



Heather Marcovitch

The Art of the Pose

Oscar Wilde's Performance Theory

This book revisits Oscar Wilde's major writings through the field of performance studies. Wilde wrote about performance as a cultural dialectic, as a form of serious and critical play, and as the basis of a subversive poetics. In his studies at Oxford University, his famous lecture tour of the United States and Canada, his friendships with famous actresses Sarah Bernhardt and Lillie Langtry, the writing of his critical essays, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Salome*, and his society comedies, and culminating in his post-prison writings *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde develops a rich theory of performance that addresses aesthetics, ethics, identity and individualism. This book also traces Wilde's often-troubled relationship with late-Victorian society in terms of its attempts to define his public performances by stereotyping him as both irrelevant and dangerous, from the early newspaper caricatures to its later description of him as a sexual monster.

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde and Performance Theory

Oscar Wilde was a man of the theatre. The statement sounds obvious, given his renown as a playwright, but, for Wilde, the theatre was more than just a venue for his plays. His writings, both dramatic and non-dramatic, are full of meditations about the theatre and more specifically about his fascination with acting. During the period in the 1880s when Wilde was a working journalist, he published many theatrical reviews; his acquaintanceships with the famous actors of the time such as Ellen Terry, Modjeska (he translated a poem of hers), Henry Irving, and especially Sarah Bernhardt and Lillie Langtry helped to define his public image when he was beginning his career in London. The doomed Sibyl Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is, of course, an actress, the Canterville Ghost delights in scaring the American tenants of his ancestral home by staging elaborate theatrical tableaux, and his short story 'The Model Millionaire' might not involve an actor, but the title character is a fairly successful impersonator. Among his full-length critical essays is not only his analysis of Shakespearean costume in 'The Truth of Masks' but the telling quote in 'The Portrait of Mr. W.H.' which states that 'all Art [is] to some degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life.'¹

This quote links Wilde's interest in the theatrical world and particularly in the nature of performing to his aesthetics, his forays into decadent and symbolist writing, his Hegelian theories, his

1 Oscar Wilde, 'The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,' in *The Soul of Man under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, ed. Linda Dowling, 31–101 (London: Penguin, 2001), 33.

public image, as well as more obviously his plays. Performance to Wilde is not merely an occasional subject matter, nor a campy mode of expression. Wilde, for all of his entertaining wit, had been interested in the question of performance and its relationship both to concepts of identity and ways of being in the world since he was a university student. It was a fitting concern of his: always the outsider in his world, whether as an Irishman living in England, a middle-class writer friendly with the upper classes, an artist in a Philistine environment, and a gay man who was also married, Wilde was always interested in the way the self could and often needed to be manipulated in order to engage with one's culture. The self, he argued, was neither as authentic nor as integrated as was believed; rather, an individual's identity stems from a series of cultivated performances where moods and influences are absorbed into his or her dress, behaviour, thoughts, and experiences.

The artists and writers of the 1890s were fascinated by performance, both the act and the individuals who excelled at it. This fascination is expressed by poets of the English decadence such as Arthur Symons, whose poems about music halls and their performers caused a sensation, and essayists like Max Beerbohm enthusiastically championing the artificial. Dancers such as Loïe Fuller and Jane Avril were painted by Toulouse-Lautrec, and actors were household names, their cultural importance epitomized in Henry Irving's knighthood in 1895, the first actor ever to be awarded one. In the mid-nineteenth century, the visual arts had men like John Ruskin and Walter Pater articulate a poetics to better appreciate and interpret art; in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, performance had Oscar Wilde. His body of work fuses performance with art, morality and the concept of the self into a theory which accounts for both performance as a mode of action and its more static, existential offshoot, persona. Wilde's writings offer the *fin de siècle* a model for the artists of that period to articulate their ideas of performance.

