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SPECIAL ISSUE:

*Aesthetic Scenarios and Revolutions in the British
Fin-de-Siècle Context*

Edited by Laura Giovannelli and Pierpaolo Martino

NEIL SAMMELLS*

Preface

“I was a man,” claimed Oscar Wilde from the dark of his prison cell in *De Profundis*, “who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of his age”. He had realised this, he said, “from the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realize it afterwards”. The prison-letter *De Profundis* is an extraordinary exercise in self-re- crimination and self-mythologising. Wilde blames himself for his downfall and for squandering his talents. He also blames Bosie for bringing him down into the dust and for not allowing him to realise his talents. He zigs and zags from self-loathing to self-aggrandisement, from the humility he orders Bosie to learn with him, to perform- ative pride in what he has achieved and has come to signify. He gathers his scant emo- tional resources about him in order to find the strength to carry on, into what Nicholas Frankel calls his ‘Unrepentant Years’: his parlous, wandering, destitute life in Europe after incarceration.

Now we can see that Wilde was right.

He looms over the *fin de siècle* and any consideration of its aesthetic, cultural, and political significance (Wilde’s political campaigning for prison reform, for instance, is elaborated upon here by Laura Giovannelli). This collection of essays is proof of his seminal importance to his age and – increasingly it seems – to our understanding of our own, as Pierpaolo Martino demonstrates in his discussion of film adaptations of *Salome*. Wildean influences and echoes are traced here in writers who, unlike him, survived the *fin de siècle*. Elisabetta D’Erme argues that Joyce was in a one-sided dia- logue with Wilde; Camilla Del Grazia argues for a formative point of contact between *Dorian Gray* and Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, reminding us of the lunch meeting between the two and J.M. Stoddart which led to the publication of Wilde’s only novel and Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four*. Henry James called Wilde a “filthy, unclean beast” but the publication of some of his shorter fiction in the *Yellow Book* roots him firmly in an aesthetic milieu over which Wilde was the presiding genius. That milieu was also one in which the ‘Uranian’ poetry of other male writers exploring, like Wilde, same-sex eroticism developed a complex and coded set of imagery for readers and devotees, as detailed here by Paola Di Gennaro.

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The *Yellow Book* has come to be regarded the most important periodical publication of the *fin de siècle* but Gino Scatasta's article makes a compelling case for the *Savoy* as the definitive magazine of 1890s Decadence – largely because Aubrey Beardsley (who founded it with Arthur Symons in 1896 while Wilde was in prison) allowed himself freer rein in his eroticised illustrations and the publication of his unfinished novel *Under the Hill* with its pre-Firbankian sexuality and ornamentation. Beardsley's importance to the *fin-de-siècle* evolution of Aestheticism into Decadence is focused on here by Giuseppe Virelli, who pays particular attention to the way Beardsley drew upon a new artistic language that was emerging in Europe at the time.

That last point is an important and appropriate one. These articles have been developed from presentations given at a conference in Bagni di Lucca in the late summer of 2022, organised by the Italian Oscar Wilde Society and the Fondazione Culturale Michel de Montaigne. I, for one, am immensely grateful for the invitation to speak in such delightful and historic surroundings and my own work has been improved immensely by conversations with those colleagues present. I am sure I am not the only delegate who feels that way and whose article published here benefited from dialogue with others. Wilde now has an international reputation and his work needs to be seen – as Virelli argues of Beardsley's – in an international context. The British *fin de siècle* can only be understood as part of a European movement which sweeps up figures as apparently unlike as Oscar Wilde and Gabriele D'Annunzio. Wilde's Europeanism (he famously declared he would take up French citizenship when *Salome* was banned in England) seems evermore relevant and salutary for a post-brexite Britain.

A final thought. However full of plans and intentions, however unrepentant he was, Wilde was broken by prison. Apart from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, he wrote nothing of consequence after his release. With *The Importance of Being Earnest* he reached his apogee as a writer. Beardsley, however, was dead at 25. What more would he have achieved had he lived? How different would be the history of modern art if he had survived the *fin de siècle*? He too stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of his age, but his brilliance and audacity could have defined the next.

Laura Giovannelli*, Pierpaolo Martino**

Introduction

In an iconic exchange taking place in Chapter XV of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde uses the term ‘fin de siècle’ in a fascinating and somehow disturbing way:

“*Fin de siècle*”, murmured Lord Henry.

“*Fin du globe*”, answered his hostess.

“I wish it were *fin du globe*”, said Dorian, with a sigh. “Life is a great disappointment”.¹

Here the idea of the *fin de siècle* is staged dialogically to convey the complexity of meanings associated with it. In Wilde’s incredibly sonorous novel the exchange is ‘recorded’, as it were, in the house of Lady Narborough, during a terribly boring evening, which also sees the arrival of Lady Narborough’s daughter, who, “to make matters worse, had actually brought her husband with her”.² As Gail Marshall puts it:

The scene works by typically Wildean paradox and humour to ensnare readers into confronting their own prejudices and limitations, and to confound expectations. In particular, in a scene which immediately follows upon Dorian’s murder of the painter Basil Hallward and the disposal of the body by Dorian’s one time friend Alan Campbell, the expectation of endings, and the assumption of *ennui*, are confounded. Dorian’s desire for a definitive ending, for sterility, a lack of continuity, his refutation of his life so far, the languor of his expressed desire, belie the extent of his visceral engagement with the sensational life which is the counterpart of his role as decadent icon.³

In this sense, “the extent of his languor testifies precisely to the extent of Dorian’s awareness of his inextricable involvement with life, its continuities and complications”.⁴ What seems absolutely fascinating is, indeed, the capacity of the term ‘fin de siècle’ to escape or at least problematise the very idea of *endings*; as Marshall points out, in confronting the end of the century – and, in a way, the ending of the narratives which had emerged in the mid-nineteenth-century period – “a creative energy is unleashed which, in its vitality and multiplicity, becomes the most effective statement against our understanding of this period as the end of anything”.⁵

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¹ O. WILDE, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891, in ID., *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, London, Collins, 1994, p. 205.

² *Ibidem*, p. 204.

³ G. MARSHALL (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge, CUP, 2007, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

Although the decade we associate with the *fin de siècle*, that is the 1890s, was a definitely circumscribed period, its origins go back to the 1880s, or even the 1870s, and its reverberations can still be heard in the first half of the twenty-first century and, very interestingly, in the 1960s and 1990s. In many ways, as we will see, we could say that the *fin de siècle* is still with us.

If the *fin de siècle* is all about inhabiting thresholds and, of course, about exceeding boundaries, a fascinating link can be established between some of its protagonists and the pop icons of our age. Most of the artists and writers of the *fin de siècle*, as Jackson observes, died young, several of them scarcely more than youths: we can refer to Wilde himself, but also to Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson and Hubert Crackanthorpe, among others. It seems as though “these restless and tragic figures thirsted so much for life, and for the life of the hour, that they put the cup to their lips and drained it in one deep draught”.⁶ This generation recalls the *27 Club*, that is, the list of popular musicians, artists, actors, and other celebrities – active from the late 1960s to 2011 – who died at age 27. Suffice it to mention such icons as Jimi Hendrix, Brian Jones, Kurt Cobain and Amy Winehouse, all artists who, like many of the *fin-de-siècle* ones, shared an interest in the art of the pose and in the notion of life as a work of art.

But there is more to that. Other contemporary artists have embraced the *fin de siècle* as a cultural moment and critical perspective and have turned it into an artistic stance. For instance, Divine Comedy’s singer and leader Neil Hannon entitled his 1998 masterpiece *Fin de Siècle*. A big fan of Wilde, Hannon not only shares the latter’s interest in Dante, but also went to Portora Royal School. There is also something profoundly Wildean about Hannon’s wit and his charmingly decadent music; besides, Oscar is one of the protagonists of Divine Comedy’s 2004 song *Absent Friends*, in which the songwriter makes reference to Wilde’s outsidership, portraying him as a lonely child who fought to conquer that very audience, that very world which sent him to an early grave.

We have focused briefly on popular music to define one of the fields in which the legacy of the *fin de siècle* still stands its ground today. More in general, we can affirm that the closing decades of the nineteenth century were a period in which the arts were strategically instrumental in discussing contemporary issues and concerns where art itself became an object of controversy; hence the centrality given to the arts and the dialogue between different art forms in this 2023 journal issue.

The end of the nineteenth century was the age of artists such as Wilde, A.C. Swinburne, Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Symons, poet and author of *The Decadent Movement in Literature* (1893), and of Walter Pater, an inspirational figure for Wilde, whose *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) might be considered as the most iconic and influential book of the age. And yet the *fin de siècle* is defined not only by crucial figures, but also by key ideas and concepts. One of them is that of ‘degeneration’, which was notoriously turned into a socio-medical category by Max Nordau in his *Degeneration* (1892). That term had a (pseudo-)scientific basis and was actually used to address and condemn artists such as Henrik Ibsen, Richard Wagner, the Impres-

⁶ H. JACKSON, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, London, Cape, (1913) 1927, pp. 157-58.

sionists and Wilde himself as belonging to the realms of the insane and criminals. A more relevant and recurrent label, which often becomes almost a synonym for the *fin de siècle*, is 'decadence'. After pointing to the complex genealogy of the term, starting from its connection with the decline of the Roman Empire and with ideas of social or artistic decay, David Weir stresses how

in the modern era, just about every manifestation of decadence owes its origins, either directly or indirectly, to a loosely affiliated group of artists who lived and worked in Paris [...]. Paris produced the first poet (Baudelaire) to be retrospectively described as decadent by the first critic of decadence (Gautier). Paris also boasts the first novelist of Decadence Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) whose novel *À rebours* had enormous influence on the next generation of decadents. That generation was mostly British, so one can say that decadence in the nineteenth century 'travels' from Paris to London [...]. The best known of these London decadents is undoubtedly Oscar Wilde.⁷

Wilde's complexity and his very *decadence* are investigated in various articles of the present collection. Jane Desmarais and Weir insist on how for some people and critics "decadence is simply negation. It is *not* moral, *not* tasteful and so on", while "for others, such negation is necessary as a critique of social norms or as a creative alternative to artistic conventions".⁸ This is exactly the sense and meaning of Wilde's personal and artistic parable. Desmarais and Weir suggest that "the way decadence functions, conceptually, allows for some remarkably dynamic reversals of meaning, such that the idea of decay or decline becomes or can become generative, inventive, creative, even progressive".⁹ In this perspective, the artistic decadence experienced during the *fin de siècle* can become a site to give voice and shape to what is *other*, multiple and multiform. It can turn into the originator of a revolution taking place at many different levels simultaneously. The two critics conclude that "not only is the concept of decadence still a part of contemporary life, but also that it may be, in some sense, necessary to an informed understanding of the anxieties and uncertainties that beset us today".¹⁰

In the opening article of this special issue, "Confederates in Cool: Oscar Wilde and Jack Johnson", Neil Sammells insists on how Wilde and the famous boxer Jack Johnson took their pleasures dangerously and, in so doing, exposed the hypocrisy and prejudice of the society they both fascinated and angered. They did so with a shared understanding of the power of the pose and of style and attitude. Johnson, according to Sammells, was quite conscious of the politics of the impudence he cultivated, which he saw as a necessary 'artistic' response to a philistinism that valued utility above beauty. Dandyism was for each of them a way of freeing themselves, of 'possessing' themselves. "Attitude is everything", said Wilde, and Johnson recognised this too. They were, as Sammells concludes, "confederates in Cool".

Journalism played a key role in the decade. The emergence of the New Journalism in the late-Victorian period saw the birth of such newspapers as the *Daily Mail* in 1896, and paved the way for a journalistic style filled with celebrity sensation and gossip. It

⁷ D. WEIR, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2018, pp. 3, 6.

⁸ J. DESMARAIS and D. WEIR (eds), *Decadence and Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2019, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

also pioneered the celebrity interview, which, as is known, helped Wilde achieve his fame. Yet, this was also the age of the iconic periodicals *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*. In his article “Yellow or Savoy? An Introduction to the Nineties”, Gino Scatasta shows how, while the debate around the Eighteen-Nineties in England has often led to considering the decade as characterised by the widespread dissemination of ideas, attitudes and works related to Decadence and Aestheticism, the analysis of some aspects of these two magazines might offer a different and illuminating introduction to the period, with all its contradictions and complexity. The yellow colour, a connoting feature of the decade which also gave the name to its most famous magazine, was actually only one of a series of colours that tinged the period, and *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, while trying to find a difficult balance among different trends and goals, reflected more than a single current or attitude, testifying to a more composite and complete picture of that historical phase.

In “A *Fin-de-Siècle Stilophagus*: Aubrey Beardsley Between Originality and Originarity”, Giuseppe Virelli focuses on Aubrey Beardsley, an artist whose name is strictly connected with *The Yellow Book*. Although his artistic career spanned little more than five years, it was characterised by a hectic exploration of different modes of aesthetic expression in pursuit of a new and original modern style. The young English artist sought, selected and sampled a wide range of figurative vocabularies from very different sources and set out to extrapolate their essence, thereby creating an artistic language that was entirely personal but also attuned to the spirit of his day. From his revival of the Pre-Raphaelite figurative tradition to his reinterpretation of stylistic traits belonging to distant cultural spheres in terms of both time and space (ranging from Greek vase painting to Japanese prints and Rococo imagery), he distilled a unique and instantly recognisable language grounded in a ‘synthetic’ approach.

According to some critics, the *fin de siècle* ‘ended’ in 1895, with Wilde’s arrest and imprisonment. The title of Laura Giovannelli’s paper – “‘It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the prisons’: Oscar Wilde’s Path towards Civic Engagement in his (Post-)Prison Years” – comes from a quotation of the author’s letter to the *Daily Chronicle* of 27 May 1897. In this analysis the focus shifts away from such *topoi* as the Irish dandy’s brilliant rhetoric and aphoristic wit; emphasis is placed instead on the human profile of an artist who, in the wake of his condemnation for ‘acts of gross indecency’, was to come to grips with two harrowing years of imprisonment with hard labour. The article sheds light on various issues as well as medico-scientific, sociocultural and political contexts, ranging from the notions of ‘Decadence’, ‘regression’ or ‘degeneration’ to the penitentiary regime in late nineteenth-century England. Particular attention is paid to Wilde’s trials, conviction and prison writings and to an awareness-raising campaign through which he exposed the physical and psychological punishments that were routinely inflicted on inmates, including children. From the Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary (2 July 1896) to the two letters to the *Daily Chronicle* (1897 and 23 March 1898), Giovannelli shows how the disengaged artist’s stance left room for a deep sense of moral and civic commitment.

In the series entitled *Oscar Wilde Murder Mysteries* (2008-2019), Gyles Brandreth imagines a close collaboration between Wilde and Arthur Conan Doyle. In her “Aestheticism

and Degeneration: Echoes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Illustrious Client'", Camilla Del Grazia further looks at these parallels by investigating possible points of contact between Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" (1924), one of Sherlock Holmes's final exploits. When considering the portrait motif and its metaphorical meanings, it is clear that, in Wilde's novel, Dorian's picture is imbued with connotations that are deeply associated with the author's aesthetic beliefs as well as with a decadent parable. In the case of Holmes's adventure, a detailed characterisation of Baron Adelbert Gruner, the evil antagonist, seems to similarly work as a kind of portrait where 'surface' and 'inner truth' are strictly interconnected. In line with *fin-de-siècle* theories such as those of degeneration and criminal anthropology, the villain exhibits physical marks that soon denounce his inner corruption (as does Dorian's picture). Moreover, in the final resolution of the case, the criminal's face is deformed by vitriol and explicitly described as a painting losing its original shapes and colours. This 'liquefaction process' further highlights, as Del Grazia points out, the increasingly pervading link between inner and outer decadence, in a way that unveils similarities between Dorian and Baron Gruner, the two corrupt aesthetes.

In "*Fin de Siècle, Fin du Globe: Mars Invaders and the End of Beauty as a Transatlantic Phenomenon*", Alessandra Calanchi focuses on H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. Having been serialised in 1897 in both *Pearson's Magazine* in the UK and *Cosmopolitan* in the USA, this novel is seen as an early example of a text circulating in a globalised market. Through *The War of the Worlds*, Western imagery had to cope with the fear of a concrete threat coming from other worlds and capable of destroying the 'civilisation' that Europe and America had painstakingly built. The narrator becomes the symbol of a crepuscular phase of Western society that is already on its way to turning into a wasteland. Thanks to a *deus-ex-machina* device consisting in a powerful coalition between God and biology, he eventually survives the 'end of beauty', not only in an aesthetic sense, but also as a cultural heritage that should be preserved. As such, he is one of the most interesting and controversial characters of dystopian fiction. Calanchi deals with both the profile of the narrator as a transmedia character and the American reception of Wells's novel in the phase of transition from the Gay Nineties to the Progressive Era.

In "Writing the Occult: A Reading of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*", Lorenzo Santi examines the rhetoric of the occult in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1871 novel, placing it in the context of the late nineteenth-century Occult Revival. A writer, aristocrat, politician and Secretary of State for the Colonies when Benjamin Disraeli was Prime Minister, Bulwer-Lytton was one of the most eminent occultists of the Victorian age and a firm believer in the redemptive power of magic. As such, he supported the idea that occult practices could provide access to the deepest mysteries of the universe, freeing man from the constraints of materialism and of the positivist episteme. Moreover, Bulwer-Lytton had direct contacts with the vast panorama of occultism thanks to his personal acquaintance with Eliphas Lévi, the leading esotericist of the day. From a literary point of view, this was to find telling reverberations in *The Coming Race*, one of the author's most enduring works and possibly his spiritual testament.

In “Hyacinths and Narcissi: The Flowers of Uranian Poetry from Decadence to Modernism”, Paola Di Gennaro shows how the Uranians – the group of English poets and artists who shared a common love for boys and poetry in a period that went from about 1880 to 1930 – resorted to a set of symbols and imagery as a mode to conceal the object of their writings, appropriating *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and modelling a real ‘fashion’, an artistic attitude that might well be defined as ‘Decadent Neoclassicism’. Di Gennaro examines the uses and functions of flowers in Uranian poetry, more specifically two specimens often associated with male-male love as from the late nineteenth century: hyacinths and narcissi. One of the reasons behind their employment exceeds the realm of aesthetic choices, as they are part of a strategy adopted to conceal – or, simultaneously, highlight – the Uranian theme. Di Gennaro also investigates possible Uranian influences on the works of the authors who, at least in their explicit intentions, would flee from their poetics, namely the Modernist poets.

In “When the Novel or the Play’s the Thing – *Fin de Siècle* Meets Sex, Class, and Literary Ambition”, Jocelyne A. Scutt illustrates how E.M. Forster’s and John Galsworthy’s lyrical style allowed them to explore what the Victorians had hidden, that is to say, the disparities between the working-class and upper-crust circles in England, along with women’s subjugation to the Empire’s demands. Forster and Galsworthy showed an ability to partially cover class cleavages, deception, deceit, and unlawfulness, as though beguiling their readers into a state of unwariness only to dramatically confront them with the truth. In *Howards End*, Forster can be said to explore class, subterfuge, and social borders so as to incorporate into his ‘lyricism’ the crushing of a last will and testament, theft of property, unmarried motherhood, murder or manslaughter, all the while painting a picture of bucolic charm and purportedly happy families and marriages. Galsworthy’s *Man of Property* (from *The Forsyte Saga*) was published shortly before *Howards End* and similarly combined the poetic with the practical, the idealism that generated hope for a new world in a new century with the expectations resting with the pragmatism of a certain type of Englishman: ‘my property’, ‘my own’, ‘my wife’, ‘my life’, ‘my family’, the ‘my’ being foremost, and yet bound to be called into question by the *fin-de-siècle* context.

In his important book *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, David Weir argues for the transitional role of Decadence within the cultural modulation of Romanticism into Modernism. The link between Wilde and Modernist icon James Joyce has been at the centre of recent academic research, as confirmed by the study “‘Se solo Wilde fosse vivo per vederti’: la lunga ombra di Oscar Wilde sull’opera di James Joyce”, in which Elisabetta D’Erme shows how Joyce drew on Wilde not only to talk about the fate of Irish art – as he did in the article he dedicated to him in Trieste’s *Piccolo della Sera* on 24 March 1909 – but also to allude in his writings to various themes, including homosexuality. As a matter of fact, Joyce’s entire work overflows with more or less explicit debts, references, allusions and quotations from Wilde’s texts, and their very common condition of exiles/artists would be enough to read their output and biographies in the light of some parallelism. D’Erme therefore problematises Joyce’s statement – through Buck Mulligan in “Telemachus” – that “We have grown out of Wilde and paradoxes”. Indeed, Wilde inhabits not only *Ulysses*, but also – and

especially – *Finnegans Wake*, where Joyce thematises the topic of the ‘fall’ and traces the ultimate ‘portrait’ of a long series.

In “Wilde, Beardsley and Beyond. *Salomé* in the Cinema: From Charles Bryant to Al Pacino”, Pierpaolo Martino investigates how cinematic versions of Wilde’s works and life span the entirety of cinema history from the silent era to the present age. *Salomé* is undoubtedly the most *decadent* of Wilde’s plays, one in which the author’s debt to the Symbolist poets clearly emerges through the disturbing music which characterises his ‘literary score’. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the play had an enormous influence on cinema and popular music. In the 1923 silent version directed by Charles Bryant, the highly stylised costumes, exaggerated acting and minimal sets created a screen image that was much more focused on atmosphere and on conveying a sense of the characters’ heightened desires than on conventional plot development. The film was shot completely in black and white, matching the illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley in the printed edition of Wilde’s play. On the other hand, the most recent filmic version of *Salomé* – the 2011 celebrated docufilm *Wilde Salomé* by iconic director and actor Al Pacino – documents a period in which Pacino performed in a production of *Salomé*, directed by actress and theatre director Estelle Parson at Los Angeles’ Wadsworth Theatre while he was also making a movie relating to the mounting of the show and shooting a narrative film version of the play. Martino shows how the film is for Al Pacino, and of course for the audience, a journey, and, most importantly, a *process* in which Pacino re-writes not only the play, but Wilde himself. Indeed, *Wilde Salomé* stages his ‘love affair with Oscar Wilde’ and his desire to explore the latter’s legacy in contemporary culture.

Taking a cue from this last comment, we could say that the present collection stands out as an attempt to stage the ‘love affair’ or critical dialogue of the authors analysed – as well as of the authors of the articles – with the *fin de siècle*, pointing to its important legacy in our modern and contemporary culture. The (British) *fin de siècle* represents, indeed, a unique and extremely fertile intellectual moment in cultural and social history we are all indebted to.

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NEIL SAMMELLS*

Confederates in Cool: Oscar Wilde and Jack Johnson

Abstract: This article examines Oscar Wilde's contribution to the development of a particularly contemporary sensibility or attitude, in which the dominant aesthetic category is not art but style. This sensibility is crystallised most clearly in the figure of the dandy, and the paper will locate Wilde's dandyism in a continuum from Charles Baudelaire through Salvador Dalí to modern artists and celebrities such as David Bowie and Miles Davis. With a particular focus on Wilde's appearance before American audiences on his 1882 lecture tour, I shall also argue that Wilde's cultivation of dandyism is analogous with black 'Cool', and that it is the basis for his continuing 'afterlife' in contemporary culture.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde. Jack Johnson. Dandyism. Cool.

“Particularly obnoxious”: this is the *New York Times*'s description of Oscar Wilde when reviewing an early, 1930s account of his 1882 lecture tour of North America and Canada. “One wonders,” the author continued, “how the country stood him at all, even as a conspicuous freak in the age of Barnum”.¹ Obnoxiousness was, of course, courted on occasion by Wilde and cultivated by his managers and was part of what we now recognise as his assiduous self-construction into a recognisably modern celebrity. The 1882 tour was not simply an evangelical mission in the cause of beauty and the importance of art and design in contemporary culture. Wilde sold himself as a dandy and the poster-boy of modish Aestheticism and helped Richard D'Oyly Carte sell the comic opera *Patience* which satirised it and toured in his wake. Such self-commodification is a form of self-fashioning, and Wilde undertook it with characteristic brashness, with what we now recognise as ‘attitude’. I want to examine certain aspects of what made him obnoxious: ways in which Wilde was perceived and his personal style and attitude understood. In so doing, I will focus on the particular valency of what we now call ‘Cool’ and how it brings together in unlikely but revealing coalescence the ‘Professor of Aesthetics’ and the first black heavyweight boxing champion of the world: Jack Johnson, who once handed out a beating to a nephew of Wilde's, and whose celebrity and subsequent downfall follow an arc not dissimilar to Wilde's own.

Wilde struggled throughout the tour to define and control the way his public image was created and consumed. Emblematic of that struggle is the series of photographic portraits taken of him in New York at the start of his tour by Napoleon Sarony, the celebrated ‘society’ photographer, who had, a couple of years before, produced the

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¹ C.G. POORE, “Oscar Wilde's American Tour”, *New York Times Book Review*, 24 May 1936.

publicity shots for Sarah Bernhardt's American tour. Sarony and his sitter co-created 'Wilde': the knee breeches; black stockings; floppy, centre-parted hair; velvet jacket; oversized fur-lined coat; the air of languid self-absorption. As Matthew Sturgis puts it: "Wilde had some experience of being photographed and had been adopting extravagant poses for much of his life. But in Sarony he found an artist ready to encourage him to new heights".² The photographer believed he had never done such good work before, and Wilde was also, by all accounts, very pleased with the effect. This was how he wanted to be seen: as the sophisticated and sensitive artist with a profound sense of personal style which in its attention to fashion and costume tested the limits of what was understood to be masculine. In this respect, as Wilde journeyed westward he engineered a clash of cultures. His proselytising for Aestheticism was in deliberate conflict with discourses which – according to Mary Warner Blanchard – were attempting to reconstruct a fractured American masculinity in the wake of the Civil War.³ However, Wilde could not dictate the way his publicity photos were deployed in the marketplace. They were purloined to advertise, among other commodities, ice cream as well as Straiton and Storm cigars and Ehrlich Brothers fur-trimmed hats. Two years later Sarony successfully established copyright over the photographs in a case that went to the Supreme Court, but that was too late for Wilde, who had to suffer the indignity of staring at himself in shop windows across the country. However, Wilde did not just lose control of these specific images, and the use to which they were put. Contemporary observers read his appearance, style, and attitude in ways that were radically different to his intentions. What Wilde presented as supersophistication was perceived as its exact opposite, and as something deeply unsettling and obnoxious. Nowhere is this more explicit or revealing than in the description of him by the splendidly named E.A. Brayley Hodgetts, who saw him some months after the photos were taken, by which time Wilde had reviewed, revised, and refashioned his coiffure: "His hair was one mass of little ringlets curled tight around his head. He looked, with his thick lips, like a negro painted white".⁴ What, we may ask, did he think he was looking at?

We are indebted to Michèle Mendelssohn's *Making Oscar Wilde* (2018), the most comprehensive and compelling account we have of Wilde's 1882 lecture tour, its foundational role in his career, and how its "transformative events" divided his life "sharply into Before and After".⁵ She is particularly informative when detailing the ways in which Wilde was seen as a "negrified Paddy"⁶ (the obverse or reverse of the medal, if you will, of a 'negro painted white'). Drawing partly on the work of L.P. Curtis and his venerable study of Victorian cartoons and caricatures of the Irish,⁷ she describes the racialised and racist discourse in which the Irish and African Americans were seen

² M. STURGIS, *Oscar: A Life*, London, Head of Zeus, 2018, p. 203.

³ M. WARNER BLANCHARD, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age*, London and New York, Yale U.P., 1998.

⁴ Quoted in H. WYNDHAM, *Speranza*, London, Boardman, 1951, p. 122.

⁵ M. MENDELSSOHN, *Making Oscar Wilde*, Oxford, OUP, 2018, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 191.

⁷ L.P. CURTIS, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971.

as sharing common characteristics which stamped them, in effect, as “evolutionary throwbacks to the sub-human”.⁸ This sense that the two groups were interchangeable was reinforced by the fact that labouring Irish and “negroes” often worked together: the former were “white niggers” or “negroes turned inside out”; the latter were “smoked Irish”.⁹ In this context, Wilde travelling with a black valet constituted a provocative spectacle. The *Washington Post* was riled by Wilde’s airs and graces, accusing him of a performative gentility which meant that he was trying to pass himself off as an Englishman when in fact he was more akin to the black Wild(e) Man of Borneo. The *Post* captured this identification in a savage caricature which gained wide circulation across the country.¹⁰ By the time the tour got to Georgia, Wilde’s valet was being described by another newspaper as “an Irish negro”.¹¹ Master and servant were melding as class and ‘racial’ differences collapsed into each other. Mendelssohn notes that Wilde’s manager played along by signing them onto a hotel register as “Oscar Wilde and servant of Ireland”.¹² He sensed, no doubt, the significant publicity value of this provocative pair (a comic Beckettian pseudo-couple) which appeared to ape social, class, and power hierarchies, while flagrantly and obnoxiously disregarding the evolutionary fact that they were one and the same.

