

■ The Critic/Artist in Oscar Wilde

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Abstract

This essay aims to rethink and reimagine the critic/artist in Oscar Wilde from the standpoints of criticism as a self-writing and as an art of the self. By appropriating and exploring the discursive possibilities created by and around Michel Foucault, particularly the ethical and aesthetic discourse that Foucault elaborates, I attempt to see and recast in a new light the traces and tracts of textual existence of the critic as artist—what is crucial to Oscar Wilde’s anachronistic, synthetic perspective towards art and life. Textual analysis will be centered on apparently equivocal, miscellaneous passages, notably in *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde’s major critical work. Baptized in Hellenistic ethical imagination, Wilde’s constant returns to the conceptualization or practices of “artist/critic,” “self-culture(/creation)” and “life as a work of art” invite further thinking with Foucault’s (re)search of “aesthetics of existence” both in ancient Greece and modern times. Effectively, for Wilde, the question of the (transformation of the) self (and/or subject) emerges gradually and becomes crucial to his thinking. In his writings, the self, treated paradoxically and under different disguises, appears as a linguistic, plastic construction incessantly menaced and torn between the past and the present, fiction and reality, internal and external forces in an ongoing pursuit of the highest form of individuality, critical as well as artistic. Hence, while identifying the dispersing and diverging details, the déviations, this essay attempts also to enlarge the field of investigation beyond the traditional image

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of critic, thereby to (re)dis-cover the metatextual, transtextual concerns of self/writing, life/existence and aesthetics/ethics, the concerns, both ancient and modern, that continuously haunt Wilde's imagination and yet are dislocated and masked in the intricate textual layers, drives, and dynamisms.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Critic as Artist, Criticism as Art, Self-Writing, Michel Foucault

Contemporary critics tend to consider and reconsider Wilde's criticism as theoretical work.¹ It is true that the multilinguistic concern, conceptual audacity, and highly self-reflexive style that characterize his major critical works such as *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying* constantly and even inevitably encourage the critics to discuss Wilde's criticism in the light of post-modern, de-constructive or even trans-disciplinary notions.

In his critical works, especially in *The Critic as Artist*,² Wilde interrogates and investigates the essence and purpose of criticism itself and views it as a totally independent discursive practice, free from the limits that the work of art, the object it criticizes, imposes. For Wilde, "Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word; criticism is in fact both creative and independent" (CA 260). He not only elevates criticism's status to be as high as a work of art's but also enlarges its scope of concern from literature and art to life. Treated as "the only civilized form of autobiography" (261), criticism metamorphoses thereby under Wilde's pen, from a textual practice merely subordinated to the literary or artistic creation or production to an ongoing meta-textual process of self-creation, a continuous "imaginative work" (253), pertinent to our very existence, to our self-culture and self-transformation. It is evident that in Wilde's attempts to redefine and research the critic as an artist, the critical enquiry is no longer centered merely upon the literary work but on the critic him-self, that is, his self and his soul. In short, for Wilde, criticism is a self-writing through which the critic experiences, forms, and transforms himself.

This article seeks therefore, from the standpoints of criticism as a self-writing and as an art of the self, to rethink the critic/artist in Oscar Wilde, to reimagine this figure in Wilde's anachronistic, synthetic discussion upon art and life, and to see how the critic/artist fashions and refashions himself artistically through critical practices. By way of appropriating and exploring the discursive possibilities opened by Michel Foucault's ethical and aesthetic discourse, particularly notions concerning self-writing and the arts of the self,³ I seek to enlarge

¹ Lawrence Danson offers a contextual conspectus of theoretical features of Wilde's criticism in his "Wilde as Critic and Theorist." And among Wilde's criticisms, Edward Watson particularly singles out *The Critic as Artist*, considering it "as Wilde's most distinctive critical exercise that attempts to analyze the theoretical foundations of literary criticism since Plato to Matthew Arnold" (225). For similar points of view, please also see Harold Bloom; Michael Patrick Gillespie; François Dupuigrenet Desrousilles and Dominique Jean.

² *The Critic as Artist* collected in *The Major Works*, hereafter abbreviated as CA.

³ Regarding the employment of Foucault's notions, it is interesting to note that the reader, particularly of the English translations of Foucault's texts might be more or less influenced or misled by the English translation "care of the self" (my emphasis) which somehow inevitably entails, as Timothy O'Leary indicates, the implication of a substantial self. The French phrase *souci de soi* employed by Foucault (which can be more properly interpreted as "care of self" instead of "care of the self") is effectively

the field of investigation beyond the traditional image of the critic, thereby to rediscover the metatextual enquiries, modern as well as ancient, of self/writing, life/existence, and aesthetics/ethics, which continuously haunt Wilde's imagination and yet are dislocated and masked in the intricate textual layers, drives, and dynamisms.

Staging Critical Encounters and Enquiries

In Wilde's diverse writings and conversations, notably his major critical works and André Gide's accounts (36-38), Wilde constantly returns to the conceptualization or practices of "artist/critic," "self-creation," "self-culture," and "life as a work of art." Those returns endow themselves richly with Hellenistic ethical imagination and conduce to staging critical encounters with Foucault's late (re)search of "aesthetics of existence" both in ancient Greece and modern times. In "*Une esthétique de l'existence*," Foucault searches for a new morality which concerns essentially "making of one's life a work of art" ("faire de sa vie une œuvre d'art") instead of obeying a system of rules (my trans.; *DE* 730-34),⁴ and which aesthetically responds to the question of the (transformation of the) self (and/or subject). Foucault, though long considered essentially a philosopher of history, is highly concerned with the problematics caused by the intertwined relations of historical research to the question of self-constitution, problematics from which his diverse notions develop and to which they return, and yet which also, we need to point out here, for cautious readers may disciplinarily and terminologically mark a point of departure that is different from Wilde's.⁵ For Foucault, the research of truth or into existence can never be separated from the question of the self-constitution which is never immanently autonomous or substantial. The self, unequipped with any universal form,⁶ should be treated as a work of art, to be unceasingly worked on and reworked, fashioned and refashioned. Thus, the (trans-)formation of the self becomes an art of the self, a work of the self on itself. By such a work or exercise, one attempts to develop and transform oneself and to artistically attain "a certain mode of being" (*EF* 26),⁷

less susceptible to a similar implication than the English version. For a further discussion of related problematics, see O'Leary, particularly chapter 6.

⁴ *Dits et écrits 1954-1988* by Foucault, hereafter abbreviated as *DE*.

⁵ We will return to this point in the following sections, notably in the section "The Highest Form of Individuality: Criticism as an Art of the Self."

⁶ In "*Une esthétique de l'existence*," Foucault claims he is very hostile and skeptical towards the conception of the subject by and in which the subject is conceived to be sovereign, and to have "a universal form" that one can find everywhere (*DE* 733).

⁷ *The Essential Foucault*, hereafter abbreviated as *EF*.

which trans-textually enlightens what Wilde implies by the self-culture of the critic/artist (CA 280).

In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde depicts “self-culture” as constituting the contemplative life, the life “that has for its aim not *doing* but *being merely*, and not *being merely*, but *becoming*—that is what the critical spirit can give us” (277). For Wilde, “self-culture is the true ideal of man,” and a true “critic as artist” should seek to embody self-culture and the life that it aims for (278-80), to eventually, in other words, epitomize a work of the self on itself through critical practices.

