician looked at him keenly. "What change do you propose, then?" he asked.

Lord Henry laughed. *"I don't desire to change anything in England except the weather," he answered. "I am quite content with philosophic contemplation. But, as the nineteenth century has gone bankrupt through an over-expenditure of sympathy, I would suggest that we should appeal to science to put us straight. The advantage of the emotions is that they lead us astray, and the advantage of science is that it is not emotional."*

(Wilde 2007:30-31; my emphases)

The influence of Lord Henry's wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories on Dorian Gray, however, are a completely different matter: if we read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a *Bildungsroman*, the triggering force that leads Dorian to the loss of his innocence is, in fact, his making acquaintance with Lord Henry, this vocal, verbal supporter of *akolasia*, of a virtually boundless experimentation of pleasure through virtually every opportunity life gives us, whatever the cost.

Dorian's characteristics as an *akratês*, *enkratês*, and *akolastos* are rather easy to recognise.

First, Dorian behaves as an *akratês* in his relationship with Sibyl Vane.

Dorian first meets the young Sibyl in a crummy theatre in London, during a performance of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), a tragedy in which she plays Juliet, precisely; it is curious to see in Dorian's account of his meeting of Sibyl that, although it is technically meant to be a dialogue describing these events, it is permeated with traces of impressionism, even if very simple ones.

His account begins with these words:

"This play was good enough for us, Harry. It was *Romeo and Juliet*. I must admit that I was rather annoyed at the idea of seeing Shakespeare done in such a wretched hole of a place. Still, I felt interested, in a sort of way. At any rate, I determined to wait for the first act. There was a dreadful orchestra, presided over by a young Hebrew who sat at a cracked piano, that nearly drove me away, but at last the drop-scene was drawn up and the play began. *Romeo* was a stout elderly gentleman, with corked eyebrows, a husky tragedy voice, and a figure like a beer-barrel. *Mercutio* was almost as bad. He was played by the low-comedian, who had introduced gags of his own and was on most friendly terms with the pit. They were both as grotesque as the scenery, and that looked as if it had come out of a country-booth." (Wilde 2007:37-38)

An important characteristic that we should note about this extract is its very first period, in which Dorian affirms that the play he had watched some time before was good enough for "the both of them"—that is, for Lord Henry and for Dorian himself; I say this is an important characteristic because, although Dorian's commentary might seem trivial at first, in truth it subtly gives away the influence that the older man has on him: early in the novel, when Dorian meets Lord Henry in Basil Hallward's studio, Dorian still finds himself constrained and unawarely lost in his own innocence, so that when Lord Henry first suggests his wicked theories about life to him, his reaction is one of interest, of

course, but also one of caution; in this sequence, however, we find Dorian self-assuredly at ease with his own awareness of beauty—so at ease, indeed, that he already seems to see himself as Lord Henry’s equal, or, if not as his equal, at least as an apprentice mindful of his tutor’s teachings and of his own learnings. Whereas, early in the novel, Dorian’s impressions of Lord Henry led him to doubt and hesitation—after all, how come can someone speak so highly of and so seriously about such dangerous modes of hedonism, about such boundless modes of self-indulgence?—, in this later sequence, we follow Dorian precisely as a student—even if an early student—of such voluntary intemperance, already aware of how his own standards of taste, much more refined now, dialogue with those of his tutor’s.

In fact, what follows Dorian’s initial commentary is a rather scornful ecphrasis of the whole clumsiness upon which the play is actually, materially built: the decrepit space, scenario and musical instruments; the also poor quality of the musicians; the complete neglect of scenic presence—which is particularly the case of an over-aged, overweight actor who seemed to take Romeo only as a cheap excuse to deliver his own comic puns to an audience that, for him, was clearly more important than the character himself. In the overall context of Dorian’s account, it soon becomes evident that this is a strategy to singularise Sibyl in her beauty and talent, that is, to emphasise the fact that her charm is so natural and her talent so impeccable, that there are no scenarios, no artists, and no incompetence dreadful enough to obfuscate her—what leads us to the hypothesis that, if there is, indeed, anything good about that play that is not Sibyl herself, this is invariably a by-product of Sibyl’s scintillating presence.

Giving himself to a more sensual impressionism, Dorian continues the story in an increasingly passionate tone:

“But Juliet! Harry, imagine a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little, flowerlike face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose. She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life. You said to me once that pathos left you unmoved, but that beauty, mere beauty, could fill your eyes with tears. I tell you, Harry, I could hardly see this girl for the mist of tears that came across me. And her voice—I never heard such a voice. It was very low at first, with deep mellow notes that seemed to fall singly upon one’s ear. Then it became a little louder, and sounded like a flute or a distant hautboy. In the garden-scene it had all the tremulous ecstasy that one hears just before dawn when nightingales are singing. There were moments, later on, when it had the wild passion of violins. *You know how a voice can stir one. Your*

voice and the voice of Sibyl Vane are two things that I shall never forget. When I close my eyes, I hear them, and each of them says something different. I don't know which to follow. Why should I not love her? Harry, I do love her. She is everything to me in life." (Wilde 2007:38; my emphasis)

As we can see, for Dorian, Sibyl's performance is incantatory: she involuntarily *presents* herself to him with an emotional impact akin to that of a sculpture, and he is soon captivated by the delicate lines of her face, hair, eyes, and lips; he then continues to concede that he found himself mesmerised by the *sound* of her voice—as if hers was the voice of a siren, and, like a sailor, he found himself trapped in it. Sibyl, then, first hooks Dorian by an ecstasy of his senses, particularly his sight and hearing, an ecstasy he actually tries to describe in some of his most ardent, intimate words; but, at the same time, he also seems to recognise in the girl this *ineffable* quality of beauty, a quality that an admirer cannot really fathom through words, images, or reasoning—because it is a quality that can only be experienced through the *limits of the body*, and, in more extreme cases, only through the *possession of a body*: "Harry, I do love her. She is everything to me in life." (Wilde 2007:38), Dorian confesses to his tutor, apparently suggesting that erotic love is the only way for him to truly grasp, to truly take control of, to truly consummate such burning aesthetic experience which is Sibyl's beauty.

At this point, however, I should emphasise a truly delicate aspect of Dorian's commentary, not only because it reiterates Lord Henry's influence on him, but also because it seems to prefigure Dorian's misreading of some of his tutor's theories: in this brief retrospective of Sibyl's acting, Dorian reasserts his tutor's contention that *beauty* seems to be more efficient in moving people than *pathos*; that is, Dorian reasserts his tutor's hypothesis that people tend to sympathise more easily with beauty than with other people's suffering. A few pages back, we actually saw another evidence of Lord Henry's opinion: in his conversation with Mr. Erskine and Lady Agatha, he openly suggests that people should sympathise with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life, since there is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. (see Wilde 2007:30-31) In a vacuum, Lord Henry's idea really sounds like a perilous *akolasia* that would befit the dangerously self-indulgent tastes of the Decadence, but, if we effectively take him as Wilde's alter-ego, as a fictional spokesman of Wilde's ideas about ethics, aesthetics, and society, than this suggestion might prove itself much less pernicious than it seems—it might prove itself not pernicious at all, in fact. If we read Lord Henry's suggestion

through the prism of “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” for instance, we soon notice that we should not, indeed, sympathise with *suffering*, because there is nothing in it to sympathise with: the idea, of course, is not that we should be insensitive to the pain of others and only care about ourselves; on the contrary, the idea is that, instead of morbidly *sympathising* with suffering, we should *antagonise* it, we should *stand up* and *revolt* against it, so that it falls back to its proper place of absurdity. If we read Lord Henry’s suggestion through the prism of “The Critic as Artist”—as we will see in a while—, we might be able to assume that it is somehow ori-



ented towards the idea that, with a proper *aesthetic education*, an individual might learn to identify the faults and omissions of art in nature and thereby learn to love and find pleasure in what is good, thus elevating her own soul and the soul of others, and hate and find displeasure in what is bad, thus repressing or castigating what might be harmful to herself and to others. Clearly, I am not suggesting that this *is* what Lord Henry, such wicked and self-centred character is saying; what I am suggesting is that Lord Henry’s wicked theories about life are ultimately part of a much broader logic in Wilde’s philosophy of art, and, as such, are likely to carry within themselves much more complex conjectures than meets the eye—and reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a fictionalisation of Wilde’s other essays can be a truly enriching experience, because the story seems to test the limits of the essays’ philosophical, epistemological, and aesthetical hypotheses. Indeed, a major trickiness in dealing with Lord Henry’s paradoxes and “self-eristic” discourses is that they often criticise their own moralism by caricaturing this very moralism: read in a vacuum, Lord Henry’s confessions that he can sympathise with everything except suffering or that the less said about the sores of life the better (see Wilde 2007:30-31) might sound absurd and terribly egotistic, they might sound moralist, classist, racist,

sexist etc.; however, in practice, what his discourse does is caricature the tone, content, and intention of many conservative discourses—typical of his Victorian society, of course, but disturbingly familiar to our present: indeed, how many people must not truly identify with such commentaries, exactly as this character utters them?

In Dorian's case, however, this tension between *beauty* and *pathos* takes yet another form—namely, that of a perfectly Decadent *akolasia*. Dorian makes clear that only two voices are really able to influence them, that only two voices are really able to stir him in different directions: on one side, Lord Henry's voice, which clearly tends to stir him in the wrong directions—that is, in the direction of boundless beauty, sensuality, pleasure, self-indulgence, whatever the costs, including doing this to the detriment of a pathological dimension, that is, to the detriment of how he might harm others; on the other side, Sibyl's voice, which, we come to realise, tends to stir him in the right directions—that is, in the direction of true erotic love, dedicated love, seemingly away from Lord Henry's ideas of beauty, sensuality, pleasure, and self-indulgence, whose boundlessness seems, as I have just suggested, to lead those who follow them to all sorts of destruction, including self-destruction.

In fact, later in the narrative, when Lord Henry and Basil Hallward, accepting Dorian's invitation, go to that lousy theatre to watch Sibyl's apparently impeccable talent, they are, instead, taken aback by the girl's terrible performance—a performance so terrible, indeed, that not only does it utterly embarrass Dorian in front of his friends, it also promptly leads him to break up with her, no explanations needed. Considering Dorian's new idea of life—a life in which he is the centre of every sort of aesthetic experience—, it is hard for us to tell how much of his brisk decision to break up with her resulted from his embarrassment in front of his colleagues, supposedly experts in art, and how much from the girl's true carelessness with art, something that for all of them, as supposedly experts in art, is a most terrible insult.

Sibyl's acting in *Romeo and Juliet* is narrated thus:

The scene was the hall of Capulet's house, and Romeo in his pilgrim's dress had entered with Mercutio and his other friends. The band, such as it was, struck up a few bars of music, and the dance began. Through the crowd of ungainly, shabbily dressed actors, Sibyl Vane moved like a creature from a finer world. Her body swayed, while she danced, as a plant sways in the water. The curves of her throat were the curves of a white lily. Her hands seemed to be made of cool ivory.

Yet she was curiously listless. She showed no sign of joy when her eyes rested on Romeo. The few words she had to speak—

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss—

with the brief dialogue that follows, were spoken in a thoroughly artificial manner. The voice was exquisite, but from the point of view of tone it was absolutely false. It was wrong in colour. It took away all the life from the verse. It made the passion unreal.

Dorian Gray grew pale as he watched her. He was puzzled and anxious. Neither of his friends dared to say anything to him. She seemed to them to be absolutely incompetent. They were horribly disappointed. (Wilde 2007:59)

Sibyl, however, seems to have an entirely different opinion about the whole situation—about her deliberate underperformance, that is; when confronted by Dorian on this matter—which is also the sequence in which he breaks up with her—, she explains:

As soon as it was over, Dorian Gray rushed behind the scenes into the greenroom. The girl was standing there alone, with a look of triumph on her face. Her eyes were lit with an exquisite fire. There was a radiance about her. Her parted lips were smiling over some secret of their own.

When he entered, she looked at him, and an expression of infinite joy came over her. “How badly I acted to-night, Dorian!” she cried.

“Horribly!” he answered, gazing at her in amazement. “Horribly! It was dreadful. Are you ill? You have no idea what it was. You have no idea what I suffered.”

The girl smiled. “Dorian,” she answered, lingering over his name with long-drawn music in her voice, as though it were sweeter than honey to the red petals of her mouth. “Dorian, you should have understood. But you understand now, don’t you?”

[...]

“Dorian, Dorian,” she cried, “before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything. The common people who acted with me seemed to me to be godlike. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came—oh, my beautiful love!—and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. Tonight, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played.

Tonight, for the first time, I became conscious that the Romeo was hideous, and old, and painted, that the moonlight in the orchard was false, that the scenery was vulgar, and that the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say. You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is. My love! My love! Prince Charming! Prince of life! I have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be. What have I to do with the puppets of a play? When I came on tonight, I could not understand how it was that everything had gone from me. I thought that I was going to be wonderful. I found that I could do nothing. Suddenly it dawned on my soul what it all meant. The knowledge was exquisite to me. I heard them hissing, and I smiled. What could they know of love such as ours? Take me away, Dorian—take me away with you, where we can be quite alone. I hate the stage. I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire. Oh, Dorian, Dorian, you understand now what it signifies? Even if I could do it, it would be profanation for me to play at being in love. You have made me see that.” He flung himself down on the sofa and turned away his face.

“You have killed my love,” he muttered. (Wilde 2007:61-62)

As we can see, then, Dorian loved Sibyl in one way, while Sibyl loved Dorian in the exact opposite way: Dorian, already influenced by Lord Henry’s wicked theories, loves the girl for her ability in acting, for her ability to turn herself into a perfect work of art—an ability that, unlike in most actors, is not reduced to her power to incarnate a given character and thereby use her body as a mediation for the delivery of a preconceived fiction; her ability, rather, is to perfectly create a *lie*, a *mask*, a *simulacrum* out of herself, so that it is the character, actually, who is transformed by her beauty—so that it is the character who, in fact, is virtually undiscernible from herself, from her own self. Dorian, then, falls in love, not with Sibyl the ordinary girl trying to make a living through her acting—this would be way too realistic for Wilde—, but with her many lies, masks, and simulacra, with her capacity to make art alive onstage, with her capacity to make herself an artwork for contemplation, admiration, and ecstasy. From her fateful confession, however, we can see that Sibyl, weary of her life in poverty and of her acting in such a shabby place, loves the boy for the renewed sense of *reality* that he makes grow in her—a sense of love that is also a sense of promise, a possibility of erotic and material happiness that no acting can bring, no matter how pleasurable this activity might be. In fact, for Sibyl, acting did often seem to work as a means to endure her cruel reality, her perfect aesthetics of existence did often seem to suggest her a momentary elation away from the encroachments of her misery, but this is a process of getting spiritually lost within herself that loses

all its meaning after she meets Dorian—whose love is for her so earthly, that any attempt to escape into art will only take her away from it. Sibyl, then, falls in love with Dorian himself, this handsome, sensitive, and worldly boy devoid of lies, masks, or simulacra—lies, masks, and simulacra like the ones she takes refuge in with her acting; she falls in love precisely with what he is, irrespective of anything else, so that being herself, being Sibyl and only Sibyl, finally makes complete sense. Dorian, then, falls in love, not with Sibyl herself, but with his aesthetic experience of her—with the impressions that she arouses in him through her beauty, yes, but above all through her beauty as an integral part of her acting, of her construction of herself as an artwork; Sibyl, however, falls in love with Dorian Gray himself, with her burning feelings for him and for the possibility of living a passionate but also earthly life with him, so that, for her, any sense of elation that is not Dorian Gray and her life with him is but a lower sense of elation, and, therefore, only a deviation from her true spiritual fulfilment.

Now, the greatest problem of Dorian's break-up with Sibyl is that this completely selfish action leads her to kill herself by poisoning—an event that, I believe, confirms Dorian as an *akratês*, that is, as an individual whose lack of 'self-control', 'self-mastery', 'self-restraint' finally leads to a terrible outcome. An evidence of Wilde's admirable narrative skills is the whole sequence in which Dorian learns about Sibyl's death: having woken up in good spirits the day after his break-up with the girl—what exposes his insensitivity, I mean, what indicates that, for him, the dispute of the night before was not all that serious—, Dorian decides to write her an apology letter, explaining to her that he had decided to go back on his decision and, in fact, that they should still get married. As he writes this message, Dorian receives from Lord Henry the news of Sibyl's suicide, along with the terribly convenient information that no one knows Dorian's name or who he actually is; this, of course, already confirms his position as an *akratês*, but, precisely at this point of the narrative, something else happens: as he admires his portrait on the wall, Dorian notices, for the first time in the whole story, that there is something different with his own image there—it is not clear what exactly he sees, but his image seems to have been somehow deformed by a subtle yet clearly evil expression, or at least some kind of ironic or malicious expression. It is, then, as if the painting had absorbed all the flaws or negative traces of his *prohairesis* so that he can remain an immaculate *akratês* and *akolastos*; we should keep in mind that, in the internal logic of the novel, people are certainly more easily moved by *beauty* than by *pathos*, so Dorian's portrait, this powerful weapon that degenerates itself by absorbing the hideousness of the suffering he puts other

people through for the sake of his own pleasures, is all an *akolastos* could wish for. In fact, I cannot help but wonder: had Basil Hallward not painted such devilish portrait, how far, in practice, would Dorian Gray have taken Lord Henry's wicked theories about life, how far would he have taken his destructive self-indulgencies, his deadly art of living?

Curiously, this is a question that seems to hover above Dorian Gray's dispute with Basil Hallward later in the novel.

Many years after Sibyl's death and the first deformations in the painting, Dorian, after a night out with Lord Henry to celebrate his thirty-eighth birthday, happens to meet Basil Hallward on the street; the two gentlemen take their conversation to Dorian's home, where they finally engage in a more heated discussion over Dorian's constant involvements in all sorts of scandals: as if the young girl's death had not been serious enough, Basil also reproaches Dorian for his apparent participation in the defamation of a man, the terrible end of another, yet another one's loss of his job, and even in implicating Lord Henry's sister in some kind of social embarrassment. Basil also warns Dorian of the fact that, as if these dreadful suspicions were not enough, rumour also has it that he has been seen wandering around in foul neighbourhoods, in filthy places, doing God knows what with God knows what kind of people; Dorian, however, does not seem to be moved by any of these accusations, what finally leads Basil to ask himself—and ask Dorian—what really lies beneath his unchanging beautiful image, what can really be found in the soul of a man whose face and body seem to have remained untarnished by the deceptions of life. Dorian, in a fit of anger and irony that only a man who has nothing left to lose can experience—after all, his *prohairesis* has become irrelevant as there is nothing, really, in the world capable of destroying the beautiful integrity of his body and the limitless erotic and social power that it seems to endow him with—, unveils the truth to Basil, showing him the now monstrous creature in the portrait.

The recognition sequence unfolds in the following paragraph:

An exclamation of horror broke from the painter's lips as he saw in the dim light the hideous face on the canvas grinning at him. There was something in its expression that filled him with disgust and loathing. Good heavens! it was Dorian Gray's own face that he was looking at! The horror, whatever it was, had not yet entirely spoiled that marvellous beauty. There was still some gold in the thinning hair and some scarlet on the sensual mouth. The sodden eyes had kept something of the loveliness of their blue, the noble curves had not yet completely passed away from chiselled nostrils and from plastic throat. Yes, it was Dorian himself. But who had done it? He seemed to recognize his own brushwork, and the frame was his own

design. The idea was monstrous, yet he felt afraid. He seized the lighted candle, and held it to the picture. In the left-hand corner was his own name, traced in long letters of bright vermilion. (Wilde 2007:108)

Basil, of course, is taken aback by such revelation, and his reaction is wonderfully symptomatic of Wilde's own beliefs, I mean, of two of Wilde's most common concerns in life: first, seeing the deformations in the painting, Basil tries to come up with some kind of *scientific* explanation to all that—the most plausible being mildew—, but is soon convinced that he is, actually, looking at Dorian's corrupted soul, at his completely destroyed dimension of *prohairesis*; shocked by such verification, he is then overwhelmed by a sense of guilt, and desperately asks Dorian to pray and repent, so that all those *sins*—clearly I cannot use the word *akolasia* here—registered in the painting, whose responsibility he believes to share, can be properly forgiven.

Basil first says to Dorian:

“I remember it! Oh, how well I remember it! No! the thing is impossible. The room is damp. Mildew has got into the canvas. The paints I used had some wretched mineral poison in them. I tell you the thing is impossible.” (Wilde 2007:109)

And then desperately looks for an alternative solution:

“Good God, Dorian, what a lesson! What an awful lesson!” There was no answer, but he could hear the young man sobbing at the window. “Pray, Dorian, pray,” he murmured. “What is it that one was taught to say in one's boyhood? ‘Lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins. Wash away our iniquities.’ Let us say that together. The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered also. I worshipped you too much. I am punished for it. You worshipped yourself too much. We are both punished.” (Wilde 2007:109)

But Basil's efforts to look for a solution ultimately prove to be in vain; Dorian, as if hypnotised by the image in the painting, is suddenly possessed by a bloodthirsty urge, by an inexplicable hatred towards his old friend, and violently stabs him to death.

Conscious of his own crime, Dorian then blackmails a new character, a chemist, into getting rid of Basil's body without removing it from the house; we cannot be sure of how, exactly, this chemist does this, but Dorian finally gets away with murder not only by eliminating the evidences of his actions, but also by doing this with the help of a man

whom he finally manages to have complete control over. A while ago, I affirmed that, in the long term, Lord Henry's wicked theories about life would lead Dorian into becoming an *akratês*, an *enkratês*, and an *akolastos*, even if this was not initially in his plans with the boy; we just saw that, because of his selfish sense of *akolasia*, Dorian involuntarily leads Sibyl Vane to suicide, which means that, in this situation he ends up in the position of an *akratês*, of someone whose actions derive from a lack of 'self-control', 'self-mastery', or 'self-temperance'; in Dorian's murder of Basil, however, the crime seems to unfold in a wholly different way, in a much more gruesome way: considering that Dorian's effective killing of Basil might have been incited by the painting's magical powers, it might be controversial to simply assume that his actions were that of an *enkratês*, of someone who is in complete 'self-control' or 'self-mastery' of his actions; however, as I just explained, Dorian does get away with murder, and he does this precisely by consistently coercing a man to help him get rid of the body and all the evidences that might somehow incriminate him. In this context, then, I believe we can affirm that, because of his selfish sense of *akolasia*, and, of course, also because of how this sense corrupted all his standards of morality, Dorian voluntarily takes part in Basil's death, which means that, in this situation, he places himself in the position of an *enkratês*, of someone whose actions derive from an effective command over them, even if the 'self-control' and 'self-mastery' behind this command are deliberately based on the intention to harm others.

As it should be clear by now, the main reason why I give such emphasis on *prohairesis* and *akolasia* when reading Wilde's works is the fact that, in his philosophy of art—and, of course, in his art proper, as we can see from my brief analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his most important fiction—, these two philosophical precepts, these two philosophical dimensions, seem to gain a completely new life: whereas, in Aristotelian ethics, these two dimensions seem to establish with one another a relation of *adversity*—for, in extreme situations, *akolasia* can be regarded as an individual's excess chiefly based on the pursuit of pleasure, to the detriment of her *prohairesis*, of her ability to choose a temperance that is healthy for herself and also for others—, in Wilde's Decadent ethics, these two dimensions seem to establish with one another a relation of *complicity*—that is, considering that one of the core intentions of Decadentism was to stand up against the accentuated moralism of 19th century Europe, a *prohairesis*, a 'predisposition', to seek some kind of *akolasia*, some kind of excess chiefly based on the pursuit of pleasure, seems like a truly refined strategy of defiance. Evidently, I am not suggesting—and, of course, neither was Wilde, nor the other members of Aestheticism—that one should deliberately

engage in destructive criminal activities or should deliberately seek to exploit others for the sake of one's pleasure—although, it should be noted, some dimensions of Decadentism and Aestheticism were, indeed, deeply associated with the typical criminality of then, like homoerotic love, libertinage, and drug use; what I am suggesting is that, whereas Aristotelian *prohairesis* seemed consistent with an idea of the 'care of the self' that sought *temperance* as a fundamental means to the 'knowledge of the self', Wildean *prohairesis*, as a symptom of the overall idea of *ethics* in Aestheticism, seemed consistent with an idea of the 'care of the self' that sought *intemperance* as a fundamental means to the 'knowledge of the self'. I am aware that, today, in the English language, the words *temperance* and *intemperance* are chiefly related to the idea of alcohol consumption—*temperance* referring to a *moderate* alcohol consumption, or even abstinence from it, and *intemperance* referring to an *immoderate* alcohol consumption, including alcoholism. But, in fact, the semantics of these two words come in handy here for us: whereas Aristotelian ethics would contend an alcohol moderation so that, through a systematic process of 'self-control', 'self-mastery', and 'self-restraint', an individual would be able to achieve a better knowledge of herself, possibly of her own self, Wildean ethics would contend, rather, an alcohol immoderation, so that, through a systematic process of 'self-exploration', 'self-challenge', and 'self-intoxication', an individual would be able to achieve a better knowledge of herself, possibly of her own self—a process of exploratory inebriety that Charles Baudelaire, in his own way, had already suggested in *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869): *il faut être ivre!, enivrez-vous!*, he would write. Of course, I am not insinuating that Wilde recommended alcoholism in his works; but I am suggesting that Wilde, in his works, seems to provide a completely new perspective of the connection between *prohairesis* and *akolasia*: the way I see it, for Wilde—and, always, also for the other members of Aestheticism—a person's deliberate predisposition to search for pleasure in its most diverse forms as a means to improve her comprehension of herself, as a means to improve her comprehension of her own self, seems a righteous choice, an effective strategy, given the proudly moralistic values of Victorian society—values enforced, legitimated, and naturalised through religion, classism, elitism, racism, sexism, liberalism, consumerism, sensationalism etc.

In this context, another interesting aspect of Wilde's ethics and his philosophy of art is his reading of Aristotle's conception of *hexis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—which, in comparison to Wilde's reading of *prohairesis*, *akrateia*, *enkrateia*, and *akolasia*, is considerably easier to understand.

In a way, in fact, I have already explored some aspects of *hexis* when I discussed Wilde's lectures, particularly "House Decoration."

The word *hexis* is truly difficult to translate, but it is most often translated as 'habit' (from the Latin *habitus*), sometimes as 'character' (which might be a bit confusing, because *ethos* is often translated as 'character' as well), and sometimes as 'state' or 'a certain state' (of being).

In their Glossary to their translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bartlett and Collins provide the following commentary about the impossibility of perfectly translating this word into the English language:

[*Hexis* is a] central term and notoriously difficult to translate. It is related to the verb *echein*, meaning to have, hold, or (with an adverb) to be (of a certain character or in a certain state). The noun *hexis* is of fundamental importance to Aristotle's account of virtue: our *hexeis*, or characteristics, are our ordered and stable states of soul that mark us as the kind of persons we are and permit us to act as we characteristically do. Our characteristics, in this sense, display our character, the habits of body and mind that have been formed through habituation and that constitute a certain way of holding oneself toward the world, so to speak. Other possible translations are "condition," "active condition," "disposition," "state" and "habit" though no single English word can capture the full meaning of the Greek. (Bartlett and Collins in Aristotle 2011:306)

Considering such controversy in finding a precise term in English for this word, then, in the following pages I will adopt the word 'habit', and gradually try to explain why this seems to be a reasonable translation in the context of Wilde's theories on art, particularly as a base component in the formation of a critical temperament.

So, first of all, I should explain that, when I use the word 'habit' here, I do it following the basic etymology of the Latin word *habitus*, which derives from the verb *habeo*, which in turn means 'to have', 'to hold', or 'to possess' (de Vaan 2008:277; Bartlett and Collins 2011:141); so, simply put, a *habit*, a *hexis*, is something that I come to have, hold, or possess, particularly in terms of traits of my own personality—mind, body, practices, affections etc. But, the problem with the word *habit* is that it has at least two fundamental meanings—one of them more ordinary and therefore more dominant, the other one more specific and therefore more secondary: the first idea of *habit* is that of *routine*, that is, the idea that *habit* is that set of practices that, once we learn, we set out to do on a regular basis without really planning or paying attention to them—take, for instance, the practices

of taking a shower, getting dressed, having breakfast, leaving for work, or choosing the best bus or route to take to come back home, but also take, for instance, the practices of living in a bedroom organised in a specific way or working on a desktop surrounded by specific objects arranged in an also specific way; the second idea of *habit* is that of *training*, that is, the idea that *habit* is that set of practices for which there is no real exhaustible learning, no matter how much we invest our energy and time working to perfect ourselves at them—think, for instance, an Olympic athlete’s systematic self-perfection at her sport, a researcher’s persistent study of certain subjects so that she can become an expert in it, a parent’s progressive learning of how to raise, take care, and protect her child, or, of course, an artist’s meticulous analysis of the present conditions of her metier so that she can continuously refine her creativity and progressively improve the technical dimensions of her creative skills. Aristotle’s idea of *hexis*—and, by extension, Wilde’s idea of *hexis*—is, therefore, closer to this second idea of *habit*, that is, of *habit* as a self-conscious *training*, a *training* that in general seeks to produce specific changes in the individual: if I want to become a freestyle swimmer, I must invest my time, mind, body, and energy in learning the rules of freestyle, the correct way to breathe in, breathe out, and move my limbs, I must re-educate my eating, sleeping, working out, and socialising routines, I must follow, study, and talk to other athletes, and so on; if I want to become an artisan, I must invest my time, mind, body, and energy in learning the material and immaterial dimensions of the techniques required to create the objects I want to create, I must repeat a number of processes so that I can start to see the qualities, flaws, and difficulties in creating what I want to create, I must study the works of other artisans—like me or not—so that I can start to discern alternatives to improve or correct my creations, I might need to set new hours of work, study, training, rest, sleep, and so on. If, as an athlete or as an artisan, I invest myself in these self-conscious trainings, in these modes of *hexis*, with time, repetition, and difference, I start to become someone else, someone whose living in the world gradually begins to prompt changes in my own personality, eventually leading me to become someone else entirely. With these two examples, we can see, then, how the ‘care of the self’ can be very deliberately put into practice so as to rule over the ‘knowledge of the self’, and, therefore, how *hexis*, this self-conscious habit of self-perfection, can be seen as a possible dimension in the whole idea of an ‘art of living’. The word *habit*, then, as a derivative noun of the verb *habeo*, is convenient in this context in the sense that an athlete or an artisan like the ones I just described, in their progressive self-learning, self-changing, and self-perfection, also end up *crafting a new personality for themselves*, they treat

themselves as and turn themselves into artworks, so that, in the end, they have, hold, or possess an entirely new personality, an entirely new craft of themselves, of their own selves.

On a much more abstract level, concerning the idea of *moral virtue*—a proto-idea of *ethics* as we are discussing it here—, Aristotle writes in Book II.4 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Further, what pertains in the arts is not at all similar to what pertains in the virtues. For the excellence in whatever comes into being through the arts resides in the artifacts themselves. It is enough, then, for these artifacts to be in a certain state. *But whatever deeds arise in accord with the virtues are not done justly or moderately if they are merely in a certain state, but only if he who does those deeds is in a certain state as well: first, if he acts knowingly; second, if he acts by choosing and by choosing the actions in question for their own sake; and, third, if he acts while being in a steady and unwavering state.* But these criteria are irrelevant when it comes to possessing the arts—except for the knowledge itself involved. But when it comes to the virtues, knowledge has no, or little, force, whereas the other two criteria amount to not a small part of but rather the whole affair—criteria that are in fact met as a result of our doing just and moderate things many times. Matters of action are said to be just and moderate, then, when they are comparable in kind to what the just or moderate person would do. And yet he who performs these actions is not by that fact alone just and moderate, but only if he also acts as those who are just and moderate act. (Aristotle 2011:31-32; my emphasis)

And, on a much more practical level, we can read Wilde’s following ideas in “The Critic as Artist”—something I mentioned very briefly a while ago:

ERNEST: I should have said that great artists work unconsciously, that they were ‘wiser than they knew,’ as, I think, Emerson remarks somewhere.

GILBERT. *It is really not so, Ernest. All fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate. No poet sings because he must sing. At least, no great poet does. A great poet sings because he chooses to sing.* It is so now, and it has always been so. We are sometimes apt to think that the voices that sounded at the dawn of poetry were simpler, fresher, and more natural than ours, and that the world which the early poets looked at, and through which they walked, had a kind of poetical quality of its own, and almost without changing could pass into song. The snow lies thick now upon Olympus, and its steep scarped sides are bleak and barren, but once, we fancy, the white feet of the Muses brushed the dew from the anemones in the morning, and at evening came Apollo to sing to the shepherds in the vale. But in this we are merely lending to other ages what we desire, or think we desire, for our own. Our

historical sense is at fault. *Every century that produces poetry is, so far, an artificial century, and the work that seems to us to be the most natural and simple product of its time is always the result of the most self-conscious effort. Believe me, Ernest, there is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one.*

(Wilde 2007:976; my emphases)

In his *Commonplace Book*, some fifteen years earlier, Wilde had already observed the following, in a painfully incomplete entry:

[65]

Mind and Body•

Just as Aristotle's theory of habit may be said to have given Ethics a physical basis, so in our own day we have a physical basis of mind: Henry More said That [The rest of the page is tantalizingly blank.]

(Smith & Helfand 1989:121)

Iain Ross insightfully observes that Aristotle's idea of ethics—and, by extension, Wilde's idea of ethics—inverts Socrates's injunction that one should be what one would seem, that is, that one should try to perfect themselves to fulfil certain relatively stable healthy paradigms in social relations—paradigms of honesty, justice, or temperance, for instance; instead, Aristotle—and Wilde, by extension—contends that one should seem what one would be (see Ross 2013:151)—so, if I want to become an artisan, I must invest my resources in putting into practice all those material dimensions that, together and in a constant process of cross-pollination, build up the personality, the character, the capacity of an artisan. This logic, of course, is truly consistent with Aristotle's idea of *prohairesis* and *enkrateia*: as we saw, for Aristotle, *actions* themselves are not always a reliable reference for clarifying a person's character or intention, so that we must investigate her *prohairesis*, the 'predisposition' that led her to those actions in the first place; in my example, then, what matters are not simply the actions, but the fact that they are the systematised material dimension for the perfection of a character, they are strategies for a 'care of the self' whose *prohairesis*, whose 'predisposition', is precisely that of making possible a new 'knowledge of the self'—in this case, that of becoming an artisan, that of learning all which comes with becoming an artisan. Wilde seems right, then, when he suggests in his incomplete annotation that Aristotle's theory of habit—of *hexis*, I believe we can say now—may be said to have given a physical basis to the whole theory of ethics—to

the whole understanding of ethics, that is. And, indeed, in “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde seems to go back to Aristotle’s logic, rejecting the hypothesis that the most competent poets—that the most competent artists, we can assume—create their artworks out of some sort of deeply personal impulse, as if some sort of artistic flame was already alive or had always been burning inside them from the beginning; Wilde does not completely reject the hypothesis that there might be, indeed, artists like these out there, but he firmly suggests that the rule, rather, is that the best artworks are careful, calculated products of the artists’ self-conscious efforts, that is, that the best artworks result from the artists’ *hexis*, from their constant study, learning, practice, and perfection, from their constant inquiry into the very places and natures of their art.

This hypothesis in fact dialogues with Harold Bloom’s idea of *influence* and Charles Martindale’s idea of *reception*: who knows, an artwork might even be the product of a person’s purely intimate aesthetic urge, but this is highly unlikely; even if an artist produces an artwork out of a sudden burst of aesthetic creativity, chances are that this burst was first aroused, was first made possible, by the artist’s prior influences, even if these influences were the ordinary cadence of her own natural environs—the space she lives in, of course, with all its dimensions, movements, colours, textures, and scents, but also the systematic use of matter—say, the systematic use of pencils, papers, brushes, canvases etc., and, ultimately, the continuous, patient, clumsy, progressive exercise of all these mundane practices. We can see, then, that in Wilde’s philosophy of art there is, first, an absolute centrality of the *individual*—of the person who goes through the singularity of an aesthetic experience—, and, second, a highly recommendable *training* of this individual in being susceptible to art through the systematic contact with the materiality of art—so that this person becomes more aware of and more open to the phenomena of art, to art in its most varied and unpredictable forms. In Wilde’s works, however, we come to notice that the absolute centrality of the individual, as the subject of an aesthetic experience, and the highly recommendable training of this individual in being susceptible to art, so that art can be found and realised even in its most unexpected forms, are connected by yet a third dimension: the dimension of *criticism*.

As we will see in my next essay, although Wilde suggests that an individual can perfectly enjoy art in its immediacy—that is, simply put, without the external assistance of some kind of criticism—, criticism seems to be precisely that one exercise that connects all the dots, that conjugates all the dimensions that we have been discussing: although an individual can perfectly enjoy art in its immediacy, criticism seems to show that

immediacy can, indeed, be improved through mind work, especially if this mind work is itself somehow creative, artistically creative.

IV

A poem is never finished, only abandoned

Paul Valéry

Who would dare assign to art the sterile function of imitating nature?

Charles Baudelaire

Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult

Michel Foucault

When art surrenders her imaginative medium she surrenders everything

Oscar Wilde



This essay will properly discuss Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," trying to emphasise how an artistic or creative criticism, particularly one that relies on a conjugation between different materialities of communication to convey the expressive and impressive dimensions of its message, seems to be one of the most consistent ways, if not the most consistent way, of suggesting a criticism in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature. However, following Paul Valéry's suggestion that the domain of art criticism should always seek to extend from "metaphysics" to "invective" (see Valéry 1960:1033), I would like to start this study not with "The Critic as Artist" itself, but with "The Decay of Lying," that one other essay in Wilde's *Intentions* (1891) that

seems to be objectively connected to “The Critic as Artist,” and which, by contrast, seems to explore on a more “metaphysical” level what “The Critic as Artist” explores as a properly “invective” practice. The way I see it, one of the greatest advantages of reading these two essays as two parts of a same discussion is that, by doing this, we come to realise that, not only are they formally complementary, as they are both works of criticism that take the fictional form of Plato’s dialogues as inspiration for a more effective delivery of abstract conjectures, they also seem to be oriented by a common idea that, in Wilde’s philosophy of aesthetics, is an absolutely central conception: the ethical, aesthetical, and epistemological idea of *lie*. This idea of *lie* is, of course, not at all distant from the idea of *lie* that I discussed in the previous essays—that is, the idea of a *mask*, of a *simulacrum*, whose general purpose is to bring forth into the world realities that, in their own fictionality, are spiritually truer than any actual fact. I would say, indeed, that the idea of *lie* that Wilde discusses in “The Decay of Lying” is consanguine with the idea of *lie* that I examined when discussing his lecturing tours in America; the obvious difference is that, while the idea of *lie* that I have discussed so far applies mostly to an individual’s existence in its own materiality, in this individual’s very act of living in the world, the idea of *lie* that I will discuss from now on mostly applies to an individual’s *critical faculty* on a more properly intellectual level. However, in spite of this distinction—I mean, in spite of the fact that so far I have only discussed Wilde’s idea of *lie* on an existential dimension, when there is also a more intellectual dimension to it—, it should be clear that, in Wilde’s philosophy of art or philosophy of aesthetics, which is not really discernible from a philosophy of criticism, nor from a philosophy of living, the theoretical grounds underlying these two dimensions are largely coalescent—perhaps, we can say, truly coextensive.

As I dwelled deeper into my studies, I realised that one of the best definitions for Wilde’s ideas of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum* is actually one provided by Giles Whiteley, my supervisor at the English Department of Stockholm University.

