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Introduction: Reconceptualising and Rewriting Wilde across Time*

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1. “Suggestive for fiction”: Reconceptualising Wilde

“To be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact” (Wilde 2010, 299). This sentence closes Wilde’s essay “Pen, Pencil and Poison” and may be read, like much of what he writes about Thomas Griffiths Wainewright’s crimes, indictment, and post-prison life, as an uncanny anticipation of the Anglo-Irish author’s own future. Like Wainewright, Wilde knew he could evade his trials by fleeing England, “Yet he returned” (294) or chose to stay; “The sentence [...] passed on him was to a man of his culture a form of death” (295); after serving his sentence, “he was no longer the kind light-hearted Janus whom Charles Lamb” – or, in Wilde’s case, many – “admired. He seems to have grown quite cynical” (296); and most tellingly, as many gay and queer writers and scholars have been arguing since the emergence of Gay and Lesbian Studies, “There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture. We cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be” (298). That Wilde should wish to distance himself from the strictures imposed by that Victorian “foolish habit” (299) of reducing reality to fact alone comes as no surprise. Even beyond the infamous accusation of “posing Somdomite” – in the Marquis of Queensberry’s oft-cited misspelling –, Wilde revelled in the fame and notoriety his writings and public persona generated in late Victorian England and beyond, and

* Although this introduction was conceived by the two editors together, section 1 was written by Lou Pinelli, section 2 by Pierpaolo Martino, and section 3 by both.

his iconicity is far from exhausted. His figure has indeed proved “suggestive for fiction” to a great number of subsequent artists, many of whom have adopted, in Neil Sammels’s words, “a Wildean aesthetic grounded in make-believe, in role-playing and the inauthentic” (2025, 569).

These adaptations and rewritings have also generated a wealth of different approaches to his work, which this special issue sets out to explore. In view of this suggestiveness for fiction, his own works continue to elicit varied responses from contemporary critics and thus renew our understanding of the *fin de siècle* and of one of its finest interpreters. Extending what Josephine M. Guy has recently argued in relation to *Intentions* to his oeuvre more broadly, Wilde was “serious and playful simultaneously” across much of his writing, often aiming to “undermin[e] critical authority while extravagantly performing it through a self-conscious display of intellectual virtuosity” (2025, 208). Wilde’s strategy in *Intentions* – and elsewhere, we should add – consists in “wrong-foot[ing] his reader and challeng[ing] their notions of what constitutes intellectual authority” (*ibidem*), thereby inviting readers to participate actively in negotiating the meaning and significance of the texts before them.

In this special issue of *Studi irlandesi*, our aim has been to foreground the many different approaches to Wilde that contemporary critics may draw on in their reassessment of the transnational Irish author. Too often reduced to his sexual identity or his light-hearted witticisms, Wilde emerges in this collection of essays as a serious, though irreducibly playful intellectual who stood at the intersection of the defining discourses of his time, generating questions and proposing solutions that many subsequent artists and critics have continued to grapple with. Whether approached through ecocriticism or the Health Humanities, queer theory or the Gothic, pop culture or theories of the self, Wilde remains a powerful cultural icon whose meanings are constantly reconfigured and re-constellated in an open-ended process of signification and renegotiation.

2. “Insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities”: Rewriting Wilde

Few writers have generated as many afterlives as Oscar Wilde. More than a century after his death, Wilde continues to occupy a singular position within literary and cultural history: at once historical and contemporary, endlessly familiar yet perpetually open to reinvention. His works remain among the most widely read, adapted, translated, and critically reinterpreted texts of the late nineteenth century, while his public persona has acquired a visibility that arguably exceeds that of any other Victorian author (Martino 2023). Wilde survives not simply as a writer, but as a cultural signifier and icon. His extraordinary longevity resides in the capacity of his writings and his self-fashioned image to generate new meanings across different historical moments and cultural contexts (Bristow 2008).

