

Critical Fallibilism in Oscar Wilde: Karl Popper anticipated?¹

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Abstract

It is argued that Oscar Wilde in many ways anticipated important premises of Karl Popper's critical rationalism. Since Wilde developed his ideas so playfully and exuberantly, their epistemological significance and modernity have in general been overlooked. The first section of the article outlines a central assumption of critical rationalism: the impossibility of verifying theories and the fallibility of all inquiry. It is shown that such a view is prefigured in Wilde's epigrams, in his essay *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, and in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The last section elucidates the reasons for these strange analogies between two such vastly dissimilar personalities such as Wilde and Popper. Both are indebted to Kantian philosophy which in this context constitutes a lowest common denominator of epistemological thought. Apart from these diachronic links, Wilde's epistemological ideas coincide with overall developments in philosophy and literature at the turn of the 20th century: e.g. Hans Vaihinger, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the American Pragmatists (William James and John Dewey). It will become apparent that the elements of critical rationalism in Wilde's epistemological beliefs are far from being arbitrary, accidental or segregated fragments – they are in fact variants of a comprehensive history of an idea.

The search for truth often appears as a specifically human, if not existential concern, a privileged property of human nature in its anxiety to rely on intellectual certainties. Truth occasions an enormous degree of psychological pleasure which Francis Bacon (1561-1626) compared with an erotic act. Drawing on an imagery of overflowing delight, Bacon characterizes "the inquiry of truth" as a form of "love-making or wooing." The advancement of truth is portrayed as a series of amatory advances that bring about further stages of joy, "the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it." All this, concludes Bacon, "is the sovereign good of human nature."² Such a view is critically reflected, indeed, ridiculed in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Truth may turn out to be a mere bundle of opinions, a

¹The article that follows is a summary of chapter three in my book *Sinnhafte Fiktion und Wahrheit: Untersuchungen zur ästhetischen und epistemologischen Problematik des Fiktionsbegriffs im Kontext europäischer Ideen- und englischer Literaturgeschichte* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994). I am indebted to Sujata Banerjee and Bruce Allen for suggestions, corrections, and proof-reading. Thank you!

²"Of Truth," *The Works of Francis Bacon*, eds. James Spedding et al. (London: Longman, 1857-1874) vol. 6: 378.

possibility already indicated in the novel's full title: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. On the other hand, untenable opinions are often represented as absolute truths, defended and fortified with radical, fanatical, and unconditional fervour. What Bacon confidently establishes as the advancement of objective truth, Sterne critically depicts as the stubborn defence of *idées fixes*:

He picked up an opinion, Sir, as a man in a state of nature picks up an apple. – It becomes his own, – and if he is a man of spirit, he would lose his life rather than give it up [...] would intrench and fortify [it] [...] as my uncle Toby would a citadel.³

A basic attitude becomes apparent which is not only confined to ridiculous characters in comic novels. In the context of science, particularly those sciences relying on the assumptions of Baconian empiricism,⁴ this attitude has promoted a corresponding methodology, the idea of verification. This mode of inquiry meets the desire for certainties and promises to deliver "the truth" quickly and comfortably. It assumes that theories can be represented as "true" if confirmed by observations and experiments. According to Karl Popper (1902-1994),⁵ two predicaments arise from such a presupposition. To begin with, any theory, no matter how absurd its propositions may appear, can be partially and selectively related to some sort of affirmative data. This could even apply to sexist statements, such as "men are more intelligent than women." There will always be individual examples appearing to "verify" such a suggestion. While this already discredits the idea of verification, a further problem reveals its sheer impossibility. Strictly speaking, a theory can only then claim to be verified if it agrees with all conceivable data on a spatial and chronological axis. A complete verification of a proposition would require its empirical correspondence to all places of the world at a given moment. Furthermore, we would need to investigate the past: centuries, years, days? – only the past or also the future? – where or when should one begin, where or when should one stop? The infinite efforts needed to meet the high-sounding claims of verification, in the final analysis, subvert its feasibility. Theories can never really be verified. They can, however, be falsified. It is, indeed, possible (and likely) to find items that contradict the propositions of a theory. Instead of fortifying our knowledge by endlessly accumulating

³Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, ed. Graham Petrie (London: Penguin, 1967; Penguin Classics, 1985) 228-229.

⁴According to Karl Popper, the "birth of modern science and modern technology was inspired by this optimistic epistemology whose main spokesmen were Bacon and Descartes." Cf. Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1963; rpt. 1972) 5.

⁵Cf. Karl Popper, *Logik der Forschung* (Wien: Springer, 1934; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, ⁸1984). See also Bryan Magee, *Karl Popper* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1986) 13-33.

confirmatory data, the idea of falsification is critically on the lookout for potential refutations. Far from being destructive, falsification advances our theoretical knowledge, for even a small number of refutations forces us to reconsider a given theory. Even if a theory passes all conceivable tests, it cannot pass as the truth. At the very most, it is a successful, but provisional approach to the truth. It can, at any time, be overcome, if not contradicted outright, by completely new views of reality, just as Newton's system was superseded by Einstein's theory of relativity. The recognition of this critical process of "conjectures and refutations" can best be summarised by the term "critical fallibilism" or "radical fallibilism,"⁶ signifying the acceptance of the inherent fallibility of human knowledge: "die Anerkennung der Fehlbarkeit alles menschlichen Wissens."⁷

Popper's fallibilism not only constitutes a new "logic of scientific discovery," but also promotes a concomitant psychological attitude, the readiness to treat the theories of others, and our own theories, only as provisional stages of inquiry eventually to be replaced by new models of reality. This implies learning new ways to cope with errors. Erring usually engenders profound anxieties of threat and punishment. It is often believed that being proven wrong is fatal for a scientist, as if the elimination of false theories would result in the elimination of the persons maintaining them (an assumption very much fostered by our educational system). With the acceptance of fallibilism as an inevitable *conditio sine qua non* and *condition humaine*, such anxieties give way to an attitude of unfearing curiosity. Refuted theories emerge less as a disaster than as a chance to embark on new scientific adventures. The constructive and critical process of "conjectures and refutations" promotes the advance of knowledge, rather than the immunization of existing theories against critical scrutiny.

