Farewell, Victoria!

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The Critic in Spite of Himself: 
Oscar Wilde

Art is the only serious thing in the world.
—Oscar Wilde

When Wilde played Oscar in the columns of a dozen journals in the eighties and nineties, as well as in his essays and stories and poems and plays, he was also being an instinctual critic. Nevertheless, that aspect of his work is usually dismissed. “Scholars and readers are generally agreed,” such commentary goes, “that Wilde’s criticism merits study only as a patchwork affair or as a polished form of public entertainment.” Scholarship has now taken a more generous view. To his public he seemed to be playing with paradoxes, yet the way in which Wilde stood the platitudes of his time on their heads was more than clever entertainment. Without at first knowing it, he was evolving a critical position that would remain consistent and consistently provocative, unaltered by prison and disgrace, or by the reduction of his audience to a handful of loyal friends.

Wilde, like many critics, began his career in the medium because he needed the money (journalistic criticism paid regularly if not well) and because he always had something to say. The first duty of a critic of the arts, he suggested, ignoring that duty in the process, “is to hold his tongue at all times, and upon all subjects.” Long before he had begun writing literary criticism regularly, Wilde busied himself with his flamboyant and notorious lectures on the arts, all the while reserving his scorn for the journeyman critic, trapped in a morass of mediocrity. “The poor reviewers,” he deplored, “are apparently reduced to being the reporters of the police-court of literature, the chroniclers of the doings of the habitual criminals of art.” Later, in The Importance of Being Earnest, Wilde’s Algernon advises John Worthing about the low state of literary criticism: “You should leave that to the people who haven’t been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers.” But Wilde not only had been to one university, he had been through two, having earned a degree at Trinity College, Dublin, before he went up to Oxford; and his comparative over-education reinforced his contempt for contemporary
critics as well as his condescension toward the work upon which they wasted their industry. Afterwards—while inferentially praising himself as a critic—he confessed in “The Critic as Artist” dialogue that he was “a little unfair” in describing English artistic and critical activity as “mediocrity weighing mediocrity in the balance, and incompetence applauding its brother.” He, of course, wrote for the smaller-circulation and higher-priced journals, for “as a rule, the critics—I speak … of the higher class, of those in fact who write for the sixpenny papers—are far more cultured than the people whose work they are called on to review. This is, indeed, only what one would expect, for criticism demands infinitely more cultivation than creation does.”

Loftily, Wilde observed that he was always amused “by the silly vanity of those writers and artists of our day who seem to imagine that the primary function of the critic is to chatter about their second-rate work.” For more than five years, however, he chattered about it himself—often at length, while insisting nonetheless that criticism ultimately had to be emancipated from its police-court function. His own best criticism would bend in that direction; yet visible in it would be more than merely a seriocomic police-court magistrate dispensing fines, for Oscar could not resist—epigrammatically—putting on the black cap of the hanging judge. Even the music-hall turns, he knew, would never win him the general reader. The average Englishman, he felt, would rather be flattered by being told that his own emotions were “the ultimate test of literature.” “Very nice of you to like my article,” he wrote one well-wisher after “The Decay of Lying” first appeared in 1889. “It is meant to bewilder the masses by its fantastic form; au fond it is of course serious.” Even in his most ambitious critical efforts he could not escape his persona: the public was always more baffled and amused by the flippant Oscarisms than it was enlightened or persuaded.

Wilde’s activities as critic began, almost inadvertently, in 1884. His brother Willie, then drama critic for the London journal Vanity Fair, had taken a midsummer holiday, leaving Oscar to fill the unsigned column whenever necessary. A few months later he was writing articles on his own, for the Pall Mall Gazette, then for the Dramatic Review, Nineteenth Century, and other publications. He had not really come to the profession belatedly, however, for his lecture performances emphasized the domestic arts almost as much as they did Oscar, and even at Oxford he had been writing criticism as well as much else. His earliest essay, “The Rise of Historical Criticism,” was first a university exercise.

By what was probably no coincidence, Wilde’s career in the critical columns, which flourished in the late eighties, followed closely upon his marriage in 1884 and the birth of his sons in 1885 and 1886. In mid-1887 he even accepted—and with eagerness—the editorship of the magazine Lady’s
One of the earliest published caricatures of Wilde

Alfred Bryan  The Entr’acte  26 March 1881
World, changing its name to Woman’s World. During his two years with the publication he strove to emphasize “literature, art, and modern life,” and sought a cachet for the magazine which only recognized contributors could give it. Cajoling and flattering “name” women to contribute, he was reduced to his own poorest criticism (on women writers, for his magazine) both in print and in private. Seeking a piece from one minor poetess, he wrote her, praising a passage in one of her verses: “Keats even would have envied you.” That he was able to force his pen to fashion the words is indicative of his need to make Woman’s World a success and thus his own position as editor secure.

Although Wilde was beginning to become known for his stories and tales, and was regularly publishing his book criticism, he needed to sell everything he could bring himself to write. He had already begun to live two expensive lives, one of them farther removed than could have been imagined by the proprietors of Woman’s World from the connotations of either its earlier title or the new one upon which Wilde had so persuasively insisted. He had by then gone over almost entirely—although still furtively—to the subterranean world of men. In 1886—so Robert Ross later confided—Ross at seventeen had seduced the thirty-year-old Wilde into the “love that dares not speak its name.” Maintaining the facade of marriage and family, while luxuriating in the secret new joys, required moneygrubbing by those additional legitimate means he had as a writer; and the very unnaturalness of the new existence may have reinforced and intensified critical points of view he had already begun expressing—that art (or “un-nature”) was superior to both utility and nature, and that art was above reason as it was above respectability.

