The Soul of Man Under... Anarchism?

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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.”

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30 Complete Letters, 602.
saying, 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, 26 Ibid., 1181. Wilde referred to the failure of government earlier, in a review of Chuang Tzu’s writings: “There is such a thing,” says Chuang Tzu, “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.
spect, 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.  

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”**

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.”

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

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24 Ibid., 1183.
25 Ibid., 1183.
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”), 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 per-
sonality,” pirates are “very fine fellows,” and the prison system
is “a perfect fiasco.”

In one interesting exchange, Wilde also expressed “consider-
able 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.”

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?”

The story — a bit surprising from a man whose earliest lec-
tures centered on the need for beautiful things in the home —
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, re-

The title of Oscar Wilde’s essay “The Soul of Man Under So-
cialism” 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.

What Wilde presents to us in the essay is a vision for a
new society and, as important, a sample of a model for polit-
tical 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.”

Wilde’s socialism — and it is a form of socialism — repre-
sents socialism in the service of individualism. It is a social-
ism 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 op-

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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.

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1 See, for instance: M. Saint-Georges de Bouhelier, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” in The Individualist Anarchists: An Anthology of Liberty
2 Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” in Collins Complete
pressed 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

³ Petr Kropotkin, whom Wilde knew and admired, defined anarchism thus: “Anarchism (from the Gr. αν- and αρχη, 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.”

⁴ Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1175.

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

¹⁵ Ibid., 1184.
¹⁶ Ibid., 1197.
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 con-
servative poem a better expression of his views. “Does the ‘Son-
net 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.’”

And yet — there is hardly a line in “Libertatis” that is not con-
tradicted somewhere in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” In
1880 Wilde declared himself “nurtured in democracy,” and “Lik-
ing best that state republican.” In 1891, he wrote: “democracy
means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for
the people.”

In the poem he is down on “clamourous dema-
gogues” 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.” 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 prefer-
ance for the “paving-stone” over “the pen”; “The very violence
of a revolution may make the public grand and splendid for
a moment.”

In his poem he worried that “beneath the igno-
rant reign” of the rabble “Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour, all
things fade.” And in “The Soul of Man” he remarked that “pop-
ular authority and the recognition of popular authority are fa-
tal” to the arts — yet, it is in large part because of the promise

11 “Oscar Wilde: An Interview with the Apostle of Aestheticism,” in Os-
car Wilde in America: The Interviews, Eds. Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharn-
12 Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1182.
13 Ibid., 1176.
14 Ibid., 1188.

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 So-
cialism, 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.

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 embod-
iment of Wilde’s double life: “I live in terror of not being mis-
understood,” he wrote.

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.

6 Quoted in Stuart Mason [Christopher Millard], Bibliography of Oscar
7 Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in Collins, 1114.
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’étais poète 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 “Liberatis 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 “Liberatis”) 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:

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

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

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\(^{8}\) 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.


\(^{9}\) Oscar Wilde, “Liberatis Sacra Fames,” in Collins, 858.

\(^{10}\) Oscar Wilde, “Sonnet to Liberty,” in Collins, 859.