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## A Classical Romanticist

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## A CLASSICAL ROMANTICIST

It is necessary in the interpretation of any writer, and especially if he be of the present day, that the literary motives which actuate him should be thoroughly understood. Through their realization and through what we might term his interpretation of his own ideals, we are enabled to form a sufficient idea of his literary originality and a better comprehension of his relation to his own and preceding times. It is of course truistic that all writers can not create new fields, that they can only follow, modifying, adapting, enlarging, or lessening, as the case may be, the accumulated heritage of the past. But their abilities within the limited field of poetic thought and expression, constitute after all a surer indication of poetic balance and power than the exercise of their inspiration in undeveloped and untried ways. Goethe himself says: "*In der Beschränkung zeigt sich der Meister,*" the master is revealed by his very limitations; and there is certainly no literature in which this principle is so well exemplified as in the Greek. Its highly developed dramatic unities and scholastic conventions seemed only to increase, and not to stultify, the subjective powers and poetic genius and inspiration of the Greek writers. Their subject-matter in epic, dramatic, and to a great extent in lyric production was confined to the customary myths of gods and heroes; and only the treatment, and not the theme, could be in any sense a new departure. This, however, only illustrates that the highest poetic art bounds itself by objectivity and thus prevents a disordered, illogical, and ill-planned result. The basis is stable and the poet is guided, not hindered; helped, not stultified, by his conditions.

The perfection in form and detail of Greek literature should not, however, in the minds of any, suffice to obscure its depth of emotion, its fondness for the picturesque, and in particular its strong and stirring romantic elements. Spiritual *ennui* such as might be and was induced in the later epochs of so-called classicism, could have found no birth in the work of the Greek masters of epic, lyric, dramatic, or other literary forms. Their subservience to rule only enhanced, as said, the genius and brilliancy of their work, and the limitations of their subject-matter

merely necessitated a freer rein upon the imagination, an intensely subjective relation to their theme, and the introduction of romantic treatment as an offset, though a natural one, to that possible monotony that may arise from too perfect execution.

All themes might, indeed, be held romantic when new and treated as novel, picturesque, quaint, and unaffected by the ears and tongues and eyes of the world. The epic of Homer is largely romantic in character, even though it stand at the height, and not at the rude beginning, of a great period of poetical endeavour; yet the epic poem of Quintus of Smyrna, of the fourth century A.D., while treating of the same grand theme, "The Trojan War," is trite, uninteresting, insipid, and failing in that instinctive vigour that characterizes the deep and profound feelings of an uncultivated and unexhausted time. The cycle of classicism had thus spent itself, to be revived later, and as a new, vitalizing, and living force at the Renaissance. The forces and the appeal of classicism, then revived, were, though naturally limited in many ways, comparatively free and untrammelled of weariness and spiritual disdain. They were an inspiration, not an expiration. The classical background which had vanished for so many hundreds of years occupied to the writers of the age the position held later by the mediæval romances, the Arthurian legends, the tales of Charlemagne, Amadis de Gaul, mysticism, mediævalism, orientalism, personal emotion, imagination, individualism, etc., to the romantic schools of Germany or of France. Finally this apparent romanticism of the ancient classical background paled from the too strict adherence of its disciples, and the romanticism of the mediæval background supplanted it, to pale in its turn and time, at least so far as its formal inspiration is concerned, when it has run the scale as have the classic motives. Romanticism, however, as commonly understood, may imply an overturn or negligence, more or less, of classic or academic form, and in this sense may always exist in some degree. Romanticism, too, should not at all be confounded with that with which it is so often associated, the mediæval background; for in the best of romantic writers, the purely imaginative, the gnomic, that which is without the limitations of time and space may be the sole basis of exposition. When the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century romanticism had attained its strength, it was inevitable that, as in all movements, its strength should somewhat subside and that writers should appear who, while

unconsciously, though strongly, affected both in temper and training by the time in which they lived, should make a conscious effort to reinvigorate the never-fading beauties of the classical heritage and by their romantic tone remove from the ancient background somewhat of its tame, academic standing. In accordance with this theory we can best interpret the poetry and in fact the entire work of Oscar Wilde.

The classicism, or perhaps Hellenism, of Oscar Wilde is hardly connected with any school or time. It is unmistakable since it is, in fact, derived directly from the source. He was a classical scholar of ability at Dublin and at Oxford. At either place he distinguished himself in Greek and imbibed that love, admiration, even worship of Greek art, language, literature, and ideals that, in the main, never left him. One of his biographers has said that had Wilde never left Ireland he would probably have lived and died in repute, if not in fame, as a Professor of Greek. His dependence upon the classical school of Pope in England or upon the eighteenth-century classicists of France is nil. He even speaks of the Renaissance as the "dreary classical renaissance." But when he speaks of the Greeks his tones are almost those of awe:

"That wonderful offshoot of the primitive Aryans, whom we call by the name of Greeks, and to whom, as has been well said, we owe all that moves in the world except the blind forces of nature. . . . In Greek thought . . . in their intellectual development . . . in their art, their poetry, and their philosophy, they seem so essentially normal, so free from all disturbing influences, so peculiarly rational, that in following their footsteps we shall really be progressing in the order sanctioned by reason."