In his *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum* (2015), a study in which he reads Wilde’s works chiefly through the prism of Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy, Whiteley suggests the following about Wilde’s whole idea of *mask* and *simulacrum*—and, by extension, his whole idea of *lie*:

As Deleuze argues, the simulacrum should be understood ‘au sens de “costume,” ou plutôt de masque, exprimant un processus de déguisement où, derrière chaque masque, un autre encore’ [in the sense of a “costume,” or rather a mask, expressing the process of disguising,

where behind each mask, there is yet another] [...] A series of masks, unfolding in a movement *ad infinitum*, a metonymy of faces, like a *matryoshka* doll without a centre. Thus we must rigorously distinguish between the simple copy and the complex simulacrum, as Wilde does in his discussion of Aristotle against Plato. For Plato, ‘les *simulacres* sont comme les faux prétendants, construits sur une dissimilitude, impliquant une perversion, un détournement essentiel’ [*simulacra* are like false pretenders, built on a dissimilarity, implying an essential perversion or deviation] [...] But ‘si nous disons du simulacre qu’il est une copie de copie, [...] nous passons à côté de l’essentiel [...]’. La copie est une image douée de ressemblance, le simulacre une image sans ressemblance’ [if we say of the simulacrum that it is a copy of a copy, [...] we then miss the essential [...]. The copy is an image endowed with resemblance, the simulacrum is an image without resemblance] [...] Put simply, the simulacrum is the image that is no longer referential to anything other than itself: a mask which mimes no simple ‘truth’ and which refers to no single *eidōs*. [...] The truth of masks is the truth that the mask reveals, not by being cast off, not in the movement of *aletheia*, but precisely through its refusal to be cast off. An unfolding which is an enfolding, *le pli* in Deleuzian terms. It is this process, identified here by Wilde, that Lacoue-Labarthe would later term “*désistance*,” a *mimesis* that ‘ne cesse pas de se retirer, de se masquer, de se désister’ [endlessly withdraws, masks itself, desists].

Wilde’s phrase ‘the truth of metaphysics is the truth of masks’ thus means a number of things simultaneously. On the one hand, and critically, the truth that is sought by philosophy is itself an illusion (idealism, from Plato to Hegel). But on the other, and positively, the truth is the realm of the simulacra. Such an affirmation is the moment of Wilde’s aestheticism: its significance as event. (Whiteley 2015:16-17)

Although Whiteley’s discourse can be a bit confusing, we can see that he really seems to reach the heart of the matter when he associates Wilde’s idea of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum* to Plato’s conception of *eidōs* ‘idea’ or ‘form’, the basic element of his Theory of Forms.

Simply put, Plato’s Theory of Forms, as he elaborates it in Book X of the *Republic*, suggests that the full reality of men is divided in two dimensions: an *ideal* one and a *physical* one; the dimension of the *ideals* is that in which the absolute nature of all things (*eidōs*) exist in perfection and in time suspension (we can think of the *kairos* conception of time), whereas the dimension of the *physicals* is that in which the ephemeral nature of all things exist in imperfection and in time progression (we can think of the *chronos* conception of time). This lower dimension of the *physicals* is that in which we, human beings, live our daily lives, whereas that higher dimension of the *ideals* is that which we, human beings endowed with the ability to think, can only reach through reason, that is, through

the self-conscious use of the intellect as a means to an ultimate truth. A logical consequence of this hypothetical architecture of reality, then, is that everything that *physically* exists in the lower dimension of people is but an imperfect copy of everything that *ideally* exists and has always existed in that higher dimension of forms. However, a fundamental characteristic of Plato's theory is that all the imperfections intrinsic to the objects existing in the *physical* dimension are a consequence of the imperfections intrinsic to this *physical* dimension—an imperfection that, in the case of people, are greatly a consequence of the faulty because irrational nature of their senses.

For example, imagine that a potter makes a ceramic vase.

According to Plato's Theory of Forms, there is, in the dimension of the *ideals* a perfect ceramic vase of which our potter's ceramic vase is but an imperfect copy, an imperfect *mimesis*; this *physical* vase is imperfect not only because the *physical* dimension is itself moved by irregularities, but also because the potter himself is a person who, despite her ability to reason, is largely moved by her senses, senses that often confuse or obscure her ability to properly use her own reason.

On a first level, then, this vase is an imperfect object because it is *once* removed from the *ideal* vase that only exists in the dimension of the *ideals*.

Now, let us imagine that an artist paints a picture of this vase.

As we just saw, according to Plato's Theory of Forms, this ceramic vase is an imperfect copy of an *ideal* vase because it was made by the hands of a potter, an imperfect person who exists in an also imperfect *physical* dimension and who is largely moved by her naturally confusing senses.

But, of course, our artist is also an imperfect person, just like our potter.

According to Plato's Theory of Forms, then, the picture that this artist is painting is but an imperfect copy of an already imperfect copy, which means that this picture is *twice* removed from the dimension of the *ideals*, which in turn means that it is even less perfect—or even more imperfect—than the *ideal* vase from which the potter's vase initially derived. But this is not all; as if the picture's faulty nature was not serious enough, it is itself a product of the artist's senses, a product whose basic purpose is precisely to please or excite the senses of other people. Considering how the senses, in the *physical* dimension of people, are perhaps the greatest impetus to imperfection—because, according to Plato's theory, the senses tend to confuse and obscure people's faculty of reason—, it entails that such picture is alone a potential risk to reason.

In Book X of the *Republic*, when Plato suggests to ban poetry from his ideal city, he does so, not because he is strictly against the arts and how they tend to excite people's senses; his discussion mostly gravitates around the idea that, of all people, the philosophers—the most suitable citizens to rule a city, because they naturally cultivate themselves in the pursuit of reason—are to be careful with the deceptive nature of art if they seek, indeed, to govern a city with the proper, rational, distributive justice.

From Whiteley's paragraph, we can see that Wilde's idea of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum* can be explained in association with Deleuze's own idea of *simulacrum*, which, just like Wilde's idea, can be taken as a resistance to Plato's Theory of Forms through a deliberate contradiction: for Wilde and Deleuze, a *mimesis* seeks to *mirror* in art or through art a given object *of* its own material reality, doing its best, therefore, to *preserve* in the mirroring image that it is the original qualities of the object; a *simulacrum*, however, seeks to *create* in art or through art a given object *for* its own material reality, doing its best, therefore, to *inaugurate* in the creative image that it is new conditions of possibility to grasp this very material reality.

In other words, a *mimesis* is a copying process that tries to provide with some accuracy a second image of a given object of scrutiny, whereas a *simulacrum* is a creativity process that tries to provide with some deviancy a first image of a given object of intention.

Within the logic of Plato's Theory of Forms, it should be possible for a person to use her reason to examine a given object in her *physical* dimension and carefully track down a possible *eidos* from which this object is but a copy, from which it is but a product of *mimesis*; for Wilde and Deleuze, the value of a *simulacrum* lies in the fact that there is no *eidos*, that there is no *definite origin* from which this *simulacrum*—ideally, an artwork or something that behaves as such—finally derives.

In the context of Wilde's works, to elaborate a *lie* or to create a *mask* is, then, a meticulous process of building or putting together a *simulacrum*: “[for] in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true,” he writes in “The Truth of Masks” (Wilde 2007:1037); “[after] all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once,” he then writes in “The Decay of Lying” (Wilde 2007:922); “[art] finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror,” he finally contends later in this same essay. (Wilde 2007:933)

On a more practical level, or at least on a less metaphysical one, two simple examples are Lord Henry Wotton and Oscar Wilde himself, particularly as I analysed them in my previous essays: Lord Wotton is that one character who only seems capable of living through the whims of language, systematically using it to create a discursive surface, a discursive ethos, that, in the end, seems to be the most truthful dimension of himself; Oscar Wilde—Oscar Wilde in America, that is—is that one character who only seemed capable of lecturing through the whims of an artificiality of his own body and language, systematically using them to create an ethical surface, an ethical body, that, in the end, seemed to be the most reliable dimension of himself as an intellectual.

The same can be said, in fact, of Dorian Gray's break-up with Sibyl Vane: in the end, he breaks up with her because she suddenly refuses to live in the perfect *simulacrum*—in the perfect *lie* and *mask*—that she so skilfully used to create for herself in her performances; when she decides to give up her perfect ability to *lie*—to perfectly put on a *mask* so as to be enfolded in a perfect *simulacrum*—, she undresses herself of the beauty of her many characters, thereby exposing an actual truth, an *aletheia*, which, for Dorian, is a truth too humanly mundane to bear.

This last example comes in handy here because, as we will see, in the overall logic of Wilde's philosophy of art, which is inevitably also a philosophy of criticism, he ultimately distances himself from Plato's idealism by assuming *nature*—including *human nature*—as a paradigm to be constantly reworked *through art and artifice*, through an individual's critical ability to create *lies*, *masks*, and *simulacra*.

In the end, the best example of what Wilde is suggesting—that is, of *lies*, *masks*, and *simulacra* that are themselves sources and limits of their own truths—are the essays gathered in his *Intentions*, particularly “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist,” his two dialogical essays.

I say that these two essays are really good examples because, as we will see, the individual natures of their characters, their dialogical structure, their discursive ambiguities, and the fictional dimension of their narratological chronotopes allow Wilde to relativise all of his contentions, no matter how righteous, how impartial, or how absurd they might be. In one of his essays, Jorge Luis Borges writes that “[reading] and re-reading Wilde throughout the years, I notice an achievement of his that his panegyrists do not seem to have even suspected: the verifiable and elementary achievement that Wilde is, almost always, right.” (Borges 1974:692; my translation) In a way, it is possible that Wilde would have taken this commentary as an offense, for he seemed to be someone

who “[lived] in terror of not being misunderstood” (Wilde 2007:971), but, in very simple terms, I dare say that one of the main reasons why Borges was able to write this, I mean, that one of the reasons why his statement seems to make so much sense, is precisely the fact that Wilde eventually truly mastered the art of the *lie*, the *mask*, and the *simulacrum*, not only in the existential dimension of his own material reality, as an individual living in Victorian and American societies, but also in the intellectual dimension of his own criticisms, as a critic and artist who seemed to realise that one of the best ways to relativise truth is by creatively subjecting it to the resistance of the *form*, of the *aesthetics* by which it is effectively expressed.

Inspired by Plato’s dialogues, “The Decay of Lying” offers us a conversation between two friends—the modest Cyril, who embodies an ordinary public opinion, and the younger but also more caustic Vivian, Wilde’s alter-ego—who languidly enjoy an evening in a library room in Nottingham. Cyril mostly watches as Vivian finishes polishing an article he intends to see published in the *Retrospective Review*, a journal dedicated to Early Modern English literature and run by a group whom Vivian refers to as the “Tired Hedonists” (Wilde 2007:923), these young gentlemen who wear faded roses in their buttonholes and have a sort of cult for Domitian (Wilde 2007:923); the article is suggestively titled “The Decay of Lying: A Protest,” and, in fact, Wilde’s essay, “The Decay of Lying,” is itself largely a narrative of Vivian’s own reading of fragments from the text.

The dialogue’s narratological chronotope is already self-critical, or meta-critical, as it predisposes the characters to the discussion of a certain subject matter that, in the end, is also the subject matter of the essay itself: annoyed by the fact that his friend will not go out to the terrace with him to enjoy a truly exquisite evening—lying on the grass, savouring the satin fresh air—, Cyril pesters Vivian into discussing the article with him as compensation; but, so it happens that, as a sort of ironic or dramatic extension of the scene itself, Vivian’s thesis is by and large a disdain for *nature* in its chaotic crudity, and, reciprocally, an open defence of *art* in its elegant artificiality. Vivian’s thesis is, therefore, an open defence of *art* as ποιῆϊν, precisely in the sense that I discussed a few pages back: not that which is *spontaneously* produced by *nature* to favour *nature* in its own physical principles, in its own physical needs, but that which is *carefully* produced by *people* to favour *people* in the complexity of their *human* affections. It is curious to notice that, in Vivian’s decided wish to stay indoors, we can recognise many traces of the ideas that Wilde had already suggested in his notebooks and lectures, particularly his idea that one

of the first steps towards the improvement of an artistic sensibility is to create a favourable environment for one to live in.

Early in the conversation, Vivian explains to Cyril:

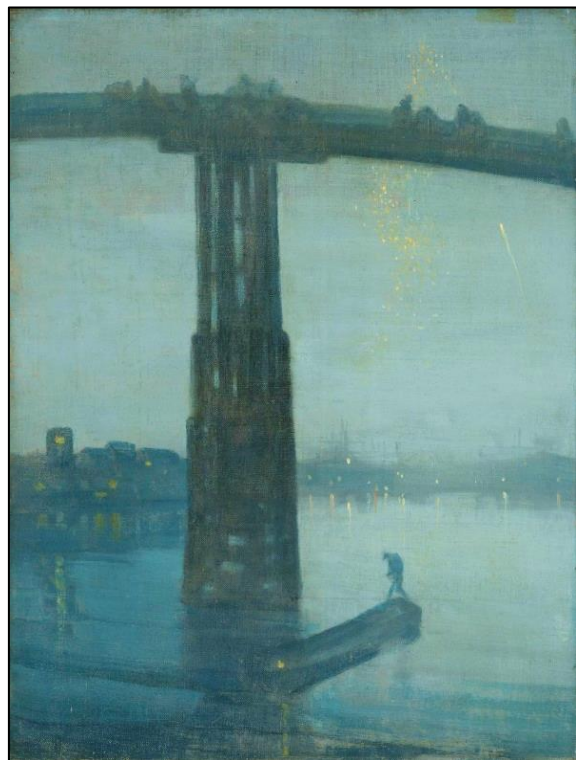
VIVIAN: [...] If nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure. Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity is entirely the result of indoor life. Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal. One's individuality absolutely leaves one. And then nature is so indifferent, so unappreciative. Whenever I am walking in the park here, I always feel that I am no more to her than the cattle that browse on the slope, or the burdock that blooms in the ditch. Nothing is more evident than that nature hates mind. (Wilde 2007:921)

He also contends, more heatedly, in a commentary that we can take as a synthesis of the whole study he intends to publish:

VIVIAN: Enjoy nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty. *People tell us that art makes us love nature more than we loved her before; that it reveals her secrets to us; and that after a careful study of Corot and Constable we see things in her that had escaped our observation. My own experience is that the more we study art, the less we care for nature. What art really reveals to us is nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition.* Nature has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out. When I look at a landscape I cannot help seeing all its defects. It is fortunate for us, however, that nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have had no art at all. *Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach nature her proper place. As for the infinite variety of nature, that is a pure myth. It is not to be found in nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her.* (Wilde 2007:921; my emphases)



Vivian's disdain for *nature* is so aggressive, indeed, that he only seems to find any value in it as a primary, mundane dimension whose sole purpose is to provide the basic material conditions for an artist to create new objects, new artworks, including those artworks that somehow seek to reappraise the chaotic crudity of *nature* into something more appealing to people's minds, senses, and affections: take, for instance, James Whistler's (1834-1903) *Nocturne in Blue and Gold* (1872-75), an impressionistic painting that beautifully depicts the gruesome



Battersea Bridge in London; Heitor Villa-Lobos's (1887-1959) *O Trenzinho Caipira* (1950), a heart-warming toccata that uses melody to reproduce the heavy sound of the trains then typically found in the backlands of São Paulo; or W.H. Auden's (1907-73) *In Praise of Limestone* (1948), these topographic verses in which ecphrasis, lyrism, and allegory converge to reinvent the glorious story of a civilization, probably the rise of the Mediterranean peoples. One of the reasons why I provide these examples—especially Whistler's picture and Villa-Lobos's toccata—is to emphasise that, although Vivian mostly seems to direct his attack towards *nature* in the basic or primary sense—that is, *nature* as that which is not produced by people—, in his thesis *nature* does seem to comprise also that which is *carefully* produced by people for *practical* purposes—such as a huge iron bridge or a noisy steam engine.

Later in the essay, Vivian boldly observes, for example:

VIVIAN: [...] Where, if not from the impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gaslamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? (Wilde 2007:937)

However, of all the arts, the one that interests Vivian the most is of course *literature*, particularly *prose fiction*; and, considering what I just explained about this tension that seems to arise between the *crudity of nature* and the *elegance of art*, the reasons for his outrage are rather easy to understand: in the essay, Vivian is especially aggressive towards the aesthetics of the then ascending Realism-Naturalism—which he and Cyril simply refer to as a “modernity of form” (Wilde 2007:927)—, an aesthetics best synthesised, for them, in the works of Émile Zola (1840-1902).

In short, Vivian's hostile attitude towards works such as Zola's lies in the fact that, the way he sees it, these works always seem to look for a *precise and truthful depiction of nature*, modified by men or not, to the detriment of the *imaginative beauty* that can only spring from the *abstractions* permitted by *art* in its most diverse forms. For Vivian, this *excess of precision* and the *lack of fancy* it entails are already more than enough reasons for one to object to such aesthetics, but he goes on to suggest that another problem of these narratives is that they often depict *demeaning realities* through also *demeaning discourses*, giving a bad use to an artistic medium that, instead, should be employed to explore with much more refinement—with much more elegance, ambiguity, mystery,

depth—much more subtle traits of the human nature. (Wilde 2007:925) But this is not all; Vivian's most acid criticisms are in fact those he directs to Zola's *characters*—that is, to Zola's perspectives about the *condition of human nature*—, and they show us his complete despire for the fact that, in Zola's attempt to *mirror* our immediate reality by emphasising the gruesomeness that seems to assure this reality its condition of reality, the result is the portrayal of a reality that is finally not credible at all—and this is so precisely because Zola bypasses or outrightly overlooks the very imaginative dimension that, paradoxically as it might seem, endows literature with its own sense of reality.

Vivian explains:

VIVIAN: [...] But from the standpoint of art, what can be said in favour of the author of *L'Assommoir*, *Nana*, and *Pot-Bouille*? Nothing. Mr. Ruskin once described the characters in George Eliot's novels as being like the sweepings of a Pentonville omnibus, but M. Zola's characters are much worse. They have their dreary vices, and their drearier virtues. The record of their lives is absolutely without interest. Who cares what happens to them? In literature we require distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power. [...] To us [these characters] seem to have suddenly lost all their vitality, all the few qualities they ever possessed. *The only real people are the people who never existed, and if a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies. The justification of a character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are, but that the author is what he is.* Otherwise the novel is not a work of art. [...] *Where we differ from each other is purely in accidentals: in dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit, and the like. The more one analyses people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear.* Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature. (Wilde 2007:925-26; my emphases)



As might be clear already, if we go back to Wilde's ideas of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum*, we might be able to explain this whole tension between the *crudity of nature* and the *elegance of art* in a slightly different way—from a more metaphysical perspective, I would say.

A few pages back, we saw that, within the logic of Plato's Theory of Forms, every artwork, every work of $\pi\omicron\iota\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\nu$, is a worldly object at least two times removed from the transcendental *eidos* which it derives from through an artist's process of *mimesis*; we also saw that this object, as a work of $\pi\omicron\iota\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\nu$ produced by the hands of an artist, is an object of aggregated imperfection, for, not only does it materialise the imperfections engraved by the artist herself, so does it materially exist to reach the people of its world in their innermost, most unreasonable emotions.

From our present discussion on Wilde's ideas of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum*, we can see that these ideas do follow the mechanics of Plato's Theory of Forms, but through a rejection of *idealism* itself, that is, through a rejection of the very possibility of an original *eidos* from which every worldly object—particularly artworks—supposedly derives:

substituting *nature* for *eidos*, and thereby contending *simulacrum* over *mimesis* as the proper dimension where an artist should work and materialise her creativity, Wilde gives his first steps away not only from Plato's Theory of Forms, but also from the idea that *art* and the *criticism* intrinsic to it should seek to objectively *mirror* or objectively *explain* the reality, the *nature*, that first motivated this art and this criticism.

In his first blatant support of *lying* as an art, Vivian suggests:

VIVIAN: [...] People have a careless way of talking about a 'born liar,' just as they talk about a 'born poet.' But in both cases they are wrong. *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.* Indeed, they have their technique, just as the more material arts of painting and sculpture have, their subtle secrets of form and colour, their craft-mysteries, their deliberate artistic methods. As one knows the poet by his fine music, so one can recognize the liar by his rich rhythmic utterance, and in neither case will the casual inspiration of the moment suffice. *Here, as elsewhere, practice must precede perfection.* [...] [If] something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify, our monstrous worship of facts, art will become sterile and beauty will pass away from the land. (Wilde 2007:923-24; my emphases)

Of course, one of the most important characteristics we should notice about Vivian's commentary is the fact that he seems to associate *lying* with *hexis*: when we discussed *hexis*, we saw that, for Wilde, the general rule is not that artists are artists by some kind of ideal accident, but because they cultivate themselves into becoming the artists they want to be—they study with a critical vein the works of other artists, their trajectories and techniques, so as to perfect themselves in the activity that will lead them to their goals: “[no] poet sings because he *must* sing. At least, no great poet does. A great poet sings because he *chooses* to sing.” (Wilde 2007:976; my emphases) If we take *lying* as a form of *hexis*, then, we come to realise that *lying* gradually becomes a means to crafting the lines of a *mask*, to weaving the veil of a *simulacrum*, a means that may finally lead one in different directions: a person might distance herself from the inertia of her own reality by becoming a dandy or by becoming a celebrity, but, in the realm of the arts proper, a person might also be able to distance herself from the inertia of her own material reality by prefiguring a reality that is not fully fathomable yet. In fact, Wilde does not object to Realism-Naturalism simply because it tries to *mirror* a given material reality through an overly descriptive and overly objective use of language; perhaps the greatest problem of Realism-Naturalism is that, by always trying to *mirror* a given material reality,

it ultimately stagnates, it ultimately fails at providing glimpses into the future: “[what] the imitative arts really give us are merely the various styles of particular artists, or of certain schools of artists.” (Wilde 2007:939), Vivian insists in his conversation with Cyril; “[even] those who hold that art is representative of time and place and people, cannot help admitting that the more imitative an art is, the less it represents to us the spirit of its age.” (Wilde 2007:938-39), he also contends a few lines before.

Perhaps a good example of what Vivian is discussing in these lines is a short anecdote that Gustav Janouch (1903-68), one of Franz Kafka’s (1883-1924) closest friends in the end of his life, narrates in his *Conversations with Kafka* (1951).

He writes:

I went with Kafka to an exhibition of French painting in the gallery on the Graben.

There were some pictures by Picasso: cubist still-lives and rose-coloured women with gigantic feet.

“He is a wilful distortionist,” I said.

“I do not think so.”, said Kafka. “He only registers the deformities which have not yet penetrated our consciousness. Art is a mirror, which goes “fast,” like a watch—sometimes.”

(Janouch 1953:85)

This translation can be a bit confusing, so I should make clear that what I mean to say with this brief anecdote is that the works of many artists often behave as a hand clock that gains: just like this clock, a well-conducted artwork—that is, very likely the artwork of an artist who at some point critically cultivated herself in her craft—will in its own way provide a glimpse into a reality yet to come, yet to be properly fathomed or realised, because in its own way this artwork is already ahead of its time.

In Vivian’s own words:

VIVIAN: [...] The highest art rejects the burden of the human spirit, and gains more from a *new medium* or a *fresh material* than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any lofty passion, or from any great awakening of the human consciousness. *She develops purely on her own lines. She is not symbolic of any age. It is the ages that are her symbols.* (Wilde 2007:938; my emphases)

I emphasise Wilde’s ultimate break with *mimesis* for two reasons:

The first reason is that, if well-accomplished artworks tend to prefigure social, political, and cultural changes, as Vivian contends, then it entails that *life imitates art* far

more often than *art imitates life*—a phenomenon that I believe to see accentuated in a mediatised age of technical reproduction.

Vivian himself provides a simple example:

I know that you are fond of Japanese things. Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture by Hokusai, or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them. The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. (Wilde 2007:939)

But, of course, we can think of a number of other examples, really simple examples: one of the most obvious is probably tourism, the opportunity one takes to, say, take a walk inside Victor Hugo's Notre Dame towers in Paris, listen to J.L. Borges's passion for tango at Plaza Dorrego in Buenos Aires, contemplate Homer's rose-fingered sunset on the cliffs of Sounion, or even experience first-hand the threat of Steven Spielberg's genetically enhanced dinosaurs at the Universal Studios in Orlando; but we can also think, I believe, of how Yann Tiersen's accordion seems to resonate in our ears when we walk through Montmartre, filling this neighbourhood with colours it probably never had, or how many un-lived histories, such as the Vietnam War, uncannily seem to take shape as memories when we listen to songs by bands such as The Animals or Creedence Clearwater Revival or by musicians such as Bob Dylan or Jimi Hendrix.

As Wilde had already written in "The Critic as Artist," back in the 1890's:

GILBERT: [...] After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own. Music always seems to me to produce that effect. It creates for one a past of which one has been ignorant, and fills one with a sense of sorrows that have been hidden from one's tears. I can fancy a man who had led a perfectly commonplace life, hearing by chance some curious piece of music, and suddenly discovering that his soul, without his being conscious of it, had passed through terrible experiences, and known fearful joys, or wild romantic loves, or great renunciations. (Wilde 2007:967)

The second reason, much more difficult to explain, but also much more important for what we are about to discuss in the following pages, is that, with his ultimate break with *mimesis*, Wilde also ultimately breaks with his precursors—Matthew Arnold, John Addington Symonds, and Walter Pater.

Mind, I am not suggesting that Arnold's, Symonds's, and Pater's theories all tightly follow *mimesis* as an epistemological paradigm of thought, because they do not; but, the point is, nor do these theories suggest anything like Wilde's ideas of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum*, ideas that deliberately seek to subvert *mimesis* as we are discussing it.

Back in my **Essay I** in this chapter, I tried to emphasise that one of the most central orientations in Aestheticism is Arnold's contention that one must always seek "to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty" (Arnold 2006:99), a contention echoed in Symonds's suggestion that a person who admires an artwork should always seek to grasp it in the most immediate traits of its materiality. (Symonds 1879:376) From a Platonic perspective—Arnold and Symonds do belong, in fact, in what we can roughly understand as a Platonic-Hegelian tradition—, "to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty" is finally Arnold's and Symonds's suggestion that a person who admires an artwork—particularly an artist or a critic—should always seek to recognise the *eidōs* materialised in the world as a material artefact. Further in my **Essay I**, I then explained that a second central orientation in Aestheticism—one that Wilde would dearly follow in his fictions and essays—is Pater's contention that "in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly" (Pater 1893:xix), a contention that accentuates the role of the critic herself as an element in the composition of beauty. From a Platonic perspective—Pater's theories do belong, indeed, in a boundary between idealism and materialism—, "to know one's own impression as it really is" is finally Pater's suggestion that a person who admires an artwork—particularly a critic—should, yes, seek to recognise the *eidōs* materialised in the world as an artefact, but always working to establish with it also a relation of intimacy, of singularity, of personal impression.

Now, what Wilde does to Arnold, Symonds, and Pater's logic is truly mind-blowing.

If Wilde's idea of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum* is a radical break from idealism, a break in light of which an artist should always try to create an artwork that is itself not only a removed but also an artificial perspective that she has of the nature of her own

material reality, then, as Ernest suggests in “The Critic as Artist,” “the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is *not*.” (Wilde 2007:986; my emphasis), because, as now Vivian suggests in “The Decay of Lying,” “no great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.” (Wilde 2007:939)

I think I can finally say, now, that everything I have written so far in this thesis I have written so as to be able to explain this additional *not* in Wilde’s theory.

In the beginning of this chapter, I also suggested that I see Wilde in a liminal position between a *fin de siècle* and a *modern* appreciation of art; I can finally say, now, that I believe this liminality is also greatly due to this very adverb *not*.

If, in very simple terms, some of the basic principles of Modernism is a rejection of realism and a dissidence from conservatism through an enlargement of the limits of expression made possible by experimentations with form, materials, techniques, and the creative process itself, then Wilde’s philosophy of aesthetics, particularly in the shape he delivers it in his essays, seems to be itself a case of a *fin de siècle* hand clock gaining into Modernism.

But, as the readers may have already noticed, there is a *catch* in Wilde’s break with *mimesis* and with the general theory of his precursors: his ideas of subversion ultimately converge into *art criticism*.

In fact, not only does he extend the logic of this break to his perspectives about *art criticism*, so does he contend in these perspectives a *deliberate* conflation between *art* and *criticism*—a conflation he describes as *art-criticism* (we can consider the hyphen as intentional, indicating a reciprocity or a coalescence between the two terms), and which we can also understand, more broadly, as an *artistic* and *creative criticism*.

The best way to explain this is through a meticulous reading of “The Critic as Artist,” probably Wilde’s most ambitious essay.

From now on, then, I will focus my discussion on this essay, trying to aggregate what I have discussed in my previous essays, but I will also gradually include in this discussion hypotheses of my own regarding the *artistic* and *creative* boundaries of the whole idea of *art criticism*, particularly as we can elaborate it in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature.

Also inspired by Plato’s dialogues, “The Critic as Artist” is another conversation between two friends—Ernest, the embodiment of a public opinion, and Gilbert, Wilde’s alter-ego—who hedonistically enjoy an evening in a library room in Piccadilly, overlooking Green Park. This dialogue’s narratological chronotope, although more subtle than the

one we find in “The Decay of Lying,” is again self-critical, or meta-critical: in “The Decay of Lying,” the whole sequence takes place in a library room with a terrace to a garden in Nottingham, a more idyllic setting that works both as ambience and excuse for the two characters’ conversation—Cyril’s modest wish to go outside and enjoy nature and Vivian’s immodest wish to stay indoors and enjoy the art they are surrounded by; in “The Critic as Artist,” the whole sequence takes place in a library room probably on the second floor of a building in central London, a more cosmopolitan setting that, again, works both as ambience and excuse for the two characters’ conversation—Ernest’s humble but conservative opinions about Victorian culture and Gilbert’s harsh but also progressive opinions about it. Another important feature of the “The Critic as Artist” is that, whereas “The Decay of Lying” does not give us too many details about the room where the Cyril and Vivian are, Ernest and Gilbert do seem to be chatting in a room much like the ones Wilde describes in his lectures in America—rooms crowded with pieces of art because the finest arts all belong to the same age—and in his “Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green”—rooms filled with precious pieces of art but whose most important piece is the individual herself. Now, perhaps the most remarkable difference between the two essays are their dialogical structures: in “The Decay of Lying,” we find a more fluid conversation between Cyril and Vivian, a more spontaneous game of questions, commentaries, and answers played on the board that Vivian’s article finally works as; in “The Critic as Artist,” however, what we find is a very deliberately artificial dialogue, in which Ernest’s doubts and often silly observations only work as excuses for Gilbert’s unrealistically long monologues—sometimes critical and constructive conjectures, other times, like Lord Wotton’s discourses, purely self-indulgent verbiages. Whatever the case, the fact is, in “The Critic as Artist” Wilde seems to condense in an epitomising idea all the other ideas that he suggests throughout his other essays—those collected in his *Intentions*, of course, but also “The Soul of Man under Socialism” and “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”—, a final idea that we can simply understand as his idea of *art-criticism*, a mode of *criticism* that is also formally *artistic* and *creative*. In fact, I believe that the greatest charm of “The Critic as Artist” is that it is itself a case of what it is suggesting: its main purpose is, of course, to provide critical perspectives about certain subject matters—the main subject matter being the nature and the limits of *art-criticism*—, but it is also a dialogue between two characters with their own psychologies, personalities, and opinions, a dialogue that takes place in a perfectly practicable setting; indeed, were it not for Gilbert’s extremely long

monologues, clearly written to be appreciated on the paper, the whole narrative could be materialised into a play—a West End play, it is not difficult to imagine.

It is not really a surprise, then, that one of the first peculiarities that come to light when one reads “The Critic as Artist” is that this essay seems to very soon recognise the idea of *lie* previously elaborated in “The Decay of Lying,” a reiteration that allows us to take the theories in “The Critic as Artist” as a refinement or at least a continuation of the theories first suggested in “The Decay of Lying.”

Early in the essay, Ernest and Gilbert have the following conversation:

ERNEST: [...] [1] But, seriously speaking, what is the use of art-criticism? [2] Why cannot the artist be left alone, to create a new world if he wishes it, or, if not, to shadow forth the world which we already know, and of which, I fancy, we would each one of us be wearied if art, with her fine spirit of choice and delicate instinct of selection, did not, as it were, purify it for us, and give to it a momentary perfection. It seems to me that the imagination spreads, or should spread, a solitude around it, and works best in silence and in isolation. Why should the artist be troubled by the shrill clamour of criticism? [3] Why should those who cannot create take upon themselves to estimate the value of creative work? What can they know about it? [4] If a man’s work is easy to understand, an explanation is unnecessary...

GILBERT: And if his work is incomprehensible, an explanation is wicked.

ERNEST: I did not say that.

GILBERT: Ah! but you should have. Nowadays, we have so few mysteries left to us that we cannot afford to part with one of them. The members of the Browning Society, like the theologians of the Broad Church Party, or the authors of Mr. Walter Scott’s Great Writers Series, seem to me to spend their time in trying to explain their divinity away. [...]

(Wilde 2007:967-68)

I select this fragment of the two friends’ dialogue for three reasons:

The first reason is, of course, the fact that, as we can see in [2], Wilde—through Ernest’s voice—seems to revisit the theories about *lie* that he had previously suggested in “The Decay of Lying”: when Ernest suggests that the task of an artist is “to create a new world,” “to shadow forth the world which we already know,” and “to give a momentary perfection” to the world we live in but are wearied of through a “fine spirit of choice and delicate instinct of selection,” he truly seems to be echoing Vivian’s theses on the lying nature of art in “The Decay of Lying.”

I also accentuate this section of the essay because, from a narratological perspective, it is important for us to notice that, although Ernest embodies the commonsense

opinion of Wilde's public and is therefore often contradicted by Gilbert, Wilde's alter-ego, Gilbert does not contradict Ernest in this specific matter; considering how Gilbert's perspectives tend to prevail as Wilde's somewhat final opinions about the problems debated in the dialogue, the fact that Gilbert does not contradict Ernest at this point indicates that Ernest's perspective about the basic nature of an artwork—what he lists in [2]—very likely corresponds to Wilde's own opinions.

The second reason why I select this fragment of the dialogue is that, as we can see in [4], Wilde also seems to recognise that a bad habit in criticism is a critic's attempt to reasonably explain everything that a given artwork provides, even when what it provides is not really explicable: not only does Wilde seem to identify what in my previous essays I referred to as *hermeneutical violence*—as when Gilbert contends that “if an artwork is incomprehensible, an explanation is wicked”—, so does he seem to be annoyed by those appreciations of art—the literary art, in this case—that ultimately boil down to the understandability and readability of a text.

The Browning Societies that Gilbert scorns in the dialogue, for example, were sorts of elite book clubs that sought to establish through some kind of interpretative collective consensus the probable or most satisfying meaning of Robert Browning's (1812-89) works, especially his poems, a wicked attitude that Wilde very ably defines as a habit of *explaining away* an artist's or an artwork's *divinity*.

Although truly *en passant*, Wilde's commentary about these Browning Societies really comes in handy for us here because he is able to synthesise in very simple words a problem that I have been discussing for about two hundred pages: an *art criticism* that uses its own language to *explain away the divinity* of a literary artwork is already condemnable, but this seems particularly serious when many dimensions of an artwork in fact resist movements of objective interpretation, which I see as the case of those artworks that often concern the Materialities of Literature.

Finally, the third reason why I select this fragment is the fact that we can find in it that one great question that coordinates Ernest and Gilbert's entire conversation—and, by extension, the entirety of my own thesis: what is the use of art criticism?

As we can see in [1] and [3], Ernest, always the voice of commonsense, expresses a resistance to the practice of *art criticism*, for, according to him, it does not seem right or accurate from the creative perspective of art that someone who is not able to *create* something herself have the ability, let alone the authority, to *estimate* the aesthetic value of an artist's creation.

But this is not all.

Ernest and Gilbert's conversation gets really heated when Ernest suggests to Gilbert that in art's best of days, which are the days of the Ancient Greek tradition, there was no art criticism whatsoever, an absence of creative control that finally allowed the Ancient Greeks to so freely and so spontaneously create their beautiful artworks.

Gilbert, however, proves himself more than ready to oppose such perspectives.

And this is where Wilde's postulates about the whole idea of *art-criticism* effectively begins.

It is curious to notice, however, that Wilde begins the development of this idea not through the basics of this idea itself, but with an addendum about it—that is, with a set of precautions that every critic who wishes to suggest an impressionistic criticism like the one postulated in “The Critic as Artist” should take.

Wilde's narrative skill is once again brilliant.

Excited with his own sense of certainty, Ernest pompously theorises:

ERNEST: [...] *In the best days of art there were no art-critics.* The sculptor hewed from the marble block the great white-limbed Hermes that slept within it. The waxers and gilders of images gave tone and texture to the statue, and the world, when it saw it, worshipped and was dumb. He poured the glowing bronze into the mould of sand, and the river of red metal cooled into noble curves and took the impress of the body of a god. With enamel or polished jewels he gave sight to the sightless eyes. The hyacinth-like curls grew crisp beneath his graver. And when, in some dim frescoed fane, or pillared sunlit portico, the child of Leto stood upon his pedestal, those who passed by, *δια λαμπροτατου βαινοντες αβρωσ αιθερος* [moving forward, lightly, through the resplendent air (*Medea* 829-30; my translation)], became conscious of a new influence that had come across their lives, and dreamily, or with a sense of strange and quickening joy, went to their homes or daily labour, or wandered, it may be, through the city gates to that nymph-haunted meadow where young Phaedrus bathed his feet, and, lying there on the soft grass, beneath the tall wind--whispering planes and flowering *agnus castus*, began to think of the wonder of beauty, and grew silent with unaccustomed awe. *In those days the artist was free.* [...] (Wilde 2007:969; my emphases)

I say that Ernest's criticism here is worthy of our attention because of the red flag it raises in the middle of our discussion: following Wilde's theories, I have been suggesting since the beginning of this study that an *emancipation of language* should be a fundamental goal in the making of an *art criticism*, particularly an *impressionistic criticism*—and, clearly, this is something that Ernest tries to do in this verbose commentary; however,

despite the captivating language of his discourse, which truly seduces us into agreeing with him and into sympathising with his ardent impressions about art, the ideas he provides are in the end not accurate at all.

What I mean to say with this brief analysis of Ernest's speech, then, is that, although I am championing a mode of impressionistic criticism that explores an emancipation of its materiality of expression as a means to improve the quality of its propositions, this emancipation is really no guarantee that its propositions will always be completely valid; therefore, what I mean to say with this brief analysis is that, when confronted with an impressionistic criticism such as the one I am suggesting—a criticism that is itself creative and artistic—, we should always be ready to assume that, voluntarily or not, this criticism might be disguising its flaws under the sophistication of its own form.

And this is a problem that Gilbert actually seems to notice in the passionate tone of his friend's discourse:

GILBERT: Ernest, you are quite delightful, but your views are terribly unsound. I am afraid that you have been listening to the conversation of someone older than yourself. That is always a dangerous thing to do, and if you allow it to degenerate into a habit you will find it absolutely fatal to any intellectual development. [...] (Wilde 2077:971)

What follows in Gilbert's response is not only an explanation of why Ernest's perspective about the Ancient Greeks is widely wrong—for Gilbert, the Ancient Greek tradition was in fact the very cradle of *art criticism*—, but also an explanation of how *culture* itself depends on *art criticism* for its own preservation and progression into the future—a perspective that finally allows Gilbert to explore the new limits of *art-criticism* in the modernity of his own present.

