

Subjective identity in the operas of James Wilson

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In the words of Maynard Solomon:

Few would altogether deny the presence of a 'personal factor' in creativity. But many minimize its importance or assert that it cannot be adequately measured [...] the creative act unites extremes of subjectivity and collective experience, even the most inimitable of psychic materials—dreams and fantasies—belong to a common stock.¹

Solomon further declares that:

biographical 'causation' of art takes place on many simultaneous levels. These are simultaneous only in the sense that the human psyche is historical, retaining the impress of archaic patterns of behaviour while constantly being reconstituted through its assimilation of present experience and its anticipation of future events.²

The concept of subjective identity and its expression in operas by Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942) is central to Sherry Denise Lee's research entitled 'Opera, Narrative, and the Modernist Crisis of Historical Subjectivity'.³ Lee's thesis examines Theodor W. Adorno's (1902-1969) assertion that modern works of art are dialectical expressions of the individual creative artist alienated within the workings of modern society. Lee draws on Adorno's musical aesthetics, Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytical theories and on writers who have contributed to this concept. While having significant recourse to Adorno's appraisal of these operas in his 1959 essays on Zemlinsky,

¹ Maynard Solomon, 'Thoughts on Biography', *19th Century Music*, 5/3 (1982),

² Lee, 'Opera, Narrative, and the Modernist Crisis of Historical Subjectivity', unpublished doctoral thesis, University of British Columbia, referred to as Lee, 'Opera'.

Lee challenges Adorno's views on both libretti and compositional style by examining both in terms of the issues of subjective identity, which they explore.

Lee's research into Zemlinsky's opera *Der Zwerg* (*The Dwarf*), asserts that both text and music convey the personal expression of two identities: the author Oscar Wilde and the composer Zemlinsky, both marginalized creative artists. Parallels are drawn between their historical situations and the issues of subjectivity explored in the text in order to provide a critical interpretation from this standpoint. Zemlinsky's libretto for *Der Zwerg* (1921) is based on Wilde's short story *The Birthday of the Infanta*, written in 1891. The tale is set in the imperial court of Spain on the occasion of the Infanta's twelfth birthday. The most popular performer is an ugly, deformed dwarf whose clumsy dance movements incite laughter and delight, particularly from the Infanta, who throws him a white rose and asks him to dance for her later. He is enchanted with her and takes the rose to be a token of her affection. Unaware of his ugliness, he later waits in the garden to dance for the Infanta. Within the garden, the birds and the lizards like him for his kind nature but the elegant flowers proclaim: 'He should certainly be kept indoors for the rest of his natural life'.⁴ The dwarf wanders around the magnificent halls of the palace in search of the lovely Infanta. Unexpectedly, he finds a room with a large mirror. Gazing at his reflection, he gradually recognizes that the grotesque image is his own. He realises that everyone, including the Infanta, has not been laughing happily with him but heartlessly at him. This realisation breaks his heart and he dies.

In terms of subjective identity, the dwarfs' sensitive nature and sad plight is a biographical double of the author, Oscar Wilde. During his career, he was publicly disparaged for his behaviour, his views and his unique personal appearance. He was eventually imprisoned in 1895 for the crime of gross indecency, the term applied at the time to homosexual practices and speedily abandoned by a sizeable percentage of his friends and high society.

Lee's thesis further asserts the composer Zemlinsky to be the Dwarf's second biographical double. In 1921, it was Zemlinsky's

⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1994), pp. 234-247.

personal choice to use Wilde's tale as the dramatic subject for his opera, renaming it *Der Zwerg* (The Dwarf). Contemporary accounts of Zemlinsky's appearance describe him as 'chinless and small, with bulging eyes...'⁵ His relationships with women were frustrating, most notably his love affair with his composition student Alma Schindler, who referred to him as 'a hideous dwarf' in her diaries and complained of his ugliness, his smell and his Jewishness.⁶ When she became engaged to Gustav Mahler some weeks after the affair ended, it was 'the most shattering set-back of his life'.⁷ Apart from his physiognomy, Zemlinsky identifies with the Dwarf's character in that he too was marginalized by society because of his '[...] Jewishness, the refusal of the Viennese public to accept his work, and his "exile" to Prague for the central years of his career'.⁸ In terms of subjective identity, George Klaren, the librettist for the opera, made significant alterations to Wilde's text, manipulating the Dwarf's character to become a reflection of Zemlinsky and freely imbuing Wilde's text with sexual undercurrents: the Dwarf is transformed into a musician and has Jewish origins while the Infanta is now celebrating her eighteenth birthday. Consequently, the Dwarf's infatuation with the Infanta is no longer one of mere affection but is now 'erotic in nature' rendering the theme of sexual rejection palpable.⁹