In his earlier years he is most ardent in his Hellenism, still his romantic feeling is already great and decided. He is always, where possible, generous with his use of classic name and myth, though a mere use of such names and myths and motives would not suffice to make a man a true classicist. The very titles of his poems bear more than abundant witness. *The Rise of Historical Criticism* is mainly Greek; Greek art is to him almost the inspirer of the beautiful paradox in *The Decay of Lying*; and in *Dorian Gray* we can not but see a modern striving after Greek character, and an exemplification, in detail, of Wilde's own view and interpretation of Greek morality and rational development. We see in the poem *Hélas*, published in 1881, in *Dorian Gray*, 1890,

and in *De Profundis*, written in 1897, published in 1905, the same recognition of self-development along artistic and subjective lines; a feeling that there should be no restraint upon a man to attain the highest, that in such a course, life for art's sake is primary, and that humanity can hardly count. That Wilde overlooked the checks which the Greeks, though holding such principles, put upon their execution is only too apparent. Their ideals of moderation and restraint in all things, their idea that only excess is the real sin, he comes at last to realize in the *De Profundis*, though his interpretation of Greek character seems in some respects materially unchanged.

Through his pages walk all the gods and goddesses of the pagan pantheon. The figures of mythology seem to burst from almost all his poems; the hero or demigod, the Oread, the Dryad, the Nereid, and that beautiful Greek ideal which he took from his greatest friend and helper, Plato, namely Charmides. In fact, it has recently been asserted that the stimulation of romantic studies in England since the 70's was induced by Jowett's work on Plato, and that the unreal, the ideal, the romantic was accordingly fostered in several successive writers who came under such influence. This connection of his with Plato, and peculiarly, too, his theory of paradox, are both excellently illustrated by a passage from *The Truth about Masks*:

"In art there is no such thing as an universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel's system of contraries."

Plato thus came to stand for romanticism to this school as opposed to the classic Aristotle. *Charmides* could possibly be interpreted in motive, as in name, as a desire to follow after Plato, in allegorical fashion or otherwise, and this is beautifully done. We can hardly imagine a Greek's painting the characteristic details more clearly or drawing out the plot, and the retribution, and the final adjustment with more consummate effect. Yet in the whole we see the strong romantic feeling and colouring induced by Wilde's own literary models, the French romanticists in particular. The Greeks would never have talked of nature as he did, nor as beautifully, though the conception is in the main Greek, and one feels that the plot is the welding together, in sufficient adaptation, of stories and motives from

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Greek mythology. There is clearly seen as well the characteristic verging on immorality, the fascination in the subject, in other words, the picturesque viciousness, so typical of his work in places, and to which I elsewhere allude. There is, however, found in this poem an excellent trait in which it exceeds Wilde's work in general, namely, a lack of his usual insincerity. If Wilde was not a poseur, he was at any rate often mistaken for one, and this opinion of him was naturally accentuated by this apparent insincerity which seems to pervade his work. This is of course heightened by his deliberate attempt to confound and shock the public by the startlingness and brilliance of his paradoxes. This note of insincerity, which nearly every reader of his works comes to feel, is hardly apparent in *Charmides*, and is even less apparent in many other of his poems, his earliest published work, than in his later prose and dramatic productions. *Charmides* rings truer than most of Wilde's work of such a character. In this respect, and with this accent and note of truth, are comparable, in the main, his tales, which are in other respects his most romantic work; for no untrue note is felt in *The Happy Prince*, *The Devoted Friend*, *The Fisherman and his Soul*, etc., though these are at the farthest remove from true classicism. Thus in his most romantic work he strikes a classic note of sincerity, and in his most classic work, his poems, he is strongly, and in a few cases, one might say entirely, under a complete romantic spell.

This note of insincerity, again, is easily traced from the beginning of his work until the end. We feel that Wilde placed himself in phases of emotion as a mere *tour de force*, and from pure fascination of running the scale of the human soul. This renders his motives of a more or less transitory nature and not as abiding and genuine as we feel in other men. Elsewhere I show that some of his most distinct motives, and such as well as we would class under the purely emotional or subjective type, are drawn largely from those he distinctly followed or imitated. His leaning toward Catholicism, for instance, one can hardly accept as genuine, or the melancholia, which is, perhaps, assumed, or the tone adopted in *The Sphinx*, which has been called the most artificial poem in the English language. Later, in his stories, his poems in prose, and in his dramas, in particular, the paradox is so evident that the reader feels that Wilde has it and it only in view; that truth, interest, all, can be sacrificed for its sake. In this, however, Wilde is true to himself, for it can not be denied

that the truly artistic effect is not impaired, and that "art for art's sake," the creed of romanticism, is held strictly in mind. Even in *De Profundis* we find beside a manifest imitation, evident in the entire work, a note that produces doubt. Will the feelings induced by his condition last, or are they merely representative of a transitory state, and is their author capable of lasting emotion? His attitude is pious but still pagan. He confesses his faults but does not forgive his enemies, the British Philistines, though here again he can not be artistically consistent and come to terms with them.

Further and lastly we feel in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* not the perfect conviction of a man exposing the wrongs of mankind, but the complaint of one who feels the injustice keenly because he has suffered and his own artistic nature has been harassed by the misery of the world. The poem would be the most powerful and perhaps the best of all his work if we could believe more strongly in the abiding character of the impressions of its author. As it is we must have recourse to poems where the Greek motive and treatment are pre-eminent or where personal theory is least predominant.

