William Morris and
Oscar Wilde

Peter Faulkner

Oscar Wilde, the centenary of whose death in 1900 brought him a good deal of attention in the year 2000, including three London exhibitions, was twenty years younger than Morris, and in many ways the two men would seem to be opposites: the physical contrast between the stocky and untidy Morris, forgetful of himself in his immersion in so many activities, and the tall and elegant Wilde, self-conscious and self-promoting, could hardly be more marked. It is a great pity that Max Beerbohm, who represented each of them so brilliantly, never brought them together in one of his brilliant juxtapositions [Figs. 1 and 2]. A good literary competition would surely be to invent suitable dialogue for such an imaginary scene, assuming the inapplicability of Wilde’s recorded response to one Morris, usually said to have been the prolific poet Sir Lewis, who had been lamenting the lack of public response to a recent publication with the words ‘There is a conspiracy of silence about my book’ with ‘Why not join it, Morris?’ But despite the differences between the two, there is no doubt that in the 1880s and early ’90s their worlds overlapped to a considerable extent. And from the perspective of public presence, it is striking that in 1905 Cunninghame Graham, reviewing De Profundis, made the observation that ‘With the exception perhaps of Morris and of Parnell, when he was alive [he died in 1891], no one bulked greater in the public eye than Wilde . . .’ Thus the extent of the overlap between the two, particularly from a political angle, is the subject of this article.

Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, and took his first degree in Classics there; he went on to Oxford, where he achieved First-Class Honours in Classical Moderations in 1876 and in Literae Humaniores in 1878, and won the Newdigate Prize for his poem ‘Ravenna’. He settled in London in 1879, and soon became a well-known society figure and a satirical target for Mr Punch and others, including Gilbert and Sullivan, whose Patience was first performed in 1881. In the same year he published three handsome small editions of his Poems, which appeared again in 1882 in a slightly revised form. Wilde’s prominence in London society at this early stage is attested to by William Powell Frith’s painting, The Private View of the Royal Academy, 1881, exhibited to considerable interest at the Academy itself in 1883; in it Wilde is the main figure. Frith later said that he wished ‘to hit the folly of listening to self-elected critics in matters of taste, whether in dress or art’, though as Frith was nothing of a satirist, this is hardly the impression the painting gives now. By 1882 Wilde was already well enough known to be included in Walter Hamilton’s pioneering book The Aesthetic Movement in England, alongside Ruskin, Rossetti and Morris. In the same year Wilde visited the United States and Canada, giving flamboyant lectures on ‘The English Renaissance of Art’, ‘The Decorative Arts’ and ‘The House Beautiful’,

25
which he repeated in Britain in 1883. In May 1884 he married Constance Lloyd, and the following year moved into their house in Tite Street, decorated for them by E.W.Godwin in a restrained aesthetic style. Wilde's first homosexual affair, with Robert Ross, took place in Oxford in 1886. The early nineties were the period of his great success: Lady Windermere's Fan, 1892, was followed by A Woman of No Importance in 1893, and both An Ideal Husband and The Importance of Being Earnest in 1895. Then the axe fell, so that during and after his two years' imprisonment with hard labour, he was able to produce only De Profundis and The Ballad of Reading Gaol, before dying in Paris at the age of forty six. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, who knew almost everybody, recorded that 'he was without exception the most brilliant talker I have ever come across, the most ready, the most witty, the most audacious. Nobody could pretend to outshine him, or even to shine at all in his company. Something of his wit is reflected in his plays, but very little'. It is evident that Wilde's life in London coincided with Morris's most active political years, and most of my attention will be given to the

Fig. 1. Max Beerbohm, Topsy and Ned Jones settled on the settle in Red Lion Square (1916).

Copyright the Estate of Max Beerbohm, reprinted by permission of London Management.
© Tate, London 2002.
question of Wilde’s politics in relation to those of Morris. But Wilde knew and admired Morris originally as a poet and as a designer, and it is with these two aspects of Morris’s influence that we will begin.

As far as poetry is concerned, Morris was one of the main influences on Wilde, along with other Romantic poets like, especially, Keats, but also Rossetti and
Swinburne. Indeed, Wilde was from the first charged with plagiarism from all these poets. When Wilde published his Poems in 1881, the proposal to buy a copy for the library of the Oxford Union was attacked in the debating chamber by the young Oliver Elton with scathing wit. He argued that the poems ‘are for the most part not by their putative father, but by a number of better-known and more deservedly reputed authors’ and that as ‘the Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of all these poets ... I move that it be not accepted’. The motion was carried, and the volume returned to Wilde. Certainly a poem like ‘Chanson’ might be read in another context as a parody of the Pre-Raphaelite mode:

A ring of gold and a milk-white dove
    Are goodly gifts for thee,
And a hempen rope for your own love
    To hang upon a tree.

