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THE AESTHETIC IDEAS
OF OSCAR WILDE

TOMMASO DI ANNO
THE AESTHETIC IDEAS OF OSCAR WILDE

by

Tommaso d'Amico
(dottore in letters, Università di Roma)

Thesis presented for the Degree of Master in Letters of Trinity College, Dublin

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Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks are due to the Irish Ministry of Education, which granted me a scholarship enabling me to spend a year in research at Trinity College, Dublin; to Professor P.W. Edwards of T.C.D., who supervised my studies; to Owen Dudley Edwards, M.A., of the University of Oregon, who provided me with some very helpful suggestions; and to Alan Freedman, M.A., of the University of Edinburgh, who helped to make my English a little more understandable.

The "nineties" that represent the last phase of an already long-lived reaction against conventional views on art; their typical manifestations are publications such as The Yellow Book (to a certain extent) and The Dandy, and the work of Aubrey Beardsley and of the "poets of the Aloysius' Club." The world of the nineties ended abruptly, as W.B. Yeats says in his Introduction to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse:

Then in 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic Church; or if they did I have forgotten.

However, some of the values of the representative figures of the nineties managed to survive, and to pass on something to the literature of our own day. Yeats, one of the greatest poets of our age, gives us more than an archaeological interest in them.

Wilde was in many ways a typical figure of the nineties. His tragic fall in 1895 seemed a prelude to the equally tragic ends of other artists of the period. He flirted with the Catholic Church. His novel and some of his poems, and his play Salome, show certain attitudes of the nineties—a curdled sensibility, a love of classical erudition.

But Wilde belonged to another, to an older generation than Beardsley and the poets of the Aloysius' Club, and he was regarded as old-fashioned by them. In The Pre-Raphael of the Vale Yeats himself gives us a clear picture of the attitude of the avant-garde of the nineties towards Oscar Wilde.
Although still an infant in life, he was considered a member of the Establishment by the younger poets, so could not forget his sympathies for them. There is a popular misunderstanding about Oscar Wilde, as Graham Hough has pointed out, for he is usually identified with the "nineties" and the "tragic generation" of artists which flourished in the last decade of last century. The modern fashion of dividing literature into decades may well be a somewhat arbitrary method of classification; but the term "nineties", ever since Holbrook Jackson's book of 1913, has been accepted to define the characteristic taste of a particular group of artists and is not meant to be comprehensive of the literary production of the decade. The "nineties" then, represent the last phase of an already long-lived reaction against conventional views on art; their typical manifestations are publications such as The Yellow Book (to a certain extent) and The Savoy, and the work of Aubrey Beardsley and of the poets of the Rhymers' Club. The world of the nineties ended abruptly, as W.B. Yeats says in his Introduction to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse:

Then in 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic Church; or if they did I have forgotten. (2)

However, some of the values of the representative figures of the nineties managed to survive, and so pass on something to the literature of our own century: their impact on Yeats, one of the greatest poets of our age, gives us more than an archaeological interest in them.

Wilde was in many ways a typical figure of the nineties. His tragic fall in 1895 seemed a prelude to the equally tragic ends of other artists of the period. He flirted with the Catholic Church. His novel and some of his poems, and his play Salome, share certain attitudes of the nineties - a morbid sensibility, a love of classical erudition.

But Wilde belonged to another, to an older generation than Beardsley and the poets of The Rhymers' Club, and he was regarded as old-fashioned by them. In The Trembling of the Veil Yeats himself gives us a clear picture of the attitude of the avant-garde of the nineties towards Oscar Wilde.
Although still an enfant terrible of letters, he was considered a member of the Establishment by the younger poets, who could not forget his sympathies for such figures as Browning, Ruskin, and Swinburne, who were by that time as much part of the Establishment as they had been antagonistic to it in Wilde's undergraduate days. In the early nineties Wilde, the author of successful plays, the hero of literary salons, was at the height of his career; but he was no longer a member of the avant-garde. A few years earlier he still had something valid to say to the younger generation. He impressed the young Yeats with a reading of his unpublished dialogue, The Decay of Lying.

The movement of those called Aesthetes (as satirised in Patience) and the movement of those afterwards called Decadents (satirised in Mr. Street's delightful Autobiography of a Boy) had the same captain; or at any rate the same bandmaster. Oscar Wilde walked in front of the first procession wearing a sunflower, and in front of the second procession wearing a green carnation, says Chesterton. But Wilde was leader of the second procession for only a short time, he was soon overtaken. His comedies - his finest work - do not belong to the spirit of the nineties; and even Wilde himself did not consider they formed part of his more serious achievement. The other creative works written between 1891 and 1895, i.e. the works which one might justifiably expect to give proof of Wilde's leadership, seem somewhat slight in comparison with what was being written by his younger contemporaries, and are utter failures from the standpoint of the less transitory values expressed by the "decadent" movement.

It is as a theoretician that Wilde exerted an influence on the men of the nineties. His essays collected in Intentions (1891), The Soul of Man under Socialism (1891), and, to a certain extent, The Picture of Dorian Gray, provided them with the soundest summary of the ideas and theories on art of which they represented the ultimate stage. Wilde was not an original thinker, nor did he open up new horizons for the men that followed. His aestheticism is the result of a sum of different influences, the main currents of which may be divided into two major streams, the English Pre-Raphaelitism and the contemporary French so-called Art for Art's Sake Movement. But Morris's and Arnold's
differently-shaped views of the relationship between art and society, Pater's intellectual edonism, Whistler's claim for the independence of the artist, and many other elements enter the picture as well. Wilde's achievement was that he provided the most intelligent and consistent summing-up of a whole body of aesthetic experiences; and from this point of view, he should be placed at the end rather than at the beginning of an era.

This is the standpoint from which our study has been carried out. We have been concerned only with Wilde as a theoretician from his earliest attempts at art-criticism to the essays of the years 1889-91, where his thought reached maturity. By 1891 Wilde's ideas were fully formed, and no substantial addition is to be found in his later work; neither in the plays, which although containing a few statements already made in Intentions belong to a category of their own, nor in the other works of the years 1895-1900. The prison experience reshaped the man, but gave the aesthete nothing new to say.

In Chapter I a short survey is given of the main streams of thought which contributed to the development of Wilde's ideas. Chapter II deals with Wilde's early efforts as an art-critic and theoretician. In Chapter III other influences are pointed out. In Chapter IV the development of the last stage of Wilde's ideas is followed through his journalistic activity of 1885-90. Chapters V-VIII are an examination of the works in which Wilde's mature theoretical ideas are to be found, that is, mainly, the essays of Intentions, The Picture of Dorian Gray, and The Soul of Man under Socialism.

Notes to the Introduction:

(1) In The Artist as a Man of Action, The Listener, 21st Oct. 1934.
(2) London 1936, p.xi
(3) The Victorian Age in Literature, London 1913, p.218.
Chapter I: Art for Art's Sake

The Decadents gave themselves that name out of a feeling of having reached the end of something. And Wilde's value as a theoretician mainly resides in that he sums up a whole period, although much can be said about the influence he exerted, an influence that in some cases was to last to the present day. He was not, nor ever cared to appear, the author of a sound aesthetic system; but he gave an ultimate shape to ideas and theories which we find scattered throughout the work of several writers, customarily grouped under the label of "Art for art's sake" movement. It may therefore be worthwhile, before coming to our argument, to carry out a rapid survey of some of those ideas. Well aware of the danger of all comprehensive definitions, we shall use this one - "Art for art's sake movement" - in its widest sense, even when it would be more proper to speak of common tendencies between artists rather than of a "movement" in its implication of an organization.

We do not know exactly when the expression "Art for art's sake" was uttered for the first time. Despite Hugo's claim to the paternity of the sentence (which, if we take his word, he created in 1829), we have good reason to believe that it had existed long before. If not its author, the first person to employ the expression constantly was the philosopher Victor Cousin, who is reported to have used it more than once in his lectures at the Sorbonne, as early as 1818. Treading along the path opened by Madame de Staël, Heinrich Heine, Benjamin Constant, and others - mediators of the German culture in France, first divulgers of the new philosophy which was being born in Jena - Cousin was giving in his lectures a practical application of the German aesthetics. Such an origin well becomes the expression; because although the "Art for art's sake" theories were in many instances born as a reaction against certain aspects of the German Idealism, it is nonetheless true that they represent a development of romantic ideas - mainly, of the general conception of the freedom of art.

Unlike other European countries, still engaged in wars for national independence, both France and England experienced a period of comparative relaxation in the decades following the Treaty of Vienna. It was the age of inventions - steam, gas, electricity - and of their industrial application; an age which saw a growth of the industrial towns - the exploitation of the workers - the death of the highest ideals - a new figure was born - the artist. It was the age of art, as Baudelaire described it. Its Preface is as clear as a manifesto.
independence, both France and England experienced a period of comparative relaxation in the decades following the Treaty of Vienna. It was the age of inventions - steam, gas, electricity - and of their industrial application; an age which saw the establishment of a new class. Two dates fix the triumph of the bourgeoisie in England: the Reform Act (1832) and the London Exhibition (1851). And with a new class, new ideals were born. Such theories as Bentham's Utilitarianism were currently interpreted as a striving for material happiness, towards which everything apparently was supposed to tend. Art, too, in the eyes of the bourgeois, had to have a practical purpose: it was admitted merely on ethical grounds; it was supposed to contain a moral lesson, to provide good examples, to keep people in line, thus contributing to their welfare. A conception that soon became so deeply rooted, as to be accepted even by one of the greatest critics and reformers of the bourgeois ideals, John Ruskin.

To fight the Utilitarian Era - the birth of the Industrial Town - the exploitation of the workers - the death of the highest ideals - a new figure was born in England: the Social Preacher. Attacks, often in the name of Art, were thrown against the moral dullness of the ruling class; Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, begun in 1833, contained a condemnation of the Victorian system from an ethical standpoint; Matthew Arnold introduced from Germany the term of Philistine, to fling it at the short-sighted, selfish, ignorant middle-class; William Morris developed, out of Ruskin's sermon, a new social gospel.

A French counterpart to the English Social Preacher was to be found in the Aristocratic Intellectual: another aspect of the same reaction. Rather than try to reform industrialization, the French artists - at least those of them who did not care for the attribute "progressive" - turned their backs on its loathsome spectacle. They withdrew in esoteric circles to devote themselves to the cult of a new ideal, to which they gave the name of Beauty. Everything must have a purpose, the current creed said; Art has none, was their answer. "What end does this book serve? Does it serve the end of being beautiful?" wondered Théophile Gautier in the Preface to his Premières Poésies (1832). In 1834 his novel Mademoiselle de Maupin appeared, a "veritable hymn to beauty", as Baudelaire described it. Its Preface is as clear as a manifesto. After
Rien de ce qui est beau n'est indispensable à la vie. — On supprimerait les fleurs, le monde n'en souffrirait pas matériellement; qui voudrait cependant qu'il n'y eût plus de fleurs? Je renoncerais plutôt aux pommes de terre qu'aux roses.... À quoi sert la beauté des femmes? ...À quoi bon la musique? À quoi bon la peinture? Qui aurait la folie de préférer Mozart à M. Carrel, et Michelange à l'inventeur de la moutarde blanche?

Il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien; tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c'est l'expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l'homme sont ignobles et dégoûtants, comme sa pauvre et infime nature. — L'endroit le plus utile d'une maison, ce sont les latrines. Moi, n'en éprouve à ces messieurs, je suis de ceux pour qui le superflu est le nécessaire, — et j'aime mieux les choses et les gens en raison inverse des services qu'ils me rendent. Je préfère à certain vase qui me sert un vase chinois, semé de dragons et de mandarins, qui ne me sert pas du tout... (3)

Speaking of D'Albert, the central figure of the novel, one of the characters says:

Quelque chose l'attire et l'appelle invinciblement qui n'est pas de ce monde ni en ce monde, et il ne peut avoir de repos ni jour ni nuit; et, comme l'héliotrope dans une cave, il se tord pour se tourner vers le soleil qu'il ne voit pas. (4)

This something is Beauty.

And this beauty may be reached through art. Later, introducing himself as editor of L'Artiste in 1856, Gautier added: "we believe in the autonomy of art; for us art is not a means but a goal; an artist who pursues an object other than the beautiful is not an artist in our opinion".

With Gautier some of the "Art for art's sake" ideas find their first,
enthusiastic utterance; in his work are to be found several patterns that will become typical of the movement, to begin with the symbol of the sunflower, which Wilde will popularize. The very title of Gautier's collection of poems, Emaux et Camées (1852), exemplifies the beauty-seeker's aspiration to carefully wrought, well-chiselled, purposeless, precious gems, and opens an endless series of "Intaglios", "Améthystes", "Rimes Dorées", "Thoughts in Marble", "Proverbs in Porcelain", "Ballads in Blue China"; the famous "Symphonie en Blanc Majeur", in the same collection, is the main responsible for the titles of Whistler's "Symphonies" and "Nocturnes".

The newly born movement finds its greatest artist in Charles Baudelaire. His thirst for beauty is not inferior to Gautier's, nor is he less preoccupied with affirming the total independence of Art from ethics. Beauty can be contained in anything, proclaims the very title of his Fleurs du Mal (1855):

Que tu viennes du ciel ou de l'enfer, qu'importe,
O Beauté! monstre énorme, effrayant, ingénue!
Si ton œil, ton sourire, ton pied, m'ouvrant la porte
De l'Infini que j'aime et n'ai jamais connu?
De Satan ou de Dieu, qu'importe? Ange ou Sirène,
Qu'importe, si tu rends - fée aux yeux de velours,
Rythme, parfum, lueur, ô mon unique reine! -
L'univers moins hideux et les instants moins lourds?

Baudelaire found a concrete expression of his own ideas in the theoretical essays of the then almost unknown American poet Edgar Allan Poe. He reproduced, often literally translating whole sentences, parts of The Poetic Principle (which appeared posthumously in 1850), giving them as his own, both in the Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe (1857) and in his essay on Théophile Gautier (1859). Working on Kantian ideas, Poe said, among other things:

While the epic mania...has, for some years past, been gradually dying out of the public mind, by mere dint of its own absurdity - we find it succeeded by a heresy too palpably false to be long tolerated...I allude to the heresy of The Didactic (Baudelaire: "l'hérésie de l'enseignement"). It has been assumed...that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged...We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true Poetic dignity and force - but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look
into our own souls, we should immediately there discover that under the 
sum there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified -
more supremely noble than this very poem - this poem per se - this poem
and nothing more - this poem written solely for the poem's sake.

... Dividing the world of mind into its three most immediately obvious
distinctions, we have the Pure Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense.
I place Taste in the middle because it is just this position which, in
the mind, it occupies. It holds intimate relations with either extreme;
but from the Moral Sense is separated by so faint a difference that
Aristotle has not hesitated to place some of its operations among the
virtues themselves. Nevertheless, we find the offices of the trio
marked with a sufficient distinction. Just as the Intellect concerns
itself with Truth, so Taste informs us of the Beautiful while the Moral
Sense is regardful of Duty. Of this latter, while Conscience teaches
the obligation, and Reason the expediency, Taste contents herself with
displaying the charms: - waging war upon Vice solely on the ground of her
deformity - her disproportion - her animosity to the fitting, to the
appropriate, to the harmonious - in a word, to Beauty.

An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is thus, plainly,
a sense of the Beautiful. This it is which administers to his delight
in the manifold forms, and sounds, and odours, and sentiments amid
which he exists. And just as the lily is repeated in the lake, or the
eyes of the Amaryllis in the mirror, so is the mere oral or written
repetition of these forms, and sounds, and colors, and odors, and
sentiments, a duplicate source of delight. But this mere repetition
is not poetry... We have still a thirst unquenchable... This thirst
belongs to the immortality of Man... It is no mere appreciation of
the Beauty before us - but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above...

The Poetic Sentiment, of course, may develop itself in various modes -
in Painting, in Sculpture, in Architecture, in the Dance - very
especially in Music... It is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most
nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the Poetic
Sentiment, it struggles - the creation of supernal Beauty. ... To
recapitulate, then:- I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words
as The Rhythmicel Creation of Beauty. Its sole arbiter is Taste.
With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations.
Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with
Truth.

... That pleasure which is at once the most pure, the most elevating,
and the most intense, is derived, I maintain, from the contemplation
of the Beautiful... I make Beauty, therefore - using the word as
inclusive of the Sublime - I make Beauty the province of the poem... the
ture artist will always contrive to tone them [Passion, Duty,
Truth] down in proper subjection to that Beauty which is the atmosphere
and the real essence of the poem.
In *The Poetic Principle*, then, Baudelaire found an aesthetic system which, putting Beauty in a province by herself, freed her from any moral attachment, and made it possible to pursue her for her own sake. Poe's other consistent essay on aesthetic matters, *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846), describing the careful, cold-blooded planning of effects during the composition of his best-known poem, *The Raven*, put a stress on an artificiality that the poets of the Art for art's sake movement, in their reaction against such romantic clichés as passion and sincerity, found highly congenial.

Art, we have seen, must not have a moral lesson as its goal; nor should she be the passive mirror held up to Nature, because Nature is far too inadequate, if compared with the abstract ideal of Beauty. Baudelaire's view of Nature is contained in an elegant *causerie*, *L'Eloge du Macquillage*. "La Nature embellit la beauté!" he exclaims:

Brief as it is, our survey of the most significant figures of the Art for art's sake movement could not be complete if we forgot to mention the greatest prose-writer of them all, Gustave Flaubert. It is significant that his ideas and aspirations in matters of art have been outlined by Walter Pater in his essay on *Style* (1888). Pater, whose affinity with Flaubert's attitude towards art and life could hardly be overemphasized, ranks him as "the martyr of literary style". Enflamed by a love of beauty for its own sake which, on a purely intellectual ground, is not inferior to D'Albert's, Flaubert embodies with his
painful, morbid search for the "exact phrase", for the "unique word" that alone allows the writer to convey his personal vision to the reader, one of the main aspirations of the period: the perfect blend of Form and Content.

In his juvenile letters his daily battles are mirrored - that endless, restless struggle out of which the terseness of his prose was to emerge.

I am growing so peevish about my writing. I am like a man whose ear is true but who plays falsely on the violin: his fingers refuse to reproduce precisely those sounds of which he has the inward sense. Then the tears come rolling down from the poor scraper's eyes and the bow falls from his hand.

I grow so hard to please as a literary artist, that I am driven to despair. I shall end by not writing another line.

Happy those who have no doubts of themselves! who lengthen out, as the pen runs on, all that flows forth from their brains.

As for me, I hesitate, I disappoint myself, turn around upon myself in despite: my taste is augmented in proportion as my natural vigour decreases, and I afflict my soul over some dubious word out of all proportion to the pleasure I get from a whole page of good writing.

One would have to live two centuries to attain a true idea of any matter whatever. What Buffon said is a big blasphemy: genius is not long-continued patience. Still, there is some truth in the statement, and more than people think, especially as regards our own day. Art! art! art! bitter deception! phantom that glows with light, only to lead one to destruction.\(^9\)

On the other hand, this pursuit is the only possible way of life.

The only way not to be unhappy is to shut yourself up in art, and count everything else as nothing.

Such theories of art were necessarily to lead to theories of life.

In the case of Gautier and Baudelaire they eventually led to a new, refined hedonism, embodied in Des Esseintes, the protagonist in Huysmans' novel, \textit{A Rebours} (1882). In the Preface to \textit{Mademoiselle de Maupin} Gautier had said: "au lieu de faire un prix Montheron pour la récompense de la vertu, j'aimerais mieux donner, comme Sardanapale, ce grand philosophe que l'on a si mal compris, une forte prime à celui qui inventerait un nouveau plaisir; car la jouissance me paraît le but de la vie, et la seule chose utile au monde.\(^{10}\)

But to Flaubert, and to Pater, the same theories meant an uneventful, even dull
exterior life, which was the only visible counterpart of a second, interior one that would be enriched by the deepest, and therefore fullest, cerebral sensations.

According to the best historian of *Les théories de l'art pour l'art*, Albert Cassagne, (11) the sudden outbreak of war between Germany and France was to give a deadly blow to such golden dreams. At any rate, by this time (around 1870) and for the following years the school was an established fact, and the symbolist poets - Verlaine, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Kahn, as well as the novelist Huysmans, to quote but a few names - belonged in many ways to its second generation.

In 1870 the Art for art's sake theories had already begun their migration to England, through the medium of a few passionate admirers of the current manifestations of French literature. They fell on fertile ground. On one side, as we hinted before, the "official" Victorian attitude to art seemed to call for a reaction - a reaction which, on a different level, Carlyle had inaugurated with his attacks on rationalism and materialism, and which Matthew Arnold had continued with his attempt to make of culture, if not art, the counterpart of current materialistic ethics.

But the French ideas had even more direct antecedents. Coleridge's theory of art, for instance, though different in its conclusions, was rooted in the same Kantian principles which lay at their basis. Praising art for what it is, and not for what it contains, Coleridge had written:

*A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth.* (12)

Furthermore, with other Romantic critics - Lamb, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt - Coleridge had provided an example of a personal, impressionistic criticism, which is not far from the kind of criticism the Art for art's sake theoreticians were to sponsor, and Ruskin and Pater were to adopt triumphantly.

I say what I think; I think what I feel. I cannot help receiving certain impressions from things; and I have sufficient courage to declare (somewhat abruptly) what they are,

is Hazlitt's defence of such a method; in Lamb it is not hard to find a statement of the same kind as the one about the *Reynard's Tragedy*;
I have never read it but my ears tingle, and I feel a hot blush overspread my cheeks. [3]

And speaking of the Poems by his young friend John Keats, Leigh Hunt goes as far as to say:

Here is a young poet giving himself up to his own impressions, and revelling in real poetry for its own sake. [16]

Indeed, in Keats — whom Wilde worshipped — a quite remarkable number of ideas can be found, which remind one closely of the creeds of Gautier and Baudelaire.

Why may I not speak of your Beauty, since without that I could never have lov'd you — I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty

he wrote to Fanny Brawne in 1819 (15) — an utterance that would not be out of place in a letter of D'Albert. Keats' conception of Beauty as Truth, as expressed in the well-known conclusion to the Ode on a Grecian Urn, may not be the same as Gautier's; but to a reader of the latter, the former's longing for such a "Principle" sounds like an anticipation.

I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the Public — or to any thing in existence, — but the Eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, — and the Memory of Great Men. [16]

The mighty abstract Idea I have of Beauty in all things stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness... (17)

Moreover, Keats' conception of a "caramel poet", who "has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen", and who rejoices in "what shocks the virtuous philosopher" (18), is a very firm step towards proclaiming the absolute independence of Art from Morals.

Some of the main ideas of the Art for art's sake movement were not, therefore, completely extraneous to the English tradition. They are to be found, still unexpressed but very powerfully operating, in the work of John Ruskin. Ruskin's puritan background never let him completely accept the idea of a free art; to him, art was always subjected to religious and moral ends. To him,
No weight, nor mass, nor beauty of execution can outweigh one grain or fragment of thought.(19)

But on the other hand, the attraction of beauty in art was to him irresistible, and his attitude often seemed to contradict his own formulas:

"Ce fut dans la Beauté que son tempérament le conduisit à chercher la réalité, et sa vie tout religieuse en reçut un emploi tout esthétique,"

Proust said of him; (20) and indeed, if I may translate the words of a distinguished scholar, Louise Rosenblatt,

The generation who was to defend Art for its own sake found expressed in Ruskin's work, in an imposing, picturesque, living prose, - an intensity of aesthetic experience and a knowledge and a love of art unparalleled in earlier English criticism. (21)

No better evidence of Ruskin's awareness of the beauties which his own conscience would oblige him to condemn can be had, than his letter to the young Swinburne about those Poems and Ballads which on their appearing in 1866 had won their author nothing but blame from the moralistic critics. "For the matter of it", wrote Ruskin, referring to the book,

"I regret much - I blame or reject nothing. I should as soon think of finding fault with you as with a thunder cloud or a nightshade blossom... I cannot help you, or understand your. But I shall always rejoice in hearing that you are at work..." (22)

A natural affinity had drawn Swinburne in the direction of Baudelaire. Whether it was his taste, or his sexual abnormality, that made him so enthusiastic about Les Fleurs du Mal is not our task to determine; certainly reading that book exerted an enormous influence over the young man's poetry, and made of him the first English supporter of the Art for art's sake movement. Swinburne had publicly taken up the cudgels for Baudelaire's poetry and theories since 1861, when he wrote in the Spectator:

"The critical students...seem to have pretty well forgotten that a poet's business is presumably to write good verses, and by no means to redeem the age and remould society... The courage and sense of a man who at such a time ventures to profess and act on the conviction that the art of poetry has absolutely nothing to do with didactic matter at all, are proof enough of the wise and serious manner in which he is likely to handle the material of his art." (23)
Swinburne's own Poems and Ballads are a proof of his aspiration to the title of English Baudelaire; and the new gospel is newly, and proudly, proclaimed in his study on William Blake, published in 1869.

"...Art for art's sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest shall be added to her (or if not she need hardly be overmuch concerned); but from the man who falls to artistic work with a moral purpose, shall be taken away even that which he has - whatever of capacity for doing well in either way he may have at starting. A living critic of incomparably delicate insight and subtly good sense, himself "impeccable " as an artist, calls this "the heresy of instruction" (l'hérésie de l'enseignement); one might call it, for the sake of a shorter and more summary name, the great moral heresy... That is the important thing: to have her [Art's] work supremely well done, and to disregard all contingent consequences. You may extract out of Titian's work or Shakespeare's any moral or immoral inference if you please; it is none of their business to see after that."

These words were written in 1867. In the same year, on January, the Westminster Review had published an essay due to the pen of a young and rather taciturn Oxford scholar, Walter Pater; its title was Winckelmann. The passionate, almost pagan appreciation of beauty for its own sake that it contained stirred a "great sensation" in the cradle of English letters, where Gautier's theories had not arrived as yet. The following years saw the publication of other studies from the same pen, they were published in book form under the title Studies in the Renaissance in 1873 - when Swinburne's Muse had taken another path - and immediately acquired the leadership of a movement for their author.

Pater had read Ruskin in his youth. He had found in him a true love of art, and a capacity for expressing aesthetic sensations in a rich and glittering language. His philosophical studies had then acquainted him with the Kantian doctrine of the subjectivity of knowledge, and with certain aspects of Greek thought. He loved Flaubert; Coleridge had been the subject of one of his juvenile essays; and Otto Jahn's Life of Winckelmann had come to him as a revelation, setting forth the living example of a life spent in a firm, impassioned pursuit of beauty.

Wrought in a supremely refined style, in which each phrase and word was
weighed "as though precious metal", the Renaissance contained, summed up in its Preface and Conclusion, a new theory both of art and life.

Pater starts by quoting Heracletys, an intuitive guess at a truth which modern philosophy and science have confirmed. What we consider physical realities, he argues, is only the momentary combination of forces which are in perpetual motion; therefore every material object only exists as a sensorial impression, and an absolute truth in unconceivable. Philosophy, and speculative culture, can only be useful inasmuch as they "rouse, startle" our spirit "to a life of constant and eager observation". For

Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, - for that moment only.

And he concludes;

Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their present energy? To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. (27)

Our earthly life is little more than an interval: and "our one chance lies in expanding that interval, getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time".

This "new hedonism" had a purely intellectual significance; nevertheless, Pater judged it wise to suppress this Conclusion from the second (1877) edition of the Renaissance, as it "might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall." Though often misunderstood, his ideas began circulating at once. They were partly responsible for the birth of what was called the "Aesthetic Movement"; to whose members the parodies of the following years were to attribute so many strange and exquisite affectations. W.H. Mallock's New Republic (1877), the earliest of such parodies, ridicules in "Mr Rose" a Walter Pater who never really existed;
the caricature reminds one rather of the posses of the young Oscar Wilde, then still an undergraduate.

The new edition of the *Renaissance* contained, in the 1877 essay on *The School of Giorgiones*, a new definition of the capital problem of the Art for art's sake school: the relationship between form and matter. Pater's extremely brilliant solution is a genuine accomplishment and a decisive step forward along the line opened by Gautier and Baudelaire.

It is a mistake, he says, to consider the various arts as "but translation in different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought", thus making "the sensuous element in art, and with it almost everything in art that is essentially artistic", a matter of indifference. Art "addresses not pure sense, still less the pure intellect, but the 'imaginative reason' through the senses"; therefore aesthetic beauty differs according to the various kinds of art, and each art, "having its own peculiar and untranslatable sensuous charm, has its own special mode of reaching the imagination, its own special responsibilities to its material". What mainly delights us in a painting is its pictorial quality; which is "quite independent of anything definitely poetical in the subject it accompanies". This quality "must first of all delight the sense, delight it as directly and sensuously as a fragment of Venetian glass; and through this delight alone become the vehicle of whatever poetry or science may lie beyond them in the intention of the composer". Thus

In its primary aspect, a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the walls or floor: is itself, in truth, a space of such fallen light, caught as the colours are in an Eastern carpet, but refined upon, and dealt with more subtly and exquisitely than by nature itself.

This view is a new and daring one indeed. It is perhaps not exaggerated to say that it contains the germ not only of subsequent art theories such as Berenson's "ideated sensations" and Roger Fry's "pure aesthetic sensations", but even of certain achievements of modern art. None of the previous "art
for art the theoreticians had ever reached the point which Pater saw so clearly: that what gives an aesthetic experience its unique value is the sensuous or intuitive perception that matter and form are one. As we saw, Poe had given music a predominance on the other arts. Pater tells us why: it is in music that this unity of perfection is perfectly achieved. Therefore, in that endless passage of each art into the condition of some other,

All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For a while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter ... should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling, that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees. (29)

In opposition to the "honourable critic" - "celui dont les tendances et les désirs se rapprochent le plus des tendances et des désirs de son public, - celui qui, confondant les facultés et les genres de production, assignera à tous un but unique, - celui qui cherchera dans un livre de poésie le moyen de perfectionner la conscience"; who is the product of a country where "l'idée d'utilité, la plus hostile du monde à l'idée de beauté, prime e domine toutes choses" (30) - both Poe and Baudelaire had sponsored the poet; he is the true critic, who, in his search for the beautiful, is himself a creator as well. This conception was ultimately to lead to such a type of criticism as Pater's - a kind of impressionistic criticism whose manner was not wholly alien, as we saw, to the English tradition. Pater himself defined it, in a review which he wrote many years after the publication of the Renaissance, as "imaginative criticism":

that criticism which is itself a kind of construction, or creation, as it penetrates, through the given literary or artistic product, into the mental and inner constitution of the producer, shaping his work. (31)

What is important, he had said in the Preface to the Renaissance,

is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects. (32)

With Walter Pater the movement born in France not only established
itself firmly on English ground, but proved vital and capable of original achievements. It seems therefore convenient now to end our quick survey of some of the ideas that contributed to the development of Wilde's thought; and in so doing to overlook the work of other important mediators between French and English culture (of whom the most important, George Moore, was to give a considerable publicity to the Art for art's sake ideas in his Confessions of a Young Man, in 1888). Although the lonely Bransenose professor always loathed the idea of being regarded as a leader of a movement, and chose to remain inaccessible in the privacy of his Oxford rooms, his ideas and achievements had an impact on the young "Aesthetes" who followed that cannot be underestimated.
Notes to Chapter I.


(2) See Hugo's essay on William Shakespeare (1864).

(3) Théophile Gautier, Mademoiselle de Maupin, Paris 1855, p.22.

(4) Ibid., p.172.

(5) Ibid., p.146.

(6) Charles Baudelaire, Hymne à la Beauté.


(10) p.23 (Op. cit.)

(11) See Albert Cassagne, La théorie de l'art pour l'art en France chez les derniers romantiques et les premiers réalistes, Paris 1906.


(13) I take both examples from René Wellek's A History of Modern Criticism, London, 1955, vol.II, pp.193, 195. Wellek notes that such methods—based on evocation, metaphor, and personal reference—although "ultimately Longinian", are quite unparalleled in English 18th century criticism. "In Germany Winckelmann, Jean-Paul and on occasion the Schlegels achieved similar effects, and in France Chateaubriand was almost simultaneously introducing similar methods". (p.191)

(14) In The Examiner, 4 and 13 July, 1817.


(16) 9th April 1818. See Letters, vol.I, p.266


(20) Préface du Traducteur to La Bible d'Amiens. Q. by Rosenblatt, p.94.

(21) L'Idée de l'Art pour l'Art, p.94.


(23) September, 6th.

(24) Baudelaire had died in 1867.