From the half-hidden double life Wilde could rationalize his aesthetic attitudes with increased effectiveness. Writing at the time of the murderer and forger Thomas Wainewright (in “Pen, Pencil, and Poison”), he suggested, as he might have of himself, “His crimes seem to have had an important effect upon his art. They gave a strong personality to his style, a quality that his early work certainly lacked.” When in 1897, three years before his death, Wilde lamented at length to Lord Alfred Douglas from prison, he recognized that “everything about my tragedy has been hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style” (De Profundis). To Wilde, even his fall was a failure in style.

The crime that earned Wainewright Wilde’s moral castigation was not the murder of Englishmen but the misuse of the English language. Here, as scandalously stated as was possible, was the kernel of Wilde’s aesthetic: “The fact of the man’s being a poisoner is nothing against his prose. The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art.” For Wilde, a misprint was more than a murder. Inveighing constantly against shoddy editing, inept translating and poor proofreading, he once concluded a review of some lame verses by
the future (and since forgotten) poet laureate Alfred Austin with the opinion that the typographical errors were less excusable than the tepid poetry: “Even the most uninteresting poet cannot survive bad editing.” The same, he thought, was true of a better American poet: “Longfellow is so essentially poor in rhymes that it is unfair to rob him even of one.” Errors of fact were equally errors in taste. “Why call upon us,” Wilde asked in one case, “to admire a bad misquotation…?” Another writer, he observed, displayed “that intimate acquaintance with Sappho’s lost poems which is the privilege only of those who are not acquainted with Greek literature.”

Although Wilde was often sharp in his published criticism, he reserved some of his most caustic sarcasm for his private letters, illustrating, perhaps, Shaw’s comment about the profession: “I have never been able to see how the duties of a critic, which consist largely in making painful remarks in public about the most sensitive of his fellow creatures, can be reconciled with the manners of a gentleman.” Early in Wilde’s career as a critic, for example, A.P.T. Elder, publisher of the new American magazine Literary Life, sent Oscar from Chicago the December 1884 and the January 1885 issues, asking for an opinion of the contents. The reply was brief but devastating:

... a little more care, both as regards style and substance, should be taken. Rossetti is not living (p. 190), and “in medias res” (p. 192) could not pass, even at a Fancy Ball, for “in medio tutissimus ibis”: that a book “will be read with interest by the illiterate” (p. 151) is too charming to alter, but that no man was more fortunate than Carlyle was in his marriage, is a somewhat too painful paradox (p. 134). Still, there is much that is good, and the advice to read the daily papers as a method of acquiring judgment and good sense (p. 183) is an excellent bit of American humour, on which you must allow me to congratulate the author.6

Similarly, when J. S. Little asked for Wilde’s views of his new novel, Whose Wife Shall She Be?, the critic was politely negative:

Thank you very much for your charming book, which I have read with great pleasure. You ask me to give you a criticism of it, but Gil Blas is plucking my sleeve and reminding me of the Archbishop.7 However, here is my opinion.

The book is a little too crowded: the motive is hardly clear enough: if Gwendoline is the heroine we should hear more of her: if she is not, the last chapters emphasise her too much. Captain Breutnall is not a success: his death is merely the premature disappearance of a shell-jacket: I decline to mourn with Gwendoline over someone who is not properly introduced.8

By the time Wilde left regular reviewing in 1890 he had formed heretical opinions about the mechanics as well as the objectives of the craft. “It is sometimes said of them,” he observed of reviewers, “that they do not read all through the works they are called upon to criticize. They do not. Or at least they should not…. Nor is it necessary. To know the vintage and qual-
ity of a wine one need not drink the whole cask. It must be perfectly easy in half an hour to say whether a book is worth anything or worth nothing. Ten minutes are really sufficient, if one has the instinct for form.” He may have preached more truly than his own critical practice evidenced, for even in omnibus notices he seems to have paid closer attention to the texts than many of his contemporary journeymen. Still, form was more significant to him than content. “In matters of grave importance,” Wilde had one of his impossible young ladies in *The Importance of Being Earnest* say, “style, not sincerity, is the important thing.”

Wilde the critic was drawn to style on the printed page as much as Oscar the personality was drawn to it in life. When, as an Oxford undergraduate, he had met Walter Pater, that high priest of style had asked him, “Why do you always write poetry? Why do you not write prose? Prose is so much more difficult.” At the time Wilde was hard pressed for an answer, for, he recalled, those were “days of lyrical ardour and studious sonnet-writing; days when one loved the exquisite intricacy and musical repetitions of the ballade, and the villanelle with its linked long-drawn echoes and its curious completeness; days when one solemnly sought to discover the proper temper in which a triolet should be written; delightful days, in which, I am glad to say, there was far more rhyme than reason…. I do not think I knew then that even prophets correct their proofs.” Afterwards Wilde understood that a portion of the artistic tension that gave the creator pleasure as he shaped his lines could be reproduced in the reader—the “critical pressure … that we receive from tracing, through what may seem the intricacies of a sentence, the working of the constructive intelligence” (*Speaker*, 22 March 1890). Yet Wilde insisted that it was not for the reader that such sentences were shaped: “The pleasure that one has in creating a work of art is purely a personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates…. Nothing else interests him…. He is fascinated by what he has in hand. He is indifferent to others.” Wilde meant it personally as well as theoretically: “I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain.”

