

Oscar Wilde on Learning Outcomes Assessment

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“Education is an admirable thing,” said Oscar Wilde in *The Critic as Artist*, the 1891 dialogue that presents the most extensive exposition of his philosophy of art, “but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught” (*Intentions* 124). Teachers of language and literature in today’s academy scarcely need Wilde’s reminder of how difficult and fruitless their task can be in an age when a college degree is increasingly viewed as a right, not a privilege. As Ian Dennis observes in “Student Resentment and Professorial Desire in Higher Education,” today’s professors frequently complain that their students are at best indifferent, and at worst hostile to the educational experiences we create in order to share with them what Matthew Arnold called “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (*Culture and Anarchy* viii). Seasoned college teachers have long known what Wilde hints at, that university education is a matter of soul craft, not training, with subtle effects that may not show themselves for decades, if at all. In recent years, however, academia has grown impatient with slow and indeterminate intellectual growth. The spread of the learning outcomes assessment movement has resulted in academic departments being required to enumerate precise educational objectives, lists of exactly what our students will know and be able to do at the end of a 15-week course on, say, British Romanticism or the Russian realist novel.

Despite its ubiquity, learning outcomes assessment remains controversial, particularly in the humanities, where Wilde’s skepticism about the teachability of things worth knowing defines one pole of what is known in the assessment literature as “the ineffability debate.”⁽¹⁾ Since learning outcomes assessment emerged in the mid 1980s, many objections, both pragmatic and philosophical, have been raised in response to what assessment’s proponents see as a long overdue emphasis on measurement of, and consequent instructor accountability for, what and how much students learn. As might be expected, the ineffability objection arises more frequently in less mathematically based disciplines. Assessment of student learning in chemistry and physics is less problematic than in history, philosophy, and literature: students either know the atomic number of xenon or that the slope of a line is rise over run, or they do not. But as mathematical certainty

diminishes, the possibility of accurate measurement of what students have learned becomes more contested. Critics complain that the input/output model of thinking on which assessment is based is incapable of representing the complexity and unpredictability—the freedom—of textual discovery, and thus, by viewing teaching and learning as a closed circuit, overlooks the unquantifiable cognitive and intellectual transformations that deep engagement with texts can inspire.

But despite these epistemological qualms, it is difficult to find a humanities department today that does not publish a set of learning outcomes for its courses and major programs. In literature and language departments, these outcomes are usually oriented toward helping students acquire the skills and willingness “to read, analyze, interpret, and write about texts from a wide range of genres, historical eras, theoretical paradigms, and cultural contexts,” and “to write with clarity, grace, economy of expression, and persuasiveness.”⁽²⁾ In adopting outcomes like these, today’s humanists—no doubt unwittingly—follow in the footsteps of Oscar Wilde’s Victorian foe, the poet, critic, and educational theorist Matthew Arnold, who famously defined the intellectual tenor of mid-nineteenth century Europe as “a critical effort; the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is” (*On Translating Homer* 64). The assessment movement uncritically accepts Arnold’s essentialist epistemology: namely, that things are, in themselves, something, and that these essential somethings can be discerned, described, and *taught*—that is, transmitted from one mind to another. While assessment purports only to measure the efficacy of the transmission, such measurements would not be possible if the essential natures of things were not fixed. Whether they know it or not, today’s proponents of assessment implicitly endorse Arnold’s mid-nineteenth-century positivism. The two sides of the ineffability debate therefore fall into venerable and familiar critical camps: classic vs. romantic, or, in M.H. Abrams’ famous formulation, the mirror and the lamp,⁽³⁾ with the pro-assessment side seeing education as the transmission of quanta of information, which students retain and are able to reproduce (like mirrors) in essays and on tests. The ineffability objection, on the other hand, views education not as the corpuscular transfer of knowledge particles, but as a wave of inspiration. Wilde’s *art pour l’art* offers a supercharged Romantic vitalism to counter the high Victorian age’s pressure on the arts—especially literature—to bring about ethical, political, and social improvement through careful and accurate mimesis of life’s material conditions. Art for art’s sake calls nineteenth-century assumptions about the nature and instrumentality of art radically into question, just as the anti-assessment side of the ineffability debate today expresses a thoroughgoing skepticism that the elements of aesthetic experience can be described, much less measured. Today’s skepticism can come either from Wildean Romanticism or postmodern epistemological anti-essentialism, illustrating how anti-assessment politics makes strange bedfellows.

There was no love lost between Wilde and Arnold, so it should come as no surprise that on the surface, Wilde’s aesthetics are about as opposite from Arnold’s essentialism as possible.

