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THE POSEUR AND THE CRITIC IN SOME ESSAYS OF OSCAR WILDE

AS WITH MANY AESTHETIC DOCTRINES, the doctrine of art for its own sake is both profound and platitudinous, both unanswerable and easily confuted. Baudelaire spoke of his own art as "pur", but he also condemned *art pour l'art*:

La puérole utopie de l'école de l'*art pour l'art*, en excluant la morale, et souvent même la passion, était nécessairement stérile. Elle se mettait en flagrante contrevention avec la génie de l'humanité. Au nom des principes supérieurs qui constituent la vie universelle, nous avons le droit de la déclarer coupable d'hétérodoxie.

Elsewhere Baudelaire says, "La première condition nécessaire pour faire un art sain est la croyance à l'unité intégrale. Je défie qu'on me trouve un seul ouvrage d'imagination qui réunisse toutes les conditions du beau et qui soit un ouvrage pernicieux." Understood in their context, these remarks of Baudelaire are answers not to those who realize the sensible implications of art for its own sake, but rather to those who glibly proclaim the idea without qualification.

One of the paradoxes of *art pour l'art* as an historical school is simply that it *was* an historical school. Its assertion of autonomy from social issues and from morality was in many ways an undermining of Philistinism. Far from ignoring bourgeois morality, it often had to address itself to this morality. The pose which *art pour l'art* provided made necessary, at least in many of the critical essays of Oscar Wilde, a continual self-posturing. One of the outstanding features of Wilde's writing, his deliberately shocking epigrams which deny what seems to be the truth, is often no more than the expression of the spirit of contradiction. Often the epigram, or the epigrammatic style, as used by Wilde in his criticism, merely provides an atmosphere that is suitable to a denial of strict bourgeois rules. But sometimes, when the atmosphere has been created, we discover that there is little else but the atmosphere—a vague mist which distorts one reality without revealing another.

This is not all meant to be simply a disparagement of Wilde. What is implied here is that a genuine freedom to publicly explore the aesthetic im-

plications of his own belief, *art pour l'art*, was, paradoxically, often unavailable to Wilde. And this was so, as has been pointed out above, because the pose brought about by a hostile public necessitated a propagandizing on behalf of itself—a constant perpetuation of itself. Nevertheless, Wilde was not merely a propagandist. Behind the pose, and often obscured by it, there is a sincere concern for the implications of his theory. What it is proposed to examine here is the “method” by which the pose and the genuine aesthetic concern interact in some of Wilde’s critical writings.

In his book of criticism, *Intentions*, the titles of the two major essays, “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist,” are themselves poses. In “The Decay of Lying” the issue of art *versus* reality is often badly stated. The plight of the young artist, says Vivian, is that “he develops a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-telling, begins to verify all statements made in his presence, has no hesitation in contradicting people who are younger than himself and often ends in writing novels which are so lifelike that no one can possibly believe in their probability.” What Wilde is attacking, and probably with justice, is the bourgeois insistence upon “realism” in art. But because the essay addresses itself to the task of shocking the middle class, the author, it seems, is forced to make a distorted statement of what he actually believes, and, even more ironically, to accept many of the notions of the middle class. (That the essay does in fact address itself to this task is apparent not only by some of its statements, but also by its form—a dialogue in which the bourgeois Cyril continually interrupts with expressions of surprise, such as “My dear boy.”)

The notion of art as a lie implies first of all an acceptance of the middle class or utilitarian notion of truth. “It is not too much to say,” asserts Vivian, “that the story of George Washington and the cherry tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature.” This, of course, is said with tongue in cheek. It is not too much for us to say that Wilde is fully aware that the idea of truth implied in the story of George Washington is in many ways irrelevant to the truth which art imparts, and that for art to ignore this concept of truth is only a “lie” in the utilitarian sense of the word. It seems that the odds which Wilde was up against consisted not only of Philistine values, but also of his own insistence upon enmeshing himself with these values. It is this insistence which leads to so much of what we may call equivocation in Wilde’s critical essays. Wilde the poseur speaks of the bore “whose statements are limited by

probability, and who is at any time liable to be corroborated by the merest Philistine who happens to be present." But Wilde the critic speaks of a legitimate probability in art. It would be too easy, and wrong besides, to attribute such a phenomenon to a limited critical vocabulary.