(26) Mr. Ward, who spent part of a summer vacation at this time in Pater's company, writes:

'The month at Sidmouth made us rather intimate, and afterwards I often walked and lunched with Pater at Oxford. He had begun to publish then: the articles on 'Coleridge' and 'Winckelmann' in the Westminster Review had appeared, and had made a great sensation in the University. Unfamiliar with Goethe's at first-hand, and with the French romantics such as Théophile Gautier, the men of about my standing had their first revelation of the neo-Cyrenaic philosophy and of the theory of Art for Art, in these papers."


(28) Ibid., p.123

(29) Ibid., p.129

(30) Baudelaire, Œuvres, pp.467-468.

(31) Q. by Benson, pp.48-49.

Chapter II

Wilde and the 'aesthetic movement' (1878-1882)

A few dates may be appropriate here to mark the progress of the revolution of taste which took place in England during the second half of the nineteenth century. The first volume of Ruskin's Modern Painters was published in 1829. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed in 1848, and its magazine, The Germ, was begun in 1850. Arnold's lectures On Translating Homer were delivered in 1861, and the First Series of his Essays in Criticism appeared in 1865. Morris's manufacturing and decorating firm, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co (Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Sadox Brown and Philip Webb were also partners) was founded in the 1860's. Swinburne's Atalanta in Calydon was published in 1865, and his Poems and Ballads followed in 1866. In 1873 Peter's Studies in the History of the Renaissance appeared.

What united these dissimilar artists and theoreticians was, basically, a reaction against current taste, which they felt a product of the dullness of the era which had seen the triumph of the bourgeoisie. This reaction, the parallel to what had been happening in France, was brought forth in the name of art: its aims being a revaluation of the visual arts, a new definition of the purpose of literature.

All schemes are dangerous, and to speak of a common movement including all or some of the aforementioned artists and theoreticians might be inaccurate. By the late seventies, however, the effects of this many-sided campaign were clearly visible: the revolution of taste had begun to spread. The ideas and ideals of a few had become, by then, the fashion of a wider elite; and it was possible to speak of an "aesthetic movement".

This rather shapeless term cannot be clearly defined, nor are the "aesthetes" identifiable. They were intellectuals and bourgeoisie, who affected a new, "intense" concern for art; their existence was tangible enough to permit the flourishing of parodies on their account. They were the visible proof that the ideas which had been expressed in the preceding decades had fallen
on fertile ground; that the revolution of taste which they had announced was finally taking place. And as the "aesthetic movement" had sprung up from the confluence of so many different doctrines and art-theories, none of the artists and theoreticians listed above held himself responsible for this new turn of the tide of fashion, nor cared to be mixed up with the degeneration which invariably follows the popular acceptance of an idea.

The "aesthetic movement" was not, then, embodied in one particular person or group of persons - until a young and ambitious Oxford graduate volunteered for the vacant seat of leader. His name was Oscar Wilde.

A small book which appeared in 1882 is probably the first published essay expressly devoted to the "movement". Its title is The Aesthetic Movement in England and its author, Walter Hamilton ("Fellow of the Royal Geographical and Royal Historical Societies; Author of 'The poets Laureate of England', 'A History of National Anthems and Patriotic Songs', 'A memoir of George Cruickshank', etc"), thus defines his purpose in the Conclusion:

As Ruskin deemed it necessary thirty years ago to enter a protest on behalf of the Pre-Raphaelites, to show how their aims were misunderstood, and their genius unappreciated, so I, in a plain homely way, have sought to point out the good there is in the modern artistic revival known as the Aesthetic movement.

It is time, Hamilton feels, for someone to come to the defence of the "movement"; especially since the larger part of the public only knows it through the daily attacks or parodies by journalists and playwrights - through the jests of Punch, the sneers in the satirical plays Patience and The Colonel. Ungenerous as such abuse is, Hamilton argues, it nevertheless proves one thing: the school really exists, and it is healthy - otherwise no one would care to ridicule it.

"What then, is this school, - what are its aims, - and what has is achieved?" Hamilton wonders. This is his answer:

The term Aesthetic is derived from the Greek, esthesis, signifying perception, or the science of the beautiful, especially in art, and the designation has long been applied by German writers to a branch of philosophical enquiry into the theory of the beautiful, or more
accurately, into the philosophy of poetry and fine arts. The term appears to have been invented, or adopted, by Baumgarten, a German philosopher, whose work *Aesthetica* was published in 1750.

A great literary controversy has been going on in Germany for a century and a half, the chief topic in dispute being the question as to whether an object is actually beautiful in itself, or merely appears so to certain persons having faculties capable of appreciating it. From this dispute came the origin of the school, and the Aesthetes are they who pride themselves upon having found out what is really beautiful in nature and art, their faculties and tastes being educated up to the point necessary for the full appreciation of such qualities; whilst those who do not see the true and the beautiful — the outsiders in fact — are termed Philistines. Now up to a certain point, the theory that beauty is apparent only to some, is perfectly sound, for most persons will agree with Kant, that there can be no strict mathematical definition or science of beauty in nature, art, poetry or music, inasmuch as beauty is not altogether a property of objects or sounds, but is relative to the tastes and faculties brought to bear upon them. Illustrations of the truth of this axiom will occur to every one, it is founded upon the old, old truism, *tastes differ*. The Aesthetes recognise this truth to the fullest extent, but having first laid down certain general principles, they have endeavoured to elevate taste into a scientific system, the correlation of the arts being a main feature of the scheme; they even go so far as to decide what shall be considered beautiful, and those who do not accept their ruling are termed Philistines, and there is no hope for them. (1)

This definition — "plain and homely" indeed, and rather vague — given in the Introduction is nowhere better developed in the text. In fact, the book has little scientific claim; it mainly consists of a list of eminent "Aesthetes", for each of whom a brief biographical notice is given with a few excerpts from his most relevant works, and records of polemics, the latter being the most relevant feature of the volume, two thirds of which are occupied by such chronicles. The titles of the chapter as listed in the Index may give an idea of Hamilton's classification of the "Aesthetes":

*The Pre-raphaelites; The Germ; John Ruskin; The Grosvenor Gallery; Aesthetic Culture; Poets of the Aesthetic School — William Michael Rossetti, Arthur W.E. O'Shaughnessy, Thomas Wollner, William Morris, Alcernon Charles Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti; Buchanan's attack on Rossetti; Jonas Fisher: a Poem in Brown and White, and Mr. Robert Buchanan; Punch's Attacks on the Aesthetes; Mr. Oscar Wilde; The Home of the Aesthetes; Conclusion.*
The Pre-Raphaelites are hailed as the forerunners of the "movement". The third chapter rapidly outlines Ruskin's life and career, to deal at greater length with the notorious trial intended on the critic by Whistler, and to conclude with an account of the pamphlet written by the American painter. The chapter Aesthetic Culture lists the current tastes of the aesthetes: "The strict Aesthete admires only what in his language is known as intense, and what Turkin somewhat gushingly terms the 'blessed and precious' in art". Wagner is "intense" in music, as Botticelli is "intense" in painting, and the Queen Anne style in architecture. Excellence among the poets of the new school is given to Swinburne and to D.G. Rossetti; Swinburne is "the King of the Aesthetic poets", and his connexions with the tradition of the "movement" is proved by the fact that "long before the movement became fashionable" he had dedicated his Laus Veneris to Burne-Jones.

On the whole, the book, which scarcely, if ever, drops its frivolous tone, is more interesting for what it omits than for what it actually tells. According to it, the "movement" is simply the logical continuation of the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelites; it is never seen in a European background, the German philosophers are only mentioned in the passage which we quoted before, Baudelaire is the only French author taken into consideration. Whistler, who exhibited paintings in the Grosvenor Gallery, is dealt with, but the author is ill at ease about his classification: a true follower of the Pre-Raphaelites, he feels, would never challenge their champion, Ruskin. Even more surprising than all that is the complete absence of any mention of Walter Pater; while the young Oscar Wilde is given a whole chapter.

Wilde's important place in Hamilton's book - the longest chapter of all, containing a wide account of his life, acquaintances and achievements, along with the usual quotations from newspapers - seems mainly due to what to modern eyes appears to have been his skilful self-advertising campaign. "Say what you like, as long as you keep talking about me", appears to have been the motto of this young Rastignac who had left Oxford to conquer London, a sunflower in his buttonhole. Appointing himself as "Professor of Aesthetics" and "Dress Reformer", he had achieved his first purpose: to be the centre
of general attention, and the target of attacks by comic newspapers. This, more than his Poems, published in 1881, and more than the accounts of the impression he had left in the States, wins him the leadership of the young aesthetes in Hamilton's eyes; though praising Wilde's work, the author of The Aesthetic Movement in England feels bound to remind the readers of the extreme youth of this enfant prodige of Aestheticism, (3) for whom he prophesies a most brilliant career.

But in a way Wilde deserved the privileged position which Hamilton gave him. It is true that his place in the history of the revolution of taste roughly outlined at the beginning of this chapter is not that of an original thinker. Wilde belonged to the generation which had been formed by these ideas; he wanted to sum them up in himself, to be their living incarnation. In so doing he had to try to give them a unity of scope, to isolate what they had in common and to reconcile their conflicting elements. This he more or less consciously did for the first time in the lectures which he delivered during his American tour in 1882. These lectures seem at first sight a heap of ill-digested notions picked up from a varied assortment of writers - Arnold and Morris, Ruskin and Pater, and many others. But the attempt to bring together so many currents into one stream, and in this way to give a theoretical consistence to that "aesthetic movement" which only seemed to manifest itself by way of contrast in the parodies of Punch, exists, and cannot be totally dismissed. The same attempt was repeated in a less naive key, in Intentions and in The Soul of Man at a time when the lapse of a few years had ripened the writer and the theoretician. These works were written when the "aesthetic movement" was no more than a reminiscence, and successfully achieved what had been attempted in 1882.

Before leaving for his lecture-tour of the United States, Wilde had published very little. We will not examine here his Poems, which from their first appearance opened the discussions on their author's plagiarisms. (4) More fitting to the purpose of our survey are Wilde's first experiments in criticism, the earliest of which is a long undergraduate essay entitled The Rise of Historical Criticism (written in 1878 for the Chancellor's English
Essay Prize, which was not awarded. This essay was not printed during Wilde's lifetime. Its style is singularly ripe, especially if compared with the two articles with which we are to deal shortly; and some of the ideas expressed there anticipate views of Wilde's maturity. The essay is a well-documented survey on the birth and development of the critical method with the Greek (and, subordinately) Latin historians. The reader of Intentions is struck by the stress put on the importance of criticism for the Greeks ("the study of Greek ... implies the birth of criticism, comparison and research") and by such remarks as the one concerning "the modern idea of the critic as the interpreter, the expounder of the beauty and excellence of the work he selects".

Wilde's début as a newspaper critic was, appropriately enough, a criticism of the 1877 Grosvenor Gallery; it appeared in the Dublin University Magazine for July of the same year. It is a not undignified attempt at a Ruskinian (and Paterian) sort of impressionist criticism. The young aesthete does not try to conceal his models, and lists them at the end, when he praises Sir Coutts Lindsay's effort as most materially aiding that revival of culture and love of beauty which in great part owes its birth to Mr. Ruskin, and which Mr. Swinburne, and Mr. Pater, and Mr. Symonds, and Mr. Morris, and many others, are fostering and keeping alive, each in his own peculiar fashion. True to Ruskin's teaching, he extols Burne-Jones and Hunt above anybody else; and makes some good-humoured fun of Whistler's Nocturnes, which were to provoke Ruskin's attack in Fors Clavigera in the same month. Pater's direct impact is visible in a quotation which Wilde refused to suppress. Two years later, a shorter review of the 1879 Grosvenor Gallery Exhibition was published in Saunders's Irish Daily News (May 5th); its general tone is the same as the first one, the main difference being the treatment of Whistler, whose acquaintance Wilde had made in the meantime. We cannot speak of recantation - Whistler had been acknowledged of "very great power when he likes" already in the first article; at any rate, the American painter is now an artist "whose wonderful and eccentric genius is better appreciated in
France than in England"; his merit as an etcher is beyond discussion and his 
Harmony in Green and Gold is "an extremely good example of what ships lying 
at anchor on a summer evening are from the 'Impressionist point of view'". 
This appreciation of Whistler's merits is important, because it represents 
a first step towards that "departure from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin" with 
which we are to deal shortly.

The next document of Wilde's ideas in matters of art lies in the 
text of his American lectures. Of these only three survive, although we 
have reports of others (R. Sherard prints three of them in the appendix to 
his Life of Oscar Wilde); Ross only published in his complete edition of 
Wilde's work those whose manuscript text survived. None of these lectures 
had been printed in England before. The English Renaissance had been 
delivered for the first time in the Chickering Hall, New York, on January 9th, 
1882, a week after Wilde's arrival in the States. It was his first attempt 
to trace a history of the "Aesthetic Movement"; and since it was written, 
if not published, before Hamilton's book, it probably is, in a way, the first 
history of the "English Aesthetic Movement", and therefore extremely interesting.

Goethe, starts Wilde, "was the first to teach us beauty in terms the 
most concrete possible"; therefore, he goes on, "I will not try to give you 
any abstract definition of beauty, but rather to point out to you the general 
ideas which characterise the great English Renaissance of Art". The term 
"Renaissance" becomes the movement, because it really consists of a "sort 
of new birth of the spirit of man". It is a revival both of Greek and Medieval 
modes of thought, to which "it has added whatever of artistic value the intricacy 
and complexity of modern life can give". In order to understand this new 
spirit we must take into account many great events of history, first of all 
the French Revolution, which had its forerunners in literature (Rousseau's 
return to Nature, Goethe's and Scott's romances). "Clearness of vision, 
artistic sense of limit": this is the meaning of Romantic art as it was opposed 
to the "colourless and empty abstractions of our own eighteenth-century poets 
and of the classical dramatists of France, or of the vague spiritualities 
poetry. "The absolute distinction of the waves is not his necessity to feel
of the German sentimental school". True, there was a rebellion: "a period of measureless passions and of measureless despair". It was "a phase through which the human spirit had to pass but one in which it could not rest. For the aim of culture is not rebellion but peace. ... And soon that desire for perfection which lay at the basis of the Revolution, found in a young English poet its most complete and flawless realisation". Keats foreshadows modern achievements as Homer prefigured Phidias; another forerunner, Blake, was not understood by his contemporaries and failed to have any real influence. In 1847 the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was born, their aim being to produce beautiful work. "Above all things it was a return to Nature - that formula which seems to suit so many and such diverse movements: they would draw and point nothing but what they saw, they would try and imagine things as they really happened," This imitation of Nature became more personal and less strict with Burne-Jones, and William Morris; Ruskin helped them with his "faultless and fervent eloquence". The revolution was a theoretical and a technical one at the same time. Rossetti and Burne-Jones, Morris, Swinburne and Tennyson wanted to show through their work what a more rigorous precision an accuracy of language could achieve, being "in this respect...one with the romantic movement of France", where Gautier used to tell the young poets to read their dictionary every day. This more mature artistic discipline does not suppress, but controls "what people call inspiration". "This problem of the conditions of poetic production" had kept both Greeks and Italians busy; other stages in its development were Schiller's attempt "To adjust the balance between form and feeling", Goethe's effort to "estimate the position of self-consciousness in art", Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "emotion remembered [sic] in tranquillity"; and Keats's longing for being "able to compose without this fever", and his desire to "substitute for poetic ardour 'a more thoughtful and quiet matter'". E.A. Poe's "analysis of the workings of his own imagination" caused a sensation among the "young poets of the French romantic movement". "In this century it is rather against the claims of the emotional faculties, the claims of mere sentiment and feeling, that the artist must react"; imagination, not passion, is the kingdom of poetry. "The absolute distinction of the artist is not his capacity to feel
nature so much as his power of rendering it". This is the lesson of Baudelaire and Gautier.

Having thus defined the history and characteristics of this "new spirit" Wilde goes on to illustrate single problems. What is the subject of a work of art? The artist is free to choose it from every age or form; but "all things are not fit subjects to poetry". He will make a choice; and he will let prose deal with anything which is "harsh and disturbing", or debatable. Byron and Wordsworth had not this "exquisite spirit of artistic choice", and that spoiled part of their work; Keats had it in full. To the poet, on the other hand,

all times and places are one... The steam whistle will not affright him, nor the flutes of Arcadia weary him: for him there is but one time, the artistic moment; but one law, the law of form; but one land, the land of Beauty.

Our Western spirit has not always remained faithful to the sensuous appeal of art; while the East "has always kept true to art's primary and pictorial conditions".

In its primary aspect a painting has no more spiritual message or meaning than an exquisite fragment of Venetian glass or a blue tile from the wall of Damascus: it is a beautifully coloured surface, nothing more.

And in poetry the real poetical quality comes from "what Keats called the 'sensuous life of verse'".

What is health in art? It is

the artist's recognition of the limitations of the forms in which he works. It is the honour and the homage which he gives to the material he uses... knowing that the true brotherhood of the arts consists not in their borrowing one another's method, but in their producing, each of them by its own individual means, each of them by keeping its objective limits, the same unique artistic delights. The delight is like that given to us by music - for music is the art in which form and matter are always one... and it is the condition to which all the other arts are constantly aspiring.
What is the place of criticism? "The first duty of an art critic is to hold his tongue at all times, and upon all subjects...it is only through the mystery of creation that one can gain any knowledge of the quality of created things". He must, however, address himself to the public and not to the artist:

Art can never have any other claim but her own perfection: it is for the critic to create for art the social aim, too, by teaching the people the spirit in which they are to approach all artistic work. (15)

Art must only think of fulfilling her own beauty, and all appeals made to her to "set herself more in harmony with modern progress and civilization, and to make herself the mouthpiece for the voice of humanity...should be made to the public".

This noble renaissance only affects poetry, the decorative arts, and painting: the commercial spirit having killed that beautiful national life and that noble national life which are necessary to the creation of great sculpture and great drama. Drama is "the product of a period of great national united energy".

To conclude, Wilde gives his audience a few bits of advice: the Americans are a young people, and they can have their own renaissance, if they want it. To achieve such a purpose they do not have to imitate anyone: just "love art for its own sake, and then all things that you need will be added to you". Art is immortal; art is international; it spreads its wings across the continents to make men brothers. A stress is put on the importance of decorative art: Plato pointed out in his Republic the necessity of raising children in beautiful surroundings. Such surroundings are in the care of the handicraftsman, who is therefore of primary utility; because a man must have beautiful surroundings to produce beautiful art.

Unlike the other American lectures that survive, The English Renaissance was written before leaving for the States. Indeed its style differs widely from the others, composed after feeling the pulse of the audience: it is written in a florid style, and every attempt is made towards an elegance and a display of culture which is meant to impress the American Philistine, and to leave him open-mouthed. Although Wilde dares not proclaim himself as the
founder of the Movement as yet - he will not hesitate to do so in a short while, after the ground has proved fertile enough to receive such a seed - this is the impression he is trying to convey with his casual dropping of names ("as I remember Mr. Swinburne insisting on at dinner..."); "and I remember once, in talking to Mr. Burne-Jones about modern science, his saying to me..."; "I remember William Morris saying to me once..."). Such a patent exhibitionism is quite innocent after all. It seems harder to forgive him his apparent neglect of the name of the most consistent of his sources; so much more striking, since we saw him calling down a whole Walhalla in support of his doctrines: Goethe, Massini, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Rousseau, Scott, Shelley, Swinburne, Blake, Michelangelo, Dürer, Homer, Dante, Keats, Morris, Chaucer, Theocritus, Newman, Emerson, Chenier, Byron, Napoleon, Phidias, Rossetti, Hunt, Millais, Burne-Jones, Tennyson, Gautier, Plato, Aristotle, Leonardo, Schiller, Poe, Baudelaire, Sophocles, Milton, Whitman, Wellington, Savonarola, Pope Sixtus, Borgia, Angelico, Leopardi, Rubens, Georgione, Titian Duke Lorenzo, Balzac, Hugo, Elizabeth I, Pericles, Ruskin, Petrarch, Körner. What about Walter Pater?

Pater, it is true, does not appear in the almost contemporary book by Hamilton. But superficial Hamilton may well have been ignorant of him; we can hardly think that Wilde had suddenly forgotten all about the lonely Bracnoese professor whose book used to fascinate him. The truth is that Wilde has not forgotten Pater at all; on the contrary, as it has been pointed out more than once, the whole lecture often echoes the doctrines and the very words of Walter Pater. Even in the few passages we have quoted there are examples of paragraphs taken out of The Renaissance as they stand. The very style of the lecture deliberately tries to reproduce the elegant, laboured style of Pater's essays; and Pater's impact is on the whole so heavy, that scholars have wondered whether Wilde's lecture can be considered anything more than a new compilation of Pater's ideas. The very opening of the lecture contains a direct echo of Pater's Preface to his book; the definition of a painting as a "beautifully coloured surface", the distinction between the arts, the supremacy of music as the art in which form and matter are one thing, the lack of any secondary aim in art: all this comes straight from The Renaissance - mainly, from the Preface, from the Conclusion, from the
latter half of the essay on Winckelsmann, and from the introductory pages of that on Giorgione; and is often formulated in his very definitions.

Wilde is obviously taking advantage of the American public's complete ignorance of Pater's work. But while it is irrefutable that he almost shamelessly uses Pater's jewels to enrich his own prose, we feel that what he is trying to do is something more than the mere cheating of a foreign audience. Because along with what belongs to Pater we find quite a lot of things that do not belong to Pater at all; their blending together, indeed, sounds etherogeneous in more than a place. With Pater's ideas go side by side theories and opinions from the Pre-Raphaelites, Ruskin, Morris, Arnold, and others. E.A. Poe's cold-blooded analysis of his own poetic inspiration, Gautier's concern for style, the final claim that "art can never have any other claim but her own perfection" belong to a stream which originated in France, and they contrast rather strikingly with the Ruskinian moral concern and with Morris's identification of art with the "useful" work of the handicraftsman. The historical importance of the French Revolution as a forerunner of Romanticism had been pointed out by Matthew Arnold, and Blake is seen through Swinburne's eyes. To find Wilde's sources is not hard; we could trace the origin of each of his assertions, if it had not been done before. But to stop here and dismiss this work as an ill-digested heap of disparate notions seems a superficial way of washing one's hands of it. It is in this very attempt to reconcile theories that can appear to belong to different brands of thought—an attempt which originates from the feeling that they did have something, and perhaps a lot, in common—that the value of Wilde's lecture resides. Such an attempt had not been made before; under this light Hamilton's book is certainly to be considered a far greater failure.

Of course Wilde's ideas as they come out of The English Renaissance are far from being complete, and much of them will be profoundly modified in the following years—to take only a few instances, the "fit subject to poetry", the place of criticism, Wilde's social concern itself will assume a different shape. But even after considering his undoubted, perhaps tactless desire to impress—his wilful extravaganzas, we must come to the conclusion that
he had not come to America as a mere puppet, a living incarnation of Gilbert and Sullivan's Bunthorne. His appreciation of other people's ideas is intelligent; from Pater, for example, he isolates the most illuminating definitions.

At any rate, Wilde paid a high price for his attitudes. Although someone, at times the better part of the local intelligentsia, took him seriously, his affectations on the whole renewed in the States the sneers of Punch. He had "committed the unpardonable offence of appearing in a pair of breeches which descended no further than his knees!" states Glaenzer, the editor of the first printed edition of Wilde's next lecture. "Whereupon, the significance of his remarks was relegated to that level by an audience whose understanding could not surmount eccentricities of dress. His lecture, however fine and worth and beautiful as a literary production, was known thenceforth as Ruskin and Water" (at least, we would say, Ruskin and Pater). The moral Glaenzer draws is that "when he posed as an idealist, he was laughed at for a fool; when he posed as a cynic he was applauded for a wit. But then the public could gain something from the pose of 1882, and had nothing to gain from that of 1892."

After a tour in some fifty or sixty American towns, Wilde returned to New York, in Glaenzer's words, "with a deeper knowledge of the needs of this country. And to suggest a remedy for those needs, he delivered his new lecture, more simple in the form than the first, more practical in its application to the requirements of the American people..." This lecture was published for the first time in 1906 by Glaenzer, from whose introduction we have been quoting, as Decorative Art in America - A lecture on "The Practical Application of the Principles of the Aesthetic Theory to Exterior and Interior House Decoration, with Observation upon Dress and Personal Ornaments", and was reprinted by Ross in Miscellanies as House Decoration. It was delivered for the first time in New York on May, 11th, 1882. Under the title of Art and the Handicraftsman go a few fragments taken from original manuscripts; printing them together in the same volume as the latter, Ross tells us that "it is not certain that they all belong to the same lecture, nor that all were written at the same period. Some portions were written in Philadelphia in 1882".
These two lectures, or what is left of them, are less interesting than The English Renaissance from the standpoint of the evolution of Wilde's aesthetic thought, even though Wilde's attempt to conciliate Pater's aesthetics with Ruskin's and Morris's social concern is still evident. Having been written in the States, with a better knowledge of the "practical" demands of their audience, they are more direct and concise than The English Renaissance; the long lists of names and of erudite quotations have disappeared in favour of a sequence of straightforward practical suggestions. Having to be more consistent and less refined, Wilde now goes back to Ruskin and Morris rather than to Pater for a source of "inspiration". In House Decoration, he speaks of America as he has seen it: he has seen too much bad work done, and emphasizes the importance of having beautiful surroundings in order to have good handicraftsmen. He stresses the importance of beauty in dress as well, and says that to be beautiful a dress must be comfortable: "the only well-dressed men that I saw ... were the Western miners ... They wore only what was comfortable, and therefore beautiful". It is necessary to have specimens of good work, he continues; they are provided by schools of rational art such as the South Kensington Museum in London: "it is here that the man of refinement and culture comes face to face with the workman who ministers to his joy". Other suggestions: "You have too many white walls. More colour is wanted ... you should have such men as Whistler among you to teach you the beauty and joy of colour". "The fault which I have observed in most of your rooms is that there is apparent no definite scheme of colour. Everything is not attuned to a key-note as it should be". Another common mistake has its origin in the widespread ignorance of the difference that exists between imaginative and decorative art: there is no sense in decorating plates with sunset scenes. "The condition of art should be simple ... Art requires a good, healthy atmosphere." The motives for art are around us; nothing is more stimulating to a painter or sculptor than the vision of a man at work. Do not misuse your noble materials; remember that marble, for instance, deserves better employment than the building of common houses. Decorate your wooden verandas with wood-carvings. Make beautiful jewellery out of your beautiful gold and silver. Live surrounded by art; teach it to create". This final rhapsody brings out the actor in Wilde. The idea of creating such a monument crossed his mind, he shamelessly says, when
your children. Teach them to "use their hands in the rational service of mankind. I would have a workshop attached to every school, and one hour a day given up to the teaching of simple decorative arts". Children must

learn to abhor the liar in art - the man who paints wood to look like iron, or iron to look like stone. It is a practical school of morals. No better way is there to learn to love Nature than to understand art. What we want is something spiritual added to life. Nothing is so ignoble that Art cannot sanctify it.(19)

Much of this is repeated in the following lecture, with a few additions, of which the following are the most interesting: "There is no opposition to beauty except ugliness: all things are either beautiful or ugly, and utility will be always on the side of the beautiful things"; "Do not think that the commercial spirit which is the basis of your life and cities here is opposed to art. Who built the beautiful cities of the world but commercial men and commercial men only?" (and to prove this homage to the commercial country whose guest he was he adds the examples of Genoa's traders, Florence's bankers, and Venice's merchants.)

He does not follow Morris too closely: we do not want to medievalize everything, he continues.

The art we want is the art based on all the inventions of modern civilization and to suit all the needs of nineteenth century life.(20)

We do not object to machinery: we reverence it when it does proper work, when it relieves man from ignoble and soulless labour... All machinery may be beautiful when it is undecorated even. Do not seek to decorate it. We cannot but think all good machinery is graceful, also, the line of strength and the line of beauty being one. (21)

The best art requires healthy surroundings, and a sense of individualism - that individualism which will be defined in The Soul of Man - "for this is the essence of art - a desire on the part of man to express himself in the noblest way possible". And to conclude, and after another sneer at the ordinary newspaper art critic - "nothing could be easier than to bring the ordinary critic under the head of the criminal classes" - Wilde proclaims solemnly himself the leader of this "new movement" - "a movement to show the rich what beautiful things they might enjoy and the poor what beautiful things they may create". This final rhapsody brings out the actor in Wilde. The idea of creating such a movement crossed his mind, he shamelessly says, when
as a young man, he saw what enthusiasm Ruskin's word could excite; and he boasts to have been one of the "Hinksey diggers". (22)

As Wilde had soon realized, practical America was readier to receive Morris's gospel than Pater's; consequently, the idea of Art's self-sufficiency was momentarily put in a corner, and the aesthete became a social preacher. On his arrival to the States he had told an American journalist that his ideas were "a development of John Ruskin's"; but he had actually found them ready-developed in Morris's lectures, delivered in the years 1878-1881 and published under the title of Hopes and Fears for Art in 1882. (23) Wilde often echoes Morris literally, as he had bluntly done with Pater. Still, we must note how convincingly Wilde selected what was best in Morris, whose pallid Medieval dream was put aside, while much of what Wilde chose to say—the importance of colour and simplicity, the absence of decoration from machines—has since them become dogma in modern architecture.

This return to Ruskin and Morris only concerns these two lectures: despite the fact that he found it convenient to pose as dress reformer and social preacher in days to come, never again did Wilde admit the coincidence of beauty and utility and such utilitarian heresies. His halfheartedness is underlined by a contemporary writing, which shows how his thought had had a further development from the stage of The English Renaissance, but not in the direction of Ruskin. In a letter to the publisher J.M. Stoddart, dated February 19th, 1882, he says:

I sent you the volume of poems and the preface. The preface you will see is most important, signifying my new departure from Mr. Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, and marks an era in the aesthetic movement. (24)

The book was Songs in the South, a small collection of poems by Rennell Rodd, a young friend of Wilde's; it was reprinted in the States with a few changes as Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf. It appeared in August, 1882, and contained a preface by Wilde entitled L'Envoi. It said, among other things:

...for the most joyous poet is not he who sows the desolate highways of this world with the barren seed of laughter, but he who makes his sorrow most musical, this indeed being the meaning of joy in art—in our soul, and colour, indeed in of itself a mystical presence of things, and thus a kind of sentiment. (25)
that incommunicable element of artistic delight which, in poetry for instance, comes from what Keats called 'the sensuous life of verse', the element of song in the singing, made so pleasurable for us by that wonder of notion which often has its origin in mere musical impulse, and in painting, is to be sought for, from the subject never, but from the pictorial charm only - the scheme and symphony of the colour, the satisfying beauty of the design: so that the ultimate expression of our artistic movement in painting has been, not in the spiritual visions of the Pre-Raphaelites, for all their marvel of Greek legend and their mystery of Italian song, but in the work of such men as Whistler and Albert Moore, who have raised design and colour to be ideal level of poetry and music. For the quality of their exquisite painting comes from the mere inventive and creative handling of line and colour, from a certain form and choice of beautiful workmanship, which, rejecting any literary reminiscence and all metaphysical idea, is in itself entirely satisfying to the aesthetic sense - is, as the Greeks would say, an end in itself; the effect of their work being like the effect given to us by music; for music is the art in which form and matter are always one - the art whose subject cannot be separated from the method of its expression; the art which most completely realizes for us the artistic ideal, and is the condition to which all other arts are constantly aspiring.

