

OSCAR WILDE

The Critic as Humanist

Bruce Bashford

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For Joan

Classicist and Companion

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Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	11
<i>Part One: Oscar Wilde as Critical Theorist</i>	
1. Interpretation and the Self in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."	21
2. Creativity and the Self in the Critical Dialogues	28
3. Fathoming the Soul in De Profundis	45
4. Wilde as Rhetor and Rhetorician	54
<i>Part Two: Oscar Wilde as Humanist</i>	
5. Defining Humanism	79
6. "The Rise of Historical Criticism" and the Consequences of "Genuine Explanation"	87
7. The Critic as Humanist	104
Afterword	153
Notes	160
Bibliography	185
Index	191

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Introduction

My purpose in this study is to exhibit Wilde's capacity for thought. I discuss his works in two takes, as it were. The first half of my study treats the short story "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," the dialogues "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist," and the prison letter known as *De Profundis*, as texts that, whatever else they do, set forth theories. By this I mean that they present developed, coherent answers to important questions: in the case of the short story, for instance, to the question, what makes an interpretation convincing? In the second half, I examine Wilde's early essay "The Rise of Historical Criticism" and the two dialogues as what I believe they are: expressions of humanism. Since there is no useful definition of "humanism" ready to hand, this section begins with a proposal for defining the term. The application I then make to Wilde's works continues my effort to bring into view his agility as a thinker. It does so by showing how he reconciles the traditional tenets of humanism with intellectual commitments not obviously compatible with those tenets.

In this study I'm clearly taking a position in the long-standing controversy over whether Wilde is a consistent thinker. It may be helpful to describe that position before I try to support it through examining his works. In my view, though Wilde's critical writings do share common concerns and nearly all have a common starting point, they explore these concerns in ways that must finally be distinguished. The common starting point I have in mind is Wilde's subjectivism, and by this I mean his assumption that meanings are always someone's, are always attached to or embodied in a person. Subjectivism usually evokes suspicion, and I'll consider further on whether Wilde's subjectivism limits what he can achieve as a theorist. For now, let me just note that given this subjectivism, it's not really surprising that Wilde's works represent distinct forays into a common set of topics.

Within a single work, inconsistency is certainly a defect, since from a contradiction everything follows, but that a person changes his mind from one occasion to another is not necessarily a scandal; rather, it may be a sign of intellectual vitality, of trying to see how a problem looks when approached from a different angle.

I am claiming less, then, for Wilde than Philip Smith and Michael Helfand, who in their valuable edition of Wilde's Oxford notebooks find a theoretical "synthesis" underlying the corpus of his works.¹ But I'm claiming more than the long line of commentators who have denied that Wilde reasons consistently within individual works—or that he even tries to do so. In my view, the sign that Wilde does think consistently within single works is that one can reconstruct the theories implicit in these works. I don't mean that these theories aren't open to objections. That would be asking too much of Wilde, and in fact, I register misgivings about each theory. Rather, my position will be established if my effort to reconstruct these theories comes to seem appropriate to these works, to be an effort to which they genuinely respond. While I devote most of my time to explicating the texts I've selected, in my fourth chapter I speak directly to a doubt about my project already expressed in the secondary commentary, the doubt that in Wilde's two critical dialogues he is asserting anything at all.

Among the thematic concerns that run through Wilde's writings, none is more important than his interest in the nature of the self and the conditions that allow the self to develop. While Wilde avoided the terms "ethical" or "moral," it's apparent that one of the basic moral tenets in his works is that the goal of life for the individual is self-realization. I follow Wilde's lead in using this theme to connect my analyses of his works. This isn't a matter, however, of making these works parallel attempts to describe the self, since the theme appears in different ways. The nature of the self is the explicit subject of *De Profundis*; in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," it's a topic that turns up in a corollary to a theory of interpretation; and in "The Rise of Historical Criticism," it appears as a potential impediment to a scientific historical method.

