

Joseph Bristow, ed. *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*.
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In this collection of essays drawn from papers first presented at the conference series “Oscar Wilde and the Culture of the Fin de Siècle” at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library from January to May 1999, fourteen Wilde scholars significantly expand the existing contextual information on Wilde. Although some of the essays derive at least partly from previously published work, most represent new and ongoing work by such well-respected scholars as John Stokes, Ian Small, Kerry Powell, Peter Raby, Laurence Senelick and Josephine Guy. The collection aims to provide contextual information meant to extend scholarly readings of Wilde’s works, often demonstrating his indebtedness to a variety of genres such as women’s romance writing, New Woman writing, autobiography and socialist writing. The essays fall into four broad sections, each representing a contextual focus, namely: professional writing, political writing, aestheticism, and the performance of gender and sexuality.

It is almost impossible to separate Wilde’s writing from his life. Even in his own lifetime he acquired an iconic status, a status that was possible because of the particular historical period in which he lived, when the explosion of the information era existed side by side with a culture of the unspoken. The myth of Wilde—the larger-than-life wit, homosexual, socialist, professional, etc.—has grown in the last one hundred years. In this collection Wilde scholars attempt to look beyond this mythic persona to the cultural soil in which his genius had roots. They do not ignore Wilde’s life by any means; on the contrary, they use it as a reference point. But unlike early twentieth-century biographical criticism, this collection only uses aspects of Wilde’s life as starting points in order to theorize specific aspects of the work, focusing on his intellectual life rather than on the sensational dramas of his life.

The wide range of his reading and the range of the genres of his writing form the contexts examined in this book, but the contextual awareness in these essays is twofold. Several scholars preface their main arguments about the contexts of textual production with an acknowledgement of the context of modern scholarly criticism itself, of the deceptiveness of received perceptions about Wilde and about textual analysis in general. For example, in his essay “Master Wood’s Profession: Wilde and the Subculture of Homosexual Blackmail in the Victorian Theatre,” Laurence Senelick uses the scholarly furore over the mistaken identification of the

“Salome” photograph in Richard Ellmann’s 1987 biography of Wilde to warn against less than solid theories of cross-dressing, while Josephine Guy alerts readers to the common assumption that the number of textual revisions signals the degree of seriousness and significance of a work. The essayists try to pinpoint exact historical moments and social contexts to unpack the process of Wilde’s arrival at the creative product. This is not just a search for obscure sources, but an attempt to identify the springs of Wilde’s conflicting and paradoxical philosophies. The slippery quality of Wilde, a scholarly truism, is acknowledged here as scholars examine the varied facets of his experiences and of influences upon him, which, as it is implied by this collection, were possible only at a certain historical moment. Joseph Bristow’s examination of the caricatures of Wilde that proliferated in popular magazines in the 1880s and 1890s attempts to understand the tension between acceptance and repudiation, the acceptance implied by the celebrity status of Wilde, and the rejection evident in the material of the caricatures themselves, arising from Wilde’s blatant and consistent self-promotion and his self-conscious persona. Like Peter Raby, Bristow attempts to articulate the essence of Wilde’s modernism, but Raby and Bristow define it differently. To Bristow, Wilde’s modernism lies in his self-fashioning, but to Raby, it is the insincerity and superficiality of social life, which he claims catapults Wilde into the angry dramas of Orton and Osborne as well as the postmodern deconstructionism of Stoppard. In locating Wilde’s modernism in these areas, Raby and Bristow affirm current scholarly perspectives.

Writing of Wilde’s professional life as a journalist in the 1880s and his awareness of the demands of professionalism and the marketplace, John Stokes provides a detailed and focused analysis of Wilde’s role as an often unsigned theatrical reviewer. Josephine Guy’s textual as well as contextual analysis of the writing and publication history of “The Soul of Man under Socialism” tries to position the work as a response (often contradictory) to a wide variety of political, scientific, and economic debates found in the pages of such journals as the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Westminster Review*, and the *Fortnightly Review*. Guy very usefully draws together the complex threads of debates between Individualists, New Radicalists, and Fabian Socialists, and examines Wilde’s argument in some detail. Although she views “The Soul of Man” as no more than “an exemplary piece of occasional journalism” that is “provocative but not profound” (79), she acknowledges its soundness when she notes that it is Wilde, and not Wordsworth Donisthorpe and others, who is read today.

Ian Small's examination of the textual history of *De Profundis* is painstaking and exhaustive, providing a methodological base for analysis and interpretation. Textual analysis leads Ellis Hanson to locate Wilde within an aesthetic compounded of Christian suffering and Decadent perversion. Hanson suggests that in *De Profundis*, Wilde is deliberately bending his life into a narrative of Christian suffering which accepts his public humiliation as the just result of a sexuality expressed in the language of sin. The subject of Christian narrative does not end with textual analysis, but moves to a reading by Stephen Arata of Wilde as an iconic figure that belongs to a broad range of rebellious and controversial 19th-century models, such as Byron. Arata firmly locates Wilde in his time when he argues that Wilde's fascination and self-identification with Christ's suffering and martyrdom depends on a peculiarly nineteenth-century aesthetic reading of Christ.

