

Oscar Wilde and Authorialism

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Abstract: This essay introduces the concept of “authorialism” to characterise the critical orientation that sees literary works primarily as actions on the part of their authors rather than as linguistic objects, using the early reception of Oscar Wilde’s works as a case study. It is argued that authorialism was the dominant tendency in 1875-1900 Anglophone criticism, and that it has characterised assessments of Wilde’s works to this day. The method has the advantage of finding coherence in literary works, which is useful in assessing matters of value; the textual features of Wilde’s writings, however, resist authorialist readings by not featuring the expected coherence.

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The uses of the notion of “the author” in literary-critical discourse have been manifold and amply debated. In this paper I would like to concentrate on its use as an interpretive tool for literary critics. In other words, rather than propounding innovations as to how we should conceptualise what an author is or does, I shall take a step backwards and look at some of the ways in which certain forms of literary criticism have used the critical category of the author in order to make sense of literary works. By calling the author a “critical category” I mean that to the extent that criticism makes use of the notions of “author”, “authorship”, or at any rate author-related knowledge, to make interpretive claims about literary works, to that extent this knowledge transcends its merely biographical dimension and becomes an interpretive tool; in this sense, it can be called a category within the practice of literary criticism, and can- be analysed as such.

To adopt this meta-critical perspective on the subject involves, to my mind, the delineation of two main lines of inquiry, a theoretical and a historical one. The former concerns the epistemology of literary criticism—namely, whether, how, and why we may be justified in making use of author-related knowledge to make interpretive claims about literary works; the latter concerns the history of the discipline—namely, what the theory and practice of literary criticism have had to say about, or do with, this same issue. In the main body of the article I shall refrain from making a theoretical case for or against any hermeneutical model; instead, I shall describe how the British criticism of

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(roughly) the last quarter of the nineteenth century dealt with the critical category of the author, using the critical reception of Oscar Wilde's works as a case study.

Wilde seems a particularly promising example to analyse the workings of the notion of "the author" in literary criticism, because the import of the words he wrote has typically been subordinated to the fact that he, and no one else, wrote them. This authorial fetishisation can be seen on book covers (which almost invariably portray the author himself), in the endless rediscovery on the part of conference organisers of the droll potential of punning on the name "Wild(e)", and most importantly in the spuriousness of the critical readings of his works, which are typically rife with notions that are logically dependent on their specific authorship in a way that is often at odds with the critic's stated methodology. This tendency is still current, but its roots lie in the criticism of the late nineteenth century.

I intend to make (roughly in this order) three broad claims: (1) that the dominant hermeneutical model, (henceforward the "protocol"), in the literary criticism of the area and era at hand may helpfully be labelled as "authorialist", for reasons I shall elucidate shortly; (2) that tensions may obtain between a protocol and the literary works to which it is applied, and that Wilde's writings are an example of such a tension in that they contain a number of textual features that make them recalcitrant to the critical praxis that followed from the dominant protocol; and (3) that the controversies that opposed Wilde to some of the critics of his work had not only a moral and political dimension (one which has been abundantly explored by modern criticism),¹ but also a hermeneutical one, in the sense that the conflicting critical positions considered in the rest of this paper implicitly relied on competing conceptions of what did and what did not count as a valid model for interpreting literary works in general, and that the controversy hinged on the notion of "the author".

Authorialism

"Authorialism", as used in this paper, is the claim, whether explicit or implicit, that the object of literary criticism, usually known as "the work", encompasses, or should encompass, not only the text, but also knowledge relative to the text's author.² An

¹ A few examples of the approach, different in methodology but having in common a concern with the ideological clashes between Wilde and his contemporaries, include Joseph Bristow: "A Complex Multiform Creature: Wilde's Sexual Identities" in Peter Raby (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jonathan Dollimore: "Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide" in *Textual Practice*, 1, 1 (1987), 48-67; Sos Eltis: *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Declan Kiberd: *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996).

² The definition of "text" is contested ground. "In aesthetics, the prevalent usage sees it as a sequence of characters: see for example Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 71-73. The concept is typically pitted against the idea of "literary work", an entity which is taken to comprise contextual elements alongside the character sequence. The philosophical literature on this is vast: see for example Alexander Nehamas: "Writer, Text, Work, Author" in Anthony J. Cascardi (ed.): *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Susan Wilshire: "A Literary

instance of criticism will be characterised as “authorialist” when it treats the literary work less as a linguistic object than as an action on the author’s part. This position pertains to ontology rather than to methodology: that is to say, it does not tell us anything about the way in which we are supposed to use the elements we have in order to construct an interpretation; instead, it draws a boundary around the area from which evidence may legitimately be gathered. In short, the claim that defines this phenomenon is that author-related evidence is a legitimate area of inquiry for literary interpretation.³ It should also be remembered that we are dealing with the relevance of author-related data for literary interpretation, not for biography or cultural history: the issue considered here is whether or not author-related elements are legitimate as a tool for interpreting literary works.

In this minimum sense, “authorialism” need mean nothing more than a propensity to look at certain elements and not others within what M.H. Abrams famously calls “the total situation of the artwork”.⁴ Alternatives to authorialism may comprise, for example, Formalism, with its exclusive concern with textual evidence; or the various forms of Materialism whose focus is with the role played by supra-individual forces in the genesis of a literary work; or again those orientations which are concerned with the effects of a work on readers’ minds, on the strength of the idea that a work is—to use Aristotelian terminology—an entity only in potency, and that it needs to be actualised in

Work is Not its Text” in *Philosophy and Literature*, 11:2 (October 1987), 307-316; Gregory Currie: “Work and Text” in *Mind*, 100:3 (July 1991), 325-340, Robert Howell: “Ontology and the Nature of the Literary Work” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60:1 (Winter 2002), 67-79. Alternative views, according to which a “text” cannot be defined formally, can be found in William E. Tolhurst and Samuel C. Wheeler III: “On Textual Individuation” in *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 35:2 (February 1979), 187-197, and in Jorge J. E. Gracia: *Texts: Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Audience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). In textual studies, the standard work on the metaphysics of the relevant notions is probably Jerome McGann: *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). For a recent take on the concept of “text” as opposed to “(literary) work” and “document”, see Peter Robinson: “Towards a Theory of Digital Editions” in *Variants. The Journal for the European Society for Textual Scholarship*, 10 (2013), 105-132.

