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Art and Politics: Oscar Wilde's Critical Theory

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"Don't let us discuss anything solemnly," says Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist." "I live in terror of not being misunderstood" (1114). Is this casual utterance only his affectation or is there any serious philosophy hidden behind its frivolousness? The passages in Oscar Wilde's works or his own utterances are almost always perplexing in this way. Whenever we face the wits and the paradoxes strewn in his works, we are forced to decode their intentions, yet their flippancy makes such an effort itself doubtful: we seek to know the serious intention while we are uncertain whether there is seriousness or a bit of intention. Despite its title, *Intentions* with this nature does not convey Wilde's intention in a clear way, making the title partly ironic, though any intention can never be presented directly, as Wilde himself suggests in this work. He recognises that his intention is produced through the interpellation between the letters on the pages and the readers, so that he gives the more privilege to the readers than to the authors.

Indeed Wilde's intention in any sense evades our full understanding. First of all, as the reactions of the contemporary reviewers record, this elusiveness is attributed to his style of the argument, the incongruity between the form and the content. Observing that "the book is entertaining" full of paradoxes, *Pall Mall Gazette* says that "[h]e has written a fascinating, stimulating book, with more common sense in it than he would perhaps care to be accused of" (91-92); *Athenaeum* claims that "[i]n spite of his showy paradoxes, Mr. Wilde . . . succeeds in proving that he has something to say" (92). As Danson summarises, most reviews seem to wish Wilde would get on with the thought itself "which is (they claim) as straightforward as the style is twisted" (20). This obvious gap between the form and the content makes it difficult

to decode the essays or even ascertain whether he is trifling with the thoughts.

The incongruities detected in the various matters are also another salient cause to make *Intentions* elusive. The obviously self-contradictory notions are put forth even within a single essay. For instance, as I shall show, he sees nature as what is created in a part while regarding it as determining and subjective in another; the importance of author's self-consciousness in the creation is pronounced whereas it is easily denied when the receivers are elevated to the only subjects to make the meanings. *Pall Mall Gazette* would be right when it observes that "consistency is the last virtue to which Mr. Wilde would dream of laying claim" (92). However, the inconsistency is one of the most important means for Wilde's critical thinking and it is only by investigating the contradictory notions that his critical theory can be understood to the full extent. This is because the inconsistency is what registers his seeking for the relationships between the critic/artist and society and for the critical position to discern the social and ideological workings.

Wilde's triviality itself which makes a gap is one method to destabilise the dichotomy between the trivial and the serious, risking the possibility that his proposition degrades into a mere entertainment. Thus what is needed to decode his critical theory is to discern the discourse upon which the inconsistent ideas converge, seeing at the same time his flippant style as the significant constituent of the content. Concentrating on the contradictory ideas and the salient styles with which they are put forth, I shall examine his notions as to art and the critic/artist with other important issues accumulating around them. His narrative reconstructed and deconstructed, it shall be revealed that Wilde's concern is exclusively political, art being always inscribed within the social sphere.

Wilde's critical task dates from as early as his lecture tour of America in 1882, and there exist many reviews, all of which make him more multi-dimensional in a sense. Yet most of his critical writings

are the inquiries about the relations between art and society, and as to *Intentions*, the main themes of "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist" are closely linked: what position do the critic/artist hold to the social matters by using the aesthetic theory. Therefore I shall examine these two essays. This social aspect in two essays, however, is likely to be overlooked because they contain many impressive passages conveying at a glance the so-called aestheticism: "Art never expresses anything but itself" (1087); "All art is immoral" (1136); "the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" (1145). All these epigrammatic utterances by the spokesmen for Wilde, Vivian and Gilbert, indicate that art is superior to everything and moreover it is autonomous. Indeed the one-sided view has made a history of the readings of the two essays with the help of the commonest notion of Wilde who, as a complete aesthete, proclaims art for art's sake and never lets society intervene in the aesthetic sphere. However, the truth is only that, because of their epigrammatic forms, those passages are cut from each context, and the aesthetic aspects they seem to have are too emphasised for them to have any social meanings. Wilde's notion of art always contains the social discourse beneath the aesthetic surface, and when he advocates the art for art's sake doctrine, it only means, as Eagleton says, "that the aesthetic should be kept free from the clutches of bourgeois morality" (338). Thus contrary to the concept of art as autonomous, he does insist upon its didactic function, exaggeratedly saying, for instance, that "Life is Art's best, Art's only pupil" (1083). Then what should be inspected is how he treats the political issues through the aesthetic arguments and how the contradictory ideas function in that narrative.

