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Wildean Degeneration

I. BODY AND TEXT: THE ART OF POSING

It all began with a gerund – with the note left by the illiterate Marquess of Queensberry in the hands of the doorman at the Albermarle Club: “To Oscar Wilde, posing as a somdomite”. Thus began the last chapter in the Wildean adventure, the game played to the bitter end both on and off the page, which had marked Wilde’s project from the outset. I am not referring here to the three trials Wilde was forced to undergo, or to the ruin that followed, but rather to the gerund “posing” so strategically placed between Oscar’s name and the brutal, unequivocal term that followed, and which indeed, calling things by their proper names would later seal Wilde’s condemnation forever. The Marquess of Queensberry had no doubts that Wilde was, in actual fact, a sodomite. It was on the suggestion of his lawyers that he used this subtle formula, “posing” to soften the explicit violence of the accusation, and to avoid automatically falling into calumny himself.¹ The incriminating phrase, so transparent at first glance, is, ironically, in code: the word “posing” immediately subverts the meaning of what follows and vice versa. At the same time it acknowledges implicitly the gesture of posing, the great device on which Wilde based his public figure and

¹ A. Hennegan, “Personalities and Principles: Aspects of Literature and Life in England”, in M. Teich and R. Porter (eds.), *Fin de Siècle and its Legacy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

his art: it is a gesture inscribed in the history of manners that was deconstructed and reconstructed, creating a system in which the Wildean body became highly charged with significance, concentrating upon itself the maximum number of messages rendered possible and amplified by a system of consumption which from the Pre-Raphaelites on had made the visual image the supreme means of cultural communication.

The high degree of visibility so determinedly displayed by the Wildean body is the excess which Max Nordau will define as *degeneration*. It closes the circle that began in Regency culture with Beau Brummel, while at the same supplying an answer to the questions posed by the era on its own social and cultural malaise: a source of continuous anxiety – and after Arnold, an obsession for the Victorian mind. In Wilde's project, posing is the powerful and persuasive device, the radicalizing of a model of behavior, that "natural gift of exaggeration" described in "The Decay of Lying" with which the author experimented, firstly on himself and, later, on the figure of Lord Henry who will be its most complete embodiment.

Posing is the art of appearances, susceptible to imitation, caricature, and parody: devices which, departing from the text and/or body may be magnified infinitely, to take their final shape into the new figure necessarily transgressive – and from now on deviant – of the artist. Once called mask, the pose does not disguise or conceal but rather reveals, although in an oblique and allusive way. The Wildean pose is the codification upon the body of the most important lesson learned from Walter Pater, under the surface of whose work we may read one of the most significant cultural changes of the *fin de siècle*: the transformation and dissolving of the concept of *temperament* into the more pervasive and contaminated concept of *personality*.² This term, obsessively appearing in Wilde's texts from "The Critic as Artist" to *Dorian Gray*, becomes *ipso facto* a protean motif, in constant transformation, at work not only in texts but on the body. Wilde refashions and inverts the whole Victorian tradition of hero-worship by substituting the cult of the hero with that of the aesthetic self, or the artist, who is, of necessity, a liar (the "lost leader" to whom society must, sooner or later return, "the cultured and fascinating liar"³) transforming the artist into the critic, and into the bearer of a new

² N. Kohl, *Oscar Wilde. The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

³ "The Decay of Lying", *The Poems and Essays of Oscar Wilde*, Hamburg, Paris, Bologna, The Albatross, 1935.