For you a House of Ivory
    (Roses are white in the rose-bower)!
A narrow bed for me to lie
    (White, O white, is the hemlock flower)!

Some later critics have been less severe on Wilde’s youthful indebtedness. Isobel Murray, in her excellent edition of the Poems, concludes convincingly that in them Wilde’s attempt is ‘to try on voices, to search for a voice in a tradition which is foreign to him, to perform Englishness and Romanticism as if in search of a place for his individual talent, in a fashion insufficiently assured to be described as parody, whatever mastery of parody he was to achieve in prose thereafter’ (p. xvi). Certainly Wilde was open in his admiration of the English Romantic tradition, and he celebrated Keats, Shelley, Morris, Rossetti and Swinburne – though not the Poet Laureate, Tennyson – in the long poem ‘The Garden of Eros’. Here is part of the tribute to Morris:

Morris, our sweet and simple Chaucer’s child,
    Dear heritor of Spenser’s tuneful reed,
With soft and sylvan pipe has oft beguiled
    The weary soul of man in troublous need,
And from the far and flowerless fields of ice
    Has brought fair flowers meet to make an earthly paradise.

The next five stanzas continue the tribute, with Wilde recording how, ‘Far from the cricket-ground and noisy eight, At Bagley ... Have I lain poring on the dreamy tales his fancy weaves’. But the next stanza – linking praise of Morris to that of Rossetti – refers interestingly to the world outside poetry:

Spirit of Beauty, tarry yet a-while!
    Although the cheating merchants of the mart
With iron roads profane our lovely isle,
And break on whirling wheels the limbs of art,

Ay! though the crowded factories beget

The blind-worm Ignorance that slays the soul, O tarry yet!

Perhaps there is evidence here of awareness on Wilde’s part of the Morris who had moved on from *The Earthly Paradise* to the lectures on art and society that were to be collected in 1882 in *Hopes and Fears for Art*.

Although the main emphasis throughout the volume is on the aesthetic – Art with a capital letter – there is sporadic evidence of the political; in the 1882 edition Wilde grouped eight such poems together under the heading ‘Eleutheria’. In general these poems express a liberal politics, placing the emphasis on the idea of Freedom, but the politics of ‘Ave Imperatrix’ are surprising in a man with an Irish background; the British Empire is applauded, and the sufferings of ‘the brave, the strong, the fleet’ – in many cases, evidently, now the dead – will apparently bear patriotic fruit:

Though childless, and with thorn-crowned head,

Up the steep road must England go,

Yet when this fiery web is spun,

Her watchmen shall descry from far

The young Republic like a sun

Rise from these crimson seas of war.

Isobel Murray glosses this to mean ‘the Empire is “resurrected” as a republic’, but what this might mean is far from clear.

‘Humanitad’ is the longest poem in the volume with a political emphasis, and a very overheated performance it is. In it contemporary England is again denounced: ‘O we are wretched men / Unworthy of our great inheritance!’ The country is in the hands of the personified figures of Anarchy, Licence, Ignorance, Envy, Avarice and Greed (‘For whose dull appetite men waste away Amid the whirr of wheels’). Beauty is no more, and the destructive work of Nature is being abetted by the architectural restorers. We suddenly find ourselves in the ethos of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings:

What even Cromwell spared is desecrated

By weed and worm, left to the stormy play

Of wind and beating snow, or renovated

By more destructive hands: Time’s worst decay

Will wreath its ruins with some loveliness,

But these new Vandals can but make a rainproof barrenness.

Perhaps Wilde should be given credit for showing an awareness of this aspect of Morris’s work, even if he fails to make much of it poetically. Overall, Wilde’s position might be described as liberal with odd deviations.

