CHAPTER IV

OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde possessed a brilliant literary
talent and his opinions on art and literature compel
attention and are likely to find a place in the
history of 19th century criticism always. Whistler
was surely very unfair when he said that Oscar
Wilde had nothing in common with art "except that
he dines at our tables and picks from our platters
the plums from the pudding he peddles in the
provinces", and that he had the courage of the
opinions of others. 1 Of course it is evident that
most of Wilde's ideas were derived from others and
his writings indicate that he borrowed from
numerous and varied sources. Some of the plagiarisms
could well be deliberate and others just unconscious
influences. But the derivations, though recognisable
have something added to them which makes them

different from their originals and gives them the peculiar Wildean flavour. As Holbrook Jackson puts it: "He mixed pure wines, as it were, and created a new complex beverage, but a sort of liqueur, or, rather, a cocktail, with a piquant and original flavour not ashamed of acknowledging the flavours of its constituents."  

Since Walter Pater's influence from the 1870's to the end of the century was pervasive, it was but natural that Wilde should have looked up to Pater as a fountain of inspiration, more so when the doctrines propounded by him, particularly in the Conclusion to The Renaissance, were very much in keeping with his own instincts. "I remember", says Wilde, "during my first term at Oxford reading in Pater's Renaissance - that book which has had such a strange influence over my life."  

He speaks of Pater as "the most perfect master of English prose" and the only critic of the century whose opinion he set high, and considered The Renaissance "the golden book of sense and spirit, the holy writ of beauty."

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5. Reviews, p.539.
Thomas Wright in his life of Walter Pater quotes Wilde as proclaiming, "there is no Pater but Pater, and Oscar Wilde is his prophet." During the 80's and the 90's Wilde was the chief promulgator of Pater's ideals, notwithstanding the fact that he misapprehended quite a few of his ideas and gave a contorted interpretation to, or stretched the meanings of others to such ridiculous extremes as Pater never intended. This he did because it suited his personal whims and attitudes or because it went with the tendencies in Art and Literature of the times. The aesthetic excesses and extravagances of Wilde must obviously have embarrassed Pater, who in his review of *Dorian Gray* remarked: "A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense, therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness as Mr. Wilde's heroes are bent on doing as speedily, as completely as they can, is to lose, or lower organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development." This must have been meant as a chastening, though mild, rebuke to those who claimed that Wilde was only carrying out


to their logical end Pater's ideas which find expression in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*. What is noteworthy is that although Wilde derived his critical ideas from Pater, he deviated and departed from the actual position of Pater, and propounded a critical theory which is more representative of decadent aestheticism than Pater's ever was.

An examination of Wilde's prose writings clearly reveals the profound influence of Pater in the matter of style and phraseology in his formative as well as mature years. In his attitude towards life, art and letters too there is the impact of Pater. The American Lectures, particularly "the English Renaissance of Art", are "crammed with reminiscences and plagiarisms" of Pater's *Renaissance* essays. The views expressed therein are what might be expected of a young poseur and propagandist of a creed. Many of the articles and reviews written during 1883-1889 contain passages obviously inspired by Pater. In 1891 appeared *Intentions* which is his real achievement in aesthetic criticism, though full of literary reminiscences like his earlier work.

Wilde was not seduced by Pater's prose only, but was enamoured of his critical ideas too. In

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"Pen, Pencil and Poison", Wilde, writing about Wainewright states:

As an art critic he concerned himself primarily with the complex impressions produced by a work of art, and certainly the first step in aesthetic criticism is to realise one's own impressions. He cared nothing for abstract discussion on the nature of the Beautiful and the historical method, which has since yielded such rich fruit, did not belong to his day, but he never lost sight of the great truth that Art's first appeal is neither to the intellect nor to the emotions, but purely to the artistic temperament..."9

The passage evidently, both in phrasing and in argument, owes a good deal to the Preface to The Renaissance.

The basis of all Wilde's criticism is the critic's temperament as is clear from his statement in "The Critic as Artist": "Temperament is the primary requisite for the critic - a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty and the various impressions that beauty gives us."10 This only repeats what according to Pater is the characteristic of a critic, "a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects."11 The idea recurs in "Pen, Pencil and Poison" where Wilde notes that Wainewright dealt

10. Ibid, p.988.
11. The Renaissance, p.x.
with his impressions of the work as an artistic whole and tried to translate those impressions into words, to give, as it were, the literary equivalent for the imaginative and mental effect of a work of art on a fine temperament. Similarly in "The Soul of Man" he says, "the only temperament that can appreciate the work of art is one capable of receiving, through an imaginative medium and under imaginative conditions new and beautiful impressions." 12