Wilde deliberately made a spectacle of himself, so it is perhaps no surprise that the hostility and ridicule he excited frequently expressed itself as countervailing spectacle. On at least one occasion Wilde and his management were complicit in such. Mendelssohn argues that the performance by Harvard students who delayed the start of his lecture on the “English Renaissance” by parading in Wildean knee-breeches, floppy-haired wigs, and green scarves was arranged by his management to allow him to demonstrate on stage his hallmark *sangfroid*. However, when Yale students decided to stage their own drama of ridicule the tactic and the effect were rather different. Wilde took control of the way he was seen in Harvard. He sanctioned the mockery of the aesthetic costume he had made his signature and countered it by appearing belatedly on stage in conventional black-tie and tails: a demonstration of dandy-like self-possession. In Yale, however, he was not able to exercise similar control over the way he was seen. Some 200 male students turned up sporting aesthetic attire in what was by now a familiar pantomime, but at their head was the black servant of a prominent local family: “the elderly black aesthete spearheaded the procession of young white aesthetes in knee-breeches and stockings. The audience was astonished”.¹³ Again, Wilde – about to lecture once more on the “English Renaissance” – was being lampooned as, indeed *seen* as, black. Students at Rochester took this a step further, to a degree that exposed the angry and violent subtext of the drama. This time a local black ‘character’, one ‘Nigger Pete’ (who was himself used to being the butt of student ridicule) threw himself into the role with both enthusiasm and expertise, provoking

⁸ M. MENDELSSOHN, *Making Oscar Wilde*, p. 108.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 192.

¹⁰ *Washington Post*, 22 January 1882, p. 4.

¹¹ M. MENDELSSOHN, *Making Oscar Wilde*, p. 192.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

overexcited members of the audience to fight each other, and the police. Wilde finished his lecture out of humour and out of pocket.¹⁴

What I want to suggest, however, is that there is another dimension to the perception of Wilde as an obnoxious “Aesthetic Darkey”.¹⁵ Brayley Hodgetts and others who regarded Wilde as ‘a negro painted white’ did not just see him through the contemporary prism of an evolutionary theory which emphasised the physical similarities of the Irish and African Americans. This identification was reinforced by the attitude Wilde adopted as he first constructed himself for his American audiences, and then attempted to face down their anger and ridicule. He did so with what Baudelaire described as the quintessential response of the dandy to the puzzled hostility of the common herd: the “pleasure of causing surprise in others, and the proud satisfaction of never showing any oneself”.¹⁶ Baudelaire claimed a long history for such an attitude, citing Caesar, Catalina, and Alcibiades as exemplars, but he saw it principally as a kind of modern heroism: a way for the individual whose uniqueness was under threat to counter the power of conformity. What Baudelaire prized we would now call ‘Cool’, and Wilde struggled to maintain it throughout his tour of the United States and Canada, as he tried strenuously to control the ways he was seen, and understood, and read. There is a curious but telling irony here. Wilde’s American public frequently identified him – an Irishman – with African Americans, as we have seen, but he countered this hostility (getting his retaliation in first) with what we have come to understand as a constituent of black style: Cool. In effect, Wilde’s style of self-presentation, deeply imbricated with what were seen as his physical racial characteristics, aligned him in white American eyes with a potentially threatening and subversive black presence, and one which seemed determined to get above its station. That, to answer my earlier question, is what Brayley Hodgetts thought he was looking at: an obnoxious confederacy and complex amalgam of black and white, of physical stereotypes and *attitude*. To see this definitive and shared attitude under stress, as a self-possessed and stylish response to moments of profound personal crisis, I want to examine two related spectacles of power at work: Wilde and Jack Johnson in court and under cross-examination.

Born in Texas in 1878 to parents who had been slaves, the early part of The Galveston Giant’s boxing career was restricted by a ‘colour bar’ which meant that no black boxer was given the chance of fighting for the highest prize: the Heavyweight Championship of the World. However, in boxing money always talks and Johnson finally won the title by beating the white champion, Tommy Burns (guaranteed a hefty \$30,000 dollars for agreeing to the fight), in Sydney in 1908. Police stopped the bout in the fourteenth round as Burns took a ferocious beating, thus preventing cine-cameras from recording the final moments of the champion’s white supremacy. Johnson held the title until 1915 when he was knocked out in the 26th round of a contest with the relatively unfancied,

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 121-22.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

¹⁶ C. BAUDELAIRE, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, Engl. trans. P.E. CHARVET, Cambridge, CUP, 1972, p. 420.

and white, Kansas cowboy Jess Willard. (Johnson would subsequently claim that he had thrown the fight.) In 1910 he had fought the brightest of the various ‘Great White Hopes’ who had been lined up to beat him (among them the Irish boxer and later film star, Victor McLaglen). The former champion James J. Jeffries came out of retirement to carry the hopes of the white nation. The humiliating defeat that Johnson inflicted on Jeffries led to race riots and lynchings across the country. This was not just a sporting event, the original ‘Fight of the Century’, but a national spectacle with significant cultural and political import.

Johnson was acutely and provocatively aware that what his biographer calls his “Unforgivable Blackness”¹⁷ could be commodified. He was the archetype of the trash-talking black boxer who knew that an almost exclusively white audience’s enmity meant they were eager to spend their money on the prospect of seeing him beaten. This was a lesson Muhammed Ali was later to put into memorable practice, against both black and white opponents. Johnson knew that to make the most of opportunities in the ring, he had to sell himself outside it, and he did so with a determination to scandalise both by his appearance and behaviour that was positively Wildean. Johnson was a flamboyant dandy and lover of conspicuous consumption (what we might now recognise as ‘bling’) from fast cars to eye-catching jewellery and clothes. As his notoriety and boxing success grew his “highly developed sense of style inside and outside the ring” started to attract newspaper attention and the “kind of celebrity coverage that had always been reserved for white sports stars”.¹⁸ He was mocked for his “dandy togs”; his “loud duds and fancy hosiery”.¹⁹ Rising to the challenge, Johnson housed what one newspaper called twenty-one “tasty suits” in his hotel closet, changed his clothes twice a day, and had a maid whose sole responsibility was to keep those suits “ready for occupancy”. The same newspaper could not resist a pointed comparison: “Beau Brummell might have been a preliminary but Jack Johnson is a main event”.²⁰ Johnson was annexing dandyism for his own ends in an act of *bravura* cultural appropriation. This is perhaps best captured in a powerful image of him dressed in a black suit with a black bowler hat and waistcoat, with a watch-chain stretched across his chest. This was the costume of a well-to-do white city gent. Johnson’s huge frame seems on the point of bursting out of his clothes as if he is pushing his role-play to its very limits. It is a deliberately challenging image, co-created by Johnson and the photographer: Otto Sarony, son of the Napoleon Sarony who had photographed Wilde in New York a couple of decades previously.

Johnson’s sartorial cool was matched by a controlled, counter-punching boxing style as he perfected the art of defence and of turning his opponents’ aggression to his advantage. The trainer of one boxer he defeated remarked: “Talk about coolness! Johnson was arctic in the ring”.²¹ Arctic in the ring and supercool outside it: Johnson composed himself into an obnoxious and threatening spectacle – and never appeared more so than when publicly flaunting his relationships with a series of white women.

¹⁷ G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, London, Pimlico, 2005.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

Of the many such liaisons, the most provocative was that with Etta Duryea, a divorced Long Island socialite. Johnson first paraded her in furs and jewellery, then married her, in 1911. The pair were the prey of *paparazzi* and drew fascinated, infuriated, and sometimes horrified crowds whenever they appeared in public together. Johnson and Etta; black man with a white woman on his arm. This is his politically charged version of the dandy gesture which had seen Gerard de Nerval walk a lobster on a lead along the boulevards of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, and Salvador Dali do the same with an anteater on the Paris Metro in the 1960s. All three were declaring ownership; inviting ridicule and astonishment; confronting the hostile and uncomprehending gaze; turning themselves impudently into performance art. In Johnson's case, this display was fraught with danger.

The marriage to Etta Duryea was a troubled one and Johnson was vilified by both blacks and whites when in December 1912 he married another white woman, the nineteen-year-old Lucille Cameron, a few weeks after Etta committed suicide. At the time Johnson was already under Federal Indictment for violating the White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, which prohibited the transportation of women across state lines for 'immoral purposes'. This 'Mann Act' was the product of an intense national moral panic about the supposed coercion of white women into prostitution by organised crime. White America chose it as the legal means to pummel Johnson, punishing him for his success in general and his marriage to a sophisticated white woman in particular. Johnson was found guilty by the inevitable all-white jury in the spring of 1913 and sentenced to a year in prison, but he skipped bail and escaped to Europe, returning to the United States finally in 1920 to serve his time. Celebrity; fortune; notoriety; downfall occasioned by sexual adventurism; trial; imprisonment and exile; bankruptcy and penury: there is a Wildean trajectory to Johnson's life and career.

It was during his exile from the United States while a fugitive from 'justice' that Johnson collided with a relative of Wilde's. Arthur Cravan was the son of Wilde's brother-in-law, Otho Holland Lloyd, and was 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'. A self-styled Dadaist poet and performance artist given to taking off his clothes and firing a pistol over the heads of his audience, Cravan claimed that his uncle Oscar was still alive and had visited him in Paris in 1913. He was also 6 feet 7 inches tall and fancied himself as a boxer. Indeed, he claimed to be the Heavyweight Boxing Champion of Europe, at a time when the continent had better things to do than quarrel with his presumption. In Barcelona in April 1916, he stepped into the ring to face the former and now disgraced champion, Jack Johnson, and was soon separated from any illusions he may have harboured when he entered it. Both men were broke. Cravan needed money from the fight to get to the US; Johnson needed cash to stay out of it. Johnson, overweight and unfit, tired of the mismatch (despite the need to prolong proceedings enough to make a saleable film) and brought matters to a concussive end in the sixth round. Cravan gathered himself from the canvas, found his way to America, married Mina Loy, and disappeared at sea off Mexico in 1918.²²

²² For a fictionalised account of these events, which hardly need fictionalising, see Antonia Logue's novel, *Shadow-Box*, London, Bloomsbury, 1999.

Wilde's world and Johnson's collided that April afternoon in Barcelona but, in a sense, they had coalesced some three years previously when Johnson was on trial for transporting one Belle Schreiber across state lines for immoral purposes. In order to understand the exact nature of that coalescence we first need to listen to Wilde in the courtroom, under cross-examination by Edward Carson who was acting for the Marquess of Queensberry in the libel action Wilde had brought against him. The circumstances of that trial – and the trials of Wilde himself which followed – are well known and I shall not dwell on them here. What I will focus on is a particular moment in his cross-examination in court which embodies Cool, and which also characterises Johnson's provocative attitude and style in the dock nearly 20 years later, when his marriage to Etta contributed to his downfall in much the same way as Wilde's recklessly public conduct of his relationship with Bosie, Lord Alfred Douglas precipitated his. That Johnson was capable of a laconic Wildean wit, a necessary constituent of Cool, is perhaps best captured by his exchange with a police officer who was obliged to fine him \$50 for speeding in one of his five automobiles. Johnson handed a hundred-dollar bill to the Sheriff, who protested that he had no change. "Keep the change," said Johnson, 'Cause I'm coming back just as fast as I went through".²³

Wilde put in quite a performance under Carson's cross-examination on the morning of Thursday 4th April 1895. He maintained, for the most part, an attitude of lofty, patrician disdain for the detailed questioning Carson submitted him to in attempting to prove that Wilde was indeed the practising 'somedomite' Queensberry had called him. One characteristic exchange concerned two bottles of iced champagne that Wilde was alleged to have shared at the Savoy with a young man, Charles Parker. "Was it a favourite drink, iced champagne?" asked Carson:

Wilde: Is it a favourite drink of mine?

Carson: Yes.

Wilde: Yes, strongly against my doctor's orders.

Carson: Never mind the doctor's orders.

Wilde: I don't.²⁴

Much of the sparring between him and Carson has this dynamic. Carson's persistent and detailed interrogation, his sarcasm and barely controlled aggression, is met with a languid insouciance as Wilde affects, coolly, either not to remember the mere details of his social encounters with young men such as Parker (some of whom Carson knew were prepared to testify against him) or not to understand the direction and implication of Carson's line of questioning: "Did you give them an 'intellectual treat'?", "They seemed deeply impressed".²⁵ Wilde is playing to the gallery, and Carson – shrewdly – gives him every opportunity to do so, confident that at some point Wilde will overreach himself, allowing Carson to deliver if not a knock-out blow then one which will floor him. Carson presses Wilde insistently about the various young men that had

²³ G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, p. 182.

²⁴ Quoted in M. HOLLAND, *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, London, Fourth Estate, 2003, p. 170.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 168.

been introduced to him by Alfred Taylor who ran a male brothel near, as Wilde takes considerable pleasure in pointing out, the Houses of Parliament. Carson mixes sexual distaste with snobbery as he lists the occupations of those who had been arrested there with Taylor, some in women's clothing: a waiter, a valet, a clerk, a costumier, a tobacconist, a fishmonger, a fruiterer. Apart from their sexual proclivities and social standing, Carson focuses relentlessly on the youth of Taylor's rent-boys, particularly that of Charles Parker. "Was he a gentleman's servant out of employment?", asks Carson:

Wilde: I have no knowledge of that at all.

Carson: Did you never hear it?

Wilde: I never heard it, nor should I have minded. I don't care twopence about people's social positions. *Carson:* Even if he was a gentleman's servant out of employment you would become friendly with him?

Wilde: I would become friendly with any human being that I liked and chose to become friendly with.

Carson: How old was Parker?

Wilde: I don't keep a census.²⁶

"I don't keep a census". This is Wilde at his most supercool but it is a style of response that is precariously maintained in the heat of Carson's forensic attack. Once again, he presses Wilde about Parker's age and is told that he was "about twenty". That, says Wilde, was "one of the attractions, the attraction of youth". Carson spots his opening and lands a heavy punch: "He was seventeen". Wilde is momentarily caught off balance and reacts with un-dandylike petulance: "I don't know his age, he may be sixteen or he may be forty-five, don't ask me about it. I think he was about twenty. If you cross-examine me on the question of whether he was seventeen, I have never asked him his age. It is rather vulgar to ask people their ages". Carson follows up by asking if Parker was an educated man and Wilde recovers himself sufficiently to parry the sarcasm with a cool response: "Culture was not his strong point".²⁷ A few moments later Carson pierces Wilde's defence by asking him if he ever kissed a boy called Walter Grainger. "Oh, no," avers Wilde in his moment of overreaching, "never in my life; he was a peculiarly plain boy". "He was what?" asks Carson, sensing blood. This time Wilde is staggered and as Carson presses home the advantage his Cool melts away: "You sting me, insult me, and try to unnerve me in every way. At times one speaks flippantly when one should speak more seriously, I admit that, I admit it – I cannot help it. That is what you are doing to me".²⁸ The dynamic between him and Carson shifts irrevocably. Wilde's imperious *sangfroid* is no longer possible to maintain nor sufficient to his cause, indeed it is proving inimical to it. There is something both ironic and uncool in the way Wilde buckles at this point and confesses to the vital importance of being earnest.

The circumstances surrounding Johnson's arrest and trial are complex. Suffice it to say that the civic authorities in Chicago persuaded themselves that the public

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 208-209.

would not be happy until he was behind bars and one of his many girlfriends, Belle Schreiber, a prostitute (Johnson enjoyed ‘feasting with panthers’ as much as Wilde did), was persuaded or induced to claim that he had transported her from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Chicago, Illinois (therefore across state lines and in direct contravention of the newly constituted Mann Act) for debauched and immoral purposes, or as the prosecuting Assistant District Attorney Harry Parkin put it, to “commit the crime against nature upon his body”.²⁹ On his first night in prison awaiting trial, Johnson requested, with a degree of aplomb that Oscar would have admired, candles, cigars, and a case of champagne. He was given a bar of soap.³⁰ In the run-up to the trial, he remained confident to the point of complacency, coolly acknowledging that, although he used prostitutes (and many of them), he was no pimp. He took that confidence with him into the courtroom and his cross-examination by Parkin on Thursday 8th May 1913. Parkin opened by accusing Johnson of beating his dead wife Etta (Johnson denied this, somewhat implausibly) and of habitually travelling with prostitutes – up to three at a time – though his defence argued that the instances cited were irrelevant because they had taken place before 1910 when the Mann Act had come into force. He then focused on Belle Schreiber:

Parkin: Now, why did you have Belle come to Atlantic City?

Johnson: I never had her come to Atlantic City.

Parkin: You entertained her there?

Johnson [brushing this aside with Wildean Cool]: I wasn’t there long enough to entertain myself.

Parkin: What did you do with her there?

Johnson: Nothing.

Parkin: Did you buy her meals or pay her hotel bills or give her any money?

Johnson: I never gave her nothing that trip at all.

Parkin continued his attack, determined to prove that Belle Schreiber was with Johnson under some form of physical or financial duress and that as a result had committed “the crime against nature upon his body”. He asked Johnson if he had sexual relations with Belle in Atlantic City and Johnson responded with an evasiveness worthy of Wilde when asked about his activities with Alfred Taylor’s rent-boys: “Belle and I were very friendly...”

Parkin: Just answer the question. Did you have sexual relations with her in Atlantic City?

Johnson: I did not.

Parkin: In August, 1910?

Johnson: I did not.

Parkin: [But] you did in every town where you and she were together?

Johnson: I don’t remember. I never kept tab.³¹

So, there we have it. “I don’t keep a census” / “I never kept tab”. In an extraordinary confluence of Cool, the Oxford-educated scion of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and the

²⁹ Quoted in G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, p. 333.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 316.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 340-41.

son of former slaves, more used to dealing in double negatives than exquisitely turned epigrams, respond in exactly the same way, strike exactly the same attitude, confront authority and crisis with self-possession and style. At a crucial moment both are 'arctic'.

In some respects, the restraint and poise – the Cool – of Wilde and Johnson under cross-examination and attack was as obnoxious as the excessive behaviour which had brought them to court in the first place, and provoked its precise opposite: a heated rhetoric of furious and unrestrained denunciation. In sentencing Wilde to two years' hard labour (the maximum penalty he could impose), Justice Wills described it as the worst case he had ever tried, saying of him and Taylor that "people who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame"³² (his shock that 'gross indecency' might be practised by a gentleman suggests that his experience of the English public school system had been untypical). Harry Parkin was very clear about the real crime that Johnson had committed: the conviction had been a nakedly racist and political one. He told reporters from the courthouse steps that:

This verdict will go around the world. It is the forerunner of laws to be passed in these United States which we may live to see – laws forbidding miscegenation. This Negro, in the eyes of many, has been persecuted. Perhaps as an individual he was. But it was his misfortune to be the foremost example of the evil in permitting the intermarriage of whites and blacks. [...] Money and fame, such as it was, brought white women. One is a suicide, the others are pariahs. He has violated the law. Now it is his function to teach others the law must be respected.³³

Johnson had been all too clear about this from the outset. As he became aware of the case being built against him, he told an audience of black businessmen in Chicago (striking an almost Shakespearean note) that "I do want to say that I am not a slave and that I have the right to choose who my mate shall be without the dictation of any man. I have eyes and I have a heart and when they fail to tell me who I shall have as mine I want to be put away in a lunatic asylum".³⁴ There was also a political dimension to Wilde's conviction, though one less explicit and clearly delineated. Letters from Queensberry were read out in open court which named in defamatory terms Lord Rosebery, the Prime Minister (who was rumoured to have a sexual interest in young men, including one of Queensberry's other sons, Viscount Drumlanrig), and Gladstone, the former Prime Minister. Carson believed that this was a mistake by Wilde's defence team because it became inevitable that he would now be prosecuted under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, so that the highest levels of the government could not be seen to favour him, or his type (what Queensberry called 'the Rosebery sort'), in any way.³⁵ Wilde was exonerated to a degree in 2017 when the British government's 'Turing Act' pardoned gay men who had been convicted of sexual offences which no longer exist. It also took over a hundred years for the United States to recognise officially that Johnson had been the victim of a racially motivated injustice and had been convicted on trumped up charges. So – given the fact that

³² Quoted in M. STURGIS, *Oscar: A Life*, p. 584.

³³ Quoted in G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, pp. 344-45.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 310.

³⁵ See R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1987, p. 423.

Johnson had paid off numerous prostitutes who might have been prepared to testify against him – it seems both ironic and appropriate that it was Donald Trump who granted Johnson a posthumous presidential pardon in 2018.

Sex Pistols Svengali Malcom McLaren managed to convince the *Irish Times* that he was planning a movie with Stephen Spielberg about how Wilde discovered Rock ‘n’ Roll as he toured the West.³⁶ I am not trying to suggest that Wilde also invented Cool at the same time. In fact, he was channelling, unknowingly, a particular form of dandyism, with a particular political and historical valency: that of black servants and slaves who appropriated the sartorial flamboyance their employers and owners expected of them as signifiers of their wealth and status. These were the “Slaves to Fashion” that Monica L. Miller describes in her pioneering study of black dandies from the eighteenth century to the present.³⁷ Dandyism and its expression as Cool was for both Wilde and the African Americans he was identified with a form of self-definition and resistance. Johnson’s moment of impertinent *sangfroid* – “I never kept tab” – validates that complex perception of Wilde as black that had so troubled his American audiences. In a sense they were right. The style Wilde developed and the attitude he struck, that combination of dandyish display and apparently nerveless self-possession, defined the black boxer as much as it did the Irish artist. What bound them together was not evolution or race but the aesthetics of Cool, and the politics of impudence.

Johnson died in 1946, in a car crash, driving furiously, having – allegedly – been refused a table in a racially segregated restaurant. His widowed third wife said that she loved him for his courage and that “he faced the world unafraid”.³⁸ In recent decades, that fearlessness has made Johnson something of a hero to black Americans and a martyr to the cause of Civil Rights. Both his heroism and his martyrdom are deeply compromised, however. There is little doubt that he used his fists on some of the women in his life as well as his opponents in the boxing ring; he lied in court and to many of those closest to him; he was not someone it was wise to go into business with. The excesses of his behaviour outside the ring deeply embarrassed those black Chicago businessmen he spoke to on the eve of his trial because they were aiming for respectability in the eyes of white society. Yet, that “I am not a slave” has profound resonance. It shows that Johnson struck attitudes and developed behaviours he felt were necessary for him to free himself from a still powerful set of historical circumstances which continued to oppress black people in general and not just him as an individual in particular.

In a sense, the clarity with which Johnson understood the political predicament he was in – however overconfident he was about his ability to extricate himself from it – contrasts sharply with Wilde’s naively blinkered view of what would happen when he found himself in the Central Criminal Court. He seems to have felt that discussions would revolve around matters artistic and cultural, and the classical antecedents of the ‘love that dare not speak its name’, and not the age of his rent-boys and soiled hotel

³⁶ *The Irish Times*, 19 July 1997.

³⁷ M.L. MILLER, *Slaves to Fashion: Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, Durham and London, Duke U.P., 2009.

³⁸ Quoted in G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, p. 448.

bedsheets. Carson soon began to disabuse him of such lofty notions. Wilde's Cool was a display not just of resistance and self-definition, it was also a form of self-delusion. He began the trials with no understanding of the weight of evidence that was massed against him, or that his palpably reckless behaviour was not going to be excused on the grounds that he was an exceptional individual. Wilde's subsequent status as a gay martyr is perhaps even more deeply compromised than Johnson's as a black martyr. First, Wilde saw himself as a martyr to Art not to homosexuality. He continued to deny all the clearly warranted accusations against him and lied to his own legal counsel about what he had done and with whom. Further, some of the 'renters' and others that Wilde had sex with were not young men but boys. Alphonse Conway, for instance, who was picked up by Wilde and Bosie when they holidayed with Wilde's family in Worthing was sixteen. No doubt there were others who were also juvenile. Even though the 'Turing Act' pardoned Wilde for the vaguely defined 'gross indecency' that he had been convicted of and which is no longer an offence, his relations with boys like Conway would land him in legal trouble today. He would also find himself swiftly cancelled because of the power dynamic between him and the various valets, grooms, waiters and sundry unemployed youths that he entertained, charmed, used, and paid.

Wilde and Johnson took their pleasures dangerously and in so doing exposed the hypocrisy and prejudice of the society they fascinated and angered. They did so with a shared – if in Johnson's case unarticulated – understanding of the power of the pose and of style and attitude. Johnson had a sharp understanding of the politics of the impudence he cultivated; Wilde saw that impudence as the necessary response of the artist to a philistinism that valued utility above beauty. Dandyism was for each a way of freeing themselves, of defining themselves, of possessing themselves. "Attitude," said Wilde, "is everything"³⁹ and Johnson recognised this too. Inveterate individualists who could be as careless of themselves as they were of others, they were not saints or martyrs, and heroes only in the Baudelairean sense with which Wilde, if not Johnson, would have been familiar. They were, however, confederates in Cool.

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³⁹ O. WILDE, "The Decay of Lying", 1889, in ID., *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, London, Collins, New Edition, 1966, p. 913.

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GINO SCATASTA*

Yellow or Savoy? An Introduction to the Nineties

Abstract: The debate around the Eighteen Nineties in England has often led to consider that decade as a phase characterised by a widespread dissemination of ideas, attitudes, and works related to Decadence and Aestheticism. The analysis of some aspects of the two most important magazines of the time might offer a more correct introduction to the period, with all its contradictions and complexity. The yellow colour, which appeared to connote the decade and gave the name to its most famous magazine, was only one of a series of colours that tinged the period, and *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, while trying to find a difficult balance among different trends and needs, reflected more than a single current or attitude, offering a composite and complete picture of those years.

Keywords: *The Yellow Book*. *The Savoy*. Eighteen Nineties. Oscar Wilde.

The answer is and has been for decades: “Yellow Nineties”. However, the appropriate questions might be different: Were the Nineties really yellow? Why *The Yellow Book* and not another magazine such as *The Savoy*? And why the colour yellow?

The definition of this decade with its peculiar qualities, different from the preceding decades but also from the following ones, “dates back to the last few years before the First World War”, as Koenraad Claes notes: this “popular image of the Nineties” stems from the concerns of the Georgians who wanted to break away from Victorianism and sought to identify some ideas and artworks in the last decade of the previous century that did not reflect the “sexual repression and social conformism” of Victorianism.¹ George Holbrook Jackson’s seminal volume *The Eighteen Nineties*, first published in 1911, was both a consequence and an amplifier of this attitude.

However, this view of the Nineties is somewhat misleading, just like the idea of the *Yellow Book* as an *avant-garde* magazine: “It was newness *in excelsis*: novelty naked and unashamed”,² as Jackson put it, but it was also the result of a compromise. In the Eighteen Nineties not all artists were radical, nor were all writers experimenting with new themes or different styles. It was, more or less, a decade like the others, perhaps a little more controversial, but, as usual, with authors who continued to write as their predecessors did twenty years earlier and others who tried something different. And this is true not only for literature, but for society in general: if assuming that the Nineties were *so* yellow, how would we explain the harsh sentence against Oscar Wilde, his rapid transformation from celebrity to outcast, the hysterical reactions of the mob

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¹ K. CLAES, *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2018, pp. 107-108.

² G. HOLBROOK JACKSON, *The Eighteen Nineties*, Edinburgh, Riverside Press, 1922, p. 46.

that, after the author's trials, smashed the windows of his publishing house, The Bodley Head, in Vigo Street? The early years of the decade were perhaps characterised by a certain open-mindedness, but, again, how to explain the outraged reviews of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890 and the shocked and disgusted reactions to Beardsley's art and Max Beerbohm's essays in the first volume of *The Yellow Book* in 1894? It is patently untrue that in England in the Nineties everybody became queer, just as it is untrue that every sexual or literary 'vice' was accepted or looked upon with a certain benevolence, that everyone was an aesthete or at least a lover of the fine arts. There was a certain tolerance for something that was previously unacceptable, it was possible to discuss topics that used to be taboo, but nothing more, and with important limitations at that.

