I read for the first time the (almost) complete account of Oscar's trials...It’s very interesting and depressing. One of the surprising features is that he very nearly got off. If he had, what would have happened, I wonder? I fancy the history of English culture might have been quite different, if a juryman’s stupidity had chanced to take another turn.

(Lytton Strachey, Letter to Dora Carrington, September 25, 1921)

Lytton Strachey’s counter-historical daydream speaks not only to the importance of Oscar Wilde well beyond his literary achievements but to the way the writer’s fate – and those of others – were entangled with the unpredictable, seemingly arbitrary exigencies of the law. Strachey’s fantasy, moreover, would appear to be taking place in what recent queer theorists call “queer time,” a temporality outside of actual (often cruel) history or the ineluctable drive of linear, progressive time. Queer time often entertains a counter-historical, backwards-looking, or futuristic temporal directionality.¹ As José Esteban Muñoz notes, the very notion of the “queer” is indissociably interconnected to unrealized visions of utopia, an “ideality” that represents a “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”²

A key figure in the history of attitudes about same-sex eros, Wilde holds literary significance in just such a future-tense queer temporality. Wilde’s transtemporal import is captured in the opening chapter of Jonathan Dollimore’s influential 1991 study Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault, which sees Wilde as both ending a period of sexual history and inaugurating a modern understanding of same-sex erosics. Dollimore focuses on a series of pivotal encounters between Wilde and the French writer André Gide, in which the Irish-born writer repeatedly challenged and undermined Gide’s sense of self – most specifically, his
sense of sexual identity – through Wilde’s insistence that Gide avail himself of the pleasures of Algerian youths. “Wilde is religiously trying to kill whatever remains of my soul,” Gide wrote to Paul Valéry in 1891. Another letter of the same month begins, “Please forgive my silence; since Wilde, I hardly exist anymore.”

Those fraught face-offs culminated in what Dollimore considers a decisive 1895 nonencounter in Algiers when Gide, seeing the names of Wilde and Wilde’s lover Alfred Lord Douglas on a hotel register, crossed out his own name and immediately left the hotel, an act of social retreat and, figuratively, of self-erasure. For Dollimore, the bruising conflict between Wilde and Gide speaks to opposite poles in the modern conception of dissident sexualities. From Dollimore’s perspective, Wildean erotic individualism is radically self-subverting, creatively perverse, legally dangerous – “feasting with panthers,” as Wilde memorably puts it – beholden to the “truth” of masks, and contemptuous of depth. Gidean individualism, on the other hand, is related to moral integrity, an essentialist faith in a “true” sexual self, as well as the affirmation of the “naturalness” of sexual inversion and therefore its legal legitimacy and moral integrity. In Dollimore’s account, these two conceptions structure all future understandings of same-sex erotics.

Abundantly suggestive as the Wilde-Gide dyad is, I want to posit a different disjunction and attendant genealogy that I argue is equally illustrative of twentieth and twenty-first-century thinking regarding dissident erotics. I posit George Bernard Shaw and Wilde in terms of their competing conceptions of sexual modernism – one coordinated by a faith in law, the pragmatics of technological advancement, and welfare state progress, and the other in queer lawlessness, Symbolist mystery, and nostalgia for undestroyed lost civilizations. With the legal advances today governing same-sex behavior in Western countries, from the decriminalization of sodomy laws to the recent legitimization of marriage equality by the United States Supreme Court, it might seem that much of Shaw’s conception of a utopian state has been increasingly achieved, although the triumph of nationalist politics in Europe and the 2016 presidential election in the United States pose substantial threats to those advances. Ironically, given his central role in a set of era-defining legal cases, Wilde was skeptical of – or perhaps simply uninterested in – issues related to the law. It is telling that not a single paragraph of De Profundis, a work written some two years into Wilde’s imprisonment in bitter denunciation of his lover, Alfred Lord Douglas, explores the legal issues determining his trials,
possibly because prison officials would find such reflections mutinous. Today, many queer thinkers and activists have similarly skeptical views of the law as an ultimate arena of redress and freedom. They question, for example, marital equality – not only because of marriage’s history as a conservative institution but for its linking in the United States of basic human rights such as health to a spousal bond – and hate-crime laws for their strengthening of traditionally anti-queer agents (the police) and institutions (prisons). While uninterested in the law, De Profundis did ponder a kind of queer time, ending its many rancorous regretful pages with a somewhat mystical observation that affirmed the subjective nature of time: “The past, the present, and the future are but one moment in the sight of God, in whose sight we should try to live. Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of Thought.”

