**Celebrating Creative Consciousness:**
Insights Into Oscar Wilde's Aesthetics.

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Tutkielmani valottaa irlantilaisen kirjailijan Oscar Wilden (1854-1900) vähemmän tunnettua työtä ja ajattelua taidekriitikkona *fin de siècle*n ja modernismin välisen siirtymävaiheen estetiikassa.

Wilden voidaan sanoa olleen edellä aikaansa estetiikkakäsityksensä suhteen: Hän käsittelee taidekritiikissään teemoja, jotka tulivat keskeisiksi modernismin ja postmodernismin myötä – esimerkiksi kielen pettävyyttä, sellaisten käsitteiden kuin 'todellisuus', 'luonto' tai 'yhteiskunta' sattumanvaraisuutta sekä yhteisön ja yksilön identiteettien fragmentoitumista. Wilde myös kyseenalaistaa – paradoksien, kielellisten nokkeluuksien ja ironian avulla – monia länsimaisessa filosofiassa 'normatiivisina' pidettyjä arvoja, kuten totuuteen pyrkimisen. Lisäksi hän haastaa taiteenkritiikin akateemisen tradition hylkäämällä sellaiset sen hyveinä pitämät piirteet kuin johdonmukaisuus ja ristiriidattomuus.

Tarkastelen Wilden estetiikkakäsitystä pääasiassa esseekokoelman *Intentions* (1891), etenkin esseen *Valehtelun rappio,* sekä *De Profundis* –teoksen (1905) kautta. Tekstejä analysoimalla ja vertaamalla osoitan miten 1890-luvun alkupuolen ja vankilatuomiotaan istuvan Wilden estetiikkakäsitys muuttui ja kehittyi.

Wilden kohdalla on syytä puhua taide*filosofiasta* taiteen*teorian* sijaan. Hänen kriittiset esseensä eivät tähtää 'harmonisen' kokonaisuuden luomiseen tai pragmaattis-loogisen mallin rakentamiseen taiteen ymmärtämiseksi vaan tulvivat ironiaa ja ristiriitaisuuksia. Wildella taideteoksen tarkasteluun liittyy aina eettisiä, ontologisia ja metafyysisiä kysymyksiä, jotka syventävät mutta myös monimutkaistavat esteettistä kokemusta. Keskeinen teema Wildelle onkin taiteen ja elämän vastakkainasettelu sekä niiden välisen yhteyden tunnistaminen ja tunnustaminen: taide on sekä autonomista että subjektiivista. Tämä paradoksi kulminoituu *esteettisessä kokemuksessa*. Wildelle luomistyö ja vastaanottajan elämys ovat tiedostamattomia prosesseja – *tietoista luovuutta* ei ole. Esteettinen kuitenkin voidaan yhdistää tietoisuuteen, mutta se edellyttää että myös *tietoisuuden* on oltava *luovaa*. Siksipä lähestyäkseen taidetta kritiikin on tultava enemmän taiteen kaltaiseksi – epänormatiiviseksi ja epäloogiseksi. Tässä prosessissa paradokseilla on merkittävä tehtävä: ne muistuttavat siitä, että puhuttaessa taiteesta ei ole oikeita vastauksia, on vain hyviä kysymyksiä.

Asiasanat: Wilde, Oscar; estetiikka; paradoksi; johdonmukaisuus; todellisuus; totuus; esteettinen kokemus; individualismi

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# 1. Introduction

I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art.

*De Profundis, CW,* 1017

Regrettably, the reputation of Oscar Wilde often seems to get reduced to that of a wordsmith and sharp-tongued commentator of the tragicomic scenes of Victorian society. This does not mean that Wilde would be out of fashion, however, quite the opposite; still today, his social comedies attract large audiences all around the world, and editions of his complete works as well as his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are frequently in reprint. Moreover Wilde's witticisms and aphorisms are alive and well, although many of them most often remain unfairly disconnected from their wider, original (and, with respect to aphorisms presented in *De Profundis*, also profoundly serious) context. Due to the several roles Wilde can be said to have played in his life – those, for example, of an Irishman in England or a homosexual in a society which condemned it as a crime – there has also been an academic revival in Wilde studies in the recent years, especially amongst those engaged in postcolonial or gay and queer studies.

Although Wilde's personality and the life he lead most certainly do not lack allure and could easily become a topic of any study of Wilde, the emphasis of this thesis will be first and foremost on Wilde's aesthetics. For me, the true versatility of Oscar Wilde as a writer was illuminated only after having read *Intentions* (1891), his first collection of critical essays, and *De Profundis* (1905, the complete version 1962), the letter Wilde wrote to his former lover, Sir Alfred Douglas, from Reading Gaol. The latter in particular reveals a completely different and a much more serious dimension of Wilde as a writer, as well as a person. These two works have inspired me to set out to explore Wilde's less widely known work as an art and literary critic; both *Intentions* and *De Profundis* are crucial texts with respect to Wilde's philosophy of art.

Since the turning points of Wilde's life tend to be as well (or, even perhaps better) known as his work, and since I want to retain a sharp focus on his aesthetics, I will not discuss the biographical background of Wilde in much length. Having said that, there are some biographical elements that provide a necessary context to Wilde's ideas, and so I have considered it helpful to recap some scenes from Wilde's life in order to make the development of his theory more holistically intelligible; this is the case especially in the context of *De Profundis.* To obtain the relevant background information concerning Wilde's life, I have mainly used biographies by Richard Ellmann (1981), Peter Raby (1988) and Neil McKenna (2004).

Wilde's criticism was never taken seriously during his lifetime, partly due to his controversial public image, and partly due to the modernity of both his thought and his style. I want to examine how Wilde's aesthetic ideas developed from the time of *Intentions* to the time of his imprisonment, which, sadly, marked the end of Wilde's career as a critic as well as a writer (apart from the poem 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', which is surprisingly traditional in its form as well as conservative in its religious imagery). In order to introduce the principles of Wilde's earlier criticism, I shall first discuss his essays in *Intentions*, paying particular attention to 'The Decay of Lying' and, subsequently, turn to look at *De Profundis.* If one compares these two texts, what is striking is the way Wilde's outlook on art and life (and the relationship between the two) changes from the satirical tone of 'The Decay of Lying' and the declaration that "all art is quite useless" (*Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*[1]*,* 17) to the deeply melancholic and self-reflective atmosphere of *De Profundis.*

For Wilde, criticism itself was yet another form of creation. In *Intentions,* particularly in the essay 'The Critic as Artist', he emphasizes the importance of creativity in the process of writing *about* art; this is an approach he most certainly employed in his own criticism. When setting out to evaluate Wilde's aesthetics, a contextualisation of his views within the tradition of Western philosophy (as well as within the academic tradition) provides an essential framework for delineating and understanding the reasons behind the dismissal of Wilde as a critic in his own

[1] From this point onwards, I will use the abbreviation *CW* with reference to this book.

lifetime. Therefore, I have chosen to dedicate the following chapter to discussion of how Wilde's ideas relate to some of the key philosophers and theorists in the history of Western aesthetics. In chapter three, I will consider Wilde as a pre-modernist thinker and discuss how Wilde's criticism was perceived in Victorian society.

At the very core of Wilde's aesthetics lies his understanding of the relation between Art[2] and Life. In chapter four, I intend to examine how his (early) aesthetic visions are displayed in *Intentions,* especially in the essay 'The Decay of Lying'. I will divide this chapter according to the four central arguments of the essay and will pay attention to topics such as the autonomy of art and the role of the artist*;* reality and art; art's foundations; and the value and role of truth with respect to art. Wilde's dislike of realism is strongly fore-grounded in this essay, and thus I will also discuss the questions of artistic imagination and subjectivity contrasted with 'scientific' search for objectivity in art.

In the penultimate chapter my emphasis will be on *De Profundis*. The genre of this text, first of all, is ambiguous, but I shall try to show why this semi-private letter can be regarded as a kind of 'aesthetic will', Wilde's last manifesto, or a postscript to his work as a critic. There are some noticeable changes of emphasis and perspective in this text in comparison with 'The Decay of Lying'. For example, Wilde elevates the themes of sincerity and humility as eminent new elements in his aesthetics. The relationship between religion and art (as well as the one between ethics and aesthetics) also becomes a more prevailing theme in *De Profundis*, as does the possibility of redemption in art.

In this thesis, I want to investigate whether or not Wilde ultimately can be said to have a definable *theory* of art, or, whether Wilde's critical works – paradoxical as it may seem, considering all the paradoxes within Wilde's aesthetics – represent a more holistic *philosophy* of art. In this thesis, I use terms theory and philosophy with the following differentiation: by 'theory' I am referring to a set of arguments

[2] Wilde uses capitalization in the word 'art' relatively inconsistently in his essays; however, most of the time he uses 'Art' in reference to art as a Platonic idea, the essence of Art *per se*, and 'art' in reference to concrete manifestations of Art, i.e. artworks. In 'The Decay of Lying', in particular, Wilde uses capitalization in a similar manner with respect to the word 'Life', referring to the idea of human existence as a whole. The use of capital letters also has the function of *personification* of art and life in the essays. (Art is referred to as 'she', for example.)

tied together with a certain inner logic and concerned with a specific field, while I use the term 'philosophy' in reference to a set of ideas, which is not concerned with one specific field but rather reaches out to contemplate as many spheres of life as possible. A philosophy of art engages itself with ethical, ontological and metaphysical questions relating to Art, whereas a theory is more concerned with constructing efficient devises for the interpretation of artworks.

Theories of art, according to Gardner, may either "aim directly at developing a single concept capturing the essence of art… [or] proceed by building up from an examination of the various specific dimensions of the works of at" (1996:137). Examples of the latter approach are, for example, the mimetic, formalist and expression theories. Thus, a theory of art seems to be concerned with only few aspects or approaches to the work of art *at a time*, whereas the task of a philosophy of art, according to Gardner (1996: 229), is to reflect "in a systematic way on [the following] largely familiar questions" attached to art:

> What makes an object qualify as a work of art? What is the relation between form and content in a work of art? Does a work of art put us in touch with the mind of the artist? What are we to think when critics disagree about the meaning of a work?
>
> Gardner, 1996: 229

With respect to Wilde, his way of constructing a kind of anti-theory in his essay 'The Decay of Lying', in which he constantly contradicts himself (I will provide examples of the paradoxes of his argumentations in a while), serves to show his reluctance to approach Art[3] in any 'systemic' way. Indeed, as far as Wilde is concerned, Art (its creative as well as interpretative dimensions) is not merely concern with a vision or a pattern of how to look at Art; for Wilde, Art is more of a way of *being* than a way of *seeing.* Furthermore, the Wildean aesthetic experience –

[3] Although Wilde uses capitalization in the word 'art' relatively inconsistently in his essays, most of the time he seems to use 'Art' in reference to art as a Platonic idea, the essence of Art *per se*, whereas using 'art' when referring to concrete manifestations of Art (to works of art). In 'The Decay of Lying', in particular, Wilde uses the word 'Life' in a similar manner, written with a capital letter, when referring to the idea of human existence as a whole. The use of capital letters also has the function of *personification* of art and life in the essay. (Art, is referred to as 'she', for example.)

Art coming into contact with Life on the level of an individual – is involved not just in *being* but, in fact, in a process of *becoming*.

Due to his fondness for paradox and his dislike of categorisation, Wilde's writings often tend to contradict one another; it is exactly due to this *inconsistency* that Wilde's contribution to aesthetics has been an easy target for dismissal. His critical works represent a miscellany of reflections on aesthetic dilemmas over centuries, giving room to the history of (Western) aesthetics but never fully agreeing with any previous theory. This kind of approach can be considered both as a burden and a blessing. The diversity of Wilde's criticism tends to confuse critics; although its key points and arguments are usually very provokingly exposed to the reader, these arguments can most often be understood in more than one ways; also, the irony within Wilde's text makes the interpretation of his arguments even more challenging. The practical application of a theory becomes problematic if it fails – or, like in Wilde's case, *refuses* – to set coherent guidelines.

Since Wilde's text allows multiple interpretations, the reader's participation becomes essential also in the process of defining what is regarded as fundamental principles of Wilde's aesthetics. Considering the variety of themes and ideas that characterizes Wilde's critical works, one is required to make a series of choices of which elements to discuss in order to define the key points of Wilde's aesthetics as a whole. Thus, it is worth noting that the preference given to certain themes in this thesis is by no means the only possible way to look at Wilde's aesthetic theory; the selection of topics I have made has thus been a process of active interpretation in its own right.

Multiplicity of paradoxes in Wilde's critical essays and *De Profundis* has guided me in the choice of topics as well as the structuring of my thesis. As I wish to illustrate how paradoxicality functions as a triumphant element within Wilde's criticism, I will concentrate on the topics to which the central paradoxes are attached, such as the relation of art and reality; lying and truth in art; and the simultaneous emphasis on art's autonomy and subjectivity. Especially in chapters four and five, I intend to set some of these paradoxes under scrutiny, providing

examples from 'The Decay of Lying' and *De Profundis*. Some of the major paradoxes in Wilde's aesthetics are, for example:

i) Art shapes our consciousness and view of the world as it sets an example for Nature and Life to copy; yet, Art remains autonomous, separate from Life and free of moral.

ii) Wilde views Art as escapism, in so far that it should only represent "beautiful untrue things [which] do not concern us" (*CW,* 1077), and yet he simultaneously presents Art as something which provides us with our view of the world and thus the basis of our understanding of everyday life – the things that *do* concern us.

iii) In 'The Decay of Lying', lying is presented as both the foundation as well as the aim of proper Art; yet, it is also asserted that Art is the "reality" and Life its imitation, and that Art is therefore more 'true' than Life.

iv) A real work of Art, according to Wilde, can never be an outcome of conscious effort; yet, the works of art affect and shape our consciousness.

With respect to representing a dependable *theory* of art, the reappearing paradoxes might dilute Wilde's credibility. However, to conclude that Wilde's aesthetic views cannot be taken seriously because they do not represent a *consistent* line of thought would mean taking Wilde's texts, most of which are written a tongue in cheek, at a face value. Irony, linguistic play and paradoxicality are essential features within his criticism, and, as I will argue in this thesis, have *a specific function* in Wilde's philosophy of art.

Even if Wilde's criticism as a whole might not be structured in the most steadfast way, it has certain unquestionable merits. Most importantly, Wilde's theory seeks to show how art is always in *motion*, and the only thing one can do is adapt to it; one's life (and one's criticism) are to develop *creatively* according to the lines that art sets for us, and not the other way around. This indicates that Wilde himself never considered consistency as the primary exigency for a theory of art. (For discussion, see 2.1.1.) Thus, one is entitled to ask whether it is justified to evaluate Wilde's theory according to precepts against which he was explicitly protesting.

In his criticism, in spite of his ironic and parodic style, Wilde does pay a lot of respect and show genuine admiration towards many of his predecessors. Indeed, rather than reacting directly against preceding theories (with the possible exception of realism and naturalism), Wilde questions some of the fundamental norms and credences upon which these theories are founded – norms which govern the philosophical and academic traditions of Western world even today. The respect for *truth*, for one, has seldom been questioned in the history of Western philosophy, as "truth appears to be one of our highest values" (Medina and Wood, 2005:3). The assessment of truth becomes relevant particularly in context of 'The Decay of Lying' and *De Profundis*; both texts deliberate the topic, but from very different perspectives.

With regard to the academic tradition, another principle Wilde does not swallow – a principle, which has traditionally been considered not only as a merit but also as a pre-conditional criterion for a critical theory – is that of *consistency*. The idea of annulling Wilde's criticism on the grounds of the modes of expression he employs leads us to question the larger, general context in which theories are evaluated. Nelson Goodman, for example, discusses the role of consistency in context of art education in *Of Mind and Other Matters* (1984); he is one of the few scholars to have set out to question whether it actually is necessary or justified (always) to demand consistency of a scientific theory, and, of a theory of art, in particular. Since views and methods attached to any theory are constantly being revised, *change* is always an essential part of a theory as well. Goodman writes:

> [W]e may notice that the judgement of scientific theories is beset much by the same problems as judgement of works of art. Conceptions of admissible method and of acceptable basic concepts *change,* gradually or suddenly. *Leading experts disagree with one another and with their own earlier views.*
>
> Goodman, 1984: 163-4 (my emphasis)

With respect to the demand for consistency and objectivity, what often tends to be ignored is that research and criticism are always carried out by people, and the human mind is hardly thoroughly consistent. Furthermore, as far as aesthetic evaluation in general is concerned, Goodman – much in line with Wilde himself –

points out that “even a satisfactory theoretical method or scientific truth or aesthetic merit would provide *no ready judgements* of particular theories or works” (1984: 164, my emphasis).

Hence, my hypothesis is that the frequent alteration of emphasis and the paradoxes in Wilde’s criticism actually contribute to the way in which his ideas are applicable to discussion about art – as long as one is not afraid to look at the concept of criticism itself from a somewhat more unconventional perspective. Not only the contents and modes of expression in Wilde’s criticism but also the values and attitudes *behind* these modes call for exploration, and this exploration is the journey on which I now embark.

## 2. The Context of Wilde's Aesthetics: Influences and Ideas

> The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass… The nineteenth century dislike of romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.
>
> The Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray, CW,* 17

Although it was not until after his years as an Oxford undergraduate (1874-8) that Wilde truly became engaged in the Aesthetic movement and started publishing critical essays, it is worth remembering that the foundations for his aestheticism were laid during the time he spent at Oxford. This was indeed the place where Wilde gained his wide knowledge of Western aesthetics as well as where he took part in lively discussions on art history and different philosophies of art. Furthermore, Oxford offered an intellectual environment for debates in which also the state of art in contemporary society was under scrutiny.

At Oxford, Wilde became closely familiar with both the history as well as the contemporary state of Western aesthetics; it was there that Wilde also met in person some of the most important art critics of his time. These included John Ruskin and Walter Pater, both of whom had a great influence on Wilde's later development as a critic. Wilde was never afraid to interpret and reinterpret the theories and perspectives of either his predecessors or his contemporaries; although he might have found faults in their work, Wilde never downplayed his debt to other scholars.

It seems that already during his university studies, and especially in his subsequent work as a playwright, poet, journalist and critic, Wilde was fascinated by the roles that the artist, the critic and the philosopher play both within the sphere of Art as well as in society, and he was never afraid to try out these different roles himself. Although his critical work is filled with references that are only accessible to an educated audience, Wilde was not an elitist critic in the sense that he emphasized the importance of individual response and creativity in the aesthetic discovery. Moreover, for example during his lecture tour in America in 1882, one of Wilde's goals was to popularize aesthetics; he soon became famous for his eloquent

and humorous style, and his lectures attracted wide audiences and were warmly applauded to (Ellmann, 1981: 166, 174). His audiences were *varied* as well; during his tour, Wilde spoke about art to, for example miners, which also designates Wilde's anti-elitist outlook.

Wilde's attitude towards the interrelation between aesthetics and ethics also dates back to his Oxford years. Wilde saw that the fact that art in Victorian society had become so coarsely influenced by morality was the primary reason behind the decline of art in the contemporary society. Wilde's distaste for realism (which will be discussed in more detail in 4.2), as well as his interest in decadence and dandyism, contributed to his idea that one should make one's life a form of art. It was Wilde's firm intention to execute this kind of 'art of living' in his own life, and, to great extent, he seems to have succeeded.

Wilde's relation to the great philosophers of Classical Greece was particularly respectful; yet, he managed to cultivate their ideas in the soil of his own creative mind, combining them smoothly with Germanic philosophic tradition as well as the ideas of French symbolism. Indeed, Wilde's philosophy of art can be regarded as a miscellany of influences and ideas from various different theories and epochs. In this chapter, I shall place Wilde in context with some of the movements, philosophers and critics most influential to the development of his aesthetic views.

## 2.1. Roots and Wings: Wilde and the Classical Philosophy of Art

As far as Wilde's theory of art is concerned, the most appropriate place to start to look at its development from is, again, Oxford, where Wilde went in 1874 after having had an excellent preparation for it at Trinity College, Dublin. At Oxford Wilde studied Classical languages and literature and, according to Ellmann, thanks to Trinity, Wilde was "on easy terms with Plato and Aristotle" from the very start (1981:41). Wilde's fascination with Classical languages and philosophy had a deep impact not only on what was to become his theory of art, but also on his poetry, as well as the *style* in which he was to present his ideas about aesthetics.

In his essays 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde adopted the dialogue form from Plato as his means of critical argumentation. Although Wilde (like Plato himself) uses this form somewhat ironically, it is nevertheless easy to understand why it was so appealing to Wilde. Like Plato, he saw it as a method which could reveal *momentary* glimpses of truth, while still retaining its humanity in the sense that the discussion was never closed with declaration of eternal or undeniable conclusion.

Plato used the dialogue form in order to open up discussion of philosophical dilemmas, and to give it a chance to continue and develop. Wilde shared and respected Plato's view of the importance of open and continuous discussion in philosophy. Another thing which must have had a deep impact on Wilde was that even though Plato was somewhat critical of art, defining it for example as a potential corruptor of the soul, he himself still employed all possible artistic devices in the formation of his texts.

Wilde was convinced that the Classical and early Christian traditions were to be regarded as the purest and the most productive of all philosophies, while French positivism and British empiricism represented a true decline in philosophical thinking. Wilde saw that due to positivism and empiricism – doctrines representing the idea that only *scientific* knowledge is authentic knowledge, and that this knowledge can only be affirmed through using a strictly scientific method – philosophy had become passive. Also, the spread of Darwinism and the great split between science and faith that society was facing at that time troubled Wilde. Although in his early criticism Wilde by no means bespeaks religion, he acknowledges its significance in the preservation of *culture*. For example in 'The Decay of Lying', he writes:

> As for the Church, I cannot conceive anything better for the culture of a country as the presence in it of a body of men whose duty is to believe in the supernatural, to perform daily miracles, and to keep alive the mythopoetic faculty, which is so essential to imagination.
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW,* 1089

However, Wilde continued that the contemporary state of the Church of England was also affected by the "growth of common sense", which had led to "concession to a low form of realism" (*CW,* 1089); even faith had become a sphere where rationality, profit and effectiveness were being promoted. "The chilling touch" of facts had spread everywhere (*CW*, 1081).

Furthermore, the way consumer-culture was entering into the sphere of art seems to have worried Wilde. He held the inability to use one's imagination and the refusal to value "beautiful untrue things" above profit making and usefulness responsible for the unquestionable decline in contemporary art (*CW,* 1091). In 'The Decay of Lying' he writes:

> The crude commercialism of America, its materialising spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and high unattainable ideas, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man [George Washington] who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie.
>
> The Decay of Lying', *CW,* 1081

Moreover, the way Wilde emphasizes the importance of not only imagination but also individuality – individuality both in the creation as well as in reception of art – attests to Wilde's serious concerns about the fortifying trend of mass-consumption in the sphere of art.

In the following, I will move on to examine Wilde's outlook on what kind of values and possible social functions art enfolds. By discussing the autonomy of art, I shall also come within reach of the central dilemma in Wilde's aesthetics: the interlinking of art and life.

### 2.1.1. Art's Value and Autonomy: Plato and Aristotle

During Wilde's lifetime, aesthetics and literary criticism were much affected (as they still are today) by the old division between Platonic and Aristotelian views of art. The watershed between Plato and Aristotle with respect to aesthetics pertains to art's value and autonomy. Since these particular topics are so eminent in Wilde's

critical writings, especially in 'The Decay of Lying', I want to take a brief look at this debate originating in antiquity.

Plato's view of art's role and value originates in his division between the world of Ideas and the world reflecting these Ideas, of which the latter is the world we live in. According to Plato, art does not have a value in its own right since a work of art is always merely a copy of a copy, the artist imitating something worldly and *already* secondary to the eternal forms existing in the world of Ideas (Beardsley, 1966, *passim*). An artistic product is thus merely a pale and, what is worse, *deceptive* 'second-hand' reflection. Plato refuses to acknowledge that art should have an autonomous existence; the unifying thread in Plato's aesthetics is that artistic values should always be, as Cooper et al. frame it, "subject to the sovereignty of truth and morality, and that they [should] justify themselves in relation to needs of psychology, politics and (ultimately) metaphysics" (1992: 327). In line with this view, the role of art in society is that of an undesirable and unproductive intruder that can only become acceptable if it is used in promoting higher, moral purposes, such as education.

Plato's view was fiercely criticized by Aristotle according to whom art did indeed have qualities that were valuable and useful in their own right. As Beardsley puts it, Aristotle set out to "study the nature of art quite independently of its moral and political connections" (1966: 55), and thus he can be considered as the philosopher who first established the field of inquiry nowadays referred to as aesthetics. Unlike Plato, who considered the existence of self-consistent 'internal' rationale in art highly questionable, Aristotle proclaimed that art had goals and standards that were justifiable on their own right, separate from, for example, their social or political functions (Cooper et al. 1992: 11-12, 327-330).

However, it would be an over-simplification to say that Aristotle developed his conceptions of art in direct reaction to the outlook of his teacher Plato, as Aristotle did not fully disagree with him. For example, they both acknowledged the *emotional potential* in the aesthetic experience, although Plato saw it primarily as a means of striving for educational or political goals whereas Aristotle proclaimed that not only were the sensations and experiences that art evoke valuable as such,

but that they *also* could function as a part of ethical discovery and (moral) self-education.

With respect to the 'didactic' potency embodied in art, Wilde was more in line with Aristotle than Plato. Although according to Wilde "art never express[ed] anything but itself" (*CW,* 1087), he did consider it as *a major source of influence* in the life of an individual. Through the individual, art's effects consequently also spread into the societal sphere. In the following, I will turn to examine how the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle influenced Wilde's outlook on the societal dimensions of art.

### 2.1.2. Art in Society and the Function of Criticism

Wilde became interested in the societal roles of art, the artist and the critic very early on. Again, Classical philosophy provided Wilde with the tools to define the function of art in the social sphere; Wilde skilfully criss-crossed between the Platonic view and that of Aristotle. Even though Wilde, in many respects, belonged to the Art for Art's Sake Movement – to the Aesthetes who followed in Aristotle's footsteps, cultivating the idea that art was autonomous and separate from ethics – he was "never an *absolute* Aesthete", as Prewitt-Brown points out, but rather "an ethical Aesthete" (1997: 61, 51). Wilde aspired to show that even if ethics and aesthetics were separate realms, there was a vital connection between the two. (Wilde's relation to the Art's for Art's sake movement will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.)

In Plato's *Republic,* the artist is seen as someone who practises *mimesis,* imitation, and especially the kind of imitation that makes *deceptive* semblances (in comparison with, for example, an artisan who produces copies of 'practical' craft). For Plato, it is exactly here that the potential dangers of art lay: art is capable of imitating life not as it is, but as it *seems*. The artist for Plato is therefore, as Beardsley puts it, "an unreliable guide to the behaviour of things in this world" (1966: 45), because the artist only creates an impression and does not aspire to the truth.

Plato wanted to oust art from the Republic, because it speaks to the weak part of one's soul instead of reinforcing the rational part. Only if art was able to show its usefulness, as a medium of education, for example (censored by the power elite, of course), should one reconsider its position in the society. Aristotle, conversely, saw that it was exactly the emotional power hidden within art that offered the means to *purify* the souls of the citizens: by going through several emotions evoked by the aesthetic experience, like those of pity and awe, the individual was freed from these emotions, and thus became more apt to act rationally and morally in real life.

According to Ellmann, Wilde was convinced was that "art had a role to play in the improvement of society" (1981: 50). Wilde regarded the lovers of culture as being parallel to the guardians in Plato's Republic in the sense that they were capable of functioning against whatever threatened the society from within (for Wilde, one of such 'internal' threats was commercialism).

