

Terry Eagleton's *Saint Oscar* (1989): Reading Wilde at the End of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse Eagleton's construction of Oscar Wilde in his play *Saint Oscar*, first performed by the Field Day Theatre Company in the Guildhall, Derry, on September 25, 1989. Eagleton outlines Wilde's relation to Ireland as essential to an understanding of the writer and his work, and claims his anticipation of many insights of contemporary cultural theory. Eagleton approaches Wilde from a postcolonial stand, seeing his critical thought as one consequence of his conflictive relation to late Victorian society. In doing this, he vindicates the relevance of Oscar Wilde as an outsider to British mainstream culture. Eagleton defines postmodernity as "a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanations (1996, vii). This paper explores the extent to which Eagleton constructs Oscar Wilde as postmodern in *Saint Oscar*.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, there has been an interest both in reviving writers and/or texts from outside the canon as well as in re-reading those that constitute the canon from new critical perspectives. One aim behind these two tendencies has partly been plurality. Either to reveal the plurality of texts and/or writers at a given moment, in a given social, political, or historical context, or to reveal the plurality of readings that a particular literary text can yield. This impulse towards releasing the plurality of literature has meant the exploration of the possible subversive nature of the literary text. The new insights into literature brought about by the new critical developments have played a dominant role. Feminists, deconstructionists, post-colonialists, marxists, cultural materialists, psychoanalysts and others have contributed to releasing plurality, complexity and sometimes even subversiveness. The post-colonial age has also brought with it a revaluation of what constitutes national literatures, at the same time as it has taken pains to reconsider the often complex relations between the colonizer and colonized as revealed by literature. The case of Ireland is particularly relevant in this connection, not only as regards its colonial/colonized relation with England, but because, as Eagleton points out:

English students of literature would know of course that Yeats and Joyce were Irish, and probably thinking of those tasty babies of *A Modest Proposal*—Jonathan Swift; but it is more doubtful that they could name the nationality of Sterne, Sheridan, Goldsmith and Burke, and they might even hesitate over Bernard Shaw. British cultural imperialism has long annexed these gifted offshore islanders to its literary canon. (1989a, vii)

It is against this background that Eagleton approaches Oscar Wilde in his play *Saint Oscar*.¹ In the preface to the play, Eagleton interrelates Wilde's Irishness with what he defines as "his remarkable anticipation of some present-day theory" (1989a, vii), arguing that the ideas of several of the leading theorists of our time have to be seen in the context of their socially marginal status (1989a, vii), giving Jacques Derrida (ex-colonial), Julia Kristeva (woman) or Foucault (homosexual) as examples. In fact, Eagleton argues that though Wilde has not usually been read either as a particularly political figure or as Irish in England, he is political "in all the most fundamental senses of the term" (1989a, viii). It is Wilde's British anti-Establishment views that Eagleton highlights in *Saint Oscar* and which he ultimately relates to his position as outsider to British mainstream thought. Indeed, Seamus Heaney introduced his reading of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* on Irish radio, in 1992, by relating Wilde's marginalised and victimised position in Victorian England not only to his homosexuality but also, and significantly in his view, to his Irishness:

... at this distance in that particular light there is indeed a way of seeing Oscar Wilde as another felon of our land, another prisoner in an English jail so that the ballad then becomes the link in a chain including John Mitchell's *Jail Journal* and Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, prison literature. This poem written by the son of Šperanza ... may be devoid of Irish nationalist political intent but it is full of subversive anti-Establishment sentiment. It has about it a kind of high banshee lament, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. So in that way it is not just a self elegy, not just a cry of a soul in pain, it is more a universal keen, an outcry not so much against power as against necessity and fate and it is this deep registering of an affront to human spirit which gives the poem its fevered majesty and carries it beyond pathos towards the tragic. (Cited in Coakley 1994, 212)

Saint Oscar was first performed on the evening of the 24 September, 1989, in Derry's Guildhall by the Field Day Theatre Company. Terry Eagleton himself gives an account of the preview, affirming Field Day as the cultural flagship of the Irish nationalist community, their cultural program

being a “conscious compensation for the nationalist community’s lack of political power” (1989b, 42) The play is structured in two acts and the plot is situated around the trial in which Wilde was sentenced to two years’ hard labour for homosexuality, sodomy and indecent acts (Ellmann 1988). In the first act, the author explores Wilde’s relationship with Ireland and with emerging socialist thought, relating these to his critical thought. The second act concentrates on the trial and its aftermath, prison and exile. Here homosexuality becomes a central issue. In a way, Eagleton affirms Wilde’s identity as Irish and as socialist in relation to Victorian society and thought, to show how the British Establishment annihilates it by reducing it to homosexuality. As it appears in the play, Wilde’s homosexuality was seen as an affront to Victorian morality, the point that Eagleton makes being that Wilde was indeed an affront to Victorian society and moral standards, though not so much because of his sexual identity as his political one. In the play, an analogy is significantly drawn between Wilde and Parnell, when Lady Wilde utters, “They’ll break you as they broke Parnell ... They see in you all that terrifies them in themselves, and to be rid of that dreadful ambivalence they’ll tear you apart” (1989a, 18). Pine (1995, 10) also agrees on this point when he states that “... there is no doubt that, at the time of his trial, Wilde represented a political rather than an aesthetic or even a moral threat to the British establishment”.

