

Textual Dissidence: The Occasions of Wilde's 'The Soul of Man under Socialism'

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Volume 4, numéro 2, printemps 2013

Textual Histories
Histoires textuelles

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016742ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016742ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Groupe de recherches et d'études sur le livre au Québec

ISSN

1920-602X (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Mackie, G. (2013). Textual Dissidence: The Occasions of Wilde's 'The Soul of Man under Socialism'. *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture*, 4(2).
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1016742ar>

Résumé de l'article

« L'âme de l'homme sous le socialisme » est une pièce unique parmi les essais d'Oscar Wilde en ceci qu'elle fut publiée en tant que livre de son vivant. Sous le titre de *L'âme de l'homme*, l'oeuvre parut cinq jours après la condamnation à deux ans de prison de son auteur. Publiée en 1895 par Arthur Humphreys, un proche, elle parut dans une modeste édition privée limitée à cinquante exemplaires. L'essai donna à Humphreys l'occasion de combattre l'injustice par l'idéalisme. En sa qualité d'éditeur, il révisa le texte de Wilde, faisant notamment disparaître un mot atténuant, « occasionnel », de sa critique de la société punitive. Je suggère dans cet article que c'est précisément cette intervention éditoriale qui intensifie le message de Wilde et donne à l'oeuvre son ton d'indignation stridente, dans un geste de solidarité avec les identités considérées comme déviantes par l'opinion publique.

TEXTUAL DISSIDENCE: The Occasions of Wilde’s ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’

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ABSTRACT

“The Soul of Man under Socialism” is unique among Oscar Wilde’s essays because it was published as a book during his lifetime. As *The Soul of Man*, it appeared five days after his sentencing to two years’ imprisonment. Issued by family friend Arthur Humphreys, *The Soul of Man* was published in a modest, privately printed edition limited to fifty copies. Wilde’s essay provided Humphreys with an opportunity to combat injustice with idealism. Humphreys’ edition went further, intensifying Wilde’s denunciation of a punitive society by emending the essay’s text, specifically by deleting the word “occasional” from Wilde’s critique of crime and punishment. Indeed, the essay’s strident indignation derives from a sense of solidarity with identities considered deviant by public opinion, which, I argue, was precisely Humphreys’ purpose when he pointedly published *The Soul of Man* in 1895.

RÉSUMÉ

« L’âme de l’homme sous le socialisme » est une pièce unique parmi les essais d’Oscar Wilde en ceci qu’elle fut publiée en tant que livre de son vivant. Sous le titre de *L’âme de l’homme*, l’œuvre parut cinq jours après la condamnation à deux ans de prison de son auteur. Publiée en 1895 par Arthur Humphreys, un proche, elle parut dans une modeste édition privée limitée à cinquante exemplaires. L’essai donna à Humphreys l’occasion de combattre l’injustice par l’idéalisme. En sa qualité d’éditeur, il révisa le texte de Wilde, faisant notamment disparaître un mot atténuant, « occasionnel », de sa critique de la société punitive. Je suggère dans cet article que c’est précisément cette intervention éditoriale qui intensifie le message de Wilde et donne à l’œuvre son ton d’indignation stridente, dans un geste de solidarité avec les identités considérées comme déviantes par l’opinion publique.

“The Soul of Man under Socialism” is unique among Oscar Wilde’s critical essays insofar as it was published as a book during his lifetime. Unlike Wilde’s other essays originally written for periodicals, it was not collected in his volume of critical prose, *Intentions* (1891). With the truncated title *The Soul of Man*, the essay appeared instead in book form on May 30, 1895, five days after Wilde’s sentencing to two years’ imprisonment on charges of gross indecency. Despite the collapse of Wilde’s literary reputation in the wake of the trials, the essay continued to circulate in book form, and it remained among the very few Wilde titles to be reprinted during the early years of the twentieth century, with new editions appearing in 1904, 1907, and 1912.¹ Attention to the textual history of the essay’s first appearance in book form enables us to recover how one of the most enduring myths of Oscar Wilde – the martyr to sexual emancipation – was diffused through and constituted in the material book. *The Soul of Man* thus permits Wilde to speak in his own defence, affording him the opportunity to “say” something,² which was denied him when Mr. Justice Alfred Wills pronounced his sentence.

Considering the dramatic change in Wilde’s fortunes during the spring of 1895 – his plays *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, running concurrently in the West End, closed as the scandal over his libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry intensified – May 1895 would seem an inauspicious moment for Arthur Lee Humphreys, publisher of *The Soul of Man*, to place a “new” Wilde title before the book-buying public. Humphreys was a family friend who had collaborated with Wilde’s wife Constance on *Oscariana*,³ a compilation of witty extracts from several Wilde texts that appeared, after many delays, in January 1895.⁴ He was also manager of the celebrated Hatchard’s bookshop in London, and it may have been here that his edition of *The Soul of Man* was issued and sold in a modest private printing of fifty copies, bound in brown paper wrappers, as *Oscariana* had been.⁵ The timing of this publication immediately following the trials, not to mention its limited scale, is far from a mere coincidence. It registers a protest, and thus functions as a form of textual dissidence. We can outline the contours of such a protest by practicing what we might call queer book history: the recourse to bibliographical and print-cultural methods of analysis in order to adduce otherwise obscured queer textual histories.

In pursuit of this project, we can say that the publication of this outwardly undistinguished book, at such a time, must certainly amount to more than, as Josephine M. Guy contends, a friend's "gesture of good faith to someone in trouble."⁶ Indeed, a careful examination of the textual history of *The Soul of Man* suggests that we should regard Humphreys' activities in terms of the verdict of the Wilde trials. I argue that Humphreys published the essay to make a statement about the fate of its author, and as such the book represents a protest against Wilde's mistreatment at the hands of British justice. In doing so, I aim to elaborate in a particularly queer way Guy and Ian Small's speculation that "it is possible to see the timing of the republication of what was effectively a defence of freedom as an attempt on Humphreys' [...] behalf to justify some of Wilde's behaviour."⁷ Humphreys, moreover, was not alone in registering his dissent with the court's verdict. His book shares its message of protest with contemporary pro-Wilde publications, such as Dalhousie Young's pamphlet *Apologia pro Oscar Wilde* (1895) and Ernest Newman's "Oscar Wilde: A Literary Appreciation" (1895), an article whose line of argument strongly recalls "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891).⁸ Instead of directly criticizing the court's verdict – as these pieces do – Humphreys recruits Wilde's own text for this task. The publication of *The Soul of Man* could thus be read not only as an act of personal loyalty (or a "gesture of good faith"), but also as an attempt to recuperate Wilde's literary reputation among the select clientele of Hatchard's. But why, this essay will ask, among all of Wilde's writings, might "The Soul of Man under Socialism" have seemed appropriate for this undertaking?