While I'm concerned mainly to reconstruct Wilde's thought, I also judge him. Again I've tried to follow his lead in the sense

of judging him against the goals he implicitly sets himself and the values that he wants to preserve. Thus these judgments are of two kinds. Since in each of the works I discuss he is elaborating a theory, one kind concerns the clarity and the coherence of these theories. And since though Wilde raises the topic of the self differently in different works, he always wants the best for the self, always wants it to reach its potential, the other kind concerns his success in describing a mode of life congenial to self development.

II

When I began writing on Wilde nearly two decades ago, the prevailing opinion among scholars and critics was that not much good work had been done on him. This was not, I think, a fair appraisal; in any case, since then there certainly has been good work done, including that done from several critical perspectives which have emerged only recently. The latter include numerous pieces reflecting the interests of gay and gender studies, and to mention but two others, Regenia Gagnier's placing Wilde in the context of a consumer culture and Ian Small's placing him in a history of intellectual institutions.² I glance at some of this material in my text and notes, but let me also briefly consider a larger question it raises: what relation do these different approaches to Wilde have to each other, or better, what relation should they have? My answer is that students of Wilde's work stand in a cooperative relation to each other—and they do so, I'm tempted to say, whether they intend to or not.

Over twenty years ago, John Pappas made this insightful remark about the task facing students of Wilde:

One realizes that despite the valuable work done in recent years on Wilde's life and writings there remains to be solved by both literary critics and biographers the central problem posed by Wilde: to come to terms with an artist whose works are deeply pervaded by his kaleidoscopic sense of all the different selves he wishes and needs to be.³

Pappas's remark helps us see why the critical concepts we may reach for first are not entirely suited to the problem he describes.

These are the concepts of formalism, since Wilde was, by his own account, a formalist. The formalist conception of the relation between the author and her works has been nicely captured by Jessamyn West:

Writing is a way of playing parts, of trying on masks, of assuming roles, not for fun but out of desperate need, not for the self's sake but for the writing's sake. "To make any work of art," says Elizabeth Sewell, "is to make, or rather to unmake and remake one's self."⁴

As my second chapter will show, it is actually an important tenet of Wilde's critical theory that to create a work of art "is to make, or rather to unmake and remake one's self," and Wilde was plainly intrigued by the notion of writing as a way of "playing parts," of "trying on masks." So formalist concepts are not irrelevant to the study of Wilde. In our century, however, formalism has gradually moved in a direction that makes these concepts not completely satisfactory either. When one asks, "what parts is the self-in-the-work playing?" the answer for twentieth-century formalism is, "the parts the work requires": in West's words, parts assumed "for the writing's sake." According to this answer, the authorial self appears only under one aspect, that of the artist making choices, including the choice of a narrative persona, to meet the formal demands of the work as a whole. Thus we have the "intentional fallacy," which forbids interpretive or evaluative criticism to appeal to a real-life author since in a successful work the author has been absorbed into her choices.⁵

This formalist view isn't completely suited to Wilde because it presents too narrow a set of alternatives: either attend to the self as artistic maker or to a self standing wholly apart from the work. To approach Wilde, we need to consider another possibility: a self appearing in the work, but one exhibiting a variety of aspects and pursuing multiple purposes. It's appropriate that we meet this possibility in Wilde on two counts. First, as Pappas suggests, Wilde believed that the self is plural and that it develops through being the many disparate selves it contains. In West's terms but contrary to her view, he *did* think that an author tries on masks "for the self's sake," and so he did not restrict the identities that the self can assume in a work to that of artistic maker, though presumably that one will always be present.⁶ Sec-

ond, Wilde's subjectivism makes it appropriate that the self appearing in the work display a variety of aspects. Again, for Wilde the self that comes into being with the work has a concrete, embodied character resembling that of an actual person. It's our commonsense experience that a person can exhibit various qualities and pursue different purposes simultaneously—as when a politician, say, makes a proposal genuinely in the public interest while clearly consulting his own political fortunes as well.⁷ Thus, if we ask what Wilde's purpose is in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."—depicting a theory of interpretation? searching for a language appropriate to representing homosexual desire? expounding a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets?—the answer may well be that he's pursuing them all, and perhaps others too.⁸