³ This is not the dominant view in today’s literary studies, at least as far as theory is concerned. The most important statement against the idea, which encapsulates the New Critical stance, is of course W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy”, in William Kurtz Wimsatt: *The Verbal Icon. Studies in the Meaning of Poetry; and two preliminary essays written in collaboration with Monroe C. Beardsley* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1954). Beardsley continued to defend the idea that the author is of no importance in judging the literary work *qua* literary work throughout his career, in works such as *The Possibility of Criticism* (Detroit: Temple University Press, 1970), esp. pp. 1-68 and *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays* (London: Cornell University Press, 1982), esp. pp. 165-188. Over the past few decades, in philosophy departments, the debate as to the relevance of author-related notions has been framed in terms of a wider opposition between “text” and “context” (wherein the author is, of course, part of the latter). This has created two “schools”, labelled “textualism” and “contextualism” respectively. For an introduction to the debate, see for example Daniel O. Nathan: “Irony, Metaphor and the Problem of Intention” in Gary Iseminger (ed.): *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) and Jerrold Levinson: “Aesthetic Contextualism” in the *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics* 4:3 (December 2007), 1-12.

⁴ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp. Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1958), 6. The notion of “authorialism” as used here is larger than Abrams’s concept of “expressivism” in that it may imply different forms of agency not reducible to “expression”, such as “intention”, “imagination”, or indeed a conditioned response to material conditions.

the mind of a reader before becoming an object of knowledge.⁵ All these orientations, in their different ways, place the main weight of literary interpretation away from the author.

“Strong” forms of authorialism, such as the ones tackled below, may go further than this, and commit themselves to the metaphysical claim that the author is the ultimate locus of signification of the literary work; in other words, that what we should be looking at when considering a literary work is not, or not primarily, something that can be found in its formal characteristics, but rather a variously defined set of notions that pertain to its author in the first instance;⁶ in this view, everything else should be regarded as ancillary to author-related evidence, and/or needing to be validated against it. The critic’s role is to discover what the meanings of the literary work are with respect to the author: the former acquires its significance (at least partly) with respect to the latter. One can see that the protocol is very elastic, and can comprise orientations as otherwise different from one another as philosophical intentionalism, expressionism, psychoanalysis, and biographical criticism, as well as those orientations that attempt to interpret artworks in terms of the author’s more fundamental strivings (towards symbolic social placement, evolutionary advantage, and so on). Yet, authorialist orientations are all alike in one crucial respect: unlike the alternatives outlined above, they regard the work not (only) as an object, but (also) as an action on the author’s part, with a number of consequences for readings.⁷ Conversely, “anti-authorialist” stances and orientations tend to stress the “object-like” quality of the work—as will be seen below. Authorialism, whatever objections may be levied against it, is a remarkably persistent hermeneutical model even today, especially when dealing with authors with as strong a personality as Wilde. The main focus of this article, however, is on late-nineteenth-century versions of this method, to which I now move.

Authorialism in literary criticism, ca. 1875-1900

⁵ The modern *locus classicus* for this view is of course Wolfgang Iser: *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). The notion was probably fully articulated for the first time by Anatole France, with his famous pronouncement that “The good critic is he who tells the adventures of his soul among masterpieces.” “Le bon critique est celui qui raconte les aventures de son âme au milieu des chefs-d’œuvre.” Quoted in Roger Fayolle (ed.): *La Critique littéraire* (Paris: A. Colin, 1964), p. 305 (originally in Anatole France: *La vie littéraire*, Vol. 2 p. iii (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1888)). My translation.

⁶ This notion has had several modern incarnations, but is not usually theorised as such. On the other hand, it was a staple of certain strands of nineteenth-century Positivism. The most outspoken theorist of the complete reducibility of the meanings of a literary work to its author’s psyche was probably Emile Hennequin, who coined the notion of “estopsychologie”, i.e. “the science of the artwork as sign of the man who produced it”. Quoted in Roger Fayolle: *La Critique littéraire* (Paris: A. Colin, 1964), p. 299 (originally in Hennequin’s *Études de critique scientifique*, published in 1890). My translation.

⁷ On some of the historical vagaries of these two conceptions of the literary work, see for example Oren Bracha, “The Ideology of Authorship Revisited: Authors, Markets, and Liberal Values in Early American Copyright” in *Yale Law Journal*, 118:2 (November 2008), 186-271 and Mark Rose, “The Author in Court: Pope v. Curll (1741)” in *Cultural Critique*, 21 (Spring 1992), 197-217, esp. 199.

In the literary criticism of this period authorialism was the dominant critical mode. A variety of otherwise very different orientations and practices converged on the idea that the work is primarily an action, and that literary interpretation is, as a consequence, a matter of gauging the nature of this action. The range of these orientations can only be hinted at here: post-Romantic expressionism; ideologically-inflected expectations as to what matters and styles were appropriate to male and female, or young and old authors respectively; various forms of Positivism; the very widespread concern with attribution and its consequences for literary interpretation; down to the humbler corners of the literary profession such as the very popular gossip articles about writers' quirks, and the characteristically Victorian genre of "word-portraits" of great men.⁸ Virtually all of the late-Victorian discourse on literature hinged on the idea that the work should be seen as, inescapably, someone's action, although the idea was rarely stated explicitly, unlike for instance in French literary discourse of the same period.⁹

Contrarian voices did exist, and many of them are more famous today than their numerically superior "mainstream" opponents. The idea of the work as linguistic object rather than authorial action, which would come to full fruition in the Formalist schools of the early twentieth century, was anticipated by a number of nineteenth-century artists and critics who were opposed, for a variety of reasons, to the positing of too strong or direct a connection between the author and the work. These ideas were not quite new at this point: Matthew Arnold had hinted at them by his charged characterisation of the object of criticism as, precisely, an "object" to be seen "as it really is";¹⁰ so had A.C. Swinburne, with his insistence that critics had no right to assume that his characters' utterances really belonged to the poet.¹¹ New these ideas may not have been, but in the last quarter of the century they were certainly still subdominant, and sometimes those who propounded them slipped into modes of thinking derived from authorialism.¹²