style and fashion. And necessarily tainting him, in the metropolitan context, to the point of making him a criminal. *In* and *outside* the text. I am here referring to the (too often underestimated) narrative experiments on the art of fashioning a personality like "Pen, Pencil and Poison" and "The Portrait of Mr. W.H."; to the caricatures by George du Maurier in *Punch*; to the parodies of Gilbert and Sullivan, and to the newspapers of the day, which, shunning photography, used anonymous illustrators to transform into a sensational story the conclusive phases of Wilde's third and decisive trial. It is the art of posing – that gesture named by the Marquess of Queensberry in order to soften the tones of a nasty accusation – which plays a fundamental role in the construction of Wilde's figure: a game slipping off the page and into real life and back again, the confusing of text and body, while forcing both to maintain a dialogue with the critical consciousness of end of the century. This is what posing meant for Wilde: the last metamorphosis of *sprezzatura*, defined by the dictionary as an "attitude of body and mind": a duplicitous gesture that declares the truth by pretending not to say it as if paradox within a discourse could neutralize a statement. The Wildean pose is a gesture of conquest which may be reproduced ad infinitum and decoded in multiple variations. The reading public created by Wilde did not consist only of the actual readers of his work – an indispensable part of his project – but of the entire community surrounding those readers: the people filling the clubs, theatres, and salons, *as well as* the anonymous crowd flowing relentlessly along the streets of the great and new metropolis which emerged at the end of the 19th century. The extremely promiscuous and utterly modern London of those years is one the most revealing phenomena of the *fin de siècle*, the stage on which new deviant figures such as the Aesthete and the New Woman, "twin figures of apocalypse"⁴ exhibited their bodies.⁵ And it was to conquer the totality of such an audience that the author of *Dorian Gray* developed a strategy that would transform him into a public figure over the span of a few years. In this, the art of posing was his most spectacular weapon, as the "change of clothes" after the American tour made explicit in the passage from aesthete

⁴ L. Dowling, "The Decadent and the New Woman", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33, 1979.

⁵ After 1870 London is no longer the city of "upward mobility and transitory impoverishment" and it is seen as "the breeding ground of a subhuman class of permanently pauperized being know as 'the residuum'" (G. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971) Besides, London is the humus of the culture of difference which emerged in those years: race, class, gender are the three main actors on the stage of deviance.

to dandy.⁶ From the suits he wore to the arrangement of his hair, from his choice of colors to the invention of style, the Wildean body, even when rendered indecipherable beneath the dandy's intentionally anonymous costume, retains a highly visible and recognizable power. The sunflower, the green carnation, the fur collar are the immediately visible signs of a complex operation of refashioning the body ("curled and scented, and in costly raiment" as his friend Robert Sherard remembers him⁷) which finds its most exact analogy in the transgression enacted by the written word itself: it is the invention of an audience the constant act of self-ostentation that fashions itself as the tool of conquest, while transforming the aesthete in a dangerous "insider dissident".⁸ Unwittingly, the Marquess of Queensberry, a rotten speller, made no mistake when he squeezed into the same phrase two equally infamous accusations later revealed to be true: "to pose as a thing is as bad as to be it" he wrote to his son Bosie.⁹ This was all that the jury was faced with deciding at the close of the first trial: did Oscar Wilde pose as a sodomite, or not? As we know, their answer rendered the gerund quite superfluous. In the jury's opinion Wilde's pose was actually a form of affectation which indeed emphasized, rather than dissimulating, the true state of affairs. This, we might say, was the final transformation of the concept of temperament inherited from Pater: personality as interpreted in the Wildean macrotext is embodied once again in the act of posing. It is this last fragment of metamorphosis which will hand over the figure of Oscar Wilde to one the great myths of the end of the century, which taking its name from the famous although soon forgotten essay by Max Nordau will be called *degeneration*.

II. DEGENERATION

Written in German in 1892,¹⁰ Nordau's essay was translated and published in England in 1895, just at the peak of the "season" which saw Wilde brought to trial, and the reciprocal impact of

⁶ L. Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: the Artist in his Criticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, and G. Franci, *Il sistema del dandy*, Bologna, Patron, 1977.

⁷ R.H. Sherard, *Oscar Wilde. The Story of an Unhappy Friendship*, Privately Printed, London, The Hermes Press, 1902.

⁸ J. Bristow, *Effeminate England. Homoerotic Writing after 1885*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1995, p. 20.

⁹ In H. Montgomery Hyde, *Famous Trials 7, Oscar Wilde*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962, p. 71.

