The Soul of Man Under . . .Anarchism?

written by Kristian Williams | January 26, 2011

THE TITLE OF OSCAR WILDE'S ESSAY "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" has long perplexed readers, especially anarchists who rightly feel that the essay belongs in their canon rather than that of the Marxists, the Fabians, or the Labour Party.[1]

What Wilde presents to us in the essay is a vision for a new society and, as important, a sample of a model for political thought. Both stand in marked contrast to the unseemly connotations that attached themselves to the word "socialism" over the course of the twentieth century — faction fights, show trials, gulags, paternalism, bureaucracy, cultural sterility, and uniform thought.

The society Wilde imagines is in all respects the opposite of that. It is one in which the arts, the sciences, and the whole of intellectual life prospers; a society without property, prisons, or crime — in which no one is hungry and machines do all the dirty, distasteful, tedious work. It is, in short, a society in which everyone is free to choose his own path and flourish in her own way, to prosper — not in petty financial terms, but in terms of character. "The true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is," Wilde wrote. This socialism, which will produce "true, beautiful, healthy Individualism," will free us, not only from the dangers of poverty, but from the demands of wealth as well: "Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live."[2]

Wilde's socialism — and it is a form of socialism — represents socialism in the service of individualism. It is a socialism based more in aesthetic ideals than in economic theories. It takes as its model the artist rather than the proletarian and is as much concerned to free the repressed bourgeois as the oppressed worker. Its tastes are aristocratic; its ethics, bohemian. It is, at once, deeply spiritual and thoroughly heretical, ethical and antinomian, rebellious and harmonious, egoistic and universally compassionate, urgent and utopian.

It is, in a word, anarchism.[3]

"Whatever One Chooses to Call It"

YET THE WORD — ANARCHY — does not appear anywhere in Wilde's essay.

Instead, Wilde expressed indifference, almost disdain, for ideological labels: "Socialism, communism, or whatever one chooses to call it . . . ," he begins one paragraph.[4]

Does Wilde deliberately avoid the word *anarchism* because of its sectarian connotations? Or is he issuing a subtle snub, siding with William Morris against David Nicoll in the dispute that had recently divided the Socialist League?[5] Or is it perhaps something greater — that no label is needed, or no label will suffice?

Wilde loved to subvert language — through irony, paradox, misdirection. He played with words, but his was a serious kind of play. He inverted their usual meanings, reinventing them in the process. He used them to expose false ideals and to imagine new ones.

Of course, all this verbal dynamism can lead to a great deal of misunderstanding, and people have never really been sure when, or whether, Wilde meant what he said. As the *Spectator* commented when his essay first appeared:

> Mr. Oscar Wilde, in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, has apparently set himself to galvanise his readers. . . . All these literary bullets are shot out in defence of the thesis that men should be themselves, in contempt it would seem, not merely of the public, but of all law which restricts their individualism. The article, if serious, would be thoroughly unhealthy, but it leaves on us the impression of being written merely to startle and excite talk.[6]

Perhaps Wilde's pervasive, insistent ambiguity was a kind of defensive strategy, allowing him to say outrageous and provocative things while evading the repercussions of a direct conflict with authority.

Or perhaps it was just force of habit, the rhetorical embodiment of Wilde's double life: "I live in terror of not being misunderstood," he wrote.[7]

Was anarchism the politics that dare not speak its name?

"The Kiss of Anarchy"

SO FAR AS I HAVE DISCOVERED, Oscar Wilde referred to himself as an anarchist on two occasions.