Gilbert begins his reasoning by explaining to Ernest that the Ancient Greeks' success in becoming a nation of art critics came from the fact that they had managed to establish the grounds for the “two supreme and highest arts”: “life and literature, life and the perfect expression of life.” (see Wilde 2007:972) Gilbert does not provide enough information for us to safely come to any conclusions, but when he affirms that the Ancient Greeks had managed to establish the grounds for the highest and supreme art of *life*, he is probably referring to what we have studied as the Ancient Greeks' *spontaneity of consciousness*, a way of living and thinking that was natural to them but which came to be completely unattainable, as it originally was, under the *severity of conscience* that finally

prevailed in Gilbert's own present—what he vaguely describes as “an age so marred by false ideals as our own.” (Wilde 2007:972) Now, what is really curious to notice about Gilbert's defence of the Ancient Greeks is what he says about *literature*, that is, about *literature* being that one art that, for him, is *the perfect expression of life*. Back in my **Essay II** in this chapter, we saw that, in “The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature,” Wilde, following Symonds's footsteps, establishes *sculpture* as that canonical art whose aesthetics seemed to coordinate the whole aesthetic temperament of the Ancient Greek tradition, a contention that seems to get into a conflict with Gilbert's opinion that *literature* is, in fact, *the perfect expression of life*: how could *sculpture* be the canonical art in the Ancient Greek tradition if their *literature* was in fact *the perfect expression of life*? I must say that I do not see any solution to this conflict; however, if we examine it more closely, we might be able to have a better glimpse into the evolution of Wilde's thoughts, as well as into some of the mechanics of his critical method: first of all, Wilde wrote “The Plastic Spirit of Greek Literature” in the mid-1870's, when he was still a postgraduate student at the University of Oxford, and published “The Critic as Artist” in the early 1890's, about ten years after his ground-breaking conference tours in America, which means that it is probably wise for us to consider that his opinions might have simply changed in these fifteen years; however, a much more appropriate way to look at this, I believe, is to properly read Gilbert as one of Wilde's many *masks*, which means that, although Gilbert considers *literature* as *the perfect expression of life*, Wilde himself might not even have a final opinion about this—the new many-sided debates that arise from this tension seems, in fact, to be the real objective of a fictional, dialogical, lying essay like “The Critic as Artist”; nevertheless, I must make clear that, considering how Wilde mostly took *language* as a means to convey his whole art of lying, using *language* to create works of fiction, to recreate the world as fiction, and to recreate himself as a piece of fiction in this world, I am inclined to think that, if there still were any traces of Symonds's theories in Wilde's thoughts in the 1890's—and there were—, then maybe Gilbert's opinion about *literature* reflects Wilde's hypothesis that *literature* was, in fact, the canonical art that coordinated the aesthetic temperament of his Victorian culture. This hypothesis seems particularly plausible if we take into account, for example, the ascension of the novel as a favourite form of cultural enjoyment throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, or the fact that, in Wilde's Victorian society, mass communication, particularly print-based media, was a fundamental element in the composition of mass culture.

And, well, a reasoning that seems to govern Wilde's idea of *art-criticism* is precisely that an artwork tends to reach an even higher form, not if it is *explained* through *thought* and *language*, but if it is *reworked* through *thought* and *language*.

This is a process that becomes clearer as Gilbert delves deeper into Aristotle's analyses of art, particularly tragedy, that epitomising art in which *language* and *action*—Aristotle's own understanding of *mimesis*—perfectly converge into an organic movement of all the senses. (Wilde 2007:974)

Although Gilbert recognises the importance of Plato's *idealism* in the conception of a *metaphysics* of art—Gilbert does not clearly elaborate on that matter at this point, but our previous discussion about *lie* is already a good example—, most of his idea of *criticism* derives from what we can understand, by contrast, as Aristotle's *materialism*—a logic that was already present in Wilde's privilege of *nature* over *eidōs*.

Further in “The Critic as Artist,” in what I believe is one of the most fascinating passages in this entire essay, Gilbert synthesises Aristotle's method in the *Poetics* with the following words:

GILBERT: [...] Aristotle, like Goethe, deals with art primarily in its *concrete manifestations*, taking tragedy, for instance, and investigating the *material* it uses, which is *language*, its *subject-matter*, which is *life*, the *method* by which it works, which is *action*, the *conditions under which it reveals itself*, which are those of *theatric presentation*, its *logical structure*, which is *plot*, and its *final aesthetic appeal*, which is to *the sense of beauty realised through the passions of pity and awe*. That purification and spiritualising of the nature which he calls *κάθαρσις* [catharsis] is, as Goethe saw, essentially *aesthetic*, and is *not moral*, as Lessing fancied. *Concerning himself primarily with the impression that the work of art produces, Aristotle sets himself to analyse that impression, to investigate its source, to see how it is engendered*. As a physiologist and psychologist, he knows that the health of a function resides in energy. [...] It is the Greeks who have given us the whole system of art-criticism, and how fine their critical instinct was, may be seen from the fact that the material they criticised with most care was, as I have already said, language. *For the material that painter or sculptor uses is meagre in comparison with that of words. Words have not merely music as sweet as that of viol and lute, colour as rich and vivid as any that makes lovely for us the canvas of the Venetian or the Spaniard, and plastic form no less sure and certain than that which reveals itself in marble or in bronze, but thought and passion and spirituality are theirs also, are theirs indeed alone*. [...] To know the principles of the highest art is to know the principles of all the arts. (Wilde 2007:974-75; my emphases)

Wilde's ability to systematise Aristotle's method in so few words is already an evidence of how refined his aesthetic consciousness is, but what truly amazes me in this simple system he provides is the fact that he finds in Aristotle's treatise the very grounds for his own understanding of *impressionistic criticism*: for Wilde, the role of *art criticism* is not simply to investigate the material and immaterial dimensions that, together, compose the dynamic structure of an artwork—such as language, theme, narratology, or plasticity—, but to examine *how* these dimensions give rise to certain impressions and thereby engender them into the person enjoying this artwork; in other words, for Wilde, following Aristotle's method, *art criticism* should not take the material and immaterial dimensions of an artwork as ends in themselves, thus turning *this artwork* into an exhaustive object of scrutiny, but as motives for different kinds of affective energy, thus turning *the person and her aesthetic experience of this artwork* into the effective objects of scrutiny—objects that are themselves always singular, always contingent, and therefore much more challenging in having their particularities exhausted by even the most meticulous critical analyses. But this is not all of Wilde's sagacity in reading Aristotle's treatise; the way I see it, one of Wilde's greatest contributions to the basic idea of *impressionistic criticism* is the fact that, through his reading of Aristotle's method, he seems to recognise that, irrespective of how the material and immaterial dimensions of an artwork are effectively arranged, in the end the many kinds of impression that they give rise to always seek to engender a final, ruling, much more complex kind of impression: *catharsis*. It is true, when we study the idea of *catharsis*, we instinctively tend to subordinate it to the whole mechanics of *tragedy*—a *cathartic moment* is almost always a sequence of *hubris*, *death*, *recognition*, *agony*, or *parrhesia*—, a subordination that is certainly a consequence of the huge influence that Aristotle's *Poetics* had on the whole genealogy of *art criticism*, from the ethics and aesthetics of his Ancient Greece to our present-day scholarly studies. However, in the realm of *art* and *art criticism*, the idea of *catharsis* seems to cover a much broader spectrum, a spectrum that spreads way beyond the domains of tragedy: in Ancient Greek, *katharsis* simply means 'cleansing', 'purification', or 'regeneration', and may therefore refer to an affective, reparative power of art that is not at all restricted to tragedy—or at least this is a hypothesis I would like us to consider, because I believe this is a hypothesis already implicit in Wilde's essay. The way I see it, Wilde truly synthesises the entire idea of *impressionistic criticism* when he suggests that "concerning himself primarily with the *impression* that the work of art produces, Aristotle sets himself to analyse *that impression*, to investigate its *source*, to see how it is *engendered*." (Wilde

2007:974; my emphasis): Aristotle's idea of *criticism*, in other words, consists in assessing how and why certain material and immaterial characteristics of an artwork arouse in the spectator certain impressions and not others, impressions that circumscribe, structure, and ultimately give rise to a final, more elevated impression: catharsis. A critic who suggests an impressionistic criticism, then, may choose many different strategies to convey her message—she may adopt a more personal or a less personal tone to deliver her more objective or more subjective perspectives about many material or immaterial aspects of an artwork under scrutiny—, but, the way I see it, following Wilde's hypotheses registered Gilbert's dialogue here, this criticism tends to be at its best when the impressions it examines all somehow take part in the formation, in the concoction of a final catharsis. And, of course, when I say that an impressionistic criticism tends to be at its best when the impressions it examines all somehow take part in the formation of a final *catharsis* I am not therefore referring to *catharsis* necessarily in the sense of a *tragic catharsis*—I am referring to *catharsis* in a much broader sense, which is also a much more literal sense: if *katharsis* simply means 'cleansing', 'purification', or 'regeneration', then, when I say that an impressionistic criticism should always seek to assess how certain impressions finally structure a final catharsis, I am suggesting that this criticism should always seek to assess the nature and the mechanics of certain impressions that, in the end, seem to take part in some kind of cathartic movement, in some kind of cathartic composition.

Simply put: an *impressionistic criticism* seems to be at its best when the material and immaterial dimensions that it investigates somehow take part in the arousal of certain impressions that, together, and one by one, structure some kind of cathartic progression or lead to some kind of cathartic disclosure.

Take, for instance, Walter Pater's "Leonardo da Vinci" (1893), a truly impressionistic essay in which Pater tries to internalise the whole mysterious beauty of the *Mona Lisa* by transmuting its material qualities into a prose-poetry more assimilable to the senses; take Hans Gumbrecht's "The Freedom of Janis Joplin's Voice" (2012), a semi-biographical essay in which Gumbrecht tries to translate into words how Janis Joplin's *Me and Bobby McGee* seems to epitomise the great libertarian ethos of the 1960's, a time he recollects as an increasingly distant memory of his own, of a world that is now mostly apprehensible as an aesthetics; or take Kogonada's "Malick // Fire & Water" (2013), a videographic essay in which he idyllically tries to bring to surface the affective impact of Terrence Malick's constant use of natural elements—particularly fire and water—in his

films. Hypothetically, we can also think of a biographical essay that tries to describe how Yann Tiersen's *La Valse d'Amélie* (2001) might influence a contemplative walk through Montmartre; we can think of an erotic essay that imagines how the young protagonist in Wilde's *Salomé* managed to use her body to convince a king to behead an innocent man; or we can imagine a truly politically engaged essay that tries to see through the dark humour of Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* (2019) and grasp how the escalating personal violence between the characters is in the end indissociable from the violence that subsists in every class struggle within a capitalist regime.

From this description of the basis of an *impressionistic criticism*—a criticism that privileges the critic's *aesthetic experience* over an objective analysis of the material and immaterial dimensions of the artwork arousing such *aesthetic experience*—and from the examples that I just provided above, we can see that this mode of criticism bears in itself a propensity to *set itself free* from the object under scrutiny—a propensity that, in the essay, seems to lead Ernest and Gilbert to a new discussion about the nature and the limits of an *art-criticism* such as the one Gilbert is suggesting.

In a dialogue that revisits the content of my previous essays, Ernest and Gilbert debate the following issues concerning the tensions that seem to arise between the artwork and its criticism, or between the artist and her critic:

ERNEST: [...] I am quite ready to admit that I was wrong in what I said about the Greeks. They were, as you have pointed out, a nation of art-critics. I acknowledge it, and I feel a little sorry for them. *For the creative faculty is higher than the critical. There is really no comparison between them.*

GILBERT: *The antithesis between them is entirely arbitrary. Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name.* You spoke a little while ago of that fine spirit of choice and delicate instinct of selection by which the artist realises life for us, and gives to it a momentary perfection. Well, that spirit of choice, that subtle tact of omission, is really the critical faculty in one of its most characteristic moods, and *no one who does not possess this critical faculty can create anything at all in art.* Arnold's definition of literature as a criticism of life was not very felicitous in form, but it showed how keenly he recognised the importance of the critical element in all creative work.

ERNEST: I should have said that great artists work unconsciously, that they were 'wiser than they knew,' as, I think, Emerson remarks somewhere.

GILBERT: It is really not so, Ernest. *All fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate. No poet sings because he must sing. At least, no great poet does. A great poet sings because he chooses to sing.* It is so now, and it has always been so. [...] *Every century that produces poetry is, so far, an artificial century, and the work that seems to us to be the most*

natural and simple product of its time is always the result of the most self-conscious effort. Believe me, Ernest, there is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one. (Wilde 2007:975-76; my emphases)

And a bit further on, Gilbert concludes:

GILBERT: [...] *An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all. [...] For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand. [...] Each new school, as it appears, cries out against criticism, but it is to the critical faculty in man that it owes its origin. The mere creative instinct does not innovate, but reproduces. [...] As a rule, the critics—I speak, of course, of the higher class, of those in fact who write for the sixpenny papers—are far more cultured than the people whose work they are called upon to review. This is, indeed, only what one would expect, for criticism demands infinitely more cultivation than creation does.*

ERNEST: Really?

GILBERT: Certainly. Anybody can write a three-volumed novel. It merely requires a complete ignorance of both life and literature. The difficulty that I should fancy the reviewer feels is the difficulty of sustaining any standard. Where there is no style a standard must be impossible. [...] (Wilde 2007:977-78; my emphases)

Lawrence Danson, a specialist in Wilde's works of theory and criticism, explains that when *Intentions* first came out in the early 1890's the public's reaction was not really of praise, but of controversy—a reaction that is not at all a surprise, considering the escalating moralism and philistinism of Victorian society, and, of course, Wilde's own provocative reactions to these two social malaises: some more conservative readers would say that Wilde had taken the joke way too far with his "Pen, Pencil and Poison"—an essay about the influence of beauty in the maintenance of culture which is also a satirical biography of a serial killer—, while more progressist readers would accept that Wilde's aesthetics, in this and in other essays, were actually a clever novelty in the whole method of criticism (Danson 1997:81); Northrop Frye, for example, would look back at Wilde's dialogical aesthetics—particularly "The Decay of Lying," but surely we can say the same of "The Critic as Artist"—as the beginning of an entirely new kind of criticism, something that he would achieve by "[making] language sovereign rather than servant of a prior, non-linguistic truth" (Danson 1997:82)—a perspective that, I believe, reaffirms Wilde's ideas of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum*. "Wilde's stylistic excess [was] a challenge to

Victorian sensibilities, and the contemporary reviewers' exasperation records his triumph," Danson writes in his article; and concludes: "Wilde's refusal to be 'solid and reasonable' [was] a slap in the face of Victorian earnestness, and his inconsistency an implicit critique of common assumptions about the production of meaning." (Danson 1997:82)

However, we can see from Ernest and Gilbert's dialogue above that Wilde's strategies to reform Victorian society and its cultural scenario were by no means restricted to the affront he often inflamed through his witty use of *language*.

As we can notice from my previous essays, Wilde has made enormous contributions to the philosophy of art itself—such as his radical politicisation of Arnold's notion of a *spontaneity of consciousness*, his modern reappreciation of the 'aesthetics of existence' and the 'art of living', or his final ideas of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum*—, but one of his most remarkable contributions, I believe, is his complete *inversion* or at least complete *trivialisation* of the hierarchical positions that the *artist* and her *critic*—and, by extension, the *artwork* and its *criticism*—occupy in the whole game of the arts.

And I say that this is one of Wilde's most remarkable contributions simply because, unlike what he suggests in most of his works, which chiefly deal with properly theoretical or philosophical dimensions of the nature of art, his hypothesis about the effective position of the *artist* in relation to the *critic* seems to shed a new light on the whole *scholarly practice* of art criticism, on the whole *nature* and *objective* of art criticism as an *intellectual* as much as an *institutional practice*.

From Ernest's speeches, which represent an ordinary public opinion, we can see that common sense often leads us to subjugate or at least to subordinate the critic to the artist, thereby subjugating or subordinating criticism to the formally artistic creation under scrutiny, a habit that seems to correspond to the logic that I mentioned a while ago, that is, that it does not seem right or accurate from the creative perspective of art that someone who is not able to create something herself have the ability or the authority to estimate the aesthetic value of an artist's creation. Gilbert, however, as the somewhat loyal representative of Wilde's own thoughts, outrightly rejects this logic by explaining that creation can be, and often is, resumed to thoughtless processes of copy or thoughtless practices of compliance with the basic rules of a given artistic genre, processes and practices that tend to culminate in the production of works that are purely mimetical, works that therefore have really nothing ethical nor cathartic to offer to those who appreciate them. Contrary to common sense, then, Gilbert suggests that criticism is not just a

systematic practice of observation, revision, clarification, commentary, and occasional judgment—what, naturally, tends to place criticism in a position of subservience in relation to the artwork it examines—, but a truly pondered and frequently self-centred practice of creation or re-creation through the aggregation of other elements of culture—a movement that elevates criticism to a higher position as a peculiar form of art and which therefore places it in a position of independence, of complementarity, in relation to the artwork it examines. But, the point is, contrary to what it might seem at first, Gilbert’s commentary is not at all an Oedipal or egocentric attempt to steal or supplant an artist’s authority over her own creative abilities or her own creative products; the elegance of Gilbert’s acumen here is that he realises that, either as a formal critic’s final work or as an artist’s routine of self-perfection—as a case of *hexis*, that is—, criticism is necessarily an epistemological reasoning intrinsic to an aesthetic temperament, so that it is ultimately not only a precondition for an artist and her art to not just repeat themselves, but also, and reciprocally, the very condition for culture not to remain stagnated in what it has already achieved.

Even today Aestheticism might look like a collective hedonistic folly that spread from the University of Oxford and found in the sybaritic lifestyle of the London bourgeoisie a perfect environment for proliferation, but, as might be clear by now, it was actually a widely self-conscious movement of ‘classical reception’ that sought to retrieve the classics from the reification they were being systematically subjected to and thereby rehabilitate them into the present as sources of ethical, aesthetical, and epistemological reasoning—and works by artists such as Arnold, Symonds, Pater, Lee, and Wilde himself are, I believe, obvious examples of how art tends to reach the best of its creative potency when it is assisted by criticism.

In fact, one of the most sophisticated evidences of how firmly the members of Aestheticism believed in criticism as means to potentialise creativity and thereby contribute to an improvement of culture is, I think, the fact that they systematically looked for alternative ways to conceive the very features of criticism—having found in an *artistic exploration of the form of their “invectives”* the most compelling solution.

Ernest and Gilbert continue in their debate:

GILBERT: But, surely, criticism is itself an art. And just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty, and, indeed, without it cannot be said to exist at all, so criticism is

really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent.

ERNEST: Independent?

GILBERT: Yes; independent. *Criticism is no more to be judged by any low standard of imitation or resemblance than is the work of poet or sculptor. The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought.* He does not even require for the perfection of his art the finest materials. Anything will serve his purpose. [...] [The] true critic can, if it be his pleasure so to direct or waste his faculty of contemplation, produce work that will be flawless in beauty and instinct with intellectual subtlety. [...] To an artist so creative as the critic, what does subject-matter signify? No more and no less than it does to the novelist and the painter. Like them, he can find his motives everywhere. *Treatment is the test.* There is nothing that has not in it suggestion or challenge.

ERNEST: *But is criticism really a creative art?*

GILBERT: *Why should it not be? It works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful.* What more can one say of poetry? *Indeed, I would call criticism a creation within a creation. For just as the great artists, from Homer and Aeschylus, down to Shakespeare and Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject-matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend, and ancient tale, so the critic deals with materials that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative form and colour have been already added. Nay, more, I would say that the highest criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself, an end.* Certainly, it is never trammelled by any shackles of verisimilitude. No ignoble considerations of probability, that cowardly concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life, affect it ever. One may appeal from fiction unto fact. But from the soul there is no appeal. (Wilde 2007:982-83; my emphases)

“The Critic as Artist” is such a rich essay, so thorough and cunning in the analysis of the problems it raises and in the proposition of alternatives, that it is really difficult not to quote it at length.

I find Gilbert’s dialogue here absolutely fascinating because, as if his conjectures were not brilliant already, he actually presents them in a psychological progression that is only possible through a fictional, narrative structure: Gilbert makes clear right from the start that he does not consider criticism a work to remain subservient to the artwork it examines, for, in the end, it requires from the critic much more cultivation than an artwork requires from its artist, a process of knowledge aggregation that, more often than not, contributes to the refinement and, therefore, to the progression of culture; in this segment,

however, although Gilbert maintains his opinion about the necessity to reevaluate criticism, this opinion is subjected to a burst of second opinions of his own, which finally leads him to conclude, in the sequence of his own reasoning, that criticism is, in fact, as a consequence of its inherently doubly creative nature, more creative than creation. It is so, Gilbert resolves, because, according to the creative logic that he is suggesting, a criticism takes an artwork as a “heuristic mediation”—as a “casuistics”, we can say—for the conception of an entirely new object whose main quality is its ability to incorporate different dimensions of thought and different elements of culture into a more conclusive organic structure that is an end in itself—that is, a structure whose very existence is the accomplishment of its own intellectual and aesthetic challenge to exist. This is why, I believe, Wilde refers to Plato as “that artist in thought” in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde 2007:28): criticism, as he suggests through Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist,” should be openly consolidated as an art of thinking, as an art of turning thought into art, as an art of making thought possible through art and of making art possible through thought; and, I believe I should emphasise, if an ‘aesthetics of existence’ and a ‘living as a work of art’ are processes by which a person, in the materiality of her life and body, seeks to meld the dimension of art with the dimension of living, thereby creating a dimension in which living is indiscernible from the making of art, criticism is a process by which a critic, exploring the materialities of communication at her disposal, seeks to meld the dimension of art with the dimension of thinking, thereby creating a dimension in which thinking is indiscernible from the making of art and in which the making of art is indiscernible from the progressions of thinking. But, as the readers might have already noticed, there is yet another catch in Gilbert’s commentary here that is absolutely fundamental for our understanding of the nature of this criticism that he suggests, which is essentially a creative mode of impressionistic criticism; towards the end, Gilbert says that “the highest criticism, being the *purest form of personal impression*, is in its way more creative than creation,” a quality that is intrinsic to the fact that this criticism “has least reference to any standard *external* to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing.” (Wilde 2007:923; my emphases) I believe that Gilbert’s commentary is particularly important for us here because, if the mode of criticism that he is suggesting is in practice an entire project of creativity in thought or of thought through creativity, by emphasising that this criticism should take the critic’s impressions as an essential element of creation, he is also taking the critic herself as an essential element in the composition of this criticism: a regular practice of criticism as an observational, revisionist, elucidative,

commentative, and occasionally judgmental exercise tends to interfere with the *artwork* itself, tautologically, often resulting in an allegorical exegesis that, although very likely to be enlightening at some point, ultimately seeks to attenuate many of this artwork's phenomenal dimensions through a clarification of its supposed or potential meanings; however, by interfering with *beauty*, with the cognitive, affective, and sensuous impact that an artwork might have on a *person*, Gilbert's idea of criticism not only goes beyond most attempts to interfere with the artwork itself, in the broadness or narrowness of its meaning, it also requires that the critic invest herself, in all her subjectivity, as a creative element that is therefore inevitably independent from and inevitably more creative than the artwork that first motivated it.

Gilbert explains to Ernest:

GILBERT: Do you ask me what Leonardo would have said had any one told him of this picture that 'all the thoughts and experience of the world had etched and moulded therein that which they had of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the Middle Age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias?' *He would probably have answered that he had contemplated none of these things, but had concerned himself simply with certain arrangements of lines and masses, and with new and curious colour-harmonies of blue and green.* And it is for this very reason that the criticism which I have quoted is criticism of the highest kind. *It treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation.* It does not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. *And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it.* Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives, and a symbol of what we pray for, or perhaps of what, having prayed for, we fear that we may receive. The longer I study, Ernest, the more clearly I see that the beauty of the visible arts is, as the beauty of music, impressive primarily, and that it may be marred, and indeed often is so, by any excess of intellectual intention on the part of the artist. (Wilde 2007:985; my emphases)

A few pages back, when I discussed Plato's Theory of Forms, I tried to make clear that, within the logic of this philosophical hypothesis, the problem of an artistic production is that it is at least two times removed from the *eidōs* which it mirrors: in general, we can take an object first brought forth into the material reality of people as an initial removal from a given transcendental *eidōs*, and then we can take an artwork, a

predominantly or at least primarily sensuous reappreciation of this given object, as a secondary removal from this given transcendental *eidōs*; according to this logic, then, a problem intrinsic to artistic creation is the fact that every creative reappreciation of an artwork is also a new removal from the original transcendental *eidōs*, which means that, the more an artist imaginatively reappreciates an artwork, the more she perverts, the more she disforms this *eidōs* and the transcendental truth that it is. We have already seen that Wilde's ideas of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum* are themselves a resistance to Plato's idea of *mimesis*, but, if it is true that, by taking an artwork as a starting-point for a new creation, a creation in which she is herself an element of creativity, a critic finally arrives at a creation that is more creative than creation, then every new criticism of this kind is also a step closer to an ultimate materialisation of a subjective truth—which means that, the more an artist reappreciates an artwork, the more she perfects, the more she informs this truth into a work that condenses her own contingent, subjective truths. This is why Wilde's reference to Homer, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Keats makes so much sense here: in the framework of Wilde's logic of creation in criticism, if every criticism takes an artwork as an imaginative premise for the creation of an entirely new object that is also an analytical aggregate of elements typical of the culture in which this object is being created, then this artwork, a "heuristic mediation" for the conception of new conditions of possibility, tends to become or at least tends to behave as a myth or mytheme. A creative impressionistic criticism such as the one that Wilde is suggesting is not, therefore, an objective mirroring of an initial object confined to its own properties, an object that begins and ends in itself; for Wilde, this initial object, this initial artwork, is a dynamic and inexhaustible system of thought and affection, of strange conditions of possibility to think and feel otherwise, a living structure that, as such, can be taken as a mediation for seeing our own material reality completely anew—and criticism, a creative impressionistic criticism, as an aggregate of different elements of culture and peculiar elements of subjectivity organised around a deterritorialising system of thought and affection, seems to be the most sophisticated strategy to making sure that this system persists throughout history.

Gilbert comments in the second part of the essay:

GILBERT: [The critic as artist] will be always showing us the work of art in some new relation to our age. He will always be reminding us that great works of art are living things—are, in fact, the only things that live. So much, indeed, will he feel this, that I am certain that, as civilisation progresses and we become more highly organised, the elect spirits of each age,

the critical and cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life, and *will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what art has touched*. For life is terribly deficient in form. (Wilde 2007:991)



But, if we consider that Wilde’s hypothesis of a creative impressionistic criticism—what we can finally understand as an *art-criticism* or, more generally, an *artistic criticism*—is in fact valid, what, then, are our options?

Gilbert himself seems to notice how he raises such doubt, so he provides some examples of his own later in the essay:

GILBERT: [...] Today the cry is for Romance, and already the leaves are tremulous in the valley, and on the purple hill-tops walks beauty with slim gilded feet. The old modes of creation linger, of course. The artists reproduce either themselves or each other, with wearisome iteration. *But criticism is always moving on, and the critic is always developing. Nor, again, is the critic really limited to the subjective form of expression.* The method of the *drama* is his, as well as the method of the *epos*. He may use *dialogue*, as he did who set Milton talking to Marvel on the nature of comedy and tragedy, and made Sidney and Lord Brooke discourse on letters beneath the Penshurst oaks; or adopt *narration*, as Mr. Pater is fond of doing, each of whose *Imaginary Portraits*—is not that the title of the book?—presents to us, under the fanciful guise of *fiction*, some fine and exquisite piece of criticism, one on the painter Watteau, another on the philosophy of Spinoza, a third on the pagan elements of the early Renaissance, and the last, and in some respects the most suggestive, on the source of that *Aufklärung*, that enlightening which dawned on Germany in the last century, and to which our own culture owes so great a debt. (Wilde 2007:1003; my emphases)

So, based on what Gilbert suggests above, we can hypothetically think of artistic criticisms that take the forms of *dialogue*, *drama*, *epos*, *narration*, and *fiction*.

But, which other technologies and which other forms of art do we have at our disposal today?

There is, of course, no exhaustible answer to this question: on the one hand, innovations in technology will always give rise to new materialities of communication, what is likely to provide new possibilities of form in artistic criticism; on the other hand, as societies change and certain cultural scenarios are overcome by others, the limits of what can be accepted as *art* are also likely to change, what might therefore stimulate new possibilities of *art criticism* while weakening or preventing others.

Very broadly, however, I can provide a few other examples.

In a progressive order of complexity, encompassing some forms and examples that we have already discussed, I would say:

Type	Characteristics	Examples
<p>Standard impressionistic criticism</p>	<p>A chiefly subjective content is delivered through a prosaic discourse that often takes the form of an essay.</p> <p>In some cases, this prosaic discourse can be refined into a more poetic discourse that, as such, can be elevated to a higher status of literature.</p>	<p>Walter Pater J.A. Symonds A.C. Swinburne Michel Field Edith Cooper Hans Gumbrecht</p>
<p>Creative impressionistic criticism</p>	<p>A chiefly subjective content is delivered through a creative discourse that may take many forms.</p> <p>In general, this poetic discourse is refined into some kind of fictional discourse that, as such, can be elevated</p>	<p>J.P. Eckermann Walter Pater Oscar Wilde Hélène Cixous Susan Sontag</p>

	to a higher status of literature.	
Experimental creative criticism	<p>Objective and subjective contents are delivered through a discourse that is not exactly poetic, nor fictional, nor does clearly aspire to the higher status of literature, although it does defy the typical prosaic form of an essay.</p> <p>It is often interspersed with tentative exercises in intermediality, but its main medium is that of a printed text.</p>	<p>W.G. Sebald John Berger Johanna Drucker Philippe Claudel Hélène Cixous John Cage Anne Carson</p>
Antithetical creative criticism	Objective and subjective contents are chiefly delivered through an antithetical criticism mediated by the combination of mostly pre-established textual sources.	<i>LdoD</i>
Montage criticism	The criticism's central argument defies a typical teleological reasoning, a typical teleological narrative, by relying on the montage of elements of different materialities—such as images, annotations, or fragments—that therefore may work as “philosophemes” for a greater contention.	<i>Arcades Project</i>

<p style="text-align: center;">Multimedial creative criticism</p>	<p>Contents that tend to be channelled into a subjective perspective are delivered through a montage criticism mediated by the digital manipulation of mostly pre-established audio, imagerial, and textual sources</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Kogonada <i>[in]Transition Journal</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Performative creative criticism</p>	<p>Objective and subjective contents are delivered through the performance of a discourse that is not exactly poetic, nor fictional, nor does clearly aspire to the higher status of literature, although it does defy the typical prosaic form of an essay. It is often interspersed with tentative exercises of bodily performance, so that its accomplishment depends on the interactions with an audience.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">John Cage</p>

In my **Introduction**, I made clear that, if the basic goal of the Materialities of Literature, a post-hermeneutical division in the literary studies, is to investigate how different materialities of communication might creatively cooperate to deterritorialise our ordinary appreciation of literature and its relation to art in general, then it is probably the case for us to also deterritorialise our ordinary understanding of *criticism*, so that we can make sure that we are not, even if involuntarily, retreating or at least confining ourselves to an objectifying hermeneutical cause. The best alternative that I could envisage was a mode of criticism that sought to break free from the asceticism of purely *expressive* analyses, ordinarily dedicated to the tautological observation, revision, clarification, commentary, and occasional judgment of the *artwork* under scrutiny, and sought to embrace the

eroticism of chiefly *impressive* analyses, dedicated, in turn, to an eccentric examination of the *aesthetic experiences* that such artwork arouses in the critic, an examination that is often improved by a refinement of the language or any other means by which it is delivered. The main reason why I believe an *impressionistic criticism* is the mode of criticism that best suits the Materialities of Literature has to do with the fact that, if the objects of study that most interest the Materialities of Literature often arouse pleasure through both linguistic and ante or extra-linguistic properties intrinsic to them, then this pleasure is ultimately aroused by movements of *interpretation*—how meaning or effects of meaning are conveyed—as much as by movements of *affection*—how materiality or presence excite feelings, emotions, intensities etc.; and, if this pleasure is aroused by movements of *interpretation* as much as by movements of *affection*, then, in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, any criticism that restricts itself to interpretative analyses of an artwork's ability to convey meaning naturally tends to underperform as criticism—an insufficiency that can be corrected if the *interpretative* dimension of such analysis is balanced with, or perhaps even subordinated to, a more properly *affective* dimension. This logic of criticism, however, seems to lead us to a conundrum that inevitably seems to become a contribution from the very way of thinking encouraged by the Materialities of Literature: a purely *objective* criticism of an artwork—that is, a criticism that seeks to remain a tautological observation, revision, clarification, commentary, and occasional judgment of an artwork under scrutiny—tends to remain an accessory to this artwork, keeping with it a relationship of subservience; now, a properly *subjective* criticism of an artwork—that is, a criticism that seeks to unfold into an eccentric examination of the *aesthetic experiences* that such artwork arouses in the critic—tends to seek its own emancipation from this artwork, therefore establishing with it a relationship of originality, a relationship of creativity, a relationship indeed strengthened by the fact that this criticism is also best conveyed through a form that seeks its own splendour. And this splendour is absolutely fundamental: a purely objective criticism, no matter how enlightening it might be, will generally preclude the critic from freely expressing her innermost feelings or from conjecturing truths that are excited by rather than rooted to the artwork under scrutiny, which means that a purely objective criticism will generally convey messages whose nature and content are tethered to the sober, often overly scientific discourse employed in this criticism; a properly subjective criticism, however, will generally allow the critic to freely express her innermost feelings or conjecture truths that are in fact excited by the artwork under scrutiny, which means that a properly subjective criticism will

generally convey messages whose nature and content are creatively free as a consequence of the intoxicating, often truly poetic discourse employed in this criticism. By seeking the splendour of its own form, then, a creative impressionistic criticism is not just bringing itself forth as product of a critic's subjective creativity, it is also exploring its own form to be able to convey messages that can be really abstract and really strange—such as transmuting into a more apprehensible form complex kinds of pleasure—, messages that therefore could never be conveyed through the categorical discourse of a purely objective criticism. In the Preface of his *Complex Pleasure: Forms of Feeling in German Literature*, Stanley Corngold tells us the story of a student of his who decided to have a conversation with him because she wanted to switch her major from Philosophy to German Literature, something she wanted to do because, in her own words, only in literature she could find “the tension of reason and imagination” that produced “new forms of feeling.” (see Corngold 1998:xi) This anecdote, I believe, synthesises this perspective that I just expressed about the convenience of a creative impressionistic criticism: if the basic goal of the Materialities of Literature is to investigate how different materialities of communication might creatively cooperate to deterritorialise our ordinary appreciation of literature and its relation to art in general, it is fundamental that the criticisms they produce, in order to avoid a retreat to a purely hermeneutical logic, try to find their own strategies to preserve, produce, or improve the tensions between reason, imagination, and sensuality that might allow us to experience new forms of feeling and, thereby, if it is the case, new ways of thinking. Another way to look at this whole matter, as might be clear already, is to explore this creative mode of impressionistic criticism as means to resist a sort of “noematic relapse”: as Gumbrecht explains, “[if] we attribute meaning to a thing that is present, that is, if we form an idea of what this thing may be in relation to us, we seem to attenuate, inevitably, the impact that this thing can have on our bodies and our senses” (Gumbrecht 2004:xiv), which, I believe, is another way of saying that, if we are able to rationalise a phenomenon that is fundamentally perceptual and not conceptual, we seem to alleviate our intellectual anxiety to tame the erratic, mysterious nature of our bodily senses; the role of art criticism, particularly in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, is not, therefore, to yield to a rationalisation of the perceptual dimension of an artwork and of the aesthetic experiences that it might trigger, but to re-appreciate both the perceptual and the conceptual dimensions of this artwork and of the aesthetic experiences that it might trigger so as to improve their mystery—and, if possible,

so as to give rise to new aesthetic experiences through the very creative act of criticism and through its final, therefore artistic product.

We can read in the second part of “The Critic as Artist”:

ERNEST: The true critic will be rational, at any rate, will he not?

GILBERT: Rational? *There are two ways of disliking art, Ernest. One is to dislike it. The other, to like it rationally.* For art, as Plato saw, and not without regret, creates in listener and spectator a form of divine madness. *It does not spring from inspiration, but it makes others inspired.* Reason is not the faculty to which it appeals. If one loves art at all, one must love it beyond all other things in the world, and against such love, the reason, if one listened to it, would cry out. *There is nothing sane about the worship of beauty.* It is too splendid to be sane. Those of whose lives it forms the dominant note will always seem to the world to be pure visionaries.

ERNEST: Well, at least, the critic will be sincere.

GILBERT: A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal. *The true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty, but he will seek for beauty in every age and in each school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought or stereotyped mode of looking at things.* He will realise himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions. For what is mind but motion in the intellectual sphere? The essence of thought, as the essence of life, is growth. You must not be frightened by word, Ernest. What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities. (Wilde 2007:1004-05; my emphases)

However, as I have also discussed in my **Introduction**, the limits of what we can feel, just like the limits of what we can think, are inevitably bound to the contingencies of our own material reality, so that improvement or obsolescence in technology, especially in association with political, economic, social, and cultural changes, tend to enlarge or constrict these limits. A good example is, of course, Gumbrecht’s basic idea of ‘presence’ or ‘production of presence’, an idea that tries to fathom, among many other phenomena, why and how we, people who live in a ‘broad present’, seem to be constantly seeking for aesthetic experiences that increasingly try to rehabilitate the body as a primary element of perception; more specifically, though, we can think of the increasing number of *immersive exhibitions*, exhibitions that associate strange spaces—like an industrial complex, an old quarry, or a submarine base—, sound effects, and animated projections

to provide the public the impression of being plunged into the chronotopes or the simula-cra of artworks often made famous by sheer mechanical and mediatic reproduction—such as Vincent Van Gogh’s (1853-90) *Starry Night* (1889) or Gustav Klimt’s (1862-1918) *The Kiss* (1907-08). Whatever the case, what I mean to say with these examples is that, if the limits of what can be thought and felt are generally bound to improvement or obsolescence in technology, processes that are invariably associated with political, economic, social, and cultural changes, then it seems fundamental that a critic conceive new forms of a creative impressionistic criticism following the new conditions of possibility made viable by these processes and changes. Of course, I am not suggesting that art criticisms should necessarily take the form of an immersive exhibition—although, in theory, this form should be perfectly acceptable; but, considering our living in a ‘broad present’, a present in which the body, technological novelties, and ‘productions of presence’ seem to be at the centre of people’s search for aesthetic experiences, the way I see it, a critic should, today, conceive her creative impressionistic criticisms based on these essentially material dimensions—without neglecting, of course, the fact that, as Wilde beautifully observes, “[the] demand of the intellect, as has been well said, is simply to feel itself alive.” (Wilde 2007:1010)

For my part, then, I would like to see more criticisms that: explore the space of the paper or the design of typography as a means to deterritorialise our ordinary understanding of criticism as a prosaic scientific discourse; embody imagery not as an accessory to the textual information but as a fusion or citation that complexifies or relativises this information; incorporate imagery deliberately created to complexify or relativise the textual information—such as illustrations or photographs conceived and produced by the critic herself; build themselves upon a fiction or some kind of poetry to enhance the complexity and the impressive dimension of the information that it provides through a properly epistemological prism; rely on the dynamic nature of audio-visual resources to aggregate and channel information that cannot be conveyed through a typical textual medium—such as audiographic or videographic essays; explore ergodism and digital technology to fuse usability and cloud information into a more linear product of criticism; experiment with performance as a means to metacritical analyses of the art of performance or as a means to critical analyses of artistic genres in some way conflictive with the art of performance—among, of course, many other possibilities.

Irrespective of the ultimate nature of the possibilities we might confabulate, however, it is fundamental that they all respect one final observation that Gilbert provides towards the end of the dialogue—a reasoning I find really hard to antagonise:

GILBERT: It is to criticism that the future belongs. The subject-matter at the disposal of creation becomes every day more limited in extent and variety. [...] *If creation is to last at all, it can only do so on the condition of becoming far more critical than it is at present.* The old roads and dusty highways have been traversed too often. [...] I myself am inclined to think that creation is doomed. It springs from too primitive, too natural an impulse. However this may be, *it is certain that the subject-matter at the disposal of creation is always diminishing, while the subject-matter of criticism increases daily. There are always new attitudes for the mind, and new points of view.* The duty of imposing form upon chaos does not grow less as the world advances. There was never a time when criticism was more needed than it is now. It is only by its means that Humanity can become conscious of the point at which it has arrived. Hours ago, Ernest, you asked me the use of criticism. You might just as well have asked me the use of thought. *It is criticism, as Arnold points out, that creates the intellectual atmosphere of the age. It is criticism, as I hope to point out myself someday, that makes the mind a fine instrument.* (Wilde 2007:1011-12; my emphases)

To conclude, and also to pave the way for the next chapter, I believe I should mention a fragment of one of Charles Baudelaire's critical essays in which he seems to synthesise not only my own thesis, but also the theses that Wilde himself suggests in his essays; in *The Salon of 1846* (1868-69; 1956), in an essay precisely titled "What is the Good of Criticism?", Baudelaire writes:

I sincerely believe that the best criticism is that which is both amusing and poetic: not a cold, mathematical criticism which, on the pretext of explaining everything, has neither love nor hate, and voluntarily strips itself of every shred of temperament. But, seeing that a fine picture is nature reflected by an artist, the criticism which I approve will be that picture reflected by an intelligent and sensitive mind. Thus the best account of a picture may well be a sonnet or an elegy.

