Wilde and Aesthetics

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English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 38, Number 1, 1995, pp. 118-121 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

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reprint of the club’s two books. Since the 1890s have achieved extensive scholarly attention, the Woodstock volumes are likely to be welcomed.

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Wilde and Aesthetics


ONE MIGHT well be wary of critics who argue that a single “unifying” theme exists in any author’s work—especially in the varied and complex work of Oscar Wilde. At first this wariness seems justified by Guy Willoughby’s *Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde*, as Willoughby focuses on an overarching, unifying Christ theme in Wilde’s writings. In the end, however, Willoughby avoids an overly unifying strategy. Instead *Art and Christhood* provides a valuable critique of Christhood as the prime model for Wilde’s sense of the individual’s “Realization,” Wilde’s term for the most important “Individual” expression possible. Indeed, Willoughby provides a valuable critique of Wilde’s orientation towards Christ, if perhaps with varying degrees of success.

Willoughby places extreme emphasis on Christ’s status in Wilde’s work—for Willoughby, Christ is not simply an important theme. In many ways it is the theme, as it unifies all other themes, from Wilde’s relationship to romanticism to his position vis-à-vis materialism. And, as Willoughby points out, there is much textual support for this tack; Willoughby places emphasis on Wilde’s recurrent references to Christ and Christ-like figures, including Wilde’s argument in *De Profundis* that “the complex integrality that typifies Romantic art ‘was to [Christ] the proper basis of actual life’ which therefore made him ‘the precursor of the Romantic movement.’”

Willoughby addresses this Christhood theme in an original way, arguing that Christ’s Wildean status is important in two ways: Christ provides both an insight into Wilde’s aesthetics, as well as into the problems Wilde’s aesthetics might address in our own fin de siècle—as we are equally in need of “form” amid the ‘chaos’ of reductive practices”: “What relevance, it might be asked, do [Wilde’s aesthetics] have for us today? The answer, I believe, is straightforward: Wilde’s aesthetics matter in these post-Structuralist days more than previously, because we, too, are struggling to salvage an affirmative concept of art out of a
deep-seated cultural pessimism.” How, then, will Wilde’s aesthetics draw upon Christ’s status to accomplish these impressive goals? First, Wilde’s aesthetics wield Christ as a model for a “revolutionary” aesthetic, an aesthetic Willoughby cites as Wilde’s “peculiar achievement.” This revolutionary aesthetic position reconciles two diverse philosophical approaches which pervade our own era; Wilde will “graft onto the near-solipsistic poetics of Pater the organic impulse, and its social imperative, tirelessly propounded by John Ruskin and Arnold.” In other words, Wilde will provide a “synthesis” relevant to both his fin-de-siècle angst, and our own sense of chaotic instability—at least, if post-structuralism is to be viewed in Willoughby’s terms. Specifically, Wilde’s aesthetics will intimate how “the private intensities of the one must combine with the moral concern of the other, so that the new aesthetics may be philosophically modish and ethically responsible together.”

Willoughby argues that this synthesis emerges around Wilde’s portrayal of Christ and the Christ-like figure—a portrayal we should not be so hasty to reject as being naive and untenable: “Wilde’s work in toto celebrates the human power to imagine and to impose order, however fleetingly, on experience; his rereading of Jesus as a definitive model for the new aesthetics—as a quintessential artist-in-life—is the key to his thought.” Willoughby offers a series of close readings to argue this point, and does so with much success. The only reservation here is that Willoughby sometimes tries officiously to tie his diverse readings together—on page 44, for example he constructs his argument somewhat awkwardly by referring piecemeal to four different works. Willoughby’s specific points are often valuable, however; he argues on that same page that Christ becomes a figure (literally and metaphorically) for a “richer selfhood” which might impose some “order” on experience. And Wilde’s corpus does provide much material for this argument.

