

# Oscillating Utopias: Oscar Wilde and the Utopian Discourse of Metamodernism<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The paper focuses on two literary periods located at opposite ends of the twentieth century and examines the relationship between utopian ideas of Victorian *fin de siècle* and the re-emergence of utopian desires within a metamodernist context. The two periods discussed, while separated by a century of what is typically understood as progress, are both permeated by impending change and in dire need of alternatives to their respective forms of capitalism, making the appearance of utopian discourse almost inevitable. While their understanding of utopia certainly differs in many aspects, I will argue that they both recognize its oscillatory potential and neither focuses on bare facilitation of escapism or provision of blueprints, instead consciously employing hope-based utopian impulses as a method and a process by means of which various alternatives can be continuously investigated.

**Keywords:** utopia, Oscar Wilde, aestheticism, metamodernism, oscillation

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout literary history, utopia has proved to be a resilient phenomenon that is continuously being rehabilitated and re-evaluated, stubbornly defying regular and numerous pronouncements of its demise (see Kumar). Literary utopias have taken on many shapes and forms and vary greatly in terms of focus, covering an impressive array of sometimes contradictory themes, beliefs and convictions across the political and social spectra (see Elliott, Levitas, Fortunati and Trousson, Jameson, Fitting, Tower Sargent, *Utopianism*, Vieira, Kloeg, Virant, Changizi). Utopian ideas have been developed and refined by legions of thinkers, writers and political theorists, each offering their own vision of what a(n) (im)perfect society might look like and using utopia to engage with important social and political questions of their respective periods. From exemplary to dystopian societies, socialist, anarchist, theocratic and feminist utopian worlds to technological, agricultural, environmental, global and futuristic ideals of existence, utopia's plasticity (as a literary genre and beyond) can be observed in its continuous resurgence and reexamination in spite of frequent negative criticism denouncing its relevance and branding it, among other things, "a self-indulgent surrender to fantasy, an act of political escapism, or at the very least unscientific" (Kloeg 208).

Continuities and discontinuities between different utopian traditions are many and diverse. The present paper aims to address one such unlikely relationship by focusing on two literary phenomena engirdling the twentieth century, namely Wildean aestheticism of the late nineteenth and metamodernism<sup>2</sup> of the early twenty-first century. In spite of the large temporal gap of over one hundred years between them, both periods are characterized by an anticipation of imminent change and a need to address the problems of their own particular forms of capitalism, thereby providing fruitful ground for utopian ideas. As will be argued, both exhibit utopian impulses that differ from utopias (or, more accurately, dystopias) typical of the twentieth century in that they are founded on hope, recognize the oscillatory potential of the utopian phenomenon, and do not solely facilitate escapism or suggest a goal to be reached, but rather use utopianism as a tool or strategy with which to repeatedly explore different possibilities in full awareness of the limitations of their endeavour.

2 In the context of this paper, metamodernism is understood as the relatively recent, still evolving and much debated cultural and literary movement as conceived by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker ("Notes on Metamodernism"). Metamodernism emerged as one of numerous responses to the assumed end of postmodernism and is characterised by a departure from its ironic, deconstructionist, and skeptical tendencies. With its oscillation between sincerity and irony, embracing of multiplicity and paradox, revisiting of grand narratives and explorations of authenticity, it appears to be one of the possible responses to the uncertainties and complexities of the present time, making it a subject worthy of closer inspection.

I propose that both Oscar Wilde's aestheticism and metamodernism as conceived by Vermeulen and van den Akker perceive utopia as a shifting and elusive concept that is constantly being redefined and reimagined, making oscillation its primary characteristic. If that is indeed the case, the contemporary understanding of utopia as an ongoing process, in fact, predates the failures of totalitarian political regimes of the twentieth century that are frequently seen as instigators of the end of the notion of utopia as a blueprint for the future. Or, as Oscar Wilde writes in his most palpably utopian work, the essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", utopia appears to be "the one country at which Humanity is always landing" (18) already during the late Victorian period. "And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail" (*ibid.*), in full and conscious pursuit of the unattainable or, in metamodernist parlance, "the impossible possibility".

