

*Vera; or, The Nihilists*: Oscar Wilde's "Wretched Play"  
The Challenges of Reassessing "Minor" Works.

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Just over 25 years ago ELT press brought out Ian Small's *Oscar Wilde Revalued* (1993). Following on from Richard Ellmann's recuperative 1987 biography, Small's volume set out both to mark, and to help further the development of, a new era of research into a writer who had finally been established as part of the canon. An element of Small's ambition in *OWR* (and his 2000 supplement, *Oscar Wilde Recent Research*, also published by ELT press) was to draw scholars' attention to a wealth of archival documents, many hitherto unstudied, dispersed among British and American libraries, as well as to the ways in which the theoretical turn of academic criticism in the 1970s and 1980s was changing the terms by which Wilde was being understood. As we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century the fruits of that research are everywhere evident, with Wilde-related materials now so numerous and various—including in the pages of *ELT*—that they can appear to constitute an academic industry in their own right, one comparable (in terms of contentiousness at least) to that generated around Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> Yet amidst this discursive cornucopia one work remains conspicuously under-represented: Wilde's first performed play, *Vera; or, The Nihilists*.

In *OWR* Small could name only two critics to have given *Vera* significant attention: Katherine Worth, who included discussion of it in her 1983 monograph *Oscar Wilde*, and Frances Miriam Reed in her today long out-of-print 1989 edition of the play published by the Edwin Mellen Press. In *Oscar Wilde Recent Research* the situation seemed hardly to have improved, with Small again finding only two treatments worth mentioning: a chapter in Sos Eltis's *Revising Wilde* (1996) and a 1993 article by George Rowell discussing an element of *Vera*'s performance history.<sup>2</sup> In the last two decades *Vera* has come more to the fore in critical discussion, but interest in this play continues to be outweighed by that afforded to the rest of Wilde's oeuvre, with the exception only of his unfinished works and scenarios.

In what follows, I explore the reasons behind this neglect, discussing the strategies of some of the most recent, post-2000 studies of *Vera*. Given the important service of *ELT* in revaluing works hitherto deemed minor or marginal, the broad question I seek to revisit is the nature of *Vera*'s claim on our attention. Is this "wretched play," as Richard Ellmann famously

termed it,<sup>3</sup> just a piece of Wilde juvenilia, deservedly confined to the dustbin of literary history? Or are there other ways of framing the problem of its failure? I suggest that paying closer attention to the sorts of archival materials which Small highlighted, and to the broader literary (as opposed to political) context in which *Vera* was produced, may open new ways of appreciating the significance of this work, if not for modern theatre audiences, then for those contemporary with Wilde. In the process I also argue for a distinction between two forms of evidence that are sometimes conflated in literary recovery projects: that adduced to explain an author's creative motives, and which in the case of Wilde (and juvenilia more generally) may involve reading earlier works in light of intentions postulated of later and more accomplished ones; and evidence used to hypothesize the reactions of a contemporary audience or readership, which may construe an author's intentions quite differently, given the information then available to them.

1. A "bibliographic curiosity"

The origins of Ellmann's dismissive attitude to *Vera* can be traced to Robert Ross. Although including this play in the oeuvre-defining 1908 *Collected Works*, Ross nonetheless judged it to be "nothing more than a bibliographic curiosity." *Vera*, Ross opined, was "worthless as literature or drama" being "interesting" only "as showing how slowly Wilde developed either his literary or dramatic talent."<sup>4</sup> It might have been thought that Reed's edition, taking its cue from the first wave of textual scholarship on Wilde's works that began in the early 1980s,<sup>5</sup> would have sparked a major reassessment of *Vera*. After all, her volume delivered an entirely new version of the play: an attempted reconstruction of the text performed at the 1883 New York premiere.<sup>6</sup> She also presented new information about its probable origins (in contemporary reporting in the *Era* of the trial in Russia of Vera Zasulich), complex staging (evidence of which was to be found in correspondence with the American actress, Marie Prescott, who produced and starred in it), and contemporary reception. Yet the result of this painstaking research seemed only to confirm the judgements of Ross and Ellmann, with Reed conceding that *Vera* had, in her terms, "clearly failed," Prescott's production having closed to boos and jeers after just a week.<sup>7</sup> Despite a life-long habit of reusing and reshuffling material from earlier works, Wilde apparently made no further efforts to revive his first performed play, revisiting its subject-matter only once, and somewhat fleetingly, in a minor reference to Nihilists in his short story "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime."<sup>8</sup> *Vera* was not named in the contract Wilde signed in August 1893 when he went into partnership with Elkin Matthews and John Lane of the Bodley Head, and which included commitments (not in the event fulfilled) to

publish other earlier works: an expanded version of “The Portrait of Mr W. H.” and *The Duchess of Padua*.<sup>9</sup>

After 1883 Wilde, somewhat uncharacteristically, apparently lost interest in *Vera*, just as most modern readers have done. Thus, despite (or perhaps because of) Reed’s research, for the next decade *Vera* remained an anomalous work in the Wilde canon, her 1989 edition having failed to reset the terms by which the play was typically understood. Critics interested in revaluing *Vera* seemed to have only two options available to them: a reconsideration of the reasons behind that failed staging; or a reanalysis of the thematic significance of Russian Nihilism for other (and more successful) works in Wilde’s oeuvre. As I will show, while providing some suggestive new readings of *Vera*, both these strategies have continued to be hampered by a paucity of information about the play’s complex textual genesis. They are also limited by an under appreciation of the confusing array of literary models from which Wilde may have drawn inspiration, and against which his own Nihilists were almost certainly measured—by some audience members at least.<sup>10</sup>

That *Vera* was a flop is not in doubt. A West End performance in December 1881 had been abruptly cancelled, and the 1883 New York run closed, as I noted, to mainly poor reviews. Prescott’s subsequent plan to recoup her costs by touring her production amounted only to a couple of performances at the Detroit Opera House. Prescott undoubtedly lost a considerable sum of money. Wilde, who had agreed a substantial advance for the performance copyright, was not out of pocket, although it appears that his pride was hurt. He reportedly slunk away from the opening night after giving a short but nervous speech, and subsequently rejected Prescott’s attempts to further involve him in her planned tour.<sup>11</sup> A common strand in the rehabilitation of Wilde that began in the 1980s has been to refigure apparent failure as evidence of some kind of censorship or prejudice at work, whether (as here) driving a cancelled or curtailed run, poor book sales (in Wilde’s lifetime, *Vera* was never made available to the book-buying public), or a more basic inability to secure a publisher or theatrical producer for a work. The implication is that such failure is due not to weak writing, or lack of originality or creativity, but to the radicalism, provocation, or—a favourite term of the 1980s and 1990s—“subversiveness” of Wilde’s works, which rendered them uncongenial to contemporary readers and audiences. In the case of *Vera*, Ellmann suggested that the assassination eight months previously of Alexander II had made the topic of Russian terrorism too sensitive for British audiences, and that this was the reason behind the cancelling of an advertised staging at the Adelphi Theatre with Mrs Bernard Beere in the title role.<sup>12</sup> George Rowell, however, later cast doubt on this argument, suggesting that it was

simple lack of funds which brought about the demise of the proposed London production.<sup>13</sup> As for the failure of the American premiere, Reed speculated that by 1883 the subject was passé and Nihilism old news, the real-life trial in 1878 of Vera Zasulich, generally assumed to have inspired Wilde's interest in Nihilism, being by then too distant a memory to spark contemporary interest in Russian politics.

More recently, a new reason for the play's unacceptability, certainly for English audiences, has been offered: its alleged allusions to Irish terrorism at a time when tensions between the two countries were escalating over the Irish Land War. As Michael Newton puts it, "a tacit link between Russia and Ireland would have been implicitly understood and resented by the 'loyal English gallery.'" He speculates that it was a "presumed hostility to the play's political message" (meaning its Irish, rather than Russian one) which led to its withdrawal from the London stage, with British attitudes to Wilde—a sense that he was "inherently ridiculous"—subsequently informing American rejection of the work as well.<sup>14</sup> This reading of *Vera* has the seeming advantage of rescuing the play from Ellmann's and Reed's dismissive judgements while simultaneously making it newly relevant to modern audiences, insofar as Nihilism itself—the play's ostensible, and for most modern readers, obscure subject-matter—becomes, as Newton phrases it, "a mask" for a more familiar (and current) concern with Irish nationalism and republicanism.<sup>15</sup> It also allows for *Vera* to be assimilated with the anti-statist form of socialism expounded in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" and the antinomianism of *De Profundis*, so that it becomes a key element in a narrative about the unfolding of Wilde's political consciousness.<sup>16</sup> But how plausible is this line of argument?

One obvious difficulty with it, which Newton acknowledges, is that the basic premise about the play's "inflammatory [Irish] politics" rests on an interpretation of the press notices, both in 1881 and later in 1883, about the cancelled Adelphi performance. Newton concedes that these notices may have been orchestrated by Wilde himself, whether to save face, or "as a means of assuring publicity for any later performance." Nonetheless, he pursues the idea that an anxiety about the play's political message, as hinted at in these notices, was genuine on Wilde's part; and that the only plausible explanation for such unease given the distance, temporal and geographical, of events in Russia, was the controversy of its Irish subtext. Newton's evidence for that controversy, and for Wilde's initial conceiving of his play in Irish terms, comes largely from four sources: the casting of Dionysius ("Dot") Boucicault, son of the Irish actor and play-writer of the same name, in the proposed London premiere; a tendency at the time to understand Zasulich's acquittal in "Irish terms," seeing Fenians and Nihilists

as “parallel cases;” an apparent allusion to Ireland in an early manuscript draft of the play; and, of course, Wilde’s own problematic Irish identity.<sup>17</sup> On close scrutiny, however, none of these factors disclose quite the story Newton attributes to them, in the sense that all are open to other, possible interpretations.