However, the popular vision of the Nineties as 'Naughty Nineties' or 'Yellow Nineties', which was widespread in the first decades of the new century and handed down soon after, had some basis in reality, just like the reputation of *The Yellow Book* as the most shocking magazine ever published. Through an analysis of the colour yellow, which according to Jackson pervaded the period, it is possible to arrive at a more complex view of that age. Even though Jackson did not use the term 'yellow' with reference to the Nineties, he nevertheless devoted a long paragraph to this colour:

Yellow became the colour of the hour, the symbol of the time-spirit. It was associated with all that was *bizarre* and queer in art and life, with all that was outrageously modern. Richard Le Gallienne wrote a *prose fancy* on "The Boom in Yellow", in which he pointed out many applications of the colour with that *fin de siècle* flippancy which was one of his characteristics, without, however, tracing the decorative use of yellow to Whistler, as he should have done. Nevertheless his essay recalls very amusingly the fashion of the moment. "Bill-posters", he says, "are beginning to discover the attractive qualities of the colour [...] though its recent boom comes from publishers, and particularly from The Bodley Head. *The Yellow Book* with any other colour would hardly have sold as well – the first private edition of Mr Arthur Benson's poems, by the way, came caparisoned in yellow, and with the identical name, *Le Cahier Jaune*; and no doubt it was largely its title that made the success of *The Yellow Aster*".³

Yellow was queer, but less dangerous than green. Green was a colour that, associated with Wilde and his circle, spread an atmosphere of perversion far more than the 'innocent' yellow. Richard Le Gallienne expresses this clearly in his essay quoted by Jackson and published in 1900, "The Boom in Yellow", which could be described as a defence of yellow, as opposed to green:

Green must always have a large following among artists and art lovers; for, as has been pointed out, an appreciation of it is a sure sign of a subtle artistic temperament. There is something not quite good, something almost sinister, about it – at least, in its more complex forms, though in its simple form, as we find it in outdoor nature, it is innocent enough; and, indeed, is it not used in colloquial metaphor as an adjective for innocence itself? Innocence has but two colours, white or green. But Becky Sharp's eyes also were green, and the green of the aesthete does not suggest innocence. There will always be wearers of the green carnation; but the popular vogue which green has enjoyed for the last ten or fifteen years is probably passing. Even the aesthete himself would seem to be growing a

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 46-47. Arthur Benson published his first collection of verse, *Le Cahier Jaune*, in 1892. *The Yellow Aster* was a New Woman novel, published in 1894 and written by Kathleen Mannington Hunt Caffyn with the pseudonym 'Iota'.

little weary of its indefinitely divided tones, and to be anxious for a colour sensation somewhat more positive than those to be gained from almost imperceptible nuances, of green.⁴

Yellow differs from green, and through its connections with flowers, innocence, and religion, Le Gallienne tries to distance himself from the sick, decadent, Wildean colour:

if in the vegetable world green almost universally colours the leaves, yellow has more to do with the flowers. The flowers we love best are yellow: the cowslip, the daffodil, the crocus, the buttercup, half the daisy, the honeysuckle, and the loveliest rose. Yellow, too, has its turn even with the leaves [...]. Let us dream of this: a maid with yellow hair, clad in a yellow gown, seated in a yellow room, at the window a yellow sunset, in the grate a yellow fire, at her side a yellow lamplight, on her knee a Yellow Book. And the letters we love best to read – when we dare – are they not yellow too?⁵

Even *The Yellow Book*, in this idyllic picture of a world turned yellow, loses its sinister side on the knees of a young girl. Le Gallienne's detachment from the decadent Nineties had already begun: in his memoirs *The Romantic '90s*, published many years later, in 1925, he would write: "*The Yellow Book* has become the symbol of the period and the two or three writers and artists to whom the word 'decadence' may perhaps be applied have been taken as characteristic of a time which was far from being all 'yellow,' or 'naughty,' or 'decadent'".⁶ In 1925 he seemed to believe that the spirit of the Nineties was very different from the popular image of the period that had been constructed in the previous decades, although in 1900 his view of yellow had been much more sentimental. Le Gallienne knew that yellow also had a dark side:

No doubt some disagreeable things are reported of yellow. We have had the yellow-fever, and we have had pea-soup. The eyes of lions are said to be yellow, and the ugliest cats – the cats that infest one's garden – are always yellow. Some medicines are yellow, and no doubt there are many other yellow disagreeables; but we prefer to dwell upon the yellow blessings.⁷

However, yellow was a much more wicked colour than this. French decadent and naturalistic novels were sold in England with yellow covers and yellow was also "the decor of the notorious and dandified pre-Victorian Regency".⁸ Yellow, like green, was also closely associated with Wilde, who wrote the poem "Symphony in Yellow" in 1889. And, again, yellow continued to appear in Wilde's works, from the yellow book that Lord Henry gives to Dorian Gray and which corrupts the young man's soul⁹ to Mrs Cheveley's famous line in *An Ideal Husband* when she says that she has never read a Blue Book because she prefers books with yellow covers.¹⁰ Wilde was suspicious of *The Yellow Book*, and, to demonstrate his dissatisfaction with it, publicly called it

⁴ R. LE GALLIENNE, "The Boom in Yellow" (1900), *Victorian Web*, <https://victorianweb.org/victorian/decadence/lagallienne1.html> (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ R. LE GALLIENNE, *The Romantic '90s*, New York, Doubleday, 1925, p. 162.

⁷ R. LE GALLIENNE, "The Boom in Yellow".

⁸ S. WEINTRAUB, "Introduction", in ID. (ed.), *The Yellow Book: Quintessence of the Nineties*, New York, Doubleday, 1964, p. viii.

⁹ See O. WILDE, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), in ID., *Complete Works*, London and Glasgow, Collins, 1977, p. 100.

¹⁰ See O. WILDE, *An Ideal Husband* (1895), in ID., *Complete Works*, p. 517.

“horrid’, ‘loathsome’, ‘dull’ and – worst of all – ‘not yellow at all’”.¹¹ However, the strongest connection between Wilde, yellow and *The Yellow Book*, which pushed the colour and the magazine firmly under his decadent influence, was unintentionally established by Wilde himself. Sally Ledger comments on a well-known misunderstanding concerning this dynamic:

As Oscar Wilde was escorted to the Old Bailey in 1895, one or two newspaper men noted that the disgraced author had under his arm a large volume bound in yellow. According to subsequent reports in the media, the yellow-backed tome that Wilde took with him to the first of his two trials was *The Yellow Book*, the hardbacked quarterly periodical edited by Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley. As it happened, the book clutched under Wilde’s arm was a French novel; the yellow dust jacket generally denoted either risqué French fiction or popular novels sold at railway bookstalls. But as far as the newspapers were concerned, Wilde was accompanied to his trial by *The Yellow Book*, and such media reports cemented in the cultural imagination of the 1890s an association between *The Yellow Book*, aestheticism and Decadence and, after April and May 1895, homosexuality.¹²

What was infamous in 1895 began to be more valued and appreciated in the following decades, giving *The Yellow Book* the aura of a decadent and *avant-garde* magazine. As the colour yellow, with its complex and contradictory meanings, would teach us, however, things were more complicated and confusing. In fact, *The Yellow Book* was and was *not* a decadent magazine. To understand this apparent contradiction, we can start from the magazine’s origins, as told by Henry Harland, its literary editor: he wrote that it was

one of the densest and soupiest and yellowest of all London’s infernal yellow fogs. Beardsley and I sat together the whole afternoon [...]. We declared each to each that we thought it quite a pity and a shame that London publishers should feel themselves longer under the obligation to refuse any more of our good manuscripts [...]. And then and there we decided to have a magazine of our own. As the sole editorial staff we would feel free and welcome to publish any and all of ourselves that nobody could be hired to print.

That was the first day of January [...] and the next day we had an appointment with Mr John Lane.¹³

The two young artists were an odd couple: Harland was an American-born novelist who had achieved some success in the United States with a sensationist novel written under a pseudonym. In 1899, he moved to Britain, where he continued to write novels and short stories under his own name, drawing inspiration from respectable authors, such as Henry James, and from less respectable friends, such as Baron Corvo and Aubrey Beardsley. As for Beardsley, he had achieved a certain notoriety with his illustrations of *Le Morte Darthur*, but had abandoned his Pre-Raphaelite style for a new and personal mode, inspired by Japonisme and with a strongly decadent and provocative attitude. In 1893 he illustrated Wilde’s *Salome*, starting an ambiguous relationship of admiration and impatience with the Irish author. Wilde himself often reacted to this arrogant young artist with an irony mixed with malice: “Dear Aubrey is almost too

¹¹ Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, “Introduction”, p. xvi.

¹² S. LEDGER, “Wilde Women and *The Yellow Book*: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence”, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 50 (1), 2007, p. 5.

¹³ Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, “Introduction”, pp. ix-x.

Parisian – he can never forget that he has been in Dieppe – once”, he is reported to have said, while Beardsley mocked Wilde, depicting him in his drawings “as puffily fat, effeminate, evil, in jester’s cap and bells”.¹⁴ The illustrations for *Salome*, however, had given Beardsley great notoriety but also a reputation as a decadent young artist, and marked once for all a link between him and Wilde.

The man that Harland and Beardsley went to see, on that yellow afternoon in January 1894, was John Lane, the third man behind *The Yellow Book* enterprise. Described as “the most resourceful entrepreneur of British Aestheticism”,¹⁵ Lane had opened a bookshop of antiquarian books, The Bodley Head, with his partner Elkin Mathews, in 1887. A few years later, they began publishing books, both as ‘The Bodley Head’ and under the name of the two partners. More than Mathews, who left the firm at the beginning of 1894, Lane realised that Aestheticism, Decadence and all that was modern, scandalous and shocking could sell well, and thus exploited his intuition. *The Yellow Book* project came at just the right time: “Lane saw at once the potential of the venture”, as Matthew Sturgis puts it. More than the artistic aspect of the project, “he saw at once the commercial benefits of establishing a periodical that would provide a platform for authors and artists already on his list, and a magnet for newcomers”.¹⁶

It has often been argued that *The Yellow Book* was a compromise and that part of its success was due to its composite character. Built on a delicate balance between novelty and tradition, it presented conventional writers side by side with Beardsley’s scandalous drawings and Max Beerbohm’s provocative essays. The first volume of April 1894 opens with a novella by Henry James, always suspicious of what he called “the small square lemon-coloured quarterly”,¹⁷ and towards the end of the volume there is an essay by Arthur Waugh, eloquently titled “Reticence in Literature”. In the middle, however, there are “A Defence of Cosmetics” by Max Beerbohm, which emphasises the importance of artifice in life and the arts, and a poem by Arthur Symons, “Stella Maris”, focusing on a prostitute, although the title is an attribute of the Virgin Mary.¹⁸

The first four volumes maintained a precarious balance between tradition and novelty. After Beardsley’s dismissal as art editor following the Wilde trials, however, this balance was increasingly difficult to keep and the magazine slowly lost its relevance. Therefore, its posthumous fame derives from these four volumes, in which the promises made in the magazine’s advertisement, distributed in March 1894, were fulfilled. The Prospectus made explicit reference to such a balance: “And while *The Yellow Book* will seek always to preserve a delicate, decorous and reticent mien and conduct, it will at the same time have the courage of its modernness, and not tremble at the frown

¹⁴ Quoted in S. CALLOW, *Oscar Wilde and his Circle*, London, National Portrait Gallery, 2013, pp. 65-66.

¹⁵ K. CLAES, *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine*, p. 109.

¹⁶ M. STURGIS, *Aubrey Beardsley. A Biography*, London, Flamingo, 1999, p. 171.

¹⁷ Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, “Introduction”, p. xii.

¹⁸ H. JAMES, “The Death of the Lion”, *The Yellow Book*, 1, April 1894, pp. 7-52, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, eds D. DENISOFF and L.J. KOOISTRA, *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2019, https://1890s.ca/YBV1_james_death; A. WAUGH, “Reticence in Literature”, *ibidem*, pp. 201-19, https://1890s.ca/YBV1_waugh_reticence; M. BEERBOHM, “A Defence of Cosmetics”, *ibidem*, pp. 65-82, https://1890s.ca/YBV1_beerbohm_defense; A. SYMONS, “Stella Maris”, *ibidem*, pp. 129-31, https://1890s.ca/YBV1_symons_stellam (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

of Miss Grundy”. And a few lines below: “It will be charming, it will be daring, it will be distinguished”.¹⁹ “From the beginning”, according to Weintraub, *The Yellow Book* “sought respectability” and was “more a survey of the literary spectrum of the Nineties than its reputation would indicate”.²⁰ And it was successful: earlier magazines that could be compared to *The Yellow Book*, such as *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* or *The Dial*, sold no more than 300 copies, while 7,000 copies of the first volume of *The Yellow Book* were printed, followed by about 5,000 of the second volume. A snobbish review in the *National Observer* outlined the type of audience the magazine was aimed at: young, middle-class, not particularly refined or educated but willing to follow new trends just because they were new, and ready to be manipulated;

you can see young men going home from their labour in the city, bearing the work deferentially under their arms; it flames out from the forehead of many an ‘occasional table’ in Brixton and Bayswater. For the great world likes to be told what it must admire, especially when it is told to admire something new.²¹

It was an audience that slightly repelled the reviewer but who could be a publisher’s fortune. As Ellen Moers recognised as early as 1960, “*The Yellow Book* was founded, after all, not by a coterie with a message, but by a publisher with an eye for value”.²²

Lane had been involved in the project of another magazine in 1893, when he and Mathews tried to revive *The Century Guild Hobby Horse*, in many ways a precursor to *The Yellow Book*: “though often described as ‘aesthetic’, [the *Hobby Horse*] belongs as much to the Arts and Crafts movement, has connections with proto-Art Nouveau, and is tinged with Decadence”.²³ Financially, it had been a complete failure and Lane and Mathews’s attempt to take over the magazine did not work. The last issue of the *Hobby Horse*, as it was renamed by Lane, was published in 1894 to soon disappear and be replaced by *The Yellow Book*. Lane had learned a lesson from the *Hobby Horse*: his new magazine was now “available from all major booksellers, not least of which the newsagent chain W.H. Smith that was present in all major railway stations to catch the many potential readers who now commuted or otherwise travelled by train”.²⁴ Its launch was a massive campaign with posters, advertisements, programs and in the end it succeeded in gaining “entrance for the avant-garde into the living rooms of a broad readership that liked the idea of owning beautiful books, but that was ultimately more interested in scandal and sensation than in new literature and art”.²⁵

A book and not a magazine: this was also emphasised in the Prospectus so as to arouse interest in the new journal before the publication of its first volume:

¹⁹ Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, “Introduction”, p. xi.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. viii.

²¹ Quoted in D. DENISOFF and L.J. KOOISTRA, “*The Yellow Book*: Introduction to Volume 1 (April 1894)”, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/yb-v1-introduction/> (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

²² Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, “Introduction”, p. viii.

²³ I. FLETCHER, “Decadence and the Little Magazines”, in ID. (ed.), *Decadence and the 1890s*, New York, Holmes and Meier, 1980, p. 179.

²⁴ K. CLAES, *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine*, p. 109.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

It will be a book – a book to be read, and placed upon one’s shelves, and read again; a book in form, a book in substance; a book beautiful to see and convenient to handle; a book with style, a book with finish; a book that every book-lover will love at first sight; a book that will make book-lovers of many who are now indifferent to books.²⁶

This passage suggests again, in a more positive light, the bookshelf of a middle-class, quite educated man who does not buy a magazine to throw it away after reading it, but carefully places it among other valuable books: the marketing strategy of The Bodley Head included the possibility of “enticing a broad middle-class spectrum into believing they were an elite group of cultivated purchasers”.²⁷

‘Compromise’ was then a keyword for *The Yellow Book*: not only a compromise between modernity and tradition or among Aestheticism, Decadence and Philistinism, but also a compromise between art and the market. ‘Compromise’, however, is a misleading word, so that we had better speak of a careful balance among those elements. In this perspective, *The Yellow Book* was the true magazine of the decade, a decade that, far from constituting *only* a reaction against Victorianism, was full of contradictions and heterogeneous elements. One could just look at the music-hall, the subject of many poems by Arthur Symons and many drawings by Walter Sickert. Music-halls were extolled by artists, but at the same time were attacked by others on moral grounds. Yeats wrote in his *Autobiographies* that Symons “studied the music halls, as he might have studied the age of Chaucer”²⁸ and his fascination is visible in many of his poems. His collection *London Nights*, published by Smithers in 1895, begins with “Prologue”, whose first line is “My life is like a music-hall”, while the next poem, “To a Dancer”, is inspired not by a classical dancer but by a music-hall one:

Intoxicatingly
Her eyes across the footlights gleam,
(The wine of love, the wine of dream)
Her eyes, that gleam for me!

The eyes of all that see
Draw to her glances, stealing fire
From her desire that leaps to my desire;
Her eyes that gleam for me!²⁹

With less sensuality, Sickert published many drawings in *The Yellow Book* whose subjects were the dancers, actresses and audiences of the various music-halls in London.³⁰

²⁶ Quoted in S. WEINTRAUB, “Introduction”, p. xi.

²⁷ L.J. KOOISTRA, “*The Yellow Book* (1894-1897): An Overview”, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/yb-general-introduction/> (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

²⁸ W.B. YEATS, *Autobiographies*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2010, p. 236.

²⁹ A. SYMONS, “To a Dancer”, ll. 1-8, in ID., *London Nights*, London, Smithers, 1895, p. 5.

³⁰ See “The Old Oxford Music Hall”, *The Yellow Book*, 1, April 1894, p. 85, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/yb1-sickert-hall/>; “The Old Bedford Music Hall”, *The Yellow Book*, 2, July 1894, p. 221, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/yb2-sickert-bedford-music-hall/> and “Ada Lundberg”, *ibidem*, p. 225, <https://1890s.ca/yb2-sickert-ada-lundberg/>; “Collins’s Music Hall, Islington”, *The Yellow Book*, 3, October 1894, p. 137, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/yb3-sickert-musichall/>; “The Lion Comique”, *ibidem*, p. 139, <https://1890s.ca/yb3-sickert-lioncomique/> and “Skirt-Dancing” (by Philip Wilson Steer, another British

However, the same subject that aroused the enthusiasm or interest of the artists was attacked not only by the more traditional and puritanical sectors of British society, but also by social reformers and women's rights activists. In 1894, Laura Ormiston Chant, "a suffragist, novelist, poet, and nurse, who was a prominent member" of the National Vigilance Association, "whose members were sometimes referred to as 'Purity Crusaders'",³¹ organised a protest against the Empire Theatre of Varieties in Leicester Square, reporting her astonishment at the immorality of the performances and the presence of prostitutes who openly solicited their clients during the show. Her efforts were successful and some changes were made to the structure of the theatre, despite the protests of the customers, to prevent the activity of prostitutes.³²

A similarly blurred situation, which shows how that decade cannot be considered in terms of a coherent whole, not even the first part of it, is related to both Wilde and *The Yellow Book*. As Ledger writes,

All too many New Woman writers and journalists were positively jubilant at the downfall of Oscar Wilde, regarding it as the proper comeuppance of one whose sexual mores failed to meet the high standards advocated by social purity feminists such as Sarah Grand, Laura Ormiston Chant, and some of the female journalists who wrote for feminist newspapers such as *Shafts* and *The Woman's Signal*. Contrarily, though, as Margaret Stetz and Linda K. Hughes have both demonstrated, the literary journals associated with Decadence and aestheticism not only included poems and short stories by women, but also facilitated a dialogue between male aesthetes, Decadents and New Woman writers of the *fin de siècle*.³³

This was the case with *The Yellow Book* and more generally with The Bodley Head, which had a catalogue devoted to New Woman fiction, besides Decadence male authors. If there was a strong moralist bent in British feminism in the Nineties, within *The Yellow Book* there was also a lively debate among New Women interested in a more open approach to sexuality and marriage, both in their life and in their works. Writers such as Ada Leveson, Ella D'Arcy, Charlotte Mew, Olive Custance (who later became the unhappy wife of Lord Alfred Douglas), Evelyn Sharp, and Vernon Lee published stories and poems in *The Yellow Book*. Some of them were regular contributors and the number of female authors increased with every issue of the magazine. The third volume opened with a rather boring but provocative essay, "Women – Wives or Mothers", signed by 'A Woman' but written by a man, i.e. the critic and journalist Frederick Greenwood. The crux of the essay is that "woman, fresh from Nature's moulding, is [...] a predestined wife *or* mother. She is not both",³⁴ and this clearly shows how committed the magazine and the publisher were to such sensitive topics as the redefinition of gender roles at the *fin de siècle*, and how they approved at least part of the demands of the New Women. And, of course, this also brought financial profits.

impressionist), *ibidem*, p. 173, <https://1890s.ca/yb3-steer-skirt-dancing/> (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

³¹ K. BECKSON, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History*, New York, Norton, 1992, p. 119.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 119-25.

³³ S. LEDGER, "Wilde Women and *The Yellow Book*", p. 4.

³⁴ F. GREENWOOD (A WOMAN), "Women – Wives or Mothers", *The Yellow Book*, 3, October 1894, p. 12, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/YBV3_greenwood_women/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

If, then, *The Yellow Book* was the result of a careful balance between some trends that characterised the Nineties, and in this sense was the true magazine of a heterogeneous decade, what can be said of *The Savoy*? Was it the true avant-garde magazine of the Nineties and, although less successful than *The Yellow Book*, did it achieve what the other magazine, in its cautious attempt at a balance, failed to do? The first thing to note is that the two publications were connected for more than one reason. Firstly, they had in common not only many contributors (Beerbohm, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Yeats), but also the two editors: Symons, who had not been the literary editor of *The Yellow Book* but had nonetheless contributed to it, and Beardsley. The latter had been dismissed as art editor of *The Yellow Book* after Wilde's imprisonment: as he was associated with the Irish writer because of his illustrations for *Salome*, some contributors to *The Yellow Book* called on Lane to sack Beardsley in order to avert any connections between the magazine and the now infamous Wilde. Lane reluctantly agreed. The second aspect that the two magazines had in common was the economic one: if Harland and Beardsley are to be trusted, we know that *The Yellow Book* was born out of a conversation between the two friends, who would then discuss it with Lane, who willingly accepted their proposal. With *The Savoy*, the situation was reversed: it was John Smithers, the publisher, who realised that the new direction of *The Yellow Book* had left room for a new avant-garde magazine: "Smithers felt there might be an opening in the print market for a well-produced magazine of art and literature, especially if it featured the kind of avant-garde work that other periodicals were now increasingly reluctant to publish" and therefore "approached the poet and essayist Arthur Symons to serve as editor".³⁵

Smithers was very different from Lane. Firstly, he was not afraid of public morality and, not surprisingly, was one of Wilde's few friends who remained very close to him after his release. Wilde responded with a witty portrait of him in a letter to a friend in 1897:

[Smithers] is usually in a large straw hat, has a blue tie delicately fastened with a diamond brooch of the impurest water – or perhaps wine, as he never touches water: it goes to his head at once. His face, clean-shaven as befits a priest who serves at the altar whose God is Literature, is wasted and pale – not with poetry, but with poets, who, he says, have wrecked his life by insisting on publishing with him. He loves first editions, especially of women: little girls are his passion. He is the most learned erotomaniac in Europe. He is also a delightful companion, and a dear fellow, very kind to me.³⁶

Smithers approached Symons, and Symons in turn contacted Beardsley, who was delighted to have the opportunity to take revenge on Lane and *The Yellow Book*. As in the case of *The Yellow Book*, the genesis of *The Savoy* hinged on a compenetration of literary and artistic concerns, with an eye to the economic aspect. This balance is also visible in Symons's editorial note to the first volume of *The Savoy*, January 1896:

³⁵ C. KEEP, "General Introduction to *The Savoy* (1896)", *Savoy Digital Edition*, eds C. KEEP and L.J. KOOISTRA, 2018-2020, Yellow Nineties 2.0, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2022, <https://1890s.ca/savoy-general-introduction/> (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

³⁶ Quoted in J.G. NELSON, "'A Delightful Companion': Leonard Smithers and the Decadents", *The Wildean*, 26, 2005, p. 18.

All we ask from our contributors is good work, and good work is all we offer our readers. This we offer with some confidence. We have no formulas, and we desire no false unity of form or matter. We have not invented a new point of view. We are not Realists, or Romanticists, or Decadents. For us, all art is good which is good art.³⁷

Eschewing rigid labelling and emphasising a preference for all that was artistically elevated, the editorial note written by Symons expressed a desire to distance the new magazine from the controversies relating to the decadent and aesthetic movements in England (foremost among them, the Wilde trials). At the same time, it looked towards an artistic excellence that could rival *The Yellow Book*. As Symons later admitted, it was actually conceived as “something of a rival to *The Yellow Book*, which had by that time ceased to mark a movement and had become little more than a publisher’s magazine”.³⁸

Unfortunately, the new magazine too was immediately embroiled in a controversy. To begin with, its very name was controversial: possibly suggested by Beardsley or his sister Mabel, it stemmed from the custom of naming a magazine after the street or the district in which it was printed.³⁹ Nothing scandalous about this, apart from the fact that *The Savoy* was also the name of the new hotel that had opened in 1889: if considered the height of modernity, it was also mentioned in many depositions throughout Wilde’s trials as the backdrop where the ‘gross indecency’ acts took place. This might have worked as a subtle allusion for a few readers, as Keep seems to think, but, due to the wide press coverage of Wilde’s trials, it is equally possible that the ‘subtle’ allusion was not so nuanced after all, being actually graspable by the general public. It could have been one of Beardsley’s typical pranks, whose desire to shock his prudish readers resurfaced again and again.⁴⁰

The same attitude can be seen in connection with two drawings by Beardsley that did not create a scandal simply because they never reached the general public. The first was submitted to Smithers for the prospectus of the new magazine: the artist proposed a winged Pierrot, but the publisher wanted something more serious, more in line with a magazine that presented itself as a container of ‘good art’, and therefore recommended the image of John Bull, the traditional incarnation of the common Englishman. Beardsley complied, but could not avoid adding an obscene detail, so that his John Bull presented “what Shaw calls ‘a condition of strained sexual excitement’”,⁴¹ raising protests from George Moore and other literary and artistic figures who had been approached for collaboration. Beardsley was no stranger to this kind of prank. Lane had spent much time scrutinising his drawings for *Salome*, looking for hidden male genitalia, sometimes asking him to remove them and on other occasions not noticing them. Smithers was not inclined to be scandalised, but his desire to distance himself from his previous reputation as a dealer in erotic books led him to intervene in the debate, siding with Moore. Another of Beardsley’s pranks was discovered on the cover of the

³⁷ A. SYMONS, “Editorial Note”, *The Savoy*, 1, January 1896, p. 5, *Savoy Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/savoyv1-symons-editorial/> (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

³⁸ Quoted in C. KEEP, “General Introduction to *The Savoy* (1896)”, *Savoy Digital Edition*.

³⁹ *Ibidem* and M. STURGIS, *Aubrey Beardsley. A Biography*, p. 256.

⁴⁰ See, among others, C. KEEP, “General Introduction to *The Savoy* (1896)”, *Savoy Digital Edition*.

⁴¹ Quoted *ibidem*.

first volume of *The Savoy*, showing the drawing of a beautiful young woman and a half-naked cherub. In the first version of the drawing, the cherub urinated on a book hidden in the grass, which, on closer inspection, turned out to be *The Yellow Book*. Smithers asked Beardsley to change the drawing and the latter complied again, although such amendments delayed the publication of the first issue until January 1896, thus missing the opportunity offered by the Christmas sales. The first volume of *The Savoy* included as a gift another beautiful image by Beardsley, this time a religious representation of the Virgin with Jesus. Was this an attempt to please a pious audience? Not exactly, because the richness and splendour of the Virgin's clothing are in open contrast to the ideals of poverty and simplicity usually associated with Christmas images.

As we are trying to demonstrate, therefore, *The Savoy* faced the same problems as *The Yellow Book* had done a few years earlier, and this should come as no surprise. What is more, times had changed for the worse: the Wilde scandal had opened a wound that would not be easily healed, and trivial controversies, such as those surrounding *The Savoy* even before the publication of the first volume, were inflated to the detriment of the magazine's contents. As a matter of fact, the quality of the artistic and literary contributions to *The Savoy* was very high, probably higher than that which could be found in any issue of *The Yellow Book*. The choice to publish not only literary works, but also criticism on a wider scale than *The Yellow Book's*, was crucial: it was thus that Friedrich Nietzsche was introduced to the British public by Havelock Ellis, along with some essays on William Blake by Yeats. The same can be said for the choice to publish serial works such as, but not limited to, Beardsley's unfinished novel *Under the Hill*.

An important difference from *The Yellow Book* is however the lack of women writers. Lane was perceived as the publisher of the New Women, since there were several examples of New Woman fiction in his catalogue and many regular contributors to the magazine were women. As for *The Savoy*, it remained primarily a gentleman's magazine, with an implicitly male audience and little interest in women's condition. Yet, there were a few notable exceptions. One of these was Olivia Shakespeare, a close friend of Yeats: her short story, "Beauty's Hour", was published in two instalments in the fourth and fifth volumes of the magazine and remains one of the few examples from the period of a woman's work focusing on the theme of the double. Equally significant was the contribution, in the fifth volume, of Sarojini Chattopadhyay, an Indian poet living in London. A few years later, Chattopadhyay returned to India, where, under the name of her husband Naidu, she became an important political activist, fighting for national independence and women's emancipation.⁴² However, most of the *Savoy* contributors, both writers and artists, were male.

Broadly speaking, *The Savoy* anticipated the next century more than *The Yellow Book* did, for instance thanks to the contributions of poems and short stories by Yeats, a short story by Joseph Conrad and a poem by Ford Madox Ford (then Hueffer). All

⁴² O. SHAKESPEAR, "Beauty's Hour: A Phantasy", *The Savoy*, 4, August 1896, pp. 11-24 and 5, September 1896, pp. 11-27, *Savoy Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/savoyv4-shakespeare-beauty/> and <https://1890s.ca/savoyv5-shakespeare-beauty/>; S. CHATTOPADHYAY, "Eastern Dancers", *The Savoy*, 5, September 1896, p. 84, *Savoy Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/savoyv5-chattopadhyay-eastern/> (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

this might be read as an early approach to the Modernist turn that English literature would take in the following years. Reviews of British art from previous decades were also prominent in many contributions, putting not only Blake but also the Pre-Raphaelites into perspective. Cosmopolitan interest was equally in the foreground through translations of Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, among others (not surprisingly, considering Symons's interest in French Symbolism), but also via the introduction of Nietzsche, as mentioned above, and Cesare Lombroso to the British public. If one wants to stress that the Nineties were indeed a bridge between Victorianism and Modernism, then the magazine to be seen as more emblematic of the decade was not *The Yellow Book* but *The Savoy*.

The Savoy was not an economic success and it remained circumscribed to a series of only eight volumes. There was a major change with the third issue, when it abandoned all ambition of being a book, like its rival, and became a literary magazine. Much negative criticism did not concern its contents but once again, as with *The Yellow Book*, the illustrations: this time, not only Beardsley's drawings but even Blake's. This was most probably a subtle way of limiting its sales at a time when the publisher and editor had achieved a balance between the mass market of monthly publications and the demands of a literary magazine. An image by Blake in the third volume, showing a naked male giant and illustrating an episode from Dante's *Inferno*, was deemed controversial by W.H. Smith, who was then the main distributor of printed material in England, particularly in railway bookshops. Smith decided to withdraw the magazine from distribution. Smithers, Symons and other intellectuals protested against this decision, emphasising the spiritual aspects of Blake's works, but the distributor was immovable. This was a fatal blow for *The Savoy*, whose sales slowly but irreversibly declined and, although the quality of the contributions remained high, the magazine was now doomed.

