

ARTFUL LYING AND LIFTING THE PAINTED VEIL: SCHOPENHAUER AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ROLE OF AESTHETICS IN THE WORKS OF OSCAR WILDE

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The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that much of Wilde's literature can be interpreted in the light of his own aesthetic theories. I shall begin by outlining the substance of a number of Wilde's ideas on aesthetics; this will enable me to establish a number of important themes before showing how they provide an aesthetic and psychological basis for a number of his important works in different genres. Finally I shall demonstrate how Wilde uses the same theories as a way of explaining and coming to terms with his own life.

Most of Wilde's ideas about the role of art are to be found in two Platonic-style essays: 'The Critic as Artist' (1890) and 'The Decay of Lying' (1889). Two important ideas upon which the latter is based are that 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life', and 'the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art'; in fact, 'Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself... She is a veil rather than a mirror'.¹ One of the starting points for Wilde's idea that art is a veil may have been triggered by Shelley's sonnet: 'Lift not the painted veil which those who live / Call life...'² Shelley's point seems to be that humanity, for the most part, prefers to see life as it is not, rather than confront the suffering that is reality. The metaphor of 'the painted veil' may have suggested to Wilde's mind the role of art, because, as I shall show, art for Wilde is a way of evading reality or suffering.

Another possible and more significant source for Wilde's ideas may have been the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. That Wilde knew Schopenhauer's works is clear from the references he makes to them (e.g. he says in 'The Decay of Lying', 'Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterises modern thought, but Hamlet invented it' (p.983)), but that Wilde knew Schopenhauer's aesthetics is, arguably, reflected in his own aesthetic theory.

Broadly speaking, Schopenhauer's pessimism, that human life —the struggle for existence which is made possible by the 'will' (a kind of life-force) and which is shot through at every point by suffering— gives rise to the development of two methods by which man could overcome 'willing' or suffering. The first method was fundamentally 'ascetic' whereby the will simply wills itself out of existence. Schopenhauer favoured this 'ascetic' approach because it implied permanence, but it is the second 'aesthetic' process that probably caught Wilde's attention. Here the contemplation of an object of art elevates both man and object, affording the contemplator temporary relief from 'the miserable pressure of the will'.³ For Schopenhauer the contemplation of an object of art transports the mind from the actual world of empirical particulars to the ideal realm of the intellect or pure knowledge where willing or suffering ceases: 'All other human works,' Schopenhauer states, 'exist only for the maintenance or relief of our existence', art (or a great work of genius), however, serves no human need: it exists for its own sake.⁴

Wilde echoes this latter point both in the introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ('All art is quite useless') and in 'The Decay of Lying' when he says: 'The only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us' (p.991). Although the influence of, among others, Gautier ('Nothing is truly beautiful unless it is useless'⁵ and Pater are relevant here, the Schopenhauerian aspects will be emphasized to show how relevant the psychological role of art is as a means of escaping suffering.

Wilde's idea that art is a veil seems a natural development of Schopenhauer's basic thesis. A comparison of Wilde's possible development of it with Nietzsche's acknowledged extension of it in *The Birth of Tragedy* will help to clarify Wilde's position and show how his ideas seem naturally related to those of Schopenhauer.

Nietzsche, like Schopenhauer, accepted suffering as an inevitable condition of human nature. Man, he felt, is incapable of facing the unbearable nature of reality. What renders life possible is not truth but falsity, not reality but the illusions created by art. Art is, in fact, a veil to protect man from the terrible suffering implied by human existence.⁶ Here, as in the literature of Wilde, illusion plays an important psychological role (art is not entirely for its own sake) in enabling man to cope with life. When Wilde says in 'The Critic as Artist' that it is only through art 'that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual experience' (p.1038), he is in perfect harmony with Nietzsche who says that once man comprehends 'the horror or absurdity of existence' only art can turn his fits of nausea into 'notions' with which it is possible to live.⁷

