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**THE LAST TESTAMENT OF OSCAR WILDE
- AN APOCRYPHAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Keywords: *postmodernism, parody/pastiche, intertextuality, historicity, historiographic metafiction, apocrypha, authorship.*

Abstract: *The paper explores certain postmodern strategies of revisiting the past deployed in The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde, a fake autobiographical journal. A relevant sample of historiographic metafiction, Peter Ackroyd's rewriting of Wilde's last months of life in Paris not only blurs the formally assumed distinction between historical fact and pure fiction, but also raises further questions regarding authenticity, originality, copyright and authorship.*

Ackroyd's rewriting of Wilde works through de-naturalization and de-doxification of what we assume to be "the canonical Wilde". Writing an apocryphal biography of Wilde is but one of the various techniques that a Postmodernist author can employ in order to express his relation with historical tradition: he reinstalls tradition at the centre of his work only to subvert it. The text also reaffirms the historical value of the apocrypha as they remake the context in which actual events took place.

Written in a parodic mood, The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde is a puzzling intertext in which the recreation of a certain historical context calls into question the very notion of historical knowledge since it challenges both the historians' claim to offer a single reliable version of the past and the concept of genuine historicity.

The one duty we owe to history is to re-write it. (Wilde 203)

Imitation changes, not the impersonator, but the impersonated. (Ackroyd 55)

Oscar Wilde utterly disliked biographies. Even more he disliked biographers, whom he considered to be 'second-hand littérateurs' and 'the body snatchers of literature' ready to fly to the artist's house as soon as he passed away along with the undertaker. In *The Critic as Artist* Wilde concluded bitterly: 'Every great man ... has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography' (195).

Peter Ackroyd, an iconoclast yet acknowledged biographer of the British literary space, must have had Wilde's words in mind when he devised one of the most deceiving samples of autobiographical writing: *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*.

A tessellated text, which recycles previous literary themes as well as literary history, Ackroyd's *Last Testament* displays two main postmodern features: intertextuality and parody or pastiche.

Ackroyd's postmodernism is revealed in the particular construction of his writings, as he ingeniously blends various literary genres, voices and registers, weaving fiction into fact, mixing real and imaginary characters. As they move between fictional and non-fictional narrative conventions, challenging the reader's expectations of the traditional narrative and narrator, most of his writings collapse into baffling literary hybrids. The most representative in this respect are his biographical works in which the historical authenticity is always subservient to the creative imagination.

Rewriting literary history by fictionalizing it into novels has been Ackroyd's major literary device. In *Chatterton*, for instance, he invents a character who in his turn concocts a pseudo-biography of a talented literary forger. *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* marks another turn in biographical writing: in order to express a more personal and original critique of the nineteenth century artist, Ackroyd decides to take on Wilde's multiple personality and to write a diary on his behalf. The result is a puzzling intertext whose status is permanently undermined by the uncertain position of his author.

As Vincent B. Leitch notices, in poststructuralist terms any text is an intertext, i.e. contaminated by previous ones, aiming at the foundation of institutions, unsettling arrangements and conventions. Moreover, 'the chain of poststructuralist thinking puts in doubt standard accounts of context, mimesis and representation, just as it interrogates regnant views of authorship, copyright and signature' (ix).

Ackroyd employs parody for its rich creative potential as well as for its critical implications. 'A nihilist of the imagination' (49), he emphasizes the central role of parody in postmodern writing as he declares in Wilde's voice that 'everything seemed to me like its own parody – [...] almost all the methods and conventions of art and life found their highest expression in parody' (50).

Wilde himself made deft use of parody: in *Salome*, for instance, he rewrote a well-known biblical episode in a decadent key; he likewise assumed the archaic jargon of the Bible in his anti-Christian parables in order to express a more poignant critique to phony ethical values and verbal clichés.

Parody is a device largely employed in postmodern art: its employment is both aesthetically and ideologically motivated. As Linda Hutcheon points out 'postmodernist parody is fundamentally ironic and critical in its relation to the past. It de-doxifies our assumptions about our representation of that past. Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative' (*The Politics* 98).

