Modernism as Anti-Modernity: Oscar Wilde and His Negative Materialism

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More than sixty years after its initial publication, it is still worth reconsidering Ken-ichi Yoshida's well-renowned opening statement of his *Modern Literature in Britain* (1959): 'Modernity started in Britain with Wilde.' [1] This aphoristic sentence suggests a great deal, especially concerning Oscar Wilde's critical insights into nineteenth-century European modern culture and society. Yoshida can be understood to contend that Wilde is the first critic of modernity in Britain and his criticism allowed 'modernity' to 'start' in a certain real sense of the term. Hence the title of this essay: 'Modernism as Anti-Modernity.' Taking Yoshida's contention as its starting point, my argument is intended to foreground Wilde as a modernist, a critic who attempts to explore aesthetic possibilities inherent in such a real 'modernity,' while suggesting that his unique materialism can function as a precursor to twentieth-century avant-garde art movements.

Language for Language's Sake

Yoshida's point is that, as a critic of modernity, Wilde's target is the aesthetic system of 'representation' in the context of modern visual arts and literature; more concretely, the artistic and epistemological assumption of 'description' in landscape paintings and realistic

literature is frequently problematised in Wilde's criticism. This is reminiscent of a set of critical approaches to nineteenth-century 'ocularcentrism,' a discursive twin of modern empirical positivism, based on the minute and objective observation of visual objects.[2] The historical parallels between this privileging of visual sight and the enhancing importance of landscape descriptions in modern art and literature are quite evident. As Fredric Jameson aptly points out, the ultimate paradox of such ocularcentrism is to be detected in impressionism, where a maximisation of scientifically objective depiction of visual objects results in their virtual disappearance.[3] Wilde's modernism is a critique of this type of ocularcentric and representational modern art forms.

Given this, Yoshida's appraisal of Wilde provides us with a variety of insights, the most important of which is his discussion that Wilde should be reconsidered in the context of a modernist literary theory, which aims to minimise and defy the referential function of language. In Yoshida's understanding, instead of linguistic reference to outside objects——the fundamental function of literary representation——the artistic value of self-referentiality is crucial in reevaluating Wilde's aesthetics. Intriguingly, Yoshida's characteristically tautological style can be read as a performative repetition of Wilde's aesthetics of what might be termed 'language for language's sake':

> Indeed, we could say something about the styles of Ruskin, Carlyle, or Arnold before Wilde; however, before Wilde there is no style which allows us to cultivate our own ideas by using language self-reflexively (of course, it is not through ideas but language that we write sonnets), and therefore it is not until Wilde that we can encounter a literary style as a product of the process of obtaining the method of expressing our own thought through a style which is exclusively indispensable for this purpose. (8)

> If we seriously pursue to explore problematics of literature, all we can find there is language and the self-evident fact that literary creation begins from language and ends in language. (9)

Yoshida's interest is not only in Wilde but in Edgar Alan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Stéphane Mallarmé, whose aesthetics can be summarised as an endeavour to 'separate literature from the rest of the world and thereby to set up the world of literature for its own sake' (6). Poe's 'genius' can be understood as an effort 'to establish language as the essential core of literature for the first time in the history of European literature and conduct a series of investigations into and experiments on the nature of language.' Accordingly, Yoshida concludes: 'his poetry, short stories, and criticism are nothing but an expression of these passionate pursuits, where language is not assumed as means but end' (7). Yoshida's point is to juxtapose Wilde's anti-mimetic modernism as 'language-for-language's-sake' aesthetics with that of Poe as a precursor to French Symbolism and a critique of modern representational and ocularcentric artistic assumption.

Style Materialised as Body

Worth mentioning in this anti-representational vein is Paul Valéry, who influenced Yoshida in a decisive way. This influence manifests itself in his frequent use of the key terms such as 'spirit' or 'mind' and 'prose.' He experiences literary prose not as a medium to represent visual objects but rather as a linguistic materialisation of the dynamic movements of spirit or mind. Of interest is Yoshida's attention to the fact that Wilde is intrigued by how 'the movement of style' (30) was analysed by ancient Greek artists. Yoshida is interested in Wilde's seemingly anachronistic attempt to excavate ancient Greek aesthetics and re-foreground it as an expression of modernity as part of his definition. In this connection, Yoshida compares Valéry to Wilde as

artists who 'did or would not forget the real voice of human beings' (32). This comparison inspires Yoshida to suggest that they——Wilde and Valéry——share the conception of literary prose as a physical manifestation of spirit or mind.