The title *Intentions* in the plural is suggestive of such an incoherency, as it seems to imply that in each essay cannot be attained a single perspective, and it is intimated by the dialogue form the two essays take. The superiority of the form over the content is repeatedly claimed in "The Critic as Artist," in which Gilbert self-referentially says that the dialogue, the "wonderful literary form," has the advantage of "giv[ing] form to every fancy, and reality to every mood"; "By

its means he [the thinker] can exhibit the object from each point of view, and show it to us in the round" (1143).¹⁾ Thus the dialogue form can make its content multiple and, as Gagnier says, "dialogical" in the Bakhtinian sense (32). The fact that Wilde uses this form knowing its multiple nature denotes that the essays are intended to be full of contradictions and open to the diverse interpretations.

This proposition that a single perspective is never attained is one of the important issues Wilde poses in "The Critic of Artist." He fully recognises the uncertainty in the signification, so he puts himself in the plays of the signs as if he took pleasure in wandering there. In these plays language is the most attractive object, so that art is often equivalent to it in his concept. Therefore the Greek is highly praised for "the fact that the material they criticised with most care was ... language"; Words have not merely music, colour, and plastic form, "but thought and passion and spirituality are theirs also, are theirs indeed alone" (1117). The idea of language as having no single fixed meaning is transmuted to the assumption that the artistic works also undergo the diverse receptions: "it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age" (1127). The idea of the superiority of the critic over the artist is developed in this view, and the germs of what is called the creative criticism as well as the reader-response theory are found here.²⁾ Yet he does not give the limitless privilege for the readers, as Gilbert says that "[a]ll artistic creation is absolutely subjective" and "that the more objective a creation appears to be, the more subjective it really is" (1142). Thus Wilde does not completely reject the author's participation in making the meanings. Yet what is recognised in this incongruity is his awareness of the performativity of the things: art with the linguistic nature is arbitrarily interpreted with the various factors around it, which might be the relatively external elements such as mood, tone, or context which are derived from the (implied) author's as well as the text's subjective interpellation. The cognizance of the performativity in art corresponds to the notion of the superiority of the form over the

content. Although, as San Juan says, Wilde "never completely ignores subject matter" (88),³⁾ for him the form is what leads the content and never vice versa: Gilbert states that "the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion. . . . He gains his inspiration from form, and from form purely, as an artist should" (1148). Realising the form has the power to control the content, Wilde adopts the linguistic manoeuvres such as epigrams, paradoxes, and inversions, which means that his style itself is an essential part of the content it conveys. The critical nature of the Wildean language recognised in this way, to speculate what is working behind this method would be profitable, for if language is often equivalent to art for him, the course the linguistic subversion of the common sense takes crosses over the antagonism between art and nature or life discussed in "The Decay of Lying."

Epigrams, paradoxes, and inversions are all in essence the linguistic rebellions against the conventional thinking. As Eagleton succinctly says, "the epigram is the mind's momentary triumph over the dead matter of conventional wisdom, a piece of linguistic deviancy, a sagacious saying gone suddenly awry" (334). Significant here is that the convention in its usual sense is what has been made by repetition and imitation, and Wilde's excessive involvement with the linguistic plays obviously derives from his strong aversion to this sort of repetition. One of the main themes of "The Decay of Lying" is the rejection of realism or naturalism, as Vivian declares that "[a]s a method, realism is a complete failure" (1080), and this anti-realism takes the form of anti-nature and anti-life, and contrarily it leads to the promotion of lying as the imaginative art. The binary opposition established here is relatively in order: realism, nature, and life all belong to the sordid facts and truth-telling whereas lying, "the telling of beautiful untrue things" (1091), and art are fictitious and imaginative. The most famous phrases that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (1082) and "Nature also imitates Art" (1091) are also reliant on this binary structure, and the most crucial factor in this division is that between the imitative and the imaginative: realism is

detestable in that it imitates blindly the facts, with the "substitution of an imitative for a creative medium, [the] surrender of an imaginative form" (1079); Nature is always behind the age, for "people only discovers in her what they bring to her" (1078); as to life, it "holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realises in fact what has been dreamed in fiction" (1086).

