

# 1 THE DECAY OF LYING

2 BY OSCAR WILDE

3  
4 A DIALOGUE.

5 Persons: Cyril and Vivian.

6 Scene: the library of a country house in Nottinghamshire.

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9 CYRIL (coming in through the open window from the terrace).  
10 My dear Vivian, don't coop yourself up all day in the library. It is  
11 a perfectly lovely afternoon. The air is exquisite. There is a mist  
12 upon the woods like the purple bloom upon a plum. Let us go and  
13 lie on the grass, and smoke cigarettes, and enjoy Nature.

14  
15 VIVIAN. Enjoy Nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost  
16 that faculty. People tell us that Art makes us love Nature more  
17 than we loved her before; that it reveals her secrets to us; and that  
18 after a careful study of Corot and Constable we see things in her  
19 that had escaped our observation. My own experience is that the  
20 more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really  
21 reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her  
22 extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition.  
23 Nature has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said,  
24 she cannot carry them out. When I look at a landscape I cannot  
25 help seeing all its defects. It is fortunate for us, however, that  
26 Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have had no art at  
27 all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature  
28 her proper place. As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is a  
29 pure myth. It is not to be found in Nature herself. It resides in the  
30 imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who  
31 looks at her.

32  
33 CYRIL. Well, you need not look at the landscape. You can lie on  
34 the grass and smoke and talk.

35  
36 VIVIAN. But Nature is so uncomfortable. Grass is hard and  
37 dumpy and damp, and full of dreadful black insects. Why, even  
38 Morris' poorest workman could make you a more comfortable

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41 seat than the whole of Nature can. Nature pales before the  
42 furniture of "the street which from Oxford has borrowed its  
43 name," as the poet you love so much once vilely phrased it. I  
44 don't complain. If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would  
45 never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open  
46 air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is  
47 subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure.  
48 Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human  
49 dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life. Out of doors one  
50 becomes abstract and impersonal. One's individuality absolutely  
51 leaves one. And then Nature is so indifferent, so unappreciative.  
52 Whenever I am walking in the park here, I always feel that I am  
53 no more to her than the cattle that browse on the slope, or the  
54 burdock that blooms in the ditch. Nothing is more evident than  
55 that Nature hates Mind. Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in  
56 the world, and people die of it just as they die of any other  
57 disease. Fortunately, in England at any rate, thought is not  
58 catching. Our splendid physique as a people is entirely due to our  
59 national stupidity. I only hope we shall be able to keep this great  
60 historic bulwark of our happiness for many years to come; but I  
61 am afraid that we are beginning to be overeducated; at least  
62 everybody who is incapable of learning has taken to teaching—  
63 that is really what our enthusiasm for education has come to. In  
64 the meantime, you had better go back to your wearisome,  
65 uncomfortable Nature, and leave me to correct my proofs.

66  
67 CYRIL. Writing an article! That is not very consistent after what  
68 you have just said.

69  
70 VIVIAN. Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the  
71 doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to  
72 the bitter end of action, to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice.  
73 Not I. Like Emerson, I write over the door of my library the word  
74 "Whim." Besides, my article is really a most salutary and  
75 valuable warning. If it is attended to, there may be a new  
76 Renaissance of Art.

77  
78 CYRIL. What is the subject?

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3 VIVIAN. I intend to call it "The Decay of Lying: A Protest."

4

5 CYRIL. Lying! I should have thought that our politicians kept up  
6 that habit.

7

8 VIVIAN. I assure you that they do not. They never rise beyond the  
9 level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to  
10 discuss, to argue. How different from the temper of the true liar,  
11 with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his  
12 healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind! After all, what is a  
13 fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is  
14 sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie,  
15 he might just as well speak the truth at once. No, the politicians  
16 won't do. Something may, perhaps, be urged on behalf of the  
17 Bar. The mantle of the Sophist has fallen on its members. Their  
18 feigned ardours and unreal rhetoric are delightful. They can make  
19 the worse appear the better cause, as though they were fresh from  
20 Leontine schools, and have been known to wrest from reluctant  
21 juries triumphant verdicts of acquittal for their clients, even when  
22 those clients, as often happens, were clearly and unmistakably  
23 innocent. But they are briefed by the prosaic, and are not  
24 ashamed to appeal to precedent. In spite of their endeavours, the  
25 truth will out. Newspapers, even, have degenerated. They may  
26 now be absolutely relied upon. One feels it as one wades through  
27 their columns. It is always the unreadable that occurs. I am afraid  
28 that there is not much to be said in favour of either the lawyer or  
29 the journalist. Besides what I am pleading for is Lying in art.  
30 Shall I read you what I have written? It might do you a great deal  
31 of good.

32

33 CYRIL. Certainly, if you give, me a cigarette. Thanks. By the  
34 way, what magazine do you intend it for?

35

36 VIVIAN. For the *Retrospective Review*. I think I told you that the  
37 elect had revived it.

38

39 CYRIL. Whom do you mean by "the elect"?

40

42

43 VIVIAN. Oh, The Tired Hedonists of course. It is a club to which I  
44 belong. We are supposed to wear faded roses in our buttonholes  
45 when we meet, and to have a sort of cult for Domitian. I am  
46 afraid you are not eligible. You are too fond of simple pleasures.

47

48 CYRIL. I should be blackballed on the ground of animal spirits, I  
49 suppose?

50

51 VIVIAN. Probably. Besides, you are little too old. We don't admit  
52 anybody who is of the usual age.

53

54 CYRIL. Well, I should fancy you are all a good deal bored with  
55 each other.

56

57 VIVIAN. We are. That is one of the objects of the club. Now, if  
58 you promise not to interrupt too often, I will read you my article.

59

60 CYRIL. You will find me all attention.

61

62 VIVIAN (reading in a very clear, musical voice). "THE DECAY OF  
63 LYING: A PROTEST." —One of the chief causes that can be  
64 assigned for the curiously commonplace character of most of the  
65 literature of our age is undoubtedly the decay of Lying as an art, a  
66 science, and a social pleasure. The ancient historians gave us  
67 delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents  
68 us with dull facts under the guise of fiction. The Blue-Book is  
69 rapidly becoming his ideal both for method and manner. He has  
70 his tedious *document humain*, his miserable little *coin de la*  
71 *création* [corner of the universe], into which he peers with his  
72 microscope. He is to be found at the Librairie Nationale, or at the  
73 British Museum, shamelessly reading up his subject. He has not  
74 even the courage of other people's ideas, but insists on going  
75 directly to life for everything, and ultimately, between  
76 encyclopædias and personal experience, he comes to the ground,  
77 having drawn his types from the family circle or from the weekly  
78 washerwoman, and having acquired an amount of useful  
79 information from which never, even in his most meditative  
80 moments, can he thoroughly free himself.

81

82 "The loss that results to literature in general from this false ideal

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3 of our time can hardly be overestimated. People have a careless  
 4 way of talking about a 'born liar,' just as they talk about a 'born  
 5 poet.' But in both cases they are wrong. Lying and poetry are  
 6 arts—arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other—and  
 7 they require the most careful study, the most disinterested  
 8 devotion. Indeed, they have their technique, just as the more  
 9 material arts of painting and sculpture have, their subtle secrets of  
 10 form and colour, their craft-mysteries, their deliberate artistic  
 11 methods. As one knows the poet by his fine music, so one can  
 12 recognize the liar by his rich rhythmic utterance, and in neither  
 13 case will the casual inspiration of the moment suffice. Here, as  
 14 elsewhere, practice must precede perfection. But in modern days  
 15 while the fashion of writing poetry has become far too common,  
 16 and should, if possible, be discouraged, the fashion of lying has  
 17 almost fallen into disrepute. Many a young man starts in life with  
 18 a natural gift for exaggeration which, if nurtured in congenial and  
 19 sympathetic surroundings, or by the imitation of the best models,  
 20 might grow into something really great and wonderful. But, as a  
 21 rule, he comes to nothing. He either falls into careless habits of  
 22 accuracy—"

23  
 24 CYRIL. My dear fellow!