Yoshida's materialism, inspired by Wilde and Valéry, even leads him to insist: 'in Britain, before losing the sense of themselves, people choose to be conscious of their own bones and the fact that their bones will return to the earth. Thus, Wilde's modern spirit is underpinned by the British sense of physicality' (32). Rather baffling though this uncanny rhetoric is, it is certain that Yoshida's reinterpretation of Wilde foregrounds the genealogy of anti-modern modernity in the context of physical materiality of prose/mind/spirit, while mentioning Valéry and simultaneously being reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence.

Precisely in this sense and rhetoric, moreover, Yoshida highlights the privileged status of criticism in modern literature:

> In the history of modern literature, criticism and poetry are close to each other to the point of them being regarded as almost identical, but in the case of criticism, prose read silently can create strongly physical impressions together with subtle effects of language no less than can poetical language, which leads us to say that the linguistic subtlety of criticism is superior to that of poetry. (26-27)

This observation also casts fresh light on a set of Wilde's key notions in his criticism, such as 'soul,' 'mind,' and 'beauty' in terms of what can be called 'anti-representational materialism of spirit or mind.'

The Invisible Void in Art

Yoshida places especial stress on the dialogical form of Wilde's criticism, with 'The Critic as Artist' in particular, as expressing a physical materialisation of Wildean spirit/mind/prose. Given

this, the text's desire to subvert the artistic assumption of mimetic representation is noteworthy. This becomes evident when Ernest, serving as a dramatic foil to Gilbert's brilliancy, naively wonders: 'the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not; that is your theory, I believe?' (Wilde 1030). Clearly discernible is the way in which a typically Wildean paradox of Gilbert works to deride the serious or 'earnest' efforts of Victorian painters to represent a visual object as objectively as possible or 'as it is.'

More significant is that Gilbert's 'theory' implies that any artistic impulse to visualise objects can suppress something invisible:

> Most of our elderly English painters […] striving to render, by visible form or colour, the marvel of what is invisible, the splendour of what is not seen. Their pictures are, as a natural consequence, insufferably tedious. They have degraded the invisible arts into the obvious arts, and the one thing not worth looking at is the obvious. (1031)

> The sculptor gladly surrenders imitative colour, and the painter the actual dimensions of form, because by such renunciations they are able to avoid too definitive a presentation of the Real, which would be mere imitation, and too definitive a realisation of the Ideal, which would be too purely intellectual. It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty, and so addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone […]. (1031)

There is no doubt that the capitalised 'Art' in Wilde's aesthetics is not a 'realisation' of the reality in the Victorian sense of the term, but a certain unique kind of expression of 'what is invisible' and 'what is not seen.' It follows that their 'marvel' and 'splendour' require artists

to 'surrender imitative colour' or 'actual dimensions of form.' Hence Gilbert and Wilde's paradox that what is worth seeing is what cannot be seen and the very 'incompleteness' of visual arts makes them 'complete.' This paradox is a brilliant critique of nineteenth-century European mimetic realism and an aesthetic privileging of something invisible.

No less intriguingly, this Wildean exaltation of invisibility serves as a critical language which glorifies what is not accomplished by artists as 'void,' while creating it as 'Beauty itself':

> It is the highest Criticism, for it criticises not merely the individual work of art, but Beauty itself, and fills with wonder a form which the artist may have left void, not understand, or understood incompletely. (1030)

This means that the impossibility of 'Art' urges 'the highest Criticism' to aspire for 'Beauty itself' as 'void' and this desire for the impossibility is called 'ΕΡΩΣ ΤΩΝ ΑΔΥΝΑΤΩΝ, that *Amour de l'Impossible'* in both ancient Greek and French. This critical affectivity, driven by the impossible, 'falls like a madness on many' (1029) 'so that they sicken suddenly with the poison of unlimited desire, and, in the infinite pursuit of what they may not obtain, grow faint and swoon or stumble' (1030). We may be reminded of a Lacanian jouissance as a repetitive-compulsive enjoyment beyond the Freudian pleasure principle. It naturally follows that this sort of 'Beauty' manifests itself in paradoxical ontology: 'Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing' (1030). This paradox of everything/nothing is also reminiscent of the Lacanian 'void' as an impossible 'plenitude.' [4]

Negative Materialism

Despite the deceptive clarity of his style, what makes Wilde's logic

complicated and opaque is a comingling of his preoccupation with the impossible or negative and his adoration of a concrete manifestation of it:

> […] just as Nature is matter struggling into mind, so Art is mind expressing itself under the condition of matter, and thus, even in the lowliest of her manifestations, she speaks to both sense and soul alike […]. Like Aristotle, like Goethe after he had read Kant, we desire the concrete, and nothing but the concrete can satisfy us. (1040)

Emerging here is an aesthetic dimension in which something metaphysical——'mind' or 'soul'——'expresses itself' in a physical and concrete form. This is one significant version of Wilde's aestheticisation of Art as a materialisation of something invisible, which he himself appropriately called '*Amour de l'Impossible*.' What is desired here is an impossible physicalisation of something non-material and metaphysical as the negative core or 'void' of Wildean Art.