Modestly, Foucault envisages his writings as “a toolbox,” admitting the problem that he constantly traces around is nearly always “the same,” that is, “the relations between subject, truth and constitution of experience” (DE 731), relations comprised within the relations of the self to itself. Since I argue that Wilde treats criticism as a self-writing and as an art of the self, I seek to see how the Foucauldian concepts concerning the self might serve as interpretive, analytic approaches or tools for my enquiry.

Among the aspects of “the self’s relationship to itself” examined in his “On the Genealogy of Ethics” (“À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique”), Foucault elaborates “the self-forming activity or ethical work” as what one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself into an ethical subject (DE 394-96), which inspirationally suggests that the self which Foucault tends to recognize is scarcely anything uniform, static, or permanent. It emerges as a plastic substance, susceptible to being continuously constructed and re-constructed, incessantly confronting and exposed to internal and external forces in an ongoing process and struggle of forming itself ethically. This is a self, we can detect, that emerges and speaks with a similar plasticity (or susceptibility) in Wilde’s critical writings, forming its own pursuit of the highest form of individuality.

With its emphasis on the reconsiderations of deviations, the genealogical method that Foucault proposes helps dynamically feature this pursuit as a continuing process in its construction of the self’s relation to itself and as a deviating struggle as this construction suggests. In fact, it has become a method that is effectively and widely appropriated in order to justify or illuminate various sorts of linguistic constructions in their relation(s) to the self.⁸ Foucault’s approaches to and formulations of the concepts such as “experience,” “subjectivity,” “the aesthetics of existence,” and “*faire de sa vie une*

⁸ As Gary Gutting indicates, since the essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” first appeared in *Homage à Jean Hyppolite* in 1971, genealogy has become one of the distinctive terms and methodologies that are frequently referenced to Foucault and discussed among critics (43-54).

œuvre d'art" cast light on the fact that the genealogical method that he deploys not only creates and recreates meanings for margins, fragments and oblivions that he continually traces and uncovers within and beyond the historical archives, but also provides ways to read and reread the texts that demand similar efforts. Wilde's criticism is justly one of those texts.

Wilde's contradictions and paradoxes that appear intrinsic to his criticisms have attracted lots of debates and interpretations and seem still to demand more. For they not only challenge ways of regarding and treating the criticism but also destabilize linear perception of time and historical process and the reality that they stand for. As Wilde provocatively says, "The nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac" (*DL* 230).⁹ Frequently, chronological reality is mingled with fictive invention; critical discussions coexist with theatrical devices, historical figures with fictional ones. The ontological objectivity and critical totality that serious criticism is generally labeled with is disrupted and questioned by the intimate, digressive intrusion of mysterious moods and individual impressions: "Don't let us discuss anything solemnly . . . , and I live in terror of not being misunderstood" (*CA* 248); ". . . it is far more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it" (260); "Tonight it may fill one with . . . that *Amour de l'Impossible*, which falls like a madness on many . . ." (264). Therefore, if we want to search further the traces and tracts of textual existence of the "critic as artist"—what is crucial to Oscar Wilde's anachronistic, synthetic perspective towards life and art—then those provocative and diverging details, those textual deviations that disrupt supposedly critical objectivity and totality, particularly deserve our attention and need to be newly, significantly identified and examined. I expect that Wilde's various critical notions such as "criticism," "art," "personality," "self-culture(/creation)," and "life as a work of art," can be newly, genealogically related to one another so as to generate new meanings.

As Foucault indicates, "genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the *dispersion* of oblivion;" it is to identify all sorts of deviations and reversals "that gave birth to *those things* which continue to exist and have value for us" (*EF* 355; my emphasis). Foucault's notion of genealogy encourages us to pay attention to diversity and dispersion, hazards of commencements and accidents, and to their effects upon the truth we know. It propels researchers to see what is beyond and behind the dispersion and to see any mode of dispersion as critical impetus that allows the rediscovery of various hidden textual encounters.

⁹ *The Decay of Lying* collected in *The Major Works*, hereafter abbreviated as *DL*.

It also obliquely encourages readers to break a framing, linear way of reading and seeing to create new perspectives on researching “those things which continue to exist and have value for us” and searching further outside of all monotone finality. For, “those things,” we may argue, are not confined simply to historical writings; they can be viewed, precisely in a broader sense, as all sorts of textual, semiotic, and cultural constructions; they can be redefined and referred to any kind of linguistic encountering, including both the critical and artistic ones, as we find in Wilde’s controversially genre-mixing writings.

Here, it is interesting to note that when Wilde proclaims, “To give an accurate description of what has never occurred is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of parts and culture” (*CA* 248), Wilde demonstrates not only a highly paradoxical, self-reflexive pose but also a genealogical prediction about the re-construction of the passing events. In fact, Wilde frequently shows his concerns towards the unwritten (hi)story, the invisible texts, professing those concerns in diverse, deviating ways: “The only duty we owe to history is to rewrite it;” “It is because Humanity has never known where it was going that it has been able to find its way” (256, 257). These statements betray, more or less, Wilde’s paradoxical reflection on the boundaries between knowing and not knowing, central and marginal, knowledgeable (or knowledgeable) and not knowledgeable (forgotten or forbidden to be acknowledged), voiced and silent. They also show a similar subversive conviction that can be found in Foucault’s genealogical enquiry, which exactly revalues the confusing dispersion of passing events and obliquely of life and memories.

In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde claims, “the most perfect art is that which most fully mirrors man in all his *infinite variety*” (249; my emphasis). If we appropriate and repurpose Foucault’s genealogical dispersion to reconsider dispersion as dispersive entanglement between one and myriad, we may say, by reconceptualizing criticism as an art, Wilde effectively attempts to reflect this hidden dispersive entanglement of subjectivities in man and the infinite possibilities that this dispersion suggests.

We may reimagine the critic/artist, characters Wilde invents in his diverse writings, and even Wilde himself through this critical enquiry of man’s infinite variety which stands as a mirroring-task for Wilde’s “critic as artist” to explore the self’s various relations to itself and to reveal the diffuse and diffusing construction of the self and of life. In this perspective, we may see further that the textual image of Wilde’s critic as artist that emerges from those (re)imaginings intriguingly characterizes itself vividly by its own literary potentiality and tends to transform, to enliven itself *along with the time*, to mirror the future, and to suggest great works of art as living things by its embodying the most perfect art

as (re-)creating/reflecting an enquiry beyond enquiries, an investigation beyond investigations.

The Highest Form of Autobiography: Criticism as a Self-Writing

Wilde regards criticism as the highest form of autobiography (*CA* 261), and art as the highest form of individuality (*SM* 17).¹⁰ Therefore, by way of these two notions, further discussion can be roughly divided into two parts. In the first one, I focus on the relation between criticism and self-writing, and in the second part, I pay more attention to the idea that criticism is an art of the self by and through which one can attain “a certain mode of being” (*EF* 26), fashion one’s self or even one’s life as a work of art, and become a critic/artist in one’s life.

