Approaching an irony of difference: the Self as an outsider in the short stories of Oscar Wilde

Leonara R. Villegas Obed
Approaching an irony of difference: the Self as an outsider in the short stories of Oscar Wilde

Leonara R. Villegas Obed

In the short stories of Oscar Wilde, compassion underscores the experiences of the characters. The complexity of their emotional awakenings is such that they anticipate a modernist connotation of the word, as illustrated by Milan Kundera in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. As a synthetic emotion, the implications of compassion are determined by its roots: the non-Latinate root that means feeling, as well as the Latin root that means either "sympathy" or "condescension" (Kundera, 1984, 20). Hence, Kundera takes great exception to this emotion, and underscores its suspicious regard: for "it designates what is considered an inferior, second-rate sentiment that has little to do with love. To love someone out of compassion means not really to love" (Kundera, 1984, 20). But then Kundera explains that one must not dismiss compassion, for one discovers that the word's broad etymological roots endow it with a similarly broad spectrum:

The secret strength of its etymology floods the word with another light and gives it a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion—joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. This kind of compassion (in the sense of soucit, wspolczucie, Mitgefühl, medkansla) therefore signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, it is supreme. (Kundera, 1984, 20)

Because compassion includes both the ability to live with the other's sorrows, as well as the ability to feel with one any kind of emotion, it allows one to experience two perspectives; that is, a view from the inner world, and that of the external countenance. In a similar manner, the short stories of Oscar Wilde allow the reader a dual perspective, or, in the words of Ian Small, a "combination of naivety and complexity that allows one to read them both as simple and satisfying narratives for children and self-conscious literary exercises" (Small, 1994, xv). Wilde's appeal to both the didactic purpose of adults...
and the childlike love for the fanciful is facilitated by a singular character: the Outsider. The confrontation with the Outsider is both a confrontation with Oscar Wilde and a confrontation with compassion. As one who dares to visit other geographical realms, the Outsider at the same time ventures on new and various imaginative places. His is the art of "emotional telepathy" and of the "affective imagination". Other places inspire him to discover all aspects of self, and to indulge in the art of selving, an art that Wilde often practiced. From Wilde's early days, he realized the importance of elegant inversion. As Declan Kiberd writes, "All the norms of his childhood were to be reversed. His father had been laughed at by society, so he would mock society first. His mother had sought to recover Ireland, so he would surpass her by invading and conquering England" (Kiberd, 1994, 13). While Matthew Arnold felt "that the Celts were doomed by a multiple selfhood, which allowed them to see so many options in a situation that they were immobilized," Wilde understood that such a Celtic nature would surpass that of the English specialist who, in his sincerity and simplification, avoided the troubles of one who entertained all aspects of selfhood (Kiberd, 1994, 13). As Kiberd notes, "Wilde was the first major artist to discredit the romantic ideal of sincerity and to replace it with the darker imperative of authenticity: he saw that in being true to a single self, a sincere man may be false to half a dozen other selves...If all art must contain the essential criticism of its prevailing codes, for Wilde an authentic life must recognize all that is opposed to it" (Kiberd, 1994, 13).

3

It is interesting to note that while Wilde, in his own life, practised the art of selving and elegant inversion, and applied it to many of his works---in particular, The Importance of Being Earnest, where each person turns out to be his own secret opposite --his native Ireland is never evoked, nor used as a literary setting. This displacement of the Hibernian place serves to emphasize Wilde's stance as an Outsider. When, at Oxford, he dropped the names of Fingal O'Flahertie Wills, he fulfilled the portent of Henry Craik, who asked, "Was there ever an Irish man of genius who did not get himself turned into an Englishman as fast as he could?"

