

“[U]ngrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious”:  
Subaltern Voices in the Writings of Oscar Wilde.

*Ronald Paul, University of Gothenburg*

In a letter to Marie Prescott, the actress who was to have the title role in his very first play, *Vera; or, The Nihilists* (1880), Oscar Wilde wrote of his intention in the work to portray, not primarily the politics but more the individual passions of people who had set themselves up to struggle against an autocratic power:

It deals with no theories of government, but with men and women simply; and modern Nihilistic Russia, with all the terror of its tyranny and the marvel of its martyrdoms, is merely the fiery and fervent background in front of which the persons of my dream live and love. With this feeling was the play written, and with this aim should the play be acted [...] (Quoted in Montgomery Hyde 2001: 89)

It is this focus of Wilde, fleshing out both the personal and the political in his writing that I will discuss in some detail in this essay. Not only the way this is dramatized in his anarchist play, *Vera*, written at the very beginning of Wilde's career, but also in his return to giving a voice to the voiceless prisoners in his very last poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). I want to seek to reassert Wilde as a politically engaged writer, whose work from beginning to end is deeply concerned with social issues and whose sympathies were always on the side of the dispossessed, whom he described in his great libertarian essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1890), as “ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious” and “quite right to be so” (1987: 1081). These disempowered people, belonging to what Gramsci called the “subaltern classes” (1973: 52), were never, as the critic Gayatri Spivak suggested, unable to speak.<sup>1</sup> The problem has always been: would they ever be heard? As an Irish republican, a feminist, a socialist and a gay

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<sup>1</sup> See further Spivak. “Subaltern Talk” (1996: 287-308).

liberationist,<sup>2</sup> Wilde was himself particularly sensitive to and aware of the predicament of oppressed and marginalized groups in Victorian society. As a writer, he also knew the importance of making public their concerns, of giving expression to their grievances in order to be heard and taken notice of. This is the radical voice of the subaltern Other that, I would claim, is to be found in Oscar Wilde's most overtly political writings.

Such a stance is of course in complete contrast to the self-absorbed, Decadent image that has dogged Wilde's reputation almost from the very beginning. The reduction of Wilde's life to the elitist aestheticism of Art-for-art's sake, not least by some literary historians, ignores the serious social relevance of his writing. And this is by critics who should know better. For example, in an early standard work of reference, Albert C. Baugh's *A Literary History of England*, Samuel C. Chew and Richard D. Altick are typical in the way they conflate Wilde's life and work in order to diminish the significance of the latter: "The story of his rise to the dizzy summit of fame and of his catastrophic fall will be remembered when oblivion, the penalty for their fundamental insincerity, overtakes most of his writings" (1967: Vol. IV: 1479-80). In their own much-read Pelican guide to *Modernism*, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane also simply recycle the demonic stereotype of Wilde as the ultimate "apostle of decadence" (1976: 639). In a similar vein, Stephen Calloway concludes that Wilde "never ceased to fulfil that most important, if also ultimately most Decadent, aim and requirement of every great Dandy: that of creating oneself afresh each day as a work of art. Or as Oscar Wilde himself would explain the final paradox of the pose of the Aesthetic Dandy, he chose, as all great Dandies must, to put only his talent into his work, but his genius into his life" (Calloway 1997: 51-52). More surprisingly, the characterisation of Wilde by the radical critic Terry Eagleton seems to imply that the contradictions of Wilde's life

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<sup>2</sup> In his gay biography of Wilde, Neil McKenna writes: "'The Extreme Left' was an apt description for those Uranians, like Oscar and Bosie, who were passionately, fiercely committed to the Cause. For Oscar and Bosie, the personal had become political. To believe in the Cause was not enough. They needed to realise their erotic selves, to proclaim their sexual orientation to the world" (2004: 312). "Uranian" was at that time a term used for homosexuals.

were all of equal importance, and that such personal paradoxes were somehow compromising in his career as a writer:

Wilde was an upper-class parasite whose political sympathies were Catholic, anarchist and republican, a socialite who was also a socialist, a Victorian patriarch who disported himself with rent boys in cheap hotels. If he hobnobbed with the Lady Bracknells, he also moved freely in radical circles, befriending William Morris and Prince Kropotkin. (2005: 49)