In his famous aesthetic manifesto, “The Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde declares, “The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography” (3). Bearing this notion in mind, careful readers may find, though the title of Wilde’s main critical work, *The Critic as Artist*, appears to foretell that its subject will be something about the criticism, yet at its very beginning, the topic that the two fictional interlocutors—Gilbert and Ernest—introduce is about autobiographies and memoirs, especially those that by portraying human weakness, illusions, and sins, audaciously analyze the process of one’s struggling between body and soul. Among the works to which are alluded, Rousseau’s *Confessions* is conspicuously featured as one of the examples. For Wilde, the world will never weary of watching a “troubled soul in its progress from darkness to darkness” (*CA* 242). If we rebaptize this “troubled soul” in Foucault’s critical contexts, it is also an agonistic self¹¹ which constantly challenges the inner and outer mechanisms, forces that form what it is.

Reconsidered in the light of criticism as a self-writing and vice versa, the opening passages of *The Critic as Artist* are in fact profoundly significant, and require further investigation.¹² For it is justly their literary potentiality, their

¹⁰ *The Soul of Man* collected in *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings* by Wilde, hereafter abbreviated as *SM*.

¹¹ For Foucault, as James Bernauer and Michael Mahon particularly point out, the subject is “an agonism,” “‘a permanent provocation’ to the Knowledge-power-subjectivity relations presented to us” (154).

¹² It is regrettable to say that the critics seem to not be paying enough attention to those passages. Edward Watson does notice the problematic beginning dialogues of the work which reintroduce “the problems of the long-standing dichotomy between the evaluation of literature from ethical or aesthetic grounds,” but his standpoint is considerably different from mine; he mainly treats them as arguments that form “the starting point” of his following discussions in “classical antiquity” (225).

genealogical annexation that implicitly interrelates all the heterogeneous, diverging details and fragments of the text and reconstructs them into a meaningful whole. This opening evocation of a significant, ongoing (meta) textual reconstruction is highlighted by the abrupt affirmation from the interlocutor Gilbert, a fictional critic/artist: "Criticism is the record of one's own soul" (261). Significantly, the word "record" used by Wilde here tells a kind of historical description or writing, implying an authority that the truth as a fact by definition may have. Thereby, it would be no wonder that he accentuates in the same work the historical fact that the Greeks "regarded writing simply as a method of chronicling" (249). However, Wilde always tends to employ one word in order to de-construct and redefine it. For Wilde, this record of one's own soul is even "more fascinating than history, as it is concerned simply with oneself" (261).

Critics often complain about Wilde's digressions in his far-reaching discussions in *The Critic as Artist*.¹³ However, those digressions, or more precisely, those deviations from supposedly linear record or habitually standardized critical argumentation, are effectively entwined with the problematic of the text which reveals itself from the very start by leading the readers to track and pursue (the) self in question. In other words, from the very beginning *The Critic as Artist* has already obliquely announced its own quest for new form(s) of criticism and reflection on itself and on the self and thereby gives rise to further questions: How does Wilde fashion his critic/artist in shaping the relation between criticism, self, and self-writing? What kind of perspective and discursive space does Wilde's critic/artist create for criticism?

To answer them, we have to firstly inquire how Wilde defines a critic, the scribe that performs the quest. Wilde essentially regards the critic as a poet who devotes himself to the art, "the most perfect" one (as mentioned above) which "most fully mirrors man in all his infinite variety" (CA 249-53). This art which is in turn embodied in the figure of the critic/poet is the art, to be explicated further, that unveils the infinitely various aspects of selfhood, of being and becoming, by creating relations and dialogues between them and for them. Criticism turns out to be thereby the critic-poet's medium by and through which he strives to familiarize himself with all the subtle aspects and principles of one's self and of life itself. That is why Wilde claims, criticism—the record of one's own soul—is also "the only civilized form of autobiography," as it deals "with the thoughts of one's life," "with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of

¹³ Wilde specifically subtitles the second part of the essay as "With Some Remarks Upon the Importance of Discussing Everything" and appears provocatively to be anticipating such attacks.

the mind" (261).

Foucault says, "in the course of their history men have never stopped constructing themselves, that is to say continually displacing their subjectivity, constituting themselves in an infinite and multiple series of different subjectivities which will never come to an end" (*DE* 75); what lies behind Foucault's statements effectively entails, from the perspective of intertextuality, a phenomenon of unceasing textual movement, dislocation, and derivation. In fact, similar textual dynamics can be equally detected in Wilde's (re-)constructions of the critic/artist. Treating "the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation" (*CA* 263), the critic/artist aims to explore not only himself but others, to realize not merely his own life but "the collective life" of his own kind. For the critic/artist, as Wilde repeatedly emphasizes: "To know anything about oneself, one must know all about others. There must be no mood with which one cannot sympathize, no dead mode of life that one cannot make alive" (276; "Mr. Pater's *Appreciations*" 145).

In this perspective, *Criticism* with a capital *C* under Wilde's pen stands for not simply criticism of the highest kind for Wilde but a kind of dynamic activity that allows men, in an artistic way, to constitute themselves anachronistically "in an infinite and multiple series of different subjectivities which will never come to an end," subjectivities which can be created by any sort of artistic manifestation. Since Criticism is about re-creation and "anything" can serve its purpose (*CA* 260), by creating relations and dialogues between the various facets of (the) self (in its infinite variety), the art of Wilde's critic/artist significantly manifests itself as a way of creating possibilities and occasions for the multiplication of subjectivities not only of one's biological existence but also of one's textual or historical existence.

Hence, while arguing the infinite variety of selfhood that a true critic can unveil, Wilde simultaneously recreates the traditional forms of autobiography and creates multiple possibilities of diverse development for criticism. If we relocate our discussion of Wilde in literary critical history, we may see that on the one hand, Wilde rethinks what is the "great critical effort" that Matthew Arnold features in his criticism, and validates it as an imperative to be made on the part of the poet and in his culture before any great creative work that can be accomplished (*CA* 260-61), and on the other hand, Wilde more or less inherits Walter Pater's views on the decisive factor that subjectivity plays in the judgments of value that a criticism possibly and potentially provides.¹⁴ Hence, while

¹⁴ It is significant to note that for critics such as Gillespie, "by calling for a recognition of the overly creative features of the imaginative critical response," Wilde "endeavors to bring to maturity the ideas

elaborating Arnold's definition of literature as a criticism of life (253), he highly praises Pater as "an intellectual impressionist" who "has put into the portrait of Monna Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of" ("Mr. Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*" 142; *CA* 262). However, Wilde does not constrain himself in the reigning critical grids or frames of the English cultural heritage that lies behind and threateningly shadows upon him. He mainly appropriates and subverts Pater as well as Arnold in order to highlight the essential quality of self-reflexivity which is for him intrinsic to criticism and determines what it is. He extensively elaborates the mirror-aspect of criticism so as to re-interpret it.