When I said above that critics of Wilde stand in a cooperative relation to each other, I meant that they are part of a pluralistic enterprise whether or not they endorse pluralism on the usual grounds. Those grounds are metacritical: the beliefs that each method of literary study can produce significant results and that therefore our understanding is enriched as various methods are brought to bear on a work. My point has been that in reading Wilde at least, we encounter multiplicity prior to assuming a metacritical perspective. It's a variety of purposes and qualities already present in Wilde's works, appropriately so given Wilde's theoretical beliefs. This multiplicity makes pluralists of us insofar as we try to be adequate to it, to bring it fully into view. Unlike Wilde, however, most of us cannot do several things at once. We have to bring one aspect of his work into focus at a time, and that is what I've tried to do in this study by attending to his capacity for thought.⁹

OSCAR WILDE

Part One

Oscar Wilde as Critical Theorist

Interpretation and the Self in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."

In "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," Wilde presents a reading of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* by writing a short story in which three men elaborate that reading. My interest is not in the substantive reading that the *Sonnets* receive, but in the hermeneutic theory that the story illustrates, especially the implications of that theory for the nature of the self.¹

By using the term "hermeneutic," I intend to place Wilde in a tradition of interpretive theory represented by a thinker like Dilthey.² This tradition draws a distinction between how we understand our material environment, on the one hand, and human actions or artifacts on the other. We encounter our material environment as set over against us, and we study it with the objective methods best exemplified by the natural sciences. We understand the meaning of human actions or expressions, however, from the "inside" since we share a form of inner life with the persons who originated these meanings. This tradition has been deeply concerned with understanding our cultural past, and it accords the objective methods of scholarship a role in achieving that understanding. But it conceives of successful understanding less as a matter of drawing scholarly inference than of imaginatively reliving the experience of the persons whose expressions have survived them.

Wilde's version of this tradition is distinguished by his notion of *what* appears when we understand a human expression from the inside. For the tradition in general, this might be anything another mind could feel or think; for Wilde it is in the first place a sense of an actual person. According to the reading developed in the story, the *Sonnets* are addressed to a boy actor named

Willie Hughes. One feature of the story that surely reflects Wilde's view of interpretation is the puzzling way that Erskine and the narrator believe so strongly in the Willie Hughes reading at some times and not at all at others. For the moment, what interests me about this feature is how it reveals Wilde's notion of meaning. While the Willie Hughes reading asserts much more about the Sonnets than the mere fact that they are written to a boy actor, Erskine and the narrator affirm or deny their belief in the reading in terms of their sense of Hughes. Erskine reports that when Cyril Graham presented the theory to him, "I was converted at once, and Willie Hughes became to me as real a person as Shakespeare."³ After the narrator has developed the theory further, he says that "Willie Hughes became to me a kind of spiritual presence, an ever-dominant personality" (177). But when his faith in the theory later lapses, he reports that "Willie Hughes suddenly became to me a mere myth, an idle dream" (213).⁴

According to this notion of meaning, the reading given the Sonnets in the story makes the poems themselves interpretive. They record meanings that Shakespeare registered in the presence of Willie Hughes. In formulating the reading, Cyril Graham assumes from the outset that "the Sonnets are addressed to . . . a particular young man whose personality for some reason seems to have filled the soul of Shakespeare with terrible joy and no less terrible despair" (159). This is not to say that the Sonnets record personal impressions in an ordinary sense. Rather the poems become meditations on topics like the craft of acting and the nature of beauty. But these meditations originate in possibilities glimpsed in Willie Hughes. The narrator claims, for instance, that Shakespeare's reflections on an actor's ability to assume different identities derive from his meeting this ability in Hughes: "'How is it,' says Shakespeare to Willie Hughes, 'that you have so many personalities?' and then he goes on to point out that his beauty is such that it seems to realize every form and phase of fancy, to embody each dream of the creative imagination" (170). And more generally the Sonnets' Neoplatonic treatment of friendship as a means of attaining intellectual insight derives from Shakespeare's finding in Willie Hughes "the visible incarnation of his idea of beauty" (187). When the narrator discerns meanings like these in the Sonnets, he is not merely noting from