Morris’s first recorded reference to Wilde occurs a letter to Jane of 31 March 1881, the year of publication of the *Poems*. Writing to Janey, Morris attempts to
be judicious: ‘Did the babes tell you how I met Oscar Wilde at the Richmonds? I must admit that as the devil is painted blacker than he is, so it fares with O.W. Not but what he is an ass: but he is certainly clever too.’7 Morris never refers to Wilde’s poems, although Rossetti wrote dismissively of them to Jane: ‘I saw the wretched Oscar Wilde book, and glanced at it enough to see clearly what trash it is. Did Georgie say that Ned really admired it? If so, he must be gone drivelling’.8

However, it is not as a poet that Wilde is valued today, and a more significant relationship between him and Morris may be felt to exist in the area of design. One of Wilde’s self-chosen missions was to carry the gospel of better decorative design to the Philistines wherever he encountered them, and not surprisingly he often alluded to Morris in this context. In 1882, Wilde went on his lecture tour of the United States and Canada, delivering a lecture on ‘The English Renaissance in Art’ in the velvet knee breeches and silk stockings that attracted so much journalistic attention, as D’Oyly Carte – who arranged the tour – and Wilde intended. Wilde’s enthusiastic account of developments in the nineteenth century includes several references to Morris, who is described as

a master of all exquisite design and of all spiritual vision . . . The visible aspect of modern life disturbs him not: rather it is for him to render eternal all that is beautiful in Greek, Italian, and Celtic legend. To Morris we owe poetry whose perfect precision and closeness of word and vision has not been excelled in the literature of our country, and by the revival of the decorative arts he has given to our individualised romantic movement the social idea and the social factor too.9

The conclusion of the lecture is suffused with Ruskin’s and Morris’s ideas, expressed in a characteristically Wildean name-dropping way:

For what is decoration but the worker’s expression of his joy in work? And not joy merely – that is a great thing yet not enough – but that opportunity of expressing his own individuality which, as it is the essence of all life, is the source of all art. ‘I have tried’, I remember William Morris saying to me once, ‘I have tried to make each of my workers an artist, and when I say an artist, I mean a man’. (X, p. 275)

One wonders how many times these two very different men had actually met. Morris would certainly have been surprised if he had seen the Philadelphia Press for 17 January 1882 in which Wilde had told journalists of his recent visit to Walt Whitman: ‘I admire him intensely – Dante Rossetti, Swinburne, William Morris and I often discuss him. There is something so Greek and sane about his poetry . . .’9 Wilde had a great talent for making a little go a long way.

In The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior, Charlotte Gere comments, a little severely, on the derivativeness of the ideas expressed in these lectures, noting that Wilde’s ‘Art and the Handicraftsmen’ shows ‘more than a hint’ of Morris’s ‘The Lesser Arts’, published in Hopes and Fears for Art in 1882.11 She shows that Ruskin and Morris were not Wilde’s only sources; he also adapted Pater, and the title of the lecture ‘The House Beautiful’ derived from ‘a
successful instruction manual on the subject of the interior written by the American art critic Clarence Cook in 1878 – its title already taken from Pater, and its ideas from Charles Eastlake’s highly successful *Hints on Household Taste* of 1868 (p. 92). Gere remarks that at the time Wilde gave the lectures, he was ‘still without the slightest practical experience of home decoration’, so that his advice was given ‘with an assurance Wilde’s views, hastily recycled from the works of Ruskin and Morris, hardly merited’ (p. 92). Nevertheless, Wilde – never a rich man – made money from the tour, and went on to give similar lectures, rather less successfully, in various parts of the British Isles (p. 95). But it was after his marriage to Constance Lloyd in 1884 that he was in a position to put some of his ideas into practice, with the advice of Godwin and Whistler, when he obtained the lease of 16 (now 34) Tite Street, Chelsea (p. 98) and endeavoured to make it into his own House Beautiful.

Philip Henderson, writing in 1967, argued that the design of the house in Tite Street in 1884 was more ‘modern’ in its simplicity than anything by Morris. He also quoted a letter from Wilde to W. A. S. Benson of 16 May 1885, which brings out the area of disagreement:

I don’t at all agree with you about the decorative value of Morris’s wallpapers. They seem to me often deficient in real beauty of colour . . . as regards design, he is far more successful with those designs which are meant for textures which hang in folds . . . I am surprised to find we are at such variance on the question of the value of pure colour on the walls of a room . . . I have seen far more rooms spoiled by wall papers than anything else: when everything is covered with a design the room is restless and the eye disturbed.

Wilde expresses the hope that Morris will ‘devote his time, as I think he is doing, to textile fabrics, their dyes and their designs’ (p. 175). But he ends his letter by telling Benson that if he were to call at the house, he would be shown ‘a little room with blue ceiling and frieze . . . which is joyous and exquisite, the only piece of design being the Morris blue-and-white curtains, and a white-and-yellow silk coverlet’ (p. 175). In a postscript, he asks Benson in understandable puzzlement: ‘how can you see Socialism in *The Earthly Paradise*? If it is there, it is an accident not a quality – a great difference’ (p. 176). When Yeats came to the house in Tite Street at Christmas in 1888 or ’89, he noted that ‘there was nothing medieval, or Pre-Raphaelite . . . I remember vaguely a white drawing-room with Whistler etchings “let in” to white panels, and a dining room all white . . . It was perhaps too perfect in its unity . . .’