But this kind of criticism is destined for anthologies and readers of poetry. As for criticism properly so-called, I hope that the philosophers will understand what I am going to say. To be just, that is to say, to justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons. To extol line to the detriment of colour, or colour at the expense of line, is doubtless a point of view, but it is neither very broad nor very just, and it indicts its holder of a great ignorance of individual destinies.

You cannot know in what measure Nature has mingled the taste for line and the taste for colour in each mind, nor by what mysterious processes she manipulates that fusion whose result is a picture. Thus a broader point of view will be an orderly individualism—that is, to require of the artist the quality of naivete and the sincere expression of his temperament, aided by every means which his technique provides. An artist without temperament is not worthy of painting pictures, and—as we are wearied of imitators and, above all, of eclectics—he would do better to enter the service of a painter of temperament, as a humble workman. I shall demonstrate this in one of my later chapters. The critic should arm himself from the start with a sure criterion, a criterion drawn from nature, and should then carry out his duty with passion; for a critic does not cease to be a man, and passion draws similar temperaments together and exalts the reason to fresh heights.

Stendhal has said somewhere ‘Painting is nothing but a construction in ethics.’ If you will understand the word ‘ethics’ in a more or less liberal sense, you can say as much of all the arts. And as the essence of the arts is always the expression of the beautiful through the feeling, the passion and the dreams of each man—that is to say a variety within a unity, or the various aspects of the absolute—so there is never a moment when criticism is not in contact with metaphysics.

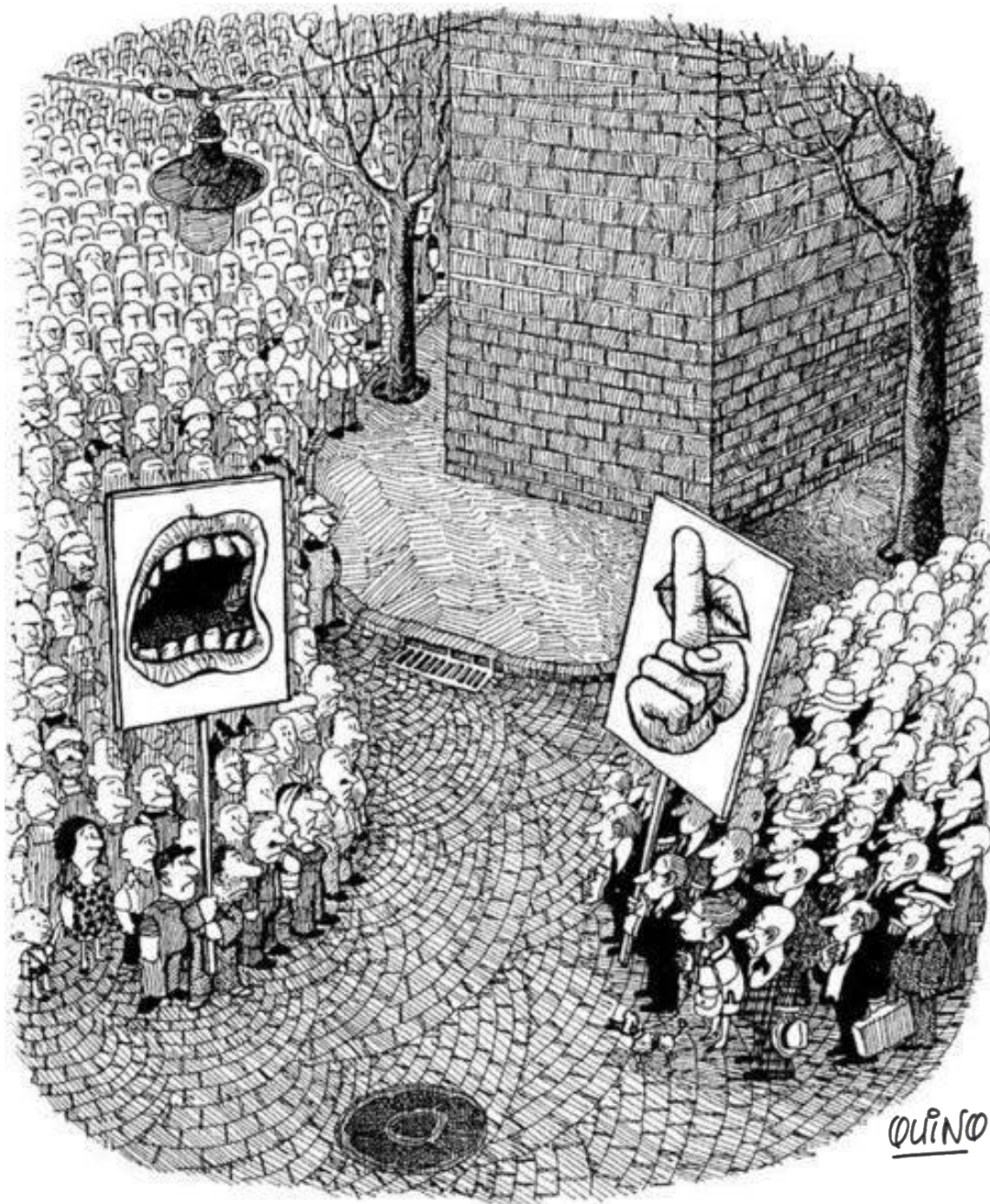
(Baudelaire 1956:41)

Some of the readers might be thinking that I could have just started my argument in this chapter, or maybe even in my entire thesis, with this commentary by Baudelaire; I could not.

If I had begun my discussion with this commentary, I could have passed the very wrong idea that the *creative impressionistic criticism* that discussed here—largely based on Wilde’s conception of *art-criticism*—could have simply been inspired by a circumstantial or even personal *insight*, such as Baudelaire’s in this case; rather, what I tried to make clear is that Wilde’s conception of *art-criticism*, although very similar to Baudelaire’s idealisation of *criticism* in this commentary, is the product of a much larger *movement*—namely, a spontaneity of consciousness that welcomes a sensual and intellectual habit of thinking through art through art, of thinking about the many dimensions and contingencies of art through a new splendour of language, a self-consciously ethical, aesthetical, and epistemological way of thinking through art that is by and large grounded on a complex chain or a complex web of ‘classical receptions.’

So, although I am only quoting Baudelaire’s essay now, in the end of this chapter, it should be clear that it is a major influence on the entirety of my thesis; and, indeed, if so far I have focused my discussion on the *aesthetics of criticism*, on its *form*, on what is *passionate* and *partial* about it, as Baudelaire puts it, in the next chapter I will focus my

discussion on the third aspect that he emphasises as a fundamental component of criticism: its *political* perspective.



Quino

Chapter Three: Aesthetics of Resistance



In the previous chapter, I relied on Oscar Wilde’s theories about the nature of *art criticism*, particularly as he suggests it in “The Critic as Artist,” to contend my own idea about the nature of *art criticism* in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature: simply put, I am convinced that, in order to make sure that we are not re-treating or at least confining ourselves to a purely hermeneutical cause, one of our best options, if not our best option, is to suggest criticisms that are in their own way creative and artistic, that is, criticisms that do not try to clarify the meaning or potential meanings of an artwork through the asceticism of a prosaic analytical discourse, typical of most journals and scholarly monographs, but criticisms that seek, rather, to take this artwork as basis for an entirely new creation—a creation that, in fact, seeks to deliberately experiment with different media, apparatuses, and discourses to deterritorialise this ordinary idea of criticism.

As my argumentation unfolded, I tried to make clear that, although this might seem a rather straightforward contention, there is, really, more to it than meets the eye: on a more *formal* plane, I tried to make clear that, in the context of Aestheticism, especially in the context of Wilde’s thought, this idea of a creatively artistic criticism is the product, perhaps the epitome, of a complex process of ‘classical reception’, a process that not only ended up rehabilitating impressionism as a fundamental means to criticism, but which also ended up establishing creativity and artistry as powerful means to the material expression of these impressions; on a more *philosophical* plane, I tried to make clear that

Aestheticism itself, as a countercultural movement that strongly relied on a Hellenic ethics—or in a spontaneity of consciousness—as a means to bring into question the disadvantages, flaws, and insufficiencies of a Christian morality—or of a severity of conscience—, was a deviant way of thinking that ultimately sought to rehabilitate the ‘care of the self’ as a ruling principle over the ‘knowledge of the self’, a process we can see manifested, for example, in Arnold, Pater, Symonds, and Wilde’s ideas that, both in the enjoyment and in the criticism of art, thought should always be privileged as a phenomenon derivative or somehow intrinsic to the aesthetic experience of this art.

So, in a few words, we can say that in the previous chapter I basically sought to develop an idea of how *criticism*, in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, seems to benefit from an experimentation with *form*.

In this chapter, my reasoning shall take a different turn.

The way I see it, this artistically creative mode of criticism that I have been contending so far should not just be an experiment with *form*; whenever possible, it should, I believe, bring to surface traces of those *social tensions* that justify its own existence, its own coming into existence.

There are, of course, many means by which a critic can provide this kind of treatment to her criticism: she might prefer to rely on the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, for example, to suggest criticisms more properly connected to the dialectics between enlightenment and social exploitation and segregation, or between the complexification of culture and the artistic deauralisation that tends to yield from a massive technical reproduction; she might prefer to rely on different branches of Subaltern Studies to suggest, for instance, criticisms on how advancements in technology and the material means for artistic creation allowed minorities to find new voices to their ordinarily silenced discourses; or she might prefer to rely on the Philosophy of Liberation or on different segments of Decolonial Studies to suggest criticisms whose epistemological reasoning is developed according to principles completely strange to the eurocentrism typically found in most research conducted in scholarly circles today.

The options are really abundant.

Continuing my own hypothesis that ‘classical reception’ might be for us a powerful methodology for investigating the present, in this chapter I would like to explore ‘classical reception’ not as a tool for the improvement of the *aesthetics* of criticism, exactly, as was basically the case of my previous chapter, but as an asset for the improvement of the

social engagement of such criticism, something I believe to have found rather well elaborated in the works of a much more contemporary thinker: Michel Foucault.

As we will see, in spite of the one hundred years that separate Foucault's thought from Wilde's, and in spite of the fact that Foucault seems to mention Wilde only once in his works (Foucault 1988:115)—in a curiously wrong observation, I should say—, both these thinkers seem to share a common interest of the greatest importance for us: namely, the classics as an ethical, aesthetical, and epistemological source of information whose basic working principle of a *spontaneity of consciousness* seems a powerful weapon to counter a *severity of conscience*—in Wilde's case, a *severity of conscience* regulated by Christianity and liberalism; in Foucault's case, a *severity of conscience* regulated by the Pastoral Power of Christianity and the governmentality intrinsic to Capitalism.

I

What must be explained is not why the hungry man steals or why the exploited man strikes, but why most of those who are hungry don't steal and most of those who are exploited don't strike

Wilhelm Reich

Half victims, half accomplices, like everyone else

J.P. Sartre

Dandyism is the assertion of the absolute modernity of Beauty

Oscar Wilde



In 1980, Michel Foucault (1926-84), using the pseudonym Maurice Florence, wrote an entry in the *Dictionnaire des Philosophes* in which he suggests that “[to] the extent that Foucault fits into the philosophical tradition, it is the *critical* tradition of Kant.” (Foucault 1994(4):631) Although at first this might seem a scornful remark, considering, for example, Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) idea of a transcendental individual and a correlated transcendental epistemology, many of the lectures and essays that Foucault prepared in 1978 and between 1983 and 1984 seem to indicate otherwise, that is, they seem to indicate that, on the whole, his historico-philosophical project was, indeed, oriented by a Kantian conception of *critique*, even if this orientation is one of complete reappreciation of the terms of this conception. We can take, for example, *Security, Territory, Population* (1978) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978-79), two Collège de France conferences in

which he discusses the formation of the modern State through the organisation of what he terms *governmentality*, but we can also think of the lectures *What is the Critique?* (1978) and *The Culture of the Self* (1983), and the essay *What is the Enlightenment?* (1984), three works that seem to have spun off from those two lectures, or which at least seem to keep a tight dialogue with it. However, the project championed in these works, which we can consider Foucault's own great project of *critique*, is not directly grounded on any of Kant's major *critical* projects—that is, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Perhaps relying on what he says about Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) in “Piéger sa Propre Culture” (1972)—that is, Bachelard's ability to produce strange, original thoughts by confronting great authors with marginal ones (Foucault 1994(2):382)—, Foucault takes as main reference for his critical project an essay by Kant that is surely a very well-known text for us today, but mostly because in the late 1970's Foucault himself managed to rescue it from the limbo that Kant's minor works had fallen into: the essay—a letter, actually—is the so-called *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784), often translated as *An Answer to the Question: What is the Enlightenment?*, or simply *What is the Enlightenment?*. Taking Kant's letter as an axis of thought, then, and in my own way following Foucault's observation about Bachelard, in this essay I would like to try a theoretical exercise based on Foucault's three minor works that I just mentioned above—*What is the Critique?*, *The Culture of the Self*, and *What is the Enlightenment?*—in order to bring to light the characteristics of the *ethical commitment* or *ethical responsibility* that I have been suggesting from the beginning of this thesis—that is, that every *art criticism*, beyond honouring the artworks under scrutiny through an analysis of an aesthetic experience of it, should always seek to contribute to the maintenance of culture as a place for social redemption by also providing an analysis of the limits that are imposed on us in our own living in the present, and, thereby, by making explicit some of the possibilities to confront, overcome, change, or even destroy these limits.

So, in 1783, the Prussian magazine *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published the following question in its December edition, inviting its readers—mostly politicians, intellectuals, and religious authorities—to provide tentative answers to it: *Was ist Aufklärung?*

That is to say: *What is the Enlightenment?*

Or: *What is enlightenment?*

The most eloquent answer, published one year later, in December 1784, was suggested in a letter by no other than Immanuel Kant, who held this magazine as one of his preferred means of information.

Kant's answer is really curious, because, contrary to what we might expect, it is not exactly a philosophical conjecture and neither does it quite fit into the transcendentalism of his general thought—what might explain why this letter remained for so long a rather marginal document in the whole body of his intellectual production.

Right in the first lines of the letter, Kant suggests that *enlightenment* is literally an *Ausgang*, an 'exit' or a 'way out', a process through which a person or a group of people release themselves from a state of self-incurred *immaturity* in order to reach a state of a therefore self-conscious *maturity*.

In the context of Kant's commentary, a state of *immaturity*, which is the state that really motivates him in his writing, refers to a person's or a group of people's state of voluntary will to accept someone else's *authority* when certain uses of reason are called for: take, for instance, how a person constantly subordinates her thinking to the theses in a book, how she systematically submits her habits to a physician's set of instructions, how she confidently places herself in a position of intellectual and spiritual subservience in relation to a pastor; in these scenarios, this person remains *immature*, she remains in *immaturity*, by not mobilising herself to think outside or beyond the theses in this book, by not trying to improve or experiment with her habits without the supervision of a physician, by not challenging the intellectual and spiritual prescriptions preached by a pastor. The problem of this mechanics between *immaturity* and *maturity*, Kant goes on to suggest, is that it tends to legitimate and perpetuate itself, reciprocally, even when the connection between a given state of *immaturity* and a given state of *maturity* has become obsolete. He explains that there are basically two reasons why people keep themselves in a state of *immaturity*: the first one is *laziness*, for the access to competence almost always depends on the realisation of an arduous work, and the second one is a *lack of courage*, for the access to competence almost always involves facing some kind of danger. Recognising the difficulties and the dangers that stand between a person in a state of *immaturity* and a given competence that might finally ensure her a state of *maturity*, a person already in a state of *maturity*, in order to keep the other person subordinate to her in a state of *immaturity*, tends to emphasise these difficulties and dangers, preventing or at least discouraging her from trying to release herself from *immaturity*, even when reasons for this release are already insinuated, are already somehow perceptible in the reality of the

relationship. But, at this point, Kant's reasoning takes the first of its many surprising turns: according to him, every person in a state of *immaturity* is capable of releasing herself from such state if she is granted and thereby protected by the *freedom* to do so; however, and this is already another surprising turn in his reasoning, this is not *any* kind of *freedom*: it is the *freedom* that a person should have to make a *public use* of her own reason in respect to anything that she might come to find problematic about a certain matter. He provides some examples that go against what he is suggesting; he says that in many places, or under the administration of many rulers, people are deliberately prevented or discouraged from making a public use of their own reason: a high officer in the army of a given state will say to a lower officer: "Don't argue! Just drill!"; a tax collector will say to an ordinary citizen: "Don't argue! Just pay!"; a religious authority will say to one of his followers: "Don't argue! Just believe!", and so on. Now, in yet another surprising turn, Kant finally contends that such restriction of a person's freedom to make a public use of her own reason does not exist in the administration of King Frederick the Great (1712-86), an enlightened despot who, unlike most rulers, would gladly allow his subjects to "argue whatever they wanted," provided that they "obeyed him and did whatever it was they were supposed to do." At this point, Kant's letter starts to become extremely objectionable—what might also explain why it eventually became a minor text in his intellectual production—, but, the truth is, what makes it so objectionable is also what makes it so interesting—and, indeed, much of Foucault's reasoning between the late 1970's and early 1980's seems to take into account his own objections to Kant's contentions here. Halfway through his letter, Kant suggests that a person has basically two ways of using her reason: she can make a *private* use of her reason and she can make a *public* use of her reason. A person makes a *private* use of her reason, Kant says, when she is a cogwheel running inside a machine, that is, when she is exercising a specific work that she is formally and socially responsible for: for example, when a priest is using his reason to write a sermon to be read to an audience, he is making a *private* use of his reason; in this sense, he exercises his reason solely from inside the circumscribed position of a priest, a position in which he has to respect certain rules established by his church in order to accomplish specific ends in contribution to his society. Now, a person makes a *public* use of her reason when she elaborates her own concerns about a problem regarding a work that she is formally and socially responsible for in order to share them with her society, so that these concerns, initially *private* to her, become a general contribution to those who might eventually benefit from having access to them: for example, when a priest, using

his own reason, realises that there are flaws in the way that his church is run, he has the opportunity—and even the obligation—to publicly bring these flaws into question so that the administration of his church can be improved, thus assuming a position in which he still respects his work as a priest, but from which he is also able to make a general contribution to those who might benefit from his use of his reason—the church itself or those who wish to be led by him in catechism. An objection that we can make to Kant’s idea of *enlightenment* is, of course, that, although it is not really a conformist idea—for it does seek to establish conditions under which changes can be effectuated—it certainly does not provide too much room for a liberation of those in a state of *immaturity* so that they can reach a state of *maturity*—for, all in all, a person’s *public* use of her reason tends to remain subservient to her *private* use of her reason: “think whatever you want, but obey!”, would be the maxim describing this logic. We can accept that there is an internal consistency in Kant’s text, for he seems to admit that there can be a hierarchy connecting people in states of *immaturity* and *maturity*, a pyramidal structure on the top of which we should find King Frederick himself, that enlightened despot who, as a fortunate consequence of his own enlightenment, is a *mature* person aware of the importance of welcoming the *maturity* of others into his population. However, it is quite clear that in his letter Kant does not account for those social scenarios in which this process of *enlightenment*—the release from a state of self-incurred *immaturity* in order to reach a state of therefore self-conscious *maturity*—is neglected, discouraged, suppressed, or outrightly forbidden; neither does he really account for the characteristics of the connections that bind a person or a group of people in a state of *immaturity* to a person or a group of people in a state of *maturity*—such as the obligations or responsibilities that a person in a position of *immaturity* has or should have in relation to a person in a position of *maturity*, and vice-versa. Whatever the case, the reason why Foucault admires Kant’s letter so much seems perfectly valid, seems perfectly understandable: by trying to define the process of *enlightenment* that characterises the historical moment that we know today as the *Enlightenment*, which is the very moment that he is living and in which he is writing, Kant seems to be actively inaugurating a remarkable *mode of thinking* in the philosophy of history—namely, an inquiry into a person’s relationship with her own present, an inquiry that, by seeking to understand the *limits* of what is possible for a person to *know* about *herself* and her own *living* in her world, brings into question a new variable: the relationship that this person establishes with the power networks that structure this present of hers. (see Kant in Schmidt 1996:58-64)

Simply put, then, if *criticism*, as I discussed it in my previous chapters, seeks to examine the subjective-impressive connection that a critic establishes with her own aesthetic experience of an artwork, *critique*, as I will discuss in the following pages, seeks to examine the power relations and power strategies that a critic may bring to light while elaborating the *criticism* of an artwork; although I do not consider a *critique* dimension absolutely essential to a good *criticism*, I am inclined to think that aesthetic experiences—as a person’s enjoyment of the tensions between reason, imagination, and sensuality triggered by every phenomenon in its own way artistic—might work as an effective means to help the critic bring to surface forms of power that are not really perceptible without their intervention, their participation, their mediation.

Clearly, then, although Kant’s letter does seem to suggest an original way of thinking about the individual—that is, through an emphasis on the individual as a person whose limits of living are always bound to webs of knowledge and webs of power—, we should not read it in isolation.

In fact, as we will now see, although Foucault objectively deals with Kant’s letter in the three minor essays that I just mentioned above—*What is the Critique?*, *What is the Enlightenment?*, and *The Culture of the Self*—, one of his first analytical cautions is to bring the content of this letter to the material reality of his own present, rejecting what was only valid to Kant himself in his own time.

Before I effectively begin my discussion of Foucault’s work, however, I should call the readers’ attention to a rather curious matter that makes me read these works as complementary, as three approaches to a same problem.

When Foucault delivered *Qu’est-ce que la Critique?* to the French Society of Philosophy in May 1978, he had not yet made his mind about the appropriate title to this conference; apologetically, he explains that he had come up with a title in his flight from Japan, but had prudently avoided it because he realised it was too “indecent,” particularly to an audience of philosophers. (Foucault 2015:33) Although to the reader the title he had in mind becomes clear right in the first pages, in the end of his communication he reveals that the title he had first considered was, in fact, “Qu’est-ce que l’Aufklärung?” (Foucault 2015:58), but, since this is probably *the* most controversial question troubling the whole realm of philosophy since it was first posed in the late 18th century, he decided to drop it. However, the fact that he told this story to his audience right before the lecture itself is clearly a ruse: by saying that he was not going to try to answer the question “Qu’est-ce que l’Aufklärung?”, to try to answer this question was exactly what he was going to do—

and he was going to do so by trying to bring Kant's hypotheses in his letter to the reality of his own present. Notwithstanding this stratagem, however, the fact that this lecture came to be titled "Qu'est-ce que la Critique?" is a very fortunate closure for us: although, for Foucault, the idea of *critique* is truly consanguine with the idea of *Aufklärung*, it soon becomes clear that, for him, *critique* is fundamentally a healthy term, whereas *Aufklärung* is fundamentally an unhealthy one, so that, in this lecture, what he does is oppose his own beneficial idea of *critique* to the controversial idea of *Aufklärung*. Now, if in the late 1970's, Foucault avoided using the title "Qu'est-ce que l'Aufklärung?" in his lecture, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" is precisely the title that he gave to one of the last essays that he wrote before his untimely death in 1984. I find this a really curious essay, not only because it seems to remain a marginal reference in Foucault's intellectual production in spite of its clear epistemological quality, but also because this quality seems to be a consequence of the fact that this essay seems to work as Foucault's intellectual testament, it sounds very much like his own last words to someone who asked him what his plans were and where they had come from. In other terms, I would say that this essay is a sort of "Introduction to Michel Foucault," but precisely because he wrote it retrospectively, thinking back at his own intellectual production, all the way from his last writings to that very first essay that seems to have begun everything: Immanuel Kant's *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*. Now, to conclude, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" is discreetly but beautifully connected to the last work that I mentioned above, the lecture titled *La Culture de Soi*, which Foucault delivered at the University of Berkeley about a year before, in April 1983. Those who read "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" will notice that, although Foucault is mostly interested in an examination of Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*, one of its sections seems to completely deviate from this main subject matter—namely, the section in which he debates Charles Baudelaire's conception of *modernity* (Foucault in Rabinow 1984:39-42), which is also, and perhaps not surprisingly, the section in which he hints at the fact that this conception, in the end, is not at all distant from the Ancient Greeks' conception of *ethos*, or *ethics*. (Foucault 1984:39) In *La Culture de Soi*, these two halves are somewhat inverted: in this lecture, Foucault takes Kant's letter just as a starting point to a much broader discussion of the Greco-Roman ethical precept of the 'culture of the self'—which we can understand as a sort of hypernym idea referring to the balance between the 'care of the self' and the 'knowledge of the self'—, so that this precept eventually operates as an *alternative* to the flaws and insufficiencies that, in light of his own contemporaneity, Foucault finds in Kant's reasoning. The way I see it, then,

La Culture de Soi seems to exist in a condition of complementarity in relation to “Qu’est-ce que la Critique?” and “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?”, providing options to the dilemmas that Foucault seems to have found when reading Kant’s idea of *Aufklärung* and when thinking about the problematic evolution of this concept throughout history.

To sum up, then, we can understand Foucault’s thought in these three works as an attempt to overcome Kant’s idea of *Aufklärung* by providing his own idea of *critique*, whose greatest material expression is based on a renovation of the Greco-Roman precept of the ‘culture of the self’, which involves a balance between the ‘care of the self’ and the ‘knowledge of the self’.

As Foucault insists on several occasions, in the history of the *subject*—that is, in the history of the relationship that a subject establishes with herself through thinking and acting in the world—, the ‘care of the self’ was progressively engulfed and suffocated by the ‘knowledge of the self’, a process that seems to have found its epitome in the philosophy of René Descartes (1596-1650) in the early 17th century—what Foucault himself loosely but frequently refers to as the “Cartesian turn,” that is, that moment in the history of the subject when, simply put, mind and matter were split in order to assure mind an authority over matter, including an authority of mind over the body.

In Greco-Roman culture, however, the hierarchy between these two precepts was actually somewhat the opposite: the ‘knowledge of the self’ was always subsumed to the ‘care of the self’, often simply because to ‘know oneself’ is but one dimension of the inexhaustible process of ‘caring for oneself’; and this is so because, throughout most part of this culture, the exercise of the mind is coextensive with the exercise of the body, that is, it is impossible to take care of the mind without taking care of the body, just as it is impossible to take care of the body without taking care of the mind.

Considering how, in my thesis, a purely hermeneutical approach of literature and art in general is mostly associated to an overly Cartesian perspective, to an exaggerated subsumption of both thought and sensuality to the ‘knowledge of the self’, a post-hermeneutical approach of literature and art in general should be logically associated to a less or even counter-Cartesian perspective, to a rehabilitation of the ‘care of the self’ as a dominant precept over the precept of the ‘knowledge of the self’.

This in part explains my working definition of *aesthetic experience*: when I say that an aesthetic experience can be understood as a person’s enjoyment of the tensions between reason, imagination, and sensuality triggered by every phenomenon in its own way artistic, I am considering that aesthetic experiences can be productively understood

through the prism of *ethics*, that is, as real coalescences between the ‘care of the self’ and the ‘knowledge of the self’.

After all, in the context of Greco-Roman culture, the ‘aesthetics of existence’, this attempt to ‘live life as a work of art’, is simply an attempt to turn *life*, to turn the *act of living*, into the perfect *medium of aesthetic experience*.

Therefore, considering how the Materialities of Literature, as a discipline and methodology coordinated by a post-hermeneutical epistemology, can be associated to an *ethical* study of the *subject*, they should always seek to make clear the advantage of rehabilitating the ‘care of the self’ as truly consanguine with the ‘knowledge of the self’—a perspective that, I believe, will always be somehow connected to the subject as a matrix of aesthetic experiences, experiences that might be triggered by a contact with a phenomenon in some way artistic or by an exploration of her own living in the world.

In a way, then, by discussing how Oscar Wilde—and the other members of Aestheticism—sought to overcome a strictness of conscience through and in order to improve a spontaneity of consciousness, and by discussing how he sought to rehabilitate the influence of aesthetic experiences in the process of making the individual and her intellect feel themselves alive, I have already discussed much of the epistemological bases of what I am going to discuss now about the theories of Michel Foucault.

The difference, as we will see, is that, whereas Wilde’s concerns seemed to revolve around the individual in relation to the living of certain aesthetic experiences, Foucault’s concern seems to revolve around the reasons why the subject always seems to find herself constrained or conditioned to live some experiences while being prevented from living a great number of others.

I find it significant that Foucault delivered *What is the Critique?* at the Sorbonne in May 1978 because this means that this lecture be-

longs somewhere between *Security, Territory, Population*, a course that he taught at the Collège de France between January and April 1978, and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, his following course at this same institution, taught between January and April 1979.



In very crude terms, I would say that, whereas *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics* deal with the organisation of reticular forms of *positivity*, with reticular forms of productive forces, *What is the Critique?* seems to anticipate much of Foucault's ethical phase (aprox. 1978-84) by dealing with the organisation of subjective forms of *negativity*, with subjective forms of reactive forces whose overall goal is precisely to stand up against the flaws or excesses of those positivities, of those reticular forms of productive forces.

Although Foucault's archaeological-genealogical method turns his two Collège de France lectures into extremely long and extremely complex investigations, their transversal idea is rather easy to understand, so I will try to synthesise it in my own words, relying on my own theoretical perspectives about them.

My reasons for doing this shall become clearer as this chapter unfolds.

In a word, I would say that Foucault's main object of analysis in *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics* is what he defines as *governmentality*.

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault examines a very curious phenomenon that took place mostly between the 16th and 18th centuries: the emergence, throughout these two hundred years, of a literature fundamentally dedicated to countering the ideas that Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) suggests in *The Prince* (1513; 1532), a political treatise whose basic purpose was to establish the responsibilities of a Prince—particularly those of Lorenzo de Medici (1492-1519), to whom Machiavelli effectively wrote his thesis—in relation to a certain territory of his and the population in it. In simple terms, according to Foucault, Machiavelli's project was to provide answers to the following question: “How and under what conditions can a sovereign maintain his sovereignty?” (Foucault 2007:90) Foucault's emphasis on this question early in his lecture is a wise move because he makes clear right from the start what is actually his conclusion—namely, that the main goal of sovereignty is sovereignty itself, that is, that the main goal of the sovereign is to preserve himself as sovereign while preserving, at the same time, his territory and the population in this territory as his objects of possession. This reasoning is of the greatest importance because it logically leads us to conclude that the Prince himself establishes with the territory and the population upon which he exercises his power not a relation of immanence and community, but a relation of externality and transcendence: there is, in other words, no natural or juridical connection between the Prince—ideally an innate retainer of power—and a given territory of his and the population in this territory—two elements that only exist as a result of this power. At first sight, this might seem a

relationship that is truly beneficial to the Prince, because he literally possesses that which is at the base of his power—after all, the territory and the population are that which tends to provide him the basis of his material resources, wealth, sustenance, security etc.; but, in practice, this relationship is truly fragile, for the Prince often finds himself under the threat of *external* forces—such as invasions, natural catastrophes, or the instability of political agreements—as well as of *internal* forces—such as insubordinations, revolts, diasporas, or diseases. Although Foucault only mentions this *en passant*—because this is not really of his interest at this point of the lecture—, this fragile connection between the Prince, on one side, and a given territory of his and the population in this territory, on the other, seems to naturally bring about an authorisation of *force* as the rationalising principle that coordinates the relations that this Prince establishes—internally—with his territory and the population, and—externally—with other Princes, other territories, and other populations. Countering Machiavelli’s hypotheses on the mechanics of sovereignty, Foucault goes on to explain, many treatises emerged throughout the 16th and 18th centuries suggesting what we can roughly understand as “arts of government,” that is, alternatives to this ultimately fragile bond that connects the Prince to his territory and the population in it. In general, what these “arts of government” suggest is a dispersion of the sovereign’s power throughout the territory and the population in this territory so that these three dimensions—sovereign, territory, and population—become tangled in a somewhat singular but truly complex nexus of administrative connections. From a different perspective, we can accept that what these “arts of government” suggest is a decentralisation of the sovereign’s power through the localisation and specification of a number of different forms of power diffused throughout the territory and the population themselves. So, for example, in order to be able to control occasional insubordinations, a sovereign should try to find strategies to keep himself informed at all times of potential reasons for insubordination: since insubordinations tend to be reactions to problems such as housing, famine, mobility, violence, or poor sanitation, the role of a more localised and more specific power is to regulate, for example, the number of people in the territory—including deaths, births, and pregnancies—, the production of all sorts of goods—from agriculture to manufacture, from access to water to the access to a consumer market—, the range and quality of roads—inside the territory itself or between different territories—, the focus and frequency of public and private disorders—taking into account the reasons for them, such as poverty, inequality, lack of infrastructure etc.—, the habits, hygiene, and diseases of the population—from the verification of these elements to their treatment, confinement,

or alienation. In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault describes this new modality of the government of others through the localised exercise of power as *governmentality*: *governmentality* describes, therefore, a mode of governance that emerged between the 16th and 18th centuries and which has as its focus, not a sovereign's transcendent and monolithic power over a territory and the population in this territory, but the sovereign's immanent and probabilistic power through the dispersion and specification of different forms of power throughout a territory and the population living in this territory.



It should be noted, therefore, that, for Foucault, *governmentality* describes not only a sovereign's dispossession of his transcendent sovereignty, but also the emergence of a wholly new form of sovereignty—namely, the Modern State. Although Foucault only mentions this *en passant*, I find it truly clarifying that the word *statistics* appears as a consequence of this new form of sovereignty, of this new coextension between a government, a territory, and a population: *statistics* is precisely the science of the Modern State, it is the means by which a government can account for its own territory and population in order to control them, in order to fathom their nature and progression; *statistics* is that which describes and thereby defines a State's numbers, its people, production, inequality, violence, security, stability, instability etc. Now, although I am mostly explaining Foucault's hypotheses in *Security, Territory, Population*, these hypotheses are themselves

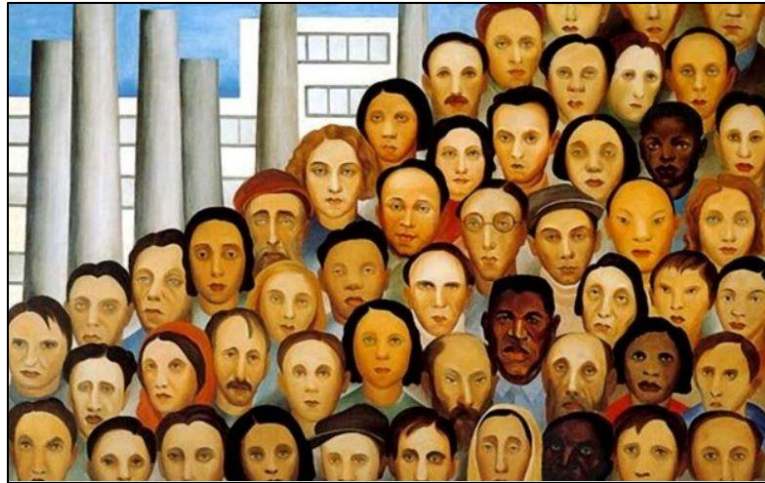
coextensive with his hypotheses on what he describes as *biopolitics*, that is, the idea that the government of a Modern State—including the government of most of our contemporary countries—is largely based on the control of the very lives, of the very living of its population. If *governmentality* describes a reticular localisation and specification of a government's power throughout a population, it is only natural that this power becomes *microphysical*, that is, it is only natural that this power will be more objectively exercised upon the dimension of the population itself, through a regulation of its entire nature and movement, through a regulation of its citizens' very acts of *living*: if a government wants to make sure that it has access to a quality workforce, that it can manage social violence, that it can understand the typical thoughts, morals, and actions in the households in its territory, it must control, for example, the education, the health, the beliefs, the information of its population; if a government wants to establish some kind of hegemony over its population, it must control what it is possible for this population to think, know, say, do, and feel, so that it must exercise some kind of *normative control* through different kinds of *dispositifs*—that is, different *means of positivisation*—, such as health, juridical, scientific, educational, disciplinary, economic, technological, and religious institutions, along, of course, with the *discourses* that these institutions are ultimately able to organise around themselves and disperse throughout the population.

As we can see, then, a central problem in the idea of *governmentality*, in this reticular and capillary expansion of power relations that have as their main objects of concern the population and its subjects, is that power presents itself not anymore as a sort of entity that one owns—like Machiavelli's sovereign—, but as omnipresent, contingent, and specific sets of driving forces that constrain the population and its subjects into complying with certain regimes of truth—thereby inevitably normalising what is possible for them to think, know, say, do, feel etc.



We can say, therefore, that *governmentality* refers to that mode of government, to that mode of State administration, in which the *conduct* of the population and its subjects is at the base of its political project: by controlling the *dispositifs* of public administration, the government, the State, controls what can be thought, known, said, done, and felt, so

that, by controlling the *dispositifs* of public administration, the government, the State, determines and thereby normalises what can be accepted as the *conduct* of the subjects that together constitute a population.



Now, perhaps the most intriguing aspect of *Security, Territory, Population* is that, in this course, Foucault finds a remarkable similarity between the *modus operandi* of his own idea of *governmentality* and of that which he refers to as the *pastoral power* of Christianity, or, more precisely, the *pastoral power* of the Catholic church.

Although in *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault never establishes a clear *mediation* between his own idea of *governmentality* and what he finds in the *pastoral power* of the Catholic church, his studies on the *government* of people lead him to realise that there are many contact points between these two dimensions: while *governmentality* seems to refer to a secular and pragmatic strategy of controlling the *conduct* of the population as a mass of subjects, the *pastoral power* seems to refer to a spiritual and dogmatic strategy of controlling the *conduct* of subjects as individuals in certain groups or populations.

What *governmentality* and the *pastoral power* have in common, then, is the fact that, in both of them, but in their own specificities, the subject constantly finds herself being *conducted* by external forces towards specific ends: if, in the *pastoral power*, the subject constantly finds her access to a given truth regulated by a *pastor* and the whole body of dogmatic *dispositifs* of her faith, in a case of *governmentality*, the subject constantly finds her access to a given truth regulated by some form of *government* and the whole body of pragmatic *dispositifs* of her society. What *governmentality* and the *pastoral power* have in common, then, is the fact that, in both of them, but in their own specificities, the subject constantly finds herself dispossessed of her ability to *conduct* herself

towards specific ends—the subject constantly finds herself, indeed, in a position of *obedience*: in the context of a *pastoral power*, the subject constantly finds herself having to renounce herself in the many dimensions of her *will* in favour of dogmatic truths—she has to renounce her ability to think for herself, to experiment with her own body, to stand up against the dogmas of her faith etc.; in a context of *governmentality*, the subject also constantly finds herself having to renounce herself in the many dimensions of her *will*, but this time in favour of pragmatic truths—she will have to exercise her thinking within the limits of certain acceptable epistemologies, she might have to renounce her exploration of her own body in face of certain jurisdictions, she might be constrained into assuming certain social positions as a consequence of a given morality, tradition, jurisdiction, economic pressure etc.

But, where exactly does Foucault's idea of *critique* fit in all this?

In *What is the Critique?*, after excusing himself for not giving a title to his lecture, Foucault goes on to explain that his main objective is to provide a tentative genealogy of this *thing* that he understands as *critique*, anticipating that, for him, *critique* is not just a person's attempt to *recognise the limitations* that she finds when trying to use her own reason, like Kant suggests, but rather an *attitude*, “a certain manner of thinking, saying, and also acting, a certain relationship to all that exists, to all that we can know, to all that we can do, a relationship to society, to culture, and also to everyone else.” (Foucault 2015:34; my translation) More concretely, this *critique*, this *critical attitude*, he then explains, “is the movement by which the subject grants herself the right to interrogate the truth under its effects of power and the power under its discourses of truth.” (Foucault 2015:39; my translation), which means that this *critique*, that this *critical attitude*, has as its main objects of interrogation not *power* and not *truth* themselves, but the *dispositifs of governmentality* that control the access from one to the other: considering how the objective of *critique* is not to question the existence of *power* and the existence of *truth* in *themselves*, but to question their *nature* or *ontology* in the present conditions of a subject's material reality, the main goal of *critique* is, therefore, not to effect a perfect emancipation from government, but to effect, as perfectly as possible, the subjection to a more convenient form of government.

