

OSCAR WILDE, PHILOSOPHER AND AESTHETE:

AN EXAMINATION OF THE EVOLVING AESTHETIC OF OSCAR WILDE

By:

M.I. MACAULAY

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AUTHOR: Marcia Irene Macaulay, B.A. (University of British  
Columbia)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. R. W. Vince

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract		P. ii
Chapter 1	Introduction	P. 1
Chapter 2	Appearance, Illusion and Reality	P. 6
Chapter 3	"He not busy being born, is busy dying".	P. 50
Bibliography		P. 93

## ABSTRACT

Oscar Wilde was one of the many men of intellectual stature in the nineteenth century who openly embraced and lauded Darwin's theory of evolution. However, with Wilde in particular, there is a kind of irony involved in this simple fact, since Wilde himself was a man highly aware and conscious of his own consistent and personal evolution. He anticipated, among others, Lawrence's feeling and belief that the "old stable ego" had had its day, and that human psychology was infinitely complex and required much insight and examination to be understood. For this reason any study of Wilde must be developmental in nature, because his ideas and theories change considerably over the short period of his life, although more frequently and consistently in the period prior to his eventual success as a playwright.

Wilde was always developing, always undergoing a process of change. His work and his development is therefore essentially linear. No work written by Wilde is pre-conceived; the act of conception and the process of creation take place simultaneously. Consequently, it is necessary to study Wilde linearly rather than to separate,

for purposes of examination, his criticism from his art. One idea develops out of another, much like the effect of a tree branching. One could term the process metaphysical, or one could term it Socratic, but in Hegelian fashion he begins always with an assumed thesis and ends always with a new synthesis.

The period under examination in this thesis is essentially that between the years "1885 - 1891", although an earlier essay "The Rise of Historical Criticism" is also included to provide focus. This early essay illustrates the extent to which Wilde's ideas were firmly rooted in Cartesian notions of reality. Romanticism, in the early nineteenth century is the first really major attack on this particular consciousness, and the Decadence of the "fin de siècle", as an outgrowth of Romanticism in effect reestablished the older, more mystical Romantic antagonism. Wilde's evolution therefore comprehends the growth of a new anti-Cartesian consciousness.

"The Truth of Masks" is Wilde's first "Romantic" point of departure, although it is Romantic only to the extent that Wilde is discussing his own reactions to and expectations of the experience of theatre. It is decadent, and therefore something new, to the extent that Wilde is interested in very specific and isolated effects rather than the effect as a whole. The essay itself is a very important shift away from traditional concepts and modes

of thought. Wilde is not analysing theatre per se, in isolation from his own experience, but rather using and therefore trusting his own experience to create his own criteria. The fairy tales both support and deny this kind of "self-oriented" reality.

It is very clear that during the period when he is both writing his best criticism and his two books of fairy tales there exists in his mind a desire for some external Cartesian order or set of principles by which to evaluate reality, and an equally strong desire to cleanse himself of the particular assumptions of his own society and determine his own rationale for thought and behaviour. The fairy tales on the whole depict Wilde's growing scepticism in respect to assuming any set of principles not initially his own. Christianity figures very strongly in many of the tales, until specifically in "The Devoted Friend", Wilde forces himself to see the emptiness of the principles as they are practised.

In the later criticism and The Picture of Dorian Gray Art is evaluated by Wilde first, very much like Arnold, as a replacement for religion, then as a possible destroyer of selfhood and imagination, and finally, in a return to many of his initial ideas in "The Truth of Masks", as a form of experience. At this point he originates his concept of "the Critic as Artist" which in

itself is a minor revolution in thought. By placing the critic on a par with the artist, Wilde's effectively destroys any concept of the mind as a "tabula rasa" or mere receptor for information. He insists that art is a product of both the creativity of the artist and the critic, and therefore constitutes a form of legitimate experience for the critic.

Arriving at such an assumption Wilde is forced to discard a very extensive body of thought; this thesis shall attempt to examine the process by which Wilde comes to do so and in turn formulate his own theories of experience and art and to discuss the relevance or significance of Wilde's theories as they evolve.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION - PERSONA

The work of Oscar Wilde represents the awareness of a new phenomenon in human consciousness, the phenomenon of self-alienation. Prior to Wilde the only real prototype of such a consciousness in the nineteenth century is Keats, who like Wilde expressed and exhibited the same obsession with moods and fluctuating states of being or consciousness. Alienation in the nineteenth century as a whole is essentially a sociological phenomenon, whereby the artist is repeatedly portrayed in isolation from his surrounding community. Comparing Wilde and Byron who have so much in common with respect to personality and wit, it is evident that while Wilde could adapt and to a large extent become a darling of society, Byron early in his career felt and voiced his overriding feelings of alienation from societal norms. Both men were eventually forced to become outsiders, but Wilde's expulsion from society was far more violent and sudden in nature and in fact bespeaks an altogether different set of problems than those experienced by Byron.

In Wilde there exists always an ambivalence of thought and feeling, a sensation of doubt as opposed to antagonism. This doubt stems from Wilde's own lack of self-understanding, and thus Wilde's concern as an artist is to comprehend the reasons for his inability to think in absolutes.



In "The Critic As Artist" Wilde, with reference to the dialogue as a form of self-discovery, speaks of the difficulty involved in any real perception of "Truth". The dialogue, like the play, permits its creator to express, almost vicariously, divergent and even contradictory points of view, but truth remains perhaps moreso in Wilde's eyes a paradox without any real possibility of discovery:

Gilbert - Ah, it is so easy to convert others. It is so difficult to convert oneself. To arrive at what one really believes, one must speak through lips different from one's own. To know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods. For what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matter of art, it is one's last mood.<sup>1</sup>

The moods and opinions which Wilde discusses in this passage dominate him throughout his career, and particularly in the period prior to his success as a playwright. He himself in "The Critic As Artist" defines creativity as a self-conscious act, the purpose of which is to discover the self. Essentially the self for Wilde is schizophrenic<sup>not</sup> in the sense employed by Robert Louis Stevenson, that is, a division between pure intellect and pure instinct, but more in the sense employed by Sartre in his dual concepts of "en-soi" and "pour-soi". Sartre's

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, "The Artist As Critic, Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde", ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 391.

analysis postulates an interior self which is forever out of touch with its exterior counterpart. The interior self, which Wilde terms logically enough the mask, can function, as Wilde himself functioned, in society, but without any understanding of its own desires and motivations, which is why Wilde argues in "The Truth of Masks" that a man is better revealed by the mask which he wears, than the face which he conceals.

Wilde's obsession with his own moods and his belief that paradox infuses all reality consistently cause him to examine and probe his relationship to both his physical environment and to his own intellectual environment. Discussing Browning at one point he ironically explains something of his own concerns as an intellectual or philosopher of thought:

He has been called a thinker, and was certainly a man who was always thinking out loud; but it was not thought which fascinated him, but rather the processes by which thought moves.<sup>2</sup>

To attempt an understanding of such processes is to attempt an understanding of motivation in human beings and the actual means by which such motivation is both conveyed and manifested in everyday acts and responses. Wilde, of course, is anticipating not only the existential psychology of Sartre, but many of the insights into human nature brought out by Freud, and specifically Freud's major insight, the fact of the unconscious, and by extension

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<sup>2</sup>. Wilde, "The Critic As Artist," Part I, p. 344.

unconscious motivation. His theories of self and self-alienation, however, are far more interconnected with his theories of art than those of Freud, and the effects which art may or may not have, depending on Wilde's stage of development, upon the human psyche. The self for Wilde does not exist without art, although the relationship as he sees it is extremely complex and involves a further interrelationship between art and society.

Art during the nineteenth century comprehends a diversity of roles and functions perhaps never actually demanded of it during any other historical period. This flux of thought concerning art again causes Wilde confusion and feelings of ambivalence. In partial agreement with Ruskin, he is also in partial agreement with Gautier and the Symbolists, never really finding a satisfactory theory of art until he creates his own concept of art embodied in his principle of the critic as artist.

This theory is Wilde's somewhat belated response to Plato's desire to exclude poets from *The Republic*. Plato attacks art because it is mimetic, and therefore, as he says, enfeebles the mind. This observation by Plato is a real concern for Wilde, since he must somehow attempt to determine for himself if art's effect is indeed crippling to the human psyche, or whether in fact it frees and liberates the mind to see what had previously been concealed or invisible. The problem, of course, is one of illusion

and reality as well as that of free will and determination. To see for Wilde is to be freed of confusion, and so art as a potential medium of perception has extraordinary importance for him as a divided and alienated man.

Primarily during the period between 1885 - 1891, Wilde as a frustrated and as yet unsuccessful artist in society engages most actively in his ever-continuing dialogue with himself. Within this short space of time Wilde undergoes extensive change as a thinker, particularly as he comes to demand greater participation in the experience of art, and as a result both a new kind of consciousness and a new kind of creativity. Like Pater, he attempts to bring art out of a moral sphere or frame of reference and into a realm of pure experience, although completely rejecting any concept of experience for the sake of experience. Wilde's ideas in part remain unique and vital and in part foreshadow the shifting emphasis on art not only as an experiential medium, but as a medium of vision or perception. Wilde himself can be considered perhaps only as an explorer or precursor, but he nevertheless reflects the origins of a consciousness which sought and continues to seek a commitment to its own wholeness and vitality, and thus he deserves examination if only because he was a man whose concerns correspond to our own.

## CHAPTER II

### ILLUSION, APPEARANCE AND REALITY

Thought in the nineteenth century can be conceived of as cyclical. The ideas of the Romantics are to some extent perpetuated by the Victorians, but in actuality there is a large gap between the two traditions. Where the Romantics are often mystical and Utopian, the Victorians accentuate reality, both in the novel and in poetry. During the period of the "fin de siècle", however, there is a desire to return<sup>to</sup> and to revive the concerns of the major Romantics. This cycle can perhaps best be examined and understood by means of an analysis of the doctrine of beauty hypothesized by Keats in his "Ode to a Grecian Urn". Wilde inherits a tradition of very rigid thought concerning Keats' proposition that Beauty is Truth and Truth, Beauty. His own reaction and development therefore necessitates some analysis of the history of this specific concept as it was understood and received during the Victorian period.

Keats postulates that Beauty is Truth - it is Reality, the only Reality. But the same could not be said by Browning or Tennyson, although in Wilde a return to Keats' vision of Truth is both desired and sought. Keats argues for a synthesis of Beauty and Truth, which Browning

and Tennyson simply cannot comprehend or accept. Significantly, Ruskin too refuses to condone such a synthesis.

Nothing is more common than to hear people who desire to be thought philosophical declare that "beauty is truth" and "truth is beauty". I would most earnestly beg every sensible person who hears such an assertion made to nip the germinating philosopher in his ambiguous bud; and beg him, if he really believes in his own assertion never thenceforward to use two words for the same thing. The fact is, truth and beauty are entirely distinct, though often related, things. One is a property of statements, and the other of objects.... That which shows nothing cannot be fair, and that which asserts nothing cannot be false. Even the ordinary use of the words false and true as applied to artificial and real things, is inaccurate. An artificial rose is not a "false" rose, it is not a rose at all. The falseness is in the person who states, or induces the belief, that it is a rose.<sup>1</sup>

If an artificial rose is not a rose, what then is it? By denying any conceptual relationship between a living and an artificial rose, Ruskin in fact is denying the idea of a rose as it exists. For Ruskin it is preferable to accuse an artist of falsehood and a deceitful imagination than to investigate the implications of that which is artificial. Ruskin is concerned at all times to deal in very specific absolutes. False art, he asserts at one point, changes that which is ugly into that which is beautiful and in so doing alters reality, an effect which Ruskin finds literally sacrilegious. In connection with

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<sup>1</sup>. John Ruskin, Modern Painters, (London: J.M. Dent & Co.), Vol.III, p. 31.

this idea both Beaudelaire in poetry and Whistler in painting are intent on doing precisely this very thing. As Beaudelaire says of his art, "Vous m'a donné la boue, et j'en fait la beauté". Art becomes in the hands of Beaudelaire and Whistler the art of a magician and not that of a high priest. Ruskin's aesthetic however will not permit such metamorphosis; the duty of the artist is to faithfully represent that which in Ruskin's eyes is true. Consequently, the principle of mimesis is fundamental to Ruskin's notions of art. It is also for this reason that choice of subject is so immensely important in his artistic creed. In the passage quoted, Ruskin defines truth as a property of statements and beauty as a property of objects. Needless to say Ruskin's mind has neither a philosophical nor a metaphysical bent. Ruskin does not toy with the unknown: Truth ascertains only that which is known by all right-thinking and sensible men to be true, to be factual. Beauty is limited to the world of objects and cannot escape or apply to the world of thought or feeling. Beauty, moreover, can be apprehended solely through the medium of vision and through no other means. For a subject to be worthy, Beauty must be combined with Truth, but Truth, or rather Ruskin's interest in statement, far outweighs any aesthetic consideration. Beauty is not equivalent to Truth, it is in the service of Truth and subordinated to it. Therefore, Ruskin is a good

deal less concerned with what the artist sees or experiences and far more concerned with what the artist has to say.

