

EMELIE JONSSON

The Soul of Man under Socialism: Oscar Wilde, Art and Individualism

The subject of this essay is another essay: *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, written by Oscar Wilde and first published in 1891. From among the rich store of ideas presented there, I want to focus in particular on Wilde's thoughts about Individualism in order to determine what they can – or perhaps should – say to us today. The idea of Individualism is a controversial subject in itself: in one dictionary definition, it is either “the belief that the freedom of individual people is more important than the needs of the community” or “the behaviour of someone who does things in their own way without worrying about what other people think or do” (*Macmillan*). Much as in the case of Wilde himself, there might be people who condone one side of the concept while condemning the other. It is alright to ‘be yourself’, but you should never think yourself to be more important than the rest of the community. It is alright to be a bohemian celebrity artist and wit, throwing aphorisms right and left in high society – but do not expect to be listened to when you speak of serious matters. In reality, however, the two sides are so intimately connected – so symbiotic – that it is impossible to judge them separately on rational grounds.

At the time when Oscar Wilde wrote his *Soul of Man under Socialism*, Industrialism had been around long enough – and successfully enough – for a countermovement to establish itself. Romanticism, and the spiritual worshipping of nature, are still very much relevant to understanding the psyche of our modern times, but it is all the more relevant to understand why Wilde let one of the typically poignant aphorisms in his *Soul of Man*, “The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful” (p.1183), be followed by a paragraph-length reproach of the idea that manual labour has ‘dignity’, a value in and by itself. As he states that he “cannot help saying that a great deal of nonsense is being written and talked nowadays about the dignity of manual labour” (p.1183), he is almost certainly directing himself partly at the Romantic notion that man working ‘naturally’, by using his own hands, is necessarily a good and soulful thing.

The fact is, that civilisation requires slaves. The Greeks were quite right there. Unless there are slaves to do the ugly, horrible, uninteresting work, culture and contemplation become almost impossible. Human slavery is wrong, insecure, and demoralising. On mechanical slavery, on the slavery of the machine, the future of the world depends. (Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, p. 1183-4)

Wilde himself was decidedly Romantic in many aspects, not least in his ideas about Art and Beauty (“I made Art a philosophy, and philosophy an art”, (*De Profundis* p.1017)). He openly admired Romantic poets such as Byron, Shelley

and Wordsworth; but he refused to accept the unforgiving attitude that most Romantics adopted towards machinery. In a simple, but rhetorical passage, he assures us that,

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. All work of that kind should be done by a machine. (Wilde, p.1183)

His biographer, Richard Ellmann, claims that Wilde, “given a choice between two alternatives, always succeeded in choosing both” (quoted in Sloan, p. 102). There is a lot in this statement generally, but it applies quite specifically to Wilde’s handling of the clash between man and machine. In Wilde’s Utopia, Industrialism and Romanticism are not mutually exclusive: the one exists to serve the other. For Wordsworth’s being able to wander in perfect glee along a daffodil-cluttered riverside, a ‘slave’ must take the dull occupations and worries of everyday life off the poet’s shoulders. For the *Soul of Man* to be ‘realised’, for each individual to become whatever is most beautiful in their nature, find whatever flowers are most dance-inducing to their individual hearts, it is necessary to take the burden of everyday toil away from human life. And so, Wilde proposes to position this burden on an entirely automated, manmade metal shoulder.

Of course, the sentiment of the “slushy crossing” passage touches one of the core problems with Wilde’s philosophy concerning work, and its *general* application: who, indeed, is to decide what man is ‘made’ for? If every individual has their own unique manner of realising themselves, can one single person truly understand and identify them all? Should any one person, however intelligent and intellectual, possess the right to tell other people that they are *not* realising their individuality when they are performing hard manual labour for others?