To take the case of Dot Boucicault’s involvement. In *OWR*, Small published an undated letter from Boucicault senior to Wilde, apparently overlooked by Newton, which followed from Wilde sending Boucicault a copy of *Vera* to solicit advice about his play. Wilde knew the Boucicaults well: in formal correspondence he had invoked the father’s name as an introduction to other theatrical professionals; while Dot was his “dear” friend.<sup>18</sup> In his response to Wilde’s request for him to be “candid,”<sup>19</sup> Boucicault senior carefully set out *Vera*’s strengths and weaknesses, making no mention of any potentially sensitive political material, Irish or otherwise. Nor did he evidence any special enthusiasm for the work. Had this Irish theme been Wilde’s motivation for writing *Vera*, and for wanting to involve an Irish actor (Boucicault’s son) in a production of his play, then one might have expected the topic to have come up in their correspondence. And not least because Boucicault senior had made his name in Irish dramas, and so (we may presume) would have been especially alert to the potential provocation of any Irish subtext. Boucicault’s reservations about *Vera*, however, were entirely to do with its poor construction, and an imbalance between dialogue and action. The implication of his letter was not that Wilde was treading too thin a line politically speaking; but that due to his inexperience in writing for the stage, *Vera* lacked accomplishment as drama. Likewise, although it is certainly the case, as Newton (and others)<sup>20</sup> have described, that contemporary Western commentators on Russian politics *did* routinely run together different forms of political opposition, lumping Nihilism with Irish Fenianism and French revolutionaries; there is no sustained evidence in contemporary reviews of the New York production of *Vera* of any specifically Irish subtext as being the principal reason for its failure. Commentators rather pointed to the poor acting (due in part to mis-casting), unconvincing language, absence of other female characters, as well as obvious anachronisms in the treatment of Nihilism, as the reasons for the play being ridiculed.<sup>21</sup> Prescott’s idea that Wilde’s more overt involvement in her production might rescue it on tour likewise hardly makes sense in the context of the play’s alleged Irish themes, or Wilde’s own Irish identity, having been linked to its offensiveness.

Newton points to a line in an extant manuscript draft of the play, suggesting that a speech about giving freedom to “three millions of people” (later changed in the printed texts of the play to “one hundred millions”) is evidence that the work was originally about Ireland,

three million being “roughly equivalent to the population of Ireland at the time.”<sup>22</sup> A systematic examination of this document does indeed disclose that Wilde’s political ideas changed as the play evolved, but not quite in the manner that Newton’s isolated example implies. When viewed in its entirety, that early manuscript draft is marked by the expansiveness (not the specificity, Irish or otherwise) of its political reference. There are mentions of revolutionary activities in France, Poland, Austria, Spain, Germany, and in several Italian cities: Venice, Sicily, Rome, Genoa, Milan and Naples. Wilde seemed originally to be gesturing towards a Europe-wide Nihilist conspiracy stoked by events in Russia, a theme which was familiar in the contemporary reporting on Nihilism in the British Press.<sup>23</sup> In later iterations of the play, including revisions made for the 1883 performance text, these wider references (including those which compared Nihilists to French revolutionaries) were systematically excised, rendering the work less overtly political, and discouraging that extension of Nihilism to other radical groups.<sup>24</sup> We can speculate on the reasons for these changes. Perhaps it was because, and as Boucicault had advised, Wilde (or Prescott) was concerned that the wide ranging and, at times, relatively abstruse political events being invoked were drawing attention away from the emotional tensions between Alexis and Vera. Perhaps there were pragmatic reasons: in the manuscript details about a Europe-wide conspiracy are relayed by five messengers from abroad who each bring tidings of revolutionary activities in different countries in Europe. The omission of these formulaic pronouncements would have saved money by limiting the number of speaking actors on stage. Or maybe Wilde had come to realize that scaremongering about such a conspiracy, and by extension about threats to British interests, were not being taken especially seriously in the press, and on occasion were being treated with open contempt.<sup>25</sup>

It is undoubtedly the case that Wilde’s nationality was an issue in the early reception of his work, notably during his lecture tour of America. There is evidence too of his consciousness, while at Oxford, of the potentially problematic nature of his Irishness for English audiences.<sup>26</sup> Given that awareness, and his need for a commercial success to help him out of what were then some significant financial difficulties,<sup>27</sup> how likely is it that Wilde would have hit upon writing about Russia *primarily* because it was “an oblique means of exploring . . . the extremity of British and Irish relations.”<sup>28</sup> And that he would then withdraw his play from the London stage, having rather suddenly taken alarm at the potential offence caused by this intended Irish sub-text, albeit one that had apparently not been flagged up by other theatrical professionals he had consulted, one of whom had specific experience of representing Ireland on the West End stage? Or might Wilde have settled on Nihilism largely

because it was, as I explain below, the topic “du jour,” whose popularity with the British public seemed most likely to guarantee him a West End run? Of course, these explanations are not mutually exclusive: recognition of the productive parallels between Russian and Irish terrorism, personal sensitivity to English prejudice against the Irish, and a general interest in exploring revolutionary violence, does not preclude an awareness that Nihilism also had the potential to deliver a commercial success. The critical question is the balance we lend to these competing motivations. And, crucially, how they are illuminated by the extant textual evidence. Picking out isolated details from a complex and difficult to decipher manuscript while ignoring other textual witnesses runs the risk of giving a misleading impression of Wilde’s creative processes, and the effects of the various pressures that bore upon him.

This problem of the partial use of evidence is also apparent in another recent strand of research, one which locates *Vera* in relation to a general literary fascination in the late decades of the nineteenth century with anarchism, terrorism and what have been termed “dynamite narratives,” as well as with the subversive potential of the specifically female terrorist. As Sarah Cole explains, the anarchist concept of “propaganda-by-deed” is inherently theatrical, with the central actor “figured in hyperbolic, gestural terms, as one who understands himself to be engaged in performance, and the whole enterprise radiates with an exuberantly aesthetic quality.” She thus sees Wilde’s “melodramatic heroine” as “an embodiment of idealistic purpose married to self-sacrificing energy,” and as such an example of “propaganda-by-deed in its purest form.”<sup>29</sup> In a similar way Elizabeth C. Miller’s reading of the play also understands the radicalism of Vera’s final act of self-immolation as being expressed through the play’s melodramatic form. She argues that Vera’s assertion of individual heroism and advocacy of a “democratic sensibility” simultaneously undermines the conventions being deployed by “valuing ‘liberty’ above heterosexual love.” More broadly, Miller understands Wilde’s focus on a female revolutionary and his use of melodrama as a critique of autocratic power. She argues that in “linking together the modern political phenomena of democracy, first-wave feminism, and political terror, *Vera* calls for a serious reconfiguration of public and political representation at the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>30</sup> However, as with the strategy of incorporating *Vera* into a narrative about Irish nationalism, this suggestion of feminist provocation in *Vera*—that Wilde’s use of a female protagonist “underscores the idea that political terror gives power and influence to otherwise insignificant individuals”<sup>31</sup>—is complicated by certain details of its stage history, including those relating to the way the text was modified during rehearsals for the 1883 performance. This reading of the play is also not easy to assimilate to contemporary understandings of

female Nihilist revolutionaries which were neither as hostile nor as negative as might be imagined.

Miller draws attention to Wilde's alliance of Vera (in her closing speech in Act III) with a "female political assassin most familiar in the Anglo-Victorian imagination": namely, Charlotte Corday, in whose story, Miller explains, "late-Victorian readers found a curious parallel to New Women and the suffragists: a woman who defined herself in public, political terms rather than private ones." That Wilde's Vera "fails to do what Corday did" — she draws back from stabbing Alexis and thereby ending Tzarist rule—is only in part, Miller suggests, a concession to "gendered convention." This is because Vera's motivation is not love, but (as her final words suggest) an "act of violent political agency on the part of an individual woman" albeit in "the problematic form of self-immolation and a rejection of collective revolutionary action." The analogy with Corday matters to this reading of the play's denouement because it provides a frame of reference which encourages the audience to view Vera's actions as political not personal, helping them understand her privileging of "individual heroism" and "individual choice" as an engagement with, rather than a retreat from, the political sphere.<sup>32</sup> However, there is a difficulty with this line of argument, in that there is compelling evidence that Wilde himself was uncertain of the analogy with Corday, and in one textual witness, post-dating the 1882 text, the reference is excised altogether, apparently as part of that general purging of overt political references described above, made in the context of the 1883 production.<sup>33</sup> More to the point, the correspondence between Prescott and Wilde alluded to earlier indicates that there were numerous areas of disagreement over the staging of Wilde's text. When viewed in its entirety, and in conjunction with evidence from all the extant textual witnesses, Wilde's rewriting of his play seems more in tune with Prescott's idea of the performance opportunities offered to her in the leading role, than in honing the character of Vera to exemplify some political point.<sup>34</sup>

In drawing attention to these complexities, I do not mean to suggest that Miller's or Newton's interesting accounts of *Vera* are "wrong;" only that they impute motives to Wilde without full regard to the actual processes of composition, including the tortured negotiations that were involved in translating a written text into a performed one. As such, they run the risk of misconstruing (or perhaps over-simplifying) not only what Wilde may have originally intended his play to be about, and how and why those intentions changed over time; but also, and perhaps more importantly as regards understanding why it failed, how contemporary audiences may typically have viewed *Vera*.

