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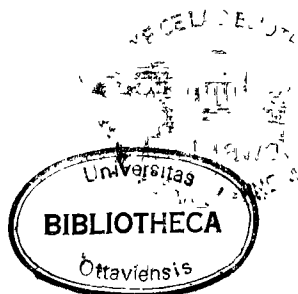


A DISSERTATION ON OSCAR WILDE'S  
THEORY OF ART

by

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of the University of Ottawa through the  
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## INTRODUCTION

The fame of Oscar Wilde was often represented by the success of "Lady Windermere's Fan" and "The Importance of Being Earnest", chiefly as a dramatist of a new comedy. Indeed, it is undeniable that he deserves such praise. But, in addition to this, Wilde, as a writer of many talents, had other literary achievements which should not be disregarded.

However, apart from the two mentioned plays, only The Picture of Dorian Gray and part of "De Profundis" are familiar to the general public. The large number of essays, criticisms, lectures, and reviews is little known. Still less widely read are his essays and criticisms which he wrote as an undergraduate.

The fame of Wilde as a dramatist often makes people think that he was superficially cynical and witty, always delightful, though mocking and satirical. But that is only one side of the picture. In addition to this superficial side, Wilde had also shown his deep thought and insight into human nature and society and these are exhibited mainly in his essays and criticisms. Probably Wilde's reputation as a successful dramatist is the first stage of the appreciation of his literary career. But such growth in reputation takes a long period of time.

The main obstacle to Wilde's fame as a literary figure and as an artist was his failure in the famous 1895 trials. The whole of society denounced him as a person, and

with this went his literary works. The press, after the trial, was unanimous in its condemnation of Wilde's work, even to the extent of his dramas which were then quite popular. The Echo, one of the leading evening papers of his time, denounced him like this:

And so a most miserable case is ended. Lord Queensbury is triumphant, and Dr. Oscar Wilde is "damned and done for". The best thing for everybody now is to forget all about Oscar Wilde, his perpetual posings, his aesthetical teachings and his theatrical productions. Let him go into silence, and be heard no more.<sup>1</sup>

Wilde's books were withdrawn from circulation, his plays from the stage. What made things worse were the publishers of obscene books of Paris who attributed their authorship to Oscar Wilde. However, after his death Wilde began to be less obnoxious to the public. With the publication of "The Ballad of Reading Goal" and "De Profundis", Wilde's fame began to grow for the better. His plays were often staged and between the two wars they were filmed and re-filmed. In 1954, the centenary of Oscar Wilde's birth, he was highly commemorated. The London County Council put a plaque on the house in his old Tite Street house. In Paris, a meeting was held at his tomb in Pere Lachaise cemetery and a special programme was given in his honour at the Sorbonne. A special display of manuscripts and books connected with Wilde was held in the Trinity

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1. Son of Oscar Wilde, V. Holland, Appendix E, p. 236.

College Library of Dublin.

But Wilde's fame was and still is higher in foreign countries than it is either on the European continent or the new continent. His plays are translated into numerous languages. This can be supported by the fact that the William Andrew Clark Memorial Library of Los Angeles, U.S.A. has a larger collection of materials connected with Wilde than any collection of similar material, either private or institutional. The progress of his fame is slow and, with the predominant witticism of his comedies, Wilde's essays and criticisms even take more time before they can be appreciated.

The objective of this thesis is, however, not an attempt to restore Wilde's fame as a literary figure for that is practically impossible within the limit of one thesis. But, with the understanding that Wilde should not be merely regarded as a comedy-writer, this thesis will aim at the presentation of his deeper thought and insight, as related to his age. Wilde was the chief figure of the "decadents" and the "aesthetic movement" of the "fin de siècle". Hence the necessity of studying him as a champion of a "new romanticism" with its cry for art for art's sake. Andre Gide, French contemporary of Wilde, said "People do not always realize how much truth, wisdom and seriousness were concealed under the mask of the jester"<sup>2</sup> and this would well fit into the general

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<sup>2</sup>. As quoted in Oscar Wilde by James Laver, p. 25.

understanding of Wilde. H. Taine, in his famous presentation of the History of English Literature, remarks, "Beneath every literature, there is a philosophy. Beneath every work of art, there is an idea of nature and of life."<sup>3</sup> Wilde's writings indeed carry a philosophy and convey an idea of nature and of life.

Many of the books written about Wilde have not satisfactorily presented him as a great literary figure who offered to share his opinions of life, of society, of beauty with the world. The life of Wilde is a legend. For this reason most of the writings in appreciation of Wilde cannot help but be mere biographical studies. There has not been any deep study of his aesthetic theory which, besides representing the art for art's sake theory of art of his own age, has in fact an important place in subsequent writings.

This thesis, therefore, will aim at the presentation of Wilde's idea of art especially from the point of view that Wilde had intended to introduce art into life and society. In matter of content, this thesis will offer to study his theory of aesthetics, of society, and of life and how Wilde had extended his theory of aesthetics into social and individual problems.

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<sup>3</sup>. Book I, (iii), p. 132.

**PART I**

**THE AESTHETICS OF OSCAR WILDE'S THEORY**

## THE CONCEPT OF ART FOR ART'S SAKE

The concept of art for art's sake was formulated not by philosophers but by artists who were putting philosophy to use. While remaining a mere concept - or an ideal - it is not a system of philosophy which can be pinned down as a set of rules or sequence of thoughts. Rather, it is merely a good number of ideas or ideals sought after by a great number of writers or artists in more or less the same field. While the early romantics set out to search for freedom of the imagination and cultivation of the senses, the art for art's sake banner-carriers showed their craving for a new type of romanticism, that as nature fails to march with the progress of man's imagination, it is up to the artist to create something out of his imagination as an end of beauty itself. It suggested the autonomy of the artist, and his art rejected didactic aim and refused subjection to moral or social judgements. All artistic forms must be judged by beauty alone and it is to beauty that every artist must aim in his creation. Art, according to the art for art's school, was supreme.

The art for art's sake concept which flowered during the Eighties and the Nineties, in the work of Wilde, Moore, Symons, and later in the works of Joyce, had many roots in the past. The ultimate origins were, however, not English, nor French, although it flourished exceedingly in

these two countries, but in the German romantic philosophers. By the first decade of the 19th century, however, such ideas, whether consciously or not, were taken up and practiced by Keats in England. This was followed by Swinburne and the pre-Raphaelite brothers. The concept was also well received in the new continent where Poe suggests in

### The Poetic Principle

That pleasure which is at once the most pure, the most elevating and the most intense is derived, I maintain, from the contemplation of the Beautiful. . . . . I make Beauty the province of the poem, simply because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring as directly as possible from their causes. . . . . the true artist will always contrive to tone them down in proper subjection to that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem.

Flaubert's novel, Baudelaire's poems (in particular, his preface to Poe) illustrate and recommend this new concept in some detail. However, the beginning of the appearance of the phrase 'l'art pour l'art' in print seems to date from 1833 according to Gautier's testimony less than fifteen years later. By the time of Cousin's long article in the Revue des deux mondes, 1845, it has become commonplace. Probably Gautier's idea may serve as a good explanation of the new aesthetic theory:

From all this one must not conclude that an artist is purely subjective, he gives and receives. If

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<sup>1</sup>. Complete Poetical Work of E. A. Poe, New York, Hurst & Co., p. 117-118.

the model of beauty exists in his mind in an ideal state, he takes from nature the signs which it needs to express it ..... L'art pour l'art signifies a work disengaged from all preoccupation other than with the beautiful in itself. The programme of the modern school is to seek beauty for itself with complete impartiality, perfect disinterestedness, without asking results through any reference or through any tendencies foreign to the subjects treated and we believe that there lies the most elevated and philosophic way to envisage art ..... The great error of adversaries of the doctrine of L'art pour l'art..... is to believe that the form can be independent of the idea. L'art pour l'art would say, not form for form as an adversary had said, but really form for beauty, withdrawing all foreign ideas, all direct utility... In its absolute essence, the beautiful is god.....<sup>2</sup>

Whether it was Gautier, or Poe or Hugo or Thackeray who first employed the term art for art's sake, hasnot been made sure. It is known only that all these people, Gautier and his followers in France, Poe and his in the United States and the "aesthetic Moore" in England had full-heartedly defended and practised this theory of the supremacy of art. In England this theory of art for art's sake was best received by Swinburne, Pater and then Wilde, who together with the painter Whistler greatly provoked their own society both by their ideals and their behaviour. Riddle and Whistler had been engaged in libel actions which, through the front page news, had speedily spread their theory to the world. Pater's conclusion to his Renaissance

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<sup>2</sup>.As quoted in Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism, June, 1953, p. 361. "The beginning of l'art pour l'art" John Wilcox.

in 1873 offers a good summary of such theory of his predecessors and it was to this conclusion, as Wilde had openly admitted, that he based a great deal of his later aesthetic development. Pater says:

Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moment, as they pass and simply for those moment's sake.<sup>3</sup>

1. Oscar Wilde and the Theory of Art for  
Art's Sake

Wilde repeatedly echoed Pater's view in most of his writings. To him beauty was a religion, having its own realm, not within the limit of time and space. He says, "All beautiful things belong to the same age"<sup>4</sup>, while agreeing with Wainwright that

Art touched her renegade; by her pure and high influence the noisome mists were purged; my feelings, parched, hot, and tarnished, were renovated with cool, fresh bloom, simple, beautiful to the simple hearted...<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>. From Beowulf to Thomas Hardy, Robert Shafer, New York, p. 868. Volume II.

<sup>4</sup>. The Works of Oscar Wilde, p. 935. "Pen, Pencil and Poison", Collins, 1948.

<sup>5</sup>. Thomas Griffiths Wainwright (1794-1803) to whom "Pen, Pencil and Poison" - a study in Green - is devoted as an appreciation of his career as a writer of prose, painter, and art-critic. Ibid, p. 933-947.

In the same essay, attributed to the apprehension of Wainwright's special artistic insight, he hinted that "Life itself is an art and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it."<sup>6</sup>

It is in the Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray that Wilde expounds most of his aesthetic theory. It is especially in this novel that aroused general criticism. The Preface, in particular, is in fact a nutshell of his theory of art for the sake of art, and he chose to write it in epigrammatic form. With this, he covered a greater field of his thinking than a few words in abrupt sentences could offer. Through his epigrams, he related art and beauty, the function of the artist, the scope of art. He dealt with art and morality and usage.

Compared to other writers, Wilde did not write a great deal. But with what he did write he covered, in the field of art and literature, enough ground to establish his own theory of aesthetics. Apart from this, he also touched upon other fine arts. He talked about music of which, according to a majority of critics and biographers, he did not seem to know much. He even talked about painting. Perhaps it was in his association with Whistler that he learned something about painting, as Whistler said that he "dines at" his table and "picks...the plums for the pudding" from

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<sup>6</sup>. Ibid, p. 934.

his platters. Redman is of the opinion that Wilde introduced his theories of music into his conversation because he wanted to add to the picture of himself as the complete artist.<sup>7</sup> From what Wilde had said about music this is quite true. To him, music appeals only to certain particular emotions. He says:

Music makes one feel so romantic - at least it always got on one's nerve - which is the same thing nowadays.<sup>8</sup>

In the "Critic as Artist", he says again:

After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never comitted, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own. Music always seems to me to produce that effect. It creates for one a past of which one has been ignorant and fills one with a sense of sorrows that have been hidden from one's tears.<sup>9</sup>

Music, whether he ranked it "good" or "bad" was to him a sort of a stimulating liquor which excites the feelings, but whether he had actually experienced such feeling has not been found.