We may thereby rethink this mirror-aspect of criticism with and through Foucault's notion of *subjectivation*. For the process of subjectivation depicted by Foucault justly reveals not only the auto-reflexivity which inherently characterizes any form of critical writing (particularly the one that Wilde proposes), but also its auto-dynamism in being potentially an unceasing textual movement. Foucault argues, in his "The Writing of Self" ("L'écriture de soi"), to understand the modes of relation with the self, we have to go through an ongoing and circling process of "writing of (the) self and for (the) self" ("d'écriture de soi et pour soi") which is destined incessantly to go back to the beginning again and again; which is the process of subjectivation: "It is concerning constructing oneself as the subject of rational action by and through *appropriation*, unification and subjectivation of an *already-said*, which is always fragmentary and selective."¹⁵

In this perspective, Wilde treats criticism more as the art of "an already-said"—that helps work out his synthetic perspectives anachronistically towards a real life and hence a real being—than simply as a form of judgment or evaluation. He appropriates and reconstructs the notions of criticism so as to explore the possible and diverse practices of "writing of (the) self and for (the) self." Wilde reshapes critical writing evocatively as a dynamic process through which one places oneself in relation with others, and in which one minutely observes and examines each subtle turn and move that works within oneself when encountering the outer world. For him, "Criticism's most perfect form" is "in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another" (*CA* 262).

The dialogue form can be seen as the most suitable form for Wilde to demonstrate his conception of critical writings as forms of autobiography. For it allows the critic to multifariously constitute and experience his subjectivity,

that Walter Pater had sought to develop a decade and a half earlier" (43).

¹⁵ My translation and emphasis. See Foucault (*DE* 430).

to investigate the different facets of a personality from various angles, and to profess diverse opinions, even contradictory ones. For Wilde's critic/artist, "To arrive at what one really believes, one must speak through lips different from one's own" (283). The dialogue form also enables Wilde to engage, as Watson indicates, "in a variety of strategic ambiguities, where the fictive elements fade into truth and truth into fictions" (226). In *De Profundis*, while self-dialogically evaluating his own life and work, Wilde claims: "to truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, . . . the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence" (729).

Both *The Decay of Lying* and *The Critic as Artist*, his two most quoted critical works, are written in dialogue form. The dialogue form and a sense of an "uneven argument" that it conveys inevitably remind critics of Plato's Socratic dialogues.¹⁶ However, compared to Plato's Socratic dialogues, Wilde's dialogical criticisms are much more theatrically demonstrated. They comprise much more evident theatrical elements, such as the setting of scene, references to the time, descriptions of events, actions, moods, and of exchanges or deliveries of small personal or daily objects between characters. With those elements, Wilde creates a dramatic atmosphere and a vivid appearance of reality in order to induce the readers to enter his dialectically conceptual and conceptualized world in which he provocatively constructs and de-constructs the relations of the self to itself by investigating the different facets of a personality.

Thus, it is interesting to further parallel Wilde's criticism with his plays and note that in his play, *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde says (through the mouth of Lord Illingworth), "One should never take sides in anything, . . . earnestness follows shortly afterwards, and the human being becomes a bore" (272). This passage precisely implies the same dialogical dynamics of shifting between different forces, of deconstructing self-image as his critical works suggest. Conversely, Wilde's plays can be viewed as the theatrical practices of his criticism, and all the characters in his plays as performers of the Art of the critic/artist.

Wilde believes, "the theatric art" can combine in one exquisite presentation "the illusion of actual life with the wonder of the unreal world" ("The Truth of Masks" 419). In his critical writings, Wilde thereby demonstrates a similar art and constantly repeats the similar idea that actual life seems to be but "an illusion" (CA 270). For him, it appears that only the wonder of the unreal world, the world of art can define and redefine, shape and reshape this illusion.

¹⁶ See, for example, Watson; Desroussilles and Jean.

Since “life cheats us with shadow,” for Wilde, “intellectual Contemplation” should be “the proper occupation of man,” even the only thing to do, and “‘What are you thinking?’ is the only question that any single civilized being should ever be allowed to whisper to another” (270, 274-75). In his dialogical criticisms, thereby, each of the interlocutors not merely plays a role but performs the dialogues elaborated for him to dislocate the apparent unity of the linguistic self and to re-constitute it as, in Foucault’s words, “an object of thinking” (“objet pour la pensée”) (DE 670). Foucault considers that a philosopher’s and thinker’s work, instead of constituting a solution, should be that of *problématisation*, which means that discursive practices should “bring something in the game of the true and of the false and constitute this *something* as an object of thinking.”¹⁷ By way of the dialogue form which is highly susceptible to the play between different or even contradictory opinions and to the game of shifting between the true and the false, Wilde writes the self in problematizing it. Vivian, one of imaginary interlocutors in *The Decay of Lying* interrogates, claiming: “Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action” (DL 216).

The Critic as Artist is divided into two parts. The first part’s subtitle—“With some remarks upon the importance of doing nothing”—wittily suggests its remedies for this “bitter end of action.” Wilde declares, “When man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet” (CA 258). To be a poet, a critic/artist of one’s life, one has to create new meanings for one’s life, that is, to describe and to discourse in a new way, to cultivate a language of criticism of one’s own. For the critic, “it is to do nothing that the elect exist” (275). By praising “doing nothing,” Wilde implicitly guards readers against blind industry, against unthinking acts. To cultivate a critical language will lead one to truly and intellectually create a dynamic relation with one’s self. That is why Gilbert proclaims, “What the highest Criticism really is, is the record of one’s own soul. . . . It is the only civilized form of autobiography, as it deals . . . with the thoughts of one’s life; . . . with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind” (261).

To show what the highest Criticism really is, Wilde demonstrates his ideas of it in different ways and often with words and terms that are explicitly or implicitly associated with the contemporary literary or artistic movements: “the sole aim of the critic is to chronicle his own impressions” (262); or “the aim of art is simply to create a mood” (278); or in an interview, “the aim of the true critic is to try and chronicle his own moods” (qtd. in Jackson xviii). Inevitably,

¹⁷ My translation and emphasis. Please see Foucault (DE 669-70).

the word “impressions” invites readers to give thoughts to “impressionism,” the artistic movement that memorably animates the art world of the second-half of the nineteenth century. And intriguingly, “impressions” and “moods” appear to be synonyms in these statements. Moreover, seemingly to test the textual impact of the critical “impressions” upon the reader, Wilde even claims further, “the critical and cultured spirits will grow less and less interested in actual life, and *will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what Art has touched*” (CA 269). Reinterpreting Wilde’s accounts in light of Foucault, we can say, impressions and moods appear for Wilde not only as the aesthetic objects of contemplation, but also as the determination of “the ethical substance,” the way in which one makes this or that part of oneself as the principal material of one’s moral or ethical judgment (to work on) (DE 394-96). The act of creating moods or chronicling impressions which appears as the highest mode of self-writing for Wilde can be further considered as “the mode of subjection” and “the self-forming activity” in Foucault’s “ethics proper” —namely, “the self’s relationship to itself” (394-96).

However, whether impressions or moods, they are essentially fluid and diverse, unseizable and susceptible to changes. By chronicling his impressions, his moods, and by replacing the formal, terminological arguments with playful impressions, Wilde suggests the subjectivity, unreliability and partiality of all the arguments, and obliquely points to the instability and fragility of self-construction.