## FROM NOWHERE TO EVERYWHERE: THE EVOLUTION OF UTOPIA

Reflecting the perennial human desire for an improved way of life in a substantially better world, the idea of utopia has long been a subject of ongoing debate in the fields of literature and philosophy, as well as political sciences. The origins of this search for an ideal society can be traced at least as far back as the ancient Greek philosopher Plato's *The Republic*, although the term utopia was notably only coined and introduced by Sir Thomas More in his eponymous work of 1516, which is considered one of the first texts of modern political philosophy. In More's *Utopia*, the reader encounters a fictional island community and its seemingly perfect existence that serves as a political and social critique of the shortcomings of contemporary European society. More's systematic and targeted representation of his ideal society made *Utopia* a foundational work of a new literary genre, although the latter only came to be known as utopia in the nineteenth century (Fitting 121).

Lyman Tower Sargent has repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that utopia is a "multi-dimensional phenomenon" ("Three Faces" 4) that requires its different aspects and uses (which Tower Sargent defines as the literary, the communitarian, and utopian social theory) to be studied systematically and individually, a task made difficult by the fact that these very aspects can frequently be intricately linked. The abundance of present-day definitions across disciplines (see Stillman 220, Moylan 77, Fitting 125) highlights what an inherently contradictory phenomenon utopia is, exhibiting its ambiguity not only in terms of its characteristics

but also through its very etymology.<sup>3</sup> Utopia itself therefore displays a “perennial duality of meaning” (Vieira 5) in that it is simultaneously a place and a non-place, “constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial” (ibid. 4) or, in other words, oscillation between the two.

Defying the very nature of a neologism’s purpose, the term *utopia* is today also used to refer to texts that were written much before More’s own, or to simply “allude to a tradition of thought that is founded on the consideration, by means of fantasy, of alternative solutions to reality” (ibid. 5). More can therefore be credited with inventing the term and shaping the narrative approach associated with it in literature, as well as bringing forward the “tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its fulfillment” (ibid. 6) that was arguably lacking in the works of his predecessors. Yet he could not have invented utopianism itself, as the concept stems from the ever-present and enduring human desire for a better existence, particularly during times of societal discontent.

Many literary utopias follow in More’s footsteps by appropriating the genre of travel literature and offering descriptions of idealized and idyllic societies, and even though utopian fiction as a genre has evolved significantly since the sixteenth century and now takes on many different forms, the writers nevertheless continue to use it for the purpose of exploring ideas and visions of ideal societies and critically commenting on the society in which they live. Utopias have retained their inspirational, motivational and juxtapositional significance and are still used to critique the existing situation or the status quo. Some other characteristics of utopia that have persisted through the ages include equality and lack of social stratification or hierarchy, harmonious and peaceful existence, abundance or high standard of living, a just and fair system of laws and governance, and a sense of community and collective well-being.

The perception and definition of the term may have changed over time, but utopia ultimately continues to be largely understood as describing an ideal, better-than-existent society (Tower Sargent, “Necessity” 11), with the term *dystopia* duly introduced in the nineteenth century to describe its opposite – a non-existent, significantly worse society. While utopias flourished throughout the nineteenth century, the two world wars contributed significantly to the fact that dystopias and anti-utopias came to dominate the literary landscape of the twentieth century as, in addition to utopia’s totalitarian connections, fears of technological and scientific advancement being abused or turning against humanity fruitfully fed the dystopian narrative. This era was followed by a brief but vigorous resurgence

3 Tellingly, there is some confusion as to whether More’s coinage was intended to be a combination of the Greek words “ou” and “topos,” meaning “nowhere” or “no place”, or whether it was derived from the combination of “eu” and “topos,” meaning “a good place” or “healthy place”.

of engaged utopianism in Anglo-American fiction in the late 1960s and 1970s, likely originating from the sweeping social upheaval of the period and often taking the form of science fiction. The revival was also accompanied by considerable increase in scholarly activity and publication of some of the seminal works in utopian studies (most notably by Tower Sargent, Elliot and Suvin)<sup>4</sup>. Dystopias returned with a vengeance in the 1980s with the advent of cyberpunk, progressing to critical dystopias (see Moylan 188) and continuing as the dominant form well into the new millennium, when utopian impulses could once again be more clearly identified, including as part of the metamodernist project.

