

## A Study of *Vera; or, The Nihilist*: A Political Play with a Revolutionary Heroine

Yoshimi Shintani

Oscar Wilde, influenced in part by his mother, the activist 'Speranza', wrote a political play *Vera; or, The Nihilist* (1880) at the beginning of his dramatic career. He took up a contemporary theme, the Russian anarchist movement, and challenged the traditional definitions of male and female, just as he was to do later in *Salome*, to show the human passion for love and liberty. It seems that he worked at 'dramatic art because it is *the democratic art*', as his letter to the Examiner of Plays for the Lord Chamberlain shows.<sup>1</sup> Still, although he admitted that he was 'a Radical'<sup>2</sup> in a political sense and that he would 'reveal great liberality of thought with regard to the political aspirations of women'<sup>3</sup>, his central characters in the play fail to act out subversive roles against the oppressive Russian society, and the heroine, oscillating between love and liberty, dies in the last act to save the new Czar, which brings the drama into outward conformity with what the then conventional sphere for women itself demanded.

Thus the play somehow turns out to disclose some discrepancies in the central characters, though we may quite well accede to Mrs Wilde's assertion that her husband wrote the play to 'show that an abstract idea such as liberty could have quite as much power and be made quite as fine as the passion of love (or something of that sort)' (*Letters*, 153).

On the whole, the typical masculine women created by male authors in the later decades of the Victorian period seem to be mostly comical versions of such unconventional women as the 'tom-boy', 'amazon' and 'new woman' — in Wilde's works, for example, Virginia E. Otis in 'The Canterville Ghost' (1887) and Mabel Chiltern and Mrs Cheveley (who was supposed to smoke cigarettes in some earlier typescript drafts) in *An Ideal Husband* (1895). One of their most striking features is their capacity for physical courage or villainous acts, quite contrary to the conventional view of a woman as the angel in the house. They commonly display good skill in handling a horse or standing on their head or blackmailing a rising politician. In this respect, these Amazonian viragos defy the fundamental Victorian rule that normal women could not be both feminine and masculine at the same time. More importantly, Wilde's unconventional heroines, mostly of a revolutionary spirit, tend to show their feminine loving-kindness to worthy or unworthy heroes, and the heroes are usually destined to be

attracted to that sort of aggressive heroine.

In *Vera*, the title character is the first of Wilde's compassionate heroines who dares to rebel against social conventions to save oppressed people. In the process she tempers her female heroism with a measure of the masculine, and she finally overrides traditional feminine boundaries and takes on some aggressive, not to say the unwomanly, masculinity. It is true, however, that Wilde then softens such aggression, letting the heroine abandon her masculine role rather than support her subversion of gender roles, because she realises in the end that she is a woman womanly enough to love a man and hence she is 'only a common woman after all.'<sup>4</sup>

It is also quite interesting that Wilde published eight similarly tendentious poems between 1877 and 1881, the most conspicuous of which was his 'first *political* poem' (*More Letters*, 33) 'Libertatis Sacra Fames'. Moreover, he sent to the then Liberal prime minister, William Gladstone, another sonnet on the massacres of Christians in Bulgaria, as Gladstone had already protested publicly against the brutal incidents there. It is apparent that Wilde felt strongly attached to Gladstone because of his support for Irish Home Rule, since Gladstone was 'the one English statesman who has understood us . . . and who, we know well, will lead us to the grandest and justest political victory of this age' (*Letters*, 231). In fact, from the 1870s onward there were debates on the Irish Home Rule question in the press. This is later reflected in Jack Worthing's joking claim to be a Liberal Unionist in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). There were also current fears about several unprecedented demonstrations and revolutionary acts, which later culminated in the Trafalgar Square riot in 1886 and in Bloody Sunday in 1887. As a matter of fact, Wilde was not only a friend of William Morris, but also had numerous personal contacts with other radicals such as John B. O'Reilly, May Morris, Michael Davitt, R. B. Cunningham Graham, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and John Barlas. Wilde stood bail for Barlas and wrote him a letter, saying 'We poets and dreamers are all brothers' (*More Letters*, 108). Besides, Wilde was the only one to sign a petition drawn up by Bernard Shaw in support of the anarchists in the Chicago Haymarket riots in 1886, and at Shaw's invitation he attended a Fabian Society meeting.<sup>5</sup>

It is, thus, clear that Wilde was deeply involved in fighting against authority and as a consequence he turned to a utopian dream of socialism, the outcome of which was his writing of *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1890). In addition, Wilde told an interviewer in 1894, 'I think I am rather more than a Socialist. I am something of an Anarchist, I believe; but, of course, the dynamite policy is very absurd indeed.'<sup>6</sup>

Yet, as already suggested, there were some dilemmas in Wilde's sense of national identity and in his ideas about women and men. To highlight this, we need to examine *Vera* in detail. But, first, we will have to give some appropriate consideration to the Irish nationalist Speranza's influence on Wilde and

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then look at his early attempts as a writer of political poems.