Since Wilde considers criticism as a tool destined for self-dialogue and self-writing, the critic/artist is therefore the one who cultivates and masters the art of self-dialogue. Both in his theatrical criticisms and his philosophical dramas of criticism, the interlocutors and characters who act frequently like puppets or *porte-paroles* of Wilde demonstrate the art of self-dialogue and incarnate Wilde’s various linguistic facets; they constantly contradict each other or even themselves by practicing paradoxical language and thoughts. Together, they show us that the self, as an entity (re/de)constructed, is effectively incessantly menaced and torn between the past and the present, fiction and reality, internal and external forces in an ongoing pursuit of the truth to its-self.

The Highest Form of Individuality: Criticism as an Art of the Self

Wilde constantly capitalizes criticism as the Art of arts, treating it as “a creation within a creation” (CA 261). Starting with these two ideas of Wilde, I attempt, in this section, to further investigate the critic/artist in Wilde by relating criticism, the activity that characterizes what a critic/artist is, to his concep-

tualization of individuality and of individualism. I intend to argue and highlight that for Wilde, criticism is the highest form of individuality and thereby can be considered as an art of the self. While rethinking the notions such as “self-development,” “self-culture,” and “life as a work of art” that Wilde brings about, I hope to engender at the same time a trans-cultural and inter-disciplinary dialogue, in the name of “a beautiful life” (*EF* 109) with Foucault, to (re)read the “aesthetic existence” in Wilde and to see if we may create more derivations and variations of literary experiences of Wilde.

Before further investigation, I have to point out, though the critics confirm the theoretical richness embedded in Wilde’s works, which means, in Jonathan Culler’s words, “to have effects beyond their original field” (3), and which thereby justifies the attempt to do further critical associations with other theorists such as Foucault, however, I cannot ignore that relatively significant differences of terminological usage still exist between Wilde, a nineteenth-century English/Irish writer, and Foucault, a twentieth-century French philosopher. For more or less, the writer’s discursive frames and choices of vocabularies are inevitably shaped and conditioned not only by his academically oriented fields and interests but also by the particular contexts (of time and space—the historical, geographical, cultural, etc.) which he inhabits.

Hence, while attempting to reconceptualize and (re-)define the self, Wilde tends to employ the words like “personality” or “soul.” In his discussion of how to be or how to live fully, Wilde frequently appropriates more the connotative impacts of the words like “life” or “soul” than those of “existence,” and in general he uses these words without evident distinction in their signification. The connotation of “personality” in Wilde can be seen as most related to that of “existence” in Foucault’s “aesthetics of existence.” For Wilde’s usage of “personality” recreates the word’s literary competence and imaginings, reshapes its resonances and makes it refer to not only a particular individual but also a particular state of being. A state, simultaneously given and acquired, needs to be discovered as well as cultivated.

Like Foucault’s, Wilde’s elaboration of self-creation or self-culture entails the necessity of artistically working on one’s own being. However, Wilde appears less skeptical towards the ontological possibilities of its perfection. For Wilde, “man reaches his perfection, not through what he has, not even through what he does, but entirely through what he is” (*SM* 10, 11). Thus, becoming “what one is” initiates the process of becoming a critic/artist and creating the highest Criticism.

Being firmly convinced that man reaches his perfection “entirely through

what he is," Wilde highly praises personal impressions and claims that the highest Criticism,

being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself, an end. (CA 261)

In this way, Wilde not only validates, again and obliquely, art for art's sake but also the highest, the most creative and artistic status that Criticism may hold. Wilde's assertion simultaneously implies the importance of the critic/artist's being true to what he is. For the highest Criticism should be the "purest form of personal impression"; and it should be thereby endowed with "least reference to any standard external to itself."

Hence Wilde explores the artistic possibilities of criticism to the extremes. The criticism is not merely a work of art; it will be, in its highest development, "more creative than creation" for what it reveals is not simply what is criticized but the one who is practicing the criticism. And through this revelation, the critic re-creates both the work and himself.

Wilde considers the critic/artist, the one who truly reembodies the work, is also the one "who exhibits to us a work of art in a form different from that of the work itself"; and his "employment of a new material is a critical as well as a creative element" (CA 269). Following this perspective, he thinks that each of the arts inherently has its own critic to truly reembody and recreate it. For instance, a good actor is simultaneously a good critic of the role that he plays and of the drama in which he plays; a good painter is a good critic of the material he employs, of what he sees and imagines. And yet, how is one to be such a critic, to show a work of art in a form different from that of the work itself, to become a true critic of the material that he employs? For Wilde, on the one hand, one has to cultivate and refine one's own critical instinct and faculty; on the other hand, one has to simultaneously cultivate, intensify, and work on one's own personality, for "personality is an absolute essential for any real interpretation"; and "as art springs from personality, so it is only to personality that it can be revealed" (268-70).

Therefore, the highest Criticism, the highest form of individuality that Wilde promotes cannot be separated from the cultivation of a true personality which one can achieve only by cultivating the critical faculty. Wilde claims, "no one who does not possess this critical faculty can create anything at all in art" (253). For him, it is the critical spirit that creates. Therefore, the great critics and creators are not ever limited to and cannot be simply defined as those who work with words. Whoever possesses the critical faculty and cultivates a criti-

cal spirit in his/her life can fashion himself/herself as a Wildean critic/artist. In *The Soul of Man*, Wilde celebrates four kinds of men as the “artists,” “the real men.” They are the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, and the men of culture; they are “the men who have realized themselves, and in whom all Humanity gains a partial realization” (*SM* 3).

For Wilde, “the development of the race depends on the development of the individual, and where self-culture has ceased to be the ideal, the intellectual standard is instantly low, and, often, ultimately lost” (*CA* 279). The “self-culture” meant by Wilde is exactly synonymous with the cultivation of critical faculty, of a true personality. Significantly, his emphasis on the decisive role that an individual’s development plays in the development of a larger community betrays the implicit ethical aspect of this self-culture. For, if we regard Wilde’s criticism as an art of the self, it stands out in Foucault’s words, as a self-forming activity, an “ethical work” that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself into an ethical subject. Through and by this art of the self, one realizes one’s own ideal existence, ethical and aesthetic, and becomes an artist of one’s life.

Indeed, by showing what a critic/artist can be transformed into and represent, Wilde justifies the critic/artist as an artist of the life, and criticism as the Art, as “the most intense mode of individualism” (*SM* 17). Generically this figure resembles “le dandy-artiste” described by Baudelaire (550-53; 559-61). Broadly it incarnates and represents the aesthetic mode of being that Wilde reimagines and idealizes through his rereading of both ancient and contemporary thoughts related to art and life. By fashioning his critic/artist, Wilde widely discusses the aesthetic phenomena of existence. The second part of *The Critic as Artist* is aptly subtitled as “With some remarks upon the importance of discussing everything.” This “everything” can be described precisely as everything that appeals to the aesthetic sense and everything that the aesthetic sense appeals to. Thereby the “critic as artist” appears under Wilde’s pen as “the aesthetic critic” as well (*CA* 282, 291).

We can find that in Wilde’s apparently random, diverted, and diverse discussion, the aesthetic sense and the critical one are actually inseparable, though sometimes they are seemingly in contradictory states, representing two facets or elements of “Art’s unity” (266). For Wilde, a good piece of criticism, just like a fine work of art, should possess fine “contrasts,” “paradoxes” and “changes,” and “the subtle quality of suggestion” to tell that from it “there is an escape into a wider world” (265-66); that those apparently instable, subversive, and inconsistent manifestations that one perceives or reads in it are in fact artistic characteristics and aesthetic ways of showing a persistent work of Art on itself and its own perfection.