Now, this increased sense of the absolutely satisfying value of beautiful workmanship, this recognition of the primary importance of the sensuous element in art, this love of art for art's sake, is the point in which we of the younger school have made a departure from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin - a departure definite and different and decisive. Master indeed of the knowledge of all noble living and of the wisdom of all spiritual things will he be to us ever, seeing that it was he who by the magic of his presence and the music of his lips taught us at Oxford that enthusiasm for beauty which is the secret of Hellenism...and yet, in his art criticism, his estimate of the joyous element in art, we are no longer with him; for the keystone to his aesthetic system is ethical always. He would judge of a picture by the amount of noble moral ideas it expresses... But to us the rule of art is not the rule of morals... Nor, in looking at a work of art, should we be dreaming of what it symbolizes, but rather loving it for what it is... Nor, in its primary aspect, has a painting, for instance, any more spiritual message or meaning for us than a Blue tile from the wall of Damascus, or a Kitson vase. It is a beautifully coloured surface, nothing more, and affects us by no suggestions stolen from philosophy, no pathos pilfered from literature, no feeling filched from a poet, but its own incommunicable artistic essence - by that selection of truth which we call style, and that relation of values which is the draughtsmanship of painting, by the whole quality of the workmanship, the arabesque of the design, the splendour of the colour, these things are enough to stir the most divine and remote of the chords which make music in our soul, and colour, indeed is of itself a mystical presence on things, and tone a kind of sentiment.(25)
This "historical" "departure from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin" may be called a complete acceptance of the teaching of Mr. Pater; who is indeed the author of every idea expressed in this passage, and of many of the sentences too. In a way, it is as if Wilde now admitted the impossibility of reconciling the two different brands of thought, as he had tried to do in his first lecture; under this aspect, both the two "practical" American lectures and L'Envoi are backward steps from the English Renaissance: the former moving towards Ruskin's social idea of art, the latter underlining art's sensuous appeals as ends to themselves, as Pater had said in that "very flower of decadence". (26) And here ends the career of "the first Oscar", the aesthete. Another, more convincing synthesis of his theories will he give in years to come; new elements are still to influence his thought.
Notes to Chapter II


(2) "Dear Bouncer, I am very glad you like Aurora Leigh. I think it simply 'intense' in every way" - Oscar Wilde to a friend in 1876 (The Letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, London 1962, p.25).

(3) In facts, Wilde was two years older than Hamilton thought; he was born on October 15th, 1854, not in 1856 as stated by Hamilton and others (even by the Dictionary of National Biography).

(4) The Oxford Union refused acceptance to the book (shortly after its publication), upon an undergraduate's protest that the poems were to be considered Shakespeare's, Donne's, Byron's, Sidney's, Morris's, Swinburne's, etc. but not Wilde's (the episode is related by Hesketh Pearson, in his Life of Oscar Wilde, London 1946, p.52, and by others). E. Fehr carefully traces influences and borrowings (see Studien zu Oscar Wildes Gedichten, Palaestra 100, Berlin, 1918); K. Hartley (Oscar Wilde. L'influence française dans son ouvrage, Paris 1935) should also be seen. See also the chapter on Wilde's poetry in La poesia inglese dall'estetismo al simbolismo by Agostino Lombardo (Roma 1950).

(5) Miscellanea, p. 226

(6) Ibid., p.209

(7) In Hamilton's words, by the foundation of the Grosvenor Gallery "strength and solidity were first given to the movement amongst the artists of the school. They thus obtained a head quarter for their art, and the founder was one of themselves in his opinions" (p.23)

(8) Wilde sent Pater a copy of his review; Pater acknowledged it with a letter where he praised Wilde's criticism as "very just" and "certainly very pleasantly expressed" (Letters, pp.46-47).


(10) On July 2nd. Wilde's article appeared in the same month, but the manuscript had been sent to the editor in June.

(11) Returning the corrected proofs of his article, Wilde wrote: "I have been obliged to explain what I mean by imaginative colour, and what Mr. Pater means by it. We mean thought expressed by colour such as the story of Merlin being implied and expressed in the colour. I do not mean odd, unnatural colouring. I mean 'thought in colour.'" (Letter to Keatinge Cook, editor of the Dublin University Magazine, dated by Hart-Davis May-June 1877 - Letters, p.39)

(12) Misc. p.258
(13) Ibid., p.261

(14) Ibid., p.262

(15) Ibid., p.263


(18) In the States Wilde friendly received by many intellectuals, among whom Longfellow and Whitman (and Louisa M. Alcott). Most newspapers renewed the attitude of Punch, but some took him seriously. The review of The English Renaissance which appeared on The New York World of January 10, 1882, said: "‘Beauty cannot be taught, but only revealed’, is the apothegm that Mr. Wilde never tires of repeating; and this, fitly enough, is the key to his style. He handled no prosaic subject, nor was his handling prosaic. Long melodious sentences, seldom involved, always clear, unfolded his meaning, as graceful curves reveal a beautiful figure. A vocabulary as wide as Swinburne’s and well-nigh as musical, modelled on that rich and flowing prose, which is as marvellous as Swinburne’s verse - how could such a style be dull? Yet it was never obscure. Always the rigid clear principle of chaste English, simplicity, and the careful attribute of clear thought, exactness, characterised his style. Almost gorgeous at times, his language never quite ran away with him, but was always equal to the clear expression of the most subtle fancy. The best parts of the lecture were its clear glimpses of a rare appreciation of artistic literary work from Homer to William Morris. It is not every day that one can sit in the hearing of so keen a critic, or catch such glimpses of so clear a revelation of art..."

(19) Misc. p.290

(20) Ibid., p.294

(21) Ibid., p.295

(22) The episode is well known; this is how Wilde relates it for the benefit of his American audiences: "One summer afternoon in Oxford ... we were coming down the street - a troop of young men, some of them like myself only nineteen, going to river or tennis-court or cricket-field - when Ruskin going up to lecture in cap and gown met us. He seemed troubled and prayed us to go back with him to his lecture, which a few of us did, and there he spoke to us not on art this time, but on life, saying that it seemed to him to be wrong that all the best physique and strength of the young men in England should be spent aimlessly on cricket-ground or river... He thought, he said, that we should be working at something that would do good to other people, at something..."
by which we might show that in all labour there was something noble. Well, we were a good deal moved, and said we would do anything he wished. So he went out round Oxford and found two villages, Upper and Lower Hinskey, and between them lay a great swamp, so that the villagers could not pass from one to the other without many miles of a round. And when he came back in winter he asked us to help him to make a round across this morass for these village people to use. So out we went, day after day, and learned how to lay levels and to break stones, and to wheel barrows along a plank - a very difficult thing to do. And Ruskin worked with us in the mist and rain and mud of an Oxford winter, and our friends and our enemies came out and mocked us from the bank..." (Misc., p.306-7). The description is lively, but Pearson, Wilde's best biographer, is obliged to admit that "the teller was not amongst those present in High Street when Ruskin delivered them from their normal pursuits, though he had probably heard the story from several who were and touched it up... The spade-work had been done by the time Oscar arrived, and he took part in the stone-breaking during his first term. The road which resulted from these labours was about the worst in the country..." (The Life of Oscar Wilde, pp.28-29). The Arts Council Exhibition Ruskin and his circle (held in London in 1964) contained a photograph of "Hincksey diggers" at work: Wilde is not among them, although the catalogue credits him with taking part in the enterprise. The same catalogue reports, from Ruskin's diary, the entry for February 6th, 1876: "Yesterday, Melancholy walk by Hincksey, where road cut up, all going to ruin that we did there".

(23) Three of the five lectures collected in Hopes and Fears had been previously printed in pamphlet form (for Morris's influence on Wilde, see Ojala, pp.74ff).

(24) Letters, p.96

(25) Misc., pp.30-33

(26) As Wilde once defined The Renaissance, adding: "the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written" (Pearson, p.31).
Chapter III

Wilde and Whistler (1882-1885)

Wilde was back in London from the States in January 1883. After a short stay he used what was left from his American earnings - and which was originally meant for "an autumn in Venice, a winter at Rome, and a spring in Athens" (1) - to give himself a three-month holiday in Paris. This diversion is significant: it can be taken to point out a fundamental change in Wilde's attitude, a passage, so to say, from contemplation to activity. To him Greece and Italy stood for the classical beauty he had learnt to venerate through Pater and Ruskin; Paris meant the centre of the most lively tendencies of contemporary art. There "The Oscar of the first period is dead", he is reported to have said: "We are now concerned with the Oscar of the second period, who has nothing whatever in common with the gentleman who wore long hair and carried a sunflower down Piccadilly, " (2). The Oscar of the second period carried around a walking stick which was the exact copy of Balsac's ivory cane, and had his hair curled after a bust of Nero in the Louvre. He plunged in the literary life of the town, and met Verlaine, Mallarmé, Hugo, Zola, Edmond de Goncourt, Paul Bourget, Daudet, Bizarro, Degas, Henri de Régnier, Jean Michepin, Maurice Rollinat; people whose name he had frequently heard in Whistler's conversation, and to some of whom he probably was introduced through his letters.

Wilde had met the eccentric artist when he had settled in London, around 1880; while in the States, he had managed to keep this friendship alive by way of exchanging telegraphic jokes, and had seen "a great deal" (3) of him during his brief sojourn, possibly receiving encouragement to choose Paris as his next station.

Whistler, twenty years older than the "aesthete", was to play an important role in this stage of the latter's career. The years 1883-1885 represent an intermediate period between Wilde's early aestheticism as expressed in his American lectures and the ultimate shape of his thought, which ripened between 1885 and 1890. This period - whose main events are Wilde's first
long stay in Paris, a second, rapid trip to America for the unfortunate production of Vera, and a resumption of his activity as a lecturer, eventually broken by his marriage and by the beginning of his journalistic occupation—was influenced by Whistler as deeply, in a way, as the preceding one had been by Pater.

We saw to what an extent Walter Pater—that distant, silent worshipper of beauty—had been the idol of Wilde's early youth. Indeed, the impact of his theories, as well as that of his style, was to follow Wilde during the whole course of his literary production. At the beginning of the period we are now dealing with, however, the personality of the young man, still under a process of formation, was looking for a model to imitate in its external attitudes. Despite his often repeated protests of admiration for the figure of the Oxford don, the youthful Irishman realized soon that a discreet life of contemplation was not, after all, what best suited him. He was, from beginning to end—we must not forget Yeats' acute definition—(4) a man of action. Life was to him as important as literary creation: his ultimate mission would become "to transfer some of the beauties that had so far appeared only on the printed page into life and action, to act out the fantasies that are so delicately veiled in the weary rhythm of Paterian prose". (5)

In his friend James McNeill Whistler he found a nature in many ways akin to his own—the nature of a man of action; and a practical application, he thought, of all he stood for. He soon learned to admire the painter's proud consciousness of the superiority of the artist over a Philistine society, and his true love of art for its own sake; in his flamboyant, caustic wit, expressing itself in sparkling paradoxes, he discovered a prototype for his own inborn gift for epigram and persiflage. Whistler's ideas, though somewhat confused and by no means the fruit of severe speculation, appealed to him as the living voice of Paris. Action, much more than speculation was what attracted Wilde in Whistler: to his eyes the painter became a living counterpart to Pater's abstractions. By the time he met him, the echoes of his famous suit for libel against Ruskin were still in the air; Whistler's phryric victory had earned him one farthing damages, the reputation of a rebel against authority, and, to his confrères, the glory of martyrdom.
"A miniature Mephistopheles, mocking the majority": thus Wilde saw him. And in the aesthete the older man found an eager disciple, ready, in the beginning, to borrow his *bon mots* and to divulge his creed from his pulpit of art preacher, content with repeating the master's dicta as they were.

Such a rapport of master and disciple, however, did not last long. Wilde's cultural background was much wider than the painter's, too much to permit him to rest in the passive acceptance of the latter's statements; soon the pupil started developing theories and paradoxes of his own, leaving his teacher behind. Despite Whistler's "shrill shrieks of 'Plagiarism'" in later years, it must be admitted that, for heavy that his impact had been to the formation of some of Wilde's distinctive features, this influence was soon overcome, and the disciple moved along his way. To this respect, Wilde can be said to have used Whistler for while - he had a "habit of absorbing whatever appealed to him in another man's style or philosophy, as though he were studying a part, and then presenting it in a slightly different guise as his own" - but only, as we shall see, for a while.

To our eyes, Whistler's claims of originality appear exaggerated. He was no man of culture; his ideas about art had been "acquired in long loafing and clever café cackle" during his long stays in Paris, and were for the biggest part commonplaces of the Impressionist circles. He gave them a personal shape through his brilliant talent for a polemical expression; they were still something unheard of in London's art circles, and did not fail to make a sensation. The notorious trial v. Ruskin (November, 1878) gave origin to one of these violent utterances in art matters, under the form of a pamphlet entitled *Art and Art Critics*, published shortly after the sentence and reprinted in 1890 in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. There an Art for art's sake idea - originally derived from F. Schlegel - was fitted to the occasion. The romantic conception of the poet as the best judge of poetry was developed by Whistler into a sort of paradox: if the poet is the best, nay, the only judge of poetry - and the scientist of science, and so on - why should the painter not be the only judge of painting? Why should a critic, even if he has spent his life among pictures, be a better
We are told that Mr. Ruskin has devoted his long life to art, and as a result - is 'Slade Professor' at Oxford. In the same sentence we have thus his position and its worth. It suffices not, Messieurs! a life passed among pictures makes not a painter - else the policeman in the National Gallery might assert himself. (12)

"No!" he concludes:

let there be no critics! ...'Shall the painter, then' - I foresee the question - 'decide upon painting?' Aggressive as is this supposition, I fear that, in the length of time, his assertion alone has established what even the gentlemen of the quill accept as the canons of art, and recognise as the masterpieces of work. (13)

Such a view implies of course, although Whistler does not underline it, a conception of an art where the formal values prevail on those of content.

Other relevant statements are contained in an article written in the same year. Apropo of the titles of his paintings (whose origin, as we pointed out, is to be found in Gautier) he said:

Why should I not call my works 'symphonies', 'arrangements', 'harmonies', and 'nocturnes'? I know that many good people think my nomenclature funny and myself 'eccentric'... The vast majority of English folk cannot and will not consider a picture as a picture, apart from any story which it may be supposed to tell... As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour. The great musicians knew this. Beethoven and the rest wrote music - simply music; symphony in this key, concerto or sonata in that.

On F or G they constructed celestial harmonies - as harmonies - as combinations evolved from the chords of F or G and their minor cor-relatives... Art should be independent of all clap-trap - should stand alone, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism and the like. (14)

(Similar titles, by the way, can be found in Wilde's Poems: several Impressions, a Serenade, a Symphony in Yellow).

Back from Paris, Wilde took to lecturing again. His tour around the United Kingdom lasted off and on for a year, the arguments of the lectures being mainly "The House Beautiful", "Dress", and "Personal Impressions of America". One of the lectures dealt with art in a more direct way. It we see around us the "depressing, soberly dreary appearance of an modern city, the sombre dress of men and women, not the gaiety and love.
was delivered to the Art Students of the Royal Academy at their Club in Golden Square, Westminster, on June 30, 1883, and, with the three American ones (14a) is the only one which reached us. It is printed in Miscellanea as Lecture to Art Students, and reproduces in full many of Whistler's ideas; thus providing in many instances a striking contrast with views expressed in the previous lectures.

Wilde started by declining to give a definition of beauty:

For, we who are working in art cannot accept any theory of beauty in exchange for beauty itself, and, so far from desiring to isolate it in a formula appealing to the intellect, we, on the contrary, seek to materialise it in a form that gives joy to the soul through the senses. We want to create it, not to define it. The definition should follow the work; the work should not adapt itself to the definition. (15)

Consequently, a history of art is useless to the creative artist, who must not have an ideal of beauty to imitate; and it is foolish to speak of ancient art, since "all good work looks perfectly modern", while archaeology is "merely the science of making excuses for bad art" (and we feel Whistler's sneers at the critics behind such bold statements). Wilde went on:

The subject of my lecture to-night is what makes an artist and what does an artist make; what are the relations of the artist to his surroundings, what is the education the artist should get, and what is the quality of good work in art. (16)

An artist must not be preoccupied with expressing his age: the great artist rises above his age to speak to all ages: he must "realise completely" his "age in order completely to abstract" himself "from it". An artist may feel suffocated, living in such an inartistic age as ours. But it must be remembered that an artistic age never existed; the artist has always been the exception, never the rule. To those who object that the Greeks were an artistic people we can answer that they attacked their greatest dramatists in the name of morality, and imprisoned Phidias for his artistic achievements. And artistic people never existed. Still, it could be said that "the external beauty of the world has almost entirely passed away from us"; that once upon a time an artist was surrounded by lovely forms: Nino Pisano, according to Ruskin's description, had the most beautiful, stimulating landscape constantly before his eyes; nowadays we see around us the "depressing, monotonous appearance of any modern city, the sombre dress of men and women, the meaningless and barren architecture".
to the real artist, nothing is beautiful or ugly in itself at all. With the facts of the object he has nothing to do, but with its appearance only, and appearance is a matter of light and shade, of masses, of position, and of value. Appearance is, in fact, a matter of effect merely, and it is with the effects of nature that you have to deal, not with the real condition of the object. What you, as painters, have to paint is not things as they are but things as they are not. No object is so ugly that, under certain conditions of light and shade, or proximity to other things, it will not look beautiful...(13)

Again, this is the voice of Whistler, probably strengthened by the recollection of the Impressionist paintings which Wilde himself had recently had occasion to admire in Paris. A homage to Wilde's new master follows: Wilde indicates Mr. Whistler as a living example of a man "who unites in himself all the qualities of the noblest art, whose work is a joy for all time, who is, himself, a master of all time."

Even the dress reformer, who had more than once proclaimed that the modern attire is a disgrace to art ("to see the frockcoat of the drawing room done in bronze", he had said, "or the double waistcoat perpetuated in marble, adds a new horror to death"), forgets himself for a moment, when affirming that "ugly dress is better for art - facts of vision, not of the object. A picture is still, in the Paterian definition, "a beautifully coloured surface"; it must make one exclaim "How beautiful!" - not "How curious", "How sad", "How interesting", and the like. One more Whistlerianism is to be found in the definition of "finish":

Am I pleading, then, for mere technique? No. As long as there are signs of technique at all, the picture is unfinished. What is finish? A picture is finished when all traces of work, and of the means employed to bring about the result, have disappeared.(20)

The lecture ends with a series of general statements of the kind of the following one:

Decorative art emphasizes its material: imaginative art annihilates it. Tapestry shows its threads as parts of its beauty: a picture annihilates its canvas; it shows nothing of it.(21)

As Whistler put it in later years, Wilde had gone forth on this occasion
as his St. John, after being "crammed" up with his master's ideas ("that he might not add deplorable failure to foolish appearance, in his anomalous position, as art expounder, before his clear-headed audience"). (22) We have no reason to disbelieve him, since in the same theories are repeated in the famous Ten O'Clock Lecture, which Whistler delivered in London on February 20th, 1885, (nor did Wilde, significantly, ever claim his priority). Whistler's brilliant lecture is well worth considering. Art, in his lively exposition, is a "whimsical goddess", who delights herself in being found in the most unexpected places and under the strangest circumstances. There is a common misunderstanding about her:

The people ... have been harassed with Art in every guise, and vexed with many methods as to its endurance. They have been told how they shall love Art, and live with it. Their homes have been invaded, their walls covered with paper, their very dress taken to task - until, roused at last, bewildered and filled with the doubts and discomforts of senseless suggestion, they resent such intrusion, and cast forth the false prophets, who have brought the very name of the beautiful into disrepute, and derision upon themselves. (23)

All this is in vain, for Art does not yield herself so easily.

She is, withal, selfishly occupied with her own perfection only - having no desire to teach - seeking and finding the beautiful in all conditions and in all times, as did her high priest Rembrandt, when he saw picturesque grandeur and noble dignity in the Jews' quarter of Amsterdam, and lamented not that its inhabitants were not Greeks. (24)

The great artists are content with that beauty which they alone can see in things - they never tried to "improve" things. Now "Beauty is confounded with Virtue, and, before a work of Art, it is asked: 'What good shall it do?'

As his appointed mouthpiece had affirmed before, Whistler strongly denies that an artistic period or an Art-loving nation ever existed, and solemnly declares the total uselessness of all archaeologists, art-historians and art-critics. The critic-writer, who has become the middleman in this matter of art, considers the work "from a literary point of view"; he deals with it as with a novel or anecdote; he disdains "mere execution", and looks for the thought, which he refers to the event; the "painter's poetry" is thus
lost to him. Art is not to be confounded with education; but happily, despite all prattle of this kind, she

happens — no hovel is safe from it, no prince may depend upon it, the vastest intelligence cannot bring it about, and puny efforts to make it universal end in quaint comedy, and in coarse farce. (25)

The most glittering part of the lecture is that dealing with Nature. Whistler's attitude in this respect has its antecedents in Baudelaire's; it is a theory which will be particularly developed by Wilde in the Decay of Lying.

Nature contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music.

But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful — as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he bring forth from chaos glorious harmony.

To say to the painter, that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player, that he may sit on the piano.

That Nature is always right, is an assertion, artistically, as untrue, as it is one whose truth is universally taken for granted. Nature is usually wrong: that is to say, the condition of things that shall bring about the perfection of harmony worthy a picture is rare, and not common at all. (26)

People often fail to acknowledge the really beautiful aspects of Nature, and praise its trivialities.

And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us — then the wayfarer hastens home; the working man and the cultured one, the wise man and the one of pleasure, cease to understand, as they have ceased to see, and Nature, who, for once, has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone, her son and her master — her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her.

To him her secrets are unfolded, to him her lessons have become gradually clear. He looks at her flower, not with the enlarging lens, that he may gather facts for the botanist, but with the light of the one who sees in her choice selection of brilliant tones and delicate tints, suggestions of future harmonies. He does not confine himself to purposeless copying, without thought, each blade of grass, as commended
by the inconsequent, but, in the long curve of the narrow leaf, corrected
by the straight tall stem, he learns how grace is wedded to dignity,
how strength enhances sweetness, that elegance shall be the result...
In all that is dainty and lovable he finds hints for his own combinations,
and thus is Nature ever his resource and always at his service, and
to him is naught refused. (27)

In this way, Art is more important than Nature, but the latter is not completely
rejected, as later by Wilde, to be replaced by Art as the only reality.
Art is rather a means to understand Nature; and it is only to the true
artist that Nature teaches her lesson.

Wilde, who had begun contributing articles on dress reform to the Pall
Wall Gazette, gave an account of Whistler's lecture on the same newspaper.
Two years had elapsed since his Lecture to Art Students, and convictions of
his own had been taking an independent shape in the meantime. Though
praising beyond measure Whistler's statements, along with his "marvellous
elocution", for the first time he allowed himself to disagree from his
master on a couple of points. As a dress reformer he could hardly accept
"that charming people should be condemned to live with magent ottomans and
Albert-blue curtains in their rooms in order that some painter may observe
the side-lights on the one and the values of the other". Much less could he,
as a littérature, consent to the dictum that only a painter can be a judge of
painting:

an artist is a judge of art, there is a wide difference. As long
as a painter is a painter merely, he should not be allowed to talk of
anything but mediums and megilp, and on those subjects should be compelled
to hold his tongue; it is only when he becomes an artist that the
secret laws of artistic creation are revealed to him. For there are
not many arts, but one art merely - poem, picture and Parthenon, sonnet
and statue - all are in their essence the same, and he who knows one
knows all. But the poet is the supreme artist, for he is the master
of colour and of form, and the real musician besides, and is lord over
all life and all arts; and so to the poet beyond all others are these
mysteries known; to Edgar Allan Poe and to Baudelaire, not to Benjamin
West and Paul Delaroche. (28)

More than by such remarks, Whistler was probably annoyed by the general
tone of the article, which was more a rival's than a disciple's. At any
rate, he took Wilde's review as an open rebellion, and hurried to write him
that "nothing was more delicate, in the flattery of the 'Poet' to the 'Painter',
than the naïveté of the 'Poet' in the choice of his Painters - Benjamin West
and Paul Delaroche!" But in doing so he had fallen straight into an open
trap. Wilde had the answer read in store for him:

By the aid of a biographical dictionary, I made the discovery that
there were once two painters, called Benjamin West and Paul
Delaroche, who rashly lectured upon Art. As of their works nothing
at all remains, I conclude that they explained themselves away.(29)

For the first time Wilde had had the last word in a verbal duel with
his master, and that was more than the susceptible artist could forgive.
And in a successive article (The Relation of Dress to Art(30)) Wilde returned
to the topic, to reiterate his objections to Whistler's statements. It was
as though from then on he had felt capable of flying upon his own wings.
The allusions to Whistler in his articles written in the following years are,
though friendly, saucy; it is clear that he now considered himself in terms
of equality. Five years after the Lecture to Art Students, Whistler decided
that he could stand no longer such an impudence, and broke in open accusations
of plagiarism. "What has Oscar in common with Art?" he wrote the Committee
of the National Art Exhibition in 1888:

Except that he dines at our tables, and picks from our platters
the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces.(31)

He repeated the same accusations two years later, in a letter to Truth.(32)
Wilde replied both times, and not without dignity. He did not plead innocent
and even implicitly acknowledged Whistler as his "master". (33) The tone
of his replies was urban, though annoyed; indeed, one would say, he did not
sound too interested in the matter. We shall soon see why. By that time
(1888) he could turn back to look at his former teacher's theories as an
early stage of his own thought.

(30) MACOMBER, p. 56.

(31) Diary, June 12, 1888.


(33) Interview with "Truth," June 15, 1888.
Notes to Chapter III.

(1) Letters, p.21.
(2) See Peerson, p.78.
(3) Letters, p.135.
(5) Graham Bough, see N.4 (p.665).
(6) Miscellany, p.64.
(7) One of the best known anecdotes about Whistler and Wilde is thus reported by Pearson (p.97): "Humphry Ward, art critic of The Times, was at an exhibition of Whistler's paintings, expressing his opinion that one work was good, and another bad, and so on. 'My dear fellow', said Whistler, 'you must never say this painting is good or that bad. Good and bad are not terms to be used by you. But you may say 'I like this' or 'I don't like that', and you will be within your rights. Now come and have a whisky; you are sure to like that!'
'Well I wish I had said that!' exclaimed Wilde delightedly.
'You will, Oscar, you will', retorted Whistler with his loud 'Ha-ha!'"
(12) The Gentle Art, p.26
(13) Ibid., p.30.
(14a) And with Impressions of America, ed. Stuart Mason (Sunderland 1906), which is not in Ross's edition of Wilde's Works.
(15) Misc., p.311.
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(16) Ibid., pp.311-312.

(17) Wilde's quotation is taken from The Two paths, London 1859, p.123 (Lect. III).

(18) Misc., p.318.

(19) Ibid., p.284.

(20) Ibid., pp.320-21.

(21) Ibid., p.321.

(22) The Gentle Art, p.236 (Letter publ. on Truth, Jan. 2nd, 1890)

(23) Ibid. pp.135-36

(24) Ibid., p.136.

(25) Ibid., pp.150-51.

(26) Ibid., pp.142-43

(27) Ibid., pp.144-45.

(28) Misc., p.66 (Mr. Whistler's Ten O'Clock, Pall Mall Gazette, Feb. 21st, 1885)


(30) See Misc., p.68 (The Relation of Dress to Art - A Note in Black and White on Mr. Whistler's Lecture, Pall Mall Gazette, Feb. 28th, 1885).


(32) See N.22

(33) Letters, p.254.
Chapter IV.

Wilde as a journalist: the development of his ideas (1885-90)

On October 14th, 1884, a letter on Dress Reform signed by Oscar Wilde appeared in the Pall Mall Gazette, (1) followed shortly by an article on the same matters. (2) Early in the following year the aesthete, who had got married and had moved into a new, luxurious house in Tite Street, Chelsea, in January, and was to have his first child born in June, became a current contributor to that paper, out of the need of a regular income; the aforementioned account of Whistler's Ten O'Clock lecture (Feb. 21, 1885) opened the series of his articles. With the exception of a few reports of lectures, book-reviewing was his task, and his critiques were not signed. Eighty-one of them have been identified so far, the last one for the issue of May 24, 1890. The volumes criticized belonged to all literary fields: books of essays, fiction, memories, travels, and even of cooking, gardening, and lace-manufacturing. Poetry he generally reviewed in a column headed as The Poets' Corner, where a survey was given of the most recent collections of poems.

Journalism was Wilde's main activity during the years 1885-90. The Happy Prince and Other Tales (May 1888) was the only work of his to see the light in book form in this period; the stories later collected as Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories (July 1891) came out for the first time in various magazines, and so did The Picture of Dorian Gray, the four essays later collected as Intentions (May 1891), and a few poems. Besides book-reviewing for the Pall Mall Gazette, Wilde took to dramatic criticism for a short while, between March 1885 and May 1886, on the Dramatic Review, contributing a total amount of 8 articles. (3) In 1887 he accepted the editorship of a magazine for ladies, whose title he changed into The Woman's World, and whose first issue was published on November in the same year. The magazine did not survive Wilde's resignation on July, 1889. Despite often repeated anecdotes about his laziness as an editor, he had done a fairly good job: the Letters witness, for instance, how he improved the quality of the contributive His personal column, entitled Literary and Other Notes, was a survey mainly, but not only Wilde's writings of 1885-91 are scattered with self-quotations
but not solely, devoted to the work of female writers or of feminine interest; we have 13 such articles. More criticism is to be found scattered on other newspapers and magazines, like The World, the Court and Society Review, the Sunday Times, the Speaker. Several letters written to newspapers, with some of which we shall concern ourselves later on, complete the picture of Wilde as a journalist.

The articles were collected by Robert Ross, who patiently traced back many of the anonymous ones, in the volumes Reviews and Miscellanea of the 1908 edition. More material turned up then since, not a little of it discovered by Owen Dudley Edwards, in whose announced critical edition of Wilde's opera omnia we look forward to seeing the complete series eventually ordered and classified. The only study devoted to this particular aspect of Wilde's activities is F.K. Baumann's Oscar Wilde als Kritiker der Literatur (Zürich, 1933), which is little more than a careful list of Wilde's literary sympathies.

Reviews and Miscellanea make rewarding reading. The display of scholarship and sound criticism is remarkable; but the main interest of the two books lies in the fact that they make it possible to follow closely the development of Wilde's ideas and literary style.

Contact with the ordinary reader did much to stifle the early Wilde's somewhat alarming tendency to imitate superficially Pater's precious prose, and brought about a welcome clarity of expression in his writing. The practice of book-reviewing brought him into contact with a variety of writings which stimulated his ideas when they were good, and sharpened his irony into his best weapon when they were bad. What is most striking in Wilde's articles is their author's equanimity - a quality which not many critics, perhaps, would accord to his work generally.

There are ideas, definitions, and even whole passages, in the articles, which Wilde used again in later works. Intentions and The Soul of Man contain a great deal of such repetitions, which is little wonder, since these essays must be considered as the crowning-point of Wilde's activity as a critic. But not only Wilde's writings of 1889-91 are scattered with self-quotations
from articles; also the plays, written between 1892 and 1895, contain echoes of statements whose origin may be found in the Pall Mall Gazette or in The Woman's World. This is one more proof of what we have said in the Introduction: that the clue to the development of Wilde's thought lies in the late 1880's, and that no substantial addition is to be found in the writings following The Soul of Man.

Two examples may illustrate Wilde's continual going back to his articles. The first is notorious, and has often been cited to charge Wilde with superficiality: it concerns the article entitled A Fascinating Book and written in 1888. Two pages from this review of a "history of Embroidery and Lace" (those corresponding to Rev., 334-5) were transferred, with slight changes, into the ninth chapter of Dorian Gray, where this list of famous pieces of embroidery stands as a specimen of Wilde's hero's refinement as a connoisseur. The second example is pointed out here, I believe, for the first time. It credits Wilde, incidentally, with a sense of humour (which in any case nobody would deny him). Who would have thought that Mrs. Walford's Your Biographies from 'Blackwood' written in 1889:

...the serious-minded little country girl ... at the age of eight had covered a whole quire of paper with letters seeking to reform imaginary depraved characters, and with return epistles full of contrition and promises of amendment... (1a)

For the purposes of our work we shall dwell on four aspects of the "aesthete" - the art-theorician, the critic, both literary and dramatic, and the "socialist" - as we may discern statements and definitions scattered through the product of his journalistic activity.

For such a novel it is not possible to state in advance how far ordinary fiction, - o - o - o - beauty of form in order to produce the facts of life, - o - o - o - is what is meant by realism or naturalism.

A few statements on art lay down, still in an approximate, ephemeral form, problems which will be dealt with in extenso in the two dialogues
The Critic as Artist and The Decay of Lying: they concern mainly the nature and function of art, art's supreme reality, and art-criticism. Reviewing the letters of George Sand, Wilde is struck by her polemics with Flaubert about his conception of art for art's sake. She reproaches the author of Madame Bovary for his attempt to conceal the writer's personality: "If we have any philosophy in our brain it must needs break forth in our writings". Although she may be said to have suffered herself from too dominant a personality, Wilde finds her right in the main, but cannot agree completely:

Art without personality is impossible. And yet the aim of art is not to reveal personality, but to please. This she hardly recognised in her aesthetics, though she realised it in her work.