What often caused Wilde anguish as a critic was the violence done to style by incorrect English and inept analogies and references. And whether or not he was sure of his facts or his quotations (his memory, however, was as encyclopedic as his reading), Wilde delivered his judgments with confidence and with an ear sensitive to the balanced phrase and the well-turned epigram. Disdaining a literary fashion, he declared: “It is only an auctioneer who should admire all schools of art”; and attacking praise of a poet grounded upon his attractiveness to “hundreds of imitators,” Wilde observed, “Longfellow has no imitators, for of echoes themselves there are echoes and it is only style that makes a school.” He condemned analogy hunting: “There is
no surer way of destroying a similarity than to strain it.” Demonstrating his point, he went on:

... when Mr. [John Addington] Symonds, after genially comparing Jonson’s blank verse to the front of Whitehall (a comparison, by the way, that would have enraged the poet beyond measure) proceeds to play a fantastic aria on the same string, and tells us that “Massinger reminds us of the intricacies of Sansovino, Shakespeare of Gothic aisles or heaven’s cathedral ... Ford of glittering Corinthian colonnades, Webster of vaulted crypts, ... Marlowe of masoned clouds, and Marston, in his better moments, of the fragmentary vigour of a Roman ruin,” one begins to regret that anyone ever thought of the unity of the arts. Similes such as these obscure; they do not illumine. To say that Ford is like a glittering Corinthian colonnade adds nothing to our knowledge of either Ford or Greek architecture.

Wilde’s sympathy with things Greek may have had something to do with his amatory as well as his literary education. Since for him life and art had fused, he could say “Whatever ... is modern in our life we owe to the Greeks. Whatever is an anachronism is due to mediaevalism.” And it was only partly with facetious intent that he added that generally “the forms of art have been due to the Greek critical spirit. To it we owe the epic, the lyric, the entire drama..., including burlesque, the idyll, the romantic novel, the novel of adventure, the essay, the dialogue, the oration, the lecture, for which we should perhaps not forgive them, and the epigram.” In fact, Wilde concluded, at the end of an even more lighthearted catalogue of genres, to the Greeks was owed every form of writing but “American journalism, to which no parallel can be found anywhere, and the ballad in sham Scotch dialect.” There was one element in the Greek critical spirit, nevertheless, from which Wilde dissented—Plato’s emphasis upon “the ethical spirit of art.”

Everything in Wilde’s personality inclined toward Aristotle, who criticized art “not from the moral, but from the purely esthetic point of view.” Here Wilde realized he was diverging (but for Pater) from nine previous decades of nineteenth-century thought. What he labeled as the confusion of ethics with aesthetics was to him as much evidence of contemporary critical sterility as was Plato’s added insistence—then no longer taken seriously—that poetry, or mythopoeia, because it is a form of lying, had to be condemned on moral grounds. This attitude Wilde related to the nineteenth-century schools of Romanticism and realism, each of which, in its way, sought a return of literature to nature. “All bad art,” he declared in “The Decay of Lying,” “comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals.” What parts Wilde’s own self-conscious role-playing, as well as his underground activities which (by the usual standards) “went against Nature,” played in formulating his critical posture can never be known, for
that posture must have been as subconsciously motivated as it was deliber-
ate. Wilde always underestimated the shaping power of the unconscious.

“All fine imaginative work” Wilde viewed (in “The Critic as Artist”) as
“self-conscious and deliberate…. A great poet sings because he chooses to
sing.” Literature that seems to be “the most natural and simple product of its
time is always the result of the most self-conscious effort…. there is no fine
art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spir-
it are one.” Wilde even went a step further, arguing that the function of the
artist was “to invent, not to chronicle…. Life by its realism is always spoiling
the subject-matter of art…. The superior pleasure in literature is to real-
ize the non-existent.”

The realization of the nonexistent is a liberation of the personality, an
enrichment of experience, and thus to Wilde it was toward that end that crit-
icism itself had to be at its highest “creative” (rather than elucidating) level.
As a result the baffled disciple of “The Critic as Artist” dialogue, summing
up the arguments and deliberate overstatements of the second part, mus-
es aloud: “You have told me that … all Art is immoral, and all thought dan-
gerous; that criticism is more creative than creation, and that the highest
criticism is that which reveals in the work of Art what the artist has not put
there; that it is exactly because a man cannot do a thing that he is the prop-
er judge of it; and that the true critic is unfair, insincere, and not rational.”
Since Wilde’s life had become the chief impulse for his art, his paradoxes
defended his practice while formulating an aesthetic.

Criticism defined as creation implied the revaluation of criticism as well
as the work toward which it had been a reaction. “Who cares whether Mr.
Ruskin’s views on Turner are sound or not?” Wilde argued. “What does it matter? That mighty and majestic prose of his, so fervid and so fiery-
coloured in its noble eloquence, so rich in its elaborate symphonic music, so
sure and certain, at its best, in subtle choice of word and epithet, is at least as
great a work of art as any of those wonderful [Turner] sunsets that bleach or
rot on their corrupted canvases in England’s [Tate] Gallery.” Style—imagi-
nation given form—outlasted all else in art: a concept obviously dear to an
artist who thought that even his own life was stylized. “My own experience,”
he observed in “The Decay of Lying,”

is 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 curious crudities, extraordinary
monotony,… her absolutely unfinished condition. Nature has good intentions,
of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out. When I look at
a landscape I cannot help seeing all its defects. It is fortunate for us, however,
that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have had no art at all. Art
is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place.
Man could accomplish what nature could not—the union of content with form.

