

Oscar Wilde's lasting significance

David Walsh
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The occasion of Moisés Kaufman's play, *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, currently running at the Minetta Lane Theatre in New York City, provides the opportunity to begin a reexamination of Wilde's intellectual legacy.

Gross Indecency dramatizes the tragic events which befell the Irish-born playwright, novelist and essayist following upon his decision to sue the Marquess of Queensberry, father of his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, for criminal libel in March 1895. The Marquess, a quasipsychotic bully, had publicly accused Wilde of "posing" as a homosexual.

The libel trial was a disaster for the writer. It was not difficult for the defense to prove that he had done more than pose. Making use of the evidence about Wilde's sexual activities that had emerged, the police arrested him and he was charged under an 1885 act that made all forms of "gross indecency" between males, consenting or otherwise, punishable offenses. The ensuing trial ended in a hung jury. The government pressed on, and, in a subsequent trial, obtained a conviction; Wilde was given the maximum sentence, two years with hard labor. After his release from prison in May 1897, he emigrated to France where he died three years later.

Kaufman has attempted, at least in a limited fashion, to show that Wilde was not hounded merely on account of his sexual orientation. The prosecution introduced his "art for art's sake" outlook during the trial as proof of his depraved character. The play suggests that Wilde's homosexuality, combined with his aesthetics, espoused moreover by an Irishman with socialistic views, represented an affront to Victorian English society that could not go unpunished. The fact that *Gross Indecency* has enjoyed considerable popular success is a heartening sign that an audience exists for works of some substance.

Oscar Wilde has been very much with us both as a personality and a creator and critic of artistic work over the course of the past century. Whether they have approved or disapproved of him, it has proven difficult for artists and intellectuals of the most diverse persuasions to ignore him. There is something in his life and work that continues to compel not merely interest, but partisanship. He is, so to speak, an unresolved issue.

Born in Dublin in 1854, Wilde entered Oxford two decades later, where he came under the influence of art critic and historian John Ruskin, and, more thoroughly, Walter Pater, aesthete and author of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Wilde inherited tastes and principles, in the words of critic Edouard Roditi, "which allowed him to progress ... to a doctrine of art for art's sake which respected only perfection of workmanship and allowed no ethical considerations to interfere in its appreciations." It was at Oxford that he proclaimed his desire to "live up to his blue china."

In 1879 Wilde brought to London, according to Arthur Ransome's early critical study, "a small income, a determination to conquer the town, and a reputation as a talker.... He adopted a fantastic costume to

emphasize his personality, and, perhaps to excuse it, spoke of the ugliness of modern dress." Within three years he became the butt of caricatures "several times a month" in *Punch*, one of the principal organs of British philistinism.

Wilde had his first play, *Vera, or The Nihilists*, a melodrama about Russian revolutionaries, published in 1880. The following year his first collected edition of poems appeared. Wilde's most productive period began in 1888 and continued until his imprisonment. During this time he wrote his collection of "socialist" children's stories: *The Happy Prince*; *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*; a volume of important critical essays, *Intentions*; and his major theatrical pieces. He wrote his extraordinary *De Profundis* while in prison, and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* upon release.

Wilde's social views

Wilde's social outlook emerged from an interplay of influences: his Irish family background, his mother's radical views and, above all, his epoch. "Of society's stratification and conflicting class interests, Wilde was indeed as conscious as any artist of his age," comments Roditi. The same critic notes that Wilde was a dandy not of the 1850s and 1860s, like Baudelaire, but of the 1890s. It was a period of substantial and growing social tensions. An estimated 2 million people in London lived in poverty. At the end of the previous decade British workers had begun to construct mass industrial unions. The Social Democratic Federation, an avowedly Marxist organization, was founded in 1884; the Independent Labour Party in January 1893.

Wilde's trial coincided with the anti-Semitic witch hunt of Alfred Dreyfus in France. The need of the ruling class to rally the petty-bourgeois masses around the defense of the nation was increasingly a critical political fact of life in both France and England. Wilde's artistic lifestyle and his homosexuality were held up as exotic and degenerate imports that threatened to unman the British Empire, increasingly facing rivals in many parts of the globe.

If Wilde's avowal of extreme aestheticism, on the one hand, and socialism, on the other, seems peculiar, it should be noted that these were by no means considered mutually exclusive intellectual tendencies either in England or on the Continent in the 1890s.

Nonetheless, what is one to make of an aesthetic that declares: "All art is quite useless"? The problem has to be approached historically.