Wilde grew up in a home where Speranza presided over a salon to which 'all the thinking minds of Dublin'<sup>7</sup> came to chat about contemporary issues. When she published her *Poems by Speranza* in 1864, she dedicated the volume to her two sons:

I made them indeed,  
Speak plain the word COUNTRY. It taught them, no doubt,  
That a Country's a thing Men should die for at need!<sup>8</sup>

Later in Reading Gaol, Wilde was to write of his mother as ranking 'intellectually . . . with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and historically with Madame Roland' (*Letters*, 496). Incidentally, when he was an Oxford student of 22, Wilde thought of *Aurora Leigh* as a work ranking with *Hamlet* and *In Memoriam*, and recommended it accordingly to his best friends, William Ward and Reginald Harding. It is very striking that the young Wilde should have loved this 'sincere' and 'intense' lyric 'written from the heart' of a woman poet. In this poetic narrative, the speaker Aurora attempts to represent the inner development of her professional life as a poet, dealing with serious social problems and women's issues of Victorian times. As the narrative progresses, the speaker becomes independent thanks to her wealthy cousin Romney, a social activist, but she finally comes to realise her proper and expected role as 'a woman such / As God made woman, to save men by love.'<sup>9</sup> So finally she accepts the conventional course of marriage.

Clearly Wilde was influenced by his family background to take great interest in women's issues. As a result of his support for feminist causes, he took up an editorship of the *Woman's World* in 1887. His ideas for reconstructing the magazine were, as Joy Melville points out, very much in line with his mother's beliefs.<sup>10</sup> He was thus very involved in contemporary issues related to women's equality, social status, suffrage and professional life, though the contributors Wilde approached were mostly confined to eminent women of intellect, culture and position. He was extremely anxious to make this journal 'the recognized organ for the expression of women's opinions of all subjects of literature, art, and modern life' (*Letters*, 195). Naturally, he encouraged Speranza to argue for sexual equality in the magazine.

So considerable was Speranza's influence over him that during his American lecture tour in 1882 he said to John Boyle O'Reilly, 'it(=Speranza's work) is so unlike the work of her degenerate artistic son' (*More Letters*, 48). One of Speranza's plans for her son, at the time of his engagement to Constance Lloyd in 1883, was that he should 'have a small house in London and live the literary life . . . and

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eventually go into parliament.’<sup>11</sup> He apparently accepted this plan at the time, since he later said, ‘There is no lack of culture in Ireland but it is nearly all absorbed in politics. Had I remained there my career would have been a political one.’<sup>12</sup> But there is no evidence to show that Wilde really took positive action to go into parliament after his migration to London’s literary world, though he is once reported to have said that he had considered entering English political life.<sup>13</sup> Anyway, Wilde’s political poems, composed between 1877 and 1881, never fail to make us aware that he tried to emulate his mother and showed similar interests in political affairs, with unstinted praise of liberty and republicanism, just as he tried to deify the republican heroine of *Vera* as ‘the priestess of liberty’ (IV. 297).

The opening section of ‘Eleutheria’ in *Poems*<sup>14</sup> (1881) focuses his stance on liberty, republicanism and anarchy. In ‘Quantum Mutata’, the poet thinks of the past glory of the great Republic England, where people once ‘died for freedom’, and he laments the present miserable situation, in which they have fallen into ‘Luxury’, forgetting about ‘noble thoughts and deeds’, though they may ‘still be Milton’s heritors’. And in ‘To Milton’, the poet is much grieved that England, once the ‘sea-lion of the sea’, should be held in fee now by ‘ignorant demagogues’ without speaking ‘the word Democracy’, so he tries to invoke Milton’s spirit, to revive the golden age. Just as Speranza once wrote a poem in praise of Napoleon III,<sup>15</sup> Wilde dedicates the requiem ‘Louis Napoleon’ to ‘the last scion’ of the ‘brood of Kings’ in memory of his mother France, where it is ‘free and republican’ and ‘the giant wave Democracy’ ‘breaks on the shores’. Also in ‘Ave Imperatrix’, initially subtitled ‘A poem on England’, the speaker meditates on England’s ‘wide empire’ and then recalls that this glory has been achieved at the cost of ‘the noble dead’, those who have died for ‘the young Republic’. According to Nick Frankel, the poem ‘became still more “English” and imperial in tone, when it was included in *Poems*.’<sup>16</sup> In ‘Libertatis Sacra Fames’, however, which Wilde claims represents his ‘division of Anarchy from Freedom’ (*More Letters*, 33), the tone changes a little, because its speaker prefers ‘the rule of One, whom all obey’, which probably means a Utopian republic, to ‘the kiss of anarchy’ in the midst of ‘this modern fret for Liberty’. And in ‘Sonnet to Liberty’, the poet becomes ambiguous about his political stance because of his ‘wildest passions’, and he would rather side with ‘These Christs that die upon the barricades’ while praising liberty so much. Finally, in the last poem ‘Theoretikos’, the speaker takes up a contemplative stance, standing apart from ‘the rude people’ raging ‘with ignorant cries’ against ‘Freedom’.