Paul Thompson has commented on this divergence of views over decoration in his account of Morris & Co’s ‘Furniture and Furnishings’, remarking that Morris’s followers found the Godwin/Wilde style ‘frigid’, and quoting Walter Crane on its being ‘needlessly Spartan – there is a hair-shirt rigour about it, opposed to all geniality and prandial humours’.

Moving on to the main area of discussion, the political, what links, if any, are to be detected between Morris the decorator and Wilde the dandy? Critics writing since Ellmann’s fine biography of 1987 emphasise the subversive element in Wilde’s stance towards his society, and assert that he held a radical political position. He is seen as an outsider, as both Irish and gay, and so associated with
the Left. Anthony Fothergill puts it like this in the Introduction to his 1996 Everyman edition of Wilde: ‘his political commitments to Irish nationalism, to republicanism, to his own form of anarchism, are attested in numerous comments and reviews. Recent critical thinking on Wilde has sought to redress the understating of this crucial aspect of his cultural position’, and he goes on to quote Gilbert’s remark in ‘The Critic as Artist’, 1891, that ‘England will never be civilised till she has added Utopia to her dominions. There is more than one of her colonies that she might with advantage surrender for so fair a land’.16 I believe that there is a general rightness about this view, though Wilde was the last person to want to be defined, or to make it easy for us to do so, as the reference to ‘his own form of anarchism’ suggests.

There is certainly plenty of evidence that he knew people active on the political Left. The recent publication for the exhibition at the Barbican Centre, The Wilde Years: Oscar Wilde and the Art of his Time, asserts that in 1888 he attended ‘meetings of the socialist Fabian Society’.17 The exhibition itself contained a section called ‘Wilde and Socialism’, which offered small helpings of Ruskin (including the Graphic magazine illustration ‘Amateur navvies at Oxford – Undergraduates making a road as suggested by Mr Ruskin, Oxford, 1874’), and of Morris and Crane. The exhibition leaflet also asserts that Wilde shared with Ruskin, Morris and Crane a ‘belief in a direct relationship between socialism and good art’. The most dramatic work in this section is A. J. Finberg’s painting John Burns, M.P. for Battersea, addressing an open-air audience, 1897. We are told that Wilde considered Burns a ‘splendid personality’ and wanted him to write a preface to The Ballad of Reading Gaol.18 In relation to Wilde’s politics, we are reminded that he signed the petition for the Chicago anarchists in 1886, and that in his report in the Pall Mall Gazette for 2nd November 1888 on Morris’s lecture on ‘Carpet and Tapestry Weaving’ delivered at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition at the New Gallery in 1888, he quoted with approval Morris’s statement: ‘commercialism, with its vile god cheapness, its callous indifference to the worker, its innate vulgarity of temper, is our enemy. To gain anything good we must sacrifice something of our luxury – must think more of others, more of the State, the commonwealth’.19

Wilde evidently knew May as well as William Morris, but neither very well, for we find Wilde writing rather formally in mid-April 1889 in connection with Peter Kropotkin, the leading Anarchist in London at the time:

Dear Miss Morris, I am afraid I cannot promise to attend any committee meetings, as I am very busy, but if you think my name of any service make any use of it you like. I put a short notice of the lectures [by Kropotkin on Social Evolution] into The Daily Telegraph and the Pall Mall, mentioned you as organising secretary. I thought a note in the Telegraph would be of service, as a means of explaining to people that the subject of the lectures was not to be ‘Anarchy with practical illustrations’.20

Just before this William Morris had written to Kropotkin:

32
My dear Kropotkine,

I am very happy to be of use to you in the matter, and enclose a cheque for £25. May has shown me today the syllabus of your proposed lectures: it seemed to me to promise very well, and I cannot doubt would interest unprejudiced persons — and let us hope some of the prejudiced also.21

Kelvin’s Note 2 explains that there were to have been six lectures in Kensington Town Hall, but that Kropotkin called them off, feeling that they had been promoted out of charity rather than respect for his ideas.

