

**Department of Media, Culture and Creative Arts**

**Complex Truth from Simple Beauty:  
Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art**

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**of**

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**Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree in any other university.

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I analyse a section of the works of playwright, poet, novelist and essayist, Oscar Wilde, with the purpose of interpreting his philosophy of art. The works I interrogate range from his Oxford student notes of 1878-9 to his prose work in 1891. This period includes the phase when Wilde was best known as the aesthete-dandy, during his postgraduate years, but before his fame as a playwright was confirmed. It also predates his conviction, in 1895, for sexual intimacy with other men. While it may be almost impossible for modern readers to separate Wilde's work from events in his life, analyses of what Wilde actually says in his postgraduate lectures, letters, fiction and mature prose, can help circumvent some of the ambiguities that have arisen about his thinking as a result of his celebrity-notoriety as a dandy, society wit, and sodomite.

What underpins this thesis is a re-reading of Wilde's own statements regarding the relationship between art and society in his writing. These include his assertions, expressed in individual works, about beauty, art, the artist, the critic and the spectator, which are customarily read as contradictory: such contradictions are interpreted here as part of Wilde's evolving thought, and as being crucial to the dialectical core of his philosophy. Indeed, this thesis interprets Wilde's philosophy of art as embodying a dialectical relationship, in the Hegelian sense, between the aesthetic, sensual experience of art, and the cognitive contemplation of the artwork. The purpose in restricting the study to the works of this period is to minimise the misrecognitions associated with Wilde's intentions since the time of his trials and conviction.

My research approach, therefore, although it includes analysis of existing biographies of Wilde, isolates Wilde's ideas – if this is possible – from later events, containing the discussion to the emergence and consolidation of these ideas. The thesis places greater emphasis on arguing for connections between specific influences on Wilde's philosophy. These influences include his readings of ancient Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, and readings of Hegelian idealism; his Anglo-Irish heritage, especially the influence of his parents' attitudes and interests; and particular influences in philosophy from his studies at Oxford. I also undertake an interpretive analysis of Wilde's student notes, prose work, novel, short fiction, early dramas, and letters, to show Wilde's contribution to social, political and cultural discourse. Such an approach aims to put Wilde's aesthetic philosophy back in the spotlight alongside his Irish nationalism, sexuality and celebrity.

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## Introduction

We are overrun by a set of people who, when poet or painter passes away, arrive at the house along with the undertaker, and forget that their one duty is to behave as mutes. ... They are the mere body-snatchers of literature. The dust is given to one, and the ashes to another, and the soul is out of their reach. (Holland 2003, 1109)

This is how Gilbert describes biographers of great artists as he argues that contemplative criticism is a form of autobiography in Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" (1891). Through Gilbert's statement, Wilde unknowingly (or not) predicted the way in which his own biography would be overrun by those who focused on the dust and ashes or the beauty, wit and martyrdom, and claimed to have exposed his complete soul. Croft-Cooke (1972) lists some of Wilde's best known biographies to that date and concludes that sanctified legends, including Wilde's death from syphilis, have been passed down from writer to writer to the point that "fragments of mythology have become solid and unquestioned chapters in the life-story" (15). Croft-Cooke cites one story started by Frank Harris and retold by many others relating the mass exodus of gay men following Wilde's conviction. He asserts that the story that the Dover-Calais boat was "laden with queer fugitives, becomes an integral part of the traditional story of Wilde, until it threatens to capsize through overcrowding as book after book appears" (17). This thesis argues that Wilde's sexuality has been accented along with familial eccentricities, his dandyism, social comedies and of course the scandal, conviction and exile, to the point that his broader cultural discourse has been significantly overshadowed.

His earlier biographers, many of whom knew Wilde, might be excused for trying to explain, defend or distance him due to the nearness of events. Merlin Holland (1997) talks about the inability of many biographers to peel away onion layers with a fine blade so they "for the most part took rough aim with a meat cleaver" (5). But the same emphasis on his tumultuous scandal is present in more recent biographies and related works. Neil McKenna's (2005)<sup>1</sup> *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, starting with the title, is so focused on recording seedy sexual exploits that even Dorian Gray's portrait would blush. And the title of Franny Moyle's (2011) study, *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs Oscar Wilde*, belies an excellent biography

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<sup>1</sup> Bristow (2013), describing McKenna as someone who seldom shies away from speculation, says "it is the case that we still do not have any evidence to substantiate the idea that Wilde's homosexual life was as rampant as McKenna would like us to believe" (16). And also criticising writers with a sensationalist approach to Wilde, Pearce (2000) says that some biographies "have sought to sensationalise his life, sacrificing truth on the altar of scandal if necessary" (xiv).

of Constance Lloyd's incredible life-story, only the last three years of which are scandalous and tragic. "So much glory has rarely been followed by so much humiliation," Richard Ellmann (1987) writes in the introduction to his famous biography of Wilde (xv). Such robust juxtapositioning of fame and infamy has been typical of many writers, and this risks reducing the value of Wilde's serious cultural thought. The dust and ashes of the scandal and the comic brilliance have been such a feature of his biographical identity that Wilde's ideas and his art have been snatched from the body of his work.

Wilde's glorious celebrity at the time of his downfall is obviously emphasised in biographies. Unfortunately such interpretations have also influenced some criticism of his work. Ellmann (1965) implies that Wilde is either the artist-criminal or representing himself in the Christ-like "nobler role of sufferer, of scapegoat rather than scapegrace" (5). Lawrence Danson (1997) emphasises Wilde's desire for authority, describing *Intentions* (1891) as his boldest attempt to write himself into history, and claims: "in the book we can read Wilde's intention to secure a powerful position at the centre of the culture whose values he was subverting" (6). Wilde's pursuit of celebrity cannot be denied, but this thesis argues it was not his pre-eminent reason for writing, as some have implied. This assumption can be compounded by Wilde's reference to himself in *De Profundis* (1897) as "standing in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age" (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 729). But rather than having a central role for its own sake, the statement can be read as expressing Wilde's real desire for change in a society he experienced as limiting and intolerant. What Wilde says soon after the statement above is closer to his intent than simply fame and power. He wanted to make philosophy into art and vice versa; he wanted to treat beauty and truth in new modes and to awaken the Victorian imagination; and he strove to do this by treating "Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction" (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 729).

Wilde's celebrity is also contrasted with what some feel are his limitations as a writer and thinker. Mary McCarthy (Ellmann 1965), critiquing *The Importance of Being Earnest*, says "the trouble with Wilde's wit is it does not recognise when the party is over. The effect of this effrontery is provoking in both senses: the outrageous has its own monotony, and insolence can only strike once" (108). Some critics, while stressing Wilde's brilliance as a playwright and his use of political epigrams, have indicated a dependence on the aphorism due to a lack of interest in larger Victorian forms. Josephine Guy and Ian Small (2000) have argued that Wilde was weak at creating extended narrative, plot and character development. They conclude that he was "a writer who did not have an abundance of either intellectual resources or material"

(281). But Bristow (2013) points to the recent sharpened critical perceptions which lift Wilde from the singular identities of Irish man, gay man, idealist, wit or celebrity. And Doody (2011) describes Wilde's family and later educational environment as the remedy to contemporary monotony. She remarks that he was born into the Victorian age "and if that period was deficient in imagination, his immediate family and wider environment supplied a powerful antidote" (25).

### **The Secret is Art**

This thesis argues that the lasting influence on Wilde's work of the combination of his parents' interest in Celtic mythology and religion, his formal education at Trinity College Dublin and his study of the Greats at Oxford, mean that his thought could never be characterised in any single way. It is becoming clear that Wilde worked these influences into his writing, and used them to shape his philosophy of art. Revolution as an aesthetic evolution is clearly seen when Wilde's work is examined in a way that is not limited to famous works or infamous aspects of his life. For decades following his death, Wilde's significance to cultural thought was ignored or undervalued because of the emphasis on aspects of his life. It was stated earlier that Wilde's literary and cultural evaluation suffered due to his controversial biography and his brilliant wit. If analysis of his oeuvre is limited to his best-known works, especially to his social comedies, his (serious) aesthetic cause and its accessibility to a broader audience is undermined.

Even those closest to him have been guilty of reducing Wilde's achievements in this way. Vyvyan Holland (Holland 2003), his second son, partly underpins this approach when he persuasively says of his father's work that "his true literary life was spread over seven years only, from 1888 until 1894" (8). This seven-year period includes some works analysed in the present study, as well as Wilde's celebrated comedies. But it ignores the significance of his earlier work. Combining most of these in an analysis with material from the end of his research at the Bodleian library exactly ten years earlier provides a comprehensive insight into Wilde's aestheticism. Social discourse and ideas explored in his early writing, for example, are seen to become primary concerns especially in his later prose, and the power of art and art's transformational potential becomes the essence of his work. When the earliest lectures, plays and literary work are incorporated in a critical study the development of a more profound aestheticism which contains political, cultural and social ideologies that remained consistent themes in subsequent work can be demonstrated. This thesis attempts to look at his philosophy of art outside the shadow of his most widely known texts (the comedies) and scandalous life.

Seamus Deane (1987) has described Wilde as one of those “minor nineteenth-century figures with all the major nineteenth-century features” (81). This conclusion is understandable given the way Wilde’s serious thinking had been obscured by public interest in the scandal of his life and a handful of plays. Beckson’s (1970) study shows that early reviewers of Wilde’s work considered literature as a moral guide in which sincerity was essential. Within this frame of reference it is no surprise Wilde’s philosophy remained largely inconspicuous for so long.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on Wilde’s psychology through explorations of his sexual identity have been a useful source in understanding his work. Dollimore (1991), for example, links the subversive undertone of his writing to his sexuality by arguing that “one of the many reasons why people were terrified by Wilde was because of a perceived connection between his aesthetic transgression and his sexual transgression” (67). Through his sexuality and his writing, Dollimore (1991) argues, Wilde “subverted the essentialist categories of identity which kept morality in place”, thus challenging Victorian morality and truth (68).

Dowling (1994) also discusses Wilde’s homosexual identity and says that, adopting Victorian liberalism’s endorsement of Hellenism, he presented homosexual identity as culturally and socially positive. (This is explored in more detail in Chapter Five.) She argues that, following the likes of Arnold, Pater and Symonds, Wilde embraced Hellenism “as the solution to the problems raised by industrial modernity, which classical republicanism [could] now no longer grasp (62). Schmidgall (1994) also points to the more positive links between Wilde’s sexuality as a radical influence on his writing. Arguing that more needs to be learned about the political motivations of Wilde’s sexuality, Schmidgall observes that “the ramifications of Oscar’s gay identity have still not been fully and satisfactorily explored” (xv).

But Small (2000) has pointed out that some of the focus on Wilde’s life, which has encouraged the popular perception of Wilde as a homosexual whose life ended tragically, has shifted attention away from his literary value. “The reclamation of the man as a cultural icon has”, Small argues, “been achieved at some cost...the writing still remains partly submerged” (3). The myth of Wilde’s life has also reduced the value of Wilde’s writing. Knox (1994), for example, puts forward the precarious argument that Bosie, Wilde’s young lover, was a substitute for Isola, his dead younger sister.<sup>3</sup> Taking her lead from a letter where Wilde refers

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<sup>2</sup> Dowling (1980) shows, for example, that secrets were deemed to be a central narrative in Wilde’s works and life (one secret “so imperfectly kept and disastrously revealed”) they were used as biographical explanations of a pathological sexual identity (27).

<sup>3</sup> Isola died of meningitis at the age of nine; Wilde was eleven years old at the time.

to the artistic life as a long, lovely suicide, Knox claims Wilde's love for Isola was passionate and that "the guilt over his sexual interest in her and his fear that her death was a consequence of that interest, haunt him" (xv). This type of conjecture, which attempts to discover hidden messages about Wilde's sexual desires, creates "a problem for the scholar who wishes to focus exclusively upon Wilde's writings", Wood (2007) argues, as the mythic Wilde and his work have become hard to separate.

Danson (1997) also avers that understanding Wilde's revolutionary intentions is to understand his relation "to the society in which he harboured them" (6). As well as his sexuality being a motivator for his contrarian philosophy, Danson asserts that Wilde's Irish identity was also significant to understanding the subversive nuance within his writing. Critics have recently focused on his Irish identity and concluded that his Irishness, in Killeen's (2005) words, "disrupts the received wisdom of authoritative Victorianism" (11). Wilde's straddling of the Anglo-Irish divide, and the ways this experience might have influenced his work, is one of the key points explored by critics. McCormack (1998), for example, argues that Wilde is impossible to define because he is both Irish and English, Catholic and Protestant, straight and gay, and a socialist republican very much at home in the company of the highest ranks of London society. Saying that because Wilde "became adept at living on both sides of the hyphen", the only thing that can be stated about him is that "of any truth advanced about Wilde, the contrary will also be equally true" (1, 2). Elsewhere, McCormack (1997) argues that Wilde used his Anglo-Irishness to his advantage in his "guerrilla warfare" with the Victorian establishment: "Camouflaging his own attack in the language of the enemy", she writes, "he blew it up" (99).

Wilde's fluctuation between Irish and English identities, Catholic and Protestant religions, and within his sexuality could be read as an almost uncontrolled or unthinking vacillation between contradictory influences. However, close consideration of his early works, including his children's stories (interrogated here in Chapter Four), shows that Wilde was consistent in his philosophy from early in his writing career. Some criticism, centred on Wilde's Irish identity, explores the influence of his Irish heritage on his fiction and his imagination. (It is argued throughout this thesis that the imagination as central to Wilde's aesthetic protest).<sup>4</sup>As well as being steeped in the literary tradition of his native city (Dublin), Coakley (1995) says that

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<sup>4</sup> Gagnier (1986), asserting that Wilde was a living protest against Victorian materialism, argued that "Wilde wanted freedom from authority for the imagination and human society to develop" (15).

“through the scholarship of his parents...Wilde became familiar with the oral tradition of the Celts” (3). In his detailed analysis of Wilde’s fairy tales, Killeen (2007) discusses the subversiveness of the oral tradition and the conservative didacticism of the written fairy tale. Wilde’s fairy tales, he argues, are both subversive and conservative, both socially radical and didactic for children. Killeen (2007) states that the stories are subversive because “they undercut the morality of late Victorian England and yet they are conservative as they serve the moral claims of another orthodoxy: that of folk-Catholicism” (15).<sup>5</sup>

Critics of Wilde in recent decades, focused on his philosophy alongside his biography, have done much to correct misperceptions of his life and, more importantly, misunderstandings of his thought. An important part of this critical change, recommended by Gagnier (1986), is a shift in focus, moving beyond personal psychology to reference to his audience. Engaged in protest against the Victorian middle-class drive to conform, Gagnier argues, Wilde can be viewed as providing “commentary on a society he despises, in the form of wit and at its expense; indeed this is his major form of participation in that society” (7). This thesis positions Wilde’s protest within his philosophy of art. From the end of his days at Oxford to his discussion of his notion of Individualism, this thesis argues that Wilde’s aesthetic protest, remained coherent throughout his writing career. The thesis also charts the development of the perfect personality in Wilde’s aesthetic. Termed “Individualism” in later essays, Wilde believed that the fully realised person was only achievable through art.

Guy (2003) concludes that Wilde’s notion of individualism is aligned with the more conservative nineteenth-century discourse of Lord Elcho’s Land and Property Defence League. She interprets Wilde’s voluntarism and individualism in “The Soul of Man” as merely a development of ideas from the likes of Herbert, Donisthorpe, Levy and McKay, saying: “Wilde’s essay shares the same fundamental conservatism of...those high Tory, landowning Individualists” (77). Describing the essay as “entertainment”, Guy’s (2003) reading of “The Soul of Man” emphasises the conservative individualistic interpretation of the work (73). However, this thesis reads Wilde’s notions of individualism and voluntary association as intrinsic aspects of his aesthetic doctrine. The perfect personality (discussed in detail in Chapter Six) is freed from the restraints of Victorian authoritarianism, which in Wilde’s words leads to people “thinking other people’s thoughts, living other people’s standards...never being

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<sup>5</sup> McCormack (1997) agrees that Wilde’s fairy tales can be both subversive and conservative and she says “It is from the margins of society, from the perspective of the poor, the colonised, the disreputable and the dispossessed, that these stories should be read” (102).

themselves for a single moment” (1182). It is argued here that he believed that only art can create the fully conscious individual. Described as the secret of life in his 1882 American lectures, and hinted at through the development of characters from his early work, Wilde becomes convinced that his aesthetic ideal can be actualised. This is because he wrote out of a distinctive aesthetic doctrine, contrary to what some have thought of him.<sup>6</sup>

Bashford (2002), reviewing the scholarship on Wilde in the previous decade, found broad readings, which included the Gay, the Irish, the Materialist and the Idealist Wilde. He argues that these paradigms are useful for showing “how theory passes into practice in Wilde’s case: his purposes have proved so elusive that critics are still engaged in the basic task of elucidating them” (613). But recent criticism has shown that Wilde is a much more intricate and complex person and writer. As Bristow (2013) points out, “new sources disclose that Wilde, to use one of his famous phrases, was a far more ‘complex multiform creature’...than scholars often imagine him to have been” (24). Smith and Helfand (1989), Murray (1991), Gagnier (1997), Prewitt Brown (1997), Small and Guy (2000), Guy (2003), Killeen (2005), Bashford (2011), Bristow (2013), to mention just a few, have in recent decades acknowledged a legitimate and authoritative philosophic grounding for Wilde’s work. Criticism that separates his ideas from his aesthetic dandy image is credited with recognising in Wilde’s work an important contribution to higher cultural discourse. Including Wilde’s early work allows a fuller examination of his idealism, an idealism that is consistent across the genres in which Wilde wrote. Such an analysis discovers that the self-realised perfect personality and the ideal aesthetic society, detailed in essays such as “The Critic as Artist” (1891) and “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891), are aspects of a non-utopian or realisable utopia.

This thesis contends that Wilde’s aesthetic philosophy stages a dialectic out of the work of other writers and philosophers. Other studies of Wilde’s writing posit that he either synthesised idealism and materialism or that he maintained contradicting interrelations between them. Smith and Helfand (1989), for example, say the wide range of influences in Dublin and Oxford (from his parents, their friends and Mahaffy to Pater, Wallace, Huxley and Clifford) helped Wilde to achieve a synthesis between science and idealism. They argue that Wilde assumes a “reconciliation of idealism and positivism [adding] the concept of absolute idea slowly moving

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<sup>6</sup> His best known biographer, Ellmann (1987), goes as far as saying “Wilde writes his works out of a debate between doctrines rather than out of doctrine” as a result of his “oscillation” between his love for both men and women (99). And his grandson, Merlin Holland (1997) argues that Wilde could not “tolerate an either/or approach with logical conclusions” because his thought required “the flexibility of both/and treatment” (4).

toward perfection in history” (34). Prewitt Brown (1997) asserts that “Wilde maintained a paradoxical interrelatedness of opposites that was no mere synthesis” (xv). This thesis claims a different dialectic for Wilde’s aesthetic. Based on a selection of works ranging between his 1882 American lecture tour and his 1891 *Intentions* and “Soul of Man” essays, this thesis argues for a dialectic between beauty and contemplative criticism at the core of Wilde’s aesthetic.

Wilde himself acknowledges significant early inspirations for his thought when he credits others, saying: “the only writers that have influenced me are Keats, Flaubert, and Walter Pater, and before I came across them I had already gone half way to meet them” (Pearson, 1960, 38). This present work analyses Wilde’s work from the perspective of a philosophy of art derived from Celtic superstition, Aristotelian contemplation and Hegelian dialectic. It argues that contemplative criticism is central to Wilde’s aesthetic, and that this is the key to shifting Wilde away from the image of a minor talent or a scandal-ridden Victorian. Chapter One outlines Aristotle’s notion of happiness as form of contemplation, discussed in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. It will also point to Aristotle’s notion of the “mean” in production or virtue as perfect beauty, which influenced Wilde’s discourse on both beauty and Victorian morality. Chapter One also discusses Hegel’s aesthetic and dialectical thought and argues that they combine with Aristotle’s contemplative discourse to form the basis of Wilde’s critical thought.

Chapter two continues to look at the range of influences on Wilde’s writing and especially his aesthetic thought. It starts with a review of the influences of his immediate family and wider Irish environment and discusses not only the inclusion of Celtic mythology and religion in his work but, more importantly, how one particular Irish superstition is crucial to the ongoing development of his philosophy, and is a crucial theme in his work. The chapter also looks at the influence of his formal education and reading at Trinity College Dublin and discusses how he assimilated the influences of his father’s interest in Irish archaeology and Greek archaeological interests borne by the likes of John Pentland Mahaffy (a highly influential mentor at Trinity) and John Addington Symonds (whom Wilde first read at Trinity) into his aesthetic thought. Chapter two also mentions the interest of Mahaffy and Symonds in pederasty, how this helped Wilde’s understanding of this phenomenon at Oxford, and how he used it in his dialectics and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The chapter concludes with a look at how broader developments in the Victorian university system ultimately influenced Wilde and it points to the impact on his thought of Benjamin Jowett (university reformer and Greek scholar at Oxford) and especially William Wallace (whose work on Hegel significantly

influenced Wilde). Wilde's notes kept as a student are mentioned during this last section of the chapter as examples of how much he was influenced by the Greats course at Oxford.<sup>7</sup>

The succeeding chapters focus on Wilde's work from his American lecture tour in 1881 to the publication of *Intentions* and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" in 1891. Mention is made of his Oxford notes and his first essay "The Rise of Historical Criticism" (1879) and the point is made that ideas first mentioned here are continually built on in his later works. The first major lecture and two lesser ones during his tour are analysed in detail and these analyses confirm the argument that even from the time when he was most considered a poseur, his lectures and letters wrote during this time show him to be in the early stages of forming a serious philosophy of art. They reveal that Wilde's intention, misunderstood because of his own outrageous persona, was to discuss the secret of life contained in art. It shows a direct link between the idea about the un-lived ideal life in his first lecture and his later discussions about art's masks and the importance of the imagination to works including "The Truth of Masks" (1885) and "The Decay of Lying" (1889). Chapter Three also takes the points Wilde makes in his two lesser lectures, "The House Beautiful" (1882) and "The Decorative Arts" (1882), and shows that they are consistent with and evolve into his later more complex philosophy.

Chapter Four continues the analysis of Wilde's oeuvre by first looking at his two early plays and the letters he wrote explaining his aesthetic philosophy in them. Building on the notion gestured towards in his lectures of revolution as a form of evolution, *The Duchess of Padua* (1883) and *Vera: or The Nihilists* (1880) present in dramatic form his belief in art's ability to provide an intellectual basis for societal change. This thesis argues that both plays are early examples of what Wilde later describes as masks containing higher truths. The relations between art and Victorian materialism are also discussed in Chapter Four as expressed in his short fiction and children's stories. The core of these stories is referred to in his lectures as an escape from the tyranny of the soul: the common theme running through them is art as an oasis of unreason within a society built on practical reason and utility. To this end, characters, such as Lady Alroy and Virginia in "The Sphinx Without a Secret" (1887) and "The Canterville Ghost" (1887) are respectively portrayed as the sanctuaries of art with whom stereotypical late nineteenth-century thought and morality must relate but can never get the better of. The chapter

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<sup>7</sup> As part of the method, this thesis takes at face value that because Wilde recorded a philosophical idea, for example in his student notes, from the likes of Aristotle, Hegel or Wallace, the idea struck him as having some significance. This method is confirmed by Ross' (2013) contention that attitudes found in Wilde's student notes recur in his later published works, including "his journalism, his criticism and his fiction" (6)

also highlights some of the social themes addressed in “The Soul of Man” and *Intentions*, which were already being expressed in stories such as “The Young King” (1888) and “The Star Child” (1891).

The final two chapters look at how Wilde expressed his philosophy of art in longer narrative, essay, and in dialogue form. Chapter Five first explores *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* (1889) and Wilde’s only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It discusses the range of similarities between both stories including the homo-social nature of the works and his use of pederasty as a tool for cultural development. The chapter also examines the belief-scepticism cycle in “Mr W. H.” and argues that it is an adaptation of the ancient Celtic superstition described in an earlier chapter. Chapter Five continues with a detailed examination of the novel, making several significant points including how Wilde used it finally to differentiate his aesthetic from Walter Pater’s, showing the failure of the pure Paterian aesthetic. It also argues that recent interpretations of the novel that over-emphasise the homosexual nature of the relationships between the three protagonists are necessarily reductive. The chapter, in line with the explorations of his others works, takes Wilde at his word when he defends and explains the moral of *Dorian Gray* immediately after publication, and when parts of it were read during his court case. The chapter concludes that, yet again, the novel’s ending represents Wilde’s statement consistently made in his oeuvre regarding the primacy of aesthetics over ethics.

Chapter Six points to the ideas Wilde discussed in his collected essays and dialogues in *Intentions* and includes “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” because of the time frame and style in which it was written and the themes addressed. This last chapter makes the point that Wilde’s aesthetic is more clearly expressed in these works than in the others, and is therefore not open to the misinterpretation suffered, for example, by *Dorian Gray*. It is argued that Wilde was experiencing the overwhelming moral policing of late-Victorian society, and these later works outline his aesthetic response. The chapter discusses how the imagination rails against the contemporary fascination with the facts of life in “The Truth of Masks” and “The Decay of Lying”. Both pieces conclude again that higher truths are found, not in actual life, but in the masks and beauty of art. The chapter also addresses how Wilde balances his apparent argument for realism in “The Truth” with his set of principles attacking realism in “The Decay”. It is also pointed out that the ethical subversion most clearly present in “Pen, Pencil and Poison” (1889) continues into “The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man”.

Chapter Six links “The Critic” and “The Soul of Man,” observing that they both argue in detail how Wilde’s aesthetic contemplation works, and propose that significant societal and individual benefits stem from practising his aesthetic. “The Critic” takes Aristotle’s form of contemplation and, merging it with an expression of Hegel’s dialectic, successfully argues for the evolution of the individual based on Wilde’s aesthetic. “The Soul of Man” looks at society under the conditions of art and describes the aesthetic development of society and the individual as the realisation of utopias. The chapter concludes that, in imagining plural utopias, Wilde indicates a faithful adherence to the Hegelian dialectic as he suggests his new Hellenism is the continual evolution of the individual and society.

By studying what Oscar Wilde wrote in and about his works it is possible to conclude that he consistently posited a philosophy of art whose purpose was the fully realised individual and the advancement of society. From his early mention of the un-lived ideal life to his later discussion of individualism, Wilde positions art above science, religion and philosophy as the key to the fulfilled life. The fact that he also argues for a critically conscious engagement with art demonstrates that he firmly believed in the transformational power of art’s beauty.

## Chapter One

### Hellenic Spirit with Speculative Intent

It is the argument of this thesis that Oscar Wilde's social criticism – with its radical ideas, distinctive forms, and rhetorical force – was significantly influenced by contemplative discourses from Aristotle to Walter Pater.<sup>8</sup> A specific form of Hegelian dialectic, it is argued, is also central to Wilde's criticism. More fundamentally, in his social criticism, this dialectic emerges as a relation between the aesthetic and the contemplative, between beauty and criticism, in which individuals' ethical engagement with social problems was, paradoxically, not at odds with an idea of art as non-instrumental: an art that, of itself, made nothing happen. In this way Wilde was able to overcome a series of intractable and disabling oppositions between ethics and aesthetics – between art and life – that he had inherited from the philistine culture (in Arnold's sense) of his mid-Victorian milieu.

The focus of much of Wilde's writing is the nature and power of art and what this means for society and for the individual. Building on the aesthetics of Pater and others, Wilde's espousing of inaction continued the protest against, as he experienced it, the repugnance and ugliness of Victorian industrial life. But he goes further than just protesting as he also offers the possibility of transformation in his work. As well as advocating for an artistic retreat from Victorian values, Wilde promotes individualism, self-realisation and a turning to an internal reality by means of the aesthetic or art-work. Beauty in art, according to Wilde, can promote consciousness of the un-lived higher life. By championing these higher aims through his unique aesthetic temperament, Wilde's artistic and critical philosophy can be seen to advocate personal and social transformation through a contemplative engagement with art. For him criticism is the quality outlined in "The Critic as Artist" (1891) that expands cultural perception and "makes the mind a fine instrument...it is criticism that makes us cosmopolitan" (Holland 2003, 1151-2). In the same work Wilde also writes that the aesthetic movement's mission should be to lure people to contemplate rather than to create, "for creation limits, while contemplation widens, the vision" (1150). The aim of this chapter is to detail the Aristotelian and Hegelian

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<sup>8</sup> Book Ten of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (considered to be the definitive statement of Aristotle's ethics) discusses the notion of pleasure and he concludes that contemplation "is the highest activity...and it is also the most continuous, since we can contemplate more continuously than we can do anything" (cited in Crisp, 2000, 194). Pater's "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) also states that contemplation "yields the fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness" (238). And his treatise on "Wordsworth" (1873) also states that "the end of life is not action but contemplation – *being* as distinct from *doing*" (61).

influences on what is referred to in this study as Wilde's unique contemplative criticism, a social-aesthetic mode of criticism in which the creative intellect, with its poetic, philosophical and speculative temper, is appropriated to social and aesthetic criticism, leading to the expansion and transformation of individual and social consciousness. It begins by introducing ideas from Wilde's earliest works at Oxford that were still central to his writing over a decade later. The chapter will then discuss Aristotle's notions of the good and the mean and Hegel's dialectic and philosophy of art and will argue that these combine in Wilde's distinctive aesthetic to challenge contemporary accepted norms. Contemplative criticism and its central role in his aesthetic dialectic will also be outlined.

### **The Greek Spirit**

"For the historian", Beckson (1970) states, "Wilde is a writer whose reputation eludes fixity and demands fresh evaluation" (3). This observation is as relevant today as when it was first made, despite the fact that Wilde is now one of the most commented-on writers of the nineteenth century. And despite the increased attention to his critical work, the tragedy of his life and the genius of his wit and personality still receive more public attention than the serious points of his philosophy of art. The uncertainty of his critical reputation is, of course, advanced by some of Wilde's own comments and the interpretation of some of his writing.<sup>9</sup> Where his critical work is taken seriously there are still some familiar standards by which he is treated including as a representative of style (Beckson 1970, Raby 1988), the dandy as homosexual (Bartlett 1988, McKenna 2005) or the Irish subversive (McCormack et al 1998). But there is a growing appreciation of Wilde as a versatile writer (his work ranges across poetry, comedy, drama, prose, short stories and a novel) and as an intellectual who focused on contemporary social, political, philosophical and ethical issues.<sup>10</sup>

This thesis argues that *truth* is the end of art for Wilde: speculative or revealed truth as it relates to individual and social development. Truth is also at the core of his reading of the Greeks, and particularly Aristotle. Highlighting one Greek ideal as "to philosophise with love", Wilde writes that "Greece represented individualism" (Smith and Helfand 1989, 115). From his earliest writing he credits the ancient Greeks with inventing criticism and ranks Aristotle as the

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<sup>9</sup> For example, his statement at the end of "The Truth of Masks" that he does not agree with everything he says in the essay or his widely recorded comment about putting his genius into his life and only his talent into his art contributed to the notion that Wilde was incapable of being a serious thinker.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Sloan (2003), Killeen (2005, 2007), Smith (2008) and Robbins (2011) for more detailed discussions.

first literary critic.<sup>11</sup> The Greek critical spirit, Wilde postulates, first appeared as an attitude of mind or habit rather than a principle of research or a formulated system, and he links this to contemporary Victorian thought. In his college notebooks he muses that the critical spirit of the ancients “had mystic anticipations of nearly all great modern scientific truths” (162). In Wilde’s descriptions of the Greek critical spirit he highlights the presence of a keen analytical aptitude. At the heart of this critical spirit Wilde discovered a speculative truth which “prepared the way for the wisdom of its matured manhood”, one that advances the spirit of an age (123). Greek speculative truth was based on Plato’s early deductive philosophy, but the inclusion of Aristotle’s inductive philosophy improved the Greek method, according to Wilde. In “The Rise of Historical Criticism” (1879), he states: “Aristotle seems to have clearly apprehended...that the aim of primitive society was not merely life but the higher life” (Holland 2003, 1212). While many of his biographers<sup>12</sup> emphasise the Platonic influence on Wilde, it is arguable that Aristotle’s notion of the higher life is just as central to his utopian ideal.

From his early writing onwards the critical method has more importance for Wilde than the actual outcome of any historical or philosophical study. His perception of the relation between facts and their interpretation becomes a core theme in his critical collection *Intentions* (1891). Taking the work of the historian as an example, there are several instances in Wilde’s writing in which the qualities of the Greek critical spirit are evident. An almost throwaway comment in “The Critic as Artist” (1891), for example, describes the proper occupation of the historian as giving “an accurate account of what has never occurred” (1114). And speaking of the need for a historian’s “intuitive sense of discrimination” in “The Rise” Wilde refers back to the earliest Greeks, who gave us the notion of psychological probability, the most important “of all the canons of historical criticism” (1203). His philosophy advocates a mix of the scientific and the non-scientific,<sup>13</sup> and argues that a greater understanding of history and what it means for the present and the future can be acquired by combining inductive and deductive

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<sup>11</sup> In his Oxford college Notebooks, written between 1878-9, Wilde says that “the study of Greek implies the birth of criticism, comparison and research” (Smith and Helfand 1989, 170). And in “The Rise of Historical Criticism” he says that the critical spirit, which he describes as “Aufklärung” or “illumination of the intellect” and an “intolerance of authority”, came to the Greeks in about the sixth century BC (Holland 2003, 1198).

<sup>12</sup> These include some of the best known biographers, including Hyde (1977) and Ellmann (1987). And McKenna (2005) emphasises the Platonic homosexual ideal in Wilde’s philosophy when he says the writer raised homosexuality to the “Higher Philosophy, as Plato had termed the love between men and youths” and mentions that Wilde inscribed a copy of his *Intentions* for Bosie with “In Memory of the Higher Philosophy” (88).

<sup>13</sup> In discussing the blend of the scientific and non-scientific methods he says in his college notes: “in early civilisations science is found intimately blended with poetry” and we are to “primarily remember that man must use all his faculties in his search for truth” (Smith and Helfand 1989, 162).

methodologies. In the first instance above, Wilde shows his approval of speculation about actual events, ancient mythology and supernatural stories. And in the second instance he sees no problem in the use of the historian's intuitive discrimination between facts to develop a true understanding of history. He says that a good historian will treat data as samples for interpretation: "Facts are the oil by which the historic muse feeds her lamp: but the light is given by ideas"; and he continues, "Facts are the labyrinth: ideas the guiding thread" (Smith and Helfand 1989, 169).

Historical criticism is much more than the gathering of facts on which one relies. Too great a reliance on facts shows a want of ideas: "nothing is easier than to accumulate facts, nothing is so hard as to use them" (159). In "The Decay of Lying" (1889) ten years later Wilde develops this idea to a point where facts are secondary to their interpretation: they should be "either kept in their proper subordinate position, or else entirely excluded on the ground of dullness" (Holland 2003, 1080). He argues that the use of the accumulated facts ultimately depends on the question of the philosophy of history, that is, the causes and the relations of events or phenomena which are crucial for the historical critic, as criticism should not be confined to whether an event happened. Implying there is a need to see truth "on a scientific basis" combined with "the strength and courage to contemplate", Wilde emphasises the need for a mix of methods, which culminates in "a return to the Hellenic ideal" (Smith and Helfand 1989, 135).

### **Aristotle and That at Which Everything Aims**

For Wilde the Hellenic ideal equated with the un-lived fully realised life and his approach to art was influenced by Aristotle's philosophical assumption that society aims for the higher life and not merely life. He says in "The Rise" that Aristotle fully understood "that in the origin of society utility is not the sole motive, but that there is something spiritual in it if, at least, spiritual will bring out the meaning of that complex expression 'the good and the beautiful'" (1212). By the time he wrote "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) the full realisation of the higher life is dependent on art: "Art is the most intense form of Individualism" (Holland 2003, 1184). Aristotle's writing on the virtues and happiness in his *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>14</sup> seems to have

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<sup>14</sup> Gadamer (1986) discusses the notion of "the good" across Aristotle's three works on ethics: the *Magna Moralia*, the *Eudamian Ethics* and "his inquiry to the concerns of practical philosophy", the *Nicomachean Ethics* (129). Crisp (2000) concludes that the *Nicomachean Ethics* "is almost certainly the product of Aristotle's developed intellect" (vii).

been particularly significant: the philosopher's concern with human happiness (*eudaimonia*)<sup>15</sup> anticipated one of Wilde's great life interests, and the final book of the "Ethics" in particular made an important impression. Wilde would have understood as a model Crisp's (2000) conclusion about Aristotle and his contemporary society: that Aristotle "believed that certain aspects of the morality of Athens were deeply mistaken, and sought to persuade his audience of that, and to live their lives accordingly" (viii).

Regarding the state of Athenian morality, Aristotle held similar views to his predecessors, Socrates and Plato.<sup>16</sup> But his notion of happiness differs from theirs as it can be considered to be more inclusive, consisting of knowledge of the virtues and virtuous activity, and the presence of pleasure in both of these states. Aristotle packages his practical wisdom with all the virtues when he writes: "if the agent acquires intellect, then his action is quite different; his state, while similar to what it was, will then be real virtue" (117). His *Ethics* also implies that everyone is capable of moving toward the higher life. In this way Aristotle, providing inspiration for Wilde, was not attached to maintaining things as they were, and his functional perception of all life, especially human life, consisted of a form of evolution.<sup>17</sup>

The happiness Aristotle speaks about, while focused on the individual, is not a self-centred happiness. Throughout each chapter and book he consistently relates his comments to other individuals and to the community, so that the pursuit of happiness and the good cannot be perceived as an egoistic or purely self-conscious endeavour. Late in the *Ethics* he specifically postulates that each person, "in so far as he is a human being and lives together with a number of others, he chooses to do actions in accordance with virtue; he will therefore need such things for the living of a human life" (197). This is a notion Wilde most clearly takes up in "The Soul of Man". At one point in the essay he says that people will be able to sympathise with both the good and bad events in the lives of others: "Man will have joy in the contemplation of the joyous life of others" (1195).<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, however, Aristotle implies that the kind of life one leads is for the advancement of one's own good and happiness, as there is no recommendation

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<sup>15</sup> Aristotle says that happiness "is obviously something complete and self-sufficient, in that it is the end of what is done" (Crisp, 2000, 11).

<sup>16</sup> See Findlay (1975), Gadamer (1976 and 1986) and Crisp (2000) for detailed comparisons between these early Greek thinkers.

<sup>17</sup> Crisp (2000) highlights this when he says Aristotle's method was based "on a teleological conception of humanity as functionally directed towards inquiry and the truth" (x).

<sup>18</sup> In his long prison letter known as *De Profundis* he also says of the love of others that it is "the faculty by which and by which alone we can understand others in the real as in their ideal relations" (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 709).

for self-sacrifice or suffering. In his life Wilde was to take this literally and to the extreme, as he believed self-sacrifice actually inhibited self-realisation. In “The Critic” he says that self-sacrifice and self-denial are methods “by which man arrests his progress” (1122). Regretting this later in *De Profundis* (1897) he says he could not see the value of suffering or sacrifice before his prison experience as “I used to live entirely for pleasure. I shunned sorrow and suffering of every kind. I hated both. I resolved to ignore them as far as possible” (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 736).

Aristotle begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* by stating that every thought, rational choice and action is aimed at some good. The very first sentence reads: “the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims” (1). Wilde can be read as incorporating into his aesthetic Aristotle’s notion of practical wisdom, which is the basis for most of the treatise. It is argued throughout this study that Wilde’s aesthetic is committed to the active development of society and the individual, based on conscious thought rising from a critical engagement with art. It is important to be aware of the virtues and to act in accordance with them, Aristotle argues, stressing that “the branch of philosophy we are dealing with at present is not purely theoretical...because it is not in order to acquire knowledge that we are considering what virtue is, but to become good people” (24).

And so most of the *Ethics* discusses human virtues such as courage, generosity, temperance, truthfulness, magnificence and friendliness and considers the *mean* between excess and deficiency of each virtue as the ideal. The mean referred to by Aristotle is an important notion within his discussion of the virtues. He says achieving the mean in character is the business of the virtue and explains the mean as having the right feeling combined with the right action “at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way” (30). Wilde’s writing shows his frustration at the lack of contemporary awareness of Aristotle’s mean within virtues, and with the Victorian emphasis on notions of duty, chastity and charity as the highest virtues. In the short story, “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” (1887), the extreme emphasis placed by the Victorians on the sense of duty is addressed in Lord Savile’s murder of Mr Podgers before he marries Sybil: murder after marriage would cause her shame, and he recognised “where his duty lay, and he was fully conscious of the fact he had no right to marry until he had committed the murder” (Holland 2003, 169). He also implies a link between Victorian virtues such as duty and a lack of thought when the narrator says of Lord Savile: “Life to him meant action, rather than thought. He had that rarest of all things, common sense” (170). In “The Critic” he also says that the Victorian “knows neither the origin of his

deeds nor their results” (1121). And his belief in the power of art to “persuade his audience” or raise contemporary awareness of “the higher life” is shown in the same essay when he states that “aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere” (1154).<sup>19</sup>

The mean in the Aristotelian sense becomes central to Wilde’s philosophy of art, particularly when it is applied to the work of the spectator or critic of art. This is made clear when the philosopher establishes the mean as a criterion for measuring products. He writes: “of successful products...nothing can be added or taken away from them, implying that excess and deficiency ruin what is good in them, while the mean preserves it” (Crisp 2000, 30). This belief can also be applied to art. Gadamer (1977) describes this principle as “one of the oldest definitions of beauty in art” (91). When nothing can be added or taken away from a work of art, the good of the work can be said to have been preserved by the mean. And later the philosopher makes a related statement about correctly perceiving which is as relevant to art as it is to philosophical or historical criticism. Seeing in the sense of understanding properly is a good because “seeing seems at any moment to be complete, because it does not lack anything that will come to be later and complete its form” (188).

For Wilde the good which is preserved by the mean in art is *beauty* and for him objects or phenomena cannot be properly seen or understood until their beauty has been seen. “The Decay of Lying” discusses in detail this comprehension of fully recognising and grasping truth. Using London’s fog as an example, he says it did not exist until art invented it. Emphasising that the way we see things depends on art, he concludes: “One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence” (1086). A strong link is created in Wilde’s philosophy here between beauty in art and the realisation of truth. Something cannot be fully seen or understood until its beauty can be perceived. And only when something is fully perceived does it come into existence. This anticipates Gadamer’s (1977) argument, in his work on the beautiful, that the artist “is less a creator than a discoverer of the as yet unseen, the inventor of the previously unimagined” (91). One of Wilde’s best known aphorisms, taken from his “Doctrines of the New Aesthetics” which conclude “The Decay”, cements the beauty-truth nexus in his philosophy of art: “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life,” which “throws an entirely new light on the history of art” (1091).

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<sup>19</sup> Wilde typically inverted contemporary assumptions to make a point. And he does so again when he says in this essay “Virtues! Who knows what the virtues are? ...Not anyone. It is well for our vanity that we slay the criminal, for if we suffered him to live he might show us what we had gained from his crime” (1122).

Aristotle discusses the method that was for Wilde the only way truth in art could be approached. Several chapters of Book Ten of his *Nicomachean Ethics* address the notion of contemplation, which is more complete than the virtues. He compares *energeia* (exertion of the virtues) with *theoria* (inactive contemplation). Despite their nobility and extent, the virtues are considered unworthy of choice for their own sake because they aim at some other purpose. But contemplation is an end in itself, says Aristotle, and this “self-sufficiency that is spoken of will belong to the activity of contemplation most of all” (194). Contemplation, in the sense of an intellectual activity leading to correctly perceiving truth, is central to Wilde’s philosophy of art. In previous chapters the philosopher had defined the virtues, including friendship, temperance and courage, and described them as the practical wisdom for which to be virtuous: being the mean between their deficiencies and excesses, the virtues are states and actions aimed at the good. Implied in this, then, is the notion of choice, since people choose to understand the virtues and act on them because they have chosen to aim at the good. Pleasure, which for Aristotle augments activity, can also inherently aim at the good as “pleasure is closely related to the activity it completes. The pleasure proper to an activity enhances it” (190). But pleasures do not, and that intelligence is the quality that makes the difference: “the life of pleasure is more worthy of choice with the addition of intelligence than without it” (189). It is in his discussion of happiness, however, that Aristotle clearly marks contemplation as the higher life. He presents happiness as a profound experience which should never be trivialised, and goes on to place the experience on a level beyond mere bodily pleasures:

Happiness, then, does not consist in amusement, because it would be absurd if our end were amusement, and we laboured and suffered all our lives for the sake of amusing ourselves . . . . For happiness does not consist in occupations like this, but in activities in accordance with virtue. (194)

Early in the *Ethics* Aristotle reasons that the complete good is self-sufficient as it exists for no other purpose and needs nothing added to it to make it complete. Happiness is “worthy of choice and lacking in nothing”: “we think happiness to be such, and indeed the thing most of all worth choosing, not counted as just one thing among others” (11). Happiness is the highest good, not just because it is considered self-sufficient and complete but also because rather than being “counted as one among others” (in terms either of being one of many ends or as one of other happenings aiming at the good) happiness is the good at which everything aims. It is in

accordance with the highest virtue of character and the highest activity which “has insight into matters noble and divine, and . . . this activity is that of contemplation” (194). A clear connection is forged between contemplation and the quality that can perceive noble and divine matters, the intellect: “For this is the highest activity, intellect being the highest element in us, and its objects are the highest objects of knowledge” (194). By its very nature, truth, being of the highest objects of knowledge, is an object of the intellect’s activity, the highest activity. For Wilde, here is Aristotle’s apprehension of the higher life. It involves intellectual activity which, in so far as it involves contemplation, is superior to the virtues, is accompanied by proper pleasure and possesses self-sufficiency which constitutes “complete happiness for a human being...because there is nothing incomplete in matters of happiness” (195). “Happiness, therefore,” the philosopher concludes, “will be some form of contemplation” (198). He also writes that the more one contemplates, the happier one is, and this is not by accident: “Happiness, then, extends as far as contemplation, and the more contemplation there is in one’s life, the happier one is, not incidentally, but in virtue of the contemplation, since this is honourable in itself” (198).

From his earliest writing Wilde fully understood the important place of contemplation in Aristotle’s philosophy. In his Oxford student notes he notes: “in Aristotle the philosopher’s life is the contemplative life” (Smith and Helfand 1989, 145). The form of contemplation in Wilde’s oeuvre constitutes a nexus between criticism, making the mind a finer instrument, and contemplation, which widens the vision. He also formed the view that the philosopher held *theoria* to be nobler than *energeia* in human life, and concludes that “the end of life is not action but contemplation, not doing but being” (141).<sup>20</sup> But in the same note he links the ends of life and art when he argues that treating life under the condition of the spirit of art is to treat it as a thing in which means and end are identified. Contemplation came to be central to perceiving truth in art which, according to Wilde, is the basis of his utopian ideal, his New Hellenism. In his later work, “The Critic as Artist”, he credits the Greeks with seeing self-culture as the true ideal and with leaving us the method to achieve it: “The Greeks saw it, and have left us, as their legacy to modern thought, the conception of the contemplative life as well as the critical method by which alone can that life be truly realised” (1140-1).

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<sup>20</sup> While Wilde quotes Pater to formulate his theory here, his thought is still consistent with Aristotle’s idea of contemplation, as stated earlier, accompanied by proper pleasure and self-sufficiency, constituting complete happiness. (in Chapter Five the argument is made that Wilde ultimately repudiates Pater’s aesthetic).