Given the scattered and ambiguous nature of utopia, as well as its closeness to and occasional overlapping with other literary genres (such as science fiction, with Suvin even classifying utopia as merely its “sociopolitical subgenre” (61)), it is not surprising that it has been impossible for scholars to reach a consensus on not only utopia’s definition, but its general influence and relevance, as well as its precise place in (literary) history. One can, however, nevertheless attempt the less gargantuan task of studying utopian impulses within specific contexts and have their incarnations juxtaposed in order to track their progression and address their similarities and differences, as well as their significance in individual periods.

## **‘WHAT IS TRUE ABOUT ART IS TRUE ABOUT LIFE’: THE WILDEAN UTOPIAN THOUGHT**

A period of many contradictions, *fin de siècle* across Europe was widely perceived as a time of decadence and so-called social degeneration, but simultaneously also of hope for a new beginning (Schaffer 3). Enter British Aestheticism, a late nineteenth century phenomenon influenced by French symbolism and exhibiting blatant utopian tendencies in the form of striving for beauty (and therefore a better world, but one specifically devoid of all ugliness) that forms the very basis of Aesthetic philosophy. As a leading figure of what later came to be known as the Aesthetic Movement, Oscar Wilde sought to elevate art and beauty to the highest status in society and make them central to human existence. His understanding of utopia is consequently characterized by a strong focus on aesthetics and a belief that beauty and artistic creation are essential components of a perfect society integral to its social and cultural fabric.

4 Lyman Tower Sargent published the earliest version of “Three Faces of Utopianism” in 1967 and his *British and American Utopian Literature 1516–1975: An Annotated Bibliography* in 1979. Robert Elliott’s influential book *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre* was first published in 1970, while Darko Suvin’s essay “Estrangement and Cognition” appeared in 1972, followed by “Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia” in 1973.

It should be noted that while Wilde's works often touch upon utopian ideas, he only uses the term explicitly in two of his essays ("The Critic as Artist" and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", both first published in 1891), leading Nunokawa to somewhat harshly accuse him of his "card-carrying involvement with the tradition of utopian prophecy [being] as brief as the length of a single essay" (95). Ironically, Wilde's statement made in this very essay about progress being the realization of utopias is repeatedly quoted as "a matter almost of convention" (Beaumont 13) in utopian scholarship and is perhaps one of the most famous proclamations on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Wilde is certainly not an author of literary utopias as such, but his works undeniably do exhibit what Fitting refers to as a "utopian impulse" (126). In his writing he, for example, frequently alludes to the idea that utopian desires are individual and personal in nature, and created through one's own experiences and perspectives, such as in the protagonist's pursuit of pleasure in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*<sup>6</sup> or Algernon's invention of 'bunburying' in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. While Geoghegan believes Wilde "recognized the centrality of utopia for human progress" (139), I would add that this utopia was not, as might be assumed, the pursuit of a perfect society, as much as a pursuit of personal fulfillment. For Wilde, utopia was not something that could be achieved through material wealth or societal structures, but was to be created through individual experience, growth and art.

Wilde's utopian beliefs, centred around the idea that individual freedom and creativity are essential to the creation of a just society, are most clearly articulated in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism". The essay is among his least read and analysed works (Kohl 123), for which Pollen blames "its assumed flippancy" and the seeming incompatibility of socialism with Wilde's "champagne life in high society". This contradiction is only one of many in his oeuvre, which is accordingly characterized by his use of aphorisms, epigrams and paradoxes. Wilde was well aware of the fact that utopia itself was a contradictory concept and embraced it as such, complementing it with his own mastery of paradoxical wit and irony by frequently presenting seemingly (or genuinely) conflicting ideas or perspectives and leaving the flummoxed reader to attempt to reconcile them. He, for example, opens his essay with the statement that "Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others" (1) and later informs us that "Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism" (3) and may even be

5 See Beaumont for a detailed discussion on the suitability of quoting Wilde's thoughts on utopia out of context, as well as Wilde's presumed understanding of what constitutes progress.

