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THE TRUE/FALSE DEBATE OVER ART: OSCAR WILDE'S RIDER IN *THE DECAY OF LYING*

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ABSTRACT

The truth-value of art, questioned since the time of Plato, was in need of further defence in the Victorian era when, helpless before the mounting pressure of science and pragmatism, many artists preferred the naturalistic style of representation in order to prove that their creation was not false. But as an insightful critic Oscar Wilde saw that the more art would incline to reality to chase the will-o'-the-wisp of truth, the more it would get degraded as art. The earlier apologists of art committed the mistake of vindicating the truth value of something which, as a product of the imagination, cannot be true in the sense scientific theorems are true. Wilde therefore excogitates a new strategy for defending art against the charge of falsehood. He admits that as a product of the imagination art is a form of lying. But then he goes into the offensive and instead of condemning art for the alleged absence of truth, he mourns the decay of this unique mode of lying – that is, the attenuation of the power of the imagination. 'The Decay of Lying' is thus a bulwark of romantic aesthetics and is in line with *Poetics*, *An Apo1ogy for Poetry*, and *A Defence of Poetry*.

Key Words: truth, art, imagination, aesthetics

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The eminent French novelist Emile Zola was the subject of a heated literary debate in the eighties of the nineteenth century. The publication of the English translation of *Nana* in 1884 stirred up a hornets' nest. The *Pall Mall Gazette* described Zola's works as 'fit for swine' (Frierson 540). Andrew Lang found Zola's interpretation of life utterly distorted as its ideal was not beauty but sordid reality (Decker 847). Zola was faulted principally on account of his naturalism.¹ Zola, happily, had his solicitors, for Vernon Lee and Robert Buchanan rose to his defence. In *A Look Around Literature* (1887) Buchanan put Zola in the same bracket with Schopenhauer and extolled his 'purer sense of the beauty of moral goodness' (qtd. in Decker 845).

When this debate over naturalism was still in the air, in a pungently critical review Alexander Galt Ross found fault with Wilde's knowledge of natural history in his story 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. This provoked Wilde to write 'The Decay of Lying' (1889) in order to give his valued opinion on the place of fact in art as well as on how to combat the charge of falsehood against a work of imagination.

The essay has been written in the form of a conversation between Cyril and Vivian in which the latter reads out from a self-written essay entitled 'The Decay of Lying: A Protest'. In this essay Wilde's mouthpiece Vivian salutes poets for being 'fine' liars: 'The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake, and the

highest development of this is...Lying in Art' (*PE* 264). Ignoring Sidney who considered the poet as 'the least liar' under the sun (28), Vivian hails the poet as the most consummate liar of the world and sets out to clear up the prejudice that art epitomizes truth. He argues that art, inasmuch as it is a product of the imagination, needs no documentation; it is self-evidential. Vivian faults the realists who 'find life crude and leave it raw' (*PE* 245), that is, without trying to aestheticize it with the touch of the imagination. Their unhealthy obsession with facts breeds novels 'which are so *life-like* that no one can possibly believe in their probability' (*PE* 244). What he means is that the more art inclines to reality to chase the will-o'-the-wisp of truth, the more it gets degraded as art. For, after all, it is the strength of the imagination that ultimately accounts for the ageless appeal of a work of art, its truth. The point has been neatly summed up in an epigram that Wilde included in 'A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated' (1894): 'The English are always degrading truths into facts. When a truth becomes a fact it loses all its intellectual value' (*CW* 1205).

Incidentally, naturalism had become such a craze in Victorian England that during the performance of Andrew Halliday's *The Great City* in 1867 a real hansom cab was driven across the stage (Booth 37). Many contemporary artists agreed with W. B. Donne that in order to touch the heart of the readers one needs 'not the imaginatively true, but the physically real' (qtd in Booth 36). This was unacceptable to Wilde who held that conceding to the demands of factuality would be a kind of stooping to conquer the heart of the sceptical and the unimaginative. In order to vindicate his stand Wilde refers to the human psychology involving conviction: 'Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable' (*PE* 263).² No wonder that Wilde's spokesman Vivian imputes the sterility and 'commonplace character' of contemporary literature to the apotheosis of fact and consequent attenuation of the imagination which he purposefully phrases as 'the decay of lying'.

