

Olga GLEBOVA  
(Akademia im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie)

## OSCAR WILDE'S PLAYS: THE AESTHETICS OF IRREALITY

О.М. Валова, *Эстетико-философская проблематика драматургии Оскара Уайльда*, «Радуга-ПРЕСС», Киров 2013, 246 с.

“Wilde and his works really never fell out of favor or interest,” writes Frederick S. Roden in his introduction to *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the field of Wilde scholarship is enormous and constantly growing. As Roden points out, it is Wilde’s breadth, both “the Wildean *opera* and *vita* [that] provide an abundance of modes for literary criticism”<sup>2</sup>.

The last two decades have seen the application of new critical paradigms to Wilde which have shifted the points of emphasis in Wilde scholarship. Wilde’s works have been analysed with respect to sexuality and gender whereas the examination of the writer’s Irish inheritance has established a postcolonial framework for Wilde studies. The easier availability of Wilde’s drafts and typescripts in the digital age as well as the discovery of the writer’s unknown manuscripts and letters has given an impetus to the development of Wilde textual studies, which allows to get an insight into the way Wilde wrote and demonstrates the seriousness with which Wilde took his role as a writer. A big amount of attention has been paid to Wilde by feminist criticism, studies in material culture and performance studies. At the same time there are new directions opening up in well-established areas of Wilde research, such as biographical criticism and Wilde’s thought, understood in terms of aestheticism, philosophy, and religion<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick S. Roden, *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2005, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Comprehensive overviews of contemporary critical perspectives on Wilde, in addition to Frederick S. Roden’s book quoted above, can be found, for example, in Peter Raby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997; and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde: Recent Research*, ELT Press, Greensboro 2000.

The new monograph by Olga M. Valova, associate professor of Vyatka State Humanities University (Russia), re-assesses Wilde's philosophical and aesthetic views from a new methodological orientation, namely by drawing upon the concept of irreality and showing its centrality in Wilde's works<sup>4</sup>. Valova is well-qualified to do so, having co-authored a book on Wilde<sup>5</sup> and produced a series of articles on various aspects of his work. Moreover, Valova's study is firmly rooted in the long and wide-ranging tradition of Wilde scholarship in Russia.

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Oscar Wilde is one the best known foreign writers in Russia. The fascination with Wilde has been pervasive in Russian culture since the end of the nineteenth century when his works were popularized by the Russian Symbolists. Such famous representatives of the Russian Symbolist movement as Konstantin Balmont, Fyodor Sologub, Valery Bryusov, and Nikolai Gumilov, who felt an affinity with Wilde's aesthetic views and were inspired by his search for new forms of literary expression, translated his works and laid the foundation of Wilde criticism in Russia. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the majority of Wilde's works had been translated into Russian. During the seventy years of the Soviet period, despite the unfavourable ideological situation in the country, Wilde's works were almost never out of print, including the original English language texts. Especially it is Wilde's plays that enjoyed great popularity and were included in the repertoire of many Russian theatres; for example, *An Ideal Husband*, staged by the renowned Moscow Art Theatre (MXAT) in 1946, had a non-stop successful run for thirty-five years. Since the 1990s there has been a real boom in Wilde publications and Wilde's plays are performed today both by well-known and new experimental theatre companies<sup>6</sup>.

Wilde scholarship in Russia, started by the Russian Symbolists and developed by outstanding Soviet critics, such as Korney Chukovsky, Aleksandr Anikst, Dmitry Urnov and others, flourishes today in numerous articles, books and doctoral dissertations. Wilde's works are mainly studied in the context of the European and Russian Symbolist movement, with particular focus on their relation to the mythopoeic tendencies in the culture of the fin de siècle<sup>7</sup>. Other critical works deal with the problem of aesthetics and religion, the tension between Christianity and paganism in Wilde's works; there is also research into Wilde's use of paradox, intertextuality and intermediality<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> О.М. Валова, *Эстетико-философская проблематика драматургии Оскара Уайльда*, «Радуга-ИРЕСС», Киров 2013.

<sup>5</sup> О.М. Валова, В.Г. Решетов, *«Счастливый принц» и другие сказки об Оскаре Уайльде*, КФ МГЭИ, Киров 2000.