An all-embracing individualism is one of the most prominent features in Wilde's philosophy, and throughout his criticism Wilde stresses the significance of subjectivity of the aesthetic experience; he was convinced that only the most subjective experience enables one to glimpse the universal. For Aristotle, as well as for Plato, the possibility of glimpsing the eternal world was more related to art's capacity to awaken certain sensations, not so much to an individual's *recognition* of these sensations. Wilde's view of aesthetic experience was never merely empirical; he did not see it purely as a series of sensations, but – giving credit to Kant's critique of empiricism – as something based on the *thinking* of our sensations. For Kant such experiences were never explainable or measurable by empirical means, since they were merely a sequence of sensations, but there was always an intellectual dimension: the detection of these sensations (Prewitt-Brown, 1997: 53).

In Classical philosophy, *mimesis* was one of the most essential elements with respect to the discussion about art. The imitations of the concrete world manifested in art were often considered as something deceitful and deceptive; therefore, *mimesis* also marked the dangers hidden within the sphere of art. For Plato, all art was merely 'brazen', since it attempted to copy the golden reality, whereas for

Aristotle, art could be regarded as an autonomous and valuable sphere on its own right (*passim*).

In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde argues that it is, in fact, Nature that imitates Art, not the other way around, and that the role of the artist is first and foremost to produce purely imaginary things – to tell beautiful lies. Thus, for Wilde, true artistic creation is not a process of imitation, as it was for Plato. Rather, what we perceive in the real world represents the symptoms of Nature's jealousy of the creative and expressive powers of art:

> My experience 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… her absolutely unfinished condition.
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW,* 1071

Also Wilde acknowledges dangers within the sphere of art, such as the existence of a "potential corrupting effect of the aesthetic sense, its power to infect" (Prewitt-Brown, 1997: 56). Even though art itself is free from morality, corruption within the aesthetic can become 'projected' on real life and thus also deteriorate one's morality. "Because life imitates art," Prewitt-Brown notes, "such corruption is always possible" (ibid.). However, Wilde concentrates on contemplating the corruption in art itself, leaving aside the possible corruptive effects that art have on its public.

The corruption in art, for Wilde, was embodied in rapidly spreading realism – a movement that was, as Danson puts it, an offshoot of "the supposed objectivity and professionalism of nineteenth-century science [in literature]" (1997: 85). In 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', Wilde's primary concern is the English middle-class audience whose new demand for art is that it should be *useful*. The idea that the public should "swallow their classics whole, never tast[ing] them" (*CW,* 1186) appals Wilde, and he goes on to show how this kind of phenomena is threatening to lead art into decline:

> The fact is, the public makes use of the classics of the country as a means of checking the progress of Art. They degrade the classics into authorities. They use them as bludgeons for preventing the free expression of Beauty in a new form. … When they say that a work of art is grossly unintelligible, what they mean is that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is new; when they describe a work as grossly immoral, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is true.
>
> 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', CW, 1186

The above passage indicates the extent to which Wilde was in contention with Plato, who stressed the moral and educational applications of art. Furthermore, in 'The Critic as Artist*',* Wilde writes that "purification and spiritualising of the [human] nature which [Aristotle] calls catharsis is … essentially aesthetic, and *is not moral*" (*CW,* 1116, my emphasis). Thus, Wilde concurs with the Aristotelian view of the aesthetic experience as something that purifies one's soul, but rejects the idea of art as a medium through which any (moral) *advice on how or why to purify* can be given.

According to Wilde, art offers the individual an opportunity to develop and grow, whereas life (and by 'life' Wilde refers to sociological reality as well as subjective existence), as Prewitt-Brown puts it, "lacks the correspondence of form and spirit" (1997: 53). However, Wilde seems to abhor any such situation in which art is employed *expressly* for educational purposes and used as a means of power. In Wilde's opinion, listening to those who are constantly set to guide *others* how to think marks a one-way street to passivity, not to intellectual growth. "The man who is so occupied in trying to educate others," Wilde remarks in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', "has never had any time to educate himself".

Nevertheless, Wilde does discuss *the role of the critic* extensively in his essays; in 'The Critic as Artist' he remarks how "there never was a time when Criticism was more needed than it is now" (*CW,* 1151). Thus, there seems to be a controversy between the significance placed on the subjective experience and the co-existing demand for the development of some universal aesthetic guidelines. What is the critic's role, if the aesthetic experience is always primarily subjective, if "nothing worth knowing can be taught"? Wilde entails that just like we should all

become the artists of our lives, we should all also become *critics* of our *own* sensations – and not those of others. One of the central paradoxes within Wilde's aesthetics is that only the most subjective can be universal, since universal cannot be universal unless it applies to each individual equally.

Thus, it is clear that for Wilde, the role of the critic is not to *educate* or provide models for interpretation but rather make the public receptive to their *own* experiences. If art is used for educational purposes, as in Plato's ideal republic, it ceases to be art and becomes something else: a decorative gift-wrap for moral advice. Similarly, if art is harnessed to the service of, for example, a political purpose, its essential function – to awaken sensations and make us aware of these sensations (instead of guiding us in certain directions through them) – is diluted. Although these sensations can be good or bad in the *aesthetic sense*, they cannot be moral or immoral. The preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* states: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (*CW,* 17). This remark also illustrates Wilde's views concerning the role of the artist and can be regarded as a reaction to the tendency of judging authors' morality by the contents of their books (and *vice versa*) that characterized Victorian criticism.

Next, I move on to consider the influences of Romanticism on Wilde's aesthetics, which are most discernible in his approaches to the roles of the artist and the critic, as well as the significance of emotionalism within the aesthetic experience.

### 2.2. The Legacy of Romanticism

Ages are all equal; but genius is always above the age.

William Blake

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the concept of Romantic art was defined by A. W. Schlegel in opposition to Classical art. Whereas Classicism relied on the imitation theory and the importance of rules in the process of aesthetic judgment,

Romanticism highlighted a kind of emotional intuition, an enjoyment of feeling and emotion in the aesthetic experience. However, it is extremely difficult to give a precise definition of any movement that has erupted at different times in different countries, and the same applies to Romanticism. As Beardsley points out, "the term 'Romantic' itself hardly has a determinate and standard sense, though it is somewhat more settled now than it was among the Romantics themselves" (1966: 245). Still, there are some features that are characteristic of all the varieties of the Romantic thought: the focus on the artist's state of mind – on the theory of expression as opposite to the theory of imitation – is one of them.

The aspirations of the Romantic movement were introduced to Wilde already at a very early stage of his life as his mother, Lady Jane Wilde, known by her *nom de plume* Speranza, passed her literary tastes and interests on to her younger son. Lady Wilde was an influential character in the literary life of Dublin; she translated from German and French and wrote poetry and articles. But more passionately still, Speranza Wilde was a nationalist protestant, and, according to Ellmann, she "communicated to her son [Oscar] both her nationalism and her determination to embody it in verse" (1981: 7). After her husband's death, Lady Wilde moved to London, and brought her literary *salon* with her. Despite of her love for Ireland, she was able to accommodate well to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city. As far as her son was concerned, despite his apparently smooth integration into English society first at Oxford (where he lost his Irish accent) and later in London, the fact that he was an Irishman in England always had its impact on Wilde. Considering this certain sense of otherness, it is not difficult to understand why Wilde found the Romantic idea of artists as an *alienated genius,* a misinterpreted artist who recognized the idea sublime, beauty combined with strong emotions such as sorrow or pain, so appealing.

Wilde's relationship to Romanticism (or, 'romanticisms' in the plural) in its entirety would offer an endless range of topics to examine; thus, for the purpose of my thesis I have selected some of the themes that most explicitly seem to connect the Romantic thought and Wilde, and which are essential to formulating an overall view of Wilde's aesthetics. Thus, in the following, I shall discuss Romanticism and

Wilde through issues such as the role of the artist, individualism and emotionalism, and the process of reception.

### 2.2.1. An Artist in Distress

A few decades prior to the start of Wilde's career as a writer, the Symbolist movement in France had restored the Romantic idea of the alienated genius and made it fashionable. Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve assigned the metaphor of *tour d'ivoire*, the ivory tower, originally to describe the life of Alfred Vigny (in the poem *Pensées d'août,* 1837), but the metaphor spread to refer more generally to the alienated life of the artist and the scholar.

Having grown up in a house where Irish nationalism bloomed alongside with French and German Romantic literature, it seems only natural that Wilde should have felt a certain sense of alienation, a sense of otherness, in Victorian England. Considering Wilde's career as writer, however, this position as "Other" turned out to be highly beneficial: due to it, Wilde was able to see the defects in English society from a certain distance, and, indeed, skilfully hit at its sorest points – the upper and middle class hypocrisy and faith in the all-round excellence of positivism. As Prewitt-Brown suggests, Wilde recognized "the connection between British imperialism and British empiricism, and saw beyond both" (1997: 27).

Furthermore, Wilde's sense of *not* belonging to any particular place allowed him to develop a special cosmopolitan identity. Wilde did not consider the position of the artist in quite as gloomy and hopeless terms as the Romantics; his answer to the agonies and pains of alienation was Art. Of course, the Romantics also saw that art, and particularly the right of self-expression, justified all the misery in the life of an artist, but Wilde took the potential benefits of art even further, stressing its universal and cosmopolitan nature: Art was something which could unite all humankind, regardless of time and place. However misinterpreted the artist might have been in his days, he was always a part of a larger, universal community in which all forms of individual expression were valued in their own right and simultaneously tied together with the strings of humanity.

Wilde's viewpoints of art and artist's role shifted considerably over the years he was developing his criticism, but in the end (if we look at *De Profundis* in particular*)*, it might be said that Wilde's conviction was the following: the artist, after having looked at the society at his feet from his ivory tower, was to leave the tower, to descend back to that society and start building bridges. Aesthetics provide the tools for this process. Art's role, therefore, was to serve as a bridge over which people were able to tread in order to reach the realms of humanity. (Furthermore, the parallelism between this metaphor and the work of Christ is quite easily on view as well. I will dwell on this theme further in chapter five in context of *De Profundis,* where Wilde parallels Christ as "the precursor of the Romantic movement in life" (*CW,* 1034).)

### 2.2.2. Individualism and Emotionalism

Wilde most certainly identified himself with the Romantics also in many other respects – particularly in stressing the importance of individualism. In *De Profundis* Wilde writes:

> People used to say of me that I was too individualistic. [Now] I must be far more of an individualist than I ever was… Indeed my ruin came, not from too great individualism of life, but from too little. *The one disgraceful, unpardonable…action of my life was my allowing myself to be forced into appealing to Society for help and protectio*n [against Douglas's father].
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1041 (my emphasis)

As the above passage suggests, Wilde eventually became more and more sceptical about the possibilities of society as a profitable 'construction' for the human kind. Here, of course, the biographical context plays an evident role; Wilde's trials and subsequent imprisonment had made him more suspicious than ever of the methods and morals of society and its laws. Moreover, due to these events, his text seems to become coloured with deep pessimism and disbelief in art's capacity to improve society. Wilde seems to place even more stress on *individualism* than on being an artist; for example, he writes to Douglas that Douglas's depreciation for him as an

artist was “quite excusable”, because it was “temperamental”, but that Douglas might have “appreciated [Wilde] as an Individualist [since] for that no culture was required” (*CW*, 1041).

However, Wilde does not fall into complete pessimism even in *De Profundis*: curiously enough, he takes religion – one of the eminent forces working within society – and presents it (although in the light of his own agnostic views) as a possible solution to the misery and pain of man. It is, however, worth noting that the religious elements Wilde emphasizes are quite different from the doctrines of the Church of England. Wilde’s view parallels more the idea of elevated medievalism, the ‘unspoiled’ period before the age of reason, in which the religion still had its place as “mythopoetic faculty” (*CW*, 1089).

Another aspect that connects Wilde to the Romantic Movement is the role of *emotionalism* in art. Romantic poets promoted the role of sentiment in the artistic expression and regarded the representation of personal emotions and feelings as a solution to the discrepancy between poetic subject matter and objects found in experience. As Abrams puts it “what marks [Romantic poetry] off from fact is, primarily, that it incorporates objects of sense *which have already been…transformed by the feelings of the poet”* (1953: 53). Particularly the objective of the Romantic Movement to find beauty in grotesque intrigued Wilde, who was interested in decadent pleasures and cultivation of senses also in a more profligate sense.

Percy Shelley’s (1792-1822) *Prometheus Unbound* serves as an excellent example of the attempt to liberate beauty and to invite the sublime out of the dangerous and melancholy: in *Prometheus Unbound,* Shelley turns the great tragedy of Aeschylus’s Prometheus into a celebration of new kind of freedom and joy. However, according to Jenkyns, there is one respect in which Shelley fails badly, and that is the fact that “his Prometheus is wholly brave and good, his Jupiter wholly evil [whereas] Aeschylus had more feeling to the true complexity of things” (1980: 102). Thus, what Jenkyns in fact seems to be suggesting is that Shelley, being too black-and-white in presenting the good and evil, sublime and grotesque,

ends up separating the two, although his original goal was to show their mysterious interrelation.

In his early criticism, Wilde seemed to mock *overt* emotionalism, as well as genuinity, stating that if either of these over-take the artistic process, the result will anything but desirable. For example, in 'The Critic as Artist', Gilbert states; "All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling. To be natural is to be obvious, and to be obvious is to be inartistic" (*CW,* 1148). Thus, according to early Wilde, too much of genuine feeling defects the work of art, and if we try to interpret a work of art solely on the grounds of a feeling or sentiment, we loose the Kantian idea of reception according to which aesthetic experience cannot be regarded merely as a sequence of sensations. According to Kant, aesthetic experience also includes the *recognition* of our own sensations, thus, an *intellectual* dimension. (For further discussion, see 2.2.3.)

In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde states: "Personal experience is the most vicious and limited circle" (*CW*, 1085). By the time of *De Profundis,* Wilde's outlook on emotionalism with respect to Art has changed remarkably. In *De Profundis*, emotionalism is regarded as an essential part of not merely the aesthetic experience and evaluation, but one's (ethical) self-development as person. Wilde discusses differences between emotions, some of which he considers as more sincere (and, at this time, therefore more valuable) than others. "Sorrow," he writes, "being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great Art" (*CW*, 1024). Wilde continues saying that because "behind sorrow there is always sorrow" (*CW*, 1024), whereas behind joy or laughter there can be various different reasons, sorrow is never a reflection of anything else but itself – just like "art never represents anything but itself" (*CW,* 1091). Simultaneously, Wilde is moving away from the idea that art should concentrate on telling beautiful lies.

Wilde's celebration of sorrow, and of the essential role of this particular emotion in the aesthetic experience, eventually accommodates to both the Romantic idea of combining beauty and suffering as well as Wilde's own, earlier principle of the autonomy of art represented in 'The Decay of Lying'. According to Wilde,

sorrow is valuable because it is independent of and incomparable with any other emotion, and yet it is something highly personal. In the similar way, art, for Wilde, is at once autonomous and subjective.

The objective-subjective paradox is, however, very much present in Romanticism already. This "Romantic Polysemism", as Abrams (1956: 235) calls it, made the task of a Romantic critic very challenging; the critic was supposed to interpret a work of art simultaneously representing the artist's *personality* as well as embodying elements of *universal* beauty (1956: 235-9). In the following, I shall turn to look at how some of the Romantic approaches to criticism and reception relate to Wilde's outlook on these issues.

### 2.2.3. Criticism and Reception: Experience, Compassion, or Creativity?

Wilde's aesthetics are linked to the German tradition of philosophy mainly through Romanticism. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a highly influential philosopher for Wilde – not only because he was one of the fathers of Romanticism, but also because his aesthetics can be considered as directly responsible for the rise of the Symbolists movement, as well as to the general development of the Art for art's sake movement.

In his aesthetics, Schopenhauer tried to show how it was only through an aesthetic experience that one was able to break out of one's natural pessimism, which generally dominates one's view of the world. He distinguished the aesthetic experience from other experiences and saw it as a means of overcoming one's 'earthly' desires and, even if only temporarily, reach the realm of purely mental enjoyment. Wilde's view of aesthetic experience comes close to Schopenhauer's; in 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde writes that Art is something that "speaks to both sense and soul alike […] Like Aristotle … we desire the concrete, but no concrete can satisfy us" (*CW,* 1137). However, as we have seen, Wilde never seemed to have a solid opinion about the relationship between sensitive, sensuous and intellectual elements within the aesthetic experience, even though he most certainly acknowledged the role of each of these within it. The aesthetic experience, for

Wilde, was neither a purely mental enjoyment (as for Schopenhauer, for example), nor a purely sensuous one.

As far as the justification of art criticism is concerned, the Romantics – celebrating the autonomy of art, on the one hand, and the significance of subjectivity on the other – faced an evident problem: how was one eventually able to criticize a work of art, if there were no rules or regulations within the sphere of art? Their answer was that criticism was not about evaluation but rather the critic should put all his effort into the process of *understanding* the work of art. The critic's role was to get as close as possible to an artwork by first opening himself up to the experience, in order to the experience to open up the meanings of the work of art in question for him in return. After this, the critic was supposed not to compare but to *connect* the particular work of art to a larger sphere of art (Cooper et al. 1992, *passim*). Thus also the act of criticism became a part of the aesthetic process. The Romantics saw that the only way in which critique could promote the work of art was by employing creative methods – the same methods which art itself employed.

Creativity most certainly plays a meaningful part also in Wilde's criticism, and his critical essays can well be considered as artworks in their own right. In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde writes:

> Indeed, I would call criticism a creation within a creation. … More, I would say that the highest Criticism, *being the purest form of personal impression*, is in its way more creative than creation… That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul.
>
> 'The Critic as Artist', *CW,* 1125 (my emphasis)

As Wilde calls criticism "the *purest* form of personal impression", one is left wondering where the artist and the recipient are situated on his scale. This special emphasis that Wilde places on the creativity of the critic might, however, partly be explained by Wilde wanting to underline his own, often downplayed work as a critic and the methods he employed. It is possible that Wilde introduced these somewhat radical ideas about the 'new critic' *partly* out of frustration towards the prevailing academic and journalistic criticism into which he did not seem to fit. (I will discuss Wilde's role as a critic in more detail in chapter three.)

In the context of art criticism, one is prone to consider also the *process of reception*. The role of the critic and the public perceiving a work of art is another aspect in which obvious connections between the Romantic thought and Wilde's aesthetics can be espied. As far as the relationship of the work of art and the recipient is concerned, Wilde had been influenced by both the Kantian theory of reception, according to which critical and creative faculties (spectator and artist) were no longer opposed but united, as well as Schopenhauer, who analysed Art from the basis of the *effects* of an aesthetic experience on the personality of the artist as well as that of the recipient.

According to Romanticism, Art's purpose was to present something completely new, something unique, an opposition to the imitation and re-production the works of previous masters, which was typical of Classicism. This kind of *self-awareness of the work of art* is one of the ideas for which Wilde takes a stand in the 'The Decay of Lying': a true work of art refuses to aim at being a naïve representation of reality, history or nature; instead, it highlights the variety of ways in which it is possible to look at reality. The emphasis on the *expressive* theory of art, instead of the imitative one, was something Wilde most certainly inherited from the Romantics. However, Wilde personalized even this theory in the course of the development of his criticism.

The expressive theory art, follows the idea that art, as Abrams puts it "is defined in terms of imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes the images, thoughts, and feelings of the [artist]", and thus the artist himself becomes "the major element generating both the artistic product and the criteria by which it is to be judged" (1953: 22). Wilde, however, did not consider the artist as someone who possesses the ultimate answers for the questions prompted by an artwork. Even though Wilde emphasized the uniqueness of the artist in the creative process, he bestow that the *result* of creative process (the work of art) should be examined separately from its creators intentions. In 'The Critic as Artist', for example, Wilde writes that the role of the critic is to reveal in the work of art "what the artist ha[s] *not* put there" (*CW,* 1154*,* my emphasis). (This paradox between the subjectivity of the artist and the autonomy of a work of art, as well as the relationship between the

artist, the work of art, and the critic will be discussed in more length in chapter four.)

In the long history of aesthetic reception, the work art has repeatedly been paralleled to a mirror. This metaphor, though it had emerged already in context of mimetic theories, like those of Plato or Plutarch, and later on in the Medieval and Renaissance art, is prevailing also in Romantic theory of reception (Abrams, 1953: 32-34) What is specific in Romantic application of the metaphor is that the work of art is regarded as the mirror of its *creator*, not as reflection of universal Ideas or models of the antiquity as in Classicism. The focus of attention in Romantic criticism is on the *particularity* of each work of art, and this particularity is closely connected to the artist's emotions and to the unique expression extracted from these emotions. In fact, the Romantics took Aristotle's catharsis – which represents a kind of emotional theory in its own right – to new heights, suggesting that poetry was a catharsis *primarily for the poet* and only secondarily for the reader (Beardsley 1966: 249). Although the critical faculties (the viewer, reader or listener) evaluating and interpreting a work of art were thus placed on a secondary position, they were nevertheless advised to rely primarily on the sensation and emotion art awakes in *themselves* in order to understand the artist's state of mind. In other words, it was not through any particular rule that a work of art should be evaluated, but through feeling only. Therefore, a work of art in the Romantic theory of reception can be regarded as a mirror of the recipient, too.

Subjectivity and individuality of the aesthetic experience (as well as of the work of art itself) seem to offer a firm common ground to the art criticism of both the Romantics and Wilde. However, using the specific metaphor of a work of art as a mirror needs to be discussed in some more detail, since, for example, in 'The Decay of Lying' the very metaphor of art as mirror is annulled: Vivian, Wilde's mouthpiece, persists that "[Art] is a veil, rather than a mirror" *(CW,* 1082). Vivian makes this point in context of art as representation of reality, though; a work of art is not a mirror of *reality*, whereas *imagination* (or state of mind of the artist, or the recipient), on the other hand, is wholeheartedly welcomed to reflect itself upon it: "She [Art] has flowers that no forest know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She

makes and unmakes many worlds", Vivian continues (*CW,* 1082). A little later Vivian turns the imagery upside down and proceeds to state how "Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality". He makes use of Plato's allegory of the cave and the shadows, arguing that when looking at the nature as reality, one is actually looking at shadows of reality that, in fact, lie hidden in Art.

So, what can ultimately be said about differences between Wilde's view of the nature of work of art and its reception, and that of the Romantics? Whilst the Romantics tend to regard the work of art as an exclamation of many individual truths (particularly that of the artist, but those of the public and the work of art itself, too), whereas Wilde's definition (at least at the time of 'The Decay of Lying'*),* seems to be more concerned with the idea of the universal and independent nature of art, stressing the idea that "art never expresses anything but itself" (*CW,* 1087). However, aspirations to define a kind of universal value of poetry did appear among the Romantics, too, and while they strongly disapproved the idea of using art for didactic purposes or expressing moral truths, some of them – Wordsworth and Shelley in particular – were convinced that "the refinement and enlargement of the capacity to feel […] those feelings that bind human beings together, is an ultimate justification of poetry" (Beardsley 1966: 252). Thus, even for the Romantics, art played an important role not merely in the life of an individual but also as a unifying force of humanity.

In many respects, Wilde can be considered as a neo-Romantic critic; however, it cannot be stressed enough how self-contradiction is highly characteristic of Wilde, and therefore it is not possible to fit his ideas and criticism into single category. When comparing his earlier and later works, his criticism is subject to alteration. Whereas in 'The Decay of Lying' his mouthpiece Vivian argues that "personal experience is a most vicious and limited circle" (*CW*, 1085), for example in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* there is a passage which highlights artist's role in the birth of a work of art, and could be taken from any declaration of the Romantic thought:

> Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself.
>
> *The Picture of Dorian Gray, CW,* 20

However, the novel as a whole refuses this position, and thus this is not necessarily Wilde's viewpoint. Although in the beginning the painter Basil Hallward does feel that he cannot exhibit his portrait of Dorian Gray because it would expose his feelings towards his sitter, the painting later on takes on a life of its very own life and becomes something utterly beyond the control of the artist. There is very little of Basil in the grotesque picture in the end, when it has turned into the mirror of Dorian's corrupted soul. (For further discussion on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the relation between the artist and the work of art, see 4.1.)

In his criticism, Wilde's primary goal was to show the interrelatedness of, on one hand, the individuality embodied in every work of art and, on the other, the universal nature of Art as an autonomous sphere. In so doing, Wilde was seeking to illuminate Art's unifying power hidden in the freedom of self-expression, as well as in a unique experience of the receiver. Wilde's conviction was that it is through this individual experience alone that one is able to get a glimpse the universal truths that art enfolds. As Prewitt-Brown puts it, "by *art,* Wilde means both the work of art and the aesthetic sense or potential in each of us" (1997: 2). Art, for Wilde, does not exist without the recognition of the experiences it awakens in us on a personal level.

In this section I have discussed Wilde's relation to the Romantic Movement trough examining a few topics that seem to unify otherwise so versatile movement. Wilde's debt to the Romantics is concerned especially with individualism; to call Wilde a neo-Romantic would, however, be over-simplification, since remarks such as "all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling" (*CW,* 1148) in 'The Critic as Artist' opposes one of the very fundamental ideas upon which Romanticism is beset. However, the role of emotionalism comes particularly significant to Wilde in *De Profundis,* and thus I will return to this topic later on in chapter five.

## 2.3. Wilde and His Contemporaries

I was one who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age.

*De Profundis* (CW, 1024)

The radical changes in the political, economic and social reality of the nineteenth century had a major effect on both the position the of artist role in society as well as on his relationship to his public. It was particularly the new wealthy middle-class that was to re-determine both the sphere of ethics as well as that of aesthetics, accommodating the two to the new kind of social reality governed by the laws of supply and demand. Thus, it was no wonder that a well-founded concern for the nature of the work of art spread widely, especially amongst artists. Works of art with their individual and distinctive nature or, as Beardsley describes it, "peculiar sort of value" (1985: 283), were now to compete in the open market with the objects of mass-production of whose primary aspiration was usefulness.

The old system of artistic patronage being gone, the position of the artist was now shifting towards that of entrepreneur; he was to obtain an income through his art, and therefore he was under the threat of being left at the mercy of the taste of the middle-class public. The dangers of commercialism creeping into the sphere of art were the major impulse behind the birth of the Art for Art's sake movement, although some of the fundamental ideas upon which the movement was built were introduced already by the Romantics, such as the alienation of the artist from the society around him.

### 2.3.1. The Doctrines of Beauty: Pater and Ruskin

In England, one of the most influential mouthpieces of the Art for Art's Sake ideology was Walter Pater. His *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) – the book that Wilde, in *De Produndis*, calls "[the] book which has had such a strange influence over my life" (*CW*, 1022) – became a text of great significance for

art-centric young men of the Victorian era, including Wilde. In the conclusion of his *magnum opus,* Pater highlighted the importance of poetic passion and desire of beauty; he demonstrated, as Danson puts it, “the transience and relativity of all things and the need therefore, ‘to be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions’” (1997b: 82). Pater’s view was that seek "not the fruit of the experience, but the experience itself" (quoted in Ellmann, 1981: 47). The ideology of the Art for Art’s Sake Movement was based on the *separation of ethics from aesthetics*; the Aesthetes held that Art’s role was to provide refined sensuous pleasures, rather than communicate ethical or sentimental messages.