At this time, the spring of 1889, Morris was publishing ‘The Society of the Future’ in Commonweal, and then reading Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward, which offended him by its association of Socialism with a highly regulated form of society. He also read an article by Grant Allen in the Contemporary Review entitled ‘Individualism and Socialism’.22 In a letter to Bruce Glasier of 13 May, Morris wrote of the article: ‘it is of little importance in itself: but as the manifesto of Herbert Spencerite against Herbert Spencer is of some interest’.23 Kelvin’s Note 6 tells us that in the article Allen dissociated his Individualism from the politics of the Liberty and Property Defence League, ‘spoke sympathetically of socialism, and insisted that individualists like himself and socialists had much in common — e.g. “a strong sense of the injustice and wickedness of the existing system”’. But Allen argued against the idea of the centrality of the State, ‘that current deus ex machina of current Socialist writing and thinking’.24 Morris had lectured to the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League on Allen and Bellamy the previous evening. We will recognise in these publications some of the political terminology that Wilde was to employ, which suggests an awareness on his part of current discussions.

The only letter from Wilde to Morris was written two years later, in March or April 1891, and conveys Wilde’s thanks to Morris for sending a copy of one of his books, recently identified as The Roots of the Mountains.

His brief letter of thanks is wonderfully extravagant:

How proud indeed so beautiful a gift makes me. I weep over the cover, which is not really lovely enough, nor nearly rich enough in material, for such prose as you write. But the book itself, if it is to have a suitable garment, would need damask sewn with pearls and starred with gold. I have always felt that your work comes from sheer delight of making beautiful things: that no alien motive ever interests you: that in its singleness of aim, as well as in its perfection of result, it is pure art, everything that you do. But I know you hate the blowing of trumpets. I have loved your work since boyhood: I shall always love it. That, with my thanks, is all I have to say.25

Quite enough, we might think. But the letter certainly shows how Wilde recruited Morris into his own aesthetic canon.

Henderson believed that the book in question was News from Nowhere, in which case Wilde’s response would have been even more subversively aesthetic. Henderson also believed that the gift of the book might have been in exchange for Wilde’s having sent Morris a copy of ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’, which
appeared in Frank Harris’s *Fortnightly Review* in February 1891, and suggested that Wilde’s article might have been written ‘after attending one of Morris’s lectures at Kelmscott House’. Although this remains as speculation, Fiona MacCarthy confirms the possibility of it when she comments on the varied people you might meet in the audience at a Socialist League lecture, from ‘the wizened E. T. Craig, who sat in the front row brandishing his ear trumpet, to Oscar Wilde, seen attending a Hammersmith lecture looking like “a basket of fruit, ripe and enticing”, and wearing a large dahlia’. Certainly, Wilde’s essay belongs to the same world of political argument as Morris’s fiction, and it is to ‘The Soul of Man’ that I should now like to turn. I will summarise the main arguments in the essay, and then consider how far they overlap with Morris’s ideas.

Wilde’s overall position – a consciously paradoxical one – is that Socialism is needed because it alone can enable Individualism, usually seen as the antithesis of Socialism, to flourish. Individualism would substitute the liberating ideal of self-development for the repressive Victorian ideals of duty and self-sacrifice:

1. The great benefit to be derived from Socialism is that it would ‘relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody’. In an unjust society, surrounded by ‘hideous poverty’, ugliness and starvation, decent people are forced into ‘an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism’. But their charity ‘degrades and demoralises’ (p. 2), and prolongs the injustices of society. This is supported by later arguments to the effect that private property is ‘really a nuisance’ (p. 4) to its owners, as well as a provocation to others, so that its abolition will free people from the false individualism of possessions; instead of being preoccupied with accumulating wealth, people will be able to live on their own terms (p. 7) – something that only artists have so far been able to do.

2. The form of Socialism to produce these beneficial results would not be authoritarian; if we move into ‘Industrial Tyrannies, then the last state of man will be worse than the first’ (p. 3). Authoritarian Socialism, described as ‘an industrial-barrack system, or a system of economic tyranny’, is denounced as likely to be even worse than the present, and Wilde admits that ‘many of the socialist views I have come across seem to me to be tainted by ideas of authority, if not of actual compulsion’ (p. 6) – though he does not say whose views these are. For Wilde, the State must diminish its own role as far as possible, concerning itself only with the most utilitarian aspects of life, since even democracy – ‘the bludgeoning of the people, by the people, for the people’ – has been ‘found out’ (p. 13). With the diminished role of the state, punishment, and with it crime, would disappear (p. 14). Machinery should be used for all servile toil – civilisation needs slaves, and ours must be not men, as at present, but machines (pp. 15-16): ‘at present machinery competes against man. Under proper conditions machinery will serve man’ (p. 16). Everything beyond the utilitarian should be left to individuals and to free associations (p. 15). Art would flourish, freed for the demands of the market (pp. 16-17). For Wilde, Prince, Pope and People can all prove tyrannical (pp. 30-31), so that the ideal is to reduce all institutions of social power.