Concern for subject or, as termed by Ruskin, "Choice of Noble Subject", must be in Ruskin's aesthetic the artist's primary concern. Interestingly enough supreme nobility of subject is almost always religious:

The habitual choice of sacred subjects, such as the Nativity, Transfiguration, Crucifixion (if the choice be sincere) implies that the painter has a natural disposition of which humanity is capable: it constitutes him so far forth a painter of the highest order, as, for instance, Leonardo, in his painting of the Last Supper.<sup>2</sup>

In this fashion, then, Ruskin, on the basis of subject matter, creates a hierarchy of artists and painters. His choice of Leonardo, however, is both interesting and significant. Were Ruskin to use Michelangelo as an example of sincerity and high-mindedness in the artist concerned profoundly with subject matter, his argument would rest on much firmer foundation. But Michelangelo is not mentioned, if only because in the art of Michelangelo there exists an unfortunate inclination to paint the unclothed body. Leonardo is preferred and Ruskin's argument dissolves. Leonardo da Vinci was the great chameleon of the Renaissance, his ruling passion was not sincerity, but

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2.

Ibid., p. 26.



curiosity, and he would far better support a theory of Art for Art's Sake. than he is here used to support a theory of art for the purpose of noble subject and thought.

Ruskin mentions the Last Supper, but La Gioconda is absent from his analysis. What noble subject does La Gioconda represent and support except herself and her own mysterious beauty? It is for Pater to analyse the true genius of Da Vinci in his famous interpretation of the La Gioconda; but where Pater views beauty as a divine mystery and the well-spring of life, Ruskin views it suspiciously as a form of threat to his own real concern in art - morality, and morality of a particularly Presbyterian order. Nevertheless, as Messianic as Ruskin's theories of art are, he still desires to see Beauty employed in the service of Truth, if not equivalent to Truth or superceding Truth. In Tennyson, however, the breach between Beauty and Truth is widened and is succeeded by a virtual antagonism between the two concepts. Truth continues to represent a form of Reality for Tennyson, although a different Reality from the Reality of Keats and that of Ruskin; Beauty, however, is no longer Beauty but diversion and escape, and so competes with Truth for Tennyson's interest and commitment.

Tennyson provides the reader with a record of his own soul searching in his poem "The Palace of Art". The poem opens with these patently confessional lines,

I built my soul a lordly pleasure house,  
 Wherein at ease for aye to dwell.  
 I said, "O Soul, make merry and carouse,  
 Dear soul, for all is well."

As a whole the poem is a lyric statement of one man's experience, but even in these opening lines, the vast tradition within which Tennyson is placing his own experience is immediately apparent. The first line itself and specifically the phrase "lordly pleasure house" at once evoke Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and its "stately pleasure dome". There the comparison ends, however; Coleridge is placing his concept of the poet in a Platonic tradition, very much along the lines of Keats and bearing greatest similarity to the platonism of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". The poet in "Kubla Khan" feeds on honeydew and has drunk the milk of Paradise, just as the knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" has known the delights of manna dew and honey wild. Both knight and poet have tasted the food of the gods, this both demarks them as poets who have knowledge of the "ideal" and grants them vision superior to common men.

Where Keats and Coleridge part company is in their specific visions. Keats in some respects like Tennyson seeks escape, but escape from a lesser truth into a greater truth. Coleridge is as mystical as Keats, but his mysticism is obviously far more revolutionary in a literally mundane sense. In Buddhism an almost identical concept to

Coleridge's notions in "Kubla Khan" exists. The Mahayana Bodhisattva attains Nirvana, but chooses to return to earth to teach others heavenly wisdom. Christ in fact could be thought of as a form of Mahayana Bodhisattva. The poet in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", however, is also very much like a modern Cassandra gifted with the power of prophesy and, as Coleridge explains, for this reason desires to revive his vision in the guise of poetry and so recreate both his vision of the pleasure dome, as a symbol of the ideal, and the prophesy of war and impending doom. Coleridge is not arguing that Beauty is Truth, but he is defining the poet through his ability to perceive Beauty or the Ideal and to reconstruct the Ideal for the benefit of mankind.

The word pleasure for Tennyson, however, connotes an altogether different concept. Tennyson's background betrays far more interest in concerns medieval than the Platonic interests of Coleridge. The medieval "hortus conclusus" in particular is a working symbol in much of Tennyson's poetry and is later employed by Wilde as well. However, the essential difference between the Victorian Tennyson and the Romantics Coleridge and Keats is the mysticism of the latter two men. Tennyson is neither a mystic nor a visionary, but seeks release almost solely in books. Nevertheless, "The Palace of Art" does speak of pleasure, but it is a strangely asensual pleasure; colour is referred

to, but there is on the whole an unusual lack of the prevalence of things sensual, as well as a lack of any real feeling of true pleasure or joy. As T.S. Eliot remarks and makes much of, Tennyson is a reflective poet, and tells or describes, rather than recreates what he at one time felt, so far as to say of his soul that her days were occupied in the following fashion:

Singing and murmuring in her feastful mirth,  
 Joying to feel herself alive,  
 Lord over Nature, lord of the visible earth,  
 Lord of the senses five;

Communing with herself:

The "senses five" of which Tennyson speaks, however, are non-existent in the poem. He tells his readers of the pleasure which he felt, but there is simply no tangible counterpart to the tale, as there most certainly would be in Keats. Tennyson goes into far greater detail concerning the books which he had read during the period of his deepest seclusion. Through books he is provided with a means of escape into the past as it is represented in sources as diverse as the Arthurian Legends and Dante's Divine Comedy. Everything he reads is converted into a form of fairy tale and nowhere does Tennyson speak with the joy or sense of felt experience as does Keats in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer". In comparison to the naiveté of Jean de Meun's garden in The Romance of the Rose or even the strange sexuality of Marvell's garden, Tennyson's "Palace

of Art" appears sterile and empty. At the close of the poem Tennyson begins to speak of this emptiness and ironically only then does the poem begin to take on life. However, the stagnation which he speaks of and feels is somehow rationalized into overpowering guilt. Rather than face the emptiness and waste of four years, Tennyson has in fact invented a myth of pleasure and become a martyr to his own newly invented guilt, but it is nonetheless the emptiness of his own self which Tennyson truly fears.

In Tennyson's "Palace of Art" there is not a little of Wilde, and Tennyson's sharp delineation between Beauty/Pleasure and Truth/Reality is the first concern which Wilde treats in his early criticism. "The Rise of Historical Criticism" was written as early as Wilde's Oxford or Dublin years (circa 1879) and indicates not only an interest in Tennyson's dichotomy, but also the origins of a consciousness like that of Tennyson and Ruskin which isolates Beauty from Truth. Moreover, "The Rise of Historical Criticism" also illustrates the first literary expression of Wilde's all-pervading concern with the nature of thought itself and the process by which thought evolves. The essay itself is strongly influenced by the concepts of Hegel concerning progress, whereby a certain "set" of "a priori" assumptions is challenged by a new consciousness to eventually result in a synthesis of the two. Change for both Wilde and Hegel is conceived of very much more as a product of the mind than as

an alteration in economy. Needless to say Wilde even in theory is not in any sense of the word a Marxist. His concerns are fundamentally Hegelian, and he chooses to examine mind rather than matter, although mind of a very complex and intricate order. It is perhaps more accurate to say that he holds interests which are psychological as opposed to interests which are sociological.

Nevertheless, "The Rise of Historical Criticism" comes as a shock to anyone familiar with the later criticism, and it is for this reason that the essay is very important as an indication of Wilde's own real philosophical beginnings. Hegelian principles may not be Marxist, but they are equally revolutionary. The very opening of this early Wildean essay as a result betrays a subtle but youthful revolutionary ardour.

Historical criticism nowhere occurs as an isolated fact in the civilization or literature of any people. It is part of that complex working towards freedom which may be described as a revolt against authority. It is merely one facet of that speculative spirit of an innovation which in the sphere of action produces democracy and revolution, and in that of thought is the parent of philosophy and physical science; and is based not so much on the results it attains, as on the tone of thought which it represents, and the method by which it works.

The rise of historical criticism is the rise of a

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Oscar Wilde, "The Rise of Historical Criticism", Essays and Lectures, (London; Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1920), p. 3.

new antithesis to the once prevailing mythopoetic consciousness of the early Greeks. Criticism plays a fundamental and essential role in the creation of this new consciousness or, as Wilde phrases it, "tone of thought", and its nature is therefore both subversive and revolutionary. Significantly, Wilde in "The Critic as Artist" will postulate something of the same order, but the revolution which Wilde desires to bring about in this early essay is far from that advocated in "The Critic as Artist". Much is similar, nonetheless; one finds interest in thought and method common to each of the two essays. The specific method referred to is the scientific method, and therefore empirical in premise, although the empiricism of which Wilde speaks in this early essay is the one-dimensional empiricism of Descartes and Bacon, a form of empiricism concerned with factual evidence of a very inelastic and specific nature.

In the course of "The Rise of Historical Criticism" Wilde delineates the growth of such empiricism. He begins by analysing the changing attitude to myth or Greek religion, reflected in the work of historians such as Herodotus, and ends with an examination of historical philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato and Polybius. Much of the essay amounts to merely a very subtle denunciation of religion and reads far more like the work of an 18th century philosophe than a 19th century aesthete. It is

often a piece of writing that, were it brought to the attention of Shaw, would find an enthusiastic reader, if only because Fabian Socialism has its true origins in the Rationalism and Utilitarianism of eighteenth-century thought. Like Fabian Socialism this essay too is deep within the eighteenth century, although Wilde never goes so far as to see myths and the mythopoetic consciousness to which he refers as the product of a child-like mind. Moreover, in a far more sophisticated fashion he begins to illustrate how cause and effect as a means of analysing reality sought and began to replace the principles and implications of a mind that thought in terms of "deus ex machina". Thucydides, unlike Herodotus, he explains, first "assumes in the thoroughly euhemeristic way, that under the veil of myth and legend there does yet exist a rational basis of fact discoverable by the method of rejecting all supernatural interference as well as any extraordinary motives influencing the actors."<sup>4</sup> In such an instance Wilde is here supporting the nineteenth-century Victorian trend towards realism, desiring like many of the great Victorians to see things as they are and not veiled in either magic or mystery.

This overriding concern for fact and factual evidence pervades almost every aspect of the essay. Much

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4. Ibid., p. 30



like a Voltaire of the nineteenth century Wilde denounces religion and myths either traditional or invented in support of what appears for Wilde at that time to be Truth. It is for this reason that Plato comes under rather severe attack. Modern students of philosophy attack Plato because of the Spartan influence on his conception of the Republic, elements of which are patently fascistic, but Wilde attacks Plato because he thinks deductively rather than inductively, as does Aristotle. Plato dreams and Aristotle observes, this is the basic distinction between the two philosophers and their respective philosophies. Plato will intuitively create for himself "a priori" assumptions; Aristotle will collect relevant data and induce from them a cause for any given problem. Thus in championing Aristotle, Wilde champions a form of eighteenth-century skepticism and accuses Plato of shallow and insubstantial reasoning.

It is not difficult to see that between the ideas put forth in this early essay and those of the elder Mill and Godwin there exists much affiliation. In the interest of Truth and Progress Wilde is prepared to denounce the dreams of Plato, not as dreams in themselves, but as exemplifying a dangerous mode of thought.

The latter is the only scientific theory and was apprehended in its fulness by Aristotle, whose application of the inductive method to history, and whose employment of the evolutionary theory of humanity, show that he was conscious that the philosophy of

history is nothing separate from the facts of history but is contained in them, and that the rational law of the complex phenomena of life, like the ideal in the world of thought, is to be reached through the facts, not superimposed on them - "end" not "reasoning from the multiplicity of experience."<sup>5</sup>

Using Aristotle and eventually Polybius, Wilde makes a case for a combination of Utilitarianism and Social Darwinism. There is evidence of Ruskin's influence as well in this early essay, for Ruskin too seeks the moral improvement of mankind through art if not specifically through historical criticism. The utilitarian ideas of Tennyson are reflected here as well. The artist must dwell in reality and not in dreams if he is to fulfill his true function as an educator of his public.

Something altogether unusual happens, however, as Wilde begins his discussion of Polybius. Wilde appears to alter positions in mid-stream, although he does in fact do nothing of the sort. Having expounded upon the spirit of inquiry, possessed by the best of ancient critics, in a rather open and curious way, very much as if the thought had just occurred to him and suddenly found expression, he provides this observation:

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5.

Ibid., p. 54 (The words in quotation are translations and replace the original Greek phrases employed by Wilde in his text.)