a third party's point of view what Shakespeare felt in Willie Hughes's presence. Instead, he too registers this presence and thus is aware of Hughes as "an ever-dominant personality".⁵

To put this last point in other terms, in the story Wilde depicts interpretation on the model of an inspiration theory. In constructing a reading of the Sonnets, the critic is drawing on the same source that enabled the poet to write them. The most famous precedent here would be Plato's *Ion*, where Ion's ability to speak well about Homer is attributed to his being inspired by the poet, who is in turn inspired by his Muse. What interests Plato is whether Ion's being inspired is a warrant for the truth of what he says about the subjects Homer treats. There are truths asserted in the reading given the Sonnets, truths about acting, for instance, but Wilde is not much interested in whether they are well-founded. He is concerned, however, in at least two respects with how the reading itself might be established. When the story begins, the narrator has been telling Erskine that he regards literary forgeries, such as Chatterton's, as legitimate means of artistic expression. Erskine then asks him what he would say "about a young man who had a strange theory about a certain work of art, believed in his theory, and committed a forgery in order to prove it" (152-53). The issue here is the role of external evidence in supporting an interpretation. The other issue is raised by the puzzling way in which one man and then another engages the theory, and it concerns how one person brings another to adopt an interpretation.

Wilde's position on the first issue is more orthodox than one might expect. When Cyril Graham presents the Willie Hughes reading to him, Erskine sees "that before the theory could be placed before the world in a really perfected form, it was necessary to get some independent evidence about the existence of this young actor, Willie Hughes" (162-63). Erskine is right, even if he is not on the whole Wilde's spokesman in the story. The interpreter registers the meaning of the Sonnets from the inside while maintaining a vivid sense of Willie Hughes. But one can go from the inside out: one can see that the meaning registered has an implication that can be tested against relevant facts. Cyril Graham will not make this move. He apparently regards the inner view as sufficient, seeing in Erskine's desire for external evidence a "philistine tone of mind," (163), and not scrupling to secure a

forged portrait to satisfy Erskine. But the main expositor of the theory, the narrator, never shows any sympathy with Cyril's forgery. Indeed, the narrator tries so hard in the third and fourth sections of the story to make the existence of Willie Hughes historically probable that it is difficult not to believe Wilde would have supplied him with conclusive evidence if any had been available. Such evidence would not necessarily alter the content of the reading as it appears from the inside (having the forged evidence be a representation of Hughes's person may be a parody of the idea that it would), but it would function to confirm and thus "perfect" the reading.⁶

The second issue, the matter of how a reading passes from one person to another, represents Wilde's treatment of critical persuasion or argument. Here his position is likely to strike us as curious because he holds so severely to his inspiration model. By this I mean that in his treatment of persuasion Wilde seems most concerned to separate out genuine contact with the source of inspiration from what may merely accompany that contact or be mistaken for it. This concern shows itself in several ways. In the *Ion*, the interpreter receives his inspiration from someone who is also inspired, the poet, and they form links in a chain descending from the Muse. In Wilde's story, persons are convinced of the reading by others who are under its sway, as when Erskine is reconverted to it by the narrator's passionate letter (214ff.). Yet receiving the reading this way is apparently not a condition of being persuaded. Early in the story, when Erskine has shown the narrator the ostensible portrait of Mr. W. H., but has not yet presented the reading of the *Sonnets*, the narrator says that the portrait "had already begun to have a strange fascination for me" (154). This suggests that the narrator is in the right frame of mind to register that sense of Willie Hughes intrinsic to the reading, and after Erskine has presented the reading, the narrator declares, "I believe in Willie Hughes" (166). But his belief in Hughes does not descend like a magnetic force through Erskine, since Erskine says that he has "converted you [the narrator] to a thing in which I don't believe" (167).