However, his major interest is in literature as an art. Like his predecessors he put literature into the realm of "Pure art", strictly isolated from any other influencing factors such as morality, truth or didacticism.

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<sup>7</sup>. The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde, A. Redman, London, 1954, p. 88.

<sup>8</sup>. Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>9</sup>. "The Critic as Artist", p. 950, The Works of Oscar Wilde.

Art, according to him, "neither appeals to the intellect nor to the emotions but purely to the artistic temperament".<sup>10</sup> He considered that "art never expresses anything but itself", "it has an independent life...and develops purely on its own lines".<sup>11</sup> As a self-appointed champion of the aesthetic movement, of the art for art's sake school, he adhered to the creed, some of which he modified and gave new interpretations.

## 2. Subsequent Influence of the Theory of Art for Art's Sake

The influence of the theory of art for art's sake on subsequent literary trends is not direct. As it has been pointed out, the theory survived only as catch words of the enthusiasts and, being vague and diffused to some extent, it offered no systematic literary programme. But even so, it was through this theory that artists and critics were able to formulate a significant world attitude of their own. The theory, though confusing, was penetrating into the age and that to follow. It was through this theory that the artists could come to realise themselves - a sort of Individualism.

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<sup>10</sup>. The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup>. Ibid, p. 59.

The English Decadents' thought, as Cazamian points out, was "vague and diffused". Yet "in it the most various literary intentions are found side by side", and,

Aesthetes such as Wilde, naturalists like George Moore, realists like Crackanthyope, neo-Catholics like Lionel Johnson, idealists and Celtic revivalists like Yeats, are thus brought together....Little consistent as it is, decadentism at least contains the germs of many further growths.<sup>12</sup>

Moore came to conceive of the idea that literature, being separated from society, had become a sort of "style" separated from substance. His The Brook Kerity (1916), and Heloise and Abelard (1912) can be read for their style alone.

The concept of pure poetry then came to find expression through members of the Rhymer's Club of 1891, founded by William Butler Yeats, Ernest Rhy, and T. W. Rolleston. It also comprised prominent writers such as Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, and Lionel Johnson as its members. Finding such organisation a refuge from confusion and the time, they pursued beauty as far as decorum permitted. The poems of Dowson fix fine sensations and moods, finding impurity of form of vehicle that was its own end. His poem, "Non SUM Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae" symbolises the conflict between Pater's ideal and reality, and with flinging roses, crying for madder music, and stronger wine. Dowson in fact followed the course of Dorian Gray and the A Rebour.

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<sup>12</sup>. A History of English Literature, Legouis and Cazamian, p. 280.

The verse of Arthur Symons devoted to exquisite emotions owed almost as much to Pater as to Baudelaire. From Pater's "Renaissance", Symons learned that life and prose could be fine arts.

Max Beerbohm probably was the closest to Wilde as far as literary relationship is concerned. Much of Beerbohm's early work was influenced by Wilde. The exact nature of this influence, however, is often difficult to assess because, through his fine sense of decorum, Beerbohm had sought to exclude Wilde. But "Wilde's influence on him ranged from unconscious and conscious imitation to pastiche, and from pastiche to parody and affected his subject matter or style, or both".<sup>13</sup> The most striking proof of the spiritual kinship between Wilde and Beerbohm is to be found in their ideas on individualism, education, realism, and the antagonism between art and experience. Beerbohm agreed with Wilde that "art was the product of passionate observations, not of experience".<sup>14</sup> Beerbohm's "The Incomparable Beauty of Modern Dress", the first essay he published, at least shows either conscious or unconscious imitation and parody of Wilde. When Beerbohm wrote "To the

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<sup>13</sup>. Sir Max Beerbohm, Man and Writer, J. G. Riewald, Martinus Nijhoff, 1953, p. 129.

<sup>14</sup>. "Max Beerbohm" Journal of English and Germanic Philology, April, 1920, p. 254-269.

aesthetic temperament nothing seems ugly. There are degrees of beauty - that is all", the parody is unmistakably of Wilde's notorious line in the Preface to Dorian Gray, "There is not such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written that is all."

Apart from such immediate influence on writers of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century England, the theory of art for art's sake found also expression over the Channel. The French Symbolists, for example, rejected sociological and ethical themes just the same as Wilde and Pater did. They insisted that art must pursue the "sensation of beauty" apart from moral or sociological responsibility. However, the subsequent influence of the French Symbolists on literature is not within the scope of this essay.

Back to the island itself, Yeats is one of the recent writers who felt the influence of the art for art's sake theory. His poetry, and more especially his prose of the Nineties, revealed the cult of Morris and Rossetti. Like Swinburne, who preceded him, Yeats based his aesthetics largely upon Blake's and conformed to the law of the imagination. In his Autobiographies Yeats says:

Yet I was in all things pre-Raphaelite, when I was fifteen or sixteen my father had told me about

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15. Autobiographies, W. B. Yeats, 1955. Macmillan, p. 114.

Rossetti and Blake and given me their poetry to read,....

through the effect of which he even created the dogma

Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those months speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth.<sup>16</sup>

In his introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1936, looking back at the poets of his group, Yeats saw Pater behind their striving away from "moral earnestness" and their attempt to purify "poetry of all that is not poetry". The style of "Rosa Alchemica" shows this influence.

Probably the most apparent and yet still arguable influence of the theory of art for art's sake is seen in the aesthetics of James Joyce. Joyce claimed that his aesthetics was indebted only to Aristotle and St. Thomas. But the effort to locate and label the Thomist aesthetics that is to be found in Joyce's works is difficult because it is not altogether clear yet what a Thomist aesthetic consists of, or indeed that a Thomist aesthetic exists at all. St. Thomas did not write a treatise *De Aesthetica* and it was not until five hundred years after his death that Baumgarten invented the modern term "Aesthetica".

But this is not to disprove Joyce's own statement and that even Joyce's aesthetics bears certain similarity to

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<sup>16</sup>.Ibid, p. 116.

that of Wilde, we can say that the latter had direct influence over the former.

When Joyce defines art as "the human disposition of sensible or intelligible matter for aesthetic ends"<sup>17</sup> it seems an echo of the art for art's sake school, if not of Wilde's theory alone. It is not by chance that Wilde began his preface to Dorian Gray with these two epigrams: "The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim", and Joyce summed up the movement when he said that "beauty is beheld by the imagination which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the sensible".

St. Thomas considered art only as only subordinate to prudence in the effecting of human ends and all temporal activity as subject to divine sanction.<sup>18</sup> What Joyce said he was driving at, with regard to his theory of aesthetics, was to push Aquinas' definition of art to a "proper" conclusion, which was objected to by his college president on grounds that "if pushed to its logical conclusion, it would emancipate the poet from all moral laws".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, New American Library Signet, p. 161.

<sup>18</sup>. Art and Scholasticism, J. Maritain, tr. J. F. Scanlan, Sheed and Ward, p. 15-16.

<sup>19</sup>. Stephen Hero, p. 95.

But Joyce's theory, like the art for art's sake one, appears quite on the line of emancipating the poet from moral laws. Joyce's theory of the artist bears a remarkable resemblance to Wilde's theory of the artist. Joyce considered that the artist's temper must be exercised in an atmosphere of complete freedom, and the artist as a creative agent is subject only to the laws of his art. Wilde considered the artist a man "who believes absolutely in himself because he is absolutely himself".<sup>20</sup> Wilde seemed to suggest the theory of isolation which Joyce regarded as the "first principle of artistic economy". Joyce regarded isolation of the artist as the only form of protest against aesthetic indifference, against a world in which "no one would listen to his theories and no one was interested in his art".<sup>21</sup> This idea was conceived earlier by Wilde when he said that

any attempt to extend the subject-matter of art is extremely distasteful to the public, and yet the vitality and progress of art depend in large measure on the continual extension of subject-matter.<sup>22</sup>

With social progress or individual responsibility, the

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<sup>20</sup>."The Soul of Man under Socialism" in Selected Essays and Poems of Oscar Wilde, Penguin, p. 38.

<sup>21</sup>.Stephen Hero, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup>. Penguin, Selected Essays and Poems, p. 36.

artist, as Wilde and Joyce believed, has nothing whatsoever to do. Art to them is self-knowledge and a sort of self-liberation. For this reason, both reject the world of their environment with a violent "non Serviam".

The resemblance of such ideas, however, would not furnish enough proof of Wilde's influence on Joyce, but it may be conjectured that at least Joyce was conscious of the art for art's sake school when he "push Aquinas" theory to a proper conclusion".

THE ABILITY OF THE ARTIST, AND THE  
CRITIC AS ARTIST

The first significant point of the art for art's sake creed is that the artist is extremely elevated to such a position that he differs from ordinary men in having a predominance of sensuous intuition and creative imagination.

Ever since the Renaissance, the artist had become increasingly self-conscious. Hence the development of the school of romantics, characteristically famous for their erotic sensibility. Chesterton saw that the romantic movement lent to English literature a "bent towards independence and eccentricity, which in the brighter wit became individuality and in the duller ones, individualism".<sup>1</sup> This awareness of self-consciousness eventuated, as it might be expected, in the political, social as well as religious withdrawal of the artists, developing to a large extent, what might be called abstract thought. After the influence of Kantian idealism, which was the most vital European philosophy of the time, there arose this new conception of beauty and the aesthetic attitude. This concept, although it often remained unstated, actually served as the basis for all the theses of the art for art's sake school. It followed that this concept provided the key to much of the

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<sup>1</sup>. The Victorian Age in Literature, G. K. Chesterton, p. 15.

confusion inherent in them. In its broad issues, especially those points which were appropriated by the theory of art for art's sake, German aesthetics greatly resembled the traditional intuitionistic aesthetics. As did the traditional view, German aesthetics saw the close relationship between beauty and pleasure. But it also held that the pleasures that are usually associated when in contact with beautiful things must not be mistaken for the other kind of pleasures that are usually associated with desire and interest.

The medium of experience in German aesthetics distinguished and contrasted two aspects: two limits towards which experience might approximate. In the world of practice - which includes science - one uses discursive reason so as to connect sensuous presentations that were given in "immediate experience", with sensuous presentations that were not given except in memory or expectation. Through this - the interpretation of the immediate experience - one is able to formulate some concept about reality. Aesthetic contemplation, on the other hand, does not need the interpretation of memory or expectation, and without the intrusion of ulterior goals. The artist merely attends to that which is given to sense.