There is something, as a rule, slightly contemptible about ancient criticism. The modern idea of the critic as the interpreter, the expounder of the beauty and excellence of the work he selects, seems quite unknown.<sup>6</sup>

Out of this observation Wilde gradually develops a far more open and less prejudiced perspective. It is logical to assume that this observation was made only while Wilde was in the process of writing the essay, since the major body of the essay and the essay's conclusion is of one very decisive and different mind concerning right and wrong thought. However, the essay format in this instance has legitimately provided Wilde with a new insight or discovery and given rise to the dual perspective which he is to maintain and attempt to synthesize in all of his ensuing criticism and art. The following passage in particular is significant:

There are many points in the description of the ideal historian which one may compare to the picture which Plato has given us of the ideal philosopher. They are both "spectators of all time and all existence". Nothing is contemptible in their eyes, for all things have a meaning, and they both walk in august reasonableness before all men, conscious of the workings of God yet free from all terror of mendicant priest or vagrant miracle-worker. But the parallel ends here. For the one stands aloof from the world-storm of sleet and hail, his eyes fixed on distant and sunlit heights, loving knowledge for the sake of knowledge and wisdom for the joy of wisdom, while the other is the eager actor in the world ever

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6.

Ibid., p. 83.

seeking to apply his knowledge to useful things. Both equally desire truth, but the one because of its utility, the other for its beauty. This historian regards it as the rational principle of all true history, and no more. To the other it comes as an all-pervading and mystic enthusiasm, "like the desire of strong wine, the craving of ambition, the passionate love of what is beautiful".<sup>7</sup>

The useful and the beautiful are no longer opposed, as they are in Tennyson and Ruskin. They are merely different; this is Wilde's insight and for Wilde a fundamental insight, although he abandons it as often as he espouses its veracity. What is more, in the above passage Wilde uses the word "reasonableness" for the first time in an essay which in itself seeks to revive the essence of Greek thought and does so only at the one point where it acknowledges such intellectual diversity. However, such "reasonableness" produces in Wilde a form of ambivalence, a dilemma rather than a problem. Truth he sees in the guise of two forms, Beauty and Utility. As an observation it is far more sophisticated in its apprehension of reality than a mind that would place Beauty and Utility in opposing camps. The latter view merely extinguishes one aspect of the duality and in doing so finds a far greater peace of mind having one and only one liaison to serve or support. Recognizing the validity of both Utility and

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7. Ibid., p. 93-94.

Beauty as media for Truth creates a legitimate form of division within Wilde, as well as continuous self-examination and continuous attempts to synthesize Beauty and Utility into one Truth. Wilde's dilemma is the dilemma of seeing too much, and his solution is that referred to in Plato's Symposium - Truth seen and understood in one thing alone is supplanted by Truth seen and understood in all things universally. Therefore, when he says of the ideal philosopher and historian that "Nothing is contemptible in their eyes, for all things have a meaning", his import is this.

Paradoxically, the period between the years 1885 - 1889 does not illustrate the reconciliation or solution of which I have spoken. It illustrates rather a search for an absolute, a denial of one aspect of his personality and consciousness in affirmation of its considered opposite. Wilde makes a very interesting comment at the close of his essay of 1885, "The Truth of Masks":

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 stand-point, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything, for in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism

and through it, that we can realize Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks.<sup>8</sup>

Both in "The Truth of Masks" (1885) and the fairy tales (1899-1891) Wilde seeks to understand one sole and specific truth by assuming alternately one particular perspective or mask. Thus the "Truth of Masks" advocates Beauty at the expense of Utility, while the fairy tales, although most contradictory and multiple in perspective, often seek to advocate Utility at the expense of Beauty. It is as though Wilde could see all aspects of reality, yet without clarity and therefore must refocus his attention on specific aspects if the desired clarity and precision of vision which he sought was to be acquired. For this reason the significance of masks for Wilde is derived from his basic awareness that true knowledge rests in the knowledge of opposites or contraries. The mask provides a technique for the discovery of Truth. It also marks a very important return to the aesthetic of Keats and the concept of negative capability:

I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense

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8. Wilde, op. cit., ed. Ellmann, p. 432.

of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.<sup>9</sup>

Wilde's thesis would appear to be in less than total agreement with that of Keats. Wilde basically is focusing on Truth, Keats on the effect of Beauty. However, each excerpt reflects a stage of intellectual development which will not admit to the existence of absolute Truth and which prefers to advocate the cultivation of what Keats terms "isolated versimilitude". Keats desires diverse and isolated experience for itself alone, or so he says in this particular letter, and Wilde for the purposes of an expanded and less vague apprehension of Truth. A very great irony exists, however, in the fact that as an essay "The Truth of Masks" far better conforms to the thesis presented in Keats' famous letter to his brother John, than it does to the above quoted conclusion provided by Wilde himself.

Wilde sub titles his essay "A note on illusion" and provides a vigorous and well substantiated defense in its behalf. The essay, nevertheless, is highly contradictory and concerns itself far more with artistic effect than the philosophical distinction between Beauty and Truth. Wilde at one point asserts that "The stage is not merely the meeting place of all arts, but is also the return of art

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The Letters of John Keats, ed. Robert Gittings  
(London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 43.

to life".<sup>10</sup> This is eventually followed by another equally forceful assertion that "The true dramatist, in fact shows us life under the conditions of art, not art in the form of life."<sup>11</sup> What is more remarkable is that in both instances Wilde is arguing for precisely the same cause - the cause of accuracy and illusionary realism. He commences his argument for archaeological accuracy of costume or masks with a statement which amounts to a proposal of Art for Art's Sake. Shakespeare, Wilde ventures, "knowing how the artistic temperament is always fascinated by beauty of costume, constantly introduces into his plays masques and dances, purely for the sake of the pleasure of beauty which they give the eye."<sup>12</sup> But the pleasure of beauty in and of itself does not in fact content Wilde during this early period, for a costume in a play may be beautiful and yet meet with Wilde's displeasure nonetheless, thus when he says that art must function under the conditions of art, not life, he means simply that he does not wish to see Ophelia attired in modern dress, but in the dress invented for her by Shakespeare, and when he argues the contrary that art is a return to life, he is demanding archaeological accuracy of detail and not the

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10. Wilde, op. cit., p. 417.

11. Ibid., p. 429.

12. Ibid., p. 408.



inventions of a modern dress designer.

To assert as Wilde does in his conclusion that "The Truth of Masks" represents solely an artistic standpoint is clearly the remark of a man either deceived by his own rationalization, or that of a man attempting to conceal his own passionate interest in illusion and escape. In one of his best known fairy tales The Young King Wilde describes the boy as wandering "like one who was seeking to find in beauty an anodyne from pain, a sort of restoration from sickness". Wilde is surely speaking of his own experience when he speaks of this specific cure for melancholy. Rather than pure beauty itself, however, Wilde chooses escape into the art of the theatre, which combines for him all the arts in one, employing the ear and eye in particular, and so provides the fullest possible pleasure and effect. The theatre, therefore, in a sense is Wilde's drug, and only once this is understood does Wilde's disregard of a consistent argument and his extreme and overriding emphasis upon accuracy become understandable. Like Keats he too is seeking the stimulus of Beauty, like Tennyson escape from the present into the past, and like Ruskin accuracy of detail, although Wilde's desire is the preservation not of Truth, but of the illusion of Truth.

Theatre is ritual, ritual which can transfer both actor and audience from one reality into another. Ritual in turn depends upon absolute perfection of detail and

exactitude of execution, and because costume is included as a dimension and condition of the reality created through theatrical ritual, it must be true to the spirit of the ritual enacted, or it threatens the very fabric of the ritual itself. Thus Wilde may contradict his original statement that art returns to life by pronouncing the proper sphere of art to be art, but the contradiction has nevertheless resulted in a discovery of the criteria which ritual or art necessitates. Art does create experience apart from the experience of everyday life and so must function under its own exacting demands and unique conditions and not those of life, simply because illusion and not mere reflection governs art.

The new aesthetic of Wilde has, as he says, "illusion of truth for its method, and illusion of beauty for its result". The illusion of truth involves archaeological accuracy of detail, but it involves also an understanding of character and characterisation. Costume functions in two ways for Wilde, as a thing beautiful in itself; and as a message or a form of symbolic statement. Costume is an extension of character and so speaks for character or defines character without spoken description. I doubt that such an observation would be considered as a revelation by an actor or director today, but the total import of Wilde's analysis is still remarkably fresh. Wilde is in fact conceiving of costume

as a form of poetry, and indeed difficult, highly symbolic and multidimensional poetry. The more difficult, the more glorious. Colour, style, accessory, carriage all entail complex and intricate meaning. This entire dimension of meaning is lost if detail is disregarded. It may be true that Wilde's aesthetic in this essay is conservative, that he is depreciating modern costuming in favour of the use made of it by Shakespeare and the playwrights of the Renaissance particularly, but like T.S. Eliot he also senses a lost dimension of reality and statement in "modern" costume and art and thus desires a return to the far more dynamic and complex theatrical world of the Elizabethan period.

As for the metaphors Shakespeare draws from dress and the aphorisms he makes of it, his hits at the costume of his age, particularly at the ridiculous size of the ladies' bonnets, and the many descriptions of the mundus muliebris, from the song of Autolycus in the "Winter's Tale" down to the account of the Duchess of Milan's gown in "Much Ado About Nothing", they are far too numerous to quote: though it may be worth while to remind people that the whole of the Philosophy of Clothes is to be found in Lear's scene with Edgar - a passage which has the advantage of brevity and style over the grotesque wisdom and somewhat mouthing metaphysics of Sartor Resartus. But I think that from what I have already said it is quite clear that Shakespeare was very much interested in costume. I do not mean in that shallow sense by which it has been concluded from his knowledge of deeds and daffodils that he was a Blackstone and Paxton of the Elizabethan age, but that he saw that costume could be made at once impressive of certain types of character, and is one of the essential factors of

the means which a true illusionist has at his disposal. Indeed to him the deformed figure of Richard was of as much value as Juliet's loveliness; he sets the serge of the radical beside the silks of the lord, and sees the stage effects to be got from each; he has as much delight in Caliban as he has in Ariel, in rags as he has in cloth of gold, and recognized the artistic beauty of ugliness.<sup>13</sup>

Truth Wilde argues resides in the metaphysics of masks, or rather the illusion of truth. Nevertheless, Wilde's interest in character and the externals through which character speaks, as well as their technique and manipulation, illustrates a consciousness discontented not only with given and created reality, but one also demanding the advent of reality in a new guise. Wilde is very much paralleling Baudelaire and the Symbolists in such an interest, particularly in his desire for multidimensional art and his emphasis upon vision as a creative rather than observational sense. The level of increased creativity in the art which Wilde advocates also makes far greater demands upon the creativity and intellect of its audience. Nevertheless, this new criterion, the product of a new form of consciousness, is constructed solely to facilitate escape from life and the moment. Wilde refers to his aesthetic position as merely a pose to better enable his exploration of a single aspect of reality. If so, he shortly alters his pose to assume its converse, although

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<sup>13</sup>. Ibid., p. 415.

in all probability for reasons less arbitrary and having far more connection with his new function as a father.

In his fairy tales (1888-1891) Wilde rejects his very significant variation of Tennyson's "Palace of Art" and espouses an ethic of Christian charity and mercy. The symbol of Christ has always been attractive to Wilde, for its theatrical or artistic implications as much as for Christ's ethic of sympathy and love. In two of the better known fairy tales, The Young King and The Happy Prince, Wilde converts each of his protagonists into Christ symbols. In each case the Young King and the Happy Prince live a sheltered and happy existence at court - the original "hortus conclusus". However, their fish bowl existence forbids the incursion of either reality or a deeper experience of life.

"When I was alive and had a human heart," answered the statue, "I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening I led the dance in the Great Hall. Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived and I died".<sup>14</sup>

The Happy Prince and the Young King are also symbols of the artist, very reminiscent of the Lady of

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<sup>14</sup>. Oscar Wilde, The Happy Prince & Other Tales (Toronto; The John C. Winston Company, 1940), p.4.

Shalott, although very different as well, since they are both recognized and have a specific function within the framework of actual society. Wilde, nevertheless, pleads ignorance of the real world for his two protagonists; they are locked into a world of beauty and pleasure by forces beyond their control, kept in ignorance to ensure their continued activity as symbols of royalty, and are prevented from assuming their proper function as rulers. Beauty and Art in these two tales are therefore seen by Wilde as diversions employed subversively by Philistines and merchants who desire the maintenance of the "status quo".

The function of clothes or attire plays a very large part in Wilde's analysis. As aforementioned, clothes function symbolically, but hardly in the manner spoken of by Wilde in "The Truth of Masks". Clothes continue to represent the personality, and alterations in personality, but in a decidedly straightforward and clearly discernible way. Clothes no longer function as poems, but as equivalents. The focus of each tale in fact rests upon the use of beauty and display. The Happy Prince has become a statue encrusted with precious jewels and inlaid with gold, but he is not made of pure unadulterated gold, since the statue within is made only of iron. Nevertheless, as a statue, the Prince is a representation of perfect serenity. He wants nothing, gives nothing and never cries; he is the symbol of the perfect citizen from the viewpoint of a

Town Councillor, as well as a pleasing divertissement for the unhappy and poor in the city. The Young King uses beauty in an identical fashion. He seeks to enclose himself in its effect. His coronation dress in particular must be of extraordinary splendour; it must dazzle everyone who is within sight. When the king eventually spurns all of his outward glory to put on a shepherd's dress, he is as much as threatened by death from his nobles for disgracing both himself and the realm. Wilde, of course, has in the back of his mind Carlyle's Sartor Resartus. He is saying like Carlyle that externals do not make a man, but rather conceal him and prevent him from achieving self-realization, a point of view which in itself is completely antithetical to the position on externals in "The Truth of Masks". However, it is not externals specifically, but beauty here which diverts the mind from reality and truth.

Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" provides the closest counterpart to Wilde's ideas in these two specific tales. An unfortunate tendency exists among many present-day critics to see the poem in terms of a neat antithesis between reality and illusion. As with the Happy Prince and the Young King, the Lady of Shalott is removed from reality, but she is thrice removed from Reality, and the obvious Platonic implications of this condition are generally ignored. In many respects the Lady of Shalott and Wilde's characters approach the tradition of the

solitary Romantic artist, divorced from his public and his society, and therefore, as Tennyson and Wilde assert, unable to speak for or represent that society. Thus they are both rejecting the Romantic notion of the artist and formulating a new hypothesis based on interaction and commitment. But when Tennyson and Wilde speak of a commitment to reality, they are not using the word as a synonym for actuality, but rather for that which is Ideal. The Lady of Shalott is thrice removed from Camelot, not medieval London. Camelot is an ideal state, existing under ideal conditions. Lancelot, who causes the Lady to abandon her isolation and seek him out, is an ideal man symbolizing a form of human perfection. Tennyson is employing the traditional Platonic synthesis of Reality and the Ideal to literally inspire those artists who would be genuine artists to serve this new Ideal through art. The artist, he argues, must devote himself to the Good and the Ideal, rather than live a life of oblivion, even if such devotion or attempted union with the Ideal causes the artist's own destruction. The Lady of Shalott produced Beauty in her tower, but such beauty was sterile; Lancelot, however, as a symbol of Tennyson's ideal combines Beauty and Truth in a potent liaison and so attracts the Lady from a life of living death. The death she literally experiences is in fact a form of nemesis, if only because her attempt at communication has come too late and her



preceding silence lasted far too long. The poem then is as much a warning as it is an exhortation to establish through the medium of art a new societal Ideal.

Wilde's tale of The Happy Prince parallels the experience of the Lady of Shalott. The Happy Prince is beautiful yet useless, and only attains sainthood by offering his beauty composed of jewels and gold to aid his impoverished subjects, whom he, as a statue, placed within the city, can now see living in extreme hardship and misery. Eyes made of sapphires cry for the first time and voluntarily blind themselves to provide food for children and even artists. Wilde, like Tennyson, often thought of the artist as a kind of Christ figure. Particularly in De Profundis he argues that Christ was the greatest of all artists because he understood that wealth was a hindrance to true self-realization. However, Wilde's point in these two fairy tales is not that wealth hinders the development of personality, but that wealth through its creation of beauty subverts such development, and thus that wealth and beauty are somehow interconnected by a scheme to deprive man of his humanity. Beauty, as in "The Happy Prince," is all too commonly a device created by the bourgeoisie to content the unsuspecting proletariat. Once the Prince loses all of his beauty, he is merely discarded by the businessmen of the town. He dies as a statue a second death and this death is a form of crucifixion. The Lady

of Shalott is certainly not a Christ figure, but she too dies in an attempt to communicate her new love of the Ideal through song. Both the Lady and the Prince have discarded their ivory towers and have died at what can only be described as the fullest or most intense moment of their lives. The idea as an idea is extremely Romantic, but its fundamental precedent is Christ's crucifixion which appeals constantly as a symbol of the principle of life in death.

The Happy Prince and the Lady of Shalott share one other point of similarity. They die without truly stimulating the awareness of their respective societies. The Prince receives his reward in heaven, but he goes unremembered by the people of his city. Although an earlier tale, "The Happy Prince" (1885), written prior to "The Young King" (1891), is somewhat more pessimistic than the latter tale, since the Prince effects no real change in his city, nevertheless "The Happy Prince" does not illustrate, as does "The Young King", the growing antipathy and tension towards society which Wilde is coming to feel more and more as an artist. The Young King is another Christ figure who through humility and the disregard of worldly goods is able to transform his pragmatic and worldly kingdom into a form of Christian paradise on earth.

Prior to his coronation he orders his artists to create the most sumptuous and regal gown ever made by man.

He desires beauty, but beauty created for him by others. Never does he consider the implications which such a desire has for those who must produce such beauty, for those who are the real artists and artisans. In a dream the King sees the human suffering which is necessitated by his craving for beauty. A weaver, the traditional symbol of the artist, remarks in answer to the dreaming king:

"In war," the strong make slaves of the weak, and in peace the rich make slaves of the poor. We must work to live, and they give us such mean wages that we die. We toil for them all day long, and they heap up gold in their coffers, and our children fade away before their time, and the faces of those we love become hard and evil. We tread out the grapes, and another drinks the wine. We sow the corn, and our own board is empty. We have chains, though no eye beholds them; and we are slaves, though men call us free".<sup>15</sup>

In this particular tale Wilde never sees Beauty as an evil in itself, he sees it rather as a force which blinds men to reality. However, the quest for Beauty is nonetheless in opposition to the quest for Good in the world. The Young King, like the Happy Prince, must therefore discard all worldly possessions and in particular his coronation gown. Like Christ he first walks in the habit of a beggar, and is accused of being foolish and unrealistic. He even faces death for his convictions.

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15. Oscar Wilde, A House of Pomegranates. (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1933), pp. 10-11.

His attire, of course, is central to Wilde's statement. Paralleling Christ's ascent, the boy is miraculously clothed by sunbeams in "a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure". Spiritual beauty has been made distinct from worldly beauty, as it is in Ruskin. Completely within the Christian tradition, Wilde argues that material splendour must be abandoned if true ethereal splendour is to be achieved or known. Thus Beauty is once again equivalent to a form of abstract Truth, but solely spiritual Beauty and not that of the world. In Tennyson as opposed to Ruskin, who are both very influential and close to Wilde in this specific stage of his development, this sharp dichotomy is not made. Lancelot in "The Lady of Shalott" represents a fusion of spiritual and physical beauty into one ideal. Wilde, however, in the two fairy tales discussed is concerned to effect precisely a distinction between these two forms of beauty. Ironically, where Tennyson loses some of the stiffness of his Victorian stance on reality, the great aesthete Wilde comes to insist upon a firmer and more rigid separation between worldly and heavenly Beauty and Truth. Again the problem of Keats' definition simply permeates nineteenth-century thought, and no writer at any time retains a consistent position, especially Wilde, on exactly what does constitute the relationship between these two concepts.

Wilde's dilemma during this period is his awareness

of exploitation. His answer to such exploitation in 'The Young King' is to deprive artists and artisans of an occupation by wearing rags; in 'The Happy Prince' his solution is charity, but charity which ends with the death of the Prince himself. Such Christian solutions are not solutions at all, they are merely salves to pacify the conscience - merely more traditional forms of casuistry. The artist as an expounder of the Good and the Ideal cannot save society. Wilde certainly does not come to this realization immediately, but rather like all reformers, he alters his vision only to the extent that he himself is altered by it. The vision very early, however, does begin to produce a gradual alienation of Wilde's interest from revolutionary and societal concerns. Such alienation is perceptible in two other fairy tales by Wilde, 'The Devoted Friend' and 'The Birthday of the Infanta'.

The Devoted Friend is the story of Little Hans, a gardener whose sole delight is to grow beautiful flowers in his garden. Wilde is again employing the symbol of the "hortus conclusus" but in a much more positive context. Little Hans grows the flowers for himself alone and chooses to suffer the long cold winters alone as well, rather than to grow crops to take to market; nevertheless, he shares his beauty freely with any who would admire it. He is open, warm and loving and thus a favourite of the townspeople. Little Hans in fact bears remarkable resemblance

to Wilde himself. The villain of the piece is a Miller, Arnold's Philistine and Marx's Bourgeois. He preaches Christian friendship and devotion, but practises exploitation. By promising a wheelbarrow, he extorts slavish service from Little Hans, to the extent that Little Hans is asked to risk his life for the Miller's sick son. He does and so dies. The Miller exploits blatantly, using the argument that between friends nothing is denied, causing Little Hans not only to sacrifice his life but even to neglect the cultivation of his garden, thus destroying Little Hans spiritually as well as physically.

Wilde is doing a number of things in this tale, primarily he is reappraising the artist's function and role within society as well as the relationship between Beauty and Truth. In "The Happy Prince" and "The Young King" exploitation takes place through ignorance; the ruler was ignorant of the suffering which he caused or permitted to flourish. Knowledge therefore was the magic catalyst to reform. But the Miller exploits and rationalizes such exploitation knowingly. He is oblivious to all contact with art, a Philistine, as Arnold refers to such men and women. Moreover, even Christianity itself is used and manipulated by him as a trick to exploit the gullible and simple. In a world that reduces everything of any worth to a lie, and destroys all those who live within its environs, Wilde seeks to preserve the one thing which

the Philistine cannot destroy or control, if only because he is unable to comprehend its true value - Art. But only the Artist can preserve Art and so must return to the protection of the "hortus conclusus", which, if in isolation from society, nevertheless would safeguard the Beauty forbidden or threatened by society at large.

The metaphor of Little Hans' garden serves to clarify the essentials of Wilde's schizophrenic universe. The flowers and the garden bring with them all the overtones of health and life and joy which Wilde wishes to underscore and draw to the reader's attention. The cultivation of Beauty for itself alone is not decadent but rather an act in celebration of life and the joy of life. Art embodies for Wilde then the very principle of life, and he, by conceiving of art as a singular rather than secular activity, seeks to preserve its continued and needed existence.

Little Hans, nevertheless, is destroyed, and the bitterness which Wilde feels towards society takes on a far more aggravated form in "The Birthday of The Infanta". The symbol of the artist in this fairy tale is not dissimilar to Little Hans, except that Little Hans is physically healthy and pleasant to look at. Significantly, the artist figure in "The Birthday of the Infanta" is a dwarf, who when presented to the Infanta "stumbled into the arena, waddling on his crooked legs and wagging his huge

misshapen head from side to side". The artist is now seen in the guise of a freak whose sole purpose is to amuse his captors if only by being himself. In two ways the little dwarf approximates the personality of Little Hans; he is gentle, joyful and noble and his natural environment is the seclusion of a forest, another Wildean symbol of the "hortus conclusus". However, the comparison ends here and a more significant comparison with Baudelaire's concept of the artist begins. The symbol which Baudelaire employs for the artist is the Albatross - "l'infirmes qui volait". Both the dwarf and Baudelaire's Albatross are taken from their own world and forced to undergo the cruelty of their captors. The wings of the Albatross inhibit land movement, and he hobbles grotesquely as does the dwarf. He is mimicked and tortured, a thing of total derision, experiencing the horror of isolation in isolation. Using the Albatross as a symbol Baudelaire is attempting to illustrate not only the artist's alienation, but the duality of the artist's nature.

Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées  
 Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;  
 Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,  
 Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.

This alienation and duality exists also for the Little Dwarf. The huge misshapen head described by Wilde, like the wings of the Albatross, signifies the artist's increased and literally enormous sensitivity and



intelligence. In his own way Wilde is trying to express symbolically two things: the difference intellectually between the artist and the common man, and the burden of such a consciousness upon the artist himself enclosed within a pitiful body with a mind deformed by its own immensity. Moreover, he can neither walk with nor behave like other human beings and is thus derided and deprived of his humanity by his fellow men and women. Like Pascal, Wilde also recognizes the physical and mental disproportion of man, as well as that of the universe within which he must somehow survive. Intellectually and spiritually the Little Dwarf is a giant, dwarfed only by the physical world which is itself a microcosm.

"The Birthday of the Infanta" deals with the Dwarf's arrival at court. He has been sold by a father who has no use for him and given him as a present to amuse the Infanta. He mistakes her laughter and her gift of a rose for love and determines to teach her all he knows of the mysteries and secrets of the forest. Seeing his reflection in the mirror he comes to finally understand that the Princess laughed not at his dance, but at him, because of his deformity and ugliness. Knowing this he dies of a broken heart.

