

Oscar Wilde and the Art of Lying

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By

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PREFACE

The monograph you are about to read is a critique in play format. I wish to make this clear in the beginning as I don't want anyone deceived and am well aware things of this sort are usually handled differently. Which is why it has been refused previously. Not to mention I am an unknown author. Also, that I appear illiberal and have off-putting ideas. And other things besides. Verily, the number of publishers who turned down this work for one reason or another over the past seven years is truly heartbreaking. Only Shaw with *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, or Ibsen with *An Enemy of the People*, may have exceeded this period of consternation, but only just a little. No, the way has been difficult, and I eventually gave up making the attempt in my own country. Of course, there were indications editors found it interesting. Interesting but troubling. It appears I did not always say the right thing about Wilde. Or the arts in general. If you have ever listened to *Dancing with the Stars* judge Len Goodman, you know what I mean. But I am now bringing modern elements into the discussion and I really don't wish to do this. Only that I realize audiences of today need a few matters of relevance.

I have been asked by Cambridge Scholars to say a few words about the origins of this work. I am glad to do so. Its genesis came about eight years ago when witnessing a performance of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* at one of the lesser known American preparatory schools in Easthampton, Massachusetts. This was not the first time I had experienced the play, rather the third, and although the performance was every bit as good as you might expect from one of the better known preparatory schools, it was not the acting that intrigued me so much as the Director's Note on the reverse of the playbill, telling us what we should know about Wilde's intentions. The dramaturg opined: "Victorian audiences enjoyed Wilde's legendary wit and were seemingly unaware of his work's deeper themes about sexuality, identity, and acceptance." The word "seemingly" gave evidence the writer was unsure, moreover hoping, those themes were what she supposed. Napoleon ostensibly not realizing the real character of Beaumarchais' *Le Mariage de Figaro* was one thing, but this was another. I wondered how it was any person now living might arrive at a level of understanding superior to that of the average Victorian. I then wondered as

to Wilde's true intentions. A seminal moment came when reading those golden words Wilde did write in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "The artist is the creator of beautiful things." This one phrase seemed correct as to what an artist should be, suggesting I might apply this standard to the analysis of *Earnest*. But I first needed to understand Wilde's broader ideas, to include his thinking on beauty itself. I undertook a careful study of what he outlined in *The Decay of Lying*. Also, other writings. What my *Interlocutor* says about wanting to explore Wilde's ideas and not wanting to abuse them is absolutely true. I wanted to give credit where credit was due. I used his own characters, *Vivian* and *Cyril*, hoping they might serve as a proper counter-balance to the *Interlocutor*, who you might infer is me. But I cannot tell you even I retained the same attitude from the point of original conception. What I can tell you is that I did warm to my subject and all characters took on a life of their own. *Vivian* and *Cyril* were studied very carefully to understand their persona. But they necessarily evolved. Just as Wordsworth and Coleridge looked back with horror on their youthful enthusiasms, I envisioned *Vivian* and *Cyril* to have become more wise but also more conservative. They defend Wilde where they might, but also admit to his weaknesses. How could they not and yet be the omniscient demi-gods I supposed they should become as they ruefully made their way forward into our time?

Arthur Symons, in his 1906 introduction to S. T. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, quotes John Dryden as saying poets are the most proper literary critics. He also quotes Charles Baudelaire as pitying poets guided solely by instinct. Playwrights were once referred to as poets, in part, for the fact they wrote in verse. Dryden believed playwrights should write in verse, in part, as a check upon license. I am a playwright not writing in verse but using an artistic structure, a logic, and sentiment, to serve as critic. No doubt I shall hear from my peers on this in due course. But since I have happened upon Symons in advance, my sympathies being with persons of the past, I shall examine his precepts as guide for self-evaluation. Symons exemplifies his views, interestingly enough, by taking umbrage in those of yet an earlier period. He explains Dryden believed true judgment in poetry "... takes a view of the whole together, whether it be good or not; and where the beauties are more than the faults, concludes for the poet against the little judge." And in the end, this is what I did, building the whole from disparate pieces, although you will see that the inverse of what Dryden says might also be true. Thus we should realize, where the faults are more than the beauties, or where the beauties are largely absent, the critic might conclude against the poet and still be against "the little judge." The "little judge" we might estimate to be the critics who are critics only, that is, the

