An exchange with a reader

Oscar Wilde and “art for art’s sake”

A Critical Comment on the article “Oscar Wilde’s lasting significance”

8 November 1997

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On July 28, 1997 we published an article by David Walsh on Oscar Wilde and his contribution to twentieth century cultural and political life (see article, Oscar Wilde’s lasting significance*). We publish below a letter from a reader in Australia, and a reply by Walsh. Other comments and letters are welcome.*

A Critical Comment on the article “Oscar Wilde’s lasting significance”

29 August 1997

D. Walsh’s article “Oscar Wilde’s lasting significance,” concerning some of the beliefs in the life and work of Oscar Wilde, has given me some reason to question the perspective and integrity of the Arts in *Workers’ News*, an otherwise fine newspaper.

The worn-out phrase “Art for Art’s Sake” repeated throughout this article is an expression that is particular to the Petty Bourgeois of society, where Art is seen without any deep significance, where purpose in Art is cast aside for the sake of mild leisure, where Art is simply feeding off Art. This much publicized and incestuous attitude towards Art sickens me!

Art provides opportunity for every individual who is desperate for change in an oppressive society to contribute towards such, to oppose a society which demands the complete conformity and subservience of its “citizenry.” If D. Walsh is correct in his explanation of Wilde as being “Socialist” with an artistic vision towards Utopia, then this principle of “Art for Art’s Sake” is a complete contradiction.

How was it possible for Wilde to write “Socialist” children’s stories, a volume of important critical essays, and major theatrical pieces when driven by such a principle? Where Art is just there for its own sake and has no ethical involvement or sociopolitical function? Walsh’s article appears to have a major discrepancy with this recurring principle.

Walsh consistently reinforces this principle through shady personalities such as Edouardo Roditi (a critic of Wilde) and Plekhanov, who voiced a pathetic and illogical statement where “ ... art for art’s sake naturally arises among artists wherever they are out of harmony with the society around them.” The Petty-Bourgeois position taken by these so-called appreciators of art is blatantly obvious and Oscar Wilde’s work was definitely not among them.

In *The Theatre of Revolt*, R. Brustein outlines the impressions of Art made by Bernard Shaw, a contemporary of Oscar Wilde (briefly referred to in Walsh’s article):

art should extend beyond itself to become an act of ethical reform, influencing public opinion, public action, and public contribution....1

This is a statement which resembles closely to the work of Oscar Wilde, yet it contradicts Walsh, where apparently no ethical consideration should be allowed to interfere in the appreciation of Art whatsoever.

Shaw, like Wilde, opposed the focus of aesthetics [an attentive study of the beautiful] in art, declaring that “beauty is a snare which draws men from the truth.”2 Instead, Shaw’s writings were driven by the purpose of “social utility”--to promote social change. And I get the impression that there are some people in this world like D. Walsh who need to seriously learn their history, particularly when it concerns the principles of artists and playwrights like Oscar Wilde and G. Bernard Shaw.

Brad Evans

1. Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt, 1991 (Elephant Paperback reprint), Chicago, p. 184.
2. Ibid., p. 185.

Reply by David Walsh

8 November 1997

Dear Mr. Evans,

I read your letter of August 29, 1997, with considerable interest. I believe it raises a number of critical issues. I must admit, however, that I’m a little surprised at your tone. If you truly believe that the *Workers News* is “an otherwise fine newspaper,” don’t you think you might have given its editors the benefit of the doubt and assumed that the motives that go into producing 15 of its pages also go into the production of its arts page? I don’t take the matter personally, but I can’t see how, for example, referring to Georgi Plekhanov--one of the extraordinary figures of Russian and international Marxism--as a “shady personality” can possibly contribute to a serious discussion. Denouncing any tendency or personality you don’t like as “Petty Bourgeois” seems equally unproductive. Analysis will reveal that nearly all artistic tendencies emanate from the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. So the term is simply an epithet.

Let’s leave aside the name-calling, and consider the issues involved. We have been attempting for a number of years to revive a Marxist attitude toward art, which was suppressed and severely damaged by Stalinism and its intellectual hangers-on. I would ask you to accept on good faith the sincerity of our efforts and recognize that it is within this context that I consider the issues you’ve raised.

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Your basic objection to the article seems to be this: only individuals or tendencies who see no deep significance in art, who reduce art to an innocuous leisure-time activity, could possibly raise the slogan "art for art's sake." Therefore, Wilde, who considered himself a socialist, could not have advanced such a conception.