The essays collected in this special issue of *Studi irlandesi* – significantly entitled “Pen, Pencil, and Wilde: Wildean Reconceptions and Rewritings across Time” – also proceed from the conviction that Wilde’s significance lies precisely in this openness to reinterpretation. The contributions gathered here explore the ways in which Wilde is constantly rewritten through acts of reading, criticism, adaptation, reception, and theoretical reconfiguration. Together, they reveal a Wilde who continues to speak to contemporary concerns about desire, embodiment, ecology, celebrity, artistic identity, and cultural memory.

Such an approach is particularly appropriate for an author whose writings repeatedly foreground imitation, performance, citation, and transformation as constitutive elements of artistic creation. The paradoxes of “The Decay of Lying” the provocative formulations of “The Critic as Artist” – in which Wilde famously wrote that “what people call insincerity is simply

a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (Wilde 2010, 101) – and the aesthetic experiments of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* all point toward a conception of art as an ongoing process of reinterpretation. Wilde understood that every act of creation emerges through dialogue with prior texts, images, and traditions. At the same time, he recognized that criticism itself possesses creative power, capable of producing new meanings and new works. To read Wilde today is inevitably to rewrite him; to interpret his work is already to participate in the process through which his cultural significance is continually renewed.

Over the past three decades, Wilde studies has expanded far beyond the biographical and aesthetic concerns that once dominated the field. The emergence of queer theory transformed Wilde into a central figure for the study of sexuality, identity, and modernity. More recently, scholars, as we have seen, have explored Wilde’s connections to environmental thought, material culture, celebrity studies, pop culture, and the medical humanities. Such developments have demonstrated not only the richness of Wilde’s writings, but also their remarkable capacity to engage with intellectual frameworks that emerged long after his death. The essays collected here contribute to this ongoing critical expansion by revisiting familiar texts through innovative perspectives while also recovering neglected aspects of Wilde’s oeuvre and influence.

The title of this collection foregrounds two interconnected concepts: reconceptualisation and rewriting. The first refers to the critical process through which Wilde is repositioned within new theoretical and historical frameworks. The second points toward the multiple forms of textual, cultural, and intellectual transformation that characterize Wilde’s own practice as well as his reception. Rewriting, in this context, encompasses literary influence, adaptation, parody, appropriation, translation, critical revision, and cultural performance. The contributions assembled here demonstrate that these processes are inseparable. Wilde rewrites his predecessors; subsequent generations rewrite Wilde; criticism itself becomes a form of rewriting through which the meanings of Wilde’s texts continue to evolve, while Wilde’s life and work are continuously rewritten in the world of popular culture, particularly in contemporary drama, cinema and music. In this sense, Wildean figures, performances, figurations, and refigurations, can actually help us to read or reread Wilde and his work and to develop *new*, and possibly more fascinating, understandings of them (Martino 2023).

3. Overview of the Special Issue

The collection opens with Camilla Del Grazia’s essay on Wilde’s engagement with Edgar Allan Poe in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”. Examining Wilde’s appropriation and transformation of Poe’s Gothic and detective conventions, Del Grazia shows how parody and comic subversion reshape the grotesque and the logic of ratiocination within a satirical framework. Her analysis highlights Wilde’s ability to transform literary influence into a vehicle for aesthetic innovation and social critique.

Questions of influence also occupy a central place in Michael Davis’s contribution, in which the author revisits the relationship between Walter Pater and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, arguing for a reconsideration of Pater’s influence on Wilde. Focusing on the queer dimensions of Pater’s thought, he reads the novel as an exploration of desire, influence, and male intimacy, revealing Wilde’s complex negotiation with the authority of a queer precursor. Influence thus emerges as a dynamic process of resistance, transformation, and creative reworking.

If Del Grazia and Davis focus on Wilde’s relationship to literary and intellectual predecessors, Laura Giovannelli applies ecocritical perspectives to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, offering a reading that foregrounds the novel’s representations of human and non-human interdependence.