6 See Fritz and Lesjak for more detailed analyses of utopian experimentation and pleasure in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Fritz discusses the idea that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was a "concrete fictional experiment" (283) in which Wilde put into practice the "abstract utopianism" (ibid.) of his essays.

assisted in its development by Christianity (11). Other paradoxical notions include Wilde lamenting the fact that the existent technological progress appears to be enslaving, rather than liberating humanity (as he envisages machinery taking over menial jobs in allowing people to fulfill their artistic potential) and informing the reader that there “are as many perfections as there are imperfect men” (14), perhaps implying that there are also as many utopias.

Wildean socialism presupposes that everyone would be able to become an artist, i.e., the highest form of existence of man, and live life as if it were an art form. Many of Wilde’s statements may seem naïve and absurd to the reader familiar with the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century, and his seemingly sincere beliefs (such as the one that socialism would help individuals realize their personality) read as bitterly ironic to a cynical postmodern audience, the passage of time only strengthening their contradictory nature. Yet Wilde himself warns strongly against an authoritarian system of government and state socialism<sup>7</sup> that “would celebrate philistinism, and impeach humour, irony, and negative capability” (Pollen), making the text even more perplexing.

Wilde’s choice of title for his best-known essay also misleadingly implies that Wilde may have been a utopian socialist whose ideas coincided with those of Godwin, Owen, or the historical or dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels. An eclectic selection of them does certainly align with various socialist beliefs, yet Wilde’s understanding of socialism generally appears to have very little to do with rule of the proletariat, nor indeed with the significance of work in asserting one’s worth, for in his ideal society individuals should be relieved of the need to work and free to think, create and, most importantly, pursue beauty. The title, combined with the frequent misreading of utopias as necessarily political, creates the expectation of ideological (rather than aesthetic) content that does not fully manifest in the text, although it can certainly be argued that Wilde’s vision is based on a libertarian, anarcho-socialist model partly inspired by his links with (and objections to) the Fabian society and acquaintances with Russian revolutionaries in exile, such as Kravchinsky and Kropotkin (see Pollen, Kuch, Williams for further discussion of Wilde’s politics). Pollen perhaps describes Wilde’s utopia best (in yet another typically Wildean feast of contradictions) as a fusion of the artistic sensibility of the Romantics and the rebellious spirit of Russian anarcho-communism, with a pinch of Rousseau and the classics thrown in for good measure.

Wilde does agree with Marxists that, in order to initiate positive changes in society, the first adjustments to occur must be those to the existent economic

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7 Wilde makes an assertion particularly amusing to the modern reader when he states: “I hardly think that any Socialist, nowadays, would seriously propose that an inspector should call every morning at each house to see that each citizen rose up and did manual labour for eight hours” (7).



situation (i.e., abolition of private property and dismantling of traditional power structures), yet there are also many aspects of his politics that oppose common socialist beliefs, not least his insistence on an individual rather than communal utopia once the conditions for it had been established. His biographer Richard Ellman has likely accurately described his politics as originating in a “general hatred of tyranny” (121), rather than ideological belief, which may account for his venturing closer to ethical socialist thought of his time. Socialist thinkers generally viewed utopia as a catalyst, as did Wilde, but felt morally obligated to devise concrete solutions that would lead to a better tomorrow, which is not a tendency particularly explicit in Wilde’s writing. Marxist thinkers, like utopian socialists (such as Owen, Fourier and Saint-Simon) before them, presented utopia as something that could be and should be accomplished, with the end goal clearly defined as the emergence of an ideal society, and many of Wilde’s contemporaries influenced by these ideas would perceive history and human progress in a similar way. Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, calls for the establishment of conditions that would lead to constant reinvention, effectively placing socialist utopia at the beginning and not the end of the process.