Performance is the theoretical paradigm which structures Wilde's writing, and its development can be traced through a chronological look at his works. He is influenced by a wide range of philosophers, scientists, and sages, such as John Ruskin and Walter Pater, and especially by Pater's Preface and notorious Conclusion to *The Renaissance*. Pater's emphasis on the value of increasing one's experiences and the importance of developing one's personality in order to heighten these experiences was refined by Wilde into the idea of developing one's personality in order to give a better performance so as to engage more fully with the world. In fact, for Wilde the performance and the self are inseparable; seeing a performance as the art of the self, he argues in his writings that through this seemingly artificial mode of being one can paradoxically lead a more authentic life. One can also, following Ruskin, achieve that element of greatness which Ruskin believes is a manifestation of the divine in mundane existence. Ruskin states that greatness in art is that 'which conveys to the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas.'² Substitute the paintings Ruskin has in mind with the human being whose everyday behaviour can be refined into a work of art, and one finds the seed of Wilde's conception of performance. It is not merely an artificial form of play but a method by which one introduces great ideas into one's culture.

Although the idea of what is in part the performance of everyday life is not new (one can only look to Shakespeare's dramas to see this notion in play), what Wilde was doing was providing the examples from which modern performance theorists later drew on to elucidate the field of performance studies, mostly a mixture of phenomenology, theatre studies and anthropological work, although it has in recent years embraced theoretical work from other disciplines. Wilde's work is nascent performance theory, slightly

2 John Ruskin, *The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John D. Rosenberg (New York: George Brazillier, 1963), 22.

predating the early work in this field done by Russian acting teachers like Konstantin Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov. Wilde's work also resonates with writers who do not reference him directly, such as sociologist Erving Goffman in his important work *The Performance of Everyday Life* and Richard Schechner's seminal work on theorizing performance, as well as with performance theorists such as Marvin Carlson who use Wilde as an example of the complexities in a performance of everyday life. For all of these writers, and for Wilde as well, performance is not simply a prescribed way of behaving under certain theatrical conditions, nor is it merely a self-conscious awareness of one's own everyday behaviour. Performance is a discursive field where notions of identity, art, culture and social relations are interrogated and through which one becomes an active participant in one's culture.

Wilde is interested in the poetics of performance and indeed devotes a large part of his writings to elaborating upon what transforms the self into a performance and thereby into a work of art. In this, he follows Pater's contention that experience 'is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us'.³ Wilde believes that all people are essentially egoists and that the development of one's performance is not only crucial to understanding the self, but is the only way to prevent egoism from deteriorating into solipsism. This is why, for Wilde, the development of the performing self is the development of the critical spirit that both Pater and Matthew Arnold insist is a necessary component of existing within modern culture. In 'The Critic as Artist,' Gilbert says:

It seems to me that with the development of the critical spirit we shall be able to realise, not merely our own lives, but the collective life of the race, and so

3 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry. The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 187.

to make ourselves absolutely modern, in the true meaning of the word modernity.⁴

To perform the self, one must develop a critical awareness of oneself and, through that, a critical awareness of one's culture and society. For Wilde then what is equally important to becoming aware of oneself as potentially art is an understanding of the mechanisms and limitations involved in cultivating oneself in this fashion.

The poetics of the performance of the self, according to Wilde, are disarmingly simple: assume and always be conscious of one's inherent fragmentary nature, cultivate each fragment to the best of its artistic possibilities, and do so under the rubric of a secular morality that stresses compassion and community with others. Above all, never succumb to the cheap stereotypes that a commodity culture utilizes voraciously in order to create marketable images. In other words, the self as work of art should strive to be unique and deeply felt, rather than, cynically or weakly, be a pale copy of another's performance. The latter dictum is one that especially concerned Wilde. In his early writing career, he had to contend with both the British and the American periodicals' cruel caricatures of both his public image and his pronouncements on aesthetics. The Victorian periodical press becomes a bit of a monolithic antagonist to Wilde, despite the appearance of sympathetic reviews and articles and despite Wilde's own work as a newspaper writer. (My use of the term 'the press' refers to the many conservative publications that seemed nearly united in their disapprobation of Wilde.)