The slogan ‘*l’art pour l’art’* was strongly fore-grounded in Wilde’s earlier aesthetic theory, and the voice of Pater is unmistakable “among the echoes of Wilde’s criticism” (Danson, 1997b: 82). It is particularly evident in ‘The Decay of Lying’ where the autonomy of Art is strongly emphasized. However, Wilde always acknowledged that even if art and morality are separate realms, they are nevertheless interrelated: in ‘The Critic as Artist’ he writes that ethics can be paralleled to natural selection which “makes existence possible” whereas aesthetics are like sexual selection which “make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress and variety and change” (*CW,* 1154). With respect to this rather comparison so full of the echoes of Darwinism, it seems apt to briefly look at Wilde’s relationship with the nineteenth century progress with respect to science and religion.

Although Wilde did deplored the rationalist-positivist elements of modernization (especially if they threatened to enter the realm of art) he nevertheless acknowledged the importance of progress and development that was taking place in the fields of philosophy, psychology, science, humanities and religion in his time. In ‘The Critic as Artist’, Wilde’s pays a tribute to both Charles Darwin and the French philosopher and writer Ernest Renan (1823-1892) who was engaged in the studies of history of Christianity:

> The nineteenth century is a turning point in history, simply on account of two men, Darwin and Renan, the one the critic of the book of Nature, the other the critic of the books of God. Not to recognize this is to miss the most important eras in the progress of the world. Creation is always behind the age. It is *Criticism* that leads us. The Critical Spirit and the World Spirit are one.
>
> 'The Critic as Artist', *CW,* 1154 (my emphasis)

The above passage shows that Wilde was aware of the significance of criticism in all spheres of life. However, this does not necessarily indicate that he would have thought very highly of the attempts to apply critical theories to real life, or that he had pleased with the split between faith and knowledge, which characterized the contemporary worldview. Wilde's unwillingness to renounce the Protestant idea of faith and science working together towards a brighter future might partly be explained by his Irish background; as an Irishman, Protestantism was a relevant part of Wilde's national identity. For Wilde, progress meant first and foremost "the realisation of Utopias", Utopia being "the one country at which Humanity is always landing" ('The Soul of Man Under Socialism, *CW,* 1184). The general glorification of objective, scientific knowledge and its spread at the expense of mythical, imaginative and inexplicable faculties of the mind was a sign of deterioration, not of progress.

Another contemporary critic highly influential on Wilde was John Ruskin, who, unlike Pater, acknowledged the ethic-aesthetic duality. Ellmann (1981: 48) suggests that Ruskin "had made England art-conscious by…[an] approach in which morality played a major part", but actually the question of *how conscious* Ruskin himself was of the moral dimensions of art is open to debate. Also, as Landow points out, when discussing Ruskin in context of the Aesthetic movement, one tends to focus on Ruskin's ideas in the 1880s, while, in fact, the early Ruskin "advanced aesthetic theories that provided a forceful justification of the attitudes of the Aesthetic Movement" at the time when he was still convinced that "the most moral, spiritual thing art could achieve was simply to convey beauty" (2007a, online).

One of the prevailing discussions in eighteenth century British aesthetics had been that of the sublime, or, "the aesthetic of 'greatness'" (Landow, 2008a, online). In the nineteenth century, the notion of sublime continued to be explored, but some

slight changes took place as regards the perspective. In spite of the frequency of the term (or, possibly exactly because of it), however, "it had no one meaning that would have satisfied its many uses" (Landow, 2008a, online).

Broadly, the notion of sublime usually indicates an element in certain aesthetic experience, combining high admiration and a strong *emotional effect*, sometimes that of horror or pain. In the nineteenth century, it was particularly the effects of the sublime *upon the perceiver* that were emphasized, and this "marked an important change in the course of English aesthetics, since the reactions of the perceiver became, for the first time, more important than the qualities of the pleasing object" (Landow, 2008b: online). This very shift of critical interest from the sublime itself to its *effects on the perceiver* was one of the most important proclamations of the Art for Art's Sake Movement.

Thus, while Pater relied on mysticism and imagination – the two of which were to operate in the sphere of Art, disconnected from any ethical restrictions – Ruskin held faith and Christian doctrine in a key position in overcoming the ethical-aesthetic duality, suggesting that Christian medieval art had managed to find "the perfect expression of ethical truth" (Prewitt-Brown, 1997: 41). The basis of Ruskin's theo-centric theory of the beautiful was that God was so infused into his creation with divine attributes that, as Landow puts it, "those qualities of nature and painting that produced beauty *symbolized the deity*… and that simple enjoyment of the beauties produced by proportion, balance, and moderation proved more spiritual than moralizing art" (Landow, 2007a: online, my emphasis). Thus, in fact Ruskin, too, rejected the idea of explicitly moralizing art as morally beneficial; yet, "pure" aestheticism would not do for him, as he still believed in the connection between art and emotional ethics. And so, in his theory, Ruskin tried to demonstrate that "the perception of beauty (especially the beauties of Turner) has an important relationship to man's moral and religious nature" (Landow 2007b, online). In line with this view, Wilde's debt to Ruskin can actually be seen highly remarkable; although Wilde fiercely rejected the utilitarian conception of art as something moral or "useful" in the pragmatic sense, he always acknowledged the interrelation between art and ethics.

Ruskin's *actual* conscience of the ethical dimensions of an aesthetic experience may be questioned, however. A concrete example from Ruskin's life illuminates this paradox between moral idealism and emotional response to a work of art: Ruskin possessed the painting 'Slavers Overthrowing the Dead and Dying – Typho[on]n Coming On' (more shortly, 'Slave Ship', 1840) by J. M. W. Turner, a painter whose expression of the sublime he admired deeply. Dabydeen quotes a letter from Ruskin claiming that 'Slave Ship' represented "the noblest sea Turner ever painted… the noblest certainly ever painted by man" (1995:7). Ruskin is known to have said: "If I were to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this" (quoted in Dabydeen, 1995:7). Ruskin was paying attention not to what is going on in the painting but to "the genius with which Turner illuminated the sea and sky in an intense and lurid splendour of colours" (ibid.) In other words, Ruskin responds solely to the majesty and terror of nature and totally overlooks the evil of man to man. This example serves to show how hypothetical Ruskin's doctrine of moral beauty actually was.

Wilde criticized Ruskin's moral idealism because it was – as the 'Slave Ship' example shows – "emotional in temper" (Prewitt-Brown, 1997:42). The French novelist and writer Marcel Proust, who devotedly studied Ruskin, was the first to make this observation in the preface to his translation of Ruskin's *La Bible d'Amiens*. Proust writes:

> The doctrines [Ruskin] professed were moral and not aesthetic doctrines, and yet he chose them for their beauty. And since he did not wish to present them as beautiful but as true, he was forced to deceive himself about the nature of the *reasons that made him adopt them.*
>
> Proust, 1987:51 (my emphasis)

So, what Proust means is that Ruskin actually searched for justifications for morality from aesthetics, and not the other way around (as he himself claimed). In other words, when Ruskin suggested that a work of art was beautiful because it was produced with elevated (moral) aspirations, he was actually saying that morality made the work of art beautiful. For example, Ruskin argued that Christian medieval art was the perfect expression of ethical truth, whereas the Egyptian pyramids were

ugly due to the hideous history of a slave economy written all over them. Proust suggests that by doing this, Ruskin actually allowed ethics to outshine aesthetics that was supposed to be the topic of his critical investigations. And yet, it was the beauty in art, Proust points out, that made Ruskin want to connect art to morality and verify firm and close connection between the two. But as the Turner painting example shows, Ruskin's desire remained on a fairly theoretical level.

Before the 1850s, Ruskin was particularly fond of the superiority of early Christian medieval art. This was something to which Wilde returned in *De Profundis.* However, Wilde's reasons for considering the medieval artistic expression as a higher form of art were to some extent different from those of Ruskin. Wilde opposed the art of early Christianity, more specifically he objected to Renaissance art that despised spontaneous and new artistic expressions and was tied up to 'dead rules'. Through this kind of comparison, his aim was to highlight the spirit of humanity and individualism (or, the Romantic spirit) of early Christianity, rather than its role as a conveyer of high moral aspirations. By these means, Wilde managed to avoid slipping into the sphere of ethics in the disguise of aesthetics. In fact, he did exactly the opposite, representing the Christ as an artist:

> [W]e can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfections which forms the real distinction between classical and romantic Art and makes Christ the true precursor of the romantic movement… the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flame like imagination. He realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation.
>
> *De Profundis*, *CW,* 1027

According to Prewitt-Brown, "Wilde's taste did not fail him, because, unlike late Ruskin, he never turned away from art criticism to social criticism, but maintained their vital connection" (1997: 43). Wilde's priorities always lay within Art, which he considered as expression of the ultimate truth and reality. Life was ultimately Art's imitation, and therefore, it was only by revealing the secrets of Art, that learning the essential (and ethical) values in life became possible.

### 2.3.2. Wilde and the Art for Art's Sake Ideology

In Wilde's time, the Aristotelian view of the acknowledgement of Art's autonomy – its *value* apart from morality and its divorce from the social sphere – was emphasized and promoted especially in the manifesto of the Art for Art's sake movement, or, the Aesthetes, as they were called in England.

In addition to Aristotle's ideas, the philosophical roots of aestheticism are to be found in Kant's, Schiller's and Schopenhauer's theories of Art's autonomy; in the eighteenth century, these roots pointed towards attempts to find some kind of universal agreement, a 'standard' of taste. Nineteenth century Aestheticism, however, rejected the possibility of a rational public sphere and the idea of a standard public response to a work of art, and emphasized the *private* response of the audience instead (Pease, 2004: 96-104). An Aesthete yielded to the sensuous experience of Art, and "drifted" from one experience to another, without having "time to make theories about the things [he] see[s] and touche[s]", as Walter Pater wrote in the conclusion of *The History of Renaissance* (quoted in Prewitt-Brown: 1997: 19).

In the formation of his aesthetic theory, Wilde drew on aestheticism both in the rejection of the idea of a standard public response as well as the claim of art's autonomy. For example, in *Saturday Review*, in 1894, Wilde remarked: "Public opinion exists only where there are no ideas" (*CW*, 1242). However, Wilde's relation to the Art for Art's sake movement was not as straightforward as I have suggested so far. Although one of the most characteristic features in Wilde's early criticism was that the evaluation of a work of art should always happen solely within the sphere of art, Wilde was never a *pure* aesthete in the sense that his theory also had an ethical dimension.

With respect to ethical reverberations of art, Wilde protested particularly against the "pseudo-ethical criticism" of the Victorians, "pseudo-ethical" meaning the way a Victorian critic would look upon a work of art as a manifestation of its creator's morality, and, in so doing, subdue the work to evaluation based on its (supposed) morality or immorality, and not on its aesthetic value (Prewitt-Brown,

1997: 44). Wilde regarded this tendency of Victorian criticism first of all extremely hypocritical. As the above example of Ruskin and 'Slave Ship' suggests, this kind evaluation of Art through emotional ethics was, in fact, not only questionable but also paradoxical (though it pretended not to be).

For Wilde, ethics and aesthetics were not to be fused or confused, but their interrelatedness was to be demonstrated, "while still preserving a distinction between [the two]" (Prewitt-Brown 1997: 51). This interrelation and the ethical dimension of art became more and more important topics in Wilde's later criticism, particularly in *De Profundis*. According to Wilde, it is because Art stands apart from morality and any pre-conditioned way of thinking – and awakens new, subjective and unique ideas and sensations instead – that it also has a privileged position within the sphere of ethics: an aesthetic experience can open our eyes to see the ethical dimensions of things by offering us understanding and compassion, whereas morality is only capable of offering us standard lenses which limits one's perceptions to a proscribed view.

Thus, Wilde stressed the importance of sensitivity to the *part* that aesthetics play in ethical discovery, and this kind of sensitivity, he argued, the Victorian society lacked. Whereas the Victorians were inclined to search the moral value of a work of art in its relation to the society around it, for Wilde it was exactly because of the separateness of art from the everyday life that art was able to show glimpses of ethical truths.

In the above section I have discussed Wilde in the context of his contemporaries. In the next chapter, I will move on to examine Wilde's work as a critic in a wider scale, and discuss where Wilde can be situated, from today's perspective, in the continuum of Western art criticism. I think this kind of contextualisation is pertinent, since, in many ways, Wilde can be said to have been ahead of his time: there are signs of very modern (sometimes almost postmodern) ideas and themes present in his work, some of which I will turn to examine in the following.

# 3. Wilde Ahead of His Time

> The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!
>
> Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Even if Wilde's debt to philosophy and criticism of his predecessors and contemporaries is evident, it is impossible to classify him as a mouthpiece of any particular aesthetic doctrine existent in his era. Therefore it may be fruitful to take a look at Wilde's position in the history of art criticism also from the viewpoint of what was yet to come. The fact that Wilde considered art and language as sovereign faculties – and not as servants of naturalistic reality or any prior, non-linguistic truth – is one of the most apparent links that connect him to modernism. According to Danson,

> Wilde's elevation of criticism into a 'creative and independent' activity makes his work the precursor of ideas that reappear […] in modern and postmodern theory. […] Wilde's critic as artist inhabits a realm where words construct the world, and society is a text to be rewritten.
>
> Danson, 1997b: 81

Thus, it is Wilde's constant undermining, through paradoxes and linguistic play, some of the very fundamental, 'inherited' concepts such as 'nature' or 'reality' (as well as undermining of also what have traditionally been regarded as normative *values,* such as truth*)* that makes Wilde a pre-modernist and even pre-postmodernist from the present day perspective.

In the formation of his aesthetic theory, Wilde drew on both the French Symbolists and their English equivalent, the Aesthetes. Wilde found some of the prominent trends attached to these movements – like dandyism and the cultivation of senses, taste, and fashion – intriguing, and fashionably played the role of a dandy himself. In his work, however, Wilde often seemed to prefer satire to self-destructiveness and pessimism typical of *poètes maudits*. '*Poète maudit',* 'accursed poet', was a term introduced by Verlaine, whose conviction was that hitherto

neglected poets found genius a curse that isolated them from their contemporaries (Beardsley, 1966).

Wilde was aware of both the maladies and benefits of being an artist; according to Ellmann, on one hand Wilde believed that he was "a *poète maudit,* subject to all the hazards of that species" and, on the other hand, "he continued to cherish also his quite different role, that of a man of the world" (1981:150). Indeed, Wilde seems to have engaged himself to both sensuous decadence, relatively pessimistic in its nature, as well as to much more optimistic cosmopolitanism. There are also other signs of Wilde moving away from *fin de siècle* decadence, towards more modern line of thought; for example, the way Wilde aligned with the ideas of relativity of knowledge and truth, as well as his acknowledgement of the unpredictable and ambiguous nature of language and our incapability to master it all-conclusively, foreshadow the birth of the Modernist Movement.

In the following, I shall discuss what might be called pre-modernist ideas in Wilde's aesthetics. Subsequently, I will introduce *Intentions*, the collection of essays that may be considered as the corner stone of Wilde's critical works. Thereafter I will discuss reception of Wilde's essays and his role as a critic in Victorian England; as we will see, Wilde was in many ways ahead of his time.

### 3.1. Wilde as a Pre-modernist

To look at Wilde as a pre-Modernist can be in many ways inspiring, but the most fruitful way to interpret his pioneering ideas is probably to look at them in the context of their times. As far as Wilde and modernist thought are concerned, there are at least two issues to consider: first, Wilde's view of reality and the role of language in it; and secondly, his outlook on art as a universal or cosmopolitan sphere which is capable of unifying the human spirit. (Both of these views are closely related to Wilde's relationship to the society around him.)

In order to examine Wilde as a pre-modernist, one needs to define what one understands by modernism. Bradbury and McFarlane suggest that one of the most immediate associations of modernism is to see it as the "coming of a new era of

high aesthetic self-consciousness… in which art turns towards style, technique, and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration in life" (1981:25). Thus, modernism can be regarded as an offshoot of the disbelief of the capacities of realistic-naturalistic attempts to describe the world objectively. At the end of the nineteenth century, subjective or inner reality had become a special field of interest in psychology and literature alike, already before Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) was published.

Wilde was born into an age when, as Kiberd points out, "philosophers were coming to the conclusion that language itself is a dubious… commodity and that to talk is to learn to tell lies" (1997: 276). Kiberd suggests that Wilde was the first to introduce this kind of "distrust of language". Wilde did work, as Raby points out, "within the dramatic conventions of his time… particularly in terms of plot" (1997: 144). However, the way in which he makes use of misunderstandings, lies and secrets in the development of the plot, and particularly in the sharp and punning dialogue of the characters, reveals Wilde's attitude towards the slippery nature of language and the relativity of truth. Furthermore, as Prewitt-Brown suggests, "though mining the *language* of Victorian melodrama by means of humour, Wilde developed in himself and in at least some of his audience…a *critical relation to its structure*" (1997: 85, my emphasis). Therefore Wilde's plays can be considered, at least to an extent, as modernist drama or, at least, as precursory to modernist drama.

Then there is the matter of insincerity to consider. Wilde did not only employ the problems attached to truth-telling as themes in his plays, but they were also central to his aesthetics. Wilde stressed the idea that art should aim at telling "beautiful untrue things" (*CW,* 1091). Paradoxically, he also claimed that truth was attainable through Art only. However, if we look at Wilde's justification for this latter argument, the argument becomes convincing and, furthermore, it seems astonishingly modern: according to Wilde, although the task of Art is to tell us refined lies, it also takes us to the very core of the nature of truth and reality, *by not pretending* to be anything but our own construction. To accommodate to this idea, we need to accept that our imagination is, in fact, as real as the "natural" world and

that even "nature" itself is merely a linguistic construction. "For what is Nature?" Wilde asks in 'The Decay of Lying', and answers:

> Nature is no great mother who has born us. She is our creation…Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us.
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW,* 1086

Considering the era in which Wilde was living might help to understand why Wilde did not avoid paradoxes in his theory. Why should he have evaded contradictory elements in formation of his philosophy when they were so prevailing in the contemporary society? The eminent tendency in Victorian society was to have progress, practicality and morality simultaneously present in all spheres of life, which, of course, offered hypocrisy a chance to bloom. Therefore, Wilde's remarks about insincerity as a key to truth and reality were quick to cause an uproar in late nineteenth century England – not because they were modern, but rather because Wilde came too close to revealing the weakness in the prevailing constructions of the reality based on the moral codes and principles of the bourgeois society.

In his critical essays, as well as in his plays, Wilde explored the special powers of language to change 'reality'. In 'The Decay of Lying' he makes a statement about the true objective of Art: it is "the telling of beautiful, untrue things" (*CW*, 1091). Wilde's argues that whereas realism presents dull facts in the disguise of fiction, truly good stories, first of all, acquire autonomy – a life of their own, as it were – and, secondly, these stories possess, as Kiberd puts it, "an *inner emotional logic* which permits the facts to be forgotten" (1997:279). Thus, Art should be concerned with the internal coherence of an artwork, not with its correspondence to the external, concrete world.

Wilde's distaste for realism finds its allies both from the past – amongst the Romantics, in particular – as well as from the future. According to Danson the Wildean critic "must see the object as in itself it really is *not,* in order to escape the prison of already-constructed. …[He] neither knows nor feels the world, but *makes* it" (1997:90, my emphasis). Thus, Wilde seems to stand even closer to modernism

than neo-romanticism. The denial of objective truths and idea of linguistic constructions as the basis of our understanding of world attaches Wilde closely to modernist (and postmodernist) thought.

### 3.1.1. "The world is my home" – Cosmopolitan Reverberations

During his tour of America in 1882, Wilde met Henry James in Washington D.C. When James expressed nostalgia for London, Wilde's less tactful response was: "Really? You care for places? The world is my home." To James – who was considered to be the master of the international theme – Wilde's comment was quite offensive. This example of Wilde's witticism does not, however, merely show that he chose to be clever rather than considerate, but reveals something fundamental about his view of the world or what might be called his 'cosmopolitan identity'.

Julia Prewitt Brown's study *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (1997) is a convincing scrutiny of how Wilde's view of himself as a citizen of the world is an important element in both his aesthetics and his attitude towards language. Wilde himself noted that "to be modern is not to be of one's age" and to be oneself is "to know the moods of otherness". According to Prewitt-Brown, Wilde "consciously made himself at home in the culture of other nations" which did not, however, "entail a republication of his own roots" (1997: xiv). Wilde's sense of cosmopolitanism seems to originate in his own, voluntary exile from Ireland, and is in a key position in the development of what can be called Wilde's cosmopolitan criticism.

The ideas of cosmopolitanism were introduced already in the eighteenth century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire and were popularized as a literary theory after the French revolution in the works of Madame de Staël. Cosmopolitanism, hand in hand with nationalism, was also widely present in nineteenth century literature. The particularity of Wilde's cosmopolitan criticism, however, is the autonomy of art. As Prewitt-Brown points out, his criticism (in comparison with, for example, that of E.M. Forster) does not address art as a "signpost to a higher spirituality", but rather it "bespeaks a philosophy of ethical

aestheticism that does not point elsewhere but always back to its own paradoxical truths" (1997: 27).

McCormack suggests how "growing up in a British colony, [Wilde] had inevitably become conscious of its methods of linguistic control" (1997:97). The consciousness of the power and influence that language enfolds were present in Wilde's life from early on; at Oxford, for example, his Irish accent – which Wilde did give up not before long – was sometimes made fun of. The Irish identity remained, however, strongly with Wilde throughout his life, undoubtedly much due to the nationalist influence and the insatiable interest towards Irish folklore (features of which he used a lot in his fiction) that he inherited from his parents. Neither of them spoke Irish themselves, however, and Wilde once remarked: "I am Irish by race … but the English have condemned me to speak the language of Shakespeare" (quoted in Kiberd, 1996:35). According to Kiberd, Wilde was particularly proud of the way the Irish had managed to excel in a language which was not even 'their own' and, through it, had managed to make such a contribution to what was called 'English' literature; the same observation was later made by James Joyce, who considered 'English literature' as an outcome of the process in which the Irish "ha[d] stamped on [the English language] the mark of their own genius" (quoted in Kiberd, 1996:35).

There was always a certain sense of displacement and otherness present in Wilde's life, as well – whether as an Irishman in England or a homosexual in a society that condemned it as a crime. It was Wilde's relation to language that sealed Wilde's displacement as a 'serious' writer or critic, too; his aphorisms, poems and fiction as well as essays all tend to take part in some kind of linguistic play, the intention of which was to show both the possibilities and restrictions as well as dangers that language enfolds.

Cosmopolitanism also suited Wilde in the sense that it made him actively deliberate the question of his own identity and search for the foundations of identity from beyond, for example, nationality; Wilde bestow that the corner-stone of one's identity was to be found, not surprisingly, from Art. For Wilde, cosmopolitanism was also a way to decolonize oneself, as his Irish identity was inevitably connected

to a colonial (England-Ireland) discourse. Thus, he made himself an example of the liberating powers of the aesthetic, showing how, thanks to Art, he was able to feel 'at home' anywhere in the world.

For Wilde, cosmopolitanism also indicated freedom from the rules and regulations of any particular society, school or movement. Indeed, it seems almost impossible line Wilde up with other theorists, not least because of his fondness of paradoxes and his employment of linguistic play within his criticism as well as in his art. Furthermore, if one considers Wilde as a man with multiple identities (those of, for example, an Irishman in England, a dandy, a father and a husband, a homosexual, and so on), it is not difficult to understand why he was strongly drawn to cosmopolitanism. To be cosmopolitan was to be modern in the sense that it allowed one to be not of one's age but ageless, and to know not just oneself but also "the moods of otherness".

### 3.1.2. *Intentions*

*Intentions*, Wilde's first collection of critical essays, was published in 1891. It consists of four essays, 'The Truth of Masks'; 'Pen, Pencil and Poison'; 'The Decay of Lying'; and 'The Critic as Artist'. In these essays, Wilde formulates and discusses topics such as the position and the responsibilities of artist as well as those of the public and critic.

As Holland (2003: 910) notes, *Intentions* is an uneven collection. Each of the essays had previously been published in periodicals. 'The Truth of Masks – A Note on Illusion' was first published already in 1885 under the name of 'Shakespeare and Stage Costume' in *The Nineteenth Century*. Written a few years prior to the other essays, 'The Truth of Masks' is not completely in line with them; this gives an impression that it might have been included in the collection as a make-weight piece (Holland 2003: 910). In 'The Truth of Masks' Wilde discusses the role of costume in performing Shakespeare's plays; according to him it is important to perform Shakespeare's plays in period costume if one wishes to convey the metaphysical truths that the plays enfold. This idea seems to contradict Wilde's view presented in

'The Decay of Lying' where he emphasizes the fact that Art neither belongs to any particular age, nor is a symbol of any age. However, as Prewitt-Brown points out, although Wilde's aestheticism teaches that the work of art possesses an "inherently irreducible quality", still "the rootedness of the work in its epoch is essential to its human significance and its distinctive effect throughout its afterlife" (1997: 75). Thus, Wilde acknowledges the socio-historical context of a work of art, but does not regard it as a restraint on the work's aesthetic qualities. In Wilde's view, beauty is universal, in which ever form and at which ever time it has been produced.

In 'Pen, Pencil and Poison', first published in 1889 in *The Fortnightly Review,* Wilde brings to light his fascination with the artist and crime. This essay is a study of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (1794-1847), a writer who was involved in several forgeries and who poisoned several people, at least his sister-in-law, his uncle and his mother-in-law. In this essay Wilde writes how "one can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin" (*CW*, 1106).

'The Decay of Lying' was first published in 1889, and a year later came out 'The Critic as Artist' under the name of 'The True Function and Value of Criticism', both in *The Nineteenth Century.* These two essays are written in the form of a dialogue between two young, upper-class men, and they represent, as Holland points out, "Wilde at his intellectual most sparkling" (*CW,* 910). 'The Critic as Artist' is the lengthiest of the essays and is divided in two parts; the discussion between the two characters, Gilbert and Ernest, begins with their exchange of thoughts on a particular book and Gilbert's observation on how "the public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except for genius" (*CW,* 1108). Hence arises the question of the role of criticism, which Gilbert sets out to defend. At the end of the essay, Ernest summons up the new criticism presented by Gilbert as follows:

> [Y[ou have told me that all Art is immoral, and all thought dangerous; 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…and that the true critic is unfair, insincere, and not rational. My friend, you are a dreamer.
>
> 'The Critic as Artist', *CW*, 1154

Thus, the view of criticism that Wilde's mouthpiece Gilbert represents in this essay differs to great extent from the conventional role of the critic as someone who reveals to the public what a work of art is supposed to represent and whether it is 'good' or 'bad' art. The primary revelation of this essay is the significance of *creativity* also in writing *about* Art. Therefore, Gilbert is not at all put off by Ernest's verdict; according to Gilbert's theory, Art criticism *should be* a faculty of dreamers.

In the next chapter I will move on to discuss Wilde's "new aestheticism" as presented in 'The Decay of Lying' in more detail. First, however, as an introduction to this undertaking, I shall briefly investigate how Wilde's criticism was perceived at the time of the publication of *Intentions.*

### 3.2. Criticism Gone Wilde

> The old modes of creation linger, of course. The artists reproduce either themselves or each other, with wearisome iteration. But Criticism is always moving on, and the critic is always developing.
>
> 'The Critic as Artist', *CW,* 1143

In his own lifetime, Wilde was not taken very seriously as a critic. Reasons for his dismissal as a literary theorist originated partially in the paradoxes and modernity that characterise his criticism and partially the way his ideas conflicted with the prevailing morals of Victorian society. As we have seen, Wilde did not fully belong to any already existing category or movement, but adroitly combined the ideas that pleased him most from miscellaneous sources, ranging from the classical to contemporary theory of art. In so doing, he was not able to avoid paradoxes in his aesthetics – and, indeed, did not even aspire to avoid them. For example, at the very beginning of 'The Decay of Lying' Vivian asks: "Who wants to be consistent?" (*CW,* 1072) Moreover, at the end of 'The Truth of Masks', Wilde writes:

> 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. *For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true*.
>
> 'The Truth of Masks', *CW,* 1173 (my emphasis)

This kind of approach to criticism was unforgivable in the eyes of the Establishment, and, as Holland points out, these kinds of statements might also explain why (even later on) "researchers may well have been reluctant to take [Wilde] at face value [as a critic] given the inherited irony of some of the articles" (2003: 909).

