

Rereading Oscar Wilde's Intentions for "The Importance of Doing Nothing"

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Oscar Wilde's dialogue, "The Critic As Artist," which appeared alongside his other critical essays "Pen, Pencil and Poison," "The Decay of Lying," and "The Truth of Masks" in May 1891 in the collection *Intentions*, reads the act of criticism as the ultimate human endeavor in which contemplation surpasses action, art outstrips life, and criticism, in turn, consistently bests art as the perfect subjective expression of an intensely individual personality. Given Wilde's efforts to bestow upon the act of criticism superlative status in human affairs, it is notable that his critical writings are rarely cited (unlike those of the "best-remembered Victorian writers [who] articulate, for their period, the value of a 'liberal' education and culture") in today's discussions of "The Value of the Humanities" (Small 7). And yet, in the context of the progressively marketized knowledge economy that the Liberal Arts and Humanities in American and British universities are faced with today, *Intentions* appears to be a particularly apposite text to include in this debate because of the powerful defense of critical thinking with which it sought in its own day to negotiate the "profound changes" that marked the "nineteenth-century reading public, and the print media which catered for it" (Guy, "Introduction" lxxxiii). Thus, it is striking to find that in Wilde's seemingly languid and playful critical writings we can recover a serious defense of the importance of critical thinking for its power to develop not only the individual but also national life and, more pressingly, his sense of the

importance of the act of criticism, rather than trade, in reshaping global politics along more equitable lines. Having been faced in the United Kingdom (at any rate) with Research Assessment Exercises in various forms since 1986, the chimera of metrics and, more recently, government dictates to provide empirical evidence of the “impact” of academia outside the university, it is striking that *Intentions* actively refuses an instrumental mode of criticism and champions the critical act as a defense against all forms of social coercion.

Stefan Collini in his 2012 study *What are Universities For?* has identified a worrying trend in public discourse, applicable to both the American and British contexts, which has reduced the value of universities “to the following dispiriting proposition [... that] universities need to justify getting more money and the way to do this is by showing that they help to make more money,” a burden that the humanities have found particularly difficult to shoulder (x). In this respect, Collini, himself the renowned editor of Matthew Arnold and John Newman, offers a particularly resonant reminder that the Humanities are “a collection of disciplines which attempt to understand, across barriers of time and culture, the actions and creations of other human beings considered as bearers of meaning, where the emphasis tends to fall on matters to do with individual or cultural distinctiveness and not on matters which are primarily susceptible to characterization in purely statistical or biological terms” (64). And even more rousing, while admitting that “the processes of identification, sympathy, [and] imagination” deployed in the humanities can suggest “an undisciplined subjectivism” he declares that “in reality they are essential to the amplest forms of understanding, whether in scholarly work or other aspects of human experience.” Accordingly, he issues the painful warning that “If we were to treat all our interlocutors’ utterances merely as symptomatic rather than expressive or communicative, we would soon find ourselves leading affectively thin and relentlessly diagnostic lives” (83).

While the essays in *Intentions*, originally written both for the edification of the Philistine public and the delectation of Wilde’s coterie,

might appear to be of a completely different order to Collini's powerful defense of the Humanities (Wilde, *Letters* n. 370, hereafter cited as *Letters*), to revisit them is to encounter a similarly fraught debate about the value of speculative thought in the increasingly market-driven print economy of the Victorian *fin de siècle* (see *Wilde's Profession*, 20-22).¹ That the collection stridently rejects a utilitarian and instrumentalist model of criticism is ironic given that the appearance of its essays in book form appears to have been necessitated by Wilde's desire to elevate his professional standing. Although the essays in the collection had all previously appeared in periodicals, Josephine M. Guy notes that "for many writers in the late nineteenth century, the book conferred a particularly desirable form of cultural capital, one rendered especially attractive from the 1880s onwards by the growth of the 'new journalism,' with its emphasis on sensation, populism, and disposability" and that "the publication of *Intentions*, rather than the cumulative effect of all [Wilde's] various periodical contributions up till 1891 (most of which, as we noted, had appeared anonymously), [...] was crucial in the attempt to present himself as a critic, as a figure in possession (like Arnold or Pater) of a distinctive aesthetic sensibility" (Introduction xiii-xiv).