⁸ Some of the most revealing examples of this tendency in British culture are W.H. Hudson: *An Introduction to the Study of Literature* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1913 [1895]), Edward Dowden: *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art* (London: Kegan Paul, 1901 [1875]), W. J. Courthope: *Life in Poetry: Law in Taste. Two Series of Lectures Delivered in Oxford, 1895-1900* (London: Macmillan, 1901). All these, in spite of the differences in their methods, operate on the assumption that to study a work of literature means to study the mind who produced it. On "word-portraits", see for example Mabel E. Wotton (ed.): *Word Portraits of Famous Writers* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1887, or Anon.: "Contemporary Portraits" in *University Magazine* (March 1879).

⁹ For a good overview, see Jean-Thomas Nordmann: *La critique littéraire française au XIXe siècle (1800-1914)* (Paris: Librairie générale française, 2001).

¹⁰ The *locus classicus* is Matthew Arnold: "The Functions of Criticism at the Present Time" in *The National Review*, No. 1 (November 1864), p. 230. Arnold does not elaborate on the nature of the "object".

¹¹ In his essay "Notes on Poems and Reviews". See for instance A.C. Swinburne (Kenneth Haynes ed.): *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon* (London: Penguin, 2000).

¹² A prominent example is the French critic Ferdinand Brunetière, who in *L'Évolution de la poésie lyrique en France aux dix-neuvième siècle*, (Paris: Hachette, 1905 [1892]) insists that the only explanation of a literary work is to be found in the literary tradition that spawned it (9), and yet later on backs down and admits that certain genres of literature (notably lyrical poetry) do provide an access to the artist's feelings (146-147). In British culture, one may note Ella D'Arcy's pre-Formalist stance that there is a strict distinction between a writer's "method", "character" and "personality", which she, too, waters down by admitting that the author's "sincerity" shines through in spite of the indirectness of the connection

The resulting critical practice was, unsurprisingly, not innocent of moral and political consequences, but this assertion should be qualified carefully. Today some of us may be inclined to label this protocol, and the critical practices based on it, as an oppressive method, a way of establishing a thought police aimed at discouraging authors from putting forward less-than-orthodox viewpoints, predicated on an ideological structure whereby authors were (or are) constructed as subjects always potentially at risk of being punished. There is doubtlessly some truth in this grim sub-Foucauldian scenario—as is brought out by the high-profile “literary” trials (such as those of Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Wilde) that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, all of which featured modes of reading literary works based on authorialism—but an exclusive focus on this side of the matter runs the risk of obscuring some of the facets of what this hermeneutics entailed in practice. To turn to the author was not necessarily to attack him/her: for example, the widespread—and quintessentially authorialist in its insistence on seeing the work as action—Victorian ideal of reading sympathetically depended on the idea that behind the “words on the page” (in I.A. Richards’s later formulation) there is a living (or dead) individual with whose “soul” we should try, as readers, to make contact. This ideal was preached, and sometimes practiced, by a number of entirely well-meaning literary critics at the time, such as Edward Dowden (an acquaintance of the Wilde family), whose article “The Interpretation of Literature” (1886) argues that the anathemas launched against writers’ morals by some of his colleagues were actually a result of these critics’ failure to engage in a “conversation” with the author of the literary work at hand:

[I]f any one of us be drawn towards a great writer, and resolve that in spite of obstacles he will interpret [...] the writer’s meaning and message, the first thing to attend to is this—that the author and his work be regarded as a whole bearing on life as a whole. Our prime object should be to get into living relation with a man; and by his means, with the good forces of Nature and humanity which play in and through him.¹³

This passage relies on a “strong” form of authorialism: the text acquires its full meaning *qua* work only when considered as an action on the part of the author, and accordingly tested against its author’s life; this does not prevent Dowden from being emphatically committed to tolerance and open-mindedness. Another thing to note is that the author’s “meaning” and “message” (the two words seem to be used as synonyms) are a single entity, to be discovered via the interpretive process.

A related facet of contemporary authorialism was the critical trope of conceptualising the act of reading as a “conversation with the author”.¹⁴ When reading a

between writer and work. Ella D’Arcy (as “G.H. Page”): “Personality in Art” in the *Westminster Review*, 139:1 (January 1893), 646-653, esp. 646-649.

¹³ Edward Dowden, “The Interpretation of Literature” in *The Contemporary Review*, 49 (May 1886), 709.

¹⁴ The idea has had several modern revivals, notably in the still-extant debates between “intentionalists” and “anti-intentionalists” in philosophy departments. For the “conversation argument”, see Andrew

text, that is, one should imagine it being uttered by a “voice”, the author’s: the textual meaning is to be supplemented by a reconstructed authorial intention, in order to attain what some aestheticians call the “utterance meaning” in its fullness.¹⁵ The authorial intention, on the other hand, is itself reconstructed at least in part from the text itself. This logic of reciprocal supplementation is evident in this passage from W.H. Hudson’s 1895 textbook *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*:

We make our reading of [a great book] [...] a matter of actual intercourse between its author and ourselves. We listen attentively to what he has to tell us, and we do our best to enter sympathetically into his thought and feeling. We note carefully how he looked at life, what he found in it, what he brought away from it. We observe how the world of experience impressed him, and how it is interpreted through his personality.¹⁶

It is easy to see that this method could have problematic implications. For instance, one of the less obvious effects of authorialism on late-Victorian critical practice was that the former pushed the latter towards aesthetic monism, i.e. the claim that in each instance of interpretation there is one single correct interpretation that can in principle be laid out unambiguously; when two interpretations contradict each other, both cannot be correct.¹⁷ A literary work, even a dramatic one, was generally expected to have a coherent, communicable message, courtesy of the author, and expressible by the critic by means of paraphrase. It was the dominance of this attitude in contemporary criticism of Henrik Ibsen’s works that prompted the critic William Archer to mock it as follows:

To treat Nora’s arguments in the last scene of *A Doll’s House* as though they were the ordered propositions of an essay by John Stuart Mill is to

Huddlestone: “The Conversation Argument for Actual Intentionalism” in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (August 2012), 241-256. The debate overlaps to some extent with the “textualist / contextualist” divide (see note 3). “Intentionalist” stances can be found in Noël Carroll: “Art, Intention, and Conversation”, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels: “The Impossibility of Intentionless Meaning”, and Gary Iseminger: “An Intentional Demonstration?”, all in Gary Iseminger (ed.): *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), Paisley Livingston: “Intentionalism in Aesthetics” in *New Literary History*, 29:4 (Autumn 1998), 831-846 and the same author’s *Art and Intention. A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). “Anti-intentionalist” arguments can be found in Daniel O. Nathan: “Irony and the Author’s Intentions” in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 22:3 (Summer 1982), 246-256 and the same author in “Irony, Metaphor and the Problem of Intention” in Gary Iseminger (ed.): *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), George Dickie and W. Kent Wilson: “The Intentional Fallacy: Defending Beardsley” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53:3, (Summer 1995), 233-250, and Umberto Eco: *I Limiti dell’Interpretazione* (Milano: Bompiani, 1990), esp. ch. 1.

¹⁵ This terminology was established by W.E. Tolhurst in his “On What a Text Is and How it Means” in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19:1 (Spring 1979), 3-14.

¹⁶ W.H. Hudson, *An Introduction to the Study of Literature* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1913 [1895]), 17.

¹⁷ A concise introduction to “monism” vs. “dualism” in aesthetics can be found in Paul Guyer: “Monism and Pluralism in the History of Aesthetics” in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71:2 (May 2013), 133-143.

give a striking example of the strange literalness of the English mind, its inability to distinguish between drama and dogma.”¹⁸

Archer’s point is that most of the critics of his time could not see the difference between, say, an essay, in which an author puts forth arguments and opinions, and a dramatic work, in which it is not legitimate to look for such a “point” below the characters’ utterances. If, however, one sees the literary work primarily as an action on the author’s part, one will tend to look for the author’s position in any literary work. This was probably one of the reasons why George Eliot was a favourite with the critics of the period: her novels featured an abundance of extradiegetic, hence supposedly authorial, critical commentary; the author’s position on a given subject could usually be stated clearly, and related to the author without too much controversy; at that point the critic could easily establish a long-distance “conversation with the author”.¹⁹

This method was very much in line with the contemporary concern with debating social issues publicly, an enterprise in which literature played an important role. One can see why the application of authorialist reading methods to literary works whose rhetorical specificities made it difficult to determine “what the author really thought” should cause irritation. The following, for example, is a comment by the president of the Browning Society, Frederick J. Furnivall, presenting his hard-nosed take on the poet’s dramatic method:

‘[S]o many imaginary persons behind whom he insists on so often hiding himself, and whose necks I, for one, should continually like to wring, whose bodies I would fain kick out of the way, in order to get face to face with the poet himself, and hear his own voice speaking his own thoughts, man to man, soul to soul.’²⁰

This attitude, too, is less dead than one may at first sight think, if only for the simple reason that disambiguation is a fundamental principle of everyday conversation. Whenever we don’t understand something that our interlocutor has said, we typically ask for clarification. Common sense typically presupposes that there be a “point” in what someone says, a “point” which we may legitimately ask for and which may be conveyed by means of paraphrase, summary, and the like. As Plato writes, we can ask a person what (s)he means; we cannot ask a text what it means.²¹ As for the “literary work”, broadly understood, the legitimacy of the question postulating the existence of an ideal meaning beyond its concrete linguistic expression varies according to our

¹⁸ William Archer, “Ibsen and English Criticism” in *Fortnightly Review*, 46:271 (July 1889), 35.

¹⁹ See for example Leslie Stephen’s obituary for Eliot, in which he argues for the legitimacy of her “little asides to the reader”. David Carroll (ed.): *George Eliot. The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), esp. p. 467 (originally in Leslie Stephen’s obituary article “George Eliot” in *The Cornhill Magazine*, Vol. 43, No. 254 (February 1881).

²⁰ Quoted in William S. Peterson, ed., *Browning’s Trumpeter: The Correspondence of Robert Browning and Frederick J. Furnivall 1872-1889* (Washington: Decatur House, 1979), xxxiii.

²¹ Plato: *Phaedrus*, 257c-279c.

conception of what a literary work is. If we see the work as an “object”, we are likely to join Cleanth Brooks in his condemnation of the “heresy of paraphrase”: the actual words used *are* the point, and there is no point in seeking any other point;²² if, on the other hand, we consider the work as an action on the part of someone, or indeed as one side of a “conversation”, we are likely to be less prone to concentrating on (or, as defenders of the method might put it, fetishizing) its textual features and more prone to asking what the “point” is whenever doubts arise. As will be seen, much early criticism of Wilde’s work looked for such a point, but his works tend to resist this mode of reading.

Indeed, one can trace back much of the critical hostility bestowed upon certain literary works by their critics to an uneasiness with the challenge these works posed to prevalent reading methods. Certain styles, genres, and authors are bound to become more popular than others, others more controversial, and yet others ignored, according to how well they respond to the prevalent critical protocol. The authorialist protocol, too, spawned a preference for certain types of literature over others, caused certain styles and rhetorical features to be valued more highly than others, and so on. The prized virtues included, in the critical idiom of the time, items such as “sincerity”, “consistency”, “moral seriousness”. G.H. Lewes expressed this attitude most forcefully:

Unless a writer has Sincerity, urging him to place before us what he sees and believes *as* he sees and believes it, the defective earnestness of his presentation will cause an imperfect sympathy in us. He must believe what he says, or we shall not believe it.²³

Now, one may ask: what does a “sincere” (consistent, morally serious...) novel, poem, essay or play look like? What sorts of textual features may be taken to be indicative of these predicates—which, after all, properly belong to the author in the first instance? I would like to suggest that, because of the investment of authorialist critics in the notion of “conversation” as a metaphor for both writing and reading, the textual features that responded best to such readings were the same which, in a conversation, would have facilitated the performance of a felicitous speech act: clearness, straightforwardness, coherence, consistency, lack of ambiguity. These are, generally speaking, the features that warrant a correct “uptake”, and these are therefore those that authorialist critics would have found it easiest to relate to.