many strong-headed persons of the literary magazines or press who even now are sharpening their knives to defend the graven icons of our modern civilization. For what I have done has indeed been to find out for you more than you can find out for yourselves; or more than you were willing; trace in you what is a prejudice or penchant, explaining why you are affected and possibly, to what purpose. All these things Symons thinks I must do; including the study of origins and effects. Here I must mention that I believe Wilde truly did wish to be an artist who created beautiful things. So I have studied and concluded upon what might have prevented this and the effect on Wilde's last and most popular play. I am told I must know myself and be able to allow for my own mental and emotional variations. Well now, I must say... I must say I do know myself only too well and am ashamed for the fact I was attracted to write this criticism as something not worthy of art, or perhaps too worthy, given I condemn the choosing of works for socio-political reasons in an age that is already too corrupted by such practices. As to my own mental and emotional variations, it is true, these variations do exist. And it means when you cannot finish a work in one sitting, you come to it a slightly different person the next time. And there is no continuity person as there is in the film industry but only your own person who must re-read the flow of the dialogue and re-imbue oneself with the soul of the characters you are employing for the purposes at hand. And I must say, it helps not a little if they are ultimately with you in what you are about. They can express misgivings, even admonishment, but if they *believe* in you as an honest arbiter, possessed of sufficient language skills and mental acuity, they will be with you to do what they can't for themselves for fact they are no longer amongst the living (or never were). This is perhaps why Whistler was correct when he said in his *Ten O'Clock* that Art is a whimsical goddess who casts about for someone worthy of her love, indifferent to all but the virtue of their refinement, although Wilde in his remonstrance was also correct in telling that an artist is not an isolated fact but the resultant of milieu and entourage, and, I might add, breeding and upbringing. But this last is only my personal opinion, for which I take full and complete responsibility. His saying a nation devoid of any sense of beauty can no more serve as the well-spring of art than a fig can grow from a thorn or a rose blossom from a thistle, does seem to suggest something of this sort (a genetic foundation), but I do not wish to unduly worry anyone in this preface. There shall be enough of that in the monograph itself. And I am sorry for those who must find this objectionable. But now comes another interesting thing from Mr. Symons. He says the critic-he is here speaking of any literary critic, even the one who has never been a poet- "must have the passion of the lover"

and “be enamoured of every form of beauty.” Further, he is not expected to be enamoured of all his loves equally, but with “a general allowance of those least to his liking.” I can assure you I had that passion, initially from the ignoble purposes explained earlier, but soon and for better reasons when studying Wilde, to include the discovery of aestheticism and the ideal of beauty. True, not all forms of beauty are equally beautiful, although in theory they might be. For Leo Tolstoy tells us the objective sense of beauty is the recognition of the absolutely perfect existing outside ourselves, thus allowing us to believe an absolutely perfect painting and an absolutely perfect symphony reside on the same plane (are equivalent in the matter of both being “absolutely perfect”). But he also tells us the subjective definition of beauty is a certain pleasure devoid of personal advantage, suggesting differences in the degree of pleasure, hence degrees of beauty, more or less to a critic’s liking. And you will find the *Interlocutor* tries to make these distinctions when dealing with *Earnest*. He sees a certain kind of beauty when Jack goes down on his knees to Gwendolen in Act I and a different kind when reading the description of the garden scene at the beginning of Act II. Mr. Symons would also inform us, quite ominously—for this is a domain most of you will find troubling—that the critic “will do well to be not without a touch of intolerance: that intolerance which, in the lover of the best, is an act of justice against the second rate.” He goes on to explain that if the second rate is accepted “on its own merits” it may be taken for the thing it resembles, alluding to a rock in the water that really isn’t there. In the case of Wilde, I see this differently. Wilde is not second rate. He is a true artist with a fertile mind whose ideas are interesting but sometimes flawed, and it is necessary to look beyond our love for the man as a symbol to evaluate him according to artistic tenets. Certain of his ideas may be a rock in the water that *is* there, though we are warned not to look for it, a shoal that is tolerable only as a warning or death-knell. And so in England, as well as the world, we need a few good poets who need to be honest critics who will put their criticism into artistic conventions and be generously just to their antecedents but also their contemporaries, finding the exact and definitive words of revelation which the prose critics are not laboriously hunting but studiously writing round.

The original version of this critique was completed in 2011 and amounted to a mere 20,000 words. As such, it was sleek as a greyhound and read in a much more buoyant manner. Hence why Cyril was at first able to suppose he would get to his luncheon in Piccadilly in half an hour. What changed? Like John Ford wanting Sean O’Casey to add words to *The Plough and the Stars*, I was asked, nay required, to add words bringing this work to

