Wilde Lectures

No.3 - Art and Morality

"A nation prospers and profits by precisely those national qualities which these innovators deride and abjure. It goes swiftly to wreck and decay by precisely that brilliant corruption of which we have just had the exposure and demonstration. All the good literature and the noble art in our own and other countries has been sane, moral, and serious in its object; nor can life be wholesomely lived under guidance of brilliant paradoxes and corrosive epigrams. To those who know how to observe, this man WILDE in the act of his defence condemned himself and his system by his vanity, egotism, artificiality, and distorted perceptions, before the Judge and jury had pronounced upon him the indirect sentence which eliminates him from the society he has disgraced. We shall have purchased the pain and shame of such an exhibition at a price, perhaps not too high if it lead the youth of our generation, on the one hand, to graver thoughts of duty and propriety, and the public, on the other, to a sterner impatience with those who, under the name of Art, or some other pretence, insidiously poison our stage, our literature, our drama, and the outskirts of our press."
(*Daily Telegraph,* April 1895, quoted in Michael S. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: deviance, morality, and late-Victorian Society* (Yale University Press, 1997)

"Dulness and dirt are the chief features of *Lippincott's* this month. The element in it that is unclean, though undeniably amusing, is furnished by Mr Oscar Wilde's story of "The Picture of Dorian Gray". It is a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents* – a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction – a gloating study of the mental and physical corruption of a fresh, fair and golden youth, which might be horrible and fascinating but for its effeminate frivolity, its studied insincerity, its theatrical cynicism, its tawdry mysticism, its flippant philosophisings, and the contaminating trail of garish vulgarity which is over all Mr Wilde's elaborate Wardour Street aestheticism and obtrusively cheap scholarship."
(*Daily Chronicle*, 1890, quoted in Stuart Mason, *Art and Morality: a record of the discussion which followed the publication of "Dorian Gray"* (London: Frank Palmer, 1912), pp.65-66)

WILDE: I do my own work in writing a plot, a book, anything. I am concerned entirely with literature, that is with Art. The aim is not to do good or to do evil, but to try and make a thing that will have some quality of beauty that is to be attained or in the form of beauty and of wit of and of emotion.
CARSON: Listen, sir. Here is one of your 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young': 'Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.' (*Laughter*.)

WILDE: Yes.
CARSON: Do you think that is true?
WILDE: I rarely think that anything I write is true. (*Laughter*.)

CARSON: Nothing you write is ever true?
WILDE: Not true in the sense of correspondence to fact; to represent wilful moods of paradox, of fun, nonsense, of anything at all – but not true in the actual sense of correspondence to actual facts of life, certainly not; I should be very sorry to think it.
CARSON: 'Religions die when they prove to be true'?
WILDE: Yes, I hold to that.
CARSON: Is that true?
WILDE: Yes – well, it is a suggestion towards the philosophy of the absorption of religion into science. It is too big a question to go into now.
CARSON: I should just like to take your opinion upon this point – do you think that that was a safe axiom to put forward as a 'Phrase and Philosophy for the Use of the Young'?
WILDE: Most stimulating of thought I should say. (*Laughter*.)
CARSON: 'If one tells the truth one is sure sooner or later to be found out'?
WILDE: Yes, I think that is a very pleasing paradox, but I don't set any store by it as an axiom. (*Laughter*.)
CARSON: Do think it was a good educational axiom for youth?
WILDE: Anything that stimulates thought in people of any age is good for them.
CARSON: Anything that stimulates thought?
WILDE: Yes, anything.
CARSON: Whether moral or immoral?
WILDE: Thought is never either one or the other.
('Regina (on the Prosecution of Oscar Wilde) v. John Douglas (Marquess of Queensberry), 3 April 1895, in Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (Fourth Estate: London, 2004), 74-5)

CARSON: A well written book putting forth sodomitical views might be a good book?
WILDE: No work of art ever puts forward views. Views belong to people who are not artists. There are no views in a work of art.