While the various accusations of plagiarism that dogged Wilde from the outset of his career might undermine his claims to originality, the individual essays offer a series of radical propositions. Thus, the reader moves from "The Decay of Lying," a dialogue praising imaginative art over the mimetic realism favored by the late Victorian public, to "Pen, Pencil and Poison," a derivative sketch of the Romantic artist cum poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, which both memorably and provocatively demurs that "The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose" (Wilde, "Pen, Pencil" 121). Wilde's reflections on art and criticism culminate in a second dialogue, "The Critic As Artist," which affords a utopian model of criticism that sees it surpass the creative arts for its importance in exercising the free play of the human mind, defend individualism, and, provocatively, consider sin to be essential to human progress. Finally, the essay "The Truth of Masks" concludes the collection

by seemingly rejecting the aesthetic propositions that preceded it. With a cast of interlocutors that range from the criminal to the conservative and who find expression in a variety of different formats, *Intentions* is a beguilingly metacritical text. Certainly in our (arguably more) fractious times,² one hopes that Lawrence Danson's assertion that *Intentions* "destabilises the very category 'criticism,' obliterating boundaries for instance between the critic and the thing criticised, which ordinarily define it" (*Cambridge Companion* 80), at the very least, licenses reflections on the pedagogical remit for academic criticism today in the context of what Henry A. Giroux has more pressingly identified as the "death of critical thought" in the face of "free market fundamentalism" (Giroux).

"The Decay of Lying"

Despite Wilde's various expressions of resistance to uncovering authorial intention both in his fiction and his critical essays,³ it is possible to adduce from the text an argument that offsets Wilde's praise (after Arthur Symonds) of "the supremacy of imaginative art" with an increasingly vocal resistance to all forms of convention, orthodoxy, and authoritarianism (Beckson 103). Consequently, Wilde's satirical dialogue "The Decay of Lying" (subtitled "An Observation"), which had first appeared in the heavyweight journal *Nineteenth Century* in January 1889 before being revised for publication in *Intentions*, is a protest both against coercion in matters of taste and, more provocatively, against the mendacities practiced against the individual by various agents and instruments of the state (here, politicians, teachers, lawyers, and journalists). Of its two well-heeled interlocutors Cyril and Vivian, it is Vivian, a self-proclaimed "Tired Hedonist" about to publish a critical essay in the fictional *Retrospective Review* who is the more controversial of the two speakers ("Decay" 75). Vivian, both in person and reading aloud from his essay, proselytizes against society's enthusiasm for Nature, facts, and more challengingly, the truth. In line with the Decadent creed of artificiality and the perverse but foregoing its lugubriousness, Vivian reads Nature with her "crudities, her extraordinary monotony [and] her

absolutely unfinished condition" as the enemy of both egotism ("so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity") and (indoor) culture ("Decay" 74). More challengingly, while he claims that politicians "never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation," an alternative moral arbiter for society presents itself in the shape "of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility [and] his healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind" ("Decay" 74).

Vivian's seriocomic protest against the twin bourgeois fallacies of truth and Nature extends into the arts where he dismisses both the imitative method in painting and realism in literature.⁴ In particular, the modish literary genre of Naturalism holds no attraction for Vivian because its cataloguing of the "dreary vices" and the "drearier virtues [...] of the lower orders" holds no aesthetic appeal for one who requires "distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power" in literature as he does ("Decay" 79). According to Vivian, "The only beautiful things [...] are the things that do not concern us" and "as long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art." For this reason, he declares the "modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter" pursued in the Naturalist genre to be "entirely and absolutely wrong" ("Decay" 82). The avowedly "fanciful" aspect of the essay belies Vivian's pessimism about living in a society where art has been co-opted by the ugly realities of modernity, and authority figures such as teachers and politicians are guilty of all manner of badly disguised falsehoods (*Letters* 237). Yet in his humorous assault on Victorian mores and institutions, Vivian indicates that society's "lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar" reveals some fabrications to be more palatable than others. Controversially, if according to Wilde's "Tired Hedonist," Art were "to be liberated from [...] the prison-house of realism" it would "run to [...] kiss [the] false, beautiful lips" of the "true liar" and "the great secret of all her manifestations" would finally be revealed – that is, "the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style" ("Decay" 88). That Wilde noted to one

correspondent that “The admirable English are still much bewildered by ‘The Decay of Lying,’” and to another that while he sought “to bewilder the masses by its fantastic form” that the essay was “*au fond* [...] serious” at the very least, underlines public exasperation with his ideas (*Letters* 236).