Nor can he share her almost utilitarian view of art:

Art for the sake of itself is an idle sentence: art for the sake of truth, for the sake of what is beautiful and good, that is the creed I seek... People say that birds sing for the sake of singing, but I doubt it. They sing their loves and happiness, and in that they are in keeping with nature. But man must do something more, and poets only sing in order to love people and to make them think, she says. "Perhaps", Wilde replies,

she valued good intentions in art a little too much, and she hardly understood that art for art's sake is not meant to express the final cause of art but is merely a formula of creation.

This is somewhat elusive, and we cannot help feeling surprised at such a tame statement from the author of The English Renaissance. What this 'formula of creation' really means is explained more clearly in an article on contemporary fiction written two years later. 'We have made Truth and not Beauty the aim of art', he regrets:

and seem to value imitation more than imagination. Beauty of form is always in itself a source of joy; the mere technique of verse has an imaginative and spiritual element; and life must, to a certain degree, be transfigured before it can find its expression in music. But ordinary fiction, rejecting the beauty of form in order to realise the facts of life, seems often to lack the vital element of delight to miss that pleasure-giving power in virtue of which the arts exist.
If the aim of art is to please, art must not search life for its archetypes. Developing Hegel's and Baudelaire's contempt of nature, Wilde will later arrive as far as to proclaim art as the only reality; an intuition which we find in an article on Balzac:

A steady course of Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shade of shades. Who could care to go out to an evening party to meet Tomkins, the friend of one's boyhood, when one can sit at home with Lucien de Rubempré?

The problem of the unity of the arts had been a capital one for Pater, who had stressed the tendency of each art to pass into the condition of another. This could lead to confusion, and Wilde finds it advisable to warn against a current mistake, apropos of J.A. Symonds' History of the Renaissance and of a lecture of Selwyn Image.

The conception of the unity of the arts is certainly of great value, but in the present condition of criticism it seems to us that it would be more useful to emphasize the fact that each art has its separate method of expression.

The true unity of the arts is to be found, not in any resemblance of one art to another, but in the fact that to the really artistic nature all the arts have the same message and speak the same language though with different tongues.

This is important, because it permits Wilde to put the fundamentals of his theory of criticism, which was born, as we saw, as a polemic against Whistler. The latter had said that the painter is the only judge of painting. But to assert this we must postulate too wide a distinction among the arts; which are, on the contrary, connected by a basic unity - that something they all have in common, and which speaks to the really artistic temperament. It follows that no amount of daubing on a cellar will make a man understand the mystery of Michael Angelo's sybils, nor is it necessary to write a blank verse drama before one can appreciate the beauty of Hamlet. It is essential that an art critic should have a nature receptive of beautiful impressions, and sufficient intuition to recognize style when he meets with it, and truth when it is shown to him; but, if he does not possess these qualities, a reckless career of water-colour painting will not give them to him, for, if from the incompetent critic all things be hidden, to the bad painter nothing shall be revealed.
The critic is then first of all, 'a nature receptive of beautiful impressions'. The example of Walter Pater comes immediately to the mind; and even if Wilde has not yet gone so far as to point him out as the living model of the ideal critic, his admiration for his achievements in this respect is patent. Mr. Pater is an intellectual impressionist. He does not weary us with any definite doctrine or seek to suit life to any formal creed. He is always looking for exquisite moments and, when he has found them, he analyses them with delicate and delightful art and then passes on, often to the opposite pole of thought or feeling, knowing that every mood has its own quality and charm and is justified by its mere existence. He has taken the sensationalism of Greek philosophy and made it a new method of art criticism. (10)

Such a method will be exalted as the only true one in The Critic as Artist; presently, Wilde still seems somewhat perplexed about its universal validity, and condemns it when it is not put into practice by a nature of adequate exquisiteness. Such is the case of the Hon. Roden Noel, whose book Essays on Poetry and Poets tells us far more about his own personal feelings than it does about the qualities of the various works of art that are criticised. It is in fact a diary of the emotions suggested by literature, rather than any real addition to literary criticism, and we fancy that many of the poets about whom he writes so eloquently would be not a little surprised at the qualities he finds in their work. (11)

It is an objection that could be raised against impressionist criticism in general, and we shall see how Wilde himself will answer to it in the dialogue we mentioned above. Before turning to see what Wilde's own criticism was like, however, two more anticipations of the ideas expounded in Intentions should be pointed out. In an article on Adelaide Ristori's autobiography Wilde formulates for the first time that theory of the actor as a critic of drama which he was to develop in The Critic as Artist. Signore Ristori's book gives him an opportunity to express his disagreement from the views of Augustin Birrell, the author of Obiter Dieta (1881):
The author of Obiter Dicta seeks to deny to actors all critical insight and all literary appreciation. The actor, he tells us, is art's slave, not her child, and lives entirely outside literature, 'with its words for ever on his lips, and none of its truths engraved on his heart'. But this seems to me to be a harsh and reckless generalisation. Indeed, so far from agreeing with it, I would be inclined to say that the mere artistic process of acting, the translation of literature back again into life, and the presentation of thought under the conditions of action, is in itself a critical method of a very high order.

Another anticipation of The Critic as Artist (and of Dorian Gray, where Wilde explains his view of "heredity") is contained in a 1890 article on Pater's book Appreciations. The passage is another definition of the "true critic", and Darwin's theory of heredity is curiously fitted to Pater's intellectual experience. The last paragraph of the passage was used again in The Critic as Artist.

...For he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives. To realise the nineteenth century one must realise every century that preceded it, and that has contributed to its making. To know anything about oneself, one must know all about others. There must be no mood with which one cannot sympathise, no dead mode of life that one cannot make alive. The legacies of heredity may make us alter our views of moral responsibility, but they cannot but intensify our sense of the value of Criticism; for the true critic is he who bears within himself the dreams and ideas and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure.

The reader of Reviews and Miscellanies may be struck by the sound scholarship displayed in several passages. This may be found in contrast with the lightheartedness and imprecision which some critics still attribute to Wilde, too easily forgetting the laurels he had received as a student in Dublin and in Oxford. To quote but a few, the appreciations of Lord Canarvon's and of William Morris' translations from Homer, based, as they are, on a careful collation with the original texts, are the work of a Greek scholar. For the same reason the review of Sir Charles Bowen's Virgil is interesting; while the mistranslations pointed out in the English version of Balzac and in Carlo's George Sand prove Wilde's perfect knowledge of the French language. A deep insight of the English literature shines through the authoritative statements contained in the articles on J.A. Symonds' Ben Jonson, and
in the biographies of Rossetti, Sir Philip Sidney, Keats, Longfellow, Coleridge, Dickens. Wilde seems extremely well read, and not only in the established classics of his day. In the article The Children of the Poets, for example, speaking of an anthology where E.S. Roberton had collected verses on children from English and American writers, Wilde underlines what he considers the grossest omissions, among which are Jonson, Waller, Arnold, and especially two poets whose close acquaintance was not too common, after all, in Victorian England, Marvell and Poe.

Edgar Allan Poe is one of Wilde's favourites. We meet him in one of the very first articles ('Edgar Allan Poe insisted that no poem should take more than an hour to read...'), and his name keeps popping out here and there. A protest is raised against his (and Baudelaire's) exclusion from the list of the 100 books to save; he is defended against Sharp's misunderstanding, and against Brander Matthews' misinterpretation.

We can open with his name a short list of Wilde's best loved authors - a list which gives us little surprise. Among the French writers we find Gautier, whose Mademoiselle de Maupin is called 'that golden book of spirit and sense, that holy writ of beauty', in words later applied to the Renaissance of Walter Pater; Baudelaire, whom he quotes several times; Balzac and Flaubert, of whom he says:

In France they have had one great genius, Balzac, who invented the modern method of looking at life; and one great artist, Flaubert, who is the impeccable master of style; and to the influence of these two men we may trace almost all contemporary French fiction; and Stendhal - 'the great, I am often tempted to think, the greatest of French novelists'. In English literature, particular predilections are given to Keats, Rossetti (see Notes 19, 17; Wilde is indignant with the unworthy images their biographers have given of them), Morris (an exquisite craftsman, whose work is like "some splendid old tapestry crowded with stately images and enriched with delicate and delightful detail"), Ruskin and Browning, who are defined thus:

Mr. Ruskin in prose, and Mr. Browning in poetry, were the first who drew for us the workings of the artist soul, the first who led us
from the painting or statue to the hand that fashioned it, and the brain that gave it line and colour. Theirs was the seed of this new literature, and theirs, too, is its flower... (33)

Last, but by no means least, comes Walter Pater. He

must rank among our century's most characteristic artists. In certain things he stands almost alone. The age has produced wonderful prose style, turbid individualism, and violent with excess of rhetoric. But in Mr. Pater, as in Cardinal Newman, we find the union of personality with perfection. He has no rival in his own sphere, and he has escaped disciples. And this, not because he has not been imitated, but because in art so fine as his there is something that, in its essence, is inimitable. (34)

It was during these years, and through these articles, that Wilde's mature style was born. He was, as his reputation has reached us, a great talker more than anything else, and a talker of a peculiar kind. "I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all overnight with labour and yet all spontaneous", says Yeats (35) of Wilde's conversation, and it is a statement which we can very fittingly apply to the quality of his prose. Wilde's periods at their best are a transposition into writing of a conversation both learned and brilliant; and as this conversation used to convey an impression of artificiality through the accurate choice of its words and the musical planning of its sentences - through its frequent inversions and alliterations - so his best prose, always somewhat artificial, never completely loses the freshness of improvisation. Paradox is Wilde's most typical weapon: there whim twists to an absurd result an otherwise unobjectionable equation. Such a style, effective as it is in the verbal intercourse, has its dangers when applied to literary criticism: the brief, explosive statements it permits are seldom free from a suspect of irresponsibility. To this respect an anecdote told by Yeats is illuminating. Wilde had been reading aloud from the proofs of The Decay of Lying. When he came to the sentence 'The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy',

I said, "why do you change 'sad' to 'melancholy'?" He replied that he wanted a full sound at the close of his sentence, and I thought it no excuse and an example of the vague impressiveness that spoilt his writing to me. (36)
In the same way, to take but an instance from the passage we just quoted: the alliteration in 'the union of personality with perfection' has an epidermic appeal; the effect of the definition does not penetrate deeper than the surface. Its own talkative brilliance is often the limit of Wilde's criticism. Lucid as they seem, many of his oft-repeated statements are, when analysed, disappointing; and yet the successful ones can be really illuminating.

As for George Meredith, who could hope to reproduce him? His style is chaos illumined by brilliant flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything, except language; as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story; as an artist he is everything, except articulate. Too strange to be popular, too individual to have imitators, the author of Richard Feverell stands absolutely alone. It is easy to disarm criticism, but he has disarmed the disciple. He gives us his philosophy through the medium of wit, and is never so pathetic as when he is humorous. To turn truth into a paradox is not difficult, but George Meredith makes all his paradoxes truths, and no Theseus can thread his labyrinth, no Oedipus solve his secret. Mr. Swinburne once set his age on fire by a volume of very perfect and very poisonous poetry. Then he became revolutionary and pantheistic, and cried out against those that sit in high places both in heaven and on earth. Then he invented Marie Stuart and laid upon us the heavy burden of Bothwell. Then he retired to the nursery and wrote poems about children of a somewhat over-subtle character. He is now extremely patriotic, and manages to combine with patriotism a strong affection for the Tory party. He has always been a great poet. But he has his limitations, the chief of which is, curiously enough, the entire lack of any sense of limit. His song is nearly always too loud for his subject. His magnificent rhetoric, nowhere more magnificent than in the volume that now lies before us, conceals rather than reveals. It has been said of him, and with truth, that he is a master of language, but with still greater truth it may be said that language is his master. Words seem to dominate him. Alliteration tyrannizes over him. Mere sound often becomes his lord. He is so eloquent that whatever he touches becomes unreal.

Alliteration, which is not rare in Wilde either ('too individual to have imitators', 'absolutely alone', 'disarmed the disciple', 'to turn truth', 'very perfect and very poisonous poetry'), can, like here, be something more than a game, and help the critic to congeal a definition, making it unforgettable.

On the whole, Wilde's criticism can be said to possess those qualities he was later to dismiss from a critic's burden: it is fair, rational, sincere.
But more than that, it is often acute. Wilde had a genuine understanding of good literature, and the writers and poets he recommended are still in our anthologies. With some of his interpretations we cannot, perhaps agree any longer; yet there is often much to be said for them.

Certainly, in Walt Whitman's view there is a largeness of vision, a healthy sanity and a fine ethical purpose. He is not to be placed with the professional littérature of his country, Boston novelists, New York poets and the like. He stands apart, and the chief value of his work is in its prophecy, not in its performance. He has begun a prelude to larger themes. He is the herald to a new era. As a man he is the precursor of a fresh type. He is a factor in the heroic and spiritual evolution of the human being. If poetry has passed him by, Philosophy will take note of him. (35)

Much in Wilde's appreciation of a Wilfrid Blunt o) of an Austin Dobson, (41) of a W.B. Henley, (42) of a Francis Brett Harte, (43) is still valid now.

On the young W.B. Yeats he wrote in 1889:

One quality Mr. Yeats has in a marked degree, a quality that is not common in the work of our minor poets, and is therefore all the more welcome to us. I mean the romantic temper. He is essentially Celtic, and his verses, at its best, is Celtic also. Strongly influenced by Keats, he seems to study how to "load every rift with ore", yet is more fascinated by the beauty of words than by the beauty of metrical music... It is impossible to doubt, after reading his present volume, that he will some day give us work of high import.

Of course Wilde is at his ease, and at his most sparkling, when the argument is not serious, and he is free to make a little good-humoured fun out of it. No critic of literature has probably ever been more amusing in this respect; the examples are numerous. We shall quote but one of them.

The Chronicle of M'm (by J. Mitchison) is a mock-heroic poem about the inhabitants of a decaying cheese who speculate about the origin of their species and hold learned discussions upon the meaning of

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o Wilde's words on Blunt contain a tragical irony, if one thinks of their author's destiny: 'Prison has had an admirable effect on Mr. Blunt as a poet. The Love Sonnets of Proteus, in spite of their clever Nascent-like modernities and their Swift brilliant wit, were but affected or fantastic at best... They contained much that was wilful and weak. In Vinculina, upon the other hand, is a book that stirs one by its fine sincerity of purpose, its lofty and impassioned thought, its depth and armour of feeling (see 3.46)'. 
Four out of the eight articles of dramatic criticism reprinted in Reviews concern productions of plays by Shakespeare: Hamlet, Henry IV, As You Like It, and Twelfth Night. In them, especially in the second and in the third one, Wilde seems mainly interested in the superb settings and in the "archaeological accuracy" of the costumes, which he underlines with high praise. Those years were witnessing the triumph of an elaborate, magnificent stage technique, which was put at the service of the accurate reproduction of nature. Real rabbits appeared on the stage during a much admired production of Midsummer Night's Dream, and a real-looking moon changed its quarters in Henry Irving's famous Romeo and Juliet. An article in the Nineteenth Century for December, 1884, signed by Lord Lytton, had condemned such attempts to rebuild life, particularly in the presentations of Shakespeare's plays; Wilde answered with an essay which appeared in the same magazine in May, 1885, entitled Shakespeare and Stage Costume. There he suggested that Shakespeare himself, for whom costumes were so important that they determine capital accidents in several plays, often complains about the inadequacy of the means of his stage, and would certainly have sponsored the perfection of the modern technique. Shakespeare was very keen about historic fidelity; and archaeology alone can give us the key to the reconstruction of antique worlds he was trying to give us. Nowhere better than on the stage is archaeology apt to make itself understood:

Art, and art only, can make archaeology beautiful; and the theatrical art can use it most directly and most vividly, for it can combine in one exquisite presentation absolute reality with the grace and charm of the antique world.
Wilde, for an example: there we are shown

the life of Byzantium in the fourth century, not by a dreary lecture
and a set of grimy casts, not by a novel which requires a glossary to
explain it, but by the visible presentation before us of all the
glory of that great town. (48)

Among the evidences put forth to support this view are dicta from Hugo, quotations
from Henslowe's Diary, and lines from Shakespeare himself. The essay,
which is as fluent and readable as anything Wilde ever wrote, is moderately
convincing for what concerns stage costume, but its thesis is on the main
too closely connected with a particular fashion to be of interest today.
Wilde's first contribution to the Dramatic Review, which was published one
month before this essay, as Shakespeare and Scenery, dealt with the same
matters, but the views he expressed there appear much broader. There he
said that, although the descriptions which Shakespeare had to employ in the
place of settings he could not build are in their essence undramatic, still

it may be a matter of congratulation that he had not at his command such
skilled machinists, as are in use now at the Princess's and at the
Lyceum. For had Cleopatra's barge, for instance, been a structure
of canvas and Dutch metal, it would probably have been painted over
or broken up after the withdrawal of the piece, and, even had it survived
to our own day, would, I am afraid, have become extremely shabby by
this time. Whereas now the beaten gold of its poop is still bright,
and the purple of its sails still beautiful; its silver oars are not
tired of keeping time to the music of the flutes they follow, nor the
Neritid's flower-soft hand of touching its silken tackle; the mermaid
still lies at its helm, and still on its desk stand the boys with their
coloured fans. (49)

Theatrical audiences, it is true, 'are far more impressed by what they look
at than by what they listen to'; but it is nonetheless true that

Shakespeare's descriptions are not what descriptions are in modern
plays - accounts of what the audience can observe for themselves;
they are the imaginative method by which he creates in the mind of
the spectators the image of that which he desires them to see. (50)

Although Wilde condemns these descriptions in favour of a more direct
stage technique, his definition of Shakespeare's 'imaginative method' is
very acute, and it is now at the basis of the modern way of producing the
bard's plays. In its pursuit of archaeological accuracy the naturalistic
theatre came, with A.C. Bradley, to the conclusion that King Lear is
impossible to perform on a stage; it took the modern revolution, heralded by Harley Granville-Barker, to restore the plays to their actual greatness, by renouncing elaborate settings in favour of the word alone. Wilde probably felt the one-sidedness of his thesis: when Shakespeare and Stage Costume was reprinted in Intentions in 1891, as The Truth of Masks, a few somewhat excessive statements were left out, and the following words added as a conclusion:

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth... (51)

And later in the same year he asked Jules Cantel, the French translator of Intentions, to leave the essay out of the book - "Je ne l'aime pas plus" - and to put The Soul of Man in its place. (52)

The other articles on theatrical topics are less interesting. Olivia at the Lyceum, (53) on Wills's play, contains remarks on the fitness of works of fiction to be turned into plays; Meredith and Zola are found disappointing in this respect, while Goldsmith would prove satisfactory, like Wills does. The review of a production of The Cenci (54) quotes at length Shelley's dramatic theories, and the article on a Helena in Tress (55) praises again, and warmly, the art of Godwin. More ideas on drama are scattered in the letters, and we shall concern ourselves with them later on.

Wilde's remarkable essay The Soul of Man under Socialism (1891) sums up aspirations and ideas whose first origins we may trace back in the aesthete's début as an art reformer in the tradition of William Morris. The development of Wilde's "Socialism", from Vere or the Nihilists to the aforementioned essay, will be the matter of a separate chapter. There we shall concern ourselves with the longest and the most important article in Reviews, a detailed critical account of the life and theories of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu. This essay, which appeared in the Speaker for February 8th, 1890, contains the germ of several ideas afterwards...
reasserted in The Soul of Man, and it seems therefore appropriate to examine
the two works together. Hints of a deeply felt social concern are not hard
to find throughout the corpus of Wilde's journalistic activity, and we shall
just point out, for the moment, a couple of the most significant passages.

Socialism is welcome as the source of a new and refreshing art.

A few years ago some of our minor poets tried to set Science to music,
to write sonnets on the survival of the fittest and ideas to Natural
selection. Socialism, and the sympathy with those who are unfit,
seem... to be the new theme of song, the fresh subject-matter for poetry.
The change has some advantages... (56)

Mr. Stopford Brooke said some time ago that socialism and the
socialistic spirit would give our poets nobler and loftier themes for
song, would widen their sympathies and enlarge the horizon of their
vision and would touch, with the fire and fervour of a new faith,
lips that had else been silent, hearts that but for this fresh gospel
had been cold. What Art gains from contemporary events is always a
fascinating problem and a problem that it is easy not to solve.
It is, however, certain that socialism starts well equipped. She
has her poets and her painters, her art lecturers and her cunning
designers, her powerful orators and her clever writers. If she fails
it will not be for lack of expression. If she succeeds her triumph
will not be a triumph of mere brute force... Socialism is not going to
allow herself to be trammelled by any hard and fast creed or to be
stereotyped into an iron formula. She welcomes many and multiform
natures. She rejects none and has room for all. She has the attraction
of a wonderful personality and touches the heart of one and the
brain of another, and draws this man by his hatred of injustice
and his neighbour by his faith in the future, and a third, it may
be, by his love of art or by his wild worship of a lost and buried
past. For, to make men Socialists is nothing, but to make Socialism
human is a great thing. (57)

What really attracted Wilde in Socialism was its lack of rhetoric.
Humanitarianism seemed to him the grossest hypocrisy on behalf of a society
whose fundamentals lay in inhumanity. Thence his contempt of social reformers,
which will be developed into a theory in The Soul of Man, and whose first
suggestion is in the following words:

There is something a little pathetic in the attempt to civilise
the rough street-boy by means of the refining influence of ferns
and fossils... The poor are not to be fed upon facts. Even
Shakespeare and the Pyramids are not sufficient; nor is there much
use in giving them the results of culture, unless we also give them
those conditions under which culture can be realized. In these cold,
crowded cities of the North, the proper basis for morals, using the
word in its wide Hellenic significations, is to be found in
architecture, not in books. (53)
Notes to Chapter IV

(1) It was reprinted in Miscellaneous (pp. 17ff.) as Mr. Oscar Wilde on Woman's Dress, and Letters (pp.161ff).

(1a) Reviews, p.422.

(2) On Nov. 11, 1884, as More Radical Ideas upon Dress Reform (repr. in Misc. pp.52ff).

(3) This is the number of the articles printed in Reviews. We know that Wilde had sporadically taken care of his brother Willy's column on Vanity Fair, imitating his style; those articles are scarcely interesting, and almost impossible to spot (see Letters, p.160).

(4) The Letters of a Great Woman (Palu Mall Gazette, March 6, 1886; Reviews pp.49, 43.


(6) Balsam in English (P.M.G., Sept. 13, 1886; Rev. p.79)

(7) Mr. Symond's History of the Renaissance (P.M.G., Nov. 10, 1886; Rev., p.108)

(8) The Unity of Arts (P.M.G., Dec. 12, 1887; Misc., p.88)

(9) Ibid., pp.83-89

(10) Mr. Pater's Imaginary Portraits (P.M.G., June 11, 1887; Rev., pp.174-5)

(11) A Sentimental Journey through Literature (P.M.G., Dec. 1, 1886; Rev., p.117)

(12) Literary and Other Notes (apropos of A. Ristori's Etudes et Souvenirs, W.'s W., Jan 1888, Rev. p.257)

(12a) Mr. Pater's Last Volume (Speaker, March 22, 1890; Rev., pp.539-50)

(12b) A Politician's Poetry (P.M.G., Nov. 3, 1886; Rev., pp.102ff.);
Mr. Morris's Odyssey (P.M.G., April 26, 1887; Rev., pp.153ff.);
Mr. Morris's Completion of the Odyssey (P.M.G., Nov. 2, 1887; Rev., pp.215ff.)

(13) Sir Charles Bowen's Virgil (P.M.G., Nov. 30, 1887; Rev., pp.220ff)

(14) see N. 6

(15) Mr. Caro on George Sand (P.M.G., Apr. 14, 1888; Rev., pp.316ff)

(16) Ben Jonson (P.M.G., Sept. 16, 1886; Rev., pp.34ff.)

(17) Rev., pp.331-2 (see N. 37)
(17) A Cheap Edition of a Great Man (P.M.G., Apr. 18, 1887; Rev., pp.148ff.)

(18) Two Biographies of Sir Philip Sidney (P.M.G., Dec. 11, 1887; not in Ross' edition)

(19) Two Biographies of Keats (P.M.G., Sept. 27, 1887; Rev., pp.181-ff)

(20) Great Writers by Little Men (P.M.G., March 28, 1887; Rev., pp.135ff)

(21) Ibid.

(22) A New Book on Dickens (P.M.G., March 31, 1887; Rev., pp.141ff)

(23) P.M.G., Oct. 14, 1886; Rev., pp.95ff

(24) A Modern Epic (P.M.G., March 13, 1885; Rev., p.4)

(25) To Read or Nor to Read (P.M.G., Feb. 3, 1886; Rev., pp.43ff., and Letters pp.185ff)

(26) In the article of N. 20.

(27) Mr. Brander Matthew's Essays (P.M.G., Feb. 27, 1889; Rev., pp.428ff)

(28) As You Like It at Coombe House (Dramatic Review, June 6, 1885; Rev., pp.32ff)

(29) Mr. Pater's Last Volume (Speaker, March 22, 1890; Rev., p.539)

(30) Literary and Other Notes (W.'s W., Jan. 1883; Rev., pp.251ff)

(31) Some Literary Notes (W.'s W., Jan. 1883; Rev., pp.374ff)

(32) Mr. William Morris's Last Book (P.M.G., March 2, 1889; Rev., pp.449ff)

(33) Rev., pp.264-65 (see N.30)

(34) Rev., p.515 (see N.29)

(35) Autobiographies (Four Years: 1887-1891), London 1961, p.130.

(36) Ibid., p.135.

(37) Rev., p.261 (see N.30)

(38) Mr. Swinburne's Last Volume (P.M.G., June 27, 1899; Rev., pp.519-20)

(39) The Gospel according to Walt Whitman (P.M.G., Jan. 25, 1889; Rev. p.401)

(40) Poetry and Prison (P.M.G., Jan. 3, 1889; Rev., p.393)

(41) Rev., pp.431-2 (see N.27)
(42) A Note on Some Modern Poets (W.'s W., Dec. 1888; Rev., pp.347ff)

(43) Some Literary Notes (W.'s W., April 1889; Rev., pp.472-3)


(45) The Poets' Corner (P.M.C., Feb. 15, 1888; Rev., p.295)


(47) Shakespeare and Stage Costume, The Nineteenth Century, May 1885 (vol.XVII, p.308)

(48) Ibid., p.807.

(49) Shakespeare on Scenery (Dramatic Review, March 14, 1885; Rev., p.3)

(50) Ibid., pp.8-9.


(52) See Letters, p.295.

(53) Rev., pp.23ff.

(54) Dr. Rev., May 15, 1886; Rev., pp.66ff.

(55) Dr. Rev., May 22, 1886; Rev., pp.69ff.

(56) The Poets' Corner (P.M.C., Nov. 16, 1888; Rev., pp.341-2 - on Lays and Legends, by E. Nesbit).

(57) Poetical Socialists (P.M.C., Feb. 15, 1889; Rev., pp.425-6 - on Chants of Labour: A Song-Book of the People, ed. by R. Carpenter)

(58) Literary and other Notes (W.'s W., Dec. 1887; Rev., pp.232-3 - on a Life of Miss Mary Carpenter, by Phillys Brownes)
Journalism was still Wilde's main activity when two of the remaining three essays later to be collected in Intentions saw the light, both in January, 1891. Pen, Pencil and Poison: a Study — a short and refined "memoir" of the notorious poisoner and aesthete ante litteram Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (1794-1852) — cannot be ranked with The Decay of Lying, which is probably Wilde's most successful theoretical work. Yet it tells us much of its author's general attitude to life and art, and is therefore well worth examining. It appeared in the January 1st issue of the Fortnightly Review edited by Frank Harris; the reprint in Intentions (May, 1891) contained slight, but as we shall see, at times significant alterations.

A sketch of Wainewright much in the same key as Wilde's had been drawn by the young Swinburne in his volume, Blake (1868). There the singular art critic had been called admirable alike as a painter, a writer, and a murderer. In each pursuit, perhaps, there was a certain want of solid worth and fervour, which at times impeded or impaired the working of an excellent faculty; but in each it is evident there was a noble sense of things fair and fit; a seemliness and shapeliness of execution. (1)

Wilde openly acknowledges his debt to Swinburne; the very title of his essay is based on an expression in Blake. Other admitted sources are De Quincey and W. Carew Hazlitt.

We are told briefly the story of the extraordinary career of the Regency dandy, who had begun as a soldier and through an interior crisis had become one of the most exquisite devotees of art of his age. An art critic and himself an artist, Wainewright unfortunately developed a habit of poisoning people, which at length proved fatal to himself as well as to others. He murdered his uncle, his mother-in-law, and his sister-in-law, and managed to escape retribution for many years; but was eventually caught and deported to Tasmania, where he ended his days.

As Swinburne had done before, Wilde achieves his humorous effect
through an impassioned way of recounting Wainewright's enormities as though they were to be judged on merely aesthetic grounds. However, he feels bound to justify such impudence in one passage at least. Wainewright, he concedes,

is far too close to our own time for us to form any purely artistic judgment about him. . . I know that there are many historians, or at least writers on historical subjects, who still think it necessary to apply moral judgments to history, and who distribute their praise or blame with the reckless impartiality of a successful schoolmaster. . . Nobody with any true historical sense will ever dream of blaming Nero, or scolding Tiberius, or censuring Caesar Borgia. These personages have become like the puppets of a play. They may fill us with terror, or horror, or wonder, but they do not harm us. . . .(2)

Wainewright is no more than a puppet in a play to us now, but——his recollection was still fresh in Victorian times, and Wilde's frivolous tone certainly appears to our eyes a great deal less shocking than it was meant to be.

It was in these pages that Wilde's daring theory of life, pushing Pater's ideas to extremes, was defined for the first time.

It must be admitted that his literary work hardly justifies his reputation. But it is only the Philistine who seeks to estimate a personality by the vulgar test of production. This young dandy sought to be somebody, rather than to do something. He recognised that life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it.(3)

Wilde sees Wainewright as a pioneer of what he himself stands for. And he feels that much should be forgiven him on account of his unquestionable love of art. Paradoxically, he seems to suggest that Wainewright should be ranked as a martyr of the then current confusion between art and morality.

We cannot condemn the artist because the man was corrupt.

The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose. The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art, though they may serve as an excellent advertisement for art. . . That he had a sincere love of art and nature seems to me quite certain. There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture. We cannot rewrite the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be.(4)
Wilde is not blinded by his sympathy for this controversial character to the point of accepting everything he produced. He acknowledges his faults—a cumbersome style, a vulgarity of expression, and frequent concessions to the "false taste" of his time. But in that he was sensitive to the true harmony of all really beautiful things irrespective of age or place, of school or manner, he, indeed, was a forerunner of that aesthetic criticism which Wilde sponsors. In Arnold's phrase, Wainewright was trying "to see the object in itself as it really is". Even more than that,

he concerned himself primarily with the complex impressions produced by a work of art, and certainly the first step in aesthetic criticism is to realise one's own impressions. He cared nothing for abstract discussions on the nature of the beautiful.

Pater, as we remember, had said;

In aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. ...What is important...is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects.

Therefore Wainewright, who knows that "all beautiful things belong to the same age"; who deals with his impressions of the work as an artistic whole, and tries to translate those impressions into words, to give, as it were, the literary equivalent for the imaginative and mental effect...was one of the first to develop what has been called the art-literature of the nineteenth century, that form of literature which has found in Mr. Ruskin and Mr. Browning its two most perfect exponents.

For this reason, in quoting excerpts from Wainewright's criticisms, Wilde is mainly preoccupied with underlining the intentions that lay beneath their turbid surface.

So much for Wainewright's relations with Art. But his attitude to Life was, in Wilde's eyes, even more important, and in a way more successful. Instead of considering Art from the standpoint of Life, he had lived his life from an artistic standpoint.
Like Disraeli he determined to startle the town as a dandy, and his beautiful rings, his antique cameo breast-pin, and his pale lemon-coloured kid gloves, were well known, and indeed were regarded by Hazlitt as being the sign of a new manner in literature.\(^{10}\)

(we cannot help thinking of Wilde’s green carnation, of whose invention he proudly was to claim the paternity in later years.)\(^{11}\)

He writes about La Gioconda, and early French poets, and the Italian Renaissance; he loves Greek goss, and Feraian carpets, and Elizabethan translations of Cupid and Psyche, and the Hypnerotomachia, and book-bindings, and early editions, and wide-margined proofs. He is keenly sensitive to the value of beautiful surroundings, and never weary of describing to us the rooms in which he lived or would have liked to live. He had that curious love of green, which in individuals is always the sign of a subtle artistic temperament, and in nations is said to denote a laxity if not a decadence of morals. Like Baudelaire he was extremely fond of cats, and like Gautier, he was fascinated by that “sweet marble monster”, of both sexes that we can still see at Florence and in the Louvre.\(^{12}\)

This pose eventually led Wainewright along the path of crime; but was not crime necessary to the fulfillment of his artistic personality?