This is why the aim of the aesthetic movement is to teach people to contemplate, not to create. The one significant difference between Wilde's contemplation and Aristotle's is that Aristotle emphasises the self-sufficient character of his form. Contemplation has no other end except that one has contemplated. In his Oxford notes Wilde initially implies his acceptance of this theory. Very quickly, however, he also adds that contemplation may be the means to transforming life. In his note stating that the end of life is not action but contemplation, he goes on: "the end of life must be realised through the means" (142). In his later work Wilde portrays his form of contemplation and the critical perspective it produces as the means to a higher end of life. "The Critic as Artist" and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" in particular argue that the critical contemplation of art is the only way to self-realisation. The contemplation of art is the intellectual method Wilde posits for seeing or perceiving truth in art, for it is only through the critical contemplation of art that speculative and realised truth, which leads to the higher life of self-realised individualism, can be seen. "Individualism", he concludes in "The Soul of Man" "is the New Hellenism" (1197).

### **Aristotle, Hegel and Wilde**

A wider and nobler perspective is available through the intellectual method in Wilde's philosophy of art. As well as being the means to the higher truth realised in art, it also fosters a questioning of accepted assumptions. Hegelian philosophy refers to this as art's de-habituating function. Wilde's Oxford's notes indicate that he found in the philosophies of Aristotle and Hegel a way of addressing contemporary ethical issues. Following William Wallace (discussed in detail in the next chapter), he compares them to Socrates and Kant who, Wilde says, brought philosophy back to man; but "Aristotle and Hegel set out again to reconquer the World" (Smith and Helfand 1989, 128). Wilde's critical method, developed over his lifetime, incorporates a synthesis of aspects of Aristotle and Hegel. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* has been shown to have influenced Wilde's notion of the good, his negative interpretation of the dominant Victorian morality, and his contemplative approach to the criticism of art. Hegel's influence can also be seen in the emphasis Wilde places on the importance of contemplation to true understanding. Wilde notes of Hegelian thought: "its sphere is the Universal – The universal Law of the Mind's movement. It examines not what ought to be but what is. It is the possession of real wisdom, not the love of wisdom" (145-6). Wilde's interpretation of Aristotle's conception of contemplation becomes central to his New Hellenism via his incorporation of a Hegelian dialectic into it.

What is most striking about Wilde's formative history is not his remarkable openness to intellectual influences as a young man but how he managed the diversity and contradictoriness of those influences. He was a product of the bewildering political, social, religious and cultural contradictions of his Anglo-Irish heritage, and the peculiar contradictions of his own family. His introduction to G.W.F. Hegel's (1770-1831) absolute idealism helped him to make sense of the contradictions into which he was born. He was introduced to the writing of Hegel at an early age by his parents and Wilde's Hegelian idealism was further enhanced by the commentaries of John Addington Symonds (1840-93), one of which, *A Study of the Greek Poets* (1876), Wilde reviewed in the year it was published. Here he would have come across Symonds' approval of Hegel: "'The Greek Spirit' says Hegel 'is the plastic artist forming the stone into a work of art'. And this work of art is invariably the image of a man or woman" (376). Smith and Helfand (1989) also suggest that Wilde was influenced by Symonds' synthesis of Hegelian aesthetic and Darwinian evolutionary views to explain "the importance of Hellenic culture in the formation of nineteenth-century thought" (23). As someone who believed the world was in need of reconquering, Wilde found in Hegel a kindred idealist spirit. He would have been impressed with a philosopher who, as Wright (2009) posits, saw in human history "the progressive realisation of *Geist* (the ideal)" (97).

Wilde is also at one with Hegel's view that the ideal of beauty is not to be found in nature but produced by the creative imagination in art. This aspect of his philosophy indicates another important feature that is central to Wilde's thought. By using "Philosophy of Art" as the more appropriate definition of his science Hegel can "at once exclude the beauty of nature" (Bosanquet 1886, 2):

the beauty of art is the beauty that is born – born again, that is – of the mind; and by as much as the mind and its products are higher than nature and its appearances, by so much the beauty of art is higher than the beauty of nature. (3)

Hegel goes further than stating that the mind is higher than nature. He implies that nature can only be made whole by the mind: "Mind, and mind only, is capable of truth...in this sense the beauty of nature reveals itself as but a reflection of the beauty which belongs to the mind, as an imperfect, as an incomplete mode of being" (4).

The creative imagination also predominates over nature in Wilde's work: this is most clearly shown in "The Decay of Lying", where life and nature are presented as imitators of art. His "Doctrines for the New Aesthetics" includes: "Nature also imitates Art. The only effects that she can show us are effects that we have already seen through poetry, or in paintings" (1091). He concurs with Hegel's dual assertion of mind over nature and that mind completes nature. Art reveals to us nature's "absolutely unfinished condition", and Nature's infinite variety resides not in Nature but "in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her" (1071). Wilde also links this aspect of Hegelian thought to Aristotle when he observes "Nature has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out" (1071). Wilde supports this argument while discussing Wordsworth in the same essay. Highlighting the importance of the creative imagination to the higher reality which is born of the mind: "Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there" (1078).

### **Art, Truth and Complex Beauty**

The development of mind through the representation of the Absolute or Ideal is the central function of art in Hegelian philosophy. The role of contemplation is also established via this function. The work of art "is essentially a question, an address to the responsive heart, an appeal to affections and to minds", and the quality of development corresponds to "the grade of inwardness and unity with which Idea and Shape display themselves as fused into one" (Bosanquet 1886, 137-8). This and other core characteristics of Hegel's philosophy (the placing of art before nature, the de-habituating function of art, his attack on empiricism and the centrality of creative imagination (*Phantasie*) for self-realisation) correspond to the critical approach found in Wilde's work. The reconciliatory aspect of the Hegelian dialectic in art<sup>21</sup> also appealed to someone used to dealing with what Prewitt Brown (1997) calls the "paradoxical interrelatedness of opposites", through which Wilde enabled art's "ideal and empirical realms...to realise themselves and become true" (xv).

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<sup>21</sup> Hegel's philosophy of fine art says that the musical note, for example, "treats the sensuous as ideal, and does so by negating and idealising into the individual isolation of a single point (and) liberates the ideal content from its emersion in matter" (169/70). Cited in Pillow (2000) Hegel indicates the role of creative imagination in the dialectic by stating "when the Concept remains immediately in unity with its external appearance, the Idea is not only true but beautiful. Therefore the beautiful is characterised as the pure appearance of the Idea to sense" (178-9).

The place and particulars of experience in Hegelian and Aristotelian philosophies are also fused when Wilde illustrates the paradox (of the usefulness) of contemplation and when he makes distinctions between theoretic, contemplative knowledge and aesthetic, sensual perception. Under the heading “Universal and Necessity” in his student notes he writes: “sensation gives us a perception of an *perceived, a something* as occupying a given space either locally or in time: *something anywhere and now*. Now Knowledge informs us of the *ever and everywhere*” (accent in the original, 146). As if to emphasise his endorsement of *theoria*, immediately preceding this distinction between the contemplative and sensual perception, Wilde notes that “Aristotle knew how difficult it was to gain from mere sensations the universality and necessity which are the factors as well as the product of experience” (146).<sup>22</sup>

With an underlying cognitive theory that is also central to the Hegelian philosophy of art,<sup>23</sup> Wilde subscribes to placing the intellect above the sense experience of art. Hegel’s cognitive approach suggests the significance of contemplative perception for universality and necessity and stresses the importance of the creative imagination to art’s central position in revealing higher ideas. He implies a link between truth and beauty and says that higher ideas are immersed in the beauty of art and that it is the task of the mind to see these ideas. The intellectual work of the imagination is used in the interpretation of art as higher truths should not be obvious but concealed within art’s beauty. In the beautiful work of art, he says, cited in Pillow (2000), “the necessity must not emerge in the form of necessity itself; on the contrary it must be hidden behind the appearance of undesigned contingency” (184). He also sees the artist as a discoverer of the previously unimagined, for whom “the productive fancy (*Phantasie*) of an artist is... the exhibition of the profoundest and most universal interests” (177). This concurs with Aristotle’s belief about the mean to be achieved in producing a perfect object and they are also comparable regarding truth lying beyond the sensuous experience of art: “man relates himself not to a contingent single sensation...but to himself, to a universal mode of action which constitutes his individuality” (153).

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<sup>22</sup> Wilde seems to be referring to Aristotle’s statement that “the activities of thought differ in species from the activities of the senses” (190). It will be shown later how this notion becomes crucial to the place of contemplation in Hegel’s dialectic.

<sup>23</sup> Pillow (2000) says that his rejection of the aesthetic idea is Hegel’s turning to a cognitive theory of aesthetic content and states “the fact that beauty consists in the sensuous expression of the Concept indicates the intense cognitive orientation of Hegel’s aesthetic theory” (179).

The contemplative penetration of beauty in art is at the core of Wilde's dialectic. The true encounter with art is not complete in the sensuous aesthetic experience. The intellectual work of the critic is emphasised in "The Decay of Lying": "art is not simple truth but complex beauty" (1079). The idealist core of Hegel's philosophy, crucial to contemplative criticism, draws attention to the separate experiences of the aesthetic and contemplative perceptions. Like Aristotle, Hegel implies in his statement about the universal that art has a more profound meaning than the aesthetic experience. He is very clear that the Aesthetic relates more to the sense experience: "'Aesthetic' means more precisely the science of sensation or feeling" (Bosanquet 1886, 1). While reluctantly permitting "the name Aesthetic to stand" in his philosophical discussion, he observes of "the realm of the beautiful" that "the proper expression, however, for our science is the "Philosophy of Art"" (2). Hegel is again in agreement with Aristotle in his elaboration on the variance between the aesthetic and contemplative experiences of art as he too places the contemplative higher: "genuine reality is only to be found beyond the immediacy of feeling and of external objects" (14). Art, like philosophy and religion represents the highest ideas and wisdom. But art is a "supra-sensuous world" which is "a *beyond* over against immediate consciousness and present sensation" and is penetrated by thought, which fashions "the freedom of thought in cognition" (13).

The freedom of thought in cognition to which Hegel refers<sup>24</sup> – informed by idealist assumptions – implies that art, and more specifically the creative imagination, has the higher reality and authentic existence which frees the individual from everyday rules and regulations. This idea of freedom is evident in Wilde's discussion of the mask in art which, he says, contains a higher truth than actual life. Liberated through the cognitive engagement with art the spectator moves from a level of immediate consciousness to a higher self-knowledge through which he can relate to himself and the universal in a way that constitutes individuality. The work of art, according to Hegel, moves the individual to the higher reality which "is no longer the sensuous immediate existence...but *self-conscious inward intelligence*" (153-4). It was highlighted earlier that self-conscious individualism, the higher perfection resulting from contemplative engagement with art, is at the centre of Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism". In this essay Wilde elaborates on the Hegelian philosophy of individuality and the universal: initially, the contemplation of beauty leads to Individualism, which has the effect of bringing "the full development of life to its highest mode of perfection" (1175). Ultimately, this development has

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<sup>24</sup> "Art liberates", Hegel continues, "the real import of appearances from the semblance and deception of this bad and fleeting world, and imparts to phenomenal semblances a higher reality, born of the mind" (15).

the potential to lead to a time when each person can enjoy the lives of others – this is central to Wilde’s argument.

### **Contemplation in the Dialectic**

Hegel’s idealist philosophy of art also contains a dialectical logic which posits that the creative imagination is central to constructing associations across differences and even opposites. For Hegel the genius of wit, a skill for which Wilde was renowned, “connects ideas which, although remote from one another, none the less have in fact an inner connection” (Pillow 2000, 165). For Hegel, art and the freedom generated by the imaginative engagement with the creation and contemplation of art objects<sup>25</sup> is crucial to the unity between the individual and the world. The mind heals this schism through works of art acting as “the first middle term of reconciliation between pure thought and what is external, sensuous, and transitory, between nature with its finite actuality and the infinite freedom of the reason that comprehends” (Bosanquet 1886, 13). This implies that the reconciliation between the individual and the world fashioned by the beauty of art also generates truth: “art sets truth before our minds”, Hegel says, “for it is precisely the unity of the concept with the individual appearance which is the essence of the beautiful and its production by art” (Pillow 2000, 180).

Hegel uses several different combinations or relations of propositions to describe his dialectical triad of relations. These sets include ‘Immediate – Mediate – Concrete’, ‘Abstract – Negation – Concrete’ and ‘Being – Essence – Notion/Idea’. The set of dialectical relations described by Hegel and used generically by Wilde in his work is ‘Being – Non-Being – Becoming’.<sup>26</sup> The practical terms of his dialectic method can be described as ‘Beauty – Contemplative Criticism – Individualism’. I argue that individual works give emphasis to each of these: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* underpins the sense-experience of Beauty; “The Critic” outlines Wilde’s notion of Contemplative Criticism, and “The Soul of Man” focuses on the development of Individualism. Hegel is insistent in his *Science of Logic* (1816) about the importance of the dialectic to progress, thought and truth. The individual propositions of the triad “do not make three *parts* of logic, but are stages or ‘moments’ in every logical entity, that is, of every notion

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<sup>25</sup> He states again that in the beauty of art, “in the origination, as in the contemplation, of its creations we appear to escape wholly from the fetters of rule and regulation” (Bosanquet 1886, 9). This, for Wilde, would also highlight the role of art in freeing people from the fetters imposed by Victorian ethics which he describes in detail throughout his oeuvre.

<sup>26</sup> In several of his prose works, including “The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” Wilde implicitly and explicitly refers to “Becoming” as the ultimate perfection and utopian ideal.

and truth whatever” (Findlay 1975, 113). He goes on to say that “everything that surrounds us may be viewed as an instance of Dialectic” (118).<sup>27</sup>

Explicit in the Hegelian dialectical relation is a progressive movement where each proposition, being a stage or moment, subsumes the preceding one, so that something of the preceding proposition is retained in succeeding ones. Though different sets of propositions might be used, the stages of the dialectic method are consistent. As Hegel explains it, the first Abstract or the mere Understanding phase is followed by the Dialectical phase or phase of negative reason, which in turn is succeeded by the Speculative phase or phase of positive reason. The Speculative moment embraces and rises above all limiting oppositions of the preceding propositions, unifies the two and creates a more conscious form of thought and truth. Being, for example, is subsumed by Non-Being, and this dialectical relation forms a unity which is Becoming. Confirming Wilde’s belief that critical engagement with art reveals higher truths, Hegel proposes that “as the first concrete thought-term, Becoming is the first adequate vehicle of truth” (132). Another explanation of Wilde’s aesthetic as he presents it at the end of “The Truth of Masks” can be found in Hegel: “the truth of Being and of Nothing is accordingly the unity of the two: and this unity is Becoming” (128).

The dialectical process is also shown to be continuous and does not end with Speculative unity. While restating that a higher proposition stems from the unification of the preceding two, in two subsequent statements Hegel provides an evolutionary underpinning to the speculative process:

“To become” is the true expression for the resultant of “To be” and “Not to be”: it is the unity of the two; but not only is it the unity of the two – it is also inherent unrest ...

Thus Becoming stands before us in utter restlessness – unable however to maintain itself in this abstract restlessness: for since Being and Nothing vanish in Becoming (and that is the very notion of Becoming) the latter must vanish too. (131, 134)

And it is the unity formed during the dialectic that informs critical responses to and interpretations of art. Pillow (2000) points to the work of the audience within Hegelian philosophy and Hegel’s view that the role of art is “to express a determinate content in a unified

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<sup>27</sup> Regarding science he is even more emphatic: “The Dialectical principle constitutes the life and soul of scientific progress, the dynamic alone which gives immanent connexion and necessity to the body of science” (116).

way, the aim of grasping that content in its unity guides the interpretive work of the respondent” (174).

Wilde’s philosophy of art recognises Aristotle’s differentiation between the activities of thought and the activities of the senses. His dialectic method consists of a relation between Beauty and Contemplative Criticism to discover Individualism. It is an interaction between mere sensations or simple truth and the enlightenment of the intellect to realise the higher life of complex beauty. The first moment in Wilde’s dialectic, known in Hegel’s method as the moment of Understanding, consists of the aesthetic sensuous experience of Beauty. Apart from the pleasure associated with the sense experience of Beauty, this is an indispensable phase of the dialectic as it is where the forms of beauty are kept distinct and pure. It is crucial when it is employed to help us understand dramatic verse, where “the different aims and interests involved should be plainly and decidedly exhibited” (Pillow 2000, 115). For Hegel the first moment of the dialectic is a form of positivism whose truth is usually found to be a purely subjective experience. Before passing through a dialectical process, this truth is said to be non-thinking. Gadamer (1976) explains this idea: while our “highest activity” comprehends, “in contrast, the truth of positivism is precisely that it replaces the concept of explanation with that of description” (57).

Because the Beauty phase describes its distinct and pure forms, this moment is also associated with aesthetic pleasure. Wilde’s view is that only art can produce this experience of beauty.<sup>28</sup> Citing Aristotle in “The Critic as Artist” he emphasises sensuous pleasure when he articulates art’s aesthetic appeal as: “to sense the beauty realised through the passions and pity of awe” (1116). Art’s aesthetic appeal is the emotional sense of wonder, amazement, admiration or the passions of awe associated with the beauty of literature, poetry and music. And it is the sensuous, emotional experience of art that he highlights as being indispensable to movement in the dialectic. As cited earlier, Aristotle argues that pleasure was proper to an activity and augmented it with the addition of intelligence. In “The Critic” Wilde develops this notion to link Beauty to the next dialectic moment when he writes: “presenting high and worthy objects for the exercise of the emotions purifies and spiritualises the man...and initiates him into noble feelings” (1117).

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<sup>28</sup> In “The Decay of Lying” he refers to the appalling living conditions of the “lower orders” and says that good housing, sunlight, air and wholesome water “merely produce health, they do not produce beauty. For this, Art is required” (1083).

Implied in this is his understanding that the aesthetic sensuous experience of Beauty is not the final good at which art is aiming. Implicit is also his appreciation of Aristotle's rejection of the end of life being amusement. Beauty is indispensable for the pleasure it brings, but even more so because through beauty art's spectators, triggered by high and worthy objects, can be initiated into noble thought. The second phase of Wilde's aesthetic, known by Hegel as the moment of Dialectic, is also indicated here. Hegel describes the first moment of his dialectic (for Wilde this equates with the sensuous experience of beauty) as being finite and as having inherent limitations.<sup>29</sup> And in *De Profundis* (1897) Wilde indicates the temporariness of emotional experiences when he argues "emotional forces...are as limited in extent and duration as the forces of physical energy" (771). The aesthetic emotional sense of Beauty, then, passes into its counterpart, which, this thesis contends, is contemplative criticism – that is, contemplation in the Aristotelian sense; unlike aesthetic sensuousness, intellect, as the highest activity and element in us, is not finite.<sup>30</sup> Speaking of the ancient Greek attitude to sense experience, Hegel says it was so far "from making feeling and sensation the canon of truth that it turned against the deliverances of sense" (Findlay 1975, 64). Until there is a dialectic process, thought has been renounced. There is a "loftier craving" for art's audience which is the "perseverance of thought" and "thought in its very nature is dialectical" (15).<sup>31</sup> Through thought's perseverance Beauty is subsumed into the highest activity of contemplative criticism in their dialectical relation so that art's truth may come into existence. From the dialectic Beauty's finite sensuous aesthetic is realised: but the inherent truth is also comprehended. Contemplative criticism is where aesthetics becomes higher than ethics as the conscious inward intelligence of self-realisation and the necessity and universality of life's higher truth can be seen.

The intellectual contemplation of art is an essential aspect of Wilde's philosophy.<sup>32</sup> Characters in his novel and short stories have missed opportunities and some experience catastrophe when there is no dialectical or contemplative engagement with beauty or beauty's equivalent. In "The

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<sup>29</sup> "Its own nature is the cause of its abrogation, and that by its own act it passes into its counterpart" (, 116)

<sup>30</sup> Saying that its objects are the highest objects of knowledge, Aristotle states contemplation "is also the most continuous, since we can contemplate more continuously than we can do anything" (Crisp 2000, 194).

<sup>31</sup> In "The Critic" Wilde links art to thought's loftier craving when he says that art and its audience represent "soul speaking to soul...with lofty passion and with loftier thought, with imaginative insight and with poetic aim" (1126).

<sup>32</sup> The protagonists in "The Critic" argue about the creative and critical faculties in art, and Gilbert, Wilde's voice in the piece, says there is an "antithesis between them" but ultimately "without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name" (1118).

Sphinx Without a Secret”, for example, Lord Murchison’s logic cannot be subsumed into Lady Alroy’s mystery. He is desperate to know if she is secretly meeting someone else at a house on Cumnor Street: she denies this and he exclaims “Can’t you tell the truth?” (Holland 2003, 207). It does not make sense to him that she took a room on the street simply “for the pleasure of going there with her veil down”, reading books and having tea (208). Despite his strong attraction, Lord Murchison’s logic or common sense cannot be compromised (by a dialectical relation with Lady Alroy’s mystery). He moves to Norway for a month and Lady Alroy dies before he returns. And Dorian Gray follows Henry Wotton’s view that art is “simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations” (152). Dorian’s vain attachment to the aesthetic sense of his portrait’s beauty ultimately forces him to commit murder and suicide.

Writing to Robbie Ross in 1897 just before his release from prison Wilde alludes to the importance of contemplation to realising the third dialectic moment by saying “prison-life makes one see people and things as they really are . . . it is the people outside who are deceived by the illusion of a life in constant motion . . . we who are immobile both see and know” (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 782). The Speculative stage of Hegel’s dialectic corresponds to Wilde’s conception of Individualism. The Speculative moment is crucial to concrete higher truths and, according to Hegel, is parallel to mysticism.<sup>33</sup> He calls this the phase of positive reason because in it the previous propositions are unified but maintain their distinction as they are disintegrated and pass through transition. The philosopher also describes the Speculative moment as the phase of utter restlessness, the phase that can never cease as it would become the same as positivism. This unending characteristic is also alluded to in Wilde’s utopian ideal. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” he says “Progress is the realisation of Utopias” and all maps should contain Utopia as it is “the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail” (1183).

In the phase of Individualism, the most intense form of art which is the New Hellenism, the realities of the aesthetic experience and of intellectual activity are realised and the higher truth is fully perceived and can come into existence. Wilde describes Individualism in “The Soul of Man” as the true perfection which is “far freer, far finer and far more intensified” than it could ever be in the unconscious contemporary society (1178).<sup>34</sup> And when he discusses the well-

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<sup>33</sup> He states that “Speculative truth, it may also be noted, means very much the same as what, in special connexion with religious experience and doctrines, used to be called Mysticism” (121).

<sup>34</sup> As outlined in the introduction, the present reading of Individualism in “The Soul of Man” emphasises the conscious perfect personality achieved through art as opposed to the conservative Individualist reading contained in Guy (2003)

known adoration scene in the Bible<sup>35</sup> he implies the dialectic between Beauty and contemplative criticism when he says “in one divine moment, and by selecting its own mode of expression, a personality might make itself perfect” (1181). In the often cited conclusion to “The Truth of Masks” Wilde makes several statements based on, what he calls, Hegel’s system of contraries. These include disagreement with his own ideas in the essay and that opposing ideas or truths in art can be true at the same time: “In art” he declares “there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” (Holland 2003, 1173). Several critics have read this as Wilde’s inability to take his own aesthetic seriously.

Of course Wilde is here stating the obvious: there is one truth for one spectator and a different truth for another. While admitting Wilde’s art criticism is legible through Hegel’s system Bashford (2011) has dismissed it as merely subjectivist, claiming Wilde is not an orthodox Hegelian. He says of Wilde’s dialectic: “rather than neatly moving through the three-phase process, it has an exploratory quality about it” (118). But Wilde, advocating for leaving the lower moral and sense experience of art for a higher benefit, shows he is not subjectivist but merely that he concurs with Hegel in suggesting that the first phase is subjectivist. Secondly, Wilde recommends the continual exploration of art for utopias and this accords with the ongoing speculation advocated by Hegel’s dialectic. But it is clear that art-criticism for Wilde is especially capable of expressing the Hegelian dialectic because it is only “through it that we can realise Hegel’s system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks” (1173).

This final sentence of his essay becomes a cornerstone for Wilde’s aesthetic. As he would outline it in “Pen, Pencil and Poison” and “The Decay of Lying” most explicitly, higher metaphysical truths inhabit the mask of art more than Victorian morality. But these truths can only be seen through art-criticism. Aristotle’s contemplation and Hegel’s dialectical influences are clearly linked by Wilde in “The Critic as Artist” promoting criticism over creation. In this essay he suggests that the move from Being to Becoming cannot take place without the highest activity of critical contemplation. It is to art that “critical and cultured spirits” turn for truth, and contemplation “in the opinion of the highest culture is the proper occupation of man” (1132). And he goes on to say in the same essay that only the critical spirit can give us “the

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<sup>35</sup> The scene Wilde is referring to is John 12:3 when Mary pours oil over the feet of Jesus and wipes it off with her hair in adoration.

contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming*” (1138/9).

This chapter has argued that the philosophical influences of Aristotle and Hegel on Wilde are particularly strong. Wilde understood Aristotle’s *mean* regarding the virtues in the context of his interpretation and experience of Victorian values and used them in his dispute with them. The chapter also indicates how he adopted the philosopher’s notion of contemplation and combined it with the Greek critical spirit to develop his own form of art-criticism. Wilde also integrated Hegel’s idea of the dialectic into his method of moving from the sense experience to the critical and speculative understanding of artworks. The method, it was argued, is central to Wilde’s belief in the evolution of Individualism through art as a lifelong process. The next chapter indicates some of the early formal and informal influences that opened Wilde to reading the likes of Aristotle and Hegel in the ways he did and contends that familial and educational effects in Ireland combine with his study of the Greats at Oxford to lay the foundation for his life-long aesthetic development.

## Chapter Two

### The Winds that Shake the Carnation

The previous chapter pointed to specific aspects of Aristotelian and Hegelian philosophy inherent in Oscar Wilde's aesthetic. The chapter argued that Wilde combined ancient Greek notions of contemplation and criticism with Hegelian dialectical process to form a philosophy of art that is concerned with social and individual transformation. Chapter two argues for a range of identifiable life experiences that predisposed Wilde to apprehending Aristotle and Hegel in the way he did. It will examine how three formative influences in particular were crucial to Wilde's philosophy of art – the mytho-poetic ideal presented to him by his mother; the relation between folk and classical literature; and the new science of archaeology in interpreting historical and contemporary issues. It will also examine Wilde's introduction to the classics at Trinity College, Dublin, and his study of the Greats at Oxford.

The influences that shaped Wilde's ideas, Murray (1971) argues, are difficult to trace “and dangerous to dogmatise about. Ideas have no guaranteed manufacturer's label” (3). But as an observer, reviewer and critic Wilde was attracted to others by a kinship of mind, temperament and style. That Wilde was open more than most to the ideas of others has never been questioned. In fact the vast number of his sources led to Whistler's often repeated accusation that Wilde dined at contemporaries' tables so as to pick from their plates food for his ideas. This may also be a basis of Bashford's (2002) argument about Wilde's purposes proving elusive. Some early influences are mentioned here and specific connections made with the development of his philosophy. This chapter will argue that rather than being a product of any one influence, Wilde discerned and merged a range of ideas, some quite contradictory, in developing his philosophy.

Energy, productivity and intense activity were crucial to the Victorian values of self-reliance and confidence. It was inevitable that the ultimate challenge to these values would come from those who had retreated into the imagination, a world that was opposed to the orthodox industrial assumptions and held utilitarianism as its greatest virtue. While advocating for an artistic retreat from the materialist Victorian values Wilde holds the promise of change through the development of an aesthetic temperament. In championing these higher aims through art, and especially art-criticism, isolation from society is not his goal. In fact the fiction and prose

works explored in this study indicate that the solution to the problems he sees in contemporary society must come from within the society.

### **Born Dialectic**

As a commentator, especially in cultural criticism, Oscar Wilde had been largely overlooked, Smith and Helfand (1989) assert, “because of his reputation as aesthete, dandy, and homosexual” (199). However, he is now beginning to be more recognised as a writer who was thoroughly engaged with some of the most important social, cultural, political and intellectual issues of his time. Bristow (2013), for example, says that recent critical approaches to Wilde’s sexuality presents a more intricate picture “of a man whose personal and professional explorations of intimacy were unquestionably in advance of their time” (24). This relatively recent insight makes it even more important to have a fuller understanding of his early cultural influences so that all sides of his varied nature can be appreciated. Wilde’s inheritance of the opposition or at least complex relation between ethics and aesthetics is now regularly highlighted. His attempts to overcome this problem of art and life have typically been discussed without serious reference to the specific influence of his family and his Anglo-Irish heritage on his aesthetic.

Croft-Cooke (1972), while critical of previous accounts of Wilde’s life, begins his own by discussing Wilde’s Oxford days. Considerations of Wilde’s thought tend to concentrate on his relation to English Victorian mentors and contemporaries. His inspiration from French writers, such as Baudelaire, Flaubert and Mallarmé, and his reliance on eighteenth-century German and classical Greek thought, are also emphasised in detail. These influences have elsewhere been shown to be crucial to Wilde’s developing thought. Both the Ireland of the nineteenth century and the remarkable family into which Oscar Wilde was born are, however, equally essential to any analysis of the flux in his emotional, intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development.<sup>36</sup>

From his parents, Wilde inherited a shared love of learning, wide ranging interests and love of things Irish. His familial and cultural background also raised for Wilde the potential cultural, philosophical and political developments inherent in the dialectic of opposites. His mother’s adoption, for example, of the title “Lady Francesca Speranza Wilde” indicates her desire to

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<sup>36</sup> It must be pointed out, however, that since the 1990s critical analyses of Wilde’s oeuvre tend to consider an Irish foundation to his thought. The collection of essays in McCormack (1997), Killeen (2011) and Bristow (2013) are representative of more recent approaches.

combine her new English title with her radical Irish political stance.<sup>37</sup> And Wilde's father's approach to studying culture through the combination of myth analysis and onsite archaeological investigation confirmed for Wilde that meaning can be best understood through the imaginative and scientific dialectic.<sup>38</sup> For Wilde, being exposed at an early age to such rich and varied experiences contributed to what Smith and Helfand (1989) call "the synthesis he was building" (33). Wilde's parents shared an interest in Irish folklore, and both lamented the passing of a tradition which opposed empiricism and utilitarianism. But their interests had differing roots: while his father was interested in traditional practices, Wilde's mother was more interested in the narrative tradition.

Speranza's version of Irish folklore was less scientific than her husband's and she was also interested in the imaginative, spiritual and figurative aspects of folklore. She presented Irish folklore as an animated and anarchic discourse that challenged, subverted and contorted conventional expectations, especially about materialism. In *Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland* (1890), Speranza writes that the spirit world, for the Irish, holds "a mystic and psychic relation to humanity, and ruling it through the instrumentality of beings had a strange power either for good or evil over human lives and actions" (2). Wilde's mother also had political views that ran contrary to many of her Anglo-Irish contemporaries. Speranza was held in especially high regard by the Irish populace because of her nationalist loyalty, expressed in her poetry of the Famine years (1845-50).<sup>39</sup> This poetry captured the full horrors of the famine and stressed that it was an avoidable tragedy. Shocked by its magnitude and blaming the Protestant Ascendancy as part of the English garrison, Speranza became more militant in her poetry as the Famine became more severe. Killeen (2005) states that "she dramatically converted to militaristic Irish nationalism" as her poetry more and more called for the spilling of English blood (3). Her *Poems* (1871) collection includes "The Enigma" which asks "Are

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<sup>37</sup> Wilde's mother had written her most famous subversive poetry under the pseudo-name Speranza, the Italian for Hope.

<sup>38</sup> Significantly, Mahaffy, Symonds and Pater, major future influences on his artistic, social and cultural thought, were also keen to combine archaeology with the study of the classics.

<sup>39</sup> The Famine had as defining a role in Irish history as any of the major political or military developments. Speranza submitted almost forty poems to the nationalist paper, *The Nation*, between 1846 and 1848 and her verses were directed at, and in support of, those suffering the most from the famine. Her status as an outspoken Irish nationalist made her a greater nationalist figure for the Irish populace, especially because she was part of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy.

there no swords in your Fatherland/To smite down the proud, insulting foe/With the strength of despair give blow for blow/To strike for freedom for the Fatherland” (14).

Speranza’s nationalism was also unique because of its feminist elements. She attended, with her husband, the first public meeting of the Irish suffragist movement in 1870 and she showed strong interest in women’s issues through her writings in *The Nation*. Her articles argued that women, whether they were married and had children or not, should seek economic independence and place their career above the demands of their family. Kinealy (2008) concludes that Speranza’s model of cultural nationalism held “that only independence based on a republic and universal suffrage could give Ireland real freedom” (3). The same social, political and cultural ideals became key outcomes of Wilde’s developing aesthetic. Such features lead Upchurch (1992) to conclude that Speranza’s influences over Wilde were both literary and cultural. He says that her revolutionary zeal “found its way into Wilde’s works through his satirical look at upper class London in his plays and his socialistic ideas expressed in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*” (15-16).

For a time when men of status could excel in any number of fields, Sir William’s achievements were exceptional.<sup>40</sup> Wilde’s father was one of a group of physicians who put Dublin medicine at the centre of the international scene. This group was also amongst the pioneers of the Celtic revival, a movement that revitalised interest in Gaelic literature and art. In his analysis of popular traditions and Irish folklore, William Wilde wove topographical descriptions and social and political comment with accounts of legends. Killeen (2007) contends that the significant imprint left on Wilde by these close encounters with his Celtic heritage can be found in his fairy tales. He says these can only be fully understood by re-situating them in “the complex theological, political, social and national concerns of late nineteenth-century Ireland” (1). As one of Ireland’s first folklorists, Sir William Wilde collected folk tales from labourers who

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<sup>40</sup> Sir William Wilde was a curious combination of wide-ranging interests and the bizarre. His tombstone and plaque on the family home in Dublin combine to form an extensive list of medical, literary and cultural achievements. The list includes surgeon oculist to Queen Victoria, aural and ophthalmic surgeon, founder of a hospital, archaeologist, ethnologist, historian, statistician, antiquarian, topographer, author and folklorist. He was also known for his slovenly dress and very dirty and smelly physical appearance. Woodcock (1949) claims Sir William “looked like an ape, and his dislike of washing may have been compensated by an excessive love of alcohol” (16). One conundrum about William Wilde, commonly posed by Dubliners at the time asked “Why are Sir William Wilde’s nails black?” to which the response would be “Because he scratched himself”. Despite his dishevelled and scruffy appearance, Hyde (1977) maintains that William Wilde “exercised a powerful fascination over women, whom he pursued with vigour” (4). Cashing in on this “powerful fascination” resulted in three half-siblings (Henry, Emily and Mary) for Oscar and a charge of sexual assault for his father.

worked his estate in Moytura, County Galway. He also gathered stories from peasant patients for his medical services. The young Oscar, according to Wright (2009), “often listened to the peasants’ tales in the company of his father” (18).

These early influences on Wilde’s own writing are now largely acknowledged by critics. Pine (1997) argues, for example, that “The Priest’s Soul”, one story collected by Speranza, provides the chief model for Wilde’s “The Fisherman and His Soul” (1891) and concludes that “everything about Wilde’s future writing is contained here: the nature of its soul, its value, the way life is lived and expressed” (183). The redemptive potential of little children, expressed in the earlier folk-story, is also signified in Wilde’s “The Selfish Giant” (1888) and “The Happy Prince” (1888). Dudley Edwards (1997) also highlights the influences of his father’s interpretations of Irish folklore on Wilde’s writing, particularly in “The Canterville Ghost” (1887), arguing that the “folk-motif is obvious: people endangered by fairy importunity are warned by signs and beings, and their salvation often turns on heeding the warnings” (62). And Upchurch (1992), in his study of Irish Celtic elements in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, says that “the wealth of Irish folk mythology to which Sir William contributed so much surely affected his dreamy, imaginative son Oscar” (12).

Wilde was as influenced by his father’s political interest and passion for Irish folklore as by his mother’s nationalism. And he first picked up views on the use of archaeology from his father, ones that would be later refined by Mahaffy and Symonds and brought into his later writing. Wilde’s father combined his study of folklore with his interest in archaeology in his attempt to better understand and compile a more complete history of Ireland. It is through his work as an Irish historian, antiquarian and folklorist that his passion for Ireland is expressed. In *The Beauties of the Boyne* (1849), for example, William Wilde expressed his frustration at the fact that the history of every other country except Ireland was taught in Irish schools. He also expressed his anger at the establishment’s lack of interest in Irish history, blaming the indifference of government ministers and “the unjust economy which the English Exchequer has ever pursued towards Ireland” (vii).

As an amateur archaeologist the senior Wilde saw Irish legends in the very landscape. He purposely built the family country-house in Moytura, County Galway, the site of the legendary battle between the Tuatha-De-Danann and the Fir Bolg tribes. On one occasion, studying the surrounding landscape while reading a legend, he instructed labourers to dig in a specific spot. Buried beneath the earth they found flagstones forming a chamber containing human bones

and ornaments. Wilde's father became convinced (wrongly) that the remains were those of a heroic warrior from the Fir Bolg. Wilde also accompanied his father on some archaeological digs and recalled in one letter that from his boyhood he had been accustomed, "through my father, to visiting and reporting on ancient sites, taking rubbings and measurements, and all the techniques of ordinary open air archaeologia" (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 85). The accumulated impact of such early experiences must amount to the first suggestion to Wilde of the historical sense and critical spirit outlined in "The Rise of Historical Criticism" and the artistic interpretation of archaeology in "The Truth of Masks".

### **Losing Sacred Knowledge**

The specific influence of Wilde's early cultural inheritance, which predisposed him to integrating the later, sometimes conflicting, influences, can be underestimated. It is important to highlight, as Coakley (1996) does, that "Wilde's formative years in Ireland left a significant imprint on his writing" (3). The Dublin Protestant Ascendancy society into which he was born had been forged in part by centuries of the English establishment's reaction against the assimilation of the English colonisers. From the well documented attempts in the 1300s (Foster 1898) to prevent colonists speaking Gaelic, wearing Irish dress and listening to native music, to Cromwell's massacres (Kee 1980) in the seventeenth century, to the Penal Laws of the eighteenth century, the English establishment worried about the problem of colonists going native.

Holland (1954) notes that the Wildes had been Irish for only three or four generations at the time of his father's birth, but his grandparents had become Irish because of the "subtle influence in the Irish climate which rapidly neutralises the characteristics of any other race" (12). Theories of climactic influence existed in Wilde's time, including in the theories of John Pentland Mahaffy (1869), Wilde's tutor at Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), expressed in his *Twelve Lectures on Primitive Civilisations* (6, 187). Ernest Renan (1850) posited a more politically practical reason for the ease of assimilation by saying their "gentleness of manners" enabled the Celts to impose their national characteristics on the various generations of colonisers (45). And Wilde's contemporary, Grant Allen (1891), indicated that the Irish, alongside other Celtic races, used their Celtic qualities against "Teutonic dominance" as part of the racial, political, and social return-wave to be "admitted into the peerage of the United Kingdom, and form a large portion of the House of Commons" (228). The ultimate fusion of the different elements of nineteenth-century Ireland, the Anglo-Irish and native Irish, combined

with the political developments of the time to create the complicated and contradictory cultural history into which Wilde was born. Nineteenth-century Ireland was poised, according to Killeen (2005), “between folklore and literature, piety and profanity, periphery and centre, Ireland and England, Catholicism and Protestantism, God and Man” (21).

Wilde was fully exposed to that history, growing up in a home dedicated to the cultural and political independence of the country. In the year of his birth, 1854, the Ossianic Society was formed in Dublin to foster interest in and publication of Irish mythology, folklore, poetry and history. Coakley (1996) suggests that new insights triggered by this group “fired the imagination of the intellectual leaders of Irish society and...names with Gaelic associations, “Oscar” among them, became popular in Ireland” (23-4).<sup>41</sup> The Wildes’ interest in things Irish included an interest in the peasant Catholicism of the time and Speranza secretly arranged a Catholic baptism for Wilde and his older brother Willie. Irish Catholicism at this time was an amalgam of pagan myth and Christian faith, still indissolubly united then. Wilde was especially exposed to this pagan/Christian belief through his parents’ research. Speranza (1887), for example, concludes in her work on ancient Irish charms and cures that pagan invocations were simply replaced by the names of the Trinity and Christian words, “and in this mode they are used to the present day amongst the peasants who consider them as talismans of magic power” (9). This leads Killeen (2005) to suggest that Wilde’s writing can be fruitfully analysed as “expressive of an Irish-Catholic heritage” (1). Irish folk-Catholicism, in enabling him to deal with traumatic life events such as his younger sister’s death, was his best means of interrogating reality. The significance of this form of Catholicism to the creative imagination, a core contribution to Wilde’s thought, is also alluded to by Renan (1850), another critical influence. The French thinker writes in his mid-nineteenth-century work:

in the presence of a people which lived by imagination and the  
senses alone, the Church did not consider itself under the  
necessity of dealing severely with the caprices of religious

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<sup>41</sup> It was his mother that gave Oscar his long list of names, Oscar Fingal O’Flathertie Wills Wilde, most of which are taken from legendary heroes. “Oscar” and “Fingal” are, respectively, grandson and grandfather, warriors from the “Ossian” saga from about the third century. “O’Flathertie” shows Wilde’s link, through his paternal grandmother, to one of the leading Celtic families of the west of Ireland. “Wills Wilde” he inherited from his father.

fantasy. It permitted the free action of the popular instinct. (50)

The characteristic which ensured there was no myth-faith conflict (within Irish folk-Catholicism or Wilde) was highlighted by Speranza (1887) in her introduction to her late husband's collection of Irish folklore. Here she stressed that the "mytho-poetic faculty" had been killed off in Europe by dogmatic religion and science. She also noted, however, that this quality only existed "now, naturally and instinctively, in children, poets, and the childlike races, like the Irish" (10). As well as the influence on his writing style and form, mentioned above, this thesis points to another notable consequence of the mytho-poetic background that related, more fundamentally, to Wilde's aesthetic. Its mytho-poetic characteristics were nurtured by a folklore that eschewed everyday rationales and typically comprised fairies involved in gruesome and bizarre events. The folk stories impacted on Wilde to the point that he came to view them as foundational for drama, epic, and novel. In his review of "The Poetry of the People" in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1919), Wilde wrote:

the Folk-tale is the father of all fiction as the Folk-song is  
the Mother of all poetry: and in the games, the tales and the  
ballads of primitive people it is easy to see the germs of such  
perfected forms of art as the drama, the novel and the epic. (29)

The folktales were instrumental as they cradled Wilde through everyday painful events, enabling him to articulate intense feelings and sensations. But they also planted in him the seed that would see him reject the external world for the inner literary landscape that later contributed to his critical aesthetic. Implied throughout the discussion of Wilde's philosophy in later chapters is the progress of an artistic temperament associated with an advanced self-perception. As well as reading Wilde as philosophically subjectivist, critics are now recognising the process of realisation inherent in his writing. Speaking principally of "The Portrait of Mr W. H.", Killeen (2005), for example, suggests that the hybrid mix of myth, folklore and the Bible in Wilde's work constitutes "a spiritual account of fulfilment" (59). And Howard (2006) argues that one of the most important themes in Wilde's work is that "human beings' perfection is inside them" (121).

The mytho-poetic quality of Wilde's imagination, which dominated his more objective, empirical mental attributes, helped the development of his inverted critical thinking in works

such as “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist”. Wilde ultimately believed, as Wright (2009) suggests, that the external world “became more significant and familiar when viewed in a ‘mytho-poetic’ rather than an objective fashion” (24). But the more elementary effect of the mytho-poetic faculty in Wilde’s thought was to significantly advance his art philosophy.<sup>42</sup> Renan (1850) believed this Celtic trait was an “inward timidity which makes them believe that a feeling loses half its value if it is expressed” (8). Speranza (1887) alluded to it when she highlighted that the Ollamhs or learned Celts “dwelt apart and kept their knowledge sacred” (1). But O hOgain (2002) identifies the quality and the reason for such reticence when he refers to the reluctance of the early Irish to share hidden treasures of the personality due to a fear that misfortune would befall the person who imparted them. He points out that the safeguarding of the gift of wisdom was a “tradition reinforced by the belief that such a gift, if divulged, would desert its possessor” (112).

Robbie Ross (1908), Wilde’s loyal friend and executor of his estate, confirmed this same quality was present in much of Wilde’s work, including “The Portrait of Mr W. H.” and “La Sainte Courtisane” (1908), recording that Wilde’s favourite theory was “that when you convert someone to an idea, you lose your faith in it” (4). In “Mr W. H.” the believer-sceptic cycle concerning the object of Shakespeare’s sonnets is central to both the form and the story. The main protagonists take turns in believing then losing faith in a premise when they share their belief. And in “Courtisane” the hermit, having been badgered by the paramour to reveal his wisdom, finally relents and the pair almost swap places. This favourite theory pervades several pieces in *Intentions* when Wilde appears to be hesitant about his artistic convictions, almost as if he regrets having shared them. Having won Ernest over to his way of thinking towards the end of “The Critic as Artist”, Gilbert says to him: “Ah! Don’t say you agree with me. When people agree with me I always feel I must be wrong” (Holland 2003, 1150). And in the last paragraph of “The Truth of Masks” Wilde (in the voice of his own persona) says: “Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree” (1173).

The apparently flippant exchanging of positions leaves Wilde open to the charge that he is no serious thinker. Every critic and biographer makes the point that his use of paradox is so profuse and automatic that it amounts to little more than saying that Wilde *is* a paradox along with his

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<sup>42</sup> For a fuller discussion see Doody (2003) in J. F. Fernandez and M. E. J. de Pablos eds *Irish Landscapes* (2003)

Irish rebel and gay martyr identities. But ongoing individual and social development is an important consequence of his critical dialectic. This is one of the main themes explicitly addressed in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”. Wilde’s self-retractions in *Intentions* and elsewhere which run counter to the accepted view of the problem of ethics and aesthetics, are aspects of a mind willing constantly to controvert his own position in search of a better one. Apart from fearing he might lose faith in it himself, his exploitation of his inherited reluctance to share the wisdom of a new principle also has a practical aesthetic purpose. His full understanding of Hegel’s ongoing dialectic process aids the cultivation of his developing theory, prevents accusations of simple self-contradiction and unshackles him from the constraint of his own opinions. His discussion of utopia in his final essay of 1891, then, is his Hegelian dialectic philosophy of art. His previously cited comment from “The Soul of Man” regarding the continual journey toward Utopia, in this context alludes to his ongoing theoretical revision concerning individual and social development.

### **Knowledge of the Senses**

Oscar Wilde’s particular Anglo-Irish background and the philosophical approaches demonstrated by his parents laid the foundation for the characteristic way in which Wilde approached philosophical debate. Through his parents’ wide ranging interests and their intellectual circle, Wilde was exposed to multiple discourses on contemporary scientific, cultural, historical and political analyses of modern and ancient societies. At a young age, through his mother’s salons, Wilde was introduced to the brilliant minds of the day. Being exposed to these historical, political, cultural and intellectual discussions predisposed him to developing his deep analytical mind. And those who formally educated him in the classics and philosophy also helped Wilde to apply a variety of concepts, including Hellenic ideals, to the problem of nineteenth-century ethics and aesthetics.