In Wilde’s schema, the law was similarly subjective and arbitrary, having its foundation in conventional ethics, for Wilde a mostly bogus and bourgeois invention, encapsulated in his quip, “I love an ethical dilemma. It is so much more interesting than a real one.”

To the degree that Wilde was interested in the law, he was concerned with infractions against unjust legal restrictions or flamboyant criminals such as Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, whom Wilde described as “one of the most subtle and secret poisoners of this or any age,” thus elevating criminality to an art. The value of the law lay chiefly in the possibilities it created for principled dissent and for exploring the creative dimension in criminality. My discussion of Shavian and Wildean conceptions of utopia construes these writers as working in dialectical relation to each other within a late-Victorian context in which same-sex desire was being articulated in fundamentally new ways. Their utopianism was part of a turn-of-the-century zeitgeist in which writers such as H. G. Wells and William Morris expressed a keen interest in utopian schemes, but they entertained such fantasies at a historical moment when the law was becoming increasingly interested in punishing aberrant forms of sexual conduct.

Although the differences between Shaw and Wilde would seem to pivot on a sharp contrast between reason and unruly imagination – Shaw’s hard-nosed utopia based on laws versus Wilde’s dreamy utopia smitten with lawlessness – this distinction is misleading. To take one example: the law depends on an imaginatively manipulative use of language and may be as rhetorically creative as any literary text. Here, for example, is Henry Vincent, Director of Criminal Investigations at Scotland Yard, on the need for the Labouchère amendment:
The increase of these monsters in the shape of men, commonly designated margeries, poofs etc., of late years, in the great Metropolis, renders it necessary for the safety of the public that they should be made known ... Will the reader credit it, but such is nevertheless the fact, that these monsters actually walk the street the same as the whores, looking out for a chance?

This colorful condemnation, with its unending, knowing catalogue of urban deviants, indistinguishable from the era’s Fleet Street journalistic rhetoric, is the agitated flipside of the amendment itself, whose dry, single-sentence stipulation outlawing acts “of gross indecency” was vague enough to implicate (notionally) large numbers of men. That today’s laws often function through literary effects seems inarguable. Thus, as Dale Carpenter notes, the 2003 US Supreme Court *Lawrence v. Texas* decision striking down sodomy laws did not simply validate a right to privacy but did so through language that emphasized, as a corollary, the ability of gay men and women to sustain *long-term* same-sex relationships. In his majority decision, Justice Kennedy repeatedly used the word “relationship” in invoking the potentiality of LGBT people to enter into an extended bond, although, as Carpenter wryly observes, the incident that originally generated the court case – a random sexual encounter between two men (who did not live together and were not in a long-term relationship) that led to an arrest by the police (who either did or did not interrupt the men having sex) – was hardly the exalted intimate affiliation evoked in Kennedy’s affirmative opinion. For the Supreme Court, then, queer time only gains legitimacy when it occurs within the context of a hallowed *protraction* of same-sex relations.

Complicating my examination of Shavian and Wildean utopianism is Wilde’s posthumous mid-twentieth-century afterlife. Wilde’s carnal utopianism troubled an Anglo-American liberal consensus on normative sexuality. Before he emerged as a progenitor of 1970s Gay Liberation, a Warholian avatar of style, and a twenty-first-century queer icon, Wilde was seen by prominent mid-twentieth-century literary intellectuals as an anarchistic, “decadent” figure overly captive to a covertly sexualized Hellenism. That the most prominent exponent of that position, the poet and critic W. H. Auden, was widely known as a gay man, represents not only a salient biographical irony but speaks to how the fissures dividing Shaw and Wilde – one heterosexually identified, the other scandalously not – ultimately emerged as divisions within twentieth-century queer culture itself. Law and lawlessness continues to structure discussions of same-sex erotics – and not without echoes of Victorian-era anxieties that defined Wilde’s life and work. For the present-day “normalization” of same-sex erotics stands
in tensile relation to a freewheeling, semiclandestine internet culture, with reverberations of the Victorian sexual “underground” that we know Wilde — and his fictional protagonist Dorian Gray — frequented.

