

THE RELATION BETWEEN  
CREATION AND CRITICISM  
IN THE WORK OF  
MATTHEW ARNOLD AND OSCAR WILDE

An Essay by  
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This essay intends to discuss the relation between creation and criticism in the work of Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde. The latter has dealt with this subject explicitly and in great detail in his essay ‘The Critic as Artist’, which therefore serves as my main reference as far as Oscar Wilde’s opinion(s) is concerned. ‘The Critic as Artist’ in turn makes extensive use of direct references and indirect allusions to Matthew Arnold to fuel its discussion. Since Oscar Wilde has already chosen him as both, a “boxing partner” and an ally, it appears to be only obvious to follow this choice. The examination of Arnold’s viewpoint focuses on ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’, because this text is the most relevant one for the questions under investigation.

The relation between creation and criticism can be divided into the following points of examination: First and most obvious of all there is the relation between the actual artistic creation, i.e. work of art, and its criticism. What function does criticism have concerning the individual work of art? Furthermore: How closely is criticism bound to an individual work? This leads to the second aspect, the relationship between artistic creation in general and criticism. Is it the purpose of criticism to review the development of art or does it actively take part in this development? Since both, Arnold and Wilde, stress the importance of art as an expression of culture and life for the national and general human society, this also involves the question of criticism’s creativity regarding the development of society. Finally and, as far as Wilde is concerned, primarily, there is the aspect of the ‘Critic as Artist’: Are the creative and the critical faculty different from each other? Can the critic be regarded as an artist?

As expected, the opinions Arnold and Wilde express in their work differ from each other. But they do so gradually rather than fundamentally, so that a surprisingly strong continuation between both critics can be observed, as I hope to show in the following closer examination.

As the title suggests, Matthew Arnold’s essay ‘The Function of Criticism in the Present Time’<sup>1</sup> focuses on the role of criticism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew Arnold, *Lectures And Essays In Criticism*, ed. R. H. Super, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1962), Vol. III, in the following text the book will be referred to by Arnold, III and the page number in paranthesis

Arnold's main concern is the function criticism has in relation to the development of art, even culture, in general. From his point of view criticism is closely linked to any artistic activity since the "creating of a current of true and fresh ideas" (Arnold, III, 271) is the responsibility of criticism. The "creative power works with elements" (Arnold, III, 260), he argues, which are "ideas" in the case of literature, and "those elements are not in its own control. Nay, they are more within the control of the critical power." (Arnold, III, 261) In this respect art is completely dependent on the critic who has to provide these ideas by "know[ing] the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known." (Arnold, III, 270) The critic thereby prepares the ground for artistic activity (Arnold, III, 260).

Effective criticism, therefore, is a condition for creative activity. Arnold expresses this quite clearly: "Criticism first; a time of true creative activity, perhaps, . . . when criticism has done its work." (Arnold, III, 269)

In order to secure a good basis for the production of valuable works of art the critic has to fulfill certain conditions and do his work with a certain attitude. First of all he has to be "disinterested". This can be achieved

by keeping aloof from what is called 'the practical view of things;' by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas . . . which criticism has really nothing to do with. (Arnold, III, 269-70)

It is a state of detachment that leads to independent criticism. Again and again Arnold reminds the critic of the importance of this independence. He complains that there is no independent criticism to be found in the England of his present time, a condition he intends to change.

Although Arnold emphasizes that criticism should not form alliances with any kind of political, social or humanitarian interest he is convinced that this attitude will not damage but help society. He hopes that the "more free speculative treatment of things" he proposes, "may perhaps one day make its benefits felt even in this [the practical] sphere, but in a natural and thence irresistible manner." (Arnold, III, 275)

Chris Baldick points out that "the dynamic of mass movements concerned Arnold greatly at this time"<sup>2</sup>. He was interested in "a strategy for containing radical new movements within traditional frameworks in the interest of social and cultural harmony;"<sup>3</sup> Baldick proposes that this, in fact, political interest stands behind Arnold's concept of "disinterestedness"<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, Arnold urges

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<sup>2</sup>Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1983) p. 15

<sup>3</sup>Baldick, p. 22

<sup>4</sup>Baldick, p. 22

Let us think of quietly enlarging our stock of true and fresh ideas, and not, as soon as we get an idea or half an idea, be running out with it into the street, and trying to make it rule there. Our ideas will, in the end, shape the world all the better for maturing a little. (Arnold, III, 282)

But Arnold is not only interested in stabilizing society. Criticism literally has the function to criticize society by “keep[ing] man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarising.” Criticism has “to lead him [man] towards a perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things.” (Arnold, III, 271) In order to achieve this criticism has to be disinterested and independent, since “polemical practical criticism makes men blind” (Arnold, III, 271). Arnold’s criticism is therefore not only necessary for the creation of art but also for the creation of a better society. In fact, art and society are closely linked in Arnold’s worldview. He perceives his present time and the near future as a time of crises in which religion, believes and tradition threaten to dissolve.<sup>5</sup> The final rescue for mankind will be poetry:

we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.<sup>6</sup>

Since the existence of - in Arnold’s sense - valuable poetry that could fulfill this function depends on the current of fresh ideas provided by the right kind of criticism, human society as a whole depends on it.