In painting as in writing, realism to Wilde was a failure: it lacked form. The only portraits in which one could believe (he used Holbein as an example) were those in which there is “very little of the sitter and a very great deal of the artist.” Holbein’s success was that he “compelled life to accept his conditions”—that he imposed upon life his style: “It is style that makes us believe in a thing—nothing but style.” And, developing his argument further, he suggested that life imitated art more than art imitated life, sometimes realizing afterward in fact what had first been imagined by a painter or sculptor or novelist. Again he called upon his favorite Greek to support the thesis. “Scientifically speaking,” he pontificated unscientifically, “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 forms through which the expression can be attained. Life seizes on them and uses them.” But life (or nature), lacking artistic intellect, and thus artistic taste, was guilty—to Wilde—of self-defeating inertia:

Art creates an incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things. Nature, upon the other hand, forgetting that imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult, keeps on repeating this effect until we all become absolutely wearied of it. Nobody of any real culture, for instance, ever talks nowadays about the beauty of a sunset. Sunsets are quite old-fashioned. They belong to the time when Turner was the last note in art. To admire them is a distinct sign of provincialism of temperament. Upon the other hand they go on. Yesterday evening Mrs. Arundel insisted on my going to the window and looking at the glorious sky, as she called it. Of course I had to look at it. She is one of those absurdly pretty Philistines to whom one can deny nothing. And what was it? It was simply a very second-rate Turner, a Turner of a bad period, with all the painter’s worst faults exaggerated and over-emphasised.

Wilde’s argument, for all its scientific unsoundness, is nonetheless brilliantly reasoned, suggesting (in a borrowing from Whistler) how art not only interprets life but imposes upon it in ways which seemingly shape it or improve upon it. Nature, for example, acquires direction from the landscape painter:

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art. You smile. Consider the matter from a scientific or a metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I am right. For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us.
To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them.

Despite the axiomatic nature of these paradoxes to Wilde, he found disturbing evidence all around him that the more trivial world of facts was increasingly dominating and usurping the role imagination had to play if man were to strive toward his highest possibilities. Facts were spreading their chilling touch over everything, vulgarizing humanity. Wryly, but not seriously, Wilde—the veteran of a cross-country American lecture tour—blamed the forbidding climate on the “crude commercialism,” the materialism, the “indifference to the poetical side of things,” the lack of imagination as well as of “high unattainable ideals” on the part of that most influential country which had “adopted for its national hero a man who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie.” It was “not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in our literature.” It was not truth which enlarged consciousness, Wilde complained, for the English, too, were always “degrading truth into facts.” And when a truth became a fact, it lost all intellectual value. Sin, unsurprisingly, was a more essential element: “Sin increases the experience of the race” and is an “intensified assertion of individualism,” a relief from “monotony of type,” which “in its rejection of the current notions about morality” is also—paradoxically—“one with the highest ethics.”

Echoing his creator, Algernon in The Importance of Being Earnest notes that the truth “is rarely pure and simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!” Since Wilde toyed with the idea of reality as appearance, “with no reality in things apart from their appearances,” he considered the artist’s mind and moods as capable of shaping that reality—thus Turner’s burnished sunsets and literature’s London fogs. Nineteenth-century “scientific” or artistic realism, however, reached only for concreteness and arrived instead at dullness, leading Wilde’s spokesman in “The Decay of Lying” to lament: “Ours is certainly the dullest and most prosaic century possible. Why, even Sleep has played us false…. The dreams of the great middle classes of this country, as recorded in Mr. [Frederic W. H.] Myers’s two bulky volumes on the subject, and in the Transactions of the Psychical Society, are the most depressing things I have ever read. There is not even a fine nightmare among them. They are commonplace, sordid, and tedious.” It was art, “absolutely indif-
ferent to fact,” which made reality readable and intelligible through imagination—and that through the medium of style.

In Wilde’s criticism one always returns to the touchstone of style. Style was “that masterful but restrained individuality of manner by which one art is differentiated from another,” and one reached toward perfection in handling style by ascertaining and utilizing the maximum expressive powers of the artist’s medium. Lack of literary style, Wilde confessed, was the only thing that ever prejudiced him as a critic against a book. In fact, he noted in an epigram which anticipated the twentieth century but which in his own time seemed only another infuriating paradox: “Only the great masters of style ever succeed in being obscure.”

Before style came certain qualities upon which style could then be imposed. Wilde pointed to these in pouncing upon a lame English rendering of a French book, which might be “up to the intellectual requirements of Harrow schoolboys” but would “hardly satisfy those who consider that accuracy, lucidity and ease are essential to a good translation.” Although accuracy, lucidity, and ease were essential to all good writing, the writer’s good intentions were not of the smallest value. Involving one’s feelings with one’s material was “outside the proper sphere of art” and put the artist at a stylistic disadvantage: “All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling. To be natural is to be obvious, and to be obvious is to be inartistic.” Or, as Andre Gide later put it, cynically: “To me the worst instinct has always seemed sincere.”

Artificiality, or self-consciousness, lay at the heart of style and was impossible to achieve if “a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live…. It is exactly because Hecuba is nothing to us that her sorrows are such an admirable motive for tragedy.” It was an unrealizable ideal, for not even the most self-conscious artist could work effectively for very long with materials which could not concern him. Even in his most blatantly commercial writings, Wilde, contradicting his own contention about critical distance, almost always twisted the subject at hand into a perspective that permitted him to say something he wanted to say in a manner at least close to the way he wanted to say it. If it were not for that, his critical journalism would possess neither interest nor vitality; yet it has both, often in spite of the dauntingly dismal duality of the publications he found himself forced to review.