In the last volume of December 1896, Symons commented in a bitter and dispassionate tone on the closing of *The Savoy*, highlighting certain events that were responsible for it, but above all subverting the erroneous perception that the Yellow or Savoy decade of the Nineties was a particularly fertile period for the arts in Britain:

Our first mistake was in giving so much for so little money; our second, in abandoning a quarterly for a monthly issue. The action of Messrs. Smith and Son in refusing to place "The Savoy" on their bookstalls, on account of the reproduction of a drawing by Blake, was another misfortune. And then, worst of all, we assumed that there were very many people in the world who really cared for art, and really for art's sake. The more I consider it, the more I realize that this is not the case. [...] Comparatively very few people care for art at all, and most of these care for it because they mistake it for something else.⁴³

Symons might be right or, perhaps, as the reviewer for *The Referee* commented, "there are many people who really do care for art, and Mr Symons is not the first clever young

⁴³ A. SYMONS, "A Literary Causerie: By Way of Epilogue", *The Savoy*, 8, December 1896, p. 92, *Savoy Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/savoyv8-critical-introduction/>, <https://1890s.ca/savoyv8-symons-causerie/> (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

man who has mistaken affectation for fine art”.⁴⁴ Perhaps *The Savoy* was too advanced for the time or perhaps it was just a posthumous victim of the Wilde trials. Whatever the case, it was a magazine that, like *The Yellow Book*, always took into consideration the economic side of the enterprise and not just the demands of a group of writers and artists. However, unlike *The Yellow Book*, and despite Beardsley’s pranks in the first volume, it was a serious periodical, with serious aims and little room for trivialities and frivolities. In this sense, it was *not* the magazine of the decade, because the Nineties were also characterised by a reaction against Victorian seriousness. In fact, they opened with the great success of the American song *Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay*, arguably coming from a St. Louis brothel but brought to England and into vogue by Lottie Collins, who sang it in London music-halls in 1892, accompanying it with a dance inspired by the ‘infamous’ French cancan. If popular British historian R.H. Gretton is to be believed, the song

was such an affront to English respectability as had never yet been administered, not only because it flaunted a vision of a high-kicking dancer on a music-hall stage, but because the very sound of the tune was jeering, as well as ludicrous. The sudden absurd jolt of its high note became a grin at the gait and carriage of a respectable man. Its penetrating shrillness warned people that nothing was going to be taken seriously. [...] The wildest of comic songs hitherto had been something said, which might appeal to you individually as funny, or be dismissed as nonsense. This one said nothing.⁴⁵

The inclination to provocation, mixed with the tendency to treat serious things trivially and trivial things seriously, was also a characteristic of Beerbohm’s contribution to the first volume of *The Yellow Book*, as shown by his essay “A Defence of Cosmetics”, which provoked harshest reactions from reviewers. In the second volume of the magazine, Beerbohm replied with “A Letter to the Editor”, claiming that his essay was just a hoax, a parody of the style of decadent writers, but ending his response by reiterating the same ideas that had scandalised his critics.⁴⁶ It was a lesson that he had learnt from Wilde: a taste for paradox whereby it was impossible to grasp whether the writer was joking or should be treated seriously. This was the real provocation and the real reaction to the stiffness of Victorian mentality: that is to say, the refusal to accept that there was only one truth and that seriousness and earnestness were what really mattered. Truth could be expressed through a mask, dialogic exchanges, parody and irony, in an endless game of ever-changing statements. At the end of the previous decade, Wilde had written in the closing paragraphs of one of his essays: “Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth”.⁴⁷ And what he said about art could also be applied to any other field.

⁴⁴ C. KEEP, “Critical Introduction to Volume 8 of *The Savoy* (Dec. 1896)”, *Savoy Digital Edition*, <https://1890s.ca/savoyv8-critical-introduction/> (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

⁴⁵ R.H. GRETTON, *A Modern History of the English People*, London, Grant Richards, 1913, Vol. I, p. 305.

⁴⁶ M. BEERBOHM, “A Letter to the Editor”, *The Yellow Book*, 2, July 1894, pp. 281-284, *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/YBV2_beerbohm_letter/ (last accessed on 22 October 2023).

⁴⁷ O. WILDE, “The Truth of Masks” (1891), in ID., *Complete Works*, p. 1078.

Both *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* entered into dialogue with somebody who contributed to neither, but exerted a powerful influence on both, impacting on these magazines' spirit and certainly their destiny. Without Wilde, *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* would never have been what they were. The choice between Yellow or Savoy Nineties, or between yellow and green, therefore, is misleading: the period is complex and full of contradictions, and at least another adjective could be brought up, even if it does not exactly cover the decade: 'Wilde Nineties'. We should keep in mind the perspective of Wilde's Vivian in "The Decay of Lying", as he states with bold non-chalance, as if embodying the spirit of the decade: "Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people".⁴⁸ Likewise, an age that is consistent is bound to be dull and doctrinaire and tedious. It might of course be argued that Wilde did not publish the first version of "The Decay of Lying" in the Nineties, but at the end of the Eighties. But then, anyway, who wants to be consistent?

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⁴⁸ O. WILDE, "The Decay of Lying" (1889, 1891), in ID., *Complete Works*, p. 971.

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GIUSEPPE VIRELLI*

A Fin-de-Siècle Stilophagus: Aubrey Beardsley Between Originality and Originarity

Abstract: Aubrey Beardsley's artistic career spanned little more than five years, yet was characterised by a frenetic exploration of different modes of artistic expression in pursuit of a new and original modern style. Like a skilled perfumer bringing together subtle fragrances, the young English artist sought, selected and sampled a wide range of figurative vocabularies from very different sources and extrapolated their essence, thereby creating an artistic language that was entirely personal yet perfectly attuned to the spirit of his day. From his revival of the Pre-Raphaelite figurative tradition to his reinterpretation of certain stylistic traits belonging to the art of cultures distant from his own in terms of both time and space (ranging from Greek vase painting to Japanese prints and Rococo imagery), he distilled a unique and instantly recognisable language grounded in a 'synthetic' approach. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Beardsley effectively opened up British culture to the new Symbolist/Art Nouveau language which was emerging at that time on the European continent.

Keywords: Symbolism. Neo-Medievalism. *Japonisme*. Neo-Rococo. Aubrey Beardsley.

Le long règne de la pieuse et sévère Victoria, Impératrice des Indes, déclinait. Burne-Jones venait d'être fait baronnet; Whistler commençait d'être sacré grand peintre, après ses batailles livrées à la Grosvenor Gallery, où les Indépendants et les snobs s'alliaient pâmer devant toute œuvre refusée à la Royal Academy. C'est alors qu'Oscar Wilde, triomphant, se promène dans Piccadilly, un grand tournesol à la main [...]. La société anglaise se réveille d'un long sommeil et secoue son indifférence pour tout ce qui n'est pas le sport. Un nouveau snobisme va la jeter dans les bras des artistes; elle attend quelque chose et se prépare à s'amuser d'autre façon. Dans cette atmosphère surchauffée, parmi les révoltés et les novateurs, voici venir le jeune Beardsley.¹

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Please note that 'Stilophagus' is a neologism derived from the Latin words 'stilus' and 'phagus', meaning 'devourer of styles'. All images in this essay are taken from Wikimedia Commons - free media archive.

¹ "The long reign of the pious and stern Victoria, Empress of India, was coming to an end. Burne-Jones had just been made a baronet; Whistler was beginning to be celebrated as a great painter following his battles at the Grosvenor Gallery, where Independents and snobs swooned over any work rejected by the Royal Academy. It was then that Oscar Wilde, triumphant, strolled down Piccadilly holding a large sunflower [...]. English society awoke from a long slumber and shook off its indifference to anything but sport. A new snobbery was about to throw it into the arms of artists; it was waiting for something, and was preparing to enjoy itself in a different way. Into this overheated atmosphere, among the rebels and innovators, came young Beardsley" (J.-É. BLANCHE, *Essais et portraits*, Paris, Les Bibliophiles fantaisistes Dorbon-aîné, 1912, pp. 53-54; my translation).



Fig. 1: Jacques-Émile Blanche, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 1895, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Generally speaking, young artists about to embark on their careers find themselves at a fork in the road beyond which two paths branch off in opposite directions, one leading towards ‘originality’, the other towards ‘originarity’.

The first path, taken by the members of every avant-garde group, leads artists to attempt to make their own particular cultural sphere a *tabula rasa*, and to assert themselves as harbingers of innovations that herald an imminent future. In order to do so, the artists travelling along this path make use of completely novel techniques, with which they give life to provocatively new styles and images that have no historical precedent.

Although initially appearing less radical, those who take the second path also perform a maieutic act in their attempt to create an art attuned to the contemporary world. Indeed, whilst ostensibly reviving techniques and

styles from the past, the champions of this approach never adopt them in a conventional or pedestrian manner, but rather recombine them in unusual ways in order to achieve novel, and frequently somewhat jarring, effects that endow their work with a high degree of autonomy. To paraphrase the critic Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), one can speak of a kind of ‘recurrent evolution’ that follows a spiral pattern, whereby certain stylistic phenomena come back into favour on a cyclical basis, but in different contexts.² In short, artistic expression is subject to a pendular motion, and swings between two opposing points: the ‘tradition of novelty’ and the ‘novelty of tradition’.

However, this sort of art-historical pattern by no means represents an absolute law but, *exceptio probat regulam*, admits of striking exceptions or ‘symptomatic anomalies’ that merely serve to confirm the rule. Amongst such exceptions, the figure of Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) stands out as a *rara avis*. Faced with the dialectical dilemma of choosing between thesis (originality) and antithesis (originarity), he opted for a third path leading towards synthesis, based not on a mere compromise between the two opposing sides, but rather on an autonomous and simultaneously all-encompassing position (Hegel). In fact, Beardsley’s adoption of this ‘alternative’ solution was characteristic of that generation of artists born around the 1860s and 1870s who would give life to Symbolism, a movement which looked towards the contemporary era from its position on the ‘promontory of the centuries’ and paved the way for the subsequent historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century.

In other words, like his contemporaries, Beardsley found himself ‘suspended’ between the old and the new, between a world still partly tied to the last offshoots of that late Romantic spirit which looked to the past as an ideal golden age, and a completely new world pervaded by an overwhelming thirst for novelty, the outlines of which were

² Cf. H. WÖLFFLIN, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, Munich, Bruckmann, 1915, pp. 246-48.

still inchoate but seemed to bristle with new and ‘mysterious’ stimuli.³

In this context, an article published in 1894 by the young English artist, defending the new art of poster advertising, is highly significant:

Advertisement is an absolute necessity of modern life, and if it can be made beautiful as well as obvious, so much the better for the makers of soap and the public who are likely to wash.

The popular idea of a picture is something told in oil or writ in water to be hung on a room’s wall or in a picture gallery to perplex an artless public. No one expects it to serve a useful purpose or take a part in everyday existence. Our modern painter has merely to give a picture a good name and hang it. Now the poster first of all justified its existence on the grounds of utility, and should it further aspire to beauty of line and colour, may not our hoardings claim kinship with the galleries, and the designers of affiches pose proudly in the public eye as the masters of Holland Road or Bond Street Barbizon (and, recollect, no gate money, no catalogue)?

Still there is a general feeling that the artist who puts his art into the poster is *déclassé* – on the streets – and consequently of light character. The critics can discover no brush work to prate of, the painter looks askance upon a thing that achieves publicity without a frame, and beauty without modelling, and the public find it hard to take seriously a poor printed thing left to the mercy of sunshine, soot, and shower, like any old fresco over an Italian church door.

What view the bill-sticker and sandwich man take of the subject I have yet to learn. The first is, at least, no bad substitute for a hanging committee, and the clothes of the second are better company than somebody else’s picture, and less obtrusive than a background of stamped magenta paper.

Happy, then, those artists who thus escape the injustice of juries and the shuffling of dealers, and choose to keep that distance that lends enchantment to the private view, and avoid the world of worries that attends on those who elect to make an exhibition of themselves.

He concludes in an almost proto-Futurist spirit:

London will soon be resplendent with advertisements, and, against a leaden sky, sky-signs will trace their formal arabesque. Beauty has laid siege to the city, and telegraph wires shall no longer be the sole joy of our aesthetic perceptions.

Now, as to the technicalities of the art, I have nothing to say. To generalise upon any subject is to fall foul of the particular, and ’twere futile to lay down any rules for the making of posters. One’s ears are weary of the voice of the art teacher who sits like the parrot on his perch, learning the jargon of the studios, making but poor copy and calling it criticism. We have had enough of their omniscience, their parade of technical knowledge, and their predilection for the wrong end of the stick. But if there be any who desire to know – not how posters are made – but how they should be, I doubt not that I could give them the addresses of one or two gentlemen who, having taken art under their wing, would give all necessary information.⁴

Although not mentioned by name, the ‘gentlemen’ referred to by Beardsley in this article were the most important representatives of European Symbolism, with whom he had become acquainted during his visits to the continent: the Nabis painters Maurice Denis (1870-1953), Félix Vallotton (1865-1925), Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), Édouard Vuil-

³ Hence the recourse to the ‘symbol’ (from the Greek *‘sýn-’* [together] and *‘bálllein’* [to throw]: ‘to put together’ two parts) as a ‘bridge’ between an ideal past and a rich but uncertain future, to be explored without completely unveiling its hidden fascination in order to avoid the risk of falling back into a kind of ‘positivist’ certainty.

⁴ A. BEARDSLEY, “The Art of the Hoarding”, *New Review*, July 1894, pp. 53-55. To a certain extent, this text anticipates ideas formulated forty years later by the German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) regarding the artwork’s loss of aura – and the consequent reorientation of art’s very purpose – with the advent of new techniques enabling the reproduction and dissemination of visual imagery en masse. Cf. W. BENJAMIN, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 5, 1936, pp. 9-44.

lard (1868-1946) and Paul Sérusier (1864-1927), but also Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), the Dutch artist Jan Toorop (1858-1928) and the Belgian painter James Ensor (1860-1949).⁵ Like these figures, in fact, the young English artist adopted a *novantico* ('modern-ancient') language, in which influences from the past were filtered through a spirit that was *absolument moderne*, rejecting any form of Naturalism – from the art of the Renaissance to that of the Impressionists – in favour of an abstract vision (in the etymological sense of the word: 'abstrahère' – 'to pull away from'). Beardsley achieved this by combining his 'black blot' technique with the use of outline: methods corresponding, respectively, to *à plat* and *cloisonnisme* in painting.⁶ This inductive process – whereby natural data (phenotypes) are reduced to generalised data (stereotypes) – allowed the artist to produce a phantasmagorical repertoire of highly sophisticated, stylised and cerebral images. His was an eccentric universe inhabited by delicate silhouettes that were alternately sensual and grotesque in appearance, floating in a two-dimensional space, where each element taken from the natural world simply served as a model for creating exquisitely wrought emblematic forms as part of a refined decorative aesthetic.⁷ Beardsley's friend Arthur Symons (1865-1945) wrote about these aspects of the artist's work:

[Beardsley] knows that he is condemned to be always in public, that emotion would be supremely out of keeping with his costume, that he must remember to be fantastic if he would not be merely ridiculous. And so he becomes exquisitely false, dreading above all things that "one touch of nature" which would ruffle his disguise, and leave him defenceless. Simplicity, in him, being the most laughable thing in the world, he becomes learned, perverse, intellectualising his pleasures, brutalising his intellect; his mournful contemplation of things becoming a kind of grotesque joy, which he expresses in the only symbols at his command [...].⁸

He went on to add:

And then, it must never be forgotten, Beardsley was a decorative artist, and not anything else. From almost the very first he accepted convention; he set himself to see things as pattern. [...] Working, as the decorative artist must work, in symbols almost as arbitrary, almost as fixed, as the squares of a chessboard, he swept together into his pattern all the incongruous things in the world, weaving them into congruity by his pattern. Using the puff-box, the toilet-table, the ostrich-feather hat, with a full consciousness of their suggestive quality in a drawing of archaic times, a drawing purposely fantastic, he put these things to beautiful uses, because he liked their forms, and because his space of white or black seemed to require some such arrangement of lines. They were the minims and crotchets by which he wrote down his music; they made the music, but they were not the music.⁹

⁵ On Beardsley's relationship with French culture, see G. SCATASTA, "Abbé Beardsley", in R. CAMPI and A.P. SONCINI FRATTA (a cura di), *Alla conquista della modernità. Studi sul Settecento in onore di Daniela Galligani*, Bologna, I libri di Emil, 2018, pp. 151-57.

⁶ This process involved the 'controlled dripping' of ink, which the artist would then use to gradually fill in those spaces he had previously traced on the paper.

⁷ "I have one aim – the grotesque. If I am not grotesque, I am nothing" (Aubrey Beardsley quoted in H. MACFALL, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Clown, The Harlequin, and Pierrot of His Age*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1927, n.p.). On the grotesque aspect of Beardsley's work, see C. SNODGRASS, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque*, Oxford, OUP, 1995; G. SCATASTA, "Una strada verso il Giappone: Beardsley e il grottesco", in P. SCROLAVEZZA, G. SCATASTA and A. SPECCHIO (a cura di), *NipPop. 10 anni di cultura pop giapponese in Italia*, Milano, Mimesis Edizioni, 2023, pp. 29-41.

⁸ A. SYMONS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, London, Unicorn, 1898, p. 21.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 29-30.

In short, with his intensely synthetic style – employed with the aim of conveying the most recondite (and frequently inexpressible) human sensations through highly evocative imagery – Beardsley effectively ‘undersigned’ the famous Symbolist manifesto of 1891 composed by Gabriel Albert Aurier (1865-1892), in which the French critic summarised the key qualities of the new movement in five adjectives: ‘Idéiste’, ‘Symboliste’, ‘Synthétique’, ‘Subjective’, ‘Décorative’.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the *enfant prodige* of English modernism distinguished himself from his continental peers by his highly distinctive interpretation of the Symbolist style, which allowed him to ‘shine with his own light’:

In spite, however, of Beardsley’s faculty for assimilation [...] his work can rarely, if ever, be mistaken, unless he himself chooses mischievously to deceive you. Degas, in an unpublished fragment by Oscar Wilde, is quoted as having said: “Il y a quelque chose plus terrible encore que le bourgeois, – c’est l’homme qui nous singe.” No man ever suffered more at the hands of these apes than Beardsley, but he remained inimitable. His artistic accent, so to speak, is unmistakably French, but it is an error to compare his work, except from the moral point of view, with that of men like Felicien Rops or Toulouse-Lautrec. Occasionally these men evoke similar emotions, but their methods are quite different.¹¹

His singularity consisted in the manner in which he studied works of art that were distant in both time and space in order to grasp their compositional secrets, and then proceeded to disassemble and reassemble these at will, all the while remaining perfectly true to himself: “He had that originality which surrenders to every influence, yet surrenders to absorb, not to be absorbed; that originality which, constantly shifting, is true always to its centre”.¹²

Apertis verbis, Beardsley arrived at his most characteristic pictorial solutions by means of a subtle and intelligent process of ‘resemantisation’, adapting the most disparate stylistic vocabularies to create distinctive works that placed him at the forefront of the fin-de-siècle art scene:

No artist of our time, none certainly whose work has been in black and white, has reached a more universal, or a more contested fame; none has formed for himself, out of such alien elements, a more personal originality of manner; none has had so wide an influence on contemporary art.¹³

The first two sources of inspiration to be ‘vampirised’ by Beardsley were Italian paintings of the Quattrocento and the images created by Pre-Raphaelite artists – in particular, the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833-1898), of whom Beardsley was a great admirer.¹⁴ However, if it

¹⁰ See G.A. AURIER, “Le Symbolisme en Peinture: Paul Gauguin”, *Mercur de France*, 2 (15), March 1891. For an analysis of the manifesto, see G. VIRELLI, “Gabriel Albert Aurier ‘critico profeta’ del Simbolismo”, in E. BALDINI, G.L. TUSINI and G. VIRELLI (a cura di), *Gabriel Albert Aurier. Scritti d’arte 1889-1892*, Milano, Mimesis, 2019, pp. 49-61.

¹¹ M. BIRNBAUM, *Aubrey Vincent Beardsley*, Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1911, pp. 11-12.

¹² A. SYMONS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 21.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁴ In a letter dated 12 July 1891, addressed to his old teacher Arthur William King, Beardsley described an encounter with Burne-Jones: “Yesterday (Sunday) I & my Sister went to see the Studio of Burne Jones; as I had heard that admittance might be gained to see the pictures by sending in one’s visiting card. When we arrived however we were told that the Studio had not been open for some years & that we could not see Mr Burne Jones

is true – as his true friend Robert Ross (1869-1918) asserted – that “his first enthusiasm was for the work of the Italian primitives”,¹⁵ and that “Rossetti and Burne-Jones [...] succeeded in their turn; the influence of Burne-Jones lasting longer than any other”,¹⁶ Beardsley’s inner drive almost immediately pushed him to go beyond the territory marked out by the latter two artists and to overcome the limits of a ‘historicist’ vision which, despite intending to revive pre-Renaissance vocabularies, remained constrained by a naturalistic approach that was still too meticulous and detailed in character. One can already perceive this transcendence of the Pre-Raphaelite model in the first important project undertaken by the artist: his illustrations for a new edition of *Le Morte d’Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory (1409?-1471), which were commissioned in 1892 by the publisher Joseph Malaby Dent (1849-1926). Indeed, despite the evident references to the work of Burne-Jones that are visible in Beardsley’s images (Figs 2-3), one can already discern in them the first signs of an ‘evolution’ towards more autonomous forms of expression, grounded in a decidedly anti-naturalistic approach:

For nature without tears, in the impressionist fashion, or as popularly viewed through the camera, Aubrey Beardsley had no feeling. He was frankly indifferent to picturesque peasants, the beauties of “lovely spots” either in England or France [...]. The treatment of nature in the larger and truer sense of the word had little attraction for him; he never tried, therefore, to represent air, atmosphere, and light, as many clever modern artists have done in black and white! [...] Beardsley’s landscape, therefore, is formal, primitive, conventional; a breath of air hardly shakes the delicate leaves of the straight poplars and willows that grow by his serpentine streams. The great cliffs, leaning down in promontories to the sea, have that unreal, architectural appearance so remarkable in the West of Cornwall, a place he had never visited. Yet his love and observation of flowers, trees, and gardens are very striking in the drawings for the “Morte d’Arthur” [...] but it is the nature of the landscape

without a special appointment. So we left somewhat disconsolately. I had hardly turned the corner when I heard a quick Step behind me, & a voice which said ‘Pray come back I couldn’t think of letting you go away without seeing the Pictures, after a journey on a hot day like this’. The voice was that of Burne Jones; who escorted us back to his house & took us into the Studio, Showing & explaining everything. His kindness was wonderful as We were perfect Strangers he not even knowing our names. By the merest Chance I happened to have some of my best drawings with me, & I asked him to look at them & give me his opinion. I can tell you it was an exciting moment when he first opened my portfolio & looked at the first drawings ‘Saint Veronica on the evening of Good Friday’ ‘Dante at the Court of Con Grande de la Scala’. After he had examined them for a few minutes he exclaimed ‘There is no doubt about your gift, one day you will most assuredly paint very great & beautiful pictures’. Then as he continued looking through the rest of them (‘Notre dame de la lune’ ‘Dante designing an angel’, ‘Insomnia’, ‘Post Mortem’, ‘Ladye Hero’ &c &c) he said ‘All are full of thought poetry & imagination. Nature has given you every gift which is necessary, to become a great artist. I seldom or never advise anyone to take up art as a profession, but in your case I can do nothing else’. And all this from the greatest living artist in Europe. Afterwards we returned to the lawn & had afternoon tea. Mrs Burne Jones is very charming. The Oscar Wildes & several others were there. All congratulated me on my success, as ‘Mr Burne Jones is a very severe critic’. During tea B. J. spoke to me about art training. ‘I will’ he said ‘immediately find out the very best school for you, where two hours daily study would be quite sufficient for you. Study hard, you have plenty of time before you, I myself did not begin to study till I was 23’. ‘You must come & see me often & bring your drawings with you. Design as much as you can your early sketches will be of immense service to you later on. Every one of the drawings you have shown me would make beautiful paintings’. After some more praise & criticism I left feeling, in the words of Rossetti ‘A Different critter’. We came home with the Oscar Wildes – charming people” (Aubrey Beardsley quoted in A.W. KING, *An Aubrey Beardsley Lecture*, London, R.A. King, 1924, pp. 61-62).

¹⁵ R. ROSS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, London, The Bodley Head, 1909, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

gardener, not the landscape painter. There is some truth in the half-playful, half-unfriendly criticism, that his pictures were a form of romantic map-making. Future experts, however, may be trusted to deal with absence of chiaroscuro, values, tones, and the rest.¹⁷



Fig. 2 (left): Aubrey Beardsley, *The Holy Grail is Achieved*, Illustrations to *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 1892.

Fig. 3 (right): Edward Burne-Jones, *The Call of Perseus*, 1877.

In other words, just as Burne-Jones had ‘translated’ fifteenth-century Italian art into his own language, so Beardsley interpreted the Pre-Raphaelite vocabulary in accordance with a grammar that was unique to him:

Although in all of Mr Beardsley’s drawings which I have so far seen there are signs of other men’s influence, I know no reason why this influence should not be apparent if the inventor of what we may consider the type is a worthy man to imitate. However, to say that Burne Jones, or even his far greater master Rossetti, invented what is vulgarly known as the Rossetti type, is absurd. They did not invent it: they have only recorded a type which is very common in this country, emphasising certain characteristics which no one had ever so emphasised before. Mr Beardsley, in illustrating the “Morte d’Arthur” wished an appropriate type; he has taken the one which appealed to him most, and he was perfectly justified in doing so.¹⁸

The same can be said of another artistic component that entered the English artist’s lexicon around this time, *Japonisme*:

Last summer I struck for myself an entirely new method of drawing and composition, something suggestive of Japan, but not really japoneseque. The subjects were quite mad and a little indecent. Strange hermaphroditic creatures wandering about in Pierrot costumes or modern dress; quite a new world of my own creation.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁸ J. PENNEL, “A New Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley”, *The Studio*, 1 (1), April 1893, p. 19.

¹⁹ Letter dated 15 February 1893, in A. BEARDSLEY, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, eds H. MASS et al.,



Fig. 4: Claude Monet, *Madame Monet en costume japonais*, 1875, Musée d'Orsay.

By the end of the nineteenth century this phenomenon – which had exploded in France in the 1860s and spread across Europe within a very short period of time – had become an out-and-out craze, giving rise to a range of interpretations that differed from country to country and from artist to artist.²⁰ In Victorian England, ‘Japanism-mania’ began to take root in the 1880s, mainly through the commercial availability of everyday objects such as cups, vases or rolls of wallpaper that were either authentic or domestically produced in a ‘Japanese style’.²¹

Once again, Beardsley’s highly personal “*japanesques*”²² do not constitute instances of straightforward iconographical ‘transvestitism’, but rather took shape through a process of ‘assimilation’, by means of which he sought to extrapolate the quintessential character of his visual source material. Indeed, Beardsley’s use of the expression ‘not really japoneseque’ suggests that he was familiar with the art produced in the Land of the Rising Sun (and its Western derivatives) and wished to avoid falling into the state of limbo occupied by its imitators.

Accordingly, in contrast to academic painters – as well as the more independent Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists (Fig. 4) – Beardsley was not content simply to dress his characters in elegant, richly embroidered kimonos, or incorporate images of paper lanterns and fans into his works, but rather sought to internalise the *modus operandi* of artists such as Kitagawa Utamaro (1754-1806), Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) or Andō Hiroshige (1797-1858) in such a way as to create an art that would be entirely his own, more modern and consistent with the spirit of the times (*Zeitgeist*).²³ Emblematic of this new phase of stylistic absorption is perhaps his most famous (indeed, infamous) body of work: the illustrations he produced for Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, published by John Lane in 1893. In these drawings, Beardsley employed all his technical expertise to create authentic ‘floating worlds’ of a distinctly modern stamp. His new Anglo-Japanese approach is evident in those images where Herod’s diabolical stepdaughter appears in sumptuous, un-

London, J.L. Duncan and W.G. Good, 1970, p. 43.

²⁰ On the phenomenon of *Japonisme* in Europe, see S. WICHMANN, *Japonismus. Ostasien-Europa. Begegnungen in der Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Herrsching, Schuler Verlagsgesellschaft, 1980; S. TAKASCHINA, *Japanese Art in Perspective: East-West Encounters*, Tokyo, Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2021; F. PARISI (a cura di), *Giapponismo. Venti d'oriente nell'arte europea 1860-1915*, Milano, Skira, 2000.

²¹ See A. ONO, *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and Nineteenth-century Japan*, New York, Routledge, 2003.

²² See H. MACFALL, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Clown, The Harlequin, and Pierrot of His Age*, pp. 95-110.

²³ On the influence of Japanese art on Beardsley, see L. GERTNER ZATLIN, *Beardsley, Japonisme and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal*, Cambridge, CUP, 1997.

mistakably Japanese, robes (Fig. 5); paradoxically, however, it emerges even more clearly in those illustrations that are less obviously homologous with *ukiyo-e* prints, such as *The Black Cape* (Fig. 6). Here, the example of the Japanese masters is assimilated in a more subtle and intellectual manner – the work’s exaggeratedly sinuous forms, inexorable outlines and broad strokes of black ink not being used to depict fluttering peacocks or other iconographical motifs ‘plundered’ from a market of Far Eastern goods, but rather serving as powerful catalysts that transform Salome into a heroine of Kabuki theatre (Fig. 7).