Both "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist" critique Arnold's dictum of seeing the object as in itself if really is. But Wilde does not merely gainsay Arnold with a Romantic counter-dictum of the ineffable sublimity of thought and aesthetic response. A close examination of Wilde's arguments reveals instead that Wilde sees the essential functions of art through the lens of an unexpectedly *anthropological* conception of mimesis. In light of the quip with which this essay opens, it seems that if Wilde were around today, he would land squarely in the "literature is ineffable" anti-assessment camp. But Wilde's idiosyncratic approach to aesthetics, conditioned as it is by an intuition of the mimetic origins of art, emerges as more tolerant of assessment than we might expect from a devotee of art for art's sake, and offers a way to break through the impasse of today's ineffability debate.

The aesthetics Wilde expounds in his two dialogic essays pushes Kantianism to its farthest logical extreme. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant concluded that the beautiful pleases "universally without a concept" (40). Equating Kant's "concept" with "purpose," Wilde famously declared in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that "All art is quite useless" (6), and, in "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist," explored how Kant's demonstration (in Eric Gans's paraphrase) of "our ability as free beings to grasp purposiveness in itself rather than merely as subordinate to a system of categories" ("Originary and/or Kantian Aesthetics" 339) can be used to expel Victorian moralizing from the arts. For Wilde, the less purpose or representational fidelity a given work of art possesses, the more beautiful it becomes. In both essays, but particularly in "The Decay of Lying," Wilde mercilessly ridicules his age for trying to enlist the arts in schemes of social, political, and moral improvement. "The only beautiful things, as someone once said, are the things that do not concern us" (*Intentions* 62), he writes. "As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art" (*Intentions* 24). "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book," declares Wilde in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. "Books are either well written, or poorly written. That is all" (5). These principles form the basis for Wilde's bitchy dismissiveness when surveying the literary giants of nineteenth-century realism. "Mr. Henry James," he says in "The Decay of Lying," though possessed of a "neat literary style" and capable of "swift and caustic satire," nevertheless "writes fiction as if it were a painful duty" (*Intentions* 15). Wilde agrees with Ruskin's opinion that George Eliot's characters are "like the sweepings of a Pentonville omnibus" (*Intentions* 18). And though he concedes that *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal* are not "without power," Wilde nevertheless complains that Zola's characters

have their dreary vices, and their drearier virtues. The record of their lives is absolutely without interest. Who cares what happens to them? In literature we require distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power. We don't want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower orders

(*Intentions* 18)

According to Wilde, literature has reached this sorry state by trading its glorious imaginative birthright for a “mess of facts” (*Intentions* 25). Artistic renewal will come, therefore, not from a return to nature, but from poets and artists embracing their ancient role as tellers of beautiful lies. Pushed by his interlocutor to follow the logical drift of his principles, Wilde’s spokesman in “The Decay of Lying” moves from denouncing realism to announcing the bold paradox that underlies his aesthetics, and which would seem at first glance to undercut fatally the assessment’s movement’s essentially Arnoldian faith in knowledge as a mirror of nature: “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life”:

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. . . . For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. 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. . . . 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 they were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them” (*Intentions* 48)

As for nature, so also for humanity. “Schopenhauer,” observes Wilde, “has analyzed the pessimism that characterizes modern thought, but Hamlet invented it. The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy. The Nihilist, that strange martyr who has no faith, who goes to the stake without enthusiasm, and dies for what he does not believe in, is purely a literary product. He was invented by Turgenev, and completed by Dostoevsky. Robespierre came out of the pages of Rousseau as surely as the People’s Palace rose out of the debris of a novel. Literature always anticipates life” (*Intentions* 40-41).

In Wilde, paradoxes giddily multiply: since it is a disinterested critical awareness—rather than an imaginative leap—which is capable of discerning this proper relationship between life and art, Wilde elevates the critical faculty above the creative, proposing that this new conception of art requires us to rename the artist the “aesthetic critic.” The aesthetic

critic's Kantian disinterestedness will enable him to reject "those obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile" in favor of "such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true and no interpretation final" (*Intentions* 164). Though Wilde mostly refrains from making the educational implications of his ideas explicit, at this juncture he cannot help imagining "the smile that would illuminate the glossy face of the Philistine if one ventured to suggest to him that the true aim of education was the love of beauty, and that the methods by which education should work were the development of the temperament, the cultivation of taste, and the creation of the critical spirit" (*Intentions* 214).

