"WE MUST RETURN TO THE VOICE": ORAL VALUES AND TRADITIONS IN THE WORKS OF OSCAR WILDE

by

PAUL KINSELLA

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Department of English

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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Abstract

This study examines the literary career of Oscar Wilde as the formation and expression of a sensibility exhibiting highly developed powers of both orality and literacy. In other words, Wilde’s work and life reveal the mind of both a talented writer and a talker par excellence, and this inquiry explores the development and co-existence of the two modes, in particular as they manifest themselves in Wilde’s writing and in his relations with the societies in which he found himself.

Chapter One discusses the balance between Wilde’s talk and his writing as it was experienced by W. B. Yeats, who emerges as a very persistent and perceptive biographer of this aspect of Wilde’s genius. The theoretical framework and terminology developed by Walter J. Ong (1982) is also brought to bear on the discussion as a further illumination of Yeats’s accounts.

Chapter Two presents an outline of some aspects of the history and culture of Ireland which might explain the formation of a dual sensibility such as Wilde’s. In Chapter Three this line of inquiry is extended further into the domestic circumstances in which Wilde grew up, focusing in particular on the influence of his tutor at Trinity, J. P. Mahaffy. A discussion of the links between Wilde and Mahaffy includes consideration of the parallels between their written works, culminating in an interpretation, at the end of the chapter, of the origins and dynamics of Wilde’s essay “The Decay of Lying.”

Chapter Four continues to explore the links between Mahaffy and Wilde, but shifts the focus to their mutual classicism, which also provides a lens through which to view the further development of Wilde’s dual oral/chirographic sensibility at Oxford,
symbolized in the person and the work of Walter Pater. I then offer a reading of "The Critic as Artist" as an expression of Wilde's Oxford literary idealism, expressed through his call to "return to the voice."

From there this study moves to a discussion of Wilde's subsequent life and work in terms of a combined orality and literacy. Chapter Five is devoted to an exploration of the power of the voice and the spoken word in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Chapter Six examines the spoken stories, *Salome*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* through a similar perspective. The Conclusion extends the analysis to Wilde's trial and prison sentence, his last works including *De Profundis*, and his final years as a storyteller in Paris.
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Preface

Oscar Wilde is generous: to those who turn to him for inspiration - critics, theorists, biographers and even declared writers of fiction – he has shown that his life and work lend themselves readily to many forms of interpretation and re-telling. My own case is no exception. I felt lucky, and thankful to Wilde, when a first reading of his critical essays several years ago yielded the essence of a point of view which seemed not yet to have been much explored, and quite convincing to me at that moment, in part no doubt because of my heightened sense of closeness to the particular points of evidence which I had singled out. But since the very ease with which an interpretation first offered itself advised a certain caution, I felt obliged to take an approach which was careful rather than cavalier, and incremental rather than predetermined, when I set about expanding the initial essay to the scope of the present thesis. I was half convinced that along the way I would discover evidence that would either make nonsense of my insights, or show them to have already been thoroughly treated by others.

At this point I think I can suggest that neither has proven to be the case. The argument of my original essay, entitled “Sound and Sensibility in the Critical Works of Oscar Wilde,” and dwelling on Wilde’s idealistic poetics in “The Critic as Artist,” remains largely intact in Chapter Four of this thesis, and the many developments of that argument, both backwards in time through the conditions of Wilde’s nativity and education, and onwards to its further application in significant areas of his life and work, have tended both to verify the strength of its roots, and to support the extension of its branches. Nor has it happened so far, to the best of my knowledge, that any other scholar or scholars have developed the same argument to such a degree.
Nevertheless a number of new perspectives have evolved along the way, from within the work itself and through the contributions of others. For example, the original essay on Wilde’s aesthetic sensitivity to sound did not make use of the terms “orality” and “literacy,” but for the present inquiry I have taken advantage of Walter Ong’s classic work (1982) on the cultural and psychological differences between those conditions. Insofar as my work is derived from theory, it rests on Walter Ong’s distinctions, rather than those of Derrida or subsequent commentators, in part because Ong’s point of view offers such a plausible and suggestive framework through which to view the life and art of Oscar Wilde, and in part because it allows me to respond to another work in the same area, an essay by the Yeats scholar Deirdre Toomey (1994), which invokes Ong’s theory to explore Wilde as an Irish oral storyteller.

For me Toomey’s essay was an encouraging discovery, at a time when I had already gone some way down the same path, and again, so natural and convincing seemed its arguments, that I fancied that a horde of other scholars must by now be engaged in its development. I was almost relieved to discover that in his most recent book-length review of Wilde studies, Ian Small cites Toomey’s essay only as a subset of the trend in the 1990s to an emphasis on Wilde’s Irishness, and questions the provability of her “claim that ‘Ireland possessed the most oral culture in Western Europe’” (Small 56, Toomey 25). I like to think that the discussion of the Irish historical and literary context in Chapter Two of this thesis will answer Small’s question by providing a background for Toomey’s assertion about the Irish, which is also one of my own, although in relation to Wilde himself, I emphasize the urban and educated rather than the rural and folkloric elements of the setting in which he grew up.

The issue of the influence of Wilde’s nationality, though again not one which found a place in my original treatment, is nevertheless addressed at some length both directly and
indirectly in this thesis. I did not set out to support the arguments emphasizing the Irish or "celtic" qualities of Wilde's personality or his work, and in fact I felt somewhat apprehensive about the narrowing potential of such an emphasis, but since my starting point had been a perception of Wilde as uniquely tuned to the world of speech and sound, I felt compelled to investigate the origins of these aspects of his sensibility. In doing so I came to the conclusion that Wilde's national background and upbringing had permeated his life and work to a greater extent than I had imagined, and endowed him too with much rebellious instinct, although perhaps it is not so much Wilde the Irish nationalist who emerges from these pages as Wilde the inheritor of an Irish cultural tradition, with its own distinct balance of orality and literacy – and the rebellious connotations thereof.

So although this work lends support to some developments in Wilde studies, it also differs, at least in emphasis, from others. To take another example, although a critical tradition already exists around Wilde's perception of himself as a poet, beginning at least as far back as Vincent O'Sullivan's record of his friendship with the author, and finding recent expression in the Introduction to the first volume of the Oxford English Texts Complete Works of Oscar Wilde; Poetry and Poems in Prose (2000), my research has led me to an even more intensified view of Wilde's poetic idealism as one of the most dynamic principles of his behaviour and his writing. While sometimes supporting this assertion with biographical information, I also trace the evidence of its expression in his written work, and this leads me to somewhat new interpretations of several texts, as when I read "The Decay of Lying" as a delayed response to the critics of Wilde's 1881 book of poems – an emphasis which differs from but does not negate Ellmann's description of that essay as largely a riposte to Whistler's accusations of plagiarism.
One of my central assertions is that Wilde's sense of poetry is strongly connected to his sense of orality or the spoken word, and that he expressed a theory, and practised a politics, of both. In marking this connection I have been drawn to an exploration of the influence of his Trinity tutor Mahaffy, to whom I assign a larger role than any I have seen described in earlier studies, although I am very much in debt to Stanford and McDowell (1971) and Davis Coakley (1994), for their confident indications of the path to follow on this topic. Wilde's relations with Mahaffy represent one area of the subject which I feel sure must be meriting the serious attention of other scholars, since it seems to me to have remained remarkably under-described up to this point, perhaps because of the rather poor impression left by Mahaffy's politics later in life, or simply because studies of Wilde tend to gravitate towards the period of his great success and his catastrophe, by which time he had little apparent connection with his old tutor.

This study, by contrast, places the Wilde of the late 1880s rather than the Wilde of 1895 at the centre of its consideration, viewing the author of "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist" at a crucial moment in his upward progress; a moment of renewed energy and combativeness, when he is loyal still to his old ideals of poetry but engaged in the process of giving them a new theoretical expression which reflects the dual dynamics of a sensibility strongly allied to both the spoken and the written word. I observe Wilde's increasing awareness that the weights and balances of his own genius are placing him in opposition to the cultural conditions of his day, and therefore I have placed those backward glances towards Ireland and classical Greece, in which he epitomizes that awareness, at the heart of my readings of his critical works.

I have not, however, neglected subsequent developments in Wilde's career, and in later chapters I have demonstrated ways that the perceptions which I have developed and supported...
may be used to engender new interpretations of some of his best-known texts, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Salome*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Chapter One, which is devoted almost entirely to an examination of Yeats’s writings on Wilde, may, like the second chapter on the Irish historical context, seem rather carefully introductory, but I believe that both will be found useful in lending weight to the interpretations which follow later: so that while this material constitutes a kind of introduction, it forms at the same time part of my substantive argument.

Yeats’s writings in particular represent one of the most influential primary sources through which Wilde has been viewed. When I studied them I was surprised by the extent to which they revealed a highly consistent way of seeing, or rather hearing, his subject. Among the many who remembered Wilde as a greater genius of the spoken than of the written word, Yeats is perhaps the one who worked hardest to articulate that awareness, and consequently I acknowledge him not only as a primary but also as a significant theoretical source in this thesis, and in that respect even as a kind of predecessor of Walter Ong.

Yeats’s perception of Wilde was also featured in Toomey’s article, and I see it recognized again in one of Thomas Wright’s prefaces to his recent edition of Wilde’s spoken stories (November 2000). The appearance of this attractively packaged work, though in a popular rather than a scholarly edition, and of other smaller signs, such as a recent review of the new edition of Wilde’s collected letters which describes them as bringing us “within earshot” of his conversation (*Globe and Mail*, 18 August 2001), may herald an increasing revival of interest in Oscar Wilde as a talker. In that case, I hope that this thesis can offer a supplement or better yet a stimulant to such interest; and that while rooted in respect for the
value of textual evidence, it may also suggest a step forward in our understanding of Wilde as an artist in the evanescent medium of the spoken word.

A Note on Sources and Citations

For most of Wilde’s written works, including The Picture of Dorian Gray, “The Decay of Lying,” and The Importance of Being Earnest, the page numbers cited are from The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde (Collins, 1994, paperback edition), abbreviated as CW. For “The Critic as Artist,” however, and for some of the associated criticism referred to in Chapter Four in particular, the page numbers cited are from The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde, ed. Richard Ellmann (1982, paperback edition), abbreviated as AC.

Abbreviations used for the works of W. B. Yeats are AB (Autobiographies, 1926), UP (Uncollected Prose, 1970), CP (Collected Poems, 1956), CW (Collected Works, 1989). Other abbreviations to be found in this text are ML, for More Letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (1986), and TT for Table Talk: Spoken Stories of Oscar Wilde, ed. Thomas Wright (2000). Occasionally, for the convenience of the reader, I have given full publication information in the notes at the end of the chapters, as well as in the Works Consulted.

For illustrations I have drawn mainly on the work of Harry Clarke (1889-1931), making my own use of images which, admittedly, were not designed by the artist in connection with Oscar Wilde, but which I hope can seem both appropriate and fresh in the present context.
“One form of success had gone; he was no longer the lion of the season and he had not discovered his gift for writing comedy…”

Reproduced from The History of a Great House: with Drawings by the Late Harry Clarke
Chapter One: Yeats on Wilde

I. “When his writing was the mirror of his speech.”

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side

What stalked through the Post Office?


W.B. Yeats aired this question in 1938, dwelling in verse on the invocation of mythological power with which Pearse had opened the Irish Revolution in Easter 1916. To revisit such a moment of the rebel insurrection was appropriate to the self-examination of Yeats’s later years, for it had been characteristic of his literary temperament to heighten, or entirely create, a mythopoeic quality in whatever it touched, and his own poetry had played one of the key roles in the enshrinement of the legends of the revolution, as when his bardic instinct had achieved one of its most intensified expressions in the poem “Easter 1916” (CP 177). In Yeats’s prose the myth-making effect is perhaps less intended, but clearly also at work, in part due to the dignified diction and lofty intonation of his sentences; and it is in Yeats’s prose that we find the description of a meeting which took place fifty years before the lines above were written, a meeting which has slowly come to be seen as representing another kind of significant moment in the history of his country, although none of the gods and warriors of Irish mythology were noted as present, or explicitly invoked. When Oscar Wilde invited Willie Yeats to visit him in December of 1888, the setting - Wilde’s house in London - though decorative, was plainly terrestrial, and the pretext - Christmas dinner - simply gastronomical, but the intellectual fare of the occasion, as recorded by Yeats in Autobiographies (1926) has provided, over time, the stuff of much critical redigestion, not only for its apparent influence on the development of Yeats’s own theories, but most recently for what it reveals of the complex personality and
thought of his host.

The entry of this occasion into the annals of Irish cultural mythology has been due not only to the characteristic tone of Yeats's prose, and the immensity of the reputation which accompanies it, but also to certain aspects of the increasingly resurgent critical interest in Wilde, his work, and his fate. In particular, a number of scholars have recently advocated what might be called the Celtic theory of the occasion; one which seeks overall to re-establish the sources of Wilde's temperament and politics in an Irish context.\(^1\) It is not my intention to refute such arguments, which on the whole have enhanced our consciousness of the part played by national sympathy and influence in Wilde's composition, in both the literary and personal senses of that word; but I will attempt to re-frame some of their evidence within a consideration of the special balance between orality and literacy which to me has come to seem the most salient characteristic of Wilde's genius, and which in my opinion offers a more convincing theoretical framework through which to view the man and his work.

To begin with, let us look in more detail at Yeats's description of their Christmas meeting. The first words of Wilde's which he quotes are: "We Irish are too poetical to be poets. We are a nation of brilliant failures, but we are the greatest talkers since the Greeks" (\textit{AB} 166-7). This pronouncement, understandably, has often been cited in support of those arguments for Wilde's Hibernicism which have been enriched and elaborated in recent years, and indeed such a reading can be maintained at more than one level, from Wilde's clear self-identification as Irish in the opening phrase, to the evocation of the well-known stereotype of the nation as possessing the gift of speech,\(^2\) to the less obvious hint of its historical consciousness of defeat (perhaps with particular reference to Anglo-Irish patriots) in the term "brilliant failures,"\(^3\) and to that other Hibernian trope, not well-known outside the country, of the Irish as being in many
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ways comparable to the Greeks, (and the English, by implication, to Imperial Romans). At least a little of Wilde's capacity to "sum up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram" (CW 913) is already evident here, but to excavate the richness of its Irish context is yet to view only one side of a statement which can reveal at least two more aspects of Wilde's self-awareness. Linking as it does his Irishness to his sense of poetry and orality, Wilde's comment resembles a *mis-en-abîme* of the first chapters of this thesis, and its terms of reference can also be read as a key to the fuller interpretation of "The Decay of Lying" which occupies the latter part of Chapter Three. For those reasons, and also because I have not seen a thorough account of Yeats's preoccupation with Wilde's orality offered elsewhere, I will venture an extended meditation on this comment, and on Yeats's account of Wilde as a whole, in some detail in the following pages, although that should not be taken to mean that the arguments of my thesis are dependent in any crucial way on Yeats's recollection and judgment alone - but rather just that they may be enhanced through my use of Yeats's position as both a memoirist and an analyst of Wilde's expression.

It is instructive to re-examine Wilde's remark within the context in which his auditor places it. Stepping back and widening our angle of view a little, we see that Yeats has prefaced Wilde's quotation as follows: "He commended and dispraised himself during dinner by attributing characteristics like his own to his country" (166). We cannot know with certainty whether we owe this insight to Yeats's sagacity alone or to some further (unrecorded) self-confession by his subject; but it is perhaps advisable to reserve judgment on the two possibilities while continuing our examination of this account. What then does Wilde's remark about "We Irish" say about other aspects of himself? As we shall see later, we can find in it a subtext which tells us about Wilde's professional life, about his (struggling) relationship with
writing, his desire to be a successful writer - not merely a "brilliant failure" - and about his
dissatisfaction with the critics who greeted his poetry with attacks which could be
(euphemistically) described as calling it "too poetical." Even without Yeats's careful
bracketing, which partially conceals the fact that Wilde's proposition is being retailed to us by a
fellow-Irishman whose own cultural nationalism could conceivably have coloured his account,
the alternative reading slightly weakens the case for Wilde's Irishness, reminding us as it does
that Wilde's response to disappointments in his ambition to succeed in English society was
sometimes to distance himself from it: he would later threaten to become a French citizen,
when the English censor banned the production of Salome (Ellmann 351-2). And also on the
skeptical side of the argument we must bear in mind Wilde's attunement to his listener: he may
have instinctively joined Yeats in feeling Irish at that moment, "in honor of the occasion."
Yeats remarks further on that Wilde "flattered the intellect of every man he liked" (167), and
also compared Yeats's art of storytelling to Homer's, so it is easy to imagine him flattering the
younger poet by an association with quixotic brilliance, Greek fluency, and co-nationality with
his host.

We have only begun to contextualize Wilde's statement within Yeats's overall account,
but it is already beginning to appear more problematic as a bolster to the argument for an Irish
essentialism on his part. If, however, we approach it from another perspective, one in which we
take the word "talkers" rather than "Irish" as the key term, we will find that we can develop an
analysis which offers not only a fuller interpretation of the pronouncement itself, but which also
demonstrates it as part of a pattern woven into Yeats's overall account of their meeting, a
pattern which, to the credit of Yeats's perspicuity, repeats itself throughout Wilde's life and
work. And as suggested earlier, to examine the statement for what it tells us about the
relationship between orality and literacy in Wilde's sensibility will not ultimately overturn the arguments for his Irishness, but rather will place them on a broader foundation; one on which the construction of his "Englishness," his "Frenchness," and even his "Greekness" may also be productively examined. Orality is beyond nationality; it may be said to be one of the lost conditions of Western culture, although it is preserved in residual form in some geographic areas, particularly Ireland,\textsuperscript{6} and is yearned for in the hearts of such poets as are uncomfortable with the chirographic dispensation.\textsuperscript{7} That Wilde recognized the trans-national character of the oral sympathy is evident in his connection of the Irish to the ancient Greeks, about whose oral culture he will theorize more extensively in "The Critic as Artist": it is evident also in his frequent discussion of sound values in the work of English poets; and his interest in the music of French Symbolist language.

A useful result of framing a discussion of Wilde in terms of orality and literacy, therefore, is that it will allow us to examine the wide range of his identity and the many forms of his creativity in a vocabulary which remains consistent throughout. Thus Wilde's Irish background and education, his subsequent lives in England and France, and the wide variety of his written works may all be examined in terms of the oral/chirographic relations which they reveal. The significance of Wilde's Irish origins is not lost in such a study, since it can show that the milieu from which Wilde emerged occupies a range on the oral/chirographic spectrum which is similar to his own, and similar to that which he manifested in his work; even when that work makes no specific reference to his origins; but by the same token this study tends to show how much more Wilde's Irishness expressed itself in the politics of orality than in the politics of nationality.

A further implication of this approach is the conception of an alternative Irish historical
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narrative centred on the formation of an oral/chirographic relationship which differed from that developed in England and other countries. In such a narrative Wilde could occupy a climactic position, rather as Pearse is enshrined as the apotheosis of a nationalist narrative. And were it not that Wilde’s social and sexual disgrace were so much less tractable to mythmaking in the early twentieth century, Yeats might even have served him in his prose as he does Pearse in his poetry. As it is, Yeats apotheosized Pearse in his poetry, but anthropologized Wilde in his prose.

The shift to an oral/chirographic emphasis can have its effect on other reputations, too. In the nationalist narrative the figure of J.P. Mahaffy, Wilde’s tutor at Trinity, has quite deservedly been left in the dust, mainly because his determined devotion to an imperialist ideal, and his notoriously snooty rejection of “a man called Pearse” as a speaker at the College, placed him firmly on the wrong side of subsequent Irish history; but in broader or perhaps the broadest terms, when all of the cultural factors which went towards the imagining of Ireland as a distinct society are taken into account, Mahaffy might be given a place as one who contributed to that cultural distinctness, not merely by his frequent acknowledgments of the high quality of the art of conversation in Ireland, but also by his insistent advocacy of related oral values, even in an often unsympathetic academic environment. His legacy of oral politics can be understood as one of the elements of Wilde’s Irishness, and his art of conversation as one of the tools refashioned by Wilde for the conquest of English society.

Once again, this thesis does not propose to establish Wilde as a phenomenon of oral culture only; its purpose rather is to identify the unique position which Wilde and his work can be said to occupy on an imaginary spectrum of orality and literacy. To this end it might be helpful to conceive, at the oral end of such a spectrum, a fluent but illiterate Irish storyteller, or
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perhaps an early Greek figure such as "blind Homer"; and at the other end, someone like the Victorian author Thomas Carlyle, who advocated silence in personal life, but whose typographic output ran to at least thirty volumes. Although this thesis will emphasize the oral rather than the literate elements of Wilde’s sensibility, it will do so bearing in mind that what makes his case so unusual, what distinguishes him from both of the examples on the spectrum cited above, is partly the very wide band over which his genius may be seen to range on such a spectrum.

To return then to his statement to Yeats: what does it tell us about Wilde “commend[ing] and disprais[ing] himself, by attributing characteristics like his own to his country”? We have already hinted that a degree of disillusionment about some aspects of his authorial career may underlie the phrase “brilliant failures.” As Yeats again notes further on: “One form of success had gone; he was no more the lion of the season and he had not discovered his gift for writing comedy...” (168). Yeats saw social success as the “one form” which Wilde had experienced by then, suggesting he was aware of the unenthusiastic critical reception given to Wilde’s early writings. The publicity surrounding Wilde’s advocacy of aestheticism had reached its peak several years before, and Wilde may have begun to worry that his captivating gift of speech was not the stuff on which solid reputations were founded in English society. A “brilliant failure,” therefore, might refer to someone who was dazzling his relatively small audience in the transient evanescent world of talk, but who felt eluded still by the more substantial success of an established author. Yet while desirous of success in English society on almost any terms, Wilde was developing modes of defiance and mockery towards it, of which putting on an Irish attitude from time to time was one. Another more extensive mode was the elaboration of a defence of oral values, and attacks on English pedantry and literal-
mindedness. In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde will have Gilbert insist that “to talk about a thing is more difficult than to do it,” and it is no co-incidence that after dinner on this occasion he would read aloud to Yeats from the proofs of “The Decay of Lying,” which, while not mentioning the Irish, is very much of an encomium for the oral values which he had just attributed to them.

Both Wilde’s remark, and Yeats’s comment on it, are couched throughout in binary terms, not all of them in opposition. Yeats, apparently taking his cue from the dualities which Wilde offers, hears him “commending” and “dispraising” himself, by “associating characteristics like his own” “with his country.” Wilde, as quoted by Yeats, infuses his binary terms with a more complex irony, undermining the association of talk with failure by endowing both with laudatory modifiers (“brilliant,” and “greatest”), and in the phrase “too poetical to be poets” enigmatically suggesting at least two differing conceptions of the nature of poetry. Given the context, the phrase may be taken to mean too poetical in some Irish sense to be poets in some English sense, but I would argue against reducing that to meaning “too Irish to be English,” not least because that would exclude those English poets whose expression also represented an opposition to dominant cultural values. It is more likely to have contained a bitter reference, not to English poets, but to certain English critics of his own poetry, who had humiliated him in 1881, and to whom “The Decay of Lying” is a delayed riposte, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three. If, however, we accept that Wilde intends to say “too poetical [in a certain Irish sense] to be poets [in a certain English sense]” and then rather than reduce the definition to national terms, we enlarge it to oral and chirographic terms, we have created a frame in which we can view all of the binaries above – Wilde and Ireland, Ireland and England, talk and failure, talk and writing, poetry and poeticality – and more, including Wilde’s own
literary theory and practice; for a part of what his ironic tone conveys is a set of questions of our understanding of literature, questions which he will particularly try to answer in his critical essays.

But what exactly does Wilde mean when he speaks of himself and the Irish being "too poetical"? Is there any evidence to suggest that he is using "poetical" as a term to designate oral values, apart from its proximity to "brilliant failures," and "greatest talkers since the Greeks" in the sentence which followed? There is at least indirect evidence of a documentary kind. During his tenure as Chair of Poetry at Oxford, Matthew Arnold gave a series of lectures which were subsequently published with the title *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). After noting that "one has to carry in mind Caesar's remark, that the Druids... partly from a desire to discipline the memory of their pupils, committed nothing to writing" (47), in the course of discussing the dates of certain Celtic documents Arnold continues:

The apparatus of technical terms of poetry, again, and the elaborate poetical organization which we find, both in Wales and Ireland, existing from the very commencement of the medieval literary period in each... indicates surely, in these Celtic peoples, the clear and persistent tradition of an older poetical period of great development, and almost irresistibly connects itself in one's mind with the elaborate Druidic discipline which Caesar mentions (49).

Here Arnold has clearly associated the Celtic peoples with the practice of an oral tradition, and the practice of an oral tradition with "elaborate poetical organization" and a "poetical period of great development." In the light of this, and of the fact that Wilde in his writings frequently invokes and echoes much of Arnold, and indeed saw himself in some ways
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as Arnold’s successor, it seems reasonable to infer the influence of Arnold’s views, expressed above, on Wilde’s view as expressed to Yeats; and that Wilde is using the phrase “too poetical,” as a somewhat bitter translation of Arnold’s praise for the highly developed literary techniques of the Celts, which, like Arnold, Wilde has associated with oral skills - “the greatest talkers since the Greeks.”

To accept the plausibility of this derivation of Wilde’s statement carries certain implications for the discussion of Wilde’s orality as well as his Irishness, however. It indicates, for example, that what we are calling Wilde’s orality is not such in the merest sense, that is, it is not merely in his case the repetition or variation of remarks or statements already present in an oral tradition to which he has access. It suggests that at least some of his recorded sayings are distilled by him from textual sources, such as Arnold’s *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, (above). In other words Wilde’s orality is of a literate kind, and while its roots may be traced to Ireland, the material on which it draws can often be found in his education and subsequent reading.

A counter-argument which might be suggested, however, is that Wilde may have heard, or heard of, rather than read, Arnold’s position in this and other works. When, for example, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* was published in 1867, it merely added fuel to the fire of an already ardent interest in the subject in Irish cultural circles such as that of Oscar’s parents, Sir William and Lady Wilde, and indeed Arnold offers acknowledgment by name to scholars of that circle such as Petrie, and Whitley Stokes (43, 49). Although Oscar would have been turning thirteen in October of that year, and was spending much of his time away as a boarder at Portora Royal School, it is quite likely that he would have overheard some of the earlier discussions at his parents’ house in Merrion Square - a milieu whose influence we shall discuss
in more detail shortly. Nor is it impossible that Wilde would have received some of the imprint of Arnold’s work aurally through lectures or conversations later at Trinity or at Oxford, and indeed the degree to which those institutions replicated the conditions of an oral culture in their effect on Wilde will also be explored in this thesis. The question raised by these possibilities is, to what extent are Wilde’s cognitive powers, including the retention in his memory of the contents of the works of other authors, founded on aural rather than textual experience? This is a question which will never be answered definitively in terms of fractions or percentile values, but I will demonstrate that it is possible to argue, from the available evidence of his life and work, that Wilde’s sensibility was highly receptive to both modes of inculcation. On the issue at hand, that of the medium of the transmission of influence from Arnold’s statement to that which Wilde made to Yeats, I am inclined to argue that although Wilde’s upbringing would almost certainly have provided him with a “deep background” sense of Arnold’s thinking on Irish culture, the specificity of Wilde’s use of the word “poetical” in relation to Arnold’s here, points to a familiarity with the source in its textual form. Francis Bacon once observed that “reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man” (444), but in Wilde the conditions overlap, and are cross-fertilized; in this instance his speech is imbued with its characteristic qualities of literacy and depth by the exactitude of the echoes of his reading which are present.

The other implication of Wilde’s transposition of Arnoldian terms here is that it shows that he may have been conceiving his Irishness partly through them. He would not have been the first to do so: On the Study of Celtic Literature, in spite of its patronizing touches and its being written by an Englishman, had immediately become a core text of the cultural nationalism of his parents’ generation. In other words Wilde’s sense of Irishness was a
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composite, in which an intellectual construction was added to an emotion more or less deeply felt. Ireland, moreover, was a subject to be examined in intellectual terms as well as a cause to be spurned or espoused. "The Irish Question," as it was called, was a constant theme in English politics in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As a prizewinning graduate of Oxford and subsequently a public figure as the "professor" of aesthetics, in other words in his English roles as a member of the intellectual elite and a cultural missionary, Wilde would have entertained the notion of his own Irishness within a complex set of perspectives, not all of them, perhaps, dictated by sentimental attachment. Furthermore, the Irish renown for fluency of speech and poetic facility had been established over the centuries by English writers and commentators as much as by the Irish themselves, and in touching on this renown Wilde is not departing from the tradition of English observation dating back at least to Sir Philip Sidney and reinforced in the nineteenth century by authors such as Thackeray and Trollope, as well as by theorists like Arnold and, before him, French and German Celtic scholars.12 This rather complicates the voice of his Irishness: indeed it is an Anglicized Wilde who is embracing Yeats and himself in the phrase "we Irish" here.

At this point we have interpreted Wilde's statement to Yeats in a way which draws attention away from its value to nationalist positions and on to its broader significance as an indicator of Wilde's oral sensibility. While we argue that this oral sensibility is in itself a testament to his Irishness, and as we shall see in due course, the principal elements of its formation are to be found in Wilde's upbringing and experience in his native country, we maintain that ultimately Wilde is not alone Irish, but that his "voice", which reflects English and Continental influence and distills much reading, represents an extraordinary synthesis of oral and literate culture. His genius was sufficient to bridge the dichotomy between the
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instinctual drive to speak beautifully and be enchanted by what we hear, and the more complex demands of print culture with its aggregative imperatives towards documentation. This is a dichotomy which, in the case of the relationship between Ireland and England, to some extent fell, and to some extent was projected, along national lines, but which existed and could be felt within every culture which was experiencing the ongoing shift from oral to chirographic conditions. Wilde embodied the tension, and for a while exemplified the solution, to the conflict between these conditions. He could and did produce marvellous work as a writer, but he was always more comfortable on the oral side of the synthesis, as a supremely literate talker, and in the last years of his life he gave up literary work entirely and lived, as best he could, off those who still cared to listen to him.

Wilde said of a character in Dorian Gray that “like all people who try to exhaust a subject, he exhausted his listeners” (CW 41). The word “listeners” suggests that he intended the warning for an oral context, but at the risk of demonstrating its validity for chirographic conditions also, we must pursue the elucidation of his statement to Yeats a little more, in terms of its performative aspects, and in the further terms of Yeats’s overall account of Wilde.

In the first place its citation by Yeats underlines his assertion of Wilde’s oral gifts, offering as it does one of many examples of how frequently Wilde’s talk struck his listeners as being memorable, and inspired a compulsion in them not only to repeat his eloquence aloud to others but also to record a more lasting (written) impression of the fleeting performance. Yeats’s record in this instance is one of numerous such accounts; as Ellmann has aptly noted: "Many a dull chronicle, as in life many a dull table, was posthumously enlivened by this boulevardier" (Ellmann, intro., xiii). The peculiarly literate quality of Wilde’s speech (which as we shall see was also noted by Yeats), its perfect grammatical form and deliberate enunciation, may have
contributed to this desire in others to transpose it as whole and entire as possible into a medium where it already seemed partly to belong; and yet there remained, evidently, a kind of superior magic in hearing it spoken, as so many of the recorders testify that the effect of Wilde's talk was to them greater than the writing of it could reveal. Insofar also as they attempted to reproduce it as accurately as possible, by transcription as well as by word of mouth, his "writings" may be said to extend far beyond the works to which his name is attached: "Wilde" was spoken and written by many others, his utterance undergoing a kind of communal circulation more characteristic of oral than of written culture.

It is an axiom of post-modern theories that writing to some extent blocks and distorts the very perception which it purports to represent. (Wilde would have agreed, at least in relation to the claims of so-called realism in literature.) Viewed in a binary relationship with speech, however, writing often embodies a documentary urge which implies an orientation, however delusory, towards accuracy and exactitude. Speech is less constrained, partly due to the speed of its production, and its operation in a context where the audience is, by definition, present to listen. Speech can presume upon the reaction of the listener because that reaction is being registered as it occurs, and so the speaker may take the liberty, based upon tacit consent, to extemporize, to modulate, to exaggerate. Wilde's remark to Yeats is a case in point. It is a defence, not only of the Irish, but of poetry as Wilde understood it, a poetry based on oral rather than chirographic values; and it is one of the many instances in which Wilde leans towards a theory which would uphold them. It certainly performs oral values, being keyed to the identity and character of the audience in situ, adapted to the community of nation shared by speaker and listener on this occasion (Wilde was more likely to join the English community, when addressing it, in print), and unstinting in its hyperbole: "poetical," "brilliant," "greatest ... since
the Greeks." It is rhetorically hot. In contrast to the cooler language of empirical research, Wilde's remark embodies the shared sense of truth of an oral community which had developed and cherished its own version of history; a passionate alternative, necessarily, to the official English line.\(^\text{13}\) (It might also be worth taking cognizance of the native Irish mistrust of written documentation, since it had so often been used as the weapon whereby the invader had dispossessed them of land and title.)

Finally, we will take leave of Wilde's remark to Yeats through consideration of its context in Yeats's overall account of Wilde in *Autobiographies*. We have seen Yeats's bracketing opinion that Wilde was talking more about himself than about his country, and a further examination of his record of their meeting would seem to lend support to our shift to an interpretation based more on orality than nationality. In the process of introducing his subject Yeats mentions that Wilde "had reviewed my book and ... praised [it] without qualification; and what was worth more than any review he had talked about it" (165-6). This shows that Yeats was already aware of Wilde's prowess as a conversationalist in those circles of social and literary influence which could be important to the success of a young author's work. It is soon followed by the direct statement to which we have devoted our discussion so far, and which is, as we have demonstrated, predicated on oral values. The sentence following that begins: "Then immediately after dinner he read me from the proofs of *The Decay of Lying...*" In other words, Wilde presents his essay to Yeats through the medium of his voice, an oral performance which is mirrored by the principal character of the essay's dialogue (Vivian), who reads his own arguments aloud to his partner Cyril from an article which he is supposed to have written. This essay/article, as its title broadly hints, lends itself readily to interpretation as a defense of oral cultural values. In its sly championship of historical writing as fiction rather than fact ("...the
works of our own Carlyle, whose *French Revolution* is one of the most fascinating historical novels ever written" (*CW*980) - note the Britishness of Wilde’s “our” here) and its call for a heterodox set of values for literature and art, it cherishes characteristically oral traits such as imaginative recreation and exaggeration, and mocks nineteenth-century tendencies towards realism - towards, in other words, documentary, empirical, and chirographic values.

Once we realize that a defence of oral cultural values is present in both Wilde's speech and his "reading" to Yeats, we find ourselves beginning to recognize the fundamental coherency of Yeats's report of the occasion. This recognition is dramatically enhanced when we come to consider Yeats’s response to Wilde’s reading:

...And when he came to the sentence, “Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterizes modern thought, but Hamlet invented it. The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy”, I said, “Why do you change ‘sad’ to ‘melancholy’? He replied that he wanted a full sound at the close of his sentence, and I thought it no excuse and an example of the vague impressiveness that spoilt his writing for me. Only when he spoke, or when his writing was the mirror of his speech, or in some simple fairy tale, had he words exact enough to hold a subtle ear. (167)

This critique by Yeats of another major figure would be significant under almost any circumstances: how much more so when it is expressed in the very terms in which we are attempting to establish our own analysis of Wilde! Our first observation on it, however, is to note how it confirms what we have exposed as the central architecture of Yeats’s report on the occasion, an architecture which was clearly designed to emphasize the orality of Wilde’s literary culture, but whose outlines have been obscured by the emphasis of recent critics on the
Irish aspect of the statement which we have discussed earlier.

One exception to such critics is Deirdre Toomey, whose discussion of Wilde and Yeats in her wide-ranging and informative article, "The Story-Teller at Fault: Oscar Wilde and Irish Orality," places the emphasis of Yeats's overall perception of Wilde squarely where it belongs, on his skill and prowess as a talker. The contents of the article are worth summarizing, but for the moment it is more useful to select a sentence which is relevant to the critique of Wilde's writing which we have just quoted: "Yeats's privileging of the oral over the written does not indicate hostility or envy: Yeats admired Wilde as a man and was almost incapable of literary envy" (25). Still, Yeats's charge is not a slight one: he accuses Wilde of favouring sound over sense, and thereby settling for a "vague impressiveness" in his written work. We see that this disparagement has been craftily prepared when we take into account Yeats's earlier notation to the effect that Wilde's statements about the Irish really referred to himself, suggesting that Wilde has already indirectly admitted such propensities. And indeed, while rather severely calling it "no excuse," this is the ground on which he has Wilde choose to defend himself in saying, "that he wanted a full sound at the close of his sentence." At the time of Yeats's writing (pre-1926), he is unlikely to have been aware of Milman Parry's contemporary but as yet unpublished research into the composition of oral epic poetry, which established "the dependence of the choice of words and word-forms on the hexameter line" (Ong 21); in other words the dominance of pattern over other elements, such as vocabulary, in the poetics of orality. Wilde's modulation from "sad" to "melancholy" to achieve "a full sound at the close of his sentence" is a striking example of such poetics, which, as we shall see, were not merely instinctive on his part, but were (somewhat incompletely) theorized by him throughout his career. Yeats does not seem to recognize ("no excuse") that inexactitude - "a vague
impressiveness" - might be one of the defects of Wilde's oral virtues. Rather he places these in a separate category, one which, interestingly, is made to encompass both speech and writing:

"Only when he spoke, or when his writing was the mirror of his speech, or in some simple fairy tale, had he words exact enough to hold a subtle ear." Here Yeats's main line of division is not exactly between Wilde's speech and his writing, but between an orality which includes both speech and that writing which it most resembles, and then the remainder of Wilde's writing, to which is attributed the term "vague impressiveness." Yeats shows his awareness of Wilde's diglossia, the dual habitation of his talent in speech and writing, yet he identifies the oral element of both as being superior, and, in a curious transposition of the Baconian term, associates it with the accuracy which he demands, and which is normally attributed to chirographic discipline. Speech, oddly enough, is what makes Wilde "an exact man" for Yeats.

At this point I have opened a number of themes and considerations, including Wilde's sense of poetry and of Irishness, the balance of orality and literacy in the composition of his sensibility, the presence of such elements in "The Decay of Lying," and the perspectives on all of these to be found in Yeats's recollections. Now the manner in which I will proceed is first by widening the circle of Yeats's analysis, in the second part of this chapter, to include those other occasions on which he offers his thoughts on Wilde. I am choosing to stay with Yeats's perspectives for the time being, because of all those who recollected his subject, he is the one who most persistently attempts to understand the phenomenon of Wilde the talker, and in particular the relationship between Wilde's talk and his writing, which is one of the central concerns of this study. In that sense indeed this analysis could be read as an attempt to continue Yeats's eloquent work on Wilde, with the addition of some subsequent perspectives such as
those of Walter Ong, and the further development of my own observations.

Or perhaps it could be said that both Yeats and I are responding in different times and different ways to a challenge implicitly offered by Wilde himself, when, near the conclusion of “The Decay of Lying” he faulted the anthropologists of his time for failing to identify society’s first liar, for “Whatever was his name or race, he certainly was the true founder of social intercourse” (CW 1081). Yeats focused wisely instead on the name and race of the First Liar’s most illustrious descendant, “the greatest talker of his time,” and in this I follow his lead; but where we will see Yeats anthropologizing Wilde by linking him to the Anglo-Irish of the eighteenth century, I will attempt to describe Wilde as cast in the mold of Irish culture as a whole, insofar as that is epitomized by its unique balance of orality and literacy.

In order to bring at least a minimum of evidence to bear on this idea, I will devote the chapter following this one to a recounting of some of the historical circumstances of Ireland which are pertinent to a reading of Wilde and to his work in terms of orality and literacy. I will reduce the unwieldiness of this task by focusing mainly on a single key document in the history of how the Irish people have been perceived by others (as well as by themselves), namely Edmund Spenser’s View of the Present State of Ireland (1596). Making use of Spenser’s text to shed light on the image of the poet both in Ireland and in England – an image which is relevant to Wilde’s occupation of the role much later - I will demonstrate also how reverberations from Spenser can still be heard in the works of Mahaffy and of Wilde almost three centuries later.

The consideration of Irish history introduces a chronological order, which this study then continues to follow in its examination of Wilde’s life and his work. Such an arrangement is particularly suited to my line of argument, which sets out to confirm the continuity of Wilde’s thought from inherited traditions, and which lays stress on the extended influence of...
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Mahaffy, from its possible origin in Wilde’s childhood to its ongoing projection into Wilde’s life in England. An examination of Mahaffy’s role also leads naturally into the fuller discussion of “The Decay of Lying” which was promised in my Introduction, and which will now be found at the end of Chapter Three.

The principal focus of Chapter Four is “The Critic as Artist,” which is also of central importance to this thesis, in part because it helps to balance the picture of Wilde’s Irishness which has developed earlier, by revealing the extent of his artistic allegiance to other oral traditions, in particular those which were represented in the atmosphere of Oxford, and in his imagining of classical aesthetics. When addressing an English audience, Wilde theorized an alternative balance of orality and literacy based not on the Irish but on the Greeks.

Under the influence of the French symbolists, Wilde’s theory of orality modulates to a theory of musicality, and in Chapter Five I examine The Picture of Dorian Gray for its frequent representations of this theme. In Chapter Six, which is also my final chapter, I argue that this particular branch of Wilde’s aesthetics reaches its climactic development in Salome, but that the play also prefigures its abandonment in favour of the epigrammatic modes of the society comedies. Even these, however, are not without their echoes of Wilde’s thoughts on the subject, and I demonstrate how, in The Important of Being Earnest in particular, tensions between oral and chirographic forces remain dramatically at play. In conclusion I suggest that Wilde’s underlying idealism about the spoken word continued to reveal itself in the last years of his life, and that he died in some respects an Irish rebel, but more importantly an international oral poet.
"It is wonderful, comma, sir, comma, how rare a quality good humor is in life, full stop. We meet with very few good-humored men, full stop."

“A Man Talking with Perfect Sentences” Repd. From The New Yorker 75th Anniversary Cartoon Collection, p.266.
II. "A Man Talking With Perfect Sentences"

To begin again, therefore, at Christmas of 1888, Yeats's record of this occasion is far from being the only place in his writings where he puts forward this thesis of the disparity of different elements in Wilde and his work. In relation to Wilde’s gift of storytelling, which is the focus of her article, Deirdre Toomey remarks on another instance of Yeats’s meditations on this theme:

And later, in ‘The Tragic Generation’, he recalls the oral version of Wilde's story ‘The Doer of Good’, which Wilde called ‘the best short story in the world’... Yeats concludes with heroic disparagement: ‘Wilde published that story a little later, but spoiled it with the verbal decoration of his epoch, and I have to repeat it to myself as I first heard it, before I can see its terrible beauty. (24)

“The verbal decoration of his epoch” bears an obvious relationship to Yeats’s earlier charge of “vague impressiveness.” Clearly the thrust of both is the same, insofar as they apply to Wilde: but “[t]he verbal decoration of his epoch” is more widely dismissive, placing Wilde’s fault in the context of the literary movements of his time. We have seen, however, that what Yeats called “vague impressiveness” can be connected to Wilde’s obedience to a sense of rhythm and pattern in his writing, which could be accounted an oral trait, in spite of Yeats’s strictures.