Notwithstanding Vivian’s obvious pessimism about the hackneyed status quo affecting Victorian England, it is equally significant that William Buckler helpfully reminds us that “‘The Decay of Lying’ is a stalwart apology for humanism in a new key” and “what Vivian defends through the metaphor of art is the integrity, autonomy, and creativity of man” (320). While reading “The Decay of Lying” as an anticipation of the defense of the Humanities based on the (non-pecuniary) value of autonomous and speculative thinking today by critics such as Collini and Giroux might be viewed in some corners as a specious form of prolepsis, it is significant that Wilde, in spite of the financial strains that dogged his adult life, insisted that criticism could not be reduced to the certainties of a mathematical formula or (after Collini) some “methodological protocol[]” (76). A month prior to the publication of the essay, Wilde had written a letter to W.E. Henley to appease him for the partially negative review that he had given his *A Book of Verses* by demurring that “Beauty of form produces not one effect alone, but many effects. Surely you do not think that criticism is like the answer to a sum? The richer the work of art the more diverse are the true interpretations” (*Letters* 234). While Wilde’s situation as an agent in late Victorian print capitalism inevitably compromised his commitment to the kind of lofty “disinterestedness” and aesthetic purism variously promoted by his forebears Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, the fictional and (assumedly wealthy) Vivian underscores the extent to which Wilde was aware that a position of critical impartiality relied on financial independence. Although, as a dialogist, Vivian has yet to reach the consummate critical zenith attained by Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist,” glimmerings of what Lawrence Danson has described as this eponymous critic’s “battle on behalf of the uncredentialed, unenforceable, self-creating individual” can certainly be adduced from

"The Decay of Lying" (*Cambridge Companion* 85). Indeed, it could be argued that by using an amateur *soi-disant* Decadent critic as its mouthpiece in "The Decay of Lying" both (after Danson) to call time on the professionalized Victorian critic and as a means of masking its author's own intentions, this metacritical essay is a bold opening gambit for the collection (*Wilde's Intentions* 6).⁵

"Pen, Pencil and Poison"

The second essay in the collection, "Pen, Pencil and Poison," is a short literary biography of the notorious Romantic artist, journalist, critic, collector, forger, and murderer Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. It appeared originally in the *Fortnightly Review* in January 1889. That Arthur Symons declared that the essay showed a "lack of intrinsic interest in its subject," and a reviewer for *The Athenaeum* deemed the piece to be simply "magazine padding," begs the question what precisely this essay signifies, appearing as it does in a collection that sought to showcase Wilde's talents as a cultural critic (Beckson 101, 104). Although Richard Ellmann, Peter Raby and, more recently, Megan Becker-Leckrone have persuasively noted Wilde's affinities with, and similarities to, aspects of Wainewright's character and career (dandyism, love of green, criminality etc.), these readings must necessarily be offset by Wilde's commitment to both the multiplicity of interpretations that he felt a work of art could engender and his rejection of the pursuit of authorial intention *per se* (Ellmann, 283; Raby, *Oscar Wilde* 40; Becker-Leckrone 102). (Notably, in the essay Wilde reiterates points he had made two months prior to the publication of *Intentions* in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.) In respect to the latter, paradoxically, as the American lecture tour had revealed, Wilde was not averse to publicity. And, in his account of Wainewright's infamous career(s), not only did Wilde seem to be simultaneously evading and inviting the public gaze, but also his observations upon his subject's marketing of his artistic personality appear markedly self-reflexive in tenor.