25  
 26 VIVIAN. Please don't interrupt in the middle of a sentence. "He  
 27 either falls into careless habits of accuracy, or takes to  
 28 frequenting the society of the aged and the well informed. Both  
 29 things are equally fatal to his imagination, as indeed they would  
 30 be fatal to the imagination of anybody, and in a short time he  
 31 develops a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-telling, begins to  
 32 verify all statements made in his presence, has no hesitation in  
 33 contradicting people who are much younger than himself, and  
 34 often ends by writing novels which are so like life that no one can  
 35 possibly believe in their probability. This is no isolated instance  
 36 that we are giving. It is simply one example out of many; and if  
 37 something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify, our  
 38 monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile and Beauty  
 39 will pass away from the land.

40

42

43 "Even Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson, that delightful master of  
 44 delicate and fanciful prose, is tainted with this modern vice, for  
 45 we know positively no other name for it. There is such a thing as  
 46 robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true, and *The*  
 47 *Black Arrow* is so inartistic as not to contain a single anachronism  
 48 to boast of, while the transformation of Dr. Jekyll reads  
 49 dangerously like an experiment out of the *Lancet*. As for Mr.  
 50 Rider Haggard, who really has, or had once, the makings of a  
 51 perfectly magnificent liar, he is now so afraid of being suspected  
 52 of genius that when he does tell us anything marvellous, he feels  
 53 bound to invent a personal reminiscence, and to put it into a  
 54 footnote as a kind of cowardly corroboration. Nor are our other  
 55 novelists much better. Mr. Henry James writes fiction as if it  
 56 were a painful duty, and wastes upon mean motives and  
 57 imperceptible 'points of view' his neat literary style, his felicitous  
 58 phrases, his swift and caustic satire. Mr. Hall Caine, it is true,  
 59 aims at the grandiose, but then he writes at the top of his voice.  
 60 He is so loud that one cannot hear what he says. Mr. James Payn  
 61 is an adept in the art of concealing what is not worth finding. He  
 62 hunts down the obvious with the enthusiasm of a shortsighted  
 63 detective. As one turns over the pages, the suspense of the author  
 64 becomes almost unbearable. The horses of Mr. William Black's  
 65 phaeton do not soar towards the sun. They merely frighten the  
 66 sky at evening into violent chromolithographic effects. On seeing  
 67 them approach, the peasants take refuge in dialect. Mrs. Oliphant  
 68 prattles pleasantly about curates, lawntennis parties, domesticity,  
 69 and other wearisome things. Mr. Marion Crawford has immolated  
 70 himself upon the altar of local colour. He is like the lady in the  
 71 French comedy who keeps talking about *le beau ciel d'Italie* [the  
 72 beautiful Italian sky]. Besides, he has fallen into a bad habit of  
 73 uttering moral platitudes. He is always telling us that to be good  
 74 is to be good, and that to be bad is to be wicked. At times he is  
 75 almost edifying. *Robert Elsmere* is of course a masterpiece—a  
 76 masterpiece of the *genre ennuyeux* [boring type], the one form of  
 77 literature that the English people seem to thoroughly enjoy. A

2  
3 thoughtful young friend of ours once told us that it reminded him  
4 of the sort of conversation that goes on at a meat tea in the house  
5 of a serious Nonconformist family, and we can quite believe it.  
6 Indeed it is only in England that such a book could be produced.  
7 England is the home of lost ideas. As for that great and daily  
8 increasing school of novelists for whom the sun always rises in  
9 the East-End, the only thing that can be said about them is that  
10 they find life crude, and leave it raw.

11  
12 "In France, though nothing so deliberately tedious as *Robert*  
13 *Elsmere* has been produced, things are not much better. M. Guy  
14 de Maupassant, with his keen mordant irony and his hard vivid  
15 style, strips life of the few poor rags that still cover her, and  
16 shows us foul sore and festering wound. He writes lurid little  
17 tragedies in which everybody is ridiculous; bitter comedies at  
18 which one cannot laugh for very tears. M. Zola, true to the lofty  
19 principle that he lays down in one of his pronunciamientos on  
20 literature, *L'homme de génie n'a jamais d'esprit* [the man of  
21 genius never has any wit], is determined to show that, if he has  
22 not got genius, he can at least be dull. And how well he succeeds!  
23 He is not without power. Indeed at times, as in *Germinal*, there is  
24 something almost epic in his work. But his work is entirely  
25 wrong from beginning to end, and wrong not on the ground of  
26 morals, but on the ground of art. From any ethical standpoint it is  
27 just what it should be. The author is perfectly truthful, and  
28 describes things exactly as they happen. What more can any  
29 moralist desire? We have no sympathy at all with the moral  
30 indignation of our time against M. Zola. It is simply the  
31 indignation of Tartuffe on being exposed. But from the  
32 standpoint of art, what can be said in favour of the author of  
33 *L'Assommoir*, *Nana*, and *Pot-Bouille*? Nothing. Mr. Ruskin once  
34 described the characters in George Eliot's novels as being like the  
35 sweepings of a Pentonville omnibus, but M. Zola's characters are  
36 much worse. They have their dreary vices, and their drearier  
37 virtues. The record of their lives is absolutely without interest.  
38 Who cares what happens to them? In literature we require  
39 distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power. We don't

40

42

43 want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings  
44 of the lower orders. M. Daudet is better. He has wit, a light touch,  
45 and an amusing style. But he has lately committed literary  
46 suicide. Nobody can possibly care for Delobelle with his *Il faut*  
47 *lutter pour l'art* [one must struggle for art], or for Valmajour with  
48 his eternal refrain about the nightingale, or for the poet in Jack  
49 with his *mots cruels* [cruel remarks], now that we have learned  
50 from *Vingt Ans de ma Vie littéraire* [Twenty Years of My  
51 Literary Life] that these characters were taken directly from life.  
52 To us they seem to have suddenly lost all their vitality, all the few  
53 qualities they ever possessed. The only real people are the people  
54 who never existed, and if a novelist is base enough to go to life  
55 for his personages he should at least pretend that they are  
56 creations, and not boast of them as copies. The justification of a  
57 character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are,  
58 but that the author is what he is. Otherwise the novel is not a  
59 work of art. As for M Paul Bourget, the master of the *roman*  
60 *psychologique*, he commits the error of imagining that the men  
61 and women of modern life are capable of being infinitely  
62 analysed for an innumerable series of chapters. In point of fact  
63 what is interesting about people in good society—and M. Bourget  
64 rarely moves out of the Faubourg St. Germain, except to come to  
65 London,—is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality  
66 that lies behind the mask. It is a humiliating confession, but we  
67 are all of us made out of the same stuff. In Falstaff there is  
68 something of Hamlet, in Hamlet there is not a little of Falstaff.  
69 The fat knight has his moods of melancholy, and the young  
70 prince his moments of coarse humour. Where we differ from each  
71 other is purely in accidentals: in dress, manner, tone of voice,  
72 religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit, and the  
73 like. The more one analyses people, the more all reasons for  
74 analysis disappear. Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful  
75 universal thing called human nature. Indeed, as any one who has  
76 ever worked among the poor knows only too well, the  
77 brotherhood of man is no mere poet's dream, it is a most  
78 depressing and humiliating reality; and if a writer insists upon

2  
3 analysing the upper classes, he might just as well write of  
4 matchgirls and costermongers at once." However, my dear Cyril,  
5 I will not detain you any further just here. I quite admit that  
6 modern novels have many good points. All I insist on is that, as a  
7 class, they are quite unreadable.

8  
9 CYRIL. That is certainly a very grave qualification, but I must say  
10 that I think you are rather unfair in some of your strictures. I like  
11 *The Deemster*, and *The Daughter of Heth*, and *Le Disciple*, and  
12 *Mr. Isaacs*, and as for *Robert Elsmere* I am quite devoted to it.