Each time someone is convinced of the theory, he believes that there is evidence that would support it. Thus while hearing the reading from an inspired advocate is not a condition of persuasion, judging the force of evidence is. But the story insists that

inspiration is fundamental to persuasion by implying that being in an inspired state is a prerequisite for recognizing the strength of evidence. This is most clearly shown when the reconverted Erskine tries to persuade the narrator by appealing to the evidence contained in the narrator's letter. No longer maintaining his vivid sense of Hughes, the narrator dismisses his own case in a wholesale manner: "[T]here is no evidence at all." "When I wrote to you I was under the influence of a perfectly silly enthusiasm" (214).

Finally, Wilde seems concerned that since inspiration creates conviction in the interpreter, conviction might be mistaken for inspiration. The story, by denying any persuasive force to deliberate displays of conviction, guards against this confusion, and so again insists that persuasion stems from inspiration. The story's final position is that such displays are expressions of doubt, the deliberate assertion of conviction being a sign that one is not in touch with a compelling ground of belief. Early in the story, the narrator does seem partially disposed to embrace Cyril Graham's reading because of the conviction displayed by Graham's taking his life for the theory. At the end of the story, however, when Erskine pretends to follow Graham's example, the narrator reflects that even genuine martyrdom is "merely a tragic form of scepticism, an attempt to realise by fire what one had failed to do by faith. No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true" (219).

I can well imagine someone wondering whether Wilde can really make persuasion depend on inspiration and still maintain a role for evidence in critical argument. This, however, is not what seems to trouble Wilde about the theory of interpretation contained in the story. Rather he is disturbed by what that theory implies about the integrity of the person.

A comparison of Wilde's theory with the standard hermeneutical position reveals how this disturbing implication arises. When Wilde's narrator has fully developed his reading of the *Sonnets*, his sense of what they record is so vivid that he says, "Yes, I had lived it all" (210). The narrator is expressing the hermeneutical doctrine that to interpret is to revive the experience implicit in the work. What is peculiar to Wilde's version of this idea is how literally the narrator intends his remark: he means that the

experience he revives seems to be his own. As he was reading the poems, he reports, "it seemed to me that I was deciphering the story of a life that had once been mine" (210). Wilde's special view of what interpretation recovers makes his explanation of how interpretation is possible depart from the standard hermeneutical form. In its usual form, the problem for hermeneutical theory is to indicate how an interpreter can recover in the present the experience recorded in a work from the past. While in the standard explanation interpreters need inspiration to do this, they are also aided by their present cultural context since that context preserves aspects of the past.⁷ For Wilde the problem is to explain how an interpreter can revive a personal experience that in an ordinary sense he or she never had. When the problem is defined this way, there is no obvious role for the interpreter's present cultural context to play in his or her activity. What Wilde needs is an explanation of how persons can already contain the past in the present, and he finds it in an aspect of the mind he calls the "soul." While interpreting the *Sonnets*, the narrator has tapped into his soul, which has a comprehensive perspective on existence and accumulates its own stock of experience: as the narrator concludes,

The soul had a life of its own, and the brain its own sphere of action. There was something within us that knew nothing of sequence or extension, and yet, like the philosopher of the Ideal City, was the spectator of all time and of all existence. It had senses that quickened, passions that came to birth, spiritual ecstasies of contemplation, ardours of fiery-coloured love. (211)

This soul is so well fitted to Wilde's problem as to be an inference from it: as if Wilde accepted his own narrator's experience and then asked, "if this is so, what follows?" Drawing this inference, he brings into full view a consequence of the way he defines his problem. This definition turns Wilde's attention away from the interpreter's contemporary cultural context and therefore away from the contribution that the interpreter's conscious mind, studying that context, could make to his or her activity. When Wilde explains that activity by appealing to the independent life of the soul, his explanation implies that our conscious lives are a kind of delusion: thus the narrator continues: "It was we who

were unreal, and our conscious life was the least important part of our development. The soul, the secret soul, was the only reality" (211).

