

Wilde Lectures

No. 2 - Wilde, Victorian and Modernist

Max Nordau's definition of *fin de siècle*:

It means a practical emancipation from traditional discipline, which theoretically is still in force. To the voluptuary this means unbridled lewdness, the unchaining of the beast in man; to the withered heart of the egoist, disdain of all consideration for his fellow-men, the trampling underfoot of all barriers which enclose the brute greed of lucre and lust of pleasure; to the contemner of the world it means the shameless ascendancy of base impulses and motives, which were, if not virtuously suppressed, at least hypocritically hidden; to the believer it means the repudiation of dogma, the negation of a super-sensuous world, the descent into flat phenomenalism; to the sensitive nature yearning for aesthetic thrills, it means the vanishing of ideals in art, and no more power in its accepted forms to arouse emotion. And to all, it means the end of an established order, which for thousands of years has satisfied logic, fettered depravity, and in every art matured something of beauty.

(Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: Heinemann, 1895), p.5)

Mr Oscar Wilde's new play at the Haymarket is a dangerous subject, because he has the property of making his critics dull. They laugh angrily at his epigrams, like a child who is coaxed into being amused in the very act of setting up a yell of rage and agony. They protest that the trick is obvious, and that such epigrams can be turned out by the score by any one lightminded enough to condescend to such frivolity. As far as I can ascertain, I am the only person in London who cannot sit down and write an Oscar Wilde play at will. The fact that his plays, though apparently lucrative, remain unique under these circumstances, says much for the self-denial of our scribes.

(George Bernard Shaw, "Two New Plays" (review of *An Ideal Husband* by Oscar Wilde and *Guy Domville* by Henry James), *Saturday Review*, 12 January 1895)

"Is this Utopian? A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the 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 Utopias."

("The Soul of Man under Socialism", first published in *Fortnightly Review* 49/290 (February 1891). Reprinted in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol.4, *Criticism*, ed. Josephine Guy (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 247)

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.

Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.
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.
Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.

Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art.

All art is quite useless.
(The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* Vol.3: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the 1890 and 1891 texts, ed. Joseph Bristow (OUP: Oxford, 2005) 167-8)

The one thing that the public dislike is novelty. 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 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 it as he chooses. The public are quite right in their attitude. Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value.

...The fact is, the public make use of the 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 new forms. They are always asking a writer why he does not write like somebody else, or a painter why he does not paint like somebody else, quite oblivious of the fact that if either of them did anything of the kind he would cease to be an artist. ("The Soul of Man under Socialism", *Complete Works* Vol.4: *Criticism*, 250)

ERNEST: You have told me many strange things tonight, Gilbert. You have told me that it is more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it, and that to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world; you have told me that all Art is immoral, and all thought dangerous; that criticism is more creative than creation, and that the highest criticism is that which reveals in the work of Art what the artist had not put there; that it is exactly because a man cannot do a thing that he is the proper judge of it; and that the true critic is unfair, insincere, and not rational. ("The Critic as Artist", *CW*, Vol.4, 205-6)

“Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Ever one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.”

(Walter Pater, Conclusion, *The Renaissance* (1873), reprinted Oxford University Press, 1986, p.151)

GILBERT: ...it has been said by one whose gracious memory we all revere, and the music of whose pipe once lured Proserpina from her Sicilian fields, and made those white feet stir, and not in vain, the Cumnor cowslips, that the proper aim of Criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is. But this is a very serious error, and takes no cognizance of Criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of the other. For the highest Criticism deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely.

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

GILBERT: Yes, that is my theory. To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises. The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see; and the Beauty, that gives to creation its universal and aesthetic element, makes the critic creator in his turn, and whispers a thousand different things that were not present in the mind of him who carved the statue or painted the panel or graven the gem.

(“The Critic as Artist”, *Complete Works*, Vol.4: *Criticism*, 155-6, 159)

Suggested Further Reading

William Morris, *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*

William Morris, *News from Nowhere*

Walter Pater - *The Renaissance* (1873)

John Ruskin, 'On the Nature of the Gothic', in *The Stones of Venice*, Vol.2

Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations - especially to *Salome*

Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (ed.s), *The Fin de Siecle: A Reader in Cultural History c.1880-1900*

Karl Beckson - *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History*

Joseph Bristow (ed.), *Oscar Wilde and modern culture: the making of a legend*

Lawrence Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism*

Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*

Regina Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*

Michele Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture*

Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*

Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge and Literature in the late Nineteenth Century*

John Stokes, *In the Nineties*

William Tydeman and Steven Price, *Salome* (Plays in Production series)