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## DISCUSSION

# The intelligence of artifice: oscar wilde and AI 🗨️

**Recto running head** : TEXTUAL PRACTICE

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**History** :

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## ABSTRACT

Present-day developments in artificial intelligence herald an explosion of the artificial, an expansion of the fabricated across many domains of human activity. The worship of artifice has long been a central thread in studies of modernity from aestheticism and decadence through postmodernism. Oscar Wilde has been a central figure in this conversation. At the turn of the century, Wilde recombined strands inherited from French and American sources and refashioned them into a new artistic stance that anticipated the postmodern preoccupation with fakery. A direct line can be traced between Baudrillard's 'simulacra' and Jameson's 'linguistic masks' and Wilde's celebration of 'the truth of masks' a century earlier. Yet for all that has been said about Wilde and artifice, the task of connecting English literature's silver-tongued champion of artificiality to emerging debates about how artificial intelligence might reshape art and culture has not yet been undertaken. Often literary critics have emphasised the distance between the automated production of text and human acts of poetic making. Here, by considering a human precedent – Wilde – for AI's creative capabilities, we demonstrate how the emergence of new creative models puts pressure on old aesthetic categories and modes of appreciation.

## KEYWORDS

- Artificial intelligence
- style
- aesthetics

- automation
- work
- leisure

It was not thought that fascinated him, but rather the processes by which thought moves. It was the machine he loved, not what the machine makes. – Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist' (1891)<sup>1</sup>

'The first duty in life', Oscar Wilde proclaims, 'is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered'.<sup>2</sup> All writers traffic in artifice. But Wilde embraced artificiality with an unwavering commitment and explicitness that few others have approached and almost none have equalled. The priority of artifice is central to his thought and aesthetic vision. On the page and on the stage, he sought to magnify, rather than conceal, the unreality of his productions, developing a mannered, inflated style filled with glittering paradoxes and willful negations, and creating characters who speak and behave like imitations of human beings. Artificiality is central, as well, as to his ethical vision – or, better, his theory of human development (for to speak of an ethics in Wilde that is even one iota separable from his aesthetics is a highly disputable undertaking). Wilde not only carried out an artistic elevation of the artificial; he also preached artificiality as a value, insisting that it is only by dedicating ourselves to the fictive, the theatrical, and the fabricated that we can realise our personalities.

Wilde's love of artifice and his valuation of the made over the natural takes in not just great monuments of culture (the dialogues of Plato, the paintings of Corot) but the trivial, the frivolous, and the ornamental (the rippling folds of a woman's dress, the foods served at tea in fashionable London circles). Some readers have perceived in his work an evacuation of depth in favour of gleaming surfaces (among the first to accuse Wilde of shallowness, *The Pall Mall Gazette* carped that his writing seemed 'the result of a facile formula, a process of word-shuffling').<sup>3</sup> Others have been troubled by what seems to be, in such works as his 1889 dialogue 'The Decay of Lying', a perverse preference for the false over the true. Do these elements in Wilde's thought reveal an impulsive shallowness? Or does his willful elevation of the superficial and the fabricated constitute a knowing confrontation with an emerging cultural order in which artifice reigns supreme? Part of Wilde's Sphinx-like character is the inculcation of uncertainty as to whether his superficialities contain profundities – not least, whether the claim that all is surface is itself a profound claim or a superficial one.

All this is hardly new. The worship of artifice has long been a central thread in Wildean criticism, as well as in studies of modernity from aestheticism and decadence through postmodernism, and scholars have abundantly debated this attitude's aesthetic, moral, and political implications.<sup>4</sup> At the turn of the century, Wilde recombined strands inherited from French (Baudelaire and Huysmans's cult of the artificial) and American (Poe's corruption of the beautiful) sources and refashioned them into a new artistic stance that anticipated the postmodern preoccupation with fakery. The diagnosis, by leading cultural theorists of the late twentieth century, that postmodern culture is suffused with unreality, such that the 'artificial' has displaced the 'real', is richly foreshadowed in Wilde. A direct line can be traced between Baudrillard's 'simulacra' and Jameson's 'linguistic masks' and Wilde's celebration of 'the truth of masks' a century earlier.<sup>5</sup>

The progress of artifice in contemporary culture is entering a new phase. Present-day developments in artificial intelligence herald an explosion of the artificial, an expansion of the fake and the fabricated across many domains of human activity. For all that has been said about Wilde and artifice, what has not yet been done is the task of connecting English literature's silver-tongued champion of artificiality to emerging debates about how artificial intelligence might reshape art and culture.