In other words, by pointing out the artistic characteristics that criticism should have and the necessity of its being as a fine work of art, Wilde effectively implies that good criticism inherently comprises and synthesizes all the diverse and contrary states of mind, for it embodies and reveals an innate linguistic process of the self's ongoing recreation and rework on itself, a process which should be treated as a work of art. And we may further justify that this is what Wilde really means by entitling criticism as "a creation within a creation," and the highest Criticism as "the purest form of personal impression," "more creative than creation" with "least reference to any standard external to itself" (261).

Certainly, this kind of criticism provokes lots of controversies. In his critical works, Wilde systematically contradicts himself and superposes opposites to aesthetically show the linguistic possibilities of criticism and the inherent coexistence of the incomplete and complete during the persistent artistic work of the self on itself and its own perfection. He claims,

It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty, and so addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone, which, while accepting both reason and recognition as stages of apprehension, subordinates them both to a pure synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole. . . . (265-66)

For Wilde, the capitalized *Art* is meant as the art of the critic/artist, as the most intense mode of individualism. It is simultaneously the art of self-creation, of a creation within and beyond a creation, precisely because it can incorporate all contrary states of mind, all the inner workings and reworkings, all the "stages of apprehension." It can transform them into critical/artistic manifestations validated by the aesthetic sense that Wilde reimagines and recreates, and further justified under a pure (personal) "synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole."

In other words, criticism is a term that Wilde appropriates and repurposes to encompass all the diverse, dynamic, and changeable relations of the self with itself. The various forms of art are regarded simply as mediums through the stimulation of which these relations are able to be understood and constructed. Therefore, for Wilde, the art of a critic is not merely the Art of arts, but also the creation of creations, for it concerns totally with the discovery, (trans-)formation and invention of the self.

The aesthetic sense that Wilde reimagines creates further dialogical parallels to what is aesthetic about Foucault's "aesthetics of existence," for as critics highlight, what is aesthetic in Foucault's "aesthetics of existence" is precisely his particular accentuation on the art of self-transformation or self-

invention,¹⁸ which is his taking the self as a task, as something artistic to be unceasingly worked on. In his later works, Foucault attempts to formulate, (re-)discover and develop a new ethics, i.e., the “aesthetics of existence” which is an ethical creation of the self and an art of the self (DE 733).

Thus, the initial concept of an “aesthetics of existence” is meant to be a new ethical task that begins precisely by refusing aesthetically what we are supposed to be.¹⁹ The new aesthetics is proposed and purposed thereby to replace what we refuse and what we should ethically reject. In other words, by rejecting what we are supposed to be and by problematizing the code of rules followed by it, Foucault’s new “aesthetics”—“faire de la vie une œuvre d’art”—aims to promote new arts of self-creation and new forms of the self to the self.

For formulating this new form of subjectivity, Foucault returns to ancient Greece to find his tools. With its particular undertone of appropriation of a tradition, of the already-said, Foucault’s Hellenistic return and re-evaluation helps illustrate Wilde’s own. For Foucault’s journey to the ancient Greek texts aims less at promoting a new textual hermeneutics (or familiarizing himself or us better with them) than at searching “both the difference that keeps us at a remove from a way of thinking in which we recognize the origin of our own,” and “the proximity which remains in spite of that distance which we never cease to explore.”²⁰

Wilde’s criticism, particularly *The Critic as Artist* and *The Soul of Man*, is full of his imagination of and admiration for the ancient Greeks. He celebrates their concepts of life, philosophy, art, and literature in order to repurpose them for his own theorizing of art and criticism. For Wilde, “our primary debt to the Greeks” is simply “the critical spirit” (CA 249). Wilde thinks that the principles of life, “as laid down by the Greeks,” can be hardly understood by modern people and realized in an age so marred by the false ideals of the moderns. He asserts that the Greeks once elaborated the language of criticism to a point “to which we, with our accentual system of reasonable or emotional emphasis, can barely if at all attain” (249). For Wilde, life and literature—“the perfect expression of life”—are the two supreme and highest arts in the world and it is upon these two arts that the ancient Greeks most demonstrate their critical spirit (249-50). He suggests that if we the moderns want to see and realize these two arts just as the Greeks once did, then we have to appeal to criticism. For

¹⁸ For typical examples, see Jean-François Pradeau 134-36; O’Leary, chapter 2 and 3. See also Judith Revel 44-46.

¹⁹ For a brief illustration of the concept, see Foucault’s “*Une esthétique de l’existence*” (DE 730-75).

²⁰ For an extended explanation of these related aims in Foucault’s researches, see his “Preface to *The History of Sexuality*” (EF 58-63).

criticism, as Wilde emphasizes (and puts forward frequently), is the creation of creations, the Art of arts and hence can perfectly integrate these two arts. In addition, to know its principles means to know the principles of all the arts.

Empowered by Hellenistic imagination as well as his own fascination, the critic/artist's Art creates for the artist himself as well as the others an "escape," a "way-out," "a suggestion for some new mood of thought and feeling," some "strange new Gods"—which means, in other words, a suggestion for some new subjective form that can be realized through "the use of a fresh medium of expression" and the rejection of what is orthodoxically established (281-82). This artistic suggestion for escapes, ways-out, effectively invites further thinking, particularly upon possible dialogues with the aesthetic refusal, a new form of the self to the self, advocated in Foucault's "aesthetics of existence."

For in his return to the Greeks, Foucault like his predecessors (among which Wilde is frequently detected) brings with him not only his own contemporary concerns but also a will to see his own task "in relation to the many previous returns" which have characterized Western thinking (O'Leary 22). Foucault's Hellenistic *regard* inevitably evokes Nietzsche's remark: "when we speak of the Greeks we involuntarily speak of today and yesterday" (27). While shaping his critic as artist, Wilde repurposes Hellenistic imagination, offers his own modern version of it, and projects it into the future. Both Wilde's and Foucault's returns to the ancients are characterized by a similar attempt at providing answers to an ever-present ethical dilemma—"how one is to live" in a world disenchanted with the universal good as well as with an ethics of obedience to a code, to a system of rules (*DE* 732).

Wilde's main critical concerns, though ostentatiously demonstrated and propagated in the name of beauty and art, constantly allow one to sense their inherent ethical aspect and search: how is one to live fully to form a perfect personality, to be a real man? The critical and aesthetic search forms modes of being which a critic/artist aims to perfect in behaving ethically, and constitutes a life-long ethical work. The highest ethical work is not simply to work on his self, but also to transform his life into the highest mode of criticism, that is, to become a work of art himself or in Foucault's words, "to leave to others memories of a beautiful existence."