Although criticism is placed into this all important position by Arnold, he does not call it a creation in its own right, at least not completely. He suggests that creative power can also be exercised in criticising (Arnold, III, 260) and states that “it is not denied to criticism to have it [creative activity]” (Arnold, III, 285), but then he closes his essay with the remark: “Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; . . . there is the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon.” (Arnold, III, 285) Criticism is a creative power, but only a second rate one.

Arnold’s most controversial statement is concerned with the relationship between criticism and the world of objects and ideas, a category which of course also contains the individual work of art: ‘It is the business of the critical power . . . ’to see the object as in itself it really is.’ (Arnold, III, 261)

Arnold never explained the metaphysical implications of his statement and Wendell Harris suggests that, because he cannot show that the object in itself indeed

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<sup>5</sup>see Matthew Arnold, ‘The Study Of Poetry’, in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Victorian Prose and Poetry* edited by L. Trilling and H. Bloom, (Oxford University Press: New York, London, Toronto, 1973) pp. 233-54, (p. 233-34)

<sup>6</sup>Arnold, The Study Of Poetry, p. 234

is a possible object of knowledge, “we are left with only the effects or impressions of objects”<sup>7</sup>. This is of course the conclusion Walter Pater draws in his preface to *The Renaissance* where he states that “the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly.”<sup>8</sup> Wendell goes on to conclude that “if we have only impressions, we are seeing the object as ‘in itself’ it is not;”<sup>9</sup>. which is exactly Oscar Wilde’s position in this question.<sup>10</sup> Wendell therefore claims that although Arnold’s and Wilde’s opinions seem to exclude each other completely, Wilde can, in fact, be seen as a continuation of Arnold: “The total views of Pater and Wilde modify those of Arnold, but the three clarify and in a sense justify each other. Arnold’s position, carried far enough, implies Wilde’s.”<sup>11</sup> It is this continuation and implication that I want show in the discussion of the relation Wilde sees between criticism and creation.

At first sight the position Wilde puts criticism in sounds diametrically opposed to that Arnold assigns to it. As the title of Wilde’s essay suggests, his main concern is to establish the critic as artist: “Criticism is in itself an art . . . Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent.” (Wilde, CW, 1124) In Wilde’s view there is no difference between the creative and the critical activity since both do exactly the same thing: “It [criticism] works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry?” (Wilde, CW, 1125) The consequence of putting criticism on an equal level with creation, of, indeed, calling it creation, is that all the characteristics of artistic creation, as Wilde sees them, also apply to criticism.

First of all criticism is independent in the sense that it is not its purpose to resemble and mirror the work of art it criticises:

Criticism is no more to be judged by any low standard of imitation or resemblance than is the work of poet or sculptor. The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought.” (Wilde, CW, 1124)

Wilde explains his view of the relation between the work of art and life and nature

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<sup>7</sup>Wendell V. Harris, ‘Arnold, Pater, Wilde, and the Object as in Themselves They See It’, in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol. XI (1971), 733-47, (p. 747)

<sup>8</sup>Walter Pater, ‘The Renaissance’, in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Victorian Prose and Poetry* edited by L. Trilling and H. Bloom, (Oxford University Press: New York, London, Toronto, 1973) pp. 313-320, (p. 314)

<sup>9</sup>Wendell, p. 747

<sup>10</sup>see Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist’, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, (Harper Collins Publishers: Glasgow 1994) pp. 1108-1156, in the following text this book will be referred to as Wilde, CW and the page-number in parenthesis

<sup>11</sup>Wendell, p. 747

in his essay 'The Decay of Lying'<sup>12</sup>. His "doctrine" is: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. . . . external Nature also imitates Art. The only effects that she can show us are effects that we have already seen through poetry or in paintings." (Wilde, CW, 1091)

Therefore the artist is not only the creator of his work of art but also, in some sense, of life and nature, and exactly the same can be applied to the relationship between the critic and the work of art he criticises. In a way, the critic creates the work of art, since "the meaning of any beautiful created thing [and of course the aesthetic critic is only concerned with this kind of creation] is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it as it was in the soul who wrought it." (Wilde, CW, 1127) And Wilde adds: "there is no such thing as Shakespeare's Hamlet." (Wilde, CW, 1131) When the critic is seen, as Wilde says, "at least" partially as the creator of a work of art, there really is nothing to mirror and resemble. When "there is no such thing as Shakespeare's Hamlet" because "when the work is finished it has . . . an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say" (Wilde, CW, 1127), there is no need for criticism to "confine itself . . . to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting it as final." (Wilde, CW, 1127)

