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Arnold, Pater, Wilde, and the Object as in Themselves They See It

W E N D E L L V. H A R R I S

Pater's modification and Wilde's rebuttal of Arnold's doctrine that the object of criticism is to "see the object as in itself it really is" are not simply eccentric or whimsical reactions. Both apparently recognized that, as the contexts in which the slogan is developed and expanded make clear, Arnold had not faced the question of how artist or critic can get beyond or behind immediate individual impressions. The relativism of all perceptions and impressions stated in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* implies the aesthetic doctrines developed in the Preface and the essay on "Style" which define beauty in terms of the artist's individual vision and "truth" in terms of the relation between the work of art and that individual vision. Wilde, going a step further, questions whether the critic can see a work of art any more than any other object "in itself." Arnold's airy dismissal of metaphysical questions thus takes its revenge. Pater and Wilde followed Arnold in placing enormous value on criticism and culture; but the resolutions they find to the unanswered metaphysical problems raised by Arnold's adjuration to "see the object as in itself it really is" define the grounds of their apostasy.

THE INFLUENCES OF Arnold on Pater, and of Arnold and Pater on Wilde, are so clear, and so openly acknowledged, that scholars have for the most part been reluctant to belabor the obvious.¹ There is, however, a tendency to forget the obvious: Richard Ellman has recently felt it necessary to remind us that "there are not two but three critical phases in the late nineteenth century, with Pater transitional between Arnold and Wilde."² Moreover, since the obvious is that which we feel the least need to account for, obvious relationships at times effectively screen more complex

¹The influences have been constantly alluded to, but comments generally reach no further than the enumeration of the differences and similarities relevant to the particular study the critic has in hand. Major exceptions are Eduard J. Bock's *Walter Pater's Einfluss auf Oscar Wilde* (Bonn, 1913) and Ernst Bendz's *The Influence of Pater and Matthew Arnold in the Prose Writings of Oscar Wilde* (London, 1914). The comparisons they offer are to some extent analytic, but neither attempts to penetrate to philosophical problems which generate the differences.

²Richard Ellman, "The Critic as Artist as Wilde," *Wilde and the Nineties* (Princeton N. J., 1966), p. 3; reprinted in *Encounter*, XXVIII (1967), 29-37, and in *The Poet as Critic*, ed. F. P. W. McDowell (Evanston, 1967).

ones. Taking the position with which Arnold opens "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," his broadest statement of his theory of criticism, as a point of departure for their own quite different major aesthetic doctrines as set forth in *The Renaissance* and "The Critic as Artist," Pater and Wilde offer the reader neatly-packaged statements of their divergences from the Arnoldian position which stimulated their rebellion. However, the grounds of the necessity felt by Pater and Wilde for developing and insisting on these divergences are easily overlooked. Thus T. S. Eliot's influential essay on Arnold and Pater³ is too preoccupied with protesting what Eliot sees as the pernicious displacement of religion by aesthetics to examine the grounds and significance of Pater's reasons either for citing Arnold's statement of the goal of criticism or for drastically qualifying it, and he makes Wilde simply an erring disciple whose deviations from the Paterian position are due to misinterpretation.

To trace the development and alterations in the major doctrines of each of the three and then to compare their explicit and implicit statements of each of these doctrines would require the unweaving of an enormous web, the individual strands of which, untangled and spooled up in critical categories, still require interpretation.⁴ On the other hand, Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Pater's Preface and Conclusion to *The Renaissance* together with the essay "Style," and Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" are the seminal documents, later qualified but never repudiated, from which the critical theories of each have most strongly spread, and between which the strands of the web are most clear. Looking primarily to those works, and avoiding as many as possible of the derivative and ancillary questions of aesthet-

³T. S. Eliot, "Arnold and Pater" in *Selected Essays* (London, 1932), originally published in *Bookman*, LXXII (1930), 1-7 and reprinted as "The Place of Pater" in *The Eighteen-Eighties*, ed. Walter de la Mare (Cambridge, 1930). Paul Elmer More had emphasized the line from Arnold to Wilde in his essay on "Criticism" in the Seventh Series of the *Shelburne Essays* (New York, 1910); he regards Pater and Wilde as erring disciples, and, like Eliot, prefers a moral judgment against them.