13  
14 Not that I can look upon it as a serious work. As a statement of  
15 the problems that confront the earnest Christian it is ridiculous  
16 and antiquated. It is simply Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* with  
17 the literature left out. It is as much behind the age as Paley's  
18 *Evidences*, or Colenso's method of Biblical exegesis. Nor could  
19 anything be less impressive than the unfortunate hero gravely  
20 heralding a dawn that rose long ago, and so completely missing  
21 its true significance that he proposes to carry on the business of  
22 the old firm under the new name. On the other hand, it contains  
23 several clever caricatures, and a heap of delightful quotations,  
24 and Green's philosophy very pleasantly sugars the somewhat  
25 bitter pill of the author's fiction. I also cannot help expressing my  
26 surprise that you have said nothing about the two novelists whom  
27 you are always reading, Balzac and George Meredith. Surely they  
28 are realists, both of them?

29  
30 VIVIAN. Ah! Meredith! Who can define him? His style is chaos  
31 illumined by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered  
32 everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything,  
33 except tell a story: as an artist he is everything, except articulate.  
34 Somebody in Shakespeare—Touchstone, I think— talks about a  
35 man who is always breaking his shins over his own wit, and it  
36 seems to me that this might serve as the basis for a criticism of  
37 Meredith's method. But whatever he is, he is not a realist. Or  
38 rather I would say that he is a child of realism who is not on  
39 speaking terms with his father. By deliberate choice he has made  
40 himself a romanticist. He has refused to bow the knee to Baal,

41

43

44 and after all, even if the man's fine spirit did not revolt against  
45 the noisy assertions of realism, his style would be quite sufficient  
46 of itself to keep life at a respectful distance. By its means he has  
47 planted round his garden a hedge full of thorns, and red with  
48 wonderful roses. As for Balzac, he was a most wonderful  
49 combination of the artistic temperament with the scientific spirit.  
50 The latter he bequeathed to his disciples: the former was entirely  
51 his own. The difference between such a book as M. Zola's  
52 *L'Assommoir* and Balzac's *Illusions Perdues* is the difference  
53 between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality. "All  
54 Balzac's characters," said Baudelaire, "are gifted with the same  
55 ardour of life that animated himself. All his fictions are as deeply  
56 coloured as dreams. Each mind is a weapon loaded to the muzzle  
57 with will. The very scullions have genius." A steady course of  
58 Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our  
59 acquaintances to the shadows of shades. His characters have a  
60 kind of fervent fiery-coloured existence. They dominate us, and  
61 defy scepticism. One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the  
62 death of Lucien de Rubempré. It is a grief from which I have  
63 never been able to completely rid myself. It haunts me in my  
64 moments of pleasure. I remember it when I laugh. But Balzac is  
65 no more a realist than Holbein was. He created life, he did not  
66 copy it. I admit; however, that he set far too high a value on  
67 modernity of form and that, consequently, there is no book of his  
68 that, as an artistic masterpiece, can rank with *Salammbô* or  
69 *Esmond*, or *The Cloister and the Hearth*, or the *Vicomte de*  
70 *Bragelonne*.

71  
72 CYRIL. Do you object to modernity of form, then?

73  
74 VIVIAN. Yes. It is a huge price to pay for a very poor result. Pure  
75 modernity of form is always somewhat vulgarising. It cannot  
76 help being so. The public imagine that, because they are  
77 interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be  
78 interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-  
79 matter. But the mere fact that they are interested in these things  
80 makes them unsuitable subjects for Art. The only beautiful

2  
 3 things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern  
 4 us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in  
 5 any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our  
 6 sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live,  
 7 it is outside the proper sphere of art. To art's subject-matter we  
 8 should be more or less indifferent. We should, at any rate, have  
 9 no preferences, no prejudices, no partisan feeling of any kind. It  
 10 is exactly because Hecuba is nothing to us that her sorrows are  
 11 such an admirable motive for a tragedy. I do not know anything  
 12 in the whole history of literature sadder than the artistic career of  
 13 Charles Reade. He wrote one beautiful book, *The Cloister and*  
 14 *the Hearth*, a book as much above *Romola* as *Romola* is above  
 15 *Daniel Deronda*, and wasted the rest of his life in a foolish  
 16 attempt to be modern, to draw public attention to the state of our  
 17 convict prisons, and the management of our private lunatic  
 18 asylums. Charles Dickens was depressing enough in all  
 19 conscience when he tried to arouse our sympathy for the victims  
 20 of the poor-law administration; but Charles Reade, an artist, a  
 21 scholar, a man with a true sense of beauty, raging and roaring  
 22 over the abuses of contemporary life like a common pamphleteer  
 23 or a sensational journalist, is really a sight for the angels to weep  
 24 over. Believe me, my dear Cyril, modernity of form and  
 25 modernity of subject-matter are entirely and absolutely wrong.  
 26 We have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture  
 27 of the Muses, and spend our days in the sordid streets and  
 28 hideous suburbs of our vile cities when we should be out on the  
 29 hillside with Apollo. Certainly we are a degraded race, and have  
 30 sold our birthright for a mess of facts.  
 31

32 CYRIL. There is something in what you say, and there is no doubt  
 33 that whatever amusement we may find in reading a purely  
 34 modern novel, we have rarely any artistic pleasure in rereading it.  
 35 And this is perhaps the best rough test of what is literature and  
 36 what is not. If one cannot enjoy reading a book over and over  
 37 again, there is no use reading it at all. But what do you say about  
 38 the return to Life and Nature? This is the panacea that is always  
 39 being recommended to us.  
 40

42

43 VIVIAN. I will read you what I say on that subject. The passage  
 44 comes later on in the article, but I may as well give it to you  
 45 now:—

46

47 "The popular cry of our time is 'Let us return to Life and Nature;  
 48 they will recreate Art for us, and send the red blood coursing  
 49 through her veins; they will shoe her feet with swiftness and  
 50 make her hand strong.' But, alas! we are mistaken in our amiable  
 51 and well-meaning efforts. Nature is always behind the age. And  
 52 as for Life, she is the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that  
 53 lays waste her house."  
 54

55 CYRIL. What do you mean by saying that Nature is always  
 56 behind the age?  
 57

58 VIVIAN. Well, perhaps that is rather cryptic. What I mean is this.  
 59 If we take Nature to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to  
 60 self-conscious culture, the work produced under this influence is  
 61 always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date. One touch of  
 62 Nature may make the whole world kin, but two touches of Nature  
 63 will destroy any work of Art. If, on the other hand, we regard  
 64 Nature as the collection of phenomena external to man, people  
 65 only discover in her what they bring to her. She has no  
 66 suggestions of her own. Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he  
 67 was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had  
 68 already hidden there. He went moralizing about the district, but  
 69 his good work was produced when he returned, not to Nature but  
 70 to poetry. Poetry gave him "Laodamia," and the fine sonnets, and  
 71 the great Ode, such as it is. Nature gave him "Martha Ray" and  
 72 "Peter Bell," and the address to Mr. Wilkinson's spade.  
 73

74 CYRIL. I think that view might be questioned. I am rather inclined  
 75 to believe in the "impulse from a vernal wood," though of course  
 76 the artistic value of such an impulse depends entirely on the kind  
 77 of temperament that receives it, so that the return to Nature  
 78 would come to mean simply the advance to a great personality.  
 79 You would agree with that, I fancy. However, proceed with your  
 80 article.

2

3 VIVIAN (reading). "Art begins with abstract decoration, with  
4 purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is  
5 unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life  
6 becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be  
7 admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her  
8 rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is  
9 absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and  
10 keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of  
11 beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is  
12 when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the  
13 wilderness. This is the true decadence, and it is from this that we  
14 are now suffering.