Nietzsche states that the worship of logic entails a 'tragic insight' which 'merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and remedy',⁸ while Wilde warns that 'if something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify, our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile and beauty will pass away from the land' (p.973). Thus, for Wilde it is the decay of lying ('lying' here is one of the faculties of the human imagination and therefore to be valued above truth) that reveals the

imaginative sterility of his age. Furthermore, Wilde says that if we regard nature as a collection of phenomena external to us, 'people only discover in her what they bring to her' (and thus Wordsworth finds in stones 'the sermons he has already hidden there').⁹ Therefore, it is psychologically important that man can, and must, actively participate in the creation of reality: one of the functions of the human mind, for both Wilde and Nietzsche, is to weave a protective veil.¹⁰

Wilde's other essay on aesthetics, 'The Critic as Artist', propounds the basic theories outlined above but with an important difference: it refines them by taking them a step further. In this essay Wilde sees criticism as 'creation within a creation' and as the purest form of art because, just as the great artists 'did not go directly to life for their subject matter' but sought for it in myth, legend and ancient tale, 'so the critic deals with materials that others have... purified for him'. Criticism is more 'creative than creation' because it has the least reference to any 'standard external to itself'; in this way Wilde is able to turn one of the central tenets of criticism on its head and conclude that 'The primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not' (p.1030). Thus the critic, like the artist, is to be a kind of self-conscious Don Quixote, imaginatively transforming the primary objects of perception.

The value of criticism as an art is in its remoteness from reality, and the further it stands from fact (or reality) the more anti-Platonic and, therefore, valuable it becomes. Wilde's attitude to much of the art of his day, that it was 'just a little less vulgar than reality', meant that the critic was bound to 'turn his eyes from the chaos and clamour of actual existence' (mimetic art) and 'look into the silver mirror or through the woven veil' (p.1028). Once again, art provides a philosophical basis for coping with existence. Wilde, arguably in the tradition of Schopenhauer, emphasizes its transcendent nature: without art man is doomed to suffer the ultimate harshness and absurdity of reality. Wilde illustrated this idea parabolically in his short story 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1889) where a dwarf, on looking into a mirror, is so overcome by the reality of his own ugliness that he dies of a broken heart.

Another important idea which is expressed symbolically is that once art becomes fact it loses its value. This is demonstrated in Wilde's prose poem 'The Poet' which tells of how, at twilight, children gathered about a poet while he told them of 'the wondrous things that his mind had created' on his journey back from the city. One day the poet returns from the city and has nothing to say because, 'on that day, for the first time in his life, he had seen reality, and to a poet, fancy is reality, and reality is nothing'.¹¹ This interplay between fancy and reality is one of the central themes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and it is to Wilde's novel that I shall now turn in order to show how Wilde's aesthetic theories can be seen to serve as controlling ideas in much of his literature.

The hedonism that motivates Dorian Gray has often been described as an extreme form of Pater's creed as outlined in his *The Renaissance* (1873): 'Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end...To burn always with this hard,

gemlike flame, to maintain the ecstasy, is success in life.’¹² G. D. Klingopulos has pointed, quite rightly, to Pater as an important source for understanding the novel but has also maintained that Wilde’s novel ‘is a morality depicting the corruption of a beautiful young man by friends and doctrines recommending the importance of “aesthetic” experience as an end in itself; the term “aesthetic” is here given its vulgarist meaning of sensual indulgence and moral indifference’.¹³

What I shall show here is that there is more content to Wilde’s aesthetics than may appear from evaluations such as those mentioned above; that embodied in the structure of the novel is the blueprint of Wilde’s philosophical views concerning the importance of an ‘aesthetic’ approach to life.

In Wilde’s novel, Sibyl Vane serves as an object of contemplation; she is a symbol of the world of art. When Gray first describes Sibyl to Lord Henry, she appears, not so much as a young woman, but as a bundle of Shakespearian heroines rolled into one (p.51). This impression is reinforced when Gray relates to Wotton how he had told the proprietor of the theatre (who had offered to introduce Gray to Sibyl) ‘that Juliet had been dead for hundreds of years, and that her body was lying in a marble tomb in Verona’ (p.52). This blurring of art and reality results in Juliet, not Sibyl, having actuality in Gray’s mind. Sibyl refers to Gray as ‘Prince Charming’ and so becomes absorbed into his conception of the world: ‘She regarded me,’ he says, ‘merely as a person in a play... She knows nothing of life’ (p.52).