Early scholarly and personal influences included Mahaffy, who, Wilde wrote in a letter, was “my first and my best teacher...the scholar who showed me the love of Greek things” (562). It was Mahaffy’s method at Trinity College, Dublin, that formally prompted Wilde to explore contemporary issues and assumptions through the ancients. More importantly, Wilde was encouraged by Mahaffy in his use of the imagination, a key quality in contemplative criticism, especially in his critical approach to history.<sup>43</sup> Mahaffy took an imaginative and artistic

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<sup>43</sup> Mahaffy’s *Prolegomena to Ancient History* (1871) analyses the practice of historical writing and the qualities of a good historian. In this work, which also influenced Wilde’s later art philosophy, Mahaffy states that the

standpoint and nurtured in the young Wilde an aesthetic approach to the study of the ancients that could merge science, literature and mythology. Wilde's father and Mahaffy applied similar approaches to their respective studies of the cultures of Ireland and the Greeks. They both employed an imaginative use of archaeology and topography to illuminate the folklore and ancient literature of both countries. In fact, Mahaffy made strong links between both cultures and countries, noting that his first sighting of Greece was literally like coming home.<sup>44</sup>

This brilliant intellectual and paradoxical conversationalist vigorously encouraged students to engage passionately with the past, and to use ancient texts to explore nineteenth-century concerns and assumptions. This may have had more than a symbolic influence on the young Wilde as Mahaffy especially induced students to challenge the nineteenth-century attitude towards one facet of Greek culture, the approval of homosexual love. Mahaffy wrote in his *Social Life in Greece* (1874) that Victorian and Greek thought were so different from each other regarding this particular issue that the Greeks "would have thought our sentimental (heterosexual) relationships . . . unnatural" (312). Such strong endorsement of love relationships between older and younger men leads Wright (2009) to describe Mahaffy's work as the "fullest and frankest discussion in all nineteenth-century classical scholarship" (68). While no sexual relationship has been recorded between the two, Mahaffy communicated his philosophy of Greek love with zeal to Wilde on their trip to Greece in 1877. Wilde was three weeks late returning to his studies at Oxford, and he wrote to his dean, H. R. Bramley, apologising that "the chance of seeing such great places – in such good company – was too great for me . . . and Mr Mahaffy is such a clever man that it is quite as good as going to lectures" (45). For being three weeks late, Wilde was sent down for the term. He did not regret his decision to stay with Mahaffy but, according to Ellman (1987), he accused the Oxford authorities of being philistines, remarking that he "was sent down from Oxford for being the first undergraduate to visit Olympia" (75).<sup>45</sup>

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critical historian must develop an "historical sense" which is a combination of "ruthless scepticism and a vivid imagination" (34).

<sup>44</sup> In *Rambles and Studies of Greece* (1878) Mahaffy writes "nor can I cease to wonder at the strange likeness that rose in my mind, and which made me think of the bays and rocky coasts of the west and south-west of Ireland" (4).

<sup>45</sup> Feeling that Oxford valued the pen over the spade, Mahaffy wrote in *Contemporary Review* (xxix, 1877), that such trips provide "geographical facts in a way quite different from what can be gained by the most accurate study of books" (890).

Wilde's belief in the importance of combining practical archaeological work with literature, intensely nurtured by Mahaffy during the Greek trip,<sup>46</sup> emerges in his constant emphasis on the historical sense and Hellenic critical spirit in interpreting art and contemporary life. Observing that Wilde could never be classified as a complete anti-historicist, Wright (2009) argues that he aimed "to balance two apparently contradictory approaches; classicists should, he thought, produce historically sensitive interpretations that also spoke to the present" (73). The value of the past for the present and the relation of art to science are issues Wilde discusses in "The Truth of Masks". In this text regarding the relation between past and present, originally written in the year he left the Hellenic Society, Wilde writes that archaeology is the means through which to "touch the dry dust of antiquity into the very breath and beauty of life, and fill with the new wine of romanticism forms that had else been old and outworn" (1162). But the real value of archaeology lies only in being deciphered by art. Wilde posits that "only an artist can use it. We look to the archaeologist for the materials and to the artist for the method" (1165).

Mahaffy's value to Wilde's aesthetic was as a Kantian idealist. One of his publications, *Kant's Critical Philosophy for English Readers* (1872), was the set text in Classics at Trinity and was the first scholarly work to introduce Wilde to aestheticism. Mahaffy's position on art and literature originated in Kant, for him the initiator of aestheticism. Mahaffy also introduced Wilde to the philosophical problem of art and life or what Prewitt Brown (1997) calls "the controversies over mind and matter" (7). In approaching this problem, Wilde's tutor, being a member of the Church of England and a Kantian idealist, Smith and Helfand (1989) contend, "sought and often found the via media in these controversies" (7). Mahaffy nurtured this quality in his students in his lectures and during their travels together. Through Mahaffy Wilde discovered his first academic and Kantian aesthetic footing for his challenge to empiricism. Mahaffy (1872) emphasised Kant's view that "experience can never teach us the nature of things in themselves", only what and how things exist (64). Kant also stresses the difference between his own Idealism and, for example, Descartes' "Empirical Idealism", and to make sure there is no confusion between the two, he retracts his transcendentalism, saying it is better to call it "Critical Idealism" (63). Empiricism, with its accent on the need for objective, concrete, experiential proof of something, was a feature of English philosophy that Irish intellectuals such as Wilde's parents or Mahaffy could not accept.

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<sup>46</sup> Iain Ross (2009) cites Wilde's causal link between topography and literature, landscape and text, from his unpublished notes made during this trip where Wilde says "it is interesting to note more impassioned and erotic literature from the islands" (179).

Wilde's anti-empiricism is implied throughout his work, but is made explicit in his first dialogue "The Decay of Lying". Nature is one point where Wilde's argument for imagination over realism is made, and he has Vivian, one of the protagonists, declare that because Nature is "the collection of phenomena external to man, people only discover in her what they bring to her" (1078). Realism in literature is especially questioned in the piece and imaginative realism in art is strongly advocated as a prompt for change. These echo Mahaffy's (1878) views that culture and representation precede nature and perception: "Greek life is a sort of protest for cities and plains and human culture, against the picturesque Alps and romantic scenery" (340). Wright (2009) sees a linked Irish influence in the imaginative faculty and concludes that Wilde's parents, as Celts, shared a cultural and intellectual affinity with the continent rather than with Anglo-Saxon thinking, suggesting: "Wilde's interest in German philosophy at Oxford, and his contempt for English empiricism, are an affirmation of his Celtic identity" (97). Wilde's parents, in line with their son's tutor, were more at home with a philosophy based on the sort of subjective, abstract perception of things which characterises German philosophy.<sup>47</sup>

Anti-empiricism takes a similar form in Wilde's writing, which elevates a principal characteristic of contemplative and critical aesthetic, the poetic and philosophic imagination, above plain facts. This philosophy is espoused through his works from early on: for instance, in his notebooks Wilde says "facts are the Labyrinth: ideas are the guiding thread" (Smith and Helfand 1989, 169). His letters also have an unmistakable anti-empirical tone. To the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* he proposed a list of books never to read, including "all argumentative books and books that try to prove anything" (276). And in *De Profundis* he confesses: "I am one of those made for exceptions, not laws" (732). Wilde was particularly fascinated with the Kantian concept of the need for sensory information to be processed intellectually before being fully comprehended. While empiricism prefers to have knowledge confirmed by experiment and observation, for Kant facts are meaningless unless they have been explained through philosophic theories. Mahaffy (1872) records Kant saying that all judgements are subjective perceptions and merely require "the logical connection of perception in a thinking subject" (66). This resonated with Wilde and he later recorded in his notebooks: "knowledge to Kant

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<sup>47</sup> Mahaffy in *Kant's Critical Philosophy* (1872) laments the English failure to appreciate Hegel, Schilling and Kant and pointedly asks the question "how many men are there now in England who thoroughly understand the Critical Philosophy?" (vi).

was the thinking of our sensations” (Smith and Helfand 1989, 128). This can also be read as an early connection with the aesthetic of his later mentor, Walter Pater.

While Mahaffy was having a direct impact on him, Wilde was also being shaped by the writing of John Addington Symonds (1840-93). Symonds’ *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873) was perpetually in Wilde’s hands in his final year at Trinity. In a sign of his belief in the aesthetic Wilde initiated correspondence with Symonds, according to Freyer (2005), having read the writer’s assertion that the ancient Greeks “trusted their aesthetic, delicately trained and preserved in a condition of utmost purity” (14). Wilde’s appreciation of Symonds’ art writing and his philosophy can also be found in his unpublished review of the second edition of *Studies of the Greek Poets* in 1876. He wrote that Symonds “has all the picturesqueness and loveliness of words that we admire in Mr Ruskin and Mr Pater” (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 31). And Symonds’ aestheticism was also derived from amalgamating practical onsite archaeological visits with a study of the ancients. Like Mahaffy, Symonds encouraged his contemporaries to intellectually engage with the ancients. Advocating for students to visit Greece and Italy he advised them, in Wright’s words (2009), to “focus on the many points at which modern and ancient cultures touch” (69). The 1873 edition of his *Studies* praises the Mediterranean topography, indicating its probable influence on the temperament of the people whose “serenity and intelligence characterise this southern landscape” (311). Symonds’ work clearly marked Wilde. Brown (1956) even suggests that the novel mentioned in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not, as believed by many, Huysmans’ *À Rebours* (1884), but an amalgamation of three books, including Symonds’ *Age of Despots* (1883).<sup>48</sup> Like Mahaffy, Symonds’ approach to morality, implied in the level of trust the Greeks placed in their aesthetic, especially appealed to the young Wilde and in it lay “the foundations for his own personal code of behaviour” (Freyer 2005, 14). Wilde was attracted to Symonds’ frank exploration of the controversies that emerged from the Greek-nineteenth-century dialogue about homosexuality.

For Wright (2009), Symonds in particular was one of the Oxford Hellenists who used “their commentaries on classical texts to safely explore and define their illicit passion” (89). Wilde reviewed several of Symonds’ books in the 1870s and the 1880s and it is clear he believed him to be a remarkable thinker. Aware of the innuendoes in Symonds’ work, Wilde marked pages that referred to the intense friendship between male protagonists and the love that seemed to

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<sup>48</sup> In a letter to *Modern Language Notes* (1956) vol. 71, no. 4, Brown states that from Symonds’ work, “Wilde gleaned the most sensational details from the lives of the Italian princes” (264). The other works Brown mentions are Suetonius’ *De Vita Caesarum* and Gibbons’ *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire*.

pass the love of women. Symonds was very clear in his writing about the Hellenistic appreciation for the beauty of boys. In his second edition of *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1876), one of the works reviewed by Wilde, Symonds calls on readers to attempt to capture an echo of Greek sculpture through visiting “the fields where boys bathe in the early morning, or the playgrounds of our public schools, or the banks of the Isis when the eights are on the water, or the riding schools of the young soldiers” (408). Following his visit with Mahaffy Wilde confirmed his agreement with this sentiment. In *Miscellanies* (Ross 1908) Wilde is cited as saying that in the Greek islands “boys can still be found as beautiful as the Charmides of Plato” (12). Symonds credits his own sexual awakening, recorded in his memoirs (Grosskurth 1984), to his first contact with Greek philosophy and Platonic love, when he says it was “as though in some antenatal experience I had lived the life of a philosophical Greek lover” (99). Wilde is clear about the significant impact of the writing of this man of letters on his thought.<sup>49</sup> As early as his notebooks he was writing about “the refinement of Greek culture coming through the romantic medium of impassioned friendships, the freedom and gladness of the palaestra” (115). His belief in the value of pederastic relationships to cultivating culture is also hinted at in the relationships and dialogues in “The Portrait of Mr W. H.” and especially in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In “Mr W.H.” Wilde confirms this by stating: “we can also trace, as Mr Symonds points out, the Platonic conception of love as nothing if not spiritual, and of beauty that finds its mortality within the lover’s soul” (325).

Evangelista (2006) argues that for the aesthetics of both Symonds and Wilde “reading produces self-knowledge” and, in keeping with the strengthening connections between Plato’s writing and Victorian homosexual identity, for both men “homoeroticism is prominently rewritten into the individual histories of intellectual development” (242). In Symonds, Wilde found a man of similar interests and he also found in him a model poet and critic.<sup>50</sup> Wilde mentions Symonds in these contexts in some of his own work. The fact that Symonds was a member of the Hellenic Society council was a motivation for Wilde to join the board. Wilde was so influenced by

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<sup>49</sup> In “The Truth of Masks” Wilde cites Symonds’ remark about Mantegna converting “an antiquarian motive into a theme for melodies of line” in support for accurate detail on stage sets (Holland 2003, 1163). In “Pen, Pencil and Poison”, an essay separating the artist’s morality from artwork, he cites Symonds as one of a number of “distinguished writers” who have written “charming studies of the great criminals of the Italian Renaissance” (1107). And in “The Portrait of Mr W. H.” Wilde borrows “a fine phrase from Symonds” who pointed to Michelangelo’s worship of “intellectual beauty” (325).

<sup>50</sup> Wilde found another model writer and talker in Symonds who describes his own abilities as “writing connectedly” on vast themes and his “art of putting forth my knowledge impressively, attractively and systematically” (in Grosskurth, 1984, 234).

Symonds' thought that he transcribed many lines, some verbatim, from his works into his notebooks.<sup>51</sup> Some of these transcriptions emphasise the importance of studying the Greeks and the significance of such study to history and criticism. Such opinions are further developed in his later work on criticism. Symonds' Hellenic influence on Wilde's philosophy of art is typically found in his remark to Wilde, cited in Ellmann (1987), that "the Greeks were essentially a nation of artists" (33). The broad Hellenic influence in Symonds' thought contributed to the comprehensive political possibilities, cosmopolitan aestheticism and contemplative criticism advanced by Wilde in "The Soul of Man" and "The Critic" years later.

### **Philosophy Underpinning Wilde's Dialectic**

It is no surprise considering his background that Wilde distinguished himself at Trinity, winning the 1874 Berkeley Gold Medal for his Greek studies,<sup>52</sup> and a Classical Demyship which brought him to Magdalen College, Oxford. He seems to have prompted a mixed response from his contemporaries at Oxford, particularly regarding the seriousness with which he took to his studies. De Sales la Terriere (1924), for example, remembered that Wilde did not appear to have done any more work than other students, so "it came as a bit of a surprise that he took the Newdigate scholarship" (76). Hunter-Blair, however, cited in Smith (2003), also claimed that Wilde "liked to pose as a dilettante trifling with his books; but I knew of his hours of assiduous and laborious reading, often into the small hours of the morning" (282). William Ward (Holland 1954), another friend, describes him as "always an interesting personality . . . brilliant and radiant . . . playful and charming" (220).

He arrived at Oxford well-grounded in the problems and controversies related to historical interpretations. Intellectually, Oxford meant the *Literae Humaniores* or "Greats" to Wilde and the course significantly enhanced his appreciation of the dialectical approach. The Greats course encouraged him to bring ancient ideas to modern issues, continuing the emphasis on creating a dialogue between the past and the present in the way that his parents, Mahaffy and Symonds had all endorsed. Oxford advanced Wilde's thinking in very crucial ways. The Greats course was designed to introduce young men to the philosophy and history of the ancients.

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44 Wilde also writes in his Oxford notebooks that "the ancients regarded that width of mind which is experience and culture was the aim (of history). They never perverted History to preach a creed" (in Smith and Helfand, 1989, 169).

52 The Berkeley Gold Medal was the highest award for Classics at Trinity. It had sentimental and practical value for Wilde: his great-uncle Ralph Wilde was a previous winner and he pawned the medal several times when he was short of money. Wilde commenced studies in Oxford in 1874 and in 1878 he received a rare double first in the Final Schools.

Shuter (2003) mentions some of the key goals of the Greats, which included encouraging students “to think critically about philosophic and ethical questions and to relate historically earlier to historically later stages of thought” (250).<sup>53</sup>

Both the critical approach to ethical issues and linking the past to the present are important elements in Wilde’s thinking which were fostered by the development of the “Greats” at Oxford. The Greats course can be seen to have arisen within the context of the momentous expansion of science, university reform and the tradition of cultural criticism during the Victorian era. Heyck (1980) says the fundamental changes took place through “these complex forces interacting in processes we call secularisation and modernisation” (167). The process of modernisation culminated in significant educational and philosophical transformations at Oxford which ultimately proved to be crucial to Wilde’s developing philosophy of art.<sup>54</sup> The status of established intellectual groups, commonly referred to as men of letters, was challenged and eventually devalued in the process. Between the 1830s and 1870s, for example, there were substantial developments in the fields of physics, biology, geology and physiological psychology which significantly impacted on the philosophy of science.<sup>55</sup> These developments ultimately led to a conflict between religious and scientific modes of thinking, particularly around the place of humankind in nature. The shift in thinking followed the planned professionalisation of scientific organisations and schools and the formulation of codes of ethics, making it possible for the sciences to penetrate educational institutions.

Scientific methods encouraged development through the heuristic method, learning for oneself by experience. These heuristic principles, according to Dolin (2005), “contributed to the extraordinary growth of popular science in Victorian Britain because they had a moral dimension and a civic function, actively promoting the values of mental discipline and self-reliance” (191). The new professional scientists also linked their work with contemporary utilitarian and imperial visions, and their contribution to economic, medical, industrial and military developments reinforced their importance for the general public. The struggle

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<sup>53</sup> Shuter (2003) also says that Wilde clearly demonstrates of the Greats course that “some men were more receptive and retentive than others of its mental impress” (250). One reason for Wilde’s serious work was because the Demysip was awarded to students based on the assumption that they further distinguish themselves as students in the classics.

<sup>54</sup> Wilde was an Oxford undergraduate at a time that Heyck (1980) says was depicted in contemporary novels as “the golden age of Oxbridge undergraduate life” (174).

<sup>55</sup> Herbert Spencer (1896), for example, indicates some of the thinking at that time. In asking “What knowledge is of most worth?” Spencer concludes that for all purposes, including “for purposes of discipline – intellectual, moral, religious – the most efficient study is once more – Science” (94).

culminated in a shift from religious authority to the secularising influence of scientific proof, critical research and empirical verification and, in universities, to the removal of all theological tests except in religious subjects. The demand for tangible answers from the middle of the century provided science with a strong social and academic footing. Turner (1978) discusses how science set out to undermine the legitimacy of the clergy and concludes that “the positivist epistemology constituted both a cause and a weapon . . . Positivist epistemology provided an intellectual solvent to cleanse contemporary science of metaphysical and theological survivals” (364).

Another intellectual group whose legitimacy was undermined during this time was the men of letters, defined by Heyck (1980) as literary men, poets and prophets “who gave symbolic interpretation to experience” (158). In universities, internal scientific and external utilitarian forces combined to alter Victorian intellectual life to the detriment of the men of letters who it was claimed, were also relying on science.<sup>56</sup> In their roles as sages and prophets this group of intellectuals had a direct link to the public and provided guidance for improvements in contemporary moral life and advice for correcting social ills. They were men independent of universities which gave them a broad social appeal. Cannon (1964) refers to them as “self-generated geniuses” who “modernised themselves on their own” (67). Historical men of letters, such as Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) and Henry Hallam (1777-1859), were amateur or literary historians who were committed to approaching their subjects with empathy and imagination rather than with analysis. This is something with which Wilde thoroughly sympathised. In “The Critic as Artist” he has Gilbert aver: “to give an accurate description of what has never occurred is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of parts and culture” (1114).

The men of letters were read by a growing number of educated readers and the appeal for this audience was reinforced by their didactic style, which gave symbolic meaning to historical events and people.<sup>57</sup> Universities became more professionalised, however, and the work of scholars more specialised, with the demands of fellow academics for methodological rigour

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<sup>56</sup> T. H. Huxley” (Barry, 1929) derided these by asserting that “The whole of modern thought is steeped in science . . . even the mere man of letters, who effects to ignore and despise science, is unconsciously impregnated with her spirit, and indebted for his best products to her methods” (45).

<sup>57</sup> Heyck (1980), says that “literary” historians wrote in “an age in which a man’s religious and political convictions outweighed his scholarly credentials” and when such amateurs “could expect and receive an international reputation for historical research” (182).

being placed above the demands for public heroic inspiration.<sup>58</sup> Universities did not have the same connections with the Victorian public who believed academics were now concerned only with the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. There was also a sense that, with the passing of the men of letters, people lost an engaged and empathetic intellectual leadership to which they could turn for direction. The alienation experienced by the public added to the sense that an already elitist education system became even less concerned with their well-being. Heyck (1980) expresses this well by observing that what could not be recovered with the passing of this group was an elite that could “empathise with a general public that agreed with them on the same ultimate concerns and standards of life” (181).

But these developments also had the effect of broadening the philosophical discourse in England and introducing a wider range of ideas. Beginning in the 1830s and culminating during Wilde’s undergraduate days, the ongoing scientific, philosophical and cultural reforms eventually led to German philosophy penetrating thinking at Oxford. The works of two dons, Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893) and William Wallace (1844-1897), and especially their interpretations of Hegelian dialectic, established German philosophy at Oxford and ultimately found their way into Wilde’s idealist philosophy of art. Jowett in particular was crucial to the reforms at Oxford and significantly enriched contemporary culture there. His contribution of the greatest significance to Wilde’s aesthetic was in the philosophical attitude he cultivated at Oxford. Symonds, who commenced at Oxford in 1858, wrote in his memoirs that “Jowett was the leading spirit in the college at that epoch; and under his influence even philosophy was studied mainly from the rhetorical point of view” (222). For Symonds, and for ultimately Wilde, Jowett did more than any other to let some fresh air into the thinking at Oxford and to widen its intellectual horizon.

Jowett established the systematic study of Greek philosophy and history at Oxford, replacing the study of Christian theology which had dominated Oxford since the Middle Ages. From this same Hellenism, Dowling (1994) argues, the likes of Wilde were able to develop an ideal homosexual counter-discourse through “the ‘spiritual procreancy’ associated specifically with Plato’s *Symposium* and more generally with Greece itself” (xiii). The secular-intellectual ideals of Hellenism under Jowett’s influence reinforced Wilde’s belief in the cultural power of male

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<sup>58</sup>The attitude of the new professional historians is indicated by John Horace Round’s *Feudal England: Historical Studies on the XIth and XIIth Centuries* (1895) when he says “the minute sifting of facts and figures is the only sure method by which we can extend knowledge” (x).

love (represented in Wilde's later dialogues and in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." (1889) and "The Picture of Dorian Gray" (1890)). Dowling (1994) points to the strong influences of Wilde's engagement with the conventions of ancient Greece which would emerge through his mature work: she says "paiderastia, symposia, dialektike – would assume the status of lived categories for Wilde...experienced by him on the level of ordinary experience as elements scarcely more remarkable than air or wine" (124).

It was also due to Jowett that the powerful systems of German thought combined with the classics of the Greats course to become the natural conduit of contemporary liberal thought. The fusion is particularly evident in his making Plato's and Hegel's dialectical methods central to the Greats. V. R. Mehta (1975) credits the Oxford don with introducing the idea central to Wilde's aesthetic: "Jowett's treatment of Platonic ideas shows him to be portraying Plato as the innovator of a system which found its culmination in the philosophy of Hegel" (185). But it was William Wallace's interpretation of Hegel that would secure Wilde's future dialectic aesthetic. Wallace, Professor of Moral Philosophy, completed his *Prolegomena to The Logic of Hegel* (1874) just as Wilde was commencing studies in 1874. The significance of the *Prolegomena* for Wilde's thought can be clearly seen in his student notes and throughout his later work, especially when Wallace places Hegel's individual dialectic experience above empirical scientific demonstration: "Experience is that absolute process, embracing both us and things, which displays the nullity of what is immediately given, or baldly and nakedly accepted, and completes it by the rough remedy of contradiction" (1874, 271). Wallace also challenged the material and utilitarian notions of philosophy: "the very terms in which Bacon scornfully depreciated one great concept of philosophy are to be accepted in their literal truth. Like a virgin consecrated to God she bears no fruit" (19). In his notes Wilde closely followed Wallace regarding the place of philosophy and, paraphrasing the *Prolegomena*, indicated philosophy's interpretative role: "Bacon's scornful words are its glory – Like a virgin consecrated to God, it bears no fruit, its duty is to comprehend the world not to make it better" (144).

There were several attractions for Wilde in Wallace's *Prolegomena* which would confirm some of his existing thought and introduce significant new ways of thinking which emerged in his later writings. Descriptions of Hegel early in the piece would have confirmed the young

student's interest in his philosophical approach.<sup>59</sup> Wallace actually opens the work with a quote from Hegel: “‘The condemnation’ says Hegel, ‘which a great man lays upon the world, is to force it to explain him’” (1). This must have struck the young Wilde, as it indicates the world existed for his benefit, not the reverse. In his writing as well as in his life, a detailed explanation of this notion was to become a cornerstone for self-realisation. Wilde would also have been impressed by the anti-empirical tone. Wallace's unfavourable comparison of English thought with Hegelian philosophy clearly indicates the limitations placed on Victorian behaviour by empiricism. Speaking of the closed, realist slant of contemporary philosophy, Wallace says English thinkers hold philosophy “as an extension and rounding off of science” or are “inclined to sweep philosophy altogether away” (14). The *Prolegomena* indicates that English philosophy, under the name of “Inductive Logic”, attempted to construct a psychological theory of mind that could regulate thinking and behaviour. Wallace also implies that this codification of behaviour, in setting “the individual mind in good order”, means that the mind “is treated only as an aggregate or a receptacle” for moral order (16-17).<sup>60</sup> For him, Hegelian philosophy shows that English thought, or “Common Sense” as he describes it in the *Prolegomena*, is a version of Understanding, the first moment in Hegel's dialectic discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>61</sup>

If he needed clarification, Wallace is here explaining for Wilde the difference between the imaginative and mytho-poetic perception of his heritage and English practical philosophy. Wallace says Understanding, while stigmatising anything that is vague or appears inconsistent such as mysticism, prefers to be ordered, clear and practical. In this way, empiricism is important in philosophy when “it is unnecessary to go into the essential truth of things, and one has only to do good work in a clearly defined sphere” (268). The need for logical consistency in English thought means the imaginative and creative faculties are constructed as more liberal than empirical intellect. Wallace indicates a particular difficulty when empiricism is applied to the higher aspects of art, religion and philosophy. Difficulties arise because a deficiency is said

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<sup>59</sup> Near the beginning of his book Wallace (1874) says of Hegel, “there is something in him which fascinates the thinker, and which inspires a sympathetic student with the vigour and hopefulness of the spring-time” (2).

<sup>60</sup> Wallace goes much further saying philosophy in England was so much associated with “the practical exhibition of self-control in life and in action”, that “the more definite and characteristic term came to be Mental and Moral Science” (14).

<sup>61</sup> Wallace says that Understanding “is the systematised and thorough exercise of what in England is called “Common Sense” (267).

to lie in art, religion or philosophy when they do not fit into the logical: “If intelligent definiteness does not make itself apparent in these, there is something wrong with them” (268).

The emphasis on the material and the inflexible within English philosophy was at odds with the mytho-poetic ideal of Wilde’s background. Moreover the description of philosophy as a mental and moral science, the codification and regulation of moral conduct and thought can be seen to have contributed to Wilde’s creative, paradoxical and contrary thought regarding the accepted ethic. In his student notebooks he discusses the notions of mental chemistry and law of association in the philosophical empiricism of Hume, Hartley and Clifford, which he associates with the lowest form of development. He summarises Clifford by saying that these notions are crucial for an individual’s survival in society, but a survival based on mutual dependency between society members for moral social order:

The basis of our moral Feelings may be found in  
the desire for self-preservation. But this preservation of self is  
not the individual self but what Clifford calls the ‘Tribal self’  
. . . it is the Tribal self wh. is the first mainspring of action, and  
canon of right and wrong. (129-30)

These early writings tell of Wilde’s first encounter with a contrarian approach to limitations and relate to what would become his life-long concerns with culture and life, concerns that inevitably arise when conforming to contemporary social norms. Adhering to the accepted social ethic is not about advancing the happiness of the individual for Wilde, but about the individual serving community: “neither in its matured development, or in its earliest starting point of evolution, is the canon of ethics the greatest happiness of the greatest number but the preservation of the Tribe, its highest excellence” (130).

Later this develops into the core of his own philosophy of art and the essence of his Individualism. One of the main intentions of “The Decay of Lying” is to relieve art of the burden of being a moral messenger and ethical educator, roles that mentors such as Ruskin had continually advocated for art. Wilde’s “Doctrines of the New Aesthetics”, which conclude “The Decay” include the proposition that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (1091). And in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” all imitation in morals and life is wrong as it is crucial for us to be relieved from “that sordid necessity of living for others” (1174).

Emphasising the limitations placed by society especially upon those attempting to develop the “perfect personality”, he says in the same essay that people do not realise they are probably “thinking other people’s thoughts, living other people’s standards...never being themselves for a single moment” (1182).<sup>62</sup>

### **Imagined Life Confirmed**

Wallace’s interpretation of Hegelian idealism was more conducive to Wilde’s own imaginative realism. Wallace highlighted the inclusive, wide ranging application of Hegel’s philosophy by saying it was not a system of principles but a theory which gave philosophy “its proper place in our Idea of reality to Art, Science, and Religion, to all the consciousness of ordinary life, and to the evolution of the physical Universe” (18). Wallace continued his praise of Hegel’s refutation of empirical thought, agreeing that “philosophy ranges over the whole field of actuality, or existing fact. Abstract principles are all very well in their way: but they are not philosophy” (18). At the end of his chapter comparing Hegel’s thought with English thinking, Wallace reiterates that Hegel’s philosophy is not a moral code for behaviour, this is significant for Wilde’s contrarian ethic and utopian ideal regarding individualism and the perfect personality. “The sphere of philosophy is the Universal”, Wallace writes: “To comprehend the universe of thought in all its formations and all its features . . . Its special work is to comprehend the world, not to try to make it better” (20). Wallace quotes the *Philosophy of Right* (1820) when he alludes to Hegel’s extension of empirical and scientific thinking:

This is the doctrine set forth by the notion of philosophy; but  
it is also the teaching of history. It is only when the actual  
world has reached its full fruition that the ideal rises to  
confront the reality, and builds up, in the shape of an  
intellectual realm, that same world grasped in its substantial

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<sup>62</sup> The same idea appears in his short stories. Lord Murchison (representing English empiricism in “The Sphinx Without a Secret”), who has become keenly interested in Lady Alroy (representing mysticism) is described by the narrator as presently looking “anxious and puzzled, and seemed to be in doubt about something. I felt it could not be modern scepticism, for Murchison was the stoutest of Tories and believed in the Pentateuch as firmly as he believed in the House of Peers” (205). And the main protagonist in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” displays that rarest of things, common sense, the quality that makes him realise, out of his sense of duty to his fiancé, he must commit murder before rather than after marriage.

being. (20)

Wilde follows Hegel and Wallace when he discusses empirical philosophy as a moral code for making society better. Rather, he emphasises the transformative nature of Idealist philosophy. He discusses the limitations associated with empiricism as Wallace tackled them in *Prolegomena*, and he also follows him in finding Hegelian Idealism the only possible way to true knowledge. In his student notes, Wilde at first accepts the validity of philosophical realism: “Every true philosophy must be both idealist and realist” (127). But he goes on to underscore the insufficiency of empirical philosophy, which, he notes, inhibits pure thought and blocks the development of the utmost individual potential: “The analytic force of science shatters the golden chain which binds the world round the feet of God” (128). It was Hegel who finally showed the Absolute and the Infinite as knowable and the highest potential as realisable. The power of philosophical synthetic unity, Wilde notes, transports thought into the sphere of pure thought and for Hegel

the road to true knowledge passed from the one-sided  
identification of the understanding, to the disintegrating  
method of the free dialectic, till the contradictions of  
thought are unravelled, and the absolute knowledge of  
absolute Being, the Idea of pure thought is reached.

(128)

Wilde’s thought closely paraphrases Wallace in his student notebooks. The complicated work of philosophy presented in the *Prolegomena* relates to comprehending the world, but does not include making it better: “If it were the purpose of philosophy to reform and improve the existing state of things, it comes a little too late for such a task” (20). The same philosophical ideal, which is critical of the real world as Hegel explains it is clear in much of Wilde’s work.<sup>63</sup> In his notes Wilde paraphrases Wallace about philosophy’s purpose as a moral code and

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<sup>63</sup> Wallace’s idea is based on the final part of Hegel’s preface to *Philosophy of Right* (1820) where he says “As the thought of the world, it appears only when actuality is already there cut and dried after its process of formation has been completed...it is only when actuality is mature that the ideal first appears over against the real and that the ideal apprehends this same real world in its substance and builds it up for itself in the shape of an intellectual realm” (Maynard Hutchins 1975, 7).

follows Hegel when he observes: “If philosophy aims at doing good to man it comes too late in the day for that” (145).

Wallace’s *Prolegomena* presents Hegelian philosophy as an antithesis to the idea of a purposeless universe advanced by contemporary scientific thought. One of Hegel’s central beliefs, one that had an enduring influence on Wilde, is that the philosophy of history reveals the significance and meaning of the world. Beyond the mere gathering of facts, Hegel defines his *Philosophy of History* (1837) as “nothing but the *thoughtful consideration of it*” (emphasis in the original, Sibree 1975, 156). There is a developmental logic underpinning this “*thoughtful consideration*” of history, evident in Hegel’s statement that “history exhibits the *gradation* in the development of that principle whose substantial *purport* is the consciousness of freedom” (emphasis in the original, Sibree 1975, 179). The *Prolegomena* shows that the core for this evolutionary perspective is the larger Reason, which lies within the third moment of Hegel’s dialectic process. Wallace contends that the development of thought, represented by the stages of the dialectic, corresponds to evolution in the biological world. Saying that “Natural Selection” may not go far enough to explain the process, he emphasises that the three stages “state the law of rational development in pure thought, in Nature, and in the world of Mind – the world of Art, Morals and Science” (276). The explanation for the history of thought can be found in the Darwinian theory concerning the origin of species, proven through the domestication and artificial selection of species which suggested a theory of similar selection in free nature. In the same way, Wallace posits it is also possible to make claims for the conscious fostering of thought as for artificial selection in the organic world.<sup>64</sup>

Several comments in Wilde’s student notes confirm the importance of Wallace’s idea of an evolutionary development of thought in his own philosophy of art. Implying the dialectic process,<sup>65</sup> he likens the stages through which the human embryo passes to the progress of the human mind in the intellectual world. Implying an early aesthetic, he writes that progress in both the biological and the intellectual worlds “must be made by slowly graduated stages from simple sensations, and formless protoplasms, to the highest differentiated organism and the purest abstractions of thought” (125). Critical thought is shown to be central to philosophical development as it challenges the closed finite nature of thought at the first stage of

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<sup>64</sup> Wallace says that “The history of philosophy records the steps in the conscious and artificial manipulation of what for the far greater part is transacted in the silent workshops of nature. Philosophy, in short, is to the general growth of intelligence what artificial breeding is to the variation of species under natural conditions” (289).

<sup>65</sup> He stresses that “neither in the world of thought or in that of matter is the past ever annihilated” (125).

development. Progress in thought begins with “first a narrow definiteness, an uncompromising dogmatism; then the antagonism and criticism to which this gives rise; lastly the intellectual synthesis and union (Hegel)” (Smith and Helfand 1989, 123). Stated in his notebooks is the notion of the evolutionary movement, through the dialectic process, from empirical thought (the first moment) to idealism (the third moment). Here Wilde builds on Wallace’s original assertion regarding evolution.<sup>66</sup> Under the heading “Progress of Thought”, Wilde, evidently linking the dialectic with evolution, says the “Hegelian dialectic is the natural selection produced by a struggle for existence in the world of thought” (Smith and Helfand 1989, 149).

Between them Jowett and Wallace created the conditions and the philosophical basis for Wilde’s mature aesthetic. Jowett created an intellectual and attitudinal climate at Oxford in which Wilde’s philosophy of art was nurtured while Wallace provided the solid philosophical foundation. The combination of critical thinking, philosophy and ethics, and the focus on correlating past and present, proved to be crucial to Wilde’s future contemplative form of criticism. Here we see the rudiments of the “perfect personality”. A great friend at Oxford, William Ward (Holland 1954), remembered that as a student Wilde’s love of pose was combined with the desire for self-realisation. Ward concluded that his “Individualism – self-realisation, as he called it – was his Philosopher’s Stone” (223). Wilde indicates his awareness, in letters to later Oxford students, of the inspiration and influence of Oxford for his aesthetic. For example, in a letter to Rennell Rodd, he implies the future dialectic method he would come to use when he states that Greats is “the only sphere of thought where one can be, *simultaneously*, brilliant and unreasonable, speculative and well informed, creative as well as critical” (emphasis in the original, Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 102). And to Henry Marillier, future journalist with the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Wilde strongly indicated the effect of the dialectic of Oxford’s physical surrounds on his thought: “Greek forms passing through Gothic cloisters, life playing among ruins, and, what I love best in the world, Poetry and Paradox dancing together!” (269). Exiled in France in 1898 he still reminisced to Louis Wilkinson about his time at Oxford, which “is the most flower-like time of one’s life. One sees the shadow of things in silver mirrors” (1113).

Through these direct references to his time at Oxford Wilde is clearly indicating the University’s intellectual and philosophic influences on his developing philosophy of art. The

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<sup>66</sup> In his *Prolegomena* (1874) Wallace says “This dialectic is the natural selection, caused by the struggle for existence” (clxxx).

impact was so significant it leads Smith (2003) to conclude that Oxford education “provided the intellectual foundation upon which Wilde built his creative and critical works for the 1880s and 1890s” (291). Wilde is also referring to some of the qualities on which his unique, transformative contemplative criticism was built. These include the poetically imaginative, unreasonable, creative and speculative abilities paradoxically “dancing together” with the intellectually brilliant, well-read and critical reasoning abilities. In *De Profundis* Wilde, mocking Bosie’s lack of intellect, refers to these abilities as the “Oxford temper” which he defines as “sustained intellectual concentration” and the desire, ability and interest to “play gracefully with ideas” (686). The characters in his dialogues and fiction clearly display the “Oxford temper”, which is also used to great effect in his prose works. Vivian and Cyril in “The Decay”, Gilbert and Ernest in “The Critic” and the main characters in “Mr W. H.” and *Dorian Gray* conduct sustained intellectual dialogues while “The Rise”, “The Truth of Masks” and “The Soul of Man” are made more interesting because of Wilde’s ability to play gracefully with ideas in his own voice.

This chapter has discussed the influences of some of the main figures in Wilde’s early and young adult life. It argues that his aesthetic philosophy was shaped by his particular Anglo-Irish heritage and formal education, combined with his experiences at Oxford. From his parents, he learned to merge with ease the mytho-poetic and semi-scientific approaches for enhanced understanding of life. This was encouraged further by his learning under Mahaffy and reading of Symonds, both of whom confirmed his interest in archaeology and also introduced Wilde to the idea of pederasty as the best way to cultivate culture. The chapter also discusses the incidental impacts of developments at Oxford, including how the philosophical attitude created by Benjamin Jowett and the works of William Wallace significantly influenced Wilde’s aesthetic both as a student and as a mature writer. At Oxford, Wilde learned to fully fuse evolution and science with idealism and the imagination, as the Greats course allowed him to explore the possibility of reconciling science and philosophical idealism. Building on this outline of the significant influences on Wilde’s early thought the following chapters discuss his philosophy of art as he expresses it in his mature subsequent writing. The analysis begins with a detailed look at his American lectures followed by discussions of Wilde’s short fiction, his only novel and his prose and dialogue forms.

## Chapter three

### Aesthetic Ambassador

The previous chapters described Oscar Wilde's philosophy of art and outlined some of the main sources of influence in the development of that philosophy. Beginning with his American lecture tour the following chapters look at how Wilde's thinking about art and society formed over a period of ten years. Several influential aspects of Wilde's life were simultaneously taking shape in his late undergraduate and early postgraduate years. These were a mixture of brash self-promotion and the practical attempt to secure regular work, combined with a maturing philosophy of art. In his attempt to create a role for himself he made advances on several fronts including creating an impressive social network, applying for paid positions and writing poetry and plays. Before graduation he was writing to a former Prime Minister, having his work published, preparing for exams and intending "to take up the critic's life" (51). After graduation he continued in the same vein. Despite his writing and efforts to find work, these years are typically seen as his high-aesthete phase, during which he fostered his own unique aesthetic identity. His endeavour to promote himself can be read as being of mixed fortune: he was so successful at creating the aesthete that it came to overpower later readings of his life. But in these years he also produced his first settled examination of the issues that would dominate his life-long artistic attitude.

When he moved to London from Oxford he initially shared a house with his painter friend, Frank Miles. Here he set about developing a strategic network of important social, political and artistic contacts by holding regular salons. His invitations show that attendees were calculated to include the most cultured, artistic, high-status and wealthy personalities in London.<sup>67</sup> With his long hair and eccentric dress – velvet jackets, flowing cravats, buckled shoes and knee breeches – Wilde deliberately set out to embody what Hegel called the Greek spirit.<sup>68</sup> He had earned the title "professor of aesthetics" at Oxford and after graduation very quickly became known as the figurehead of the aesthetic movement. His central position in William Powell Frith's famous 1881 painting attests to this fact,<sup>69</sup> and this is how he has continued to be perceived: as the late nineteenth-century aesthetic type. His aesthetic dress was interpreted as

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<sup>67</sup> Wilde's letters show attendees at his salons included actors, writers, directors, politicians, lords and ladies.

<sup>68</sup> Hegel, in his *Philosophy of History*, said that in the Greeks "we find this boundless impulse of individuals to display themselves, and to find their enjoyment in doing so" (267).

<sup>69</sup> In his painting, *A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881* Frith places Wilde in the foreground surrounded by admirers and being looked at by du Maurier.

a desire for notoriety, and some of his actions underpinned this perception. For example, when he sent a draft of his first play, *Vera: or The Nihilists* (1880), to the Examiner of Plays in 1880 he stated that he wanted fame. This type of comment along with the scandal his behaviour stirred up framed how his life and work were read. But Doody (2011) suggests that this was an early strategic use of the mask around which Wilde would develop a whole philosophy. It suited his self-image-building project that he should be “thought of as languorous and nonchalant while his everyday self got on with the mundane task of making a living” (31).

At this time Wilde was not just calculating to create the aesthetic niche for himself, he was also promoting the aesthetic theories about which he held such strong convictions. There were others at this time for whom aestheticism was central, but they could not be said to have been part of an aesthetic movement in the real sense, despite their devotion to the Pre-Raphaelites, Ruskin, Pater, Morris and Burne-Jones.<sup>70</sup> Wilde was attracted to the values of these individuals whose aestheticism grew from Pre-Raphaelitism and the PRB’s symbolic father, the poet Keats. Their ideal aestheticism was a radical hybrid drawn from diverse influences including art for art’s sake, socialism and trades unionism. Their attitude rebelled against the conventional taste in life and art and they believed that the beauty of poetry, arts, crafts, thoughts and ideas was enough to initiate real change in society. Wilde’s postgraduate behaviour and dress led to him being seen as the leader of fin-de-siècle aestheticism. Reflecting later in *De Profundis* Wilde believed himself to be the man of the Zeitgeist, the inventor of the aesthetic movement. But the reality is that his aesthete dress and pose were premature, for he had not created anything of enduring worth. And because of the calculated way in which he set about promoting himself, some saw Wilde as one of the fashionable exploiters of genuine craftsmen and artists.

The combination of his early celebrity and eccentricities, and the later scandal of his life and imprisonment, for many decades resulted in the biographical identities overshadowing the substantial cultural value of Wilde’s work.<sup>71</sup> His arrival in America for his 1882 speaking tour epitomises how public and (later) biographical perceptions of him developed. From the perspective of his emerging philosophy, his reported disappointment with the Atlantic and

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<sup>70</sup> Pearson (1960) says “the so-called Movement was in the air, never in committee” (51).

<sup>71</sup> Pearson (1960) says only Wilde’s under-developed emotional state and over-developed intellect can account for his life and work. Woodcock (1949) emphasises that Wilde’s nature was of a “schizoid type” and his writing cannot be seen other than in light of a “very deep cleft in his mental process” (9-10). Even more recently, McKenna’s (2005) descriptions of Wilde in America emphasise Wilde’s attire and supposed seedy encounters, including one with Walt Whitman.

declaration about his genius to a customs official were as unfortunate as they were witty. These ultimately concealed his earlier answers to American journalists who had asked about the aestheticism he had come to espouse. He defined it as “the search for the signs of the beautiful . . . it is to speak more exactly the search after the secret of life” (Ellmann 1987, 159)..

Concurrently with playing the poseur, Wilde’s postgraduate years were a time when he canvassed the support of a wide range of contacts in an attempt to find paid work in academic and education positions. He wrote several letters requesting positive references for work and these show him seeking a variety of positions, including at the British Museum, the Hellenic Society and in the School Inspectorate.<sup>72</sup> He also complained wittily to Oscar Browning about his financial worries, saying that rents he expected from a small property in Ireland were as extinct “as the dodo or moly” (87). His early political, social and cultural philosophy is also apparent in his letters and in his poetry. For example, he sent “Ave Imperatrix! A Poem on England” and “Libertatis Sacra Fames” to his friend Violet Hunt, describing them respectively as his “first attempt at political prophesy” and “first political poem” (94, 101). It is clear during these years that Wilde was, with conscious intention, forming his philosophy. In his final year at Oxford, he had toyed with converting to Catholicism, and it is accepted that he finally resisted this due to fears of losing part of his inheritance and because of his affiliation with the Freemasons. However, it is also likely that his developing aesthetic held broader promise for him than the theological limitations within formal Catholic belief. He had visited Fr. Sebastian Bowden at Brompton Oratory to discuss his baptism but he had also read Ernest Renan’s *Life of Christ* (1863) and had written to W. E. Gladstone professing similar beliefs to the Frenchman concluding that the resurrection “was the divinist (sic) lie ever told” (48). When the priest requested him to attend for baptism, Wilde sent some lilies instead, signifying his choice of art over religion.<sup>73</sup> Renan’s influence on Wilde and the specific relation of art to religion becomes more apparent in later works.

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<sup>72</sup> For example, he wrote to E. A. Bond to be a British Museum reader, to A. H. Sayce and George Macmillan regarding translation work/archaeology scholarship with the Hellenic Society and to Oscar Browning enquiring about the feasibility of him being an Education Officer. Wilde also provided advice to artists such as the Dutch painter Alma-Tadema who specialised in “that beautiful old Greek world” (106).

<sup>73</sup> Near the conclusion of his main American lecture he describes the lily and the sunflower as the two most perfectly designed and decorated flowers in England and he wears them because they give “to the artist the most entire and perfect joy” (Wilde 1908, 67).

While many were seeing the superficial flâneur, records at the Bodleian show that Wilde continued to make visits to the library for almost three years following his graduation.<sup>74</sup> Their immediate purpose related to his research for the detailed manuscript entered for the 1879 Oxford Chancellor's English Essay Prize. The subject for that year was announced as "Historical Criticism Amongst the Ancients". As a student he had already published one review of the Grosvenor Gallery and a poem in the *Irish Monthly*, and had won the 1878 Newdigate Prize for Poetry for *Ravenna*. Buoyed with these successes, he entered his essay "The Rise of Historical Criticism" (1879). He did not win the prize, and none was awarded that year. The essay touched on some of the issues his later work would dwell on and he emphasised the Greek critical approach rather than merely recording historical events and their results. He had stressed in his notes that the study of the Greeks is the birth of criticism, and in his essay argues that the real study of history "in its ultimate development passes into the wider question of the philosophy of history" (1199). This makes historical criticism revolutionary as it treats events merely as the material of history, not as history.