The first occurred in 1893, two years after "The Soul's" first publication. Wilde wrote to a French periodical, in response to a list of questions: "Autrefois, j'etais poete et tyran. Maintenant je suis artiste et anarchiste." ("In the past I was a poet and a tyrant. Now I am an artist and an anarchist.")[8]

This statement indicates the direction of Wilde's political development, and connects it decisively with his development as an artist. It stands as a direct repudiation of remarks he made earlier in his career. In the poem "Libertatis Sacra Fames," published in 1880, Wilde had written:

> Better the rule of One, whom all obey,
> Than to let clamourous demagogues betray
> Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy.[9]

He was somewhat more ambivalent in his "Sonnet to Liberty," which appeared (along with "Libertatis") in his 1881 collection, *Poems*. There he begins rather ungenerously, by distancing himself from the oppressed masses, "whose dull eyes/ See nothing save their own unlovely woe." And he claims not to care about political conflict or the claims at stake:

> all kings
> By bloody knout or treacherous cannonades
> Rob nations of their rights inviolate
> And I remain unmoved.

"And yet" — he begins the final lines of the poem —

> and yet,
> These Christs that die upon the barricades,

God knows it I am with them, in some things.

With what things is he with them? The poem ends without specifying, but Wilde does hint at it earlier in the verse:

the roar of thy Democracies,
Thy reigns of Terror, they great Anarchies,
Mirror my wildest passions like the sea
And give my rage a brother — ! Liberty!
For this sake only do thy dissonant cries
Delight my discreet soul[10]

It is not the "children" of liberty that move him, not their "unlovely woe," nor the "treacher[y]" of kings, nor the "rights" of nations; it is the "roar" and violence of the upheavals that "Mirror" his "passions" and his "rage." It is the spirit of revolt that they share. Rebellion makes them "brother[s]," and allows the poet to see those who "die upon the barricades" as "Christs."

We can detect here, in a less developed form, something of the sentiment that was later to inspire "The Soul of Man Under Socialism": They each celebrate liberty, of course. But more than that, they also share the notion that oppression makes people insensitive and dull. Both refuse to treat the poor as objects of pity, and instead praise them when they resist. Both engage in the aestheticization of rebellion, and promote the idea that social conflict reflects individual feeling. And both the poem and the essay identify their rebels with Christ.

Still, while touring America in 1882, Wilde felt the more conservative poem a better expression of his views. "Does the ‘Sonnet to Liberty’ voice your political creed?" a reporter from the *San Francisco Examiner* asked. "No," Wilde replied, "that is not my political creed. I wrote that when I was younger. . . . Perhaps something of the fire of youth prompted it. . . . If you would like to know my political creed . . . read the sonnet ‘Libertatis Sacra Fames.’"[11]

And yet — there is hardly a line in "Libertatis" that is not contradicted somewhere in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." In 1880 Wilde declared himself "nurtured in democracy," and "Liking best that state republican." In 1891, he wrote: "democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people."[12] In the poem he is down on "clamourous demagogues" who "betray Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy" — while in the essay he is fond of "agitators," who "sow the seeds of discontent," because "[w]ithout them. . . there would be no advance towards civilization."[13] In the poem he was quite clear: "I love them not whose hands profane/ Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street;" whereas later, he expressed a preference for the "paving-stone" over "the pen": "The very violence of a revolution may make the public grand and splendid for a moment."[14] In his poem he worried that "beneath the ignorant reign" of the rabble "Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour, all things fade." And in "The Soul of Man" he remarked that "popular authority and the recognition of popular authority are fatal" to the arts — yet, it is in large part because of the promise for the arts and for learning that he advocates socialism: "the community. . . will supply the useful things, and . . . the beautiful things will be made by the individual. . . . it is the only possible way by which we can get either the one or the other."[15] As he famously concluded: "The new Individualism, for whose service Socialism, whether it wills it or not, is working, will be perfect harmony. . . . The new Individualism is the new Hellenism."[16]

Perhaps the only portion of the "Libertatis" that would be at home in the later essay is Wilde’s hope for a world "Where every man is Kinglike and no man/Is crowned above his fellows. . . ." This

is, for certain, the only radical sentiment to be found in the poem — and, with its paradoxical form, it is also the most Wildean statement of the composition. It is, at once, egalitarian and aristocratic, but clearly Wilde was still "a poet and a tyrant," not yet "an artist and an anarchist."

He had not yet found that the secret of individualism lay in socialism — and vice versa.