Popper's critical rationalism is, still today, a highly relevant and up-to-date philosophy of science. It is, however, not as novel as one commonly believes. This particularly applies to the critical fallibilism outlined above. Such an attitude was already prefigured, if not prepared, by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and others a hundred years ago. Critics have acknowledged Wilde's modernity with regard to many present-day movements, particularly in connection with poststructuralism.⁸ According to Terry Eagleton, "such theory, for all its excited air of novelty,

⁶Lothar Schäfer, *Karl R. Popper* (München: Beck, 1988) 28.

⁷Karl Popper, "Über Wissen und Nichtwissen," in: *Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt: Vorträge und Aufsätze aus dreißig Jahren* (München, Zürich: Piper, 1984) 44.

⁸See, for example, Jonathan Dollimore, "Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide," *Textual Practice* 1 (1987): 48-67.

represents [...] little advance on the *fin de siècle*,"⁹ and it is especially Wilde who (apart from Nietzsche, another 19th-century giant currently regarded as a patron of deconstruction)¹⁰ in many ways foreshadows central premises of poststructuralist theory. Similar elective affinities can be observed in relation to Popper – though, at first sight, both seem to have little in common. Popper's critical rationalism is usually regarded as the essence of science: logical, objective, and committed to truth; whereas Wilde is commonly viewed as an eccentric writer: paradoxical, playful, often inconsequential and incongruous in his modes of thought; above all, committed to art rather than science. A closer look, however, reveals a highly meaningful epistemological potential in Wilde's work, both in his essays and plays, anticipating important premises of Popper's philosophy of science. As these prefigurations occur in a literary context, that is, in a fictitious medium, and as they are – particularly in Wilde's case – expressed most imaginatively and playfully, they tend to be overlooked, although they constitute a highly significant structure in his work. Literature and epistemology are closely connected in Wilde – they enable and condition each other. The dramaticity of his plays is very much occasioned by epistemological games. On the other hand, the epistemology in his essays is expressed in dramatic terms and contains a highly dramatic potential.

Nor is Wilde an isolated case. It will be shown that similar ideas recur towards the turn of the 19th century in general, both in literature and in philosophy, and not only in Britain but also in Continental Europe and America too. These parallels are not fortuitous, nor are the points of convergence between Wilde and Popper. They can be explained against a common background of Kantian philosophy that influenced not only Popper and Wilde.

1. Wilde's Critique of Monistic Notions of Truth

Wilde frequently discussed the concept of truth, and, in so doing, he repeatedly questioned the univocal notions commonly associated with that concept: its alleged explicitness, supremacy and universality. The following passage from *The Critic as Artist* demonstrates Wilde's aversion to

⁹Terry Eagleton, *Saint Oscar*, Preface (Derry: Field Day, 1989) vii.

¹⁰Cf. J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," in: Harold Bloom et. al., eds., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 217-253; 229.

such a monistic understanding of truth. "For what is Truth?", Gilbert disrespectfully asks his friend, a rhetorical question which he answers for himself: "In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art it is one's last mood."¹¹ The universal term "truth" (capitalized by Wilde) disintegrates into lesser terms, such as "opinion," "sensation," and "mood," all of them debunking the high value of truth and diminishing it in conceptual scope and significance. The totality of truth is revealed as a fragmentary, even a contradictory affair. As with so many of Wilde's epigrams and *bon mots*, the above passage is the inversion of a collective habit: the practice of representing our ideas, views and opinions as the truth, the anxiety to verify them, and this in the original sense of the word, *veritatem facere*. This coincides with another attitude criticized by Wilde. It is the tendency to judge our "intellectual products" according to their truth-value, provability and verifiability, to force them into rigid patterns of scientific reasoning and, finally, to either declare them to be absolute "truths" or to reject them on grounds of their "fallacy." Thus, lively ideas undergo a process of reification, that is, they turn into petrified facts and immutable commonplaces. This leads to a further criticism expressed in Wilde's work. Commonplaces are constituted by majority views. It is often suggested that these views are true because many people believe in them. Wilde also turns this topos on its head: "A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it."¹² While this inversion is as untenable as its popular antithesis, it does show Wilde's abiding dislike of all those instances conspiring to the stagnation and ossification of creative knowledge: public opinion, verified facts, closed reasonings, proven certainties. At variance with Bacon, Wilde does not value firmly established "truths" as a source of pleasure but, on the contrary, considers them as the graveyard of human understanding. "Religions die when they are proved to be true. Science is the record of dead religions."¹³ It is characteristic of Wilde to compare intellectual securities and certainties with death, while regarding sceptical doubt as a lively activity: "To believe is very dull. To doubt is intensely engrossing. To be on the alert is to live. To be lulled into security is to die."¹⁴

¹¹*The Critic as Artist, Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. G.F. Maine (London, Glasgow: Collins, 1966; rpt. 1991) 1047.

¹²"Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," *Complete Works*, 1205.

¹³*Ibid.*, 1205.

¹⁴Leslie Frewin, *The Importance of Being Oscar: The Life and Wit of Oscar Wilde* (London: Allen, 1987) 47.