4

To this query the answer lies not in a visible place that can be found on a map, but in an otherworldly milieu, a city of the mind that is as much a land of the imagination. Or, as Owen Dudley Edwards writes, "the stories in almost all cases travel back to a Celtic folk-world dominated by ghosts and God" (Edwards, 1994, 14). While Wilde may have visibly transformed his accent and appearance into that of a London gentleman, his internal world was loyal to Ireland. Through his meetings with William Butler Yeats and other Irish writers, as well as his regular correspondence with his mother, Lady Esperanza, he not only lived with the misfortunes of his country, but felt with it all of its experiences, from pain to ecstasy. Richard Ellmann wrote that "Wilde had to live his life twice over, first in slow motion, then at top speed. During the first period he was a scapegrace, during the second a scapegoat" (Ellmann, 1988). His life may be viewed as one that increasingly approaches the persona of the Outsider. In truth, he was an Outsider for much of his life. As he could not find much cultivation in Dublin, he went to Oxford, where he gained the Newdigate Prize for "Ravenna" but failed to secure for himself there a permanent position. In London he structured his social life in such a way that facilitated proper literary connections, but when the conventions of marriage and fatherhood seemed too safe he delved deeper into his clandestine world of homoeroticism—the world of Lord Alfred Douglas, or "Bosie", who caused his ultimate downfall in Reading Gaol, where he became the quintessential Outsider, alienated from family, friends, and country.
M.H. Abrams cites the Greek origin of irony as the eiron, or "dissembler" who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the alazon—the self-deceiving and stupid braggart" (Abrams, 1988, 91). In his life and art, Wilde relied on the eiron, and fused him with the persona of the Outsider, so that the synthetic self became an Outsider who used his alienation as a means of being able to view situations with greater sensitivity. As one reads Wilde's works, one can observe a progression of this fused persona, whose sardonic wit is correlated with his social stance and discovery of various and other places.

By the time he wrote his short stories, Wilde was living in London with his wife, Constance Lloyd, and his children, Vyvyan and Cyril. He was at a stage in his life where he could enjoy the company of his sons, and thus, could almost stifle the shadow of the Outsider. Reading Gaol and forthcoming shame were in the very distant future, and could not disturb his love for his children. If the themes of love and self-denial figure so strongly in the short stories it is because Wilde wrote them with the image of parents telling them to their own children, in mind (Small, 1994, xv). Thus, the irony in the short stories is that of a gentle dissembler: not quite the sardonic wit who, in the axioms, claims that "Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others." But this does not mean that such playful sarcasm is not extant. In fact, one hears the voice of the sardonic Outsider—as later manifested in The Importance of Being Earnest—in the fairy tales, such as The Devoted Friend, where the Miller, in his attempts at sincerity, hides behind the mask of selfishness and says, "I will certainly take care not to give away anything again. One always suffers for being generous" (Wilde, 1994, 34). The Miller anticipates the antagonists of later works; that is, one who is so focussed on his narrow and specialized world that he fails to see different aspects of the self.

The fairy stories are obvious examples of how the childlike perspective invades the more adult, didactic realm. Wilde subverts the typical fairy tale by illustrating how good does not necessarily triumph over evil, especially in a world where the exploitation of vulnerability and charity are encouraged. As Ian Small emphasizes, the strategy of reversal is the key to understanding Wilde's works; rather than socialize readers into the given values of a culture, Wilde's stories subtly criticize the nature of those values, and the ways in which they bring about social cohesion in the first place (Small, 1994, XVIII). One observes this same pattern of reversal in the short stories. From the theatrical Cyril Graham in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." to the enigmatic Mrs. Alroy in "The Sphinx Without a Secret", the Outsider is imbued with a great sense of imagination, which in turn allows them to make decisions that are not necessarily based on societal standards. But unlike the fairy tales, where the realm of the fanciful folk-world is akin to the Celtic underworld, the short stories feature a Celtic self that is twice removed; hence, the realm of the Outsider who finds himself in a setting that is neither Ireland, nor England, but that of a displaced self, suspended in wonder and awe, and better able to understand compassion. This motif of suspension anticipates the milieu of Reading Gaol, where, in the isolation of his ignominy and betrayal, Wilde felt that he belonged neither to his native Celtic land nor to his adopted Anglo-Saxon home. When viewed from this perspective, one may imagine his short stories as a portent: the confrontation with the Outsider of imprisonment and De Profundis, as one whose exercises in prayer and spirituality, to prepare himself for the final apotheosis of Reading Gaol.
The fact that the short stories exploit a suspended realm that is not geographically specific is manifested in the emphasis on imagination. Somehow, place and location do not matter to the characters as much as the ability to understand all aspects of their personality. Thus, geography is redefined, so that a map of the world is illustrated not by land and place, but by nuances of persona and imaginative journeys. Space can thus be determined by compassion, or, one's ability to feel various kinds of emotions with others. The imaginative bent is evident in Baron Hausberg, the art patron and millionaire who commissions a painting featuring himself as a beggar. This skill of the Baron is artistic deception, and the ability to sustain that lie. His skill is such that he is able to inspire compassion in Hugh Erskine, who sacrifices hansom rides and a sovereign for the pity that he feels for the poor man. But the Baron rewards his compassion with even greater reciprocation; greater in the sense that he displays compassion in all of its forms: that of condescension, in the act of deception, so that he is given the chance to stoop to a lower level; that of appreciating the sincerity of Hugh's act, so that he assists his need by paying back his sovereign in a far greater amount; and that of the affective imagination, so that in his exploitation of art and its lies, is able to feel the misery and want that his wealth cannot afford him. By imagining himself a hero, he in fact becomes one. He chooses to ignore the conventional route of sincerity in order to be true to himself, and by exploiting the deceptive nature of art, learns the true meaning of charity.