Despite all this biographical equivocation, the starting-point for any serious discussion of Wilde's political ideas is his essay, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, which he published in 1890, the same year as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared in print. It is significant to note that Wilde's most radically explicit statement about the need for a socialist revolution was written at the same time as his apparently most "Decadent" and aesthetically detached novel. In fact, it is the *Soul of Man under Socialism* that is one of the keys to his most famous literary satire, as Richard Ellmann reminds us: "By exposing the defects of orthodox aestheticism in *Dorian Gray*, and the virtues of reconsidered aestheticism in 'The Critic as Artist' and 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', Wilde presented the case as fully as he could" (1987: 311). The case was not only to criticize the socially regressive aesthetic of Art-for-art's sake, but also to envisage what could replace it. Moreover, in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, Wilde sought to shift the emphasis away from the piecemeal philanthropy of 'bread-and-butter' reformists to a much more radical understanding of the truly individual liberation that socialism could achieve: "Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism" (1987: 1080). By individualism, Wilde meant the kind of creatively fulfilled life that was restricted under capitalism to those privileged few who had the time and means to be "the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture – in a word, the real men, the men who have realised themselves, and in whom all Humanity gains a partial realisation" (1987: 1080). As for the others, those who were condemned to work merely in order to survive, their individual talents were lost in daily grind of wage slavery:

Upon the other hand, there are a great many people who, having no private property of their own, and being always on the brink of sheer starvation, are compelled to do the work of beasts of burden, to do work that is quite uncongenial to them, and to

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which they are forced by the peremptory, unreasonable, degrading Tyranny of want. These are the poor [...] (1987: 1080)

Wilde showed that he had no Victorian illusions about the value of the work ethic for the majority of people. Their lot was instead an endless round of soul-destroying physical labour that would, he predicted, under socialism be done instead by machines, leaving people to get on with cultivating more meaningful lives:

All unintellectual labour, all monotonous, dull labour, all labour that deals with dreadful things, and involves unpleasant conditions, must be done by machinery. Machinery must work for us in coal mines, and do all sanitary services, and be the stoker of steamers, and clean the streets, and run messages on wet days, and do anything that is tedious or distressing. At present machinery competes against man. Under proper conditions machinery will serve man [...] while Humanity will be amusing itself, or enjoying cultivated leisure – which, and not labour, is the aim of man – or making beautiful things, or reading beautiful things, or simply contemplating the world with admiration and delight, machinery will be doing all the necessary and unpleasant work. (1987: 1089)

There is a keen awareness here, reminiscent of the ideas of William Morris, of the conflict between individual aesthetic needs and the reality of existence of the mass of ordinary people.<sup>3</sup> It was a contradiction only socialism could solve. This is Wilde at his most visionary and provocatively compelling, a characteristic that made his essay on socialism one of the most widely read and translated of all his writings.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Morris's pamphlet, "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil" (1884: Reprinted in Morton 1973: 86-108). That Wilde and Morris were close friends is indicated by George Bernard Shaw's recollection that "Morris, when he was dying slowly, enjoyed a visit from Wilde more than from anybody else" (Quoted in Pearson 1987: 141)

<sup>4</sup> As early as 1906, one of Wilde's first biographers, Robert Harborough Sherard wrote in *The Life of Oscar Wilde*: "[A]ll over Europe amongst the poor, oppressed and outcast, his name is revered as that of an apostle of the liberties of man. No writing on the social question, perhaps, has produced a profounder impression than his on the continent, where 'The Soul of Man' has been translated into every tongue. Amongst the very poorest and most forlorn, and most desperate of the helots of Europe, the Jews of Russia and Poland, Oscar Wilde, known to them only as the author of this essay, is regarded in the

It is, moreover, a text that reflects Wilde's genuine concern with the quality of life of those who are rarely represented in the public debate – such as the street sweeper, whose job Wilde uses to attack all the “nonsense” written and talked about the “dignity of manual labour”:

To sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours on a day when the east wind is blowing is a disgusting occupation. To sweep it with mental, moral, or physical dignity seems to me to be impossible. To sweep it with joy would be appalling. Man is made for something better than disturbing dirt. (1987: 1088-9)

At the same time, Wilde is equally critical of the charitable aims of social reformists who sought to improve the lot of the poor by decree from above. Rightly in Wilde's view, the poor rejected such a “ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannise over their private lives” (1987: 1081). In contrast, Wilde regarded the “disobedience” of the poor, not as a sign of ingratitude, but as an expression of the stirrings of a much-needed collective revolt:

Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion [...] No: a poor man who is ungrateful, unthrifty, discontented, and rebellious, is probably a real personality, and has much in him. He is at any rate a healthy protest. (1987: 1081)

This is Wilde reaching out to the subaltern classes, conjuring up in his writing an image of both their oppressive physical conditions and their radical potential for change. It is also a tribute to Wilde's sense of social justice that he could so tangibly empathize with the lot of “the great unwashed,” as they were denigratingly referred to in the Victorian period, even though he had, as yet, little or no personal experience of their lives. Wilde nevertheless saw these people both as individuals and as a collective force for the future. This is the real “Soul of Man” that socialism would release. In his essay, Wilde poses all sorts of serious, yet

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light of a prophet, a benefactor, a saint” (Quoted in Eltis, Sol. *Revising Wilde* (1996: 24)).

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still difficult questions about how this social change could be achieved – by reform or revolution – and how to promote its cause among the people. He pre-empted, for instance, what has become a perennial debate within the workers’ movement about consciousness-raising and the role of political agitation:

What is said by great employers of labour against agitators is unquestionably true. Agitators are a set of interfering, meddling people, who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community and sow the seeds of discontent amongst them. That is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary. Without them, in our incomplete state, there would be no advance towards civilisation. (1987: 1082)

This radical insight also informs the plot of Wilde’s first major dramatic work – *Vera; or, the Nihilists* – to which I now want to turn. It is a controversial play in many respects, not least in terms of its depiction of political violence, written at a time, very much like our own, when there was an increasingly paranoid preoccupation with the phenomenon of terrorism in the public debate.

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To write a play in the 1870s that was sympathetic to the aims of the Russian anarchists or Nihilists as they were called,<sup>5</sup> was arguably the equivalent today of portraying on a London stage members of al-Qaida as heroic freedom fighters.<sup>6</sup> An indication of the controversial nature of Wilde’s play was the governmental manipulation that went on behind the scenes to prevent any performance of the work in Britain, as John Sloan records:

Wilde’s battle with the censors began with his first play. *Vera; or The Nihilists* was cancelled three weeks before its performance at the Adelphi Theatre, London, in December 1881. It has been suggested that the play was cancelled for financial reasons, but the evidence points to political interference. The assassination of Tsar

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<sup>5</sup> For a fuller discussion of the term ‘Nihilist’, see Hingley (1967).

<sup>6</sup> Further parallels between today’s fundamentalist terrorists and the anarchists of Wilde’s time are drawn in Mary Evans’s article, “For jihadist, read anarchist” in *The Economist* 18 August, 2005.

Alexander II in March that year had caused a wave of alarm among the royal families of Europe. The wife of the new emperor, Alexander III, was sister of the Princess of Wales. In London, establishment fears centred on republican groups and foreign workers' clubs. (2003: 87)<sup>7</sup>

These revolutionary groupings included Irish Fenians, who had already been involved in several bombing attacks in London, as well as anarchists fleeing persecution after the fall of the Paris Commune in 1871.<sup>8</sup> That Wilde was himself personally drawn to these radicals is well documented, although he rejected their bomb-throwing tactics as politically counterproductive: "We are all of us more or less Socialists now-a-days [...] I think I am rather more than a Socialist. I am something of an Anarchist, I believe, but, of course, the dynamite policy is very absurd indeed" (Quoted in Ellmann 1988: 273).<sup>9</sup> However, Wilde fully understood how the savage colonial oppression of subaltern peoples, not least of the Irish, could provoke such desperate acts of political retribution. When a terrorist group assassinated both the Chief Secretary and Under-Secretary for Ireland in Phoenix Park, Dublin, Wilde told the press: "We forget how much England is to blame. She is reaping the fruit of seven centuries of injustice" (Quoted in Ellmann 1988: 186).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, to call himself an anarchist at this time was

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<sup>7</sup> The play had its world premier instead in New York on 20 August 1883.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the state of political tension in London at this time, see Clive Bloom: " 'Good Old Dynamite': London's War with the Bombers" in *Violent London*. (2003: 239-257).

