OSCAR WILDE AND THE INTERRELATIONSHIPS
AMONG CRITIC, ARTIST, AND SOCIETY

by

PAUL DAVID STRICKLAND
B.A., University of Nevada, 1971

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department
of
English

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
September, 1974
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Head of my Department or by his representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of English

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver 8, Canada

Date August 30, 1974
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine Wilde's aesthetic, to find his most consistent beliefs beneath his many shifts in critical viewpoint, and to determine his contribution to modern attitudes toward Art and criticism. The manner of proceeding has been to study various influences on Wilde, especially those of ancient philosophers, and to place his view of the interrelationships among critic, artist, and society into a philosophical as well as a critical perspective.

Wilde's basic critical position is far more consistent than is commonly assumed. Although he shifts first from support of pan-aestheticism, then to advocacy of the autonomy of Art, and finally to decorative formalism, he never loses sight of the principle that Art is an end in itself. This fundamental principle is based on the Aristotelian doctrine of the autonomy of each of the arts and sciences.

The fact that Wilde says that the critic is an artist does not compromise his primary concern with the creative artist. In his later critical writings he gives the true literary critic—as opposed to the ordinary or journalistic critic—vast powers to range over and exercise leadership in almost every field of human endeavor. He even goes so far as to say the critic may lead the artist. However, beneath all the overstatement in which he often engages to underscore a point, he means merely to say that the critic is superior to the artist only in criticism's proper domain, and that the critic does well to gain some of the artist's sensitivity, perceptiveness, and sense of proportion. The artist is still supreme in
his own area—the arrangement of particular subject-materials to form a perfect image of an ideal.

Wilde's paradoxes, epigrams, and extravagant overstatements of his views give the casual reader an impression of reckless irresponsibility and callous unconcern with fundamental moral questions. However, in addition to using them to give his writings a memorable quality, Wilde systematically employs these devices to subvert superficial and oppressive moral systems which harm both the artist and members of society, and subtly to redirect the thoughts of more intelligent people toward a deeper morality, which means the unconscious, almost instinctive seeking of the good in the beautiful. He looks forward to a harmonious inter-relationship among critic, artist, and society, the result of which will be the freedom of every individual to enjoy a truly creative and independent selfhood.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapters</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Sources for Wilde's View of the Interrelationships Among Critic, Artist, and Society</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II The Artist and His Art.</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III The Artist and Society.</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV The Relationship of Critic to Artist.</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V The Critic and Society.</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI Conclusion.</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

Sources for Wilde's View of the Interrelationships Among Critic, Artist, and Society

In the course of developing his aesthetic, Wilde defined a number of ways in which the critic, artist, and public could relate to each other. Many other critics and aestheticians had done so before him, and the place of the artist and critic in society was a lively topic of discussion among the intellectuals of his own day. However, Wilde was far more successful than his contemporaries in keeping this topic before the public consciousness. His success was partly a result of his paradoxes and epigrams, his abilities as a supreme conversationalist, and his eminently readable style, but it was more a consequence of his special way of focusing on the artist. Instead of merely asserting the individualism of the artist, Wilde grounded it in a complex and profound doctrine of the autonomy of Art in relation to all other fields of endeavor. Additionally, he recognized the necessity for artistic talent and sensibility in the critic while at the same time maintaining for him an essentially separate sphere of activity. Finally, he looked forward to a social structure in which the artist and the critic would in the
course of creating and contemplating represent man at his best and inspire all the other members of society to become true individualists and to develop their capacities for creation.

An understanding of Wilde's ideas about the interrelationships among critic, artist, and society involves a study of his educational background and careful consideration of continuing critical and philosophical influences. Often his originality lay in striking interpretations of well-known philosophers and critics rather than in any new theories of his own. It would of course be a mistake to assume that the series of influences on Wilde follows a chronological line corresponding to that of the history of criticism or the history of philosophy, but one finds that in his writings the most important ancient philosophers occupy a position of higher esteem than any single modern thinker.

More than is commonly supposed, Wilde goes back to the ancient philosophers, especially Aristotle and Plato, for the assumptions which form the foundation of his view of the social role of the critic and artist. This fact may be attributed, at least in part, to his educational experience. Between 1871 and 1874, he was in residence at Trinity College in Dublin. There he came under the strong influence of the Rev. J. P. Mahaffy, who inspired in him a consuming interest in all aspects of Greek culture. Between 1874 and 1878 Wilde was at Oxford, where Walter Pater successfully reinforced that interest and added to it a Heraclitean approach that became the basis for a hedonistic aestheticism.
In fact, Pater, whose works are evidence of his intimate knowledge of Plato's philosophy, was probably responsible for the Platonic veneer of Wilde's basically Aristotelian aesthetic. As a critic, Wilde owes some debt to Plato, a debt which he often acknowledges but sometimes leaves implicit in the special character of his writings. In the first place, the form of the dialogues closely resembles that of Plato's: the setting described in the first two pages of "The Decay of Lying," for example, bears a definite similarity to that set forth in the first few pages of Plato's Phaedrus. Wilde, who did not find dogmatic, or even merely straightforward, essays the best vehicles for discussing literary criticism, was fascinated by the Platonic dialogues as an alternative mode for the presentation of aesthetic ideas. For instance, Wilde admired Chuang Tzu because, like Plato, he adopted "the dialogue as his mode of expression"; he favorably mentions the mystic's strategy of putting words into other people's mouths in order to gain breadth of view. Moreover, when Wilde makes his most explicit defense of the dialogue form in "The Critic As Artist," he acknowledges that he is inspired by Plato:

Dialogue, certainly, that wonderful literary form which, from Plato to Lucian, and from Lucian to Giordano Bruno, and from Bruno to that grand old Pagan in whom Carlyle took such delight, the creative critics of the world have always employed, can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression.

In short, the form of the dialogue served Wilde's sometimes dialectical
approach very well. In combination with his wonderfully readable style, it gives his two crucial critical works a memorably artistic quality which was often lacking in the critical prose of many of his contemporaries.

When, in addition to using the form of the Platonic dialogues, Wilde uses many of Plato's basic assumptions in his critical discussions, these assumptions tend to support a more philosophically idealistic approach to Art than the aesthete would ordinarily countenance. It is Platonism, perhaps, which allows him to adopt a stance of decorative formalism and to demand that man live his life for Art. Platonic thoughts can be found in Wilde's writings from the very beginning of his career. First of all, Wilde devotes much space in The Rise of Historical Criticism, a long essay he wrote at Oxford in competition for a university prize, to a discussion of Plato's theory of history. At one point, he alludes to Plato's concept of forms when he says that "we must first note that the primary cause of the decay of the ideal state is the general principle, common to the vegetable and animal worlds as well as to the world of history, that all created things are fated to decay." Wilde criticizes Plato's excessive dependence on an a priori approach to history, and favors Aristotle's more inductive methods, but the Platonic concept of forms continued to influence the aesthete to some extent for the rest of his life. In "The Truth of Masks," for example, he concludes that "it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas." And when he refers to "abstract" and "ideal"
Art in "The Decay of Lying," or to the artist building "a world more real than reality itself, and of loftier and more noble import" in "The Critic As Artist," one can see how he gives a Platonic coloring to his Aristotelian idea that the artist abstracts universals from particulars. The Platonic theory of forms even comes up in The Picture of Dorian Gray, especially when Wilde uses Basil Hallward or Lord Henry Wotton as mouthpieces for the expression of his own critical ideas. In the third chapter of the novel, Lord Henry thinks the following to himself about Hallward and his ideas of Art:

And Basil? From a psychological point of view, how interesting he was! The new manner in art, the fresh mode of looking at life, suggested so strangely by the merely visible presence of one who was unconscious of it all; the silent spirit that dwelt in dim woodland, and walked unseen in open field, suddenly showing herself, Dryad-like and not afraid, because in his soul who sought for her there had been wakened that wonderful vision to which alone are wonderful things revealed; the mere shapes and patterns of things becoming, as it were, refined, and gaining a kind of symbolical value, as though they were themselves patterns of some other and more perfect form whose shadow they made real: how strange it all was! He remembered something like it in history. Was it not Plato, that artist in thought, who had first analysed it?

Anyone who carefully reads Wilde's works will find that Plato's philosophy turns up quite often, even if it does not form the major part of the foundation of his aesthetic. Most often it helps him to assume an attitude of nearly religious veneration toward Art, and to advocate that the members of society should do the same.

Wilde frequently relates aesthetics to the well-being of society, and it is consequently significant that he acknowledges his indebtedness
to Plato for some of his ideas about this subject. In "The Critic As Artist," he expresses his appreciation of Plato's having first considered Beauty as such, thereby sowing the seeds that would grow and develop into the science of aesthetics:

Plato . . . , of course, dealt with many definitely artistic subjects, such as the importance of unity in a work of art, the necessity for tone and harmony, the aesthetic value of appearances, the relation of the visible arts to the external world, and the relation of fiction to fact. He first perhaps stirred in the soul of man that desire that we have not yet satisfied, the desire to know the connection between Beauty and Truth, and the place of Beauty in the moral and intellectual order of the Kosmos.  

Thus, reinforced by Keats, Plato's philosophy may have influenced Wilde to develop the aesthetic doctrine that the beautiful and the truly ethical are one and the same, and that the individual who strives for a lively appreciation of Beauty is being moral in the profoundest sense of the word. In fact, Plato says in the Symposium that the person who seeks to possess the beautiful actually is searching for the good. Hence Plato may figure in Wilde's attacks on the superficial deontological approach to ethics that was very prevalent in his day. Wilde also indicates that Plato, as well as Aristotle, may be the source of his idea that Art is a spiritual restorative and of his belief that criticism is best undertaken in a mood of self-reflection and contemplation.

Sometimes Wilde uses Plato's aesthetic ideas as a catalyst for the development of his own thoughts. The most notable instance of his doing so is the dialogue, "The Decay of Lying." In it he takes a fresh look
at the idea in the *Republic* that all artists are liars; the very title of this work indicates that he is thinking to himself, "If Art be lying, let us make the most of it." Wilde also gives an original twist to the Platonic idea that Art should be admitted into the ideal state only if it aids the moral instruction of the young:

Lying for the sake of the improvement of the young, which is the basis of home education, still lingers among us, and its advantages are so admirably set forth in the early books of Plato's *Republic* that it is unnecessary to dwell upon them here.15

In this specific instance, of course, Wilde is as interested in shocking the Philistines of his day as he is in turning inside out the original interpretation of Plato's idea of the artist as liar. A less striking example of Wilde's use of Plato's aesthetic as a catalyst occurs in "The Critic As Artist," in which the aesthete appears to accept the philosopher's idea in the *Ion* that the artist, or poet, is moved by a divinely-inspired madness: "For Art, as Plato saw, and not without regret, creates in the listener and spectator a form of divine madness."16 With his predominantly Aristotelian bias, Wilde could not entirely accept the idea of the poet's madness, first because he believed that emotion is not a guide to artistic excellence, and secondly because he thought that the artist, when exercising his critical faculty in reference to his own work, should operate from a reasoned, if subjective, standpoint.17 A few short paragraphs after the passage concerned, Wilde shows that he is using Plato's idea of poetic madness only to emphasize the separateness
of Art from all other areas of endeavor, an Aristotelian idea, and to free that same Art from the shackling influences of a superficial and tradition-bound "Reason."  

Plato's philosophy seems to have had a greater impact on Wilde's private life than on his aesthetic ideas. Wilde made much use of Plato's theories of friendship to defend his own proclivities and the relationships resulting from them—in short, to give some sort of pattern to his love life. The Portrait of Mr. W. H., besides being an exercise in creative criticism, is a defense of homosexual friendships from a Platonic standpoint:

Friendship, indeed, could have desired no better warrant for its permanence or its ardours than the Platonic theory, or creed, as we might better call it, that the true world was the world of ideas, and that these ideas took visible form and became incarnate in man, and it is only when we realize the influence of neo-Platonism on the Renaissance that we can understand the true meaning of the amatory phrases and words with which friends were wont, at this time, to address each other.  

In this same study, he mentions the Symposium of Plato as "this wonderful dialogue, of all the Platonic dialogues perhaps the most perfect, as it is the most poetical."  

When one puts Wilde's personal life aside and considers his aesthetic exclusively in regard to the social role of the critic and the artist, one finds that Plato is a significant but not a major influence. More often than not, the philosopher is the source of the form rather than the content of Wilde's critical writings. Wilde seems to have depended on
Plato more for a personal code of ethics than for a universal theory of Art. For the doctrine of the autonomy of Art—which lies at the core of Wilde's view of the interrelationships among critic, artist, and society—one must go to Aristotle.

Whether the influence of Plato preceded that of Aristotle in Wilde's education is difficult, if not impossible, to determine: a responsible guess would be that, given the traditional, classical character of his education at Trinity College and at Oxford, these ancient philosophers influenced him at roughly the same time. One should note, however, that the extent of Aristotle's influence on Wilde is greater than Plato's, and much greater than most students of Wilde's criticism have assumed it to be. Aristotle's philosophy forms the foundation of Wilde's aesthetic, especially with respect to the social function of Art, and figures significantly in even his earliest writings. The Rev. J. P. Mahaffy may well have been the source of Wilde's over-riding interest in Aristotelian critical thought. Indeed, Wilde entitled his review of his former professor's book about the etiquette of conversation "Aristotle at Afternoon Tea." In any case, Wilde's concern with Aristotle was quite intense by the end of his Oxford years. His long essay, *The Rise of Historical Criticism*, is evidence of this devotion. In it he speaks very favorably of Aristotle's scientific approach to history, shows a thorough knowledge of the *Politics* as well as much of the rest of his philosophy, and already talks from an Aristotelian standpoint about the place of Beauty in the social order.
Wilde was influenced by Aristotle first of all because he believed the philosopher took a morally neutral position toward Art. In "The Critic As Artist," Wilde has nothing but praise for the Poetics; he believes the treatise provides the best justification for his own attitude of moral neutrality toward the relationship between the artist and the materials of his Art. Aristotle gives the artist a free hand in regard to moral issues, but does not advocate the consistent representation of extreme immorality in Art; in general, his statements tend to support Wilde's position. In the Poetics, he is very open-minded and says the artist may represent life in any way: "The poet being an imitator just like the painter or other maker of likenesses, he must necessarily in all instances represent things in one or other of three aspects, either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or have been, or as they ought to be." One might argue that this statement is a foundation for the Realism and Naturalism that Wilde opposes as well as for the separation of morals and Art which he supports; however, Aristotle is probably merely listing the alternatives open to the artist and does not mean to say that each type of subject-material is equally successful artistically. A few pages later in the Poetics, Aristotle reinforces the implications of moral impartiality in this statement when he suggests that depravity can have a place in a work of art provided it serves some valid artistic end. He only condemns "improbability of Plot or depravity of character" when they are neither
necessary nor useful from an aesthetic point-of-view. Wilde almost perfectly represents the Aristotelian position in some of the letters he wrote to newspapers in defense of The Picture of Dorian Gray. For instance, he told the editor of the Scots Observer that every element in the novel, including that of moral depravity, is artistically necessary:

> It was necessary, sir, for the dramatic development of this story to surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption. Otherwise the story would have no meaning and the plot no issue. To keep this atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful was the aim of the artist who wrote the story.

Perhaps Aristotle would not approve of the idea of a "vague and indeterminate" atmosphere, but the essence of his position in the Poetics is there. In short, Wilde, who matured artistically in an age when Philistines demanded a moral lesson in every work, probably found the separation of ethics and aesthetics the most attractive element of the philosopher's treatise.

There were more general but more important aesthetic assumptions in Aristotle which influenced Wilde. In the Poetics Wilde found a justification for his preoccupation with style. Aristotle does, in fact, devote several pages of his treatise to the purely linguistic aspects of poetry and their relation to its effect on the reader. Then Wilde found inspiration in both Plato and Aristotle for his idea that a work of art must have an inherent organic unity. In Aristotle's philosophy specifically, this idea derives concrete support from a
passage in the Poetics, in which the philosopher says that a plot in a work of art must have a beginning, middle, and end. To be sure, Wilde's idea of the necessity for organic unity in a work of Art is supported by passages in other works of Aristotle, most notably the Metaphysics. But this specific statement in the Poetics probably forms the foundation of many of his attacks on Realism and Naturalism, which in his opinion would, like governmental censorship, destroy the beautiful impression which the literary artist tries to convey to his reader through the carefully developed form of his work.

Perhaps the most important general doctrine Wilde derived from the philosophy of Aristotle was that of the autonomy of Art. In The Rise of Historical Criticism one can discern the beginnings of that doctrine. In the essay, Wilde credits the philosopher with seeing the essential differences between an artistic or theological approach to historical phenomena on the one hand, and a scientifically historical attitude toward them on the other. The specifically Aristotelian doctrine of the autonomy of each art and each science matured in Wilde's mind over a decade to become the foundation of his idea of Art-for-Art's-Sake, which he sets forth most forcefully in "The Decay of Lying" and in the Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray.

The concept of Art as an end in itself is related to the notion of Art as a spiritual restorative. Since Art has no utilitarian or moral purpose, it is ideally suited to be a leisure-time activity. In the eighth
book of the *Politics*, Aristotle insists on the importance of Art in the leisure of the gentleman. In Wilde this idea, too, appears in its nascent form in *The Rise of Historical Criticism*, where he discusses Aristotle's theories about the factors which led to the formation of the first human organizations:

Aristotle seems to have clearly apprehended complex socio-logical factors in the development of the first politieś, when he says that the aim of primitive society was not merely life but the higher life, and 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 τὸ καλὸν.

Wilde's early conviction that social organization enables man to contemplate the beautiful later inspires him to make several seemingly irresponsible statements about the meaning and direction of human activity. In a review of Chuang Tzu and in "The Critic As Artist," he goes so far as to say that inaction is the ideal state for the aesthetically sensitive individual. No doubt he is exaggerating Aristotle's position to shock his basically puritanical readers; in his straightforward passages Wilde means to say essentially the same thing as the philosopher about the relation of Art to leisure.

To proceed into an area of less certainty, one may venture to say that elements of Aristotle's aesthetic provide a basis for Wilde's Romanticism. To be sure, the term *mimesis* at the literal level seems to justify Realism more than Romanticism, and for the most part Wilde speaks disparagingly of the word "imitation" the few times he chooses to use it.
On the other hand, Aristotle obviously means more than the literal definition of *mimesis* when he uses it in the *Poetics*. At all times he implies that man improves on what he imitates. Thus he says that "imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation." In some cases he uses the term to signify the artist's act of giving form to that which is both unusual and significant. The artist, in other words, gives *expression* to his mental image of what is either more beautiful or more terrible than any ordinary phenomenon. As a consequence, the average man takes pleasure in seeing properly expressed that which he cannot express himself. Hence Wilde, whenever he wishes to refer to the Aristotelian idea of imitation, uses the word "expression." Invoking the authority of Aristotle, he says that the basis of life is "simply the desire for expression," and that "Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained."

Since the concept of imitation need not stand in the way of those who detect an equivalence for certain Romantic elements in the *Poetics*, one can now examine the various points in the treatise which Wilde might have used to defend his Romanticism. Perhaps Aristotle's most famous dictum is that "the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen . . . ." In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde exaggerates this thought and asserts that
the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her absolutely unfinished condition. Nature has good intentions, of course, but as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out. 38

In Wilde's view, the thing that "might happen" is the thing that should happen. He most certainly draws inspiration also from the closely related Aristotelian idea that Art is superior to history because it deals with universals, while history is concerned with particulars. 39 Art has the capacity to shape man's future, while history can only reflect the patterns of the past.

One can now see a possible source for Wilde's Romanticism in Aristotle's theories about tragedy. In the first place, Aristotle hints at an ennobling function of Art when he refers to the methods of portrait-painters and tragedians:

As tragedy is an imitation of personages better than the ordinary man, we in our way should follow the example of good portrait-painters, who reproduce the distinctive features of a man, and at the same time, without losing the likeness, make him handsomer than he is. The poet, in like manner, in portraying men quick or slow to anger, or with similar infirmities of character, must know how to represent them as such, and at the same time as good men, as Agathon and Homer have represented Achilles. 40

This is a degree of recognition of that creative power of imagination which is seen as a supreme force in Romantic art. In the second place, he says that Tragedy is the highest genre, and that it is most successful when it involves men who are better than average. 41 Although Aristotle says elsewhere that Art is at liberty to portray things that are as well as things that might be, 42 one may conclude with some assurance that he
means tragedy is the highest genre precisely because it portrays men better than average, and that he has therefore given an opening to Romantic Art. The poet may choose to portray things as they are, but he does better aesthetically to present them as they might be. Only when he chooses the latter alternative can he engage and stir the imagination of the members of his audience. Wilde most certainly pondered these passages when he studied Aristotle, and he devotes a full page of "The Critic As Artist" specifically to the philosopher's theories about tragedy and καθορίστανος.  

The extent of Wilde's indebtedness to Aristotle is difficult to estimate. Wilde tends to be independent of any metaphysic: he is an eclectic who often plays one philosopher off against another. Hence it is dangerous to attribute to him any single aesthetic viewpoint. Yet, if one wants to place Wilde into any philosophical tradition when he speaks of the interrelationships among critic, artist, and society, one may with the least objection place him into the Aristotelian tradition.

Although Wilde was influenced most by the two greatest ancient philosophers, he also owed many of his ideas to the artists, critics, and philosophers of his own century. For example, German thinkers had a noticeable effect on his outlook. They had considered many aesthetic problems which figured prominently in Wilde's critical theories, and provided a few philosophical constructs for his discussions as well. Pater, whose outlook was often very Hegelian, was at least partly responsible for German influences on Wilde. Even where one cannot find direct
influence by German thinkers in Wilde's writings, one may often draw instructive parallels between their ideas and his.

