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Criticism as Art: Form in Oscar Wilde's Critical Writings

By HERBERT SUSSMAN

IN the years 1889 and 1890 Oscar Wilde produced a varied group of prose works—"The Decay of Lying" (1889); "Pen, Pencil and Poison" (1889); "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." (1889); "The Critic as Artist" (1890)¹—that have as their unifying purpose the expression of what he called his "new views on art, and particularly on the relations of art and history."² Although scholars have recently begun to take Wilde's critical writings seriously,³ this seriousness is usually shown by, in Frank Kermode's apologetic phrase, "ruthlessly abstracting"⁴ Wilde's critical principles from the varied ways in which they are expressed. The form itself—the dialogue, the narrative frame, the self-conscious irony—is usually dismissed by critics as mere "entertainment,"⁵ as a distressingly flippant means of expressing serious ideas. This assumption of a disparity between form and content

¹ Dates refer to first publication. "The Critic as Artist" originally appeared under the title, "The True Function and Value of Criticism: with some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: a Dialogue." "The Decay of Lying," "Pen, Pencil and Poison," and "The Critic as Artist" were published in *Intentions* in 1891.

² Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1962), p. 236. Further references to the *Letters* will be given parenthetically in the text.

³ George Woodcock, *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1950), Chap. VII; Epifanio San Juan, Jr., *The Art of Oscar Wilde* (Princeton, 1967), Chap. III; Stanley Weintraub, ed., *Literary Criticism of Oscar Wilde* (Lincoln, Neb., 1968), pp. ix-xxxvi.

⁴ *The Romantic Image* (New York, 1964), p. 44.

⁵ San Juan, Jr., p. 74. See also Seymour Migdal, "The Poseur and the Critic in Some Essays of Oscar Wilde," *Dalhousie Review*, XLVIII (1967), 65-70.

is a particularly misleading approach to Wilde's prose, for, as I shall argue in this essay, Wilde is consciously working to create new forms of critical discourse through which he can adequately express his "new views." Writing to an admirer of "The Decay of Lying," he tells of his determination to express his views "in a form that would be understood by the few who, like yourself, have a quick artistic instinct" (*Letters*, p. 236). And under Wilde's touch, the traditional forms of the critical dialogue, the biographical sketch, and even the short story are transformed to appeal to those of "quick artistic instinct," are reshaped into new literary forms that express his deeply Paterian, radically modern sensibility.

Furthermore, the reduction of Wilde's critical writing to coherent system is distorting because the central principle of these works is the questioning and the redefinition of intellectual activity itself. Drawn to the Paterian belief that the only knowable reality is that of mental impressions, Wilde shows intellectual discourse to be a means of fixing these impressions rather than a way of describing a stable external reality. The varied forms of his works all dramatize the process described in the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, the process by which intellectual formulations, "principles of things," dissolve, are "dissipated" into a "group of impressions" within "the narrow chamber of the individual mind." In Wilde's works, then, intellectual discourse is "aestheticized," shown to be a form of art, not only as a means of giving form to feeling, but as evanescent, dependent upon the ceaseless, shifting flux of emotion. Like art, intellectual formulations are, for Wilde, not to be judged by mimetic criteria, by their correspondence to a material world, but as autonomous artifacts whose validity lies in their self-sufficient coherence.

The Wildean dialogue becomes, then, a solo performance in which, to the admiration of the minor character, the principal figure moves from assertion to assertion just as an actor shifts from role to role. But, as Wilde notes of "The Decay of Lying," the purpose of this "fantastic form" is "*au fond* . . . serious" (*Letters*, p. 236). The dialogue as performance is a Paterian *tour de force*, a form suggesting that intellectual formulation is itself a type of artistic creation which, for a moment, fixes in the form of language the complex of mental sen-

sations or, in Wilde's terms, gives "reality to every mood."⁶ But, as the representation of mental states, such discourse must be, in the metaphor of Pater's "Conclusion," constantly "weaving and unweaving," for it is dependent upon, and determined by, the ceaseless flux of mental life.