This aesthetics could be termed 'physical metaphysics' and draws our attention to Wilde's use of paradox for paradox's sake. The logic of 'The Critic as Artist' is doubly twisted by Wildean paradoxes: the text strives to see something invisible, while at the same time arguing for the physical materiality of the invisible. Of importance is Wilde's recurring use of reflexive pronouns, which brings us back to his attachment to the 'language-for-language's-sake' self-referentiality of art and literature. This can be taken to designate the way in which Wildean art does not refer to anything other than itself, and thereby aspires for an impossible event, where this artistic un-referentiality reveals itself as a materialisation of its own invisible 'soul' in such a self-referential manner. The concluding part of this text defines the essence of art criticism as an impossible drive to 'speak to' this

impossibility:

> It is Criticism that, recognising no position as final, and refusing to bind itself by the shallow shibboleths of any sect or school, creates that serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake, and loves it not the less because it knows it to be unattainable. (1057)

The Genealogy of Physical Metaphysics

Wilde's physical metaphysics thus read is evocative of the Marxist genealogy of this sort of antinomy. Of interest in this connection is Yasuo Kawabata's book review of Jiro Ono's work on William Morris, where Kawabata is reminded of Gershom Scholem's recollection of Walter Benjamin's work as characterised by 'a frequently mysterious comingling of two types of thinking: metaphysical or theological and materialistic.'[5] This 'Janus-faced' textuality——as Scholem puts it——is reflective of Benjamin's endeavour to transplant his 'metaphysical and theological way of thinking' into his 'materialistic world view,' only to be 'divided between the two' (40). Kawabata, displaying considerable discernment, associates this Benjaminian predicament with the Japanese Marxist Kiyoteru Hanada's daring reevaluation of Marxist materialism as 'a liberation of mysticism' or 'the methodology of grasping a physical mystery as it is' (41). Inspired by Hanada, Kawabata posits the ontological temporality of such a physical mystery (grasped as it is) as 'not-yet-ness' or "an existence which has not yet existed,' alluding to Ernst Bloch (42).

This genealogy of the works of 'heretical Marxists' serves to bring into relief the significance of Ono's glorification of Morris as a Marxist art critic, who denounces the mechanisation of Marxist materialism as a renunciation of the ontological, temporal, and utopian dimension of this 'not-yet-ness' (42). In other words, the orthodox mechanical

Marxist materialism is devoid of this 'spirit of negativity' (43). This lack of negativity also allows Marxist materialism to 'relinquish "quality" as the unqualifiable' (43), the kind of quality which Ono reads——or feels tactually and textually——materialised in 'the rhythm of a thing itself' or 'the pulse of the hands of those who created it.' It is precisely in this sense (of feeling) of Morris's physical mysticism——or mystical physicality——that we can discern within everything the potentiality of it becoming a decoration. Or rather, in Ono's aesthetics, Kawabata stresses, a thing is a synonym of a decoration and vice versa. A thing or decoration——thus felt——is something which is excessive of itself (44). In Ono's own words, Morissian thing or design is a materialised 'revival of a vast amount of something which has not yet been integrated into history' and this aesthetics can only be felt or appreciated tactually 'at the level of sensually physical principle.'[6] Ono's reading of Morris is thus fascinated with a materialisation of something unhistoricised and their art criticism is driven by this 'level of sensually physical principle' as 'the spirit of negativity.'

Wilde and Post-Cubist Abstract Materialism

Wilde can be labelled as a disciple of Morrissian socialism, an approach which finds another justification in their shared physical metaphysics or materialistic engrossment in negativity. Their corresponding attachment to the negative not only highlights this socialist genealogy from Morris to Wilde, but it further situates the latter——Wilde——as a precursor to avant-garde art after Cubism in the twentieth century.

Kenjiro Okazaki's Abstract *Art as Impact: The Concrete Genealogy of Abstract Art* (2018) maintains that the essential core of arts after Cubism is materialism: what 'matters' in avant-garde arts is the concreteness of abstraction. Okazaki's critical interest ranges from Europe to Japan and Roger Fry is presented as a key figure in the

former context:

> As is well known, it was the painter and critic Roger Fry (1866-1934) who articulated the problematics of Post-impressionism and defined Fauvism and Cubism as its development. Fry, who curated the famous Post-Impressionist Exhibition, pointed out that painters moving from Post-Impressionism to Cubism had detached themselves from the visual information perceived by the eye. Instead, they aimed to logically compose the real and definite imagery of objects that is grasped and recognized beyond the mere sensory input. (2-3)

Hence, 'at the core of Cubism was a disinterest in representational images that vision could grasp at a glance' (3). Okazaki examines a great variety of examples of this sort of 'object that is grasped and recognized beyond mere sensory input' in Japanese as well as European contexts; one intriguing case in Japan can be found in the work of Ryūsei Kishida (1891-1929), a contemporary of Fry. Okazaki stresses that Kishida's 'paintings certainly aligned themselves with Post-Cubism problematics in the endeavor to realize *Mukei* [formlessness]——something that cannot be localized as visual object' (29). This invisible dimension can manifest itself as 'a plastic, formless, material truth that exceeds familiar appearance of the visible figure' (28). Crucial here is thus the materiality of the invisible.