The identity of views with those of Pater is limited, however, to the equipment of the critic only. For, when it comes to describing the ultimate objective of the critic, or the function of criticism, Wilde parts company with him. Whereas in Pater's view the critic aims at getting to the essence, the virtue of a work of art, to analyse it and interpret and communicate it to the reader, Wilde conceives of the critic as using the peculiar sensibility or susceptibility to gain impressions, which are valuable in themselves. The only aim of the critic is to cherish his own impressions. The kind of emphasis he lays on extreme subjectivity and impressionism is nowhere to be found in Pater. The statements he makes in his dialogue, "The Critic as Artist", regarding criticism and the critic sound almost fantastic and

are a complete departure from Pater's point of view. Wilde believes that "the highest criticism deals with art not as expressive, but as impressive purely." Criticism is in itself an Art, creative and independent. It cannot be judged by any standard of imitation or resemblance. "The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour or the unseen world of passion and thought." The highest criticism, being the purest form of personal impression and the record of one's soul, is in a way more creative than creation. The critic's sole aim is to record his own impressions. It is wrong to consider that the proper aim of criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is. Criticism in its essence is purely subjective and "seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another." Wilde, referring to the portrait of Mona Lisa, says he does not care that Pater has put into it something Leonardo never even contemplated. He admires the passage on Mona Lisa as the highest kind of criticism, for "it treats the work

13. [Works, p.967.]
14. [Ibid., p.966.]
15. [Ibid., p.967.]
of art simply as a starting point for a new creation. The critic's function, Wilde suggests, is not to discover the real intention of the artist and accept it as the last word, because the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it, Wilde anticipates T.S. Eliot and some other modern critics in remarking that "when the work is finished it has, as it were an independent life of its own and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say." He further states that the primary aim of the critic is "to see the object as in itself it really is not", thus reversing the position held by Pater and Matthew Arnold. Wilde's contention is that to the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises. He concludes that "the one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see; and the Beauty, that gives to creation its universal and aesthetic element makes the critic creator in his

16. Ibid., p.968.
17. Ibid., p.968.
The critic will then turn to such works as make him brood and dream and fancy, to works that possess the subtle quality of suggestion. Since it is not the critic's business to interpret or explain the work of art he may "seek rather to deepen its mystery." Says Wilde:

It is through its very incompleteness that art becomes complete in beauty, and so addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason but to the aesthetic sense alone, which while accepting both reason and recognition as stages of apprehension, subordinates them both to a pure synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole, and taking whatever alien emotional elements the work may possess, uses their complexity as a means by which a richer unity may be added to the ultimate impression itself. You see, then, how it is that the aesthetic critic rejects these obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile, and seek rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true, and no interpretation final.19

Such then is Wilde's theory which makes of criticism a creation and the critic an artist. The object criticised is lost to view and the adventure of the soul in the presence of the object replaces it. This is the extreme form of the impressionistic theory of criticism, where criticism is for the sake of criticism.

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18. Ibid., p.969.
19. Ibid., p.970.
only. The basis for such creative criticism may
well be traced back to Pater, and, in fact, Wilde
seizes upon its solitary example—the Mona Lisa
passage—to exemplify his conception of creative
criticism. But it has already been suggested that
the passage quoted does not illustrate the mature
criticism of Pater. Even in the Preface to The
Renaissance Pater emphasizes the need for an
objective analysis of the beauty of the work of art
while Wilde is interested in an effusion of the
impression. He reflects, like most of the disciples
of Pater, the opinions held by him almost twenty
years earlier.

Although it is difficult to give credence to
Wilde's ideas on criticism as creation, we find that
a little later in the same essay he makes some
profound statements. For instance, it is difficult
to disagree with him when he says: "It is only by
intensifying his personality that the critic can
interpret the personality and work of others." 20
For a cultivated and imaginative critic is not likely
to be capricious and whimsical. Wilde obviously
discards the extremely subjective attitude in
suggesting that the development of the critical spirit

will enable us to realise our own lives as well as the collective lives of the race. "To realise the 19th century one must realise every century that has preceded it and that has contributed to its making. To know everything about oneself one must know all about others." 21 And again, the true critic is one "who bears within himself the dreams and ideas and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure." 22 Criticism Wilde believes, can make us cosmopolitan, and annihilate race prejudices by insisting upon "the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms." 23 Such statements are not only reminiscent of Pater and Arnold but anticipate T.S. Eliot's ideas of tradition too.