His crimes seem to have had an important effect upon his art. They gave a strong personality to his style, a quality that his early work certainly lacked.\(^{13}\)

Wilde of course delights in quoting such anecdotes as the following:

When a friend reproached him with the murder of Helen Beresford he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Yes; it was a dreadful thing to do, but I had very thick ankles.”\(^{14}\)

The 1891 edition of the essay is called Pen, Pencil and Poeson - A Study in Green. The corrections, often slight and marginal, include the adjunction of a few good aphorisms, one of which once more stresses the independence of Art from Life (now both spelt with capital A’s):

[after quoting an example of Wainewright’s criticism:]

Were this description carefully re-written, it would be quite admirable. The conception of making a prose poem out of paint is excellent. Much of the best modern literature springs from the same aim. In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other.\(^{15}\)
A "social" touch forecasts *The Soul of Man*, implying at the same time that the personality of a sinner for other reasons than want is in a way fascinating:

Crime in England is rarely the result of sin. It is nearly always the result of starvation.\(^{(16)}\)

But on the whole the modifications seem to be there to underline the "naughty" character of the essay.

[on the assassination of Helen Abercrombie:] De Quincey says that Mrs. Wainwright was not really privy to the murder. Let us hope that she was not. Sin should be solitary, and have no accomplices.\(^{(17)}\)

[on Wainwright's sentence to deportation, issued, his murders not having been as yet discovered, on the charge of forgery:] There is...something dramatic in the fact that this heavy punishment was inflicted on him for what, if we remember his fatal influence on the prose of modern journalism, was certainly not the worst of all his sins.\(^{(13)}\)

[of Wainwright's pseudonyms:] Janus Weathercock, Egress Bonmot, and Van Vinkvooms, were some of the grotesque masks under which he chose to hide his seriousness or to reveal his levity. A mask tells us more than a face. These disguises intensified his personality.\(^{(19)}\)

The last topic, a typically Wildean one (our author will illustrate it more fully in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) was to become one of the foundations of the so-called Decadent Movement in Literature; it is well exemplified even in the work of W.B. Yeats.

Wilde’s choice of the subject treated by the young and rebellious Swinburne some twenty years earlier is indicative. He aims to *évanter le bourgeois* as Baudelaire and Swinburne had done before, hinting nonchalantly at awful atrocities and affecting to value them from an aesthetic standpoint. Of course his rebellion is a little bit out of date, and Swinburne’s sour sarcasm is now melted into a clever *esprit de salon*. But retrospectively we feel as though at a certain stage Wilde had begun to take what he was saying more seriously than his frivolous tone implied. Some of the alterations in the second edition of his essay - very slight as they are, nor on the other hand could the nature itself of the memoir suggest more radical ones - point out clearly enough a change in the aesthete’s attitude within the short period of two years. There had been the publication of *Dorian Gray* in the
meantime (June 1890), whose harsh reception by the press had prompted Wilde to take the field and fight. His attitude became stiffer, and the mask he had chosen to wear no longer revealed the face beneath it. The pose became reality. And the elegant balance reached in The Decay of Lying already appears somewhat more uncertain in The True Function and Value of Criticism, better known as The Critic as Artist. Wilde had decided to live up to his mask, and he was taking the first steps along the path that was to lead to catastrophe.

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The Decay of Lying - an Observation was published in the Nineteenth Century in the same month (January, 1889)\(^{(2)}\) as Pan, Pencil and Poison, and was reprinted in Intentions with a few corrections and additions. The essay is in dialogue form, and the two interlocutors, whom Wilde christened Cyril and Vivian after his own children, are young and refined idlers who exchange opinions on matters of art in "the library of a country house in Nottinghamshire". At the end of the discussion, in which he plays the leading role, Vivian summarises the points he has made clear, and of which the "doctrines of the new aesthetics consist". They are: (1) Art never expresses anything but itself; (2) All bad art is the result of returning to Life and Nature; (3) Life imitates Art for more than Art imitates Life; (4) Lying, the telling of beautiful untruths, is the proper aim of art.

The debate starts with Cyril's exhortation to "go and lie on the grass and smoke cigarettes and enjoy Nature". Vivian's reply follows immediately, as clear as a manifesto:

Enjoy Nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty. People tell us that Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before; that it reveals her secrets to us; and that after a careful study of Corot and Constable we see things in her that had escaped our observation. My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition... When I look at a landscape I cannot help seeing all its defects. It is fortunate for us, however that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have no art at all.
Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place... If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our proper sense of human dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life... Nothing is more evident than that Nature hates Mind. Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world. (21)

"That Nature is always right, is an assertion, artistically, as untrue, as it is one whose truth is universally taken for granted", Whistler had said (see p.49); and before him, as we have seen (pp.10), Baudelaire had spoken of Nature's crudity, and of Art as "un essai permanent et successif de réformation de la nature". This time Wilde is not content with repeating what the two masters had said before him, as he had done in his hurriedly prepared Lecture to Art Students six years earlier. But he uses their statements, which he supports with additional evidence, as a starting point for a new discussion of the relationship between Art and Nature.

To corroborate his views Vivian now reads aloud to his friend an article he has just written, entitled "The Decay of Lying: a Protest". There, he deplores the eclipse of the good old habit of lying in art; were it restored, he affirms, a new Renaissance would follow. Once upon a time, he argues,

historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of a fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction. (22)

To lie means here to invent - to modify the dullness of nature. Nowadays the artist, Vivian says with regret, is satisfied with reproducing what surrounds him as it is, with lamentable accuracy. The necessity of illustrating this gives Wilde the opportunity of providing us with some pointed criticism of modern literature:

Even Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson, that delightful master of delicate and fanciful prose is tainted with this modern vice... There is such a thing as to rob a story of its reality by trying to make it too true, and The Black Arrow is so inartistic as not to contain a single anachronism to boast of... (23) Mr. Rider Haggard, who really has, or had once, the makings of a perfectly magnificent liar... is now so afraid of being suspect of genius that when he does tell us anything
marvellous he feels bound to invent a personal reminiscence, and to put it into a footnote as a kind of cowardly corroboration... Mr. Henry James writes fiction as if it were a painful duty, and wastes upon mean motives and imperceptible 'points of view' his neat literary style, his felicitous phrases, his swift and caustic satire. Mr. Hall Caine, it is true, aims at the grandiose, but then he writes at the top of his voice. He is so loud that one cannot hear what he says. Mr. James Payn is an adept in the art of concealing what is not worth finding. He hunts down the obvious with the enthusiasm of a short-sighted detective. As one turns over the pages, the suspense of the author becomes almost unbearable. (24)

Things are not much better on the other side of the Channel:

Mr. Guy de Maupassant, with his keen mordant irony and his hard vivid style, strips life of the few poor rags that still cover her, and shows us foul and festering wounds... Mr. Zola, true to the lofty principle that he lays down in one of his pronouncements of literature, l'homme de génie n'a jamais d'esprit, is determined to show that, if he has not got genius, he can at least be dull. And how well he succeeds! He is not without power. Indeed at times, as in Germinal, there is something almost epic in his work. But his work is entirely wrong from beginning to end, and wrong not on the ground of morals, but on the ground of art. From any ethical standpoint it is just what it should be. The author is perfectly truthful, and describes things exactly as they happen. What more can any moralist desire? We have no sympathy at all with the moral indignation of our time against Mr. Zola. It is simply the indignation of Tartuffe on being exposed. But from the standpoint of art, what can be said in favour of the author of L'Assommoir, Nana and La Bouille? Nothing. Mr. Ruskin once described the characters in George Eliot's novels as being like the sweepings of a Pantaloon omnibus, but Mr. Zola's characters are much worse. They have their dreary vices, and their dreary virtues. The record of their lives is absolutely without interest. Who cares what happens to them? In literature we require distinction, charm, beauty and imaginative power. We don't want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower orders. (25)

Even in his dismissal of Zola, Wilde finds a way of throwing an arrow en passant against the irrelevance of an artistic evaluation based on moral premises — one of the bases of his aesthetics. The topic is only hinted at in the present essay, but it is one to which he was to turn his attention again.

Daudet and Bourget, to complete the panorama of French literature, can be accused of the same vice. Daudet spoiled his readers' pleasure by telling them (in Vie de La Vie Littéraire) that certain characters in his
the only real people are the people who never existed, and if a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies.

Cyril objects that at least two of the authors whom his friend admires, Balsac and Meredith, can be called realists; but Vivian denies it. Meredith, about whom Wilde repeats the definition he had previously given in an article (see p.63), can be called "a child of realism who is not on speaking terms with his father"; and Balsac "was a most remarkable combination of the artistic temperament with the scientific spirit". Baudelaire's opinion that "all Balsac's characters are gifted with the same ardour of life that animated himself" is cited as an introduction to Wilde's own definition, which again had partly been printed before (see p.58), and where an idea is introduced which will soon be repeated and illustrated, namely that Art has more reality than Nature itself.

A steady course of Balsac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades. His characters have a kind of fervent fiery-coloured existence. They dominate us, and defy scepticism. One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempré. It is a grief from which I have never been able to completely rid myself. It haunts me in my moments of pleasure. I remember it when I laugh. But Balsac is no more realist than Holbein was. He created life, he did not copy it.(27)

Balsac, however, is by no means perfect. He "set too high a value on modernity of form", and this is a serious mistake. Because - as Wilde had pointed out in *Pencil and Poison*, echoing Pater's words on the artistic temperament - we should remember that Beauty belongs to all ages and soars above fashions. Wilde adds something to this theory here, by asserting that anything can be a fit subject for Art, provided that it does not concern us directly.

The public imagine that, because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter. But the mere fact that they are interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for Art. The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or
affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art. To art's subject-matter we should be more or less indifferent. We should, at any rate, have no preferences, no prejudices, no partisan feeling of any kind. It is exactly because Hecuba is nothing to us that her sorrows are such an admirable motive for tragedy.\(^{(28)}\)

These words must not be taken as a total condemnation of modernity in art. Modernity - that is, the preoccupation of being up-to-date, of keeping close to the reader, of portraying him as he sees himself, and, eventually, of being useful to him - must simply be a means to reach Art, and not an end to itself. An artist, as we shall be told within the next few pages, "may" express the spirit of his times, but only inasmuch as he expresses himself and his imagination, and the style he has created.

Having thus made his first point, Vivian is now ready to pass on to the second one, again provoked by a question from Cyril. What does he think, he is asked, of "the panacea that is always recommended to us", that is, the "return to Life and Nature"?

Nature is always behind the age. And as for Life, she is the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that lays waste her house,\(^{(29)}\) is Vivian's answer. And before going further he pauses to state the meanings which can be given to the term "Nature". Here Wilde puts a little order in the terminology used by his forerunners: we have Baudelaire's acceptance of the term in the former instance, Whistler's in the latter:

If we take Nature to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture, the work produced under this influence is always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date... If, on the other hand, we regard Nature as the collection of phenomena external to man, people only discover in her what they bring to her. She has no suggestions of her own. Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there.\(^{(30)}\)

We can detect three stages in the history of any art. In its first stage Art only deals with "what is unreal and non-existent", and produces purely imaginative work.
Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. (31)

This is the happiest stage; a period of decadence inevitably follows, "when Life gets the upper hand and drives Art out into the wilderness". It is the case of the present epoch, Vivian says; let us take the history of English Drama as an instance, he goes on. It was at first, when in the hands of the Church, abstract, decorative, and mythological. But then Life was enlisted in its service;

and using some of Life's external forms, she [i.e. the Art of Drama] created an entirely new race of beings, whose sorrows were more terrible than any sorrow man has ever felt, whose joys were keener than lover's joys, who had the rage of the Titans and the calm of the gods... To them she gave a language different from that of actual use, a language full of resonant music and sweet rhythms... Old myth and legend and dream took shape and substance. History was entirely rewritten, and there was hardly one of the dramatists who did not recognise that the object of Art is not simple truth but complex beauty. In this they were perfectly right. Art itself is really a form of exaggeration, and selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of over-emphasis. (32)

To get this ideal moment we must therefore have both, Art and Life, fused together, as it were; but in such a fusion Life must be subordinated to Art, since the former's clamorous predominance would be sure to spoil any equilibrium. The happy moment cannot last for long, Life soon tries to break the balance in its own favour; we find an echo of its voice even in Shakespeare, who in his more uncouth passages aims, here and there, at reproducing rather than recreating Life. Decadence began when Life prevailed, and this situation Vivian states, has lasted to the present day. In modern English plays

the characters...talk on the stage exactly as they would talk off it; they have neither aspirations nor aspirates; they are taken directly from life and reproduce its vulgarity down to the smallest detail; they present the gait, manner, costume and accent of real people; they would pass unnoticed in a third-class railway carriage. (33)
A similar evolution - from a thoroughly abstract, symbolical form, to the present dull imitation of Life - has taken place in the so-called decorative arts, to such an extent that now almost every artist has forgotten that "the proper school to learn art is not Life but Art". Vivian closes his argument by reeling off a triumphant list of notorious liars, ranging from Herodotus down to Carlyle, through Cicero, Suetonius, Pliny, Froissart, Marco Polo, Casanova, Cellini, Boswell, and others, to end in a brilliant display of paradoxical fireworks.

Now everything is changed. Facts are not merely finding a footing-place in history, but they are usurping the domain of Fancy, and have invaded the kingdom of Romance. Their chilling touch is over everything. They are vulgarising mankind. The crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature. (34)

This protest, which comes straight from Wilde's heart, despite the irrelevance of its tone, ends however with a touch of optimism. This obnoxious era, we are told, must come to an end; and society will certainly return to "its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar". When he appears, then Art

will run to greet him, and will kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style. (35)

Critics will of course try to oppose him;

they will call upon Shakespeare - they always do - and will quote that hackneyed passage forgetting that this unfortunate aphorism about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art matters. (36)

Having established the second point he wanted to make, Vivian is now close to the end of his article. But once more Cyril interrupts him with
a question. Of art Vivian has said:

Hers are 'the forms more real than living man', and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies;(37)

so she is not the mirror held up to Nature. Surely Vivian does not mean to go as far as to imply that Life is the mirror, and Art the reality?

Paradoxical though it may be, this is exactly what Vivian believes. He puts his proofs aside for a moment in order to explain his theory more fully. There are only too many instances around us, he says, of how Life takes after Art. The Pre-Raphaelite woman one so frequently sees in private views or artistic salons was invented by Rossetti, who provided Life with an ideal example to imitate, just as the Greeks set in the bride's chamber the statue of Hermes or of Apollo, that she might bear children as lovely as the works of art that she looked at in her rapture or her pain.(33)

Holbein and Van Dyck did not find in England the types they painted; they brought these with them.

Heine had said:

Die Natur hat hier den Künstlern das Kapital zurückgenommen, das sie ihnen eintat geliehen, und siehe! es hat sich auf entzückendste verzinst. Die Natur, welche einst den Künstlern ihre Modelle lieferte, sie kopierte heute ihrerseits die Meisterwerke, die dadurch entstanden. Der Sinn für das Schöne hat das ganze Volk durchdringen, und wie einst das Fleisch auf den Geist, so wirkt jetzt der Geist auf das Fleisch.(39)

Wilde starts from a similar assumption, developing it into an original theory which explains and illustrates the implications inherent in the idea. He extends it to cover Literature as well as the figurative arts; and of course there are plenty of examples of people's lives being influenced by Literature to quote.(40) The boys who repeat the misdeeds of Jack Sheppard or Dick Turpin are simply putting into practice suggestions they found in books. Literature is in this case generally supposed to have influenced their imagination, but this would be a most inaccurate diagnosis, for the imagination is essentially creative, and always seeks for a new
form. The boy-burglar is simply the inevitable result of Life's imitative instinct. He is, in fact, occupied as Fact usually is, with trying to reproduce Fiction, and what we see in him is repeated on an extended scale throughout the whole of Life. Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterises modern thought, but Hamlet invented it... The Nihilist... was invented by Dostoevski. Robespierre came out of the pages of Rousseau... Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but it woulds it to its purpose. The nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac. Our Luciens de Rubempré, our Baudinames, and De Marsays made their first appearance on the stage of the Comédie Humaine.\(^{41}\)

To illustrate his theory, as though afraid of being taken too seriously ("I live in the terror of not being misunderstood" was one of Wilde's favourite slogans; it is repeated in The Critic as Artist), Vivian quotes two anecdotes which obviously are the product of his own fancy. It is his way of being consistent with what he had been saying about the liar in art; truth is a matter of style; and "the more insincere the man is, the more purely intellectual will the idea be" (Dorian Gray).\(^{42}\) Both his two amusing stories prove, however, that Life, not Nature, follows Art, as Cyril points out; but Vivian is quick to reply. Who does Nature follow, but the landscape painter? What comes next is in the very best vein of Wilde's flippancy.\(^{43}\)

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn it to paint forms of fading grace, curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art... For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. \textit{She} is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then and then only, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught us the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them.\(^{44}\)
Art exhausts a subject and capriciously passes on to another; Nature wearies us with her endless repetitions.

Yesterday evening Mrs. Arnold insisted on my going to the window and looking at the glorious sky, as she called it... And what was it? It was simply a very second-rate Turner, a Turner of a bad period, with all the painter's worst faults exaggerated and over-emphasized. (43)

But surely Vivian won't go so far as to deny Art its most important link with Life, Cyril insists: does Art not express the spirit of its time? "Art never expresses anything but itself", is the answer:

this is the principle of my new aesthetics; and it is this more than that vital connection between form and substance, on which Mr. Peter dwells, that makes basic the type of all the arts. (46)

This is not to be taken literally; Vivian hurries to explain what he really means. "The more imitative an art is the less it represents to us the spirit of its age" is his next and more definite statement. That is, to give us an idea of the spirit of an age or of a nation, an art needs to be abstract: music and architecture tell us of a country's inner life much more than painting. At their best, the imitative arts give us the styles of particular artists or schools of artists:

The Middle Ages, as we know them in art, are simply a definite form of style, and there is no reason at all why an artist with this style should not be induced in the nineteenth century. No great artist ever sees things as they really are. (47)

The example introduced to support this view is again in the best vein of Wildean paradox: (48)

...do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture by Hokusai or Kokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them... In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people... if you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a tourist and go to Tokio. On the contrary, you will stay at home and steep yourself in the work of certain Japanese artists and then, when you have absorbed the spirit of their style, and caught their imaginative manner of vision, you will go some afternoon and sit in the park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see an
absolutely Japanese effect there you will not see it anywhere. (49)

In the same way Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans's A rebours (1884), fought against a stifling heat by wearing a fur coat and imagining himself in Alaska; and having planned a trip to London, gave it up at the last moment, realizing that he could not find in England more English effects than those which had crossed his mind while he was preparing for the journey. (50)

Imagination was the strongest reality for Huysmans' dandy; in Wilde imagination can only be realized through art, and therefore it is Art, and Art only, which fashions, rather than interprets, Truth. In a hundred years, Vivian adds, people will not believe that such people as those portrayed in contemporary English pictures ever existed: the portraits look too much like their subjects. A real artist - take Holbein's case: it is his style, rather than Life that makes us believe him - compels Life to accept his conditions. "It is style that makes us believe in a thing - nothing but style". Modern painters are often wrong: they do not paint what they see, but "what the public sees, and the public never sees anything". (51)

Vivian has thus reached the conclusion of what he wants to say; he now reads the final part of his article, a plea for the restoration of the honourable habit of Lying. Not lying, however, for base matters of interest:

The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake, and the highest development of this is, as we have already pointed out, Lying in Art. Just as those who do not love Plato more than Truth cannot pass beyond the threshold of the Academe, so those who do not love Beauty more than Truth never know the inmost shrine of Art. (52)
Notes to Chapter V

(1) Blake, London 1863, p.67.


(3) Ibid., p. 43.

(4) Ibid., p. 54.

(5) Ibid., p. 45.

(6) Ibid., p. 44.

(7) The Renaissance, p. 27, 29.


(9) Ibid., p. 46.

(10) Ibid., p. 43.

(11) In a letter to the Pall Mall Gazette, published on 2nd October, 1894, (Letters, p.373).


(13) Ibid., p. 53.

(14) Ibid.

(15) Pen, Pencil and Poison, in The Works of Oscar Wilde, London 1964, p. 850. I shall refer to this good, handy edition, which is based on the texts published in Ross, as much as possible.

(16) Ibid., p. 355.

(17) Ibid., p. 353.

(18) Ibid., p. 354.

(19) Ibid., p. 345.

(20) Vol. XXV, pp. 35-56.


(22) Ibid., p. 327.

(23) A well-chosen example. The same novel is exposed in H.W. Fowler and
F.G. Fowler's *classical King's English* (Oxford 1958, pp. 203-9) as an instance of how wearing a writer's fondness for accuracy of his torical language can be.


(26) Ibid., p. 829.

(27) Ibid., p. 830.

(28) Ibid.

(29) Ibid., p. 831.

(30) Ibid.

(31) Ibid., pp. 831-2.

(32) Ibid., p. 832.

(33) Ibid.

(34) Ibid., pp. 833-4.

(35) Ibid., p. 834.

(36) Ibid.

(37) Ibid., p. 835.

(38) Ibid.


(40) Of course literature had been conscious of this kind of influence it could exert for a long time. Dante's Paolo and Francesca (Ilferno, V) find in a book the revelation of their mutual love; in times closer to Wilde's, Stendhal, an author who looked for his characters in life, writes in one of his novels: "A Paris, la position de Julien envers madame de Renal n'aurait été bien vité simplifiée; mais à Paris, l'amour est fils des romans. Le jeune précepteur et sa timide maîtresse auraient retrouvé dans trois ou quatre romans, et jusque dans les couplets du Gymnase, l'éclaircissement de leur position. Les romans leur auraient tracé le rôle à jouer, montré le modèle à imiter; et ce modèle, tôt ou tard, et quoique sans un plaisir, et peut-être en rechignant, la vanité a été forcée Julien à la suivre." (Le Rouge et le Noir, in *Romans et Nouvelles*, Vol.V de la Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Tours 1963, p. 252).


(43) Cyril's question and the subsequent answer are one of the main additions to the 1891 edition of the essay.


(Ibid., p.839.

(46) Ibid.

(47) Ibid., p.840.

(48) The following passage appeared in the 1891 edition for the first time.


(50) "A quoi bon bouger, quand on peut voyager si magnifiquement sur une chaise?" (A Rebour, Paris 1955), p.178)


(52) Ibid., p.342.
Chapter VI

The Picture of Dorian Gray: intellectual edonism.

Art and morality.

Leaving aside for the moment *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, which was written in 1839, Wilde's next work was the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was published in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine for July, 1890, and reappeared, greatly enlarged (1) in book form in July, 1891.

This famous or, rather, notorious book was from its first appearance a succès de scandale; it was commonly considered a loathsome, immoral piece, and Wilde's self defence against accusations of this kind will be examined later. Here, we are not really concerned with the result of the book as a work of art; we would have, at any rate, very little to add to what such critics as Draz and Hough have already pointed out. (2) That is, that despite its undeniable popularity and even the influence it exerted, Dorian Gray fails exactly in what it was meant to be: a perfect work of art, a "gem", a living example of an achievement in the Art for art's sake line. "An essay on decorative art", Wilde called it; (3) but it does not live up to its acknowledged model, Huysmans's *A rebours*.

One who sets up as a connoisseur of sights, sounds, odours, and the like should at least satisfy us that he has experience and discrimination in these matters... There is nothing in Wilde's writing to show that he had ever seen, smelt, tasted or listened with any special attention, had ever done anything but call verbally impressive passages from his favourite literature, Graham Hough says, and it is hard to disagree with him. As has been justly emphasised by every serious critic of Wilde, the aesthete was only too sensible to literary reminiscences; once more, we should here refer to the innumerable studies of the more or less conscious analogies between Wilde and so many other writers. It is fair to add that rather than plagiarism it was the outpouring of an enthusiastic reader, endowed with an extraordinary verbal memory, which made him even more receptive than he was prepared to believe. Without *A rebours*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would probably never have been
written. But we can say, paradoxically, that without the most direct echoes of the French book it would be a much happier accomplishment. The novel has a plan, a raison d'être of its own, but it is spoiled by the preoccupation of living up to its model. The endless pages devoted to vulgarising Huysmans into English, so to speak, hopelessly ruin the balance of the whole book.

At any rate, we are concerned here with Dorian Gray only inasmuch as it throws light on Wilde's aesthetic ideas, and from this standpoint the book is highly interesting. Its story is that of the progress of an aesthete, and we do not have to repeat here how indissolubly art and life were connected together in Wilde's views. It was the gospel Pater had preached in the Renaissance: a theory of Art is a theory of Life, and that is the meaning of Wilde's life as a whole, ever since his beginnings as a social reformer in the name of Art.

Before pursuing this examination of Dorian Gray we should like to go back a little and make a short digression. Isobel M. Murray lists Huysmans, Pater, Balzac, Poe, Stevenson, Maturin, Disraeli, Zola, Gautier, Musset, Goethe, Flaubert, and others, in her summing up of the influences which critics have found in Dorian Gray; and we feel that we should not make the catalogue any longer by pointing out another. All the same, we might be excused on the ground that Chuang Tzu aroused Wilde's enthusiasm as a kindred spirit, rather than as a writer, providing him with definite patterns to imitate. This Chinese philosopher, who lived in the fourth century before Christ, was the hero of Wilde's longest and in some ways most interesting review, written in February, 1890. The article will be dealt with in our chapter on what can be called Wilde's Socialism, that being the ground on which Chuang Tzu's seed proved most fertile. However, much of what Wilde read in the Chinese sage may be of help here, where we wish to illustrate his aims in writing Dorian Gray.

In Wilde's words, Chuang Tzu spent his life in preaching the great creed of inaction, and in pointing out the
uselessness of all useful things. 'Do nothing, and everything will be done', was the doctrine which he inherited from his great master Leo Tau. To resolve action into thought, and thought into abstraction, was his wicked transcendental aim. Like the obscure philosopher of early Greek speculation, he believed in the identity of contraries; like Plato, he was an idealist, and had all the idealist's contempt for utilitarian systems; he was a mystic like Dionysius, and Scotus Erigena, and Jacob Böhme, and held, with them and with Philo, that the object of life was to get rid of self-consciousness, and to become the unconscious vehicle of a higher illumination. ...Who is the perfect man, what does he do? He 'does nothing beyond gazing at the universe. He adopts no absolute position. In motion, he is like water. At rest, he is like a mirror. And, like Echo, he answers only when he is called upon' ... He is passive, and accepts the laws of life. He rests in inactivity, and sees the world become virtuous of itself. He does not try to 'bring about his own good deeds'. He never wastes himself on effort. He is not troubled about moral distinctions. He knows that things are what they are, and that their consequences will be what they will be. His mind is the 'speculum of creation', and he is ever at peace.(6)

Now this ideal of contemplation and inaction reappears, coloured with aestheticism, as the moral of The Picture of Dorian Gray. Wilde sub sole novi: that was the true sense of Pater's theory as well, as Wilde himself had underlined. In his article on Pater's Appreciations (the article appeared in The Speaker for March 22, 1890) he had quoted at length the following passage from the essay on Wordsworth, introducing it as containing "a truth eminently suitable for our age":

That the end of life is not action but contemplation - being as distinct from doing - a certain disposition of the mind is, in some shape or other, the principle of all the higher morality.(7)

Who is Dorian Gray? He is a sophisticated young man of extraordinary personal beauty, who tries to realise in himself an ideal of perfection ("Dorian [is] what I would like to be", Wilde admitted in later years."(7a). To a certain extent, he is successful:

Indeed, there were many, especially among the very young men, who saw, or fancied that they saw, in Dorian Gray, the true realisation of a type of which they had often dreamed in Eton or Oxford days, a type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world. To them he seemed to be of the company of those whom Dante describes as having sought to 'make themselves perfect by the
Worship of beauty'. Like Gautier, he was one for whom 'the visible world existed'.

And, certainly, to him Life itself was the first, the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation...

The leading influences shaping the attitudes of this dandy are Lord Henry Wotton's advice and a mysterious "yellow book": the former being a paraphrase of the implications contained in Pater's pagan creed (a rather cynical paraphrase, in which are sensible traces of Gautier's cult of beauty as well); while in the latter it is not difficult to identify, as Wilde himself privately admitted, Huysmans' *A rebours*. This book was by then the dernier cri (1884) of the French counterpart of the "aesthetic movement": a study, as Wilde put it, "of the artistic temperament in our inartistic age".

In his first meeting with the beautiful lad, Lord Henry begins his tuition. He encourages him to

cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul; he teaches him that

Beauty is a form of Genius - is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation.

To realise oneself perfectly one must yield to one's senses:

The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.

Years later Dorian recollects thus his friend's theories:

The worship of the senses has often, and with much justice, been decried... But it appeared to Dorian Gray that the true nature of the senses had never been understood, and that they had remained savage and animal merely because the world had sought to starve them into submission or to kill them by pain, instead of aiming at making them elements of a new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic. As he looked back upon man moving through History, he was haunted by a feeling of loss. So much had been surrendered! And to such little purpose! There had been mad wilful rejections, monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial, whose origin was fear, and whose result was a degradation
from which, in their ignorance, they had sought to escape... Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly; yet, it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be...

Dorian had shaped his own life on the model provided by the hero of the "poisonous book" which Lord Henry gave him. It was a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realise in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin.

To live up to his model, Dorian Gray decides to deny nothing to himself - to live a life full of refined experiences. But in so doing he has to put himself above the scale of ethics. His progress is mirrored in the clear allegory of his decaying portrait, a merciless reminder of his rotting conscience, whose calls never completely cease to haunt him; and when he tries to destroy the painting, and to silence his conscience, he kills himself.

The weak point in Wilde's exemplification is in the quality of his hero's "sins". Dazzled by the example of the French novel, as it were, he accordingly shows us Dorian Gray exquisitely collecting strange jewels and precious lace, smelling exotic perfumes and reading forbidden or forgotten books. Darker crimes are hinted at; but the ones which we are described in full make us wonder. In Pen, Pencil and Poison Wilde had good-humouredly excused Wainewright for his awful crimes, suggesting that they might have been necessary for the development of his artistic personality. But can we say the same for Dorian Gray? First of all: is crime really necessary for the development of an artistic personality? After all, even the corrupt Lord Henry states that:

All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is crime. Crime belongs
exclusively to the lower orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime was to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations. (16)

This statement, whose immediate purpose is to explain to the blushing lad how his secret fancies and dreams can be more sinful than if they were carried into action, stresses at the same time the all-pervading importance of what happens in our mind.

For Pater and Flaubert, to realize oneself through art (the noblest way of doing it) means above all to live a life of contemplation. It is the marriage of the philosophy of the Sage of the Yellow River with Gautier's worship of Beauty. Des Esseintes, to give a name to the "young Parisian" in the "yellow book", does not have to commit crimes to taste aesthetic sensations; actually, he hardly leaves his rooms. Dorian Gray has failed to understand this, while even his corruptor, Lord Henry, seems well aware of the superiority of contemplation upon action. He gives this answer to Dorian, who calls him responsible for the bad influence his gift—the "poisonous book"—exerted on his life:

As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. (19)

From the Philistine standpoint, Dorian Gray loses his soul because he loses his moral sense. To the eyes of the true aesthete, he is unsuccessful because he mistakes action for contemplation.

Walter Pater's review of the novel gives a fair example of an aesthete's appraisal.

Clever always, this book, however, seems intended to set forth anything but a homely philosophy of life for the middle-class—a kind of dainty Epicurean theory, rather—yet fails, to some degree, in this; and one can see why. A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr. Wilde's hero—his heroes are bent on doing as speedily, as completely as they can, is to lose, or lower, organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development. (20)

These are words which resent nothing of their author's views as they had
been expressed in the Renaissance, and which explain, with the position of Pater, that of Wilde: who, though occasionally tempted to indulge in a more dangerous interpretation, seems aware of the implications contained in the more ascetic creed.

Pater's article on Dorian Gray is among the very best criticisms of this book, and we shall quote from it again. To appreciate it better we should not forget that the older man never really liked Wilde, nor approved of the somewhat misleading publicity he had been giving to his ideas: Wilde's attitudes in the early 1880's illustrate the reasons why Pater withdrew the "Conclusion" from the second edition of the Renaissance.