<sup>9</sup> George Bernard Shaw recalled that when he campaigned in 1886 for the release of the Chicago anarchists, accused of throwing a bomb at the police during a workers' demonstration, "I tried to get some literary men in London, all heroic rebels and sceptics on paper, to sign a memorial asking for the reprieve of these unfortunate men. The only signature I got was Oscar's" (Quoted in Pearson 1987: 177).

<sup>10</sup> In a review about Ireland for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 April 1889, Wilde also wrote: "Blue Books are generally dull reading, but Blue Books on Ireland have always been interesting. They form the record of one of the great tragedies of modern Europe. In them England has written down her indictment against herself, and has given the world the history of her shame. If in the last century she tried to govern Ireland with an insolence that was intensified by race-hatred

to risk being demonised as one of these same bomb-throwing terrorists. It is, therefore, an indication of just how politically motivated Wilde was when he began his career as a dramatist by writing a play about the Russian Nihilists. Perhaps this goes to explain in part why, later on during his trial, it was as much Wilde's radical reputation, as his image as a bohemian aesthete, that was brought up in the press, where he was decried as "the real leader [...] of the revolutionary and anarchist school which has forced itself into such prominence in every domain of art" (Quoted in Sloan 2003: 104). Radically committed to the end, Wilde celebrated in his final prison testament, *De Profundis*, the life of Peter Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist leader, who was well-known as an advocate of the violent method of "propaganda by deed." Wilde praises him lavishly as "a man with the soul of that beautiful white Christ that seems coming out of Russia" (1987: 934). Similarly, Vera, Wilde's own early anarchist heroine, is also portrayed both as an adherent of violent political assassination and as a woman who dies a Christ-like martyr for the cause.

Critics have, however, been generally dismissive of this, Wilde's first, full-length dramatic work. For example, Ellmann calls it "a wretched play" (1988: 119), while Montgomery Hyde refers to it as an "immature melodrama" (2001: 44). Joseph Donohue passes over it quickly as an "unnecessarily complicated" early play (1997: 136). Sloan mentions it merely as Wilde's "political costume drama" (2003: 13). What they all seem to miss, however, is the fact that the play is first and foremost a dramatisation of political ideas, of the clash between the tactic of terrorist violence from below and that of gradual reform from above. *Vera* is not so much a historical portrayal of Russia, but an intervention in the debate that was raging at the time in Britain and elsewhere, involving socialists, communists and anarchists, about how to combat class inequality and create instead a world without want.<sup>11</sup> It is a debate

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and religious prejudice, she has sought to rule her in this century with a stupidity that is aggravated by good intentions." *Selected Journalism* (2004: 36).

<sup>11</sup> Wilde attended many lectures given by socialists and anarchists like William Morris, George Bernard Shaw and Kropotkin. He even attended strike meetings. Sloan writes for instance that in 1889 "That was also the year of the famous London dock strike for the right of unskilled workers to unionize. Constance



about reformism and revolution that has resounded through to our own time. Wilde's play was also a way for him to write back at the vilification of socialism in the press. As E. P. Thompson writes, the word "Socialism" was used at the time "as a boggy-word to cover the 'outrages' of the Commune, the terrorist methods of the Russian nihilists – bomb-plots, assassination, dynamite" (1977: 276). It is an indication of the depth of Wilde's own radicalism that he nevertheless chose to explore on stage such politically sensitive issues as anarchism and the murder of a royal head of state.

It is also an even more remarkable early example of a play that allows ordinary people, in this case a Russian peasant girl, to speak and act in a context of political struggle. The fact that the heroine, Vera Sabouroff, is a member of the Nihilist Party, which was at the time conducting a campaign of terrorist attacks on leading Russian figures, including the Tsar himself, links her indirectly to Spivak's pioneering study of an Indian freedom fighter, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, who also falters at the final moment to carry out her suicide attack.<sup>12</sup> There is a similar plotline in Wilde's play, in which he explores the political and emotional tensions within the heart and mind of a female terrorist. In Wilde's case, however, the subaltern speaks and is heard on stage:

Vera: I must. They are getting faint-hearted there, and I would fan the flame of this revolution into such a blaze that the eyes of all kings in Europe shall be blinded. If martial law is passed they will need me all the more there. There is no limit, it seems, to the tyranny of one man; but to the suffering of a whole people there shall be a limit. Too many of us have died on block and barricade: it is their turn to be victims now. (1987: 657)

Here we see Vera expressing the dilemma of revolutionaries everywhere: how to respond to the violence of the state in a way that would bring about a lasting change? Moreover, would individual acts of political assassination really inspire the people to rise up against their oppressors? These are issues that Wilde himself was certainly familiar with in

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Wilde with Oscar by her side attended a Hyde Park demonstration on 1 September in their support" (2003: 36).