## 2. An “excrescence” of Nihilists.

Recuperating *Vera* for twenty-first century eyes has tended to involve looking beyond the play’s ostensible subject-matter to see Nihilism as a convenient cipher for other interests. As Miller neatly phrases it, the play “both was and was not about Russian nihilism; it was simultaneously a sympathetic portrayal of a Russian revolutionary context that Wilde knew slightly, an oblique representation of the Irish revolutionary context Wilde knew well, and a wholly idealized rendering of political themes in the form of stage melodrama.”<sup>35</sup> One consequence of this shift of focus is that some of the assumptions underlying Ellmann’s and Reed’s narratives about *Vera* have gone un-challenged. These include the proposition that Wilde’s chief inspiration was the real-life case of Vera Zasulich, and that the principal contexts for understanding his (and the audience’s) interest in Nihilism are therefore the journalistic discourses of the time which discussed Russian (and Irish) politics. Largely overlooked have been other kinds of contemporary treatments of Nihilism, such as those found on the stage and in the pages of popular fiction.<sup>36</sup> The last kinds of works are significant because—as I will explain—they had a habit of blurring the line between fact and fiction. This in turn led to their recommendation by contemporary reviewers as authoritative sources of information about “real” Nihilist activities, their accessibility apparently rendering them more congenial reading than contemporary political reportage. Recent research into Anglo-Russian cultural relations has shown that from the late 1870s to the mid-1890s these literary Nihilists were surprisingly numerous, and although oftentimes frankly preposterous, they nonetheless represented a key source of imagery for potential theatre audiences.<sup>37</sup> Their dominating presence in popular culture over something like a fifteen-year period gives the lie to the idea that Nihilism was either an especially controversial or obscure topic at the time. This body of material also controverts the notion that Nihilism’s popularity with the reading public and theatrical audiences was in any way short-lived. Such observations in turn give new point to the questions: why did Wilde’s treatment of Nihilism not please, when those of others manifestly did? And why did Wilde later lose all interest in his play, despite the topic’s continued social currency? If it *was* the “Irishness” of his *Vera* that offended, why was this subtext not called forth in a compromising manner in other Nihilist dramas and fictions, many of which, like Wilde’s play, glamourized Nihilist conspirators and had female revolutionaries as their protagonists?

Full answers to these questions will require a comprehensive analysis of the rich body of Nihilist literature that was circulating in British and American culture in the late decades of the nineteenth century—a task clearly beyond the scope of a single essay. Here I aim to

sketch only some of the contours of that landscape, drawing attention to how they may complicate recent politicized readings of *Vera*. By reference to some hitherto overlooked treatments of Nihilism in contemporary works of popular fiction, I aim to provide a fuller sense of the range of meanings associated with this term at the time, and thus of the kinds of expectations Wilde's play-title might have set up in the minds of contemporary audiences, and which may have led to some of them subsequently having been disappointed with his work.

A factor complicating modern analysis of the “excrescences” of late nineteenth-century Nihilist-themed material, as Anna Vaninskaya has termed them, is the sheer numbers of genres and print-forms over which they ranged.<sup>38</sup> They encompassed, at one end of the scale, lengthy and considered analyses in publications such as the *Nineteenth Century*, *Contemporary Review*, *British Quarterly Review*, *Blackwoods* and *Westminster Review*, and which typically mixed observations on Russian history and the Russian character with commentary on Russian politics and literature, drawing attention to (and often quoting extensively from) works such as Sergei Nechaev and Mikhail Bakunin's *Catechism of a Revolutionary* (1866), Nicolas Chernyshevsky's *What is to be done: Tales of the New People?* (1863), the writings of Alexander Herzen and Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) and *Virgin Soil* (1877)—the last work often cited as being responsible for coining the term Nihilism. At the other end of the scale, was the briefer though more frequent reportage, for example of the political trials of 1877-8 (including that of Zaslulich), and reviews of contemporary books about Nihilism (of which there were many), to be found in papers such as the *Examiner*, *Athenaeum*, *Academy*, *Saturday Review*, *Era* and the London and New York *Times*. Nihilists also featured regularly in the fiction pages of cheap penny papers like *Bow Bells* and the *London Journal*. They were considered a suitable topic for popular, serious and children's fiction; and then there was the “swell of non-fictional accounts, travelogues and memoirs which took Nihilists, and the inevitable Siberian exile, as their subject.”<sup>39</sup> A sample of the fictional treatments on offer included: *A Nihilist Princess* (a translation from the French novel by Louise Mignerot Gagneur (1881)), Edward King, *The Gentle Savage* (1883), Oudia, *Princess Napraxine* (1884), Philip May, *Love, The Reward* (1885) (May also published anonymously, “Nihilism: By One of the Band,” “A Nihilist Mandate” and “The Nihilist Plot: A Complete Tale”), Charles Henry Eden, *George Donnington, or, In the Bear's Grip* (1885), Joyce Emmerson Muddock, *Stormlight: A Story of Love and Nihilism in Switzerland and Russia* (1888), with a new edition with the catchier title, *Stormlight, or, The Nihilist's Doom*, appearing in 1892, Joseph Hatton, *By the Order of the Czar: The Tragic*

*Story of Anna Klosstock, Queen of the Ghetto* (1890), Edward Arthur Brayley Hodgetts, *A Russian Wilde Flower, or, The Story of a Woman in Search of a Life* (1897) and L. T. Meade, *The Siren* (1898). The enduring popularity of such material can be seen in the fact that novels like Mark Eastwood's *Within An Ace: A Modern Sensation* went through five editions in its first year of publication (1891), including a title-change (by the fifth edition) to the more pointed: *Within An Ace: A Story of Russia and Nihilism*. Nihilism also attracted more serious writers: Henry James referred to Nihilism in his *Princess Cassamassima* (1886) while Jerome K. Jerome published the six-part "Memoirs of a Female Nihilist" by Sophie Wassilisff in the *Idler* in 1893.

From the 1870s Russian revolutionaries also featured regularly on the Western stage, where bomb plots, explosions, and assassinations provided regular fodder for spectacular melodramas, as Nihilism rapidly became, from the 1870s onwards, the "new favourite stage cliché."<sup>40</sup> Prominent examples included *Les Exilés*, staged at the Porte St-Martin in 1877 and later a "phenomenal success" in New York and Boston; Jules Verne's *Michel Strogoff*, adapted from his novel of that name, and which opened in London at the Adelphi in 1881; Sardou's *Fédora*, the 1882 production of which at the Paris Vaudeville was "a triumph" for Sarah Bernhardt;<sup>41</sup> and a little later, Herbert Beerbohm Tree's 1887 production of *The Red Lamp*, not the first in which he had starred as a Nihilist villain. As Laurence Senelick explains, for 1880s and 1890s theatre-goers, Nihilism "bore the same relation to melodrama that Roman Catholicism had to the Gothic novel or terrorism has to the action film: it was deep-dyed villainy in an up-to-date disguise." He goes on:

With only the vaguest idea of its ideological principles, confusing it with anarchism, playwrights concocted midnight gatherings of conspirators plotting the assassination of tsarist officials and the bombing of public works. They might espouse noble purposes and thus attract misguided idealists, but their means were always underhand. Yet the secret police who tracked them down were depicted as dogged and merciless agents of a despotic regime. Between these millstones, the heroes (or more often heroines) were ground to powder.<sup>42</sup>

A fictional equivalent of this "deep-dyed villainy" which appeared around the time when Wilde was writing the first draft of *Vera*, and which gives a flavour of the kinds of overblown clichés about Nihilism that were to become so pervasive in popular culture, was *The True History of Nihilism: Its Words and Deeds* (1880) by the English journalist John

Baker Hopkins.<sup>43</sup> The Nihilists in Hopkins's short novel included a certain "Citizen Kippax," armed with his "revolver thickly inlaid with silver," "dagger in a silver sheath, a silver box, and a silver bottle,"—the last being the "weapons of the people" ("arson" and "poison"). Kippax's compatriot is one "Clegg the Destroyer. Dipped-dagger Clegg. Kill-shot Clegg. Air-poison Clegg." Hopkins's Nihilists are a rum lot: drug-addled, drunken, debauched, paranoid, and driven half-mad by the devils and demons in their heads. They have multiple allegiances and identities, including foreign ones, their Nihilist credentials and frequent conflation with French revolutionaries being signified by their wearing of the "cap of liberty," and their rallying cry of "Death to tyrants, destruction to property; liberty, equality, and fraternity for all!" Their secret Nihilist council is directed by an "Invisible Hand," and on each Nihilist there is "a close watch," the Nihilist who "wavers" being the Nihilist who dies. Nihilist ceremonies take place in a "Hall of Liberty" decked out in black and red with "thirteen" the organizing principle, whether of the décor, the wooden panelling and surrounding gas-jets, the members of their Nihilist council, or the articles in their Nihilist creed. Oaths are sworn, wine is drunk, and in a Nihilist marriage ceremony that reads like a satanic ritual, hair cut from bride and groom is twisted together, put on "a metal plate", "lighted with a wax taper, and burnt."<sup>44</sup>