She argues that Dorian's tragedy stems from his refusal to recognise his place within broader networks of life, revealing Wilde's engagement with questions of relationality, environmental responsibility, and the agency of the natural world.

The transnational dimensions of Wilde's imagination are explored in Donatella Badin's contribution on *The Duchess of Padua*. By situating Wilde's early blank-verse tragedy within a tradition that uses the foreign – Renaissance Italy – as a symbolic displacement of domestic political tensions, Badin reveals how the play's subversion of revenge tragedy conventions simultaneously engages with Anglo-Irish ambivalence toward colonial violence and with emergent questions of female agency.

Paolo Bugliani's contribution similarly explores a less discussed part of Wilde's oeuvre, namely his prose poems. In his reading, these short texts constitute a series of parabolic self-figurations in which the artist is rendered not as a psychological subject but as a portable icon, iterable and detachable, whose authority is exposed as performative rather than grounded. Situating Wilde's sequence at the intersection of the French prose poem tradition, the biblical parable, and the "diaphanous" protagonists of Walter Pater's imaginary portraits, Bugliani argues that these brief miniatures enact, at the level of genre itself, the instability of authorial identity.

Lou Pinelli's contribution brings the Health Humanities to bear on Wilde by rethinking "unwellness" – broadly understood as a bodily and existential condition that resists full medicalisation – as a productive political and aesthetic force in his work. Reading *De Profundis* alongside other pre-1895 texts, Pinelli challenges the familiar dichotomy between the pre-prison jester and the post-prison martyr, arguing instead for a coherent philosophy underpinning Wilde's oeuvre – one in which suffering attunes the vulnerable body to the "Symphony of Sorrow" that retrospectively gives shape and meaning to a life and a literary career.

The collection closes with Pierpaolo Martino's reconceptualization of Wilde as one of the first modern celebrities. Focusing on his 1882 American tour and its afterlives in U.S. popular culture, the essay examines Wilde's legacy in American film, music, and performance—through figures such as Al Pacino, Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, and Patti Smith—arguing that his self-fashioning and aestheticism anticipated modern celebrity culture and continue to resonate across media and generations.

Taken together, the essays collected here reveal Wilde as a figure whose significance lies in his capacity to generate new forms of meaning across time. Despite their diverse methodologies and objects of analysis, the contributions share a common commitment to understanding Wilde as a dynamic site of cultural production rather than a fixed historical object. They demonstrate that Wilde's writings continue to invite reinterpretation because they themselves are structured around processes of transformation, mediation, and performance. Whether engaging with Gothic traditions, queer genealogies, ecological thought, transnational imaginaries, artistic self-fashioning, embodied suffering, or celebrity culture, the essays reveal a writer whose work remains extraordinarily responsive to changing intellectual and cultural circumstances.

The essays gathered here also remind us that Wilde's relevance does not derive simply from his apparent modernity. Rather, it emerges from the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities that permeate his writings. Wilde's texts resist closure; they encourage reinterpretation; they invite readers to participate in the creation of meaning. Their afterlives are therefore not external additions to an already completed oeuvre but extensions of a process already embedded within Wilde's own aesthetic practice.

In short, to reconceptualise and rewrite Wilde across time means engaging with an ongoing cultural conversation that stretches across historical periods, national boundaries, and disciplinary formations. The essays in this collection contribute to that conversation by

demonstrating the continuing vitality of Wilde's work and by revealing new possibilities for its interpretation. Collectively, they show that Wilde remains our contemporary (as Kott famously defined Shakespeare) not because he belongs to the present, but because each generation discovers in his writings new ways of thinking about art, desire, identity, suffering, and the world. Wilde's afterlife, in other words, is not a story of survival alone. It is a story of perpetual reinvention—and it is precisely this capacity for reinvention that continues to make him one of the most compelling and fascinating figures of modern culture.

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