Wilde’s major critical works, “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist,” were in part spillovers from his book-reviewing phase, then in its waning months. Their perspectives parallel the earlier reviews, while also reinforcing earlier judgments about particular authors. But their self-con-
scious brilliance creates the atmosphere of a performance, an effect the dialogue form sustains. As a result his views about writers and writing seem more genuine in the reviews, where he usually appeared anonymously and had no cause for calling attention to Oscar Wilde. Because he took his work as critic more seriously than his pose suggested (and very likely more seriously than he at first intended), he did have cause for some mild despair. Wilde felt, for example, that the high level of poetry in his time was only relative to the extremely low quality of contemporary fiction and drama and made the best of a depressing situation by concluding: “We have been able to have fine poetry in England because the public do not read it, and consequently do not influence it.” In his Pall Mall Gazette days he had appealed not only for readers for books of new poetry, but for purchasers of the books. He may have believed in a relationship between coterie and quality—later, in fact, he subsidized the private publication of John Gray’s verses, Silver-points—but Wilde realistically understood that trade publishers had to sell books in order to stay in business. “It would be sad indeed,” he wrote, “if the many volumes of poems that are every year published in London found no readers but the authors themselves and the authors’ relations; and the real philanthropist should recognize it as part of his duties to buy every new book of verse that appears. Sometimes, we will acknowledge, he will be disappointed, often he will be bored; still now and then he will be amply rewarded for his reckless benevolence.”

Wilde’s own such rewards as a critic were few, but one was the young Yeats, whose Wanderings of Oisin seemed to him so remarkable that he could “hardly resist the fascinating temptation of recklessly prophesying a fine future for its author…. Here we find nobility of treatment and nobility of subject-matter, delicacy of poetic instinct and richness of imaginative resource.” He reviewed few other living poets he could admire. Swinburne, who “once set his age on fire by a volume of very perfect and very poisonous poetry,” disappointed Wilde by developing crippling limitations, “the chief of which is … the entire lack of any sense of limit. His song is nearly always too loud for his subject.” The best of the later Swinburne was to Wilde empty of everything but technical excellence: “Out of the thunder and splendour of words he himself says nothing.” “Art for art’s sake” may have been a splendid contemporary watchword, but Wilde expected art to provide some “revelation of human life.” Now and then the mask slipped.

The criticism from which Wilde most shrank was that of religious poetry, and his reasons were much the same—“that quality of absolute unintelligibility that is the peculiar privilege of the verbally inspired.” More orthodox religious verse was seldom an improvement. “There seems to be some curious connection between piety and poor rhymes,” he discovered. “Ordinary theology has long since converted its gold into lead, and words and phrases
that once touched the heart of the world have become wearisome and meaningless through repetition. If theology desires to move us, she must re-write her formulas.” His skepticism included a “little volume ... of poems on the Saints. Each poem is preceded by a brief biography of the Saint it celebrates—which is a very necessary precaution, as few of them ever existed. It does not display much poetic power and such lines as these on St. Stephen ... may be said to add another horror to martyrdom. Still it is a thoroughly well-intentioned book and eminently suitable for invalids.”

Wilde often pinpointed the appropriate audience for a book, a useful way to indicate a bad book’s meager appeal, and the method was a critical staple of his right up to the last line of his last review column: “On the whole Primavera is a pleasant little book, and we are glad to welcome it. It is charmingly ‘got up,’ and undergraduates might read it with advantage during lecture hours.” It was an early effort by four young Oxonians, two of whom would be famous in a decade, and nearly forgotten in two—Laurence Binyon and Stephen Phillips. One earlier young poet—who died young—remained in Wilde’s thinly populated literary pantheon. Thomas Chatterton, he thought, was “one of England’s greatest poets.” Wilde’s 1886 lecture on the “marvellous boy,” given at Birkbeck College, London, was promised for publication in Herbert Horne’s Century Guild Hobby Horse, but although the extant manuscript runs to seventy pages, it was apparently never ready for the printer.14

In at least one case Wilde’s pantheon was occupied by a poetess, and one might hope that Oscar the gentleman rather than Oscar the critic made the choice. Belying his own dictum about overpraise rendering the criticism suspect,15 he intoned that the author of Sonnets from the Portuguese was “unapproachable by any woman who has ever touched lyre or blown through reed since the days of the great Aeolian poetess.... Of all the women of history, Mrs. Browning is the only one that we could name in any possible or remote connection with Sappho.” Another Greek analogy was more appropriate. To Wilde, England’s greatest poet was Milton, and it was to his loss of sight that the language owed “the sonorous splendour of his later verse.” There was a lesson to be learned. “When Milton became blind he composed, as everyone should compose, with the voice purely, and so the pipe or reed of earlier days became that mighty many-stopped organ whose rich reverberant music has all the stateliness of Homeric verse.... Yes: writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to the voice.” Mrs. Browning’s husband fared worse, for reasons consistent with Wilde’s attitude toward Milton. “Meredith,” he wrote in an observation on the contemporary novel, “is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose.”
In some cases Wilde found reason to praise a poet for largely non-poetic values. The worth of Whitman’s poetry was “in its prophecy, not in its performance.” He found in Whitman (whom he had met in the old poet’s home in Camden) “a largeness of vision, a healthy sanity and a fine ethical purpose”—all qualities none of Whitman’s detractors noted, and all qualities which had little to do with Wilde’s theories of art. Longfellow, a lesser poet, he praised as “one of the first true men of letters America has produced,” for that reason alone a writer who deserved “a high place in any history of American civilization…. But his poems are not of the kind that call for intellectual analysis or for elaborate description or, indeed, for any serious discussion at all.” It was the very problem that afflicted Wilde whenever he had a column to fill on the latest output in verse, for few writers he criticized even measured up to the modest Longfellow standard.