I propose to investigate this question by turning first to the 1891 essay, which mounts an aggressively polemical defence of the artist in the public sphere. This was a defence Wilde maintained on the witness stand in 1895 in the midst of a tremendous popular scandal.⁹ Faced with the accusation during his first trial that he had written, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a "sodomitical book," he insisted that "my work never aims at any effect other than literature,"¹⁰ a position that he had earlier elaborated at greater length in "The Soul of Man under Socialism." An ambitious and provocative work that attacks the moral poverty of public opinion, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" provided Humphreys with the opportunity to present Wilde at his most idealistic and combative. It is also one of Wilde's most urgently personal texts, for it was initially written in response to the

hostile reception of *Dorian Gray*, in which that novel's reviewers (like his later detractors in court) explicitly accused Wilde of sexual deviance. I read "The Soul of Man under Socialism" as an extension of Wilde's very public replies to such accusations in the press. I do so by considering his elaboration of a queer politics of individualism in the essay before turning to Humphreys' re-issuing of it in *The Soul of Man*. Here, I am interested in the material book as Humphreys published it in 1895. I aim to show how its bibliographic features mark it as a book *about*, as much as *by*, Oscar Wilde. I also attend to how Humphreys' edition updates the 1891 essay's plea for sexual freedom by intervening editorially in Wilde's text. Humphreys took such action to counter the image of Wildean sexual perversity that circulated after the trials. Both late-Victorian occasions of Wilde's text, as we shall see, share a common thread in that the essay voices a rebuke to institutionalized homophobia.

The Queer Politics of Individualism in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891)

Throughout Wilde's critical essays, we glimpse configurations of identity that subvert conventional models of subjectivity and the conservative values that underwrite them,¹¹ from the Liar in "The Decay of Lying," to the Critic in "The Critic as Artist," to the Forger/Poisoner in "Pen Pencil and Poison." Wilde celebrates these exemplars of dissident subjectivity as individualists, and in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" he continues the cultural critique established in these earlier essays by theorizing an ethics of "individualism." As the central concept in the essay – indeed, the principle it seeks to affirm – individualism is nonetheless semantically opaque. Jonathan Dollimore, for one, emphasizes the political implications of Wildean individualism, as a notion "which implies a radical possibility of freedom."¹² Although this essay also considers the politics of individualism, it concentrates more closely on the genesis of this political stance in the context of Wilde's literary career and reputation.¹³

What I want to propose here is a queer reading of individualism that sustains two distinct, yet intersecting, meanings that circulate in the essay. On the one hand, individualism is legible as uniqueness or eccentricity, as a version of the "individuality" John Stuart Mill promotes as "one of the elements of well-being" in *On Liberty*.¹⁴ On the other hand, since

individualism connotes a socially disruptive potential embodied in “the individual,” it can also be read as elaborating a non-normative and queer identity. We can discern these latter meanings when we regard “The Soul of Man under Socialism” in the context of the debate over the reception of *Dorian Gray*. For the terms of that debate spill over into “The Soul of Man under Socialism”: in it, Wilde inverts the encoded discourse of queerness surrounding his novel’s reception by conscripting its moralizing vocabulary into his essay’s ethics of resistance. In “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” individualism carries an ethical charge because it disrupts a (hetero)normative regime of personhood – the stultifying conformity in thought and action, taste and desire that is policed by “Public Opinion.”¹⁵ Wildean individualism thus stands, perhaps, as one of the modern era’s earliest formulations of the politics of queer liberation.

The notion of public opinion attacked in “The Soul of Man under Socialism” can be traced to the vitriolic and homophobic reviews of *Dorian Gray*. Following its 1890 periodical publication, Wilde became entangled in an extended public debate with a series of anonymous newspaper critics. Their reviews suggestively attacked the “effeminate frivolity” of *Dorian Gray*’s homoerotic subtext, denouncing the author as purveyor, and his novel as the vehicle, of moral contamination.¹⁶ Another reviewer noted (prophetically) that the novel dealt with “Matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department.”¹⁷ The *Scots Observer* was the boldest and most topical in its homophobic attacks, claiming that Wilde wrote for “outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys.”¹⁸ The *Scots Observer* reviewer went on to note of *Dorian Gray*: “it is false art – for its interest is medico-legal ... it is not sufficiently clear that *the writer* does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity.”¹⁹ Wilde’s defensive arguments, which were published in letters to the editors of the newspapers that had attacked him, substituted the theoretical for the personal in order to counter imputations about his own life adduced from a literary work. He insisted on abstractions, asserting, for instance, that “the sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate.”²⁰ Moreover, he maintained that his novel did not amount to a form of autobiography, but rather, “Each man sees his own sins in *Dorian Gray*. What *Dorian*’s sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them.”²¹ Such “Puritanism,”²² as Wilde termed the unsophisticated philistinism of the

press during the *Dorian Gray* controversy, came under renewed and more trenchant attack in “The Soul of Man under Socialism.”

