

Oscar Wilde About Criticism

Abstracts: Oscar Wilde is less known as a critic of an art and literature. His critical theory in general is shown in his well-known essay *The Critic as Artist*. Here Oscar Wilde presents the analyses of the criticism from the ancient era till modern epoch. Most important is that we find here paradigms and patterns of XX century literary theories and trends. For example, in Wilde's concept we find some kind of pattern of structuralism and psychoanalytic trend of literary theory.

The Critic as Artist is an essay written in the form of a dialogue between Ernest, who believes that criticism is easy, worthless and art-killing, and Gilbert, who is certain that criticism is a separate form of art. *The Critic as Artist* is more than one of Wilde's aesthetic statements. It is an unprecedented attempt at defending, not art or literature as has been the tradition, but criticism! The critic is hailed as being someone greater than the artist.

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Oscar Wilde holds the critic in high regards as an artist in his own right, who uses the works of artists as they in turn have used the material world: as a point from which to jump in the creation of something wholly new. He seems to anticipate reader response criticism when he states that the artwork is not „expressive”, but „impressive”, and that criticism is „in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal it's own secret and not the secret of another” (Wilde 1999 : 54). Criticism, for Wilde, has no interest in discovering the true intentions of the artist; that is a shallow endeavor. Rather, Criticism must use the artwork as a pallet upon which to read “the record of one's own soul” (Wilde 1999 : 55). Wilde suggests, “There have been critical ages that have not been creative, in the ordinary sense of the world, ages in which the spirit of man has sought to set in order the treasures of his treasure-house” (Wilde 1999 : 54). Wilde sees no such distinction. Indeed, the very title of his work suggests as much: the critic does not stand in relation to the artist, but rather becomes an artist himself as he experiences and interprets the art of others. For Wilde, Criticism in its highest form is “more creative than [artistic] creation” because it relates not to the world, but to one's soul; in this sense, Criticism becomes a more pure realization of Hegel's self-consciousness, which Wilde holds to be essential to the creation of true art” (Wilde 1999 : 55). Wilde even goes so far, at times, as to (somewhat humorously) denigrate the artistic function. About authors, for example, he says, “Anybody can write a three-volumed novel. It merely requires a complete ignorance of both life and literature” (Wilde 1999 : 55).

Wilde's concept of Beauty echoes and revises that Kant asserts that the beauty is a symbol of the morally good. Wilde parallels Kant's sentence when he claims that "Beauty is the symbol of symbols"(Wilde 1999 : 79). For Kant, establishing the subjective universality of Beauty was essential, and he went to great lengths to eliminate all interest from the aesthetic judgment of an artwork. In Kant's aesthetic, beauty must have no *purpose*, and all judgment of beauty lies within the person who is judging. Wilde takes in these concepts and states that "because it expresses nothing," Beauty offers the opportunity to the Critic to "put into it whatever one wishes" (Wilde 1999 : 79). There it seems that Wilde considers the text as an independent ontological category. That is why we see the real patterns of structuralism (Lomidze 2008 : 146-159) in Wilde's concept. Wilde also excludes objective perception of artwork and text because he accents that it not possible to evade subjective perception of artwork as a reader as well as a critic. This phenomenon is called *projection* in Psychoanalysis. The best representative of this is Wilde's words: "When Rubinstein plays to us the Sonata Appassionata of Beethoven, he gives us not merely Beethoven, but also himself, and so gives us Beethoven absolutely Beethoven re-interpreted through a rich artistic nature" (Wilde 1999 : 25). All abovementioned affirms that Oscar Wilde perceived in advance the main categories of structuralism as well as psychoanalytic trend of literary theory. That's why together with structuralism we see the patterns of psychoanalytic trend of literary theory (Bregadze 2008 : 71-80) in Wilde's concept. The great example of this is Wilde's following words about Hamlet: " People sometimes say that actors give us their own hamlets, and not Shakespeare's and this is fallacy... In point of fact, there is no such thing as Shakespeare's Hamlet... There are as many Hamlets as there are melancholies" (Wilde 1999 : 25).

Beauty, according to Wilde, "has as many meanings as man has moods," and Criticism of artwork offers the opportunity to bring to fuller light "a form which the artist may have left void, or not understood, or understood incompletely" (Wilde 1999 : 79). That the artwork is somehow incomplete for the artist is an idea first raised by Shelley, who saw in the works of Dante and Milton the possibility of interpretations that the artists themselves could not have anticipated. Wilde echoes this concept when assigns to his Critic the role of "always showing us the work of art in some new relation to our age" (Wilde 1999 : 83).