Lee's study of subjective identity in the Zemlinsky / Wilde opera provides an intellectual backdrop for the present study, which explores three operas of Wilson: *The Hunting of the Snark* (1963) *Letters to Theo* (1982) and *Grinning at the Devil* (1986-1988).

As with Zemlinsky's use of a story by Wilde, it was Wilson's choice to use Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1874) as the dramatic subject for his children's opera. This fact alone is surprising since it has long been disputed whether Carroll specifically wrote this extraordinarily long poem for a young audience. The poem

⁵ See Beaumont, *Zemlinsky*, 27 and 74 ff., as cited in Lee, 'Opera' p.136.

⁶ As documented in Beaumont, ch. 5 "Alma gentil" (74-84), and ch. 6 "Alma crudel" (85-89), as cited in Lee, 'Opera, Narrative, and the Modernist Crisis of Historical Subjectivity', p. 137.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lee, 'Opera', p. 139.

⁹ Ibid, p. 143.

has no young protagonists, it does not end happily, the Baker disappears, the Banker loses his sanity and the original illustrations of the crew-members in the 1875 publication caricature them as middle-aged with disproportionate heads and unpleasant features.¹⁰ Yet when Wilson received his first commission in 1963 to write the first Irish opera for children, he was immediately taken with Carroll's poem, which he insisted on adapting himself for a libretto that would satisfy his dramatic, aesthetic and, as argued here, subjective requirements.

According to Julius Portnoy, the artist can 'find himself subject to stimulus [...] which will bring into play associative memories and impressions that have long lain dormant in the unconscious faculty'.¹¹ Harry Slochower asserts that, 'In a work of many dimensions, such as [...] an opera, the artist symbolically enacts roles which are at once within and beyond his immediate experience'.¹² This article argues that Carroll's poem, *The Hunting of the Snark*, provided the perfect stimulus for Wilson to recall past memories and re-enact past experiences through artistic creation. The plot is essentially a long voyage in search of a Snark. It is nonsensical and fantastical, but represented for Wilson a means of re-enacting the memories of his earlier life in the Navy and his two years travelling on the yacht *Vistona* with his lifelong partner Lt. Commander John Campbell.

It was in 1937, aged fifteen, that Wilson first set sail on a school cruise up the coast of Norway. Two years later, in May 1939, he started work in the Admiralty. In 1941, he was transferred to the Navy and his home for the following four years was the ship, the *HMS Impulsive*. His predilection for this period of his life is palpable as he recalls in his memoirs:

I heard Roy Henderson sing Schumann's Dichterliebe. Next day, I was up the mast of the *HMS Impulsive*, lubricating the radar aerial. Suddenly I remembered Schumann's melody: 'Allnächtlich im Träume'

¹⁰ Martin Gardner: 'Introduction and extensive notes', in *The Annotated Snark*: (New York: Simon & Schuster 1962), pp. 30–36.

¹¹ Julius Portnoy: 'A Psychological Theory of Artistic Creation', *College Art Journal*, 10/ 1. (1950), pp. 23–29, (p. 24).

¹² Ralph J. Hallman, 'Aesthetic Motivation in the Creative Arts', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 23/4 (Summer, 1965), 453–459, (p. 457).