Fig. 5 (left): Aubrey Beardsley, *John and Salomé*, Illustrations to *Salome* by Oscar Wilde, 1893.

Fig. 6 (centre): Aubrey Beardsley, *The Black Cape*, Illustration to *Salome* by Oscar Wilde, 1893.

Fig. 7 (right): Shunbaisai Hokuei, *Arashi Rikan als Sasaki Saburo Morimatsu*, 1831.

Essentially, then, Beardsley’s interest in Japanese art can be seen in the context of his consistent, and increasingly extreme, impulse to simplify his forms, which were no longer depicted as three-dimensional or plastic, and which distilled, suggested and evoked rather than minutely represented:

Taking freely all that the Japanese could give him, that release from the bondage of what we call real things, which comes to one man from an intense spirituality, to another from a consciousness of material form so intense that it becomes *abstract*, he made the world over again in his head, as if it existed only when it was thus remade, and not even then, until it had been set down in black line on a white surface, in white line on a black surface.²⁴

Initially, Wilde feared that his work would be overshadowed by the young artist’s illustrations²⁵ and reacted to them with a certain hostility, complaining that while his

²⁴ A. SYMONS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 29 (emphasis added).

²⁵ In a letter to his friend William Rothenstein, Max Beerbohm wrote: “Why do I write on this odd paper? Because it was wrapped up with two very lovely drawings by Aubrey Beardsley which J. Lane has just given me. They lie before me as I write: I am enamoured of them. So is John Lane: he said: ‘How lucky I am to have got hold of this young Beardsley: look at the technique of his drawings! What workmanship! *He never goes over the edges!*’ [...] I forget whether you like *Salome* or not. *Salome* is the play of which the drawings are illustrative? I have just

play was “Byzantine” in character, Beardsley’s drawings were, in fact, “too Japanese”.²⁶ In reality, Beardsley had in no sense betrayed the eminent writer’s text; as Gino Scatasta has correctly pointed out, the young artist had actually “taken on board Wildean principles, absorbing the ‘spirit of the [Japanese] style’”²⁷ in accordance with recommendations that had previously been set out by Wilde himself in a famous essay titled “The Decay of Lying” (1889), where he had outlined his notion of artistic ‘inauthenticity’ with reference to the Japanese imagery then in vogue amongst contemporary artists:

No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist. Take an example from our own day. I know that you are fond of Japanese things. Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture by Hokusai, or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them. The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. One of our most charming painters went recently to the Land of the Chrysanthemum in the foolish hope of seeing the Japanese. All he saw, all he had the chance of painting, were a few lanterns and some fans. He was quite unable to discover the inhabitants, as his delightful exhibition at Messrs. Dowdeswell’s Gallery showed only too well. He did not know that the Japanese people are, as I have said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art. And so, if you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a tourist and go to Tokio. On the contrary, you will stay at home, and steep yourself in the work of certain Japanese artists, and then, when you have absorbed the spirit of their style, and caught their imaginative manner of vision, you will go some afternoon and sit in the Park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see an absolutely Japanese effect there, you will not see it anywhere.²⁸

Ultimately, just as the author of *Salome* had been ‘inspired’ by the work of other writers to create one of the most significant examples of ‘décadent’ tragedy,²⁹ so too Beardsley had infused his illustrations with the ‘essence’ of Japanese art to create one of the indisputable masterpieces of Art Nouveau illustration. Indeed, the success of his imagery was such that a long line of ‘imitators’ immediately sprang up not only in Europe, but also in the United States and even in Japan itself where, from the turn of the century, a sort of ‘reciprocal *Japonisme*’ was practised for several decades, directly informed by the works of the English artist.³⁰

been reading it again – and like it immensely – there is much, I think in it that is beautiful, much lovely writing I almost wonder Oscar doesn’t dramatize it” (Max Beerbohm quoted in W. ROTHENSTEIN, *Man and Memories*, London, Faber & Faber, 1931, Vol. I, p. 183).

²⁶ M. STURGIS, *Aubrey Beardsley. A Biography*, London, Flamingo, 1999, p. 158.

²⁷ G. SCATASTA, “Something suggestive of Japan? Il giapponismo di Aubrey Beardsley”, in I. GRAZIANI and M.V. SPISSU (a cura di), *Il mito del nemico. Identità, alterità e loro rappresentazioni*, Bologna, Minerva, 2019, p. 297 (my translation).

²⁸ O. WILDE, “The Decay of Lying”, *The Nineteenth Century*, 143, January 1889, pp. 47-48; subsequently published in ID., *Intentions*, London, James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co, 1891, pp. 46-47.

²⁹ “When he gave me a copy on its first publication in its violet paper cover, he knew at once that it put me in mind of Flaubert. He [Wilde] admitted he had not been able to resist the theft. ‘Remember’ he said with amusing uncton, ‘Dans la littérature il faut toujours tuer son père’. But I didn’t think he had killed Flaubert; nor did he, I believe” (Aubrey Beardsley quoted in M. STURGIS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 184).

³⁰ See J. KAWAMURA (ed.), *ビーズリーと日本 [Aubrey Beardsley and Japan]*, Tochigi, Utsunomiya Museum

However, such success did not quench Beardsley's thirst for novelty. Soon after drinking from the wells of Japanese art, he turned his gaze towards new sources of inspiration – particularly Greek vase-painting – in order to further enrich his stylistic repertoire: “whilst at work upon the Salome designs he [Beardsley] was much at the British Museum and was intensely drawn to the Greek vase-paintings in which the British Museum is very rich”.³¹ As had been the case first with the Italian Primitives and Pre-Raphaelites, and subsequently with the work of Japanese artists, what fascinated Beardsley about ancient Greek imagery was the ‘simple’ means of expression employed by Hellenic artists and their ability to depict complex scenes (whether drawn from mythology, poetry, tragedies or simply everyday life) with the use of a minimalist graphic style that was broadly akin to his own technique: “it was precisely the skill with which the great Greek painters uttered erotic moods by the rhythmic use of line and mass that most keenly intrigued Beardsley”.³²

This shift of Beardsley's stylistic horizon from the slopes of Mount Fuji to the Attic coast is particularly evident in the illustrations he produced for the famous *Yellow Book*, a new artistic-literary journal edited by Beardsley himself together with the American writer Henry Harland (1861-1905), which was once again supported by the publisher John Lane.³³

The “plump and merry lady laughing boisterously”³⁴ on the cover of the first issue is no longer depicted in a ‘Japanese’ manner, but recalls Greek black- and red-figure vase paintings dating from c.700-500 B.C. (Fig. 8). Even more ‘Hellenistic’ than this image are other drawings in which the artist modulated his new ‘Mediterranean style’ on a double technical register:

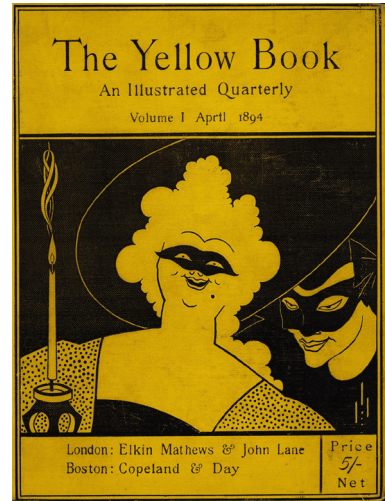


Fig. 8: Aubrey Beardsley, *Cover of The Yellow Book*, Volume I, April 1894.

The Yellow Book phase of Beardsley's art is very distinct from what went before and what was to come after. There are two types: a fine firm line employed with flat black masses of which the famous *Lady Gold's Escort* and *The Wagnerites* are the type, and of which *The Nightpiece* is the triumph – and a very thin delicate line, generally for portraiture, to define faintly the body to a more firmly drawn head – of which the *Mrs Patrick Campbell* is the type and *L'Education sentimentale* a variant – whilst the three remarkable *Comedy-Ballets of Marionettes I, II, and III*, show white masses used against black.³⁵

of Art, 2016.

³¹ H. MACFALL, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Clown, The Harlequin, and Pierrot of His Age*, p. 114.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ For a consideration of the journal's literary content, see G. FRANCI and G. SCATASTA (a cura di), “*The Yellow Book*, una rivista di fine secolo, Aprile 1894 - Aprile 1897”, *In Forma di Parole*, 3, luglio-agosto-settembre 1999.

³⁴ P.G. HAMERTON, “The Illustration”, *The Yellow Book*, 2, July 1894, pp. 186-87.

³⁵ H. MACFALL, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Clown, The Harlequin, and Pierrot of His Age*, p. 134. Of the aforementioned drawings, *The Wagnerites* was an immediate success, to the extent that it was referred to by the famous German psychologist Iwan Bloch (1872-1922) as one of the most significant examples of ‘satyresque’

In addition to changing the general atmosphere of his compositions, this new artistic direction also altered the tone of his expressive voice. Indeed, through his ‘Grecian’ style, Beardsley’s imagery moved from an elegant form of ‘primitivism’ towards one that was harsher and more terse in character. In this respect, it anticipated the brutal mark making that would be employed by that generation of artists active during the early years of the twentieth century: first and foremost, the Expressionist painters, but also other figures whose work was aligned with different aesthetic principles, such as the Futurist Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916):

Ho passato due notti agitatissime piene di smanie di sogni. Non posso negare che questo è l’effetto dei due libri con illustrazioni di Aubrey Beardsley che ho nelle mani da due giorni. Uno è una specie di monografia su di lui di Arthur Simon [*sic*], l’altro è una raccolta di scritti letterari illustrati dall’originalissimo artista [...]. Le sue illustrazioni mi hanno mostrato tutta la mia inferiorità non solo nella forma, ma nell’energia necessaria continua ininterrotta della testa guidatrice della mano.³⁶

Following the turbulent end to his collaboration with *The Yellow Book* – a consequence of the hue and cry generated in Great Britain by the trial of Oscar Wilde – Beardsley promptly embarked on yet another path, the last before his untimely death. Indeed, around the middle of 1895, he prepared for his departure by adding a sophisticated dessert in neo-Rococo style to his ‘eccentric menu’. This was the final and most difficult challenge of all: to convert the triumphant naturalism of eighteenth-century art into a new and sublime ‘visual anorexia’:

In 1896 Beardsley, many people think to the detriment of his style, turned his attention to the eighteenth century, in the literature of which he was always deeply interested. Eisen, Moreau, Watteau, Cochin, Pietro Longhi, now became his masters.³⁷

For one last time, he prepared to reinvent his own visual vocabulary by revisiting the works of the ‘bewigged artists’ of the 1700s, once again turning the contemporary art scene upside down in the process. Like neo-medievalism and *Japonisme*, eighteenth-century art had also become fashionable from the 1850s onward. This was especially the case among lower- and upper-middle-class philistines and the *nouveaux riches* who, in order to distance themselves from their humble origins, tended to favour *Ancien Régime*-style furnishings, paintings and other knick-knacks, snobbishly aspiring to claim a coveted

eroticism: “Never in the history of art has the beast in woman, the savage obscenity of ‘pure sex’ been more powerfully expressed [...]. It is night; an army of horrendous, denuded Vampyre-women drink in the Tristan music with their blood-sucking lips in a state of maddened satyriasis: *Wagnerites*” (I. BLOCH, “Beardsley Studies of Satyriasis”, in ID., *Ethnological and Cultural Studies of the Sex Life in England as Revealed in Its Erotic and Obscene Literature and Art*, New York, Falstaff Press, 1934, p. 369).

³⁶ I have spent two restless nights full of troubling dreams. I cannot deny that this is the effect of the two books illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley that I have been looking at over the past two days. One is a kind of monograph about him by Arthur Simon [*sic*], the other is a collection of literary writings illustrated by this highly original artist [...]. His illustrations have revealed my inferiority to me, not only in formal terms but also with regard to the necessary, continuous, uninterrupted energy of the head that guides the hand” (U. BOCCIONI, *Taccuino terzo*, 25 aprile 1908; my translation). With regard to Beardsley’s influence on Boccioni, see E. PONTIGGIA, *Aubrey Beardsley*, Milano, Abscondita, 2018, pp. 28-30; F. ROVATI, *Umberto Boccioni. Beata solitudo sola beatitudo*, Milano, Scalpendi, 2013, pp. 34-35.

³⁷ R. ROSS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 46.

social status that was beyond their reach. For turn-of-the-century dandies, on the other hand, the eighteenth century was above all the era of silk stockings fastened at the knee, elaborate spool-heeled shoes, lace, beauty spots and perfumed face powders (for both women and men, with their consequent overtones of sexual ambiguity). In short, the eighteenth century represented the apogee of artificiality and unbridled libertinism; in these respects, it was perfectly aligned with Beardsley's imagery³⁸ and explains the artist's readiness to once again transplant his characters from one sphere to another: from the shores of the island of Cythera to the gardens of Versailles. Some of the most intense illustrations from the final period of his intense, yet brief, career were executed in this 'guise' – most of them being published in a new journal titled *The Savoy* that was edited by Arthur Symons and Beardsley himself, and published in London by Leonard Smithers (1861-1905).³⁹ They include images for two of Beardsley's own texts: a short sonnet titled *The Ballad of a Barber* and the more complex *Story of Venus and Tannhäuser (Under the Hill)*, both of which were the direct literary equivalent of Beardsley's new neo-eighteenth-century style,⁴⁰ the mature fruit of a "Sade in un lucido delirio floreale".⁴¹

But it was through his work on two other texts that Beardsley really intensified his engagement with the century of gilded palaces and masked balls: *The Rape of the Lock* and *Lysistrata*, both of which were published by Smithers in 1896.

The first was a new illustrated edition of the mock-heroic poem by Alexander Pope (1688-1744) – a text appropriately characterised as "the most exquisite specimen of *filigree* work ever invented".⁴² In visually 'translating' this work, in which "a toilette is described with the solemnity of an altar raised to the Goddess of vanity"⁴³ and "the

³⁸ In this regard it must be remembered that, due to the repressive nature of Victorian culture, sex was a topic deemed unfit for any form of public discussion or consideration. Perhaps partly as a consequence of this excessive 'obsession', the matter of libidinal drives began to come to the fore; however, there was still no real understanding of these phenomena of the psyche, the Freudian theories formulated during those years not being widely disseminated until the early twentieth century. Consequently – like all Symbolist artists and writers – Beardsley was constrained to transfer his precocious intuitions to 'external' entities, opting once more for a symbolic 'bridge' capable of reconciling the needs of the Id with those of the Ego. For an in-depth study of issues relating to sexuality in the Victorian era, see S. MARCUS, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964; G. FRANCI, *Il sistema del Dandy. Wilde-Beardsley-Berbohm. Arte e artificio nell'Inghilterra fin-de-siècle*, Bologna, Pàtron, 1977.

³⁹ Smithers was the owner of a second-hand bookshop specialising in the sale of rare volumes as well as under-the-counter erotic literature and pornographic drawings; he was well known in London's literary circles for his unbridled passion for 'decadent' French literature. In a letter of August 1897 to his friend Reginald Turner, Oscar Wilde described him as follows: "I do not know if you know Smithers: he is usually in a large straw hat, has a blue tie delicately fastened with a diamond brooch of the impurest water – or perhaps wine, as he never touches water: it goes to his head at once. His face, clean-shaven as befits a priest who serves at the altar whose God is Literature, is wasted and pale – not with poetry, but with poets, who, he says, have wicked his life by insisting on publishing with him. He loves first editions, especially of women: little girls are his passion. He is the most learned erotomaniac in Europe" (O. WILDE, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. R. HART-DAVIS, London, Hart-Davis, 1962, pp. 630-31).

⁴⁰ "Famous at twenty as a draughtsman, he found time, in those incredibly busy years which remained to him, to deliberately train himself into a writer of prose which was, in its way, as original as his draughtsmanship, and into a writer of verse which had at least ingenious and original moments" (A. SYMONS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 13).

⁴¹ "Sade in a lucid floral delirium" (G. CONTE, "La poetica di Aubrey Beardsley", *Il Verri*, 10, giugno 1975, p. 56; my translation).

⁴² W. HAZLITT, *Lecture on the English Poets*, London, Taylor and Hessey, 1818, p. 142.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

atmosphere is perfumed with affectation”,⁴⁴ Beardsley employed a simple and ingenious stratagem. Reviving the so-called ‘stipple engraving’ technique developed by the Italian-born artist Francesco Bartolozzi (1728-1815) at the court of King George III (1738-1820),⁴⁵ he modified it in such a way as to obtain characteristically ‘low resolution’ images. Whereas the Italian artist had used stipple engraving to achieve a realistic and detailed rendering of different flesh tones and atmospheric effects, Beardsley enlarged the individual quanta of Bartolozzi’s ‘pointillist’ technique to create images resembling lace (Fig. 9).⁴⁶

The second work is yet another example of the ‘Beardsley paradox’. As in *Salome*, here too the artist amused himself by transforming the protagonists of Aristophanes’ comedy into intriguing figures inhabiting a carefree *Watteauesque*⁴⁷ Arcadia. Consequently, they do not wear simple sandals, severe tunics or peplums, and their heads are not crowned with vine or laurel wreaths; instead, they are dressed up (or rather stripped bare) like ladies and gentlemen attending a lewd *fête galante* (Fig. 10).

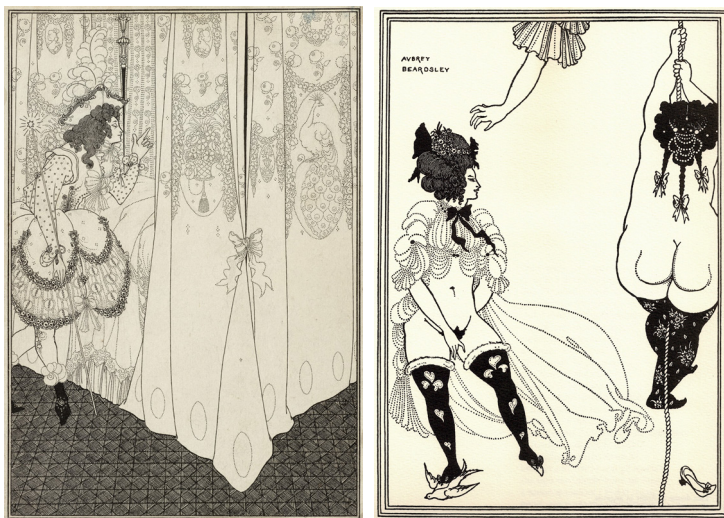


Fig. 9 (left): Aubrey Beardsley, *The Dream*, Illustration to *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope, 1896.
Fig. 10 (right): Aubrey Beardsley, *Two Athenian Women in Distress*, Illustration to *Lysistrata* by Aristophane, 1896.

With these final works, what Robert Ross identified as Beardsley’s *annus mirabilis* came to an end.⁴⁸ As death approached, his creative forces rapidly declined and he attempted to revive, *in extremis*, those principles of mimetic art such as chiaroscuro, half-tones and plasticity that he had avoided all his life in the pursuit of a radically modern vocabulary.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ See M. MAYMONE SINISCALCHI, *Aubrey Beardsley. Contributo ad uno studio della personalità e dell’opera attraverso l’epistolario*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1977, p. 75.

⁴⁶ That Beardsley deliberately sought this effect is confirmed by his use of the words ‘embroidered by’ instead of ‘illustrated by’ beneath the title of this work on the volume’s cover.

⁴⁷ S. OWENS, *Aubrey Beardsley, Salome and Satire*, PhD Thesis, University College London, 2002, p. 149.

⁴⁸ R. ROSS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, n.p.

Nevertheless, the highest and purest examples of his art – grounded in a formal synthesis that was achieved by means of an ‘alternative repetition’ of the past – had already made history, to the extent that his career became a temporal eponym: ‘The Beardsley Period’.

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“It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the prisons”: Oscar Wilde’s Path towards Civic Engagement in his (Post-)Prison Years

Abstract: As suggested by the thought-provoking statement “It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the prisons”, a quotation from Oscar Wilde’s letter to the *Daily Chronicle* of 27 May 1897, this paper deals with a relatively less investigated chapter of the author’s life. Here, the focus shifts away from such *topoi* as the Irish dandy’s brilliant rhetoric and aphoristic wit, or the magnetic aura of the Professor of Aesthetics and man of the theatre. Emphasis is placed instead on the human profile of an artist who, in the wake of his condemnation for ‘acts of gross indecency’, was to come to grips with two harrowing years of imprisonment with hard labour. Light will be shed on various issues as well as medico-scientific, sociocultural and political contexts, ranging from the notions of ‘Decadence’, ‘regression’ or ‘degeneration’ to the penitentiary regime in late nineteenth-century England. Particular attention will be paid to Wilde’s trials, conviction and prison writings – their content, structure, reception – and to an awareness-raising campaign through which he set out to expose the physical and psychological punishments that were routinely inflicted on inmates, including children. From the Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary (2 July 1896) to the two letters to the *Daily Chronicle* (1897 and 23 March 1898), we will see how the disengaged artist’s stance left room for a deep sense of moral and civic commitment.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde. British penal system. Prison experience. Writings. Civic engagement.

1. A public figure like Oscar Wilde would readily open up avenues of enquiry strictly connected to the topic of this journal’s special issue. Indeed, a whole set of aesthetic scenarios and revolutions characterising the British *fin de siècle* might well see Wilde at its centre: from the theme and implications of the ‘religion of art’ – or ‘aesthetic uselessness’, in an anti-philistine sense – to a poignant re-evaluation of ancient Greek and Roman myths, from the philosophy of *otium* and a hypostatisation of the dandy/*flâneur* to a fascination with the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, to say nothing of the intense transnational dialogue with various artistic currents and styles (e.g. Symbolism, Impressionism, Japonisme, Art Nouveau). Wilde’s writings gave full play to an eclectic phenomenology that enhanced classical inheritance as well as synaesthetic analogies, a taste for hedonism and luxurious excess, the seductive lure of the pagan/exotic and an obsession with sensuality, artifice and masks. They wove together the strands of modish world weariness and *blasé* attitudes, cynicism and sensation-hungry rambling, corruption and martyrdom, beauty and monstrosity, a cult of personality and a deep-seated fear of disintegration. In short, to varying degrees did Wilde epitomise the phase of Aestheticism and Decadence in Britain and Europe at large, encompassing

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the far-reaching reverberations of the ‘Art for Art’s sake’ maxim, the divorce from prescriptive moral codes and an ultimate insurgence of disquietude and angst.

But there is more to this – and to the notion of Decadence, for that matter, as critics have been stressing for some three decades now. To quote just a couple of comments, Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen open their volume’s introduction by reminding us that the “social, scientific, and industrial revolutions of the later nineteenth century brought with them a ferment of *new* artistic visions”,¹ while Jane Desmarais and David Weir point out that, no longer “just a term of opprobrium for mannered art or immoral behaviour, decadence today describes complex cultural and social responses to *modernity* in all its forms [...] decadence has emerged as a way of taking cultural stock of *major social changes*”.² In a previous study, Weir argued that ‘decadence’ is “a simple word but a complicated concept” and that decay

is oddly generative: the historical decline of Rome ultimately seems less like decadence and more like progress because of the many social and cultural developments that ensued in the wake of both the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire. Rome not only remains the paradigm of decadence, it also provides the pattern for the inevitable linkage of decline and renewal. But this pattern becomes a paradox in the modern era: historical decline and renewal, social decay and regeneration, artistic decadence and avant-gardism appear increasingly interrelated.³

As this paper aims to show, such a paradoxical wavering between dejection and reactivity, surrender and agency, could similarly be traced in Wilde, with specific reference – in our case – to the period of his tragic downfall, that is, his being charged with ‘acts of gross indecency’ with another male person, a conviction followed by two years’ imprisonment with hard labour (1895-1897). While clearly a phase of excruciating ordeal in which he fell prey to suicidal impulses and risked being plunged into insanity, that traumatic turning point in his life also brought about a piercing new awareness, a changed perspective and a search for recovery. It might be argued that Wilde wielded his own golden bough while in the hellish underworld of the prison, a magic branch that taught him never to be oblivious to feelings of fellowship, solidarity, forgiveness and compassion for the human condition, especially when it came to the most unfortunate and destitute. In a compelling insight from *De Profundis* – the letter to Lord Alfred Douglas of January-March 1897, whose prodromes probably reached back to September 1896 and which amounted to an apology, a spiritual autobiography and a touching example of prison writing originally entitled *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*⁴ – Wilde juxtaposed moments of bitterness and self-blame with musings on desolation and humility as “the starting-point for a fresh development”, for “a new life,

¹ M. HÄRMÄNMAA and C. NISSEN, “Introduction: The Empire at the End of Decadence”, in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 1 (emphasis added).

² J. DESMARAIS and D. WEIR (eds), *Decadence and Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2019, p. i (emphasis added).

³ D. WEIR, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2018, pp. 1, 3.

⁴ On the epistle’s discursive structure and transgeneric layering, see R. GAGNIER, “*De Profundis* as *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde’s Autobiography”, *Criticism*, 26 (4), 1984, pp. 335-54, and I. SMALL, “Love-Letter, Spiritual Autobiography, or Prison Writing? Identity and Value in *De Profundis*”, in J. BRISTOW (ed.), *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003, pp. 86-100.

a *Vita Nuova*” wherein to seek “a fresh mode of self-realisation”.⁵ Quite tellingly, by picking up on Dante’s poetic and allegorical imagery, Wilde firmly distanced himself from the *accidiosi*, a miserable congregation affected by sloth and placed low in the *Inferno*. As opposed to this kind of paralysis, he wanted to both get to grips with “all that has been done to me, to make it part of me, to accept it without complaint, fear, or reluctance” and “learn how to be cheerful and happy” with “a real desire to live”,⁶ although never pretending to sweep that gruesome experience away with a clean slate. In other words, he endeavoured to tone down rupture and reinforce a sense of connectedness and acceptance while working through sorrow, because

[t]his new life, as through my love of Dante I like sometimes to call it, is, of course, no new life at all, but simply the continuance, by means of development, and evolution, of my former life [...]. My only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sun-gilt side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom [...] I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also.⁷

Crossing the threshold into the other, gloomier “half of the garden” is cast as an initiation rite, a fundamental step towards achieving a new status of maturity and spiritual development. As Wilde hastens to underscore, the idea of suffering as a constituent part of one’s existence had been foreshadowed in a number of his works, with the physical and mental hardships of detention and life-space constriction having now supervened to dramatically magnify the effects of that pain. At the same time, he sounds adamant when dissociating himself from the pitfall of solipsism and attributing a momentous significance to the postulate of the common bond of humanity, a kinship one could honour through forms of sympathetic imagination and identification.

In 1897, by which time he had almost served his prison sentence, Wilde’s sense of moral engagement was therefore anything but latent. Needless to say, the unfolding of this parable of awakening, empathic sharing and receptivity would lend itself to an alignment with the interpretative categories of Trauma Studies, especially the nuanced, pluralistic and transdisciplinary model that has come into vogue in recent years. Generated by a shocking and disruptive event, Wilde’s psychological wound called for a healing process of assessment through recollection and a therapeutic ‘assimilation’ of that laceration into a fully fledged individual identity. In spite of harsh social stigmatisation, he understood that self-censure and concealment behind a bulwark of forgetfulness, repression and the ‘unsayable’ would have been a much worse option than attempting to master the damage via memory retrieval, comprehension and meaning-construction.

⁵ O. WILDE, *De Profundis*, in ID., *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. N. FRANKEL, Cambridge (MA) and London, Harvard U.P., (1897) 2018, p. 171. The textual version of *De Profundis* appearing in the collection edited by Frankel corresponds to the original prison manuscript, which has been housed in the British Library since 1909 and has more recently been reproduced in a volume with Merlin Holland’s introduction (see *De Profundis: A Facsimile*, London, 2000).

⁶ O. WILDE, *De Profundis*, pp. 175-77, 183.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 191-95.

To put it differently, Wilde recognised “how past violence leaves marks on the present and future, how the past haunts us and how past injustice needs to be remembered and worked through so that we can avoid repeating it”.⁸ He had his own urgent story to tell, to be verbally transposed and narrativised. Importantly, as we will see in the remainder of this article, the hurtful traces engraved on his mind were to raise the issue of institutional and collective responsibility, exceeding the boundaries of the sensational court case and transforming his psychic burden into a springboard for agency. Formerly confined to the walls of his stuffy cell, his utterances eventually departed from the scripts of spiritual autobiography and the confessional/dramatic monologue to set the pattern for a scathing testimonial contribution against structural violence and “wrong and unjust laws [...] a wrong and unjust system”.⁹ As a logical corollary to this, the moral involvement of Wilde the ‘notorious internee’ would join ranks with the civic commitment of Wilde the ‘eminent survivor’ intent on bearing witness to the adversities and tribulations of prison life. As I have remarked elsewhere, a salient intermingling emerges at this juncture between “prison writing and writing about imprisonment”, two approaches capable of throwing light on Wilde as a historical subject grappling with “a profound sense of shock, devastation and psychological harassment” and facing up to “the criminal justice system that was in force in England at the time”.¹⁰

When looking at present-day Wilde scholarship, one notices that some critics have started to make a foray into this topic, mostly concentrating on *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), the poem Wilde wrote while in exile in northern France, taking a forcible cue from the execution by hanging, in 1896, of Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a Royal Horse Guards’ ex-trooper who had murdered his wife. With reference to *De Profundis*, Christian Gerzso contends that the letter discloses a substantial space of re-conceptualisation allowing Wilde to “rewrite the story of his downfall and, in the process, recast his aestheticist philosophy”.¹¹ In doing so, the author not only integrated elements like suffering and pain, but also “incorporated notions of effort and work into an aestheticism that had famously celebrated indolence”.¹² Wilde took cognisance of the value of intellectual and aesthetic productivity as opposed to idleness and, crucially, the regime of *useless* physical labour that prison authorities imposed on inmates in accordance with an inflexible policy of retribution, crime deterrence and soul-crushing chastisement. In sum, besides constituting an “act of resistance against insanity and against the material matrix of prison space and time”,¹³ *De Profundis* can be said to foreground Wilde’s efforts to reclaim a degree of purpose and agency in defiance of apathy, blind acquiescence and despondency.