"Rather More Than a Socialist"

WILDE'S SECOND PROFESSION OF ANARCHISM came in 1894, a year after the first. He told a journalist from *The Theatre*: "We are all of us more or less Socialists now-a-days. . . . Our system of government is largely socialistic. . . . What is the House of Commons but a socialistic assembly? . . . I think I am rather more than a Socialist. . . . I am something of an Anarchist, I believe. . . ."[17]

Wilde here positions anarchism as a type of socialism — but a type that, paradoxically, goes further. Anarchism is a socialism, but anarchism is more than socialism. It is not merely the most extreme variety, it is also something new. It surpasses the category to which it belongs.

Though this interview appeared under the headline "New Views of Mr. Oscar Wilde," in it he really only re-states some of his established positions. Beginning with poetry ("A glorious passion is poetry"),[18] Wilde works his way around to politics, religion, and crime. Here many of his views are familiar from "The Soul of Man Under Socialism": Christ is a "marvelous personality," pirates are "very fine fellows," and the prison system is "a perfect fiasco."[19]

In one interesting exchange, Wilde also expressed "considerable sympathy" with burglars: "In nine cases out of ten they only take what we really do not want. . . . The loss of our last guinea is a loss; the loss of a thousand pounds when we have a hundred thousand in the bank is *not* a loss."[20]

He goes on to tell of the unhappiness a friend experienced when his house was robbed, only to conclude: "Now, had someone fallen downstairs and broken a limb, it would have been reasonable cause for distress; but, really, silver spoons! Japanese curiosities! What good are they?"[21]

The story — a bit surprising from a man whose earliest lectures centered on the need for beautiful things in the home[22] — shows us something of Oscar Wilde's attitude toward property. As he wrote in "The Soul Of Man":

> In a community like ours, where property confers immense distinction, social position, honour, respect, titles, and other pleasant things of the kind, man, being naturally ambitious, makes it his aim to accumulate this property long after he has got far more than he wants, or can use, or enjoy, or perhaps even know of. Man will kill himself by overwork in order to secure property, and really, considering the enormous advantages that property brings, one is hardly surprised. One's regret is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in him — in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living.[23]

In the details of the interview, then, we find Wilde repeating the points he had made in the earlier essay. The brief mention of anarchism, in this context, suggests not a new philosophy, but a new name for his position. It announces, in other words, that Wilde's socialist ideas are, in fact, anarchist and that "The Soul of Man" should be read accordingly.

"What the State is to Do"[24]

IF THERE IS A CASE TO BE MADE against "The Soul's" anarchism, it must be that Wilde assigned a role to the state. He did so: "The State is to be a voluntary manufacturer and distributor of necessary commodities. The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful."[25]

This is a very peculiar kind of state. It is a state that does not govern: "the State must give up all idea of government," he says, adding a few lines later: "All modes of government are failures."[26]

Wilde's essay is replete with similar statements: "The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all";[27] "there is no necessity to separate the monarch from the mob; all authority is equally bad."[28]

A few pages later, he explains in greater detail:

> It is clear, then, that no Authoritarian Socialism will do. . . . Every man must be left quite free to choose his own work. No form of compulsion must be exercised over him. If there is, his work will not be good for him, will not be good in itself, and will not be good for others. . . . Of course authority and compulsion are out of the question. All association must be quite voluntary. It is only in voluntary association that man is fine.[29]

"A Dangerous Adventure"

I NOTED EARLIER that there were two occasions on which Wilde referred to himself as an anarchist. But there was also a third time, when he came very close. This last is, in some respects, I feel, the most revealing. It's a small story, but it says much about Wilde's attitude and approach.

In August 1894, Wilde wrote to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, to tell of "a dangerous adventure." He had gone out sailing with two lovely boys, Stephen and Alphonso, and they were caught in a storm. "We took five hours in an awful gale to come back! [And we] did not reach pier till eleven o'clock at night, pitch dark all the way, and a fearful sea. . . . All the fishermen were waiting for us."