Given the volume's focus on Wilde, it is not surprising that several papers should examine the performance of gender and sexuality. Kerry Powell reads *A Woman of No Importance* in light of Wilde's kinship to the puritan feminists of his age, such as Josephine Butler and Sarah Grand, arguing that gender is a ritualized performance and that categories of gender need reconstruction. Laurence Senelick's essay analyses a little-known play, *The Blackmailers*, in an attempt to bring together the various threads of his argument about the theatricality and performative aspects of the Victorian homosexual identity. Talia Schaffer writes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray's* connection to the aesthetic novel, which she positions within women's romance writing. Her examination of the flowered aestheticism of Ouida's novels claims that *Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are reworkings of Ouida's *Chandos* and *Under Two Flags*. The danger of the female dandy's subversiveness, suggests Schaffer, is heightened by her femaleness, which makes her doubly dangerous as a combination of the New Woman and the dandy. The complex relationship between effeminacy, degeneration and dandyism, earlier examined by Alan Sinfield in *Wilde and the Queer Century* (1994) is given a new dimension in Lisa Hamilton's paper. Instead of examining Wilde's debts to others, she reverses the object of influence, and examines New Woman writers' debt to the phenomenon of Wilde: his writings and his own performance of self, both of which were read as effeminate and, thus, degenerate.

Wilde's influence on other writers is examined from a very different perspective in Xiaoyi Zhou's "Salom in China: The Aesthetic Art of Dying." This essay greatly expands the range of Wildean contexts by tracing how Wilde, one of a series of Western "hero-sages" (296) was used by Chinese intellectuals "as a powerful weapon against traditional Confucian ideology"

(295). Although the focus is on performances, retellings and reception of Salom Vanco, the essay also looks at other Wildean texts.

One of the more unusual subjects covered in this collection is aesthetic philanthropy. Diana Maltz examines Wilde's struggle to find a balance between "Ruskinian ethical aesthetics and Paterian decadence" (193) during his editorship of *The Woman's World*. There is interesting and little discussed material here on the discourse of philanthropy married to aesthetics in the articles published in *The Woman's World*. Wilde's editorship is read as a deliberate and active attempt to control and influence a particular kind of philanthropic action. The paradoxical attitudes of the middle and upper-class Ladies Bountiful and Wilde himself towards helping the working classes by introducing them to art and beauty are examined in the context of *The Woman's World* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Using photographs and etchings of working-class subjects, Maltz suggests that activism often turned into voyeurism, where the poor were not only encouraged to view art, but were turned into objects of art themselves. Focusing on the socialist journals, *Clarion* and *New Age*, Ann Ardis continues the exploration of art and activism in her discussion of Wilde's peculiar position in the consciousness of twentieth-century socialist debates about art and culture, a debate in which he "both does and does not figure" (275). Ardis looks at the explicit criticism by socialists of exactly the kinds of philanthropic enterprises that Maltz introduces, though that criticism may focus on intellectual decadence and effeminacy rather than on voyeurism. It shows that it is never easy to grasp satisfactorily Wilde's typically paradoxical positions of simultaneous marginalism and centrality.

Probing uncharted areas is a major strength of the volume, although some of the contributions may seem at times to provide too much of a good thing in their intensive treatments of their material, which is so seductive that it sometimes overtakes the criticism. While the volume is densely packed with valuable and rare information, the arguments of some of the essays tend to become somewhat diffuse and obscured by the weight of that information. Wilde sometimes becomes only a touchstone rather than a central figure, a conduit to analyses of other, often obscure writers. This criticism notwithstanding, *Wilde Writings* is an excellent sourcebook both for scholars and for students, providing solid and useful material that extends the scope and depth of Wilde studies. While the emphasis on contextualization is not a methodological innovation, many of the contexts themselves are fresh, and like some other recent collections, such as the *Cambridge Companion to Wilde* (ed. Peter Raby, 1997),

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this set of essays will go a long way towards building the base of serious Wilde scholarship.

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Maureen Moynagh, ed. *Nancy Cunard: Essays on Race and Empire*. Peterborough: Broadview, 2002. Pp. 305. \$24.95 paper.

In order to appreciate Nancy Cunard's cultural work and radical politics, scholars must face the troubling challenge that lies in the irresolvable tension between Cunard's subject position of white privilege and her choice of causes. Editor Maureen Moynagh transforms this disconcerting tension into an invaluable critical asset in Nancy Cunard's *Essays on Race and Empire*. The beauty of Moynagh's editorial strategy is in its compelling contextualization of Nancy Cunard and of her work. Moynagh's insightful, inclusive, yet theoretically specific introduction to the collection of Cunard's essays, complemented by a cogent selection of appendices, provide the relevant cultural and historical grounds to understand Cunard and the implications her work holds for current scholarship. Reading Cunard's essays through Moynagh's carefully crafted context makes possible further revisionist readings of modernism by situating Nancy Cunard and her writing on race and empire in a way that advances understanding of the interdependent relationship between radical politics, gender, race and modernism.

Nancy Cunard (1896–1969) confounds the usual categories of scholarly discourse because she behaved as if she could claim an independent agency that was not bound to or defined by traditional affiliations of class, gender and race. Allowing her passions to lead, rather than concerning herself with appearance or propriety, she inserted herself into cultural and political concerns that were not appropriate for a manor-born daughter of British imperial culture. Cunard, who in 1920 became a participant in the radial chic of Paris's left bank, began her bid for independence as she took male and female lovers and refused to confine herself to the tradition of female fidelity. However, it was Cunard's commitment to racial justice that marked her independence from avant-garde as well as traditional expectations. Although Nancy Cunard's initial interest in African culture began with the avant-garde and modernist fascination with the primitive, her interest became a life-long passion for racial justice. Between 1930 and