15  
16 "Take the case of the English drama. At first in the hands of the  
17 monks Dramatic Art was abstract, decorative, and mythological.  
18 Then she enlisted Life in her service, and using some of life's  
19 external forms, she created an entirely new race of beings, whose  
20 sorrows were more terrible than any sorrow man has ever felt,  
21 whose joys were keener than lover's joys, who had the rage of the  
22 Titans and the calm of the gods, who had monstrous and  
23 marvellous sins, monstrous and marvellous virtues. To them she  
24 gave a language different from that of actual use, a language full  
25 of resonant music and sweet rhythm, made stately by solemn  
26 cadence, or made delicate by fanciful rhyme, jewelled with  
27 wonderful words, and enriched with lofty diction. She clothed her  
28 children in strange raiment and gave them masks, and at her  
29 bidding the antique world rose from its marble tomb. A new  
30 Cæsar stalked through the streets of risen Rome, and with purple  
31 sail and fluttered oars another Cleopatra passed up the river to  
32 Antioch. Old myth and legend and dream took shape and  
33 substance. History was entirely rewritten, and there was hardly  
34 one of the dramatists who did not recognize that the object of Art  
35 is not simple truth but complex beauty. In this they were perfectly  
36 right. Art itself is really a form of exaggeration; and selection,  
37 which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified  
38 mode of overemphasis.

39

41

42 "But Life soon shattered the perfection of the form. Even in  
43 Shakespeare we can see the beginning of the end. It shows itself  
44 by the gradual breaking up of the blank verse in the later plays,  
45 by the predominance given to prose, and by the over-importance  
46 assigned to characterisation. The passages in Shakespeare—and  
47 they are many—where the language is uncouth, vulgar,  
48 exaggerated, fantastic, obscene even, are entirely due to Life  
49 calling for an echo of her own voice, and rejecting the  
50 intervention of beautiful style, through which alone should Life  
51 be suffered to find expression. Shakespeare is not by any means a  
52 flawless artist. He is too fond of going directly to life, and  
53 borrowing life's natural utterance. He forgets that when Art  
54 surrenders her imaginative medium she surrenders everything.  
55 Goethe says, somewhere—

56

57

58

In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister,

59 'It is in working within limits that the master reveals himself,'  
60 and the limitation, the very condition for of any art is style.  
61 However, we need not linger any longer over Shakespeare's  
62 realism. *The Tempest* is the most perfect of palinodes. All that  
63 magnificent work of the Elizabethan and Jacobean artists  
64 contained within itself the seeds of its own dissolution, and that,  
65 if it drew some of its strength from using life as rough material, it  
66 drew all its weakness from using life as an artistic method. As the  
67 inevitable result of this substitution of an imitative for a creative  
68 medium, this surrender of an imaginative form, we have the  
69 modern English melodrama. The characters in these plays talk on  
70 the stage exactly as they would talk off it; they have neither  
71 aspirations nor aspirates; they are taken directly from life and  
72 reproduce its vulgarity down to the smallest detail; they present  
73 the gait, manner, costume, and accent of real people; they would  
74 pass unnoticed in a third-class railway carriage. And yet how  
75 wearisome the plays are! They do not succeed in producing even  
76 that impression of reality at which they aim, and which is their  
77 only reason for existing. As a method, realism is a complete  
78 failure.

2  
 3 "What is true about the drama and the novel is no less true about  
 4 those arts that we call the decorative arts. The whole history of  
 5 these arts in Europe is the record of the struggle between  
 6 Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation, its love of  
 7 artistic convention, its dislike to the actual representation of any  
 8 object in Nature, and our own imitative spirit. Wherever the  
 9 former has been paramount, as in Byzantium, Sicily, and Spain,  
 10 by actual contact, or in the rest of Europe by the influence of the  
 11 Crusades, we have had beautiful and imaginative work in which  
 12 the visible things of life are transmuted into artistic conventions,  
 13 and the things that Life has not are invented and fashioned for her  
 14 delight. But wherever we have returned to Life and Nature, our  
 15 work has always become vulgar, common, and uninteresting.  
 16 Modern tapestry, with its aerial effects, its elaborate perspective,  
 17 its broad expanses of waste sky, its faithful and laborious realism,  
 18 has no beauty whatsoever. The pictorial glass of Germany is  
 19 absolutely detestable. We are beginning to weave possible carpets  
 20 in England, but only because we have returned to the method and  
 21 spirit of the East. Our rugs and carpets c twenty years ago, with  
 22 their solemn depressing truths, their inane worship of Nature,  
 23 their sordid reproductions of visible objects, have become, even  
 24 to the Philistine, a source of laughter. A cultured Mahomedan  
 25 once remarked to us, 'You Christian are so occupied in  
 26 misinterpreting the fourth commandment that you have never  
 27 thought of making an artistic application of the second.' He was  
 28 perfectly right, and the whole truth of the matter is this: The  
 29 proper school to learn art in is not Life but Art."

30  
 31 And now let me read you a passage which seems to me to settle  
 32 the question very completely.

33  
 34 "It was not always thus. We need not say anything about the  
 35 poets, for they, with the unfortunate exception of Mr.  
 36 Wordsworth, have been really faithful to their high mission, and  
 37 are universally recognized as being absolutely unreliable. But in  
 38 the works of Herodotus, who, in spite of the shallow and  
 39 ungenerous attempts of modern sciolists to verify his history,

40

42

43 may justly be called the 'Father of Lies'; in the published  
 44 speeches of Cicero and the biographies of Suetonius; in Tacitus at  
 45 his best; in Pliny's *Natural History*; in Hanno's *Periplus*; in all  
 46 the early chronicles; in the Lives of the Saints; in Froissart and  
 47 Sir Thomas Mallory; in the travels of Marco Polo; in Olaus  
 48 Magnus, and Aldrovandus, and Conrad Lycosthenes, with his  
 49 magnificent *Prodigiorum et Ostentorum Chronicon*; in the  
 50 autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini; in the memoirs of  
 51 Casanova; in Defoe's *History of the Plague*; in Boswell's *Life of*  
 52 *Johnson*; in Napoleon's despatches, and in the works of our own  
 53 Carlyle, whose *French Revolution* is one of the most fascinating  
 54 historical novels ever written, facts are either kept in their proper  
 55 subordinate position, or else entirely excluded on the general  
 56 ground of dulness. Now, everything is changed. Facts are not  
 57 merely finding a footing-place in history, but they are usurping  
 58 the domain of Fancy, and have invaded the kingdom of Romance.  
 59 Their chilling touch is over everything. They are vulgarising  
 60 mankind. The crude commercialism of America, its materialising  
 61 spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of  
 62 imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to  
 63 that country having adopted for its national hero a man, who  
 64 according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie,  
 65 and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington  
 66 and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of  
 67 time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature."

68

69

70 CYRIL. My dear boy!

71

72 VIVIAN. I assure you it is the case, and the amusing part of the  
 73 whole thing is that the story of the cherry-tree is an absolute  
 74 myth. However, you must not think that I am too despondent  
 75 about the artistic future either of America or of our own country.  
 76 Listen to this:—

77

78 "That some change will take place before this century has drawn  
 79 to its close we have no doubt whatsoever. Bored by the tedious  
 80 and improving conversation of those who have neither the wit to

2  
 3 exaggerate nor the genius to romance, tired of the intelligent  
 4 person whose reminiscences are always based upon memory,  
 5 whose statements are invariably limited by probability, and who  
 6 is at any time liable to be corroborated by the merest Philistine  
 7 who happens to be present, Society sooner or later must return to  
 8 its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar. Who he was who  
 9 first, without ever having gone out to the rude chase, told the  
 10 wondering cavemen at sunset how he had dragged the  
 11 Megatherium from the purple darkness of its jasper cave, or slain  
 12 the Mammoth in single combat and brought back its gilded tusks,  
 13 we cannot tell, and not one of our modern anthropologists, for all  
 14 their much-boasted science, has had the ordinary courage to tell  
 15 us. Whatever was his name or race, he certainly was the true  
 16 founder of social intercourse. For the aim of the liar is simply to  
 17 charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of  
 18 civilized society, and without him a dinner party, even at the  
 19 mansions of the great, is as dull as a lecture at the Royal Society,  
 20 or a debate at the Incorporated Authors, or one of Mr. Burnand's  
 21 farcical comedies.