There is, however, a certain disagreement between literary critics as to the status and role of pastiche in postmodern revisiting of the past.

Fredric Jameson, for instance, makes a neat distinction between parody and pastiche, and while he refers to pastiche as one of the most significant features and practices in postmodernism, he refuses to assimilate it 'to the related verbal phenomenon called parody. Both pastiche and parody involve the imitation or the mimicry of other styles, but [...] parody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation that mocks the original.' (113) He assumes that the moment pastiche appears parody vanishes:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language, but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour. (114)

Ackroyd's *Last Testament* doesn't fully support Jameson's definition of pastiche as blank parody; the sense of humour is out there easily detectable: there is nothing neutral in Ackroyd's mimicking of Wilde's voice or in recounting his life-story: at times the irony is devastating.

On the other hand, Linda Hutcheon contests Jameson's assumption that only unique styles can be parodied; to her, parody is an umbrella term, a by-word for intertextuality.

Parody - often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality - is usually considered central to postmodernism [...]. For artists, the postmodern is said to involve a rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention. [...] But this parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical. [...] through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference. (*The Politics* 93)

Refusing the prevailing interpretation that postmodernism offers a 'value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms' she argues that postmodernist parody is a 'value-problematizing, denaturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations.' (*The Politics* 94)

Imitation is a key word on the agenda of this politics of representations and plays a central role in the novel. It is in subversive relation with both identity and originality, which paradoxically can only be achieved through ever more refined imitative practices.

Postmodern writers, hence, appropriate the past in a way that is both imitative and innovative; Ackroyd's stunning appropriation of Wilde's style is the result of a mimetic technique that can be dubbed as literary ventriloquism. On the one hand he internalizes the nineteenth century writer's linguistic mannerisms and original syntax based on emphatic inversions, on the other he makes use of Wilde's favorite themes and motifs, slightly adjusting them to suit his own purposes. All over the novel he rewrites significant episodes of his character's life in a postmodern key, reinventing stories and historical contexts. Such is the case of *The Happy Prince* whose earthly life is imagined and remade in the fashion of the spin off series which recollect the early years of controversial personages rendered famous in previous films. Ackroyd's impersonation of Wilde is also related to another popular postmodern literary technique – that of a ghost writer hired to produce autobiographical texts on behalf of celebrities.

Creative imitation through impersonation is the main auctorial device employed in the making of the novel. One relevant episode recounts Wilde's dream of being a mask laying on the counter of a shop in Piccadilly. 'Many people came in and tried me upon their faces: I saw myself reflected in the mirrors, a strange white thing, but then they laughed and flung me back upon the counter' (73). In order to recreate Wilde, Peter Ackroyd chooses the most difficult and volatile mask, the verbal mask: he assumes that Wilde saw everything in words, 'for in words he could hide from himself' (37). Hence, the pseudo-biography is a reading in the mirror of a personality continuously constructed and deconstructed through words.

Ackroyd's parodic revisting of Wilde searches legitimization in artistic techniques recommended and employed by his own subject-matter: extensive quoting, deceptive use of masks, paradoxes and scholarly plagiarism. Not only does Ackroyd assume Wilde's lines, but he also takes up his personality and life, stealing into his character's mind and whispering his own words into Wilde's voice. A singular piece of writing which mixes freely literary history and biography, *The Last Testament* comes very close to Wilde's views on the highest type of art criticism:

That is what the highest criticism is, the record of one's soul. It is more fascinating than history, as it is concerned simply with oneself. It is more delightful than philosophy, as its subject is concrete and not abstract, real and not vague. It is the only civilised form of autobiography, as it deals not with events, but with the thoughts of one's life; not with life's physical accidents of deed or circumstance, but with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind. [...] One may appeal from fiction unto fact. But from the soul there is no appeal. (Wilde 206)

Written in a presumptive mood, the *Last Testament* explores deceptive modes of stream-of-consciousness and self-reflexiveness. From a more formal point of view it can also be regarded as pseudepigrapha as its authorship is cunningly attributed to another writer.