Wilde pays most homage to Goethe as a perfect example of a man who, both as an artist and as a critic, significantly influenced his age. Wilde notes that the "Aufklärung or Illumination of the eighteenth-century" was "brought to its full and perfect issue by Goethe." He mentions his name twice in "The Decay of Lying" and three times in "The Critic As Artist." One may assume that Goethe probably had some small effect on Wilde's thinking, and his thoughts helped Wilde crystallize a few of his specific aesthetic doctrines. To Goethe one may safely attribute Wilde's idea that Art should be a crystal purifying visions of existence. One also recalls that Wilde credits Goethe with establishing that Aristotelian is essentially aesthetic and not moral. Furthermore, the German thinker probably provided the idea that the painter should not copy nature but instead reproduce an idealized image of nature in his mind.

Probably because of the strong praise Arnold had for the German writer in his critical essays, Goethe's thoughts figure most importantly in Wilde's theories about the freedom of the artist and the powers of the critic. Concerning the artist's liberties Wilde said, in a letter to the editor of the Scots Observer written in defense of Dorian Gray, that only a Goethe could "see a work of art fully, completely, and perfectly." Goethe also provided encouragement for Wilde's emphasis on style, for
Wilde quotes his statement that "it is working within limits that the master reveals himself." Then, concerning the powers of the critic, Wilde mentions first of all that Goethe developed the doctrine that "self-culture is the true ideal of man," an ideal which is first and foremost realized by the critic; in this connection, Wilde says that we owe a greater debt to Goethe than to any man since Greek days. In addition, Wilde praises Goethe as an exemplary universal critic who understood man's universal brotherhood.

Hegel had less of an influence on Wilde than did Goethe. Yet Hegel was partly responsible for Wilde's dialectical approach to criticism. Wilde concludes "The Truth of Masks" with a reference to Hegel; invoking the philosopher's authority, he defends the proposition that the artist or critic may shift from one system to another in order to represent all the issues that bear on an aesthetic viewpoint with which he may or may not agree: "it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks."

Wilde also definitely owed much to nineteenth-century English writers and critics. It would be wrong to assume that Wilde devoted his attention to the ancient philosophers and, to a lesser extent, to the German thinkers before he considered the great men of letters of his own country and century. Nevertheless, nineteenth-century English influences served less as sources of basic ideas concerning the interrelationships among critic, artist, and society than as vessels through which Wilde
received or reinforced the thoughts of Aristotle, Plato, and the German Romantic philosophers.

The English Romantic poet who impressed Wilde most deeply was Keats. In his review, "To Read or Not to Read," Wilde puts the works of Keats among books to re-read, side-by-side with Plato. In addition, he sometimes speaks of Shakespeare and Keats as being of equal genius. Such excessive admiration is possible because Wilde regarded Keats as a prototypical aesthete and therefore as a source of inspiration. In an 1882 letter to Emily Speed, the daughter of George Keats (the poet's younger brother), Wilde referred to the Romantic poet as "that young priest of beauty," and spoke of his own aesthetic movement as being "this great renaissance of art which Keats indeed would have so much loved, and of which he, above all others, is the seed." Since Keats' influence on Wilde was so strong, the famous Keatsian line that "a thing of beauty is a joy forever," as well as the idea that Beauty and Truth are synonymous, must have been uppermost in Wilde's mind when he defended the artist's absolute freedom to choose whatever materials he thinks will contribute to a beautiful impression.

As Keats' writings helped Wilde to discuss the value of the artist's search for Beauty, so did Arnold's essays help him to consider both the artist's and critic's role in society. In fact, Arnold was, among the English writers and critics, second only to Pater as an influence on Wilde. The poet-critic made a great impression on Wilde in his early youth. In
1879, Wilde sent Helena Sickert a copy of Selected Poems of Matthew Arnold, expressing high praise for the volume, and later, in 1881, Wilde sent Arnold a complimentary copy of his own volume of poems.

Wilde adopted some of Arnold's ideas about the artist and society. In his early lectures, for example, Wilde admits that the dramatist needs a great age to succeed. More importantly, he agrees with Arnold that the aim of culture is peace, not rebellion, "the valley perilous where ignorant armies clash by night being no dwelling-place meet for her \textit{Art}, to whom the gods have assigned the fresh uplands and sunny heights and clear untroubled air."

Wilde also borrowed a great many of Arnold's terms and ideas concerning the role of the critic. His single most important acquisition from Arnold was the term "Philistine," which he defined not as one who fails to understand Art, but as a person "who upholds and aids the heavy, cumbersome, blind forces of Society, and who does not recognize the dynamic force when he meets it either in a man or in a movement." Wilde likewise borrowed the phrase "sweet reasonableness" from the poet-critic, and meant by it a state of mind which the critic should strive to attain. One of the more important critical ideas Wilde acquired from Arnold is the doctrine that the critic should work to keep a nation's language precise and clear. Though he speaks specifically of the poet's role in society, Wilde obviously was thinking of Arnold's essay, "The Literary Influence of Academies," when he said, "It is the poets of a country who make its
language; let them see that they keep it perfect." Accordingly, in his many reviews, Wilde showed evidence of having adopted Arnold's concern for the state of the language when he consistently condemned lesser novels and volumes of poetry for poor grammar and general misuse of words.

Wilde continued to be impressed by Arnold's critical ideas to the end of his life. In De Profundis, he told Lord Alfred Douglas that, if he ever wrote again, he would consider only two topics: "Christ as the precursor of the Romantic movement in life" and "the artistic life considered in its relation to Conduct." The latter topic reveals not only Wilde's continued use of Arnoldian terms, but also his avid interest in Arnold's religious criticism and ideas, without which, perhaps, parts of "The Soul of Man under Socialism" and much of De Profundis might never have been written. In later correspondence, Wilde still shows an interest in Arnold's criticism, especially that concerning Byron, Shelley, and Amiel. One who studies Wilde's criticism, therefore, must keep in mind that Arnold is not far in the background.

Of nineteenth-century literary figures, two had a very direct influence on Wilde because they were his teachers. They were Ruskin and Pater. They both underscored the importance of Art, but their assumptions about the artist's relationship to society were diametrically opposed and helped produce in Wilde's mind a certain measure of ambivalence, which accounts for those shifts which do occur in his aesthetic position.
From Ruskin Wilde gained a sympathy for socialism and a belief in the universal applicability of the principles of Art. In his early essays and lectures, written between 1878 and 1883, a period during which Ruskin's influence was still very strong, Wilde assumes most consistently the position that Art should transform all of society. Wilde specifically acknowledges the influence of Ruskin in "Art and the Handicraftsman," where he recalls the road-building project the social reformer inspired, and adds, "I felt that if there was enough spirit amongst the young men to go out to such work as road-making for the sake of a noble ideal of life, I could from them create an artistic movement that might change, as it has changed, the face of England." Among Wilde's later writings, Ruskin's ideas probably figure most prominently in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," in spite of the fact that they have been significantly transformed to fit Wilde's strong and even anarchistic individualism.

From Pater, the Oxford professor who had the greatest direct influence on him, Wilde learned many arguments to support the Art-for-Art's-Sake position which directly contradicts Ruskin's aesthetic. In addition, much of the exotic atmosphere which surrounds Wilde's poetry, dialogues, and fiction has a definitely Paterian quality. The deep impression Pater made on Wilde is attributable partly to the informal discussions they enjoyed during Wilde's residence at Oxford. Wilde acknowledged his debt to him in "Mr. Patér's Last Volume," an 1890 review. In it he declared that Pater had influenced him to turn from poetry to prose, and praised Pater's essays as "the holy writ of beauty."
Wilde probably learned no really new ideas from Pater, but rather used the professor's critical writings to reinforce concepts he had discovered elsewhere. Pater's writings helped Wilde solidify many of his convictions about the artist's relationship to the society in which he lives, although in the history of criticism one finds that Aristotle, Goethe, and Arnold also discussed these issues, and that Baudelaire developed the special doctrine of Art-for-Art's-Sake. Pater repeated in very powerful terms the doctrine that the artist must be an individualist. It is not, he said, enough for the poet to be a child of his own age: it is necessary that there be "something individual, inventive, unique, the impress there of the writer's own temper and personality in his work." Such a view of the individualism of the artist leads logically to Romantic assumptions about Art. In "Winckelmann," an essay he included in The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry, Pater writes that the

\[ \text{basis of all artistic genius lies in the power of conceiving humanity in a new and striking way, of putting a happy world of its own creation in place of the meaner world of our common days, generating around itself an atmosphere with a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombin-}
\]

Wilde no doubt uses Pater's critical ideas to reinforce his own Romanticism, which he expresses most eloquently in "The Decay of Lying." Pater's influence on Wilde is no less important concerning the function of the critic. Wilde's idea that the critic should employ elements of
both subjectivity and objectivity is Hegelian, but, since there is no evidence that Wilde studied Hegel before going to Oxford, and since Pater was a Hegelian, one may conjecture that he first learned this idea through Pater, who had probably spoken of it in Arnoldian terms and in the context of Arnold's critical dicta. In "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Arnold had said that the "aim of criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is." Pater effectively reinterpreted Arnold's statement when, in the preface to The Renaissance, he added the qualification that "the first step toward seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly." Hence, when Wilde mentions "disinterested curiosity" in "The Critic As Artist," he means by it a combination of subjectivity and objectivity which is much closer to Pater's intentions than Arnold's.

Pater's phrase about "burning with a hard, gem-like flame," which applied both to the critic and to the life of any cultivated individual, of course influenced Wilde immensely. In his lecture, "The English Renaissance of Art," Wilde made obvious his debt to Pater when he said that "men to whom the end of life is thought," not action, must "seek for experience itself and not the fruits of experience" and "burn always with one of the passions of this fiery-coloured world." And in a letter to Rebecca Smith, he writes, "We burn with a hundred flames: and culture is a gem that reflects light from a myriad facets ...."
Moreover, Pater's famous phrase influenced not only Wilde's critical ideas, but quite probably had a considerable effect on his private life as well.

Pater is partly responsible for Wilde's leanings toward decorative formalism in his later criticism. In his essay on Leonardo Da Vinci in *The Renaissance*, Pater maintained that for the Italian artist "the novel impression conveyed, the exquisite effect woven, counted as an end in itself—a perfect end." Wilde's extreme emphasis on style did not come only from Pater, however; Flaubert also considered style the quintessential element of Art and the foremost concern of the critic. In a letter to Louise Colet, he made this extreme statement:

> There are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects; from the standpoint of pure Art one might almost establish the axiom that there is no such thing as subject, style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things.

Since Wilde as a critic took an interest in George Sand's correspondence with Flaubert, and since Flaubert is favorably mentioned several times in *Intentions*, one may safely assume that Flaubert as well as Pater contributed to Wilde's ideas on style.

Flaubert, the most important French influence on Wilde, certainly inspired in Wilde the doctrine that critics should become artists in their own right. To be sure, Arnold had said in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" that the critic shares the joys of creation with the imaginative artist. Yet Wilde probably would not have thought to extend Arnold's idea without Flaubert, who in a letter to George Sand made these pregnant remarks:
You spoke of criticism in your last letter, saying that it will soon disappear. I think the contrary, that its dawn has barely begun. It's simply that its trend is the reverse of what it once was. In the time of La Harpe critics were grammarians; in the time of Sainte-Beuve and Taine they are historians. When will they be artists, nothing but artists, real artists?

To Flaubert, Wilde definitely owes the title of his longest piece of criticism, "The Critic As Artist," and he probably owes to the French novelist some of its material as well.

However far one might choose to pursue a study of influences on Wilde, one would eventually have to conclude that Wilde was not an original thinker about the interrelationships among critic, artist, and society. He was clearly an eclectic. His achievement lay in his ability to combine all the disparate elements in his background into a single, relatively unified aesthetic. Whatever the variations this aesthetic may undergo, at its center is the doctrine that Art is an end in itself.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE


2Ibid., p. ii.


6Ibid., p. 50.

7*Works*, p. 1078.

8Ibid., p. 988.

9Ibid., p. 1049.

10Ibid., p. 41.

11Ibid., p. 1018.


14Ibid., p. 1039.

15Ibid., p. 990.

16Ibid., p. 1047.

17Ibid., p. 1042.

18Ibid., p. 1048.
19 Ibid., p. 1175.
20 Ibid., p. 1174.
22 Works, ed. Foreman, pp. 1017-1018.
24 Ch. 25, in Basic Works, p. 1486.
26 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1018.
27 Chs. 20-23, 25, in Basic Works, pp. 1475-1480, 1484-1486.
29 Essays and Lectures, pp. 53, 55-56.
30 Bk. VIII, Ch. 3, in Basic Works, pp. 1306-1308.
31 Essays and Lectures, p. 39.
34 Poetics, Ch. 4, in Basic Works, p. 1457.
37 Poetics, Ch. 9, in Basic Works, pp. 1463-1464.
38 "The Decay of Lying," in Works, p. 970.
Poetics, Ch. 9, in Basic Works, p. 1464, and "The Decay of Lying," in Works, p. 972.

Ibid., Ch. 5, in Basic Works, p. 1470. In Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1951), Samuel Henry Butcher strongly suggests that the Poetics contains some essentially Romantic ideas. In his second chapter of commentary on the Poetics entitled "'Imitation' as an Aesthetic Term" (p. 122), Butcher implies that Aristotle saw Art as having a possible idealizing function: "The artist may 'imitate things as they ought to be': he may place before him an unrealized ideal. We see at once there is no question here of a bare imitation, of a literal transcript of the world of reality." And in his third chapter of commentary entitled "Poetic Truth" (p. 168), he suggests that Aristotle did not see the tragedian's function as being essentially separate from the idealizing function of Art as a whole: "Poetry, he [Aristotle] means to say, is not concerned with fact, but with what transcends fact; it represents things which are not, and never can be in actual experience; it gives us the 'ought to be'; the form that answers to the true idea. The characters of Sophocles, the ideal forms of Zeuxis, are unreal only in the sense that they surpass reality. They are not untrue to the principles of nature or to her ideal tendencies."

Although they may be debatable, Butcher's ideas have much to recommend them. Even if he were wrong in suggesting that tragedy has an idealizing function, one could still maintain that the tragic hero is similar to the Romantic hero in that he is out of the ordinary. The tragic hero, furthermore, is extraordinary in the sense that, despite his flaws, he shows how man's goodness outweighs his capacity for destructive action. To be sure, the tragic hero with his flaws and "infirmities of character" does not represent an actualized ideal, but he does represent man at his full potential.

Ibid., Ch. 2, in Basic Works, p. 1456.

Ibid., Ch. 25, in Basic Works, p. 1483.

Works, p. 1018.

Dictionary of National Biography.

The Portrait of Mr. W. H., in Works, p. 1192.


49. Willoughby, op. cit., p. 21.


54. Ibid., p. 1057.

55. Works, p. 1078.

56. The Artist As Critic, ed. Ellmann, p. 27.


60. Ibid., p. 260.

61. Ibid., p. 72.


63. Essays and Lectures, p. 118.

64. De Profundis, in Letters of Wilde, ed. Hart-Davis, p. 492.


67. Ibid., p. 484.

68. Ibid., pp. 782, 786.


74. Ibid., pp. 213-214.

75. *Complete Prose Works*, III, 258.

76. Ellmann, "The Critic As Artist As Wilde," in *The Artist As Critic*, p. xi.


78. Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, p. 236.


81. Ibid., pp. 149-150.


85. *Works*, pp. 976, 990, 1009.


CHAPTER TWO

The Artist and His Art

The artist's relationship to the materials of his art is extremely important in Wilde's aesthetic. Though Wilde may in turn argue that Art should transform all society, that Art is autonomous, and finally that form is paramount in Art, he never forgets that his concern with Art is a controlling one. This controlling concern produces the underlying consistency of thought beneath all the critical changes and scintillating paradoxes. Many scholars have argued that Wilde is extremely inconsistent, and that many of his ideas are irrational, but, in spite of the variations in his critical position, his ideas are more precise and rational than they suppose.

In Wilde's view, the artist's essential purposes determine the nature of his relationship to the materials of his Art. In his Romantic interpretation of the Aristotelian aesthetic, Wilde views the artist as a seer who, using only the essential, universal elements of life as man presently finds it, creates possible futures. "For the past is what man should not have been," he says in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," summing up his position. "The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are."
The Aristotelian statement Wilde builds on is in itself more prosaic: "The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but the kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary." Sir William David Ross, a twentieth-century commentator on Aristotle, says the philosopher's statement means only that the artist may rearrange facts to show the effect of character on destiny, while the historian must describe "events in which the necessary sequence of effect on cause is obscured by a thousand casual interventions." However, a commentator contemporary to Wilde, Samuel H. Butcher, interpreted this statement in a much more Romantic and even vitalist way. Butcher thought the Aristotelian concept of imitation meant the looking forward of the artist to the perfected state of things toward which Nature is tending, in all its imperfections and cycles. It is very possible that his interpretation of Aristotle's Poetics was representative of the interpretations accepted in Wilde's day, and that such readings of Aristotle's treatise were part of the foundation on which Wilde built his aesthetic.

Despite the uncertainties in interpreting the Poetics, one can still establish that Wilde builds his aesthetic on that Aristotelian treatise, and that he finds many Romantic implications in it. In his view the artist extrapolates universals either by himself or with the aid of a perceptive critic, converts them into a mental image, and finally translates that image into a tangible or perceivable form for Life to imitate.
In 'The Decay of Lying,' he says, "Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms." When the artist works entirely on his own, the process of treating Life as raw material involves distilling from it its most valuable elements, i.e., universals. In a letter to Coulson Kernahan, Wilde emphasized the active aspects of completely independent creation: "You must deal directly with Life—modern, terrible Life—wrestle with it, and force it to yield you its secret." In his "Lecture to Art Students," he spoke in less physical terms about the role of the artist when he told his audience "not to copy beauty but to create it in your art, to wait and watch for it in nature." In each instance, however, he makes it clear that the artist's ultimate goal is to bring forth a universally valid image of beauty from an originally formless nature. The artist, of course, does not always depend on his own deductions. Since both he and the critic are involved in the "passage of ideas into images that is the intellectual history of art," he may often choose to turn to the critic for an inspired understanding of the essence of Life. In fact, Wilde in "The Critic As Artist" says that artistic creation will become sterile reproduction without the intervention of the professional critic. In making this assertion, Wilde comes perilously close to contradicting his essential principle of the autonomy of Art. But he has merely gone a little too far to establish the main point in question: whether an artist discovers universals by himself or whether they are transmitted to him by the perceptive critic, his function is to deal with these universals as the elements of the work of art he finally fashions.
One can, of course, run into trouble trying to devise a consistent interpretation of Wilde's view of the role of universals in Art. In some passages of "The Decay of Lying," Wilde says that the artist is trying to get away from the fact that members of the human race appear to have a common range of emotions and actions. "Sooner or later," he laments, "one comes to that dreadful thing called human nature."\(^{12}\)

When he asserts that it is a humiliating confession that men are all "made out of the same stuff," one wonders if he would actually prefer to have the artist avoid recognition of universals entirely.\(^{13}\)

A more complete understanding of Wilde's tactics and a profounder insight into his views of artistic creation dissipate such confusion. In the first place, when he makes such lamentations, one may almost be certain that he is overstating his case deliberately. If he had not seen any positive universal characteristics in human nature, he would not have believed that any improvement in public taste is possible, and hence would never have developed and popularized an aesthetic theory which implies that Art can increase man's capacity to appreciate Beauty. What Wilde means to point out by such overstatement is that the artist should concern himself with the positive universal characteristics of human nature, or at least with the interesting undeveloped ones. In the second place, the universals of human nature cannot become worthy of notice until the artist, ingeniously using the all-important element of style, transforms them into something unlike anything ordinarily
encountered in experience. In Wilde's view, style is the individual artist's unique method of uniting form and content. In "The Critic As Artist," Gilbert, explaining how the great anonymous poems of early ages could not have been collective productions, but instead were the single inventions of single artists, tells Ernest "there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual."14 Through style, the independent artist gives the universal that he projects as an ideal such a unique combination of individual and general qualities that it cannot fail to have a definite and consistent impression on the reader's or viewer's perceptual consciousness.

In Wilde's aesthetic, the artist who deals with universals necessarily dominates the real materials he works with, molding them to fit an idealized image of reality he has previously formed in his mind. Consequently, Wilde believes that a devotion to Realism and Naturalism is ultimately destructive of the relationship between the artist and his art, because both literary theories, when strictly applied, make the artist subservient to his subject-matter—a passive observer of reality rather than the master of it.

Wilde believes that both Nature and everyday Life are hostile to the mind of the artist or to any contemplating mind that looks for patterns of any sort. "Nothing is more evident than that Nature hates Mind."15 It is futile to make present-day Life or existing Nature into an ideal or
standard. Nature "is a foolish place to look for inspiration in, but a charming one in which to forget one ever had any." The person who believes he can find inspiration in Nature or Life has actually already discovered that inspiration elsewhere, whether in Art, religion, or philosophy. "If . . . we regard Nature as the collection of phenomena external to man," Wilde concludes, "people only discover in her what they bring to her." The person who believes Nature has lessons to teach has failed to trace what he has learned to its actual first source in civilized Art and thought. His misconceptions about the relationship between Nature and Art lead him to adopt aesthetic views which subvert Art as the Romantic understands it.

Wilde believes imagination is truer than observation. "The function of the artist is to invent, not to chronicle," Thanks to wrong literary theories, however, Life now "is always spoiling the subject-matter of art" with its realism, in effect, destroying imagination and invention. Keeping in the back of his mind Aristotle's famous statement concerning the relation of history to Art, Wilde in "The Decay of Lying" has Vivian drive his point home in a striking way: "The ancient historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction." The influence of Naturalism and Realism has led the human race to sell its birthright—the right to imagine—for a mess of facts.