In Foucault's own words:

I do *not* mean to say with this that against *governmentalisation* there would be a sort of face to face contrary affirmation that “we don't want to be governed, and we don't want to be

governed *at all*.” What I mean to say is that, in this great disquiet around the manner of governing and around the researches on the manners of governing, we come to recognise a perpetual question—namely, “how can we not be governed *in this way*, by these people, in the name of these principles, in order to attain these objectives, and by means of these processes; not in this way, not for this reason, not by these people?”; and, if we attribute to this movement of *governmentalisation*, of individuals as well as of society, its historical insertion and the dimension that I believe it has, then it seems to me that we would be able to place on its side that which I would roughly call a *critical attitude*. In opposition, and as counterpart—or, rather, as a partner and adversary of the arts of government, as a way of suspecting them, rejecting them, limiting them, finding to them a just measure, transforming them, as a way of trying to escape these arts of government, or, in any case, of displacing them, in order to find an essential reticence, but also and for this very reason as line in the development of the arts of government, there would have been something born in Europe at this time [from the 15th to the 18th centuries], some form of general culture, at the same time a moral and political attitude, a manner of thinking etc., that I would simply call the art of not being governed, or the art of not being governed in this way and at this cost. And I would propose, therefore, as a summary definition of *critique*, this general characterisation: the art of not being governed along these lines. [*l’art de n’être pas tellement gouverné*] (Foucault 2015:36-37; my translation)

Now, as Foucault explains early in his lecture, there are many paths that a researcher can take when suggesting a genealogical evolution of a given problem (Foucault 2015:35), each path leading to a different story, to a different conclusion; what shall interest me for the next pages, then, are the events and practices that he chose as the historical points of anchorage for the genealogy of what he understands as *critique* or *critical attitude*—namely, the ethical reactions of those people who at some point found themselves at odds with the *pastoral power* to which they had subjected themselves in their exercises of religion, in their acceptance of the Christian faith and, thereby, of the Catholic church. I, however, will not provide any archaeological analyses here because they would be an inconveniently long enterprise; I will only synthesise what Foucault seems to recognise as key events in the organisation of such ethical reactions, so that my archaeology here is, in the best of cases, a second-hand archaeology. I believe my reasons for doing this are already pretty clear, but, hopefully, they shall become even clearer as my discussion unfolds: in the previous chapter, we saw how Aestheticism was largely oriented by a detachment from a strictness of conscience—centred on a Christian morality—and a rehabilitation of a spontaneity of consciousness—centred on a Hellenic ethics; in the next pages, I will try to show how Foucault also seems to rely on this logic—a

detachment from a strictness of conscience promoted by a Christian morality and a rehabilitation of a spontaneity of consciousness promoted by a Hellenic ethics—when identifying the strictness of conscience typical of the pastoral power as a possible root for the organisation of a critique or a critical attitude and when finding in the spontaneity of consciousness typical of the Greco-Roman culture possible alternatives for the practice, for the materialisation, for the realisation of this *critical attitude* in the present.

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault mentions a great number of sources from which he began the distillation of his general understanding of the *pastoral power* later institutionalised by the Catholic church; some of the most important are: John Chrysostom's *De Sacerdotio*, Saint Cyprian's *Epistles*, Saint Ambrose's *De Officiis Ministrorum* and the *Liber Pastoralis*, John Cassian's *Conferences*, Saint Jerome's *Letters*, and Saint Benedict's *Rules*. From the reading of these texts, Foucault comes to the conclusion that, transversally, they all seem to suggest an idea of *pastorate* based on three crucial elements: first, the pastorate is *dogmatic*, since its fundamental goal is to conduct the individuals to *salvation*; second, the pastorate is endowed with *juridical power*, since, for individuals and communities to earn their salvation, they must first abide by the orders or commands of God, mediated by some kind of ecclesiastical authority; third, the pastorate is connected to *truth*, since an individual's earning of her salvation is conditional upon her belief, acceptance, exercise, and profession of a given truth—say, the very existence of God, the realisation of a weakness, the awareness of a temptation, the resistance to a temptation, the accomplishment of an act of faith, the recognition, repentance, and cleansing from a sinful act or thought etc. (see Foucault 2007:167) But, Foucault's point is that, in this scenario, from within this web of connections binding together the *pastor*, the *individual*, and the *community*, a new set of obligations seems to arise, obligations that are, in turn, largely grounded on a point of contact between *conduct*, *humility*, and *will*. A *pastor* who *conducts* an individual or a community to *salvation* does not do so out of his own *free will*; he does this because, as a *pastor*, it is his duty, before God, the church, the individual, and the community, to abdicate of any other *will* of his own in order to comply with what was entrusted to him the moment he became a *pastor*—a *pastor* to an individual and to a community alike. An *individual* who *is conducted* to *salvation* by her *pastor* does not do this out of her own *free will*, either; she accepts this because, as a child of God, it is her burden, before God, the pastor, the church, and the community, to abdicate of any other *will* of hers in order to attain that which was expected, demanded, or commanded from her the moment she accepted God in *herself*—*herself* as a child of God

and *herself* an individual in the larger community of God. We can recognise here the logic that Kant emphasises in his letter: an individual builds for herself and preserves herself in a state of *immaturity* when she accepts the conditions in which she will find herself *conducted* by someone in a state of *maturity*, that is, by someone who, unlike herself, has better access to or is more knowledgeable of the truths that she, from a position of *immaturity*, is seeking to attain. In fact, Foucault explains, the logic of subordination typical of the Christian pastorate—what he repeatedly describes as the logic of the *pastor* and his *sheep* (see Foucault 2007:175)—is so strong, is so well established as the pastorate’s very *raison d’être*, that it can be placed on the top of three truly solid pillars: first, and obviously, the pastorate is a relationship in which an individual submits herself to another in order to obtain from this subservience guidance into both spiritual and material matters—that is, matters that deal with the elevation or salvation of the soul, such as the nature or the workings of God’s will, and matters that deal with moral issues in the individual’s everyday life, such as the right or constructive actions as opposed to wrong or destructive actions; second, the pastorate is a perfectly autotelic relationship, its principle of humble obedience has no other end but obedience itself, or more obedience, or more perfect obedience, its sole purpose is to progressively conduct the individual to renounce her own will, because the renunciation of her will, or the complexification of her obedience, is both at the base and on the horizon of its existence; third, and this is similar to the Ancient Greeks’ idea of *ethics*, the pastorate assumes that truth is inalienable from action, so that, on the one side, a pastor must always teach by bringing himself forth as an example, and so that, on the other side, his subject must always effectuate her learning by bringing herself forth as an embodiment of that teaching. (see Foucault 2007:180-81) At this point, Foucault’s study becomes even more archaeological, as he sets himself to analyse the *practices*, the *techniques*, that the *pastoral power* seems to employ to *conduct* its individuals to salvation, to control the *conduct* of its individuals so that they can reach a final salvation through the investment of themselves in the accomplishment of good deeds while living their earthly lives. First of all, the pastorate depends on a thorough and constant modulation of the subject’s earthly actions through a pastor’s systematic supervision and direction of this subject’s conduct: for example, the pastor must monitor his subjects’ routines, cleanliness, hygiene practices, eating habits, study hours, praying hours, he must give them tasks to be accomplished, such as clean-ups, gardening, cooking, tending to animals etc. But the pastorate also depends on this extremely important practice that we can broadly understand as *spiritual direction* or *spiritual guidance*, but which Foucault

himself originally refers to as *direction de conscience*, which, of course, literally means *direction of conscience*. It is curious to notice, at this point in Foucault's lecture, that he openly relies on the Ancient Greek culture to explain the general idea of a *spiritual direction*—an expression that I consider more suitable for us because it avoids the word *conscience*, which, in the context of my discussion, alludes to the sense of *guilt* intrinsic to a Christian morality: first, he explains that, in Ancient Greek culture, *spiritual directions* were *voluntary*, that is, if a person found the necessity of some kind of spiritual guidance—say, to cope with a problem or simply to be educated in some specific matter—, she would go to a counsellor for help, and would often pay for it; second, in this culture, *spiritual directions* were circumstantial, that is, they were by no means compulsory to the people—in fact, in ordinary circumstances, the Ancient Greeks would only have their conducts regulated by the law, by persuasion, or by themselves—, so that, in general, they would only resort to a *spiritual direction* if necessity came up; third, and logically, in this culture, *spiritual directions* normally had a teleological goal—namely, to help the person take control of all that was or had gone out of her control so that she could become a self-conscious master of herself—, so that they normally lasted for as long as it took for the person to attain this self-mastery. (see Foucault 2007:181-82) In a pastorate context, these three dimensions have a completely different mechanics—a completely opposite way of functioning, I would say: first, in Christian practice, *spiritual direction* is by no means voluntary—it is, indeed, inalienable from the systematic *conductions* in which the person constantly finds herself in, which is only logical, considering how the pastorate's very principle assumes that the subject will never find any sort of spiritual perfection until her earthly time has ended; second, in this practice, *spiritual direction* is by no means circumstantial—it is, indeed, constant, organised, progressive, scrutinising, for the pastorate's very principle assumes that, since the subject will never find any sort of spiritual perfection until her earthly time has ended, it is its duty, it is the duty of the pastor, to make sure that the subject will, eventually, attain this perfection when her time has come; third, and logically, in this practice, *spiritual directions* invariably had an autotelic goal—namely, to help the person transfer the control of all the dimensions of her life to another authority, whether or not they are a problem for her, so that she could abdicate from her own mastery of herself—, so that they invariably lasted for the entirety this person's subservience to her pastor.

But, in this context, many questions seem to arise.

For example, what if the subject's experience of subservience shows her that the way she is being conducted is not leading her any closer to her experience of God or to her attainment of a given truth?

What if, in her own practices of subservience, the subject comes to realise that she does not want anyone mediating her faith or devotion to God?

What if the practices of subservience themselves prove to be ineffective or even potentially harmful to the subject?

What if the pastor or the church, which should be examples of their own teaching, eventually prove to be doing the exact opposite of what they preach?

What if the subject finds in her own reading of the Bible a means to be closer to the word of God?

Of course, I am in part raising some of the questions that eventually led to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, but the truth is, I am also raising some of the questions that eventually led to the Counter-Reformation organised by the Catholic Church a few years later, a movement that finally led to more intricate changes in the core of the pastorate practices—changes that, in fact, can be understood as more *ethical reactions* to the old practices of conduct regulated by the pastoral power.

But, what exactly are these *ethical reactions*?

First of all, a question of vocabulary.

Halfway through the lecture of 1 March 1978, still in *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault explains that, as he singled out the many strategies employed by the subjects to stand up against the faulty pastoral practices that they found themselves tangled in, a problem of *formal definition* came up: for example, these *reactions* cannot be described as *revolts* because the word *revolt* is too strong and generally refers to a movement that is too organised to properly describe these practices that were completely moderate and diffuse; these *reactions* cannot be described as *disobedience* or *insubordination*, either, because the subjects' problem is not that they want to emancipate themselves from the pastorate power, but that they want to obey this power in a different way, they want to subject themselves to this power in order to attain different results; the word *dissent* could be used to describe these *reactions*, because what these *reactions* seek is in fact a sort of alternative means to the attainment of similar goals, but the problem is that the word *dissent* seems to be way too localised on a political context strictly understood—especially since the Cold War (1947-91). (see Foucault 2007:200-02) Besides, there seems to be a more suitable expression to describe these *ethical reactions*, an expression

that in fact relies on the very etymology of the problem under scrutiny: the expression *counter-conduct*. Considering how the *ethical reactions* that we will see are not products of an organised movement that had as its goal some kind of uprising against the pastorate, considering how they do not seek any emancipation from the pastorate itself, and considering how they are more properly alternative ways of conducting spiritual exercises than some kind of divergence or factionalism, the expression *counter-conduct* seems, indeed, to be the most convenient one: after all, as we will see now, what these *ethical reactions* sought were *other forms of conduct*, particularly *other forms of conduct* that gave to the subjects themselves more freedom, more power over their own *conducts*, over their own strategies to *conduct* themselves towards God, towards salvation, towards the attainment of some kind of truth. (see Foucault 2007:202-04) In fact, here we can already see how Foucault's idea of *counter-conduct* seems to be at the base of his idea of *critique* or *critical attitude*: a *counter-conduct* is not a movement through which the subject seeks not to be governed; the subject still wants to be governed, she still wants to be conducted, but she wants to be conducted in another way, by other people, at different costs, in the name of different purposes. (see Foucault 2015:36-39)

The most obvious strategy of *counter-conduct*, I believe, is what Foucault refers to as *asceticism* or *ascesis*—words that derive from the Ancient Greek ἄσκησις ‘exercise’, ‘practice’, ‘training’, ‘attention’ etc.—, this hypernym expression to describe a great number of exercises of a very special and also very specific kind: *exercises of the self on the self*. Simply put, an *ascesis* is a very singular type of exercise in that it consists of a battle of progressive difficulty that involves a subject's struggle against herself as an earthly being in the pursuit of different forms of truth that might eventually lead to the ultimate truth—that is, to God or salvation. But, as Foucault well puts it, what is the criterion of this progressive difficulty? It is the subject's own suffering, the ascetic's own progressive suffering. (see Foucault 2007:205) For example, some common *ascetic practices* were exercises like *fasting*, *praying*, *anachoresis*, or *mortification*: in a progressive practice of suffering, then, an ascetic could challenge herself to *fast* for a day, then a week, then a month; she could challenge herself to remain in *prayer* for an hour, then two hours, then three hours etc., and she could challenge herself to remain in *prayer* in spite of the cold or the heat, in spite of her physiological needs or uncomfortable positions etc.; now, *anachoresis* was not necessarily a suffering practice, but it could be turned into one if the ascetic challenged herself, for example, to remain in prayer in isolation, to take increasingly long walks to perfect meditation, to confine herself in solitude in order to study or

simply to deprive herself of the company of others etc.; finally, the ascetic could subject herself to a mortification of her own flesh, for example, through fasting or endurance, but also through self-flagellation, self-deprivation, or self-submission.

Foucault explains:

[Asceticism] strives for a state that, to be sure, is not a state of perfection, but which is nonetheless a state of tranquillity, of appeasement, a state of that *apatheia* I talked about last week, and which is at bottom another kind of asceticism. It is different in the pastoral practice of obedience, but the ascetic's *apatheia* is the mastery he exercises over himself, his body, and his own sufferings. He reaches a stage in which he no longer suffers from what he suffers and in which anything he inflicts on his own body no longer troubles him, no longer disturbs him, and provokes no passion or strong sensation. [...] All in all, it is a matter of overcoming oneself, of vanquishing the world, the body, matter, or even the devil and his temptations. Hence the importance of temptation is not so much that the ascetic must suppress it, as that he must constantly master it. The ascetic's ideal is not the absence of temptations but to reach a point of mastery where he is indifferent to temptation (Foucault 2007:206)

And later on concludes:

This is clearly incompatible with a pastoral structure that (as I said last week) involves permanent obedience, renunciation of the will, and only of the will, and the deployment of the individual's conduct in the world. There is no refusal of the world in the pastoral principle of obedience; there is never any access to a state of beatitude or to a state of identification with Christ, to a sort of final state of perfect mastery, but instead a definitive state, acquired from the outset, of obedience to the orders of others; and finally, in obedience there is never anything of this joust with others or with oneself, but permanent humility instead. (Foucault 2007:207)

Another strategy of *counter-conduct*, one that might have a more transversal effect in the whole body of ascetic subjects, is what Foucault refers to as a *return to the Scriptures*—a strategy that seems to be very well synthesised in Martin Luther's (1483-1546) translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Ancient Greek to the German language of his people. In his lecture, Foucault explains that the Scriptures, of course, were always there as an essential source of information in the pastorate system, but, in practice, they were often relegated to the background of the presence of the pastor himself, whose words, whose teachings, were therefore often a fundamental mediation of or a primary access to God's words. But, clearly, there is an absurd to this: since God's words are God Himself

embodied in the materiality of an earthly language, there should be no intermediaries between this language and God's subjects; every contact between these subjects and the materiality of the language that delivers God's message should be as immediate as possible, the subjects should be as free as possible to reach out for this language, as it is physically tangible in a book, as it is promptly readable in a given translation. As Foucault himself puts it: "[reading] is a spiritual act that puts the faithful in the presence of God's word and which consequently finds its law and guarantee in this inner illumination.", so that, in practice, "[by reading] the text given by God to man, the reader sees the very word of God, and his understanding of it, even when confused, is nothing other than what God wanted to reveal of Himself to man." (Foucault 2007:213) In fact, I should add, this strategy of *counter-conduct* seems to follow a logic somewhat similar to what Foucault refers to as *mysticism*—but which I believe is better described as an *acceptance of mysticism* or a *welcoming of mysticism* or even an *acknowledgment of mysticism*—, this strategy of *counter-conduct* that by definition escapes the game of pastoral power. In the pastorate system, a subject's soul is often brought forward to examination through one very specific strategy of access to truth—the practice of *confession*: in a strict regime of pastorate, the subject constantly finds herself exposing her dreams, nightmares, thoughts, conjectures, temptations, weaknesses etc. to the scrutiny of a pastor, of an authority supposedly more qualified to clarify the nature and the effects all this to her, and, thereby, also more qualified to demand from her specific reactions, specific acts of correction—such as prayers, meditations, discipline, mortification, study etc. However, according to Foucault, throughout the Middle Ages there seems to be a progressive *acknowledgment of mysticism* as an acceptable spiritual practice of the subject in relation to herself: "[in] mysticism the soul sees itself. It sees itself in God and it sees God in itself.", which means that "as an immediate revelation of God to the soul, mysticism also escapes the structure of teaching and the passing on of truth from someone who knows it to someone to whom it is taught, who passes it on in turn." (Foucault 2007:212); also, "mysticism develops on the basis of, and in the form of, absolutely ambiguous experiences, in a sort of equivocation, since the secret of the night is that it is an illumination.", what leads us to conclude that "[in] mysticism ignorance is a knowing, and knowledge has the very form of ignorance." (Foucault 2007:212-13) Foucault never provides any clear archaeological evidence to *mysticism* in particular, but, clearly, we can think of Saint Teresa (1515-82) and her extensive writings describing and pondering about her experience of God and other heavenly phenomena. In fact, although Foucault mentions the renewed importance of the

written word as an instrument for a practice of *counter-conduct*—in what he describes as a *return to the Scriptures*—, he does not discuss in this lecture the importance of the very *act of writing*, as we can verify in Saint Teresa’s *writing of the self*—in this case, her writing of her own mystical experiences.

Now, what is truly remarkable in these strategies of *counter-conduct* in the context of the Christian pastorate is that, although the Christian morality attached to the pastoral power might have contributed to a dominance of the ‘knowledge of the self’ to the detriment of the ‘care of the self’—as a Christian morality seems to have led to practices such as *confessions*, understood as an effort to attain truths forever deferred, and *renunciations*, like the renunciation of the bodily pleasures of the flesh in favour of divine pleasures of the spirit—, for a long time in the history of the pastorate the ‘knowledge of the self’ and the ‘care of the self’ seem to have consistently coexisted, even if in a relationship completely strange to the Greco-Roman culture. For example, although in the end they seek the *suffering* of the subject, the *ascetic practices* that I mentioned above are ultimately a training of the body as a coextension of the soul: by exercising the body to endure increasingly strenuous challenges, the ascetic subject is also cleansing her soul, she is also exercising her soul into getting in contact with higher ethereal experiences. The same can be said, I believe, about the *return to the Scriptures* and the *writing of the self*: although the practices of *reading* and *writing* might not necessarily be exercises as strenuous as those normally found in ascetic practices, they still are an investment of both mind and body as a means to a specific ‘culture of the self’—in the first case, a proximity or even a coalescence between the subject’s earthly life and her own experience of the *word* of God; in the second case, a proximity or even a coalescence between the subject’s earthly life, condensed in the materiality of *writing*, and her own mystical experiences, phenomena that naturally belong in the realm of the ineffable.

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault never makes clear how much of his return to the mechanics of the Christian pastorate is an objective response, an objective archaeological verification of what Kant discusses in *Was ist Aufklärung?*, but his intention, as I have already hinted at a few pages back, seems considerably clear: since a *counter-conduct* consists of an interrogation of authority, not in order to seek an emancipation from this authority, but in order to reconfigure the nature of the submission to this authority, what he understands as *counter-conduct* is clearly at the base of his idea of *critique* or *critical attitude*, this idea that the subject should, as frequently as possible, consider the possibility of granting herself the right to interrogate the truth under its effects of

power and power under its discourses of truth. In fact, in *What is the Critique?*, after synthesising the content of Kant’s letter—more specifically, how Kant’s idea of *Aufklärung* is essentially that of a transition from a state of immaturity to one of maturity through an individual’s initiative of courage to interrogate the power of a certain authority in its effects of truth—, Foucault goes on to suggest that, in modernity and contemporaneity, an individual’s *counter-conduct*, an individual’s *critical attitude*, should not be directed to her submission to a *pastorate control* only, but also to her submission to a much broader *governmentality network*. (see Foucault 2015:41-43) Or, put another way, whereas *counter-conducts* were desubjection strategies through which individuals would question authority—centred on the Church, or the pastorate system, and its pastors—in order to be *conducted* differently, *critical attitudes* are desubjection strategies through which individuals should question authority—centred on the State, or the government, and its dispositifs—in order to be *governed* differently. At this point, I believe, we can even go back to what I quoted from Nietzsche in my **Introduction** many pages ago: “[to] what extent even our intellect is a consequence of conditions of existence?: we would not have it if we did not *need* to have it, and we would not have it *as it is* if we did not need to have it *as it is*, if we could live *otherwise*.” (Nietzsche 1968:273)

Now, in *What is the Critique?*, Foucault suggests that the 19th century seems to have seen a reorganisation of society, of the individuals in relation to their government, that in turn can be examined through the prism of the two analytical counterparts in which Kant’s philosophy seems to be divided: on the one hand, “an epistemological critique that establishes the necessary and universal conditions that make legitimate knowledge possible” (Penfield 2014:87), represented by Kant’s *critical project*, and, on the other hand, “a political critique that uncovers the historically contingent and singular conditions that have delimited the range of what we can say, think, and do” (Penfield 2014:87), represented by Kant’s *Aufklärung letter*.

Foucault explains:

This historical occasion that seems to be offered much more to the Kantian *critique* than to courage of *Aufklärung* simply consisted of these three fundamental traits: first, a positivistic science, that is, a science that fundamentally relied on itself, even if it was cautiously critical to all of its own results. Second, the development of a State, or a statist system, that saw itself as the profound reason and rationality of History, and which, on the other side, chose as its instruments processes for the rationalisation of economy and society. Thence the third trait, following this scientific positivism and the development of the State: the science of a State

or a statism, if you wish. Between them, a whole fabric of tight relations is woven, as science will play an increasingly determinant role in the development of productive forces; as, on the other side, state powers will be increasingly exercised by means of refined technical ensembles. Therefore, considering the 1784 question “What is the Enlightenment?”—or, better, the way that Kant, in relation to this question and the answer that he provided to it, tried to insinuate his critical enterprise—, this interrogation will legitimately acquire the form of a distrust or, at least, the form of an increasingly distrustful questioning: for which excesses of power, for which governmentalisation, inescapable inasmuch as they are justified on reason, will not this very reason be historically responsible? (Foucault 2015:43-44; my translation)

So, as we can see, much of Foucault’s project—which, I believe, we can thus understand as a critical philosophy of history centred on the limits of subjectivity—seems announced in this paragraph: on the one side, we have all those *dispositifs* that seek to limit or outrightly produce transversal forms or kinds or *conducts* of subjectivity—such as religious institutions, traditions or moral codes, scientific institutions and their research, law and jurisdiction etc., along, of course, with their *discourses*; on the other side, we have all those *counter-conducts* or *critical attitudes* that seek to stand up against these *dispositifs* and their *discourses* in order to change or expand or outrightly challenge the limits that they normally establish—thereby allowing the subjects to think, know, speak, say, act, and feel otherwise; in a word, thereby allowing the subjects to *live* otherwise.

In *What is the Enlightenment?*, that essay in which Foucault seems to retrospectively synthesise his own philosophical project, he revisits this idea of *critical attitude*, conjecturing the following:

Thinking back on Kant’s text [*Was ist Aufklärung?*], I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by “attitude,” I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an *ethos*. And consequently, rather than seeking to distinguish the “modern era” from the “premodern” or “postmodern,” I think it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of “countermodernity.” (Foucault 1984:39)

I will discuss Foucault’s reference to the Ancient Greeks’ idea of *ethos* in my next essay, so let us leave it at that for the moment; what I would like to discuss now is an aspect of this essay that also seems to bring Foucault’s thought closer to Wilde’s, this

time through a much simpler common denominator: Charles Baudelaire's reflections on the nature of *modernity*.

In the second part of his essay, Foucault suggests, very synthetically, that “[modernity] is often characterized in terms of a consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment,” a sort of constant present-tense appreciation of the world as it is, of all that it can provide to touch our mind and our senses as some kind of beauty, as some kind of pleasure, “[and] this is indeed what Baudelaire seems to be saying when he defines modernity as ‘the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent.’” (Foucault 1984:39) However, and this is where Foucault's essay gets really interesting, he seems to notice, following Baudelaire, that, since *modernity* is a world of ephemerality, fleetingness, and contingency, what a person living in this world should try to grasp is not the nature or the mechanics of this *world* proper, but *her own nature* and *the mechanics of her own living* in this world as a subject, as a vital element in the very construction and experience of this world. In other words, considering how *modernity* seems to be defined by the ephemerality, fleetingness, and contingency of the 19th century—a world increasingly built upon the dense demography and the economic aggressiveness of urban centres and their social frenzy, consumerist and mass cultures, mass communication and technological revolutions etc.—, Baudelaire's strategy—and, by extension, Foucault's strategy—is not to try to fathom what is by definition unfathomable, but to try to channel this undefinable movement through its most fundamental element: the *subject* herself, or *subjectivity* itself. A *modern attitude* is not one of *passive* witnessing of and amazement by the transient presentness of a new world, but an *active* construction and exaltation of this presentness: “this deliberate, difficult attitude consists in recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it,” so that “[modernity] is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to ‘heroize’ the present.” (Foucault 1984:39-40) At this point, it is curious to notice how Baudelaire's and Foucault's conceptions of *modernity* are consanguine with Wilde's, in at least two dimensions: Wilde's *artworks* proper and *himself as an artwork*. The central theme of Wilde's most influential fiction, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is precisely this ephemerality, fleetingness, and contingency of the modern world, a transience narrated from the standpoint of a beautiful young boy who finds himself able to challenge the passing of time and thereby enjoy an eternal present of himself, thereby enjoy himself as an eternal present—an enjoyment so intense, indeed, that he soon also finds himself disdaining of any sense of morality in favour of

his own sense of pleasure, an increasingly sordid sense of pleasure. Wilde's idea of *lie* or *simulacrum*, as he suggests it in "The Decay of Lying," also seems a strategy of grasping the ephemerality, fleetingness, and contingency of the modern world in a subjective instant: if the summary idea of *lie* or *simulacrum* is to see the object as in itself it really is not, it seems legitimate to assume that, if this object is the subject's material reality, a *lie* or a *simulacrum* created from this reality naturally tends to heroise it, naturally tends to eternise it as a singular and transitory moment not just witnessed, but truly felt, truly lived and experienced by the subject. In fact, Wilde's 'aesthetics of existence' and 'art of living'—that is, his *mask* as an aesthete intellectual touring through America and himself as an *artist* or *public figure* in the social circles of Victorian society—seem to give us evidence of his own *dandyism of the senses*, that is, of *himself* as a place for a heightened aesthetic experience of the world in all that this world has to offer.

Foucault explains in his essay about Baudelaire's sense of *modernity*:

The attitude of modernity does not treat the passing moment as sacred in order to try to maintain or perpetuate it. It certainly does not involve harvesting it as a fleeting and interesting curiosity. That would be what Baudelaire would call the spectator's posture. The *flâneur*, the idle, strolling spectator, is satisfied to keep his eyes open, to pay attention and to build up a storehouse of memories. In opposition to the *flâneur*, Baudelaire describes the man of modernity: "Away he goes, hurrying, searching... Be very sure that this man... this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert has an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur*, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance." (Foucault 1984:40)

And later on concludes:

[Modernity] for Baudelaire is not simply a form of relationship to the present; it is also a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself. The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire, in the vocabulary of his day, calls *dandysme*. [...] Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth [what Foucault describes in his theories as a "hermeneutics of the self"]; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not "liberate man in his own being"; it compels him to face the task of producing himself. (Foucault 1984:41)

As I commented a while ago, I find it really curious that Foucault finally titled this essay *What is the Enlightenment?* because, by doing this, he deliberately exposes himself to one of the most controversial questions of modern philosophy—a controversy so great, in fact, that about six years before he had clearly explained the very indecency of even trying to provide a synthetic answer to it. As I said, there are certainly many reasons and no reason whatsoever for this supposed contradiction—such as Foucault’s retrospective understanding of his own philosophical enterprise; a realisation that perhaps this question can be treated in a way so that it does not sound that controversial at all; a recognition of the proximity of death, what might have been translated, on a practical level, as a sense of nothing left to lose or, on the contrary, as a sense that a final conclusion should be suggested to such a long and complex intellectual endeavour. Whatever the case, I believe it is of the utmost importance that Foucault brings back Baudelaire’s idea of *modernity* in this essay because, by doing this, he seems to be considering the hypothesis that the final goal of his project—which, I think, should be divided in four rather than three phases: anthropological, archaeological, genealogical, and ethical—is, in fact, a new kind of *dandyism*, one whose limits of self-experience are self-consciously or critically grounded on the social, political, and cultural limits of the world where this experience takes place, where it is mostly conducted by the subject herself within the changeable limits of all that she finds to be at the base of her own sense of a life worth living. In fact, I believe it is clear by now that this *dandyism* is the conclusion of a reasoning that Foucault began working on with his own reading of Kant’s letter: in his letter, Kant suggests that *enlightenment* is a process through which a person or a group of people release themselves from a state of self-incurred *immaturity* in order to reach a state of self-conscious *maturity*, which means to say that this is a process through which a person or group of people bring themselves the initiative of making use of their own reason without the conduction of someone else’s authority; a fundamental axis of analysis for Kant is the realm of religious matters, a realm in which a person or a group of people willingly subordinate themselves—in their use of reason, in their care for the spirit, in their access to truth etc.—to someone else’s authority in order to be conducted by them; in *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault provides a thorough archaeological analysis of the *pastorate* or the *pastoral power*—this power that grew inside the Catholic church throughout the Middle Ages to the early decades of the 17th century—to explain how this mode of *conduct* of the living can be seen as the perfect scenario for the emergence of different strategies of *ethical reactions*, which Foucault finally describes as *counter-conducts*—not strategies of

rebellion against the pastors and the pastorate, but effective strategies of self-conduction, of a person's granting herself the agency of her own spiritual cultivation through different practices, techniques, exercises, ascetes; now, although Foucault never provides a clear mediation between the strategies of conduction employed by the regimes of *pastorate* and those employed by regimes of *governmentality*, he does suggest that these two regimes seem to share a great number of common traits that finally allow us to find in regimes of *governmentality* analogous strategies of *counter-conduct*—which are best understood not as *counter-conducts* proper, but as *critique* and *critical attitudes*, that is, this movement by which the subject grants herself the right to interrogate the truth under its effects of power and the power under its discourses of truth.; the central objective of this movement, then, is not an *emancipation* from authority, but the possibility of *being governed otherwise*—along other lines, by other people, at other costs, in the name of other principles etc.—, so that these alternative forms or modes of government may allow the subjects to live otherwise, *to be conducted* or *to conduct themselves otherwise* in order to attain new forms of truth; but, at this point, I believe I should make a clearer distinction between the terms *critique* and *critical attitude*: from Foucault's *What is the Enlightenment?*, we come to the conclusion that there might be a more categorical distinction between the word *critique*, which essentially describes *the movement by which the subject grants herself the right to interrogate the truth under its effects of power and the power under its discourses of truth*, and the expression *critical attitude*, which essentially describes *a subject's careful work upon herself within the framework or the circumstances of this movement*; the distinction between these two terms becomes particularly evident in Foucault's commentary on Baudelaire's idea of *modernity*, this moment in the history of humanity whose ephemerality, fleetingness, and contingency seem to require and give rise to a new kind of subject—namely, a *dandy*, a subject who is self-consciously able to heroise her own present by always recapturing something eternal that is not beyond this present, nor behind it, but within it; in fact, a *dandy* seems to be *par excellence* that kind of subject who systematically defies Kant's idea of *immaturity*, not simply because she tends to resist a great number of extraneous authorities that tend to constrain the limits of her living, but also because she seems to do this by precisely taking control of herself as her object of *work*, as her object of *conduct*, as her object of *counter-conduct*—and, perhaps, it makes all the more sense now to affirm that Aestheticism, a *counter-cultural movement*, was also a perfect *counter-conduct movement*, was also a perfect *critical movement*, a movement that had as its fundamental goal to incite people into new modes of *critical attitude*,

particularly *creative* and *artistic* ones; but, to conclude, at this point, it should also be clear that, although Foucault champions a sort of contemporary form of *dandyism*, he does not provide any concrete examples—what might be disappointing and even suspicious to some extent, but what I believe to be consistent with some other aspects of this last phase of his philosophical project.

In my next essay, I will examine some of these aspects.

II

An unexamined life is not a life worth living

Socrates

Those who see any difference between soul and body have neither

Oscar Wilde

Always extract the eternal from the ephemeral

Charles Baudelaire



Continuing the discussion of my previous essay, in this essay I would like to examine Michel Foucault's *The Culture of the Self*, a lecture that he delivered to professors and under and postgraduate students at the University of California in Berkeley in April 1983, about one year before his death.

However, before I carry on with this discussion, I would like to go back to *What is the Critique?* in order to examine a very specific concept that Foucault suggests there, a concept that, although a bit obscure in the context of his theories, and although terribly ugly in its form, actually sheds some light on his method of systematising history: I am talking about what he describes as *événementialisation*, an awful neologism that I will translate as *eventualisation*—incidentally, a much more precise and much less awkward word for its own purposes. (see Foucault 2015:51)

The reason why I would like to go back to this concept is not exactly easy to explain, but it is rather easy to understand: simply put, an *eventualisation* is a *singular event* that

takes place in a given social juncture in a given time in history as a product of conditions of possibility involving the broad connections between mechanisms of coercion and contents of knowledge *particular* to this time and juncture.

These *singular events* can be larger or smaller in scale, and even tiny in scale, but, whatever the case, the idea is always to use them as an ἀρχή or *arche*, that is, as ‘origins’ or ‘starting points’ for analyses that go beyond the surface of crystallised appearances—hence, why these *singular events* are references for *archaeological analyses*, that is, analyses that dig deep beneath the sedimentation of those greater narratives that for some reason lasted or are bound to last throughout history.

In other words:

Historical events in Foucault’s thought are not merely those happenings that would conventionally be labelled “events”—noteworthy occurrences such as the beginning of a war, an election, a death—but rather are more subtle, pervasive, multiple, and diverse shifts that underlie these incidents. With his reconceptualization of the event, Foucault sets his own theoretical practice in contrast to traditional historical practice: it is a counterpractice, specifically a resistance to the governing presuppositions concerning history’s continuous teleological development, the unity of the knowing subject, the objectivity of historical analysis conducted by that subject, and the fixity of stable categories of analysis. (Gilson 2014:143)

Let us try to think outside Foucault’s works for a while.

On a larger scale, a good example, I believe, is the rise of a conservative far-right ideology in Brazil, particularly after the second term of Dilma Rousseff’s presidency (2015-16) and with the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. Those who somehow oppose Bolsonaro and his far-right ideology often describe his followers either as his “minions” or, which is becoming more and more common, as his “herd,” meaning that they blindly follow him as the livestock would blindly follow a wrangler on a ranch. I am particularly uncomfortable with the word “herd” in this case because it too easily tends to homogenise a truly heterogeneous mass of supporters who, in the end, follow him not just because of some sort of political affection for his image, but also, and perhaps more properly, because they in fact find in him the political legitimacy for very specific ways of life. It is true, this mass mostly consists of white middle or upper class straight men whose actual idea of democracy is that of a social segregation of specific strata of society; but, what about those women, those people from the lower classes, those people from the marginalised groups—all those people who, in spite of being real focuses of this administration’s

oppression, still vote for it? The worst possible answer to this question is to suggest that they are “herds”; they are not “herds”: to suggest that they are “herds” would be to homogenise a very heterogeneous collection of problems under the mischievous shadow of a single story. Of course, I have not been able to conduct an archaeological-anthropological study on these people, but, as a first-hand witness, I would say that any study of this kind would find out that many of those women who support this administration do so as a result of a structural classism and sexism whose multifaceted origins can be tracked back to a time when the name Jair Bolsonaro was barely known; this study would find out that many people from the lower classes, including a thick mass of people from the black communities, support this government simply because some religious leadership told them to—a disturbing contemporary strand of Kant’s idea of *immaturity*; this study would find out that many people from the lower classes, people often cultivated in all sorts of violence, support this administration precisely because of its oppressive nature, so that their idea of social stability is, in the end, the substitution of one act of violence for another, an act that they can actually vote for; perhaps this study would even be able to clarify why, roughly since the end of 2017 in Brazil, the word and the idea of “hater”—which refer to those people who distil hate discourses through the media—slowly disappeared in all sorts of discourses.

Therefore, the rise of Bolsonarism and the conservative far-right ideology among many strata of Brazilian society can be accepted as an *event*, but, in order for us to fully understand this *event*, it is essential that we provide its *eventualisation*, that is, it is essential that we track down the unfoldments of this *event* back to its many *origins*, back to its many *starting points*, so that what is *true* about it does not remain within the confinements of a single story, of a thick layer of sedimented discourses.

In the context of Foucault’s life and work, we can say that he put this idea of *eventualisation* into practice when in 1978 he flew over to Iran to follow from up close what came to be known as the Iranian Revolution (1978-79), the series of urban uprisings that culminated in the overthrow of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919-80), who had been investing his power, an already dynastic power (1941-79), in a rigid programme of economic and cultural “renovations.”

On a smaller scale, a good example, I believe, are the works by Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexijevich, notably her *Last Witnesses: an Oral History of the Children of World War II* (1985; 2019). This book is an amazing work of archaeology for many reasons, but three of them seem to me particularly remarkable: first, this book goes against

a very hegemonic narrative according to which the Nazi expansion was effectively held back by North-American forces sweeping away its war efforts from the West, when, in truth, this expansion was mostly held back by Soviet forces sweeping away its war efforts from the East; second, this book also goes against a hegemonic narrative according to which the winds of change brought by the Russian Revolution (1917-23)—Leninism and Stalinism included, of course—managed to relight a sort of nationalism or transversal spirit of union in the peoples encompassed by the Soviet administration: the first-hand stories chronicled in this anthology soon show us that any sense of union—including, more often than not, the very act of going to battle—was essentially a way out of the misery in which lived those who could not escape the periphery of the Soviet system; third, by choosing the standpoint of witnesses who were young children during World War Two (1939-45), this book completely deterritorialises our ordinary perception of this war, which is more commonly narrated by those who actively took part in the battles or who followed its sordid events from an already adult perspective. The greatest quality of this book as an archaeological document, then, is that it brings to surface not only narratives of first-hand witnesses that, as such, provide us a more accurate characterisation of the war, but also narratives of first-hand innocence that, as such, destabilises our ordinary perception of a war as purely a product of political or economic interests.