In details of language and expression, as well as ideas, it would be exceedingly difficult to trace in their entirety, for their very extensiveness, the imitations, not to say the plagiarisms, of Wilde from ancient as well as modern authors. Whistler's famous mot on Wilde as "a man who had the courage of the opinions of others" is calmly quoted by Wilde later with no concern to denote its original author or primary reference. The many expressions from ancient writers, the compound words in Greek fashion, the comparatively simple vocabulary, but poetically used, the oft repeated lines, or phrases, or words, in true classic wise, all show a most careful study and mastery and enthusiasm for Hellenic models. His spirit is romantic, his training classic, and from this training we find the greatest influence exerted upon his style both in poetry and in prose.

It is hard in some respects to overpraise his diction. He speaks of himself as "a lord of language," and the euphony and cadence of his style are remarkable to a degree. Finish and polish would characterize it but partially, for its quality seems higher than mere artificial treatment and is one embodied, so to speak, in the nature of the writer. There is no doubt that Wilde's excellent classical training gave him a feeling for prose



style and poetic rhythm such as few have possessed. In a letter he says: "I see you are studying the delicate forms of verse. That is quite right. To master one's instrument is the greatest thing." Again, his romantic feeling made him anxious to paint, to draw, to emblazon his language, that it, of itself, and by its sound, no less than its meaning, might assist in the conveyance of the thought. This would easily lead to deterioration in an ordinary writer, but his early classical sense for form almost always exercised a due and prevailing moderation. Yet, in a way we may consider his mood for style to be unconscious in his poetry and conscious in his prose. He says that he cares nought for syntax in comparison with effect, but this may be only his customary paradox. He holds that in prose, at any rate, correctness should always be subordinate to artistic effect and musical cadence. He has, in fact, been criticized for a certain carelessness, but it is not certain that it has been with justice. His statement regarding this is only indicative of an intensely romantic feeling that the laws of literary form are of importance only when they completely subserve the purpose of the artist. His dramatic unities are well observed, except in his first play, *The Duchess of Padua*, his earliest, crudest, and most imitative, not to say plagiaristic, work.

Stylistically, he often seems in his work to be consciously imitative. *Ravenna* is much in the style of Byron, and Wilde's great admiration for that poet is undoubted. Wilde also affected this tone a little as being somewhat grand or Homeric in quality. It is also interesting to note that Byron claimed to be a classicist, and that he was in his temperament closely akin to Wilde. The effect, which Byron maintains in uninterrupted fashion, Wilde strikes only as it suits his mood. That Wilde's models among the English poets were always among the best and that his taste in this sense is strictly standard, or, as we say in another sense, classical, is shown by his frequent references: Spenser, Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning are to him the great procession of the sweet singers of England. Milton is in the rank with Homer. Shakespeare is the greatest literary figure since Greek days. Keats's lips are the sweetest since those of Mitylene; and Wilde follows him, as he states, in his lack of reverence for the public, or for anything in existence, but the Eternal Being, the memory of great men, and the principle of

beauty. Poetry was to Wilde an obsession, an object of worship. In a letter he says: "I hope you will devote yourself with vows to poetry. It is a sacramental thing, and there is no pain like it." Again he says elsewhere: "I am afraid you are going to be a poet. How terribly tragic! In the waters of Helicon there is death, the only death worth dying." He was, apparently, in English literature, influenced most by those men upon whom his personal admiration had fixed, without regard to the movements they represented or tendencies that they displayed; while in Germany or France, it is the movement first of all that attracts his attention, and then he settles upon the particular men who represent the trend and most stimulate his fancy. This is especially true in France, where Gautier and Baudelaire, in particular, exercised upon him a most potent influence; and while he was a close student of, and adapted from German, romanticism, it is more than doubtful that his patterning after Novalis or others ever reached such limits as in the case of the Frenchmen I have named. A cursory examination, therefore, might easily classify Wilde as Hellenist, of almost the Matthew Arnold type,—and, in fact, Arnold he greatly admired—or might, on the contrary, rank him intimately with Lamartine and Victor Hugo, two typical exponents of French romanticism. In many ways, also, resemblances of a general kind can be seen between him and the school of German romanticism, as typified by Novalis, Tieck, and F. Schlegel. With these latter he agrees in his use of mediæval, mystical, and romantic motives, as in *The Young King*, *The Happy Prince*, *The Star Child*, *The Devoted Friend*, *Ballade de Marguerite*, *The Dole of the King's Daughter*, etc.; and in his tendency towards Catholicism in his younger days, a characteristic trait of the German romantic school, and not unknown among the younger members of French romanticism in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. This Catholic tendency is shown most clearly in Wilde's poems, his earliest published work, though it is interesting to remember that at his death Wilde received the last rites of the Roman Catholic Church. Catholicism also receives at his hands a most significant treatment in *The Priest and the Acolyte*, a work which is strangely symbolic of Wilde's own life, and more so by far than *Dorian Gray*, the story of which has so often been compared to his own. *The Priest and the Acolyte* draws with a wonderful realism Wilde's own attitude towards life and convention, his mastery of self, and then seems to fore-

shadow his final and actual fall. To Wilde, as to the priest in his tale, appeal is made by the beautiful mysteries of Christianity, its æsthetic tendency, the artistic beauty of the services, the ecstasy of devotion, and the passionate fervour that comes with fasting and prayer. In his sonnet *On Approaching Italy*, he ends:

“But when I knew that far away at Rome  
In evil bonds a second Peter lay,  
I wept to see the land so very fair.”