Wilde's transformation of assertions into artifacts is emphasized by constant reminders that the critical works are themselves fictions. This self-reflexive quality appears in its simplest form in "The Truth of Masks," a work written in 1885 and included in an expanded form in *Intentions*. In this work, the speaker suddenly states at the end of his defense of archeologically accurate stagings of Shakespeare: "Not that I agree with everything I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything" (432). Here, the admission is jarring because of a confusion of form. Up to this point, the essay has used a reliable personal voice, the standard form of Victorian critical essays, and at the end the reader is surprised to find that this supposedly reliable voice is but a mask, a fictional construct setting forth a position the validity of which lies solely in its internal coherence. In the dialogues, where Wilde uses overtly fictional characters rather than a personal voice, he is more successful in suggesting to the reader that the critical pronouncements have the only self-consistency of art. In "The Decay of Lying" Vivian, discussing how life imitates art, tells of a man named Hyde who, shortly after the publication of Robert Louis Stevenson's story, accidentally knocks over a child while walking in the city and escapes from a hostile crowd by taking refuge in a nearby surgery: "The name on the brass door-plate of the surgery caught his eye. It was 'Jekyll.' At least it should have been" (310). In "The Critic as Artist," the self-reflexive comments are equally forceful in reminding the reader that the critical discourse is a work of art, a coherent fiction, rather than the typically Victorian statement of the speaker's beliefs. After listening to Gilbert discuss the varied uses of the dialogue by critics of the past, Ernest comments, "By

⁶ Richard Ellmann, ed., *The Artist as Critic* (New York, 1969), p. 391. Further page reference to this edition will appear in parentheses in the text.

its means, too, he can invent an imaginary antagonist, and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly sophistical argument" (391).

These pointed reminders that the critic is behaving like an artist provide a momentary relaxation from the strain of establishing a "standpoint" (432), a position of temporary stability within the flux. And yet a major effect of these works lies in just this sense of strain, in their dramatization of both the limitations and the power of language in giving form to varied, often antithetical, forms of mental life. Just as the White Queen could, with practice, believe "as many as six impossible things before breakfast," the protagonists in Wilde's criticism delight in taking up seemingly "impossible" critical positions. The speaker in "The Truth of Masks" deftly redefines terms and scatters paradoxes in order to praise Sir Henry Irving's historical productions of Shakespeare, even if the same voice later admits that this praise is only an aesthetic "attitude" (432). In the dialogues, the characters take up almost any position that is offered. After Ernest discusses the assertion that "the Greeks had no art-critics" (349), Gilbert, with equal grace, describes the Greeks as "a nation of art-critics" (349). In making difficult, often contradictory positions attractive, the aim is not only the pleasure of watching a performer overcome difficulty with ease, of seeing the trapeze artist perform his skillful if wholly useless art, but also the illustration of the essentially aesthetic nature of discourse. If all assertions can be given a self-consistent form, then none is more valid than another; "All principles of things" are, in the terms of Pater's "Conclusion," "but inconstant modes or fashions."

This attack upon the descriptive function of intellectual formulation appears in the pervasive formal pattern of the dialogues, the reduction or dissolution of all assertions into their constituent mental impressions. Here, most clearly, the dialogues dramatize the psychological process described by Pater's "Conclusion," in which the forms and formulations of the external world upon "reflection" are "dissipated" and reality "dwindles down" into groups of impressions. As in *Dorian Gray*,⁷ the characters in the dialogue are masks, objectifications of

⁷ See Wilde's letter stating that the characters in *Dorian Gray* represent different parts of his own personality. *Letters*, p. 352.