something much larger. Nearly double. But it in no way had to do with changing the theme, for which I was grateful. Still, what to add, and where? One element which appeared eminently correct was an analysis of the seldom performed “Gribsby” episode Wilde was obliged to remove when his play was first performed at the St. James. Intrigued by the removal, it seemed important to review what this contained. Fortunately, this could occur squarely within the overall analysis of *Earnest* which was the announced purpose of the monograph at the outset. It is here I learned one cannot summon ghosts one has previously enticed, at will. No, they must be brought back gradually. In truth, this means refamiliarizing oneself with characters as first created. But it is more than that. When they did return, they returned as even more aged persons whose personalities had somewhat changed. Emboldened, however, I now launched into a number of other digressions affecting the preamble to *Earnest*. One of these was a long-standing curiosity as to where Western art went astray. Was it, in his preface to *Valentinian*, when Robert Wolseley proposed the artist should be free to depict anything in nature, beautiful or ugly, good or evil? Or even earlier when Lodovico Castelvetro proposed poetry’s sole purpose was “to delight and to recreate.”¹ Was it when Thomas Mann recounts in *Gladius Dei* the despoliation of the Madonna, or the founding of the Satanic School by Byron and Shelley? Was it the Art Nouveau of the 1920’s, Skip Houston and His Merry Madmen of the 1930’s, or the ever more liberal and decadent tendencies following WWII? What was the turning point which, if going back just before, one might find a more salubrious path steering clear of ruin? The aestheticists embodied one good trait, the ideal of beauty, while also deluded by a false belief, “art for art’s sake,” and a discussion of the origins of this latter concept therefore seemed worthwhile. I thank *Vivian* for attempting to make this clear for us as previously I had only been able to take this back to Cousin and Hegel. But I was also persuaded to explore the artistic controversy between James McNeill Whistler and Oscar Wilde which, though having a number of worthwhile points, was later excised as being too much of a digression delaying the discussion of *Earnest*. The reader has therefore been spared this lengthy dialogue, although I cannot guarantee it might not eventually appear in some other form elsewhere.

As I have mentioned, the original form of this monograph as 20,000 words was more sleek and efficient. But no one wanted it. No university press, literary magazine, drama agency, theatre research institute, media group,

¹ Lodovico Castelvetro, *Poetica d’Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* (Basel, 1576), 29, as cited in Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre* (Ithaca, 1993), p. 48.

Victorian studies group, private publisher, any publisher, as they were all approached at one time or another and said "No." Or nothing at all. And once you have read this work you will understand why. But that begs to ask about the current publisher. Why has Cambridge Scholars accepted it? I believe I can now tell you. Because they are fine chaps willing to take a chance. Because they are willing to oblige talent regardless of the consequences. Because Wilde was Irish and not English. Because Wilde went to Oxford and not Cambridge. Take your pick. But to say it is because they necessarily believe what I am saying or how I am saying it would perhaps be going too far. In fact, I predict following the first edition (assuming there is a second), they will be obliged to print a disclaimer-just like certain American TV stations are obliged to do when televising a dwindling number of undiluted Christian evangelical broadcasts in the land of the free-disassociating themselves from the views expressed in this monograph. And that will be fine with me if it shall allow them to continue to print this work and make it available for your edification.

Today it is an unfortunate fact our arts are compromised by the influence of adventitious social philosophies, causing me to appreciate ever more what Wilde intended when saying the only things beautiful are the things that do not concern us; that any century is a suitable subject for art except our own. And because I take this to heart, sensing the sham and shoddiness of my own period in history, I necessarily employed older texts-the views of reputable persons already long dead-by which to inform what my characters were given to say. This is the only thing, perhaps, sparing the present work from being subjected to the same criticism, although I trust there shall be ample criticism, nonetheless. Visiting the cemetery of Père Lachaise just a year ago, I was incredulous to find Wilde's tomb having to be protected by a rather large sheet of plexiglass. We usually do this for presidents and popes hoping to shield them from malevolence. But in Wilde's case, it was to prevent the innumerable visitors who visit every year from kissing, fondling, embracing or otherwise effacing the stone edifice, making it readily apparent Wilde is anything but forgotten and in fact more beloved today than perhaps any other time. Meanwhile, other once-upon-a-time notables such as poor J. Cornely, who thought he had served the grand cause of the oppressed through his writings in *Le Figaro*, is sadly ignored nearby. Wilde's continued popularity is baffling, and I am not altogether sure it is for his ingenious farce or artistic ideas so much as he is a symbol and tool of inartistic adventurism. If he is to be remembered, it should be for his art.

Writing this in play format was intended to imitate and therefore be a compliment to Wilde. But it also satisfied another and more longstanding desire to finally get something play-like into print. The fact it isn't truly a play does not disappoint me and will continue to satisfy those many dramaturgs and publishing houses which have been stymying me for so long. If, perchance, there is a theatre now wishing to perform this monograph that isn't a play, I would not know what to say. Except to again quote Arthur Symons who wrote: "Two people should be able to sit quietly in a room, without ever leaving their chairs, and to hold our attention breathless for as long as the playwright likes."² Admittedly, there are three persons rather than two, none of whom remain quiet for long and are not always sitting in chairs. But their conversation is brisk, their ideas are intelligent, and they express many things that might hold us breathless for an hour or so which is rather conventional for a standard play. The King's Reader of Plays shall need to be consulted, but if he loves his queen and is true to his profession, will find solace in the fact a former Queen (Victoria) is upheld, and a more honorable time is lauded.