At present, [...] a great many people are enabled to develop a certain very limited amount of Individualism. They are either under no necessity to work for their living, or are enabled to choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them and gives them pleasure. (Wilde, p. 1175)

I say ‘problem’, but I do not suggest it is a problem in the *ideology* of Wilde: he is obviously quite happy to allow the tilling of fields or factory-assembly work if that is what your individual creativity commits you to. It is not a problem of ‘truth’: the problem, alarmingly enough for the “lord of language” (dubbed so by Robert Sherard, quoted in McKennan, p. 54), is one of communication. Wilde himself admits this:

[N]o class is ever really conscious of its own suffering. They have to be told of it by other people, and they often entirely disbelieve them. [...] 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. (p. 1176)

Wilde is also very much aware that radical changes in society will always meet with resistance from those that profit – or think they profit – from the current state of things, and from others who have grown so accustomed to being victimised that they know no other existence, and may well fear the possibility of any. Again, Wilde is aware of the dilemma, and he acknowledges it, without trying to neutralise it. Whatever he says, and however eloquently he says it, the fact remains that there is a barrier between the ‘agitator’ and the ‘slave’. And this by no means indicates that there has to be a difference in intelligence between the one and the other, but rather that one does not like to be insulted. If you elevate something to the extent of proclaiming it ‘the meaning of life’, other things are going to seem lowered – even treated with condescension – in comparison: whichever way you proffer Wilde’s Utopia to a farmer, electrician or factory worker, you will not have enough thumbs to cover the passages that say to them, ‘your time is wasted’. No one likes to be told that their way of life is soulless; no one likes to hear, regardless of the sentiment of writers and the reasons they give for the state of things, that one’s spiritual development is on a level with beasts.

Wilde sought to communicate his message sufficiently to a certain number of people: disciples, as it were. But sadly, the people for whose circumstances he seems to bleed so powerfully through the prose of his *Soul of Man* – those blissfully ignorant in misery and servitude, the ‘ragged-trousered philanthropists’ – were not likely to be among these disciples. Communication is always a problem when it comes to ideologies, and as Nietzsche’s and Darwin’s words were themselves distorted, so might Wilde’s – if read literally and without understanding – be interpreted as a dandy’s naivety, or even scorn for the working class:

These are the poor, and amongst them there is no grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilisation, or culture, or refinement in pleasures, or joy of life. (p. 1175)

A literal interpretation of any philosophy is comparable to staring down a well and making assumptions about the shadowy shapes at its bottom – if you want to understand anything beyond your own prejudice, you will have to equip yourself with a lantern and make the leap that the writer did before you. But at the same time, it is impossible to entirely relieve a philosopher of responsibility for his or her work. Wilde himself conveniently supports this claim in his famous comment on the false rumour that he had walked down Piccadilly in full Aesthetic costume carrying a lily: “Anyone could have done that. The great and difficult thing was what I achieved – to make the whole world believe that I had done it”. (quoted in McKennan, p. 17)

The credit of one inadvertent impression thus claimed, it is hard to ignore the blame of another. One might call it profound naivety, or an ultimate belief in humanity; one might even – with some irony – say that the two are one and the same: but the optimistic quality of *The Soul of Man* is impossible to pass by. “Is this Utopian?”, Wilde asks (p. 1184) on the subject of his ideal society, where machines are enslaved by humans instead of the other way around. The rhetorical

question answering itself, he proceeds in an eloquent defence, stating that Utopia is “the land where humanity is always landing”, and that “progress is the realisation of Utopias” (p. 1184). That may well be, and it may well ‘be’ beautiful. But if one looks beyond the spiritual beauty, the statement itself is quite optimistically romantic. And though what is usually named ‘romantic’ could be seen as a vital part of the human soul, every individual does not deem it so.

Practical use, then: Wilde moves in the higher spheres of thought with his ideology, but it is definitely an ideology that proposes to intervene in the sphere of action. He continually denounces the system of private property as a destroyer of freedom – equally so for the ones who are in possession of its advantages:

One man owns a machine which does the work of five hundred men. Five hundred men are, in consequence, thrown out of employment, and, having no work to do, become hungry and take to thieving. The one man secures the produce of the machine and keeps it, and has five hundred times as much as he should have, and probably, which is of much more importance, a great deal more than he really wants. Were that machine the property of all, every one would benefit by it. (p. 1184)