different intellectual possibilities present in Wilde himself. As Wilde acknowledges (390-1), this use of dialogue to express opposing critical views is in keeping with a literary tradition that goes back to Plato. In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde is not to be identified with Gilbert. Rather, both Gilbert and Ernest are masks for modes of thought attractive to Wilde. The aptly-named Ernest not only holds conventional, Arnoldian views, such as the inferior role of the critic in relation to the artist, but represents a conventional sensibility which presents such beliefs as generalized assertions, as descriptive statements. In contrast, Gilbert represents the aesthetic sensibility that dissolves such assertions into the underlying reality of mental impressions. But unlike traditional critical dialogues, the interaction of these two characters, or masks, shows neither the presentation of differing positions nor the logical pattern of assertion-proof-refutation; instead it shows assertion dissolving into impressions. Ernest speaks most often in generalized statements. For example, he asks Gilbert, "What was it you said? That it was more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it?" (361). Gilbert's reply apparently follows the form of logical argument in contrasting the transitory nature of the actions in the Trojan War to the eternity of the deeds as recorded in the Homeric epic. He speaks first of the warriors: "It was easy enough on the sandy plains by windy Ilion to send the notched arrow from the painted bow, to hurl against the shield of hide and flame-like brass the long ash-handled spear." He then speaks of the poets: "What of those who wrote about these things? What of those who gave them reality, and made them live forever? . . . Every day the swan-like daughter of Leda comes out on the battlements, and looks down at the tide of war" (361). But for all the ostensibly logical form of contrast, the use of the same mock-Homeric style to describe both the historical actions and actions in the eternal present of literature makes the reader unable to determine whether a particular line is describing the Trojan Wars or the *Iliad*. As throughout Wilde's writing, the stylistic unity, the reduction of event and literary description of the event, of life and art to the same ornate style, suggests that the essential form of the work is not the comparison of assertion to phenomenal events, but the expression of a single sensi-

bility. And as art, as the objectification of a private mental vision, Gilbert's "argument" succeeds not through logic, but through an intensity that suspends disbelief. Ernest can only reply, "While you talk it seems to me to be so" (362).

In "The Decay of Lying," too, the characters are masks for similarly antithetical mental possibilities present in Wilde. Cyril represents the sensibility given to setting reality into ordered intellectual formulations, Vivian the sensibility working to dissolve these assertions into mental impressions. Speaking in abstract language, Cyril asks, "[Do] you seriously believe that Life imitates Art?" (307). Vivian's answer is, again, almost a parody of logical argument. After restating the assertion, he ostensibly demonstrates the influence of art on life by describing how the paintings of Rossetti and Burne-Jones shape the appearance of modern women. He tells of seeing in the women at the galleries "the mystic eyes of Rossetti's dream," "the sweet maidenhood of 'The Golden Stair,' the blossom-like mouth and weary loveliness of the 'Laus Amoris,' the passion-pale face of Andromeda" (307). Although these descriptions appear to have the traditional argumentative function of examples proving an assertion, the language describing the appearance of actual women is self-consciously that of impressionistic art criticism. Here again, the description of art and life in a single style reminds the reader that the work is not showing the correspondence between the external world and an assertion, but giving coherent form to the mental impressions of a single sensibility.

This Paterian sense of intellectual activity as the objectification of the "whirlpool" of mental life is further emphasized by Wilde's use of the dialogue to transform critical discourse into drama. In the typical Victorian critical essay, Ruskin or Arnold speaks in a single, reliable voice.⁸ This form suggests that the assertions are not only descriptive of a stable external reality, but are the beliefs of an equally stable and unified personality. Wildean critical dialogue, however, exists as a dramatic action, a form showing the process by which intellectual formulation shifts over time and is dependent upon the con-

⁸ To consider the Victorian critics as speaking in a single reliable voice is somewhat of an over-simplification. Victorian writers also experimented with means of expressing their own divided self, as in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* or Arnold's *Friendship's Garland*.

tinuous flux of the inward life. The ceaseless movement of the Wildean dialogue in which assertions dissolve into impressions, impressions re-emerge as new formulations, dramatizes Wilde's modernist view that intellectual activity proceeds not by the rules of logic but is shaped by deeper psychic forces. Each drama ends in the same way. Gilbert becomes "tired of thought"; Vivian says, "We have talked long enough." Intellectual discourse ends, then, not when a logical conclusion is reached, but when emotional intensity slackens. By transforming critical discourse from the personal statement of the essay to the continuous process of the drama, Wilde achieves a new form through which he can express the "new views" he so praised in Pater's *Appreciations*: "In matters of art, at any rate, thought is inevitably coloured by emotion, and so is fluid rather than fixed, and, recognising its dependence upon moods and upon the passion of fine moments, will not accept the rigidity of a scientific formula or a theological dogma" (232).