In his later writings, he warned of the danger of relinquishing control of one's performance, both to the integrity of the self and of society as a whole. An individual performance shaped and realized by that individual does more than develop the self; it also challenges

4 Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist,' in *The Soul of Man under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, ed. Linda Dowling, 213–279 (London: Penguin, 2001), 254.

society's pressure on individuals to conform to an already-established social type. Because Wilde sees the potential for subversion in performance (and, in 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' even suggests its revolutionary possibilities), he is also aware of the potential harm it can do if not cultivated with care, and his writings of the 1890s are concerned with just that.

Wilde's work on performance goes by different names: realizing the self, cultivating one's personality, developing the critical spirit. All of these terms are interconnected, all recur throughout his writings, and all have traditionally been linked with Wilde's own status as a celebrity in late-Victorian culture – and even beyond, for writers looking back at the period, such as Richard le Gallienne, note that the 1890s was a decade where it seemed as if anyone who had any personal connection to a celebrity claimed that status for themselves. Le Gallienne writes (without including himself in this criticism, apparently): 'There was a vulgar exploitation of minor personalities. The era of the engineered boom was beginning, and one had a feeling that men were getting "famous" too quickly.'⁵ Osbert Burdett, looking back on the end of the nineteenth century, writes that 'the typical attitude . . . was one of preoccupation with the public, a public no less courted than despised.'⁶ Burdett is referring to the 1890s as well (and to Whistler in particular), but it is worth noting that Wilde was not only one of the most notable celebrities of this time but that he anticipated the preoccupation with celebrity in the 1890s by using his own celebrity as a dialectic in the previous decades. While still a student at Oxford, Wilde's remarks were picked up by a London periodical; as a minor celebrity in London, his picture was on collectible postcards, his image was used to sell items as different as ice cream and cigars, and he was the

5 Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (New York: Doubleday Page, 1926), 13.

6 Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period: An Essay in Perspective* (London: Bodley Head, 1925), 7–8.

subject of a celebrity impersonator who was a fixture in the music halls. In a more satirical light, his image was not only the subject of countless caricatures, but also helped to sell satirical songsheets so that the songs could be learned and played in the home. Regenia Gagnier and the scholars who have followed her have already noted that, rather than eschewing this commodification of his public image, Wilde was an active participant in his own self-marketing; as a result, Gagnier argues, one needs to reread Wilde's work in light of the commodity culture he was engaging in.⁷ I do not dispute this way of reading Wilde, but what I mean to argue in this study is that Wilde's relationship to performance involves a dialectic (which at times lays itself bare as a tense struggle) between performing within a commodity culture which did reward Wilde financially and eventually with a literary reputation and his work on performance as a structural paradigm which Wilde believed ought to subvert that same culture. In addition, Wilde's work on performance has been underexamined and this has been an oversight in the field.

What is needed is to position Wilde as an early writer of performance theory and thereby to extend performance theory into literary studies, with which it currently has more of a tangential relationship. Modern performance studies, such as the work that has been done by theatre scholars and directors like Richard Schechner and anthropologists like Victor Turner, assumes a link between modern theatrical performances and the performance-based rituals of tribal cultures. These writers posit that performance is the method by which individuals become social beings; in modern performances, it also serves as an expression for normally-unarticulated anxieties about one's existence as a social being. Performance is distinguished from the performative, that term that has replaced sociologist Erving Goffman's phrase 'the performance of everyday

7 See Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

life' by the awareness of the theatricality in one's behaviour; the performative, however, is an aspect of performance and sometimes the distinction between the two terms is blurred.⁸

According to Schechner, performance originally involved the transmission of certain culturally-accepted codes, such as in the ritualized performances of shamans or in the performance of religious ceremonies. Schechner claims that it was the Ancient Greeks who first separated performance from a direct signifier of its culture to a more abstract symbol. 'Historically speaking, in the West,' he argues, 'drama detached itself from doing. Communication replaced manifestation.'⁹ Instead of a performance enacting the exchange of goods (meat, for instance) between houses, it would symbolize either the idea of exchange or, with the advent of modern drama in the late nineteenth century, the emotional or psychological impact of the exchange. Schechner writes:

This convergence of symbolic and actual event [present in the exchange of a good] is missing from aesthetic theatre. We have sought for it by trying to make the performer 'responsible' or 'visible' in and for his performance – either through psychodramatic techniques or other psychological means.¹⁰

Schechner locates the performer as the vehicle through which the participants (both performers and audience members) try to recover the loss of the original signified of the performance, that concrete meaning which was obscured when performance became symbolic. This argument is echoed by Bert States in reference to modern drama. States sees what he calls a 'double consciousness' in a per-

8 Both J.L. Austin's work on performative speech and Judith Butler's work on the performative in gender behaviour are examples of the overlap between the performative and performance.

9 Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory 1970–1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), 38.

10 Ibid., 73.

formance; in an effective performance, one sees the mechanisms utilized by the actor even as one suspends one's disbelief in order to appreciate the drama being performed. For States, the performer is never 'lost' within a role, but he or she provides, through the use of his or her body, an additional text to be read into the performance. This way of seeing the performer is a method that dates back to the early twentieth century where, according to Philip Auslander,

Theorists as diverse as Stanislavski, Brecht, and Grotowski all implicitly designate the actor's self as the *logos* of performance, all assume that the actor's self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths.¹¹

States argues that a dramatic performance is motivated by a kind of theatrical shorthand, where characters represent easily-identifiable concepts that stand in for the purported complexities of the characters. 'Even a character as philosophical as Hamlet,' States writes,

can hardly be called a profound thinker on the evidence of his thoughts. Any one of them might serve as the epigraph for an entire philosophy of existence or ethical responsibility, but we never catch him tracking an idea that does not cast his whole being (and hence the actor's) into a visible attitude. In short, philosophy, in the theater, must unfold itself, literally, as a thinking of the body.¹²

Performance therefore is comprised of a dynamic relationship between text and body, the body becoming a sign to the public which economically substitutes for the entire personality. This *persona* is the self as bodily text or, as Auslander puts it, 'a textual entity generated

11 Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 30.

12 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 133.

by the performance context.’¹³ The persona is an integral part of Wilde’s writings about performance and serves as the point where Wilde’s writings are refracted and doubled by his own performances, from the aesthete to the sophisticate to the social outcast, bearing strong similarities to States’ description of a theatrical shorthand. In fact, Wilde’s various personae form images so resonant with both the Victorian and our contemporary public that one reads his works always having an additional character, ‘Oscar Wilde,’ as an integral part of the text.

But while performance involves negotiating between text and body, or between self and persona, it obviously does not take place without the presence of some sort of audience. This not only marks performance as social but also marks its extension beyond a narcissistic obsession with ways of portraying oneself. If Schechner argues that modern performance is a distilled version of older ritualistic behaviours, Victor Turner sees culture as a series of different, competing performances, often operating in antagonistic relationships to each other. Turner recognizes two types of performances within cultures: the performance which reinforces the social hierarchy (which he refers to as ‘structure’), and the performance of individuals marginalized by the same hierarchy (referred to as *communitas*). Structure, according to Turner, distances individuals from each other by locking them into statuses and roles and what he also refers to as personae, in this case ‘the role-mask, not the unique individual.’¹⁴ For Turner, the history of cultures can be read as an ongoing tension between structure and *communitas*, which he defines as being essentially an iconoclastic, subversive performance. ‘*Communitas*,’ he writes, ‘does not merge identities; it liberates them

13 Auslander, *From Acting to Performance*, 44.

14 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 237.

from conformity to general norms.¹⁵ Within this tension, though, Turner sees communication and change as possible through movement which will eventually see the subversive become the normative. His term *liminality* describes a state which he marks as a transition between the anti-structure of *communitas* and the structure of the social norm and the accompanying ‘liminal’ figures – people, such as artists or performers, who are able to move between the two groups.¹⁶