In chapter 7, as a result of her passion for Gray, Sibyl turns away from the world of art to face reality. In front of Gray’s friends she acts badly and explains to Gray why she can never act well again: ‘I thought that it [the theatre] was all true...Tonight for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played...’ (p.74). Gray explains to her that he loved her only because she ‘realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art’ (p.75).

This revelation of the ‘real’ world outside art is too much for Gray to bear: he has to reject Sibyl because he no longer sees her through a veil of art; art becomes fact and therefore loses its value. Sibyl is driven by this intrusion of reality to suicide, but what enables Gray to survive is an aesthetic code based on the supposed non-reality of Sibyl Vane’s existence. Under Wotton’s influence, Gray begins to regard Sibyl as little more than ‘a wonderful tragic figure, sent on to the world’s stage to show the supreme reality of love’. For Wotton, Sibyl’s death is to be seen as no more than a ‘lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy... The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died’ (p.86). That Gray accepts this creed is entirely consistent with his earlier thinking, because in doing so he merely returns her to the sphere of art. It is by treating reality as if he were the spectator of a drama that Gray is able to elude suffering: ‘To become the spectator of one’s own life’, Henry Wotton tells him ‘is to escape the suffering of life’ (p.91).

Gray looks upon his ‘unmentionable’ deeds (never fully articulated) as looked upon Sibyl: as if they were but the shadows of art. Wotton has taught Gray to place

'youth' and 'beauty' above all things, hence Gray's prayer before Hallward's canvass that he would give everything, including his soul, for the portrait to grow old while he remained forever young. Ironically, Gray unwittingly emancipates his soul in an effort to destroy the portrait: the one piece of evidence that was capable of condemning him. At the end it is Gray's inability to face reality that leads to his death and yet, paradoxically, it is his attempt to destroy art (he appears to forget his prayer) which kills him.

We can see here how theories, perhaps to some degree culled from Schopenhauer, give motivation to the plot: Wilde has Gray attempt to transcend the cycle of suffering by treating life as an artistic mode of existence. By attempting to destroy the portrait, Gray effectively destroys the veil of art which has protected him from reality: it is as if he has tried to live as an object of art or genius as Schopenhauer saw it.

Thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be seen as a reworking of Faustian myth with decadence, symbolized by Henry Wotton, as a Mephistophelean devil. In this sense Gray surrenders his soul to Wotton's creed and, with an almost fairy-tale *peripeteia*, is punished. This interpretation is to see the novel very much as Klingopulos sees it;¹⁴ but as I have shown, Gray's aestheticism is more than just a Paterian pose: it contains an important psychological component akin to Schopenhauer's aesthetics. Art not only provides a way of seeing, but also offers a means of protection from suffering and, in Gray's case, moral responsibility. In this way the plot can be seen as a series of variations on a theme (the lifting of Shelley's 'painted veil'): Sibyl Vane exists in the realm of art which protects her until she tries to face life without it; Basil Hallward idealizes Gray as an object of art, but as soon as he confronts the unpleasant truth about his subject (the reality behind the portrait) reality (literally, Dorian Gray) kills him; Gray protects himself from life by swapping roles with the portrait, but once the painting is restored to the world of art, Gray is returned to the Schopenhauerian world of willing and suffering and the physical reality of his situation kills him. Significantly, Lord Henry Wotton is the only major character to escape suffering because he alone truly regards life as if it were an object of art: as if he were a spectator of it.

The drama most closely related to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, from the point of view of Wilde's aesthetics, is *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892). In this play there is a sense in which a portrait is a symbol of perfection, and that to discover the reality behind the portrait would lead to suffering and loss.

The fact that Lady Windermere worships a miniature portrait of her mother, whom she believes to be dead and to have led a stainless life means that to discover the truth behind the miniature would destroy this illusion. Although Mrs Erlynne earns her daughter's sympathy and respect, at no point can Lady Windermere give up the ideals she associates with the portrait; a point emphasized when Mrs Erlynne remarks that she heard that Lady Windermere is devoted to her mother's memory but warns her that 'Ideals are dangerous things' and that although they wound,

'realities are better'. Lady Windermere's reply that 'We all have ideals in life. At least we all should have. Mine is my mother... If I lost my ideals, I should lose everything' (p.427) results in Mrs Erlynne concealing her identity and so truth is sacrificed to illusion.