**Utopias of Law and Realism/Utopias of Lawlessness and Artifice**

A dialectic of law and lawlessness as well as one of forward-moving time and recessive time structures the divide between today’s social egalitarians and queer critics, one whose genealogy may be traced to Shaw and Wilde’s discordant relationships. This dialectic also pivots on the law’s “realism” versus a visionary — and therefore unreal or unrealistic — conception of freedom. To Shaw’s materialist stance insisting on social and economic justice, Wilde offers an antimaterialist credo of beauty that insisted on hierarchies in the aesthetic realm. Their disagreements comprise a creative dialectic and not simply a set of contradictions. For just as Shaw’s faith in welfare state legal resolutions shorn of obfuscating mysticisms notionally allows for competing conceptions of eros, Wilde’s defense of lawlessness in the political, social, and erotic domain depends on the existence of laws against which he took an oppositional stance. It is, however, in the aesthetic sphere that Shavian and Wildean political divergences are most evident. The realm of art, for Shaw, represented an opportunity for dramatizing the social obstacles to utopia, a utopia defined as a sphere in which nonnormative sexuality would be legal but also inconsequential or unnecessary. For Wilde, on the other hand, the aesthetic realm was the location for imagining the freedoms of a political utopia, one that would leave untroubled unruly desires defined by society as nonnormative.

Building on their contrasting notions of dissident erotics, I want to explore how Wilde’s enduring decadent persona reproduces the divide between a legalistic conception of same-sex erotics and nonlegal conception that abjures simple classifications and a concomitant language of legal “rights.” Tellingly, Shaw sensed that Wilde represented a challenge to his worldview; he doggedly followed Wilde’s rise and fall and, in a sense, tracked Wilde’s evolving persona. Initially Shaw became aware of Wilde as a dandified troublemaker, then saw him as a rival in the London theatre world, and later denigrated the playwright’s increasing celebrity. Yet Shaw defended Wilde during the latter’s legal travails and soon after Wilde’s release from prison nominated him to be one of the “Immortals” for the Academy of Letters. After Wilde’s death, Shaw became an obsessive epistolary tormentor of Alfred Lord Douglas for some twelve years. Shaw’s
intellectual and emotional investment in Wilde—ambivalent, contradictory, excessive—at times resembles a vexed, one-sided romantic fixation. The biographical asymmetry between these writers’ interest in each other aside, their relationship stands as an overwrought, overlooked, and defining affiliation in critical accounts of Wilde’s life and in the history of modern conceptions of dissident sexuality.

Irish-born provocateurs as well as successful London playwrights, Wilde and Shaw, who had some twelve personal encounters, shared much in their public deportment and political sympathies. As Michael Holroyd observes, “Both Wilde, the complete dandy, and Shaw, the rationale dress reformer, were showmen . . . Whenever these two noticeable figures met, they treated each other with elaborate courtesy.” Shaw’s first novel, Immaturity (written in 1879 but unpublished until 1930) includes a character, Patrick Hawkshaw, a dandy and poet, obviously modeled on Wilde, whose name suggests Shaw’s intense self-recognition in Wilde the aesthete even as he depicts Hawkshaw in sexually ambiguous terms. It is likely, however, that Shaw did not perceive Wildean aestheticism as a mask or code for same-sex preferences. In fact, Shaw maintained that until the last of Wilde’s trials he had never conceived of his friend as having had sexual relations with other men. Alone among Shaw’s literary acquaintances, Wilde signed a petition initiated by Shaw on behalf of Chicago anarchists involved in the 1886 Haymarket riots. Shaw rallied for his fellow Irishman several times—notably a defense of Wilde in an article on Max Nordeau’s best-selling Degeneration (1892), a book that skewered Wildean aesthetics, and later when Wilde was convicted for “gross indecency.”