Wilde’s works and the critics

²² Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947)

²³ G.H. Lewes: “The Principles of Success in Literature” in the *Fortnightly Review*, 1:1 (15/5/1865), 95. Also see Robert Buchanan: “Immorality in Authorship” in *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 6, No. 33 (15 September 1866), esp. p. 289, in which he argues that a sincere literary treatment can even drain immorality out of intrinsically immoral subjects.

Within this framework, Wilde's works present a number of problems for the critic. In what follows I shall provide a number of examples of the various ways Wilde's works have of making it difficult, or indeed downright impossible to take them as "statements" on the part of their author.²⁴ These will include the instability of their implied axiology, the frequent ambiguity of their dramatisation (so that one cannot be sure whether it is the author or a character speaking), the frequent inconsistency between the subject of the writing and its tone, and the way in which certain narratological features, such as dialogism and metalepsis, preclude a reading that can be unified under the overarching idea of "the author" as a guarantor of the stability of meaning. I will also argue for the necessity of a revision in our understanding of Wilde's quarrels with critics, especially with regard to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: too often one sees the simplistic assumption that critics at the time simply *understood* from Wilde's novel that the author was homosexual—much as we today, in the view of many critics, can trace the significance of the novel back to its author's sexual orientation.²⁵ As will be seen, there were deeper reasons for these critical controversies, ones that had to do with the difficulty in accommodating Wilde's works within the prevalent authorialist framework.

These interpretive difficulties occur both at a structural and at a microscopic level, and they span the whole of Wilde's career. For example, his first published work, *Poems* (1881), contains a number of poems dealing with topical themes, such as the Pope's imprisonment in the Vatican at the hands of the Italian state. With poems of this kind, and in this critical climate, it was an obvious move on the part of critics to ask what it was that the author wanted to convey, what the political "message" was. Now, a look at these poems will reveal that the "message" is irreducibly contradictory: some of them thunder against the sacrilege committed by Italy against the papacy, others celebrate the action with Guelphic transport. Pius IX is called at one point "God-anointed king"²⁶, elsewhere a "base wolf".²⁷ The collection contains many more examples of this: taken singularly, these poems are straightforward, and indeed rather unsubtle; taken together, they construct an irreducibly contradictory narrative.²⁸ So, to look for a coherent authorial position here entails finding oneself in a deadlock. This is

²⁴ J.L. Austin regards literary discourse in general as an "etiolation of language" (John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 22) and in fact there is a line of argument, developed principally by Monroe Beardsley, that stresses how literature in general cannot be read as a proper statement on the part of the author because it lacks illocutionary force (Monroe Beardsley, "Intentions and Interpretations. A Fallacy Revived" in his *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays* (London: Cornell University Press, 1982), *passim*). This paper obviously presupposes that degrees of "felicitousness" can be identified, or in other words that certain literary works are more "statement-like" than others.

²⁵ See for example Nicholas Frankel, "Introduction" to Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray. An Annotated, Uncensored Edition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), *passim*.

²⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. I. Poems and Poems in Prose*, Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson eds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁸ Another difficulty was the derivativeness of the collection, which seemed to contain the "voices" of a number of poets other than Wilde. For a historical account, see Ellmann: *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1987) 140. For a literary-critical analysis of the issue, see Josephine Guy: "Self-Plagiarism, Creativity and Craftsmanship in Oscar Wilde" in *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 41:1 (1998), 6-23.

one trait that sets this work at odds with the authorialist protocol, as critics did not fail to notice. This comment is from a review of the collection by Oscar Browning:

If Mr. Wilde has changed his mind, why did he perpetuate in the same volume two states of opinion so violently opposed? Probably he has not changed his mind, but only his mood, and thinks one mood as good as the other.²⁹

One may well feel that this diagnosis was correct; at any rate, this was not acceptable in the critical climate of the time. The fact that the author's mental states, as inferable from the contradictoriness of the textual features of his works, were not appropriate to the genre, was seen as an aesthetic flaw, as in this review, published in *The Spectator*:

The truth is that all Mr. Wilde cares about is to have some sort of excuse for a lackadaisical melancholy, without substance and without character. [...] There is, indeed, no trace of genuine emotion in any one of these poems.³⁰

Moreover, and more to the point, it constituted a serious interpretive difficulty. It was not so much that these poems lacked a "point"; rather, they consistently (at times, even shrilly) gestured towards there being one, while providing such an irreconcilable multiplicity of positions that there was no hope of reducing them to the singularity and coherence implied by the notion of "the writer's meaning and message", as Dowden had it.

A similar dynamics can be observed in the reception of Wilde's 1891 collection of essays, *Intentions*.³¹ At the time, few critics took note of it, and those who did generally kept themselves at a high level of generality. I would like to suggest that the reason for this comparative neglect may have been that, as a collection of essays—a genre which, even today, is supposed to be an exposition of the author's ideas on a certain subject—this book is very hard to judge. The title itself is rather baffling. In an 1897 letter to Max Beerbohm, Wilde wrote that "[t]he name one gives to one's work, poem or picture [...] is the last survival of the Greek Chorus. It is the only part of one's work in which the artist speaks directly in his own person".³² In this case the title *Intentions* may or may not signal a conscious mockery on Wilde's part of the idea that an author must have "intentions" with respect to his/her work: one is—and this is precisely the point—at a loss when it comes to judging what, if anything, the author may have meant by it.

²⁹ Quoted in Karl Beckson, *Oscar Wilde. The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 45 (originally in the *Spectator*, 13/8/1881, liv, 1048-1050).

³⁰ Quoted in Karl Beckson (ed.): *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 44 (originally in an unsigned review in the *Spectator*, 13/8/1881, liv, 1048-1050).