The equivocation referred to may also be found in Wilde's discussion of the relationship between art and morality. It is fair to say that when Wilde says "all the arts are immoral" he means that they are amoral; and when he implies that art is amoral, he means that it is moral. In the first of these implications, the reader is to understand that the subject matter of art may properly ignore or contradict conventional rules of morality; in the second the reader is to understand that in ignoring conventional rules, art may reveal to us a moral order that is more meaningful than the one which these rules describe. To arrive at any relatively simple statement of Wilde's belief concerning the extent to which art can exclude morality and ignore empirical reality, the reader must often separate the two levels of Wilde's vocabulary. But when he has done this, he may see that Wilde's belief in these matters was not very different from Baudelaire's.

Baudelaire, too, saw his own idea of the relationship between morality and art in an historical context:

La plupart des erreurs relatives au beau naissent de la fausse conception du dix-huitième siècle relative à la morale. La nature fut prise dans ce temps-là comme base, source et type de tout bien et de tout beau possible. La négation du péché originel ne fut pas pour peu de chose dans l'aveuglement général de cette époque. ("Eloge du Maquillage")

This was an aspect that was sometimes unavailable to the Wilde who was always proclaiming the complete timelessness of art:

Remember that if you are an artist all art rests on a principle . . . and that mere temporal considerations are no principle. . . . Those who advise you to make your art representative of the nineteenth century are advising you to produce an art which your children . . . will think old fashioned. ("Lecture to Art Students")

Baudelaire could, and did (at the beginning of "Eloge du Maquillage"), justify the cult of the artificial on moral grounds. In fact, in Baudelaire's essay there is hardly anything that is as shocking as the title, especially when we realize that under the rubric of "artificial" is included philosophy and religion, and especially since Baudelaire says that cosmetics can not give beauty to what is essentially ugly. In any case, with whatever indignation the public

may have received this essay, it is not written in the spirit of contradiction; and there is not the brazen paradox that commits the writer to what must remain, unless it is qualified, an absurdity.

That famous passage in *Intentions* where Wilde seems to assert the priority of art to nature can be understood only in the context of the essay itself and in the context of Wilde's other critical writings. "Where if not from the Impressionist do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down on our streets blurring the gaslamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows?" And in an indirect reference to Ruskin, Vivian expresses his ennui toward Turner and toward sunsets, implying thereby that we saw the sunset only after Turner painted it, and that since then it has become an exhausted subject. The implication of Vivian's doctrine, as Cyril observes, is that "Life in fact is the mirror and art the reality." But beneath the paradox is the ancient idea that the artist sees colours and forms in nature that are not visible to the ordinary eye. And in a place in his "Lecture to Art Students" where he is not trying to dazzle his audience, Wilde declares himself in complete accord with Ruskin's belief that when the artist can not "feed his eye on beauty, beauty goes from his work". Obviously there is a relationship between art and the external world, but it is not the simple one demanded by the middle-class public; nor is it to be described by a paradox whose purpose is simply to contradict this demand.

The basic idea of art for its own sake led Wilde, therefore, in two directions. In so far as it was a pose it led to other poses. In so far as it was a serious doctrine, it led to a serious exploration of its implications. In reality, though, the idea of art for its own sake as it is seen in Wilde's criticism is not so easily divisible into public pose and aesthetic doctrine; for the aesthetic doctrine often denies the dazzling pose. The sense that is beneath the epigram and the paradox absorbs the shock of the delightful and outrageous comments. Or, to return to the metaphor used earlier, if we find our way through the mist we may enter a world that is more ordinary than enchanted.

The final aspect of art for its own sake in Wilde's writing that I wish to turn to is the notion of the critic as artist, because there, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, we can see how one absurdity leads to another and at the same time how one serious and thoughtful consideration leads to another such consideration.