This implication would be disturbing to Wilde because the concept of the person is so important to him. As noted in my introduction, he is a subjectivist in the sense that he insists a meaning is always *someone's*, that is, is always attached to a person. "The Portrait" reflects this view by reading the *Sonnets* as expressing meanings bodied forth by Willie Hughes. But to recover these meanings requires inspiration, and when Wilde explores the ground of this inspiration, he turns up the threat that a person may, as it were, disintegrate under meaning. The narrator's experience shows that we can occasionally live the subconscious life of our soul, but such periods are discontinuous with our conscious life and their duration is beyond our control. The result is that these interludes leave us uncertain about our identity and our command over our minds: musing over his sudden indifference to the Willie Hughes theory, the narrator asks, "was there no permanence in personality? Did things come and go through the brain, silently, swiftly, and without footprints? Were we at the mercy of such impressions as Art or Life chose to give us? It seemed to me to be so" (213).⁸

Since "Mr. W. H." is a piece of criticism in the form of a short story, it appears to illustrate Wilde's claim in his critical dialogues that criticism is not simply about creative works, but is itself creative. In my next chapter, however, I will show that the story and the dialogues are not as compatible as they may seem, that, in fact, in the latter Wilde treats certain critical concepts present in the story in a way that avoids the story's disturbing implication for the person.⁹

2

Creativity and the Self in the Critical Dialogues

I

Wilde's two critical dialogues, "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist," are the works in which his talent for critical thought is displayed most clearly. In them, Wilde succeeds in elaborating his subjectivism into a genuine theory of criticism. In what follows, I will define the basic components of this theory and then consider Wilde's implicit replies to several questions that readers may have about his theory. To close my discussion, I will return to the topic raised at the end of the previous chapter, the fate of the self or person in the realm of criticism and the arts.¹

I am using the term "subjectivist" to refer to Wilde's belief that the perspective of the individual is primary. This belief appears in Wilde's critical theory as the view that forms are determinate only in relation to a person who originates them or perceives them. Among the many signs of this belief in the dialogues is Vivian's prediction that "Most of our modern portrait painters are doomed to absolute oblivion. They never paint what they see. They paint what the public sees, and the public never sees anything."² Since forms are always someone's, for Wilde, the phrase "public vision" is an oxymoron.

I realize that defining Wilde's subjectivism through his view of form may seem odd. The formalism that dominated literary studies in the mid-twentieth century was strongly antisubjectivist. And if various strains of contemporary criticism are more sympathetic to subjectivism, for instance, Reader Response criticism, they are also often antiformalist.³ But Wilde is, in fact, both a subjectivist and a formalist. The "basis of life," Vivian claims,

"is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which the expression can be attained" (DL 232). It is important to fix the relation between expression and form, for it is the basic principle of Wilde's theory in the dialogues. Gilbert's rejection of the subjective/objective distinction is helpful on the point:

those great figures of Greek or English drama that seem to us to possess an actual existence of their own, apart from the poets who shaped and fashioned them, are, in their ultimate analysis, simply the poets themselves, not as they thought they were, but as they thought they were not, and by such thinking came in strange manner, though but for a moment, really so to be.