¹⁰ M. Nordau, *Degeneration (Entartung)*, introd. by G. L. Mosse, Lincoln & London, University of Nebraska Press, 1993.

these two events was enormous. The term "season" is here used deliberately to emphasize the unprecedented, spectacular repercussions of the whole affair: between the second and third trials, *An Ideal Husband* was withdrawn from the Haymarket Theatre, while the playwright's name was struck from the playbill of *The Importance of Being Earnest* – an ironic twist for an author who had built an empire of significance around his name.

The English title for Nordau's essay, *Degeneration*, was most certainly a fortunate choice, as it takes to the extreme a series of considerations, theories, and questions on the state of society and culture which were a pervasive and constant anxiety of late-Victorian consciousness. It was with growing pessimism that the inheritors of Carlyle and Arnold tried to inquire into the nature of the malaise afflicting the culture of the times,¹¹ watching with concern the new and disturbing forms of deviance manifest at the end of the century and those figures who embodied that deviance: figures who though quite marginal would soon assume a major role in the terrible and powerful myth of degeneration. Thanks to Nordau a new anthropological body was born, with its own lexical correspondent. If previously the language knew only the abstract noun, "degeneration", after Nordau people started referring to the new figure of the "degenerate". This shift is important, for it marks a milestone: pathology has become identity, just as the abstract "sodomy" has become the very recognizable "sodomite". After the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, it will no longer be the act but the perpetrator of the act to be punished.¹²

The apocalyptic vision depicted by Nordau would not have had the extraordinary impact it had in England and in other European countries (above all Italy, partly because Nordau dedicated his essay to Lombroso, thus placing it within a philosophical trend which, in the reigning atmosphere of Positivism in Italy, found many followers) had it not voiced so threateningly and clamorously the anxieties rife at the century's close – anxieties which were then rationalized and ordered with the help of science. Darwinian biology combined with the nascent studies of medical psychology to produce new theories regarding the evils afflicting society. The works of Bénédict Augustin Morel and of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck concerning hereditary and transmittable pathologies were read with fascinated interest: the

¹¹ See J. E. Chamberlin, "An Anatomy of Cultural Melancholy", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. XLII, 4, Oct-Dec, 1981.

¹² A. Sinfield, *The Wilde Century. Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, London, Cassell, 1994.

culture of science became a major point of reference for all social and cultural concerns and invaded heretofore unexplored territory. Grant Allen, and especially Havelock Ellis with *Psycopathia Sexualis* (1886) and *The Criminal* (1890)¹³ contributed to divulge the idea that certain forms of deviance, such as homosexuality or criminality, could be explained by obscure hereditary pathologies. The term “degenerate” in itself, exquisitely “scientific” compared to the more anthropological and contiguous term “decadent”, unites two meanings, each of which has rich reverberations within the major concerns of *fin-de-siècle* culture¹⁴: the first looks at physiological deterioration, the other suggests the perverted capacity of a society not to progress but to regress. The more a society progresses, the more it creates and fears mechanisms of return to a previous, more primitive, ancestral, even bestial state. As defined in the OED, degeneration is indeed, “the falling off from ancestral or earlier excellence; declining to a lower or worse stage of being; degradation of nature”: In Stevenson’s words, Mr Hyde is “hardly human – something troglodytic”, and both Kurtz and Moriarty bear hidden traces of their real nature as “high degenerates”. Thus, it is no longer the discourse on the natural aging of the social body which was the great metaphor for decadence: rather the entropy and the diminishing of energy, as Edwin Lankester had explained: “a gradual change of the structure in which the organism becomes adapted to *less* varied and *less* complex conditions of life”.¹⁵ What is repeatedly underlined is, again, the idea of “falling off from ancestral excellence” which, outside the strictly scientific realm of usage in which the term first arose, was soon transformed into the more highly charged image of the “fall from grace”, being the result of a terrible and hereditary pathology through whose signs the disease of the social body and its culture could be read and interpreted. It was a generative metaphor¹⁶ of extraordinary power which contributed to sanction definitively the dominating position of science as culture: a science able to interpret the symptoms of its patient’s illness and, implicitly, regulate its pulse. The divulging of evolutionary biology, the increasing importance of empirical science, the passion for classifying diseases, all this combined to identify de-

¹³ In this last work Havelock Ellis significantly compares Verlaine to the criminal. This chapter was cancelled with the second edition of the book in 1901.