With a view to contesting naturalistic worship of facts and figures in a work of fancy,

Wilde's persona Vivian proceeds to redefine the relationship between life and art. He first tries to establish how art gradually sinks into atrophy due to the preponderance of fact over fancy or the substitution of 'an imitative for a creative medium' (*PE* 251). Making a survey of the evolution of the theatre he finds that it is a journey towards realism, for characters in contemporary plays 'talk on the stage exactly as they would talk off it' (*PE* 251). Admittedly, Wilde here criticizes the contemporary theatre for confusing the conditions of art with those of life, for failing to maintain the distinction between life and art. Since art is generally held to be an imitation of life, in order to discard naturalism, Vivian proceeds to interrogate the mimetic theory of art. He dismisses Hamlet's famous phrase about art reflecting life as an 'unfortunate aphorism' which Hamlet deliberately uses 'to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters' (*PE* 254). This is ingenious but somewhat bewildering, for Wilde not merely gives a new interpretation of the insanity of the Prince of Denmark but apparently throws his gauntlet at Plato and Aristotle who have stressed the mimetic quality of art. How Wilde wants to re-formulate the relation of art and life will be clear if one refers to his words in a letter to More Adey written in 1896: 'Art is not a mirror, but a crystal. It creates its own shapes and forms' (*LOW* 415). Understandably, Wilde refuses to have any truce with naturalistic obsession with facts which impoverishes the imagination and makes poetic imitation aesthetically very poor. This is also clear from his appraisal of the difference between Zola and Balzac, a 'difference between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality' (*PE* 248). Whereas Zola goes to life for his personages, Balzac is capable of transfiguring facts into truths: Balzac 'created life, he did not copy it' (*PE* 248).

Evidently, Wilde is strongly opposed to any verisimilitudinal representation of life in art, which is the dream of the votaries of naturalism. What distinguishes creative reproduction (crystal-image) from photographic representation (mirror-image) is that the former is inspired by 'imaginative sympathy'. Imagination, to borrow Wilde's words, is 'the quality that enables one to see things and people in their real as in their ideal relations' (*SL*

236). Its force enables the artist to transcend factual, temporal and moral allegiances.³ This clearly explains why Oscar Wilde in his essay 'The Critic as Artist' un-equivocally states that art may certainly have 'some resemblance' to the world but part of its charm really consists in 'the rejection of resemblance' (PE 310). Taking a stand diametrically opposite to that of the naturalists, Oscar Wilde rejects lifelikeness because, art is, strictly speaking, a re-creation of reality, mimetic in outline but imaginative in essence.

But is it not a fact that a realistic work is far more saturated with truth than a work of pure imagination? Wilde does not think so, for he is the last person to synonymize fact with truth. Even in 'The Truth of Masks' where he pleads for archaeological accuracy of costume and scenery in the staging of a play, he categorically says that the aesthetic value of plays 'does not, in the slightest degree, depend upon their facts, but on their Truth, and Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure' (PE 353). Vivian therefore claims that the embodiment of the zeitgeist in a non-naturalistic art is worthier and than its reflection in a realistic work. He argues that the highest art 'is not symbolic of any age': 'The more abstract, the more ideal an art is, the more it reveals to us the temper of its age'(PE 261). Whereas others demand art to be a reflection, Wilde wants it to be an abstraction. His contention is that since art is an act of imaginative creation, a form of lying, the less mimetic it is, the more ideally it would epitomize the spirit of the age. Medieval painting and contemporary Japanese art, according to Vivian, illustrate this highest form of abstract art. By contrast, contemporary English painting is trash, for it is, according to Vivian/Wilde, predominantly a photographic representation⁴ of life. It is inferior as creation because here painters see an object not with their own eyes but with the eyes of the public. In other words, as artists they are not loyal to their own vision; rather they betray it. Elsewhere in the essay Vivian criticizes such modernity of form as vulgar, since here 'the common livery of the age' is mistaken for 'the vesture of the Muses' (PE 249).

In a letter dated January 1889, Wilde confides to Pollock that his 'new views on art' have

been expressed in a form unintelligible to the public (LOW 236). The unintelligibility mentioned here may be due to the quixotic phrasing intended more to shock than to win the reader's conviction. Anyone who labours to dig beneath the surface would discover that the essay 'The Decay of Lying' is really a bulwark of romantic aesthetics and is in line with *Poetics*, Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*, and Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*. While Plato impugned poetry principally on philosophical grounds, the nineteenth-century positivists denounced it on pragmatic grounds. Utilitarian philosophers considered literature as 'the disease of the age' because 'Ledgers do not keep well in rhyme' (qtd. in Abrams 302). Bentham like Plato held that all poetry is misrepresentation, for in the utilitarian view any form of language except the logical is distortion. Thus poetry and truth were posited in oppositional relationship.