<sup>6</sup> The reception of Wilde's works in Russia is discussed in detail in Ю.А. Рознатовская, *Оскар Уайльд в России* <19v-euro-lit.niv.ru/19v-euro-lit/articles-eng/roznatovskaya-uajld-v-rossii.htm> [accessed 22 August 2015].

<sup>7</sup> Н.Ю. Бартоцц, *Мифопоэтика модерна в творчестве Оскара Уайльда*, дис. ... канд. филол. наук, Москва 2009.

<sup>8</sup> О.М. Валова, *Эстетико-философская проблематика драматургии Оскара Уайльда*, с. 6–7.

The innovative aspect of Valova's book is her reading of Wilde's plays through the lens of his "philosophy of irreality", which Wilde himself saw as the intellectual basis of his aesthetics. In his letter of 17 December 1891 to Edmond de Goncourt he wrote:

Cher Monsieur de Goncourt, quoique *la base intellectuelle de mon esthétique soit la Philosophie de l'Irréalité*, ou peut-être à cause de cela, je vous prie de me permettre une petite rectification à vos notes sur la conversation où je vous parlé de notre cher et noble poète anglais m. Algernon Swinburne [...]<sup>9</sup>.

Valova argues that Wilde's philosophy of irreality, though not a formal philosophical doctrine, finds its explicit expression in his non-fictional writings. She convincingly supports her argument by extensively quoting from Wilde's letters and essays and demonstrating how, albeit in an unsystematic way, the writer developed his aesthetic and philosophical doctrine based on the notion of irreality. She presents Wilde as a thinker who in his works contrasts artistic imagination and reality and affirms the great power of the irrational in human life. For Wilde, the inner, spiritual life is more important than its external, material manifestations; behind the everyday and the material the writer always perceives the timeless and the spiritual. As Wilde wrote in his prose confession *De Profundis*:

Still, I am conscious now that behind all this beauty, satisfying though it may be, there is some spirit hidden of which the painted forms and shapes are but modes of manifestation, and it is with this spirit that I desire to become in harmony. I have grown tired of the articulate utterances of men and things. The Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature this is what I am looking for. It is absolutely necessary for me to find it somewhere<sup>10</sup>.

Valova locates Wilde's philosophy of irreality in the tradition of European philosophical idealism tracing it from Platonism and medieval Christian theology (St. Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Abelard, Thomas Aquinas) to Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Schopenhauer, Bergson, Husserl, and Nietzsche. In a particularly illuminating way she explicates the Wildean concept of irreality by drawing on the ideas of Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev who in his book *Spirit and Reality* (1935) postulates the existence of two levels, or types, of reality: reality as a physical, organic, psychic and social world, on the one hand, and reality as truth, goodness, beauty, and creative imagination, on the other. The latter type of reality refers to spirit, to spiritual activity<sup>11</sup>. Philosophical idealism, endorsed by some European writers of the fin de siècle as a reaction against the dominant trends of positivism in philosophy and naturalism in literature, was also embraced by Wilde who reflected it in his works.

<sup>9</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, Henry Holt and Company, New York 2000, p. 504 (emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup> Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1998 HTML edition by R. van Valkenburg <[www.upword.com/wilde/de\\_profundis.html](http://www.upword.com/wilde/de_profundis.html)> [accessed 15 December 2015].

<sup>11</sup> Н. Бердяев, *Философия свободного духа*, Республика, Москва 1994, с. 370.

In her book, Valova sets out to show how Wilde's aesthetics of irreality is embodied in his comedies and tragedies. She maintains that in his attempt to get an insight into the transcendental and the mystical, Wilde created multilayered works in which his philosophy of irreality is expressed on the ideological, thematic, and structural levels. The categories through which the Wildean philosophy of irreality is actualized on various levels of his plays become the principal object of analysis in Valova's book.

The book consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. In the introduction the author provides a valuable survey of the complex philosophical and cultural context of the European fin de siècle highlighting such features of this period as a shift in guiding axiological principles; growing skepticism in the possibility of objective perception of reality; reconsideration of artistic principles and search for a new language of culture; eschatological attitudes; synthesis of the arts; interest in myth and in philosophical doctrines which emphasize the irrational nature of society and the world. Valova also gives a comprehensive overview of contemporary Wilde scholarship produced both in English and in Russian, and discusses Wilde the playwright in relation to the so-called "new drama" that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in the works of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Émile Zola, Maurice Maeterlinck, G.B. Shaw and W.B. Yeats.