³¹ The most balanced study of the collection is probably Lawrence Danson: *Wilde's Intentions: the Artist in his Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

³² Oscar Wilde, *Selected Letters*, Rupert Hart-Davis ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 276-277 (Letter to Beerbohm, 28/5/1897).

When one turns to the “arguments” presented in the essays, one is faced with similar challenges. Two of the four essays, “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist”, are shaped in the manner of Socratic dialogues, but they are a remarkably atypical specimen of the genre in that their characters hardly seem to be interested in anything so serious as Truth, or in articulating a coherent position.³³ The atmosphere is that of a Wilde society comedy, in which characters are so inhumanly brilliant that they would deem the idea of “proving” anything as below them. As a consequence, the standard questions of “what is the point?” and “what does the author think?” become extremely difficult to answer. Several exchanges, in fact, mock the idea of there being a “point” to a philosophical dialogue. The first of the following passages is from “The Critic as Artist”, the second from “The Decay of Lying”:

ERNEST	Ah, you admit, then, that the critic may occasionally be allowed to see the object as in itself it really is.
GILBERT	I am not quite sure. Perhaps I may admit it after supper. There is a subtle influence in supper.
VIVIAN	Have I proved my theory to your satisfaction?
CYRIL	You have proved it to my dissatisfaction, which is better. ³⁴

The implied blithely cynical take on the nature of intellectual pursuits—we all know that we’re just wittering on about nothing in particular, and we don’t care—is obviously radically at odds with the quest for philosophical truth that one can usually safely expect from the characters in a Socratic dialogue. Even today, the standard tactic for critics is to take the opinion of the most brilliant character in each dialogue and take it as Wilde’s.³⁵ This move is a witness to how powerful the sway of authorialism still is today—perhaps, how inevitable the method is when one is searching for a summarizable “truth”.

In keeping with the authorialist modes of reading and critical preferences, the early reception of *Intentions* was dominated by the recognition of an *écart* between the potentially weighty subject matter and the unfittingly unserious way Wilde had chosen to expose it. This requirement for “seriousness” was one of the tenets of authorialism. One critic wondered:

Are they all hand-made, these quaint perversions of the obvious? Are they not turned out by machinery at so much the gross? May we not suspect them to be

³³ On this, see the excellent discussion in Herbert Sussmann: “Criticism as Art: Form in Oscar Wilde’s Critical Writings” in *Studies in Philology*, 70:1 (January 1973), 108-122.

³⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. IV. Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, Josephine Guy ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 96.

³⁵ For example Regenia Gagnier: “Wilde and the Victorians” in Peter Raby (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Philip E. Smith II and Michael Helfand (eds.): *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks. A Portrait of Mind in the Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), and Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation* (London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

the result of a facile formula, a process of word-shuffling, rather than of genuine insight into the facts of art and life?³⁶

Wilde's paradoxes seem to have been produced mechanically; there is no "genuine insight" behind them; they do not seem to be the result of an appropriate action on the author's part. Another reviewer struck a similar note by complaining that the style undermined the content:

In spite of his showy paradoxes, Mr. Oscar Wilde [...] succeeds in proving that he has something to say, and it is a pity that he should think, or find, it necessary to resort to the tricks of the smart advertiser in order to attract attention to his wares.³⁷

The reviewer then refers to the "form of language which [Wilde] chooses to conceal his thoughts", and goes on to hope that Wilde might one day write "something more solid and reasonable and not less brilliant than *Intentions*."³⁸ As it was, the propositional "point" of the essays was ruined by the author's perceived lack of seriousness. In a favourable review, Wilde's friend Richard Le Gallienne wrote that

all [Wilde's] "flute-toned" periods are written in the service of the comic muse [...] where he seems to be arguing with serious face enough, is it not simply that he may smile behind his mask at the astonishment, not to say terror, of a public he has from the first so delighted in shocking?³⁹

As Le Gallienne's reference to the powers of detachment of the "comic muse" suggests, this idea of "seriousness" does not simply equate to "decorum": seriousness is the property of speaking in one's own name, of meaning what one says. By refusing, by means of their rhetorical features, the idea of a centralised "point", itself the result of an appropriately discursive authorial intention, this collection refused to engage in a straightforward "conversation" with readers, thereby setting itself at odds with the authorialist protocol.

The subject of resistance to authorialist interpretation on the part of Wilde's works is a large one, and length constraints preclude exhaustiveness here. One could wonder, for example, what it was that prompted G.B. Shaw to berate *The Importance of Being Earnest* as "a heartless play" and what sort of "heart" he wished to find in it (a purpose? a sense of moral seriousness? a position one could ascribe to the author?).⁴⁰ Let us, however, conclude with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The authorialist protocol, as

³⁶ Beckson, p. 90 (originally in an unsigned review in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12/5/1891).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92 (originally in an unsigned review in the *Athenaeum*, 6/6/1891).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99 (originally in Le Gallienne's review in the *Academy* (4/7/1891).

⁴⁰ Cited in Beckson, op. cit., 194 (originally in the *Saturday Review*, lxxix (23/2/1895), 249).

we have seen, looked for coherence in literary works so as to articulate a position that could be ascribed to the author. Wilde's novel refuses to comply.⁴¹

The issue of who (or what) caused Dorian Gray's downfall is a case in point: this feature drives the plot and provides something like a moral hinge for the novel. The novel, however, does not provide an answer to this central question; instead, it provides many contradictory ones. The three main characters of the novel, Dorian, Lord Henry and Basil Hallward all provide their own versions of why things went the way they did, and sometimes more than one. In each case they state their points well, and the reader is momentarily tempted to accept each version as it comes along: Basil thinks Dorian's downfall was Lord Henry's fault, and Lord Henry accepts the allegation at times, but at other times he denies it or finds the whole issue irrelevant; Dorian variously accuses himself, Basil, Lord Henry, and his own ancestors.⁴² Readers are not given any conclusive evidence, but only a wealth of incompatible interpretations, and this moral issue remains undecided, though Wilde himself thought the moral was "obvious".⁴³ The (implied, inferred) "author", the hypothetical holder of the "truth" of the story, gets lost in the multiple points of view, which do not gel together in a coherent whole, but which claim the reader's attention with an insistence that, as in Wilde's political poems, seems to bespeak an urgent topicality without having anything coherent to say about the issues at hand.