As I have already argued elsewhere[7], Fry's post-impressionism can also be considered as preoccupied with this kind of negative materiality. Fry's physical metaphysics is urged by his annoyed frustration with an impressionist reduction of physical objects to visual images on the retina and resulting fragmentation and virtual disappearance of their materiality. Fry's key word in this materialist critique of the ocularcentric impressionism is 'a thing itself'——a

certain physical and affective intensity which takes forms of 'rhythm.' Fry's rhythm——something, by definition, invisible——thus materialises itself in the 'thing' thus speculated. Fry himself is divided between his aesthetic confidence in and epistemological skepticism about this negative materialism. The latter leads him to regard this aesthetics as 'mysticism.' Worth mentioning here is that this critique of the modern positivist and impressionist ocularcentrism requires Fry to re-foreground the aesthetic significance of pre-modern Italian art, wherein he believes he can grasp 'a thing itself' as it is. This reminds us that Wilde's anti-modern modernism is also an excavation of the aesthetic potentialities inherent in ancient Greek art.

Given this genealogical background, we need to retort to Virginia Woolf's observation: 'on or about 1910, human character changed' (421). This has been taken to refer to the year when Fry's post-impressionist exhibition took place and argue in favour of the real modernity of their Bloomsbury modernism. If we correlate Yoshida's assertion——'Modernity started in Britain with Wilde'——with our genealogy of physical metaphysics, however, we should return to 1891, when Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist' was published, in order to identify the year in which British anti-modern modernism discovered itself in the real sense of the term.

It is interesting here to mention Paul de Man, who discerns a suppression of 'a thing itself' in what he calls 'post-romantic' poetics in such a way as recalls Fry's criticism of impressionism. His point is that the collapse of pre-modern representational system forced William Wordsworth, for example, to witness 'a naked thing' exposing itself. De Man examines how this Wordsworthian traumatically materialistic experience was repressed after the poet, while terming this reaction 'post-romantic.'[8] In this regard, I contend, we can also correlate de Man's argument with ours and regard Oscar Wilde as a critic of 'post-romantic' aesthetics as well.

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Notes

1 Yoshida Ken-ichi, *Modern Literature in Britain* [*eikoku no kindai bungaku]*. 1959, Chikuma-shobo, 1974, 3. All citations from this text are my own translations and hereafter page references will be given in parentheses after quotation.

2 For an excellent study on this topic, for instance, see Martin Jay, his *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (U of California P, 1993) or Mineo Takamura, *Modernity of Touching* [*furerukotono modernity*], Ibunsha, 2017.

3 See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. 1981, Routledge, 1983, 199-203.

4 For one possible explanation of this sublimation of negativity, see Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book VII,* ed. Jacques Alain-Miller and trans. Dennis Porter, W. W. Norton, 1997. As for a brilliant Lacanian reading of Wilde's negativity, see Hideaki Suzuki, 'The Portrait as a Hole: The Politics of Representation in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."' *The Journal of Yamawaki-gakuen Junior College*, vol. 37 (1999): 97-107. Another biographical possibility is the influence of the Hegelian negativity on Wilde, who was an avid reader of this philosopher at Oxford. For this, see Oscar Wilde's *Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making,* eds. Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, Oxford UP, 1989.

5 Yasuo Kawabata, '"Mystery Resides in Something Visible [Shinpi wa menimieru mono no nakani aru],"' Book Review of *Decorative Art: William Morris and Others* [*Soushoku geijyutsu: William Morris to*

sono shuhen] by Ono Jiro, *Poiesis*, vol. 5 (1982), 40. All citations from this text are my own translations and hereafter page references will be given in parentheses after quotation.

6 Ono Jiro, *Decorative Art*: *William Morris and Others* [*Soushoku geijyutsu: William Morris to sono shuhen*], Seidosha, 1979, 32, 33. All citations from this text are my own translations.

7 See Fuhito Endo, 'Landscape and Affect, or the Primal Scene of Romanticism: The Aesthetics of Roger Fry and Virginia Woolf,' *Seikei Review of English*, vol. 21 (2017): 53-61.

8 For this discussion, see the above article.

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