Eagleton uses the figure of Lady Wilde, ‘Speranza’, to explore the ramifications of Wilde’s identity as Irish. Lady Wilde was a supporter of the Young Ireland movement (1842), which produced *The Nation*, edited by Gavan Duffy. This movement wished to create a nation where all Irish men and women would live in harmony. It attracted many middle-class Protestant and Catholic Irish. Speranza, as an active member, advocated a free Irish nation in her writings (Coakley 1994, 8). She dedicated her book of poetry *Poems by Speranza* (1864) “To my sons Willie and Oscar Wilde. I made them indeed, speak plain the word COUNTRY [sic]. I taught them, no doubt, that a Country’s a thing men should die for at need!” (Coakley 1994, 68). Wilde’s father’s love of Irish folklore and history is also well known. He was responsible for building up the Royal Irish Academy’s collection of antiquities and preparing a detailed catalogue of it. William Wilde had a fishing lodge on the west coast of Galway, which his son would explore as a child. There he was exposed to Celtic folklore, which would influence his later work. Coakley (1994, 94–99), for instance, argues that Celtic folklore and myth form the basis and structure of *Dorian Gray*. An illustrative example of Wilde’s Irish roots lies behind his name, Oscar Fingal O’Flaherty Wills Wilde. Robert Sherard, Wilde’s first biographer, claims the Ossianic origin of the name ‘Oscar’ (1937, 42). Apparently, the King of Sweden, after whom it has been argued Oscar was named, was given the name on the suggestion of Napoleon, who seems to have been an enthusiast of Celtic mythology, “an Ossian mad” (Lady Wilde, cited in Coakley 1994, 24).²

'Fingal' is the Gaelic for 'blonde or fair-haired stranger'. Samuel Ferguson seems to have used this name in his poems and MacPherson used it instead of Fionn in his Ossianic tales. Fingal is a common placename in areas where there were Viking settlements and it is the name of the region that stretches along the coast between the Liffey and the Boyne rivers. 'O'Flahertie' marks Wilde's links through his paternal grandmother with some of the leading Celtic families of the west of Ireland. O'Flahertie was one of the principal chieftains of Connemara and the O'Flahertie clan was the subject of one of the famous precatory mottoes that hung outside the four gates of the old city of Galway (Coakley 1994, 24–25).

Bernard Shaw would affirm that "... it must not be forgotten that though by culture Wilde was a citizen of all civilised capitals, he was at root a very Irish Irishman, and as such, a foreigner everywhere but in Ireland" (cited in Hyde 1977, 45). Wilde himself always described himself as either Irish or Celtic and his letters and contemporary record of his conversations reveal that he was a consistent supporter of Home Rule for Ireland and of the movement's leader, Charles Stewart Parnell. He described himself as "a most recalcitrant patriot" (Hart-Davies 1962, 111), and seems to have admired the Land League leader, Michael Davitt, who spent many years in prison for his campaign on behalf of tenant rights: "We in Ireland are fighting for the principle of autonomy against empire, for independence against centralization, for the principles for which the South fought" (Anon. 1882); "My own idea is that Ireland should rule England" (Wilde cited in Wratlaw 1979, 13).

Eagleton identifies Lady Wilde with Ireland in *Saint Oscar* (1989a, 9), and makes hers an Irish nationalist discourse to which Wilde reacts in a Joycean manner with the words, "I won't serve" (1989a, 18). A line may be drawn between Wilde, the character here, and Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The oppressiveness of Ireland as experienced by the young artist in Joyce's work is made Wildean by Eagleton, and he explores the ramifications of Wilde's relationship to Ireland around the development of his critical thought. Thus, Wilde's views of the relativity of truth, with his rejection of a transcendent, objective truth, whether that truth be called history, culture or nature; his conception of the textual nature of history; his identification of reality and fiction (the world as stage); his conception of myth; his concern with the role of language, are all seen in the play as inseparable from the context of his historical being. What Eagleton does is to locate Wilde's critical views, as expressed mainly in the essays published in London in 1891 as *Intentions*,³ as an extension of his historical nature, that is to say, as directly related to his Irishness and consequently his problematic position as an outsider with regard to British Victorian society. In this connection, Lawrence Danson (1997, 6) makes the point that "The Irish son of an Irish patriot would stand at the summit of a newly defined, a

revised and perfected, ideal of English culture, the colonial subject outdoing the occupier by capturing the history and future of culture”.