¹⁴ R.K.R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, London, Edward Arnold, 1983.

¹⁵ E.R. Lankester, *Degeneration: a Chapter in Darwinism*, London, Macmillan, 1880, p. 32.

¹⁶ S.G. Gilman, “Political Theory and Degeneration: from Left to Right, from Up to Down”, in J. E. Chamberlin and S. L. Gilman (eds.), *Degeneration. The Dark Side of Progress*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985.

generation as a phenomenon pertaining to medical science which was thus able to rationalize the contradictions of the end of the century, adding a new category to the classification of pathology: a sort of missing – but for us crucial – link. Alongside the criminal and the deviant whose physical degeneration had been studied by Lombroso, late-Victorian consciousness placed for the first time the figure of the genius, the intellectual, and the artist. At the close of the century, a new theory was set forth concerning artistic creation which could be explained as a form of mental degeneration: the artist is a deviant and therefore liable to punishment. The figure of Oscar Wilde surfaces continually in Nordau's essay, creating a short circuit between body and text, between life and word, representing the most powerful sabotage device of late Victorian culture, and presenting the Willean body and corpus as the ultimate bearer of the signs of degeneration. The strong impact that this concept had on the *fin-de-siècle* mind to the point of becoming a powerful myth derived from this premise: degeneration, which is a hereditary factor, transmitted through the nerves of the body (physical or social), lurks in hiding from generation to generation and only through the keenest observation of its signs can the evil be identified. It is not by coincidence that, drawing on the conventions of theatrical melodrama and sensationalist fiction¹⁷, the *fin-de-siècle* imagination sought its narrative forms in the mythologies of the body and of the portrait, in the perfect intersecting of anatomy, anthropology, and physiology, and in the paradigm of transparency/concealment which this allowed both in fiction and in life: the luminosity of Dorian Gray's face/the dark evil concealed by his portrait; the Willean pose/the symptoms it conceals by paradoxically displaying them.

A myth of twilight, a journey towards night starkly contrasting with Arnold's sweetness and light, Nordau's *Degeneration* opens significantly with a chapter entitled "The Dusk of Nations". A myth of concealment, for while the symptoms afflicting the social body are as visible as the sores on a leper's skin, the causes remain hidden. George L. Mosse was right in claiming that Nordau's essay was one of the most important documents of the *fin de siècle*,¹⁸ despite the fact that within a few years it would be completely forgotten. Nordau however left an enduring legacy by introducing the term "degenerate" as an adjective and noun into common English usage.

¹⁷ W. Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994; L. Pikett (ed.), *Reading Fin de Siècle Fictions*, London and New York, Longman, 1996; S. Ledger, "In Darkest England: The Terror of Degeneration in Fin-de-Siècle Britain", *Literature and History*, 4/2 (1995).

¹⁸ See note 2.