(Every night in my dreams, I see you). It was an illumination, the sun was shining, Schumann was there, and life was wonderful.¹³

During this period, Wilson sailed to places such as Normandy, Norway, Iceland and as far away as Russia. However, as a consequence of contracting tuberculosis, from which he eventually made a full recovery, Wilson was forced to take early retirement from the Navy in 1945. It was five years later, commencing 2 August 1950, before he could once again experience the freedom of sailing the seas. An entirely new experience was in store this time as he set sail with his partner of two years, Lt. Commander John Campbell, on a two-year voyage around the coast of Europe. As Wilson reflects: 'The first half of my education had been given to me by my mother. The second half started on John's yacht, *Vistona*, a thirty-ton gaff cutter, teak-decked and planked on grown oak frames'.¹⁴ Recounting memorable events of this trip occupies four pages of Wilson's memoirs where he recollects his travels 'from Dun Laoghaire to Corcubion on the North-West tip of Spain, down the coast to Gibraltar via Vigo, Lisbon and Cadiz, Majorca, Cagliari and Ischia in the Bay of Naples'.¹⁵ When they finally settled back in Monkstown, Dublin, circa 1952, Wilson and Campbell were inseparable until the latter's death in 1975. So taken was Wilson with this voyage, that, he wrote a long and detailed article recounting events which he submitted for publication to *The Rudder* magazine in 1951. The magazine published his seventeen-page article entitled 'Dublin to Athens in *Vistona*' over three issues between June-August 1951'.¹⁶

¹³ James Wilson, 'From the Top', (unpublished memoirs), p. 21.

¹⁴ The *Vistona* was built in 1937 by Dickies Shipbuilders, Bangor, (Wales) and designed by MacPherson Campbell (no relation).

<<http://belleplaisance.blogspot.com>> [accessed 10 March 2008]

¹⁵ James Wilson, 'From the Top', (unpublished memoirs), p.21.Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁶ James Wilson: 'Dublin to Athens in *Vistona*', *The Rudder Magazine for Yachtsmen*, *The Rudder Publishing Company* 61/10/11/12 (1951) pp. 5-9, 50-56, 28-31, 20-23. Hereafter referred to as Wilson: 'Dublin to Athens'. *The Rudder* magazines were kindly supplied to Brian Grimson by the current owner of the *Vistona*: Duke Gian Battista Borea d'Olmo of Monaco.

The Hunting of the Snark (1963)

In *The Hunting of the Snark*, there is much evidence to assert that the biographical doubles of Wilson and Campbell are reflected in the characters of the Baker and the Bellman. The first striking feature is Wilson's assignment of roles to the various characters aboard the ship. All of the vocal parts are entrusted to children with the exception of two male adult roles, the Baker and the Bellman. Ironically, Carroll's depiction of both characters in the poem is generally quite an accurate portrayal of how Wilson would have perceived himself and his partner aboard the yacht, *Vistona*. As Wilson recounts: 'John was responsible for the navigation and the brainwork. I did the cooking and gave a hand at whatever else was needed: painting, scraping, mending, cleaning, polishing or stowing away'.¹⁷ Wilson's reflections reveal much about how he viewed their various strengths and abilities. According to Wilson:

John had been educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge where he had studied engineering and chemistry. In 1924, he had taken part as a pole-vaulter in the Paris Olympics. He had been a naval officer throughout the war, [a rank that had not been available to Wilson given his educational background]... Campbell had planned the capture of General von Kreipe, the German officer commanding Crete. With these and other operations, he had won himself a Distinguished Service Order and a Distinguished Service Cross¹⁸

These honours were traditionally awarded for gallantry during active operations against the enemy.

In the opera, the Bellman, representing Campbell, is in charge of the crew and is very much the figure of authority. The crew respect and trust him. The role of the Baker, representing Wilson, powerfully reflects his personality, certainly as his contemporaries viewed him. The Baker is likeable, sociable, an excellent worker and, similar to the navy's rules, trusts the Bellman's ways of running the ship. In addition, he is also a cook, which was Wilson's favourite pastime. Furthermore, there is a parallel in terms of age since Wilson was approaching his forty-

¹⁷ James Wilson, 'From the Top', (unpublished memoirs), p. 35.