Wilde reviewed few contemporary plays, either in print or in performance. It was a thin period for the theater. “The only link between Literature and the Drama left to us in England at the present moment,” he complained, “is the bill of the play.” Like Shaw, he defended paradoxically the serious place in the theater of the play of wit. “I was on the point of explaining to Gerald,” says his Lord Illingworth, “that the world has always laughed at its own tragedies, that being the only way in which it has been able to bear them. And that, consequently, whatever the world has treated seriously belongs to the comedy side of things” (A Woman of No Importance). Comedy appealed to him too because it was the self-conscious side of theater—“an audience looks at a tragedian, but a comedian looks at his audience.” In comedy, he thought, “situations predominate over characters,” while tragedy was the “exaggeration of the individual.” But plays, in any case, were meant to be acted rather than read, for in no other way could they combine the literary and plastic arts. “On the stage,” he wrote hopefully, “literature returns to life and archaeology becomes art. A fine theatre is a temple where all the muses may meet.” It was foolish, he thought, to complain “of the passion of a play being hidden by paint, and of sentiment being killed by scenery…. A noble play, nobly mounted, gives us double artistic pleasure. The eye as well as the ear is gratified, and the whole nature is made exquisitely receptive of the influence of imaginative work.”

Shakespeare helped sustain a number of contentions basic to Wilde’s criticism. He was, for example, “indifferent to historical accuracy.” Of course, Wilde added: “the aesthetic value of Shakespeare’s plays does not, in the slightest degree, depend upon their facts, but on their Truth, and Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure.” Truth in stage performance could take many forms, one aspect being the truth suggested by paradox, as Wilde observed about a famous scene in Hamlet:
The whole point of Hamlet’s advice to the players seems to me to be lost unless
the Player himself has been guilty of the fault which Hamlet reprehends, unless
he has sawn the air with his hand, mouthed his lines, torn his passion to tatters,
and out-Heroded Herod. The very sensibility which Hamlet notices in the
actor, such as his real tears and the like, is not the quality of a good artist. The
part should be played after the manner of a provincial tragedian. It is meant to
be a satire, and to play it well is to play it badly.

_Hamlet_ was Wilde’s favorite play, and the curious pair of Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern were among his favorite characters, perhaps because he
could read so much into their shadowy existences. As late as his 1897 let-
ter-essay _De Profundis_ he was discovering new depths in the pair; but review-
ing an 1885 performance, he pretended not to be able to tell them apart.
“Mr. Norman Forbes,” he wrote, “played either Guildenstern or Rosen-
crantz very gracefully. I believe one of our budding Hazlitts is preparing a
volume to be entitled ‘Great Guildensterns and Remarkable Rosencrantzes,’
but I have never been able to discern any difference between these two char-
acters. They are, I think, the only characters Shakespeare has not cared to
individualise.”

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were useful to Wilde in other ways as well,
as he drew upon them to develop what has since become a cliché of bio-
ographical criticism. “Formerly we used to canonise our great men; nowadays
we vulgarise them,” he wrote, with Joseph Knight’s life of Dante Gabri-
el Rossetti in mind. It was “just the sort of biography Guildenstern might
have written of Hamlet. Nor does its unsatisfactory character come merely
from the ludicrous inadequacy of the materials at Mr. Knight’s disposal…. Rossetti’s was a great personality, and great personalities do not easily sur-
vive shilling primers. Sooner or later they have inevitably to come down to
the level of their biographers.” Wilde could pillory the biographer as deftly
as the biography, observing about a mild and reticent life of George Sand
that it was “the biography of a very great man from the pen of a very lady-
like writer.”

After reading Hall Caine’s _Coleridge_ he was reminded of what Wordsworth
had once said on viewing a bust of himself: “It is not a bad Wordsworth, but
it is not the real Wordsworth; it is not Wordsworth the poet, it is the sort of
Wordsworth who might be Chancellor of the Exchequer.” It was what Wilde
later called in “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist” the fail-
ure of realism: “The incidents of the life are duly recounted…, as no doubt
they should be in every popular biography; but of the spiritual progress of
the man’s soul we hear absolutely nothing. Never … are we brought near to
Coleridge; the magic of that wonderful personality is hidden from us by a
cloud of mean details.” For Wilde “the goings-out and comings-in of a man,
his places of sojourn and his roads of travel are but idle things to chronicle, if
that which is the man be left unrecorded.” There was much that was mys-
trious in an artist’s “thoughts, dreams and passions, his moments of creative
impulse, their source and secret, his moods of imaginative joy, their marvel
and their meaning, and not his moods merely but the music and the melancholy
that they brought him;... and though we may not be able to pluck out
the heart of his mystery, still let us recognise that mystery is there.”

In the later major essays Wilde not only borrowed ideas from the reviews,
but epigrams as well, including the lines about vulgarization replacing can-
onization in biography, and about cheap editions of great books being
replaced by cheap editions of great men. “Every great man nowadays has
his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography.” Not always,
he should have noted in the interest of consistency: sometimes the biogra-
pher was Guildenstern.

Wilde found contemporary fiction no better than writing in other forms.
The Peerage, Lord Illingworth observes in A Woman of No Importance, “is
the best thing in fiction the English have ever done.” In conversation Wilde
added: “No modern literary work of any worth has been produced in the
English language—except of course Bradshaw.”17 His Gwendolen Fairfax,
in The Importance of Being Earnest, resorts to even more offbeat literature in
order to find something satisfactory: “I never travel without my diary. One
should always have something sensational to read in the train.” She might
have found history more exciting. Miss Prism, in fact, warns Cecily to omit
from her schoolwork the chapter “on the Fall of the Rupee.... It is some-
what too sensational.”