Their shared anarchist leanings and defense of artistic freedom are complicated, however, by Shaw and Wilde’s deep differences in political belief and aesthetic outlook. Of his fellow Irishman, Wilde told Frank Harris, “He is a man of real ability but a bleak mind. Humorous gleams of wintry sunlight on a bare, harsh landscape. He has no passion, no feeling and without passionate feeling how can one be an artist. He believes in nothing, loves nothing, not even Bernard Shaw, and really on the whole, I don’t wonder at the indifference.” Wilde displays his elegant cynicism here as well as the (less familiar) idealism at the core of his philosophical outlook, which stressed the pleasures of fantasy and artifice in contradistinction to the bracing exposures of realism that were so basic to Shaw’s theatre. For his part, Shaw despised what he took to be Wilde’s fraudulent unconventionality (“never was there a man less an outlaw than he,” claimed Shaw), casting aspersion on Wilde’s writing for the theatre as well. The Importance of Being Earnest, Shaw declared, was Wilde’s “first
truly heartless play.” In a review of The Ideal Husband, Shaw dismissed Wilde as “absolutely the most sentimental dramatist of the day” (the play, he complained, “has no thesis”). The idea that a theatrical work would have an argument is obviously opposed to Wilde’s aestheticist doctrine, which militated against edifying depth in works of art.

The two writers’ differing ideological positions on dissident sexuality echo in a present moment in which the neoliberal accommodation of same-sex eroticism within the discourses of equality, marriage, and family opposes queer conceptions of dissident sexuality that resist normative systems and embrace an unstable, artificial component in sexual identity. Furthermore, as LGBTQ liberties are threatened by authoritarian regimes relying on punitive laws in Russia and parts of the Middle East, the asymmetries between Shavian and Wildean utopias still matter. For Shaw’s politics were not just allied with egalitarian democratic ideals but held totalitarian inclinations that were utterly alien to Wilde’s idiosyncratic anarchism, with its skepticism about limitations on individual freedom. As Ruth Lively notes, the “religion of socialism” characteristic of the 1880s Fabian movement emerged as a belief in a welfare state overseen by an enlightened intellectual leadership. Further, as Matthew Yde demonstrates, Shaw’s utopian politics frequently darkened into the idealization of “Superman” figures and tyrannous regimes. Despite his support of anarchists, Shaw became beholden to visions of a smooth-functioning rationally cohesive social order that required a charismatic leader.

To be sure, Shaw was a maverick in his understanding of – and principled activism on behalf of – homosexual rights, particularly in the 1880s and 1890s during an intense social purity campaign in Britain. That assertive stance first was signaled in the playwright’s 1889 letter to Truth magazine, the organ of the social purity campaigner Henry Labouchère, the architect of the so-called Labouchère Amendment under which Wilde would be prosecuted for “gross indecency” four years later. In his letter – either unsent or rejected for publication – Shaw denounced the arrest of men ensnared in a homosexual brothel scandal that erupted in London’s West End, the notorious 1889 Cleveland Street case. Empowered by the recently passed “gross indecency” clause of the Labouchère law (and not, as Shaw’s letter did not seem to recognize, by existing sodomy laws), police arrested several socially prominent men.

Shaw undermined the legitimacy of the legal charges by insisting on the temporal and geographical pervasiveness of same-sex erotic activity. “There are hundreds of others who might have been expelled on the same grounds,” he wrote, “Greek philosophers, soldiers, sailors, convicts and
in fact members of all communities deprived of intercourse with women.” He further clarified that same-sex desire was not the prerogative of men alone: “Women, from Sappho downward, have shewn that this abnormal appetite is not confined to one sex.” Most importantly, Shaw protested that the Labouchère law violated individual rights through misguided religious injunctions that trespassed on the secular state:

I appeal now to the champions of individual rights . . . to join me in a protest against a law by which two adult men can be sentenced to twenty years and servitude for a private act, freely consented to and desired by both which concerns they themselves alone. There is absolutely no justification for the law except the old theological one of making the secular arm the instrument of God’s vengeance (230).