In spite of their new and destructive inroads into areas traditionally
controlled by Romanticism, Realism and Naturalism are nevertheless doomed in the long run. In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde says that Realism as a method is already "a complete failure."^23 The Naturalist and the Realist fail to see that the truth of a work of art lies in its internal consistency, not in any specific correspondence to events or facts in reality. Wilde defines a fine lie, or imaginative piece of fiction, as "simply that which is its own evidence."^24 Believable consistency in a work of art is actually a product of style, and the Naturalistic novelist at best only produces a good style as an accident or as a secondary consideration. "Truth," Wilde concludes with typical overstatement, "is entirely and absolutely a matter of style."^25

Wilde more or less consciously introduces his views on the absurdity of Naturalism and Realism into his own works. These views are most strikingly evident in The Picture of Dorian Gray. It is in the first chapter of the novel that Lord Henry, parrying Basil Hallward's charge that his cynicism is just a pose, laughingly declares, "Being natural is just a pose, and the most irritating pose I know."^26 Later in the same chapter, Hallward denounces Realism as he rhapsodizes to Lord Henry about how Dorian is his artistic inspiration:

"Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body—how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void."^27
Both Lord Henry's rejoinder and Hallward's statement reflect Wilde's critical standpoint: the Naturalist cannot avoid exercising artistic selectivity from some general principle any more than the Romantic can, and Realism makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the artist to portray ideals. The Picture of Dorian Gray is, in fact, full of such important asides. In addition, a major episode in the novel has a direct bearing on the antithesis between Realism and genuine art, that episode being the love affair between Dorian and Sibyl Vane. When Sibyl first appears in the novel as a beautiful, highly-talented actress, Dorian views her as an ideal character in a Romantic work of art, and therefore as an inspiration. When, however, she allows Life to intrude into what Dorian considers her special relationship with Art, and because of lovesickness embarrasses him in front of his friends in an especially bad performance of her role as Juliet, he loses all interest in her. Now her art is "simply bad art"; she is a "complete failure."28 Since he believes Sybil is not a noteworthy individual outside the realm of Romantic art, he immediately ends his relationship with her, and she subsequently commits suicide.

The idea that imagination is what separates Art from the sciences of observation turns up rather poorly camouflaged in the four-act version of The Importance of Being Earnest. When Cecily and Jack confront each other in the fourth act, for instance, Wilde takes the opportunity to damn the fact-finding aspects of realism and naturalism:
CECILY: But, dear Uncle Jack, for the last year you have been telling us all that you had a brother. You dwelt continually on the subject. Algy merely corroborated your statement. It was noble of him.

JACK: Pardon me, Cecily, you are a little too young to understand these matters. To invent anything at all is a sheer act of genius, and, in a commercial age like ours, shows considerable physical courage. Few of our modern novelists dare to invent a single thing. It is an open secret that they don't know how to do it. Upon the other hand, to corroborate a falsehood is a distinctly cowardly action. I know it is a thing that the newspapers do one for the other, every day. But it is not the act of a gentleman. No gentleman ever corroborates anything.\(^{29}\)

In the second act of the four-act version of the play, Wilde introduces a very oblique reference to his view of the relationship between artistic invention and Life as it is:

ALGERNON: Can't you invent something to get Miss Prism out of the way?

CECILY: Do you mean invent a falsehood?

ALGERNON: Oh! Not a falsehood, of course. Simply something that is not quite true but should be.\(^{30}\)

If George Alexander had not forced Wilde to cut the longer version down to the presently popular three-act version,\(^{31}\) many more of Wilde's critical ideas would have reached the general theatre-going public through his most famous play.

Indeed, most of Wilde's works either exemplify or contain references to his Romantic view of Art. There is, perhaps, only one notable exception, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." It is his last important work, and his experiences in prison had seriously affected his originally Romantic and optimistic view of the function of Art. Nevertheless, the aesthetic which he had so carefully constructed over two decades still made him
uncomfortable with the realistic elements in the ballad. In a letter to
Robert Ross, he explained his partial dissatisfaction with the poem:

The poem suffers under the difficulty of a divided aim in
style. Some is realistic, some is romantic: some poetry,
some propaganda. I feel it keenly, but as a whole I think
the production interesting: that it is interesting from
more points of view than one is artistically to be regretted. 32

Even though his ordeal had made him more actively concerned with Life,
he was still convinced that in a work of art style takes precedence over
subject-matter, that form is more important than content.

Since style is the most important element of a truly imaginative
Art, and since style can only be an individual achievement, one must
defend Art as one of the ultimate forms of individual expression if the
artist is to maintain organic unity and coherence in the images of uni-
versals he produces. The concept of Art as one of the highest forms of
individual expression is thus a central part of the Wildean aesthetic.

Artistic creation—especially for the artist himself, but also for
the creative individual in any walk of life—is one of the most satisfying
forms of self-expression because it affords one the opportunity to develop
fully one's personality in a realm unmolested by the accidents and ob-
structions of the everyday world. Later in his life, from a position of
exile, Wilde could still unequivocally declare that "the aim of life is
to realize one's own personality—one's own nature, and now, as never be-
fore, it is through Art I realize what is in me."33 In fact, the public
is able to enjoy a work of art only because the artist first has had the
great pleasure of realizing his personality in creating it. Explaining to Frank Harris why he could not in early 1898 produce comedies to match those of his pre-trial period, Wilde said, "I have lost the mainspring of life and art, la joie de vivre."34

The true artist, then, gets most of his enjoyment in his career from the sheer act of creating; all other considerations, such as popular acclaim or public approval, are completely secondary. In a letter to the editor of the St. James Gazette defending Dorian Gray, Wilde boldly declares:

I wrote this book entirely for my own pleasure, and it gave me very great pleasure to write it. Whether it becomes popular or not is a matter of absolute indifference to me.35

Such a view of pleasure in artistic creation could very well have its source in Aristotle, who in the Nicomachean Ethics says that "an activity is intensified by its proper pleasure, since each class of things is better judged of and brought to precision by those who engage in the activity with pleasure."36 In a very similar letter to the Scots Observer, he amplifies his position considerably:

The pleasure that one has in creating a work of art is a purely personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates. The artist works with his eye on the object. Nothing else interests him. What people are likely to say does not even occur to him. He is fascinated by what he has in hand. . . . If my work pleases the few, I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist. It is far too easy.37

Here Wilde not only emphasizes the joy of creation, but, by pointing out
the rarity of those who are truly able to appreciate a new work of art, suggests another reason for defending personal pleasure in artistic creation—the artist's pleasure in creating an art object which the public has not anticipated.

In other words, the artist's pleasure in creation stems from contem­plating what has never been before created as well as from the process of creation itself. He experiences a unique joy in being able to put into material form his previously immaterial idea of beauty. The artist's methods of perception are radically different from those of the ordinary person, and the emotions which attend his perceptions, especially his joy in creation, are also different. Seeing, as he often does, a reflection of his character in Hamlet, Wilde in De Profundis explains how the artist's means of using his consciousness differ radically from those of the ordinary person:

He [Hamlet] is a dreamer, and he is called upon to act. He has the nature of the poet and he is asked to grapple with the common complexities of cause and effect, with life in its practical realization, of which he knows nothing, not with life in its ideal essence, of which he knows much. Since the artist puts his mind to extraordinary uses, he experiences extraordinary joy in having been able to put ideal essences into a perceivable form. It is quite proper that he should experience that joy, because the translation of universals into models is his raison d'etre. Pleasure in seeing the finished work of art is a necessary concomitant of his artistic function. Again Wilde's views on the pleasure of
artistic creation probably stem from the philosophy of Aristotle, who, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, says that "each of the pleasures is bound up with the activity it completes." Consequently, despite the protests of Puritans and Philistines who emphasize their moral attitudes and utilitarian goals to the point of excluding any concern with pleasure, one must defend the artist's private joy in realizing the unrealized if one wants Art to survive.

There are, of course, other elements of the artist's pleasure in creation which are less important to a defense of art, but which are nevertheless significant to an understanding of Wilde's aesthetic, and especially of its application to his own literary works. These other elements chiefly concern the highly personal or the highly subjective aspects of the artist's relation to his art.

The first of these elements is the artist's freedom to give some form of reality or concrete existence to very personal desires and dreams which he cannot pursue in the world of objective fact, either because they are impossible from the point of view of natural law, or because social restraints make them excessively difficult to effect. Wilde first touches on this freedom of the artist in his lecture, "The English Renaissance of Art":

> Art never harms itself by keeping aloof from the social problems of the day: rather, by so doing, it more completely realizes for us that which we desire. For to most of us the real life is the life we do not lead, and thus, remaining more true to the essence of its own perfection, more jealous of its own unattainable beauty, is less likely to forget form
in feeling or to accept the passion of creation as any substitute for the beauty of the created thing.

Here Wilde is concerned only with relating his understanding of Aristotle's concept of contemplation of universals, and with subtly transforming Arnold's notion of "high, unattainable ideals" in order to suit his own individual purposes. But in his later writings this idea and similar thoughts give rise to the suggestion, perhaps only half-serious, that the artist can produce purely capricious or fantastic things. He no doubt means only to defy Philistine pragmatism in making such a suggestion, but it nevertheless undercuts the more rational aspects of his literary criticism. In a letter to William Harnett Blanch, the more irrational side of his mind allows him to say, with some sincerity, "But I love superstitions. They are the colour elements of thought and imagination. They are the opponents of common sense. Common sense is the enemy of romance." Strictly delimited, superstition can of course provide a useful framework both for presenting a conflict between ethical systems and for fulfilling impossible dreams in at least some respects. In fact, it forms the basis for The Picture of Dorian Gray: the Faustian notion of selling one's soul to the devil makes it possible for Wilde to create in Dorian's mind a conflict between the ethical concepts of excess and renunciation, and it furthermore allows him to fulfill his wishes for eternal youth through the protagonist. Nevertheless, in defending the artist's prerogative to enact in the world of art what he cannot enact
in the real world, Wilde sometimes more or less seriously defends forms of irrationality which undercut the Aristotelian foundation of his critical theories.

The artist may also use his art for purposes of self-contemplation as well as for wish-fulfillment. He may, for instance, mirror aspects of his personality in a fictional character. Wilde does just that in Dorian Gray, as he admits in a letter to Ralph Payne:

"Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps."

The characters in the novel also discuss this special use of artistic creation. In agreeing with Dorian that his portrait cannot be displayed, Hallward makes statements which probably have reference to Wilde's own views of Art in respect to self-contemplation:

"One day, a fatal day I sometimes think, I determined to paint a wonderful portrait of you as you actually are, not in the costume of dead ages, but in your own dress and in your own time. Whether it was the realism of the method, or the mere wonder of your own personality, thus directly presented to me without mist or veil, I cannot tell. But I know that as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my secret. I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry. I felt, Dorian, that I had told too much, that I had put too much of myself in to it."

Wilde is thus very much aware of the pitfalls of this method of approaching artistic creation. He knows that it can lead the second-rate artist directly into either tawdry realism or cheap sentimentalism. Earlier in the novel, Hallward, in reply to Lord Henry Wotton, who has said that a
poet's "broken heart will run to many editions," condemns that sort of second-rate artist:

"An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty."

In fine, Wilde appears to believe the artist can legitimately use a work of art as a means of mirroring his own personality, so long as he either keeps the public from knowing he has done so, or idealizes those aspects of his personality he has chosen to portray.

In Wilde's aesthetic the idea of using Art as a means of self-contemplation can lead to the idea of regarding it as a substitute for religion or ethics. The result is a complete corruption of Arnold's idea in "The Study of Poetry" that the strength of religion is its unconscious poetry. The artist who finds his art can reflect his personality and provide a vicarious enactment of his personal desires is likely to give that art a controlling influence in his life. Wilde broaches this idea in De Profundis, where he directly connects Art and ethics in an attempt to give his life some form or consistency:

Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. But, somehow, I have got to make both of these things just and right to me. And exactly as in Art one is only concerned with what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself, so it is also in the ethical evolution of one's character. I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me.48
A few pages after this passage, he mentions that "in Marius the Epicurean Pater seeks to reconcile the artistic life with the life of religion in the deep, sweet and austere sense of the word." He does not consider Pater's attempt entirely successful, for he fears that Marius in one passage in the novel is "perhaps a little too much occupied with the comeliness of the vessels of the Christian Sanctuary to notice it is the Sanctuary of Sorrow that he is gazing at." Nevertheless, he strongly suggests that in the artist's personal life there is a definite connection between the functions of Art and the functions of religion.

The various elements of the joy that attends artistic creation are highly individualized and, when closely considered, lead to the general idea that the artist is an egoist. Wilde, however, does not use the word "egoist" in a pejorative sense. To him, the artist's egoism is a legitimate egoism: it is a result of the fact that he has been able to fulfill his own exacting standards and elevated goals. The most important part of this self-esteem is the satisfaction the artist gets from mastering the requirements of style for his particular work, and thereby ensuring the immortality of his creations. Style is, in the artist's case, the true means for the lasting assertion of the man himself—the ego. Furthermore, as a kind of cultural leader, the artist can take pleasure in receiving public praise that he really deserves, an egoistic pleasure unavailable to a mere follower of the tastes of the crowd. In De Profundis, Wilde looks back to the period during which he was such a
cultural leader, especially when he says he was "to many an arbiter of style in Art, the supreme arbiter to some," or when he refers to "that beautiful unreal world of Art where once I was king." Wilde may be exaggerating the heights he reached before 1895, but he admits that even the most independent artist enjoys admiration that is legitimately earned.

A noteworthy egoism in the artist cannot, however, come from his merely asserting a personality which has no real significance, nor can it come from his following a blind subjectivism. In a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, dated shortly after his release from prison, Wilde declared that André Gide's latest book, Les Nourritures Terrestres, failed to interest him. Explaining, he said, "The egoistic note is, of course, and has always been to me, the primal and ultimate note of modern art, but to be an Egoist one must have an Ego. It is not everyone who says 'I, I' who can enter into the kingdom of Art." Wilde holds that true egoism is an extremely rare phenomenon, something almost to be worshipped. It is a rare personal state, emanating from a deep-seated confidence in having mastered the forms of art that make one's work memorable and worthwhile. In short, Wilde considers a strong, profound egoism good for both the well-being of the artist and the vitality of Art.

Almost as important to the artist as the pleasure he derives from creation are the conditions under which he works. In order to preserve
the integrity of his relationship to his art, the artist requires both freedom and a proper atmosphere for independent work.

The artist needs untrammeled freedom to contemplate the nature of things; otherwise he can produce no new vision based on a knowledge of universals. Wilde facetiously says that "it is to do nothing that the elect exist"\(^53\) in order to tease his Philistine and Puritan opponents, but beneath the frivolous statement his serious position is that the artist needs free time to reflect on his material. In the philosophy of Aristotle, contemplation (θεωρία) is man's highest activity because it involves the highest and most essential aspect of his nature, reason.\(^54\) Wilde's statements in this area are probably based on a modification of the Aristotelian idea that the artist must be allowed the freedom to contemplate, because contemplation is his highest and most essential activity as an artist. Thus, in "The Critic As Artist" he has Gilbert tell Ernest that while "contemplation is the gravest sin of which any citizen can be guilty, in the opinion of the highest culture it is the proper occupation of man."\(^55\) Wilde's statements seem silly and irresponsible on first reading, but subsequent reflection on them reveals they have both a hidden serious meaning and an Aristotelian philosophical base.

Stated in different terms, Wilde's position is that the artist should be free of narrowly utilitarian aims and concerns. He thinks artists should not be pressed to produce things of direct economic value, because
their proper concern is the making of beautiful, useless things. In a letter to the editor of the Daily Telegraph, he says that if "a thing is useless, it should be made beautiful, otherwise it has no reason for existing at all."\textsuperscript{56} At the end of his preface to Dorian Gray, he sums up his position by saying "all art is quite useless."\textsuperscript{57} He does not mean that Art is totally valueless in every sphere. He means instead that Art serves no practical purpose. Its main value lies in its being a spiritual restorative to both the artist and the public in a world that is primarily ugly and materialistic.

A proper atmosphere for contemplation and creation involves several specific conditions. First, Wilde believes artists are most likely to thrive in an "intellectual atmosphere."\textsuperscript{58} Influenced by Arnold, he says that the "man of culture" must be in a position to benefit from "the best that is known and thought in the world."\textsuperscript{59} A related condition is that the artist must have companionship in the realm of ideas. In a letter to George Ives he indicates how in his own case such companionship is especially valuable: "I like to talk to you about literature, life, the progress of thought, its power to touch the world, its practical energy—subjects of no interest to others than ourselves."\textsuperscript{60} Friendship can provide such companionship: the artist can benefit from elevating friendships "linked together not by affection merely, or the pleasantness of companionship, but by the capacity of being stirred by the same noble things in art and song."\textsuperscript{61} The wrong type of friendship, however, can
distract him from his creative work. In *De Profundis*, Wilde complains to Lord Alfred Douglas about how distracting he had found their unsatisfactory friendship:

When I was actually engaged in writing, and penning comedies that were to beat Congreve for brilliancy, and Dumas fils for philosophy, and I suppose everybody else for every other quality, I had not sufficient influence with you to get you to leave me undisturbed as an artist should be left.  

Intellectual companionship and true friendships are indispensable values, but the artist must never be interrupted during the process of creation.

Peace, then, is the final and most important condition for artistic creation. Although the artist must sometimes revolt against the militant ignorance represented by a Philistine society, he ultimately needs for his best work an atmosphere of peace, in which he is untroubled by strife or a desire for rebellion. In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde notes that such artists as Shelley and Byron had wasted "half their strength ... in friction" battling "the stupidity, and hypocrisy, and Philistinism of the English." Wilde finds this a shameful state of affairs and a sad comment on modern civilization. His deepest conviction is that "peace is the note of Art as of religion," and "is as requisite to the artist as to the saint."

In Wilde's aesthetic, the method by which the artist chooses his materials, the individualistic attitude which he assumes in the process of creation, and the conditions under which he chooses to work are all interrelated by a single fundamental principle. Some critics may charge
that Wilde undercut Art by defending it in an irresponsible and egotistical way. Others may say that he held no consistent aesthetic position. Still others may say his attitude towards Art was inseparable from his homosexual orientation, that he used Art to lend indirect support to the homosexual sub-culture, and that his critical views are therefore almost completely useless to the general reading public. These critics either read Wilde's works in a superficial way or else are side-tracked by the details of his life. In the final analysis, his view of the artist's relationship to his art is in all respects determined not by a narrow or capricious subjectivism, but by a genuine understanding of the requirements of artistic creation.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER TWO


6 Wilde, Works, p. 978.


11 Wilde, Works, pp. 1021-1022.

12 Ibid., p. 975.

13 Ibid., p. 975.


15 Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in Works, p. 971.
16 Hart-Davis, ed., Letters of Wilde, p. 175.
19 Ibid., p. 259.
20 Ibid., p. 259.
21 Wilde, Works, p. 972.
22 Ibid., p. 977.
23 Ibid., p. 979.
24 Ibid., p. 971.
25 Ibid., p. 981.
27 Ibid., p. 24.
28 Ibid., p. 74.
29 Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, in Works, p. 375.
30 Ibid., p. 354.
31 Vyvyan Holland, "Introduction" to Works of Wilde, p. 13.
33 Ibid., p. 751.
34 Ibid., p. 798.
36 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, in Basic Works, p. 1000.
37 Hart-Davis, ed., Letters of Wilde, p. 266.
38 Ibid., p. 302.
39 Ibid., p. 504.
40 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, in Basic Works, p. 1000.
41 Wilde, Essays and Lectures, p. 128.
42 Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in Works, p. 971.
44 This correspondent has not been identified. Q. v. Hart-Davis, ed., Letters of Wilde, p. 352, n. 4.
46 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, in Works, p. 94.
47 Ibid., p. 25.
49 Ibid., p. 476.
52 Ibid., p. 590.
54 Aristotle, Metaphysics, Bk. XII, Ch. 7, in Basic Works, p. 879.
57 Wilde, Works, p. 1084.
59 Wilde, The Critic As Artist, in Works, p. 1041.

61 Ibid., p. 147.

62 Ibid., p. 500.


65 Ibid., p. 764.

66 Philip Rieff, "Oscar Wilde and the Impossible Culture," *Encounter*, 35, No. 3 (September, 1970), p. 42. Rieff complains, "By the grace of his opposition to militant truths Wilde helped lead an aesthetic movement away from the dominance of inwardness and towards an externalization that works against all of our received conceptions of character."

67 James Agate, *The Masque: Oscar Wilde and the Theatre* (London: The Curtain Press, Ltd., 1947), p. 6. Agate goes so far as to say that "apart from his wit, Wilde was bogus... He knew very little about the arts."

68 Charles McCabe, "The Fearless Spectator: Decadent Days," *San Francisco Examiner*, September 14, 1973, p. 43. McCabe says "the whole enchanting apparatus of the Decadent movement," of which Wilde was the leader, "was largely a rationale for the homosexual way of living."
CHAPTER THREE

The Artist and Society

The most important part of Wilde's aesthetic has to do with the direct and indirect relationships between artist and society. Although he may personally have considered the relationship between the artist and his material or the function of the critic to be more vital concerns, the nature of his many encounters as an artist with the society of his day, which could often be hostile, contemptuous, or unimaginative, forced him to deal most often and most directly with the question of the artist's place in the social framework. Accordingly he wrote much on this issue. His critical approach varies considerably, but the underlying philosophical basis of his aesthetic has enough consistency to make possible an explanation of any flaws or gaps in his position.

René Wellek plausibly identifies three aesthetic stances among which Wilde shifts when he deals with the nature of the relationships between artist and society in his many lectures, reviews, critical essays, and letters. These basic stances are pan-aesthetics, the theory of Art-for Art's-Sake, and decorative formalism. Pan-aestheticism
is the belief that Art "embraces all life, art is the standard of life, and life is to be lived for the sake of art." Wilde is most heavily influenced by this belief when he speaks, especially in his earlier works, of Art transforming all of society. Art-for-Art's-Sake is based on a theory of the autonomy of Art and emphasizes Art's separation from life. It is the aesthetic view he most consistently upholds in Intentions. Pan-aestheticism and Art-for-Art's-Sake should in no way be confused: the former upholds the conquest of reality by Art, but the latter sees Art retreating into the seclusion of the ivory tower. Decorative formalism is Wilde's least frequently upheld position, and it involves an extreme emphasis on mere craftsmanship and virtuosity at the expense of any idea of a proper balance between form and matter, between conscious and unconscious. To understand the fundamentals of Wilde's aesthetic, one should keep in mind these three variations in his position.