There is, in addition, a tea-drinking female Nihilist avenger who hides her villainy behind various masks, including those of "Gorsko the Flower-seller" and "Kind Ekaterine, the Dumb Nurse,"<sup>45</sup> which enable her to infiltrate the home of the aristocrat she hates. Owing more than a little to Dickens's Madame Defarge in *A Tale of Two Cities*, she enacts a terrible revenge on the Prince who seduced her, initially by murdering the infant son she bore him, and nineteen years later by capturing, imprisoning and torturing his two children by his then wife. In an echo of Hugo's famous description of the "bleeding mouth of Fantine" (as Wilde phrases it in *Intentions*)<sup>46</sup> the mutilated daughter is returned to her father, prematurely aged, with "short-cut hair . . . jet black, her face fearfully seared, toothless, no eyelashes, no eyebrows, scantily clothed in vile rags . . . her teeth had been lately drawn, and the terrible state of her mouth made it difficult to make her swallow the food necessary for sustaining life." Her only identifying feature—reminiscent of those of Wilde's Salomé—are her feet, "very white, small, and shapely." In the novel's denouement, the Prince, his son and their Nihilist torturer all perish, "dying . . . in utter darkness" in the gothic-sounding "Cistern Room," an underground dungeon beneath the Prince's castle that fills up with water when the flood gates are opened.<sup>47</sup>

Hopkins's sensational novel, written in a style reminiscent in places of James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, is self-conscious in its exaggerations, its Preface noting that "neither the Nihilist leaders, nor those who are bewildered and horrified by Nihilism, will aver that in this book the license of the novelist has been used to magnify the Terror." It is hard to credit that any reader would have taken Baker Hopkins's diabolic Nihilists, or "Nihilist-Socialists," as one of the characters terms them, and their determination to "annihilate society,"<sup>48</sup> remotely seriously, any more than the subject-matter of the 1840s penny dreadfuls or "bloods" of which the novel is reminiscent. In works such as this, Nihilism, as Senelick had noted of the stage, was little more than a new excuse to re-tread familiar literary territory, appealing to a well-established taste for a certain kind of shock-horror. Although Wilde's *Vera* was obviously aiming for something more considered and serious—his *Vera* is, after all, quite distinct from Hopkins's demonic Nihilist avenger, the "Bride of Chaos"—it nonetheless shared with it, whether consciously or not, certain common themes and tropes. These included an un-subtle coupling of Nihilists with the colour red, and the portrayal of Nihilists at their meetings as obsessed with secrecy and obscure rituals, paranoid about infiltration by outsiders. The issue to consider is not whether Wilde knew of, or was influenced by, Hopkins's novel—this circumstance we cannot determine. But the extent to which works like *The True History* may have provided (at least for some audience members) a series of expectations against which Wilde's own play may have been judged, and possibly found wanting. This may not have been (as Miller presumes) on account of the provocation of *Vera*'s non-mimetic excess, but because such excess as *Vera* did possess was in practice, and for some viewers, not excessive enough, in the sense of failing to providing an appropriate dose of excitement and titillation.<sup>49</sup> Contemporary theatre critics' insistently pointed to the play's inherent lack of popularity; this may not have been due to any inherent obscurity or political complexity of its subject-matter, but *Vera*'s simple failure to conform fully enough to the generic expectations by which some audience members were by then encountering fictional Nihilists.

### 3. *The Nihilistka*

Another contemporary Nihilist fiction which bears useful comparison with Wilde's *Vera*, and with which, on this occasion, we do know Wilde was acquainted, is Gagneur's *A Nihilist Princess*.<sup>50</sup> Much as Boucicault had advised of Wilde's own *Vera*, the convoluted plot of *A Nihilist Princess* centred on the dynamics of the personal relationships between the eponymous Princess and her three potential suitors, and these in turn provided ample

opportunity for familiar dramas over conflicting loyalties, changing allegiances and the Nihilist staple of the tensions between romantic love and devotion to the cause. In her Preface Gagneur loftily described her tale as providing “an accurate picture of a movement which is destined to take a high place in the philosophical and social history of the nineteenth century,” and she included in it references to real people, such as those associated with originating Nihilist ideas, like Herzen, as well as participants in the 1877-8 trials, including Trepov and Zasluch (at one point she imagines a Nihilist meeting attended by Zasluch and her heroine).<sup>51</sup> The plot centres on Princess Wanda Kryloff—intelligent and aloof, yet seductive like a “houri” and with “wonderful eyes”<sup>52</sup>—who becomes involved in the Nihilist cause, to which she recruits her best friend Nadege, and Nadege’s husband, Count Stepane Litzanoff. Wanda and Litzanoff are mutually attracted to each other, and when the latter is betrayed, arrested and imprisoned, he is sprung from his cell by Wanda’s Nihilist friends.

Although not as sensationalized as Baker Hopkins’s treatment, *A Nihilist Princess* contains much that is familiar in fictional representations of Nihilists, including in Wilde’s *Vera*. There are secret meetings, secret letters brought to Nihilist meetings about conspiracies being hatched in Europe, a swearing of oaths, along with the voicing of fears of infiltration and betrayal. There is the ubiquitous contrast between the lavish life of the St. Petersburg court with its balls and feasts, and the impoverishment of the peasants. There is a brutish, autocratic father who wishes to marry Wanda off to a mendacious German prince, Vassili Stackelberg (who later betrays Wanda, through jealousy). In a story-within-a-story Wanda’s much maligned mother flees her husband’s violence after falling in love with a serf called Michael. Finally, we have Wanda’s own “fictitious marriage” to fellow Nihilist, the loyal Frenchman, Raymond Chabert, who in reality is also in love with her, and thus a rival to Litzanoff. This last love-triangle occasions some earnest digressions on love, marriage, duty and gender equality in a manner reminiscent of Chernyshevsky, as Wanda is torn between her feelings for two very different men (Chabert and Litzanoff), for the Nihilist cause, and guilt over her betrayed friend Nadege, while simultaneously trying to dodge the attentions of Stackelberg. At the denouement, Wanda, disguised as one “Vera Perowsky”—Vera was a popular name for fictional Nihilists—is executed for her presumed role in the assassination of a Count Heyking (although not the killer of Heyking, Wanda is arrested, gun in hand, having taken up the weapon to defend her fellow Nihilists from the soldiers and police who have surrounded them). Litzanoff, Michael and Chabert all escape, with Litzanoff and Chabert finally reconciled through their mutual admiration for the executed and martyred Wanda.

The Translator's Preface to *A Nihilist Princess* describes it as a "thrilling story" based on real-life characters, pointing out the resemblances between the fictional heroine and the real-life "Sophie Pieoffsky" (Sopfyia Perovskaya)—that is, the member of the revolutionary group, *Narodnaya Volya*, who had been executed by hanging, the first Russian woman to receive this sentence for a political crime, for her role in the assassination of Alexander II. Before this event, Perovskaya had been involved in three unsuccessful attempts on the Tzar's life, all involving explosions with dynamite, and in which many civilians had been killed or injured, though not the Tzar. She had also, controversially, had a passionate affair with her fellow Nihilist, Zheliabov, a peasant who at the time had a wife and children. (Perovskaya herself was from the gentry, her father the "scion of a noble family").<sup>53</sup> As Richard Stites notes, for all of these reasons Perovskaya was portrayed at the time, and by a source hostile to her, as "aloof, secretive, stubborn, rude, scornful of men, heartless, evil and cruel."<sup>54</sup> It is tempting to see in the representations of the real Perovskaya, the fictional Wanda and Hopkins's "Bride of Chaos" a familiar narrative of (male) anxiety about the monstrosity of female empowerment, against which Wilde's more humanized and sympathetic Vera might have appeared as an uncomfortably original challenge to patriarchal prejudice. This is what Aileen Kerr seems to have in mind when describing how "[t]he normative gender power dynamic is reversed in the play, and in so doing the idealization of the Victorian patriarch is undermined and replaced by an idealization of female power."<sup>55</sup>

Yet, the Female revolutionary or *nigilistka* was not always nor everywhere portrayed in negative terms. As historians such as Barbara Alpern Engel have noted, an equally potent, if similarly neutralizing, form of Nihilist mythologizing took the form of the self-denying revolutionary ingenue. In this piece of image-making the radical attributes of the *nigilistka*, including those related to her perceived sexual ethics, were counterbalanced by her simultaneous association with youthfulness, idealism and a propensity for self-sacrifice, qualities that became especially significant when she turned assassin.<sup>56</sup> A good example of such attitudes can be found in comments in the *Nineteenth Century* by self-taught Russian expert W. R. S. Ralston. Over the course of a wide-ranging article Ralston turned his attention to the women revolutionaries caught up in the trials of 1877-8, including the Lyubatovich sisters, Vera and Olga, the latter of whom would be the subject of the sympathetic *A Female Nihilist* (1885), by Russian émigré writer and acquaintance of Wilde, Sergey Kravchinsky-Stepnyak. Ralston found it "difficult to believe that young girls, belonging to what we should call the upper middle classes, well educated, and by no means destitute of culture, can leave their homes and go away, of their own free will, to lead a hard

life among strange people of a lower class,” only on returning to depart “into the wilds of Russia city life as Nihilistic missionaries.” He was perplexed rather than threatened by such activities, observing: “They had nothing to gain by the changes which they deserved to bring about; they had everything to lose if their efforts should be detected. And yet they worked on, amid discouragement and discomfort, with never ceasing energy and determination.”<sup>57</sup> While the attitude of the *nigilistka* (fictional or real) to marriage was viewed as distinctly odd—Ralston cites two attempts to contract a pretend marriage so that a woman could release for her own use funds from a dowry—it did not, as Ralston’s piece also shows, rule out some sympathy, and on occasion qualified admiration, for these women’s efforts, even if they were in the service of what was viewed as a misguided ideal.