¹⁸ Wilson, 'From the Top', p. 31.

second year when he finished the opera and was forty-three when it was produced. Carroll's original poem suggests that the Baker is forty-two years of age or thereabouts. Certainly, forty-two is significant in the plot. When the Baker is telling his life story, he relates, 'I skip forty years'.¹⁹ In relation to the Baker's luggage, he had 'forty-two boxes, all carefully packed, with his name painted clearly on each', suggesting perhaps one box for every year of his life.²⁰

Surprisingly, the age factor provides yet another biographical link, this time to the author Lewis Carroll, who was also forty-two years of age when he wrote the poem in 1874. Research conducted by Martin Gardner similarly contends that the subjective identity of Carroll is reflected in the Baker. In support of his argument, Gardner claims the text to be imbued with clues that suggest Carroll's conscious intention that the Baker should represent himself. In addition to the age parallel, the Baker forgets his name so his identity remains unknown to the other crewmembers, and the Baker's character, described in the first section, corresponds with other artistic representations of the author as himself.²¹ Accordingly, as Lee's thesis asserts the character of the Dwarf in *Der Zwerg* to have two biographical doubles, this chapter contends that there are two biographical doubles involved: the author Carroll and the composer Wilson.

As Wilson's original intention was to create *The Snark* as a companion piece to Britten's *The Little Sweep*, he employs similar orchestral forces to those in the Britten score: string quartet, piano duet (one piano, four hands) and percussion. However, there is a clear divergence in relation to the adult roles. Britten includes seven adult vocal roles while Wilson includes only two, assigned to the Bellman and the Baker. Also, while Britten omits the baritone range, Wilson includes one baritone voice. This was Wilson's favourite range and he assigns this to The Bellman, which may be considered as an aesthetic imperative.

¹⁹ Lewis Carroll, 'Fit the Third, The Baker's Tale' in *The Hunting of the Snark* (Harvard, Massachusetts, The MacMillan Company, 1898), p. 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²¹ Martin Gardner: 'Introduction and extensive notes', in *The Annotated Snark*: (New York: Simon & Schuster 1962) pp. 30–36.

Wilson's recollections as published in *The Rudder* magazine for yachtsmen in the June, July and August issues of 1951, portray a busy ship of friends and deckhands arriving and departing, one arrival coinciding with the other's departure. Setting sail from Dun Laoghaire on 2 August 1950 were a crew of five, which Wilson recounts:

John, the owner, captain and navigator [...] Rory, a gynaecologist, Jim, a musician, the paid hand Ernie and Ronnie, an ex-naval officer. Ronnie and Rory were on their summer leave of a few weeks and the others free for the duration of the voyage.²²

According to Wilson, the only female ever on board over the two-year trip was 'Anne, Ronnie's wife, who had been in Lisbon for some days.'²³ Wilson writes fondly of her, noting that although she 'joined the galley staff, [she] regularly could be seen in her swimming costume [...] drying her hair under the wind sail'.²⁴ This could account for Wilson placing all of the crew at various duties at the opening of Act 1, with the exception of the Bonnet Maker who is sunning herself under her parasol. It may also feasibly account for Wilson's major change in the adaption of Carroll's poem for the libretto by removing a full section entitled 'The Barrister's Dream' and replacing it with a complex ballet / pantomime section specifically for the only female on board. The following example is suggestive of the banter on board the *Vistona*. The Bellman has asked the Baker to tell them his life story, but he is impatient that the Baker's story will not become too long-winded.

²² Wilson, 'Dublin to Athens', pp. 5–9 (p.5).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–9 (p. 5).

Example 1. Wilson: *The Hunting of the Snark* Op. 8, 'Fit the Second', scene i: 'My father and mother were honest, though poor', bars 1–30

Valse Lente

Baker *P*
My fa-ther and mo-ther were hon - est, though poor

7 Baker *P*
I skip for-ty years and pro-ceede with-out fur-

[Bellman] *mp* *parlando*
Skip all that

12 Baker
ther re - mark to the day when you took me a board of your ship to— help you in hunt

17 Baker
ing the Snark A dear un - cle of mine Af-ter whom— I was

22 [Treble/Alto] *mp*
Tr. A. Oh skip your dear un - cle oh skip your dear un - cle

Bak. named What,

Bell. *mp*
Oh skip your dear un - cle oh skip your dear un - cle

27 *poco rall.* *mp* (spoken) I wish you wouldn't DO that!
Bak. skip my dear un - cle?