His picture of society I have defined here as apocalyptic is actually functional in taking Lombroso's atavism to its extreme conclusion and anchoring forever a visionary interpretation of society to scientific hypothesis. What is even more relevant, in his nearly 600-page discussion of the subject, divided like a scientific treatise into three sections covering symptoms, diagnosis, and etiology, Nordau focuses his analysis on the pathology of artistic creation and gives a nightmarish view of the society of his era. He begins with an attack on fashion, painting a grotesque picture of a cosmopolitan society hideously got up in absurd attire. Men, women, and children all slaves of a shared aberration, of a furious impulse towards imitation which runs through all phases of culture and civilization, leading ultimately to the *dismembering* of the body: "thus we get heads set on shoulders not belonging to them, costumes the elements of which are as disconnected as though they belonged to a dream [...] the impression is that of a masked carnival, where all are in disguises [...] one seems to be moving amongst dummies patched together at haphazard, in a mythical mortuary, from fragments of bodies, heads, trunks, limbs [...] and which the designer, in heedless pell-mell, clothed a random in the garments of all epochs and countries".¹⁹ This same neurosis leads to the senseless accumulation of objects: "The present rage of collecting, the piling up, in dwellings, of aimless bric-a-brac, which does not become any more beautiful or useful by being fondly called bibelots, the irresistible desire among the degenerate to accumulate useless trifles".²⁰ Here Dorian Gray cannot but come to mind, together with his author whose image, body and corpus, seems indeed the figure in the carpet of this reconstruction, even though he is not named explicitly. The passages dealing directly with Wilde appear in the chapter entitled "Ego-mania", where posing is identified as Wilde's distinctive trait. He is taken to task for dressing "in queer costumes which recall partly the fashions of the Middle Ages, partly the rococo modes"; for his "tortuously disdainful prattling", and for his "ego – maniacal recklessness and hysterical longing to make a sensation",²¹ while the essays in *Intention* confirm Nordau's main thesis: society must fear its artists and men of genius just as much as it fears its most dangerous criminals, madmen, and those defined by Lombroso as "mattoidi" – its unhinged misfits.²²

¹⁹ *Degeneration*, p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 319.

²² P. Bade, "Art and Degeneration: Visual Icons of Corruption", in Chamberlin and Gilman, *Degeneration*.

III. THE WILDE BODY: THE TRIALS

With fascinated horror do we read the transcriptions of the three trials which were the consequence of a simple question (i.e.: did Wilde pose as a sodomite or not?) and which rapidly transformed Wilde from the victim of calumny to a convicted criminal and sodomite. Two aspects here deserve our attention. The first is the definitive and official sanctioning of public/private life (with no distinctions drawn between them) as public spectacle and theatrical event. And the trials of Oscar Wilde were pure theatre, with their ritual drama and verbal fencing matches between Wilde and his judges. Dramatic in their suspenseful revealing of a dark secret, mounting to a climax which became a mass event, magnified by the newspapers and pamphlets sold on every street corner. The press leaked out to the public the thorniest phases of the trial followed by a crowd of thousands who chose their hero and their villain, and, becoming public opinion, transformed their villain into an ikon of evil. Oscar Wilde and the Elephant Man: two extreme examples of abnormality and degeneration put on show for late-Victorian masses.²³ But this is no morality play as some have suggested.²⁴ The roles are too ambiguous, or perhaps too complex, to assign an allegorical identity to the players in this drama. Nor can we easily define the central conflict: Art vs. morality? Public vs. private? Transparency vs. Secrecy? The second aspect to underline is the fact that the trial soon became an epistemological exercise which cast into doubt a number of keywords on which the culture of the times was based through the unprecedented gesture of examining not only the man but his texts during the course of his trial: culture as degeneration. It is well known that Wilde, asked to explain his intentions in writing *Dorian Gray*, was forced to testify with two voices, with the voice of the man and that of the author. Art, morality, culture, beauty, sex, these were the subjects at hand, but in the verbal duel between Judge Carson and Wilde it was obvious that they shared no common language: the courtroom became significantly a modern Babel giving voice and body to the anxieties of those years²⁵ the greatest of which is the one which was magni-

²³ For a full account of one of the most interesting cases of late-Victorian sensationalism see M. Howell and P. Ford, *The True History of the Elephant Man*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992.

²⁴ J. McGowan, "From Pater to Wilde to Joyce: Modernist Epiphany and the Soulful Self", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 32, 3, Fall 1990, p. 426.