CARSON: An illiterate person reading *Dorian Gray* might consider it a sodomitical book?
WILDE: The views of the Philistine on art could not be counted: they are incalculably stupid. You cannot ask me what misinterpretation of my work the ignorant, the illiterate, the foolish may put on it. It doesn't concern me. What concerns me in my art is my view and my feeling and why I made it; I don't care twopence what other people think about it.

CARSON: The affection and love that is pictured of the artist towards Dorian Gray in this book of yours might lead an ordinary individual to believe it had a sodomitical tendency, might it not

WILDE: I have no knowledge of the ordinary individual.
CARSON: Oh, I see. But you do not prevent the ordinary individual from buying your book.
WILDE: I have never discouraged them. (*Laughter*.)
(Ibid, 80-81)

"Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age. I consider that for any man to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality."
(*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde,* vol.3, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* The 1890 and 1891 texts, edited Joseph Bristow (Oxford University Press, 2005), chap.VI, p.235)

"The poor public, hearing, from an authority so high as your own, that this is a wicked book that should be coerced and suppressed by a Tory Government, will, no doubt, rush to it and read it. But, alas! they will find that it is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Halward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it. Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray* - a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book."
(Letter to Editor of *St James's Gazette* (26 June 1890)*, The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (Fourth Estate: London, 2000), pp.430-431)

"Your reviewer, sir, while admitting that the story in question is 'plainly the work of a man of letters', the work of one who has 'brains and art, and style', yet suggests, and apparently in all seriousness, that I have written the work in order that it should be read by the most depraved members of the criminal and illiterate classes. Now, sir, I do not suppose that the criminal and illiterate classes ever read anything except newspapers. They are certainly not likely to be able to understand anything of mine. So let them pass, and on the broad question of why a man of letters writes at all let me say this. The pleasure that one has in creating a work of art is a purely personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates. The artist works with his eye the object. Nothing else interests him. What people are likely to say does not even occur to him. He is fascinated by what he has in hand. He is indifferent to others. I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few, I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist. It is far too easy.

"….It was necessary, sir, for the dramatic development of this story to surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption. Otherwise the story would have had no meaning and the plot no issue. To keep this atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful was the aim of the artist who wrote the story. I claim, sir, that he has succeeded. Each man sees his own crime in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them."

(Letter to Editor of the *Scots Observer* (9 July 1890), *Complete Letters*, pp.438-9)

The Doer of Good

It was night-time and He was alone.

And He saw afar-off the walls of a round city and went towards the city.

And when He came near He heard within the city the tread of the feet of joy, and the laughter of the mouth of gladness and the loud noise of many lutes. And He knocked at the gate and certain of the gatekeepers opened to Him.

And He beheld a house that was of marble and had fair pillars of marble before it. The pillars were hung with garlands, and within and without there were torches of cedar. And He entered the house.

And when He had passed through the hall of chalcedony and the hall of jasper, and reached the long hall of feasting, He saw lying on a couch of sea-purple one whose hair was crowned with red roses and whose lips were red with wine.

And He went behind him and touched him on the shoulder and said to him, `Why do you live like this?'

And the young man turned round and recognised Him, and made answer and said, `But I

was a leper once, and you healed me. How else should I live?'

And He passed out of the house and went again into the street.

And after a little while He saw one whose face and raiment were painted and whose feet were shod with pearls. And behind her came, slowly as a hunter, a young man who wore a cloak of two colours. Now the face of the woman was as the fair face of an idol, and the eyes of the young man were bright with lust.

And He followed swiftly and touched the hand of the young man and said to him, `Why do you look at this woman and in such wise?'

And the young man turned round and recognised Him and said, `But I was blind once, and you gave me sight. At what else should I look?'

And He ran forward and touched the painted raiment of the woman and said to her, `Is there no other way in which to walk save the way of sin?'

And the woman turned round and recognised Him, and laughed and said, `But you forgave me my sins, and the way is a pleasant way.'

And He passed out of the city.

And when He had passed out of the city

He saw seated by the roadside a young man who was weeping.

And He went towards him and touched the long locks of his hair and said to him, `Why are you weeping?'

And the young man looked up and recognised Him and made answer, `But I was dead once and you raised me from the dead. What else should I do but weep?'