

Criticism after Romanticism

José Angel García Landa
 Universidad de Zaragoza
 1987

1. Moral criticism
- 2. Art for art's sake**
- 3. Impressionism and subjectivism**
4. Scholarship and literary history
5. Sociological approaches
6. Realism and naturalism

2. Art for Art's Sake

- 2.1. Forerunners and influences
- 2.2. Edgar Allan Poe
- 2.3. Walter Pater
- 2.4. Oscar Wilde

2.1. Forerunners and Influences

One possible response of artistic theory to the scientist attacks was the traditional vindication of the cultural role of poetry, be it in Arnold's, Shelley's or Marx's way. Another possible line of argument to counter those attacks is the assertion of poetry as an autotelic activity, one which does not need to be judged or justified on the basis of criteria external to itself. "It could be set up as a legitimate pursuit, apart from, and perhaps even in defiance of, the rival norms of ethics and politics" (W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* 476).

The ground for this justification is to be found, of course, in the only evident effect of art on the audience: pleasure. Since Horace's "aut delectare," pleasure has been an important value criterion in most theories of art, although usually subject to "instruction." This view was most pronounced in some Renaissance hedonist theories and the aestheticism of the 18th century, which sees art mainly as a source of pleasure for the imagination and even of downright sensuous pleasure. The romantic divinization of art and the artist also strengthened any possible claim of the artist to a peculiar sphere of his activity. Even if the main Romantic critics

do not hold that art is an autotelic activity, they stress that it is in a way unavoidable and compulsive for reasons of its own.

Kant's theory had isolated the purely aesthetic kind of pleasure, and had in a way paved the way for the theories of the 19th century. It is important to see Kant's ideas of "purposiveness without a purpose" or "pure aesthetic pleasure" in their proper context, which is a transcendental philosophical investigation, and not a psychology of artistic creation or reception; Kant's views on art as a whole are very far from seeing in it an autotelic activity. But the popular versions of his theory did not make such fine distinctions; the phrase "art for art's sake" seems to occur for the first time in the lectures and writings of French romantics influenced by Kant. Kant's ideas are diffused in France, vaguely simplified, by Madame de Staël, Benjamin Constant, Cousin and Jouffroy. Constant speaks of

l'art pour l'art without purpose, for all purpose perverts art. But art attains the purpose which it does not have.¹

This is still a far cry from art being a "useless" activity. It is during the late 1830's and the 1840's that "l'art pour l'art" becomes a popular phrase, due to a great extent to the writings of the French poet Théophile Gautier (f.i., the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*). "The new idea spread out pervasively and subtly; it was atmospheric" (Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* 478). "Beauty" and "Art" are the favourite words of the criticism of this age. "'Beauty' was something very pure, very different from everything else. So was 'art'" (Wimsatt and Brooks 485). Some of the later propounders of this idea proudly claim that art is completely useless. James Whistler, for instance, attacked Ruskin's moralistic brand of criticism, and spoke of art as being "selfishly occupied with her own perfection" and having no desire to teach. But then they sometimes found themselves hard pressed when they attempted to prove it. Proving that art is useless seems to be almost as difficult as proving that it is useful. Most of these theories stress the internal coherence and autonomy of art to a greater extent than mimetic or moral theories, but in the end they always try to relate in a significant way art to human life in some way or another.

Moral or didactic theories of art usually are more concerned about content, while pleasure is associated to form. Accordingly, Art for Art's Sake will disregard the content, and divinize the form. Form is the secret of art, it is everything. The content is a mere foothold, a necessary material to hold form, but valueless in itself. At their best, these views drew a sharp line between the artistic and the practical approach to a subject; at their worst, they propounded a divorce of content and form in quite a superficial way: form is identified merely with imagery and metrical patterns. Intrincacy and experiment in variety are valued, for instance, in the poetic current of the second half of the nineteenth century known as Parnassianism.

¹ Benjamin Constant, *Journal intime* (entry for February 10, 1804), qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 476.

The selection of contents is in accordance with these principles: the trivial, the morbid, the exotic and bizarre, the ugly, the artificial will all be tempting to the poet. There is a reaction against self-revelation in poems and the flow of personal emotion which had been so fashionable only some years before: the poet is to keep aloof from his work as well as from the world, shut up in his ivory tower. He is no longer an inspired being or a prophet: rather, he is a skilled workman, a jeweler polishing his miniature jewels until they reach perfection. The poet becomes a kind of mystic of triviality.