Another reason for continuing to visit the Bodleian related to his lecture tour of America. While he was not the progenitor of the aesthetic movement, he welcomed any notoriety that resulted from his behaviour. Wilde's calculated exhibitions of himself as the aesthete had been successful to the extent that he was being caricatured by du Maurier in *Punch* and when Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *Patience* (1881) toured America its producer, Richard D'Oyly-Carte, asked him to lecture around the country as a form of promotion. *Patience*, following Frank Burnand's *The Colonel* (1844), Scott Ramsey's *Where's the Cat?* (1880), was the latest in a string of productions portraying the generic aesthete – an amalgam of well-known artists and critics. There is some debate as to whether the central character Bunthorne in *Patience*—he who sings about walking down Piccadilly with a lily in your mediaeval hand—is more Rossetti than Wilde, and speculation regarding the origins of the witticisms usually attributed to Wilde. When asked in America if he had indeed done such a thing, by way of claiming the character, Wilde replied: "To have done it is nothing, but to make people think one had done it was a triumph" (Ellmann 1987, 135). There is also discussion across several biographies regarding the sources of some comments, including one recorded by Du Maurier which had Wilde comparing himself to his blue china in his student rooms. But the visits to the Bodleian

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<sup>74</sup> See Smith (2003) for details on the type of material Wilde researched at the Bodleian during this time.

and the subsequent lectures, which he repeated in Europe, show that his American trip was to have as significant effect on his philosophy as some feel he had on the American Gilded Age.<sup>75</sup>

Although it has defined Wilde especially in the public mind as the merest aesthete, this period can be considered as Wilde's opening assault on Victorian values. The amount of detail in his first lecture in America, "The English Renaissance of Art" (1882), was deemed too theoretical and difficult for audiences. Following criticism in the American press, Wilde shortened it for wider appeal and it became "The Decorative Arts" (1882).<sup>76</sup> In cities where he had more than one engagement he wrote a third called "The House Beautiful" (1882). (And in cities with a large Irish population Wilde also talked about "The Poets of '48" (1882), especially mentioning his mother's poetry and other works written during the famine.) The two shorter talks are less theoretical and historical but include practical applications of Wilde's doctrine. Some critics find the first lecture uncharacteristic compared to his later work, but such criticisms relate to style.<sup>77</sup> In "The English Renaissance" Wilde outlines his aestheticism in detail for the first time, and challenges his own image. Apart from his dress during the tour, some of the content was shaped in part by the needs of the tour organisers and the perceptions of the American Gilded Age, both of which forced him to foreground the sensuous experience of beauty.

### **Taking up the Critic's Life**

America had not had the same experience as the England of the Pre-Raphaelites and English aestheticism, and D'Oyly-Carte was concerned that audiences of *Patience* would not understand the humour. Croft-Cooke (1972) points out that, in *Patience*, Americans "found rather a vague subject for such outright comedy as Gilbert provided" (67). Wilde was chosen to promote the musical as he would dress the part of the real-life aesthete and be seen as the ambassador for the aesthetic movement. But Wilde also had an agenda: his letters written during the tour confirm his concern for the cause of art he represented and his belief that he was civilising America by explaining his cause. In one letter he states:

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<sup>75</sup> Within five years of the trip several respected journals cited by Blanchard (1998) imply that because of Wilde's American lectures "the aesthetic revolution is an accomplished fact" (3).

<sup>76</sup> Newspapers were also publishing much of the lecture before Wilde gave his talk in new venues so that audiences had read his ideas before he had talked about them. In March 1882 Wilde wrote angrily to W. F. Morse who was managing his bookings saying "I have not delivered that lecture ('English Renaissance') since February 11...people think they know it and stay away. The lecture is on 'The Decorative Arts' (147).

<sup>77</sup> Holland (1994), for example, also criticises the style of the lecture as being stilted, over-long and theoretical. He goes on to criticise Robbie Ross for emphasising "The English Renaissance of Art" as the main talk in his 1908 *Collected Works* when "The Decorative Arts" had become the main lecture after just one month.

I have something to say to the American people, something that I know will be the beginning of a great movement here, and all foolish ridicule does a great deal of harm to the cause of art and refinement and civilisation here (129).<sup>78</sup>

He suggested talks on Shakespeare, the lyric form and beauty as subjects for his tour, but D'Oyly-Carte pounced on beauty as this would advertise his production. Being forced to address beauty directly in this way had a profound influence on the development of Wilde's philosophy of art. While acting-up the aesthete, Wilde took the opportunity to define and explain the historical place of beauty in nineteenth-century English art and society and he included ideas for appreciating beauty and some practical advice for decorating homes. Letters between Wilde's friends at that time attest to the seriousness with which he explored the subject.<sup>79</sup> They became concerned for his welfare, as his success during the tour had made him enemies, especially of the war journalist Archibald Forbes, who was having less success with his own lecture tour.

Of the three lectures Wilde gave during his extended tour, "The Decorative Arts" (1882) and "The House Beautiful" (1882) expand the practical advice for domestic decoration, dress, and labourer's work, tools and materials. He used material researched at the Bodleian, which enabled him to advise his audiences not to judge aestheticism by the satire *Patience*. Advertising for the talks mentions the practical application of the aesthetic theory, which was warmly welcomed by his American audiences. Still recovering from the devastating civil war, aestheticism in America interpreted beauty as being largely for the purpose of pleasure. According to Blanchard (1998), the country could only flirt with aestheticism "without fully subscribing to all of its ramifications" (3). The American longing for beauty in art saturated popular culture. From business cards to paint brushes to the appearance of art schools, the emblems of aestheticism became the outward manifestations of the movement. Blanchard remembers "*Artistic* was a mantra, a password that applied everywhere and was used for any

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<sup>78</sup> In the first lecture Wilde says something similar about the satire used to ridicule the Pre-Raphaelites and himself and refers to it as mediocre homage.

<sup>79</sup> Dionysius Boucicault, Irish actor and dramatist, wrote to Mrs George Lewis, wife of the famous solicitor and the person thought to have first suggested Wilde for the tour, complaining about Wilde's shoddy treatment by D'Oyly-Carte. Likening the treatment to Millais' and Hunt's caricatures thirty years earlier in *Punch*, he states "Carte thought he had got hold of a popular fool. When he found he was astride of a live animal instead of a wooden toy, he was taken aback" (135).

purpose” (in the original, 189). But the focus on the practical application leaves out much of the essence of Wilde’s aestheticism covered by the first lecture. In the shortened versions he is prevented from addressing seriously the important issues inherent in his philosophy of art. He has no time, for example, to provide the historical context for his aestheticism nor detail the importance of beauty in art and simultaneously emphasise the intellectual and social developments which follow on the sense experience of art.

Wilde’s American audience (and his own links with the Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts Movement) accounts for his focus on the decorative arts in these lectures. But the apparent contradictions within the talks, including his thoughts on art-for-art’s-sake, which he immediately contradicts with statements about art’s social significance, must also be seen in the light of contemporary American aestheticism. There are several instances in the lectures when he emphasises beauty for its own sake: when he suggests, for example, that art in its various forms was a prelude to, and essential for, the beginning and success of the French Revolution, and is also the beginning of knowledge and wisdom. In these talks there is an underlying message regarding the nexus between art and the possibility of higher realisation. “The English Renaissance” traces the work of the fin-de-siècle back to the art of Keats and the Pre-Raphaelites. Wilde told his audience that his generation had inherited from the Romantics a potent combination of ancient Greek thought and medieval feeling. Combined with the experience of modern life, this amounted to a marriage between Faust and Helen, and their son is ‘Euphorian’, the nineteenth century artistic attitude. (In “The Soul of Man” almost ten years later Wilde was still writing about the euphoric nature, the perfect personality that can only be realised through art.)

Wilde also highlights the specific qualities of the artist, including the technical abilities necessary for creating form and physical beauty, having a definite concept, clear vision and a sense of limitation. But at the core of this lecture is what he calls the gracious and comely life achievable through art. While much of the talk focuses on the sense experience of beauty, the underlying essence is the importance of art to the higher life: “in art as in politics there is but one origin for all revolutions, a desire on the part of man for a nobler form of life, for freer method and opportunity of expression” (Wilde 1908, 50). Discarding the blatant didactic purpose of art espoused by Ruskin, we do not learn anything from art; instead we become something purely by being in its presence. Wilde also emphasises an idea that would become the core of his life-long interest by stressing the social as well as the imaginative effects of art. The keynotes of his American talks, including the origins of nineteenth-century aestheticism,

the artist's abilities, the power of beauty, the critic's role and the place of art in life, become central issues in his later work.

### **Keats, the Pre-Raphaelites and the 'Poetical Attitude'**

Wilde approached the history of art as he approached the history of criticism. The poetical attitude and the Greek critical spirit, outlined in "The Rise of Historical Criticism" (1879), are similar, and it is their qualities that help us to realise the un-lived life. The qualities of art and of artists such as John Keats who embody the poetical attitude also realise Hegel's notion of the consciousness of freedom developed in the *Philosophy of History* (1837) and discussed in the previous chapter. The Greek critical spirit of Wilde's college notes and "The Rise of Historical Criticism", both as influenced by Hegel's work as they were by his reading of the ancients, return in his main lecture: in his synthesis of, for example, Greek thought and medieval feeling; and in the shift from eighteenth- to nineteenth-century art, which reveals the gradation, in the Hegelian sense, of the knowledge of freedom in the history of art. Wilde proposes that artworks are created through a synthesis of the facts of real life and the artist's poetical attitude. He implies that the same relation between life and attitude is the proper critical approach to art.

In 1877 and 1886 respectively, Wilde wrote "Keats' Grave" and "On the Sale by Auction of Keats' Love Letters", and his admiration for their incipient aestheticism can be discerned in both.<sup>80</sup> (Almost as a prelude to the concerns shown in his latter poem, Wilde wrote to his friend, Helena Sickert, in March 1885 regarding the principles of political economy of the sale of Keats' letters as she had purchased most of them at the auction.) Pearson (1960), Wilde's first comprehensive biographer, concludes that the main point of interest to be deduced from Wilde's early poems is that Keats was his favourite poet.<sup>81</sup> From his undergraduate writing to his mature essays, Keats is an inspiration for some of Wilde's chief ideas about art and life.<sup>82</sup> On being asked to define aesthetics on his arrival in America he said it was the science of the

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<sup>80</sup> The latter sonnet goes as far as to compare the sale of the letters to "throwing dice for the garments of a wretched man/Not knowing the God's wonder, or his woe" (271).

<sup>81</sup> Pearson (1960) records Wilde formally changing the address of the house he shared with Frank Miles from Skeats to Keats House.

<sup>82</sup> Having visited Keats' grave in Rome Wilde described him as a martyr and "Priest of Beauty slain before his time" (49). In his college notes Wilde says Keats is among those who "best represent the Greek spirit" (138). By way of confirming art over formal religion he tells one priest that "Keats' grave...is to me the holiest place in Rome" (247). And in "The Soul of Man" he lists him with the few, including Darwin, Renan and Flaubert, who have realised true individualism.

beautiful and the search for truth that had begun with Keats. Keats' niece attended his lecture in Louisville, Kentucky, and sent Wilde the original of Keats' *Sonnet on Blue*. In his thank you letter he again states that Keats, above all others, is the seed of the renaissance of art in England.

In "The English Renaissance" Wilde celebrates the spirit that creates political revolution, the desire for a better life—the perfect life—that also underpins the creation and experience of art. He says that the human spirit must pass through phases of measureless passions and despair where ambition and discontent become the chords of life and art. However, it is essential not to rest in this phase of upheaval, for the purpose of culture is peace not unthinking resistance, a point he re-emphasises years later in "The Soul of Man". The spirit that drove the French revolution, he says in this first lecture, "found in a young English poet its most complete and flawless realisation" (Wilde 1908, 52). In Keats can be discerned the beginning of the English renaissance of art, as in him are found the artistic qualities of clearness of vision, calmness of choice and perfect self-control absent in Shelley, Blake, Swinburne and Byron. Shelley had been a dreamer, Byron a rebel and while Blake had tried to raise design to the level of poetry and music, he and Swinburne were too cosmical and remote. Being part of real life is a quality that artists must have but life must also be approached with a poetical attitude. As the pure and serene artist and forerunner of the Pre-Raphaelite school, Keats was the absolute incarnation of the artistic spirit of the nineteenth century.

Like Wilde, the group of young men known as the Pre-Raphaelites were passionate admirers of Keats. They believed that when art has fulfilled its conditions of beauty it has completed its mission. They also perceived the public in the same way as the poet and believed that it is to the public the critic should speak, not to artists.<sup>83</sup> In the first lecture Wilde quotes Keats: "I have no reverence . . . for the public, nor for anything in existence but the Eternal Being, the memory of great men and the principle of Beauty" (Wilde 1908, 60). (In his later works Wilde says the education system in Victorian England was very reluctant to encourage public interest in artists who challenged established values.) The Pre-Raphaelites had a desire for spiritual and decorative value in painting and poetry. Under Ruskin's tutelage they reintroduced a stronger, truer realism of imagination, a more fervent and vivid vision and an individuality that was intimate and intense. According to Wilde these qualities allow their work to be experienced with a newness and wonder that speaks to each individual "through channels whose very

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<sup>83</sup> And the lines "Rid of the world's injustice and its pain...The youngest of the martyrs here is Iain" from his "Grave of Keats" indicates his own opinion of public reductive attitude to art and artists, and Keats is martyr for both (Holland 2003, 770).

strangeness makes us more ready to give them welcome” (53). They returned to nature but painted only what they saw or how they imagined things had really happened. Morris and Burne-Jones, when they joined Millais, Holman-Hunt and Rossetti, introduced an even more extraordinary excellence in choice, faultless devotion to beauty and intense seeking for perfection. Morris may have especially influenced Wilde. Of the relation between art and nature, an idea he later accorded with in “The Decay of Lying”, he says Morris felt that the close imitation of nature “is a disturbing element in imaginative art” and the craftsman’s revival of the decorative arts also introduced “the social idea and the social factor” to aestheticism (53). Like the Pre-Raphaelites Wilde’s aesthetic was a reaction against empty conventional faculty and academic insipidity in poetry and painting.

In “The English Renaissance” Wilde discusses how the Pre-Raphaelites and their work were viewed by the Victorians, and in some ways he is also describing his own relationship with the public. When the Pre-Raphaelites started their artistic programme, he recounts, the philistine public was roused suddenly from its apathy and reacted against their youth, power and enthusiasm. Uncannily foreshadowing his own later situation, Wilde posits that the artist that produces serious and beautiful work loses his rights as a citizen. He describes the satire aimed at the Pre-Raphaelites in the press as the “homage mediocrity pays to genius” (52). Being significantly influenced in his own attitude to the public, he later expresses the same opinion regarding the relation between the media and the public.<sup>84</sup> Disagreeing with most of the public is a sign of sanity and a source of consolation during times of spiritual doubt. (Years later, Robbie Ross’ defiant act when Wilde was found guilty – he tilted his hat to Wilde as the rest of the courtroom cheered – proved to be a great source of consolation for him). But there is a serious effect resulting from the homage paid by the popular press to aesthetics: ridiculing art and artists, as he hinted at in his letter, harms only the public and confirms artists in the perfect rightness of their work and ambition. The public is blinded to the beautiful as derision teaches them an irreverence which limits and narrows life. (D’Oyly-Carte could not have been happy with this opinion nor the point made later in the first lecture when Wilde implies a similar criticism about *Patience*).<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> In “The Critic as Artist” regarding contemporary journalism he says the “English public feels perfectly at ease when a mediocrity is talking to it” (1108).

<sup>85</sup> Despite what “Mr Gilbert may tell you”, he says, aesthetes do not eat flowers. The lily and sunflower are perfect for art and give “to the artist the most entire and perfect joy” (67).

While he highlights the influence of Keats on the Pre-Raphaelites, Wilde is also highlighting the significant influence of the poet on the core of his own philosophy of art. Listing the poets and philosophers from the Greeks onwards preoccupied with the peculiar fascination of the problems of poetic production, and the impression made by “either spontaneity or self-consciousness,” he talks about one of the stages “all imaginative work” must pass through (55).<sup>86</sup> The aesthetic experience of beauty in art is followed by the intellectual work of the imagination. This relates to both the creation and the critical experience of art.<sup>87</sup> Citing Keats as an example, Wilde finds in the poet’s longing to be able to compose without fever or desire “the most important moment in the evolution of that artistic life” (55). This recognition substitutes poetic passion for a more thoughtful power, and is his first mature indication of the transformational effects that take place beyond the mere enjoyment of beauty in art.

Wilde goes on to link his idea to an earlier philosophical argument, observing that Goethe’s ultimate protest was against the intrusion of the didactic claims of the eighteenth-century understanding of art. The new protest, in a similar way, must be against the claims of mere sentiment and feeling evidently prevalent. With this, he begins his separation from his one-time mentor Walter Pater, who emphasised the importance of the aesthetic sense-impression in art.<sup>88</sup> Citing Baudelaire, he asserts that while the heart contains passion, the imagination alone contains poetry. He believes everyone is affected by a sunrise, but only those with the artistic abilities of Keats or the Pre-Raphaelites can render it. Hegel’s influence is seen when Wilde depicts the nineteenth-century philosophy of art in dialectic form. The subordination of emotional and intellectual qualities to the informing poetic principle will measure the magnitude of the English Renaissance. The poetical attitude should be adopted toward all things. The relation between the sense experience and the critical contemplation of beauty in art is subordinated dialectically into the poetic attitude and realises “a consciousness of the absolute difference between the world of art and the world of real fact”, the importance of which lies in its power to help us to achieve our desire to realise perfection “for to most of us the real life is the life we do not lead” (56).

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<sup>86</sup> He says the problem is found in Plato’s mysticism and in Aristotle’s rationalism, while “Schiller tried to adjust the balance between form and feeling, and Goethe to estimate the position of self-consciousness in art” (55).

<sup>87</sup> The revolution accomplished by the Pre-Raphaelites, also under the influence of Ruskin, “was not one of ideas merely but of execution, not one of conceptions but of creations” (54).

<sup>88</sup> Pater is most clear about this in the “Conclusion” of his *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) – this will be further discussed in Chapter five which analyses *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

## Wilde's First Beauty

The prominence given to beauty in “The English Renaissance” and Wilde’s ongoing obsession with it in works such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have made it easy to reduce him to the arch-advocate for art-for-art’s-sake. But in the first lecture a delicate balance between beauty for pleasure and its social value is addressed. There are times when he speaks of beauty in religious terms, recommending its worship and devotion. He even describes his aesthetic age as a cult of pure beauty, and art as having one law of form and harmony, and says that the main principle guiding the English Renaissance is beauty highlighting the aesthetic sense experience. But understood in the context of his American audience and in his broader view of art creation and criticism, beauty is only one of several important qualities that give art its position in society. If beauty cannot be experienced, the first crucial step in Wilde’s aesthetic philosophy cannot be advanced upon. A concern for fin-de-siècle aestheticism, which Wilde addresses in much of his later work, is a concern that contemporary society is becoming less conscious of physicality in the same way it has become unconscious of the higher philosophies: he cites Gautier referring to the dead visible world. While he appears to insist on the physical appearance of beauty for the sake of pleasure, Wilde ultimately discusses it in terms of its place in individual, social and national transformation. As a first step it is essential that society be exposed to beauty in every aspect - this requires beauty having a national value.

Wilde commences “The English Renaissance” lecture by saying it was Goethe who gave the most concrete definition of beauty that allowed the individual to fully realise it. Eighteenth-century philosophy had provided universal definitions but these could only be abstract as they attempted to communicate the incommunicable. While he does not repeat Goethe’s definition, he defines the characteristics through which art’s spectators can experience beauty for themselves, especially for his American audience. It is the poetical attitude to art towards all things that both the artist and the critic of art should adopt. Here he again likens the poetical and critical spirits. He had already compared the two in his college notes when he said the sphere of History uses “the same artistic spirit of exclusive attention to form” (Smith and Helfand 1989, 159). For those with calm artistic control who are “in possession of the secret of beauty” the facts of life and art lie like an open scroll and can be chosen or rejected depending on what is constructive for the spirit (60). It is the same for those having a historical sense: as Wilde points out in “The Rise of Historical Criticism” the historical critical spirit is *Aufklärung*, or the enlightenment of the intellect, which appears first as a change of attitude. For historians,

it is easier to accumulate facts than to use them. Gathering facts about events merely produces antiquarians, but what is essential is an intuitive sense of discrimination.

“Between a poet’s deliberate creation and historical accuracy”, he writes again in “The Rise”, “there is a wide field of the mythopoetic faculty” (1202).<sup>89</sup> From his Oxford notes it is clear that Wilde highly valued the poetical attitude. In several notes he stresses the importance of the poetic quality and he says in one “poets are the original historians as well as the original men of science” (172). The mythopoetical attitude, being a mix of calm artistic control in art and the historian’s intuitive sense of discrimination, frees both the artist and spectator from forms of creation and experience typical for mainstream society. For Wilde and other nineteenth-century thinkers such as Carlyle and Arnold this removed the traditional material and scientific bases to which art had been reduced. He blamed commercialism in England for undermining the aesthetic achievements of his age, and Burne-Jones had convinced him of the potential of contemporary material science to diminish the effect of beauty.<sup>90</sup> For these reasons beauty in art appears aloof from ordinary material life and only the poetical attitude can help us aspire to unattainable individual beauty. Here again, the artist is like the historian. While it is possible to be contemporary to the events one is recording, the artist and the historian must appreciate the complete view.<sup>91</sup>

Art’s beauty has more than one purpose. “The meaning of joy in art” and “the satisfying beauty of its design” are caused by art’s flawless beauty (58). But this beauty also has a broader intent, according to Wilde. Beauty and the perfect form of its expression amount to the social idea. Here is the ultimate worth of the aesthetic attitude, as the test of society is the value it places on art: the “devotion to beauty and to the creation of beautiful things is the test of all great civilised nations” (62). In comparison, philosophy, science and religion, the more familiar material creeds, might provide moral guidance or some solace when needed but they change like leaves in autumn. Beauty in art alone is a permanent joy for all seasons, promoting individual realisation and making the whole race immortal.

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<sup>89</sup> In “The Rise” he says the characteristics of historical criticism are crucial to society for it “produces democracy and revolution” when acted upon and in thought it is “the parent of philosophy and physical science” (1198).

<sup>90</sup> He repeats Burne-Jones’ saying to him “the more materialistic science becomes, the more angels I shall paint: their wings are my protest in favour of the immortality of the soul” (57).

<sup>91</sup> The problem of recording current events is the same for both the historian and artist. To appreciate the full facts of a great epoch Wilde says in “The Rise” “the scene must be viewed from a certain height and distance to be completely apprehended” (1234).

In *Dorian Gray* Wilde explores the complexities of beauty in more detail than he could in the lecture and he is more explicit about the relationship between the aesthetic and intellectual aspects of art's beauty.<sup>92</sup> In the first lecture, the stress on the need for the permanent presence of beautiful artefacts elevates beauty to a religion or a church where great consolation can be sought. In a troubled age, society should turn "to that secure house of beauty where there is always a little forgetfulness, always a great joy" (64). In the next chapter several characters are discussed as being or experiencing secure houses of beauty. But even in this early piece he foregrounds beauty's sense experience as a first step towards realising perfection. Beauty is the way to a 'more thoughtful' power: "prelude indeed to all knowledge and to all wisdom," he declares, "will this love of beautiful things be for us" (64). To obtain the fullest realisation there has to be a total commitment to art. Only to those who worship art will beauty reveal truth. And while it cannot teach us anything, individuals and society can become something through it. Realisation is the mind conscious of the secret of Hellenism and demanding of art "all that art can do in rearranging the facts of common life" (65).

Wilde discusses the role of art and artists in this lecture in ways that are implicitly dialectical: artists and their work are rooted in society but they are aloof from it; his ideal art contains concrete characteristics; he synthesises Greek thought with medieval feeling; while art does not deal with essential truths it does attempt to rearrange the facts of life; and the realism of his aestheticism is rooted in the artist's imagination. He details the qualities of the true artist in terms of some technical abilities, but emphasises the characteristics that set the artist apart from the ordinary. The real value of the artist to an age can only be realised historically, and the artist must be different and separate from others because, while everyone can feel a sunset, only the artist can express it. The artist must be perfectly articulate but the great skill lies in creating art that is alien to ordinary experiences so that the audience might be awakened to a higher reality. Presenting what appear to be contradictory images of artists, Wilde says they need to be remote from the ordinary, specifically because they are essential to changing ordinary life. Evoking, again, religious imagery, he describes the artist as a sort of John the Baptist, a preacher in the wilderness who is never appreciated in his own age. While the artist grasps a strained self-consciousness and is therefore different to mainstream society, the true artist must have no desire to escape the bondage of life.

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<sup>92</sup> He has the advocate for the experience of beauty, Henry Wotton, say "but beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins" - while the story's conclusion implies catastrophic consequences if the main experience of art remains merely in the aesthetic sense (Holland 2003, 5).

New artistic eras with new technical skills emerge in response to discoveries of and developments in materials rather than philosophical developments. Greek sculpture evolved from the discovery of marble in Pentelicus, which allowed the Greeks to improve on the more primitive Egyptian form and to advance Greek thought. He first mooted this idea in his Oxford notes, where he says the Egyptian form, architecture, is humanity being unconscious of its beauty while Greek sculpture “corresponds to the unperplexed emphatic outlines of Greek humanism” (140). There was also a material cause for Venetian painting, which he says developed from the new oil-paint medium. And developments in poetry have stemmed from the words, refrains and elaborate alliterations of the ballade, villanelle and rondel so poets could use eloquence to add music to their messages. With these developments in materials and the skills to work with them the artist still has to express without blatant preaching intent. This is especially relevant for fin-de-siècle artists, who have the dual responsibility to exclude the didactic element and mere sentiment and feeling from their work. The true artist’s work has no direct expression but is gathered up in the artistic form farthest removed and most alien from real experiences.<sup>93</sup>

Literature, drama and poetry were Wilde’s favourite arts, and he alludes to these more than other arts when enumerating the qualities of the true artist. Artists must avoid abstraction and create art based on “close observation and the sense of limitation as well as of clearness of vision” (51).<sup>94</sup> He talks about realism in Hellenic terms as opposed to contemporary notions of realism and says the study of the ancients is a return to the real world. The artist is the true realist and represents, as did the Greek pure artist, life imbued with the higher life.<sup>95</sup> This is the imaginative realism he would go on to discuss in “The Decay”. In this later essay he says that as a method, realism fails because “there is such a thing as robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true” (1075). One of the points that “The Decay” develops from the lecture is the notion of life imitating art so that the spectator desires the un-lived life.

Greek thought and medieval feeling, combined with complex nineteenth-century scientific thought, are the roots of Wilde’s artistic spirit: they are also the essential elements of the

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<sup>93</sup> Arguing for the supremacy of the imagination in poetry over moralising and sentimentality Wilde cites Goethe who said “the more incomprehensible to the understanding a poem is the better” (55).

<sup>94</sup> Later, in “The Decay of Lying”, he quotes Goethe when he describes art as ‘complex beauty’ and says “it is in limitation that the master first reveals himself” (1079).

<sup>95</sup> In his college notes Wilde also implies the Greek influence, on his aestheticism, in their representation of life and talks of “the essential plastic character of the Greek thinkers whose works are penetrated through and through with a specific quality, a singleness, a concentration” (170).

contemporary “conscious intellectual tradition, of our permanent standard of taste” (Wilde 1908, 50). These are the shared qualities of the desire for artistic and political revolution, and the noble life they strive for is consonant with the perfect personality he frames in his later works. He implies that the nineteenth century is an historical era opposed to artistic feeling. However, the artist’s critical nature, which is the basis of Wilde’s aestheticism, is essential to progress and movement and the social life of the day. Although he is a child of the age, the artist’s own time is blind to the artists’ work. Like Greek gods the artist is only revealed to other artists and only history can show their real value. As their writing did not take didactic form, Keats and Shelley were as “wanderers in the wilderness, preachers of vague or unreal things” to their contemporaries (57). Though appearing remote, the artist mirrors the age, because only the artist can absorb and correctly express life experiences. Implying Aristotle’s notion of habituation (discussed in Chapter one), Wilde says the artist’s work strips life of what is accidental, of “that mist of familiarity which makes life obscure to us” (56). This is at the root of his claim for the need to recognise the separate realm of the artist, for a consciousness of the absolute difference between art and life.

At the same time, a conscientious engagement with art transforms the spectator into an artist. Wilde details this idea later in *Intentions*. From this early lecture onwards, he sets out the role of the artist in creating the utopia realised through art. The major social importance of art, he seems to mean, is to make everyone an artist: while the artist should occupy a separate realm, there is paradoxically the possibility of everyone being an artist. Following Ruskin, he says that art must be made by the people for the people, and there is nothing in life that art cannot sanctify or “common things too trivial to be ennobled by your touch” (67). The sensuous life of verse, the skill of the poet for handling language, is the true joy of poetry. But ordinary life is incomplete, and the reader can bring nothing to the poem; however, the aesthetic experience occurs because “when the poet’s heart breaks it will break in music” (59). Citing a conversation with Morris, he introduces his idea of the artist as the complete individual, a notion he returns to most notably in “The Soul of Man” and *De Profundis*. Because the artist can best express individualism, works of art cannot be limited to the sensual experience of joy. William Morris told Wilde that he had tried “to make each of my workers an artist, and when I say artist I mean a man” (66). In his aesthetic, equating the artist with the notion of the realised person, the works of the handicraftsmen are beautiful and noble expressions because ultimately their lives are more complete.

## **Art in Life**

This first American lecture presents a considered, sincere philosophy of art as genuinely transformational on an individual, social and national level. More than religion, philosophy or science, it is art alone for Wilde that holds the secret of life. Indeed, by appropriating the spiritual, ethical and material qualities of these typical societal foundations in his aestheticism he presents a unique response to some Victorian concerns. He creates idiosyncratic sets of relations in the lecture: the experience of beauty in art, for example, potentially leads to major political change which ultimately achieves a higher life. The claims he makes for art in this lecture remain consistent through his later work. Like several others before him, Wilde makes great claims for culture in society, and on a global level. His argument goes beyond individual, social and national identity as he presents an international perspective on the power of art. He elaborates on this in detail when he later discusses cosmopolitan criticism in “The Critic as Artist”, but the notion is first alluded to in the lecture when he asserts that a narrow form of nationalism is stronger when culture is at its weakest.

Wilde’s early expression of his philosophy is an all-encompassing approach to transforming the individual and the world. For him, art more than supplements the incomplete and ordinary life. While there is a mountainous task facing his idealism (nine-tenths of the British public do not know the meaning of the word aesthetics, he says) Wilde includes some practical recommendations regarding artists, critics, and the public, as well as for architectural and interior designs that have the potential to bring about collective transformation. He almost provides an aesthetic formula in the early part of the lecture, which is elaborated in his later work. Works of art might have to conform to the aesthetic taste of an age, but more importantly they are to be created by artists who are remote individuals, and be communicated “only by virtue of a certain newness and wonder in the work, and through channels whose very strangeness makes us more ready to give them welcome” (53). This engagement with art is transforming. The ‘strangeness’, ‘newness’ and ‘wonder’ that enable the spectator to appreciate works of art are the virtue of beauty. The artistic temperament, the quality that welcomes art, ultimately prepares the personality for an aesthetic utopia. Citing “one of the greatest modern French critics”, possibly Gautier, Wilde announces “la personnalité voile ce qui nous sauvera” (53).<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> “In the future the personality will save us”.

Positioning aesthetics above ethics appears to have been part of Wilde's philosophy from early on. In "The English Renaissance", art is elevated to a place higher than the facts of life, for "art is very life itself . . . she is absolute truth and takes no care of fact" (57). Because of its remoteness from ordinary life, art can promote the realisation of the life that is not lived. Wilde implies there is a reality to fiction that is not only more real than ordinary reality, but that reality is in part a fiction. Because contemporary morals are not the correct virtues to live by they have no place in life and are of no value in judging art. Aesthetics, as he would later clarify in his only novel and elsewhere, are higher than ethics. Art should never be about, nor does it need, any moral sense or supervision: "One should never talk of a moral or an immoral poem" he says in the lecture, as "poems are either well written or badly written, that is all" (62). In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde expands this to include all literature. When art is either morally didactic or is judged in a moral way, there is a sense of harmonious discord and incompleteness of vision in the artist or the audience. Citing Goethe, he says we should not look for culture in what is moral because "everything that is great promotes civilisation as soon as we are aware of it" (62).

Even from early in his career the artistic spirit referred to is predominantly Hellenic. While he includes medieval feeling, the proper spirit for addressing individual, social, political and national issues is essentially drawn from the ancient Greeks. Wilde's insight is not surprising, given that at Trinity he had won the Berkeley Gold medal for Greek, had spent time travelling through Greece, and had detailed the development of Greek historical criticism in "The Rise" essay.<sup>97</sup> Historical evolution is also central to the American lecture. Although Wilde speaks of revolutions, ultimately there are no such things as revolutions. Building on ideas he discusses elsewhere, the modern historical sense shows that revolutions are evolutions only and that the roots of the French Revolution, for example, evolved from art work, which "was first sounded in literature years before the Bastille fell and the Palace was taken" (50). In "The Rise" he had argued that revolutions were the gradual, natural and rational evolution of antecedents. He said it was Aristotle who showed historical developments to be incoherent, and the discontent of the people of Paris had echoes in Greek criticism. This does not mean people learn anything from art, because the truths of art cannot be taught, but the Hellenic nature is receptive and

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<sup>97</sup> The first poem in his 1881 collection, "Hēlas", also deals with his early concern about losing ancient wisdom and the secret of the whole, qualities of the life he does not lead, because of the life he does lead.

becomes conscious through it. Art gives the mind “that enthusiasm which is the secret of Hellenism and accustomed people to demand a change in ‘the facts of common life’” (65).

The lecture also addresses the role of the critic in Wilde’s early philosophy. The truths of art cannot be taught, but the correct receptive attitude can be nurtured. The artist is not the one who nurtures, as artwork should have no deliberate didactic expression or purpose. The role of countering mediocrity’s homage falls to the critic. It is the critic who must nurture the spirit of Hellenism. Wilde emphasises the importance of the artist for much of the piece, and his initial comments regarding the critic are scathing. Critics should have no place in culture. The duty of the art critic “is to hold his tongue at all times, and upon all subjects” (59).<sup>98</sup> But it becomes clear later that the criticism he is addressing is the contemporary reductive “homage” typically aimed at artists. True criticism must never address the artist but the public only. Art’s perfection is its only claim and the appeals to art to have a mission are the appeals that should be aimed at the public. It is the critic who advances art’s social aim by teaching “people how to find in the calm of such art the highest expression of their own most stormy passions” (60). In this way the public is imbued with the Hellenic spirit needed to approach all artistic work and perceive art’s essential truths. The great claims for the Hellenic spirit made in this lecture have individual and global implications. The political implications begin with how a nation treats its art and artists, which Wilde posits as the real test of a nation. Art is universal and cannot be reduced merely to a single national identity. Creating such a common intellectual atmosphere can, Wilde says, prevent international tensions from turning into conflict.<sup>99</sup>

Later in “The Critic as Artist” Wilde elaborates on this notion and argues that criticism makes us cosmopolitan, gets rid of racial-prejudice and creates the peace that springs from understanding. Art, he implies in this early lecture, is the best place for nations to meet as it is the only empire which is not taken by conquest but is taken by submission. In the later work, Wilde is more explicit about the crucial role the critic plays. Discussed in detail in Chapter Six, he develops the notions of the critic addressing the public and not the artist, the critic nurturing the critical spirit, the critic advancing art’s social aim by claiming that the critic is actually more creative than the primary artist.

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<sup>98</sup> His attitude must have been affected by the cold reception of his first publication of *Poems* in 1881: his collection was rejected by the Oxford library committee and mocked in *Punch*.

<sup>99</sup> He cites Goethe who said during the Franco-German war he could not hate the “nation to which I owe a great part of my own civilisation” (63).

Wilde finishes his first American lecture in a discussion of an issue particularly relevant to the Victorians: the lives of action and thought. At this point in time the major influence on this aspect of his thought had been Aristotle's discussion of *energeia* and *theoria* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Later Wilde was influenced by his reading of *Chuang Tzu*, which he reviewed in 1889 for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. This reading confirmed the inactive life as the highest form. Those for whom the purpose of life is thought are more open to art as they are naturally receptive. The contemporary utilitarian ethic, however, held that our days are barren without industry, and this criticism was levelled at aesthetes due to their perceived lack of industry or usefulness. It was also one of the insults Archibald Forbes, also on an American lecture tour in 1882 talking about his experiences as a war correspondent, aimed at Wilde. Interestingly in one written response, Wilde replies: "You have to speak of the life of action, I of the life of art. Our subjects are quite distinct and should be kept so" (129). Wilde posits the notion that industry without art is barbarism and art is of more value to those for whom life is inseparable from labour because the new appreciation for art would bring about a fundamental ethical change.

### **Some Practical Applications**

In the first American lecture, Wilde spoke of "the effect that decorative art has on human life – on its social not its purely artistic effect", and this topic became the focus for the duration of his tour (66). He had presented this first lecture for only about a month (according to his letters, from January 9<sup>th</sup> until February 11<sup>th</sup> in 1882) when he was encouraged to change and shorten it.<sup>100</sup> This initial lecture contained theoretical and historical detail that was thought not to be of interest to America at this time. For the duration of the tour Wilde spoke on "The House Beautiful" (1882) and "The Decorative Arts" (1882) and included a short talk on "The Poets of '48" (1882) for cities with large Irish audiences.<sup>101</sup> What had been perceived as laboriously theoretical and historical was replaced in subsequent talks by practical design advice, and the relationship between the maker and user of aesthetic artefacts. These points had been almost

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<sup>100</sup> Ellmann (1987) says that Wilde was eventually persuaded to change mainly because newspapers were reporting his lecture in full before he had given it in Chicago.

<sup>101</sup> The first response from American-Irish reporters, especially in the *Irish Nation*, adversely commented on Wilde, accusing him of minimising differences between Ireland and England and implying he supported those colonising his country.

lost in the first talk. Both the later talks also criticise mass-mechanised production of any aesthetic objects.

Wilde's talks in America explored the relations between *energeia* ("The House Beautiful") and *theoria* ("The English Renaissance of Art" and "The Decorative Arts") in his aesthetic. They also mirror the discourse between the work of the artist and the critic of *Intentions*. Despite the imposed limitations and more prescriptive nature of the second round of talks, Wilde still managed to include his philosophy of art, albeit in edited form. Of the forty-eight paragraphs in the "House Beautiful" talk, for example, six have obvious social, cultural and political relevance, and the final three paragraphs are crammed with philosophical thought. The intervening thirty-nine paragraphs present practical detailed advice for creating perfect rooms in the perfect nineteenth-century American house. The "Decorative Arts" lecture, which is closer to the original "English Renaissance" talk, has fifty-two paragraphs and is less prescriptive than the "House Beautiful". The structure is also less defined, with his philosophy being more obvious and spread throughout. But there is also here the sense of Wilde finding place for his philosophy. "Decorative Arts" replaces the historical and theoretical detail with the importance of the handicraftsman, whom he ennoble, and the need for decorative art on common objects.

Influences on Wilde's thought are more concisely treated in the shorter talks. The focus on the handicraftsman in one talk and the aesthetic practicalities in the other reflect two particular aspects of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. In the aesthetic advice we see the influences of Rossetti, Millais and Hunt while the nobility of the handicraftsman is a nod in the direction of Morris and Burne-Jones. Indicated in these connections is Hilton's (2004) conclusion that the Pre-Raphaelites created "the totally artistic environment" (169). Traces of the Pre-Raphaelites can also be found in Wilde's positioning of women at the core of aesthetic development, but another influence would have been Constance Lloyd, with whom he was falling in love just before leaving for America. In later years Constance was to become very involved in the Radical Dress Movement, some of whose aims overlapped with those of the aesthetic movement. In her early correspondence with Wilde she indicates her aesthetic interest when she points to their disagreement over art: "I hold that there is no perfect art without perfect morality, whilst to you they are distinct and separable things" (Moyle 2011, 71).

Contrary to Constance's and others' opinions, Wilde's American talks were not philosophically slight, or politically empty. One of the effects art has on human life, for example, relates to the

position of women in contemporary society. The guests he invited to his salons included some of the leading female figures of the day.<sup>102</sup> The contact he had with women at these would confirm what he had learned from Speranza about the central role of women to social development. Constance Lloyd had definite ideas at a young age about how dress limited life for women. Moyle (2011) describes her attire as aesthetic and political, in sympathy with the movement to “emancipate women from the confines of corsets and hoops” (7). The “House Beautiful” lecture starts by indicating the crucial importance of women to the aesthetic cause, and for Wilde the arts flourish most when the position of women is honoured: “there has been no good decorative art done in any age or any country where women have not occupied a high social position” (Holland 2003, 913). While he follows this by noting it is women who desire to beautify their households, the significance of this point can only be appreciated when the relationship of art to individual and social transformation is understood. This aspect of his thought particularly ties in with the influence of women on American aestheticism at the time of his tour. As he toured America, Wilde would have observed how woman-centred aestheticism was, and he likened their skills in interior decor to wisdom. Noting this, Blanchard (1998) asserts that, as interior designers and artists, women ruled like visionaries of art who had seen “an ideal glimpsed by earlier writers who explored the boundaries between the sacred and secular” (179).

It was well timed to detail each room in the perfect house of nineteenth-century America. Gilded-Age aesthetic interiors were considered as spaces that had been created by the combined imaginations of the artist and the users – spaces that were artistic and detached from the real world. According to Blanchard (1998), the model aesthetic house of the 1870s and 1880s “was a created pastiche of linear embellishment and unrelated, exotic formats (Greek, renaissance, medieval, oriental, Moorish, or Japanese)” (87). Following his opening remarks on the place of women in aestheticism, Wilde summarises his aesthetic philosophy by reminding his listeners that “art does not depend in the slightest degree upon extravagance or luxury” and by highlighting the need for schools of decorative art “where the principles of good taste and the simpler truths about design would be taught” (913). He also restates that art can ennoble everything (the best artefacts in museums are clay urns used to draw water two thousand years

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<sup>102</sup> In the invitations to male attendees of the salons he often refers to enjoying tea and beauties. The beauties included the likes of Genevieve Ward, opera singer and actress, Lady Lonsdale (Constance Gladys) to whom he dedicated the play *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and writer and advocate for women’s rights, Helena Sickert.

ago) including handicraftsmen (who should be educated to an understanding of their relation to art). His opening philosophical statement also sets out several broad principles of art which need to be observed when planning the perfect aesthetic house. These include the need for a distinct individuality, for artefacts that are pleasurable to the maker and user and are both beautiful and useful, no imitation between materials and nothing machine made allowed in the house for decorative purposes.

The intervening paragraphs are full of practical advice, beginning with the type of structural material that should be used. Based on observations Wilde had made during his travels, he commends the American use of marble and coloured stone, which produce the warmth and colour which he describes as proper to architecture. For those who cannot afford marble or coloured stone, Wilde recommends using red brick and wood, which provide the opportunity for natural ornamentation. For interiors, he makes some general comments for all rooms, including the hallway, and strongly recommends not using carpets on the floors or wallpaper for walls. In his detailed recommendations he talks about floors, ceilings, walls, windows, curtains, paintings, picture frames, furniture, fireplaces, mantelpieces, embroidery, pianos, pottery, china, books and libraries. He also provides advice on the type of clothes men and women should wear.

Such detailed descriptions of rooms and clothes radiate *energeia*, the aesthetic sense experience that America was looking for at this time. This talk was particularly timely as the American aesthetic interest was widespread. In the years following the civil war domestic aesthetic tastemakers had dismissed all reference to war, violence and death, especially in the parlour and dining room. “The decorative arts as high art,” Blanchard (1998) comments, “as the measure of civilisation and culture, were treated with respect and reverence during the Gilded age” (88). Underlining this, Wilde announced that designers must “imagine in colour”, for “the aim of all art is simply to make life more joyous” (916). But even in this more practical talk he can never merely preach or give advice. His higher philosophy inevitably finds its way into the talk, as when he mentions that museums could be used as schools of art rather than merely for the scientific gathering of stuffed animals and objects. He cites the example of the South Kensington museum, in which his future wife would take pottery lessons, where artisans would gather each Saturday night to learn about the importance of works of art. Wilde also recommends women’s dress, especially encumbering corsets, bows or flounces that are destructive to health, should be done away with in favour of clothes that provide ease of movement.

Wilde manages to pack his *theoria* philosophy into the closing three paragraphs of the “House Beautiful” lecture. They espouse many of the cultural, social and political ideas he would revise in his later work. Against the materialism, commerce and science of the Victorian age which debase the human soul and destroy nature, he describes the artist as priest and prophet, and art as a spiritual ministry: democratic art, created by the people for the people, actually fosters morality and can create a common intellectual atmosphere that prevents hatred and war. Aestheticism runs counter to popular prejudice and in the end aesthetic truth will prevail; ultimately there is nothing in life that art cannot raise and sanctify. Combining practical advice with aesthetic theory would promote dedication, especially amongst women, to a religion of the beautiful in everyday things. By creating a nexus between *theoria* and *energeia* Wilde is credited with forming a community of believers and aesthetic critics in America. Blanchard (1998) asserts that he advanced an ideal of personal transformation which elevated aestheticism to prophecy and provided the possibility of redemption from the horrific effects and hatreds of civil war. Following one talk, the *Potter’s American Monthly* wrote: “once upon a time fashionable people used to be Evangelicals” but “now they’re beginning to be aesthetic” (179).

### **A Democratic Art**

While the “House Beautiful” starts by celebrating the position of women in art and society, “The Decorative Arts” commences by highlighting beauty’s reliance on the skill of the craftsman. The handicraftsman needs to be honoured and reinstated into his rightful noble position. The talk proposes that decorative art, which can exert influence in the humblest homes, is the art to which America should devote its attention. The mark of all good art is indicated first by the pleasure the workman takes in making beautiful things, artefacts that are “worked out with the tender, appealing vitality of the workman’s heart and head” (Holland 2003, 927). Despite the focus on ennobling craftsmen Wilde remains closer to “The English Renaissance of Art” and keeps *theoria* at the centre. Early in the talk, echoing the point at which he finished the “House Beautiful”, he proposes that the art most needed at this time in America is democratic art, found in things common to all. This talk returns to the idea, raised in the first talk, of developing a culture of art by being surrounded always by beautiful common objects and utensils that have been fashioned by artisans: he in fact implies that constantly being in the presence of beautiful artefacts fosters artistic knowledge and intellect and is as good as going to university. Art is the best moral school and his proposed art culture will do more than any practical school of morals, because art never lies, misleads or corrupts.

Wilde blends his aesthetic philosophy with ideas on manual work, commerce, nature, science, sports, everyday objects and the materials with which they are made, and children and their education. The tension between high art and everyday life, work and objects, is addressed in this way, and he again posits a new and strange way of experiencing art in the everyday. America already has the natural resources to create beautiful art, and there is also a sense of individualism which is crucial to life and is the essence of art. Handicraftsmen are essential to bringing all this to fruition, which is why the poet and artist must furnish them with beautiful designs, thoughts and ideas which will honour, dignify and ennoble both their work and the worker's life. The pleasure shared by the maker and user of decorative artefacts creates the nexus between them. The increased appreciation of the craftsman's work will come about through the recognition of "those heart-throbs of joy, and keen thrills of intellectual pleasure known only to the maker of beautiful things" (926). Unless there is a change of attitude toward the craftsmen, Wilde warns his American audience, art will be restricted in terms of who can experience it: confined to a luxury for the rich and idle, which defeats the goal of achieving the complete artistic environment. This will happen if commonplace and unintelligent design and ideas are given to craftsmen, which will merely lead to commonplace work. Against the contemporary practical age, Wilde emphasises the need to encourage and support the brightest young men and women of real refinement, position and mental culture to take up studying and working in simple decorative arts. In this he is referring possibly to the Pre-Raphaelites' educational experiment at the Working Men's College in London. Wilde might especially be thinking of Ruskin's and Morris' time there. Those attending the classes were furniture-makers, jewellers, gold-smiths, draughtsmen, lithographers, engravers and bookbinders. This leads Hilton (2004) to conclude of Ruskin's teaching approach: "it would be nearer the truth to say that the workmen were to learn to become Pre-Raphaelites" (134).