Wilde once said he was ‘a most recalcitrant patriot’ (*Letters*, 232). Yet his patriotic republicanism is clearly shown in his statement: ‘I am a thorough republican. No other form of government is so favorable to the growth of art.’<sup>17</sup> It is true that he was sometimes ambiguous in his political stance on anarchy, but he was very critical of anarchistic violence, which later elicited his quick reaction to the

murder of Lord Frederick Cavendish, the new Chief Secretary for Ireland, by the Irish Nationalist group 'The Invincibles' on 6 May 1882. For, shortly afterwards, Wilde replied to an American reporter in a double-edged way, 'When Liberty comes with hands dabbled in blood it is hard to shake hands with her. . . . We forget how much England is to blame. She is reaping the fruit of seven centuries of injustice.'<sup>18</sup> Thus we should never forget that Wilde was very sensitive to his Irish nationality. This is later reflected in his famous announcement about intending to become a French citizen after the ban on his poetical drama *Salome* in 1892.

As Nick Frankel points out, however, Wilde's split over national identity appears to have been more striking after he chose to publish his poems exclusively in English journals in April 1879. The split is partly reflected also in his Anglicized writing style and his signature changes.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, in answer to the protest by the *Irish Monthly's* editor against his would-be English nationality, Wilde was bold enough to acclaim Keats as 'poet-painter of our English land' in 'The Grave of Keats', which is included in *Poems* (1881).<sup>20</sup> Likewise, as Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small point out, it is quite striking that Lady Wilde dropped her pen-name 'Speranza' when she came to London to write for the English periodicals and that she traded explicitly on her connections with the aristocracy.<sup>21</sup> It is, therefore, quite proper to conclude that mother and son were alike in their inconsistencies about their political creeds. Still, as Patrick M. Horan emphasises, the young Wilde shared Speranza's love of revolution and glorified the actions of the female revolutionary in his first drama.<sup>22</sup> Richard Ellmann also makes the conclusive judgement: 'Wilde was like his mother in hating mob rule and excess, and in admiring personal heroism and feeling fellowship with the oppressed.'<sup>23</sup>

*Vera; or, The Nihilist*, 'a drama on modern Russia', was privately published in September 1880 at Wilde's own expense, but we can not ascertain exactly when he began to write the play and what sources he made use of. John Stokes makes the point that Wilde's journalistic work reveals his considerable enthusiasm for Russian literature,<sup>24</sup> and some of the sources may have derived from personal contacts with Prince Kropotkin or Stepnyak, not only because the play reflects actual political turmoils in Russia, but also because the nihilists' oath is borrowed directly from 'The Catechism of a Revolutionary' by S. C. Nechayev and Mikhail Bakunin. Other sources, as Katharine Worth points out, may have been operas such as Glinka's *Ivan Susanin* and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, which helped to familiarise English audiences with some aspects of Russian political history.<sup>25</sup> At any rate, as is usual with him, Wilde must have borrowed materials from a broad range of sources. Certainly he was a dedicated theatre fan, a frequent operagoer and an avid newspaper reader.

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In fact, just before the writing of his political play, the unstable Russian political situation aroused international attention, and from around 1878 on the *Times* began to carry articles on Russian nihilism and revolutionaries. On 24 April 1878, for example, it reported the acquittal of Vera Zusulich and compared her to 'a second Charlotte Corday',<sup>26</sup> whose name Wilde had intended to use in relation to Vera's regicidal role in Act IV, which originally read: 'Ay! the spirit of Charlotte Corday beats in each petty vein, and nerves my woman's hand to strike, as I have nerved my woman's heart to hate.'<sup>27</sup> The sensational topics discussed in the press were mainly Russian nihilism, regicide and sexual licence, the last of which is apparently covert in *Vera*, because women's sexual freedom actually figured largely in the nihilist manifestoes.<sup>28</sup>

It is thus clear that Wilde tried to produce a serious and iconoclastic play dealing with social problems, in spite of the familiar melodramatic plot, with the heroine choosing love and duty. Probably he must have felt it quite safe to mount such a political play in England, since it dealt with revolutionary movements in the far-away despotic country of Russia. Unfortunately, he did not succeed in persuading English theatre managers or actresses to take up the play, as George Rowell evidences convincingly.<sup>29</sup> So Wilde's brother William announced on 30 November 1881, 'Considering the present state of political feeling in England Mr Oscar Wilde has decided on postponing for a time the production of his drama *Vera*.'<sup>30</sup> This helps to explain why Wilde accepted Richard D'Oyly Carte's offer of an American lecture tour. He hoped to appeal to American managers or actresses to mount the play in what he saw as the freer and more democratic country. His significant undated letter, similar to one sent to the American actress Clara Morris, addressed to an unknown recipient, reads:

The note through which the passion of the play is expressed is democratic — and for that reason it's unthinkable to act it in London. It is yet the tragedy, the essence of the play is human. There are two fine men's parts for character acting — the old Prince Metternich sort of statesman full of epigram and unscrupulousness, and the Czar. The hero is a young enthusiast, and the heroine who gives the name to the play is conceived in all the many moods of passion that a study of Sarah Bernhardt could suggest.<sup>31</sup>

Finally he entrusted this play's production entirely to Richard D'Oyly Carte, and during his stay in America Wilde added a Prologue and revised the work extensively, explaining to Carte, 'The first act, which at present stands "Tomb of the Kings at Moscow," has too operatic a title: it is to be called "99 Rue Tchernavaza, Moscow," and the conspirators are to be *modern*, and the room a bare garret, painted crimson. It is to be realistic not operatic conspiracy' (*Letters*, 104). On this point, it is quite worth

remarking that he was extremely careful that the play should not be 'operatic', because such strong operatic elements are found in his other plays, particularly *Salome*, *A Florentine Tragedy*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde wrote to the actress Marie Prescott in 1883, in the course of exchanges of opinions about the play:

As regards the play itself, I have tried in it to express within the limits of art that Titan cry of the peoples for liberty, which in the Europe of our day is threatening thrones, and making governments unstable from Spain to Russia, and from north to southern seas. But it is a play not of politics but of passion. It deals with no theories of government, but with men and women simply; and modern Nihilistic Russia, with all the terror of its tyranny and the marvel of its martyrdoms, is merely the fiery and fervent background in front of which the persons of my dream live and love. With this feeling was the play written, and with this aim should the play be acted (*Letters*, 148).

Finally, with the title changed simply to *Nihilist*, to avoid the litigation threatened by a Mr. Frank P. Hulette, Wilde introduced a little boy into the Prologue and renamed it Act I, thus making it into a five-act play, with Vera made more appealing. He also made further changes, with the time shifted from 1800 or 1875 to the present and the place from St. Petersburg to Moscow. In the end, *Vera; or, The Nihilist* opened on 20 August 1883 at the Union Theatre in New York.

The first act opens at a Russian inn, with its inn-keeper Peter conversing with a young peasant Michael about Vera's having gone to the post office to see if a letter has arrived from Dimitri, her brother. It is apparent that Michael loves Vera deeply and that Dimitri has never written home in the five months since he went to Moscow to study law. When Peter is grumbling about the miserable happenings in the poor neighbourhood, Vera appears in her peasant's dress, quite worried that something terrible may have happened to Dimitri, though her father Peter does not care about his son at all, thinking that Dimitri is squandering half of his dead mother's fortune on profligacy.

The clumsy Michael proposes to Vera and wants her to give him a kiss, but she manages to evade the delicate problem. Then a little boy named Nicholas comes in to tell her of his secret find, and asks her if everything in the world belongs to anyone. In answer, Vera replies that it is not rightly so, but, finding that Nicholas is referring to a robin's nest, she corrects herself and tells him that the beautiful things of this world should never belong to anyone. Then a metallic clank is heard from a distance, and they find soldiers on their way to Siberia coming down the hill with some prisoners in chains. Peter is

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very glad to think that he can reap a profit. After a time they really stop at the inn to take a rest for a meal. Their Colonel thinks of Vera as a 'dangerous woman', because she is rather an independent character and educated enough to read and write. As soon as Peter leads the Colonel and his aide-de-camp into an inner room, Vera bribes a sergeant with her mother's necklace to let the exhausted prisoners sit down and relax. While she is speaking to them, she is startled to recognise Dimitri among them. According to his story, Dimitri heard men talk of liberty one night in a Moscow café and soon joined them in order to liberate thirty million Russian people from the despotic Czar. Amazed at his awful exile, Vera is determined to avenge him at all costs, and goes so far as to take the following oath:

To strangle whatever nature is in me, neither to pity nor to be pitied, neither to show mercy nor to take it, neither to marry nor to be given in marriage, neither to love nor to be loved. . . .(I. 309-12)

Then Dimitri informs her of a secret Nihilists' den at 99 Annadroona Street in Moscow. By and by, the Colonel reappears with his aide-de-camp and Peter, and he orders his soldiers and prisoners to march on. Just as they are leaving, Peter sees his own son and pleads with them to save Dimitri's life, in vain.