When one considers the social importance of Art, the most significant aspect of Wilde's aesthetic is the idea that Art shows imperfect, incomplete Life its perfected, completed state. In other words, Art anticipates Life. Art may present a perfected model of Nature in two specific ways. First, it may fill in Nature's omissions. This idea appears to have an Aristotelian source. In his essay, "Rhetoric and Poetic in Aristotle," Richard McKeon attributes to Aristotle the suggestion that Art may supplement or complete natural processes when it "imitates
Nature." Wilde may quibble about the definition of the word "imitation" when he assumes his decorative formalist stance, but he entirely concurs with the general drift of the Poetics when he declares that through Art "the things that Life has not are invented and fashioned for her delight." Art's second specific method of producing a perfected model of Nature is to correct Nature's mistakes. Within its own realm Art may eliminate or give form to ugliness, and it may accentuate what is beautiful or noble. Lord Henry Wotton, probably speaking for Wilde himself, speaks about tragedy from a very Aristotelian viewpoint in The Picture of Dorian Gray:

"It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style. They affect us just as vulgarity affects us. They give us an impression of sheer brute force, and we revolt against that. Sometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty crosses our lives. If these elements of beauty are real, the whole thing simply appeals to our sense of dramatic effect. Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of a play." When an artistic individual can abstract himself from a tragic situation which has affected him, observe how the other persons involved show their full human potential in dealing with that situation, and give form to what he has experienced in order that others may contemplate it, he helps other men to know more about the essence of tragic situations and thus to act in any future tragic situation in a more fully human and more truly noble way. There is some risk involved in
assuming that Lord Henry's views correspond exactly to Wilde's, but in this case they are entirely consistent with his romantically Aristotelian aesthetic.

In general terms, when Art fills in Nature's omissions and corrects her mistakes, it shows Life a model of an ideal future, and Life, struck by the perfection of that future's details, feels impelled to change itself to become worthy of the model. Therefore, in "The Decay of Lying," Wilde says that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life." In such a way he emphasizes the immensely important social effects of Art, in spite of his more extreme Art-for-Art's-Sake and decorative formalist stances. "A great artist," he explains, "invents a type, and Life tries to copy it." In fact, Art, in undertaking to influence Life for the better, assumes a quasi-religious role. Consequently, Wilde can say in _De Profundis_ that "every single work of art is the fulfilment of a prophecy," and that "every single human being should be the fulfilment of a prophecy." Art, in short, influences Life not by engaging in didacticism, as is sometimes supposed, but by representing to Life its ideal forms. Wilde does not hesitate to add that "Literature is, and has been, and always will remain the supreme representative art." Because he believes that Life follows Art, Wilde condemns the popular belief that Art mirrors Life. Noting its Shakespearean origin, he tells the reader of "The Decay of Lying" through the character Vivian
that Hamlet said the unfortunate aphorism "in order to convince the
bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters." Later in
the same dialogue he characteristically turns Hamlet's aphorism
around so that its meaning is completely reversed: "Life holds a
mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type invented
by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in
fiction." Wilde often uses his gift with paradox in this way in
order to develop his critical philosophy.

Wilde thus believes that to reverse Art's true relationship to
Life is to destroy its function and to remove its reason for existing.
Art does not exist to report on the obvious, to tell about Life as it is.
That is the task of journalism. This thought forms the main idea be­
hind his attacks on Realism and Naturalism when he condemns them from
a social point of view.

Wilde advances two major reasons for believing that Naturalism and
Realism are failures in terms of the relationship between the artist
and society. The first is that the Naturalist artist with a mind for
scientific observation fails to see one basic thing: if a work is too
true, if it is too correct down to every last detail, the public will
fail to see its universal interest or its universal validity, and in­
stead regard the events in it as historical occurrences or mere accidents
unlikely to happen again. If a writer errs on the side of historical
accuracy and produces a novel with the sole aim of giving a faithful
representation of his age, his work will become quickly dated and consequently fail to have any lasting impact on the reading public. "Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life," Wilde warns Zola's admirers. Even as early as 1883, when pan-aestheticsm was his dominant stance, he admonished his listeners in his "Lecture to Art Students" that "those who advise you to make your art representative of the nineteenth century are advising you to produce an art which your children, when you have them, will think old-fashioned." If, on the other hand, a novelist strives for accuracy in a description of the merely extraordinary, his readers will be unable to sustain interest in his works. In the long run, the public will discover that isolated facts or occurrences, however striking they might initially be, have no lasting significance. If a work of art fails to unite the unique with the universal, it will contain no essential element which can make it appeal to the emotions of any person in any age or any place. It is for this reason that Aristotle says that "what convinces is the possible," and that "for the purposes of poetry a convincing impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility." And it is for this reason that Wilde rephrases Aristotle's observation in the form of a seemingly absurd paradox: "Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable." It is impossible that the specific events in Hamlet should ever take place in the modern world, but the universal emotions expressed in the course of the play will continue to be felt
again and again. In the final analysis, the Naturalist whose sole purpose is to strive either for historical accuracy or for description of unique events ironically "ends by writing novels which are so like life that no one can possibly believe in their probability."²¹

Wilde has a second reason for believing that Naturalism and Realism are failures in regard to the relationship between artist and society: both schools fail to explore deeply enough the traditional assumption that the central function of Art is to present ideals for contemplation. Perhaps presupposing too much, Wilde says that Naturalism and Realism represent the actual—even the sordid—in a form that most people take to be for the projection of ideals. It is patently absurd, he says, to make into an ideal what already exists, but this is just what Naturalists and Realists, in usurping the traditional art forms and stylistic devices, unwittingly do. Wilde laments that "all bad Art comes from going to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals."²² Even if one could believe in the contradiction of trying faithfully to present formless Life through the forms of Art, even if one could accept the reduction of Art to a means of reproducing actual experiences, Naturalism and Realism would still tend to be counterproductive in practice. First, there must be some separation of Art and Life if the former is to be in a position to mirror or reflect the latter.²³ Next, since both schools assume Art has little to do with ideals or universals, it is consequently impossible for writers to decide among themselves what is the most real aspect of
reality which should be presented within the limitations of formal Art. Thus, the combination of Realist and Naturalist assumptions with the physical limitations of Art, Wilde predicts, "would reduce genius to the position of a cracked looking-glass."²⁴

Much of Wilde's thinking about the relationship between artist and society derives from his Romantic view of Art. Accordingly he believes that Art affects society in a generally positive way, and he tends to discount the possibility that it could have specific deleterious effects. He spends a great deal of time showing that Art brings about general social improvements, especially in his earlier essays and lectures.

The most important influence the artist has on society is to civilize man by increasing his imaginative capacity. Wilde associates imagination with true humanity and true civilization because it is "the quality that enables one to see things and people in their real as in their ideal relations."²⁵ For this reason he praises the Church as well as the artist, since they do good "for the culture of a country" by keeping alive "that mythopoeic faculty which is so essential for the imagination."²⁶ A logical consequence of increased imagination is increased sensitivity. On the widest plane, therefore, men become much more reverent of all life because "a thing in Nature becomes much lovelier if it reminds us of a thing in Art."²⁷ On the narrower plane of human social interaction, truly imaginative Art increases man's
capacity to empathize with every other man.\textsuperscript{28} In \textit{De Profundis} Wilde considers this consequence of imagination at length, but he also emphasizes it in his 1882 lecture, "The English Renaissance of Art":

Philosophy may teach us to bear with equanimity the misfortunes of our neighbours, and science resolve the moral sense into a secretion of sugar, but art is what makes the life of each citizen a sacrament and not a speculation . . . .\textsuperscript{29}

Ultimately, by stimulating men's imagination and therefore sharpening their sensitivity, Art can spread love. In \textit{De Profundis} Wilde even equates love and imagination:

The imagination itself is the world-light, \textit{τὸ φῶς τοῦ κοσμοῦ}: the world is made by it, and yet the world cannot understand it: that is because the imagination is simply a manifestation of Love, and it is love, and the capacity for it, that distinguishes one human being from another.\textsuperscript{30}

Consequently, the artist, knowing the important positive effects of imagination, can indirectly combat Philistinism, shallowness, brutality, and other general social evils, since their common origin is the absence of imagination in most people. Wilde believes Philistinism is "simply that side of man's nature that is not illumined by imagination."\textsuperscript{31} He tells Lord Alfred Douglas several times in \textit{De Profundis} that "shallowness is the supreme vice,"\textsuperscript{32} because he believes that it grows out of a lack of self-reflection, and that self-reflection is what an aesthetic experience often occasions. Moreover, he asserts that brutality in modern civilization "comes from the decay of imagination in the race, caused by the pressure of an artificial and mechanical
Society." Thus the artist, by exercising his imagination in creation and by increasing the imagination of those who approach and understand his creations, brings about a more tolerable social atmosphere.

In the final analysis, the artist contributes to social peace because he is an example of man at his best. Since he is an individualist, he neither sacrifices others to himself, nor sacrifices himself to others in often worthless or indirectly evil philanthropic projects. He is man creating entirely out of the resources of his own talents. Wilde emphasizes this point in "The Critic As Artist" and warns that many people are unaware of how infinitely valuable independent artistic genius, or any kind of genius, is in a society:

It takes a thoroughly selfish age, like our own, to deify self-sacrifice. It takes a thoroughly grasping age, such as that in which we live, to set above the fine intellectual virtues, those shallow and emotional virtues that are an immediate practical benefit to itself. They miss their aim, too, these philanthropists and sentimentalists of our day, who are always chattering to one about one's duty to one's neighbour. For the development of the race depends on the development of the individual, and where self-culture has ceased to be the ideal, the intellectual standard is instantly lowered, and, often, ultimately lost.

Not only is the artist an example of man at his best, but he is also one of the rare individuals who approach men on the best level of their nature. "The object of Art," Wilde declares, "is to stir the most divine and remote of the chords which make music in our soul," i.e., the imagination. In fine, the artist vanquishes Philistinism and brings
about the moral improvement of men because in appealing to their imagination he approaches them through the most divine aspect of their being.

The artist also liberates men by providing them with a means of expression and in so doing influences society in a second important way. To support this idea Wilde invokes the authority of Aristotle: "Scientifically speaking, the basis of life—the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it—is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various modes through which this expression can be attained." Indeed, there is much of the Aristotelian concepts of both mimesis and katharsis inherent in Wilde's beliefs concerning human expression through Art. Wilde assigns special importance to the fact that the artist himself finds means for expressing his deepest and most essential personal emotions in his art: "No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything." But he also believes it is important for other artists and other men to be able to find expression through a particular artist's productions, for only in this way can the intellect feel itself alive. Each individual artist, then, provides opportunities for each member of society to see some aspect of himself or of his dreams expressed in artistic creations. Within the practical sphere, the works of the artist can perform the negative function of providing for some individuals an avenue through which they may allow all sorts of ideas to expend their energy harmlessly. Similarly, within a wider, less purely practical sphere, the
artist can make it possible for people to express themselves in increasingly positive ways. "The self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression," Wilde repeats in "The Decay of Lying," "and . . . Art offers it certain forms through which it may realize that energy." Drama is an especially effective vehicle for the expression of repressed or forgotten actions or emotions because it is "the meeting place of art and life." In general, Art provides an opportunity for expression to otherwise pent-up and expressionless people.

Since it is directed toward no utilitarian goal, Art is, in addition to being an avenue for expression, both a means for leisure and a spiritual restorative for man. Wilde believes that work is neither the only goal nor even the chief end of society's existence, and that labor is at the very least undertaken to make life easier and more tolerable in some respect. In other words, when there is a division of labor, man should find that he has more and more time to spend in leisure. Wilde proposes that Art should occupy man's leisure hours and thereby provide him an opportunity to reflect on the goals of his labor.

Wilde is no doubt influenced by Aristotle when he makes such assertions. Indeed, in his Ethics the Stagirite emphasizes that leisure, not work, is the final goal of man's utilitarian efforts: "And Happiness is thought to depend on leisure; for we are busy that we may have leisure, and make war that we may have peace." Furthermore, he mentions in the Politics that the teaching of music has "one purpose—to provide an
occupation for leisure." In short, Aristotle's ideas on leisure appear to form the main part of the foundation on which Wilde's own theories on the subject rest.

Hence Wilde confidently propounded his fairly consistent doctrine that leisure spent in the appreciation of Art is as important as, if not more important than, the work spent in gaining that leisure. In his earlier writings, he can occasionally allow pan-aestheticism to predominate, and thus can say that the pleasure of working on properly-conceived projects and the pleasure of contemplating Art in leisure are virtually equivalent. But most of the time he insists on the unqualified superiority of leisure over work, even pleasurable work. Hence he declares in "The English Renaissance of Art" that "if our days are barren without industry, industry without art is barbarism." Later, in "The Critic As Artist," he warns in a brilliant paradox that "industry" is "simply the refuge of people who have nothing whatsoever to do." The thought that the artist must have leisure to create and that each individual must have leisure to contemplate the artist's creations is an extremely important consideration in Wilde's aesthetic.

The concept of Art as leisure leads to the idea that Art can be a spiritual restorative for man. Wilde believes that even in ordinary life situations an artist's works allow men to return the intellect to contemplation of itself in a mood of spiritual repose. But in tragic
or trying circumstances works of Art assume a yet greater importance.

For instance, Wilde was aware of Art's power as a spiritual restorative when, during his visit to the Nebraska State Prison in 1882, he noted that in one cell he found a translation of Dante, and a Shelley. Strange and beautiful it seemed to me that the sorrow of a single Florentine in exile should, hundreds of years afterwards, lighten the sorrow of some common prisoner in a modern gaol. . . .

When he was himself in prison, he certainly saw Art as a spiritual comfort: he complained to the Home Secretary about the lack of literature available to him and added that he was "deprived of everything that could soothe, distract, or heal a wounded and shaken man." Thus, while Art is most important as a leisure activity, it also has great importance for some as a means of restoring hope.

In general Wilde believes that the artist contributes to the evolution of a happier society. Hence, turning Plato's condemnation of artists as liars against him, he says that "the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure." Yet beneath all the paradoxes, Wilde concedes also that Art can by the way have definitely practical and concrete effects on society, since he actually believes Art is useless only from a purely economic point of view.

In the first place, Art can have a direct influence on society by forming part of a truly humanistic education. In talking about Art's role in education, Wilde lays great stress on the importance of
beautiful surroundings on the young learner. He believes such sur-
roundings impress on a student's subconscious the beauty of form and
the ugliness of formlessness, so that he instinctively knows beauty
whenever he encounters it in the outside world. In other words, taste is not to be directly taught, but indirectly impressed on the
mind of the student. Wilde also emphasizes that a child should
have early and frequent opportunities to exercise artistic crafts-
manship. These experiences can give the child reverence for what
form does exist in nature. For instance, "the boy who sees the thing
of beauty which a bird on the wing becomes when transferred to the
wood or canvas will probably not throw the customary stone." Such
an idea comes directly from Ruskin's "Lectures on Art." In fact,
many of Wilde's views on Art in education may be found in the essays
and lectures he wrote in the early 1880's, only a few years after he
studied under Ruskin at Oxford; hence one may conjecture that one of
the important sources of these views was Ruskin, although Aristotle's
Politics might also have contributed to Wilde's thinking on this
topic.

The enlightened artist will, however, have his say not only con-
cerning the education of young people, but also concerning the relation-
ships of adults to each other in their daily work situations. He can
bring together occupational groups who sometimes do not understand all
the necessary and beneficial interconnections between them—for
instance, artists and handicraftsmen. The aesthetic movement, Wilde declares in his 1882 lecture, "Art and the Handicraftsman,"

has been the first movement which has brought the handicraftsman and the artist together, for remember that by separating the one from the other you do damage to both; you rob the one of all spiritual motive and all imaginative joy, you isolate the other from all real technical perfection.  

By way of illustration, he adds that the "two greatest schools of art in the world, the sculptor at Athens and the school of painting at Venice, had their origin entirely in a long succession of simple and earnest handicraftsmen." Additionally, in the process of bringing together occupational groups who rarely coordinate their efforts, the artist can directly contribute to the improvement of working conditions. He does so simply by emphasizing the importance of making places of work more beautiful and therefore more tolerable. Wilde holds such views most often during his pan-aesthetic phase, but they have a wide application and do not necessarily conflict with his later formulations of his aesthetic. In "The English Renaissance of Art" he makes this pregnant suggestion:

Hewers of wood and drawers of water there must be always indeed among us. Our modern machinery has not much lightened the labour of man after all: but at least let the pitcher that stands by the well become beautiful and surely the labour of the day will be lightened. . . ."

The artist, simply by virtue of being concerned with the nature of his surroundings and with the future of Art, should consequently have an
abiding interest in seeing that the workman labors in "the right surroundings." 61

Wilde concedes, furthermore, that the artist inspires even the most ordinary people to specific efforts at imitation. In "The Decay of Lying," he notes that "young men have committed suicide because Rolla did so, have died by their own hand because by his own hand Werther died." 62 The vulgarest instance of imitation of literary events and characters occurs

in the case of the silly boys who, after reading the adventures of Jack Sheppard or Dick Turpin, pillage the stalls of unfortunate apple-women, break into sweetshops at night, and alarm old gentlemen who are returning home from the city by leaping out on them in suburban lanes, with black masks and unloaded revolvers. 63

Wilde explains that the "boy-burglar is simply the inevitable result of life's imitative instinct." 64 Yet he places relatively little emphasis on people's slavish imitation of the particulars in a literary work; by contrast he devotes a great deal of attention to man's imaginative contemplation of universals portrayed in various art forms. He believes the insignificant harm caused by the former is far outweighed by the positive results produced by the latter.

The question as to whether some people might imitate specific acts narrated in literary works occupied a secondary place in Wilde's aesthetic; nevertheless, the puritanical society of his day was so pre-occupied with the moral effects of Art that he had to devote considerable attention to this issue. Wilde rejected the idea that morality
must be the uppermost consideration in the artist's mind simply because there might have been a few unimportant instances of immorality inspired by literature. He believed a moralistic attitude toward Art obscures the fact that a work's strength derives from its artistic excellence, and not from the correctness of issues externally applied to it.

In Wilde's aesthetic, morality is a minor issue in Art, if indeed it is an issue at all. Thus, obviously angered by the moralistic fury unleashed against him by the critics of The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde says in a letter to the editor of the St. James' Gazette, "I must admit that, either from temperament or from taste, or from both, I am quite incapable of understanding how any work of art can be criticized from a moral standpoint." Morality is merely a single element among many elements making up a whole work of art. It is therefore absurd to criticize the complete work of art on the basis of a consideration which can at most apply to one of its subordinate parts. Employing this kind of reasoning, Wilde compares the novelist making use of moral issues to the painter making use of color combinations:

Virtue and wickedness are to him [the novelist] simply what the colours on his palette are to the painter. They are no more, and they are no less. He sees that by their means a certain artistic effect can be produced, and he produces it.66

In a letter to the editor of the Daily Chronicle, he says that he maintained such an attitude toward his subject matter in the writing of
Dorian Gray:

The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realizes itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself.67

He succinctly summarizes his position toward the issue of morality in Art in the Preface to Dorian Gray: "Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art."68

In their moralistic fury, Puritans and Philistines confuse the artist with his subject-matter and consequently utter not only irrelevancies but doctrines positively destructive to Art. In Wilde's aesthetic, Art is in no way to be limited by any special outside consideration. For this reason Wilde informed the editor of the St. James's Gazette, who had asked him what he thought literature's rights are, that "the rights of literature are the rights of intellect."69 "To Art," he adds, "belong all things that are and all things that are not . . . ."70 Art, then, has a greater latitude of choice than morality, since the productions of the artist are not necessarily aimed at any existing social conditions as are the teachings of the moralist.71 Thus to limit Art for moral reasons is in effect to limit it for the sake of Life, and many of the arguments Wilde levels against Naturalism and Realism, moreover, apply as well to a moralistic attitude toward Art. Like Realists and Naturalists, the Puritan and Philistine moralistic critics fail "to
recognize the essential difference between art and life."^72 Therefore, such critics are just as likely to subvert the true functions of Art.

In making rebuttals to the assertions of moralistic critics, Wilde can sometimes declare such an extreme separation between Art and morality—and therefore between Art and Life—that he in effect assumes his decorative formalist stance. In the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he says, "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy is an unpardonable mannerism of style."^73 Then he tells the editor of the *St. James's Gazette* that "the only thing that ever prejudices me against a book is the lack of literary style."^74 Such emphasis on style to the exclusion of all else reaches ultimate expression in "The Critic As Artist," where he says that it is just because the artist "has no new message, that he can do beautiful work. He gains inspiration from form, and from form purely, as an artist should."^75 Yet there is evidence to indicate that much of the time he writes and speaks this way he is being facetious, and that at most he intends to draw attention to style as a vital element in works of Art. In "The Truth of Masks," he makes statements which are not epigrammatic and which one may reasonably assume reflect his true position. These statements refer to the necessary subordination of details to
the central motive of a play, but they could just as well apply to the necessary subordination of ethics to the central vision in a novel or poem:

What we have to see is that the details are not allowed to usurp the principal place. They must be subordinate to the general motive of the play. But subordination in art does not mean disregard of truth; it means conversion of fact into effect, and assigning to each detail its proper value. 76

Actually, when Wilde speaks epigrammatically about the issue of Art's relationship to morality, he usually concedes the use of the word "moral" to those most inclined, but least qualified, to handle the adjective—the Puritans and the Philistines. Then he uses the word "aesthetic" in connection with the human desire to make "life itself a shaped and satisfying whole." By such a maneuver he means simultaneously to shock the moralists and to make his views on the moral issue clear to the intelligent reader. 77 Therefore, one should not put too much credence in any of his statements which assert an absolute and unbridgeable gap between Art and morality.