Later, when we come to discuss the Symbolists, whose theories of composition had a distinct influence on Wilde’s written work (Salome in particular), and to whom Yeats is referring in part, we shall see that “verbal decoration” too, can be translated into a poetics of orality, in particular insofar as it implied an experimentation with the tonal effects of language.

Incidentally, the congruity of these two phrases also sheds light on a question which we have not ventured to take up so far, namely, the overall authenticity of Yeats’s record of that
statement of Wilde's on the oral qualities of the Irish to which we have devoted so much
discussion. "Vague impressiveness" and "verbal decoration" are, we can see, quite different in
tone and thrust from "too poetical to be poets." The latter implies a distinctly different stance
than Yeats's towards the elements of elaboration in Wilde's writing, and can be archaeologized
in terms of Wilde's own professional and intellectual experience. In spite of a tendency to
inexactitude in quoting even the written texts of others, Yeats seems to have captured Wilde's
voice and attitude here.

What we have seen of Yeats's critique of Wilde so far, however, does beg the question
of exactly in what instances - in which works or parts of works - he would have considered
Wilde's writing to be "the mirror of his speech." Remarkably however, although Yeats has
nowhere left us a fully comprehensive account, his scattered prose writings, in returning to the
same point again and again, sometimes even provide us with analyses and examples which
allow us to fill out at least a partial picture of his intriguing view of Wilde's orality manifesting
itself in speech and writing. To begin with, for instance, we have earlier heard the mention of
"some simple fairy tale" specified in conjunction with the description of Wilde's writing at its
(oral) best, and another hint emerges later in this chapter of Autobiographies in the suggestion
that "[Wilde's] plays and dialogues [my italics] have what merit they possess from being now
an imitation, now a record, of his talk" (172).

Furthermore, in his review of A Woman of No Importance for the March 1895 issue of
the Bookman, Yeats seems to offer a division of the play into what might be called its oral and
its chirographic elements:

All of 'The Woman of No Importance' [sic] which might have been spoken by
its author, the famous paradoxes, the rapid sketches of men and women of
society, the mockery of most things under heaven, are delightful; while, on the other hand, the things which are too deliberate in their development, or too vehement and elaborate for a talker’s inspiration, such as the plot, and the more tragic and emotional characters, do not rise above the general level of the stage. The witty or grotesque persons... all, in fact, who can be characterized by a sentence or a paragraph, are real men and women... (UP1, 354)

Yeats’s sense of the oral mode here seems to be associated, if not with precision, at least with concision, with brevity (“‘rapid’ sketches of men and women”), almost, one feels, with what can be uttered in a breath, as though in recognition of the physiological aspect of the oral drive - just as the language of the physical encounters of duelling is sometimes borrowed to describe the action of wit and “the mockery of all things:” we speak of satirical thrust, for example, or of rapier-like wit, and this is consistent with the Yeatsian view of Wilde as “a man of action,” which we shall be examining in a moment. The other elements of Wilde’s writing in this play, those not struck forth in the manner of speech, but produced, presumably, in the slower, more reflective chirographic mode (“sedentary” is the word we shall later see Yeats applying), are “too deliberate in their development,” or too “vehement”[?] and, in what is consistently Yeats’s favourite charge against Wilde’s writing, too “elaborate.” These elements are associated also with the “more tragic and emotional characters,” who have not been touched by the magic wand of Wilde’s oral genius, and therefore “do not rise above the general level of the stage,” and do not seem to live for Yeats, unlike “[t]he witty or grotesque persons” - rather like Wilde himself perhaps? - who “can be characterized by a sentence or a paragraph” and who, like their author, are “real” to Yeats.

Here once again we see that Yeats is shifting the ontological boundary line between
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Wilde and his work. On one side of the division he places Wilde himself, alive in Yeats’s mind as “the greatest talker of his time,” along with those characters and verbal actions which seem instinct with their author’s breath of life and personality; then on the other side, with a diminished ontological status, those characters, constructions, and elaborations - the over-designed elements - which seem to belong in a kind of chirographic dead zone for Yeats. This feeling which he asserts again and again for the life-force, or lack of it, within the merged entity of Wilde and his work, is not an improbable instinct for Yeats, who wrote of his own work:

“For the elemental creatures come and go / About my table to and fro” (CP50) and for whom aspects of writing could clearly embody ontological (and supernatural) force.

Yeats goes on to suggest that the successful creation of some of the characters may also be linked to the tastes of the contemporary theatre-going audience:

There is something of heroism in being always master enough of oneself to be witty; and therefore the public of today feels with Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby much as the public of yesterday felt, in a certain sense, with that traditional villain of melodrama who never laid aside his cigarette and his sardonic smile. (354)

In this, as in most of the points he has already brought up about A Woman of No Importance, Yeats’s approach is consistent not only with the opinions he has expressed on Wilde’s work elsewhere, but also with those theoretical outlines of the divisions between orality and literacy which have been developed in more recent times. The sense of affinity with a particular audience, for example, although common even in the minds of writers working in solitary conditions, is a residually oral trait, deriving obviously from the communal conditions of oral production and performance (Ong 42). The sense also of the “sounded word as power and
action” (Ong 31) is present in Yeats’s recognition of the enhanced life of certain textual elements; and “the mockery of all things” recalls the “agonistic name-calling” identified as characteristic of oral texts (45).

The prevalence of proverbs and “set expressions circulating through the mouths and ears of all” (Ong 35) is another typical feature. Yeats goes on to note in this review that “... many [an] epigram, too well known to quote, rings out like the voice of Lear’s fool over a mad age” (355), another assertion of the recognisable distinctness of some elements of Wilde’s writing, this time not only for their specific source in his orality, but for their wider destination in the mouths of the public. “[T]oo well known to quote” salutes their escape from the chirographic confines of the play’s script, beyond even the prescribed oral performance of the actors, and into the general sea of consciousness, from which even today they are often fished, to serve as witty tidbits in conversational fare.

Concluding the review, Yeats restates his central point, and in so doing extends its application to two other of Wilde’s works: “The truth is, that whenever Mr. Wilde gets beyond those inspirations of an excellent talker which served him so well in ‘The Decay of Lying’ and in the best parts of ‘Dorian Grey’ [sic], he falls back upon the popular conventions, the spectres and shadows of the stage” (355).

In spite of the numerous quotations and examples cited so far, we are far from exhausting the revelation of Yeats’s attempts to explain and analyse Wilde and his work to his own satisfaction. Twenty-seven years after the date of the above review, in 1923, we find him once again restating his theory, in essentially the same terms as long before, as he presents an introduction to *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*: “The further Wilde goes in his writings from the method of speech, from improvisation, from sympathy with some especial audience,
the less original he is, the less accomplished” (CW 6, 148). And Yeats again goes on to
distinguish among different works according to how they match his oral/chirographic criteria:

I think that ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’ is sometimes profound because
there are so many quotations in it from his conversation; and that The Happy
Prince and Other Tales is charming and amusing because he told its stories...
and that “A House of Pomegranates” is over-decorated and seldom amusing
because he wrote its stories; and because when he wrote, except when he wrote
for actors, he no longer thought of a special audience. In ‘The Happy Prince’ or
the ‘The Selfish Giant’ or ‘The Remarkable Rocket’ there is nothing that does
not help the story, nothing indeed that is not story; but in ‘The Birthday of the
Infanta’ there is hardly any story worth the telling. (148 -9)

It is the “method of speech,” implying immediate and direct force of presentation - “nothing
indeed that is not story” - which holds all the value in Wilde’s writing for Yeats, but it is
apparently the method of writing which becomes - again that key charge - “overdecorated.”

A feature of this 1923 introduction is the way in which it parallels key passages on
Wilde in Autobiographies, which Yeats was writing at around the same time, but which was
published three years later. For example, Wilde’s statement on eloquence and the Irish, to
which we have devoted so much discussion, is also quoted here, in precisely the same words -
which again suggests that Yeats was convinced of the authenticity of his memory of them. And
here also Yeats repeats the story “The Doer of Good” just as he had heard it from someone else
who had known Wilde. We have already seen his judgment of the written version of this story
in “The Tragic Generation” section of Autobiographies (10, above), but in this introduction the
“verbal decoration” which so consistently disappointed Yeats is actually specified by example:
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The other day I found at the end of one his volumes, in a section called 'Poems in Prose', that very story expanded to fifty or sixty lines, and by such description as 'Fair pillars of marble', 'the loud noise of many lutes', 'the hall of chalcedony and the hall of jasper', 'torches of cedar', 'One whose face and raiment were painted and whose feet were shod with pearls.' (150)

In our tour of Yeats's writings on Wilde so far we have seen enough indication of what displeases him so as not to be surprised by what he singles out here. He certainly seems to think that simply quoting the ornate phrasing from the written story may be enough to fill the sensible reader with a disgust similar to his own, and perhaps there is also a certain sniffiness in his citation of the title “Poems in Prose,” as if he’s deploying it with some consciousness of its association with the French Symbolist aesthetic, just as the offending phrases would be characteristic of “the verbal decoration of [Wilde’s] epoch.” In the lines which follow in this introduction, however, Yeats offers a different socio-cultural explanation for Wilde’s use of such devices, attaching an English pedigree and an association with visual art to those writings which are not founded on “the method of speech.” He claims they are a result of “the influence of painting on English literature which began with the poetry of Keats” and that Wilde, “a provincial like myself,”

found in that influence something of the mystery, something of the excitement, of a religious cult and of a cult that promised an impossible distinction. It was precisely because he was not of it by birth and by early association that he caught up phrases and adjectives for their own sake, and not because they were a natural part of his design, and spoke them to others as though it were his duty to pass on some password, sign, or countersign. (150)
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From a biographical standpoint, the principal effect of this passage may be to lend weight to the well-known picture of Wilde as a social climber, a somewhat pathetic outsider attempting to sound the right note, or to work the linguistic rooms, in the chosen milieu of his fantasies, even taking on the role of enthusiastic propagandist in order to ingratiate himself. There is also, perhaps, an implied rebuke to Wilde’s management of his “provincial” status, a suggestion that Yeats by comparison was not fooled, at least in the long run, by the baubles of English culture. From the standpoint of our examination of Wilde as a theorist and exponent of oral modes, however, the passage is somewhat more ambiguous. It does seem to diminish Wilde, portraying him as a mere parrot of buzzwords and received formulae, whose connection to decorative language reflected social aspirations rather than aesthetic interest. Our contemporary theories of orality might instead recognize Wilde’s use of “special” words and formulaic expressions, and his enthusiasm for their circulation, as a sign of his predilection to oral cultural modes, and his instinctive desire to revive them in others. Yeats’s passage also ignores Wilde’s sense of experimentation with sound and meaning, as well as his theoretical musings on the subject; and by limiting him to an English context, neglects his intellectual and artistic investment in French culture - one of whose results was the highly ornamented and symbolic language of *Salome*. On the other hand, this passage is valuable for several reasons.

In the first place, it does contain the significant admission that Wilde not only wrote such language, but also spoke it aloud. In this instance we see that Yeats has noted that one of Wilde’s modes of speech entailed the excited mouthing of exotic or decorative phrases and expressions. But, here and elsewhere, as we have also seen, Yeats’s condemns the use of such expressions in Wilde’s writing, apparently because, unlike the best of Wilde’s work, they do not arise from “the method of speech” or from “sympathy with some especial audience.” At the
same time, however, these florid formulae are quite obviously intended to appeal to an “especial audience” within English society, and they are clearly also transmitted orally by Wilde. Is this an inconsistency in Yeats’s overall understanding of Wilde’s utterance? Perhaps not: even when spoken aloud, such phrases may not have represented “the method of speech” for Yeats, since they did not form “a natural part of [Wilde’s] design,” and Yeats also seems to see Wilde deploying them in a kind of unreflecting way, as “password, sign or countersign,” rather than with the responsiveness of true “sympathy” - even though the audience may have seemed a somewhat “especial” one. What this shows us once again is that when thinking of Wilde, Yeats alters the boundaries between the common definitions of “speech” and “writing.” We have seen that Yeats identified a type of orality which represented some of Wilde’s writing as well as his speech: now we can see, from the other side of the mirror as it were, that Yeats recognized that the chirographic elements which he disliked were sometimes a feature of Wilde’s speech as well as of his writing. In this Yeats reveals a set of perceptions which corresponds to the divisions between oral and chirographic modes developed by later theorists, although he does not employ their specific vocabulary.

Secondly, to anyone interested in Wilde, this passage is valuable as a relatively direct impression of one of his modes of speech. It reminds us that the critical analyses and tentatives which we have been documenting and discussing were based by Yeats not only on his reading of Wilde’s writing but also on his many first-hand encounters with the living author (and speaker). In fact we are indebted to Yeats for some of the specific descriptions which have come down to us of the character and quality of Wilde’s speech in itself, as well as for the theorizing of the relationship between speech and writing in Wilde which we have been examining. When we troll back through the documentary sources from which we have derived
our discussion of Yeats’s theories on Wilde, we sometimes discover such direct descriptions nestled in or near the more analytical musings, and it is appropriate to turn to them now in order to complete our consideration of Yeats’s critical treatment of Wilde and his work.

Perhaps the most immediate of such accounts, and from our point of view the most germane, is given by Yeats at the opening of Section VIII of “Four Years” in Autobiographies.

“My first meeting with Oscar Wilde was an astonishment” he tells us. “I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all over night with labour and yet all spontaneous” (160). There is a vivid sense of wonder recollected here, as if Yeats had encountered an entirely new variety of the human species, one which uttered sounds reflecting at the same time both the measured character of *homo scriptus* and the effervescence of a gay blade: a paradoxical creature! It could perhaps be argued that all of the subsequent descriptions and critiques are attempts explain the paradox, to find a single central focal point for both the man and his work.

What seems one of his most plausible and brilliant insights into the question follows in his elaboration on that first meeting:

> [T]he impression of artificiality that I think all Wilde’s listeners have recorded came from the perfect rounding of the sentences and from the deliberation that made it possible. That very impression helped him, as the effect of metre, or of the antithetical prose of the seventeenth century, which is itself a true metre, helped its writers, for he could pass without incongruity from some unforeseen, swift stroke of wit to elaborate reverie. (160 -1)

This is technical yet oracular, as befits a magus. It can be said to impinge on the territories of
theories not only of orality but also of poetics and of the occult. Some of its complexity derives from the possible ambiguity of the phrase “as the effect of metre.” I read this as referring back to “[t]hat very impression” (of artificiality), in other words as another subject of the verb and object “helped him,” rather than as the subject of “helped its writers.” Yeats can also have a very particular way of using the conjunctions “as” and “but” in his prose. Here he seems to be using “as” in a more active sense than its common equivalent meaning of “like,” suggesting that he is making more than a mere comparison of Wilde’s talk to metrical language, and yet is stopping somewhere short of declaring it to be such.

Partly perhaps as a rhetorical step towards the justification of this adventurous transposition of metrical effect from poetry to conversation, Yeats introduces a comparison to “the antithetical prose of the seventeenth century, which is itself a true metre.” In other words, this is to some extent a zig-zag manoeuvre to suggest that if prose can be metrical, then so can speech; but along the way it seems to redefine metre, allowing it, perhaps, to have some alternative foundation to conventional number and measure. “[A]ntithetical” suggests, among other things, balanced or bipolar rhythms, perhaps such as those used by hypnotists to induce a kind of trance in the unsuspecting listener.

Insofar as Yeats is abstracting the notion of metre from its conventional embodiment in poetry and relocating it in Wilde’s conversation, he endows that conversation with a prestigious argosy of powers and effects. Theories which explain the action of poetry on human consciousness may be increasingly elaborate, but have not closed the question, nor fully defined the operation of metre within it. In Yeats’s time the concept of metre had all the more the attributes of a long inheritance, which may have seemed to be losing some of its potency in the onset of “the filthy modern tide,” but which was still mysterious for all that, particularly to
occult and literary initiates. Some of the archaic gravitas of Biblical utterance, for example, might attach to words pronounced in such a deliberate or even metrical fashion - and indeed, one of Wilde’s favourite forms of storytelling was the inverted parable, in which he would replicate the sonorities of the original version, no doubt drawing his audience into all of its reverential atmosphere, only to undermine or reverse its moral in some unexpected or “decadent” conclusion. The “true metre” of Wilde’s talk would have assisted, no doubt, in adding to the shock effect engendered by the sudden move from shared worship to something like blasphemy. And likewise, according to Yeats, it allowed Wilde “to pass without incongruity from some unforeseen, swift stroke of wit to elaborate reverie.”

Overall, this is a very promising line of description on Yeats’s part. It registers the transdimensional character of Wilde’s talk, observing both the literary superstructure and the mobile, responsive inner dynamics of orality. It opens with a record of sensory experience - “I never before heard a man talking with such perfect sentences”: “I noticed too that the impression of artificiality...” - which launches a brief but concentrated theoretical exploration. We have already briefly discussed this in terms of its poetic theory: in terms of the occult Yeats’s inclusion of the words “artificiality” and “antithetical” may also be taken as an indication that he had a further theory in mind in this passage. It recalls his placement of Wilde, in A Vision, in “Phase Nineteen” which is “the beginning of the artificial, the abstract, the fragmentary, and the dramatic,” and in which “the being is compelled to live in a fragment of itself” and experiences “enforced failure of action,” but has “thought [which] is immensely effective and dramatic, arising always from some immediate situation” (148-9). Here a very similar terminology to that of Yeats’s other writings on Wilde is derived in a more explicitly schematic way. It corresponds to the opinion expressed a little further on in Autobiographies (the two
books were published at around the same time) that Wilde was essentially "a man of action,...
being meant for crowds, for excitement, for hurried decisions, for immediate triumphs" (171-2):
and elsewhere we have seen the stress Yeats places on Wilde's need for "an immediate
audience" to bring his written work to life.

Yeats reconciles all of the terms which we have encountered, including "artificial,"
"antithetical," and "man of action," in his description and analysis of Wilde's conversation, and
in this he is remarkably consonant with the third level of theory which we have mentioned,
namely, that of orality and literacy. One of the key observations of orality theory is that the
word, in an oral culture, does not exist in the abstract, that is, it could not for example be
"looked up" in any kind of dictionary: it can be produced only by being uttered, and hence
appears to be "power-driven" (Ong 32), that is, to be a form of action. Yeats reveals a similar
sense of Wilde's spoken word in a number of references: for example, in another elaboration of
the theme of Wilde as man of action, in a review of Lord Arthur Saville's Crime and Other
Stories, Yeats profiles him as a descendant of the rakes and duellists of the eighteenth century,
seeing in the title story "something of the same spirit that filled Ireland once with gallant,
irresponsible ill-doing, but now it is in its right place making merry among the things of the
mind" (UP 205). Again, in Autobiographies we have: "the dinner table was Wilde's event and
made him the greatest talker of his time" (172), anticipating exactly the terms of oral theory: "In
a primary oral culture" says Ong "... [words] are occurrences, events." (31) "For anyone who
has a sense of what words are in a primary oral culture...it is not surprising that the Hebrew
term dabar means 'word' and 'event'" (32). Ong continues, with more co-incidental echoes:

Malinowski (1923, pp. 451, 470 -81) has made the point that among 'primitive'
(oral) peoples generally language is a mode of action and not simply a
Malinowski’s conception of talk as a mode of action has since been recognized as an important step in the development of orality theory. It is interesting to note that in exactly the same year, in the preparation of Autobiographies, Yeats was applying the same conception to his studies of the art and temperament of his fellow-countryman, describing him as essentially a man of action in a linguistic context, and, in the same sentence, even going so far as to theorize an association with the ‘primitive’ as the reason for Wilde’s difficulties with writing: “I think, too, that because of all that half-civilized blood in his veins he could not endure the sedentary toil of creative art...” (171). And, too, we have seen Yeats’s use of Malinowski’s term “countersign” in Yeats’s introduction to The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales, written in the same year. We do not know whether Yeats was reading Malinowski at the time, but we can at least confidently assert that he was groping towards a similar theory of orality about Wilde.

And yet he was troubled to ascertain the exact nature of that orality. Wilde’s speaking of “perfect sentences” could, it seems, be included in the definition of it, since they succeeded also in being “all spontaneous”: but “verbal decoration” by contrast, whether written, or even spoken as “password, sign, or countersign” could not. Some, but not all, of the essays and stories would qualify; and some elements in the plays. In the light of our current theoretical perspectives on the characteristics of oral as distinct from chirographic or literate culture, we might not feel obliged to agree with Yeats on all such points, but we can hardly fail to be impressed with this sagacious and persistent refraction of Wilde’s genius in the prism of his
own impressions, at a time when "understanding of the psychodynamics of orality was almost non-existent." Furthermore, his instances of direct description of Wilde's talk in action, such as that just given, are invaluable evidentiary statements to those who, working from an array of primary and secondary sources which can no longer include the living speaker, are nevertheless attempting to reconstruct and analyze his unique voice, in the fullest sense of the word. In that respect the project of the present thesis could even be described as the attempt to further explicate and resolve, from a later perspective, the same paradox with which we have seen Yeats so exercised, namely, the true nature and expression of that sensibility which so astonished him with "perfect sentences ... all spontaneous."

In fact the retrospective announcement by Yeats of that first impression of Wilde may also be said to contain the argument of this thesis. For while we are seeking to confirm and elaborate the oral character of Wilde's genius, we intend also to differentiate it from the so-called "primary orality" of an illiterate storyteller or poet. By contrast, Wilde was super-educated, at least in the institutional sense, having taken the highest honours in classical scholarship at both Trinity and Oxford. He was also widely read (well-versed?) in "great books" and in the literature and culture of his own time. His talk was full of the fruits of this education and reading; and yet somehow it retained all the power, charm, and immediacy of great speech. What might have come off as pedantry was remembered instead as magic, not only by Yeats but by so many others who knew him. Wilde was a highly "advanced" Victorian whose views in some respects anticipated modern and post-modern theoretical developments, and at the same time a kind of throwback to an earlier stage of cultural "development," a kind of "Homerian" stage in which the human voice remained the primary conduit of knowledge and communication. How did Wilde's extraordinary gift of orality survive not only his progress
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through various nineteenth-century educational institutions but also his immersion in an increasingly literacized Victorian culture? - is one of the questions we will inevitably be asking. And one of the answers is already certain to be: not without rebellion and protest.

We are fortunate that Yeats was so haunted by the unique character of Wilde’s oral sensibility that he was driven to attempt an explanation of it in so many writings: and fortunate too, that it was not only the editor in Yeats who found expression in his orality-based critique of Wilde’s writing, but also the auditor in him who found time to record his impressions of Wilde’s living voice. We know that Yeats’s drive to criticize and reshape the writings of others was strong, as evidenced in his imperious revisions and re-arrangements of the materials of others in the collection entitled *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, published in 1888, the year of his dinner with Wilde; but his also were the instincts of a keen listener, who spent summers recording folk tales from the mouths of Irish peasants and left recollections of the readings at the Cheshire Cheese in London: he was justified in implying possession of “a subtle ear.” His vocal production does not seem to have been charismatic - the voice sounds somehow indrawn on the recordings he made of himself reading his poems, and he is said to have been tone deaf - but he was highly receptive to the sounds made by others, and presumably could project these with perfect pitch in the auditorium of his own mind. It is fitting, therefore, that we close our account of Yeats’s re-presentation of Wilde with a passage in which both the auditor and the editor in Yeats may be seen rising to fullest expression: in which the editor in him is impelled to castigate what he sees as the over-elaboration of Wilde’s prose, but the auditor is given over to a spellbound imagining of “that incomparable talker,” in performance, as he goes beyond analyzing his dissatisfaction with Wilde’s writing, and calls on his personal memory of Wilde’s voice in order to re-create one of the stories (“The Fisherman and his
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Soul”) in a kind of *platonic oral form*:

I try to imagine it as it must have been when he spoke it, half consciously watching that he might not bore by a repeated effect or unnecessary description, some child or some little company of young painters or writers. Only when I so imagine it do I discover that the incident of the young fisherman’s dissatisfaction with his mermaid mistress, upon hearing of a girl dancing with bare feet was witty, charming and characteristic... In the written story that incident is so lost in decorations that we let it pass unnoticed at a first reading, yet it is the crisis of the tale. To enjoy it I must hear his voice once more, and listen once more to that incomparable talker. (*CW*, 6, 149)

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2 A stock image in the mirroring process which went on between English and Irish discourses, dating back at least to Sidney’s and Spenser’s impressions of the role of the bard in Gaelic oral culture. More on this in Chapter Two.

3 Examples which Wilde may have had in mind could have been literary, like Oliver Goldsmith, or political, like Robert Emmet (the failed insurrectionist). Emmet’s attempt to spark a general uprising by leading a mob against Dublin Castle in 1803 resulted in a criminal fiasco, but his magnificent speech from the dock before execution recaptured the moral high ground from the forces of the Crown. The Anglo-Irish oratorical tradition had already been established in the eighteenth century by Burke and Grattan in particular: the great Catholic example of the nineteenth century was Daniel O’Connell, whose fiery speeches to monster meetings led to the achievement of Catholic Emancipation in 1829.

4 Such comparisons appear to have flourished especially in the early part of the nineteenth century, among a generation whose writings would have been particularly familiar to Wilde’s parents: “[N]ationalist authors also embrace all aspects of the national culture with even a remote resemblance to Mediterranean cultural prototypes ... The footnotes of *The Wild Irish Girl* labor to establish connections or analogies between the customs, religious rituals, music, dancing, and literature of ancient Greece and those of present-day Ireland” (Trumpener 142). The *locus Hibernicus* for many of these connections can perhaps be identified in Geoffrey Keating’s seventeenth-century history of Ireland (Gaelic title: *Foras Feasa ar Eireann*), which recapitulated bardic tradition in assigning Greek, Scythian, and Spanish origins to early invasions of Ireland. Another emergence of this theme is described by Seamus Deane, in *A Short History of Irish Literature*, as follows: “... the military engineer and surveyor Charles Vallancey began, [in the 1770s] to pursue his strange researches into the connection between the ancient Irish and the ancient Carthaginians, setting off that series of contrasts between a destructive imperial-Roman-England and a devastated-but-surviving Ireland-Carthage, which was to have such durability in Irish writing” (62). In Lord Lytton’s poem “St. Stephens,” moreover, I find an English example connecting conditions of Irish orality
to those of the ancient Greeks, in a description of one of O'Connell's speeches to an open-air multitude:

To the last verge of that vast audience sent
It played with each wild passion as it went;
Now stirred the uproar - now the murmur stilled,
And sobs or laughter answered as it willed.
Then did I know what spells of infinite choice
To rouse or lull has the sweet human voice.
Then did I learn to seize the sudden clue
To the grand troublous life antique - to view,
Under the rock-stand of Demosthenes,
Unstable Athens heave her noisy seas. (Quoted from McCarthy, Vol 1, 155)

5 The responses of English critics to Wilde's first published book of poems will be given in more detail when we come to discuss "The Decay of Lying."
6 Even as late as the 1982 edition of Orality and Literacy, Walter Ong refers to Ireland as "a country which in every region preserves massive residual orality" (69).
7 One of the conclusions towards which the present study tends is that classic defences of poetry such as Sidney's may be productively re-examined in terms of orality theory. For example, if my interpretation of Wilde's dialectic in "The Decay of Lying" as a defence of oral values proves convincing, it may open the way to re-reading the very similar oppositions between imagination and learning in Sidney's Apology, or between "Invention, Nature's child" and "Stepdame Study" in the first sonnet of the Astrophil and Stella sequence as indicators of cultural tensions between orality and literacy, like those which Havelock has read in Plato's Phaedrus (The Muse Learns to Write, 1986).
8 It was John Morley who famously remarked on this apparent contradiction. (Works of Lord Morley, London 1921, vol. 6, p.181).
9 This observation is confirmed in Yeats's Introduction to The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales (1923): "My mind went back to the late eighties when ... nothing of Wilde's had been published except his poems and "The Happy Prince." I remember the reviews were generally very hostile to his work..." (YCP, 6, 147)
10 In the case of two other probable background sources for Wilde's comment, one seems more likely to have been encountered in reading, and the other in listening. Ernest Renan's Poetry of the Celtic Races was published in 1853 and contains passages suggestive of both Arnold's and Wilde's intimations of Celtic eloquence. Wilde's French was good enough for him to have understood it in the original (it was not translated into English until 1893), but somehow one imagines him reading rather than hearing the French text (we do not hear of Wilde speaking French until his later visits to Paris, but in his Oxford Notebooks he transcribed a passage in French from La Vie de Jesus, another of Renan's works). Another possible source is Mahaffy; in Twelve Lectures on Primitive Civilizations (1869), he (emphatically) quotes the description of the Celtic character given by Mommsen in his History of Rome. As the title of Mahaffy's book makes clear, its contents had been given in the form of lectures, which then may well have been repeated by Mahaffy for the students of Wilde's years at Trinity not long afterwards. Oddly enough, Mommsen's History of Rome was among the first titles Wilde requested when he began to be allowed to read in prison, many years later -- a little as if he knew some of its contents aurally already, but now wanted as it were "to catch up on his reading."
11 Wilde refracts the theme of Arnold's essay again in 1892. In a letter to Grant Allen (Letters 286-7) he praises an article of Allen's for its "superb assertion of that Celtic spirit in art that Arnold divined, but did not demonstrate, at any rate in the sense of scientific demonstration, such as yours is."
12 Trollope wrote five "Irish" novels, whose characters are not unlike those in the novels of Anglo-Irish writers of the time such as Banim and Carleton. Although Ernest Renan's The Poetry of the Celtic Races was not published in an English translation until 1893, its contents were an influence on Arnold and other commentators.
13 Cf. The following note (n.68) from Trumpener's Bardic Revolutions: "In the wake of the Ossian controversies, Irish and Scottish nationalists repeatedly defend oral tradition as a valid historical source. Owensen follows Sylvester O'Halloran's line of defense, arguing in The Wild Irish Girl that contemporary historiographical practice already sanctions the use of oral sources. 'Manuscripts, annals and records, are not the treasures of a colonized or conquered country...[I]t is always the policy of the conqueror (or the invader) to destroy those mementoes of ancient national splendour which keep alive the spirit of the conquered or the invaded' (p.172); English attempts to
discredit Irish claims of a long cultural history include deliberate efforts to keep even Irish written records from circulating" (317).

14 In Wilde the Irishman, ed. Jerusha McCormack, pp. 24 - 35. She does Hibernicize Wilde towards the end of her article by claiming that some of his stories are derived from Irish folktales.
15 "We Irish, born into that ancient sect/But thrown upon this filthy modern tide..." "The Statues," CP 323
16 The best evidence of which can be found throughout the two volumes of E.H. Mikhail's Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections.
Chapter Two

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“Subtilties and Slye Shiftes”

In the previous chapter we noted that in his account of Christmas dinner with Wilde in 1888, Yeats described Wilde as attributing “characteristics like his own to his country” when Wilde defined the Irish as “a nation of brilliant failures” but “the greatest talkers since the Greeks.” We argued that Wilde’s “own” characteristics could be described in terms of orality more than of Irishness, and that Yeats’s numerous writings on Wilde and his work support this position, revealing an almost obsessive interest in the oral aspect of Wilde’s character and writing, which in turn discovers Yeats to us as the elegant proponent of an orality theory on Wilde for which the technical language had not yet been derived.

I ventured so far as to say that Yeats’s descriptions of Wilde had something of the character of cultural anthropology about them. The Christmas dinner is a case in point, Yeats having left us a written record not of a gastronomic, but of an oral event, giving literary form to Wilde’s spoken observations somewhat as he might have collected the folkloric sayings of some other “half-civilized” but highly expressive Irishman. And at the heart of this description lies the revelation that after dinner Wilde read aloud to his guest from the proofs of “The Decay of Lying,” thus transforming the written into the oral, the reverse of the Yeatsian process. Nevertheless Wilde’s oral performance at this moment is a setpiece, with a written text as its platform, which distinguishes it from a purely vocal recital, and allows us to examine its content more than one hundred years after it was spoken. A detailed discussion of the text of that essay is the ultimate destination of the chapter which follows this, since it represents a kind of nexus of many of the interwoven strands of Wilde’s personality and work which we have discussed so far, including the overlapping themes of his Irishness and his orality. In order to
lay bare the place of such elements in "The Decay of Lying," however, it seems useful to offer in advance some discussion of the cultural and historical context from which what we are calling both Wilde’s Irishness and his orality will emerge.

As before, orality is understood to encompass rather than to negate the proposition of Wilde’s Irishness - “Irishness” being a kind of composite term, representing aspects of temperamental affinity, political positioning, and self-identification - and what one sets out to do in developing a theory of orality within which to interpret Wilde and his writing is to show how it explains not only Wilde’s Irishness in this sense, but also his relationship to other national cultures, and to broader issues of the changing social and intellectual climate of his time. Wilde was an “Irishman” who published “the first French novel to be written in the English language” as Dorian Gray has been called;\(^1\) who wrote Salome in French while intending it for the London stage; who was at the same time both a modernist and a high Victorian, but a classical Greek in his education and his sexual tastes (which he toured Italy and North Africa to indulge); who was a Protestant by birth but who may have turned to the Church of Rome with his last breath - in other words, who was a cultural cosmopolitan. The argument for his Irishness is useful as a corrective to the complacent inclusion of his name in anthologies of “English” writers, which was prevalent for some decades, and as an enrichment of our understanding of his spirit and his sensibility. However, although growing up in Ireland was undoubtedly crucial and instrumental in his formation, Wilde continued to receive the impress of his surroundings beyond what are normally thought of as the formative years, undergoing major changes in personality and circumstance as time went by - witness, for example, the profound influences of his Oxford teachers, the late flowering of his homosexual instincts, the reversion to a mode of agonized sincerity during his prison term, his recurring participations in

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life in France, etc. A theory which divides Wilde’s personality along national lines provides an interesting but ultimately unsatisfactory model to account for these developments. The broader terms of orality and literacy, however, do allow for a fuller explanation.

Nevertheless it is true to say that Ireland played a generous part in creating Oscar Wilde, and indeed we can go so far as to assert that certain aspects of Irish culture and history are oddly consonant with Wilde’s temperament and fate. In order to support this assertion the present chapter will consider in slightly more detail one or two of the features of Irish history and culture which have stood out to observers from both inside and outside the country. What we have primarily in mind here is the legendarily oral character of Irish culture, a truism which is at least centuries old, which remains embodied in expressions such as “Irish blarney” and “the gift of the gab,” and which, as we noted, has had its continuing prevalence even in the latter half of the twentieth century certified by no less an authority than Walter Ong. Therefore in this section I will demonstrate, based on the truth of the proposition above, the extent to which Oscar Wilde is the product of what I call an Irish oral civilization. However, just as I have already seen fit to fill in the outlines of Wilde’s orality with a consideration of his advanced state of literacy, so also it seems appropriate to remind ourselves that the character of Irish culture has been marked by strikingly literate as well as oral values. The co-existence of the two modes is as marked in the history of the nation as it is in the life and work of Oscar Wilde. In fact Wilde’s orality, his literacy, and the tensions between them, all seem to have had their origins in his native country.

While it is true to note that in Ireland the conditions which have been defined as characteristic of an oral culture were, and perhaps still are, more pronounced and predominant than in England, it is well to observe that, firstly, their being perceived as such is partly due to
the sense of a binary relationship between England and Ireland, which in the course of history
has induced a complicated process of cultural mirroring and differentiating between them.\textsuperscript{2}

What we are calling Irish orality has been identified by numerous English and Irish
commentators over the centuries,\textsuperscript{3} with the corresponding construction of a more taciturn
English identity, including other elements formed, perhaps, not only in relation to Ireland on
the western side, but also in relation to the rival powers of the European continent, and to the
colonial subjects of an expanding Empire. But so-called cultural construction, insofar as it is
merely a record of relational perception, while it cannot be denied, can be found inadequate as
a description of the phenomena which give rise to such perception. It can still seem fruitful to
describe these in more direct, positive, and sometimes even absolute terms; and so we will
continue to do so. We would agree, therefore, that broadly speaking there has been a transition
from orality to literacy taking place among the nations and cultures of the world, and that in
such terms Ireland was a country, as of Wilde’s time, which “preserved massive residual orality
in all regions,” as Ong says, and that England, by the same definition, did not,\textsuperscript{4} but within that
definition we wish to advance a more complex or at least binary view of Irish culture itself, one
which recognizes the long history of its literacy as well as its orality.

Were it within the scope of this work, we would also examine the changes in English
culture which contributed to its differentiation from that of the Irish, and to its development of
an apparently different symbiosis between oral and literate cultural features. For now let us say
briefly that a number of factors and conditions may have contributed to these results.
Variations in so-called “national character” might be one: records on both sides of the Irish Sea
which suggest differences between the Irish and English temperaments go back a long way
indeed. But how could one begin to separate the influences of temperament from those of
climate or social and political conditions? Many commentators have noted that Ireland has an unusually powerful or insidious way of shaping the consciousness of those who spend time there, no matter what their origins, and the defensiveness and confusion generated by the threatened breakdown of solid English identities on Irish soil is reflected in a number of English texts. This would seem to suggest that factors other than ethnicity have more influence in the shaping of national character, (insofar as the phrase “national character” may be granted any legitimacy.) We might therefore give consideration to a thesis such as that of the historian Macaulay that “the effect of the great freedom of the press in England has been in a great measure to destroy this art [of speaking] and to leave among us little of what I call oratory proper” - a suggestion that technical and political development was playing its part in altering the balance between orality and literacy in that country: in which case it would seem to follow that in neighbouring Ireland not only temperament but also impoverishment, political and cultural turmoil, state repression, and the absence of industrial development could have some bearing on the condition of “massive residual orality” there. I am prepared to argue that the unsettled conditions which persisted in the island of Ireland for over a thousand years offer the broadest explanation for the combined orality and literacy of Irish culture, and I will even go so far as to say that aspects of those historical conditions were projected into the temperament of Oscar Wilde, and in turn projected by him on the world stage.

It is noteworthy, for example, that when one goes back a thousand years in the history of Ireland, to the period even before the beginning of the Norman/English influence, one reads the story of a literate culture already experiencing the vicissitudes of political and military upheavals. One of the most striking demonstrations of such cause and effect occurred in the Eleventh Century, when the earliest waves of Viking depredations, which already had
modulated to more settled forms of commercial intercourse than the burning of monasteries, the plundering of artifacts, and in particular the zestful destruction of manuscripts, were symbolically concluded by the destruction of their armies at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, and a massive revival of Irish manuscript culture followed. Kuno Meyer summarized the transition as follows:

In Ireland itself most old books were destroyed during the Viking terror which burst upon the island at the end of the eighth century. But from the eleventh century onwards, we have an almost unbroken series of hundreds of MSS. in which all that had escaped destruction was collected and arranged. Many of the tales and poems thus preserved were undoubtedly originally composed in the eighth century; some few perhaps in the seventh; and as the Irish scholarship advances, it is not unlikely that fragments of poetry will be found, which from linguistic or internal evidence, may be claimed for the sixth century.  

Along with the re-collection and re-copying of surviving manuscripts, there must have been countless redactions of materials which by that time had survived only in oral form. This is indicated not only by linguistic clues within the compilations, but also by their own and other (well-known) historical records of, for example, the years of rigorous mnemonic training required in order to attain the rank of *fili*, or poet, in the Gaelic social system, showing the dependence on memory functions characteristic of an oral society. Such primarily oral processes, while having their origin, obviously, in pre-literate times, seem also to have played the role of offering continuity and protection to Irish cultural traditions during unsettled times, such as the periods of the Viking raids - and such as the endlessly contested period of Anglo-Norman domination which followed not long after.
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At this point a thousand years may seem a long way to be going back in time for a discussion of influences on Oscar Wilde, but what we are suggesting is that the pattern of interaction between orality and literacy which became unique to Irish culture was being established at that time, and that such a pattern may be said to find its analogue in the history of Oscar Wilde. It is well to remember, for example, that a similar cycle of cultural retrieval and renewal was once again taking place during Wilde’s own lifetime, when scholars and scribes (among them Sir William Wilde - Oscar’s father - and later, W.B. Yeats) were touring the Irish countryside documenting the oral literature and traditions of the peasantry. For it was not only the Vikings who would burn and plunder Irish manuscripts in the long course of the island’s history. Factors contributing to more chaos, and to the ultimate de-stabilization of Gaelic culture, were already beginning to manifest themselves in the 1170s, when the Norman barons began their crossings from England and Wales. Almost five hundred years later, in the 1590s, we see the English poet Edmund Spenser occupying a colonial position in Munster, and find that “during his sojourn in Munster many ancient manuscripts of the province were cut up to make covers for the English-language primers then being circulated among schoolchildren” (Kiberd 1995, 10). Shortly afterwards Spenser writes A View of the Present State of Ireland, in which he advocates the most savage suppression of the Irish, on the basis of their savagery. (Spenser frequently urges that the inhabitants be “reduced” to “civility,” fully intending all of the sinister connotations of the verb.) Some of his bloodthirsty determination arises from first-hand experience of the unsettled conditions there, which he blames on the character of Irish society and customs, as well as on the vacillations of English policy, from conciliation to repression.
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Among the principal targets of Spenser’s draconian venom are the Gaelic poets; he is all too aware of their high place in the Gaelic social order, and that “by their ditties they do encourage lords and gentlemen” (Kiberd 1995, 10) In ironic contrast, the principal prose work of Spenser’s friend and compatriot Sir Philip Sidney is an essay lamenting the declining status of poets and poetry in English culture at the time, in which essay the high esteem in which poetry is held in neighbouring Ireland is also noted. It is odd, and rather unlucky for the Irish, that the Elizabethans never seem to have confronted the disparity between such cultural observations and their broader categorization of the Irish as barbarians. Many critics have noted with shock the contrast between the harshness of Spenser’s views on Ireland in prose, and the overall gentleness of his poetry, but Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland*, attributes “the sheer ferocity of Spenser’s writings on the Irish resistance” in the *View*, to a “radical ambivalence,” implying that Spenser must have sensed the similarity between his own position and that of the poets in Ireland:

The Irish, despite their gibs and mantles, actually looked like the English to the point of undetectability; their poets were court poets, whose duties were, like those of Spenser himself, to praise the sovereign, excoriate the king’s enemies, and appeal in complex lyrics to the shared aesthetic standard of a mandarin class. (11)

Although I think Kiberd’s first observation, on visual resemblances, may contain some exaggeration, I am inclined to agree with his overall point, and even to suggest that Spenser’s elaborate and detailed (although often inaccurate) description of the Irish laws and customs which he wished to see suppressed is further evidence of his underlying ambivalence. (The
dialogue form in which the *View* is cast might be cited as another clue, although it also seems possibly designed to circumscribe the broader uncertainties of English policy.)

Any sympathies arising from further reflections on Spenser’s part seem likely to have evaporated with the burning of his house in Munster during a rebel uprising, not long after his departure: but it was not long either before the defeat of the Irish forces at the battle of Kinsale, in 1601, dealt the death blow which he wished to see, to the remains of Irish Gaelic culture.