Because Wilde always insisted that facts did not add up to truth, it was
characteristic of him to blur the line between fiction and history. “The only
form of fiction in which real characters do not seem out of place;” he wrote,
“is history.” In fact, he added afterwards, “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 historical writings of Carlyle, he
thought, proved his paradox, for in Carlyle’s French Revolution, “one of the
most fascinating historical novels ever written, facts are either kept in their
subordinate position, or else entirely excluded on the general ground of dull-
ness.” He was convinced that the “one duty we owe history is to rewrite it.
That is not the least of the tasks in store for the critical spirit. When we have
fully discovered the scientific laws that govern life, we shall realise that the
one person who has more illusions than the dreamer is the man of action.”

Fiction, Wilde’s observation about Carlyle suggested, was guilty of lit-
erature’s worst crime—dullness; and the reasons only proved in his man-
ner the validity of his critical theses. “What are American dry goods?” Lady
Hunstanton asks. “American novels,” says Lord Illingworth.18 Traditional-
ly swollen Victorian fiction fared no better. “Anybody can write a three-vol-
umed novel,” Wilde declared in “The Critic as Artist.” “It merely requires a
complete ignorance of both life and literature.” In The Importance of Being
Earnest the worldly Lady Bracknell describes Miss Prism’s mislaid early
manuscript as being that “of a novel of more than usually revolting senti-
mentality.” No change is discernible in Miss Prism’s later critical position.
When Cecily Cardew—that paradoxically modern spirit—complains that
she dislikes novels that end happily because they depress her so much, Miss
Prism restates the case for the traditional novel: “The good ended happily,
and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.” Such fiction was not
only unlike life, but was not art, any more than was the new documentary
novel to Wilde a work of literary art. The Zolaesque novelists of East End
slum life “find life crude, and leave it raw.” That this could have social util-
dity did not impress Wilde, for social utility itself was outside art. Zola him-
self, with all his .narrative power and exactitude of description, left Wilde
unmoved, although he defended Zola against the moral indignation he cor-
correctly analyzed as “simply the indignation of Tartuffe on being exposed.”
The problem of the naturalist novel was that it dealt with the “dreary vices”
and “drearier virtues” of people whose lives were “absolutely without inter-
est.” Whatever their interest to the newly literate classes emancipated by
board-school English, the characters brought to life by this new breed of
novel were not for Wilde. “Who cares what happens to them?” The justifica-
tion of a character in a novel for him was not that character’s realistic basis,
“but that the author is what he is. Otherwise the novel is not a work of art.”

Wilde bore the cross of novel-reviewing with wit and patience. He observed
(an idea he borrowed for his best play) that some of the most inept fiction-
writing was “done with the best intentions, and that people are never so triv-
ial as when they take themselves seriously.” Yet he did not feel that he had to
be very severe with the contemporary English novels he reviewed, for they
were “the only relaxation of the intellectually unemployed.” Bad writing,
however, irritated him: “The nineteenth century may be a prosaic age, but
we fear that, if we are to judge by the general run of novels, it is not an age
of prose.” The explanation, he quipped, might have been that the novelists
of his day were caught in a dilemma—“if they do not go into society, their
books are unreadable; and if they do go into society, they have no time left
for writing.” One group of inexpensively priced novels he found so unwor-
thy of publication that he concluded: “We sincerely hope that a few more
novels like these will be published, as the public will then find out that a bad
book is very dear at a shilling.”

There were consolations, too, for the critic of fiction. An English edition of
Balzac prompted his declaration that the Comédie humaine was “the greatest
moment that literature has produced in this century…. Balzac’s aim was to
do for humanity what Buffon had done for animal creation. As the naturalist studied lions and tigers, so the novelist studied men and women. A steady course of Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades. Frugally, he reused some of the lines from the review in “The Decay of Lying,” adding to them a sentence linking his observations to a theme of the essay: “Balzac is no more of a realist than Holbein was.” But Wilde had no patience with Englishmen who claimed Dickens as the domestic Balzac. “One must have a heart of stone,” he joked, “to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.” More seriously, he wrote that “in some respects Dickens might be likened to those old sculptors of our Gothic cathedrals, who could give form to the most fantastic fancy, and crowd with grotesque monsters a curious world of dreams, but saw little of the grace and dignity of the men and women among whom they lived, and whose art, lacking sanity, was therefore incomplete. Yet at least they knew the limitations of their art, while Dickens never knew the limitations of his.”