Therefore, although World War II is clearly the major *event* concerned in this book, it deals more properly with the *event of war itself*, that is, with the changes in the material reality of those who found themselves literally in the crossfire between the Nazis, coming from the west, and the Soviets, coming from the east; this book, then, provides us a remarkable *eventualisation* of this war by providing us first-hand accounts such as that of a young soldier who goes to war so that his mother can use his money to buy clothes to his sister; or that of a woman who quickly handed out the salaries of workers in a factory because by the end of the day they would all be refugees; or that of a mother who had to choose between having one of her children live or having all of them killed.

In the context of Foucault's work, a good example of an *eventualisation* of a smaller scale would be, I think, *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother* (1973), this peculiar study in which he, coordinating a team of researchers, tries to track down the factual reasons that led this young man, Pierre Rivière (1815-40), simply presumed insane by the court that convicted him of murder, to gruesomely kill, not three, but four members of his family, considering that his mother was close to giving birth when he slit her throat.

But, why am I giving such emphasis on this idea of *eventualisation*?

Again, I believe that my reasons for doing this are not exactly easy to explain, but are rather easy to understand.

Simply put, I am inclined to think that *art criticism*, particularly a *socially-engaged art criticism* such as the one I have been suggesting in the last few pages, tends to benefit from analyses that seek to clarify the *eventualisation* of certain *events* involved in an artwork, that is, from *archaeological* analyses interested in clarifying the many forms of *arche* comprised in the broad structure of an artwork—either its *external* structure, such as the factual conditions in which it was conceived, or its *internal* structure, such as its philology, narratology, topography, architecture, imagery etc.

To be fair, I know that I am not suggesting anything terribly new; but, the same way John Addington Symonds believed that a good *art criticism* is one that manages to find a *formula* that synthesises the whole aesthetics of an artwork, I am inclined to think that an *art criticism*—both an *impressionistic criticism* and a *socially-engaged criticism*—tends to become more refined, more affectively complex, when it centres its analyses on certain *archai* ‘points of origin’ *in* or *within* an artwork.

This might seem a bit vague, but it is really a trivial practice in at least two fields of art studies: *image studies* and *filmmaking studies*, particularly in the areas of *screen-writing* and *art direction*—in fact, I dare say that it is actually impossible for a *screen-writer* and an *art director* to perform their tasks without mastering this perspective about *eventualisation* and *archaeology* that I am discussing.

I can provide a couple of very simple examples, which are also cases of what I described above as *singular events* on a “tiny scale.”

Let us take, for instance, the horror film *Signs* (2002), by M. Night Shyamalan.

In spite of its eerie *Stimmung*, this film is actually a deeply emotional story of a family—Graham (Mel Gibson), a father and church minister; Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix), his younger brother; Morgan (Rory Culkin), his 12 year old son; and Bo (Abigail Breslin), his 6 year old daughter—still coping with the sudden death of the mother in what was a truly gruesome car accident. Isolated in an old house in the middle of a large corn field, this grieving group of people find themselves in the epicentre of an alien invasion, an apocalyptic sense of an ending that brings back to surface the absence of this mother, a void particularly painful to the father, to the widower. The people who follow this story, however, do not understand the source of such anguish until the very end, until the moment when the creatures are massively attacking this poor family’s house. Nevertheless,

and with great discretion, the narrative does suggest that Graham, the narrative's emotional core, is facing some kind of distress that has also led him to a severe crisis of faith, the worst possible affliction that can happen to a church minister.

The filmic narrative insinuates this affliction in the following sequence:



As we can see, Graham's crisis of faith is synthesised in an extremely simple iconography: not just the absence of a cross, but the absence of a cross that had been hanging on a wall for a very long time—what we can deduce from the grimy outlines of this cross on the wall; also, this is not just any place on any wall: this cross is hanging at face level above a dresser strategically placed by the bathroom door, indicating that it is some kind of essentiality in Graham's daily routine.



In the end of the film, under a much brighter and much warmer cinematography, we can notice that the grimy memory of the cross has been replaced by several photographs of Graham's family—a sequence that, if examined more closely, proves to be a bit more complex than it seems at first: if Graham had simply restored his faith in God, perhaps he would have simply replaced the cross in its former place; but this is not what happens, and we only know that he restored his faith in God because he took back his place as a minister; the reasons why he filled that very spot on the wall with pictures of his family are of course open to speculations, but we are, indeed, invited to speculate about it: it is possible that his traumatic experience did not just restore his faith in God; more importantly, way beyond restoring this faith in God, he seems to have finally moved on and found himself at peace not only with the death of his wife, but also with the family with which he seems to have been blessed.

Now, let us take a look at this draft of the film's screenplay:

4	INT. BATHROOM - MORNING	4
A bathroom door is open. WE HEAR THE SINK RUNNING. WE HEAR THE SOUNDS OF TEETH BEING BRUSHED. Outside the bathroom on the bedroom wall is the sun faded outline of where a large CATHOLIC CROSS used to hang. It's ghostly stained forever on the blank wall. MNightFans.com A CHILD SCREAMS FROM FAR AWAY. The water from the sink stops. Graham steps into the doorway. Toothbrush and foam in his mouth. He becomes very still.		

(Shyamalan 2002:5)

Usually, when a scenic object is of particular importance to the unfoldment of a given narrative, it is indicated in capitalised letters in the screenplay, which is exactly the case here: by emphasising the material presence of the cross in the textual narration—and in the future conversion of this narration into moving images—, the screenplay is indicating precisely an *arche* within the artwork—either the film or the screenplay itself, if for some reason we come to consider it an aesthetic artefact—, that is, it is indicating, at the same time, a culmination of a set of *eventualisations*—in this case, the epitome of Graham's grieving—and a starting point for our analyses as *art critics*—for, what kind of helplessness, hate, pain, anguish etc. must a church minister go through so as to completely lose his faith in God?

I am aware that this brief commentary of mine on Shyamalan's *Signs* might not be the most refined case of *art criticism*, but I think it makes clear what I mean when I suggest that we should pay more attention to certain *archai* within artworks.

Nevertheless, it is curious to notice the striking similarity between the topography of this sequence in Shyamalan's film and the topography of one of Johannes Vermeer's (1632-75) most famous paintings: *Woman Holding a Balance* (1662-63).



In her *Reading Rembrandt* (1991), Mieke Bal observes very well that, although Vermeer's paintings are in general deeply narrative, his *Woman Holding a Balance* is really a contemplative picture: like in many of Vermeer's works, in this picture we follow an indoors activity only dimly lit by an oblique source of clarity coming in from a very specific source—in this case, a narrow window partly covered by a thin curtain in the upper left; in the foreground, we see a young woman in front of a box of jewellery, amid which there seems to be a scale, the balance she is gently holding between her fingers; on the background, we can see a painting of the *Final Judgment*, which, as Bal observes, seems to establish through symbology and iconography a contrast with the balance in the centre of the whole scene. (see Bal 1991:01) So, as we can see, the picture does not give too much information for us to effectively work out a narrative; the only exception, and it is a very discreet exception, are an almost imperceptible *hole* and *nail* hammered on the wall a few centimetres left of the painting in the background.



It is curious to notice, then, how, in spite of the picture's overall aesthetics of sym-bolical contrasts, these two tiny details—a *nail* and a *hole* that may or may not be the original place of this *nail*—excite in us a deep sense of narrative, which, in the context of what I have been discussing, is also a deep sense of *eventualisation* or at least a true invitation to more *archaeological* analyses.

Bal admits about this detail in the picture:

For me [what caught my attention] was the nail and the hole that the light made visible, produced; that instigated a burst of speculative fertility. When I saw this nail, the hole, and the shadows, I was fascinated: I could not keep my eyes off them. *Why are they there?* I asked myself, Are these merely meaningless details that Roland Barthes would chalk up to an “effect of the real”? Are these the signs that make a connotation of realism shift to the place of denotation because there is no denotative meaning available? [...] *If the room were a real room, the hole and the nail would evince traces of the effort to hang the painting in the right place. As such, they demonstrate the materiality of the difficulty and delicacy of balancing. Hanging a painting in exactly the right place is a delicate business, and the result is of the utmost visual importance.* For the representation of this statement on visual balance, the nail alone would not do the trick; the failure of the first attempt to balance the represented painting correctly must be shown through an attempt still prior to it. The hole is the record of this prior attempt. The suggestion that the *Last Judgment* was initially unbalanced, with balancing as its very subject matter, threatens to unbalance the painting as a whole. While the metaphoric connection between the idea of judgment and this woman's activity is tightened by the final result, the difficulty of balancing and of judging is thus foregrounded. (Bal 1991:03; my emphases)

Of course, when we suggest a *criticism* on a given *artwork*, we must always try to examine the qualities of this *artwork* as comprehensively as we can, but, considering how

many *criticisms* today—particularly those we find in academic journals in our everyday lives as scholars—seem to ground their analyses on deeply theoretical perspectives, I feel that I am growing increasingly fond of an idea of *criticism* that is grounded, not on a broad exploration of beauty *through the prism of* a given theoretical perspective, but on a specific exploration of beauty based on sorts of *wabi-sabi* traits specific to an artwork: the idea, therefore, is not to systematically try to find a *dialectic* between an *artwork* and a *theoretical perspective*, but to spontaneously try to find a *singularity* or even an *ephemerality* within an artwork, to spontaneously let ourselves be guided by our *impressions* through those details, accidents, and imperfections of a given artwork that, in the end, might even defy analyses dependent on deeply theoretical perspectives. Obviously, and I think I already made this clear in my **Introduction**, I am not suggesting that we should completely give up *epistemology* as a means to the examination of certain *aesthetic* qualities of a given artwork, because certain elements of beauty might only come to surface specifically under the light of certain *epistemologies*; but, even when this is the case, the *critic* should try to look for and let her analyses be inspired by those discreet *eventualisations*, those discreet *elements of archaeology* that are likely to be overlooked by overly theoretical analyses. As I anticipated a while ago, when Foucault uses the word *archaeology*—and, by extension, when he uses the word *archive*—he is often strongly relying on the *etymology* of this word: as we just saw, the Ancient Greek word *arche* means ‘origin’ or ‘point of origin’, so that, for a researcher, it refers to that element in the present from which her analyses should begin so as to be expanded into the past; but, at the same time, this ‘origin’ or ‘point of origin’ is actually the *culmination of eventualisations*, of a web of contingencies that led to *this specific closure*, and *not to any other*. And, finally, the reason why I give such emphasis on such mechanics is that, in the context of *art*, particularly in the context of *narrative arts*, which is mostly my case here, *eventualisations* seem to be a quality raw matter for *impressions*, and, therefore, for more complex but also more solid *impressionistic criticisms*.



Now, there is one very specific case of *eventualisation* that I would like to examine, but, since it intersects with Foucault's hypotheses in *The Culture of the Self* (1983), a lecture that, I believe, seems to exist in a fine relation of complementarity with my discussion in my previous essay, I will now pause my analyses on *eventualisation* proper and come back to them in a convenient opportunity.

In my previous essay, I discussed how Foucault, between 1978 and 1984, the years that roughly comprise his *ethical phase*, seems to have shown a renewed interest in an idea of *critique*: inspired by Kant's hypothesis that a person attains her own *enlightenment* when she ascends from a state of self-incurred *immaturity* to a state of self-conscious *maturity* in which she can make use of her own reason without being conducted by an external authority, this idea can be understood as a genealogical outgrowth of what Foucault in turn understands as *counter-conduct*, that is, these diffuse strategies of working on the self that seem to have emerged within and to a great extent as a reaction to the *pastoral power* that was gradually organised and institutionalised by the Catholic Church. Simply put, this *critique* is a process by which a person gives herself the right to interrogate many forms of power in their effects of truth and many forms of truth in their effects of power so as to obtain or at least deduce from this interrogation, not ultimate means to a "social emancipation," but practicable means to be governed along different lines, lines that, in fact, may give this person more freedom and more effectual means to conduct herself differently. The summary difference between *counter-conduct* and *critique*, then, is that, whereas *counter-conducts* are strategies of working on the self that emerged as a reaction to the faulty conductions effected or suggested by the *pastoral power*, conductions that are therefore *dogmatic* in nature and which have as their aim the *salvation* of the subject's body and soul in face of the deceitful nature of the earthly world, processes of *critique* are strategies of working on the self that should emerge as a reaction to the faulty conductions effected or suggested by *regimes of governmentality*, conductions that are therefore more *pragmatic* in nature and which have as their aim the *normalisation* of the subject's living in the world in face of all that is acceptable in this world—from tradition and morality to economic pressure and epistemological reasoning. Foucault's idea of *critique*, however, is not just a process of *inquiry*, but also a process of *action*, and it is in this sense that we can understand it not just as a *critique*, but also, and perhaps more properly, as a *critical attitude*: the same way that *counter-conducts* within the context of the *pastoral power* came to involve certain strategies of working on the self—such as the ascetic practices of fasting, praying, anachoresis, or mortification—, a *critical attitude*

should also involve certain strategies of working on the self—strategies that, of course, do not aim at something like the *asceticism* of mind and body as a means to salvation or to the experience of God, but which aim, rather, at something like the eroticisation of mind and body as a means to pleasure, or to a broader experience of the human faculties as effective and privileged means to knowledge, as effective and privileged means to truth, as a means to enlarge the limits of what can be known, thought, said, done, and felt in the complexity of the power networks that structure a regime of governmentality.

I must anticipate that, partly due to his untimely death, Foucault does not offer us much about the strategies that might allow a contemporary subject to materialise certain *critical attitudes* of hers in our present today; in fact, what he does offer us, in *The Culture of the Self* and also in *Technologies of the Self* (1982)—a seminar that he delivered at the University of Vermont in the fall of 1982 and from which *The Culture of the Self* seems to formally derive—is a tentative genealogy of a *critical attitude* based on archaeological evidences that, in the end, only range from the Greco-Roman tradition of a ‘culture of the self’ to the early Christian practices of *counter-conduct*, precisely.

So, simply put, in his late works, Foucault does not give us clear examples of how this *critical attitude* can be put into practice in our own present, that is, of which *strategies* or *technologies of the self* a contemporary subject can employ as a means to materialise a given *critical attitude* in her own *present*.

However, in *The Culture of the Self*, Foucault does seem to reach a conclusion, or at least to hint at one: what he understands as a *critical attitude* is, in the end, an attempt to rehabilitate *philosophy as way of living in the present*, an essential vocation of philosophy that has been gradually eroded throughout history by a gradual dominance of the ‘knowledge of the self’ over the ‘care of the self’. (see Foucault 2015:87)

Foucault begins this lecture by going back to Kant’s letter to emphasise that it seems to be a landmark in the history of philosophy for one very specific reason: although Kant is by no means the first philosopher to suggest philosophy as a means to analyse one’s own present, Foucault explains, his letter seems to be a peculiar case in that, whereas most philosophical perspectives about the present seem to examine the present as a synthesis of the past or in light of a future whose symptoms should be somehow already perceptible, it ultimately contends the use of reason as a means to deciphering “the nature, the sense, the historical and philosophical meaning of *the precise moment in which the philosopher is writing and which she is part of.*” (Foucault 2015:82; my translation and emphasis, with minor adaptations) This, I believe, is a very fortunate way of laying out

the problem because it allows Foucault to systematise his own object of scrutiny according to the following logic: “What is our *actualité* as a historical figure? What are we and what must we be as part of this *actualité*? Why is it necessary to philosophise and what is the specific task of philosophy in relation to our *actualité*?” (Foucault 2015:83; my translation. Foucault’s lecture was originally delivered in English, but in this section he insists on the French word *actualité*, for which there is no precise equivalent in English) And this systematisation is also very fortunate because, in turn, it allows Foucault to recognise that Kant’s letter seems to have widened or maybe deepened the gap that sets apart two basic ontologies: on the one hand, representing a more traditional line of philosophical thinking, a *formal ontology of truth* or a *critical analysis of knowledge*, best described by questions such as “What is the truth? How is it possible for us to come to know the truth?” (Foucault 2015:84; my translation); on the other hand, representing a more modern line of philosophical thinking, a *historical ontology of ourselves* or a *critical history of thought*, best described by questions such as “What is our *actualité*? What are we as being part of this *actualité*? What is the objective of our philosophical activity considering that we belong in this *actualité*?” (Foucault 2015:84; my translation) Foucault’s enterprise, then, he contends, is not to try to answer the inquiry “What is the thinking being?” (Foucault 2015:84; my translation)—a question of metaphysics and transcendentalism that, I believe, goes back to his generally unhealthy understanding of the *hermeneutics of the subject*—, but to try to answer the inquiry “How has the history of our own thought made of us what we are?” (Foucault 2015:84; my translation)—a question of ontology and immanentism that, I believe, takes us forward to his generally healthy understanding of the ‘culture of the self’:

[I am] not interested in analysing what people think in opposition to what they do, but what they think when they do what they do. What I want to analyse is the meaning that they give to their own conduct, the way how they integrate their conduct in general strategies, the kind of rationality that they recognise in their practices, institutions, models and different conducts. (Foucault 2015:85; my translation and emphases)

So, it is not difficult to see that, in the end of his life, Foucault seems to have grown increasingly fond of the idea of Greco-Roman origins that we can roughly understand as an *examined life*, or, more precisely, of the idea of rehabilitating *philosophy as the basis of living*, including a revision of all those *strategies* that at some point in the past used to

be employed for a *coalescence*, or, even better, for an *indiscernibility* between *philosophy* and the very *act of living*.

Before I carry on with this discussion, however, I must make something clear.

Today, in the 21st century, when we read about this idea of an *examined life*, of an *indiscernibility between philosophy and the very act of living*, we often feel inclined to think about these cheap and rarely well-founded exercises generally known as *coaching*: *spiritual coaching*, *life coaching*, *coaching for a well-being* etc.

Foucault himself makes fun of this similarity when he explains in the opening of *The Culture of the Self*:

In a dialogue written in the end of the second century, Lucian tells us of a certain Hermotimus, who mumbles many things as he walks along a street. One of his friends, Licinius, sees him, crosses the street, and asks him: “What are you mumbling about?” And he answers: “I’m trying to remember something I’m supposed to tell my master about.” From this conversation between Hermotimus and Licinius, we find out that Hermotimus has been visiting his master for twenty years, that he is almost bankrupt because his precious lessons are extremely expensive; and we also find out that Hermotimus is likely to need yet other twenty years to conclude his formation. But we also learn the content of these lessons: the master teaches Hermotimus how to take care of himself in the best ways possible. I am sure that none of you here is a modern Hermotimus, but I bet that most of you have already met one of these people who, nowadays, regularly visit this kind of master, who in turn asks them for their money so that he can teach them how to take care of themselves. However, and fortunately for me, I forgot—in French, English or German—the name of these modern masters. In Antiquity, they were called “philosophers.” (Foucault 2015:81; my translation)

Of course, although there might be some occasional similarities on a practical level, what I have been discussing as *critique*, *critical attitude*, *counter-conduct*, *care of the self*, *culture of the self*, *philosophy as a way of living* etc. is not at all one of these cases of *coaching*, for an obvious but also very complex reason: the basis of *critique* is the right that a person gives herself to interrogate many forms of power in their effects of truth and many forms of truth in their effects of power so as to abstract from this interrogation practicable means to be governed along different lines, which means that *critique* is in its own principle a practice of challenging and ultimately standing up against conformity and normalisation in the present; since *coaching* strategies are not fundamentally grounded on this right, on this logic of interrogation, they ultimately tend to boil down to strategies of simply living well with conformity and normalisation in the present, that is, to

strategies of simply living well with the conviction of or compliance with the impossibility of living otherwise in the present.

In this sense, *critical attitude* and *coaching* are actually contradictory practices.

In very simple terms, then, and this is certainly no coincidence, we can also affirm here that Foucault's idea of a *critical attitude* is that of a philosophical existence that basically consists of a person's ability to consciously and self-examiningly practice ways of living in and by means of which what she can attain as truth is indissociable from, and in fact subsumed to, her *ethical* conduct (the conduct that she establishes in relation to herself) and *moral* conduct (the conduct that she establishes in relation to others) in relation to this truth.

In the context of Foucault's late works, there are actually two fascinating examples of how this logic of *philosophy as a way of living* can be put into practice in the order of the day—examples that, in fact, seem to establish a curious connection between this idea of *philosophy* and the field of the Materialities of Literature.

The only disappointing aspect of these examples is that, again, partly due to his untimely death, Foucault was not really able to elaborate on them; they are, to be fair, more cases of consistent hypotheses than proper objects of analysis.

The first example are the *hypomnemata*, that is, those notebooks that many people from the Ancient Greek tradition used to write on, read from, and carry around with them as literally an extension of their own consciousness, often specifically as a sort of manual for ethical and moral conducts.

Foucault explains:

What are the *hypomnemata*? They are notepads, notebooks. They are exactly the kind of notebook whose use was becoming more and more common at this time in Classical Athens and which is, at the same time, an instrument of political administration, because it was on the *hypomnemata* that, for example, taxes of commercial transactions, taxes that an individual had to pay etc. were noted down; they were an instrument of political management. The *hypomnemata* also were, for those who ran a private business, agricultural or commercial, an instrument for registering the activities that one had completed or had yet to complete. It was also an instrument for personal management, in which a person would note down what she had done and, above all, what she had to do; it was an instrument that allowed her to remember, in the morning, what she was supposed to do along the day. This introduction of the *hypomnemata*, not only as a general material support for recollections, but also as this material instrument that I just discussed [...], is as disruptive as the introduction of the personal computer in our present lives. (Foucault 2015:157; my translation)

And further on he adds:

Socrates gives [his disciples] advice on their health: how to keep a good health, what diet to follow? We find here the influence of Hippocratism and of the exercises of dieting that derived from Pythagoreanism and the medical practice. And it is remarkable that Socrates, in [Xenophon's] *Memorabilia*, says to his disciples: "You must note down in your *hypomnemata* what you eat, how you react to what you eat, what diet you are following." These are the *hypomnemata*. (Foucault 2015:157-58; my translation)

As we can see, then, what makes the *hypomnemata* so important for the Ancient Greek culture is that they introduce the *technology of the notebook* as a means to associate the *technology of writing* to the *indexation* of certain forms of *truth*: the history of a farmer's production throughout the year, the history of a craftsman's manufactures in a month, the history of a tradesman's commercial transactions in a week, the history of a citizen's payment of her taxes etc.; but also the history or the chronicle of an individual's observations, feelings, thoughts, dreams, and even routines, such as his monthly studies, weekly diets, daily physical exercises etc. (see Foucault 2015:161)

In my previous essay, I briefly discussed how Foucault's conception of *governmentality* is one that seeks to explain how, roughly between the 15th and the 18th centuries, the idea of *sovereignty* changed from the stability of the ruler's power over a certain territory and the population in it to the stability of the population itself in relation to a given territory through the dispersion and localisation of power down to the level of the individuals' lives—a dispersion and localisation that ultimately sought to monitor and control the conduct of this population as a mass of individuals in light of a certain administration. In a way, then, as personal objects, what these *hypomnemata* did was provide a convenient technology—the technology of registering information through writing them on notebooks, or what we can finally understand as a technology of *archiving*—to bring down to an individual dimension new means for a person to *govern* herself, or for her to *conduct* herself in her own way, according to her own interests.

As Foucault himself observes:

Therefore, the point in which the question of the *hypomnemata* and the question of culture seem to play a remarkable role is the point in which the culture of the self assumes as its goal the perfect government of oneself, that is, a sort of permanent political relationship of oneself

to oneself; we must edify a politics of ourselves. And this politics of ourselves, one accomplishes it when one materially makes these *hypomnemata*, just like the rulers are compelled to keep registers, just like those who run a business are also compelled to keep registers. This is how writing seems to be connected to the problem of the culture of the self. (Foucault 2015:159; my translation)

But, the point is, the entries in the *hypomnemata* were not restricted to these registers that somehow sought to systematise the order of an individual's day—what she saw, thought, or felt, or what she dreamed, ate, or simply did in this day; in a more complex sense, the entries in the *hypomnemata* often comprised information that outrightly sought to regulate the individual's ethical and moral conducts—such as *fragments* or *aphorisms* from other texts, *pieces of advice* elaborated by the individual herself or recommended by others, or the so-called *gnōmē*, these *maxims* or *nuggets of teaching* often reworked by a poet or philosopher but which were themselves pieces of essential truths that everyone should know, if possible by heart. (see Foucault 2015:162)

Unfortunately, Foucault does not give us concrete examples of these *hypomnemata* that he so dearly discusses in some of his later lectures and essays, and, in truth, these *hypomnemata* are not exactly easy to come by; there is, however, a good example worth analysing, an example that is not a *hypomnema* proper, but which nevertheless seems to shed some bright light on how these notebooks were generally used.

If we take a look at Plutarch's (46-119 AD) works, we will notice that, at some point in his life, Paccius, a friend of his, wrote him a letter asking for advice on how to keep a "tranquillity of mind," that is, on how to care for himself or to take care of himself so as to achieve a "tranquillity of mind."

Plutarch begins his answer thus:

1. It was only very recently that I received your letter in which you urged me to write you something on tranquillity of mind, and also something on those subjects in [Plato's] *Timaeus* which require more careful elucidation. And at the same time it chanced that our friend Eros was obliged to sail at once for Rome, since he had received from the excellent Fundanus a letter, which, in his usual style, urged haste. But since I neither had the time I might have desired to meet your wishes nor could I bring myself to let the friend who came from me be seen arriving at your home with hands quite empty, I gathered together from my note-books [*hypomnemata*] those observations on tranquillity of mind which I happened to have made for my own use, believing that you on your part requested this discourse, not for the sake of hearing a work which would aim at elegance of style, but for the practical use in living it

might afford; and I congratulate you because, though you have commanders as your friends and a reputation second to none of the forensic speakers of our day, your experience has not been that of Merops in the play, and because it cannot be said openly, as of him, that

The plaudits of the mob have driven you [1]

from those emotions given us by nature; but you continue to remember what you have often heard, that an aristocratic shoe does not rid us of the gout, nor an expensive ring of a hangnail, nor a diadem of a headache. [2] (Plutarch 1939:464E-465B)

So, it is curious to see that, in his letter to Paccius, Plutarch clearly admits that, partly because of his busy routine, he had to go back to his *hypomnemata* to be able to write something minimally consistent about what they can both accept as a “tranquillity of mind.” In [2] we can already see that, in order to encourage Paccius to care for himself as an object more important than anything else in their material world—in this case, even precious objects of nobility—, Plutarch relies on a series of dictums, apparently diffusely elaborated in their own culture: he, Paccius, is the main responsible for the health of his body and mind, not all these material signs of social superiority; or, from a different angle, there is no use in covering himself with all these riches if he, Paccius, does not take care of himself first and foremost. But, in this passage, surely the most intriguing element is [1], that is, a quotation—not exactly a *gnōmē* in this case—apparently taken from Euripides’s *Phaeton*, a tragedy that today only exists in loose fragments. (see Nauck 1889:606; Thorburn Jr. 2005:428) Since we only have bits of this tragedy, it is not possible to affirm with all certainty what Plutarch meant by retrieving this quotation from his *hypomnemata*, but, considering the overall context of the letter and the dictums that follow, it seems that he mentions Merops—an Ethiopian king, one of the tragedy’s leading characters—as a bad reference: unlike Merops, Paccius should not let himself be conducted by the plaudits of others, but by his own care of himself; that is, unlike Merops, Paccius should not let himself be conducted by his own pride or greed or sense of power, but by his own attention to himself, by his own training of himself.

Later in the letter we also read:

2. Now he [Democritus] who said: “The man who would be tranquil in his mind must not engage in many affairs, either private or public,” first of all makes our tranquillity very expensive if it is bought at the price of inactivity; it is as though he advised every sick man:

Lie still, poor wretch, and move not from your bed. [1]

And yet it is true that a state of bodily stupor is a bad remedy for insanity; but no whit better as a physician of the soul is he who would relieve it of its disturbances and distress by prescribing idleness and softness and the betrayal of friends and family and country.

In the next place, it is also false that those who are not occupied with many things are tranquil in mind. For if that were true, women ought to be more tranquil than men, since for the most part they keep at home; but as it is, the North Wind

Blows not through the soft-skinned maid, [2]

as Hesiod says, yet more pain and excitement and despondency than one could enumerate, caused by jealousy and superstition and ambition and vain imaginings, seep into the women's quarters. And though Laërtes lived twenty years by himself in the country

With one old woman, who his food and drink
Would place beside him, [3]

and abandoned his birthplace, his home, and his kingship, yet he had grief as an ever-constant companion of his inactivity and dejection. And for some persons, even inactivity itself often leads to discontent, as in this instance:

The swift Achilles, Peleus' noble son,
Continued in his wrath beside the ships;
Nor would he ever go to council that
Ennobles men, nor ever go to war,
But wasted away his heart, remaining there,
And always longed for tumult and for war. [4]

And he himself is greatly disturbed and distressed at this and says:

But here I sit beside my ships,
A useless burden to the earth. [5]

For this reason not even Epicurus believes that men who are eager for honour and glory should lead an inactive life, but that they should fulfil their natures by engaging in politics and entering public life, on the ground that, because of their natural dispositions, they are more likely to be disturbed and harmed by inactivity if they do not obtain what they desire. But he is absurd in urging public life, not on those who are able to undertake it, but on those who are unable to lead an inactive life; tranquillity and discontent should be determined, not

by the multitude or the fewness of one's occupations, but by their excellence or baseness; for the omission of good acts is no less vexatious and disturbing than the commission of evil acts, as has been said. (DTA 465C-466A)

I will not provide a thorough analysis of this section of Plutarch's letter because I think I have already made my point about how the *hypomnemata* were generally used; it is curious, however, to notice the variety of sources that Plutarch relies on in order to build his argument: [1] Euripides, *Orestes*, 258; [2] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 519; [3] Homer, *Odyssey*, I.191; [4] Homer, *Iliad*, I.488; [5] Homer, *Iliad*, XVIII.10.

In practice, I think we can say that these *hypomnemata* were not so different from the *commonplace books* that Wilde used during his years at the University of Oxford—something that I have already hinted at in my previous chapter; the fundamental difference, I believe, is the fact that the authors of these *commonplace books* did not register in them what I mentioned above as “the order of an individual's day,” they only registered thoughts and excerpts more properly related to their objects of study—either to use them as basis for formal studies, such as an essay or an article for some discipline, or as basis for personal use, what I believe is consistent with the idea of a *hypomnema* as an *archive* of prescriptions for an individual's ethical and moral conceptions of himself.

In fact, I should reiterate that in the Ancient Greek tradition the ‘knowledge of the self’ was fundamentally subsumed to the ‘care of the self’, that is, that in this tradition the ‘knowledge of the self’ was indeed one of the many means by which an individual should ‘care for her self’—and this *archive* of information in the end provides us a beautiful perspective of how *literature* was one of the most fundamental elements in the formation of an individual's ‘knowledge of the self’ and, thereby, in the formation of her ‘care of the self’: whereas today the arts and literature are often regarded with scorn or at least with disdain as bases for an individual's education, for the Greco-Roman tradition they were *literally* constitutional elements in an individual's ability to conduct or to govern herself ethically and morally, so that these *hypomnemata*, in that they provided the bases for an individual's conduction of herself, were ultimately a new mediation for turning the arts and literature into poignant factors of social change, they quite literally shaped the thoughts and the behaviour of people, thereby creating impetuses for all sorts of social change.

The second example is something that I have already discussed at length in my previous essays, so I will try to explain it very succinctly in the following paragraphs: I

am, of course, talking about the ‘culture of the self’—the rehabilitation of the ‘care of the self’ and the ‘knowledge of the self’ as a means to deliberately forge an ‘art of living’ or an ‘aesthetics of existence’ in modernity or contemporaneity—that we can find intrinsic to *dandyism*, or, I should say, to *dandyism* and to a *dandyism of the senses*.

Considering the general mechanics of Foucault’s idea of the ‘culture of the self’, then, it is no coincidence that at this point we can go back to Oscar Wilde as a very good case: from the perspective of *ethics*, we can say that Wilde would effect his *dandyism of the senses*—that is, a habitual working of and upon *himself* as a place for his own heightened aesthetic experience of the world in all that this world has to offer—through different forms of *hexis*, for example, such as a systematic immersion in art and culture, a constant perfection of discourse and mannerism, a progressive experimentation with clothing, sexuality, narcotism, sociality etc., and, of course, through a constant self-analysis of all this, often through his own works, that is, through the very process of criticism through language, through writing or creative writing; from the perspective of *morals*, we can say that he would effect his *flamboyant persona*—that is, a circumstantial working of and upon *himself* as a place for others’ heightened experience of himself as an authority and epitome of Aestheticism—through an ‘aesthetics of existence’ such as his careful transformation of himself into a buffoon, into the embodiment of the artistic and intellectual madness that had been spreading through many segments of Victorian society, an embodiment that ironically had as an essential goal to provide him the necessary credibility to talk about the complexity of his own expertise.

In the previous chapter, I tried to make clear how Aestheticism was a *counter-cultural* movement, in that, among many other goals, it sought to retrieve the classics from the commodification that Victorian society had been subjecting them to; but, in light of Foucault’s theories, we can now see how it was by and large also a movement of *counter-conduct* in that, among many other goals, it sought to *encourage* its members to somehow stand up against ascending strategies of *normalisation of conduct*—morality, liberalism, utilitarianism, materialism, philistinism etc.—by providing them the theoretical and practical grounds to do so, grounds that, of course, were largely structured upon the basis of Ancient Greek ideals of *ethics* and *aesthetics*.

In its own way, therefore, this example seems consistent with Foucault’s Baudelairean hypothesis in *What is the Enlightenment?*, that is, the hypothesis that the *modern man* is perhaps best described not as a man who sets off into the world to unveil the transcendental secrets of his own existence, in a sort of hermeneutics of the self, in a sort

of journey of self-discovery, but a man who constantly works on himself as both a subject and an object of a complex elaboration in connection to the conditions of possibility of his own present—a *dandyism* that, in the end, is of course truly akin to the Ancient Greeks ideals of *ethics* and *aesthetics*. (see Foucault 1984:41)

Wilde concludes in the end of “The Soul of Man under Socialism”:

For what man has sought for is, indeed, neither pain nor pleasure, but simply Life. Man has sought to live intensely, fully, perfectly. When he can do so without exercising restraint on others, or suffering it ever, and his activities are all pleasurable to him, he will be saner, healthier, more civilised, more himself. Pleasure is Nature’s test, her sign of approval. When man is happy, he is in harmony with himself and his environment. The new Individualism, for whose service Socialism, whether it wills it or not, is working, will be perfect harmony. It will be what the Greeks sought for, but could not, except in Thought, realise completely, because they had slaves, and fed them; it will be what the Renaissance sought for, but could not realise completely except in Art, because they had slaves, and starved them. It will be complete, and through it each man will attain to his perfection. The new Individualism is the new Hellenism. (Wilde 2007:1065-66)

And Foucault concludes in one of the debates that followed *The Culture of the Self*:

[One’s work upon oneself], with its consequences to the austerity of life, is not imposed upon the individuals by a civil law, nor by religious obligations: people choose, they decide by themselves to care for themselves: a sort of choice of existence, a way of life, that they impose upon themselves. And they do this to themselves for what? Not to save their souls and reach eternal life, because they do not believe in any of this. They do this solely in order to turn life itself into a work of art; that is, they are motivated by an aesthetics of existence to choose this way of life. [...] And, to conclude, and as a consequence of all this, the self, this object upon which one works and which one tries to elaborate in light of certain aesthetic values, is not at all something that one should discover, because it had been hidden, because it had been alienated, because it had been disfigured by something else. The self is a work of art. It is a work of art that one should make and which, in some way, one has in front of oneself. And the individual will only wait for her own self in the end of her life and in the moment of her death. We can find in this a very interesting over-valuation, in these conceptions of old age, of the last moments of life and of death. The moment in which we die, or the moment in which we are old enough so that there is nothing else for us to live, the moment in which we can sculpt all our life and arrange it into a work of art, which will then remain immortal in the memory of men through the very brightness of recollection, this is finally the goal, and this is the moment in which we will have created our own self. Hence the idea, which I find

of equal importance, that the self is a creation, a creation of oneself: we make our own self. (Foucault 2015:154-55; my translation)

Didier Eribon, one of the few researchers to properly connect Foucault's thought to Wilde's, observes about their common interest in Ancient Greek ethics:

At the end of his life Michel Foucault was investigating the manner in which we are produced as subjected "subjects" ("*sujets*" *assujettis*) and the ways there might be to escape this "subjection" or "subjugation" (*assujettissement*). This is the period in which he was working on Greece in relation to his History of Sexuality project. His thinking turns around the idea from ancient philosophy that it is possible to shape one's own subjectivity through the work one does on oneself. This shaping could happen by way of the creation of "styles of life" by means of which one strives to shake off modes of being and thinking that are passed on by history or imposed by social structures. One could try to reinvent oneself, to recreate oneself. Thus the question he poses in a 1983 interview, one year before his death, "But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?" This idea seems quite important to him; he returns to it several times in the course of the interview in question.

Did not Oscar Wilde write an identical sentence some hundred years earlier? "To become a work of art is the object of living." Does not all of Wilde's writing, and even his life, from beginning to end consist of an effort to ask the very question that would come to preoccupy Foucault just before his death? We know, moreover, that Wilde referred both to Hellenism and to the Renaissance in laying out this aesthetics of the self. Foucault would do the same. Whatever the divergences may be between these two authors from such different times and different societies, the parallels between them are also striking. Wilde was trying to forge, if not a new "identity," at least a personage, a role, or, to use a more modern word, a "position" from which it would be possible to create oneself in a way that steered clear of dominant norms. Foucault suggests that we invent new relations between individuals, new modes of life that could be means of resistance to power and could help to further one's own self-reformulation. The parallels seem even more compelling when we recall that for Foucault the two vectors of the "aesthetic of existence" are what we might call a "politics of friendship," and an "economy of pleasures." The former entails the work of constituting meaningful relations with one's friends, devoting close attention to them day by day; the latter involves the effort to intensify pleasure by means of the maximal eroticization of bodies. Wilde seems close at hand when one recalls, on the one hand, his theories of a new hedonism, and, on the other, the development of (all male) circles in which relations of friendship provide the ground for the invention of a new culture and for resubjectification. (Eribon 2004: 247-48)

In conclusion, then, we can see that, in his last works, Foucault contended an idea of *critical attitude* that was grounded on two greater dimensions: one of *interrogation* and

one *self-creation*, or, more precisely, one of *interrogation of present conditions of certain regimes of governmentality* and one of *creation of oneself within these conditions through certain technologies of the self*—two dimensions that, of course, influence and change one another. From his reading of Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*, Foucault establishes that *critique* is a process by which a person gives herself the right to *interrogate* many forms of power in their effects of truth and many forms of truth in their effects of power so as to obtain or at least deduce from this *interrogation* practicable means to be governed along different lines, lines that may finally give this person more freedom and more effectual means to *conduct* herself differently. From his reading of many documents from the Greco-Roman culture, often in relation to documents from the Christian Pastoral, Foucault then establishes that the *culture of the self* is a process by which a person gives herself the freedom to *conduct* herself so as to be able to *create* herself in different ways in certain regimes of governmentality, often in ways that lead her to defy many normalisations imposed by these regimes by precisely stimulating her to work on her own self by her own means. In this context, we can accept Foucault's idea of *critical attitude* as a sort of balance between these two dimensions: a person can perfectly *interrogate* many forms of power within regimes of governmentality while *cultivating* herself in these very regimes, but, the point is, the more she *interrogates* these many forms of power within regimes of governmentality and the more she *cultivates* herself within these regimes, the more likely she is to realise that the conditions of possibility for the self are largely limited by many of the power networks that structure these regimes—a realisation that, in turn, is likely to lead her not only to even newer strategies to *cultivate* herself, but also to newer reasons and means to challenge these power networks. At this point, then, we come back to one of the faulty aspects of Kant's letter, a problem that I already announced when I examined it: in his letter, Kant does not account for those social scenarios in which this process of *enlightenment*—the release from a state of self-incurred *immaturity* in order to reach a state of therefore self-conscious *maturity*—is neglected, discouraged, suppressed, or outrightly forbidden; or, to bring this discussion to the context of Foucault's works, what if, then, certain *interrogations*, certain *cultures of the self*, certain *critical attitudes*, what if they are neglected, discouraged, suppressed, or outrightly forbidden in certain regimes of governmentality?