There is a tendency to stress the formal aspect of the poem, to see it as an object, with a definite texture and outline, and not as a discourse. We find titles like *Émaux et Camées* ("Enamels and Cameos"), *Proverbs in Porcelain*, etc. "Precision" is a key word. Music is another analogy, because of its intrinsic formal character. Pater says that "all arts tend towards the condition of music"²; poetry will become for many a musical game of forms and evocations (cf. Gautier's poem "Symphonie en blanc majeur"). This will continue during the 20th century in the theory of painting (above all abstract painting), after it has died out in literature. Aesthetic emotions will be said to come from "significant form," while the represented content is irrelevant. Such formalist aestheticism is the doctrine of Clive Bell, (*Art*, 1914) and Roger Fry (*Vision and Design*, 1920). It remains to prove that these "significant forms" are not tied in some obscure way to a represented content: the curved line is more "organic" or "alive" than the straight one, and the circle is linked to the image of the sun or the moon (Wimsatt and Brooks 490). In the early avant-gardes of 20th century in Russia or France, we find "trans-rational" or "pure poetry" in the sense of mere meaningless sounds. But most people may have serious doubts about the value of such poems. "What is not quite possible in lines and colors may be even less possible in words" (WB 490).

Most of the poets or theorists listed in the ranks of this movement seem to adhere only to some principles of art for art's sake, or to adhere to this idea for a short time before their principles became settled. Among the poets and critics who toyed at one or another moment with this doctrine we may mention Gautier, Victor Hugo, De Quincey, Stevenson, Poe, Baudelaire, Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Whistler, Pater, Mallarmé, Henry James, Oscar Wilde, etc.

As regards criticism, these views are usually linked to a suppression of the barriers between criticism and art. Insofar as criticism is creative, it is art and it is positive; insofar as it is abstract and rational, it is useless. Criticism for criticism's sake, the logical outcome of these views, is usually impressionistic criticism. In the 20th century another attitude will emerge, though, with some links to autotelic views of art: formalist criticism, which seeks to unravel the mysteries of that purely aesthetic element, form.

² Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* ; qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 490.

2.2. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

"One of the most theatrical presentations [of the doctrine of Art for Art's Sake] occurs in the essays and reviews of the American Gothic story-teller and poet Edgar Allan Poe" (Wimsatt and Brooks 472). Poe's best essays are "The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Poetic Principle."³ In them he expounds his melancholy and vague concept of pure beauty. Beauty is not located in the poem, but in the very experience of itself; it is not a quality, but an effect ("Philosophy of Composition"). This effect may be produced by the poet provided that he keep to certain principles. A poem must not be unduly long or short: he does not accept the epic as a poetic form.

I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase , a long poem, is simply a flat contradiction in terms A poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. ("Principle" 564).

And, as excitement is transient, a poem must not extend beyond one phase of excitement. While he warns that

undue brevity . . . degenerates into epigrammatism,

Poe is satisfied that the "epic mania is . . . dying out" ("Principle" 565). Poe is against the ludicrous, and also against passion. His favourite poetic emotion is melancholy: a taint of sadness, he says, is always connected with the highest beauty.

Most of all he is against "the heresy of the didactic" ("Principle" 565). A poem must not be justified in terms of truth or morals, but only in terms of beauty. It has its justification in itself:

Under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble than this very poem—this poem per se—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem for the poem's sake. ("Principle" 566).

The spirit of truth, which culminates in the scientific spirit, is the very opposite of the poetic spirit. It is not that poetry is the enemy of truth: it has nothing to do with truth. The poetical instinct, the instinct of the beautiful, has its own place in the human mind, distinct from the spheres of truth and morals.

Dividing the world of mind into its three most obvious distinctions, we have the pure intellect, taste and the moral sense. I place taste in

³ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," (1846). Rpt. in *The American Tradition in Literature*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty and E. Hudson Long (New York: Norton, 1962 ; 871-881; "The Poetic Principle" (1848); rpt. in Hazard Adams, *Critical Theory since Plato* 564-574.

the middle, because it is just this position which in the mind it occupies An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is this, plainly, a sense of the beautiful. ("Principle" 566)

This instinct reveals man's unquenchable thirst for perfection, infinity and immortality. Like many other Romantics, Poe tends to separate poetry from poems, and to see in it something which is diffused in all the arts. Several modes may develop the poetic sentiment: poetry, painting, music... Music is the nearest to the creation of supernal beauty. "Still the picture is hazy. Ethereal vagueness and melancholy, evaporation of languorous and pallid loveliness wreathes the figures of Poe" (Wimsatt and Brooks 479). Wimsatt and Brooks believe that with Poe Romantic theory is on the point of vanishing into thin air, out of pure vagueness.

