

Melissa Marie Bruno

February 11 2008

“It goes without saying that nothing in art goes without saying” - Theodor W. Adorno
 Art as a Useless End: an Analysis of Aesthetic Autonomy in Oscar Wilde’s “Preface to
The Picture of Dorian Gray”

In the “Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*”, Oscar Wilde delineates a genre of aesthetic autonomy whereby art is useless¹, suggesting that art, being the creation/perfection of Beauty, is an end arrived at through the championing of imperfect means: Wilde’s concept of the morality of art². Paradoxically, due to the vague nature of Wilde’s fragmented prose, in order to ‘render into rational terms’ his ‘paradoxical theorems’, one must venture beneath the surface of his diction to clarify his ambiguity, [al]locating potential embedded meanings ensconced within his aesthetic theory. In this respect, one must superimpose one’s own interpretation, stringing together the fragmented/displaced kernels of aesthetic thought in order to make his arguments intelligible. In this vein, the reader/audience is forced to engage in an analytical dialogue with the text itself, invariably suggesting the dilemma of interpreting self-professed autonomous art: the paradox of attempting to render meaning out of that which escapes meaning³. As such, the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ leaves the reader/audience skimming along the surface of ‘meaninglessness’, left with nothing to do aside from mindlessly observing the ‘spectacle’ of Beauty.

¹ I have understood Wilde’s usage of “useless” in relation to art to mean that art is an end in and of itself. It does not have a function, a use, aside from being beautiful.

² Specifically, Wilde states that the “morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium” (899).

³ Outside the maxim of beauty--- beauty being the ultimate end of art.

According to Wilde, if art is an end, and Beauty is the ideal end of art, art is useless because it is neither didactic nor useful outside of being aesthetically pleasing. Furthermore, if Beauty is the objective Truth of art, this allows for nothing more than a superficial appreciation of art itself. However, Wilde's argument is easily complicated by his lacking a definition of the beautiful. Wilde claims that the "artist is the creator of beautiful things" (899); therefore, the assertion that "[d]iversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital" (899) suggests that Beauty is not concrete, fixed, or stable considering that it is not easily identifiable. The "diverse opinions" in response to art, trying to determine whether it is or is not objectively beautiful, suggests that Beauty is subjective and therefore not an ultimate end. Having triggered an individually motivated debate about clashing understandings of Beauty, and seeing as though "[t]he critic is he who can translate into another manner or new material his impression of beautiful things" (899), 'beautiful things', what is beautiful, is in the eye of the beholder. Beauty is a desired end, but the realization of the end is disputed; therefore, art does provoke debate and is not as transparent as Wilde would suggest: "[t]hose who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. [...] They are the elect to whom the *beautiful things mean only beauty*" [my italics] (899). This brings into question the true authenticity of artistic autonomy.

Wilde purports "[t]o reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" (899); however, this premise is complicated by the implication that "[t]hought and language are to the artist instruments for an art" (899), alongside the suggestion that "[v]ice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art" (899). Considering that 'thought' is the vehicle of individual self-awareness/comprehension/exploration, if the artist's thought, as being

employed through language is the instruments for art, the product of that creation is a product of the artist's mind, 'revealing' it to everyone who perceives it. Furthermore, the notion of the artist's 'vices and virtues'---as informed by his/her own versions of what he/she values --- as being the 'materials' for art blatantly taints the artist's art with individual morality because "the moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist" (899). Inasmuch as it is a modern idea to remove the artist from his/her artwork, it is a futile endeavour, for the art itself is a consummated vision of the artist's perception. The artist's conception of Beauty is the product of his/her own individuation; therefore, how can the two, artist and art, really be authentically divided? Similar to how the artist cannot entirely detach himself from his art, the audience/viewer cannot perceive art outside the shackles of their own gaze.

Wilde concludes that "[i]t is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (899) insinuating that art is another form of observation, imitating the silent 'spectator' aside from visually gazing upon that which is observed. However, drawing upon the theories of Lacan, a 'gaze' is a "way of regarding people or things which is considered to embody certain aspects of the relationship between the observer and the observed" (OED); in this regard, a gaze is accompanied by one's own values, which [sub]consciously [a/e]ffect one's perception of art, surroundings, and life at large. Wilde asserts that "[a]ll art is at once surface and symbol" (Wilde 899) and cautions that "[t]hose who go beneath the surface do so at their peril" (899) in addition to "[t]hose who read the symbol do so at their peril" (899). However, the sheer act of perception itself entails perceiving something through a lens of individual interpretation; as such, vision is inherently interpretative and whether or not one actively 'read[s] the symbols' or 'go[es]

beneath the surface', both symbol and surface are already tainted. Therefore, it is impossible to truly look at something objectively: all art is created and perceived through the lens of bias.

Perhaps, in this respect, Wilde's assertion that "all art is quite useless"(899) is not far from the truth insofar as it serves as the vehicle for self-reflection in a hedonistic fashion. The emphasis on Beauty as being the end of art is not too farfetched insofar as one sees what one looks for in art and it is prejudged through the sheer act of perception itself. One cannot divorce one's own individual impulse to focus one's gaze selectively upon something. Therefore, outside from being pleasing, art is useless.

Works Cited

“Gaze.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. 8 February 2008.
<<http://dictionary.oed.com> >

Wilde, Oscar. “The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent Leitch. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2001. 899.