But if the dialogues show a constant stylistic pressure toward the reduction of all reality to the impressions of a single mind, they are not exercises in pure solipsism. The virtue of Wilde's critical writing lies in its balance between an attraction toward solipsism and a clear hold on the belief that a world of nature and of men exists independently of the mind. As much as the dialogues suggest that intellectual activity is the momentary formulation of evanescent moods, they still provide literary judgments and suggest new theoretical formulations, such as the shaping effect of art upon perception.⁹ Wilde's use of the two opposing masks, of the abstracting intellect and the impressionistic sensibility, suggests his own refusal as critic to identify with either pure impressionism or what he calls the "rigidity of a scientific formula." The virtue of Wilde's critical writings is that he sets forth his "new views" and specific literary judgments in a form that implicitly suggests the tentative nature of his assertions and the impressionistic basis of his judgments.

As dramas of his own divided psyche, the dialogues show a pattern of action illustrating that one cannot remain locked in the solitary

⁹ The purpose of this essay is not to provide another outline of Wilde's critical ideas. For such outlines see San Juan, Jr., or Weintraub.

world of mental impressions. Each takes place in a room, "the library of a house in Picadilly" or "the library of a country house in Nottinghamshire." For the aesthetic sensibility the enclosed room is a central symbol representing solipsistic retreat into mental impressions. It is "the narrow chamber of the individual mind" which, for Pater, encloses all reality; the old schoolroom in which Dorian's portrait is locked; the mansion in which Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans' *A Rebours*, creates his own palace of art. In these fables of decadence, salvation comes only when the room is opened, when a connection is made between the psyche and the social world. Des Esseintes must leave his mansion or die. When Dorian decides to give up his self-centered life, he dies, the schoolroom is broken into, and the true nature of his soul is revealed to society. And at the end of both dialogues, the characters emerge from a room, from enclosure in the self-contained space of the psyche. Vivian says, "Now let us go out on the terrace." Gilbert asks that they "Draw back the curtains and open the windows wide." To escape from the "narrow chamber" of the self, Gilbert and Ernest must attempt to re-enter the social world, "go down to Covent Garden and look at the roses."

In the dialogues, then, Wilde illustrates one of his favorite paradoxes, that one can be "far more subjective in an *objective* form than in any other way" (*Letters*, p. 589). By abandoning the Victorian convention of the critic speaking directly to the audience as sage, a mode suggesting what Wilde calls "the permanence of personality" (334), he finds forms to express the fragmented nature of the self.¹⁰ Cyril and Vivian, Gilbert and Ernest dramatize fragments of self, distinct yet antithetical psychic possibilities present in Wilde. Similarly, by rejecting the novel, a genre that uses psychologically unified characters, for forms bordering on allegory in which characters exemplify distinct moral and intellectual types, Wilde is able successfully to dramatize the multiplicity of the individual psyche. His own moral conflict is rendered with great com-

¹⁰ See Yeats' description of Wilde as exemplifying the phase in which "Unity of Being is no longer possible, for the being is compelled to live in a fragment of itself and to dramatise that fragment." Quoted in Richard Ellmann, ed., *Oscar Wilde, A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1969), p. 22.

plexity in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; the intellectual issues of his criticism are presented with complex ambiguity in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."¹¹