"We discover pronounced, if diffused, Kantian elements in Poe's system " (Wimsatt and Brooks 478). But they are misrepresented and psychologized. For Kant, the study of taste is a kind of bridge between the study of morals and the study of pure reason; Poe's system is not transcendental, but psychological, and as such it becomes absurd. Poe's poetry is a softened and simplified version of Coleridge, and his essays bear the same relationship to the *Biographia*. Poetry, for him, starts with the Romantics. He is remarkably unable to understand the design of the *Iliad* or of *Paradise Lost*, while he is fond of quoting some rather bad poems. For Henry James, Poe was "probably the most complete and exquisite example of *provincialism* ever prepared for the edification of men"; for T.S. Eliot, he was a "heroically courageous critic . . . a critic of the first rank." A critic who did not believe in criticism, at any rate: Poe says that the beauties of any poem, if they are not self-evident, are not worth pointing at.

In a review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe extends his ideal of brevity to the composition of prose.

In almost all classes of composition, the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance. It is clear, moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting.⁴

So we see that Poe tends to place the unity of the work not so much in the structure of the work itself as in the effect on the reader: the unity of the reading experience is essential for the unity of the work. Novels he sees as a genre "demanding no unity" ("Philosophy" 873). The short story is the most artistic prose genre, because the unity of effect on the reader can be preserved and calculated.

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. . . . In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. ("Philosophy")

⁴ Rpt. in Bradley et al. 866.

But Poe does not identify prose and poetry. Prose is more "impure" or lower than poetry; its aim is not simply beauty, but above all, truth. The tale is not the medium in which a writer should aim at pure beauty. This has, however its advantages: there can be more variety in a tale than in a poem, both of subject and of tone; the humorous, the sarcastic, etc., are forbidden in poetry but legitimate in prose.

We must note that Poe is advocating a hyper-conscious theory of writing. Everything is controlled by the authorial intention. The end of the work must be complete in the writer's mind in some way before actual composition begins: there is to be no improvisation or change of plans during the writing. Poe stands at the opposite end from novelists like Dickens or Trollope, who worked without a pre-established plan and often improvised their plots as they went along. Poe's conception is plot-centered:

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention. ("Hawthorne" 871).

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe applies this optimistically hyperconscious theory of writing to the composition of poetry; he analyses the way in which he himself composed his poem "The Raven."

It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem. ("Philosophy" 873)

So he chose a speaking bird to emphasize the lover's solitude, black in colour, the short chorus "Nevermore", etc. Poe "was concerned to demonstrate that a poem, like any other work of art, is fabricated of materials selected of consciously determined purposes; that these plastic potentials are shaped by the creative intelligence to make them most useful in communicating the intended effect or idea" (Bradley et al. 871). This view is completely opposed to the Romantic, inspirationalist one. Poe sees the writer as a craftsman, a conscientious maker of polished literary artifacts. He laughs at the inspirationalist view of poetry, and he insists that composition is a matter of defining ideas, of selecting, correcting, erasing, interpolating. Of course, just as the seer-poets may have disguised the actual process of composition to suit their inspirational ideals, so Poe raises in us a strong suspicion of having altered the facts and give us an over-conscious account of his own activity.

2.3. Walter Pater (1839-1894)

"Often considered the father of aestheticism, Pater set forth the principles of impressionistic criticism in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* [1873]" (Adams, *Critical Theory since Plato* 642). Of course, he was indebted to many critics before him most noticeably Arnold. Pater is the enemy of abstract definitions of beauty. We must see the effect of art on *us*. The aesthetic critic regards works as powers or forces capable of producing each an unique sensation, having each its own wholly characteristic properties. "All aesthetic judgements must finally be referred to the reader's receptivity, his taste. The critic's worth depends on the refinement of his temperament, since objective standards of aesthetic judgement are abstract and useless. For Pater, criticism itself becomes a work of art" (Adams 642). So, instead of having a scholarly equipment or a philosophy of art, the critic must have a *temperament*: "the power to be deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects."⁵ The object of the critic is to trace genius and discover its virtues. Pater's work is the culmination of romantic reservations against abstract thought: he rejects the exclusivity of rational knowledge alongside with his rejection of materialism.