The new wave of hype around AI revolves around large language models (LLMs) – like ChatGPT – trained on enormous amounts of text and capable, in turn, of generating on-command text that is passable if often inelegant and factually unreliable (as of this writing). 'For the first time in human history', N. Katherine Hayles notes, 'we engage with machines capable of using natural languages and literary forms that used to be – but are no longer – the unique and distinctive markers of human identity'.<sup>6</sup> The processing and manipulation of language are central both to literature and to LLMs, yet literary creation is rarely invoked in mainstream discussions of AI (even though this is, in many ways, what these text-generating machines are doing). Publishers are hastily grappling with the technology's literary implications. In September 2023, Amazon reduced the number of manuscripts it allows authors to self-publish to three *per day*.<sup>7</sup> Some small publishers, deluged by AI-generated manuscripts, have closed their submissions or even closed shop.<sup>8</sup> Certain larger publishers, electing to serve AI rather than be submerged by it, are leaning on the opaque wording surrounding future technology that is standard in author contracts, and offering their books to LLMs.<sup>9</sup> In May 2024, the parent company of this journal's publisher, Taylor & Francis Group, sold access to its book data for over US\$10 million – and that is just the first tranche. It is reported that Wiley, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press will likely follow suit by offering their catalogues to AI.<sup>10</sup>

And literary critics? For their part, they have generally emphasised the distance between the automated production of text and human acts of poetic making, unfavourably contrasting, for example, the efforts of current AI models with the sonnets of Shakespeare.<sup>11</sup> Here, by considering a human precedent – Wilde – for AI’s creative capabilities, we hope to better understand how the emergence of new creative models puts pressure on old aesthetic categories and modes of appreciation.

To say that Wilde’s intelligent artifice anticipates today’s artificial intelligence is not merely an example of the wordplay of which he was so fond. We can observe numerous parallels between Wilde’s methods of literary composition and the tasks completed by LLMs. The cool inhumanity of his style, his gift for imitation and recombination, and his proclivity for the dialogue – the specific form through which most people engage with conversational AI systems like ChatGPT – are among the features of his writing that look ahead to today’s intelligent machines. Moreover, Wilde explicitly envisions, in his political writing, a world reshaped by labour automation, in which machines free human beings from productive labour. What would human beings do in such a world? Wilde has an answer for that, too. He finds in aesthetic reception – even more than in artistic production – the consummation of our most prized human faculties. In short, Wilde anticipates AI in his artistic protocols and gives us tools for living under the sovereignty of artifice.

## Artificial style

The artificiality of Wilde’s style is one of the hallmarks of his writing and persona. In ‘The Decay of Lying’, for example, he opines that ‘Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar’.<sup>12</sup> Max Beerbohm described Wilde as ‘one of the most artificial natures produced by the nineteenth century in England’ who, almost despite himself, managed to make ‘a sweet and reasonable contribution to the gospel of humanity’.<sup>13</sup> Some of Wilde’s contemporaries found him maddeningly derivative. Others found him astonishingly inventive. Nearly all regarded him as ostentatiously artificial, estranged from nature, a long-haired man clad in green velvet and brimming with *bon mots* who lived for, and through, the world of art.

As Wilde’s biographers have remarked, he had an unusual gift for textual processing. He could read a three-volume novel closely enough in half an hour to give an accurate summary of the plot. If given an hour, he could recount the major scenes and passages of dialogue.<sup>14</sup> He composed with a number of books open at his elbow, including his own works.<sup>15</sup> And his engagement with the poems, plays, essays, and novels that he read often went beyond emulation or allusion.

Across the multiple genres in which Wilde worked, we can find evidence of bold appropriations from prior texts – yes, truly bold. Now, as Colin Burrow remarks, ‘every language user is in some sense an imitator’, and imitation is far from unknown in literary history; it is, rather, one of literary history’s key ‘drivers’.<sup>16</sup> Even so, Wilde’s methods amount to unusually blatant acts of data scraping. His literary debut *Poems* (1881) was condemned by some as a collection of poetic ‘echoes’.<sup>17</sup> Critics totted up debts to Milton, Rossetti, Morris, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Arnold, and above all Swinburne.<sup>18</sup> The Oxford Union rejected an inscribed copy of the work on the grounds of plagiarism; the student leading the campaign against Wilde claimed to have identified ‘direct borrowings from more than sixty authors’.<sup>19</sup> The painter James McNeill Whistler called Wilde an artistic freeloader with a parasitic creative practice. ‘What has Oscar in common with Art?’ Nothing, Whistler objects in an alliterative splutter, ‘[e]xcept that he dines at our tables and picks from our platters the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces. Oscar ... has the courage of the opinions ... of others!’<sup>20</sup>

Wilde’s society comedies were likewise assaulted as derivative. He liberally borrowed plots, scenarios, and devices from contemporary French and English plays. ‘For the staleness of the incidents one has only to refer to half a dozen familiar French plays’, wrote one reviewer of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892).<sup>21</sup> Wilde did not seek to disguise his acts of theatrical recycling. ‘The originality ... we ask from the artist, is originality of treatment, not of subject’, he proposes in an 1885 review.<sup>22</sup> ‘It is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything’. Identifying his purloined source material became, for contemporary critics, a kind of game. In the case of *Lady Windermere*, critics bemoaning Wilde’s lack of novelty pointed to scenes and situations lifted from plays by Victorien Sardou, Alexandre Dumas fils, and other practitioners of the ‘well-made play’.<sup>23</sup> Such plays were the corpus on which Wilde trained. Yet he was not a slavish imitator of dramatic formulas. As he revised, Sos Eltis argues, he subtly modified his plagiarised material, so that his plays end up subverting the conventions they appear to mimic.<sup>24</sup>