All right, so life imitates art—but why? asks Wilde's interlocutor in "The Decay of Lying." Here Wilde's thinking takes what must have been to his late Victorian contemporaries a startling anthropological turn, one that reveals a middle way between the mysticism or anti-essentialism of the ineffability proponents and the reductionist essentialism of the assessment mavens. Life is art's best, and only pupil, says Wilde, because humanity possesses a "keen imitative instinct," an impulse that propels all human action, from the blows of Michelangelo's hammer and chisel to the criminal's mayhem:

The most obvious and the vulgarest form in which this is shown is in the case of the silly boys who, after reading the adventures of Jack Sheppard or Dick Turpin, pillage the stalls of unfortunate apple-women, break into sweet-shops at night, and alarm old gentlemen who are returning home from the city by leaping out on them in suburban lanes, with black masks and unloaded revolvers. This interesting phenomenon, which always occurs after the appearance of a new edition of either of the books I have alluded to, is usually attributed to the influence of literature on the imagination. But this is a mistake. The imagination is essentially creative and always seeks for a new form. The boy-burglar is simply the inevitable result of life's imitative instinct. He is Fact, occupied as Fact usually is with trying to reproduce Fiction, and what we see in him is repeated on an extended scale throughout the whole of life (*Intentions* 40).

Wilde follows this with several anecdotes in which acquaintances of his found their lives conforming to various works of fiction, including Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," offered to illustrate his proposition that in living our lives, "We are merely carrying out, with footnotes and unnecessary additions, the whim or fancy or creative vision of a great novelist" (*Intentions* 40). In the final analysis,

Life holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type

imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in fiction. Scientifically speaking, the basis of life—the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it—is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained. Life seizes on them and uses them, even if they be to her own hurt. Young men have committed suicide because Rolla did so, have died by their own hand because by his own hand Werther died. Think what we owe to the imitation of Christ, of what we owe to the imitation of Caesar (*Intentions* 46).

This complex paragraph is worth unpacking, for doing so enables us to see how Wilde's ultimately mimetic understanding of the origins, function, and communicability of artistic expression are not as ineffable as his glib statement that "nothing worth knowing can be taught" might lead us to believe. For Wilde, the "energy of life" is the "desire for expression," a desire fulfilled instinctively *both* by the boy-burglar's antics and the aesthetic critic's "love of beauty." The difference between the boy burglar and the aesthetic critic lies in the degree to which the latter *controls*, rather than is *controlled by*, the ultimately mimetic desire for expression. But in both cases, the "energy" *moves* via the "keen imitative faculty" which is at once the original impetus for artistic creation and the means by which the "desire for expression" is continuously manifested, whether for good or ill: "Think what we owe to the imitation of Christ, of what we owe to the imitation of Caesar."

In common—unexpectedly, perhaps—with Aristotle before him and Kenneth Burke and René Girard after him—Wilde bases his aesthetics on an essentially mimetic conception of the human. Aristotle observed that the human is "the most imitative of living creatures," and posited that poetry arose from the confluence of an imitative instinct and "an instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm" (*Poetics* 55-56). But if humanity is distinguished from other animals by the heightened degree of its imitative faculty, and that faculty can be controlled or even cultivated, is it really the case that nothing worth knowing can be taught? If that were the case, what would be the point of deriving educational aims and methods—"the love of beauty" and "the development of the temperament" and the "cultivation of taste" from the characteristics of the aesthetic critic? The educational scheme with which Wilde hopes to scandalize the Philistine would hardly stand a chance of succeeding were it not to acknowledge, and channel towards its pedagogic ends, humanity's imitative instinct. Perhaps things worth knowing can be taught after all.

Wilde's intuition of the fundamentally mimetic nature of artistic expression not only undermines his dismissal of education, it also serves to clarify the real issue at stake in today's assessment wars, especially in the humanities, where both the possibility and efficacy of setting and measuring student attainment of learning objectives are so bitterly disputed. Humanists who reject the very idea of identifying qualitative outcomes for courses in literature, history, or philosophy under the belief that doing so is somehow antithetical to

human freedom would do well to be reminded by Wilde that humans are imitative beings and that imitation is an instinct that can be conceptualized and subjected to conscious control. At their best, learning outcomes are ideas toward which the recurring events of the classroom—as a communally constituted scene of modeling and imitation—are oriented. In the humanities classroom, that direction will always be less fixed and reliably foreknown than in the engineering, mathematical, or scientific classroom; but it is a mistake to equate “less certain” with “unknowable.”