Ralston’s piece appeared in 1877; but even by the 1880s, when knowledge of women’s involvement in assassination plots, including that of Alexander II, was more widely known, sympathy did not entirely evaporate. This was partly due, as noted, to the influence of émigré accounts of Nihilism, and especially of Stepnyak’s earlier *Underground Russia*. Although not published in England until 1883, it was made known to British readers in 1882, in a lengthy review of an Italian translation published in Milan (*La Russia Sotterranea: Profili e bozzetti rivoluzionari dal vero di Stepniak, già direttore de Zemlia e Viola (Tera e Libertá)*). The reviewer was aware of the book’s potentially partisan character—that the first-hand authenticity of accounts of Nihilism claimed by Russian authors like Stepnyak or Lavroff (who wrote the preface to *Underground Russia*) amounted to them being “party statements.” Yet this did not prevent an acknowledgement of the effectiveness of their humanizing portrayal of female Nihilists, as “women who might have played a really noble part in life, replete with generous feelings, free from anything like selfishness or ignoble ambition, most ready to risk in the cause which they thought righteous all that an ordinary woman would hold dear”<sup>58</sup>—a description which might equally be applied to Wilde’s fictional Vera. To be sure this conventionalized association between femininity, purity of sentiment and a certain naivety was not seen to exonerate such women from their actions—as the reviewer’s closing comments made clear. But it did much to render them acceptable subjects for literary treatment, including, potentially, as tragic heroines; rather than, and as might have been expected given their parallel association with sexual license, simply as femmes fatales (as in Gagneur’s *A Nihilist Princess*) or sadistic avengers (in Baker Hopkins’s *The True History*). As the anonymous reviewer summed up, a little sardonically:

[A]lthough we may feel sorry for their misfortunes, we must not the less lose sight of the fact that they were assassins . . . A woman who explodes a mine, utterly reckless as to how many inoffensive passers-by she may blow into atoms along with the Royal personage to whom she objects, cannot fairly be held up for admiration as a species of saint, even if she has an attractive face or fine eyes.<sup>59</sup>

In Wilde's play, Vera does not carry through her assassination attempt, killing herself rather than Alexis when confronted with the tensions between personal feeling and political principle. Her love-interest is set in competition with (rather than, in Chernyshevsky's *What is to be done?*, as finding fulfilment through) Nihilist political ideology which is, of course, part of what renders her situation tragic. Regardless of what Wilde's intentions may have been for his play, the question to consider when trying to understand its failure, is how Vera's actions might have been interpreted by contemporary theatrical audiences. Would they have appeared as a provokingly radical assertion of individualism and rejection of patriarchal control? Or would they have seemed of a piece with what by then was a familiar defusing—through the humanizing impulses of romantic love—of the female Nihilist's potency, and along with it, the equally comforting thwarting of a Nihilist assassination plot? It is exactly the familiarity of such a trope which may explain why a review of another Nihilist fiction with a female protagonist who commits suicide in its denouement (and which also appeared in the *Saturday Review*, a paper not exactly renowned for its sympathy with radical causes) was recommended to readers on account of it being “interesting, exciting, one might say ‘sensational’; and yet . . . absolutely pure and harmless.”<sup>60</sup>

These comments related to the English translation (as *The Female Nihilist*) by G. Sutherland Edwards and published in 1880 by W. H. Allen & Co. of Ernest Lavigne's *Le Roman d'une Nihiliste* (1879)—a novel that was far removed from Baker Hopkins's *The True History*. In his choice of “Vera Pavlovna” as the name for his female Nihilist protagonist, Lavigne seemed explicitly to call to mind, and to invite comparison with, Chernyshevsky, while also signalling his own serious intentions. Lavigne, a French writer and journalist, was the author also of *Introduction: A L'Histoire de Nihilisme Russe*, brought out in 1880 by Charpentier—a house Wilde knew well and admired—as well as several articles on the topic. Lavigne thus professed, and was viewed as such by several British commentators, to be an expert on Nihilism; he was one of the authors whom Edward Levy had acknowledged in his 1881 pamphlet, *Russian Nihilism*, as an important source for Levy's own history, and whom he recommended to readers wishing to “follow up” on the topic.<sup>61</sup> The translator of Lavigne's

novel is almost certainly the polymath and Russophile, Henry Sutherland Edwards (1828-1906), who may also have been known to Wilde. (It is not clear why his first name appears as “G” on the book’s title.) Author, journalist, translator, first editor of the *Graphic* and founder of the short-lived journal *Portrait*, Sutherland Edwards had been involved in various theatrical productions (including the comic drama *The Four Cousins* (1871) written in collaboration with Augustus Mayhew), as well as being a self-taught Russophile. He had been in Paris during the coup d’état in 1852 and learned Russian when he travelled to Moscow to report on the coronation of Nicholas II for the *Illustrated Times*, publishing on his return *The Russians at Home* (1861) and later *The Russians at Home and the Russians Abroad: Sketches of Russia Under Alexander II* (1875). He later travelled to Poland (again for *The Times*), occasioning a return visit to Moscow and St. Petersburg. In 1876 he published a series of pieces in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the Balkan question under the title “The Slavonian Provinces in Turkey.” *The Story of a Nihilist* was one of a series of translations of Russian and French works that occupied him for the next couple of decades, along with further works on Russia (including *The Romanoff, Tzars of Moscow and Emperors of Russia* (1890)), and on music history and criticism, as well as novels (possibly co-authored with his wife).<sup>62</sup>

While there is no concrete evidence that Wilde was acquainted with Edwards, whether personally or through his writings, Edwards’s career nonetheless suggests numerous potential points of contact by which he might have come to Wilde’s attention, and his translation of *Le Roman d’une Nihiliste* is very close to the initial composition of *Vera*. It is also possible that Wilde may have known of Lavigne’s novel in the original French, given his own interest in French culture at the time. Wilde first visited Paris with his mother in July 1874, and would return for a longer, three-month stay in January 1883.<sup>63</sup> Regardless of whether the Lavigne/Edwards’s *Vera Pavlovna* was a possible influence on Wilde, it would have been known to, and again (I suggest) likely formed a point of comparison for, some of his contemporaries, not least because it was a recommended source for British readers with a general interest in Nihilism. Thus, although describing the events in *The Story of a Nihilist* as “highly improbable” and “so remote from our ordinary experience, that it is difficult to imagine a state of society in which they exist and act,” and elements of Nihilist doctrine expounded there as “wild and insane,” the *Saturday Review* nonetheless judged Lavigne’s novel to be an “easy and entertaining read.” And if the statements of Lavigne, who was described as having once edited a Russian newspaper, were not necessarily to be “implicitly relied on,” the book was still recommended as one from which “most English readers will

obtain . . . a better notion of the real designs of these revolutionaries . . . than by reading many of the graver essays and treatises which have been devoted to an exposition of the subject.” Lavigne vouchsafed to the British reader, the *Saturday Review* noted, “an accurate representation of the so-called principles of Nihilists, as far as those have been formulated and can be understood.”<sup>64</sup> The volume was also favourably reviewed, and its convoluted plot carefully summarized, in the *Examiner*. There, too, it was commended to readers for its authenticity, on account that its author was judged to be “intimately acquainted” with his subject and that it included in the narrative “living individuals” (such as, once again, the protagonists in the Zasluch trial).<sup>65</sup>

Lavigne’s novel centres on the activities of an underground Nihilist group, following the fates of three of its activists: the scheming Pavlovna and her two male compatriots, feckless Vladimir and earnest Sergei. It begins with Pavlovna’s plot to procure for the Nihilist cause the wealth inherited by a rich Countess (Stasia) on the death of her father Count Rostoff. Pavlovna recruits the beautiful and naïve Stasia to the Nihilist cause, persuading her into marriage with Vladimir, with whom Pavlovna is, nonetheless, herself in love. To keep control of Vladimir, Pavlovna likewise induces him simultaneously to contract with herself a secret marriage. (This co-option of a member of the nobility—Stasia—to the Nihilist cause and the keeping secret, from the rest of the Nihilist group, of Pavlovna’s real feelings for Vladimir are suggestive of some elements of the plotting of Wilde’s *Vera*.) In the event, Vladimir proves a disappointment to all, neglecting his new wife Stasia, renegeing on Pavlovna and the Nihilist cause, and having an affair with a French actress. He is conveniently assassinated by a fellow Nihilist, the Polish student Count Riboffski, who is in competition with Sergei to take control of the Nihilist group. Riboffski himself is then also conveniently killed by the police, the Nihilist cell infiltrated, and its members rounded up. In the ensuing trial, Stasia, Pavlovna and Sergei all are found guilty of being implicated in Vladimir’s death. Stasia is exiled, Sergei condemned to Siberia, and Pavlovna to imprisonment (where she kills herself). Sergei is eventually pardoned and reunited with Stasia, who has always been his true love. This over-contrived plot enabled Lavigne to rehearse what were then solidifying into a familiar set of fictional clichés, several of which, as I have already noted, can be found in Wilde’s play. They concerned the intrigues and competition for power within Nihilist groups; Nihilist fear of betrayal both from within and without; their obsession with secrecy (and how this was ensured, for example, via punctuality at meetings); their peculiar sexual ethics and elevation of political principle over love; as well as the ultimate pointlessness of their cause. Lavigne’s novel suggests that it is romantic love,

rather than political principle, which is the most important animating force, and that educated women only turn to Nihilism as an outlet for not being married, Pavlovna killing herself in the realization that her sacrifices have achieved nothing.

