

Giles Whiteley, Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum. The Truth of Masks, Oxford: Legenda, 'Studies in Comparative Literature', 2015, 356 p. ISBN: 978-1-909662-50-6

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The connections between Oscar Wilde's writings and philosophy are well attested. The present volume is a welcome addition to discussions of the philosophical significance of Wilde's literary production, complementing such studies as Julia Prewitt Brown's *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), Pascal Aquien's work on the affinities between Wilde's texts and Nietzsche's thought ('Entre Dionysos et Apollon: pour une lecture nietzschéenne de Wilde', *Études anglaises*, 49/2, April-June 1996, 168-179), and the recent books broaching the topic of Wilde's Platonism (Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*: London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Ian Ross, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Giles Whiteley is currently Assistant Professor in the English Department of the University of Stockholm. His research focuses on late-nineteenth-century British literature and, in particular, on its philosophical implications. In 2009, he defended a PhD at the University of Manchester, which proposed a reconsideration of Walter Pater within Victorian philosophical debates. A revised version of his doctoral thesis was published under the title *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010).

The aim of *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum. The Truth of Masks* is to take Wilde seriously as a philosopher and to show that Wilde's theories still have relevance in our postmodern age of surfaces. The book opens with a discussion of Deleuze's concept of the event as a rupture, creating new trajectories (3). Whiteley argues that Wilde's challenge to the philosophical *doxa* of his age—Plato and Hegel's idealism in particular—is indeed an 'event' in the Deleuzian sense and constitutes a major epistemological shift that still has resonance today. Thus, Whiteley goes against the grain of neo-historicist approaches to Wilde—as epitomised by Ian Small and Josephine Guy's *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)—, which tend to play down the disruptive, revolutionary potential of Wilde's writings. Whiteley's core concept in his re-evaluation of Wilde's contribution to philosophy is that of the simulacrum: countering the idealist legacy of Plato and Hegel, Whiteley shows, Wilde reconfigures truth as a paradoxical 'truth of masks' and, just as Nietzsche did, asserts the (liberating) 'power of the false', of simulacra, namely 'images which are no longer referential to anything other than themselves' (16).

Whiteley's book attests to the author's impressive scholarship, both in the field of Wilde criticism and literary studies and in that of continental philosophy. Not only does Whiteley pertinently resituate Wilde's work in relation to its precursors or contemporaries (Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Carlyle, Nietzsche, Pater), but he also reads the Irish writer in the light of the theories of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida. *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum* certainly makes for demanding reading, but the—sometimes unexpected—connections it suggests yield new and fruitful interpretations.

The first chapter, 'Intentions' (28-53), offers a re-reading of Wilde's 1891 collection of essays (containing 'The Decay of Lying', 'The Critic as Artist', 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison' and 'The Truth of Masks'), showing that it foregrounds Wilde's philosophy of masks and theory of the simulacrum (29). The second chapter, 'Intensities' (54-91), discusses Wilde's conception of history as a philosophy of 'intensity' and 'individualism' (that is to say, according to Wilde, an intensification of personality, art being described as 'the most intense mode of individualism' in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* [1891]) (55). In a *tour-de-force*, Whiteley argues that Wilde's philosophy might be called not idealistic, but 'materialistic' (in its emphasis on force as a governing principle in both the physical and the metaphysical world of art and morality), and could thus be compared with that of Leibniz and Spinoza (71). The final section of chapter 2 ('Eternal Return' [78-91]) lays stress on the parallels between Wilde's theory of 'individualism' and Nietzsche's conception of identity: both writers emphasise the idea of the self as multiple and fragmented.

Chapter 3, 'Proper Names' (92-114), mainly centres on *The Importance of Being Earnest* and contends that in the 1895 comedy, the proper name is a simulacrum (95). Whiteley reads Wilde's play in the light of Plato's *Cratylus*—and the debate it stages between conventionalism (according to which names are mere conventions) and naturalism (according to which there is a direct correspondence between names and their referents, between signifier and signified)—and, more surprisingly, of Pierre Klossowski's *Roberte ce soir* (1953) and the reflection it elicits on the instability of identity. That stimulating parallel is followed by an equally fascinating fourth chapter, devoted to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-1891), 'Doubles' (115-132). There, Whiteley revisits Wilde's only novel and its interpretation as an illustration of Narcissism. He draws on various sources, from Freud to Lacan, Blanchot and Žižek, and argues that Wilde 'complicates the Narcissus myth in *Dorian Gray*' (132), in that the titular character becomes fascinated not so much with his own image as with a portrait that is 'a composite of other texts' (123), 'a simulacrum that bears no relation to [the character]' and 'refers to nothing but itself' (132).