Given Wilde's desire to simultaneously publicize himself and evade the public gaze with *Intentions*, it is telling that in the various pseudonyms

that Wainewright deployed in his career (Janus Weathercock, Egomet Bonmot, and Van Vinkvrooms) Wilde adduces a playful attitude on the part of his subject to the public. While for Wilde, Wainewright's "grotesque" masks "hide his seriousness [...] [and] reveal his levity," his ensuing observations that "A mask tells us more than a face" and that "These disguises intensified his personality" teasingly advert to a psychological depth on the part of the subject not immediately apparent to both Wainewright's, and by extension, Wilde's audiences ("Pen, Pencil" 107). (It is telling that in his review of *Intentions*, Wilde's contemporary Richard Le Gallienne pointed to Wilde's use of an authorial mask himself to propose where he "seems to be arguing with serious face enough, is it not simply that he may smile behind his mask at the astonishment, not to say terror, of a public he has from the first so delighted in shocking?" [Beckson 105]). Moreover, in his belief that as an art-critic, Wainewright shows how the "'aesthetic temperament' or 'taste' as he calls it, [was] [...] unconsciously guided and made perfect by frequent contact with the best work, [which] becomes in the end a form of right judgement," Wilde again appears to be deploying Wainewright's example to exhort his own contemporary audience into developing and exercising a refined aesthetic taste ("Pen, Pencil" 108-9). In this respect, Wilde also uses the form of the literary biography to advert to the key proposition that Matthew Arnold had made in his seminal essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," which appeared in 1867 (also in the *Fortnightly Review*), that critics were responsible for fashioning fresh ideas to engender an intellectual atmosphere in which a new and vibrant art might develop (28).⁶

Moreover, Wilde makes further observations on Wainewright's career that are pertinent to his own simultaneous attempt to negotiate the contemporary culture industry. Thus, he reads Wainewright's career as a journalist as pioneering in the field of modern newspaper writing and notes the way in which Wainewright exploited the medium to market his personality to the public by detailing the minutiae of his daily life. And although Wilde declares this to be "the least valuable side of his work,"

tellingly, it is the one that for him "has had the most obvious influence" ("Pen, Pencil" 115). Wilde's own frequent appearances in London society and in the pages of various publications from *Punch* to the *Pall Mall Gazette* also suggest his own personal investment in the declaration that Wainewright "sought to be somebody, rather than to do something" and that "He recognized that Life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it" ("Pen, Pencil" 108). Coming after the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the previous year in *Lippincott's Magazine* had gained Wilde such public notoriety that his exchange with reviewers offended by the novel led him to publicly assert that Dorian's demise chronicled the dangers of a life of aesthetic excess (*Letters* 259), it is significant that in his account of Wainewright's commitment to style and "aesthetic eclecticism" that Wilde appeared to be once again putting aestheticism under the spotlight ("Pen, Pencil" 108). Megan Becker-Leckrone has observed that Wilde's essay originally came out just as Pater was seeking to manage the negative reception of his writing by retracting some of the ideas expressed in the infamous conclusion to *The Renaissance* which he claimed had been misunderstood by impressionable young readers (98). In many ways, it would seem that in 1891 Wilde envisioned Pater's critical reputation as a foil to his own.⁷

In this respect, it is significant that Josephine Guy has noted that "it is 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' (rather than 'The Decay of Lying') which directly engages with Pater's reputation by explicitly borrowing some of the best-known passages in the preface to *The Renaissance*" ("Introduction" xxxv). Although Wilde himself noted his essay's debt to the introduction of W. Hazlitt Carew's edition of Wainewright's *Essays and Criticism* (1880), Guy has painstakingly identified a number of other source texts to which Wilde's essay was also indebted and observes that Wilde "never makes clear the extent or nature of his borrowings" (412). The intention behind Wilde's acts of plagiarism still continues to exercise Wilde scholars to this day, with some scholars declaring that his use of unacknowledged sources was necessitated by personal financial pressures and the production constraints of the print market ("Self-Plagiarism" 6-7).