In Act II, some masked Nihilists are seen in a large garret holding a meeting. They unmask themselves, after they have provided passwords to prove that they are genuine members. We soon learn that Michael has already joined them and that Vera has not come back from her reconnaissance mission at the Grand Duke's ball. A young medical student named Alexis, who is in reality the Czarevitch, is very anxious about Vera's safety because the police are hot on her trail. At Alexis' statement about the movements of the police, Michael makes sarcastic remarks, suggesting that Alexis could be a spy or a traitor. The President intercedes, and Alexis then begins to read an article titled 'Assassination as a method of political reform', when they hear the sound of sleigh bells, and soon Vera appears in full ball dress to inform them that martial law is to be proclaimed the next day. Moreover, she makes a passionate speech about a desperate remedy, the Czar's assassination. When she sees Alexis, she tries to persuade him to leave at once, adding that there is no room for a delicate nature like his. To this, Alexis replies that the devilish Prince Paul has brought the Czar to this misery, but Vera's earnest entreaty spurs him on to announce his intention of pleading for the people to the Czar in person, thus coming near to betraying his real identity.

Michael leads the President away to whisper about Alexis' traitorous conduct, and soon they venture to condemn him as a spy, because Alexis has a secret password as well as a private key to the palace. As they are accusing him bitterly of his betrayal, Vera steps forward to protect him against their accusations, saying 'You must kill me first, Michael, before you lay a finger on him.' Then,



unexpectedly, General Kotemkin, formerly the Colonel in Act I, calls with some soldiers to inspect the suspicious house, and orders all in the party to take off their masks. Though everyone else thinks this is Alexis' doing and that it is all over with them, Vera never loses her composure and endeavours to make the General believe that they are merely a company of strolling players. At this critical moment, Alexis reveals himself to save his brothers, to the Nihilists' astonishment. After hearing that the General has been hunting the notorious Vera, on whose head the Czar has put a 2,000 roubles reward, Alexis pulls himself together to order the General to leave the room there and then, to Vera's great relief.

In Act III, the scene changes to the Council chamber in the Czar's palace, where the ministers talk to each other about how the 'young scatter-brained Czarevitch' is to take his seat again because the Czar has forgiven him at last. They mention strange rumours about the Czarevitch, one of which is that the Czar has kept him in prison in his palace since he came back from abroad a changed man, with a liberal view of the social system, and evinced strong sympathy for the poor Russian people. As he makes his appearance sulkily, Alexis begins to complain bitterly to them of having seen some wretched Nihilists hung this morning, saying he wants a 'change of air'. In sharp contrast, Prime Minister Prince Paul Maraloffski talks unceasingly about the pleasurable aspects of his aristocratic life, mentioning an excellent supper and a charming lady, and expressing his original ideas in jests and epigrams. Alexis denounces Paul as the 'evil genius' in his father's life, concluding that Paul has made his father a tyrant. While Alexis and Paul are arguing over political issues, the other ministers only look significantly at each other.

Meanwhile, the Czar enters nervously, fearful that someone there may be a conspirator sent to assassinate him. The Czar puts blind trust in Prince Paul, and turns a deaf ear to his son's earnest remonstrances. Then a letter arrives saying that the Governor of Archangel has been shot. Prince Paul recommends the Marquis de Poivard as new Governor, because Prince Paul is strongly attached to the Marquis' wife. Perturbed by the recent assassinations, the Czar is terribly shocked that Vera, the 'she-devil of the revolution', has not been arrested yet. Musing pensively on his erstwhile bravery, the Czar laments the deplorable situation in which he now can not sleep well, with terrible nightmares every night. For his own safety as well as for the extermination of the Nihilists, he demands that martial law should be proclaimed as soon as possible, and Prince Paul instantly answers that the appropriate papers are quite ready for his signature. At this moment, Alexis intervenes to protect the people from the 'ban of terror' and tries to stop his father from taking such a foolish measure. When he fails to convince his father of his fatal mistake, Alexis declares that he himself is nothing but a Nihilist. All the ministers start to their feet. The Czar is astounded that his son has turned out to be a deadly enemy, and orders him to be shot immediately. As soon as he goes out onto the open balcony, however, the Czar himself is

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shot to death. The ironic result is that Alexis is to be crowned New Emperor of Russia.

In Act IV, the banished Paul appears at the Nihilists' den to offer money as well as information. Surprisingly, he is admitted. After a while, the regicide Michael returns to receive a hearty welcome and he excitedly tells them how he escaped and where he hid himself, while Vera alone is anxious about why Alexis has not come in spite of their urgent summons. The others unanimously agree that Alexis must be a traitor and that his offence deserves the death penalty. Vera alone tries her best to prove his innocence persistently, but to no effect. Jealously, Michael challenges Vera, saying that she would 'betray liberty for a lover and the people for a paramour', and he brings home to her starkly her brother Dimitri's miserable fate and her father's broken-hearted death. Convinced, she draws a lot, which happens to be the winning one, and is chosen to assassinate Alexis. It is arranged that just at midnight Vera should throw a bloody dagger from a Palace window to show that she has slain the New Czar successfully.