However, despite the punning style of most of his critical essays, Wilde himself is said to have esteemed his best essays much more than the rest of his writing. (Holland 2003: 907). For example, Wilde wrote to his friend Violet Fane that 'The Decay of Lying', although "it is meant to bewilder the masses by its fantastic form […] *au fond* it is of course serious" (quoted in Holland 2003: 907-8). This suggests how sincerely Wilde, in fact, took his role as a critic.

In *Intentions,* Wilde brings to light his views on the role of Art in society, and, in so doing, illuminates not only to the maladies of contemporary art but, through them, also to those of contemporary society. However, since his argument focuses exclusively on aesthetic matters, his text cannot be construed as socio-political criticism. Wilde was not, of course, by any means alone with his criticism of Victorian society that, as San Juan puts it, "impel[led] man to doubt, question, and disbelieve" (1967: 76). For example Matthew Arnold shared Wilde's distaste for the positivist and materialist aspirations of his contemporaries and acknowledged the deteriorating effects of these phenomena on Art. Arnold promoted the idea of a self-conscious artist who "continually strives acquire that 'divine natural persistence of beauty' which is the ruling spirit of antiquity" in comparison with all the "violence and vagueness" of the modern art (San Juan, 1967: 76).

Although Arnold's ideas certainly had a major impact on Wilde, there were also some aspects on which Wilde disagreed with him. For example, Arnold emphasized Art's non-declarative character; he represented a doctrine that, as Cooper et al put it, "recognizes the limits of sayable" (1992: 362) as opposed to the idea of Art as *sui generis,* represented by the Art for Art's Sake Movement. For Wilde, at least at the time of *Intentions*, Art's expressive powers had no limitations; as long as aesthetic expression was allowed to flourish detached from demands of moralism and realism, it was omnipotent.

This argument, however, calls for explanation since in the beginning of this chapter I have discussed Wilde's view of language as something beyond our control. Although the fact that language is slippery and uncontrollable does set some "limits of sayable" for people, Wilde presents these features in the language as something that actually adds to its power in *artistic expression* as something *autonomous*. Art, as Wilde points out in 'The Decay of Lying', "develops purely according to its own lines" (*CW,* 1087).

### 3.2.1. Societal Uproar

Bearing in mind the morality generally dominating the Victorian thought, it is not difficult to understand why many of Wilde's arguments were considered, not merely light-minded, but potentially dangerous. In 'Pen, Pencil and Poison', for example, Wilde states that "one can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin" and that "the fact of man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose" (*CW,* 1106). This kind distinction between the artist's ethics and the aesthetics of his work was more than enough to make many Victorians furious. For example, when *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published (1890), one of its outcomes was a campaign, which suggested that the Vigilance Society ought to consider prosecuting Wilde on the grounds that the book's contents were 'immoral'.

Thus, Wilde's relation to the orderly world-view of the Victorians was always controversial. As Gagnier points out, "individuality was essential to modernism," (1997: 19) and it certainly was essential for Wilde, too. On one hand, Wilde shared Victorians' "faith in the liberal tenets of individual freedom, equality, and autonomy" (ibid), although Wilde's conception of individuality differed from Victorians view of 'self' as indubitable, rational and progressive. (Wilde's view of individualism will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.) On the other hand, Wilde was quick to sense the weaknesses of orderly world view of the Victorians and to point out how excesses in market ideology and industrial revolution could be seen as destructive (especially from an individual's point of view) as beneficial, which shows how already Wilde in the nineteenth century pre-conceptualised what

Lyotard calls the *crises of legitimation*, usually associated with postmodernism (Gagnier 1997: 19). Furthermore, Wilde did not only respond to ideologies and tendencies within society in his criticism; as we have seen, he set out to reveal how such essential conceptions as reality and language were, in fact, human *constructions,* and how the human kind had lost possession and control over these constructions.

The very way Wilde defined the role of a reviewer might also partly explain why he did not fit in the prevailing critical scene. As Danson points out, people in Victorian society expected a good critic to "clarify the meaning of a work of art by helping us see what its maker intended" and "sincerely express [one's] unbiased opinion" (1997a: 80). For Wilde, a good critic was someone who, instead of trying to explain a work of art, tried to *deepen* its mystery. In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde notes that "the highest criticism is that which reveals in the work of Art something that the artist has not put there" (*CW,* 1154).

In his time Wilde was widely considered as an exquisite playwright and successful poet, and in addition to these roles, the public knew him primarily for his witty remarks and jokes, but his criticism was mostly waved aside as overly paradoxical. As the discussion in this chapter shows, the reasons behind the tendency to overlook Wilde's aesthetics actually might have been more attached to psychological than to meta-analytical aspects. The true reasons behind the annulment of Wilde as critic undoubtedly relates to his acceptance of 'immorality' in Art and to his questioning of knowledge and truth as such rather than to his refusal to be consistent, although the modernity of his thought and representation surely played a role in the process as well.

In the following chapter, I will turn to examine the essay 'The Decay of Lying' in more detail in order to illuminate the paradoxical nature of Wilde's argumentation and to show how he makes use of these paradoxes in his aesthetics. One interpretation of the function of paradoxes in Wilde's essays is that through them Wilde is constantly keeping his audience aware of the *relativity* of truth.

# 4. Art and Life: Beautiful Untrue Things

> Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world, and people die of it just as they die of any other disease. Fortunately, in England at any rate, thought is not catching.
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', CW, 1072

In this chapter, I shall concentrate primarily on the essay 'The Decay of Lying' in which Wilde (ironically) sets out to establish "the doctrines of the new aesthetics" (*CW*, 1091). I examine the ways in which Wilde discusses topics such as the autonomy of Art; the role of the artist; the representation of reality; Art's foundations; and Art's relation to truth in 'The Decay of Lying'. The essay is also a manifesto against realism; through looking at the questions of artistic imagination and subjectivity contrasted with the search for "scientific" objectivity in art, Wilde proceeds to claim that the real decadence – deterioration within the sphere of Art – is brought about by the realists' desire to represent the world as it 'really' is.

To examine 'The Decay of Lying' as a piece of (literary or philosophical) criticism is a somewhat challenging task – and, to some extent, a contradictory one as well, since at the very beginning of the essay Wilde's mouthpiece Vivian states: "Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action… Not I… I write over the door of my library the word 'Whim'" (*CW*, 1072). The fact that Wilde's argumentation is ironic – and thus deliberately and purposefully – ambiguous is also relevant: with respect to Wilde, one simply has to accept 'whims' as a fundamental characteristic of his writing. However, these 'whims' do not need to be an objection to examining the essay as an important milestone in Wilde's aesthetics: as the text explicitly denies consistency as one of its aims, it would seem deficient to assess it by traditional criteria for evaluation of a theory – that is, according to the consistency or inconsistency of its arguments.

In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde's radical conceptions of reality also give rise to what seems lie a remarkably modern outlook on truth: the essay sets the whole normativity of truth under a microscope as Vivian declares:

> The aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of civilized society… He alone is in the possession of the great secret of all [Art's] manifestations, *the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style*; while Life – poor, probable, uninteresting human life…will follow meekly after him [the liar] and try to reproduce, in her own simple and untutored way, some of the marvels of which [the liar] talks.
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW*, 1081 (my emphasis)

In this essay Wilde shows how lying actually plays an essential role not only within the sphere of Art but also in our everyday life, in all human communication as well as in social norms. But whereas Art knows how to mingle with the Liar, Life just "meekly" follows him. Therefore, the essay is first and foremost corroboration for lying *in Art*.

In order to examine 'The Decay of Lying', I let the text guide me in so far as I shall dedicate a section to each of the four distinct arguments that Vivian presents at the end of the essay. These arguments are:

(i) "Art never expresses anything but itself";
(ii) "All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature";
(iii) "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life"; and,
(iv) "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art".

Before moving on to analyse the essay itself, I shall first briefly summarize it in order to give the reader an idea of how its argumentation proceeds. Vivian, one of the two characters, has just finished his article for the *Retrospective Review* and is presenting it to his friend Cyril. The starting point for Vivian is that the cause behind the "curiously commonplace character of most of the literature of [Wilde's] age" is "the decay of Lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure", and how the

way “the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction” is deeply fatal to Art (*CW,* 1073). He proceeds to note how lying, like poetry, is an art which needs to be cultivated and nurtured.

Already at an early point in the essay, Wilde brings up the topic of imagination and exaggeration and the essential role of these two in the process of creation and thus in a work of art itself. In order to become a real artist, Vivian proposes, one has to leave space for imagination to flourish. Otherwise, the prospective artist will, at some point along the way, develop “a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-telling…and [will] often end by writing novels which are so life-like that no one can possibly believe in their probability” (*CW,* 1074). Thus, an artist in possession of imaginative power is given an essential role in the aesthetic process. However, Vivian also explains how Art is only supposed to represents itself, not the world around it. Hence a paradox between the *autonomy of art* and, on the other hand, the importance of the subjective, imaginative *input of the artist* arises with respect to a work of art. (This topic will be discussed in 4.1.)

Vivian then proceeds to lecture on the dullness of contemporary literature. French writers seem to be Wilde’s main points of reference, but also some English-speaking writers are discussed, for example Henry James – to whom writing fiction is an endeavour that, according to Vivian, seems to be taken “as if it were a painful duty” (*CW,* 1074). The relationship between Wilde and James was never particularly warm, despite their seemingly parallel backgrounds; both were non-English homosexual writers working in England. The two men met during Wilde's tour in America in 1882, and Wilde’s sharp tongue left a somewhat unfavourable impression on James. In addition to their personal dislike of one another, James never seemed to overcome the fact that Wilde excelled in the enterprise in which he himself never really succeeded: *videlicet* writing pieces for the stage. Moreover, homosexuality provided another differing viewpoint for Wilde and James: James felt that his homosexuality was private and deplored Wilde’s dandyism and flamboyant social life.

In ‘The Decay of Lying’, Wilde does not criticize realism solely on the grounds of the banality of its subject matter and its form, he also questions the main

principles of the Realist Movement: to *represent reality* in the first place, and to carry out this task *objectively*. According to Wilde, these kinds of endeavours do not belong to the sphere of art, as "the moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything" (*CW,* 1091). However, it must be pointed out that, in the essay, Wilde oversimplifies Realists' manifesto to a great extent; he does not, for example, acknowledge that realism did, in fact, recognise the significance of the subjective touch of the artist as essential element in a work of art. Subjectivity in realism was not merely supposed to be visible in the *perspective* from which a novel, for example, was written, but rather in the author's choice of words, characters and so on. Consequently, Wilde's criticism of realism stays on a relatively superficial level. (See section 4.2 for more details.)

The third argument concerning Life imitating Art is illustrated through examples of how people and their lives are affected and shaped by works of art. Vivian starts off by discussing the influence of a particular work on a particular individual and moves on to eventually to state how

> *Art creates an incompatible and unique effect,* and, having done so, passes on to other things. *Nature*, upon the other hand, *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.
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW,* 1086 (my emphasis)

Thus Vivian, emphasizing the effects of an aesthetic experience on human mind, shows how Life and Nature take after Art, and how Art therefore must actually exist *a priori*, setting an example for Life and Nature to try to reproduce. Thus the central argument of the essay concerning how "Art never expresses anything but itself" (*CW,* 1087) arises. The fact that Wilde is being incongruous and ironic again makes it even more difficult to discern Wilde's actual opinions.

At the end of the essay, Vivian returns to the topic of the proper aim of Art – "lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things" (*CW,* 1091). Since the real artist "never sees things as they really are" (*CW*, 1088), the kind of Art which will stand the test of time and last throughout centuries is the kind of Art that "very fortunately, has

never once told us the truth" (*CW*, 1088). Vivian suggests that, in fact, "we look back on the ages entirely through the medium of art" (ibid.). He points out how for example religious art – which greatly is responsible for our views of the Middle Ages – has been capable of reinforcing and nurturing our imagination, the duty of the Church having been "to believe in supernatural, to perform daily miracles and to keep alive the mythopoeic faculty which is so essential for the imagination" (*CW*, 1089). With respect to this last topic, at the end of this chapter, I will move on to examine a matter which can be regarded as a back-drop to the whole essay: that concerning the *value of truth.*

Already the name of the essay indicates that lying, in fact, can be evaluated according to criteria other than comparing it to whatever is meant by 'truth': the title suggests that whilst Lying can be *corruptible*, it is not *corruptive*. According to Wilde, first of all, Lying in itself is neither bad nor immoral; this is a view which – regarding the long history of normativity of truth – is rather rebellious. Secondly, Wilde's essay indicates that Lying can, and should be, assessed according to its *motives*, lying in Art – lying for its own sake – being "the only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach" (*CW,* 1090). The radical idea behind this kind of line of thought was first properly presented in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche – the idea that *truth* is actually assessed according to its *consequences* and that it is not to be taken as a *normative* value. In 4.4 I shall look at how Wilde's essay reflects this idea of evaluating truth through evaluating (and valuing) lying.

### 4.1. "Art never expresses anything but itself"

Wilde finished 'The Decay of Lying' in December of 1888, and presented it to W.B. Yeats shortly afterwards. Yeats was impressed by the dialogue form Wilde was using and remarked how, through this particular form and its dialectical possibilities, Wilde was able to sharpen the central paradox of the essay – that Art, in fact, creates Life, and not the other way around.

Vivian's argument on how "art never expresses anything but itself" *(CW,* 1087), together with his subsequent proposition that it is actually art that shapes our

perceptions of life and reality, creates one of the central themes of the essay: which one actually comes first, Life or Art, Nature or form? For example, at one point Vivian states: "The nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac…we are merely carrying out …a whim or fancy or creative vision of a great novelist" (*CW,* 1084). By this he means that Art affects our perceptions of the world and thus our reality is affected by Art.

The significance of the role of the artist and Wilde's constant emphasis on individuality seems to clash with the idea of art standing on its own, which creates one of the central dilemmas in Wilde's aesthetics. If a work of art makes us perceive things differently, as Wilde suggests, that difference must be attached in one way or another to the perceptions of the *artist* who has displayed his or her vision in their work. Therefore Art also seems to express something of its *creator*, and *not just itself.* Describing the nineteenth century as an "invention of Balzac" suggests that also the artist has a major role to play in *making* art autonomous – giving birth to a work of art so that it is subsequently able to start leading a life of its own.

Thus good art, in Wilde's view, is not something that reflects the world, but rather something upon which life starts to reflect itself (for discussion, see 2.2.2). By stating that "art never expresses anything but itself" (*CW,* 1087), Wilde's primary intention is to indicate that "[art] is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance" (*CW,* 1082). The only possible objectivity that a work of art can obtain arises *not* from the lack of subjective input of the artist *nor* the extent to which a work of art manages to produce an impersonal copy of something existing in the world, but from *the way the work of art eventually starts to lead a life of its own*, outside its creator's intentions. The independent life of a work of art begins when it is opened to interpretation and evaluation.

The socio-economic reality of Wilde's time undoubtedly inspired Wilde to emphasize a view according to which a work of art should stand the test of time merely *due to its aesthetic qualities* rather than due to, for example, the status of the artist within the Establishment or the popularity of the artist among the contemporary public. Wilde observed how the constantly bolstering consumer-culture and the mechanical reproduction threatened the uniqueness of art. In 'The

Soul of Man Under Socialism', he set out to explain how the creation of a mass culture had also enabled massive *manipulation* of the public by those who were in charge of the channels through which this culture was intermediated (Gagnier 1997: 19). Even works of art were now being sold as 'items' with the help of 'brands' (such as the name of an established author), and, worst of all, evaluated according to the standards of how the subject-matter and morals of the work suited the prevailing ideologies of Victorian society.

Wilde resisted the linking of the artist and his work on the grounds of social position and prominence. It is probably exactly this kind of connection to which Vivian refers when he states:

> The highest *art rejects the burden of human spirit*, and gains more from a new medium or a fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any lofty passion, or from any great awakening of the human consciousness. *She develops purely on her own lines.*
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW*, 1087 (my emphasis)

What is, then, eventually the role of the artist in creating such independent form of life? When a work of art is released into the world and exposed to others for interpretation, does its creator's involvement and 'responsibility' end? Wilde certainly found the idea of the independent life of a work of art enchanting; in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), he successfully explores one possible implication of such a prospect.

In the novel, artist Basil Hallward paints a fatal portrait of an incredibly beautiful young man, Dorian Gray. Subsequently, Dorian wishes that he could always stay as young and beautiful and the picture would grow old and ugly instead. This wish is apparently granted as the painting turns into a mirror of its sitter's corrupted soul, while Dorian himself retains his youthful and innocent looks. When, at the end of the novel, the artist discovers the hideous reality – that Dorian's wish has come true – he feels utter horror and disbelief. When he views the painting, he cannot help speculating on *his* responsibility for what has happened:

> An exclamation of horror broke from the painter's lips as he saw in the dim light the hideous face on the canvas grinning at him… Yes, it was Dorian himself. But who had done it? He seemed to recognize his own brushwork, and the frame was his own design […] In the left hand corner was his own name. It was some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire! He had never done that. Still, it was his own picture!
>
> *The Picture of Dorian Gray, CW*, 115

The story of Dorian Gray's portrait illustrates Wilde's aesthetic arguments in two ways. First of all, through this story Wilde depicts how, rather than being a mirror of Dorian Gray's soul, the painting actually *becomes* his soul; thus, it is in Art where the *reality* lies, not in Life. Secondly, the way the painting has transformed *on its own* and yet remained the same painting, the way it has taken on an autonomous existence outside Basil Hallward's brush, paint, or intentions, illustrates Wilde's idea of how Art "develops purely on her own lines" (*CW,* 1087).

In 'The Decay of Lying', Vivian talks about Holbein's 'realist' portraits and points out how the artist has actually "compelled life to accept his [Holbein's] conditions, to restrain itself within his limitations, to *reproduce his type* and to appear as he wished it to appear" (*CW,* 1089, my emphasis). Thus, these drawings that "impress us with a sense of their absolute reality" only do so because Life has adopted them as believable and has begun to produce real-life 'copies' of these pictures. "It is style that makes us believe a thing – nothing but style", Vivian declares (*CW,* 1089). He thus places Holbein in the same category as Balzac: within an *imaginative reality* as opposed to *unimaginative realism*. Throughout the essay, Vivian attacks late nineteenth century realists and naturalists who aim at as neutrally objective presentation of the world as possible. In so doing, Vivian demonstrates how Lying in Art is essential. From here, he is able to move on to discuss the decline in contemporary art, which, according to him, originates in the attempts to describe reality objectively.

### 4.2. "All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature"

In the second phase of his argument, Vivian presents the late nineteenth century French realists and naturalists as being particularly obstinate in pursuing the goal of objectivity; especially Émile Zola comes in for a significant share of the criticism. Vivian brings to light the idea according to which a writer trying to represent reality objectively, like a scientist, actually shatters the whole idea of art as a creative process. As Ellmann points out, "the real decadence" for Wilde is "the trespass of life into art" (1981:302).

Given Wilde's familiarity with French literature (and his recurrent references to their work in his criticism[4]), it is not surprising that Wilde demonstrates his relation to realism in 'The Decay of Lying' mainly through referring to writers such as Balzac, the Goncourt brothers, Flaubert, Maupassant and Zola, who aimed at representing reality in a work of art, and to do this as *neutrally and objectively* as possible. Combining the co-existing demand for certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* – without which a representation of reality would be but an empty copy, not a work of art in its own right – with alleged objectivity was undoubtedly the most challenging project of a Realist artist. Writers such as Flaubert, Zola and Maupassant all wrote articles, letters and essays[5] on how this task was to be carried out; in addition to their contribution to the theory of realism, they also examined the question of how to combine the subjective input of the artist and an objective perspective within their novels through, for example, depicting artist characters tackling the questions of (realist) representation.

Wilde reacted to Realism strongly, primarily because its goal was to represent 'factual' accounts of reality, and, moreover, because the Realists were convinced that this could be done objectively. Objectivity, according to Wilde, is not possible in the creative process in the first place. In 'The Critic as Artist' he writes:

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[4] e.g. in 'Balzac in English' (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 September 1886); 'The Truth of Masks' ([1885] 1891) and 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' (1891)

[5] e.g. Zola: 'The Experimental Novel' and 'Naturalism in the Theatre' (1880)

> The difference between objective and subjective work is one of external form merely. It is accidental, not essential. All artistic creation is absolutely subjective… For out of ourselves we can never pass, *nor can there be in creation what in the creator was not*.
>
> CW, 1142 (my emphasis)

Thus Wilde states that the subjectivity of the Artist is always present in his representation of the things around him. However, as we have seen (in 1.4), Wilde does acknowledge that once the creative process has been completed, objectivity does become possible in the 'afterlife' of the work of art, when it is opened to interpretation. This line of thought illustrates Wilde's paradoxical argumentation well: a work of art obtains objective qualities only after it becomes the meeting point between multiple subjective interpretations, each of which are different from another and yet equally valuable. "Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital", Wilde writes in the preface of *Dorian Gray,* and continues: "When critics disagree the artist is in accordance with himself" (*CW,* 17). Thus, what Wilde suggests is that having managed to produce a work which invites multiple and controversial opinions, the artist may congratulate himself.

The primary error that the Realists commit, according to Wilde, is exactly their attempt to employ objectivity *as a tool* already within the creative process, when, it fact, it is one of the possible *outcomes* of the process. The most important tool for the artist, as well as the foremost energy behind Art, in Wilde's view, is *imagination.* At the end of 'The Decay of Lying', Vivian notes: "The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything" (*CW,* 1091). Imagination can never be objective, nor can it be an outcome of conscious effort. Imagination thus becomes a kind of a mediator between what can be regarded as the autonomous existence of Art and the subjective input of the Artist, which is so essential in the process of mediating "beautiful, untrue things" (*CW,* 1091).

In such a passionate attack towards Realism as the one Vivian involves himself with in 'The Decay of Lying', some of the aspects of the theory of Realism tend to get callously oversimplified. Wilde is deliberately using the ironical tone and hyperbolical argumentation, which contributes once again to the ambiguity of his

theory. Due to Wilde's highly ironic and provocative style, Vivian's opinions cannot be taken at face value. This, however, serves a specific function in Wilde text: he thus refrains from 'instructing' the reader on how the text should be read and allows the reader the pleasure of asking questions, without making them feel unintelligent. Wilde's style is provocative in order to show that as far as Art is concerned, nothing is ever quite as it seems. Thus, rather than providing answers, Wilde lets his readers to feel clever when (or, if) they are capable of pointing out paradoxes in Vivian's theory, yet simultaneously furnishing them with a fresh outlook on Art.

In his criticism towards realist writers, Vivian dismisses them primarily as copyists of tedious, everyday life, carefully avoiding any kind of touch of personality and subjectivity in their work, which makes his argument lack in depth. In fact, for example Flaubert did not at any point close his eyes to the importance of personal, original touch of the artist as an essential element within a work of art (Israel-Pelletier, 2004: 180-195). As Green points out, "Flaubert once wrote that an author should be like God in the universe, omnipresent but nowhere to be seen" (1996: 132). This idea is rather compatible with Wilde's own view presented in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* according to which art's proper aim is "to reveal art and to conceal the artist" (*CW,* 17).

Thus, the Realists did not, in fact, aim at ousting subjectivity *completely* from the creative process, as one could surmise from Wilde's essay. Yet, it was specific kind of subjectivity that the Realists sought: subjectivity, which was *not* to be used for guiding the reader or the onlooker to take the perspective of the artist, but which rather served as a means of representing reality itself as something that was never simple or straightforward. Many of the Realists, Flaubert for instance, did acknowledge that art had its specific features that proscribed the possibility of total (scientific kind of) objectivity (Becker, 2000, *passim*).

However, a complete abandonment – or, at least denial – of *imagination* was true of some of the writers within the movement. In his essay 'Naturalism in the Theatre' Zola (1880), for example, declared, "imagination no longer has a function" (quoted in Beardsley 1966: 295). And indeed, Zola is the writer who is most fiercely

criticised in ‘The Decay of Lying’. Wilde’s conviction of how the realist-naturalist line of thought was absolutely fatal to Art comes out sharply in Vivian’s satirical comment on Zola as artist:

> M. Zola, true to the lofty principle that he lays down in one of his pronunciamimentos on literature, *L’homme de genie n’a jamais d’esprit,* is determined to show that, if he has not got genius, he can at least be dull. And how well he succeeds! He is not without power. Indeed at time, as in *Germinal*, there is something almost epic in his work. But his work is entirely wrong from beginning to an end, and *not wrong on the grounds of morals, but on the ground of Art.*
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW,* 1075 (my emphasis)

According to Wilde, the *principal* error of the realists is not, however, the abandonment of the beautiful and imaginary, nor the banality of their subject matter – although Vivian does criticize both these tendencies in ‘The Decay of Lying’ – but their goal of telling the 'truth' in the first place. As Danson puts it: “The realist novel was condemned to be a copy of the worst, not because its morals are bad, but simply because it aims to tell the 'truth' *instead of making it new*” (1997b: 87, my emphasis).

One of the metaphors most commonly associated with the Realist Movement is the metaphor of a work of art as a mirror walking along the street. “*Le roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route”* is a slogan made famous by Marie-Henri Beyle (1783-1842) writing under the pseudonym of Stendahl. This idea of art reflecting reality of everyday life is criticised by Vivian in the essay. First of all, he supports escapism in art – stating that everyday life and facts are “usurping the domain of Fancy” (*CW,* 1080). Secondly, he notes how “Art is a veil, rather than a mirror” (*CW,* 1082) because instead of reflecting reality, Art, in fact, *produces* reality: it “makes and unmakes many worlds” (*CW,* 1082). What Vivian attacks in ‘The Decay of Lying’, is thus not merely the idea of objectivity in artistic endeavour to represent reality, but the very conception of ‘reality’ as something existing *a priori* ‘out there’.

The imitation of reality for Wilde, as San Juan has pointed out, is thus “*not* the imitation of *truth* but the faithful *expression of the inner experiences and physic*

*states of the individual*" (1967: 68, my emphasis). The artist "translates the rough material of life into the specific conventions of art" since he is capable of "see[ing] things *not as they really are* but *as they appear* to him under pictorial conditions" (ibid, my emphasis). Vivian illustrates his point by noting how we perceive history, for example, solely through Art: "The fact is that we look back on the ages entirely through the medium of art" (*CW,* 1089). Hence history, too – which is regarded as the 'reality' of our past – is, in fact, composed of subjective interpretations and reflections of artworks, and "art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth" (*CW,* 1089).

Thus, Wilde represents both reality and truth as first and foremost subjective faculties. However, bearing in mind Wilde's declaration that "art never expresses anything but itself", we are again facing the paradox originating in, on one hand, the emphasis of the artist's subjective input in the creative process, and, the autonomy of Art on the other. As the above discussion (in 4.1) shows, Art *can* become objective in the sense of becoming *independent*, but this only happens due to the "distinction, charm, beauty and imaginative power" that a work of art embodies (*CW,* 1074), and it is the artist's responsibility – indeed, the artist's *only* responsibility – to enfold these elements in his or her work.