If the miniature serves to protect Lady Windermere from the truth about her mother, then the fan functions to protect Lord Windermere from the truth about his wife. The discovery of the fan in Lord Darlington's rooms, with Mrs Erlynne's willingness to accept social ruin for the second time in order to save her daughter's reputation, enables the fan, like the miniature, to serve as the means by which illusion will prevent the suffering entailed by truth or reality.

In the final act, when Lady Windermere defends Mrs Erlynne from her husband's rebukes, she shows how she has revised her earlier simplistic, puritanical values: 'To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice' (p.429). Ultimately, however, Lady Windermere cannot live without her ideals and, like her husband, will continue to live partially 'blinded': she may think she can live with truth but even the will to see the truth is not enough; only Mrs Erlynne, who has suffered, knows the true value of illusion (achieved through 'art' or lying) and, as Wilde's aesthetic apostle, as it were, works to preserve it with portrait and fan.

Lady Windermere's idealization of her mother in some respects reflects Wilde's idea that life copies art more than art copies life. As a result of Lady Windermere's idealization, Mrs Erlynne becomes an 'ideal' mother in both the physical and symbolic sense. The idealization of Mrs Erlynne also lends support to Wilde's claim that 'things are in their essence what we choose to make them. A thing *is*, according to the mode in which one looks at it'.¹⁵ I want to show here how the character of Salomé is also the dramatic representation of this idea as well as showing how the play dramatises the other principle ideas contained in Wilde's aesthetics. Wilde's assertion that life copies art prompted Joyce to refer to *Salomé* as Wilde's 'Polyphonic variation on the rapport of art and nature'.¹⁶ Although Joyce never explained this in detail, an analysis of the play reveals that it is this rapport which symbolically reveals the contrary forces in Salomé's soul while demonstrating Wilde's dictum that life copies art more than art copies life.

The Young Syrian at the beginning of the play identifies Salomé with the moon by personifying it as 'like a little princess who wears a yellow veil... who has little white doves for feet' and who one would fancy 'was dancing'.¹⁷ The references to 'princess', 'veil' and 'dance' clearly identify the moon with Salomé while emphasizing the pure and virginal side of Salomé's nature which is in sharp symbolic contrast with how his companion, The Page of Herodias, had viewed the moon as 'like a woman rising from the tomb... like a dead woman' that one would fancy 'was looking for dead things' (p.552). That Wilde intended the moon to be regarded as the external and artistic symbol of Salomé's soul, and not just a simple

proleptic device, is also made apparent from the use he makes of verbal echoes to identify the two.

When Salomé says of the moon that she is ‘cold and chaste’; that she is a virgin and has a ‘virgin’s beauty’; that she has ‘never defiled herself’ or ‘abandoned herself to men’ (p.555), there is a sense in which the moon, like Dorian Gray’s portrait, becomes the visible emblem of *her* soul. Yet it is not only this, it is also a symbol of those who look upon it. When Herod looks upon the moon he compares it to a mad woman who is wanton, naked and seeking lovers (p.561). This reveals not only the darker side of Salomé’s soul, or what now might be termed her subconscious drives, but also Herod’s own voluptuousness; likewise, Herodias’s reply that ‘the moon is like the moon, that is all’ (p.561) reflects her emotional and spiritual sterility. Juxtaposed with the idea that the moon is an emblem is the dramatic realization of the theory that ‘things are in essence what we choose to make them’.