In his late research, Foucault strives to integrate his former ethical concerns with his new one, "the aesthetics of existence," declaring,

The principal aim, the principal target of this kind of ethics, was an aesthetic one. . . , this kind of ethics was only a problem of personal choice. . . . It was a personal choice for a small elite. The reason for making this choice was the will *to live a beautiful life*, and to leave to others memories of *a beautiful existence*. (*EF* 103; my emphasis)

“To live a beautiful life” is to elaborate one’s own life to be a work of art, and this elaboration is for Foucault “the core” of the moral experience, of the ethic will in Antiquity (*DE* 731), which should be re-introduced in our own times to help fashion a new version of “beautiful existence.”

Foucault asks: “couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life” (*EF* 109)? At the end of his life, after his fateful trial and two-years of hard labor in prison, Wilde said to the French writer, André Gide,

“I knew that there would be a catastrophe; this one or that one, I had expected. Things had to be ended in this way. [. . .] *My life is like a work of art.* An artist cannot repeat twice the same thing . . . ; he would never have succeeded if he did. My life before the prison was as successful as possible. Now it is a finished work.”²¹

In this perspective, “Art” represents for Wilde not only the highest art of the self, “the most intense mode of individualism” (*SM* 17), but also the only real mode of being, of life. For Wilde, criticism is not merely a textual practice but also an aesthetic activity and process that fashions life as a work of art.

The idea of life as a work of art appears constantly in Wilde’s works. In *De Profundis*, Wilde depicts Christ himself and his life as “a work of art” (753). In his criticism, tracing the ideas of the ancient Greek critics like Plato and Aristotle, Wilde frequently investigates “the connection between Beauty and Truth,” “the place of Beauty in the moral and intellectual order of the Kosmos” (*CA* 250-51), in order to see how the sense of beauty can help make of one’s own life a work of art. For Wilde, “Life,” this supreme art, of which the principles were once laid down by the Greeks (249), should recreate its own perfect expression. Thus, criticism serves actually as a temporary discursive frame and medium for his search for how to express life, to mirror man in his infinite variety. Consequently, the terms like art, truth, and beauty serve to illustrate this search.

Trans-textually, Wilde’s idea of life as a work of art evokes Foucault’s “beautiful existence” behind which lies Foucault’s appropriation of the ancient “*art de vivre*” (“art of living”). Foucault repurposes it and the self-culture that it suggests to highlight one’s continuous elaboration on one’s relation with the self in an intense labor of care and skill for fashioning the individual life into a work of art.²² Notably, this “care of the self” does not encourage the individual to deny the self but to recognize the continuity and diversity of self-transforma-

²¹ My translation and emphasis. See Gide (37).

²² For a further and extended discussion of this point, see *EF* 30-32; 107-10; see also Pradeau (133-34).

tion. It aims to concern the relation of the self to itself and then to the others. In other words, through the care of the self, we care for others and rebuild the relation with them.

In this perspective, Wilde's interests in perfecting one's own personality obliquely show his concerns for caring for the self, and the crucial presence of the terms like soul, individuality, and individualism in Wilde's criticism particularly betrays a profound idea for how to transform one's self. For the core of the critic/artist's art is "concerned simply with oneself" (CA 261); to perfect one's own personality is ultimately to transform one's self perfectly. It is a form of the care of the self that the critic/artist critically demonstrates and brings into practices. It is Wilde's own version of it.

For Wilde, to perfect one's own personality one has to first intensify it. The aim of this intensification, this intense care, is for the critic/artist to know others better in order to create true, living interpretations about life and the world. Wilde asserts,

it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true. (268)

To put it further, it is by intensifying his own personality that the critic/artist interprets more personalities and thereby creates truer interpretations of life itself which inherently involves many more other selves. In effect, Wilde's version of caring for oneself implies a deep connection of the self not only to itself but also to other people's selves. Eventually, Wilde's "simple concern with oneself" subtly entails further subversive reflection on altruism which controversially illustrates his "new Individualism."

In *The Soul of Man*, Wilde celebrates a "new Individualism" and demonstrates the forms and ways in which it can most manifest and (re-)construct itself (2-37). To highlight and conceptualize this new Individualism, he develops the idea of "personality" in an apocalyptic, even mystic way, proclaiming,

The true personality of man . . . will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything. (9)

For Wilde, such a personality that he advocates will help reject all kinds of unhealthy altruism so as to realize the perfection of what is in him. And yet this does not mean isolating oneself from others nor does it mean celebrating selfishness. On the contrary, Wilde constantly suggests, if everyone can "know oneself" and "be(-come) oneself," and develop fully what is in oneself, i.e., one's

own personality, there will be no one that will busy himself with proving his own existence by dominating or homogenizing others. For Wilde, unhealthy altruism begets true selfishness. Wilde claims, "Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live"; it "always aims at creating around it an absolute uniformity of type" (32-33). Wilde thus encourages everyone to live intensely, fully, perfectly and "do so without exercising restraint on others, or suffering it ever"; he asserts that only when man can do so, can he be more civilized, more himself (36).

In order to empower an aesthetic reading of the cult of personality, Wilde even promotes a religious one of his ideal personality, illustrating it through the figure of Jesus and yet ostentatiously in an individualistic way in which a true personality, a true critic/artist of life would be defined:

What Jesus meant, was this. He said to man, 'You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. . . . Ordinary riches can be stolen from a man. Real riches cannot. In the treasury-house of your soul, there are infinitely precious things, that may not be taken from you.' (10)

Wilde repurposes Jesus's words to highlight the importance of being a true personality, a true individual. He appropriates the religious divinity in order to create the holy aura around his new individualism.

It is clear that Wilde actually equates his renewing version of individualism with the full realization of one's personality or full self-development which he treats frequently as the primary aim of life, as a necessary counterforce to "absolute uniformity of type." What Wilde means by a full self-development can be further deciphered by Foucault's art of existence. For this art, this "new aesthetics," as we have brought up earlier, suggests and represents an aesthetics that no longer embraces obedience to a certain code of rules nor a uniformity of existence that would follow. The renewing aesthetics is based upon the "acceptance of fragmentation, plurality and instability" in contrast to that which evokes uniformity, stereotype and permanence;²³ it is an aesthetics whose spirit Wilde equally celebrates though in different words and ways. For Wilde's creation of a new aesthetics is closely related to his recreation of what a critic can do and represent, and to his redefinition of the critic as an artist who, by fully developing his self and perfecting his own personality, questions and subverts what is commonsensically grounded and what is absolutely uniform.

Wilde's rejection of any type of "absolute uniformity" thereby significantly

²³ For a related discussion of the main differences between Foucault's aestheticism and its Fascist counterparts, see O'Leary 131-33.

echoes Foucault's "beautiful existence" which precisely rejects any form of domination or tyranny. Both authors suggest in their own ways that to recreate ourselves as works of art is to live a life based upon an "aesthetics of existence," to act, even in the absence of any universal grounds of ethical action, without trying to homogenize or dominate other existences through knowledge or power.

For Wilde, the individualism that a real personality develops will substitute co-operation for competition and give life its full development to its highest mode and so shape one's own existence that external things will not harm or dominate it in any way, and vice versa. In *The Soul of Man*, Wilde asserts, "If a man approaches a work of art with any desire to exercise authority over it and the artist, he approaches it in such a spirit that he cannot receive any artistic impression from it at all" (26). To put it further, if a man fashions his own life into a work of art and becomes a Wildean critic/artist, he should give up any idea or desire of possessing or exercising any kind of authority when approaching himself, others, or any (possible) work of art; instead, he should fully experience what he encounters and contemplates, immersing himself in what it brings to him without any single idea of objectizing (knowledging) or dominating it.