⁴For a very able analysis of a complex series of borrowings, qualifications, and adjustments, see David DeLaura's "The 'Wordsworth' of Pater and Arnold: 'The Supreme Artistic View of Life,'" *Studies in English Literature*, VI (1967), 651-657.

ics, morality, culture, and religion addressed by the three writers, one can discern a basic, ultimately metaphysical, problem lurking behind their successive formulations of the roles of artist and critic. I have no wish to claim that Arnold, Pater, or Wilde consciously attempted to follow a logically irrefragable path from metaphysical first principles. All three found metaphysics dreary. Rather, I think it important to recognize that the three exhibit in a general way the almost inevitable direction of development of aesthetic principles behind which lie certain implied metaphysical assumptions.

It is easy to regard Pater's and Wilde's successive transmogrifications of Arnold's doctrine that the goal of criticism is "to see the object as in itself it really is" as strategic moves toward the ultimate positions at which they, in their own critical statements, wish to arrive. However, if we explore in the first instance not the regions to which Pater and Wilde were bound, but that from which they were escaping, if we turn, as it were, from final to efficient causes, the significance of their reformulations looms larger.

Arnold's argument in "The Function of Criticism" involves the evident assumption that it is indeed possible to "see the object as in itself it really is." That Arnold is giving full weight to every word in the famous statement and stating unequivocally that it is at least possible to see objects as they actually exist without any distortion arising from the constitution of the mind of the viewer is apparent from the argument which leads up to its original formulation in the second lecture of "On Translating Homer."⁵ His summation of his argument at the end of that lecture begins by reiterating that the overwhelming defect in F. W. Newman's translation of the *Iliad* (Arnold's principal target) is that Newman's conception of Homer is arbitrary and eccentric. Arnold then links Newman's failure to "the great defect of English intellect," that against which so much of his writing is directed, the arbitrariness and

⁵That "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" grew out of the Colenso controversy and not immediately out of the lectures on translating Homer has been clearly established by Sidney M. B. Coulling in "The Background of 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,'" *Philological Quarterly*, XLIII (1963), 36-54. However, the Arnoldian attitudes lying behind "The Function of Criticism" are as much to be found in the lectures on translating Homer as in "The Bishop and the Philosopher."

eccentricity which result from the neglect of the cultivation of the critical spirit as found in France and Germany, the neglect of "the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge . . . to see the object as in itself it really is." The mind must be disciplined to avoid personal eccentricities and thus, by striving for "simple lucidity of mind," move beyond the personal estimation to an objective one.

To the attentive reader of these lectures, Arnold will be found already to have involved himself in unhappy confusions. From the beginning the means of comparing the translation with the original has been assumed to be by comparing the *effects* of the translation with the *effects* of the original, and once it is admitted that one must judge by the effects, one has already dropped a veil over the work "in itself." Moreover, Arnold urges that the effect of the translation cannot be judged by comparison of its effect on modern readers with that of the *Iliad* on its original Greek hearers, since the latter can never be known; therefore the proper comparison is between the effect of the original and that of the translation on the modern scholar. This is an admission that the same work (object) produces different effects in different ages, and one is further than ever from knowing how to come at the work as in itself it really is.

The philosophical shadows cast by Arnold's doctrine are not at all lightened in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." Beginning with the attempt to establish the importance of the fruits of criticism for the creative artist, Arnold moves on to the topic which so preoccupies him, the lack of the critical spirit in England, and then to the importance of a disinterested criticism of political and religious institutions and party programs. Criticism must be patient, must redress the balance when any element of thought receives undue emphasis, must above all "maintain its independence of the practical spirit and its aims." Criticism thus becomes for Arnold the "disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." The difficulty in disinterestedly and unpractically propagating anything has been well examined by Geoffrey Tillotson.⁶

⁶Geoffrey Tillotson, "Matthew Arnold: The Critic and the Advocate," *Essays by Diverse Hands*, n.s. XX (1943), 29-41; reprinted in *Criticism and the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1951).