<sup>12</sup> See further Stephen Morton. "Learning from the Subaltern" in *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (2003: 45-69).

relation to Ireland, where there was a long tradition of republican terrorism.

In the play, Wilde includes a number of ideological set-pieces in which characters discuss different reformist and revolutionary strategies to change the autocratic regime in Russia. One of the most contrived plot coincidences in this context is when Alexis, the young Tzarevitch, becomes himself a secret member of the Nihilists. Moreover, after the Tsar, his father, is assassinated, Alexis succeeds to the throne and is in a position to begin implementing his own ideas of reform. The critical turning-point in the play is a meeting between Alexis, as the new Tsar, and Vera, who has been sent to assassinate him, even though they are already in love. The melodramatic strain of such an implausible encounter is typical of the moral didacticism of the play, although not unlike the that of George Bernard Shaw it may be said, whose writings on drama had, according to John Sloan, already a decisive impact on Wilde: "Wilde saw a mirror of himself in Shaw's portrait of Ibsen as a courageous artist struggling to give people new forms of truth" (2003: 89). Thus, the psychological realism of the play is sacrificed to the ideological polemic on stage. In a Brechtian sense, however, Wilde is also inviting the audience to reflect upon and perhaps even take sides in solving Vera's personal and political dilemma, not least when Alexis offers her the chance to marry him and share his power as an enlightened despot who will liberate Russia by decree:

The people will love us. We will rule them by love, as a father rules his children. There shall be liberty in Russia for every man to think as his heart bids him; liberty for men to speak as they think. I have banished the wolves that preyed on us; I have brought back your brother from Siberia; I have opened the blackened jaws of the mine. (1987: 686)

Despite this, Vera chooses to kill herself in an act of self-sacrifice rather than murder the new Tsar. Generally speaking, critics have seen this ending as an illustration of terrorism being overcome by the power of love. Ellmann comments for instance that: "Of the two causes for which Vera Sabouroff may be said to die, she no longer believes in Nihilism, but she does believe in love" (1988: 118-9). However, by killing herself, Vera refuses not only the opportunity to kill the head of state, but also the possibility of living a life of philanthropy with her Tsarist lover. There is, moreover, no guarantee that her death will prevent any further

attempts on his life. A more radical reading of the play's ending might suggest, instead, that Vera kills herself in rejection of individual terrorism and reformism, both of which appear as ideological dead-ends. Her final exclamatory words reflect her feelings of desperation at this critical ideological impasse:

Vera: Oh, love! love! love! be merciful to me! The wolves are hot upon you! – you must live for liberty, for Russia, for me! Oh, you do not love me! You offered me an empire once! Give me this dagger, now! Oh, you are cruel! My life for yours! What does it matter?

Czar: The bitterness of death is past for me.

Vera: Oh, they are breaking in below! See! The bloody man behind you! Ah!

Conspirators: Long live the people!

Czar: What have you done?

Vera: I have saved Russia! (1987: 688)

Despite her death, Vera is, nevertheless, not entirely a tragic heroine, whose life is merely a waste of misguided political action. The play remains a fundamental celebration of the struggle for freedom and democracy, albeit through a clash of political strategies and personal affections. It is most certainly not a paean to political quietism.<sup>13</sup> Although Wilde seeks to dissociate himself from terrorism as a tactic, he is clearly fascinated by the psychology of people who are willing to take the ultimate step and kill for a higher ideal. Thus, all of the most moving monologues are given to Vera throughout the play, lines that explore the tensions between gender, politics and personal commitment. As Jody Price comments, “Vera’s growth presents an image of a complete woman, empowered and self-aware” (1996: 152). Moreover, Wilde shows Vera as consciously belonging to a long line of female activists who have rejected the conventional passive role of women in favour of that of a revolutionary activist:

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<sup>13</sup> Despite his generally sympathetic reading of the politics of the play, Sos Eltis claims, in contrast, that the confused ending of the play achieves no “real impact”: “No coherent subtext emerges, as too many contradictions of character and motive add up to a maze of hints below the highly theatrical surface” (1996: 54).