Wilde's version of aestheticism turns it into a cult of artificiality. His views about art echo Pater to some extent but he pushes them to a point where we recognise very little of Pater. In "De Profundis" he describes himself as "a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of his age" and states further: "I treated Art as the supreme reality and life

22. Ibid., p.980.
as a mere mode of fiction." His observations on Art in Intentions, particularly in the essays the "Critic as Artist", and the "Decay of Lying", are interesting but cannot be regarded as, "the most imposing theoretical monuments" as William K. Wimsatt opines in his Short History of Criticism.

Wilde, like Pater, was dedicated to the principle of Beauty. He found life banal and stressed the idealizing role of art. In the "Decay of Lying" he advances the theory that life and nature imitate Art. He considers Realism the enemy of Art and as a method a complete failure. "If something cannot be done to check or at least to modify, our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile and beauty will pass away from the land." He does not set too high a value on modernity of form and subject matter, for it is always somewhat vulgarizing. "The only beautiful things are things that do not concern us." Wilde bewails the trend of realism in literature and says: "We have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture of the Muses, and spend our days in the sordid streets and hideous suburbs of our vile

26. Ibid., p.915.
cities when we should be out on the hill-side with Apollo.  

27 He would like art to be completely cut off from nature." One touch of nature will make the whole world kin, but two touches of nature will destroy any work of art."  

28 Nature has no suggestion of her own. In fact, people find in her what they bring to her. The artist creates nature. Even Wordsworth, Wilde suggests, produced his good work when he returned not to nature but to poetry. "Poetry gave him "Laodamia", and the fine sonnets and the great Ode such as it is. Nature gave him "Martha Ray" and "Peter Bell", "  

29 According to Wilde, "what Art really reveals to us is nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition ... Nature has good intentions. She cannot carry them out ... Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach nature her proper place."  

30 He ridicules those who believe in Shakespeare's dictum that Art holds the mirror up to nature, commanding that it was put into the mouth of Hamlet to convince everyone of his absolute insanity.

27. Ibid., p.916.  

28. Ibid., p.916.  

29. Ibid., p.917.  

30. Ibid., p.909.
and of his stupid views on the aim of art.

From such calculatedly outrageous remarks, Wilde proceeds further to record apparently the most ridiculous conclusions. "Life imitates art far more than art imitates life," says he and life either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor or realises in fact what has been dreamed in fiction." 31 Art is always presenting different forms and life seizes upon them. "Young men have committed suicide because Rolla did so, have died by their own hand because by his own hands Werther died." 32 "The world has become sad because Hamlet was once melancholy." 33 One sees "the long ivory throat, the strange square cut jaw, the loosened shadow hair," because Rossetti painted them. Wilde mentions how women in real life ape the lives of heroines in fictional stories in magazines. And nature is not far behind in imitating Art. "Where if not from the impressionists do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets blurring the gas lamps and changing

31. Ibid., p.924.
32. Ibid., p.924.
33. Ibid., p.922.
the houses into monstrous shadows?" he asks. Wilde believes that nature is the artist's creation and quickens to life in his brain. "Things are because we see them and what we see and how we see it depends upon the arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty." The upshot of Wilde's arguments is that Art and Literature influence life deeply and far from copying it, anticipate life. The lack of perfection in life is what Art seeks to correct.

Wilde's theory that Art finds her own perfection within and never expresses anything but itself, and is not to be judged by any external standard leads on to the next step, its complete severance from morals. His view is that all art is immoral and useless, and the aim of art is "emotion for the sake of emotion." The idea obviously derives from Pater's Conclusion to The Renaissance where he says that "great passions may give us the quickened sense of life ... of such wisdom the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake has most." The Conclusion was

34. Ibid., p.925.
35. Ibid., p.925.
36. Ibid., p.978.
withdrawn because Pater felt that it was liable to misconstruction and people would find meanings in it that he never intended to put into it. Pater was a stickler so far as the use of language was concerned and he wished to be fully satisfied that he had used the precise words for his ideas. And he was right. Wilde obviously was one of those who deliberately misconstrued the doctrine contained in the conclusion, took it as a gospel to be practised, in life as well as in letters, despite the fact that Pater had in Marius clearly established that he was no votary of the hedonistic aestheticism, the philosophy of the fleeting moment, and the sensationalism attached to it. Wilde was drawn to it, for it suited his temperament and also because his discipleship of Pater had not gone beyond the year 1873 when *The Renaissance* was published, and he had not cared to reflect on the later works of his master.