A practical political proposition, certainly, if not a formal plan of action. Symptomatically, of course, this idea has more to do with a general change in mentality than it has with the actual distribution of material wealth. One man has more than he ‘should’ have, indeed – but, then, how do you measure something like that? What if this particular man’s individuality requires a lot of resources in order to be fulfilled? To reduce any man’s ‘needs’ to the actual means necessary to keep his body alive would – in the light of Wilde’s own discourse on the subject of the soul, if nothing else – seem ridiculous. And who is to build the machine in question? Even if you assume that the heavy assembling work could be done by other machines – and Wilde’s technological optimism might be excused to a certain degree, as he lived during the heyday of the industrial revolution – who is to burden his or her mind with laboriously putting the technical details together in a blueprint? Surely, it is to be assumed that this task will appeal to someone, out of all the individuals in our prosperous Utopia: but will it appeal to enough individuals for society to function on a practical level? In this grand new world over the portal of which glows the inscription ‘Be Thyself’ (p. 1179), what human minds will busy themselves with the technicalities of dentistry or plumbing? Who will worry his or her free-flying soul back to the body to consider the best way to handle animal waste on a farm? If the reply is that people, at the moment, enjoy perfectly soulful existences as plumbers and dentists, then the philosophy has met with a quite regrettable catch-22.

Another relevant point to the general, practical application of this philosophy is that Wilde assumes every human being capable of respecting her fellow creatures, as long as she is allowed the space to develop her own Individuality.

It will be a marvellous thing - the true personality of man - when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flower-like, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never

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argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. [...] It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet, while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us by being what it is. (p. 1179)

Yes – oh, fill the silence with a yes! – it is Utopian. It is one of the most comforting Utopias that has ever been conjured up, and it speaks to us about the ultimate beauty of the human soul with a sincerity seldom found, seldom dreamed, even in the more sympathetic passages of religious texts. But it is still Utopian.

Is it sensible to assume that there will be no scarred souls in this new world, no existences hurt into a craving to hurt others, and no minds biologically turned away from the concept of empathy? Is it practical to assume that there is a place for every individual, once realised, in the cell-like organism of society, and that the precipitous despair of loneliness, of scorned love and profound sorrow, will simply cease to exist? Oh, that Wilde were alive so we could ask him, because his answer would be most likely beautiful – but untrue. However, with language like his, it would be unfair to blame him too hard for the liberty, just as it would be unfair to blame an otherworldly beauty too much for narcissism. It is almost impossible to resist being swept off your feet by Wilde's eloquence if you share his romanticism and general values: and who could possibly have shared those values more than he himself? Who could possibly have had a stronger wish for them to be true, and consequently, who could possibly have been more violently swept off his feet?

The lord of language was never the lord of practical things. His concern was with the words, the senses, the expressions, and the soul. In his *Soul of Man under Socialism*, he aspires to put his wisdom and wit to all manner of practical use, offering a suggestion for social reform that he cannot help but tie pink bows around and arrange in the most flattering lighting of the room. He is quite right to do so: acting in any other way would have meant a gross deviation from his character – his Individualism – and would therefore have rendered his essay oxymoronic from the outset.

So, then, what is the practical use of the philosophy of *The Soul of Man* when it comes to human activity? Well, as Wilde so conscientiously points out, humankind is always heading for Utopias. There is a plural form in my paraphrase, because to some extent it might be possible to argue that everyone is striving (more or less consciously) towards his or her own individual Utopia – but also because our *general* Utopias are as shifting and intangible as the mist-veil of Cynthia when she chases the fleeing Endymion in Wilde's 'Garden of Eros'. In fact, we barely dare mention them nowadays, those ultimate goals which we aspire towards; and the word 'Utopia' has been banned from the political scene after too many bad examples have made us cower in fear from it.

Abstract concepts, like solid objects, do not need to be seen or named, in order to exist. Depending on the individual case, they might even gain in strength for

not being named. The fact that we do not popularly discuss Utopias – repeating instead the mantra of staying in the present and keeping our feet on the ground – does not deter us from our course towards one. For that is what Utopias do; they steer us into a path, permeate the small and big decisions that we make for the future: they are ever with us, as much for the fact that we never reach them. They are the basis for ethic and moral codes, the ends that shape the means – and so the future visions that shape the present. Religion has long claimed Utopias as its own territory, but religion – at least in our part of the world – has lost much of its popular political power. So what do we see in the secular Utopias of today? To where do the men and women at the rudders direct their speedboat nations, and by what High Definition stars do they navigate? With some apprehension, though readily admitting that I am speaking generally, I answer that they navigate by Profit: by Profit, and Progress, and Stability. Now, as the Utopias – no, as the Dystopias, of literature's past come to mind, is the coast towards which we are heading beginning to maliciously demist?