And in the same passage: "The objective form is the most subjective in matter. Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (CA 281-82). The distinction breaks down because the subjective and the objective are linked in a reciprocal, or better perhaps, reflexive relation. The artist's subjective desire for expression issues in an ostensibly objective form which, in effect, acts back on the desire itself by giving it a definite character. The relations that Gilbert claims exist between the dramatist and his characters and the man and the mask illustrate the process. Both examples sound paradoxical because Wilde seems to be asking us to compare his notion of the expressive process with a more familiar one in which the artist chooses or creates a form, perhaps guided by subjective factors, but remains unaffected by the act. A mask, by definition, is not the wearer's real face. But clearly Wilde's notion is different: in finding a form for his characters, the dramatist, though perhaps only for the moment of creation, fashions his own identity. And by adopting a mask, the man is able to tell you who he is because he then has an identity to reveal.

By calling this principle basic to Wilde's critical theory, I mean that it gives us his view of how all definite expression originates. The principle is important enough and subtle enough to merit further comment. In their remarks about expression, Wilde's speakers have in mind not only art that obviously expresses the personality of the artist, but even apparently descriptive or mimetic art; thus Vivian observes that Wordsworth "went to the

lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there" (DL 223). In fact, for the Wilde of the dialogues, discourse in any intellectual realm is at least partially a projection of its author on his subject matter. Gilbert quips that the "one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (CA 256) and regards the literary critic as a creator in her own right. This is not to say, however, that the artist, historian, and critic are completely inattentive to anything other than themselves. "It is in our brain," Vivian claims, "that Nature quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us" (DL 232-33). The arts can have this role in an otherwise subjective process because they are a source of forms, and forms are required by Wilde's principle for expression to realize itself. He makes a "beauty sense" (CA 286)—a sensitivity to beautiful forms, including those created by others—the basic prerequisite for both the artist and the critic, presumably because without it their expressive energies would remain inarticulate. I will examine later how a practical critic can both attend to the work of another and produce criticism reflecting her own personality. At this point, however, I am trying to do the prior task of identifying the general structure of Wilde's theory, and so let me simply reiterate that the principle he sees as governing perception and creation is the reflexive relation between energy and form. To talk about either element apart from their synthesis in this manner is to lose the principle. In this respect, Gilbert's remark about the dramatist and his characters is more accurate than that about the man with the mask, for the characters, unlike the mask, do not exist before the dramatist's expressive energies assume their shapes.

Another way of putting this caution about the proper view of Wilde's principle is to observe that Wilde actually doesn't believe, as subjectivists often do, that individuals are naturally unique. "It is a humiliating confession," Vivian says, "but we are all of us made out of the same stuff. . . . Where we differ from each other is purely in accidentals; in dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit, and the like" (DL 222). To assume we are inherently unique would be to distort his principle. Taken by itself, the individual's capacity for expression is characterless; therefore Vivian com-

plains that the "more [i.e., more deeply] one analyses people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear" (DL 220). It is only when this energy is coupled with forms—the "accidentals" above—that one distinguishes oneself as an individual. For Wilde, persons must earn or create their identities.⁴

A further component of Wilde's theory, his method, grows out of a tension between his principle and the value he puts on individuality. By "method," I mean Wilde's manner of elaborating the import of his principle, of bringing it to bear. His principle describes how particular expressive urges are realized, but it does not account for the general growth of the individual. It could not explain, for instance, why a person who believes that he has sufficiently realized his individuality through merely adopting a certain manner of dress has, as we say, sold himself short. But for Wilde this person has done so because by resting self-satisfied he has restrained his expressive energy, and as Gilbert says, to "have a capacity for passion and not to realize it, is to make oneself incomplete and limited" (CA 251). Wilde's method avoids this stagnation by continually applying the principle in fresh ways. Its practitioner stays in motion not by knowing in advance where she should go but by ceaselessly rejecting where she has been. In criticism, this means a continual search for the new: the critic

will seek for beauty in every age and in each school, and will never suffer himself to be limited in any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realize himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. (CA 284)