Let's consider the second matter first. You cite the views of G.B. Shaw and suggest, by association, that they must have been Wilde's as well. As a method of historical analysis this leaves something to be desired. Shaw and Wilde were contemporaries and acquaintances, but they were by no means cothinkers. I believe that Wilde was the considerably more farsighted and (in the best sense of the word) radical personality of the two, and that he left a richer legacy. His conscious emphasis on the active role of the human subject placed Wilde in opposition to the general intellectual tenor of his times and enabled him to discern processes that were less obvious to those who, like Shaw, adapted themselves to a greater degree to the surface of social life. I also find it difficult to believe, incidentally, that Wilde, had he lived another few decades, would have developed an infatuation, as Shaw did, first for Mussolini and later Stalin.

Historical facts must be worth something. Wilde espoused precisely the "art for art's sake" outlook to which you object. Let me quote a few passages to make the point perfectly clear. In *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde wrote: "Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines." In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he formulated his well-known view: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all," and concluded, "All art is quite useless." In *The Critic as Artist*, perhaps his most important essay, Wilde noted that "the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" and that "the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion."

The real issue is not whether Wilde held the views of an aesthete, this is a matter of historical record, but to what extent, if any, they are incompatible with his socialist convictions--and ours.

Of course anyone has the right to challenge the depth of Wilde's convictions. Philistine critics simply write off *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* as an aberration or an act of insincerity, or labor to prove that Wilde's notion of "socialism" had nothing in common with the Marxist conception, etc. I think a serious study of the matter would demonstrate that in writing *The Soul of Man* Wilde summed up long-held anticapitalist views.

I should point out as well that my original article did not suggest, nor am I suggesting now, that you are obliged to subscribe uncritically to Wilde's outlook. There is much in him that is self-consciously paradoxical, modish or merely irritating. Rosa Luxemburg regarded Wilde as simply a drawing-room socialist. It is your privilege to draw the same conclusion, but I think it would be a mistaken one.

One of the problems with your letter, in my view, is that you tend to operate with formal categories. Socialists (whom you approve of) over here, aesthetes (of whom you don't approve) over there, and never the twain shall meet. Life is not so simple. "Here," as Trotsky wrote in *Literature and Revolution*, "we must bring in a little dialectics."

The central task, I believe, is to provide the basis for a Marxist-critical reading of Wilde, by which I mean separating out, to the best of one's ability, the objectively-truthful elements from what was historically limiting and limited in his work. We read him, in other words, from our standpoint and for our purposes. One might take a cue from Wilde himself who noted that "when the work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put in its lips to say"; and that "To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own" (*The Critic as Artist*).

Let us assume then, if only for the sake of argument, that Wilde was a serious thinker and sincere in his socialism, however he may have understood it. The question remains: what is our own attitude toward the phrase "art for art's sake" and the outlook it seems to imply?

At first glance, this catch-phrase seems quite antithetical to Marxism. And indeed considered as the historical rallying cry of definite artistic schools it has not played a particularly wholesome role. No one is obliged to agree with French writer Theophile Gautier (1811-72), one of the popularizers of the slogan "*l'art pour l'art*," who praised the poet Charles Baudelaire for having upheld "the absolute autonomy of art and for not admitting that poetry has any aim but itself, or any mission but to excite in the soul of the reader the sensation of beauty, in the absolute sense of the term" (quoted by Plekhanov in *Art and Social Life*). "Pure art," as Leon Trotsky and Andre Breton noted in their "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art," of 1938, "generally serves the thoroughly impure ends of the forces of reaction."

Plekhanov was attempting to prove, in that passage you found objectionable, that sociological and historical causes must be sought to explain why, in a given period, large numbers of artists view their work as the play of pure forms. He associated this outlook with a mood of disappointment often produced by the previous failure of attempts to radically transform society. To put it somewhat crudely, when artists become discouraged with the prospects of changing the external world, they turn inward and tend to become fixated by the inner workings, the purely formal side of their own activity.

In any event, in his *Literature and Revolution* Trotsky remarked that the quarrels about "pure art" and tendentious art "do not become us. Materialistic dialectics are above this." Art does its work "*quite independently* [my emphasis] of whether it appears in a given case under the flag of a 'pure' or of a frankly tendentious art."

If we set aside, however, the historical associations of the phrase "art for art's sake" and consider it on its own merits, the question becomes somewhat more complex. The content of the phrase is then determined by how one defines art and what one takes to be its objective significance.

In this regard, let me speak frankly about an aspect of your letter that I found troubling. It did not convince me that you have given sufficient thought to what is peculiar to art as a form of human activity. There are those, and I don't believe you would deliberately place yourself in their company, who write or speak about "art" and mean, in fact, a political or moral message attractively packaged. The works created on the basis of such conceptions, which are simply the aesthetic (more or less) fleshing out of the author's social conceptions, have little lasting impact on anyone, because they do not proceed from a profound place and cannot locate one in the spectator either. I agree fully with Wilde that the "real artist ... does not first conceive an idea, and then say to himself, 'I will put my idea into a complex metre of fourteen lines'" (*The Critic as Artist*).