Wilde’s views on utopia perhaps appear to broadly coincide with those of his Victorian contemporaries such as G.B. Shaw or William Morris, whose *News from Nowhere* is often seen as the most representative utopia of the period and shares many similarities with Wilde’s essay.<sup>8</sup> Yet careful reading of Wilde’s work reveals them to be much more complex, ambiguous and closely linked to the contradictory nature of utopia than appears at first sight, mostly due to the abundance of paradox in his writing. Beaumont (drawing heavily on Eagleton) continuously emphasizes how Wilde’s writing appears to exhibit contentment with “the bourgeois narrative of history” (20) and poses as nothing more than a product of its age, while on the other hand continuously challenging, upsetting and subverting this very narrative. Amusingly, Wilde somehow seems to be attempting to combine what Jameson believes Utopians are trying to achieve with what they are not, aiming simultaneously “at the alleviation and elimination of the sources of exploitation and suffering” and “the composition of blueprints for bourgeois comfort” (12).

Wilde’s works in general are famous for portraying Victorian society in satirical and ironic ways, exposing the absurdity, hypocrisy and inefficacy of its morality, values and conventions in ways that this same Victorian society found amusing. The profusion of paradox and contradiction in Wilde’s work (and “The Soul of Man” in particular) leads to the creation of an oscillating dynamism which obscures any

8 See Flaherty and Davis for comparisons of the two works. While the individuals of Morris’ utopia are artisans who continue to work because they find it a pleasurable activity, Wilde’s ideal society consists of artists that practice “cultivated leisure” (18).



potential final objectives, confirming that Wilde does not perceive utopia as a goal in itself, but already understands it as an ongoing process of transformation. His famous quotation about progress being the realization of Utopias has been much used and discussed, but little emphasis has been placed on the fact that Wilde does not speak of utopias in the singular, but in the plural. Wilde's idea of a utopian existence is one of enabling unrestricted artistic creation, an action that continues to construct new worlds, constantly redefining and reimagining. "Process, the energy in being, the refusal of finality, which is not the same thing as the refusal of completeness, sets art, all art, apart from the end-stop world" (Winterson in Wagner-Lawlor 234-235).

The value of Wilde's utopian contribution, as well as the political dimension of Wilde's work, are complex questions that cannot be discussed here in detail due to spatial constraints,<sup>9</sup> so this section is necessarily limited to the aspects essential to understanding the arguments for Wilde's utopia as an oscillatory phenomenon and an ongoing transformative process, with beauty as the only (apparent, yet vague and subjective) constant. It is hopefully nevertheless evident from the above that the key elements of Wilde's utopia are not socialism or class struggle, nor indeed any other political conviction, but paradox, the ensuing oscillation and, most importantly, artistic creation. His perplexingly contradictory ideas, so facetiously presented and so evidently unfeasible, are such on purpose, acknowledging the dangers of prescriptivism and encouraging us to use our imagination to consider various alternatives. It is important to note that in "The Soul of Man", Wilde already "tap-dances between satire and sincerity, a dance Wilde perfected" (Pollen) and resorted to in many of his works, the "tap-dancing" being nothing more than constant oscillation informed by a sentiment not unlike what metamodernists will later come to term "informed naivety".

## REIMAGINING UTOPIA: NAVIGATING THE METAMODERN LANDSCAPE

Fast-forward to a century later, after the failure of numerous political visions, regimes and revolutions had left in its wake a disgraced and diminished utopia inevitably associated with the totalitarian state and political agendas. The twentieth century did away with the optimistic expectations for the future that were typical of the previous centuries and resorted to dystopian discourse<sup>10</sup> fuelled by

9 Consult Fritz (286-292) for an overview of criticism regarding the value of Wilde's utopian contribution.

10 An interesting parallel can be drawn here with the eighteenth (and, particularly in Britain, also part of the nineteenth) century, similarly characterised by discrediting of utopias. While the twentieth century sought to ridicule the constructive, hopeful and positive spirit of utopia (which it perceived as naïve and absurd) by resorting to dystopian writing, the eighteenth century did much the same through the prevailing use of its predecessors, satirical utopia (the most famous example of which are the works of Jonathan Swift) and anti-utopian writing.

general disappointment in humanity and its unwillingness to act as a force for good, with the notable exception of the hopeful works resulting from the counter-culture movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. This brief revival of the idealistic utopian ethos in the form of so-called critical utopias featured predominantly Anglo-American writings that were influenced by the optimism of the flower power generation and the emergence of the New Left, as well as feminist, gay and lesbian, civil rights and other movements that rebelled against various social injustices. Because these utopias nevertheless emerged after the ordeal of the two world wars, amidst dystopian discourses that preceded and followed them, they were also much more aware of the shortcomings and failures of utopian experimentation. Critical utopias consequently present us with worlds, societies and futures that may be better, but are by no means perfect or final.