Acutely, Pater begins by stressing the real quality of Wilde's prose - all the more acutely, since Wilde's theatrical success was still to come. And we may be surprised to see that before Dorian Gray Wilde was known and appreciated by a discerning critic like Pater exactly for his best achievement - that is, not his poetry, or his short stories, but his criticism; and we shall soon have to come back to the parallel, which Pater suggests, with Matthew Arnold.

There is always something of an excellent talker about the writing of Mr. Oscar Wilde; and in his hands, as happens so rarely with those who practise it, the form of dialogue is justified by its being really alive. His genial laughter-loving sense of life and its enjoyable intercourse, goes far to obviate any crudity there may be in the paradox, with which, as with the bright and shining truth which often underlies it, Mr. Wilde, startling his "countrymen", carries on, more perhaps than any other writer, the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold. The Decay of Lying, for instance, is all but unique in its half-humorous, yet wholly convinced, presentation of certain valuable truths of criticism. Conversational ease, the fluidity of life, felicitous expression, are qualities which have a natural alliance to the successful writing of fiction; and side by side with Mr. Wilde's Intentions...comes a novel, certainly original, and affording the reader a fair opportunity of comparing his practice as a creative artist with many a precept he has enounced as critic concerning it.

A wholesome dislike of the common-place, rightly or wrongly identified by him with the bourgeois, with our middle-class - its habits and tastes - leads him to protest emphatically against so-called 'realism' in art; life, as he argues, with much plausibility, as a matter of fact, when it is really awake, following art - the fashion an effective artist sets; while art, on the other hand, influential and effective
art, has never taken its cue from actual life. In *Dorian Gray* he
is true certainly, on the whole, to the aesthetic philosophy of his
*Intentions*...(21)

Pater rightly stresses the fact that in *Dorian Gray* Wilde is true to
the aesthetic philosophy of *Intentions* "on the whole"; the reservation
justly affects the additions to the 1891 version of the novel, where we find
a certain amount of intrusion from that very sordid life which the aesthete
affected to despise. Besides the example of an aesthetic way of life which
it sets forth, then, *Dorian Gray* provides us with more material for the
illustration of some of Wilde's favourite topics. There is, for instance,
a new discussion of that basic problem, the connections between Art and
Nature, in Basil Hallward's attitude to the work of art he has produced.
Hallward is a partial projection of Wilde, and shares many of his views
as well as his background (he is an Oxford man, and obviously an "aesthete");
therefore he knows that art is not a mere reproduction of Nature, and we may
be sure that the portrait of his beautiful sitter, no matter how truthful,
is a long way from being photographically life-like. But to follow Nature
too closely is not the only danger which an artist should avoid; there is
another peril, of which the reader of *The Decay of Lying* is well aware, and
that is the danger of putting too much of oneself in one's work of art.
"Every portrait that is painted with feeling", Hallward confesses,

is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely
the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the
painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals
himself. (23)

To reveal oneself - to mix up autobiography with art - is so capital an
artistic fault as to copy Nature without improving it. "Art", we know,
"never expresses anything by itself". (24) Basil Hallward knows it too.
He refuses to exhibit his masterpiece not only because it would reveal feelings
of which he is ashamed, but also because he knows that as a work of art it
stands against his very beliefs. He says:

*An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing
of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as
if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the
abstract sense of beauty.* Some day I will show the world what it is;
and for that reason the world shall never see the portrait of Dorian Gray. (25)

However, Hallward says that to his art Dorian Gray is indispensable, that under his influence he has produced his best work. We wonder here how such a statement can fit what Wilde stated so precisely in The Decay of Lying: that Nature and Life follow Art, and that the process is not reversible. The apparent contradiction is explained as follows. Hallward himself, well aware of the heresy of what he was saying when acknowledging the all-important influence of Dorian Gray, had hastened to emphasise that, in an absolutely exceptional way, it is possible for a "new personality" to have a real importance to art. Dorian is a living masterpiece, and like Antinous to the late Greek sculptors, he is to him an instance of that ideal perfection which his art is to seek. (26) Later in the book Lord Henry analyses the situation more clearly. Ordinary life is hideous, we are told; it is something from which we should escape by means of art. Art can thus help to create a fuller form of life, which is a sort of art in itself. And since life can be art, it can create its own masterpieces, whose credit goes, strictly speaking, to Art rather than to Life.

Ordinary people waited till life disclosed to them its secrets, but to the few, to the elect, the mysteries of life were revealed before the veil was drawn away. Sometimes this was the effect of art, and chiefly of the art of literature, which dealt immediately with the passions and the intellect. But now and then a complex personality took the place and assumed the office of art; was indeed, in its way, a real work of art, life having its elaborate masterpieces, just as poetry has, or sculpture, or painting. (27)

Ordinary life is dreadful; or, rather, it is imperfect. It needs art as a corrective all the time. Being more finished than life, art is more real: the loss of Lucien de Rubempré, as Wilde remarks in The Decay of Lying, affects us more than the loss of a personal friend. An echo of this statement lies in Dorian's words on hearing of the tragic death of his fiancée, the actress Sybil Vane: "If I had read all this in a book...I think I would have wept over it" (23) (he does not weep, because the thing really happened). Life's tragedy needs correction; and Lord Henry suggests to
his young friend a way to realise artistically the incomplete suggestion received from life.

...you must think of that lonely death in the tawdry dressing-room simply as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy, as a wonderful scene from Webster or Ford, or Cyril Tourneur. The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays... Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sybil Vane. She was less real than they are. (29)

In this way, to really experience life, one has to detach himself from it: to watch oneself as though one were a character in a book, in a play. Art provides one with a thousand situations, it makes one live a thousand lives - the life of everyone except his own; it gives one a thousand ancestors, in history as well as in literature. We shall say more about this when dealing with Wilde's view of heredity as he expresses it in The Critic as Artist; we simply want to state here how, to obtain the indispensable detachment from life, to look at one's own self in the third person, one must wear a mask at all times. A mask of one's make and choice, a mask which, being different from one's obviously imperfect nature, is but a product of one's mind, and therefore wholly artificial, and thus one's only real self. Paradoxically, a man is not what he is, but what he tries to be - what he pretends to be; it is his attitude that matters, and "be artificial" is the motto of the true Hedonist. "Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know", (30) Lord Henry says at the beginning of the book. Later on he remarks: "I love acting. It is so much more real than life". (31) After all, hypocrisy is always welcome in good society, where manners are felt to be more important than morals, where, as in art, form is essential:

It should have the dignity of a ceremony, as well as its unreality, and should combine the insincere character of a romantic play with the wit and beauty that make such plays delightful to us. Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities. (32)

To wear a mask makes life wider, richer, fuller. And as it allows the
Hedonist to enjoy all sorts of experiences, it leaves the thinker free to play with ideas, to maintain opposite standpoints for the sake of argumentation. This explains a great deal of Wilde's "inconsistency" - although we see that he should be considered, on the whole, much more consistent than he generally is. But he never pretended to be totally consistent; and in no case should we charge him with not believing what he says. A remark of Lord Henry's to this effect comes straight from the author's heart. It is something that Wilde never tires of repeating, and it seems particularly fitting to quote it when discussing Dorian Gray.

If one puts forward an idea to a true Englishman...he never dreams of considering whether the idea is right or wrong. The only thing he considers of any importance is whether one believes it oneself. Now, the value of an idea has nothing whatsoever to do with the sincerity of the man who expresses it. Indeed, the probabilities are that the more insincere the man is, the more purely intellectual will the idea be, as in that case it will not be coloured by either his wants, his desires, or his prejudices. (33)

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Antecedents and parallels of Dorian Gray are to be found in some of Wilde's Fairy Tales, collected in The Happy Prince (1888) and in A House of Pomegranates (1891). Both the stories entitled The Happy Prince and The young King (in the later collection) portray young men who after a life of pleasure and self-indulgence open their eyes to the reality of the world; The Birthday of the Infanta is full of gorgeous decoration, and The Star-Child has "the same unhealthy, destructive love of beauty as had Dorian Gray and the Young King", in the words of Miss Murray, (34) who deals extensively with such analogies.

More rewarding may prove a comparison of Dorian Gray with the short story The Portrait of Mr. W.H., published in Blackwood's Magazine for May, July 1889. This elegant tale is above all a piece of speculation, a work of criticism such as will later correspond to Wilde's theories explained in The Critic as Artist. As in Dorian Gray, the portrait of a beautiful young man is central to the plot; as in Dorian Gray, the story contains an allegory,
and in this respect The Portrait of Mr. W.H. is probably more successful. One fundamental theory of Wilde's is exemplified here, and it is the one hinted at in Lord Henry's words about the irrelevancy of the author's belief in his theory. Truth is a matter of style. What does it matter whether Willie Hughes really existed? The conjecture that a handsome boy actor was the recipient of Shakespeare's sonnets is charming, and it is not important whether it is "true" in our everyday sense, or not. The very author of the suggestion loses his faith in it as soon as he gains an enthusiastic supporter. The theory cannot be proved, and it need not be proved. Tragedy happens to whoever takes it too seriously; the moral of the fable is, let the idea live its own ethereal life, do not let it really interfere with your life. This is the attitude which Wilde maintained towards his own ideas. We have seen how, when he reprinted The Truth of Masks in Intentions, at a time when he no longer shared the implications contained in the essay, he simply added a postscript to warn us that the essay "simply represents an artistic standpoint. "A truth in art", he says in the same work, "is one whose contrary is also true". Dersent May has pointed out (35) how curiously this statement seems to be echoed in T.S. Eliot's examination of the implication of independence of art from its creator - for instance, in his praise of seventeenth-century wit, which, in Eliot's words, "involves a recognition, implicit in the expression of any experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible".

We shall return to this point when dealing with The Critic as Artist. Before coming to that, however, we must briefly turn our attention to Wilde's defence of Dorian Gray.

In the beginning of this chapter we hinted at the shocked reception which greeted the appearance of Wilde's novel. The full text of all the important reviews and letters concerning The Picture of Dorian Gray is given in Stuart Mason's Art and Morality. (36) In 1895 the book was even produced in court as evidence against its author. Wilde stood his ground, and his defence of his work there, as well as in the letters which he had written in 1890 to the editors of the St. James's Gazette, the Daily Chronicle, and the Scots Observer - the content of some of which was produced as well, by
Wilde's counsellor - are worth noting. In these letters Wilde defended above all the independence of aesthetics from ethics, and put forth the necessity of a criticism based on such principles. On the whole, his behaviour was exemplary. He never gave the impression of fighting for personal reasons, but, rather, for the sake of abstract ideas. "The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate", he was contented with reminding the St. James's Gazette, where one of the most grossly outrageous reviews had appeared. True to his ideal of the detachment of the artist, he added:

I wrote this book entirely for my own pleasure, and it gave me very great pleasure to write it. Whether it becomes popular or not is a matter of absolute indifference to me. (32)

The newspaper replied, and Wilde was obliged to return to the topic. This time he confuted, one by one, the main points of the article. Among other things, he said:

The writer of the article...suggests that I...take pleasure in a subject because it is dangerous. About such a suggestion there is this to be said. Romantic art deals with the exception and with the individual. Good people, belonging as they do to the normal, and so commonplace, type, are artistically uninteresting. Bad people are, from the point of view of art, fascinating studies. They represent colour, variety and strangeness... Your critic, if I must give him so honourable a title, states that the people in my story have no counterpart in life. Quite so. If they existed they would not be worth writing about. The function of the artist is to invent, not to chronicle. There are no such people. If there were I would not write about them. Life by its realism is always spoiling the subject-matter of art. The supreme pleasure in literature is to realize the non-existent. (33)

Wilde would give a fuller analysis in what he called the healthy influence of sin upon art in The Critic as Artist, which he was writing at this time (the letter was published on June 27, 1890; the first part of the dialogue appeared in the following month). The artist as teller of beautiful invention had been theorized in The Decay of Lying, and would remain central in Wilde's subsequent work. He even gave this theory the form of an apologue, although he never cared to put this down in writing. This short tale, entitled The Poet, survives in Gide's and in Mrs. Carew's recollection (the latter's, the most accurate of the two, is printed as Appendix C in
Vivian Holland's Son of Oscar Wilde). It deals with a Poet who lived in the country. Every morning he went to the great city which lay miles away, and when he came back children and countrymen would gather around him to listen to the description of the marvellous things he had seen during his journey: little brown fauns, green-haired nereids and the like. One day the poet really saw fauns and nereids peering at him; when he came back, the same evening, he told his listeners: "I have nothing to tell you, for today I have seen nothing"; for on that day, for the first time in his life, he had seen reality, and to a poet, fancy is reality, and reality is nothing.

The letter quoted above also contains a remark about the "terrible moral" contained in Dorian Gray. It is, Wilde says, all too evident; so evident, indeed, that he is afraid to have committed an aesthetic fault. He expresses the same doubt in an almost contemporary letter to the Daily Chronicle, where he explains why he hopes to have kept the moral in its "proper secondary place":

The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself.

More remarks on the function of criticism follow:

A critic should be taught to criticise a work of art without making any reference to the personality of the author. This, in fact, is the beginning of criticism.

Were I a French author, and my book brought out in Paris, there is not a single literary critic in France, on any paper of high standing, who would think for a moment of criticising it from an ethical standpoint... It is proper that limitations should be placed on action. It is not proper that limitations should be placed on art.

Your critic...commits the absolutely unpardonable crime of trying to confuse the artist with his subject-matter. For this, sir, there is no excuse at all. Of one who is the greatest figure in the world's literature since Greek days Keats remarked that he had as much pleasure in conceiving the evil as he had in conceiving the good...
...if a work of art is rich, and vital, and complete, those who have artistic instincts will see its beauty, and those to whom ethics appeal more strongly than aesthetics will see its moral lesson. It will fill the cowardly with terror, and the unclean will see in it their own shame. It will be to each man what he is to himself. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. (45)

These statements form the best introduction for our next chapter. Along with these, and with the same purpose, we should like to quote here an extract from the records of Wilde's first trial. Edward Carson cross-examined him on the aphorisms which, under the title of Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young, Wilde had contributed to The Chameleon, an Oxford undergraduate magazine. (46)

Carson: "Pleasure is the only thing one should live for?"

Wilde: I think that the realization of oneself is the prime aim of life, and to realize oneself through pleasure is finer than to do so through pain. I am, on that point, entirely on the side of the ancients - the Greeks. It is a pagan idea.

Carson: "A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it"?

Wilde: Perfectly. That would be my metaphysical definition of truth; something so personal that the same truth could never be appreciated by two minds.

Carson: "The condition of perfection is idleness: the aim of perfection is youth"?

Wilde: Oh, yes; I think so. Half of it is true. The life of contemplation is the highest life, and so recognized by the philosopher. (47)
Notes to Chapter VI

(1) The additions amounted to six new chapters and a Preface.

(2) Respectively, in The Romantic Array and in The Last Romantics (opp. cit., passim)

(3) Letters, p.264.

(4) The Last Romantics, p.199.


(6) Reviews, pp.528-9, 534-5.

(7) Rev., p.543.

(7a) Letters, p.352.


(9) To a Mr. W.W. Pratt Wilde wrote (postmark 15th April 1892): "The book in Dorian Gray is one of the many books I have never written, but it is partly suggested by Huysmans's A rebours, which you will get at any French bookseller's. It is a fantastic variation on Huysmans's over-realistic study of the artistic temperament in our inartistic age." (Letters, p.313). In 1894 (postmark 12th February) he wrote, to a Mr. Ralph Payne, "The book that poisoned, or made perfect, Dorian Gray, does not exist; it is a fancy of mine merely". (Letters, p.352). During his trial, Wilde admitted that the "yellow book" was a French work, A rebours, by J.K. Huysmans" (The Trials of Oscar Wilde, ed. by H. Montgomery Hyde, London, Glasgow and Edinburgh, 1948, p.130).

(10) Letters, p.313.

(11) Dorian Gray, p.388.


(13) Ibid., p.336.

(14) Ibid., p.450.

(15) Ibid., p.477.

(16) Ex June 30, 1890.

(17) Letters, p.255.

(18) Ibid., p.280.
(18) Dorian Gray, p.386.
(19) Ibid., p.500.
(21) Ibid.
(22) Letters, p.352.
(23) Dorian Gray, p.379.
(26) Ibid., p.382.
(27) Ibid., p.409.
(28) Ibid., p.432.
(29) Ibid., p.435.
(30) Ibid., p.379.
(31) Ibid., p.421.
(33) Ibid., p.381.
(35) In The Times, October 24, 1963.
(36) London 1912.
(37) Letters, p.257
(38) Ibid., p.259.
(39) London 1954.
(40) On June 30, 1890.
(41) Letters, p.263.
(42) Ibid., p.260.
From the standpoint of style it should be pointed out that The Jewels of Borne is not so effective as the Jewels of Bithra. Although its style, Wilde’s forte, is as good as ever (the characterization of the two individuals is better here than in The Dreyfus Affair, where only one speaker has anything important to say), the style is more deliberate than in the previous works, and the two characters are even more long-winded than their predecessors. Moreover, those elements in the dialogue which reflect the influence of the French decadents, such as the satir of Tristan Max (as Jan says (1) that as a critic Wilde saw best in Wilde’s words a critic should put fair, rational, sincere.) He means it as a compliment, and Wilde’s accomplishment — as shown in Essays and in the essays which we have examined so far — certainly deserves it. The Jewels of Borne was not the same criticism in that line, especially on scoring; but the points matches which the author provides.
Chapter VII.

The Critic as Artist

Entitled The True Function and Value of Criticism, the dialogue better known as The Critic as Artist was originally published in the July and September 1890 issues of The Nineteenth Century: that is about a year before the final version of Dorian Gray. But we have already pointed out how the 1890 edition of the novel contains all that is of importance for Wilde's aesthetic theory. However it is not only for chronological reasons that we are dealing with it here: the essay, which is Wilde's longest theoretical work, is a summing up of all his views in matters of art, and shows the ultimate stage of his ideas. Wilde added nothing to his aesthetics in the years between 1890 and 1895; and if the prison experience reshaped, to an extent, the man, it certainly provided the aesthete with no new art theory. What Wilde wrote after The Critic as Artist, with the exception of The Soul of Man, which concerns the social application of his aesthetics, is simply an illustration of the points he had made: the most relevant of such repetitions being the passionate defence of the independence of aesthetics from ethics which we already mentioned, and which took place in letters to newspapers and in the self defence during the trial.

From the standpoint of style it should be pointed out that The Critic as Artist is not as felicitous as The Decay of Lying. Although the dialogue, Wilde's forte, is as good as ever (the characterization of the two interlocutors is better here than in The Decay of Lying, where only one speaker has anything important to say), the style is more effeminate than in the previous work, and the two dandies are even more languorous than their predecessors. Moreover, those elements in the dialogue which reflect the influence of the French Décadents remind one of the worst of Dorian Gray. Ojala says (1) that as a critic Wilde was what in Wilde's words a critic should not be: fair, rational, sincere. He means it as a compliment, and Wilde's accomplishment - as shown in Reviews and in the essays which we have examined so far - certainly deserves it. The Critic as Artist contains some criticism in that line, especially on Browning; but the purple patches which the author provides
here for the first time, almost as an example of that "Impressionist Criticism" which he is setting down, hardly seem to support his theory. It is curious to note how the longest of such passages - a lyrical synopsis of La Divina
Commedia, which was left out in the first edition of the essay (Wilde repented giving it up and tried to have it restored, but too late; it was one of the few additions in Intentions)\(^{(2)}\) was one of the few things which one of Wilde's first critics, Leonard Crosswell Ingleby, approved of. In his book, Oscar Wilde (London 1907), Ingleby thoroughly condemns as wrong and wicked the theories in the essay; yet the latter will survive, he maintains, for the supreme beauty of such passages as the aforementioned. We feel, on the contrary, that the beauties of the work are to be looked for in the clarity and poignancy of the ideas it sets forth, and we are, therefore, more inclined to approve of their defence in Arthur Ransome's contemporary book, Oscar Wilde, A Critical Study (London 1910).

It was Wilde's destiny that his work should not find impassioned critics for many years after his death, and if Ingleby's book is malignant, Ransome's is dithyrambic. It contains, however, an interesting suggestion about the source of the form Wilde chose for his essay. The dialogue form doubtlessly suits Wilde's mode of reasoning very well, as Pater pointed out. Its choice was a happy one. On the one hand, it helped Wilde's best quality: his Irish talkative brilliance made him a better writer of dialogues than of anything else - his most prominent literary achievements are in the field of drama. On the other hand, through dialogue he could best conceal his real opinions, he was free to play with ideas, rolling them, as it were, on all sides. He speaks of his own method in The Critic as Artist when he says that the critic is not limited to "the subjective form of expression". The critic, he says, is free to adopt narration, as Pater did in his Imaginary Portraits (and as Wilde himself did, as we saw, in The Portrait of Mr. W.H.).

And dialogue certainly has appealed to many great writers of criticism, from Goethe to Landor, from Plato to Lucian to Giordano Bruno.

By its [the dialogue's] means he [the thinker] can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view, and
show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things, gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress, and really illumine the idea more completely, or from those felicitous afterthoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme, and yet convey something of the delicate charm of chance. (3)

Dialogue really came too naturally to Wilde for us to suppose that he needed to pick up the suggestion for its use from a precise work. At any rate, Ingleby hints at a parallel which could be drawn between Wilde's essay on criticism and that written by John Dennis (1657-1734) in 1693 and entitled The Impartial Critick. This, too, is a dialogue on the function of the critic; here, too, the characters are two young friends, and the general tone of the conversation allows some witty remarks. But the points of contact between Wilde's work and that of the Augustan critic end here, although a comparison can be amusing - Wilde's fin de siècle intellectual amateurs play the piano, and have Chambertin and ortolans for dinner, while Dennis's characters spend their entracte at a tavern called The Old Devil and take tougher drinks. The Impartial Critick is a short essay, intended to discuss the methods of contemporary critics and artists like Rymer and Waller, and Dryden's adaptation of Oedipus, rather than to put forth a new theory of criticism. "Succinctness" and "Gravity" are suggested for a critic's "didactick" style: "Pleasantry", such as displayed by Mr. Rymer in his Account of Tragedy, is to be avoided. There is not much, as we see, that could have influenced Wilde, and of course we have no evidence that he ever came across the book; although, as pointed out in E.N. Hooker's Introduction to his admirable edition of The Critical Works of John Dennis, Dennis's fortune soared again, to a certain extent, in the nineteenth century; both Shelley and De Quincey knew him, Landor ranked him above Dryden as a critic, and Swinburne thought highly of him. Landor's and Swinburne's appreciation is enough to entitle us to believe that Wilde might have been led to read the dialogue in question (Dennis's only one), even if we forgot that Wilde was anything but little read in English literature. His very contempt for Pope might have solicited some interest in the works of a man whom the poet attacked so viciously. At any rate, a fuller comparison of Wilde's and Dennis's
In the article which we quoted about Dorian Gray Walter Pater underlined how Wilde carried on "the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold". Wilde himself may be said to have volunteered to fill the great man's vacant place: the title of the first version of his dialogue directly recalls Arnold's famous The Function of Criticism at the Present Time (Nov. 1864), which, like Wilde's essay, was mainly a plea for an acknowledgement of the vital importance of the critical spirit. The influence of Matthew Arnold on Wilde has been studies by Ernst Bendz, who points out a few stylistic analogies between the two writers (particularly evident in some of Wilde's poems), and rightly concludes that it was in the public figure of the man, rather than in the ideas, that the impact on Wilde is to be looked for: "it was in his capacity of a gallant and untiring combatant of British Philistinism; it was as an upholder, against narrow-minded insularity and national prejudice, of the notion of 'a free play of the mind upon all subjects' as a pleasure in itself, and for its own sake; it was, finally, as a refined artist in prose and delight-ful essay-writer". So rather than speak of an influence, it is correct to say that Wilde's attitude to criticism was, if not born as a reply to Arnold's, certainly helped by the latter to determine itself by way of contrast. The spirit of Arnold is present throughout The Critic as Artist - but Arnold's views are left behind.

Another ghost flutters in the pages of The Critic as Artist. Indeed, we may believe that the direct stimulus to write the essay was given by the re-opening of Whistler's polemics against Wilde. Once more, on January 2, 1890, Whistler had written an open letter to his former friend, accusing him of plagiarizing his ideas and claiming the paternity of the theories expressed in The Decay of Lying (see above, p.51); under this light The Critic as Artist may sound like a declaration of intellectual independence. The dialogue (whose characters, this time called Ernest and Gilbert, sit in "the library of a house in Piccadilly overlooking the Green Park") opens with some sneering at modern biographers (Wilde had often been sarcastic with them
in his reviews). But the main point of the forthcoming discussion is introduced by Ernest's Whistlerian remark that "in the best days of art there were no art-critics"; and we may, with Ojala, imagine Gilbert's answer as directed to the querulous painter:

I seem to have heard that observation before... It has all the vitality of error and all the tediousness of an old friend.

But since we have started, let us go on with the account of Wilde's essay. The incredulous Ernest insists in his opinion, drawing an idyllic picture of the conditions of art before its critics were born: the sculptor effortlessly poured forth his marvellous recreations of nature, not troubled by "irresponsible chatter"; "by the Ilyssus", in Arnold's words, "there was no Maugham"; the prattle of short-sighted, narrow-minded, ridiculous newspaper critics was unheard of.

To Ernest's (and Whistler's) naive description Gilbert would have a great deal to object, but, true to Wilde's often-asserted principle of individualism and self-education (Lord Henley held that nobody can seriously influence anyone), he starts by refusing to give a lecture and behaving like a boring preacher ("we are born in an age when only the dull are treated seriously, and I live in terror of not being misunderstood. Don't degrade me into the position of giving you useful information...nothing that is worth knowing can be taught"). Ernest, however, insists, and Gilbert is obliged to explain his theory.

He begins by enforcing it with historical evidence: the Greeks, he says, knew art-criticism so well, that they may be considered a nation of art-critics. Matthew Arnold had sponsored the rebirth of a critical faculty which was to judge — on highly moral, and not basely utilitarian principles — all the activities of man. Wilde makes a distinction: We are primarily indebted to the Greeks, Gilbert says, for the critical spirit; a spirit "which they exercised on questions of religion and science, of ethics and metaphysics, of politics and education" (we may wonder here why history is left out, since on The Rise of Historical Criticism Wilde had written, as we saw, a brilliant and documented undergraduate essay). The Greeks' main
glory lies in the fact that they exercised their critical spirit on questions of art also: in the two "supreme and highest arts", which are "Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life". That life can be an art had been affirmed in Dorian Gray; it is boldly re-asserted here, where the hensydasis Life and Literature permits Wilde to place art-criticism as the highest manifestation of the critical spirit right from the beginning (Arnold does not make such a hierarchy; rather, he seems to imply that a sound criticism is more urgent in such "burning matters" as politics and religion rather than in literature). Gilbert goes on illustrating the Greeks' system of literary criticism, which was based on language. From the ear they deduced the rules of poetry and prosody; the myth of Homer being blind may be taken to stress the importance of the "element of singing" in his "song". It is a value which we have lost, Gilbert comments: a faultless modern prose-writer like Walter Pater writes for the eye and not for the ear, and his work "is often far more like a piece of mosaic than a passage in music". Here Wilde probably betrays something of his own method of composition: he used to submit the prose he wrote to the test of the ear, often by way of reading it aloud to his friends (he read the proofs of The Decay of Lying to W.B. Yeats).

Plato, Gilbert continues, was perhaps the first man to put forth the problem of the connection between Beauty and Truth; but Aristotle, like Goethe, treated art in its concrete manifestations, analysing, for instance, the material, the subject-matter, the method, the structure, etc., of Tragedy; whose final aesthetic appeal he acknowledged to be "to the sense of beauty realised through the passions of pity and awe" (and Goethe clearly saw that "that purification and spiritualising of the nature" which he called catharsis is "essentially aesthetic", and not moral). Aristotle was then one of the greatest aesthetic critic of all ages, and a prominent figure of a culture where art-criticism was even more widespread than in modern times.

If this is how things are, Ernest remarks, we cannot but be sorry for the Greeks: because surely - and here we find another echo from Arnold: "The critical power is of lower rank than the creative. True..."
"the creative faculty is higher than the critical". (15)

Gilbert has his answer ready: it also follows to a certain extent an implication contained in Arnold's theory. Arnold, he says, spoke of literature as a criticism of life - a definition which was not very felicitous in form, but...showed how keenly he recognised the importance of the critical element in all creative work. (16)

Now artists -great artists- are "self-conscious and deliberate":

No poet sings because he must sing...he chooses to sing. We are apt sometimes to think that the voices that sounded at the dawn of poetry were simpler, fresher, and more natural than ours... Our historical sense is at fault. Every century that produces poetry is, so far, an artificial century, and the work that seems to us to be the most natural and simple product of its time is always the result of the most self-conscious effort. (17)

This self-conscious effort is impossible without the critical faculty: without which "there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name".

Furthermore - and this is fundamental to Wilde's theory: it will be more fully analysed in The Soul of Man - art is always an individual performance. We may believe, with Ernest, that "the primitive, anonymous collective poems, were the result of the imagination of races, rather than of the imagination of individuals": if so, they were not poetry.

For there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual. (18)

It takes an individual genius to pick up this rough material and shape it into song, as Homer and Shakespeare did. It follows that "behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age". It is a reassertion of the superiority of art over nature, and the critical faculty has a vital importance in the process. "Creation", that is, nature, tends "to repeat itself", and "it is the critical faculty that invents new forms".

The critical faculty is doubtless indispensable to the creation of art, and Ernest is ready to follow his friend so far. But what are we going to do, he wonders, of "criticism outside creation"?
Gilbert's long answer to this question settles one of the capital points of the essay. He starts by stating that the fact that so many bad critics exist is nothing against criticism, just like the fact that so many bad writers exist is nothing against literature. Actually, the reviews of bad books are often better than the books themselves. In praising the artist above the critic Ernest is leaning upon a common mistake. People generally maintain that to do a thing is harder than to talk about it; the truth is the other way around. To talk about a thing is much more difficult than to do it. "Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it".

It is a first step towards the dogma which Gilbert will enunciate in the second part of the dialogue: that to do nothing at all is the most difficult of all things, a doctrine of contemplation whose first suggestion lay in Pater, to whom Wilde adds Chuang Tzu. The impact of the Chinese sage is particularly evident here, in the passionate condemnation of all action. Action, Gilbert says, is something men share with animals:

"It is only by language that we rise above them, or above each other. By language, which is the parent, and not the child, of thought." (15)

Action is easy, and primitive; its basis is the lack of imagination. "It is the last resource of those who know not how to dream". A conscious aim does not improve it, because the man of action is, more often than not, blind.

If we lived long enough to see the result of our actions it may be that those who call themselves good would be sickened with a dull remorse, and those whom the world calls evil stirred by a noble joy." (20)

The digression that follows could not be more Arnoldian in its indignatio, nor less Arnoldian in its message. Men, Gilbert goes on, are the slaves of words; they condemn Materialism, and forget the "barren hopes" and "fruitless aspirations" that more spiritual ages have produced. By self-denial and self-sacrifice the world has renounced its hopes of progress; who can say what the virtues are?

What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless.
By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism it saves us from monotony of type. (21)

Sin is defended here for the same reasons which were upheld in Dorian Gray: it is an assertion of independence (The Soul of Man will tell us more about Wilde's view of individuality) and of "curiosity" (it probably was malicious of Wilde to use this particular word, which Arnold had tried to rehabilitate in The Function of Criticism at the Present Time:)

It is noticeable that the word curiosity, which in other languages is used in a good sense, to mean, as a high and fine quality of man's nature, just this disinterested love of a free play of mind on all subjects, for its own sake, - it is noticeable, I say, that this word has in our language no sense of the kind, no sense but a rather bad and disparaging one. (22)

One should not forget, however, that here, perhaps more clearly than in Dorian Gray, Sin is ultimately condemned as a form of Action - something much less perfect than Contemplation.

Coming back to the main thread of his argument, Gilbert sums it up in the following definition: "When man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet", and to demonstrate it he throws himself into a description of a few scenes from the Ilyad and other classics: the people of whom we are told there, he maintains, are more real than real people; Literature alone has fully solved the problem of movement, that problem of visible arts.

Of course that only proves that the creative artist is superior to the man of action: but one must not forget, Gilbert points out, that the critic is no less a creative artist than the artist himself.