John Sloane states, in his *Authors in Context*, that, “Wilde’s political radicalism might easily be dismissed as an artistic pose, as an emotional rather than a genuinely political commitment” (p. 100). Disregarding the issue of whether political commitment can be readily measured for genuineness – or for that matter whether it can and should be separated from emotional commitment – I ask: does this matter? If the truth of an idea is to be measured by the sincerity with which it appears to be spoken, we might as well give up all attempts to understand Wilde in the first place. The idea, in this case, is that Individualism *for all* is the one way for humanity to realise its ‘soul’, the one truly altruistic solution to the problems caused by human coexistence. And it is not to be achieved by compulsion, but *through the removal of it*.

As it is now, popular opinion tends to fall into the trap of valuing ‘happiness’ for all more than individual development for all. Spirituality is a hobby, at most, and is looked upon as rather peculiar. Development of the mind comes second, always second, to the demands of the reality about us and their immediate fulfilment. Yet, for all its practical flaws, Wilde’s Utopia aspires to the most spiritual thing in the world: community through Individualism. Whatever our prejudices about Wilde, that is *not* a paradox.

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The Soul of Man under Socialism concerns itself with social reform. As the title implies, it is Wilde’s take on applying socialism to society – and as the title also implies, though slightly more covertly, it is his take on achieving an appealing result. Like a great sculptor, he looks at the rough material that is humankind and sees the potential for beauty. The potential for Individualism:

Under the new conditions Individualism will be far freer, far finer, and far more intensified than it is now. I am not talking of the great imaginatively realised Individualism of such poets as I have mentioned, but of the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally. (p. 1177-78)

In Wilde's philosophy – the same philosophy that might be misinterpreted as elitism if read shallowly – every single human being is an individual waiting to fulfil his or her beauty. For beauty and Individualism, in some passages, almost seem to become synonymous. And here is where Wilde's own definition of 'Art' remains relevant:

[W]henever a community or a powerful section of a community, or a government of any kind, attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do, Art either entirely vanishes, or becomes stereotyped, or degenerates into a low and ignoble form of craft. A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. [...] [A]lone, without any reference to his neighbours, without any interference, the artist can fashion a beautiful thing; and if he does not do it solely for his own pleasure, he is not an artist at all. (p. 1184)

It is clear then, that in Wilde's world 'Art' requires 'Individualism' in order to exist. It requires the artist to *want* to create what she or he does, and take pleasure in doing it. Depending, of course, on the level of meaning one chooses to read into the two concepts, this might seem like a more or less extreme opinion. For this is a point where general opinion could be said to divide itself, even today, among actual practitioners of things as profoundly connected to Art as painting, sculpting and drawing: does Art exist for society, or does it exist for the artist? Wilde obviously believes that Art is a necessary part of society – but at the same time, he argues that no Art is possible if society tries to interfere with its creation, and that artists cease to be artists the moment they stop creating for the sake of their own pleasure. On the surface, these two notions might not seem mutually exclusive – and they certainly should not be – but if one digs deeper into their foundations, they are soon discovered to be depressingly likely to cave into one another.

Wilde was not the man to lack a metaphorical shovel. Directly following the above statement about the nature of Art comes – in one of his longest digressions from the ostensible subject of the essay – an analysis of his contemporary society's relationship to it. Mercilessly, he falls on 'the public' and their moral thick-headedness: their believing it possible to keep Art as a trained pet, expecting of it all the fervour and elegance of a free spirit while shackling it bluntly to a cage. Their asking Art to be 'popular', when, as he puts it, "Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic":

There is a very wide difference. If a man of science were told that the results of his experiments, and the conclusions that he arrived at, should be of such a character that they would not upset the received popular notions on the subject, or disturb popular prejudice, or hurt the sensibilities of people who knew nothing about science; if a philosopher were told that he had a perfect right to speculate in the highest spheres of thought, provided that he arrived at the same conclusions as were held by those who had never thought in any sphere at all - well, nowadays the man of science and the philosopher would be considerably amused. (p. 1184)

A burning personal gospel, no doubt; but what ideology – what thought followed so deeply into the mind that it has transformed into a philosophy – is not also a personal gospel? The point is not whether it is personal, or even, in this case, whether it is a truthful image of the moral censorship that was practiced in Wilde's day by English society: the point I am trying to make is the level to which Wilde's society reform really values Art, and how intimately he connects it with Individualism.