Wilde effectively encourages a creative personifying criticism and considers the true critic as an artist in life and of life. He aestheticizes criticism in treating life as a poetical and artistic work that needs to be constructed and reconstructed through the critical exploration of each aspect of the self. This ongoing work stands strongly as to evoke its most resounding echoes in the Foucauldian "aesthetics of existence," or *stylisation* which is simply a synonym of the former. Foucault foresees how the writing of a modern history of human existence would be "a history of existence as art and as style."²⁴ And yet long before Foucault, in his works, Wilde has indicated in different ways, how "style" is essential to every aspect of life and the formation of "a personality." In "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," Wilde claims, "In all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential. In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential" (*The Major Works* 572). Through the generations, Wilde proves himself as a living inspiration for many critics by stylizing not only his works but also his own life and his afterlife.

Great Works of Art as Living Things

As we see, the theoretical perspectives that Wilde opens up in his

²⁴ For an extended elaboration of this notion, see Foucault's "À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours" (*DE* 609-31).

criticisms not only renew the thinking of criticism but reform the image and identity of the critic. Bequeathing the critic with multifarious possible facets of creation, Wilde creates a new paradigm for the critic, long before literary criticism's remarkable resurgence of becoming a major theoretical interest and professional activity in the twentieth century. Describing the true critic as "a poet," as "a real man," Wilde recreates the critic as the man who truly develops and fully realizes himself, who fashions new forms, new discourses for his self and his life.

In agreeing with Arnold about the notion that "literature is a criticism of life" (*CA* 253), Wilde develops Arnold's idea further to integrate literature, criticism, and life into his own version of "criticism of life" realized by the art of the critic/artist. Indeed, out of all the criticism of life created by his predecessors, Wilde recreates a criticism on criticism which justifies itself as an art by all the metatextual concerns of self vis-à-vis writing, life vis-à-vis existence, and aesthetics vis-à-vis ethics that it is able to carry and realize; an art thanks to which one is not merely able to create criticism of life but to make of oneself a work of art and a criticism of life.

In this perspective, the art of the critic/artist so memorably defined, so controversially elaborated by Wilde effectively resonates with the art of existence that fashions and preoccupies later generations. Indeed, terms like "personality," "new Individualism" or "self-culture" that Wilde appropriates and conceptualizes all can be repurposed to illustrate expressions such as "aesthetics of existence" and "care of the self" newly empowered in and through Foucault.

Both Wilde and Foucault, in the name of beauty or "a beautiful life," undertake similarly intellectual activities of thinking and reflection on the relation of the self to itself. They simply use different tools or terminological frameworks. The main tool and target for Foucault is the philosophy of history, while for Wilde, it is criticism.

For Wilde, the highest criticism is, as we have seen, "the only civilized form of autobiography," as it deals essentially with "the thoughts of one's life." Wilde artistically highlights the thoughts of one's life to the point that he even asserts contemplation should be the proper occupation of man, of "any single civilized being." For it cultivates the self and beautifies the existence, but does not necessarily benefit material existence nor the body. That's why he also claims, apparently contradictorily as always, that "thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world" (*DL* 216).

In an interview, when talking about experience and self-formation, Foucault claims, "my task here is, in inviting the others to do the same thing with

me, to make of *myself*, through a determinate historical content, *an experience of our modernity*, the one out of which we would be transformed.”²⁵ We may elaborate Foucault’s “invitation” further to say, by insisting on the notion of self-transformation, Foucault invites us at the same time to problematize our existence, to deliver ourselves, even within a definite confinement, to an indefinite, personal form of struggle and transgression and ultimately to a persistent, permanent creation of ourselves. For Foucault, modernity refers not simply to one’s relation with the present, but also the relation with the self. And in this perspective, by “*une expérience de notre modernité*” (“an experience of our modernity”), Foucault also tends to mean a stylization, a way of thinking and living that will open possibilities for new relations to self and events in the world. Wilde somehow unforgettably illustrates this “*expérience de notre modernité*” by his own life and work and stylizes it with vivid contrasts and brilliant paradoxes. The dramatic rise and fall of his own life proves to be one of the most popular and controversial targets for biographers and storytellers. Wilde and his life critically embody this Foucauldian agonistic self that is unable to become autonomous other than through a stylization of the concrete possibilities that present themselves to it.

It would be fair to say, in exercising his own theory of the critic/artist, Wilde is a critic/artist of life, and his own life is a work of art. Furthermore, he practices and realizes his own version of “aesthetics of existence” by and through his life before Foucault enunciates his. Indeed, by fashioning the critic/artist as a critical task for life, Wilde foresees and creates the discursive possibilities of a new aesthetics, which are further opened up by Foucault’s “aesthetics of existence.” For, by making him(his)self as well as his own life become a permanent controversy and unsettled debate, he unceasingly criticizes and thus problematizes the world which he inhabits or finds him-self (a self, historical as well as textual) in. As Wilde himself predicts, a critic/artist “will be always showing us the work of art in some new relation to our age. He will always be reminding us that great works of art are living things—are, in fact, the only things that live” (CA 269).

²⁵ My translation and emphasis. See Foucault’s “Entretien avec Foucault” (DE 44).

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王爾德中的批評家/藝術家

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摘要

本文旨在從批評作為自我書寫以及批評作為自我藝術兩主要論述途徑，重思並重繪王爾德筆下批評家/藝術家之意象。藉傅柯在論述上所開啓的言說可能性，尤其是傅柯所細究闡釋之倫理/美學言說，本文由是嘗試探尋、重新審視王爾德批評家即藝術家其文本存在縱跡及軌跡，以見其實則既錯時又統整地根本形塑了王爾德的藝術與人生觀。文本分析將著重於看似混雜、模稜兩可的文句段落，尤其是出自王爾德主要批評作品《批評家即藝術家》一文之文段。王爾德對古希臘倫理的想像，不斷重構或實踐「藝術家/批評家」、「自我陶冶/創造」以及「人生作為藝術品」等概念，令人思及傅柯對於古希臘時期與現代「存在美學」之種種探究。的確，就王爾德批評論述軌跡與展延來看，自我（及/或主體）的（轉化）問題逐漸進入其思想核心。在其書寫中，自我在似是而非、層層相異的偽裝中，呈現出流動可塑的語言樣態，在過去與現在、虛構與真實，以及內在、外在各種力量間，不斷遭受推擠與拉扯，以持續追尋批評上以及藝術上，最高形式的個人性。因而，在辨識文本中四散而逸離的細節，解讀其意義及偏移且開展差異的同時，本文也試圖擴展探討的視野，超越批評家的傳統意象，從而重新發現關乎自我/書寫、生命/存在以及美學/倫理之後文本乃至跨文本間種種思緒，這些關注既古老又現代，持續縈繞王爾德的想像力，然而卻錯置隱身在細緻複雜的文本層次、驅力以及動能中，構成意義的根本及其衍異。

關鍵字：王爾德，批評家即藝術家，批評即藝術，自我書寫，傅柯