In this tale the court is no longer a symbol of contented isolation; the decay of the world has finally encroached upon its original naïveté. It is now controlled

by evil ministers and ignored by a king in perpetual mourning. Art in such circumstances is only a diversion, and Wilde again reiterates his dichotomy between health and disease in the comparison which he draws between the Dwarf's forest existence and the court itself. The Dwarf, however, is completely cut off from all human love and friendship, even his own father has no feeling for him, and only the birds will show him any kindness. The pathos of such alienation is intensified by the Dwarf's ignorance of his true condition and the exploitation of him which results. Wilde employs the same technique in his treatment of Little Hans, who also is in ignorance of the cruelty which he experiences. Little Hans, however, is blinded by his own kindness; the Dwarf simply does not know. His suffering is therefore more extreme than that of Little Hans, for he must experience the self-contempt which is produced when love goes unrecognized or unaccepted. The beautiful little Infanta is indifferent to the Dwarf's feelings of love, it is solely his deformity that captures her attention. Of course, in his analysis of the little Infanta, Wilde is very much concerned to debunk the neo-Platonic concept that inner beauty is reflected physically without, but he never becomes maudlin in his use of the Dwarf and the Infanta as symbols. The Infanta represents the potential hope of new life-blood, French life-blood, in the court of grave and serious

Spain, yet in drawing her character Wilde realistically takes into account the deathly circumstances and environment which have nourished her personality. Not illogically, therefore, the Infanta, like the court itself, is beautiful without, but unfeeling within.

The distinction between physical and spiritual beauty made in "The Young King" is made again in the story of the Infanta, but love of physical and concrete beauty in "The Birthday of the Infanta" does not deprive the soul or blind the eye to reality. The Dwarf's lack of physical beauty and the Infanta's lack of spiritual beauty are, rather, ironies which Wilde is placing in contrast to intensify the pathos and pessimism of his tale. However, the Dwarf's desire to teach the Infanta is Wilde's own symbolic representation of the Romantic desire to teach the world spiritual beauty through the medium of the physical universe. Undoubtedly Wilde has Wordsworth in mind and is referring to "Tintern Abbey" in particular. Wordsworth as a boy and the Dwarf as a boy are comparable: the joy, the activity and the experience of a form of spiritual communion with Nature are present in both backgrounds. Moreover, the Dwarf desires to teach the Infanta the mysteries of Nature, just as Wordsworth sought to reawaken a new consciousness of Nature in mankind. It is odd to think of Wilde in accord with Wordsworth, at least as concerns the merits of Nature, but the Wilde of this

period is clutching at precisely the same straws. Wilde is surely the less naïve, however. The well-meaning and noble Dwarf has no significance for the Infanta apart from the ugliness which separates him from other human beings. Only this distinguishes the Dwarf in her eyes, and it is the only reason for his continued existence at court. His true self is ignored, indeed unknown to the princess or her entourage.

"To see ourselves as others see us". In Burns it is a desire for men to examine their own souls, for Wilde it is the recognition of an external self unknown or alienated from the inner or true self. It is the recognition of one's own schizophrenia, as well as the recognition of a self over which one has no control. In a brilliant dénouement Wilde depicts the Dwarf's gradual recognition of himself as he first curiously notices his own image in a mirror. In this particular sequence Wilde employs a double irony by placing the ugly little Dwarf within the sumptuous and grave surroundings of an audience chamber in the Spanish court.

It was a monster, the most grotesque monster he had ever beheld. Not properly shaped as all other people were, but hunchbacked, and crooked-limbed, with huge lolling head and mane of black hair. The little Dwarf frowned, and the monster frowned also. He laughed, and it laughed with him, and held its hands to its sides, just as he himself was doing. He made it a mocking bow, and it returned him a low reverence.... He shouted with amusement and ran forward, and it was as

cold as ice. He grew afraid, and moved his hand across, and the monster's hand followed it quickly. He tried to press on, but something smooth and hard stopped him....

What is it? He thought for a moment, and looked round at the rest of the room. It was strange, but everything seemed to have its double in this invisible wall of clear water. Yes, picture for picture was repeated and couch for couch. The sleeping Faun that lay in the alcove by the doorway had its twin brother that slumbered, and the silver Venus that stood in the sunlight held out her arms to a Venus as lovely as herself.<sup>16</sup>

As a technique Wilde's use of the mirror is certainly not original in itself, although Wilde's treatment is subtle and skillful. He prefers not to describe the Dwarf's thoughts directly, but allows the effect of each frustrated attempt at communication to intensify the Dwarf's reactions as well as those of the reader. The Dwarf's initial curiosity grows and develops into terror as he comes to identify with an object once external and separate from himself. The reader too is made to experience the Dwarf's curiosity and terror as they occur, and thus becomes co-author to the Dwarf's process of self-realization. The Dwarf's tragedy is not unlike that of Oedipus, for in both instances self-realization is tantamount to self-destruction. The Dwarf discovers himself as he is seen by others, although not as he is, for he is much more than an image in a mirror. Yet the despair

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<sup>16</sup>. Ibid., pp. 63-65.

which he feels and his eventual death result from his realization that not only is he unable to alter his own appearance and thus reality, but most importantly he is unable to alter the way in which he is perceived by others. He is a prisoner of both his body and the limited perception of ordinary human beings.

Symbolically Wilde is using the little Dwarf to express the essential difference between the artist and mankind in general, a difference which cannot be reconciled, and literally demands a life of continuous alienation and isolation for the artist. The differences are too many and the similarities too few to enable the artist to find acceptance within society. The Dwarf also functions as a symbol of the effect which society has on the artist; it destroys him by demeaning him, by perceiving him as a dwarf, a thing without significance to be laughed at and derided. The schizophrenia which the artist therefore experiences is not intrinsic to himself, but in actuality is caused by a consciousness which will see or grant the existence of a man or a woman only in part and so must create division within the self.

"The Birthday of the Infanta" represents both a change in Wilde's conception of the artist and a change in his proposed solution to the artist's increasing alienation. The "hortus conclusus" has been discarded as a haven for Truth and Beauty. In Baudelaire the Albatross

is captured by sailors while in flight; in Wilde the Dwarf is captured and taken by a group of hunters who see him by chance in the forest. There is no physical escape, society pervades every corner of existence. In reaction to this realization, Wilde, therefore, abandons all interest in immediate societal reform as hopeless, and eventually returns to his earlier role of professional aesthete. However, to illustrate the extent of Wilde's pessimism concerning society, the little Infanta when informed of the Dwarf's death and broken heart, remarks, "For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts". Society is thus seen by Wilde very much as a shell of lies, cruelty and insensitivity, a vulgar and ornate wasteland in which Wilde nevertheless feels bound to survive.

During the period between 1888 - 1891 a transformation takes place in Wilde. The fairy tales and particularly, "The Birthday of The Infanta", illustrate his growing paranoia and desire for escape and security. While writing the fairy tales, which begin very much as didactic illustrations of duty and social conscience, he is simultaneously exploring his own psyche and, as in the fairy tales, his changing concepts of the role of art and the artist in society. However, where the fairy tales project a series of various messages with respect to the artist in society, the criticism, produced within the

same period, is attempting to arrive at what can only be termed a psychology of art; that is, an understanding of how and why art either affects or fails to affect human beings within a world as sterile as that depicted time and time again in Wilde's fairy tales.



### CHAPTER III

He not busy being born is busy dying. - Bob Dylan

A visual orientation dominates the art and criticism of Wilde during the early period of his writing. To see a thing as it is, to see a thing as it is not - these two conflicting desires control his early intellectual development. As with many other Post-Renaissance thinkers, the schizophrenia and alienation produced by this conflict of visual perception results in a rationalization of mind over matter. Satan's insistence that "the mind is its own place" parallels Pascal's "roseau pensant", and Descartes' dependence upon thought as the true and only gauge of existence. The Little Dwarf in Wilde's fairy tale is destroyed by the world in which he lives, he is virtually helpless to prevent his own destruction. The mind, then, and the mind's great resource, the imagination, becomes the last region of safety for the man or woman who, like Wilde, sees too well things as they are. As he says, "The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass".<sup>1</sup>

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1. "Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray", op. cit., ed. Ellmann, p. 235.

Wilde as always combines within himself both the realist and the Romantic, but as he goes beyond realism in the fairy tales, he extends his concerns beyond those of Romanticism in his later criticism. He says at one point in The Critic as Artist that "artists reproduce either themselves or each other with wearisome iteration. But Criticism is always moving on and the critic always developing". Wilde's own very significant development involves his interest in the mind and the imagination. In "The Decay of Lying" (1889) he focuses particularly on the function of imagination in the creation of illusion, which first concerned him on a theoretical basis in an earlier essay "The Truth of Masks" (1885). Wilde in both essays desires to widen the gap between Art and Life. Yet Life in itself does not frighten Wilde, it is rather the influence of life on his own personality which disturbs him. In Keats one finds a correspondence with Wilde's own analysis of life at this time, as well as a comparable solution to the problem of reality faced by both artists. Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" records a passionate desire to escape from life in order to achieve unification with an external reality through the medium of art, but art as each of the great Romantics knew and understood it was not the most reliable of transcendental media. "The fancy" as Keats sadly remarks, "cannot cheat so well as she is feigned to do, deceiving elf". Underlying this recognition of the

power of reality, there is also a new awareness of the function of the unconscious. Freud's analysis of societal influence was in fact understood long before Freud formulated any of his observations. However, in respect to terminology, what Freud refers to as the super-ego, Wilde understands as "Nature" or "Life", and his fear, therefore, is the fear of the suppression of himself by Nature or, in Freudian terminology, the Super-Ego. To alleviate this fear he must attack the very principle of interdependence between Art and Life, first hypothesized by Plato in his theory of archetypes and later developed along aesthetic lines by Aristotle in his theory of mimetic art. Wilde, as a result, comes to attack an entire orientation to reality as well as the manner in which that orientation perceives reality.

He begins by merely attempting to fortify himself against the destructive influence of "Life" or "Nature". If the fancy is a deceiving elf, but unreliable, the fancy should therefore in Wilde's analysis be made more dependable through early cultivation of the art of lying. If one compares Ruskin's attitude to "false" art and that of Wilde, the prevailing attitudes are both contrary and irreconcilable. What Wilde comes to argue is that all art by nature is false, the more false, strangely enough, the more fertile and healthy. He blithely refers to "careless habits of accuracy", but seriously sees the pursuit of

exhorts the artist to copy and recreate the best in life, as an example to all men, thus his interest in the great deeds of heroes of poetry and tragedy in particular as a exemplary form of moral education. Arnold too is obviously equally influenced by Aristotle, although his emphasis is less upon religion per se and more upon upright and noble behaviour. Despite his theory of archetypes, however, Plato like Wilde is very much in the habit of contradicting himself, and as a result realizes that art itself is a realm of archetypes and produces often its own reflections in life. Wilde arrives at this insight as well, although as a realization it does in fact pervade nineteenth-century thought, manifested specifically in its obsession with censorship and its fear of subversive literature. Nevertheless, in Wilde at this stage there is no fear of the influence exerted by art on life, and his attitude to any such possible influence in fact favours those circumstances creating a catalytic relationship between the distinct worlds of art and life.

Having arrived at the position that Art is not only a world apart from Nature, but a world of archetypes influencing rather than reflecting Life, Wilde glories in his own insight and sees in it a means of artistic freedom for the artist and himself in particular. Selecting Balzac, for whom he has great admiration as a novelist, he uses Coleridge's distinction between fancy and the imagination

facts and factual data which he himself advocated in "The Rise of Historical Criticism" as productive of artistic sterility. "If something cannot be done to check or at least to modify our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile and Beauty will pass away from the land".<sup>2</sup> Mimetic thought in Wilde's eyes becomes a form of virulent disease, eating away at the very substance of life. What is significant, however, is that he views mimesis not as a function of art, but as a process of thought, pervading the mind and the unconscious. Consequently, he is most unwilling to see young minds exposed to such a process of mimetic conditioning, and foreshadows the fears of a form of Pavlovian condition and response derived from the belief in and practice of didactic art primarily concerned with the inculcation of morality and "character".

It is doubtful that mimesis is the invention of any one philosopher, but in Plato certainly the idea is first organized into a vision of reality. Plato postulates a theory of archetypes whereby reality or actuality, as man knows it, is but a reflection of a greater reality which embodies perfection, Truth and Beauty. Art then as a reflection of Life is thrice removed from Reality. In Aristotle's Poetics this idea takes precedence. Aristotle, employing a not dissimilar hierarchy of subject to Ruskin,

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<sup>2</sup>. Op. cit., ed. Ellmann, pp. 294-3.

to argue that "the justification of a character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are, but that the author is what he is". The imagination for Coleridge is a medium for the creation of the artist's own unique and completely personal vision of reality. Balzac exemplifies this concept of imagination perfectly; he has, Wilde asserts, created the nineteenth century itself and transformed it into an art form, which unoriginal and uninspired life in turn seeks to reflect.

But if Life reflects Art, then certainly it is a potentially moral instrument. Wilde in this essay himself refers to Life as "Art's best, Art's only pupil". He means by this that art instructs life in the cultivation of Beauty - yet what of morals and behaviour, does it cultivate these also? Dostoevsky, having Balzac and Dickens in mind, spoke of creating a new "type" in his novel The Idiot, that the goodness of the novel's protagonist might be reflected and repeated in the world of actuality.