Wilde's concept also is the improvisation of literature, because mainly he is a poet and a writer. One of the best example of this improvisation is his words about Shakespeare: "Shakespeare might have met Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the white streets of London, or seen the serving-men of rival houses bite their thumbs at each other in the open square; but Hamlet came out of his soul, and Romeo out of his passion. They were elements of his nature to which he gave visible form, impulses that stirred so strongly within him that he has, as it were perforce, so suffer them or realize their energy" (Wilde 1999 : 25).

Wilde's theory is based on different aesthetic concepts: "Plato had, of course, dealt with many definitely artistic subjects, such as the importance of unity in a work of art, the necessity for tone and harmony the aesthetic value of appearances, the relation of the visible arts to the external world, and the relation of fiction to fact. He first perhaps stirred in the soul of man that we have not yet satisfied, the desire to know the connection between Beauty and Truth, and the place of Beauty in the moral and intellectual order of the Cosmos. The problems of idealism and realism, as he sets them forth, may seem to many to be

somewhat barren of result in the metaphysical sphere of abstract being in which he places them, but transfer them to the sphere of art, and you will find that they are still vital and full of meaning. It may be that it is as a critic of Beauty that Plato is destined to live, and that by altering the name of sphere of his speculation we shall find a new philosophy” (Wilde 1999 : 9).

After Plato Wilde analyses Aristotle’s and Goethe’s aesthetic concepts: “But Aristotle, like Goethe, deals with art primarily in it’s concrete manifestations, taking Tragedy, for instance, and investigating the material it uses, which is language, it’s subject-matter, which is life, the method by which it works, which is action, the conditions under which it reveals itself, which are those of theatric presentation, it’s logical structure, which is plot, and it’s final aesthetic appeal, which is to the sense of beauty realized through the passions of pity and awe. That purification and spiritualizing of the nature which he calls is, as Goethe saw, essentially aesthetic, and is not moral, as Lessing fancied. Concerning himself primarily with the impression, that the work of art produces, Aristotle sets himself to analyze that impression to investigate it’s source, to see how it is engendered. As a physiologist and psychologist, he knows that the health of function resides in energy” (Wilde 1999 : 10).

There are aspects of Wilde’s work which call to mind Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lying” as well; foremost perhaps is Wilde’s insistence that it is the primary aim of the writer to lie willfully. What Nietzsche asserts gravely, however—that we are blind to our reality because of our immersion in a lie—Wilde approaches playfully; he seems to register Nietzsche’s concerns even as he acknowledges them as the components of the great play-thing that is human existence. In his exploration of the critic, in fact, Wilde builds an argument that echoes Nietzsche’s at each step, while at each turn reversing the “tone of grim intensity” that pervades Nietzsche in favor of a certain frivolity. Wilde first acknowledges indirectly Nietzsche’s skepticism of language when he asserts that language “is the parent, and not the child, of thought” (Wilde 1999 : 47). Wilde maintains a certain level of pride in the human animal, who through language can “rise above” “lower” life-forms (Wilde 1999 : 49). Where Nietzsche criticizes language for its roll in constructing a false sense of reality, Wilde praises this linguistic function in human existence: „...it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon, and through which common natures seek to realize their perfection (Wilde 2010).

One can see that Wilde uses the word true just as Nietzsche would, to describe the constructed reality revealed through the employment of language. Language divides us from the crude rule of mere action, which Wilde points out any animal may achieve, calling action “a blind thing, dependent on external influences, and moved by an impulse of whose nature it is unconscious” (Wilde 1999 : 48). Wilde’s man of action here begins to sound a bit like Nietzsche’s intuitive man.

As Wilde describes the way in which the critic interacts with the artist, he does so in a way that hearkens the role that Nietzsche assigns to Science. For Nietzsche, science “works unceasingly” to fit the world of primary concepts, concepts more or less created as metaphors for reality, into a “*columbarium*,” a great framework which imposes metaphors upon metaphors and thus removes humanity ever farther from the

primary experience of reality (Wilde 1999 : 41). Similarly, Wilde's critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought.

As Nietzsche's Science piles metaphor upon metaphor, so Wilde's criticism is "a creation within a creation," and just as Nietzsche condemns Science for this tendency, Wilde praises criticism as "the purest form of personal impression" because "it has least reference to any standard external to itself" (Wilde 1999 : 48).

Reading Wilde, we are struck by the way in which he constructs his arguments. As is evident in the above analysis, he is interesting not so much for the originality of his ideas, but for the wild spin he puts on the ideas of others. He uses the dialogue format to highlight the ostensible absurdity of his theses, and then shows them to arise out of a certain point of view taken on past theoretical work. It is, of course, the subjective point of view which arrives as the champion of Wilde's Criticism, and employing just such a point of view serves to demonstrate the very theory he is positing.

References:

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