If Wilde's method prevents an arrested growth incompatible with the value he places on self-development, might this method not also overwhelm his principle? To put it differently, how can this constant turning to the new possibly lead the critic to his "true unity"? The explanation lies in the effect of the method on the critic's beauty sense, that sensitivity to form needed for expression. Beginning as a "cultivated instinct," after prolonged contact with forms, this sense becomes "critical and self-conscious" (CA 286).⁵ The fullest account of the process in the

dialogues comes in Gilbert's claim that the true critic and the true man of culture are one, a passage worth citing at length:

For who is the true critic but he who bears with himself the dreams, and ideas, and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure? And who the true man of culture, if not he who by fine scholarship and fastidious rejection has made instinct self-conscious and intelligent, and can separate the work that has distinction from the work that has it not, and so by contact and comparison makes himself master of the secrets of style and school, and understands their meanings, and listens to their voices, and develops that spirit of disinterested curiosity which is the real root, as it is the real flower, of the intellectual life, and thus attains to intellectual clarity, and, having learned "the best that is known and thought in the world," lives—it is not fanciful to say so—with those who are the immortals. (CA 277)

Since, again, Gilbert's claim is that one and the same person possesses culture and judgment, I shall treat the whole passage as a description of the ideal critic: ideal in that this is the state toward which the activity of all critics moves them, though presumably very few would fully attain it. As the critic extends her knowledge of art, her beauty sense becomes increasingly discriminating in its ability to choose and select among forms. If she acquires the encyclopedic acquaintance attributed to her above, the sense changes its character. Or rather, this sense fully realizes its character, for the process is again that defined by Wilde's basic principle, now in effect writ large by the action of his method. Just as a particular expressive urge finds its identity by taking on a form, so the beauty sense realizes itself by assuming all forms. In its initial state, this sense is a simple receptivity to beauty; its fruition is to know its own nature, that is, to become self-conscious about its own powers of discrimination. This self-awareness changes the sense from an instinct into an intellectual power.

Wilde, then, can state his view of the critic's growth paradoxically—"through constant change alone, he will find his true unity"—because he has in mind a faculty that can develop steadily while the critic apparently turns restlessly from one interest to another. The unity that the development of this faculty gives the critic is primarily attitudinal: she becomes disinterestedly

curious. Wilde continues the passage just cited to explain further how this happens:

the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not doing but being, and not being merely, but becoming—that is what the critical spirit can give us. The gods live thus; either brooding over their own perfection, as Aristotle tells us, or, as Epicurus fancied, watching with the calm eyes of the spectator the tragi-comedy of the world they made. We, too, might live like them, and set ourselves to witness with appropriate emotions the varied scenes that man and nature afford. (CA 277, Wilde's emphasis)

Wilde's references to these two conceptions of the gods are more careful than they might appear. Epicurus's gods see the world as though it were a drama. Since life and events never exhibit fully realized forms, the world appears this way only because of their ability to perceive forms it but partially suggests. This is the sense in which their mode of existence is a "becoming": they perpetually sustain the world. Aristotle's gods meditate on their own activity; in other words, they know that they have made the scenes they watch. The ideal critic, then, having mastered all forms, is able to "express" the whole world; that is, she can respond to the world with "appropriate emotions" because she organizes the changing spectacle of the world into definite forms. In addition, she realizes her own role in maintaining this spectacle; in my earlier terms, her beauty sense has come to know its own powers. This self-awareness distances her from the drama she witnesses: Epicurus's gods are attentive but "calm," and the critic is disinterested or "contemplative."

By saying at the outset that in the dialogues Wilde elaborates his subjectivism into a genuine theory, I mean that this theory meets Aristotle's criteria in the *Poetics* for a "whole"—something with enough internal development to exist as an independent entity. Wilde's theory has a beginning, a middle, and an end. His principle is a beginning in precisely Aristotle's sense of being that which does not follow from something else, but rather itself inaugurates something. The expressive process described by his principle combines energy and form to give the critic a definite identity. Wilde's method, the continual reapplication of the principle to new materials, elaborates this beginning into a middle: it allows the growth and development of the critic's