This might be a good opportunity, however, to clarify one thing about Wilde's definition of the concept: when he says 'Art', he includes anything done through human creativity, no matter what the medium. He talks about 'the arts', mentioning poetry, novels, drama, sculpture, painting and drawing. Although this definition may not be unique to him – and certainly not uncommon today – it is not to be taken for granted. Just as a number of people might be convinced that Art is something that exists for society as a whole rather than for the individual artist as an expression of his or her soul, other people might be convinced that 'writing' – for instance – is not a hyponym of 'Art'. Wilde's definition may seem generous in this sense at first glance, but it is not an undiscerning generosity. William Morris, in his 1880 lecture 'The Beauty of Life', captures the spirit of his friend's discernment:

[W]hen [Art] was dead, for a long time people did not know it, or what had taken its place, crept so to say into its dead body – that pretence of Art, to wit, which is done with machines, though sometimes the machines are called men, and doubtless are so out of working hours (Morris, p. 58).

Mass-production, creation without creativity: when men and women adapt machines to work for them, or degrade themselves to the same level of imagination as machines, Art 'dies'. It is a strong word to use, but doubtlessly it was a subject about which both Morris and Wilde felt very strongly. Moreover, on the subject of machines, this is what makes Wilde's thoughts about Art in *The Soul of Man* so very relevant to our own times: here is a man, by his contemporaries hailed both as the lord of language and the guru of Art, who lived during the dawn of mass-production. Though we might claim to have a more objective view of the effects Industrialism has on Art – looking, as we do, at the 'big picture' – subjective views can be invaluable. Especially in a matter like this, as big pictures sometimes tend to make significant details blur. However, there is a further significance in how Morris follows up the passage quoted above:

[N]evertheless long before it was quite dead it had fallen so low that the whole subject was usually treated with the utmost contempt by every one who had any pretence of being a sensible man, and in short the whole civilized world had forgotten that there had ever been an Art *made by the people for the people as a joy for the maker and the user.* (p. 58).

Does this seem inconsistent with Wilde's somewhat condescending talk about 'the public', and how they exercise tyranny over Art? I suppose it should, at a first glance:

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The one thing that the public dislike is novelty. Any attempt to extend the subject matter of Art is extremely distasteful to the public; and yet the vitality and progress of Art depend in a large measure on the continual extension of subject-matter. (Wilde, p. 1185)

‘The public’, then, is something that absolutely antagonises Art. They hold it back in their thick-headedness and conservatism, they force the artist to write “not for the artistic joy of writing, but for the amusement of half-educated people” (p. 1185), and they quite obviously, if one were to spell it out, do not understand it. In his book *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde*, George Woodcock captures the feeling invoked by passages such as this in Wilde:

An accusation that clings more closely [than that of immorality] is that of social snobbery. Wilde, it is said, was an arrogant snob and an unmitigated social climber. He had no real sympathy for the poor, it is added, and, indeed, insulted them on numerous occasions (p. 139).

He did, obviously: in *The Soul of Man* alone many harsh words are spoken against both ‘the public’ and the lifestyle of ‘the poor’. So what is this elitism? The mere kicking of a bruised ego, having been the object of scorn from this same ‘public’? Certainly, to a degree – but like so much of Wilde’s work, what is on the one hand an autobiographical self-justification, on the other becomes a poignant, intensely beautiful philosophy. In a way, this double nature of his artistic output is the greatest proof we could have asked him to provide for the idea that artists create their best work when they are absolutely themselves. The answer, then, is to be found right at the beginning of his litany about Art: “It is not quite their fault”, he says, after initially condemning the public’s trying to exercise authority over the Individualism of Art. “The public has always, and in every age, been badly brought up” (p. 1184).