This imitative subversion plays out on the level of the line. Wilde’s characters do not speak like real people. Their dialogue is affected, sometimes stilted. Inversions abound. Thought is turned on its head. And yet one would be hard-pressed to call it nonsense. Consider a few examples from *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895):

Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don’t try it. You should leave that to

people who *haven't* been at a University.<sup>25</sup>

Well, I know, of course, how important it is *not* to keep a business engagement, if one wants to retain any sense of the beauty of life.<sup>26</sup>

One should always do what a woman *doesn't* expect, just as one should always say what she *doesn't* understand.<sup>27</sup>

In each of these cases, a banal statement is made surprising by its negation. The sharp inversions are remarkably effective. And yet it's a very simple technique that hinges on the insertion of a 'not' and the addition of an intensifying phrase that hammers it in. Wilde intuitively grasps a common-sense or shopworn view and contradicts it. In this way, he manages to be at once conspicuously derivative and provocatively inventive. These negations, perhaps the most basic category of Wildean epigram, show how commonplace language can form the basis of potent art with only slight verbal modification. They demonstrate how *perceived* uncertainty and unpredictability compel aesthetic interest. These operations could easily be programmed into a machine.

And indeed intelligent machines accomplish strikingly similar tasks. AI alignment researchers have noted a phenomenon slangily termed the 'Waluigi effect' – named after the wicked alter ego of the helpful plumber Luigi from Nintendo's *Mario* franchise.<sup>28</sup> The Waluigi effect describes a problem observed in LLMs: Once an LLM is trained to satisfy some desirable property *P* (e.g. helpfulness), it becomes easier to elicit a response that exhibits the opposite of *P* (e.g. aggression).<sup>29</sup> In other words, 'by learning to behave in a certain way, the model also learns its exact opposite'.<sup>30</sup>

Wilde is more subtle than a chatbot gone rogue. But a similar principle applies to his work: the more he was trained in Victorian pieties, the better equipped he was to develop antithetical positions. Wilde's 'legendary wit', comments Regenia Gagnier, 'consisted in a talent for reversing Victorian truisms'. He had a mind 'stocked with commonplaces' ripe for reversal.<sup>31</sup> His acts of verbal re-assembly (or 'word-shuffling') allow new, sometimes alien, ideas and attitudes to swim into view.

Wilde's poems were echoes, his plays gleeful feats of annexation; but it is his essays that most clearly reflect a system of linguistic and conceptual recombination analogous to today's LLMs. With their 'audacious turns of argument, showman-like displays of learning, and bold appropriations of earlier works (both by himself and others)', in the words of his most recent scholarly editor, the essays present striking parallels with LLMs like ChatGPT, which generate overconfident opinions and surprising arguments, parade a wide range of brazenly appropriated source content, and exhibit a loose relationship to the truth.<sup>32</sup>

Wilde's manuscripts show evidence not just of plagiarism but of an unusual kind of self-plagiarism. He will take a phrase or idea from Swinburne (or Ruskin or Walter Pater or Matthew Arnold or Whistler) and iteratively reuse it. When, for example, in 'The Decay of Lying' Vivian tells Cyril that the difference between Zola and Balzac is 'the difference between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality', Wilde is redeploying an idea that he first took from Swinburne's *A Study of Shakespeare*, used in a review of 'Balzac in English', and now recycles without attribution.<sup>33</sup> Wilde tended to favour his own versions of others' ideas, and when he would reuse a thought or phrase for the second (or third or fourth) time, he would typically work from his own prior writing, rather than the original source. Across his essays, he draws from a pool of other people's words and thoughts, but he progressively revises and refines these appropriations in a system of recursive self-improvement. Recursive self-improvement is crucial for machine learning. Scientists have recently proposed training a 'self-improving reward model' that follows an iterative process that continually updates its LLM. It generates new instructions for itself to add to its training set, eliminating the need for external human intervention – a development that Luciana Parisi calls 'the automation of automation', a prospect that has prompted alarm among AI ethicists.<sup>34</sup> Wilde's recursive system is, of course, different: his iterative refinements are not driven by statistical correlations but by the pressure of adapting ideas to new contexts, and he can only iterate so many times. While Wilde's recursiveness hits up against the limits of one man's compositional powers, his creative process can be seen as an example of what media historian Friedrich A. Kittler calls a 'discourse network', the many organisational and physical channels through which information is stored and processed.<sup>35</sup> Wilde intervenes in nineteenth-century culture to reshuffle and deliver its familiar aesthetic and cultural inheritance as an aggregate of precious flotsam and jetsam unexpectedly framed and artfully signed 'Oscar' – works of art that are, like Balzac's before him, sustained in 'their rhetorical modes of engagement, their figural insistences, their allusive and connotative breadth'<sup>36</sup> by the Victorian discourse network but, unlike Balzac's, clearly anticipate modernist modes. Wilde achieves this because, in Kittler's idiom, his 'discursive manipulations are incisions' – interrupting or cutting into Victorian pieties. The 'proximities' Wilde established between old and new discourses both obliterate and create (the Hegelian term

*aufgehoben*, with its double meaning of destruction and preservation, is pertinent here).

