



Decorative Art in America, A Lecture: Together With Letters, Reviews, and Interview

Oscar Wilde

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An excerpt from the beginning of the Introduction:

If we are content to accept Oscar Wilde at his own final valuation and to judge him by the confession which he has left the world in *De Profundis*, we can apply to him no better epithet than *The Epicurean*. But confessions are at best misleading. They are tinged by the exaggerations of humility. They are laden with self-abasement proportionate to the penitent's desire for absolution, rather than to the culpability of the malefactor. They confuse things material with things spiritual and the sins of the body with those of the intellect. Fearful of half-truths, they disclose monstrous untruths, until the spirit of self-immolation is glutted and the tortured soul satisfied that repentance has no further penance within reach. So, with Wilde, it is difficult to believe the whole of the "pitiless indictment which he brings against himself." *Flâneur* and dandy he accuses himself of being. *Flâneur* and dandy he may have been. But, however profitless his *life*, must his word be wholly without purpose? Surely there was something more than mere dilettantism in talents so diverse, so brilliantly manifested, so exquisitely elusive. For elusive, perplexing, defiant of definition was he in all that he did—this man of genius, Oscar Wilde *par excellence* The Protean. The Protean—for we embrace the singer of songs to find that we have seized upon the cynic; we seek to learn the secret of worldly disdain and discover that we are communing with the prose poet; we are roused from the lulling charm of fable and delicate imagery by the mordant wit of the dramatist; with the smile still on our lips we are confronted by a soul in torment. Oscar Wilde, The Protean, the weaver of paradoxes— himself the great paradox! Try as we may, shall we ever understand him?" Be warned in time, James; and remain, as I do, incomprehensible. To be great is to be misunderstood." At all events he remains unexplained and unexplainable, nor one, whom his most pitiless critics have been able to explain away.

Yet, if we are to approach him, as we must, with a small measure of understanding, let us begin where he ends in *The Truth of Masks*: "Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true."³ Using this dogma as a basis for argument, Arthur Symons evolves the theory that Wilde was "an artist in attitudes."⁴ "And it was precisely in his attitudes," he says, "that he was most sincere. They represented his intentions; they stood for the better, unrealized part of himself. Thus his attitude, towards life and towards art, was untouched by his conduct." There is a kernel of truth in the theory so long as emphasis be laid upon this sincerity; for with Wilde the attitude was not so much a pose assumed as a point of view accidentally encountered. Given the new point of view, with the change of perspective, new theories became not only admissible, but imperative. Nor was inconsistency or insincerity possible to him, whose one fixed star was that "art never expresses anything but itself." * But not only was he sincere in his attitudes; he was sincere concerning his attitudes. "What people call insincerity," he says in *The Critic as Artist*, "is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities." Were this example a random citation, it might carry little weight....

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