However, quite another and more basic problem is raised by the intent of this formula in supplying a recipe by which criticism (either literary or cultural) can see the object as it really is. By comparison of one's own view with the views which make up the best that is known and thought, personal aberrations and eccentricities can be overcome. But this only pushes the matter back one step: What is the best that is known and thought? Since the best that is known and thought is itself a set of objects, one of a contentious nature might even ask how one is sure one really knows these and not merely one's own impression of them. Arnold's method of judging poetry by comparison with established touchstones provides a working model of the operation of all criticism as he envisions it. For just as criticism judges the slogan "The Dissidence of Dissent" by reference to St. Peter, and the pilgrim fathers by comparing the assumed personalities of the pilgrims with those of Plato and Vergil, it judges a poem by comparison with selected lines from Shakespeare, Vergil, Milton, Dante, et al. Is not what the Arnoldian critic performs really a comparison of the effects, the impressions, made on him by the things compared? Are not the original touchstones chosen because they make the strongest impression on the chooser? Arnold's own bias, his preference among types of effects or impressions, is as obvious in the elegiac tone of most of his touchstones as in his praise of high seriousness and eviction of Chaucer from the heights of Helicon. There seems no reason that what is true of the attempt to avoid misleading estimates in judging poetry would not be equally true of the attempts to see any object as it really is. The veil remains.

Had Arnold been a philosophical realist, he might have made the case for the possibility of seeing "the object as in itself it really is" which necessarily must precede the injunction that we should endeavor so to see it. Had he followed the Romantic doctrine of the imagination, at least as that doctrine is set out in D. G. James's *Matthew Arnold and the Decline of English Romanticism*, that all perception depends on imagination, he might have argued that, in James's words, "to be a man of imagination, is to see the object in exceptional degree

as it really is."⁷ Had he been an idealist believing that there is a realm of truth which transcends experience and yet is accessible to man,⁸ he might have argued for its availability through a higher form of the imagination such as Coleridge has been interpreted by some as believing, or through ascending the Platonic stairway, or through a Carlylean vision vouchsafed after the recognition of an "Everlasting Yea."

In *Culture and Anarchy*, while lightly admitting the charge that he lacks "a philosophy with coherent, interdependent, subordinate and derivative principles"—a charge the wording of which begs his mockery—Arnold, wielding his urbane modesty as a weapon, makes a virtue of "a plain man's expedient of trying to make what simple notions I have, clearer and more intelligible to myself." Nevertheless, though Arnold may have been well-advised not to "affect the metaphysics," one who advances the importance of knowing anything as it really is has need of recourse to some sort of system which will explain what really exists, how we know that which exists, and how we know what we think about that which exists is true. That is, we need answers to the primary questions to which metaphysics addresses itself.

Nothing in the above analysis is, I think, either startling or altogether novel, but if we bear the results in mind it becomes evident that Pater was being neither wilful nor capricious in amending Arnold's doctrine in the Preface to *The Renaissance*: "To see the object as in itself it really is, has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly." Pater is recognizing and accepting the implications of Arnold's position. All finally we have as an object of contemplation is the effect, the impression. Pater, of course, is not simply reacting to the absence of a metaphysical base to Arnold's idea of criticism. The relativism implied and never directly contradicted (but never admitted) in Arnold is explicitly adopted in that Conclusion to *The Renaissance* which

⁷D. C. James, *Matthew Arnold and the Decline of English Romanticism* (Oxford, 1961), p. 5.