The first condition of criticism, Wilde says, is that, "the critic should be able to recognise that the sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate." Art is beyond the reach of morals because it fixes its gaze on things beautiful. It is quite easy, he thinks, to be good according to the vulgar standard of goodness, which is akin to a low

passion for middle class respectability. Wilde argues that "Aesthetics are higher than Ethics and to discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive." Earlier in the Preface to his Dorian Gray he had said: "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written." In "Pen, Pencil and Poison", he writes about one Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, friend of Charles Lamb, Artist, Writer, and Poisoner. It would perhaps not be unreasonable to assume that Wilde wrote about him only because he was a poisoner, and because the aesthete of his day felt thrilled at such things as a bad man who was also a good writer. Wilde says that the fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his art and that "there is no essential incongruity between crime and culture." His view that Wainewright's crimes gave a strong personality to his style and that "one can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin" sound interesting when considered in the light of Wilde's own later plight. One wonders whether he was trying to justify his own conduct.

39. Ibid., p.997.
40. Ibid., p.947.
41. Ibid., p.946.
However, it is opinions such as these which set in motion a wave of resentment against the fin-de-siècle aesthetes, and brought aestheticism to disrepute. By such extreme postures the liberation of art and the artist from the trammels of the Philistine society, the real object of the aesthetic revolt, was hindered rather than helped.

Wilde stressed the primacy of form and developed an aesthetic based upon the criterion of form as opposed to matter, to which he said the artist should be more or less indifferent. Pater in his theory of criticism laid emphasis on style, on finding the unique word for the idea, on clearness of expression in short. The requirement of calculated and conscious artistry on the part of the artist resulting from such an emphasis did not, however, preclude Pater from cautioning against "the stupidity which is dead to the substance." He in fact argued in favour of the fusion of form and matter. Wilde obviously misconstrued the whole idea and believed that the delight of a work of art was to be found in the beauty of design and never in the subject. "The sense of form is the basis of creative no less than critical achievement," he maintained. He pursues the

42. *Appreciations*, p.261.
point to a position which is very different from Pater's and links him up with the twentieth century formalist criticism. Wilde says, "the real artist is he who proceeds not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion. He does not first conceive an idea and then say to himself "I will put my idea into a complex metre of fourteen lines," but realizing the beauty of the sonnet scheme, he conceives certain modes of music and methods of rhyme and the more form suggests what is to fill and make it intellectually and emotionally complete." The artist is not inspired by something to say, a new message to the world but by form purely. It is not just in art that the body is the soul. Wilde asserts that "form is everything. It is the secret of life ... Start with the worship of form, and there is no secret in art that will not be revealed to you," Just because the term form is linked with the idea of technique and craftsmanship Wilde exalts the power of rhyme. "Rhyme that exquisite echo which in the Muse's hollow hill creates and answers its own voice ... Rhyme which can turn man's utterance to the speech of gods." It is this enthusiasm for craftsmanship that he expresses when he says that the inventive and creative handling of

44. Ibid., p.991.
45. Ibid., p.991.
46. Ibid., p.951.
line and colour, the form and choice of beautiful workmanship rejecting all metaphysical ideas, give distinction and quality to a work of art and are sufficient in themselves to satisfy the aesthetic sense.

One more reason why Wilde insisted on deliberate artistry in a work of art, and in this he was one with Pater, was his reaction against inspiration or force of feeling. The upholding of craftsmanship is in a way a measure against the faith in spontaneous expression, for Wilde believed that the job of the artist was to create something beautiful and not to unburden his soul. There is, thus, no ambiguity in the more extreme standpoint that Wilde takes up as compared to Pater.

In "De Profundis", it is true, Wilde makes such remarks as indicate that he has a different conception of the perfection of art. For example he says, "truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself, the outward rendered expressive of the inward, the soul made incarnate, the body instinct with the spirit." 47 He even speaks of "music in which all subject is absorbed in expression and cannot be separated from it." 48 And again in the "Soul of Man", "of course, form and substance

cannot be separated in a work of art, they are always one. But for the purposes of analysis and setting the wholeness of aesthetic impression aside for a moment, we can intellectually so separate them." 49 But these statements though clear echoes of Pater, are more in the nature of exceptions than the rule. For Wilde, who was inclined to exploit artistic interests for public effect and who considered it his first duty to be as artificial as possible, it was the purely extraneous that mattered. His dominant attitude towards this question is best summed up in his own words, "Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style." 50 And style, we can be sure, for Wilde did not include the soul as it did for Pater.

We find, then, that the impact of Pater's critical opinions on Wilde is more than apparent. But it is evident too, that the interpretation he gave to these opinions is partly or totally distorted by his own peculiar temperament. There is a definite disparity with and a deliberate departure from the position of Pater. And the reason is not exactly the superior intellect or genius of Wilde as is commonly believed. His theory of criticism, for instance, is neither coherent nor consistent and is at times ridiculous as

49. Works, p.1032.
50. Ibid., p.920.
compared to the chaste and ordered work of Pater. His deviant temperament, his search for stimulus and kicks beyond the bounds of conventional feeling made Wilde the first generation vulgariser of Pater.