An early formulation of Wilde's socialist ideas enters his lecture, when he eschews the notion of utility being separate from the beautiful, and the Victorian move toward mass production which he equates with dishonesty. The industrial age has produced more rubbish than any other age because of the dishonesty associated with the drive for profit from machine-made artefacts. Utility should be on the side of the beautifully decorated article, Wilde posits, as he rails against the distinction being made between what is useful and what is beautiful. Dishonesty and hypocrisy in workmanship have been created because artisans no longer love their work and are no longer familiar with the principles of beautiful design. The introduction of machines has

led to manual labour being no longer noble or honourable.<sup>103</sup> This distinction between beauty and usefulness and the dishonesty of the age, he says, is responsible for the new word “second hand”, which implies a fall in value over time. When something is carefully created by honest hands, like the walls of Gothic cathedrals, it will last and can only increase in beauty and value. He hopes that the word “second hand” will fall into such disuse “that when philologists in the future try to discover what it means they shall not be able” (928).

Commerce, manual labour and art do not have to be opposed to each other as they are in contemporary times. For his ideal, Wilde cites Renaissance cities such as Florence as examples of how bankers, tradespeople and artists can work together to produce beauty, but this requires that all should live with “beautiful surroundings”. The eras of the highest decorative art have been the ages of costume and beautiful surroundings, which create the scenery of perfect human life. Workers can only create real beauty when they experience “the joy and loveliness that should come daily on eye and ear from a beautiful external world” (931). He again mentions his early ideal of a cosmopolitan world where it would be impossible for anyone to take up arms. (This form of utopia, where the perfect personality and intense individualism are realised, is outlined fully later in “The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man”.) And the scenes of people at work are the scenes of beauty which provide the scientific basis of aesthetics: beauty is not mere dainty ornament and luxury but the expression of strength, utility, and health.

This chapter has argued that the time between his graduation and his trip to America presented Wilde with the opportunity to forge an identity and a role for himself in society. In this he could be said to have been too successful, since it prevented his critical thought being taken seriously for decades after his death. The following chapter will show that from the time he returned from America, in order to be taken more seriously, he deliberately set out to reform the identity he had created, and that his critical work and his literature reflect this attempt as he further developed philosophy of art.

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<sup>103</sup> In later writings such as “The Soul of Man” Wilde elaborates on the ideal use for machines which he associates with completely freeing people to appreciate art only.

## Chapter Four

### Life's Perfect Expression

The previous chapter examined the state of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic during his American lecture tour in 1882. In Wilde's early postgraduate life, while he was busy inventing a society identity, he was also busily developing a philosophy of art. This chapter looks at how Wilde expressed those developing ideas in two early dramas and in his short fiction, and points out how his American experience contributed to the crystallisation of his thought. From changes to his appearance to the refinement of his aesthetic purpose, this chapter argues that Wilde's writing continued to express an aesthetic that was committed to social transformation.

Wilde's American experience changed him in several ways. On his return he had his long hair, constantly parodied in the media, cut relatively short. He also changed his dress: while he continued to dress with style, gone were the eccentric and colourful accessories such as the silk stockings and breeches he had deliberately used to gain attention and notoriety. Apart from being tired of the ridicule, Wilde wanted to acquire a new level of professional respect for whatever might be his future career. The change in his appearance was a conscious act on Wilde's part. Pearson (1960) records him confiding to a friend while he was in Paris shortly after his return: "The Oscar of the first period is dead. We are now concerned with the Oscar of the second period, who had nothing whatever in common with the gentleman who wore long hair and carried a sunflower down Piccadilly" (85).<sup>104</sup> He was thinking, with strong encouragement from his mother, of entering Parliament. But he had also begun to think about being a playwright during his tour and had made several attempts to secure agreements to stage *The Duchess of Padua* (1883) and *Vera: or The Nihilists* (1880). Through the producer, Steele MacKaye, he had reached tentative agreements with several actresses for lead roles in both plays (despite not having completed *The Duchess* before the end of his American tour.)

The brash attitude with which he had welcomed the American lecture tour, and written of his success, was replaced by a mature confidence in his ability to communicate his aesthetic cause. Clearly drawing on this early experience, in one of the more significant chapters of *Dorian Gray*, written seven years after his initial lecture tour, the narrator describes Dorian as wanting to be more than a mere aesthetic performer or consultant. One line from his only novel is the

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<sup>104</sup> When he was accused of self-advertisement by *The St James' Gazette* on the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde stated "I am tired of being advertised. I feel no thrill when I see my name in a paper. The chronicler does not interest me anymore" (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 428).

strongest link between the author at this time and his later protagonist: in chapter nine of the original uncensored transcript, Dorian is described as seeking to develop a way of life with “its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles and find in the spiritualising of the senses its highest realisation” (Frankel 2012, 161). On his second trip to America in August 1883 Wilde wrote to the well-known artist and potter, Charles Volkmar, explaining that what he had been able to do was “to create a desire for beautiful things among the people” (218). Along with this growing confidence was the belief that he could do this without exaggerating his public character or appearance too much.

Some of the most significant and paradoxical events of Wilde’s life occurred in the years following his return from America. He married Constance Lloyd in May 1884 and within two years his sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, were born. Marrying and becoming a father confirmed for some Wilde’s maturity as a man, which in turn confirmed, for a while, his standing as a serious writer. But also within two years of his marriage he would begin again to engage in homosexual relations with much younger men. In 1886 he had met and started an affair with Robbie Ross. Ross was to become his closest friend and the executor of his work. His writing career also broadened and for the next few years Wilde wrote in several genres beginning with completion of his first two plays, fairy stories for children, adult short stories and work as a journalist.

Despite being aware of each other for some time, Wilde and Constance did not formally start their relationship until 1883. He had met Otho, her brother, first in Dublin then later at Oxford (they studied the same course but two years apart), and Wilde would not have been Otho’s first choice as a husband for his younger sister. Without directly naming them, Constance’s brother implied that some of Wilde’s behaviours at Oxford raised serious concerns about his ability to be a proper husband.<sup>105</sup> Wilde’s youngest son, Vyvyan Holland (1954), says that his mother’s family “were incurably middle class” and adhered “to the strictest conventional code” (145). They did not like Wilde because he represented everything they disapproved of. Constance’s family adhered to rigid standards regarding life, career and dress. Even though her family had serious concerns, according to their letters Constance and Wilde were very much in love, and they married in May 1884. The *New York Times* (Moyle 2011) time said that as a bachelor

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<sup>105</sup> A letter, no longer in existence, that Otho sent to Constance at the end of November 1883 crossed with her letter informing him of her engagement to Wilde. Moyle (2011) says the letter “related a story about Oscar Wilde, sufficiently unsavoury for Otho to feel he must raise an immediate alarm” (72).

Wilde had embodied aesthetic principles and in marriage he also saw an opportunity “to set an example of the pervading influence of art in matrimony” (89).

For the first few years the married couple seemed to be inseparable and it did appear that Wilde had achieved something of an artistic marriage. Their clothes often matched or complemented each other, and Constance in particular was prepared to embrace the aesthetic style and philosophy. (This is not surprising, as in her younger years she showed her enthusiasm for the style of dress worn by the Pre-Raphaelite women).<sup>106</sup> As well as expanding his distinctive identity in style and philosophy, the marriage offered Wilde the opportunity to broaden his appeal by changing his appearance. Silk breeches and long hair were swapped for respectable, elegant suits and short curly hair.<sup>107</sup> As Wilde would later detail in explanations of his plays, his actions seem to have been an example of maintaining public interest by offering it continual change. And this worked, as Constance’s and Wilde’s dress in public attracted so much attention. Wilde’s dress became more sensible; Constance’s style, meanwhile, in keeping with the changing aesthetic taste and political attitude more and more took on the style that would lead her to become involved in the Radical Dress Society.

Weeks after his return from America, Wilde set off again to Paris, where he describes himself as being deep in literary work and completing his two dramas. While he was there he met a wide range of French actors, painters, writers, playwrights, composers and poets. Hugo, Verlaine, Mallarmè, Daudet, de Goncourt, Dègas, Pissarro and Zola were among the notable personalities with whom he discussed art. In one conversation with the French actor, Coquelin, he discussed his play, *The Duchess*, and indicated his difficulties with the genre, remarking: “Between them, Hugo and Shakespeare have exhausted every subject. Originality is no longer possible, even sin. So there are no real emotions left – only extraordinary adjectives” (Pearson 1960, 86). Wilde had mixed feelings about this drama in particular, which might account for his struggle. When it was complete, he viewed the play as consisting of more than style, and wrote: “I have no hesitation in saying that it is the masterpiece of all my literary work, the chef-d’oeuvre of my youth” (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 196). Fifteen years later, however, he

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<sup>106</sup> Moyle (2011) says of Constance, after her marriage, that her attitude and dress “spoke not only of her allegiance but of her preparedness to partner the high priest of Aestheticism in awakening a wider public to just how far art might be extended in life” (92).

<sup>107</sup> During his time in Paris Wilde sported a curled Neronian coiffure, after he had seen a bust of the Roman leader in the Louvre. He kept the style for some time on his return to England. In a letter to Robert Sherard he laments being unable to write creatively but says “nobody recognises me, and everybody tells me I look young: that is delightful, of course” (211).

would say of *The Duchess*, “My dear Robbie, you are quite right. ‘The Duchess’ is unfit for publication – the only one of my works that comes under that category. But there are some good lines in it” (1091). A more significant point was raised during the conversation cited above. Pearson (1960) records Wilde described civilisation as the love of beauty and said beauty is “that which the bourgeois call ugly” and what the bourgeois call beauty does not exist (86). This becomes a point made throughout Wilde’s short fiction.

### **Artist and Critic**

During his time in Paris in 1883, Wilde continued to draw comparisons between artistic and political revolutions. In America he had said that political and artistic revolutions are born of the critical spirit and the desire for a more noble, gracious and comely life. But he also saw revolutions as mere aspects of evolution, and this is the basis of the relationship between art and politics. Art was the generative force of the French revolution, Wilde posits in “The English Renaissance of Art” (1882), and the people’s discontent “was first sounded in literature years before the Bastille fell and the Palace was taken” (Wilde 1908, 115). Artistic and political revolutionary ideas were very much in his mind as he wrote *The Duchess of Padua* and redrafted *Vera: or The Nihilists* during his time in France. Pearson (1960) records Wilde stating to Robert Sherard as they walked the cobbled streets of Paris, that “there is not there one little blackened stone which is not to me a chapter in the Bible of Democracy” (90). Evolution as radical revolution is a core theme of both Wilde’s early mature plays.

Wilde seems to have returned to Europe more convinced of the importance of art to individual and social development. Several aspects of his philosophy in particular are clearly highlighted in letters he wrote to actresses whom he hoped to persuade to play the leads in his two plays. His letter to Mary Anderson, whom he unsuccessfully attempted to persuade to play the Duchess in the play of that name, outlines the play for the actress and discusses the use of specific artistic and dramatic techniques such as tragedy and comedy. This letter is quite long (Wilde apologises for the letter being a Titian) but in it he also presented the drama’s meaning.<sup>108</sup> Ultimately Wilde wants to create in his audience the ability to critically look at contemporary attitudes and situations with understanding and sympathy. These include, he says, the Duchess representing the individual and the universal woman whose Victorian life is so miserable it required special legislation to protect and improve it. But ultimately he wants

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<sup>108</sup> Apologising for its length Wilde says there is so much detail because “all art must be capable of scientific analysis” (203).

to give the audience an “intellectual basis for their sympathy” (200). He says Shakespeare always provides this intellectual basis, as for instance, in Hamlet’s request that Horatio explain his cause to the unsatisfied or unthinking public, and asserts Guido must do the same for the Duchess before her death:

not with the cold intellect of a philosopher, or the chilling plausibility  
of a pleader, but as a passionate lover . . . but this again is not enough:  
the Duchess must die: her death must be emphasised: its horror must  
intensify that sympathy which emotion has created, and which  
intellect has made invulnerable. (201)

His letter stresses that both the emotional aesthetic experience and the intellectual critical experience work together to achieve his speculative cause: ultimately, however, the intellectual is above the emotional. He describes the intellectual idea in art as the health of art, while the emotional is the heart, and as the emotion is momentary it will be forgotten with the fall of the curtain. Wilde is here pointing to immature and unconscious approaches to contemporary moral questions. Guido’s lines intellectually sum up for the audience their emotional sympathy, and will be the lines the audience can quote to one another as they leave, “very glad to find the shield of intellect held over the newborn babe of pity” (200). Moral doubt inspired by sympathy for the murdering Duchess is qualified for a philistine Victorian audience as, “Emotion lives in terror of ridicule, and the imputation of weakness, and is never happy unless it has got hold of its big brother Intellect by the hand” (200).

Wilde’s work not only criticises the poverty or attitudes to women of his day; he wants it to point to the higher life that is not lived, or, as he would later call it, the self-realised and perfect personality. In *The Duchess* this is partly represented by Guido, the character most aggrieved with the Duke, who finally refuses to take revenge. In the play Guido, talking of a world where higher philosophy is a form of power, decides he will place a dagger and a message in the sleeping Duke’s arms because “There is a better knowledge in the other world . . . he will know who held him in his power and slew him not: this is the noblest vengeance I can take” (Wilde 1919, 84-5). Guido goes on to say his hope is that the tyrannical Duke will “have some loathing for his life, repent, perchance, and lead a better life” (93). Wilde is creating the awareness of two important points with this play. Firstly, he is creating an intellectual sympathy that *sees*

oppression and its causes with the hope of fostering an alternative consciousness in contemporary society. Secondly, he is pointing to a higher life wherein intellectual understanding sees punishment, even though it appears to be a justified response, always as the lower choice. Wilde believes, and this manifests in several other works, that artistically expressing the (unexpected) higher attitude will enlighten his audience: as the artist he is giving to the audience exactly what he wants to produce. This indicates that his work deliberately aims to be transformative.

His letter to Mary Anderson also suggests key points in his aestheticism which are explored in later works. Firstly, a nexus he mentioned in his first American talk is flagged. He writes that the audience will not expect to find modern life in an Italian tragedy but “the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form” (197). The play reflects not only mainstream nineteenth-century attitudes to women, politics, industry and poverty but it also presents counter arguments to these. This builds on the notion, mentioned in his lecture, of the relation between Greek and medieval spirit (thought and emotion) and the intricacy, complexity and experience of contemporary life. In the case of *The Duchess* the audience is deliberately moved from one sympathy or understanding of social issues to the deeper realisation of alternatives, with the intention of producing intense emotion with intellectual speculation. This intellectual speculation born of art is the goal of Wilde’s entire oeuvre.

As he explained it in his lecture, this idea is at the core of Pre-Raphaelite art. In the play Wilde shows he is inclined towards the Pre-Raphaelites when he has Guido emphasise the place of women in art, industry and society: “I think women are the best artists in the world, for they can take the common lives of men, soiled with the money-getting of our age, and with love make them beautiful” (61). But in his restrained contempt for contemporary philistinism,<sup>109</sup> he also contradicts another Pre-Raphaelite idea about the need for art to conceal its meaning. In his letter to the actress he describes audiences as well-meaning but very stupid. As the audience is unthinking it must have things clearly explained to it. It is like a group of nice children, Wilde remarks, who need to have “their vague emotions crystallised and expressed for them” (200). In the play he contradicts the contemporary view of how those who have committed serious crimes should be viewed by society. In the third act, the Duchess, having killed her

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<sup>109</sup> Wilde’s contempt is also made clear several times in the play itself. In Act V, for example, he has Guido say “let those who have not walked as we have done, in the red fire of passion, those whose lives are dull and colourless . . . cast stones against you” (168).

husband and now pleading for Guido's love, says "sure it is the guilty who, being very wretched, need love most" (103).

Through his art, Wilde is attempting to produce in the audience an alternative way of looking at contemporary issues. He tells Anderson, "it is not by abstract morals but by living sympathy that an audience is affected" (198). By his portrayal of the Duchess as a victim of her husband's oppression, the audience is forced to understand why she would commit such a crime. This blatant twist to the norm becomes the core of Wilde's later work. In "Pen, Pencil and Poison" (1889), for instance, he would stretch the point further about judging behaviour: he emphasises the artist/murderer T. G. Wainwright's qualities as a great artist, and stresses that because he is a serial killer that should not obstruct the spectator's aesthetic experience. In his first American lecture, Wilde had emphasised that meaning in art should only be discovered through the critical endeavour of the spectator. In this play, however, he implies that art has to be very obvious in its meaning, and he stresses this in his letter. This might indicate a deepening concern about the level of philistinism in the public. (Wilde had quite a privileged life as a classical scholar before his American tour.) The level of contact he had with the public and the practical changes he was forced to make to his talks, seem to have intensified this concern which would be addressed later in *Intentions*.

Wilde's attempt to give the audience an intellectual basis for their sympathy in his other play, *Vera: or the Nihilists*, is even more blatant. In the early stages of writing the play he realised it would court controversy in contemporary England. In letters to various people with whom he was attempting to promote the drama he mentions the revolutionary aspects but focuses on love and the human story.<sup>110</sup> Later letters to D'Oyly-Carte talk about the development of the main characters and some of the Russian districts where the drama takes place. In one letter he says the play "is to be realistic not operatic conspiracy" (151). This is very interesting, as during his tour Wilde had emphasised the imaginative and aesthetic aspects of art, and had only discussed realism in Pre-Raphaelite terms. He was almost two months into his tour at the time of this letter, and the experience may have been teaching him that realism needed to be foregrounded for art to have the desired political impact at this time. His concerns and his ultimate hope for art in contemporary times are implied in another letter regarding *Vera* when

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<sup>110</sup> Typical of his approach is his letter to the actor Clara Morris where he says the play has "avowedly republican sentiments . . . yet the tragedy is an entirely human one" (97). Wilde's concern was justified, as the original December 1881 production was cancelled due to the recent assassination of Czar Alexander (a relation through marriage to the Prince of Wales).

he concludes “it is a great fight in this commercial age to plead the cause of Art. Still the principles which I represent are so broad, so grand, so noble that I have no fear for the future” (185).

In a letter to Marie Prescott, who agreed to play the lead, he again emphasises the intellectual nature of art, and he also adds a scientific element to it when he says “art is the mathematical result of the emotional desire for beauty. If it is not thought out it is nothing” (204). His second letter to the actress explains the play as his attempt to express the desire of the people for liberty. In the letter Wilde talks about the interaction between physiology and psychology and the various arts, as painting depends on the science of the optics and music on the science of the acoustics. Defending the play against political accusation, he asserts that the characters experience an intellectual transformation due to romantic love and not political development. He tells Prescott the play is not about politics but about human passion, dealing with men and women simply. It is men and women in their ideal state, in the lives they do not lead but lives they desire to live, and “modern Nihilistic Russia, with all the terror of its tyranny . . . is merely the fiery and fervent background in front of which the persons of my dream live and love” (214).

This can be read as an indication of Wilde’s dual role as artist and critic. Considering the political tensions in America and in Europe, he attempts to reassure the actress and others by emphasising the play is a romance and not a revolutionary tract. The cumulative effect of the play and the letter to Prescott is his balancing of his artistic and critical natures. As the artist Wilde can legitimately state the play is a love story between Vera and the Czar’s son with revolution as the background only. The transformation in several characters, however, indicates they are moving toward the political utopia Wilde wants his audience to realise.

Wilde’s role as critic, however, can also be seen. In his first American lecture he had stated that critics should never look at the artist but always at the public – the critic’s role is to make the audience aware of the meaning of art. Wilde’s letters about both dramas may be looking at the artistic work, but as a critic his plays are looking directly at the public. The essence of *The Duchess* is the creation of modern thought through an antique form while *Vera* can be seen as an attempt to transform English thought through the form of another country’s political drama and love story. Through these early dramas Wilde is presenting the public with what he wants his art to show them: the reality of their own lives and their need for revolution. As the French

revolution evolved from art, he is hoping that a Victorian revolutionary change would be an evolution of his art.

### **Close Encounters**

Wilde's aesthetic revolution is addressed again in his first set of stories. These can be read as encounters between fin-de-siecle art and the mainstream attitudes he wanted to transform. The four short stories, individually published between February and June 1887<sup>111</sup> and published in book form in 1891 as *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, portray aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities without obvious artistic themes. Aspects of the stories can be traced to Wilde's own life experiences: Wilde's wife, Constance, and her interests in the Radical Dress Society are modelled in "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" (1887)<sup>112</sup> and his own American experience is foregrounded in "The Canterville Ghost" (1887). But the conflict is shown in protagonists, such as Lady Alroy in "The Sphinx Without a Secret" (1887) and Hughie Erskine in "The Model Millionaire" (1887), who exhibit aesthetic personalities while Lord Arthur Savile and Hiram B. Otis in "The Canterville Ghost" are obviously devoid of the artistic temperament.

Wilde returned from France in March 1883, and in June gave the first lecture of his tour of Britain and Ireland, during which he gave versions of the aesthetic lectures and included a talk on his impressions of America. He had been critical of the interior and exterior designs of American houses and he included this criticism in his 1906 *Impressions of America*. In these thoughts on American he also expresses mixed views about the political, artistic and scientific advances being made. Where the Americans have deliberately attempted to create beauty in their cities, he argues they have failed, and he describes the knowledge of art in parts of the country as infinitesimal. He relates the story, which might have been invented to make the point, of an arts patron winning a law-suit against a railroad company "because the plaster cast of Venus of Milo, which he had imported from Paris, had been delivered minus the arms"

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<sup>111</sup> "The Canterville Ghost", "The Sphinx Without a Secret", "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" and "The Model Millionaire" were published respectively in 1887 in *The Court and Society Review* (February/March), *The World* (May), *The Court and Society Review* (May) and *The World* (June).

<sup>112</sup>The physical appearance of Sybil, Lord Arthur's fiancé, and especially her interest in spiritualism, are used throughout the story. There are references in a letter from Lord Arthur's cousin about the influences of the Radical Dress Society. Jane Percy says with everybody being so radical and irreligious, "I don't know what we are coming to. As papa has often said in his sermons, we live in an age of unbelief" (Holland 2003, 179). And the fact that a paranormal 'science' is at the core of the story reflects Constance's interests.

(Wilde 1906, 33). Some of these criticisms are parodied in his short stories. In “Lord Arthur”, for example, when Arthur gives Lady Clementina a bonbon laced with poison, he tells her it’s an American cure for her heartburn. She replies that she does not like American inventions and that “I read some American novels recently and they were quite nonsensical” (Holland 2003, 172). Wilde also emphasised the positives, however, and said it was only when he contemplated American machinery that he realised his long-held desire to believe the line of strength and the line of beauty were one. He also recommends visiting the country to learn “the beauty of the word FREEDOM and the value of the thing LIBERTY” (36).

Wilde makes a similar recommendation in “The Canterville Ghost” when he has Virginia recommend a journey to America for the ghost: “the best thing you can do is to emigrate to improve your mind” (Holland 2003, 197). But he uses his opinions in more significant ways, including his comments in the story on the nature of American materialism, indicating the relations between materialism and the aesthetic. He had already stressed the commercial nature of America, noting that “the men are entirely given over to business” and have “their brains in front of their heads” (Mason 1906, 35). This is hinted at from the beginning of “Canterville” when Mr B. Otis says that if a ghost were found in America it would be placed “in one of our public museums, or on the road as a show” (184). In the story, utility and marketing products, as agents of materialism, are second nature, as adult characters refer to cleaning and medical products by their full titles. The “United States Minister” (as he is called throughout the story) and his family have bought an old English house along with the furniture and ghost. When supernatural events are encountered, the Otises’ response is typically materialist. To a permanent bloodstain on the floor, Washington, the eldest son, applies Pinkerton’s Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent. Mr Otis recommends Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator for the ghost’s noisy manacles. And on another occasion when the ghost “laughed his most horrible laugh, till the old vaulted roof rang and rang again”, Mrs Otis offers him a bottle of Dr Dobell’s tincture in case he has indigestion (189).

In this short fiction, Wilde is again attempting to produce the modern English aesthetic idea under another (American) form. The ghost reminisces about the success of his previous hauntings - some have driven people to suicide and to murder - and he is confused and distressed by his failure with this family. Reasons for the unaffected, materialist responses of the Otises to immanent phenomena are hinted at. Despite the owl beating against window panes and the strong wind wandering through the house as a lost soul, “the Otis family slept unconscious of their doom” (191). Their interest in superficial topics is emphasised when the

narrator says the subjects of their discussion did not include “those primary conditions of receptive expectation” (187). Ultimately the ghost provides the aesthetic reason when he concludes the family “were evidently people on a low, material plane of existence, and quite incapable of appreciating the symbolic value of sensuous phenomena” (193).

More serious consequences of non-aesthetic responses to artistic experiences are also expressed in these short stories. In “The English Renaissance of Art” Wilde had said it takes courage to be delighted, elevated and, most importantly, instructed by art. This was the secret of the artistic life, “for while art has been defined as an escape from the tyranny of the senses, it is an escape rather from the tyranny of the soul” (Ross 1908, 65). This is expressed in the manner of Hughie Erskine’s introduction to “The Model Millionaire”. For Wilde, mainstream attitudes are the nineteenth-century tyrannies that need to be escaped from. Four aphorisms are listed at the beginning of the story:

Unless one is wealthy there is no use in being charming. Romance  
is the privilege of the rich, not the profession of the unemployed.  
The poor should be practical and prosaic. It is better to have  
a permanent income than to be fascinating. (209)

These reflect stereotypical Victorian attitudes and Erskine has never realised any of them. He failed at all his business ventures until “ultimately he became nothing, a delightful, ineffectual young man with a perfect profile and no profession” (209). It is interesting to note that Dorian Gray also has no profession but becomes successful in his sensuous endeavours.

Lord Murchison’s logic, another agent of Victorian attitudes, is the tyranny needed to be escaped from in “The Sphinx Without a Secret”. Lady Alroy’s behaviour and Lord Murchison’s response to it convincingly mirror nineteenth-century aestheticism and Wilde’s observation of attitudes toward it. Murchison is portrayed as the typical conservative Victorian man: he is the stoutest of Tories who always is honourable, speaks frankly and is a firm believer in the House of Peers. These qualities are made more explicit in his doubt-filled response to contact with art (in the form of Lady Alroy). The story starts with the narrator coming across Lord Murchison outside a Parisian café. He is “a good deal changed” and is “anxious and puzzled”; he is “in doubt about something” and the narrator concludes that because of the

strength of his logical thought, Murchison could not be challenged by mere “modern scepticism” (Holland 2003, 205). His changed state must have been caused by a woman. Wilde’s emphasis on Lord Murchison’s certainty before his contact with Lady Alroy and his total confusion afterwards reflects the public reaction to art since Pre-Raphaelite times. Murchison, because he is innately curious, initiates contact with Lady Alroy and becomes obsessed with her. He tells the narrator that she has “for some reason or other, attracted my attention” and she “fascinated me immediately . . . the indefinable atmosphere of mystery that surrounded her excited my most ardent curiosity” (Holland 2003, 206). He tells the narrator his reason for not being married: “I don’t understand women well enough . . . I cannot love where I cannot trust” (205). Yet he is hypnotically drawn toward what he neither understands nor trusts. More than anything else he wants to know if she can be trusted.

Before he met Lady Alroy, Murchison, with Victorian practical, scientific and industrial confidence, was fully convinced he had the right answers. Mainstream media and the public are well represented by Murchison. Despite their mistrust and lack of understanding, Victorian society was keenly interested in aesthetic representations. But in the end, like Lord Murchison, most chose the safer mantle of withdrawing from rather than engaging with something they could not understand. Like Lord Murchison’s encounter, the public response to nineteenth-century artists was one of incomprehension. To Murchison Lady Alroy is “deeply veiled” and like “those strange crystals . . . which are at one moment clear, and at another clouded” and it is not possible to “come to any conclusion” (207). And when Alroy asks Murchison (as aesthetes asked the public) “what right do you have to question me?” Lord Murchison answers: “the right of a man that loves you” on their behalf (207).

Duty represents the soul’s tyranny in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”. Lady Windermere is first introduced in this story and it is while attending one of her salons that Lord Arthur is told by Mr Podgers, the chiromantist or palm-reader, he will commit murder. Wilde is at his comic best in his description of the salon which is attended by conservatives and radicals, anarchists and royalists, economists and poets and cabinet ministers and bishops, who all present views atypical for their roles. Lady Windermere likens her salons to a menagerie, and says the attendees are performing lions. The reception as he outlines it is a type of dream salon for both Wilde and his mother. But the comedy suddenly stops and is replaced with tragedy as Arthur insists on being told the truth by Mr Podgers. He had a privileged life which was “exquisite in its freedom from sordid care”, but now for the first time he experiences “the terrible mystery

of Destiny” (Holland 2003, 165). He leaves the salon in despair and walks through street scenes that parallel Dickens’s London.

Because of the shock of the news and its supernatural source, he is forced to view life from a different perspective. Brooding on the meaning of life and destiny, Arthur envies actors who get to choose their parts. He now believes that few people are correctly cast to play their given roles in life. Passing through shameful, poverty-stricken alleys, he wonders if each person is merely a predestined puppet of a monstrous show. Real life, according to Lord Arthur now, with its lack of harmony, coherence and meaning, captures the absolute “discord between the shallow optimism of the day, and the real facts of existence” (167). To reverse the imbalance Wilde again points to engaging with art but the encounter must be a conscious one. While Murchison was left confused by his encounter with Lady Alroy, Lord Arthur has no understanding of his experience. This is hinted at when he sees poor and good-humoured farmers taking beautifully coloured flowers and vegetables to Covent Garden and does not know why he is so curiously affected.

Despite finally acknowledging that his happiness is down to chiromancy, he is not transformed, but is instead confirmed in his original position. In this sense Lord Arthur can be read as representing the mainstream Victorian misrecognition of fin-de-siècle aestheticism, one that persisted for decades regarding Wilde’s own philosophy. Like the protagonists in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Arthur does not move on from the aesthetic sense-experience. Stepping from his bath he allows the “exquisite physical conditions of the moment” to dominate, because he believes “the senses, like fire, can purify as well as destroy” (169). His attachment to his sense experience is emphasised by his fiancé Sybil Merton’s beauty, which has stirred his senses as well as his conscience. But not understanding his curiosity for beauty, he completely misreads the aesthetic experience, and has no hesitation in doing his duty (marrying Sybil only after he commits some random murder) for “he was no mere dreamer, or dilettante . . . he was essentially practical. Life to him meant action, rather than thought. He had that rarest of all things, common sense” (170).

Wilde portrays nineteenth-century attitudes in “Lord Arthur” as a perverted unconsciousness which justified abstract ethics, attitudes and action. Arthur, as the extreme example, interprets the murder he is to commit not as a sin, but as a sacrifice. It might be easier for him to ignore what his palm has written on it, but he is too conscientious and, despite the lack of personal pleasure or gain, will not allow his selfishness to win over love. When he has doubts about

committing the random murder, his better nature asserts itself and he realises that not committing murder is the wrong decision because of his duty to Sybil. As a staunch Victorian, he will keep his sacrifice a secret. Emphasising his lack of awareness Lord Arthur, on his way to commit murder, sends Sybil a basket of narcissi as a sign of his unselfish love for her.

In comic twists, Wilde re-emphasises the perverted nature of contemporary mainstream values. For instance, Arthur chooses poison for his first murder attempt because, like most Englishmen, he objected to violence and the public scene that follows. When poison fails, however, his “excellent common sense” and “sound practical mind” leave him in no doubt that some form of explosive “was obviously the proper thing to try” (175). Despite his several attempts, it seems he is destined never to succeed at committing a random murder, and he feels “oppressed with the sense of barrenness of good intentions (of fulfilling his duty), of the futility of trying to be fine” (180). And when Arthur is resigned to dying in some war, he comes across, by chance, Mr Podgers leaning over the Thames wall, takes him by the legs and throws him over. Having carried out his selfless duty he is then free to marry and he lives a very happy life, which in his mind is owed to chiromancy.

### **Secure Houses of Beauty**

The short stories explore nineteenth-century tyrannies for fin-de-siècle artists. But they also emphasise the nature of the aesthetic, or as Wilde would later call it, the perfect personality. Lady Alroy in “The Sphinx Without a Secret”, for example, is described as looking like a person with a secret, “like a clairvoyant”, and as a “beauty moulded out of many mysteries – the beauty is psychological, not plastic” (205). In this her beauty is explained as if it has been engaged with in a Wildean aesthetic that includes intellectual phenomena rather than merely sensual experience. Her artistic qualities are further alluded to when she is first seen in a yellow brougham or horse-drawn carriage (the colour yellow became symbolic of the aesthetic movement) and she is introduced with a reference to one of da Vinci’s best known paintings.

In the story Lady Alroy’s behaviour intrigues and angers Lord Murchison and he wants to know what she does with her time. Having discovered she goes to a house on Cumnor Street with her veil down for two to three hours he becomes suspicious. Lady Alroy’s attempts to explain herself are in vain, and Murchison verbally abuses her and goes to Norway for a month. Lady Alroy, being delicate, catches a cold at the opera and dies before he returns. He discovers from the house-owner that Lady Alroy paid good money each week “merely to sit in my drawing rooms now and then . . . reading books, and sometimes had tea” (Holland 2003, 208). In “The

English Renaissance of Art” Wilde asserts that in times of discord and despair we should turn to “that secure house of beauty where there is always a little forgetfulness, always a great joy” (Wilde 1908, 64). Lady Alroy had discovered the secret of the artistic life and found her secure house of beauty. The narrator explains as much to Murchison, saying Lady Alroy had

a mania for mystery. She took these rooms for the pleasure of going there with her veil down, and imagining she was a heroine. She had a passion for secrecy, but she herself was merely a Sphinx without a secret. (208)

“The Sphinx”, a poem Wilde started as a student at Oxford and only published in 1894, contains the lines (333-336) “Get hence, you loathsome mystery! hideous animal, get hence!/You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what I would not be” (882). Before publication, the title for the short story was changed from “Lady Alroy” suggesting an emphasis on the mystical nature of Lady Alroy’s characteristics and behaviour. For the practical Murchison Lady Alroy’s attraction is illogical – how could someone be so unproductive and inactive? This does not make sense to him and the story closes with his question “I wonder”?

Like Lady Alroy, Hughie Erskine in “The Model Millionaire” chooses to engage with art, though with more direct critical effect. Erskine also exhibits behaviour which is the anti-thesis of Victorian common sense. His literal engagement with the object of art, as well as underpinning Wilde’s social and political discourse, becomes a critical one, and the dialogue reveals the roles of the artist and the critic consistent with Wilde’s aesthetic doctrine. Erskine has achieved almost everything in his life except money. Prevented by poverty from marrying, his qualities are highly valued by Wilde. Like Wilde and Constance at this time, Hughie and Laura are said to be the handsomest couple in London. He is friendly with the artist, Alan Trevor, who is described as a master when he has a brush in his hand and his works are highly sought after. Trevor believes that the only people an artist should know “are people who are *bête* (foolish) and beautiful”, those who are “an artistic pleasure to look at and an intellectual repose to talk to” (Holland 2003, 209).

This simple story points to two issues, both of which are prompted by Erskine’s literal encounter with the object of an artwork. When he visits Trevor’s studio, the artist is working on a life-sized picture of a beggar, and the model is present. The main issues are the differing

roles of artists and critics, and Wilde's antagonism to philanthropy. Erskine is completely affected by the dishevelled appearance of the model who is "a wizened old man, with a face like wrinkled parchment, and a most piteous expression" (210). He discovers the artist will be paid two thousand guineas while the model will receive one shilling an hour. There are echoes of Wilde's "Decorative Arts" lecture when Trevor details the amount of work involved and concludes "there are moments when art almost attains to the dignity of manual labour" (210).

Erskine and Trevor are revealed as critic and artist through their short dialogues. In one discussion, the artist implies the difference between them in terms of political responsibility when he refers to rags as romance, and says that what is poverty to Erskine is picturesqueness to him. And when artists are accused of being heartless, he says the artist's heart is his head and continues, "our business is to realise the world as we see it, not to reform it as we know it" (211). The roles of artist and critic are discussed by Wilde in "The English Renaissance" when he says the Pre-Raphaelites paint the world as it was meant to be, and it is the role of the critic to initiate change.

So affected is Erskine, the critic, by the image of the beggar-model he gives him all the coins in his pocket. The model is eventually revealed to be Baron Hausberg who is so rich he has a house in every capital and can prevent countries from going to war. The Baron learns of Erskine's plight and sends him the ten thousand pounds so he can marry Laura Merton. In some of his later prose works, especially in "The Soul of Man", Wilde is very critical of philanthropic and charitable work and says it merely maintains the status quo. But in this story, he seems to be saying that as long as the aesthetic motive or connection to the philanthropic action, both charity (Erskine is so affected he gives everything he has) and action (the Baron's action enables Erskine to fulfil a dream) can bring change.

In "The Canterville Ghost", the person with inherent aesthetic qualities is fifteen-year-old Virginia Otis. She is the one person in the family affected by the ghost of Sir Simon de Canterville, who had murdered his wife and was murdered in turn by her brothers. Cited in Mason (1906), Wilde describes American teenage girls as "little oases of pretty unreasonableness in a vast desert of practical common-sense" (34). Virginia, as when she reprimands the ghost for his hauntings, sometimes has a "sweet Puritan gravity, caught from some old new England ancestor" (Holland 2003, 196). Despite this, she is an aesthetic oasis for the ghost, and she agrees to help him reach the nearby Garden of Death to permanently rest in his particular secure house of beauty. Sir Simon's ghost echoes Lady Alroy's desire for the

aesthetic when he says that being in the Garden of Death will allow him “to forget time, to forgive life, to be at peace” (198).

There is a love in the garden more powerful than death, but he can only reach there if an old prophesy, the young girl’s prayer of forgiveness, is realised. The prayer is needed for the ghost’s crime when he was alive and his many successful hauntings afterwards. But Virginia, as the oasis in the desert that is the Otis family, is also the prayer for the sins of materialism. The ghost warns her of practical, non-aesthetic voices, represented by huntsmen in a wall tapestry and carved chimney-piece gargoyles, telling her not to get involved with the unpractical: he tells her that “wicked voices will whisper in your ear, but they will not harm you, for against the purity of a little child the powers of Hell cannot prevail” (198). Five years after helping Sir Simon, Virginia is asked by her new husband to reveal the secret of her encounter with the ghost. All she will say is “he made me see what Life is, and what Death signifies, and that Love is stronger than both” (204). The end scene is reminiscent of Lord Murchison’s response as Virginia’s new husband insists that she at least share her secret with their future children.

### **Child-like Wonder**

There are hints that Sybil Merton, Lord Arthur’s fiancé, is also a possible oasis in his desert of common-sense as she is “a symbol of all that is noble and good” (Holland 2003, 170). But Arthur cannot be influenced by her as he refuses to have contact until he has carried out his duty to her. “Lord Arthur” can be seen as the odd-one-out in this collection of short stories. While significant changes, resulting from aesthetic engagement, take place for protagonists in the other three stories, the main character in this story is ultimately confirmed in his attitude by the immanent encounter.<sup>113</sup> Perverted ethics loom large in Wilde’s fairy stories too. Unlike his short stories, only two of Wilde’s tales were individually published.<sup>114</sup> These fairy tales, starting in the year after his short stories, are even more complex. Some of the characters, including the rat in “The Remarkable Rocket” (1888) and the student in “The Nightingale and

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<sup>113</sup> Hughie Erskine is rewarded with marriage to Laura in “The Model Millionaire” and Virginia in “The Canterville Ghost” realises the meaning of life, death and love. Even the ultra-confident Lord Murchison in “The Sphinx Without a Secret” is ultimately left in doubt following his contact with Lady Alroy.

<sup>114</sup> *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*, including “The Selfish Giant”, “The Devoted Friend”, “The Remarkable Rocket” and “The Nightingale and the Rose” was published in 1888. “The Young King” was published in *The Ladies Pictorial* in December 1888 while “The Birthday of the Infanta” was published in *Paris Illustré* in March 1889. These were published as *A House of Pomegranates* with “The Star Child” and “The Fisherman and His Soul” in 1891.

the Rose” (1888), like Lord Arthur remain unchanged. Other characters, however, become the result of a dialectic between beauty and the work of the imagination. “The Happy Prince” (1888) and “The Fisherman and His Soul” (1891) also foreground the theme Ross says was Wilde’s favourite – that when you share something of value you lose it.

Wilde continues his cause of aesthetic revolution by again attacking mainstream Victorian values. Gagnier (1997) argues that “the Victorians agonised over values”, and she describes Wilde as one of those fin-de-siècle critics who revealed these values “as a fraud, a tool of domination of some over others . . . and promoted a radical perspective and scepticism” (1997, 18). While they are children’s stories, Wilde is addressing an adult audience, as he continually centre-stages ethics. In “The Happy Prince”, for example, the mathematical teacher ridicules children for having dreams. “The Devoted Friend” (1888) begins with a mother-duck speaking of the importance of standing on one’s head to achieve status in society while in “The Young King” (1888) a Professor of Etiquette slates natural manners as a grave offence. Fairy tales allow Wilde to broaden the audience for his aesthetic ideas, and allow him more explicitly to work through those ideas.<sup>115</sup>

The general critical approach to Wilde’s fairy tales has been either to ignore them entirely or re-classify them as folk-tales, fairy-tales being too conservative for such a subversive as Wilde.<sup>116</sup> But this thesis posits that they are a logical stage in his developing philosophy of art. In an 1889 letter to the American novelist Amelie Rives Chanler he describes these stories as:

are an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality –  
to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not  
imitative:...they are written, not for children, but for childlike people  
from eighteen to eighty. (388)

Wilde’s parents, especially Sir William Wilde, collected folk-tales and fairy stories from the west of Ireland, and some critics find strong roots for Wilde’s fairy-tales in his these

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<sup>115</sup> The notion of these stories as a message is also implied by a letter Wilde sent to Ruskin with a copy of *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*. In it he describes Ruskin as a prophet, priest and poet and says his eloquence was such “that your message might come to us with the fire of passion, and the marvel of music”, which implies that Wilde is attempting to achieve the same (349).

<sup>116</sup> For detailed discussions of the critical approach to Wilde’s fairy stories see Kohl (1980) and especially Killeen (2007).

collections.<sup>117</sup> Wilde also sang old Irish ballads and many of his own collections originated as children's stories told to his young children.<sup>118</sup> Wilde's wife, Constance, also published *There Was Once: Grandma's Stories* (1888), a collection of children's stories and rhymes, in the same year as *The Happy Prince*, and there is speculation that Constance co-wrote some of the latter collection. Moyle (2011), for example, asserts "the narrative voice and broad-brush imagery in 'The Selfish Giant' are arguably closer to Constance's style in *Was it a Dream*" (137).

Spread as they are over a five year period (1888-1891), however, Wilde's fairy stories were also written simultaneously with his serious prose work, and there are compelling overlapping themes. In a letter to the poet G. H. Kersley he explains that his fairy-tales are really prose works "put for Romance's sake into a fictional form" as they are "meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the child-like faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness" (352). Both collections are themselves oases of unreasonableness in the desert of the materialism and realism of contemporary literature, science and economics. In "The Decay of Lying" Wilde again speaks of his hope that "Romance, with its temper of wonder, will return to the land" and believes people will see "beautiful and impossible things . . . things that are lovely and never happen . . . things that are not and should be" (1091). As well as indicating the life that should be lived, Wilde's fairy-tales are works of art and works about art.

### **The Un-Happy Prince**

Several ideas explored in Wilde's fairy-stories, such as social inequality resulting from industrial development, are clearly indicated in "The Happy Prince" and "The Young King". The issue of property ownership is also addressed in "The Selfish Giant" when the giant closes off his garden to the children and reasons: "'my own garden is my own garden . . . anyone can understand that, and I will allow no one to play in it but myself'" (Zusak 2009, 16). But even in these children's stories, the overriding theme is the perversion of contemporary ethics and how pathetic people become through rigid adherence to them. The stories' complexity is added to when Wilde details his aesthetic method in them. This is perhaps the subtle strangeness of their simplicity, only found by the child-like, of which Wilde wrote to Kersley.

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<sup>117</sup> See Killeen (2005, 2007).

<sup>118</sup> Vyvyan Holland (1954) mentions his father "told us all his own written fairy stories" and says "he had tears in his eyes when he told us the story of 'The Selfish Giant'" (45).

“The Happy Prince” first expresses this simplicity when the prince says he did not care about life outside the palace walls before he died, because he was constantly surrounded by beauty. When he was alive he was always known as the happy prince: “happy I was indeed, if pleasure be happiness” he says, but now that he is dead and on a raised plinth he can see only ugliness and suffering (4). Wilde is arguing for a dialectical relation between the aesthetic experience of beauty (before death the prince thought life consisted only of beauty) and the intellectual work of the imagination which follows the sense experience (as a statue he had a greater awareness of another side of life). Having experienced only beauty, the prince is now aware of inequalities in society and, feeling the same intellectual sympathy of Wilde’s early dramas, he wants to initiate change. This theme is also in the story of “The Selfish Giant” when he is taken to paradise after “a strange awe fell on him and he knelt before the little child” (21). The giant dies after experiencing this aesthetic awe, and his body is found by the children covered with white blossoms.

“The Young King” alludes to all three phases of Wilde’s aestheticism more clearly than the other fairy tales do. It had been the opinion of all at court that the young king was the son of an artist, as he had a strong passion for beauty, and there are several sightings of him in adoration of beautiful palatial artefacts in his secure house of beauty. Like Lady Alroy he believed “that the secrets of art are best learned in secret, and that Beauty, like Wisdom, loves the lonely worshipper” (71). He was especially taken with the robe and sceptre for his coronation. But a series of dreams reveal to him socialist motifs of inequality; the hardship of those who make his robes, the separation of the rich from the poor, the separation of work from the product and the blinding of ordinary people to wealth production. Following his prolonged aesthetic experience his dreams become the contemplative dialectic through which he becomes conscious.

When the young king decides to be crowned king in pauper’s clothes, representatives of society, including the court, the church and the people, ridicule him and plead with him not to be different. The strongest argument is made by the bishop who asks how one person can be expected to make the world a better place. As the crowd are about to kill him, they see him standing in awe at the cathedral altar, bathed in colours from the stained-glass windows. The motif for Wilde’s aesthetic Becoming is described when the crowd sees him transformed: “in the fair raiment of a king he stood before them” (88). Those who witness the young king’s aesthetic experience are also affected, which is a main point made later in *Intentions*. Similarly, in “Pen, Pencil and Poison”, a serial killer is transformed in the sight of his readers in this way

through the way his artwork is described. Darwin, Keats, Renan and Flaubert are also cited in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” as examples of “the men who have realised themselves, and in whom all Humanity gains a partial realisation” (1175).