Wilde undoubtedly recognizes that a few of his moralistic opponents are genuine, if dull-witted, defenders of ethical purity. He knows, however, that the real motives of most of his attackers are dishonorable. These men are angered because it "is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." 78 A literary work sometimes gives readers insights into their own characters, and some of them do not respond kindly if the shoe fits. If a society denounces the productions of an artist as
"immoral," it is only because those works show it its shame. In the Preface to *Dorian Gray*, Wilde suggests that many moralists do not even know what they want in Art:

> The nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.  
> The nineteenth-century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.

He believes that such moralists lack a sense of individuality, appropriate someone else's moralistic philosophy, and ferociously utter second-hand opinions on Art. They "go through their lives in a sort of coarse comfort, like petted animals, without ever realizing that they are thinking other people's thoughts" and "living by other people's standards." Wilde is also certain that an over-concern with right and wrong represents an incomplete development of the moral sense in an individual; therefore, he asserts that "it is immoral to be consciously good." In general, the questionable motives of many of his attackers only make him more certain of his ideas about the necessary autonomy of Art.

Many of the moralistic critics' attacks on Wilde included either implied or explicit approval of governmental censorship of Art. In addition, the Lord Chamberlain banned Wilde's play, *Salome*, in June, 1892, on the ground that it contained biblical characters. Wilde therefore found it necessary to address himself specifically to the issue of censorship in literature.

Wilde asserted that governmental censorship over Art is inevitably
harmful. Censorship destroys the artist's freedom to choose the details with which he can most effectively re-create the images of ideals existing in his mind. If censorship curtails the journalist's freedom to select the details which will best convey the facts about present-day reality, then it certainly impedes the artist's freedom to select those details which will best convey a unified image of an ideal or future reality. One recalls Vivian's statement in "The Decay of Lying" that "selection ... is the very spirit of art." Indeed, there is much of the Aristotelian concept of entelechy in Wilde's critical ideas, and he probably has that concept in mind when, in De Profundis, he refers to "that inevitableness that in Art characterizes the treatment of any great theme." Such an idea of an essential unifying factor or a vital principle operating within Art has a significant application to Wilde's view of governmental censorship over Art. An art which is hampered by censorship, in other words, can have no inevitable, ultimately truthful quality about it. In fact, governmental interference with Art is more destructive than any immoral play or novel:

A Government might just as well try to teach painters how to paint, or sculptors how to model, as attempt to interfere with the style, treatment and subject-matter of the literary artist; and no writer, however eminent or obscure, should ever give his sanction to a theory that would degrade literature far more than any didactic or so-called immoral book could possibly do.

Art admittedly does inspire specific efforts at imitation, but they
occur by the way and are not its main purpose, which is to increase imagination in general, and to give Life a clear vision and a wider range for development. The advocates of censorship and the censors themselves fail to see that Art portrays universals in particular concrete forms, and that Life is not primarily to regard the specific particulars to the detriment of the universals. In *Dorian Gray* Wilde may well be speaking to the moralistic advocates of censorship through Lord Henry Wotton when the character answers Dorian's charge that he has poisoned him with a book: "As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile." Wilde says Lord Henry represents him as the public believes him to be, and consequently much of what the character says may be a deliberate exaggeration of Wilde's own views designed to shock the Philistine reader. Yet the underlying, basically reasonable idea is clear: Art brings about the betterment of man by encouraging him to contemplate universals and to long after ideals, but it does not aim primarily to incite him to attempt specific imitations. Censorship which aims at preventing particular efforts at imitation by denying Art the right to be universal does worse than miss its goal. It positively degrades a culture.

In undertaking to defend Art against Puritans and Philistines, Wilde at one point or another assumes all three of his critical stances. When he insists on the separation of Art and morals, he often slips into
decorative formalism. When he describes Art's positive effects on society, especially in Essays and Lectures, he sometimes advocates pan-aestheticism. When he defends Art's integrity and independence in his most important critical works, however, he assumes the stance of supporting the autonomy of Art, or Art-for-Art's-Sake. This last position is his most consistent one, and it depends on Aristotle's philosophy to a significant extent.

Wilde's handling of the moral issue in Art makes clear his conviction that Art is an autonomous activity. Much of what he says about the relationship between artist and society is based on the concept of the complete separateness of ethics and Art.\textsuperscript{89} The artist is a specialist in his own field, just as the scientist and the ethical philosopher are specialists in theirs. In accordance with the theory of Art-for-Art's-Sake, Wilde believes that if the artist has the scientist or the moral philosopher in him, he should not allow science or morality to dominate over his essential artistic personality.\textsuperscript{90}

Wilde's beliefs in this area no doubt derive from the basically Aristotelian doctrine that each art and each science have their own unique central purpose, and that it is according to how well that purpose is fulfilled that a particular human creation is finally judged. A corollary to this doctrine is that each art and science have their own special methods for attaining their unique purpose. Aristotle explains and illustrates this doctrine and its corollary primarily in the Ethics,
the Metaphysics, and the Poetics. First he sets up the basic division between the arts and sciences: he declares in the Ethics that "scientific knowledge is . . . the capacity to demonstrate," and that "art is identical with a state of capacity to make." Next he proceeds to prove the proposition that each art and each science have their own special methods and their own particular area of competence. He states in the Metaphysics, for instance, that "each of the sciences must know how to know what it knows and use this knowledge as a principle." Also in the same work he illustrates the autonomy of each of the useful arts by mentioning the example of a cook who accidentally produces a medical remedy in the process of preparing a meal:

A cook, seeking only to please the palate, may concoct something having a remedial virtue, but this is not essential to his culinary art; hence we declare it an accident—that is, though in a sense it is the case he did it, he did not do it as a cook.

Eventually he carries over to the fine arts the idea that each of the arts and sciences is autonomous. In the Ethics, he suggests that Art must be judged as Art:

Wisdom . . . in the arts we ascribe to their most finished exponents, e.g. to Phidias as a sculptor and to Polyclitus as a maker of portrait-statues, and here we mean nothing by wisdom except excellence in art . . . .

Likewise, in discussing possible ways of criticizing literature in the Poetics, he implies that negative judgments are important only if they
refer to "the essentials of the poetic art," and not merely to scientific errors or morally objectionable events in a poem or play. In regard to the necessary autonomy of the fine arts, therefore, Aristotle and Wilde have much in common.

With the aid of some commentators, one will find the connections between Aristotle's and Wilde's critical positions even more striking. In his commentary on the Poetics, Sir William David Ross explains how Aristotle clarifies the fundamental differences between the arts and sciences, and between the useful arts and the fine arts: "The fine arts in general are among those which aim at pleasure, in distinction from the useful arts which produce the necessaries of life and from the sciences which aim at knowledge." The Chicago Aristotelian critic, Richard McKeon, discusses the philosopher's doctrine of the autonomy of each art and science in such a way that its influence on Wilde's thought becomes clear:

Among the independent sciences instituted by Aristotle's philosophic method, . . . rhetorical arguments could be considered as devices of persuasion apart from consideration of truth or falsity of conclusions, accurate or candid presentation of the character and predilections of the speaker, or preferable ends or devices of the auditor, and poetry could be considered in terms of the structure of the poem apart from its tendency to stimulate moral or immoral conduct or to produce pleasure or other passions.

After reading these commentators, one is strongly tempted to believe that Wilde's theories about the autonomy of Art come directly from the Ethics, the Poetics, the Metaphysics, and even, to some extent, from
the Politics. The fact that Wilde mentions Aristotle favorably several times in both The Rise of Historical Criticism and Intentions adds to this evidence.

If one keeps Aristotle's probable influence in mind, one can see how the doctrine of the separateness of all disciplines influenced Wilde throughout his adult life, and how it formed the foundation of Art-for-Art's-Sake. In The Rise of Historical Criticism, Wilde noted how Aristotle very greatly advanced the study of history by separating it from theology and the study of the supernatural. Also in this essay, Wilde presupposed the independence of each field of study in the course of discussing morality's relationship to history and Art:

To set before either the painter or the historian the inculcation of moral lessons as an aim to be consciously pursued, is to miss entirely the true motive and characteristic of both art and history, which is in the one case the creation of beauty, in the other the discovery of the laws of the evolution of progress . . . .

Then, in an 1885 letter to the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, in which he criticizes André Raffalovich's volume of poetry, Tuberose and Meadow-sweet, he illustrates how science and Art have mutually exclusive approaches to the beauty of nature:

Henceforth there really must be two derivations for every word, one for the poet and one for the scientist. And in the present case the poet will dwell on the tiny trumpets of ivory into which the white flower breaks, and leave to the man of science horrid allusions to its supposed lumpiness and indiscreet revelations of its private life below ground. . . . On the roots of verbs Philology may be allowed to speak, but on the roots of flowers she must keep silence.
Likewise, in an 1890 letter to the editor of the St. James's Gazette, which he wrote in defense of The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde asserts the separateness of grammar and aesthetics, and subordinates the former to the latter:

As regards grammar, I hold that, in prose at any rate, correctness should always be subordinate to artistic effect and musical cadence; and any peculiarities of syntax that may occur in Dorian Gray are deliberately intended, and are introduced to show the value of the artistic theory in question.  

Hence Wilde's views in this area are already well developed in his undergraduate years, and assume a greater and greater place in his aesthetic as he becomes more and more successful as an artist.

Two years of prison did not really change his concept of Art's autonomy in relation to all other fields of endeavor. In an 1897 letter to Ernest Dowson he makes these humorous, yet vaguely prophetic remarks: "Psychology is in its infancy, as a science. I hope in the interests of Art, it will always remain so." And in an 1899 letter to Robert Ross, he reiterates that "a work of Art is an adequate expression of Art; that is its aim. Only that."

When Wilde combines Aristotle's doctrine of the autonomy of each art and science with the concept of entelechy, he makes the further conclusion that Art has a separate life of its own. He believes, in other words, that Art has its source of life within itself. This idea carries the implication that the artist successfully enters the realm of Art
only by adopting standards which have no necessary application to
a practical existence in society.

Wilde's early writings show that he is not absolutely clear
about the ramifications of the separation of Art and Life in respect
to the social position of the artist. In "The Rise of Historical
Criticism," an essay he wrote as an undergraduate in 1879, he insists
that both the historian and the artist should mingle with Life:

He [the historian] is to be no book worm living aloof
from the experiences of the world in the artificial
isolation of a university town, but a politician, a
soldier, and a traveller, a man not merely of thought
but of action, one who can do great things as well as
write of them, who in the sphere of history could be
what Byron and Aeschylus were in the sphere of poetry,
at once le chantre et le heros. 105

But in "The English Renaissance of Art," a lecture he delivered less
than three years afterwards in January, 1882, he contradicts his
earlier position:

The recognition of a separate realm for the artist, a con­
sciousness of the absolute difference between the world of
art and the world of real fact, between the classical
grace and absolute reality, forms not merely the essential
element of any aesthetic charm but is the characteristic
of all great imaginative work and of all great eras of
artistic creation—of the age of Phidias as of the age of
Michael Angelo, of the age of Sophocles as of the Age of
Goethe. 106

Wilde evidently was struggling with the contradictory influences of
Ruskin and Pater when he wrote these early expositions of his views.

In his later writings, however, Wilde makes no mistake about
the necessity for a self-sufficiently vital Art, and therefore concedes to Life or Society nothing that properly belongs to Art. In "The Decay of Lying," he says, "Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life of its own, just as Thought has, and develops purely along its own lines." He occasionally underscores the concept of Art's independence by saying that Art has a soul. In Dorian Gray, Lord Henry tells Dorian of an experience he had with a street-corner preacher: "I thought of telling the prophet that Art had a soul, but that man had not. I am afraid, however, that he would not have understood me." Although one can incidentally discern in this passage the logical process by which Wilde can edge into decorative formalism and ask man to live his life for Art, one can nevertheless assume that Lord Henry is extravagantly presenting Wilde's essentially reasonable position that Art has its own reasons for existing. This position is part of the unchanging core of his aesthetic; it survives all of his shifts from one critical stance to another.

Art-for-Art's-Sake, therefore, is the critical position Wilde most consistently upholds: Art both has a life of its own, and exists in its own realm. Sometimes he goes so far as to assert that a purely contemplative appreciation of Art is the only area of endeavor for the best imaginative minds. Thus he writes to the editor of the Scots Observer that "cultivated idleness seems to me to be the proper occupation for man." In his serious moments, however, he does not really support
any idea of pure idleness. "I don't know Stanhope personally and am afraid he may take the popular idea of me as a real idler. Would you tell him it is not so?" he writes to George Curzon. Ultimately, the doctrine that Art is separate from Life and from all other fields of endeavor is not based on irresponsibility and egocentrism. Rather, it underlies any Art free enough to create truly great and comprehensive things. Indeed, Wilde says in one of his reviews that the phrase "Art-for-Art's-Sake" refers not to the final cause of Art, but to a "formula of creation." Lord Henry Wotton in *Dorian Gray* therefore best sums up Wilde's views on the relationship between artist and society when he says that "Beauty is a form of Genius." In the Wildean aesthetic, the idea of Art-for-Art's-Sake means nothing more and nothing less.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE


2 Ibid., pp. 411-412.

3 Ibid., pp. 409-410.

4 Ibid., p. 413.


7 Works, p. 84.


9 Ibid., p. 982.

10 Ibid., p. 982.


12 Ibid., p. 460.

13 Works, p. 981.

14 Ibid., p. 985.

15 Ibid., p. 977.

16 Ibid., p. 992.

18. Poetics, Ch. 9, in Basic Works, p. 1464.
19. Poetics, Ch. 25, in Basic Works, pp. 1485-1486.
21. Ibid., p. 973.
22. Ibid., p. 991.
29. Essays and Lectures, p. 144.
31. Ibid., p. 486.
32. Ibid., pp. 425, 448, 453, 469, 508.
33. Ibid., p. 694.
35. Works, p. 1043.
36. "Lecture to Art Students," in Essays and Lectures, p. 211.
38. Aristotle, Politics, Bk. VIII, Ch. 7, and Poetics, Ch. 4, in Basic Works, pp. 1315, 1457-1458.


42 *Works*, p. 992.


44 Bk. X, Ch. 7, in *Basic Works*, pp. 1104-1105.

45 Bk. VIII, Ch. 3, in *Basic Works*, p. 1307.


48 *Essays and Lectures*, p. 152.

49 *Works*, p. 1023.


51 Ibid., p. 403.


58 *Essays and Lectures*, p. 185.
59 Ibid., pp. 184-186.
60 Ibid., p. 152.
61 Ibid., p. 153.
62 Works, p. 985.
63 Ibid., p. 983.
64 Ibid., p. 308.
66 Ibid., p. 266.
67 Ibid., p. 263.
68 Works, p. 17.
69 Hart-Davis, ed., Letters of Wilde, p. 262.
70 Ibid., p. 261.
73 Works, p. 17.
74 Hart-Davis, ed., Letters of Wilde, p. 262.
75 Works, p. 1052.
76 Works, p. 1073.
78 Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, in Works, p. 17.
79 The Picture of Dorian Gray, in Works, p. 163.
80 Works, p. 17.
81 "The Soul of Man under Socialism," in Works, p. 1087.


84 Works, p. 978.


87 Ibid., p. 260.

88 Works, p. 163.


90 Irving Singer, "The Aesthetics of 'Art for Art's Sake'," JAAC, 12, 344.

91 Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. VI, Ch. 3, in Basic Works, p. 1024.

92 Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. VI, Ch. 4, in Basic Works, p. 1025.


95 Bk. VI, Ch. 7, in Basic Works, p. 1027.

96 Ch. 25, in Basic Works, Ch. 25, p. 1483.


99 Works, p. 1127.
100. Works, p. 1115.


102. Ibid., p. 258.

103. Ibid., p. 665.

104. Ibid., p. 778.

105. Works, p. 1141.

106. Essays and Lectures, p. 128.


112. Works, p. 31.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Relationship of Critic to Artist

To gain a clear understanding of Wilde's view of the relationship between critic and artist, one must first note that Wilde differentiates between two classes of critics: first, the journalistic critics and their close allies, the popular biographers; secondly, the true literary critics. Wilde holds radically different opinions about each class, placing the former very low in his esteem but elevating the latter to a position of unusually high regard.

Wilde usually viewed journalistic critics with contempt, and his attitude toward them may well have contributed to the increasingly distorted view that the public got of him toward the end of his life. He believed that the vast majority of journalistic critics are incompetent to deal with matters of Art, either because they are uneducated in the arts, or because the nature of their work makes it impossible for them to acquire the leisure time and the disposition to appreciate Art or to pass judgment on it.¹ He spoke of "scribes" who pass "with purposeless alacrity from the police news to the Parthenon."² He fulminated against the "extremely slipshod and
careless style" of ordinary magazine writers. In short, "the press only represents the worst side of English life."  

No doubt part of this contempt resulted from his adoption of some upper-class biases as well as from the abuse he encountered during his American lectures and at other times. Sherard attributed it entirely to the former factor, saying snobbishness was responsible for his being unable to understand the plight of the poorly-paid journalist:

Much of the bitterness manifested against him in the press, was caused by his contemptuous and unfair remarks about the profession of journalism. . . . I was always sorry to hear his utterances on the subject, . . . because it seemed to me unworthy of him to share a prejudice, essentially British and vulgar, which arises from the fact that most of the journalists in England, ill-paid and anonymous, are in a humble position in life, with no footing in that sphere of society which he, first of all, should have despised.

There is evidence, however, that points against Sherard's view. In the first place, Wilde was editor of Woman's World from 1887 to 1889, and was therefore himself in a position very close to that of the ill-paid journalist to which Sherard refers. In the second place, he shows sympathy for the intelligent journalist who is required to do things against both his taste and his principles in order to keep his job. There are, he says, journalists "who take a real pleasure in" publishing scandalous things, but there are other journalists, I feel certain, men of education and cultivation, who really dislike publishing
these things, who know that it is wrong to do so, and only do it because the unhealthy conditions under which their occupation is carried on oblige them to supply the public with what the public wants, and to compete with other journalists in making that supply as full and satisfying to the gross popular appetite as possible. It is a very degrading position for any body of educated men to be placed in, and I have no doubt that most of them feel it acutely."

Obviously, Wilde's condemnation of journalists is too deeply thought out to come entirely from superficial class bias.

One finds, therefore, that Wilde's contempt for the journalistic critic arises primarily from principles rather than prejudices. He observes that, in the present circumstances, the journalistic critic commands the public taste, and in so doing, virtually takes a position of predominance over the artist. He condemns this state of affairs as tantamount to having Life lead Art, a situation both absurd and detrimental to the artist's interests. As if to warn what might happen if the trend goes too far, he notes in passing that "the art which would represent the spirit of modern newspapers would be ... grotesque art, malice mocking at you from every gateway, slander sneering at you from every corner." As it is, Art is being damaged by the Philistine journalistic critic who, without being asked, tries to tell the artist what to do. In deference to the popular will he both serves and commands, he endeavors to force the creative individual imagination of the artist to deal with everyday details that the public will find relevant. Wilde consequently declares that the "attempt
made by the journalists to dictate to the artist and to limit his
subject-matter is of course monstrous, and everyone who cares at
all for Art must strongly protest against it."

At best, journalistic critics are of no importance because
they lack an ability to enter into the spirit of any truly imagi­
native work of art they are called upon to evaluate. English news­
papers, Wilde says somewhat facetiously, are perfectly capable
only of exhausting the obvious. If, however, critics who write
in ordinary newspapers and magazines set out to inform the public
taste, they succeed only in degrading it. It is impossible to
calculate the amount of damage they can do in such efforts:

There should be a law that no ordinary newspaper should
be able to write about art. The harm they do by their
foolish and random writing it would be impossible to
overestimate—not to the artist but to the public,
blinding them to all, but harming the artist not at
all.

An example of such damage is that they establish a tradition of
judging writers by non-essentials or by inapplicable standards.

In spite of his strongly negative opinions, Wilde is eager to
acknowledge the occasional exceptions to the present rule. He
admits that, even in the newspaper world as it is, the rare good
comment can be refreshing to a writer. He is, after all, aware
that the more intelligent of journalistic critics are what they
are because they are "apparently reduced to be the reporters of
the police-court of literature, the chroniclers of the habitual criminals of art." Wilde also believes that the regrettable state of affairs in current journalism need not always be the case. Ideally, newspapers and magazines should appeal to universal interests. In his many letters to potential women contributors, Wilde stated his editorial view of the function of *The Lady's World*:

*The Lady's World* should be made the recognized organ for the expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life, and yet should be a magazine that men could read with pleasure, and consider it a privilege to contribute to.

This view indicates that no narrow interests should dominate any popular periodical, however specialized.

Wilde can sometimes entertain sympathetic views of journalistic critics, but his opinion of biographers and other journeymen of literature, whom he terms "our second-rate litterateurs," is more completely negative. That he considers biography to be in a bad state is evident in some of his most witty statements. "Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is usually Judas who writes the biography." In a condemnatory review of a biography of Rossetti, he says sharply of it, "The best that we can say of it is that it is just the sort of biography Guildenstern might have written of Hamlet." Summing up his views of contemporary biographies in general, he avers, "They rob life of much of its dignity and its wonder, add to death itself a new terror, and make one wish
that all art were anonymous.\textsuperscript{20} Clearly Wilde has a negative view of biographers equal to, if not lower than, his view of journalistic critics.