As a consequence, the novel is highly problematic in terms of authorship; it is written by Ackroyd but it pretends to be Wilde's; it is a compound text into which two narrative voices split by a century are melted; to put it in a Wildean way, it is not purely Wilde's text, but it is not simply Ackroyd's either. Even the title is utterly misleading: *The Last Testament* implies that there was at least another one preceding it: in fact there was none. Besides, the text has the form of a diary and not that of a testament. The title can be deemed as a mockery to the biblical canon as well as an allusion to religious apocryphal writings, which drew upon the original whilst twisting its message.

Generally considered as second-hand historical or literary documents, apocrypha are writings or statements of questionable authorship or authenticity. Notwithstanding, they may represent a valuable source of historical knowledge as they reconstruct the events of an age from the perspective of another. Apocrypha provide important co-textual information: they rewrite the context in which the original text was produced and show the manner in which the present feeds on the past, recycling old themes, beliefs and values; they also maintain a contradictory relation with the canon which is established amongst and against them.

In this sense, Ackroyd's *Last Testament*, which originally rewrites an episode of the nineteenth century literary history in Wildean jargon, can be regarded as a particular piece of apocryphal writing.

The Last Testament is a text purported to be written by Wilde, under the shape of an imaginary diary spanning the last four months of Oscar Wilde's life in Paris. The first person narrator who speaks in Wilde's voice sets out to forge an apologetic journal in the confessional mode of De Quincey or Saint Augustine. Thus in the first chapter we are offered a possible motivation for the writing of the journal: following an embarrassing encounter with two compatriots who mocked him on account of his inverted sexuality, the first person narrator decides to write an explanatory journal, as an answer for a question yet to be asked: 'Who was Oscar Wilde?' (5)

Highly acclaimed for his talent but stigmatized for his deviant sexual ways, more too often subject to general misunderstanding and various prejudices, he fears he might be ending up as 'the literary equivalent of Boadicea' (51).

The first person narrator presents us with an account of significant moments in Wilde's life: his lonely childhood years, his college and university education, his complex relationships with other artists and men of letters who played an important role in fashioning his style and personality. The chronological memories are interspersed with witty and bitter remarks on his pitiful current condition. The faked autobiography sheds new light on significant events in Wilde's life, as it revisits key moments of his formal education and artistic achievements. Along with his intellectual and artistic development, it records his ever-growing interest in young boys and homosexual practices. His gay inclination is repeatedly underscored throughout the novel from childhood to deathbed; in one chapter concerned with Wilde's childhood memories, the hero recollects the image of a young boy of modest origin whom he had met on his ramblings down the Dublin's

streets : 'I've been searching for that boy all my life' (19). The deceptive narrator manages to give a homoerotic motivation even to Wilde's marriage to Constance when he reports the opinion of Wilde's mother about her: 'she had the figure of a boy' (76); furthermore, he provides us with overt details of Wilde's presumed homoerotic practices, describing his meetings with rentboys in filthy London brothels.

Ackroyd's empathetic rendering of his hero has undoubtedly much to do with their shared literary and gender ways. There are surprising similarities between Peter Ackroyd and Oscar Wilde: both began their literary career by writing poetry but won their fame through prose; both expressed interests in literary forgery and plagiarized freely changing the context – for instance, Chatterton's destiny and faked poems inspired both Wilde and Ackroyd – and, last but not least, they both indulged in homosexual practices.

Ackroyd capitalises on previous biographical writings on Wilde as well on Wilde's texts and concentrates his narrative on the artist's last months in Paris, the city he chose to exile himself after his release from prison, an exile that gradually became estrangement from life. There, in a cheap hotel Wilde is envisaged rummaging through memories of his past and trying to make sense of his broken life. The prevailing tone is one of sorrow and doubt, similar to Wilde's dramatic lamentations in *De Profundis*.