Tired, cold, and "wet to the skin," the three men immediately "flew to the hotel for hot brandy and water." But there was a problem. The law stood in the way: "As it was past *ten* o'clock on a Sunday night the proprietor could not *sell* us any brandy or spirits of any kind! So he had to *give* it to us. The result was not displeasing, but what laws!"

Wilde finishes the story: "Both Alphonso and Stephen are now anarchists, I need hardly say."[30]

Footnotes

1. See, for instance: M. Saint-Georges de Bouhelier, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," in *The Individualist Anarchists: An Anthology of Liberty (1881-1908)*, ed. Frank H. Brooks (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994) 101-4.

2. Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003) 1178.

3. Petr Kropotkin, whom Wilde knew and admired, defined anarchism thus: "Anarchism (from the Gr. *av-*, and *apxn*, contrary to authority), is the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government — harmony in such a society being attained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded

between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being."
Kropotkin was clear that anarchists held "their economic conceptions . . . in common with all socialists, of whom they constitute the left wing." [Petr Kropotkin,] "Anarchism" in *The Essential Kropotkin*, ed. Emile Capouya and Keitha Tompkins (New York: Liveright) 108-9.

4. Wilde, "Soul of Man," 1175.

5. See: E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) 564-572.

6. Quoted in Stuart Mason [Christopher Millard], *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: Bertram Rota, 1967) 73.

7. Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Collins,* 1114.

8. David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006) 76-7. Wilde had previously written, in "The Truth of Masks" (1885), "Monarchy, Anarchy, and Republicanism may contend for the government of nations; but a theatre should be in the power of a cultured despot. There may be division of labour, but there must be no division of mind." Oscar Wilde, "The Truth of Masks," in *Collins, Ibid.,* 1172.
When his collection of critical essays, *Intentions*, was to be released in a French edition, Wilde suggested removing "The Truth of Masks" ("je ne l'aime plus") and replacing it with "The Soul of Man under Socialism." *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000) 487.

9. Oscar Wilde, "Libertatis Sacra Fames," in *Collins,* 858.

10. Oscar Wilde, "Sonnet to Liberty," in *Collins,* 859.

11. "Oscar Wilde: An Interview with the Apostle of Aestheticism," in *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, Eds. Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 2010), 102-3.

12. Wilde, "Soul of Man," 1182.

13. *Ibid.,*1176.

14. *Ibid.,*1188.

15. *Ibid.,*1184.

16. *Ibid.,*1197.

17. Percival W. H. Almy, "New Views of Mr. Oscar Wilde," in *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections, Volume 1*. ed. E.H. Mikhail (New York; Barnes and Noble, 1979) 232.

18. *Ibid.,* 229.

19. *Ibid.*, 231-2, Compare with "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," 1179-81 (on Christ), 1182 (on punishment), and 1180 (on law-breaking).

20. Almy, 231-2.

21. *Ibid.,* 232.

22. See: "The House Beautiful," 913-925, though here, too, he insists that beautiful things should be *used*: "Whatever you have that is beautiful if for use, then you should use it, or part with it to someone who will." Oscar Wilde, "The House Beautiful," in *Collins,* 921.

23. Wilde, "Soul of Man," 1178.

24. *Ibid.,* 1183.

25. *Ibid.,* 1183.

26. *Ibid.,* 1181. Wilde referred to the failure of government earlier, in a review of Chuang Tsu's writings: "'There is such a thing,' says Chuang Tsu, 'as leaving mankind alone: there has never been such a thing as governing mankind.' All modes of government are wrong. They are unscientific, because they seek to alter the natural environment of man; they are immoral, because by interfering with the individual, they produce the most aggressive forms of egotism; they are ignorant, because they try to spread education; they are self-destructive, because they engender anarchy." Oscar Wilde, "A Chinese Sage," in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 223-4.

27. Wilde, Soul of Man, 1192.

28. *Ibid.,* 1193.

29. *Ibid.,* 1177.

30. *Complete Letters*, 602.