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Defining Art and the Function of Criticism: Where Oscar Wilde Diverges from Walter Pater

Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde were both influential writers of the late Victorian era who had established a unique standpoint on their interpretation of the term “aesthetic criticism.” Although their theories were not supported by the general public, their new perspective shed light on the importance of aesthetic experience and contributed in bridging the transition between the Victorian period and the newly emerging modernist era. Aesthetic criticism, in its nature, cannot be discussed without defining art because aestheticism views beauty as the key principle of human life and art is the embodiment of beauty. Personal understanding of the true meaning of art and the function of criticism forms the pillar of Pater and Wilde’s argument. While it is true that Wilde was largely influenced by Pater’s reader-response criticism and view on the ideal role of art, it is equally crucial to note Wilde’s distinctive ideas and objections that enabled his theory to stand alone past a mere inheritance of Pater’s ideas. These differences include the relationship between art and reality and the artist’s contribution to aesthetic experience.

Pater’s definition of art in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is quite broad. He believes that the object of aesthetic criticism ranges from artwork such as paintings, music and literature to “the fairer forms of nature and human life” (1539). Because an aesthetic critic’s main interest is the apprehension of beauty in its many different forms, any source that provides a sensually pleasurable experience can be defined as art. For example, a person with engaging qualities or a beautiful scenery of nature has as much aesthetic significance as a literary masterpiece in that they are all “powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations” (1539) to the receptor. In this perspective, the relationship between art and reality is inclusive. Every little pleasurable aspect of our daily life can be captured as a fleeting moment of aesthetic stimulation, and all instances of art has an equal status, for the value of art is determined by the swift impression it has on the appreciator which is subjective for every individual. In other words, the potential for any type of art is unlimited and unpredictable. The term “virtue” is introduced at this point to indicate the “property each [art] has of affecting one with a special, a unique, impression of pleasure” (1539). Virtue is normally associated with moral connotations, but Pater’s particular usage of the word as the essence of sensual pleasure suggests that he sees disagrees with the contemporary belief in art’s morally didactic function.

To continue with Pater’s impressionistic approach, he claimed that in order to appreciate art, one should not focus on the physical object outside of our mind, but turn inwards and introspect. The mark that the object creates in one’s mind, the feeling that it evokes inside oneself is the true manifestation of beauty and the object of aesthetic investigation. By the same token, it is suggested that the artist’s intention is not the standard rule for optimal apprehension. This does not mean that the artist’s influence ends at the moment of the artwork’s creation, but rather, that the artist’s crystalized genius and imagination that evokes pleasure is scattered within the artwork, and the receptor collects them which in turn initiates the individual impression process. Hence the artist’s “unique, incommunicable faculty, that strange, mystical sense of life and natural things, and of man’s life as a part of nature” (1540) is transmitted to the receptor. The fact that the artist’s virtue is not blatantly offered in its clearest and most compressed form is what creates the opportunity for manifold impression. The critic’s role here is “to follow up [this] active principle, to disengage it, to mark the degree in which it penetrates [the artist’s] verse” (1540). In short, an aesthetic critic’s function is to detect and document his own impression, find the virtue of the impression to guide other receptors, and to analyze how purely it is manifested within the artwork.

Wilde has internalized Pater’s reader-response, impression-centered criticism in *The Critics as Artist*, directly criticizing the widely accepted theory by Matthew Arnold, just as Pater did. Wilde boldly states that criticism is “in its essence purely subjective and seeks to reveal its own secret ad not the secret of another” (1728), because the highest criticism “deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely” (1728). Pater’s influence is also evident in Wilde’s emphasis on appreciative introspect when he says that criticism is “the only civilized form of autobiography” (1727) whose focus is on one’s thoughts, feelings, and everything else affected in one’s mind, and not the physical artwork itself. Thus an artwork’s sole purpose of existence is to be appreciated by the critic and a critic’s role is to document his own impression of an artwork. This idea also implies that art should have a different pleasurable effect on every individual instead of a single universal lesson which appeals to one’s intellect. This corresponds to Pater’s belief that art’s primary purpose should not be to morally instruct, but to stir up imaginative passion and pleasure. Yet Wilde’s enthusiasm for a purely sensual and impressionistic stimuli leads him to detest any artwork that imitates reality, since it might induce the receptor to understand it in a particular way. This is where he begins to diverge from Pater.

According to Wilde, verisimilitude interrupts impression in its purest form, and the more art distances itself from reality, the superior it is. He proceeds further with this opinion and uses the degree of realistic resemblance to stratify the genres of art: poems are superior to paintings because paintings always have to be pictorial, and music is the highest form of art because it isn’t trammeled by any exterior rules other than its own. However, in Pater’s point of view, this idea cannot coincide with the impressionistic perspective, because if the beholder’s impression gives art its true value and if impression is truly relative, one cannot assign a fixed level of importance to any genre of art. Pater’s impressionism also signifies that if one is moved by the experience, any ordinary stimuli including parts of reality can be art as well. In this sense, Pater’s logic cannot fully account for Wilde’s approach.

Another major disagreement lies in the extent of the creator’s influence on the final product. Wilde adheres to Pater’s opinion that the receptor is the center of criticism, but instead of emphasizing the receptor’s role over that of the creator, takes a step further to deny the author’s intention altogether. To him, the moment the creation process is completed, the ties between the author and his work is broken and it becomes an independent object that lies meaningless until a beholder is affected by it. Compared to Pater’s theory, this is a radical claim that overlooks the artist’s imagination and genius which, although it does not determine the receptor’s impression, exists eternally in the artwork as the artist’s virtue and initiates the creation of the receptor’s impression. This contrast leads to the different perspective on the ultimate function of aesthetic criticism. Pater suggests that the critic’s role is to create a guideline for other receptors in search of the artwork’s virtue. On the other hand, despite their same methodological approach to criticism, Wilde’s idea of an ideal criticism goes a step further into believing that criticism is the purest and most independent form of art. Although Pater and Wilde’s evaluation of the artist’ role cannot comply with each other, Wilde’s effort to include criticism into the rank of art can easily be accepted into Pater’s broad definition of art.

Wilde and Pater’s view on aesthetic criticism both depart from the reader-response criticism and emphasis on impression, but while their shared understanding allows part of the two perspectives to coexist, Wilde’s radical depreciation of imitating reality and denial of the artist’s significance in the appreciation process clashes with Pater’s opinion. It is precisely due to these conflicting aspects that Wilde came to be seen as an original theorist on criticism. Wilde’s attempt to include criticism into the domain of art is especially ingenious and affective. However, despite his contributions to criticism, some discrepancies are observed in his logic, compared to Pater’s relatively broad and flexible approach. (Word count: 1386)