⁸ C. DAVIS and H. MERETOJA, “Introduction to Literary Trauma Studies”, in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 3.

⁹ O. WILDE, *De Profundis*, p. 175.

¹⁰ L. GIOVANNELLI, “Oscar Wilde and Prison Experience”, *Textus: English Studies in Italy*, 35 (2), 2022, pp. 21, 24.

¹¹ C. GERZSO, “No Useless Labour: Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis* and the Importance of Intellectual Work”, *Textual Practice*, 33 (6), 2019, p. 1026.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 1027.

¹³ R. GAGNIER, “*De Profundis* as *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde’s Autobiography”, p. 335.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol has not eluded attention either, on account of its feelings of empathy and allegorical identification with the crowd of ‘souls in pain’ – mankind and its inherited inclination to sinfulness – doomed to ‘kill the thing they love’ and to wistfully linger in a pit of shame, or vale of tears, until their last day on earth. Brett Beasley meditates on Wilde’s drawing on traditional ballad forms (e.g. the popular gallows ballad subgenre) and direct, brutal experience as a way to reach a level of “humility of style and subject matter”.¹⁴ This humility, however, is not incompatible with richness in imaginative possibilities and ethical/social implications. Indeed, Wilde’s poem stands out as “a ballad of the prison itself since our focus is drawn not to any particular outlaw personality but to the entire penal system”.¹⁵ Here, the real threat is not to be found in the convicts themselves but in a callous jurisdiction that forestalls the “mercy and redemption represented by nature and by Christ”.¹⁶ The nefarious regulations of a secularised system go so far as to withstand God’s eternal Laws, including the cleansing power of Christ’s Passion and Divine Mercy. In order to disrupt this twisted logic, the collective ‘I’ in the text struggles to recognise the detainees’ fellow feeling as well as the moral weight of suffering, contrition and expiation.

Even more to the point, Mona Salah El-Din Hassanein offers an appraisal of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* within the framework of literary Trauma Theory (particularly through the lens of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra) and reads it as a parable whereby Wilde “manages to transcend the victim status and assumes the role of ethical agent to voice a critique of the Victorian penal system and the standards of morality underlying the cruelties practiced against wrong doers and to solicit social action”.¹⁷ This conversion might be described in terms of a “survivor mission”: the mission of a famous and subsequently disgraced *fin-de-siècle* celebrity who had to wrestle with his own “prison trauma and the indirect traumatization he experienced as a result of witnessing the execution of a fellow prisoner whose story forms the narrative base of the poem”.¹⁸ Rising above haunting personal experience and listening to the others’ suffering, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* elicited a deep emotional/cognitive response among readers by simultaneously speaking out against the barbaric treatment of prisoners and portraying prison itself as a trauma-catalyst ambience.¹⁹

¹⁴ B. BEASLEY, “Oscar Wilde’s Humility: A Reassessment of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*”, *Renascence*, 69 (4), 2017, p. 254.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 264.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 268.

¹⁷ M.S. EL-DIN HASSANEIN, “From Victim to Ethical Agent: Oscar Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as Post-traumatic Writing”, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11 (9), 2017, p. 2287.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*. El-Din Hassanein highlights the extent to which the “confrontational aspect of post-traumatic writing is reflected in *The Ballad*: Wilde illuminates readers to help them see the penal system in a new light; he urges them to take the side of the prisoners who suffer the humiliation and brutality of the prison regime [...]. Characterizing the prisoners as ‘souls’ foregrounds the spiritual part of their personalities that is capable of redemption from the power of sin through divine grace. Unlike the unyielding human law, divine forgiveness will not disfavor sinners, and repentant souls are accepted by God” (*ibidem*, p. 2295).

¹⁹ In tune with this, and adopting a Levinasian perspective, Mojtaba Jekhouni thus outlines Wilde’s route of ‘ethical becoming’ and concern for the other: “Wilde affirms that loss of enthusiasm for life goes hand in hand, paradoxically, with an unbending optimism that could lend the melancholy impulse a new lease of life. Suffering

These preliminary considerations already strengthen the case for approaching Wilde in light of today's debates on nineteenth-century Decadence as a complex phenomenon hovering on the brink between decline and renewal, a low-spirited sense of an ending and pivotal epistemic shifts. To gloss this first part of the article with a final quotation, it might be added that, via his denunciation of the authoritarian aloofness and self-righteous rigour of late-Victorian penal policy, Wilde went on to develop "a critique of modern bureaucracy which anticipated in some respects the work of influential twentieth century commentators such as Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman", giving voice to "a number of observations which were *ahead of their time*".²⁰

2. Before following this trajectory and focusing on Wilde's two campaigning letters to the *Daily Chronicle* (1897-1898), in which he lifted the veil on the stark brutalities of the penitentiary regime, we should however take a look at the other, macroscopic side of the historical coin. It would in fact be deceptive to simply brush aside decadent *topoi* such as those of decline, reversion, malaise, or degeneration. Moreover, the crepuscular framework hinging on the *fin de siècle/fin du globe* dyad proves instrumental in contextualising another document penned by Wilde on the subject of prison hardships: the "Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary", dated 2 July 1896 and actually the first piece of writing that will be examined here.

It is by now commonplace to observe that, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, a condition of cultural ferment and iconoclastic reaction to a bourgeois establishment was inextricably bound up with feelings of anxiety, pessimism, and *taedium vitae*. People seemed to be affected by an existential distress and symptoms of psychic disorders leading to nervousness and sickness. All this appeared to be exponentially gaining ground from the individual sphere into the collective realm, so that notions of social corruptness, atavism and involution started to hold currency. Absolute faith in progress and in a rational order was called into question in various fields, from the philosophical to the socio-anthropological one, from Darwinian postulates and medical studies to sexology and the positivist school of criminology, which assigned a (pseudo)scientific status to the anatomical traits and physiognomy of 'moral degenerates' and 'congenital/atavistic criminals'.

Although a major focus on these issues is beyond the scope of the present article, it is worth recalling that what might be subsumed under the umbrella terms of 'degeneracy' (a pathological deviation from normative and moral standards, or a constitutional propensity for it) and biological 'regression' (a lower-state throwback, or a form of arrested development) was part and parcel of a nineteenth-century paradigm associated with a diversified body of inquiries that shaped medico-sociological discourse and

can give meaning to an ethical way of being and should not overflow into despair. Significantly enough, it is now an inspiration by sorrow, and not pleasure, that triggers Wilde's most sincere humanity, out of which the seeds of a new art germinate [...]. In shifting the center from Being toward Otherness, he starts to give priority to the transcendence of the other over the imperialism of the ego" (M. JEIHOUNI, "Oscar Wilde and Call of the Other in *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*", *The Explicator*, 74 [1], 2016, pp. 48-49).

²⁰ M. HOUSDEN, "Oscar Wilde's Imprisonment and an Early Idea of 'Banal Evil'", *Forum Historiae Iuris*, 25, 2006, p. 5 (emphasis added), <https://forhistiur.net/2006-10-housden/abstract/?l=en> (last accessed on 22 July 2023).

paved the way for Cesare Lombroso’s and Max Nordau’s well-known theorisations.²¹ Debates involving the tenets of degenerationists and criminal anthropology soon crossed over the line into the social milieu, curtailing Victorian confidence and stirring up geopolitical fears about the impending fall of western civilisation. Or rather, about the decline of a British Empire that risked taking a downward slide to earlier evolutionary stages, reverse-colonisation dynamics, and ultimate disintegration. It is therefore no wonder that, in a perspective of racial determinism and imminent deterioration, being faced with a spectrum of ‘deviant types’ exhibiting anomalies and atavistic alterations was fraught with sinister overtones.

Among the most caustic interpreters of this retroactive ‘wave of barbarism’ and alleged resurgence of primal as well as flawed instincts was the social critic Max Nordau (1849-1923), whose major and controversial contribution remains *Entartung* (1892), a bulky exposé which made a sensation at the time and was translated into English as *Degeneration* in 1895, running through no less than five editions. Although the credibility and scientific pretensions of this literary-sociological investigation have long been tarnished, *Degeneration* purported to objectively assess a network of artistic and literary works and cultural trends circulating in Europe at the turn of the century. By transferring Lombroso’s clinical pictures of criminals and Bénédict Augustin Morel’s “degeneration theory from the insane asylum to the literary avant-garde of the fin de siècle” and “applying the psychiatric concept of degeneration to modern culture”, Nordau’s trenchant attack wanted to show that “the cultural avant-garde, far from being modern and progressive, was actually atavistic and regressive”.²² Behaving like an earnest diagnostician and therapist, Nordau scrutinised a contemporary “dusk of the nations”²³ and pointed the finger at a cluster of writers, artists and thinkers he classified as sick, insane or perverted: as discreditable members of an effete, degenerate race that had to be contained before it led to total ruin. By creating a palimpsest of interlocking links between psychiatric case studies and the psychophysiological ‘unhealthiness’ of the representatives of Decadence, Nordau granted the ruling classes an opportunity to exorcise their fear of anarchism, solipsism and different kinds of threatening aberrations.

In brief, *Entartung* provided an etiological model according to which end-of-the-century Europe was suffering from a collective sociopathology oscillating between

²¹ As Elisa Segnini fitly sums up: “Before the advent of evolutionary biology, Bénédict Morel (1809-1873), author of the influential *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine* [*Treatise on Physical, Intellectual, and Moral Degeneration of the Human Species*] (1857), had defined degeneration as a pathological deviation from the norm, a state that could be inherited and that was discernible through physical signs. In *Degeneration, a Chapter in Darwinism* (1880), the biologist Edwin Ray Lankester (1847-1929) combined Morel’s notion of degeneracy with Ernst Haeckel’s recapitulation theory. Extending the logic of evolution to the social sphere, he argued that degeneration was the response of adaptation to a less challenging environment: just as a lack of stimulation could lead an organism to an inverted development, the lack of challenge in contemporary European society would cause its atrophy” (E. SEGNINI, *Fragments, Genius and Madness: Masks and Mask-Making in the Fin-de-Siècle Imagination*, Cambridge, Legenda, 2021, p. 2).

²² H.-P. SÖDER, “Disease and Health as Contexts of Modernity: Max Nordau as a Critic of Fin-de-Siècle Modernism”, *German Studies Review*, 14 (3), 1991, p. 475.

²³ M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, Engl. trans. from the second edition of the German work, London, William Heinemann, (1892) 1920, p. 1.

degeneration and hysteria, a feverish restlessness and feebleness of will. The evidence gathered by Nordau concerned famous names, movements, and currents of that period, from John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites to the French Parnassians and Symbolists and, of course, the affiliates of Aestheticism. Indeed, he did not spare the ‘mystics’ Richard Wagner, D.G. Rossetti and Paul Verlaine, the ‘hysterical’ Joris-Karl Huysmans, the ‘egomaniacs’ Henrik Ibsen and Friedrich Nietzsche, or the false realism and morbid pessimism of Émile Zola. In the book’s dedicatory preface – a warmy homage to his spiritual father, ‘Professor Cæsar Lombroso’ – Nordau vigorously asserted:

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil.

Some among these degenerates in literature, music, and painting have in recent years come into extraordinary prominence, and are revered by numerous admirers as creators of a new art, and heralds of the coming centuries [...]. If they are absurd and anti-social, they exert a disturbing and corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation.²⁴

By means of his anathema, Nordau projected the reader into a bleak scenario populated by artists and intellectuals ostensibly impaired by psychic and/or somatic stigmata, exhaustion and a weak intellect, metaphysical and erotic fixations. Yet, if he thought that degenerates whose “mental derangement is too deep-seated [...] must be abandoned to their inexorable fate”²⁵ because they are past cure or amelioration, he also offered a glimmer of hope by maintaining, in the closing section of the volume (“Therapeutics”), that the very principle of the survival of the fittest would help restore an ethics of rationality, responsibility, modesty, and restraint.

Regarding Oscar Wilde, his name was bound to loom large in Nordau’s ‘clique of unrecoverables’. A number of pages is in fact dedicated to him in Chapter 3 (“Decadents and Æsthetes”) of Book III (“Ego-mania”). Here follows a significant excerpt:

The ego-mania of decadentism, its love of the artificial, its aversion to nature, and to all forms of activity and movement, its megalomaniacal contempt for men and its exaggeration of the importance of art, have found their English representative among the ‘Æsthetes,’ the chief of whom is Oscar Wilde [...] Wilde dresses in queer costumes which recall partly the fashions of the Middle Ages, partly the rococo modes. He pretends to have abandoned the dress of the present time because it offends his sense of the beautiful; but this is only a pretext in which probably he himself does not believe. What really determines his actions is the hysterical craving to be noticed, to occupy the attention of the world with himself, to get talked about [...] it is above all a sign of anti-social ego-mania to irritate the majority unnecessarily, only to gratify vanity, or an aesthetical instinct of small importance and easy to control [...] When, therefore, an Oscar Wilde goes about in ‘aesthetic costume’ among gazing Philistines, exciting either their ridicule or their wrath, it is no indication of independence of character, but rather from a purely anti-socialistic, ego-maniacal recklessness and hysterical longing

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. vii-viii.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 551.

to make a sensation, justified by no exalted aim; nor is it from a strong desire for beauty, but from a malevolent mania for contradiction.²⁶

First published in German in 1892, *Entartung* could not have pursued the line of Wilde’s criminalisation and of the trials lying ahead. This is why it did not so much expand on the topic of ‘erotomania’ – an obsession Wilde would instead refer to in his 1896 petition, while in the depths of despair – as capitalise on an inventory of megalomaniacal idiosyncrasies, including a proclivity for eccentric posturing (“buffoon mummery”) and a capricious wit (“tortuously disdainful prattling”).²⁷

Be that as it may, in July 1896, when he was serving his sentence in Reading Gaol and disgrace had clung to his name since the spring of the previous year, Wilde was induced to look backwards and boost his chance of getting a pardon by depicting himself as a *bête noire* along the lines of *Entartung* (which he probably read in its first French translation). He also openly based his self-diagnosis on the theses of Lombroso and Nordau:

The petition of the above-named prisoner humbly sheweth that he does not desire to attempt to palliate in any way the terrible offences of which he was rightly found guilty, but to point out that such offences are forms of sexual madness and are recognised as such not merely by modern pathological science but by much modern legislation, notably in France, Austria, and Italy, where the laws affecting these misdemeanors have been repealed, on the ground that they are diseases to be cured by a physician, rather than crimes to be punished by a judge. In the works of eminent men of science such as Lombroso and Nordau, to take merely two instances out of many, this is specially insisted on with reference to the intimate connection between madness and the literary and artistic temperament, Professor Nordau in his book on “Degenerescence” published in 1894 having devoted an entire chapter to the petitioner as a specially typical example of this fatal law. The petitioner is now keenly conscious of the fact that while the three years preceding his arrest were from the intellectual point of view the most brilliant years of his life [...] during the entire time he was suffering from the most horrible form of erotomania, which made him forget his wife and children, his high social position in London and Paris, his European distinction as an artist, the honour of his name and family, his very humanity itself, and left him the helpless prey of the most revolting passions, and of a gang of people who for their own profit ministered to them, and then drove him to his hideous ruin.²⁸

In his anguished petition to Sir Matthew White Ridley, first Viscount Ridley, a document which would unfortunately grant him no remission,²⁹ Wilde clarified his

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 317-19.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 319, 320.

²⁸ O. WILDE, “Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary”, 2 July 1896, in *Id.*, *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 41, 43.

²⁹ As Nicholas Frankel explains in his illuminating and carefully detailed commentary on Wilde’s prison writings: “Victorian prisoners were entitled to appeal to the home secretary, and remission of part of a prisoner’s sentence for good behavior was an accepted element of the late-Victorian penal code [...]. However, the chairman of the Prison Commission told Frank Harris that Wilde couldn’t possibly be granted a remission since ‘good conduct meant, in prison parlance, absence of punishment, and Oscar had been punished pretty often. Of course, his offences were minor offences’”. However, “Wilde’s petition would not have succeeded even had his behavior been perfect. Before 1898 remissions were granted only to prisoners serving sentences of more than two years in one of the large government-run convict prisons, whereas ‘people sentenced to imprisonment in a local prison ... did not have the inducement and advantage of a remission in sentence’” (N. FRANKEL, Note to O. WILDE, “Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary”, p. 40).

reasons for pleading by casting himself as the victim of a decadent disease that was gnawing at the soul of quite a few talented artists of the age. On the one hand, he drew attention to his poor physical condition, mentioning a failing eyesight – due to the gas-jet flaring at night in the whitewashed cell and the bright daylight's hurtful impact on his optic nerve during yard time – and the abscess in his right ear, which had caused a serious infection and a perforation of the drum, this being in fact the injury that would hasten his death from meningoencephalitis in November 1900. On the other hand, he put the accent on the already mentioned erotomania, a delusional disorder Nordau had conceived in terms of a 'sexual madness' or 'sensual monomania', and to which Wilde appealed as a catchword to provide a rationale for his collapse from the peak of success and the deplorable alienation from his family and friends.

To be sure, there was at least another seminal text Wilde must have had in mind when writing his petition, i.e. Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis: eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie* (1886; first English translation 1892), where the postulated abnormal behaviour had been tagged as 'sexual perversion'. Within the sphere of medico-scientific investigation pioneered in the nineteenth century, sexology had been gathering impetus thanks to the work of physicians, psychologists and neurologists such as Heinrich Kaan, Albert Moll, Magnus Hirschfeld, Havelock Ellis, and Krafft-Ebing himself. Via his 1886 encyclopaedic treatise, this German psychiatrist supplied a professional community with a focal clinical-forensic sourcebook, expanded through a dozen integrated editions and ultimately recording over two hundred case histories of psychopathological or obsessive sexual behaviour. Among other codifications, 'homosexuality' was one of the words employed by Krafft-Ebing in order to clearly distinguish it from a normalcy paradigm of sexual orientation thought of as exempt from 'dysfunctions' and 'deviations' and basically geared toward procreation. In his view – which he would tone down and amend over the course of time, though – the homosexual subject was suffering from an innate biological anomaly, an 'inverted sensibility' originating in the embryonic and fetal gestation stages. On account of this, homosexuality was not to be dealt with as, say, an acquired misconduct, a sinful or criminal behaviour, but ministered to by healthcare specialists as a psychoneuropathic illness and inborn deviance. A psychiatrist as well as forensic expert addressing himself to a circle of medical practitioners, lawyers and judges, Krafft-Ebing argued that 'sex offenders' ought not to be legally prosecuted but treated as patients. Importantly, his non-judgmental stance looked ahead to the earliest movements bent on removing laws against homosexuality in Germany.

With rhetorical intelligence, Wilde hastened to take up this subject in the opening paragraph of his petition, where he underscored how his 'pathology' called for a proper cure and demanded a rethinking of the penal code, as attested by the fact that such laws had been repealed in France (1791), Austria (1852), and Italy (1889). If this search for atonement and the seemingly absolute trust in medico-legal authorities followed the lead of a peroration inspired by the pragmatic principle of *docere, probare et movere* (and a few targeted instructions by Frank Harris),³⁰ and if Wilde was to

³⁰ On Frank Harris's interview with the chairman of the Prison Commission and following visit to Wilde at

court again Uranian love and boy-worship after his release, the content and style of the Clemency Petition give us a taste of the author’s high degree of awareness and ethical-emotional involvement. However, as we keep on reading, what is compellingly brought home to us is neither Wilde’s legal knowledge, nor his acquaintance with theories about sexual madness. Being pushed to the fore is an overwhelming fear that punctuates his reflections like an eerie *leitmotif*: a sheer terror of an insanity going well beyond the confines of erotomania. As Nicholas Frankel observes, during the first nine months of Wilde’s stay in Reading Prison, “there was no letup in the intensity of his punishment. He remained in solitary confinement, unable to associate with fellow prisoners, picking oakum in his tiny cell for hours on end”.³¹

In all likelihood the only privileged, upper-middle class and university-educated person in the institution, he was crippled even more by its poor sanitary conditions and hard-and-fast rules, an environment which was light years away from his former lifestyle and contacts. Wilde was here an exceptional case, a helpless black swan whose life was literally at risk. Since 20 November 1895 – the day he was transferred to Reading after two months spent in Wandsworth Prison’s infirmary, owing to insomnia, dysentery and the fall which had damaged his right ear – he had had the chance to break the enforced silence and communicate with the outside world only to receive grim news, as when, on 19 February 1896, his wife Constance travelled from Italy to tell him that his mother, Lady Wilde, had passed away about two weeks before. Bereft of both his name (replaced by cell number C.3.3.) and writing materials, allowed only two books per week (by special permission and often the same volumes, given the prison library’s scant collection), cut off from “all human and humane influences”, Wilde felt “deprived of everything that could soothe, distract, or heal a wounded and shaken mind”, not least the gift of “literature to one to whom Literature was once the first thing of life”.³² Hence his “fear of absolute and entire insanity” and the hope for a remission that might see him “go forth while he [had] still some sanity left”.³³ From the heartrending tones of this peroration it was only a small step to a more militant, factual perspective finding fault with an institutionalised system of sickening and crushing privation, as suggested by the following aside:

Dreadful as are the results of the prison system – a system so terrible that it hardens their hearts whose hearts it does not break, and brutalises those who have to carry it out no less than those who have to submit to it – yet at least amongst its aims is not the desire to wreck the human reason.³⁴

3. As a functional preamble to further commentary on Wilde’s incarceration experience, let us briefly recapitulate the climactic moments of his ostracisation and conviction. As is widely known, the wick that triggered the *débâcle* was ignited in February 1895 by the father of Lord Alfred ‘Bosie’ Douglas, i.e. John Sholto Douglas, the

Reading on 16 June 1896, see N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, London, Reaktion Books, 2021, pp. 220-21.

³¹ N. FRANKEL, “Introduction”, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 3.

³² O. WILDE, “Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary”, p. 47.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 47, 49.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

9th Marquess of Queensberry, who left an offensive visiting card addressed to his youngest son's lover at the Albemarle Club in Piccadilly. In this calling card he had hastily scrawled "For Oscar Wilde posing Somdomite" [*sic*]. As a counter-response (and partly at the instigation of Alfred), Wilde decided to sue the marquess for criminal libel and secure a warrant for his arrest, underestimating the ill-tempered aristocrat's resourcefulness and the implications of such a course of action, which would actually prove disastrous for the author as an advocate (and practitioner) of a then forbidden same-sex love. Indeed, by "initiating his libel action against Queensberry, Wilde willingly exposed his life and work to the law's scrutiny",³⁵ so much so that his attorney, Sir Edward Clarke, advised him to withdraw the suit, secretly expecting his client would flee the country and look for a safe place in France. This, however, did not happen. Wilde refused to debase himself to the level of a deserter and, somewhat too rashly and confidently, opted for holding his ground. He thus got enmeshed not only in a failed libel action, but in a clamorous turning of the tables whereby he would find himself a defendant against the Crown, to be finally convicted on seven counts of gross indecency.³⁶

The evidence collected by Queensberry's private detectives and a copy of the witnesses' statements relating to Wilde's intimate associations with a dozen young males from 1892 to 1893 – mostly boys from the urban underclass embroiled in homosexual and/or blackmailing networks – were passed on to the Director of Public Prosecutions and, on the evening of 5 April 1895, the author was arrested at London's Cadogan Hotel, where Douglas had booked a room. The rest is history: what followed were two criminal trials and a verdict of guilty. The sentence, amounting to two years with hard labour in solitary confinement, was the maximum permissible by law. According to Mr Justice Alfred Wills, who pronounced the verdict, the punishment should have been even more exacting, since people like Alfred Taylor (a thirty-three-year-old man gone bankrupt and a promiscuous procurer of boys) and Wilde himself

must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst case I have ever tried. That you, Taylor, kept a kind of male brothel it is impossible to doubt. And that you, Wilde, have been the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men, it is equally impossible to doubt.

I shall, under such circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgment it is totally inadequate for such a case as this. The sentence of the Court is that each of you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years.³⁷

The law prescribing the penalty referred to by Justice Wills was Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which added the offence of gross indecency to the statute book with the purpose of broadening the spectrum of actionable sexual

³⁵ N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, p. 213.

³⁶ As Merlin Holland remarks, "[t]o be fair to the lawyers, Oscar had lied to his solicitor and also to Sir Edward Clarke, the Queen's Counsel who was to represent him in court, saying that Queensberry's allegations were groundless, but the more serious interpretation of the libel may well have prompted Queensberry's legal team to look more closely at Wilde's private life than they would have done otherwise" (M. HOLLAND, "Oscar Wilde's Crime and Punishment: Fictions, Facts and Questions", in K. POWELL and P. RABY [eds], *Oscar Wilde in Context*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013, p. 201).

³⁷ Quoted in R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, London, Penguin, (1987) 1988, pp. 448-49.

misconducts and deviances. If, in compliance with the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, sodomy (or ‘crime of buggery’, a felony) could be punished with penal servitude for life or a term of at least ten years, gross indecency concerned other, less ‘reprehensible’ kinds of intimate (homoerotic) relationships between men. These intercourses fell into a fuzzy category labelled ‘Outrages on decency’, without any further definition and with such misdemeanours taking in various parties and degrees of accountability, from, virtually, the exploitation of minors to consenting adults in private. The clause stated that

Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour.³⁸

Commonly known as ‘Labouchere Amendment’ – from Henry Du Pré Labouchère (1831-1912), the liberal-radical MP responsible for this eleventh-hour addition to the Bill resulting in an all-out criminalisation of male homosexual liaisons – Section 11 had been wryly nicknamed the ‘Blackmailer’s Charter’, due to its fomenting secrecy and fear and implicitly facilitating extortion by abusers who might threaten to report suspect gay men to the police.

Rivers of ink have been poured with reference to the public quagmire and myriad of circumstantial factors that had turned so heavy-handedly against Wilde. Much has been said about the energies mobilised to secure his conviction, as though he had been singled out by the establishment for retribution, along a trajectory that pigeonholed him as a degenerate transgressor while ultimately converting him into a sacrificial-victim icon. Across the years, Wilde had certainly emerged as a divisive figure and mordant provocateur, both in the field of sexual behaviour and in light of his anti-authoritarian and socialist/anarchist views. At the same time, the draconian norms applied to his case and the consequential aftermath of his scandal-torn drama of disclosure brought matters to a spectacular head via a punishment that was to serve as a yardstick, a graphic example of the “striking of the soul and body in the name of a normative creed and a redeeming social function”.³⁹ Patently, this epoch-making watershed would have a long-lasting impact on, first of all, questions of homophobia, gender identity, and LGBT rights. There is little doubt that “[i]mages of the homosexual, whether dangerous or persecuted, coalesced around the writer’s personality and fate”,⁴⁰ and

³⁸ UK PARLIAMENT, “1885 Labouchere Amendment”, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/sexual-offences-act-1967/1885-labouchere-amendment/> (last accessed on 17 August 2023). The full title was “An Act to make further provision for the Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and other purposes”. As one reads in the introductory gloss on the website, Section 11 “made all homosexual acts of ‘gross indecency’ illegal. The bill was primarily concerned with the protection of women and girls by increasing the age of consent and yet this small section in the Act was a pivotal change in homosexual legislation [...]. It was under this Act that Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing, among many others, were convicted and punished for committing homosexual acts”.

³⁹ L. GIOVANNELLI, “Oscar Wilde and Prison Experience”, p. 22.

⁴⁰ M.B. KAPLAN, “Literature in the Dock: The Trials of Oscar Wilde”, *Journal of Law and Society*, 31 (1), 2004,

that Wilde's dandified, flamboyant 'camp queen' aura eventually crystallised into a more definite (and pilloried) profile. In the often cited thesis formulated by Alan Sinfield in the context of Cultural and Queer Studies, this negative *identikit* adhering to the male homosexual took shape as

the trials helped to produce a major shift in perceptions of the scope of same-sex passion. At that point, the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived, variously, as instantiating, was transformed.⁴¹

Again, in a statement by Joseph Bristow dating back to the same period of Sinfield's contention:

The key figure who became the most notorious victim of the Labouchere Amendment was Oscar Wilde in 1895. Not only did Wilde represent for the first time in public a celebrity who had committed sexual acts of 'gross indecency', he also came to emblemize a specific style of effeminate identity that represented a distinctly late nineteenth-century apprehension of the male homosexual [...] effeminacy became the main stigma attached to male homosexuality in the eyes of English society. So familiar is this queer stereotype that it is easy to forget that the connection between effeminate behaviour and same-sex desire was firmly established in the public imagination only after Wilde was sent to Reading Gaol for two years in solitary confinement with hard labour [...]. Only after the trials would Wilde's persona become radically refashioned as that of a pathological being: a degraded degenerate whose effeminate bearing coincided with increasingly popularized notions of the invert who, according to some sexologists, contained a woman's soul within his male body.⁴²

In spite of his noble paean to the 'Love that dare not speak its name' (from the last line of Lord Alfred Douglas's poem "Two Loves", 1892), which drew a reverberant applause from the audience during the first criminal trial, Wilde was now being faced with a blunt obliteration of the dignified ideals of male homophilia and homosocial intimacy inspired by a Socratic/Platonic ethos and endorsed by Oxonian Hellenism. The notions of a pure and deep affection, of a spiritual and intellectual 'procreancy' that had acquired legitimacy at Victorian Oxford⁴³ were eclipsed in a court of law

p. 116.