Lastly, I realize that in analyzing Wilde and not finding beauty, I gave little indication of what might have been beautiful in its stead. It was an analysis lacking redemption. This occurred to me while dining out recently by way of genteel and intelligent conversation from several tables near to where I was sitting. But only in a modest way mind you, nothing flagrant nor boisterous. Mankind has certainly improved over the years, we are nearly perfected as the creation of some ultimate and wise god. But still it wouldn't hurt if we were exposed to a little more beauty. More beauty is what is needed. And so in my next monograph, again in play format, I shall explore exemplifications of beauty from an eclectic collection of some of our better artists. Thus that future artists, needing just a little help, might benefit from their example.

² Arthur Symons, *Plays, Acting, and Music* (New York, 1909), 8, as cited in Marvin A. Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre* (Ithaca, 1993), p. 303.

OSCAR WILDE AND THE ART OF LYING

D.D. DESJARDINS

CURTAIN RISE

INTERLOCUTOR I invite you to return to the year 1895 to meet two worthy people. Neither are more than six years old, or thereabouts, but already full grown. In telling you this I shall not trouble to say how it is possible, for you already believe the impossible, it is only the improbable some of you find difficult. So I hasten to add it is the same year H.G. Wells published *The Time Machine* thus showing us the way. But before going further, I should like to explain our purpose. It is to discuss a play “of no importance.” I am speaking about Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play you probably have witnessed. Personally, I view this as a very important play and yet cannot discuss it alone. I shall therefore call upon Wilde’s own characters “Vivian” and “Cyril.” True, “Vivian” and “Cyril” did not appear in *Earnest* but they do have some expertise, especially in the art of... lying. Lying being central to Wilde’s play, I think there is much “Vivian” and “Cyril” might tell us... Shall we begin?

INTERLOCUTOR BOWS HEAD FOR A MOMENT

INTERLOCUTOR (CONT.) It is now 1895 and we are here to meet Vivian and Cyril.

CYRIL AND VIVIAN ENTER ARM IN ARM FROM STAGE LEFT

INTERLOCUTOR (CONT.) Ah! Here they are now...

CYRIL Listen old man, what’s this all about?

VIVIAN Yes, why were we called? We were lying on the grass smoking cigarettes just now and you have disturbed us.

INTERLOCUTOR I wish to ask some questions.

VIVIAN Questions?!

CYRIL What about? I have a luncheon engagement in Piccadilly and am expected there within the hour. Besides, the view overlooks the Green Park and if I’m late the sun will shine at the wrong

angle and the hue of green will be much less pleasant.¹

INTERLOCUTOR You like green?

CYRIL Very.

INTERLOCUTOR Wilde said love of green is a sign of subtle artistic temperament. That is necessary to our discussion. So I promise you shall have your green, and you (**LOOKING AT VIVIAN**) your cigarettes. Only indulge me on the questions I wish to ask regarding Oscar Wilde.

VIVIAN This is about Oscar is it? Then why that ridiculous idea about a “time machine”? And why do you suppose you must return to 1895 when it is we who have come to you!?

INTERLOCUTOR Not 1895?

VIVIAN Of course not! Look at your calendar!

INTERLOCUTOR Then how is it we are here?

VIVIAN The same way H.G. explored the future – through the imagination. But you have the advantage: our age is a matter of history.

INTERLOCUTOR But not its nuances. Not you and Cyril.

VIVIAN Yes, we are fictional. So it is not your intellect that brings us but your imagination. And here we are, and here you are... and what are your questions?

INTERLOCUTOR I wish to ask about *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

¹ The Green Park was at that time green, not for its trees, of which there were few, but for its grassy expanse allowing the observer an encouraging view when making his way southeast from Hyde Park Corner to the precinct of Piccadilly (see Henry James’ “London” as printed in *The Portable Henry James*, Morton Dauwen Zabel, ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), p. 533, as taken from James’ original observations in 1888).

VIVIAN Then I'm afraid you've imagined yourself with the wrong people.

CYRIL We have nothing to do with Oscar's play. Possibly you want Lady Bracknell or Ms. Cardew, or possibly Algernon's friend, Ernest.

INTERLOCUTOR No, it is with you I wish to speak.

CYRIL Then I presume this regards what we said – what Oscar had us say – in *The Decay of Lying*?

INTERLOCUTOR Yes, only more.

CYRIL There are people who want to use us you know, take things out of context to punish Oscar.

INTERLOCUTOR I come to examine Wilde, not punish him.

VIVIAN **(PULLING CYRIL BY THE SLEEVE FOR A TÊTE-À-TÊTE)** I don't like this man. Still, he has called us from the pantheon of Oscar's intentions. It is imitation and therefore a compliment. Perhaps we should speak with him.

CYRIL If you wish. **(LOOKING AT WATCH)** But only half an hour!

VIVIAN **(RETURNING TO INTERLOCUTOR)** We have decided to cooperate. Ask your questions.

INTERLOCUTOR **(RETRIEVES NOTES)** You say, or rather Wilde has you say, Art and Life are separate. Nature is an enemy, Art a protest. Is that correct?

VIVIAN The words are there and you have obviously read them. Whether I now believe them is another matter altogether.