In Act V, the ministers are seen complaining that the New Czar is so romantic and foolish that he has offered to amnesty political prisoners as well as the convicts in Siberia, and that he is likely to do a complete reform of public service. Obviously, they are not concerned about the people's rights at all but are engaged in their own pursuit of pleasure, motivated solely by self-interest. After he enters unobserved and overhears their conversation, Alexis takes firm action to banish the corrupt ministers from Russia. After he has got rid of them, he ponders his incredible fate and his beloved Vera, desiring to tell her why he now wears the Crown. When it is time to go to bed, Alexis declines his Page's earnest request to stay near him all night. The Page is clearly afraid there is some danger to the Czar. Outside, it has snowed heavily and now looks cold under the pale moon. Before going out to meet Vera, he takes a short nap while waiting for a sledge and horses to arrive, when Vera herself steals into his bedroom to assassinate him. When she is about to strike, Alexis starts up and tells her:

Vera, it was for you I broke my oath and wear my father's crown. . . . We will rule them by love, as a father rules his children. . . . I have banished the wolves that preyed on us; I have brought back your brother from Siberia; I have opened the blackened jaws of the mine. . . . Tomorrow I will lead you forth to the whole people, will crown you with my own hands as Empress in that great Cathedral which my fathers built. (V. 223-246)

Vera does not accept his offer but tries to keep her oath to kill him with a single thrust, in vain. Realising then that she is 'only a common woman after all', she kisses Alexis passionately, and they fall into a rhapsody of love for a short while. Then murmurs become a little louder outside in the street and

the clock begins to strike midnight, so Vera breaks away from him and stabs herself. At this moment, Alexis snatches the dagger from her and wants to die with her, but Vera tries with all her might and main to persuade him to live 'for liberty, for Russia' as well as 'for her'. Lying to him about there being a bloody man behind him, she manages to take the dagger back and flings it out of the window as a signal, and dies at last, crying 'I have saved Russia'(V. 333).

This, Wilde's first and last political play, had a run of only one week. There is probably more than a grain of truth in what one reviewer said of it:

The audience was critical, but favourably disposed until the last act when there was some jeering at the passion which became sentimental. The defects of the play seemed to lie in the attempt to treat a contemporaneous and historico-political theme from an ideal standpoint.<sup>32</sup>

There were also complaints about the single female character in some reviews, the most typical of which was the *New York Herald's*, 'There is but one woman in the entire cast, and contemporaneous human interest demands two at least — a blonde and a brunette.'<sup>33</sup> When the leading actress, Marie Prescott, first read the play to Mr McVicker, he seriously objected that the dramatist's use of a single female character would ruin it, though he later became firmly convinced that 'there was no room for another woman as Vera was a world in herself.'<sup>34</sup> So, before the play was staged, Wilde seems to have been well aware that the theatre people concerned had reservations about the single female character. While Wilde accepted 'every actor's suggestion'(Letters, 104), he seems to have been steadfast in just one respect, that is, in sticking to his original idea that there should appear no other female character than the heroine. There may remain some uncertainty as to his original intention, but his aim seems to be quite obvious: the heroine should be transformed from an innocent peasant girl into a masculine revolutionary champion, absorbed into the male-dominated world of the anarchistic society, then finally should learn her genuine identity as a woman. This sort of idea was to be used again in his next play, *The Duchess of Padua*, though there Lucy, maid of the Duchess, appears only briefly in Act IV.

Of course many contemporary events influenced Wilde as he wrote *Vera*. After the publication of Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1861), an image of the female nihilist was firmly fixed in the Russian public eye. Moreover, the novel *What Is To Be Done?* (1863) by Nicholas Chernyshevsky became a Bible for advanced Russian women. In this novel, feminine will power and social consciousness are presented as the salient features of the New Woman. A character named Vera, for

example, recognises that economic independence is more essential to her life than sexual equality and freedom.<sup>35</sup> In fact, real women nihilists demanded total liberation from the yoke of the traditional family as well as sexual equality, and the defeminization of the typical nihilist girl was quite obvious in that she smoked cigarettes and wore her hair short and straight beneath a cap, with dark glasses and a plain dark garment. There were, however, some 'aristocratic nihilists' who retained fashionable dress habits.<sup>36</sup>

Later, nihilism developed into a terrorist movement designed to subvert the ancient regime, political as well as social, and the term 'nihilist' became in due time a synonym for an assassin. When the doctrine of anarchism began to emerge in Britain under the influence of foreign models during the 1880s, its activists were regarded as threats to the social order, and the image of anarchist dynamiters was established clearly in people's minds during the late 1880s and 1890s.<sup>37</sup> Scares about their movements were often reported in the press, and Robert L. Stevenson and his wife collaborated on *The Dynamiter*, an attempt to capitalize on the popular interest generated in 1885, the heyday of British anarchism. Likewise, Wilde took up this topic in his short story 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' in 1887. But, in a way, just as an episode involving Eugène Delacroix and his model once inspired Wilde to write a witty short story 'The Model Millionaire',<sup>38</sup> so Delacroix's famous painting *Liberty Leading the People* seems to have been equally important in captivating him. At first, Wilde took great pleasure in making a caricature of this icon of Liberty, making a comical reference: '...we heard a whirring noise, a little puff of smoke came from the pedestal of the figure, and the goddess of Liberty fell off, and broke her nose on the fender.' Then, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he has Lady Bracknell refer to Jack Worthing's origin and his supposed mother's indiscretion as 'the worst excesses of the French Revolution'.