More recently, Florina Tufescu has suggested that his plagiarism should be understood as a form of intertextuality deriving from an earlier model of classical composition that stretched back to Seneca and Martial (5, 6). However, in his own day, a more sympathetic response from Wilde's circle to these acts of creative larceny is apparent in Arthur Symonds' recognition in his review of *Intentions* of the "charm of graceful echoes" in Wilde's writing, though his further observation that Wilde was "always original in his quotations" might be read as a more ambiguous response to his attitude toward textual authority (Beckson 104). Moreover, Richard Le Gallienne's declaration that Wilde was "a damascener of thought rather than a forger" also acknowledges, without condemning, his friend's unreferenced borrowings, a position that Le Gallienne roundly defended by declaring that "for the serious in the pursuit of literary pleasure he is as serious as every new joy must be; it is only in the domain of thought where it is rather funny to see him taken with such open mouth" (Beckson 106). By accenting the playful and pleasurable aspects of "Pen, Pencil and Poison" Le Gallienne, for one, could forgive Wilde his transgressions.

"The Critic as Artist"

While the "Decay of Lying" can be read as a spirited protest against forms of social coercion, and "Pen, Pencil and Poison" appears to use Thomas Griffiths Wainewright's career to reflect on Wilde's own attempts to negotiate the mutable conditions of the contemporary print market, in turn, "The Critic as Artist" stands as the consummation of Wilde's ideas on the role of the "aesthetic" critic and what he deems to be the pioneering critical activity on which this figure will embark. A second dialogue (this time peopled with two more equally matched interlocutors than "The Decay of Lying"), this two-parter seeks to elevate the act of criticism above the creative arts with its champion, the intensely individualist "elect" critic, promising by the act of contemplation to transform not only English society but also England's role in the global arena. In this respect, the wealthy and languid dialogists in this second dialogue and its similarly insouciant subtitle ("The Importance of Doing Nothing") belie the momentous critical

ambitions of the text. For Gilbert's assertions that "it is to do nothing that the elect exist" and that because "Action is limited and relative [...] we who are born at the *close of this wonderful age*, are at once too cultured and too critical, too intellectually subtle and too curious of exquisite pleasures, to accept any speculations about life in exchange for life itself," use the critical act not only to call time on Victorian industriousness and rectitude, but also appears to ring the death knell on Victorian criticism *per se* ("Critic as Artist" 175, emphasis added). As Gilbert pointedly avers of his compeers, "The actual art of to-day will occupy [...] the critic] less than the art of to-morrow, far less than the art of yesterday, and as for this or that person at present toiling away, what do the industrious matter?" ("Critic as Artist" 197).

Where "The Decay of Lying" protests against the way in which the hackneyed tastes of the bourgeois public have impacted negatively upon the quality of the nation's art and criticism, in "The Critic as Artist" both Ernest and Gilbert are similarly dismissive of the tastes of an English public which "always feels perfectly at its ease when a mediocrity is talking to it" and can forgive "everything except genius" ("Critic as Artist" 124). Certainly, Ernest's rousing demand for the autonomy of the artist in the face of staid bourgeois opinion lays the blame for the perceived banalities of the English culture industry squarely at the feet of the "silly art-congresses, bringing provincialism to the provinces and teaching the mediocrity how to mouth" that had sprung up to minister to the public ("Critic as Artist" 128, 134). Indeed, that the dialogue proffers an unashamedly élitist vision of the function and value of critics and criticism at the *fin de siècle*, at the very least, indicates Wilde's disquiet with the perceived vulgarization of English art and criticism threatened by the encroachments upon it of the so-called "aesthetic democracy."⁸ In this respect, it is telling that Gilbert voices his annoyance at the way in which "people [...] are always coming shamelessly up to one at Private Views and other places that are open to the general public, and saying in a loud stentorian voice, 'What are you doing?' whereas 'What are you thinking?' is the only question that any single civilized being should ever be allowed to whisper to another" ("Critic as Artist" 174).