I would like you, Mr. Evans, to consider the following: does art embrace within its scope problems and subject matter that are distinct from those treated by science, politics, philosophy and ethics? Does it make use of distinct materials? If not, if its role overlaps substantially with, or can even be *replaced* by other forms of social consciousness, why does art exist?

In our view art is a relatively autonomous field of human activity, with its own history and laws, and concerns. Art cannot be reduced to the reformulation, in verse or on canvas, of political and philosophical themes. It represents a distinct, aesthetic approach to the world that has to be understood on its own terms and its products have to "be judged by its own law, that is, by the law of art" (*Literature and Revolution*).

In a sense, Wilde's phrase, "Art never expresses anything but itself," is a truism. The question that follows is: yes, but what is art?

Marxists view art as an objective form of cognizing reality, and, moreover, as "an expression of man's need for a harmonious and complete life, that is to say, his need for those major benefits of which a society of classes has deprived him." (Trotsky, *Art and Politics in Our*

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Epoch.) In that sense, we are for an art that pursues artistic aims, because *we value those aims*. Art, in other words, is not a mere means, it is an end, and an end with enormous implications.

Let me pose the problem in another way. Would anyone challenge the notion of science for science's sake? Should science merely pursue immediate social aims, no matter how pressing? Should Darwin have abandoned the study of evolution, which had no apparent "ethical involvement or sociopolitical function," to use your phrase, and devoted himself to cleaning up the sewer system of Manchester? Is science merely politics or philosophy in a lab coat? In my opinion we have to trust the objective and independent roles of these forms of human endeavor, and their consequences for *the total life of society*. Would anyone deny Darwin's subversive influence, in the broadest sense, on modern society? Or the influence of a Shakespeare, or a Van Gogh, or, for that matter, of a Wilde?

This view, which I take to be the position held by the classical exponents of scientific socialism, does not accord with what passes today for "Marxism" or left-wing thought on the university campuses and elsewhere. Postmodernism, for example, entirely rejects art's cognitive and disruptive power, viewing it merely as a form of ruling class ideological cement. Its advocates would consider outrageous the notion that art has an objective, universal significance, a significance that can be separated from the individual--a helpless object, virtually a construct of bourgeois influences--who produces it.

The standpoint of populism or vulgar radicalism does not have anything in common with genuine Marxism either, in my view, with its insistence, in the manner of a small shopkeeper, on the immediate utilitarian value of any artistic tendency or work. Nor, of course, does the outlook of Stalinism, which fed ignorantly off existing radical-populist traditions and turned them, at gunpoint, into something quite monstrous: "Socialist Realism," "art" produced by toadies in the service of a counterrevolutionary bureaucracy.

Our view is that when art is truest to its own, distinct purposes it cuts a path closest to that of the social revolution. What are those purposes? The question is not a simple one. Art, it seems to me, navigates freely between the inner and the outer worlds, between the world dominated by the striving, in Trotsky's phrase, for "a harmonious and complete life" and the world of immediate reality. In my view art is very much bound up with the struggle, as old as human consciousness, to shape the world, including human relations, in accordance with beauty and the requirements of freedom, with life as it ought to be. This naturally leads the serious artist to reject the oppressive, antihuman conditions of class society, to "the total negation of that reality," in Breton's words (*Marvelous versus Mystery*).

It is also the case, in my opinion, that artistic form has an independent and objectively significant power, an ability to enrich spiritual experience and refine feeling, which ought not to be underestimated. I think that Wilde was correct as well when he said that in the "mere loveliness of the materials employed [by artists] there are latent elements of culture," and that "Technique is personality" (*The Critic as Artist*).

If these last comments disturb you, I'm sorry of course, but I think one has to consider the conditions of contemporary cultural life. What dominates today?--art for the sake of profit, art for the sake of one's career and prestige, art for the sake of one's race or nationality. I won't make any secret of the fact that I believe that a serious dedication to the cause of art, conceived of as the penetration and representation by aesthetic means of reality in all its dimensions, would be an entirely worthy undertaking at the present time. Such a dedication to artistic truth would, in my estimation, *inevitably* put the artist on the same general trajectory as the socialist workers' movement. I believe a critical examination of artistic tendencies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before Stalinism discredited socialism in the minds of masses of people, would verify this contention.

Let me recall once again the words of Trotsky and Breton in the 1938 manifesto, referred to above: "Our conception of the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence on the fate of society. We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution. But the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art."

These are some of the issues I believe ought to be considered in response to the questions you raised in your letter. I certainly intend to expand on some of these themes in the lectures I will give at the educational school to be held by the Socialist Equality Party of Australia in Sydney in January. I invite you to attend and continue the discussion.

Sincerely,

David Walsh

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