⁸That he did not so believe is of course nowhere better demonstrated than by his definitions in *Literature and Dogma* of religion as "morality touched by emotion" and God as "the not ourselves which makes for righteousness."

is too well known to require much comment here. If it is true that experience "is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us," we can only know the object as a personal impression, and to speak of knowing "the object as in itself it really is" can only be a rhetorical adjuration to compare notes with impressions expressed by others (that, primarily, is what culture makes possible), in the attempt to clear away as much of the personal as possible.⁹ But for Pater the critic simply records his impression; "What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*?"¹⁰ The aesthetic critic will distinguish and analyze "the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or a book, produces the special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced." But the immediate raw material of this analysis is the impression, not the object which produces it. The impression may be an eccentric or arbitrary one, but nevertheless it is the starting point. For Arnold, the highest intellectual life is the attempt to increase the range and power of the ability to see things as in themselves they really are; for Pater, "the wisest, at least among 'the children of this world'"¹¹ will attempt to increase the intensity of their impressions.

Now in Pater's aesthetic doctrine, of course, it is not only the critic who begins with an impression, but the creative artist. The Conclusion to *The Renaissance* provides the philosophical base for the *Preface*, and was in fact written several years earlier, appearing originally as a pendant to Pater's 1868 review of three volumes of William Morris's poems. There it stands as a justification of the earthly paradise created by Morris's poetry, "a kind of poetry which . . . [assumes] artistic beauty of form to be an end in itself," a

⁹It is worth noting that in Pater's metaphor it is not the individual mind which is ringed by personality, but experience itself—the effect of this inversion of the expected metaphor is to put emphasis on the importance and "reality" of the individual mind, not on the object.

¹⁰Madden (pp. 69-70; see note 3) has reminded us that Pater's very phrasing here echoes the Goethean formulaic question for ascertaining truth on which Arnold had built: "Is it so to *me*?" The differences in the uses to which the question is put sum up Pater's revision of Arnold.

¹¹The qualifying phrase, "at least among 'the children of this world,'" was added in the edition of 1888.

justification drawn from the "sad-coloured world of abstract philosophy." It serves there as a defense of "art for art's sake" in the most innocent sense of that slogan, but it implies not only that one should not look in poetry for the accurate presentation of the truths of which the modern world is in possession, but that neither art nor any other endeavor of the human mind gives us unqualified truth (the object as it really is). Thus, as he makes clear in the Preface written some five years later, the critic is concerned not with the degree of truth but the kind of beauty, the formula of the beauty, in a given work.

The Preface states a theory of criticism, the later essay "Style" (1888) states a theory of creation which is also based largely on the Conclusion: "all beauty is in the long run only *fineness* of truth, or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within." And by "vision" Pater means, as the whole passage makes clear, the writer's "sense of fact rather than the fact." At this point Pater allows himself to be inconsistent with his earlier position, for he goes on, "as being preferable, pleasanter, more beautiful to the writer himself." If one is truly bound to "the narrow chamber of the individual mind," and experience ringed round by the "thick wall of personality," the artist must *necessarily* be limited to transcribing his "sense of fact," that is, his impression. In emphasizing the importance of recognizing that the artist's role is to be conscious that it is the uniqueness of his "sense of fact" that is worth conveying, Pater is moving from a purely relativistic position, a tendency both Helen Young and Ruth C. Child have documented in his later works.¹²

But the larger question to which I wish to call attention remains unaffected. Whether all humans, and thus all artists, are limited to their personal impressions, or whether artists choose to transcribe personal impressions by choice, what critics have to work with are their impressions of the artists'

¹²Helen Wadsworth Young, *The Writings of Walter Pater: A Reflection of British Philosophical Opinion from 1860 to 1890* (Lancaster, Pa., 1933); Ruth C. Child, *The Aesthetic of Walter Pater* (New York, 1940). One finds a considerable amount of dallying with the thought of what might be hidden "behind the veil" in Pater's later essays, but he never completely commits himself to the belief that there is a veil, or anything behind it.

impressions of experience. The artist, says Pater, attempts accurately to transcribe or translate his impression (or vision), but the critic cannot judge the degree of his success in being accurate. Not only are the immediate materials on which the critic has to work his own impressions, but there is no way of getting behind these impressions to compare either the artist's work with his impression, or that impression with the object "as in itself it really is" which gave rise to it.