The intellectual attitudes outlined so far in many ways follow the epistemological views of Wilde's Oxford mentor, Walter Pater (1839-1894). For him, too, human understanding no less than scientific discovery is a highly relative, tentative, inconclusive process. The transitoriness, diversity and inconsistency of understanding cannot, for Pater, be integrated into a definite concept of truth. Thus, it is impossible "to arrest every object in an eternal outline, to fix thought in a necessary formula, and the varieties of life in a classification by 'kinds', or genera."¹⁵ Nevertheless, philosophers have attempted to reduce the complexities inside and outside the human mind to clear-cut essences; as an example Pater cites the epistemological writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). Once again, the definition of truth centres upon notions of certainty and totality. "We are," Coleridge states, "to seek [...] for some absolute truth."¹⁶

It is to be found [...] neither in object or subject taken separately, and consequently [...] must be found in that which is neither subject nor object exclusively, but which is the identity of both.¹⁷

The nomenclature is symptomatic, particularly the word "identity"¹⁸ which recurs throughout Coleridge's definition of truth: the identity of subject and object, being and knowledge, idea and reality. On the other hand, this longing for unity and totality springs from a profound anxiety over the fragmentary, the doubtful, the equivocal, the paradoxical – everything that cannot be decided or arrested. Pater arrives at opposite conclusions. Indeed, our impressions of the world are "unstable, flickering, inconsistent," in short, a "whirlpool."¹⁹ However, this recognition no longer causes uneasiness. Rather it is taken as an inevitable, yet promising and rewarding mode of coping with the world.

Similar attitudes emerge in Oscar Wilde. Human understanding he regards as an inevitably provisional and paradoxical process, and that in two ways: paradoxical in the original sense of the word, *pará dóxa*, i.e. contradicting existing opinions; but paradoxical, too, in the sense of self-

¹⁵Walter Pater, *Appreciations, Library Edition of The Works of Walter Pater*, (London: MacMillan, 1910) vol. 5: 66. Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *Walter Pater: Die Autonomie des Ästhetischen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1960).

¹⁶Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, in: *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) vol. 7: 268.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 272-275. See also Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies: Hegel & Marx* (London, Henley: Routledge, 1945; ⁹1980) vol. 2: 40-42. Referring to Hegel, Popper characterizes this equation of "Ideal=Real," "Idea=Reason," "Real=Reason" as "philosophy of identity." According to Popper, these intellectual totalities contributed to the rise of totalitarian thought.

¹⁹Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, "Conclusion" (London: Macmillan, 1925) 234-235.

contradiction, of the contradictoriness of reality and reality models, including that of the human mind. The following epigram pin-points this double meaning: "The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves."²⁰ Contradicting oneself and contradicting others obviously contains a fallibilistic potential, in other words, cheerfully admitting our own fallibility and that of others, which brings us to a further characteristic of Wilde's life and work: his playfulness, his liking for games (intellectual, social and dramatic), his playing-around with mistaken identities and realities, both in his drama and in the drama of his life. This conjunction of playful paradoxes, intellectual games, and fallibilistic musings recurs throughout his dramatic work and in his essays, particularly in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*,²¹ an essay said to "anticipate Borges."²² One could equally argue that *The Portrait* is even more an *exemplum* of Popper's critical fallibilism.

2. Against Verification: *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*

The Portrait of Mr. W.H. (1889) goes beyond the dialogic composition of Wilde's other essays. It is organized and mediated by a personal, but anonymous narrator. This is established right at the outset: "I had been dining..."²³ The question arises, why *The Portrait* is commonly classed as an essay at all (e.g. in the *Complete Works*), for its narrative and fictitious structure makes it rather a story than an essay. This is significant, as Wilde had originally intended to develop his theory of Shakespeare's attraction to boys in a scholarly mode, but obviously paid attention to the warnings of Frank Harris and transmuted his theory into a narrative.²⁴ Had he not done so, Wilde would have written an "ordinary" scholarly article. He would have addressed us in his own voice, most probably an opinionated one: stating, demonstrating, verifying a theory, and, in so doing, authoritatively dismissing doubt and criticism. Paradoxically, as the narrative form of *The Portrait*

²⁰"Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," *Complete Works*, 1205.

²¹A lucid discussion of the paradoxes in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* can be found in Ria Omasreiter, *Oscar Wilde: Epigone, Ästhet und wit* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1978) 16-22.

²²Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988) 280.

²³*The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, *Complete Works*, 1150. All further quotations are taken from this edition and will be indicated in the text.

²⁴Cf. R. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 279-280.

displays, critical fallibilism is at its apogee where it is least expected: in the equivocal and fictitious modes of literature rather than in realm of science itself.

The Portrait is the story of three persons who examine a question related to the literary past and human identity: the addressee of William Shakespeare's sonnets. The narrator, initially, holds the established view that the poems were dedicated to Lord Pembroke. Thereupon his friend, Erskine, relates to him the theory of a dead friend, Cyril Graham. According to this theory, Shakespeare had addressed his sonnets to a young actor called Willie Hughes. Erskine himself does not believe in this theory. Thus, he represents it in a detached and sceptical way, far from wishing to convince or to convert his friend. "As I don't believe in the theory," he says, "I am not likely to convert you to it." Nevertheless, it "may interest you" [1152]. He then outlines the basic assumptions and propositions of the theory, before altogether rejecting it as a bizarre fiction – all the more because his dead friend had based his argument on a forged portrait, the portrait of Mr. W.H., in order to prove the existence of Shakespeare's actor. Cyril therefore appears as a deceiver whose theory deserves no further consideration and discussion. The prospect and process of gaining new knowledge seems to be over: "it is a perfectly unsound theory from beginning to end" [1160]. Nevertheless, without intending it, Erskine's account not only arouses the narrator's curiosity, but actually convinces him of the truth of Cyril's theory. The second part of *The Portrait* reports the narrator's efforts at reconsidering the theory, basing it upon new findings. After several weeks of thorough research, he summarizes his results in a letter which he describes as a "passionate reiteration of the arguments and proofs" of his studies, determined that this will "make a strong appeal to Erskine" [1196]. And, indeed, this has the desired effect on Erskine who now becomes converted to the theory and, from then on, believes in its truth. Once again the discussions over Mr. W.H. seem to have come to an end, only this time a positive sense. However, it is this seeming completion of the affair which triggers off a "curious reaction." First the narrator loses interest in "the whole thing, wearied of its fascination" [1196] and later grows increasingly sceptical about his own reasonings and findings. On the other hand, Erskine now adopts the theory, represents it as his creation and furthers it by new arguments. In so doing, he assumes the opposite part in a reversal of roles and intellectual positions, passionately appealing to his friend:

I feel quite sure that my theory is the true one. Of course it is a hypothesis, but then it is a hypothesis that explains everything, [...] a hypothesis that explains everything is a certainty. [1199]

The personal pronoun "my theory" is indicative. From now on, two intellectual attitudes oppose each other. On the one hand, we have Erskine's commitment to an adopted theory which has become a possession (in a double sense). It is represented as a truth and certainty which explains everything. On the other hand, there is the growing scepticism of his friend who becomes a critical-fallibilistic *advocatus diaboli* of his own findings.

Two years pass. One day the narrator receives a letter from Erskine in which he announces his determination to give his life for his theory, just as Cyril committed suicide for the same cause many years ago. By the time he reads the letter, Erskine is already dead. It is worth noting that Erskine's suicide is explained and justified in epistemological terms: "theory," "to verify," "to die for a literary theory" [1199-1220]. The quest for truth and the eagerness to verify it lead to death. While this further discredits the idea of verification (similar links, as observed earlier, are found in Wilde's epigrams), the impersonation of such an idea by a character about to die arouses the reader's empathy. One might even discern heroic overtones in Erskine's act. Such reactions, however, are soon checked, for Erskine's death, far from being a suicide, is eventually disclosed as the result of a mortal disease. Once again, the "truth" of Mr. W.H. is promoted by fictions (first a forged painting and now a fake suicide), and once again the story seems to arrive at a definite conclusion: an untenable theory and the untrustworthy character of its supporters. The final ending of inquiry is also suggested by the plain fact that all the theory's advocates are dead. In the end, however, the process of conjecturing is resumed with the narrator contemplatively stating: "sometimes, when I look at it [the portrait], I think there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets" [1201].

The *Portrait of Mr. W.H.* enacts the never-ending quest to decide between the pros and cons of an innovative literary theory. It proves to be an inconclusive, yet rewarding process of "conjectures and refutations," in many ways prefiguring Popper's critical fallibilism. A theory is established and rejected – for the time being – since its creator is said to have advanced it by means of a forged portrait. Nevertheless, another person becomes interested in the theory and succeeds in substantiating it, before he too critically detaches himself from his scholarly achievement and proceeds to question his own reasonings and findings. A third man embraces the theory and attempts to validate it. Not only does he add new evidence to the theory, but he seeks to further its suggestiveness by means of a pretended suicide. Again the theory appears untenable. At long last it is placidly surmised that there is yet a great deal to be said for the theory. In the course of the story, the stages of conjecturing and refuting alter, along with the positions of the researchers: now

they support the theory and attempt to verify it, now they reject the theory and are inclined to falsify it. One might be tempted to mistake all this for a circular process of inquiry, ever revolving around the same wealth of knowledge. The critical-fallibilistic structure of *The Portrait* rather encourages an opposite movement: the continual growth of knowledge. Each new phase of falsification forces the researchers (instead of simply repeating an existing theory) to look for new evidence and to argue more complexly. On the other hand, it is the eagerness to verify which turns out to be misleading and deceitful, and which even concurs with the death of two characters. Thus, falsification does not put an end to inquiry but permits new beginnings and further progressions. What some critics characterize as a "dazzling" illustration of a homophilic theory,²⁵ can equally be interpreted as an *exemplum* of an altogether different story: Wilde's prefiguration of important fundamentals of 20th-century philosophy of science:

Die wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis, das wissenschaftliche Wissen ist also immer hypothetisch: Es ist *Vermutungswissen*. Und die Methode der wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis ist die *kritische Methode*: die Methode der Fehlersuche und der Fehlerelimination [...].²⁶

There is, however, a further aspect in Wilde's story which adds to its epistemological richness and enacts yet another philosophical idea. *The Portrait* sketches the development of a theory. Twice this theory is corroborated by fictions, once by a forged painting, then by a pretended suicide. At first sight, they appear to be deceitful frauds discrediting the theory, though, logically speaking, these fictions do not "in the slightest degree invalidate the truth of the theory" [1160] itself, nor is it "necessarily true because a man dies for it" [1161]. And, psychologically speaking, these fictions even stimulate the actual process of research. Having discovered the portrait, "we did nothing but go over each poem line by line, [...] for three months" [1159]. Furthermore, the forgery gives pictorial shape to a literary theory, just as the second fiction, Erskine's alleged suicide, adds dramatic forms to it. It is also significant that the first hoax is the very emblem of the whole story: *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* Thus, the fictions in Wilde have meaningful potential. They prove to be helpful devices suggesting the "truth" of a theory and thereby encouraging ever new steps of inquiry. Two contrary but complementary movements become apparent. Fictions have the potential to assert truths, and truths are always in danger of being revealed as fictions.

²⁵R. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 279-280.

²⁶K. Popper, "Erkenntnis und Gestaltung der Wirklichkeit," in: *Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt*, 13.