It was up to this point that the art for art's sake school ceased upon the German doctrine of aesthetics, and tailored it to fit their own imagination. Therefore, Wilde

put it that the artist, being the expert in beauty, "is the creator of beautiful things"; and that a true artist is himself, trusting only in his own experience and his own perception and interpretation of beauty. "A true artist takes not notice of the public", Wilde went on to say, "The public are to him non-existent."<sup>2</sup> By the "public", he meant probably the non-artists, which comprised of the majority of people. It seemed to Wilde, that real artists are miserably rare. He accused the public because "The public imagine that because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, art should be interested in them also, and should take them as its subject matter. But the mere fact that they are interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for art."<sup>3</sup> What he wanted of an artist was the ability to enter into a realm of absolute idealism free from any influence, or to be placed in a position which would permit him to intensify his personality, through only the "companionship of ideas and intellectual atmosphere".<sup>4</sup> Under such circumstances, the artist can rely on himself because as an artist, "Whatever is realised is right."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>. Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>. The Works of Oscar Wilde, Collins, p. 915.

<sup>4</sup>. "De Profundis", Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup>. Ibid, p. 130.

Hence, the word "artist" comes to have a new meaning, quite different from pre-nineteenth century concept. However, it was not Wilde alone who contributed to this new interpretation. Ever since the romantic "revolt" the word "artist" became less and less associated with "artisan, scientist, painter", or even "writer". Thus according to Wilde and his art for art's sake colleagues, an artist was in fact an "imaginative creator". The artist was no more assumed to be a member of any specific guild or union, profession or occupation as the artisan painters or scientists were. He was no longer thought of either in terms of his class affiliations or his means of earning a livelihood. As he declared that "all art is quite useless", he echoed his ideas in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", that "a work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is", because "the moment, that an artist takes notice of what the people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes either a dull or amusing craftsman, or an honest or dishonest tradesman".<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the eighteenth century concept of the artist was then supplied with a new vocabulary by way of distinguishing each into various fields

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<sup>6</sup>. Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 34.

of specialisation. In short, the term "artist" was being redefined in accordance with the view of the art for art's sake school of theorists.

Thus when Wilde said, "The true artist is a man who believes absolutely in himself because he is absolutely himself", he suggested a form of individualism quite different from the ordinary concept of the term; still more different was it from the Chesterton interpretation that such is attained through dull wit. By Individualism, Wilde meant more than GKC would mean by Individuality. Wilde's theory jettisoned both the eighteenth century belief that the artistic faculty consists in the power of generation and the Renaissance notion that it consists in the power of realisation. In a way he reversed the situation of the triumph of the understanding over the imagination. But he went one step further in establishing the ideal of the artists. He argued:

The vitality and progress of art depend in a large measure on the continual extension of subject matter. The public dislike novelty because they are afraid of it. It represents to them a mode of individualism, an assertion on the part of the artist that he selects his own subject and treats as he chooses....Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of men to the level of machine....<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>. Ibid, p. 36.

Therefore this type of Individualism, in the creative sense, was the entire subjective selection in the artist. Trusting that the artist has special insight and having a predominance of sensuous intuition, he realised that "whatever is realised" by the artist "is right". He therefore insists on the need for artistic selection. Since there was no reason for the artist to make his work specifically true to life, or to any purposes save for that of beauty's sake, he was to have a free hand in selecting and even distorting his material. The artist has to make his work congruent to his own vision of beauty.

#### 1. The Critic as Artist

Probably one of the most unique contributions Wilde made to literature was his proposal of the critic as an artist. Not only did he maintain that the critical function is identical to that of the artistic, he in fact elevated the position of the critics to a superior field of artistic achievement. He claimed that "criticism demands infinitely more cultivation than creation does". This has some truth in it, for at least he hinted that the critical function should not be what the ordinary people think, as a mere mode of subjective impressionism. A critic needs culture. He needs the cultivation of his taste for beautiful things. But besides that, Wilde had conceived of the idea that

criticism is an "essential part of the creative spirit," because "an age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all". He was of the opinion that the "higher" class of critics (those who wrote for sixpence paper) are "far more cultured than the people whose work they are called upon to review". He defended his proposition by adding that

Anybody can write a three-volume novel. It requires a complete ignorance of both life and literature. The difficulty that I should fancy the reviewers feel is the difficulty of sustaining any standard.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that the critic should sustain a standard by which all art, regardless of the age, can be compared and judged. As far back in history as the Greek philosophers criticism was based exclusively on the objective elements of beauty, either confining their attention to objects which revealed proportion and harmony in their constitution as the Platonic and Aristotelian school did, or considering beauty of a work as a transcendental attribute of Being as such, and therefore as abiding in simple as well as in composite things as the Neo-Platonic school suggested.

When Wilde said that criticism is essential to the creative spirit, he implied that criticism, though itself an

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<sup>8</sup>. The Works of Oscar Wilde, Collins, p. 961.

art, "creative and independent", is in fact contributing to the creative function. He gave as examples great artists like Homer and Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Keats, who did not go directly to life for their subject-matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend and ancient tale. Therefore, the critic "deals with materials that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative form and colour have been already added".<sup>9</sup> Hence the critical presentation is in fact a "creation within a creation."<sup>10</sup> The critical function, therefore, has of necessity reached the realm of what Maritain called the "totality", which is a blend of the critic himself, his imagination, and his sensuous perceptions to form an artistic ideal. Wilde realised that such an artistic ideal, when produced in the proper form, can be "more creative than creation", because something of the critic's personality has been added to the initial creation. He gave an example in music presentation:<sup>11</sup>

And in the case of all these creative critics of art it is evident that personality is an absolute essential for any real interpretation. When Rubinstein plays to us, the Sonata Appassionata of Beethoven, he gives us not merely Beethoven, but also himself and so gives us Beethoven absolutely -- Beethoven reinterpreted through a rich artistic nature, and made vivid and wonderful to us by a new

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<sup>9</sup>.Ibid, p. 966.

<sup>10</sup>.Ibid, p. 966.

<sup>11</sup>.Ibid, p. 973.

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and intense personality.

He saw the same thing in dramatic acting.<sup>12</sup>

When a great actor plays Shakespeare we have the same experience. His own individuality becomes a vital part of the interpretation.

To Wilde, the critical function was not what Arnold believed to be the setting of itself a task to point out to people all that is best, both in former and in contemporary writers. To Wilde, the critical function was not the ultimate end but rather a means towards an end. Criticism to him was, in process, a channel through which a great artistic work can be produced.

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<sup>12.</sup> Ibid, p. 973.

LITERARY FORMS, MATTERS, AND THE  
TECHNIQUE OF THE ARTIST

Therefore it can be said that Wilde had transformed the function of art from reason, from understanding, and from having a purpose, to a sphere of pure aestheticism, which then can be called art for beauty's sake. Apart from this, however, he was quite conscious of the importance of the literary forms. Before the artist sets out to create something beautiful, he must have realised the importance of forms which, together with the subject matter, contribute to make a thing "formally perfect". Wilde did not particularly stress this point. But, indirectly, he had hinted that beauty, which was the end of artistic creation, could be apprehended only by sensuous intuition. In particular, therefore, this apprehension depended upon the proper use of sense modalities such as sight, hearing which led to the perfection of the "outward". He said,

What the artist is always looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible; in which the outward is expressive of the inward; in which form reveals.<sup>1</sup>

He said again, "Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself; the outward rendered expressive of the inward."<sup>2</sup>

He realised that as he took "drama, the most objective form

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1. "De Profundis", in Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 161.

2. Ibid, p. 151.

known to art", he could "make it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or sonnet". He appraised his own success in this respect. "Drama novel, poem in prose, poem in rhyme, subtle or fantastic dialogue whatever I touched, I make as beautiful in a new mode of beauty. He found himself justified in using epigrams, because "I summed up all system in a phrase and all existence in an epigram."<sup>3</sup>

It is apparent that his success depended on the right choice of forms. He chose the epigram because by such he could sum up all systems of argument and philosophy, a form which requires understanding and cultivated taste in the reader. Hence the necessity for an artist to have technical or formal proficiency, and it might be said further that artistic talent was conceived as proportional to technical skill.

Wilde, as other members of the art for art's sake school did, set out to emancipate the artist from certain purposes of writing or creating. His ideal was to detach the artist from the aim of the moralist, the philosopher or the scientist, and the aim of the propagandists. He seemed to agree with Goethe that to demand a moral aim of the artist is to ruin his work. He admired Charles Reade to the extent

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3. Ibid, p. 151.

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that he had created a beautiful book, The Cloister and the Hearth. However, if he had tried "To draw public attention to the state of our convict prison, and the management of our private lunatic asylums" he would have "wasted the rest of his life" in such "foolish" attempts. He argued that Reade, as "an artist, a scholar, a man with a true sense of beauty, raging and roaring over the abuses of contemporary life like a common pamphleteer or a sensational journalist" was wasting his talent.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, once getting into a moralistic or didactic purpose the artist would be degraded to what he called common pamphleteer or sensational journalist, whose end is not beauty but propaganda.

Somewhat along this line, Wilde had most emphatically attacked the ugliness of Realism. He devoted the whole essay "The Decay of Lying" to such purpose. Art, according to Wilde, has independent existence and has direct relation neither to its own time nor to external nature. Its appeal is timeless and "so far from being the creation of its time, it is usually in direct opposition to it, and the only history that it preserves for us is the history of progress". Art is essentially imaginative and therefore, while nature and life may be its raw materials, they can never be its real motives and are of use to it only after they have been con-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, "The Decay of Lying", p. 66.

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verted into terms of artistic convention. What Wilde wanted of art was "distinction, charm, beauty and imaginative power" which he thought realism could not offer. He saw the weakness of Elizabethan and Jacobian artists in that they "used life as rough material and drew all its weakness from using life as an artistic method". Therefore, this inevitably resulted in the surrender of an imaginative form, as they took directly from life and reproduced its "vulgarity down to the smallest detail". He saw further that these groups of writers did not succeed even in "producing that impression of reality at which they aim".<sup>5</sup> As a result, Realism as a method was a "complete failure".

Talking about realism, there inevitably arises the familiar term "nature" which has been so frequently and widely interpreted. Ordinary people would say that artists copy nature or reflect nature. But Wilde took the opposite approach that Nature copies life. He was very right in seeing that Wordsworth did not use nature as an end in his creation. He did not give to his reader photographic precision of the scenes of the lake district. Wilde said:

Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there. He went moralising about the district, but his good work was produced when

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 69.

he returned, not to nature, but to poetry.<sup>6</sup>

Wilde realised that the success of Wordsworth lay in his "recollection in tranquility" which was a mode of imagination entirely based on his own "personality" and his cultivated taste. Wilde thereby set out three stages of the development of artistic creation as related to nature in literary history. First, "art begins with abstract decoration, with pure imagination and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent". Secondly, "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 or ideal treatment". Probably it was good so far as Wilde's ideals are concerned. But inevitably the pendulum would swing and, in the third stage, he saw the situation when "life gets the upper hand, and drives art out into the wilderness, and it was from this that his age suffered."<sup>8</sup>

The thesis Wilde put forth in "The Decay of Lying" is that the creation of art should depend upon the working of the imagination which is divorced from any influence of reality. In his own terms, the artist should be a cultured

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<sup>6</sup>. Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>8</sup>. Ibid, p. 68.