Pater was enough of a Platonist to accept the view that our experience is of appearance only, not enough of one to believe that there is a transcendent world of forms. Had he believed the latter, in one form or another, he might have tried to develop in his own terms Carlyle's view of the poet as prophet (and thus hero), or Coleridge's struggle to give the creative imagination the high destiny of seeing beyond appearance. But he did not, and he refused to follow Plato in reconciling Heraclitean Flux with the Parmenidean Absolute through the assignment of the first to the world of appearance and the second to the world of ideal forms.

Helen W. Young's *The Writings of Walter Pater*, an immensely perceptive work which draws on a careful study not only of Pater's writings but the philosophical climate of the time, makes clear how strongly, despite its imaginative rhetoric, Pater's relativism, during the period in which *The Renaissance* was written, is a reflection of British Empiricism and interest in scientific method. Thus she is able to see the critical approach set forth in the Preface as, "in its emphasis on analysis into simples," an adaption of the methods of physical science.¹³ His sense of the relativism of all things reinforced by scientific empiricism, Pater drops curtains between the object and the artist's impression of it, between the artist's impression as embodied in the work of art and the critic's impression of that work. The stage is set for Wilde.

Ernest I seem to have heard another theory of Criticism.

Gilbert Yes: it has been said by one whose gracious memory we all revere, and the music of whose pipe once lured Proserpina from her Sicilian fields, and made those white feet stir, and not in vain, the Cumnor cowslips, that the proper aim of Criticism is to see the

¹³Young, p. 20.

object as in itself it really is. But this is a very serious error, and takes no cognisance of Criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another.

Wilde's gracious tribute to Arnold's poetry precedes a denial of Arnold's theory of criticism and, after purple passages proclaiming that the prose in which Ruskin treats Turner or Pater describes the *Mona Lisa* has its value solely in its own perfection without reference to accuracy, leads to its clear reversal:

Ernest The highest Criticism, then, is more creative than creation, and the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not; that is your theory, I believe?

Gilbert Yes, that is my theory. To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticizes.¹⁴

Ernest's "I seem to have heard another theory of Criticism" is Wilde's recognition of the importance of Arnold's influence, but his readiness to bring in Arnold's formula may also be the result of his sense that the juxtaposition of the two views, in combination with reference to Ruskin and Pater, will remind at least some of his readers that they turn to critics like these for something besides an accurate description of the object. Wilde's presentation of his position proceeds by his usual method of paradox, but the number of direct references to and echoes from Arnold and Pater indicate that Wilde had been pondering both critical theories. Moreover, indications that Wilde had been giving at least some thought to the philosophical cruxes which historically underlie aesthetic debates are not lacking.

For instance: "All artistic creation is absolutely subjective. The very landscape that Corot looked at was, as he said himself, but a mood of his own mind. . . ." Wilde is indicating an acceptance of Pater's subjectivism and relativism which, as I have tried to show, implies not merely that the artist does

¹⁴"The Critic as Artist" in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London, 1967), single-volume edition edited by Vyvyan Holland, pp. 1028 and 1030.

not imitate, but that the role of critic is not to imitate either. For both are in receipt only of impressions. As he states earlier in the essay, "it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age. . . ."

Wilde's whole central paradox can perhaps be illuminated by the way in which he stands Plato on his head. As everyone knows, Plato condemns art for being merely an imitation of appearance, which in itself is only a poor imitation of the ideal. The obvious lines of rebuttal are two: one can argue that art is not an imitation but a means of transcending experience and gaining direct access to the world of ideal forms; or one can argue that art is not an imitation but a wholly new creation which is of interest in itself. Wilde accepts the position that imitation *per se* is paltry—"Criticism is no more to be judged by any low standard of imitation or resemblance than is the work of poet or sculptor"—and takes the second route, that art and criticism are valuable precisely because they create something wholly new. Art and criticism thus become identified, except that criticism, being further removed from experience, is more creative. Plato is inverted, and the further one moves from immediate experience, the more creative one is.