Supporting this negative view is his belief that many biographers are opportunists making money from a writer's name.\textsuperscript{21} After the death of every great man come out hurried editions of biographies, full of misprints, especially when they quote from a great personage's works or statements.\textsuperscript{22} Individuals responsible for such editions are "the mere body-snatchers of literature."\textsuperscript{23} Even if their base opportunism did not make them despicable, their regrettable tendency to judge a figure by non-essentials, which fault they share with the journalistic critic, would disqualify them.\textsuperscript{24} It is a good thing that, after death, at least a writer's soul is out of their reach.\textsuperscript{25}

If a person is to become a true biographer of some benefit to Art, he must have something essential to add to discussions which concern the effect of a great man's works or life on the world of Art. Otherwise his scholarly efforts will have been wasted. In his review of a biography of Rossetti mentioned above, Wilde declares solemnly that a true artist, and such Rossetti undoubtedly was, reveals himself so perfectly in his work, that unless a biographer has something more valuable to give us than idle anecdotes and unmeaning tales, his labor is misspent and his industry misdirected.\textsuperscript{26}
In the world of scholarship, one cannot merely go over old ground; one must do original, inspired, and significant work.

There is, however, an apparent contradiction in Wilde's views concerning the biographers and the artist's soul. If the artist is safe from bad biographers because he reveals himself so completely in his work, as Wilde states in the paragraph above, then one might reasonably ask why he says in the Preface to *Dorian Gray* that "to reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim," implying that Art does anything but reveal the artist's essential personality. The resolution of this apparent contradiction lies partly in Wellek's discussion of Wilde's three basic stances—pan-aestheticism, the doctrine of the autonomy of Art, and decorative formalism. Wilde may have been thinking of a defense of the autonomy of Art when he said that an artist, by virtue of revealing his greatness in his art, is safe from inept biographers. And he may well have been defending decorative formalism when he said that an artist should conceal himself in his art, implying that art's universal appeal and restorative effect have to do with its studied failure to make any reference to real persons in real life. The contradiction is completely resolved when one refers back to Wilde's 1883 "Lecture to Art Students." In that lecture Wilde advises the students that a picture is finished only "when all traces of work, and of the means employed to bring about the result, have disappeared." In other
words, it is not Art's aim to conceal the artist in all respects, but merely to conceal all evidence of his preliminary work. In fact, when it comes to the element of style, Art can indeed reveal the artist.

Wilde reserves his highest opinion for the true literary critic, and, in "The Critic As Artist," and elsewhere, he spends much of his time discussing the significance of his position. He first weighs the merits of critical subjectivity and objectivity.

There is a great deal of surface subjectivism in Wilde. He believes critics are subjective and prejudiced in favor of the works of art they delight in dealing with. Because a critic's intimate understanding of a work of art is based on a love of that work, and because love is a passion that does not often ally itself with reason and objectivity, this state of affairs can hardly be altered.

A critic must imaginatively enter into the spirit of a work of art in order to do it justice. When he first approaches a work, the critic who is a deep thinker permits himself to judge by appearances; regardless of the consequences to abstract objectivity, because "the mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible." In other words, the critic, like everyone else, is affected first by percepts, and only later by concepts, and he does well to recognize this fact. The intelligent critic also knows that a work of art is a striking combination of particulars with universals, and so he cultivates a
subjective approach which enables him to take the arrangement of particulars into full account. After the critic has become more familiar with a work, he delves beneath the enchanting appearances to identify the truths which are their secret, however subjective he may allow his thoughts to become in so doing. On the other hand, only the unimaginative can be "fair" in the strictest and most superfluous meaning of the word, because they lack the passionate imaginativeness which they must cultivate before they can genuinely understand specific works of art that catch their fancy. Hence Wilde says that absolute catholicity of taste is a danger to truly effective appreciative criticism. In a short article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* entitled "To Read or Not to Read," he invents an epigram that directly applies to this issue: "It is only the auctioneer who should admire all works of art." 

Wilde, of course, is engaging in another play on words. He is aware that "absolute catholicity of taste" is an impossible extreme of a superficially objective pose many critics assume in order to hide a lack of aesthetic sensibility. He knows that the "fair" critic—one who is fair for other than artistic reasons—is grossly unfair as far as the artist himself is concerned, while the subjective critic who understands and appreciates Art is the person who can definitely encourage genuine creativity.

Therefore, in an age when superficially objective criticism may
destroy Art's fertility by lumping together the great with the merely good, the profound with the obvious, critical subjectivity is an encouragement to the true genius. The critic consequently has the prerogative of placing unusual emphasis on certain details in a work of art in order to support his subjective interpretation. He may even invent them if they will draw attention to several levels of meaning in a work. If it is necessary to deepen the mystery of an insufficiently appreciated work of art, the critic—as well as the historian, Wilde paradoxically adds—is to give an "accurate impression of what has never occurred." Of course, he would not countenance this liberty in the ordinary journalistic critic or in the ordinary scholar, but he encourages it in the exceptionally gifted true literary critic, who can suggest new forms for Art by adding to a suggestion in an existing work. Wilde favorably notes, for instance, that Walter Pater, in a spirit of constructive subjectivity, deepens the mystery of the Mona Lisa by giving it profound meanings "that Lionardo never dreamed of." On the other hand, he observes, "only the dull are treated seriously" by the ostensibly objective critic. For this reason, those writers who consider themselves geniuses "live in terror of not being misunderstood." It would be a dreadful blow to them if a pedestrian critic should be able instantly to identify all the levels of meaning in their works. Thinking along these lines, Wilde himself sometimes feared his work would be appreciated too early and too easily.
In an 1893 letter to Ada Leverson, he wrote, "It is quite tragic for me to think how completely Dorian Gray has been understood on all sides." In fine, an artist is happier with his book if it is understood in his own age by only a few "subjective" critics.

When Wilde speaks of critical subjectivity, however, he does not mean to support uninformed caprice or unbridled irrationality. In order to use subjectivity properly, the critic must know when to be objective. A critical mode of thought "which seeks to solve intellectual problems by a denial of the supremacy of the intellect" is for this reason doomed to failure.

The first area in which the critic can make use of objectivity is that of literary scholarship. Before he can write in a more personal manner, he must first become thoroughly familiar with the methods of scholarly research and engross himself in studying the background of the material he is to deal with. Only then will he have in his possession one of the indispensable tools for getting at objective fact, a well-developed historical sense. Wilde virtually anticipates T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" when he speaks of the necessity for a complete historical perspective in the critic:

Ordinary people are "terribly at ease in Zion." They propose to walk arm in arm with the poets, and have a glib ignorant way of saying "Why should we read what is written about Shakespeare and Milton? We can read the plays and the poems. That is enough." But an
appreciation of Milton is . . . the reward of consummate scholarship. And he who desires to understand Shakespeare truly must understand the relations in which Shakespeare stood to the Renaissance and the Reformation, to the age of Elizabeth and the age of James; he must be familiar with the history of the struggle for supremacy between the old classical forms and the new spirit of romance . . . .

In addition, he must acquaint himself with several other relevant aspects of Shakespeare's literary, critical, and historical background. Before the critic can give an "accurate impression of what has never occurred," he must have the thorough scholar's idea of what actually did occur.

The next important way the critic may use objectivity is to develop a lively appreciation of the technical methods of Art. He must learn all the elements of prosody and acquaint himself with both the advantages and limitations of every verse form. He should be able to deal with language, the basic element of literature, with scientific exactness. Wilde praises the Greeks for their objective, critical spirit in these areas and others. He considers Greek literary criticism supreme because it often concerns itself with Art from a purely technical point of view. Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry he calls "one perfect little work of aesthetic criticism," because it deals with art

primarily in its concrete manifestations, taking Tragedy, for instance, and investigating the material it uses, which is language, its subject-matter, which is life, the method by which it works, which is action, the conditions under which it reveals itself, which are those of theatric presentation, its logical structure, which is plot, and its final aesthetic appeal, which is to the sense of beauty realized through the passions of pity and awe.
Before the critic can creatively and subjectively deal with the artistic works of others, he must acquire a total and objective knowledge of the structure of art for himself.  

Wilde also makes other, more directly practical suggestions to the critic about the proper use of objectivity. For instance, he advises the critic always to criticize the essentials in an artist's methods and productions. The critic, then, should write without reference to the personality of the author. He should recognize that the sincerity of a man has nothing to do with the validity of his concepts. In fact, Lord Henry Wotton says in *Dorian Gray*, the more insincere, the better, because the idea in question will be "more purely intellectual, . . . not. . . coloured by either his wants, his desires, or his prejudices." The last thing a critic should do is to tell his readers that their own emotions are the ultimate test of literature. That is to engage in base flattery. If an author's works have stood the test of time, the critic should be able to analyze the specific strengths in those works instead of appealing to some vaguely defined sentimentalism in the reading public. All of Wilde's practical suggestions to the critic are obviously based on his conviction that Art depicts universals in an imaginative way, and that the critic shares with the artist the responsibility of dealing with them.

Wilde is not contradicting himself when he calls for both
subjectivity and objectivity in the critic. He believes that it is not very fair to expect him to see a work of art from every point of view, and that a combination of subjective impressions with the truth of the artistic object under examination will yield him the most valuable results. Sometimes, from the standpoint of his own happiness and the future of Art, it is quite enough for him to chronicle his own moods in his writings in a systematic manner.

To those critics who pride themselves in a specious form of objectivity, Wilde says that "the difference between objective and subjective work is one of external form merely," and that the "objective form is the most subjective in matter." When called upon to be objective, the critic, like the artist, picks for objective study those topics which interest him personally. Consequently, Wilde, believing that criticism which is both imaginative and reasoned is a stimulus to culture and thought, formulates a dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity.

Only an extremely individualized perception can maintain the difficult combination of subjectivity and objectivity. Wilde therefore encourages the critic to be as individualistic as possible. Only by an intensification of his own personality can the critic interpret the personality and work of others. "The more strongly ... personality enters into the interpretation the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing,
the more true." When a critic writes of a subject with personal interest, his views are more convincing to the reader. By writing clearly, instead of with the obscuring film of a conventional or impersonally objective style or attitude, he is truer to the intention of the work and the purposes of the reader than the ordinary critic. A critic's individuality, then, is a vital part of a critical interpretation of a work.

To prepare the way for the truly individualistic critic, Wilde consistently assigns criticism a definite and honorable place among human occupations, and very often does much more. The first, but perhaps the least important of the critic's privileges, is interpretation of artistic works. In "The Critic As Artist," Wilde discusses this most basic prerogative of the critic: "The critic will be interpreter, if he chooses. He can pass from his synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole, to an analysis or exposition of the work itself, and in this lower sphere, as I hold it to be, there are many delightful things to be said and done." The critic's next prerogative is to arrange existing works of literature according to a hierarchy of value, especially during what Arnold would call "an epoch of concentration." In such an age, the spirit of hopeful innovativeness is at a low ebb and there is little that can encourage the talented person to new creation; rather than attempt to invent something inadequate, he does better to use his talent more profitably. Wilde
speaks eloquently, even poetically, of the critic acting in this
capacity:

There have been critical ages that have not been creative, in
the ordinary sense of the word, ages in which the spirit of man has sought to set in order the treasures of his treasure-house, to separate the gold from the silver, and the silver from the lead, to count over the jewels, and to give names to the pearls. 

The critic derives a great deal of power from even his most basic capacities: these make him nothing less than the guardian of a literary tradition.

Wilde is not content with leaving the critic an honored servant of Art. Building on what he has said about the subjectivity of the critic, he makes his position parallel to that of the artist. He establishes that, like the artist, the critic requires a temperament susceptible to beauty. "Temperament is a primary requisite for the critic—a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty, and to the various impressions that beauty gives." The critic is to be as open to beauty in the world as the creative artist; he can be no cold classicist applying rules without feeling to the work of art before him. Furthermore, just as Art springs from the heightened personality of the artist, so does it only reveal itself to the heightened personality of the critic. The critic and the artist require parallel development of sensitivity and individuality.

A more important parallel between the critic and the artist is
that they both work to produce valid artistic creations. Like the artist, the critic transfigures his impressions of a work of art into a definitely memorable form. He imaginatively arranges his perceptions of the work of art he examines, subtly refashioning it in so doing, with the result that his essay becomes a work of art in its own right.  

Ruskin put his criticism into imaginative prose, and is superb in his changes and contradictions; and Browning put his into blank verse, and made painter and poet yield us their secret; and M. Renan uses dialogue, and Mr. Pater fiction. . . .

Criticism is, in fact, "creation within a creation." For the critic, the work of art he examines is merely the starting point for another work of art of his own. Wilde's own critical dialogues, "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic As Artist," are excellent examples of critical works which use the works of others as starting points, but which in so doing actually become works of art in their own right. They are rich with poetic imagery, and have a polished, elegant style.

The most important parallel between the critic and the artist is that they both share in the joy of creation. On this point, Wilde is influenced directly by Arnold, who, in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," affirms that others besides the artist enjoy with the artist the pleasure of creating:

It is undeniable that the exercise of a creative power, that a free creative activity, is the highest function of man; it is proved to be so by man's finding in it his true happiness. But it is undeniable, also, that
men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in ways other than in producing great works of literature; if it were not so, all but a very few men would be shut out from the true happiness of all men.62

Wilde applies Arnold's conclusions about the universality of creative joy specifically to the relationship between critic and artist when he elevates the critic to the level of the artist:

\[
\text{Just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty, and, indeed, without it cannot be said to exist at all, so Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent.}\]

Making a further extension of Arnold's ideas, Wilde asserts that expression is an essential element of the happiness which the artist enjoys in creation, and that the critic and the artist are equally expressive. In "The Critic As Artist," Gilbert tells Ernest that "the critic has at his disposal as many forms of expression as the artist has."64

Criticalism can, in fact, be "a mode of autobiography."65 Such is certainly the case with Wilde's own criticism, especially The Portrait of Mr. W. H. and "Pen, Pencil, and Poison." Hesketh Pearson remarks that in prison Wilde "recognized how much of himself he had expressed in his three dialogues and in 'The Soul of Man'."66

Wilde is not content to stop with the idea that the critic and the artist are equal in position and creative potential. Perhaps to stimulate his readers into finding more imaginative roles for the
true critic, Wilde goes on to make the declaration that the critic is in many ways actually superior to the artist. Of course, he is not entirely without precedent in saying such a thing, because Arnold, especially in his criticism of Johnson and Wordsworth, often implied that the critic could in some cases take a position of predominance over the imaginative writer. Still Wilde acquired significant new ground for criticism by being bold and explicit in this regard.

Wilde advances several reasons for the supposed supremacy of the critic. The first is that criticism invents fresh forms for Art. "It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mold that art finds ready to hand." The critic can observe the state of artistic creation in his age to find and encourage the growth of a new and valid genre. In so doing, the critic, who is already a special sort of artist himself, creates new opportunities for other artists. Wilde adds that the artist does not always appreciate the critic's efforts in his behalf. "Each new school as it appears, cries out against criticism, but it is to the critical faculty in man that it owes its origin."

The critic not only invents fresh, new forms for the artist, but also concerns himself with the forms presently at hand. The critic judges which artistic form will best suit certain subjects, and channels the efforts of artists accordingly. The creative artist, whose only concern is his own form or genre, generally cannot decide for himself in such matters, because he "cannot recognize the beauty
of work different from his own." Since "a truly great artist cannot conceive of life being shown, or beauty fashioned, under any conditions other than those that he has selected," and since "creation employs all its critical faculty within its own sphere," only the aesthetic critic can be detached enough to appreciate all of Art's forms and molds:

For in nations, as in individuals, if the passion for creation be not accompanied by the critical, the aesthetic faculty also, it will be sure to waste its strength aimlessly, failing perhaps in the artistic spirit of choice, or in the mistaking of feeling for form, or in the following of false ideals.

The artist is extremely dependent on the critic. If the critic did not exist, Art would lose its bearings, and there would be "no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name." Wilde's second reason for declaring the critic's superiority over the artist is that the critic identifies universals for the artist, especially when the latter does not or cannot do so for himself. These universals are timeless, but from the perspective of the artist working in a particular era they become the constantly new subject-matter with which the artist can make images of future perfection. Such timeless universals are what Wilde refers to when he says the critic creates new expectations in both the artist and the person who appreciates the artist's works:

The Critic will concern himself not with the individual, but with the age, which he will seek to wake into
consciousness, and to make responsive, creating in it new desires and appetites, and lending it his larger vision and his nobler moods.\textsuperscript{73}

The critic also identifies universals for the artist by making explicit the universal Beauty which in an existing masterpiece may only be implicit, making it easier for future artists to fashion an "idealized representation of human life."\textsuperscript{74}

The Beauty, that gives to creation its universal and aesthetic element, makes the critic a creator in his turn, and whispers of a thousand different things which were not present in the mind of him who carved the statue or painted the panel or graved the gem.\textsuperscript{75}

In a larger arena but under the same principle of uncovering universals for the artist, the critic can take "the cumbersome mass of creative work, and distil it into a finer essence."\textsuperscript{76} Wilde tells how it is necessary for the critic to sort the best out of "the monstrous multitudinous books that the world has produced."\textsuperscript{77} In all situations, then, the critic, by identifying universals in various ways, unveils "the process of becoming" in the purest Aristotelian sense.\textsuperscript{78}

The third reason for the critic's superiority is that he has a greater number of possible ways of enjoying creative satisfaction. The critic, Wilde says paradoxically, is more creative than the creative artist,\textsuperscript{79} because "the mere creative instinct does not innovate, but reproduces."\textsuperscript{80} Wilde means that the creative artist, however selective, must, in the first stages of creation, deal with the accidental details of objective reality more often than the critic, who is free to work
with the seemingly infinite variety of art objects given form by the human mind. The very nature of the artist's work makes him less concerned than the critic is with the essential creative thought processes and their final effects. Consequently, "the subject-matter at the disposal of creation is always diminishing, while criticism's subject-matter increases daily." Faced with a diminishing number of topics and ways of expressing themselves, artists often resort to imitating each other's efforts, either in the realm of style or in that of subject-matter. Only when criticism comes to its aid and opens new realms for it does artistic creation become genuinely and productively original. Therefore, while "the artists reproduce either themselves or each other, with wearisome iteration, . . . Criticism is always moving on, and the critic always developing."82

The reader might well ask at this point why Wilde spends so much time formulating relatively complicated defenses of the artist, often slipping into a position of defending the complete autonomy of Art, if he is going to turn around and elevate the critic into a virtual philosopher-king in the realm of the fine arts and make Art itself seem derivative and imitative by comparison. Part of the answer lies in the fact that Wilde's category of the true literary critic is a wide one. He sees the artist consciously becoming his own critic, as, to an extent, he has implicitly been since time immemorial. All great art, in that it is subjective, contains already to some extent the critical as well as the creative element.83
Wilde complains that nineteenth-century art is not yet sufficiently critical of itself. In a warning stated in obviously hyperbolical terms, he says that "if creation is to last at all it can only do so on the condition of becoming far more critical than it is at present." The artist cannot allow needless imperfections in prose style to be excused by cogency of subject-matter, or poetry to lapse into mere prettiness for lack of substance. He must become much more self-critical if his whole work is to make a lasting contribution to the domain of beauty, and if there is not to be an unnaturally extreme separation between criticism and Art itself.

However, Wilde's proposition that the artist should become his own critic explains only a small part of the reasoning behind his paradoxical assertion that the true literary critic is superior to the creative artist. Wilde finds a heightened critical awareness in the artist very desirable, but in most of his writings he obviously wishes to distinguish between this awareness in the artist, and the critic who comments on a work of art created by another person. Whether Wilde seriously means the professional literary critic to be superior to the creative artist, or if he is playing with paradox when he speaks in those terms, is a hard question to answer. The evidence indicates, however, that Wilde does not seriously believe that in all realms the critic is more creative than the creative artist.
himself. What he means instead is that the critic is superior to
the artist only in what is criticism's proper domain. He has made
a paradox of the very reasonable Aristotelian doctrine that each
art and science has its own essential central purpose, and is judged
with regard to the effectiveness with which it attains that main
purpose.  

The highest criticism, being the purest form of personal
impression, is in its way more creative than creation,
as it has least reference to any standard external to
itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing,
and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to it-
self, an end.  

Wilde is saying that one should give to Criticism what is Criticism's
and to Art what is Art's, and no more. The artist naturally is in-
ferior to the critic in areas that are properly within the critic's
purview.

There is, of course, some inconsistency in his statements about
the relationship between critic and artist which cannot be explained
as paradox. In 1882, in "The English Renaissance of Art," Wilde
maintains that "the first duty of the art critic is to hold his
tongue at all times, and upon all subjects." But, in "The Critic
As Artist," published in 1891, he maintains that the critic is equal,
and sometimes superior, to the creative artist. No doubt the inco-
sistency concerning this issue arises out of the fact that in the
nine years between the lecture and the essay, he refined his aesthetic
to differentiate between the journalistic critic and the true literary critic. Wilde's final and most serious opinion is that the former is in one class while the latter is in another. And the latter, one should remember, enjoys unqualified superiority over the creative artist only when uncritical artistic emotionalism forces an unnatural division between the creative arts and criticism. If the arts maintain the critical faculty within their own domain to the extent that is necessary for the continued progress of Art, the critic will be superior to the artist only in areas properly dominated by criticism, and Art will continue to maintain its supreme position over Life.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR


2 Ibid., p. 98.

3 Ibid., p. 183.

4 Ibid., p. 318.


10 Ibid., pp. 295-296.

11 Ibid., p. 170.

12 Essays and Lectures, p. 191.

13 Ibid., p. 191.

14 Hart-Davis, ed., Letters of Wilde, p. 323.

15 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1022.


17 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1010.


Ibid., p. 51.

Ibid., p. 49.

Ibid., pp. 49-50.

"The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1010.


"The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1010.


Works, p. 17.


Essays and Lectures, pp. 211-212.


Ibid., p. 324.

Ibid., p. 712.

The Artist As Critic, ed. Ellmann, p. 28.

"The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1015.

Ibid., p. 1026.

Ibid., p. 1016.


40Ibid., p. 1020.

41Wellek, p. 415.

42"The Critic As Artist," in Works, pp. 1032-1033.

43Ibid., pp. 1017-1018.


45Works, p. 23.


49"The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1045.

50Ibid., p. 1033.