## TECHNIQUE OF THE ARTIST

and fascinating liar. It is in the lying that a new product, entirely out of the imagination, can be produced. But he denounced his and the preceding age in that writers had tended to be too true to reality, and this is why he saw the "decay" of lying. To Wilde only the "liar" can give charm, delight, and pleasure. He is the "very basis of civilised society". Realism, to him, was merely a mirror through which the object is presented as it is. Therefore, if one copies reality he is merely reducing his genius (if he has possessed such) to the position of a "cracked looking glass". The copying of reality, which is merely truth telling, is morbid and unhealthy exercises of one's creative faculty.

While admitting Stevenson's mastery of delicate and fanciful prose, Wilde had found him "fainted with this modern vice" in making his story such as The Black Arrow too true. He attacked Henry James on the ground that he wrote fictions "as if it were a painful duty and wasted upon mean motive and imperceptible points of view".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>. Ibid, p. 61.

## ART, MORALITY, AND THE ARTIST'S END

Prior to Pater's view of art for its own sake, critics, writers, and philosophers had always maintained the idea that moral, or other sociological factors played a great part in the creation or appreciation of a piece of art. Plato questioned Homer's competence in dealing with his chosen subjects on the grounds that Homer had never himself governed a state and was lacking in first hand knowledge about human affairs. It seemed, therefore, that the value of a piece of art stands in direct proportion to the moral, spiritual, or ideological attributes of the artist who creates it. Ruskin usually referred to this view whenever he discussed "the morality of art", even though he was really not primarily motivated by the idea that a piece of art should be judged on the moral worth of its creator. Rather, it was an expression of Ruskin's belief that the perception of beauty was itself a function of an "exulting, reverent, and grateful" attitude, without which a man could not create great art.

But, in response to this idea, Oscar Wilde and his art for art's sake colleagues carried their argument beyond their definition of the term "artist". As it has been pointed out, he held that a man was an artist only insofar as his aims were the technical ones of a specialist in beauty. Over and above this, he held firmly that it was unlikely (if

not impossible) for a man whose behaviour was motivated by moral aims on some occasions to have a predominance of the distinctively aesthetic ones on other occasions. He maintained that insofar as a man has the didactic aims of the moralist, he is not an artist, and from this he implied that the aim of the artist and the aim of the moralist cannot reside within the same individual.

When questioned about the morality of The Picture of Dorian Gray Wilde explicitly ruled that "no work of art ever puts forward views. Views belong to people who are not artists."<sup>1</sup> In the Preface to the same novel, Wilde stated that "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written, that is all." And further, he went on to say

The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything."<sup>2</sup>

What Wilde meant to be "unpardonable mannerism of style" perhaps suggested that he did not merely try to distinguish between ethical attitude and aesthetic or

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<sup>1</sup>. The 3 Trials of Oscar Wilde, H. M. Hyde, New York, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>. Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 17, Collins The Works of Oscar Wilde.

artistic ones; but to rule that the former is detrimental to the latter. In this respect, he completely divorced morality from art. Art and morality, therefore, were incompatible as well as independent. He said, "The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate."<sup>3</sup>

As result of this denial that a morally good man could also be good as an artist, the aloofness of the artist became a matter of principle as well as practice. The "movement" of the so called "Pre-Raphaelites" or the "fin de siecle" was primarily to emancipate the artist, and was itself a political and social movement which served to detach the artist from all other political and social movements. Idealising the ragged Bohemians of the Latin Quarter, Oscar Wilde came to conceive of the artist not merely as a person in whom creative power was concentrated but also as a kind of sacrosanct being above the ordinary battle of mankind. At all costs, he must be kept pure, even at the expense of building an ivory tower to shelter him. Wilde demanded "the recognition of a separate realm for the artist" on grounds that it was a characteristic of all great imaginative work and of all great eras of artistic creation. He believed that art never harms itself by keeping aloof from the social problems of the day. In this fashion, Wilde, attempted to

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<sup>3</sup>. In a reply to a critic, as quoted in Redman's Epigrams of Oscar Wilde, p. 174.

secure the complete detachment of the artist. He was to enjoy stylistic impersonality, ethical and political aloofness, and virtual anonymity. He was to be the unseen observer and the unrestricted creator. He was to owe responsibility only to his work and nothing else. It was only through his work that the artist's genius was to manifest itself.

Needless, therefore, to look to morality but to concentrate only on his own sensation. Wilde came to conceive of the idea that artistic creation is the highest end of life. Having established a firm and aloof position for the artist, by detaching him from the ethics, politics, and the society of most sublunar beings, it followed that the artist had only one end in life and that was to create art. Just as the life of aesthetic contemplation was superior to the life of practice, so too was the life to the artist superior to any other. In order to attain the pure artistic temperament that was denied to everyone else save the artist, he dissociated himself from the ordinary interests of mankind and prevented the herd morality from contaminating his talent. Such a measure, to create a thing of beauty had, therefore, become an ethical behaviour among the Wildean circle. In maintaining that artistic creation was the highest end of life, Wilde seemed to assert that the life of the artist was intrinsically valuable. What Wilde referred to as "one great experience" was probably the artistic one

which should be "reproduced as often as possible". Therefore, he stressed that "if a man treats life artistically, his brain is in his heart". It followed, therefore, that leading an artistic life, the highest and possibly the most worthy aim of life, is artistic creation by "reproducing" the one great artistic experience. As Pater had said, "some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us", Wilde adopted the master's idea. The "reality" of such artistic experience was the highest end of art. Therefore, the highest end of life will undoubtedly be to reveal such mood or insight through the proper form.

## ART AND POPULARITY - WILDE'S IVORY TOWER

In reply to a critic, Oscar Wilde said

I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few I am gratified. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist. It is far too easy.<sup>1</sup>

From this he made it plain that he sheltered himself in an ivory tower. He formed a special order or caste of what he called true artists which included, as he said, "the few" who would be pleased with his work. Together they would form themselves into a special clique. Therefore, whatever is written or talked about, whatever emotions they express will be those of their clique. Consequently all their works became intelligible only to their fellow "artists".

Such segregation of artists from the rest of mankind reached its culmination during Wilde's time - the fin de siècle. The corporate life of the group became, therefore, a kind of ivory tower whose prisoners could think and talk of nothing except themselves, and had only one another for an audience.<sup>2</sup> But what made the situation more complicated was that there was not only one ivory tower with the label art for art's sake during the Victorian age. Instead of a

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<sup>1</sup>•The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde, Redman, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup>•It is curious to note that Wilde was more linked to the French Symbolists than to his English contemporaries. Hence building a tower across the Channel.

single (though no doubt sub-divided) clique of artists, all inhabiting the same tower, the tendency was for each artist or group of artists to construct a world of his or their own, to live in a world of his or their devising, cut off not only from the ordinary world of common people, but also from the corresponding towers of other artists. Wilde, for example, had always tried to be obscure to other people. He said, "only the great masters of style ever succeed in being obscure", as if obscurity in this sense was a virtue or at least an artistic device. Work of art might, to the layman (in this respect those who had comparatively less contact with art or literature) be obscure, but it was merely mistaking the effect for the cause to be deliberately obscure, not only to the layman public but also to other artists. It would be an "unpardonable" mannerism of style, to use Wilde's own words, to strive to become obscure as if by doing so one's work would become high-sounding and elevated.

Having thus tried to be obscure, Wilde had repeatedly denounced popularity in art. He thought that the only thing not worth looking at is the obvious and that "Popularity is the crown of laurel which the world puts on bad art. Whatever is popular is wrong".<sup>3</sup> Wilde's artistic world

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3. "Lecture to Art Student", The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde, Redman, p. 58.

would somehow fit into Tolstoy's description that

Instead of an artistic activity aiming at transmitting the highest feelings to which humanity has attained we have an activity which aims at affording the greatest enjoyment to a certain class of society. And from all the immense domain of art, that part has been fenced off and is alone called art which affords enjoyment to the people of this particular circle.<sup>4</sup>

This seems more apparent if this argument is supported by the fact that Wilde was brought up and educated in a sophisticated environment and that the group he wrote about was that of high society - as that of his plays. It seemed to Wilde that life, which he differentiated from mere "survival", must be a sophisticated and mystical one; and such a kind of life can be found only in high society. When he said that life imitates art, it was to the sophisticated form of life which he referred. It follows, therefore, that high society life is the artistic life, which is granted only to a limited number of individuals.

Having as its members only the sophisticated society, the ivory tower of Wilde afforded only a literature whose possible value was an amusement value by which persons imprisoned within the tower, whether by their misfortune or their fault, helped themselves and each other to pass the time without dying of boredom or homesickness for the world they left behind. But, apart from amusement value, Wilde's

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<sup>4</sup>. What is Art and Essays on Art, Tolstoy. Oxford, p. 149.

works, especially the plays, have acclaimed great success as works of art. A Lady Windemere and her circle, a Bunburying and an Ernest in town, and Jack in the country indeed are comical in a setting of high society which the popular people knows little of. Yet these plays achieve great popularity, charming both the men inside the tower and those outside.

If "popularity" is the sign for bad art, Wilde would hesitate very much to accept the crown of laurel. He aimed at writing good art more than at achieving great popularity. In reply to a critic, he said

I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few I am gratified. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist. It is far too easy.<sup>5</sup>

Not only did Wilde's works please the few in his Ivory Tower, but also to the "mob" they are masterpieces. Both the Towermen and the mob very much appreciate his works. If man is given a piece of art in terms of popularity, Wilde would enjoy double if not contradicting appraisals from both sides. Taking for granted that bad art lends popularity is true, artistic judgement must alter the criteria of evaluation because Wilde's plays could not possibly be included in bad art.

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The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde, Redman, p. 82.

It would be more likely that the concept of "whatever is popular is wrong" is wrong, for even though Oscar Wilde's plays are popular, they still remain a great success as artistic creations. The sharp wit and paradoxes, the freshness of form, not only made his plays achieve great box-office success, but also served to make his plays a monument in English dramatic history. It is unfair though to say that Wilde found English comedy a corpse and left it a harlot. But even if he raised comedy from the dead as a harlot, he did raise it from the dead. In the midst of giving a sensitive and sophisticated playgoer much to shudder at and shake his head over, he gave him much to smile at and be charmed and dazzled by. He might not, in the first three plays - *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *A Woman of No Importance* - have brought comedy back into the theatre, but he did bring wit. The curtain might clatter down, following some turgid gossips, but while the curtain was up there would be scenes in which Wilde's great gift for writing prattle - a gift that had hardly existed for a century - brought real lightness and exhilaration into the theatre.

He actually brought some kind of style and form into the art of playwriting. The paradox he chose to use had served his particular purpose. What is easily called a paradox and dismissed is often something quite true. In

Wilde's work we find what might be called "truth of the unconventional", the truth of the masks which as a form of technique had deliberately omitted the expected. Wilde's characteristic use of the comic dramatist's weapon of surprise is a kind of amalgam of surprise and recognition. His antithetical method is a delicate flavouring of satire imparted to dialogue that is not yet falsified beyond recognition of its essential truth. In his comic dialogue he had introduced the technique of inconsequences which play as large a part as the antithetical quality. One comes in with the other. The inconsequence is a kind of antithesis, such that it is amusingly strained as to give rise to pleasure of surprises - and antithesis serves to tell the truth. Another characteristic which accounts for both his popularity and also success is that he had grasped the true essence of comedy. The average person prefers a comedy precisely because he feels it will take him out of himself, will offer an escape, will make him laugh, and would not make him think of much. It thus exists in his mind as a holiday from the serious business of life; and just as it affords relief from being serious, so it affords relief from being dignified.