Like the dialogues, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." dramatizes Wilde's divided response to Paterian solipsism, the tension between his sense of reality as created wholly by the mind and his belief in a reality existing independently of the mind. The complexity of the narrative through which the theory is presented suggests that the purpose is not so much to set forth a particular theory about Shakespeare as to test the limits and the necessity of critical and historical description itself. As in the dialogues, the characters are masks, objectifications of the antithetical possibilities of the abstracting and the impressionistic mind. In Part I, Erskine takes the role of Ernest or Cyril in the dialogues. On first hearing Cyril Graham's theory as to the identity of Mr. W. H., he treats it as a description and asks for "some independent evidence" (163) showing that it corresponds to an external reality. Cyril, who is, significantly, an actor, reprimands him for his "philistine tone of mind" (163), his bourgeois identification of reality with the material world. Driven by a desire to conform to bourgeois views, Cyril has the false portrait done, but, on discovery of the forgery, returns to the position of aesthetic critic by stating that the origin of the painting "does not affect the truth of the theory" (165). To the aesthetic sensibility, a theory must be judged in the same way as a work of art, on its internal coherence and the intensity with which it represents the individual vision of the creator, not on its correspondence to an external reality. Cyril's death, an act designed "to show . . . how firm and flawless his faith in the whole thing was" (166), becomes, within the terms of aestheticism, a vindication by showing his theory as the form given to his own intense feeling. But as in the dialogues, the narrative form of conflict between masks prevents the reader from identifying Cyril's views with Wilde's. Erskine's comment that "a thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it" (166) must be read in terms

¹¹ Like Wilde's other critical writings, this allegory is either dismissed as mere entertainment, a "mockscholarly *jeu*" (Russell Fraser, ed., *Selected Writings of Oscar Wilde* [Boston, 1969], p. 293) or discussed as an expression of Wilde's psychic life (Ellman, *The Artist as Critic*, p. xix).

of Wilde's ambivalent attraction toward solipsism. It is both the sign of an obtuse failure to realize that theories are only artifacts and a reminder that one must still acknowledge that an external world exists. To symbolize the need to escape imprisonment within the "narrow chamber" of the mind, the narrator leaves "the library" of Erskine's "pretty little house in Birdcage Walk" (152) to return home "through St. James Park" (168).

The narrator's return to his own room marks his movement into his own psyche, his Paterian reduction of reality to wholly private mental impressions. As he studies the texts, themselves the fragmentary objectifications of Shakespeare's mind, he creates a solipsistic vision of Willie Hughes. Intensely felt and self-consistent, it is created entirely within the mind: "Willie Hughes became to me a kind of spiritual presence, an ever-dominant personality. I could almost fancy that I saw him standing in the shadow of my room, so well had Shakespeare drawn him, with his golden hair, his tender flower-like grace, his dreamy deep-sunken eyes, his delicate mobile limbs, and his white lily hands" (177). But when the narrator attempts to communicate this belief to Erskine in a letter, he finds that he gives away his "capacity for belief in the Willie Hughes theory of the Sonnets" (212). For attempting to share this vision is to misunderstand its nature. It is to turn an autonomous creation into a description of an external reality, into a statement that can be independently verified by separate minds. As in the dialogues, the narrative suggests that intellectual formulations are essentially a means by which we give form to the flux of emotion. The narrator is trapped by the Paterian paradox that at the highest pitch of intensity, the moment is already vanishing; "by finding perfect expression for a passion" the narrator has "exhausted the passion itself" (212). And as speculation ends in "The Critic as Artist" when Gilbert becomes "tired of thought," belief in Willie Hughes dissolves when the narrator becomes "tired of the whole thing" (213).

If the narrator achieves the Paterian awareness that thought is a form of feeling, Erskine, equally subject to the flux of emotion, now becomes obsessed with the theory. He still represents the empirical mode. In the manner of those who have "been sent to Cambridge