When Salomé attempts to woo the prophet of God, Jokanaan, her conception of him undergoes a dramatic metamorphosis each time she is repelled by him. At first the purity and undefiled nature of the prophet is stressed in images of lilies never mown and snow (p.558); yet when Jokanaan rejects Salomé, she sees his body in images which suggest death, sterility and pestilence (p.559) Later, Salomé’s advances are once again rejected and the sensuous images of grapes and cedars which she imposes on him are transformed into the images of ‘mire’, ‘dust’ and a ‘knot of black serpents’ before she becomes enamoured of his mouth: ‘Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on an ivory tower. It is a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory’ (p.559). Here things are in their essence what Salomé chooses to make them. She has depicted Jokanaan in images of white black and red: an ominous sign of what is to follow, for just as the moon (as symbol) will predict Salomé’s fate, so will Salomé’s imagery or symbolism foretell that of Jokanaan (the ‘pomegranate cut with a knife’ anticipates the scene where Jokanaan’s head is severed).

The identification between Salomé and the symbolic role of the moon reaches a climax when The Young Syrian, who can be seen to symbolize Salomé’s conscience, commits suicide. The Page of Herodias responds to the suicide by saying: ‘Well, I know that the moon was seeking a dead thing, but I knew not that it was he whom she sought’ (p.560). Ironically, the ‘moon’ has not yet found what she is seeking. If the moon is to be associated with Salomé’s soul, then it is the death of Jokanaan (or even Salomé herself) that is to be its victim; although, symbolically, Salomé needed to have ‘killed’ her conscience before she could give full vent to her passion for the prophet.

Salomé’s changing interpretations of Jokanaan’s appearance echo the earlier interpretations of the moon: the one innocent: ‘dove’, ‘flower’ and ‘virgin’; and the other indicative of death, as when the Page of Herodias says of the moon, ‘You would think it was the hand of a dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with a shroud’ (p.557). Art again prefigures reality for Salomé is destined, after stripping

off her veils (literally exposing herself to reality) to be crushed beneath the soldier's shields.

Salomé's dance of the seven veils is on blood, which for Herod is a bad omen reflected by the moon which becomes 'red as blood' (p.569) and so Salomé demands that which has already been foreshadowed by the imagery and demands the head of Jokanaan. After Herod's offer of riches 'even unto half' his kingdom is refused by Salomé he comes to realize the importance of the artistic veil which protects man from the perils of reality: 'Neither at things, nor at people should one look. Only in mirrors should one look, for mirrors do but show us masks' (p.571).

'Art' or symbol has been the precursor of each stage of the action, and as the cloud, which can be seen as symbolic of the presence of evil and approaching death, blackens the moon, Salomé commits the blasphemous act (with its overtones of necrophilia) of kissing the lips of Jokanaan.

Salomé's differing conceptions of Jokanaan not only render imaginatively Wilde's aesthetic theories concerning the relationship between art and reality, but imaginatively dramatize the overmastering of sexual innocence by sexual desire. Yet Salomé's 'art', her imaginative projection of images onto the prophet, serves also as a means of psychological protection. Each time Salomé projects an image onto Jokanaan she is rejected which results temporarily in a kind of deconstruction, or reinterpretation, of the original image. This is followed by a psychological recovery which is a product of imaginative renewal and symbolic reconstruction: each image is a kind of phoenix which rises from its own ashes. Indeed, the symbolism that Salomé imposes on Jokanaan acts as an artistic veil to protect her from the reality of rejection while dramatizing the idea that the world is the creation of the imagination or intellect. Art or symbol has prefigured life, either in the differing interpretations of the moon or in the way Salomé imaginatively 'constructs' Jokanaan; it is significant from this point of view that the last thing Herod says before ordering Salomé's death is 'Hide the moon! Hide the stars!', as if he attempts to escape the means by which the symbolic process influences the course of events.

Wilde's idea that life copies art more than art copies life is given perfect dramatic form in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, only the consequences are comic rather than sinister or tragic.¹⁸ John Worthing's explanation to Algernon Moncrieff of why he has resorted to what he believes is fabrication by saying that in order to enjoy himself in town, he has always pretended to have a younger brother named Earnest is concluded by the phrase: 'That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple' (p.326). Algernon's remark that 'the truth is rarely pure and never simple' (p.326) initiates the theme which is central to the play from the perspective of Wilde's aesthetics: for when Worthing *thinks* he is being truthful, he is lying, and when he thinks he is lying (ironically being 'earnest'), he is being truthful. By the final act when all Worthing's falsehoods have materialized into reality and Lady Bracknell informs him that he is her nephew and consequently Algernon's elder brother, he is forced to realize that life has, indeed, imitated art or lying: 'Then I