In discussing the relationship between the Artist and the work of art, the metaphor of the artist as a mother who gives birth to a child is extremely applicable also with respect to Wilde's philosophy. For example Marcel Proust uses this metaphor at the end his *À la recherché du temps perdu,* where the protagonist reflects upon the creation process of his impending book. The work of art is like a child who, at some point, becomes independent of its mother and starts to lead a life of its own. Yet the mother always retains a certain attachment to the child, as well as some kind of sense of responsibility:

> [E]ven my work had become for me a tiresome obligation, like a son for a dying mother who … has to make the exhausting effort of constantly looking after him. […] In me, in the same way, the powers of the writer were no longer equal to the egoistical demands of the work.
>
> Proust, 1996: 443 (my emphasis)

Although Proust places a great emphasis on the artist, he underlines the fact that a (great) work of art cannot be created through conscious effort; it is "the egoistical demands of the work" that actually master the artist, not the other way around. This idea of the artist as a tool in service of Art itself is another meeting point for Proust and Wilde on the level of aesthetics. (In real life, they are known to have met at least once, but this rendezvous was brief and not particularly successful [See e.g. Carter 2000: 124-6].)

Wilde and Proust both also recognised that true Art is something which cannot be understood, valued, or, least of all, created through *conscious endeavours.* Rather, the aesthetic experience *precedes* our consciousness, as Wilde's example of the way we comprehend history through medium of art, or Proust's idea of awakening of involuntary memory by chance through, for example, an aesthetic experience (as opposite to conscious remembrance) demonstrate. In 'The Decay of Lying', Vivian states that the best kind of creativity rejects "the burden of human spirit" and that Art "gains more from a *new medium or a fresh material* than she does from any…great wakening of the *human consciousness*" (*CW,* 1087, my emphasis). The "burden of human spirit" here does not refer to the subjective input of the artist but rather to theories and expectations imposed on Art by the human mind. Vivian takes the idea of Art preceding our consciousness further in the next phase of his argument, as he embarks on the goal of showing how Life, in fact, imitates Art, and not the other way around.

### 4.3. "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life"

> CYRIL: What do you mean by saying that life, 'poor, probable, uninteresting human life,' will try to reproduce the marvels of art? I can quite understand your objection to art being treated as a mirror. You think it would reduce genius to the position of cracked looking-glass. *But you don't mean to say that you seriously believe that Life imitates Art, that Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality?*
> VIVIAN: Certainly I do.
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW,* 1082 (my emphasis)

The third part of Vivian's argument escorts us to the questions attached to the *foundations of Art*: what is the ultimate grounds upon which Art is built, and where can it be found? Vivian argues that Art is by no means copies Life or 'reality', and Nature does not set an example for Art to imitate, but exactly the other way around. According to Vivian, Art's effects upon the human mind are so innumerable that Art can, in fact, be said to exist prior to human consciousness and Life itself. Although the idea of Life imitating Art might initially seem to be self-evidently untrue, Vivian manages to support his argument relatively convincingly, first by presenting a few examples of the effects of works of art upon an individual:

> The basis of life… is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which the expression can be obtained. Life seizes them and uses them, even if they be to her own hurt. Young men have committed suicide because Rolla did so, have died by their own hand because by his own hand Werther died.
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW*, 1085

Vivian continues with an example of how Impressionistic art has made "people see fogs, not because there are fogs but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects" (*CW*, 1086). This phenomenon is explained by Vivian through the statement "one does not see anything until one sees beauty" (ibid.) Thus, Vivian portrays the aesthetic process as something *preceding* our consciousness.

When Cyril asks Vivian to prove his theory about Art preceding reality and nature, Vivian leans on a metaphysical (and also very modern) observation of Nature itself as a human invention, saying: "For what is Nature? She is no great mother that has born us. She is our creation" *(CW*, 1086). Vivian thus brings to light the fact that Nature and Life themselves lack structure as well as form before imposed upon them by human mind. As the task of the artist is to tell "beautiful, untrue things", an artist must not accept the idea that there are things that could be regarded as 'natural' in the first place. Rather, he must acknowledge that Nature is just as much a human construction as, for example, is society or culture. Art,

however, does not need to search for justifications outside itself – it aptly recognizes itself as lying, and thus is *more truthful* than what is presented as 'natural'.

### 4.3.1. The Foundation of Art and the Nature of Aesthetic Experience

With respect to the foundations of Art Wilde takes a distance to Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), a philosopher whom Wilde greatly admired. Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory "locates the proper foundation of art in the perceptual *apprehension of natural forms*" (Foster, 1999: 214, my emphasis). According to Schopenhauer, good art can be distinguished from bad art "only on the basis of *fidelity* to this foundation [in the natural forms]" (ibid.) Thus, Schopenhauerian evaluation of art is to be based on how well a work of art carries out this function of representing 'natural' forms – "a function which is *primarily cognitive or illuminative*, though it partakes a palliative dimension" (Foster 1999: 214, my emphasis). As the above discussion on Wilde and Proust shows, Wilde does not seem to regard cognition or consciousness as an essential part of aesthetic process; on the contrary, for Wilde, the success of a work of art is *not* to be measured according to how well it corresponds to the world around it, but rather according to how well it succeeds in representing *new, imaginary* things.

According to Beardsley, art for Schopenhauer is "essentially cognitive enterprise, with its own special object of knowledge, the Ideas", but since this knowledge is "utterly removed from…the ordinary intellect, it has no practical use" (1966:269). Thus, Schopenhauerian aesthetic experience is an intellectual process, but it does not result in any ordinary 'use'. In 'The Decay' of Lying', Vivian states:

> As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us … or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, *it is outside the proper sphere of Art.*
>
> 'The Decay' of Lying', *CW*, 1077

Thus, Wilde shares Schopenhauer's view of how Art is detached from 'practical', matter-of-fact use. Furthermore, even if Schopenhauer examines the aesthetic experience as a way of gaining knowledge of the Ideas, it is important to bear in

mind that he regards these Ideas themselves as unconscious and that, as Gardner puts it, "consciousness, like a magic lantern, can display only one image at a time, and is related to the mind as a whole as a traveller in an intermittently illuminated labyrinth" (1999: 376). However, Schopenhauer still connects the artistic expression to the goal of *consciously* reaching for the Idea, even if the Idea itself is not conscious.

For Wilde, the aesthetic experience does not seem to be concerned with *knowledge* to the same extent as with Schopenhauer. However, when examining 'The Decay of Lying' as a whole, we notice that actually, according to Vivian's argument, Art *does* function as an important contributor in the processes through which we perceive and understand the world; therefore Art would ultimately seem to establish itself as something highly *useful* (and essential) for human consciousness. This creates a kind of double-paradox: how can Art as something unconscious, untrue and detached from Life serve as the basis of our consciousness and what we consider as 'reality'? It is important to note at this point, however, that, according to Wilde's line of thought, Art is not *produced to serve this function*; on the contrary, its autonomous and self-valuable existence sets an example for the 'natural forms'.

For Wilde, the so-called 'natural forms' are nothing more than another invention of man, and in line with this idea, Vivian in 'The Decay of Lying' proceeds to his argument about the nature and Life itself imitating Art: "The self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression" (*CW,* 1091), he states. Life does this by imitating Art, *not* the other way around. Appositely, Vivian illustrates his point with an example with a reference to Schopenhauer: "Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterises modern thought, but it was Hamlet who invented it" (*CW*, 1083). By this, Vivian suggests how the state of mind of the unhappy prince, brought to our consciousness through Shakespeare's play, has subsequently began to characterise our perception of the world.

Here we are facing one of the central paradoxes of Wilde's philosophy, already anticipated in the discussion above: Wilde offers to Art a prominent role as the foundation of human Life and human consciousness and yet, at the same time,

he insists upon the autonomy of Art and its separateness from the practicalities of everyday life. Furthermore, if indeed, Art affects our view of the world in such a fundamental way as Vivian suggests in the essay, Art thus would seem to have a conscious and practical (useful) dimension to it as well.

As we have previously seen in context of the discussion on Wilde's views on the reception of art (see 2.2.3), the relationship between the sensitive, sensuous and conscious-intellectual dimensions of the aesthetic experience, for Wilde, is a very complicated issue. His view includes elements from the Kantian theory of reception as something based on our *thinking* (thus, conscious recognition) of those sensations that art evokes in us. Unlike Walter Pater and the Aesthetes, for example, it is not only the "palliative dimension" of aesthetic experience in which Wilde is interested. Thus, there are elements of both intellect and sensation within the Wildean aesthetic experience. However, Wilde seems to be suggesting that the intellect cannot *produce* sensations, but rather those sensations that Art offers us shape our thought:

> Things *are* because we *see* them, and what we see, and how we see it, depend on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is different from *seeing* a thing. *One does not see anything until one sees beauty*. Then, and only then, does it come into existence.
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW*, 1086 (my emphasis)

Whilst for Schopenhauer an aesthetic situation has a double aspect, cognitive and affective, for Wilde the creative process and the reception are first and foremost affective. However, as the above passage shows, the aesthetic experience *leads into* a cognitive and illuminative experience. Wilde's view differs from that of Schopenhauer's in the sense that, for Wilde, the aesthetic experience *in itself* is not pragmatic or conscious, nor can it be justified by reasoning or described by the parties *involved* in the experience. In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde notes that a lover of Art must love it above all other things and that "against such love, the *reason*, if one would listen to it, would cry out" (*CW,* 1145, my emphasis). Furthermore, he notes that there is "nothing sane about the worship of beauty" (ibid.).

What kind of a role does the intellect play, for Wilde, in the aesthetic experience? Is there a way to arrive at an understanding of the magic embodied in

Art by conscious effort? As neither the artist nor the public seem to be using their critical apparatus with respect to the aesthetic experience, Wilde introduces a contributor who *will* bring Art into contact with intellect: the Critic. In 'The Critic as Artist', Ernest asks Gilbert about the use of Criticism, and Gilbert notes: "You might have just as well asked me the use of thought. […] It is criticism…that makes the mind a fine instrument" (*CW,* 1151). When introducing Criticism as an essential element in the sphere of Art, Wilde acknowledges that Art *is*, in fact, founded upon a certain set of rules and conventions. However, the artist must be *unaware* of these in the creative process and only yield to the imagination in order to make his or her work unique:

> Certainly: each art has its grammar and its materials. There is no mystery about either … But while the laws upon which Art rests may be fixed and certain, *to find their true realization they must be touched by the imagination* into such beauty that they will seem an exception, each one of them.
>
> 'The Critic as Artist', *CW,* 1151 (my emphasis)

These laws are situated, as it were, in the sub-consciousness of the artist, an inseparable but oblivious part of their personality which only the Critic is able to reveal: "Technique is really personality. That is the reason why the artist cannot teach it, why the pupil cannot learn it and why the critic can understand it" (*CW,* 1151), Gilbert explains.

If Art, then, exists before our consciousness, before reality and life itself, what is it founded upon? As the above discussion shows, Wilde acknowledges that each art "has its grammar and its materials" (*CW,* 1151), but that it is only through processes of creation and reception that Art really comes into life, and in these processes *imagination* plays an essential role. In 'The Decay of Lying', Vivian declares, "the moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything" (*CW,* 1091); the aesthetic expression is thus seen as something highly subjective and closely attached to the imaginative power of the artist. However, because a work of art does not stand in direct relation to anything 'real' or to any undeniable, objective truth – and because "the only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us" (*CW,* 1091), and the Artist should aim at "telling beautiful,

untrue things" – the work of art is equally available for everyone and allows multiple sensations and interpretations. It is along these lines that Art becomes independent. (The role of the Critic is thus to bring the intellectual dimension into the process of interpretation. Wilde states that "the aesthetic critic, and the aesthetic critic alone" can "appreciate all forms and modes", and therefore, "it is to him that Art makes her appeal" (*CW,* 1150).)

With respect to the role of the Artist, Wilde again diverges to some extent from the philosophy of Schopenhauer to whom, according to Foster, "reflection, as the unique capacity of *the artist or philosophical genius,* finds expression for the artist in the creative works embodying the Ideas" (1999:215, my emphasis). Wilde, then again, would seem be more apt to make comparisons between the intellect of the *critic* and philosopher than the artist and philosopher. Even though in 'The Decay of Lying' Vivian states that "[Art] has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on her own lines" (*CW,* 1091), parallelism between the artist and philosophical genius might seem dubious for Wilde as, according to him, "those who do not love Beauty more than Truth never know the innermost shrine of Art" (*CW*, 1090). However, it is important to bear in mind that Wilde expects a good critic to be *creative* as well – as creative as an artist, in fact. Thus, ultimately, the creative and conscious-intellectual faculties do not need *exclude* one another. In the following, I will move on to examine the role of Truth in Wilde's aesthetics, with special reference to 'The Decay of Lying'.

### 4.4. "Lying is the proper aim of Art"

In Wilde's day, one of the most striking features in his criticism was undoubtedly his outlook on the value of truth. Still today, truth is most often considered as normative in some way, and, as Medina and Wood (2005:3) point out, "we seem to take for granted all kinds of *prima facie* obligations with respect for truth". With respect to the philosophy of truth, there are similarities between the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and Wilde. Nietzsche, who was responsible for posing "the hardest and the most crucial questions that the subsequent philosophical debates on

truth will have to answer" (Medina and Wood, 2005:9). Nietzsche both rejected absolutism (the idea of truth as an unquestionable, absolute value) as well as arose critical consciousness of *normativity* of truth – a concept which has "traditionally has been either assumed or denied" (ibid.).

With respect to aesthetics, there are several common interlocutors between Nietzsche and Wilde. As Prewitt-Brown points out, "Wilde and Nietzsche inherited the same situation in philosophy" (1997: 58), as both of them were faced with "the Kantian undermining of truth itself" as well as the 'despair of reason', meaning the confessed inability of reason to "solve the contradictions with which it is ultimately faced" (1997: 58-9). Prewitt-Brown also suggests that this despair was visible in the *use of paradox* in each writer, and also points out that "their shared deployment of aphorism may be seen as a sign of resistance to enter any system" (1997:59). Also, very much in line with Wilde's views of how one should make one's life into art, also Nietzsche cultivated the idea that we should all become "poet of our lives" (*Joyful Wisdom*, 233; quoted in Prewitt-Brown 1997: 59).

However, Nietzsche's view on truth is nihilist, and thus not completely compatible with that of Wilde's. One of the issues where Nietzsche and Wilde part company concerns the *motives* and *purposes* of truth (or, with respect to Wilde's essay, those of lying). Nietzsche's critique of truth concentrates primarily on the *performative dimension* of truth and argues that truth is, in fact, desired for its *consequences*, and performative power of truth "consists in the consequences it can bring about" (Medina and Wood, 2005:11). According to Nietzsche, there is a "will to truth", which is primarily at the service of the preservation of the herd, and a "will to falsehood", which, respectively, functions at the service of the individual. But for Wilde, it is not truth that is used for the "preservation of the herd", but lying plays a significant role in the everyday functions of our society as well. In 'The Decay of Lying' Wilde writes:

> Lying for the sake of the improvement of the young, which is the basis of home education, still lingers amongst us, and its advantages are so admirably set forth in the early books of Plato's *Republic* that it is unnecessary to dwell upon them here… Lying for the sake of a monthly salary is, of course, well known in Fleet Street[6]… *The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake,* and the highest development of this is, as we have already pointed out, *Lying in Art*. Just as those who do not love Plato more than Truth cannot pass beyond the threshold of Academe, *so those who do not love Beauty more than Truth never know the innermost shrine of Art.*
>
> 'The Decay of Lying', *CW,* 1090 (my emphasis)

On one hand, Wilde thus shows that lying does, in fact, play a significant role in the way the human mind works. On the other hand, he points out that lying in Art – "lying for its own sake" – is the only completely *justifiable* form of lying, because it does not seek to either control or benefit from the act of lying. Thus, the "will to falsehood", in Nietzsche's terms, is also in service of the herd as well as the individual.

Here, another paradoxical element in Wilde's theory emerges: how can Art be claimed to be a separate and abstract realm, and works of art free from ethical reverberations, when Art, in fact, shapes our consciousness and makes us perceive the world a certain way (for discussion, see 4.3)? It seems justified to claim that Art must also have its say in the development of our ethical sensitivity. In order to approach this paradox, Wilde, following in Aristotle's footsteps, represents a stance according to which an aesthetic experience purifies our soul (regardless of the morals the work of art represents are 'good' or 'bad'), and that it is exactly because a work of art is not *real* or *true* that we can observe the ethical dimension of things more clearly through it, being freed from the conventional or pragmatic morals of our everyday life. Along these lines, lying in Art becomes the one form of lying that is "absolutely beyond reproach" (*CW,* 1090).

In 'The Decay of Lying' the assessment of truth seems to pertain to Wilde's renouncement of the idea that Art should (or could) represent 'reality'. If we consider the way Wilde writes about nature, history and our perception of time in

[6] Fleet Street, in WC2, central London, was the centre of journalism up to the 1970s.

this essay, it is not only Art that represents "beautiful untrue things" but, in fact, Life (although largely perhaps due to the way Art affects and shapes our view of the world, history and so on) is an "untrue" thing in itself. Hence, the whole essay is coloured by the "Kantian undermining of truth itself", to which Prewitt-Brown refers (1997: 58) – a constant questioning of any 'given' or 'inherited' nature of truth. And this is another point of similarity for Wilde and Nietzsche: the consideration of truth as a human *construction*.

According to Nietzsche, truths are always *produced;* this process is similar to the making of an illusion, since "to believe the truth […] we have to forget how things have been *made* true" (Medina and Wood, 2005:11). Even if Vivian, in 'The Decay of Lying', presents the *Liar* (or, the Artist) as an illusionist whose fighting against the "morbid and unhealthy habit of truth-telling" (*CW,* 1074), Wilde's essay as a whole does, in fact, represent the idea of *truth itself* as something relative and *produced*. Through his argument on how Life imitates Art, Vivian shows the de-sustainability of some of the concepts we normally regard as 'true'; with respect to history, for example, Vivian shows how our view of the past is actually an illusion created through Art.

In order to discover Wilde's *ultimate* view of the relation between Truth and Art, however, one has to turn to *De Profundis.* Written after Wilde's trials during his imprisonment, this piece offers a revision of at least two themes covered in 'The Decay of Lying', the *consciousness of the artist* – and his sincerity – and *Art as a vessel of truth* (or reality). In *De Profundis*, one begins to determine what Wilde thought of the role of truth within the sphere of Art in. Prewitt-Brown suggests that "[t]he courtroom was Wilde's nemesis for this question [of truth]" since it marked a crisis for a man who had "pledged to live his life as a work of art" (1997:94).

Prewitt-Brown notes how Wilde's behaviour at the time of the trials suggests that he had a certain "will to truth" after all (1997:94); Wilde could have, if not completely avoided, at least lessened the extent of his public humiliation, had he wished to put on another mask and deny his intercourse with Douglas. This was not an option for Wilde, however. The fact that the court of law repeatedly used his art as evidence against him, for example the 'immoral' novel *The Picture of Dorian*

*Gray* (which Wilde had written before he met Douglas), made it impossible for Wilde to conform: such a withdrawal would have meant not only denial of what was an essential part of his identity but also betrayal of his Art. Prewitt-Brown notes how this "experimental and effectively self-destructive element in Wilde's conduct may be seen as one aspect of greater artistic intention or 'intellectual conscience', in Nietzsche's words" (1997: 95).

Thus Wilde himself, as the artist of his own Life, does not seem to follow the aesthetic doctrines represented by Vivian in 'The Decay of Lying'; when examining *De Profundis*, one can see how Wilde's view concerning lying in Art as the artist's best friend seems to shift towards the forewarning of *self-deception* representing the artist's worst enemy. Hence, Wilde also regards artist's *conscience* in a new light. In the next chapter, I will move on to discuss *De Profundis* in order to show how Wilde examines (and possibly reconsiders) the themes I have discussed in this chapter with respect to 'The Decay of Lying': the autonomy of Art and the artist's role; Art and reality; Art's foundation; and, the value of truth.

# 5. The Importance of Being Alive: *De Profundis*

> [E]xcuses have no place in art and intentions count for nothing: at every moment, the artist has to listen to his instinct, and it is this that makes art the most real of all things, the most austere school of life, the true last judgement.
>
> Marcel Proust, *Time Regained,* 233

*De Profundis* has traditionally served as a kind of watershed among Wilde scholars, not merely due to the ambiguity related to the genre of the text or to the fact that the contents of the text dwell upon some highly controversial topics (such as Wilde's contemplation on his own agnostic-Christian religious views) but also because it represents Wilde himself in a completely new light: in *De Profundis*, quite contrarily to any of his previous work, Wilde's representation can be regarded as utterly sincere and serious.

With respect to the genre of the text, *De Profundis* has been regarded as a semi-private love letter – *semi*-private, because Wilde made copies of it, and, in addition to sending it to Douglas, he also gave a copy also to his friend, Robert Ross, with the request that it would be edited and published after Wilde's death. While others have regarded *De Profundis* as a dramatic and carefully assessed 'last performance', others consider it as the most sincere piece of writing ever produced by Wilde (Small, 2003: 86). In many ways the exceptional biographical context makes *De Profundis* a particularly interesting text, and it is partly due to the conditions under which this text was produced that the critics are always impelled to ask to which genre or category they should consign it. Yet to place *De Profundis* into any particular category is extremely problematic, as the text can be examined as epistolary prose, prison writing, or, indeed, as a proposal of an aesthetic theory and a kind of conclusion of Wilde's literary career; Prewitt-Brown, for example, considers *De Profundis* as a representation of "the culmination of the Wildean aesthetic speculations" (1997: xiii). These various definitions are not, of course, necessarily mutually exclusive.

In the following, I shall examine *De Profundis* first and foremost as a text which represents Wilde's final stand on some of the aesthetic questions I have discussed in the previous chapter (yet without annulling the text's autobiographical dimension and content), in order to illustrate the changes that have taken place in Wilde's aesthetic views since his production of 'The Decay of Lying'. The two texts are, indeed, very different both with respect to their style as well as their genre, but both nevertheless address a topic which patently remained important to Wilde throughout his life: the interrelatedness of Art and Life.

In his introduction to Wilde's essays in *Complete Works,* Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland, points out how "the story of *De Profundis* […] is as eventful in its own small way, as the life of its author, including a posthumous trial and 50 years spell under lock and key" (*CW,* 911). Therefore, with respect to this particular text, I find it essential to briefly discuss the conditions under which it was produced before moving on to analyzing the text itself.

In 1891, while Wilde was visiting a friend, at Oxford, he met a young man who was, as Ellmann puts it, "even better looking than John Gray [Wilde's lover from 1889 onwards, and a model for Dorian in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*]" and "even less talented" (1981: 307, 324) – Sir Alfred Douglas. The liaison with this young aristocrat was to become more fateful for Wilde than he could predict at the time. Around 1895, Douglas's father, the Marques of Queensberry, discovered their relationship and could not tolerate the situation. He was the driving force behind the procedures that had led to Wilde's prosecution and imprisonment. However, prior to the Marques of Queensberry pressing the charges, Wilde initiated litigation on the grounds of libel, but lost (Ellmann, 1981: 426, 430). The Marques was not in good terms with his son to begin with, and Wilde was caught in the middle of their complex relationship; as he himself puts it in *De Profundis*, "in your [Douglas's and his father's] hideous game of hate together, you had both thrown dice for my soul, and you [Douglas] happened to have lost" (*CW*, 1002).

In the trials, the prosecution did not only use Wilde's and Douglas's correspondence as an evidence, but accused Wilde of soliciting more than twelve boys (ten of whom were named) in order to "commit sodomy" (Ellmann, 1981:

443). On May 25 1895, Wilde was convicted of homosexuality and sentenced to two years of hard labour (Holland 2003: 911). Wilde had spent a total of fourteen months in jail – first in Pentonville and then Wandsworth from whence he was finally moved to Reading Gaol in November 1895 – before he was first allowed writing materials in his cell, and in early 1897, Wilde started writing the letter to Douglas (Holland 2003: 911).

*De Profundis,* as a work that gave rise to so much conflict and controversy due to its background and contents, has been greatly neglected *outside* the biographical context. Even if the text provides a fascinating autobiographical dimension and, perhaps, takes us a bit closer to Wilde as a person, it is nevertheless as much a *work of art* as a letter. Indeed, the fact that it was Wilde's intention from the very beginning to publish parts of the letter provides sufficient justification for examining it as a text from which we can also extract Wilde's aesthetics views.

The first, heavily expurgated version of *De Profundis* came out in 1905, five years after Wilde's death; this version, edited by Ross, was only one third of the length of the original. In 1909, Ross deposited the manuscript in the British Museum on the provision that it was to remain sealed for fifty years (Holland 2003:192). In 1912, however, in his biography of Wilde, Arthur Ransome referred to *De Profundis* as a letter addressed to "a man to whom Wilde felt that he owed some, at least, of the circumstances of his public disgrace" (quoted in Holland, *CW,* 912). Not surprisingly, this kind of reference infuriated Douglas, and he sued Ransome as well as the publisher. The original manuscript had to be brought from the Museum for the court trial; some parts, which were highly critical of Douglas, were read out loud, after which the jury decided that Ransome's choice of words was fully justified. An accurate and a complete version of the letter has only been available since 1962, when it was published in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* and the original text was revealed to the public at the British Museum (Holland 2003:192).

There are extensive parts in *De Profundis* in which Wilde discusses the disastrous effects that Douglas has wrought on, for example, Wilde's finances, his marriage, and his other relationships. As these sections are not directly relevant to my thesis, I will not be examining them in great detail. I shall, however, pay

attention to the parts in which Wilde reflects Douglas's influence upon him *as an artist*. Wilde suggests that his primary error was precisely the way in which he allowed himself to neglect his art in order to maintain the continuous emotional and physical attendance that Douglas has demanded during their relationship. He does not blame Douglas for his ruin, but effectively blames himself for having allowed Douglas to separate him from his art.

As I have suggested above, *De Profundis* is a highly distinctive text amongst Wilde's work, based on *other* qualities besides its biographical context. First of all, it reveals an unforeseen dimension of Wilde, who, for once, seems to be utterly serious: unlike Wilde's earlier work, this text promotes sincerity and humility, now condemning shallowness as "the supreme vice" (*CW,* 981). Moreover, in *De Profundis,* Wilde seems to have almost completely abandoned the use of irony that characterises his earlier texts. Wilde masterly employed irony as a disguise for his real opinions and stances; irony – combined with puns and other forms of linguistic play – also allowed him to 'mean' several different things at the same time.

In *De Profundis,* Wilde seems to have come to the conclusion that, in fact, an artist can be (and often is) blamed and condemned for what he has *not* done even more easily than for what he *has* done, and therefore it is more profitable to (finally) be sincere. In the following, I intend to examine *De Profundis* primarily from the point of view of how it contributes to Wilde's aesthetic theory, and pay attention to similar aspects that I have discussed in the previous chapter in context of 'The Decay of Lying', such as the role of the artist; the interrelatedness of Art and reality; Art's foundations and aesthetic experience; and the value of truth.

## 5.1. The Artist's Role Revisited

> [T]he Artists who gives up an hour of work for an hour of conversation with a friend knows that he is sacrificing a reality for something that does not exist.
>
> Marcel Proust, *Time Regained,* 228

I begin with an overview of *De Profundis* as a whole in order to introduce the main points I wish to examine in later sections. The contemplation on the role of the

artist, first of all, reaches new highs in *De Profundis:* the text exemplifies Wilde's aesthetic standing on a universal scale, but the specific circumstances under which the text was produced bring an additional depth to it. The relation between Art and Life is again at the centre of Wilde's attention, but in comparison with his previous works, his views have slightly altered: in *De Profundis,* Wilde extensively contemplates the significance of *real* life experiences to both one's artistic development as well as one's self-development as man. The emphasis is not ardently on aestheticism anymore, but more on the ethical and metaphysical dimensions of Art and (artistic) life.