Both operations meet a central argument in Hans Vaihinger's (1852-1933) *Philosophie des Als Ob*, a book which came into being a decade before *The Portrait*, but was not to be published before the beginning of the 20th century.²⁷ Vaihinger's argument runs as follows: "Wir kommen im theoretischen, im praktischen und im religiösen Gebiet zum Richtigen auf Grundlage und mit Hilfe des Falschen."²⁸ The intellectual activities of man inevitably have to make use of fictions. This also applies to science. She must rely on fictitious constructs not found in reality but which enable it to be conceived and calculated in a meaningful way. Hence, science's conjectures and refutations undergo the very double movement outlined above: (1) the constructive transmutation of fictitious assumptions into helpful conceptions of reality; (2) the critical reflection on established truths by reconstructing their underlying and preceding fictions.²⁹ The same happens in Wilde's story. A daring theory makes use of a fiction to assert its truth, only for it to be revealed as a fiction. It is then rediscovered as a possible truth in a new round of inquiry, to be advanced and discredited by yet another fiction; and finally, it is reconsidered as still an interesting explanation of Shakespeare's sonnets. Thus, truth and fiction are no longer exclusive opposites. The one is continually preceded or succeeded by the other. They disintegrate and commingle, the one being already inherent in the contrary, both conditioning and cancelling each other. In Vaihinger's words:

Zwischen wahr und falsch sind keine so schroffen Grenzen, wie man gewöhnlich anzunehmen beliebt. Irrtum und Wahrheit fallen unter den gemeinsamen Oberbegriff des Mittels zur Berechnung der Aussenwelt; [...] was wir gewöhnlich Wahrheit nennen, nämlich eine, wie man sagt, mit der Aussenwelt zusammenstimmende Vorstellungswelt, [ist] nur der zweckmäßigste Irrtum.³⁰

Nor is this only of epistemological significance. It also contains a dramatic potential waiting to be enacted on stage – this being most completely accomplished in Wilde's last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

²⁷Wilde neither read nor knew of Vaihinger. The absence of a direct influence does not, however, diminish the parallels between both. It rather underlines the concurrence of similar epistemological ideas towards the end of the 19th century.

²⁸Hans Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1911) viii.

²⁹Cf. *ibid.*, 219-231.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 192-193.

3. Truth is Fiction and Fiction is Truth: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), the male protagonists continually discuss the truth: the concept of truth in general and the truth of individual statements in particular. The paradoxical³¹ nature of these debates can be demonstrated by two contradictory statements made by Jack Worthing alias Ernest. Once his false identity is revealed, he has to admit:

JACK: (*slowly and hesitatingly*): Gwendolen – Cecily – it is very painful to me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind.³²

In the next act, however, he remarks:

JACK: Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me? [383]

In his first speech, Jack acknowledges that he has lied all his life and now, for the first time, is forced to speak the truth. Lying appears as a continuous principle of life, whereas the truth is represented as a unique state of emergency. Logically, Jack's confession is in complete disagreement with his second declaration, in which he claims to have never spoken anything but the truth. Both statements are incompatible, in a logical respect, and yet they are equally appropriate to the complex layers of reality/fiction in the comedy. On the one hand, indeed, it is true that Jack has been lying with regard to all central issues of the play. On the other hand, he is equally justified in claiming the truth, for in the end all his fictions (his assumed name and the alleged existence of a brother) turn out to be imaginary anticipations of the truth. His name really proves to be Ernest and he discovers that he actually has a brother. Thus a double paradox is enacted: two incompatible statements are demonstrated to be consistent after all. One might argue that this dubious constellation can be resolved by distinguishing two notions of truth, the subjective truthfulness of an individual and the objective truth lying beyond these subjective conceptions. Nevertheless a basic paradox persists. In Wilde's comedy bold fictions prove to be anticipated truths, whereas the initial assumptions of the "actual facts of real life" [330] turn out to be fictions.

³¹A good discussion of the paradoxes in Wilde can be found in W.B. Hess-Lüttich, "Die Strategie der Paradoxie: Zur Logik der Konversation im Dandyismus am Beispiel Oscar Wildes," in: Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren, eds., *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre: New Perspectives in the Theory of Drama and Theatre* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1984) 197-234.

³²*The Importance of Being Earnest, Complete Works*, 366. All further quotations are taken from this edition and will be indicated in the text.

In one of the most lucid articles on *The Importance*, Frank Zaic discusses the implications of this situation:

Was entspricht eher der Wahrheit: wenn ich sage, 'ich habe einen Bruder' (habe aber tatsächlich keinen), oder wenn sich sage, 'ich habe keinen Bruder' (habe aber tatsächlich einen, nur weiß ich es nicht)? [...] Und wie ist die Situation, wenn ich sage: 'Ich habe einen Bruder', dabei aber weiß, daß ich keinen habe, und plötzlich stellt sich heraus, daß ich tatsächlich einen Bruder habe – die Situation im Werk! War dann meine Lüge nicht bloß eine 'Vorwegnahme der Wahrheit'?³³

In any case, Wilde's comedy undermines a widespread epistemological commonplace, namely the assumption that truthfulness, the high esteem of and quest for truth, is bound to produce the truth (as suggested by Bacon), as if the will to truth were automatically succeeded and rewarded by its revelation. On the other hand, untruthfulness is commonly regarded as a deviation from the truth, if not as its actual prevention. In *The Importance* both assumptions are subverted alike. The paradoxical plot structure of Wilde's play enacts the very epistemological problem outlined in Vaihinger's *Philosophy of As If*: what is believed to be true can be based on forgotten fictions, whereas consciously employed fictions can lead to the truth.