Spenser’s *View*, therefore, besides being the most extensive prose work on Ireland, its politics, and its culture, from an Elizabethan English perspective, is also the last significant work of that kind to be written from personal experience before the collapse of the old Gaelic order. As such, in spite of its hostility it forms a most valuable account of the features of that culture, the most germane of which to our thesis are as follows:

First, that Irish culture was founded on both oral and literate traditions. That the orality of the Irish was already standing out at least to English perceptions is suggested by the following passage:

…and Common Carriours of newes with desire whearlof you would wonder howe muche the Irishe are fed for they vse Comonlye to sende vp and downe to knowe newes and if anye mete with another his seconde worde is what newes Insomuche that hearof is toulde a prettye leste of a ffrenchman whoe havinge bene somtime in Irelande wheare he marked their e greate enquirye for newes…

(128)

Even more striking than such folksy revelations (in which Spenser appears, at least in this instance, to have incorporated some of his own oral milieu into the text) is the following candid
admission of the antiquity of Irish letters: as Irenius, who seems closest to the voice of Spenser himself in the dialogue, explains to his interlocutor Eudoxus:

But yeat for the Ancientness of the wrighten Cronicles of the Irishe ... wheare ye saie that the Irishe haue bene without Lettres yea are thearein muche deception for it is Certaine that Irelande hathe had the vse of lettres verye Ancientlye and longe before Englande!! (87)

And yet Spenser is insistent that Ireland is in a state of barbarousness and incivility. Perhaps, however, his positions on Ireland may be productively viewed from another perspective, namely that of the shifts taking place between orality and literacy in both his own culture and that which he is scrutinizing. For example, his embodiment of the (presumably oral) anecdote of the Frenchman in his written text may be taken as an indicator of a more general transition from orality to literacy taking place in the English culture of the time, especially if one notes the parallel between such an example and those which are cited as evidence of a similar transition in other cultures, (such as in studies of the oral elements of Plato’s dialogues). By contrast, the Irish passion for “newes” is suggestive partly of their conversational inclinations, and of their embodiment of cultural transmission in oral forms, but it may suggest also their growing rather than diminishing dependence on those forms, especially when taken in combination with the knowledge of their dying manuscript tradition, implied in the information, already given, that during Spenser’s stay in Munster many ancient manuscripts were cut up to make covers for English-language primers. In other words it may seem to indicate that Gaelic culture, under the ever-increasing pressure of English determination to dominate the island (so evident in Spenser’s text) may have been undergoing a shift from literacy to orality, rather than vice versa. The defeat at Kinsale, which followed in 1601, put an
end to the old Gaelic social order, and with it the aristocratic patronage which was the chief support of the Gaelic bards. It would be another hundred years before the first master of a new type of Irish literature, written in English, would emerge; although Jonathan Swift might not have recognized himself as belonging to such a category as “Irish Literature.”

It is evident that, deprived of cultural stability and momentum, the native Irish of Spenser’s time took increasing refuge in the oral modes in which the bardic traditions had schooled them. It is evident also that the Irish clung to a dream of education and literacy, of which the phenomenon of the “hedge schools,” which flourished throughout the century and more of the harsh Penal Laws, and which included instruction in the classics, are a sufficient indication. To put it another way, Ong’s claim that Ireland “preserved massive residual orality in all regions” into the twentieth century, while perfectly valid in the context of theories of orality, should perhaps be balanced with the reminder that Ireland is the nation which possesses “the oldest vernacular literature in Europe.” Likewise, while advancing our view of Oscar Wilde as a genius in the oral mode, we shall remain conscious of the deep vein of literate culture which leavens and refines the ore of his verbal talents.

Secondly, it is evident from Spenser’s text that the unsettled conditions which had disrupted the development of Irish manuscript culture during the period of the Viking invasions could not, unfortunately, be counted only as a feature of the remote past in that nation’s destiny. Indeed, what Spenser reveals to us en route to his repressive prescriptions for curing Ireland’s ills, is just to what an extraordinary degree the entire country persists in a state of ferment in spite of successive centuries of “administration” by English officials, “in soe muche as theare is no parte now sounde or ascertained but all haue theire eares vprighte waytinge when the watcheworde shall Come That they shoulde all rise generallye into Rebellion and
Caste awaye the Englishe subieccion" (147). Furthermore, in offering a resume of some of the previous history of the Irish wars and disturbances, Spenser makes it evident that English rule had never for long remained uncontested (55-63), and that the Irish, although seldom united enough to achieve outright military success, were possessed of an indigenous culture sufficiently strong to have retained their passionate loyalty: “they doe not accepte of [English laws and rules] but delighte rather to leane to their oulde Customes and Brehon lawes…” (53); and even to have seduced some of the most powerful earlier waves of English invaders: “for the moste parte of them are degenerated and growen allmoste meare Irishe yea and more malitious to the Englishe then the verye Irishe themselves/” (96).

In such changeable circumstances, having already engaged in centuries of physical and cultural resistance, and under the increasing pressure of successive waves of military occupiers and colonists (Cromwell, of grim memory, was soon to arrive on the scene, with more soldiers and then settlers), it is hardly surprising also that the Irish were developing a reputation for skill in matching wits with the English. “[T]hey are for the moste parte so cautelous and wily-headed,” Spenser complains, “speciallye being men of so small experience and practize in lawe matters that youe woulde wonder whence they borrowe suche subtillties and slye shiftes” (67). And again it seems easy to theorize a link to the figure of Oscar Wilde, who practised a cultural resistance of his own to many of the modes of English thought, and who was a master of the oppositional stance and the deft rerouting (or upending) of established Victorian clichés, in other words, of “subtilties and slye shiftes.”

To see an Irish trait in Wilde’s ability to offer a paradoxical, even perverse, but brilliant re-interpretation of complacent assumptions, for example on the subject of truth-values in “The Decay of Lying,” is simply to confirm what the English have been saying about the Irish all
along, though in a less appreciative vocabulary. "[T]hey are moste willfullye bente," Spenser says of them, in a phrase that could equally well be applied to the arguments in Wilde’s essay, "for in the moste apparence matter that maie be[,] the leaste question or doubte that cane be moved will make a stoppe unto them and put them quite out of the waie" (67). Ultimately, "the moste apparence matter that maie be" to the English was the right given to them to rule in Ireland by virtue of military conquest; and the whole goal of the Irish was to subvert the meaning and validity of that apparent right, in myriad forms of resistance and re-interpretation. Characteristically, "The Decay of Lying" offers the upending of apparent truths. When Wilde gives the strongest voice in the dialogue to Vivian, and allows him to succeed in establishing arguments such as that nature and life imitate art, instead of the opposite, he is re-manifesting some of the traditional intellectual dynamics of being Irish, although in this case choosing not to apply them to questions of Irish politics, but instead to the contested arena of literature and art in the nineteenth century.

If, by the 1590s, the Irish had already found ways to demonstrate that "the moste apparence matter that maie be" was not so apparent after all, the English preferred to hold to their view that those Irish "were moste willfullye bente," a perspective which was repeated in various forms all the way down to the nineteenth century, when they could be described even by a sympathetic English observer as "but little bound by the love of truth." One thing that is certain about the Irish is that they were keenly conscious of how they were described by others, and the long tradition of mainly unsympathetic commentary on their veracity would almost certainly have been known to Wilde from the days of his childhood attendance at his mother’s salons. So it is fair to argue also that Wilde’s defense of lying, exaggeration, and imaginative values in his essay, as well as his attack on realism and literalism, was at least half-
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consciously responding to that English tradition, and that the character of his intellectual enterprise is tinged with an historical Irish cast of mind.

However, my use of a sixteenth century Elizabethan writer as a representative example of English commentary on the Irish, in a study of the sensibility of a nineteenth century Anglo-Irish writer, does raise one or two obvious questions. There seems on the face of it an enormous social and circumstantial gulf between most of the native inhabitants described by Spenser - feudal, Catholic, Gaelic-speaking, clinging to a doomed civilization, often living on the run in the hills and woods - and the prosperous, Protestant, English-speaking, urban professional class into which Oscar Wilde was born almost three hundred years later. While it is easy enough to trace the lineaments of an Irish cultural mask in the consistent prejudice of English accounts through the centuries, can we also establish a more positive link between the features of the older Hibernian culture and what Wilde himself suggestively called “the new Celtic school in art”?

The beginnings of an answer lie in some of the points already noted. For example, as Spenser’s text indicates, the shift of allegiance from Anglo-centric to Hiberno-centric points of view which had taken place among the previous groups of invaders from the larger island was already a well-established fact in Elizabethan English eyes. For a significant proportion of the new settlers, to live in Ireland, to inherit in Ireland, to bequeath to one’s heirs in Ireland, was in the long run to identify with Ireland, to recognize that from an Irish point of view, government from England was at best a form of misrule, at worst an illegitimate tyranny. Although the Gaelic-speaking civilization which had absorbed pre-Elizabethan settlers expired in the seventeenth century, by the end of the eighteenth the role of protesting Ireland’s wrongs, both rhetorically and in arms, had been thoroughly adopted by representatives of the Anglo-Irish
Protestant ruling class, such as Wolfe Tone, Edmund Burke, and Robert Emmett. These activists and speakers, although educated in a different language and tradition, were in some important respects the political descendants of the "cautelous and wily-headed fellowes" who had so discombobulated Edmund Spenser with their talent for obstructing the straightforward application of English dominance. Nor were they "fellows" only; the youthful figure of Oscar Wilde is closely imbricated in the genealogy of resistance through the rebel position taken by his mother, Lady Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde, better known by her pen name "Speranza," under which she wrote inflammatory verse against the English occupation. (Wilde was content to be introduced to some American audiences on his lecture tour as "the son of Speranza.") Speranza in turn had taken her inspiration from the leaders of the Young Ireland Movement, characterized by Thomas Davis, another Protestant of the Anglo-Irish community. And in the work of a woman novelist of the generation just before (Sydney Owensen) we can even discover a passage specifically invoking Spenser's View, when two of her fictional characters argue over the poet's legacy to history.\textsuperscript{11}

So it is clear that the spirit of resistance, along with some endowment of rhetorical skills and strategies of opposition ("subtilties and slye shiftes"), although transferable from one sector of society to another, and sometimes intermittent, was nevertheless a perennial feature of the Irish political landscape, and the common cultural heirloom of successive generations. Some of its inheritors re-applied it to its original purpose – the dislocation of English rule in Ireland; others, like Wilde, chose to deploy it in the wider domains of English and European culture, which had become another kind of contested territory in his time.

So much for a general statement concerning a certain kind of characteristic Irish attitude, a cast of mind which had been passed down through generations: but can we adduce
more evidence of this genealogy in the details of Irish verbal expression? There is at least one critical work extant which suggests that we can. *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962), according to its author Vivian Mercier, is an effort to provide "a synoptic view of a subject matter ranging over eleven centuries and two languages" (xi) and offers "the first sustained attempt to show that an unbroken comic tradition may be traced in Irish literature from approximately the ninth century down to the present day" (vii). The selection of these quotations may have given a false impression of Mercier’s tone; saying "the whole subject of the relationship between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literature has been bedevilled by so many intemperate generalizations on both sides that I was determined not to force my own views upon the reader" (x), he offers instead a dispassionate (but, I will insist, highly suggestive) survey of some of the comic elements in both the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literary traditions. Among the Anglo-Irish he has little to say about Wilde and Shaw, suggesting that they "belong essentially to English literature" (79), but nevertheless includes them in what is perhaps his strongest thesis statement: "all I am claiming … is that the archaic, tradition-bound nature of Gaelic literature and culture preserved into modern times something of the ancient, playful attitude to language, thus creating in English-speaking Ireland a climate favourable to the growth of the great Anglo-Irish wits and ultimately of Joyce" (80). More recent scholars might be inclined to contest the firmness with which Wilde and Shaw are assigned to the province of "English" literature, but all that Mercier is really saying is that "their Irish upbringing or heritage undoubtedly fostered their special gift for wit, but that gift would have developed differently had they remained in Ireland" (79), a point which the present thesis will elaborate and modify, but not ultimately contradict.
The few specifics that Mercier offers in his brief references to Wilde certainly support his inclusion in the general inheritance of Irish wit:

Actually, when we examine some of Wilde's most famous witticisms carefully, we find that, although he avoids puns, the element of verbal play in them is very important. Take his definition of foxhunting, 'The unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable'; the close resemblance in sound between the two key words adds greatly to our pleasure in the witticism. Had Wilde written, 'People unfit to be spoken of in pursuit of an animal they cannot eat', much of the wit would have evaporated. Wilde's famous critical judgment, 'Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning', is so worded as to give pleasure to people who are ignorant of both Meredith and Browning. (78-9)

In general, Mercier seems to have been willing that others should draw more conclusions than he has from the many fascinating details in his book, especially perhaps those which shed light on Gaelic literary modes, forms and techniques. For example, Mercier reveals that the verbal contest, or colloquy, is a significant sub-genre in Gaelic literature, and, after an illustrative discussion of one famous tenth-century composition, concludes as follows:

[This text] expresses three archaic attitudes which have remained imbedded in the popular beliefs of the Irish: first, that wisdom can be demonstrated by the propounding or answering of seemingly insoluble riddles; second, that the dexterous use of verbal ambiguity is inseparable from wit and wisdom; third, that truth can be arrived at by witty dialectic. (86)

The second and third points have obvious applicability to Wilde and his work. In particular, the revelation "that truth can be arrived at by witty dialectic" immediately evokes
Wilde's dialogue essays, especially "The Decay of Lying," whose quality of agonistic wit is one of the characteristics which most distinctly sets it apart from the rest of the critical tradition in English, and from other examples of the dialogue form, such as Spenser's *View*. The connection to the Irish colloquy or verbal contest also appears to open the possibility of a literary ancestor other than the Platonic for Wilde's dialogues. Vivian Mercier does not explicitly draw these links to Wilde, noting instead that "the witty and humorous cross-examination of witnesses who match their own wit and humour against the barrister's is a part of Irish legal tradition" (86). Even this revelation may be seen to cast an indirect light on our principal subject, however. It seems to describe almost exactly the spirit in which Wilde presented himself in court, and indeed it would even go some way to explaining his disastrous decision to engage Queensberry in that arena.

At this point we may seem to have, perhaps surprisingly, deepened the arguments for Wilde's quintessential Irishness, and while there is nothing objectionable about such a position, it still falls short of the overall argument of this thesis. Let us, therefore, employ a similar strategy to that of the first section, wherein we began by taking an equally suggestive quotation from Yeats about Wilde and the Irish, and, by drawing back to attain a wider view, discovered first its applicability to Wilde's English and European contexts, and ultimately its position within a framework of orality and literacy.

To begin, for example, with the "play-spirit" which Mercier has advanced as a possible link between the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish traditions: J.L. Wisenthal, in "Wilde, Shaw, and the Play of Conversation" (1994) draws attention to the way that "The Critic as Artist," in its original title ("The True Function and Value of Criticism"), and in its playful approach to a variety of subjects, echoes and elaborates the spirit and content of Matthew Arnold's value of
“the free play of the mind upon all subjects” as advanced in his essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” This gives an English lineage to the expression, if not the instinct, of Wilde’s play-spirit. Although, as Wisenthal notes in passing, both Arnold and Wilde are criticizing “the intellectual deficiencies of the English,” I would argue that both are doing so as Englishmen themselves: Arnold because he was of the nationality, and Wilde from the position of an assumed identity. The outer mask of that identity, as represented by the characters in the dialogue, is obviously not Irish: Gilbert and Ernest are English names, in a London setting, whose conversation, when it touches on specifics, is much concerned with topical English references. One would not associate their languid tones with the purposeful cries from the heart of Irish nationalism at that time. Nor does the second layer of identity reveal an Irish accent; the voice which speaks through these puppets does so from a position created by Wilde for himself, somewhere between the inherited aristocracy of English social rank and the invented aristocracy of artistic hauteur.

Likewise, we have seen a certain relish for legal contestation identified as an Irish trait, but Wilde himself may not have wished to be reminded of it as such, since his own family had at best had very mixed experiences in the courtrooms of Ireland. He seems far more likely to have attached a sense of glamour to the English legal spectacle, into which intriguing questions of artistic merit had recently found their way. Neither Whistler nor Ruskin was Irish, but the legal confrontation between them was not without wit as a colour-element, if only because of Whistler’s reputation, and it may even be said to have involved an element of play, in so far as it required the transposition of tangible and intangible tokens of value. This development in the English cultural context seems just as plausible a source of inspiration for Wilde’s legal adventure as does anything in the Irish courtroom tradition. London, not Dublin, was the
chosen theatre for Wilde’s legal performance; it was the British, not the Irish public, with which he was engaged.

Furthermore, although we can point to the oppositional spirit as a characteristic of Irish culture, and we can name Oscar Wilde as one of its inheritors, again we must remind ourselves that a flourishing spirit of opposition to established values, a kind of artistic counter-culture, was already in place in England and continental Europe before Wilde began his career, and that the anti-middle-class, anti-industrial values of this feature of the zeitgeist can also be detected in Wilde’s attitudes and writing. How then to distinguish between the impress of his childhood and youth in Ireland, and that of the powerful forces to which he became attracted on his arrival in England? The question is made all the more interesting by a certain similarity between modes of cultural rebellion in Irish history, and the antinomian roles espoused more and more by English and continental artists in the nineteenth century. Witness the following peroration against the Gaelic poets of the 1590s, in Spenser’s View:

[These Irish Bards] …so farre from instructinge yonge men in morrall discipline… they seldom use to Chose out themselues the doinges of good men for the argumentes of theire poems but whom soever they finde to be moste Licentious of life moste bolde and lawles in his doinges most daungerous and desperate in all partes of disobedience and rebellious disposicion him they set up and glorify in theire Rhymes him they praise to the people and to yonge men make an example to follow. (125)

This striking description of the poets in rebellion is replete with ironies, not the least of which is that Philip Sidney not long before had felt obliged to take pen to paper to defend English poets against similar charges of immorality:¹² how convenient for Spenser, to have the
Irish towards whom to direct those opprobrious energies. Yet above all, how closely Spenser’s sixteenth-century description of Irish rebel poets seems to fit the bohemian artist of three hundred years later in England, France, or America. How like the poètes maudits are the Irish bards, in the reckless desperation of their lifestyles! How like the rebels of the Yellow Nineties, in their refusal to accept the imposition of an oppressive moral system on their art! If the nineteenth-century critics of English culture might roughly be divided into two kinds: those who, like Ruskin and Arnold, preached against the shortcomings of society while remaining indubitably committed members of it, and the others, like Byron and Shelley, and, for a time at least, Swinburne, who underlined their criticisms with lifestyles of flagrant rebellion, then Wilde seems to belong in the latter category. Although he sometimes adorned his critical positions with Arnoldian and Ruskinian sermonics, Wilde’s free play of the mind went further to imply a divorce between art and morality; and as time went by the hidden aspects of his lifestyle came more and more into the light, so that in terms of his fate he seems more like Verlaine, or Rimbaud, than Arnold or Ruskin. But by suggesting that Wilde’s ultimate identification is with the artist/poet as outcast in the nineteenth century, we are placing him also with those earlier Irish filidhe who, to the English, belonged beyond the pale, in moral as well as literal terms. Another similarity is in Wilde’s combining of the roles of the poet and the aristocrat; as the histories of Gaelic society reveal, the social rank of the bards was close to that of the chiefs themselves. After the collapse of the old order in the seventeenth century, many of them fled along with their leaders to exile in France and other European countries, and though some eventually flourished, others, like Wilde, ended their days in exile more or less in a condition of beggary.
To compare the turbid outlines of Wilde’s dismissal from society with the fate of “The Wild Geese” may seem to some like an insult to the nobler tragedy of Irish history. But both had fallen foul of English society in one way or another. In Spenser’s condemnation of the Irish poets, we have already seen that the Elizabethan goal of dominating the Irish was accompanied by a kind of moral aggression, and we know from Sidney that the “crime” of encouraging immorality was one which had also been preferred more weakly against the English poets. Similarly, Wilde was made an example of for crimes which had gone unpunished in England up until then, though common enough, especially among the aristocracy. In its results also this procedure has many historical parallels; for like so many English judgments of the Irish, it rebounded sooner or later to the discredit of the society which had passed the judgment.  

We can see that the oppositional tilt of the nineteenth-century artist/intellectual, in particular of this kind, also has something strangely in common with the centuries-old Irish cultural rebellion, in the flagrancy of its defiance at the very least. Small wonder then perhaps, that one critic, John Wilson Foster, is also inclined to see a response to Spenser in Wilde:

One is tempted to remark that Spenser’s dialogue on the contemporary state of Ireland is answered three centuries later by the Irishman Oscar Wilde, in whose dialogue *The Critic as Artist* (1890) Eudoxus and Irenius become Ernest and Gilbert and in which there are pungent observations on the present degenerate state of England and the claim that it is the cultivated Celt who leads in art.  

Earlier in this section I identified an oppositional cast of mind as part of the inheritance of being Irish, and suggested that Wilde had transposed his own version of it to the cultural politics of the English and European scenes. I suggested for example that “The Decay of
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Lying” might be read partly as an ironic reflection of the centuries of English critical observation which had characterized the Irish as untruthful. John Wilson Foster’s comment suggests that a similar kind of subversive cultural mirroring may be perceived in “The Critic as Artist”. We have seen how other critics, (Mercier and Wisenthal), have discussed the “play-spirit” as one of the characteristics of Wilde and his writing, with Mercier finding it in an Irish, and Wisenthal in an English, setting. One of the aims of the present thesis is to extrapolate the key elements and influences of both compositions: and the question remains of whether we can discover a unifying framework within which to encompass the different approaches, by applying the perspective of an orality/literacy contrast. I will demonstrate why on the whole, while not inclined to disagree at all with Foster’s inspiration about The Critic as Artist, I find it to be the more English, or at least the less Irish, of the two texts, and, comparably, to be the less informed by oral principles of the two; although both, certainly, are works of and about orality in several important respects.

1 Ransome 101.
2 “... [T]he English helped to invent Ireland, in much the same way as Germans contributed to the naming and identification of France. Through many centuries, Ireland was pressed into service as a foil to set off English virtues, as a as a laboratory in which to conduct experiments, and as a fantasy-land in which to meet fairies and monsters.” – Declan Kiberd, Inventing Ireland, Intro., p.1. Kiberd points out that Ireland was invented also by the Irish themselves, at home and abroad (1-3).
3 Kiberd identifies the character of Captain Macmorris in Henry V as one of the first examples: “In Shakespeare’s rudimentary portrait are to be found those traits of garrulity, pugnacity, and a rather unfocused ethnic pride which would later signalize the stage Irishman...” (Inventing Ireland, 13). See also J.O. Bartley, “The Development of a Stock Character: The Stage Irishman to 1800,” MLR, 27, (1942), 438-47. Bartley indicates a change in the representation of the stage-Irishman as a talker, from boastful braggart captain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the blundering perpetrator of “Irish bulls” in the eighteenth. A parallel tradition exists in prose works, but in it I note a greater respect for the language skills and quick-wittedness of the Irish, beginning with Spenser’s sense of them as “cautelous and wily-headed” and emerging especially in nineteenth century descriptions like those of Trollope and Thackeray. Trollope found, for example, “the [Irish] working classes to be much more intelligent than those of England” (An Autobiography, 59), and Thackeray was struck by the intelligence and eloquence of even the children on the streets: “I think, in walking the streets, and looking at the ragged urchins crowding there, every Englishman must agree that the superiority of intelligence is here, and not with us... Does the reader remember his school-days, when half-a-dozen lads in the bedrooms took it by turns to tell stories? How poor the language was, and how exceedingly poor the imagination! Both of these ragged Irish lads had the making of gentlemen, scholars, orators in them” (Irish Sketch Book, 108). Even the Anglo-Irish, although frequently
demonstrating their own gifts of eloquence to English audiences, remained in awe of the natural talents of the native population: “The Irish nation, from the highest to the lowest, in daily conversation about the ordinary affairs of life, employ a superfluity of wit, metaphor, and ingenuity, which would be astonishing and unintelligible to a majority of the respectable body of English yeomen. Even the cutters of turf and drawers of whisky are orators; even the cottiers and gossoons speak in trope and figure” - Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, *Essay on Irish Bulls*, (1802). One hundred years later, Violet Martin (of Somerville and Ross) seems still to be echoing Spenser when she writes to Lady Gregory: “[Y]ou know, and no one better, what the power of repartee and argument is among such as these. It is inimitable in my opinion, I mean that no one who is not one of themselves can invent it…” from Gifford Lewis, *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M.* Quoted in Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 70.

1 Ong (1971) associates the Romantic Movement with “the beginning of the end of the old orality-grounded rhetoric.” According to Kiberd (1994), the persistence of oral modes in Gaelic-speaking Ireland can be attributed to the relative scarcity of Gaelic printing-presses in the eighteenth century, when “England was undergoing an Industrial Revolution and a massive growth in towns, as Fielding produced his masterpieces for the expanding middle class. In Ireland, speakers of the native language still told the old romantic tales, which were filled with supernatural wonders and were recited in public to a credulous audience. The European novel, on the other hand, was a realistic account of everyday life, to be read in silence and in private by the sceptical, solitary reader” (341). 2 Shaw: “There is no Irish race any more than there is an English race or a Yankee race. There is an Irish climate, which will stamp an immigrant more deeply and durably in two years, apparently, than the English climate will in two hundred.” (“Preface for Politicians,” xi). Whatever the cause, even as far back as the time of Elizabeth the First, English colonial officials were complaining that the original Anglo-Norman settlers, who theoretically should have remained loyal to the Crown, had become “more Irish than the Irish themselves.”

5 In Charles Kingsley’s *Westward Ho*, for example, which is loosely based on the historical record, the normally decisive English military commanders become trapped in a bog of moral uncertainty in Ireland, over questions of how to distinguish friend from foe, soldier from civilian, and the result is a culpable massacre of prisoners on their part, with an accompanying sense of guilt - a pattern which has repeated itself in English-Irish relations, even to this day, in Northern Ireland. One of Kingsley’s sources was almost certainly Edmund Spenser’s *View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596), which includes a defensive discussion of the incident. Spenser’s *View* is in many respects a compendium of developing English attitudes and stereotypes about Irish culture, including a powerful sense of ambivalence and uncertainty, evident in the following lines on the first page: Mary soe theare haue byne diuere good plottes devised and wise Councells cast allreadye about reformacion of that realme, but they saie yt is the fatall destinie of that Lande that no purposes whatsoeuer are mente for her good, will, prosper or take good effecte, which wheather it proceed from the very Genius of the soile, or influence of the starres, or that Allmighty god hath not yeat appointed the tyme of her reformacion or that he reserueth her in this vnquiet state still, for some secreete skourge, which shall by her Come vnto Englande it is harde to be knowen but yeat muche to be feared/ The historian Froude ventured the comment that “the Irish had disowned the facts of life, and the facts of life had proved the strongest” (Qtd. in Sullivan, p.39). Anthony Trollope, perhaps because he was a novelist rather a historian, or perhaps because he spent some of the happiest years of his life in Ireland, seems almost to have intended a compliment when he described the Irish as “but little bound by the love of truth.” (Autobiography 60).

6 From a fragmentary essay on the Athenian authors: cited in Modern Eloquence, 10, xxvi. Coincidentally, Ong (1982) suggests that Macaulay is one of those English authors in whose work traces of residual orality can still be clearly perceived (158).

7 In the 1850s Renan described the early literacy of Ireland as follows: “Especially is it forgotten that this little people, now concentrated on the very confines of the world, in the midst of rocks and mountains whence its enemies have been powerless to force it, is in possession of a literature which, in the Middle Ages, exercised an immense influence, changed the current of European civilization, and imposed its poetical motives on nearly the whole of Christendom” (*Poetry of the Celtic Races*, 2). Such assertions were taken up by Kuno Meyer and others, with scholarly research into ancient Irish manuscripts: “Slowly… the fact is becoming recognized in ever wider circles that the vernacular literature of ancient Ireland is the most primitive and original among the literatures of Western Europe…” *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry.* (London 1913, repr.1994). <http://www.ucc.ie/ce/t/earlypoetry.html>

8 Meyer, Kuno. Ibid.
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10 E.g., in *The Muse Learns to Write*, by Eric Havelock (Yale UP, 1986). The dialogue form employed by Spenser may be seen, like that of Plato, as another sign of this transitive stage. Likewise, as suggested in an earlier footnote, a text such as Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poetry* can be read as a protest at the erosion of oral cultural values.


12 Sidney finds it necessary to engage in a lot of nimble verbal footwork to guide poetry over to the right side of the moral equation of his own times. Taken alone, this almost has a stirring quality; but when compared to the images of full-blooded bardic rebellion evoked by Spenser’s description, this aspect of Sidney’s *Defense* begins to seem like mincing stuff.

13 For that matter, we might reverse the dates, and for the 1590s read the 1950s, bringing to mind the likes of Ginsberg, Kerouac, et al

14 Names like Hennessy (cognac) and MacMahon (one of Napoleon’s generals, after whom Rue General MacMahon in Paris is named) are among the reminders of the part their immigration played in the development of the French nation

15 The process continues to this day: one has only to look at the controversial cases which have arisen in the past few years out of the chaos in Northern Ireland.

A caricature of Mahaffy after the Davis Centenary incident in 1914 (from *A Book of Caricatures* by V. L. O'Connor; published by Tempēst, Dundalk)
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“A Pregnant Irish Bull”: J.P. Mahaffy and the Politics of Orality

The previous section contained an outline of some of the historical circumstances of Ireland, especially those which contributed to the construction of a national stereotype of the Irish as talkers, which can arguably be said to have played a part in the formation of Oscar Wilde’s self-construction. Now we shall examine the more immediate influence of the household of Wilde’s parents, wherein many of these contextual elements of Irish life and character were given specific expression and animation, and where we find the advanced literacy which was the privilege of wealth and status combined in a very Hibernian way with an eager orality, a passion for wit and conversation. We shall then see how in Wilde’s case certain of these influences of the national and family milieu were reinforced by the figure of J.P. Mahaffy, who participated in the salons of his parents, and who later became his tutor at Trinity. His crucial role in Wilde’s development has never been fully expounded: but I shall argue, for example, that Mahaffy wrote and practised what I call a politics of orality, derived in part from conscious reflections on his experience in the Wilde family salons, and that this “philosophy of talk” played a major part in determining the masks or personae which Wilde adopted in his career in England, and is traceable also throughout Wilde’s written work, in particular in "The Decay of Lying."

I. An Oral Civilization

Details of the domestic world into which Wilde was born have emerged more fully and vividly in recent years. They confirm, firstly, what was already understood somewhat vaguely by the majority of people, namely, the rich social and cultural accomplishments of both of his parents. These we can easily imagine to have played a crucial role in the formation of the
unique symbiosis of orality and literacy which became Wilde's personality. On the one hand, each of his parents was renowned for vocal prowess: Sir William was said to read aloud beautifully, as well as to have been an excellent storyteller in his own right, and to have been capable of dominating the conversation around his dinner table - to which were invited many of the most illustrious Dubliners of his day (Coakley 35-7, 39). His son Oscar was sometimes present on these occasions, and may have had the image of his father in mind when he later observed, in A Woman of No Importance, that “a man who can dominate the London dinner table can dominate the world”(CW 493). Speranza, Oscar’s mother, was in her turn the reigning queen of the literary salons which were held in the house, and at which many of the same guests made their appearance. One of those guests recorded that Speranza’s talk “was like fireworks – brilliant, whimsical, and flashy.”¹ We may choose to see in some elements of this description a prefiguration of the accolade accorded to Oscar’s talk, after his death, by his loyal friend Robert Ross: “He was indeed a conjuror. To talk with him was to be translated to an enchanted island or to the palaces of the Fata Morgana. You could not tell what flowers were at your feet or what fantastic architecture was silhouetted against the purple atmosphere of his conversation.”² When W.B. Yeats refers to Wilde’s parents, (he knew Speranza later in her life,) we find him, as we have come to expect, again drawing attention to the oral/aural modes: “When one listens to her and remembers that Sir William Wilde was in his day a famous raconteur, one finds it in no way wonderful that Oscar Wilde should be the most finished talker of our time.”³

Yeats’s use of the word “finished” also provides us with a clue to the literary dimension of the accomplishments of Wilde’s parents. Both of them were published authors: Sir William of respected medical treatises as well as works of Irish archaeology, and Lady
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Wilde of translations from French and German and a collection of Irish folklore, not to mention the impassioned verses with which she stirred the hearts of Irish nationalists. Their conversation, especially on designated social occasions, would certainly have reflected at least some of the studied character of their chirographic disciplines, and it was this deeply literate kind of orality with which the child Oscar would correspondingly have been imbued. Indeed his parents may have been responsible for the first formation of those mimetic and condensatory powers of intellect for which Wilde was well known later in life - his habit of distilling the more laboured thought and expression of others into concise and playful forms which, while retaining the intellectual content of the originals, yet lent themselves readily to oral transmission. (This habit was sometimes misinterpreted in the more chirographic atmosphere of English society as a tendency to plagiarism.) The appearance of this educated and literate quality in Wilde’s conversation seems to be what Yeats has in mind in his reference to Wilde as a “finished” talker.

But it would not have been the voices of his parents alone which left such strong impressions on young Oscar’s mind. The immediate family was simply the centre of a number of widening circles of conversation. The first of these would have consisted of the domestic servants of the Wilde household – six in number, at the principal residence in Merrion Square. Even here the seeds of Wilde’s later cosmopolitanism can be discerned in the sounds of European voices, for the servants included a German governess and a French bonne, who taught the children their respective languages. (The writing of Salome may be seen as one of the eventual results of Wilde’s early instruction in French.) We do not know whether the young Oscar might have absorbed some of the dialects or inflections of the people of his own country, either through the influence of Irish domestic servants, or otherwise. Although
insulated from the miseries of the Irish rural population by the wealth and status of his parents, he nevertheless had some contact with the peasantry, having spent time at his father’s fishing lodge at Illaunroe, Co. Galway, and having sometimes accompanied his father on the latter’s archaeological jaunts in the area. (Wilde would later cite this as a credential when angling for an Archaeology Studentship at Oxford.) Sir William Wilde had expressed his sympathy for the plight of the Irish after the Famine, in some of his writings, and Speranza had taken such sentiments even further, into the publication of her fiery verse denunciations of the English occupation. But there is no evidence that Wilde had any experience akin to that of another eminent Irish writer, John M. Synge, who was to recall with gratitude the role played by a female country servant in the formation of his own literary sensibility, made visible in the rich country argot of *The Playboy of the Western World*. The preponderant influence on Oscar seems rather to have come not from domestic staff but from the brilliant social circle with which his parents surrounded themselves.

Dublin had been more or less abandoned by the Irish Aristocracy since the Act of Union in 1800 which transferred the seat of government to London, and the resulting social vacuum was filled by the educated and professional classes, which appear to have been culturally energized by the resulting sense of elevation. At any of the numerous salons and entertainments held at various houses on Merrion Square, especially that of the Wildes, might have been counted medical specialists such as Sir William Wilde and William Stokes (both of them also passionate antiquarians,) the famous mathematician (and inventor of quaternions) William Rowan Hamilton, poets and translators like Samuel Ferguson and Speranza, and a variety of Trinity dons and assorted international visitors, including well-known artists and even specimens of European royalty. Social and intellectual activity was somewhat hectic even
at the quotidian level. According to one source, “the great doctors entertained each other and
dined out almost every night with judges, lawyers, or eminent government officials. Wit and
anecdote circulated with the port.”6 In the Wilde household the young Oscar was often the
witness, and perhaps more importantly the auditor, of this stimulating society. “There is no
doubt,” according to another source, “that the brilliant epigrams in *Intentions, Lady
Windermere’s Fan*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* sprang up naturally in the mind of
one who was brought up in the atmosphere of Dublin in the days when Irish society was
unrivalled for its spontaneous wit.”7 In the first biographical notice of Wilde, published in
1888 when he was still only twenty six years old, we seem to hear his own voice confirming
these impressions:

Mr. Wilde was constantly with his father and mother, always among grown-up
persons, and, at eight years old, had heard every subject discussed and every
creed defended and demolished at his father’s dinner table, where were to be
found not only the brilliant genius of Ireland, but also celebrities of Europe and
America that visited Dublin. He considers that the best of his education in
boyhood was obtained from this association with his father and mother and
their remarkable friends.8

For me the operative word of this description is “heard.” It confirms that Wilde’s primary
introduction to the intellectual world was aural and sounded aloud, rather than documentary,
visual and silent. Another account by one who knew Wilde later in life (Robert H. Sherard),
although it suggests the influence of other factors, confirms the main theme:

From his earliest childhood his principal companions were his father and
mother and their friends. Now wandering about Ireland with the former in quest
of archaeological treasures, now listening in Lady Wilde's salon to the wit and thought of Ireland.... He had, of course, tutors, and the run of a library containing the best literature, and went to a Royal School; but it was at his father's dinner table and in his mother's drawing-room that the best of his early education was obtained.\footnote{9}

It is evident that in spite of the literate elements in the setting, the silent, chirographic, detailed and documentary form of education which we associate with solitary scholarship and book-learning was not the primary mode in which Oscar Wilde learned to learn. He would more likely have internalized the distilled, animated, audience-conscious oral modes of those who surrounded him in real time. We must remember again, however, that the talk to which Wilde listened was, in spite of the compression, spontaneity, and sometime imprecision of the oral medium, talk of a highly literate kind, informed by the lore of chirographic repositories. He, who had as yet read little, was fed through the channels of the ear the redacted contents of libraries and the nodal points of political and intellectual issues, a diet of predigested knowledge spiced with the aspiration towards witticism which was the characteristic ingredient of such Irish conversation. It does not seem amiss to describe that cultural milieu as a kind of an oral civilization, and Oscar Wilde as its inheritor.

The fact that books came to Wilde in this manner, more or less in the form of living people, so early in his life, may account for the persistent tendency to anthropomorphize art and literature which reveals itself in his mature sensibility. The most obvious example is the painting which takes on the entropic characteristics of an organic being in \textit{The Picture of Dorian Gray}, but for Wilde texts also have an extra dimension of existence: the process of corrupting Dorian which is set in motion by the person of Lord Henry Wotton is continued by
the book which Lord Henry sends him (*A Rebours*, by Huysmans) “Cheap editions of great books may be delightful, but cheap editions of great men are absolutely detestable,” announces Vivian in “The Critic as Artist” (*AC* 342), implying that the ontological status of a human being and a book are easily comparable. Indeed in another instance the books have the upper hand entirely: Wilde was fond of remarking, about one of his favourite authors: “A steady course of Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades.” This is entirely consistent with his playful insistence on the supremacy of art, over nature and life itself, in the creation of imaginative reality; and it reminds us also that Wilde was always conscious of the dominant role of internal rather than external processes in creating that individual sense of reality. “The question we should always ask someone is, not ‘what have you been doing?’ but ‘what have you been thinking?’” was his advice to partygoers. His insistence on the high artistic value of autobiography, near the beginning of “The Critic as Artist,” conveys a similar message:

> But I must confess that I like all memoirs...In literature mere egotism is delightful ... Even in actual life egotism is not without its attractions.

> When people talk to us about others they are usually dull. When they talk to us about themselves they are nearly always interesting, and if one could shut them up, when they become wearisome, as easily as one can shut up a book of which one has grown wearied, they would be perfect absolutely. (*AC* 342)

As this passage, and the remarks on Balzac, suggest, a sensibility which raises the being-status of books might also wish to lower that of real persons at times; and indeed this might be taken as a clue to a certain area of coldness or alienation in Wilde’s personality. It was probably this
quality in him which infuriated some of those whom he met socially, and turned them against him, and made them glad of his disgrace and downfall. One senses that he did not respect the ordinary politics of conversation. No doubt this was due in part to the natural impatience of his genius with the social perquisites of upper-class English bores; but it might also tell us that a part of him at any salon was forever the child in his father's house in Dublin, listening with a child's sense of calm dissociation to the conversational gambits of the invited guests, and perhaps hearing them judged and dissected afterwards too.

The influence of Speranza's conversation and ideas on her son seems especially marked throughout his life. A sentiment expressed in her early days as a bride and young mother, when she experienced a sense of tedium about the nature of some of her guests, already suggests some of the attitude later adopted by her son in "The Decay of Lying: "They deal in facts too much. I can be overwhelmed with knowledge any minute I like on every fact of creation" (Coakley 40). Speranza was an admirer of Disraeli's technique of reversing well-known idioms to create paradoxical effects in his novels (Coakley 40), and it is notable that in her later espousal of such methods she has transposed them from literature to conversation: "epigram is always better than argument in conversation, and paradox is the very essence of social wit and brilliancy; the unexpected, the strange combination of opposites, the daring subversion of some ancient platitude, are all keen social weapons" (Coakley 48). One should be aware, however, that these sentiments were published in 1893, by which time her son was already famous for the practice of such precepts. One could argue, nevertheless, that Oscar and his mother took it in turn to champion each other's views.

Above all, Speranza seems to have been the first to pass on to her son a certain complex of feelings and ideas about the nature of poetry and the role of the poet, and indeed he
told the American writer Mary Watson that it was his mother who had inspired him to become a poet (Coakley 40). According to Yeats, Speranza herself had experienced a kind of epiphany about poetry when as a young woman in Dublin her way was blocked by an enormous funeral procession. Told it was for Thomas Davis, but not recognizing the name, she asked who he had been, and was answered “a poet!” This moment seems to have crystallized for her a sense of the exaltation of the role of the poet in society which throughout his life Oscar would dwell upon and try to advance. In that sense at least, the conception of Oscar Wilde can be said to have taken place at the funeral of Thomas Davis; and a measure of the passion Speranza instilled in her son for such values may be found in the story told of him at Trinity, that when a bully sneered at a poem he had read aloud, Oscar flew into an uncharacteristic rage, responded with a blow, and surprised everyone by his victory in the ensuing fight (Mikhail 1, 2).

It is well for us to remember, however, that the poetry of Davis and other Young Irelanders with which Speranza had imbued herself was in turn derived from sources outside as well as inside of Ireland. As Yeats put it later, the poets of Young Ireland “mingled a little learned from the Gaelic ballad-writers with a great deal learned from Scott, Macaulay, and Campbell.”¹² Neither should we neglect to imagine the general influence of English Romantic poets on conceptions of the poet among persons of education and sensibility in Speranza’s time – an influence which was heightened by the recognition that in their revolutionary fervour some of them were equally the enemies of the English establishment, and indeed had identified with the Irish cause on occasion.¹³ If one thinks for example of Shelley’s brief foray into Ireland, where he hoped to rouse the mob to revolution, and his famous declaration that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, and if one imagines such elements in combination with the national and other factors just mentioned, one begins perhaps to get
some idea not only of the potency of the image of poetry which Speranza passed down to her son, but also of the multiplicity of its sources. The ancestors of Oscar the poet are to be found in the universe of literature rather than in the single nation of Ireland: the only occasions on which he is known to have erupted in spontaneous violence were over issues of poetry not of politics, Irish or otherwise, although as time went by, the elements of orality which were so pronounced in his local inheritance would distinguish him more and more sharply and combatively from an English culture which was trending in the opposite direction.