Whether or not a given reader of Wilde will find his essays derivative depends on how familiar they are with the authors Wilde is imitating and borrowing from. Many fin-de-siècle reviewers, immersed in the stream of nineteenth-century letters, considered his essays gimcracks, not originals. They knew his sources well and recognised them readily, whether or not Wilde bothered to acknowledge them. Educated Victorian readers recognised the magnitude of the giants on whose shoulders Wilde stood and, as a result, many 'were simply unpersuaded that his critical voice had the necessary scholarly foundations'.<sup>37</sup>

Yet it is by no means clear that Wilde's essayistic recombination is necessarily unoriginal. The challenge that Wilde poses for mainstream intuitions about literary originality resides in his curious ability to achieve novelty precisely through pilfering other people's ideas. His 1891 essay 'The Critic as Artist', for example, flagrantly appropriates the phrase 'to see the object as in itself it really is', which Matthew Arnold originated in English nearly three decades earlier in 'On Translating Homer' (1860) and repeated in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1865). For Arnold, 'to see the object as in itself it really is' epitomised the critical efforts of mid-Victorian arts and sciences.<sup>38</sup> Rather than hoisting himself up on Arnold's shoulders, Wilde turns Arnold's thought on its head:

ERNEST: The highest Criticism, then, is more creative than creation, and the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not; that is your theory, I believe?

GILBERT: Yes, that is my theory. To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises. The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see.<sup>39</sup>

Again we see negation ironically deployed against an authoritative view. But is this a shallow gesture, or a profound dialectical move? Wilde's recombination of Arnoldian thought lays the groundwork for a new, provocative theory of aesthetic judgement, one that follows Pater's 'Preface' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in its emphasis on subjective response but trades Pater's careful attention to the concrete for a gleeful indifference to the artworks under examination. Arnold had been dead for nearly a year when Wilde's essay was published. One can imagine him rolling in his grave at the essay's false reverence:

GILBERT: Yes; it has been said by one whose gracious memory we all revere [...] that the proper aim of Criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is. But this is a very serious error, and takes no cognizance of Criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another. For the highest Criticism deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely.<sup>40</sup>

Look beyond the mock-piety, and this passage revels in a conception of criticism that is indifferent to the objective, to the 'object ... as it really is' – blithe, indeed, to any standard of truth. To the question of whether critics like Ruskin or Pater are describing aesthetic objects accurately, Wilde's Gilbert replies, 'Who cares [...] What does it matter? [...] Who, again, cares?'<sup>41</sup> The essay disavows the aspiration toward truth in favour of a vision of criticism as an art form unmoored from epistemological constraints. For the 'aesthetic critic', what is important is the 'imaginative beauty' of an interpretation. That this relativistic approach will 'make all interpretations true and no interpretations final' is, for Gilbert, not a defect but an advantage, because it multiplies the opportunities for individual personalities to impress their sensibilities on the world, treating any given artwork 'simply as a starting-point for a new creation'.<sup>42</sup>

It is well established that LLMs generate fictions and present them as facts, sometimes citing, in Borgesian fashion, articles and books that do not exist, however plausible their titles may sound.<sup>43</sup> ('Don't degrade me into the position of giving you useful information', Gilbert chides Ernest.<sup>44</sup>) LLMs are designed to produce text that appears truthful. They are trained to offer appeasing, extravagantly apologetic responses when users point out errors or falsehoods.<sup>45</sup> This approach to truth is not flippancy, as it was with Wilde, but indifference.

Despite his celebration of the 'art of lying' in 'The Decay of Lying' and elsewhere, Wilde was not uniformly hostile to the truth. His prison letter *De Profundis* (1897) is, among other things, a brilliant and detailed attempt to set the record straight about his fall into disgrace and his doomed love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas. But he nursed a lifelong interest in the aesthetic power of forgery. He compiled copious notes on the eighteenth-century poetic forger Thomas Chatterton.<sup>46</sup> He penned an energetic essay on the critic and murderer Thomas Griffiths Wainewright ('a forger of no mean or ordinary capabilities' and one of the more sinister figures in Wilde's pantheon of 'artificial people').<sup>47</sup> And he developed, in 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', a theory of Shakespeare's sonnets so tantalising that the artistic forgery at the heart of the story comes

to seem not discrediting but mythic. Wilde's devotion to anti-realist artifice intensified over the course of his career, developing particularly in 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist', the key essays of his 1890s phase in which Balzac became his hero and Whistler, James, and Dickens his antagonists. It was there that he decried realism's 'monstrous worship of facts' as 'the modern vice'.<sup>48</sup> Around this time, his borrowings became more brazen, such as when, for instance, he copied into 'The Decay of Lying' a passage from Whistler accusing Wilde of being a copyist.<sup>49</sup>

Wilde's valuation of aesthetic criteria over epistemological standards takes on a different cast now that we have 'post-truth computational systems' proliferating dubious information.<sup>50</sup> The spread of AI-generated content on the Internet poses risks for human beings. It can also be fatal to the AI models themselves. A recent paper in *Nature* finds that generative AI models can 'collapse' and produce nonsense if their training data contains too much AI-generated content.<sup>51</sup> Unlike Wilde's recursive – and creative – self-plagiarism, 'the use of LLMs at scale to publish content on the Internet' risks polluting the data scraped from the web and used to train future models, leading models 'trained on polluted data' to 'mis-perceive reality'.<sup>52</sup>