22  
 23 "Nor will he be welcomed by society alone. Art, breaking from  
 24 the prison-house of realism, will run to greet him, and will kiss  
 25 his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of  
 26 the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is  
 27 entirely and absolutely a matter of style; while Life—poor,  
 28 probable, uninteresting human life—tired of repeating herself for  
 29 the benefit of Mr. Herbert Spencer, scientific historians, and the  
 30 compilers of statistics in general, will follow meekly after him,  
 31 and try to reproduce, in her own simple and untutored way, some  
 32 of the marvels of which he talks.

33  
 34 "No doubt there will always be critics who, like a certain writer  
 35 in the *Saturday Review*, will gravely censure the teller of fairy  
 36 tales for his defective knowledge of natural history, who will  
 37 measure imaginative work by their own lack of any imaginative  
 38 faculty, and will hold up their inkstained hands in horror if some  
 39 honest gentleman, who has never been farther than the yew trees

40

42

43 of his own garden, pens a fascinating book of travels like Sir John  
 44 Mandeville, or, like great Raleigh, writes a whole history of the  
 45 world, without knowing anything whatsoever about the past. To  
 46 excuse themselves they will try end shelter under the shield of  
 47 him who made Prospero the magician, and gave him Caliban and  
 48 Ariel as his servants, who heard the Tritons blowing their horns  
 49 round the coral reefs of the Enchanted Isle, and the fairies singing  
 50 to each other in a wood near Athens, who led the phantom kings  
 51 in dim procession across the misty Scottish heath, and hid Hecate  
 52 in a cave with the weird sister. They will call upon  
 53 Shakespeare—they always do—and will quote that hackneyed  
 54 passage about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, forgetting that  
 55 this unfortunate aphorism is deliberately said by Hamlet in order  
 56 to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-  
 57 matters."

58  
 59 CYRIL. Ahem! Another cigarette, please.

60  
 61 VIVIAN. My dear fellow, whatever you may say, it is merely a  
 62 dramatic utterance, and no more represents Shakespeare's real  
 63 views upon art than the speeches of Iago represent his real views  
 64 upon morals. But let me get to the end of the passage:

65  
 66 "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself.  
 67 She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance.  
 68 She is a veil, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forests  
 69 know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and  
 70 unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with  
 71 a scarlet thread. Hers are the 'forms more real than living man,'  
 72 and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence  
 73 are but unfinished copies. Nature has, in her eyes, no laws, no  
 74 uniformity. She can work miracles at her will, and when she calls  
 75 monsters from the deep they come. She can bid the almond tree  
 76 blossom in winter, and send the snow upon the ripe cornfield. At  
 77 her word the frost lays its silver finger on the burning mouth of  
 78 June, and the winged lions creep out from the hollows of the  
 79 Lydian hills. The dryads peer from the thicket as she passes by,  
 80 and the brown fauns smile strangely at her when she comes near

2  
3 them. She has hawk-faced gods that worship her, and the  
4 centaurs gallop at her side."

5  
6 CYRIL. I like that. I can see it. Is that the end?

7  
8 VIVIAN. No. There is one more passage, but it is purely practical.  
9 It simply suggests some methods by which we could revive this  
10 lost art of Lying.

11  
12 CYRIL. Well, before you read it to me, I should like to ask you a  
13 question. What do you mean by saying that life, "poor, probable,  
14 uninteresting human life," will try to reproduce the marvels of  
15 art? I can quite understand your objection to art being treated as a  
16 mirror. You think it would reduce genius to the position of a  
17 cracked looking-glass. But you don't mean to say that you  
18 seriously believe that Life imitates Art, that Life in fact is the  
19 mirror, and Art the reality?

20  
21 VIVIAN. Certainly I do. Paradox though it may seem—and  
22 paradoxes are always dangerous things—it is none the less true  
23 that Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life. We have all  
24 seen in our own day in England how a certain curious and  
25 fascinating type of beauty, invented and emphasised by two  
26 imaginative painters, has so influenced Life that whenever one  
27 goes to a private view or to an artistic salon one sees, here the  
28 mystic eyes of Rossetti's dream, the long ivory throat, the strange  
29 squarecut jaw, the loosened shadowy hair that he so ardently  
30 loved, there the sweet maidenhood of "The Golden Stair," the  
31 blossomlike mouth and weary loveliness of the "Laus Amoris,"  
32 the passion-pale face of Andromeda, the thin hands and lithe  
33 beauty of the Vivien in "Merlin's Dream." And it has always  
34 been so. A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to  
35 reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher.  
36 Neither Holbein nor Vandyck found in England what they have  
37 given us. They brought their types with them, and Life, with her  
38 keen imitative faculty, set herself to supply the master with  
39 models. The Greeks, with their quick artistic instinct, understood  
40 this, and set in the bride's chamber the statue of

41

43

44 Hermes or of Apollo, that she might bear children as lovely as the  
45 works of art that she looked at in her rapture or her pain. They  
46 knew that Life gains from Art not merely spirituality, depth of  
47 thought and feeling, soul-turmoil or soul-peace, but that she can  
48 form herself on the very lines and colours of art and can  
49 reproduce the dignity of Pheidias as well as the grace of  
50 Praxiteles. Hence came their objection to realism. They disliked it  
51 on purely social grounds. They felt that it inevitably makes  
52 people ugly, and they were perfectly right. We try to improve the  
53 conditions of the race by means of good air, free sunlight,  
54 wholesome water, and hideous bare buildings for the better  
55 housing of the lower orders. But these things merely produce  
56 health; they do not produce beauty. For this, Art is required, and  
57 the true disciples of the great artist are not his studio imitators,  
58 but those who become like his works of art, be they plastic as in  
59 Greek days, or pictorial as in modern times; in a word, Life is  
60 Art's best, Art's only pupil.

61  
62 As it is with the visible arts, so it is with literature. The most  
63 obvious and the vulgarest form in which this is shown is in the  
64 case of the silly boys who, after reading the adventures of Jack  
65 Sheppard or Dick Turpin, pillage the stalls of unfortunate  
66 applewomen, break into sweet shops at night, and alarm old  
67 gentlemen who are returning home from the city by leaping out  
68 on them in suburban lanes, with black masks and unloaded  
69 revolvers. This interesting phenomenon, which always occurs  
70 after the appearance of a new edition of either of the books I have  
71 alluded to, is usually attributed to the influence of literature on the  
72 imagination. But this is a mistake. The imagination is essentially  
73 creative and always seeks for a new form. The boy burglar is  
74 simply the inevitable result of life's imitative instinct. He is Fact,  
75 occupied as Fact usually is with trying to reproduce Fiction, and  
76 what we see in him is repeated on an extended scale throughout  
77 the whole of life. Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that  
78 characterises modern thought, but Hamlet invented it. The world  
79 has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy. The  
80 Nihilist, that strange martyr who has no

2  
3 faith, who goes to the stake without enthusiasm, and dies for what  
4 he does not believe in, is a purely literary product. He was  
5 invented by Tourgénieff, and completed by Dostoieffski.  
6 Robespierre came out of the pages of Rousseau as surely as the  
7 People's Palace rose out of the *débris* of a novel. Literature  
8 always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its  
9 purpose. The nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an  
10 invention of Balzac. Our Luciens de Rubempre, our Rastignacs,  
11 and De Marsays made their first appearance on the stage of the  
12 *Comédie Humaine*. We are merely carrying out, with footnotes  
13 and unnecessary additions, the whim or fancy or creative vision  
14 of a great novelist. I once asked a lady, who knew Thackeray  
15 intimately, whether he had had any model for Becky Sharp. She  
16 told me that Becky was an invention, but that the idea of the  
17 character had been partly suggested by a governess who lived in  
18 the neighbourhood of Kensington Square, and was the companion  
19 of a very selfish and rich old woman. I inquired what became of  
20 the governess, and she replied that, oddly enough, some years  
21 after the appearance of *Vanity Fair*, she ran away with the  
22 nephew of the lady with whom she was living, and for a short  
23 time made a great splash in society, quite in Mrs. Rawdon  
24 Crawley's style, and entirely by Mrs. Rawdon Crawley's  
25 methods. Ultimately she came to grief, disappeared to the  
26 Continent, and used to be occasionally seen at Monte Carlo and  
27 other gambling-places. The noble gentleman from whom the  
28 same great sentimentalist drew Colonel Newcome died, a few  
29 months after *The Newcomes* had reached a fourth edition, with  
30 the word "Adsum" on his lips. Shortly after Mr. Stevenson  
31 published his curious psychological story of transformation, a  
32 friend of mine, called Mr. Hyde, was in the north of London, and  
33 being anxious to get to a railway station, took what he thought  
34 would be a short cut, lost his way, and found himself in a network  
35 of mean, evil-looking streets. Feeling rather nervous he began to  
36 walk extremely fast, when suddenly out of an archway ran a child  
37 right between his legs. It fell on the pavement, he tripped over it,  
38 and trampled upon it. Being of course very much

