

**'Art is the only serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious.'**

The study of the life and work of Oscar Wilde -the married homosexual, the Protestant Anglo-Irishman with Nationalist and Catholic sympathies- is characterised by his most famous literary device, the paradox, and nowhere is this more true than in his attitude to art. He was an aesthete who worshipped the cult of beauty and strove to live his life artistically yet he was unable to realise these high ideals in either his work or his life, inextricably linked as they were. Art was certainly the serious guiding principle in the life of Wilde the artist, but he compromised his aesthetic principles by his human inability to keep it, and thus himself, detached from serious ideas.

On arriving in England, Wilde was initially seduced by the Oxford Aesthetes, who at that time were heavily inspired by the pre-Raphaelite and Christian enthusiasms of Ruskin, and by his idea that art should remain true to nature. However, he soon fell under the more Decadent influence of his tutor, the German and Greek philosophy don Walter Pater, who had already published a number of essays on the subject of art, including one in 1866 in which he publicly declared his renunciation of Christianity in favour of 'a religion of art'<sup>1</sup>. Pater proposed in his collection of essays *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*<sup>2</sup> that young men ought to actively seek out sensation and 'great passions'<sup>3</sup> and cultivate Romantically heightened sensibilities in the pursuit of aesthetic experience, advocating that they ought to 'get as many pulsations as possible into the given time'<sup>4</sup>. Wilde later described the work as 'the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty' and, in the same letter, as having had 'such a strange influence over my life'<sup>5</sup> and it seems likely that he saw it as his own equivalent of Dorian Gray's fatal book.

Adopting Pater's neo-pagan artistic creed inevitably led Wilde to take art very seriously indeed; he saw his role as an artist as a vocation that he must struggle to live up to, conforming both his life and his work to the aesthetic ideals of beauty, and art for art's sake. Art was an 'exaggeration' of life, a more wonderful, intense version that life in turn sought to imitate, and ideally it was as abstract and independent of reality as possible, beauty being far preferable to naturalism. Art was superior because whilst the occasional pallid beauties of life are transient and necessarily unique, 'there is no mood of passion that art cannot give us, and those of us who have discovered her secret can settle beforehand what our experiences are going to be' (*The Critic as Artist* page 992)<sup>6</sup>, art thus being far more convenient and reliable

ERNEST: Life then is a failure?

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Pater, *Coleridge's Writings*, Oxford, 1866

<sup>2</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, London, 1873

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Oscar Wilde, in a letter to Ernest Radford quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, London 1987, page 80

<sup>6</sup> all page references for Wilde's work from *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, Ware, 1987

GILBERT: From the artistic point of view certainly (The Critic as Artist page 992).

This freedom to experience noble and great passions through art without truly engaging with the emotions brings man closer to the aesthetic ideal, for real grief is bitter and thus is 'a passage to a lesser perfection' (The Critic as Artist page 993) as it mars the personality, whereas art 'shield[s us]...from the sordid perils of actual existence' and therefore it is 'through art, and through art only, that we can realise our perfection'. Art itself is 'emotion for the sake of emotion' and therefore an important tool in Pater's idea of the pursuit of sensation and excellence, as well as, as such, beautifully useless.

Wilde's theory of art considered it as so ideally abstract and divorced from reality as to be entirely free from the norms of ethics, morality and other concerns of squalid life

As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affect us in any way...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. (The Decay of Lying p.927).

However, although he wrote about this at length in his critical essays, he found such a doctrine impossible to uphold in his own creative work. His poetry is conventionally Victorian in that it expresses the moral and religious attitudes and addresses the social and cultural issues expected of serious literature, yet in doing so it involves itself with action, with normal life and with being instructive or edifying in some way, and in so doing moves out of Wilde's sphere of art. Both Sonnet to Liberty and Libertatis Sacra Fames reveal the poet's concerns about the rise of socialism and the dangers of giving power to the anarchic masses in an age of ever widening democracy, despite his support for equality in principle

Spite of this modern fret for Liberty,

Better the rule of One, whom all obey,

Than to let clamorous demagogues betray

Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy. (Libertatis Sacra Fames, lines 5-8).

Many of the poems written during his visit to Italy in the summer of 1875 were unmistakably influenced by his growing attraction to Roman Catholicism, surely a subject of contemporary relevance in the post-Darwinian age of spiritual crisis. In San Miniato he suggests a parallel between the martyred artist, fighting against social convention and Christ himself, and also talks mystically of the Virgin Mary and confessions of sin, seeming to identify himself with the passionate ritual and devotion of the Roman church, perhaps attracted by its mysterious and exotic artifice in comparison to the Irish Protestant church

O crowned by God with thorns and pain!