Initially, Wilde seems to abandon his previous assertion of how "art never expresses anything but itself" (*CW,* 1087) since, in *De Profundis,* Wilde carefully examines how one's life can function either as a stimulus or a deterrent for artistic endeavour. Whereas in 'The Decay of Lying' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde concentrates on the autonomous existence of a work of art (and the way it starts to lead a life of its own), in *De Profundis*, he contemplates on the everyday life circumstances of an artist and the effect of these circumstances on the artist's capacity to produce such an independent work of art.

In *De Profundis,* the 'tediousness' of everyday life, and the pain within it, thus receive more attention than in any of Wilde's previous works; suffering and sorrow extracted from our real life experiences are turned into something valuable, and regarded as essential for both ethical and critical self-development:

> I see new developments in Art and Life, each mode of which is a fresh mode of perfection. I long to live so I can explore what is no less than a new world to me […] Sorrow…is my new world. [S]orrow and suffering…were not part of my scheme of life. They had no place in my philosophy. […] During the last few months, I have, after terrible struggles and difficulties, been able to comprehend some of the lessons hidden in the heart of pain.
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1024 (my emphasis)

Wilde does not, however, abandon his previous views completely: even if he does not necessarily regard Art as the ultimate and *sole* 'reality' anymore, he nevertheless remains an aesthete, turning his real life suffering and disgrace into exceptionally beautiful philosophical contemplation. Thus, Life has not "g[ot] the

upper hand, and drive[n] Art into the Wilderness" (*CW,* 1078), but rather the emphasis in Wilde's philosophy of Art has shifted, and his focus is now more on the ethical dimension of the interplay of Art and Life.

But the shift in emphasis also has its effects on the *contents* of Wilde's philosophy, of course. As far as Art's autonomy is concerned, Wilde does not rescind the idea that Art has independent existence outside the thought and comprehension of man, but he does reverse the modes of *approach* to the work of art. In his earlier criticism, especially 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde seems to consider artistic creativity as more or less an unconscious process, and criticism as the ultimate intellectual *modus operandi* of Art. In *De Profundis,* however, he ascends individuality in artistic life to whole new highs: "[T]he artistic life is simple self-development," Wilde writes (*CW,* 1026). Thus, even though Wilde is not reversing his idea of artistic creativity as an unconscious process, he brings to light the role of artistic sensitivity within the *Life* of the artist: an artist is not merely a tool between material and form, but is now taken first and foremost as an individual to whose self-development Art can contribute. Due to this even greater emphasis on individualism, Wilde's aesthetic stance can also be seen shifting further towards modernism. He writes:

> Perhaps there may come into my art, no less than into my life, a still deeper note, one of greater unity of passion, and directness of impulse. Not width but *intensity* is the true aim of modern Art. We are no longer in Art concerned with the type. *It is with the exception that we have to do*. *I cannot put my sufferings into any form they took,* I need hardly say. *Art only begins where Imitation ends.*
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1039 (my emphasis)

Even though Wilde now acknowledges the significance of 'everyday life' experiences on one's artistic development, he nevertheless stresses that they are not usable *as such* as the material of a work of art. Rather, he regards these experiences as seed sown to the personality and the imagination of the artist; it is only what can be harvested from this cultivation that can constitute a work of art. This view echoes

the one represented in 'The Decay of Lying', according to which "no great artist ever sees things as they are" (*CW,* 1088).

In *De Profundis,* Wilde's views have distanced from those of an aesthete who strives for sensual aesthetic pleasure and bespeaks for the separation of Art from the sphere of morality. Wilde's text now implies that he has become a more *ethical* aesthete. Even though Wilde has acknowledged the interrelatedness of Art and Life before, he now underlines the role of an individual as the ultimate meeting point between the two. Wilde seems to have arrived from the viewpoint that Art itself is the ultimate reality to the view according to which Art is an *essential part of self-realisation*. In addition to this shift in emphasis, Wilde respectively takes a distance also to his previous *modes* of criticism; he notes that he had made "the *trivial* in thought and in action […] the keystone of a very brilliant philosophy expressed in plays and paradoxes" (*CW*, 989, my emphasis). Recognizing the significance of *sincerity* both in the contents as well as in the display of his new aesthetic standing in *De Profundis,* Wilde also reconsiders his earlier contemplation on the role of Truth. (I will discuss this topic in more detail in 5.4.)

The inspection of the role of the artist in *De Profundis* brings one into contact with yet another a paradox. On the one hand, Wilde is writing about the significance of suffering and humility wrought on him by real life circumstances, and how he has found completely new depths within himself and in his art through them. On the other hand, he brings to light the *misfortunate* consequences that real life has had on his art. In Wilde's view, thus, Life can play both the role of a great destroyer of artistic capacity as well as that of a great instructor. Wilde does consider *every* moment of his past as meaningful within a wider scope, though, stating: "Humility in the artist is his frank acceptance of *all experiences*, just as Love in the artist is simply that sense of Beauty that reveals to the world its body and its soul" (*CW,* 1027, my emphasis).

In *De Profundis,* Wilde is writing of himself as an Artist mostly in the past tense. This can, of course, be regarded also merely as a stylistic feature, since *De Profundis* was to be published posthumously, but the contents of the letter also

implicate Wilde's uncertainty about whether he will ever be able to work again. He still seems to anticipate the chance of a creative recovery:

> Still, the very fact that people will recognize me wherever I go, and know about my life, as far as its follies go, I can discern something good for me. It will *force me on the necessity of again asserting myself as an artist*, and as soon as I possibly can. If I can produce one more beautiful work of art I shall be able to… pluck out the tongue of scorn by the roots. *And if life be, as it surely is, a problem to me, I am no less a problem to Life.*
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1022 (my emphasis)

At the beginning of *De Profundis,* Wilde asserts that the Artist must love Art above all things. He presents autobiographical and detailed evidence of the fatal consequences of everyday life's interference and effects upon the Artist's creativity, when he describes, in length, the degradation that Douglas has wrought on him: "You knew what my Art was for me, the great primal note by which I had revealed, first myself to myself, and then to the world; the real passion of my life" (*CW,* 1001). He also makes it very clear that Douglas ever only found him interesting, when he was "on his pedestal" (*CW,* 993). Wilde's cogitation on the nature of fame points out how Douglas's interest in him has been as transitory as fame itself:

> For I have come, not from obscurity into the momentary notoriety of crime, but from a sort of eternity of fame to a sort of eternity of infamy, and sometimes seem to myself have shown, if indeed it required showing, that *between the famous and the infamous there is but one step, if so much as one.*
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1022 (my emphasis)

This passage also serves as a somewhat bitter reminder of Wilde's complex relation to the society around him. Even though he was capable of quite skilfully manipulating the public opinion (and made fun of it in several of his works), the above passage shows how easily mutable fame was to determine his destiny: not only his relationship with Douglas but also the reception of his works (especially the critical essays) were crudely determined by his public image, which did not necessarily bear much resemblance to his real character or his *true* artistic ambitions. This remark on fame provides another indication of why Wilde, in *De*

*Profundis*, chooses to concentrate on topics such as individualism, sincerity and Art as a mediator of individual truths.

As far as the chances of rediscovering his creative faculty are concerned, Wilde seems to waver between an optimistic and a pessimistic outlook on whether he will ever be able to work again; he recognizes a profound change that has taken place within himself due to the harsh prison life, but does not seem to know whether his experiences will contribute to his creativity or render him capable of regaining his imaginative power. When, at the end of the letter, Wilde writes about the possibility of creating a work of art after his imprisonment, he points out that there are only two topics he would be interested in examining:

> If I ever write again, in the sense of producing an artistic work, there are just two subjects on which and through which I desire to express myself: one is 'Christ, the precursor of the Romantic movement in life': the other is 'the Artistic life considered in its relation to Conduct'.
>
> *De Profundis*, *CW*, 1034

To the author of *De Profundis,* the very change that has taken place within himself as a person seems to be, however, of even greater importance than re-establishing his role as an artist; *individualism,* in Life as well as in Art, has now become the centre of his undivided attention. The individualism for which Wilde bespeaks differs markedly from the nihilistic and egoistic individualism presented in, for example, Nietzsche's philosophy. (For further reference, see 5.4.) In context of individualism, Wilde examines the figure of Christ, viewing him as "not merely the Supreme Individualist, but … the first in History" (*CW,* 1030). Wilde underlines the fact that "while Christ did not say to men 'live for others', he pointed out that there was no difference between the lives of others and one's own life" (*CW,* 1030), and this kind of respect for the lives of the others also characterizes Wilde's own individualism.

The ultimate focus is, nevertheless, on oneself. The 'self', for Wilde, seems to simultaneously function as both the source of ultimate truth as well as an endless well of question*s*. The possible anxiety over all the unresolved questions (un-resolvable, even) can be soothed with the help of Art, as it is the aesthetic

experience that can, even if merely momentarily, offer us glimpses of the truth that lies hidden within us, even though we can never really grasp it*:* "People whose desire is solely for self-development never know where they are going … The final mystery is oneself," (*CW,* 1038) Wilde states. Once more, we can observe how Wilde's emphasis is on the process (or, *transformation*) rather than its outcome.

One is prompted to ask, considering the paradoxical nature of Wilde's criticism, how Wilde's refreshed ideas about the relatedness of Life and Art *eventually* affect his vision of Art as a realm of ultimate reality? In 'The Decay of Lying', Vivian explains how Art, "breaking from the prison house of realism, will run to greet [the Liar], knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all [Art's] manifestations" (CW, 1081). In the following, I will turn to examine what kind of effect, on the bases of *De Profundis,* Wilde's imprisonment and the reality of the prison life had on his aesthetic standing.

## 5.2. From the "Prison House of Realism" to the Realism of a Prison House

There is about Sorrow an intense, an extraordinary reality.

*De Profundis, CW,* 1024

In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde puts forward the demand that Art should always stand at a certain distance from everyday life, to "represent beautiful untrue things" (*CW,* 1087*)*. Wilde's proclamation that "the only beautiful things […] are the things that do not concern us" (*CW,* 1077) feeds into the interpretation that Wilde considers the sphere of Art as a kind of Utopia where people can flee from the *ennui* of their quotidian reality. However, already at the time of 'The Decay of Lying', statements such as "the only real people are the people that never existed" *(CW,* 1075) and "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" *(CW,* 1091) suggest that Wilde does not consider Art merely to be an escape route, but rather as the ultimate *reality*, of which life is an imitation.

Prison life, however, seems to have altered Wilde's philosophy: in *De Profundis,* he introduces two important contributors to one's self-development, both of which can only be absorbed and realised through Life: sorrow and humility. The *entrée* of these new elements into Wilde's aesthetics (or the fact that he finally seems to be writing with utmost sincerity) does not, however, remove the traces of paradox from Wilde's text. *De Profundis* does not merely (nor, indeed, attempts to) leave the paradoxes of Wilde's earlier "very brilliant philosophy" based on "the trivial in thought and action" (*CW,* 987) unresolved, but furthermore introduces new ones. For example, on the one hand, Wilde highlights the importance of Art as the one true passion of the artist, the one true goal worth striving for, and forewarns about the defects of real life on one's artistic productivity. On the other hand, he considers real life experiences as an essential contributor to the artist's self-development. Whereas previously in 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde has called Life "the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that lays waste her house" (*CW,* 1078), he now points out the dangers of letting Life slip through one's fingers while one is in search of more extravagant sensations:

> I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction: I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created a myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram. […] I became spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me curious joy […] Desire, at the end, was a maladity […] I was no longer the Captain of my Soul.
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1018

However, it is noteworthy that Wilde does not blame Art or his artistic ambition but rather his vanity for losing the control over his soul. He does not completely reject his previous idea of the ultimate reality being hidden within the sphere of Art, either, but emphasizes the impact of our everyday life experiences on our aesthetic sensitivity. For example, Wilde considers recreating his creative faculty as the only goal worth striving for, but implies it is the harsh reality of prison that has taught him to appreciate certain things even more than before:

> My nature is seeking a fresh mode of *self-realisation*. That is all I'm concerned with. […] When I go out of the prison … if I may not write beautiful books, I can at least read beautiful books, and what a joy can be greater? After that, I hope to be able to recreate my creative faculty. […] And I shall really have no difficulty in forgiving you [Douglas]. […] I need not say that my task does not end here, it would be comparatively easy if it did. There is much more before me. I have hills far steeper to climb, valleys much darker to pass […] And I have to get it all *out of myself. Neither Religion, Morality, nor Reason can help me at all.*
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1019 (my emphasis)

Wilde thus gives to self-development – both ethic and aesthetic (and indeed, in *De Profundis*, the relatedness of these two grows in significance) – the primary role in making amends with his past. Providing a highly personal account of one man's "walk in thorns" (*CW,* 1026) and his way to survive his constraints, *De Profundis* also proffers ideas for one's *aesthetic* self-development. Even though Wilde claims not to find relief in religion, his text nonetheless skilfully deploys the Christian imagery and includes some deep contemplation on the teachings of Christ. For Wilde, however, rather than yielding to "the faith that others give to what is unseen", he abides by "what one can touch, and look at" (*CW,* 1019), Wilde's faith thus leans on his own experiences "in this earth" – those of "Beauty of Heaven, but the horror of Hell also" (ibid.)

It is worthwhile examining Wilde's approach to religious issues in a more detail, since the extensive use of religious imagery and the contemplation on agnosticism both contribute to the framework within which Wilde develops his aesthetic arguments on the importance of individualism and the possibility of artistic redemption in *De Profundis*. Thus, in the following, I will briefly discuss the function of religious references in *De Profundis.*

### 5.2.1. "The Confraternity of the Fatherless"

The presence of religious imagery is one of the features that distinguish *De Profundis* from Wilde's earlier work; this text brings to light Wilde's agnostic Christianity more than any other (apart from the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol,*

which Wilde wrote after his imprisonment). The extensive use of religious allusions can partly be explained by the fact that the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* were the only books Wilde was allowed to read in his cell (Ellmann, 1981: 485). And read them he did – as an artist, as a critic, and apparently also, to some extent, in order to soothe his anxiety. Wilde's text does not, however, at any point attempt to convert the reader, but rather seems to use the discourse and patterns of Christian thematic in the formation of his own philosophy of art and Art's interrelatedness with Life.

In order to illuminate the significance of individualism, for example, Wilde uses Christian imagery to illustrate his agnosticism and portrays Christ as the first great individualist. Highlighting the way in which the early Christianity succeeded in combining modesty and bravery, simplicity and courageousness, Wilde distinguishes between Christianity and Christendom (of which the former promotes individualism and the latter, more or less, suppresses it).

"When I think about Religion at all", Wilde writes, "I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who cannot believe: the Confraternity of the Fatherless one might call it" (*CW*, 1019). He also states that agnosticism should have its rituals, just like religion, and because

> [i]t has sown its martyrs, it should reap its saints, and praise God for having hidden himself from man. But whether it be faith or agnosticism, it must not be anything *external* to me. Its symbols must be my own creating. *Only that is spiritual which makes its own form. If I may not find it within myself, I will never find it.*
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1020 (my emphasis)

Wilde thus states that whatever outlook one is to follow, it must be followed because of an internal vocation; in search of recreating one's creative faculty (or, developing one's ethical sensitivity), no external aid is of any use. Wilde considers "Reason, Morality and Religion" (*CW,* 1019) as being external to his artistic mind. The fact that he feels that "the symbols" of whatever he will rely on "must be [his] own making" (*CW,* 1020) suggests that it is in *Art* where he is determined to find his ultimate redemption.

Wilde's outlook on faith-related issues is thus highly individualistic but also artistic. An example of Wilde's perusal of religious texts for pleasure can be found, for example, in the following passage in *De Profundis:*

> Of late I have been studying the four prose-poems of Christ with some diligence. At Christmas I managed to get a hold of a Greek Testament, and every morning … I read a little of the Gospels […] It is a delightful way of opening the day. To you, in your turbulent, ill-disciplined life, it would be a capital thing if you would do the same.
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1033

It seems that the relief Wilde extracts from reading the Bible is as much (if not more) due to its aesthetic merits as its contents. Furthermore, later on in the text, Wilde connects Christ to Romanticism by allegorising him as a Romantic artist. This comparison is, as Raby points out, "one of [Wilde's] more innovative and surprising ideas" (1989:137). Wilde also puts Shelley on a pedestal, declaring that Shelley and Sophocles belonged in Christ's company – by which Wilde, as Stokes appositely remarks, "mean[s] of course that Christ belonged to *theirs*, and in [Wilde's] own" (1996:102). In the following, I will briefly discuss how Wilde parallels the suffering figure of Christ to his own situation.

### 5.2.2 *De Profundis* and Heroism: "Lord Christ's Heart and Shakespeare's Brain"

Despite the realism of prison life, *De Profundis* is an exalted account of suffering – and indeed, suffering of more than just one man. Wilde turns his personal tragedy into a story to which one can easily adapt. Wilde does not venerate his fate and states that he is alone is to be blamed for his misfortunes: "I ruined myself […] and nobody, great or small, can be ruined expect by his own hand" (*CW,* 1917). Jenkyns suggests that, in *De Profundis,* Wilde portrays himself as a protagonist of a Greek tragedy (1980:97). Furthermore, Wilde can also be examined as a Romantic hero on the edge of self-destruction. Wilde writes:

> [M]ost of all I blame myself for the entire ethical degradation that I allowed you [Douglas] to bring on me. The basis of character is will-power, and my will-power became absolutely subjected to yours. […] I always thought that my giving up to you in small things meant nothing: that when a great moment arrived I could reassert my will-power… It was not so.
>
> *De Profundis*, *CW,* 985

And if Wilde is the Faustian hero, then Douglas is his Mephistopheles. However, the comparison between a hero suffering for a sublime goal and imprisoned Wilde is not quite straightforward. Neither is the one of Douglas and Mephistopheles.

According to Prewitt-Brown, Wilde's self-destructiveness in *De Profundis* is not glorified, at least not to the extent of Romantic heroism (1997: 63). This interpretation can be taken further by looking at Wilde's lament as something that, in fact, emphasizes the human suffering deriving from human mistakes: instead of blaming himself for aiming too high and then falling, he accuses himself of *not aiming high enough*. As far as Douglas's hold over him is concerned, Wilde's remarks that "it was the triumph of the smaller over the bigger nature" (*CW,* 984). Therefore, neither Douglas can be regarded as purely a Romantic representative of evil: although capable of leading Wilde into temptations, Douglas seems much too weak himself.

Wilde's deepest wound bleeding in *De Profundis* is the one he has cut himself: what he regrets most is the negligence of what he sees as the most worthy of all goals in his life – his Art. Wilde seems to consider that he has wasted his time trying to please Douglas (although he does not straightforwardly blame Douglas for this, but rather his own weakness in not having been able to resist him) as something that has taken a heavy toll on his work as an artist. The flamboyant social life has left too little time for Art. Subsequently, Life has become painfully realistic, and it is not possible to consider it as "a mere mode of fiction" (*CW,* 1017) anymore.

Through the re-occurring themes of suffering and forgiveness, humility and austerity, Wilde also compares himself to Christ, albeit indirectly:

> [W[e can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between classical and romantic Art and makes Christ the true precursor of the romantic movement in life, but the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flamelike imagination. […] [W]rite up on the wall of your house in letters for the sun to gild and the moon to silver *'Whatever happens to another happens to oneself,'* and should anyone ask you what such an inscription can possibly mean you can answer that it means 'Lord Christ's heart and Shakespeare's brain.'
>
> *De Profundis, CW* 1027

Considering the nature of the above passage, not everyone might agree with the suggestion that Wilde differs from the prototype of a Romantic hero in the sense that he intentionally misses the opportunity to highlight his martyrdom. Some might, on the contrary, claim that Wilde's account of his own genius and character in *De Profundis* is free from all forms of diffidence. There are, however, at least two objections against this kind of assertion. First of all, although Wilde does not avoid self-pity completely, he takes responsibility of what has happened to him: "I will begin by telling you that I blame *myself* terribly" (*CW*, 981, my emphasis). Secondly, in *De Profundis,* Wilde introduces a new acquaintance of his that has previously paid very few (if any) visits to the pages of Wilde's work, namely humility: "There is only one thing for me now, absolute Humility […] It is the last thing left in me, and the best […] As I found it, I want to keep it" (*CW*, 1018).

The Faustian hero is ultimately faced with the horrific consequences of aiming too high; this situation in Romantic heroism can be interpreted as a kind of *entrée* of humility into the hero's consciousness and usually marks the anti-climax of the story. Wilde, however, seems to regard 'discovering' humility rather as a kind of salvation, a climax proper. The fact that all the suffering has made him find this new element in himself is regarded as worthy of all the pain. He writes:

> Better than Wordsworth himself I know what Wordsworth meant when he said: "Suffering is a permanent, obscure and dark/ and has the nature of Infinity." *But while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning.* […] Nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something … is Humility.
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1018, my emphasis)

However, it would be inadequate to analyze Wilde's extensive discussion of the figure of Christ as simply self-serving. When observing *De Profundis* from an aesthetic viewpoint, we shall see, as Prewitt-Brown points out, how "even the most personal utterances in the letter are a part of a larger philosophical pattern of recurrence and overcoming" (1997: 95). Reading the New Testament in prison thus seems to have functioned as much (if not more) as a source of inspiration for Wilde's own aesthetic philosophy as a channel for personal relief. Rather than searching redemption through religion, Wilde borrows elements from Christian thematic in order to represent his own ideas about finding *redemption through Art*. 'Saving one's soul' through an aesthetic experience, is a theme which I shall discuss in the following.

### 5.3 "The Mystical in Art": Experiencing the Aesthetic

We think in Eternity, but we move slowly through Time.

*De Profundis, CW* 1025

Wilde states that "neither Religion, Morality, nor Reason" (*CW,* 1019) can assist him in the process of becoming himself again, "recreating [his] creative faculty" after the imprisonment and the experiences preceding it. Pointing out that he "must get it all out of [him]self" (ibid.), Wilde is convinced that Art, in its turn, will play a specific role in the process of recovery. One indication of Wilde's undying faith in Art can be found in the way he plans to start the journey to his recovery of the imprisonment: "[I]f I may not write beautiful books, I can at least read beautiful books, and what joy can be greater?" (*CW,* 1019) Thus, a significant emphasis is placed on the *aesthetic* experience as a source of happiness – not merely sensuous or merely intellectual, but both at the same time. Wilde remarks:

> If after I go out a friend of mine gave a feast and did not invite me to it, I shouldn't mind a bit. I can be perfectly happy by myself. With freedom, books, flowers, and the moon, who could not be happy?
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1039

The fact that Wilde paints such an idealized picture of artistic life (or, simply, of life outside prison walls in general) – free and filled with beauty found in Art as well as in nature – suggests how afar he has actually been taken from it. At this point, Wilde still seems to believe in finding happiness regardless of the (expected) exclusion from society.

Yet, Wilde is aware of the fact that the exclusion from society threatens to leave a certain void into his life. To some extent, his fortified interest in individualism is explainable through the need to fill this void; for a man who has lost almost everything, individualism counts as almost a spiritual and redemptive line of thought, since even after "one has weighted the sun in a balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens start by star, *there still remains oneself*" (*CW,* 1038, my emphasis). For Wilde, the moment of *true* self-realisation is thus not attached to one's merits and achievements in life. Rather, it is the moment of realising the incompleteness of oneself, the discovery of Humility. The ultimate goal of self-realisation is thus not *knowing* oneself, but *becoming* oneself.

Moving towards his ultimate revelation – that it is *individualism* that will from now on govern his life more than ever before – Wilde starts by declaring: "Morality cannot help me. I am born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws" (*CW,* 1019). Thus, the fact that he relates himself to the view according to which Christians are released by grace from the obligation of observing moral law suggests that Wilde has not switched his role of an aesthete to that of an ethical man altogether. And yet, he continues: "But while I see nothing wrong in what one *does*, I see that there's something wrong in what one *becomes*" (*CW,* 1019, my emphasis). In Wilde's view, Morality, no less than Art, should not be imitation of a set model as such, but rather it ought to spring a much deeper source – from one's self-realisation, the convergence of one's conscious and unconscious faculties.

Not only Wilde (as an artist, or as a person) but also his whole philosophy is ultimately concerned with the process of *becoming* rather than with that of being, seeing or seeming. The idea that ultimate reality is revealed to us through the

aesthetic experience of transformation connects Wilde to the aesthetic theory of Intuitionalism, which "holds a metaphysical view that reality, in its inmost nature, is nothing but process, *élan vital,* becoming rather than being" (Beardsley, 1981: 388). The emphasis placed on the process of becoming consolidates not only Wilde's self-development but the changes that have taken place in Wilde's aesthetics: his previous views which highlight the separateness of Art and Morality are not being replaced by more 'moral' ideas, but rather the ethical dimension is entering into his aesthetics through slow *development* and *transformation* of his previous ideas.

*De Profundis* can be regarded as the ultimate demonstration of a Wildean way of 'theorizing' (or rather, anti-theorizing): even though some of Wilde's views seem dramatically contradictory with what he has opined in the past, and even though he refers to his earlier views in *De Profundis* as "trivial in thought" (*CW,* 987), he does not seem to have any inclination or need to explain or justify those previous views. After all, he has already shown that "the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence" (*CW,* 1017).

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) also examined the idea of 'transformation', the process of becoming, being closely attached to the aesthetic experience. He, like Wilde, connects transformation to the interpretative process that should take place when a critic approaches a work of art (Prewitt-Brown, 1997: 97). It is only through aesthetic experience that we can, albeit momentarily, stand, as it were, one foot on the ground of our everyday life and another on that of Art; in Wilde's view, it is self-development, *becoming* something, which connects Art and Life. As Prewitt-Brown describes it:

> The aesthetic state in Wilde, or more precisely the state of aesthetic reception, is not one in which the mind is merely a *tabula rasa* that registers without any selection or refraction. … In Wilde […] there is no consciousness of any kind that is purely passive. *But neither there is the mind simply assertive, arbitrarily imposing its modes of perception onto the object. […]* In the aesthetic state, one is essentially vibrating between activity and passivity […] *One becomes.* One receives *in order to become*; one does not receive in order to consume or simply to mirror.
>
> Prewitt-Brown, 1997: 98 (my emphasis)

This argument describes the uniqueness of an aesthetic experience: it is unique because it consists of both a passive, unconscious reception through senses, as well as an active process of intertwining those sensations and their origins into our consciousness. Albeit the process of reception is at first an unconscious process, the recipient is not a *tabula rasa* upon which the artwork would reflect a certain impression. What already rests at the bottom of our receptive faculty are the more 'concrete' real life experiences, and when a work of art comes to contact with them, it both *becomes transformed* according to each receiver's individual layer of experiences and *transforms* these pre-existing experiences within us.

Here again, a certain parallel between Wilde and Marcel Proust can be observed; Proust who displayed his philosophy of art in his *magnus opus*, *In Search of Lost Time,* compares the aesthetic process, especially the process of creation, to the way our memory works. His protagonist, in the famous passage where the taste of a madeleine dipped in a cup of tea suddenly carries him back to his childhood, epitomizes the mysterious nature of the meeting between the sensuous and aesthetic-intellectual experiences within an individual. Proust's Narrator describes it as follows:

> I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than the first […] the potion is loosing its magic. It is plain that *the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself.* […] I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region though it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. *Seek? More than that*: *create.* It is face to face with something which *does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance.*
>
> Proust*,* 1982: 48-49 (my emphasis)

In the similar manner, for Wilde, rather than concerned with just seeking and finding, the aesthetic process of transformation – the coming-together of Life and Art on the level of an individual – consists of *creating*, of something new becoming into existence.