Foucault, once again, seems to find in the Ancient Greek tradition the basis for an answer to this problem.

And, beginning at this point, I will gradually go back to my previous discussion on Foucault's idea of *eventualisation*, which, as I will explain as my analysis unfolds, I also believe to be associated to *narratology*—yet another issue that typically concerns a great many studies conducted within the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature.

When confronted with the scenario that I just described above—that is, situations in which certain *critical attitudes* are somehow stifled within certain regimes of governmentality—, Foucault seems to arrive at the conclusion that this *act* of providing a *critical attitude* in spite or precisely in face of certain power relations somehow contrary to it is, in the end, an *act* truly akin to what the Ancient Greeks understood as *parrēsia*, a word that literally means ‘to say all’, but which is also often translated as ‘truth telling’ or ‘frank speech’.

In the end of his life, Foucault suggested many genealogical archaeologies of the use and nature of the idea of *parrēsia*—such as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981-82), *The Parrēsia* (1982), *Discourse and Truth* (1983), *Fearless Speech* (1983), among many others—, but these studies are extremely long and often repetitive and contradictory, so I will not try to systematise them in any way here; relying on *Fearless Speech* and *Discourse and Truth* only, I will provide, rather, a simple blueprint of this idea of *parrēsia*, trying to emphasise about it three fundamental aspects and also a hypothetical one: first, of course, how it is connected to Foucault's idea of a *critical attitude*, which, as we know, is in turn connected to Kant's idea of *enlightenment*; second, how it is *essentially* a process of telling a *factual truth* about a certain matter; third, how it can be, and often is, a *subjective* process of telling a *fictional truth* about a certain matter; fourth, and this is a hypothesis of mine, how these three fundamental aspects finally seem to turn *parrēsia* into a sort of *narratological substance*, particularly one connected to the narratological strategy normally described as *anagnōrisis*, that is, ‘recognition’ or ‘scene of recognition’—a strategy whose origins trace back to Ancient Greek tragedy, but which is one of the most vital artifices in virtually every form of narrative, from the Ancient Greek tradition to contemporary cinema.

In *Fearless Speech*, Foucault synthesises *parrēsia* in the following words:

[In sum,] *parrēsia* is a kind of verbal activity [in which] the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other

people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, *parrēsia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In *parrēsia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. (Foucault 2001:19-20)

In my own words, I would say that *parrēsia* is a verbal activity in or by which a speaker—someone not in a position of *immaturity* exactly, but in a position of *relative subalternity*—takes the risky initiative to reveal a certain truth to an audience—someone not in a position of *maturity* exactly, but in a position of *relative authority* or *relative privilege*—in order to bring into question problems that in some way affect these two positions, problems that, indeed, are often at the base of the very conflicts that set these two positions apart in the first place.

Perhaps the most obvious example of *parrēsia*—or, more precisely, of a *parrēsiastes*, that is, of a ‘person who says everything’ or, by extension, a ‘person who speaks the truth’—is Socrates, as he is often depicted in Plato’s dialogues, particularly in the *Apology of Socrates* (IV BC), a dialogue in which an aged Socrates presents to an Athenian tribunal and audience his verbal defense against that which he has been accused of: namely, and to put it in very simple terms, *the disturbance of peace and the corruption of future generations*.

For the sake of brevity, and also because I will clarify *parrēsia* by other means, I will not discuss the *Apology of Socrates* here; just so I can make myself clear, I think it suffices to mention only this brief opening sequence in the dialogue:

How you, men of Athens, have been affected by my accusers, I do not know. For my part, even I nearly forgot myself because of them, so persuasively did they speak. And yet they have said, so to speak, nothing true. I wondered most at one of the many falsehoods they told, when they said that you should beware that you are not deceived by me, since I am a clever speaker. They are not ashamed that they will immediately be refuted by me in deed, as soon as it becomes apparent that I am not a clever speaker at all; this seemed to me to be most shameless of them—unless of course they call a clever speaker the one who speaks the truth. For if this is what they are saying, then I too would agree that I am an orator—but not of their sort. So they, as I say, have said little or nothing true, while from me you will hear the whole truth—but by Zeus, men of Athens, not beautifully spoken speeches like theirs, adorned with phrases and words; rather, what you hear will be spoken at random in the words that I happen

upon—for I trust that the things I say are just—and let none of you expect otherwise. For surely it would not be becoming, men, for someone of my age to come before you fabricating speeches like a youth. And, men of Athens, I do very much beg and beseech this of you: if you hear me speaking in my defense with the same speeches I am accustomed to speak both in the marketplace at the money—tables, where many of you have heard me, and elsewhere, do not wonder or make a disturbance because of this. For this is how it is: now is the first time I have come before a law court, at the age of seventy; hence I am simply foreign to the manner of speech here. So just as, if I really did happen to be a foreigner, you would surely sympathize with me if I spoke in the dialect and way in which I was raised, so also I do beg this of you now (and it is just, at least as it seems to me): leave aside the manner of my speech—for perhaps it may be worse, but perhaps better—and instead consider this very thing and apply your mind to this: whether the things I say are just or not. For this is the virtue of a judge, while that of an orator is to speak the truth. (Socrates 2018:12)

As I explained a while ago, one of Foucault’s major concerns in his last works is to try to fathom the reasons why, throughout the history of thought, there was a split and in fact a hierarchical inversion between the ‘care of the self’ and the ‘knowledge of the self’, a split and inversion that seems to have been finally consummated in the 17th century, with what Foucault refers to as the “Cartesian turn”—that is, the organisation of a sort of “macro-episteme” in the history of thought and in the practice of science according to which the relationship that a person establishes with the *truth* is ontologically not anymore one of an *ethical* nature, but rather one of a *purely epistemological* nature. In simple terms, this means that, whereas before this “Cartesian turn” a person’s relationship to *truth* fundamentally aimed at her own flourishing of her own *self*—what required from her that she conducted herself in order to be or to become someone consistent with a certain kind of truth—, after this “Cartesian turn” a person’s relationship to *truth* fundamentally aimed at the establishment of the nature and the limits of *knowledge itself*—a process that virtually any person can take part in, irrespective of how she conducts herself in her own search for this knowledge, for this truth. In more practical terms, this means, therefore, that after this “Cartesian turn,” it is ontologically possible for a person to be immoral and know or have complete access to truth—since her practice of or her access to truth does not clearly require from her that she modify her own living as a means to this truth—, something that, ideally, was not really conceivable in Ancient Greek philosophy—since the practice of access to truth clearly requires from a person that she modify her own living as a means to this truth. It is in this sense, then, that we can make a distinction between two kinds of *truth*: *epistemological truths*, which, simply put, comprise

those hypotheses that in some way correspond to universal or transversal facts of the world and which are verifiable through reproducibility according to a certain method; and *alethurgical truths*, which, simply put, comprise those hypotheses that in some way correspond to singular or localised facts of the world and which are verifiable through “verbal or non-verbal procedures by which one brings to light what is laid down as true as opposed to false, hidden, inexpressible, unforeseeable, or forgotten.” (Foucault 2011:7) Although more properly *epistemological truths* and more properly *alethurgical truths* might occasionally coalesce, it should be clear that in an act of *parrēsia*, in this act of ‘truth telling’ or ‘telling the truth’, this truth is fundamentally an *alethurgical* one: the basic logic of *parrēsia* is one in which a speaker—normally someone in a position of *relative subalternity*—takes the risky initiative to reveal a certain truth to an audience—normally someone in a position of *relative authority* or *relative privilege*—in order to bring into question situations in which the truth is in some way not consistent with morality, for whatever reasons, but reasons that, of course, are often related to the lines along which one is governed. Foucault, in fact, forges the word *alethurgy* by connecting the Ancient Greek word *alētheia*, which literally means ‘truth’, to the Ancient Greek word *ergon*, which means something like ‘deed’ or ‘duty’ or ‘action’—particularly a citizen’s social ‘deed’, ‘duty’ or ‘action’ in relation to her own government; an act of *parrēsia*, then, is an *alethurgy* in that it consists of a person’s initiative to speak the truth to an audience whenever this truth proves to be somehow inconsistent with the lines along which one is being governed, so that these lines can be revised and ultimately changed.

But, how exactly can we understand *parrēsia* as a sort of substance to the narratological strategy of *anagnōrisis*?

Perhaps I can clarify it with a simple example: a brief analysis of Euripides’s *Ion* (V BC), a play that Foucault himself describes as a truly *parrēsiastic tragedy*. (see Foucault 2016:123)

Although formally considered a tragedy, Euripides’s *Ion* is really a sweetsour narrative whose plot culminates in a broad reconciliation between the characters, rather than in some sort of downfall motivated by their hubristic actions—a peculiarity that we perhaps can take as one of Euripides’s many attempts to innovate in this genre. This narrative gravitates around the actions of three main characters: Xuthus, a war hero from the Peloponnese who won Creusa, his now wife, as a prize for having assisted the Athenian government in the battles against Euboea during the years of the Chalcidian League (~426 BC); Creusa, daughter of the old king Erechtheus, a man who is mythically known as the

founder of the *polis*, particularly that *polis* that would later become Athens; and Ion, an orphan and a servant to a Priestess of Phoebus Apollo at the Delphi Oracle who, unbeknownst to everyone, is also the son of Creusa and Apollo himself. This tragedy unfolds upon two greater subjects: in the background, it enacts the myth of the origins of Athens, through the flourishing of the Ionian people; in the foreground, it enacts the practice of *parrēsia* in Ancient Greek society as a whole, but of course particularly as it was exercised in Athens, or to the Athenian citizens. According to the myth, Erechtheus was literally born from the earth of the ground where Athens would be built, and died by being swallowed back into it—a legend that, on the one hand, sought to legitimate the autochthony of the Ionian people, but which, on the other hand, also sought to do this in order to legitimate this people as the original and therefore as the true and pure citizens of Athens. Also according to the myth, Erechtheus had a daughter, Creusa; Creusa, when still a young girl, was lured into a cave right under the Acropolis by Apollo, who then either *raped* or *seduced* her there. As Foucault himself explains, the Ancient Greek culture had a different understanding of *rape* and *seduction*, *seduction* being generally graver than *rape*: in a case of *rape*, the crime is entirely committed by a perpetrator, who forces their victim to do something against their will; in a case of *seduction*, the crime is partly committed by the perpetrator and partly by the victim, who yields to or is complicit with the perpetrator's intentions. (see Foucault 2016:126) In Euripides's text, it is not really possible to determine which one is in fact Apollo and Creusa's case, because the whole incident is normally described in very ambiguous expressions, such as 'mixing with' (see *Ion* 338) or 'mating with' (see *Ion* 437), but, apparently, it was a case of *seduction* rather than *rape*; the reasons for this are open to speculation, but it is possible that such choice seeks to avoid an idea of *violence* by replacing it with one of *concupiscence*—a strategy that, once again, we may consider as one of Euripides's attempts to innovate in the genre. Whatever the case, Creusa finds herself pregnant with Apollo's baby, and, in order to avoid being accused of *moicheia* 'betrayal through intercourse' by her father, she hides her pregnancy and then leaves her baby to die of exposure in the same cave where he was conceived. Pitiful, she abandons the baby in a basket along with three presents: a weaving with the image of a gorgon, a necklace in the shape of two serpents, and a garland of olive branches. Aware of Creusa's actions, Apollo sends Hermes to rescue the child and bring him to be raised by a Priestess at the Delphi Oracle; Hermes, of course, obeys to Apollo's request and brings the baby to the Priestess, who then raises him as her child and tasks him with taking care of the temple's daily chores, such as sweeping its stairs, cleaning up

the birds' mess, and preparing morning sacrifices—precisely what we find him doing when the play begins.

I know that this background might feel a bit long, but it is absolutely fundamental for my analysis of the characters' *parrēsia*.

Xuthus and Creusa arrive at the Delphi Oracle to try to figure out why they cannot have children, and what to do in order to have one: for his part, Xuthus is desperate to have a child so that he can have a new legacy, so that he can pass on to future generations the nobility that he earned by becoming part of the Athenian administration; for her part, Creusa is desperate to have a child so that she can have a real legacy, so that she can pass on to future generations the purity of blood and the potential dignity of Athenian citizenship that she was born with—and I say “potential” because Creusa herself, as a woman, is not fully entitled to such dignity. Following tradition, Xuthus, the man, enters the temple first, while Creusa stays by the stairs chatting with this boy, her son, who she takes as an ordinary servant to the Delphic Priestess; their conversation is truly interesting: the boy explains to her his situation as a servant to the Priestess and to Apollo, a position he seems to regret because, as a poor boy and probably as a foreigner to Athens, for he does not know his real parentage, he will never be able to exercise any kind of citizenship; the woman, in turn, explains to him how his situation strangely reminds her of a “friend of hers” who was once seduced by Apollo and bore him a child, a young boy whom she was forced to abandon, but who, if still alive, would be roughly his age. As Creusa walks out of the scene with her personal Tutor, leaving behind her handmaids—who in this tragedy amazingly also play the part of the chorus—, Xuthus comes out from the temple and awkwardly tries to hug the boy cleaning the stairs, who in turn rejects this apparently sexual advance. Xuthus then explains that he had just received from the Oracle the information that the first person he met after leaving the temple would be his natural son; since the boy was the first person he met, he could only be that son of his, and this is why he had tried to hug him. The boy is not completely satisfied with this information, but accepts to be called Ion—a word that literally means ‘to go’, as Xuthus was going out of the temple when they met. After a brief game of stichomythia, which in this case is a brief game of questions and answers, Xuthus comes to the conclusion that Ion’s mother is probably a peasant that he, Xuthus, had met during a Bacchic Festival a few days before his marriage with Creusa; although this information does seem to lift Ion’s spirits as to the reality of his own parentage, he remains melancholic, because, if both his parents are foreigners to Athens, this means that he will never be able to be a real citizen, which in

turn means that he will never be able to speak freely and truthfully—that is, that he will never be able to exercise his own *parrēsia*, his own ‘truth telling’ or ‘frank speech’.

This is explained in very literal terms in the text:

Iōn

steichoim’an. hen de tēs tychēs apesti moi:
ei mē gar hētis m’eteken heurēsō, pater,
abiōton hēmin. ei d’epeuxasthai chreōn,
ek tōn Athēnōn m’hē tekous’eiē gynē,
hōs moi genētai mētrothen **parrēsia**.
katharan gar ēn tis es polin pesē xenos,
kan tois logoisin astos ē, to ge stoma
doulon pepatai kouk echei **parrēsian**.

Ion

I’ll go. But one thing’s missing.
Until I find my mother, my life rings hollow.
O father, if only she were Athenian,
then I could **speak out as I want**.
A foreigner, coming to a pure city,
might call himself a citizen and think
he belongs. But his tongue’s a slave.
He doesn’t have the right to **speak his mind**.

(*Ion* 668-75; transl. DiPiero)

But why does Ion feel so melancholic about this?

Well, at this point his entire situation becomes more complicated, because at this point *right* inevitably interweaves with *truth*—or, more precisely, at this point we come to realise how the nature and the legitimacy of *truth*, irrespective of how *true* it might be *in practice*, are often connected to *power*: in this case, the *juridical power of Athenian citizenship*.

Foucault explains in one of the lectures in *Discourse and Truth* (2016):

We must of course remember that, according to Athenian legislation, at [Euripides’s time], no one could be a citizen in complete exercise of their rights if one was not the son of a father and a mother both born in Athens. Ion feels bad at the idea of coming back home as the son of Xuthus, who, you well know, is a foreigner to Athens, and son of an unknown mother. (Foucault 2016:135)

And he adds in a footnote in his own annotations: “There was at Euripides’s time many discussions about this legislation, whose consequence was that of a dangerous decrease in the number of citizens.” (Foucault 2016:135n^a)

The reason why I am emphasising this historical detail is that, as we will see now, an ambiguity seems to emerge from within the tragedy’s plot if we take it into consideration.

After accepting Xuthus as his father, Ion goes on to concede that, yes, he will follow him back to Athens as his son, but that he will do this in spite of his own apprehensions about it.

But, what are these apprehensions?

In a discourse that is actually rather complex for a young man who spent all his life as a slave to a priestess, he explains that one of the main reasons why he feels uncomfortable with taking his place beside Xuthus in Athens is that Athenian democracy is structured upon three greater groups of citizens that, each in their own way, will equally reject him as a citizen—something that he dreads because, if he is not an Athenian citizen, he will not have a *right to parrēsia*. According to Ion’s analysis, these three major groups of Athenian citizens are: the *adunatoi* ‘the powerless’, that is, those citizens that in practice have no real civic power because, in spite of their citizenship, they are not rich enough, or competent enough, or simply powerful enough; the *khrēstōi dunamēnoi* ‘the good powerful’, that is, those citizens that are in practice both good and powerful, what makes them the perfect people to govern the *polis*—but the problem is, Ion remarks, these citizens who are both good and powerful are also very wise, wise enough not to interfere and dirty their hands with political affairs of this *polis*; and the *logō te kai polei khrōmenoi* ‘those who make use of the rational discourse and the city’, that is, those citizens that in fact are powerful enough to take part in political affairs—making use of the *logos* ‘rational discourse’ and the *polis* ‘apparatus of the city’, in this case—, but who seemingly tend to exploit these affairs as means to particular interests. (see Foucault 2016:135-36; *Ion* 585-620) Now, having identified these three dominant groups of citizens, Ion explains to Xuthus that all of them will somehow reject him: ‘the powerless’ will detest him, because he is a bastard and a foreigner who eventually rose to some power through his father, who is also a foreigner, but whose rights of citizenship were strategically bestowed to him for political reasons; ‘the good powerful’ will laugh at him, because, although he might rise to power through his father, he will forever be some sort of administrative accident, that is, he will forever be a bastard and a foreigner whose powers are not natural to him, but

given to him in light of his position as a son of a ruler; finally, ‘those who make use of the rational discourse and the city’ will see him as a lower but privileged adversary, which means that they will soon find their own reasons and their own means to impeach him or outrightly remove him from power. (see Foucault 2016:136; *Ion* 620-647)

If Foucault’s observation is correct—that is, if citizenship is only granted to those men who are sons of an Athenian father and an Athenian mother—, then the ambiguity here is, of course, the fact that, even if Ion is introduced into the city as Xuthus and Creusa’s son, he still will not be considered a citizen, for Xuthus is a foreigner. The tragedy itself does not clearly discuss this matter, it is Foucault who brings it to light; whatever the case, this conundrum seems to culminate in Xuthus’s declaration that Ion “must learn to be happy” (*Ion* 650-53), that is, that Ion must join him in Athens and see what happens, and see what kind of life other than that of a citizen, and therefore other than that of a *parrēsiastes* ‘one who speaks the truth’, he might be able to live.

Whatever the case, it is clear that, at this point, we are confronted with a sort of tragic irony, or at least with a melancholic one: from Ion’s explanation, we realise that, in Athens, he will never be able to juridically be a *parrēsiastes*, even though, in practice, *he already is one*—and the evidence that *he already is a parrēsiastes* is precisely this discourse in which he explains to Xuthus the cultural, social, and juridical reasons why he will never be able to be a citizen and exercise his own *parrēsia* in Athens.

Euripides’s ability as a tragedian here is absolutely amazing.

But there is, in fact, more to it.

Whereas Ion offers us this *parrēsia* that we can understand as a case of *political parrēsia*, Creusa, his mother, offers us a second type of *parrēsia*, what we can understand as a *personal parrēsia*, or an *intimate parrēsia*.

Creusa’s *parrēsia* is so beautiful, I will not dare to try to explain it in my own words; I will provide only a brief explanation of the context in which she delivers it—a moment in the tragedy that, in fact, is already one of *anagnōrisis*.

As I clarified a while ago, in this tragedy the chorus is also the group of Creusa’s handmaidens, an amazing diegetic strategy that turns the chorus into a more participant agent in the whole movement of the narrative—an agent so participant, indeed, that these handmaidens, who had followed Xuthus’s conversation with Ion, eventually become the very characters responsible for informing Creusa that Ion is in fact Xuthus’s son with a lover, with a woman also foreign to Athens. This revelation infuriates Creusa, not so much because of Xuthus’s unfaithfulness, but rather because of the great private and political

effects that his acceptance of Ion as his own son has on herself and on her city as a whole: first of all, by welcoming Ion into their home, Xuthus is neglecting her own wish and responsibility to bear an Athenian child to rule their home and their city; by welcoming Ion into their home, Xuthus is in fact forcing her to accept a bastard foreigner as the potential future of their home and city, which is a disgrace both for her own lineage as the daughter of Erechtheus and for the future of her blood as the natural blood of Athens. And, as if this new scenario was not bad enough, it has been structured by two foreigners upon the tragedy of her own past—a tragedy that no one knows about: in truth, while Xuthus and Ion have been plotting, to her own ignorance, a future reconfiguration of Athenian administration, she is suffering in silence the fact that in the past she had to give up an Athenian child, a son of Apollo, in order to protect her own dignity and thereby in order to bear a legitimate child and heir of Athens when the time was right; and, well, now that the time is right, she has been betrayed by her very husband. Clearly, then, Creusa has a great number of perfectly plausible reasons for standing up against basically all the men in the tragedy—Xuthus, Ion, and Apollo himself—, and she in fact does this by delivering what is a truly visceral and poignant *parrēsia*:

Creusa

Silent still, [Creusa]?
Stop now and say no more?
Or flood down light
on that dark bed?
What holds you back? Match
your husband's shame with your own?
My husband, traitor, robs me
of house, robs me of children,
hope's human shape, that hope
now gone. Why silent about
that other marriage, silent
about that wept-for child?
By Zeus' starry throne, by Athena,
mistress of our citadel who reigns
at the sacred shore of Triton's lake,
I will not hide my marriage,
but heal myself and tell,
as tears flood my eyes and my soul breaks,
how men and gods betrayed me,

disgraced me in their beds.
From seven strings
strung between the bull's bright horns,
you pluck soft songs,
O Leto's child, Apollo.
To sunlight's jury I cry
my charge against you:
Bright God,
you came to me, sunburst
in your hair, in the fields
where I was plucking
soft yellow petals
that fluttered to my lap
and sang back dawn's bright gold.
Your hand grabbed and locked
this pale wrist, dragged me
to the cave bed, while I
shrieked 'Mother!'. There you worked
Aphrodite's shameless grace.
In misery, I bore you a son.
With a mother's terror,
I put him back, left him
to die on our dark bed,
where you yoked me to darkness.
Ah, I wept, alone. Now the child
is gone, a feast for vultures,
my son and yours.
You,
Lord of song
you all the while
sing self-praise, you
chant the future
before the golden throne
at the earth's core.
Into your ear
I scream these words:
Vile coward lover,
you forced me to be your wife,
now you give my husband a son
and my house to house him.

You owe him nothing. Our child,
mine and yours, you left to die,
prey for birds, stripped
of cradle clothes his mother made.
Delos, where your mother
laboured you into life,
hates you. And the laurel
sprung up there
beside the feathery, bloodroot palm—
the laurel hates you,
seed of highest Zeus.

(in DiPiero's translation: *Ion* 826-895; in the original: *Ion* 859-922)

Brad Elliott Stone, one of the most remarkable commentators of Foucault's works today, explains that *parrēsia*, particularly as Foucault examines it in his ethical phase, basically consists of five elements, or is structured upon five fundamental pillars: frankness, truth, danger, critique, and duty. (see Stone 2018:192-96)

First of all, **frankness** is a fundamental characteristic of a *parrēsiastic discourse* because this is one of the most basic features that make it so different from a *rhetorical discourse*: whereas a *rhetorical discourse*, especially in Athenian democracy, is often coated with an “aesthetics” that seeks to charge it with “truths” that, more often than not, are not really inherent to the argument in question—a practice that can often be associated to hypocrisy or demagoguery—a *parrēsiastic discourse*, especially in Athenian democracy, is ideally bare of any “aesthetics” that seeks to charge it with “truths” that are not inherent to it; if what the speaker is speaking is a *factual truth*, this means that she really believes in what she is saying, and, since she really believes in what she is saying, there is no reason for her to somehow try to use language as means to “disguise” herself or the truths that she is bringing to light—in fact, the more objective her discourse is, the closer to the truth it is, and closeness to truth is certainly the most elementary characteristic of *parrēsia*. Now, when Stone, via Foucault, says that **truth** is a fundamental characteristic of *parrēsia*, he is not exactly talking about a *factual truth*, but about an *ethical truth* or a *moral truth*: as Stone puts it, “[there is] no conflict between the *parrēsiastes*'s mind and her heart: she believes in the truth that she knows, she believes in her knowledge of the truth, and knows that her beliefs are true.” (Stone 2018:193; my translation) This means that, although a well-examined *parrēsiastic truth* is likely to be epistemologically accurate—that is, is likely to be a *factual truth*, verifiable through some kind of scientific

scrutiny—, this *parrēsiastic truth* is, before anything, an object of conviction for the speaker, it is a matter that, for her, is likely to bring healthy changes to herself and her society. As I already anticipated a few pages ago, **danger** is a fundamental characteristic of *parrēsia* because in *parrēsia* a speaker—someone in a position of *relative subalternity*—takes the risky initiative to reveal a certain truth to an audience—normally someone in a position of *relative authority* or *relative privilege*—in order to bring into question problems that in some way affect these two positions, problems that, indeed, are often at the base of the very conflicts that set these two positions apart in the first place. This danger might of course come in many different forms, depending on the nature of the relationship between the *subaltern* and the *privileged* parties; in an ascending scale of seriousness, I would say: omission, skepticism, discredit, scorn, mockery, reproach, silencing, alienation, stigmatisation, defamation, dishonour, ostracism, persecution, repression, oppression, imprisonment, torture, and execution or death—among many other possibilities. The immediate relationship between *truth* and *danger*, then, is the fact that, for the *parrēsiastes*, the *truth* must be worth the *danger* of telling it, the changes motivated by this *truth* must be so great so as to be worth for the speaker *to take the risk* to tell it to a certain privileged audience. In this context, **critique** becomes a fundamental characteristic in that the *truth* under scrutiny brings into question the nature of the very circumstances that somehow take part in and finally legitimate this division between a *subaltern party* and a *privileged party*, a process of interrogation that at some point, and even if for just a moment, forces the *privileged party* to examine itself, to examine the conditions of its own existence as a *privileged party* that in fact depends on the existence of *subaltern parties*. Finally, **duty** is a fundamental characteristic of *parrēsia* because, in practice, the speaker is perfectly free to remain silent about a given matter that might be somehow harmful to her or to her society; however, considering how her *parrēsiastic* revelation of a certain *truth* might contribute to the betterment of certain ways of living harmed by the omission of a certain truth, it is both her *moral* and *ethical* duty to reveal this truth: *moral*, because, by bringing this truth to light in front of the proper audience, the speaker is likely to improve the life of her fellow citizens; *ethical*, because, by bringing herself forth as a proof or as a case of this truth, the speaker is showing consistency between her ideals and her actions, or, in more technical terms, between her *prohairesis* and her practical actions.

Considering this basic structure of *parrēsia*, we can see, then, how Ion's *parrēsia* is more properly a case of *political parrēsia*, whereas Creusa's *parrēsia* is more properly a case of *personal parrēsia*.

In fact, it is important to notice how Ion's discourse on *parrēsia* is consistent with Kant's hypothesis of *enlightenment*: from Ion's dialogue with Xuthus, we can see that he feels bad about going to Athens in the condition of a foreigner because he will not be juridically able to exercise his *parrēsia*, even though he seems perfectly conscious of flaws in Athenian society that indeed could use some re-evaluation and reformation through a citizen's *parrēsia*, through a citizen's *criticism and denunciation*; in other words, Ion's idea of *parrēsia* is one in which he, a person in a relative position of *subalternity*, gives himself the right to publicly use his reason before a group in a relative position of *privilege* in order to interrogate how, in this social configuration, certain truths in their effects of power and certain powers in their effects of truth do not seem to be consistent with the well-being of certain strata of society. Now, it is also important to notice how Creusa's *private use of parrēsia*, although of course different from Ion's *public use of parrēsia*, remains consistent with Kant's hypothesis of *enlightenment*: from Creusa's burst of *parrēsia* in her monody above, we can see that she, a person in a relative position of *subalternity*, in fact gives herself the right to publicly use her reason—in her case, a sort of genealogical analysis of how she has been wronged, silenced, and betrayed by the gods and by her own family—before a group in a relative position of *privilege*, including a *godly privilege*, in order to bring to light the many ways in which truth has been used as an instrument of power against her; in fact, if first she, a victim, was forced to hide the truth of her affair with Apollo and her pregnancy in order to preserve her own dignity and that of her family, on a second occasion, she, again the victim, is being confronted with Apollo's silence about the truth of their affair and her pregnancy, a silence that is constraining her to her condition of *subalternity* as a rape victim, as a subservient woman, daughter, and wife, and finally as the childless mother of a half-god, half-Athenian noble citizen.

In Euripides's tragedy, a fundamental aspect of Creusa's *parrēsia* is the fact that it finally leads the whole narrative to a series of cases of *anagnōrisis*, that is, to a series of cases of *recognition sequences*.

In a way, of course, Creusa's *personal parrēsia* is already *itself* a case of *anagnōrisis*, even if a minor one in the plot, in that her revelations about her own past also reveal herself precisely as a rape victim, as a subservient woman, daughter, and wife, and finally as the childless mother of a half-god, half-Athenian noble citizen—a whole condition of *subalternity* that, in the context of the tragedy, leads us to recognise that Apollo's silence and Ion's whole affair with Xuthus are, for Creusa, acts of divine injustice rather

than acts of divine justice. But this is not all; after her monody, Creusa is convinced by her Tutor to take revenge upon Ion by poisoning him with drops of a gorgon's blood—a plan that ultimately fails. As a consequence of this frustrated assassination attempt against a boy who is, after all, the son of a nobleman, the Delphian populace chase after her in order to stone her to death—a series of unfortunate events that finally leads her to seek refuge and immunity at the Delphi temple, a place where she is then confronted by Ion himself. The Delphi priestess, Ion's adoptive mother, emerges from the temple carrying the basket in which she found him and instructs him to use it to find his mother, now that he already knows who his father is. In what is finally the cathartic moment of the tragedy, Creusa recognises Ion's basket and soon reveals to him that she, of all people, is really his mother; Ion remains sceptical, so he dares her to list him the objects that he sees inside the basket—a challenge that she completes without any difficulty: she knows that inside he will find an unfinished weaving with the image of a gorgon, a necklace in the shape of two serpents, and a garland of olive branches. Her correct answers then leads them to reconcile, and she eventually reveals to him that he is her son by Apollo; once again, Ion remains sceptical, believing that Creusa is hiding his father's identity to him for some personal reason. Determined to find out the truth, Ion decides to go into the temple and confront Apollo himself, but is surprised by Athena, who, as a messenger to Apollo, confirms Creusa's version of the story. So, in this context, we once more can see a connection between *parrēsia* and *anagnōrisis*: the tragedy's greatest *recognition scene*—Creusa's recognition that Ion is her son, followed by Ion's recognition that Creusa is his mother—is built, first, upon Creusa's *parrēsia* regarding the content of Ion's basket, and, then, and by extension, upon her *parrēsia* regarding the circumstances in which she was forced to leave him in this basket. However, and this is perhaps the most remarkable quality of Euripides's tragedy, we are confronted by yet another case of *parrēsia*, which eventually does not take place: Apollo's *parrēsia*. It is true, it feels really strange to consider the hypothesis that a god would have to subject himself to a typically subaltern practice such as *parrēsia*, but the point is, although he is the main responsible for the entire tragedy, and although he would be perfectly able to fix everything by just telling the truth about his affair with Creusa, he eventually lacks the *courage* to do so: in Foucauldian terms, Apollo does not have the *courage of truth*. The reasons why Euripides chooses to make such a blatant criticism against godly authority depends on a much deeper analysis of the circumstances in which he wrote this tragedy, a problem that does not belong in this study; but, whatever the reasons, Euripides's narrative remains consistent until the very end,

when Athena, only carrying Apollo's message, intervenes to fix everything—a sequence that is finally a truly acid yet truly beautiful use of the *deus ex machina* narratological strategy.

In sum, then, what I mean to suggest when I suggest *parrēsia* as a sort of substance of *anagnōrisis* is the fact that, in the narrative arts, acts of *parrēsia* often lead to events of *recognition*, while, at the same time, events of *recognition* are often stuffed with some *parrēsiastic matter*.

It is not difficult to understand why this is so.

Simply put, *parrēsia* is a verbal activity by which someone in a position of *relative subalternity* takes the risky initiative to reveal a certain truth to someone else in a position of *relative authority* or *relative privilege* in order to bring into question problems that in some way affect these two positions, problems that, in fact, are often at the base of the very conflicts that set these two positions apart in the first place.

Simply put, *anagnōrisis* is a key moment in a narrative in which a character or a group of characters make a critical discovery or a critical revelation regarding not just any matter in this narrative, but specifically a crucial matter connected to what one is struggling against or, which is normally the case, to what one is standing up for—a realisation process that, in turn, leads not just to a simple verification from the characters, but to a complex reconfiguration of the entire webs of power and truth through which they are connected.

If these two hypotheses are legitimate, then *anagnōrisis* becomes a truly *parrēsiastic act* when a character, placed in a relative position of *subalternity* by the circumstances of the narrative's plot, gathers the *courage* to speak that very truth whose revelation should somehow destabilise these circumstances, ideally also leading to a destabilisation of this character's relative position of *subalternity*, possibly to a real subversion or destruction of this position.

It is in this sense, then, that, in the context of Foucault's theories, I take *parrēsia* and *anagnōrisis* as cases of *eventualisation*: by taking *parrēsiastic cases of anagnōrisis* in a narrative as *archai*, that is, as 'starting points' for *criticism* and *critique*, we are likely to track down not only the networks of power and truth that structure this narrative internally—such as Ion's *political parrēsia* and Creusa's *personal parrēsia*—, but possibly also the networks of power and truth that motivated this narrative to be brought into existence in the first place—such as Euripides's own concern about and possible

propaganda against the overly restrictive nature of Athenian citizenship and the occasionally harmful nature of Ancient Greek religion.

However, the truth is, in spite of his great interest in *parrēsia* in many of his works of the ethical phase, Foucault in the end seems to remain sceptical about the viability of *parrēsia* as an institutional practice in the present: considering how, in the present, it is largely impossible for us to grasp this coextension between truth and subjectivity, between truth and a subject's ethical and moral relationship to this truth, *parrēsia*, in spite of being an act of courage of truth aimed at effective social change, is likely to be ineffective or even ridiculed as an institutional practice itself.

To the extent that *parrēsia* can be exercised as an institutional practice, Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France are perhaps the best example: these lectures, which were open to the public and often criticised by the media, by a number of specialists, and also by government authorities themselves, provided to speakers like Foucault the juridical, epistemological, and even alethurgical legitimacy to speak the truth as a means to social change, or at least as a means to encourage the possibility of social change.

In the everyday life of most citizens, however, *parrēsia* is more likely to happen in the shape of a *personal parrēsia*, which means that *parrēsia* is not likely to be articulated within an institutional context with the purpose of seeking social change through changes in some kind of aspect of public administration, but in virtually any context in which a courageous revelation of truth is called for as a means to a rearrangement of power configurations: for example, when one interrogates the efficiency and legitimacy of a certain tradition or belief, of a certain use of jurisdiction or epistemology, of a certain state of affairs in a given administration or in an erotic relationship, of a certain essentialism in a given case of privilege or social segregation etc.

Now, as Foucault makes it clear in *The Courage of Truth* (1984; 2008), there does seem to exist a certain "place" in society today where *parrēsia* can be more properly effected, a "place" where *parrēsia* does seem to consist, at the same time, of a sort of *personal parrēsia* and a sort of *political parrēsia*—often, not always, with the due legitimacy: *art*.

In a way, it seems pretty clear how *art* can be taken as a *parrēsiastic* practice par excellence: take, of instance, how Euripides's tragedy seemed to publicly speak against the fact that Athenian democracy was apparently corroding itself from the inside by overly restricting its own juridical conception of citizenship; or take how Bob Dylan's song seemed to publicly speak against the fact that North-American peacekeeping is

sordidly just a façade discourse for what is in practice an imperialism grounded on the exploitation of both foreign and domestic citizens.

Considering, however, my discussions in this chapter and in the previous one, there seems to be a much more complex dimension of *parrēsia* in its relation to *art*, a dimension that, in fact, seems to take us back to Oscar Wilde's conception of *lie* and to his idea that, in practice, *life* seems to imitate *art* far more than *art* seems to imitate *life*.

As it is surely clear by now, considering how *parrēsia* is basically a verbal activity by which someone in a position of *relative subalternity* takes the risky initiative to reveal a certain truth to someone else in a position of *relative privilege* in order to bring into question problems that in some way affect these two positions, it should be evident, therefore, that *parrēsia* also describes a *clash* between two greater groups of discourses: on the one side, the side of *relative privilege*, we have those discourses that for some reason—tradition, religion, morality, jurisdiction, violence, economic interests etc.—established themselves as hegemonic upon other discourses; on the other side, the side of *relative subalternity*, we have all these other discourses, that is, discourses that for some reason were consequently constrained into a position of subservience in relation to that first group of discourses.

About these tensions within such a discursive arena, Marrigje Paijmans, an art critic particularly devoted to Foucault's theories on *parrēsia*, writes:

Methodologically, the historical incidents of *parrēsia* serve Foucault as “chemical catalysts so as to bring to light power relations.” [Foucault 1982:780] As the workings of discourse usually go unnoticed, it is only through the clashes with other discourses, when subjects are forced to explicate themselves, that a space opens up in which discursive processes become observable. *Parrēsia* as clash functions as an indicator of the limits of historical discourses. (Paijmans 2019:44)

This perception of *parrēsia* as a sort of catalyst for bringing certain power relations to surface seems a really nice logic because, as such, *parrēsia* therefore also seems to work as an activity by which obsolescence is interrogated in face of the new, that is, by which the historical legitimacy of certain practices is interrogated in face of a new order of the present or of a future about to become present.

In a passage of one of Theodor Adorno's lectures on moral philosophy amazingly consistent with this logic, he suggests:

[It] is not uncommon for the customs of a nation to assume the form of what the Nazis called *Brauchtum* [usage, custom], and for mores to persist even though the consciousness of individuals and the critical labour of the intellect are no longer in tune with them. But the moment such customs continue to assert themselves in the face of a confrontation with liberated, autonomous reflection, it ceases to be possible to regard them as the vestiges of things that are old, good and true because they then assume the features of something poisoned and evil. [...] [In] all likelihood nothing is more degenerate than the kind of ethics or morality that survives in the shape of collective ideas even after the World Spirit has ceased to inhabit them—to use the Hegelian expression as a kind of shorthand. Once the state of human consciousness and the state of the social forces of production have abandoned these collective ideas, these ideas acquire repressive and violent qualities. (Adorno 2001:17)

In this context, then, *parrēsia* is not just a verbal activity by which someone in a position of *relative subalternity* takes the risky initiative to reveal a certain truth to someone else in a position of *relative privilege*; in a much more subtle but also much more complex sense, it becomes an activity by which someone in a position of *relative progress* takes the risky initiative to reveal certain truths to someone else in a position of *relative conservatism*. And, in this context, it should be clear that *parrēsia*, in spite of its fundamentally verbal nature, becomes something else that is not entirely verbal, that cannot be entirely verbalised: considering how *parrēsia*, in this context, becomes an activity by which someone in a position of *relative progress* takes the risky initiative to reveal certain truths to someone else in a position of *relative conservatism* so that the constraints of obsolescence are interrogated in face of what is therefore the creativity of the new, many discourses of progress are not possible yet *in practice*. For example, it seems legitimate to say, today, that Oscar Wilde's thought, especially as he systematised it in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *Intentions* (1891), and "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), is that of a "pre-modernist" or of a "proto-modernist" because he envisaged many ideas that were later formalised by modernist movements, such as a resistance to realism, a rejection of conservative values, and an experimentation with form; however, it seems perfectly clear that these discourses that today we can associate to "a resistance to realism," "a rejection of conservative values," and "an experimentation with form" were not at all organised discourses at his own time—and so this is true that, if they were, Wilde's works and Wilde himself would not have become such amazing objects of polemic then. Simply put, what I mean to say is that *art*, especially an *art* that is deliberately *vanguardist*, is par excellence a *parrēsiastic activity*, even if *parrēsia* is not entirely visible: it is an

activity by which someone in a position of *relative progress* takes the risky initiative to bring into question the obsolescence of someone or something in a position of *relative conservatism* in order to expose how any attempt to preserve such obsolescence has already become an act of violence—an act of violence not just against the *possibility* to think, know, say, do, and feel otherwise, but above all an act of violence against the *concrete necessity* to think, know, say, do, and feel otherwise.