In *Italia* he says:

“Look southward where Rome’s desecrated town  
Lies mourning for her God-anointed king!  
Look heavenward! Shall God allow this thing?  
Nay! but a flame-girt Raphael shall come down,  
And smite the spoiler with the sword of pain.”

In *Rome Unvisited*:

“O joy to see before I die  
The only God-anointed king!  
And hear the silver trumpets ring  
A triumph as he passes by.”

This last is interesting also as an attempt at the grand and lofty style. This Catholicism appears in *Urbs Sacra Æterna*, *Easter Day*, and in many other places. The relation of this religious attitude to the romantic school is excellently phrased in *De Profundis*. It was the outward charm, the stirring impulse, the past background of mediævalism, the form and fascination of Catholicism that held the poets in her power. The artistic fascination of Christ’s life and the dwelling of the Church upon the visible symbols attract Wilde from the point of view of art, especially, if not alone. Wilde, however, says that he “stands apart neither for God nor for his enemies”; that “religion interests him not at all.” Yet this strong and undoubted influence worked upon him as well as upon others.

The German romantic school had a fondness and affection for the Oriental, for the land of mystery and romance, as is seen in such of Wilde’s tales as *The Fisherman and his Soul*, which is undoubtedly one of his best productions, and it is certain that in

such a sphere his genius is at its highest. Here he is absolutely untrammelled by classicism and compels us to wonder if his entire work might not have been greater but for the restraining influence of his early training.

I shall touch in another place upon the reactionary conservatism, which he holds in common with both French and German romanticism; a conservatism not romantic in origin but rather the reverse, classical by tradition, one superintended by the understanding of the French Revolution, and increased by the Philistinism, and mediocrity, or worse, of the middle and lower classes. In this Wilde notes the similar war of Christ:

"His chief war was against the Philistines. That is the war every child of light has to wage. Philistinism was the note of the age and community in which He lived. In their heavy inaccessibility to ideas, their dull respectability, their tedious orthodoxy, their worship of vulgar success, their entire preoccupation with the gross materialistic side of life, and their ridiculous estimate of themselves and their importance, the Jews of Jerusalem were the exact counterpart of the British Philistine of our own. . . . The cold philanthropies, the ostentatious public charities, the tedious formalism so dear to the middle-class mind, He exposed with utter and relentless scorn."

This Philistinism represents to Wilde the materialism, liberalism, radicalism, and overwhelming mediocrity against which he utters his whole life in protest.

An appreciative understanding of Wilde's work is thus so closely connected with the history of the æsthetic movement, and of French, and, to a lesser degree, of German romanticism, that an interpretation of the one is almost necessarily a means of exegesis to the other. The tale of French romanticism in the nineteenth century, in particular, finds in him a typical exponent, and, than he, a more passionate, brilliant representative hardly exists within its own school. This is of course best attested by the unity of style, of form, and subject-matter, and a general harmony in literary theory and criticism. As specific characteristics we may take in mind the splendour and sonorousness of diction, the free choice of subject, the disregard of arbitrary critical rules, no academically limited vocabulary, an irrepressible individualism. All these, applicable in some extent or other, and in some place or other, we find represented in Wilde's works.

Wilde himself testifies most clearly to the conjunction of

this romantic influence with his early training. In his lecture on the English Renaissance he says:

“The English Renaissance has been described as a mere revival of the Greek modes of thought, and again as a mere revival of mediæval feeling. Rather, I would say, that to these forms of the human spirit it has added whatever of artistic value the intricacy and complexity and experience of modern life can give. . . . It is from the union of Hellenism in its breath, its sanity of purpose, its calm possession of beauty, with the adventive, the intensified individualism, the passionate colour of the romantic spirit, that springs out of the nineteenth century in England, as from the marriage of Faust and Helen of Troy sprang the beautiful boy Euphorion.”

Again, he says, when writing in *The Truth about Masks*, concerning the attitude of the Renaissance toward the antique world:

“Archæology to them was not a mere science for the antiquarian; it was a means by which they could touch the dry dust of antiquity into the very breath of beauty of life, and fill with the new wine of romanticism forms that else had been old and outworn.”

The element of imitation which he finds in literature, as in painting, corresponds as well to his classic viewpoint. The danger of valuing it too little, he thinks, is almost as great as the danger of setting too high a value upon it.

“To catch, by dainty mimicry, the very mood and manner of antique work and yet to retain that touch of modern passion without which the old form would be dull and empty; to win from long silent lips some echo of their music, and to add to it a music of one's own; to take the mode of fashion of a by-gone age, and to experiment with it, and search seriously for its possibilities”—

there is a pleasure in all this.