44 frightened and a little hurt, it began to scream, and in a few  
45 seconds the whole street was full of rough people who came  
46 pouring out of the houses like ants. They surrounded him, and  
47 asked him his name. He was just about to give it when he  
48 suddenly remembered the opening incident in Mr. Stevenson's  
49 story. He was so filled with horror at having realized in his own  
50 person that terrible and well written scene, and at having done  
51 accidentally, though in fact, what the Mr. Hyde of fiction had  
52 done with deliberate intent, that he ran away as hard as he could  
53 go. He was, however, very closely followed, and finally he took  
54 refuge in a surgery, the door of which happened to be open,  
55 where he explained to a young assistant, who was serving there,  
56 exactly what had occurred. The humanitarian crowd were  
57 induced to go away on his giving them a small sum of money,  
58 and as soon as the coast was quite clear he left. As he passed out,  
59 the name on the brass doorplate of the surgery caught his eye. It  
60 was "Jekyll." At least it should have been.

62 Here the imitation, as far as it went, was of course accidental. In  
63 the following case the imitation was self-conscious. In the year  
64 1879, just after I had left Oxford, I met at a reception at the house  
65 of one of the Foreign Ministers a woman of very curious exotic  
66 beauty. We became great friends, and were constantly together.  
67 And yet what interested most in her was not her beauty, but her  
68 character, her entire vagueness of character. She seemed to have  
69 no personality at all, but simply the possibility of many types.  
70 Sometimes she would give herself up entirely to art, turn her  
71 drawing-room into a studio, and spend two or three days a week  
72 at picture galleries or museums. Then she would take to attending  
73 race-meetings, wear the most horsey clothes, and talk about  
74 nothing but betting. She abandoned religion for mesmerism,  
75 mesmerism for politics, and politics for the melodramatic  
76 excitements of philanthropy. In fact, she was a kind of Proteus,  
77 and as much a failure in all her transformations as was that  
78 wondrous seagod when Odysseus laid hold of him. One day a  
79 serial began in one of the French magazines. At that time I used  
80 to read serial stories, and I well remember the shock

2  
 3 of surprise I felt when I came to the description of the heroine.  
 4 She was so like my friend that I brought her the magazine, and  
 5 she recognized herself in it immediately, and seemed fascinated  
 6 by the resemblance. I should tell you, by the way, that the story  
 7 was translated from some dead Russian writer, so that the author  
 8 had not taken his type from my friend. Well, to put the matter  
 9 briefly, some months afterwards I was in Venice, and finding the  
 10 magazine in the reading-room of the hotel, I took it up casually to  
 11 see what had become of the heroine. It was a most piteous tale, as  
 12 the girl had ended by running away with a man absolutely  
 13 inferior to her, not merely in social station, but in character and  
 14 intellect also. I wrote to my friend that evening about my views  
 15 on John Bellini, and the admirable ices at Florio's, and the artistic  
 16 value of gondolas, but added a postscript to the effect that her  
 17 double in the story had behaved in a very silly manner. I don't  
 18 know why I added that, but I remember I had a sort of dread over  
 19 me that she might do the same thing. Before my letter had  
 20 reached her, she had run away with a man who deserted her in six  
 21 months. I saw her in 1884 in Paris, where she was living with her  
 22 mother, and I asked her whether the story had had anything to do  
 23 with her action. She told me that she had felt an absolutely  
 24 irresistible impulse to follow the heroine step by step in her  
 25 strange and fatal progress, and that it was with a feeling of real  
 26 terror that she had looked forward to the last few chapters of the  
 27 story. When they appeared, it seemed to her that she was  
 28 compelled to reproduce them in life, and she did so. It was a most  
 29 clear example of this imitative instinct of which I was speaking,  
 30 and an extremely tragic one.

31  
 32 However, I do not wish to dwell any further upon individual  
 33 instances. Personal experience is a most vicious and limited  
 34 circle. All that I desire to point out is the general principle that  
 35 Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life, and I feel sure  
 36 that if you think seriously about it you will find that it is true. Life  
 37 holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange  
 38 type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has  
 39 been dreamed in fiction. Scientifically speaking, the

43

44 basis of life—the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it—is  
 45 simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting  
 46 various forms through which this expression can be attained. Life  
 47 seizes on them and uses them, even if they be to her own hurt.  
 48 Young men have committed suicide because Rolla did so, have  
 49 died by their own hand because by his own hand Werther died.  
 50 Think of what we owe to the imitation of Christ, of what we owe  
 51 to the imitation of Cæsar.

52

53 CYRIL. The theory is certainly a very curious one, but to make it  
 54 complete you must show that Nature, no less than Life, is an  
 55 imitation of Art. Are you prepared to prove that?

56

57 VIVIAN. My dear fellow, I am prepared to prove anything.

58

59 CYRIL. Nature follows the landscape painter then, and takes her  
 60 effects from him?

61

62 VIVIAN. Certainly. Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we  
 63 get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our  
 64 streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into  
 65 monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master,  
 66 do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and  
 67 turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying  
 68 barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the  
 69 climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to this  
 70 particular school of Art. You smile. Consider the matter from a  
 71 scientific or a metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I  
 72 am right. For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has  
 73 borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens  
 74 to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and  
 75 how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To  
 76 look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not  
 77 see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does  
 78 it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because  
 79 there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them  
 80 the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been  
 81 fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one

2  
3 saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did  
4 not exist till Art had invented them. Now, it must be admitted,  
5 fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere  
6 mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their  
7 method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an  
8 effect, the uncultured catch cold. And so, let us be humane, and  
9 invite Art to turn her wonderful eyes elsewhere. She has done so  
10 already, indeed. That white quivering sunlight that one sees now  
11 in France, with its strange blotches of mauve, and its restless  
12 violet shadows, is her latest fancy, and, on the whole, Nature  
13 reproduces it quite admirably. Where she used to give us Corots  
14 and Daubignys, she gives us now exquisite Monets and  
15 entrancing Pissaros. Indeed there are moments, rare, it is true, but  
16 still to be observed from time to time, when Nature becomes  
17 absolutely modern. Of course she is not always to be relied upon.  
18 The fact is that she is in this unfortunate position. Art creates an  
19 incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on  
20 to other things. Nature, upon the other hand, forgetting that  
21 imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult, keeps on  
22 repeating this effect until we all become absolutely wearied of it.  
23 Nobody of any real culture, for instance, ever talks nowadays  
24 about the beauty of a sunset. Sunsets are quite old-fashioned.  
25 They belong to the time when Turner was the last note in art. To  
26 admire them is a distinct sign of provincialism of temperament.  
27 Upon the other hand they go on. Yesterday evening Mrs. Arundel  
28 insisted on my coming to the window, and looking at the glorious  
29 sky, as she called it. Of course I had to look at it. She is one of  
30 those absurdly pretty Philistines, to whom one can deny nothing.  
31 And what was it? It was simply a very second-rate Turner, a  
32 Turner of a bad period, with all the painter's worst faults  
33 exaggerated and overemphasized. Of course, I am quite ready to  
34 admit that Life very often commits the same error. She produces  
35 her false Renés and her sham Vautrins, just as Nature gives us, on  
36 one day a doubtful Cuyp, and on another a more than  
37 questionable Rousseau. Still, Nature irritates one more when she  
38 does things of that kind. It seems so stupid, so obvious, so

42  
43 unnecessary. A false Vautrin might be delightful. A doubtful  
44 Cuyp is unbearable. However, I don't want to be too hard on  
45 Nature. I wish the Channel, especially at Hastings, did not look  
46 quite so often like a Henry Moore, grey pearl with yellow lights,  
47 but then, when Art is more varied, Nature will, no doubt, be more  
48 varied also. That she imitates Art, I don't think even her worst  
49 enemy would deny now. It is the one thing that keeps her in touch  
50 with civilized man. But have I proved my theory to your  
51 satisfaction?