In the subsequent chapters Valova analyses closely particular texts with regard to Wildean thought. In chapter 1, entitled "Topical Issues of Modernity: An Aesthete's Point of View", she examines Wilde's attitude to the political and social realities of his day. The author discusses Wilde's treatment of the theme of terrorism in *Vera; or, The Nihilists* (1880), his early tragedy which was inspired by the Irish struggle for independence and the rise of anarchism and nihilism in the world. She then analyses *Salomé* (1894) as a play reflecting the crisis of the modern church and the writer's wavering between paganism and Christianity. She reads the tragedy, in which true faith (represented by Jokanaan) is contrasted to formal religious practices, as a critique of religious fanaticism.

One of Wilde's leading themes – the clash between the laws of society and moral laws – is discussed on the basis of his social comedies: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Valova points out that Wilde's critique of society's prejudice and potential to quash independent thinking serves the purpose of asserting the value of individualism and individual freedom. She makes an interesting observation that Wilde's representation of the absurdities inherent in social life makes him a precursor of existentialism.

Finally, she examines the American theme in Wilde's writing, focusing on the problem of mutual influence of British and American cultures, which is dealt with in some of his letters, 1880s essays, and such works as *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Wilde, who visited America in 1882 for a lengthy and successful lecture tour, criticizes both American pragmatism and British conservatism and maintains that it is only

through the interaction of the two cultures that positive changes in society can be achieved.

Chapter 2, entitled “Oscar Wilde’s Philosophy of Irreality and Its Embodiment in his Dramatic Works” is especially useful, for it discusses the sources of European philosophical idealism, explicates Wilde’s philosophy of irreality and concentrates on the crucial question of its embodiment in his plays.

Primarily, Valova examines how Wilde’s philosophy of irreality is realized on the thematic level through the use of the category of “influence”, which she regards as the dominant one and by which she means a change or re-adjustment in a character’s thoughts, mood, or behaviour effected not by rational persuasion but by such factors as art, beauty, voice, appearance (costume), gestures, love, or charisma. She concentrates on the analysis of these factors and their contribution to what Natalya Yu. Bartosh has called Wilde’s “mytho-symbolic construction of the aesthetic reality”<sup>12</sup>.

Valova points out that in Wilde’s works it is always significant characters who are endowed with enchanting voices and who often exert a destructive influence on the protagonists (for example, Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or Baron Arngheim in *An Ideal Husband*). Interestingly, she connects Wilde’s use of voice (“that wonderfully fascinating quiet voice”<sup>13</sup>) with the folkloric and mythological tradition of mermaid singing.

The mystical nature of female influence in Wildean plays is portrayed in accordance with the tendencies characteristic of the fin de siècle and bearing similarities to the way female characters are drawn by Maurice Maeterlinck and August Strindberg: on the one hand, there are women characters who are manipulative and who pose a threat to male independence (Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Mrs Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*); on the other, there are those who represent the female version of the dandy character type and who do not try to subdue men but enchant and captivate them in the way a work of art does (Mrs Allonbyn in *A Woman of No Importance*, Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Mabel Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*).

Discussing the character of the dandy as the epitome of the writer’s ideal of a harmonious life based on the principles of art, Valova pays attention to those traits which are particularly associated with Wilde’s philosophy of irreality, notably the dandy’s intuition and his exceptional ability to experience a spiritual insight. In this chapter Valova also discusses Wilde’s views on art, his idea of the superiority of art to life and its lack of obligation to any standards of mimesis.

The chapter ends with the author’s statement that for Wilde, who propagates the cult of individualism, any kind of influence exerted on a person is deemed

<sup>12</sup> Н.Ю. Бартош, *Мифопоэтика модернизма в творчестве Оскара Уайльда*, с. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act II <[www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/885](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/885)> [accessed 14 August 2015].

harmful; it is only art that can exercise a beneficial influence for it gives aesthetic pleasure, inculcates humanistic values, and elevates people above the everyday and the commonplace.