But, fundamentally, it was still the urge within him to make something beautiful that he took to writing. Indeed, it is easy to write popular works, but to create something beautiful requires genuine good taste in the author. Still

more is the demand greater for one to create, as Wilde did, literature which can both be popular and yet artistically successful.

"LYING" AND REALISM<sup>1</sup>

Probably what attracted Wilde most in his ideals form of life and art was the mysticism behind it. Therefore, "life's master", art was essentially to Wilde a mode of mysticism. Hence, in "The Decay of Lying" he said

Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of herself....She is a veil, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forest knows of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread...<sup>2</sup>

Talking about James Whistler, he said, "Jimmy explains things in the newspapers. Art should always remain mysterious. Artists, like gods, must never leave their pedestals."<sup>3</sup> And he seemed to agree with Whistler.

However, what Wilde and Whistler understood as mysticism was not as profound and deep as the theological mysticism. Probably what they meant can be said to be that individuality within a piece of art which so characterised, distinguished itself from the exactness and photographic precision of realistic writings. The term "mysticism" to

<sup>1</sup>.Wilde regarded "lying" as an "art, a science, and a social pleasure". He believed "that lying andpoetry are arts, not unconnected with each other". He was thinking of Plato's statement in The Republic 413, Book III. Everything that deceives may be said to enchant, and this he admitted.

<sup>2</sup>.Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 73, "The Decay of Lying".

<sup>3</sup>.The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde, Redman, p. 57.

Wilde is not so much an antonym to "Realism". Rather, it was to him an attribute towards non-realism. His antithesis to Realism was probably what he called "Lying".

The concept of realism in literature had arisen under controversy during the Victorian age. There were differences of opinion among philosophers, moralists, aesthetes, and romantacists. While Robert Buchanan surrendered to the "erotic madness" of Zola, Andrew Lang remained a cudgel of attack on the champion of realism. J. E. Symonds, less troubled by the popular moral question of the Realism-Romance controversy, probed into more of the fundamental issues than his contemporaries.

Applying Darwin's evolutionary concepts to life criticism, he attempts to liberate the mind from dogma through the instrumentality of science, to reconcile Hellenism Christianity and modern scientific thought and to justify the democratic spirit in art.

But not many of the Victorian critics and artists could contend with Symond's compromise. Meredith, for example, found a more fundamental quarrel with the contemporary realists. His charge, in brief, is that the realist's obsession with the physical (particularly in the realm of sex) prevents their seeing beyond into the sphere of mind and spirit. The theory of evolution suggested that man is a mere animal. But the higher function of man, his

intelligence (reasoning power) disproved of such and hence, merely taking the animal nature of man for granted will blind one to man's higher functions which are of the utmost importance to his progress. Stevenson's literary efforts and theories were romantic, to whom the novel was a means of escape from life. Therefore, he came to conceive of the idea that literature was not a transcript of life, but a mood, a mood which satisfies the imagination.

In contrast with Zola's preoccupation with the ugly and low, with his neglect of style, with his insistence that art must be an exact copy of life, and with the seriousness with which he approaches the business of writing, Wilde proceeded to aim at the fastidious, stylized, imaginatively clever and flippant writing. He attacked Zola on grounds that

True to the lofty principle that he lays down in one of his pronouncements on literature, 'L'homme de geue 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!...But his work is entirely wrong from beginning to end, and wrong not on ground of morals, but on ground of art...from the standpoint of art, what can be said in favour of the author of L'Assommoir, Nana and Pot-Bouille? Nothing.<sup>4</sup>

He continues to say that Zola's characters have every "dreary vice and then drearier virtues", and that his record of their lives was absolutely without interest. He

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<sup>4</sup>. "The Decay of Lying", Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 62.

judged Zola from the point that the high priest of realism could not achieve distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power, which to Wilde were the chief "requirements" of literature.

"As a method", Wilde said, "realism is a complete failure." He saw that art, like thought, has independent existence, that it has direct relation neither to its own time nor to external nature. Its appeal is timeless and, as he said "so far from being the creation of its time, it usually is in direct opposition to it and the only history that it preserves for us is the history of progress." Art, to Wilde, develops purely on its own lines, and "it is not necessarily realistic in an age of realism, nor spiritual in an age of faith".

Wilde pointed out that the extreme distinction between realism and his own aesthetic idealism can be seen in the difference between Zola's L'Assommoir and Balzac's Illusions Perdues. He regarded Balzac as the most remarkable combination of the "artistic temperament with the scientific spirit". Hence, while Zola's L'Assommoir is sort of an "unimaginative realism", Balzac's Illusions Perdues is "imaginative reality". He approved of Baudelaire's praise of Balzac

All Balzac's characters are gifted with the same ardour of life that animated himself. All his fictions are as deeply coloured as dreams. Each mind is a weapon loaded to the muzzle with will.

The very scullions have genius.<sup>5</sup>

He saw the creative genius of Balzac because "he created life, he did not copy it." The "imaginative reality" of Balzac enabled him to achieve the making of characters that "have a kind, fervent, fiery-coloured existence" which "dominated us and defy skepticism".

Many years ago, in a number of All the Year Round Charles Dickens complained that Balzac was very little read in England and, although since then the public has become more familiar with the great masterpieces of French fiction, still it may be doubted whether the Comedie Humaine is at all appreciated or understood by the general run of novel readers. It is really the greatest monument that literature has produced in our century, and H. Taine hardly exaggerates when he says that, after Shakespear, Balzac is our most important magazine of documents on human nature...the distinction between such a book as M. Zola's L'Assommoir and such a book as Balzac's Illusion Perdues is the distinction between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality..... He was, of course, accused of being immoral. Few writers who deal directly with life escape that charge. The morals of the personages of the Comedie Humaine are simply the morals of the world around us. They are part of the artist's

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<sup>5</sup>. Ibid, p. 65.

subject matter; they are part of his method.<sup>6</sup>

His attack on Realism as an artistic method can be seen in his criticism of the Russian novelists.

Of the three great Russian novelists of our time Turgenev is by far the finest artist....Count Tolstoy's method is much larger, and his field of vision more extended....Dostoyevsky differs widely from both of his rivals. He is not so fine an artist as Turgenev, for he deals more with the facts than with the effects of life; nor has he Tolstoy's largeness of vision and epic dignity; but he has qualities that are distinctively and absolutely his own, such as a fierce intensity of passion and concentration of impulse, a power of dealing with the deepest mysteries of psychology and the most hidden springs of life, and a realism that is pitiless in its fidelity, and terrible because it is true.<sup>7</sup>

Wilde saw that realism as a method would not leave much work for the imaginative faculty from which a true piece of art must originate. He was of the opinion that "when art surrenders her imaginative medium, she surrenders everything". While the imagination would set out to create new things realism, as a method, is merely imitative and in fact the "surrender of an imaginative form". Realism as a method is a failure because it would take things directly from life and "reproduce its vulgarity down to the smallest detail".

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<sup>6</sup>.As quoted in "The Aesthetic Revolt against Naturalism in Victorian Criticism", Clarence Dekker, P. M. L. A., Vol. LIII, Mr. 1938, pp. 853-854. This passage, slightly moderated, was repeated in "The Decay of Lying", Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup>. Ibid, p. 854.

In fact, Wilde's argument for and against realism could be said to be still within the realm of realism. The controversy that arose in his argument was a matter of method and that of artistic end. Using life as material, one still can get an impression of reality which then can be reproduced in the ideal form of writing. This is still creative, and he somehow approved of the Jacobean artist in this respect. But, once an artist set out to use life as a method, he is bound to be imitative and such exact copy of life or reality, without the fusing with the artist's own personality and taste is indeed the wrong approach. Using reality as raw material, "the visible things of life are transmitted into artistic conventions" by the working of pure imagination.

Wilde had high hope of the artistic future because he thought that society would one day be bored with realism and return to its lost leader - "the cultured and fascinating liar" who would "charm", "delight", and "to give pleasure". The "liar" is "the very basis of civilized society".

One day, as Wilde would imagine, "Art, breaking from the prison-house of realism, will run to greet" the liar, and "will kiss his false beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestation". Only the "liar" can be artist, because in lying he would not reproduce things as they are. He said that no great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist. Essentially, the artist is one who

is supposed to reveal art, but he could succeed in doing so only by allowing art to develop along its own line, "remote from reality" and "finding expression in a new form" in order to "reveal her own perfection".

All Wilde's theory of the essence of lying in creative writing can be summed up in the last paragraph of "The Decay of Lying", where he ended up with four doctrines of his "new aesthetics". His ideas were somewhat along this line.

1. Art is independent of the spirit of the age in the sense that it must not be a conformity to the fashion of the age. In other words, artistic creation should not set to copy life in its immediate surroundings.
2. In order to introduce life to art, the former must be "translated into artistic convention" because otherwise it would be mere realistic copying which, as a method, is a complete failure. "Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism (in the sense that the artistic imagination is employed towards a new ideal) is always in front of life".
3. Life imitates art far more than otherwise because art invents new form and manner which life can copy. It follows, therefore, Nature copies art.
4. Lying, the telling of beautiful, untrue things, is the proper aim of art.

In conclusion, what is only good of realism, was to Wilde that it could only offer raw material to imitate artistic creation, as such, what Eliot would call the objective correlatives. According to Wilde, essential reality was not to be found in the surface appearance of life. It is to be found in the interpretation of the objective phenomena.

PART II

OSCAR WILDE'S IDEA OF SOCIETY

## INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde never established an entire system of ideas about society. In fact, with what he understood of and what he wrote about "Socialism", he was never a social philosopher, not even to the extent of having certain keen interests in social reform as writers like Arnold, Ruskin, or Shaw had.

But he had some theory of social reform, especially that on human behaviour and the process of achieving a better living.

Brought up in a home where rebellion was a tradition, Wilde showed his defiance not in the political field as did his mother. His idea towards revolution, particularly that towards the French Revolution of almost a century before, was quite confused in his mind. He saw the ill effect of the revolution. In the "Sonnet to Liberty",<sup>1</sup> he says:

Not that I love thy children, whose dull eyes  
See nothing save their own unlovely woe,  
Whose minds know nothing care to know  
But that the roar of thy Democracie  
Thy Reigns of Terror thy great anarchies  
Mirrors my wildest passion like the sea  
And give my rage a brother.

However, he also cherished the noble motive of the revolutionary for the sake of liberty. In the same poem he says:

For this sake only do thy dissonant cries

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<sup>1</sup>. The Works of Oscar Wilde, Collins, p. 963.

Delight my discreet soul, else might all kings  
By bloody knout or treacherous connoades  
Rob nations of their rights inviolate.