In order to imagine a socialist polity comprised of individualists, in the essay Wilde re-theorizes socialism by separating equality from sameness. Under socialism, Wilde argues, political and economic equality will lead not to conformity, but rather to liberating individualism. Resistance to conformity is required to guarantee individual liberty, since “to the claims of conformity no man may yield and remain free at all.”²³ Socialism, in other words, nurtures and enables *difference* – of all kinds. Even under the prevailing regime, individualism possesses immense exemplary value, since for Wilde individualism is non-conformist, anti-authoritarian, and disobedient. “Disobedience,” Wilde declares, “in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.”²⁴ Wildean socialism makes the promotion of expressive, individual subjectivities an ethical project. To become more of what you are, to intensify your personality, is thus a moral triumph, for “all imitation in morals and in life is wrong.”²⁵ The intensification of individualist difference in a world tyrannized by conformist pressures, especially if such individualism goes against the grain, is a moral imperative. Individualism demands active resistance to “the immoral idea of uniformity of type and conformity to rule which is so prevalent everywhere, and is perhaps most obnoxious in England.”²⁶

Wilde views the power of public opinion as an especially pernicious vehicle for social conformity, and it is most corrosive to individual freedom in the threat it poses to “private lives.” “The tyranny that it proposes to exercise over people’s private lives seems to me to be quite extraordinary,” he notes.²⁷ The essay favours instead the confirmation, in protective isolation, of the individual’s autonomy from the intrusive forces of mass culture: “The private lives of men and women should not be told to the public. The public have nothing to do with them at all. In France they manage these things better.”²⁸ References in the essay to “details of the trials that take place in the divorce courts”²⁹ and to the greater liberties available in France (where homosexual acts were not subject to the penalties that obtained in Britain) elaborate the sexual implications of Wilde’s defense of “the private lives of men and women.”³⁰ Even though they do not explicitly allude to aberrant

sexual practices, such references encode challenges to heteronormative Victorian domesticity. France, after all, was the spiritual home of Decadence,³¹ and among conservative Victorians it was infamous for being a locale of unbridled sexual license. Wilde, for his part, was an unabashed Francophile. “In France,” Wilde avers, “they do not allow the details of the trials that take place in the divorce courts to be published for the amusement or criticism of the public [...] In France, in fact, they limit the journalist, and allow the artist almost perfect freedom.”³² The key term here is “details” – presumably intimate details of people’s private, sexual lives – details that cease to be private once they are broadcast, commented on, and judged in public.

Yet Wilde’s critique of public opinion in the essay nonetheless discloses a substantive degree of anxiety about the relation between publicity and private lives that even a principled affirmation of individualism cannot contain. An illustration of this anxiety can be found in his choice of metaphors to describe journalistic power as an agent of majoritarian coercion. Physical torture is updated to an age of press and public opinion: “in the old days men had the rack. Now they have the press. That is an improvement certainly. But it is still very bad, very wrong, and very demoralising.”³³ In this defence of individual privacy, “The Soul of Man under Socialism” explicitly recalls the *Dorian Gray* controversy, where journalism skirted the boundaries of public art and private life with compromising suggestions about Wilde’s sexual identity. The tradition of reading *Dorian Gray* as an index of Wilde’s desires and sexual practices would later disastrously inform the proceedings of the 1895 trials – a media event covered by the British press, as well as by papers in Paris and New York³⁴ – where the Marquess of Queensberry’s lawyers introduced passages from the novel into evidence. While the moralistic attacks made by reviewers of *Dorian Gray* in 1890 hinted at sexual deviance, such charges sealed the court’s verdict of gross indecency only a few years later.

That Wilde views sexual privacy as an ethical principle in an essay that promotes a politics of individualism also sheds some light on the contested status of Wilde’s own homosexual identity. Alan Sinfield, among others, has argued with some authority for the historical specificity of such fully articulated identities.³⁵ According to Sinfield, before Wilde’s time homosexuality was comprehended in terms of acts rather than identities;

Wilde himself, through the publicity surrounding his 1895 trials, helped to define modern perceptions of sexual identities that were not available to him. The Wilde legend that emerged during the trials, advanced largely by the press, in which Wilde featured as a tragic, self-aggrandizing decadent, courting his own doom, thus became the iconic image of the male homosexual. There is a great deal to be said for this argument, not the least of which is its value in historicizing Wilde's symbolic influence on the development of male homosexual typologies. At the same time, however, Wilde's preoccupation in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" with identity, ethics, and their manifestations in public and private realms suggests that he articulated a sense of identity defined in part by dissident sexuality some time before the trials. And it was an ambivalent, anxious identity at that, one for which he sought moral sanction in an ethic of intensified selfhood and in an aesthetic doctrine of oppositional, expressive individuality.

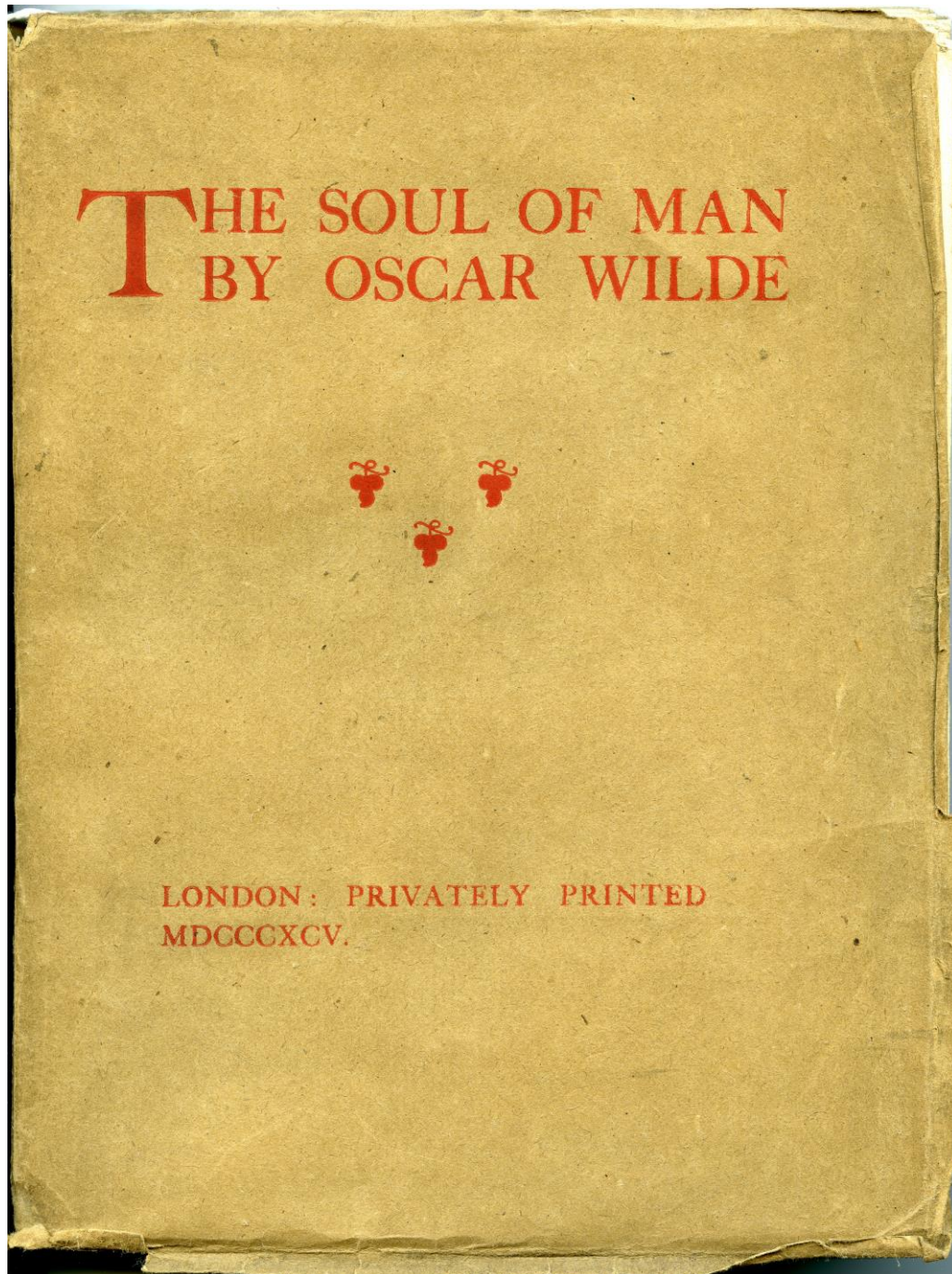
***The Soul of Man* and Arthur Humphreys' Intentions in 1895**