Of all the misfortunes that have befallen him the most tragic seemed to be that he has lost all his powers of imagination; Ackroyd makes us witness the terrible agony of the poet deserted by his muse and who has become a mere spectator of his life: 'The death of an artist such as I am is a fearful thing. Death itself holds no terror for those who have known and understood life, but to lose one's powers as an artist – that is the unendurable punishment' (11-12).

The hero is relentlessly musing on his past glorious life trying to find a satisfactory interpretation for his failure and inability to recover. Admitting to be dependent on his audience's unconditional admiration for his art and artistic persona, he finds himself confronted with a somber perspective: he has become a subject of public disdain and opprobrium, a byword for infamous sexual behavior.

Following his conviction for gross indecency and crimes related to homosexuality Wilde had been stripped of everything that made his identity: his family, his home, his belongings, his country and his audience. He was even forced to give up his real name, Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wills Wilde, a name which seemed to 'bestow power and reality' (3) on the artist; instead he took the pseudonym of Sebastian Melmoth, which is parodically again indicative of two essential aspects of his identity: homosexuality and Irishness. The pseudonym is symbolically derived from Saint Sebastian whose martyrdom has acquired an 'iconic significance' (Leitch 26) to the gay community and Melmoth the Wanderer –the eponymous hero of a novel written by his mother's uncle Charles Mathurin; like Melmoth, Wilde became a pariah of society not because he had committed 'purple, unforgivable sins' (17), but because of his knowledge of the world and his unmasking of its false ideals.

Wilde's artistic development and his exemplary destiny, which like Greek tragedies involved hubris and fall, are properly summed up in the following paragraph:

My career as an artist is complete, and it would be superfluous to attempt to add to it. I went from poetry to prose, and then to drama. And then I went to prison. [...] It was fitting, however that my last published work should be *The Ballad* and that I should end, as I began, with poetry. Like the head of Orpheus, I sang as I floated into oblivion. I began with the song of Apollo, and ended with the cry of Marsyas. (169)

Despite its amazingly mimetic rendering of the nineteenth century writer and a certain historical fairness, the text cannot at any rate be construed in terms of a reliable biography. Nevertheless, it brings an original and significant contribution to both literary history and criticism.

In the *Last Testament* Ackroyd rewrites Wilde according to his own personality. Following Wilde's theoretical considerations on the creative power of criticism which rewrites all art and history, he comes out with a pseudo-biography in which the fictional Wilde feeds on the historical one. The narrative, which employs both literary and historiographic techniques, is a relevant sample of historiographic metafiction.

The Last Testament basically illustrates a more radical position of the postmodern politics of representation, which refuses historicization of the extratextual past and 'its exclusive relegation to the domain of historiography in the name of the autonomy of art' (*A Poetics* 93); by its deliberate ignorance of factual authenticity, Ackroyd's pseudo-biography calls into question not literary history as such, but the historians' claim to offer the single authentic account of the past. Unlike the official biographies based on factual accounts supported by documents and testimonies, the metafictional novel disregards the historical method and provides an internalised biographical record.

A consequence of such a-historical approach is the collapse of genre distinctions, for genres are also historically constructed. The indeterminacy which is the prevailing mood of postmodernism leaves little room for clearly-cut artistic forms and norms. The only respected convention is the break of all conventions.

The invitation to check the imaginary diary against factual information on the subject is pending and calls for extensive knowledge on the subject. The main danger lies in that an unprepared reader, duped by Ackroyd's mastery of the Wildean style, may be tempted to consider as veridical certain events or opinions expressed with faked ingenuity by the first person narrator, especially that there are so many biographical references corroborated by previous writings on Wilde. The amazing mixture of truth and make-believe makes it difficult to distinguish between real and imagined events, between Wilde's self-creation of identity and Ackroyd's reinvention of Wilde's persona via pastiche. For instance, the sense of doom that runs like a red thread throughout Wilde's life is attributed by Ackroyd to the artist's alleged illegitimate descent from an Irish poet and patriot, Smith O'Brien (30).