As for the contemplation on religion and especially the figure of Christ is concerned, Wilde points out that the (ethic) teachings of Jesus bear a resemblance to

the effects of aesthetic within us. Wilde proceeds to note how Christ, in addition to his resemblance to an artist, is furthermore

> *like a work of art himself*. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one *becomes* something. And everybody is predestined to his presence. Once at least in his life each man walks with Christ to Emmaus.
>
> *De Profundis, CW*, 1037 (my emphasis)

Thus, Wilde's extensive use of religious imagery can eventually be regarded as in service of another goal; the true gospel of Wilde's text is, indeed, concerned with the possibility of *redemption in Art*, rather than in Religion, Moral or Reason. Solely through the aesthetic process of *becoming* – whether it is creation, interpretation or simply the immediate enjoyment of a work of art – one can overcome the "static separation between art and life, subject and object, art and truth" (Prewitt-Brown, 1997: 97).

The fact that Wilde is treating Christ as a work of art also contributes to the divulgence of aesthetic-ethic duality presented in *De Profundis*. By approaching Christ from both creative as well as interpretative viewpoint (regarding him as an artist and as a work of art), Wilde introduces deeply ethical notes to aesthetics. Yet, there is no trace of moral advice of how to be or how to see; rather, Wilde consolidates the aesthetic-ethic duality, the relation of Art and Life, by emphasizing the process of transformation experienced by an individual – the movement *between* the two, simultaneously belonging to both and neither. Wilde presents no direct argument on *how* one is to reach this numinous state, though; the whole process of transformation seems, for Wilde, like for Baudelaire, "something of a mystery" (Baudelaire [1885] 1972: 116). But, as I have already suggested, arriving at a logically indubitable conclusion is a not a *prima facie* value within Wilde's criticism; on these grounds, *De Profundis*, can well be called the culmination of Wildean aesthetics.

However, the fact that the nature of the aesthetic experience is mysterious does not mean that it is merely sensuous and lacking an intellectual dimension; on the contrary, for Wilde – even though he suggests that observing the aesthetic *solely*

from an intellectual distance is an attempt doomed to fail – the aesthetic experience still enfolds strong intellectual potency, and thus is entitled to intellectual examination.

### 5.3.1. The Intellect of the Aesthetic

In order to at least partially unveil the 'mystery' of transformation, one can examine the aesthetic process phase by phase. As I have already suggested (in 4.3), in Wilde's earlier criticism, one can observe a paradox between *conscious-intellectual* and *sensual-emotional* perceptions of the artwork. This paradox can best be approached by dissecting the aesthetic experience into different loci of concern: creation, reception and interpretation. In *De Profundis,* Wilde returns to the idea presented in 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist', namely that culture (manifesting itself through language, Art, 'histories', myths, morality and the like) actually makes the world what it is. He now writes:

> I said in *Dorian Gray* that the great sins of the world take place in the brain, but *it is in the brain that everything takes place*. We know now that we do not see with the eye or hear with the ear. They are merely *channels for the transmission*, adequate or inadequate, *of sense-impressions.* It is in the brain that a poppy is red, that the apple is odorous, that the skylark sings.
>
> *De Profundis, CW*, 1033 (my emphasis)

Thus, Wilde's denunciation of the aesthetic experience as *merely* sensuous is further in the past than ever: sense-impressions now become more tightly tied to the intellectual experiences, since they both are located in the same place, our brain. However, the problem of how the conscious and unconscious dimensions of the aesthetic are inter-linked still remains.

The Wildean paradox concerned with the unconscious *within* the consciousness, as it were, serves to show how *unaware* we actually are of the fact that most of what we consider as 'natural', 'true' or 'self-evident' is actually highly arbitrary and based on cultural inventions, most often introduced to us, in one way or another, through Art. Wilde's idea of how "nowadays people see fogs, not

because there are fogs but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects" ('The Decay of Lying', *CW*, 1086) is a good example of this line of thought and seems to get reinforced in *De Profundis*. The fact that not only "the sins of the world" but "everything" takes place in the brain also suggests that it is, in fact, the same locus – our brain – which inhabits both *morality* and *aesthetic* within us, and that both of these faculties embody unconscious elements as well as conscious ones.

*De Profundis* marks the revelation of what an intense effect a basic *everyday life experience* may have upon us. As an example, Wilde describes an incident which took place in prison; the doctor allowed him to have white bread to eat instead of "the coarse black or brown bread of ordinary prison fare" (*CW,* 1034). This very basic sensuous experience, tasting white bread, suddenly becomes highly substantial:

> To you it will sound strange that dry bread could possibly be a delicacy to anyone. I assure you that to me it is so much so that at the close of each meal I carefully eat whatever crumbs may be left on my tin plate … and do so not from hunger … but simply in order that nothing should be wasted of what is given to me. So one should look on love.
>
> *De Profundis, CW*, 1034

This experience, *in a way,* parallels with Proust's Narrator's experience with a simple taste of a madeleine dipped in tea, in which "the whole of Combray [where the Narrator spent his childhood summers] and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity [seem to] spr[i]ng into being… from [his] teacup" (Proust, 1982:51). This kind of expanding one's sensuous experience (no matter how simple it may be) into the intellectual-aesthetic realm is the very core of the 'transformation' that both Baudelaire and Wilde describe.

Thus, in both Wilde and Proust, a simple sensuous experience can function as an essential element in the process of *becoming*: it transports us to experience another dimension, which is emotional and aesthetic, and eventually intellectual. In so doing, the sensation leads one into a process of transformation. What is most significant in the aesthetic experience is that the *experience transforms us*, not the other way around. This idea also feeds into Wilde's view according to which not

even the process of creation should be a based on conscious effort to describe the world or our emotions, to copy them 'as they really are'. Real life does not provide material for conscious creation – since "Art only begins where Imitation ends" (*CW,* 1039) – but it is a substantial element in the *creative consciousness* of the critic. The task of the critic is to mark the connection between his real life experience and the aesthetic one, and thus 'individualize' the work of art, to "reveal in [it] what the artist has not put there" (*CW*, 1154).

The significance of the *communication* between Life and Art – the confluence of the sensuous-emotional and the spiritual-intellectual dimension within an aesthetic experience – forms the foundation for an aesthetic contemplation within *De Profundis.* Mere sensation, trigged by beauty, mere "distinction, charm … and imaginative power" (*CW,* 1075), for which Wilde pants in 'The Decay of Lying', no longer suffice. In *De Profundis*, all of these elements are still very significant contributors to the aesthetic experience, but Wilde now brings to light his need to find *spirituality* behind Beauty. He writes:

> Still, I am conscious now that behind all this Beauty, satisfying though it be, there is some Spirit hidden of which the painted forms and shapes are but modes of manifestation, and it is *with this Spirit that I desire to become in harmony*. I have grown tired of the articulate utterances of men and things. *The Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature – this is what I am looking for and … it is absolutely necessary for me to find it somewhere*.
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1057 (my emphasis)

This view differs markedly from the claims such as "all Art is quite useless" (*CW,* 17) or "art never expresses anything but itself" (*CW,* 1087). For the author of *De Profundis*, some ultimate reality or truth awaits to be discovered, even beyond the aesthetic experience *per se*. "Beautiful untrue things" (*CW,* 1090) that Art represents are not regarded as being *superior* to Life anymore, but rather also the subject of Life finally becomes beautiful. In the following section, I will turn to look at Wilde's ultimate outlook on truth. At this point, it is clear that the process of transformation between Art and Life plays a central role in Wilde's reassessment of truth.

## 5.4. Reassessment of Truth

> The fatal errors of life are not due to man's being unreasonable: an unreasonable moment can be one's finest moment. They are due to man's being *logical*. There is a wide difference.
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1000 (my emphasis)

The line of thought presented in the above passage seems to govern Wilde's philosophy of art: thinking logically does not save one from the misfortunes of Life, nor does it contribute to one's comprehension of Art, since neither Life nor Art, for Wilde, are logically constructed or realised. Due to this kind of hyperbolic (and often cunning) nature of Wilde's criticism, defining his sincere outlook on the role of truth with respect to aesthetics is extremely challenging. In the context of *De Profundis*, however, one has the benefit of reading a text which, at last, seems to be written with utmost gravity; moreover, the contents of this text are concerned with the very the issues of sincerity and truth. For these reasons, *De Profundis* can be regarded as a source *par excellence* when one sets out to investigate how the value and nature of truth are ultimately assessed in Wilde's philosophy of art.

Already at the time of *Intentions* (1891), Wilde's view of truth can be regarded as highly individualistic. For example, in 'The Decay of Lying', through the exemplification of how Art and language shape our consciousness and view of the world, Wilde arrives at the conclusion that a collective, objective reality is impossibility in itself, and therefore very little can be said about the existence of any 'normative' truth, either. In the article 'Philosophies for the Use of the Young', which was published in 1894 in *Chameleon*, Wilde remarks that "a truth ceases to be truth when more than one person believes in it" (*CW,* 1245). A remark like this in earlier Wilde may also be regarded as merely ironic – as an attempt to trig controversy and amazement – rather than as an expression of a sincere conviction. In *De Profundis*, however, individualistic conception of truth is regarded with supreme severity.

Some significant changes have taken place in the line of thought of a man who, again in 'Philosophies for the Use of the Young', remarks "only the shallow know themselves" (*CW*, 1244), to the outlook of the author of *De Profundis* who writes:

> The important thing, the thing that lies before me, the thing that I have to do … is to absorb into my nature all that has been done to me, make it part of me, to accept it without a complaint, fear, or reluctance. *The supreme vice is shallowness.* Whatever is realised is good.
>
> *De Profundis, CW* 1020 (my emphasis)

Also Wilde's *perspective* to truth thus differs from the one presented in 'The Decay of Lying' where he concentrates on lying rather than truth, and particularly, lying in Art. "Lying for its own sake" is viewed as the artist's best friend, since attempting to describe any 'objective' truth is regarded as the most severe mistake in Art. In *De Profundis*, however, Wilde's counter-pair for truth is not lying for its own sake, but rather lying to *oneself*. He now counter-poses *self-deception* and *self-development*; the latter is portrayed as an absolute fulfilment of artistic life. Self-deception, then again, is asserted to be an artist's worst enemy. Taking himself as an example, Wilde writes:

> When first I was put to prison some people advised me to try and forget who I was. It was ruinous advice. It is only by realising what I am that I have found comfort of any kind. […] *To reject one's own experiences is to arrest one's own self-development. To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life.*
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1020 (my emphasis)

And yet, even though Wilde writes at length about the financially, ethically and aesthetically degrading effects that his affair with Douglas has wrought on him, he still does not "regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure" (*CW,* 1026). Wilde sees that each moment of his past life has been a significant contributor to the state of mind he has now reached:

> I wanted to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world, and that I was going out into the world with that passion in my soul. And so, indeed, I went out, and so I lived. My only mistake was that I confined myself exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sungilt side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom. Failure, disgrace, poverty, sorrow… remorse that makes one walk in thorns, conscience that condemns … all these were things of which I was afraid. *And as I had determined to know nothing of them, I was forced to taste each of them in turn.*
>
> *De Profundis, CW*, 1026 (my emphasis)

Thus, Wilde regards all of experiences, both pleasant as well as morbid, as contributory elements in the development of his personality, and presents Humility deriving from those experiences as the "ultimate discovery at which [he has] arrived: the starting-point for a fresh self-development" (*CW,* 1018). The fact that Wilde takes himself and his personal experiences as the starting point of his representation of his outlook on truth, serves, in its own way, to illustrate how Wilde's final assessment is that truth is, first and foremost, a matter of an individual's self-realisation.

### 5.4.1. Individualistic Truth(s): "One cannot give [Humility] away, and another may not give it to one"[7]

In 4.4, I discussed parallels and differences between Wilde and Nietzsche's views of the value of truth. As we have seen, Nietzsche's individualism and his individualistic view of truth, as presented in *Joyful Wisdom,* include some similar elements to Wilde's earlier philosophy, for example the idea of that one should make one's life into art. According to Cooper et al, Nietzsche, "faced with [the] terrible knowledge brought by that intellectual 'honesty' which defines the scientist in general and the philosopher in particular" stated that one should turn from science to "to the 'cult of the untrue' … not primarily, [to] the art of artworks but *art … which has our own life as its product*" (Cooper et al. 1992: 305, my emphasis). Thus, Nietzsche's idea is that only by annulling all attempts to discover any

[7] *De Profundis, CW,* 1018

objective, normative truth, we can free ourselves from the sphere of influence (and depression) of others and become truly individualistic. The process of becoming "the poet of [one's] life" thus requires refusal of truth as such and prompts us to *create* our own life rather than just passively take it as it comes.

One of the motivations behind Nietzsche's nihilism towards the existence of any collective truth is exactly to distinguish oneself from the 'herd'. Thus, the rejection of any normative value of truth originates in "the preservation of the individual" (as oppose to "the preservation of the herd") in eccentricity and isolation, both of which Nietzsche regards as "the source of the creativity and originality that are the core of human existence" (Medina and Wood, 2005:10). However, for Nietzsche, "the cult of untrue" and the idea of becoming "the poets of our lives" means that we must filter our experiences through a kind of insincerity, avoiding honesty, in order to obtain this "divinely *artificial kind of life*" (quoted in Cooper et al. 1992: 305, my emphasis). More importantly, Nietzsche states that we must learn from the Greeks how to "stop courageously at the surface" and how to be "superficial – *out of profundity"* (quoted in Cooper et al. 1992:305). Thus, according to Nietzsche profundity in itself is pretentious and merely serves to maintain certain power-relations within the society; similarly, the conception of 'truth' is a medium of subjugating the individual.

Even though Wilde's earlier criticism also acknowledges the inter-changeable and relative nature of truth (examined especially in 'The Truth of Masks', [1885] 1891), his view is never straightforwardly nihilistic, and becomes even less so in *De Profundis.* As the title suggests, this texts is not concerned with stepping "out of profundity" but with ideas *from* profundity. Wilde's outlook remains highly individualistic, but, unlike Nietzsche, Wilde considers sincerity and profoundness as essential elements in an individual's self-development and deems shallowness as "the supreme vice" (*CW,* 1020). In opposition to Nietzsche, *the individual truth* in each of us makes us unique and separates us from the 'herd'.

Wilde is not simply taking life 'as it comes', either, regardless of the new emphasis on humility presented in *De Profundis*. Wilde does not endorse *passivity* but rather the recognition of how all experiences – also the ones we have not sought

ourselves – can help us to understanding both Art and Life more profoundly. The glorification of sorrow and humility in *De Profundis* feeds into Wilde's aesthetic contemplation, rather than marks him as submissive. He writes: "Sorrow, and all that it teaches one, is my new world. […] I now see that sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once *the type and the test of all great art*" (*CW,* 1023-4, my emphasis).

Already in 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde wrote: "If you wish to understand others, you must intensify your own individualism" (*CW,* 1131). This remark suggests that, for Wilde, individualism was never at the service of simply selfish ends. Indeed, Wilde's individualism must not be confused with egoism or, as with respect to Nietzsche, any attempt to reach the state of a *Übermensch,* an almighty man. For Wilde, *all* individual truths are valuable and equal. Furthermore, Wilde's interpretation of individualism has its agnostic-Christian overtones; he calls Christ "the Supreme Individualist" (*CW,* 1030) but remarks on how Christ nevertheless "pointed out that there was no difference at all between the lives of others and one's own life" (ibid.).

For Wilde, individualism is not solely a matter of empowerment (at least not in *De Profundis*); it is also a matter of how to *surrender*. The same applies to Art: the effects of the aesthetic experience upon us are beyond our control, and we first need to yield to the experience in order to be able to use it as a means of self-development or as a source of strength. Yet, as the aesthetic experience transforms us, it *empowers* us, but only after we have approached it with "absolute Humility" (*CW*, 1018).

Also in Nietzsche's philosophy, Art functions as a means of empowerment, although without the respectful attitude towards the powers of the artwork. "If art is true, for Nietzsche," Eagleton appositely remarks in his *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, "it is only because its illusoriness embodies the truth that there is no truth" (1990: 256). Art's function is thus to pave the individual's way in becoming an *Übermensch* by setting an example of how to alter the 'truth'. Becoming the "poets of [one's] life" means that one becomes the creator of one's own reality, which enables one to step out of the sphere of influence of the 'herd'.

Thus Nietzsche and Wilde part company. The ultimate individualistic truth for Nietzsche seems to be that every 'truth' is based on lies and only functions as a means of empowerment. In *De Profundis,* Wilde considers individualistic truth as something that is only attainable through Humility, which he describes as

> the ultimate discovery at which [he has] arrived. […] Of all things it is the strangest. *One cannot give it away, and another may not give it to one. One cannot acquire it, except by surrendering* everything that one has.
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1018 (my emphasis)

Thus, Wilde's ultimate view is far from *nihilistic:* truth – individual, fluctuating and unfixed as it may be – does *exist,* even though it is not necessarily consciously and voluntarily accessible as such but only concretized within individual's mind at an unpredictable moment in time.

Wilde's individualistic outlook on truth also embodies elements of Intuitionalism. According to intuitional theories, there is "a unique faculty of insight that is independent of both sense experience and rational intellect" in each of us (Beardsley, 1981: 388). Albeit Wilde suggests that the aesthetic process represents a kind of inter-play between our sensations and intellect, he never sets out to explain what are the roles of sense and intellect with respect to each other. Thus, it may well be that, for Wilde, *intuition* – by which we are, as Beardsley puts it, "able to grasp things 'internally' … not just from the outside" (ibid.) – forms a kind of no-man's-land in between our sensations and understanding.

### 5.4.2 The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth?

Through the examination of Wilde's outlook on individualistic truths, I have already shown that Wilde considers truth as something pluralistic; for Wilde, a normative, fixed and uniform truth is nothing but an abstract concept. In the following, I will briefly summarize the significant features that have entered Wilde's outlook on truth by the time of *De Profundis,* and suggest how the *aesthetic experience* can function as a means of self-realisation, and, therefore, also as a means of attaining (parts of) one's individual truth.

In his essay 'On the Nature of Truth', Bertrand Russell discusses the non-sustainability of the monistic theory of truth, the idea that there is *a* truth that can be understood as a whole. First of all, Russell points out how each 'whole' is always a composition of parts and how there is no way of distinguishing these parts from one another. Thus, also *a* 'truth', according to Russell, consists of multiple components – truth*s* in plural – rather than forms any "significant whole" as such. He writes:

> In a 'significant whole' each part, since it involves the whole and every other part, is just as complex as the whole … Since, moreover, the whole is constitutive of the nature of each part, just as much as each part is of the whole, we may say that *the whole is part of each part.*
>
> Russell, 2004: 179 (my emphasis)

Russell thus calls for the unveiling of the structure of truth; truth is portrayed as a web of elements all of which equally contribute to the 'whole'. Along these lines, the concept of 'whole truth' becomes paradoxical; a 'whole truth' cannot exist separately from its components, individual truths. This kind of acknowledgement of truth as something fragmented and relative can be found already in Wilde's criticism.

For Wilde, one's own soul represents, in a way, the kind of 'whole' Russell examines; it has parts, each of which functions for a specific purpose and feed into the entity of one's own self. The truth of an individual – the "significant whole" of our personality and identity – consists of multiple separate but interrelated elements, each of which is significant to the whole:

> For just as the body absorbs things of all kinds…so the Soul, in its turn, has its nutritive functions also, and can transform into noble moods of thought, and passions of high import what in itself is base, cruel and degrading: nay more, may find in these its most august modes of assertion, and often reveal itself most perfectly through what was intended to desecrate or destroy.
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1021

Thus, as I have already suggested above, Wilde's individualistic truth can be regarded as consisting of the process of *self-development*, within which very experience counts. Furthermore, both the process of self-development and that of

discovering (one's individual) truth can be paralleled to the aesthetic experience, within which, respectively, each part and feature of a work of art (created or perceived) is essential for the work as a whole and contributes to the experience the artwork offers us.

The three loci of concern of the aesthetic process – creation, reception and interpretation – are all significant in their own right, since each of these stages contains a truth of its own. What counts in (and what only becomes accessible through) an aesthetic experience is the convergence of Art and Life, the coming-together of the subjective and the objective. This *process of becoming*, this transformation, for Wilde, is as close to the truth as one can get.

Thus, on the one hand, Art without Life – without an individual's recognition of oneself within a work of art – is dead Art. Life without Art, on the other hand, is keeping an essential part of oneself – the part that reciprocates to Beauty – hidden altogether. A Life without Art is one within which there are fewer options; there is no room for 'useless' things, such as Beauty, in it. It is Life that is governed by the simple instinct to *survive,* thus primitive. Alternatively, a life without Art can also be a scenario of the future governed by the pursuit of profit, reason, logic and so on, making all 'useless' things highly overlooked and redundant – a Life that does not value *questions* unless they can be answered in any conclusive way.

The scenario of logic and reasoning taking over the sphere of Art can be seen as the ultimate reason behind Wilde's refusal to formulate a consistent theory of art. Art itself, Wilde reminds us, is concerned exactly with questions without uniform or conclusive answers; Art is "a veil rather than a mirror" (*CW,* 1082). It is a garden in which questions, individual views, responses and interpretations, may flourish freely and endlessly, and Wilde encourages us to step in and wonder at its many marvels.

# 6. Conclusions

> The great things in life are what they seem to be,
> and for that reason […] often difficult to interpret.
>
> *De Profundis, CW,* 1007

In the introduction to my thesis, I set out to explore whether it can be said that Wilde formulated a theory of art. I anticipated, considering the paradoxical nature of Wilde's aesthetic argumentation filled with irony and linguistic play, that the examination Wilde's critical works would result in exposing a somewhat internally inconsistent theory, or, indeed, an anti-theory. On the basis of a closer examination of some of the key texts in Wilde's criticism, however, it appears that rather than establishing *a theory* (or, an anti-theory), Wilde aspires to display an entire philosophy of art. In his essays, alongside with his discussion about Art, Wilde constantly observes Life in its various forms: he moves from the declarations such as "all art is quite useless" (*CW,* 17) and "Art never presents anything but itself" (*CW,* 1087) to denoting how Art actually serves as the foundation for all human consciousness. Our aptitude to understand the world in a particular way is a result of Art's effects on us. This complex and paradoxical relationship between Art and Life is highly representative of the contradictory nature of Wilde's argumentation.

Inconsistency and the multiple paradoxes within Wilde's aesthetics, not to mention the irony he constantly cultivates in his essays, prompts one to question whether Wilde can be taken seriously as a critic, and, also, whether he himself did so. One does not need to look further than to Wilde's essays (particularly 'The Critic as Artist') to note that criticism plays a major role in Wilde's philosophy, even though he disputes the possibility of logical and coherent argumentation with respect to Art.

I argue that paradoxes have a specific function in Wilde's aesthetics. In the following, I shall return to one of the central paradoxes found within Wilde's work and let it illustrate the way paradoxicality contributes to Wildean criticism in so far that it *prompts conversation* and *creativity* within discussion about Art. My suggested approach to this paradox does not aim at the uniformity but rather the

*versatility* of interpretation. After all, for Wilde, Criticism, like Art, is not concerned with copying ideas but with *making them anew.* In 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young'*,* for example, Wilde distinguishes between 'acculturation' (gained through one's upbringing and education) and wisdom (gained through self-development), stating: "The well-bred contradict each other. The wise contradict *themselves*" *(CW,* 1244, my emphasis). Thus, the fact that Wilde contradicts himself does not necessarily need to imply inferiority in constructing his outlook on aesthetic matters. In *De Profundis*, he writes:

> *The trivial* in thought and action is charming. I had made it the keystone of a very brilliant philosophy expressed in plays and paradoxes. But the froth and folly of our life grew often very wearisome to me.
>
> *De Profundis, CW*, 989 (my emphasis)

In the light of Wilde's argument about wisdom as something which is related to the ability to contradict oneself (and thus to the process of self-development and self-realisation, both of which receive much attention in *De Profundis*), Wilde is not suggesting that his previous 'trivial' thought should necessarily be discussed as mere 'froth', but rather that his previous views also have their role to play in the continuum of his views on Art and Life. The fact that there is something to be reconsidered and contradicted in one's past denotes an opportunity to develop. This is an example of Wilde's celebration of paradox: by *not* providing a ready answer or advice, he compels his audience to think for themselves. Furthermore, like in the example above, he often also makes uses paradox as a meta-analytical device: proposals such as that the wise should contradict themselves, or, that the critic should "reveal in a work of art what the artist has not put there," (*CW*, 1154) leave Wilde free hands to constantly revise and develop his criticism.

### 6.1. "Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable"

One of the central paradoxes I have examined in this thesis is attached to the aesthetic experience and the roles of the artist, the public and the critic within it. On

the one hand, Wilde seems to regard the aesthetic experience as sensuous, emotional and *unconscious:* detached from morality. On the other hand, he also suggests that the aesthetic experience is something which shapes our view of the world, thus producing the basis of our *consciousness*. If it is the aesthetic upon which the very fundamental concepts and ideas of human thought are ultimately founded (for discussion, see 4.3), the aesthetic process is bound to have intellectual and even ethical dimensions as well.

My suggested approach to this paradox is the *dissection* of the Wildean aesthetic experience into different processes: one must examine the creative, the receptive, and the interpretative process separately from one another, and it is not until in the interpretative stage that theory and criticism become pertinent. One can distinguish at least three different loci of concern in Wildean aesthetic experience:

(i) the creative process, carried out by the artist, or, rather, *through* the artist;
(ii) the immediate, sensuous and emotional reception of a work of art by the public; and
(iii) the process of interpretation of a work of art by the critic, who eventually brings art to contact with intellectual faculties.

The central paradox within Wilde's philosophy of art – *that Art exists autonomously, it is detached from life, morality and consciousness, and yet, simultaneously, it forms the basis of our consciousness and thus also determines our perception of life and morality* – can be approached by observing these processes within the aesthetic experience one at the time.

However, there are paradoxes also *within the different stages* of the aesthetic experience. For example, with respect to the creative process, Wilde, on the one hand, emphasises a highly subjective, unique input of the artist, presenting imagination, which is "essentially creative and always seek[ing] a new form" (*CW,* 1083), as the primary tool of the artist. Yet, on the other hand, in 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde states that the real Artist "gains his inspiration from form, and from form purely [and] proceeds, not from feeling to form, but *from form to thought and*

*passion,*" since "a *real* passion would ruin [the Artist]" (*CW,* 1148, my emphasis). Thus, one is inclined to ask whether creative process ultimately is subjective or objective, and whether the Artist keeps repeating certain forms or actually creates something entirely new.

Wilde's outlook on the creation of a work of art seems to suggest that even if Art is basically founded upon certain set of rules and forms, the true Artist *is not aware* of the fact that it is the form that inspires him:

> [The real artist] does not first conceive an idea, and then say to himself, 'I will put my idea into a complex metre of fourteen lines,' but realising the beauty of the sonnet-scheme, he conceives certain modes of music and methods of rhyme, and the mere form suggests what is to fill and make it intellectually and emotionally complete.
>
> 'The Critic as Artist, *CW,* 1148

Thus, the creative process, albeit being inspired by a particular form, is not a *conscious endeavour to follow* this form. The Artist *does* have passion and feeling, but this passion originates in and is directed towards Art, not everyday life. It springs from beauty of a particular kind of mode of expression and is more withstanding than a 'real life' passion. This idea parallels with Wilde's declaration that an artist should always "love Beauty more than Truth" (*CW,* 1090) and becomes pertinent in Wilde's later contemplation in *De Profundis* on the degradation that a real life passion (Douglas) has wrought on his artistic capacity.