Poetry, for Speranza, entailed not only the anti-colonial attitudes embodied in her early verse, but also a general credo of anti-factual values. It is my contention that the split between the spirit of fact and of imagination, which was to some extent synonymous in Irish (and English) minds with the psychic divisions between the English and the Irish, can also at times be mapped onto an oral/chirographic divide. Written documentation was the embodiment of unequal treaties of colonial conquest and official English claims to land title, which the Irish had worked on subverting for hundreds of years; orality was the refuge of alternative versions of history and possession, retained in memory and passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Thus it was that the Irish kept alive a spirit of resistance to the domination of “fact” by a resort to oral modes. Perhaps it is hardly surprising then that a visitor to 1 Merrion Square who found the bailiffs attempting to serve writs downstairs also discovered Speranza in a room upstairs, who then ostentatiously ignored the “men in possession” by reading aloud to her guest from the *Prometheus Vinctus* of Aeschylus! (Coakley 73). A similar spirit is reflected in her son’s life and work, most obviously in his own deliberately improvident financial management, but also in the critical positions towards society and literature which inform his works. “The Decay of Lying,” for example, is an attack on realism
in the arts ("realism as a method is a complete failure," which, as I demonstrate at the end of this chapter, is founded on an oral sensibility. In London later, when Wilde remarks that he and his mother have founded "a society for the suppression of virtue," it is obvious that they share a sceptical and subversive attitude towards the official meaning of such terms as "virtue." In that sense they are both what we would nowadays call social constructionists. So it is also that "The Decay of Lying" is dedicated to revealing the social construction of much of what was passing for reality in the Victorian mind, whether it was the character of London weather, or of Japanese society (in this respect, notes Wilde, "the Japanese as a people do not exist"), and it playfully overturns earnest moral notions about truth-values: but such interrogations of English constructions of meaning had been common in Ireland for centuries.¹⁴

II. “Speaking from the Page”

The profound influence of Speranza on her son’s thinking and behaviour will be taken up again when we come to an examination of Oscar’s relationship to the values of the classical past, but no treatment of the theme of Wildean/Irish/oral approaches to truth-values should be considered complete without an analysis of the influence, perhaps equally strong, of Wilde’s Trinity tutor J.P. Mahaffy, on the formation of the sensibility of his famous pupil.

Biographers and critics of Wilde and his work have never ignored Mahaffy completely (his official position as Wilde’s tutor at Trinity would rule that out), but neither have they ever recorded a full examination of Mahaffy’s possible influence on Wilde’s development. One of the reasons for this may be found in the nature of biography itself. “No details survive of Mahaffy’s relations with Wilde during his three years at T.C.D.” (Stanford and McDowell 39), a lacuna which scholarly biographers must find discouraging, since their work is by definition
obliged to attempt a correspondence with truth-values, and these, short of Divine revelation, are expected to rest on recorded evidence, chiefly of a documentary kind. Where none apparently exists, we are unlikely to find the topic given substantial treatment. This is particularly true as time passes: after the subject has departed, first from this life, and then from the living memory of family, friends, and acquaintances, the basic elements of biography become purely chirographic: all new texts are dependent on the texts which went before them, and are obliged to follow their evidence. Diligent research may uncover more of them, but it cannot, despite occasional claims to the contrary, establish direct contact with the deceased, or conduct any further viva voce inquiries: the door to the oral medium has closed forever. Strong motives do remain, of course, for the writing of new biographies. Every age, for one thing, wants to see all subjects of interest to it cast in the mold of its own thought; new documentary evidence can occasionally be found which alters former perspectives; and the application of new theoretical models may shed new forms of illumination on the evidence already existing.

In the case of Oscar Wilde almost all of the documentary evidence concerning his life and work has been exhaustively researched and re-presented, much of it in Ellmann’s prodigious biography, and although recently more details have emerged of his early life in Dublin, as we have begun to show, most of the biographical work around the subject of Wilde has quite naturally shifted to a consideration of the figures who represent the greatest influences in his life. Both of his parents have appropriately become the subjects of full-length studies, and in the summer of last year (2000) a wide range of journals featured reviews of a new life of Lord Alfred Douglas, which does indeed even offer new evidence, garnered from home Office prison records. It is surely only a matter of time before Mahaffy too receives some kind of extended treatment. In 1971 his sole biographers to date, Stanford and
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MacDowell, ventured a note of surprise in their introduction: “It is strange that a full account of Mahaffy’s life and work has not yet appeared, considering how often he is mentioned in other peoples’ memoirs” (xii). It is evident also that interest in Mahaffy need not depend on his connection with Wilde. “Historian and philosopher, man of letters and musician, conversationalist and controversialist, sportsman, publicist, diner-out and don – even among so versatile a race as the Irish and in an epoch so favorable as the Victorian, Mahaffy was outstanding” (xi).

The reasons for the neglect of his posthumous image may have been partly political, for Mahaffy had got himself on the wrong side of history with his outspoken defences of unionism and imperialism, even into the age when the nationalist narrative was rapidly becoming paramount in Southern Ireland. And as we have seen, the lack of scholarly commitment to an exploration of his influence on Wilde may be accounted for by a dearth of documentary sources. Very few scholars, however, have even tried to search for evidences of influence by a comparison of the written works of Mahaffy and Wilde, for reasons which are not so apparent, unless it be that Mahaffy, although a copious writer, is not a canonical figure like Arnold or Pater (whose pollinations of Wilde’s writings are the subject of individual studies), and that the majority of Mahaffy’s writings are on classical history and culture (an unfashionable subject nowadays), while the exciting developments of Wilde’s later career have tended to overshadow the ground in which his early ideas were rooted and fostered.

One of the purposes of the present study is to address the lacunae concerning Wilde and Mahaffy in a number of ways. It is my contention that a comparison of the details of the single biography of Mahaffy with those of the numerous available lives of Wilde can easily yield a host of parallels, too numerous and substantial to be ascribed only to coincidence; and
that a thoughtful reading of their respective written works will also reveal clear evidence of a
significant influence. I will focus on a single theme, that of the unique symbiosis of orality and
literacy which characterized the mind of each man, in order to dramatize certain powerful
similarities between them, and I will make use of Walter J. Ong’s outline of orality theory,
when appropriate, as a critical framework with which to reveal previously invisible aspects of
their relationship. The result may involve not only a new sense of some of their common
purposes and positions, but also a revised perspective on Mahaffy’s own cultural and political
reputation.

In the first chapter of this thesis the sensibility of Oscar Wilde was examined through
the prism of W.B. Yeats’s autobiographical and critical writings. Yeats’s persistent fascination
with Wilde’s prowess as a talker, and his frequent attempts to classify the nature of Wilde’s
linguistic gifts, in a time before the adumbration of an academic theory of orality, provided a
clear demonstration of the appropriateness of applying such a theory now to the study of
Wilde’s life and work. Yeats’s writings on Wilde would be sufficient in themselves to provide
a rationale for the approach taken in the present thesis. No such aesthetically acute observer
has endowed us with as sensitive a description of Mahaffy’s talents, however, and yet it is
abundantly clear from the available evidence that Mahaffy is at least an equally suitable
subject for the insights provided by a theory of orality.

In the first place Mahaffy was himself a talker of great repute - “the finest talker in
Europe,” according to Gogarty (Stanford and McDowell 66). Like Oscar Wilde’s parents and
Wilde himself, however, Mahaffy manifested the most striking characteristic of the educated
Irish, the dual linguistic talents of literacy and orality. He liked to characterize his university
lectures as a kind of “speaking from the page” (180), and although his chirographic output
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was immense, befitting the age in which he lived, it was marked by qualities which we can identify in retrospect, with the aid of Ong’s theory, as typical of the residually oral consciousness. “Primarily a scholar, he published so rapidly and profusely that for many years he incurred scathing criticism for lapses in accuracy and judgment” (x). Wilde would later be cited for the same fault, and in response he would follow Mahaffy in mounting philosophical attacks, particularly in “The Decay of Lying,” on the chirographic cult of accuracy.

Another oral trait for which Mahaffy was censured was his tendency to various kinds of personal and political digression in his academic works. Wilde would perhaps have approved of some of this tendency, since he thought highly of the autobiographical elements in writing (“in literature mere egotism is delightful”), but, mainly perhaps for political reasons, even he eventually took his old teacher to task for a persistent habit of inserting parallels between the period of ancient history under discussion, and the conditions of contemporary Ireland, faulting “his attempts to treat the Hellenic world as ‘Tipperary writ large,’ to use Alexander the Great as a means of whitewashing Mr. Smith, and to finish the battle of Chaeronea on the plains of Mitchelstown.”

Mahaffy may in some way have recognized his eccentricities in writing as the traces of an oral sensibility: his general observation in their defence was the question “Can the dry bones live?” (Stanford and McDowell 147). We are not dependent, however, on such implicit evidence alone, for among the many intellectual instincts which Mahaffy allowed to flourish in himself was a strong theoretical interest in oral/aural media. Numerous biographical details, such as his habit of transcribing (in musical notation) sounds which he heard on his travels, (“a cry of a muezzin at Luxor, the crowing of cocks in Athos monasteries”) plus the publication of two books, The Principles of the Art of Conversation, and The Decay of Modern Preaching,
are a sufficient testimony to his curiosity on the subject, which is one of the keys to understanding his overall sensibility, as well as his impact on his pupil Wilde. I will argue that in spite of their differences on issues such as the resolution of the Irish Question, the deep structures of their cultural politics are remarkably similar, and each is brought into conflict with the more dominant cultural modes of his time because of this.

By way of further demonstration of this point, it seems useful to begin touching upon some of the biographical facts which support the view of Mahaffy as an exponent of the spoken word, and which offer suggestive pointers to the nature of his links with Wilde.

III. "Know Nothing Accurately"

Born on 26 February 1839, John Pentland Mahaffy spent the first nine years of his life in Switzerland and in Kissingen, Germany, a fashionable spa, where his father was stationed as a Church of Ireland minister. Although he received no formal schooling in these countries, he was ably tutored at home by his parents, especially his mother; and his exposure to European languages (especially German) at this time was to stand him in good stead in his later years as a scholar and academic. His exposure to the pleasures of cultured conversation at this early age is equally striking. "[I]f the Mahaffy home was characterized by serious piety, it was not dull. Nathaniel Mahaffy and his wife were both good talkers and enjoyed social life. There was a constant stream of visitors, German, English, and Irish, to their house"(Stanford and McDowell 3). In this respect the role of Mahaffy in Wilde’s life has its origins in the same kind of social milieu as that which Oscar absorbed as a child. In his childhood Mahaffy was likewise frequenting a lively and exalted conversational circle. Among his recorded acquaintances of the time were the Tsarevitch – the future Alexander II of Russia – who took Mahaffy for a walk in order to practise speaking English, and King Ludwig of Bavaria, who
apparently introduced the boy to his mistress of the time, an Irishwoman from Limerick improbably named Lola Montez (2). For the rest of his life Mahaffy was a gleeful snob, once referring to the King of Greece as “Quite the nicest king I know” (36), and this was a trait which he seems to have reinforced in Oscar Wilde.

Like Oscar Wilde after him, Mahaffy was exposed in the course of his childhood to the linguistic world of the native Irish. A decline in rental revenues from Ireland due to the Potato Famine forced the Mahaffys to return to their Monaghan estate in 1848, where the young John Pentland first made the acquaintance of the social charms of the Irish peasantry, and was first impressed by their natural conversational skill, to which he often made reference in his later work. From the brief memoir written at the end of his life his biographers have distilled the following observation: “It was a society in which conversation was one of the great sources of entertainment, family history providing a staple of talk, and stories about local heroes, reshaped in repetition, becoming legend” (9). A delight in storytelling, and a mastery of the technique, emerge from the biography as marked traits of Mahaffy’s personality; among the recollections of one of his listeners we can even detect an indication of a particular balance of literacy and orality perhaps not unlike Wilde’s: “The wonder and power of the [fish] story lay in the spaced sentences and subdued stress with which the Provost recited it amid the foam-streaked shallows of Lough Derg” (65). That notation was found among the private papers of Sir Shane Leslie; but in “spaced sentences and subdued stress” we seem to hear an echo of the “perfect rounding” and “deliberation” or “the effect of metre” noted by Yeats in his analysis of Wilde as a “finished talker.”

After a period of struggling to make ends meet in Monaghan, the Mahaffys found it more convenient to remove to Dublin, where by the age of fourteen, still without any formal
schooling, John was already well versed in the Bible and the classics in Greek and Latin, and was becoming absorbed in two of the works which were among the most profound and lasting in their influence on his thought – Grote’s *History of Greece* and Whately’s *Elements of Logic*. Once again, however, the reception of influence was enhanced by an oral dynamic; Whately, while Archbishop of Dublin, was “renowned for his puns, conundrums, hard-hitting retorts and pungent conversation... [which]... had a lasting effect on Dublin manners” (Stanford and McDowell 12,13). Mahaffy was well aware of Whately’s social impact, and we shall shortly see him discussing it in terms of a kind of theory of orality, in a speech to the students of Alexandra College. Meanwhile, as a young teenager he further nourished his susceptibility to the arts of speech by frequent attendance at evangelical sermons, especially those of the Irish preachers, whose oratorical power he was to recall decades later, in *The Decay of Modern Preaching*, (1882), a work which represents another of his spirited attempts to explore the principles of oral discourse through the medium of written reflection.

Mahaffy’s written productions, in all their copiousness and variety, appeared in the course of his long association with T.C.D., which he entered at the age of sixteen as a student, and from which he retired some sixty years later, having spent his final years in fulfillment of his ambition to reign as College Provost. It was through his successful Trinity career that Mahaffy became acquainted with the most eminent circles in Ireland, including those of the Wilde household.

We may think of Speranza as the den-mother of Wilde’s oral consciousness; but it seems that the greatest part of its paternity should be attributed to Mahaffy. Although only fifteen years Wilde’s senior, Mahaffy was old enough to participate in the salons of the Wilde parents as an adult, and indeed we shall see that he absorbed the influence of one of the key
figures from those gatherings, which he in turn re-presented to Oscar in his capacity as his Trinity tutor and general mentor. Oscar was therefore twice the recipient of a certain congeries of ideas and attitudes, concerning speech and writing, conversation and scholarship – at one period, from the guests, including Mahaffy, in his parents’ home, and later from Mahaffy in particular in his role as Oscar’s Trinity tutor. Mahaffy never abandoned some of the preoccupations he developed during his exposure to the Wilde salons, and traces of these remain strongly registered in the life and work of his most prominent pupil. In fact, we will see Wilde reacting directly to Mahaffy’s fascination with the subject of conversation as late as 1887, and indirectly in his subsequent writings, in particular “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist” produced the following year. Remarkably also, Mahaffy even elected to play an interventionist role during Wilde’s education in Oxford, virtually raiding that university to carry Wilde off with him on a tour of Greece, a caper which was not accepted with equanimity by the Oxford authorities. We shall see that this interlude, and the reactions to it, may also be interpreted along oral/chirographic cultural fault lines.

I have suggested already that Mahaffy probably reinforced Wilde’s snobbish inclinations. It is unclear from Ong’s book whether historical studies have clearly established affinities between primarily oral societies and an aristocratic social order (and its correlative, a link between literacy and democracy). At any rate Mahaffy’s exuberant attachment to social success would obviously not have been transmitted so much through the official written curriculum as through the immediate influence of personality – through the conversations and social activities which filled out his tutorship role, and as it happens there is an anecdote which Mahaffy liked to tell of himself that reveals the interaction of sight/literacy and sound/orality.
in the composition of his own sensibility, as well as in the transmission of social cachet at the
time.

As he was sitting with a friend from the British embassy in an Athenian
restaurant, a stout, elderly woman, dowdily dressed in total black, and
obviously of unimpeachable bourgeois respectability, came in. His friend
nudged him excitedly and whispered ‘Look! Look!’ ‘Why should I look at
her?’ Mahaffy asked. ‘She is plain and unprepossessing.’ ‘She is Byron’s Zoe,’
was the reply. (Stanford and McDowell 35)

Within the story itself the attribute of glamour, the aura of legend, is triggered by the sounded
name. The sight which is before the speakers is not thought of as significant in itself (“Why
should I look at her?”); it operates as contrast, either to undermine the original legend, or, a
more likely interpretation, to prepare another layer of meaning, perhaps a more general
reflection on the ravages of time on living flesh. The voyeuristic values which are taken for
granted (the story would lend itself nicely to theories which harp on the evils of the “male
gaze”), are nevertheless subsumed within the overall form, which is essentially oral. When the
original incident becomes a story, a speech act which describes someone’s visual appearance is
contrasted with another which is the act of dropping a name, and of the two, the latter is shown
to be of a far greater resonance: the oral/aural dimension reigns supreme over the world of
appearances. However it is a complex and educated form of orality which is presented and re-
presented here, because what we are calling the resonance of the name “Zoe,” while it is
merely enriched by the visual element, is also intertwined with and dependent on the world of
chirographic literacy – “Byron’s Zoe.” In this instance of storytelling the enjoyment and
appreciation to be experienced by the auditors is keyed to their knowledge of Byron’s life and
work, and therefore it belongs in the genre of literary orality which could be called the academic folktale.\textsuperscript{17}

It is hardly to be wondered at that Wilde as a Trinity undergraduate would have been attracted to the company of a don who produced such conversation, so sprinkled with the stardust of royal and celebrated names, and seemingly pregnant also with some form of moral and philosophical reflection (it was Mahaffy who originated the quip that the characteristic of an “Irish bull” was that it was always pregnant). Wilde was described by Shaw as “a snob to the marrow of his being, having been brought up in Merrion Square” (Ellmann 273-4). What Shaw’s comment seems to miss is the child-like excitement associated with social adventure in Wilde’s mind, a zest which probably owes its origin not only to the royal and fantastic inhabitants of the fairy tales which were read aloud to him as a child, but also to the real if occasional presence of distinguished guests in his own household, and the lively discussions of social status which must have ensued, especially among the newly-elevated professional classes of Dublin at the time. Yeats’s observation that to Wilde the British aristocracy had an exotic quality, like the caliph and nobles of Baghdad, perfectly captures the sense of continuing wonder and adventure, and yet not of inferiority, which was the endowment of the early days on Merrion Square, and later of his conversations with Mahaffy.

Again we see that the infusion of this element of Wilde’s character would have taken place mainly along aural/oral lines, in the reading aloud and the discussions just mentioned. In fact an interesting feature of the phenomenon of social status in the modern era is the degree to which it is communicated in sound. Ceremonial and state occasions on which costumes are worn are relatively infrequent visual re-assertions of social rank and status. In most other circumstances, where aristocracy is indistinguishable by dress, placement is mainly confirmed
by the re-iteration of vocal utterance: “Lady So-and- So: how delightful to meet you again so soon.” “Good afternoon, Herr General.” Unlike visual display this form of recognition does not require the presence of the nominee: “I spoke to the Duchess about you yesterday.” The sounded name or title stands in for the person who is not present, and in so doing seems to partake a little of their actual existence: hence the association between sounded word and magical power in oral cultures. Wilde’s oral inheritance meant that he was fully alive to the residual magic in the utterance of names, and in his written works he often presented them with their numinous powers enhanced by the nomenclature of social status. His fairy tales are appropriately sprinkled with royal personages, as one might expect in that genre (“The Young King,” “The Happy Prince,” “The Birthday of the Infanta”); but even the social satire of his plays, designed one presumes for more worldly audiences, circulates largely in the mouths of lords and ladies, who almost invariably address each other according to form, so that aristocratic titles are constantly sounded aloud in the Wildean drama.18 (Of the sixteen characters in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, no less than nine are titled: similar proportions are revealed in *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance.*) As we noted in Chapter One, Yeats observed that Wilde “caught up phrases and adjectives for their own sake... and spoke them to others as though it were his duty to pass on some password, sign, or countersign”: however, by deploying aristocratic titles in a dramatic context whose overall tone is often almost farcical, Wilde does inject their sonorities with a certain satirical spin. Wilde’s consciousness of the voice and its nuances meant that he could speak lords and ladies into existence on the boards with a deliberate insinuation of the ultimate superiority of the artist who was their puppetmaster – hence also his evident pleasure, which some felt to be insolent,
in re-invoking that position by appearing before the audience after a performance (of *Lady Windermere's Fan*) and commenting on the audience's performance.

But Mahaffy too was exposed to the influence of the brilliant circle which surrounded Oscar’s parents, and in particular to the aegis of William Stokes, a close friend of Sir William Wilde’s, and a distinguished practitioner of medicine – and of wit. For this reason the impact of Mahaffy alone on Wilde is not always distinguishable from that of Wilde’s parents and their milieu, or from the atmosphere of Dublin and Ireland as a whole. But although we can only state the probability of a direct influence from William Stokes to the child Oscar in the salons of the Wilde parents, there is actually a linguistic provenance which is clearly traceable from William Stokes to Oscar Wilde through the mediation of Mahaffy, and this fits like a keystone into the architecture of Wilde’s literary orality. It may be summarized in the revelation that Mahaffy studied the art of conversation under William Stokes, and that the principles which he self-consciously derived from that study are traceable in his own writings, and in turn manifestly represented in some of the positions in Oscar Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying.”

According to Davis Coakley, himself a Trinity medical man, to whom I owe the suggestion of the link from Stokes to Mahaffy to Wilde:

[The young Mahaffy] was fascinated by Stokes’ conversational powers and he used to go for long walks with him near his country home at Howth. Stokes loved to mystify his dinner guests by his use of wit and paradox. Mahaffy went on to become one of the greatest and wittiest conversationalists of the last century, and in 1887 he wrote a book entitled *The Principles of the Art of Conversation*. (44)
As it turns out, one of the most important principles of this art expounded by Mahaffy concerns the avoidance of that pedantic exactitude with which bores are so often inclined to interrupt the natural flow of speech. Here is how he expresses it:

... there is such a thing in society – Aristotle saw it long ago – as being over-scrupulous in truthfulness. Even a consummate liar, though generally vulgar, and therefore offensive, is a better ingredient in a company than the scrupulously truthful man, who weighs every statement, questions every fact, and corrects every inaccuracy. In the presence of such a social scourge I have heard a witty talker pronounce it the golden rule of conversation to know nothing accurately. (78)

This passage by Mahaffy has connections backwards in time to the conversation of William Stokes, and forward to Wilde’s “Decay of Lying.” In the first place Coakley has shown that William Stokes must be the “witty talker” whom Mahaffy quoted, since Mahaffy attributed the same “golden rule of conversation” directly to Stokes in an obituary sketch which he wrote on him in 1878, as follows:19

I remember sitting beside him at dinner, when a scientific man of this kind was boring us with his talk. He turned to me, and said with emphasis: ‘there is one golden rule of conversation – know nothing accurately.’ And this rule he always observed himself except where the interest actually lay in minute and careful description; then nothing could exceed the life-like picturesqueness of his language. (Coakley 44-5)

In the passage quoted from Principles of the Art of Conversation (above), published ten years later, we can see that Mahaffy retained the exact wording of the key phrases, “the golden
rule of conversation,” “to know nothing accurately,” as though they are permanently engraved in his mind, in the manner of oral formulae. Nevertheless he paid his respects in a slightly different manner in the later work. The direct quotation given in the obituary has become indirect reported speech, perhaps as befitting the more chirographic and less intimate conditions of the published book; and Mahaffy then ventures also to suggest a modification of his own, for he continues: “Far more important is it, in my mind, to demand no accuracy. There is no greater or more common blunder in society than to express disbelief or scepticism in a story told for the amusement of the company” (78).

Both Stanford and Coakley are convinced that Wilde’s “Decay of Lying” is, in turn, partly an elaboration and adaptation of the ideas and style of Mahaffy’s work. Each advances the argument in a slightly different way. Stanford, the earlier of the two and more the literary critic, expresses it thus:

Though written in dialogue form, which Mahaffy did not use, Wilde’s essay with its pseudo-Aristotelian approach and its references to ancient historians … and in many turns of phrase, sounds extraordinarily like Mahaffy’s work at times. Further, Wilde’s blandly outrageous advocacy of mendacity as a fine art is little more than an extension of Mahaffy’s assertions that excessive regard for truth could be socially pernicious. (84)

We shall trace in a moment the “references to ancient historians” and the “many turns of phrase” referred to, and we may also wish to qualify the comparative “little more than an extension of,” above; but for now let us note that here and elsewhere in his biography Stanford also cites aspects of Mahaffy’s personality which implicitly or explicitly suggest parallels to Wilde and his work, relating, for example, that not only was Mahaffy often accused of taking
liberties with the truth in his academic publications, but that "lying" was even a subject which interested him in itself, for much of his life:

As a boy he had copied out the following remark in his personal notebook.

‘Swift said that universal as was the practice of lying and easy as it seemed, he did not remember to have heard three good lies in all his life.’ As a don he had been chaffed by his colleagues for his fictional flights. An anecdote records how, when he remarked among a group of dons that he had only once been caned in his life and ‘that was for telling the truth’, [one of them] Salmon observed: ‘It certainly cured you, Mahaffy.’ Late in life, too, he told a young man at Oxford, ‘Never tell a story because it is true: tell it because it is a good story.’ (85)

Salmon’s response to Mahaffy might be cited as a successful example of the art of conversation in Mahaffy’s own terms. It observes Mahaffy’s dictum “to demand no accuracy,” and implies firstly an amused recognition of the probable futility of doing so with Mahaffy anyway, and secondly a sophisticated suspension of disbelief for the purpose of allowing the existence of a Mahaffyian form of discourse, permissible on the strength of values other than those of strict factuality. Instead of bringing the conversation to a halt with a tedious form of correction, it plays with the terms already offered by the speaker, carrying them forward to the point where they turn upside down, thus making the respondent’s sceptical point of view wittily apparent. Mahaffy provides a similar description of this effect in The Principles of the Art of Conversation, in the definitions of both “Wit” and “Humour.” The “quick flashes” and “prompt repartee” of the former are a match to Salmon’s remark, but so also is the more sustained “comic way of looking at serious things” (a phrase which brings to mind Wilde’s
“trivial comedy for serious people”) and “perception of a ludicrous vein in human life and character” of the latter. (83) Humour, furthermore:

may be manifested either in comment upon the statements made by others or in narrating one’s own experience. Of course in receiving and commenting on what has been said, no preparation is possible. It depends upon a mental attitude, which ... exposes the ridiculous side of human life not more by irony of comment than by mock approval of social vices, mock indignation at social virtues... (87)

“Mock approval of [a] social vice” applies neatly to Salmon’s response to Mahaffy; and equally well to Wilde’s defence of “lying” in his essay lamenting its imagined decline. Wilde’s approach in “The Decay of Lying” might also be characterized as mock disapproval of the social virtue of accurate description, and he would follow the same principle in dozens of the epigrammatic remarks for which he became famous (and notorious.) When faced with the moral earnestness of Victorian culture, however, Wilde was driven a few steps further, to a point of moral ambiguity where mock approval could verge almost insolently on real sanction, of vice both social and otherwise, and mock indignation verge on real contempt, of virtue whether plodding or indignant.

Mahaffy’s definitions of “wit” and “humour” involve some overlap, since the function of “receiving and commenting upon what has been said,” which he assigns to humour, cannot, as he notes, be prepared in advance: it therefore seems to share the element of spontaneity associated with the flash of wit, which points, perhaps, to the weakness of an “Aristotelian” analysis of the overall subject. (Wilde would point to this as a fault of Mahaffy’s book, in his review of it entitled “Aristotle at Afternoon Tea.”) This kind of overlap should perhaps serve
as a warning to us not to press too hard to discuss distinctions between “oral” and
“chirographic” elements in such topics, and yet, in a general way, it certainly seems possible,
if not useful, to infer some such distinctions. From that point of view the best medium for
spontaneity and the “electric flash” of wit is an oral context with the live audience present,
while a book seems a fitter receptacle for the sustained “comic way of looking at serious
things.” The presentation of a pre-written play to a live theatre audience is perhaps a way of
having the best of both worlds, recalling Ellmann’s observation that “When faced with a
choice between two alternatives, Wilde chose both.”

Mahaffy’s advice to the young man at Oxford on the best kind of story to tell, as well
as “the golden rule” and other elements of his book on conversation, make it abundantly clear
that he valued artistic principles over slavish veracity, at least in oral forms designed for
entertainment. There is also another highly significant anecdote which reveals the extent to
which even Mahaffy’s critical sensibility was consciously propelled by principles of orality. In
a lecture to the girls of Alexandra College, Dublin, (an oral tradition in which Wilde would
later follow in Mahaffy’s footsteps), Mahaffy spoke of

the well-known tendency in the human mind of fitting a good story to the most
suitable existing character that can be found....

You may remember...that a few years ago every good joke, however
originated, used, in Dublin, to attach itself to the late Archbishop [Whately]. I
venture to predict, that whenever there arises another man of equally high
position, and of equally jocular disposition, these same stories will take refuge
under his wing, and flourish beneath the shadow of his name. (Stanford and
McDowell 67)
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Evidently, Mahaffy is discussing an oral community here, one in which “jokes” and “stories” have a wide circulation, and even the phrase “you may remember” suggests that he imagines himself continuing to address such a community through some of its junior members. From the perspective of the present time we can see that Mahaffy’s remarks also reveal accurate insight into the nature of oral narrative, which Milman Parry’s researches would later prove was produced over and over from “a repertoire of stock themes and formulas” (Ong 23). Mahaffy’s notions might also be fruitfully compared to Parry’s idea that oral narratives were primarily “form-driven.”

It is impossible to imagine that he would have denied himself the pleasure of imparting his deliberately provocative attitudes to a pupil as apt as Wilde, who was so much in his company at Trinity, and even later when Wilde was enrolled at Oxford. As soon as one acknowledges this probability, the links between Mahaffy and “The Decay of Lying” seem to proliferate. For example as both Stanford and Coakley point out, Mahaffy also wrote essays with the titles of “The Decay of Modern Preaching” and “The Decay of Genius.” In this context the very title of Wilde’s essay “The Decay of Lying” seems clearly composed of a humorous reference to Mahaffy’s writings, as well as an acknowledgment of Stokes’ golden rule of conversation, “to know nothing accurately,” which Wilde has termed more provocatively “Lying.” The notched-up shock value of Wilde’s use of such a term as “Lying” is a sign of the intensity of the cultural battles he was waging on the English mainland; and it is clear also that some of his sharpest weaponry in that struggle was forged in the Irish oral tradition as it was recreated in the Dublin of his childhood and college years, and as it was personified in such figures as Speranza, Stokes, and Mahaffy.
Even the anecdote about Mahaffy being “cured” of telling the truth seems to find a kind of echo in Wilde’s essay, in his subversion of the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, which follows a similar narrative pattern. After first advancing the mock-sociological theory that the materialism, “lack of imagination” etc., of the Americans “is entirely due to that country having adopted as its national hero a man who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie,” Wilde brings the whole assertion to a conclusion with an ironic twist: “and the amusing part of the whole thing is that the story of the cherry-tree is an absolute myth.” The amusing thing about Wilde’s argument is that it is tongue-in-cheek from beginning to end; he probably knew that the image of the Americans on which it depended was itself a form of defensive mythology within English culture. But the sudden and impish inversion of terms at the conclusion of the tale is reminiscent of the quick thrust at Mahaffy by the listening don, and it seems that to be on the qui vive for such opportunities in conversation was characteristic of some Irish circles of wit. Wilde would later take every opportunity to practice, especially in English conversational circles, the inversion of terms which often gave point to such sallies. We see this tendency to turn conventional values upside-down as a form of play exhibited also in Mahaffy’s remark at the end of Wilde’s stay in Trinity: “Go to Oxford, my dear Oscar: we are all much too clever for you here” (Stanford 39). When Wilde did go, he took a good deal of their cleverness with him.

IV. “Careless Habits of Accuracy”

It is interesting that both Stanford and Coakley are writing as Trinity dons, each of whom inhabits a different area of the traditions which fostered Mahaffy and Wilde. Stanford occupied a position in the department of Classics, as did Mahaffy approximately a hundred years earlier, while as a medical man with a wider range of interests Coakley can claim
academic descent from William Stokes, whose links to Wilde and Mahaffy he has so appropriately identified. As with Stanford on Mahaffy, in his book on Wilde Coakley goes on to note, among other evidence, some personal traits of his subject which reinforce the theoretical positions of both *The Principles of the Art of Conversation* and “The Decay of Lying.” For example Coakley repeats Wilde’s statement to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: “Between me and life there is a mist of words always. I throw probability out of the window for the sake of a phrase and the chance of an epigram makes me desert truth,” and cites Vincent O’Sullivan on Wilde’s “intolerance of people who insisted on a strict adherence to facts,” in a passage which inevitably recalls those which we have quoted from Mahaffy:

> The truth is that there was a certain description of man loathed by Wilde. This was the kind of man who insists on precise facts in the most casual of talks. Thus, if Wilde, sailing along beautifully, should happen to say: ‘On the morning of the fifteenth of June, Napoleon, seeing that Grouchy did not come up, and that all was lost –‘, some man might pop his head out and declare in a tone which brooked no denial: ‘You are wrong, Oscar. It was the eighteenth of June, and the time was three o’clock in the afternoon.’ That kind of thing really had the power of exasperating Wilde beyond endurance. (45-6)

One wonders if Wilde ever responded by pointing out Mahaffy’s golden rule of conversation; but whether he did so or not is something we cannot know accurately now. “The Decay of Lying,” however, can be read as a manifesto in response to all such irritations. It is probably no coincidence that the example suggested by O’Sullivan is of an historical tale, since in the essay Wilde makes no apology for his preference for ancient historians “who gave us delightful fictions in the form of fact.”
At the heart of each account both Stanford and Coakley cite the following passage from Wilde’s “Decay of Lying” as the exemplum which matches or extends the central passages from Mahaffy on the golden rule of conversation:

Many a young man starts in life with a natural gift for exaggeration which, if nurtured in congenial and sympathetic surroundings, or by the imitation of the best models, might grow into something really great and wonderful. But, as a rule, he comes to nothing… He either falls into careless habits of accuracy, or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and the well-informed. Both things are equally fatal to his imagination, as indeed they would be fatal to the imagination of anybody, and in a short time he develops a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-telling, begins to verify all statements made in his presence, has no hesitation in contradicting people who are much younger than himself, and often ends up writing novels which are so life-like that no-one can believe in their probability. This is no isolated instance that we are giving. It is simply one example out of many; and if something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile and beauty will pass away from the land. (*CW* 1073-4)

Coakley does not offer much elaboration on the parallels between the passages, but Stanford ultimately draws a distinction between the moral and theoretical limits of the respective positions of the two authors, suggesting that Mahaffy was limited by his position as “a clerical don in a highly respectable university,” whereas “what Wilde has done is to accept Mahaffy’s basic principles, and to develop it [sic] to a serio-comic logical extreme, becoming deliberately more anarchical as the argument accelerates” (85). This is nicely put. The phrase “deliberately
more anarchical” is an elegant modernism covering a multitude of Victorian sins which have more recently become post-modern virtues of transgression and subversion. But in any vocabulary Wilde’s position is more radical than Mahaffy’s: the question which arises perhaps is whether it represents merely an “extension” of Mahaffy’s arguments? Both *The Principles of the Art of Conversation* and “The Decay of Lying” are light-hearted disquisitions, with each author in his way trying to “jolly” society into a less earnest frame of mind about topics such as the literal truth. Both authors, I contend, are the representatives of a culture of orality which persisted in Ireland for some centuries after its diminution in England. As a result both are endowed with the perspective of an outsider who yet seems to understand the lingering aspiration of English culture for what it has suppressed, and each adopts an elegiac tone to this aspect of perceived social decline. But Mahaffy’s resulting advice to polite society is written with full awareness of the limits of the traditional academic role of the Socratic gadfly. He safeguards his position by making conversation his topic, which can be passed off as a kind of whimsical choice, and by further making it clear that the purpose of this oral medium is not instruction but entertainment. There is a liberating impulse in his attempt to free conversation from the trammels of exactitude, and to re-center it on alternative principles which he senses are well-founded, although perhaps opaque to the age in which he was living, but Mahaffy hedges this about with the earnest moral qualifications which were most characteristic of the time: “[while] an over-seriousness in morals may be detrimental to the ease and grace, above all to the playfulness, of talk…. [t]here is no more valuable and useful check on the degenerating of talk into ribaldry, profanity, or indecency, than the presence of a mind of solid moral worth, which will not tolerate such licence” (77). Mahaffy even goes so far as to recommend the placement of “two or three grave and reverend people” in conversational
circles which are at risk - especially those of young men! Contrast this with Wilde’s mock-
sermon, in the lines beginning “many a young man starts in life with a natural talent for 
exaggeration, which, if nourished in congenial and sympathetic circumstances…” The “grave 
and reverend people” to whom Mahaffy so respectfully assigns the role of moral guidance in 
conversation reappear in Wilde’s text as in a distorted mirror-world, where one of the 
symptoms of a young man’s decline is that he “takes to frequenting the society of the aged and 
the well-informed.” Implicit here is both an acceptance of the Mahaffyian prescription to know 
nothing accurately in conversation, and a mocking dismissal of the warning label which 
Mahaffy had attached.

A century steeped in the practice of irony and scepticism has passed since Wilde wrote 
that passage, and so it is easy to see mainly its playfulness, and to miss the extent to which it 
struck a transgressive note. We nowadays tend to read only hypocrisy in Victorian moral 
earnestness, and forget the genuine melancholy which so many felt at the perceived moral 
decline of a fellow-creature. The perspectives promoted by provocateurs and moral speculators 
like Swinburne and Wilde happened to become the cynical wisdom of the majority in the 
period which followed, thus obscuring to us to some degree the extent of their shock effect in 
their own time. When we re-read the exhortative moral literature which was still common in 
Wilde’s day, or note how an author like Mahaffy felt obliged to qualify his own signs of 
cultural waywardness, we begin to see how bold and confrontational is Wilde’s text, beneath 
the veneer of wit and charm. But perhaps because the rhetorical tropes of the Evangelical 
Movement and other such moral crusades were already past the era of their strongest influence 
at the time he wrote, we sense that Wilde has identified the proponents of conventional 
morality not only as enemies but as easy targets, and there is a hint of a sneer in his parody of
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a cautionary tale. It undermines conventional morality by affecting to lament a different kind of decline, that of an assumed vice; but it goes further than a gesture of subversion, re-governing a familiar kind of narrative with a new set of laws, (one of Wilde’s favourite strategies) thus replacing a moral standard with its apparent opposite, while playfully or perhaps somewhat insolently borrowing the established vocabulary and tone. To those too rigid to perceive its essentially humanistic values Wilde’s text may have presented more than a hint of demonic taunting.

In concluding the passage Wilde even goes so far as to sound the prophetic note in pseudo-Biblical language: “...if something can not be done to check, or at least to modify our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile and beauty will pass away from the land.” Again we should ask ourselves whether this near-blasphemy had still a power to offend which it has largely lost since then. We may take it into account that the half-century before had reverberated with shocks to religion, and that both Carlyle and Ruskin had clothed their secular utterances in the vestments of Biblical style: indeed Ruskin may be said to have paved the way for Wilde’s concluding remark in this instance, since he it was who had emphasized to the Victorians a spiritualized view of aesthetic value. But as was his inclination with all those who influenced him, and as we have just seen with Mahaffy, Wilde could sharpen Ruskin’s lance to suit his own purpose, and tip the master’s arrows with poison if he so wished, showing particularly with Salome (1893) how little he minded about offending religious sensibilities in the process.

V. “Flowers that No Forests Know Of”

Therefore if it were possible to go back in time and observe Wilde’s sensibility from within, one of the questions which it would be desirable to answer more fully is that of why he
chose to extend the positions of his masters so far into aggressive postures, whether we are speaking of Mahaffy, or Ruskin, or Arnold, or Pater. Answers which are derivable from a perusal of past and present biography and criticism, as well as from the study of Wilde’s works themselves, include the possibility that Wilde felt confident of the superiority of his own critical insights in some instances. Also of course Wilde would not have failed to recognize his different location in time from that of his predecessors, a position which may have seemed to call for either a furthering of the momentum of certain achieved critical and social positions, or a sharpening of their defensibility against threats of erosion. By the late 1880s, for example, the so-called Aesthetic Movement might easily have been perceived as either in ascendancy or decline. Also in the late 1880s Wilde had embarked on a way of life which seems likely to have confirmed his outsider status to himself, when he joined a kind of secret society, that of the homosexual underworld, wherein his embrace of a symbiotic association between aristocrats and rent-boys would have placed him further beyond the pale of Victorian middle-class values. In sexual matters Wilde may not yet have been prepared to emerge openly from the discreet Paterian closet, but he was banging loudly on the door from within, in a way that was sure to attract attention. It is the added motive for rebellion of his homosexuality which has naturally received the most attention in recent critical studies focussed on gender theory: I’d like to suggest, however, that the foundations of Wilde’s antinomian stance were laid much earlier, very possibly while he was under the tutelage of Mahaffy, and that Wilde’s rebellions, like Mahaffy’s, can be described as those of an oral sensibility protesting against the constrictions of a literalist chirographic cultural dispensation, with differing intensities and results in the battles that each of them fought.
Ideally, perhaps, Wilde would have liked to conduct his campaigns entirely through talk, wherein his greatest strength and preference lay, ("a man who can dominate the London dinner-table can dominate the world") but he recognized the indispensability of written armaments too, and was driven to produce texts either as siege-weapons for social success, (most notably his poems and plays) or as blasts of sometimes didactic defiance when he had fallen on the defensive. All of Wilde’s works may be read for both tendencies, but I will be interpreting “The Decay of Lying” in particular, as the elaboration of an aggressive defence against chirographic strictures.

As the phrase “aggressive defence” suggests, there is some question about the extent to which Wilde was the initiator of the contest with society in which he came to occupy such forward positions. “The Decay of Lying” may actually be read as one of a series of reactions, to a series of provocations. He was barely out of Oxford before Punch began its heavy-handed campaign of humorous belittlement, which was no doubt partly responsible for his being widely if erroneously associated with the figure of Bunthorne in Gilbert and Sullivan’s Patience. It was in response to these proceedings that Wilde accepted D’Oyly Carte’s offer of a North American tour, and it was partly in reaction to a physical disillusionment with marriage that Wilde allowed himself to be seduced by (not to seduce) Robbie Ross and thus to begin touring the new continent of another kind of sexuality. We have already noted how “The Decay of Lying” (and according to John Wilson Foster, “The Critic as Artist”) can be read as responding to English typecasting of the Irish as untrustworthy. And as will shortly be demonstrated, Wilde may also have embodied in this essay a long-meditated answer to the criticisms of his first book of poetry. At other times Wilde was simply forced to write in response to financial pressures. Then his decision to sue the Marquess of Queensberry for libel
was, famously, taken in reaction to provocation, and in response also to the urgings of Lord Alfred Douglas. His long prison letter, *De Profundis*, was a cry of pain and anger wrung from him only by Douglas’s persistent neglect; and his last published works, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and the letters to the *Daily Chronicle* are produced from the imprint of prison experience. When Wilde emerged and found that thereafter he was shunned rather than attacked, his own written strictures on society, witty and otherwise, ceased upon the hour. As one might expect from such an oral sensibility, his relations with the public had been entirely dialogic; and when it refused to speak to him, he himself fell pathetically silent. “The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about” Wilde had once quipped, and he lived to verify the truth of his own remark. “We no longer speak of Mister Oscar Wilde” was Mahaffy’s tight-lipped pronouncement in Dublin, appropriately mirroring the terms of Wilde’s death sentence in the oral world from which he had emerged.