It should be clear, then, that at this point *parrēsia* no longer operates as a *verbal activity* or as a *discursive activity*; at this point, it seems more correct to say that *parrēsia* operates, rather, as a *pre-discursive activity*, which means to say that it cannot be *verbalised*, that it does not belong in an effectively *linguistic* dimension.

But, where does it belong, then?

Foucault never makes a proper connection between *aesthetics* and *parrēsia*, or between *aesthetic experience* and *parrēsia*, but, considering how artworks seem to essentially appeal to our senses in order to excite us into thinking, it seems logical that, in this case, *parrēsia* belongs in a dimension of *imagination and affection*.

In a Kafkian sense, I believe we can say that an art that works like a hand clock that gains is an art that is successfully managing its *parrēsia* in face of the obsolescence of its own present.

In a Wildean sense, I believe we can say that an art that is successfully managing its *parrēsia* in face of the obsolescence of its own present is an art that is successfully managing its own ability to *lie*: for, as we have seen, for Wilde, a *lie* is not only a refusal of realism as an unsound depiction of the present, but also, and certainly above all, a calculated predisposition to progress through imagination, through the erotics of an art that, in the heights of its own creativity, is more real than reality itself—an art indeed so real to thought and to the senses that it inevitably becomes a paradigm for an appreciation of the present, of the material reality of the present.

In sum, then, Wilde's idea of *lie* and Foucault's idea of *parrēsia*, as paradoxically as it may seem, seem to exist in a remarkable relationship of coalescence, if not consanguinity: in art, if one wishes to interrogate truth in its effects of power and power in its effects of truth, one of the most efficient ways to do so is by means of a *lie*, and, at the same time, if one wishes to raise above the limitations of material reality that first motivate an artistic activity, one of the first steps is to bring into question the very legitimacy of these limitations.

Self-Criticism as Conclusion



I

Content

In this study, I tried to examine ‘classical reception’ in Oscar Wilde’s and Michel Foucault’s theories on ethics and aesthetics, particularly in Wilde’s conception of *art-criticism* and Foucault’s conception of *critique*, to suggest forms or perhaps a method of literary criticism more consistent with the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature.

In a few words, my main contention is that, if one of the basic goals of the Materialities of Literature is to investigate how different materialities of communication might creatively cooperate to deterritorialise our ordinary appreciation of literature and its relation to art in general—a process in which purely interpretative analyses tend to become insufficient for an effective appreciation of the literary art—, it is also the case for us to deterritorialise our ordinary understanding of *criticism* to make sure that we are not re-treating, or at least confining ourselves, to a purely interpretative routine—a process in which creativity and artistry seem to emerge as more consistent strategies for an effective appreciation of the literary art.

In practice, this means that a most consistent method of literary criticism in the Materialities of Literature is not, I believe, some kind of interpretative commentary that seeks to put into words the ineffability of an aesthetic experience in order to attenuate the

tensions that it excites in the critic, but some kind of creative initiative that seeks to deepen the mystery of an aesthetic experience by taking it as raw matter for the conception of entirely new artworks—which, in fact, should try not only to honour the original artwork by enlarging its aesthetic potential, but also, whenever possible, to take it as a “casuistics,” as a sort of spyglass for the identification, in the critic’s material reality, of all sorts of truth in their effects of power and all sorts of power in their effects of truth.

I cannot possibly try to exhaust the forms that a critic as artist has at her disposal for conceiving her criticism, but, considering the creativity and the artistry expected from this mode of critical attitude, a few forms come to mind: in order of complexity, we can take, for example, aphorisms, monologues, dialogues, and streams of consciousness; prose fictions; plays and screenplays; personal journals; memoirs; travel writings; life writings; epistolary conversations; compositions that emulate other genres, such as interviews, film criticisms, magazine columns, or newspaper articles; scrapbooks that provide a montage through the collage of textual and visual materials; artist’s books; multimedial essays, such as essays that conjugate printed materials with digital materials; video-graphic essays, in all the complexity of their elements of montage; criticism embodied in the critic’s performance; digital essays, in all the complexity of their interface and programmable dimensions; installations, in all the complexity of the media materiality used in their composition etc.

Whatever the case, and this is one of my own self-criticisms, it should be noted that these creative or artistic criticisms should be situated in what we can roughly understand as an “Adornian-Wildean” context:

Adorno champions the essayistic form as a form of argumentation that, placed in a liminal position between epistemology and aesthetics, is able to resist and dissent from an orthodoxy of thinking that often deliberately instrumentalises scientific reasoning as a means to provide the grounds to and thereby perpetuate an academic capitalism; however, in his contention, Adorno makes clear that the essay should not be considered an art form, for it is not generally based on any sort of aesthetic semblance.

Now, Wilde champions the criticism form as a form of argumentation that, by subjecting epistemology to an aesthetic treatment, is able to resist and dissent from an orthodoxy of thinking that often deliberately sanitises aesthetic experiences as a means to legitimate a primacy of reason over affection, when, in fact, affection should be able to claim primacy over reason, or at least be able to claim a parity with reason; indeed, in his contentions, Wilde makes clear that criticism should be considered an art form, for it is,

or should be, inspired by some kind of aesthetic semblance—such as the original artwork taken as starting point for this new criticism.

What I mean to say with connection between Adorno and Wilde is that a creative or artistic criticism such as the one I am contending here relies on Wilde's hypotheses to take Adorno's to a wholly new level of complexity: art criticism should, of course, do its best to stand up against the orthodoxy of thinking still dominant in many academic circles by exploring forms through which it is freer to express its own partiality, passion, and political engagement; but, considering how Adorno's hypotheses are anchored on an idea of essay that is basically still that of a prosaic form, it seems to me that, if we read these hypotheses through the prism of Wilde's hypotheses, we come to realise that partiality, passion, and political engagement can be truly improved if we raise the logic of the essay to the logic of creativity, that is, if we rely on creativity and artistry as formal means to enhance, to potentialise the logic of the essay.

This seems to be a relevant case because, as I made clear in this study, an artistic treatment of science, an aesthetic treatment of epistemology, is likely to allow the critic to convey, through her criticism, not only epistemological truths, like an ordinary scholarly article does, but also alethurgical truths, that is, truths that are not less legitimate because they are circumstantial, contingent, transitory, singular, truly subjective, truly impossible to be rationalised—whether into language or into universality.

In this study, however, I did not simply try to examine this strategy of criticism itself; in order to clarify its theoretical relevance, I tried to examine it from an axiological perspective, specifically against the backdrop of what we recognise today as an overly Cartesian reasoning that tends to encumber a proper post-hermeneutical thinking, a reasoning that, in a context of 'classical reception', can be connected to the anti-ethical and anti-aesthetical subjugation or at least subsumption of the philosophical precept of the 'care of the self' to the precept of the 'knowledge of the self'.

In this study, I relied on Mallarmé's remark that, in order to examine art criticism, one should always seek to examine how the "metaphysical dimension" of a given process of criticism is connected to its "invective dimension"—a remark that, of course, I do not take literally.

My point is that, whereas the "invective dimension" of this study consists of an analysis of the *forms* that criticism should take so as to enlarge the limits and deepen the complexity of its contentions, its "metaphysical dimension" consists of an analysis of the *motivations* for these *forms* to be explored: considering how my main motivation is a

transition from *hermeneutics* to *post-hermeneutics*, which, today, seems to be consistent with a transition from *humanism* to *post-humanism*, and considering how, in a context of ‘classical reception’, this transition can be examined through the prism of a rehabilitation of the ‘care of the self’ as dominant upon the ‘knowledge of the self’, it seems to me that the best way to examine *post-humanism* and *post-hermeneutics* in a context of ‘classical reception’ is to examine their possible connection to a ‘culture of the self’, to an ‘aesthetics of existence’, or to a ‘living as a work of art’—that is, to a philosophical practice in which thinking is coextensive with living, in which what can be attained or realised as truth is indissociable from, and in fact subsumed to, one’s ethical and moral conducts in relation to this truth.

In Wilde’s theories, I would say that this practice is basically centred on the rehabilitation of the individual as a matrix of aesthetic experiences of both conceptual and perceptual natures, which explains not only, for example, his ideas of *lie*, *mask*, *simulacrum*, and *aesthetic temperament*, but also his idea of *art-criticism*, that is, a peculiar kind of *impressionistic criticism* in which the critic takes her aesthetic experience of an artwork along with the thoughts that such experience excites in her as raw matter for the conception of a work of criticism that is itself an entirely new artwork, an entirely new creation whose purpose is not only to appreciate the original artwork under scrutiny, but also to help the critic’s intellect and senses to feel themselves alive.

A possible commentary that one could make about this brief reasoning of mine, I believe, is the fact that Wilde’s thought is generally regarded as *humanist*, rather than *post-humanist*—which is only logical, considering how labelling Wilde a *post-humanist* would be a serious anachronism.

However, I should make clear that the problem is more “terminological” than properly “epistemological”: considering how, in its most basic sense, the *humanism* that a *post-humanist* thinking stands up against is the *humanism* that began to emerge in the sciences of men around the 15th century and reached its highest level of complexity between the 17th and 18th centuries—that is, after the thought of René Descartes and with the crystallisation of the Enlightenment, two “macro-epistemes” which Wilde often seems to find himself at odds with—, it seems to me that Wilde’s *humanism*, which is, in fact, *pre* or *proto-modernist*, is in the end also *pre* or *proto-post-humanist*.

In Foucault's theories, on the other hand, I would also say that this practice is basically centred on the rehabilitation of the subject as a matrix of aesthetic experiences of both conceptual and perceptual natures, but I would emphasise that these theories largely depend on this subject's evaluation of the reasons why such rehabilitation is necessary in the first place, which includes, of course, an evaluation of the reasons why such rehabilitation is recognisable, wanted, and defended by some groups while being ignored, repudiated, and persecuted by others—a process that, in a few words, we can describe as process of *critique* that might allow a subject to adopt a certain *critical attitude*, that is, a certain strategy of *conduction* of herself as a reaction to those coercive powers that she recognised through some kind of critical scrutiny.

A possible commentary that one could make about this brief reasoning of mine, I believe, is the fact that both Wilde's and Foucault's hypotheses can be generally regarded as *individualistic*, rather than *collectivistic*—what would place them in the context of an old *Bildung*, a truly bourgeois and patriarchal idea, according to which are only legitimate those conceptions of knowledge and aesthetic experience, for example, attained by a person through a selfish process of isolation, introspection, and abstraction.

In a way, this would already be a faulty commentary, for both Wilde and Foucault, each in his own way, clearly contend, for example, a rehabilitation of the materiality of the body as a matrix for new aesthetic experiences; but, the real problem is, I believe, the fact that, although their ideas of ethics are centred on an aesthetics of the self, this aesthetics does not necessarily depend on any process of isolation, introspection, or abstraction, and it certainly does not consist of some kind of construction and exploration of the self to the detriment of others and of otherness—on the contrary: for Wilde, an individual's effective ethical relationship to herself depends on anarchism, it depends on a perfect distributive justice, because the efficiency of an individual's ethical relationship to herself is in fact proportional to the other individuals' ethical relationship to themselves; for Foucault, an individual's effective ethical relationship to herself depends on socialisation, it depends on a practical political engagement, because the efficiency of an individual's ethical relationship to herself is in fact proportional to the changes that she can bring about in her society.

At this point, I believe I should make what I believe is the most important criticism that I have to make about myself and this thesis.

All in all, I would say that I managed to accomplish the goals that I had established to myself in my project, even if only now, many months later, I can really systematise them in orderly fashion.

However, I must say that my greatest achievement is certainly the fact that, on my own, and truly unwittingly, I managed to elaborate on a really complex and really promising subject that I was not at all acquainted with in the beginning of this thesis: *artistic research*—more specifically, the inclusion of literature and literary studies in the system of artistic research.

The same way Foucault said that he would have probably abbreviated his studies in about six years if he had read about Critical Theory before starting them, I think I can say that I would have probably written this thesis with much more fluency and authority if I had read about *artistic research* before starting it.

Whatever the case, I say that this is perhaps my greatest achievement, not only because of this thesis itself, but also, and most importantly, because today I recognise the Materialities of Literature as that one doctoral programme that, albeit perhaps involuntarily, most consistently managed to suggest something like an inclusion of literature and literary studies in the system of artistic research.

For the sake of brevity, I will not explain the details of artistic research, but, for the sake of clarity, I think we can roughly describe artistic research as a scholarly practice that consists in relying on artistic creation as a means to potentialise or relativise the impact of certain scientific contentions.

I will try to explain myself with an example.

In 2013, members of the Investigación, Arte, Universidad, a group of artistic research based at the Faculty of Arts of the Complutense University of Madrid, in Spain, published a collection of essays titled *Investigación Artística y Universidad: Materiales para un Debate* (see Blasco 2013), in which they examine that which is probably the main controversy of artistic research as a scholarly practice today: the fact that, although studies in artistic research largely rely on the practice of art as a means to attain new forms of thinking, knowing, seeing, hearing, saying, acting, feeling, and living in the present, they still tend to be regulated by the teleological and capitalistic interests of the scientific parameters established by the academic institutions in which they are being conducted.

One of the most relevant essays in this collection, I think, is Aurora Polanco's "Escribir desde el Montaje: Otra Forma de Exponer," an essay in which she brings into question the contradictions that seem to arise when a researcher artist in a university—an

MA student or PhD candidate in a Faculty of Arts—finds herself in the need to formally “justify” or “defend” her artworks before a jury. More specifically, Polanco brings into question the fact that, when this researcher artist is forced to “explain” her artworks to a jury, she usually does so by bringing to this jury a sort of scientific interpretation of her intentions through what is often an overly analytical discourse that cannot help but be conflictive with the very principles of art.

In the end, as a practical alternative to an ordinary dissertation, Polanco suggests what she calls a “montage writing”: an essayistic composition through which the researcher artist offers her own perspectives about her artwork by allowing herself to freely articulate fragments of those events, perceptions, feelings, and thoughts that first inspired her to conceive this artwork or which she eventually realised to be connected to it.

Polanco’s suggestion is a really curious case, not only because it sheds a new light on the tensions that seem to arise between art and scientific thinking when art is formalised as a scholarly practice, but also because it seems to involuntarily touch on a problem that, as I just explained, is widely overlooked by most studies in artistic research today: the absence of literature in the very system of artistic research.

In fact, although Polanco’s idea of “montage writing” seems to be a perfectly valid alternative to an ordinary analytical discourse when the study of art is at play, artistic research into literature is likely to prove that it is by no means the only alternative: take, for example, the creative limits of the essay as form; the inventive uses of language, such as prose, poetry, fiction, drama, monologue, dialogue, letter, fragment, or aphorism; the material treatment of language, such as textuality, typography, imagery, or multimediality; the physical mediation of language, such as page design, book artistry, digital media, or intermediality—take, in fact, all those potential forms of creative criticism that I discussed at length in this study.

And, yet, literature still seems to be widely ignored in most studies conducted in the field of artistic research today.

There is, I must say, one particular work, a very recent work, that discusses the possible inclusion of literature into the system of artistic research: *Artistic Research and Literature* (2019), a companion edited by Corina Caduff and Tan Wälchli.

This is a work of the major importance and should be read by anyone interested in how literature and literary studies fit in the system of artistic research; however, the very existence of the Materialities of Literature seem to bring to surface a major problem in this companion: for most of the specialists in this collection, if not for all of them, artistic

research into literature is basically defined by a process of *creative writing* on a certain scientific matter, a process that should be ideally assisted by a *scientific work* that explains the relevance of the aesthetic dimension of this writing to the improvement of its scientific contentions.

Clearly, I do not mean to say that their hypotheses are wrong—on the contrary, I think they are all perfectly legitimate.

But I see two problems in this work: first, by suggesting artistic research as this analytical routine that I described above, they seem to be tangling themselves in the very paradox that I mentioned earlier—that is, they seem to be subsuming or subjugating the legitimacy of art to the orthodoxy of scientific scrutiny; second, although creative writing seems to be a perfectly valid practice of artistic research into literature, the *Materialities of Literature* seem to easily indicate that it, however, is not at all the only option—in fact, the *Materialities of Literature*, by deterritorialising our ordinary appreciation of literature and its relation to art in general, seems to suggest the aesthetic value of literature seems to depend on many more dimensions than simply that of writing and textuality.

This contact with the possibility of literature in artistic research truly reassures me as a researcher and as the author of this thesis:

Without any previous knowledge of artistic research—except the term “artistic research”—, I seem to have recognised not only the relevance of artistic research for our scholarly practices in the arts and humanities today, but also the possibility of integrating literature and literary studies into the system of artistic research.

In fact, based on my experiences as a member of the programme, and based on what I have learned with my thesis, if there is one thing that I can suggest to the *Materialities of Literature* is an investment of logistics, resources, and researchers into a more organised system of artistic research into literature and its connection to the other arts—before some other institution does it.

II Form

My main inspiration for the *form* of this thesis were, of course, Theodor Adorno’s “The Essay as Form,”, Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation,” and Hans Gumbrecht’s “Why Intermediality—if at All?,” not to say Oscar Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist,” essays

that have provided me many of the epistemological and aesthetical reasons for choosing a more personal and essayistic tone to the detriment of a more scientific reasoning and an analytical discourse—which explains why I have chosen a clear first person perspective and an argumentation that follows a somewhat narrative movement. However, I must also make clear that other three major influences for the form of this thesis were Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (1927-40; 1999), W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), and Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne* (1929-37; 2010), works that have not played any significant role as theoretical bases, but which have truly encouraged me to rely on a wide array of images as “philosophemes,” that is, not as illustrations, but as microstructures that gestate the possibility of information whose nature defy that of purely linguistic meaning. In fact, the readers surely noticed that I deliberately avoided titles and subtitles in my argumentation, which means to say that I did my best to truly avoid the essentialisation of meaning through predication; I chose, rather, images and gnomic quotations that excite in the readers a fluidity of meaning and which allow them to establish with the essay in question some kind of aesthetic connection, beyond an epistemological one.

I must say that I am not completely satisfied with what I have done in terms of form: I wish I could have used many more images as integral parts of my discourse, but I found myself constantly struggling against technical problems; also, I wish I were able to avoid so many long and truly analytical examinations—such as my examination of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Euripides' *Hecuba*—, but I must also say that some of this is a reaction to criticisms to my initial project: for instance, it has been remarked that my project was not “literary” enough and that it lacked an objective interaction with literature, even though I insisted that I would only be able to determine these interactions as my study effectively unfolded.

In fact, the way I decided to formally conduct my study was often regarded with scepticism, by listeners particularly in the last two or three State of the Art reunions that I took part in.

The readers surely noticed that my essays do not follow a “homogeneous” line of reasoning, but one that progressively unfolds in a sequence of smaller examinations that, together, structure a major contention. Honestly, I did not plan this method based on any previous theory, even though I might have unconsciously relied on it as a consequence of being influenced by Benjamin's and Warburg's treatises—as well as by Ernst Gombrich's thought, an art historian who insists on the idea that there is no such thing as Art, but only specific works of art whose singularities must be examined in their own particularities.

Whatever the case, I was surprised to find myself once again unwittingly working with a method that, in practice, is truly compatible with the principles of artistic research. About 18 months after the beginning of my thesis, while doing some private investigations on artistic research, I bumped into a book titled *Penser par Cas* (2005; 2020), edited by Jean-Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel. This is a really complex work on epistemology, but, in a few words, the basic idea is to suggest a methodology of thinking about the humanities which, in fact, avoids a strict teleological reasoning by replacing teleology with what they refer to as “casuistics,” that is, with analyses of isolated cases that, put together, allow the researcher to build a major contention out of what were initially particularities. This is what I set myself to do from the beginning, for the scepticism of some and for the praise of others, even though, in my own way, I initially referred to these “casuistics” as “heuristic mediations.” This explains my use of these two expressions throughout the thesis; and this also explains why I often referred to the overall structure of my thesis as a “pearl necklace.”

Retrospectively, I would synthesise this line of reasoning in this way:

In my **Introduction**, I tried to lay out, first, my central contention—that is, considering how one of the main goals of the Materialities of Literature is to investigate how different materialities of communication might creatively cooperate to deterritorialise our ordinary appreciation of literature and its relation to art in general, then perhaps it is also the case for us to deterritorialise our ordinary conception of *criticism*—, and, second, a working definition of what I believe should be one of the central objects of interest of this criticism: *aesthetic experience*—which I described as a person’s enjoyment of the tensions between reason, imagination, and sensuality triggered by every phenomenon in its own way artistic.

As this idea of criticism seems to depend on a connection between *literary criticism* and *art criticism*, it naturally tends to become a case of *impressionistic criticism*, which, considering its attention to both perceptual and conceptual movements emerging in the subject as a consequence of her experience of a certain phenomenon in its own way artistic, tends, in turn, to be compatible with the post-hermeneutical framework in which the Materialities of Literature generally operate.

In my **Methodology**, I then relied on a study of the classics—whose remoteness in time tends to place them among the literatures that most diversely suffered some kind of hermeneutical violence—to shed some light on the importance of post-hermeneutics today: first, I revised a group of more orthodox criticisms that take the classics as purely

hermeneutical entities, that is, as artefacts whose aesthetic qualities are generally connected to their understandability, which, in turn, is generally connected to their readability; but, as my discussion unfolded, I tried to emphasise an idea of ‘classical reception’ according to which the best way to praise the classics today is not simply through interpretation, but through a creative process in which the classics are deliberately taken as mediations for the conception of entirely new things.

As it is surely clear by now, one of the reasons why I chose the classics as an epistemological epicentre for my discussion is the fact that they seem to epitomise the relevance for us today of a transition from hermeneutics to post-hermeneutics: it seems to me that one of our best options to suggest a criticism that is not just some kind of interpretative commentary is by suggesting a criticism that is, in fact, an entirely new creation, that is, an entirely new artwork that takes the original aesthetic experience of an artwork as raw matter for its conception—I think I can now say, in a few words: one of the most efficient and most interesting post-hermeneutical attitudes is creativity; and, well, considering the idea of ‘classical reception’ that I initially suggested, and considering how the classics are certainly one of the literatures that most diversely suffered some kind of hermeneutical violence throughout history, it seems to me that, by examining the classics as an object of transition from hermeneutics to post-hermeneutics, I am shedding some light on the still expanding potential of a post-hermeneutical thinking today.

Another reason why I chose to study ‘classical reception’ is the fact that the Ancient Greeks were really some of the most remarkable founders of the idea of *impressionistic criticism*, an idea that, in fact, is not at all purely interpretative, but one intimately connected to possibility of exploring the limits of beauty and of aesthetic experience through the limits of language.

Now that I am thinking about it, if I had been familiar with Passeron and Revel’s ideas on “casuistics” when I started writing this thesis, my **Methodology** probably would not be so confusing as it is.

In my **Chapter Two**, I then focused my energies on trying to clarify the influence—the “post-hermeneutical influence,” we can now think—of the classics upon Oscar Wilde and Oscar Wilde’s theories on art.

In the first two essays of this chapter, however, I decided to swerve my own conception of “casuistics” in a slightly different direction, trying to unfold my reasoning through what I believe to be another fascinating field of the Materialities of Literature today: life writing. Relying, then, on a wide array of archive material such as letters,

notebooks, press documents, biographical accounts etc., I tried to rebuild Oscar Wilde as an individual who epitomised in himself, in his own body and persona, several principles of ‘classical reception’ as I have been studying it. In a way, I tried to examine an idea of materiality of literature that is basically that of a coextension between literature and living—something we can recognise not only in the relationship that Wilde seemed to establish between his art, his criticism, and his own ways of living, but also, and perhaps much more clearly, in Marcus Aurelius’ and Plutarch’s use of writing and literature literally as sources of ethical conduct: for these three thinkers, writing and literature were literally integral components in a subject’s construction of her own character, of her own conduction of herself in the world.

In the last two essays of this chapter, I swerved back to a more orthodox approach to try to shed some light on Plato’s and Aristotle’s influence on Wilde’s idea of *art-criticism*, which we can now recognise as a creative criticism or as an artistic criticism, that is, a mode of impressionistic criticism that takes the critic’s aesthetic experience of an artwork as raw matter, as a starting point, for the creation of a criticism that is itself an entirely new piece of art, or at least should try to be. It is at this point, when discussing Wilde’s ideas of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum*, that we were able to recognise him not just as a *fin-de-siècle* thinker, but as a *pre* or *proto-modernist*—a way of thinking about art that we can find attested in his contention that “the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not.”

In my **Chapter Three**, I finally focused my energies—also a “post-hermeneutical influence,” we can say—of the classics upon Michal Foucault’s thought.

In what is really an interesting axiological parallel with Wilde’s theories on ethics and aesthetics, Foucault’s theories on ethics and aesthetics takes the strictness of conscience intrinsic to the Catholic pastorate as an “unhealthy” paradigm to be confronted by the spontaneity of consciousness intrinsic to the ‘culture of the self’. What I mean to suggest with this parallel between Wilde’s and Foucault’s thought is the fact that not only did they both seem to recognise in their own material realities certain forms of subjective oppression, certain forms of ethical and moral violence, that kept people from exploring their real potential as members of a society, they also seemed to find in the classics, in a sort of Hellenic ethics, an interesting way of resisting such oppressions. Wilde eventually systematised a really complex idea of *lie*, *mask*, and *simulacrum*—an idea that he put into practice through both his literature and himself as a person—, while Foucault systematised a really complex, and also really disorganised, idea of ‘culture of the self’ that is

virtually indissociable from an idea of courage of truth. Now, what is really curious about this parallel, I believe, is the fact that, even though Wilde's and Foucault's hypotheses seem to be conflictive—for Wilde champions an idea of *lie*, whereas Foucault champions an idea of *truth*—, they are actually incredibly similar: both Wilde and Foucault suggest an aesthetics of the self that, in its own singularity, in its own emphasis of the self as an artwork in constant perfection, boils down to a person's re-creation of herself, to a person's creation of a lie out of herself, that is, in fact, a courageous act of expressing a really particular truth about herself, about her own self.

Also, an important aspect of Foucault's theories on ethics and aesthetics, in their connection to Wilde's theories on ethics and aesthetics, is the fact that they truly depend on a critical initiative from the individual or the subject: for Wilde, an act of *criticism* seems to be much more than just a scholarly or professional practice—for him, *criticism* seems, in fact, to be a nodal point where a person's intellect, sensuality, and singularities converge to build up an individuality, that is, to build up a character, an ethics, that allows this person to make the best of her life as a truly examined act of living with herself and with others in her world so that everyone can attain the best of the beauty that the world has to offer; for Foucault, an act of *critique* also seems to be much more than just a scholarly or professional practice—for him, *critique* seems, in fact, to be a nodal point where a person's intellect, sensuality, and singularities converge to build up a subjectivity, that is, to build up a character, an ethics, that allows this person to make the best of her life as a truly examined act of living with herself and with others in her world so that everyone can be the most of themselves by bringing into question those powers that in some way forbid some forms of existence while allowing others.

Image Catalogue

All the images in this study, used for scientific and educational purposes only, legally comply with the law decree n.º 63/85 issued by the Ministry of Culture of Portugal and published on the Diary of the Republic (n.º 61/1985, Series I of 1985.03.14).

01. Pg.1: *Snow Storm, or Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842) by William Turner (1775-1851)

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-snow-storm-steam-boat-off-a-harbours-mouth-n00530>

02. Pg.7: *The Nightmare* (1781) by Henry Fuseli (1741-1825)

<https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/nightmare-45573>

03. Pg.8: Rubin's Vase (c.1920); the Rabbit-Duck Illusion (1892)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubin_vase#/media/File:Rubin2.jpg

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit%E2%80%93duck_illusion#/media/File:Kaninchen_und_Ente.svg

04. Pg.9-10: *Solaris* (1972) by Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-86)

Solaris (1972), dir. Andrei Tarkovsky; perf. Donatas Banionis and Natalya Bondarchuk. Soviet Union: Mosfilm.

Context: Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* narrates the strange events that take place in a space station orbiting Solaris, a sentient oceanic planet with fantastic abilities—the most remarkable of them, the ability to scan people's emotions to bring back to them their most painful losses. Centred on Kris Kelvin, a veteran psychologist that travels to the station to evaluate a possible shutdown of the entire programme, the film depicts his affective breakdown after Solaris brings back to him Hari, his late wife, who had killed herself as consequence of his leaving her. The best characteristic of the narrative is a very specific subtlety: Solaris does not really bring people back from the dead; it recreates their image and character after its scanning of their hosts' affective needs, so that these people, these visitors, come into existence only after Solaris's definition of their essences.

05. Pg.10: Sketch of a bridge in Arles (1888) by Vincent Van Gogh (1853-90)

<http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let587/letter.html>

06. Pg.11: Malin Byström, as Salomé, delivers her own conception of the “dance of the seven veils” in Richard Strauss’s homonymous opera-ballet, performed by the Dutch National Opera (2017)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_E3UB_KfO78

07. Pg.13: *Las Meninas* (1656) by Diego Velázquez (1599-1660)

<https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/las-meninas/9fdc7800-9ade-48b0-ab8b-edee94ea877f>

08. Pg.13: *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) by Jan Van Eyck (1390-1441)

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait>

09. Pg.15: *Reading* (1892) by José Ferraz de Almeida Júnior (1850-1899)

<http://warburg.chaa-unicamp.com.br/obras/view/9941>

10. Pg.17: *Lavender Mist* (1950) by Jackson Pollock (1912-56)

<https://www.jackson-pollock.org/lavender-mist.jsp>

11. Pg.17: *Dead Child* (1944) by Cândido Portinari (1903-62)

<http://warburg.chaa-unicamp.com.br/obras/view/7306>

12. Pg.18: *The Creation of Adam* (1512) by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Creation_of_Adam#/media/File:Michelangelo_-_Creation_of_Adam_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Creation_of_Adam#/media/File:Michelangelo_-_Creation_of_Adam_(cropped).jpg)

13. Pg.24: *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891) by John William Waterhouse (1849-1917)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:WATERHOUSE_-_Ulises_y_las_Sirenas_\(National_Gallery_of_Victoria,_Melbourne,_1891._%C3%93leo_sobre_lienzo,_100.6_x_202_cm\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:WATERHOUSE_-_Ulises_y_las_Sirenas_(National_Gallery_of_Victoria,_Melbourne,_1891._%C3%93leo_sobre_lienzo,_100.6_x_202_cm).jpg)

14. Pg.29: *Caffè Bongo* (1986) by Nigel Coates

https://nigelcoates.com/projects/project/caffe_bongo

15. Pg.36: Operation Pershing (1967) by Patrick Christain

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/07/opinion/sunday/vietnam-the-war-that-killed-trust.html>

16. Pg.37: Napalm Attack in Vietnam (1972) by Nick Ut

<https://time.com/vietnam-photos/>

17. Pg.43: *Another November* (2014) by Laura Stevens

<https://www.lensculture.com/2014-lensculture-emerging-talent-award-winners?modal=project-26504-another-november>

18. Pg.44: *Philip II (Philip's Portrait in Sayo)* (1549-50) by Tiziano Vecellio (1490-1576)

<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/philip-ii/d12e683b-7a51-41db-b7a8-725244206e21>

19. Pg.45: *Philip II (Philip's Portrait in Armour)* (1550-51) by Tiziano Vecellio

<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/philip-ii/d12e683b-7a51-41db-b7a8-725244206e21>

20. Pg.46: *Diana and Actaeon* (1556-59) by Tiziano Vecellio

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diana_and_Actaeon_\(Titian\)#/media/File:Titian_-_Diana_and_Actaeon_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diana_and_Actaeon_(Titian)#/media/File:Titian_-_Diana_and_Actaeon_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

21. Pg.46: *The Death of Actaeon* (1559-75) by Tiziano Vecellio

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Death_of_Actaeon#/media/File:Actaeon.jpg

22. Pg.57: *Alice in Wonderland* (2003) by Annie Leibovitz

<https://filippoventuri.net/2009/11/27/annie-leibovitz-alice-in-wonderland/>

23. Pg.61: *Penelope* (1980) by David Ligare

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/david-ligare/penelope-1980>

24. Pg.62: Façade of the British Museum

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit>

25. Pg.63: *Winged Victory of Samothrace* (c.200 BC) in the Louvre Museum

My photograph

26. Pg.64: Piece of the Elgin Marbles (c.447 BC) in the British Museum

My photograph

27. Pg.74: *Coronation of the Virgin* (1440-42) by Fra Angelico (1395-1455)

https://www.wga.hu/html_m/a/angelico/09/cells/09_coron.html

28. Pg.76: *Aphrodite of Milos* (c.130 BC) in the Louvre Museum

<https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/aphrodite-known-venus-de-milo>

29. Pg.81: *Laocoön* (c.40 BC) in the Vatican Museums

<http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-clementino/Cortile-Ottagono/laocoonte.html>

30. Pg.82: *Winged Victory of Samothrace* (1962) by Yves Klein (1928-62) in the Reina Sofía Museum

<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/victoire-samothrace-s-9-victory-samothrace-s-9>

31. Pg.87: *Mona Lisa* (c.1517) by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

<https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/mona-lisa-portrait-lisa-gherardini-wife-francesco-del-giocondo>

32. Pg.95: *The Death of Ophelia* (1880) by Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923)

<https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/sarah-bernhardt/ophelia/>

33. Pg.96: Sketches by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) in a letter from Florence to his father (1875)

Wilde, Oscar (2000). *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. **Holland, Merlin and Hart-Davis, Rupert (ed.)**. London: Fourth Estate, p.6-7.

34. Pg.104-05: *Columbus* (2017) by Kogonada

Columbus (2017), dir. Kogonada; perf. John Cho and Haley Lu Richardson. USA: Depth of Field; Nonetheless Productions; Superlative Films.

Context: Kogonada's *Columbus* narrates the unlikely friendship between a young girl obsessed with the architecture of her birth city—Columbus, Ohio—and a bitter man of Korean ascendancy who comes back home after many years in Asia after his father, one of the most renowned architects in this city, falls suddenly ill. As an experienced writer and translator, he befriends this young girl by having her express to him her innermost feelings and thoughts triggered by her perceptual experience of all those works of architecture that she is so fond of. It should be noted that Columbus is, in fact, an open-air museum of Modernist architecture. It is also curious to notice that Kogonada first became known as a videographic essayist (<https://vimeo.com/kogonada>); his essay on Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, centred on Hari's affective evolution, is particularly beautiful.

35. Pg.129: The Juilliard Experiment (2016) by Fabienne Verdier

<https://fabienneverdier.com/db/the-juilliard-experiment/>

<http://thejuilliardexperiment.com/>

36. Pg.131: Bust of Ramses II (c.2686 BC) in the British Museum

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/egyptian-sculpture>

37. Pg.135: *Soundscapes* in The Juilliard Experiment (2016) by Fabienne Verdier

<https://fabienneverdier.com/db/soundscapes-the-juilliard-experiment/>

38. Pg.187: Notre Dame Cathedral in flames (2019)

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47941794>

39. Pg.187: Drowned immigrants in Mexico (2019)

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-mexico/photo-of-drowned-migrants-triggers-fight-over-trump-asylum-clampdown-idUSKCN1TR23Q?feedType=RSS&>

40. Pg.202: *Danaë* (1907) by Gustav Klimt (1862-1918)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gustav_Klimt_010.jpg

41. Pg.210: *At Eternity's Gate* (2018) by Julian Schnabel

At Eternity's Gate (2017), dir. Julian Schnabel; perf. Willem Dafoe and Oscar Isaac. France, UK, USA: Riverstone Pictures; SPK Pictures; Rocket Science; Rahway Road; Iconoclast.

Context: Julian Schnabel's *At Eternity's Gate* narrates Vincent Van Gogh's last years of life, with a particular attention to his tumultuous stay in Arles, southern France. The first part of the film emphasises Van Gogh's relationship with Paul Gauguin as well as the abrupt end of their friendship, which culminated in Gauguin's departure from the city and Van Gogh's cutting off his own ear. The film itself, however, is a huge class on the aesthetic and philosophical principles of Impressionism, especially its detachment from realism and a reworking of nature through a creative experimentation with light and colour.

43. Pg.210: *Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old Battersea Bridge* (1872-75) by James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/whistler-nocturne-blue-and-gold-old-battersea-bridge-n01959>

44. Pg.213: *At Eternity's Gate* (2018) by Julian Schnabel

See 41.

45. Pg.236: *The Annoying* (1898) by José Ferraz de Almeida Júnior; *Re-reading Almeida Júnior's 'The Annoying'* (1999) by José Cláudio; *Reviewing Almeida Júnior's 'The Annoying'* (1999) by Antônio Carelli.

<http://warburg.chaa-unicamp.com.br/obras/view/1460>

<http://warburg.chaa-unicamp.com.br/obras/view/5581>

<http://warburg.chaa-unicamp.com.br/obras/view/5580>

46. Pg.247: *Guernica* (1937) by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/guernica>

47. Pg.250: *Au Printemps ou la Vie à l'endroit* (1972) by Gérard Fromanger

<http://www.artnet.com/artists/g%C3%A9rard-fromanger/au-printemps-ou-la-vie-%C3%A0-lendroit-QbBIsiKnRCFYJhe2LmyhYw2>

48. Pg.258: *Rue Aubriot - Yves Saint Laurent* (1975) by Helmut Newton (1920-2004)

<http://warburg.chaa-unicamp.com.br/obras/view/4126>

49. Pg.261: *London* (2005-15) by Gareth Wood

<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/gallery/2015/sep/10/cool-cartography-the-art-of-mapmaking>

50. Pg.262: Police officer in Palm Beach measuring a woman's bathing suit (1925) | General Photographic Agency

<https://mashable.com/2015/05/27/swimsuit-police/?europa=true>

51. Pg.263: *Proletarians* (1933) by Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973)

<http://warburg.chaa-unicamp.com.br/obras/view/8239>

52. Pg.281: *New York Movie* (1939) by Edward Hopper (1882-1967)

https://www.wikiart.org/pt/edward-hopper/not_detected_235598

53. Pg.286: *Signs* (2002) by M. Night Shyamalan

Signs (2002). dir. M. Night Shyamalan; perf. Mel Gibson and Joaquin Phoenix. USA: Touchstone Pictures; Blinding Edge Pictures; The Kennedy/Marshall Company.

Context: see the text.

54. Pg.288: *Woman Holding a Balance* (1662-63) by Johannes Vermeer (1632-75)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman_Holding_a_Balance#/media/File:Johannes_Vermeer_-_Woman_Holding_a_Balance_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

55. Pg.290: *Babel* (2006) by Alejandro González Iñárritu

Babel (2006). dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu; perf. Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett. France and USA: Anonymous Content; Zeta Film; Central Films; Media Rights Capital.

Context: Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* is a collection of interconnected narratives whose tragic epicentre consists of some kind of tension that emerges with the cultural uses of language. In this sequence, we follow a couple who takes a trip to Asia to try to save their marriage, falling apart after the loss of a child. During this trip, however, the woman is accidentally shot, so she and her husband are forced to look for help in a poverty-stricken village in the middle of nowhere. At some point during her struggle against pain and death, she asks her husband for help to urinate; as he holds her in his arms and pulls down her underwear so that she can sit on a bucket, they are suddenly involved by an unexpected intimacy that soon unfolds into a real eroticism, into a real erotic impulse, which culminates in their passionate kiss.

56. Pg.326: *The Last Supper* (1753) by Marcos Zapata Inca (1710-73).

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/guinea-pig-last-supper>

Context: In this depiction of The Last Supper, housed today at Cusco Cathedral, in Peru, we can see an aesthetics of resistance against the European episteme that spread Catholicism to Latin America: Jesus and his apostles gather around a plate of *cuy*, the roasted Guinea pig typical of that area.

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