"Nature imitates Art." This is indeed not a paradox nor perversion when read in the essay's proper narrative. Although the passage has often been interpreted as the ultimate claim for art, what Vivian propagates is the axiom that nature is never natural in itself as culture conditions what it is. Wilde persists in the word art, but it can be changed with language in general as before or culture as the ideological and linguistic way of thinking. Vivian's explanation is quite reasonable: "Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is our brain that she quickens to life" (1086). Thus the passage, disclosing that nature is made up through the linguistic enactment, has within it the strong political concern to transform society: if nature which is regarded as inevitable is the imitation in that it blindly reflects the ideological orders, nature as well as other social artifacts can be displaced from the seemingly fixed position, society being radically transformed. As Dollimore says, "Wilde is a proto-structuralist" (11) in this sense.

The medium he sees as significant for this transformation is the imagination: it "is essentially creative, and always seeks for a new form" (1083) and "[t]he moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything" (1091). Just as nature is degraded as the imitative creation, life is in the same way regarded as the mimic of the imaginative art. "Life imitate Art" is either not so perverse as it appears to be, which has again the highly political connotation. Although the examples Vivian tells of this matter are insignificant as if they were the practices of lying, the general principle he expounds is pertinent: "Scientifically speaking, the basis of life ... is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms

through which the expression can be attained. Life seizes on them and uses them" (1085). Art is again tantamount to language, and from the linguistic point of view, this logic denotes that the signifiers precede the signifieds, as Gilbert regards language as "the parent, not the child, of thought" (1121). Life which is the social phenomena in general is exposed as nothing but the fictitious production in that it only imitates the fiction without any origin nor the Platonic idea. This is the true meaning of the sentence that "[a]ll bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals" (1091), all bad art corresponding to the deficient society which imitates the prior acts repeatedly without any critical spirit.

That one must have this kind of critical spirit in order to recognise the naturalised workings of the ideologies and learn "the best that is known and thought in the world" (1138) is the subject discussed in "The Critic as Artist." Focusing upon the creativity which is born of the imaginative faculty, in this essay is claimed the superiority of the critic over the artist and the criticism over the artistic work itself. As is broadly acknowledged, this seemingly inverted proposition is affected by Arnold's and Pater's critical thoughts. The original title, "The True Function and Value of Criticism; with some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: a Dialogue" clearly echoes Arnold's title. According to Arnold, the creative faculty can be used as the part of the critical power, and by criticism one can make progress and "create a current of true and fresh ideas" (20). Wilde follows this proposition in his own essay. However, "to see the object as in itself it really is" is rejected by Gilbert, who declares that it is "a very serious error, and takes no cognizance of Criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective" (1126), which has more echoes from Pater, who has emended the Arnoldean disinterestedness in the preface to *The Renaissance*, observing "in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is" (xix). Yet Gilbert's revision of Pater goes further to extremes of subjective impressionism: "the Highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way

more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself" (1125). Now to the criticism is attached the more creative faculty than to the artistic work, and as far as the creativity is concerned, the subjective is naturally more important than the objective. Therefore, in this idea some arts are considered to be a little lower because "[t]he mere creative instinct does not innovate, but reproduces" (1120), that is, it is not subjectively creative but objectively imitative. When the opposition between the imitative and the creative is implicitly evoked in this way, the criticism naturally gets more significance. However, if the critic is regarded as a kind of artist, the artist is also fully recognised as critic, as "artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty, and, indeed, without it cannot be said to exist at all" (1124). Then it is one and the same creative faculty that what is required for both the artist and the critic. Even if the critic is in a certain condition superior to the artist in the subjective purity, the artist is equally significant in that he is manipulating the creative hence critical faculty.