51Ibid., pp. 1033-1034.

52Ibid., p. 1032.


54Ibid., p. 285.

55Works, p. 1021.

56Ibid., p. 1049.

57Ibid., p. 1033.

59 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1047.
60 Ibid., p. 1027.
61 Ibid., p. 1027.
63 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1026.
64 Ibid., p. 1047.
65 Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, in Works, p. 17.
68 Ibid., p. 1022.
69 Ibid., p. 1053.
70 Ibid., p. 1054.
71 Oscar Wilde, "The English Renaissance of Art," in Essays and Lectures, p. 142.
72 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1020.
73 Ibid., p. 1053.
75 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1030.
76 Ibid., p. 1056.
77 Ibid., p. 1056. Wilde no doubt gives an entirely Aristotelian interpretation to Arnold's critical approach, which may contain both Platonic and Aristotelian elements. In a letter to Clough, Arnold complains of poets, including Keats, who "will not be patient neither understand that they must begin with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness . . . ."
Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. Howard Foster Lowry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 96-97. Here it appears that Arnold is using the word Idea in a Platonic sense. But in "On the Modern Element of Literature," Arnold makes reference to the plight of "the individual man who contemplates ... the spectacle of a vast multitude of facts awaiting his comprehension," and declares that the critic has effected an "intellectual deliverance" of an age only "when our mind begins to enter into possession of the general ideas which are the law of this vast multitude of facts." [Super, III, p. 20.] Here he seems to be speaking of the Aristotelian concept of abstracting universals from particulars.

78 Ibid., p. 1056.
79 Ibid., p. 1027.
80 Ibid., p. 1022.
81 Ibid., p. 1055.
82 Ibid., p. 1046.
84 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1054.
85 Wilde, "Mr. Swinburne's Last Volume," in The Artist As Critic, ed. Ellmann, p. 146.
87 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1027.
88 Essays and Lectures, p. 136.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Critic And Society

Once he has established the connections between the critic and
the artist, Wilde proceeds to discuss the critic's relationship to
society. He first demonstrates that, since the critic is an artist
in his own right, his relationship to society is in many respects
similar to that of the creative artist.

As is the case of the creative artist, the first and most
essential principle governing the critic's relationship to society
is that his primary mission is to himself and to his creative potential. Consequently, the critic must have within him his own well-
spring of individual creativity, and in order to preserve it he must
value his separateness from common life. In "The Soul of Man under
Socialism," Wilde says that when a critic like Renan is able to
separate himself from society, "and so to realize the perfection of
what [is] in him," he does so "to his own incomparable gain, and to
the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world." One must
never ask the critic to aim at anything other than perfecting himself,
because the demand of the intellect is to feel itself alive.
Therefore, the critic must not be distracted by minor and inconsequential pursuits. He may wish to exercise influence on his own age, but only when he thinks it serves his interests to do so. He does his best to educate himself, instead of wasting his energy in the comparatively unproductive enterprise of being a propagandist or dogmatist toward others. The critic who educates himself concerning topics he finds interesting often comes forth, albeit erratically, with opinions that directly inspire others to a great degree. Specifically in the realm of art, the intellectually independent critic is "the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us . . . ." He is always engaged in developing himself, and is therefore refreshingly interesting when he talks or writes about any subject. The dogmatic critic however, by constantly repeating the same opinions in order to instruct others directly, freezes himself into a limited system he is obligated to defend for the rest of his life. In such a way he becomes dull and repetitious to the people around him. He and the moralist share a similar tragic fate.

The true critic's judgments are of value to a culture because they are truly disinterested in the most profound sense of the word. In the realm of Art, to be sure, the critic employs a method of analysis that includes both subjectivity and objectivity, producing judgments which in many cases are definitely not disinterested. Yet,
while on the one hand, Arnold's concept of "disinterestedness" does not always apply to Wilde's idea of the perfect relationship between the critic and the artist, on the other hand it certainly applies to the Wildean critic's relationship to society in many important ways. The critic's opinion is extremely valuable to a society because the practical political or moral concerns of the day have not tainted it.\(^8\) The Philistine may consider the critic's views subjective, but those views are actually more objective and considerably more stimulating than most that are available to the average reader, having been formulated by a mind that is removed from the baser elements of civilized life.\(^9\)

To prevent himself from being encased in a rigid system, and to maintain his disinterestedness by staying at least at one remove from the everyday, practical world, the critic avoids being a popular authority. In supporting the critic's individualism, Wilde recognizes the primary importance of the critic's ability to treat life "from a definite and reasoned standpoint."\(^{10}\) Thus he believes the critic cannot become a popular authority without depending in some way on popular demand and losing sight of the fact that "he bears within himself the dreams, and ideas, and feelings of myriad generations."\(^{11}\) His view is an extended extrapolation from Arnold's contention that the first duty of the critic is to make available "the best that is known and thought in the world."\(^{12}\) Both for himself and for society
at large, it is extremely important that the critic remain individualistic and stay aloof from everyday affairs, because "where self-culture has ceased to be the ideal, the intellectual standard is instantly lowered, and, often, ultimately lost."¹³

Wilde, furthermore, proposes ideas parallel to Aristotle's in order to support the theory that the critic must necessarily stay aloof from everyday world of action. First he takes note of the ancient philosopher's doctrine that reason is the faculty in man which makes him most human while instinctive physical action pertains to his animal characteristics and therefore to the lower part of his being. In "The Critic As Artist,"

Gilbert advises that there is

no mode of action, no form of emotion, that we do not share with the lower animals. It is only by language that we rise above them, or above each other. . . . No, Ernest, don't talk about action. It is a blind thing dependent on external influences, and moved by an impulse of whose nature it is unconscious. . . . It is the last resource of those who know not how to dream.¹⁴

Then Wilde proceeds to show that just as there is a fundamental difference between elemental physical action and reason, so is there a basic distinction to be drawn between everyday pursuits and contemplation. When one acts in the everyday world, one's reasoning capacities are restricted to a material or practical goal which has to be attained. Contemplation, however, implies the use of one's reasoning faculty without any restriction or restraint whatsoever: it is rational thought at its purest. Finally, Wilde suggests that contemplation, which the critic has the most leisure to engage in, is the highest application of reason, man's most essentially human faculty. Hence, with Aristotle probably in mind, he concludes that
the critic is most human when, "calm, and self-centered, and complete," he contemplates life from "the high tower of thought." Wilde's position is clear, but he perhaps fails to understand that such an extreme emphasis on contemplation to the exclusion of other human activities and emotions can lead to ethical callousness.

The critic and the artist, then, are equally concerned about retaining their creative potential and staying away from the pressures of everyday life, though sometimes for different reasons. However, when Wilde gives the critic wide possibilities of intellectual leadership, he sees the purposes of the artist and those of the critic beginning to diverge. Carrying to a logical extreme what Arnold said a generation before him, Wilde declares that criticism can govern all spheres of human endeavor in some way. Except that it is more oriented toward a subjective, aesthetic point of view, criticism is, in short, very much like philosophy.

Wilde establishes criticism's virtual equality with philosophy first by maintaining that the critic, like the philosopher, helps to create the intellectual atmosphere of an age. Acknowledging his closeness to Arnold on this point, he has Gilbert tell Ernest

> you asked me the use of Criticism. You might as well have asked me the use of thought. It is Criticism, as Arnold points out, that creates the intellectual atmosphere of the age.16

Again like Arnold, Wilde holds that criticism is free in the "sphere of the intellect." He may be slow to admit it, but when he gives criticism governing powers over not only the artistic sphere, but over all spheres of intellectual endeavor whatsoever, he gives it vast
philosophical—and consequently social—importance. Like philosophy, criticism is the organizer of ideas, and that which organizes ideas has the power sooner or later to organize all human activity.

The fact that criticism, like philosophy, has contemplation as its high and final stage also serves to demonstrate that criticism and philosophy have equal power. "Yes, Ernest," Gilbert proclaims in "The Critic As Artist," "the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not doing but being, and not being merely, but becoming—that is what the critical spirit can give us." The source for such a statement is Aristotle, who said that the highest pleasure and activity of the rational man is contemplation, and that it is the central activity of God.

Not only does the critic enjoy contemplation himself, but he also makes it possible for other members of society to follow his lead in some capacity. He can inspire the critical spirit in each man, and free him from blind, mechanical action. By learning through the critic "the experiences of those who are greater than we are," the individual can reach ultimate intellectual clarity. Ultimately, by making people more aware of the consequences of their actions, the critic makes them more self-sufficient, more self-confident.

As a type of philosopher, the critic governs all spheres of human endeavor in some way. On the one hand, he may influence the direction of man's intellectual pursuits; on the other, he may indirectly cause practical changes in the everyday world he avoids for reasons of principle.
Logically, the first of the intellectual pursuits the critic governs is the science of aesthetics, his home ground and his intellectual court of appeal. The highest criticism, Wilde says, "criticizes not merely the individual work of art, but Beauty itself." Influenced by Keats, Wilde tends to identify Beauty and Truth. He is fascinated with the thought that genuine Truth—the sort of Truth that is able to bring about a real harmony between body and soul—can be found in the same place as Beauty. Certainly he has this in mind when he says, in a letter to Mrs. Lathbury, "For myself, I look forward to the time when aesthetics will take the place of ethics, when the sense of beauty will be the dominant law of life." And, in an attempt to underscore this point through paradox, he twice writes that a sense of color is more important to an individual's development than a sense of right and wrong. In often replacing ethics with aesthetics, Wilde goes far beyond Arnold, who in many respects still subordinated Art to moral concerns. At the very least, Wilde means that another branch of philosophy, like ethics, can make man's existence possible, but aesthetics can make "life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, give it progress, and variety and change." Ethics provides for man's survival; aesthetics provides for man's survival qua man. Thus, since the latter subject contributes to the activity that makes men most human—i.e., the contemplation of beautiful objects, it is the critic's central, and essential, domain.
The next discipline over which the critic has power is that of history. Wilde tells critics that "the one duty we owe history is to rewrite it." Unless one puts such a statement into proper perspective, it may appear wholly irresponsible, and it may even seem to support totalitarian thought. One should note, then, that Wilde took an early interest in the relation of the critical spirit to history in his undergraduate essay, The Rise of Historical Criticism. In that essay he says that historical criticism, or the critical spirit working within history, "is part of that complex working towards freedom which may be described as the revolt against authority." And when he speaks of "a factor of progress . . . based not so much on the result it attains, as on the tone of thought which it represents, and the method by which it works," he refers, still cautiously, to what in his later writings becomes the autonomous field of criticism. If The Rise of Historical Criticism may be considered prototypical of Wilde's later thought, one can assume with some measure of security that, to him, the rewriting of history is the process of making it less subservient to the orthodoxies of the day and therefore more rational and approachable. Through the critical spirit, history becomes less of an authority and more of a science.

Wilde sometimes takes a dim view of history in education, calling it "that record of bloody slaughters and barbarous brawls," and suggesting it is far less fit for teaching to children than the study of
One might sometimes wonder if Wilde considered history an important concern for criticism. At this point, however, the reader should remember that Wilde, when he makes such a statement, refers to the events of history rather than to the discipline of history itself. He implies again the Aristotelian notion that contemplative activity, which man shares with God, is superior to pure physical action, which man shares with the animals. Consequently, he can say, "Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it."^32

The critic does not divert himself from his main interest in Art to direct the study of history. He assumes such a position of intellectual leadership in this area precisely because he is the guardian of a nation's literary tradition. The scholar cannot honestly say he understands an older work of art unless he has first obtained a full understanding of the historical background relevant to it.^33 Moreover, if history suffers from very poor scholarship, it is impossible for the literary critic to reach a true appreciation of the earlier literature of his nation. Consequently, to guard the integrity of the humanistic disciplines, the critic has to make history one of his major concerns. Moreover, when the critic has been able to exercise the fullest influence on history, the critical spirit is widespread enough to enable man to see in perspective not only his own life but also the collective life of the human race, and therefore to direct his actions with historical awareness.^34
Because the transmission of the collective intellectual life of man is done by criticism alone, and because the future of the appreciation of Art is at stake in this transmission, the critic must also take an interest in education. The justification for the critic's interest in education lies in the fact that "the true aim of education is the love of beauty." The education sanctioned by the Philistine, however, falls far short of this ideal, and the future of artistic genius and of the capacity of men to appreciate true art is endangered. The inculcation of a true love of beauty depends on "the development of temperament, the cultivation of taste, and the creation of the critical spirit," but the contemporary educational establishment has burdened the memory with a load of unconnected facts, and laboriously striven to impart our laboriously acquired knowledge. We teach people how to remember, we never teach them how to grow. It has never occurred to us to try and develop in the mind a more subtle quality of apprehension and discernment.

In the interest of guarding the future integrity of Beauty, the critic must see that the educational system makes the mind of the student into a fine analytical instrument. As evidence to support this suggestion, Wilde recalls that the Greeks made the inculcation of the critical spirit the main purpose of their system, to their great intellectual advantage. Wilde thus shows that the critic, by concerning himself with educational matters, not only ensures a secure future for
Art, but also contributes to the major task of making men more imaginatively rational.

Since the critic is supposed to have an interest in both history and educational theory, then, it is conceivable, and indeed necessary, that he should have an abiding interest in politics and economics, with which both are unavoidably connected. Wilde recognizes the appropriateness of such an interest, even though in some sections of his writings he seems to avoid taking an interest in political affairs.

To be sure, he would agree with Arnold that the critic should not become involved in the ordinary political-practical. Thought is degraded by its constant association with practice," he admonishes. He adds that "those who try to lead the people can only do so by following the mob." Then, in a review of Chuang Tzu, he goes beyond Arnold to praise "inactivity," and, in this instance allowing flippancy and paradox to lead him into contradicting his own efforts to change the public taste, declares that "it is only the intellectually lost who ever argue."

But the reader should put such instances of flippancy and self-contradiction into perspective. Wilde means that thought—critical thought—should always lead action, and therefore should not be tainted by any unnecessary involvement in specific events:

Who that moves in the stress and turmoil of actual existence, noisy politician, or bawling social reformer, or poor
narrow-minded priest blinded by the sufferings of that unimportant section of the community among whom he has cast his lot, can seriously claim to be able to form a disinterested intellectual judgment about any one thing? Each of the professions means a prejudice. The necessity for a career forces everyone to take sides.44

In this passage, Wilde implies an unexpected, but essentially defensible interpretation of the Arnoldian concept of disinterestedness: he suggests the English people would benefit from the presence of more people who are definitely not "practical," i.e., who have not made their range-of-the-moment practicalness into a virtue. But by saying that the critic should be both disinterested and unpractical, and that he should stay away from ordinary political affairs, Wilde does not mean that disinterestedness and practicalness are necessarily incompatible states of mind, or that the critical thinker should remove himself from the arena of political and economic thought. On the contrary, he keeps the critic out of the sphere of the political-practical because he sees him influencing politics and economics in a more important area—political theory. The critic is to involve himself with universal political principles. For this reason, only unpractical people, or critics, can "see beyond the moment, and think beyond the day."45

Wilde even more affirmatively upholds the critic's concern with politics by saying that the critic, as organizer of ideas, must have the liberty to dream up Utopias based on those ideas. The critic, like the artist, is a seer who uses the essential, universal elements
of life as he finds them to create possible futures. Wilde is thinking of this aspect of the critic's social role when he declares that "England will never be civilized until she has added Utopia to her dominions."

Obviously, then, the fact that a critic must stay away from specific practical issues in politics and economics does not prevent him from dealing with political and economic issues on a higher, more general level. Similarly, his aversion for moralizing does not bar him from having an influence in the field of ethics and even in the area of religion itself.

The true critic, of course, is above traditional ethics. He has the philosopher's freedom to experiment in the area of moral issues and determine a new ethics. In fact, he can use "Sin" as a tool to destroy the ethics of the Philistine and to build a higher ethical system. Wilde elaborates:

What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity, Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. By its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics.

As usual, Wilde's words are not as shocking as they may seem at first glance. By "Sin" Wilde means those actions which are socially condemned, but which are not intrinsically harmful. By a higher ethics, he means a state of unconscious "equilibrium" in which the individual's emotions
are naturally in tune with his moral actions. Such a concept of unconscious equilibrium leads him to conclude that "it is immoral to be consciously good."49

When one turns to Wilde's works for examples of experimentation with Sin, one finds one fictional character and one dramatic character whose motives are diametrically opposed. On the one hand, Dorian Gray, acting as a kind of critic, experiments with Vice, but he quite inexcusably causes the destruction of many innocent lives. On the other, Algernon toys in a superficially destructive manner with the hypocritical moral values of the English upper classes in The Importance of Being Earnest, but he does so with an ultimately constructive effect. Also a kind of critic, he turns aristocratic values upside down, heightening the moral consciousness of the audience. One difference between Dorian and Algernon is that the former is too self-conscious in his revolt against traditional morality, while the latter is joyously carefree. Another difference is that, unlike Algernon, Dorian uses, or exploits others for his own experiences, perhaps adding to his knowledge, but destroying them and ultimately himself.50 Together, the two illustrate Wilde's conviction that "the note of the perfect personality is not rebellion, but peace."51

A critic who worries about public reactions might hesitate to go from analyzing morality to criticizing religion, but the often intimate relationship between the two makes such a progression logical.
Wilde certainly dares to undertake such criticism himself, and he further implies that his true critic should do the same. He no doubt has Arnold's religious criticism in mind as a precedent. A consideration of Wilde's religious criticism is therefore important to any study of all his critical ideas. In order to gain a better understanding of Wilde's religious criticism, one should recognize that Wilde takes three different attitudes toward the subject. He may take a favorable approach and praise religious ideals. He may view religion opportunistically and manipulate religious myths to serve his own aesthetic ends. Finally he may be negative and condemn certain religious sects or certain manifestations of the religious spirit.

_De Profundis_ contains by far the greatest part of Wilde's praise of religion, especially the Christian religion. In this epistle he can consider the Christian faith a source of "imaginative sympathy" for suffering, and can in that connection recall the spirit of Arnold's discussion of the "sweet reasonableness of Jesus." But reviewing the question from another perspective, he can expatiate on Dante's great wisdom in dealing with the sin of purposely indulged melancholy, and in the same passage can praise the Church for having recognized such a sin. He suggests in this and similar passages that the Christian religion at times possesses the power of a perfectly universal philosophy. Throughout the letter he evinces a capacity to see Christ in an unusually positive light. More significantly, he recognizes that
Christ was not just a quintessential philanthropist, but a very wise man who had the imaginative sympathy to realize that the rich and the pleasure-seekers might need saving even more than the poor.\textsuperscript{55} Most importantly, he considers Christ an individualist— the supreme individualist—in an age when individualism was waning.\textsuperscript{56}

Just as often as Wilde criticizes religion positively, however, he opportunistically manipulates religious myths and religious history for his own aesthetic ends. In \textit{De Profundis}, he tells Lord Alfred Douglas quite frankly that because of his situation he has to find mystery \textit{somewhere} in order to give his wrecked life some sort of meaning and aesthetic proportion.\textsuperscript{57} And a passage in \textit{The Picture of Dorian Gray} suggests that, for the greater part of his life before prison, Wilde considered religion just a high aesthetic experience:

> It was rumoured of him [Dorian Gray] once that he was about to join the Roman Catholic communion; and certainly the Roman ritual had always a great attraction for him. The daily sacrifice, more awful really than all the sacrifices of the antique world, stirred him as much by its superb rejection of the evidence of the senses as by the primitive simplicity of its elements and the eternal pathos of the human tragedy that is sought to symbolize. . . . The fuming censers, that the grave boys, in their lace and scarlet, tossed into the air like great gilt flowers, had their subtle fascination for him.\textsuperscript{58}

Pater's influence becomes obvious as Dorian Gray, representing a very real aspect of Wilde's own personality,\textsuperscript{59} sees the Roman Catholic mass as merely high drama. To the Wildean aesthete Roman Catholicism is
not a system to follow unquestioningly for the rest of one's days but, to use Wilde's successful analogy, an inn at which a person should stay for no more than one night.60

If Dorian's view of the Roman Catholic Church does not prove that Wilde has the capacity to use religion for his own opportunistic ends, then certain passages in De Profundis may. In one paragraph of the letter, Wilde regards Christ as a poet among poets, the leader of a perfectly poetic life, and a Romantic.61 In fact, he makes him into a precursor of the Romantic movement:

We can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between classical and romantic Art and makes Christ the true precursor of the romantic movement in life, but the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flamelike imagination.62

Wilde's opportunistic use of religion may perhaps shock those who have religious convictions. But such an approach to it is a predictable result of a wide-ranging attempt to make the critic into a philosopher reigning unchallenged over all realms of human endeavor.

When Wilde criticizes religion negatively, he usually does so in ways that do not contradict his positive or opportunistic criticism. He condemns Puritanism, for instance, not so much for its theological and moral assumptions in themselves as for its interference with Art. In short, his hostility toward Puritanism stems from an attitude of critical and artistic self-defense. Such an attitude of self-defense
leads him to damn Puritanism in a letter to the editor of the St. James's Gazette about Dorian Gray:

Believe me, Sir, Puritanism is never so offensive and destructive as when it deals with art matters. It is there that its influence is radically wrong. It is this Puritanism, to which your critic has given expression, that is always marring the artistic instinct of the English.

When Wilde criticizes the spirit of medievalism, he does so for the same reason as he condemns the spirit of Puritanism—that is, out of a wish to make the reading public aware of the nature and history of ecclesiastical oppression of artists and critics. In The Rise of Historical Criticism, he refers to "the melancholy sea of medievalism," and reminds his scholarly reader that "monkish hymns . . . obscured the pages of Greek manuscripts." Elsewhere he speaks disparagingly of "medievalism with . . . its love of self-torture." In addition to condemning Puritanism and medievalism specifically, he shows, in his review of Chuang Tzu, an antipathy toward any kind of religion which has been perverted into mere philanthropy, or which makes morality into a duty imposed by an outside agency. None of these condemnations of certain religious attitudes contradicts what he says in favor of specific faiths. Rather, one can, after taking all his religious criticism into account, discern a pattern by which he praises religious attitudes he considers artistic, but condemns those he considers destructive to Art or an aesthetic attitude.