Ackroyd's recounting of Wilde's passionate relation with Douglas also differs from the version offered by the artist; while in *De Profundis* the writer accused Alfred Douglas of treacherous behaviour and presented him as the main responsible for his misfortune, Ackroyd's Wilde puts forth a different interpretation of their love affair and of its tragic consequences: instead of playing the scapegoat, he admits of being an eager debaucher of young men and voyeurist and confesses to being guilty of Bossie's cynical behaviour as he fashioned the latter into his own image.

But even that image is parodically rendered. Several times in the novel, Ackroyd's Wilde is confronted with instances of his impersonation. During his American tour, he catches an actor, Dowson, dressed in a costume similar to his own, reciting one of his poems. He impersonates Wilde not only onstage but also offstage, as he goes to romantic rendezvous or gambling dens under the artist's name (54-55).

Later on in the novel, the hero-narrator watches the comedian Arthur Faber mimicking him and acknowledges the destabilising effect of parody: 'I saw myself at that instant as others saw me' (117). The paradoxical status of parody, which undermines identity while reaffirming its defining attributes, makes it the proper ideological tool of postmodernism.

Ackroyd's original revisiting of Wilde through parody serves a double purpose: firstly, to take refuge into his subject-matter in order to safely express his own views on Wilde and art and secondly, to escape possible allegations of plagiarism. His clever approach to Wilde's works and life can be at no moment underrated; he even goes so far as to declare under the safe mask of a first person narrator: 'if anyone were foolish enough to write my biography ... there will, in any event, be no royalties' (15). By so doing, he strikes a heavy blow against the whole business into which literature has nowadays turned owing to marketplace laws.

Notwithstanding, Ackroyd's pseudo-biographical approach to Wilde is more than a clever trick employed to dodge violation of intellectual property rights or his hero's despise of the biographers. It raises several epistemological and even ontological problems as it calls into question both the claim of historians to offer the only acceptable versions of the past in terms of authenticity and major philosophical concerns relating to the unity of the subject with itself.

Ackroyd's rewriting of Wilde works through de-naturalization and de-doxification of what we have come to consider as the canonical Wilde. Writing an apocryphal biography of Wilde is but one of the various techniques that Postmodernist writers may employ in order to express their relation with tradition; they reinstall tradition at the core of their works only to fully subvert it. Previous texts and historical events are rewritten according to the new anti-essentialist demands, which cry for the return of the author in the text only to proclaim his death by writing his last testament. Following deconstructive rites, the author acquires the most unstable position: he is no longer the center which spins the story, but rather a by-product of the story. Ackroyd's novel is also a refined illustration of an extreme anti-essentialist position which calls into question the metaphysical categories of subject, identity, essence and permanence. This is

especially due to the ambiguous relation between the author, the narrator and/or protagonist of the *Last Testament*. Ackroyd's mirroring of Wilde reflects, on the one hand, his character's fear of lack of permanence in personality and, on the other, his own anti-essentialist view on the subject, whose historical identity is continuously undermined by means of impersonation. 'I do not know who I am ... Could it be that I, who have written so much about the powers of the personality, do not – after everything which has happened to me – know what my own personality is?' (92) In pure postmodern way, Ackroyd's takes over Wilde's self-constructed myth only to completely debunk it: 'I have discovered the wonderful impersonality of life. I am an effect merely: the meaning of my life exists in the minds of others and no longer in my own.' (2)

As he advances towards the inevitable end, the first person narrator hands down the journal writing to Maurice Gilbert so that the last pages of the diary recollect a double-voiced account of the hero's last moments. The last page records the author's utter detachment from the narrator as he switches from impersonation to the impersonal style of an obituary: 'Mr Wilde died at ten minutes to two p.m. on Friday, November 30.' (185) Death as the most radical and objective reality can never be expressed in the first person.

The expected dénouement offers Ackroyd the best way to take farewell from his personage and brings the novel full circle. The threads of narrative that wove fiction into fact are cut at the very moment that fiction gives way to factual information. In the last paragraph, we can see how fiction and fact are reconciled by death. Wilde once said that 'biography lends to death a new terror' (wilde-online.info); his apocryphal autobiography according to Ackroyd lends a new perspective to literary history and opens up new vistas in postmodern critical revisiting of the past.

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