These epistemological questions arise from the very beginning of Wilde's comedy, already with the first appearance of Jack Worthing – or is it Ernest Worthing? The main text (the text verbalized on stage) announces him as "Mr. Ernest Worthing" [322], although the auxiliary text introduces him as Jack: "*Enter Jack,*" whereupon he is immediately hailed as Ernest: "How are you, my dear Ernest?" [322]. In the dialogue that ensues, his friend Algernon incessantly inquires into his real identity and finally demands a full explanation: "Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable" [325] – clearly a paradoxical request. Jack relates the story of his life and concludes his account with the following remark: "That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple" [326]. Thereupon Algernon replies: "The truth is rarely pure and never simple" [326]. Truth and fiction have become part of a role play, with ever-changing protagonists and antagonists, positions and oppositions, evaluations and revaluations. First, it is Algernon who plays the role of the enquirer unremittingly trying to uncover Jack's true identity. As soon as the truth is about to be revealed, however, he explicitly demands an "improbable" version of the "truth;" in other words, Jack's initial fiction is to be succeeded by a new fiction. Furthermore, instead of rebuking his friend for his deceitful game, he cheerfully compliments him on being "the

³³Franz Zaic, "Oscar Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest*," in: Horst Oppel, ed., *Das moderne englische Drama* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1963; ³1976) 51.

most advanced Bunburyist" [326] he knows (Bunbury being Algernon's own version of a fictitious existence). Finally, Algernon even questions the concept of truth itself by stating that it is "rarely pure and never simple." Algernon's opposite, Jack, pursues an opposite course. The moment he is exposed as a "liar," Jack adopts the role of a supporter of truth, "the whole truth pure and simple" – and a highly monistic and clear-cut concept of truth it is. (In the end, however, this confident "truth pure and simple" proves to be yet another mistaken assumption.) Truth and fiction are revealed as provisional parts and stages in arbitrary role plays, enacting ever new versions and inversions of themselves – and all this in one scene!

Although truth and fiction, unlike in Harold Pinter's plays,³⁴ are still distinguishable concepts, they have already been deprived of many of their habitual foundations. To begin with, the exchanges between Algernon and Jack suggest that truth and fiction are no longer of ethical significance. Finding out the truth, or being found out as a liar are no longer relevant to questions of morality, nor to man's integrity or the friendship between men. Consequently, truth and fiction are also released from the usual forms of social sanction: "I have entirely decided to overlook my nephew's conduct," says Lady Bracknell, the personification of Victorian morality, at the end of the play, after Algernon's "disgraceful deception" and "false pretence" [375] are made public. Instead of being punished, all fictions are positively reinforced in the social sphere. Furthermore, they are also reaffirmed by life itself, if one regards the protagonist's good fortune and the marvellous course of events towards the end of the comedy. Finally, and most importantly, the epistemological basis of truth and fiction is subverted, as a closer look at the plot structure of *The Importance* reveals.

After the disclosure of Jack's "true" identity in the first act, the main and auxiliary text are now restored to agreement. The name Jack is both verbalized on stage and written into the text. The recipient seems to have a clear concept of two distinct layers of reality: (1) a knowledge of Jack's "true" identity, and (2) an understanding of his fictitious role plays. Thus, when Jack proposes to Gwendolen under the assumed name of Ernest, the following discrepancy of awareness is brought about. Both Jack and the audience presume to know more than Gwendolen. Telling a lie implies a knowledge that the person believing it does not have; and the audience, let into the secret of Jack's "true" identity, is titillated into amusement at Gwendolen's ignorance:

³⁴Cf. J. Zelter, *Sinnhafte Fiktion und Wahrheit*, 234-283; J. Zelter, "Wirklichkeit als Wettkampf widerstreitender Fiktionen: Zu einer bedeutsamen erkenntnistheoretischen Thematik in den früheren Dramen Harold Pinters," *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 27 (1994): 257-270.

GWENDOLEN: But your name is Ernest.
 JACK: Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then?
 GWENDOLEN (*glibly*): Ah! that is clearly a metaphysical speculation and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them.
 [330]

In the light of the existing paradigms of the "true" and "fictitious," Jack appears to be right and Gwendolen wrong. What she ignorantly dismisses as a "metaphysical speculation" appears to be a firmly established and verified fact. On the other hand, it is Gwendolen's exaggerated commitment to "the actual facts of life" that presently strikes one as the actual "metaphysical speculation" in this encounter. However, if we reconsider this scene from the perspective of the comedy's ending, the whole picture changes. The discrepancy of awareness outlined above is turned on its head. The superior knowledge of the audience is revealed as a mistaken assumption, whereas Gwendolen's misconceptions prove to be an anticipated truth after all. In the end, she can confidently state, "I felt from the first that you could have no other name" but Ernest, just as her fiancée is equally justified in saying: "I always told you Gwendolen, my name was Ernest" [383]. Thus not only the deliberate use of fictions, but also the illusionary belief in them, has the potential to become true, to be vindicated by an unexpected and marvellous turn of events.

After Jack's ironic confession of having spoken, all his life, nothing but the truth, he asks Gwendolen: "Can you forgive me?" Once again the common ethics of truth undergo a paradoxical reevaluation, and Gwendolen replies accordingly: "I can. For I feel that you are sure to change" [383]. The word "change" is indicative. To begin with, it strongly contrasts with the overall "At last!" which concludes the final union of the three couples in the play. Moreover, the word suggests that the present state of affairs is only provisional and still contains the possibility of change, particularly with regard to the truth. What is currently believed to be true, Gwendolen insinuates, is only the most recent state of events and is likely to be succeeded by new fictions. The ending of *The Importance* might be a happy one (six unmarried characters form three couples), but it does not put an end to its epistemological ambiguities. Of which another notable instance is the final naming of Jack (or is it Ernest?). In the main text he is now called Ernest, "Ernest! My own Ernest!" [383], while the auxiliary text still names him Jack. The same disagreement occurs in the first scene, when the name Ernest is still a fiction – now it is a truth. Thus, the discovery of a truth can bring about the same predicament as the use of a fiction. Epistemologically speaking, *The Importance* never comes to an end, but rather breaks off in the

middle of an endless succession of versions and inversions of the true and the fictitious. In this respect, Wilde's play closely parallels the structure of *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* as a fallibilistic and inconclusive process of conjectures and refutations.