INTERLOCUTOR But through you we begin to see Wilde as an enemy of Nature and wonder why?

VIVIAN Yes. But already I do not like your inference. Let us stick to the question whether Art and Life can be mutually exclusive. And the fact is, they cannot. Nature is Life, and those who create Art, no less than those who do not, are part of Nature. Without Life there is no Art. So Oscar unfortunately had it wrong. He had it wrong just as Ralph Waldo Emerson, another intelligent human, had it wrong about Transcendentalism. Both were desperate for a unique idea that embraced the spiritual but denied the physical.²

CYRIL TAKES A PLACE BY THE WINDOW

INTERLOCUTOR This appears to be the same criticism William Hazlitt offered against Samuel Taylor Coleridge. But are you not sympathetic to philosophies that raise the mind above all else?

VIVIAN Of course. For although the mind itself is something physical, I nevertheless view the thoughts within as something distinct and quintessential. So I sympathize with Oscar when he says Art, springing from the artist's imagination, can create something even more beautiful than Nature, albeit unreal and non-existent. For Art indeed soars highest when rising above common, mundane experiences – William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hans Christian Anderson's *The Red Shoes* – but these fabulous works nevertheless come from the imagination of Man, from living artists who are part of Life, and so it is incorrect to say Art and Life exist apart from each other, just as it is incorrect to say thought exists apart from the mind.³ Even in reality plays – the realism Oscar claimed was a failure – the artifice of the stage, its lighting, sets, costumes and action can be made beautiful, devoid of what Nature might otherwise provide by way of a sultry sun, lumpy grass, bothersome insects, pollen and dust – yes, all these discomforting things can be absent unless, of course, the artist wishes them.⁴ The artist's Art can

² See *The New England Transcendentalists*, Ellen Hansen, ed. (Boston: HistoryCompass, 2006), pp. 21-23.

³ It was said with regard to the choreography surrounding the marriage of Grace Kelly to the Prince of Monaco, “For once let it be reported that imagination was matched by reality,” something Wilde might be obliged to dismiss, although Shakespeare not. For in the latter's view “all the world is a stage” and it is especially so in elaborate ceremony where Life is ordered, organized, rehearsed and presented according to an ideal.

⁴ For an artist who wished them to be part of his protagonist's experience of spring grown lovely, see “The Apple Tree” (1916) by John Galsworthy in *Great Modern*

indeed erect the impenetrable barrier of the decorative and the ideal. But even as artifice, the lighting, and backdrops and costumes are real, their incandescence, wood and cloth are such, serving to provide, as Coleridge said, the “willing suspension of disbelief,” though the sagacious amongst us see them not as a substitute for Life, but instead a servant.

INTERLOCUTOR You are blending a number of ideas here, but I believe I follow. First, that Art is indissoluble from Nature and Life. Second, that plays about Life – reality plays – share the same means as those projecting the abstract and mythological. And finally, the means – costumes, props, stage setting and such – whether true or abstract decoration, are always and equally a servant to Art. Is that correct?

VIVIAN Yes. But allow me to add something more. When I said the artifice of the stage is not a substitute for Life but a servant, I am in fact saying this artifice is not separate but also part of Life, for it is made by Man, who is Life. It is therefore Man serving Art.

INTERLOCUTOR But this is exactly what Wilde had you say in the beginning, that Man should serve Art.

VIVIAN True. He only had me go this far. And as far as that goes, Man should indeed serve Art by bringing it to humanity, through acting, directing, costumes, and properties. However, I shall add, in contradistinction to Oscar, the end result must be that Art return the favor by providing a demonstrable service. It must serve Man by giving him something of profit or pleasure, elevating him to think and feel beyond the mundane circumstance of his everyday life. The sorry fact is, when a work of Art is created, it is more often shunned, dismissed or ignored, the general attitude being skepticism, even cynicism, regardless whether the art has actually been seen or experienced. And that is because there is indeed bad art that isn't art at all, but also good art that one doesn't trust. And it is not trusted because the artist has yet to make a name for himself, or the subject is new, or the audience is untested and the purveyors are too full of the business of art to where they are unwilling to take chances and go out on a limb.

Short Stories, Grant Overton, ed. (New York: The Modern Library, 1930), p. 147):
“The midges bit him, the dancing knats tried to fly into his mouth, and all the spring around him seemed to grow more lovely and alive...”

INTERLOCUTOR I empathize with what you are saying, I truly do. But you did say, did you not, that Art should serve Man?

VIVIAN Of course!

INTERLOCUTOR But Mr. Wilde said...