There is, finally, yet another way in which Wilde's aesthetic sensibility and manner of composition anticipate LLMs, and this is his lifelong preference for the dialogue as a literary form. In his dramatic writing, as we have seen, he sought out unnatural forms of speech. He favoured this affected style as early as his first play *Vera; or the Nihilists*, in which the dialogue is exceptionally stilted, and he defended this anti-realist approach as a matter of artistic principle. 'In an acting age, perhaps the best test of a good play is that it should not read well', the debut playwright informed the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, Edward Smyth-Pigott, when he sent him *Vera*.<sup>53</sup>

Plato's dialogues were central to Wilde's Greek-inspired course of study at Oxford, and much of his writing bears their imprint. 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist' are presented as Socratic (or mock-Socratic) dialogues; and, as in Plato, dialogue as an intellectual method is itself among the subjects that receive dialogical scrutiny. 'Dialogue, certainly, that wonderful literary form', Gilbert tells Ernest in 'The Critic as Artist' as he breathlessly surveys the long history of a form

which, from Plato to Lucian, and from Lucian to Giordano Bruno, and from Bruno to that grand old Pagan in whom Carlyle took such delight, the creative critics of the world have always employed, can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression. By its means can he both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view, and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things, gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress, and really illumine the idea more completely, or from those felicitous after-thoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme, and yet convey something of the delicate charm of chance.

ERNEST. By its means, too, he can invent an imaginary antagonist, and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly sophistical argument.<sup>54</sup>

Gilbert's survey of the dialogue form traces an arc across the summits of Western culture. On closer inspection, however, Gilbert's pantheon presents a highly selective history of the dialogue, focused on rebels and dissidents: he cites one thinker famed for merciless satire (Lucian) and another who was burned at the stake (Bruno). Dialogue may allow a writer to 'reveal and conceal himself' and to show an idea 'in the round'; but its special value may reside in its capacity to puncture ideals and dogmas. Gilbert's worshipful survey is efficiently deflated by Ernest's reply – and the exchange underscores how dialogue can upset pieties, even pieties about dialogue itself. Of course, when Wilde sought to establish himself as a creative critic, he had no need to imagine an antagonist for himself: Whistler's venomous critical barbs against him in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* and his 'Ten O'Clock' talk provided ample fodder for fiery exchanges that catalysed Wilde's reinvention of Aestheticism.<sup>55</sup>

Wilde made himself into a master of dialectic. In the 1880s and 1890s, he yoyoed interviewers back and forth at will, ricocheted contradictory ideas through his essays, and cast his plays' characters in push-pull exercises disguised as society dramas. Irony, his signature mode and his weapon of choice, hinges on the often disconcerting disconnect between two ideas simultaneously expressed. A phrase like 'education is an admirable thing. But it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught' slaps the reader with contrariness and sass but also tickles them with its essential truth.<sup>56</sup>

The forms Wilde preferred give us a useful clue to understanding LLMs. With Google, you can type words almost at random into a search bar and get a response; you don't need to formulate a question as you once did with its (now defunct) predecessor, Ask Jeeves, the avuncular machine butler. Conversational AI marks a return to the dialogue form of yore. ChatGPT and other LLMs present themselves as chatty conversationalists and thereby emulate a human actor. A transcript of

a conversation with an AI system is dialogical in form, a series of prompts and responses, questions and answers. Not uncommonly, such conversations follow a Socratic arc. We ask, the chatbot replies, and sometimes we follow up with additional questions increasing in specificity until either a satisfactory response emerges or the limitations (or ignorance) of the AI model become plain.

Conversational AI inherited the dialogue form from two sources: general human patterns of inquiry that stretch back to the Ancients and Wilde, and a specific twentieth-century scientist familiar with the Socratic tradition who thought a dialogue-based method could be used to verify a machine's simulation of competence. Indeed, the importance of dialogue in testing the capabilities of AI goes back to the father of modern computing, Alan Turing, and his famous 'Turing test'. Like Wilde, Turing was influenced by the Socratic tradition. In late 1930s Cambridge, a 26-year-old Turing attended Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'Socratic discussion group' about the foundations of mathematics.<sup>57</sup> The pair disagreed but they shared a similar debating style, arguing through 'plain speaking and argument by question and answer'. Years later, when Turing developed the 'imitation game', he returned to this form, devising a dialogue-based method to test a machine's aptitude for displaying human-like intelligent behaviour. Importantly, by focusing on conversational abilities, Turing evaded asking whether a machine could 'think', a question he considered impossible to answer. Better known today as the Turing test, the imitation game used dialogue as a stand-in for 'thinking', on the principle that 'a machine capable of conversation must surely be intelligent'.<sup>58</sup>

Both Turing's relationship to artificial intelligence and Wilde's celebration of artificiality are intimately intertwined with a heritage of oppression. While living under the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act that prohibited 'gross indecency' (including any sexual contact between men), Wilde made one type of sexuality pass for another in plays like *Salome* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The former was 'half Biblical, half pornographic'<sup>59</sup>, according to the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, and used moralism to mask incest. In the latter, a heterosexual marriage plot decoyed two hedonistic male Ernests/Uranists who delivered plenty of winking talk about illicit 'Bunburying'.