Wilde did provide some "keys" to the novel's moral meaning; however, these only complicate the matter further. A case in point is the oft-quoted comment that "Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry what the world thinks me; Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages perhaps."⁴⁴ This comment complicates things rather than simplifying them, similarly to another playful assertion, this time uttered by the character Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist", that the best fictional characters are "simply the poets themselves, not as they thought they were, but as they thought they were not".⁴⁵ The figure of the author, instead of being authorialistically posited, as Foucault puts it, as "a point starting from which contradictions are resolved, [and] incompatible elements finally link with one another, or organise themselves around a fundamental or original contradiction",⁴⁶ is presented as one further riddle.⁴⁷

⁴¹ On the novel's resistance to unifying interpretations, see Houston A. Baker: "A Tragedy of the Artist: The Picture of Dorian Gray" in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 24 (1969), 349-355, and, more explicitly, Michael Patrick Gillespie: "Picturing Dorian Gray: Resistant Readings in Wilde's Novel" in *English Literature in Transition*, 35 (1992), 7-25.

⁴² Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. III. The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, Joseph Bristow ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), *passim*. For an analysis of the cultural background of Dorian's own interpretation, see for example Terri A. Hasseler: "The Physiological Determinism Debate in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" in *Victorian Newsletter*, 84 (1993), 31-35.

⁴³ Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (eds.): *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 435 (originally in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, 30/6/1890)

⁴⁴ Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.): *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 116 (originally in a letter to Ralph Payne, 12/2/1894).

⁴⁵ *Complete Works*, p. 1142.

⁴⁶ "Un point à partir duquel les contradictions se résolvent, les éléments incompatibles s'enchaînant finalement les uns aux autres ou s'organisant autour d'une contradiction fondamentale ou originaire."

As for the “Preface” that Wilde added to the 1891 version of the novel, it may be taken to enjoy an ambiguous status, as it is placed in a nebulous no-man’s-land between paratext and text: is this the “author” speaking directly to us? Is this brilliant series of aphorisms supposed to be, like the title, a “remnant of the Greek chorus”? How well does it fare as a guide to interpretation? One may well feel that, taken as the author’s guide to his own vision, the Preface does a distinctly poor job. As an aid to interpretation, the main thing that these sentences seem to tell us is that morality is irrelevant to an appreciation of a work of art. This is one way of reading the novel perhaps, but certainly not the most fruitful one, as the story is saturated with moral content. To read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as its preface instructs us to do means to be blind to—or to wilfully ignore—the whole logic behind the development of the action, much in the same way as Lord Henry does. Towards the end, for example, he cannot even conceive that Dorian may have murdered Basil. He is wrong; but no one comes across as being right.

Given these challenges to the critical preferences spawned by authorialism, critics were bound to react by fabricating a coherence that in fact did not exist, in order to extract a message that could be attributed to the author; not only those critics who felt morally outraged, but also those who found the novel “highly moral” instead of immoral.⁴⁸ One reviewer alleged that books like this “are revelations only of the singularly unpleasant minds from which they emerge.”⁴⁹ The difficulty in knowing what the author really thought was noted by Walter Pater in a favourable review: “[Lord Henry’s] cynical opinions [...] seem sometimes to be those of the writer, who may, however, have intended Lord Henry as a satiric sketch.”⁵⁰ Another reviewer struck a more perceptive note than he may have known: “[*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] is false to morality, for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health and sanity.”⁵¹ That is precisely the novel’s challenge to the authorialist protocol.

When Wilde wrote back to some of the papers whose reviewers had attacked him, he did not argue that his novel was really not immoral—in fact, he went out of his way to distance himself from that kind of reading as well; instead, he denied that the moral content of a novel, whatever it is, can be ascribed to the author in the way those critics, in accordance with the dominant protocol, implied. “Your critic [...] commits the

Michel Foucault: “Qu’est qu’un auteur?” in *Dits et écrits 1954-1988*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 802. My translation.

⁴⁷ As Gillespie puts it, “[Wilde uses the complexity of his own personality to call attention to the multiplicity of possible responses to his work”. Gillespie, “Picturing Dorian Gray”, op. cit., 12.

⁴⁸ “It is highly moral and will have a salutary effect on readers.” Cited in Beckson, op. cit., 9 (originally in *The Christian Leader*, 3/7/1890). Another declared that “[t]he moral of Mr. Wilde’s book is meant to be good”, before complaining semi-jocularly about the “pernicious tone” (*Ibidem*; originally in *The Chicago Tribune*, 6/7/1890). Yet another called it “a work of highly spiritual import” (see Wilde’s letter to the director of the *Scots Observer*, 4:89 (29/7/1890)).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 71 (originally in an unsigned review in the *St James Gazette*, 20/6/1890).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 84 (originally in Pater’s review “A Novel by Mr Oscar Wilde” in the *Bookman* (November 1891).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 75 (originally in the *Scots Observer*, 7/7/1890).

absolutely unpardonable crime of confusing the artist with his subject matter.”⁵² And again: “An artist [...] has no ethical sympathies whatsoever. Virtue and wickedness are to him simply what the colours on his palette are to the painter.”⁵³ What I am driving at is that there was a theoretical undercurrent in Wilde’s replies, one that explicitly set him in opposition to the assumptions of the authorialist protocol, and the critical praxis that resulted from them. If one is to understand the critical controversies that surrounded Wilde’s novel, one needs to delve deeper into the nature of the disagreements between Wilde and his critics, which were not limited to sexual mores, but had to do with the practice of literary interpretation itself. These critics, following the tenets of “strong” authorialism, wanted to use (their idea of) the author as a tool to be used to disambiguate whatever might be ambiguous in the work “as object” within the more determinable logic of the work “as action”; Wilde insisted, in proto-Formalist terms, that an “object” is all the work is, and that the writer is merely its accidental cause. “The artist is the creator of beautiful things”⁵⁴ implies that the importance of that which is created, the “things”, overrules the interest of the mere process of “creation”. “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” attempts in paradoxical form to put further distance between his own work and the authorialist protocol of inferring author-related notions from the work.⁵⁵ Wilde was not (not only, and not yet) the hounded homosexual writer trying to conceal the “truth” of his writings against a press that had “found him out”: he was also a literary critic in his own right, and one who was articulating a respectable position which was alternative to the critical orthodoxy of the time, but which was on the rise, and which in fact became the new orthodoxy within two or three decades: at the time it had not yet received a theoretical articulation (the first to do so was probably Richard Green Moulton, whose idea of “inductive criticism” anticipated several New Critical tenets),⁵⁶ but these salvos—whatever their immediate occasion—are an important anticipation of the later critical movements that conceptualised the work as a linguistic entity defined by its formal features.

