

Wilde and Bakhtin or the openendedness of art and life

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In the last decade or so there has been a tendency to do justice to Wilde's critical legacy, which for a long time had been neglected or rejected. In this sense a special emphasis has been placed on the way in which many of Wilde's ideas are congenial to contemporary critical theories. The big names like Barthes, Frye, etc. have been cited, but interestingly enough no reference has been made to a critic whose contribution to the theory of the novel has been praised by the majority of scholars: Mikhail Bakhtin. It is true that Regenia Gagnier in her book *Idylls of the Marketplace* has underlined the fact that for Bakhtin Wilde was one of the first readers to recognize what he called the "dialogicality" of Dostoevsky's novels. She has also used Bakhtin's own term "dialogical" to describe the way in which Wilde deconstructed bourgeois categories of thought as well as the form of his larger essays¹. However, what Gagnier is doing here is merely applying Bakhtin's ideas to Wilde's work, whereas we believe that it is necessary to go further and analyse the similiarity that exists between some aspects of Bakhtin's theory of the novelistic discourse and Wilde's thinking about the critical faculty. It is precisely the purpose of this paper to examine those parallelisms centring our attention on Wilde's most "bakhtinian" essays: "The Critic as Artist" and "The Soul of Man under Socialism".

For Bakhtin the novel is the genre that best represents the inherent dialogism of language by means of its polyphony which allows the orchestration of diverse discourses culled both from oral and written speech, without any of them dominating the others. This last aspect is vital since it prevents the author from imposing a single point of view and therefore a single truth:

The possibility of employing on the plane of a single work discourses of various types, with all their expressive capacities intact, without reducing them to a single common denominator - this is one of the most fundamental characteristics of prose².

What characterizes, then, authentic novelistic discourse is the artistic organization of diversity of individual voices and heteroglossia, the internal stratification of any national language into social dialects, professional jargons,

¹ Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace. Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1986, pp. 31-33.

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson, Manchester, 1984, pp. 200-1.

generic languages, etc. This dialogism of the novel is of great importance, because the writer, conscious of the great variety of languages, all of them equally relative and limited, rejects the notion of a single, unitary language, inviolable and indisputable, centre of the ideological world. The novel thus liberates language from the power of myth, destroying any mythic and magical attitude to language and the word. The linguistic medium is no longer something sacred and sacrosanct which contains the whole truth, but merely one of many possible ways to hypothesize meaning:

Language is transformed from the absolute dogma it had been within the narrow framework of a sealed-off and impermeable monoglossia into a working hypothesis for comprehending and expressing reality³.

The object is liberated from the power of language and the notion of a simple and unmediated relation of ideological content to language is undermined. The novel thus becomes a revolutionary and liberating genre in which the last word has never been expressed. Bakhtin brilliantly summarizes this idea in his book on Dostoevsky: “*nothing* conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and always will be in the future⁴”.

And it is precisely because of its liberating character that the novel always shows a carnivalesque irreverence towards all kinds of authoritarian, repressive, monologic ideologies that aim at sociopolitical and cultural centralization. For Bakhtin the novel is essentially parodic, it exposes and subverts the linguistic and formal conventionality of other genres and is therefore associated with unofficial language and unofficial thought.

But, and this is of uppermost importance, the impiety of the novelistic discourse is directed not only to other genres, but also to itself. The novel is always criticizing itself and that is why in the novel language both represents and becomes the object of representation. “It is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review⁵”. The novel is always revealing the limits, the artificial barriers which have been imposed upon a literary system. In contrast to other genres, which we know in their completed aspect and which, therefore, preserve their rigidity and canonic quality, the novel is the only genre that continues to develop, rejecting any kind of formal stylization. Bakhtin even goes so far as to say that studying other genres is like studying dead languages, whereas analysing the novel is like analysing languages that are alive and young. The novel has no canon of its own and thus the scholar will only be able to examine individual examples. As a matter of fact, whenever any of these individual manifestations, which are the result of parodying other forms, tries to stabilize and to establish itself as the model for the genre, it also becomes the object of parody.

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, Univeristy of Texas Press, Austin, 1992, p. 61.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 166.

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, p. 39.

The most important novelistic models arose precisely during the parodic destruction of preceding novelistic worlds. Furthermore, it is because of its uncompleted, developing character, that the novel is the genre that best reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making and therefore is defined by Bakhtin as "the leading hero in the drama of literary development"⁶. Being in the vanguard of change the novel will always anticipate the future evolution of literature as a whole. Also, whenever the novel becomes the dominant genre, it "novelizes" other genres, it infects them with its spirit of change and openedness and they become more flexible and free.