²⁵ M.S. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde. Deviance, Morality and Late-Victorian Society*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997.

fied by the trial itself, thus encompassing all others. In it Wilde and his degenerate double converge tragically. Dorian Gray and his portrait, the concealing of degeneration and the deceptive transparency through which degeneration is spread and under which it smoulders (the incubation period lasts eighteen years): the body, the face,²⁶ once again as the palimpsest on which the figure writes and rewrites its destiny at the close of the 19th century.

IV. THE WILDE CORPUS: DORIAN GRAY

Just as Lord Queensberry lacked the subtlety to understand the import of that crucial gerund, "posing", Judge Carson could not realize why his ruthless interrogation of the body of Dorian Gray was doomed to fail in its attempt to identify and pin down the deviance which is indeed latent in Wilde's novel. Nor was Wilde aware of how much the novel does subliminally express the myth of degeneration which Nordau helped codify for his times. This raises two interesting points. The first is the definitive collapse of Victorian identity, or of all identity, a theme which echoes continually throughout Dorian Gray in the act of posing. The accent is continually placed on personality as the negation of history or rather on its transformation in the expansion of the Self. "There were times when it appeared to Dorian Gray that the whole of his history was merely the record of his own life, not as he had lived it in act and circumstance, but as his imagination had created for him, as it had been in his brain and in his passions".²⁷ But if personality is a style, as it is in Wilde's project, the surface cannot be distinguished from the depths, the copy from the original, culture from corruption²⁸ ("I have known something of both. It seems terrible to me now that they should ever be found together"²⁹), and the human face becomes the place where the story of a destiny may be recounted *ad infinitum*. As the extremely influential Henry Maudsley wrote in 1895, "Now and then a person may detect in his own face in the looking glass a momentary flash of expression of the sort which he will find formal in the portrait of an ancestor or perhaps of some living relative, near or remote. In the same way silent

²⁶ D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration. A European Disorder*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

²⁷ *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chap. 11.

²⁸ A. Levy, *Reproductive Urges. Popular Novel-Reading, Sexuality, and the English Nation*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

²⁹ *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chap. 19.

memories of strange feeling shall startle and move him. Beneath every face are the latent faces of ancestor, beneath every character their character".³⁰

V. EPILOGUE

One text, then, enters in dialogue with another: the obscure and powerful myth of degeneration is mirrored by the Willean body in all its nuances, and goes even further. Never, of course, would have Wilde agreed with a single word of Nordau's apocalyptic vision of society and its culture. Yet there is a terrible moment when, for just a second, the thoughts of the two men coincide perfectly. That is when Wilde, in chains, writes from prison to the Home Secretary to acknowledge his own "sexual madness" and explaining it as a "disease(s) to be cured by a physician, rather than crimes to be punished by a judge. In the works of eminent men of science such as Lombroso and Nordau [...] this is specially insisted on with reference to the intimate connection between madness and the literary and artistic temperament".³¹ The body as the place of a hidden, invisible sickness which corrupts the brain of the artistic temperament.

During the Spring 1895, one of the many newspapers which wrote lengthy reports on the trials gives us a final glimpse of the fatal losing shape of that famous body: "Wilde seemed to have lost control of his limbs. When at last he turned away, between two warders, he trailed his feet like a man smitten by paralysis, and descended with obvious difficulty the steps leading to the cells".³² Later, Ford Madox Ford will remember Wilde in Paris as "a shabby and incoherent immensity".³³ The body, again. Dismembered and violated by what Nordau would have called "the *fin-de-siècle* mood: the impotent despair of the sick man".³⁴ From its fragments the new figure of the homosexual has finally emerged on the late-Victorian scene.³⁵ The pose is dropped, the circle complete, Nordau has won.

³⁰ *The Pathology of Mind*, London, Macmillan, 1895, p. 71.

³¹ O. Wilde, *Letters*, R. Hart-Davis (ed.), London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962, p. 402.

³² M. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, p. 47.

³³ Ford Madox Ford., *Return to Yesterday*, London, Gollancz, 1931, p. 42.

³⁴ *Degeneration*, p. 3.

³⁵ E. Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, London, Routledge, 1993.