Mother of Christ! O mystic wife!

My heart is weary of this life

And over sad to sing again. (lines 9-12).

Wilde was inspired to write the patriotic Ave Imperatrix in support of the war against Afghanistan, celebrating England's noble mission to halt Russian expansion and acting as an unofficial Poet Laureate, garnering public support and national feeling. Even Hélas, which begins with a distinctly un-Victorian

vision of a life free from any moral purpose or strictures, negatively concludes that such an existence may distance man from God and from eternal truths

To drift with every passion till my soul  
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,  
Is it for this that I have given away  
Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control? (lines 1-4).

The poetry inspired by the art of others, as vaunted in *The Critic as Artist*, is often based on Avant Garde, Impressionist subjects yet whilst he succeeds in limiting the work to the creation of beautiful images like the paintings in works such as *Impressions Les Silhouettes*, which draw no moral conclusions, *Impressions du Matin* cannot escape a typical Victorian judgement on the prostitute waiting in it's dawn world

With lips of flame and heart of stone (line 16).

Nor can Wilde's more famous society comedies conform to this central tenet of his views on the importance of art, notoriously articulated by Gilbert in *The Critic as Artist* in the assertion that 'all arts are immoral' (page 999). *A Woman of No Importance* questions the relationship between class, wealth and morality, with the puritan American Hester and the middle class Mrs. Arbuthnot representing the new egalitarian morality and the fading dandy Lord Illingworth signifying the dying aristocratic privilege of being above moral reproach. Whilst superficially a light pastiche of the private lives of the ruling classes of England, *An Ideal Husband* highlights the discrepancy between high minded morals and the realities of political power, and also generates a faint sense of disquiet at the ease at which Lady Chiltern is relegated back to the role of the dutiful, subservient wife by Lord Goring's absurd speech

A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions...A woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of woman, or should want of them.

It is only in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that the social and moral agendas of the other comedies is allowed to give way completely to an aesthetic drama governed by Gwendolen's maxim

In matters of grave importance style, not sincerity is the vital thing. Norbert Kohl notes that Wilde 'reduces earnest Victorian morality into the proportions of a name, making an ethical attitude into a formal aesthetic category'<sup>7</sup> and therefore undermines the very idea of a moral point to the play.

Wilde's fairy tales conform to his aesthetic principle, outlined in *The Decay of Lying*, that the naturalistic style so in vogue in the nineteenth century was in complete opposition to the true aim of the artist, which was 'the telling of beautiful, untrue things'. Their fanciful form and content is certainly art as he saw it, 'purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent'. It seems probable that they were not written purely because of his new family circumstances, but, perhaps chiefly, to put into creative practice his anti-realistic ideas. As with much of their

---

<sup>7</sup> Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, Cambridge 1989

genre, there is a clear moral theme running through the tales, despite their fantastic settings. The *Picture of Dorian Gray* combines this supernatural element with conventional moral issues, and Wilde himself admitted that it was 'a story with a moral'<sup>8</sup>, indeed one which recognises the dangers of aestheticism. Aesthetic philosophy clearly offers an inadequate basis for social conduct, and is ultimately unable to suppress moral awareness with its eternal quest for pleasure and attempts to style existence into a work of art.

Wilde saw art as so serious that it is inevitable that the role of the artist in it would not have been dismissed. Tellingly, he idolised Keats as a work of art in himself, the physically beautiful poetic genius martyred by public persecution and a victim of a romantically early death epitomised Wilde's ideal of the artist living his art, the 'priest of beauty, slain before his time'<sup>9</sup>. He once ridiculed Tennyson for his prosaic, ordinary life,

How can a man be a great poet and lead the life of an English country gentleman? Think of a man going down to breakfast at eight o' clock with the family, and writing *Idylls of the King* until lunchtime.<sup>10</sup>

He envisaged much more public role and active role for the artist himself; art was a vocation that must be fulfilled in his very physical presence and appearance. The artist required certain discerning critical sensibilities in order to be able to fully appreciate beauty for its own sake, and thus create it

There is in us a beauty-sense separate from the other senses and above them, separate from the reason and of nobler import, separate from the soul and of equal value (*The Critic as Artist*, p.1006).