have a brother after all ... I always said I had a brother!' (p. 380). Yet when Worthing discovers that his name really is Earnest he admits to Gwendolen Fairfax: 'It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth' (p.383). This fits in with Wilde's theory in 'The Decay of Lying' that 'One of the chief causes that can be assigned for the curiously commonplace character of most of the literature of our age is undoubtedly the decay of lying as an art, a science and a social pleasure' (p.972). It also alludes playfully to Wilde's assertion that 'the only real people are the people who never existed' (p.975). Thus Algernon's 'Bunburyism' and Worthing's adoption of a social mask when he is in town is the means by which Wilde elevates 'lying' into 'an art, a science, and a social pleasure'.

From the aesthetic angle, the most effective summary of the plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is to be found in 'The Decay of Lying' where the three stages of the plot's development are clearly defined. In the first stage, 'Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent... Then life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative and ideal treatment'. Finally, 'life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence...' (p.978).

In the final act of the play the characters have reached the point where reality has completely usurped fantasy (although, as I shall show, they do not, nor will, exist in a 'wilderness'). Seen from this standpoint, the final lines vibrate with extra resonance. When Lady Bracknell says, 'My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of frivolity' and Worthing replies, 'On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital importance of *Being Earnest*' (p. 384) he is now dramatically realizing through irony the vital importance of maintaining the artistic veil of illusion between himself and reality. According to this reading of the play, Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism symbolize reality which has rendered what was once a 'beautiful lie' into rigid fact by revealing to Worthing who he really is. Facts here, as Wilde stated in 'The Decay of Lying' 'are not merely finding a footing-place in history, but they are usurping the domain of Fancy, and have invaded the kingdom of Romance' (p.980).

Worthing and Moncrieff are not the only characters in the play who dramatize Wilde's theories of art. For example, Cecily Cardew's role can also be seen to be a play on Wilde's ideas. Gilbert, in 'The Critic as Artist', states that, 'To give an accurate description of what has never occurred is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of parts or culture' (p.1015). In *The Importance of Being Earnest* this becomes the inalienable privilege of Cecily Gardew. She relates to Algernon her purely imaginative courtship with

him, including his own fictional part in it; in fact she gives him an accurate description of all that has never occurred. 'Art' anticipates life when Algernon proposes only to find that he has already been engaged for three months (p.359) and thus the main plot and sub-plots facilitate the comic reversals of fantasy and reality. This creates a rich vein of humour; for example, when Worthing says to Algernon in act one that if Gwendolen accepts him he will 'kill' his fictional brother, Earnest, in actual 'fact' Worthing would be killing himself. Effectively this is a humorous and hypothetical repetition of the theme in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where the destruction of 'art' leads to the death of the protagonist. Here, however, the invasion of reality is rendered harmless.

Again Wilde's aesthetic theories flow into one another: art (or imagination or lying) is the precursor of life; things (or 'life' for the protagonists) are in essence what they choose to make them; the telling of beautiful untrue things is the aim, not so much of art, but of life; it is as if the central characters have taken Gilbert's words from 'The Critic as Artist', 'Don't let us go to life for our fulfilment' (p.1038) and used them as a philosophy for life—in this way they escape the tragic consequences that befall Dorian Gray and Salomé (and even Wilde himself). Gwendolen and Cecily idealize the name Earnest; Jack and Algernon strive to become this ideal, demonstrating life's imitative instinct. As Peter Raby has said, 'Life is made to imitate Art: the predominance of Form is absolute'.¹⁹ Although life eventually 'gets the upper hand' and enters the 'charmed circle' of art, it does not drive 'Art out into the wilderness' because the essentially comic atmosphere of telling beautiful, untrue things is preserved in the final act by the following paradoxical exchange:

JACK. Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

GWENDOLEN: I can. For I feel that you are sure to change (p.384).

Theirs is not the Schopenhauerian universe of agony and pessimism, because they thrive by regarding art and reality in the same way as Wilde claimed he had done in *De Profundis* by treating 'Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction' (p.912); and it is to this relationship that I want to turn as a conclusion to this essay.