It is then only consequent to say that "to the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own." (Wilde, CW, 1128) This statement implies two further consequences. First of all the critic's work is subjective, since "all artistic creation is absolutely subjective." (Wilde, CW, 1142) Criticism is also impressionistic. It is as much the critic's aim "to chronicle his own impressions" (Wilde, CW, 1125) as it is the artist's. The difference is that both use another point of reference or starting point. Where the artist works with the raw material of life and nature the critic 'deals with materials that others have . . . purified for him, and to which imaginative form and colour have already been added.' (Wilde, CW, 1125) Criticism can therefore be called "a creation within a creation" (Wilde, CW, 1125), it can even be seen as "more creative than creation" (Wilde, CW, 1125) in Wilde's terms, since "it has least reference to any standard external to itself" (Wilde, CW, 1125) and forms its impressions on the basis of already purified material in a more perfect way (see Wilde, CW, 1141).

As I have noted earlier, Wilde's idea of criticism as the highest form of creation does sound completely opposed to Arnold's opinion of criticism as a second rate creation. But Wilde's whole attitude is connected to the question whether and how anybody can see the object as in itself it is. Arnold claims that this is possible, although he cannot and does not try to explain to the reader how this might work. It is, moreover, not very convincing to make statements and judgments, as Arnold does, and simply call this process "seeing the thing as in itself it is" without giving detailed conditions for this kind of seeing. Therefore, the "impression" arises that Wilde is not doing something that much different

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<sup>12</sup>Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, (Harper Collins Publishers: Glasgow 1994) pp. 1071-1093

from Arnold. What he does is simply calling it by a different – and perhaps more honest – name.

The above mentioned sense of a strong continuation between Arnold and Wilde becomes even more obvious in the relation both critics see between criticism and the development of artistic creation in general. Like Arnold Wilde observes that “it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand.” (Wilde, CW, 1119) It is the critical faculty that brings innovation to art and consequently criticism plays a crucial role in the development of artistic creation. As Wilde explains further - again sounding very much like Arnold:

An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age possesses no art at all. . . . But there has never been a creative age that has not been critical also. (Wilde, CW, 1119)

In the end Wilde’s aesthetic critic is not only a creator of the highest form, not only the driving force of the development of the arts, but also, by bringing all this about, the creator of culture: “It is criticism . . . that by concentration makes culture possible. It takes the uncombersome mass of creative work, and distils it into a finer essence.” (Wilde, CW, 1152) And again the reader is reminded of Arnold when Wilde claims that it is the critic who by creating the intellectual atmosphere of the age (see Wilde, CW, 1151) and by “the mere fact of his own existence” influences human society:

He will represent the flawless type. In him the culture of the century will see itself realised. . . . The critic may, indeed, desire to exercise influence; but, if so, he will concern himself not with the individual, but with the age, which he will seek to wake into consciousness, and to make responsive, creating in it new desires and appetites, and lending it his larger vision and his nobler moods. (Wilde, CW, 1149)

Wilde’s vision of criticism will lead to an attitude of cosmopolitanism, to an annihilation of race-prejudices and even to a united Europe.(Wilde, CW, 1152-53) At the end of Wilde’s essay the reader meets again Arnold’s disinterestedness modified by Wilde’s position that there is no such thing as seeing an object as in itself it is:

It is criticism that, recognizing no position as final , and refusing to bind itself by the shallow shibboleths of any sect or school, creates that serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake, and loves it not less because it is known to be unattainable . . . ‘sweet reasonableness’ of which Arnold spoke so wisely.

Oscar Wilde's style does not come naturally to the reader's mind when he thinks of sweet reasonableness. On the other hand I hope to have shown that Arnold is less reasonable and objective than he pretends and probably wants to be.

Both critics share very similar ideas about the relationship between creation and criticism. Both call criticism a creative activity and disagree mainly concerning the degree to which it can be regarded as creative. While Arnold is willing to nominate artistic creation as the higher and more "real" form of creativity, Wilde sees criticism as the highest form of creation. Both critics agree in the importance of criticism for the development of art in general by providing innovation through new ideas and new forms. And since both view art and culture as essential for human society both critics believe that proper criticism will influence society in its development. Arnold and Wilde disagree completely in the question whether the critic (or artist) should see the object of their criticism as in itself it is or whether this is impossible and the critic therefore always sees the object as in itself it is not. It has been suggested in this essay that this disagreement mainly occurs in the attempt to come to terms with metaphysical and epistemological problems which Arnold leaves out of his discussion and Wilde addresses more directly.

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