⁴¹ A. SINFIELD, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, London and New York, Continuum International Publishing, 1994, p. 3.

⁴² J. BRISTOW, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885*, Buckingham, Open U.P., 1995, pp. 2, 5. Ari Adut's considerations on the reticence/exposure dynamics underlying the scandal are also worthy of note: "Wilde's well-known homosexuality did not cause a scandal until his trials simply because it was not publicly denounced. People prattled – much and maliciously, but always in private. The polluting publicity of the transgression, strict libel laws, and the high status of Wilde all educed reticence from the Victorian elite public. Those who considered themselves to be victims and who would have had legally superior evidence about Wilde's homosexuality (for instance, the families of his lovers) had reputational disincentives to take on the dramatist. They would themselves be contaminated by the resultant scandal [...] a private crusade against Wilde could also eventuate in a public contestation – a chancy proposition in the light of the tough libel laws. Finally, while Wilde was the subject of gossip within various subpublics, without a public denunciation it would be difficult to coordinate attitudes vis-à-vis the deviant dramatist within the larger Victorian public. While those with low tolerance of homosexuality would find it costly to sanction Wilde, those with higher tolerance (for instance those in the cultured milieus) would not have to at all" (A. ADUT, "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde", *American Journal of Sociology*, 111 [1], 2005, pp. 228-29).

⁴³ For an investigation of this aspect see, among others, the landmark study by L. DOWLING, *Hellenism and*

where the Wilde case came to be perceived as a ticking time-bomb putting at risk social order and the political agenda. Strenuously supported by the English middle class and the upper echelons of society, the author’s condemnation might be compared to a collective exorcism performed against ‘enervation’ and ‘degeneracy’ with a view to reintegrating a positive, healthy, and masculine discernment. It is worthwhile stressing that it was only by virtue of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, as late as the second half of the twentieth century, that male homosexuality was partially decriminalised in England and Wales (with Scotland and Northern Ireland waiting until 1980 and 1982 respectively). On the other hand, “the crime of gross indecency remained on British statute books until 2003 and Wilde was not formally pardoned of the crimes for which he was convicted until 2017”.⁴⁴ This happened thanks to the Alan Turing Law, so called after the brilliant mathematician and computer scientist who was prosecuted for homosexual acts in 1952 and died two years later in the wake of a chemical castration treatment. The Turing amnesty law granted a pardon to thousands of previously condemned gay men, including Wilde.

Although the pathway leading up to Wilde’s internment was partly built on tainted and scarcely corroborated evidence – or even vulnerable, coerced witnesses forswearing themselves⁴⁵ – a big strain seems to have been placed on legal authorities in matters of a criminal procedure that was spreading like wildfire to both working-class youth and the sociopolitical high spheres. Indeed, the guilty verdict had better be seen not so much as “a direct result of his love affair with Douglas”, but more on the grounds of Wilde’s “association with London’s rent-boys”.⁴⁶ Still fresh in people’s memory was in those years the Cleveland Street Affair, a male-brothel scandal which had broken out in 1889, when a house at 19 Cleveland Street, London, was raided and a gang of telegraph boys from the General Post Office were found entertaining customers belonging to the aristocracy and the top ranks of politics (with a plausible involvement of Prince Albert Victor, the grandson of Queen Victoria). In order to prevent bad publicity, the thing was hushed up, with no arrests being made and the clientele managing to cover their tracks. This sly diplomatic manoeuvre was not forgotten either, so that, in 1895, discretion and soft approaches would hardly be condoned.

Dramatically raising the spectre of a public outcry were also rumours concerning the upper reaches of the Liberal Party, with the Marquess of Queensberry sticking out again as a belligerent puppet master. Suspicions arose that the Prime Minister Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery, might have had an affair with the

Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford, Ithaca and London, Cornell U.P., 1994, including its rich bibliography.

⁴⁴ N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, p. 247.

⁴⁵ As pointed out by Joseph Bristow, Wilde “was sent to jail on the basis of testimony of felons who openly acknowledged their engagement in both the ‘gross indecency’ of which he was charged and the crime of extortion. Throughout the proceedings, these witnesses provided testimony – even if it revealed that they, too, were guilty of the crime not only of ‘gross indecency’ but also of blackmail – that remained admissible because their word supported the prosecution’s charges against Wilde [...]. The information that these confessed blackmailers disclosed in the witness box made the indictment of ‘gross indecency’ look far more culpable than the extortion they admitted to perpetrating upon Wilde and other gentlemen” (J. BRISTOW, “The Blackmailer and the Sodomite: Oscar Wilde on Trial”, *Feminist Theory*, 17 [1], 2016, p. 42).

⁴⁶ M. HOLLAND, “Oscar Wilde’s Crime and Punishment: Fictions, Facts and Questions”, p. 207.

marquess's eldest son, Francis Douglas, who had been Rosebery's private secretary when the latter was serving as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. In 1894, Francis had tragically passed away, officially from injuries received at a shooting party, but possibly committing suicide. Queensberry had thus "certain information about very high persons in the liberal government that would be made public unless Wilde were convicted".⁴⁷ In other words, the peer might well have urged the government to hasten Wilde's prosecution if they did not want the Prime Minister's alleged secret to become public knowledge.

In various ways a symbolic figure and a scapegoat, Wilde got entangled in an illegal circuit that had little to do with the ethics of liberal Hellenism and the pure ideal of Greek love. It was an unsavoury circuit that cut across social classes, age or status, dangerously giving a nod to the criminal underworld. The reconstruction of Wilde's trials would make for another long chapter, especially when one thinks of the staggering array of courtroom events and revelations, tireless cross-examinations and lack of eyewitness testimonies that characterised them, not to mention the misconceptions and loss of a part of the shorthand reports.⁴⁸ Even so, scholarly research has made great strides from the 1990s onwards, up to Joseph Bristow's cutting-edge contribution published in 2022.⁴⁹

In a nutshell, what should be kept in mind here is that the three trials took place at the Old Bailey, London's Central Criminal Court, between April and May 1895. Wilde first appeared before the court on 3 April, testifying against the Marquess of Queensberry for libelling him a 'sodomite' in the misspelled calling card. The hazardous libel suit came to a close two days later, with the marquess's defense team submitting detailed accounts of the author's embroilment in queer circles. After Sir Edward Clarke suggested to withdraw the charge, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Wilde, who was refused bail and languished for about three weeks in Holloway jail, in the London Borough of Islington. The second trial – actually the first Crown prosecution – opened on 26 April and ended on 1 May in a hung jury, because its members did not agree on the counts. The final criminal trial started on 22 May and

⁴⁷ R. GAGNIER, "De Profundis as Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde's Autobiography", p. 339.

⁴⁸ A measure of this can be inferred from the fact that "there was no authorized record printed of the proceedings or, for that matter, kept in the court records when they were transferred to the Public Record Office in 1955. Two very incomplete versions of the three trials were printed, almost certainly from the newspaper accounts: in Germany in 1896 and in Paris in 1906, before Christopher Millard published *Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried* in 1912, also relying mainly on contemporary newspapers. For many years that remained the definitive but still abridged version, until 1948 when an enterprising lawyer, Montgomery Hyde, took Millard's version (with scant acknowledgement), and made various cosmetic changes" (M. HOLLAND, "Oscar Wilde's Crime and Punishment: Fictions, Facts and Questions", pp. 197-98).

⁴⁹ In addition to J. BRISTOW, *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment*, New Haven and London, Yale U.P., 2022, and as valuable complements to the pioneering surveys by Christopher S. Millard and H. Montgomery Hyde, see M.S. FOLDY, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late-Victorian Society*, New Haven, Yale U.P., 1997; M. HOLLAND, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, London, Fourth Estate, 2003; M.B. KAPLAN, "Literature in the Dock: The Trials of Oscar Wilde"; L.J. MORAN, "Transcripts and Truth: Writing the Trials of Oscar Wilde", in J. BRISTOW (ed.), *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, Athens, Ohio U.P., 2008, pp. 234-58; H. COCKS, "Wilde and the Law", in K. POWELL and P. RABY (eds), *Oscar Wilde in Context*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013, pp. 297-304.

closed on 25 May, with a conviction for gross indecency carrying a maximum sentence. Lord Alfred Douglas’s public appeals, as well as the petition to the Home Secretary drafted by More Adey with George Bernard Shaw’s support, remained unheard and, similarly to Wilde’s lengthy 1896 Clemency Petition, would fail to secure an early release.

4. In the time span extending from 25 May 1895 to 19 May 1897, Wilde served his sentence in three different institutions: Pentonville, a government penitentiary in the north of Greater London (from May to June 1895); Wandsworth, in south London (from July to mid-November 1895); and Reading, a local jail for less serious offenders in South East England (from 20 November 1895 to the day before his release in 1897). It is a familiar observation that, within days of Wilde’s arrival at Pentonville – a detention centre where the protocols of solitary confinement and silent isolation had been rigorously applied since the 1840s – warning news circulated in the press about his deteriorating physical and mental condition. To be sure, bad reports of a similar kind had been worrying government officials for at least a year, causing concern about the rules and regulations in force. In 1894, the *Daily Chronicle* – a best-selling newspaper based in London and aligned with the Liberal Party – had fostered the cause of prison reform by publishing a series of unsigned articles where Reverend William Morrison (assistant chaplain at Wandsworth), H.W. Massingham and trade unionist John Burns had put readers on guard on the escalation of cases of insanity and suicide among convicts. Other newspapers, such as the *Fortnightly Review*, *Truth* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, added fuel to the fire.

These widely publicised allegations shone a spotlight into the prison system itself, whose ‘Hard labour, hard fare, and hard board’ rallying cry encapsulated the principles of an iron-fist policy revolving around retributive justice and deterrence. Untouched by questions of sympathy and restorative practice, Victorian Britain’s penal laws were committed to imposing sanctions and pinning down culpable behaviours, giving little consideration to potentially mitigating circumstances or outside factors. Offenders were bound to ride on the discipline-and-punish highway, being denied human dignity and with their needs reduced to a bare minimum, almost below subsistence level. Funnily enough, although the declared objective was to train lawbreakers in obedience and self-control and rehabilitate them for a reentry, the stigmatisation process risked producing the reverse effect. Owing to the lack of effective reintegration programs, crime and recidivism rates tended to fester.

When Wilde was incarcerated, jails were run in accordance with two main pieces of legislation, both championing tough-on-crime policies designed to break the spirit and mortify even the coarsest of miscreants. One was the Prison Act 1865, which defined hard labour and formalised the institution of separate cellular confinement, mandating that every inmate be locked in a single cell, except for one hour of physical activity per day in the prison yard. Whether in the cell – where each of them was to concentrate on hard-labour duties – or in the yard, they were forbidden to talk, the only possible verbal contact being with prison officials. Such a penalisation of speech powerfully added to the absence of human contact and companionship. Indeed, the

so-called 'silent system' was "thought to be a vehicle whereby convicts' wills were broken by being kept in total silence and by long, pointless hard labour".⁵⁰ From the point of view of the staunch upholders of this decalogue, any 'promiscuous mingling' and 'contaminating influences' between hardened outlaws and first offenders would thus be hindered. Above all, solitude and the preclusion of intercourse were conceived as a lesson of admonition and an ideal predicament setting the scene for examinations of conscience, the probing of one's misdeeds, repentance, and prayer (a ritualistic moment that was strengthened through mandatory Christian worship). It was not for nothing that prison libraries basically consisted of copies of the Bible, prayer-books, and other religious works.

The other piece of legislation was the Prison Act 1877, which implemented a uniform disciplinary code by nationalising prisons. Administrative power was transferred from local authorities to the government under the Home Secretary and an appointed Board of Prison Commissioners. Therefore, in a twin move, the separate system and the ban on verbal interchanges were institutionalised on the national territory.⁵¹ Coming as a package were a panopticon-like monitoring and a pitiless daily routine within cold, dank and smelly cells, with long amounts of time allotted to heavy tasks. Dirt, chronic hunger and insomnia were the order of the day. If the unvarying prison diet was poor and unpalatable, for the first thirty days of his/her sentence, an inmate would be allowed no mattress but only a hard pillow of coarse sack, an old blanket and a plank bed, which made it extremely difficult to sleep and caused pains in one's bones.

Wilde was to bear much of this burden, from the unhealthy food to an enforced-labour timetable, from the isolation in a dreary cell to the impossibility to communicate (the silence rule, together with the wake-up call in the early morning and the scrupulous cleaning of the cell, were tricky terrain to him). As soon as he set foot in HMP Pentonville, he

encountered the general régime that, with the exception of type of labor, would reflect little change during the next two years [...] 6 a.m. clean cell; 7, porridge and brown bread; exercise for an hour, oakum pick-

⁵⁰ N.R. STOREY, *Prisons & Prisoners in Victorian Britain*, Stroud, Gloucestershire, The History Press, 2010, p. 13. As Philip Priestley also underlines, the "only communication officially allowed to convicts undergoing penal servitude was via visits and letters. Both channels were subject to conditions which greatly reduced their usefulness to anyone genuinely seeking to keep alive an emotional attachment to someone outside [...]. 'During the first two years letters are allowed to pass between prisoners and their families, and also visits to take place every six months, the second year every four months, and after that every three months, provided always that a prisoner did not forfeit his privilege by misconduct, and that he earned his proper quota of marks'" (P. PRIESTLEY, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830-1914*, London and New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 198).

⁵¹ The 1877 Act "transferred direct control of the local prisons to central government", and one could "see the creation of a centralized prison administration in England and Wales as the handiwork of Major-General Sir Joshua Jebb and Major-General Sir Edmund DuCane. Both were soldiers, both were engineers, and both were vigorous penal administrators [...]. A truly English compromise permitted the emergence in time of a regime which incorporated elements of both systems: separation *and* silent association. Under the later superintendence of Sir Edmund DuCane, the essentially moral purposes of both systems were discarded. Lip-service continued to be paid to the idea of reform, but its external forms were redirected towards ends of punishment and deterrence; towards the creation of a system of 'salutary terror'" (P. PRIESTLEY, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830-1914*, p. 6). These policies rested "on purely punitive grounds" and the "formulation of pseudo-medical remedies for crime" (*ibidem*, p. 37).

ing until noon; dinner of bacon, beans, bread, potatoes (cold meat once a week); 12:30-6 oakum picking; tea or gruel and 8 ounces bread; 7 p.m. lights out. No personal possessions were allowed in the cell, which included only a plank bed, blanket, hard pillow and small table. Each morning on pain of punishment the prisoner would arrange these items symmetrically for inspection. (After his release, Wilde’s friends noticed that he was incapable of allowing common objects to rest without comparable ordering.) One letter could be sent and received per quarter, but letters were allowed for the “purpose of enabling [prisoners] to keep up a connection with their respectable friends and not that they may be kept informed of public events.” No books were allowed the first month, during the second and third only a Bible, prayer-book, and hymnbook. Afterwards, one book a week from the prison library was permitted.⁵²

During the first few weeks, Wilde spent roughly six hours a day climbing the ‘everlasting staircase’ of the treadmill, which was one of the mainstays of punitive labour, a cog in the drab machine of a pointless toil that did not provide any industrial training, nor teach trades that might open the door to a post-release employment. Also called the ‘treadmill’, this appliance was designed by civil engineer Sir William Cubitt and first installed in the 1810s (originally with the productive purpose of driving mill stones for grinding corn or pumping water). It consisted of a large hollow cylinder with an iron frame and a series of wooden steps built around it. The big wheel started rotating as the convicts – each of them positioned in a separate compartment made of wood – pushed with their feet on the planks so as to climb the steps, not rarely tripping up and getting their limbs caught in (or even dying due to heart attacks or collapsed lungs).⁵³

Another infernal device that plagued the correctional population, including Wilde, was the wearisome crank, a machine located in the cell and targeted for turning paddles in a box of sand. Its working depended on the force exerted by the prisoner, who was expected to turn as much as twenty revolutions a minute, up to 10,000 revolutions in eight and a half hours. Other cumbersome tasks were mailbag sewing and oakum picking. Consonant with the precept of keeping “unskilled hands from idleness”,⁵⁴ the preparation of oakum (generally three pounds per day) boiled down to separating strands of old tarred ropes, which had to be pulled apart in order to make them as fine as silk for shipbuilding use (although the demand for oakum declined when iron replaced wood in the construction of ships). This tedious assignment caused greasy blackened fingers and blisters on hands.

If, as soon as June 1895, Wilde was released from the treadmill to be transferred to Wandsworth, regrettably in this second penitentiary he did not fare better. Due to

⁵² R. GAGNIER, “*De Profundis as Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde’s Autobiography*”, p. 340.

⁵³ More specifically, “each wheel contained twenty-four steps set eight inches apart, so the circumference of the cylinder was 16ft. The wheel, under the power of the convicts walking up its ‘steps’, revolved twice in a minute with a mechanism set to ring a bell on every thirtieth revolution to announce the spell of work was finished. Every man put to labour at the wheel worked fifteen quarter-hour sessions, climbing up to 18,000ft every day” (P. PRIESTLEY, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830-1914*, p. 71). Furthermore, with reference to the partitions: “[T]he design of the prisoners’ treadmill changed slightly with the installation of panels to separate the prisoners (resembling a voting booth) so that they could not talk to one another, that they might contemplate their crimes in bare isolation and without distraction. The exercise became one that was about psychology and the exertion of absolute institutional power over the prisoner” (V.C. REID, “Running Wilde: Landscape, the Body, and the History of the Treadmill”, *Critical Survey*, 24 [3], 2012, p. 82).

⁵⁴ P. PRIESTLEY, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830-1914*, p. 123.

a physical and psychological collapse, he continued to lose weight and, as already said, was hospitalised for two months. He would then serve the longer part of his sentence (one year and a half) at Reading, a secluded regional prison in Berkshire, presumably safer from the prying eyes of the press. During the first nine months there, he was not spared the ills of the silent and isolation regime, even being temporarily put on bread and water. Subsequently, though, he would enjoy a relaxation of the rules and the granting of some privileges via the intermediation of friends as well as administrative and political authorities, in a turning of the tide that did much “to generate momentum for penal reform”.⁵⁵

It was again in June 1895 that Wilde was visited in his cell by Richard Burdon Haldane, a Liberal statesman, lawyer and member of a commission that was investigating on British jails’ conditions and bureaucracy. Aided by Sir Evelyn Ruggles-Brise – just appointed new Chairman of Prison Commissioners by the Home Secretary H.H. Asquith, and who is duly remembered today as the founder of the Borstal system – Haldane had Wilde relocated from Pentonville to Wandsworth and would arrange for him to obtain access to a selection of outside books and some stationery items.

Both Ruggles-Brise and Haldane were part of the Gladstone Committee, an investigative body set up by Asquith and chaired by Herbert John Gladstone, the undersecretary at the Home Office, with the purpose of inquiring into and writing a report on the treatment of prisoners in British penitentiaries. The 1895 Gladstone Report expressed concern about the serious flaws in the coeval administration’s management and provided recommendations by dint of twenty-five proposals for change that reflected the New Liberalism spirit, a “sincere attempt to design a prison system concentrating upon the reformation of the individual and a greater understanding of character typology and specific needs”. Indeed, this document “remained the definitive statement on penal policy for much of the first half of the twentieth century”.⁵⁶ Imbued with a reform-conscious ethos, it voiced criticism of an apparently state-produced torture whose consequences proved deleterious and irreversible, particularly on mentally unstable inmates and first offenders. In contrast with such a crime-fighting line, the report encouraged flexible and constructive policies envisioning the individual’s reinstatement in civic life. One of its premises was that the system should help convicts to develop moral instincts and become better men and women than when they went in. In order to do so, each person had to be seen as virtually reclaimable. Among the recommendations were the lifting of the ban on talking, the promotion of collective labour, education, and the creation of Prisoners’ Aid and Rehabilitation Societies.

No wonder that, upon the Gladstone Report’s publication and with a growing pressure to take forward a revolutionary agenda on penal environment, a very small margin was left for Sir Edmund Frederick Du Cane to hold his position as Chairman of Prison Commissioners. A Major-General of the Royal Engineers, Du Cane had been

⁵⁵ M. HOUSDEN, “Oscar Wilde’s Imprisonment and an Early Idea of ‘Banal Evil’”, p. 4. Housden further comments: “Indeed Wilde attracted a series of celebrity visitors. Through his experiences influential people normally insulated from unsavoury spheres of life were exposed to the dire conditions behind bars. As a result, the prison establishment was forced to consider its position very carefully indeed” (*ibidem*).

⁵⁶ N.R. STOREY, *Prisons & Prisoners in Victorian Britain*, p. 17.

a Surveyor-General of prisons and Inspector of military guardhouses and colonial convict jails, and had also played a pivotal role in strengthening government control by closing down local or sub-standard detention centres and reducing maintenance costs in view of the Prison Act 1877. Yet, his stiff personality and unyielding traits were now perceived as eerily out-of-date and, in March 1895, he was cajoled into resigning his post in favour of Ruggles-Brise, who was of course heedful of the Gladstone Committee’s counsel.

By a twist of fate, all this happened in a matter of weeks before judgment was passed on Wilde. Despite that, in yet another capricious turning of the wheel that was to shape the author’s destiny, the suggested reforms, due to a change of government, would go into effect only three years later. One had in fact to wait for the Prison Act 1898, i.e. the year following Wilde’s release, to witness the adoption of enlightened canons finally sealing “the abolition of unproductive labour in prisons”, including the crank and treadmill, and stipulating that “prisoners were to work together, learn trades and have a greater access to books”.⁵⁷ Total isolation might not now be imposed for periods longer than one month and offenders between 16 and 21 years of age were to be hosted in state reformatories, instead of being subjected to the harsh treatment administered to adults.

However, it was no small thing that when, in 1898, the long-overdue Prison Reform Bill was being debated in Parliament, some members mentioned the poignant testimonial value of C.3.3.’s *Ballad of Reading Gaol* before the House of Commons. All in all, one can state that Wilde was indissolubly bonded to this extraordinary train of events and that his case history contributed to providing the impetus for a momentous change toward prison reform and restorative justice. Even his *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis* would not have existed if, in correspondence with the Du Cane/Ruggles-Brise succession, sympathetic Major James O. Nelson had not replaced tyrannical Lieutenant-Colonel Henry B. Isaacson as the new Governor of Reading Prison. When he took over, in the summer of 1896 and under the auspices of Ruggles-Brise, Nelson started bending the rules via acts of humane consideration. He lifted restrictions on Wilde’s use of paper, ink and reading material as well as on schedules and the frequency with which he might write “to his friends outside, sometimes with instructions for them to write back under cover” to Nelson himself.⁵⁸ The latter “quickly understood the psychological and emotional necessity of allowing Wilde to write, over a period of many months, to the man whom he blamed for his personal downfall, his lover Douglas”.⁵⁹ It was again thanks to this governor that, in May 1897, the complete manuscript of the *Epistola* was returned to Wilde, who would further praise the man’s ‘noble kindness’ by sending him inscribed copies of both *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (in February 1898) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (in February 1899).

Besides expressing his deep gratitude to Nelson, speaking of him as “the most

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, p. 222.

⁵⁹ N. FRANKEL, “Introduction”, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 9.

Christ-like man I ever met” and “my good and kind friend”,⁶⁰ Wilde eulogised other commendable exceptions to a generally appalling context. Among them was Thomas Martin, an altruistic and generous Irish warder who was dismissed from service at Reading because he dared give some sweet biscuits to a tiny child crying with hunger. Along with other two, this child could not afford to pay a fine and was therefore convicted for stealing rabbits.⁶¹ The publication of Martin’s letter in the *Daily Chronicle* on 24 May 1897, in which the fired junior warder told his sad story, was instrumental in stimulating Wilde to pen the first of his two campaigning letters to the same newspaper. He thus seized the opportunity to make official remarks about prison life in an effort to expose its cruelties and promote an urgent, systemic change.

Well-aware of the potential of his statements for orientating parliamentary inquiry and accelerating reform, Wilde took his stand in what at this stage could not be a totally losing battle. The first blow he dealt consisted in a circumstantial letter to the *Daily Chronicle* written within days of his release, on 27 May 1897, and published on 28 May. Fittingly titled “The Case of Warder Martin”, it subsequently came out in pamphlet form as *Children in Prison and Other Cruelties of Prison Life* (London, Murdoch, ca. 1898), continuing to fuel a debate covered by the press and on the floor of Parliament.⁶² In this cogent document, Wilde’s claims are infused with the charisma of first-hand experience and pungent rhetorical force. The author sets out to share his genuine feelings of consternation in the face of a sort of legalised horror that had deleterious effects at various levels. The first thorny issue that he takes pains to highlight regards the abusive treatment of children, beginning with the tragically icastic episode of the three starving little robbers mentioned above and then looking at a wider picture connected with the hundreds of children and youths routinely locked up in British adult jails.

At the same time, Wilde is wary of going off at abstract tangents, and offers instead a concise overview that makes his reflections sound as a trustworthy witness account. In other words, he sticks to the point and often underscores the fact that he personally *saw* what he is describing and that his emotional involvement is authentic and justified. Hence his stressing that the cruelty “practised by day and night on children in English prisons is incredible, except to those that have witnessed it and are aware of the

⁶⁰ Quoted *ibidem*, p. 8.

⁶¹ Wilde seems to have contacted Martin on the sly, offering to pay the fine himself. Frankel observes that Martin and Wilde “surreptitiously exchanged friendly notes, written on stray scraps of paper, and Martin broke prison rules and ran great risks so that Wilde and his fellow prisoners might be provided with a modicum of comfort. Martin supplied Wilde with contraband copies of the *Daily Chronicle* and the weekly reviews, for instance, as well as ginger biscuits” (N. FRANKEL, Note to O. WILDE, “Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*”, 27 May 1897, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 292).

⁶² Noticeably, he signed this letter “‘Oscar Wilde’, determined to harness his name and fame to the cause of prison reform. But it was a rare public use of his birth name post-release, and the last time in his life that he signed a publication of any kind with this name” (N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, p. 229). As Regenia Gagnier reminds us, “Wilde’s association with the prison did not end when he left it: he corresponded after release with inmates, prison administration, and reformers like Michael Davitt and wrote articles describing prison conditions to the *Daily Chronicle*. He read the debates on penal reform while he was still imprisoned and experienced at first hand the demise of the official penal philosophy of deterrence” (R. GAGNIER, “*De Profundis* as *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde’s Autobiography*”, p. 336).

brutality of the system”.⁶³ Such a ‘regimentation’ of callousness and stringent rules would indeed border on stupidity and blindness to common sense. And, strange as it may seem, this could have little or nothing to do with upstream ‘good intentions’. The real false step is to be found in the fallacious assumption that “because a thing is the rule it is right”.⁶⁴ In a mixture of humanitarian afflatus and psychological understanding, Wilde also calls for a prompt intervention by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a body established in 1889 and obtaining a Royal Charter in 1895, as well as for proper dormitories, physical activities, and the organisation of workshops. The following excerpt gives us a flavour of his indictment:

The present treatment of children is terrible, primarily from people not understanding the peculiar psychology of a child’s nature. A child can understand a punishment inflicted by an individual, such as a parent or guardian, and bear it with a certain amount of acquiescence. What it cannot understand is a punishment inflicted by society. It cannot realise what society is. With grown people it is, of course, the reverse [...]. The child consequently, being taken away from its parents by people whom it has never seen, and of whom it knows nothing, and finding itself in a lonely and unfamiliar cell, waited on by strange faces, and ordered about and punished by the representatives of a system that it cannot understand, becomes an immediate prey to the first and most prominent emotion produced by modern prison life – the emotion of terror. The terror of a child in prison is quite limitless [...]. The inhuman treatment of a child is always inhuman, by whomsoever it is inflicted. But inhuman treatment by society is to the child the more terrible because there is no appeal [...]. The second thing from which a child suffers in prison is hunger [...]. A child who has been crying all day long, and perhaps half the night, in a lonely dimly-lit cell, and is preyed upon by terror, simply cannot eat food of this coarse, horrible kind [...]. Of course no child under fourteen years of age should be sent to prison at all [...]. If, however, they are to be sent to prison, during the daytime they should be in a workshop or schoolroom with a warder. At night they should sleep in a dormitory, with a night-warder to look after them. They should be allowed exercise for at least three hours a day.⁶⁵

In this 1897 letter, Wilde resolutely discredits a system targeted at crashing inmates of all ages through an internment of twenty-three hours out of twenty-four, and also does not refrain from denouncing the badness of sanitary arrangements (especially latrines in cells). The writer’s mental dexterity and celebrated art of paradox eventually shine in the adamant assertion italicised below, and echoed in the first part of the present paper’s title:

[T]he only really humanising influence in prison is the influence of the prisoners. Their cheerfulness under terrible circumstances, their sympathy for each other, their humility, their gentleness, their pleasant smiles of greeting when they meet each other, their complete acquiescence in their punishments, are all quite wonderful, and I myself learned many sound lessons from them [...]. *It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the prisons.*⁶⁶

If the last clause should speak for itself by now, it is again worth emphasising Wilde’s contemplation of and empathy with a population of outcasts – many of them nonviolent and detained for petty offences – with whom he had formed social bonds. As Peter

⁶³ O. WILDE, “Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*”, 27 May 1897, in ID., *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 293.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 297.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 297-305.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 305 (emphasis added).