As Morris Kaplan notes of this letter, Shaw was alone among observers of the West End scandal to raise the issue of human rights. Prophetically anticipating the logic of Lawrence v. Texas, his letter designated privacy as a basic right, a central fundament of the recent liberal defense of same-sex eros.

Like Richard Burton, whose Orientalist “Terminal Note” to his 1885 translation of One Thousand Nights and a Night neutrally taxonomized sodomy as geographically widespread, especially in Eastern locales, Shaw maintained that the behavior exposed in the Cleveland Street case was widely observable in different societies and historical epochs, implicitly insisting on the tolerance of difference as a fundament of an enlightened society. As Aleardro Zanghellini notes, Shaw’s letter “normalizes homosexuality by historicizing it, by appealing to moral pluralism.” Of course, Wilde – with the fin de siècle artist’s characteristic backward-looking idealization of mythic, artistic, or historical players – similarly appeals to history in his famous speech at trial, in which he referenced the “great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare.” Rejecting Wilde’s nostalgic temporalizing, Shaw democratized illicit acts and actors – hence the reference to those sailors, soldiers, and convicts, all of them existing in the present and many of them, it is implied, circumstantially drawn to their own sex. Hence, in his Truth letter, Shaw notes the existence of a Norfolk penal colony as an instance of situational homosexuality wherein imprisoned men resorted to same-sex erotic activity in the absence of women. With its forward-looking sexual modernism, Shaw’s emphasis on the contingent nature of queer carnal acts opposed the prevailing late Victorian sexology’s notion of congenital sexual “types.”
Tellingly, although Shaw later made the case for prostitution as a victimless crime in Mrs. Warren’s Profession, his Truth letter ignored the issue of sex work in the Cleveland Street case, focusing entirely on the question of sodomy. Shaw’s elision signaled a shrewd awareness that the vendible economics disclosed by the Cleveland Street case could feed into a sordid narrative of cross-class exploitation – a specter that had inspired Labouchère when he sought support for his social purity legal activism in W. T. Stead’s recently published 1885 “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” an expose in the Pall Mall Gazette dealing with allegedly widespread child prostitution in Britain. Rather, Shaw – at least publicly – preferred to see the case as wrongly turning a common vice into a new crime. Yet ignoring the issue of class exploitation effectively put Shaw – now an official advocate for working-class aspirations in his new role as a leader of the Fabian Society, established a year before – at some odds with Shaw the campaigner for the decriminalization of prostitution.

With his polemical defense of male same-sex amours – his speech at trial evoking Hellenic and Renaissance love – Wilde exalted dissident erotics by evoking classical and Renaissance models, affirming a utopia defined by cross-generational, as opposed to cross-class, affection. Yet it was precisely this heightened rhetoric of Hellenic and Renaissance love that doomed Wilde when the prosecution paraded before the court a group of lower-class young men with whom he had traded money for erotic favors. “Hellenic Wilde” was thus exposed as “Predatory Wilde,” a member of an illicit brethren of relatively prosperous men that extended from the Lotharios depicted in Stead’s 1895 “Maiden Tribute” article to the upper-class homosexual cenacles of Eton, Harrow, Oxford, and Cambridge. In this way, prosecutors demythologized nineteenth-century utopian discourse surrounding same-sex eros, extrapolating the economist logic that, for wholly different purposes, Shaw had invoked in considering the question of prostitution in Mrs. Warren’s Profession (1893). Yet Wilde’s theatrical persona may have predisposed the jury and the press to deem him anathema to a decent-minded public even before the trial’s revelations of same-sex liaisons. Tellingly, The Evening News’ early coverage of the proceedings foregrounded Wilde’s quicksilver linguistic skills – not the specifics of his sexuality – as “the source of evidence” for his “strange personality.”