Lavigne's Vera Pavlovna sits somewhere between Baker Hopkins's "Bride of Chaos" and Gagneur's "houri" Wanda, yet she is still a caricature, and certainly less sympathetic than Wilde's Vera Sabouroff. Lavigne's Vera Pavlovna's death in prison, alone and through suicide, is pathetic rather than tragic, and her devotion to the Nihilist cause takes the form of a misguided, self-defeating fanaticism, rather than the heroic self-sacrifice of Wilde's heroine. Yet it is striking that in all these works, the deaths of the women leave the current political order more or less intact, and the Nihilist protest nullified. The future of Russia in Wilde's play is left in the hands of the young, reforming Czar, Alexis; in Lavigne's novel, hope resides in the marriage of the more moderate Sergei and aristocratic Stasia. Ultimately, Wilde's Vera is no more successful in her revolutionary ambitions (whether in the personal or political sphere) than Lavigne's heroine. In this respect, it seems possible that her death rather than being understood as a provocative political statement—whether of feminist autonomy or an assertion of democratic solidarity with other marginalized groups—would have seemed little more than the expected ending for the female revolutionary. In this respect, it also seems possible that the American audience's booing of the play was due not to offence but to boredom: that it contained little that was new or surprising. Perhaps the reported audience jeers were due to an over-familiarity with what was being offered, made even less engaging by the deficiencies of Prescott's own acting. Alternatively, and as suggested earlier, some audience members on seeing Prescott decked out in her striking cloak of vermillion silk and the scarlet mask of one of the Nihilist conspirators may have been anticipating something altogether more racier, and were subsequently disappointed by the play's turn away from blood and gore to declarations of love and political idealism. As for Wilde himself, it seems possible that his own discarding of *Vera* may have due to his perception that even by 1883 the pervasiveness of Nihilism in popular culture was rendering it a topic too trite, in the sense of being too easily "sent up," to sustain tragic (nor indeed serious political) treatment.<sup>67</sup>

#### 4. Why did *Vera* fail?

Nihilism was a convoluted but not obscure topic in early 1880s British and American culture. It could be, and often was, the subject of serious analysis, as commentators struggled to come to terms with a country and culture that both fascinated and repelled, Russophilia and Russophobia coexisting side-by-side. But Nihilism was also, and arguably as frequently, an

opportunity for a comically exaggerated literature of terror, with any threats Nihilists posed in real life being cathartically removed through their inevitable annihilation. The sense that Nihilism was so slippery a term that it could stand in for any sort of terrorist act, Irish included, may seem to gain purchase from this discursive melee, lending weight to the politicized readings of *Vera* that have recently gained currency. My suggestion is that such valency works in multiple ways, and that in attending too exclusively to *Vera*'s alleged sub-textual themes we run the risk of overlooking understandings of the play that might have come more readily to contemporary audience members' minds. And here is it worth recalling that the pervasiveness of fictional and dramatic (as opposed to "real") Nihilists in late nineteenth-century British and American culture owed as much to their exceptionalism, as to their malleability, in the sense that the attractiveness of Russian rather than Irish revolutionaries was because the former typically came, as in Wilde's *Vera*, in aristocratic and/or female guise. Quite how these exotic figures might recall or lend legitimacy to Fenianism is moot. While I do not rule out the possibility that political sensitivities over Ireland may have contributed to *Vera*'s lack of success on both the London and America stage, as well as to Wilde's own discarding of this work; I nonetheless contend that a complete understanding of the reasons behind its failure as a staged work awaits an analysis of the full range of Nihilist materials—literary, dramatic and otherwise—in circulation in late nineteenth-century British and American culture. And that these materials in turn need to be brought to bear on an equally comprehensive appreciation of the play's complex textual genesis.

Notes.

I should like to record my thanks to the Philip Leverhulme Foundation for an award (from Sept 2018-Sept 2000) of a Senior Research Fellowship which has supported my current research into Wilde's early dramas.

1. Jarlath Killeen, for example, has described Wilde studies as a "dynamic and exciting" area to work in, if also a "contentious and treacherous one." He attributes this situation to Wilde being a writer "in whom the reading public has a large stake," as well as to tensions between those who read his work "ideologically" and those who "believe that what mattered to Wilde was audience, money and working within his own range"—an opposition which, as I show,

also characterizes academic approaches to *Vera*. See *Irish Writers in their Time*, Jarlath Killeen, ed. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 1, 19.

2. Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); George Rowell, "The Truth About Vera," *Nineteenth Century Theatre*, 21. 2 (1993), 94-100.

3. Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 119.

4. Typed note by Ross which is included in his copy of the 1882 privately printed text of *Vera* presented to the British Library.

5. The New Mermaids editions of the society comedies edited by Ian Small and Russell Jackson, published between 1980 and 1983, were the first attempt to review systematically, and partially to collate, the extensive extant manuscript evidence relating to any works in Wilde's oeuvre. The extent and complexity of that editorial task can be witnessed in comparing Jackson's 1980 edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with the more complete 2019 (2-volume) edition of the same work edited by Joseph Donohue as part of the on-going Oxford English Texts Edition of the *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* published by Oxford University Press.

6. As was the custom at that time, when trying to interest theatrical producers in his play Wilde published his play privately with his own funds, and in two different versions: initially in 1880, and then in a revised version (with a new prologue) in 1882. Both the 1880 and 1882 printings were strictly limited in number due to the absence (at that time) of a copyright agreement with America, and were only for the eyes of other theatrical professionals. Prior to Reed's edition, most readers would have encountered *Vera* via the text produced by Ross in the 1908 collected edition, or that in the Collins *Complete Works*, which were both based on the text of the 1882 edition. However, as Reed noted, the 1883 performance text, though again based on the 1882 edition, was substantially different from it, as Wilde's script underwent many modifications during rehearsals.

7. Frances Miriam Reed, "Oscar Wilde's *Vera: Or, The Nihilist*: The History of a Failed Play," *Theatre Survey*, 26. 2 (1985), 174; in her later edition of the play, Reed, while conceding that *Vera* was "carefully crafted" and "often well written," concluded that it was also "often imitative," "in need of judicious cutting," and that Wilde had "erred with his choice of subject matter." See *Vera; or, The Nihilist*, ed. Frances Miriam Reed (Lampeter Dyfed: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), xxxvi and xlii.

8. The reference is to Arthur's "friend," a certain "Rouvaloff," described as "a young Russian of very revolutionary tendencies" and suspected of being "a Nihilist agent" (*The Complete*

*Works of Oscar Wilde, VIII, The Short Fiction*, ed. Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 69; the detail has relatively little relevance for the story as a whole, and may in part be an in-joke allusion to the Russian émigré writer, Sergey Stepanyak-Kravchinsky, with whom Wilde was then acquainted. The only other evidence we have of interest in *Vera* post 1883 is an inscribed copy of the 1882 text of the play which Wilde sent to the American actress Eleanor Calhoun, probably in 1888, the year when he met her. There is no evidence to suggest that either she (or Wilde) ever contemplated her staging this work, for it was Wilde's other early play, *The Duchess of Padua*, that she had expressed an interest in. See *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, V. Plays I*, ed. Joseph Donohue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.

9. See 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), 162-3.

10. A major limitation of Reed's 1989 edition of *Vera* is that it has virtually no annotation explaining the political, historical and literary references in the play; moreover, the way in which her textual notes are laid out make it difficult to trace how she has reconstructed the performance text, and when and why she has preferred one textual witness over another.

11. For details of the contract, and of Wilde's earnings and Prescott's losses, see *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, 98-99. Evidence of Prescott's attempt to rescue her production through Wilde being involved in it come from a press notice announcing that Wilde was to take on a role, presumably that of Prince Paul (see Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 228 and *Vera; or, The Nihilist*, ed. Reed, xxxiv). While this suggestion was probably a ruse—there is no evidence Wilde had agreed to it—orchestrated by Prescott to drum up ticket sales, it nonetheless tends to undermine the suggestion made by some modern critics that Wilde's own reputation, including his Irishness, was a major factor in the play's demise, despite mockery of him in the press.

12. Ellmann reported additionally that the cancellation came at the instigation of the Prince of Wales, whose family was related (by marriage) to that of the Tzar (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 146).

13. See Rowell, "The Truth About Vera". It seems likely that only a single performance at the Adelphi was envisaged, probably without special costume or scenery, in order to establish copyright and interest potential backers for a full run. Surviving correspondence between Wilde and E. F. S. Pigott, the then Examiner of Plays, dated November 1881, suggests that by late autumn Wilde had yet to obtain a performance license for the work. Nor as Rowell noted, is there any evidence in the Lord Chamberlain's papers of a license having subsequently been

granted—details which further suggest that there were unlikely to have been preparations in place for a long run (see *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 117).