Tennyson's aim in writing The Idylls of the King is also to create a "new man" and thus a new world through art. Therefore, if Dostoevsky and Tennyson, possessing such moral aims, both assume that Life reflects Art, as does Wilde, upon what possible grounds can Wilde assert that all art is useless and amoral? This is the essential contradiction which Wilde must resolve if his thesis as a whole is to hold. His reasoning, however, is as ambivalent

as his own position. Art's sole purpose, he argues, is the creation of Beauty, Beauty which is in turn reflected in Life, but morality he ignores by simply refusing to acknowledge its existence in art.

The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that don't concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or 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.<sup>3</sup>

He flees from life and nature which he perceives as sterile only, ironically, to seek sterility in art. Beauty itself, however, is not sterile, and while analysing the effect of Beauty he argues a position in direct opposition to that quoted:

They [the Greeks] knew that Life gains from Art not merely spirituality, depth of thought and feeling, soul-turmoil or soul-peace, but that she can form herself on the very lines and colours of art, and can reproduce the dignity of Pheidias as well as the grace of Praxiteles. Hence came their objection to realism.<sup>4</sup>

Within the context of "The Decay of Lying" it must be understood that Wilde is vacillating between a Romantic desire to improve the quality of life itself through the

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3. Ibid., p. 299.

4. Ibid., pp. 307-308.

cultivation of Beauty and a "decadent" desire to see art freed from an essentially Victorian interest in moral behaviour. His desires are consistent, but his logic contradictory because, like all philosophers, he is involving himself in the fabrication of generalizations. It is therefore irrelevant to evaluate Wilde on the basis of consistent argument, only the process of his thought has any significance at this stage and indeed until the publication of his essay "The Critic as Artist". The above passage is quoted to illustrate the contradiction involved in Wilde's analysis of his own antagonism to life, but also to illustrate how this antagonism and concern for self-discovery causes him to hit upon very real insights concerning the nature of art and thought. The above passage in fact coincides with the theory of vision put forth by Blake. Blake contended the one "became what (one) beheld". As a concept it is still mimetic in principle, yet can be viewed either positively or negatively, depending very much upon the specific archetype reflected or beheld. Blake himself believed that if human beings "beheld" something as psychologically injurious as a factory, they would themselves become a factory. Employing precisely the same principle Wilde, however, argues the reverse - that in beholding beauty one oneself becomes beautiful or more precisely a human art form. Therefore, as aforementioned, when influence of this kind is exerted



upon life, Wilde advocates the influence of Art on life in general, but once the influence of morality through art is considered Wilde's generalization loses its momentum and mimesis as a principle in itself remains virtually unchallenged, providing that Life is a reflection of Art for Wilde and not the converse.

Nevertheless, the implications of such inverse mimesis are enormous in Wilde's developing aesthetic. The mind can know and experience the past, find expression and extension through art as a medium, and thus find within art a medium of self-discovery and self-exploration. However, Wilde remains obsessed with his desire to fully comprehend mimesis, and the remaining essay is a record of his attempts to completely succeed in isolating the complex and intricate interconnection between Art and Life. Leaping from his own approximation of Blake's theory of vision to a very close approximation of that of Berkeley, he chooses to focus upon his own analysis of perception and provides this brief but insightful discussion of Nature and Life.

For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. 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.<sup>5</sup>

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5. Ibid., p. 412.

Again, this contradicts his earlier theory of Art's influence upon life. Wilde incorporates Blake's concept of vision, but understands far greater complexity in the interaction between Life and Art. Significantly, Wilde is not saying that Life reproduces or reflects Art, he is saying something far more important - that art alters our consciousness of life. He has for the moment rejected the principle of imitation, and is beginning to perceive reality in terms of a new dynamic.

Not that Wilde's ideas are new or original, but to parallel them one must return either to the sixteenth century to see feelings and thoughts colour man's environment, or look to Eliot in the twentieth century for an analysis of objective correlativity. Yet Wilde is speaking of more than merely the externalization of an inner reality, and is attempting some form of approach to the workings of unconscious reality itself. Beyond the ideas of Eliot, Wilde is here foreshadowing the concerns of modern linguistic philosophy to understand how language itself governs our perception of life. Indeed he says in "The Critic as Artist" that "There is no mode of action, no form of emotion, that we do not share with the lower 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".<sup>6</sup> Such an observation is "a priori"

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<sup>6</sup>. Op. cit., ed. Ellmann, p. 359.

in the systems of both Russell and Wittgenstein. What is more fascinating, however, is that Wilde is looking at art in a manner closely resembling McLuhan's discussion of media, a theoretical comparison which becomes more and more self-evident as Wilde develops and extends his theories of the effect of art on man's consciousness.

If not "what" we see, or whether we see any given thing as it is or not, but "how" we see is altered by art, then art is in actuality unconsciously affecting its audience regardless of its own specific purpose or aim. Employing the example of fog, Wilde explains how the mind processes data available to it at all times. Obviously, as Wilde understood, the mind filters out that data considered unnecessary to its own continued existence or without any aesthetic value. But once an orange or an apple is thought of as an art form as well as a food, a new dimension of reality has been understood, just as fog, once seen by an artist as beautiful or unique, is altered and in turn alters man's perception or consciousness. Perceiving a new dimension to reality changes the fundamental character of that reality, if only because the integration of that new dimension must take place consciously or unconsciously within the minds of human beings. The revolution in art which took place in the Renaissance causing art to be manifested in the illusion of three-dimensional reality and possessing a particularly spatial focus is an

illustration of an unconscious shift in perception made conscious. Men of the Renaissance had only to examine the interiors of their own houses or churches to know that their world was in transition. A somewhat comparable revolution takes place in art during the latter half of the nineteenth century with the birth of Impressionism. For this reason Impressionism for Wilde is not simply the birth of a new form of art, rather, as a new art form dealing essentially with the effects of light refraction, Impressionism for Wilde is comparable to a new vision of reality and thus productive of a new dimension to life itself.

The problems and concerns of perception are from this point intermingled with the problem of morality in art, which Wilde has yet to resolve. Moreover, his new awareness that art influences not only life, but the mind raises another problem concerning freedom within art. Inverted mimesis, or the influence of art on life, may ensure the liberty of the artist's conception of reality, but does it by extension deny the imagination and thus the freedom of the artist's audience? Does the artist's control and creation of his own vision result in the destruction or replacement of vision in the reader or listener? At one point in "The Decay of Lying" Wilde asserts that, if the Philistines are to be routed, "Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating

liar". It is, of course, an echo of Shelley; but is the artist in fact the unacknowledged legislator of the world, and if so, what are the dynamics of such legislation? Wilde very soon becomes suspicious of his own theory of mimesis. Thought, like Art, he contends in the "Decay of Lying", is independent and "develops purely on its own lines". In Dorian Gray, however, and "The Critic as Artist" thought is conceived of less independently and its relation to art is examined more fully.

Marshall McLuhan discusses this very problem of mimesis in a short segment within The Gutenberg Galaxy concerning the advent of literacy. He makes this comment in respect to Plato's distaste for literacy and preference for oral communication.

Mimesis to Plato had appeared, quite understandably, as varieties of representation, especially visual. In his Poetics <sup>4</sup>, Aristotle made mimesis central to his entire cognitive and epistemological world, not limiting it to any one sense. But the first onset of literacy, and, therefore, of visuality as abstracted from the other senses, seemed to Plato a diminution of ontological awareness, or an impoverishment of Being. Bergson somewhere asks, how should we be able to know if some agent could double the speed of all events in the world? Quite simply, he answered. We would discern a great loss of richness in experience. Such seems to have been Plato's attitude towards literacy and visual mimesis.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy (New York: Signet Books, 1969), p. 68.

The "impoverishment of Being" understood and feared by Plato is Wilde's theme in The Portrait of Dorian Gray. To become what one beholds in the case of art, is to become an art form oneself. But what are the dynamics of such a form of mimetic transformation? In search of an answer the crux of the novel revolves around the strange and chemical relationship between Dorian Gray and his portrait.

Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him? Could it be that what the soul thought, they realized? - that what it dreamed, they made true? Or was there some other, more terrible reason?<sup>8</sup>

Wilde, like Keats, views the relationship between Art and Life as a chemical process. In the above passage, he is recording the thoughts of Dorian Gray as he examines a changed representation of himself in his portrait. Dorian Gray wonders first if Life, in this case his living soul, is reflected in Art, but this possibility is soon succeeded by his awareness of some other, more dread explanation.

Art, Wilde illustrates through Dorian Gray's fear of such an explanation, has precisely the effect on Life which he describes and advocates in "The Decay of Lying"; that is, Art alters the fabric of reality itself. His theory too that absolute existence or being derives from a perception of beauty is illustrated by Dorian as well.

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<sup>8</sup>. Op. cit., ed. Aldington, p. 246.

Dorian Gray comes to fear the very principle of change and thus life directly as a result of the cognizance of his own beauty which he acquires through the portrait painted of him by Basil Hallward. Wilde, therefore, is reiterating his premise that until the beauty or aesthetic quality of any given thing is understood and recognized it rests virtually nonexistent. However, Dorian Gray through Basil Hallward and ~~Lord~~ Henry Wotton is made aware of his external beauty, and thus a dimension of himself previously unnoticed, once perceived, alters his entire personality. But of course the chemical interaction between these three men is more complex, and through the creation of such an interrelationship Wilde seeks a more thorough examination of both the principle of mimesis and the negative effects which the influence of all art may exert upon life and reality as perceived through one's consciousness.

To begin, the portrait of Dorian Gray is not a portrait of Dorian Gray at all, it is a protrait of the composite personalities of Hallward, Lord Henry and Dorian unified into one self. The novel, however, is not an allegory, it is rather an examination of schizophrenia and the psychology of influence. Wilde is using as an archetype Plato's concept of a tripartite soul divided into Emotion, Will, and Reason. As a concept it is not terribly different from the tripartite analysis of Freud. The Ego is equated with Will, Emotion with Id, and Reason with

Super-ego. The analogy is not airtight, but both constructs are comparable if not identical, and furthermore also recall Eliot's theory of a dissociation of sensibility within man.

The Will in Plato, much like the Ego in Freud, is in itself without direction if it is not aligned in some way with either Reason or Emotion. Lord Henry Wotton in fact conceives of Dorian Gray as a form of living "tabula rasa", a blank slate upon which to implant impressions. For Hallward, however, Dorian is a symbol of Greek perfection. Yet this is significant in itself because Dorian possesses neither feelings nor thoughts of his own with the exception of those provided for him by Hallward's ideal, and which ironically is the harmony of self advocated by the Greek concept of 'mens sana in corpore sano' .

Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the Greek. The harmony of soul and body - how much that is. We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void.<sup>9</sup>

Hallward, because he worships Dorian as an ideal, does not and cannot paint Dorian as he is, but only as Hallward himself is, or rather as Dorian is, transformed and idealized by Hallward. Hallward has in fact recreated

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<sup>9</sup>. Ibid., p. 150.



Dorian in a new guise. Yet while Hallward recreates Dorian through the medium of painting, Lord Henry Wotton effects an even more potent metamorphosis through the verbal medium of ideas. Lord Henry Wotton's art is the art of words. He uses words to recreate new meaning and reality, seeing always a dimension unseen by others. Nevertheless despite their artistry, both Lord Henry and Basil Hallward are sterile men, sterile in the sense employed by Keats, lacking a self and therefore requiring transcendence and unification through vicarious experience. Hallward possesses a deep and refined sensibility but can express it only through art; Lord Henry postulates innumerable theories but practises none. "A poet, a great poet, is the most unpoetical of all creatures", Wotton explains, quoting Keats at one point, adding himself that "[He] writes the poetry that [he] dare not realize".

Lord Henry Wotton fashions himself, however, not as an artist or poet, but as a scientist. Dorian Gray in turn is Lord Henry's Frankenstein, his creation, as Lord Henry himself says. Yet in the long and significant passage in which he analyses his influence upon and psychological manipulation of Dorian Gray, Henry Wotton remarks also that, "It often happened that when we thought we were really experimenting on others, we were really experimenting on ourselves". Dorian Gray is an extension of Sir Henry, as he is an extension of Basil Hallward; each man desires a

form of psychic fusion with the youth and beauty of Dorian Gray that the life and the sensation denied to them in reality can be known vicariously through Dorian as a medium and as an art form. Because of this Dorian Gray becomes prematurely old before his time while simultaneously maintaining perpetual youth, yet knowing neither real age nor real youth, since, quite simply, he has himself experienced neither of these two states of being. By becoming an art form created by Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton, his "self" is reduced to a painting on a canvas, an illusion of three-dimensional reality. Thus a double irony is employed through Wilde's device of Dorian's portrait; Art is reflected in Life which itself is represented by a form of artistic illusion. Indeed for Wilde the concept of self is an illusion, as insubstantial as a flat canvas, and as intangible.

