Petra Burianová, *Polarities in the Works of Oscar Wilde*
Review of a BA thesis

Petra Burianová chose an ambitious and complex topic for her thesis, perhaps too ambitious and broad for a study of some forty pages, but she has proved to be able to tackle it with a great deal of enthusiasm and sense of proportion. Her bibliography is definitely imposing and makes a good basis for further, more detailed, work on the same topic. Yet it lacks some important items too as I will try to show later.

The aim of the thesis is defined as an attempt to explore “the socio-cultural background of Wilde’s life and work,” to provide “a deeper insight into his private life and its consequences – his imprisonment,” and to discuss his “literary and philosophical influences” (8). This wide spectrum is somewhat at odds with what the title suggests, the more so that what we actually get is a mosaic of different aspects of his life, rather than work, where various kinds of polarities or contradictions are at play. This is not to say that Petra’s account lacks in depth; she can make admirable use of all sort of information she excerpted from her sources, but the way she involves Wilde’s works in the discussion is hardly more than as illustrations. Critical analysis of one or two works would, I believe, connect this background context with Wilde’s practical aesthetics more convincingly. Moreover, the selection of Wilde’s own writings seems rather arbitrary: instead of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* with its theme of corruption or *Salomé* with its polarity of the desires of the body and the desires of the soul would be more adequate.

The tendency to cover as many contradictory aspects of Wilde’s life and career, laudable as it by all means is, results, however, in a number of inaccuracies and simplifications. Thus e.g. when Petra claims that “[a]lready the classicists wanted to correct nature, to imitate it as it should be” (18) she should distinguish between the goals of the Neoclassicist and Wildean aesthetics: while the former sought the ideal universal laws of beauty to be applied in art, the latter aspired to replacing the natural by the artificial, i.e. by the supreme product of the creative mind. Similarly, the passage on dandyism calls for more accuracy: English aesthetic dandyism is miles away from Balzac’s (or Carlyle’s) conception, it is a question of subversive aesthetic gesture rather than elegance (on this, see e.g. F. Cobulence’s *Dandyisme*). The account of Wilde’s attitude to the Decadent movement should also be more specific: while befriending young French writers such as Schwob and Louÿs, he was almost hostile to the English proponents of Decadence such as Arthur Symons or Aubrey Beardsley and ostentatiously shunned their activities (the meetings of the Rhymer’s Club, the Verlaine English tour, the *Yellow Book*, etc.; see M. Sturgis’s *Passionate Attitudes* or W. Gaunt’s *The Aesthetic Adventure*). Occasionally some parts sound almost pointless: what is e.g. the relevance of Wilde’s religiosity (the Protestant-Catholic polarity) (38)? How does this determine polarities in his work? This should be explained properly as Catholicism plays a significant role in the fin-de-siècle context (on this, see E. Hanson’s *Decadence and Catholicism*).

The above remarks are not meant to discredit Petra’s effort but to show how complex and demanding the topic really is. One can indeed identify other polarities which are missing in the account, e.g. Wilde’s appeal to the bourgeois audience on the one hand (in his comedies) and to the elitist intellectual readers and connoisseurs on the other (e.g. by the exquisite edition of his poem *The Sphinx*); his proclivity to *épater le bourgeois* and to entertain the middle classes at the same time; his elitist seclusion and his irresistible self-promotion; his above mentioned decadent and anti-decadent attitudes, etc.
The thesis is very well structured, even though it reads as an extended preface to a more analysis-oriented study, due to incessant references to critical sources, rather than a satisfyingly completed work of criticism. More disquieting are marks of neglect in the final editing of the text – some titles in the footnotes are italicized, some are not, there are occasional undeleted remnants of later rephrasing (“Not the in the sense,” etc.) and the use of quotation marks is sometimes confusing.

To conclude: I believe that many readers may find the thesis a useful guideline to Oscar Wilde; it is readable, lucid, albeit not flawless as I have tried to demonstrate. I do not hesitate to recommend it for defence with the preliminary grade of very good (velmi dobře).

30 August 2013

PhDr. Zdeněk Beran, Ph.D.