Whenever the alarming growth of science and pragmatism threatens to clip an Angel's wings or unweave a rainbow, the votaries of art feel impelled to vindicate the worth of their pursuit. It was Aristotle who first defended poetry against Platonic charge of misrepresentation with his theory of mimetic idealization. Sidney in the sixteenth century found the charge of falsehood untenable because nothing is affirmed here: 'Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, therefore never lieth' (28). The phrase 'science of feelings', used by Wordsworth in the Note to his poem 'The Thorn', seems to be an attempt to update the terminology. Keats' vindication of the imagination in his letter to Benjamin Bailey (22 November 1817) is confident enough: 'what the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth— whether it existed before or not' (Sharrock 176). But it is no argument but an utterance hardly plausible to people who do not share Keats' conviction. Subsequently, I. A. Richards would defend poetry by making its language value-free. According to him, poetic statements, even when 'frankly false, this is no defect... their truth, when they are true, is no merit' (PLC 215). M. H. Abrams rightly says that had these theorists given 'truth' to science and 'adopted a different term to characterize poetry', the dispute could have been

resolved (312). However, the term was too charming and prestigious to be dispensed with.

Here Oscar Wilde stands unique. He knows for certain that to call poetry true or to describe it as a semblance of truth – as a product of the imagination it is neither – is to underpin the argument of his antagonists. He finds that while the romantic reasoning about the value of poetry is just, its premise is vulnerable and as such the conclusion drawn is apparently indefensible. Far from being a *vates* an artist is nothing better than a liar: ‘a skilful, ingenious, pleasant, or even salutary liar, perhaps, but still a liar’ (Collingwood 286). With a deep critical insight Wilde diagnoses the root of the problem. As poetry is a product of the imagination, strictly speaking, it cannot be true in the sense scientific theorems are true. Reality-fixation of the naturalist kind actually strengthens the charge that poets are liars. Or else why should they be so shy of valorizing the imagination? As a theorist Wilde, therefore, tries to score over the *misomousoi* by going into the offensive. Without making any attempt to reconcile what Poe calls ‘the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth’ (Edel 233), he strategically steps into the philistine shoe to cleverly draw his own conclusion. Without showing any hesitation to call a spade a spade, he admits that poets who bank upon the wealth of the imagination are certainly ‘liars’. For, after all, what is represented in poetry is not verifiable. But instead of condemning poets on account of this, he salutes them for their non-factual representation, and also mourns that in contemporary naturalistic literature this unique mode of lying is on the ebb. He agrees with Plato that poetry is a mere copy and exclaims that it is not a creation. He finds fault with contemporary novelists for presenting ‘dull facts under the guise of fiction’ (PE 243), for their failure to bank on the imagination to move beyond the real. His clever argument is that it is wrong to ascribe truth-value to poetry, for poetry creates a heterocosm where the unreal conjured up by the imagination shines with as much brightness as truth in the real world. As all art is essentially an imaginative reconstruction of life, the ‘decay of lying’, manifest in morbid fact-orientation of literature, is bound to enfeeble art. Regrettably enough, the critics of Wilde mystified by

his highly complex idiolect, have failed to place the article in the proper critical perspective. ‘The Decay of Lying’, thus, is not an exercise in critical brinkmanship. It is actually a highly serious treatise in which Wilde is out to deviously defend art, the science of lying,⁵ from the attacks of those insensitive Gradgrinds who, like Bitzer in Dickens’ *Hard Times*, would define ‘heart’ not as a centre of emotions but merely as an anatomical organ for pumping and circulating blood.

Notes

1. Naturalism is the crudest form of realism that expects an artist to depict life ‘with all the precision and inclusive detail of the biological scientist (Dutton 59). For Wilde naturalism is a disease of vision as well as of representation. Servile adherence to fact, Wilde believes, results inevitably in naturalistic pidginization of art.
2. Cf. ‘A likely impossibility is always preferable to unconvincing possibility’ (Bywater 84). The Aristotelian ring of the sentence can hardly be missed. Aristotle held that even the impossible has a room in art provided it is made probable. Conversely, the possible may be out of place in art if it strikes us as improbable, that is, unconvincing.
3. Incidentally, ‘imagination’ must be distinguished from ‘make-believe’. At the touch of the former even the impossible impresses us as probable; the latter tries to cover up the deficiency of the imagination with a stronger sensation but cannot raise even the possible to the level of the probable.
4. The pejorative undertone is fast dying out. Thanks to the cinema, the T.V. and the excellent snaps of some eminent photographers, photography has emerged as a powerful form of art in our times. However, even here the touchstone is not flawless reproduction which the camera, a gift of science, ensures. What is valued is the artist’s sense of angle, colour and the perspective which raises it above mere mechanical reproduction.
5. Wilde has not coined the phrase but the hint is unmistakably there where Wilde explains how the natural instinct for falsehood was gradually

elevated into a self-conscious science known as art.

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