Although *De Profundis* is, in essence, a therapeutic document in which Wilde wished to purge himself of the bitterness he felt towards Douglas, some two-thirds of the way through the letter Wilde discusses the significance of Christ, and two important ideas emerge which have an important bearing on the way he comes to terms with his suffering and which have their origin in his aesthetic theory: one, that Christ is not so much a saviour, in the Christian sense, but 'the true precursor of the romantic movement in life' (p.923); and two, that Christ's miracles were, in fact, the effect of art on reality.

For Wilde Christ's place is with the poets because his whole conception of humanity 'sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realized by it' (p.923). Christ has accordingly the poet's 'inner' understanding of the world. To some extent the life of Christ to Wilde was like Sibyl Vane's death to Dorian Gray: it had the air of a work of fiction. The betrayal, 'the crucifixion of the Innocent One before the eyes of his mother...the terrible death by which he gave the world its most eternal symbol' (p.924) becomes an object for contemplation—a sublime and tragic drama; what Wilde calls 'the most wonderful of Poems' (p.924). In fact, 'The absolute purity of the protagonist raises the entire scheme to a height of romantic art...' (p.924). Here Wilde's aesthetic theory is adapted to suit those who have been influenced by the supreme artist, Christ. Wilde finds no difficulty in believing the miracles because they are brought about by the influence of Christ's 'intense and flamelike imagination' (p.923). Christ, like the artist, transforms the world for all those who perceive life through his divine or aesthetic vision.

Fundamentally this is the creed that Wilde was preaching in 'The Decay of Lying' when he asked 'what is Nature' (i.e. reality without the influence of Wilde's aesthetics) and continued that Nature was 'no great mother' who had born us: Nature was 'our creation' (hence Wilde's conception of the miracles) and 'Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us... One does not see anything until one sees its beauty', only then 'does it come into existence'.²⁰ And so it is in *De Profundis*: once the intermediary has come between man and reality (in this case Christ) reality yields up new secrets. Men who were 'philistines' are given 'imagination' and hence water 'had the taste of good wine' and those whose lives had been but a 'mode of death rose as it were from the grave' (p.925). The miracles are merely symbolic of the imaginative change that occurs in the wake of the aesthetic vision.

Later in the letter Wilde goes on to explain that the symbols of his faith are not to be those drawn from organized religion, but must be of his 'own creating' (p.915). The implications of this private faith become apparent when they are considered beside Wilde's comments on himself. There is, says Wilde, an 'intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist' (p.922); Christ 'ranks with the poets... Shelley and Sophocles are of his company' (p.924). Here is the crux of the matter, for if Shelley and Sophocles are of Christ's company, then so is Wilde, for he says of himself: 'The Gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring: I made art a philosophy and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder...' (p.912).

Filling men with wonder, altering the minds of men and the colours of things is tantamount to Wilde claiming the same role for himself as the one he gave to Christ as a performer of miracles. This impression is reinforced when he says: 'Whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty' and 'I awoke the imagination of

my century so that it created myth and legend around me' (p.912). This secularization of and identification with Christ puts Wilde on a pedestal with Christ; he is at once elevated to the role of prophet, supreme Romantic artist and fellow sufferer.²¹ Thus one of the keystones of Wilde's aesthetics that reality is wholly subjective; that the mind is but a blank canvass upon which the imagination, influenced by art, paints its colours and creates its forms, was to maintain its central role throughout his creative life.

In *De Profundis* Wilde's theories of aesthetics are put to more practical use: here they are used in a similar way to the way they were employed in *Salomé*: just as she recreates Jokanaan through metaphor and image and in so doing protects herself psychologically, so here in jail Wilde recreates himself by reworking the New Testament, and creating a mythological or symbolic veil to protect himself from the sordidness of his life in jail. One of his claims to Douglas was that he was ready to accept suffering ('the other half of the garden' (p.922)) but his psychological response to this suffering is to merge himself with Christ and thus become, in his own mind, part of an 'idyll': his life, like Christ's, is already entering the realm of tragic art or myth, and is therefore an object for contemplation.