This alluring figure seems to have fascinated artists as a symbol of every worthy cause, from freedom and justice to the social battle against coercive authorities. According to Linda Dowling, the image of the bare-breasted goddess of Liberty represents a continuum 'from a symbolic vocabulary of impotence and effeminacy to an idiom of that blind generativity — of bodies, of money, of value — threatening to overwhelm a middle-class world of controlled desire and legal marriage and the orderly transmission of property within society'.<sup>39</sup> This sort of dual image of women is more or less implicit in Wilde's female characters, not least in the heroine Vera. But in the play the self-indulgently emotional heroine ends up in sacrificing her life to be a redemptive force for her lover Alexis as well as for her country Russia. In other words, she is one of the subversive female characters like Salome and Mrs Allonby who threaten to compete with manly male characters enough to disrupt the male-dominated social order, though at the same time she is one of those angelic 'golden' girls such as Virginia E. Otis and Sybil Merton who play a crucial part in restoring order or converting some evil or helping potentially dangerous men like Sir Simon de Canterville or Lord Arthur Savile become morally

upstanding characters. In marked parallel with these women, Wilde's male characters are divided into either innocent and pastoral types or guilty and urbane aristocrats, but almost all of them can be said to be effeminate or dandyish, reflecting the decline of the Victorian warrior ethos. Thus the seemingly manly Lord Illingworth, though, is subjected to a painful humiliation, struck across the face with the glove which Mrs Arbuthnot snatches up on the impulse of the moment in the satirical comedy *A Woman of No Importance* (1893).

Prince Paul, in *Vera*, is obviously the prototype of these Wildean dandies. He is certainly cynical to his fingertips, and in Wilde's view, he is the key to the play's 'comedy lines', intended to relieve some portion of the emotional tension. As Patricia F. Behrendt points out, this epitome of the Wildean dandy makes some references to 'an excellent supper' or 'a charming woman', which shows that his anti-romantic cynical wit acts on the pleasure principle in any circumstance, concerned only with his physical satisfaction.<sup>40</sup> The actress Marie Prescott noticed strong points in Prince Paul, so she suggested, to compensate somewhat for the failure of the play, that Wilde himself should play the dandy on tour around the country. In a way, she must have identified Prince Paul with one facet of Wilde's personality, and 'the old Prince Metternich sort of statesman full of epigram and unscrupulousness', if we borrow Wilde's own comment, is in sharp contrast to the idealistic Alexis. This chameleon-like dandy is the very embodiment of Wilde's opportunistic personality. He adopts any policy to survive, without any regard for principle, in any situation. Of course the 'enthusiast' Alexis is not consistent in his political creed and betrays his nihilist brothers, but he is never faithless to Vera from first to last. In this way Alexis and Vera have much in common, and they 'live and love' in front of 'the fiery and fervent background' of the 'modern Nihilistic Russia'.

As for the role of the heroine, we can safely conclude that Wilde's abortive representation of Vera as the priestess of liberty capsizes on the crucial Victorian demand of female self-sacrifice and self-effacement. It may be partly because Speranza's influence on the young Wilde was so powerful and lasting that he believed it should be women's mission to save men by their sacrifice or love, as in *Aurora Leigh*. Patrick M. Horan argues that Speranza's life with her infidel husband Sir William inspired Wilde to create so many compassionate wives and that her belief in the self-sacrificing capacity of females is central to Wilde's *Vera* as well as *The Duchess of Padua*.<sup>41</sup> It is also quite noteworthy that the creation of this Russian peasant girl should coincide in its figuration with the icon of Erin or Hibernia, the feminine embodiment of both Parnellism and Irish nationalism, whose image began to emerge in the 1870s and 1880s. This figure also possessed all the feminine qualities associated with male fantasies of the ideal wife or lover, epitomising for the nation all their presumed purity, virtue and valour.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, we need to see that it is very characteristic of principal characters in Wilde's plays to