VIVIAN I was only Oscar's brainchild, not his impresario. True, he first breathed life into me and I was his creation, but I actually derived from a myriad of persons Oscar met or had read about, just as you derive from your ancestors, shaped by the world about you. Fortunately, I am not fixed in stone like some immobile statue. I grow. In fact you are seeing me grow now. And year by year I become one of the ancients, conferring and conversing with those who are more ancient and wise. Horace, for example, never ceased in his opinion Art should delight and instruct, Minturno, that it should "move," and Aristotle, who preceded both, believed there should be an arousal of pity and fear. Indeed, all the great artists, save possibly Castelvetro and Wolseley, believed in a moral purpose for Art. And this was still largely true in our Victorian period, with Oscar one of the few exceptions. George Bernard Shaw was famously didactic, the able and brilliant George Henry Lewes utilitarian, and Thomas Babington Macaulay, our quintessential Victorian, claimed utility and progress as the only true aims of man. And these are the sages to whom I now gravitate.

INTERLOCUTOR How interesting.

VIVIAN Your contemporaries won't think so, but what is that to me? We were speaking of great artists, and there are few great artists in your era, only imitators, and bad imitators at that. They have sprung from conservative parents not nearly so conservative as their grandparents and certainly not evolved to any similar level of sagacity. But enough. Let me just say I am less inclined to the idea of *Art for art's sake* and more inclined to *Art for Man's sake* and the wisdom of William Makepeace Thackeray...

INTERLOCUTOR Thackeray?

VIVIAN Who said that unless one writes with a purpose, “a novelist is... good for nothing.”⁵ And it is the same for any poet. The impenetrable barrier of the decorative and the ideal is nice in its way, is necessary as a construct for presenting Art to Man, but it must have a purpose, else it is useless, so much cardboard, paint, and paper!

INTERLOCUTOR To be sure, in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde said “all art is quite useless.”

VIVIAN I would warn against taking such remarks too literally. Oscar only meant Art finds her perfection within and not outside herself. It was useless for Man but not for Art itself. That is why he admired Aristotle, who regarded Art as its own end. Aristotle’s focus was on the structure of drama, its internal relationships. And Oscar saw this as a confirmation of Théophile Gautier’s ideal as represented to him by Swinburne and Pater: *Art for art’s sake*.

INTERLOCUTOR Which Henry James thought an absurdity.

VIVIAN I am not responsible for Mr. James’ attitude. Nor can I help George Bernard Shaw making sport of it in *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Nor Mr. Burnand’s very clever play *The Colonel*, or Gilbert and Sullivan’s even more satirical condescension in *Patience*. Nonetheless, if you have pretensions to being an artist you should at least appreciate Oscar’s side of it.

INTERLOCUTOR Oh, but I do. In fact, I’ve been studying its origins.

VIVIAN And what have you found?

INTERLOCUTOR I presume...

VIVIAN I suggest you do better.

INTERLOCUTOR Nevertheless, because Wilde did not visit Paris until 1881-unless he was there as part of his trip to Italy and Greece with Professor Mehaffy-I presume he never met Gautier, that it was Whistler who met him during his sojourn to Paris in 1855.

⁵ Kathleen Tillotson, Introduction to Anthony Trollope’s *The Warden* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1975), p. vi.

VIVIAN My dear fellow! Which is it you are trying to be: an artist or an historian?

INTERLOCUTOR How do you mean?

VIVIAN All these dates, this fetish for facts: must you?

INTERLOCUTOR I feel they establish a simulacrum of truth.

VIVIAN Your feelings are profound, but certainly erroneous.

INTERLOCUTOR I'm struggling to find my voice as Wilde once did for the Chancellor's Essay prize.⁶

VIVIAN A prize he didn't win. And you shan't either unless you keep to your topic.

INTERLOCUTOR To my topic then. I presume it was Whistler who brought back ideas of *Art for art's sake* after meeting Gautier.

VIVIAN Whistler never met Gautier.

INTERLOCUTOR Never met Gautier?

VIVIAN He met Baudelaire, Gautier's friend. But it is to Pater you should look, or Swinburne, if hoping to find the influence of *l'art pour l'art* with regard to Whistler.⁷

INTERLOCUTOR I stand corrected.

VIVIAN We are all standing. Which reminds me you have not invited us to sit. **(TURNING)** Cyril, dear, would you mind? **(CYRIL EXITS, THEN ENTERS FROM STAGE LEFT BRINGING**

⁶ Oscar Wilde's essay, *The Rise of Historical Criticism*, was submitted to the Chancellor's Essay prize the year after he graduated from Magdalen College at Oxford, where he earned a double first in his B.A. of Classical Moderations and Literae Humaniores. The fact there was no prize awarded that year was unusual.

⁷ See Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler, A Life for Art's Sake* (London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 111.

A CHAIR. THE CHAIR IS PLACED AND VIVIAN SITS) Thank you. **(CYRIL RESUMES HIS PLACE AT THE WINDOW).** Please continue.

INTERLOCUTOR I apologize for not thinking of this earlier.

VIVIAN Never mind. Continue what you were saying.

INTERLOCUTOR After all, it was he who professed...

VIVIAN “He” who?

INTERLOCUTOR Gautier. We were speaking of Gautier.