Once again, however, it is useful to qualify the phrase “oral sensibility” by recalling that in this thesis it is not intended to describe the mind of an inhabitant of a pre-literate, primarily oral culture. Rather in this case it describes someone one who is a master of literacy, after having served a thoroughgoing apprenticeship in the chirographic conditions of school and university, but whose more heartfelt attachment is to the values and dynamics of an oral consciousness – a tendency which is reinforced by some characteristics of the national culture in which he is fostered, especially through its representatives in his immediate circle as he is growing up. However, just as Irish and English cultures cannot be crudely sorted as Irish/oral and English/chirographic, but can be differentiated somewhat according to the different balances of orality and literacy between them, so also it will be useful to complexify the notion of “the chirographic conditions of school and university” which I have just advanced.
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There were, for example, numerous elements of residual orality in the curriculum of the typical British public school (a model of which Wilde attended in Ireland), and also in the university culture of Oxford (as well as, of course, Trinity, where Mahaffy's influence on Wilde was dominant). Some of these will be examined in more detail in the next chapter, when we come to a consideration of the influence of classical culture on Wilde's sensibility, and in particular on the writing of "The Critic as Artist." But in relation to "The Decay of Lying," the preceding discussion of Wilde's dialogic relations with the world is matched on the theoretical plane by Walter Ong's observations on the oral roots, and the dialectical character, of the classical rhetorical tradition. "Rhetoric was at root the art of public speaking, of oral address... The Greek rhetor is from the same root as the Latin orator and means a public speaker" (109). "Rhetoric retained much of the old oral feeling for thought and expression as basically agonistic and formulaic" (110). "Rhetoric of course is essentially antithetical ... for the orator speaks in the face of at least implied adversaries" (111). That the "The Decay of Lying" quite clearly conforms to such characteristics has been strongly indicated by arguments already advanced in this thesis, which the following remarks are designed to reinforce and review.

In the first place Wilde's essay is quite obviously "agonistic." It might be argued against this that the same could be said of a number of other texts before or since. Whether it could be demonstrated that these provide indications of the traces of an oral sensibility in their authors is a question that would have to be addressed case by case; but it is clear on the evidence that few authors and texts have occupied such adversarial positions to their period as did Wilde and "The Decay of Lying." Wilde's dialogue is much more than an attack on literary realism, and a satirical review of contemporary authors working in that mode. Although it peppers those targets with a running fire, the "essay" which Vivian introduces
within the dialogue and reads aloud to Cyril will regard them merely as the principal symptoms of a deeper malaise: “One of the chief causes that can be assigned for the curiously commonplace character of most of the literature of our age is undoubtedly the decay of Lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure” (1073).

This sentence declares war on (at least) three fronts: it proposes, obviously, an assault on contemporary literature; it threatens, humorously but unmistakably, to question the moral and social orders in which “Lying” has been assigned negative characteristics; and simultaneously it subverts a real or perceived trend towards linguistic complexity, by presenting the broad, colloquial, common word for falsehood as one of the major terms for serious discussion, in an essay to be published among the comparatively sober contents of *The Nineteenth Century*. All this is announced in a single sentence, but the essay as a whole goes even further, developing an impudent momentum sufficient to overturn the conventional relationships of art to life, to nature, and to art itself. So it is more than adequately agonistic to qualify it for Walter Ong’s description of residually oral rhetoric. And the fact that Vivian reads the proofs of his essay aloud to Cyril, and that Wilde read aloud the proofs of the dialogue to Yeats, is also a sign of Wilde’s desire for a re-calibration of the relative values of orality and literacy, so that insofar as it achieves existence in speech, “The Decay of Lying” may even be described as an oral text which is residually literate, rather than vice versa.

“[T]he orator,” says Ong, elaborating on agonistic traits, “speaks in the face of at least implied adversaries,” and “The Decay of Lying” clearly displays this characteristic. Its explicit adversaries include those persons and cultural trends which it names as targets, but I wish to argue also that a certain bitterness towards hidden opponents propels the agonistic thrust of its rhetoric, and that an analysis of this factor will reinforce our perception of its oral character.
The hidden opponents in question are the English critics who attacked Wilde’s first major publication, the book of poems which he presented to a treacherous public seven years before, in 1881. Among the most mocking responses it evoked were those which concentrated not on its verbal felicities or its imaginative values but, more pedantically, on its lapses from accuracy and realism. “Mr. Wilde,” noted The Saturday Review, in July of that year, “brings into his verse the names of innumerable birds and flowers, because he likes the sound of their names, not because he has made any observation of their habits.” (Beckson 37). It will not do, in other words, to give free rein to oral/aural values in a culture where the spirit of documentary realism is the order of the day, and where the dominant modes of consciousness are chirographic and visual. Another unsigned notice in The Spectator in August points up the same defects:

It is the heart of June, he says though a daffodil and some violets have outstayed the spring... and finally, to our great astonishment, we are told that the almond-blossoms gleam ... almond-blossoms which, so far as we know, are never seen later than March or the earliest days of April. (Beckson 43)

It is hard not to imagine that the young poet must have felt some humiliation at such reminders. At the same time he may have felt, in his own defence, that there was something pedantic or pedestrian about these exactitudes, and that his flights of fancy were unfairly trammeled by them. Whatever the case, it is clear that he did not acquiesce. Although on the surface he appeared to have abandoned poetry, he never became a writer of realist prose; on the contrary, after seven years of cogitation and journalistic practice, he responded with a rebellious assault on the value system in which his poetry had been judged and found wanting. “Nature” is the first subject taken up in “The Decay of Lying”; but far from having humbly
devoted himself to a more accurate observation of it, as the critics of his poetry had implicitly enjoined him to do, Wilde has become radically dismissive; the first words uttered by Vivien, the strongest partner in the dialogue, are: “Enjoy Nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty” (1071). In the same paragraph he begins the proposition of a central thesis of the essay: “My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature.” This will eventually lead to a ringing declaration, which, even more than the foregoing, seems to turn and rebut his old tormentors: “Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself... She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses” (1082) (My emphasis).

The fact that the last sentence above, with its assonance, alliteration, and symmetrical stress patterns, actually performs the cadences of poetry, strengthens my argument that Wilde had the reception of his own poems somewhere in mind when he wrote “The Decay of Lying.” And of course these cadences, which occur throughout his prose, reveal the continuing operation of an oral/aural sensibility, as also does the nature of his argument, with its animus against the “monstrous worship of facts,” and its implicit approach to the position that sound can sometimes be its own justification.

It also seems a highly significant coincidence that in the previous paragraph Vivian makes mocking reference to “Critics who, like a certain writer in the Saturday Review, will gravely censure the teller of fairy tales for his defective knowledge of natural history” (1081). Here is the Saturday Review again; and for “the teller of fairy tales” we may read the poet Wilde, whose defective knowledge of the local flora was jeered in the same publication seven years before. Nor can we mistake the echo when, elaborating on “flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses” Vivian makes explicit reference to another ancient

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bugbear: “[Art] can bid the almond-tree blossom in winter…” (1082) Could this be the same almond-tree which Wilde had so vulnerably allowed to blossom in mid-summer in his poetry?

The foregoing evidence seems sufficient to establish that the critical reactions to Wilde’s first published book of poems seven years earlier provided one of the major long-term causes of the writing and publication of “The Decay of Lying,” and this knowledge can greatly amplify our sense of how Wilde is writing in dialogic relation to the culture in which he is struggling for success. His long memory of the insults received, and his throwing them back in almost the same words, are further indications of a sensibility which has been often associated with oral cultures. But what was it, then, that finally prompted Wilde to put pen to paper? What are the proximate causes for the production and publication of this essay? At least three can be adduced, in one of which Mahaffy can be detected as the prime mover; but let us begin with consideration of a more obvious case, that of Mrs. Humphry Ward’s *Robert Elsmere*.

The explicit targets of “The Decay of Lying” are evident enough, since most of them, if cultural trends, are clearly defined, and if persons, are actually named. In this respect the form of the essay contributes to enabling its adversarial content. Dialogue is a conveniently mixed genre, which by funneling its arguments through the mouths of “characters,” can invoke some of the irresponsibility of fiction, thus creating a line of defence around the real author, if such is needed. Wilde’s fictional interlocutors do not, however, limit themselves to discussing fictional or abstract subjects; they opine upon real persons and events, living or dead. One of the problems this creates for the real persons named is that it would be difficult to respond, without seeming literal-minded or ungracious, to what could be passed off as a light-hearted exchange of views between imaginary characters, merely a kind of overheard conversation, as it were. In addition the role of respondent is already occupied, and thereby pre-empted, within
the dialogue itself, which the author controls, and thus the format partially disables the essay’s potential foes from the outset.

Cyril, and especially Vivian, range freely over the domains of art and literature, praising and dispraising authors from Herodotus to Meredith, and “artists” from Christ to Corot: uprooting assumptions, corrupting and inverting platitudes, triumphantly confirming outrageous assertions, and generally finding under the rocks of ages the sermons that Wilde himself has already placed there. Much of the satirical attention of these dialogic homilies is directed towards the realist movement in the literature of their own day, Wilde’s central argument being the insistence that the piling-up of exact and detailed description does not result in the successful creation of works of art. What seems to have made Wilde’s thesis an urgent matter, however, was the recent runaway success of a long, sober, theological novel in the realist tradition. Robert Elsmere, when it was finally published in 1887 after being rejected by several publishers who were convinced that its subject and style were past their sell-by date, astonished everyone by garnering ecstatic reviews (including one by Gladstone which ran to twenty pages) and becoming an overnight best-seller. Wilde, who was not a realist writer, and who may have been entertaining hopes that the documentary aesthetic was on the wane, seems to have taken alarm at the evidence of its potential resurgence in English letters. Certainly he makes Robert Elsmere one of his prime targets in “The Decay of Lying,” and devotes more ink to it than to any other of the numerous works mentioned in the essay. Robert Elsmere, according to Vivian, is “a masterpiece of the genre ennuyeux” (1074), and “deliberately tedious” (1075). Even Cyril, after appearing to begin its defence, manages to characterize it as “Arnold’s Literature and Dogma with the literature left out” (1076). Wilde’s professional jealousy is confirmed in a letter he wrote to Ellen Terry’s sister Kate in January 1889,
immediately after the publication of his essay: “I have blown my trumpet against the gates of
dullness, and I hope some shaft has hit Robert Elsmere between the joints of his nineteenth
edition” (Letters 237-8). We note the oral/aural metaphor with which he begins the description
of his action; it positions a weapon consisting of sound itself in opposition to the “dullness” of
the novel, which, at eight-hundred-plus pages, is obviously affiliated with the chirographic
dispensation.

Richard Ellmann, in his biography of Wilde, offers another description of the
influences which may have been at work under the surface of Wilde’s essay:

After “Pen, Pencil, and Poison,” Wilde began to write his first and most
successful dialogue, “The Decay of Lying,” and finished it by December 1888.
The impulse to write it came, as with “The Portrait of Mister W.H.,” from a
conversation with Robert Ross, the beloved disciple. (233)

Although contrary to his usual assiduous practice Ellmann does not mention a source for the
correspondence with Ross (in fact it is briefly mentioned in De Profundis [CW 984]) it is
understandable that he should bring it forward, since it offers support to a thesis of his
regarding the development of Wilde’s prose writing at that time:

At Oxford Wilde had made the problem of becoming or not becoming a Roman
Catholic the nub of much of his verse. He was now able to make his experience
of marriage and counter-marriage the centre of his career in prose.

Homosexuality fired his mind… Ironic frivolity, with dark insinuation, was the
compound through which he now sought to express himself. (265)

There is no contradiction here between Ellmann’s views and mine in relation to the
sources of “The Decay of Lying.” The clandestinity of Wilde’s initial participation in
homosexual culture could certainly have sharpened his sense of opposition to mainstream society, and indeed from that point of view the homosexual milieu might even bear comparison to Irish rebel circles; both of them could be described as worlds of seditious talk which could hardly ever be allowed a flagrant appearance in print. But Wilde was familiar with such an atmosphere since the days of his childhood, and I am suggesting also that he had been nursing a grudge against some sectors of English society at least since the date of publication of his poems. Homosexuality may have fired his mind in the late 1880s; but he had been minding his fires for a much longer period.\(^{25}\)

Finally, of course, there is another proximate source of inspiration for “The Decay of Lying” which cannot be ignored, and this is the publication of Mahaffy’s *Principles of the Art of Conversation.* Appearing, like *Robert Elsmere*, in 1887, it is in some ways that novel’s antithetical counterpart: it seems to have provided a positive, as opposed to negative, stimulus to Wilde’s creative powers. Both Wilde and Mahaffy had been attacked in the course of their careers for lapses in accuracy, and Mahaffy’s published reply on oral topics may well have triggered Wilde’s more wide-ranging manifesto: certainly in its arguments and examples, it appears to have provided Wilde with the philosophical ammunition with which to defend, not only explicitly oral values of exaggeration, but the associated anti-realist and poetic platforms of “Lying in art.” The title of Wilde’s essay is itself a tribute to Mahaffy’s publications, as we have noted; and it is not hard to see, in the person of the pedantic critic in *The Saturday Review*, the same egregious bore whose presence at the dinner-table Mahaffy deplores. But, as we shall see in the next chapter, our examination of Mahaffy’s catalytic influence on Wilde and his essays is far from concluding with these observations.

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4 A more complete list of their respective publications may be found in Appendix A (pp.589-91) of Ellmann’s biography of their son.

5 Introduction to *The Playboy of the Western World.*


10 E.g. in “The Decay of Lying” (*CW* 1077), and in an unsigned review of *Balzac’s Novels in English* (*AC* 30).


13 An indication of the strength of the assumption in Ireland that some of the artists and writers of England were on the Irish side can perhaps be seen in the memoirs of Ford Madox Hueffer (*Ancient Lights and Certain New Reflections, 1911*), who recalls that his grandfather, Madox Brown, along with Rossetti and Holman Hunt, were at one time asked by Daniel O’Connell to stand for Irish constituencies. Madox Hueffer continues: “O’Connell’s idea was that if the cause of Ireland could be represented in the House of Commons by Englishmen of distinction in the world of arts of intellect, the cause of Ireland would become much more acceptable in English eyes. In this he was probably wrong, for England has a rooted distrust for any practitioner of the arts...” (147).

14 One can begin to cite examples from as far back as 1535. When the troops of an Irish garrison were tricked into surrendering with the promise of a pardon, and then summarily slaughtered, the incident was retained in Irish memory as “the pardon of Maynooth,” obviously with the word “pardon” spoken sarcastically to mean its opposite. (Ellis 128.)

15 In a review of *Greek Life and Thought* ("Mr. Mahaffy’s New Book") in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of November 9, 1887 (*AC* 80).

16 Stanford and McDowell 58. Mahaffy’s aural inclination might be compared with the (more typically English?) habits of sketching or photographing.

17 The University as the arena of an oral culture will also be discussed in Chapter Four.

18 In fact when Mrs. Cheveley addresses Lady Chiltern as “Laura,” it seems a calculated insult.


20 Stanford is also the author of various books and articles on classical subjects, including *Ireland and the Classical Tradition* (1976) (See my Bibliography).

21 Coakley is also the author of *The Irish School of Medicine* (1988) and *Irish Masters of Medicine* (1992).

22 It is Stanford’s fuller quotation of Wilde’s passage which is reproduced in this text.

23 Witness his patronizing treatment of Arnold in his critical essays, and his stinging reviews of Mahaffy’s most recent publications in 1887.

24 Stanford and McDowell (87).

25 Nor had those fires remained buried beneath the surface for that entire time. An eruption in 1885 took the form of one of the funniest and finest letters Wilde would ever write (my personal favourite), in which he insisted on a poetic, anti-scientific scanion of “tuberose”: [To the Editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*] “Sir, I am deeply distressed to hear that tuberose is so called from its being a “lumpy flower.” It is not at all lumpy, and even if it were, no poet should be heartless enough to say so. Henceforth there really must be two derivations for every word, one for the poet and one for the scientist. And in the present case the poet will dwell on the tiny trumpet of ivory into which the white flower breaks, and will leave to the man of science horrid allusions to its supposed lumpiness and indiscreet revelations of its private life below ground...” (*L* 172-3).
Chapter Four: Greek Sympathies

I. "Athenians and Boeotians"

In 1892, Wilde concluded a letter to the editor of *The St. James's Gazette* as follows:

> When criticism becomes in England a real art, as it should be, and when none but those of artistic instinct and artistic cultivation is allowed to write about works of art, artists will no doubt read criticisms with a certain amount of intellectual interest. As things are at present, the criticisms of ordinary newspapers are of no interest whatsoever, except in so far as they display in its crudest form the extraordinary Boeotianism of a country that has produced some Athenians, and in which other Athenians have come to dwell. (*Letters* 313)

Wilde’s parting shot, the division of England along Graeco-aesthetic boundary lines, provides a striking parallel to the analogy with the Irish which sounded the keynote of our earlier discussion, and likewise will serve as a suitable epigraph to the present chapter, which is centred on Wilde’s understanding of the classics. The comments on the state of criticism in England are also an echo, albeit a strident one, of the concerns expressed in “The Critic as Artist,” which is the work to be considered at length later in this chapter.

The principal focus of the preceding chapter was still on the influence of Ireland – its history, its culture, and its personalities – on the formation of Wilde’s dual sensibility, and on the manner in which that sensibility reveals itself in his writing, particularly in “The Decay of Lying.” Here I will continue to address this theme of the dual orality and literacy in Wilde’s life and work, but will do so principally through the perspective of his classical studies and of his professed Hellenism. Ireland and Mahaffy will not disappear, and in fact they may seem to
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dominate our consideration of Wilde again for a while, but this should not appear
inappropriate, since the groundwork of Wilde’s classical education was laid in Ireland and
especially at Trinity, and Mahaffy would attempt to continue directing the current of Wilde’s
Hellenism even in the Oxford years. However, we will see such influences begin to be
modulated, and eventually redirected, by Wilde’s Oxford and English experience, a
modulation which is given its strongest impetus by the person, and the work, of Walter Pater,
and later finds theoretical expression in “The Critic as Artist” in particular. I will also suggest
that one of the ways that Wilde contrived a continuity of identity was by placing himself in a
series of oral communities after his departure from Ireland, and that an important link between
them was derived through a notion of classical aesthetics based partly on oral/aural values.

Some characteristics remained true for almost all of the oral communities in which
Wilde would participate. One was the sense of rebellion, of upholding antinomian values, even
of taking pride in swimming against the current of society: and as it happens, a pointed
imagining of the classical world was one of the weapons by which this sense of otherness
would be upheld, whether in Ireland or in England. As an “Athenian,” Wilde could be both
Irish and English, oral and chirographic, homo- and heterosexual.

Wilde’s classicism, in other words, offered him among other things an apparently
supranational bridge between Ireland and England. He crossed it publicly at the outset of his
career, when he transferred from Trinity College Dublin to Magdalen College at Oxford, a
crossing customarily available to English-speaking Anglo-Protestants of the Irish colony,
although in Wilde’s case entry was also earned with a scholarship awarded for his academic
prowess. Such admissions and scholarships accorded with a theory of empire which calculated
benefits to itself from the endowment of an English education on elite colonial subjects.
Similarly, classics-based curricula met with approval for their assumed potential to instill martial values, and their provision of a common frame of reference to students from different backgrounds. Unfortunately academic admission did not entail acceptance at the equivalent social level in the English class system: many an idealistic colonial Anglophile discovered loneliness and disillusionment at Oxbridge universities, and there is some evidence that Wilde would have faced a similar experience, had he not arrived at Oxford armed with the background, training, and creativity to counter it with his own atmosphere. With his innate abilities already nurtured by the context of Ireland and the coaching of Mahaffy, he turned the tables on the louts who attempted to haze him, disturbed the authorities through his insolently manifested academic capacity, and developed the beginnings of public notoriety with his profession of the difficulty of living up to his blue china.

Memoirs of those who knew him at Oxford stress Wilde’s brilliance as a talker, but are not without cognizance of his scholarly achievements (Mikhail 2, 3-27), which before he won the Newdigate Prize for poetry were exhibited mainly through his knowledge of the classics. One of the arguments of this thesis is that his orality and his classicism are the twin overlapping themes through which the apparent and oft-noted paradoxes of Wilde’s nationality, sexuality and class may most productively be viewed. Mahaffy embodied similar gifts, which he projected internationally, but from the relatively provincial stage of Trinity College, Dublin; Wilde was able to use both the accomplishment of his classicism and the inheritance of his orality to successfully negotiate the transitions between countries as well as the boundaries of sexuality and class.

Oxford made this possible. Wilde entered as an Irishman with a budding affinity for the Aesthetic Movement, but emerged claiming descent from Arnold, Ruskin and in particular
Pater; according to Ellmann, even the sound of his voice changed during this period, losing its Irish intonation and taking on “that stately and distinct English which astonished its hearers” (37).

Biographers therefore generally identify the years at Oxford as a crucial period in Wilde’s development. I agree, but I will argue that the influence of Mahaffy remained more powerful than has been acknowledged – Wilde’s intense dislike of his Oxford tutor Allen (Ellmann 64, 74, 78) is one sign of this lingering attachment, and there are many more - and that Wilde’s crucial changes occurred as a result of his interaction with a particular community within Oxford, rather than the institution as a whole. Wilde emerged with distinction, but not without having chosen sides.

The social and academic prospects which the study of the classics might have opened up even then had been injected with an additional current of excitement in some quarters by a stirring of interest in the homosexual character of ancient Greek literature and society. Such interest was frowned on by the authorities, and was therefore restricted to the unofficial world of after-hours meetings and discussions, for which the rooms of Walter Pater were known as a focal point. It was here, in the relative privacy and play of conversation, that risqué allusions in the classics might be more freely developed, and here perhaps that Wilde began to add to some of the characteristics which he would later associate with “Athenians.” In that respect Wilde’s career would reflect the discovery that the classical inheritance, while common to elements of the population in both Ireland and England, could be differently inflected in each country and in different social situations.

The evidence to be examined in this chapter is of a slightly different character than that which supported my previous arguments. Wilde made comparatively few written statements
on Irish issues, or on his own Irish nationality, and in previous chapters the extensive influence of the culture of Ireland on the development of Wilde’s sensibility was demonstrated mainly through a comparison of the oral/scribal features of that culture, personified in the figure of Mahaffy, and the similar characteristics of Wilde’s temperament, talent, and expression in both written and oral forms. Eventually “The Decay of Lying” was shown to sustain an interpretation as an Irish/oral/Mahaffyian text, both in the nature of its arguments and in specific instances of its rhetorical vocabulary. Wilde did not openly acknowledge such influences in the text of the essay, and yet they are demonstrably present: for example it was obviously reasonable to suggest that some significance attaches to the similarity between the title of his essay and the titles of Mahaffy’s works on conversation (reviewed by Wilde the year before) and on preaching. The evidence which will support the assertions of the present chapter is more explicit: although some influences will be brought to light for the first time - certain surprising parallels, for example, between “The Decay of Lying” and Plato’s *Phaedrus* - on the whole the analysis will proceed on the strength of statements in which Wilde explicitly avows his consciousness of the classical world, even though while paying it such open tribute, he sometimes also deploys it for less obvious strategic purposes.

The quotation concerning Athenians and Boeotians at the beginning of this chapter is a case in point. It shows how embattled, and yet how confident, Wilde had become in English society by early 1892. By this time he was burning his bridges to the English middle class and laying about him in a cultural combat in which he did not hesitate to deploy the resources of his classical education as a weapon. When he had spoken to Yeats in the intimate setting of Christmas dinner at the end of 1888, Wilde had proposed a specific connection, that of being great talkers, between the Greeks and “we Irish”: but now in addressing the readers of the
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_Gazette_ he is publicly wielding a scalpel to divide English society into a general mass of “Boeotians” and another, more elevated group, in which he obviously intends to include himself. One might suggest that this is Wilde’s comment to Yeats reshaped for an English audience with the characteristic suppleness of an oral sensibility: but each remark also encapsulates Wilde’s sense of identity and of cultural positioning at the time it is made, revealing both his imagined and his actual circumstances. To Yeats in 1888 he linked himself to the Irish and their gifts of speech, implying that his Celtic sensibility had suffered setbacks due to chirographic prejudice; but by February 1892, with a growing number of works in print, and a commercially successful play on the stage, he had begun to assert his artistic aristocracy with a confidence bordering on arrogance. After the opening performance of _Lady Windermere’s Fan_ a few days earlier Wilde had appeared on stage and addressed the public while smoking a cigarette, a gesture which had infuriated some, but in his letter to _The Gazette_ he doesn’t hesitate to refer to it again, thus repeating the provocation: “[A]fter the play was over, and the author, cigarette in hand, had delivered a delightful and immortal speech…” (312-3). The purpose of his letter is to repudiate the claims of journalistic critics to have influenced changes made to the play after its opening, but Wilde makes a point of adding sarcastic insult to correction: “[The changes were made] long before I had the opportunity of studying the culture, courtesy, and critical faculty of such papers as the _Referee, Reynolds, and the Sunday Sun_” (313).

His concluding redivision of English society along Greek lines has the character of a war manoeuvre. Firstly, it blurs the territorial boundaries of Wilde’s own time and place, deflecting attention away from the Irish origin which made him vulnerable to English mockery, and placing him in an elite corps which clearly claims to hold the high ground in the
struggle for status. Wilde’s revised social boundaries conform to traditional English class lines to some extent; “Athenians” and the upper classes were bound to overlap, since attendance at public school, where the classics were taught, was the prerogative of the privileged few even then; but since, for the most part “education in England produces no effect whatsoever” as Lady Bracknell would observe, Wilde may really be proposing a division along the lines of personal cultivation rather than social class. One might even argue that Wilde’s imaginary society most resembles that of Gaelic Ireland, where the aes dana, the class of poets and learned people, held rank above that of chieftains, and second only to that of kings themselves (Mercier 106, Scherman 34).

In England those who were secure in their social positions didn’t need to care whether they knew the classics or not: an aristocrat like the Marquess of Queensberry, for example, would probably have had to look up the reference to Boeotians, in order to discover that in the ancient world their general reputation was for a coarse and vulgar materialism. But even among those who took their education to heart, or those who looked to the classics for an alternative sexual dispensation, the distinction between Boeotians and Athenians, which was a very minor theme in ancient literature and history, could hardly be described as a byword, nor was it in common circulation among Victorian literary folk, to judge from the texts of the period: what, then, had kept it so alive in Wilde’s mind as to make it his analogy of choice for the pages of The Gazette? We find that the answer, even at this late date, lies in a return to Mahaffy.

Not only did Mahaffy take a particular interest in the Athenian/Boeotian distinction, he gave specific expression to it in two of his written works, to both of which Wilde was connected in different ways. The first of these, Rambles and Studies in Greece (1878) arose
from a journey Mahaffy, Wilde, and two other companions had taken together the year before (when Wilde was already at Oxford). On page 226 we find reflections inspired by the group’s visit to Thebes and the Boeotian plain, including a discussion of the reputation of the “unartistic, vulgar Thebans”: the group’s failure to observe significant artistic relics “corroborates what we find in the middle and new comedy of the Greeks, that Thebes was a place for eating and drinking, a place for other coarse material comforts, but no place for real culture or for art” (227). The word “corroborates” hints at an attitude of skeptical inquiry, perhaps on the part of Mahaffy himself; certainly he goes on to agitate the question, as if in dialogue with himself or another, by attempting to account for the exceptions: “Thus, even in Pindar, there is something to remind us of his vulgarity; and it is, therefore, all the more wonderful, and all the more freely to be confessed, that in Epaminondas we find not a single flaw or failing...” (227). The marks of an oral sensibility are clearly present here, in the agonistic tone, the sense of debate or argument evinced in the need to prove the point against exception, and the assumed closeness to the audience (“us”). When Mahaffy is interested in an issue, he seems to invite the reader to become part of a wrestling match which is already under way in himself; nor was he one to suppress his preoccupations when engaged in conversation or teaching – quite the opposite in fact; so that when Wilde travelled to Thebes with him, he can hardly have escaped without hearing vividly of his old tutor’s notions of the Boeotians. Wilde also had read the sources for these views, in the original Greek; but it was Mahaffy’s oral effulgence which brought them to life, and Mahaffy’s combative tone which inspired Wilde to forge such a reference into a weapon for use against his English enemies.

We find that nine years later, when Mahaffy published *Greek Life and Thought*, he had not entirely finished with the character of the Boeotians, and even argues another side of the
issue, in a footnote: “The sketch of Boeotian life, with its luxury, sloth, and feasting, together with complete idleness and neglect of all public business, given by Polybius (xx. 14) is to me perfectly incredible. How could a people, that lived in perpetual idleness, and also extravagance, remain rich and keep the means of luxury?” (301). There is no repudiation of his earlier views on their artistic sloth, however, and Wilde’s view of the Boeotians appears not to have been changed by Mahaffy’s contest with Polybius on this later occasion; perhaps because he was not at all impressed by other aspects of the book; irritated by its intrusive references to Irish politics, he reviewed it in harsh terms (AC 80-4). Wilde had internalized Mahaffy’s influence at an earlier stage, and subsumed it within his own, superior, style; but as the letter to the Gazette demonstrates, it long remained present as an active element.

The preceding discussion has exposed the archaeology of a single classical allusion by Wilde: in how many more, with proper consideration, could Mahaffy’s presence be detected? Even in another paragraph of the same letter, when Wilde expounds a favourite provocation—“The opinions of the old on matters of Art, are of course, of no value whatsoever” – the source with whom he is in dialogue still appears to be his old tutor, who in Principles of the Art of Conversation had recommended the placement of “two or three grave and reverend people” in conversational circles, “especially those of young men.” But since the topic of the present chapter is mainly to be the connection between Wilde’s classical knowledge and his oral sensibility, rather than more on the influence of Mahaffy in general, it is time to go back to the first stages of its imprinting on him.

II. “How to Love Greek Things”

The first stage in Wilde’s formation as a cultural warrior in an oral community took place in the family circle, when as a child he listened to his mother’s denunciations of the evils
of English misrule, and to the obsessive differentiating of the markers of identity of the
English and Irish peoples which was a staple of the conversation of the period. As noted in
Chapter One, a favourite analogy for this process of differentiation was that of Irish/Greeks
versus English/Romans. “From Athens and Sparta fair Liberty came” Speranza reminds the
Irish in one of her patriotic poems, and she commissioned a bust by the neo-classical sculptor
Thorvaldson which hangs in the portico of the Merrion Square house to this day. The Irish
antiquarian movement of the late eighteenth century which found its continuance in the
archaeological forays of Sir William Wilde and his contemporaries strengthened the
comparison between Ireland and Greece through a growing awareness of the comparable
antiquity of Irish culture. Viewed in the longer perspective thus established, the English
conquest, though already underway for several centuries, could be assigned a temporary and
even a vulgar status – a feat of Irish imagination which was mirrored by some aspects of
English anxiety over imperial decline.

Wilde undoubtedly received an early imprint of the politics of defiance; and when,
much later, he was faced with the decision of whether or not to flee his imminent arrest, it was
Speranza’s words which decided the issue: “If you stay, even if you go to prison, you will
always be my son. It will make no difference to my affection. But if you go, I will never speak
to you again” – a statement which has been compared to the Spartan mother’s injunction to
her son: “Return with your shield or on it” (Coakley 36). Ellmann describes it as “in her grand
manner” (439): certainly in its urging of martial values, it is consistent with the rhetoric of her
calls to arms to the Irish people made around the time of Oscar’s birth some forty years before.
But whatever her advice to the masses, after the physical potential of the Young Ireland
movement had fizzled out, Speranza’s own resistance to the British Empire – and that of her
social set - was conducted almost entirely on the cultural front, and presumably it was the politics of cultural variance and spiritual defiance, rather than of armed rebellion, which she inculcated in her son. Her statement to him at the time of his trial encapsulates such a code, associating itself with the Greeks not only in its focus on stoical values, but also in its apparent unconcern with the particular sexual issues on which her son was being tried, a position which sets her well apart from the mainstream culture of the time, whether in England or Ireland.

One cannot of course assume that the absence of condemnation implies an approval on Speranza’s part of what was called “the Greek sympathy.” But whatever Speranza’s private views, there was in general a difference between Irish and English Hellenism. It was the Greek attributes of quick intellect, fluent speech, and aristocratic mentality (like those attributed to extinct Gaelic culture) with which the Irish identified themselves in order to mark their distinction from the supposedly more methodical and taciturn English, and the increasingly plebeian values of their industrial society. Thus the chief Irish use of imagining the Greeks, other than for scholarship and education, was to enhance Irish individuation within the platform of cultural nationalism. In England the political purposes for which the ancient Greeks were invoked tended to revolve around the association of the Athenians with the development of democracy, so that they were cited, for example, in debates on the extension of the franchise. In more private contexts, however, there were those who increasingly cited them as precedent, if not authorization, for homosexual practice: it was mainly in England rather than in more sexually conservative Ireland that the study of Greek culture came to provide a form of nourishment for private rather than public forms of liberation. The long-term effect of Wilde’s move from Ireland to England was a corresponding modulation in the form of his Hellenism. It became ultimately a hybrid in which some elements, like his Irish nationalism,
were cut back or allowed to wilt a little; others, such as the affinity for aristocratic values, were ardently transplanted; and others, such as the practice of homosexuality, were grafted on and eventually flourished.

Speranza, who was the first source of her son’s Hellenistic and antinomian values, did not herself remain static during Oscar’s transitions. Like her son she moved to England; but though expressing disillusionment with the condition of Ireland, she retained more of her cultural nationalism, founding a kind of salon in London with Irish expatriates at its centre. Oscar took a few steps further. He absorbed the dynamics but outgrew the details of his mother’s program, going beyond Irish cultural resistance and joining instead the aristocratic and artistic sorties against middle-class values which he found among the English themselves, and in time adopting the sexual practices of those with whom he was consorting, an influence which was malignantly represented in the person of “Bosie.” In the long trajectory from his mother’s influence to that of Lord Alfred Douglas, the single most important figure in the shaping of Wilde’s complex cultural identity remains that of John Pentland Mahaffy, although Mahaffy’s influence too, while it persisted into Wilde’s Oxford days and beyond, would become subject to the addition of new themes and theories in Wilde’s quest for aesthetic value and personal pleasure.

I have already identified a politics of orality, and the study of the classics, as the central areas of Mahaffy’s influence. These are confirmed in the reflections of each man on the other. Mahaffy claimed to have taught Wilde the art of conversation, whereas Wilde laid stress on Mahaffy’s ability as a classics teacher: his last recorded communication to Mahaffy, a letter written in 1893, was tinged with nostalgic affection, nominating him “my first and best teacher” and “the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things” (Letters 338). In the
previous chapter we saw how the politics of orality worked itself out in Wilde and Mahaffy's attitudes and writings: here their common Hellenism provides an illuminating prism through which to view the relationship of the two men. Both are talented, highly educated classical scholars, but neither of them is drawn to being a narrow specialist in this field: Mahaffy is nicknamed "The General" by his students in acknowledgment of the range of his interests (Stanford and McDowell 69), and Wilde confided to his college friends "I won't be a dried-up Oxford don, anyhow" (Mikhail 5). Ideas and observations founded in their classical studies will nevertheless permeate the lives and writings of both men. What is remarkable also is how much of the widely varied spectrum of Irish and English Hellenic interests both will occupy, albeit in distinctly different ways.

In terms of Irish Hellenism, Mahaffy would have understood where Wilde was coming from, so to speak. Although his politics were on the surface the opposite of Speranza's, (he was an ardent Unionist and imperialist) Mahaffy was nevertheless intrigued by parallels between the Irish and the Greeks, and could not restrain himself from sowing examples of his observations on the subject throughout his works. In the first book of his which was successful in attracting a wide readership, *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* (1874), there are at least a dozen instances of comparison cited. This was also the work in the preface of which Mahaffy acknowledged the help of his former pupil, now "Mister Oscar Wilde of Magdalen College" for having "made improvements and corrections all through the book" (Ellmann 27). We know from this and from the general records of Mahaffy's personality that his was not an arm's-length sort of tutorship, and that Wilde must have become well acquainted with the main outlines and even the eccentricities of Mahaffy's scholarship and thought on a wide variety of topics. Thus, when Mahaffy asserts that the nineteenth-century
Irish peasants, like the Homeric Greeks, valued imagination and politeness more highly than truth-telling, or when he observes that “the pure Celt, who is always a Catholic, has less regard for truth than the Protestant, with his touch of Saxon breeding,” in the book which Wilde has helped him to prepare (25, 99), we are perhaps justified in detecting some trace of Mahaffy’s influence in Wilde’s praise of lying and imagination in “The Decay of Lying.” Indeed, when we recall the declaration with which Wilde prefaced the reading-aloud of his essay to Yeats, that the Irish “are the greatest talkers since the Greeks,” and then discover that in that early book, Mahaffy had dilated on the conversational manners of the Greeks, (311-18) and then compared them to “lively people, like the Irish… where [conversation] is the branch of culture thoroughly understood” (319): and that much later, in 1887, Mahaffy had specified Ireland as a country “where the practice of conversation is confessedly on a high level, and where the average man is able to talk well” in one work, and the Greeks as “a nation of talkers” in another - and that Wilde had in fact reviewed both works shortly before he wrote “The Decay of Lying” – then the ongoing impact of Mahaffy’s thinking, even over ten years after the end of his official tutelage, can hardly be denied. We see also that the sense of orality as an Irish national characteristic is a feature of the Hellenism of both men, and we are about to see ever more clearly that both share the feeling that somehow the values of orality are different, that it has a moral order of its own which is not fairly perceived or judged in a more English or chirographic cultural context.

Moreover, in a general consideration of their common Hellenism, we should not pass on without noting that it is while Wilde is still in Ireland, and still Mahaffy’s pupil, that the issue of Greek homosexuality is brought explicitly to his notice, perhaps for the first time. Again it is through the process of preparation of Social Life in Greece that the lesson is
revealed. As it turns out, this work is the first in Ireland or in England to offer for the general reader a frank discussion of the Greek practice. Its forwardness is clearly indicated by the fact that, although the passage is hedged about with qualifying remarks acknowledging for example how strange and repulsive such customs must appear to the sensibilities of Mahaffy’s time, it still met with such indications of moral and critical disapproval that its author felt obliged to suppress it from the second edition — along with, coincidentally we suppose, the names of the students who had helped in the book’s preparation. Wilde’s reaction to the simultaneous deletion of himself and the subject of homosexuality from Mahaffy’s book is not on record. He had already been at Oxford for some time by then, and as it happens, had also been exposed to a parallel example at that more high-profile institution. In 1873, the year before Mahaffy had published *Social Life in Greece*, a quiet Oxford don had released a set of essays loosely grouped under the title of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Some of his more sensitive students had thrilled to what seemed in the essays a subterranean fire, a subversive music in which was heard an inkling of pagan pleasures, of carpe diem philosophy, of moral relativism, which broke through in the final pages to an explicit urging to “burn with a hard, gem-like flame.” Wilde on his arrival in Oxford in October 1874 became one of those who had fallen under the spell of the first edition of the work, and proclaimed it as his “golden book” (Ellmann 46). The conclusion soon became notorious, however, and Pater, anxious to avoid disturbance, agreed to suppress it from the second edition, published in 1877. This was the year in which Wilde came to know Pater in person, and he was therefore in a position to know of this development firsthand, just as he must have been privy to Mahaffy’s strategic retreat. Again he has not left us a record of his reaction, perhaps because he was already in trouble with the Oxford authorities for returning late for term from his trip to Greece with
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Mahaffy, but his position on such matters may have been building up tension. When his own first volume of poems was published in 1881, his room-mate’s father Canon Miles wrote to his son Frank urging him to separate from Wilde: the reaction, according to one witness, was an explosion of rage from Wilde:

He demanded to know if Miles was going to obey his father in the name of morality. Miles, financially dependent, said that much as it distressed him he had no alternative. ‘Very well then’ said Wilde. ‘I will leave you. I will go now and I will never speak to you again as long as I live. (Wilde has Dorian Gray threaten Basil Hallward, ‘on my word of honour I will never speak to you again as long as I live.’) He tore upstairs, flung his clothes in a large trunk, and, rather than wait for help, tipped it over the banister. It crashed down on a valuable antique table and smashed it into fragments. He swept out of the house, hailed a cab, and was gone. (Ellmann 142)

The most important point to note about this event is that once again, as in the pugilistic incident at Trinity, it is an issue concerning poetry which lights an uncharacteristic fury in Wilde, but it may also be telling us that some resentment of censorship had been smouldering in his spirit for a longer time. It was seven years since he had been seduced by Pater’s controversial work, and witnessed its vicissitudes, and seven years too since the appearance of Mahaffy’s book, in the offending passages of which he may even have had a hand. Too long for a passage of Wilde’s development? Perhaps, but consider this: seven years further on, in 1888, Wilde would write “The Decay of Lying”: and one of the readings which we have established for that essay is that it represents a long-meditated and deeply-felt response to those English critics who in this year of 1881 censured his poetry for its inaccuracies of detail.
Wilde is famous in the public imagination for his spontaneous wit, but even that, as we know, was sometimes prepared beforehand: the evidence suggests also that some of his theoretical positions may have sustained seven-year cycles of gestation.

The subject of cycles of influence raises another question in respect to “The Decay of Lying.” We have seen clearly how both the short-term and the long-term promptings and preoccupations of Mahaffy manifested themselves in the spirit and in the letter of that text: but there is another powerful (and classical) parallel whose genesis is not so clear, at least in its chronology, and that is the set of similarities which exist between Wilde’s essay and Plato’s *Phaedrus*, especially in their opening themes.

Each, of course, is cast in dialogue form; and in each, one of the first concerns of the two gentlemen of leisure who are its protagonists is the issue of where to conduct their conversation, which leads to some general reflections on the subject of nature and the outdoors. Socrates confesses to Phaedrus’s charge that he never goes beyond the city walls: “Forgive me. My appetite is for learning. Trees and countryside have no desire to teach me anything; it’s only the men in the city that do” (7). However, he is willing to violate his custom on this occasion for the sake of his “abnormal appetite for hearing good talk” (4), and even praises the spot which they choose: “...the finest thing of all is the grass, thick enough on the gentle slope to rest one’s head most comfortably” (7). Wilde’s Vivian is a more emphatically negative commentator, perhaps because of the more northern terrain, or perhaps because he feels the need to counteract a century of Romantic idealism; he flatly refuses to go outdoors, but his terms nevertheless clearly echo those pronounced by Socrates. “Enjoy Nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty.... Grass is hard and lumpy and damp, and full of dreadful black insects. Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal.
One’s individuality absolutely leaves one... Nothing is more evident than that Nature hates Mind” (1071).

Another similarity between the two dialogues is that both incorporate a shift from spoken to written “text.” Phaedrus proposes to try and repeat from memory a speech which he has heard from Lysias, but before he can begin, Socrates catches him hiding a written copy of the speech beneath his cloak: this is then read aloud, after which Socrates extemporizes his own speeches in response. In Wilde’s essay, after the opening oral exchange of views on Nature, Vivian announces that he is writing an article (“The Decay of Lying: a Protest”), which he then produces: his reading it aloud to Cyril occupies the majority of the dialogue, set off by Cyril’s responses and by the momentum of his own writing leading Vivian to embark spontaneously on exuberant oral elaborations of his theories.