to study science" (216), he tries "in every way to verify" (217) the hypothesis, to treat it as a description of an historical reality. The narrator finally receives a letter from Erskine stating that, like Cyril, he will "give his own life also to the same cause" (217). On visiting the scene of death, however, the narrator is told by the doctor, the man of science, that Erskine died of consumption and wrote the letter knowing that he had only a few days to live. Does Erskine's death suggest that the validity of an assertion depends upon the intensity with which it is held and that one can give to the sordid circumstances of life the coherent form of art? As the narrator asks, "Did Erskine merely want to produce a dramatic effect?" (219). Or is Erskine's suicide a distortion, a refusal to face the physical reality of death? The meaning of the fable lies in just this ambiguity, in Wilde's refusal to identify reality solely with either physical change or with the solipsistic fashioning of life into art. The fable ends with the narrator attempting to maintain this balanced view. He keeps in his room the portrait, a work which, ostensibly an imitation of physical reality, is actually the objectification of the mental impressions of a single sensibility. And he does not tell his contemporaries "its true history" (220). He maintains the necessary fiction that what pass in society for descriptions of the physical world are actually expressions of mental sensations.

The ambiguous conclusion to the fable suggests another issue of Wilde's critical writings, what he called "the relations of art and history" (*Letters*, p. 236). As a critic at the end of the century, Wilde was faced with the problem of whether the past is a continuity independent of the individual mind or whether it is entirely a creation of the present age. The problem is suggested by Pater. In the "Conclusion," Pater says that if reality consists of the flux of impressions, since "time is infinitely divisible," each of these impressions must also be "infinitely divisible" and all that is "actual," all that can be truly known is but the "single moment." The question of how a continuity can exist between these moments and how there can be a continuity of self remains unanswered, obscured in Pater's metaphor of the "strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves." The unresolved contradiction between the doctrine of moments and

the notion of continuity through time appears on a larger scale in Pater's treatment of historical subjects. In *The Renaissance*, Pater works as both an aesthetic and an historical critic. He describes both moments in his own sensibility and a continuity or historic tradition.¹² But Wilde rejects even this admixture of historicism. Carrying to an extreme the implications of the Paterian analysis, Wilde aestheticizes the past as he aestheticizes intellect. Through the reversal of conventional historical modes, he suggests that the "past" is entirely an objectification of a present moment of psychic life.

As critic, Wilde, unlike Pater, seldom takes as his subject either other writers or other times. Rather than writing of a literary tradition, Wilde describes himself, or rather his possible selves objectified in masks. His only extended historical work is the biographical sketch, "Pen, Pencil and Poison," ostensibly a portrait of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, "poet . . . painter . . . art-critic . . . antiquarian . . . forger . . . and subtle and secret poisoner" (321). Here the psychological pressures which made Wilde shape Wainewright as the projection of his own personal vision of the artist as criminal¹³ fuse with his purposes as critic in parodying the form of historical biography to show how the past is the creation of the present. Wainewright is clearly and insistently described as a man of the present, as an aesthetic, deeply Paterian young man. "He writes about La Gioconda, and early French poets and the Italian Renaissance. . . . With Gautier, he was fascinated by that 'sweet marble monster' of both sexes that we can still see at Florence and in the Louvre" (324). "As an art-critic he concerned himself primarily with the complex impressions produced by a work of art" (326). The man appearing out of his time is a common Victorian notion. Hallam appears "ere the times were ripe"; Winckelmann with his Renaissance sensibility is born into the eighteenth century. But whereas Tennyson and Pater see these figures as appearing in an unexpected order within a linear continuum moving from past to future, the form of Wilde's sketch suggests that this historical figure is modern be-

¹² Philip Appleman, "Darwin, Pater, and a Crisis in Criticism," in 1859; *Entering an Age of Crisis*, ed. Philip Appleman (Bloomington, 1959), pp. 81-95.

¹³ Ellmann, *The Artist as Critic*, p. xix.

cause it is entirely a creation of the author's mind. The narrative voice is so intrusive, the use of contemporary idiom so self-conscious, the speaker so different from the self-effacing historian, that the reader is primarily aware, not of the past being retrieved, but of the present self of the speaker creating the past.

History becomes equated with artistic creation through a consistent metaphorical pattern. The person of "true historical sense" sees the figures of the past as "puppets of a play" (340). Wainwright is compared to Julian Sorel (324), for he is a fiction, as much the objectification of specific mental possibilities of the author as the character of a novel. As if to call attention to his own transformation of Mr. W. Carew Hazlitt's biographical memoir into an autonomous artifact, Wilde notes that the historical Wainwright was transformed into the hero of a Dickens story and a Bulwer-Lytton novel. The final sentence—"To be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact"—self-consciously comments on Wilde's own method, his translation of historical "fact" into "fiction," into the expression of a present moment in his own psyche.

