

Anatole France

1844–1924

The brief but famous passage from France's *The Literary Life* printed below epitomizes the attitude of the impressionistic critic. Wary of "scientific" description, impatient with external canons of judgment, accepting the essential subjectivity of all experience, the impressionist considers his criticism a comment on himself. To his mind there are no such things as aesthetics, ethics, sociology, and biology. Nor are there such things as tradition, universal consent, and free taste.

France, a well-known novelist and man of letters, was probably the foremost of the antiscientific and impressionistic critics, but his position of relativism actually adopts the subject-object opposition that forms the philosophical basis of scientific method.

The standard translation of France's *La Vie littéraire* is that by A. W. Evans, *On Life and Letters* (1911). Studies of France include H. M. Chevalier, *The Ironic Temper: Anatole France and His Time* (1932); Jacob Axelrad, *Anatole France, A Life Without Illusions 1844–1924* (1944); Carter Jefferson, *Anatole France: The Politics of Skepticism* (1965); and Reino Virtanen, *Anatole France* (1968).

The Adventures of the Soul

As I understand criticism it is, like philosophy and history, a kind of novel for the use of discreet and curious minds. And every novel, rightly understood, is an autobiography. The good critic is he who relates the adventures of his soul among masterpieces.

There is no such thing as objective criticism any more than there is objective art, and all who flatter themselves that

THE ADVENTURES OF THE SOUL. *The Adventures of the Soul* is part of France's *La Vie littéraire* (1888–93), the four critical volumes that grew out of the articles France wrote as literary critic of the French newspaper *Le Temps*. The text is from the translation by Ludwig Lewisaohn in *A Modern Book of Criticism* (1919). Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

Oscar Wilde

1854–1900

The narcissistic witness of Wilde, combined with the Arnoldian desire of some readers for "high seriousness," has caused Wilde's critical work not to be taken seriously enough. Beneath the impertinent transvaluations of *The Decay of Lying* lie important theoretical implications. Wilde recognized that the theory of imitation was undergoing a crucial change. The trend, at least since Kant and Coleridge, had been to emphasize art's power to *make*, not to *copy*. Art affects how we come to see the world. For Wilde, life and nature imitate art more than art imitates life and nature. For example, his critic Vivian blames the fogs of London on certain painters of the nineteenth century. Indeed, we see the world in certain frameworks—frameworks that we have been taught. 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 experience things. No doubt the fine arts help to build up our sense of a more complex and intense world than do the popular arts. Much in modern philosophy and psychology reflects this Wildean idea. For example, Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms suggests the power of art, history, religion, and science to make our cultural world.

Wilde takes another Kantian idea to an extreme. Vivian argues against usefulness as an element in the art object. Kant did not assert that art objects should not or cannot be useful; instead he suggested that to judge an art object in terms of its use is not to make an aesthetic judgment. Vivian argues that the art object should have no use. He associates use with verbal "content"—that is, something that can be abstracted from the work and judged true or false by some process of verification or recourse to an a priori set of moral principles. According to Wilde "truth" in art (or "lies") is a matter only of style. In this argument we see a Romantic effort to distinguish poetry from discursive argumentation and scientific procedures. Sidney remarked that the poet does not lie because he never affirms. Wilde is not quite content with that or with arguments defending art because it leads us to some Platonic truth. Fundamentally he sees art as a formative force in culture. Why does Wilde talk of art as lying? Because he recognizes the dominance in his time of scientific and discursive modes of structuring our reality, and he wishes to attack this dominance—in his view a terrible imbalance—by the shocking inversion of normal terminology. If naturalism and science bring truth, then art brings lies, and Wilde chooses lies. Who wants truth?

Hesketh Pearson has edited Wilde's complete works (1936) and his essays (1950). Wilde's criticism is also available in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Richard Ellmann (1969). Relevant commentaries include Arthur Symons, *A Study of Oscar Wilde* (1930); William Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure* (1945); Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1946); George Woodcock, *The*

they put aught but themselves into their work are dupes of the most fallacious illusion. The truth is that one never gets out of oneself. That is one of our greatest miseries. What would we not give to see, if but for a minute, the sky and earth with the many-faced eye of a fly, or to understand nature with the rude and simple brain of an ape? But just this is forbidden us. We cannot, like Thersites, be men and remain her having been women. We are locked into our persons, in into a lasting prison. 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 that 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."