52  
53 CYRIL. You have proved it to my dissatisfaction, which is better.  
54 But even admitting this strange imitative instinct in Life and  
55 Nature, surely you would acknowledge that Art expresses the  
56 temper of its age, the spirit of its time, the moral and social  
57 conditions that surround it, and under whose influence it is  
58 produced.

59  
60 VIVIAN. Certainly not! Art never expresses anything but itself.  
61 This is the principle of my new æsthetics; and it is this, more  
62 than that vital connection between form and substance, on which  
63 Mr. Pater dwells, that makes music the type of all the arts. Of  
64 course, nations and individuals, with that healthy, natural vanity  
65 which is the secret of existence, are always under the impression  
66 that it is of them that the Muses are talking, always trying to find  
67 in the calm dignity of imaginative art some mirror of their own  
68 turbid passions, always forgetting that the singer of Life is not  
69 Apollo, but Marsyas. Remote from reality, and with her eyes  
70 turned away from the shadows of the cave, Art reveals her own  
71 perfection, and the wondering crowd that watches the opening of  
72 the marvellous, many-petalled rose fancies that it is its own  
73 history that is being told to it, its own spirit that is finding  
74 expression in a new form. But it is not so. The highest art rejects  
75 the burden of the human spirit, and gains more from a new  
76 medium or a fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm  
77 for art, or from any lofty passion, or from any great awakening of  
78 the human consciousness. She develops purely on her own lines.  
79 She is not symbolic of any age. It is the ages that are her

2  
3 symbols.

4  
5 Even those who hold that Art is representative of time and place  
6 and people, cannot help admitting that the more imitative an art  
7 is, the less it represents to us the spirit of its age. The evil faces of  
8 the Roman emperors look out at us from the foul porphyry and  
9 spotted jasper in which the realistic artists of the day delighted to  
10 work, and we fancy that in those cruel lips and heavy sensual  
11 jaws we can find the secret of the ruin of the Empire. But it was  
12 not so. The vices of Tiberius could not destroy that supreme  
13 civilization, any more than the virtues of the Antonines could  
14 save it. It fell for other, for less interesting reasons. The sibyls  
15 and prophets of the Sistine may indeed serve to interpret for some  
16 that new birth of the emancipated spirit that we call the  
17 Renaissance; but what do the drunken boors and brawling  
18 peasants of Dutch art tell us about the great soul of Holland? The  
19 more abstract, the more ideal an art is, the more it reveals to us  
20 the temper of its age. If we wish to understand a nation by means  
21 of its art, let us look at its architecture or its music.

22  
23 CYRIL. I quite agree with you there. The spirit of an age may be  
24 best expressed in the abstract ideal arts, for the spirit itself is  
25 abstract arid ideal. Upon the other hand, for the visible aspect of  
26 an age, for its look, as the phrase goes, we must of course go to  
27 the arts of imitation.

28  
29 VIVIAN. I don't think so. After all, what the imitative arts really  
30 give us are merely the various styles of particular artists, or of  
31 certain schools of artists. Surely you don't imagine that the  
32 people of the Middle Ages bore any resemblance at all to the  
33 figures on mediæval stained glass or in mediæval stone and wood  
34 carving, or on mediæval metalwork, or tapestries, or illuminated  
35 MSS. They were probably very ordinary-looking people, with  
36 nothing grotesque, or remarkable, or fantastic in their appearance.  
37 The Middle Ages, as we know them in art, are simply a definite  
38 form of style, and there is no reason at all why an artist with this  
39 style should not be produced in the nineteenth century. No great  
40 artist ever sees things as they really are. If he

44  
45 did, he would cease to be an artist. Take an example from our  
46 own day. I know that you are fond of Japanese things. Now, do  
47 you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented  
48 to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never  
49 understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the  
50 deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If  
51 you set a picture by Hokusai, or Hokkei, or any of the great  
52 native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you  
53 will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them.  
54 The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run  
55 of English people; that is to say, they are extremely  
56 commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about  
57 them. In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no  
58 such country, there are no such people. One of our most charming  
59 painters went recently to the Land of the Chrysanthemum in the  
60 foolish hope of seeing the Japanese. All he saw, all he had the  
61 chance of painting, were a few lanterns and some fans. He was  
62 quite unable to discover the inhabitants, as his delightful  
63 exhibition at Messrs. Dowdeswell's Gallery showed only too  
64 well. He did not know that the Japanese people are, as I have  
65 said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art. And so, if  
66 you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a  
67 tourist and go to Tokio. On the contrary, you will stay at home,  
68 and steep yourself in the work of certain Japanese artists, and  
69 then, when you have absorbed the spirit of their style, and caught  
70 their imaginative manner of vision, you will go some afternoon  
71 and sit in the Park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see  
72 an absolutely Japanese effect there, you will not see it anywhere.  
73 Or, to return again to the past, take as another instance the ancient  
74 Greeks. Do you think that Greek art ever tells us what the Greek  
75 people were like? Do you believe that the Athenian women were  
76 like the stately dignified figures of the Parthenon frieze, or like  
77 those marvellous goddesses who sat in the triangular pediments  
78 of the same building? If you judge from the art, they certainly  
79 were so. But read an authority, like Aristophanes for instance.  
80 You will find that the Athenian ladies

2  
3 laced tightly, wore high-heeled shoes, died their hair yellow,  
4 painted and rouged their faces, and were exactly like any silly  
5 fashionable or fallen creature of our own day. The fact is that we  
6 look back on the ages entirely through the medium of Art, and  
7 Art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth.

8  
9 CYRIL. But modern portraits by English painters, what of them?  
10 Surely they are like the people they pretend to represent?

11  
12 VIVIAN. Quite so. They are so like them that a hundred years  
13 from now no one will believe in them. The only portraits in  
14 which one believes are portraits where there is very little of the  
15 sitter and a very great deal of the artist. Holbein's drawings of the  
16 men and women of his time impress us with a sense of their  
17 absolute reality. But this is simply because Holbein compelled  
18 life to accept his conditions, to restrain itself within his  
19 limitations, to reproduce his type, and to appear as he wished it to  
20 appear. It is style that makes us believe in a thing—nothing but  
21 style. Most of our modern portrait painters are doomed to  
22 absolute oblivion. They never paint what they see. They paint  
23 what the public sees, and the public never sees anything.

24  
25 CYRIL. Well, after that I think I should like to hear the end of  
26 your article.