3. Change will come about only through agitation; the poor should not be grateful and obedient but ungrateful and rebellious: ‘misery and poverty are so
absolutely degrading, and exercise such a paralysing effect over the nature of men, that no class is really conscious of its own sufferings' (p. 5). Agitators should be respected as necessary for progress. Slavery was not abolished by the slaves but by the Abolitionists (p. 5). Sadly, 'the starved peasants of the Vendee voluntarily went out to die for the hideous cause of feudalism' (p. 6).

4. Christianity, understood in Wilde's terms, could help the process: Christ taught people to be themselves (p. 9), to dispense with possessions, to become personalities; to be oneself is to be Christ-like (p. 12). It is not the true medieval form of Christianity (p. 34) that is needed, with its emphasis on sympathy with suffering - though this is still relevant in Czarist Russia (pp. 35-36). Christ had no social message (p. 34), but we have a scheme for social reconstruction, employing Science. The Christian approach needs to be supplemented by Renaissance humanism with its emphasis on beauty and joy (p. 33). The end will be a 'new Hellenism' better than those of Greece or the Renaissance (p. 37).

5. Progress depends on individuals, like Irving in the theatre, Thackeray and Meredith in the novel; one would have expected Wilde to cite Morris in relation to progress in the decorative arts, but Wilde gives no names, merely stating that 'the craftsmen of things so appreciated the pleasure of making what was beautiful . . . that they simply starved the public out' (p. 29). These progressive forces are currently having to fight 'that monstrous and ignorant thing that is called Public Opinion' (p. 22), led by a press which is prurient and intrusive. With characteristic wit, Wilde observes: 'in old days men had the rack. Now they have the press' (p. 23). He insists that 'the private lives of men and women should not be told to the public' (p. 24).

6. If these ideas sound Utopian, so much the better in Wilde's view: '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' (p. 16). The fact that these ideas seem unpractical and 'against human nature' are what's good about them (p. 31). Otherwise we remain trapped in 'existing conditions'. But 'the only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predicate of it' (p. 31).

In these six points, which encapsulate Wilde's central arguments, we can see a good deal that overlaps with Morris's thinking, though not often expressed in Morris's terms. The first, the idea that Socialism would 'relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody', which we may interpret as a wish to be liberated from liberal guilt, does not seem very relevant to Morris, who was too busy doing things to change the situation to have much time for introspection; but his doubts about palliatives can be related to Wilde's belief in the dangers of charity. The second, that the form of Socialism to produce these beneficial results would not be authoritarian, was close to Morris's view, and the idea that machinery should be used to undertake the servile work of society is one he also shared. The third, that change will come about only through agitation, so that agitators are to be applauded not condemned, reminds us of the motto of the Socialist League, 'Educate, Agitate, Organise'. The fourth, concerning the possible
role of Christianity, finds no counterpart in Morris, who held no favourable view of the Renaissance either. The fifth, that progress depends on the efforts of great individuals, Morris would surely have denied, although we may see him as a great individual helping to bring it about; nor does Morris seem to have been greatly concerned about public opinion or the power of the press. Finally, Utopianism. We can hardly deny that to the man who added Nowhere to the literary map of the world, and we must also agree that any Utopianist must believe in the possibility that human nature can be changed. Old Hammond asserts this vigorously in Ch. 14 of News from Nowhere.29