Both Plato’s and Wilde’s essays embody a defense of oral values: *The Phaedrus* is famous for its attacks on writing, and we have seen that the art of “lying” which Wilde advocates is intimately connected with Irish and Mahaffyian forms of orality. Wilde’s thoughts on “lying” may well have been aided also by Socrates’ discussion of the art of deception in rhetoric. Socrates, speaking of the law courts: “Then the man who speaks with the skill of art can make the same thing appear to the same people just at one time, and unjust at another, as he chooses?” (48) Vivian, on lawyers: “They can make the worse appear the better cause, as though they were fresh from Leontine schools, and have been known to wrest from reluctant juries triumphant verdicts of acquittal for their clients, even when those clients, as often happens, were clearly and unmistakably innocent” (1072).

Both Socrates and Vivian are conscious of living in a time of weakened mythological imagination. When asked about the myth of Boreas and Orytheia which is connected to a spot
nearby, Socrates begins his answer, "If I followed the learned in disbelieving it, I should be more in fashion than I am" (6), and proceeds to summarize the rationalist explanation. Rather than opposing it directly, however, he claims that when one begins to explain away one myth, one is forced to continue the process with others: "After this rationalization he has to go on to straighten out the appearance of Hippocentaur, and then Chimaeras: there floods in a great horde of such creatures as Gorgons and Pegasuses and masses of other impossible portentous beings..." (6). Socrates excuses himself as simply not having enough time for such labours, but he seems to be saying that mythology is better left unexploded; like an ecologist of the imagination, he is hoping to preserve its endangered species. Wilde’s character Vivian reveals the perspective of a much later period on roughly the same fabulae - he is obliged to invoke not their preservation but their revival from extinction: “And when that day dawns... Out of the sea will rise Behemoth and Leviathan... Dragons will wander about the waste places, and the phoenix will soar from her nest of fire into the air... Champing his gilded oats, the Hippogriff will stand in our stalls...” (1090). In short, “there floods in a great horde of such creatures,” in both essays.

Eric Havelock, in The Muse Learns to Write, linked Platonic dialogues such as The Phaedrus and The Symposium to resistance to a transition period from orality to literacy in Greek culture; Wilde’s life and work reflect a similar tension and symbiosis between oral and chirographic modes, in a later setting. In that sense it was by embodying a throwback to an earlier period in cultural evolution that Wilde astonished Victorian England. Ellmann, in an essay in Golden Codgers, puts this another way: “a classicist by training, Wilde considered Hellenism to be the more basic side of his nature, overlaid, but only as a palimpsest conceals the original, by a more modern mode” (67).
What we do not know is the point in Wilde’s development at which he came under that influence of *The Phaedrus* which is manifested in “The Decay of Lying.” Does this date back to the Trinity years with Mahaffy, or their later trip to Greece together? It seem equally possible that the influence dates to Wilde’s time at Oxford, since *The Phaedrus* recently had become a hot topic there, a development spurred by Jowett’s 1871 translation.⁹

I have suggested that Wilde’s formation as a “cultural warrior” owes its first great impulse to Speranza, and probably its next to Mahaffy: and as already noted, one of the entry points to a discussion of such influence is through a consideration of their mutual classicism. And once again it is worth noting that the study of the classics, in the period of which we are speaking (the 1870s and 1880s) was becoming newly fraught with implications whose potential to disturb had hardly been felt with such keenness since the Renaissance itself. The awakening consideration, in some quarters, of the very different sexual mores of ancient society was only one aspect of the phenomenon, and we have briefly looked at the involvement of two different scholars, Mahaffy and Pater, in its exposure. A more broadly based effect was occurring, however, due in part to the questioning of the traditional Christian narrative which was resulting from its subjection to the scholarly and scientific research methods not only of the evolutionists but also of such well-known theorists as Renan, Strauss, and Colenso.¹⁰ In such a context it may have been difficult to avoid a certain creeping sense of relativism. This is shown, for example, in Gladstone’s declaration to Mrs. Humphrey Ward of his ambition “to reconcile the Hebrew and Homeric dispensations”:¹¹ there was surely something still a bit shocking about the implication of a certain parity in the two.¹² Arnold’s suggestion, in *Culture and Anarchy*, that the English represented more a Hebraic than a Hellenic nation carries something of the same implicit revaluation of Classical standards for
their application to modern times. Such assertions were seldom subversive of Christianity in their intent – indeed, an author like Arnold would have been very pained at that idea – but that their potentially threatening interpretation was felt is strongly indicated by the expressions of conventional piety with which they were often accompanied. Mahaffy is a case in point: a clergyman himself, and evidently aware that too robust an enthusiasm for the classics might leave him open to misunderstanding by his watchful peers, he confronts the implicit issue more or less head-on in the introductory chapter of *Social Life in Greece*, and sorts it out as follows:

[I]t will appear that the points of superiority in our condition to that of the Greeks were partly due... to a higher and better religion. [This] is of course the great contrast, and the great advantage which we have gained. But I confess that when I compare the religion of Christ with that of Zeus, Apollo, and Aphrodite, and consider the enormous, the unspeakable contrasts, I wonder not at the greatness, but at the smallness of the advance in public morality which has been gained. It is accordingly here, where the difference ought to be greatest, that we are led to wonder most at the superiority of Greek genius which, in spite of an immoral and worthless theology, worked out in its higher manifestations a morality approaching in many points the best type of modern Christianity. Socrates and Plato are far superior to the Jewish moralist, they are far superior to the average Christian moralist; it is only in the matchless teaching of Christ himself that we find them surpassed. So then the social life of the Greeks is more than a matter of antiquarian curiosity, it is of practical value and interest to us all. (8)
This is a typically Mahaffyian display of circumscribed boldness. He is anxious to assure the reader that he has the situation in perspective, and that he does not ultimately represent any threat to orthodoxy, but at the same time he cannot refrain from employing his favourite academic strategy, that of inserting elements of shock value with which to enliven the reader’s attention. Mahaffy is audience-oriented in a way which betrays the elements of orality in his writing; his frequent digressions, of which this is one, for which he was faulted by supposedly more “serious” scholars, are an attempt to inject personality into his books, to engage the reader with the figure of himself as a kind of guide not only to the subject, but to its applications in modern times. He often seems to have the general rather than the specialized reader in mind, and his strong pedagogical instincts results in a desire not to patronize but to stimulate. For this purpose he is operating in the gap between academic and common knowledge: his placing of “the religion of Christ and that of Zeus” in the same comparative clause, in spite of his insistence on the superiority of the latter, might still have seemed shocking to ordinary sensibilities, but would have been considered standard fare in the “advanced” discussions of a senior common room. So Mahaffy is playing it safe on one level while enjoying the role of a pedagogical *agent provocateur* on another. But there are obvious dangers in the Mahaffyian strategy, one of them being that the tame rebel in him may prove more wild than he had imagined, and become, like Milton’s Satan, the primary source of life in the writing: in other words that the author may, without intending to, write himself into trouble. It is just possible, for example, that Mahaffy surprised even himself by his yoking together of “the religion of Christ and of Zeus” in the same sentence, or by his sudden confession of doubts about the efficacy of Christianity in terms of public morals, or even by his apparent separation of Christ from “the average Christian moralist.”\(^\text{13}\)
Wilde would turn the focus on Christ into a kind of obsession, figuring him as the type of the Supreme Artist, but he would take to subverting the “matchless teachings” with his own decadent forms of parable. He could, however, also adopt the Mahaffyian forms of temporizing when it suited him to do so, and for a while it did. For example, he spent part of 1879 writing an essay, eventually titled "The Rise of Historical Criticism," with which he hoped to win the Chancellor’s Essay Prize at Oxford. In it he can be seen following Mahaffy’s formula almost exactly. We are first reminded of the unsatisfactory character of the myths of the Greeks: “From their Aryan ancestors they had received the fatal legacy of a mythology stained with immoral and monstrous stories which strove to hide the rational order of nature in a chaos of miracles” (CW 1199). It turns out, however, that the legacy is not after all “fatal” to their intellectual achievements, which are accorded short but significant meeds of praise: “…the primitive Aryans, whom we call by the name of Greeks, and to whom, as has been well said, we owe all that moves in the world except the blind forces of nature”: “that there is a science of the apparently variable phenomena of history is a conception which we have perhaps only recently begun to appreciate; yet, like all other great thoughts, it seems to have come to the Greek mind spontaneously…” (1198, 1215). Along with Wilde’s digestion of contemporary ethnological theory, what is apparent in these quotations is the sense of inheritance, the assumption of a narrative which would assign to the Greeks the ancestry of our present civilization. “Whatever, in fact, is modern in our life we owe to the Greeks. Whatever is an anachronism we owe to medievalism” Wilde would assert in “The Critic as Artist” (AC 354), but at this point he feels the need to re-affirm, like Mahaffy, the centrality and superiority of the Christian dispensation: “But the turning of all men’s hearts to the East, the first glimmering of that splendid dawn which broke over the hills of Galilee and flooded the
earth like wine, was hidden from [Polybius’] eyes” (1235). The transparent insincerity of this purple patch\(^\text{16}\) has been aptly noted in Ellmann’s biography: “[Wilde] bore in mind that his examiners were probably in orders. So he qualified his praise of the historian Polybius by adding an orthodox sigh” (102). Mahaffy appears to have professed his pieties in earnest, while at the same time allowing himself to be energized by controlled impulses of defiance, from which he was generally willing to retreat if called upon to do so. Wilde follows the same rhetorical pattern of occupying forward positions while covering his rear, so to speak, but with an important difference in tone, detectable in the faintly insulting implication of his too-fulsome language of Christian reverence.

Elsewhere in the same essay, we find him slipping in an explicit provocation, in a reference to “Aristogeiton being jealous of Hipparchos’ attention to Garmodios, then a beautiful boy in the flower of Greek loveliness” (CW 1206). The final phrase seems to belong more to a tendency than to Thucydides, (the author under discussion). We might see in it an early example of flaunting in prose, or again as Ellmann puts it, respecting this passage: “Wilde never fails to seek out dangerous ground... He cannot resist his own suspect cadences” (103). The aural metaphor is entirely apt, evoking as it does the link to Pater’s subversive music, which Wilde has absorbed and begun to amplify – some would say to vulgarize.

To express the same observations in terms of the theoretical framework in which we are interested, it is as if both Mahaffy and Pater are consciously working with the boundaries between the oral and the chirographic. Each of them makes use of the less stringent rules of the oral dimension to give expression to ideas and sentiments which would be socially unacceptable in chirographic (print) form, Mahaffy because of a somewhat anti-academic, “larger-than-life” rebellious streak, and Pater, presumably, from urgent personal necessity –
the dilemma of forbidden desire. To some extent both of them test the waters: partly for the love of Socratic liveliness, Mahaffy, in *Social Life in Greece*, ventures on a qualified but frank revelation of Greek homosexuality for the benefit of the general reader, and Pater, in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, manages to secrete the politics of desire into his prose in subtle allusions and "suspect cadences." But neither of them is a committed print radical: both of them retract when called upon to do so.

Wilde listens to both; but while Mahaffy is heard, Pater is overheard.\(^\text{17}\) It is possible that he first hears Mahaffy’s voice in his childhood home; he is often in Mahaffy’s company later while at Trinity College, and helps him on a book project; then while at Oxford he brings the wrath of the authorities down upon himself by taking an unpermitted leave for the sake of a voyage to Greece in which he shares Mahaffy’s company every day for almost three months – a voyage which, incidentally, reappears in several gestures of mise-en-scène in *The Rise of Historical Criticism*. Mahaffy goes a good deal further in conversation than in print; indeed he is famous in his own right as a conversationalist; and it is mainly through this medium that Wilde becomes primed with Mahaffyian attitudes and knowledge.

He enters the Paterian orbit on a different trajectory. Wilde can be just as susceptible to books as to living beings (especially when such books are the repositories of hidden daemonic energies) and he is among those haunted by the music of Pater’s notorious work, until almost three years later (not long after his return from Greece, and perhaps rather tired of Mahaffy at that point) he joins the ephebic throng in the don’s rooms, and listens, and no doubt contributes, to whatever emancipated conversation is ventured upon. It is not, however, the secrets of the art of conversation which Wilde sets out to absorb from this particular master. In Ireland Wilde had already completed years of apprenticeship in the arts of oral wizardry,
which he would now be deploying in an English context; what he wanted instead from Pater was the secret of chirographic magic which was one of the essential keys to success in English society, and which the effect of *The Renaissance* on its readers had proven the don to possess.

Pater in that respect was the complement, indeed almost the opposite, of Mahaffy, who was remembered by those who knew him as a larger-than-life character and conversationalist, but whose prose, it has to be admitted, achieved no particular resonance either then or since, in spite of all his determined efforts to make “the dry bones live.” Pater, on the other hand, made little impression as a personality – so little, that later, when he heard of his death, Wilde’s response was to ask, “Was he ever alive?”18 – but his prose appeared to Wilde to embody a transfer of existence, a subtle vitality almost as dangerous to those who read it as the impact of a charismatic personality in real life.

Wilde appears to have believed that the secret of this almost anthropomorphic quality of Pater’s art lay in its sound system, its “music;” and at some point during his Oxford education he began a process of intellectual and artistic inquiry into the connections between sound and sense, wanting to absorb to himself the power of those connections to seduce the minds of others. It was his fate to succeed in exercising this power not in his writings but in the medium of the spoken word. That may be the reason why it remains a theme in his life and art which has not received consideration, although, as we shall see in this chapter and the following, Wilde often gave both spoken and written expression to his thoughts on it.
III. Sound and Sensibility

Evidence of a link between sound and sensibility in Wilde's thoughts on aesthetics appears early in his critical writings. In the text of a lecture given on his return from North America in 1883, he remarks:

America is the noisiest country that ever existed. One is waked up in the morning, not by the singing of the nightingale, but by the steam whistle. It is surprising that the sound practical sense of the Americans does not reduce this intolerable noise. All art depends upon exquisite and delicate sensibility, and such continual turmoil must ultimately be destructive of the musical faculty. ("Impressions of America," AC 7)

The last sentence above clearly implies that "the musical faculty" is essential to art, since it forms part of the "exquisite and delicate sensibility" upon which "all art depends." Wilde often applied the terminology of music to either the formal structure of a literary work, or its prosody, or both. It seems that he may have had both in mind here. The steam whistle not only replaces sweet sounds with harsh, it obliterates the natural intervals of birdsong, in which, according to aestheticians, we may find the origins of the intervals used in our own music. This industrial assault upon sensibility is the means by which 'one' is awakened to consciousness each day. Within the generic pronoun through which he includes all those who might suffer the same, Wilde gives an account of his own experience here; and it is easy to imagine that there must have been many times on the American tour when the relatively unknown author struggled to create fine prose under inhospitable aesthetic conditions.
Besides destroying natural sound, the steam whistle attempts to dominate the pattern of human energy, by subordinating it to the dictates of mechanical time. Wilde's use of the word "turmoil" in the passage is evocative in this respect, for there is an element not only of noise but of hard forced labour in its meaning. It may be as a response to these two evils of industrialization that we find, throughout his life and work, an aesthetic emphasis on sound, and a vision of indolence as a positive condition: his characters adopt idle poses, and are free to talk until dawn, or have smoking as an "occupation." Perhaps they are satirical versions of the aristocratic young men of his acquaintance, but perhaps also Wilde was deliberately envisioning conditions conducive to a state of unforced creativity.

Conversation, and the sound of speech, were important features of the aural milieu from which literature might emerge. Wilde could also be finicky about other aspects of the circumstances in which he wrote. Throughout his life he appears to have believed in the immediate influence of material and intellectual surroundings on creative work. Six years after the remarks on America quoted above, he commented; "Prison has had an admirable effect on Mr. Wilfrid Blunt as a poet" ("Poetry and Prison," AC 116); but ten years further on, after his own release from prison, he complained of the conditions in which he lived in Paris as making it impossible for him to write. The remark about Blunt might be ascribed to the opportunity to say something unconventional, which Wilde seldom passed up, and his reasons for not settling down to serious writing in Paris might be seen by some as merely the flimsy excuse of a debauchee. Interpreting Wilde's words and actions by such lights poses an eternal temptation to the moralist in all of us; but some beliefs appear so often and in so many
different forms in his life and work that they may be taken as sincerely contemplated. That certain conditions either nurture or discourage the production of art forms one of them.

In this, as in many other of Wilde's aesthetic preoccupations, one may easily discern a Paterian influence. In the essay on Winckelmann in *The Renaissance*, Pater had written of the need for "unity with ourselves, in blitheness and repose" (146) as necessary conditions for intellectual culture, but Pater in his turn was restating the ancient truism that art and intellectual life are the product of undisturbed reveries which require copious hours of leisure and silence, or better still, perhaps, musical accompaniment.

Fittingly, it is Ernest and Gilbert, of "The Critic as Artist," who personify the ideal of such conditions. They are indolent, free of the constraints of mechanical time (they tell the hour by the lightening of the sky), and also musical; Gilbert is at the piano when the dialogue begins. By discussing the critical spirit at such length, they themselves become representative of it; and in conversing until dawn, they maintain the value of speech as a mode of literary and critical discourse. The dialogue, as a literary form, already shifts the written text in the direction of oral performance; at least in typographic terms it manifests some of the features of a script for the stage.

Appropriately, the first phase of the discussion between Ernest and Gilbert results in a blurring of the distinction between life and literature, between speech and writing, and between books and beings. Books, at least of the kind that Gilbert favours, are not so much written as spoken aloud: "Poor, silly, conceited Mr. Secretary Pepys has chattered his way into the circle of the Immortals" (342). Declaring his affection for the personal
memoir as a literary mode, Gilbert transforms the experience of reading into one of
listening, and the effect of literature into that of a social encounter.

[The author] may be a sceptic like the gentle Sieur de Montaigne, or a
saint like the bitter son of Monica, but when he tells his own secrets he can
always charm our ears to listening and our lips to silence. (AC 341)

Wilde had a gift for pushing cliche d metaphors to their limits - and beyond, to the
point of inversion. Gilbert supplies an apt example of the process. Having just spoken of
books as personalities, it soon occurs to him to begin doubling the image back upon
itself:

When people talk to us about others they are usually dull. When they talk
to us about themselves they are nearly always interesting, and if one could
shut them up, when they become wearisome, as easily as one can shut up a
book of which one has grown wearied, they would be perfect absolutely.

(342)

A little more tugging at this theme with Ernest stimulates Gilbert to complete the image
with a satirical and almost ludicrous epigram: “Cheap editions of great books may be
delightful, but cheap editions of great men are absolutely detestable” (342).

The playful alchemy by which Gilbert has metamorphosed books into people, and
vice versa, would make an interesting comparison with other examples of transformation
in Wilde's work, such as that of the picture of Dorian Gray in the novel of that name. The
assignment of temporality, of changes wrought by time, to the static visual medium of
painting, like the definition of books in terms of personality, may have reflected an
intensely creative urge on Wilde's part to infuse life into every form of art, or it may
suggest a more intellectual exploration of Pater's observation, in *The Renaissance*, that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" (86). Pater in turn may have been taking note of Leonardo da Vinci's description of painting as 'frozen music', in the *Trattato della Pittura* (Clark 125). Similarly, perhaps, writing might be considered as the sound of speech in a hardened form, and literary memoirs as "frozen" personalities, almost in a cryogenic sense. The multi-dimensional, shape-shifting powers of persistence, manifested by Wilde's own legend over the passage of time, may be said to form an eerie parallel to such artistic experimentation.

As we read on in “The Critic as Artist,” it becomes apparent that Wilde espouses the evaluation of literature by standards of orality, in theory as well as in practice. Gilbert, who is the dominant voice of the dialogue, makes Wilde's theoretical position quite explicit, in his evocation of a time in classical antiquity when the critical spirit supported the production of art:

> ...they elaborated the criticism of language, considered in the light of the mere material of that art, to a point which we, with our accentual system of reasonable or emotional emphasis, can barely if at all attain; studying, for instance, the metrical movements of a prose as scientifically as a modern musician studies harmony and counterpoint, and I need hardly say, with much keener aesthetic insight. In this they were right, as they were right in all things. (350)

This is contrasted with the effects of technology on Western European literature:

> Since the introduction of printing, and the fatal development of the habit of reading amongst the middle and lower classes of this country, there has
been a tendency in literature to appeal more and more to the eye, and less and less to the ear, which is really the sense which, from the standpoint of pure art, it should seek to please, and by whose canons it should abide always... Yes: writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to the voice. (350-1)

Wilde's use of the word "fatal" here may or may not be read, or rather heard, as a note of the personal mannerism which is sometimes used to indicate sexual preference, but more significantly it is fully consistent with the notion of art as having a "life" of its own, and it is typical also of the exaggeration which is a permissible indulgence of oral culture. It does not in fact undermine the overall sincerity of the point being made, on the nature of a shift in artistic values brought about by a technological innovation. Like his reaction to the noisiness of America, this places Wilde in the tradition of those authors, from Thomas Carlyle to T. S. Eliot, who expressed apprehensions about the impact of technology on artistic sensibility and public taste. Many of them, for example Charles Baudelaire and Matthew Arnold, are acknowledged influences on Wilde himself; most if not all of them, however, were reacting to the new technologies which accompanied and sometimes led industrial progress: "Poetry and progress are two ambitious men who hate each other" wrote Baudelaire, in an essay attacking photography (88), and T.S. Eliot would later aver that the internal combustion engine had altered the rhythms of modern poetry. Wilde's observation differs a little in that it dates the negative effect of technology all the way back to the invention of printing, that is, the 1430s. This is remarkably close to Ruskin's date for the beginning of the Renaissance, (1424), which he considered a negative development (277). It is not, however, the medieval period that
Wilde is comparing to his own time, but rather, as we have seen, the period of the flourishing of the Greek critical spirit. "Whatever, in fact, is modern in our life," says Gilbert a little further on, "we owe to the Greeks. Whatever is an anachronism is due to medievalism" (354).

We note in passing that Wilde appears also to have distinguished between technology and scientific inquiry, at least of the natural kind, to which he was not antipathetic, and which in some respects he equated to the critical spirit. In this he may have been following Matthew Arnold, who expanded his definition of "culture" to include all of the highest intellectual activity of a nation (Trilling, 371). Wilde seems to acknowledge this by having Gilbert note that "It is criticism, as Arnold points out, that creates the intellectual atmosphere of the age" (403). As Gilbert goes on to say:

... criticism can re-create the past for us from the very smallest fragment of language or art, just as surely as the man of science can, from some tiny bone, or the mere impress of a foot upon a rock, re-create for us the winged dragon or Titan lizard that once made the earth shake beneath its tread, can call Behemoth out of his cave, and make Leviathan swim once more across the startled sea. (404)

But in "The Decay of Lying," Vivian uses very similar terms to envision a future Age of Romance, when "Facts will be regarded as discreditable" and "Truth will be found mourning in her fetters":

The very aspect of the world will change to our startled eyes. Out of the sea will rise Behemoth and Leviathan, and sail round the high-pooped galleys, as they do on the delightful maps of those ages when books on
geography were actually readable. Dragons will wander about the waste places... (CW 1090)

It would seem from this that the spirit of critical and scientific enquiry leads to a similar vision of the world as the spirit of Romance and fiction, or of that fabulous, erroneous historical scholarship of former times to which Wilde was agreeably partial. And the result is much the same whether we are seeing the thing as it really is, or isn't.

IV. "Strange and Remote Relations"

Perhaps in the same spirit, Wilde himself may have taken a few liberties with historical facts in his re-creation of the role of metrical and prosodic values in the Greek age of criticism. He had carried off prizes at Trinity and Oxford for Classics scholarship, and one naturally hesitates to challenge his erudition, but he may simply have chosen not to fall into "a careless habit of accuracy" on the subject. Gilbert is broadly correct when he speaks of Greek critics "studying, for instance, the metrical movements of a prose as scientifically as a modern musician studies harmony and counterpoint." There were two classes of scholars, known as the metrici and the rhythmici, whose business, as their names suggest, was to study the complexities of the structural elements of literary language (Jackson Knight 2). Their work survived into Roman times, and was later codified and passed on by Saint Augustine in his treatise, De Musica. Their secrets as revealed by Augustine mainly consist of balances in mathematical relationships, within units such as the hexameter, based on the assignment of numerical value to syllable lengths (Jackson Knight 82-3). These relationships of proportion in Classical languages have sometimes been invoked with a sense of superstitious awe by poets and critics in the English tradition, because of their possible connection to knowledge of the original,
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sacred, sound and proportion of the words of God which created the world, and underlay
the music of the spheres. As the critic Seth Weiner has suggested:

It is little wonder that Renaissance prosodic theorists looked back on the
masters of classical poetry with awe: for them, the ancient poet, musician,
orator, divine, and philosopher, were one and inseparable: in speech
pronounced by such a magus with due regard for number, weight, and
measure, was heard an echo of the Word that moves planets, changes
seasons, and numbers every hair and leaf-fall. (5)

It was due to such assumptions that the most serious efforts were made, during the
English Renaissance, to transfer the quantitative measures of classical verse into the
native English tongue. The failure of the movement to achieve this had the effect of
revealing all the more clearly to English poets and critics the nature of the language in
which they were working. Wilde indicates some familiarity with these historic facts
when he has Gilbert acknowledge that "we, with our accentual system of reasonable or
emotional emphasis, can barely if at all attain" to such an elaborate, even scientific
analysis of the movements of prose or poetry as that conducted by the critics of Classical
times. However, the phrase "accentual system of reasonable or emotional emphasis" is
not an entirely accurate description of the English language in this context. It is true, and
the Renaissance prosodists found it inescapably so, that English is a stress-based,
accentual language; but the great majority of stresses are assigned according to a
preordained pronunciation pattern which derives from tradition, not from reason or
emotion. In other words, Wilde may be confounding metrical with semantic stress in the
word "emphasis" above.
This would not necessarily rule out Gilbert's claim that the Greeks "elaborated the criticism of language, considered in the light of the mere material of that art," but the mythical note is sounded when he concludes that such studies were conducted "with much keener aesthetic insight" than in his own time. This is another example of misleading by association. Few of the works of the metrici and the rhythmici remain to us, and those that have been preserved suggest that their aesthetics are far from reliable (Jackson Knight 2). The Classical critics whose names Gilbert does mention, later in the dialogue but in the same context - Aristotle, Lucian and Longinus, Quintilian and Dionysius - were indeed noted for their aesthetic insights, but not for elaborate metrical or prosodic analysis. The only name among them who is sometimes associated with criticism of such a technical nature is Dionysius (of Halicarnassus), a Greek who lived and wrote in Rome in the first century B.C. No doubt it is Dionysius whom Gilbert has in mind when he declares:

Sometimes, when I have written a piece of prose that I have been modest enough to consider absolutely free from fault, a dreadful thought comes over me that I may have been guilty of the immoral effeminacy of using trochaic and tribrachic movements, a crime for which a learned critic of the Augustan age censures with most just severity the brilliant if somewhat paradoxical Hegesias. (351-2)

It is as well that Gilbert uses Dionysius as his example, even if not by name here, for none of the other critics he mentioned could have provided any such evidence of the elaborate and minute criticism which he implies to have been characteristic of their work. Even Dionysius, in his best known work, De Compositione Verborum, declares a certain
distaste for detail: "... for certainly it was not part of my design to touch without due
cause on metrical and rhythmical questions, but only so far as it was really necessary"
(177), as though knowing that an overly finicky approach to such matters was a proven
critical cul-de-sac. The fact that he lived and taught in Rome in the Augustan age makes
him rather a late entry in evidence of Gilbert's claim that the Greeks were a nation of art
critics. Gilbert himself, unless he wrote in Greek (and possibly even if then) rather strains
our credulity with his claim to be worrying over "the immoral effeminacy of using
trochaic and tribrachic movements": applied to English, such a concern is merely high-
sounding nonsense.20

I have here pointed out some of the weaknesses and contradictions in Gilbert's
version of Classical times, but Wilde may have judged that even in his day, when a
modicum of classical education was common, few of his readers would have followed
him far enough and carefully enough to discern them (as indeed nor would I, had not an
English translation of Dionysius' work become available in 1910). Wilde may even have
been pretending more than he knew in this matter. But what is most important is not the
explanation for such mythologizing, but the fact of its occurrence, for it shows that he
cared deeply enough about metrical and prosodic values in literature to construct an
historic fantasy of a culture in which they predominated.

Wilde's idealized view of such a period is paralleled by his memory of a time in
his own life when sound values were likewise the object of elaborate and loving
attention. He locates this time, in a review of Walter Pater's Appreciations, as follows:

It was during my undergraduate days at Oxford; days of lyrical ardours
and studious sonnet-writing; days when one loved the exquisite intricacy
and musical repetitions of the ballade, and the villanelle with its linked long-drawn echoes and its curious completeness; days when one solemnly sought to discover the proper temper in which a triolet should be written; delightful days, in which, I am glad to say, there was far more rhyme than reason. (AC 229)

The idyllic note is certainly clear here, and although it contains perhaps not so much exaggeration as Gilbert’s claim to anxiety over trochees and tribrachics, there seems to be a subscription to the same ideal at work, wherein what we have heard of as "the musical faculty," comprising both metrical and prosodic values, is perceived as essential to the crafting of poetic form.

The quotation also implies that one of the great formative periods of Wilde’s own poetic sensibility occurred in conditions similar to those of the development of Greek literature, where "the voice was the medium, and the ear the critic." By locating his myth of a personal Golden Age in Oxford, Wilde is ignoring the more common attribution of it to childhood years; and yet he had grown up in a country which even at that time was famous for its people's gift of speech, and it was there also that he had received his first grounding in Classical scholarship. To his fellow countryman, Yeats, Wilde had been willing to acknowledge such links: "We Irish are... a nation of brilliant failures...[but] the greatest talkers since the Greeks." Wilde was more interested in being a brilliant success than a brilliant failure at that time, however, and in an English context it was his Oxford rather than his Irish background which would show to his best advantage.

Wilde, then, could perhaps be compared to one of those ornamental bushes which blossom most successfully when their roots are kept in the shade. The grafting on of
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Classical scholarship which had begun while he was still on his native soil, was completed in the more sultry atmosphere of Oxford, where an entire generation of young men were being pollinated with an aesthetic - and often sensual - Paterian ardour. The heady influences of sound, sensuality, and aesthetic aspiration, and some of their ultimate effect on art and morality, were later shown in reflection in Wilde's sonnet "Helas!":

... Surely there was a time I might have trod
The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God:
Is that time dead? lo! with a little rod
I did but touch the honey of romance -
And must I lose a soul's inheritance?

(CW 864)

Ellmann in his biography points out that the sonnet describes Wilde's state of mind while at Oxford, and neatly characterizes him as being torn between "cadence and decadence" at that time (331).

There is even a suggestion in all this that Wilde himself might have at one time valued sound over content; but in practice he seldom took this position to extremes. We saw in Chapter One that when Yeats pressed Wilde to change the final word in the sentence "The world has grown sad because a puppet was once melancholy," from "melancholy" to "sad," Wilde refused, explaining that he wanted a fuller sound at the end of the sentence (135), but there is no serious compromise of meaning in this example: and in fact Wilde was critical of Swinburne in such terms, saying of his poetry, "... it may be
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said that Language is his master. Words seem to dominate him. Alliteration tyrannizes over him. Mere sound becomes his lord (AC 146).

Wilde was an enthusiastic believer in rhyme, however, in the particular sense of the word, identifying it as an element of structure as well as of sound. "Rhyme gives architecture as well as melody to verse" he points out, in faulting the poet Henley for abandoning it:

   Rhyme gives architecture as well as melody to verse: it gives that
delightful sense of limitation which in all the arts is so pleasurable, and is,
indeed, one of the secrets of perfection; it will whisper, as a French critic
has said "things unexpected and charming, things with strange and remote
relations to each other" ... and in his constant rejection of rhyme Mr.
Henley seems to me to have abdicated half his power. (AC 91)

Wilde was aware also of its place in literary history, as the formal feature which distinguished Western European poetry from the Classical tradition. This and his somewhat mystical sense of the power of sound is once again evident in Gilbert's rather beautiful rhapsody in "The Critic as Artist":

   Rhyme, that exquisite echo which in the muse's hollow hill creates and
answers its own voice; rhyme, which in the hands of the real artist
becomes not merely a material element of metrical beauty, but a spiritual
element of thought and passion also, waking a new mood, it may be, or
stirring a fresh train of ideas, or opening by mere sweetness and
suggestion of sound some golden door at which the imagination itself had
knocked in vain; rhyme, which can turn man's utterance to the speech of
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gods; rhyme, the one chord we have added to the Greek lyre, became in Robert Browning's hands a grotesque, misshapen thing... (345)

More on Mr. Browning in a moment; for now, let us consider another possible background influence to this obviously more than material view of sound values on Wilde's part. The editors of Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks argue that "the foundations of his later work were laid in the reading he did during and shortly after his years in Oxford" (8) – a sentence which, incidentally, would benefit from an additional reference to listening. We might see both as the more passive forms of Wilde's retrospective visions of himself in "lyrical ardours and studious sonnet composition": and we might wonder what intellectual underpinnings he was absorbing, to support such a confident proclamation of rhyme as "a spiritual element of thought and passion" - a phrase in which we see an implication of the deepest links between sound and meaning. One source, as we have seen, may lie in his (perhaps partial) understanding of Greek critical practices, given emphasis by personal colloquy with Mahaffy, and we have noted also how he appeared to have taken cognizance of the mystical strain in the history of English prosody; but a proximate and powerful influence towards a belief in such links was also present at Oxford in the person of F. Max Müller, the famous comparative philologist, who was one of Wilde's teachers in his first year, and of whose sonorous lectures Wilde was an auditor. 22

Müller claimed that a parent language, now lost, was created by divinely inspired, imaginative, and rational members of the Aryan race. In the words of the editors of the Oxford Notebooks, "The original language was then transformed by racially related nomadic groups into later languages and mythologies, fallen versions of the original
tongue" (9). If this original "golden age" tongue was composed of "phonetic types" as Müller said, i.e., sounds which held a "natural" association with meaning, then it is reasonable to suppose that some traces of these natural associations remain in the languages of modern times. Certain sounds and sound-patterns might contain hints of underlying thought-forms which act upon the listener at the same time as the surface meaning. Perhaps Wilde was playing with some such theory in his mind when, as Pearson reported, he dwelt on the sounds of certain words "pronouncing them as if tasting them" (164); and it likewise may have formed the background to his sense of the magical powers of rhyme.

But if we were to accept that the power of sound, in poetry for example, consists not only in pleasing assonances and repetitions, or aesthetic effects in the lightest sense, but in a hidden relationship to underlying meanings, then might not its effects be extended beyond the narrow circles of aesthetes and literati, becoming even a tool for some form of social action? Wilde may have thought so at one point. "The Poets and the People," an unsigned article by him in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in February 1887, opens with an alarum on the state of the nation:

Never was there a time in our national history when there was more need than there is now for the creation of a spirit of enthusiasm among all classes of society, inspiring men and women with that social zeal and the spirit of self-sacrifice which alone can save a great people in the throes of national misfortune. (AC 43)
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The details of the "national misfortune" are not spelled out, although symptoms such as "poverty and distress" and "the greediness of capitalists" are mentioned, and there is a more metaphoric summation at the end of the article:

The struggle to live in all parts of Western Europe, and perhaps especially England, is so fierce that we are in danger of having all that is idealistic and beautiful crushed out of us by the steam engine and the manipulations of the Stock Exchange. (AC 45)

The steam engine is presumably referred to here as a symbol of industrialization; it may be also that like the steam-whistle referred to in the account of America, its unpleasant noise is a negative characteristic in Wilde's mind: once again, at any rate, it is the effect on spirit ("all that is idealistic") and sensibility ("[all that is] beautiful") that concerns Wilde.

His response is to issue a clarion call to the nation's poets:

There is one class of men to whom we have a right to look for assistance, to whom the task of stirring the national conscience should be accepted with delight....surely the hour has come when the poets should exercise their influence for good.... (43)

Here is further evidence of what I have maintained throughout this thesis, namely, that for many years Wilde cherished a profound and even combative idealism about the nature of poetry, an idealism which places him firmly in the tradition of Sidney, Shelley, and the other great apologists of the medium. Indeed this apostrophe to the nation's poets implies a full acceptance of Shelley's famous definition of them as the unacknowledged legislators of the world.
When Wilde looks at the actual productions of the poets of his day, however, he
finds no evidence of such stirring patriotic efforts: "One gives us a string of melancholy
pessimism.... Another...does his best to abuse and dishearten a nation that is heroically
struggling...." (43). The brunt of his criticism, however, is directed against Robert
Browning, "who in the eyes of many is esteemed one of the greatest of living poets." In
the eyes, perhaps, but not in the ears, it would seem: significantly, Wilde's attack is
directed strongly at Browning's neglect of sound values: he "fails to produce music in his
lines" and indulges in "composition of word-puzzles and ear-torturing sentences" (44).
Evidently, Wilde conceives of the music of poetry as an essential element of its potential
to stir the soul of the nation and lift the spirits of the people. No doubt it is possible to
suggest the influence of Ruskin in particular on the gloomy assessment of the state of
society in this article, but the connection with the aesthetics of sound is, as I have shown,
a feature of Wilde's own critical work.

Four years later in "The Critic as Artist" Wilde eschews such explicit links,
although he dwells again on Browning's poetry, remarking for example "There are
moments when he wounds us by monstrous music" (57). Perhaps Wilde had become
cynical about the spirit of the age, or the power of poetry to move the masses: perhaps he
had concluded that "the introduction of printing, and the fatal development of the habit of
reading among the middle and lower classes" had in fact rendered their ears impervious
to poetry's subtle influence. He seems to have absorbed this lesson in his fiction and his
works for the stage, where it is only individual members of the upper classes, such as
Dorian Gray and Sir Robert Chiltern, whose lives are derailed by Orphic suggestion, (as
will be noted in the next chapter). He longer writes of the duty of the poets to rouse the
people, but rather that "the mission of the aesthetic movement is to lure people to contemplate" (AC 122). Eventually, in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he will wash his hands of any social mission for art: "all art is quite useless." But he would continue to idealize its music and its form, even within prison walls: "...if ever I lie in the cool grass at night-time it will be to write sonnets to the moon" (*De Profundis*, P. 518).

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1 The class system of England could not but be felt in Oxford also. “Old Etonians looked down on those from other public schools and they despised the Exhibitioners who did not come from any. (Portora and Trinity were no recommendation)” (Jullian 40). Oxford also housed an anti-Irish academic strain. In the nineteenth century its chief representative was the historian J.A. Froude, who, finding the limitations of historical narrative impeding the expression of his prejudice, gave vent to it in a novel, *The Two Chiefs of Dunboy*. In reviewing it in *The Pall Mall Gazette* (13 April 1889, under the title “Mister Froude’s Blue Book [on Ireland],” signed with initials only) Wilde listed at least twenty of its unpleasant stereotypes of Ireland and the Irish. Wilde’s sense of antipathy to Froude probably originated much earlier than the publication of *Dunboy* — perhaps even in his Dublin days, since the Irish of every class took note of their enemies; or perhaps as a result of some Oxford experience. Evidence that the anti-Irish tradition continued even into the last quarter of the twentieth century can be found in the 1975 edition of A.L. Rowse, *Oxford in the History of the Nation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), where we find that Wilde’s downfall was triggered by his “vulgar Irish exhibitionism” (208). Not surprisingly, on the next page Froude is described as “a genuine Englishman,” who also “could not admire the rhodomontade of Disraeli.” (209) Apparently, Jewish “rhodomontade” and Irish “exhibitionism” disqualify Disraeli and Wilde from admission to the category of “genuine Englishman,” as understood by Rowse, and as assigned by him to his anti-Irish predecessor Froude. However, although these sentiments make their appearance in what seems a semi-official history of the university, they obviously create only a narrow and partial impression of its overall atmosphere, which Wilde, for example, would later recall with dreamy nostalgia (see pp.148-9 of this chapter). And as others have noted, Oxford also recognized the aristocracy of talent: “The great difference between the public schools and Oxford University was that in the former the athlete was the hero, but in the latter a brilliant man or a dandy was equally admired” (Jullian 40). “...at that little college [Magdalen] more importance was attached to social ability than to individual or athletic superiority” (W.W. Ward, in Mikhail 2, 13). Furthermore it is worth noting that although Froude began his career at Oxford, he was not widely encouraged there.

2 Compared especially with discussions of the differences and conflicts between Athens and Sparta, Greece and Persia, or Greece and Rome.

3 Wilde makes frequent reference to Polybius in “The Rise of Historical Criticism.”

4 Ellmann p. 439. Sources in Yeats, Weidnfeld and Nicolson.

5 Wilde had already received several years of schooling in the classics, at Portora, by the time he became Mahaffy’s pupil, but nominating Mahaffy as his “first” teacher suggests that he had not been much impressed by the quality of his education there.

6 *Principles of the Art of Conversation*. Preface, p.vii

7 *Greek Life and Thought*, 126.

8 A model of Miles, Sally Higgs. Ellmann cites Frank Harris and E. A. Ward as sources. (Notes 564.)

9 Now available on the world wide web: simply look up the title.

10 A sign of Mahaffy’s absorption of such influences appears early in his career, in the Preface to the publication of his Twelve Lectures on Primitive Civilizations (1869): “Many young people have the historical character of the Old Testament completely hidden from them, by being taught to read it only from a spiritual point of view. It is to such people, if they have historical tastes, a book of new and strange
interest, when it is examined like any other book, from a purely secular aspect” (xviii). Typically, the sentence with he then concludes the paragraph returns to a pious note: “There is no reason why the latter aspect should be the least inconsistent with the reverence due to the Scriptures, as the result of Divine inspiration.”


12 “That Homer had been the Bible of the Greeks was a Victorian cliche. Where Gladstone was unusual was in his desire that the poet should become the Bible of the English too.” (Jenkyns 204)

13 This is a familiar theme in Mahaffy: he had made a similar point in *The Decay of Modern Preaching* two years earlier, where he expressed his disappointment with the rhetorical capacities of the average clergyman of the day; and in doing so, he had characteristically wandered to the edge of trouble in his own expression.

Many of Mahaffy’s works achieved wide circulation, and their tendencies to ambiguity did not always go unnoticed. For example, in *The Story of Religious Controversy* (1929), Joseph McCabe makes extensive use of it to attack the view of the Athenians as brilliant but loose in morals: e.g. as follows:

“But it is not true: and to disprove it, I will take at once a high authority who is also a Protestant clergyman, Professor Mahaffy. Indeed, the work from which I am going to quote, “Social Life in Greece,” an express study of moral and social life by a master of Greek literature, and therefore, even on the academic side, the most reliable book we could choose, the conflict of Christian (or clerical) sentiment and scholarly love of facts (and even of the Greeks themselves) is somewhat amusing. Professor Mahaffy is bound to hold that Christianity is superior to Paganism, but he is singularly unfortunate in vindicating his belief. (http://www.infidels.org/library/histori...e/religious_controversv/chapter_10.html. See also note 11, above.