Few contemporary writers earned Wilde’s encomiums. His old mentor Walter Pater (whom Wilde often paraphrased) wrote sentences which had “the charm of an elaborate piece of music” as well as “the unity of such music.” George Meredith, however, “as a writer … had mastered everything except language,” while as a novelist (Wilde admired his characterization) Meredith could do “everything, except tell a story.” Henry James wrote fiction “as if it were a painful duty, and wastes upon mean motives and imperceptible ‘points of view’ his neat literary style, his felicitous phrases, his swift and caustic satire.” Hall Caine, aiming rather at the grandiose, wrote “at the top of his voice. He is so loud that one cannot hear what he says.” Carlyle was once dismissed with the remark that “the whole of the Philosophy of Clothes is to be found in Lear’s scene with Edgar—a passage which has the advantage of brevity and style over the grotesque wisdom and somewhat mouthing metaphysics of Sartor Resartus.” Earnestness as well as bad writing condemned Mrs. Ward’s much esteemed Robert Elsmere, “a masterpiece of the genre ennuyeux, the one form of literature that the English people seem thoroughly to enjoy.” F. Marion Crawford’s popular American expatriate novels were also moral and dull: “He is always telling us that to be good is to be good, and that to be bad to be wicked.” Charles Reade’s novels of moral indignation drew Wilde’s saddest reproaches, for he felt that after one of the most distinguished and beautiful books of the age, The Cloister and the Hearth, Reade, “an artist, a scholar, a man with a true sense of beauty,” wasted the rest of his career “raging and roaring over the abuses of contemporary life like a common pamphleteer.” By placing himself too close to his material, by substituting subjectivity for self-consciousness, Reade—by Wilde’s standards—forsook the necessary critical perspectives. Wilde never altered this view, even from the sobering vantage of prison. From Reading
Gaol he wrote Robert Ross about a posthumous collection of Robert Louis Stevenson’s letters; they were “most disappointing…. I see that romantic surroundings are the worst surroundings possible for a romantic writer. In Gower Street Stevenson could have written a new *Trois Mousquetaires*. In Samoa he wrote letters to *The Times* about Germans.”

Wilde seemed almost to anticipate prison, if not actually to aspire toward it, for reasons related to his subterranean life yet capable of rationalization from a critical point of view. While he lived as if he could evade the morals laws forever, he knew better and prepared his case for himself by equating courageous wrongdoing with the artist’s search for enrichment of experience. What one shouldn’t do had to be done in order to explore new possibilities in self-consciousness—a concept Algernon applies to literature in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: “Oh! it is absurd to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn’t. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read.” What one shouldn’t do might be enforced by prison regulations, Wilde wrote more than six years before his own days in the dock, but prison nonetheless could have an “admirable effect,” while in no way limiting or constraining “the freedom of a man’s soul.” Approvingly, he quoted Wilfrid Blunt as reporting after his own experience that prison “like a sickness or a spiritual retreat … purifies and ennobles; and the soul emerges from it stronger and more self-contained.” *The Importance of Being Earnest* was only in its second month at the St. James’s Theatre when its author had the opportunity of prison forced upon him, and in *De Profundis*, written in his last months of incarceration, he applied his experience to his theories.

“Everything that is realised is right,” Wilde insisted in *De Profundis*, thus continuing to equate sin—artistically mastered—with truth. “The books that the world calls immoral books,” he had written in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “are books that show the world its own shame.” In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* he explained: “When the public say a work of art is grossly unintelligible, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is true.” It was a paradox he had to believe in: it explained himself. It also explained his art. “Romantic art,” he wrote in defending *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “deals with the exception and the individual. Good people, belonging as they do to the normal, and so, commonplace, type, are artistically uninteresting. Bad people are, from the point of view of art, fascinating studies. They represent colour, variety and strangeness. Good people exasperate one’s reason; bad people stir one’s imagination.” The sinister double life of Dorian Gray was more relevant to the author’s own condition than the reading public then knew. On the surface Wilde was in the novel no more than creatively consistent with his own aesthetic theories. Yet it was through more than critical uniformity that Wilde’s essays, stories, and plays talked of
masks and of lying, and pivoted cleverly upon deception and double lives. “It is proper,” Wilde wrote, intending perhaps only a half-truth, “that limitation should be placed on action. It is not proper that limitation should be placed on art. To art belong all things that are and all things that are not.”

The Wildean ideal was an artist who “has no ethical sympathies at all. Virtue and wickedness are to him simply what the colours on his palette are to the painter.” The proposed public for that ideal was less realizable—one which would understand that the “sphere of art and the sphere of ethics” were “absolutely distinct and separate.” It was to the confusion between ethics and art, he explained, “that we owe the appearance of Mrs. Grundy, that amusing old lady who represents the only, original form of humour that the middle classes of this country have been able to produce.”

Grundyism, Wilde understood, was not entirely a laughing matter, for it implied some de facto censorship over imaginative literature. Literature possessed certain rights and freedoms inherent in art, he insisted. “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.” Censorship “would degrade literature far more than any didactic or so-called immoral book could possibly do.” The problem was that although Wilde was right, he was evading the equally crucial question as to whether the immoral literary artist (in his capacity not as artist, but as human being) degraded literature. And it remains to the confusion between the two inescapable questions that we owe some skepticism about Wilde the literary critic. In Oscar’s heyday, the young Max Beerbohm, in his first published essay (he was still at Merton College, Oxford), pointed out the problem: “Apart from the truth that the excellence of a work lies not in the possession of any ulterior motive or original conviction of its author, but in the aspect of the work itself, to say that Mr. Wilde is not in earnest is manifestly false. No writer has pleaded with greater zeal and consistency for the preference of Aesthetics to Ethics … [yet] it is not by his works alone that we must judge him, but by the personality of which his works are a part.” Wilde could have agreed with the dangerously accurate and prophetic judgment. “I treated art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction,” he afterwards wrote to Douglas in De Profundis. But he might have added, as was his method, a diversionary paradox. “Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay,” he had already explained in The Truth of Masks. “There is much with which I entirely disagree…. For in Art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradiction is also true.”

A critic in spite of himself, then a critic to explain himself, Wilde sought to bring art into harmony with his life, and his life into harmony with art. It
is a paradox entirely consistent with his life that such criticism has proved to be as enduring as it is entertaining. But like his John Worthing (who was Ernest in the country), Wilde might have confessed his surprise “to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.”