VIVIAN. You were speaking of Gautier.

INTERLOCUTOR Very well, it was Gautier who professed *Art for art's sake* at a time he was transforming himself from romanticist to aesthete in the year... 1832.

VIVIAN You make it sound so sudden. You can be sure it was not so perfunctory. Two years before—a lifetime—this same messieur, this Gautier of yours, was leading a fuliginous group of romantics defending Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* at the Comédie Française, shouting down the neo-classicists—or *péruques* as they were called—appalled by the performance. Not that it was badly acted, but that it was acted at all. And he was doing this in velvet jacket and scarlet waistcoat—the same vesture Wilde adopted in the 80’s—thinking himself some type of prophet. Just how long a romantic is anyone’s guess, but I will say his allegiance as an aesthete was a little less dubious. He remained one the rest of his life. However, you can see by this just how superior we are to the French.

INTERLOCUTOR How do you mean?

VIVIAN Samuel Johnson single-handedly wrote our entire encyclopedia, although a similar effort on the part of the French required Denis Diderot and some forty others; Wordsworth and Coleridge initiated the romantic movement on the heels of the French Revolution, while the French required another 30 years plus a new revolution to assist them! A simple reform bill solved our problems, allowing us to evolve with intelligence and aplomb.

INTERLOCUTOR To the Victorian Age.

VIVIAN. That is correct.

INTERLOCUTOR And a very fine age it was! You must admit, however, Aestheticism did seem to come to France before it did Britain.

VIVIAN You will be hard-pressed to defend it ever did come as a formal movement to either country.

INTERLOCUTOR Nevertheless, with regard to the French, my supposition-if I may suppose-is that Gautier adopted *Art for art's sake* from Victor Cousin.

VIVIAN The eclectic French philosopher who visited Hegel at the University of Heidelberg?

INTERLOCUTOR Then you know.

VIVIAN But, of course! I'm just making sure you do. Hegel was lecturing on aesthetics at the time and the two agreed art should be its own master.⁸ But what you truly should be wondering is not when this happened, but why. Why would two self-respecting philosophers agree to such a proposition? Was it something Baumgarten wrote in his *Aesthetica*? Was it the fact Cousin studied under Larmiguière, who taught the philosophy of Locke and Condillac? Was it the fact Hegel, in his intellectual intercourse with Schelling, adopted the doctrines of freedom and reason? After millennia of our greatest occidental artists believing a moral purpose for art, why would two intelligent men who were not artists suddenly propound a theory freeing art of all responsibility?

INTERLOCUTOR That is a good question.

VIVIAN Shall I tell you?

INTERLOCUTOR Please do.

⁸ Frederic Will, "*Flumen Historicum*, Victor Cousin's Aesthetic and Its Sources," UNC Press, Chapel Hill, 1965.

VIVIAN You are hoping I might say this in some simple way, so I shall. It was the Enlightenment; the “enlightenment” so-called. But it was also the French Revolution. Shall I name names?

INTERLOCUTOR Yes.

VIVIAN Lessing, Mendelssohn, Reimarus. There are others, but we can start here.

INTERLOCUTORS Philosophers?

VIVIAN Popular philosophers, whose intention was to affect general education and culture through self-emancipation from prejudice and tradition. And other such poppycock! The movement oddly began in Germany but did extend to our island with Locke and Newton, and to France with Condillac, Diderot and Voltaire.

INTERLOCUTOR But did the artists care what the philosophers said?

VIVIAN Lessing was an artist. Diderot and Voltaire were too. But let us trace the development in Germany to see how it evolved. In doing so, we shall look at your chosen avocation, which I presume is theatre. I shall begin with Johann Christoph Gottsched. In his early treatise on drama, *Versuch einer critische Dichtkunst*, he maintained an allegiance to the neo-classic unities, also to verisimilitude. Not surprisingly, he also believed there should be a moral function in drama. So far, so good. But in a later essay he curiously proposed even poetic justice might be set aside if it could not be made compatible with the illusion of reality. In essence, he was signaling that justice, if not morality itself, might be abandoned if art demanded it. Between his early and later writings was a leap of twenty years, the time in which Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* appeared. But I warn you not to jump to conclusions. This Johann would be superseded by another, his student, Johann Elias, a predecessor of two other Schlegels we shall speak of in a moment. This early Schlegel was certainly more conservative than his descendants, for he was willing to subordinate the rules of art only if an audience wasn’t pleased. In his opinion, if a play didn’t please, no matter how artistic, it “... belongs in the study and not on the stage.”⁹ And while there is no

⁹ Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,

complete freedom here, certainly there is a loosening of the shackles. For we now see artists bowing to crass pleasure rather than high art when indulging the public's undeveloped and lowly tastes.

INTERLOCUTOR Might it not be refined tastes if played to the upper classes?

VIVIAN It might. But the lower classes always shout the loudest. Now let us speak of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

INTERLOCUTOR As philosopher, or as artist?