Sexual passing was also a thread that ran through Turing's life and work. Living in a climate of sexual repression and under laws that made sodomy a punishable offence, Turing, like Wilde, understood the need for gay men to dissemble, to pretend to be what they were not. The Socratic dialogue has a long queer and pederastic history, and this history is obliquely present in the making of the Turing test. When he formulated his 'imitation game', Turing embedded in the test a form of sexual passing. In his famous paper 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' (1950), he initially described the Turing test as a racy party game aimed at testing whether one's interlocutor was a man or a woman:

The new form of the problem can be described in terms of a game which we call the 'imitation game'. It is played with three people, a man (A), a woman (B), and an interrogator (C) who may be of either sex. The interrogator stays in a room apart from the other two. The object of the game is for the interrogator to determine which of the other two is the man and which is the woman.<sup>60</sup>

The object of this game is to 'pass' sexually. 'We now ask the question', Turing continues, 'What will happen when a machine takes the part of A in this game?' The best strategy for the machine to follow would be to imitate 'the behaviour of a man [...] to provide answers that would naturally be given by a man'.<sup>61</sup> If challenged, 'the machine would be permitted all sorts of tricks so as to appear more manlike', Turing later elaborated.<sup>62</sup> As David Leavitt points out, trying to 'provide answers that would naturally be given by a man' would 'also be the best strategy for a homosexual to adopt when trying to persuade an interrogator that he is straight'.<sup>63</sup> Both gay man and machine dissemble in order to seem like a 'real' man. Much as Wilde's elevation of the artificial accompanies a celebration of 'unnatural' love, Turing's interest in a machine passing as a man seems informed by painful private experience.

With the people closest to him, Turing let the mask slip. To break off his engagement to Joan Clarke Murray, he quoted Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a bitter fable about suppressed desire whose refrain warns that 'each man kills the thing he loves'.<sup>64</sup> Years later, around the time Turing was pleading guilty to a charge of sexual offence with a young man, he composed a three-line syllogism, satirising the faulty logic of his persecutors:

Turing believes machines think

Turing lies with men

Therefore machines do not think.<sup>65</sup>

Turing feared that people in the future would discount artificial intelligence because of his sexuality. Discrediting a

scientist's discoveries because he 'lies with men' is – as the mock-syllogism expresses – laughably poor reasoning; yet, as Leavitt suggests, Turing's erotic life does not seem wholly unrelated to his work on machine thinking.

There is one last twist to this story of AI and oppression. For a long time, humans who worked like or with machines were, more often than not, deemed less intelligent. 'The word computer referred to poorly paid workers, by the 1920s mostly women, who calculated, with or without mechanical aids, in astronomical observatories, census bureaus, and military undertakings', Lorraine Daston observes.<sup>66</sup> In Wilde's day, this connotation of inferiority was already in place; he turned it to his advantage to conceal his homosexuality when he gave instructions for the reproduction of his top-secret prison manuscript, *De Profundis* ('the only document that really gives any explanation of my extraordinary behaviour').<sup>67</sup> To ensure 'control' over the manuscript that revealed the extent of his same-sex desires, Wilde explicitly advised his executor to have it transcribed by 'type-writing girls – women are the most reliable, as they have no memory for the important. ... I assure you that the type-writing machine, when played with expression, is not more annoying than the piano when played by a sister'.

## Automation and 'the Importance of Doing Nothing'

'The condition of perfection is idleness,' Wilde quips in his 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young'.<sup>68</sup> His proposal for how we might arrive at this blessed condition is simple: 'machinery will serve man'.<sup>69</sup> In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891) he lays out his vision of progress:

while Humanity will be amusing itself, or enjoying cultivated leisure—which, and not labour, is the aim of man—or making beautiful things, or reading beautiful things, or simply contemplating the world with admiration and delight, machinery will be doing all the necessary and unpleasant work.<sup>70</sup>

Wilde was not alone among late-nineteenth-century socialists in championing labour automation as a solution to the suffering and exploitation of workers. The French socialist Paul Lafargue, in his 1883 treatise *The Right to Be Lazy*, argues that if workers seized the 'Rights of Laziness' and refused to work more than three hours a day, industrialists would be obliged to invest in automation: 'To force capitalists to perfect their machines of wood and iron, we must raise the salaries and reduce the working hours of machines of flesh and bone'.<sup>71</sup> Such proposals were not mere theorising. Labour movements in several industrial nations, including the United States, France, England, and Canada, pursued the reduction of worktime as a key political goal in the nineteenth century.<sup>72</sup> What is subversive about Wilde's critique of work is his palpable scepticism about whether productive labour possesses ethical or expressive significance.