In *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch famously identifies hope as the central notion of utopianism,<sup>11</sup> yet we can see from the history of literary utopias that the presence and focal role of hope varies dramatically and only develops gradually.<sup>12</sup> According to Vieira, it is only with the arrival of echronias (utopias placed in the future) in the last decades of the eighteenth century that we begin to see utopian hope replacing utopian wish (9). Marxist thought also built on the idea of looking at the future with hope by perceiving utopia as a projection of a realistic possibility, which is why its inability to deliver on this promise resulted in an entire century of dystopian writing that denounced utopian dreaming as flippant, incongruent and therefore irrelevant. Yet, according to Wagner-Lawlor (237), a utopian process that effectively performs Bloch's principle of Hope makes utopias a form of "transitive imagining, and not immobile ideologic constructions" (ibid.), with its plastic nature inviting us to express wonder, in Wagner-Lawlor's opinion "the most reliable and objective sign of hope" (ibid.).

Following decades of postmodern incredulity, cynicism, scepticism, deconstruction and general meaninglessness, it would appear that hope once again glimmers on the horizon and with it yet another reappraisal of utopia. Postmodernism has had a lasting impact on contemporary art and culture through various discursive and ideological approaches, but is now in decline and can no longer be perceived as the dominant cultural force (see, for instance, Kirby and Hutcherson). Its abating has led to the rise of a new and still evolving sensibility that has already acquired many names and definitions, among the more prominent

11 Fitting (126) complains about Bloch's influence making it possible to find the utopian impulse in just about any literary work, leading to designations of non-utopian works as utopias.

12 Utopias of the Renaissance period, for example, can be seen as "expressions of the utopist's wishes, not of his hope" (Vieira 9), in the sense that the individuals inhabiting utopian settings do not "envision their lives as a process of becoming" (ibid.) and consequently there is no further progress once the utopian society had been set up.

that of metamodernism as identified by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. Metamodernism is a relatively recent cultural and intellectual trend that arose as a response to postmodernism and is characterized by a simultaneous embrace of both modern(ist) and postmodern(ist) ideas. It is among the more prominent among numerous attempts<sup>13</sup> to map and analyse the elusive and volatile landscape of the presently still emerging post-postmodernist sensibility<sup>14</sup> and perceived to be ontologically oscillating, most notably between modern sincerity and postmodern irony, consequently encouraging a form of deliberate pragmatic idealism within which utopias can once again be reimagined.

With metamodernist research still very much in its infancy, one of its few characteristics that most scholars seem to agree upon is the pronounced manifestation of utopian impulses. Signs of utopia's re-emergence have in recent years been observed in various cultural contexts, from art and architecture (see Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes" and "Utopia, Sort of", Turner) to visual media (see MacDowell, Šporčič) and written works (see Southward), confirming that humanity had not lost its ability to think of alternatives and utopia "as a trope, individual desire or collective fantasy [...] is once more, and increasingly, visible and noticeable across artistic practices" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Utopia, Sort of" 57). Utopian impulses, alongside a yearning for meaning, have a tendency to appear in times of uncertainty, be it due to political, financial or, as is the case for our generation, medical and ecological crises. While the late nineteenth century sought a "social alternative to industrial capitalism" (Beaumont 23), the twenty-first is preoccupied and "characterized by a deepening of the neoliberalization of the institutional constellations surrounding [...] capitalism" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Utopia, Sort of" 57) that appear to have elicited a renewed sense of empathy and hope.<sup>15</sup>

Metamodernism makes extensive use of paradox and irony in all art forms, yet unlike postmodernism it aims to re- rather than de-construct while searching for new forms of meaning and authenticity. It recognizes the importance of multiple perspectives and the interplay of different cultural and historical traditions,

13 We can find very similar ideas categorised under various labels such as altermodernism, hypermodernism, digimodernism, remodernism, automodernism, renewalism, performatism, and transmodernity, to name but a few. These "-isms" tend to focus on different aspects of art and popular culture, with metamodernism being the most appropriate for our purpose due to its focus on utopia and paradox.