It is very fortunate that in our estimate of Wilde's work we are so materially assisted by the frankness of the author. As a plagiarist, an imitator, a copyist, Wilde is almost unparalleled; yet he easily handles and revivifies all that he touches. His modesty therefore is non-existent, for though he does not admit that he has taken yet he copies so boldly and baldly, even from himself most of all, that the merest tyro may easily ascertain. He also mentions at times the very ones by whom he has been most affected; not as having been affected by them, for he never

gives credit to the owners of his stolen goods, but as representatives of certain opinions upon art, or literature, or life in general. As a typical model of his from the ranks of French romanticism is to be mentioned above all Theophile Gautier. Others of the same school are often named by Wilde and probably did influence his work to a certain degree; but Gautier furnishes such an absolute parallel in practically every instance that, taken together with Wilde's own references to his work, we cannot avoid the conclusion that he must have been of the most vital and far-reaching influence upon his views of life, literature, and art. Baudelaire, Verlaine, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, all contribute materially to his literary makeup, and between them all and Wilde close parallels in both general and specific things might be drawn; but space forbids more than a cursory examination of Gautier as undoubtedly the most illustrative.

Many of the parallels between the two will naturally be of a general nature such as might be attributable to many pairs of writers. Other characteristics will result from the fact that they were each openly and consciously part and parcel of a great movement; but still others are so individual in turn that they can be explained only by a close and definite comparison. Both Gautier and Wilde possessed in an exceptional degree the artistic temperament; Gautier having in fact begun his life as a painter and Wilde having often declared in his earlier days that if he did not take to literature he would make his living by painting pictures. Both were true representatives of a splendidness and euphoniousness in style and diction. To Wilde, as has been said, the euphonious was always paramount even though it be to the detriment of grammar and syntax, and in his characterization of himself as a lord of language, there is certainly justice in the claim. Gautier astonished Sainte-Beuve by the phraseology and style of his literary essays, even before he had reached the age of eighteen. Wilde was stimulated in some of the eccentricities of the æsthetic movement by the very example of Gautier. Of the latter it is said that he wore a flaming crimson waistcoat and a huge mass of waving hair as outward signs of the cult, if such it may be called, he held. This accords entirely with the picture we have of Wilde before he left Oxford, but after he had become fully identified with the æsthetic movement. It reminds us of the velvet coat, knee-breeches, loose shirt, and flowing tie. He wore his hair long and shaved his face closely. He walked

along the streets holding in his hand a lily or a sunflower at which he gazed admiringly and longingly. It was for this that he was ducked in the Cherwell, satirized in *Punch*, and caricatured in Gilbert Sullivan's comic opera *Patience*. But in both Wilde and Gautier it was the expression of a self-sufficient individualism, careless of the opinions of others, posing somewhat, perhaps, but seriously intent upon the propagation and advancement of their artistic ideals.

In his earliest published poem, *Albertus*, 1830, Gautier exhibits this extravagant character, but also shows uncommon command of language and imagery and an unusual descriptive power. As far as this command of language and descriptive power are concerned—though not for its excellence or originality—we may compare Wilde's early poem, *Ravenna*, with which he won the Newdigate prize at Oxford in 1878, at the age of twenty-four. He writes in part:

“How strangely still! no sound of life or joy  
Startles the air; no laughing shepherd boy  
Pipes on his reed, nor ever through the day  
Comes the glad sound of children at their play;  
O sad and sweet and silent! surely here  
A man might dwell apart from troublous fear,  
Watching the tide of seasons as they flow  
From amorous spring to winter's rain and snow  
And have no thought of sorrow; here, indeed,  
Are Lethe's waters and that fatal weed  
Which makes a man forget his fatherland.”

Though this poem in some ways marks Wilde's farthest remove from the romantic movement, and indicates his purest strain of classicism, yet traces are to be drawn even from it of his descriptive imagery and colour painting, exuberant, perhaps, from youthful enthusiasm, but still remarkably similar to Gautier. Poetical form, vigour, wealth, and appropriateness of diction characterize all Wilde's poetry just as in Gautier. In either is found an extraordinary feeling for beauty in nature, coupled with a contempt for nature, as compared with art, that amounts almost to a contradiction. Art is reality, life is fiction, according to Wilde, for nature imitates art and not art nature; while both believe in art for art's sake, the favourite keyword of the romanticists. The apparent contradiction may be due to the pose or insincerity

of either, but is more rationally explained as the feeling of a spirit alive to beauty in nature when viewed objectively, but conscious of the superiority of art over nature from a subjective standpoint; and the subjective standpoint again was a cardinal principle of the romanticists.

This love of nature in Wilde, one of the abiding and permanent touches in all his works, from the earliest to the latest, is manifested toward birds and bees, flowers and fruits, trees and landscape, and all similar things. The narcissus is never exhausted; the daffodil as well; the lily is always huddling the bee, and some shrub is supporting the corncrake. As an instance of this fondness I may cite again from the *Ravenna*:

“ The throstle singing on the feathered larch,  
The cawing rooks, the wood-doves fluttering by;  
And fair the violet's gentle drooping head,  
The primrose, pale for love uncomforted,  
The rose that burgeons on the climbing briar,  
The crocus bed, that seems a moon of fire  
Round-girdled with a purple marriage ring;  
And all the flowers of our English spring;  
Fond snowdrops, and the bright-starred daffodil.  
Upstarts the lark beside the murmuring mill,  
And breaks the gossamer threads of early dew;  
And down the river, like a flame of blue,  
Keen as an arrow flies the water-king,  
While the brown linnets in the greenwood sing.”

This characteristic is continually at hand in all his work, but most of all, as is natural, in his poetry. Such expressions as the following continually recur:

“ One pale narcissus loiters fearfully  
Close to a shadowy nook.”