Wilde's 1891 essay was prescient about the vulnerability of sexual dissidence in a society that was to condemn him as its embodiment. The trials of 1895 proved that his fears about hostile and conservative public opinion had been well founded. If Humphreys' publication of *The Soul of Man* in the wake of these events prompts us to read it from a biographically topical perspective, then it also frames Oscar Wilde as a martyr for the emancipatory principles that the essay enunciates. Whereas the 1891 essay targeted the reviews of *Dorian Gray*, Humphreys' 1895 text newly targets the court. To put it another way, if "The Soul of Man under Socialism" indexes the terms around which Wilde's homosexual identity cohered, Humphreys' 1895 *Soul of Man* attacked its criminalization. Wilde was, quite literally, the victim of the very mindset that "The Soul of Man under Socialism" condemns as unjust and immoral. The notion of "soul" in Humphreys' *Soul of Man* can thus be understood as an abstract symbol, something universal, as well as the site of a particular subjectivity: Wilde's own soul. The removal of "socialism" from the title of Humphreys' book requires the essay's 1895 readers to focus less on political abstractions than on a particular subjectivity, the "soul" of *one* man. Such a title reconfigures the essay by concentrating our attention on the notion of individualism as personal protest. After the trials it is next to impossible to read this title merely on an

abstract, philosophical level, and by altering it Humphreys invites readers to project the revelations of the trials *into* Wilde's text.

Josephine M. Guy's work on *The Soul of Man* has helpfully contextualized the publication of Humphreys' volume, and I aim to extend that work here. She persuasively amends, for instance, Richard Ellmann's claim that the publication of *The Soul of Man* had been planned at the same time as *Oscariana*, that is to say, in August 1894. According to Ellmann's theory, *The Soul of Man* represented the fulfillment of existing publication arrangements, and as such, its appearance in May 1895 by the publisher of *Oscariana* does not amount to an occasion of much significance.³⁶ In Guy's view, however, Wilde's apparent lack of involvement with the preparation of his essay for book publication suggests an unusually activist role for the publisher, and she places "the decision to republish 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' at a rather later date than the end of the summer of 1894, perhaps as late as the spring of 1895."³⁷ Although it is difficult to come to a firm conclusion about whose decision it was to publish the essay as a book, the evidence we can infer from the physical book favours Humphreys as the driving force behind the project, and indeed, its originator.

In support of this claim, we may note that Humphreys' 1895 edition retains a printing error – a misplaced paragraph – to which Wilde had objected when he reviewed the proofs of the essay for its initial 1891 appearance in the *Fortnightly Review*. In the opinion of Guy and Small, this oversight "suggests that on this occasion [i.e., in 1895] Wilde did not see the proofs."³⁸ A further indication of Wilde's lack of involvement with the essay's 1895 publication is the volume's unprepossessing appearance. Wilde was consistently concerned with the physical quality of his books, and he attended closely to the details of binding, paper, and typography to ensure that the highest aesthetic standards were met in their production.³⁹ The appearance of the 1895 edition of Wilde's essay is especially striking in its variance from those high standards. Indeed, the first edition of *The Soul of Man* displays curiously mixed physical features.



[Caption: *The Soul of Man*, 1895. Reprinted by permission of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library.]

It is a quarto-sized volume that appears designed as an ephemeral – and therefore timely – artifact. It is bound in cheap, plain brown paper, sewn and glued, with the title THE SOUL OF MAN in large, arresting red capitals. BY OSCAR WILDE (also in red) follows immediately underneath the title, with the author’s name occupying a place of prominence equal in

size to the title of the essay itself. Humphreys' name is absent, and the front cover discreetly informs us that the volume has been "privately printed." The spine is blank. Once inside the inauspicious covering, however, we find something rather different. The thick laid paper and beautiful type, set in wide margins with a decorative initial capital and a decorative headpiece, belies the cheap wrappers. What are we to make of these jarring "bibliographical codes"?⁴⁰

The disjunction between the outside and the inside of the book lends itself to a number of possible interpretations. Perhaps Humphreys spent all his available funds on this "privately printed" volume on the paper, with little left over for the binding. Since it is likely that Humphreys was acting in some haste, he probably wasn't fussy about the binding for a printing limited to a mere fifty copies. The front cover, the binding, and the paper and type respectively afford us several ways of apprehending Oscar Wilde as presented by Arthur Humphreys. The book's front cover, with its title and the author's name in revolutionary red, displays the defiance of its author, while the anonymity of the blank spine suggests a degree of caution and discretion on the part of the publisher, perhaps for purchasers. The paper and type, for their part, pay tribute to the very aesthetic standards Wilde upheld. Both aspects of the physical book thus function to package Oscar Wilde in the historical moment of May 1895 in different ways.