14. Michael Newton, “‘Nihilists of Castelbar!’: Exporting Russian Nihilism in the 1880s and the case of Oscar Wilde’s *Vera; or the Nihilists*,” in *Russia in Britain, 1880-1940*, eds. Rebecca Beasley and Philip Ross Bullock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 43, 49.

15. Newton, “‘Nihilists of Castelbar!’,” 43.

16. See for example, Stuart Robertson, “The terrorist, the artist and the citizen: Oscar Wilde and *Vera*,” *Journal for Cultural Research*, 18. 2 (2014), 146-57.

17. Newton, “‘Nihilists of Castelbar!’,” 42, 45.

18. *Complete Letters*, eds. Holland and Hart-Davis, 97, 153.

19. Small, *Oscar Wilde Revalued*, 97; Small reproduces the text of Boucicault’s letter in full.

20. The perceived connections between Irish and Russian terrorism are also discussed by Anna Vaninskaya in the context of W. T. Stead’s pro-Tzarist *Truth About Russia* (1888), a work in which Stead used “constant parallels between Russia and Ireland” to “demonstrate how much more abominably the British government treated the Irish than the Russian authorities did the Nihilists.” More generally, Vaninskaya notes that contrary to what one might assume through consulting “conservative die-hards” like the *Saturday Review*, there were commentators who readily distinguished between Irish and Russian terrorists—as Newton also concedes—seeing the latter as having right on their side because fighting “a despotic regime”. (Vaninskaya, “‘Truth About Russia’: Russia in Britain at the Fin de Siècle,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Fin-de-Siècle Literature, Culture and the Arts*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 255, 251.) It is this detail which helps explain why Nihilism, rather than Fenianism, was considered a subject appropriate for popular entertainment, including for children’s fiction. Stead’s potential influence on Wilde, who would later work for him (in Stead’s role as editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* from 1883-9), has yet to be explored by critics interested in Wilde’s Russophilia.

21. Where reviews certainly did find elements of the play’s subject-matter offensive, it was generally the suggested analogy between Nihilists and Christ. Much of the negative commentary centred on the play’s presumed lack of popularity, which in turn was attributed to its convoluted structure and over-blown language—“long dramatic rot, a series of disconnected essays,” according to the *New York Herald* (qtd. in *Vera; or, The Nihilist*, ed. Reed, 85). The poor quality of the acting, especially that of Prescott, was also widely noted; and there is some evidence that the audience’s uncertainty about the play’s tone—their

apparently inability to take it seriously—may have been due to actors known for playing low-comedic roles (like Edward Lamb) and melodramatic villains (like Lewis Morrison) being deemed out of their depth when playing more serious and sophisticated characters, in this case, those of Prince Paul and of The Czar, respectively.

22. Newton, “Nihilists of Castelbar!,” 43-4. The manuscript in question, a 169-page autograph notebook, is held in the Clark Library (Wilde W6712M2 V473). It comprises heavily corrected drafts, in varying stages of completion, of Acts I, II, III and IV. Newton refers to this document as the “first draft” of the play, but we do not know this for certain. A fragmentary draft of part of Act I, which differs from all other extant witnesses, and which is contained in another early notebook, most of which is filled with jottings on Roman history, suggests that Wilde probably made multiple early drafts of his play. (This notebook is held in the Beinecke Library, Oscar Wilde Collection, GEN MSS 275, Box 1, Folder 24). The Clark MS is also cited by Elizabeth C. Miller (discussed below), who identifies another line which, she claims, “makes much more sense in the Irish context than the Russian one” (Miller, “Reconsidering Wilde’s *Vera; or, The Nihilists*,” in *Wilde Discoveries: Traditions, Histories, Archives*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 73. That critics like Newton (and indeed Aideen Kerr, cited below (see note 30)) are working only with a partial knowledge of *Vera*’s complex textual genesis can be seen in the fact that neither render the play’s title accurately: Newton gives it as *Vera; or the Nihilists*; Kerr as *Vera or the Nihilists*. In both the 1880 and 1882 texts it is given as *Vera; or, The Nihilists*; while publicity for the 1883 performance announced it as *Vera or, The Nihilist*.

23. The idea was of a “modern” Nihilist spirit—meaning the Russian revolutionaries of the 1870s and 1880s, rather than the intellectual Nihilists of the 1860s—forming a “vast conspiracy” (“Art VII. Russia Before and After the War,” *Edinburgh Review*, 151 (Jan. 1880), 208) which was threatening to “penetrate all Europe,” with “every country” having its own Nihilists (“Art V. The Revolutionary Movement in Russia,” *British Quarterly Review*, 142 (April 1888), 407). Vaninskaya, like Newton, also draws attention to this interest in “international terrorists,” but notes that “in the Russian context” such terrorists “could also be seen as freedom fighters,” which in turn explains “Nihilist novels and drama’s occasional willingness to step into the shoes of the enemy,” as well as the appeal of the “young Englishman in league with the foreign Nihilist,” as found in Wilde’s “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” (Vaninskaya, “Truth About Russia,” 254). The singularity and seductiveness of the Russian terrorist, especially when in the guise of an aristocrat (like Wilde’s courtier-turned Nihilist, Prince Paul), has also been commented on by Choi Chatterjee. He explains this

phenomena as an element of a general Western fascination with the luxury of Russian court life, and a parallel appreciation of the vulnerability of all classes in an autocratic regime (see Chatterjee, “Transnational Romance, Terror, and Heroism: Russia in American Popular Fiction, 1860-1917,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50. 3 (2008), 753-77).

24. Evidence for this purging comes from a pattern of revision seen in emendations marked up to three copies of the 1882 edition of *Vera*, which were almost certainly used during preparations for the 1883 staging. Only one copy—that cited earlier (see note 4) belonging to Robert Ross and bequeathed to the British Library—is extant; the emendations to the other two copies are documented by, respectively: Stuart Mason [Christopher Millard] in his *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1908), 274-81; and Leonard Smithers in his 1902, privately-printed, pirated edition of the 1882 text. Although Smithers’s reliability is often questioned by Wilde critics, in this instance there is strong corroborating evidence—both from the pattern of emendations and from comments by Mason (254) about the provenance of Smithers’s edition—to suggest that the variants he reports have authority. Notably, their authority is accepted by Reed.

25. Apprehension about a Europe-wide Nihilist conspiracy was typically tempered by a condescending incredulity that anyone in the West could take Nihilism seriously. For example, Fritz Cunliffe Owen in an article on “Russian Nihilism” in the *Nineteenth Century*, 35 (January 1880), 1-26—a periodical that Wilde later published in—felt that in the long run Nihilist protests would prove as “fleeting and unstable as are most of the impulses and ideals of the Russian mind” (24). Summarizing various Nihilist doctrines, Owen further observed: “To Western Europeans it is almost utterly incomprehensible how thousands of human beings can entertain such notions as have now been quoted; and above all, how they can have been adopted to such an extent as to form a menace to the Government” (10).

26. Ellmann suggests that while at Oxford Wilde had made a sustained effort to disguise his Irish origins, including his Irish accent, “remaking his speech” into a “stately and distinct English which astonished its hearers” (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 37).

27. Evidence of these difficulties can be found in Wilde’s correspondence during the winter of 1879-80, where he lists among his “troubles” the “impossibility of getting rents” from properties owned in Ireland (*Complete Letters*, eds. Holland and Hart-Davis, 84-9)

28. Newton, ““Nihilists of Castelbar!,”” 39.

29. Sarah Cole, “Dynamite Violence and Literary Culture,” *Modernism/Modernity*, 16. 2 (2009), 307.

30. Elizabeth C. Miller, *Framed: The New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 204-5; see also Miller's later, more detailed discussion of the work in "Reconsidering Wilde's *Vera*". Miller's political recuperation of *Vera* is framed in opposition to Julie Buckler's assessment of it as a play which "affirms essentially conservative values in politics *and* art" (Buckler, "Melodramatizing Russia: Nineteenth-Century Views from the West," in *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia*, eds. Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuburger (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 66; quoted in Miller, "Reconsidering Wilde's *Vera*," 63). This is also a line of argument pursued by Aideen Kerr in "Re-considering Oscar Wilde's Flamboyant Flop: *Vera or The Nihilists*," in *Ireland, Memory and Performing the Historical Imagination*, Christopher Collins and Mary P. Caufield, eds. (London: Palgrave, Macmillan: 2014), 55-68.

31. Miller, "Reconsidering Wilde's *Vera*," 77.

32. *Ibid.*, 77-9.

33. The Clark MS shows that the line in which Vera compares herself to "the spirit of Charlotte Corday" was at one point struck out, although it was reinstated in a slightly later speech. (Analogies between Vera Zasulich and Corday were common at the time, although sometimes disapproved of; see, for example, the comments by the Russian émigré writer, Elizaveta Bezobrazova in her piece "In Russia," in the *Contemporary Review*, 32 (June 1878), 602.) The marked-up copy of the 1882 printing that formed the basis of Smithers's 1902 edition of the play—see note 24 above—indicates that the reference to Corday was later excised altogether, including probably from the performance text, given that the Smithers' reported variants appear to supersede those marked up in the Ross's copy of the 1882 text, as well as those reported by Mason.