So there is certainly some overlap between the political ideas these two writers, especially in their shared hostility to authoritarian definitions of Socialism. These ideas were certainly in the air at the time. As we have seen, there is a story that Wilde's essay was the result of attending a meeting at Kelmscott House; another is that it was a response to a lecture by Shaw: both are plausible. But this means that it is not appropriate to argue for Morris as a separate and specific influence on Wilde. It is also relevant to consider the views of the most thorough editor of 'The Soul of Man' so far, Isobel Murray, who argued in her 1990 discussion of the essay that previous scholars have for too long 'repeated parrot cries about the most important modern authors for Wilde being Ruskin and Pater, with the occasional mention of Arnold' (p. xi). In her view Ruskin is a much less important influence on the mature Wilde than the American Transcendentalist, R. W. Emerson, who, she dryly notes, 'seems not to have been much read by Wilde scholars'. She goes on to argue that Emerson's essays 'Self-Reliance' and 'Considerations by the Way' provide much of the basis for Wilde's, in particular in their opposition to 'conformity, consistency, imitation, philanthropy, charity, property, and the mob' (pp. xii-xiii). Murray argues that what gives Wilde's contribution to the 'contemporary periodical debate' about Socialism and Individualism its 'different flavour', is that his Individualism is so close to Emerson's Self-Reliance (p. xiii). Her detailed notes to the essay support this contention (as one would expect): she locates some 16 passages with Emersonian overtones, as against one each by Engels (attacking philanthropy in the Preface to the 1887 edition of The Condition of the Working Class in England), Morris ('Art and Socialism' on 'slave's work', strangely related here to the abolition of slavery in the United States), and Bellamy (Looking Backward, 1888, here cited as a possible source for Wilde's dismissive reference to the 'industrial barrack system'). This does not mean that we have to ignore Wilde's indebtedness to social thinkers such as Arnold, Ruskin, Pater and Morris, but rather that we have to add Emerson to the list of contributors to Wilde's eclectic political position.

Wilde's political views were largely formed before his imprisonment, although we may see a more inclusive humanity in The Ballad of Reading Gaol than in his earlier work. But parts of his letter from prison to Lord Alfred Douglas, De Profundis, show that he retained, and had perhaps strengthened, some of his convictions about English society. He deplores, through his radical reconstruction of Christ, 'the dull lifeless mechanical systems that treat people as if they were things, and so treat everybody alike'.30 Wilde's radical Christ saw and exposed the Jews of his day as exact counterparts of the modern British Philistine in their 'heavy inaccessibility to ideas, their dull respectability, their tedious orthodoxy,
their worship of vulgar success, their entire preoccupation with the gross materialistic side of life, and their ridiculous estimate of themselves and their importance' (p. 122). Unsurprisingly, prison did nothing to make Wilde think better of the English ruling class. But he could still be witty, as in his observation that we should be grateful that there were Christians before Christ, followed by the observation, 'the unfortunate thing is that there have been none since' (p. 125) – though he goes on to make an exception of St Francis of Assisi.

Recent academic work on Wilde, especially that of the American scholar Regenia Gagnier, has consolidated the case for Wilde’s radical politics. In her _Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public_ in 1986 Gagnier argued for placing Wilde’s work in its context:

Wilde’s aestheticism was an engaged protest against Victorian utility, rationality, scientific factuality and technological progress – in fact against the whole middle-class drive to conform. Wilde wanted freedom from authority for the imagination and human society to develop. And in her _Introduction to Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde_, which she edited in 1991 for G. K. Hall, she observed that the most important meanings that Wilde has for ‘late twentieth-century life in the United States’ are ‘freedom and toleration’. Gagnier went on to praise ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’ as a relevant critique of modern capitalism, with its bogus claim to offer everyone the freedom denied in reality by the workings of the market, and argues that Wilde’s essay is ‘clearly within the mainstream tradition of socialist thought (if not practice)’ (p. 7) and that it is also consistent with ‘a long tradition of socialist aesthetics’ to be found in Schiller, Marx and Engels, William Morris, Trotsky and Marcuse. She saw Wilde’s as a ‘dialectically materialist aesthetic – socialism giving rise to individuals who then build the first genuinely flourishing society’ (p. 8). It is ‘an aesthetic of the everyday rather than the extraordinary, of the many rather than the few’ (p. 9). Similarly, Anthony Fothergill argued in 1996 that ‘like William Morris’s, Wilde’s social commitment to “ordinary people” was not in contradiction with his notions of the aesthetic’. In a similar vein, Declan Kibberd writes of ‘Anarchist Attitudes: Oscar Wilde’ in _The Wilde Years_. Kibberd discusses ‘The Soul of Man’, noting that Friedrich Engels ridiculed a Socialism that ‘has actually donned evening dress and lounges lazily on drawing-room causes’. But Kibberd then puts forward the challenging argument that Engels ‘utterly misunderstood Wilde’s underlying motive’, which was to challenge society’s conservatism and complacency. This raises the whole question of whether Wilde’s dandyism can be seen as a political attitude rather than a regrettable self-indulgence. His brilliant playing of the part of an English gentleman can be seen as a way of exposing the reactionary assumptions of that social caste, which he does also in the earlier plays – though _The Importance of Being Earnest_ seems to me a masterpiece of aesthetic autonomy, ‘quite useless’, in Wilde’s own phrase. Perhaps the Left in Britain has been too earnest – too Engelsian, maybe – to admit the value of the social critique that may be provided by the wit of the dandy. If we are more aware as a society today than were the late Victorians of the importance of culture in forming our attitudes and in the corresponding dubiousness of referring
to human nature as a fixed category, perhaps that is due as much to the sniping of
the wits as to the direct attacks of the polemicists.