“ The trumpet mouths of red convolvulus.”

“ Yon curving spray of purple clematis.”

“ The purple sky to burnished gold was turned.”

“ The oranges on each o'erhanging spray.”

In fact, it is difficult to say whether in his references to nature Wilde approaches realism by the minuteness and completeness



of his description, or is merely classical in clear-cut vividness and appreciativeness of all her expressed charm, or whether he is romantic in the individualism of the treatment he accords her and in the emotions she inspires in him.

Another distinct trait which allies Wilde with Gautier, and the romantic French school in general, is his early developed train of melancholia. It would be quite surprising if a man, who is said to have made, by his dramatic productions, the English public laugh as they had never done before, should have been of such a nature; and undoubtedly Wilde was not; but he did believe in all subjective feelings and the cultivation of all stimuli, and, more than that, there was not a phase of romanticism which he did not consciously touch. It is quite natural, then, that this melancholia should be best exemplified in his early work where the imitative element was probably at its strongest and the gropings and searchings of a youthful mind touched all spheres of personal or literary emotion. The *Vita Nuova* furnishes an excellent instance:

“I stood by the unvintageable sea  
 Till the wet waves drenched face and hair with spray,  
 The long red fires of the dying day  
 Burned in the west; the wind piped drearily;  
 And to the land the clamorous gulls did flee.  
 ‘Alas!’ I cried, ‘my life is full of pain,  
 And who can garner fruit or golden grain,  
 From the waste fields which travail ceaselessly!’  
 My nets gaped wide with many a break and flaw,  
 Nathless I threw them as my final cast  
 Into the sea and waited for the end.  
 When lo! a sudden glory! and I saw  
 From the black waters of my tortured past  
 The argent glory of white limbs ascend.”

This strain appears in *Hélas*, *Ave Imperatrix*, *Quantum Mutata*, *The Harlot's House*, *Tædium Vitæ*, *My Voice*, *The New Remorse*, etc., and finds its last and greatest expression in the mighty *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Just as in other things, so in this, it is difficult to decide how much of such melancholia is a pose and how much is real feeling. Even in the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, where the depth of emotion is the most profound that the human heart can apparently conceive, we wonder if the writer did not draw upon the objective features of life with the same subjective relation that he elsewhere shows. We wonder if this appealed

to him from the side of life and humanity or merely, as is natural with such an artistic temperament, from the view of his own individualism and the joy of fulfilment; whether his gratification at the presentation of such a mighty theme did not help to render his own interpretation of the sorrow and pain of life; whether the wonderful colour painting that in this poem is unsurpassable was not more conscious from the very fact that he might thus the more revenge himself upon society.

Gautier was a monarchist in fact as are most of the romantics, at the end if not in the beginning. Despite their individualism, art for art's sake does not readily foster the principle that all men are created free and equal; and Wilde is no exception. He may follow Ruskin in his *Gospel of Labour*, and even break the stones to fill his master's wheelbarrow, but he has that cool contempt for the middle and lower classes such as is so often the contradictory concomitant of a militant individualism. Gautier as well holds all in contempt who are beneath him intellectually; but mediocrity, liberalism, and radicalism were, if possible, more annoying in England than in France; and, though Wilde found sufficient stimulus in Gautier, he undoubtedly outdoes his master. Peculiarly and contradictorily, this is accompanied in both by a theoretical passion for liberty such as seems, however, the natural attendant of their individualism. Wilde's attitude is excellently illustrated in his *Libertatis Sacra Fames*:

"Albeit nurtured in democracy,  
And liking best that state republican,  
Where every man is kinglike and no man  
Is crowned above his fellows, yet I see,  
Spite of this modern fret for liberty,  
Better the rule of One, whom all obey,  
Than to let clamorous demagogues betray  
Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy.  
Therefore I love them not whose hands profane  
Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street  
For no right cause; beneath whose ignorant reign  
Arts, culture, reverence, honour, all things fade,  
Save treason and the dagger of her trade,  
Or murder with his silent bloody feet."

Again in the *Ode to Milton*:

"This England, this sea lion of the sea,  
By ignorant demagogues is held in fee,  
Who love her not."

This is the romantic attitude which, theoretically, assumes the necessity for the overthrow of tradition, and, practically, deprecates it and qualifies its zeal. It cannot be better illustrated than in Wilde's *Sonnet to Liberty*:

“Not that I love thy children, whose dull eyes  
See nothing save their own unlovely woe,  
Whose minds know nothing, nothing care to know,—  
But that the roar of thy democracies,  
Thy reigns of terror, thy great anarchies,  
Mirror my wildest passions like the sea  
And give my rage a brother—! Liberty!  
For this sake only do thy dissonant cries  
Delight my discreet soul, else might all kings  
By bloody knout or treacherous cannonades  
Rob nations of their rights inviolate  
And I remain unmoved—and yet, and yet,  
These Christs that die upon the barricades,  
God knows it I am with them, in some things.”

This attitude is also a material and natural concomitant of romanticism as a reaction against an age of materialism. This hatred of materialism is again a characteristic of Gautier, and is seen clearly in Wilde's *Quantum Mutata*:

“How comes it then that from such high estate  
We have thus fallen, save that luxury  
With barren merchandise piles up the gate  
Where noble thoughts and deeds should enter by:  
Else might we still be Milton's heritors.”