14 "Post-postmodernism" is not a universally accepted or clearly defined term, as different thinkers and scholars use it in various ways, and it therefore remains a somewhat controversial subject of ongoing debate. In this paper the term is employed in its broadest sense of describing the cultural and intellectual phase beyond the peak of postmodernism, as well as the critical responses to its limitations and excesses.

15 For further elaboration on the re-emergence of utopia within metamodernism see Šporčič.

consequently embracing the hopefulness of utopia alongside its ambiguity and fluidity, the two enabling the balancing of postmodern skepticism towards grand narratives and ideologies with modernist optimism towards progress and the possibility of a better future. The metamodern discourse, therefore, ends up actively committing itself to an impossible possibility, since it does not acknowledge any objective of history that could be realized, yet nevertheless decides to pursue it.

The metamodernist concept of informed naivety (which Vermeulen and van den Akker also describe as “pragmatic idealism” (“Notes” 5) and Turner as “a moderate fanaticism”) is not dissimilar to that of contemporary utopia, as it also stands against postmodernist dystopian resignation and acceptance of all efforts as futile by providing the methodology for exploring different alternatives. And much like Wildean paradox, informed naivety represents a situation in which one seeks to occupy simultaneously “two opposing or alternative ideological positions [...] that in some way negate one another” (Southward 78). Yet in attempting to “turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes” 8) metamodernism never ceases to try and “attain some sort of transcendent position, *as if* such a thing were within our grasp” (Turner).

Paradox is employed as a sophisticated narrative technique across literary periods and genres, but its use and objective tend to differ. According to Barbieri, “metamodern paradox is unique in the sense that it does not seek to resolve the paradox,” yet this could also be claimed of some (although certainly not all) instances in Wilde’s writing. Wilde obviously revels in the ambiguity and complexity of paradoxical statements and does not always use them as a way to reconcile and navigate the tension between different perspectives and ideas. Barbieri also points out that, in the case of metamodernism, the contradiction often manifests itself through the existential nature of the work itself being paradoxical (such as, for example, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996)), which could easily apply to Wilde’s “The Soul of Man” as well. Both Wilde and metamodernism also use paradox in more traditional ways, as a means of exploring the complexities and contradictions of society, challenging conventional ways of thinking and encouraging readers to question their assumptions and beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Yet what enables us to really draw relevant parallels between them is their awareness of oscillatory

16 Note, for example, the simultaneous isolation and interconnectedness of David Mitchell’s narratives in *Cloud Atlas* (2004) or *Ghostwritten* (1999), the juxtaposition of humour and critique in the works of Zadie Smith, or the blurring of truth and subjective reality/fiction in Scarlett Thomas’ *The End of Mr. Y* (2006) or Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000). While the works mentioned do exhibit characteristics associated with metamodernism, such as narrative complexity or oscillation between sincerity and irony, it is important to note that their classification as metamodernist is a subject of ongoing literary discussion.

potential as a means of perpetual (re)creation of perfection through art. It was with Wilde that utopia became “a strategy of creativity, clearing the way for the only path that man can possibly follow: the path of creation” (Vieira 23), and it is with metamodernism that it adapts itself to the demands of the present time, once again beating the odds and proving that it is alive and well.

## CONCLUSION

Utopias reside between reality and fiction, oscillating between the two in order to extrapolate ideas that could potentially be adopted (or discarded). Although utopias have typically always been critical of the present, they did not necessarily always provide new avenues for exploration, and once they did begin to project their ideal societies into the future they frequently saw their establishment as the end goal, as opposed to a continuous process. Today they continue to provide speculative discourse within which alternative social organisations can be investigated, yet have ceased to be equated with achievable perfection and, as we have seen, this already occurred even before they fell victim to postmodern incredulity. Both the notion of social harmony that is not interpreted as sameness and the idea of utopia as a process and not the final solution therefore far predate Suvin’s *novum* that “does not close off the possibility of alterity, but introduces it continuously” (Wagner-Lawlor 234), as the continuously regenerating *novum* is present in Wilde’s utopia in the form of artistic creation and individuality.