But still he "remained unmoved", and tended to temper his revolutionary themes with appeals to the supernatural spirit of "order" and the poem concludes with

These Christs that die upon the barricades  
God knows that I am with them, in some things.

The only work in which Wilde used the word "Socialism" is his famous essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism". It is a satiric and ironic rather than a suggestive piece of social reform. The thesis he put forth is the development of the individual -- he called it individualism -- as the basis of social improvements. The essay itself, as Hesketh Pearson points out, is not only the best but the greatest in the language and has the "quality of making people think for themselves, of jolting them out of their ruts, instead of influencing them to accept the thoughts of the writer, to sink into another rut."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, Wilde had deliberately retreated from didactic writing, hence inviting his readers' discussion and reasoning rather than just telling them what socialism should be.

The motive of writing the essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" was curious. It was said that he attended a meeting in Westminster where the chief speaker was Bernard

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<sup>2</sup>. Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 15.

Shaw whose address on Socialism moved Wilde to write his essay. As a matter of fact, Wilde's socialism, if ever it is a system of social philosophy, was not at all along the ideals of Shaw. Their viewpoints, as Pearson points out again, "were radically dissimilar", as "Wilde regarded socialism merely as a means to an end; Shaw considered it as an economic creed, an end in itself."<sup>3</sup> However, his treatment of social adjustment was more of the layman's ideal rather than that a social philosopher would offer.

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<sup>3</sup>. Ibid, p. 15

## WILDE'S IDEAS OF SOCIAL REFORM

Wilde as a great master of irony, opened his essay on "The Soul of Man under Socialism" with a highly paradoxical remark. While most social philosophers propose immediate social adjustments, social relief or the like, Wilde had gone to the most fundamental and the most ultimate requirement of a stable society. Therefore, when he says, "Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others", he hinted that mere financial or material aid to the under-privileged in society is not the method by which we should approach utopia. His aim is, as he says in the essay, "to try to reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible". His continuing remarks seem shrewd and shocking. He said "the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good". This is a response to his belief that society can never be better by the equal distribution of wealth. Hence such "Altruistic virtues" as doing good and amusing the poor have "really prevented the carrying out of the aim of reconstructing society" in such a manner that poverty will no longer exist.

It sounds paradoxical, too, when he said that "in the interest of the rich", private property should be abolished. But the fact that private property calls for endless attention to such business and endless bother is true. Furthermore, Wilde pointed out that a man of property under

existing conditions could be very insecure. Take the example of an enormously wealthy merchant, "every moment of his life" is "at the mercy of things that are not under his control". Shakespeare had the same idea as he put to Gratiano's mouth in The Merchant of Venice:

You have too much respect upon the world  
They lose it that do buy it with much care.<sup>1</sup>

On talking about crimes in society, Wilde's ideas appear quite modern to our time. He held that crime is the result of unsolved social problems rather than of inherent wickedness. People, he urged, commit crimes not because they are in themselves wicked but because poverty and circumstance place them in an impossible position. This idea is more or less in line with Confucius' thinking that men are born good and with a good nature in them. Wilde felt that "For what are called criminals nowadays are not criminals at all, Starvation and not sin, is the parent of modern crime!"<sup>2</sup> Later, in "De Profundis" he pointed out that "Sins of the flesh are nothing. Sins of the soul alone are shameful."<sup>3</sup>

History, according to "original authorities of each kind of time", as Wilde pointed out, often relates to us

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<sup>1</sup> The Merchant of Venice, Act I, Scene 1, lines 74-75, Shakespeare.

<sup>2</sup> "The Soul of Man under Socialism", Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> "De Profundis", Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 133.

"not the crimes that the wicked have committed, but by the punishments that the good have inflicted". Based on the belief that men are born good and that punishment, if practised, would do more injustice than justice, he therefore proposed to abolish punishment. He argued:

A community is infinitely more brutalised by the habitual employment of punishment than it is by the occasional occurrence of crime. Obviously follows that the more punishment is inflicted, the more crime is produced, and most modern legislation has clearly recognised this, and has made it its task to diminish punishment as far as it thinks it can....The less punishment, the less crime. When there is no punishment at all, crime will either cease to exist, or if it occurs will be treated by physicians as a very distressing form of dementia, to be cured by care and kindness.<sup>4</sup>

Some thanks must be expressed to Wilde then for the abolition of capital punishment in England with the passing of such laws by the Commons in 1956. This is not a direct influence of Wilde, but credit must be given for his penetrating insight and most humanitarian proposal. It is a pity that such a proposal had not received the attention of legal authorities of his time, other he himself would have reaped the harvest of being sentenced to a more moderate punishment than the two years imprisonment with hard labour he suffered during his last years.

Ever since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the English had suffered from its bad effects as much

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<sup>4</sup>."The Soul of Man under Socialism", Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 31.

as from the good ones. The principle of inventing machines was to ease man's burden from heavy, tedious, manual labour. But the Victorian age still saw the lack of proper adjustment in this respect when man was still then under "mechanical slavery". Wilde saw the tragic effect that "as soon as man had invented a machine to do this work, he began to starve!"<sup>5</sup> He realised that under improper social adjustments we would see "one man owns a machine which does the work of five hundred men" but hereafter "five hundred men are in consequence thrown out of employment".<sup>6</sup> Even up to this last half of the twentieth century this effect is still felt in the most modern industrial countries. However, Wilde still had high hope that "under proper conditions machinery will serve man, there is no doubt at all that this is the future of machinery", and that "human slavery is wrong, insecure and demoralising".<sup>7</sup> On mechanical slavery, on the slavery of the machine, the future of the world depends.

Society, according to Wilde, is an ever progressing one. Mankind is constantly striving towards some ideal. Therefore, he says

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopia.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, man needs to have an ideal to live up to. It is through this constant yearning for a better ideal, through his ever unappeased dissatisfaction with the present that society can enjoy its progress.

Wilde's ideas on social reform, as brought out, were in themselves not as constructive as the social philosophers would suggest. Shaw's response to Wilde's idea was that, to him, they were merely witty and entertaining. and had nothing to do with socialism. But what Shaw probably had in mind was that, what can be called socialism had only one form and that was only through the expression of his Fabian Society. Wilde was never a member of such an organisation, nor would he be interested in it. Wilde's sayings, especially that in the essay on Socialism, were mostly witty and paradoxical. Hence the error to respond to them with a mere laugh on their apparent and superficial contradiction of meaning. When Shaw said that he enjoyed particularly a paragraph as "agitators are a set of interfering meddling people who come down to some perfectly contented class of community and sow the seeds of discontent amongst them, that is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary".<sup>9</sup> It is only admissible if Shaw's

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<sup>8</sup>.Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup>.Ibid, p. 23.

statement was meant to be just paradoxical, otherwise Wilde would be very much misunderstood. Agitators are necessary because it is only through them that those who "made private terms with the enemy, and sold their birthright for every bad pottage"<sup>10</sup> (that is the seemingly contented people) can be liberated towards a fair and stable social condition.

Hesketh Pearson points out both the Fabian and Marxian socialists, according to Shaw, laughed at statements like those that follow:

If the socialism is Authoritarian; if there are Governments armed with economic power as they are now with political power; if in a word, we are to have Industrial Tyrannies, then the last state of man will be worse than the first.<sup>11</sup>

It is to be regretted that a portion of our community should be practically in slavery, but to propose to solve the problem by enslaving the entire community is childish.<sup>12</sup>

All authority is quite degrading. It degrades those who exercise it, and it degrades those over whom it is exercised.<sup>13</sup>

The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all.<sup>14</sup>

A concluding remark from Pearson might well serve to

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10. Ibid, p. 22.

11. Ibid, p. 21.

12. Ibid, p. 24.

13. Ibid, p. 30.

14. Ibid, p. 46.

justify Wilde's special insight and prophecy.<sup>15</sup>

No doubt the early socialist thought such remarks funny; and now that Authoritarian Socialism is the fashion, Wilde's warnings must strike bureaucrats as very old fashioned; but the joke is not yet over, and it may be as well to remember that he only conceived socialism as one of many possible utopias.

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15. Hesketh Pearson's Introduction to Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 16.

SOCIAL REFORM THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
INDIVIDUALISM

Occasionally we find some real artists who also contributed to the well being of society. They did so by giving their opinions on social reform either through economic, social, or political improvements. But they were usually neglected by the Social philosophers. These artists were usually regarded as merely a sect of crazy dreamers. They were regarded as those who would cultivate themselves or within their own group only without much care for the society as a whole.

Hence, Oscar Wilde's theory of socialism received only a laugh from people under the Fabian and Marxian order. But as it has been pointed out, Wilde did not propose to be serious in dealing with such a topic as immediate social reform. He did not believe that in a short duration of time, society could be changed down to its roots. His approach to reform was fundamental and he strove to cure the basic wrong of society. He proposed to do this through artistic progress and this, he thought, could be achieved by the development of what he called "individualism". He said "for the full development of life to its highest mode of perfection, something more is needed. What is needed is Individualism."<sup>1</sup>

What Wilde regarded as Individualism was that quality

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<sup>1</sup>. Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 21.

## INDIVIDUALISM

which, if cultivated in the individual, enables him to be outstanding and distinguished in personality among his fellow man. He gave examples of such personalities.

Now and then in the course of the century, a great man of science, like Darwin, a great poet like Keats, a fine critical spirit like M. Renan, a supreme artist like Flaubert, has been able to isolate himself, to keep himself out of reach of the clamorous claims of others...as to realise the perfection of what was in him, to his own incomparable gain and to the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world"<sup>2</sup>

Wilde realised that with the existence of such personalities there is hope for "incomparable and lasting gain for the world".

Paradoxical as his essay on socialism is from the beginning, his idea of the true beautiful and healthy individualism is equally ironical in meaning. He distinguished living from mere existing. "To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all", he said. What he really meant was the necessity of man to know himself and to live up to his own ideal. He urged that everyone should exercise his own "individualism". But, in order to do so, everyone must of necessity cultivate himself artistically at first. Only the artist can know himself fully. The only process by which "individualism" can be cultivated is through the contemplation of art. Wilde's

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<sup>2</sup>. Ibid, p. 19.

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ideal was, therefore, to require artistic cultivation in every individual. It follows, therefore, that everyone will be able to know himself, and his position in society; hence the possibility of every individual utilising his own power to the fullest extent. It was, as Wilde believed, only through this artistic cultivation in the individual that future society could improve itself. But, Wilde never stressed (nor did he plan for) the development of individualism in a progressively short duration of time. Broadly speaking, and indeed this really goes to the heart of the problem, Wilde suggested the cultivation of the individuals as the basic elements of society. Such a fundamental principle of social reform is quite analogous to that of Confucius, who taught that one who wishes to rule his country well must see that the families are well regulated, and that in order to regulate the family properly one must see to the development of the individual. Within the individual, Confucius went further to demand the rectification of the spirit, a step toward sincerity of thought which then contributes to the culture of knowledge. But Wilde went on with a different method in the development of the individual.