When Wilde places aesthetics, politics, economics, ethics, and
religion within the domain of the critic, he does not necessarily mean to restrict criticism to the major disciplines. On the contrary, the critic may freely delve into narrower subjects like standards of dress, funerary architecture, and athletic competition—to name but a few.

In his 1882 lecture, "House Decoration," Wilde implies that the critic has a role in ensuring dress reform when he himself undertakes criticism of men's dress. Dress reform is important, he says, because men's costumes are an important part of the quality of surroundings which affect the artist's and craftsman's performance. Dress reform is a worthy concern for the critic because "one of the most difficult things . . . to do is to choose a notable and joyous dress for men." In general, the critic applies philosophical and aesthetic universals to the particulars of the world around him; as dress reformer he applies "the Greek principles of beauty" and "the German principles of health" to the specific requirements of dress.

In a review in the Pall Mall Gazette, "The Relation of Dress to Art: A Note in Black and White on Mr. Whistler's Lecture," Wilde adds that while the artist at present might struggle to transform ugly costumes into beautiful impressions, he would be much more likely to produce works of great beauty if the costumes of the people in his region were naturally beautiful and inspired him to an instinctive appreciation of Beauty. As are his other interests, the critic's interest in dress reform is directly tied to his concern for Art and the artist.
To consider another area, Wilde's specific interest in the aesthetics of funerals and funerary architecture probably stems from his wider interest in the relationship between religion and Art. He refers with disgust to a "hideous Protestant service" in a letter to Lady Dorothy Nevill, suggesting there might be room for a critical comparative study of the various religions' funeral rites. And in a letter to the Rev. J. Page Hopps, Wilde indicates a wish to speak, as a critic, about "the expression of sorrow in art." He calls the "urns, pyramids and sham sarcophagi" of his day the "ugly legacies from the eighteenth century to us," and adds that "the beautiful crosses of Ireland" or "the delicate bas-reliefs" on Greek tombs are good examples of beautiful memorials. Since funerary architecture is an art, it "should concern itself more with the living than the dead—should be rather a noble symbol for the guiding of life than an idle panegyric on those who are gone." Such an art, like any other art, should of course come under the purview of the critic.

The list of minor subjects with which the critic might interest himself, then, is nearly endless. He may discuss athletic competitions, for example. He tells Oswald Sickert in a letter that even boating, billiards, and cricket "may be subjects for criticism if you take grace of movement and gesture as your standpoint. From the point of view of art the athlete may be criticized, but from no other." Another area for discussion is house decoration, both because it affects the craftsman's
pride in his workmanship, and because it forms part of the environment significant to the development of the artist's capacity to appreciate beauty instinctively. In the end, the critic's obligation to protect Art and Beauty leads him into the most specific, as well as the most general, areas of human interest.

In writing "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Wilde himself is an example of the ideal critic ranging over several intellectual spheres of interest, advocating anarchy and endeavoring to free the artist and society. With it he becomes both a political and a social critic without becoming enmeshed in the petty, practical concerns against which he warns the ordinary critic.

In "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Wilde ostensibly supports socialism, but his statements tend more toward anarchy. One of the major socialist movements of his time—Fabian socialism—saw the contemporary state evolving into an ideal Socialistic State, but Wilde makes the idea of a state meaningless by saying that it "must give up all idea of government." Emphatically he declares, "All modes of government are failures." The democratic state no less than others comes in for his condemnation. He calls it "simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people." All authority is degrading, because it dehumanizes not only those "over whom it is exercised," but "those who exercise it" as well.

Of course Wilde, as a true critic, relates his interest in politics
and economics to his solicitude for Art. He believes the public meddling with Art which he so much resents comes from the "barbarous concept of authority" encouraged by the present political and economic systems. The fact that the artist more than anyone else tends to suffer from the evil of the concept of authority compels Wilde to make a close connection between Art and Liberty. To be sure, he appears illiberal and imperious when he emphatically tells spectators they must submit to domination by the artist's creations. But if, as critic, he dictates to audiences in the artist's behalf, it is because the members of a society ruled by government are necessarily unfit for Art. "The form of government most suitable for the artist," Wilde asserts, "is no government at all." The critic realizes creativity depends on individual freedom and initiative, not on popular demand, and certainly not on governmental supervision.

The essentially anarchist society which Wilde proposes will be possible because the critic will have a say in the direction of industry. Exaggerating Aristotle, Wilde says "it is mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure." Being necessarily undignified, all manual labor should be done by a machine, for "man is made for something better than disturbing dirt." By stating that machinery will do all of man's lower tasks and free him for a more creative life, Wilde suggests that the critic as philosopher has the prerogative of directing science and technology toward humanistic
goals. The freedom to exercise such a prerogative is another aspect of the true critic's versatility.

Religion has a special place in society which compels Wilde to treat it differently than politics and economics in "The Soul of Man." Certainly he acknowledges that it can have a definite practical effect in terms of the political atmosphere of the society in which the artist works; on this ground he condemns the authority of the Pope as well as that of the Prince and the People. But Wilde goes on to recognize that it more importantly forms part of the ethical and spiritual climate which surrounds the artist. Early in the essay he reinterprets Christ's words to serve his own ends. Christ becomes the archetypal individualist, and His whole doctrine is to be summarized in the motto "Be Thyself."

Much later in the essay he produces a negative criticism of Christ which is unusual in the context of his other writings. The true Christ, he says, is the medieval Christ of pain and suffering. Since "pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection," and is instead "merely provisional and a protest" for the individual oppressed by society, Christ must necessarily outlive his usefulness as soon as the world proceeds to a more or less complete vanquishment of injustice. Since in other essays and letters Wilde speaks positively of Christ, and in De Profundis even calls him the supreme Romantic, it surprises the reader to find him relegating Christ to such an inferior historical and sociological position. However, even if Wilde expresses opinions in "The Soul of
Man" which contradict his views about Christ in his earlier and later writings, he is still within his self-defined bounds as a religious critic to discuss and make judgments about religious figures and religious myths.

"The Soul of Man," therefore, is the nearly perfect example Wilde presents of what a critic can do to exercise moral and intellectual influence in areas not ordinarily considered artistic—politics, economics, science, and religion. In it Wilde demonstrates extraordinary intellectual versatility.

The critic who "creates the intellectual atmosphere of the age" is concerned with the quality and direction of thought in general as well as in specific subject areas. In the short run, he tries to preserve intellectual values in the face of growing emotionalism and sentimentalism. He opposes those "who appeal to mere emotional sympathies, or to the shallow dogmas of some vague system of abstract ethics." Attacking people who support a facile pacifism, he declares, "There is only one thing worse than Injustice, and that is Justice without her sword in her hand. When Right is not Might, it is evil." In the long run, the critic hopes to transform the "coarse and undeveloped English mind"—or the mind of every individual in every nation, for that matter—into a "fine instrument." Once he has accomplished this transformation, he can affirm the essential unity of mankind and prevent wars born out of a lack of awareness of human similarities, since he has a complete grasp of universal human concerns.
Early in his career Wilde believed Art possessed the powers he later ascribed to Criticism. In his lecture, "The English Renaissance of Art," he says the artist must assume a cosmopolitan attitude. An artistic masterpiece is universal, rather than merely national; consequently, "the political independence of a nation must not be confused with any intellectual isolation." In an 1882 lecture at Denver, Colorado, he definitely prescribes for Art exactly the activist role he will later assign to the critic: "There never was an age that needed the ministrations of Art more than this cold, avaricious, selfish age. . . . Art if rightly used will pave the way for a sort of universal brotherhood of man."

Later in his life Wilde says it is primarily criticism's function to lead man into complete peace and brotherhood. "Creation is always behind the age," he asserts in "The Critic As Artist." "It is Criticism that leads us. The critical spirit and the world spirit are one." Though classical economists have failed to unite men peacefully through the lower level of trade, the critic will bring about peace by making the individual mind more cosmopolitan. He will annihilate the race prejudices which are the root cause of many wars "by insisting on the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms." Thus he lays a solid foundation for "the peace that springs from understanding." Surely Wilde is far from proposing a role of useless and antisocial idleness for the critic, which so many moralists accuse him of doing;
indeed, he asks for him a role of leadership which has the vastest social importance.

Of course, Wilde's view of the relationship between the critic and society is an ambiguous one on the surface. On the one hand, the critic should be a serenely independent subjectivist, not a crusader educating the public, and certainly not a moral reformer. On the other, his ideas will be as important as those of a universally recognized philosopher, for they will have the power to direct all fields of human endeavor and even to make universal brotherhood a reality. What seems to be ambiguity on the surface impels one to an eventually successful search for deeper consistency beneath appearance.

In short, to understand the underlying consistency of Wilde's attitude toward the critic, one must recall his whole aesthetic. On one plane, true works of art come from a perfect balance of form and content. On another, true opinions result from taking into account the inseparable interdependence between subject and object. Similarly, only when the critic is totally independent—even eccentric or dangerously idle in the Philistine's view—is his subjective consciousness able to interact meaningfully enough with objective reality to abstract its universals. Consequently, when the critic is true to himself and loyal to his own impressions, he becomes a society's most valuable source of new ideas. In Wilde's view, criticism is the means by which human consciousness can be extended, while shallowness is certainly the supreme vice for both the critic and society.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE


2 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1053.

3 Ibid., p. 1053.

4 Ibid., p. 1043.

5 Ibid., p. 1029.

6 Ibid., p. 1043.


9 The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1023.

10 Ibid., p. 1043.

11 Ibid., p. 1041. In this connection Wilde strangely implies that the imaginative element in criticism is the result of Heredity. What he most probably means by "Heredity" is the cultural transmission of the essential element of Western civilization—the critical spirit itself. It would be very unlike Wilde to propose a theory of biological determinism as the basis of the best element in the critic. In any case, a capacity for imagination growing out of Heredity makes it possible for the critic to identify creatively with all sorts of historical and literary personages.


14 Ibid., p. 1023.
To be sure, Arnold does not propose that the critic become as systematic or as original as a traditional philosopher. Nevertheless, it is certain that when Arnold himself goes beyond keeping abreast of the literature written in many different tongues, and beyond merely explicating new philosophical systems for the benefit of the educated man; and when he proceeds, as he does in Culture and Anarchy, to make an original attempt to change the direction of economic and political philosophy; or when he sets out, as he does in "Heinrich Heine" or in St. Paul and Protestantism, to discuss religion's place in the human consciousness and religion's relation to conduct (i.e., ethics); then he certainly appears to make a strong attempt to affect the course of philosophical thought in important ways. Moreover, one does not necessarily have to be systematic to be in a position comparable to that of the professional philosopher. Wilde probably understood the direction in which Arnold, and Pater after him, were taking the critic, and so began to carve out a philosophical position for the critic in "The Critic As Artist."


19Ibid., p. 1041.


21Ibid., p. 1041.

22Ibid., p. 1030.

23Ibid., p. 1030.


29 Ibid., p. 1023.


33 Ibid., p. 1032-1033.

34 Ibid., p. 1040-1041.


36 Ibid., pp. 1049-1050.

37 Ibid., p. 1050.

38 Ibid., p. 1055.

39 Ibid., pp. 1049, 1055.


41 "The Critic As Artist," in *Works*, p. 1042.

42 Ibid., p. 1043.


47,"The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1042.

48Ibid., pp. 1023-1024.


50In a conversation with Professor M. W. Steinberg, University of British Columbia, May 28, 1974.

51"The Soul of Man under Socialism," in Works, p. 1084.


54Ibid., p. 471.

55Ibid., pp. 479-480.

56Ibid., p. 479.

57Ibid., p. 409.

58Works, pp. 105-106.


60The Picture of Dorian Gray, in Works, p. 106.


62Ibid., p. 476.


64Essays and Lectures, p. 106.

65"The Soul of Man under Socialism," in Works, p. 1102.


71 Ibid., p. 169.

72 Ibid., p. 314.


75 *Works*, p. 1087.

76 D' Amico, p. 134.


79 D' Amico, p. 136.


82 "The Soul of Man under Socialism," in *Works*, p. 1089.

83 Ibid., p. 1099.

84 Ibid., pp. 1085-1087.

85 Ibid., p. 1103.


88 Ibid., pp. 1043-1044.
89 Ibid., p. 1056.
90 Ibid., p. 1056.
91 Ibid., p. 1055.
92 Essays and Lectures, p. 134.
93 Lewis and Smith, p. 324.
94 "The Critic As Artist," in Works, p. 1058.
95 Ibid., p. 1056.
96 Ibid., p. 1057.
97 Woodcock, p. 239.
A final evaluation of the importance of Wilde's critical theories must include a study of the paradoxes and inconsistencies in his writings, first because they are part of the fascination of his style, and secondly because they contribute to the continuing validity of his thought. Generally speaking, the more one studies Wilde's criticism, the fewer inconsistencies and the more paradoxes one discovers. Wilde had several reasons for making heavy use of paradox.

First of all, Wilde wished to bewilder the masses at the same time he set their imaginations into motion by frustrating their normal expectations. He believed his theories would be given consideration for a longer period of time if he put them into some sort of ostentatious form. Hence he used paradoxes according to a definite, deliberate pattern. This pattern, as Arthur Ransome explains, involves "the statement of a result and the omission of the steps of reasoning by which that result has been achieved." The fact that Wilde enjoyed inventing paradoxes should not, therefore, discourage those who seek to find valuable, even universal truths beneath them. After writing
"The Decay of Lying," Wilde explained in a letter to Violet Fane that the dialogue "is meant to bewilder the masses by its fantastic form: au fond it is of course serious." Wilde's considered strategy in using paradoxes was that, however much they might anger a person, they would force him to think. Wilde, although with a novel strategy of paradox, in many respects carried on the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold.

The second reason Wilde used paradoxes was his desire to protect his works from vulgarization while still making them intelligible to the gifted few. Thus, according to Dyson, the most suspect of flippancies must be considered together with complementary passages. It was to protect his supremely moral outlook from the superficially moral Puritan that Wilde often switched the meanings of the words "moral" and "aesthetic" in his later critical writings and statements. It was to avoid being misunderstood and pigeonholed concerning the Aristotelian concept of mimesis that he switched the words "imitation" and "expression." For example, he wrote in the Preface to Dorian Gray, "No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything." In this second strategy Wilde admirably succeeded. His criticism has survived and reached an age when all those who once knew him are dead, the debate over the exact details of his life has abated, and his aesthetic can at last reach serious consideration.

In the third place, Wilde used paradoxes because he thought that
only the fool bares his soul and entraps himself in one serious position, while the wise man speaks freely, if more artificially behind several masks. Earnestness, he believed, is the disguise of the fool, while triviality and lack of care are the signs of a wise man. No doubt this is the reason he entitled his most famous play, The Importance of Being Earnest. Wilde was fascinated with masks, and devoted a whole essay to the subject, because he believed they provided a means of defense against the vulgar age he lived in. "In so vulgar an age as this we all need masks," he said. But in spite of all the masks, or critical stances, he assumed, Wilde sincerely held certain constant convictions. Thus, in a letter to Kate Terry Lewis, he said that underneath its fanciful form "The Decay of Lying" hides "some truths . . . about art, which I think require to be put forward, and of which some are, I think, quite new, and none the worse for that."12

Wilde's fourth reason for using paradoxes was, as he explained in De Profundis, his penchant for summing up "all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram." He sought for the precisely-worded paradox or epigram which could replace tomes of serious writing. In other words, Wilde believed that the paradox, in addition to being a means of shocking the public, was a way to truth. San Juan explains that, in his plays, Wilde matches empty aristocratic standards with their inversions in order to disclose what they really mean.14
fact, Wilde himself explained his policy in fairly explicit terms through a minor character in Dorian Gray, Mr. Erskine, who tells Lord Henry Wotton, "To test reality we must see it on a tightrope." Wilde, then, was convinced not only that paradoxes could reveal the essence of a truth in a short and memorable form, but also that an idea could stand or fall according to how well it could be summarized in an epigram.

The fifth and final reason Wilde used paradoxes was that, his ideas and behavior being socially unacceptable, he had to use the court-jester pose in order to be heard at all. The court-jester pose is used by anyone who holds views that are too directly opposed to those which are currently accepted. Such a person must either assume such a foolish stance or couch his views in such foolish terms that ordinary people will not take him seriously. However, if he makes his foolishness consistent enough, intelligent individuals will be able to detect the serious ideas it camouflages. George Woodcock attributes a great deal of importance to Wilde's court-jester pose: "there is much in him of the classic fool whose antics are the mask for a biting criticism of established values, and whose vagaries disguise an essential wisdom." Undoubtedly Wilde referred to Hamlet as often as he did because he saw many parallels between the madness which the Danish prince feigned and the court-jester guise which he himself had to assume. Wilde, however,
was not afraid that his views would be permanently ignored because of his apparent irresponsibility. In *De Profundis* he said that the fool in the eyes of the gods and the fool in the eyes of men are very different.17

To be sure, there are inconsistencies in Wilde's writings which must be considered flaws. The explanation for them lies partly in the fact that Wilde was heir to two basically different moral traditions in his immediate literary antecedents—the tradition of aesthetic paganism as represented by Walter Pater and Arthur Symonds on one hand, and the tradition of religious aestheticism as represented by William Morris and John Ruskin on the other.18 This fact no doubt explains the irony that "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," his most powerful and most famous poem, is propagandistic.19 This fact also serves to explain why Wilde shifted at times among the critical stances of pan-aestheticism, Art-for-Art's-Sake, and decorative formalism.

The rest of the explanation for true flaws and inconsistencies can be gathered from Wilde's own words. He admits that "there is always a mist of words" between him and Life, and that "the chance of an epigram" makes him desert Truth.20 There is no doubt that Wilde, who found the aesthetic value of language an endless source of fascination, sometimes let words run away with him. He could not be a serious philosopher because of his supreme concern with
the artistic effect of language and words. In De Profundis, he confessed, "I made art a philosophy and philosophy an art."\textsuperscript{21} In some cases he would have done well to heed his own warning in "The Decay of Lying": "Paradoxes are always dangerous things."\textsuperscript{22}

One may say with certainty that Wilde's dramatic life, in combination with the nettling, half-hidden truths beneath his paradoxes, helped ensure continuing interest in his views. However, there are a number of minor writers who led fascinating lives who have not attained anything close to Wilde's prominence in posterity. It is best, then, not to lay too much emphasis on Wilde's life as an explanation for a continued and widening study of his critical views in the latter third of the twentieth century. One must instead try to look for the timeless and universal aspects of his critical work. Admittedly, there is little that is really original in what he wrote, but he restated some old critical ideas in fresher and more meaningful ways, often interpreting passages in ancient thinkers long forgotten or purposely buried by his immediate, more moralistic predecessors. He successfully combined the poetic qualities of the Platonic dialogue form with the more Romantic assumptions implicit in Aristotle's \textit{Poetics} in order to breathe new life into Romanticism in the last third of the nineteenth century, when a militantly scientistic Naturalism seemed about to dominate Art. One might, in fact, say that Wilde to some
small extent helped to ensure that the more vital aspects of Aristotle's critical philosophy survived into the twentieth century.

In addition to restating old critical ideas in new ways, Wilde tried valiantly to define and propagate a truer selfhood for the critic, the artist, and the individual member of Society in an age when the mere work "self" more and more often connoted evil. "To be good is to be in harmony with oneself," Lord Henry Wotton says in *Dorian Gray*, and after reading "The Soul of Man under Socialism," one may be certain that Wilde entirely concurred with this statement by his character. In that essay he plays at switching the words "selfishness" and "unselfishness" until their original meanings under the Puritan moral code are no longer recognizable:

A man is called selfish if he lives in the manner that seems to him most suitable for the full realization of his own personality; if, in fact, the primary aim of his life is self-development. But this is the way in which everyone should live. **Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.** And unselfishness is letting other people's lives alone, not interfering with them. Selfishness always aims at creating around it an absolute uniformity of type. Unselfishness recognizes infinite variety of type as a delightful thing, accepts it, acquiesces in it, enjoys it. It is not selfish to think for oneself. A man who does not think for himself does not think at all.

Wilde clearly was in favor of untrammeled self-development. He may well have gone to Aristotle for the philosophical foundation of his very valuable ideas about individualism. In a section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* dealing with friendship, which Wilde is certain to
have read, the philosopher says that "the good man should be a lover of self," and that a "friend is another self." But whether or not Wilde borrowed his ideas in this area from Aristotle, his spirited and essentially reasonable defense of individualism constitutes one of the high points of his critical writings.

In the final analysis, Wilde did not produce his own system of thought, nor did he advance any strikingly new ideas in the field of aesthetics. His ideas were not original, even if in the context of his age the emphasis he placed on some of them was. However, discussion of his originality or lack of it is idle if one is trying to understand the significance of his works in the history of criticism. His main achievement was to combine all the different elements in his background into one relatively unified aesthetic. In so doing, he helped man to see the interrelationship among critic, artist, and society in a new perspective.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER SIX


4 Hart-Davis, ed., Letters of Wilde, p. 236.


6 Ibid., p. 273.


8 Works, p. 17.


10 Ibid., p. 353.

11 Kate Terry, a leading actress and elder sister of Ellen Terry, retired from the stage in 1867 on her marriage to Arthur Lewis. Q. v. Hart-Davis, ed., Letters of Wilde, p. 200, n. 2.

12 Ibid., p. 237.

13 Ibid., p. 466.


15 Works, p. 43.


19 Woodcock, p. 168.


21 Ibid., p. 466.

22 *Works*, p. 982.

23 Ibid., p. 69.

24 Ibid., p. 1101.


26 Bk. IX, Ch. 4, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, p. 1082.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:

A. Works on Wilde-

1. Books


2. Articles


B. General Background

1. Books


2. Articles


