

The Portrait of Mr W.H.

O.Wilde

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In order to prove a theory it is not hard to amass evidence for it. And the more you amass, the more convincing it may appear. By the same token you can also start to try to amass evidence for what contradicts it. If you do that with the same ease, it is time to stop and reflect on what you have been doing. This is the central tenet of Popper's philosophy. Not to verify, but to fail, at least provisionally, to contradict.

A classical problem in Shakespearean scholarship is to identify the object of desire in his sonnets. Another classical problem is to identify the identity of Shakespeare himself. Did he really exist, or is he just a phantom, a pen name for a theatrical collectivity. In this little study, lavishly illustrated by many a Shakespearean sonnet, Wilde tells the imagined story of someone proving the existence of a certain William Hewes and backing his claim on a forgery of a portrait of the same. Now the first narrator, although initially convinced, is disgusted when he by chance discovers the forgery, and lose all conviction. As he notes, the whole deductive chain rests on what it is purported to prove, namely he existence of the above mentioned actor. The original purveyor of the theory, as he calls it, is devastated, claiming that he is utterly convinced by the evidence, the last piece of forgery intended merely to support the faith of his interlocutor, but fully redundant. Whereupon he kills himself. How mad. To give ones life for one theology is the worst use one can make of ones life, to sacrifice it for a literary theory. Impossible. Now, the narrator of the story itself is so taken by the arguments that he decided to make his own researches. Those turn out to be so captivating that he retreats to his proverbial chamber and declines all invitations (a rare sacrifice indeed, one would surmise). At the end he is firmly convinced and writes a letter to his skeptical informant. Having so done he loses all his conviction and sees it all as nothing but folly, indeed based on circular reasoning, assuming the existence of what is to be shown to exist. Having divested himself of his thoughts by putting them on paper, he has concomitantly annihilated the conviction that had generated them. He hurries over to his correspondent to apologize. Apologize for what, this asks him. It makes perfect sense, and a long argument follows, in which the narrator is incapable of releasing his friend of the illusion brought about by his argument. They separate, not exactly on the best of terms, and the other travels to the continent to preach the truth of the theory. Some years later the narrator gets a letter from his friend down in Nice. He is told that as a final proof of the theory he will commit suicide, just as the original purveyor had done. The narrator is filled with remorse, hops on the next train down south, only to find that his friend is already dead an buried. But not from a suicide, as expected, but from consumption. A cruel joke? Anyway the mother gives him the forged portrait as a present from the dead. It now occupies pride of place in his rooms, admired by all of his visitors. A little story with a moral.

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