In the conclusion to his *Studies*, Pater holds that experience, in its fleeting transitoriness, is an end in itself, that we must not ask any further fruit of it.

To treat life in the spirit of the art, is to make life a thing in which ends and means are identified: to encourage such treatment, the true moral significance of art and poetry.⁶

Theories are at the service of experience; they are not its justification. Pater advises his readers to feel greatly, to live their lives led by a great poetic passion and a poetic wisdom:

Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake. (*Studies* 645)

This was interpreted at the time as an appeal to hedonism: Pater had not meant that, and he suppressed this conclusion in later editions. So, art for art's sake is a kind of quintessence of life for life's sake. This is what made T.S. Eliot say that Pater's theory of art for art's sake was ultimately a moral theory, and not an esthetic one. Eliot sees in Pater's brand of art-for-art's sake an offspring of Arnold's ideal of Culture as a substitute for Religion: "Art for Art's Sake is the offspring of Arnold's Culture; and we can hardly venture to say that it is even a perversion of Arnold's doctrine,

⁵ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (select. in Adams 643-645) 644.

⁶ Qtd. in T. S. Eliot, "Arnold and Pater" (1930); rpt. in Eliot's *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 439.

considering how very vague and ambiguous that doctrine is" ("Arnold and Pater" 434).

2.4. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

Wilde's essays collected in *Intentions* (1891) are the most purposive English exponent of the movement of Art for Art's Sake.

Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything because it expresses nothing.⁷

He proudly repeats Jeremy Bentham's phrase that "All art is useless"⁸; more than that, "all art is immoral."⁹ Disinterest is an important quality in art: we must be indifferent to the subject-matter of a work: it had better not be modern, lest we feel unduly involved with it. Wilde, like Poe before him, corrupts some Kantian ideas about beauty, extending them to the whole realm of art. Art had said that in the experience of pure beauty there is an element of internal purposiveness, not that art had no purpose.

In his essay "The Decay of Lying" (1889)¹⁰ Wilde deliberately associates art with lying, in order to shock his readers. Truth and lies, he says, are a matter of style in a work of art. Like all thinkers since Romanticism, he speaks against the idea of art being an imitation of nature. Nature is imperfect, and it is unworthy of art's imitation. Nature is unfinished, imperfect and irrational. Art is a higher thing than just imitation: it is creative, it brings to perfection things which Nature can't complete (Wilde humorously relates this idea to Aristotle's conceptions). Art is a kind of subjection of nature to the human mind. So, Wilde is against pat realism: the purpose of art is best attained in art which is not "true to nature", in art which lies.

Lying and poetry are arts—arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other. (674)

Wilde opposes the worship of fact which he notices in the contemporary naturalist novelists. Balzac was a great liar and a great creator, an artist: Zola is true to life and morally right, but he is an insufficient and disgusting artist. Art needs selection and exaggeration, and these are lacking in the naturalists. It is not tied to nature, but to the spiritual reality of man beyond nature:

Art finds her own perfection within, not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror Hers are the "forms more real than living man," and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies. (681)

⁷ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 485.

⁸ Oscar Wilde, preface to *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 485

⁹ Wilde, qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 486.

¹⁰ Rpt. in Adams, *Critical Theory since Plato* 673-686.

Art is not an imitation, neither of nature nor of social life. Rather, nature and social life imitate art. Art is the creation of the patterns which we perceive in reality.

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace, curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to this particular school of art. You smile. Consider the matter from a scientific or a metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I am right. For what is nature? She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till art had invented them. Now, it must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold. And so, let us be humane, and invite art to turn her wonderful eyes elsewhere. She has done so already, indeed. That white quivering sunlight that one sees now in France, with its strange blotches of mauve, and its restless violet shadows, is her latest fancy, and, on the whole, nature reproduces it quite admirably. (682-683)

Art makes us see: in a way, it creates the world by creating the instrument of our vision. Likewise, Hamlet's sadness has saddened the world, has turned all of us into Hamlets. What follows from Wilde's reasoning is not that art is useless, but rather that art has a great responsibility: it must lie in the right way. So, the current decay of lying, the current drive towards realism, is a terrible turn in the history of art. The ancient Greeks always opposed realism:

they felt that it inevitably makes people ugly. (681)

Modern portrait painters want their pictures to look like the people they paint. That is why they are not true artists:

They never paint what they see. They paint what the public sees, and the public never sees anything. (685)

So we must learn to lie again, to lie for the sake of lying, and to make art for art's sake, not for the sake of truth.