In his Truth letter, Shaw questioned the notion of sodomy as unnatural, deftly rebuking the Cleveland Street prosecutors for claiming that sodomyitical acts were so “expressively disagreeable as to appear unnatural.” Notwithstanding this disruption of the “natural” as subjective and
arbitrary, Shaw’s utopian vision was almost entirely legalistic, economic, and moral, a socialist and humanist dream of rational discourse, secular laws, and freedom of expression. Broadly speaking, Shaw’s “sexual utopia” depends on a structure of private individual “rights” secured by the state even as it conceives of dissident sexual acts as largely emerging from unequal social and economic conditions, exemplified by the imprisoned Norfolk men or Mrs. Warren’s reliance on prostitution for financial independence.

More abstractly, Wilde’s endorsement of utopian schemes is apparent in his much-quoted comment in “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891), “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 realization of Utopias.” Unlike Shaw, Wilde distinguishes “individual” socialism from “authoritarian” (what he termed “bureaucratic”) socialist societies that cause the “complete suppression” of original creative power,” advocating what today we might recognize as a libertarian refinement of anarchist beliefs. Wilde’s caution girds his fundamental point that “What is needed is Individualism. If the Socialism is Authoritarian; if there are Governments armed with economic power as they are now with political power; if, in a word, we are to have Industrial Tyrannies, then the last state of man will be worse than the first” (229). Yet Wilde’s dominant concern is the aesthetic realm. As George Woodcock notes: “Wilde’s aim in The Soul of Man under Socialism is to seek the society most favorable to the artist. . . . for Wilde art is the supreme end, containing within itself enlightenment and regeneration, to which all else in society must be subordinated. . . . Wilde represents the anarchist as an aesthete.” Moreover, to the extent that it evokes the law, his polemic explores occasions when the dissenting individual must choose to violate legal injunctions.

One may glean Wilde and Shaw’s divergent conceptions of sexual utopia by considering Salome and Mrs. Warren’s Profession in tandem. Both plays center on unruly women in fissured familial relationships. Both were originally banned from the London stage – Salome because of its use of biblical figures, deemed unallowable by the Lord Chamberlain’s office, Mrs. Warren’s Profession because of its sympathetic treatment of female prostitution. There the similarities end. The dilemma of Shaw’s play is related to a dramatization of desire’s wily management, and even then its subject is the cost of sexual dissidence to normative familial relations. Thus
Mrs. Warren struggles – after years of successfully working as a prostitute and then as a brothel-owner – with her daughter Vivie’s bourgeois moral-ism, a disgust only partly camouflaged by Vivie’s New-Womanish qualities. The play never wrestles with the more problematic aspects of prostitution – for example, whether prostitution, if legalized, might remain degrading to indigent women. Sidestepping such thorny issues by focusing on a prostitute of financial means – a bourgeois madam – the play steadily shifts to questions of motherhood, culminating in Mrs. Warren’s confession to Vivie that she wishes she had been a better mother and her daughter’s rejection of any relationship with her.

As Robert Brustein notes, “like Arthur Miller, Shaw envisions a reconciled society in which there will be no more tragedy – or mystery, since all human problems will be already solved.”

Paradoxically, Shaw is contemptuous of Victorian pieties regarding social reform yet resorts to well-made plays of dogged nineteenth-century realism indebted to Ibsen. In *Salome*, contrasting, Wilde is absorbed in the ineluctable enchantments, symbolist inscrutabilities, and tragic potential of disorderly eros. There is no rectifiable Shavian “social problem.” Also, Wilde not only inverted Victorian-era hypocrisies in plays such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Salome*, he absorbed the poetics of nineteenth-century Symbolism, repeatedly sequestering dissident erotics into a realm of mystery, opacity, and doubleness valued by the antirealist, largely French Symbolist movement exemplified by Stéphane Mallarmé and Odilon Redon. *Salome* depicts dissidence as almost entirely outside a circuit of repressed desires – except when Herod ultimately orders his stepdaughter Salome’s execution, the climactic but sole law-substantiating act in Wilde’s play. At the same time, we are left with a sense throughout *Salome* of sexual fantasies run wild, independent of any stable sexual “identity” in large part because Symbolism rejects the codes of realism.