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Vera: [...] Methinks the spirit of Charlotte Corday has entered my soul now. I shall carve my name on the world, and be ranked among the great heroines. Ay! The spirit of Charlotte Corday beats in each petty vein, and nerves my woman's hand to strike, as I have nerved my woman's heart to hate [...] O Liberty, O mighty mother of eternal time, thy robe is purple with the blood of those who have died for thee! The throne is the Calvary of the people, thy crown the crown of thorns. O crucified mother, the despot has driven a nail through thy right hand, and the tyrant through thy left! Thy feet are pierced with their iron [...] O Liberty, do I dedicate myself to thy service; do with me as thou wilt! The end has come now, and by thy sacred wounds, O crucified mother, O Liberty, I swear that Russia shall be saved! (1987: 681)

Vera stabs herself and throws the bloody dagger out of the window in an attempt to appease the crowd in the street. The weapon becomes, therefore, a pen and her body the paper on which the message is written in blood. Like Spivak's Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, her suicide has even more meaning than her life. It is, however, left to others to interpret its significance.

There is another link, this time between Vera's death and that of Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a trooper in the Royal Horse Guards, who was hung in Reading Gaol on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1896 for the murder of his wife, Laura Ellen. Once again, we have the story of the death of a subaltern (literally and metaphorically), that Wilde, himself incarcerated in the same prison, rescues from oblivion and rewrites as a literary text – *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) – a radical fusion of politics and poetry in which Wilde once more seeks to give a voice to those that society has forgotten.

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Wilde's last poem is, without doubt, a conscious act of collective subaltern memory, a dramatic reconstruction of the brutal reality of prison, in particular the cold, state-sponsored murder perpetrated in revenge for another man's terrible crime of passion.<sup>14</sup> In this work, Wilde

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<sup>14</sup> The dedication of the poem reads: "In Memoriam C. T. W. Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards. Obiit H. M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1896." See Wilde's letter to Leonard Smithers, his publisher, 19 November

subsumes himself into the life of the ordinary prisoners: thinking, feeling and reacting against an inhuman regime of punishment that is directed at them all. It is not for nothing that Wilde first published the poem anonymously under his own prison number – “C. 3. 3.” – Block C, third floor, third cell. Wilde’s identification with the other prisoners is projected through the narrative “We” of the poem, which is what gives his portrayal of the nether world of prison its unique emotional power and moral persuasiveness. Here we find the repressed voice of the subaltern Other, whose burden of regimented servitude is an indignity shared by all:

With slouch and swing around the ring  
We trod the Fool’s Parade!  
We did not care: we knew we were  
The Devil’s Own Brigade:  
And shaven head and feet of lead  
Make a merry masquerade.

We tore the tarry rope to shreds  
With blunt and bleeding nails;  
We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors,  
And cleaned the shining rails:  
And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank,  
And clattered with the pails.

We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones,  
We turned the dusty drill:  
We banged the tins, and bawled the hymns,  
And sweated on the mill:  
But in the heart of every man  
Terror was lying still.

Despite the collective consciousness contained in lines like these, Ellmann’s critical comment that the “theme of betrayal, whether by friend or lover, run[s] through his work from *Vera* to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis*” (1988: 278), once again reduces the import of Wilde’s great prison poem to the level of mere personal

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1897, for his detailed instructions about the “In Memoriam” page. In Wilde *Selected Letters* (1962: 315-318).

biography. It also repeats what early critics like Chew and Altick have already done to try to negate the political message of the poem: “[T]he rhetorical exaggeration and the inappropriate echoes from other poets smack of artifice, and the basic theme, that ‘all men kill the thing they love,’ is an absurd generalization from Wilde’s personal experience” (1967: Vol. IV: 1481). However, one must again go back to Wilde’s essay, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, to understand just how deeply Wilde had already thought about questions of crime and punishment, both of which he places firmly in a social and political context:

[O]ne is absolutely sickened, not by the crimes that the wicked have committed, but by the punishments that the good have inflicted; and a community is infinitely more brutalised by the habitual employment of punishment than it is by the occasional occurrence of crime. It obviously follows that the more punishment is inflicted the more crime is produced [...] For what are called criminals nowadays are not criminals at all. Starvation, and not sin, is the parent of modern crime [...] When each member of the community has sufficient for his wants, and is not interfered with by his neighbour, it will not be an object of any interest to him to interfere with any one else. Jealousy, which is an extraordinary source of crime in modern life, is an emotion closely bound up with our conceptions of property, and under Socialism and Individualism will die out. It is remarkable that in communistic tribes jealousy is entirely unknown. (1987: 1088)