We have already noticed that Wilde emphasized that aspect of art which imposes a form upon reality. And although it was important, perhaps,

to emphasize this in Wilde's age, still this is not quite so shocking as "Reality as an imitation of art" first seems. And just as this seems outrageous at first glance, so too does art as an imitation of criticism. "To an artist so creative as the critic, what does subject-matter signify? No more and no less than it does to the painter and the novelist." We see here how one paradox leads to another. If the validity of any work of imagination is not to be tested by its proximity to external reality, then criticism, as such a work, is not to be tested, or regarded, with respect to its subject matter—art. Furthermore the great writers from Homer to Keats—because they were great, Wilde implies—"did not go directly to life for their subject matter, but sought for it in myth and legend;" and so the critic, like the artist, deals with forms that have already been "purified" for him. And the critic exists in the same relationship to the artist as the artist to the public, which, through art, recognizes objects which never existed before.

In exploring Wilde's notion of the critic as artist (on the level of paradox) we are again involved in what I have, perhaps inadequately, called equivocation. If criticism of all the arts "has least reference to any standard external to itself," then it does not aid us in understanding its subject matter, art. We may ask, what does? Wilde provides an answer to this question. The appreciation of Milton, he says for example, can only be the result of very careful scholarship. And his similar but expanded passage on the appreciation of Shakespeare could serve as an apology to many an Elizabethan scholar for a lifetime of lucubration.

To speak about great works of art as being understood only through scholarship, however, is to use the word "art" in quite a different context from that in which Wilde usually defines it. It implies—this approach—that art is almost entirely a product of its time. This is more than clear when Wilde asserts that an appreciation of Shakespeare entails an exact knowledge of such items as the conventions of the Elizabethan theatre, and Elizabethan idiom. This is only a small passage in *Intentions*, but it is a good example of some of the extreme positions into which Wilde's extravagance often forced him. If criticism reveals little truth about its subject, still the subject can be understood—through scholarship. The logical extension of all this is that works of criticism which Wilde so greatly admired are themselves to be understood only through scholarship. (Wilde would probably have an answer to this. Since criticism is an art, and art can only be appreciated by those with an "artistic temperament," then the reader—or critic—of criticism, as he formulates his ideas on his reading, becomes an artist.)

The web is getting rather tangled; rather than disentangle it, if this is possible, let it suffice for us to say that from one point of view there is really no reason for this complexity, or rather for this type of complexity. Wilde's belief on the question of the critic as artist is very similar to the one beneath the paradox of reality as an imitation of art. In dealing with external reality, and the source of this form, lies the artist's special talent or vision. In dealing with a work of art, the critic also creates a new shape. And because the imposition of the critic also comes from within, there are, as Wilde says, as many different *Hamlets* as there are critics.

"Who cares," asks Wilde, "whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter? That mighty and majestic prose of his . . . is at least as great a work of art as any of those wonderful sunsets that bleach or rot on their corrupted canvases in England's Gallery." But of course Wilde often does care for what Ruskin is saying, rather than for the style in which he says it. It seems that one of the real values of "The Critic as Artist" is that it describes and, at times, justifies, a phenomenon in literature that had been going on for quite some time—impressionistic criticism. A critic such as Pater would not admit that his writings did not illuminate his subject matter; and Wilde, in places, would agree with him. When Wilde expresses his indifference to the inaccuracy of Pater's "new" *Mona Lisa*, he means that it is inaccurate only in the sense that the painting affected Pater in a manner that Da Vinci might never have intended.

Of course, the procedure followed here would possibly have been labelled as Philistine by Wilde, for it presupposes that the critic (Wilde) is someone who has something important to say about his subject. It is not pretended that the paraphrase of what I believe Wilde is saying is minutely accurate, or more worth while in any way than the essays themselves. But I do believe that to consider Wilde as a serious critic, one must delve beneath the level of paradox and epigram. And it seems that Wilde was aware of this. In his "Lecture to Art Students", he says, "Still you do not care to be answered by merely a paradox." Even Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" realizes that he is speaking on two levels, and says that a paradox is a "dangerous thing". And I do believe that what Wilde, as a serious critic, has to say obviates the necessity for the continual self-posturing that we find in his essays. Other factors, perhaps a hostile public, may have required this posing. It is true that the paradox does provide a means of getting the reader temporarily off his guard so that he may be receptive to what the critic has to say. He may still wonder (at least today) why he has been jolted so violently.