To explore Wilde’s socialist thought, Eagleton introduces Richard Wallace.⁴ If Lady Wilde is made to speak for Ireland and Irish nationalism, Wallace’s is the voice of contemporary socialist thought:

Important things are happening, Oscar. For the first time since the Chartists the workers are starting to organize. Look what’s happened since the dock strike: thousands flooding into the seaman’s union, the birth of the miner’s federation—even the white-collar workers are getting themselves organized. Pretty soon we’ll have the shop assistants on the march. Trade councils are springing up all over the place: I hear there are new dockers’ unions in Glasgow and Liverpool, and over in Belfast ... (1989a, 21–22)

If Lady Wilde makes her son’s cause one and the same with the Irish one in spite of his “I won’t serve”, Wallace does the same with the working classes—“your cause and the workers’ struggle are the same” (1989a, 22)—on the grounds that Wilde is “a living affront to the sex-and-property market” (1989a, 22). Supporting proof of Wilde’s socialist beliefs is provided by reference to his pamphlet “The Soul of Man under Socialism” as well as to his fairy stories. Some of the ideas that Wilde puts forward in his pamphlet are outlined in the play, particularly his insistence on individualism: “I’m a socialist because I’m an individualist” (1989a, 24);⁵ his belief in poverty as the main root of all social evil;⁶ and his belief in socialism not as an end in itself but rather as the means towards another aim, the development of the individual, and particularly the artist.⁷ Ultimately, in the first act of the play, Eagleton locates Wilde as an outsider to British mainstream thought: “I’m a shameless parasite: whatever the English believe, I believe the opposite ... And my task is to remind the English that they haven’t the faintest idea who *they* are. I’ve merged with them so they can behold their own monstrous image in me” (1989a, 26).

The second act concentrates on Wilde’s trial and its aftermath, prison and exile. Here Eagleton introduces Edward Carson,⁸ and Wilde’s homosexuality becomes a central issue, since it was the issue at stake during the trial. But Eagleton gives many hints in these pages that what was on trial was not so much Wilde’s sexual behaviour as his political being. Wilde’s understanding of life as a performance (“my life *is* a theatre”; Eagleton 1989a, 34) is underlined in this part of the play and the courtroom becomes the stage where Wilde, like Caliban (1989a, 41), is victimized: as Carson says, “I saw a chance to shut your mouth forever so I moved fast” (1989a, 62). Wilde’s understanding of the nature of truth (1989a, 46) and his exploration of the concept of mask (1989a, 55)⁹ are more deeply examined in this part of the play. Wilde stands to the trial in the play by making it a

political one. He defends himself by speaking out socialism and, most intensely, by speaking out Ireland (1989a, 46). Thus Wilde the Irishman is both affirmed and vindicated in these pages (1989a, 33–54). In the final moments of the play, Wilde is seen in the context of the future: “I’m an image of the failure of the present” (1989a, 58). The reference to Thomas Hardy and the publication of his novel *Jude the Obscure* that we find in these lines may also be read in this context of “the failure of the present” (1989a, 56), and certainly places Wilde alongside other forethinkers of the time. Danson (1997, 22) also relates Wilde to Hardy by arguing that “In every obvious way they had nothing to do with each other. But they belonged together because they were two of the most dangerous writers in England”. Thus, Eagleton shows Wilde the critic, the scholar, the intellectual, to be inseparable from Wilde the homosexual, the socialist and the Irishman, that is to say, from Wilde the outsider, and he is ultimately vindicated in the play as a canonised martyr, thus Saint Oscar.

In *The Illusions of Postmodernism* Eagleton argues that:

Postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities. (1996, vii)¹⁰

Wilde’s critical writings reveal that he questioned notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, that he wondered about the idea of universal progress and was definitely suspicious of single frameworks, grand narratives and ultimate grounds of explanation. Furthermore, his paradoxical relation to British mainstream thought led him to see the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable and indeterminate. His political and sexual make-up led him to be openly sceptical about the objectivity of truth, history and norms and to see nature and identity as problematic and paradoxical rather than coherent and unified. Pine argues that Wilde’s aesthetic credo had clear political ramifications, which he summarizes around three main points:

... that the critic was central to the artistic process, which was itself central to society; that modern society was in danger of extinction because of its insistence on material values to the exclusion of the spiritual and imaginative dimensions of existence; and that it could be liberated from this fate by means of an artistic process which

would establish an amoral zone secured by mutual respect between the individual and society. (1995, 290)

Thus Wilde's preoccupations place him as a pioneer, as advancing many of the concerns of twentieth-century critical thought. In so much as postmodernity has taken time and effort to reconsider all these issues, Wilde may be vindicated as a precursor of postmodern thought, and consequently as very much ahead of his time. Furthermore, in so far as Wilde elevated criticism into a "creative and independent" activity (1989, 1021, 1026), arguing that "Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it" (1989, 1023), he can also be seen as precursor of the dominant role that literary theory has played in the intellectual domain in the second half of the twentieth century.