When trying to explain this openedness of the novel Bakhtin says that is mainly due to the fact that this genre has always been structured, not in the zone of an absolute distanced image, but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality. In other words, contemporary life has always been the starting point for understanding, evaluating and formulating novelistic discourse, which thus becomes determined by experience. Whereas in the monologic genres it is memory that serves as the source for creation and evaluation and, therefore, nothing can be changed, in the polyphonic type of work the literary world is liable to personal interpretation and therefore to new insights, to new points of view: "...the novel has a new and quite specific problematicalness: characteristic for it is an eternal re-thinking and re-evaluating"⁷. This permits the introduction of one of the most characteristic features of the novel, the element of formal self-consciousness.

The world of the novelistic discourse in which the cultural-semantic and emotional intentions have been liberated from the hegemony of a single and unitary language, this is the literary world Oscar Wilde wanted for himself and his society. As Gagnier has remarked, Wilde was well aware of the way in which language had been distorted in order to reinforce bourgeois values⁸. He obviously considered this process a threat to art and liberty and in his critical essays he denounces the dangers of any kind of linguistic perversion:

It has been pointed out that one of the results of the extraordinary tyranny of authority is that words are absolutely distorted from their proper and simple meaning, and are used to express the obverse of their right signification⁹.

He perceives the consequences of the object becoming entangled in the power of language and that is why he adds that in a perfect socialist world words will be realised in their "free, beautiful lives". The use of the word "free" is highly significant, since it shows that Wilde knew that in a world where a process of verbal and semantic centring of the ideological world has taken place, there is no freedom, but authority, repression and, above all, one indisputable Truth. For him the ideal

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, p. 7.

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, p. 31.

⁸ Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace. Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, p. 31.

⁹ Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism", in *The Artist as Critic. Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 285.

of uniformity is simply immoral, because it implies the imposition of a single world view and the belief that art and life are completed and sealed off: "It is Criticism that, recognizing no position as final,...loves truth for its own sake, and loves it not the less because it knows it to be unattainable¹⁰". This statement is very revealing because it reminds us of one aspect of Rabelais's work analysed by Bakhtin. For the Russian critic Rabelais's books, which have had a decisive influence on the novel, express a clear parody of every type of ideological discourse to the extent that the French author even questions the possibility of conceptualizing anything in language. All language is conventional and false, incapable of recreating the great complexity of reality: "Truth is restored by reducing the lie to an absurdity, but truth itself does not seek words, she is afraid to entangle herself in the word, to soil herself in verbal pathos¹¹".

Similarly Wilde claims that there is no such thing as a universal truth¹² but just one's last mood¹³ and the best work of art is that in which no voice dominates the others: "Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods¹⁴". This explains why for Wilde selfishness is a virtue while unselfishness is a defect. This statement must have shocked his contemporaries, but we think that it was because they were deaf to the plea for freedom which it contained. Wilde considers that unselfish people are always trying to force their own ideas on others, while the selfish man is, in Bakhtin's terms, dialogical, since he recognizes and welcomes variety of type and rejects any voice or mood that seeks to become dominant and exercise its authority. Thus the critic, who is capable of appreciating all forms, will only be interested in those artistic products which have infinite messages to deliver and are open to new insights. He will, on the other hand, disdain those works which allow just one interpretation and the meaning of which is too obvious. In other words, the critic will always reject everything that is monologic. Zhang Longxi is one of the authors that has best described Wilde's liberating approach to criticism and literature: "Wilde's creative criticism...seeks to open the text of an artistic work and its inexhaustible meaning rather than close it once and for all with a seal of authority¹⁵".

This search for freedom explains why for Wilde the perfect State will be a socialist one in which no compulsion or authority will be exercised on the individual. It is true, as some critics have remarked, that he seems to be advocating anarchism rather than socialism, since he defends the idea that the State must give up all ideal of ruling and that the most suitable form of government for the artist is no government at all. But we think that this distinction (socialism/anarchism) hardly matters, that what is really significant is the fact that he believes that only

¹⁰ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", in *The Artist as Critic. Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 405.

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, p. 308.

¹² Oscar Wilde, "The Truth of Masks", *The Artist as Critic. Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann, p. 432.

¹³ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", p. 391.

¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", p. 368.

¹⁵ Zhang Longxi, "The Critical Legacy of Oscar Wilde", in *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde*, ed. Regenia Gagnier, G.K. Hall & Co., New York, 1991, pp. 169-170.

freedom from authority will allow the imagination and society to develop. In this sense he is specially worried about what he calls "popular authority", that is to say, the public trying to dictate to the artist what he must do. And again he uses the word "immoral" to describe such an attitude, because he knows that it will lead to uniformity, which he deplores so much. It is in this context that the statement "the work of art is to dominate the spectator"¹⁶ should be understood. Wilde is not contradicting here what he has said in "The Critic as Artist" about the plurality of meanings to be found in a perfect work of art, but merely pointing out how dangerous it is when the spectator measures an artistic product by an agreed and repressive standard instead of being receptive to the novelty of it: "A temperament capable of receiving, through an imaginative medium, and under imaginative conditions, new and beautiful impressions is the only temperament that can appreciate a work of art"¹⁷.