34. Miller acknowledges this correspondence but does not pursue in detail its relevance for the writing of the play. She sees Prescott's desire for what publicity material termed a role that would give "excellent scope for the emotional powers of the Star" as of a piece with the choice of flamboyant vermillion silk for her costume, and Wilde's interest in "female glamour inflected with female violence" (69). My own reading of the textual evidence and of the costuming choices suggests that relations between Wilde and Prescott, despite the polite tone of their correspondence, may have been fraught, with evidence of some tension over the balance between the play's personal and political themes and its witty and tragic elements. Wilde lengthened the Prologue at Prescott's request to demonstrate Vera's desire for revenge coming from maternal instincts (in the exchanges with Little Nicholas) and filial love for her

brother, Dimitri. Likewise, the changes Prescott asked to be made to Vera's speeches in Act IV placed the emphasis, conventionally, on the power of her love for Alexis. In this respect Laurence Senelick's view of the title role, as having been "obviously tailored to provide a diva with an opportunity to display a kaleidoscope of emotions" is more of a piece with the textual evidence (Senelick, "For God, for Czar, for Fatherland': Russians on the British Stage from Napoleon to the Great War," in *Russia in Britain, 1880-1940*, eds. Rebecca Beasley and Philip Ross Bullock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 28).

35. Miller, "Reconsidering Wilde's *Vera*," 66.

36. Miller acknowledges that Vera is not "a mimetic reflection of a real-life woman," and that its "hodge-podge of referents" suggest that the play was not intended as a "reflection of life, but a pastiche of women's images in a modern, visually orientated public sphere" (ibid., 67). Her discussion of those images does not, by and large, include references to those found in portrayals of Nihilists in popular fiction and on the stage.

37. My appreciation of the wealth and variety of Nihilist-themed fiction and drama in the late nineteenth century, and its relevance to the fate of Wilde's *Vera*, is indebted to scholars such as Senelick and Vaninskaya who have brought to light hundreds of references to what might usefully be termed "literary" Nihilism in British culture in the late 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. (See Senelick, "For God, for Czar, for Fatherland'" and Vaninskaya, "Truth About Russia"; Vaninskaya in turn cites the pioneering work of Meri-Jane Rochelson, for example in her "Networking Nihilists: Russian Nihilists in the British Periodical Press, 1880-1900," presented at the annual meeting of the North American Victorian Studies Association, Maddison, WI, September 2012.) That this material was extensive in both Britain and America helps explain Wilde's and Prescott's need to deal, before the plays' opening, with a potential suit for copyright infringement (see Mason, *Bibliography*, 268-9).

38. Vaninskaya, "Truth About Russia," 249.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 248.

41. Senelick, "For God, for Czar, for Fatherland,'" 25, 27.

42. Ibid., 27.

43. See Hopkins, *The True History of Nihilism: Its Words and Deeds* (London: Diprose and Bateman, 1880). Hopkins's title disguises—deliberately so, we may presume—his novel's fictional status. Like Wilde, Hopkins was a writer who worked in several genres, including popular fiction, drama (tragedy and farce) and occasional journalism. A collection of his "Cosmopolitan Sketches" originally appearing in the *Cosmopolitan* newspaper was reprinted

in 1867; an anonymous contemporary reviewer of the volume described Hopkins's literary style as "coarse," reminiscent of the "flashy habiliments in which the merchants of St Mary Axe array themselves on gala days" and of possessing a "smartness" which was "most effective when it daringly insults good taste" (*Athenaeum*, 2046 (12 Jan. 1867), 48)—a description that well characterizes the tone of *The True History*.

44. *Ibid.*, 8-30.

45. *Ibid.*, 132.

46. *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, IV, Criticism*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 172.

47. Hopkins, *The True History*, 116-8, 137.

48. *Ibid.*, 5.

49. Miller's reading of *Vera* suggests that the play troubled audiences because it "took the issues at stake in Russian nihilism and Irish nationalism—imperialism, state oppression, dynamite terror—and extracted them from a familiar realistic framework, so they took on an altogether different cast" ("Reconsidering Wilde's *Vera*," 72). My suggestion is that Wilde was by no means the only, nor indeed the first, to treat Nihilist violence in what Miller terms "non-mimetic" ways. "Unrealistic excess" was commonplace in contemporary fictional and theatrical treatments of Nihilists, and to appreciate the full significance of Wilde's effort, what is required is a systematic analysis—as Vaninskaya suggests—of the whole "spate" of fictional Nihilists parading across the 1880s stage and page ("Truth About Russia," 248).

50. The English translation of Gagneur's novel had apparently been brought to Wilde's attention by Clara Morris, an English actress (originally, Fanny Mary Whitehead) whom he had hoped might take the title role in a production of *Vera*, but who had apparently been put off the subject on reading *A Nihilist Princess*. Writing about the matter to D'Oyly Carte, Wilde had dismissed Gagneur's novel as "a sham" and "empty of all dramatic matter," explaining that Miss Morris should not "be afraid of it" (*Complete Letters*, eds. Holland and Hart-Davis, 152). It is not clear, whether Wilde had read the story before making this judgement, or had read it very thoroughly, because "drama" was hardly what *A Nihilist Princess* lacked, whether of character or of action.

51. M. L. Gagneur, *A Nihilist Princess*, translated from the French (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Company, (1881). General Fedor Trepov was the governor of St. Petersburg whom Zasluch had attempted to assassinate, shooting him through the groin. He survived the attack, and her subsequent trial and acquittal became a cause célèbre in the western press in the late 1870s.

52. Ibid., 22-3. The original Nihilist ethos of the 1860s, as associated with writings of Chernyshevsky, had centred on a critique of the family and of parental control (especially among gentry families) over children's choice of marriage partners; as Chernyshevsky depicted it in *What is to be done?*, that freedom typically took the form of women contracting "fictional marriages" to escape from patriarchal control, a practice which in turn led Nihilism to be associated (however incorrectly) with sexual license, even though the point of such marriages were that they were in name only. Although not translated into English, Chernyshevsky's novel was often referred to in the western press, as for example in Fritz Cunliffe Owen's detailed summary of it in his account of Nihilism in the January 1880 issue of the *Nineteenth Century* (see note 25). For Owen, as for other commentators, the Nihilist "fictional marriage" was a source of much incredulity.

53. "Subterranean Russia," *Saturday Review*, 54. 1398 (12 August 1882), 215. See also Barbara Alpern Engel, *Mothers and Daughters of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 110-11). Clara Morris's reported anxiety about *A Nihilist Princess* was possibly due to worries that in playing Wilde's own Vera she might be identified not with the shy, empathetic Zasluch, but with the altogether more forceful, unrepentant and unchaste Perovskaya.

54. Richard Stites, *The Woman's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978, 1990), 147. Those who knew Perovskaya personally presented a different picture, of a woman whose implacable hostility to her political foes and coolness under pressure coexisted with a "maternal tenderness for 'the people'" (147), and who retained her dignity throughout her trial, including on the scaffold. On the eve of her execution Perovskaya was reported to have told her mother: "I have lived according to my convictions; I could not have acted otherwise, and so I await the future with a clear conscience" (Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia, 1700-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83.

55. Kerr, "Re-considering Oscar Wilde's Flamboyant Flop," 60.

56. As Engel explains of Russian radical women in general, "When they rebelled against the confining aspects of the traditional female role, [Russian] women often drew upon ideals of altruism and self-sacrifice that were rooted in religious tradition . . . Despite the radical women's more visible role, their moral aspirations and rationale for activism resembled those of their law-abiding sisters" (*Women in Russia*, 85).

57. Ralston, "Russian Revolutionary Literature," *Nineteenth Century*, 1. 3 (May 1877), 400-1. Ralston's comments related to the failed "going to the people" movement, or "populism,"

that began in 1874 and involved a crusade into the countryside to integrate with and radicalize the Russian peasantry. As was noted by contemporary commentators, most of the students who took part, and which included a high proportion of young women, were drawn from the educated gentry class, and it was the distance between their interests and those of the Russian peasantry whom they hoped to politicize, that was routinely cited as the reason for their failure. (see, for example, Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 141-5).

58. "Subterranean Russia," *Saturday Review*, 54. 1398 (12 August 1882), 215.

59. *Ibid.*

60. "A Female Nihilist," *Saturday Review*, 50, 1295 (21 August 1880), 240.

61. Edward Lawrence Levy, *Russian Nihilism, etc. Paper Read Before the Members of the Alliance Literary & Debating Society*. Published by Request [1881]. Modern critics often point to Stepnyak as the most significant source for British views about Russia and Russian Nihilists. However, although Stepnyak, as a reviewer of his *Underground Russia* had noted, was contemptuous of French novelists' attempts to "make capital" out of Nihilism (*Saturday Review*, 12 August 1882, 215) —almost certainly Stepnyak had Lavigne in mind—it was Lavigne's fictional Nihilists that were recommended to British readers as the more reliable, perhaps because the Frenchman's portrayal of the *nigilistka* was considered less romanticized.

62. Some of these details are taken from the on-line *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. <https://www-oxforddnb-com>. Accessed 27.8.19

63. Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, 202.

64. "A Female Nihilist," *Saturday Review*, 240.

65. "A Female Nihilist," *Examiner*, 3784 (7 August 1880), 948-9.

66. A further possibility is that Wilde's attempt in *Vera* to play Nihilism for both tragedy and humour simultaneously may have left his audience confused as to his intentions. In the Clark MS Prince Paul has a more prominent role than in either of the printed texts of the play and is given more witty one-liners. At this early stage of composition, Wilde's interest seems to lie in the power dynamics between the male characters and the opportunities that interactions between Nihilists and courtiers offered for the kind of urbane banter that would later become the staple of the society comedies.

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