As W. Robert Connor has argued, Late Antiquity’s concept of sublimity served as both an aesthetic characteristic and an educational objective. Longinus’s sublime, writes Connor, “is not ‘ineffable’; it can be recognized and analyzed, and perhaps even given expression, using the techniques illustrated in” *On the Sublime* (97). In practice, of course, today’s departments of language and literature—under the sway of political or ideological commitments, or perhaps held back by an understandable reluctance to pledge more than they think themselves capable of delivering—stop well short in their mission statements and lists of educational goals of trying to cultivate in their students an appreciation for the Longinian sublime: a “certain loftiness and excellence of language, which takes the reader out of himself” (2). Searching for achievable and readily demonstrable outcomes, today’s academic departments aim low, promising to teach our students to write with clarity and economy of expression, and to analyze “a wide range of texts” rather than feel literature’s (in Longinus’s words) “imperious and irresistible force” (2). Though identifying, and then measuring students’ attainment of outcomes originated, as Michael Holquist has argued, as a well-meant effort toward educational reform, in practice it has created a slide toward standardization, which is “a constantly lurking danger in any assessment program” (77). A powerful means of guarding against the chilling effects on educational discovery of such standardization, however, lies in Wilde’s statement that the true aim of education ought to be “the development of the temperament, the cultivation of taste, and the creation of the critical spirit.” However difficult—or even impossible—it might be to convert temperament, taste, and spirit into the information quanta with which assessment conventionally works, these characteristics are nevertheless capable of being *imitated* and *recognized*. And anything that can be *recognized* can be *assessed*.

The humanist’s answer to calls for identifying and measuring what we think our students will know and be able to as a result of our courses should not, therefore, be an outraged claim that such knowledge is impossible. Instead, we should take a page from Wilde’s book and assert that students’ souls will be exalted by their encounters with aesthetic greatness, and that exalted souls have certain characteristics by which they can be recognized. We humanists should shake off the timidity that has prompted us to proffer puny objectives like “effective communication” and “historical awareness” when we should, as Wilde implies, use our understanding of the mimetic bases of education to demonstrate to our students the paradoxical fact that imitation is a path to innovation, and to model for them the benefits of striving for sublimity. As Longinus points out—in terms that uncannily anticipate Wilde’s

exposition of the mimetic origins of all representation—one of the surest ways to the sublime lies through imitation:

We may learn from this author [Plato], if we would but observe his example, that there is yet another path besides those mentioned which leads to sublime heights. What path do I mean? The emulous imitation of the great poets and prose-writers of the past. On this mark, dear friend, let us keep our eyes ever steadfastly fixed. Many gather the divine impulse from another's spirit, just as we are told that the Pythian priestess, when she takes her seat on the tripod, where there is said to be a rent in the ground breathing upwards a heavenly emanation, straightway conceives from that source the godlike gift of prophecy, and utters her inspired oracles; so likewise from the mighty genius of the great writers of antiquity there is carried into the souls of their rivals, as from a fount of inspiration, an effluence which breathes upon them until, even though their natural temper be but cold, they share the sublime enthusiasm of others (29).

Like the nineteenth-century realist novel Wilde critiques in the "The Decay of Lying," humanities education in the age of learning outcomes assessment appears to have sold its sublime birthright for a mess of facts. Knowing how ideologically and theoretically contested the once-stable concepts of inspiration and the sublime have become, many literary educators have thrown their lot in with mystics and Romantics in asserting the ineffability of aesthetic outcomes. They need not have done so, however. Acknowledging the anthropologically mimetic bases of representation enables us both to do assessment *and* urge our students toward sublimity. We need not pursue one at the expense of the other. If we embrace sublimity (as Wilde does), and at the same time make our peace with the perhaps uncomfortable fact that our students' imitative faculty is the natural impulse we, as teachers, can use to coax them toward sublimity, if we bring all our wisdom and anthropological insights to bear on creating scenes of educational mimesis that reasonably lead to transmitting the knowledge, skills, and attributes we value—even if nothing worth knowing can be *taught*, many things worth knowing can be *caught*.

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Notes

1. See Peter T. Ewell, "An Emerging Scholarship: A Brief History of Assessment" in Banta, Trudy, *Building a Scholarship of Assessment* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002), 17-18. For a discussion of the ineffability debate in literary education, see Donna Heiland and Laura J. Rosenthal, eds., *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime: Disciplinary Assessment* (New York: The Teagle Foundation, 2011), especially the articles by W. Robert Conner (an assessment skeptic) and Lucinda Cole (an assessment proponent). ([back](#))

2. From the High Point University English Department's web page (<http://www.highpoint.edu/english/>). ([back](#))

3. Classical poetics sees the poem—and, by extension, all works of art—as an imitation of the universe; Romantic poetics views the essence of art as the dynamic relationship between artist and world. See M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 1953), especially parts II and III. ([back](#))