When the Outsider finds himself in a place that is neither native nor foreign, he learns to create his own space, even if the attempts may seem rather strange. As Wilde illustrates, the voice of the Outsider is subtle, speaking through actions, rather than words. Hence, the secretive Lady Alroy, who exploited her wealth to create her own spaces of solitude: "She paid me three guineas a week merely to sit in my drawing-rooms now and then...She simply sat in the drawing-room, Sir, reading books, and sometimes had tea," the woman answered (Wilde, 1994, 204). Lady Alroy, or, The Sphinx Without a Secret, so arrested the attention of the narrator that his senses became more acute. He suddenly noticed actions which in other cases would seem mundane, routine. As he explains, with much certainty, to the perplexed Gerald, "Lady Alroy was simply a woman with a mania for mystery. She took these rooms for the pleasure of going there with her veil down, and imagining she was a heroine" (Wilde, 1994, 205). What he feels for Lady Alroy is, in a very subtle way, compassion. He is able to recognize her need for solitary space--the only space which allows her to enact the enigma of a heroine; such a need would not be easily recognized by most people, particularly those who are not sensitive to the mysteries of the self. In a similar manner, compassion, or the ability to feel any emotion with someone, is a virtue that enabled Wilde to find beauty even amidst the squalor of Reading Gaol. As he watched the scene of execution, he conjured in his mind the image of one who kills the thing that he loves, and from this event sprang the theme of his most poignant poem, The Ballad of Reading Gaol.

A similar poignancy is evident in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.", where the theme of heroism underscores that of potential. The ability to imagine oneself in romantic, heroic terms enables one to die nobly; hence, the possibilities of selfhood are manifested not only in life, but in death. Throughout the story, the reader's interest is sustained by the enigmatic life of Cyril Graham, the iconoclastic thespian who insisted on propagating his theory of Willie Hughes, the boy actor who served as a possible inspiration for Shakespeare's sonnets. Erskine talked about Graham, and the tragic suicide prompted by his unwillingness to believe his friend's theory. The narrator becomes so engrossed in the
possible truth of Willie Hughes that he devotes much time in proving the credibility of Mr. W.H. When, after an argument he and Erskine part, he learns of Erskine’s death, and believes it to be a repetition of the tragedy of Graham, but the irony hits him: "Poor Erskine did not commit suicide. He died of consumption. He came here to die." At this moment, the pursuit of truth becomes insignificant. As he accepts the portrait of Mr. W.H., he does not care so much about the truth of the theory, nor about Erskine’s attempt to make him believe that he would commit suicide. Like the aura of Mrs. Alroy, the sharing of the mysterious and unknown becomes even more significant than the validation of truth. The narrator suddenly realizes the poetic license that Erskine had to take in order to bring dignity and beauty to his slow and gradual death by consumption. The final lines are particularly arresting: "The picture hangs now in my library, where it is very much admired by my artistic friends. They have decided that it is not a Clouet, but an Ouvry. I have never cared to tell them its true history. But sometimes, when I look at it, I think that there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s sonnets" (Wilde, 1994, 79). Somehow, the tone of these musings seems akin to those of Wilde, who on his departure from Reading Gaol, "opened his arms towards some budding bush saying, 'Oh beautiful world! Oh beautiful world!' The warder implored him to stop, 'Now Mr. Wilde, you musn't give yourself away like that. You're the only man in England who would talk like that in a railway station’” (Ellmann, 1987, 492). The tone is that of an Outsider who understands the secret sadness of a beautiful moment, but cannot bring himself to explain truth to those who cannot understand.