Willoughby’s initial points concerning Christ’s ethical and artistic reconciliation draw upon such works as “The Happy Prince” and “The Nightingale and the Rose.” Here, Willoughby argues, Wilde begins to reconcile aesthetics and ethical concerns by suggesting the possibility of an “individual completion” which can personify “a commitment to community” (compare this to the Individual’s Realization in “The Soul of Man under Socialism”): “The storyteller is trying to formulate a model personality that incorporates ethics within the canons of aesthetics. As these tales suggest, that model will be increasingly identified with the figure of Christ.” One of Willoughby’s most important arguments about
this aesthetic/ethical model lies in his chapter “Jesus in The Soul of Man under Socialism.” Here, Willoughby argues that Wilde’s link between Truth and Art builds upon Keats’s ambitious “dictum...[that] ‘Truth’ becomes the complex ‘Beauty’ of the Simultaneously expanded and coherent personality, which at last accords with the integrality of art.” Christ, then, will become the “true personality” reconciling these ethical/philosophical and aesthetic spheres. Christ manifests a “realized personality” which will bring about something Wilde notes may never really have occurred—the expression of a “realized” personality in terms of “action” itself: “It is a question whether we have ever seen the full expression of personality, except on the imaginative plan of art. In action we never have.” Wilde then argues that true “Individualism” will be modelled on Christ’s unification of these spheres—and implementation of aesthetic truth or “Beauty” in action as ethical or social “Truth.” Perhaps Wilde’s most definitive expression of this hopes describes the role of artists in cultivating this Individualism: “The past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be.... The future is what artists are.”

This by no means covers all of the points Willoughby raises in terms of Wilde’s Christ-like Individualism. In his wide-ranging study, Willoughby links this theme to such concerns as Hellenic and Hebraic misconceptions of Christ vis-à-vis Wilde, and Wilde’s sophisticated relationship to the questions they raise. Nonetheless, Art and Christhood raises several important—if perhaps debatable—points about the notion of Wildean “unification” through Christhood. The main reservation one might have is that Wilde admits that his Individual has never been realized (something Willoughby acknowledges), and also suggests that the Individual’s contradictions are excruciatingly difficult to resolve (e.g. the complex private property/individual economy in “The Soul of Man under Socialism”).

As a result, Wilde seems to remain on the edge of a sublime artistic chasm—never explaining entirely how individual expression and social responsibilities are to be reconciled, Christ paradigm or no Christ paradigm. Nevertheless, Willoughby’s Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde articulates this Wildean paradox forcefully and provocatively, and explains how Wilde used Christ as a model for overcoming his sublime paradox of art, the individual, and the social. As Willoughby articulates it eloquently, Wilde’s attempt was to “make his life a resonant and cohesive statement...[to] enact an aesthetic
vision, like Christ's, beyond words. In this sense, Wilde's life completes his art—indeed is prolative of it. That, in the last analysis, is the meaning of his Christ.”

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Maud Gonne and Yeats


THE CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT of A. Norman Jeffares's distinguished career in Anglo-Irish literary studies, this landmark Norton edition presents for the first time the entire sequence of over 350 letters Maud Gonne MacBride (1866–1953) wrote W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) in reply to the nearly continuous succession of missives the future Nobel laureate sent this independent and resourceful professional beauty, who deserted the Viceregal Court to play the romantic Irish revolutionary, yet who remained, with her reckless courage in the face of personal danger, Captain Thomas Gonne's rebellious elder daughter. Although they are usually written hastily, in a brief, telegraphic style, with tantalizing references to difficult personal matters squeezed into postscripts, many of her letters become important documents in literary history because of the intimate details they reveal about the nearly life-long obsessive relationship Ireland's Joan of Arc shared with Yeats. This frustrating “spiritual marriage” dragged the shy, naturally introspective poet through the bog of Irish nationalist politics at the same time as it inspired him to write patriotic plays for Gonne to act in like The Countess Cathleen (1892) and Cathleen Ni Hoolihan (1902), as well as some of the most successful love poems of the fin de siècle. Among them are these beautiful lines he composed on 21 October 1891 in imitation of Pierre de Ronsard that were also among Gonne's personal favorites:

“When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face.”

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