The same clash of protocols was at work in the “literary” section of Wilde’s first trial. The Marquess’s attorney, Edward Carson, used Wilde’s novel (and other writings of his) to argue that Queensberry’s allegation that the author was “posing as a sodomite” was veridical, and hence not libellous. In his cross-questioning of Wilde he insisted that Wilde admit that “sodomy” might be one of the sins of which readers may infer Dorian Gray was guilty. The attorney thus relied on the authorialist protocol by trying to (1) reduce the ambiguities of the novel to a coherent “reality”, implying a singular authorial “position”, and (2) compel the author to admit that the significance of his action of writing and publishing the novel overrode what the novel said, or did not say (the third intended step was to prove that the author was, as a consequence, “posing as a sodomite”). Wilde resisted this construal, and insisted that he had no responsibility

⁵² *Selected Letters*, op. cit., 82 (originally in a letter to the editor of the *Scots Observer*, 9/7/1890).

⁵³ *Ibidem*

⁵⁴ *OUP Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 167 (this and the following quotes are from the 1891 edition).

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ Moulton began to develop his ideas in the 1880s, but they were crystallised in a 1915 book, *The Modern Study of Literature: An Introduction to Literary Theory and Interpretation*. See Anger, op. cit., pp. 138-139.

over “what misinterpretation of my work the ignorant, the illiterate, the foolish may put on it”.⁵⁷ Eventually, though, he was compelled to make the carefully-worded concession that one of the passages could “convey the impression that the sin of Dorian Gray was sodomy”, while still denying his responsibility for this interpretation.⁵⁸ This line of argument eventually ran dry without yielding any definite result on either side (literary analysis comprised only a small part of the trials, and the Marquess’s defence had stronger cards to play for its own, non-literary ends). Thus, the clash of interpretive protocols at the trial was the same that had taken place in journals a few years before: the author argued against authorialism.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented and argued for the usefulness of the idea of “authorialism” to label a number of critical orientations not usually considered together. I have also argued that Wilde’s works contain a number of textual features that make them recalcitrant to authorialist modes of reading, and that counter the strong temptation to read this larger-than-life writer into his works and vice versa. Wilde’s pronouncements on the theory of interpretation, I have argued, are also corroborated by some of the textual features of his works, those that involve ambiguity, contradictoriness, and more generally a refusal on the part of the “implied author” to yield a coherent “statement”.

I have also suggested that the legacy of authorialism has long survived the Victorian period, though in different forms. The recent history of Wilde studies is, in fact, rife with modes of reading based on this protocol.⁵⁹ In matters of interpretation (though not in matters of morals) many Wilde scholars tend to agree with the modes of reading advocated by early critics and by Edward Carson rather than those advocated by Wilde.⁶⁰ For example, nothing but the continuing influence of this paradigm could have prompted the critic Nicholas Frankel to propose, in his introduction to a recent Harvard University Press edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the surprising claim that the novel is not “a condemnation of aestheticism” because “Wilde never ceased to be an aesthete in his writings and pronouncements”.⁶¹ Certain ethical issues thematised in the

⁵⁷ Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: the Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), 81.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁹ An extensive analysis of this can be found in Josephine Guy and Ian Small: *Studying Oscar Wilde: History, Criticism, and Myth* (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 2006) esp. the introduction and 13-46.

⁶⁰ The point is forcefully brought home by Lawrence Danson: “[I]n *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a book that never describes an act of physical intimacy between men, many readers think they recognize a particular notion of homosexual identity. Their reading is in various ways impure. It derives from both Wilde’s text and Wilde’s life, following a hermeneutic protocol used at the Old Bailey, where Wilde’s book was judged by the author, and vice versa; it is always a retrospective reading, informed not only by what the author wrote, but by how its author came to be written in the history of his culture.” *Wilde’s Intentions*, op. cit., 9.

⁶¹ Nicholas Frankel, “Introduction” to Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray. An Annotated, Uncensored Edition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 31.

text, for Frankel, acquire their full significance only when weighed against the author's life-long "performance" of the same issues; the work is an action on the part of its author and is to be judged as such.⁶² Once again, the questions asked are of the "What does the work say?" or "What must the author have meant?" kind.

Finally, I have argued that when one asks of Wilde's works these kinds of questions the result is a baffling concoction of mutually exclusive answers, provided—and this is an important *caveat*—that one does not disregard textual specificities to make them fit a critical argument. This may be regarded as an unreasonable requirement in a critical climate which tends to see Wilde primarily as an anticipator of the concerns of today's own dominant academic protocols, and in which much criticism is, as a consequence, bent on looking for (sexual, political) "truths" in the idea of Wilde's works "as actions". Nonetheless, this is no more and no less than what they require, and if one wishes to respect their specific literary *quidditas* a good place to start may be to recognise the ways in which Wilde's works refuse to say what we, or our ideal "Oscar", may want them to say.

⁶² This is even more evident in an older readings such as Kate Millett's: "*Dorian Gray* is [...] disguised homosexuality and just misses being the first important homosexual novel because it is too timid to tell us what Dorian's "crime" really was and so must lean upon the frummery of "vice" – those plastic whorehouses and opium dens we are asked to believe were his downfall." *Sexual Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 155. Note how extratextual material is assumed to have the authority to flatly contradict the text.