27  
28 VIVIAN. With pleasure. Whether it will do any good I really  
29 cannot say. Ours is certainly the dullest and most prosaic century  
30 possible. Why, even Sleep has played us false, and has closed up  
31 the gates of ivory, and opened the gates of horn. The dreams of  
32 the great middle classes of this country, as recorded in Mr.  
33 Myers's two bulky volumes on the subject and in the  
34 Transactions of the Psychical Society, are the most depressing  
35 things that I have ever read. There is not even a fine nightmare  
36 among them. They are commonplace, sordid, and tedious. As for  
37 the Church I cannot conceive anything better for the culture of a  
38 country than the presence in it of a body of men whose duty it is  
39 to believe in the supernatural, to perform daily miracles, and to  
40 keep alive that mythopoetic faculty which is so essential for the

45  
46 imagination. But in the English Church a man succeeds, not  
47 through his capacity for belief but through his capacity for  
48 disbelief. Ours is the only Church where the sceptic stands at the  
49 altar, and where St. Thomas is regarded as the ideal apostle.  
50 Many a worthy clergyman, who passes his life in admirable  
51 works of kindly charity, lives and dies unnoticed and unknown;  
52 but it is sufficient for some shallow uneducated passman out of  
53 either University to get up in his pulpit and express his doubts  
54 about Noah's ark, or Balaam's ass, or Jonah and the whale, for  
55 half of London to flock to hear him, and to sit openmouthed in  
56 rapt admiration at his superb intellect. The growth of common  
57 sense in the English Church is a thing very much to be regretted.  
58 It is really a degrading concession to a low form of realism. It is  
59 silly, too. It springs from an entire ignorance of psychology. Man  
60 can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the  
61 improbable. However, I must read the end of my article:—

62  
63 "What we have to do, what at any rate it is our duty to do, is to  
64 revive this old art of Lying. Much of course may be done, in the  
65 way of educating the public, by amateurs in the domestic circle,  
66 at literary lunches, and at afternoon teas. But this is merely the  
67 light and graceful side of lying, such as was probably heard at  
68 Cretan dinner parties. There are many other forms. Lying for the  
69 sake of gaining some immediate personal advantage, for  
70 instance—lying with a moral purpose, as it is usually called—  
71 though of late it has been rather looked down upon, was  
72 extremely popular with the antique world. Athena laughs when  
73 Odysseus tells her 'his words of sly devising,' as Mr. William  
74 Morris phrases it, and the glory of mendacity illumines the pale  
75 brow of the stainless hero of Euripidean tragedy, and sets among  
76 the noble women of the past the young bride of one of Horace's  
77 most exquisite odes. Later on, what at first had been merely a  
78 natural instinct was elevated into a self-conscious science.  
79 Elaborate rules were laid down for the guidance of mankind, and  
80 an important school of literature grew up round the subject.  
81 Indeed, when one remembers the excellent philosophical treatise  
82 of Sanchez on the whole question one cannot help regretting that

2  
 3 no one has ever thought of publishing a cheap and condensed  
 4 edition of the works of that great casuist. A short primer, 'When  
 5 to Lie and How,' if brought out in an attractive and not too  
 6 expensive a form, would no doubt command a large sale, and  
 7 would prove of real practical service to many earnest and deep-  
 8 thinking people. Lying for the sake of the improvement of the  
 9 young, which is the basis of home education, still lingers amongst  
 10 us, and its advantages are so admirably set forth in the early  
 11 books of Plato's *Republic* that it is unnecessary to dwell upon  
 12 them here. It is a mode of Lying for which all good mothers have  
 13 peculiar capabilities, but it is capable of still further development,  
 14 and has been sadly overlooked by the School Board. Lying for  
 15 the sake of a monthly salary is of course well known in Fleet  
 16 Street, and the profession of a political leader-writer is not  
 17 without its advantages. But it is said to be a somewhat dull  
 18 occupation, and it certainly does not lead to much beyond a kind  
 19 of ostentatious obscurity. The only form of Lying that is  
 20 absolutely beyond reproach is Lying for its own sake, and the  
 21 highest development of this is, as we have already pointed out,  
 22 Lying in Art. Just as those who do not love Plato more than Truth  
 23 cannot pass beyond the threshold of the Academe, so those who  
 24 do not love Beauty more than Truth never know the inmost shrine  
 25 of Art. The solid stolid British intellect lies in the desert sands  
 26 like the Sphinx in Flaubert's marvellous tale, and fantasy *La*  
 27 *Chimère*, dances round it, and calls to it with her false, flute-  
 28 toned voice. It may not hear her now, but surely some day, when  
 29 we are all bored to death with the commonplace character of  
 30 modern fiction, it will hearken to her and try to borrow her wings.

31  
 32  
 33 "And when that day dawns, or sunset reddens how joyous we  
 34 shall all be! Facts will be regarded as discreditable, Truth will be  
 35 found mourning over her fetters, and Romance, with her temper  
 36 of wonder, will return to the land. The very aspect of the world  
 37 will change to our startled eyes. Out of the sea will rise Behemoth  
 38 and Leviathan, and sail round the high-pooped galleys, as they do  
 39 on the delightful maps of those ages when

43  
 44 books on geography were actually readable. Dragons will wander  
 45 about the waste places, and the phoenix will soar from her nest of  
 46 fire into the air. We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk, and see  
 47 the jewel in the toad's head. Champing his gilded oats, the  
 48 Hippogriff will stand in our stalls, and over our heads will float  
 49 the Blue Bird singing of beautiful and impossible things, of  
 50 things that are lovely and that never happened, of things that are  
 51 not and that should be. But before this comes to pass we must  
 52 cultivate the lost art of Lying."

53  
 54 CYRIL. Then we must certainly cultivate it at once. But in order  
 55 to avoid making any error I want you to tell me briefly the  
 56 doctrines of the new æsthetics.

57  
 58 VIVIAN. Briefly, then, they are these. Art never expresses  
 59 anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought  
 60 has, and develops purely on its own lines. It is not necessarily  
 61 realistic in an age of realism, nor spiritual in an age of faith. So  
 62 far from being the creation of its time, it is usually in direct  
 63 opposition to it, and the only history that it preserves for us is the  
 64 history of its own progress. Sometimes it returns upon its  
 65 footsteps, and revives some antique form, as happened in the  
 66 archaistic movement of late Greek Art, and in the pre-Raphaelite  
 67 movement of our own day. At other times it entirely anticipates  
 68 its age, and produces in one century work that it takes another  
 69 century to understand, to appreciate, and to enjoy. In no case  
 70 does it reproduce its age. To pass from the art of a time to the  
 71 time itself is the great mistake that all historians commit.

72  
 73 The second doctrine is this. All bad art comes from returning to  
 74 Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals. Life and Nature  
 75 may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but  
 76 before they are of any real service to art they must be translated  
 77 into artistic conventions. The moment Art surrenders its  
 78 imaginative medium it surrenders everything. As a method  
 79 Realism is a complete failure, and the two things that every artist  
 80 should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject-  
 81 matter. To us, who live in the nineteenth century, any century is a

1  
3 suitable subject for art except our own. The only beautiful things  
4 are the things that do not concern us. It is, to have the pleasure of  
5 quoting myself, exactly because Hecuba is nothing to us that her  
6 sorrows are so suitable a motive for a tragedy. Besides, it is only  
7 the modern that ever becomes old-fashioned. M. Zola sits down  
8 to give us a picture of the Second Empire. Who cares for the  
10 Second Empire now? It is out of date. Life goes faster than  
11 Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life.  
12  
13

14 The third doctrine is that Life imitates Art far more than Art  
15 imitates Life. This results not merely from Life's imitative  
16 instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to  
17 find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms  
18 through which it may realize that energy. It is a theory that has  
19 never been put forward before, but it is extremely fruitful, and  
21 throws an entirely new light upon the history of Art.  
22  
23

24 It follows, as a corollary from this, that external Nature also  
25 imitates Art. The only effects that she can show us are effects  
26 that we have already seen through poetry, or in paintings. This is  
27 the secret of Nature's charm, as well as the explanation of  
28 Nature's weakness.  
29  
30  
31

32 The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue  
33 things, is the proper aim of Art. But of this I think I have spoken  
34 at sufficient length. And now let us go out on the terrace, where  
35 "droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost," while the evening  
36 star "washes the dusk with silver." At twilight nature becomes a  
37 wonderfully suggestive effect, and is not without loveliness,  
38 though perhaps its chief use is to illustrate quotations from the  
39 poets. Come! We have talked long enough.  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44

45  
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48 Corrected by David Scott Wilson-Okamura.  
49  
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