The *interpretative process* differs from the creative one in so far that it acknowledges and brings to light what seems to lie in the unconsciousness of the Artist; it is only by the means of criticism that "Humanity can become conscious of the point at which it has arrived" (*CW,* 1151). Thus, interpretation and criticism are the means through which consciousness steps into the sphere of Art. However, Wilde notes that art criticism should still be *creative* in its own right, since it is only by making criticism *another form of creation* that a critic is able to hold on to the idea of Art's autonomy: the critic needs to avoid all comparisons of the artwork with what, in our culture, is considered more 'real' or 'truthful' than Art (such as

'nature', 'reality' and the like) and refrain from evaluating Art through any 'normative' moral values (such as the value of truth, for example).

In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde's mouthpiece – Vivian – demonstrates the way a deliberate *conscious* appliance of a theory into a work of art in the creative stage can have disastrous consequences: according to Vivian, failure in 'modern' literature, by which he broadly refers to realism and naturalism, pertains to the attempt to apply a theory (of depicting reality objectively) to a work of art already during the creative process. Due to this kind of conscious effort, "the modernity of form and the modernity of subject-matter are entirely and absolutely wrong" (*CW,* 1077). Thus, also the separate treatment of the work of Art *in process* from the work of art released and *opened for interpretation* is essential in Wilde's aesthetics. According to Wilde, criticism is only applicable to an already existing work of art, never to a work of art which is still in process. Along the lines of this thought, it seems discriminatory to denounce Wilde's aesthetic arguments as a deficient theory, as one of the fundamental features – and virtues – of his criticism is exactly that it is *in process.*

In spite of all its inconsistencies, or, possibly, precisely because of them, Wilde's aesthetics "bring out the crucial need for modern criticism to develop a balanced awareness of both the personal and the traditional elements … in a particular work" (San Juan, 1967: 104). Wilde was writing in the period of transition from *fin de siècle* literature to modernism. While he acknowledged the worth of the long tradition of the significance of style and form in artistic presentation, he was, simultaneously, already celebrating the expressions of subjectivist and relativist views of truth and reality – a tendency that was to became central in modernist art. Thus, also the paradoxical situation within the field of art theories, generated by the coexistence of, on the one hand, the respect for and knowledge of centuries of aesthetic tradition, and, on the other, the demands and changes that the modern society was facing, undoubtedly had its bearing on the paradoxical style and contents of Wilde's aesthetics. The strong emphasis on individualism and subjective experience also infiltrate into his criticism, contributing to his denial of objective, wholly consistent approaches to Art.

### 6.2. "I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art"

In this thesis I have contextualised Wilde in relation to his contemporaries, the history of Western aesthetics and the vantage point of today. The modernity of Wilde's thought makes his philosophy particularly interesting for present day scholars and philosophers; there are still many topics to explore regarding Wilde's aesthetics, which hopefully will be embarked on in the near future. The ambiguity and sporadic nature that characterize Wilde's aesthetics make it highly appropriate for our (post)postmodern era and its pliable and multiple approaches to art.

Wilde's criticism should, indeed, be referred to as a *philosophy* of art rather than a *theory* of art. Even though Wilde's critical works stress the idea of Art's autonomy, they also imply that Art has a fundamental role in the workings of the whole of the human mind – within both our consciousness as well as unconsciousness. A theoretical approach always enfolds a hypothesis, anticipation for a particular outcome, some kind of desire for conclusion, whereas a philosophical approach values, as it were, the journey more than the destination. Philosophy is concerned with *contemplation* on problems, celebrating their complexity, whereas a theory tends to be more concerned with solving them.

As I have shown in the above discussion on the use of paradoxes and renouncement of consistency, Wilde's criticism stands for the significance of continuous *discussion* within art criticism and prompts the re-consideration of the conventional norms and values behind criticism itself. Wilde's viewpoint seems to be that whilst Art is a necessity for the human thought (and even sensation) to develop, it exists in its own right, *a priori* the process of Life imitating Art. Ultimately, Life, for Wilde, is not merely imitation, either, but another form of interpretation. In line with this thought, we may return to Nelson Goodman's point concerning the deep-rooted need of the human mind to *theorize*; the aptitude to make theories or compose stories and apply them to everyday life in order to make things *seem* coherent and logical (when, in fact, they seldom are) is a basic element of the human psyche.

Thus, the final great paradox seems to arise: For Wilde, criticism seems essentially important (as a means of understanding how essential Art is for our consciousness), yet in his essays he does not only satirize modes of expression usually applied in theoretical argumentation by his paradoxical, ironic and inconsistent approach, but furthermore seems to undermine the prospects that theory could perform any useful *function*. In the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde writes:

> We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making useless thing is that one admires it immensely. All art is quite useless.
>
> *The Picture of Dorian Gray, CW*, 17

Criticism was certainly something Wilde admired; thus, if we follow the logic of the above argument in reverse, criticism does not necessarily need to be *useful* (in a practical sense). What is noteworthy is that by stating that Art is *useless* Wilde is not suggesting that it would therefore lack *value.* On the contrary, it is the very 'uselessness' of Art that establishes its position as something free of social norms and demands, as well as from 'nature' itself. The same applies to Wildean criticism: if a practical application of Wilde's aesthetical 'theory' seems impossible, the reason for this pertains to Wilde's revelation of how even the interpretative process (although conscious and intellectual) does not need to proceed in a predictable way, or result in any definite conclusion. Art criticism should, in this sense, be as creative and autonomous as Art itself, and the critic should engage in creative reflection, which produces manifold perspectives, rather than follow a particular perspective and pattern in order to reach a particular conclusion.

"What criticism really is," Gilbert declares in 'The Critic as Artist', "is the record of one's own soul. […] It deals with… the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind" (*CW,* 1125); thus, criticism attaches Art to our consciousness by making us realize its unconscious dimensions and the effects of the aesthetic upon us. Wilde notes how "Art is not symbolic of any age [but rather] it is the ages that are her symbols" (*CW,* 1087): *what* we are and *how* we are is based on the

example Art sets us. Since Art therefore ultimately consist of fine lies, the only 'truths' we can ultimately grasp (through Art) are neither normative nor objective.

Particularly in *De Profundis*, Wilde emphasizes individualism as superior mode of both thought and conduct. Nonetheless, he also acknowledges the idea of an aesthetic experience as a meeting point between people. Wilde's cosmopolitanism, which I examined in chapter three, springs from this very idea of communicative elements embodied in Art: Art offers us modes of communication that are beyond the restrictions of every day communication. As Isenberg points out, "it is a function of criticism to bring about communication at the level of the senses, that is, to induce a sameness of vision, of experienced content" (1973: 163). Wildean criticism is not concerned with providing *models* of interpretation; rather, its function is to allow us to find points of similarity between our own interpretation and someone else's, and thus enable us to discover something about the essence of the work of art. Criticism, too – even though it has its intellectual and philosophical dimensions – is primarily concerned with receptiveness and creativity, not with drawing conclusions: it "creates that serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake, and *loves it not the less because it knows it to be unattainable*" (*CW,* 1153, my emphasis).

Thus, for Wilde, there is no such thing as conscious creativity, but – in the form of criticism – Art has an intellectual dimension: *creative consciousness*. Even though Art is by no means regarded as capricious before the critic's intervention, a correct approach employed by the critic can contribute to the aesthetic experience by adding more substance. For distinguishing a suggested 'correct' approach within Wilde's contemplations *is* possible, despite the paradoxicality of his criticism. Ultimately, there is at least one idea which is in harmony with everything else Wilde opines: when examining Art, one must avoid following the rules we apply to our everyday life in the pursuit of practical outcome or profit as possible – rather, one must yield to the rules written in Art's own legislation: an endless book of questions. Criticism may be regarded as "the purest form of personal impression … the record of one's own soul" (*CW,* 1125) exactly because it activates and joins both the sensuous-emotional as well as the spiritual-intellectual domains of our mind.

Since "all Art is quite is useless" (*CW,* 17), Wilde considers any attempts to form 'useful' methods that aim at making artworks more *accessible* as doomed to fail. Acknowledging that "there is nothing sane about worship of beauty [because] it is too splendid to be sane" (*CW,* 1144), Wilde reminds us that whilst we cannot *know* our final destination as regards to a work of art and the aesthetic experience (whether it be creation, reception or criticism), we might as well enjoy the journey. Wilde himself foresaw that "those of whose lives [the worship of beauty] forms the dominant note will always seem to the world to be pure visionaries" (*CW,* 1144). With reference to Wilde, however, to be called a "pure visionary" can be regarded as a first-class compliment.

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# Finnish Summary

Pro gradu –tutkielmani tarkoitus on valottaa irlantilaisen kirjailijan Oscar Wilden (1854-1900) vähemmän tunnettua työtä ja ajattelua taidekriitikkona. Wilden vaikutus vuosisadan lopun ja modernismin välisen siirtymävaiheen estetiikassa on merkittävä, mutta siitä huolimatta hänen estetiikkakäsityksiinsä liittyvä tutkimus on jäänyt ihmeteltävän vähäiseksi. Wilden elinaikana hänen esittämänsä taiteenfilosofian tulenarkuutta lisäsivät hänen kritiikkinsä sisältämät sosio-poliittiset kaiut: vaikka Wilde keskittyykin pääasiassa taiteeseen, hänen esseensä – samaan tapaan kuin hänen näytelmänsä – ottavat silti purevan satiirisesti kantaa viktoriaanisen yhteiskunnan ilmiöihin ja epäkohtiin. Se, että Wilde kerta toisensa jälkeen kritisoi muun muassa koulutusta, Englannin kirkkoa, lehdistöä, yliopistolaitosta sekä teorioiden ja oppisuuntausten olemassaoloa ylipäätään, riittänee selittämään miksi Wildea ei hänen elinaikanaan haluttu ottaa vakavasti kriitikkona.

Myöhäisemmässä vaiheessa Wilden estetiikkaa lähestyneet tutkijat taas ovat joutuneet toteamaan, että jonkin teoreettisen mallin tai argumentatiivisen kokonaisuuden sijaan Wilden esseet jättävät lukijansa kasvokkain pikemminkin eräänlaisen *antiteorian* kuin teorian kanssa. Wilden kriittiset esseet eivät muodosta ’harmonista’ argumentatiivista kokonaisuutta, vaan suorastaan vilisevät paradokseja ja keskenään ristiriitaisia ajatuksia. Nimenomaan tämä piirre Wilden estetiikassa tekee siitä kuitenkin hyvin mielenkiintoisen ja ajankohtaisen (post)postmodernin taiteentutkimuksen kannalta. Wilden kriittinen ajattelu sisältää monia elementtejä, jotka levisivät estetiikan alalla yleisemmän ’hyväksynnän’ piiriin vasta modernismin ja postmodernismin myötä; Wilde käsittelee esseissään muun muassa kielen pettävyyttä, sellaisten perustavien käsitteiden kuin ’todellisuus’, ’luonto’ ja ’yhteiskunta’ sattumanvaraisuutta (*arbitrariness)* sekä yhteisön ja yksilön identiteettien fragmentoitumista. Hän myös kyseenalaistaa – paradoksien ja kielellisten nokkeluuksien suosiollisella avustuksella – monia ’normatiivisina’

pidettyjä arvoja, kuten muun muassa totuuteen pyrkimisen. (Itse asiassa, Wilde kyseenalaistaa koko absoluuttisen totuuden olemassaolon.

## Tutkimuskysymykset

Tein taiteesta filosofiaa ja filosofiasta taidetta.

Wilde, *De Profundis,* 117

Eräs tämän tutkielman tärkeimmistä tutkimuskysymyksistä on, voidaanko ylipäätään puhua Wilden taiteen*teoriasta*? Hänen kriittisissä esseilleen ominaisia ja keskeisiä piirteitä ovat paradoksaalisuus ja (osittainen) epäjohdonmukaisuus. Wilden kriittiset esseet eivät siis muodosta ristiriidatonta kokonaisuutta – eivätkä edes *pyri* muodostamaan sellaista. Wilden kohdalla onkin syytä puhua taide*filosofiasta* taiteen*teorian* sijaan, mikäli termiin 'teoria' liitetään oletus jonkinlaisen pragmaattis-loogisen mallin rakentamisesta taiteen ymmärtämiseksi. Wilden kritiikki nimittäin korostaa normatiivisten mallien muodostamisen turhuutta ja keinotekoisuutta; pikemminkin Wilde pyrkii osoittamaan, että keskustelua taiteesta on mahdotonta tuoda päätökseen ja että jonkin loogisen mallin soveltaminen taiteeseen on yhtä turhaa kuin koittaa soveltaa sellaista elämään.

Eräs keskeisimmistä teemoista Wilden filosofiassa onkin juuri taiteen ja elämän välinen vastakkainasettelu, ja samanaikaisesti niiden välisen yhteyden tunnistaminen ja tunnustaminen: taide on samaan aikaan sekä autonomista että subjektiivista. Vaikka Wilde etenkin aikaisemmassa tuotannossaan puolustaakin kiihkeästi taiteen autonomisuutta, hänen estetiittiset pohdintansa sisältävät aina myös eettisiä, ontologisia ja metafysiisiä ulottuvuuksia. Esimerkiksi *Valehtelun rappiossa* Wilde esittää, että hahmotamme maailmaa ja elämäämme – sekä mennyttä, nykyistä että tulevaa – yksinomaan taiteen kautta.

Toinen tutkimuskysymykseni liittyy Wilden esseissä esiintyviin paradokseihin. Tämän tutkielman yksi päämäärä on osoittaa miten nämä ristiriitaisuuden elementit Wilden filosofiassa itse asiassa toimivat tärkeinä tiennäyttäjinä, kun etsitään tapaa lähestyä *taidetta itseään.* Wilden mukaan muun muassa kriitikon tehtävä on olla yhtä (ja jopa vahvemminkin) luova kuin taiteilija.

## Lähteet ja rakenne

Ensisijaiset lähteeni, joihin tämän tutkimuksen analyyttinen osuus perustuu ovat Wilden *Intentions*-kokoelmassa julkaistu essee *Valehtelun rappio* (’The Decay of Lying’, 1891) sekä *De Profundis* (1962), Wilden Reading Gaolin vankilassa kirjoittama pitkä kirje entiselle rakastajalleen Sir Alfred Douglasille. Analysoimalla ja vertaamalla näitä kahta tekstiä pyrin myös osoittamaan millainen muutos Wilden estetiikkakäsityksessä on tapahtunut *Intentions*-kokoelman julkaisun ja Wilden vangitsemisen välisenä aikana. Kontrasti on melkoinen; *Valehtelun rappion* ironinen ja viihdyttävä tyyli sekä liioittelevat argumentit ovat vaihtuneet *De Profundiksessa* syvälliseen melankoliseen pohdintaan selä vilpittömyyden, surun ja nöyryyden ihannointiin.

Tutkielmani koostuu kuudesta luvusta, joista ensimmäinen on esittely tämän tutkielman tavoitteista. Toisessa luvussa kontekstualisoin Wilden estetiikkakäsityksen länsimaisen taiteenfilosofian valtavirtoihin. Kyseisessä luvussa tarkastelen Wilden suhdetta edeltäjiinsä, erityisesti (i) antiikin filosofian, (ii) romantiikan sekä (iii) Wilden aikalaisten kuten Walter Paterin ja John Ruskinin sekä ”taidetta taiteen vuoksi” -liikkeen estetiikkakäsitysten kautta. Tämän luvun tarkoitus ei ole kategorisoida Wildea minkään tietyn esteettisen suuntauksen edustajaksi, vaan pikemminkin osoittaa, että Wilden työtä on tarkasteltava *mahdollisimman monissa erilaisissa viitekehyksissä*, jotta kykenemme ymmärtämään hänen taiteenfilosofiansa todellisen moniulotteisuuden ja haastavuuden.

Kolmas luku valottaa Wilden suhdetta oman aikansa taidepoliittiseen ilmapiiriin sekä esittelee hänen ensimmäisen esseekokoelmansa *Intentions* (1891). Tässä luvussa tarkastelen myös Wilden esimodernistisia ajatuksia liittyen kieleen ja totuuteen sekä käsittelen kosmopoliittisuuden merkitystä Wilden taiteenfilosofialle sekä ’wildelaiselle’ kriitikolle.

Neljännessä luvussa siirryn analysoimaan Wilden aikaisempaa estetiikkakäsitystä *Valehtelun rappio* –esseessä esitettyjen keskeisten argumenttien kautta; nämä argumentit ovat:

(i) ”Taide ei koskaan ilmaise mitään muuta kuin itseään”,

(ii) ”Kaikki huono taide syntyy siitä että palataan elämään ja luontoon ja korotetaan ne ihanteiksi”,

(iii) ”Elämä jäljittelee taidetta paljon enemmän kuin taide elämää”, ja

(iv) ”Valehteleminen, kauniiden epätotuuksien kertominen on taiteen varsinainen päämäärä.”

Alati läsnäoleva ironia, esseen paikoin hyvinkin liioitteleva tyyli sekä muoto – Platonin mallin mukainen avoimeksi jäävä dialogi – tuovat oman lisänsä tulkinnan haastavuuteen. Niiden takia lopullisen johtopäätelmien tekeminen siitä, mikä Wilden näkökulma asioihin itse asiassa on jää paljolti lukijan oman harkintakyvyn ja tulkinnan varaan. Tämän esseen pohjalta tarkastelen Wilden käsityksiä (i) taiteen autonomisuudesta ja taiteilijan roolista, (ii) taiteen ja todellisuuden suhteesta, (iii) esteettisen kokemuksen problematiikasta sekä (iv) taiteen ja totuuden suhteesta.

Viidennessä luvussa käsittelen *De Profundista* ja keskityn samoihin teemoihin kuin *Valehtelun rappiota* analyysissäni. Tuon esiin ne muutokset, joita Wilden taidefilosofiassa voidaan katsoa tapahtuneen *Intentions*-esseekokoelman ja *De Profundiksen* kirjoittamisen välisenä aikana. Etenkin tietyt painotukset Wilden suhtautumisessa taiteeseen ja elämään ovat muuttuneet: siinä missä *Valehtelun rappio* leikittelee ajatuksella, jonka mukaan taiteen ensisijainen tehtävä on olla mahdollisimman kaukana totuudesta, *De Profundiksessa* taide esitetään ensisijaisesti merkittävänä osatekijänä ihmisen identiteetin ja luonteen kehityksessä. Esteettinen kokemus on tärkeä valonnäyttäjä yksilön matkalla kohti hänen *omaa subjektiivista totuuttaan*, koska se yhdistää ainutlaatuisella tavalla elämän ja taiteen, etiikan ja estetiikan, konkreettisen ja abstraktin, objektiivisen ja subjektiivisen.

## Päätelmät

Oppineet kumoavat toistensa ajatuksia, viisaat omiaan.
(Wilde, ’Lausahduksia ja filosofiaa nuorten käyttöön’, 1849, oma käännökseni)

Keskeinen aihepiiri Wilden estetiikkakäsitystä tutkittaessa on taiteen ja elämän välinen suhde, ja siihen liittyvät myös tärkeimmät Wilden esseissä esiintyvät

paradoksit. Wilden mukaan taide on autonomista eikä ”koskaan ilmaise mitään muuta kuin itseään” (*Valehtelun rappio*, 74). Tästä syystä taide menettää todellisen arvonsa – itseisarvonsa – jos se koetetaan valjastaa esimerkiksi moraalin tai koulutuksen palvelukseen. Silti samaisessa esseessä esitetään argumentti, jonka mukaan koko ajattelumme ja se mitä pidämme ’luonnollisena’ tai ’todellisena’ on itse asiassa taiteen meille opettamaa; tapa jolla hahmotamme todellisuutta on taiteen kautta, jonka ainoana päämäärän tulisi olla valehtelu, ”kauniiden epätotuuksien kertominen” (*Valehtelun rappio*, 77). Taide siis on valehtelua, mutta samalla todellisuutemme pohja. Yksi keskeisimmistä Wilden filosofiassa esiintyvistä paradokseista on tällainen esteettisen ja eettisen, kuvitelman ja todellisuuden, taiteen ja elämän välinen vastakkainasettelu, ja samanaikaisesti niiden välisen yhteyden tunnistaminen ja tunnustaminen. Tämän monimutkaisen suhteen kulminoituma on *esteettinen kokemus* (niin luominen, elämys kuin tulkintakin), jossa elämä ja taide yhdistyvät yksilöllisen kokevan subjektin tasolla. Esteettisellä kokemuksella viittaan tässä tutkielmassa

(i) luomisprosessiin,

(ii) taideteoksen välittömästi meissä herättämään tunteisiin ja ajatuksiin sekä

(iii) ensireaktioiden jälkeiseen tulkintaan ja taidekritiikkiin.

Kyseisellä jaottelulla pyrin tekemään Wilden muotoilemien taideteoksen ja taiteilijan, kokijan tai kriitikon väliseen suhteeseen liittyvät mahdolliset vastakkainasettelut helpommin lähestyttäviksi. Esteettisen kokemuksen tarkasteleminen erillisinä prosesseina, eri toimijoiden kannalta, auttaa tarkastelemaan ristiriitaa, joka syntyy (i) taideteoksen itsenäisyyden, (ii) taiteilijan subjektiivisen luomisvoiman ja (iii) vastaanottajan yksilöllisen elämyksen merkityksen *samanaikaisesta* painottamisesta Wilden estetiikassa. Wilde osoittaa, miten taiteilijan ja vastaanottajan suhteet taideteokseen ovat aina yksilöllisiä ja näin ollen osaltaan edesauttavat taideteoksen autonomista olemassaoloa. Jokainen (todellinen) esteettinen kokemus on vahvasti subjektiivinen. Luomistyössä taiteilija epäonnistuu, mikäli hän pyrkii kiivasti objektiiviseen kuvaamiseen; esimerkkinä

tällaisesta tilanteesta toimivat realismin ja naturalismin kannattajat, joiden oppeja Wilde sivaltaa ankaralla kädellä *Valehtelun rappiossa.* Taiteen itsensä lisäksi myös kritiikin on Wilden mukaan ravistauduttava irti objektiivisuuden ja normatiivisuuden kahleista.

Wilden esteettisen kokemuksen eri prosesseja on myös syytä tutkia *tiedostamisen* kannalta. Wilden mukaan mielikuvitus on taiteilijan tärkein työkalu, eikä mielikuvitus milloinkaan ole *tietoisesti* tuotettua; luomisprosessi on vaarassa epäonnistua, jos taiteilija harkitusti koittaa noudattaa tiettyjä dogmeja. Samoin katsojassa, lukijassa tai kuulijassa tapahtuva taideteoksen välitön vastaanottaminen on alkuvaiheessa tiedostamaton prosessi. Vastaanottaja ei silti ole Wildelle pelkkä *tabula rasa*, jolle taideteos sanelisi tietyn impression; pikemminkin taideteos ottaa aina uuden muoden heijastellessa itseään erilaisen peilin – yksilöllisen vastaanottajan tunteiden ja aistimusten – kautta. Emme kuitenkaan kykene *tietoisesti* ohjailemaan tuntemuksiamme tietyn taideteoksen edessä.

Tiedostava prosessi taiteessa on varattu kriitikolle, joka on ensin käynyt läpi (tiedostomattoman) vastaanottoprosessin. Taideteoksen meistä riippumaton elämä, jota tietoisuutemme tai tahtomme ei kykene hallitsemaan, sekä taiteen samanaikainen intellektuaalinen ulottuvuus – vastaanottajan kyky sitoa esteettinen elämys omiin kokemuksiinsa ja tulkita sitä niiden kautta – mahdollistuvat, kun taideteoksen aiheuttamaa elämystä lähestytään vaihe vaiheelta. Viimeisessä vaiheessa, kriitikon tuodessa esteettisen kokemuksensa tietoisuuden kentälle, taiteen autonomia ja subjektiivisuus sulautuvat hetkeksi yhteen. Wilde korostaa, että julkinen mielipide vallitsee siellä, missä todellista ajattelua ei esiinny; hän korostaa yksilöllisen ja mahdollisimman luovan tulkinnan merkitystä: taiteen kohdalla ”totuus lakkaa olemasta totuutta, kun useampi kuin yksi ihminen uskoo siihen” (‘Lausahduksia ja filosofiaa nuorten käyttöön’, 1894, oma käännökseni). Lyhyesti sanottuna Wilden estetiikka siis kieltää *tietoisen luovuuden* olemassaolon mutta korostaa *luovaa tiedostamista* taideteoksen äärellä. Esteettinen kokemus on silta elämän – todellisen minämme – sekä taiteen, autonomisen kauneuden välillä. Tätä siltaa kulkiessamme käymme läpi eräänlaisen *transformaation,* kokiessamme samanaikaisesti jotain sekä hyvin subjektiivista että objektiivista.

Jos Wilden esteetikasta lähdetään jäljittämään yhtenäistä, käytännössä sovellettavaa teoriaa, huomataan pian että sellaisen löytäminen on mahdotonta; monaisten paradoksien esiintyminen Wilden esseissä vähentää tässä mielessä niiden uskottavuutta. On kuitenkin aiheellista kysyä miten oikeutettua on arvioida Wilden ajatuksia sellaisten periaatteisen perusteella, joita Wilde nimenomaan kritisoi esseissään. Wilden taidefilosofian ylenkatsominen hänen tekstien sisältämien ristiriitojen ja hyperbolien takia edellyttäisi lisäksi, että Wilden kirjoituksia tulkittaisiin sananmukaisesti. Juuri ironian ja jopa parodian jatkuva läsnäolo Wilden tekstissä tekee mahdottomaksi niissä esitettyjen ajatusten *kumoamisen*; niiden kautta Wilde kykenee sekä provosoimaan lukijaansa että jättämään viime kädessä tulkinnan ja johtopäätösten muodostamisen lukijalle itselleen. Näin myös epäjohdonmukaisuudesta tulee meriitti; Wilden tarkoitus on epäilemättä oman tekstinsä tyylin kautta osoittaa miten mahdotonta (ja naurettavaa) loogisten päätelmien ja totuusjohdanteisen teorian rakentaminen on ylipäätään, *etenkin* taiteen kohdalla.

Paradoksaalisuus ja ironia Wilden taidefilosofisissa kirjoituksissa peräänkuuluttavat sitä elintärkeää tehtävää, jota taidefilosofian ja -kritiikin olisi innolla riennettävä toteuttamaan: uusien näkökulmien kehittämistä ja luomista alati kehittyvään ja luomisvoimaiseen taiteeseen. Wilden paradoksit sekä hänen suosimansa sokraattisen dialogin tarkoitus on siis ilmaista lukijalle, ettei ole olemassa yhtä oikeaa, normatiivista tapaa lähestyä taidetta. Koska taide ja elämä itsessään ovat ristiriitaisia (ja ihmismielen liikkeet usein epäjohdonmukaisia), miten ylipäätään olisi mahdollista – ja *miksi edes tarpeellista* – muodostaa johonkin loogiseen ja ristiriidattomaan päätelmään tähtääviä teorioita taiteesta? Taide, kuten elämäkin, on jatkuvassa liikkeessä, ja näin ollen myös kritiikin on sopeuduttava tähän jatkuvan muutoksen prosessiin. Siksipä todella lähestyäkseen taidetta kritiikin on tultava enemmän taiteen kaltaiseksi – epänormatiiviseksi ja epäloogiseksi. Tässä prosessissa paradokseilla on merkittävä tehtävä: ne muistuttavat meitä siitä, että puhuttaessa taiteesta ei ole oikeita vastauksia, on vain hyviä kysymyksiä.