The execution of criminals was, as Wilde very well knew in relation to the Irish Fenians, always a political act on the part of the state. Up until 1867, executions had been public in the hope they would function as a shocking deterrent. The last public execution in England took place on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1868 when Michael Barrett, an Irishman, was hung for his participation in a bombing attack on Clerkenwell Prison in an attempt to free the Fenian prisoners within. It was deemed a terrorist attack since several innocent people living outside the prison walls were also killed or injured. However, not wanting to give future prisoners like Barrett a chance to turn their executions into public demonstrations of support for their cause, the law was changed and hangings were subsequently carried out in secret within the confines of the prison walls. It is this act of covert state violence that Wilde attacks in his poem, viewing the calculated horror of the event from the point of view of the inmates themselves – the victim and his fellow prisoners.

In *Reading Gaol* Wilde writes that “I walked, with other souls in pain,” identifying himself as one of the anonymous community of the

damned. Even though the persona in the poem varies here from “We” to “I,” there remains a tangible sense of the collective solidarity of suffering, of ‘us against them’. ‘Them’ in this case are the prison authorities that are seen as bureaucratic administrators of a punitive system that aims only to grind the prisoners down. In response, Wilde exposes the old excuse of those servants of power who hide behind a mask of loyalty – of people in office saying they were only doing their job:

The Governor was strong upon the  
The Regulations Act:  
The Doctor said that Death was but  
A scientific fact:  
And twice a day the Chaplain called,  
And left a little tract.

This prison routine of men working to the letter of the law is all the more obscene when they are faced with the task of killing trooper Wooldridge in cold blood. It is here that Wilde puts his poetic finger on the moral crux of a state execution: every man is always responsible for his own actions, including the prison warders and officials themselves. Thus, in a harrowing detail of dramatic insight, Wilde contrasts the dirty business of the clandestine burial of the prisoner with the keeping up of civilised appearances: the white traces on the warders’ boots reveal, however, the horror of what has been done:

The warders strutted up and down,  
And watched their herd of brutes,  
Their uniforms were spick and span,  
And they wore their Sunday suits,  
But we knew the work they had been at,  
By the quicklime on their boots.

Before this macabre act of official murder is carried out, the victim himself is depicted facing his end with great dignity, as though he had already succeeded in turning the moral tables on his accusers. As a passive observer, Wilde himself appears more terrified by the prospect of the execution and there is a growing feeling of real empathy with this doomed man who is not allowed to communicate with the other

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prisoners. Wilde imagines instead what he is going through, so that we as readers may also bridge his terrible gap of silence:

I never saw a man who looked  
With such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue  
Which prisoners call the sky,  
And at every wandering cloud that trailed  
In ravelled fleeces by.  
[...]  
He did not wring his hands nor weep,  
Nor did he peek or pine,  
But he drank the air as though it held  
Some healthful anodyne;  
With open mouth he drank the sun  
As though it had been wine!

And I and all the souls in pain,  
Who tramped the other ring,  
Forgot if we ourselves had done  
A great or little thing,  
And watched with gaze of dull amaze  
The man who had to swing.

Neil McKenna writes that the poem “is a powerful and moving indictment of the futility of capital punishment and of the senseless cruelty of prison life” (2004: 596). However, it is important to add that the cutting edge of the poem’s social criticism is directed, not at the prisoners, but at the state powers that build “with bricks of shame” such monstrous places of human mortification (Wilde 1987: 857). It is clearly an agitational poem, written in a realist mode that is very accessible to the reader, as Wilde said himself: “It is a new style for me, full of actuality and life in its directness of message and meaning” (Quoted in Sloan 2003: 132).<sup>15</sup> It also formed part of a campaign that Wilde joined