Only with this critical faculty can both the critic as artist and the artist as critic recognise the political problems in general. Social matters are the very objects of the critic, as Gilbert praises the Greeks for having exercised the critical spirit on questions of "the two supreme and highest arts," that is "life and the perfect expression of life" (1114). The critical attitude towards the social affairs is revealed especially when Wilde's essay has much likeness to Arnold's: as Kohl puts it, their antagonism "against a materialistic, utilitarian view of life" (102); the worldwide standpoint, which Arnold says "regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result" (33), which in Wilde's view gives rise to "the peace that springs from understanding" (1153); and above all, Arnold's prospect of doing "most good to his readers" by "communicating fresh knowledge, and letting his own judgement pass along with it" (32), which is explained by Wilde as the critic's concern with the age, "which he will seek to wake into consciousness, and to make responsive creating in it new desires

and appetites, and lending it his larger vision and the nobler moods" (1149). Contrary to the propaganda for art for art's sake, "The Critic as Artist" thus proposes the transformative power the critic and the artist hold. The critical faculty born of the creative imagination makes it possible to detect the social fissures, rejecting the acts the ideologies demand to repeat in order to make them appear natural. The critic and the artist are, as Price maintains, "not isolated from the political and social problems of the time, but directly involved within them" (116).

If this is Wilde's attitude *per se*, however, the importance of the contemplation against the action Gilbert proposes seem incoherent, for this principle seems to register the countercurrent rejecting the political involvement. That he refuses the action preferring the contemplation and the (effeminate) artistic world seems the most casual explanation, but this is tainted with the predilection for seeing him as an aesthete. His aesthetic attitudes always contain implicitly or explicitly the criticism of the ideological workings. Then to examine what is at stake in this seeming incongruity would serve to illuminate Wilde's complicated critical idea.

He exposes nature as an ideological fiction in that it is created in our brain, whereby he can take a critical position to displace what is called natural: if it is an arbitrary product, it can be easily transformed and with it is also disclosed the ideological workings insidiously making the nature what it is. In this way the effect of his criticism depends upon the concept of nature as an artifact. However this deconstructive measure goes halfway, for the notion of nature as innate hence determining obsesses him, which engenders the inconsistent ideas. Nature as determining, for instance, comes to the surface when Vivian personifies it, saying "Nature has good intentions," though he soon puts forth the opposing view, claiming the infinite variety of nature "resides in the imagination" (1071). Thus the antithetical views of nature exist in the essays.⁴) The concept of nature as determining is brought about by the notions as to heredity and the inevitable natural selection, which affect the argument of the action and the con-

templation. Gilbert explains: action "is a blind thing dependent on external influences, and moved by an impulse of whose nature it is unconscious. . . . Its basis is the lack of imagination" (1121). Although the term used is "external," the idea of action as determined is concerned with internal heredity. Thus he later expounds: The scientific principle of heredity "has shown us that we are never less free than when we try to act. It has hemmed us round with the nets of the hunter, and written upon the wall the prophecy of our doom. We may not watch it, for it is within us" (1137). If the action is determined and we cannot but repeatedly follow the programmes heredity as the innate nature constitutes, there would be no chance to take a critical standpoint. This is why Wilde rejects the action and instead insists upon the contemplation. Thus it is not the escape from the political involvement but, quite contrarily, the positive participation in it that brings about this proclamation. As Gilbert's argument shows, the imagination is set forth against the action, and the opposition between the creative and the repetitive is again what separates them. However, surprisingly, too much obsession with the principle of heredity makes Gilbert declare that "the imagination is the result of heredity" (1138). If this is the case, the imagination, losing the creative capacity, degrades into the repetitive agent. To prevent this degeneration, Wilde takes advantage of the multiplicity heredity promises: the principle of heredity in the case of imaginative sphere "can help us to leave the age in which we were born, and to pass into other ages, and find ourselves not exiled from their air. It can teach us how to escape from our experience, and realise the experiences of those who are greater than we are." The assumption is that by imagination which "is simply concentrated race-experience" can one live the multiple lives, and it is the true critic "who lives with those who are the Immortals" that can make perfect "this culture that this transmission of racial experiences makes possible" (1138). In this way, whereas in the sphere of action heredity is the burden to trap us in the determinism where we are the object of its workings, in that of imagination it is the medium to lead to the multiplicity and the indeterminacy through which we can have

the subjective position.

