

Individualism's Dandy Daddy

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A review of

Resist Everything Except Temptation: The Anarchist Philosophy of Oscar Wilde by Kristian Williams. AK Press 2020

At first blush, Kristian Williams' literary and political biography *Resist Everything Except Temptation: The Anarchist Philosophy of Oscar Wilde*, could have been an interesting blog post about the famed playwright. After all, the details of Wilde's politics are well-known enough, articulated as they are in the essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." He was an enemy of the state as well, and was arrested and imprisoned for gross indecency and sodomy. All that needs doing is to rifle through the man's creative works and surviving correspondence to find some political bons mot, and behold—clickbait!

But Williams has bigger plans. Wilde was a committed socialist, but an anarchist in aesthetic and personal practice, though he avoided referring to himself as an anarchist, perhaps for purely sectarian reasons. Wilde is something more than another 19th century socialist concerned for the public ownership of the economy because of his embrace of individualism as a guiding ethos. Wilde's is "a socialism based more in aesthetic ideals than in economic theories. It takes as its model the artist rather than the proletariat and is as much concerned to free the repressed bourgeois as the oppressed worker," Williams contends.

The tension between revolutionary politics and artistic creation is well-known. Totalizing theories, such as Marxism, have plenty to say about art, and when the revolution appears to succeed, the analysis becomes prescriptive. Down with the dynamic montages of Vertov and Eisenstein, up with musicals about tractors! That's what happens when the state owns the movie cameras and the film labs. Even tiny groupuscles ruin art by quashing individualism. See the sad case of avant-garde musician Cornelius Cardew, who in the 1970s joined the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), a tiny cult seeking the Albania franchise. Cardew abandoned his compelling improvisational motifs to write songs in which "Marxist-Leninist" is forced to rhyme with "the working class' clenched fist." And he declared The Clash a fascist band.

Oscar Wilde stood up to the stifling prudery and emerging homogenized mass culture of Victorian Great Britain, transformed the women's magazine he edited into an anti-imperialist organ, and inspired Kropotkin to declare that "the self-assertion of the individual" is an important part of breaking through the bonds that the State—and the city, or village, or tribe—hold us all to. Freedom is a necessary component of excellent art, and thus Wilde, the socialist artist, is necessarily an anarchist even if not admittedly an anarchist.

Williams does more than simply make this argument. He grounds Wilde's politics in that of the era in which he lived, analyzing his work and life from his early (and not very good) play *Vera*, through fairy tales with obvious morals such as "The Selfish Giant" and "The Young King," and on to the masterpieces—*The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*—that made Wilde's reputation and cemented his notoriety.

Wilde's very public trial also influenced anarchism. Anarchists in the UK were the first to defend him after his arrest, and anarchists worldwide advanced their thinking about queerness. Alexander Berkman went from denying the possibility of homosexuality to wanting to kiss a man after his prison experience and learning of Wilde's plight. Of course, Wilde also became a gay icon—his dandy affect is still widely emulated, and the seminal gay book-

store, Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop on Christopher Street in Manhattan, was crucial for the development of LGBT+ culture until its closing in 2009. Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble had made finding gay books so easy. The shopping mall had made dressing like Oscar Wilde just as simple. Though homophobia and especially transphobia remain especially virulent cultural prejudices that are baked into the state and capitalist relations, there has been since Wilde's death a sort of half-liberation. In the US, the UK and France, to name three places Wilde lived in or visited, playhouses are not being shut down by the police, books aren't banned outside of prisons or burned, and a little consensual sodomy is no crime. So why do we need Oscar Wilde anymore?

We must not cede individualism, and bohemian culture, to the right. The right wing today is making great inroads into popular culture, and posing as advocates for free speech against the "cancel culture" of online mobs, and as libertines contra the neo-Puritan left. Oscar Wilde is a model for the left of artistic achievement that holds neither to Party lines or the demands of a "scene," and a model for artists of an explicitly left-wing and implicitly anarchist mode of being in the world as a creator and activist that doesn't sacrifice aesthetics and individuality. *Resist Everything Except Temptation* is a case study in how one artist balanced, sometimes even successfully, the often contradictory demands of individual creation and social transformation. Intriguing, vital stuff.

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