Now, this might seem to some like an even clearer case of Wilde looking down his nose at ‘common people’, but what is so important in this simple statement, is that he specifies, zooms in, so to speak, on the object of his own scorn: it is authority. Not the individuals, because *it is not quite their fault*, but the underlying force, that which has *brought them up* into a stupid, thick-headed and antagonistic mass – that which has suppressed their Individualism. The thing at which his criticism was really aimed, then, is the stupefying, immense, smothering power of authority.

And so, when Morris says, “I do not want Art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few” (‘The Lesser Arts’, 1877), Wilde echoes that he does not want Art to be subject to authority, forcing the hollow perception held by a few of the concept to suppress the Individualism of the many in its practice. The ‘people’s art’ that Morris elicits is the unmarred creativity of the individual that Wilde speaks of straight from the heart: his ‘elitism’ is a love for humanity, coupled with a profound distaste for the authority which attempts to keep it chained.

Moreover, both Morris and Wilde reacted to the negative effects of mass-production: the flip side of the benefits that Industrialism brought humanity. There were certainly unpleasantnesses in the old system where most people were compelled either to make their own tools and utensils, or buy handmade ones from other people – but the upside of that arrangement was that it forced human beings to be creative, habitually. Along with Industrialism came the mass-produced tools and home decorations that so horrified Morris, and the new pace: the transformation of humanity into creatures that could no longer afford the time to be creative. And so, in the wake of our greater levels of biological living, in the wake of our boasted increase in Individualism, Art has become something that does not concern everyone. Art has become something that does not allow access to every individual, even when they offer it their invaluable spark of beauty – their Individualism – as an entry fee. Art has become an exotic bird in a cage, inside the walls of a garden, watched from afar by those who are not invited with a mixture of fascination, incomprehension and contempt.

‘Art’, in the Wilde definition of the concept, is the expression of humanity’s very soul. To limit something as unimaginably universal to the practice of a select few, to lock it up in a cage of authority and conventions – to, as Wilde says, “degrade the classics into authorities” (p. 1186) and use them as comparison to define what is and what is not Art – is so depressingly stupid that it borders on the ridiculous.

Neither Wilde nor Morris, however, propose that we should evolve backwards. It is merely a case of realising the full extent of our new situation, and addressing the spiritual needs of the ‘new humanity’. This can be done, according to Wilde by enslaving the machines, and using them as a means to liberate Individualism instead of blocking the way towards it.

As he sets Individualism free, Wilde also lets the bird of Art fly its cage. This is significant, because though the setting free of humanity’s soul is an immense step in the right direction towards his Utopia, the *expression* of the soul is its fulfilment. The expression of the soul, for the soul’s own sake: that is Wilde’s Art. He is not particularly worried about it after all, I should say. Because he knows that Individualism is a powerful force – as he himself tried to tell us:

Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine.
(Wilde, p. 1186)

One of the most fundamental human traits is that of forgetting: it is part of our flexibility as a species, and without it we would most likely have been lost long ago – but the price we pay is a slowness of understanding, a need for ideas to seep through many great minds before they can take a strong enough hold to remain unforgotten. This is why we must keep studying the ideas left behind for us by the past. Regardless of the practical problems, and the Utopian nature that he refuses to apologise for, the idea of reform that Wilde puts forth in *The Soul of*

Man under Socialism is a great one, a wonderful one – one that it would be inhuman to let slip into oblivion without discussion. In an age that has let spirituality sit on the fence while ‘serious matters’ are being discussed – has made Individualism become synonymous, to a large extent, with Capitalism and private property – we need Wilde more than ever. We need his unforgiving attitude towards the suppression of Individualism, his proclamation of everyone’s right to realise the beauty within them, and his scorn towards the doting on poverty’s symptoms while the underlying sickness continues to thrive unchecked. In short, in the middle of our isolated expertise and narrow specialisation mania, *we need his holistic view*: even if it has risen so high in order to get a proper vantage point that its head is slightly among the clouds.

More than anything, *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is a work of art, and Wilde is an artist. As he points out himself in the preface to *Dorian Gray*, Art mirrors the spectator rather than the artist. A mirror might be more or less clear, and depending on the angle and execution it might highlight different aspects of our personalities. We need an infinitely wide range of mirrors to truly understand ourselves, and this is exactly why we have a lot to gain by gazing long and hard into the mirror of ideas that Wilde created for us 117 years ago.

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