Wilde is not simply being paradoxical and ingenious when he goes beyond Arnold's claim for the importance of criticism to the creator (which Wilde himself asserts fairly early in the essay: "But there has never been a creative age that has not been critical also"). Criticism becomes more creative than creation primarily because the relativism implied by Arnold and made explicit by Pater is here carried to a conclusion. Neither Wilde nor Pater is consistent enough directly to assert that since it is impossible in any case to see the object as in itself it really is, the only basis for judging either art or criticism is the degree of its creativity. Rather, Pater simply sees the artist as leaving fact for the sense of fact, Wilde sees the critic as aiming at seeing the object as in itself it really is not.

Wilde was of course often inconsistent in following out the consequences of his basic principles. For instance, at one point in "The Critic as Artist" he regards the work of art as an

object which can be depended upon always to produce the same effect on a given reader. Yet in passages both preceding and following he builds on the view that the effect of a work will change both with the mood of the reader and his familiarity with the work.¹⁵ The first argument has its charms, but, if what art offers us are impressions, why should these not change, at least within limits? However, such inconsistencies, into which one feels Wilde is led by the force of his own rhetoric, scarcely touch his basic aesthetic, and ultimately metaphysical, commitments.

Wilde was clear about the alternatives he was rejecting, and he seems to follow Pater in believing their acceptance impossible to the modern mind. Pater's "To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought" is echoed by Wilde:

Metaphysics do not satisfy our temperaments, and religious ecstasy is out of date. The world through which the Academic philosopher becomes "the spectator of all time and existence" is not really an ideal world, but simply a world of abstract ideas. When we enter it, we starve amidst the chill mathematics of thought. The courts of the city of God are not open to us now. . . . We cannot go back to the philosopher, and the mystic leads us astray. Who, as Mr. Pater suggests somewhere,¹⁶ would exchange the curve of a single rose leaf for that formless intangible being which Plato rates so high? What to us is the Illumination of Philo, the Abyss of Eckhart, the Vision of Böhme . . . ?¹⁷

Not only is art not an imitation as Plato thought, but neither is the object experienced an imitation of anything, for all that it may be ringed around by the personality of the be-

¹⁵The passages referred to are those beginning, respectively: "How different it is in the world of art! On a shelf of the bookcase behind you stands the *Divine Comedy* . . ."; "Sometimes, when I listen to the overture of *Tannhäuser* . . ."; "The aesthetic critic, constant only to the principle of beauty in all things, will ever be looking for fresh impressions." These may be found in the *Complete Works* on pp. 1035, 1029, 1045.

¹⁶Pater makes the statement in the essay on Coleridge [*Appreciations* (London, 1910), p. 68].

¹⁷*Complete Works*, p. 1039.

holder. An imitation of an imitation of an imitation would indeed be valueless, but an impression of an impression of an impression is to be celebrated as the most unalloyed expression of creativity.

But for Wilde, as for Arnold, finally, criticism offers more than delight. For Arnold, the value of criticism is in discovering the object as it really is; for Pater, who, in emphasizing the impression offered by the artist rather than the critic, considered the results of criticism rather than its larger possible functions, its value is in increasing our delight in art; for Wilde it offers both insight and delight. Though we may not know the objects of experience, the impressions reported by the artist and critic reveal what the soul is and is capable of. Wilde's rhetorical development of this idea has all the qualities of mystical rapture which he had earlier dismissed as inappropriate, but the point which emerges is that the critical spirit, through its very creativity, can get outside the individual consciousness which Pater so eloquently describes and give it access to the fundamental qualities of man, or, as Wilde puts it, "the race-experience."¹⁸

For who is the true critic but he who bears within himself the dreams, and ideas, and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure? And who the true man of culture, if not he who by fine scholarship and fastidious rejection has made instinct self-conscious and intelligent, and can separate the work that has distinction from the work that has it not, and so by contact and comparison makes himself the master of the secrets of style and school, and understands their meanings, and listens to their voices, and develops that spirit of disinterested curiosity which is the real root, as it is the real flower, of the intellectual life, and thus attains to intellectual clarity, and, having learned "the best that is known and thought in the world," lives—it