After those two case studies, *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum* proposes a re-reading of larger critical concerns about Wilde's works. Chapter 5, 'Commodities' (133-165), examines the 'apparent contradiction between Wilde's criticism of capitalism [...] and his own active consumerism' (135), a tension pointed out for instance by Regenia Gagnier in *Idylls of the Marketplace. Oscar Wilde and the Reading Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986). Chapter 6, 'Bodies' (166-206), concentrates on the relationship between the simulacrum, the body and sexuality in Wilde's texts; as in the previous chapter, Whiteley contends that the Irish writer's approach calls into question idealism (167). Chapter 7, 'Women' (207-254), is a discussion of Wilde's relationship to women, through a reading of his depiction of female characters: the Sphinx in the 1894 poem 'The Sphinx', Sibyl Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and Salomé (in *Salomé* [1893-1894]) in the last two sections of the chapter ('The Woman in the Moon', 'Dancing' [223-254]). The comparative approach—Wilde's play is read alongside Huysmans's *À rebours* and its ecstatic *ekphrases* of Gustave Moreau's Salomé paintings (*L'Apparition*, c. 1875; *Salomé dansant devant Hérode*, 1876) and Stéphane Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* (1864-67)—again testifies to the author's extraordinary erudition and provides the reader with inspiring analyses: far from merely being the embodiment of misogynistic fantasies, Salomé's dance of the seven veils is 'a moment of pure becoming' in which the Judean princess becomes the very image of the simulacrum, 'a body celebrating its own materiality and form, an affirmation gliding across the stage' (254). The final chapter, 'Styles' (255-278), focuses in particular on paradox, Wilde's most emblematic trope, which

Whiteley looks at through the prism of Deleuze's philosophy. Wilde's paradoxes, Whiteley writes, are 'the force of creativity' (263), they foreshadow Deleuze's celebration of 'surface effects' (267) as a way out of Platonic dualism. They suggest a revolutionary counter-philosophy, tearing bodies from their assigned places and disrupting forms of domination, thus possibly performing what Jacques Rancière calls a 'redistribution of the sensible' (*'partage du sensible'*¹). The conclusion, 'Wilde's Ethics of Joy' (279-303), argues that Wilde's joyful philosophy of masks delineates a politics of resistance and is ultimately ethical, combining care of the self and a welcoming of the other.

From the point of view of presentation, the volume is of the highest standard: the numerous footnotes testify to the author's great culture and knowledge—they are almost like a book within the book—, the bibliography (315-333) is exhaustive, the two indexes (an index of names, places and texts [335-345] and an index of concepts and subjects [346-356]) are very useful. Whiteley's scrupulous approach and expertise are also attested by the quotations, which are always given in the original language (French or German) before being translated. The polyglot nature of the book, however, sometimes leads to strange linguistic encounters, when subject and verb do not agree ('A percept is 'indépendants d'un état de ceux qui les éprouvent', 19) or when the syntax is slightly problematic ('As Philippe Sollers puts it in his analysis of Lautréamont "s'agit de l'annihilation même du discours biographique"' [33]; '[Salomé] remains "soif de ta beauté"' [253], an incongruous, if poetic, phrasing). There remain very few typing errors: Beerbolm instead of Beerbohm (162-163), the French 'à' should be accented and the relative pronoun should be spelt 'dont' and not 'don't' in Irigaray's beautiful quote from *Amante marine de Friedrich Nietzsche* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980) about the sun and the moon: 'à la splendeur d'Apollon correspond la déchéance nocturne de sa sœur [...]. L'un prend tout l'éclat, dont l'autre devient le reflet' (225-226), Moreau's first name is Gustave and not Gustav (208, 240, 241). One might regret that the publisher chose to print the paintings by James McNeill Whistler (fig. 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3), Gustave Moreau (fig. 7.1, 7.6, 7.7) and François Boucher (fig. 7.2 and 7.3) in black and white. Moreover, in an extremely richly referenced work, the reader might, at times, have wished to be more firmly taken by the hand, so to speak, and guided through the dense forest of literary and philosophical works dealt with here: s/he might have liked the logical links to have been slightly more clearly signposted during the challenging intellectual adventure on which the present study invites him/her to embark.

Those are but minor flaws, however. *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum* is, in my opinion, an important contribution to Wilde studies in at least two respects. Firstly, it pertinently resituates Wilde's works within the intellectual context in which they were conceived and convincingly challenges the idea according to which Wilde's philosophy of art is simply a derivative, Platonic and Hegelian, idealism. Secondly, it stages a large number of fruitful encounters between Wilde's texts and contemporary theory, thereby taking much further Richard Ellmann's intuition that Wilde was 'one of us'² and shedding new light on the Irishman's literary production. *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum* is itself a Deleuzian event, creating 'lines of flight' and causing renewed delight in the reader's apprehension of Wilde's shimmering surfaces.

¹ Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*, Paris : La Fabrique éditions, 2000.

² Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, New York: Random House, 1988, xvii.