Criticism is itself an art. And just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty, and, indeed, without it cannot be said to exist at all, so Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent. (23)

This is the most original part of the essay, and the richest of suggestions: what follows is simply an illustration of the implications of this theory.
Arnold's highly moral plea for the critical spirit, Fater's claim that a critic must know what his impressions really are, are fused together in a rich synthesis. Gilbert's dialectic is well reasoned. "The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought". Flaubert took from life a sordid little story and made a masterpiece of style out of it; why shouldn't the true critic do the same, using as his rough material such trifling matters as the pictures in this year's Royal Academy? So criticism is independent: it can find its motives anywhere. And since it "works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful", it is a creative art. Even more than that, indeed:

For just as the great artists, from Homer and Aeschylus, down to Shakespeare and Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject-matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend, and ancient tale, so the critic deals with materials that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative form and colour have been already added...the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression is in its way more creative that creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put, in itself, and to itself, an end. (24)

"Don't degrade me into the position of giving you useful information...nothing that is worth knowing can be taught", Gilbert had said at the beginning of the conversation. Criticism has no second end: teaching is not its aim, nor is it interested in the moral edification of the public. It is not "useful", in the sense in which such a thing as a useful work of art does not exist. As art, it is an end to itself. What is criticism then?

...the highest criticism really is...the record of one's own soul. It is more fascinating than history, as it is concerned simply with oneself. It is more delightful than philosophy, as its subject is concrete and not abstract, real and not vague. It is the only civilised form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life... (25)

"To be quite frank, the critic ought to say: 'Gentlemen, I am going to speak about myself apropos of Shakespeare, apropos of Racine'," as Anatole
France puts it in the Preface to *On Life and Letters* (London 1911). In Chapter I we tried to point out a few forerunners of this kind of criticism; we may add here that it had its golden period in the Wildean and the immediate post-Wildean era, with writers like Arthur Symons and George Saintsbury. Although crushed by T.S. Eliot in *The Sacred Wood*, it managed to survive until our days; when it seems particularly conspicuous in the works of art-critics in the tradition of Bernard Berenson, such as Kenneth Clark. Its description and defence as Wilde puts forth in the present essay stand, however, quite unparalleled.

The critic's sole aim, Gilbert goes on, "is to chronicle his own impressions". Ernest again quotes Arnold, who had stated that "the proper aim of Criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is". This view Gilbert decidedly repels:

"...this is a very serious error, and takes no cognisance of Criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another. For the highest Criticism deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely." (26)

There are two living examples of this creative kind of criticism, Ruskin and Pater. "Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? ... Who, again, cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Monna Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed?" Gilbert wonders. The former's "mighty and majestic prose" is "at least as great a work of art as any of those wonderful sunsets that break of rot on their corrupted canvases in England's Gallery"; and the latter's lines on Leonardo's masterpiece reveal to us a secret of which the painter knew nothing, treating the work of art "as a starting-point for a new creation". Thus criticism - the highest Criticism, spelt with a capital C - does not try to discover the artist's intention, nor to give a final interpretation of a work of art. The value of a painting lies to a great extent in the soul of the beholder; it is, therefore, an artistic fault to try to restrict the field for interpretation. An artist should never be too precise. Pater had said that music was the highest art, because there form and substance are most intimately fused together; Wilde uses music as an instance of an art which can never be
comprehended by too strict an analysis — a condition to which all arts are to aspire. Just like the same tune may fill the same man with different passions, according to the mood of the moment, a painting should be able to suggest to its critic anything that he feels like reading in it.

To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises. The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see... (23)

A real critic therefore will not care to describe too accurate representations of life. People may believe that the pictures which "the critic loves most to write about are those that belong to the anecdotage of painting, and that deal with scenes taken out of literature or history". But pictures of this kind "do not stir the imagination, but set definite bounds to it". Painters who borrow their subjects from poets and novelists are wrong: "while the poet can be pictorial or not, as he chooses, the painter must be pictorial always". Pater of course had been the first to stress the importance of the pictorial element in painting (developing an idea contained in embryo in a few statements of Baudelaire’s); and the young Wilde, the art-lecturer, had echoed in his very words that a picture is primarily a coloured surface only. Wilde says much more here. Indeed, in the words quoted below, one might even hear a prophecy of much that has been happening in art since they were put down on paper. Wilde seems almost to foresee modern art and modern art-criticism: an art which is both primarily pictorial and rich in suggestion, a criticism that is only too ready to "see in it whatever it wishes". Pictures of the illustrative kind, Gilbert says,

...will not really fascinate the critic. He will turn from them to such works as make him brood and dream and fancy, to works that possess the subtle quality of suggestion, and seem to tell one that even from them there is an escape into a wider world... The sculptor gladly surrenders imitative colour, and the painter the actual dimension of form, because by such renunciations they are able to avoid too definite a presentation 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... (29)
After all, if we were to give Wilde's words a meaning which they were far from possessing, we would be doing nothing but applying the principles of the kind of criticism he stood for. At any rate, the ultimate function of Gilbert's description of the blessed incompleteness of the best art is to draw a parallel between the unimitative, but evocative, beauty of, say, the flowers on a Persian rug, and the equally evocative, and even less imitative, beauty of the critic's reproduction of the work that he criticizes; a beauty to which he gives a meaning, at the same time preserving its mystery, and solving once and for all the problem of the unity of the arts by transforming each of them into literature.

The second part of the essay opens with a question from Ernest. Gilbert said that a critic should be both creative and independent in his relations with the work of art; should he not be, then an interpreter of the work of art as well?

Gilbert admits this function of the critic, but gives it a more creative sense. A critic, he says, is only an interpreter "if he chooses". His object may not always be to explain the work of art: "he may seek rather to deepen its mystery", by way of reminding ordinary people, who are "terribly at ease in Zion", of how many things concur to the appreciation of a work of art. He will be an interpreter in a superior sense, "by intensifying his own personality". "If you wish to understand others", Gilbert states, "you must intensify your individualism". Therefore, the more strongly the critic's personality "enters into the interpretation, the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true". To explain what he means, Gilbert gives some examples. Leaving aside for the moment the literary critic (who, "having the wider range, and larger vision, and nobler material", stands first: Wilde gives literature that supremacy over all arts which Pater gave to music, and Whistler to painting), each art can be said to have its particular critic: "a critic, as it were, assigned to it". The actor is a critic of drama, just as the singer or the player is the critic of music; similarly, the etcher may be the critic of a painting. This last instance is not a particularly happy one, but there is a great deal to be said in favour of the conception of
actor and player as critic of drama and music. Wilde had already recognised, as early as in 1882, the importance of the actor in the theatre. Of his juvenile play, *Vera*, he had written to L'Oyly Carte:

The play is meant not to be read but to be acted, and the actor has always a right to object and to suggest. (30)

And in interview given to the New York World he had affirmed that

A good play is hardly ever finished. It must be fitted to the stage. (31)

These ideas are of course a commonplace now. But one must remember that it was in Wilde’s days that the profession of actor was restored to its dignity, mainly thanks to the efforts of the greatest actor of the age, Henry Irving, the first professional actor to be knighted. The decay of the English theatre during the nineteenth century is pointed out by the fact that the only first rate littérateurs who tried to write drama—Shelley and Swinburne—produced absolutely unactable plays. It is not often acknowledged to Wilde that he was one of the first serious writers to devote himself to the theatre; and his awareness, in so doing, of the ultimate importance of the actor in the play puts him at the avant-garde of his time.

Like the actor and player, the critic-interpreter “will always be showing us the work of art in some new relation to our age.” His function will be considered more and more important as our civilization progresses; real life will be recognised to be “terribly deficient in form”, and people will turn to art to find pure, perfect emotions. The condemnation of ordinary life is pronounced in almost the same words as in *Lorian Gray*: its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people. There is a grotesque horror about its comedies, and tragedies seem to culminate in farce. One is always wounded when one approaches it. (32) The last censure is the most bitter one. Life wounds us, and then she makes us find out that we have been cheated by shades; the emotions which we gather from Art are beautifully sterile, and even more intense. To illustrate what he says Gilbert gives us the long, self-indulgent symposia of Dante’s masterpiece which we mentioned before. That book, he says, can fill one with love or hate, with aye or beatitude. In the same way we can open our Baudelaire, and with the poet
"repent of strange crimes" of which we are innocent, and then "restore our soul" in Perdita's garden. How many times has Wilde repeated that Art is more real than Life? We are never more in love than when we love a character in a book: "we run to kiss the bleeding mouth of Fantine, and we follow Manon Lescaut over the whole world".

There is no passion that we cannot feel, no pleasure that we may not gratify, and we can choose the time of our initiation and the time of our freedom also. Life! Life! Don't let us go to life for our fulfilment or our experience. (35)

The discussion of Wilde's theory of criticism is left aside for the moment, to let the author stress once more that superiority of Art over Life which he has expressed before, though never so fully. We must go to Art for everything, he maintains,

Because Art does not hurt us. The tears that we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of Art to awaken. We weep, but we are not wounded...it is through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence. (34)

This view ultimately leads Wilde to that doctrine based on inaction and contemplation that is in the truly Paterian aesthetic creed, and that we saw perhaps a little too ambiguously suggested in the story of Dorian Gray. Before coming to the conclusion, however, there is a further point which Wilde is eager to make: art, it must be clear, all art, is of course amoral; more, it is immoral.

For emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life, and of that practical organisation of life that we call society. Society, which is the beginning and basis of morals, exists simply for the concentration of human energy, and in order to ensure its own continuance and healthy stability it demands...of each of its citizens that he should contribute some form of productive labour to the common weal... Society often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer. The beautiful, sterile emotions that art excites in us are hateful in its eyes... (35)

This passage shares with Arnold, and indeed with many another Victorian social preacher, an indignation towards the current, "practical" ethics. An indignation, however, which Wilde carries so far as to give up ethics altogether: he classifies ethics as a set of rules dictated by society for its own survival,
and finds in their unavoidably practical end an irresoluble conflict with art, which is by definition unpractical and unproductive. He will try to suggest a solution of this conflict on a social scale in The Soul of Man. For the moment, he is content with putting the sage in an ivory tower, alone with the aesthetic sensations with which Art will provide him. There is no other solution. No escape is possible through action, which "is limited and relative". Vision only is unlimited and absolute; but we can no longer accept "speculations about life in exchange for life itself". "We desire the concrete": neither the philosopher, whose ideas are too abstract, nor the saint has anything to tell us.

Who, as Mr. Pater suggests somewhere, would exchange the curve of a single rose-leaf for that formless intangible Being which Plato rates so high?(36)

Art - "mind expressing itself under the conditions of matter" - alone speaks to sense and soul alike.

The critical spirit can help us to realise this ideal. We have seen how, through its assertion of individualism, it can penetrate the most different works of art. It can enrich our life as well, with the most diverse experiences of all ages and of all men. The scientific principle of Heredity, Gilbert states, "by revealing to us the absolute mechanism of all action, and so freeing us from the self-imposed and trammelling burden of human responsibility", "has become, as it were, the warrant of contemplative life". Darwin, who is called at the end of the essay "the critic of the Book of Nature", has shown the pointlessness of all action; and at the same time he has made us conscious of the way in which the past experiences and passions of our ancestors may still be living hidden within us. In Dorian Gray the leading character was fascinated by the example of the "young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realise in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own" - and living up to that model he went, too, through the "myriad lives and myriad sensations" of his ancestors - he had found that "one had ancestors in literature, as well as in one's own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament, many of them, and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely
In the opening pages of *The Critic as Artist* Gilbert has spoken of a similar recreation of an ideal past through art - music this time:

> After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own. Music always seems to me to reproduce that effect. It creates for one a past of which one has been ignorant, and fills one with a sense of sorrows that have been hidden from one's tears. (38)

So art gives us that, too: a "transmission of racial experience"; and a life spent in its contemplation is fuller than any other. "To do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world" (39) because to reach such a blessed state we must be as detached as the ancient god. Of course such a philosophy is immoral. The current morals say: "Be productive", therefore, "act". "Action of every kind", Wilde says, "belongs to the sphere of ethics", while "the aim of art is simply to create a mood". Pater and Chuang Tzu concur in this formulation, and the latter's influence is particularly conspicuous in the ironical words which Gilbert dedicates to the vain striving of social reformers, who hopelessly try to make good through action - a topic which will be further illustrated in *The Soul of Man*.

The critical spirit alone can help man to realise this kind of perfection: "the contemplative life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being". For who is the true critic but he who bears within himself the dreams, and ideas, and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure? (40)

The point is made, and Gilbert is ready to go on with his dissertation. Stirred by another question from Ernest, he now gives us a full explanation of one of Wilde's fundamental theories, again one which is recurrent in *Dorian Gray*, and which we may call the doctrine of the Mask and the Face. The kind of work which the critic produces, Ernest argues, "is, of necessity, purely subjective, whereas the greatest work is objective always, objective and impersonal". But Gilbert contradicts this statement at once: all artistic sense to content constitutes us for the moment to the relation of every other

*See above, p. 60*
creation, he says, "is absolutely subjective"; "the difference between
objective and subjective work" being "one of external form merely". Shakespeare
tells us more about his soul in _Hamlet_ than in the _Sonnets_, which are meant
to be autobiographical.

Yes, the objective form is the most subjective in matter.
Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him
a mask, and he will tell you the truth.\(^{(4)}\)

Something new is added here to Wilde's favourite topic - the eulogy of
artificiality. Masks had been encouraged because they help a man to enrich
his personality, to detach himself from harsh reality in order to create a
higher, more intellectual world. In so doing, we are told here, man will
eventually be truer to his real self; what we call spontaneity is
cowardice and self-denial, and it is in what we call artificiality that truth
lies. The critic, who from what has been said above would seem to be
limited to the subjective form, is in fact completely free. His mask will be
the refusal to rest in the passive acceptance of any fashion or taste; he
will pursue Beauty alone, recognising that "each mode of criticism is, in
its highest development, simply a mood, and that we are never more true to
ourselves than when we are inconsistent". As for what concern his external
form of expression, he can certainly choose an objective one, if he likes
to.

Ruskin put his criticism into imaginative prose... And Browning
put his into blank verse... And Mr. Renan uses dialogue, and Mr. Pater
fiction, and Rossetti translated into sonnet-music the colour of
Gioarno and the design of Ingres...\(^{(42)}\)

Gilbert now passes on to answer Ernest's _question_ about the
qualities that a true critic should possess. A critic should not,
paradoxically, be "fair". Instead of detaching himself from the work of
art he is to criticise - in order to see it "as in itself it really is" - he
must "surrender" himself absolutely to it: "each form of Art with which we
come in contact dominates us for the moment to the exclusion of every other
form". "Art is a passion, and, in matters of art, Thought is inevitably
coloured by emotions". For the same reasons a critic shall not be "rational":
"there is nothing sane in the worship of beauty". Nor shall he be "sincere": "what people call insincerity" is stated in Lord Henry's precise words, "is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities". Sincerity and fairness are too close to "the borderland of morals":

...and the first condition of criticism is that the critic should be able to recognise that the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate.

This quotation opens a long paragraph which contains an attack against newspaper-criticism, being, with the passage on Dante and another containing remarks on the modern schools of paintings, one of the three most relevant additions to the 1891 edition of the dialogue. Wilde's bitter sarcasms were undoubtedly provoked by the reception of Dorian Gray, and can help us to illustrate the letters which he wrote to the press and the Preface which he added to the new edition of the book. After saying that "poor Tartuffe" should not be allowed to write upon modern art, Gilbert underlines that Science is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon eternal truths. Art is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon things beautiful and immortal and ever-changing. To morals belong the lower and less intellectual spheres.

After this parenthesis Gilbert goes on to illustrate the pre-requisites of a critic. In Pater's words, the first one of course is "a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty, and to the various impressions that beauty gives us". How this kind of temperament may be born and weaned is discussed at length: it is a problem of surroundings. Here Wilde seems to return to his axioms as a lecturer in town- and house-planning, and the result is a bit awkward. His plea for beautiful homes, his announcement of the new Renaissance of decorative arts seems hardly consistent with his doctrine of contemplation and of abstraction. Plato, Gilbert says, described how beautiful surroundings may develop a boy's sense of beauty. The Philistine would never admit that the love of beauty and the birth of the critical spirit are the true aim of education; yet in Oxford's grey cloisters a youth is left some inspiring "loveliness of environment". Nor in Oxford only: all over England, indeed, a new Renaissance of the decorative art is being type. In him the culture of the century will see itself realized."
born, and ugliness may be said to have "had its day". The decorative arts are important because they create surroundings which shape artistic temperaments; how can modern art be judged in this respect?

And here a digression occurs which criticizes the too intellectual, too autobiographical art of the gifted painters of the French Impressionist school, in favour of the so-called school of the archaiciastes, who seek beauty in design and colour rather than in "mere atmospheric effect". Colour and design make a greater appeal to the imagination; besides - and this conclusion is interesting, and a return to the more vital part of the theories expressed in the essay -

By its deliberate rejection of Nature as the ideal of beauty, as well as of the imitative method of the ordinary painter, decorative art not merely prepares the soul for the reception of true imaginative work, but develops in it that sense of form which is the basis of creative no less than of critical achievement. For the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion. He does not first conceive an idea, and then say to himself, "I will put my idea into a complex metre of fourteen lines", but realising the beauty of the sonnet-scheme, he conceives certain modes of music and methods of rhyme, and the mere form suggests what is to fill and make it intellectually and emotionally complete. (46)

It is the system which Poe put into practice while composing The Raven, and described in The Philosophy of Composition. From Poe, through Baudelaire and Gautier, the predominance of form over content is a cardinal point of the aesthetic school. For Wilde, "form is everything. It is the secret of life. Find expression for a sorrow, and it will become dear to you..." Form creates the critical temperament; it also creates "the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under their conditions of beauty".

Proceeding to illustrate further the functions of the aesthetic critic, Gilbert explains the nature of the influence which he will exert. Wilde, as we have seen before, does not believe in influencing other people: his critic will produce art for its own sake. But he will exert an influence at the same time, in the sense that he will provide a living ideal. His aim being simply "the perfecting of himself", he will "represent the flawless type. In him the culture of the century will see itself realised".
The definition of the artistic temperament allows Wilde to dismiss another cardinal point of Whistler's theory. Since art speaks to the artistic temperament, it does not address itself "to the specialist". It follows that to say that the poet is the best judge of poetry, or the painter of painting, is to talk nonsense. Even more so because, he adds maliciously, "a great artist cannot recognise the beauty of a work different from his own". Wordsworth could not appreciate Keats, nor Milton Shakespeare: indeed, creation limits the vision. Here is another point of superiority of the critic. "It is exactly because a man cannot do a thing that he is the proper judge of it". Nor is technique something that an artist can explain or teach, because to an artist his technique is one with his personality, and is the only possible one; again, the critic alone can understand it. He "can appreciate all forms and modes".

The conclusion of the essay is among Wilde's boldest theoretical utterances. It deals with the future of Criticism; Gilbert affirms that "it is to criticism that the future belongs". He points out how "the subject-matter at the disposal of creation becomes every day more limited in extent and variety", and underlines how, at present, the writer of fiction - to take but one instance - to stir us

must either give us an entirely new background, or reveal to us the soul of man in its innermost workings. (47)

Kipling is an example of the former attempt, Browning and Meredith of the latter - to a certain extent. Again Wilde sounds somewhat prophetic of much that modern art has attempted or accomplished:

there is still much to be done the sphere of introspection... We have merely touched the surface of the soul, that is all. In one single ivory cell of the brain there are stored away things more marvellous and more terrible than even psychological masters like Stendhal have dreamed of... (43)

Still, Gilbert concludes, "it is possible that a further development of the habit of introspection may prove fatal to that creative faculty to which it seeks to supply fresh material" - a statement, by the say, which has become ever more apt since Wilde's days. To Gilbert all creative activity seems to be diminishing daily, while subject-matter for criticism is increasing.
Arnold had stressed the importance of criticism in ages which are not productive of great art: it could help, he had said, to prepare the ground for a re-birth of art in a following age. Wilde sees criticism as the natural successor to art. This statement cannot be taken in a narrow sense. Nature, we have been told, is imperfect, and only becomes perfect through art; it is therefore to art that we must turn for a glimpse of "reality", and criticism makes this approach possible. Criticism makes culture possible, by concentrating the mass of creative work and distilling it into a "finer essence". Criticism recreates history: archaeology is but a branch of criticism (this is one last shot at Whistler, who held that archaeology was worthless). By putting us in contact with artistic experiences of all countries, criticism makes us cosmopolitans. Goethe could not bring himself to hate France, to which he owed so much of his culture; in the same way, one day, people will abolish wars and boundaries, united under a common love for art. Finally, criticism will create, "recognising no position as final, and refusing to bind itself by the shallow shibboleths of any sect or school", "that serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake": the "sweet reasonableness" of which Arnold "spoke so wisely".

(15) The Function of Criticism as the Artist, p.81.

(16) The Function of Criticism as the Artist, p.88.

(17) Ibid.

(18) Ibid.

(19) Ibid., p.88.

(20) Ibid., p.89.

(21) Ibid.

(22) The Function of Criticism as the Artist, p.19.

(23) The Critic as Artist, p.97.
Notes to Chapter VII


(2) Letters, p.274.


(4) Baltimore, 1939, 1943.


(6) Ibid., p.67.


(8) The Critic as Artist, p.860.


(10) The Critic as Artist, p.862.

(11) Ibid., p.863.

(12) (see p.59.

(13) The Critic as Artist, p.865.

(14) The Function of Criticism at the Present Time, p.3.

(15) The Critic as Artist, p.866.

(16) Ibid.

(17) Ibid.

(18) Ibid.

(19) Ibid., p.868.

(20) Ibid., p.869.

(21) Ibid.

(22) The Function of Criticism at the Present Time, p.10

(23) The Critic as Artist, p.871.
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(24) Ibid., p.872.

(25) Ibid.

(26) Ibid., p.873.

(27) It will be remembered how W.B. Yeats printed them as verse in his Oxford Book of Modern Verse (1936)

(28) The Critic as Artist, p.874.

(29) Ibid.; the interview was printed on August 12, 1883.


(31) The Critic as Artist, p.878.

(32) Ibid., p.879.

(33) Ibid., p.881.

(34) Ibid.


(36) Ibid., p.882.


(38) The Critic as Artist, p.859.

(39) Ibid., p.832.

(40) Ibid., p.834.

(41) Ibid., p.837.

(42) Ibid., p.838.


(44) The Critic as Artist, p.839.

(45) Ibid., p.890.

(46) Ibid., p.892.

(47) Ibid., p.895.
Chapter VIII

The Soul of Man and Wilde's "Socialism"

Oh! for a hundred thousand muskets glittering brightly in the light of heaven, and the monumental barricades stretching across each of our noble streets made desolate by England—circling round that doomed Castle, where the foreign tyrant has held his council of treason and iniquity against our people and our country for seven hundred years... One bold, one decisive move. One instant to take breath, and then a rising; a rush, a charge from north, south, east and west upon the English garrison, and the land is ours.

These words appeared in The Nation, the Irish independent newspaper, on July 29th, 1848. They were part of an article entitled Jacta Alea Est, and signed "Speranza": the pseudonym of the well-known poetess and patriot who was, six years later, to become the mother of Oscar Wilde.

Thus revolutionary tendencies were present in the aesthete's background; and although with him they took quite a different shape, the fact should be kept in mind. Many people, beginning in Wilde's lifetime, have never taken him seriously as an artist. Still fewer seem to have taken him seriously as a subversive force. But all his life, ever since his début as a "Professor of aesthetics", Wilde was in many ways a rebel against society—as were, in Victorian times, men as different as Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Morris.

Wilde's reaction against contemporary society took at first the shape of an anticonformism in the line of Baudelaire and Gautier, and of the English dandies of the early nineteenth century. Like them, he wanted to sprout; like them, he manifested his disagreement with society by putting himself above, than below it (as popular imagination fancies an earnest agent of subversion ought to do). Wilde's over-refinement and undeniable snobbishness was of a kind which is commonly associated with the upper classes rather than the lower. This may be one of the reasons why he was not taken too seriously as a revolutionary.

In his second period he used the weapon of irony. This irony, which appears at its sharpest in some of the added chapters of Dorian Gray and in the plays Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband,
and "The Importance of Being Earnest", had had its rehearsal in the newspaper articles, in the essays of Intentions, and, mainly, in "The Soul of Man under Socialism", where many a biting remark, occurring later in the plays, was used for the first time.

His use of irony puts Wilde among the most remarkable critics of society of his time. His criticism, especially in the period 1881-1891, was mainly formulated in the name of art - "The Soul of Man" makes no exception, as will be seen, for what concerns its main purpose. But beside this criticism of a society which does not provide adequate conditions for the development of art, a sincere social concern is discernible throughout Wilde's career. We are not concerned here with such evidence as is contained in the letters on prison reform and in the Ballad of Reading Gaol, which were written after the prison experience, when Wilde was in many ways a new man, longer shared, as can be seen in "De Profundis", some of the views expressed in "The Soul of Man". What we wish to stress here is the fact that the revolutionary theories which "The Soul of Man" expounds have antecedents in Wilde's earlier life and works.

Certain anecdotes show Wilde's sympathy with extremist ideas. "As a matter of fact he was somewhat inclined to socialism", Sherard tells us of the young Wilde whom he knew:

When I first met him in Paris he did actually profess 'an elegant Republicanism'. We were both at that time somewhat under the influence of Victor Hugo and Les Misérables. I took him to one of Hugo's receptions, and as we walked home he repeated some of the passages from the descriptions in Les Misérables of the fighting in the streets of Paris. 'Citoyen, lui disait Enjolras, ma mère, c'est la République', was a line he repeated more than once. On our way to the Quai Voltaire we passed in front of the Tuileries, the blackened ruins of which were still standing in 1883, and pointing to them he said: 'There is not there one little blackened stone which is not to me a chapter in the Bible of Democracy'.

In 1886, following the throwing of a bomb which had killed seven policemen, seven anarchists were sentenced to death in Chicago, after a hurried trial and without any other evidence against them except their beliefs. The trial aroused indignation in many countries, and in England G.B. Shaw tried to gather signatures of eminent persons to protest against the sentence. This is how he relates the episode:
I tried to get some literary men in London, all heroic rebels and sceptics on paper, to sign a memorial asking for the reprieve of these unfortunate men. The only signature I got was Oscar's. It was a completely disinterested act on his part; and it secured my distinguished consideration for him for the rest of his life. (3)

In the same spirit of disinterestedness, Wilde bailed out of jail the anarchist poet John Barlas, who had fired a revolver at the House of Commons in 1891. Barlas was not an intimate friend of Wilde's; in fact, he had grossly abused him years before. No doubt Wilde's gesture, which might have proved dangerous (Barlas being in many ways an irresponsible person, of whose future good behaviour Wilde offered to stand surety), derived from sympathy with the poet's ideas. This episode took place in the year in which _The Soul of Man_ was published. By that time Wilde's social ideas had developed in the direction of Anarchism; and he called himself an Anarchist in 1893, when answering a questionnaire which the French magazine _L'Hermitage_ had submitted to various personalities.

A social conscience is similarly evident in many of Wilde's works. As a young poet, he often hailed Freedom and the Rights of Man. "Liberty" is saluted as early as in 1878, in the prize-winning poem _Ravenna_, which contains lines on the revolution which had brought about "New Italy's" independence:

> The Austrian hounds are hunted from the land,
> Beyond those ice-crowned citadels which stand
> Girdling the plain of royal Lombardy... (2)

It is only fair, however, to say that this Speranza-like sympathy for a people who have shaken off their chains gives place to quite a reactionary attitude in some of the poems collected in 1881—such as the _Sonnet on Approaching Italy, Italia, Urbs Sacra Aeterna_. Wilde's flirting with the Catholic Church in his late Oxford years—a product of his admiration for Newman and for certain attitudes of the author of _The Renaissance_—had made him regard the makers of Italian independence as the jailers of His Holiness the Pope.

"At last", he had exulted in _Ravenna_,

> Italiain's royal warrior hath passed
> Rome's lordliest entrance, and hath worn his crown
> In the high temples of the Eternal Town!
> The Palatine hath welcome back her King,
> And with his name the seven mountains ring! (5)
Now, for the same reason, Rome is called "city crowned by God, discrowned by man": on her walls "the breeze...+
the hated flag of red and white and green"; and we are invited to mourn over "The prisoned shepherd of the Church of God". This curious attitude lasted to Wilde's death: in a letter to Ross, written from Rome in 1880, Wilde tells an anecdote which confirms it:

You know the terrible, the awe-inspiring effect that Royalty has on me: well, I was outside the Caffè Nazionale taking iced coffee with gelato - a most delightful drink - when the King drove past. I at once stood up, and made him a low bow, with hat doffed - to the admiration of some Italian officers at the next table. It was only when the King had passed that I remembered I was Papista and Nerissimo! I was greatly upset: however I hope the Vatican won't hear about it.

At any rate, contradictory as Wilde's ideas about Italy's Risorgimento may have been, a good deal of the 1881 Poems contain more or less distinct revolutionary hints. In the Sonnet to Liberty Wilde says that he does not care for this goddess's children, "whose dull eyes see nothing save their own unlovely woe"; and yet "the roar of [her] Democracies, [her] reigns of Terror, [her] great Anarchies" have an appeal upon him:

and yet, and yet,
These Christs that die upon the barricades,
God knows it I am with them, in some things.

The sonnets Louis Napoleon, Quantum Mutata, Theoretikos display stern Republican inclinations. On the whole, Wilde's poetry does not tell us much about its author's ideas; it seems mainly to consist of commonplaces shared by many a late Romantic poet of noble and libertarian ideals. However, one sonnet at least indicates clearly enough the way by which Wilde will ultimately arrive to his dream of an Individualism whose main merit will be to let man freely develop his artistic inclinations. The sonnet is entitled Libertatis Sacra Fames, and at first sight it seems to condemn what Wilde was later to sponsor:

Albeit nurtured in democracy,
And liking best that state republican
Where every man is Kinglike and no man
Is crowned above his fellows, yet I see,
Spite of this modern fret for Liberty,
Better the rule of One, whom all obey,
Than to let clamorous demagogues betray
Our Freedom with the kiss of anarchy.
Wherefore I love them not whose hands profane
Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street.
For no right cause, beneath whose ignorant reign
Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour, all things fade,
Save reason and the dagger of her trade,
And Murder with his silent bloody feet. *(5)*

But of course the aspiration to "that state...where every man is Kinglike", the condemnation of the concept of anarchy as an "ignorant reign" where "Arts" and "Culture" (significantly put before "Reverence" and "Honour") "fade", are significant to the reader of The Soul of Man.

The lectures which Wilde delivered in the early 80's, in the United States and elsewhere have been examined above. Their social concern is evident, and as has been pointed out, much in it is but a repetition in a minor key of dicta of Ruskin's and Morris's - pleas for healthier surroundings and for lovelier backgrounds, and the like. We may note here how already ten years or so before The Soul of Man Wilde was trying to give art a social scope.

In Wilde's lectures - as in Ruskin's and Morris's teaching - art has an important social function; it helps to make life agreeable. In The Soul of Man the process is reversed; there, as will be seen, it is life which has to be re-organised in order to provide the best conditions for art's development.