We may also view Humphreys' 1895 edition as a contribution to the legend of Oscar Wilde the martyr. Humphreys' book may have endorsed Wilde as a champion of individual freedom, but such a maneuver did little to change the fact of Wilde's imprisonment. Yet the irony of Wilde's words when compared to his fate constructs a narrative that features him as its martyred protagonist. Wilde himself furthered this durable legend by referring to himself, somewhat facetiously, as "the Infamous St. Oscar of Oxford, Poet and Martyr" in 1898,⁴¹ but the central text of this Wilde myth is surely Robert Ross's 1905 edition of Wilde's prison letter *De Profundis* – the posthumously published autobiographical work that has had an indelible influence on Wilde biography and criticism.⁴² Indeed, Guy and Small propose that the 1895 *Soul of Man* "may seem analogous to Ross's attempt in 1905 to rehabilitate Wilde's reputation with his carefully edited version of *De Profundis*."⁴³ Indeed, Humphreys' presentation of Wilde in 1895 is not unlike Ross's strategy with *De Profundis*. The prison letter's title, we should note,

was not Wilde's, but was appended for publication by Ross, his literary executor, to a text Wilde had entitled "Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis." Like Ross's expurgated text, which gives us a penitent, suffering Wilde expressing pain "out of the depths," Humphreys' book presents us with a similarly austere construction: the "soul of man." But whereas Ross's book presents Wilde as a figure to be pitied, Humphreys' is far more defiant. Despite the differences in tone (and scale)⁴⁴ of their respective attempts to recuperate Wilde, Ross clearly approved of Humphreys' efforts, to the extent that he contributed a preface to Humphreys' 1912 edition of *The Soul of Man*, praising Humphreys' loyalty to Wilde.⁴⁵ According to Ross's "Superfluous Note of Explanation," after Wilde's death in 1900, "only one or two of Wilde's published dramas were to be found in London bookshops; some of the other works being surreptitiously sold in pirated editions. There was, however, one exception. The copyright of 'The Soul of Man' belonged to Mr. Arthur Humphreys, from whom copies could always be obtained."⁴⁶

Unlike the prison memoir, whose repackaging under a new title was not initiated by Wilde, there is no conclusive evidence that the decision to emend the title of "The Soul of Man under Socialism" was undertaken by Humphreys alone. But since it was very likely Humphreys' decision to publish the essay when he did, and, presumably, to take on the costs of its production, it follows that the publisher very likely altered the title himself. Although Isobel Murray has suggested that "Wilde himself quickly and significantly emended the title"⁴⁷ after the essay's initial periodical appearance, there is little archival proof confirming Wilde's formal authorization of this change. He does refer to it in an 1891 letter as "L'Ame de l'Homme,"⁴⁸ proposing it instead of "The Truth of Masks" for a projected French edition of *Intentions*, but this truncation of the title could just as easily be ascribed to the grammatical awkwardness of rendering "under socialism" into French. Wilde cites *The Soul of Man* in *De Profundis*, but there again it is difficult to discern whether an emended title or a shortened form, or any distinction between the two, is intended. And by the time Wilde came to write *De Profundis*, in prison in 1897, Humphreys' edition had already been published. Humphreys remained a generous friend to Wilde during his imprisonment, and sent many books to him; it is possible that among them was a copy of *The Soul of Man*.⁴⁹

Humphreys' other major textual intervention into *The Soul of Man* also works to depict Wilde as a martyr. He intensified Wilde's denunciation of a punitive society by making slight, if crucial, emendations to the text of the essay, specifically by deleting the word "occasional" from its critique of the criminal justice system.⁵⁰ With this qualifier removed, the text of Humphreys' 1895 edition becomes even more outspokenly dissident than Wilde's had originally been, especially in the context of recent events in the courts. Where the 1891 *Fortnightly Review* text reads (in italics) "*a community is infinitely more brutalised by the habitual employment of punishment, than it is by the occasional occurrence of crime,*"⁵¹ in the 1895 text, this aphoristic pronouncement reads (without italics) "a community is infinitely more brutalized by the habitual employment of punishment, than it is by the occurrence of crime."⁵² While at first glance such a change may seem inconsequential, even "a simple printing error,"⁵³ it was a major textual change that Humphreys deliberately maintained in subsequent editions. The significance of this editorial intervention keys us into Humphreys' strategy as he published the essay in the face of the prevailing hostility toward his friend: he adapts Wilde's words, and arguments, to issue a protest on behalf of an individual subject to the juridical silencing of his own prison sentence.

In "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Wilde argues that greater moral harm results to society from punishment than from the transgression of its laws. A just society would focus on attacking the *causes* of crime rather than simply punishing criminals for the ostensible wickedness of breaking its laws. The context that frames this aphorism is a critique of social inequities that would be ameliorated by socialism. According to Wilde, there is no logical correlation between morality, on the one hand, and criminality, on the other. The existence of poverty is the social crime that requires correction. Such a sentiment is not surprising, given that Wilde was consistently sympathetic to the disruptive and oppositional subject position occupied by the criminal in a society he saw as oppressively conformist and moralistic. In championing the criminal, Wilde detached "crime" from "sin." The essay "Pen Pencil and Poison," for instance, celebrates the career of Regency forger and poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, and argues that "crime in England is rarely the result of sin. It is nearly always the result of starvation."⁵⁴ And "sin," for its part, functions as an expression of individualism. In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde insists, "what is termed Sin is an essential element of progress [...] by its curiosity, Sin increases the

experiences of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from the monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one of the higher ethics.”⁵⁵

In *The Soul of Man*, the balanced rhetoric of the aphorism about habitual brutality and occasional criminality emphasizes the structural imbalance between crime and punishment in a conventional understanding of justice. Where crime is merely “occasional,” a value-neutral “occurrence,” punishment is brutally “habitual.” Humphreys’ 1895 version removes the parallelism between the modifiers “occasional” and “habitual,” and introduces a change whose effect is at once subtle and powerful. When we read the aphorism in Humphreys’ edition, we experience a more pronounced indictment of the punitive mentality. The injustice of punishment remains “infinitely more brutaliz[ing],” but it is no longer contingent on the infrequent and negligible effects of crime, and there is no implicit distinction between “occasional” crime and crimes of greater severity and scope. All punishment, in other words, is infinitely brutalizing by definition, regardless of the crime involved. When this principle is applied to Wilde’s particular case in 1895, the point of Humphreys’ emendation crystallizes: society experiences far more harm for putting an individual (like Wilde) in prison than it does by countenancing whatever “crime” he may have committed.