Both Wilde and metamodernists object to the utopian tradition of establishing societies based on repressive, rigid rules and regulations designed to impose order, peace and/or equality. Instead of being suspicious of and sacrificing the mercurial individual for the good of the utopian society as a whole, they see individuality as an advantage, focusing much more on the anthropological, rather than ideological, capacity of utopia. Another parallel could be drawn between Wilde’s interest in the “soul” of man and the heightened attention paid by metamodernism to affect and emotion. Interestingly, both resort to irony and paradox as a delivery mechanism for profound sincerity, and in doing so explore the idea of utopia as a complex, fluid, and paradoxical concept that can never be fully realized, but that remains a source of inspiration and hope in direct opposition to the philosophies that followed (in the case of Wilde) and preceded (in the case of metamodernism) their own. Wilde and the metamodernists also both appear to be aware that a political pursuit of a definitive goal can only end in “dissolution of difference” (Wagner-Lawlor 233), with “exclusion rather than inclusion [...] the ideological motive” (*ibid.*), which is why they strive towards a process utopia instead, a utopia that allows for constant anticipation, deferral, possibility, and consequently, alterity and inclusion.

Oscar Wilde's assertions on this topic may, when encountered out of context, lead us to believe that his views on utopia were typically Victorian, casting the eye back on utopia's bourgeois origins and the simplistic understanding of it as an imagined ideal society of tomorrow, yet Wilde's ideas on the matter should really be perceived as much more complex, ambiguous and inextricably linked to utopia's inherently contradictory nature. The latter emerges as key in relation to both the paradoxical wit exhibited in Oscar Wilde's works *and* oscillation as a central concept of metamodernist thought.

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## Nihajoče utopije: Oscar Wilde in utopični diskurz metamodernizma

Pričujoči prispevek se osredotoča na literarni obdobji neposredno pred 20. stoletjem in po njem ter proučuje povezave med utopičnimi idejami britanske dekadence in ponovnim vznikom utopičnih hrepenenj v metamodernističnem kontekstu. Dasiravno ti dve obdobji loči celo stoletje, ki velja za čas velikega napredka, pa obe prežemata negotovost zaradi neizogibnih sprememb in potreba po alternativah zadevnim kapitalističnim ureditvam, kar privede do ponovnega vznika utopičnega diskurza. Pojmovanje utopije v poznem 19. stoletju se v mnogih vidikih bistveno razlikuje od tistega z začetka 21. stoletja, vendar v prispevku zagovarjam tezo, da je v obeh obdobjih moč zaznati prepoznanje oscilacijskega potenciala utopične misli, hkrati pa tudi preseganje utopije kot zgolj eskapizma, saj lahko v obeh primerih govorimo o zavestni rabi utopije kot metode, s pomočjo katere je mogoče raziskovati in analizirati raznolike alternative obstoječemu stanju. Zunajkontekstualna obravnava odnosa Oscarja Wilda do utopije lahko daje vtis tipično viktorijskega razumevanja tematike, z njenim buržoaznim izvorom vred, kot zgolj izmišljene popolne družbe prihodnosti, vendar je mogoče Wildove ideje razumeti tudi kot mnogo kompleksnejše in tesno vezane na prepoznavanje inherentno nasprotujoče si narave utopije same. Slednja se izkaže za ključno ne le za doseganje paradoksalne humornosti v Wildovih delih, temveč tudi v primeru oscilacije kot osrednjega koncepta metamodernistične misli. Metamodernizem, kot ga opisujeta Vermeulen in van den Akker, je eden izmed vidnejših poskusov analize trenutno še nedorečene krajine post-postmodernistične senzibilnosti, ki naj bi ontološko nenehno nihala, najbolj opazno med moderno odkritostjo in postmoderno ironijo, in posledično spodbujala nekakšen načrten pragmatičen idealizem, znotraj katerega je utopijo znova mogoče (os)misliti.

**Ključne besede:** utopija, Oscar Wilde, esteticizem, metamodernizem, oscilacija