Chapter 3, entitled “The Embodiment of Wilde’s Philosophy of Irreality in the Structure of his Dramatic Texts”, offers a detailed analysis of the way Wilde’s philosophy is embodied in the plot structure of his plays. The chapter begins with the discussion of the role of chance in the plot of Wilde’s comedies and tragedies. For Wilde, chance, together with art, love and influence, is another manifestation of the unreal in life. Lack of verisimilitude is one of the main aesthetic principles in Wilde; however, non-realistic plots (as, for example, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or *The Canterville Ghost*) do not prevent the writer from dealing with important ethical and philosophical issues. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to the analysis of the ways in which Wilde’s philosophy of irreality is manifested in the internal action of his plays. Following the Russian literary theorist V.E. Khalizev, Valova distinguishes between the external and internal action of a literary work. According to Khalizev, the internal action refers to the characters’ psychological states, their emotions and feelings evoked by situations of conflict, in contrast to the external action which refers to the characters’ deeds as they strive to achieve certain goals<sup>14</sup>. As Valova indicates, in Wilde’s plays, social and political issues (terrorism, political corruption, blackmail, marital and familial problems), which are dealt with in the external action, are of less consequence than the internal conflict, which concerns the power of the irrational and which becomes an exposition of the writer’s philosophical and aesthetic views. Significantly, in *The Critic as Artist* (1890) the life of action is unfavourably compared by Wilde with the life of art: actions are dangerous and their results are unpredictable.

Valova’s book is wide-ranging in scope and provides a comprehensive analysis of various categories constituting Wilde’s philosophy of irreality. Although the subject of Valova’s research is Wilde’s plays, they are examined in the context of his whole oeuvre, including letters and essays (*The Decay of Lying*, *The Critic as Artist*, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, *De Profundis* and others) as well as prose fiction (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Canterville Ghost*, fairy tales). Moreover, the analysis is situated within the philosophical, historical and literary context of the European fin de siècle. The book includes an impressive bibliography consisting of 528 sources (344 in Russian and 184 in English). All these features of Valova’s book contribute to the plausibility and persuasiveness of her analysis.

If this book can be said to have a weakness, then this resides in its structure. The chapters are sometimes allowed to overlap as regards their subject matter, while the chapter titles are too general and inexpressive.

Despite the fact that Wilde’s aesthetic views are well known and have been thoroughly researched, Valova’s adopted perspective – reading Wilde’s plays

---

<sup>14</sup> В.Е. Хализев, *Теория литературы*, Высшая школа, Москва 2002, с. 371.

through the prism of his philosophy of irreality – offers many interesting insights into Wilde's works, which are analysed with considerable subtlety. One of the benefits of the book is that lesser-known plays, such as *Vera, or the Nihilists* (1880) and *The Duchess of Padua* (1883) are given well-deserved attention. Of particular interest is Valova's illuminating focus on the theme of terrorism in *Vera*, since the increasing visibility of terrorists as societal actors in the contemporary world raises the question what literature can do and say in response to violence. What is more important, Valova's attempt to identify the concepts through which Wilde's aesthetics of irreality is implemented has prepared the ground for a new theoretical move in Wilde research, stimulating the application of cognitive literary criticism to Wilde's texts.

## References

- Raby P., (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997.
- Roden F., S., *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2005.
- Small I., *Oscar Wilde: Recent Research*, ELT Press, Greensboro 2000.
- Wilde O., *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, Henry Holt and Company, New York 2000.
- Бартош Н., Ю., *Мифопоэтика модерна в творчестве Оскара Уайльда*, дис. ... канд. филол. наук, Москва 2009.
- Бердяев Н., *Философия свободного духа*, Республика, Москва 1994.
- Валова О., М., Решетов, В.Г., *“Счастливый принц” и другие сказки об Оскаре Уайльде*, КФ МГЭИ, Киров 2000.
- Валова О., М., *Эстетико-философская проблематика драматургии Оскара Уайльда*, «Радуга-ПРЕСС», Киров 2013.
- Хализев В., Е., *Теория литературы*, Высшая школа, Москва 2002.

## Internet Sources:

- Wilde O., *De Profundis*, 1998 HTML edition by R. van Valkenburg <[www.upword.com/wilde/de\\_profundis.html](http://www.upword.com/wilde/de_profundis.html)> [accessed 15 December 2015].
- Wilde O., *An Ideal Husband* <[www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/885](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/885)> [accessed 14 August 2015].
- Рознатовская Ю., А., *Оскар Уайльд в России* <[19v-euro-lit.niv.ru/19v-euro-lit/articles-eng/roznatovskaya-ua|ld-v-rossii.htm](http://19v-euro-lit.niv.ru/19v-euro-lit/articles-eng/roznatovskaya-ua|ld-v-rossii.htm)> [accessed 22 August 2015].