“The Happy Prince” also indicates the types of changes that can occur through Wildean aestheticism. Enlisting the help of a swallow, the prince provides material support to the poor of his land in the form of the jewels and gems from which he is made. While Wilde is sarcastic about how people think gold will make them happy, he makes it clear that the material support carries a profound message. When all the jewels are gone, including the prince’s eyes, the swallow is compelled to stay and tells the prince of all the beauty in Egypt. The prince, however, really wants to know of the misery he can no longer see in his own city, and is told of the dire poverty of children and how “the rich make merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates” (11). Each gold leaf on the prince is distributed by the swallow and the children’s faces become rosier, everyone has fur clothes against the cold and there is happiness in the city.

### **Pathetic and Tragic**

The story commences with comments, typically attributed by Wilde to practical-minded Victorians, regarding the usefulness of the statue of the happy prince. These include the town councillor, who does not want to appear unpractical, the sensible mother critical of her son’s crying for the moon, and the disappointed man who represents the great unsatisfied referred to in Wilde’s letters regarding his earlier dramas. The only ones not happy in the end are the same types who, not noticing the general improvement around them, complain about how dull the prince’s statue now looks. The art professor at the university comments that as the statue is no longer beautiful it is no longer useful and it is decided to take it down.<sup>119</sup>

Two of Wilde’s fairy-tales argue that Victorian values potentially make those who adhere to them look pathetic and they have tragic consequences. At first glance “The Devoted Friend” provides a reversal of the action/inaction debate in Wilde’s work. The animals to which the story is being told are similar to mainstream characters in “The Happy Prince”. This story within a story focuses on Hans, who is distinguished by his kind heart and his garden where there is always beauty, and Hugh the miller who keeps taking from Hans’ garden. Hugh

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<sup>119</sup> It has to be remembered that the final comment in the Preface to *Dorian Gray*, written shortly after this story, confirms that art is meant to be useless in the Victorian practical sense.

continues Lord Arthur's perverted common sense as he espouses the theory of friendship, which includes an unfulfilled promise of a wheelbarrow for Hans, but never acts on the theory. As Hugh speaks to Hans about the essence of friendship Hans has an aesthetic sense experience and his face glows "all over with pleasure" (29). But there are also examples of the distorted moralistic mainstream attitude to art. The water-rat, like the young critic he heard walking around the pond, says that stories should not have morals unless they are supporting mainstream values. There are examples of blatant perverted ethics, such as Hugh's discussion about selfishness and true friendship. Hugh tells Hans that while he now has mastered the practice of friendship, one day he shall have the theory also. Hans is so impressed by the opinions and theories of the miller he ultimately dies completing yet another task on his behalf.

Hans is figured as a representative of art several times in the story: when he wanted to rest in bed listening to birds (as he works better when he has this aesthetic experience); or when he would rather hear the theories of friendship than have access to material comfort in winter. But this characteristic is ridiculed by Hugh the miller, in a Murchison-like manner, when he accuses Hans of being lazy and inactive. Hugh takes the place of honour at Hans' funeral as he considers himself to be his closest friend "in theory".

The remarkable rocket in the story of the same name, meanwhile, becomes very pathetic, as he thinks he has successfully synthesised practicality and late nineteenth-century aestheticism. Like the king in the story, who answers for everyone, the rocket imagines himself artistic, and he also thinks he has the status, common sense and selflessness to answer the Victorian century's great issues. The rocket actually presents himself as a Pre-Raphaelite, as Wilde described them in "The English Renaissance" lecture when he says

Common sense indeed . . . you forget that I am very uncommon, and very remarkable. Why, anybody can have common sense, provided they have no imagination. But I have imagination, for I never think of things as they really are; I always think of them as being quite different. (47)

Though no one sees it, he even enjoys his own artistic display when he finally explodes in daylight. But the rocket immediately perverts Pre-Raphaelite values by thinking about the life that is not lived, Lord Murchison-style, in a fearful and negative way, when he is seriously

affected by the worry of a future child of the prince and princess. Like Lord Arthur, he conveys abstract ethics when he accuses the frog, who only spoke of himself, of being selfish, and concludes “for I am well known for my sympathetic nature” (52). The rocket states that his duty is to merely provide a sensation, after which he immediately goes out.

In works such as “The Remarkable Rocket” Wilde is exploring the impossibility of synthesising Victorian and aesthetic values. Nor can they continue in the longer term in paradoxical relation to each other, as one of them has to be subsumed by the other. He is blatantly advocating through these fairy-stories that art is the better way; as he would later say in “The Critic as Artist”, the spheres of art and ethics are separate and “Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere” (1154). There is the sense throughout this story that Wilde, while indicating similarities between the aristocracy and artists, highlights essential differences between their notions of inaction: while the artist wants to change things, the establishment wants things to stay the same.

The imagery in “The Nightingale and the Rose” presents an even stronger argument for the inability of rational and aesthetic values to exist together in the longer term. Art, as the higher life, is shown when the red rose is portrayed as better than practical philosophy, an idea underpinned when the bird’s song has the power to affect even the moon. But when the artist (the nightingale) and the Victorian (the student) first meet they are both presented as incomplete: the bird sings of love but does not know it, while the student knows the secrets of philosophy “yet for the want of a red rose is my life made wretched” (58). The significant difference between the two is the willingness of the bird to understand the student: “the Nightingale understood the secret of the Student’s sorrow, and she sat in the oak-tree, and thought about the mystery of Love” (60). The student, however, fails to understand the bird, for he only knows things written in books. The student is a motif for contemporary and modern critics of Wilde: when the bird sings for him he notes that she has form but no real feeling and

she is like most artists; she is all style without sincerity. She would not sacrifice for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good. (63)

Like Lord Murchison in “The Sphinx Without a Secret” the student’s experience of the bird-song is based solely on logic and is non-aesthetic. The nightingale this time is an oasis in the desert of common sense. Having an aesthetic experience of the student’s love dilemma, she is now willing to sacrifice her life for him for she has realised that “Love is wiser than Philosophy, though he is wise, and mightier than Power, though he is mighty” (62). When he is rejected by his lover, the student concludes that love is less than logic “for it does not prove anything . . . (it) is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy” (67). Like the remarkable rocket, the student is unable to move beyond the aesthetic sensation and realise the higher life.

The apparent inability of the aristocracy to engage fully with art is indicated again in “The Birthday of the Infanta”. In the story, aristocratic values are shown to have great difficulty in succumbing to Wilde’s aesthetic dialectic, when the very haughty flowers all agree “well-bred people always stay in the same place, as we do” and those who travel around “are mere vagrants like the gypsies and should be treated in exactly the same manner” (105-6). (One firework in “The Remarkable Rocket”, does advocate travel [as Wilde did following his American tour] because it “improves the mind wonderfully, and does away with all one’s prejudices” (42). Again, over-indulgence in aesthetic pleasure is seen to be the cause of tragedy as it contributes to the queen’s death: the king loved her madly but his blind passion for her caused him to be so affected he did not see that his many ceremonial arrangements aggravated her strange illness. The entertaining dwarf also misreads his aesthetic experience, and when he cannot let go of the beautiful rose, he dies of a broken heart. The infanta concludes that her future entertainers must not have hearts at all; she had learned from her father, who had removed himself from all chances to experience beauty (made explicit in his refusal to consider marriage to the Archduchess of Bohemia).

“The Star Child” was published in the same year as “The Soul of Man”, and significant themes overlap. For example, the concerns of animals in the wood and their reactions, including the wolf who wants the government to sort out the weather, are motifs for the values of an unconscious contemporary society. The morbid discussion between, and powerlessness of, the woodcutters about inequality and injustice in the world is also a theme addressed in his final essay. The central point Wilde makes in “The Soul of Man” is that full self-realisation and awareness can only be achieved through art, and society is obliged to facilitate each individual in this. In the fairy story, these themes are put in romantic fictional form, as the beautiful star child, like Dorian Gray, becomes obsessed with his own beauty and is proud, hard-hearted and

cruel at the same time. Eventually he loses his beauty and becomes “as foul as a toad, and as loathsome as an adder” (129). This loss of comeliness is an important moment in the story as it represents the reversal of the revolutionary accomplishment evolving from Wilde’s aestheticism.

Written almost three years after “The Birthday of the Infanta,” this story is significant as it indicates a shift in Wilde’s thinking regarding aristocratic change. The star child becomes aware of the ugliness of his attitudes and sets out to make amends. His quest includes a three-year search for his mother and for white, yellow and red-gold.<sup>120</sup> The revolution moves forward again when the star child finds the varieties of gold and gives them to a begging leper. His beauty and comeliness are restored. Seeing his reflection again he sees that “his comeliness had come back to him, and he saw that in his eyes which he had not seen there before” (139). As with the story of the young king, and as explained in “The Soul of Man”, the people also see his beauty and confess they have been hoping for beauty to rule over them. “The Star Child” fulfils the desires of “The Decay of Lying” and “The Soul of Man” as utopian, beautiful and impossible things that never happen actually occur. The star child is discovered to be king and during his three-year reign there is only justice, peace, mercy, kindness and plenty. It is only right that this utopia is temporary as Wilde’s aestheticism posits that once perfection is achieved, it is essential to begin the process over again.

There is also a temporary three-year phase of goodness at the end of Wilde’s final fairy-tale, “The Fisherman and His Soul”, when the priest only speaks of the love and not the fear of God. This is Wilde’s longest and most powerful story of the encounter between life and art in the genre he referred to as romantic prose. The fisherman falls in love with a beautiful mermaid, who sings only of the beauty of the ocean. Eventually he wants to live permanently with the mermaid but she requests he gets rid of his human soul. Here Wilde is clearly indicating that the soul’s tyranny must be let go for perfection, through art, to occur. When the realisation that his soul, the motif for contemporary oppressive and autocratic ethics, is alien to him, the fisherman declares:

‘Of what use is my soul to me? I cannot see it. I cannot touch it. I do not know it. Surely I will send it away from me, and much gladness

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<sup>120</sup> This thesis posits that gold here, and the places where it is found, are motifs for the arts.

will be mine'. And a cry of joy broke from his lips. (146)

The utter disconnection for Wilde between contemporary ethics and the higher life is reiterated by the fisherman to the priest (who merely emphasises their importance), the merchants (who confirm their worthlessness to business life), and the witch (who is instrumental in getting rid of the soul). To each of these he passionately repeats that he cannot see, touch or know his soul.

This complicated and intricate story shows that while change is possible, it is also very difficult because there are many obstacles to the process. The oppressive nature of contemporary attitudes is confirmed when the witch tells the fisherman, “the shadow of the body is not the shadow of the body, but the body of the soul” which needs to be cut away (Zusak 2009, 158). But even when the fisherman is freed from the tyranny of the soul, it makes entreaties to him to reconnect. The soul travels the world for three years and returns each year to tell the fisherman of his amazing journeys and to offer enticements such as Wisdom and Riches if the fisherman will accept the soul. To each of these he retorts that Love is better than both. It is only after the soul offers him art, in the unfulfilled promise of a beautiful dance (as the mermaid cannot dance), the fisherman is prepared to reunite with his soul temporarily.

When it is too late, the fisherman realises that the soul is offering him merely the aesthetic sense experience of watching the woman who “dances for pleasure, and sometimes she dances on her hands and at other times she dances on her feet” (185). The strength of Wilde’s aestheticism, here in the form of love, is shown when the fisherman realises his need to return to his mermaid – “Love is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men” (190). Despite further enticements from the soul, it can never re-enter his body, and both the mermaid and the fisherman are found dead in each other’s arms on the shore. Following church tradition, the priest refuses to have them entombed in holy land and they are buried in the corner of a field.

Throughout his fairy stories, Wilde has positioned art above science, philosophy, material needs and morality. In this story aestheticism is also shown to be even more powerful mystically than is religion. After three years, beautiful and powerful flowers grow on the lovers’ un-consecrated grave and are placed in the church. The priest is so affected by their curious beauty and sweetest odour that instead of preaching the wrath of God “there came another word into his lips, and he spake not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name

is Love. And why he spake, he knew not . . . And he stood as one in a dream” (192). The priest’s realisation is further shown when he arranges an elaborate high church blessing of all things in nature, something he had previously refused to do. And because of his aesthetic encounter, humanity gains a partial realisation, as “the people were filled with joy and wonder” (193).

This chapter highlights how Wilde exchanged his aesthete appearance for acceptable attire as he wanted to have his philosophy of art taken more seriously. The conscious development of this aestheticism is shown firstly in his early dramas *Vera: or The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua*. It is also seen in letters explaining that his writing is a deliberate attempt to create in his audience an informed consciousness that will lead to revolutionary change in Victorian morality and attitude. His short fiction is shown to be romantic prose forms of his doctrine, and as it evolves Wilde starts to include more detail of his aesthetic dialectic method. The chapter argues that his aestheticism is a definite doctrine, and the chapter makes the point that Wilde’s work is becoming an aesthetic dialectic where contemporary values are subsumed by art. This is indicated by changes in the protagonists in his short fiction. While he is writing in the form of the self-described genre of romantic prose, Wilde is shown to be overlapping the thinking of his later stories with his straight prose writing at this time.

## Chapter Five

### The Immoral Moral

The genres in which Wilde worked increased significantly during the late 1880s and early 1890s. The success of the short stories and fairy-tales was proof that he was able to address the issue of art in society in literary form. While he had been exploring his philosophy of art in mainstream adult and children's stories, he was also working as a reviewer which led to the offer of editorship of the *Ladies World* (changed to *The Woman's World* during his editorship) in 1887.<sup>121</sup> Wilde was chosen for this position because of his and Constance's high public profile and for his close friendships with many celebrated women of the day. Despite stressing to potential contributors the apolitical nature of the periodical, with prompting from his wife Wilde forged a radical political agenda for the periodical which encouraged women to engage in politics.<sup>122</sup> In terms of the development of his aesthetic, Wilde's work at *The Woman's World* was more significant than his work at the *Pall Mall Gazette*.<sup>123</sup> As well as including reviews of more women writers, he argued particularly against realism in novels, in terms similar to those he had used in "The Decay of Lying" (1889). As Youngkin (2013) observes, Wilde's reviews of noted women writers for *The Woman's World* made the same distinctions as the later prose work between, what he calls, right or imaginative realism and vulgar or unimaginative realism. He applied the same literary principles to the work of women such as Violet Vane, Amy Levy and Margaret L. Woods that he did to men. But in his reviews of these and others he pointed out the unimaginative approach of the modern novelist in contrast to these writers, who responded to the real world while retaining their imagination.

His work as reviewer and editor allowed Wilde to insert his ideas into the broad discourse on art. Gaining professional respectability as a writer encouraged Wilde to experiment further with his prose writing in 1889, finally taking the advice given by Pater while he was at Oxford. Pater was a Fellow and Tutor of Brasenose College, and on their first meeting he famously asked

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<sup>121</sup> In 1884 he had started to write regularly for the *Pall Mall Gazette* as a literary reviewer and on a variety of topics including embroidery, Christian art in Ireland and works by minor and better known writers and poets such as Froude, Crane, Whitman, Swinburne and Symonds.

<sup>122</sup> See Moyle (2011) for a fuller discussion of Wilde's and Constance's collaboration during his time at *The Woman's World*. In letters to potential contributors, including social reformers and sisters of politicians, Wilde had stressed the magazine would have no artistic or political creed of its own under his editorship.

<sup>123</sup> In his acceptance letter to T. W. Reid, manager of the periodical, Wilde clearly sets out his political and aesthetic agenda. As well as changing the discourse on fashion he says he wants to deal with what women think and feel, telling Reid "the *Lady's World* should be made the recognised organ for the expression of women's opinion's on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life" (297).

Wilde why he did not write prose, indicating that it was the difficult genre. In his review of Pater's *Appreciations* Wilde outlines his reasons for not writing in prose until his later career. He states that it was not until he had "carefully studied" each essay in Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) "that I fully realised what a wonderful self-conscious art the art of English prose-writing is" (Wilde 1919, 187). His ability to move comfortably between genres was further confirmed when Wilde wrote two large pieces of fiction which allowed him to expand the aesthetic argument advanced in his shorter fiction. As well as confirming Wilde's literary development, the two larger pieces, *The Portrait of Mr W H* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, share common motifs which substantiate his aesthetic and sexual interests. His incorporation of sexual and aesthetic themes which often overlap, in works written almost simultaneously, indicates his conviction of their mutual significance in the transformation of culture.

Other major shared motifs include the central role of the portrait of a beautiful young man and the relation between aesthetic and ethical concerns. Several common ideas also include beauty as a key motivation for artists; in both pieces, Shakespeare's Rosalind, for instance, is played by actors who commit suicide; and there are some statements, for example regarding the importance of good looks over good behaviour, which are phrased very similarly in both works.

<sup>124</sup> And while three male characters are the focus of both literary works, the issue of pederasty is addressed differently in them. It is a core theme in *Mr W. H.*, but the issue is central to Shakespeare's poetry rather than directly between the protagonists as it is in *Dorian Gray*. In both, Wilde represents homosexual love in pedagogical and homo-social terms, based on Oxford university tutorials, and about the homoerotic in a style typically Victorian.<sup>125</sup> The works of Symonds and Mahaffy on Greek pedagogical relationships, and Wilde's relationships with Ruskin and Pater at Oxford, are characteristic of the academic discourse and practice of the time.

In *Mr W. H.* the homoerotic is presented in terms of a spiritual connection while in *Dorian Gray* it is almost invisible, especially in the final version of the novel, as Dorian's behaviour is never actually named. Because of contemporary limitations, Wilde presented his homoerotic

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<sup>124</sup> While *Dorian Gray*, whose beauty becomes the inspiration for the artist Basil Hallward, dies alone in the upper room, Wilde also speculates that *W. H.*, the inspiration for Shakespeare, also died alone as it had "been with others whose beauty had given a new creative impulse to their age" (342).

<sup>125</sup> Dowling (1994) discusses the style of tutorial at Oxford introduced by Newman and continued by Jowett "as a vehicle for the intensifying reciprocal bonds of male interest, affection and obligation" where intellectual and religious development merged "and instruction would verge on intimacy" (35).

interests through the pedagogic nature of Greek pederastic relations.<sup>126</sup> In *Mr W. H.* he emphasises the higher spiritual nature of love, and physical desire and passion are discussed in neo-Platonic language linking these impulses with intellectual and spiritual development. Highlighting the influence of Hellenism on the Renaissance, for example, he mentions several historical relationships, calling them “the Platonic conception of love” (325).<sup>127</sup> Campbell (2013) concludes that Ficino’s translation of the *Symposium* initiated the Renaissance for Wilde and in *Mr W. H.* he attempts to show that “masculine homoerotic relationships produce cultural change” and new philosophies of art “are produced by masculine inspiration” (174-5). Wilde’s representation of homosexual love is more blatant in *Mr W. H.*, especially compared to the censored publication of *Dorian Gray*. In it, his contention is that the object of Shakespeare’s love sonnets is a boy actor, William Hughes. Focusing solely on the internal evidence of the texts he concludes that they were addressed to “a particular young man” who filled “the soul of Shakespeare with terrible joy and with no less terrible despair” (307).

*The Portrait of Mr W. H.*, first published in the July 1889 issue of *Blackwoods*, is Wilde’s exploration and expression of his emerging sexual identity and has been discussed in detail many times before. Bristow (1997) describes the piece “as an exemplary starting-point for reflecting on same-sex eroticism in Wilde’s works” (204) and Danson (1991) argues that Wilde’s spiritualising of homosexual passion in the piece meant that “homosexual desire could both declare itself and efface itself” (998). But in this shorter of his two major fictions, Wilde also engages his own idealist aesthetic. Early in it he positions aesthetics above ethics, an idea he explores more fully in “Pen, Pencil and Poison” (1889), and stresses even forgeries in art are an artistic desire for perfection. At one stage, proof of an historical point rests on the authenticity of a portrait. But Wilde ultimately deduces that censoring an artist for forgery confuses an ethical with an aesthetic problem, as all art is an attempt to realise one’s personality. Similar to the historical and artistic sense outlined in works such as “The Rise of Historical Criticism” (1879), Wilde attempts to nullify the reliance on demonstrable evidence, and advocates a spiritual and artistic sense as the only true way to interpret meaning in art. Wilde’s aesthetic argument, referred to as a revolution in criticism, emphasises faith in literary

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<sup>126</sup> Robson (2004) says that such relations were almost made acceptable by Victorian scholars, “because the purpose of these relationships was the creation of the good and noble citizen” (2004, 301).

<sup>127</sup> He emphasises homosexual love more clearly when he discusses the influence of Ficino’s 1492 translation of the *Symposium* which “began to exercise a strange influence over men, and to colour their words and thoughts, and manner of living” (324)

theory rather than in provable knowledge.<sup>128</sup> Cyril Graham's suicide and Erskine's planned suicide are embedded in the sceptical aesthetic. In death, both desired to prove the strength of their belief in the theory that William Hughes was the inspiration for Shakespeare's love sonnets, and Wilde refers to both as martyrs, and martyrdom as a form of scepticism. In *Dorian Gray* Wilde would also advocate his aesthetic idealism when, for example, in one of the additional chapters of the revised edition, he has Henry Wotton assert "scepticism is the beginning of faith" (Holland 2003, 141).

The non-provable aesthetic also leads directly to the cycle of scepticism and belief in *Mr W. H.* Throughout the piece, protagonists oscillate between accepting and not accepting the theory of William Hughes. At the core of this debate is the issue of converting someone to a belief which leads to the loss of the belief by the converter.<sup>129</sup> Some critics see this acquiring and losing belief as a form of resistance used by Wilde against nineteenth-century heterosexual norms.<sup>130</sup> Ablow (2013) speculates that the belief-scepticism cycle occurs because when a truth becomes a fact, Wilde, like the story's protagonists, no longer has a stake in the idea. This argument may be supported by Henry Wotton's comment in *Dorian Gray*, when he says to Dorian that "the things one feels absolutely certain about are never true. That is the fatality of faith" (154). However, this thesis also posits that Wilde would have been aware of the Celtic insistence, outlined in Chapter two, that once shared, a belief is then lost. His use of the self-subverting narrative, which Ross said was Wilde's favourite theme, allowed Wilde to continually explore ideas, and to evolve his unique form of utopia through his dialectical aesthetic.

Reading Shakespeare was almost as important as reading the Bible in Victorian England, and it can be considered very audacious of Wilde to indicate that the bard wrote homoerotic sonnets despite his contrary claims at his trial.<sup>131</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray* continued his discourse

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<sup>128</sup> Wilde concludes the work by implying it is more important to be a martyr for a belief than for what is known: he says "no man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them not to be true" (349).

<sup>129</sup> Erskine relates the theory regarding William Hughes to the narrator and loses his own belief; the narrator writes to confirm his own belief based on internal evidence and he immediately loses it; Erskine regains his belief in the theory on receiving the letter; the narrator regains his belief when he hears of Erskine's planned suicide.

<sup>130</sup> Danson (1991) for example says "the story's structure of self-subverting narratives . . . in a century that could not mention Wilde's love without making it unnatural . . . was a necessary act of resistance" (997). And McKenna (2005) states that *Mr W. H.* for Wilde was "a manifesto of *paiiderastia*, a closely argued dissertation designed to give cultural and historical legitimacy to sex between men and youths" (107).

<sup>131</sup> In the brief exchange about *Mr. W. H.* with Edward Carson, the prosecuting council, Wilde says he was trying to prove Shakespeare's love was not homosexual but "the love of an artist for a personality" which is an intense

on pederasty and this work was cited much more than *Mr W. H.* during his prosecution. In the novel he presents his homosexual interests as a theme between the three male characters, and the obsession with male beauty and homoerotic allusions make *Dorian Gray* a form of autobiography, with many of his biographers and critics emphasising Wilde's attempt to explain his work through his life and vice versa.<sup>132</sup> In his recent study on the original typescript Frankel (2012) avers that while Wilde had wanted to draw attention to the artistic merits of the novel, there is much in it to suggest that the three main characters engaged in homoerotic activities. Frankel concludes that *Dorian Gray* is part of a highly coded text "that governed England's homosexual community" following recent significant events (9).<sup>133</sup> Heavily influenced by Ellmann's (1987) biography, Frankel goes much further in emphasising the homosexual nature of the novel when he says it is one of the first English language novels to "explore the nature of homoerotic and homosocial desire . . . it plays a cat-and-mouse game of hiding and revealing the fact that homoerotic desire is the force that animates its still gripping, macabre plot" (7).

It is hardly surprising that the homoerotic is so emphasised in criticism of *Dorian Gray*. It is almost impossible for contemporary readers to interpret it otherwise. Robbins (2011) even asserts that Wilde and his novel were collapsed into each other after the scandal "and the corruption of one was increasingly read as an index for the corruption of the other" (109). In this sense, Frankel's (2012) point regarding life gaining the upper hand over Wilde's art and the description of Wilde (and not the central protagonist) as aestheticism's first martyr, carry significant weight. It is clear that Wilde wanted to provoke discussion regarding contemporary values with this work, but his letters to various newspaper editors after the original publication, and his responses during the 1895 trials, indicate some frustration with the level of attention given to the sexual theme. His responses are at pains to emphasise the higher nature of the

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devotion and affection that only "an artist can feel for a wonderful and beautiful person, or for a wonderful and beautiful mind" (Holland 2003, 93).

<sup>132</sup> Some critics read the novel as soul-searching for Wilde culminating in the discovery of the soul's dark side. McGowan (1990), for example, likens it to an epiphany for Wilde indicating that his individualism cannot be developed without reference to others. Profit (2011) also suggests the failure to recognise the boundaries of the soul, including the inability to "recognise the separateness of others" leading to the "depersonalisation of others" and "unmitigated narcissism" (1). Riquelme (2000), meanwhile, describes the character of Dorian as Pater's last sentence to the "Conclusion" but states that "Wilde's version is unremittingly dark" (623).

<sup>133</sup> The 1885 *Criminal Law Amendment Act* criminalised sexual acts between men, the National Vigilance Society was established in the same year and the 1889-90 Cleveland Street affair involving prominent aristocrats, including the Prince of Wales, and military men with rent boys combined to drive the homosexual community further underground.

novel's aesthetic purpose. The centrality of sexuality cannot be disputed, but the present analysis challenges the assumption that the homoerotic is all. Wilde's letters, trial responses and the novel itself offer opportunities to interpret *Dorian Gray* ethically and aesthetically: to reposition it, as Gillespie (1994) puts it, outside the possibilities "delineated by our immediate hermeneutic" which finds one secret meaning (154).

Just as the work of fiction explores his sexual interests, *Dorian Gray* cannot be read separately from Wilde's developing aesthetic. This study also contests the view of his aestheticism as a fixation with the mere pleasurable experience of beauty in art,<sup>134</sup> and argues that the novel continues his discourse on the aesthetic sense experience as merely a first step to something more significant. In this way the novel is also read as Wilde's distancing his aesthetic from Pater, and through it Wilde moves away from the pure Epicureanism outlined in Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873) (especially in the "Winckelmann" and "Conclusion" chapters) and in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885).

### **The Separation**

The extent to which Wilde was preoccupied with the discourse on power, individualism and the self-realised personality through art is clearly apparent at this stage of his literary life. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* cannot be read separately from his earlier work or his parallel prose writing, and it also clearly shows he continued to develop his philosophy of art in it.<sup>135</sup> In fact Jullian (1986) says works such as "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" and *Mr W. H.* prepared the way for the novel. Its gothic and occult elements, for example, had been deployed in "The Canterville Ghost" and "Lord Arthur". The occult themes allow some of Wilde's work to fit in with contemporary interests and those of Wilde's wife. Lorang's (2010) intertextual analysis of the American and British July 1890 edition of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, found that the original *Dorian Gray* and Edward Heron-Allen's "The Cheiromancy of To-Day", with which it appeared, reflected "the nineteenth century's fascination with occultism and the

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<sup>134</sup> Since the first critical reviews Wilde has been accused of advocating in *Dorian Gray* for the sensuous. The *Daily Chronicle* set the tone by claiming that the novel encourages the search for new sensations and quotes Henry Wotton's "nothing... can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul" (Mason 1908, 55).

<sup>135</sup> Lawler and Knott (1976) say that the novel is a reassembling of ideas and material from *Mr. W. H.* and "The Fisherman and His Soul" and such self-appropriation proves Wilde "was resynthesising his material at many levels" during the first and subsequent versions of *Dorian Gray* (391). And Hultgren (2013) argues that the publication history and aesthetic ideas explored in the novel correspond to those of "The Critic as Artist" show "Wilde moving back and forth between the two projects or working on them simultaneously" (219).

pseudosciences” and these and others in the issue offered readers “a counter-history to empiricism and positivism” (22).

But the aesthetic theme is also continued in the novel from his short fictions. The artist Basil Hallward’s experience of Dorian’s beauty continues the young king’s aesthetic experiences, mentioned in Chapter four, in the palace before his set of dreams. Hallward can also be seen as a blend of Erskine and Trevor (critic and artist) in “The Model Millionaire”, while Henry Wotton’s influence over Dorian Gray mirrors Hugh blinding Hans with his expositions on friendship in “The Devoted Friend”. Regarding this issue of influence in the novel, Gillespie (2011) goes so far to argue that from the very opening of the novel, power over others “is the true seductive force” and that Dorian should ultimately be viewed more as “a fascist than a sensualist” (104). Dorian’s narcissistic descent is more complete than that of the protagonist in “The Star Child”, and Wotton has a greater awareness of Wilde’s aesthetic ideal than Lord Murchison in “The Sphinx without a Secret”.

Characters in the short fiction can also be read as Wilde’s first symbols for the Paterian sensual aesthetic he was moving away from. An important difference alluded to in “The Devoted Friend” is fully developed in the novel. In the earlier work the self-absorbed water-rat emphasises that stories should contain absolutely no moral meaning, a recommendation he had heard from the bald critic instructing a young man near the pond. This is Wilde’s first obvious metaphor for Pater’s impressionism. Combined with Hugh’s theorising about friendship to Hans in the same story, the metaphor also acts as a sort of introduction to Henry Wotton’s aesthetic discourse and role as a mere spectator in the later novel. The remarkable rocket becomes the second metaphor when he refers to himself as having uncommon sense and a creative imagination while simultaneously emphasising the sensuous as the ultimate ideal.

But even before the 1888 *Happy Prince* collection, Wilde had expressed a degree of frustration with Pater’s thought. In his 1887 review of Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* he describes Pater’s writing as “somewhat laborious” which “makes us long for a little more freedom” (Wilde 1919, 54). If there were hints of Wilde’s inclination to differentiate between himself and Pater, then *The Picture of Dorian Gray* becomes a declaration of independence. Henry Wotton, especially in the later editions of the novel, expresses Wilde’s understanding and appreciation of the sense experience of beauty in art. Wotton also indicates how close he comes to Pater’s impressionism. But by showing the flaws in Wotton’s exaggerated representation of Pater’s

beliefs and the potential for the absolute destruction of body and soul through living his aesthetic philosophy, Wilde is indicating how far he has moved away from Pater.

Smith and Helfand (1989) contend that Wilde, through Henry Wotton, distanced himself from Pater in terms of contemplative attitude. They describe Wilde's thought as an Aristotelian harmonious and balanced development of self-perfection. This is in comparison to the uninvolved and hedonistic spectator described in Pater's "Conclusion" in *The Renaissance* and shown in Henry Wotton's perverted understanding of contemplation Wilde's novel.<sup>136</sup> But the novel is also claiming that Wildean aestheticism more clearly explains the true meaning of the nexus between fin-de-siècle individualism and Greek Hellenism. If Pater's individualism was aesthetic passion (the gratification of his New Hedonism outlined in the "Conclusion"), for Wilde, individualism is consciousness through this passion (his New Hellenism discussed in "The Soul of Man"). The fully formed, independent personality suggested but not realised in the novel is outlined in *Intentions* and "The Soul of Man".

The level to which Pater notices Wilde's criticism is clear in his short review of *Dorian Gray* for *The Bookman* in 1891.<sup>137</sup> Pater begins by praising Wilde as the true inheritor of Mathew Arnold's critical legacy but undermines this when he talks of him startling his "countrymen", drawing attention through single inverted commas to Wilde's otherness as an Irishman. Pater heavily praises Wilde's artistic management and skills as a writer, but indicates that the novel provides an opportunity for readers to judge whether Wilde practices in his artistic creation what he preaches in his recently published *Intentions*. Pater concludes that Wilde is not infallibly true to his aesthetic philosophy, especially with regard to Wilde's discussion of realism in *The Decay*.<sup>138</sup> Wilde's one-time mentor also becomes very defensive in his discussion of the novel's take on Epicureanism and says Wilde has misunderstood the philosophy. Distancing the corruption of Dorian from his own philosophy by blaming it purely

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<sup>136</sup> In their analysis of *Dorian Gray* Smith and Helfand (1989) implicitly accept, as this study does, the aesthetic moral in Wilde's novel as he explains it in his letters following publication and during his trials.

<sup>137</sup> Pater had refused to review the earlier version published in *Lippincott's* as he realised the potential dangers for himself of being associated with more explicit homosexual content (see Holland 2003 and Frankel 2012, for more detail).

<sup>138</sup> Pater likens the realism of Wilde's novel to that of Poe's work describing the lives of Sybil Vane's family, the very unrefined characters and the "pleasures and griefs" in it as examples of "the intrusion of real life and its sordid aspects" (Uglow 1973, 142). But Hultgren (2013) posits the idea of James Vane's attitude in particular as a representation of those who, making ethical judgements about the novel, fail "to adequately understand Dorian Gray because they are merely considering Dorian Gray on a superficial level" (225).

on vice and crime Pater describes the character as an unsuccessful experiment in Epicureanism<sup>139</sup> and reduces the story to “a very plain moral, pushed home” (144).

Some points made in the review are clear in the novel. Pater states Basil Hallward is the only true Epicurean. And defending his own aestheticism, and in part claiming some credit for the novel, he says the story would not exist without Wotton (the implication being, perhaps, that Wilde would not be possible without Pater).<sup>140</sup> But there are times when Pater appears to be restraining his annoyance at the portrayal of his philosophy. He argues that Wotton’s cynicism is really Wilde’s, but he conveys the notion of Wotton as a sketch. Pater believes Wilde could not possibly have intended Wotton “with his cynic amity of mind and temper” to be a true Epicurean (143). He says the horrible changes to Dorian could never be scientifically possible, though they are allowed in fiction. And knowing Wilde’s views on imitation in art he concludes his review by likening the novel to some good French work of the same kind “done, probably, in more or less conscious imitation of it” (145). Despite the presence of some high praise, Pater’s review of Wilde’s novel reads like a deliberate misinterpretation of the aesthetic intent in it. Linking Wotton’s aestheticism directly to Wilde, labelling it dainty, distancing Wilde from his English audience and highlighting a deliberate didactic purpose in the novel all point to Pater’s awareness of Wilde’s distancing of his aestheticism from his own, and the review is really a defence of his own aestheticism.

That Pater was a significant influence is attested to by many critics and by Wilde himself. In *De Profundis* he describes *The Renaissance* as having had a strange impact on his life, and this is typically read as Wilde alluding to the motivation for his apparent pleasure-seeking endeavours as well as his art-for-art’s-sake philosophy.<sup>141</sup> While there is some merit in this argument, it would also be accurate to say Wilde was referring to the intense focus in his cross-examination during his trials, on the combination of pure Epicureanism and homosexuality in *Dorian Gray*. This is ironic as it clearly indicates Wilde was seen to be an advocate of the voices of Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray rather than that of Basil Hallward. It is clear that Wotton and Dorian are more Paterian than Wildean, and the characters’ attitudes are drawn

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<sup>139</sup> Pater says of the main characters in *Dorian Gray* that they are bent on becoming “less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development” (143).

<sup>140</sup> In his review Pater says “Wotton’s cynicism, or whatever it be, at least makes a very clever story possible” (143).

<sup>141</sup> It is said Wilde was rarely without a copy of the book during his undergraduate days. McKenna (2005) is among the many biographers who say that Wilde’s aesthetic argument merely mirrors Pater’s sensual version and cite *The Renaissance* as the major influence.

from *The Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean*. And as Wilde himself said in a letter three years after the novel-version was published, “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Henry Wotton what the world thinks me: Dorian I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps” (585).

In the essay on Winckelmann, a seminal work in *The Renaissance*, Pater makes several points that directly influenced Wilde and can be read as giving the idea for *Dorian Gray*. This would not have been the first time Wilde directly followed his mentor. In his early American lecture, beginning with the title, Wilde draws on several key points from Pater. Following Pater’s lead in “Winckelmann” he spoke of becoming something in the presence of art; he distinguishes between the artistic type and situation in the same way; he also uses the imagery of the marriage of Faust and Helen (unity of the Romantic with Hellenism) following Pater; and Wilde also referred to the artist as a child of his time as Pater does. Even when separating himself from Pater in the lecture he uses similar language. In *The Renaissance* Pater describes the spectator’s experience of “supreme works of art” as an escape from “the tyranny of the senses” (Pater 1873, 184). It was highlighted in Chapter four that Wilde describes art as an escape from the tyranny of mainstream ethics, which he refers to as the soul.

One significant influence is Pater’s description of Winckelmann as one who became a starting point in philosophy and says “his appointed teachers did not perceive that a new source of culture was within their hands” and that the philosopher had “within him a longing desire to attain the knowledge of beauty” (149-50). Dorian describes himself in very similar terms and is confirmed by Wotton in Wilde’s novel. Some things said by Pater can also be seen as sources for the idea of *Dorian Gray*, an important point not mentioned by many who discuss possible origins of the novel.<sup>142</sup> In Pater’s essay there are allusions, clearly expressed by Henry Wotton, to the beauty of youth and the mournfulness of maturity, an idea Pater credits to Winckelmann. Pater also talks of Greek artists as always needing supreme beauty before them to work, and he makes the point that in the Hellenic tradition, beautiful people inevitably became famous. In *Dorian Gray* Henry Wotton, Basil Hallward and Dorian also express this idea. Wotton’s strong desire for the knowledge of beauty is never fully realised, and Dorian’s fame becomes a central block in his attempts to change. Hallward’s several statements about Dorian’s extreme

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<sup>142</sup> Many origins for *Dorian Gray* have been put forward. Roditi (Ellman 1969) states that the novel is based on his great-uncle’s 1820 novel *Melmouth the Wanderer*, while Pearson (1960) says the novel’s origins lie merely in Wilde’s desire to scandalise his contemporaries. Hyde (1976) credits the idea for the novel to when Wilde viewed his own portrait painted by Frances Richards and Moyle (2011) says it was inspired by Constance and Wilde’s involvement with the Order of the Golden Dawn. McKenna (2005), finally, says the novel purely reflects Wilde’s sexual exploitation of a young acquaintance, John Gray.

beauty, typically read as homoerotic, carry on Wilde's belief about the importance of continually experiencing beauty in life.

While Wilde can be seen to rely on Pater's "Winckelmann" and "Conclusion", he goes on to ultimately counter both essays in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Talking of Winckelmann's discovery of the Greek sensual ideal of art, Pater is critical of any reason, even for the sake of greater awareness, for ending the aesthetic sense experience. He says the longer a person can contemplate the Hellenic ideal the stronger will be the regret at having passed beyond the sense experience. But Wilde's oeuvre clearly indicates the necessity to pass beyond the aesthetic sense experience, and the novel goes further by portraying extreme consequences when this does not happen. *Dorian Gray* also counters the "Conclusion", Pater's strongest statement on Epicureanism outside of *Marius*. Wotton echoes Pater almost word for word regarding the experience and not its fruit being the aim in life. Concluding with his famous statement, Pater (1873) implies that beauty must be experienced for pleasure, not for the purpose of consciousness:

Be sure it is passion – that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake. (198-99).

In the "New Cyrenaicism" chapter of *Marius*, Pater also talks about the need to experience the power of emotion and the senses. He describes such experiences as aesthetic education which is "certainly occupied very largely with those aspects of things which affect us pleurably through sensation" (111). The fully realised life and challenging contemporary temperament and attitude are at the core of Wilde's and Pater's aesthetic, but their philosophies significantly diverge in their methodology. This can be seen in Marius' aesthetic philosophy which weighs, Pater says, the mere realisation of experience against accepted morality. As he had recommended to Wilde, Pater has Marius change his manner of work from poetry to prose but

insists on maintaining the poetic temper so that as a critic he may pass on the knowledge of his experience. While he argues against the use of hedonism (which is a reproachful term “of large and vague comprehension”) to describe his Epicureanism in *Marius*, Pater admits that his philosophy of pleasure may “fairly become the ideal of the ‘hedonistic’ ideal” (114).

In *Dorian Gray* the three main characters experiment fully with the Paterian aesthetic philosophy expressed in *Marius* but dire consequences ensue. Pater, while arguing his aesthetic is not hedonistic, says it may become somewhat antinomian when, in the search for experiences, it is confronted by conventional morality and “would be found from time to time breaking beyond the limits of the actual moral order” (113). In Wilde’s novel, Wotton’s theory and Dorian’s life become metaphors for the experience and not the fruit; they become ambassadors for the antinomian pleasurable excitement of going beyond the accepted moral order. Wilde’s oeuvre argues against Pater’s impressionistic theory. In the development of his aesthetic from early implications in his American lectures, and culminating in his late prose, Wilde posits that art is anything but for that moment’s sake. Unlike Pater, who lived a secluded life in Oxford, he lived in society, and this made his criticism more relative, focused and dynamic. As Prewitt Brown (1997) concludes in her comparison of both critics, Wilde’s aestheticism was “conscious of the sociological realities pressing in upon art” (10). In the lives of characters in his novel we see the potential destruction of a life lived according to the Pater’s tenets. This makes the focus on *Dorian Gray* in Wilde’s trials rather ironic.

### **Separation Achieved in Literature**

Wilde realised, after several weeks of attempting to defend his novel in the British press, he could not change the way it was being viewed. He also believed the intense correspondence with editors was impacting on his attitude and his writing. He expressed a concern that his ongoing engagement with critics in the press was weakening his literary style (referring to his prose writing). “People get violent” he said, “and abusive, and lose all sense of proportion, when they enter that curious journalistic arena in which the race is always noisiest” (Holland and Hart-Davis 2000, 448). His responses had attempted to bring attention to the artistic discourse in the novel and away from the moral debate in Victorian society. The beauty of

*Dorian Gray* as a work of art was lost on the critics, just as Dorian's beauty was lost on Wotton.<sup>143</sup>

In one letter, Wilde mentions the impact of realism on art and says the function of the artist is always to invent, and the supreme goal in art is to realise the non-existent. To this end he states: "I am of the opinion that Lord Henry Wotton is an excellent corrective of the tedious ideal shadowed forth in the semi-theological novels of our age" (429). He restated his belief that ethics have no place in art-criticism but accepted the existence of a moral in the novel. The moral was that all excess and all renunciation bring punishment. He also wanted to emphasise the moral as simply a dramatic element in this work of art. Describing the novel as an essay on decorative art he asserts that it "reacts against the crude brutality of plain realism. It is poisonous if you like, but you cannot deny it is also perfect, and perfection is what we artists aim at" (436).

Recalling a point made in his first American lecture, and reiterated in the Preface to his novel, Wilde insists that when immorality is seen in art it is put there by the audience. He claims that art really mirrors the spectator, not life, and asserts Christian and mystical criticism see in the novel an ethical parable with spiritual import; pure literary critics see it as serious and fascinating as a work of art; and critics acting for prurient readers see in it some dreadful things. It was to these critics that Wilde responded primarily. No one knows exactly Dorian's immorality, the implication being that whoever finds immorality in the story has put it there. But finding a moral in it is just a half-truth. Confirming the limitations of attitudes which perceive the novel as advocating sensuous indulgence, he says in the letters that the prurient will not be able to find *Dorian Gray's* moral as it can only be revealed to artistic and healthy

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<sup>143</sup> Unsurprisingly for the time much of the criticism of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* focused on the intimacy and affection between the three male characters. The *St James' Gazette* (June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1890) under the heading "A Study in Puppydom" described it as a vulgar piece of work and pondered "whether the Treasury or the Vigilance Society will think it worth while to prosecute Mr. Wilde or Messers. Ward, Lock, and Co., we do not know" (Mason 1908, 17). *The Daily Chronicle* of June 11<sup>th</sup> said that dullness and dirt were the features of the June 1890 edition of *Lippincotts* and that "the element in it that is unclean is Oscar Wilde's story", a poisonous tale heavy with "the odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction" (55). And the *Scott's Observer* of July 5<sup>th</sup> stated that "the story – which deals with matters fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing in camera – is discreditable to author and editor" (63).

minds. The whole truth of the novel implies the reverse of Henry Wotton's beliefs and confirms the difference between his contemplative aesthetic and Pater's impressionistic version.<sup>144</sup>

Frankel's (2012) endeavour to re-present the original transcript is obviously very welcome to all scholars interested in Oscar Wilde and does much to highlight the very constrained circumstances in which Wilde, Pater and many other critics and artists were forced to think. This edition will do much to counter suggestions about the negative attitudes to homosexual literature created by Wilde's overtly gay novel.<sup>145</sup> Frankel also presents great detail about the history of the novel and its later development. However, the focus on the homoerotic in the original transcript risks reducing Wilde's philosophy of art.<sup>146</sup> This study posits that parallel to the homoerotic inferences, the dialogue between Hallward and Wotton about Dorian can be read as representing the aesthetic discourse between Wilde and Pater about the meaning of beauty in art. An emphasis on the homoerotic is absolutely essential to understanding Wilde and the novel, but there is a risk that the emphasis on such a powerful theme can relegate the equally significant aesthetic discourse to a minor theme.

Lord Henry Wotton's artistic appreciation and misreading are laid bare from early in the novel. The character is Wilde as the world thinks he is, and there is a lot of Wilde in Wotton, but only to a point. Ultimately he is more the embodiment of Pater's sensuous aesthetic and he paraphrases Pater's aesthetic throughout. The hedonistic aspect of this aestheticism is expressed when he describes intellect as an exaggeration that destroys harmony. Wotton also describes beauty as higher than genius and as less superficial than cognition. To highlight a nexus between sensuousness and beauty, Wotton advises Dorian to

Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon  
you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing.

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<sup>144</sup>It also confirms Smith and Helfand's (1989) statement about Wilde's contemplative imagination "provided the basis for ethical, social behaviour" while Pater's was self-centered and "informed by a materialist and utilitarian ethic" (ix).

<sup>145</sup> Referring to the novel Jullian (1986) for example says "Wilde has put all homosexual literature under a tragic sign, perhaps because he looked upon his pleasures if not as sins then at least as offences against society" (190).

<sup>146</sup> Frankel does highlight Wilde's attempt to clarify Dorian's moral ambiguity such as in his very different treatment of Hetty Merton, in comparison to Sybil Vane, late in the novel. But he fails to mention other changes, such as in chapter three (four in the revised version), pointing to Wotton's Wildean aesthetic. Wotton says to Dorian "Most people become bankrupted through having invested heavily in the prose of life. To have ruined oneself over poetry is an honour" (Holland 2003, 50).

A new Hedonism! That is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season. (Frankel 2012, 79)

There are several points to note from this and other early aphorisms. The first relates to Wotton as an exaggeration of Pater. He says the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it and talks of the need to create something finer and richer than the Hellenic ideal. He proposes hedonism in the shape of the continual search for new sensations and, considering Pater had argued in *Marius* that his aesthetic was not hedonistic, Wotton's comment is expressive of Wilde's disaffection with Pater.