Letters to Theo (1982) and Grinning at the Devil (1984/1986)

The Hunting of the Snark has been examined in some detail from the perspective of subjective identity, for the purpose of this chapter. Observations with regard to Wilson's choice of subjects for his third and fourth operas also are considered broadly within this context. Though subjective identity can be exemplified as re-enactments of past experiences, another aspect of personal identification featured in the operas is Wilson's attraction to creative figures that are in some way isolated from their surrounding society. While Wilson openly admits to being drawn towards such peripheral characters, the question remains: what was his aesthetic purpose for engaging such figures as the principal protagonists within his dramatic plots? In response, this chapter contends that Wilson was implicitly marginalized and isolated both during his formative years and as an adult living as an exile in Dublin. Contemplating his youth, Wilson describes himself as 'a rather solitary child'.²⁵ Left fatherless at four years of age, his two brothers Alex and Rob, 'were separated from [him] by the vast gulf of four and five years'.²⁶ The one emotionally stable element during this period was the reciprocated, profound love and admiration for his mother. When Wilson moved to Dublin in 1948 to take up residence in Monkstown with his life partner Lt. Commander John Campbell, he left behind London, a city benefiting from a post-war boom, to enter an Irish culture and society that was submerged in the economic and cultural doldrums. Irish society in the 1950s and 1960s was conservative, illiberal and religiously orientated. As Diarmuid Ferriter notes: 'the laws relating to homosexuality were draconian, and dated from 1861, when section 61 of the Offences against the State Act stipulated: "whosoever shall be convicted of this abominable crime ...[shall] be kept in penal servitude for life."²⁷ David Norris's proceedings to change this law did not begin until 1977. As Norris recalled, the difficulty was not just a legal one, but also 'a barrier in terms of popular and political prejudice'. The High Court and the Supreme Court dismissed Norris's case in 1980. The then Chief Justice, Tom O'Higgins, asserted that 'the deliberate practice

²⁵ Wilson, 'From the Top', p. 10.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Diarmaid Ferriter, '1970-2000', in *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*, 1st edn, (Profile Books Ltd., 2004), pp. 623-759, (p. 715). Hereafter referred to as Ferriter, '1970-2000'.

of homosexuality is morally wrong, that it is damaging both to the health of individuals and the public and finally, that it is potentially harmful to the institution of marriage'.²⁸ Within the British Isles, homosexuality was decriminalised in England and Wales in 1967, Scotland, in 1980, Northern Ireland, in 1982 and, astonishingly, in the Republic, as late as 1993. Though Norris had succeeded in winning his case in 1988 at the European Court of Human Rights, it was the Catholic Church who had remained staunchly opposed. It is significant that, shortly after this, Wilson took out Irish citizenship in 1995 at the age of seventy-three. Senator Norris, acquainted with Wilson over a number of years, strongly supports the view that Wilson '[...] had been deeply scarred in his past by a feeling of rejection and unworthiness as a gay man' and he [Wilson] would categorically have seen '[...] himself as a marginalized creative artist living in Dublin as an English homosexual'.²⁹

Within Irish society, he was viewed by all who knew him as a socialite, an absolute gentleman and a total conformist in every way that he could be. Wilson was certainly not known for exhibiting symptoms of cultural estrangement yet he was intrinsically a solitary person. His homosexuality was a taboo subject that he rarely discussed among heterosexual colleagues or friends, and he openly disparaged questions with regard to his cultural identity. Wilson and Campbell's social lives, in the 1950s, revolved around and within a small elite sector of what were then termed 'Anglo-Irish' society. This society itself, as a cohesive community, was a minority within Ireland who conceivably viewed themselves very much as a marginalized community. Though Wilson gradually integrated himself into musical life in Dublin by actively involving himself in improving conditions for musicians, composers and performers, it was fifteen years before he received any form of public attention.

In the language of Riesman: the 'inner-directed' type of person, whose motivation is provided by his own staunch values and convictions, is being supplanted by the "outer-directed" type, whose mirror-personality [endeavours] to reflect what is going on around

²⁸ Diarmaid Ferriter, '1970–2000', p. 715.