When Wilde asserts that he 'treated art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction' this recalls the aesthetic responses of Dorian Gray as well as Wilde's own responses to the life of Christ. This tendency or psychological reaction which strives to minimize pain and suffering through contemplation links back to Schopenhauer's aesthetics where the contemplation of an object of beauty releases the individual from 'the miserable pressure of the will'. Like in the parable of 'The Birthday of the Infanta', it is only those who exist in a palace of beautiful things (those who are truly part of the world of art) where suffering, in the physical sense, has no meaning. Wilde in mythologizing his own life places himself in the same relation to art and life as he had placed Dorian Gray, and like Gray suffered the consequences of his life when he faced the trial or 'reality' (it is interesting that Wilde in taking Queensbury to court was challenging Queensbury's 'portrait' of him as 'ponce and somdomite' (sic)).²² In this sense Wilde ironically becomes a victim of his own aesthetic theory (he says himself that his suffering is foreshadowed in his art (p.922)): Wilde puts himself beyond the suffering of life by treating it as art: art is a protective veil; life characteristically enters the 'charmed circle' and gets the upper hand: once life imitates art Wilde is exposed to reality and is driven into the wilderness; the only way of escape from this wilderness is to adopt the tactics set out in his own aesthetic theory —his own resurrection is symbolically realized through Christ.²³

Notes

- ¹ All references are to the *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, introduction by Vyvyan Holland (London, 1966). See p. 982.
- ² *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson corrected by G.M. Matthews (Oxford, 1970), p. 569.
- ³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, (trans. E. F. J. Payne), 2 vols. (Dover, 1967), vol.ii, p. 169.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* vol. i, p. 196 and vol. ii, p. 388. See also *Parerga and Paralipomena*, quoted in *Arthur Schopenhauer: Essays and Aphorisms*, (trans. R. J. Hollingdale), (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 157.
- ⁵ Quoted in Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 151. Wilde quotes Gautier in this context in *Dorian Gray* p. 91 ('*la consolation des arts*').
- ⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (trans. Walter Kaufmann), (Random House, 1967), e.g. pp. 35, 45.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* p. 60.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p. 98.
- ⁹ *Works*, p. 997-8. This seems to be an exaggeration of Wordsworth's claim in *Tintern Abbey*: 'Therefore am I still/A lover of...all the mighty world/Of eye and ear,— both what they half create/And what perceive.' (l.103f.) *Lyrical Ballads* ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London, 1963, 1968 ed.), p. 116.
- ¹⁰ *Op cit.* n. 6., p. 109.
- ¹¹ See Vyvyan Holland, *Son of Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth, 1957), p.226-7. This idea is highlighted in *The Decay of Lying* when Vyvyan says: 'The only real people are the people who never existed' (p. 975) and 'No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did he would cease to be an artist' (p. 988).
- ¹² Quoted in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* (6), ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 67.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* p. 66.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *De Profundis*, works, p. 957.
- ¹⁶ *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969), p. 60.
- ¹⁷ All quotations from the 'Douglas' translation in *Works*, see p. 552.
- ¹⁸ This is a variation on Ellmann's thesis that the play reduces its serious themes to harmlessness. See the introduction to *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York, 1968).
- ¹⁹ Raby, *op cit.*, n. 5, p. 128.
- ²⁰ *Works* p. 986. An idea repeated in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* as Wilde makes clear in *De Profundis* p. 923.
- ²¹ It seems to me that Wilde's psychological recovery is achieved, not through his kneeling 'before' Christ, as Nasaar claims, but by considering himself as on a par with Christ. See Christopher Nasaar, *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (Yale, 1974), p. 147f. and p. 157-8. My interpretation would support Bernard Shaw's claim that *De Profundis* has a 'comic' element, see *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London, 1970) p. 243.
- ²² In Richard Ellmann *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1988), p. 412.
- ²³ This is an updated but greatly reduced version of an unpublished thesis written in 1984. I would like to thank Laurence Normand for his helpful advice when I was writing the original thesis and Ángel-Luis Pujante who offered valuable comments on this revision. Of course, all errors are entirely my own.