In 1894 Wilde told an interviewer for the magazine *Theatre*: ‘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’.

By this time Morris had been driven out of the Socialist League
by the anarchists, and was back at Kelmscott House with the Hammersmith
Socialist Society. He might have been surprised to find himself included in George
Woodcock’s 1977 *Anarchist Reader*, and to read in the somewhat bland note to
his name that he ‘worked with anarchists in the Socialist League and in the editing
of *Commonweal*’. Wilde’s formulation, that an anarchist is ‘rather more than a
Socialist’, would certainly not have appealed to Morris. For whatever the merits
of Wilde’s position and the brilliance with which his formulations challenged
conventional thinking, I find it hard to locate anywhere in his writings that sense
of community and fellowship that is central to Morris and to my understanding of
his Socialism. As we know, many of Morris’s activities at the Firm, in the SPAB,
and at the Kelmscott Press, were cooperative, team efforts. Wilde, by contrast,
was primarily a writer and performer, both lonely activities. True, he wrote most
successfully for the theatre, which we may think of as a communal place. But I do
not believe that he would have wanted his scripts to have been modified by actors
or directors. The story of his remark before the first performance of *The
Importance* supports this view: when asked whether the play would be a success,
Wilde wonderfully replied, ‘the play is a success. It remains to be seen whether the
first night’s audience will be one’. For Wilde, the play was surely to be
performed on his, the writer’s, terms. Morris and Wilde seem to me therefore to
differ significantly in this respect. Whether the difference is related to that between
Socialism and Anarchism is a question for further discussion.

NOTES

A version of this article was given as a lecture to the Society at Kelmscott House
on 9 December 2000.

1 The remark is recorded by E. M. W. Stirling, ed., *The Richmond Papers*

2 R. B. Cunningham-Graham, 1905, quoted in Karl Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The

3 T. Sato and L. Lambourne, eds., *The Wilde Years: Oscar Wilde and the Art of
His Time* (Barbican Art Galleries and Philip Wilson, 2000), p. 106.


6 ibid., p.196.

7 Norman Kelvin, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Morris* (Princeton UP,
1987), II, p.38.
8 J. Bryson and J. C. Troxell, eds., *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris: Their Correspondence* (OUP, 1976), p.188.


18 Barbican Exhibition leaflet, under Room 2.

19 *The Wilde Years*, p. 111.

20 *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 174-75.

21 *Collected Letters*, III, p. 38; 26 February 1889.


23 *Collected Letters*, III, p. 59; 13 May 1889.

24 *Collected Letters*, III, p. 60.

25 M. Holland and R. Hart-Davis, eds., *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 476. The editors note that a copy of *The Roots* inscribed by Morris to Wilde was sold at the auction of Wilde’s possessions on 24 April 1895. But as *The Roots* was published in November 1889, it is not obvious why a copy should have been sent to Wilde well over a year later. In relation to the cover, Mackail records that Morris was delighted with the whole book, ‘typography, binding, and must I say it, literary matter’; J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1922 [1899]), II, p. 238.


audience’ Wilde seemed ‘an incongruous figure, sporting a large crimson dahlia in his buttonhole’.

28 Isobel Murray, ed., Oscar Wilde. The Soul of Man under Socialism and Prison Writings (OUP, 1990), p. 1. Subsequent references to this edition are given in brackets after quotations.


30 The Soul of Man and Prison Writings, p. 122. Subsequent references to this edition are given in brackets after quotations.


33 Plays, Prose Writings and Poems, Introduction, p. xxiii.

34 Declan Kibberd, ‘Anarchist Attitudes: Oscar Wilde’ in The Wilde Years, p. 44.


36 George Woodcock, ed., Anarchist Reader, (Fontana/Collins, 1978), p. 377. Woodcock acknowledges that Morris always called himself as a socialist, but then goes on: ‘but he belonged to the extreme libertarian wing of socialism, worked with anarchists in the Socialist League and in the editing of Commonweal, was a close friend of Kropotkin, and in News from Nowhere wrote an account of a society without government that is the nearest thing to an anarchist utopia’ (pp. 377-78).