14 In *De Profundis* (CW 1027-9). A Supreme Artist who, incidentally, wrote nothing down himself.

15 A point which Mahaffy had made many times: see “Prolegomena to Ancient History,” pp.26-7, or the following, from Chapter One of the edition of *Social Life in Greece* in which Wilde had collaborated: “In a word, they [the Greeks] are thoroughly modern, more modern even than the epochs quite proximate to our own... even the medieval baron and the medieval saint would feel vastly more out of place among us than the intelligent Greek” (1-2).

16 Wilde’s frequent use of overwrought or purple patches in his prose and even in his poetry is worthy of a separate study. It seems at times to represent an expression of cynicism, and at others a form of laziness or lack of stylistic development. Wilde was fully conscious of chirographic codes, and well knew in what vein he was employing them. It seems likely that he himself would have sometimes winced at his own excesses, and he is possibly referring to his own failure to develop beyond them in his confession to Gide that he had put his genius into his life, but merely his talent into his work.

17 Wilde’s response, according to Frank Harris, to Pater’s anxious inquiry as to the audibility of his voice (Mikhail 31-2). I am also using J. S. Mill’s distinction between eloquence being “heard” and poetry “overheard” to suggest one possible difference between Mahaffy’s influence and that of Pater.

18 (Ellmann 50). A rather melancholy indicator of Pater’s inner world can be found in the Conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*: “Experience, already reduced to a swarm of sense impressions, is ringed round for each of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without” (151). While appearing to despair of human communication, it does specify the voice as the one potential channel.


20 And may be another echo of Mahaffy, who discusses Dionysius’ judgment of Hegesias on page 317 of *Greek Life and Thought*.

21 On his American tour Wilde had proclaimed that rhyme was of Irish origin (Ellmann 186) but here he has apparently subsumed the Irish in the “we” of Gilbert’s rhapsody.

22 Lectures and sermons were a form of what could be called “the higher orality” of university precincts; their influence should be noted along with that of books whenever possible. Arnold refers in a letter to the importance of having “heard” Newman, to whom he also sent a copy of *Essays in Criticism* inscribed with the words “From one of his old hearers” (De Laura 49).
Chapter Five: “Musical Words Said with Musical Utterance.”

In the previous chapter I read Wilde’s explicit exhortation, in “The Critic as Artist,” to “return to the voice” as the central statement of an oral aesthetic which was already implicit in his life and work from the time of his student days at Trinity. Now I will present more evidence from his life and from his other works, in particular *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which corroborates my assertion of the centrality of this aspect of Wilde’s sensibility.

As we shall shortly be seeing in the novel, Wilde’s sense of himself as a poet is one key to the rest of his writing. The volume of poetry which Wilde published at the outset of his career in 1881 had been suffused with oral values to an extent which had drawn gibes from the critics. From then on he was to confine his written expression almost entirely to prose, but he was never to abandon his instinctive and acquired belief in the underlying oral and aural powers of poetic utterance, which he explored and theorized in a variety of ways throughout his writings and his talk. Although hardly daring to produce more verse, his cultural politics remained those of a poet with an oral sensibility. “The Decay of Lying” defends poetry and oral values, and attacks the chirographic aesthetics of realist prose, and, in advocating the revolution of imagination against the regime of fact, also hits back against the early critics of Wilde’s own verse. Then in “The Critic as Artist” Wilde is drawn to theorize upon the relationship between sound and sensibility, positing the ideal critic as one who judges literature by the ear. For Wilde therefore, prose, and critical prose especially, is a continuation of poetry by other means.

We saw that Wilde also attributed powers to poetry in a way which hearkened back to an earlier (oral) stage of culture, locating the ideal age of criticism in Classical times, and even expressing the expectation that the poets of England could rouse the people to action in his
own day. Unlike other positions taken by him, this was not to prove media-savvy: poetry was not to become the propaganda weapon of choice in the twentieth century. Wilde’s connection to poetry was atavistic, not futuristic; like someone living in an oral/tribal culture, he held it in a certain superstitious awe. Vincent O’Sullivan, recalling Wilde’s method of literary composition, noted this affinity: “He invented, not in silence, but in talking. Possibly he had inherited the soul of some far away bard who invented his chants as he sang them” (36).

Or possibly the oral culture which he replicated in himself was drawn from an earlier stage of his own existence. The influence of his childhood in this respect can be discerned in at least two forms. One would be the initial primal experience of being held in thrall by the vocal performances of his talented parents. A recent biography makes reference to that as follows: “Oscar fondly remembered his father’s deep voice doing justice to the cadences of Walt Whitman and his mother’s whispers and squeals when she told the old stories of witches and blood fairies” (Belford 18). The other was of course his overhearing of the vigorous but cultured and witty conversation (later reinforced by Mahaffy) which surrounded him on his parents’ social occasions. It seems plausible that both of these modes awoke the magic of the voice to him, and planted the seeds of his own future prowess as a vocal artist, since the mature conversation with which he entranced his auditors often consisted of literate and ironic variations on simple primary tales. In the words of the same biographer, “Oscar Wilde’s first public performance was in the drawing room of his Dublin home on Merrion square, where the two-year-old entertained guests by reciting his name – Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde – over and over” (3). Throughout his life Wilde, unlike Shakespeare, would insist that there was much in a name, even lightheartedly going so far in his best-known play as to make the Christian name “Ernest” the sine qua non of male eligibility for marriage.
Of Wilde’s parents, it could be argued that his mother’s voice was the dominating influence. She appears to have been closer to Oscar than his father was. Although eccentric, she took her role as a mother seriously, while Sir William was much occupied with his medical practice and other interests (which may have included an affair with Mary Travers around the time of Oscar’s birth). She outlived her husband by many years, and thereby extended her influence on her son, and it is clear that she encouraged his sense of language; one of his favourite Romantic novels as a boy was her translation of *Sidonia the Sorceress*, and she began a lifelong correspondence with him after he entered Portora Royal School, in which she kept language in play by signing off with a variety of noms-de-plume in Italian, according to her mood (La Madre Dolorosa, La Madre Devotissima, La Madre Povera) and addressing Oscar as, for example, Caro Oscuro, Figlio Mio Caressimo, or Mio Caro Figlio. One looks in vain for any extended treatment of this element of language play between mother and son in the biographies of Speranza, or in Melissa Knox’s psychoanalytic study, which one might have thought an interesting venue for such a topic. However, studies by Winnicott (1986), on the mother-child relationship, and more recently by Dissanayake (1992, 1999) on the influence of that relationship on a child’s artistic development, might profitably be applied to Wilde’s case.

Belford’s biography has Wilde “savouring the vowels, and trilling the fricatives” in his recital of his own name for parents and guests; if true, this would represent a very early example of his plumbing the qualities of sound and testing their effects on an audience. To judge from the evidence of other biographers, Wilde continued, like an alchemist on a lifetime search for an elixir, to sift the sounds of language for their potencies. According to Hesketh Pearson, Wilde “derived an exquisite pleasure from the sounds of syllables, and in conversation would dwell on such words as ‘vermilion,’ ‘narcissus,’ ‘amber,’ crimson,”
pronouncing them as if tasting them" (164). He also loved to vary his speech with quotations in French, which he described as “that subtle instrument of music” (Letters 331). As Richard Le Gallienne recalls, in his Introduction to The Writings of Oscar Wilde (1909):

Like most poets with – or even without – beautiful voices, Wilde loved to say over and over again beautiful lines or phrases that had caught his fancy.... Of his own work, I think he cared most for his prose, for the rhythmical prose of “The Decay of Lying” or “The Dialogue of Criticism,” the piled-up luxurious sentences, the strange, skilfully-used learning, and the beautiful strange words. I well remember the boyish delight with which one afternoon he paced his study declaiming a sentence from “The Decay of Lying,” which had taken his fancy – a sentence from one of the most beautiful and characteristic passages of his prose: “She hath hawk-faced gods that follow her and the centaurs are seen running at her side.” (25)

Wilde’s attempts, in “The Decay of Lying” to steer the reading public away from literary realism are evidence of his desire to influence the overall direction of English culture, but it may be that his strongest urge to power found expression in the entrancing of an immediate audience. Disappointed not only in the reception of his own poetry, but in the fading power of poetry in general in a changing cultural climate, he seems to have decided that the fullest potential of language might be expressed through the spoken rather than the written word. English readers and critics had failed to appreciate the music of his language through the medium of the printed page; the world no longer judged literature by the ear – in aural terms, the reading public in England was a failure. So Wilde returned to the oral media to which he had been apprenticed since his childhood. Through the medium of the dinner party in
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particular, he concentrated on captivating the public in small groups, where he could monitor the reactions of his listeners, and modulate his own delivery and intonation to ensure the success of - his audience.

At the same time he remained in search of the more abstract levers of chirographic power: hence his ceaseless experimentation with different literary genres. Affecting to dislike lectures, he nevertheless presented them extensively on a tour of North America, and afterwards in the English provinces. Disliking journalists since the attacks on him in Punch, and critics since the reception of his poetry, he nevertheless became both a journalist and a critic, and went on to define rules and standards for the criticism and journalism of his own time, in the essays in Intentions. With his single experiment in the novel form, The Picture of Dorian Gray, he managed to stimulate some and to offend others; and with the extended letter/memoir/apologia De Profundis, he ensured years of bitter controversy among his former friends and lovers, as well as continuing posthumous attention to his own tragic social destiny. Not only, however, did Wilde fail to find perfection in any of these forms – he did not succeed either in establishing that magical rapport with a discerning public which could lift him above the carping of the critics and beyond financial cares, while satisfying his own need for immediate applause. It was not until he wrote the successful cycle of stage plays which began with Lady Windermere's Fan and culminated in The Importance of Being Earnest that Wilde found the medium in which he finally achieved perfect pitch, the symbiosis of orality and literacy where he and the audience danced in harmony. At the end of the first performance of Lady Windermere's Fan he congratulated the audience on the success of its performance; the public at large had learned at last how to listen to his genius. He had really been tuning them up for years, educating them aurally through the vocal seduction of select groups and
through the deployment of provocative sound-bites in the mass media. Now that they were finaly getting on his wavelength he was determined that they should hear what they had come to hear: he transposed many of his choice epigrams and best lines of conversation into the script, and fussed over the aural aspects of the production. “Every word of a comedy dialogue should reach the ears of its audience” he wrote to George Alexander (ML 112), and he took pains to coach the actors on the precise inflections with which to deliver his lines, as if they were simply standing in for one of his own dazzling vocal performances. (Wilde’s brother Willie wrote of the tone and content, with which he was obviously familiar: “The author peoples his play with male and female editions of himself” [Ellmann 348]).

However, although Lady Windermère’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance, and An Ideal Husband represent a working-out of Wilde’s quest for a simultaneously oral and literate rapport with the playgoing public, they offer little in the way of authorial meditation on the theme of a “return to the voice,” such as we found so explicitly dwelt upon in “The Critic as Artist,” perhaps because for Wilde they offered the possibility of combining commercial success with the chance to vent some of his cynical perceptions of the social world – hence their common designation nowadays as “the society plays.” In the next chapter we shall see that Wilde’s fascination with the aesthetics of sound revealed itself mainly at that time in the script of Salome, and would re-appear in a number of surprising ways in The Importance of Being Earnest, after a period of waiting in the wings during the production of the society plays; but we should not proceed to that point without some consideration of The Picture of Dorian Gray, published in the same year as Intentions (1891), and expressing from behind the mask of fiction many of the same preoccupations we have been discussing, especially that of the role of the voice, of which the novel treats in its most sensual and sensational aspects.
In fact *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is permeated with the seductions of sound. Its descriptive passages echo the aural effects and the exotic vocabulary of Wilde’s poetry, and its dialogue, which parallels that of the critical essays and anticipates the major plays, is reinforced with reflections on words and music and on the persuasive powers of the human voice.

The opening paragraphs present a setting similar to those framing the dialogues of the critical essays, but fuller in deliberate sound effects. The clearest comparison occurs with “The Decay of Lying” which, like the novel, begins with a description of external nature. In the dialogue Cyril tells Vivian, “It is a perfectly lovely afternoon. The air is exquisite. There is a mist upon the woods, like the purple bloom upon a plum” and then proposes that they “go and lie on the grass and smoke cigarettes and enjoy Nature” (*CW* 1071). The description is momentarily lyrical, using Wilde’s favourite alliterative “p” (“purple bloom upon a plum”) but not lengthy, since it functions as the opening gambit of a conversation, and any Romantic view of the human relationship with Nature is quickly undercut by the consciously cynical proposal to smoke cigarettes in it, and by Vivian’s instant response: “Enjoy Nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty…” *Dorian Gray* at first follows the same pattern – shifting focus from an outdoor idyll to a smoking (and reclining) male figure:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.
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From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton...

(CW 18)

Wilde may also have had some theory in mind of the hidden potencies of the human sense of smell, since it is evoked three times in these opening lines ("odour," "scent," and "perfume,"), but again we are conscious of a certain striving for poetic aural effects, in homonymic sounds ("odour of roses"), alliteration ("perfume of the pink") and archaic forms ("amidst," "there came"). There is a difference of authorial attitude, however, which has expanded from the anti-Romantic "against Nature" debating position of "The Decay of Lying" to a more outright decadence, in which Nature has now been conscripted as a sensual accomplice to cigarettes and Persian saddle-bags. And because he has chosen the medium of prose fiction for Dorian Gray, Wilde can make use of the third-person authorial voice to accumulate the descriptive sound effects:

... the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs... The sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass... The dim roar of London... like the bourdon note of a distant organ. (18)

The techniques evident in the opening of "The Decay of Lying" are once more easy to discern in these lush assonances, although the homonyms have modulated from homosocial to homerotic; here "sullen" murmuring bees are "shouldering" their way through the long unmown grass like a troop of Greek ephebes, and we are shortly to meet a tremulous young man who will find it difficult to bear the burden of his own beauty...
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*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is ostensibly the story of a beautiful visual appearance, and the plot turns on the transitions of a visual work of art, but just as with the odours wafting through the studio, and the murmuring of the bees, all of the sensory perceptions in the novel must be evoked through the medium of words, which, not being images or scents in themselves, can convey impressions of all the senses only through their assigned meanings, with, however, as Wilde here determinedly demonstrates, the possible reinforcement of their effects through a skilful arrangement of their sounds.

But the phrase I have just used, “reinforcement of their effects” does not fully describe Wilde’s feeling for the operation of the sounds of language on our sensibilities, which he has not left untheorized even in this novel. It is given to the character of Dorian himself to muse on its powers, as follows:

He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself. The few words that Basil’s friend had said to him – words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with wilful paradox in them – had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses. (29)

The precise balance and proportion of the symbiotic relationship between language and the self does not need to be specified, since these are simply the thoughts of a fictional character, and yet volumes of theory are implicit here, on the individual as Aeolian harp perhaps, or on the awakening of dormant spiritual genetics, or what Wilde would refer to in “The Critic as Artist” as “concentrated race-experience.” Phrases such as “some secret chord” and “curious pulses” raise more questions than they answer, but in the context established in this thesis they
can be read as representing ideas which function as accessories to Wilde’s recurrent interest in
the subliminal potencies of linguistic performance. These are metaphors of the human being as
an instrument which is played upon by language: and as Dorian’s meditation continues, Wilde
clearly implies that this human instrument responds to acoustic as well as to intellectual
suggestion, though the emphasis lands on the characteristics of language rather than of the
human soul:

Music had stirred him like that. Music had troubled him many times. But music
was not articulate. It was not a new world, but rather another chaos, that it
created in us. Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and
vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic
there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless
things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viola or lute. Mere
words! Was there anything so real as words? (29)

The utterance is Dorian’s, but the reflections are the author’s. Wilde had remarked
elsewhere on the superiority of language to all other media of artistic expression, and he
demonstrates it here since our apprehension of all of the “characters” in the novel, including
Dorian, derives from the power of the author to “give a plastic form to formless things”
through the action of words on our imaginations – the ultimate example of the operation of this
power being Wilde’s creation, and our imagining, of a painting which sustains organic change
like a human being, and which exhibits visual symptoms according to a theory of morality
which holds that the human soul is corrupted by sin and vice.

The passage could give rise to some confusion in its references to music. At first,
Wilde appears to want to separate the effect of music from that of language, but when he
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speaks of words, he re-introduces music as a term in which to describe their powers. Unlike music itself, the music of words does not result in "another chaos," but rather assists the emergence in the listener of a definite, if ultimately self-destructive, cluster of ideas and attitudes; but the process by which it effects these changes remains a mystery, to the listener, to the reader, and apparently also to Wilde. Throughout his life Wilde himself had experienced such effects, as a listener to Irish and Oxford voices, as a reader of Tennyson and Swinburne, and in particular as an acolyte of Pater and an apprentice to the subtle sonorities of the master's prose, the magic of which he sought to emulate and to understand. In "The Critic as Artist" Wilde showed that he believed, as apparently did Mahaffy and Pater, that the Greeks had understood the secrets of such magic in their own tongue, since they judged literature by the ear and "elaborated the criticism of language ... studying, for instance, the metrical movements of a prose as scientifically as a modern musician studies harmony and counterpoint, and ... with much keener aesthetic insight;" and it is clear from so many aspects of his life and work that although Wilde recognized that "we, with our accentual system ... can barely if at all attain" to the same mastery of sound in English, it remained an artistic ideal which haunted him, and a touchstone which he consulted in every genre he attempted.

Once we recognize this, we are in a better position to see that the classical and neo-Platonic aesthetic theory which informs so many of Lord Henry's pronouncements to Basil and to Dorian offers a contextual framework not only for the theme of psycho-visual displacement from Dorian to the painting, but also for the theme of the incubation of ideas in Dorian through sound. It is in this context that we can more fully experience not only the deliberate assonances of Wilde's prose in the novel, and the reflections on the nature of
language which we have just seen, but also the many specific references to the qualities of
different voices which recur throughout the novel.

The first of these is no more than a fleeting mention, which occurs when Basil
Hallward is telling Lord Henry how after first catching sight of Dorian, at the house of a
society hostess named Lady Brandon, he reacts with an impulse to flee the scene:

... I certainly struggled to the door. There, of course, I stumbled against Lady
Brandon. “You are not going to run away so soon, Mr. Hallward?” she
screamed out. You know her curiously shrill voice? (21)

Lady Brandon never actually appears in the novel, and Lord Henry’s reply – “Yes; she
is a peacock in everything but beauty” – diverts the topic; but Basil’s question may be taken as
a hint to the reader that not only the content but also the character of different voices will be
noted in the course of the narrative. It also tells us that Basil Hallward, though a visual artist
who is strongly susceptible to Dorian Gray’s beautiful appearance, is voice-sensitive. This
detail might be considered unimportant on its own, but it takes on added significance when the
same is shown to be true of Lord Henry (by his assent) and then of Dorian, since Wilde once
described the three principal male characters as complementary components of his own
personality: “I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me
in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I
would like to be – in other ages, perhaps” (Letters 352). Since Wilde has also made a point of
showing in the novel that all three characters are aurally responsive, we may once again infer
that the same trait is true of himself, and that it forms an important part of his own sensibility.

Wilde may also be putting on record something about the quality of his own voice in
his descriptions of Lord Henry’s. Max Beerbohm remembered Wilde’s “mezzo voice, uttering
itself in leisurely fashion, with every variety of tone” (Ellmann 37); “so great was its charm,” according to Gide, “it made even publishers afraid to deal with him.” From the beginning of their association Dorian is conscious of a similar gift in Lord Henry “to whom he had rather taken a fancy. He was so unlike Basil. They made a delightful contrast. And he had such a beautiful voice” (28). The aesthetic and philosophical captivation of Dorian which now proceeds is interspersed with recurring references to its influence: “‘And yet,’ continued Lord Henry, in his low, musical voice…” (28). “There was something in his low, languid voice that was absolutely fascinating” (30). “‘Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about,’ he answered, in his slow, melodious voice” (66). Dorian’s reflections on music and language, and his recognition of the “vibrating and throbbing” of “some secret chord” arise amidst such reminders that not only ideas, not only the hidden qualities in the sounds of words, but the very tones and resonances of the vocal chords, all have their part to play in the arts of a verbal wizard.

The occurrence of such emphases in this key section of the novel is further evidence that an oral cultural mode of understanding language as performative rather than abstract in its most powerful manifestations was characteristic of the mind of the author.

Wilde signals the triumph of Lord Henry’s linguistic seduction with an apparently salacious set-piece echoing and intensifying the decadent character of the novel’s opening paragraphs:

Dorian Gray listened, open-eyed and wondering. The spray of lilac fell from his hand upon the gravel. A furry bee came and buzzed around it for a moment. Then it began to scramble all over the oval stellated globe of the tiny blossoms. … After a time the bee flew away. He saw it creeping into the stained trumpet
of a Tyrian convolvulus. The flower seemed to quiver, and then swayed gently to and fro. (31-2)

At first glance the symbolism seems incontestably sexual. The reader sees the return of one of the masculine “shouldering” bees of the early paragraphs, now entering a flower and accomplishing an act of pollination, apparently with an accompanying (mutual?) orgasm. This is strongly suggested not only by allusion but by sound association: ambiguous images of anal or/or vaginal penetration may be hidden in “stained trumpet,” and in the syllables of the name “convolvulus,” which shares its Latin root with a term for female genitalia. “Tyrian” calls to mind a decadent period of antiquity, possibly one of those “other ages” in which Wilde would have liked to be Dorian; and the ongoing repetition of the “v” sounds in “convolvulus” and “quiver,” is unmistakably imitative.

But imitative of what? The context established in this study provides for another reading, in which the central metaphor pervading the passage is not so much of sex as of sound itself. A trumpet is a musical instrument after all; if taken as an image of a part of the body, it is readily associated with the tympanic membrane and other features of the ear – all the more so, since in Wilde’s time “ear trumpets” were still in common use. Wilde had invoked the trumpet in its acoustic associations more than once already: “I have blown my trumpet against the gates of dullness” he had remarked in a letter describing his attack on Robert Elsmere in “The Decay of Lying” (L 237), and he had earlier taken André Raffalovich to task for “making tuberose a trisyllable always, as if it were a potato blossom and not a flower shaped like a tiny trumpet of ivory” (L 173). More significantly in relation to The Picture of Dorian Gray, Yeats reported Wilde associating flower and trumpet with Pater’s seductive “golden book”: “[It] is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment
it was written" (*AB* 161). "Convolvulus," too, could suggest the whorls and labyrinths of the auditory or the vocal organ, not only in the derivation of its root from the Latin meaning "roll," but also at the sonic level, its hard "c" and liquid "l"’s making it similar in sound composition to "canal" "cochlea," and "uvula," and its soft "v"’s, like those in "quiver" and "vibration," imitating, surely, the action and reception of sound as much as of sense.

"Hearing can register interiority without violating it," according to Ong, who notes "the unique relationship of sound to interiority when sound is compared to the rest of the senses" (71). Whatever, if anything, Wilde may have wished to convey through the activities of bee and flower, the principal perception in the mind of Dorian himself is of an effect upon him like that of music, as we have seen, and in the following chapter, when Lord Henry reflects on the phenomenon of his influence over the young man, he resorts once more to this key metaphor: "Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow" (39). In at least one of the images with which Lord Henry continues the comparison, Wilde may again seem to veer for a moment towards sexual suggestion, but this time concludes with what could be taken as an admonition against such a reading:

> There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one’s soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one’s own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth; to convey one’s temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume; there was a real joy in that – perhaps the most satisfying joy left to us in an age
so limited and vulgar as our own, an age grossly carnal in its pleasures, and
grossly common in its aims.... (39-40)

The hyphen break, followed by the first person plural in “us” and “our own,” signals the appearance in the sentence of another authorial persona: here is Wilde the cultural combatant grabbing Lord Henry’s mask for a moment to launch a strategic homily, a pre-emptive intervention in the reader’s possible response to “subtle fluid.” Wilde may, as often, be trying to have it both ways here – to simultaneously arouse and deny erotic speculation - but his implicit direction to the reader to keep to the high road leaves the musical metaphors in control of the passage. And although biographies of Wilde naturally tend to emphasize the climactic narrative of his trial and imprisonment for being “grossly carnal” in his own pleasures, the less sensational record of the activities of his existence suggests that he himself was consistently more interested in the intellectual and spiritual seduction of his audience through the power of the voice.

This is not really surprising, because our study of his background suggests that he himself had thrilled to being captivated, controlled, even dominated, by the voices of those around him. Wilde’s life could be read as a history of aural submission, to his parents and their friends, to Mahaffy and Pater (through the music of Pater’s book), and ultimately to the shrill and sneering tones of Lord Alfred Douglas – but he sought in turn, and with higher talents, to project the ambiguous wonder of his experience onto others. His real history is one of listening and speaking rather than of carnal action – of vocal more than of sexual seduction.

When, later in the novel, during the Sibyl Vane episode, Lord Henry muses once again on the projection of his own personality into Dorian’s, he offers the phrase which perhaps comes closest to a definitive formulation of this alchemical inter-personal process:
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He was conscious – and the thought brought a gleam of pleasure into his brown agate eyes – that it was through certain words of his, musical words said with musical utterance, that Dorian Gray’s soul had turned to this white girl and bowed in worship before her. To a large extent the lad was his own creation (58).

“Musical words said with musical utterance”: no wonder that the lad who is Lord Henry’s creation is named after a classical Greek musical mode. In the previous chapter of this thesis, I suggested that Wilde’s ideas in “The Critic as Artist” on the role of the voice and the ear in Greek literary aesthetics resumed a strain of mysticism about “the secret power of pronunciation” which had last manifested itself in English literature in the neo-Platonic theories of the English Renaissance: here in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he makes use of such speculations on the power of sound in order to enhance his fictional representation of the insemination of one personality by another.

This is a conventional choice in some respects, since, from the Bible on down, the transfer of energy into matter has been associated with sound, and with the spoken word in particular. God speaks the world into existence through Logos, the Word; Lord Henry imitates the creator by speaking Dorian Gray’s personality into existence. Dorian is the word made flesh, who goes forth to practise the doctrines of the New Hellenism.

Impregnation of the mind through the agency of a male voice leads Dorian to live out a philosophy which will bring disaster to the woman in the story, Sibyl Vane, because she mistakenly assumes that his aesthetically-founded passion for her will carry over into a real existence together. For a brief interlude, however, Dorian is drawn to her, not only for her
beautiful appearance, but for one of the particular qualities that most fascinated him in Lord Henry:

And her voice – I never heard such a voice. It was very low at first, with deep, mellow notes, that seemed to fall singly upon one’s ear. Then it became a little louder, and sounded like a flute or a distant hautbois. In the garden scene it had all the tremulous ecstasy that one hears just before dawn when nightingales are singing. There were moments, later on, when it had the wild passion of violets. You know how a voice can stir one. Your voice and the voice of Sibyl Vane are two things that I shall never forget. When I close my eyes, I hear them, and each of them says something different. I don’t know which to follow. Why should I not love her? (49)

The question in the negative foreshadows the outcome of Dorian’s dilemma, but his evocation of Sibyl’s effect shows once again that in this novel the very sound of the voice itself communicates meaning in some unknown non-linguistic language. Tone and timbre tell their own stories, and whisper suggestions beyond the meaning and even the sounds of the words being spoken. Dorian’s reflections on Sibyl’s voice follow the pattern of his earlier reaction to Lord Henry’s speech, at first comparing it to music, but then implicitly acknowledging its greater specificity of suggestion, its intimation of a “new world” rather than “another chaos.” Dorian, however, will reject the world of Sibyl Vane when it distills itself down to her own rather ordinary person, choosing instead to remain in the realm of aesthetic pleasure instilled in him by the voice of Lord Henry

Wilde himself would also reject the boredom of a stable existence with a female partner in favour of the dangerous aesthetic excitements of the homosexual world, which he
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compared to “feasting with panthers.” And just as Dorian finds that the influence exerted upon him by the person of Lord Henry is eventually continued by the agency of a fascinating book, in which he is haunted by effects which he cannot quite analyze, so also had Wilde experienced in his own life the transfer of sway from living to literary voices, quite possibly for the first time when he left the home of his parents for the regime of boarding school, and most certainly when he departed from Mahaffy’s genial precincts in Trinity for the initially more chirographic atmosphere of Oxford, where, long before he met Pater in person, the don’s “golden book” had caught him up in its strange music. In this and in many other respects *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems the mirror, or perhaps more precisely the echo, of Wilde’s own existence.

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1 O’Sullivan also holds that Wilde as a dramatist is in some respects inferior (e.g. to Sheridan) but that his plays gain an advantage because Wilde was essentially “a real poet.” (24, 29)

2 Belford’s biography has been faulted for its “novelistic” touches by Thomas Wright (TLS, February 9, 2001, pp. 3-5), and this may well be one of them, but it is at least consonant with Wilde’s later sensitivity to the sounds of words.

3 “To [the Greek critical spirit] we owe the epic, the lyric, the entire drama…the lecture, for which perhaps we should not forgive them…” (“The Critic as Artist,” *AC* 357)

4 It is ironic that in respect to Wilde and his work the print media actually played a positive role in enhancing the aural consciousness of the reading public. In order to justify their assignment to him of the role of ineffable aesthete, they were obliged to publish representative quotations; Wilde’s were interesting enough to achieve wide circulation, thus familiarizing the public with his epigrammatic style. The publication of a book of Wilde’s sayings in 1888 is further evidence of the creation of a public appetite for his oracular wit, although the book was poorly produced, and was not a success, even with its author.

Such is the chirographic bias even of recent critical theory on Wilde, however, that it nowhere takes note of the aural dimension of Wilde’s success as a cultural phenomenon. To take two examples: in Chapter One of *Idylls of the Marketplace*, entitled “Creating the Audience,” Regenia Gagnier reads the strategies adopted by Wilde towards the Victorian public as an artist’s response to sociological developments, ignoring the linguistic context; while Camille Paglia, in *Sexual Personae*, reads Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement entirely as proponents of the dominance of the cold “Apollonian eye” in Western culture.

5 “The Critic as Artist.” “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”

6 Wilde’s relationship with Douglas evolved in reverse order. In the beginning it was Wilde who laid siege with all of his prestige and his vocal charm, but before long it was Douglas who was calling the tune – disrupting Wilde’s attempts to write in seclusion, urging him to more and more public displays of folly, and finally goading him into litigation against Queensberry.
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Reproduced from *Faust*, illustrated by Harry Clarke
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Chapter Six: “Vibrations”

The emphasis in this study so far has been on the development of Wilde’s dual sensibility and its expression in his life and work up to the publication of The Picture of Dorian Gray in book form in 1891. I have added a chapter on that novel to the discussions of the two critical essays which are my principal focus, mainly because the venture into fiction so strikingly combines Wilde’s oppositional spirit with aspects of his fascination with the agency of language and the human voice, showing as it were the deployment in action of some of his underlying theories of orality.

All of the works which I’ve discussed at length, with the exception of the letter to the Pall Mall Gazette, were completed prior to the period of great success which accompanied the production of his four most immediately successful plays – Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband, and The Importance of Being Earnest. However, I do not propose to discuss the first three of these, the so-called “society” plays, at any length, in part because they no longer represent so much the struggle to express an oral/chirographic sensibility as the achievement of it, and in part because they are focussed more on social commentary than on the strain of literary idealism which we have been following. That works written for performance on the stage have both an oral and a chirographic character seems too obvious a point to belabour here, and besides what they show us of Wilde is not so much his defiance of the culture as his mastery of it, or perhaps one should say his temporary harmony with it. Although in the sharpness of these three plays we may perceive Wilde working out some of the elements of his continuing anger at English society (re-ignited, perhaps, by the censorship of the London production of Salome), he had, as noted earlier, also been engaging in a process of educating his audience, to the point where he and they had finally agreed on
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terms - for example, Wilde was now allowed to mock society as much as he pleased, because it was what the audience had come to expect of him, and they flocked to the theatre in order to imagine themselves, not as being mocked of course, but rather as showing their membership in a smart set by sharing in a satirical view of others. It had become culturally fashionable to acquire an appreciation of Oscar Wilde.

The orality of the genre was crucial to this result. What might have been read in the colder format of a print medium as a stinging assault on society, or a perverse will to undermine the general morality, was heard instead in the theatre as a form of superior amusement, an art of pointed epigrammatic finesse which it was a sign of sophistication to admire - and to transmit by oral repetition. What publicists nowadays call the buzz, or the word-of-mouth, which arose from this form of Wilde’s art, was indeed dynamic and gratifying, and may even have helped to propel him beyond the more ambiguous results of that other line of artistic experimentation, culminating in Salome, in which he had attempted to replicate in writing all of the seductive musicality of the voice rather than its witty aspects.

In Chapter One of this study we saw that Yeats felt that Wilde’s writing was at its strongest when it was closest to the conversational mode ("when his writing was the mirror of his speech") and weakest in its elaborate descriptive passages. This might raise the question of why Wilde so determinedly attacked realist fiction and the three-volume novel, but in his own work often inserted long purple passages which do nothing to contribute to the advancement of the plot, and which seem the antithesis of conversational modes.

There are various ways to answer such a question. Regenia Gagnier’s argument that “Wilde developed two prose styles, one of Wildean wit, or critique, and one of jeweled
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seduction, to meet the challenge of the general public and of his own desire to attract a special audience"(4), points to a sociocultural explanation, the "special audience" being composed mainly of the overlapping categories of homosexual and aesthete. By and large the perspectives generated from the present thesis would support such an answer, but my explanation remains rooted in the dual character of Wilde's sensibility rather than extrapolated to the dual character of his audience, thereby leading also to a somewhat different reading of specific works.

I would suggest first of all that the purple passages in Wilde's writing have their origin in the dual dynamics of his spoken stories, almost all of which, at least when addressed to adults, were composed of a blend of oral and chirographic elements, which operated, I believe, somewhat as follows. The range of chirographic reference, noted earlier, allowed an educated audience to feel it was being addressed at an appropriate level, in particular when the story provided a sting in the tail, some unexpected paradox or reversal which appeared to provoke the listeners' intellectual faculty. The effect of either paradox or reversal is to cause the listener's mind to oscillate between two meanings, either the old and the new version of a story in the case of reversal, or, in the case of paradox, the two apparently contradictory meanings. In both cases the result is a distraction, possibly even a paralysis, of the intellectual faculty. With their cerebral defences thus occupied, or disarmed, the audience were rendered susceptible to techniques of enchantment which are more commonly a feature of storytelling for children, or perhaps for the listeners of a primarily oral culture before the advent of the print media. Such techniques would typically have included a stagey use of tone and tempo in the vocal performance (including the "musical" effect associated with the voices of Lord Henry, Baron Arnheim, Salome, Gilbert, and Wilde himself), and, in the "text" of the story,
selective use of archaisms, exotic terms, and decorative descriptions or embellishments, such as would have originally inspired wonder in the minds of listeners of limited geographical experience and/or literacy.

A certain copiousness of description was appropriate in these circumstances; where the spoken word was presented as a substitute for reality, it gained power from imitative effects. Enumeration increased the sense of numbers and size (one thinks of Homer’s listing of ships or armies), and enunciations of the colours and qualities of precious things in a tone of wonder enhanced the imaginative sense of their reality. To those who were poor, the storyteller brought details of rich palaces and treasures, while those whose appetites were sharp could feast their imaginations on lavish descriptions of luxurious banquets. The real wonder in Wilde’s case is that he was able to impose such techniques and effects, which normally appear somewhat “corny” to the chirographic mind, on his relatively sophisticated Victorian listeners. A part of the explanation, as already suggested, lay in his ability to get below their defences, but another important factor may be found in the structure of the stories themselves, and in particular in their length.

What I have just called “length” is really duration, since oral productions can be measured only in terms of the time it takes to narrate them. Although Wilde could and often did command the attention of his audience for hours on end, each of the stories he told was usually quite short in itself; those which were transcribed, by numerous hands, in his lifetime and after, seldom ran to more than a page or two in print, as a recently published collection shows. I think we can assume that descriptive details are the parts of a story most likely to be left out in transcriptions based on memory, but even if Wilde sometimes took more pleasure in
elaborating than has been recorded, it would not have occupied the audience’s attention for
more than a few moments within the overall telling of such brief and pointed tales.

So when Wilde wrote a story, what did he do so differently from when he spoke it? In a
sense, he did nothing differently, but therein may lie part of the problem. Purely in terms of
mathematical proportion, the degree of decoration in his written productions may not be
greater than in his spoken stories; after all, even a “line” or two of description in one “page”
of a spoken story, if extrapolated in proportion, would expand into many pages of elaboration
in the text of a novel. But when length or duration expands in one element, it becomes,
beyond a certain point, a generic change in the overall structure, because every form, every
genre, whether spoken or written, is defined ultimately in relation to the attention span of the
human beings who read or listen to it. For example, if we take the sentence from Wilde’s
spoken story “The Poet”, “[h]e would say, ‘I beheld three mermaids by the sea, who combed
their green hair with a golden comb’” (TT 65), each descriptive phrase, “three mermaids,”
“green hair,” “golden comb,” is relatively short in itself, consisting of a single noun and
modifier, and all are held firmly in control by a subject and verb which are directly connected
to the overall construction of the story. But if the descriptive phrases were multiplied, and
padded by the addition of extra modifiers, their relation to the original action words, and
therefore to the movement of the overall work, would obviously become more attenuated, and
at some point the description would begin to take on the character, in the mind of a reader or
listener, of a thing in itself. When Dorian Gray begins to list the qualities of perfumes, jewels
and fabrics (CW 101-5), or Gilbert launches into a three-page tour of The Divine Comedy (AC
375-8), the reader will at some point, perhaps either with pleasure or resentment, begin to at
least temporarily separate these passages from the principal narrative, simply in order to give
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their contents the attention required to participate in their meaning: this is sure to also raise
questions in the reader’s mind about the overall structure of the work. Whether or not we can
define a culture as chirographically-based, the speed at which we can read is far greater than
the speed at which we can listen: this naturally causes a tendency towards greater length in
written than in spoken forms. Oral epics such as the Homeric may be long, but they are
generally divisible into discrete sections, each of which can be performed as an individual set-
piece in a given stretch of time, but such is not usually the case with extended written texts.

Several of Wilde’s major literary works began as spoken stories (I am thinking of
_Dorian Gray_ and _Salome_ in particular); when it came time to write them down, Wilde was
faced not only with the tendency in the Victorian period towards more extended literary forms,
but with the fact that even a novel in one volume embodied a substantially greater amount of
language than a spoken story. The first and shorter published version of _The Picture of Dorian
Gray_ alone (in _Lipincott’s Magazine_) held approximately fifty thousand words, a far greater
number, certainly, than that required to narrate the original oral version. One hesitates to make
this suggestion about a mind so radiant and inventive, but Wilde may have had a problem with
the transition from oral to literary form, or with the structure of literary form itself. _Dorian
Gray_, the most extended of his works, is a very uneven production, with many elements
seemingly patched in from stock melodrama (the characterization of Sibyl Vane’s mother
appears to me particularly hasty and derivative) and some of the descriptive passages imported
(by Wilde’s own admission) from catalogues in the British Museum. This, his only novel, was
the longest work which he succeeded in writing; as we noted earlier, he jumped from genre to
genre, as if unable to settle on a single literary form.
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In the society plays, it is true, he was beginning to find his literary element, because they were so much more closely modelled on the oral dynamics of dialogue. Merlin Holland sees Wilde’s prose moving from its conversational origin through the essays in dialogue and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to the plays: “by the time of *Dorian Gray* [it] is pure theatre with chunks of Lord Henry’s and Dorian’s exchanges finding a second life in *A Woman of No Importance*” and goes on to note that “the logical conclusion, as Owen Dudley Edwards has pointed out in his introduction to the Stories, was for this master of conversation to burst the constraints of prose and finish up nightly addressing the largest drawing-room in London – the West End stage” (*CW* 909). In this plausible sequence the culminating work is presumably *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but even that play projects the somewhat ambiguous image of a masterpiece with two forms; Wilde originally wrote it in four acts, but eventually accepted George Alexander’s remodelling to a (shorter) three-act version, which again suggests that the author may have lacked complete confidence in his own instinct for literary structure. The sense of this deficiency may even have been what he had in mind in his oft-quoted remark about putting his genius into his life, and only his talent into his work.

On the other hand, we may instead choose to see the decorative passages of Wilde’s prose as the results of a deliberate experimentation with literary effects, and in particular with the literary effects of sound. This line of argument, which I would like briefly to advance here, is that Wilde indeed developed two prose styles, but they could be described as one based on dialogue, and another on recitation, rather than as “one of wit” and another of “jeweled seduction” (Gagnier), or one which was “the mirror of his speech” and another, too elaborate, which fell away from that central value (Yeats). In this interpretation the lavish descriptions, the purple passages, and the poems in prose fall into the category of an oral medium, but that
of sustained recitation rather than conversation. My underlying assumption is that Wilde would not have thought of them as belonging so much to the chirographic world to which Yeats seemed to assign them, and that he might have given more emphasis to the seductions of art than to the arts of seduction suggested by Gagnier. To me they seem evidence of a sustained effort on Wilde's part to give practical expression, via the example of the French Symbolists, to the various forms of theories of orality with which we have previously seen him associating himself, including the theory of the seductive and other powers of the sounds of words. Thus in the transfer to writing, a descriptive sentence or phrase of a spoken story becomes an entire passage of description which is intended as a set-piece with its own aura, to be cherished individually or perhaps even performed aloud like a Homeric catalogue.

Considerations of the overall structure of a piece of writing would have taken second place to the effort to translate into chirographic form all of the techniques of enchantment which were dependent on performance elements – the quality of the voice, its modulations and tempo, and so on. The elements of description added to the writing would therefore have been intended as equivalents or substitutions for the operations of the narrator's living voice; even the length or extension of the passage would be necessary in order to prompt the reader out of the silent pursuit of the narrative and into a more pseudo-oral reading mode verging on re-performance, on recitation.

To put it another way, in practice Wilde represented his mystical feeling for the innate powers of poetry partly through the agency of the living voice in his performance of conversation and story, but for a long time he searched also for the literary voice which could arouse an equivalent world of sensation and tone in the mind of a reader. He had tried initially to render the effect through his own poetry, but had found the audience unappreciative of its
music. In response he conducted a campaign to change the taste of the public, a campaign which found its culminating expression in “The Decay of Lying,” reflecting Irish and Mahaffyian values of literary orality, and “The Critic as Artist,” which cast a longing glance back towards a similar cultural configuration in the ancient Greeks - for whom “the voice was the medium, and the ear the critic.” But while continuing to exhort and to castigate the English critics and their public, Wilde had not given up hope of finding the medium and the language which would beguile their ears. The author whose cadences had come closest to achieving the effects which he sought was Walter Pater, and as Mahaffy is to “The Decay of Lying,” so Pater is to “The Critic as Artist.” Wilde’s tribute to his Oxford mentor in that essay is unmistakable, not only in his arguments, but in his glowing paraphrase of Pater’s evocation of La Gioconda (AC 366-7), and indeed in the other paraphrastic passages, such as the literary tours of the characters of Robert Browning or the highlights of the Divine Comedy, which are based on the same rhetorical pattern.