The dialogues, too, reverse conventional forms to undercut the belief in a continuous past, particularly belief in the Arnoldian notion of historical tradition as an objective moral and literary standard outside the self by which we can evaluate the present. "The Critic as Artist" appears to follow the form of Victorian Hellenism, the use of ancient Greece as the norm against which to judge the vulgar present. For example, the Hellenic ideal is introduced with an abstract statement, "In the best days of art there were no art-critics" (346). In the recurring formal pattern of the work, however, this assertion immediately dissolves into the uniform ornate style that is applied throughout the work to both art and life: "The sculptor hewed from the marble block the great white-limbed Hermes that slept within it. The waxers and gilders of images gave tone and texture to the statue, and the world, when it saw it, worshipped and was dumb" (346). The use of the ornate language and languid rhythms of impressionistic art criticism to describe the phenomenal world suggests that the passage is not so much describing an actual society in the past as a purely personal vision of a single mind in the present.

Gilbert comments on this lengthy "description" of classical Greece: "To give an accurate description of what has never occurred is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of parts and culture" (349). Given the Paterian analysis of the difficulty of knowing anything beyond the present moment, the past "has never occurred," and yet, Gilbert argues, it must still be described with accuracy. The paradox neatly expresses Wilde's own complex attitude toward the solipsistic view of history. Just as his criticism makes assertions through forms that suggest the emotive and evanescent nature of these assertions, so his use of history employs an ideal of the past while suggesting that this ideal past is a work of art, the objectification of a purely personal vision. In this dialogue, Wilde uses the Hellenic ideal to show the necessity of what he calls creative criticism, while describing ancient Greece in an impressionistic style that shows this ideal to be very much a creation of the present. To use Frank Kermode's useful terminology, Wilde is seeing the past as a "fiction," an ordering of time that is necessary, but must be "consciously held to be fictive."¹⁴ Wilde's unmentioned antagonist is Arnold, the "man of . . . culture," who sees the past not as a "fiction" but, to use Kermode's terms again, as a "myth," an ordering of time that is held to be "an adequate explanation of things as they are and were."¹⁵

That the past is a "fiction," a creation rather than a description, is suggested in the dialogues, as in "Pen, Pencil and Poison," by the implicit identification of history with art. The ostensibly historical account of the Hellenic world quoted above is, for example, indistinguishable stylistically from the impressionistic criticism of Browning's imaginative vision of the past: "There, creeps Fra Lippo Lippi with cheeks still burning from some girl's hot kiss. There, stands dread Saul with the lordly male-sapphires gleaming in his turban" (345). Similarly, in the passages on the Trojan Wars discussed earlier, the account of men acting in the past—"It was easy enough on the sandy plains by windy Ilion to send the notched arrow from the painted bow" (361)—is rendered in the same mock-Homeric style

¹⁴ *The Sense of an Ending* (New York, 1968), p. 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

as the description of the *Iliad* itself: "Every day the swan-like daughter of Leda comes out on the battlements, and looks down at the tide of war" (361). The uniformity of style dramatizes the reduction of all phenomena, whether in the fictional world of art or the world of human action in the past to the compass of a single sensibility. Through style, events and literary description of events, history and art become indistinguishable.

The Wildean view of history is best symbolized by the portrait of Mr. W. H. Although consistent with commonly-held views of the society as to the nature of the past, this work is neither a description of an event which actually "occurred" nor an object descending in linear time from the past into the present. Autonomous and coherent, the painting, like the past, has only the validity of a work of art. And the proper use of the past is demonstrated by the narrator who, aware of its true status as a created artifact, employs the painting, not as an imitation, but as a stimulus for emotion in the present, a source from which he can create his own imaginary portraits.

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