If this subjective position is important for the criticism, it is the multiplicity of imagination itself that is equally essential to be critical, which is transmuted into the support of the multiplicity and the indeterminacy in the self: "we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent" (1142); and as to the true critic, "through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. . . . The essence of thought, as the essence of life, is growth" (1144-1145). This claim is obviously political, as the diverse imaginations as race-experiences are what "will annihilate race-prejudices, by insisting upon the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms" (1153).

This inconsistent self in the indeterminacy, however, seems a little ambiguous because how and when one can be critical in such a state is unknown. Yet this is what characterises Wilde's political measure, the attitude to reject any authority and authenticity to the extent that his own view loses them: destabilising his own standpoint with its frivolous style and the incongruities, he subjects himself to the multiple views and the plays of the signs. This is the very reason Wilde's ideas are always elusive. The inconsistency which promises the progress, subverting the logocentric base, is, as Danson observes, "a challenge to common assumptions about the sources and production of meaning" (20). It is certain that the critic/artist seem to take pleasure in that indeterminacy, yet it is not pleasure for pleasure's sake but to be forever creative hence critical without any final view that this radical indeterminacy functions. It is the political concern that stimulates the critic/artist to be inconsistent and growing.

The dialogue form of the two essays coupled with the flippant style sets up the basic ground where the diverse views can be contested. Besides, the form which embeds the articles within them with many descriptions and digressions renders them multiple and inconsistent, the form being foregrounded as the part of the content. Then the appropriate name for their genre would be theory in that, as Culler argues, "theory is itself the questioning of presumed results and

the assumptions on which they are based" (17). Moreover, taking into account the essays' positive seeking for the indeterminate dynamics, they are the practice of the deconstructive procedure in its proper sense, as deconstruction, Miller observes, "attempts to resist its own tendencies to come to rest in some sense of mastery over the work" (252), the work here meaning the social and linguistic network as text. The function of the true critic/artist is to be critical forever. As Gilbert declares: "It is Criticism that, recognising no position as final, and refusing to bind itself by the shallow shibboleths of any sect or school, creates that serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake, and loves it not the less because it knows it to be unattainable" (1153). Although this truth for its own sake as well as art for art's sake seems to indicate the autonomy of thought and art, this is never their meaning; on the contrary the proposition is that thought and art are where the imaginative and creative faculty works, with which alone can one have the critical viewpoints, rejecting the social repetition the ideologies demand. Wilde's aesthetic doctrine always contains the discourse of the social transformation, so the famous inverted passage, "No great artist ever sees things as they really are" (1088) is indeed recognised as the manifestation of the artist's critical function in society.

Most of the inconsistent ideas are caused by Wilde's notion of the growth which can be made possible only through the everlasting questioning. He puts forth an idea while deliberately or not negating it, inhabiting the indeterminate space. As a result, what the essays present is at once the insistence on the significance of incongruity and the practice of it, the form being the part of the content. For the development of society, the critical views are essential, which can be attained only by the multiple imaginations. The inconsistent self engendered in this logic denotes Wilde's political concern, and the essays register his struggle for the wide views to be critical. Having the imaginative and creative faculty, the critic/artist are the only agents qualified for those critical positions, whence they can see "the dawn before the rest of the world" (1155).

Notes

- 1) This idea is taken from Chuang Tsü, as Wilde explains in a review quoting the saga's words that "he adopts dialogue as his mode of expression . . . 'in order to gain breadth of view'" (227).
- 2) The affinity between Wilde's creative criticism and the contemporary literary criticisms is fully acknowledged and Longxi's list includes the great critics such as Wimsatt and Beardsley, Frye, Barthes, Said, Bloom, and Hartman.
- 3) Vivian rejects not only the form but the content of naturalism, saying "modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter are entirely and absolutely wrong" (1077).
- 4) These antithetical views engender the opposition between the essentialism and the anti-essentialism. Although most of Wilde's ideas are established on the latter as maintained by Dollimore, the former can be seen, as Price observes that he is "an essentialist who believes in a human nature" (7). Yet as far as the critical method is concerned, his is anti-essentialism, and the essentialism surfaces almost only when his notion tends towards the optimistic natural selection. The problem as to the aesthetic democracy and the individualism is related with this matter, of which Dowling's argument is informative, 89-100.

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