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change their attitudes capriciously or suddenly. Consider how Guido and Bianca react to the murder of the Duchess and Simone in *The Duchess of Padua* and *A Florentine Tragedy*, respectively. It is sometimes difficult for us to grasp the psychological processes of these heroes or heroines. We may, however, remark that Wilde's manly heroines or effeminate heroes are apt to rush to extremes, because with them the heart is much stronger than the head. This is quite contrary to the familiar comment that the philosopher Lord Goring makes on men and women in *An Ideal Husband*: 'A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses'. As with most of Wilde's works, the action in society comedy centres around the hypocrisy of gender roles, creating a satire about good or fallen women and ideal or bad husbands. At any rate, moral anarchy and passionate impulse prevail in all of Wilde's works. Passionate love is all important to Wilde and this carries considerable psychological charge throughout his life. As he said in an early scenario of *Mr and Mrs Daventry*: 'I want the sheer passion of love to dominate everything' (*Letters*, 361). Thus everything in Wilde's world begins and ends in love. Guido and the Duchess conclude the play in unison: 'they do not sin at all / Who sin for love' and 'have loved much'. This is the same sentiment that prevails at the end of *Vera*. For all their ambiguity, Wilde's characters are ever of a piece.

Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *More Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: John Murray, 1985), 32; hereafter cited as *More Letters*.

<sup>2</sup> Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *Letters of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 180; hereafter cited as *Letters*.

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- <sup>3</sup> E. H. Mikhail, ed., *Oscar Wilde: Interviews & Recollections* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), 153.
- <sup>4</sup> Frances Miriam Reed, ed., *Oscar Wilde's 'Vera; or, The Nihilist'* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), v. 269-70. This edition is based on Wilde's final version of *Vera* as it was performed at its premiere on 20 August 1883 at the Union Square Theatre in New York City, and it is used and quoted in my paper as the definitive text of *Vera; or, The Nihilist*.
- <sup>5</sup> See Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s* (New York: Norton, 1992), 17.
- <sup>6</sup> E. H. Mikhail, 232.
- <sup>7</sup> Joy Melville, *Mother of Oscar Wilde* (London: John Murray, 1994), 115.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.
- <sup>9</sup> Kerry McSweeney, ed., *Aurora Leigh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), VII. 184-5.
- <sup>10</sup> See Joy Melville, 201.
- <sup>11</sup> See Joy Melville, 181.
- <sup>12</sup> E. H. Mikhail, 63.
- <sup>13</sup> See Joy Melville, 182.
- <sup>14</sup> See Ian Small, 'Introduction' to *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. 1: Poems and Poems in Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), eds. Boddy Fong & Karl Beckson, xvi-xvii. This edition is used and quoted in my paper as the definitive text of *Poems*.
- <sup>15</sup> See Joy Melville, 117.
- <sup>16</sup> Nick Frankel, "'Ave Imperatrix": Oscar Wilde and the Poetry of Englishness', *Victorian Poetry* 135, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 124.
- <sup>17</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 196.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.
- <sup>19</sup> See Nick Frankel, 119-25.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>21</sup> See Josephine M. Guy & Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27.
- <sup>22</sup> See Patrick M. Horan, *The Importance of Being Paradoxical* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), 50.
- <sup>23</sup> Richard Ellmann, 120.
- <sup>24</sup> See John Stokes, 'Wilde the Journalist', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), ed. Peter Raby, 69.
- <sup>25</sup> See Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 27.
- <sup>26</sup> *The Times* (April 24, 1878), 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Frances Miriam Reed, 100.
- <sup>28</sup> See Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 121. Also in an article 'Russian Nihilism', published in *Nineteenth Century* (January, 1880), Fritz Cunliffe-Owen takes up the novel 'What Is To Be Done?' and dwells on the nihilist outlook on women and sex.
- <sup>29</sup> See George Rowell, 'The Truth About Vera', *Nineteenth Century Theatre* (1993), 94-113.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 95. Interestingly he points out that Wilde sent the senior Irish playwright Dion Boucicault a copy of the 1880 edition of *Vera* for some advice or opinion on the play, though Boucicault's connection with its projected premiere is almost unimaginable.
- <sup>31</sup> Richard Ellmann, 154.
- <sup>32</sup> Stuart Mason, *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: Routledge / Thoemmes Press, 1993), 272-3.
- <sup>33</sup> Francis Miriam Reed, xxxiii.

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<sup>34</sup> Stuart Mason, 262.

<sup>35</sup> See Fritz Cunliffe-Owen, 'Russian Nihilism', *Nineteenth Century* (January 1880), 6-7.

<sup>36</sup> See Richard Stites, 103-4.

<sup>37</sup> See George Woodcock, *Anarchism* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963), 415-20.

<sup>38</sup> See Karl Beckson, *The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia* (New York: AMS Press, 1998), 218. Beckson introduces Adeline Tintner's revelation that an anecdote about Delacroix and his model Rothchild is the source for 'The Model Millionaire'.

<sup>39</sup> Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>40</sup> See Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan Academic and Professional, 1991), 73.

<sup>41</sup> See Patrick M. Horan, 69.

<sup>42</sup> See Perry Curtis Jr., *Images of Erin* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 2000), 8-13.