Apart from the comments on hedonistic self-absorption as Hellenic, Wotton misinterprets the notion of the perfect personality in Wildean philosophy. Throughout the novel physical beauty and personality are interchanged by the characters but for different purposes. Here, Wotton interprets Dorian's beauty as a sign of the self-realised personality. "The Soul of Man", written soon after *Dorian Gray*, talks about the perfect personality as individualism, which is beyond the experience of beauty, and becomes the New Hellenism. Wotton's fixation with physical beauty and the pursuit of sensations is a misunderstanding of the perfect personality and ultimately implies a separation between physical beauty and personality, because of the attachment to beauty. This study argues that in having Wotton miss the point, Wilde highlights the limitations caused by the primacy of beauty over criticism and by its separation from thought.

Wilde's own split from Pater's aesthetic is re-emphasised also by the suggestions, usually made by the artist Basil Hallward, of Wotton's artistic qualities having somehow become bastardised. Perhaps mirroring Wilde's frustration with Pater, several times in the novel Hallward says he does not believe Wotton has faith in all his aphorisms.<sup>147</sup> Wotton uncomfortably laughs off such suggestions in a manner not unlike Pater's review of Wilde's novel. There are instances when Wotton shows his artistic insight, such as in his intent gaze of appreciation at a daisy in chapter one, or when he catches himself when talking of Hallward's work: "I thought you would never care for anything but your painting – your art, I should say. Art sounds better, doesn't it?" (66). And later, when Dorian describes Sybil Vane as sacred, he tells Dorian with

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<sup>147</sup> The intensity of this may be found in Hallward when he says "you are thoroughly ashamed of your own virtues...you never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" (61).

pathos in his voice that only sacred things are worth touching. Wotton's pathos and sense of the sacred indicate some understanding of the Wildean aesthetic. In emphasising the pleasure of the senses and power over another, however, Wotton ultimately expresses the Paterian self, through which he becomes separated from Wilde.

Hallward, who interchanges physical beauty with personality, is more advanced. In chapter one he looks at the gracious and comely form he has created (Dorian's portrait) and attempts to imprison the image in his brain in case he loses it. The artist follows a point previously made by Wilde when he tells Wotton there are two eras in history: the appearance of a new medium for art and the appearance of a new personality for art. And Hallward's worship of Dorian's beauty illustrates Wilde's belief that people become something in the presence of art's beauty. An aesthetic consciousness exists in Hallward, who is mindful of the import of beauty for self-realisation and individualism. Lauding Dorian to Wotton the artist confirms "he is much more to me than that" and continues: "His personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way hidden from me before" (66). Unlike Wotton's interest in Dorian, Dorian's personality represents to Hallward a unified harmony of body and soul. Indicating he has the historical sense Wilde spoke of in "The Rise of Historical Criticism", Hallward says "there is a fatality about all physical and intellectual distinction" which down the ages has dogged those in authority who implement the distinction (59).

The discourse between Wotton and Hallward in the early chapters confirms their different aesthetic. Henry Wotton makes the main pronouncements about art, life and society and there are times when he sounds like a Wildean paradox. But Wotton is very different from Vivian in "The Decay" and Gilbert in "The Critic" because he is not Wilde. Misunderstanding the Wildean aesthetic, he becomes exasperated at the artist for refusing to exhibit his best work (Dorian's portrait). He exclaims to the artist, "have you any reason? What odd chaps you painters are!", and proceeds to emphasise the fame that would come with exhibiting a brilliant work of art (58). And the difference between Wotton and Hallward is confirmed when the artist explains that he cannot exhibit because the painting has too much of himself in it. Wotton, believing the explanation to be about physical likeness, says "you have an intellectual expression, and all that. But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins" (59).

## The Intellect Takes Over

The reference to beauty ending with intellectual expression contains the clearest difference between Wilde's and Pater's aesthetic. Pater emphasises the experience of beauty and Wilde emphasises the dialectic between beauty and the intellect. Art's beauty remains central to Wildean philosophy but the novel from this point on can be read as Wilde's concern with Paterian impressionism and the fixation on the sensuous. Dorian never shakes off the influence of the novel sent to him by Wotton, as narrated in a later chapter. He tells Wotton that he does not like the book but that it fascinates him and he purchases five copies (nine in the later version) of the first edition and has them bound in different colours to suit his "various moods and the changing fancies of a nature over which he seemed, at times, to have entirely lost control" (158). Almost referring to Pater, the narrator remarks that "The Renaissance knew of strange manners of poisoning" and Dorian is completely poisoned by the book he has been given (178). Through the novel's moral as he explains it, unlike Dorian, Wilde freed himself from Pater's *The Renaissance*, the book he said had such a strange influence on his life.

Interestingly, the dialogue about beauty and intellect comes immediately before the passage that prosecuting council, Edward Carson, read during Wilde's cross-examination.<sup>148</sup> Carson read out four passages from *Dorian Gray* in court, the final one from a dialogue between the artist, Basil Hallward, and Dorian relating to the morbid influence Dorian has had on male aristocrats.<sup>149</sup> Another is from the dialogue between Henry Wotton and Basil and includes the artist telling his friend how, since their first meeting, Dorian's beauty and personality, "absorb my nature, my whole soul, my very art itself" (Holland 2003, 85). Obviously predicating his argument on a single-minded reading, Carson emphasises the homosexual feelings aroused in the artist and ignores the aesthetic reiterated by Basil in the novel and Wilde in court. Carson also ignores a later passage indicating that Basil's interest in Dorian differs from Wotton's as the artist says: "you don't understand, Harry . . . Dorian Gray is merely to me a motive in art" (Frankel 2012, 67).<sup>150</sup> Carson continues with reading another dialogue between Basil and

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<sup>148</sup> Carson chose to use the *Lippincott's* version referring to the later one, several times during the trial, as the purged version. The same passage in the later version, however, has the artist describing his growing obsession with Dorian and includes talk of various iconic gay portraits of the young man.

<sup>149</sup> At the end of this passage Carson asks Wilde if the unstated meaning of Dorian's behaviour towards these men "would suggest that what they are talking about was a charge of sodomy?" (102). Wilde states the influence is not mentioned and that in the real world he does not believe one person can influence another.

<sup>150</sup> In the later version Hallward, emphasising his aesthetic insight further, says at this point "You may see nothing in him. I see everything in him" (Holland 2003, 24).

Dorian, which again reveals the artist's love for the younger man. The passage includes the phrase "I admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly" and Carson asks if Wilde had experienced the same feelings (Holland 2003, 87). In response, Wilde says several times that the passage describes an artist's reaction to the influence of a beautiful personality on art. In one answer he says the passage is a perfect description of how an artist reacts "on meeting a beautiful personality that he felt some way was necessary to his art and life" (85).

In the novel Basil becomes exasperated with Wotton and says his friend cannot feel what he feels. He repeats on three separate occasions that Wotton does not understand.<sup>151</sup> If some of Wotton's declarations, as I am arguing, are Pater's work, there are others that come directly from Wilde's prose written simultaneously with the novel. This is most clearly seen when the protagonist says: "the aim of life is self-development. To realise one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for" (74). This is taken directly from "The Soul of Man". But Wotton's methodology – the continual search for new sensations – is significantly different from Wilde's. In one sentence, Wilde practically ends Pater's influence over him when Hallward says that Wotton has a bad influence over everyone, with the noticeable exception of himself.

As he rejects Pater, Wilde is also rejecting an aspect of his contemporary age. Nineteenth-century consumerism is a motif shared by all three protagonists in *Dorian Gray* and had already been addressed by Wilde most blatantly by Mr Otis in "The Canterville Ghost". Both Hallward and Dorian want to hide the portrait away when they see themselves in it. And Dorian is later shown to be a collector of artefacts from around the world.<sup>152</sup> But Wotton's appropriation of Dorian represents the contemporary attitude and can be read as being almost as sinister as Dorian's reasons for concealing his own grotesque portrait. The appropriation of art, rejected by Wilde, relates to the use of art for the preserve of the social status quo.<sup>153</sup> He indicates this early in the novel when, in the final part of chapter two, the story's turning point is introduced. Heavily influenced by Wotton's sensual philosophy Dorian jealously views his portrait and,

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<sup>151</sup> The first relates to Wotton's misrepresentation of artists and their work, similar to the remarkable rocket, the second, like Hugh in "The Devoted Friend", relates to his misunderstanding of friendship and finally when Hallward highlights what beauty means to both of them, mirroring differences between Lady Alroy and Lord Murchison in "The Sphinx without a Secret".

<sup>152</sup> Sloan (2003) concludes, in fact, that *Dorian Gray* is less a moral tragedy than "a paradoxical commentary on the aesthetic tendencies of its time that would conceal and repress the true relations between people and things" (138).

<sup>153</sup> Moarn (2006) in her work on Victorian literature emphasises the focus on bourgeois assumptions through the recurring themes of public institutions such as the church, politics, and business, which rarely portrayed any opposition from the proletariat.

worried about growing old while the picture will stay forever young, wishes it could be the reverse. Hallward is aware of an emerging conflict between the picture and the sitter and admonishes Wotton for speaking of sin as life's only entertainment. We are told a look of pain comes into Hallward's face when he realises Wotton has seduced Dorian with his words, and his sadness is as much as an aesthetic concern as it is a forlorn love for Dorian.

Along with the additional comments by the artist regarding Dorian's importance to his art, there are other significant textual differences between the first and subsequent versions of the novel. The later version includes six additional chapters with the final chapter divided in two. The changes can be read merely as Wilde's response to criticism of the original version, or as a way of padding for its publication as a volume. During his trial, however, Wilde's explanation for at least one change, regarding exchanges between Hallward and Wotton, ironically points to Pater.<sup>154</sup> The additional material allows Wilde to emphasise his aestheticism, and it combines with the old material to address the same aesthetic and social criticism found in prose at that time. Wotton's comments, for example, in the new chapter three regarding philanthropic attitudes to poverty in London's East End, could have been taken directly from "The Soul of Man".<sup>155</sup> The depiction of Sybil Vane's family life and attitudes in the new chapter five, and comments in chapter seventeen about the public, are also Wildean and taken from "The Critic as Artist".<sup>156</sup> Chapter seventeen also implies Wotton to be a slightly advanced Lord Murchison. In the joust with his cousin Gladys he is asked to describe women as a sex and his unambiguous response is "sphinxes without secrets" (Holland 2003, 176).

But even if Henry Wotton is more aesthetically advanced in the additional material, Wilde portrays his development as arrested. The chapters show him to be a kind of artist, a playwright shaping Dorian's life, but this appropriation expresses material power over his creation in contrast to Hallward's aesthetic appreciation. The book gifted by Wotton later in the novel becomes the major influence, but in the new chapter three Wotton gloats over his direct influence on Dorian. The older man is enthralled by his influence over the younger and believes

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<sup>154</sup> Wilde explains one addition was made because Pater suggested an early passage might be misconstrued. He said he had not been influenced "by any newspaper criticism or anything but by the only critic of this century I set high" (78).

<sup>155</sup> Wotton, through several conversations, implies philanthropists are not helping solve social ills; that it is better to sympathise with beauty than with suffering; and that slavery is the root of poverty in the East End while charity changes nothing.

<sup>156</sup> References to common sense, worldly cunning and hatred and suspicion of the arts and society in Sybil Vane's home and Wotton's belief that in contemporary society art is a malady, stupidity is balanced by wealth and mediocrity brings fame are based on his prose piece.

he can project his own soul, temperament and intellect directly into Dorian. Wotton's true material aesthetic is made clear when he concludes he will own Dorian and do whatever he likes with him. This becomes his real and most satisfying joy in life.<sup>157</sup> The base-nature of Wotton's aesthetic is compounded in the early part of the next chapter by the brief appearance of his wife. Victoria, through her name and description, is painted as a kind of stereotypically incapable nineteenth-century woman: she is a curious woman whose clothes look like they have been "designed in a rage and put on in a tempest"; she is always in love but is never loved in return and she has "a perfect mania for going to church" (Frankel 2012, 89). While discussing music and her love for pianists with Dorian Victoria makes a statement, an idea central to "The Critic", regarding art's relation to cosmopolitanism. Telling Dorian that piano-playing makes pianists foreign she declares "even those that are born in England become foreigners after a while, don't they? It is so clever of them, and such a compliment to art. Makes it quite cosmopolitan, doesn't it?" (90). Wotton's unsophisticated wife has more insight into art's cosmopolitan culture than he does and this short scene makes her more Wildean than he is.

Even Dorian Gray, the object of Wotton's hedonistic experiment, is temporarily more Wildean. In chapter eight of the earlier versions of the novel, Dorian regrets not telling Basil his reasons for hiding the portrait. He feels the artist could help him resist the poisonous influence of his own temperament and that of Henry Wotton. Almost directly comparing the sensual and aesthetic loves Wotton and Basil have for him the narrator says Dorian realises the love the artist bore him, "for it was really love, had something noble and intellectual in it" and was not merely the "physical admiration of beauty that is born of the senses, and that dies when the senses tire" (Holland 2003, 150). The following chapter, however, details Dorian's own philosophy, and also the content and influence of the book sent by Wotton. Speculation for the inspiration for this book includes Huysmans' *À Rebours* and a passage about it was read out by Carson during Wilde's cross-examination.<sup>158</sup> Dorian feels his own sins are being revealed to him by the book and believes it describes his life before he has lived it. While the book has no clear plot he sees the Parisian character as realising moods, passions and modes of thought that belong to every century but the nineteenth (where they are met by artificial renunciations or

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<sup>157</sup> In this additional chapter the narrator makes Wotton's intention clear: "he would seek to dominate him – had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own" (35).

<sup>158</sup> In response Wilde claimed the chapters referred to in the book do not exist in *À Rebours* and that the book is actually one he has not yet written. Supporting this Brown (1956) claims the narrator's description does not match *À Rebours* but is an amalgam of three historical books including Suetonius' *De Vita Caesarum*, Symonds' *Age of Despots* and Gibbons' *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He credits these with providing detail of the effeminate nature and lurid lifestyles of Italian Princes and Roman Emperors described in the book.

morals). Wondering whether the book is about a saint or sinner, Dorian ultimately feels he has been poisoned by it, and believes that evil becomes a mode through which he can realise his concept of beauty.

The following chapter (nine in the *Lippincott's* version, eleven in later versions) presents Dorian as a kind of aesthetic saint and sinner. To others, especially some younger men, he is the perfect cosmopolitan nature described in "The Critic"; they see in him the true realisation of the "real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world" (160). Like Wilde on his return from America, Dorian desires to be something more than a performing aesthete or mere consultant. Clearly drawn from Wilde's own experiences of the American tour, one passage has Dorian wanting to be "something more than a mere *arbiter elegantiarum*, to be consulted on the wearing of a jewel, or the knotting of a neck-tie, or the conduct of a cane" (161). He wants to introduce a new art philosophy with ordered principles that restored the importance of the sensual experience, a way of life that finds "in the spiritualising of the senses its highest realisation" (161). But ultimately, Dorian chooses Paterian Hedonism over Wildean Hellenism because his philosophy could never sacrifice pleasurable experience for intellectual advancement. Clearly pointing to Pater's "Conclusion", the aim of Dorian's philosophy "was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience" (162). Dorian becomes like the freed soul from "The Fisherman and His Soul", who spends his time travelling the world: he becomes devoted to the study and collection of perfumes, jewels and embroidery and becomes obsessed with Catholicism and music. Each in turn become Dorian's house of beauty but his devotion is temporary with the purpose of helping him forget his fear of the changing portrait.<sup>159</sup>

Chapter thirteen continues Dorian's complex nature, and when it is divided into two extended chapters (nineteen and twenty in the later versions), the protagonist's complexity is emphasised and Wilde's cultural argument is made clear. Earlier writings on cultural discourse, such as Carlyle's dynamic and mechanical relation and Arnold's notions of Hellenism and Hebraism, had talked of binaries influencing development. Wilde begins the final chapter of *Dorian Gray* with similar dualistic notions.<sup>160</sup> Dorian's response again indicates a higher aesthetic when he tells Wotton that culture and corruption should not go together or have the same purpose. This

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<sup>159</sup> The narrator tells us that all Dorian's fascinations are his "modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne" (171).

<sup>160</sup> Wotton tells Dorian there are two ways of becoming civilised, "one is by being cultured, the other is by being corrupt" (Frankel 2012, 207). In response Dorian says he has experienced both.

point is emphasised more in the later versions when Dorian moves from being merely curious about the combination of culture and corruption to viewing their amalgamation as terrible. Additional material in the new chapter nineteen reinforces Wotton's materialistic aesthetic when he says art is merely for procuring extraordinary sensations because life is governed by biology and not high intentions.<sup>161</sup>

Some more edifying elements of Dorian's personality are introduced when, in chapter eighteen, he experiences guilt, and is portrayed as having a conscience as well as an artistic imagination. In the same chapter, he joins in a hunt and requests that a hare be saved. This is supported by some comments he makes about beauty in the new chapter twenty. However, Dorian puts Wotton's sensual theories fully into practice (for example, he engages in drug induced relationships with several others) and many people are destroyed, and he discovers the portrait continues to deteriorate. Here, Wilde expresses the truth of the reverse of one key idea in "The Soul of Man". Early in the essay, Wilde posits that the whole of society can benefit from the self-realisation of artists like Keats and Flaubert. In the novel's added material he shows how others are destroyed by Dorian's unrealised behaviour. There is a connection between Henry Wotton's fear of death, expressed in chapter nineteen, and Dorian's realisation in the next chapter that his problems arise from his desire to keep his youth and beauty. Wotton's fear and Dorian's desire are against Wilde's aesthetic which emphasises moving from the sense experience of beauty. The circumstances of Dorian's death at the end – attempting to destroy the portrait with a knife, Dorian actually kills himself – fictionally expresses Wilde's aesthetic outlined at the end of "The Decay" where art is portrayed as higher than life.

This chapter has surveyed the development of Wilde's fiction, from short stories to novel, and argues that his longer fiction continues his aesthetic development. One core argument of the chapter is that Wilde, especially in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, finally separates from Pater when he argues that the sensual experience is not the ultimate aim of his aestheticism. This chapter also argues that the shared themes, including the pederastic and aesthetic discourses, in *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* and *Dorian Gray*, are both fruitful for the development of art, ideas and culture. Links are made between Wilde's writing of *Dorian Gray* and prose writing which he was working on simultaneously with the later versions of the novel: these writings are discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>161</sup> Wotton tells Dorian "life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams" (Holland 2003, 155).

## Chapter Six

### The Un-Misrecognised Aesthetic

The previous chapter dealt with Wilde's aesthetic as he outlined it in *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was argued in particular that Wilde's only novel presented a fully developed aesthetic philosophy quite as much as a homo-social critique. The chapter also argued that the novel clearly differentiated Wilde's aesthetic from Pater's impressionistic philosophy. The present chapter looks at Wilde's prose work and dialogues written around the time of his novel and collected in his 1891 *Intentions*. It argues that these works are close to Wilde's mature fiction in their form, style and content. In highlighting the similarities across the fictional and prose works it argues that these works explored Wilde's aesthetic philosophy in parallel with *Dorian Gray*, in particular, and raised it to another level. In doing so these works clearly state the potential outcomes for society and the individual that are implied in his aesthetic theory.

As well as responding to criticism of his novel, the changes Wilde made to *Dorian Gray* allowed him to include the social and aesthetic ideas he was simultaneously working on in his prose work. In fact from his editorship of *The Woman's World*, beginning in 1887, to the publication of his prose in 1891 Wilde was addressing common aesthetic and social themes across the genres. While the issue of social realism in literature is addressed similarly in *The Woman's World* reviews and "The Decay of Lying", aristocratic philanthropy and attitudes to poverty in London's East End are addressed in additional chapters to *Dorian Gray* and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism". From *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* to "The Soul of Man" the relationship between art and morality remained a core issue. Within years of his death it was acknowledged that he endeavoured to engage with the struggle of consciousness and social ideas despite his apparent embrace of art-for-art's-sake. While Woodcock (1949) observes that "The Soul of Man" is Wilde's only social tract, he does emphasise that the radical social thought in Wilde's work is the realisation and practice of individualism, which "became his single rule of conduct and determined his philosophy" (239). It was a philosophy that placed contemplation and aesthetic inaction above the accepted contemporary utilitarianism.

Castle (2013) makes the argument that during his tour of America Wilde consciously used newspaper interviews to correct any misrecognitions of himself and his ideas caused by his lecture performances and outrageous modes of self-expression. Castle argued that Wilde was unconcerned with his aesthete's mask during his lectures, knowing that he could always make

his real argument following the performance because he knew that “what matters is the time between repetitions of the mask as it is put on, between error and correction, between events and accounts of them, between interlocutors in an interview, between performers and audiences” (111). Wilde’s responses to critics of his novel can also be seen in this way as his use of the press to redress his readers’ misrecognitions of his elaborate aesthetic argument. The two last dialogues and essay, written after the original version of *Dorian Gray*, continue this redress. While “The Critic as Artist” in particular resumes the aesthetic dialogue, “The Soul of Man” broadens Wilde’s argument in the social sphere. Where the novel focused on the experience of beauty in art, “The Critic” furthers the discussion by emphasising the critical contemplation of beauty, and “The Soul of Man” indicates the potential outcomes for the individual and society of engaging more consciously with art.

The ideas and topics discussed in Wilde’s work published from 1889 to 1891 and the similarity of style are continuous and almost seamless. In fact it could be argued that they might be interchangeable between genres. For example, his dialogues, amended to include storylines, could easily become pieces of Wildean fiction, and dialogues or straight prose works could easily be abstracted from narrative. The dialogue settings and discussion topics in his novel easily match those of “The Critic”, his most famous dialogue in *Intentions*. His shorter fiction, *Mr W. H.*, and his other dialogue, “The Decay of Lying”, might also be prose pieces along the lines of “Pen, Pencil and Poison”. This is because they share central ideas, because the middle chapters of *Mr W. H.* contain so much analytical prose, and because there is very little real dialogue in “The Decay”, so it is easy to forget that both pieces contain two and more protagonists. It is possible to conclude, then, that the ideas Wilde wrote about were of as much interest to him at this time than the forms he wrote in.

This has implications for interpretations of Wilde’s espousal of the total autonomy and independence of art, or how he is frequently seen as championing art-for-art’s-sake or art merely as a form of disconnected or disinterested contemplation. Small (1991), for example, implies that the reduction of art from the mid-century to the 1870s from embodiments of moral knowledge to expressions of merely private aesthetic matters incorporates Wilde’s aesthetic. Varty (1998) cites Henry Wotton’s comment that art’s complete annihilation of the desire to act defines Kantian disinterestedness. These interpretations of Wilde are anticipated by early views of Wilde’s separation of art from life. Two comments cited in Beckson (1970) support the contemporary view that Wilde’s aesthetic represented the pure form of art-for-art’s-sake. An anonymous review of his poems in the *Spectator* suggests that he “abjures the world he is

so dissatisfied with, and devotes himself to what he calls the world of art” (43). And Reppelier, reviewing “The Decay” for the *North American Review* in 1892, claims that in the essay he presents a “great truth . . . the absolute independence of art” (104). Bashford’s (1978) description of Wilde as a subjectivist critic supports this, but shifts the perspective away from pure art-for-art discourse. He asserts that Wilde’s work is an extreme subjectivist theory of criticism where “form in art must always be understood in relation to the individual who perceives or creates that form” (218). Bashford (1977), focusing on the dialogues, had argued Wilde’s principle could not be understood without synthesising energy and form, and his theory “governing perception and creation is the reflexive relation” between them (183). Even when Bashford (2011) discusses Wilde’s work as dialectic, it is presented as rhetorical and reflexive in form when he argues “the perspective adopted in his works is typically *subjectivist*” (117).

Robbins (2011) is particularly minimising. She reduces Wilde’s critical work by suggesting that the dialectic mode merely presents a double standard or even two-faced vision of the world, allowing Wilde to sway whichever way it suits him. She compounds this by concluding, contrary to Wilde, that ethics and aesthetics bear no relation to each other and questions his endeavour when she claims that “criticism and commitment do not belong in the same sentence” (73). Others have acknowledged the transformational aspect of Wilde’s theory, expressed predominantly in *Intentions*, but their endeavour to eschew the apolitical can imply an unrealisable utopian ideal. Gagnier (1997) sees Wilde as a political economist of art, whose goal was not to objectify art but to provide the conditions to live with the freedom of art. But ultimately she sees his aesthetic theory as typically consisting of “thought experiments on the social limits of this aesthetic autonomy” (31). Danson (1997) talks about the almost supernatural traits which he claims Wilde attributes to the spectator especially in “The Critic as Artist”). He says the essay recreates “the sublime critic who looks out upon the world and knows its secrets and becomes divine” (129). Some critics who move Wilde further away from the purely apolitical still risk reducing his philosophy to the merely utopian. Prewitt Brown (1997) is more explicit about art’s social and cultural engagement when she argues that Wilde’s criticism “is a form of aesthetic contemplation with worldly benefits” and that “Wilde’s first achievement was to retrieve Pater’s ‘aesthetic moment’ from exclusive absorption in the world of sensation” (4). Smith and Helfand (1989) describe Wilde’s work as dialectical, and, speaking of “The Truth of Mask” state it “is not an affirmation of art for art’s sake but Wilde’s Hegelian description of the spirit, or *Geist*, of art” (55). But both these analyses imply the unrealisable potential of his aesthetic by emphasising the ancient Greek notions in Wilde’s criticism.

By contrast, this thesis reasons that Wilde's emphasis in his later prose on the individual and society moves his theory away from the purely subjective aesthetic. "The Critic" and "The Soul of Man" show Wilde's strong commitment to forging relations, in particular between the ethical limitations of the age and the transformations inspired by art. Despite their potential limitations, works such as those cited above have significantly endorsed Wilde's work as a philosophical theory of the relation between art, society and culture. This is particularly true of Smith and Helfand (1989) and Prewitt Brown (1997), who have, in Smith's (2004) words, shown for readers of Wilde that

his reasons for writing...show that he wrote out of an intellectual commitment to philosophical and scientific positions, social convictions, and ethical and aesthetic beliefs which developed over the course of his education and career as a writer and which are expressed in many, if not most, of the texts in his oeuvre. (164)

Yet the way in which his philosophical theory was constructed conspires with readings that emphasise the unrealisable utopia. For Wilde, the real Truth or the life not lived cannot be experienced in his age but, as he outlines in "The Decay", it can be conceived in the imagination. His works, especially in *Intentions* show that he wanted to change the world known by the middle classes and to achieve this he advocated inaction in the age when utilitarianism was thought to be the only way to be. Ryles (1961) writes about the cult of inaction in the nineteenth century and implies that Arnold, Pater and Wilde had a desire for escape from the ugliness and sordidness of Victorian life.<sup>162</sup> However, Wilde's unique philosophy of inaction, highlighted in "The Critic" and "The Soul of Man", does not stop at the imagination. Because his aesthetic theory positions criticism higher than creation, art's engagement with society is crucial to his creed of inaction. As Murray (1971) argues, by the time Wilde wrote his mature works he had amalgamated so many influences and was mature enough of mind that he could not have complete disdain even for the Victorian world.<sup>163</sup> She

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<sup>162</sup> Ryles (1961) describes inactivity as a retreat from demands "to choose between compromise with and rejection of modern life" by divorcing "as completely as possible from contemporary life and turning inwards to a world of the mind" (59).

<sup>163</sup> McCormack (2007) says its also important to note Wilde's attempts at this time to be accepted as a celebrity in high society "thus proving himself a contrarian even within the parameters of his own public persona" (3).

says the contempt of Wilde (and Baudelaire, for example) “is almost always partial and selective, and a grand, large-scale version of the artist’s dislike of the Bourgeois” (13).

Wilde’s writing at this stage shows that he found Victorian society overwhelmingly moral rather than aesthetic or philosophical as he would have preferred. It shows he attacked consensual forms of authority, whether elected government, public opinion or powerful journalism that blocked and interfered with the life of the individual. But the attack had more to do with a desire to raise to consciousness the un-lived life, first addressed in his early lectures, that these powerful nineteenth-century forces prohibited. In more recent times, Wilde’s later writing has been credited with containing convincing and plausible philosophical arguments. Watson (1984) says, for example, “the spirit of ‘The Critic as Artist’ is one with Plato’s and Aristotle’s criticism and no less earnest than Arnold’s” (232). And Buckler (1990) laments Wilde’s downfall, as it destroyed him at a crucial moment in his development when he “might have added numerous idiosyncratic classics to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century English literature” (321). From presenting life under the condition of art in “The Truth of Masks” to his socialist ideal of individualism in “The Soul of Man” Wilde outlines a philosophy that wants to engage with life rather than reject it, and believes the optimal aesthetic and cultural conditions would produce a realisable utopia.

### **Converting Facts into Effect**

The year 1891 was one of Wilde’s most productive. His early play, *The Duchess of Padua*, was finally produced in New York and his short stories, one collection of children’s stories, the full version of *Dorian Gray*, *Intentions* and “The Soul of Man” were also published. At the end of the year he wrote his play *Salome* in Paris. The evolution of Wilde’s aesthetic becomes clear in an analysis of his work at this time, especially of *Intentions* and “The Soul of Man”. In these Wilde shows his monologues to be standard forms of Victorian critical essays and his dialogues again prove the aesthetic nature of his discourse. His earlier work presents a general case for the central role of beauty and art, while his later writing becomes more specific about the aesthetic temperament and critical spirit. Wilde’s lectures and dramas in the early 1880s plead the cause and place of art in revolution and in utilitarian society. And despite his ultimate warnings about a fixation with beauty in “Dorian Gray” he continues to insist on the crucial role of beauty in the everyday in *Intentions*. “The Canterbury Ghost” and “The Sphinx Without a Secret”, for example, emphasised the aesthetic temperament above the contemporary rational and material attitude. However, from “The Truth of Masks” to “The Soul of Man” it is possible

to trace a more finely tuned aesthetic and social thought. From archaeological and costume accuracy on the stage to the perfect personality in *Intentions*, Wilde's aesthetic discourse explores the place of and the relations between beauty, the artist, the critic and the audience in art. In "The Truth" the central character is the artist; in "The Critic" six years later it is the critic who is most crucial.<sup>164</sup> Ultimately "The Soul of Man" is very clear about the need for the aesthetic temperament in the development of individualism.

It is possible to understand why some critics read inconsistency in Wilde's more serious writings. Holland (2003), for example, describes *Intentions* as uneven and says that "The Truth" was merely a make-weight inclusion, the essay's amendments are merely an afterthought and the title change does not deliver what it promises. But as a record of the development of his aesthetic the works collected in *Intentions* exemplify Wilde's claim in "The Soul of Man" that the end-point of one stage of development ultimately becomes the starting point for the next. It is for this reason many see inconsistency and contradiction in his philosophy. Holland (2003) cites a large part of the final amended paragraph of "The Truth" as a potential irony in his prose work and wonders if it is possible to trust the printed opinions of a man who says he does not agree with his own opinion. But for modern readers, Wilde's dialogues and prose in *Intentions*,<sup>165</sup> with "The Soul of Man" added on, make it possible to read his prose works as correcting potential misrecognition by his readers. Taken as a whole, the collection shows Wilde's thought to be consistent and that, rather than showing oscillation, he debated from a particular philosophical base.

Wilde's writing on the notion of realism, as just one example of potential misrecognition, develops significantly between the collected works. It is more accurate to state that the way Wilde explains his thought on the topic comes closer to his aesthetic with each new work. "The Truth of Masks" begins the discussion by making a case for the use of authentic stage design and costume in contemporary productions of Shakespeare's plays. In the essay Wilde suggests that the move towards accurate scenery and costume is one of the most important contemporary movements on the modern stage. He argues early in the piece against critics and specific

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<sup>164</sup> In "The Truth of Masks", for example, he says that only art and the artist can interpret and explain archaeology, while in "The Critic as Artist" only the correct critical spirit can interpret and explain art and the artist.

<sup>165</sup> "The Truth" was first published in May 1885 in *The Nineteenth Century* as "Shakespeare and Stage Costume" and included with amendments in *Intentions*. "The Decay" and "Pen, Pencil and Poison" were both published in January 1889; "The Decay" was published in *The Nineteenth Century* and *Pen* was published in *The Fortnightly Review*. And both parts of "The Critic" were first published in July and September 1890 in *The Nineteenth Century* as "The True Function and Value of Criticism".

historians who suggest it is impossible for nineteenth-century productions of Elizabethan plays to portray the era factually. When this piece is read separately from his anti-realism stance outlined in the other works, it is easy to interpret Wilde as promoting stage realism and imitation of life. He even appears at one point to be advocating art's return to life, an idea completely contrary to "The Decay".

He suggests the use of authentic stage costumes and archaeologically correct scenery is legitimate and beautiful, and as such it "is also the return of art to life" (Holland 2003, 1162). But when "The Truth's" discourse is seen in light of the other writings it is possible to interpret the earlier essay more reliably and realise Wilde is again arguing that art points to the un-lived life, as he suggested in his early lectures and in comments regarding his earlier dramas. He rebuts a claim by contemporary historians that Shakespeare was more interested in acting than costume. In a remark reminiscent of his letter regarding the intellectual basis for the sympathy of the audience in *The Duchess of Padua* he notes: "nobody from the mere details of apparel and adornment has ever drawn such irony of contrast, such immediate and tragic effect, such pity and pathos, as Shakespeare himself" (1157-8).

His statement then in "The Truth" that Truth is the real aesthetic value addresses the ultimate dual purpose for accuracy on the stage: the pleasure of beauty and dramatic effect. The essay was written in an age captivated by science and art. When he says only art can make archaeology beautiful he is alluding to imaginative reality in art rather than unimaginative realism. His father's imaginative antiquarian influence is made clear when Wilde says the critical Renaissance attitude is necessary to "touch the dry dust of antiquity into the very breath and beauty of life" (1162). And returning again to the historical sense essential for accuracy on the stage, he says the value of archaeology depends on how it is used, "and only the artist can use it. We look to the archaeologist for the materials and to the artist for the method" (1165). Wilde indicates that audiences were becoming more susceptible to the effect of beauty, even if they were not familiar with precise archaeological data. The stage presents the illusion of the real and the wonder of the unreal. Stage beauty in the form of accuracy is the conversion of facts into effect and while the setting is subordinate to the play's motive it does not mean a disregard for the truth. In this he is less circumspect than he had earlier been to Marie Prescott when he played down the political significance of *Vera: or The Nihilists* in favour of the love lives of protagonists.

In “The Truth” Wilde places art above life by discussing the notion of imaginative reality which he details later in *Intentions*. Alluding again to the necessary historical sense of the critical spirit he says archaeologically correct costumes and stage design help create an illusion that shows us “life under the conditions of art, not art in the forms of life” (Holland 2003, 1170). Only archaeological accuracy must be under artistic influence or there will merely be an artificial sense: he is here highlighting the Truth achieved by using archaeology as a method of artistic illusion. Though at first appearing to be out of place with the rest of *Intentions*, “The Truth” essay is the foundation for one of Wilde’s main aesthetic ideas. This work achieves the balance, missing from his earlier explanations, between the play’s motive and beautiful accuracy, and the distinction between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality. By contributing to the illusion, beautiful accurate costume creates the artistic temperament for the intellectual basis of affect. The imaginative value of archaeological and scientific facts to art is imaginative realism. He has hope that future critics will be more highly qualified to encourage a movement that “has the illusion of truth for its method, and the illusion of beauty for its result” (1173).

As if sensing future critical misrecognition Wilde announces with the amended ending to “The Truth of Masks” his disagreement with some of the ideas he has written about. More importantly for his developing attitude he leaves open the door when he says Truth in art is an argument whose opposite is also true. On the surface this seems to indicate he believes in the argument for realism in art thereby undermining his own contention in “The Truth” and future writings. But especially in light of the rest of *Intentions* this amendment is no mere afterthought. The whole of *Intentions* explains art’s contradiction as readers are helped more fully to apprehend Platonic theories and realise Hegel’s dialectic through art criticism. As Smith and Helfand (1989) argue, “The Truth” should “be understood as a dialectical and critical artwork, an illusion which embodies opposing truths” (58). Converting facts to effect as Wilde explains in this essay encourages audiences to become cognisant of the life that is not lived and conscious of his premise that the higher truths “are the truths of masks” (1173).

## Higher Truths

Wilde restates his notion of life's important truths residing in the masks of art in two other works in *Intentions*. In some of his earlier work he had suggested the distinction between ethics and art. In the Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he wrote that art is neither moral nor immoral; in "Pen Pencil and Poison" and "The Decay of Lying" Wilde examines art's ethical and moral relation more directly. In both these pieces, he contends that seeing the illusion and wonder of art's mask helps us judge people, events and life with a higher ethic. Because of beauty the mask tells us more about life's potential because facts in art can give the misleading impression that we are all the same. He prefers, for example, to see the serial-killer artist, T. G. Wainewright, in the beauty of his art-literature than as the criminal. Wainewright chose whimsical pseudonyms for his articles which, Wilde says, hid his seriousness or revealed his levity. "A mask tells us more than a face. These disguises intensified his personality" he concluded (1093). The mask is also of interest to Wilde's aesthetic in "The Decay"<sup>166</sup> where he says that all people in society are made the same and novelists should at least pretend they never met their creations. He emphasises his belief that the beauty of art's facades has more effect than the social realism contemporary authors constructed in their works. His interest in the mask of high society is explored to great comic effect in the society comedies written after *Intentions*.

"The Decay of Lying" can be read as an attack on contemporary moral judgement of Wilde himself. When he refers to Wainewright's personality again later in the piece it is to show the limitation of English law in its ability to deal ethically with criminals. (Descriptions of the murderer's experiences of prison, with other prisoners, and of exile almost anticipate the author's own experiences years later.) He recognises that they shared the same attitude about beautiful surroundings and the dislike of suffering, and he remarks that Wainewright anticipated the philistinism of the late nineteenth-century. One description reads: "This young dandy sought to be somebody, rather than do something. He recognised that Life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it" (1095).

Wilde also states that Wainewright loved green, which is a sign of a subtle artistic temperament and denotes a laxity and decadence of morals in nations. But the argument for aestheticism above ethics is the core value of the essay and this is consistent with his later writing. As well

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<sup>166</sup> "In point of fact what is interesting about people in good society" he says in "The Decay", "is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask" (1075).

as favouring the power of the mask in his works, in “Pen, Pencil and Poison” Wilde restates his artistic perception of archaeology when he says there is no need for historical accuracy in domestic decoration. This is part of the eclectic aesthetic or true harmony of beautiful things. From Wilde’s earliest work aesthetic eclecticism is a core feature as beauty across the arts has a consistent meaning. His argument from his lectures onwards is that exposure to the best art unconsciously guides the aesthetic temperament merely through frequent contact with it.

This is not enough to achieve the perfect personality he outlines in his final essay. Wilde credits Wainewright with being one of the first to recognise the universalism of art’s beauty. But he also praises him for recognising that frequent contact with beauty is just a first step in aesthetic criticism as such exposure helps the spectator “to realise one’s own impressions” (1096). Paintings should not merely be what the artist sees. Along with imaginative power, works should have composition, beauty, colour and dignity of line. Consistent with Wilde’s belief in works such as *Mr W. H.* for example, a work of art can only be measured within itself and against its own consistency. Citing several examples Wilde says Wainewright turned his impressions of art into words that had the same imaginative and mental effect as the work. Translating a work as an artistic whole, he concludes, is the correct aim of the critic. This is art-literature and its purpose is to express the beauty of art within the Hellenic tradition of creating intellectual sympathy.<sup>167</sup>

The subtitle to “Pen, Pencil and Poison,” “A Study in Green,” indicates Wilde’s intention in the essay is to subvert conventional ethical discourse. As well as attributing to Wainewright the ‘green’ characteristic of laxity of morals the essay makes it clear that Wilde privileges art above contemporary life and ethics. One statement in the essay brings together art’s eclecticism and the value that Wilde perceives it has for society. He claims Wainewright’s “conception of making a prose poem out of paint is excellent. Much of the best modern literature springs from the same aim. In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other” (1100). This is confirmed when Wilde concludes the essay with the statement: “to be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact” (1107). As he saw it, the contemporary moral ethic hindered life so that only the imaginative realism of the arts could be relied upon for inspiration. This idea is explored by Wilde in more detail in “The Decay”. But in the “Pen, Pencil and Poison”, he challenges his contemporaries to see the cultural

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<sup>167</sup> It is interesting to note Wilde praises Ruskin and Browning in this essay as two perfect exponents of this type of nineteenth century art- literature; in “The Critic” Pater’s description of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* is the exemplar.

contribution even murderers can make to society and implies that it is society that creates the criminal.

The value of the criminal personality is again taken up in “The Critic as Artist”. Wilde lists Wainwright’s crimes which include forgery and murder and says these improved his style. He also makes a statement about the reliance on sin for personality and the cultivation of consciousness, which is repeated in “The Critic” where he says the only sin is stupidity. In “Pen, Pencil and Poison” he compares Wainwright’s portraits to a murderer in one of Zola’s novels who included the face of his victim in his art and asserts “one can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin” (1106). A similar line is used in *Dorian Gray* and there is also reference here to the reversed impact of Dorian’s behaviour on his own portrait. Wilde anticipates the approach he would have his own work measured by when he suggests the correct historical sense, devoid of moral judgement, should be used when measuring the value of the artist and critic. Aesthetics are higher than ethics and “the fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose” (1106).

### **The Importance of Ernest and Cyril**

In the same month that “Pen, Pencil and Poison” was published, Wilde also published “The Decay of Lying” the first of his directive dialogues. The later “Critic as Artist” is more Platonic, as the characters argue their points more as equals, and changing the opinion of the antagonist can be read as being more successful. The Platonic description is used here to refer not just to the form Wilde used, but also the thoughtful and directive guiding purpose he endeavoured to achieve in his dialogues and other works. Bashford (2011) indicates the importance of these two dialogues when he says an analysis of them “suggests a way of understanding Wilde’s literary production as a whole” (114). *Dorian Gray*, with its large tracts of dialogue, is also considered in the same way. In “The Critic” Wilde explains the power of the dialogue mode, and in the process clearly refers to his own works. Describing it as a wonderful literary form he lists its use from ancient Greece to the nineteenth century. He also gives his reason for using it when he says the dialogue form will always have an attraction for philosophers and thinkers. By the means of this rhetorical mode, Wilde argues, the critical thinker, like the artist, can exhibit an idea “from each point of view, and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things” (1143). From the progress of the central theme to peripheral thoughts the dialogue form more completely illuminates an idea as it can include afterthought and suggest the allure of

indefinite or open-ended possibility.<sup>168</sup> It is clear that Wilde's dialogic form was influenced by his experience of writing *Dorian Gray* and would influence his imminent move back into the theatre. The dialogue in "The Critic" is more substantial than in "The Decay" and the scene is quite similar to those of the novel. There are also very subtle signs of intimacy between the characters in the second dialogue that are absent from the first.<sup>169</sup> But the main difference between the two dialogues concerns the topics discussed. The first piece presents his aesthetic against the realism of some contemporary literature and the second addresses the role of the critical faculty in art: one focuses on principles of art creation while the other focuses on art criticism.

Making clear his intention to be directive in using the dialogue form, Wilde adds a second subtitle to "The Decay of Lying: An Observation: A Dialogue". But this first dialogue is more monologic, with the input of Cyril, the antagonist, acting as a prompt than a serious challenge to Vivian's exposition of Wilde's aesthetic principles. In this sense Cyril is comfortably converted to an idea, much like Dorian Gray, who only challenges Wotton late in the novel. However, Gilbert in "The Critic" is like Hallward who was a serious antagonist right up to his death. With the experience of *Dorian Gray* between his two dialogues Wilde had learned the power of Platonic dialogue and the experience of his novel also improved the technical skill in this mode. (Following his serious prose and dialogues it is clear Wilde went on to develop the comedic twist in the form with his society plays). Gadamer (1980) argues that the Platonic dialogue provides a doctrine of ideas which is always relevant to the present. He says, for example, that in Socrates Plato met a person who "could steadfastly hold to what he viewed was right – unerringly, unconditionally, and in self-reliant independence from all external influences" (3). Wilde's main protagonists in his dialogues address issues that were particularly relevant to contemporary times. They also steadfastly hold their views, much like and on behalf of Wilde, with self-reliant independence.

Despite the characters being named after his two sons, there is no real warmth between Cyril and Vivian in "The Decay" and the way Wilde achieves, or perhaps excuses, Cyril's easy conversion is to have Vivian read an article he has written. Titled "The Decay of Lying: A Protest", Vivian reads several long tracts which makes the dialogue appear as prose and it forces Cyril to ask for clarification rather than challenge ideas. One interesting point is that

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<sup>168</sup> This last point is crucial to Wilde's philosophy of art and will be discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>169</sup> It will be argued later that the more combative style of "The Critic" represents a more substantive debate between Wilde's and Pater's aesthetics which teases out some subtle differences not addressed in the novel.

Wilde subtitles his work “An Observation” while Vivian calls his article “A Protest”. But read within the context of *Intentions*, it becomes clear that Wilde’s work is no simple reflection or commentary on realism in contemporary art. His remonstrance is shown from the beginning, when Vivian says the more he understands beauty in art, the less he can rely on life and nature to develop critical thought. Ultimately contemporary literary realism expresses life in unsophisticated and unfinished terms which leaves it unconscious. Wilde had argued that all literature should amount to the prose poetry of Wainwright’s art-literature, and this dialogue argues that the contemporary focus on realism neglects this quality in literature.

Characters and their lives should be the artist’s creations, otherwise they are not works of art, and, according to Wilde, only contribute to the worship of facts. Modern literature merely amounts to a boast by an author to having met protagonists in real life. He cites Zola, Stevenson, Caine and James as examples of writers with imagination to whom literature is now a duty. He compares their work to Balzac, Browning and Meredith who focus on the mask and not what lies beneath. He specifically mentions Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and suggests it might have been published in the medical journal *The Lancet*. (Interestingly, Wilde does not surreptitiously compare Dr Jekyll’s transformations with Dorian Gray’s portrait, perhaps taking Pater’s review of his work to confirm his differentiation between imaginative reality and unimaginative realism.<sup>170</sup>) Imaginative reality is the creation of life, while the unimaginative modern form of contemporary literature is imitative and vulgarising. On this point Wilde, through Vivian, becomes angry and exclaims: “we are a degraded race, and have sold our birthright for a mess of facts” (1077). His main concern in “The Decay” relates to contemporary art, especially literature, copying life as this perpetuates an unself-conscious culture.

It is possible to view Wilde’s aestheticism as condescending when he says people who find their lives interesting believe art should also be fascinated with them. Wilde also says that those who write about actual life merely seem to chronicle such lives. These he says belong to the English “school of novelists for whom the sun always rises in the East-End” (1074-5). But he counters the notion of condescension when he says that Art is not separate from Life, but continuously interacts with it; however, Art must always be superior to Life.<sup>171</sup> Beauty, charm, distinction and imaginative power prompt intellectual sympathy. This is the conversion of fact

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<sup>170</sup> It will be remembered Pater had implied in his review of *Dorian Gray* that transformations such as Dorian’s portrait could only have been imagined in art.

<sup>171</sup> Vivian reads his extract and says even Shakespeare lets Life echo in his work too much: “He is too fond of going directly to life, and borrowing life’s natural utterance. He forgets that when Art surrenders her imaginative medium she surrenders everything” (1079).

into effect and is only achieved by people and events that never really existed. In this way, the facts of life are kept to a bare minimum or excluded, because “the object of Art is not simple truth but complex beauty” (1079). There is a longing for the day when readers will be “bored with the common-place character of modern fiction . . . and Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land” (1090). Literature should be poetic and should exaggerate and over-emphasise, and use life as its material only, not as an artistic method, as realism does. Life’s events are described as unfinished copies of art’s perfect archetypes. Ultimately he claims nineteenth-century life is unconscious and unimaginative and is therefore the mirror and Art is the imaginative, conscious reality. Wilde’s idealism outlined in this dialogue is expressed in the aesthetic principle that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates life” (1082). Art shows the un-lived reality that can only be realised through Art.