Again in *Humanitad*:

“Avarice whose palsied grasp  
Is in extent stiffened; monied greed  
For whose dull appetite men waste away  
Amid the whirr of wheels and are the seed  
Of things which slay their sower, these each day  
Sees rife in England, and the gentle feet  
Of beauty tread no more the stones of each unlovely street.”

Also in *Theoretikos*:

“The people rage against the heritage of centuries.”

With this attitude against materialism is connected a trend to the depreciation of the literature which is supposed to represent

the industrial classes, newspaperdom, journalism, etc. Gautier's jibes and cynicism were frequently directed thereat, but he, by way of the perfect contradiction which seems to characterize such individualists, became a journalist, or literary critic, a position which he filled with great repute for some thirty years. In the same way Wilde was actually an editor from 1887-1889, and later some of his most brilliant work was done in the writing of reviews and miscellanies. This is of course due to his natural and critical knowledge of form, as well as his high subjective literary instinct. In the *Decay of Lying* Wilde says: "Newspapers, even, have degenerated. They may now be absolutely relied upon. One feels it as one wades through their columns. It is always the unreadable that occurs." Anent Mr. T. P. O'Connor's *Sunday Sun*, Wilde writes to the *Pall Mall Gazette*: "He now solemnly accuses me of plagiarizing the poem he had the vulgarity to attribute to me. This seems to me to pass beyond those bounds of coarse humour and coarser malice that are, by the contempt of all, conceded to the ordinary journalist, and it is really very distressing to find so low a standard of ethics in a Sunday newspaper." Again to the *Pall Mall Gazette* under date of September 25, 1894: "Literary instinct is of course a very rare thing, and it would be too much to expect any true literary instinct to be found among the members of the staff of an ordinary newspaper." Under date of February 27, 1892, in the *St. James Gazette* he writes anent criticism of *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "As things are at present, the criticisms of ordinary newspapers are of no interest whatever, except in so far as they display, in its crudest form, the Bœotianism of a country that has produced some Athenians, and in which some Athenians have come to dwell." In the *Scots Observer*, August 16, 1890: "The English public likes tediousness, and likes things to be explained to it in a tedious way." Of *Dorian Gray*, he writes to the *St. James Gazette*, June 27, 1890: "To say that such a book as mine should be chucked in the fire is silly. That is what one does with newspapers." He writes to Joaquin Miller under date of February 28, 1882, St. Louis, Mo.: "As touching the few provincial newspapers that so vainly assailed me . . . be sure I have no time to waste on them. . . . Who are these scribes who, passing with purposeless alacrity from crime to criticism, and from the *Police News* to the Parthenon, sway with such serene incapacity the office which they so lately swept. . . .

Secure of that oblivion for which they toil so laboriously and, I must admit, with such success, let them peer at us through their telescopes," etc. These citations might be extended as far as one wished, but the idea would not be made more apparent. The romantic element, either of Wilde or Gautier, cannot tolerate the realism and objectivity of modern journalism.

The type of subject-matter and its style and method of treatment, even when considered objectively, form another close bond between Wilde and the French romanticists. Gautier's *Mlle. de Maupin*, published in 1835, was thought to be unfitted by subject-matter and treatment, by general supposed suggestiveness and a too deep psychological analysis of forbidden things, for general perusal. It brought disrepute upon and created prejudice against its author, just as *Dorian Gray* seems to have done in the case of Wilde. *Dorian Gray* is a psychological novel, and in its creation Wilde seems to have followed the standard set by Gautier in *Mlle. de Maupin*, and also with a blatant disregard for the prejudice which he, of course, knew had risen for Gautier, and for which he cared as little as did the Frenchman. Wilde in speaking of *Dorian Gray* says: "I only hope some ghostly publisher is even now distributing shadowy copies in the Elysian fields, and that the cover of Gautier's copy is powdered with gilt asphodels." Of this book he writes again in the *Scots Observer*, July 7, 1890: "I write because it gives me the greatest possible pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few, I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist, it is far too easy."

This is closely connected with the attitude of the romanticists towards truth, with which, in art, is joined the false, both the true and the false being merely forms of intellectual existence. Just as Gautier had no interest in morals, religion, or politics, though he was not immoral, irreligious, or subservient to despotism, Wilde disdains morality, etc., as a function of artistic literature. Wilde says: "I am quite incapable of understanding how a work of art can be criticized from a moral standpoint. The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate." Again he says: "Romantic art deals with the exception and the individual. Good people, belonging to the normal, and so commonplace type, are artistically uninteresting. Bad people are, from the point of view of art, fascinating studies. They represent colour, variety, and

strangeness. Good people exasperate one's reason. Bad people stir one's imagination." Still again: "An artist has no ethical sympathies at all. Virtue and wickedness are to him simply what the colours on his palette are to the painter. They are no more and they are no less. . . . Shakespeare, as Keats said, had as much delight in creating the one (Iago) as he had in creating the other (Imogen)." In the *De Profundis* we find his attitude upon this subject expressed in full: "Neither religion, morality, nor reason can help me at all. I am a born antinomian. I am one of those made for exceptions, not for laws. . . . Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch and look at. . . . Reason does not help me," etc. In the *Decay of Lying*, the untruthful or false, absolutely divorced of course from the moral element, is made the basis of real literature and romantic art. This idea is prevalent in his works, and often insisted upon and is, in fact, strictly in conformity with the romantic school of which Wilde felt himself such an integral member and such a typical representative.