This devaluation of work was – and is – a minority position on the political left. Friedrich Engels may well have had Wilde in mind when he belittled the socialism of late-nineteenth-century England as languid and suspiciously fashionable, a socialism that has 'donned evening dress and lounges lazily on drawing-room *causeuses*'.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, published in full the same year as 'Soul of Man', offers a utopian vision that differs strikingly from Wilde's. The residents of Morris's utopia take such deep 'work-pleasure' in their acts of labour and creative craftsmanship that they fear that one day they will be 'short of work'.<sup>74</sup> Morris's hope was that labour would take on the qualities of artistic creation. Wilde (who likely read Morris's novel when it appeared in instalments in 1890) shows little patience for the romanticisation of labour.<sup>75</sup> Against Morris's celebration of 'effortful labouring manhood', as Ruth Livesey puts it, Wilde proposes a gentler form of exertion: 'the exercise of pleasurable taste'.<sup>76</sup> Aligning art with pleasure and labour with pain, Wilde's view was not that labour should be perfected, but that it should be minimised. 'I cannot help saying', Wilde intones, 'that a great deal of nonsense is being written and talked nowadays about the dignity of manual labour. There is nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading [...] To sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours on a day when the east wind is blowing is a disgusting occupation'.<sup>77</sup> While Morris, like Ruskin, looked to the Middle Ages in search of more humane labour arrangements, Wilde's invocations of medievalism are typically negative. 'Whatever, in fact, is modern in our life we owe to the Greeks', Gilbert asserts in 'The Critic as Artist'. 'Whatever is an anachronism is due to medievalism'.<sup>78</sup>

It was, indeed, from the Greeks that classically educated Wilde adapted his leisure ideal. He updates the model of serene contemplation championed by Plato and Aristotle by giving philosophic tranquillity an aestheticist slant. He was well aware that classical leisure was sustained by the exertions of a class of slaves. Nor is he above aestheticizing the slave societies of antiquity. Ernest, in his lush description of the beauty-loving culture of the Greeks, imagines a king in a 'green-curtained litter' borne by slaves 'upon oil-bright shoulders'.<sup>79</sup> Yet Wilde likely knew the passage in the first pages of Aristotle's *Politics* that described slaves as 'living instruments'. In a stunning counterfactual anticipation of automation, Aristotle goes on to say that

if every instrument could accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating the will of others, like the statues of Daedalus, or the tripods of Hephaestus [...] if, in like manner, the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre without a hand to guide them, chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves.<sup>80</sup>

Wilde and Aristotle agree: 'civilisation requires slaves'.<sup>81</sup> But Wilde had the advantage of seeing that the shuttle could weave without a hand to guide it. Therefore, he decides, it is 'on the slavery of the machine' that 'the future of the world depends'.<sup>82</sup>

The machine, for Wilde, could liberate us from drudgery. At the same time, Gilbert reflects, 'the great machine of life ... may grind our virtues to powder and make them worthless, or transform our sins into elements of a new civilisation'.<sup>83</sup> This remarkably Nietzschean point about ethical transvaluation is offered as a comment on the futility of action, our inability to foresee the results of what we do. But it has more general relevance to Wilde's celebration of idleness. As Jeff Nunokawa observes, Wilde attempts a direct inversion of the Protestant work ethic.<sup>84</sup> Gilbert's statement that 'It is to do nothing that the elect exist' flips on its head the Puritan doctrine that the 'elect' destined for salvation demonstrate their status through ceaseless diligence in the service of God.<sup>85</sup> For the Puritans, idlers are among the damned. For Gilbert, idleness is itself a calling – yet another of Wilde's great negations. Wilde believed that was not just the 'machine of life' that might grind virtues – such as the work ethic – to powder. It was 'the machine', full stop, that might require us to forge, from the vice of idleness, the 'elements of a new civilisation'.

What are we to do with all the free time that technological innovation will secure for us? Again, Wilde's answer is simple: we are to devote ourselves to aesthetic contemplation. In doing so, we will develop and intensify our personalities, reaching peaks of individuality previously reserved for rare specimens like Byron, Shelley, and Jesus.

'The Critic as Artist' repeatedly extols the superiority of the passive over the active and the artificial over the 'real'. Gilbert praises daffodils by likening them to 'amber and cool ivory' and marvels at the 'hard hollow sapphire' of the sky.<sup>86</sup> These canonical Wordsworthian sites of natural beauty are celebrated in the register of the artifactual, as sculpted jewels, in a characteristic decadent reversal. Even the live tissue of the brain is described as 'ivory'.<sup>87</sup>

As Gilbert goes on, we learn that all of reality is burnished, augmented, and laden with significance by the labour of poets and artists, that it is *through* art that the 'real' makes its claims on us. Whereas action 'dies at the moment of its energy', art endures.<sup>88</sup> The raging warriors of Homer are not 'heroes of mist' or 'shadows', Gilbert insists, in a Platonic line of argument; 'they are real', more profoundly real than the ephemeral mortals who now walk in the city where chariots once lurched into battle and where shepherds once looked out over the wine-dark sea.<sup>89</sup> Homer's Greece is immutable, persisting in an eternal present. 'Every morning' the warriors of the *Iliad* 'go forth to battle', just as 'on that little hill by the city of Florence, where the lovers of Giorgione are lying, it is *always* the solstice of noon', just as 'it is twilight *always* for the dancing nymphs whom Corot set free among the silver poplars of France'.<sup>90</sup> And so Gilbert declares: 'The world is made by the singer for the dreamer'.<sup>91</sup> As 'civilisation progresses', he ventures, 'the elect spirits of each age, the critical and cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life, and *will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what Art has touched*'.<sup>92</sup> Progress, for Gilbert, is the triumph of artifice, the displacement of 'actual life' (which is 'terribly deficient in form') by the 'world of Art'.<sup>93</sup> Likewise, the deepening of personality (the aim of life, according to Wilde) is achieved by immersion in the imaginary worlds that artists have made.