A further textual feature of several editions of Wilde’s essay can help us confirm and more fully comprehend Humphreys’ editorial intervention into this passage. As we have observed, Josephine M. Guy views the omission of the word “occasional” from the aphoristic phrase critiquing the ethics of punishment in the 1895 edition as a print house mistake, but close examination of the various Humphreys editions (1895, 1904, 1907, and 1912) leads me to the conclusion that Humphreys’ printers were well aware that deliberate textual changes had been introduced. In the 1891 *Fortnightly Review* version of the essay, many phrases, including the pronouncement about crime and punishment, are italicized, as if they could function as aphorisms detachable from the rest of the text.⁵⁶ Wilde’s ostentatiously epigrammatic style was thus legible on the page. Humphreys’ 1895 text standardizes this typographical flourish, and uses roman type throughout. In the phrase under discussion, the word “brutalized” is spelled in 1895 with an American ‘z’ instead of a British ‘s’, the spelling Wilde used in the 1891

periodical version. Even though Humphreys' version uses the *Fortnightly Review* as copy-text (the verso of the title page of his 1895 edition reads "Reprinted from the FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW by kind permission of the Proprietors"), the text of the newly retitled essay was clearly altered in ways beyond the omission of "occasional." Humphreys' 1907 edition, however, reverts to the original periodical spelling of "brutalised," which suggests that the printers were indeed paying very close attention to the condition of the text in relation to the copy-text, to the extent of altering (once again) the spelling of a particular word. Despite such close attention to spelling, this edition maintains the omission of "occasional," intimating that the omission was intentional – in other words, anything but a "printer's error." Even the unusual 1904 Humphreys collection of extracts, *Sebastian Melmoth*, which includes *The Soul of Man*, contains the 's' spelling.⁵⁷ The consistency of Humphreys' editorial policy indicates that the publisher deliberately intended such a change. As he continued to republish Wilde's essay into the twentieth century, this was a change – like the hoped-for rehabilitation of his friend's literary reputation – that he wished to make as permanent as ink on fine paper.

Humphreys' Fellow Dissidents

Humphreys conscripted and altered Wilde's own words to protest the fate of their author shortly after his public downfall. In doing so, he was joined by a small chorus of other supportive voices who also bravely expressed their dissent with Wilde's conviction. I close this essay by surveying two such instances of textual dissidence, by Dalhousie Young and Ernest Newman, respectively, both of whom likewise make a point of emphasizing their timeliness with regard to the Wilde trials. Humphreys' *Soul of Man*, we recall, appeared on May 30, 1895, five days after Wilde's sentencing. Young's pamphlet is signed with the date "May 31st 1895," while Newman's article first appeared in the June 1, 1895, issue of *The Free Review*.

These works, like Humphreys' edition of *The Soul of Man*, conjure Oscar Wilde as the victim of injustice, and a representative figure for sexual minorities.⁵⁸ In *Apologia pro Oscar Wilde*, for instance, a pamphlet whose title recalls a classic of Victorian autobiography, John Henry Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864), Dalhousie Young defends Wilde by offering "some considerations in opposition to the mass of general vituperation with which

the irresponsible public has thought fit to demonstrate its own virtue and its superiority to the author of *Dorian Gray*.”⁵⁹ Young’s reference to *Dorian Gray* as the signal text of Wilde’s literary career is telling, judging from that novel’s constitutive role in establishing Wilde’s homosexuality before the courts. Like Humphreys, Young seeks cautiously to affirm Wilde’s sexuality, but unlike the publisher, he did not know Wilde personally.⁶⁰ He offers his “apologia” as a matter of disinterested principle, “without ever having been acquainted with him [i.e. Wilde] myself.”⁶¹

Young’s *Apologia* deals quite explicitly with some of the most sensational evidence produced during the trials. For instance, he mentions (though he does not quote) Wilde’s effusively affectionate letters to other men, only to argue – unconvincingly – that such missives do not express erotic desire, let alone a legally proscribed relationship. Fully aware of the power of institutionalized homophobia to silence and punish gross indecency, Young distances himself from his subject by proudly confirming his own heterosexuality. He situates himself within the discursive confines of Victorian domesticity: “I am thankful to say,” he notes, “that I have received many letters containing expressions of ardent affection, and I am proud to confess that I have at least one male friend who kisses me with a love no less pure than that with which I kiss my wife, my mother, or my sisters.”⁶² Regardless of the sincerity of his sympathy for Wilde, such a rhetorical maneuver on Young’s part indicates the very limited possibilities available to anti-homophobic critique, which was only conceivable, during “the spring of 1895” when articulated from a heteronormative subject position. As John Stokes observes, the “legal situation after the spring of 1895 ensured that most protests against the punishment of homosexuals tended [...] to assume a euphemistic tone [...] [a]s Wilde, and Wilde’s friends knew, the problem with protest was that it only proved guilt.”⁶³ In his *Apologia* Young sends mixed messages, for his defence of Wilde is only tenable in terms that reinforce Wilde’s criminality.