He taught that Individualism is a mode of art, and then the immense value of individualism lies in its "disturbing and disintegrating force". Individualism is

sound because

For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine.<sup>3</sup>

He was disillusioned with the general public of England because

The public accept what has been, because they could not alter it, not because they appreciate it. They swallow their classic whole, and never taste them. ...In the case of Shakespeare...the public really see neither the beauties nor the defects of his plays...<sup>4</sup>

What was worse of the general public was

The public make use of classics of a 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....A fresh mode of Beauty is absolutely distasteful to them...<sup>5</sup>

Hence, he saw grounds for the artistic improvement of the public, and this could be done only through the development of the individuals toward a more cultivated taste toward a more cultivated taste in them. "The public", as he says, has always and in every age, been badly brought up." It was time then that "the public should try to make itself artistic".<sup>6</sup> He saw the reason why the public could not improve

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<sup>3</sup>. Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup>. Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup>. Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup>. Ibid, p. 35.

its taste for art. It was because there existed a sort of effort to "attempt to interfere with the individualism of imaginative art". Therefore, even if a piece of art, if purely imaginative, it is liable of being abused once it becomes popular. The public, not having cultivated their taste properly, often misunderstand any pure form of art.

Therefore, if everyone can develop a sort of individualism in himself everyone can at least give out healthy protest against unreasonable social maladjustments. To Wilde, the economic and scientific factors in society are immaterial. They are not the solution to stable society. They only contribute to Authoritarian government or the mechanical slavery in men.

Therefore, he sought to find a means on which society could rely for stability. Disillusioned in both religion and scientific progress, Wilde sought for the solution in Art. He realised that art was the highest end of life. Therefore with each individual achieving a taste for art, it follows that Utopia shall be at hand.

Chesterton, on reviewing the Victorian age in literature, was usually unsympathetic toward Wilde as a literary career. But he admitted in Wilde one thing which is worth mentioning.

But there is one literary consequence of the thing which must be mentioned, because it bears us on to

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that much breezier movement which first began to break in upon all this ghastly idleness --- I mean the socialist movement....I mean the one real thing he ever wrote "The Ballad of Reading Goal" in which we hear a cry for COMMON JUSTICE and BROTHERHOOD very much deeper more democratic and more true to the real trend of the populace of to-day than anything the socialist eger uttered even in the boldest pages of Bernard Shaw.<sup>7</sup>

"The Ballad of Reading Goal" was written eight years after "The Soul of Man under Socialism". It was written after he was released from prison, but still bore under authorship, his prison number C.3.3. The idea Wilde expounded in the Ballad represents his more mature view of life and society. He continued to stick by the theory of art for art's sake, but he was no longer as consistent as before. However, as far as society is concerned, he still saw the existence of undiminished evils. Over and above this, time and suffering had made him more susceptible to social evils and he had acquired a deeper understanding and insight into the matter. It is unjust that "each man kills the thing he loves, yet each man does not die" except one who was bravest to do it with a sword, especially that he is considerably the kindest in doing so because "the dead so soon grow cold". In this respect, he says

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<sup>7</sup>. The Victorian Age in Literature, G. K. Chesterton, p. 138.

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The man had killed the thing he loved  
And so he had to die.

Yet each man kills the things he loves  
By each let this be heard  
Some do it with a bitter look  
Some with a flattering word  
The coward does it with a kiss  
The brave man with a sword.

Some kill their love when they are young  
And some when they are old;  
Some strangle with the hand of Lust  
Some with the hand of Gold;  
The kindest use a knife, because  
The dead so soon grow cold.

...  
For each man kills the thing he loves  
Yet each man does not die.

He felt that it was "strange to think that he had such a  
debt to pay".

Wilde had a strong feeling against the injustices of  
laws. He realised that society is lacking the spirit of  
Christ. Man made laws are made not for the good of man.  
Men usually struggle among themselves. He goes on to say:

I know not whether laws be right  
Or whether laws be wrong...  
But this I know, that every law  
That man has made for man  
Since first man took his brother's life  
And the said world began...  
This too I know -- and wise it were  
If each could know the same --  
That every prison that men build  
Is built with bricks of shame  
And bound with bars lest Christ should see  
How man their brothers maim.

and,

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With bars they blur the gracious moon  
And blind the goodly sun  
And they do well to hide their Hell  
For in it things are done  
That Son of God nor son of man  
Ever should look upon.

There is indeed a cry for men to wake up and realise that as God meant to make this a world of love, men had acted otherwise in exercising various cruel acts against their brothers.

However, Wilde is often accused of trying to escape from reality through Art. It must be remembered that Wilde was himself a great artist. He was not a social thinker. He was never an active member of the socialist organisation. He dealt with the difficult problem of social reform only because he had a deep and sympathetic realisation that as men are good by nature, there must be a way of reforming society.

There is reason by which artistic progress can contribute to society. Having a deep understanding of the Russian revolution,<sup>8</sup> he admired the conspirators for their healthy protest. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism", he said:

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<sup>8</sup>The 1905 Russian Revolution had its root in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. By the time Wilde wrote this essay in 1890, Russia was in a reign of terror opened by the Revolutionists.

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No one who lived in modern Russia could possibly realise his perfection except by pain....A Russian who lives happily under the present system of government in Russia must either believe that man has no soul or that if he has, it is not worth developing. A Nihilist who rejects all authority because he knows authority to be evil, and welcomes all pain, because through that he realises his personality is a real Christian. To him the Christian ideal is a true thing.<sup>9</sup>

He admired Dostoevsky as a man who expressed this spirit in Russia. Therefore it really needs men like Dostoevsky who could represent the true spirit, because of being an artist.

Wilde concluded his essay on the soul of man under socialism by bringing in happiness and pleasure to the individual as the basic mode of healthy society.

Man has sought to live intensely, fully, perfectly. When he can do so without exercising restraint on others, or suffering it ever and his activities are all pleasurable to him, he will be saner, healthier, more civilized, more himself. Pleasure is Nature's best, her sign of approval. When man is happy, he is in harmony with himself and his environment.<sup>10</sup>

The essay did represent Wilde's real social belief. It is not merely the result of a passing enthusiasm inspired by hearing Shaw's lectures on socialism. Hesketh Pearson points out that "his whole trend of thought was antagonistic to the Webbshavian deification of the State", and there is no doubt that "The Soul of Man under Socialism" really did

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<sup>9</sup>"The Soul of Man under Socialism", Selected Essays and Poems, Penguin, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup>. Ibid, p. 53.

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mirror Wilde's personal discontent with society as he found it, and gave a picture of the kind of world in which he would like men to live. He did not, as it has been pointed out, strive to work out a reform scheme. But his ideas were at least a healthy protest. At least he could realise that the socialistic idea then in the air would inevitably become authoritarian socialism which would be just as undesirable as the former state of government. His ideas were too much in opposition to the dominant tendencies of the day in England. Hence his essay was not regarded as important in the English socialist movement. But, across the Channel, millions of copies were sold in central and eastern Europe, gaining reputation for him among the discontented classes under Russian, German, and Austrian despotisms of the time. In America, large pirated editions were printed and sold by revolutionary groups. But, all in all, he maintained his artistic approach towards social reform even though his utopia is too far to be attained. Remoteness to attain such an ideal is not to suggest that such attempt would be impossible. Wilde's ideal still retains its objective truth.

PART III

WILDE'S LIFE AND HIS IDEAL OF LIFE

"I put genius into my life; I only put talent into my work".<sup>1</sup> This remark, which was spoken by Wilde to Andre Gide in Algiers, can well serve as an expression of Wilde's philosophy of life. When saying this, Wilde was probably conscious of the difference in meaning between the two words "genius" and "talent". Dr. Henry Bradley, in the Oxford English Dictionary, traces the distinction of the two meanings back to the eighteenth century German writers, and to some foundation in French usage, and concludes that "The difference between 'genius' and 'talent' is formulated very variously by different writers, but there is general agreement in regarding the former as the higher of the two as 'creative' and 'original' and as achieving its results by instinctive perception and spontaneous activity, rather than by processes which admit of being distinctly analysed."

This interpretation would, therefore, agree with Wilde's distinction of the two words. To him, to "live" was the most important thing. To him, living was the most creative of all arts, hence the necessity of moulding his life into a beautiful form and expression. He said,

...what man has sought for is, indeed, neither pain nor pleasure but simply Life. Man has sought to live intensely, fully, perfectly.

Wilde's life was more than a mere sequence of events and

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<sup>1</sup>.As quoted in The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde, Redman, p. 64.

actions. According to him, life was almost a programme. He acted according to his own ideal of living, and put into action his philosophy of life. When he said "the world is a stage, but the play is badly cast"<sup>2</sup>, he was probably thinking of appointing himself to play the main part in his new cast, which included only the "selected" and the "artists". The reason why he saw the cast badly chosen was that "Most men and women are forced to perform parts for which they have no qualifications."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, realising his own genius as an artist, he set to practise what he preached and did what he advocated. To a certain extent, the Lord Arthur in his story is a portrait of Wilde himself. He described Lord Arthur as "no mere dreamer, or idle dilettante", but as one who was "essentially practical". "Life to him meant action, rather than thought."<sup>4</sup> This also serves to add to the description of himself.

Webster's Dictionary defines genius as an

innate bent of mind or disposition; remarkable aptitude or natural endowment for some special pursuit; character or essential principle embodiment; a person possessed of high mental powers or faculties.

This thesis will not concern itself with the last definition of the term listed by Webster, because the earlier attempts of Webster would better fit Wilde's claim of his own genius.

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<sup>2</sup>."Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", The Works of Oscar Wilde, Collins, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup>.Ibid, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup>.Ibid, p. 178.

The objective of this part of the thesis is to show that Wilde's philosophy of aesthetics is to be seen in his life. Or, to borrow from Webster again, Wilde's innate bent of mind is to be seen in his life. The remarkable aptitude or natural endowment for the pursuit of beauty appears again and again in his biography. His life can be studied as the embodiment of an essential principle -- that of the pursuit and enjoyment of beauty. This section on the life of Wilde, therefore, is not mere padding. It is based upon Wilde's own reference to his putting his genius into his life. What at first sight might be taken lightly as a typical facetious remark takes on more meaning when the true meaning of the word "genius" is more fully appreciated. Many examples of his pursuit and appreciation of the beautiful and of his horror of ugliness can be found in Wilde's life.

Oscar Wilde showed his remarkable talent for literature from his school days. At Oxford, where he held a scholarship (demyship) from 1874-1879, he obtained the double distinction of a "First" in Classical Moderations and in "Literae Humaniores". He pretended to be idle at college, but there is evidence that he read voraciously. For this, he was very familiar with Plato and Aristotle, Spinoza, Goethe, Hegel, Renan, Kant, Matthew Arnold, Emerson, and Baudelaire, apart from his being able to furnish critical appreciations of works of his contemporaries. Although he believed that "Genius is born", yet he, on the other hand, realised the

necessity of the contemplation of the beautiful, which he found in literary works and other "objets d'art". The dominant philosophy of his school days in England was that of the Neo-Hegelians led by T. H. Green. But the more cultivated undergraduates were attracted to Swinburne and the new ideas of interior decorations expounded by the Pre-Raphaelites. Wilde was particularly attracted to Whistler's passion for "blue china", and his room in Magdalen was full of blue china and peacock feathers, which he declared to "live up to".