Gilbert's insistence that criticism is more creative than artistic creation introduces several paradoxical formulations. Throughout 'The Critic as Artist' we find a blurring of the active and the passive. Artistic labour is assimilated into idleness or rendered as languid: 'the long fingers of the lute-player rest idly upon the chords'.<sup>94</sup> Aesthetic contemplation, on the other hand, comes to seem rigorous, a vocation in its own right. The life of the dreamer requires 'consummate scholarship': to 'truly' understand Shakespeare, for example, requires an awareness of 'the conditions of theatrical presentation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century', the development of the English language, the Renaissance, the Reformation, Greek drama, verse, and much else.<sup>95</sup> In Gilbert's programme, the mind is ceaselessly – even restlessly – active. 'Criticism is always moving on, and the critic is always developing [...] he will seek for beauty in every age and in each school ... and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view [...] For what is mind but motion in the intellectual sphere?'<sup>96</sup> This relocation of emphasis allows Wilde to present a vision of idleness that is active, not stagnant. Wilde's critic does not engage in productive labour. But he is committed nonetheless to constant effort and perpetual motion. It is with some justification, then, that Gilbert can profess that 'to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual'.<sup>97</sup>

The unremitting effort required by a life of eager aesthetic reception looks ahead to Wilde's reckoning, in *De Profundis*, with the ambiguities of intellectual labour. In prison, Wilde was forced to perform useless labour (like picking oakum). The long blank days in the prison cell made him newly aware of the leaden and melancholic side of inactivity: while he once thought of sloth as 'the sort of sin [...] a priest who knew nothing about real life would invent', in prison this sullen sorrow becomes a daily temptation.<sup>98</sup> *De Profundis* reflects a reappraisal of work and leisure, argues Christian Gerzso, in its rejection of the shallow leisure-class pursuits of Lord Alfred Douglas and its framing of intellectual activity – reading, writing – as continuous with physical labour.<sup>99</sup> Jeff Nunokawa's provocative argument that the work ethic subtly persists in Wilde's utopian vision of 'absolute idleness' sounds a similar note.<sup>100</sup>

These ambiguities reflect a real tension in Wilde's thought. This is an artist, after all, who made a show of ease while producing a major body of work, who bucked at Thomas Carlyle's religion of labour but owned the writing-desk on which the august sage composed his book on the French Revolution.<sup>101</sup> But they also reflect more general instabilities in the position of intellectual and artistic activity relative to other forms of work. Writing is work, but it is not always recognised as such. One critic's sniping remark that because Wilde 'can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and the public morals' is not only a catty denigration of Wilde (tailoring being a traditionally 'effeminate' occupation) but also a reflection of how easily the status of writing as work can be called into question or demoted.<sup>102</sup> And even if one takes writing to be a 'decent trade', a form of productive labour, a further ambiguity remains: the work of the artist supports someone else in leisured contemplation. In Wilde's schema, even the most hard-working artists are, in some sense, of the party of idleness: 'The world is made by the singer for the dreamer'.

Wilde's discounting of creation in favour of aesthetic judgment and reflection may seem fanciful, even perverse. But some commentators on AI are also coming to prize literary reception over literary creation. The ability of LLMs to generate text instantaneously 'may lead to a situation', a group of AI researchers have recently remarked, 'where the ability to *read* and *interpret* different text options becomes more important than the ability to *write* them'.<sup>103</sup> In the future of knowledge work, reading and interpreting prose may prove more important than generating it.

Wilde caused, in the late nineteenth century, an aesthetic disruption. His data-scraping techniques of composition, his indifference toward truth, and his reliance on the dialogue all offer potent analogies for the disruptions we are experiencing now with AI. Wilde is already credited as prescient for his embrace of artifice. Perhaps one day his championing of 'cultivated leisure' as humanity's true aim will seem equally prophetic. For in addition to serving as an uncanny precursor to today's LLMs, Wilde lays out a positive programme for how machines might liberate us. To read and interpret even a fraction of what poets and artists have made would take many lifetimes of leisure. Wilde's elevation of reception over production, of criticism over art, endows idleness with a seriousness of purpose. By identifying automation with an aesthetic aim – that of freeing people for rigorous yet pleasurable projects of self-cultivation – Wilde provides a sketch of how a world in which productive labour is largely automated might lead not to discontent or boredom but to new educational and creative possibilities. His aestheticism might inform more assertive claims from contemporary critics about the value of hermeneutics in response to AI. For all that AI might yet accomplish, the task Wilde saw as most indispensable – the pursuit of individuality, the fashioning of personality, a process of 'becoming' in which, through artifice, we grow to be unmistakably ourselves – remains, at least for now, the province of human beings alone.

## Notes

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s) [Q3].