"The Model Millionaire", "The Sphinx Without a Secret", and "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." are all similar in that they are sustained by a somewhat softened irony; that is, their discovery of the ironic consequences results in a state of silent contentment, and the triumph of virtue over vice. But in "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", the propagation of murder is necessary for the protagonist’s final happiness. As in the fairy stories, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" illustrates the stark authenticity of life, of the fact that one must entertain all aspects of human nature—even the most dark and heinous nuances—if one is to seek a full understanding of compassion. To some extent, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" shows the more negative side of compassion; for if one meaning of compassion is the ability to feel any emotion with a person, then a fully authentic life would not deny from the self its evil aspects. Subtitled 'A Study of Duty', "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" parodies the rules and rigid standards that people blindly follow in their pursuit of happiness. One may view Lord Arthur as the reversal of the Outsider. As an aristocrat who is about to be married, he represents the more privileged class of society. Unlike the palm reader, Mr. Podgers, he has a more difficult time seeing the world from the outside; "outside" not only in the Outsider’s sense, but "outside" as in external to his life of certain and predictable circumstances. The discovery of a bad fortune is a revelation that shakes his sensibility, so that he is paralyzed to think of "Murder" in any other sense but the literal. He cannot think, for instance, that "Murder" may signify something other than the violent termination of a life. When, at the end, he realizes that Mr. Podgers himself is his ultimate and necessary victim, he in turn causes the death of the Outsider. As a chiromantist, Mr. Podgers views life from a magic underworld; he alone is able to bring some sense of excitement and imagination to the circle of insouciant aristocrats. Lord Arthur, however, lacks the imagination to pursue any other alternative, except that which is based on a literal interpretation. His 'duty' is the similar duty of the specialists and 'sincere' persons who, unlike Wilde, chose to be true to a single self, thus ignoring other possibilities of selfhood and imaginative realms.
"Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" is significant in that it exemplifies Wilde’s apprehension of moral issues. By parodying the hypocrisy and standards that govern men’s lives, Wilde forces his audience to confront life in all of its harsh differences. To some extent, he anticipates the Derridean aspect of differance, derived from the verbs meaning to differ and to defer. What does it mean to lead a moral life? What does it mean to follow duty? By employing parody and irony in unconventional ways, Wilde allows readers to confront these questions, and view them from the Outsider’s point of view: the persona of which may be manifested in the eyes of a child, or the eyes of a potential murderer. This meditation on how life may differ from the norm, and yet defer to its multiple possibilities, is later realized in full force in De Profundis, where Wilde’s challenge to conventional religion is evident in such lines: "Those whom he saved from their sins are saved simply for beautiful moments in their lives....All that Christ says to us by way of a little warning is that every moment should be beautiful, that the soul should always be ready for the coming of the Bridegroom, always waiting for the voice of the Lover" (Wilde, 1994,1036).

It may be said that all of Wilde’s work feature the persona of the Outsider, but his quartet of short stories is particularly telling in that it marks an important stage in the Outsider's evolution. At such a point he straddles the boundary between sardonic and parodic irony and compassion. It is in Wilde’s short fiction—written, along with the fairy tales, with children in mind—that compassion is allowed its full creative fruition. It is in his fiction that Wilde artistically rehearses the compassion that prepares him for his own personal apotheosis. It is the virtue of compassion that underscores much of his mature work. The play, An Ideal Husband, illustrates the importance of compassion in the understanding of self, both of one's own and of others, as applied by Lord Goring: "Why should you scourge him with rods for a sin done in his youth, before he knew you, before he knew himself?" (Wilde, 1994, 579). Almost a century after his death, the resonance of Wilde’s belief in compassion is again evident, as in the words of director Peter Hall, who, in his revival of An Ideal Husband at the Old Vic, London, ensures that compassion reigns: "Wilde is as emotionally honest as his public would allow. This play lives not because of its wit but its compassion" (Hall, program book, August 1996).

**BIBLIOGRAPHIE**


RÉSUMÉS

Wilde, l'Irlandais à l'accent d'Oxford, a toujours situé sa fiction ailleurs qu'en Irlande, en des lieux qui explorent le royaume de l'autre. Hantés par des spectres mais aussi par Dieu, ces "ailleurs" ne sont pourtant pas si lointains du monde celte dont le folklore est aussi dominé par ces mêmes thèmes. En effet, Wilde est un simulateur - et tel est en Grec le sens du mot "eiron", lui-même à l'origine du terme "ironie". Trait caractéristique de l'oeuvre de Wilde, l'ironie n'y sert pas uniquement des fins de rhétorique ou d'esthétique ; elle y est, comme tous ces "ailleurs", pour nous abuser, pour y créer un ton humoristique qui participe à l'intention de l'auteur à ébranler les moeurs anglaises. En composant "ailleurs" et derrière le masque de l'ennemi, Wilde explore de nouvelles possibilités de devenir, pour lui, certes, mais aussi pour nous tous.

AUTEURS

LEONARA R. VILLEGA S OBED

Philippine d'origine et élevée aux Etats-Unis, a étudié la littérature anglaise et comparée aux Etats-Unis puis au Canada. Actuellement elle prépare la soutenance de sa thèse de doctorat sur Oscar Wilde à l'Université d'Edinbourg en Ecosse, sous la direction des professeurs Owen Dudley Edwards, éditeur des œuvres complètes de Wilde, et Declan Kiberd.