²⁹ Correspondence with Senator David Norris, 1 May 2008.

him.³⁰ Fromm similarly points out that contemporary society is not so much concerned with how people are but how they seem. Hence, they become so intent upon playing roles that their inner life dries up.³¹ Wilson's psyche establishes itself comfortably within this categorization: the desire to conform, be a wonderful entertainer, generous, caring, hard-working, a 'gentle' gentleman, a man of character, distinction and integrity: in short a model citizen, yet all the while always demonstrating a constant aversion to discussing on any level issues which would have him appear different or at odds within society. This assertion helps explain Wilson's subjective identification with the protagonists in his operas as an expressive creative outlet for his personal experiences and feelings of isolation, freedom, escapism and the struggle for selfhood of an artistic marginalized figure discordant within his society. These complex subjective themes purposefully pervade the plots of *Letters to Theo* and *Griming at the Devil*.

The gestation period of *Letters to Theo* was ten years. It was during the 1960s that Wilson [...] had read and been very moved by Vincent Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo'.³² The entire narrative essentially reflects an extreme case of the artist in isolation and reveals much about Van Gogh's creative and thought processes. Surfacing regularly is Van Gogh's struggle for a sense of selfhood through his desire to have his paintings accepted. The individual letters though moving are not unduly dramatic. It is more the cumulative aspect of the narrative that firmly establishes the opera's dramatic impetus. The chorus reflects his creative thoughts reciting Van Gogh's detailed discernments of light and colour and descriptions of nature, as only a true visual artist can perceive them. Intrinsicly embedded in the isolation theme is the concept of escapism, fantasy and freedom. Van Gogh withdrew from society and its conventions and retreated entirely into his creative imagination. Freedom of the mind eluded Van Gogh however and the image presented, of the caged bird bashing against the bars, is a powerful allegory for Vincent's thoughts, claustrophobic with

³⁰ 'The Lonely Crowd' (New Haven, 1950), as cited in 'The Artist as Outsider', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16/ 3 (1958), pp. 306–318, (p. 309).

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 306–318, (p. 309).

³² Wilson, 'From the Top', p. 69.

inner turmoil and voices that crowd his perceptions. While the flute conveys the fragility of the bird, the narrow intervals and fragmented vocal line portray the artist's unquestionable anxiety, bursting into extreme agitation at bars 197–98.

Example 2. Wilson: *Letters to Theo* Op. Act 1, scene ii, 'The Borinage', bars 183–201

183 *delicato colla voce* ♩ = 63
 Flute *p*
 Vincent
 A caged bird in Spring knows there is some rea-son for

187
 Fl. *poco più f* *p*
 Vin. *p*
 hic What is it? He can't re-

190 *Animando*
 Fl. *poco*
 Vin. *poco*
 mem - ber Then he says to him - self The o - thers make their

194
 Fl. *p* *mf* *mp* *f*
 Vin. *p*
 nests and lay their eggs and bring up their chicks

197
 Vin. *ff*
 and he beats his head a - gainst the bars

199 *A tempn*
 Vin. *pp* *mp* *spoken*
 But the cage is still there

Colin Wilson's research entitled 'The Alienated Artist as a Product of Western Culture' deals with the type of artistic figure that feels estranged from the world and his own deeper self. Citing Van Gogh, he notes:

his loneliness drove him first to a kind of Christian communism, then, with unabated religious ardour, to painting of feverish intensity and finally to madness and suicide. Although suffering less extremely, many creative artists have felt at odds with their society.³³

Wilson can plausibly be included within this collective group. As Brian Grimson, conductor of both productions of *The Hunting of the Snark* in 1963 and 1974 notes: 'Wilson was like a calm river beneath which were many undercurrents that were only expressed through his creative output'.³⁴

When the prominent Danish writer, Elsa Gress, was commissioned by the Riddersalen Theatre in Denmark to write a libretto, she chose to write about the life of her friend and colleague, Danish writer, Karen Blixen. The first two acts are set in Africa with Blixen's partner, Denys Finch-Hatton. Act III is set in New York thirty years later. By the time of the work's conception, all of Blixen's literature was commercially available in both Danish and English including *Letters from Africa* (1981) a posthumous publication of over two hundred letters, sent predominantly to her brother in Denmark between 1914-1931, when she resided in the Ngong Hills in Africa.