This is of particular importance because Wilde believed that all art sprang from personality, and therefore that nothing of pure beauty could come from the aesthetically imperfect. Part of the artist's responsibility was to seek out sensation and experience whenever possible, but it was important that he should never become too serious about any position except the abstract notion of beauty, for this would obstruct full experience of other views of the world

The true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty, but he will seek for beauty in every age and in each school and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought or stereotyped mode of looking at things...he will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions. (*The Critic as Artist*, p. 1005)

Thus morality in either the artist or his work was a dereliction of duty, for he was obliged to give 'free play to all sensations so as to experience more of them and escape submission to any single one'<sup>11</sup>.

It has already been seen that Wilde was unable to recreate this ideal in much of his work, but he was more successful in his life, giving some truth to André Guide's comment

A great writer, no, but a great viveur...like the philosophers of Greece, Wilde did not write but talked and lived his wisdom.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1962, page 141

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, page 41

<sup>10</sup> quoted in *Aspects of Wilde*, Vincent O'Sullivan, London 1936, page 214

<sup>11</sup> Ellman, *Oscar Wilde –Critical Essays*, ed. Ellman, London 1969

<sup>12</sup> André Guide, *Oscar Wilde*, London, 1951, page 16

He viewed his own life in terms of art, and devoted it to beauty; this being most easily applied to his physical presence and surroundings he perfected the ephemeral arts of conversation and gorgeous dress and decoration in a manner reminiscent of the dandies of his society comedies. Rather like Lord Goring, Lord Illingworth and Lord Henry Wootton, Wilde hid behind exquisite buttonholes and epigrams to avoid the obligation of true intimacy with another individual. Much of the humour in his work arises from the dandy, or Wilde, ignoring the concerns of another speaker and, presuming that they know better, answering them with a witty and slightly relevant paradox, neatly avoiding the obligations of a relationship whilst exhibiting their own cleverness. There is some evidence to suggest that Wilde constructed his plays to an extent around such previously written lines, showing the importance at which he held a beautifully composed exchange in relation to plot.

In keeping with the idea of not adopting any one creed or set of opinions Wilde had a number of different personae that he altered according to the audience of the time, including the salon raconteur, the critical lecturer and the decadent connoisseur. He hid behind various masks, and it is very difficult to recognise which, if any, were the 'real' Oscar; even in his work the true author is hidden behind clear similarities to other authors, as the young Oliver Elton pointed out when Wilde sent his first book of poetry to the Oxford Union, it was clearly influenced by

Sidney...John Donne...Lord Byron...William Morris...Algernon Swinburne and...sixty more.<sup>13</sup>

Wilde struggled to reconcile his aesthetic self with social convention and his inherently Victorian sensibilities, which inevitably led to tensions within his work, such as in his poetry. He wrote that the life of a true artist would place him outside conventional social boundaries, but he himself was unable to resist the superficial beauty, glitter and wit of high society.

After his fall from this world Wilde began, unsurprisingly, to view his life rather differently; instead of a decorative art form he now gloomily saw it as a tragic drama as described in *De Profundis*, with himself as the tortured, Christ like figure, martyred for his art. Peter Raby notes that in this sense his life reflects the principle set out in *The Decay of Lying*, that 'a truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true', for what began as a 'grotesque, artificial comedy' became the 'grotesque bitterness of modern tragedy'<sup>14</sup>, with Wilde cast as the suffering scapegoat. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, written in prison, is the most overtly didactic of all of his work, yet the fact that the tragedy has finally become real for the author makes it more than empty Victorian morality, it is a real expression of life in art.

Wilde held very high artistic ideals, but the reality for him as an artist is well illustrated by his comment on the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian is what I would like to be –in other ages perhaps.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Oliver Elton quoted in Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, London 1946, page 82

<sup>14</sup> Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge 1988

<sup>15</sup> *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1962, page 352

He saw art as the only serious aim in life, yet he himself was a continual compromise between Lord Henry and Basil Hallward, between his public and private personas, between the disinterested beautiful aesthete and the conventional Victorian socialite, and thus he was never able to devote himself entirely and seriously to art. He could not isolate himself from society or its morality, and this retention of another creed meant that, by his own artistic standards, his work was often outside the sphere of true art; although both it and his life were often aesthetically beautiful, they did not exist solely for beauty. This does not however make his art a failure by less exacting standards, for it was the social and personal influences upon it that saved it from superficiality. His work is less about 'art for art's sake' than an expression of his own life and ideas

Wilde devoted his career to investigating that most elusive of subject matter, the self, and creating an expressive medium for his findings.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde, Art and Egotism*, London 1977, page 1