VIVIAN As both. As philosopher, he was opposed to Gottsched for venerating French neoclassicism. As artist, he wrote the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, a collection of some hundred essays telling the public about plays being offered at the new National Theatre in Hamburg.

INTERLOCUTOR Destroyed, I suspect, during the last great war.

VIVIAN Yes. Fire-bombed. But I don't wish to discuss this. Essay number 77 tells us the reason Christian Felix Weisse's *Richard der Dritte* triumphs despite its failure to instill pity is because "We so love anything... that gives us pleasure quite independent of the morality..."¹⁰ You see how he follows Schlegel not just for a liberation from the rules but also from any moral standards. True, Lessing's joy over individual expression and flexibility of theoretical approach is typical of later romantics, but he could not quite remove himself from neoclassicism altogether. He acknowledges the infallibility of Aristotle's *Poetics* by comparing it to the geometry of Euclid. No, if we are to find a clear break with the neoclassic tradition, we must look to two other contemporaries, Herder and Hamann.

INTERLOCUTOR Herder, the founder of *Sturm und Drang*?

VIVIAN Yes, with Hamann his Svengali.

INTERLOCUTOR How do you mean?

1993), p. 166

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

VIVIAN Hamann was not an artistic person himself but more of a religious mystic who preached the rejection of order, decorum, and probability. Also, “la belle nature.”

INTERLOCUTOR The beauty of Nature Wilde would dismiss?

VIVIAN You are beginning to see, aren’t you? Hamann pondered what it was about Homer making up for an ignorance of the rules Aristotle later devised; what it was in Shakespeare allowing him to circumvent these same rules, long established. The answer: genius! And this is perfectly fine and possibly correct except for the fact this genius is to be acquired in a very rude manner, or “snatched” as he says, from the very person who created him. Certainly, you can see how tantalizing it is to think we might share the same intelligence as God, but the means he proposes are not those of a deserving offspring but an inveterate rascal!

INTERLOCUTOR Perhaps there is some problem in how Hamann has been translated.

VIVIAN Possibly. But you might also suggest we should excuse his vanity. For this was something of the same arrogance exhibited by the ancient Romans when returning from their triumphs, although they at least had the good sense of placing someone at the back of their chariots whispering “You are not a god. You are not a god!” to keep them from becoming too contumacious. Not surprisingly, Herder’s essay *Shakesper* infuses this same ecstatic view of the poet as a quasi-divine creator, although with the more reasoned argument Shakespeare was merely writing as a man of his time. But this is not to explain, of course, why he did do it. Or why he thought he might get away with it. After all, even in Elizabethan times, the theatre had its pea-brains, its stalwarts, its nay-sayers, just as it does now. And no one had experienced Preston Sturges’ “Christmas in July” to get the idea an artist might have good ideas despite winning contests.¹¹

INTERLOCUTOR Ay-men!

VIVIAN So you see all Herder’s concerns-the new idea of nature, the emphasis on the sensual and metaphorical, the search for an

¹¹ “Christmas in July,” Warner Bros., 1940, starring Dick Powell, Ellen Drew, William Demarest, Ernest Truex; written and directed by Preston Sturges.

individual unifying principle within each individual work—are clearly laying the foundations for romantic and aesthetic theory.

INTERLOCUTOR What about the French Revolution?

VIVIAN We are coming to that. In fact we have already arrived. For all persons I shall now mention were persons affected by the revolution. For example, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: I trust you've heard of Goethe?

INTERLOCUTOR The author of the *Faust* legend.

VIVIAN In *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, he tells of a hero who is intrigued, nay, transported even, by a playwright specializing in “mad and bizarre monstrosities,” strange, yet wonderful words, outraging all *bienséance* and *vraisemblance*. That playwright, not surprisingly, was Shakespeare. And after reading him Goethe expressed how he no longer felt bound to the theatre of rules. You mentioned the *Faust* legend just now. It began as *Sturm und Drang* but changed over time to become something different. This something different might have been neo-classic, because in journeying to Italy, Goethe had belatedly become initiated to this genre despite its existence from the time of the Renaissance. But no. Goethe's new yet old classicism led to an inevitable conflict with the romantics, who had by now gained a foothold in Germany thanks to the publication of the *Athenäum* by the Schlegel brothers, the same year Wordsworth and Coleridge were publishing *Lyrical Ballads*.

INTERLOCUTOR So Goethe remained a stalwart of classicism over romanticism?

VIVIAN No. I am not saying this. For he did what all artists do whose art is mercenary. He conceded. This was Wilde's downfall, too, although we shall speak of this later. We needn't say anything about *Winckelmann und Sein Jahrhundert*, for here Goethe defends the classical ideal. But with *Faust*, it is clear he was steering a different course, *Faust* being accepted as a triumph of romantic art.

INTERLOCUTOR But why? What was the imperative?

VIVIAN Why indeed! If I were to tell you it had something to do with the revolution this would be false, for Goethe saw in