4. Philosophical & Literary Background

At first sight, the epistemological issues in Wilde's work may appear strange. Far from being a meaningful or intended structure, one might be tempted to reject all this as the unintended fall-out of Wilde's hilarious modes of thinking, a pure chance hit rather than a serious purpose. Such reservations are even more readily aroused, if one relates Wilde to Popper. Both seem to operate in quite different, if not incompatible fields. Popper's critical rationalism is known as a well-founded philosophy of science pursuing the pathways of truth, while Wilde is committed to the fictitious world of art – and if one takes his essay *The Decay of Lying*, he even explicitly propagates the "lying in art" no less than the "art of lying,"³⁵ both inside and outside of art: "I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction."³⁶ These apparent differences, however, are outweighed by striking elective affinities, particularly with regard to epistemological essentials. Both reject the common notion of truth as a self-evident entity, ready-made and clear-cut, waiting to be mirrored by the human mind, pouring its "light into the face of his chosen,"³⁷ easily verified by industrious accumulation of data, giving rise to no problems and answering all questions, conclusive and eternally valid. The common ground of this critique is constituted by the heritage of Kantian thought that influenced both Popper and Wilde. According to Popper, who read Kant very early in his intellectual development, one quintessence of Kantian philosophy is the idea that scientific theories are of our invention, and that we attempt to superimpose them onto the world: "daß die wissenschaftlichen Theorien von uns selbst erfunden werden und daß wir sie der Welt aufzuzwingen versuchen."³⁸ Popper is referring to the preface of the second edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. The laws of nature, Kant argues, are not a property inherent in nature herself. Rather they are attributions and conceptions of the human

³⁵*The Decay of Lying, Complete Works*, 990.

³⁶*De Profundis, Complete Works*, 912.

³⁷F. Bacon, "Of Truth," *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 6: 378.

³⁸Karl Popper, *Ausgangspunkte: meine intellektuelle Entwicklung* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1979; 1984) 79.

mind, "was die Vernunft selbst in die Natur hineinlegt."³⁹ We only perceive what has been invested with the conceptions of the mind: "daß wir von den Dingen nur das apriori erkennen, was wir selbst in sie legen."⁴⁰ These epistemological assumptions were also known to Wilde who had read Kant during his Oxford days.⁴¹

Following Kant's belief that the human mind has priority over nature, Popper and Wilde regard our conceptions of the world as more relevant and meaningful than underlying reality itself. The natural world can only be comprehended and mastered by the artificial worlds that are man's own creation, the world of art (Wilde) or the technical and intellectual artifacts of mankind (Popper). The growth of scientific knowledge and the development of mankind in general, Popper argues, does not so much depend on a collecting data or facts, "der Sammlung von Daten oder von Tatsachen,"⁴² but rather on the creation of artifacts – material and immaterial, theoretical and practical, intellectual and artistic: "Bücher, Symphonien, Werke der Bildhauerei, Schuhe, Flugzeuge, Computer; [...] alle geplanten und gewollten Produkte der menschlichen Geistestätigkeit."⁴³

Wir: der menschliche Geist, unsere Träume, unsere Zielsetzungen. Wir sind Urheber des Werkes, des Produkts, und gleichzeitig werden wir von unserem Werk geformt. Das ist das eigentlich Schöpferische am Menschen: daß wir, indem wir schaffen, uns gleichzeitig durch unser Werk umschaffen.⁴⁴

Popper refers to a wide range of human activities, including the arts, such as music or sculpture, and himself suggests that both art and science, in the final analysis, are grounded in similar modes of creativity and inventiveness:

Ich sehe das Gemeinsame von Kunst, Mythos, Wissenschaft und sogar Pseudowissenschaft in der schöpferischen Phase, die uns Dinge in neuem Licht sehen läßt und die Welt des Alltags durch verborgene Welten zu erklären sucht.⁴⁵

³⁹Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft 1, Werke 3*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1956; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968) 23.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 26.

⁴¹Cf. R. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 40; Gerald Müller, *Philosophische Ästhetik versus ästhetisches Manifest: Rekonstruktion und systematischer Vergleich der ästhetischen Theorien Kants und Oscar Wildes*, Konstanzer Dissertationen 21, diss., U Konstanz, 1983 (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 1983).

⁴²K. Popper, "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften," in: *Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt*, 80.

⁴³K. Popper, "Erkenntnis und Gestaltung der Wirklichkeit," in: *Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt*, 17.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁵K. Popper, "Wissenschaft und Kritik," in: *Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt*, 67.

A similar argument is developed in Wilde's essay *The Decay of Lying* (1889). Art is not an imitation or representation of the existing world. Instead of copying reality, as is commonly believed, it actually creates it. The world follows the inventions and fictions of the artist, not the other way around. Wilde particularly questions art's mimetic function with regard to nature, i. e. the "phenomena external to man."⁴⁶ Nature is far from being self-evident: "She has no suggestions of her own" [977]. Nature only comes into being through the perceptions and conceptions of art, either revealing to us nature's "lack of design" [970] or inventing her beauties. The foggy sceneries of London, for example, were discovered, or rather invented, by the designs of art – otherwise their existence would have remained unknown. Art not only structures the perception of reality but also the constitution of reality itself. This especially holds for the imaginative power of literature, where fictitious worlds can actually influence human activities and can verify themselves, in the literal sense of *veritatem facere*,⁴⁷ that is, they are made true and enact themselves into existence. Wilde cites in support adventure stories which are read and then acted out by the young, thereby imitating roles unprecedented in their social surroundings (cowboys, Indians, pirates, etc.). The realities of life follow the fictions of art. Thus, the classic idea of mimesis is turned upside down:

Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose. [...] We are merely carrying out [...] the whim or fancy or creative vision of a great novelist.⁴⁸

Such propositions are often dismissed as typical whim or fancy of Wilde himself, an effect of exaggerated rhetoric rather than a conclusive argument, and hence deserving no further consideration. One critic warns us of attaching any epistemological significance whatsoever to it: "es wäre verfehlt, daran eine erkenntnistheoretische Elle anlegen zu wollen."⁴⁹ What Wilde states in relation to art, however, has been confidently claimed by others with regard to the history of science. Life follows the "creative vision of a great novelist," Wilde asserts. One could equally

⁴⁶*The Decay of Lying, Complete Works*, 977. All further quotations are taken from this edition and will be indicated in the text.