A veritable *tour-de-force*, “The Critic as Artist” proposes that the act of criticism is an art in itself (“a creation within creation”) and one that surpasses the object under discussion because it has come from the uniquely individual temperament of the “flawless” critic who will influence “the age, which he will seek to wake into consciousness [...] creating in it new desires and appetites, and lending his larger vision and his nobler moods” (“Critic as Artist” 154, 197). Clearly rejecting Matthew Arnold’s earlier assertion in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” that “The critical power is of lower rank than the creative” (28), for Gilbert, it is the figure of the critic rather than the artist who can lay claim to a consummate artistry since he has chosen, through the act of criticism, to refine and purify the artist’s original vision (“Critic as Artist” 154). More provocatively, Gilbert also consciously refutes Arnold’s keynote declaration that the “proper aim of criticism is to see the object as it really is” by demurring that it is not the job of criticism to explain the art work but rather that criticism will actively seek to deepen art’s mystery (Arnold 26; “Critic as Artist” 163). Although, as seen above, Wilde’s dialogist rejects Arnold’s propositions for the function of criticism and its status with regard to art, it is also nonetheless significant that Gilbert declares that “It is Criticism, as Arnold points out, that creates the intellectual atmosphere of the age,” a statement that is reiterated when Gilbert further observes that “Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name” (“Critic as Artist” 201, 142). That “The Critic as Artist” had originally borne the title “The True Function and Value of Criticism” clearly indicates an anxiety on Wilde’s part about his debt to Arnold’s earlier essay.

Significantly, in spite of its elegant celebration of the amorality and individualism of the aesthetic critic and attendant criticism, the essay takes on a darker and more deterministic hue in the second part. Given Gilbert’s ranking of aesthetic criticism above the arts in terms of the free-play of the individual critical consciousness that it licenses, to Ernest’s surprise, Gilbert proposes that in experiential matters art surpasses life because “Life is terribly deficient in form,” since there is “a grotesque horror about its comedies, and its tragedies seem to culminate in farce” (“Critic as Artist” 166). Although admitting that the emotions engendered by art are “exquisite[ly] sterile,”

Gilbert nonetheless deems that "It is through [...] Art only, that we can realize our perfection" because it allows us to "shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence" ("Critic as Artist" 173). Where Art is a shield from life's disappointments (according to Gilbert, lived experience is "incoherent" and circumstantial) the act of criticism promises to refine and expand the individual consciousness. Gilbert's further claim that "It seems to me that with the development of the critical spirit we shall be able to realize, not merely our own lives, but the collective life of the race, and [...] make ourselves absolutely modern" reveals the extent to which, for him, the art of criticism transcends the individual critic to become pivotal for the development of the modern (English) race ("Critic as Artist" 176). By further declaring the imagination to be "concentrated race experience" extraordinarily, for Gilbert "the scientific principle of Heredity has become [...] the warrant for the contemplative life." Thus, for him, this hereditary compulsion licenses a permissive and ungovernable journey on the part of the "true critic [...] 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" ("Critic as Artist" 177-78). Significantly, an echo of Wilde's plea for uncensored critical autonomy can be found in Collini's recent defense of "Intellectual enquiry [as] ungovernable" because "there is no predicting where thought and analysis may lead when allowed to play freely over almost any topic" (55). However, Christine Ferguson's point that "the intensely hereditarian aspects of 'The Critic as Artist' remain neglected" draws attention to an aspect of the essay which today's readers will inevitably find ideologically problematic: that is, Wilde's deployment of a quasi-Eugenicist discourse (65). While these Eugenicist undertones will no doubt discomfit us today, it is important to bear in mind not only the central purchase that Wilde affords to the critical act *per se* but also Gilbert's utopian observation that "the cultivation of the habit of intellectual criticism" will see his countrymen "rise superior to race prejudices" ("Critic as Artist" 202). Although Gilbert's purview does not extend beyond Europe (it is Ernest rather than Gilbert who declares that "The Critical Spirit and the World-Spirit are one"), importantly, he insists that "Criticism will annihilate race-prejudices, by insisting upon the

unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms” (“Critic as Artist” 205, 203). And as a consequence, Gilbert envisions a supranational body of critics who he predicts in the future will surpass the efforts of both the “shopman or sentimentalist” through trade and charity, respectively, to strengthen the bonds between nations (see “Critic as Artist” 203). However, at present for Gilbert, unfortunately, “Anything approaching to the free play of the mind is practically unknown amongst us” (“Critic as Artist” 204). Certainly, in the market driven arena in which today’s scholars of the Humanities variously operate, Gilbert’s previously cited pessimism will resonate with those among us who are faced with what Collini and others have variously identified as the “presuppositions of those who believe that such enquiry is a luxury whose economic benefit remains to be demonstrated” (Collini xi).

Coda: “The Truth of Masks”?