Wilde's earliest play, _Vera or The Nihilists_, written in 1880 and unsuccessfully performed in New York in 1883, shows an interest in the Russian libertarian movements along with a remarkable ignorance of Nihilism. The word "Nihilism" must not be taken seriously, though; Wilde himself underlined, in the magniloquent tone he used when he wanted to impress Americans, that _Vera_ "is not a play of politics but of passion". *(10)* Indeed the play contains no suggestion of precise theories or ideals, save a certain generic love of "Freedom"; the Nihilists' aims are vaguely described as "the good of the people".
And the one original character in the play, the cynical, brilliant Prince Paul — an ancestor of Lord Henry Wotton — reads aloud a few Nihilist dogmas just to make fun of them. At least one of these theories, however, was to be repeated with serious intent in The Soul of Man, and its inclusion here shows that Wilde was not entirely unacquainted with Anarchist, if not Nihilist, views:

The family as subversive of true socialistic and communal unity is to be annihilated. (11)

Some of Wilde's Tales may be considered as social apologetics, mainly, The Happy Prince (whose dedication to the Ranees of Sarawak George Woodcock considers ironical (12)) (1888), The Young King (1888), The Birthday of the Infanta, The Star Child (1891). (13) But the most evident proof of Wilde's growing interest in progressive social theories is to be found in many of the articles collected by Ross in Reviews. Some of these articles have been quoted in Chapter IV. On the whole, they are remarkable for their author's attitude of general sympathy with Socialism, which he welcomes as the inspirer of a new and energetic art (in the 1886 article on Toynbee's translation of Béranger, (14) in the 1888 one on Miss Hasbit's Lays and Legends, (15) and particularly in the 1889 one entitled Poetical Socialists, a review of Chants of Labour: a Song-Book of the People, a collection edited by Edward Carpenter). (16)

In other places there are hints at ideas which will be repeated and perfected in The Soul of Man — as in the 1887 article on a life of Mary Carpenter, (17) which was quoted above. It is in this article that Wilde begins to wonder at the system of social assistance with which his century nurtured the illusion of healing its own flagrant contrasts. The review where Wilde's social ideas seem most ripe, — the most direct antecedent of The Soul of Man, is the article on Chuang Tsu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer (translated from the Chinese by Herbert A. Giles). It appeared in The Speaker in 1890, (18) and it is Wilde's longest and in many ways most interesting article. We have already had occasion to quote it. As we have said, there is evidence for thinking that Chuang Tsu did not bring new ideas to Wilde, but it is clear that there the aesthete found a kindred spirit and it is probable that the Chinese philosopher gave him the first suggestion towards the writing of his own social essay.
The similarities between Chuang Tzu's doctrine of inaction and Pater's eulogy of contemplation have been underlined above. It is interesting to note how Wilde's review of Chuang Tzu and his article entitled Mr. Pater's Last Volume - the two most complete illustrations of those ideas in Reviews - were written in the same period (the former appeared on February 8th, 1890, and the latter on March 22nd in the same year). Chuang Tzu's ideas concern the sphere of politics, as it were, and Pater's creed affects the sphere of art; in The Soul of Man the two spheres become closely linked together.

Chuang Tzu's theories have many a point of contact with the anarchical ideas which Wilde sums up in his essay.

He sought to destroy society, as we know it, as the middle classes know it; and the sad thing is that he combines with the passionate eloquence of a Rousseau the scientific reasoning of a Herbert Spencer. There is nothing of the sentimentalism in him. He ities the rich more than the poor, if he ever pities at all, and prosperity seems to him as tragic a thing as suffering. He has nothing of the modern sympathy with failures, not does he propose that the prizes should always be given on moral grounds to those who come in last in the race. It is the race itself that he objects to; and as for active sympathy, which has become the profession of so many worthy people in our own day, he thinks that trying to make others good is a silly an occupation as 'beating a drum in a forest in order to find a fugitive'. It is a mere waste of energy. That is all. .. This curious thinker looked back with a sigh of regret to a certain Golden Age when there were no competitive examinations, no wearisome educational systems, no missionaries, no penny dinners for the people, no Established Churches, no Humanitarian Societies, no dull lectures about one's duty to one's neighbour, and no tedious sermons about any subject at all. In those ideal days, he tells us, people loved each other without being conscious of charity, or writing to the newspapers about it... There was no chattering about clever men, and no laudation of good men. The intolerable sense of obligation was unknown.

In Chuang Tzu Wilde finds a stern condemnation of his century's moral attitude: the Chinese philosopher rejects philanthropy as action, which is always unprecise and useless. His doctrine of contemplation does more, however, than merely reject the vain efforts of the Social Reformers. It condemns, as a product of unjustifiable concern for others, all forms of government.
government are wrong. They are unscientific, because they seek to alter the natural environment of man; they are immoral because, by interfering with the individual, they produce the most aggressive forms of egotism; they are ignorant, because they try to spread education; they are self-destructive, because they engender anarchy. (20)

Similar ideas are at the basis of Anarchist doctrines, of which, as will be seen, _The Soul of Man_ is in so many ways an exposition. Chuang Tzu also provides Wilde with effective criticism of "the curse of capital":

The accumulation of wealth is to him the origin of evil. It makes the strong violent, and the weak dishonest. It creates the petty thief, and puts him in a bamboo cage. It creates the big thief, and sets him on a throne of white jade. It is the father of competition, and competition is the waste, as well as the destruction, of energy. The world of nature is rest, repetition, and peace. Weariness and war are the results of an artificial society based upon capital; and the richer this society gets, the more thoroughly bankrupt it really is. (21)

And such statements as the following, of course, cannot but appeal powerfully to Wilde's individualism:

The prizes of the world degrade a man as much as the world's punishments. (22)

As for education, true wisdom can neither be learnt nor taught. It is a spiritual state, to which he who lives in harmony with nature attains. (23)

Morality... went out of fashion when people began to moralise. Men ceased then to be spontaneous and to act on intuition. They became priggish and artificial, and were so blind as to have a definite purpose in life. Then came Governments and Philanthropists, those two pests of the age. The former tries to coerce people into being good, and so destroyed the natural goodness of man. The latter were a set of aggressive busybodies who caused confusion wherever they went. They were stupid enough to have principles, and unfortunate enough to act up to them. (24)

According to Chuang Tzu, the perfect man "does nothing beyond gazing at the universe... His mind is the 'speculum of creation; and he is ever at peace".

_The Soul of Man under Socialism_ was printed in the _Fortnightly Review_ for February, 1891, too late to be reprinted in _Intentions_, which came out three months later; in a letter referred to above, Wilde asked his translator to include it in the French edition of the book, in place of the early essay _The Truth of Masks_. Its text was never revised by Wilde in the way the
other essays were: the only diversity between the Fortnightly Review version
and that in the collected edition being the different printing of a few key
sentences, which appear in italics in the earlier text.

There is a legend about The Soul of Man, according to which Wilde wrote
the book in a few nights, its idea having been suggested to him by a lecture
of G.B. Shaw's. The comparison with Shaw, an Irishman, a wit, and a socialist,
is of course a very natural one. The story of Wilde's essay being inspired
by the author of Back to Methuselah probably originated in Lord Alfred Douglas's
afterwards recanted book, Oscar Wilde and Myself (London 1914) - an ill-natured
offspring of Douglas's trial v. Arthur Ramsone, after which Lord Alfred wanted
to play down his intimacy with the writer, and the latter's literary importance
too. There he says:

Probably if he had never known Shaw he would never have written the
"Soul of Man". While Shaw's socialism was a very much redder and
more blatant affair in those days than it is now, it attracted Wilde
because it was odd and Shaw was Irish... Shaw helped him to a species
of socialism which looks very revolutionary but which is really designed
to benefit the rich rather than the poor. (25)

Lord Douglas's libel would not deserve any particular attention here, were
it not for the fact that its statements on The Soul of Man are so untrue that
they give one a good starting-point to begin the analysis of Wilde's essay.
Wilde's theories, although they can scarcely claim originality, cannot possibly
remind anyone of G.B. Shaw. They have very little in common with the ideas
of the Fabian Society and the Labour Party. For the Webb-Shavian Socialism
the present State must be developed into a Democratic State, through which
the final ideal, a Socialist State, is to be reached. (26) Wilde proposes
to abolish the State altogether; his ideas belong, if one wants to give them
a convenient label, to the history of Anarchism rather than to that of Socialism.
George Woodcock points out (27) how Wilde's basic ideas are to be found in
such classical Anarchist authors as Godwin and Kropotkin (and, to a certain
extent, William Morris): a truth which only concerns the first part of
Wilde's essay, and which takes little account of Wilde's typical standpoint,
which has not much in common with those writers.
The chief originality of *The Soul of Man* does not lie in its effectually expounded revolutionary doctrines, but in its passionate assertion of the freedom of art, which is the reason why the essay was written. The exposition of the social doctrines, however, forms a clever compendium of anarchist ideas, and deservedly gained the pamphlet a circulation even among circles for which it probably was not originally meant.

From the beginning of the essay, Wilde emphasises the main merits of that "Socialism, Communism or whatever one chooses to call it", which he is about to describe. It will discharge man from his present occupations, thus leaving him free to completely realize his own personality. This view is typical of Anarchism: man will be of help to the community by working for himself - by asserting his own individuality. An individualism of this kind has been the exception in the past: it will be the rule for the future.

Now and then, in the course of the century, a great man of science, like Darwin; a great poet like Keats; a fine critical spirit like M. Renan; a supreme artist like Flaubert, has been able to isolate himself...and so to realise the perfection of what was in him, to his own incomparable gain, and to the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world. These, however, are exceptions. The majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism - are forced, indeed, so to spoil themselves. (29)

Like Chuang Tzu, Wilde rocks at contemporary "altruism". It is, he argues, a useless, morbid, and even immoral palliative; its only effect being that of making people waste the time which they ought to dedicate to themselves.

It is hard to resist the call for help of the hideous poverty that surrounds one, because "the emotions of man are stirred more quickly than man's intelligence". Still, philanthropists of this kind should realize that their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the disease.

They try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor. (29)

All this is not only useless, but immoral: "It is immoral to use private under the new conditions. Individualism will be far freer, far higher, and
property to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property. It is both immoral and unfair.

What can be done to combat this state of things? To abolish the kind of society that permits social inequality is the only answer. The general prosperity must be equally distributed in order to grant everyone a share. Were this the only purpose of an ideal state, however, any kind of Communist administration could achieve it. But

For the full development of life to its highest mode of perfection, something more is needed. What is needed is Individualism. If the Socialism is Authoritarian; if there are Governments armed with economic power as they are now with political power; if, in a word, we are to have Industrial Tyrannies, then the last state of man will be worse than the first.(30)

Under an Authoritarian kind of Socialism the situation of the individual would be even worse than in present society. At present, Wilde argues, there is a large majority of people – the poor – who are forced to accept hard, loathsome jobs simply in order to survive. There is a small minority of people – the rich – who lead a no less absurd life because of the extent of their property ("Property...has so many duties that its possession to any large extent is a bore... In the interest of the rich we must get rid of it").

But there is a happy class of people who are "enabled to develop a certain very limited amount of Individualism". These are the people who are either under no necessity to work for their living, or are enabled to choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them, and gives them pleasure. These are the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture – in a word, the real men, the men who have realised themselves, and in whom all Humanity gains a partial realisation.(31)

An Authoritarian Socialism would enslave the entire community instead of freeing it for ever. Man must not be forced to work; on the contrary, he must be left free to choose the activity he finds most congenial, even free not to work at all, if he so chooses.

All association must be quite voluntary. It is only in voluntary association that man is fine.(32)

Under the new conditions Individualism will be far freer, far finer, and
far more intensified than it is now. Contemporary society "has led Individual-
ism entirely astray": "it has made gain, not growth, its aim".

In a community like ours, where property confers immense distinction,
social position, honour, respect, titles, and other pleasant things
of the kind, man, being naturally ambitious, makes it his aim to
accumulate this property, and goes on wearily and tediously accumu-
lat- ing it long after he has got far more than he wants, or can use, or
enjoy, or perhaps even know of. (33)

"The true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is".
The task of the new order of things is simply that of getting rid of all that
stands between man and the true realisation of himself: of his riches, then
as well as of his hunger.

It is a message, Wilde says, which the world has heard once: through
the lips of Christ. Christ never said "that impoverished people are
necessarily good, or wealthy people necessarily bad".

What Jesus does say, is that man reaches his perfection, not through
what he has, not even through what he does, but entirely through
what he is. (34)

"Be thyself": this is the meaning of what He said to the wealthy young man
or to the adulteress, whose sins were forgiven "not because she repented,
but because her love was so intense and wonderful". Christ simply taught
people to stop caring for anything of this Individualism, He even "rejected
the claims of family life". Accordingly, "with the abolition of private
property, marriage in its present form" will necessarily "disappear".

And so he who would lead a Christlike life is he who is perfectly
and absolutely himself. He may be a great poet, or a great man of
science, or a young student in a University, or one who watches
sheep upon a moor; or a maker of dreams, like Shakespeare, or a thinker
about God, like Spinoza; or a child who plays in a garden, or a
fisherman who throws his net into the sea. (35)

Another result of the advent of Individualism will be the disappearance
of government:

All modes of government are failures. Despotism is unjust to
everybody, including the despot, who was probably made for better
tings. Oligarchies are unjust to the many, and ochlocracies are
unjust to the few. High hopes were once formed of democracy; but democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people. It has been found out. I must say that it was high time, for all authority is quite degrading.

So authority will pass away; and so will punishment, which is a consequence of authority. Punishment is often more cruel than crime itself. Modern legislation has realised the connection which exists between punishment and crime, and tends to diminish punishment as far as it can; to stop crime or ever, one simply has to abolish punishment completely.

When there is no punishment at all, crime will either cease to exist, or, if it occurs, will be treated by physicians as a very distressing form of dementia, to be cured by care and kindness. For what are called criminals nowadays are not criminals at all. Starvation, and not sin, is the parent of modern crime. (37)

The state is not to be abolished. It will not govern; but it will be "a voluntary manufacturer and distributor of necessary commodities."

The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful. (38)

Despite what other socialist writers say, Wilde cannot be led to believe that all work can be joyful and ennobling:

There is nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading. It is mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure, and many forms of labour are quite pleasureless activities, and should be regarded as such. To sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours on a day when the east wind is blowing is a disgusting occupation. To sweep it with mental, moral or physical dignity seems to me to be impossible. To sweep it with joy would be appalling. (39)

The State, not the individual, is to take care of the dirty work. No individual is to be bothered with it; it is all to be done through machines. "At present machinery competes against man. Under proper conditions machinery will serve man."

Machinery must work for us in coal mines, and do all sanitary services, and be the stoker of steamers, and clean the streets, and run messages on wet days, and do anything that is tedious or distressing. (40)

The Soul of Man under Socialism may be divided into two parts. In the
first, which we have been summing up, Wilde explains how and why "Socialism"—that is, a new organisation of society which will grant the widest freedom to each individual—is to become a reality. In the second part he discusses more fully what he means by Individualism; he criticises contemporary society, and speaks at length about art.

The first half of the essay is mainly a compendium of Anarchist theories, and it earned Wilde a reputation as a revolutionary writer. Boss tells us that the essay was available in four different languages in Nijni Novgorod in 1901. It is little wonder. Although the principal interest of the work for Wilde probably lies in the second part, where he deals with problems concerning art more directly, his brilliant epitome of Anarchist ideas made The Soul of Man become one of the most effective pamphlets of its time.

Among the Anarchist writers whose echo is discernible in this first half of The Soul of Man are Godwin, Kropotkin, and Morris. It is interesting to note that Wilde can scarcely have been directly acquainted with Godwin's work, Political Justice, which had been out of print for several decades—although there was of course the poetry of Shelley, an author whom Wilde quotes with particular emphasis in The Soul of Man; and Shelley's poetry is in many ways a transposition of Godwin's ideas. In 1891 Kropotkin had been living in England for five years; and although his first published English book came out in 1906, by 1891 he had written several articles, he had been running a magazine, Freedom, and was taking part in public meetings. Wilde, who probably never met him personally, credits him in De Profundis with one "of the most perfect lives I have come across in my own experience", calling him "a man with the soul of that beautiful white Christ that seems coming out of Russia". William Morris, who was a friend of Kropotkin's and who had had a strong influence on Wilde's development, never called himself an anarchist. However, as Woodcock says,

News from Nowhere was published in the same year as The Soul of Man, 1891.
Along with these influences, which Woodcock points out in his book, The Paradox of Oscar Wilde, one should not forget that of Renan (underlined by K. Harlcy). The French thinker, whose name recurs more than once in The Soul of Man, had publicly shown his sympathy for Kropotkin when the anarchist leader had been sentenced to jail in France in 1883.

In his excellent introduction to the facsimile edition of Godwin's Political Justice, F.E.L. Priestley traces a rapid survey of attitudes towards this author's work and fortune during the nineteenth century. He says:

Occasionally one finds a thorough rehearsal of Godwin's whole system, as in Oscar Wilde's The Soul of Man, where one meets again the objection to accumulation of property as harmful to rich and poor alike; objections to collectivism; the prediction that 'with the abolition of private property, marriage in its present form must disappear'; the attack on all forms of government; the Godwinian views on crime and punishment; the insistence on the social nature of man; the hope of abolishing manual labour by machines; and the hope of abolishing disease by the advance of science.

Quite true; but of course many of these theories were shared by other socialist writers (not to mention Chuang Tsü) closer to Wilde's time. The affinities with Godwin are particularly relevant as far as concerns marriage, the evil of government, crime and punishment, and machines. Kropotkin shows a similar concern for individual freedom. In his manifesto in the first issue of Freedom (October, 1886) he stressed the right to choose one's own activity:

Socialists, disbelievers in property, advocates of the equal claims of each man and woman to work for the community as seems good to him or her... We dream of free scope for the social impulses, now distorted and compressed by Property, and its guardian the law.

Like Godwin and Wilde, Kropotkin believed in a common exploitation of machines. F.J. Cobden-Sanderson, who visited him at Harrow in March 1891, noted in his diary:

He hoped that all the necessities of life would come to be made by machinery, so that they might be abundant and cheap. At present machinery was in the hands of capitalists, and was misapplied, and the 'hands' were enslaved. In the better times to come machinery would be the property of the commune or community, be directed to social ends, keep always going, and be worked by frequent and short shifts of all classes.
Kropotkin also insisted on "the elevation of character" that would result from the "development of the individual that socialism would bring about"; this quotation was reported in Commonweal on November, 27th 1888.

Morris's _News from Nowhere_ also has its points of contact with Wilde's essay: the anarchist absence of "anything which you, a native of another planet, would call a government" the free attitude to marriage - which does not appear in Kropotkin's system - the abolition of criminal law. It is interesting to note also the issues where Wilde and Morris disagree. Wilde does not share the "natural desire to work" which Morris postulates in every man, ("all work is now pleasurable" says a citizen of his ideal republic). And in one passage at least Morris sounds directly critical of Wilde's theory about machinery and the use of spare time:

many people...used to think that machinery would entirely supersede handicraft... But there was another opinion, far less logical, prevalent amongst the rich people before the days of freedom... This opinion, which for all I can learn seemed as natural then, as it seems absurd now, was, that while the ordinary daily work of the world would be done entirely by automatic machinery, the energies of the more intelligent part of mankind would be set free to follow the higher forms of the arts, as well as science and the study of history. It was strange, was it not, that they should thus ignore that aspiration after complete equality which we now recognise as the bond of all happy human society.

Both Morris and Wilde maintain that art has a high social function; but to Wilde art, man's most perfect realisation of himself, must never have a useful end - it is, rather, a product of leisure - and he would consequently use machines to do man's ugly work, and leave him free to dedicate himself to the pursuit of a higher activity. Morris, the _Craftsman_, says that all manual work, that is all work, is art, too precious to leave to machines; he consequently gets rid of them to let man go back to a Medieval ideal of beautiful craftsmanship.

K. Hartley has exhaustively pointed out what Wilde owes to French literature. For what concerns _The Soul of Man_, he probably exaggerates the impact which French Anarchist writers such as Proudhon may have had on Wilde's ideas; which are, as we have been showing, the common inheritance of Anarchist thought. Hartley rightly emphasises, however, one of the most
important influences throughout Wilde's work, and one which is particularly discernible in The Soul of Man and in De Profundis: the influence of Renan and of his "gospel according to St. Thomas", as Wilde called it. It is probably from La vie de Jésus that Wilde took the idea the "Socialism annihilates family life": in his context the statement is made in the passage dealing with Christ. Moreover, like Wilde Renan had seen Jesus as an anarchist:

Ce qui distingue, en effet, Jésus des agitateurs de son temps et de ceux de tous les siècles, c'est son parfait idéalisme. Jésus, à quelques égards, est un anarchiste, car il n'a aucune idée du gouvernement civil. Ce gouvernement lui semble purement et simplement un abus... Tout magistrat lui parut un ennemi naturel des hommes de Dieu... Mais jamais le tentative de se substituer aux puissants et aux riches ne se montrer che lui. Il veut anéantir la richesse et le pouvoir, mais non s'en emparer.

From what has been said, it must be concluded that the ideas expressed in this first half of The Soul of Man are scarcely original. It might be added that they were not meant to be so. Unlike Godwin's, Kropotkin's, and even, to a certain extent, Morris's works, The Soul of Man is a Utopia. Its main purpose is not that of putting forth practical suggestions for the progress of society, but to help this progress by criticism. Wilde does not tackle political or economical problems in detail, as the aforementioned writers do: he is happy to borrow what he needs to put together a system which may give him the possibility of criticizing in detail those aspects of contemporary society with which he is particularly concerned. It is to the writer's credit if he could clothe other thinkers' ideas so brilliantly in his polemical, paradoxical, sparkling prose, that his essay became a widely known means of diffusion of their ideas. But one feels that - despite the undeniable fact that Wilde's social concern was sincere, as the whole body of his works bears witness - The Soul of Man is mainly interesting for what it adds to the discussions on art in The Decay of Lying and in The Critic as Artist - that is, for its assertion of the necessity of thoroughly free art. The essay should be examined from this particular standpoint; it must not be forgotten that to Wilde art was at all times of the utmost importance. And it is exactly in the different value given to art (scarcely mentioned by Godwin, Kropotkin, Renan, and differently considered by Morris) that Wilde differs
from the authors of the socialist theories which he summarizes.

Morris, as has been seen, identifies art with craftsmanship. To Wilde's mind, art must never have a "useful" purpose; it cannot have any other purpose than its own existence. It is art for its own sake.

An individual who has to make things for the use of others, and with reference to their wants and their wishes, does not work with interest, and consequently cannot put into his work what is best in him. Upon the other hand, whenever a community or a powerful section of a community, or a government of any kind, attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do, art entirely vanishes, or becomes stereotyped, or degenerates into a low and ignoble form of craft. A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. (57)

Elsewhere Wilde had emphasized the freedom of the artist; here he wed it to the anarchist ideal. "Art", he says, "is the most intense mood of individualism that the world has known". No one can set up a standard for art; to ask art to be popular, as the public do, is as silly as to ask a scientist or a philosopher to arrive at the conclusions which the majority already hold. Of course the community suspects the artist and tries to interfere with his work; the individual is a dangerous enemy to established society. It is very hard for art to resist this continual pressure; the arts which best escape are the least popular ones, such as poetry, while fiction and drama resent the continuous interference which goes under the name of popular demand.

In his introduction to Hennell Rood's Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf, written in 1882 and quoted above, Wilde had solemnly announced his "departure from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin" on the ground that Ruskin judged art on ethical grounds; in the same passage he had stressed that a work of art must have "the impress of a distinct individuality" (53). In later works he explained that by "ethica" he meant a conformity to the standards of the established society, which considers good what helps it towards what it considers its progress. In The Soul of Man the statement is repeated on a social ground; the anarchist views on Individualism help Wilde to illuminate better the incurable contrast between the artist and society. As an individual, the artist works
against society, he stands for everything which society condemns. This contrast can only be solved by the abolition of society.

Wilde proceeds to illustrate by instances what he means. "The public dislike novelty because they are afraid of it". They accept, however, what has been in the past: it is too late to change it. But they take their revenge by using the classics "as a means of checking the progress of Art". They "degrade" them into authorities: "they use them as bludgeons for preventing the free expression of Beauty in new forms".

They are always asking a writer why he does not write like somebody else, or a painter why he does not paint like somebody else, quite oblivious of the fact that if either of them did anything of the kind he would cease to be an artist. (59)

"Unintelligible" and "immoral" are the two adjectives most commonly thrown atauthentical works of art at the time of their first appearance. When they are used, Wilde argues, one may be almost sure that the artist referred to is an authentic one. "Morbid" is another of such epithets; but "to call an artist morbid because he deals with morbidity as his subject-matter is as silly as if one called Shakespeare mad because he wrote King Lear". In the same way, the public generally call "healthy" or "unhealthy" a work of art for the wrong reason. A work of art cannot be "unhealthy" if its style "recognises the beauty of the material it employs", and if its subject "is conditioned by the temperament of the artist"; "unhealthy" it will be if its style be "obvious, old-fashioned and common", and its subject "chosen, not because the artist has any pleasure in it, but because he thinks that the public will pay him for it".

In this attempt to meddle with art - an attempt that ultimately comes from "the barbarous conception of Authority" - Public Opinion uses Journalism as its secular arm. In the page that follows Wilde enriches with new sarcasms his polemic against the public press, that slave of the public, concerned only with giving them what they demand.

In centuries before ours the public nailed the ears of journalists to the pump. That was quite hideous. In this century journalists have nailed their own ears to the keyhole. That is much worse. (60)
Unlike France, where the journalist is limited, and the artist allowed almost perfect freedom, Britain allows absolute freedom to the journalist, and entirely limits the artist.

This fact is sad, because to really help the public would not be completely impossible. There are artists who eventually succeeded in bringing the public to their standards, instead of descending to the standards of the public. Wilde names a few of these artists: they are the real people, the people who would not part with their individuality. Henry Irving is one of them; he could have been popular and rich with a much smaller effort, "had his sole object been to give the public what they wanted". But his object was to realise his own perfection as an artist, under certain conditions and in certain forms of Art. He eventually succeeded in creating in the public "both taste and temperament". In his case, thanks to his impassive consistency to himself, the public gave up their obnoxious desire to exercise authority over the artists, and developed that "temperament of receptivity" to which art appeals.

The work of art is to dominate the spectator; the spectator is not to dominate the work of art. The spectator is to be receptive. He is the violin on which the master is to play.

A spectator's attitude to a work of art is fatally determined by those existing works of art, with which he is already acquainted; on the contrary he ought to try to forget all his previous experiences and concentrate in the new one alone. His mood must be a perfect receptivity, else will he be guilty of the attempt to exercise authority - and thus become "the avowed enemy of Art, and of himself".

In Esmond Thackeray tried to please himself; in Pendennis, in Philip, in Vanity Fair even ("at times") he was conscious of the public. In his different attitude lies the different degree of perfection of those novels. George Meredith is the living instance of an artist who never tried to meet popular taste; he made "those wonderful, quickly moving figures" for his own pleasure. He, too, like Irving, eventually succeeded into educating the
public to accept his own standards.

To educate the public is therefore possible. It is interesting to note how Wilde's conclusion, as the conclusion of The Critic as Artist, is optimistic. Again, as in the other essay, he strikes here the note of that English Renaissance of decorative arts of which he had been an apostle ten years before. From what he has been saying elsewhere about the gulf between art and utility one would expect him to condemn here all decorative art as a product of necessity. He has condemned it for this reason, as a matter of fact. But here he feels that an exception can be made, because the authors of this revolution, which affected "house-decoration, furniture and the like", did not act to meet the popular demand, but in direct opposition to it. Exactly like Irving and Meredith, Morris's craftsmen did not give the public what the public wanted, but they waited for the public to accept their own standards. As a result,

However they may object to it, people must nowadays have something charming in their surroundings. Fortunately for them, their assumption of authority in these art-matters came to entire grief. (63)

At any rate, the conclusion is that all authority is bad. There is no form of government under which the artist may be completely happy: all government is despotism. The Prince tyrannises over the body, the Pope tyrannises over the soul, and the People tyrannises over soul and body alike. "The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all".

So far for the artist: but Individualism is for all men. With most anarchist writers, Wilde believes that Individualism belongs to the inner nature of man. He does not have to postulate a revolution: the change will come naturally and unavoidably.

Individualism does not come to the man with any sickly cant about duty, which merely means doing what other people want because they want it; or any hideous cant about self-sacrifice, which is merely a survival of savage mutilation. (64)

Wilde's horror for what he called "self-denial" - for Medieval renunciation and "worship of pain" - had been clearly underlined in Dorian Gray. Medieval
saints, he says, realised themselves, but it was an "impoverished personality" that they realised. Dorian could not help admiring them, but he felt at the same time that too much had been surrendered. Wilde's individualism is of the opposite kind: it wants to realise man's personality to the full, and through experience, not through the renunciation of experience.

Wilde felt, too, what was morbid under that idealisation of pain. In the same way, there is something unhealthy in modern sympathy with suffering. Individualism does not ask one to sympathise with others. It simply asks everyone to be true to himself; if this were achieved, all kinds of suffering would disappear - starvation through common property, disease through science; and man would be left with the more agreeable task of sympathising with his friend's success, rather than with his pain. No true individualist can be called selfish:

Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live. (65)

This new Individualism will be more perfect than Christian life (as it has been lived during the Middle Ages: but "the medieval Christ is the real Christ") itself. "Pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection": the new Individualism will express itself through joy. "Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval". Man will feel it when his activities "are all pleasurable to him". Then will he be happy, then will he be in harmony with himself and with his environment.

The new Individualism, for whose service Socialism, whether it wills it or not, is working, will be perfect harmony. It will be what the Greeks sought for, but could not, except in Thought, realise completely because they had slaves, and fed them; it will be what the Renaissance sought for, but could not realise completely except in Art, because they had slaves, and starved them. It will be complete, and through it each man will attain to his perfection. The new Individualism is the new Hellenism. (66)
Notes to Chapter VIII

(1) The quotation is from Pearson, pp. 2-9.


(5) Ibid.,

(6) Ibid., p. 618.

(7) Letters, p. 824.

(8) Works, p. 600.

(9) Ibid., p. 605.


(13) For a detailed study of these tales, see A. Herzog, Die Märchen O. Wildes, diss., Zürich 1930.

(14) Reviews, p. 60.

(15) Ibid., p. 341.

(16) Ibid., p. 425.

(17) Ibid., p. 232.

(18) Ibid., p. 528.


(20) Ibid., p. 531.

(21) Ibid., p. 532.

(22) Ibid., Nbr. 11, 907-8; 11, 305; 12, 201.

(23) Ibid., p. 533.

(24) Ibid., pp. 533-4.


(27) In *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde*, but see also *Anarchism*, London 1963.

(28) *Works (The Soul of Man)*, p.915.

(29) Ibid.

(30) Ibid.

(31) Ibid., p.916.

(32) Ibid., p.918.

(33) Ibid., p.919.

(34) Ibid., p.920.

(35) Ibid., p.921.

(36) Ibid., p.922.

(37) Ibid., p.923.

(38) Ibid., p.931.

(39) Ibid.

(40) Ibid.

(41) In a superfluous note of explanation to *The Soul of Man*, London 1912, p.vii.

(42) Letters, p.438.


(48) Ibid., p.222.

(50) Morris, p. 50.

(51) Ibid., pp. 101, 102.

(52) Ibid., pp. 200-1.

(53) Letters, p. 479.


(55) Ibid., p. 127.

(56) Ibid., p. 129.

(57) Soul of Man, p. 924.

(58) Miscellanies, p. 35.

(59) Soul of Man, p. 926.

(60) Ibid., p. 128.

(61) Ibid., p. 929.

(62) Ibid., p. 930.

(63) Ibid., p. 931.

(64) Ibid., p. 933.

(65) Ibid.,

(66) Ibid., p. 936.
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A. Works by Oscar Wilde

No complete edition of the works of Oscar Wilde is available - one is being prepared by Owen Dudley Edwards, and it should appear shortly. It should bring to light many forgotten articles, and include what is left out of the "standard" edition; this is still the one edited by Robert Ross in 1908:

_Works, ed. by R. Ross, 14 vols., London 1908._

Thirteen of the volumes were published by Methuen in London, and the fourteenth, _The Picture of Dorian Gray_, by Charles Carrington in Paris. A fifteenth volume, containing _For Love of the King_, a Burmese Masque (which Wilde wrote in 1894 as a gift for a friend, Miss Mabel Cosgrove, who had married Mr. Chan Toon, a Burmese gentleman and a nephew of the King of Burma) was added by Methuen in 1922.

Among the most important works missing from this edition are the lecture _Impressions of America_ (ed. Stuart Mason, Sunderland 1906); the full text of _The Portrait of Mr. W.H._ (ed. V. Holland, London 1958); the full text of _The Importance of Being Earnest_ (two vols, New York 1956); and the full text of the letter known as _De Profundis_ (in _Letters_, ed. R. Hart-Davies, London 1962). Recollections of original stories which Wilde told but never cared to put into writing are to be found in the reminiscences of W.B. Yeats, A. Gide, Ada Leverson, and of many others. A version of some stories of this kind is printed as an appendix to Vyvyan Holland's _Son of Oscar Wilde_.

I only refer to Ross's edition for the two volumes _Reviews_ and _Miscellanies_, which contain material not easily available elsewhere. But I have found it handier to refer to the _Poems_, to the _Essays_, to _The Picture of Dorian Gray_, to the _Stories_, to the _Fairy Tales_, to the _Poems in Prose_, and to the _Plays_, in _Works of Oscar Wilde_ (one vol.), London 1963 - a rather reliable edition.
B. Biographical and Critical Sources

The bibliography on Wilde is immense. I have only included here those works which have a direct bearing on the aspects of Wilde which have been central to my study. More material, especially concerning editions of writers other than Wilde, is to be found in the notes to the chapters.

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