A refusal of erotic identification is characteristic of Wilde’s work and persona more generally. Today, we might understand this stance as presciently “posthumanist,” a queer deflection of a univocal sexual identity. At the same time, Shaw and Wilde’s contrasting outlooks on erotic futurity were entangled with radically opposed aesthetic values. Shaw – for Yeats, a “notorious hater of romance” – was skeptical of artifice and subterfuge, whereas Wilde was deeply committed to an aesthetics of the beguilingly artificial, what he called the “truth of masks,” and the possibilities for sexual freedom that concealed or deferred identity allowed. Wilde’s aesthetic values were entangled with his overt utopian political ideas, as
became clear with the critical dissent that Wildean ideas generated in the twentieth century when liberalism was being formed as an antidote to a supposedly misguided utopianism.

Wilde’s Aesthetic/Political Anarchism, W. H. Auden, and the Midcentury Backlash against Queer Temporality

Wilde’s discomfort with strictly legal and scientific conceptions of dissident same-sex desire may be one reason he long has represented a problem for some prominent mid-twentieth-century humanist intellectuals, who saw in Wilde and his defenders at once an excess of Hellenic and Renaissance nostalgia and anarchist and socialist sympathies that threatened a liberal, law-based society as well as gender fixities. That distrust may have stemmed from a number of extra-aesthetic positions, such as Wilde’s disapproval of charity as demoralizing in “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” his embrace of so-called paganism, his ostentatious openness to sensation, and his pioneering role in the creation of modern celebrity culture, all anathema to many midcentury American liberal intellectuals.

Nowhere is the mid-twentieth-century apprehension about Wilde’s political imagination and Hellenic vision of same-sex amours more evident than in W. H. Auden’s shifting responses to the playwright between 1941 and 1969. Although Auden’s appreciation of Shaw was unbounded—he once called him “probably the best music critic who ever lived” Auden’s wariness about Wilde pivoted among caustic disavowal, overt hostility, and eventual admiration of Wilde’s cultural impact if not his artistry. In a 1941 essay on Byron, Auden noted that Wilde was one of only three writers with major reputations outside of Britain, the others being Shakespeare and Byron. However, in a striking about-face, in 1950, Auden – now a resident of the US and writing in a more politically conservative country and era – derisively dismissed Wilde as a mere performer. This claim appeared in a Partisan Review critique of George Woodcock’s 1962 The Paradox of Oscar Wilde, one of the first scholarly works to comprehend Wilde in emphatically political terms – specifically, as a thinker with an idiosyncratic anarchist outlook. Negatively duplicating Woodcock’s terms (“Playboy or Prophet” was one chapter title in Woodcock’s account, which in measured terms judged him to be both), Auden derided Wilde as a consummate playboy as well as a failed prophet and artist. Auden claimed that Wilde authored only one significant work, The Importance of Being Earnest, which Auden read as indicative of Wilde’s paltry vision. “At the end all secrets are out, there is no need for
Mr. Bunbury and Lady Bracknell surrenders,” writes Auden. “In the Eden of Wilde’s Hertfordshire all things are possible; in the late-Victorian Old Bailey, unfortunately, they were not.”

Auden’s dilation on a Wildean carnal utopia syntactically forecloses that possibility through a semicolon that interrupts Wilde’s progress, followed by a terse reference to Wilde’s ghastly legal fate. The semicolon, in effect, denies Wilde the integrity of his utopian dreams. It is “gross indecency” law that, in Auden’s telling, mockingly forecloses dreams of utopia, as if Wilde’s erotic utopianism had been an entirely personal vision instead of one that may have been shared by millions of others. The history-determining law, given authority through its successful enactment, has the final word on Wilde. Auden’s anti-utopianism then deduces in the playwright’s love of Hellenic ideals a common mistake of the fin de siècle, and exposes Wilde’s true – but covert – merely personal interests:

Of all men Wilde was least in the position to say “the real weakness of England lies . . . in the fact that her ideas are emotional and not intellectual” for in few cases is the emotional root of thinking so obvious as his.