Wilde had always tried to find an aesthetic philosophy of universal application. An opportunity came when he was invited to America to lecture about aesthetics. He accepted gladly. He arrived at New York on January 2, 1882. A remarkable incident happened at the custom office. He was asked if he had anything to declare. He replied, "Nothing but my genius." Indeed, Wilde never doubted his own genius. He was conscious always of his own power and his own intellectual quality.

For his first lecture in New York, he appeared in "Aesthetic" costume, with knee breeches, but he refused to carry a button hole with a sun flower to the platform. Later at Camden, New Jersey, Wilde called on Walt Whitman, with whom he talked about Rossetti, Morris, Swinburne, Tennyson, and Browning and, more important than these, they talked

about "beauty". A recollection of their conversation is remarkable as an exchange of opinion between a great American poet and a young but promising figure of English literature. According to Pearson, their conversation went like this:<sup>5</sup>

Wilde: "I can't listen to anyone unless he attracts me by a charming style or beauty of theme."

Whitman: "Why, Oscar, it always seems to me that the fellow who makes a dead set at beauty by itself is in a bad way. My idea is that beauty is a result, not an abstraction."

Wilde: "Yes, I remember you have said 'All beauty comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain'. And, after all, I think so too."

Whitman regarded Wilde as a "genuine, honest and manly...his youthful health, enthusiasm and buoyancy are refreshing".<sup>6</sup>

Wilde, as a personality, was charming. He quelled the Harvard students' pre-arranged riot by the force of his charm and his penetrating voice in lecturing. Later, he lectured in fifty or sixty cities of the West, and if he did not persuade his hard-bitten audiences to adopt his ideas, at least he had earned their respect.

"The English Renaissance", the subject of Wilde's lecture in America, carried his main theme of aesthetics. The Sun evaluated his lecture with this remark:

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<sup>5</sup>. As recorded in Oscar Wilde, His Life and Wit by H. Pearson, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup>. As quoted in Oscar Wilde, James Laver, p. 13.

It is not a performance so trifling as to insult the intelligence of the audience, but a carefully prepared essay which proves its author to be a man of cultivation, taste, imagination, education, and refinement.<sup>6</sup>

Wilde was married to Constance Lloyd in 1884.

Between the 1882 and 1888, he did not write much, although he wrote reviews (unsigned) for various papers, and took the editorship of The Woman's World. But this period is one of the most important in Wilde's life, for his frequent visits to Paris enabled him to get into close contact with the French men of letters, especially the symbolists. However, prior to that, he was aware of the existence of the French "Decadent" school, because the influence of Baudelaire had preceded that of Swinburne. Huysmans', A Rebours was published in 1884, and must have appealed to Wilde fervidly. Mario Praz, in his book, The Romantic Agony, affirms that the direct source of Dorian Gray is the A Rebours. With his keen interest in the "Decadent" ideas, his excellent French, his charm and easy manner, Wilde was well received in France.

The year 1888 marked the beginning of a period of progressive literary activity which lasted until 1895. Among the major works were "The Happy Prince and Other Tales" (1888), "The Decay of Lying" (1889), "Pen, Pencil and Poison" (1889), "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." (1889), "The Critic as Artist" (1890). "The Picture of Dorian Gray" was published in the

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<sup>6</sup>. As quoted in Oscar Wilde, James Laver, p. 13.

Lippincott's Magazine, in 1889, to which he added the preface a year later. The novel was published in book form in 1891 with an additional preface. All these works established for him a more or less systematic sequence of aesthetic ideas. He began his plays in 1892 starting with "Lady Windermere's Fan" and "Salome" (which is written in French), and with the production of "The Importance of Being Earnest", he reached the climax of his fame.

Practically all the plays of Wilde have a setting in high society. Personally, he liked high society and its sophistication. In "An Ideal Husband", he said,

I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be.<sup>7</sup>

He liked the mask which everyone wore in high society. In "The Decay of Lying", he remarks, "What is interesting about people in good society is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask."<sup>8</sup> It was in high society that he found what he called "charming Personalities". Prior to his social downfall, his only acquaintances were with high society figures -- figures like those he portrayed in his plays.

Probably, it was in high society that he could find

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<sup>7</sup>. The Works of Oscar Wilde, Collins, p. 469.

<sup>8</sup>. Ibid, p. 914.

utility for his eloquent tongue. He was a superb conversationalist. Moreover, he liked to live in a world of gestures. Although he was essentially eccentric and an individualist, yet behind the flamboyant facade there existed a genuine understanding of other points of view besides his own. Although his whole manner was one of self confidence, he was seldom condescending. He preferred sharing views at a dinner table to making the dogmatic statements of a lecturer. He spoke in parables, told anecdotes, fairy stories, maintaining the same degree of fascination whether his talk prompted laughter or tears. All in all, he viewed his own life as a work of art, and he took the utmost care to use his conversation as a means of expressing himself and the great creative emotion within himself. For this reason, his statement, "I put genius to my life" is well justified.

After 1895, however, being sentenced to two years hard labour, the joyous, spirited, and gay personality of Wilde suffered a great turn. Wilde, too, realised a great change in himself. In a letter from Paris, 1898, he wrote:

I don't think I shall ever write again. Something is killed in me. I feel no desire to write -- I am unconscious of power. Of course my first year in prison destroyed me body and soul. It could not be otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

But still, he finished with "De Profundis" which conveys a

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<sup>9</sup>. As quoted in The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde, Redman, p. 246.

heavier and gloomy tone in contrast with the gay and merry themes of his earlier works. W. W. Ward's "Reminiscence" gives a good account of "De Profundis".

I know that some say they detect in it the false ring of self pity, the Neronian cry of "Qualis artifex pereo" I hear no such note. Deliberately he had cultivated as it seems to me, moods and feelings and appetites and states of thought so warring and so contradictory that at length the mould of sanity and self control broke. He had made his mind a stage on which incongruous scenes continually shifted across which strange characters, each the protagonist of the moment, passed and re-passed in a carnival of mad confusion while he himself sat, as he fondly thought, a passive spectator in the stalls and watched the play proceed -- with appropriate emotions. He had turned his mind into a laboratory in which he might test his own experiences and he fell a victim to his experiments. For he searched on---individualism-self-realisation as he called was his Philosopher's Stone, or rather the Helen for whom he lost all.<sup>10</sup>

The other major work he wrote after being released from prison is "The Ballad of Reading Goal" which, lacking entirely the earnest insincerity of his earlier works, reveals in another manner, his deep understanding of the brotherhood of men. The gay, sweet-tempered elegance of his earlier work is replaced by a grave and solemn exposition, which probed deep into humanity. However, the whole of his life philosophy was concerned with an attempt to prove that personality should be the final work of art, and he sought to prove this through action.

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<sup>10</sup>. As quoted in Appendix B, of Son of Oscar Wilde, V. Holland, p. 223.

Although this last part of this thesis has not tried to prove the validity of the statement, "I only put my talent into my works", there would be room enough to state that Wilde had underestimated his works in this respect. As an approach, Wilde had indeed tried to live up to his own ideals of aesthetics. But as a result, he had equally put his genius into his work. At least, as a literary-historical figure, his place is unique. He served well as a "symbolic relation to his age". He has his permanent position in the literature of England and in that of the world.

Having dealt with Wilde's theory of aesthetics of society and of art, it can be seen that the basic theme of his theories is his advocacy of art for the sake of art. The idea of art for art's sake was not new when Wilde took it up. But he remodelled and slightly modified it in his own manner. He therefore strongly urged the creating of pure art as an end of beauty itself. Such artistic process can also be applied to social reform and for the betterment of life. Hence there is a common thread of the theory of art for art's sake running through his ideal concept of art, society, and life. It is only through art that man can strive at better living. It is only through art as a basic cultivation of the individuals that society can be healthy. Art, as Wilde conceived it, is in itself a thing of beauty. It owes its influences not to morality, nor to other things other than the artistic temperament itself.

For all such theories, it can also be seen that Wilde is not in fact the superficial, witty creator of a Lady Windermere, a Lord Darlington, an Ernest or an inventor of "Banburyism". He was not what the public considered as merely a supreme talker, still less was his pose that of a mere dandy of his own aesthetic cult. His aesthetics, though wrong to the extent that they deliberately detach art from morality, have some fundamental truths. Although it could not be said that the twentieth century "beauty maze" is directly indebted to Wilde, yet he had contributed a great

deal to modern aesthetics, especially as an English literary figure. Since Sir Philip Sidney's time, aestheticism had not been given a careful consideration in respect to literature. It was not until Wilde that people began to realise the essence of "beauty" in literature. The Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century revolted against the morbidity of the eighteenth century, hence giving the artist the power of self-realisation. The Romantic movement taught the importance of the individual or the individual artist. Somehow, the concept of the individual taste entered the picture of artistic creation. Wilde's art for art's sake theory, which could be called a "new Romanticism", went a step further. Realising the importance of the cultivation of the individual taste, it strives to specialise the work of the artists to the realm of art for beauty's sake, whereby "beauty" is the final aim of artistic creation. No history of aesthetics could afford to miss the important part Wilde played in such a field, especially in England where aestheticians are comparatively rare. Wilde's aesthetics are more than a mere link between the Romantics and the moderns. It is more than a deliberate revolt against dogmatic and didactic writings. Wilde's theory, in fact, transcends the realm of literature and enters into the field of pure art whose aim is nothing but beauty. This no study of literature could afford to miss, because the essence of beauty is necessary for literature.

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## A B S T R A C T

Oscar Wilde remodelled the old concept of Art for art's sake and put it in a way that the artist is different from other men in having a pre-dominance of sensuous intuition or creative imagination. He believed that an artist is a specialist in the techniques of his own art, and insofar, as a man is a philosopher, scientist, moralist, propagandist etc., he is not an artist. Great art, he considered, is not created by men of high moral character, and the artistic creation is the highest end of life. The critical function is in fact a form of artistic creation other than a mere appreciation as generally regarded. Wilde regarded that art should never be popular, because true art can only be appreciated by men of cultivated taste which the general public lacks. Art, according to Wilde, should not be realistic. Instead, the artist should 'lie', because it is only through 'lying' that the imagination can perform its work as the principle faculty in artistic creation.

This theory of Art for Art's Sake receives a considerable response in the writings of Beerholm, Yeats, and James Joyce, but it could not be said that such has been a direct influence.

Wilde's theory of social reform was not a systematic one, but it offers a utopia in which every individual is to be artistically cultivated. He believed that the world can only be better if every one can see the 'beauty' of living. He gave 'socialism' an artistic twist.

Wilde's life is legendary. He was a genius. He was a hard worker as a defender of his aesthetics. Although he claimed that he put his genius into his life and his talent into his works, yet the work of a genius can be seen in both. However, his ideal of life was still 'living for beauty's

sake.

Therefore, it can be established that the theory of art in fact runs through Wilde's concept of literature and art, his concept of society and that of life. Although his contemporaries had been highly prejudiced against him, yet his theory of art is receiving keen attention after the turn of the ~~19th~~ century.