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<sup>15</sup> The choice of the ballad, traditionally a popular form of story-telling, was also a conscious one on Wilde’s part. Sloan writes that “The truth was that the degrading and banal details of prison life – the ‘real experiences’, as Wilde called them – were as exotic and unfamiliar to his middle-class readership as the strangeness of romance. Wilde himself acknowledged this when he considered



for the reform of prisons and the treatment of the inmates, not least the child prisoners in Reading gaol. It was followed on his release by two letters to the *Daily Chronicle* newspaper in which he underscored his arguments with the intimate details of personal prison experience. Together, they make up some of the most devastating and damning words that Wilde ever wrote. In the first letter of May 28, 1897, Wilde is particularly concerned about the plight of the children in prison and the responsibility of the authorities for creating a climate of mortal terror:

This terror that seizes and dominates the child, as it seizes the grown man also, is of course intensified beyond power of expression by the solitary cellular system of our prisons. Every child is confined to its cell for twenty-three hours out of the twenty-four. This is the appalling thing. To shut up a child in a dimly lit cell, for twenty-three hours out of the twenty-four, is an example of the cruelty of stupidity.  
(1987: 959-60)

His second letter, of March 24, 1898, is even more full of personal insight into what makes a prisoner's lot so miserably tormenting: the bad food, the chronic diarrhoea, the tiny latrine tins, the lack of air and exercise, the insomnia, the lack of reading and writing facilities, the restriction on visitors and the callousness of the prison authorities. It is a depiction of punishment that one might relate to Dickens, but which is much more reminiscent of Dante's circles of hell.

There was, however, one redeeming circumstance that Wilde discovered in prison that left a profound and lasting impression on him: the mutual sympathy and support of the prisoners themselves. It must have come as something of a surprise to find that in conditions made to brutalise and break the spirit of the inmates, Wilde found the simple humanity of men whom society had condemned as criminals:

But the only really humanising influence in prison is the influence of the prisoners. Their cheerfulness under terrible circumstance, their sympathy for each other, their humility, their gentleness, their pleasant smiles of greeting when they meet each other, their complete acquiescence in their punishments, are all quite wonderful, and I myself learned many sound lessons from them. (1987: 961)

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having the poem appear in *Reynolds Police News* because it was read by the lower and criminal classes, so ensuring him a sympathetic audience" (2003: 132).

Wilde saw that “/s/uffering and the community of suffering makes people kind” (1987: 962). It is this solidarity of the oppressed that his *Ballad of Reading Gaol* also reveals – the basic fraternity of these “outcast men,” who were the only ones to really care about each other and mourn the death of one of their own:

But there is no sleep when men must weep  
Who never yet have wept:  
So we – the fool, the fraud, the knave –  
That endless vigil kept,  
And through each brain on hands of pain  
Another’s terror crept.

The poem was the fulfilment of a promise that Wilde made to himself to speak out in the name of the ordinary prisoners whose voices were never heard in Victorian society. It was, therefore, a continuation of the cause of human liberation that he always felt himself to be a part of. Shortly after the publication of *Reading Gaol*, he commented that the fight for prison reform would continue whatever the terrible cost: “I have no doubt we shall win, but the road is long, and red with monstrous martyrdoms [...] It is not so much public opinion as public officials that need educating” (Quoted in Montgomery Hyde 2001: 345). Despite the fact that he was now financially bankrupt, Wilde nevertheless paid the fines of three of the children he knew were in prison merely for poaching rabbits. He also sent money to several other “brother prisoners” and helped them get jobs on their release from Reading gaol. It was a further significant act of solidarity with the men who had shared his journey to the end of night and with whom he still felt such a strong common bond. After his death, it was once again back to them that the final inscription on his grave in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris referred, the epitaph taken from the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

And alien tears will fill for him  
Pity’s long-broken urn,  
For his mourners will be outcast men,  
And outcasts always mourn.

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Sloan states that Wilde's writings are "deeply resonant with the main social questions of the day – anarchy and socialism, poverty and privilege, feminism and gender, imperialism, and prison reform" (2003: 99). Although, it must be said, not in any abstract, theoretical sense, but in the way these big political issues impacted on the lives of real people, be they Russian peasants and students or road sweepers and prison inmates. As I have tried to show, these are the subaltern voices that resonate directly or indirectly in the writings of Oscar Wilde. Throughout history there has been a recurring struggle by ordinary people to make themselves heard in the debate about how society should be organised and directed. As Wilde himself argues in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, this striving for a radical alternative remains indispensable to our search for human progress:

Is this Utopian? A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias. (1987: 1089)

The work of Oscar Wilde still helps us to navigate that never-ending quest.

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