I have dwelt thus at great length on Wilde's close connection with the French romantic school, and Gautier in particular, in the desire that the more tangible criteria might suffice to show the unmistakable transference of a certain type of French artistic literature from its native home to England, a place where, under skilful and in fact still Celtic hands, it gained in force and brilliancy by a comparative contrast with the slowgoingness of the English public. That Wilde often exceeded Gautier or other Frenchmen in any of his characteristics is hardly maintainable, but the contrast which he endured in his own country heightened his work above theirs.

Again, in the field of literary criticism, the more or less intangible general characteristics are more striking because they suffice for the true or subjective interpretation. Gautier's whole philosophy is one of paradox, his ideal of life one of picturesque viciousness. His besetting sin was a desire to say something clever and wicked to shock the Philistines. This succinct but comprehensive criticism is word for word applicable to Wilde. It was his gospel, his life, his art. If he had a mission to preach of beauty and to educate what of the public as might understand, he preferred to do it in the most shocking way. With these he toyed and fondled, not strictly and entirely from the start, for

his steeping in classicism was too strong, as I have indicated above; but it grew upon him to a passion that obsessed him in art, in drama, in essay, in novel, in all that he subsequently touched after the publication of his poems, and it is possible to find even in them certain traces which can well foreshadow his later attitude.

This picturesque viciousness is probably best seen in *Dorian Gray*, a work which I have before compared with Gautier's *Mlle. de Maupin*. It is full of paradox, too full, as Wilde himself says, but it is not necessarily a paradox itself; in fact, its author states that a moral can be adduced from it and that this fact constitutes a blemish upon an otherwise perfect book. It is not difficult to see in his poem *Charmides* a touch of this same viciousness, despite its lovely idyllic and classic Greek colour, and its sweet and never failing theme of love passing beyond the gates of death. But *Charmides* must have served to shock British Philistinism a little, as *Dorian Gray* shocked them much. The characters of Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mrs. Chevely in *An Ideal Husband*, though the last is more commonplace, all, and Illingworth in particular, bring before us this clever picturesqueness with which Wilde loaded the stage as he had filled his novel of *Dorian Gray*.

The paradox, again, is to him his gospel and so he states in *De Profundis* with the correlated admission that it is responsible for his fall: "What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion." The greatest paradox is of course the clever, more than clever, essay on the *Decay of Lying*. Not only is it filled with paradox as are all Wilde's works in general, but the theme itself and the manner of treatment are paradoxical as well. Wilde undoubtedly felt that nothing but the sharp detonation and impact of the unexpected could excite from its habitual stolidity the British Philistinism with which he had to deal, and we can suspect the glee with which he startled the Puritans of his day.

A summary or characterization of Wilde's writings hardly falls within the province of my title. This naturally precludes an extensive discussion of many and perhaps the most interesting features of his work: his philosophy of life, of literature, art, morality, religion; all these suffice to make him a wonderfully fascinating and complex study. From the point of view of style

alone, his many achievements are worthy of special recognition; as poet, dramatist, essayist, critic, novelist, teller of tales, etc.—in all, he realizes his boast that he gives to each a new form of beauty. Wilde himself refused to recognize that he might surpass himself in one or another form. “The artist moves in cycles, not in progression or retrogression.” But in his work we may think to see some essential differences.

He is most sincere, with the exception of a single other form, in his poems, and yet we cannot rank these as his greatest work, paradoxical as it might seem. He is most insincere and most paradoxical in his stories, such as *The Canterville Ghost*, *Lord Arthur Saville's Crime*, etc., and in his dramas, and yet these touch a new and very high mark in artistic literature; and his dramatic ability deserves much greater recognition. He is not original, in many ways, in his tales; such as *The Happy Prince*, *The Devoted Friend*, *The Fisherman and his Soul*, and yet in these he strikes his frankest and most satisfying strain. As an essayist and critic, he is probably from many points of view at his best. The luminosity of his style tends to clear and enliven the subject, and his combination of scientific literary training and romantic inspiration gives him the clearest insight in all literary matters.

In essays such as *The Rise of Historical Criticism*, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, his insincerity vanishes, paradoxism disappears and we have the purely literary, intellectual mind. *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is his highest and best expression of individualism, and put in terms, besides, that we might not expect, neither overdrawn, nor fanciful, but the exposition of an ideal worthy of any time or place. To characterize his work to a greater degree would lead me far afield and overdraw my theme.

There is in part a revival of interest in Wilde at the present time. This is the customary procedure with the rejected work of any writer if it contains any enduring elements. The viewpoint of the present is always obscure and only the lapse of time can clarify a clouded life. But his work, despite its many and great excellences, seems still, perhaps, just as considered in his own time, to possess the latent power of harm. This power also recedes with time and with a clearer understanding of the conditions of its production. A comprehension of the man as a whole, as a poet, writer of prose, as a master of style and diction, of the influence he underwent from many men, of his Celtic temperament, his artistic imagination,—all these will increase the value of



his work and, in a way, remove from it much of the harm that we at present find contained therein. They serve to show as well that his faults, both of character and in his writings, were imitative, and that his prime excellences in both are found, to a large extent, where he is most original in life and work.

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