¹⁸Pater's belief in "the accumulative capital of the whole experience of humanity," as he states it in *Plato and Platonism* (London, 1910), p. 159, which appears as early as the review of Morris's poetry as "the composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us," seems cognate with Wilde's view here, though despite his developing emphasis on moral and even aesthetic responsibility, Pater seems never to have fully seen the relevance of the belief to the function of art.

is not fanciful to say so—with those who are the Immortals.¹⁹

Thus it is that Wilde returns to Arnold's position on the importance of culture and from this point on the Arnoldian references and echoes become thicker. "What we want are unpractical people who see beyond the moment, and think beyond the day. Those who try to lead the people can only do so by following the mob." "The critic may, indeed, desire to exercise influence; but, if so, he will concern himself not with the individual, but with the age, which he will seek to awake into consciousness, and to make responsive, creating in it new desires and appetites, and lending it his larger vision and his nobler moods." "It is Criticism, as Arnold points out, that creates the intellectual atmosphere of the age."²⁰ "How little we have of this [the critical] temper in England, and how much we need it! . . . The intellect of the race is wasted in the sordid and stupid quarrels of second-rate politicians or third-rate theologians."

In divorcing criticism from practical action even more completely than Arnold, Wilde makes it clearer that the critic is not merely one who retires from the fray to regain perspective before rejoining it, but one whose creative vision, by making clear the collective consciousness of man, may free the fighters from their futile opposition over lesser things.²¹ Arnold's "The Function of Criticism" moves from focus on the literary critic to criticism in its larger meaning, at which point, as John Holloway has made clear,²² the act of criticism becomes synonymous with the exercise of culture. The critical endeavor set forth in the Preface to *The Renaissance* is one application of the prescription for making the most of life

¹⁹*Complete Works*, p. 1041.

²⁰Wilde's eclecticism is of course what makes it particularly difficult to see his position as a whole. In the passage which immediately follows this Wilde is simultaneously paying homage to Newman and pretending that he is not aware that he has been anticipated.

²¹Merritt Y. Hughes pointed out that "the whole practical, political gospel of *Culture and Anarchy* is implied in Gilbert's interpretation of 'self-culture as the true ideal of man.'" But more; the emphasis on the critic as one whose impressions are ultimately reports of the possibilities of the human mind makes clearer *how* the critic can affect the course of society without engaging in the practical. See "The Immortal Wilde," *University of California Chronicle*, XXX (1928), 317.

²²John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage* (New York, 1953), pp. 222-223.

given in the Conclusion. The importance of lying—a way of seeing and presenting the object as it is not—in “The Decay of Lying” is justified in the doctrine set forth in “The Critic as Artist,” the argument of the second portion of which expands until it becomes a prolegomena to the social program set forth in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” The aesthetic doctrines of each, grounded in various conscious degrees of denial of a transcendent world, generate philosophies of life which define the ideal relation of the individual to the world. The total views of Pater and Wilde modify those of Arnold, but the three clarify and in a sense justify each other. Arnold’s position, carried far enough, implies Wilde’s, and does so in a much more fundamental way than T. S. Eliot has suggested.

Wilde’s aesthetic/cultural theory may not finally satisfy us, but I have hoped to make clear that Pater’s alterations of Arnold’s doctrine, and Wilde’s alterations of the doctrines of both, grow out of unresolved problems inherent in the metaphysical assumptions all three partially share. If it cannot be shown that the object “in itself” is a possible object of knowledge, we are left with only the effects or impressions of objects; if we have only impressions, we are seeing the object as “in itself” it is not; but in the act of creativity which gives form to the impression which is the object as in itself it is not, we discover the range of qualities, powers, and desires which make up the race of man as in itself it really is. And that, perhaps, is as far toward transcendence as Arnold’s starting point will take us.

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