Wilde at this point has altered his position considerably concerning the nature of art and the nature of Art's influence on Life. Dorian must be thought of as an archetype for all human beings who have experienced the effects of Art. As he argued in "The Decay of Lying", to behold art is to become an art form oneself and to perceive beauty is still to recreate life, but viewed psychologically, Wilde in The Portrait of Dorian Gray comes to see both processes as destructive to the integrity of the human psyche or soul. Dorian loses far more than he acquires

through the artistic insights and influence of Basil Hallward and ~~Lord~~ Henry Wotton. Part of the problem is due largely to the fact that Wilde is using the experience of such an empty human being as Dorian Gray to theorize a generalization concerning the interrelationship between Art and Life. He argues, like Keats, that the true Artist is without an absolute personality, but he seems equally convinced that all human beings are as mindless and emotionless as a man such as Dorian Gray. Human beings, and the human mind itself, are understood at this stage by Wilde as being only 'tabulae rasae' with none of the beneficial effects accorded to them by art in "The Decay of Lying". Consequently, the fear of self loss or destruction theoretically brought about by Art in Dorian Gray produces by extension a desire to find and understand what exactly does constitute one's "self"; that is, is the mind in fact as Locke contends a form of 'tabula rasa'?

The self, as Wilde sees it, is divided, but divided in what way, by what means? Does the influence of art in fact split man's soul by providing a medium for vicarious experience? "To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul", as ~~Lord~~ Henry Wotton maintains, is only a method of escaping one reality by entering vicariously into another. Nevertheless Sir Henry continuously expounds the harmlessness of art, since to be a spectator of one's own life is to achieve true freedom from

life itself, but what Wotton does not understand is that it is also to create the need for vicarious experience as well. Moreover, Art as a vicarious medium, as Wilde illustrates, possesses more than one function or dimension, and thus is doubly dangerous. It not only deprives one of one's own life and experience, it also provides escape and consolation by supplanting one's own concerns with those of a puppet on a stage or within a book, whose problems are ephemeral and die almost as they are born. Yet again Wilde becomes ensnared in contradiction; mimetic art cannot provide escape, rather it must encourage imitation; it must affect and alter. By means of this contradiction, however, Wilde is subtly exposing the fragmented and disunified sensibility of Lord Henry Wotton and that of his partial creation Dorian Gray. The relationship is such that because Lord Henry's sensibility is disunified, the sensibility of Dorian Gray is disunified as well, thus illustrating a mimetic relationship. Dorian seeks sensation to cure his conscience; but ends in a search for complete and total oblivion. Keats sought escape in sensation also, but he sought meaning and significance in conjunction with that sensation, whereas Dorian's quest for sensual data functions solely in a vacuum. As opposed to self-discovery, the quest of Keats, Dorian is involved only with the mutilation of his own conscience, although not a moral conscience specifically, but rather a

consciousness of the daily increasing control which the composite ideal of Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton more and more comes to acquire over his soul.

For this reason the Huysmans section, inspired almost equally by Pater, is extremely ironic. Within this section of the novel there is indeed a new theory of art, and new aesthetic, but the aesthetic of Huysmans and Pater is not one of transcendental escape, but one of transcendental discovery. Initially Dorian recognizes something of himself in Gautier, who said of himself that he was a man for whom "the visible world existed". Wilde repeats this quote and develops from it, very much along the lines of Symbolist thought, his theory that Life is an art form. However, where Dorian is the creation of other men, the Symbolists created art forms of themselves. Dorian would appear to espouse this latter philosophy, but again Wilde shows Dorian influenced not by ideas of his own, but those of Art, and specifically the novel A Rebours. Dorian fashions himself after Des Esseintes, the protagonist in A Rebours, forgetting that the desired isolation of Des Esseintes develops from real feelings of misanthropy, and provides a haven for a man who has experienced both pain and pleasure in life and would recreate, not imitate, the art for which he feels such great affinity. In Gautier, Pater and Huysmans, Wilde will later see the prototypes for his own vision of the critic as artist, but in Dorian

Gray the fact that Des Esseintes creates both an atmosphere and a library suited to himself alone is somehow ignored by focusing solely upon the love of the concrete and the beautiful expressed as it is in such an unusual and exotic fashion by Des Esseintes.

The loss of Dorian's own personality for Wilde is interconnected with the loss of selfhood by mankind in general. Influenced by Symbolist thought possibly during the very period of writing Dorian Gray (1890), he infuses the book with numerous analyses of the psychological split in man between the mind and the senses. The novel does not in fact integrate his fear of mimetic thought with such schizophrenia in the modern mind, but it does illustrate that on practically every level Wilde is probing into heretofore untouched areas of human psychological experience. Wilde's own ambivalence with respect to the senses is the only possible reason why he refuses to maintain a consistent position concerning sensory experience in the novel. On the one hand, Wilde, through Lord Henry Wotton, appears to offer a new freedom of self oriented to the senses, yet, on the other hand, he seems also to fear such a sensual reawakening and therefore far too often chooses to describe the limp and foolish orgiastic flights of Dorian Gray into a supposedly grotesque world of sensual pleasure and escape. In the following passage such ambivalence is very apparent as he commences an analysis of the division

between mind and body in man, although such ambivalence dissolves as Wilde continues to consider the effect of a loss of sensory experience and the sublimation of sensation by the mind.

The worship of the senses has often, and with much justice, been described, men feeling a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves, and that they are conscious of sharing with the less highly organized forms of existence. But it appeared to Dorian Gray that the true nature of the senses <sup>had</sup> never been understood, and that they <sup>merely</sup> remained savage and animal<sup>ly</sup> because the world <sup>had</sup> 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 <sup>feeling</sup> of loss. So much had been surrendered, and to such little purpose! There had been mad wilful rejection, monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial, whose origin was fear, and whose result was a degradation infinitely more terrible than that fancied degradation from which, in their ignorance, they had sought to escape; nature, in her wonderful irony, driving out the anchorite to feed with the wild animals of the desert and giving to the hermit the beasts of the field as his companions.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly, these ideas are Wilde's, but they are not truly those of Dorian Gray. At no other point in the novel does Dorian Gray sense such loss, never having denied himself, or the concept which he comes to have of himself, and at no other point does the new spirituality combining mind and body of which Dorian speaks become more than a

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10. Ibid., p. 286.

fascinating theory. It is important, nevertheless, that Wilde is analysing the mental and physical schizophrenia within man. It is Blake's theme also, and Wilde on more than one occasion echoes not only Pater, Huysmans and Gautier but Blake as well, specifically Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell". As a result there is not a little of Blake's Devil in Lord Henry Wotton, although most certainly where Blake's Devil is the spirit of energy and life, Lord Henry is very much a philosopher of inaction and refined contemplation. Nevertheless Lord Henry's aphorism that, "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it", does recall many of Blake's Proverbs of Hell, in particular: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom"; "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence"; "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough"; "Enough, or too much". The list and the similarities are endless, but what is important is that Wilde like Blake is searching for some means of self-discovery, to offset the sense of loss which, like Blake, he also feels so keenly.

The influence of Pater's concept of life as a series of "moments privilégiés" with its implications in respect to temporal concepts and the notion particularly of continuum is reflected in Dorian's new aesthetic as well. But again Dorian in dream and Dorian in fact are most dissimilar. Dorian's life is not a series of



privileged moments, it is a perpetual present. Time has been defeated by a trick of art:

The brain has its own food on which it battered, and the imagination, made grotesque by terror, twisted and distorted as a living thing by pain, danced like some foul puppet on a stand, and grinned through moving masks. Then suddenly time stopped for him. Yes, that blind, slow breathing thing crawled no more, and horrible thoughts, time being dead, raced nimbly on in front, and dragged a hideous future from its grave, and showed it to him. He stared at it. Its very horror made him stone.<sup>11</sup>

Dorian's hideous future is a dead future, a mere timeless continuum, the horror of which is further intensified by Dorian's realization that he has neither a future nor a past, since his past is but a string of memories, best unremembered. He has known sensation and the effect of escape, but never feeling or beauty, and thus life for Dorian Gray is a disappointment and a void.

Wilde through Dorian Gray speaks of dreams as "phantoms, more terrible than reality itself", recalling instincts somehow deadened in life but reborn in the mind at night. This nocturnal reality more real than reality can be escaped only by a casuistic transformation of Pater's theory of moments into a rationale of sensual mysticism. Where Pater argues the immorality of accepting "any formal creed or system", Wilde must use this

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11. Ibid., p. 327.

not as an assertion of his own thought, but to pursue what he terms the mysteries of the soul. The experimentation he advocates is again another manifestation of escape into oblivion created by endless sensual pursuit. The brilliant portrait of the supersensitive and tortured Des Esseintes drawn by Huysmans is unconsciously reduced by Wilde from a man seeking to create and experience a dimension of life, combining sensation with thought, into a precocious child playing with dangerous and exquisite toys in an exotic doll's house untouched by life. In Des Esseintes there exists thought so intense that it exhausts him physically. Where Dorian Gray collects pretty rocks, Des Esseintes experiences the reflections of light produced by precious stone. Des Esseintes defies and denies Nature, but he creates a world in her place. Synesthesia is created and experienced as it is in Baudelaire. In advance of Proust, Huysmans also understands the intercommunication between memory and sensual data. Proust's madeleine is anticipated by Irish Whiskey and the smell of a certain perfume. Wilde himself also comprehends through Huysmans this principle, recognizing that in recaptured memory there does indeed exist a new and possibly revolutionary principle of experience. For this reason Henry Wotton characteristically enough comes to formulate Huysmans' concept of memory into a theory of life:

Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams. You may fancy yourself safe, and think yourself strong. But a chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it, a line from a forgotten poem that you had come across again, a cadence from a piece of music that you had ceased to play - I tell you, Dorian, that it is on things like these that our lives depend. Browning writes about that somewhere; but our own senses will imagine them for us. There are moments when the odour of lilas blanc passes suddenly across me, and I have to live the strangest month of my life over again.<sup>12</sup>

One then can escape from neither life, nor art nor oneself. Vicarious experience is experience, not a dream; the beauty of odour, vision and touch, as well as the sound of even forgotten poetry are impressed upon the unconscious, even if they do not live in our memory. Time cannot be defeated if loss of memory can be regained, or if the unconscious continues to exist and continues to influence subconsciously. We are the experiences we have experienced, including those fashioned for us by art. But if those experiences are fragmented and dissociated, and the art created by artists is fragmented and dissociated as well, and those experiences in turn are responsible for the creation of man's consciousness and sensibility, then the relationship of art to life is

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12. Ibid., p. 383.

potentially damaging in Wilde's eyes. Wilde himself refers to A Rebours as a poisonous book. Moreover, all influence he contends is immoral because "to influence a person is to give him one's soul". "He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him".<sup>13</sup> Ironically these words are spoken by Lord Henry Wotton, yet nevertheless serve as the core of Wilde's theme. Throughout the novel Wilde searches for a means to reject the principle of mimesis. He opposes theories of distanced and remote art to theories of intense and complete mimesis, yet is forced always to concede to the realism of the latter concept.

The novel itself does not have a conclusion; Wilde's love of beauty and art is equalled by his fear of its potential ability to destroy his personality. In the course of the novel he does, however, raise problems of very real significance concerning the nature of experience and the self, but he nevertheless feels compelled by his own observations to affirm a mimetic orientation to reality, which analyses behaviour and life in terms of cause and effect, very much as he did in "The

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<sup>13</sup>. Ibid., p. 158.

Rise of Historical Criticism". Dorian's murder of his own portrait is his first and last attempt to cut through the Gordian knot of the cause and effect relationship existing between himself and the ideal created through him by Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton. He is not destroying his conscience, he is attempting to regain control over his life; to kill the cause and thus destroy the effect, which constitutes a form of metaphysical possession of his soul. Wilde is arguing that to kill such a cause does indeed destroy such an effect, but the effect ironically is Dorian himself. He has become an ideal and its destruction necessitates his own. However, Dorian's act is not to be confused with an act of suicide; he destroys the portrait because he does not recognize the chemical bond which exists between life and art. He has no self other than that provided by the portrait, once dead he is unrecognizable except by the rings on his finger. This is Wilde's last comment in the novel: we are recognizable only through externals, what exists within us we ourselves do not know, or understand or recognize, unless of course we recognize ourselves in the art forms or media which have created our consciousness.

Wilde is in Dorian Gray a stage beyond alienation from the self, he is considering the possibility that the self as man conceives of self may in fact be an illusion. The self as a unique and separate entity

representing a given individual may not exist at all, or it may; but if so, how he asks in a universe governed by mimetic reality and the principle of cause and effect?

This dilemma is the basis of Wilde's examination in "The Critic as Artist". The essay itself recalls "The Rise of Historical Criticism", replacing an analysis of historical criticism with that of art. However, "The Critic as Artist", as an examination of criticism, is far less interested in facts than in language, the medium by which facts are communicated. Returning to early Greek criticism Wilde realized that the Greeks as a people, with the possible exception of late Sparta, were a nation intensely involved with the art produced in their midst, far more than any people past or present. Greek art did not appear to deprive men of their own feelings, but rather appeared to provide them with a means of self-expression. Yet the Greeks discovered mimesis, although in Periclean Athens mimesis is literally brand new and experiences much opposition, specifically from Plato. The point, however, is that the Greeks appeared to care very much about what they would and would not experience. Shakespeare's plays were produced on stage despite his audience; the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, however, were received almost as sacred offerings to the god Apollo and entered in competitions contrived to encourage and create beauty and truth in Greek life. It is for this reason that

Wilde begins to argue, in a not dissimilar fashion to Pope, although arriving at a very dissimilar conclusion, that Western man's primary debt to Greek culture is what he terms the "critical spirit".