NOTES

¹ Eagleton's is not the only work to vindicate Wilde's Irishness, not the only one to approach the writer from a post-colonial stand. Suffice it here to mention as examples two recent relevant contributions in this direction, namely Coakley (1994) and Pine (1995).

² The quote comes from Lady Wilde's *Driftwood from Scandinavia* (1884), where she explains that in the years before Napoleon's rise to fame he had courted Desirée Clary, the daughter of a Marseilles banker of Irish descent, but she rejected him and married an army officer named Bernadotte. When Desirée's first son was born, Napoleon suggested the name Oscar. Years later Bernadotte became one of Napoleon's marshalls and eventually he was crowned King of Sweden.

³ The core of Wilde's critical thought is to be found in the essays published under this title (which includes "The Decay of Lying", "The Truth of Masks", "Pen, Pencil and Poison", and "The Critic as Artist"), as well as in "The Portrait of Mr W. H." (1889) and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891).

⁴ Richard Wallace (1818–1890) was a connoisseur and collector of works of art, known in youth as Richard Jackson. He was educated entirely under the supervision of his mother Maria, Lady Hertford. The influences by which he was surrounded were on the whole more French than English, but he always insisted strongly on his English extraction. Most of his young days and early manhood were passed in Paris. On Lord Hertford's death in 1870, Wallace became heir of the Marquis's property including a house in Paris and Hertford House in London, the Irish estates about Lisburn and the finest collection of pictures and objects d'art in private hands in the world. During the war of 1870–71 he equipped an ambulance which was attached to the 13th corps d'armée, and two more in Paris. He also founded a hospital for the use

of British subjects in Paris, subscribing 100,000 francs to the fund in aid of those who had suffered because of the bombardment. During the siege of Paris he donated at least two million francs in aid to the besieged. In 1873 he was elected MP for Lisburn, which constituency he continued to represent until 1885. In 1878 he was nominated one of the commissioners of the Paris exhibition. He was also a trustee of the National Gallery, and a governor of the National Gallery of Ireland, to both of which he had presented donations. The last four years of his life were spent in Paris (Stephen and Lee 1959–60, 559–560).

⁵ Wilde elaborates on his understanding of individualism extensively in the essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1989, 1079–1104).

⁶ "The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible" (1989, 1079).

⁷ Eltis makes the point that Wilde's "definition of himself as an anarchist, in the context of late nineteenth-century British politics, was in itself a daring act. Early socialist and anarchist movements were regarded with distrust, hostility, and often fear by the establishment they criticized. Late nineteenth-century London was an international refuge for radical socialist from Germany, Russia, and France, exiled from their native countries by punitive anti-socialist laws. The British authorities surveyed their activities closely and were quick to inflict harsh penalties if they over-stepped the mark" (1996, 15).

⁸ Coakley (1989, 197) states that "In the mid 1880s Anglo-Irish affairs were going through a very difficult phase. Gladstone began to indicate his support for limited Home Rule for Ireland, and with this purpose in mind he introduced a Home Rule Bill at Westminster in 1886. It was very limited in scope, as the parliament in London would retain control over defence, foreign policy, trade and coinage. Despite its limited nature, the bill raised a storm vituperation in England. There was a deep-seated belief among many English intellectuals at the time that the Irish or 'Celts', being an emotional and unstable race, were fundamentally unsuited for self-government. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxons, who were at that time managing an empire, were sober and steady and therefore ideal rulers. Gladstone's bill collapsed and he resigned as prime minister. He was replaced by Lord Salisbury at the head of a Tory government that was determined to restore 'law and order' in Ireland. Arthur Balfour was then appointed chief secretary for Ireland and he introduced a ruthless policy of coercion. Around this time Balfour met Edward Carson, who was already making an impression as barrister. Balfour made Carson his crown prosecutor."

⁹ It is relevant here to remember Wilde's famous statement, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (1989, 1045).

¹⁰ In the introduction to *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Eagleton draws a line between postmodernity and postmodernism: "The word *postmodernism* generally refers to a form of contemporary culture, whereas the term *postmodernity* alludes to a specific historical period" (1996, vii). He further argues that "Postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' culture, as well as between art and everyday experience" (1996, vii). Eagleton then offers the reader a critique of postmodernism as a style of culture. I am drawing here on his understanding of postmodernity as a style of thought that has characterized the last decades of the twentieth century, and it is in this sense that I use the adjective 'postmodern' later on, with reference to 'postmodernity', not to 'postmodernism'.

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