Though reared within an aristocratic family in Denmark, Blixen led an isolated and unfulfilled childhood. Her father, a writer and army officer, hanged himself when she was just ten years old. She describes her formative years as 'unhappy', restrictive and constraining, with Victorian sensibilities that had to be observed.³⁵ She was also very much 'at odds' with her family's expectations of her.³⁶ Blixen's first escape

³³ Melvin Rader, 'The Artist as Outsider', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 16/3 (March 1958), pp. 306-318, (p. 308).

³⁴ Interview with Brian Grimson, conductor of *The Hunting of the Snark*, 15 July 2007.

³⁵ <<http://www.english.emory.edu>> [accessed 27 February 2008].

³⁶ *Ibid.*

route was into the world of her creative imagination. This began at eight years with fantasy stories, which she would narrate to her family, a selection of which were published in 1907 and 1909. Her decision to marry her first cousin Baron Bror Blixen and move to Africa to open a coffee plantation provided her with a second escape mechanism from the constraints of her culture and society to a romantic exotic retreat in the Ngong Hills. She speaks of her years in Africa as a relief from her former life: 'Here at long last one was in a position not to give a damn for convention, here was a new kind of freedom'.³⁷

As Gress fashions the libretto, she engages with Blixen's identity as an isolated artist drawing on themes of loneliness, escapism, fantasy and freedom that permeate the opera in a series of complex and interwoven layers of fantasy within fantasy. Tania's solo 'Aria to Ariel' is imbued with symbolic representations of freedom that are powerfully transmitted in the narrative through bird imagery and mythology. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Ariel represents Shakespeare's creative imagination.³⁸ In Greek mythology, Ariel represents the spirit of the air. In *Grimming at the Devil*, Ariel represents the spirit of Karen's dead partner Denys, who experienced freedom through flying; like Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and fell to his death, Denys died when he crashed in his Gypsy Moth airplane. As Denys experienced freedom through flying, Tania's 'word wings' powerfully exemplify her gift to create literature through the flight of her imagination. Despite her isolation, her bereaved and destitute state, it is this freedom that will inevitably establish her sense of selfhood. While Wilson typically employs syllabic word setting, he exemplifies this symbolism by contrasting the vocal style and treating the word 'wings' melismatically over long sustained rising notes, which are then repeated to emphasize the significance:

³⁷ <<http://www.english.emory.edu>> [accessed 27 February 2008].

³⁸ Peter R. Jacoby: 'Ariel: The Creative Spirit of Shakespeare'
<<http://home.san.rr.com>> [accessed 27 February 2008]

Example 3. Wilson: *Grinning at the Devil*: Act 1, scene I, ‘Aria to Ariel’, bars 355–361

354 *poco* *poco*

of wings of wings

In both operas, freedom of the mind is inextricably linked to the creative imagination. As the image of ‘the caged bird’ in Theo exemplifies Van Gogh’s *deprivation* of freedom, the imagery of wings symbolically represents Tania’s *wealth* of freedom. Furthermore, as creative artists, it is evident that both Van Gogh and Blixen view this freedom as an essential prerequisite towards artistic creation. In terms of subjective identification, so too does Wilson who completely empathizes with their respective circumstances in this regard.

To draw parallels in terms of the aesthetic necessities of Van Gogh and Blixen, it can be argued that Wilson’s first route of escape to freedom from the constraints of 1950s Dublin was his two-year voyage around Europe. Demonstrably, his second escape route was his lifelong engagement with the composition of opera through his interaction with fantasy and the imagination. What began as the subjective identity of Wilson’s autobiographical re-enactment of past memories in *The Hunting of the Snark*, developed into a phenomenon of far broader scope. Wilson’s self-identification with creative artists: their inner solitariness, their desire for freedom and as a consequence their engagement with fantasy and the creative imagination as an aesthetic necessity, captivated Wilson’s psyche. In turn, the genre of opera offered him the opportunity to indulge in self-identification on a very deep level and provided him with a medium through which he could isolate himself, escape into a world of fantasy and be free.

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