Wilde acknowledges that realist artists dislike contemporary life on social grounds and want to highlight horrific conditions. But realism takes over to the extent that painted fog makes people catch colds and bronchitis. Chronicling social ills, as Wilde believes contemporary novels do, raises the awareness of the need to improve physical conditions only. This will merely lead to philanthropy of the kind he criticised in an additional chapter to his novel and later in *Intentions*. But art, he says in “The Decay”, improves something more spiritual which affects depth of thought. He says it is possible to improve housing, water, air and light “but these things merely produce health, they do not produce beauty. For this, Art is required” (1083). He credits Art’s complex beauty with getting people to see nature and its corruption, pointing out that fog was not noticed until poets and painters represented it. He argues that beauty in art raises consciousness: “To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence” (1086). The explanation of nineteenth-century life as a mirror rather than reality externalises the origin of effect in the context Wilde discusses. That is, the morals, ethics and temper of the age that Wilde so loathes externally control and influence contemporary life and thought. Art, on the other hand, cultivates internal capacities for higher judgements through revealing its own perfection. Rather than symbolising the age, the age should represent art. Once more Wilde makes it clear he is discussing art differently to Pater’s impressionistic approach, when he says that the highest art “gains more from a new medium or a fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any lofty passion” (1087).

Before he lists the principles of his new aesthetics at the end of the dialogue Wilde discusses an issue that caused Basil Hallward such anxiety in *Dorian Gray* and which is the basis for

Hallward's flawed aesthetic. Challenging Arnold (the same challenge is repeated in "The Critic" Wilde proclaims that an artist never sees things as they really are. Medieval and Japanese people as they are seen in artworks are the pure creations of the artist. Portraits should have more of the artist than the sitter. Basil Hallward was correct to feel there was more of himself than Dorian in the portrait, but this only made him anxious rather than complete, and he refused to exhibit it. Wilde's later discussion of the critic and the artist in *Intentions* goes some way to explaining why Hallward, as the artist and not the critic, had a flawed aesthetic. Art should not express the common-place or what the public sees, and this is the problem of modern art, according to Wilde. Art should never tell the truth: to do so would be to give too much credence to common sense which, is the lowest form of realism. He stresses that "those who do not love Beauty more than Truth never know the inmost shrine of Art" (1090). The anti-realism stance is continued and summed up in the five principles of Wilde's new aesthetic, some of which had been consistent with his thinking since his American lecture tour. Along with the notions of nature and life imitating art, the principles include: art opposing the age of its time (mentioned in his first lecture); the only age out of bounds to art is the present (addressed when Wilde discussed his early dramas); and nature and life exist to illustrate the quotations of poetry and literature. Cultivating the art of lying, Vivian concludes in "The Decay", will ultimately promote an imaginative art that is higher than contemporary unimaginative life.

### **The Critical Element**

The article from which Vivian reads in "The Decay of Lying" has been written for the fictitious journal *Retrospective Review*, which had been revived by a group he calls "the elect." Youngpin (2013) has pointed out the aesthetic nature of *The Woman's World* under Wilde's editorship, in particular the anti-realist bent of the journal. When "The Decay" was written Wilde had been working at the *Woman's World*, and it may be no coincidence that the fictitious and the real journals not only contain alliterations but were both revived by what Wilde believes to be an elect. Vivian defines the elect as "The Tired Hedonists," which seems to refer to Wilde as he finishes with Paterian aestheticism. He hints as much when Vivian tells Cyril he is not eligible to be a member because of his fondness for simple pleasures. This is Wilde's core argument against realism in "The Decay" because of its influence on the uncultured experience of art.

Late in the piece Vivian speculates that an object does not come into existence until its beauty is seen. Following this he remarks that realism in art is so strong that “where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold” (Holland 2003, 1086). Those who live life as it is portrayed in literature, or who want art’s simple pleasures, will miss complex beauty in art and will not change. At the core of the second dialogue is the notion that criticism is higher than creation, and therefore requires more cultivation. It is fitting, then, that Wilde’s second dialogue expounds on how to cultivate the aesthetic temperament. It is also interesting that, written simultaneously with the revised *Dorian Gray*, sections of “The Critic” could be read as a discussion between Pater and Wilde or at least an early and later Wilde.

But this is different from reading this dialogue as a digressive unfolding of ideas, and not as a progression of Wilde’s aesthetic. Some read the dialogues as expressing both sides of Truth which was perceived as slippery in the fin-de-siècle. Watson (1984), for example, suggests there are no opponents in either of Wilde’s dialogues, as the interlocutors are representations of both halves of Wilde’s consciousness. Watson says the dialogue form is used by Wilde “as a creative medium more so than as an instructional one” which merely “afforded Wilde the opportunity to both ‘yea’ say and ‘nay’ say within a provocative, creative context” (226-7). This thesis argues that while he did use the form creatively, the presence of a system of ideas in both Wilde’s dialogues is borne out by the consistency across his prose form. Wilde himself indicates this when he says the dialogue form “presents to us, under the fanciful guise of fiction, some fine and exquisite piece of criticism” (Holland 2003, 1143).

There is an aesthetic focus in both Wilde’s dialogues and the main protagonists are similar when they show their reluctance to carry on their arguments at various stages of the works. But Wilde reveals the influence of his novel on “The Critic as Artist” as Ernest more seriously argues against Gilbert’s idea. There are intimate moments which are absent from “The Decay of Lying”, even if the undertones are less pederastic than *Dorian Gray* because the characters appear to be the same age. The opening scene – the dialogue takes place in a library overlooking Green Park – is reminiscent of the opening to chapter four in the revised edition of the novel. The intimate friendship of the banter (they complement each other on occasion) and the intense level of discussion, combined with the way in which cigarettes are shared,<sup>172</sup> indicate closer relations between the interlocutors: joined together these qualities make this dialogue a more

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<sup>172</sup> Cyril merely asks, on two occasions, for a cigarette from Vivian in “The Decay”, while in “The Critic”, Ernest and Gilbert have a small discussion about them which includes the line from *Dorian Gray* about how cigarettes ultimately leave smokers dissatisfied.

genuine example of Wilde's comment about the dialogue form in "The Critic". The depth of Ernest's questions in "The Critic", particularly those interrogating the value of criticism, signify complexity rather than merely facilitating the other person's thoughts as Cyril does in "The Decay". In one argument about the existence of ancient Greek criticism, he seems to say more than Cyril does in the whole of "The Decay". And apart from conceding the point about Greek criticism after ten pages, it takes a total of fifteen pages of argument (pages 1108-23 in Holland 2003) before he shows real signs of influence or persuasion.

In "The Critic as Artist" Ernest is given some comic lines near the start (see his comments about music being written in the German language) which bolsters him as a genuine interlocutor. This is very significant, not just because it fulfils the purpose of the dialogue form, or because a serious argument counters Wilde's, but the strength of the counter argument reads as if it is also the author's. For example, Ernest's high praise of Greek art in the case mentioned above is art-prose of the kind Wilde had lauded in "Pen, Pencil and Poison".<sup>173</sup> And to strengthen the dialogue even further, Gilbert praises Aristotle's and Goethe's emphasis on the aesthetic experience, to the extent that the reader may think Wilde has returned to Pater.<sup>174</sup> In the same passage he seems to credit Plato with giving the world the idea of being critical of beauty. But the dialogue form allows Gilbert to tease out his differences with Ernest step by step in "The Critic", so that similarities are highlighted but distinctions are clearly explained. If his distinction from Pater in *Dorian Gray* appears intangible, in this dialogue Wilde more succinctly states his aesthetic philosophy in a way that is less open to the misrecognition that his novel was subject to. Some of this may already have been anticipated in "The Decay" but the artificial or mock dialogue could also be read as derisory criticism of some of his contemporaries. The argument against realism begins the second dialogue, but this time Wilde puts the onus on the audience, not the artist, which needs cultivating by "the elect spirits of each age, the critical and cultured spirits" (Holland 2003, 1132). He contends that public thinking is only at ease when it is not being challenged and asserts that while mediocrity is wholly consumed, intellect is wholly rejected by the public.

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<sup>173</sup> This antagonist also accepts an idea Wilde argues in "The Decay". Ernest accepts that literature takes the rough material of life and creates a world "more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world the common eyes look upon" (1124).

<sup>174</sup> In making his point about the Greeks being a nation of critics Gilbert cites Aristotle and Goethe when he asserts the sense impression of beauty is purifying and spiritualising.

This is criticism's ultimate purpose and greatest challenge in society. "The Critic as Artist" begins with Ernest's question about the value of art-criticism and his notion of the artist's independence. Ernest's initiative here also brings "The Decay" into focus as he makes the case for the artist deciding whether his work should be the actual world or created shadow world and implies the need for faith in art because "her fine spirit of choice, and delicate instinct of selection" will give momentary perfection (1110). At one point he says there is no comparison between creation and criticism – creation is higher. But Gilbert answers in a way that distinguishes between the momentary and the more conscious experience of art. His response also contradicts the subtitle to the first part of the dialogue, "With Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing". Gilbert implies a more active response to art not just by the audience but also on the part of the artist. Recalling Arnold's definition of literature as the criticism of life he says the selective instinct is the core of the critical faculty and creation cannot take place without it: "That spirit of choice, that subtle tact of omission, is really the critical faculty in one of its most characteristic moods, and no one who does not possess this critical faculty can create anything at all in art" (1118).

The critical spirit is the nineteenth century's biggest debt to the Greeks, along with their flawless system of criticism of the two supreme arts – Life and Literature. (Gilbert defines the highest arts as life and the perfect expression of life.) This brings the need for the critical faculty also into the work of the artist: evoking a point made in "The Rise of Historical Criticism" Gilbert says creative work is a deliberate choice requiring the critical spirit. Imaginative work is self-conscious, and the critical spirit and self-consciousness are one. In his attack on realism in "The Decay", Wilde listed his new aesthetic principles by which art and literature in particular should be created. In "The Critic" he posits that to know the principles of the highest art is to know the principles of all art. Wainwright's eclectic quality is repeated here, but more forcefully, in arguing the role of criticism in cultivating Individualism. Though myths, legends, poems and music appear to represent the imagination of a tribe or nation, ultimately they originate in the individual and are claimed by whole races. It is the self-conscious critical spirit that is the core quality of Individualism, which Wilde goes on to discuss in "The Soul of Man".

Art and criticism are entwined in maintaining and developing the health of a society. Wilde, through Gilbert, asserts that an age without criticism "is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all" (Holland 2003, 1119). Earlier, Ernest asked how those who cannot create can criticise an artist's work. Gilbert's response to this is an aesthetic response to a problem Wilde considered

severe in his time. The critical spirit of the kind Wilde advocates returns mystery to artwork by inventing fresh forms and new ways of seeing which demand more cultivation than the creative element. This is why it is harder to talk about something than do something, and it is also why criticism needs more considered development. Wilde commences his debate on and explanation of the importance of doing nothing and links it to the individual and to beauty. In responding to criticisms of an uncreative quality, Gilbert, on Wilde's behalf, claims that the spectator is not just experiencing art's beauty, but also criticising it. When discourse shifts from Philosophy and Truth to Beauty and Truth, art is seen to have its full and vital meaning.<sup>175</sup> The change of focus in discourse suggests a shift in intellectual activity to art criticism.

*Intentions* encapsulates Wilde's philosophy of art at this time. If "The Decay" contained Wilde's new principles of aestheticism for the artist, "The Critic" outlines the responsibility of the spectator. Ernest starts the discussion with a comment about ordinary art-criticism in autobiographies, referring to it as an observation on the artist's skill, and enquires if this is the purpose of periodicals. Gilbert gives a lengthy endorsement of Wilde's work as reviewer in his response and is scathing about modern writers.<sup>176</sup> He says that when reading reviews in periodicals where it appears that mediocrity is weighing mediocrity, it is because reviewers are "reduced to be reporters of the police-court of literature, the chroniclers of the doing of the habitual criminals of art" (1120). The critic approaches art as the artist approaches life: therefore criticism is a creation within a creation, or something even higher, because someone else has already purified life in the imaginative form.

Here Wilde introduces the idea of contemplative criticism, explaining his notion of doing nothing, which can make a thing of beauty out of ordinary art. Described as wisdom being called from its cave, contemplation is the highest form of criticism which exists for itself. It is the purest form of personal impression, having no reference to external influence. The highest criticism is a record of the soul, Gilbert says, and the critic can, through the "faculty of contemplation, produce work that will be flawless in beauty and instinct with intellectual subtlety" (1125). Contemplative criticism relies on the selective instinct, as it does not deal with the actual events of life or history, but is a record of the imaginative moods of the spectator. As such it is the only proper form of autobiography. In this part of the dialogue,

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<sup>175</sup> He considers whether Plato might be the first critic of beauty "and that by altering the name of the sphere of his speculation we shall find a new philosophy" (1116).

<sup>176</sup> Gilbert provides a possible insight into the way Wilde worked at *The Pall Mall Gazette* and *The Woman's World* when he says there is no need to drink a full cask of wine to know the quality, a small taste is enough.

Wilde reverses Arnold's stance of seeing a thing as it really is, and advances Pater's aesthetic sense experience or impression. It also anticipates the death of the artist and the myriad of interpretations of his own work when he says through Gilbert,

for when the work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say . . . Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty . . . shows us the whole fiery-coloured world. (1127)

In the prose, poetry or art-literature of Wainewright or Pater, the artwork becomes their own. Citing Pater's *Portraits*, for example, he says his mentor saw more in the *Mona Lisa* than Leonardo put there. Necessarily concentrating on the material elements, the artist may leave the form void or not complete. But critical spirits can cultivate culture through the highest criticism beyond the artist's original intent. He says the highest criticism, is soul speaking to soul, "with intellectual and emotional utterance, with lofty passion and with loftier thought, with imaginative insight, and with poetic aim" (1126).

Contemplative criticism, which is the highest form of art and criticism, sees the work as it is not. It criticises Beauty itself and it makes the critic the creator. Rather than being a momentary experience, beauty becomes universal, the whole sphere of feeling and thought. The meaning and the mystery of Beauty can be explained in the highest criticism. And this mystery relates to the ongoing effort for the realisation of the Ideal. (In "The Soul of Man" Wilde describes this as the continual search for utopia). "When the ideal is realised," he says in "The Critic"), "it is robbed of its wonder and mystery, and becomes simply a new starting-point for an ideal that is other than itself" (1129). Embedding his aestheticism in Hegel's dialectic, he explains the interaction between the sense experience of beauty and the critical imagination. Representations of the Real or definite realisations of the Ideal are respectively imitative or purely intellectual, and both must be rejected. Art only becomes complete in beauty, and can only address itself to the aesthetic sense. But it must be synthesised with emotional and imaginative responses to the work of art whose complexity becomes "a means by which a richer unity may be added to the ultimate impression itself" (1129). Realism and idealism are not completely rejected but are synthesised and subordinated to a pure impression of the work

of art as a whole. As if to emphasise that contraries in art are always true, Wilde argues that obvious, singular and ethical meanings are rejected because imaginative beauty makes all meanings true and allow no meaning to be definitive or final.

Several benefits are claimed for contemplative criticism in the dialogue. Gilbert says, for example, that it will get rid of race prejudice through a peace that springs from intellectual understanding. He says that cultivating the habit of intellectual criticism will be the starting point for a cosmopolitanism that will insist on unity. Criticism will annihilate race-prejudices and wars will be prevented because people will believe that by destroying or rejecting others they might be destroying the most important element of their own culture. Gilbert also refers to the ancient Chinese sage, Chuang Tzu, whom Wilde had recently reviewed for the *Pall Mall Gazette* where he wrote: “the perfect man does nothing beyond gazing at the universe. He adopts no absolute position” (Wilde 1919, 183).<sup>177</sup> It is the intellect that is conscious and free from the unconscious ethic promoted for the stability of society. While it is believed that the purpose of the aesthetic movement is to lead people to create, its real purpose is to make contemplation attractive to society. Gilbert again mentions the beauty-sense, a quality in each individual that “leads some to create, and others, the finer spirits as I think, to contemplate merely” (1146). Wilde, through Gilbert, is hopeful for the future development of criticism, indicating what he believes will be its growth at the end of the nineteenth century. Positioning aestheticism at the centre of social development, he cites Arnold and says criticism creates the intellectual atmosphere of the age.<sup>178</sup> Wilde asserts that ultimately, through self-consciousness and knowing the secrets of the world, aesthetic contemplation will create the perfect personality and a society built upon its relation with art.

Gilbert points to two modern examples of non-aesthetic critics who transformed religious and scientific opinions and made the nineteenth century a turning point in history. Darwin, he says, was the critic of the book of nature, while Renan was the critic of the books of God. What Wilde is arguing for is the importance of the aesthetic critic governed by the principle of beauty who finds fresh impressions in art and can cultivate high-level critical insights. The higher arts (those not didactic or purely sensual) are immoral as they do not comply with the contemporary

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<sup>177</sup> Wilde concludes the review by saying the translation of Chuang Tzu after two thousand years “is obviously premature, and may cause a great deal of pain to many thoroughly respectable and industrious persons” (Wilde 1919, 186).

<sup>178</sup> By citing and challenging Arnold several times Wilde implies this dialogue advances Arnold’s ideas. He also alludes to himself and his work as being at the centre of development and by Gilbert’s desire to state all his ideas publicly. He says “it is Criticism, as I hope to point out one day, that makes the mind a fine instrument” (1151).

ethic of action. And contemplative criticism is a key quality of the aesthetic which challenges the ethics on which society is based. It is a quality frowned on not just because it challenges but because in a society built on action it is perceived as doing nothing. Recalling Wilde's Oxford notes, Gilbert describes contemplation as the proper occupation, and asserts that aesthetic criticism gives "the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not doing but being, and not being merely, but becoming" (1139). Cultivated, self-conscious aesthetes live the true ideal as they contemplate life in the way he described earlier, and see life as it truly is and how it should be.

### **A Country called Utopia**

If Wilde's dialogues in *Intentions* are considered directive, his final prose piece is more prescriptive in tone. Having outlined an aesthetic system or method for realising the perfect personality and society, Wilde's final essay outlines how that society might appear. In "The Soul of man Under Socialism"<sup>179</sup> he discusses the qualities of the realised personality and what society can do to promote this for all. He is scathing of the emphasis on material acquisition over personal development in mainstream society, and is equally critical of authority, property and poverty, indicating they all lead to or confirm unconscious thought. Art is again a core theme, as it is still central to cultivating culture. But this piece is less art-specific than "The Truth of Masks", "Pen, Pencil and Poison" or his dialogues; "The Soul of Man" reads like the last piece of Wilde's aesthetic philosophy in prose or dialogue form, and as such it has a political manifesto that shifts the focus onto the aesthetic society. It closes the circle begun in 1879 with his student notes and essay on Greek criticism, as Wilde concludes for the moment that the fully realised individual is a representation of the new Hellenism. In this position, he integrates the critical spirit and aesthetic philosophy he has been developing since his student days with ideas garnered from his recent review of Chuang Tzu.

Wilde's second dialogue, "The Critic as Artist", and final prose piece are his most coherent and complex versions of his idea. Together they represent an articulate account of how his philosophy of art can be applied to the transformation of culture. With its focus on the spectator, "The Critic" asserts that the stage promotes emotions that do not originally belong to the audience, and this sense experience is crucial to developing the proper aesthetic temperament. Echoing comments about *The Duchess of Padua*, Wilde says that drama exercises the emotions

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<sup>179</sup> Highlighting the importance of personal realisation more than political approach, for the French edition, Wilde dropped "Under Socialism" from the title.

and initiates noble feelings through high and worthy objects and ideas. “The Soul of Man” also shows Wilde thinking of his future stage comedies as a new forum for his ideas. The only art that has not been attacked or taken control of by the public is poetry, because there is no cultural interest in it. Implying the same argument against realism in literature made in “The Decay”, Wilde believes the public exercises popular authority over the novel and drama whose treatment of life and art is affected by the meanest capacity of the uncultivated mind. Alluding to his new aesthetics in “The Decay”, he asserts that the artist must now create for half-educated people, and “suppress his individualism, forget his culture, annihilate his style, and surrender everything that is valuable in him” (1185). But comedy is different, and interesting ideas can be produced, especially in the burlesque and the farcical, as the artist still has great freedom in that genre. This could be read as expressing Wilde’s elitist attitude, but the essay presents the optimum scenario built upon his aesthetic philosophy. The cause of uncultivated contemporary thought is the education system, supported by journalism and the prevailing industrial activity. The essay posits that public opinion has been so manipulated people do not know how to think.

Although he does not mention them, his shift to comedy after this phase of writing indicates that Wilde believed philosophical prose and dialogue, like poetry, were unattractive to an uncultivated public. He did not revisit the prose form until after his humiliation and prison experience, concentrating in the intervening years on farcical comedy.<sup>180</sup> (He might have added this to the list of the forms, mentioned in “The Critic”, that the critic can draw on to express ideas.) The final essay can be read as the culmination of the ideas in *Intentions*, broadened or brought to a conclusion. Life’s imitation of art develops into a rejection of the imitation of morals; the sinner is now presented as a potential genius; and cosmopolitanism is needed for a greater understanding between members of the same society. This work has a broader appeal, as it is not limited to art, the artist or the spectator of art. Ultimately, critical thinking inspired by art reaches a conclusion: the artist is held up as the exemplar, but the ideal can be realised by all. It calls for a radical reconstruction of society, whereby realisation will not be limited to the few but will speak of “the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally” (1178).

Just as “The Critic” finishes with them, Darwin and Renan along with Keats and Flaubert open “The Soul of Man” as examples of full personalities whose realisations can partly help the rest

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<sup>180</sup> While it is a letter to Bosie, much of *De Profundis*, written near the end of his prison sentence, is similar in form and content to *Intentions* and “The Soul of Man”.

of society. Each of these writers and their cultural fields posited by Wilde in other works as beacons of his Idealism. These four are respectively described as a great man of science, a fine critical spirit, a great poet and a supreme artist. He also refers to Irving, the owner of the Lyceum theatre, and Meredith the novelist, who, Wilde asserts, through realising their own perfection as artists, and for their own pleasure, have educated many and “created in the public both taste and temperament” (1190). Wilde also uses the figure of Christ as an ultimate expression of his own desire to transform a society he experiences as limiting. Christ represents a perfection which realises more than the Greek critical spirit because He promotes the message “Be Thyself” over “Know Thyself”. Christ and the true artist believe absolutely in themselves, and completely resist society. The entire essay expresses the clash between external material utilitarianism and Wilde’s internal utopian ideal – between what people are and what they own. The contemporary emphasis on material possession has created a false Individualism and has made gain, not growth, its aim. “A man reaches his true perfection” Wilde says, “not through what he has, not even by what he does, but entirely through what he is” (1179).

The essay is anti-capitalist in essence, but socialism is dealt with early on, and Individualism quickly becomes the main focus. Private property is the prime example of external concerns blocking the rich and poor from developing personality (while one group obsesses about their wealth, the other obsesses about poverty). Wilde espouses the notion of each person sharing in the general prosperity of society, but concludes that “Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism” (1175). While a socialist government is briefly championed, Wilde’s concern is that it would economically control the people just as capitalism politically controls them. All forms of authority are equally tyrannical, according to Wilde, as they block progress and impede the development of Individualism. Modern democracy, referred to as the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people, merely confirms a nation’s unconsciousness and indicates the level to which people are “thinking other people’s thoughts, living other people’s lives . . . and never being themselves for a single moment” (1182). And being individual in all aspects is the cornerstone of the new Hellenism: Individualism imbued with the critical spirit is disruptive because it challenges “monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit and the reduction of man to the level of a machine” (1186).

As well as creating equality of resources, the type of socialism Wilde argues for would remove the necessity to work. Instead people would enjoy the cultivated leisure of contemplating art and forget the ignorance of contemporary ideas that limit Individualism. Contemplation

realises the receptive aesthetic temperament, which does not seek to dominate the work of art. Reminiscent of the faith needed to appreciate a Wainwright, Wilde makes art the master musician with the spectator as the violin. The more the spectator goes to art to receive beautiful impressions through imaginative conditions, “the more completely he can suppress his own silly views, his own foolish prejudices, his own absurd ideas of what Art should be, or should not be” (1190). Artists should be equal to scientists and philosophers who do not have results of experiments or speculative outcomes forced upon them by the public. Spectators of art should not, therefore, exercise authority over the artist. Public opinion is bad enough when it tries to control action, but becomes infamous when it controls art and thought. The receptive temperament allows the spectator to become rather than merely consume or experience art.

Wilde argues that self-development does not mean selfishness. One of the main challenges Wilde offers to modern society in this essay is the notion of selfishness as a demand for all to live by the same moral code. With obvious reference to his own lifestyle and sexuality, he says “nowadays a man is called selfish if he lives in the manner that seems to him most suitable for the full realisation of his own personality” (1194).

Evolution means perpetually moving towards life for all organisms and realising Individualism is a natural evolution towards life for people. Emphasising the soul, rather than socialism, in the essay’s title Wilde has clearly favoured the internal over external faculties in human evolution. Individualism as an internal quality is a natural evolutionary process and should not be considered selfish, because self-development is the primary goal. He previously stated that art copying life limits art: now imitation of morals limits self-development. It is not possible to conform and remain free because imitation in morals and in life is wrong. Real selfishness, according to Wilde, resides in asking others to live by the same ethics as oneself. Selfishness is also limiting because through it, people can only sympathise with another’s grief; the wider unselfishness of Individualism, however, creates cosmopolitanism, as people sympathise with another’s grief and joy equally.<sup>181</sup>

Returning to an idea that formed in his American lectures ten years earlier, Wilde is optimistic about the nineteenth-century’s position as the new Renaissance. Despite what they had to offer the individual and society, both the Greeks and fifteenth-century Renaissance were limiting:

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<sup>181</sup> Alluding to contemporary values, Wilde claims competition formed from utilitarianism and industrialisation fosters hate, but unselfish Individualism means “man will have joy in the contemplation of the joyous life of others” (1195).

the former kept development to an idea only, and the latter kept their development to art only. Contemporary Individualism, according to Wilde, will be a unity and harmony between thought, art and life. The fin-de-siècle's perfect synthesis of modern science and socialism will rid society of the physical diseases and ethical injustices that prevent most people from realising their own perfection. Modern life will be complete, he asserts, and each person will attain perfection. And he concludes: "the new Individualism will be the new Hellenism" (1197).

An artistic explanation of the Hegelian dialectic can be found in the famous stanza repeated twice in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898) when he says

And all men kill the thing they love  
By all let this be heard  
Some do it with a bitter look  
Some with a flattering word  
The coward does it with a kiss  
The brave man with a sword.

(Holland 2003, 899)

But Wilde's first artistic expression of his dialectic appears in "The Soul of Man" where he expresses it more simplistically. He also suggests inconsistency is absolutely essential, rather than being a kind of virtue. In Chapter one, it was pointed out that Hegel's dialectic means that each end-point of the process is the beginning of the next. "The Soul of Man" succinctly illustrates this when Wilde talks about his notion of utopia. In several works, including the final essay, Wilde refers to the ongoing realisation of impressions in art. This realisation is built on the critical contemplation of art's beauty, which creates new levels of consciousness. "The Truth of Masks" concludes that Hegel's system of contraries is an ongoing realisation of truth. Perpetual movement is also implied in "The Critic as Artist" as there is no final meaning to artwork. In his final essay, Wilde suggests every map should contain a country called utopia, as humanity always lands there: "And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of utopias" (1184). In the individual works in *Intentions*, Wilde can be seen to form a strong nexus between his dialectical philosophy of art and the ongoing realisation of beauty, truth and the perfect personality.

This chapter has looked at Wilde's most overtly philosophical works contained in *Intentions* and "The Soul of Man". It argues that Wilde continued his aesthetic development after *The*

*Picture of Dorian Gray* and outlined his philosophy more succinctly and with less risk of misrecognition than he had done in the novel. *Intentions* presents a number of aesthetic ideas, including the notion of the importance of masks and the use of artistic imagination in revealing higher truths. Across the individual works, Wilde expressed an aesthetic morality as an alternative to the mainstream ethic, which he believed hindered individual development. Contemplative criticism built on the Hellenic spirit is envisioned as a higher form of artistic creation. This ideal cultivates thought, culture and aesthetic temperament which will advance a cosmopolitan society of fully realised individuals. Emphasising the central role of art, Wilde's final essay outlines the political conditions under which the perfect personality might develop, and stresses his conception of the new Hellenism as an ongoing realisation of utopias.

## Conclusion

Critics who have focused on a philosophical interpretation of Wilde's work have done much to lift it out of the shadows of biography and broaden out readings that limited understandings of Wilde's art and thought. They show that his aesthetic ideas were not just witty skirmishes with Victorian conventionality, piety and conservatism: instead he is portrayed as offering an alternative, a realisable non-utopian utopia. Wilde balances the Hellenic critical spirit with modern individualism. From his eclectic religious and cultural upbringing and detailed reading of Greek criticism to his understanding of Aristotle's contemplative theory and Hegel's dialectic it is possible now to appreciate the full range of Wilde's philosophy of art. He hints that he himself understood this more after his tumultuous devastation when he writes in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" that those who live more than one life must die more than one death.

Three years after *Intentions* and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" Wilde wrote to the artist Phillip Houghton about the ethical scheme of one of his plays (probably *An Ideal Husband*). He confirms in the letter both his belief in the cultural importance of the mask in art and his reason for switching away from serious prose to social comedies:

To the world I seem, by intention on my part, a dilettante and dandy merely  
– it is not wise to show one's heart to the world – and as seriousness of  
manner is the disguise of the fool, folly in its exquisite modes of triviality  
and indifference and lack of care is the robe of the wise man. In so vulgar  
an age as this we all need masks. (586)

If he deliberately returned to the mask of the dandy portrayed in *Dorian Gray*, his dialogues, and later plays, it was not for publicity or celebrity as it had been in the early 1880s. By this time he had devised an aesthetic theory for the mask in art as the best way to raise consciousness. It is also clear that Wilde believed he could no longer articulate his philosophy in forms not appropriated by those to whom he addressed the works. He paradoxically alludes to this in several statements about "The Decay of Lying" which could be used for all of *Intentions*, "The Soul of Man" and all his fiction. To his friend Violet Vane he wrote: "it is meant to bewilder the masses by its fantastic form; *au fond*, it is of course serious" (386). To others he also wrote about the need for the appropriate aesthetic temperament in order to

understand the work.<sup>182</sup> But to Amelie Rives Chanler he indicates the reason why so few would understand his work when he says “the article is written only for artistic temperaments. The public are not allowed a chance of comprehension, so you will know what I mean by it” (388).

These show that despite the decision to change his primary artistic form Wilde was intellectually and emotionally attached to his prose and dialogue works. Having received a specially bound edition of *Intentions* from Ada Levenson in September 1894 he wrote thanking her and said “I simply love that book” (616). He also refers to his new understanding of the work in a separate telegram to Levenson and hints that it might be more morally decadent and culturally progressive than he originally thought. He says “the copy of *Intentions* is quite beautiful. It is more green than the original even, and I read it as a new work with wonder and joy” (616). He had expressed his artistic philosophy at an early stage in his writing but Wilde clarified the meaning of all his earlier works in his final dialogues and essays. As Ellmann (1987) notes, particularly of “The Critic” and “The Soul of Man”: “Wilde presented the case as fully as he could” (329).

This is not to take away from the emergent philosophical ideas of the earlier lectures, dramas and fictions; nor does it support Ellmann’s (1987) other suggestion that each new work destroys or repudiates the previous one. While Wilde’s final works are clear manifestations of an aesthetic doctrine, they would themselves ultimately have become conceptions of a final idea. As such Wilde’s overall aesthetic statement can be read as the archetype of his dialectical ideal. From “The Rise of Historical Criticism” to “The Soul of Man” an alternative code of belief evolves as one idea builds on an earlier one, and adds to the next. In this Wilde clearly grasped and adhered to the Hegelian dialectic principle. He may have argued in paradoxes against Victorian morality but his aesthetic doctrine is no whimsical contradiction of itself. This thesis has argued that Hegel’s dialectical theory is not a straight forward three-stage formula implying a complete swing to the opposite.<sup>183</sup> While it is true that Wilde’s aesthetic does not neatly fit this interpretation of Hegel, it nevertheless betrays a rigorous use of the Hegelian method. In chapter one it was pointed out that Hegel uses several propositions when outlining his theory but the principle is consistent with each proposition being a progressive moment that is

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<sup>182</sup> For example, to W. H. Pollock he wrote the public so soon vulgarise any artistic idea that one gives them that I was determined to put my new views on art, and particularly on the relations of art and history, in a form they could not understand, but that would be understood by the few (387).

<sup>183</sup> Bashford (2011), for example, says Wallace’s translation of Hegel recognises “the three stages of an Hegelian method that have passed into common culture: thesis, antithesis and synthesis” (117). He also interprets Wilde’s aestheticism as purely subjectivist which does not fit this formula.

subsumed and partially maintained in the succeeding moment. Wilde's statement, then, about the desire to move from one utopia to the next is consistent with Hegel:

Thus becoming stands before us in utter restlessness – unable however to maintain itself in this abstract restlessness: for since Being and Nothing vanish in Becoming (and this is the very notion of Becoming) the latter must vanish too. (Findlay 1975, 131)

Wilde also amalgamates Aristotle's notion of contemplation with Hegel's dialectic. Aristotle concludes that: "the more contemplation there is in one's life the happier one is" (Crisp 2000, 198). From Wilde's earliest writing he describes the philosopher's life as a contemplative one and interprets Aristotle thus: "the end of life is not action but contemplation, not doing but being" (Smith and Helfand 1989, 141). Aristotle's discussion of balanced virtues also influenced Wilde's experience of Victorian morality. The ancient philosopher advocated the evolutionary notion of advancing attitude and behaviour through developing the intellect: "if the agent acquires intellect, then his action is quite different; his state, while similar to what it was, will then be real virtue" (Crisp 2000, 117). In "The Critic as Artist" Wilde suggests altering the sphere of Greek speculation from philosophy to art in order to understand Greek criticism. His work combined Aristotle's suggested evolution through intellectual contemplation with Hellenic notions of criticism and transferred them into art. Through continuous and conscious engagement with art the individual will see the un-lived life of real virtue mentioned as far back as Wilde's first lecture. And beauty is central to seeing the higher life constantly alluded to in Wilde's oeuvre. If Plato was the first to criticise beauty in art and life for Wilde, Aristotle's characterisation of the mean must have been the first definition. For Aristotle excess and deficiency can ruin beauty while its balance is provided and preserved by the mean. Perceiving beauty then brings balance as "seeing seems at any moment to be complete, because it does not lack anything that will come to be at a later stage" (188). In *Intentions* Wilde ultimately links beauty in art and perceiving truth when he makes it clear that nothing can be really seen until its beauty is first seen and criticised as the critic discovers the unseen and invents the unimagined.

Wilde's apparently innate capacity for the unseen and unimagined has its roots in an Anglo-Irish heritage that exposed him from an early age to a dialectic between empirical authoritative thinking and a mytho-poetic quality. The influence of his parents' interest in Irish folklore and

culture is now more generally accepted by critics. But one significant outcome of the mytho-poetic influence has not been previously pointed out. This thesis posits that his command of early Irish myth-systems contributed to his fictional form and to his developing aesthetic. He first encountered the idea in Renan (1850), who described the Celtic “inward timidity which makes them believe that a feeling loses half its value if it is expressed” (8). Speranza’s (1887) writing also suggests the need to preserve wisdom in her comment about the Ollamhs or learned Celts living separately from their community to keep their knowledge sacred. Ó’hÓgáin’s (2002) substantial study of early Irish superstitions indicates the reason for this reluctance to share wisdom which, like Renan’s understanding, is due to the fear that a significant idea, “if divulged, would desert its possessor” (112). This belief appears in several of Wilde’s works as masks; at the end of “The Truth of Masks” and “The Critic as Artist” he appears hesitant about these ideas, but in *The Portrait of Mr W. H.*<sup>184</sup> sharing then losing faith in an idea is the kernel of the story. The principle and the mask are such features in his work that it leads Robbie Ross to say it was Wilde’s favourite theory.

This theory provided more than just a model for Wilde’s work. It allowed him to anticipate and address misrecognition in subsequent works. Combined with his aesthetic philosophy the belief of an idea being lost when shared also contributes to the ongoing development of the idea. It was pointed out in the last chapter that Wilde claimed that higher truths reside in the illusion of art’s mask rather than in realism. In the works cited above Wilde can be seen to turn the early Irish fear of sharing wisdom into a mask in art which becomes part of his aesthetic dialectic. The statements, for example, at the end of “The Truth” and “The Critic” are natural outcomes in this light as he must leave his own ideas open to further questioning. For the narrator and Erskine in *Mr W. H.*, the experience is a full cycle of the aesthetic dialectic. They hear a new idea (about the object of Shakespeare’s sonnets) and their initial belief equates with the sense experience of beauty. Further analyses of the idea confirm this experience for them but sharing the idea very quickly introduces a new attitude of doubt which compares to the critical spirit’s experience of beauty. Both protagonists immediately question their belief in the theory but the third stage of the cycle sees them reconverted by the strength of the belief of the other. Ultimately Erskine is actuated to reconvert the narrator to the idea by convincing him he is willing to die for it, but the narrator sees this “pathetic fallacy of martyrdom” merely as “an

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<sup>184</sup> It is important to note here that this favoured theory is also a cornerstone in the completed *La Sainte Courtisane* which he left in a Parisian cab. There is also a hint of the same theory when Basil Hallward, having completed the portrait of Dorian, rejects the idea of exhibiting it and proposes its destruction.

attempt to realise by fire what one had failed to do by faith” (349). However, the mere possession of the forged portrait of Willie Hughes induces the narrator to again conclude again that “there is really a great deal to be said for the Willies Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s Sonnets” (350).

Critics have pointed to Wilde’s fairy tales as obvious indications of the influence of his parental interest in Irish mythology. And some have also pointed to his other fiction, including themes in “The Canterville Ghost” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as having roots in this influence. This informal influence combined with Wilde’s formal education at Trinity and Oxford to produce his later philosophy of art. J. P. Mahaffy, whom Wilde described as his first and best teacher, for example, was the initial inspiration for what Wilde refers to in his Oxford notes as the Kantian knowledge of the senses which would open him to Pater’s aesthetic. Mahaffy was also instrumental, in conjunction with Wilde’s father, in setting the scene for the Hellenic notion of the artist as the interpreter of archaeology and for the conversion of facts into effect.

Wilde’s first teacher, along with J. A. Symonds, also laid the foundation for Wilde’s understanding and use of pederastic relationships essential to works such as *Dorian Gray*. Symonds also points to significant developments at Oxford which came to the fore just as Wilde commenced his studies there. Symonds amongst others credits Benjamin Jowett as the leading light and intellectual driving force behind the philosophical thought that would so influence Wilde. One crucial idea for Wilde’s aesthetic credited to Jowett was his portrayal in the Greats course of Plato as the innovator of a dialectic system that culminated in Hegel. At Oxford William Wallace rounded off and fortified the Hegelian idea for Wilde’s imaginative idealism. Wallace’s translation of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* is peppered throughout Wilde’s student notes but the evolutionary process highlighted by Wallace’s *Prolegomena* to his translation becomes the central determination of his own dialectical method.

The object of Wilde’s evolutionary aesthetic is the life that is not lived, which he first pointed to in his American lectures. From the beginning of his professional life as an artist and critic he positioned beauty in art as central to realising this goal. Early in his career he emphasised the need to be exposed to beauty in the everyday, and, he almost elevates beauty to a religion in his lectures. But from his first lectures he had already started to position beauty as a “prelude indeed to all knowledge and to all wisdom” (Wilde 1908, 64). In a similar way to the early Irish Ollamhs, artists are remote from the age, separate from the ordinary not because their work is irrelevant but because it is essential to changing ordinary life by stripping away the “mist of

familiarity” which leads to the unconscious life (Wilde 1908, 56). Wilde’s early notions of art’s indifference to the facts of life here, especially to Victorian moral life, are fully realised years later in his tirade against realism in “The Decay” and his preface to *Dorian Gray*. Early on, Wilde also mentions the social role of the critic, who should not be looking at the artist or the work of art but should focus on the public. By the time of “The Critic” and “The Soul of Man” this would also include the autobiographical aim of individualism.

Wilde’s early lectures pointed to the notion of revolutions being simply another manifestation of human evolution and as his writing style and forms of expression develop it becomes evident that he hopes a Victorian revolution will evolve from his art. Out of *The Duchess of Padua* and *Vera: or The Nihilists*, for example, he wants to develop an intellectual understanding of the causes of contemporary social ills such as poverty and inequality that will lead to change. All through his later fictional artwork, too, Wilde can be read as attempting to affect his audience with an individualised living sympathy which will promote an escape from the tyranny of the modern soul.<sup>185</sup> To stand against this tyranny, to be the oasis of unreasonableness in the desert of practical common-sense, is the role accorded to Lady Alroy in “The Sphinx Without a Secret” and Virginia in “The Canterville Ghost”. Wilde’s fairytales, written not for children but for the childlike, continue his promotion of evolution as revolution but they are more definite attempts to mirror modern life, he claims, in a form more remote from reality. The remote form allows Wilde’s aesthetic principles to sit side by side with issues of property ownership, growing social inequality and the perversion of contemporary morality to be explored in “The Happy Prince”, “The Selfish Giant” and “The Young King”. The tyranny of the modern soul outlined by Wilde in his earlier lectures is portrayed as blocking real engagement with art in his fairytales. “The Birthday of the Infanta” and “The Remarkable Rocket”, for example, respectively propose that people should always stay the same and refrain from engaging with beauty in art. There is also an utter disconnection between contemporary ethics expressed by Wilde in “The Fisherman and His Soul”. But in the end he concludes the story with showing the good that comes from life encountering art. “The Star Child”, written at the same time as “The Soul of Man”, also highlights the good by stating that when beauty reigns there is only justice, peace and kindness in the land.

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<sup>185</sup> Obvious expressions of this modernism are Mr B. Otis in “The Canterville Ghost”, Lord Murchison in “The Sphinx Without a Secret” and Hughie Erskine in “The Model Millionaire”.

Having proven to himself his ability to articulate anaesthetic philosophy in a fictional form Wilde wrote two more ambitious pieces in which he also explained homosocial themes. In both *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde argues, in Campbell's (2013) words, that "masculine homoerotic relationships produce cultural change" and new philosophies "are produced by masculine inspiration" (174-5). Alongside this theme Wilde advances the aesthetic to a position higher than ethics. All art, he concludes in *Mr W. H.* for example, is an attempt to realise one's personality. This includes forgeries used to try to authenticate a historical fact and to censure an artist for forgery confuses an ethical with an aesthetical problem. Faith in a literary theory is higher than belief in provable knowledge but when artistic truth becomes fact Wilde, building on the ancient Irish superstition, can no longer, like his protagonists, have a stake in it. But losing faith in an idea in the context of Wilde's aesthetic allows him to further his exploration of the idea in the hope of advancing it.

The homoerotic is more overtly treated as a direct relationship between the characters in *Dorian Gray* and this work was read more than any other during Wilde's trials. This theme is still emphasised including in main biographers such as Ellmann (1987) and Frankel's (2012) reading of the original transcript of the novel. But there is also compelling evidence of Wilde articulating in the novel a Hellenistic aesthetic philosophy that is separate from, and an advancement on, Pater's hedonism. The attitudes of both Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray are clearly drawn from Pater's "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) and *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (1885), while those of Basil Hallward are Wilde's (and it is Hallward that Wilde identifies with). Both Pater and Wilde challenged Victorian morality but *Dorian Gray* shows Wilde significantly diverging from his mentor. Pater's approach advocates in *Marius* for pleasure to "become the ideal of the 'hedonistic' ideal" (Pater 1898, 114). Wotton's cry for Dorian to continually search for new sensations in Wilde's only novel, however, obviously points to Pater's aesthetic but the horrific outcome of this mode of life emphasises his split from it. While Wotton and Dorian have been likened to Wilde it is clear both characters misrecognise the essentials of his aesthetic. This is emphasised by Dorian's life and by Wotton's aphorisms, including when he says to Basil "you have an intellectual expression, and all that. But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins" (Frankel 2012, 59).

Contemporary readings of the homoerotic energy in the novel risk missing the point about Wilde's declared separation from Pater. Beauty is central for both men of letters but where Pater emphasises the hedonistic sense experience of beauty Wilde accentuates the Hegelian

dialectic between beauty and the intellect. The expanded version of the novel, written simultaneously with some of his prose work, afforded Wilde the opportunity to develop his characters and address the misrecognition, betrayed in the press. Wotton and Dorian in particular are more compassionate and the moral character of the aesthetic is more obvious. As well as expanding the aesthetic idea, rewriting the novel also provided Wilde with the chance to introduce the broader social and cultural ideas he was exploring in his dialogues and essays. But in these Wilde leaves less room for misrecognition. Outlined in these works are his clearest statements about the relation between life and art, with art clearly established in the superior position from the first work onwards. From the conversion of authentic archaeological stage and costume design for artistic affect to the power of imaginative realism in literature, art is shown to be crucial to developing individualism in the cultural context. Art's relation to life is explored fully across the works with the role of the artist emphasised in some and that of the critic in others and through his writing Wilde continually builds upon his earlier conceptions of his aesthetic philosophy.

Several core principles of Wilde's "new aesthetic" are defined across and in each piece of the collection. In "The Truth of Masks", "Pen, Pencil and Poison" and "The Decay of Lying" higher truths are shown to reside in the mask of art than in the realism of life. The aesthetic temperament is shown to be crucial to the creation and, more importantly, to the criticism of art in "The Critic as Artist" and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" and is essential for individual and collective transformation. The inactive life of art is nearer to the real being of each person and is preferred over industrious Victorian materialism which favours the non-being of possession and status. Experiencing Victorian society as overwhelmingly moralistic, Wilde's attacks on all forms of restrictive authority are fuelled by a desire to raise consciousness of life under the condition of art. Art for Wilde, especially beauty in art, allows the spectator to see or become conscious of the cultivated life in a way higher than science, philosophy or religion. The final dialogue and essay combine to present a dialectical aesthetic doctrine that favours the critical contemplation of beauty over the sense experience of it and look forward to the realisation of individuals in an artistic society. In this fully cosmopolitan society the individual is encouraged to develop the complete personality, a never-ending process concurrent with Wilde's philosophical dialectic in which there is always a future stage. Individually and even more so as a collection Wilde's essays and dialogues spell out an aesthetic philosophy which is full of promise for the future.

Wilde's aesthetic philosophy is unique because it is based on a synthesis of a unique set of influences ranging from Celtic and Greek mythology and philosophy to eighteenth-century German idealism and what he referred to as the nineteenth-century English renaissance. His later work also shows the influence of an ancient Chinese philosopher. Kinship in temperament and style was as important to him as similarities in thinking which left him open to a wider selection of ideas, perhaps more so than his contemporaries. Wilde's oeuvre also shows that he did not slavishly follow others. He integrated Greek criticism and Aristotle's notion of contemplation to fashion the creative critic. He assimilated an ancient Irish superstition with German philosophical idealism and by altering the sphere of speculation found a new philosophy of art. He keenly associated himself with Rossetti and Morris, Ruskin and Pater and yet with great ease he could point to differences in his work as significant advancements. Oscar Wilde was more complex than convoluted, more involved and intricate than problematical and removed. His many influences make him as complex and multiform as his ideas and inform the myriad lives and sensations experienced by his characters.

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