⁴⁷Cf. William James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. Alburey Castell (New York: Hafner, 1948; ¹⁷1974) 161.

⁴⁸*The Decay of Lying, Complete Works*, 983. See also Alfons Klein, "Ästhetisches Rollenspiel: Zum Motiv der 'gelebten Literatur' in Oscar Wildes *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," in: Theodor Wolpers, ed., *Gelebte Literatur in der Literatur: Studien zu Erscheinungsformen und Geschichte eines literarischen Motivs* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 272-297.

⁴⁹Ulrich Horstmann, *Ästhetizismus und Dekadenz: Zum Paradigmakonflikt in der englischen Literaturtheorie des späten 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: Fink, 1983) 112.

argue – indeed it has already been done – that science is carrying out the creative vision of a great scientist or philosopher. A typical case would be the very foundation of the modern idea of science itself: originally the Utopian design by Sir Francis Bacon (its urgent novelty encapsulated in such dramatic titles as *Instauratio Magna*, *Novum Organum*, *New Atlantis*), it later materialized with the founding of the Royal Society. According to Thomas Kuhn, this is the normal pattern in the history of science. First we have a revolutionary idea emerging from one individual scientist, then the collective efforts of his successors to follow it up with systematic research and teach it to future generations.⁵⁰ This applies even more to the Utopian maps of political philosophers, not only implemented by individual thinkers but executed by whole nations.

It will have become apparent that Wilde's epistemological beliefs are far from being arbitrary or accidental. Not only can they be related to a great number of individual ideas (past, contemporary and future), but they actually fit into a comprehensive framework of intellectual history which can be traced back to Kantian philosophy and which culminated towards the end of the 19th century, in philosophy and literature, in England and on the Continent, in Europe and in America. Some names ought to be mentioned in passing: Friedrich Nietzsche, the American Pragmatists, John Stuart Mill and, of course, Hans Vaihinger (who was strongly influenced by both Kant and Nietzsche). Even if not all of these figures can be subsumed under the critical-fallibilistic paradigm outlined above, they nevertheless share an attitude closely allied with it: a profound scepticism with regard to traditional concepts of truth. This particularly applies to Nietzsche who polemically dismisses all kinds of immediate certainties, "unmittelbare Gewiheiten,"⁵¹ presupposed by the human mind, especially the will to truth,

der Wille zur Wahrheit. [...] Wir fragen nach dem Werte dieses Willens. Gesetzt, wir wollen Wahrheit: warum nicht lieber Unwahrheit? Und Ungewiheit? Selbst Unwissenheit?⁵²

In America, the Philosophical Pragmatists (William James and John Dewey) questioned the idea of truth as a ready-made and eternal entity. Thus, they replaced the noun "truth" (which suggests a monistic quality) by the adjectival and adverbial forms "true" and "truly,"⁵³ or, if necessary, by adjectival nouns, "the true." Rather than a stagnant property inherent in things or ideas, "the true"

⁵⁰Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1962).

⁵¹Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Bse* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1984) 25.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 12.

⁵³Cf. George Dykhuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Illinois: Southern Illinois UP, 1973) 132.

is a dynamic event driven by a new understanding of utility. While it is usually argued that truth *per se* is useful (Bacon), Pragmatism turned this relation upside down and asserted that whatever is useful (psychologically, socially or politically) has the potential to become true.⁵⁴ A similar thought is already indicated in the title of John Stuart Mill's essay *The Utility of Religion* (1874). Although religion can no longer be maintained in terms of modern standards of truth, Mill argues, it is, nevertheless, a meaningful fiction, "a well meant hypocrisy,"⁵⁵ which mythologically backs the allocation of societal values.

Such critical developments in respect of epistemological issues also recur in the field of literature, in Wilde and in the aestheticist movement in general. Writing about "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893), Arthur Symons characterizes its essence in epistemological terms: "an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, [...] over-inquiring, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or in conduct."⁵⁶ The terminology is indicative, not only drawing on the modes of scientific discovery but also stressing the critical-fallibilistic nature of inquiry. Urgent curiosity and indeterminate inquiry are also marked features of both Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Joris-Karl Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884). Both novels are variations of a never-ending and inconclusive search for ever new methods of experiencing and viewing the world, but without arriving at any satisfactory or tenable certainty: "The things one feels absolutely certain about," Dorian remarks at the end of his restless quest for aesthetic and intellectual experiences, "are never true. That is the fatality of faith."⁵⁷ Thus, what Wilde announced as *The Decay of Lying* actually turns out to be the decay of truth as a clear-cut entity and certainty. Old notions of truth give way to the confident acceptance of fiction as an inevitable *condition humaine*. Wilde, Vaihinger and Nietzsche are the most pronounced exponents of this idea, although its presence becomes even more apparent when viewing the products of mainstream culture at the turn of the century – a noteworthy example being Henry Arthur Jones' melodrama, *The Liars* (1897). The play lives up to the high claims of its symptomatic (or diagnostic?) title,

⁵⁴Cf. W. James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, 159-176.

⁵⁵Cf. John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society, Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto, London: Toronto UP/Routledge, 1963) vol. 10: 403-428; 403.

⁵⁶Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," in: Karl Beckson, ed., *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890's: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981) 135-151.

⁵⁷*The Picture of Dorian Gray, Complete Works*, 161.

culminating in a sentence one could equally ascribe to Wilde: "In that way a lie becomes a sort of idealized and essential truth."⁵⁸

Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik 43 (1995/3): 218-233.

⁵⁸Henry Arthur Jones, *The Liars, Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones*, ed. Clayton Hamilton (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1925) vol. 3: 145.