Thus, when, like all the nineteenth-century literary école païenne, he extols the Greeks, the Great God Pan, and the Beautiful Pagan Life, any resemblance to the historical reality is accidental and all he seems to mean is: I should like a world without Sunday closing, damp weather and overcooked vegetables but with plenty of sunshine and lots of yummy scantily-clad teenagers who can’t say No. (186)

The Hellenic sympathies of the fin de siècle are reduced to the pitiful fantasies of a fussy ephebophile, whose biographical fate delegitimizes his utopian ideals. In Auden’s rejection of a queer temporality of nostalgia, the law’s “historical reality” is the restorative cudgel that recuperates pressingly real actualities. Put another way, for Auden, the (discretely gay-identified) humanist poet, the movement of history is indissociable from the workings of the law.

Writing in 1963 at the beginning of what would be a more sexually emancipatory period, Auden returned to Wilde in a review of a new collection of the playwright’s correspondence, this time with far less bile. He observed, “From the beginning Wilde performed his life and continued to do so even after fate had taken the plot out of his hands” – an acknowledgement that Wilde was not reducible to his imprisonment and that he existed in future-tense queer time. Still, Wilde’s utopianism continued to trouble bien pensant intellectuals worried about the social impact of a lawless imagination, particularly given the ascendant counterculture. “The claim of the artist to express everything is subversive in one
especially acute sense: the claim to express everything can only exacerbate feelings of being nothing,” wrote Philip Rieff in 1970. “In such a mood, all limits begin to feel like humiliations. Wilde did not know that was prophesying a hideous new anger in modern men, one that will render unexcited peaceable existence even more Utopian than before.”

Yet Wilde came to have a far more powerful set of cultural effects than as an actor in a Victorian – or present-day – morality tale or as a mere instrument in the liberalization of attitudes related to same-sex eros.

For Dollimore, Gide’s essentialist and Wilde’s destabilized notions of erotic identity represented an unresolvable disjuncture – and one that vexingly endured into the present. But the theoretical fissure that I have highlighted between utopias of law and lawlessness – the inheritance of Shavian and Wildean ideological skirmishes that has been revived in mid-twentieth-century critical debates about Wilde – is arguably less deeply ingrained. Moreover, the aesthetic realm for Wilde was not opposed to politics but was the very location for the potential for a political utopia. If, following Lytton Strachey, I may indulge in a queer counter-history – and thus a queer counter-futurity – I might wish that the juryman’s stupidity at the last Wilde trial might have been undone through some lawless feat of the imagination.

Notes
1 See, for example, Heather Love, Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
2 José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York University Press, 2009), 1.
5 Oscar Wilde, De Profundis, in The Soul of Man and Prison Writings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 158.
Shaw’s apparent ignorance of Wilde’s same-sex propensities confirms Alan Sinfield’s argument that so-called effeminacy at the fin de siècle did not register as a homosexual identity until the Wilde trials. Alan Sinfield, The Wilde Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

Quoted in Frank Harris, Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, [1916] 2007), 260. Wilde once commented acerbically: “Mr Bernard Shaw has no enemies, but is intensely disliked by his friends.” Quoted in Holroyd, Bernard Shaw, 194.


Shaw’s early plays often dealt with socially topical themes (restrictive marriage laws, prostitution, and slum-lordism), although after the 1880s Shaw claimed to have tired of what he called his “Blue Book” plays, a reference to British government reports, bound in blue covers, addressing pressing societal problems.


Shaw, Collected Letters, 1874–1897, 231.

Wilde, The Soul of Man under Socialism and Other Essays, 246. Subsequent references in text.


The so-called New York intellectuals were especially caustic about Wilde. Alfred Kazin contrasted writers who followed “Wells, Shaw, and Kipling” with the “sickly exoticism that merely ran after Pater and Huysmans and Oscar Wilde.” See On Native Grounds (New York: Doubleday, [1942] 1956), 53. In 1948, the anticommmunist and anti-anarchist Partisan Review published Mary McCarthy’s essay, “The Unimportance of Being Oscar,” which states
“There is something outré in all of Wilde’s work that makes one sympathize to a degree with the Marquess of Queensberry; this fellow is really insufferable.” Mary McCarthy, “Theatre Chronicle,” Partisan Review (Summer 1948): 302.


Philip Rieff, Introduction to The Soul of Man under Socialism and Other Essays, xxxii–xxxiii.