Plekhanov, in his *Art and Social Life*, argued convincingly that "the belief in art for art's sake naturally arises among artists wherever they are out of harmony with the society around them." He wrote that it was natural that the French Romantics "were revolted by the idea of 'useful art.' In their eyes, to make art useful was tantamount to

making it serve the bourgeoisie whom they despised so profoundly.”

In his work on Wilde, Roditi says, “As a conscientious objector to the social order in which he lived, many a nineteenth-century artist ... sought evidence of his own integrity in his utter uselessness.” Farther on he writes: “In an ugly age, Wilde believed that art should not imitate life but art.” Wilde wrote, “To project one’s soul into some gracious form” is “perhaps the most satisfying joy left to us in an age so limited and vulgar as our own, an age grossly carnal in its pleasures, and grossly common in its aims.”

He rejected an art of “moral uplift,” practiced by a vast array of Victorian writers, which amounted, in the final analysis, to a legitimizing of existing institutions and conditions. To defend himself and his work he was obliged to state, and believe, that “Art never expresses anything but itself.” But few artists, paradoxically, have been more consumed at such a deep level by moral and social commitments. (G.B. Shaw pointed out that when he attempted to get various literary figures in London to sign a petition asking for a reprieve for the Haymarket defendants, Wilde was the only one who signed.) His best plays, *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as well as *Dorian Gray*, in addition to demonstrating Wilde’s renowned wit, provide a devastating glimpse of the morals and mentality of the ruling circles, among whom he circulated.

The creative personality

If Wilde’s artistic work and criticism is read historically and dialectically it reveals, above all, a belief, held onto in the face of great odds, in the vast power of thought and the thinking subject. In an age dominated by the concept that art (and other intellectual activities) held up a passive mirror to nature and life, Wilde fought tenaciously for the opposite view: that the decisive role in life was played by the creative personality.

His famous dictum that life and nature imitated art is easy enough to dismiss, but one might consider its implications before doing so. When Wilde’s spokesman in *The Decay of Lying* declares, “At present, people see fogs ... because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London.... But no one saw them.... They did not exist until Art had invented them,” he had come upon something that was a closed book to the average artist and intellectual of his day. Of course such concepts can be abused, and have been in our century, but they contain essential particles of truth.

So too in politics Wilde rose far above the Fabians, his contemporaries and supposed cothinkers. In his deeply humane and subversive essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde, in fact, heaped scorn on piecemeal approaches to the social ills produced by capitalism. Of the reformers he said, “their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it.... The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible.”

Wilde reminds us forcefully that there is a visionary component to socialist consciousness when he writes, “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at.”

One might put the matter this way: Wilde expressed many truths which, due to his class background, the nature and tone of his times and, equally significantly, the undeveloped, and somewhat unreceptive, state of socialism in England, took the form of

paradoxical quips, but which in reality pointed toward critical intellectual issues of the twentieth century. They could only make themselves known to those acutely attuned to the broadest questions bound up with the transformation of society.

It should come as no surprise then that Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* bears traces of Wilde’s influence, interpreted through the prism of a historical materialist outlook. While Wilde baldly asserts that socialism will be of value chiefly “because it will lead to Individualism,” Trotsky writes, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, that “heightening of the objective quality and the subjective consciousness of individuality [in the proletariat] is the most valuable contribution of the cultural advance at the threshold of which we stand today.”

Wilde begins his essay by noting, “Now and then, in the course of a century,” great scientists like Darwin, poets like Keats, have been able “to realise the perfection” of what was in them. “These, however, are exceptions.” He ends his piece by explaining that through socialism, working in the service of individualism, “each man will attain to his perfection.” For his part, in the final passages of *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky also addresses himself to man’s harmonizing and perfecting himself in the communist future. He concludes his work, “The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.”

Arthur Ransome remarks that when Wilde “was sent to prison the spokesmen of the nineties were pleased to shout, ‘

We have heard the last of him.’” Ransome added, “To make sure of that they should have used the fires of Savonarola as well as the cell of Raleigh. They should have burnt his books as well as shutting up the writer.”

Wilde insisted that life had to be remade along aesthetic lines. “Now Art should never try to be popular,” he wrote. “The public should try to make itself artistic.” The modern world trusted “to Socialism and to Science as its methods” to do away “with poverty, and the suffering that it entails,” that when man had accomplished this task, “he will be saner, healthier, more civilised, more himself.” A century later his thought retains its full validity.

See also: David Walsh replies to a reader’s criticism of this article



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