Turner’s model for social behaviour is strikingly similar to one that Wilde uses in his writings. Calling himself an iconoclast and embedding sharp social criticisms in his writings, even his aesthetic ones, Wilde partly champions performance as a way of developing an idea of *communitas* among marginalized individuals. A unique and personal performance, in his view, opens up a social space that has the potential to subvert the social stereotypes and the norms that inform them. It is a fairly easy move for Wilde to make, since, as Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick point out, ‘the performative has . . . been from its inception already infected with queerness.’¹⁷ A performance, recognized as being an artificial mode of behaviour, calls attention to the artificiality involved in behaving according to social norms and the subversive potential that shadows every norm, a point Wilde gleefully makes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*; exchanging these performances with other individuals can lead to the development of a subculture. Wilde’s extension of performance into *communitas* produced some interesting results, from the American playwright Clyde Fitch who enthusiastically proclaimed his belief in the existence of Willie Hughes, the fictional character in ‘The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,’ to the reports of the group

15 Ibid., 274.

16 Ibid., 273.

17 Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Introduction to *Performativity and Performance*,’ in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial, 167–174 (New York Routledge: 2004), 169.

of young men who attended the premiere of *Lady Windermere's Fan* sporting green carnations in their buttonholes, to Wilde's final poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which forms *communitas* out of a group of outcast prisoners through their witnessing the performance of a man condemned to die.

Thus performance, far from being strictly a solipsistic act, is the realization that one's self is always already constructed through one's relationship to others. It is the self not necessarily constructed inside the boundaries of social laws, but one which, through its relationship to other distinct performances, creates identities which can use their alterity as a way of challenging or subverting the social order. Jonathan Dollimore sees this move as being essentially transgressive insofar as a performance is inseparable from subversive or deviant desires and, as a result, 'actually decentres or disperses the self' – in this case, into different performances.¹⁸ In the cultivation of performance, one is looking outward from oneself, so to speak, but one also has an external perspective, seeing one's performance in the context of other performances. It is at the juncture of these two perspectives from which Wilde writes.

This book charts the development of Wilde's theories of performance and its more aesthetically-based variant, the persona. For Wilde, performance and persona are intertwined and he often describes an individual's persona – the image of the self put forth to the public – as the most fundamental type of performance. Wilde's work on persona, with its connections to image and identity, resonates with the psychoanalytic approaches to the self that began to gain some currency in the *fin de siècle*. His work may predate most of Freud's major writings, but he too is aware of the pleasurable and anxiety-ridden forces that govern the self and he sees a persona as created out of the tension between these forces. Whereas his earlier

18 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 14.

work is concerned with developing the concepts of performance and persona as largely positivist methods of engaging with the world, his work of the 1890s shows a clear anxiety about the potential destructiveness of an unmediated persona.

A note on the terminology in this book: *Persona* is a word I use frequently in this study to refer to Wilde's theories; it is not Wilde's term, as he prefers to use the term *personality* in his critical essays. But in my view, the word *persona* emphasizes the connections to both Wilde's aesthetics and to performance. It stresses that self-conscious detachment that Wilde believes is necessary for the development of the self. And unlike the word *personality*, *persona* does not imply any given correlation between public performance and the interior self. In fact, since Wilde was a Hegelian thinker in many ways, the relationship between public and private selves is contested in his writings.¹⁹ For Wilde, a person is not born a performer but always has the potential to become one; each work of art, as well, is not necessarily a performance, but also has this potential. In this book, I use *performance* when referring to more active behaviour and *persona* when referring to the image the individual projects without any corresponding action on his or her part.

Wilde's own public performances gesture towards dissolving the boundaries between performer and spectator. If his aim is to influence people into a more aesthetic performance of their everyday lives, he is also looking towards creating *communitas* or what Schechner calls the 'community of participants' that he believes is the key to 'environmental theatre,' a performance which exceeds the boundaries of the traditional stage.²⁰ Wilde becomes an actor when

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- 19 For discussions of Hegel's influence on Wilde, see Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand's introduction to *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 19.
- 20 Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater*, 2nd ed. (New York: Applause, 1994), 245.