However, the very fullness of Wilde’s exploration of the art of the extended summary in “The Critic as Artist” is a testament to the growing strength of another influence on his work. In “The Decay of Lying” Wilde had made it clear that he was not impressed with most of the French exponents of the realist aesthetic, and according to Ellmann, that essay also signalled the passing of the movement of the Décadents (316); but in “The Critic as Artist,” by contrast, we can mark the traces of an increase in the prestige of the French Symbolists, and of their leader, Stéphane Mallarmé, in particular.

The galvanizing moment may have come when Wilde paid a visit to Paris in February 1891, and attended one of the maître’s famous Tuesday salons, where Mallarmé presented him
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with “Le Corbeau,” his translation of Poe’s “The Raven.” In the letter of thanks which Wilde sent the following day, we can discern the movement of his own thought:

Dear master, How can I thank you for the gracious way in which you presented me with the magnificent symphony in prose which the melodies of the great celtic poet Edgar Allan Poe have inspired in you. In England we have prose and we have poetry, but French prose and poetry become in the hands of such a master as you one and the same thing.²

This was not empty flattery; Mallarmé’s “symphony” wrought from “celtic” “melodies” had confirmed a new location for Wilde’s fantasies of a language of musical enchantment. The effect on his life and work was soon discernible. He had visited Paris just at the time “The Critic as Artist” was first published in The Fortnightly Review, but when he came to revise the essay for Intentions later that year the principal change he made was not to edit it more tightly but rather to extend it, with the addition of longer passages of bravura descriptive effects. He was attempting to add the music of Mallarmé to that of Pater, in English; but his comment in the same essay on the deficiency of this language for his purpose, because of its “accentual system of reasonable or emotional emphasis” may reflect uncertainty about the success of his efforts. Still, the impetus to explore and intensify the acoustic effects of English led him also to advance towards completion of “The Sphinx,” a long poem combining an ornate vocabulary with a “celtic” rhyming pattern, which he had begun many years before, also, as it happened, in Paris and under the influence of Edgar Allan Poe.

Wilde’s visit to Paris in February 1891 had been brief (he had attended only two of Mallarmé’s Mardis) but he was happy to return in November, gravitating not only to the French but to their language; in café and salon he conquered his new audience in their own
tongue with dazzling displays of creative conversation, which led to his being described in the French media as the "event" of the Paris social season. Among the many contes with which he regaled his listeners were his own elaborations on a Biblical tale whose protagonist had captured the imagination of a number of European artists, including Mallarmé. According to Wilde himself later, his writing out of his spoken stories of Salome into the play of that name occurred almost by chance – a piece of paper was lying handy when he returned to his room one day – but the play nevertheless represents the summit of his efforts to transcribe a language of captivating recitation.

Salome is Wilde’s most determined and indeed almost his final effort to give artistic expression to the theories of hypnotic linguistic musicality towards which his poetic instincts had long inclined him, and which he amplified under the spell of the French Symbolists. His response to a critic who reviewed the first French edition of the play bears this out, and underlines also the significance of the earlier letter to Mallarmé quoted above. Richard Le Galliene wrote: “It seems built to music. Its gradual growth is exactly like the development of a theme in music.” Wilde answered: “...how pleased I am that you ...have glided into the secret of the soul of my poem... You have got into the secret chamber of the house in which Salome was fashioned...” (ML 120-1) In Wilde’s accord with Le Galliene’s understanding of the play we can discern the echo of his praise of Mallarmé’s translation of Poe as a “magnificent symphony in prose.” A direct line runs from his meeting with Mallarmé to the writing of Salome.

Wilde would later look back on Salome with fondness as his greatest accomplishment in the sphere of pure art, but its progress in the real world met with a serious obstacle. When Sarah Bernhardt had agreed to put on the play with herself in the title role, Wilde had
fantasized a lavish spectacle on the London stage in luridly decadent colours, but after
rehearsals had begun the English censor intervened and the production was halted. The author
made much of his disappointment, but at some point he must have realized that he was
receiving a double message from the Goddess of Fame whose favours he had been courting for
so long. For whatever reason, the writings through which he had attempted to epitomize the
spirit of poetry for his own age had not met with success; from the gibes which greeted the
appearance of his Poems in 1881 to the mocking laughter which followed his threat to become
a French citizen after the cancellation of Salome, he was persistently informed of the public’s
refusal to envision him as a potential laureate; but quite on the other hand, Lady Windermere’s
Fan, the first of the society comedies, which he had written in haste and even cynically
perhaps, had become a runaway success; prince and plebeian overruled the critics and flocked
to see it. Wilde caught the message and embraced his métier, if it was the language of epigram
and wit that the public wished to appreciate, he would feed them a steady diet, and so did, till
his downfall three years later.

In the meantime the language of written embellishment was laid aside, but the text of
Salome remained as the high watermark of this aspect of Wilde’s idealist poetics. It is perhaps
not surprising that Wilde had invested considerable expectation in its success; after all, it had
originated in an oral mode, and although processed afterwards through chirographic
elaboration and translation\(^4\), it was then to be re-endowed with the magic presentness of the
spoken word through its presentation on the stage. (The princess Salome, of course, was to
have “a lovely musical voice.”\(^5\) This would take it a step further than The Picture of Dorian
Gray, in which the music of the purple passages remained trapped on the page, and therefore
entirely dependent on the reader’s performance, although the behaviour of the painting was
indicative of Wilde's desire to have his art re-cross the boundaries into life. Ironically, however, the injected vitality of a stage performance would not be enough in itself for Salome to gain its eventual hold over audiences everywhere: that would require that the metaphoric descriptions of its language be set to music by Strauss.

Wilde did not live long enough to see Salome's triumphant metamorphosis, but as it happens the dramatic development within the play seems to reflect a sense of the insufficiency of its verbal music, and even to predict Wilde's abandonment of this particular line of his art, especially if we accept that its decorative language can be taken as an attempt to create a poetry-like prose through the extended transcription of an oral mode of recitation. For the elaborate speechmaking, although contributing to the buildup of an exotic atmosphere in which extraordinary behaviour can find a context, is nevertheless generally a failure in its intended effect on the characters to whom it is addressed.

Salome herself is the first to discover that the old linguistic magic is losing its power. The sensual cadences through which she seeks to seduce the Prophet fall on deaf ears; her Song of Jokanaan is a flop with its intended audience. Like many a poet before her, she is stung by the unexpected rejection of her lyrical strains, but Jokanaan will not be the only character upon whom she will revenge herself.

Herod is the chief potentate of a doomed order of society and of speech, and as such, the principal practitioner of an elaborate form of discourse patterned on what the Victorians imagined as an Asiatic oral mode, that is, one which is stately, pompous, hyperbolic, and embellished. Elaborate speech is important to Herod in part because he senses the limits of action; he kept his brother imprisoned for twelve years in the cistern before having him finished off, and he is loth, also, to bring the matter of Jokanaan to a conclusion. In spite of his
evident lust for Salome, it is clear that he may not indulge it beyond a voyeuristic limit; he would hardly offer to barter away half his kingdom for a dance if there was a realistic prospect of something more tangible. In this atmosphere of erotic displacement and postponement which applies to language as well as to flesh, Herod is thrilled when Salome, AFTER she has danced for him, begins her demand for payment with a touch of mimicry of his own manner of speech:

HEROD: ...I will give whatever thy soul desireth. What wouldst thou have? Speak.

SALOME: I would that they presently bring me in a silver charger...

HEROD (laughing): In a silver charger? Surely yes, in a silver charger. She is charming, is she not? What is it that you would have them bring thee in a silver charger?...

SALOME: The head of Jokanaan.

Herod has seized prematurely on Salome’s phrase, and repeated it in a pattern of ejaculatory delight, as if convinced by her playing of the language game that their pleasure has been mutual. But she is merely setting him up for the fall. She has danced the dance of the seven veils in order to strip away the rhetorical flourishes of the older generation; and her new manner is blunt and hard and insistent. She will repeat her demand for the head of Jokanaan again and again in the plainest terms, to which Herod will respond with increasingly desperate elaborations; but the age has passed when ornamental speech could gild and enhance the reality of the objects it conjured, and persuade by its very splendors. The longest prose poems in the play, which are Herod’s descriptions of the treasures he will offer Salome if she will rescind her demand, are presented, like Wilde’s own, in a context where they are no longer received with any kind of susceptibility. Salome, which is cast in the mold of a classical drama, reflects Wilde’s growing awareness of the hopelessness of his quest for a written
language of high art which would provide a “return to the voice” and match at the same time the aesthetic standards of the Greeks. Herod’s final pronouncement, “Kill that woman!” symbolizes in its naked brutality his abandonment of the old oral values of flowery speech; it is written at a time when Wilde can hear in his other ear the applause which has greeted the opening of Lady Windermere’s Fan.

In spite of the dominance of a wordly and witty tone in the society plays, Wilde did not omit all reference to what I have suggested were his almost mystical notions of the powers of sound and the human voice. Hence in An Ideal Husband Sir Robert Chiltern attributes the moment of his past corruption to “the philosophy of power” expounded by Baron Arnheim “[w]ith that wonderfully fascinating quiet voice of his” (CW 537): as in the case of Dorian Gray with Lord Henry, the voice itself is admitted to possess some undefined power which works below the level of consciousness to reinforce the surface argument. And in a shift which I will shortly identify as characteristic of a number of Wilde’s major works, the seduction is later recalled or re-enacted through the influence of a chirographic artifact – in this case the letter which is now in the possession of Mrs. Chevely. But it is not until The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) that we can really discern a discern a significant return to Wilde’s old preoccupation.

Its keynote is sounded by Gwendolen, who maintains an irrational insistence on the magical potency of a “divine” name. Gwendolen will not marry anyone who is not called Ernest because it “has a music of its own. It produces vibrations” (CW 366). By comparison the name Jack, for example, “has very little music… if any at all. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations…” It’s an irreparable loss to our academic concern that Gwendolen
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does not engage in a more detailed prosodic analysis here - that she will not, like the Greeks in
"The Critic as Artist," "elaborate the criticism of language, considered in the light of the mere
material of that art" (AC 350). Nor will she engage in "metaphysical speculation" on the
powers of other names. But the purely anecdotal evidence which she offers as support for her
point of view does seem to point to the neo-Platonic theoretical sources which interested
Wilde: "I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception, were more than usually
plain."

Gwendolen’s taking of a high aesthetic line over the sound of a name is another sign of
her affinity with her creator. Like Wilde, and in tune with the young of whom Wilde approved,
in choosing sound over sense she defends the spirit of poetry. It is left to the old, in the person
of Lady Bracknell vis-à-vis Gwendolen’s character, to represent the prosaic world of social
and financial considerations. Wilde, who never cared for realism whether in life or in art,
makes Lady Bracknell a paragon of the faults towards which realism tends; she is a complete
literalist who is apparently unconscious of the nuances and the resounding ironies of her own
utterance. When Vivian, in “The Decay of Lying,” regales us with the remark that
“Fortunately, in England at any rate, thought is not catching” (1072), we know quite well that
just like the author he means it with conscious mocking irony, even if we were to imagine him
speaking sotto voce; but when Lady Bracknell voices in passing the declaration that
“fortunately, in England, education produces no effect whatsoever” she appears unconscious
of the effect intended by the author. (Terence Brown, in his introduction to the plays in the
Complete Works, notes correctly "the imperviousness of the players who must remain
unaffected by the lunacy they enact" – a principle also fully understood by Dame Edith Evans
in her definitive portrayal of Lady Bracknell in the 1952 film production.) To put it another
way, Lady Bracknell is not a character in the round, but neither is she an entirely “flat” character; she is so clearly outlined as the type of the dowager dragon with which Victorian audiences were thoroughly familiar, that Wilde could afford to have her speak out of character without losing the symbolic impact of her role. So she occupies not one or three, but two dimensions, like a marionette whose design is fixed, but who sometimes speaks her own lines, and sometimes the ventriloquist’s: for example, her approval of smoking as a man’s “occupation” vaults her momentarily beyond the role of an upper-class matron and into that of a dandiacal co-conspirator.

In keeping with the brilliantly light tone of the whole comedy, where a truly pernicious character would be out of place, the extreme quality of her obliviousness makes her almost likable. Her determined literalism functions as an aid to the audience’s sympathy for romance and absurdity. In “The Decay of Lying” Wilde had attempted a critical defence of fantasy and poetry against fact and realist prose through a dialogue which had some of the character of a lecture; here he gains the same point more successfully with the public by positioning an aged and absurd caricature of the spirit of realism as an obstacle to the joyous and lyric absurdity of attractive youth. And it is youth and poetry which wins in the end on all counts; although it is admittedly stretching the limits of interpretation to suggest that Lady Bracknell epitomizes the domination of prose over poetry in her summary pronouncement that “the line is immaterial,” the denouement of the plot does reveal more than is dreamt of in her philosophy, when the line proves material to Jack’s pedigree after all, just as Jack turns out to have been christened Ernest, the name synonymous with the musical and vibratory powers of poetry.

As Lady Bracknell is to Gwendolen, so is Miss Prism to Cecily, a would-be promoter of the Victorian values which Wilde associates with chirographic heaviness: when we come
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upon the pair in the garden at the beginning of Act Two, Miss Prism is attempting to bend Cecily’s attention to her German lesson, which Cecily resists on similar grounds to those voiced by Gwendolen against the name Jack: “But I don’t like German. It isn’t at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson” (375). And as if, like the author of “The Decay of Lying,” she recognizes that “the duty of the historian is to keep an accurate record of the things that have never occurred,” Cecily has kept a journal in which she has inscribed the details of an engagement to someone called “Ernest” (a name which she, like Gwendolen, insists upon), apparently in full confidence that life will imitate art and produce him in the flesh in due course.

The liberty with the truth which Cecily embodies, and which we showed in Chapters One, Two, and Three to be connected with an oral sensibility, is posed in contrast to the dullness of extended literary production based on real events: “I believe,” Cecily remarks disapprovingly, “that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us” (376). Miss Prism then responds with a confession which confirms the association of her character with chirographic values: “Do not speak slightingly of the three-volume novel, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days.” Having revealed that it was “mislaid” she ends the discussion of it by dismissing it, like the line, as immaterial: “such speculations are pointless.” But of course it, too, will prove a significant detail in the establishment of a happy ending.

Miss Prism is not a one-dimensional figure either, although her character comically undermines itself differently than Lady Bracknell’s; her governance of her charge is more tenuous, her novel was apparently of a sentimental turn, and she evinces a marked partiality for Canon Chasuble. She is recognizable as belonging to the class of the educated poor, as one who aspires anxiously and subserviently to Victorian respectability, but whose true nature or
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repressed self has a habit of asserting itself. Weakened by her ambivalence, she is susceptible to the power of a lie, even to the point of participating in one; when Cecily boldly asserts that she has been complaining of a headache, in order to send her off with Canon Chasuble, her first response is denial ("Cecily, I have not mentioned anything about a headache") but soon afterwards she is prompted by desire to a confirmation of the symptom: "I find I have a headache after all, and a walk might do it good" (376,7). Thus Cecily controls outcomes in the real world of the play not only by the inscription of a falsified history in her journal, but by her "creative" utterance in the garden. In this she exhibits the dual deployment of orality and literacy which characterizes her own authorial creator.

It is not, however, Miss Prism’s human foibles in themselves, but rather the channel into which they were forced by a repressive culture, which is the source of the problem which the plot of the play seeks to work out. Stepping back for a moment we see that the structure of the plot falls along traditional lines. At some time in the past a dynastic and cultural disaster was created when the rightful heir to a prominent social position was dispossessed. As a result of this unnatural tear in the social fabric, the instinctively correct urges towards marriage of the principal couples remain blocked. A happy ending will require that the dispossessed heir be restored to his rightful place, which will harmonize the social order, allowing not only his own mating plans to go forward, but also the solution of the problems of the other characters; even the pent-up energies of Prism and Chasuble may at last be regularized. In this case, however, the original villain of the piece is not the dark-faced usurper of traditional melodrama, but a heavy chirographic tome; Jack’s original position in his pram as heir to the family name and fortune was taken by a three-volume novel, left there in his stead by Miss Prism. Thus the future was at some point derailed, and the baby, a symbol of life and of positive social
development, was replaced by a dead artifact. A book was substituted for a living being, which broadly speaking mirrors the cultural fall from living performance to silent reading, i.e. from oral to chirographic, attributed in “The Critic as Artist” to the invention of printing. More narrowly Wilde targets a process of decline within Victorian culture, where a joyously creative approach to writing, one which is closer to oral values, has degenerated into extended forms of literature produced not by talent but merely by emotional displacement. Repression of natural feeling was causing weaker spirits to produce three-volume novels “of more than usually revolting sentimentality” (in the words of Lady Bracknell [CW 413], speaking in and out of character as one who apparently took the time to read Prism’s novel, but who judges it rather as Wilde himself might have). It was the trend towards tediously extended literary productions, especially those based on a realist aesthetic (identified with “Memory” by Cecily), which Wilde viewed with alarm and hostility, and which he had pilloried in “The Decay of Lying,” associating it with “the true decadence” “when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness” (1078).

The young people are therefore the cultural and even the moral heroes of the play, because they insist on adhering to an anterior social and aesthetic order which they instinctively feel to be the true cause. Gwendolen’s mysteriously articulated but determined loyalty to the music of the name of “Ernest,” Cecily’s strongly intentional fabrication of a world closer to the heart’s desire through spell-making both in utterance and inscription (which are used to advance both Prism’s emotional interests and her own), Jack’s development of an alter ego and his prophetic divination of its true name, even Algy’s flexible adaptation to an existence scripted by the woman he loves, all testify to youth’s superior communion with an alternative reality obscured by the current more chirographic dispensation. The play’s
By giving expression to their intimations of a buried code the young have been resurrecting their own future...
Reproduced from *The History of a Great House: with Drawings by the Late Harry Clarke*
happy ending rewards their cherishing of musical and imaginative discourse with more
potency than mere recognition of their yearning for a lost value system: as it turns out, by
giving expression to their intimations of a buried code the young have been resurrecting their
own future and that of their society. In the new context even the moral judgments of the old
order are forced to undergo a reversal (Jack turns out “to have been telling the truth after all”),
but in keeping with the overall tone of the play, every character is suitably mollified and
compensated; we may presume even Lady Bracknell to be happy with the outcome.

One of the small plot elements left unresolved, however, is the ultimate fate of Miss
Prism’s three-volume novel. The attention given to the details of authentication of her
handbag, when it re-appears at the end of the play, cleverly distracts us from any
preoccupation with its original contents; and these are further covered by a palimpsestic
device, when the novel is overlaid by a diary of the same length. Prism promises to forward to
Canon Chasuble “the three last volumes of my diary. In these you will be able to peruse a full
account of the sentiments I have entertained towards you for the last eighteen months” (416).
In revealing that she has kept a diary of her hidden feelings Prism has once again demonstrated
her own addiction to a repressed selfhood, but her new-found intention to offer, even to a
single reader, “a full account” “in three volumes,” is a gaffe in artistic terms. She remains
guilty of chirographic excess, and is suitably rebuked for it by Lady Bracknell, who voices a
critique comprehending both the novel and the diary, again effectively subsuming the former
as a plot element: “Prism, from your last observation to Dr. Chasuble, I learn with regret that
you have not yet given up your passion for fiction in three volumes.” In the same speech,
turning a moment later to Chasuble, she offers what might be understood as a remedy: “…if
baptism be, as you say it is, a form of new birth, I would strongly advise you to have Miss
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Prism baptised without delay. To be born again would be of considerable advantage to her” (416). The joke is about the age at which Prism is venturing to marry, but it reflects back also upon her literary production, which is now that of a past era.

Through all this the question of the eventual whereabouts of Miss Prism’s original effusion is set aside and never answered. But what critic has ever complained that the finale of *The Importance of Being Earnest* leaves loose ends untied? What reader has ever registered a curiosity about the disposal of the three-volume novel? Thus also has Wilde made his point about the ultimate obscurity of the genre.

I have now briefly shown how another of Wilde’s works, in this case the most famous of his plays, can be understood in terms of the orality and literacy in which the development of his sensibility has been viewed throughout this study. Again the ultimate point is that Wilde is not purely an oral genius, but that his particular balance as an artist was different than that of the society around him, and that both his life and work bear strong traces of the friction which resulted. Wilde is far from being anti-chirographic; in the literature which he loved he sometimes claimed to find an experience more real than that of life itself. “A steady course of Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows” he observed more than once, as if he relished the thought that the characters given life in his imagination through the experience of art could have an equal, even a superior, being-status to those encountered in reality. The spoken stories which he invented or elaborated on the spot to enchant his listeners reflected a wide range of classical, biblical, and mythical reference points, and his major critical essays are also notable for the sheer number of works to which they pay attention. So it was not print culture in itself
which he deplored so much as its excesses, which had resulted in a departure from the living
voice and a suppression of the creative imagination.

Wilde’s firsts at Oxford set the seal on his conquest of the education system, but did
nothing to dispose him in favour of its machinery. One could define him in relation to his
readers and listeners as one who had survived and transcended the education with which they
had merely been crammed. His spoken stories, for example, often relied for their effect on the
element of surprise created by a variation from an original source known to the audience -
Lazarus, in Wilde’s twist to his story, weeps over being raised from the dead; and in the eyes
of Narcissus, the pool sees only a reflection of its own beauty. Having absorbed and mastered
the chirographic input which had rendered his audience passive, Wilde embarked on the
creative control and re-arrangement of its elements, re-vivifying its dead figments in a process
which Bernard Shaw perceptively summarized as “play[ing] with everything.”

This could and often did include shifts from oral to chirographic elements, a pattern
which is clearly visible in a number of his major works. So it is that Vivian begins by talking
about the decay of lying, but then shifts the reader’s attention to the article he has just written,
and so the influence over Dorian established by Lord Henry’s musical voice is re-presented
later in the novel through the agency of a “poisonous” book. Likewise the effect of Baron
Arnheim’s “fascinating” voice on Robert Chiltern is perpetuated in the letter which has turned
up again much later; and Cecily’s oral creation of a headache to further Miss Prism’s romance
is subsequently matched by the written text in which she has invented an entire romantic
relationship for herself. However, it would not be long after the successful opening of The
Importance of Being Earnest before a more ominous shift from spoken word to written record,
and from comedy to tragedy, would manifest itself in Wilde’s own life.


3 *The Star*, 22 February 1893. Cited in *ML*, 120.

4 Wilde originally wrote it in what he called “that subtle instrument of music, the French tongue” (*Letters* 331).

5 In a sense Wilde did see *Salome* performed by Sarah Bernhardt on the London stage, through his attendance at the rehearsals which took place before the production was censored. These he recalled in aural terms: “To hear my own words spoken by the most beautiful voice in the world has been the greatest artistic joy that it is possible to experience” (Mikhail 187).

6 In 1886 Wilde had characterized his own time as “an age that that reads too much to admire, and writes too much to think” (*Letters* 186).


8 Wilde’s spoken stories rely for their world of reference mainly on classical and biblical sources created long before the invention of the printing press, whereas the emphasis in his critical essays - at least in “The Decay of Lying” - often falls more on contemporary authors. Wilde’s connection with both worlds was derived mainly from reading, i.e. from a function of literacy; but he seems to have preferred the more ancient sources – those closer to the world of oral culture - as material for his spoken performances.

Conclusion

They praise us half in pity, sure:
To gold still tends,
On gold depends
All, all! Alas, we poor!

Reproduced from *Faust*, illustrated by Harry Clarke
Conclusion

**Conclusion: The Complete Life of Oscar Wilde**

The courtroom is easily compared to the theatre, for obvious reasons, but there are significant differences, one being that the script of a trial is only partly written in advance by opposing counsels, who are not advised of all of each others’ lines either. The courtroom drama is therefore produced on the spot, especially by witnesses and defendants, who, although supposedly prepared by counsel, are often required to give answers to questions which were not predicted, and must therefore engage in a kind of “improv” theatre, whether or not they are trying to stick to the truth. And their spoken answers, no matter how hasty and ill-conceived, are immediately placed on the written record. So the courtroom becomes an arena where the tendency of orality to escape from literacy is curbed by objections against “irrelevance” and directives to “answer the question,” and where the spoken word is kept nailed to the written, sometimes with serious consequences for the defendant. The seesaw relationship between the two modes is then reflected in the final scene, when the judge “pronounces” the “sentence.”

Wilde began his trial against Queensberry confidently, triumphantly leading the opposing counsel into oral modes of digression (“Do you drink champagne yourself?” “Yes. Iced champagne is a favourite drink of mine – strongly against my doctor’s order.” “Never mind your doctor’s orders, sir!” “I never do”): and holding his own on issues of literary interpretation, even managing to managing to make a point about oral performance: “‘Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry.’ Is that a beautiful phrase?” “Not as you read it, Mr. Carson” (Hyde 1962, 129, 116). But the turning-point came when he denied having kissed a certain boy (“Oh dear no! He was a peculiarly plain boy…” [133]) and then began to realize that the facetious tone which he intended was being stripped away by
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Carson's insistently literal interpretation of his answer, which ensured that the element of oral performance on which it relied would be submerged in the written record. Wilde found himself reduced to the humiliating position of having to specify the tone of his speech in an attempt to inscribe it on that record: "You sting me and insult me and try to unnerve me – and at times one says things flippantly when one ought to speak more seriously. I admit it" (134). But the damage had been done. Wilde’s legal fortunes began a downward spiral at the bottom of which lay a pit of utter silence. At the end of his own trial he was denied the right to speak: his last words, uttered after the sentence on him was pronounced, were: "And I? May I say nothing, my lord?" (272). It is hard to know whether he thought of making an eloquent or impassioned statement in defence of his life or love;¹ at any rate he was deprived of that privilege through which so many Irish rebels of his own caste had recorded their verdicts of English justice.² The sentence of hard labour, as if revealing society's fear of both the oral and chirographic sides of his nature, ensured that he would neither be allowed to express himself in writing, or even to speak to other prisoners in the exercise yard, for many months.

Upon his release from prison, Wilde gravitated towards part but not all of his old genius. His days as a brilliant playwright for the London stage were over, but a glowing autumnal period as a storyteller in Paris still lay ahead of him – a period which is only recently gaining its proper recognition. In spite of all its taint of failure and humiliation, and in full recognition that it may not have been the destiny Wilde would have chosen for himself, I am inclined to argue from the momentum of my own study that this time can be seen as an appropriate completion of Wilde's life and work. It marked a return to a world of educated orality such as that which had characterized his childhood in Dublin, lending a certain
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symmetry to the early and late phases of his existence, and revealing the final transformation
of his childhood experience as a listener into his adult performance as a talker.

The two major written works which preceded the final oral phase can then be situated
in the gravitation towards it. When still a prisoner, but granted more permission to write
letters, Wilde began the long missive to Lord Alfred Douglas which has become known as De
Profundis. A review of the recently issued facsimile edition of this work refers to “its
ambiguous status” noting “it is both a private letter and a highly wrought work of literature.”
Equally ambiguous is its embodiment of both orality and literacy. As a private letter addressed
in the second person singular, it obviously bears some of the marks of a conversational mode,
as in its tone of intimacy, and in its agonistic approach, which at times lends it the air of a
dialogue from which the answers of the respondent have been cut. But there is also something
false in its orality; and something disingenuous in its reformist rationale for an extended
recitation of the faults of Lord Alfred Douglas, who Wilde must have known was beyond
reform anyway. It seems motivated at least as much by the most ancient and fundamental
purpose of all inscription, which was to set down a documentary record that would be
legitimized by posterity. It also bears the marks of chirographic duress: the condition of
loneliness in which it was produced, and the absence of a balancing voice, sometimes cause it
to topple over into emotional and rhetorical excess, unfortunately representing, like Miss
Prism’s three-volume novel, the displacement of suppressed feeling into chirographic form. Its
existence is unnatural: had Lord Alfred Douglas visited Wilde during his prison sentence, De
Profundis would never have been written.

Alienated from his cheerful gregarious oralizing self by enforced isolation, Wilde
pressed himself into a correspondence with phantoms. One of them was the departed lover,
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Lord Alfred Douglas; another the circle of friends and readers to whom he would like to justify his side of that relationship; and another, looming ominously over the text like the guards who perused it and the walls which surrounded the author, was the society which had inexplicably immured him. He, who, whatever his faults, was almost entirely without malice, could not fathom the vindictiveness of his punishment, and like a bewildered child yielded up an abject penitence in the terms framed by his persecutors, excoriating himself for extravagance, decadence, time-wasting, and other sins against the mercantile and masculinist values of the late empire.

His one show of strength lies in attempting to convert these terms to his own, claiming that his worst sins are against art, and that he laments above all his failure to devote himself more completely to his writing. For this he blames Bosie’s character, and his own weakness in relation to it; but even in this contrition we can read the terms of surrender imposed on Wilde by a chirographically heavy society. For what in his misery he has forced himself to confess to is the grievous crime of excessive socializing with the person he loved, and a corresponding failure to grind out a greater volume of the lonely chirographic production which society demanded of the artist. Dwelling on his lost destiny as one “who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of [his] age” (1017) more than on his already marvelous achievements as a writer, he regrets not having imprisoned himself more often while he was free. Having found that his punishment consists in an extreme and unnatural solitude, he has inferred a criminal gregariousness in himself, forgetting that one of the major sources of his artistic brilliance lay in conversation. It was by building on the momentum of talk, even mainly his own, that he had “played with the idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air, and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox” (CW 43).
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Little of this is to be found in *De Profundis*: in spite of the elements of orality already mentioned, it is above all a chirographic product, its sentimental misery the result of an extreme and unnatural condition of isolation. It was precisely because its sorrows were his own that they were not a suitable motive for art, but prison and the loss of conversation had burst the bubble of Wilde’s daring: from the deliberate hard posturing which had challenged a sentimental society, and which found stimulation in Bosie’s absolutely perfect selfishness, (“we must learn how to judge things more by their appearances”) he fell to repeating a cliché: “the supreme vice is shallowness.”

After Wilde’s release from prison, it proved impossible for him to repair the unique coalition of oral and literate powers which had enabled him to produce works like “The Decay of Lying” and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The presumed losses to literature are naturally to be lamented, but rather than read the story of this period in the negative terms of its paucity of written production, I prefer to recognize it in positive terms for its late flourishing of his oral genius. In the first and harshest year of Wilde’s prison term, the institution had erased both sides of his sensibility - he was allowed neither to speak nor to write - but in the final, more permissive phase of his sentence, one side of that sensibility was offered back to him more fully than the other: in the months before his release, while he still could not congregate freely, he was provided with pen and paper, and encouraged to write.

In several ways however, *De Profundis*, the result of his efforts, is not what it seems. For one thing, in spite of its prolonged, devastating and historically successful indictment of Lord Alfred Douglas, it does not mark the conclusion of their relationship; on the contrary, as Ellmann noted, “Wilde’s repudiation of Douglas was complete enough for him to feel drawn towards him once more” (484): it presents a purgation of the suffering and resentment Wilde
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had experienced, and thereby prepared him a for subsequent return to his lover. Likewise, one would have thought the conditions in which he was placed (ascetic solitude, access only to pen and paper) to be ideal for the recreation of himself as a writer; but in the resulting letter perhaps his tendency to blame Bosie’s interruptions for his not having written more in the past, his proposal to recuperate for a while after leaving prison before beginning to write again, and the long meditation on Christ (who wrote nothing down) as the Supreme Artist, near the letter’s conclusion, offer the clearest indications that Wilde himself was going to abandon writing, and to make his life his work. So *De Profundis* did not represent a return to writing for Wilde; on the contrary, he used it to discharge himself at last from a lifetime of chirographic servitude. Through *De Profundis* he was writing himself out of writing, back to talk – and to Bosie.

Wilde’s only subsequent publications – the letters to *The Daily Chronicle* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* - were offered in fulfillment of his debts to emotion, to suffering, to the plight of the poor and the downtrodden, and those ground beneath the heel of the justice system. Such were the only debts that had retained meaning for him, and he paid them in the chirographic coin acceptable to the British public. But for himself he reverted to a different side of his genius; and for his relations with others who were better off, he adopted a different set of economic values.

In prison his return to the privileges of life and literacy had begun with access to the Bible, and he now began to turn his reading of it to profit, by generating the spoken stories based on Biblical reference with which he entertained friends and then admirers in Paris cafes. In returning this written document, itself based on oral accounts, to spoken forms, Wilde
placed his own perverse parabolic spins on the tales, a number of which were, ironically, then re-transcribed by his (mainly French) apostles.  

He also took to producing oral performances based on documents which did not yet have a textual existence, nor in fact ever would. A classic instance has been cited as follows:

On arriving an hour late at the Café de la Paix, Wilde announced to the company [of theatre producers], “Gentlemen, I have here with me one of the four acts of the play that I promised to deliver to you finished today. Certain things have occurred which have made it impossible for me to write down the remaining acts, but they are all here [at this point Wilde tapped his forehead, then sank into the chair facing them and lit a cigarette], only you must give me wine – yellow sparkling wine – and plenty of it.”

Champagne was ordered for Wilde and, as he drank it, he described the play with such brilliance and in such detail that the men imagined that they were attending its first performance. He made ingenious suggestions concerning the acting, the scenery, and even the audience; he also quoted long extracts from the dialogue and effortlessly conjured up the characters with a few sentences. He went on in this way for over an hour and a half, then, promising them that he would write the play out by the end of the week, he stood up to take his leave.

His listeners were so impressed by his outline that they gave him a great deal of extra money on account. Wilde bowed to them with a flourish, refused to shake their outstretched hands and then plunged into the stream of passers-by on the Avenue de L’Opéra, never to be seen again by any of them. (TT 150-1)
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Such an incident can of course be read in terms of the losses to literature, and the levels to which Wilde was forced to stoop in order to meet his exigencies; and indeed Wilde himself sometimes regretted his inability to concentrate for long enough to complete any written work. But I am tempted to suggest a more positive interpretation. There are some indications that Wilde instinctively felt that he was entering the final stages of his existence; “there is a kind of doom over me,” as he confided to Robert Ross (Ellmann 516). His behaviour may have reflected not only an incapacity to write, but a stubbornness about not writing: as he said to an acquaintance in Paris, “I told you that I was going to write something. I tell everybody that… It is a thing that one can repeat each day, meaning to do it the next. But in my heart – that chamber of leaden echoes – I know that I never shall. It is enough that the stories have been invented, that they actually exist, that I have been able, in my own mind, to give them the form that they demand” (536). There is an element not just of incapacity, but of defiance, in this, as if he has become unwilling to share the gifts of his mind with the society which had rejected him: one should not, as he said, expect writing from one who had “been struck”(530).

But Wilde’s sense that the stories “actually exist” meant that he did not after all confine his talents to the theatre of his thoughts. For a sympathetic audience, of poets and artists whose appreciation he could relish in his presence, or from others who could be counted on to pay his immediate expenses, he was happy to revert to the art which had always come to him most naturally – that of brilliant table talk and storytelling. When Graham Greene’s father met Wilde in Paris without knowing who he was, and took care of his bill after being entertained by an hour of his conversation, Greene later reflected that Wilde “was paying for his drink in the only currency he had” (Ellmann 525). Wilde seems to have known at some level that in spite of its immediacy and ephemerality, its lack of chirographic circulation and permanence,
his talk was a real art and a real currency in its own right. A metaphor he used in 1897 to
describe his hopes of raising money from his writing can perhaps be read also as a description
of the oral talent to which he was reverting: “Still I keep on building castles of fairy gold in the
air: we Celts always do” (Letters 666).

I conclude that in the final stages of his life Wilde was acting out a form of radical
politics of orality which was the natural outcome not only of his temperament and background,
but of a vein of thought and feeling, a consistent complex of attitudes and analyses, which he
had manifested in dozens of ways throughout his life and work. When he sketched in the air
the outline of his unwritten play, when he conjured characters and entire snatches of dialogue
so that the theatre producers at the café appeared to experience the performed script in their
own imaginations, he was working in a rarefied medium which had no doubt existed in the
past, but to which he had added fresh developments, and which no one had perhaps touched
with a genius quite like his. It could perhaps be called a kind of “orature,” an oral medium
bearing some of the rhetorical traces of a literary work, like a paperless version of The
Importance of Being Earnest, floating in the ether and externalizing only from time to time in
the transitory world of sound, at which time its audience might simultaneously find themselves
imagining it both as a textual artifact and as a future theatre performance. What the theatre
producers were privileged to experience was a unique private performance of an elusive
masterpiece by an artist of rare genius, a castle of fairy gold in the air, and a performance
which has even made its way into cultural history in the story of it given above.

Under the circumstances the price they paid was not too high, and indeed in Wilde’s
hands ready money was as of transient a nature as words in the air, and thus an appropriate
match to the nature of the medium with which he generated it. The producers were paying in
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the only currency they had - money itself - for an event which they at least dimly apprehended as extraordinary, while distracting the more venal side of their spirits with an illusion of future profits. Their names, merely as customers, have sunk below the level of any significance; but had they been artists, and therefore capable of writing down what they heard, they themselves might very well be anthologized in works on Wilde today. Yeats paid a far greater debt to history in his discussion, in Autobiographies, of that Christmas Day long before when Wilde had read aloud to him from the proofs of “The Decay of Lying.”

To recall that description is to return also to the introductory section of this thesis, and its concerns, which have in some respects come full circle. With Yeats and Ong as guides and fundatory critics, I have attempted to trace some of the dynamics of Wilde’s dual sensibility in the development of his life and work. I have shown the persistent influence, and sometimes even the centrality, of oral modes of thought in much of Wilde’s behaviour and in many of his principal works, and I have located the places in which he himself seemed most conscious of such modes, and in which he came closest to giving them deliberate expression. I have suggested that a theory and politics of orality is a better rubric than that of nationality for a description of Wilde’s sensibility, and I have shown that this was derived from several sources; but I have acknowledged the most important of these as Wilde’s Irish background, and in particular the role of his teacher Mahaffy, who practised a theory and politics of orality in his own right.

In the early part of this conclusion I suggested that one could see a certain symmetry between Wilde’s first years in Dublin and his last years in Paris, in that both were predominantly oral milieux, and it is certainly possible also to amplify an “Irish” or “Celtic” reading of the final phase of his life. Although he had also achieved the creation of a
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comparable context of literate orality in some English circles, Wilde had found that talk, no matter how brilliant, was not a career in England, and so had disciplined himself sufficiently to produce a number of written works (whose extreme variety testified somewhat to the restlessness of his mind in such circumstances). In response to English society closing its doors against him, however, he had instinctively abandoned chirographic effort, and in a sense even taken a stand against it, by revaluing oral performance as its equivalent, even in commercial terms. As we established earlier in this inquiry, issues around the value of talk, and oral values in general, resonated not only in historical Anglo-Irish relations, but also in personal terms for Wilde. By rejecting the chirographic economy, and re-centering his art completely in the spoken word, Wilde was identifying himself with that aspect of the Irish which the English had traditionally both despised and admired. Even the straitened circumstances in which he then found himself can be seen as replicating the situation of those primarily oral Irish poets who upon the collapse of Gaelic society three centuries before had followed their masters into exile in Europe, and fallen into poverty and disregard. To the extent that Wilde wilfully chose the path of orality in his final years, he can be said to have taken his last stand as an Irish rebel; it is hardly surprising, perhaps, that Vincent O'Sullivan recalled him as possessing a kind of bardic aura during this period (36).

It is also hardly surprising that an Irish reading of Wilde’s last published literary work, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, has since appeared. As a literary form the ballad, which was traditionally composed to be recited or sung, is one of those closest to orality; and one which was frequently chosen as a vehicle for Irish patriotic sentiments. Wilde’s use of it for an emotional identification with the downtrodden, and an unflattering portrayal of English justice, runs closely parallel to that tradition. As Seamus Heaney has noted, “This poem written by the
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son of Speranza,...may be devoid of Irish nationalist political intent but it is full of subversive anti-Establishment sentiment.” Furthermore, Davis Coakley has convincingly pointed to the striking links between the metre and even the vocabulary of “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” and “A New Year’s Song,” by the Young Ireland poet Denis Florence McCarthy, whose work Wilde had praised in one of the lectures on his American tour. To Coakley the link between Wilde’s ballad and McCarthy’s poem suggests that “Wilde was associating himself with the poets of ’48 when he wrote his most famous poem” (212).

However, while Coakley’s purpose is to accord recognition to a neglected Irish dimension of The Ballad of Reading Gaol, he does not fail to observe a point made by others, namely, the obvious debts of Wilde’s poem to various works in the English tradition, in particular Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner. It is worth noting too that English Romantic poets as well as earlier Irish bards had chosen to live and die in exile on the European continent, and that Wilde also belongs in their tradition of opposition to English society. When he spoke of himself, he added a French dimension: “I am a vagabond. The century will have had two vagabonds, Paul Verlaine and me” (Ellmann 539). Therefore Wilde inherited the role of the outcast from at least three different countries.

“The Leftover Years” is one of the chapter titles with which Richard Ellmann heads his account of the final period of the life of his subject, but the parallel which I have suggested between Wilde’s last years as a talker in Paris and his early life as a listener in Dublin would allow us rather to see him as having lived a “complete” or symmetrical life, in particular by his deliberate choice to return at the end to a world of listening and speaking rather than of writing - a personal culture of educated orality rather than of chirographic isolation. His last years, like his first, are spent in a brilliant conversational circle; but he has completed a trajectory from
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being the listening child whose only performance was his name, to becoming the dying master
of speech whose name was the most suppressed aspect of his existence. In the record of his
life and work between those symmetrical moments we have seen the struggle of his uniquely
composed sensibility to manifest itself against the friction of a differently weighted world.

Although I have defined his struggle and his art in national, cultural, and above all in
oral/chirographic terms, perhaps the simple title by which Thomas Davis was described to
Speranza is ultimately that which most befits her son: “He was a poet.”

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1 Such a moment had already occurred, when, in the course of his first trial, Wilde had defined and defended the
“Love that dare not speak its name,” in a short oration, described by Max Beerbohm as “simply wonderful. Here
was this man, who had been for a month in prison and loaded with insults and crushed and buffeted, perfectly
self-possessed, dominating the Old Bailey with his fine presence and musical voice” (Ellmann 436).
2 In Speeches from the Dock, one of the most influential and widely-circulated nationalist publications of the
nineteenth century, the eloquence of Anglo-Irish Protestant rebels such as Emmet and Tone takes pride of place.
Wilde was not granted, or did not insist upon, the right to such a valedictory oration; but may be said to have
“replied” to his experience of English justice in De Profundis and The Ballad of Reading Gaol.
4 Many of these have lately been anthologized in English, in Thomas Wright’s collection: Table Talk: Spoken
Stories of Oscar Wilde.
5 In the century which followed, with its explosion of cultural industries, the situation of the poet seems to have
changed for the better in some respects. Large audiences, positions in universities, and corporate funding have
become almost the norm. Seamus Heaney was recently offered $5,000 U.S. plus a business-class air ticket to give
a reading in Vancouver.
6 In Davis Coakley’s The Importance of Being Irish.
8 Coakley reveals also that Wilde considered asking the Irish patriot and former political prisoner Michael Davitt
to provide a preface for the second edition of “The Ballad,” and compared his own and Davitt’s reasons for being
sent to prison. (213)
9 Wilde had assumed the name “Sebastian Melmoth” for a period after his release from prison.
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