Young’s defence of Wilde also verges, at times, on misrepresentation. He insists, for instance, that “Nowhere has Mr. Wilde said that moral considerations should be outweighed by artistic ones.”⁶⁴ While Young wishes to clear Wilde of *immorality*, he acquiesces to society’s judgment of Wilde’s *criminality*, offering “a few speculations, for which I am alone responsible, concerning the nature of the crime of which Mr. Oscar Wilde

has been convicted.”⁶⁵ He goes on to question the criminalization of “paiderastia,”⁶⁶ which, he notes, is an “act [...] done by mutual consent by two men, an act which does not in any way render them unable to fulfill the duties of citizenship, and which does not affect directly or indirectly, for good or ill, any other person.”⁶⁷ Although in Young’s pamphlet “paiderastia” is conceptually limited to a sexual act and not understood as a category of identity (and one, we should note, that is misidentified by Young as obtaining between adult men), Wilde is presented as its most visible representative, and the victim of its prohibition. Young’s aim, as Humphreys’ had been with *The Soul of Man*, is thus to defend sexual minorities in the face of their oppression by the majority. Ultimately, Young places his hopes in the future, where “the verdict of ‘all time and all existence’ may after all, as far as we can see, regard as innocent what to the majority of our age is sinful.”⁶⁸

Within days of Humphreys’ and Young’s publications, Ernest Newman, who went on to become a distinguished music critic, attacked Wilde’s conviction in the progressive journal *The Free Review*. He did so in terms that recapitulate many of the arguments from “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” and in doing so, engages in a critique far more radical than Young’s. He declares, for instance, that “it is to the criminal that we owe the inspiring spectacle of human individuality; it is the criminal alone who has the native independence to show us that here also things are not what they seem, and that the human spirit [the “soul of man”?] is too vast and too many-sided to be cramped forever in the fetters of convention.”⁶⁹ By presenting us with a “spectacle of individualism” that causes us to question our own assumptions, “criminals” like Wilde thus perform an ethical service to the community. The Wilde defended here is the same figure produced by Humphreys’ 1895 *Soul of Man*: the exemplary artist-rebel, the martyr to a cause. Newman’s adopted name (he was born William Roberts) itself enacts a kind of homage to Wilde, and suggests a measure of Wildean self-fashioning: that of a “new man” who styles himself “Ernest,” like the two main characters in Wilde’s play about concealed identities.⁷⁰

In defending Wilde, Young and Newman – like Humphreys – did not dispute his criminal status; rather, they redefined it. Transmuting criminality into heroism, they deploy a rhetorical mode Newman praises (no doubt with the pun intended) in Wilde’s writing as a “method of inversion.”⁷¹ This is

the very rhetorical mode that structures “The Soul of Man under Socialism” in both iterations as a periodical essay and as a book. Such a pattern of thought, Newman argues, exemplifies intellectual and ethical sophistication. Wilde, for Newman, is *textually* queer: he identifies “inversion” as a discursive mode, and as the most conspicuous and laudable feature of Wilde’s writing, which maintains – without seeking to resolve – “moral paradox [...] as charmingly as intellectual paradox.”⁷² And that mode, as Wilde says of individualism in “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” “is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value.”⁷³

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Notes

¹ Two separate editions of the essay appeared in 1904: one was a pirated edition published by Leonard Smithers that retained the original title, and the second was a compilation of extracts, including the text of *The Soul of Man*, entitled *Sebastian Melmoth* (Wilde’s post-prison alias), published by Arthur Humphreys. The 1907 and 1912 editions were both published by Humphreys. As *The Soul of Man*, the essay was collected in Robert Ross’s 1908 edition of Wilde’s works.

² Once his sentence was given, Wilde is reputed to have asked the judge: “And I? May I say nothing, my lord?” See H. Montgomery Hyde, *Famous Trials: Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 273.

³ Arthur Humphreys may have been Constance Wilde’s lover, so his actions with regard to Wilde’s essay might also be construed in light of that relationship. On their relationship, see Karl Beckson, *The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia* (New York: AMS Press, 1998), 410-11; Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde’s Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in*

the Late Nineteenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 179; Anne Clark Amor, *Mrs. Oscar Wilde: A Woman of Some Importance* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1983).

⁴ According to Josephine M. Guy, *Oscariana* had been planned since the summer of 1894; an edition of fifty copies on handmade paper came out in January 1895, to be followed by a further 200 in May. See Guy, ed. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. 4. Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), lxxvii.

⁵ Stuart Mason indicates that the first edition of *The Soul of Man* was “published by Arthur L. Humphreys at 187 Piccadilly.” See Mason, *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1914), 404. By signaling the address of Hatchard’s, Mason strongly suggests that the volume was also sold there. A 1904 copy of Humphreys’ *Sebastian Melmoth* in the Colbeck collection at the University of British Columbia retains a bookseller’s label marked “Hatchards 187 Piccadilly,” which further implies that Humphreys sold the books he published at that location. Hatchard’s was perhaps the most prestigious bookstore in late-Victorian London. In his history of the bookstore, Humphreys elaborates its position as a meeting-place for the socially prominent, for there “may be seen, at one time or another during the Season, almost all who are known within the precincts of the town.” See Humphreys, *Piccadilly Bookmen: Memorials of the House of Hatchard* (London: Hatchards, 1893), 74-5. Guy and Ian Small, moreover, suggest that *The Soul of Man* sold for a price of 2s. 6d. See Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde’s Profession*, 283-84.

⁶ Guy, ed. *Criticism*, lxxvii.

⁷ Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde’s Profession*, 182.

⁸ To this list we could add “Some Gentle Criticisms of British Justice” (1895), by the pseudonymous “I. Playfair,” which is discussed in John Stokes, *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles and Imitations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39-64.

⁹ For a complete account of Wilde’s first trial, see Merlin Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

¹⁰ Wilde qtd. in Holland, 73.

¹¹ For an extended discussion of the critique of traditional models of subjectivity articulated by Wilde’s “transgressive aesthetic,” see Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

¹² Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 8.

¹³ For another reading of the essay’s political context, see Josephine M. Guy, “The Soul of Man under Socialism”: A (Con)Textual History.” *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 59-85.

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and The Subjection of Women*, ed. Alan Ryan (London: Penguin, 2006), 64.

¹⁵ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, 254. Wilde goes on to designate “Public Opinion” as “a monstrous and ignorant thing.” The capitals are Wilde’s.

¹⁶ Unsigned review, *Daily Chronicle*, 30 June 1890.

¹⁷ Unsigned review, *Scots Observer*, 5 July 1890.

¹⁸ This was a reference to the 1889 Cleveland Street scandal, the most sensational homosexual scandal in Britain to date. That year police had raided a male brothel in London’s Cleveland Street, only to find that the clientele of the messenger boys who moonlighted as “renters” included prominent aristocrats and well-connected politicians. See Colin Simpson, Chester Lewis, and David Leitch, *The Cleveland Street Affair* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976); Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); William A. Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Unsigned review, *Scots Observer*, 5 July 1890, emphasis added.

²⁰ Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 428.

²¹ Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 439.