Those who do not love beauty more than truth never know the inmost shrine of art.

Besides, realism does not even reach its limited objective. Realism is never realistic: it is felt to be insufficient; nature is always more real than realistic art.

Life goes faster than realism, but romanticism is always in front of life. (686).

It is easy to dismiss Wilde's ideas in a facile way because of their whimsical appearance. "Art in the restricted sense of fine art may not be responsible for as much of our world as Vivian thinks, but when seen to include the popular arts, such as television, publishing, and advertising, it certainly does constantly affect the way we see things" (Adams 672). This conception of the creative capability of art can be linked to Shelley's and Coleridge's ideas in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, Ernst Cassirer (*Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*) will speak of art as a way of making our cultural world: Wilde's ideas must be seen in this light.

So, nature is not the guiding principle of art. Rather, art must guide nature. This is in keeping with the ideas of Baudelaire or many classical critics. But Wilde goes further when he applies the same reasoning to the relationship between art and criticism. Just like art is not subject to nature, criticism is not subject to art. It is an autotelic activity, impressionistic to the extreme. Art exists for its own sake, and so does criticism ("The Critic as Artist"). The idea had already been advanced by F. Schlegel.

Wilde was not content with holding his creed of Art for Art's sake: he *acted* it, believing that life itself ought to be ruled by art, and that social life in particular is a work of art.

I treated art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction.¹¹

Something like this can be found as well in De Quincey and Stevenson. Dandyism, with its curious mixture of the skilfully conventional and the eccentric, with its cult of the witty retort, fashion and outward appearance, was a profession and an art for these writers. Life becomes a work of art, with social intercourse and conversation at the centre of the picture. The dandy cultivates artificiality, refinement and calculated shocking attitudes or opinions (cf. "Of Murder considered as a Fine Art", De Quincey's "Confessions of an English Opium Eater", Baudelaire's "Éloge du Maquillage").

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*; qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 485.

6.3. Impressionism and Subjectivism

The main tenet of impressionistic criticism is that the critic's individual, spontaneous and subjective reaction to the work is the most reliable guide as to its worth and the only reason for the existence of criticism. Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt are the earliest impressionistic critics in England. 'In their works "we encounter . . . a use of metaphor, an overt personal reference, and a Longinian evocation of feeling such as cannot be matched in earlier English criticism" (Wimsatt and Brooks 494). For them criticism is spontaneous response to the work "I say what I think, I think what I feel," says Hazlitt.¹² This attitude will become more common towards the end of the century: then we find the figures of Saintsbury and Quiller-Couch in England, Huneker, Mencken, Nathan and Van Vechten in America. Sensibility is for some of them the only necessary equipment of the critic: they play down the need for a wide knowledge and an analytical mind. The critic is a kind of artist, an imaginative essayist, and the best critic (at least according to T. S. Eliot) will be the artist himself.

Anatole France (1844-1924) is the most radical defender of impressionistic criticism. He is completely lacking in critical principles or method. Of course, this is related to his particular philosophy of the world at large: complete subjectivism, relativism, skepticism and distrust of philosophy, science or any system of knowledge. For him, all novels are autobiographies of the author's spiritual life, and all works of criticism are novels.

The good critic is he who relates the adventures of his soul among masterpieces.¹³

That is because man is irremediably enclosed in his own subjective existence. As any other man, the critic cannot view things apart from his own circumstance, objectively, and pronounce an opinion which is not tied to himself.

The best we can do, it seems to me, is gracefully to recognize this terrible situation and to admit that we speak of ourselves every time we have not the strength to be silent.

To be quite frank, the critic ought to say, "Gentlemen, I am going to talk about myself on the subject of Shakespeare, or Racine, or Pascal, or Goethe, subjects that offer me a beautiful opportunity." (671)

¹² Qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 494.

¹³ Anatole France, *La vie littéraire* ; excerpt in Adams, *Critical Theory since Plato*, 671.