The "critical spirit", as Wilde understood it, in Greek culture was a consciousness passionately involved with language:

Recognizing that the most perfect art is that which most fully mirrors man in all his infinite variety, they elaborated the criticism of language, considered in the light of the mere material of that art, to a point to which we, with our accentual system of reasonable or emotional emphasis, can barely if at all attain; studying, for instance, the metrical movements of a prose as scientifically as a modern musician studies harmony and counterpoint, and, I need hardly say, with much keener aesthetic instinct.<sup>14</sup>

Language for the Greeks was a world cohabiting with man's external and internal environment, and possessing meaning and significance intrinsic to itself. Realists rather than nominalists, to the Greeks, each word was a microcosm containing within its own specific universe infinite variables or shades of meaning, but meaning nonetheless. Words were not simply tools or devices, but living things having the ability to engender reality itself. As Wilde says, language is the parent of thought, and thus like all parents may create any given number of children. But if the potential of language is such, has

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<sup>14</sup>. Op. cit., ed. Ellmann, p. 350.

language then degenerated, become more precise as T.S. Eliot argues, but less subtle and nuanced in turn? Have we in our desire for certitude and precision of thought reduced language to a one-dimensional medium? Is it perhaps for this reason that reality is mimetic in character and not kaleidoscopic? Wilde, of course, in his essay is asking this very question.

Wilde's first concern is to understand what exactly language has lost as a medium. In the back of his mind Pater's premise that all art aspires to the condition of music is assumed, but he develops the idea and draws from it a remarkable insight concerning the influence and nature of print. It is obvious that, like McLuhan, Wilde has examined Plato's distaste for literacy and arrived at precisely the same conclusion, although not accompanied by precisely the same implications.

Since the introduction of printing and the fatal development of the habit of reading amongst the middle and lower classes of this country there has been a tendency in literature to appeal more and more to the eye and less and less to the ear which is really the sense, which from the standpoint of art, it should seek to please, and by whose canons of pleasure it should abide always.<sup>15</sup>

Vision indeed is a far more precise framework of reference than hearing, yet words are originally expressions of an oral/aural reality, and only secondarily

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15. Loc. cit.



adapted to print. Music, of course, is an aural experience, and in the sound of the voice there are literally the two composite dimensions of beauty and truth, united rather than disunited. Wilde thus argues that truly great poets are not painters, as Aristotle first contends, but singers. Language, like theatre, as an art form is multi-dimensional. Through language Keats can express the sensation of touch and taste, Baudelaire can focus on smell and texture, Huysmans on light and colour refraction and Verlaine and Wilde himself on prose and poetry that approaches melody. Chaucer, of course, like Homer, read his work aloud, but Milton in the seventeenth century, Wilde observes, required the tragedy of blindness to sing rather than to write. Wilde is not stipulating that poets, to become great, must blind themselves, but he is seeking an orientation that is richer in human experience than that which provides solely a visual frame of reference.

Returning to an earlier premise that all art is a form of experience, he takes Aristotle's concept of katharsis and bends it literally into his own meaning. Despite his excuses, he transforms katharsis from a method of purification or purgation into what he defines as a rite of initiation. Art initiates one into a realm of experience, but experience no longer completely preconceived or controlled by the artist. The artist himself seldom understands what he has created, Wilde contends -

a work of art possesses life unto itself, the analogy being that of a child conceived of by a parent, but having a life and personality distinct from, if similar to, its originator. To trust the tale not the teller, as D.H.

Lawrence commends, is the new premise which Wilde in "The Critic as Artist" chooses to advocate and to explore.

He maintains, nevertheless, that all art and art criticism remains completely subjective, distinguishing between conscious and unconscious creativity. "The world" he says, "is made by the singer for the dreamer". The dreamer or critic in Wilde's aesthetic is granted creativity equal to that of the artist. Each critic in fact recreates the work of art experienced, criticism being "a creation within a creation" by virtue of the nature of multi-dimensional language.

The artist creates beauty, but beauty is not obvious. What was once pictorial must become suggestive and evocative in nature. The creation of beauty must be both abstract and concrete, a mystery as opposed to an exposé:

Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole firey-coloured world.<sup>16</sup>

Wilde here is, of course, thinking of the criticism

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<sup>16</sup>. Ibid., p. 368.

of Pater, a form of criticism which seems constantly to discover meaning and beauty where none before was perceptible. But Wilde realizes very well that Pater carefully selected the art which he desired to examine. When Wilde postulates that Beauty expresses nothing, he is recalling Pater's own theory of omission, which at present forms the basis of McLuhan's analysis of hot and cool media. It is the suggestive, evocative nature of art, a form of incompleteness, which permits the critical or imaginative spirit in men such as Pater and Wilde to discover and experience the fullness of art. Indeed Wilde theorizes these ideas into a form of revolutionary aesthetic manifesto of his own. "It is through the very incompleteness of Art", he says, "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, which, while accepting both reason and recognition as stages of apprehension, subordinates them both to a pure synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole, and, taking whatever alien elements the work may possess, uses their very complexity as a means by which a richer unity may be added to the ultimate impression itself."<sup>17</sup> In this very long sentence Wilde has done two very essential things; he has formulated a

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<sup>17</sup>. Ibid., p. 348.

theory of art based on a synthesis of the experience of both artist and critic, and he has formally rejected a reality oriented to the principle of mimesis and cause and effect. The experience of art is a process, a continual synthesis of new and old experience.

Art, therefore, has again become positively significant in the development of individual personality and thought for Wilde. It is a medium of revelation, a process of self-discovery and intellectual growth. Wilde goes so far as to say that "the elect spirits of each age, the critical and cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life, and will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what Art has touched".<sup>18</sup> Modernity itself is not knowledge of the present, but knowledge of "The collective life of the race", - a phrase, and concept, that T.S. Eliot understood. The past for Wilde becomes contemporaneous with the present and the future.

Wilde is nevertheless still torn between his desire for growth and a desire for escape from life. Through the medium of art he wishes to grow in experience, but without knowing real pain or real suffering. In a brilliant critical passage he recreates Dante's journey down into the Inferno, up through Purgatory and eventually into

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Ibid., p. 375

Heaven, but he journeys as a spectator and simply refuses in this way to experience the horror which he sees around him. He desires what he terms a "transference of emotion", but his attitude is consistently ambivalent. In the realm of ideas, once divorced from the fact of actually facing adverse experience itself, Wilde will, however, theorize a position whereby the past becomes one with the present or whereby knowledge of oneself is derived through knowledge of others, or through knowledge of mankind's own specific heredity. Through the critical faculty man, he maintains, can know the past as an aspect of the present, much as Eliot's Tiresias embodies the experience of all men and women in one principle. Interestingly enough, numerous passages in "The Critic as Artist" foreshadow the temporal simultaneity which not only T.S. Eliot uses and examines, but intellectuals as varied as McLuhan and Margaret Mead have recognized and sought to analyse.

Temporal concepts are examined, of course, only indirectly as a part of Wilde's real concern, which is the function of the self. The self is no longer negated by art, rather it is extended into its own past and thus its own present through the medium of art. The human race is the past. Human beings live not their own existence but "the lives of the dead". Moreover, "the soul", Wilde points out, "that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual, created for our service,

and entering into us for our joy"; the soul of man is, rather, "concentrated race-experience". We are where we have been, and thus must retrace our steps to go forward. The same insistence upon heritage exists in Eliot's essay "Tradition and The Individual Talent" with the difference that Wilde seeks to find self-expression through art and the past, while Eliot seeks to deny his selfhood. To do this, Wilde would argue, would necessitate the denial of the past itself and art and art criticism, and would result only in the achievement of oblivion.

The sole desire of the mind for Wilde is to "feel itself alive". Such life posits the development of the individual which in Wilde's new aesthetic is the essential factor in the development of a modern civilization equal to that of the Greeks. Not to know oneself, but to be oneself, becomes Wilde's ideal in both art and life. But such being presupposes a new process of thought. Thought like language has degenerated in Wilde's eyes, degenerated into mere opinion. Perhaps realizing something of the barriers he, like others, creates between himself and art, he asks that the critic surrender every aspect of himself, mind and body, to a work of art, that the impression he does formulate be neither destroyed nor denied. Experience cannot be cultivated, unless within the critic himself there exists an openness to art and experience in all its forms. He advocates continuous growth,

continuous evolution, and the continuous experience of new forms, sensations and thoughts. In this way art lives and life is enriched. He desires in fact to permeate man with a temperament primarily aesthetic and valuing experience alone, rather than the effects of experience - a consciousness involved in process as opposed to cause and effect in endless, pointless succession. Reflection as a concept therefore does not exist in Wilde's universe; one cannot look back to the past, one must rather re-experience it and so integrate such experience within the present itself. The living personality in fact functions totally within the present, and so, Wilde logically assumes, must art. Yet this desire to fully realize the present also causes Wilde to redefine and alter the traditional concept of artistic creativity. The artist, he maintains, proceeds "not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion". He seeks not to express or analyse the past, but rather to record the mood suggested by form alone. The artist who desires to reflect upon his past must see himself in the past as an object. Such objectification of the self, however, both necessitates and perpetuates the continuation of schizophrenia. The artist can perhaps know himself as he was, but he remains virtually isolated from himself in the present, just as the present itself is somehow negated by thought that looks forever backward into the past. As Wilde observes, "We

teach people how to remember, we never teach them how to grow". The memory is bound to the opinions of the past, but it is to re-experience the past and so integrate it within the present that he desires, not remembrance of the past alone.

All that manifests the present, therefore, Wilde acquires and employs as criteria for his theory of art. The moment must be denied neither for the benefit of the past nor the future; all three temporal concepts must be thought of as one. However, Wilde, like Plato, also extends his theories of art to include or interconnect with his theories of life and society. A return to the primacy of the present, he argues, remarkably enough, not only creates temporal simultaneity but makes mankind one as well. The critical spirit which he advocates creates a consciousness which is "cosmopolitan". There is something of McLuhan in this argument, as one might expect from Wilde's use of the word "cosmopolitan". McLuhan's theories, however, focus largely upon the speed of communications media to destroy the concepts of past and future, whereas Wilde's concept depends not so much upon the rapidity of communications media, as it depends upon the creation of a broadened or more universal sense of self derived through the medium of art alone. Culture for Wilde has neither national nor temporal boundaries. Goethe, he points out, could not hate the conquering armies



of Napoleon, because French culture created his "being" perhaps even more so than it created the Frenchmen who technically had become his enemies. To hate them was to hate himself:

"Criticism will annihilate race prejudices, by insisting upon the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms. If we are tempted to make war upon another nation, we shall remember that we are seeking to destroy an element of our own culture, and possibly its most important element. As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination. When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular. The change will, of course, be slow, and people will not be conscious of it".

Wilde's words recall the fears of Erasmus as early as the sixteenth century. In the fragmentation of the Medieval world Erasmus understood that man was losing a fundamental dimension of himself, and replacing that dimension with a sensibility as disunified as the world which he saw in genesis. Goethe's refusal to write hate songs to inspire war is his refusal to disunify his own sensibility and thus acknowledge such fragmentation. Hate relies upon the objectification of any given human being. If a poet can conceive of himself as a object, he can conceive of any other human being as an object. But if he views the world subjectively, as a medium for discovery and growth, as in Goethe's case, such hate is impossible. The

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Ibid., p. 405

cosmopolitanism which Wilde speaks of in this essay thus depends totally upon the cultivation of the self and the present, as Wilde has come to conceive of these two concepts.

"The Critical Spirit and the World-Spirit are one", he states. Yet the critical spirit he further maintains is always in advance of its time. In Wilde there is indeed thought in advance of its time. His analysis of the art of living is like that of no other thinker in the nineteenth century. He looks ahead always to the complexity of awareness that exists in twentieth-century thought. It is because of this complexity that Wilde realizes that a change in consciousness will be slow, as will an awareness of such change. But in Wilde there does exist a record of one man's thought which does alter consciousness, and in so doing implicates a very new role for both art and criticism. In Wilde one can see and better understand the developments sought by such writers and critics as Joyce, Pound and Eliot. Knowledge itself needs no apology or reason for being, but nevertheless an understanding of the still very new tradition created by such men provides a framework whereby the experience of art can perhaps be examined and considered more fully.

Wilde's theories, however, do more than this; as Borges pointed out, Wilde is always right, and when wrong, only wrong because Truth is a paradox. There is also

something fine about Wilde's refusal to accept his own rationalizations, and to consistently examine the assumptions accepted by the majority of men and women in his time and our own. He wanted not so much freedom of thought, as freedom to think. Reality he thought of as a dream, and himself as a dreamer, but his dreams often approximate visions which herald a consciousness as extensive as it is whole.

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