To what extent Wilde used his dramatic interlocutors to articulate his own opinions while simultaneously evading the exposure of his “real” intentions is a question that exercised Wilde’s contemporaries and continues to this day. Given the notoriety that Wilde had accrued with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the previous year, Lawrence Danson, for one, has pointed to how the specter of public prosecution for obscenity that had been raised in relation to Wilde’s novel necessitated some circumspection on his part with regard to how he was to present himself and his ideas in his next major publication, *Intentions* (*Wilde’s Intentions* 128, 136). (Certainly, the English production history of Wilde’s *Salome* – from the refusal of a license for it in Britain by the Lord Chamberlain’s licenser of plays in 1892 to the notorious libel case generated by Canadian dancer Maud Allan’s performance of the *Visions of Salome* in 1918 – indicates the political motivations driving the censorship of Wilde’s work that outlasted his lifetime.) And, although by the time readers reach the final essay of *Intentions* they may feel that they have come to understand the significance of Wilde’s use of masks and dramatic characters and his final retraction in “The Truth of Masks” of all of the aesthetic propositions that have preceded it as a strategy to both articulate the unsayable and evade public censure that

is no longer applicable today, the strategic corporatization of the Humanities at present, as identified by Collini, Small, *et al.*, suggests otherwise. In this respect, it is significant that in *The Last Professors*, Frank Donoghue has noted the explicitly political motivations underpinning the Arnoldian defense that is used time and again to present the value of the Liberal Arts in terms of "'the best that has been thought and said' in literature and philosophy." In particular, he finds the continued influence of the then U.S. Secretary for Education's 1984 report *To Reclaim a Legacy* in shaping an insistently apolitical remit for the Humanities to be questionable (xv). And while, Donoghue and Giroux have both variously identified how the university has become "more corporatized [and] intellectual and critical thought is transformed into a commodity" (see Donoghue 1), a particularly direful Giroux has identified "a drift toward the disappearing critical intellectual and the erasure of substantive critique" in higher education *per se*. Perhaps it is from Wilde's *Intentions* (rather than Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*) with its utopian vision of critical thinking, rejection of social coercion, and formal strategies to evade the censoring hand of consensus, that a reinvigorated defense of the Humanities might be launched today (Giroux).

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Notes

¹ Also see Josephine Guy's "Introduction" to *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol 4*, where she notes that "the showy if sometimes superficial displays of erudition in pieces such as 'The Critic As Artist' and 'The Decay of Lying,' coupled with an apparently casual attitude to textual authority, might best be understood as Wilde's attempt to negotiate these contradictions, to write in a manner which would impress his cultural superiority upon a body of readers which was in constant flux" ("Introduction" lxxxiv).

² Frank Donoghue, for one, in his book *The Last Professors, The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, takes issue with the rhetoric of "crisis" applied to the predicament of the Humanities today (xii-xiii, xv).

³ See for example, Wilde's exchanges with the editor of the *St James's Gazette* over *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (*Letters* 257-62) and the preface to the novel (*Dorian* 167-68) and "The Critic as Artist" (128, 134).

⁴ Vivian complains of being forced to admire a sunset by Mrs Arundel, an "absurdly pretty Philistine" which he judges to be a "very second-rate Turner" ("Decay" 96).

⁵ Danson notes that "*Intentions* announces (sometimes by masking) [...] Wilde's intention to secure a powerful position at the centre of the culture whose values he was subverting and whose laws he was flouting [...] in order] to create the conditions for his own social and literary success" (*Wilde's Intentions* 6).

⁶ Wilde's debt to this essay is discussed in more detail below.

⁷ See Guy's fascinating discussion of Wilde's attempts in *Intentions* to mask his debt to Pater (xxxv).

⁸ For Linda Dowling, this discursive trope is most memorably instantiated in John Ruskin's celebrated appraisal in *The Stones of Venice* of the conciliatory politics he envisioned embodied in the city's medieval architecture. That Ruskin's vision of how Gothic architecture conveyed not only, after Dowling, "the promise of a sociality lived completely free from the competitive individualism and degrading power of markets" but also "upheld the individuality [and] freedom [...] of the ordinary citizen" appeared to indicate to his Victorian readers the socially transformative (if essentially conservative) power of art (35).

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