²² “Puritanism,” according to Wilde, “is never so offensive as when it deals with art matters. It is there that its influence is radically wrong.” See Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 432.

²³ Wilde, *Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 244.

²⁴ Wilde, *Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 235.

²⁵ Wilde, *Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 243.

²⁶ Wilde, *Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 265.

²⁷ Wilde, *Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 255.

²⁸ Wilde, *Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 256. Indeed, as Merlin Holland observes, the French press coverage of Wilde’s trials displayed “surprise and distaste at what they saw as the English hypocrisy of professing to be shocked and yet reporting as much prurient detail as they could about the case.” See Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, xxxii.

²⁹ Wilde, *Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 256.

³⁰ In his biography of Wilde, Richard Ellmann cites the well-established anecdote of homosexual men fleeing England for relative safety in France in the wake of Wilde’s arrest. He quotes *Yellow Book* editor Henry Harland’s observation about Wilde’s arrest, when “six hundred gentlemen had crossed from Dover to Calais on a night when normally only sixty would have done so.” See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 430.

³¹ The association of France with decadence is a durable commonplace of literary history. It was in circulation well before the publication of Arthur Symons' 1893 essay, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," which deals with the nineteenth-century school of French *symbolistes*. See Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (November 1893), 858-867. Symons later expanded the essay as the book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899).

³² Wilde, *Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 256.

³³ Wilde, *Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 255.

³⁴ Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, xxxii.

³⁵ See Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). On Wilde's sexuality, see Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*; Joseph Bristow, "A Complex, Multiform Creature: Wilde's Sexual Identities," *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 195-218; Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Century, 2003).

³⁶ See Ellmann, 401. Unlike *Oscariana*, "no contract for *The Soul of Man*" has survived. See Guy, ed. *Criticism*, lxxvii.

³⁷ Guy, ed. *Criticism*, lxxviii.

³⁸ Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, 182.

³⁹ On Wilde's concern for his books' material features, see Guy and Small and Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

⁴⁰ I borrow the concept of bibliographical codes from Jerome G. McGann, for whom a book's bibliographical codes are those implications (and meanings) apart from the text that can be adduced from the physicality of the book. See McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁴¹ Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 1041.

⁴² On *De Profundis* and the production of the Wilde myth, see Nicholas Frankel, "The Typewritten Self: Media Technology and Identity in Wilde's *De Profundis*." *Bound for the 1890s: Essays on Writing and Publishing in Honor of James G. Nelson*, ed. Jonathan Allison (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2006), 27-44; Josephine M. Guy, "Wilde's *De Profundis* and Book History: Mute Manuscripts," *English Literature in Transition* 55.4 (2012), 419-440; and Guy and Small, "Reading *De Profundis*," *English Literature in Transition* 49.2 (2006), 123-49.

⁴³ Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, 182.

⁴⁴ *De Profundis* was an immense success when it was first published, reaching an audience numbering in the tens of thousands.

⁴⁵ The 1912 edition is anomalous in its presentation of the essay's title. According to Mason, two impressions were issued in 1912, one giving the title as *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, while the other reads *The Soul of Man*. See Mason, *Bibliography*, 406-7. Both impressions include the Ross preface.

⁴⁶ Robert Ross, "A Superfluous Note of Explanation." *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (London: Arthur Humphreys, 1912), vi.

⁴⁷ See Isobel Murray, "Oscar Wilde and Individualism: Contexts for *The Soul of Man*." *Durham University Journal* 52.2 (July 1991): 195.

⁴⁸ Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 487.

⁴⁹ On Humphreys' gifts of books to Wilde while in prison, see Thomas Wright, *Oscar's Books* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008) 270; 274-5, and Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 673; 879-80.

⁵⁰ This omission was first noted in Mason, *Bibliography*, 404.

⁵¹ Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism." *Fortnightly Review* n.s. 49 (February 1891), 301.

⁵² Wilde, *The Soul of Man* (London: Privately printed, 1895), 36.

⁵³ Guy, *Criticism*, lxxviii.

⁵⁴ Wilde, "Pen Pencil and Poison," ed. Guy, 119.

⁵⁵ Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," ed. Guy, 148.

⁵⁶ In an overview of Wilde's aphoristic style, Amanda Anderson notes that Wilde's epigrams "announce their easy exit from the text, their extractability." See Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 148.

⁵⁷ This spelling also appears in Leonard Smithers' pirated 1904 edition of *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, which simply reproduces the 1891 text *Fortnightly* text.

⁵⁸ According to Margaret D. Stetz, a number of avant-garde 1890s writers associated with *The Yellow Book* also registered their sympathy with Wilde's predicament in print. See Stetz, "The Love That Dared Not Speak His Name: Literary Responses to the Wilde Trials." *Bound for the 1890s: Essays on Writing and Publishing in Honor of James G. Nelson*, ed. Jonathan Allison (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2006), 45-63.

⁵⁹ Dalhousie Young, *Apologia pro Oscar Wilde* (London: William Reeves, 1895), 5-6.

⁶⁰ Young, a British composer, became acquainted with Wilde after his release from prison in 1897, at which point they contemplated collaborating on an operatic version of *Daphnis and Chloe*, with a libretto by Wilde. See Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 875-6; 881-3; 936; 943-4; 945-6; 948-9.

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- ⁶¹ Young, *Apologia*, 32.
- ⁶² Young, *Apologia*, 23.
- ⁶³ Stokes, *Myths, Miracles and Imitations*, 46-7.
- ⁶⁴ Young, *Apologia*, 18.
- ⁶⁵ Young, *Apologia*, 34.
- ⁶⁶ Young, *Apologia*, 37.
- ⁶⁷ Young, *Apologia*, 39-40.
- ⁶⁸ Young, *Apologia*, 43. Young is quoting Plato's *Republic* here.
- ⁶⁹ Ernest Newman, "Oscar Wilde: A Literary Appreciation." *The Free Review* 3.4 (June 1, 1895), 195.
- ⁷⁰ Such Wildean self-fashioning is also apparent in Newman's stylistic imitation of Wilde's aphorisms, as he muses, "the function of paradox is really the same as the function of religion – not to be believed." See Newman, "Oscar Wilde," 194.
- ⁷¹ Newman, "Oscar Wilde," 199.
- ⁷² Newman, "Oscar Wilde," 200.
- ⁷³ Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, ed. Guy, 250.

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