Like Bakhtin, then, Wilde thinks that man's conformity to the current ideal in art and life will deprive him of his freedom and therefore any dominant ideology must be subverted. As Ellmann has remarked: "It was as essential to disturb complacencies as to convince, or possible more"¹⁸. In life he welcomes disobedience and rebellion and praises the notion of Sin because it arouses man's curiosity and makes him eager to look for new things. In art he celebrates the critical faculty, which despises the past and is always generating new forms. For Wilde all imitation and repetition in morals, life and art is wrong and is disheartened by the fact that many people live by other people's standards and see reality through other people's eyes without ever being conscious of it. This is what happens to a great extent with the public. They are afraid of novelty, they simply want the same stories to be retold repeatedly and the same paintings to be painted again and again. They do not realise that only by breaking the old chains will man be liberated from custom, from monotony of type. Mere repetition reduces man to the level of a machine: "Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name"¹⁹. As a matter of fact, in an age in which there is no critical spirit art does not develop and is confined to the reproduction of formal types. When art becomes impregnated with criticism, it turns into a disturbing and disintegrating force which undermines things as they are and searches for new formal possibilities. Thus only theories that are dangerous, that confront accepted standards of truth, have any true intellectual value.

It is in this context that Wilde's famous statement "Aesthetics are higher than Ethics"²⁰ must be read. The reason for Aesthetics being above Ethics is that the latter simply makes existence possible, whereas the former turns life into something truly enjoyable and liberates man from the tyranny of tradition by producing new forms and encouraging progress, variety and change.

An observation must be made at this point. Apparently there is a big gap between Bakhtin's and Wilde's thinking about the critical faculty, since, whereas for

¹⁶ Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism", p. 279.

¹⁷ Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism", p. 279.

¹⁸ Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, Penguin Books, London, 1988, p. 289.

¹⁹ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", p. 355.

²⁰ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", p. 406.

the Russian critic the novel is the “leading hero”, for the British writer this role is played by criticism. Wilde even uses expressions similar to those we find in Bakhtin’s books: “criticism is always moving on, and the critic is always developing²¹”, “It is to criticism that the future belongs²²” or “It is Criticism that leads us²³”. But, in our opinion, their positions are no so wide apart as they seem, because what is really essential is that for both writers the type of art in the vanguard of artistic development is that which is self-conscious and ever changing. The critic’s main virtue is his inconsistency because he, like the bakhtinian novelist, is always looking for new modes and fresh impressions. And, as happens with the novelistic discourse, criticism infects other spheres of life with its spirit of process and openendedness, awakening the individual into consciousness and creating the intellectual atmosphere of the age. It is criticism that makes man responsive to new possibilities and inculcates in him real apprehension and discernment²⁴. For Wilde society is making a great mistake by teaching people how to remember, but not how to grow. Like, Bakhtin, then, he believes that art and life must be based on experience, knowledge and not on memory. Things can only change when they are liable to personal scrutiny, to new insights. This is precisely what Wilde means when he says that “it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others²⁵”. The critic must overcome the influence of the past and open the work of art to new interpretations. In this sense we totally disagree with Camille Paglia when she claims that Wilde’s “personality” is hard and dominant²⁶. The critic never tries to impose his own ideas on others, but undermines all authoritarian and monologic ideologies which are being forced on him.

Bakhtin and Wilde deliver a liberating and revolutionary message, in which they welcome everything that is progressive and life-enhancing. To a certain extent it could not have been otherwise. Both had experienced the tyranny of authority and the lack of individual freedom. Bakhtin was exiled and silenced by political censorship and persecution for most of his life. Wilde was never forgiven by his society for having challenged bourgeois assumptions about life and art. His “transgressive aesthetic”, as Jonathan Dollimore has called it²⁷, opposed the values considered essential to the survival of the established culture and that had to be punished. But his critical legacy has survived and, as in the case of Bakhtin’s ideas, it speaks not only of culture, art, literature, etc., but of man, whose dialogic, incomplete and ever changing character nobody will ever be able to destroy.

²¹ Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist”, p. 390.

²² Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist”, p. 402.

²³ Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist”, p. 407.

²⁴ It is interesting to point out that already in 1846-7, Ernst Renan, a young French intellectual who was much concerned with the concept of decadence, wrote a book, *Cahiers de jeunesse*, in which he defended the worth of criticism and praised it for being superior to creation. See: Matei Calinescu, *Cinco caras de la modernidad. Modernismo, vanguardia, decadencia, Kitsch, posmodernismo*, Madrid, Tecnos, 1991, pp. 160-1.

²⁵ Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist”, p. 373.

²⁶ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, Penguin, London, 1991, p. 520.

²⁷ Jonathan Dollimore, “Wilde’s Transgressive Aesthetic and Contemporary Cultural Politics”, *Sexual Dissidence*.