Stoneley contends in his pioneering archival research among Reading Prison's Registers, "[s]eeing them, and seeing that they were as unhappy as he was, made him feel pity, and it was this that broke his obsession with his own fate". Wilde "demonstrated a friendly and sympathetic awareness of the other prisoners, and acknowledged a debt to them",⁶⁷ somewhat experiencing a 'therapeutic epiphany' capable of warding off suicide drives.

In addition to children – among whom no one under 14 years of age should be placed behind bars – the author identifies another category at risk, i.e. the mentally weak or sick, or those who degenerate when in prison. Wilde focuses on one specific case he came upon, namely James Edward Prince, a young soldier serving a six-month sentence and behaving like a half-witted man, constantly crying, grinning, hysterically laughing to himself or gesticulating in a grotesque manner. Although he was being watched day and night by warders, Prince continued to be punished for disobedience, typically through flogging. To all appearances, except for the Medical Commissioners, he was becoming insane, so much so that the Irish nationalist and MP Michael Davitt would discuss this controversial instance in Parliament. For his part, Wilde provokingly addresses the *Daily Chronicle's* editor in stark terms: "May I ask you to use your influence to have this case examined into, and to see that the lunatic prisoner is properly treated?".⁶⁸

Symbolically enough, the letter closes with a last cry against the stupidity of the system, but it also lets in a ray of hope by referring to the changing of the guard at Reading, when, in July 1896, the warm civility of Nelson had begun to wipe out Isaacson's dogged harshness. Almost a year elapsed between this contribution and Wilde's second letter to the *Daily Chronicle*, dated 23 March 1898 and published on 24 March under the teasing headline "Don't Read This If You Want to Be Happy Today" and with the signature "The Author of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*". This allusive self-reference "carried considerable weight at the time of publication and also hinted at Wilde's brief rebirth as a prominent literary figure in his own lifetime",⁶⁹ with the poem breaking a record of sales at just six weeks from its distribution. Riding the wave of a (temporarily) regained notoriety, and with the once gaping wound of his personal ordeal now on the mend, Wilde drew up a shorter and yet no less acerbic piece. Importantly, its appearance in the press coincided with the day the second reading of the 1898 Prisons Bill was being debated in the House of Commons.

Here, Wilde returned to the attack with an *exposé* aiming to foster support for change and to impact on parliamentary negotiations. History would prove him right, with the soon-to-be Prison Act 1898 chiming in with various of the amendments he had strongly encouraged. The question of urgent reforms is raised in the very opening paragraph of the letter, lashing out at "our present stupid and barbarous system".⁷⁰

⁶⁷ P. STONELEY, "Looking at the Others': Oscar Wilde and the Reading Gaol Archive", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19 (4), 2014, p. 457. Interestingly, Stoneley identifies about ten inmates with whom Wilde forged a link, corresponded or even helped financially when he was in exile. See *ibidem*, pp. 474-77.

⁶⁸ O. WILDE, "Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*", 27 May 1897, p. 311.

⁶⁹ N. FRANKEL, Note to O. WILDE, "Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*", 23 March 1898, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 382.

⁷⁰ O. WILDE, "Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*", 23 March 1898, in ID., *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar*

This system’s bureaucratic body and team of officers (inspectors, justices of the peace, doctors, chaplains, and so forth) are said to be the ones that should be re-orientated in the first place, starting from their supine bowing to discipline and rules. In fact, “what is cruel and ignorant is this very code of regulations”,⁷¹ which, when carried out, risk making the situation worse.

Wilde asserts that the only way to break the vicious circle is to swiftly introduce a series of high-priority reforms concerning two types of needs: the demands of the body and those of the mind. The former are associated with hunger, insomnia (owing to plank beds) and disease, three evils thriving in the foul air and unwholesome environment of the detention house, where food is insufficient, disgusting and repeatedly causing diarrhoea. As for the needs of the mind, they are not far to seek either, to the point that

[t]he present prison system seems almost to have for its aim the wrecking and the destruction of the mental faculties. The production of insanity is, if not its object, certainly its result [...]. Deprived of books, of all human intercourse, isolated from every humane and humanising influence, condemned to eternal silence, robbed of all intercourse with the external world, treated like an unintelligent animal, brutalised below the level of any of the brute creation, the wretched man who is confined in an English prison can hardly escape becoming insane.⁷²

Not wishing to dwell longer on such horrors or sound too sentimental, Wilde soon switches to what must be done, from the possibility for every prisoner to get an adequate, well-chosen supply of books (more than just one a week) to being allowed to see his/her friends and relatives once a month, for a reasonable time and in a proper room (instead of for twenty minutes, four times a year, in separate iron cages or wooden boxes). Every detainee should be permitted to write and receive a letter at least once a month (as opposed to four times a year). The protocol enabling to censor a prisoner’s correspondence ought to be set aside, too. Crucially, penitentiaries should be equipped with a team of full-time (and less ignorant) doctors, who might really be up to their task and mission.

This final remark is loaded with vitriolic overtones, reverberating in the letter’s epilogue like a taunting apophthegm: “But to make even these reforms effectual, much has to be done. And the first, and perhaps the most difficult task is to humanise the governors of prisons, to civilise the warders, and to Christianise the chaplains”.⁷³ In true Wildean style, a memorable, bittersweet witticism can thus be seen as ultimately holding up a mirror to British society’s ‘notables’, such as administrators and clergymen, politicians and legislators. In an awareness-raising effort, Wilde looked forward to a moral (re)assessment of all actors and a debunking of received ideas, from the alleged brutality of convicts to the righteousness of establishment authorities. And it is surely no coincidence that the author embraced responsibility and dialectically entered the field of civic engagement by way of a startling reversal of perspectives.

Wilde, p. 373.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 379.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 383.

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Aestheticism and Degeneration: Echoes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client"

Abstract: The present paper aims at investigating possible points of contact between Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" (1924), narrating one of Sherlock Holmes's final exploits. When considering the portrait motif and its metaphorical meanings, it is clear that, in Wilde's novel, Dorian's picture is imbued with connotations that are deeply associated with the author's aesthetic beliefs as well as with a decadent parable. In the case of Holmes's adventure, a detailed narrative characterisation of Baron Adelbert Gruner, the evil antagonist, seems to similarly work as a kind of portrait where 'surface' and 'inner truth' are strictly interconnected. In line with *fin-de-siècle* theories such as those of degeneration and criminal anthropology, the villain exhibits blatant physical marks that soon denounce his inner corruption (as does Dorian's picture). Moreover, in the final resolution of the case, the criminal's face, deformed by vitriol, is explicitly described as a painting losing its original shapes and colours. This 'liquefaction process' further highlights the increasingly pervading link between inner and outer decadence, in a way that lets us envisage similarities between Dorian and Baron Gruner, the two corrupt aesthetes.

Keywords: Degeneration. "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client". *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

It is widely acknowledged that Arthur Conan Doyle was an avid consumer of prominent literary works of his time and of popular culture, more broadly. His autobiography and correspondence clearly reveal as much; in both, moreover, there is a discernible emphasis (at times bordering on the self-complacent) on the famous personalities he encountered. This fact is relevant for three reasons.

Firstly, it sheds light on Conan Doyle's immersion in the social and intellectual circles of his time. Secondly, critical assessments of his work frequently highlight how elements from his cultural milieu served as inspiration, or were directly referenced in his stories.¹ These references could take the form of subtle nods or overt intertextual references. Thirdly, as pointed out by Douglas Kerr, Conan Doyle had devised his Sherlock Holmes stories with "a business plan that took into account publication outlets and the market they fostered and served".² His voracious consumption of other popular works and his interest in famous figures, therefore, also had the practical

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¹ See A. GLAZZARD, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle's Detective Fiction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2018, p. 7. See also SIR A.C. DOYLE, *A Life in Letters*, eds J. LELLENBERG, D. STASHOWER and C. FOLEY, New York, Harper Collins, 2008; SIR A.C. DOYLE, *Memories and Adventures*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013; C. PITTARD, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction*, London, Routledge, 2011; J.M. ALLAN and C. PITTARD (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes*, Cambridge, CUP, 2019, *inter alia*.

² D. KERR, *Conan Doyle: Writing, Profession, and Practice*, Oxford, OUP, 2013, p. 13.

aspect of keeping him informed about what was commercially successful at the time.

Among his many sources of inspiration, scholars often cite Oscar Wilde. Their famous meeting at the Langham Hotel with J.M. Stoddart, an editor for *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, in 1889, resulted in the publication of *The Sign of the Four* (1890) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891). Nils Clausson goes so far as to define this event as “the most consequential literary dinner of the English *fin de siècle*”.³ It also left a lasting impression on Conan Doyle, who referred to it as a “golden evening” in his autobiography.⁴ His fascination with Wilde, in particular, was so profound that characters like the aesthete Thaddeus Sholto in *The Sign of the Four*, Sherlock Holmes’s brother Mycroft, and even the Great Detective himself are believed to have been partly inspired by Wilde and his remarkable wit.⁵

If Wilde’s personality made such a strong impact on Conan Doyle’s characters, what about his novel? On the one hand, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems to be a good candidate as a source of inspiration for the author of Sherlock Holmes. It aligns with the type of popular fiction which he usually borrowed from,⁶ and although the sales did not qualify it as an immediate success, it certainly garnered much interest from the reading public. On the other hand, the type of interest it earned – and the scandal it provoked – would have discouraged Conan Doyle. In keeping with the standards of his main outlet, George Newnes’s *Strand Magazine*, he carefully avoided topics and tones which could be construed as ‘sensational’.⁷

This article will argue that at least one of Sherlock Holmes’s stories clearly looks at *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client”, published in 1924 in the American periodical *Collier's* and the following year in the *Strand Magazine*. Specifically, my contribution focuses on the concept of ‘degeneration’ in relation to the figure of the decadent aesthete, highlighting how this notion connects Wilde’s novel and Conan Doyle’s short story especially when considering the theme of the portrait. Moreover, I will show how Conan Doyle transformed and adapted some aspects of Wilde’s novel which relate to degeneration so as to suit the requirements of detective fiction and of his publication outlet. Finally, I will illustrate how the same concept could be reinterpreted in the light of Wilde’s aestheticism, on the one hand, and Conan Doyle’s ‘rationalised’ stance, on the other.

³ N. CLAUSSON, “Arthur Conan Doyle’s Darker Mystery”, *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 27 (4), 2020, pp. 18-19.

⁴ SIR A. C. DOYLE, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 78.

⁵ See for instance A. GLAZZARD, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle’s Detective Fiction*, p. 118; P. BAROLSKY, “The Case of the Domesticated Aesthete”, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 60 (3), 1984, pp. 438-52; M. SEENEY, “The Fictional Career of Oscar Wilde”, *The Wildean*, 9, 1996, pp. 39-50; A. KINGSTON, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction*, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

⁶ Glazzard, for instance, includes Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins and Robert Louis Stevenson among the most prominent authors influencing Conan Doyle. See A. GLAZZARD, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle’s Detective Fiction*, p. 7.

⁷ See R.R. THOMAS, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, Cambridge and New York, CUP, 1999; M. CAIRNEY, “The Healing Art of Detection: Sherlock Holmes and the Disease of Crime in the *Strand Magazine*”, *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 26 (1), 2007, pp. 62-74; C. PITTARD, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction*; D. KERR, *Conan Doyle: Writing, Profession, and Practice*; C. CLARKE, “Doyle, Holmes and Victorian Publishing”, in J.M. ALLAN and C. PITTARD (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes*, pp. 29-41.

1. *Degeneration Theory, Oscar Wilde and The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The concept of degeneration, quite popular during the English *fin de siècle*, originated from the socio-scientific discourse that emerged from Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory. European and British scholars like Bénédict Morel, Max Nordau, or Francis Galton elaborated on the notion that, if individuals could evolve, they might also revert to a less evolved state. This kind of degeneration was seen as primarily affecting individuals who were inherently predisposed, but there was agreement that it could also be triggered by environmental stimuli such as the unfavourable socio-sanitary conditions in large metropolises, excessive indulgence in vices like smoking, drinking, or stimulants, deviant or unregulated sexuality, or even physical traumas. According to these theories, degeneration would be transmitted to the offspring, intensifying over time and thus endangering society as a whole: "degeneration theory posited that 'degenerate' individuals shred a deficient biological makeup, which not only set them apart from society's 'normal' population, but threatened that very population with a potentially contagious disease".⁸ Degenerates, in other words, were to be identified, described and potentially isolated from 'healthy' society in order to preserve its progress and haleness: "the writings of [...] degenerationists betray a fierce taxonomical impulse: degenerate individuals are singled out as clearly marked and thus easily recognizable (at least by the medical expert), making them amenable to measures of control and segregation".⁹

The instrument that allowed this process of classification was mostly derived from criminal anthropology and, especially in the cases of Nordau and Galton, from Cesare Lombroso's taxonomy of criminal types in *The Criminal Man (L'uomo delinquente, 1876)*. Nordau, for one, openly acknowledged his debt to Lombroso, the "dear and honoured Master"¹⁰ to whom he dedicated *Degeneration (Entartung, 1892)*.

Lombroso suggested that criminal men (and women) could be distinguished from the 'normal' population through physical and psychological signs, which he called 'stigmata'. A macrocephalic skull, small and close-together eyes, unlobed ears, and then lethargy or hyperactivity, sexual incontinence, or excessive mysticism are only some of the possible signs which indicated a predisposition to crime, according to Lombroso. These stigmata helped the medical practitioner or anthropologist to *identify* deviance and simultaneously *prove* the innate proclivity to crime of a given subject, in a basically circular process of reasoning.

In a later essay, *The Man of Genius (L'uomo di genio, 1882)*, Lombroso built on an idea he had introduced in *The Criminal Man* by positing that the "born criminal" (the innately criminal man), the "morally insane" man (an individual deprived of moral sense to a varying degree), and the "man of genius" are three possible incarnations of the same set of signs. These three types of individuals, that is, would all exhibit the same stigmata but instantiate them differently in society. Significantly, Nordau

⁸ S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, Engl. trans. from the Second Edition of the German work, New York, D. Appleton & Co., 1895, p. vii.

did not concur on this point, sharply differentiating between “degenerates”, who are also morally insane and potentially criminal, and “men of genius”, who do not exhibit the same outward signs of degeneration. In his systematisation, a flawed biological makeup, being the hallmark of the degenerate, invariably leads to a deterioration in society at large.¹¹ The man of genius, on the contrary, must stand on the opposite side of the evolutionary scale, leading society to progress. The two, therefore, cannot and must not coexist: as pointed out by Stephan Karschay, degenerates (among whom Nordau included aesthetes) must be controlled and segregated.¹²

Nordau also sealed an immediate correlation when discussing the concept of degeneration in relation to Wilde and his *oeuvre*. Indeed, he devoted a chapter of *Degeneration* to expanding on the evils of Aestheticism and an extensive section of this chapter to Wilde, the “English representative” of this ilk.¹³ In addition to this, Karschay, Andrew Glazzard and Dominic Janes evidence how, in his 1896 petition to the Home Secretary, Wilde adopted Nordau’s (and Lombroso’s) “medicalised view of homosexuality”¹⁴ and the lexicon of degeneration theory in a “feigned acceptance of Nordau’s view that, as an *avant-garde* artist, he must be suffering from a psychiatrically recognised pathological condition”.¹⁵

This is also, incidentally, the stance taken on by Conan Doyle in *Memories and Adventures*. After praising Wilde’s brilliancy, generosity, and intellectual stature during their dinner at the Langham Hotel, he commented:

Only once again did I see him, many years afterwards, and then he gave me the impression of being mad. [...] Nothing could have been more different from his early gentlemanly instincts. I thought at the time, and still think, that the monstrous development which ruined him was pathological, and that a hospital rather than a police court was the place for its consideration.¹⁶

If Wilde had affected acceptance of his ‘diagnosis’, Conan Doyle was evidently in earnest in his adoption of a bio-medical explanation for Wilde’s degeneration – taking for granted, moreover, that such a degeneration had indeed occurred over the years. The vocabulary here employed refers to the sphere of moral insanity in the vein of Lombroso and Nordau: Wilde is described as ‘mad’, ungentlemanlike and ‘monstrous’, with the proper corrective being identified in hospitalisation.

The same kind of “symptomatic reading”¹⁷ had been applied to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which had triggered similar accusations of being a corrupted and corruptive work. Unsurprisingly, the novel was also used as evidence against Wilde

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

¹² See S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, p. 2.

¹³ M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, p. 317. See also E. HANSON, “Style at the *Fin de Siècle*: Aestheticist, Decadent, Symbolist”, in K. POWELL and P. RABY (eds), *Oscar Wilde in Context*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013, pp. 150-58; C. FERRARI, “Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*”, *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 44 (1), 2017, pp. 67-86; S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration*.

¹⁴ A. GLAZZARD, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle’s Detective Fiction*, p. 118.

¹⁵ S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, p. 2. See also D. JANES, “Oscar Wilde, Sodomy, and Mental Illness in Late Victorian England”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 23 (1), 2014, pp. 79-95.

¹⁶ SIR A.C. DOYLE, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 79.

¹⁷ S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, p. 79.

by the Marquess of Queensberry's counsel.¹⁸ This move was favoured by the fact that Nordau himself derived extensive material for his attacks against Aestheticism from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In essence, then, a book which had been perceived as corruptive and almost pathological by contemporary readers was used to build a taxonomy of deviant traits, which were in turn employed to formally accuse its author. The circularity of this reasoning is entirely in keeping with the one that underpinned Lombroso's taxonomical systematisation of criminal stigmata.

Nonetheless, while Wilde's trial, incarceration and public accusation of 'gross indecency' almost inevitably catalyse the attention when dealing with the topic of degeneration, the author's familiarity with the scientific discourse of his time was by no means limited to the later stage of his life. It is worth noting, with Karschay, Michael Wainwright, Suzanne Raitt and Chiara Ferrari, that the scientific vocabulary of evolutionary theory and degeneration had already made its way into *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.¹⁹ Any reading of the novel through these lenses cannot but start from an analysis of the portrait, which records the effects of Dorian's corruption as stigmata clearly manifesting on his body. Similarly, another essential starting point is Chapter XI, which acts as a parossistic compendium of Aestheticism crammed with decadent overtones, a diary in which Dorian's activities, passions, studies and narcissistic obsessions are minutely recorded: a portrait within the portrait, so to speak.

When interpreted through Degeneration Theory and its hermeneutical system, the portrait's workings emerge as prominent. As Dorian remains forever young and innocent-looking, the portrait takes on the signs of both his advancing age and moral degeneration. That is why, in the wake of Sibyl Vane's suicide, his mouth instantly and graphically becomes distorted in an evil grin:

The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange. He turned round, and, walking to the window, drew up the blind. The bright dawn flooded the room, and swept the fantastic shadows into dusky corners, where they lay shuddering. But the strange expression that he had noticed in the face of the portrait seemed to linger there, to be more intensified even. The quivering, ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing.²⁰

The description of the discovery of this eerie trait is in itself significant: at first, the event is presented as "strange", possibly some trick of an overexerted imagination. Then, however, light, the signifier of illuminist rationality, is let into the room, and the *fantastic* shadows are chased into a corner, leaving space for objective observation. Yet, the "lines of cruelty" remain there, plainly showing the "dreadful thing" that Dorian had indeed done the night before, forever marking him – the 'him' in the portrait – to the eyes of the world.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 79-80.

¹⁹ See C. FERRARI, "Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*"; M. WAINWRIGHT, *Toward a Sociobiological Hermeneutic. Darwinian Essays on Literature*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 25-48; S. RAITT, "Immoral Science in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", in L. KARPENKO and S. CLAGGETT (eds), *Strange Science: Investigating the Limits of Knowledge in the Victorian Age*, Ann Arbor, Michigan U.P., 2017, pp. 164-78.

²⁰ O. WILDE, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. R. MIGHALL, London, Penguin Books, (1891) 2000, pp. 87-88. All references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

Dorian's attempt to conceal this consists in burying the portrait in darkness once again, where however it still keeps on recording the stigmata associated with his deviant behaviour. Progressively, the figure in the portrait becomes monstrous, deformed, and blatantly evil. On the one hand, the correspondence between sign and deviance theorised by Lombroso appears to be reversed: Dorian's stigmata do not preexist, but manifest themselves in parallel with his descent into a moral abyss. As such, they do not seem to be symptoms of latent deviance, apparently confirming the effects of 'nurture' rather than 'nature' on the development of the subject. On the other hand, the novel offers multiple suggestions that Dorian could have been predisposed to this descent, i.e. to degeneration. The first suggestion is to be found in Chapter II, as Lord Henry Wotton proceeds to enthrall Dorian with his speech, as the latter is sitting for his portrait. Lord Henry is presented as a veritable snake in the Garden, his rhetoric and voice – "such a beautiful voice" (p. 20), muses Dorian – being reminiscent of a Miltonian Lucifer.²¹ Still, his monologue touches Dorian in a peculiar way:

He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself. The few words that Basil's friend had said to him [...] had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses. (p. 21)

Lord Henry's words about beauty and youth as supreme ideals strike Dorian not as something completely new, but as an awakening of something dormant within him. The musical metaphor comes back to evoke the image of a tuning fork, a sort of "curious" vibration which finds in Dorian a kindred sounding board. If this moment is identified as the protagonist's first step towards a life of dissolution, then Lord Henry can be said to have corrupted him only insofar as he has triggered a part of Dorian which was actually ingrained.²²

This metaphoric resonance seems to find a visual equivalent and a more thorough characterisation in terms of heredity and deviance in Chapter XI. Strolling through his family's portrait gallery, Dorian begins to wonder whether his life might be influenced by something at once undetectable and nevertheless material:

He loved to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins. Here was Philip Herbert [...]. Was it young Herbert's life that he sometimes led? Had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own?

Here [...] stood Sir Anthony Sherard, with his silver-and-black armour piled at his feet. What had this man's legacy been? Had the lover of Giovanna of Naples bequeathed him some inheritance of sin and shame? [...]

What of George Willoughby, with his powdered hair and fantastic patches? How evil he looked! The face was saturnine and swarthy, and the sensual lips seemed to be twisted with disdain. [...]

And his mother with her Lady Hamilton face, and her moist wine-dashed lips – he knew what he had got from her. (pp. 137-38)

²¹ See C. FERRARI, "Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*", p. 72.

²² S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, pp. 170-71.

Here, Dorian is studying a collection of portraits much like his, leading us to wonder if these works, too, had captured the true essence of their subjects. If Dorian's musing on the role of inheritance is also modelled on J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours*,²³ Wilde's use of the scientific lexicon of the time remains significant. His reference to a "strange poisonous germ", for instance, echoes Morel's definition of degeneration as a deviant germ that progressively obstructs human progress.²⁴ According to Wainwright, it also shows Wilde's familiarity with "the enviroing discourse of late nineteenth-century biology",²⁵ as well as introducing the concept of atavism, i.e. the possibility that an individual could exhibit regressive traits associated with previous stages of development or deviant ancestors.²⁶

This potentiality is also expressed through the use of the term 'inheritance' in correlation with 'sin' and 'shame' and, most of all, by the focus on the lips of Dorian's ancestors. Making the parallel with his own portrait more explicit, this focus shows lips that are "twisted" and "sensual", or "moist" and "wine-dashed", clearly evoking both Dorian's "lines of cruelty around the mouth" (p. 88) and his sensuous turn towards degeneration. Blood and heredity seem to be confirmed as major forces behind Dorian's corruption, possibly predisposing him to fall victim to noxious influences from his environment. The gallery also affords him the chance to perform a sort of anthropological study *à la* Lombroso: applying a scientific methodology,²⁷ he closely inspects his ancestors to detect in their features possible stigmata which would disclose their interior life to him, and ultimately allow him to decipher his family history through one cohesive key.

It is worth pointing out that Wilde is careful to merge nature and nurture in his description of Dorian's 'descent'. He immediately mitigates his hereditary recognition by having Dorian reflect that "one had ancestors in literature as well as in one's own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament [...] and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely conscious" (p. 138). This intellectual legacy is also highlighted, as pointed out by Nils Clausson, by the parallel established by the word 'poisonous'. On the one hand, the "strange poisonous germ" (p. 137) transmitted by his ancestors might have predisposed him to degeneration. On the other hand, Dorian is no less corrupted by the "poisonous book" (p. 121) that Lord Henry has given him.²⁸

That being said, a focus on reading, detecting and decoding signs of degeneration can also be traced in the inability of high society to correctly 'interpret' Dorian. Seeking reassurance on the moral integrity of his former muse, Basil Hallward observes:

Mind you, I don't believe these rumours at all. At least, I can't believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret

²³ See O. WILDE, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 246n.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

²⁵ M. WAINWRIGHT, *Toward a Sociobiological Hermeneutic. Darwinian Essays on Literature*, p. 36.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 36-37.

²⁷ See also C. FERRARI, "Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*" and S. RAITT, "Immoral Science in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*".

²⁸ See N. CLAUSSON, "Culture and Corruption: Paterian Self-Development versus Gothic Degeneration in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", *Papers on Language and Literature*, 39 (4), 2003, p. 360.

vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even. (p. 143)

Basil is here rehashing what the science and the public discourse of the time posited, that is to say, that a criminal or a ‘morally insane’ person would be clearly set apart from the rest of society.²⁹ Ironically, he points out the very same features – the lines of one’s mouth, drooping eyelids, the shape of one’s hands – that Dorian had focused on first in his recognition of the changes in the portrait and then in his observation of his ancestors (pp. 87-88, 137-38). The reader is already alerted to the fact that these stigmata do appear on Dorian and his ancestors, but they do so on works of art. These works, therefore, can be said to capture the real essence of their subjects more than a mirror or an unbiased, rational, even scientific observer ever could.

Paradoxically, while Dorian’s body remains immortal and static but is ultimately a fabrication, Basil’s art is dynamic and lively, truer than the apparent truth, even in its rational, scientific aspects. Thus Wilde, besides striking a balance between nature and nurture in Dorian’s path towards degeneration, also integrates Aestheticism with the scientific discourse of his time. In doing so, he contests the positivist assumption that “reality is a given, truth is absolute and cumulative, and language is transparent”³⁰ not through a medium sounding “extravagant in its tropes, lapidary in its fascination with exotic words for their own sake, and scholarly in its arcane knowledges undivested of their enigmas”,³¹ but by using a scientific, or scientised, vocabulary.

On this point, however, Ferrari argues that Wilde knowingly sought out the “aestheticization of the scientific method – a new conceptualization of observation and experimentation. This scientific stance would be grounded in the mechanisms of the imagination instead of the neutral and objective recording devices of external reality”.³² From this perspective, then, one would assume that through *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde actually contributed to a process of destabilisation of scientific discourse, questioning its power to accurately decode and order reality. Clausson sees this attack on positivist thought as typical of *fin-de-siècle* Gothic, remarking that, when this genre appropriates the discourse of degeneration, it mines “Western belief in the power of science to explain all mysteries, and particularly [...] the belief that Darwinian evolution offered biological confirmation of progress”.³³

While some critical assessments highlight how Gothic influences achieve similar effects in Sherlock Holmes’s stories,³⁴ it should be underlined that Conan Doyle did strive for a normalising stance that aligned itself with the *Strand Magazine*’s guidelines

²⁹ See R. MIGHALL, “Introduction”, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. xxii.

³⁰ M. LEPS, *Apprehending the Criminal: The Production of Deviance in Nineteenth-Century Discourse*, Durham and London, Duke U.P., 1992, p. 154.

³¹ E. HANSON, “Style at the *Fin de Siècle*: Aestheticist, Decadent, Symbolist”, p. 154.

³² C. FERRARI, “Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*”, p. 70.

³³ N. CLAUSSON, “Degeneration, *Fin-de-Siècle* Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story”, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 35 (1), 2005, p. 70.

³⁴ See *ibidem*; M. ASCARI, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; C. DEL GRAZIA, ‘No Ghosts Need Apply’: *Gothic Influences in Criminal Science, the Detective and Doyle’s Holmesian Canon*, Brighton, Edward Everett Root, 2020.

and with a rationalistic imprint. Therefore, drawing inspiration from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would basically mean adapting its core theme as well as its use of the notion of degeneration in relation to the aesthete and to the trope of the revelatory portrait.

2. “*The Adventure of the Illustrious Client*” and its Intertextual References to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

In contrast with the prevalent opinion of his time, and leaving aside Wilde’s claim in the preface to the book edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” (p. 3), in *Memories and Adventures* Conan Doyle earnestly asserted that Wilde’s novel “is surely upon a high moral plane”.³⁵ Notably, he did so from a safe chronological and social distance from the Irish author. “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client” was published in 1924, the same year as his autobiography, and its intertextual references to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are somewhat covert, albeit still detectable. Similarly, his engagement with the figure of the aesthete and the notion of degeneration is much more normative.

A wide array of studies has delved into Conan Doyle’s dialogue with Degeneration Theory, criminal anthropology and atavism.³⁶ In some instances, the detective is understood as a pure instrument of institutional order and reason; more recently, however, his figure has been problematised by evidencing how ‘eccentric’ Sherlock Holmes can be with respect to the norms of Victorian and Edwardian society. Scholars have also defined Holmes as a sort of undercover aesthete,³⁷ citing his addiction to cocaine, interest in art, witticism and collector tendencies as evidence of this.³⁸

However, if the focus has shifted from the figure of the detective to the structure of the detective story, the role of the sleuth continues to gravitate towards collecting

³⁵ SIR A. C. DOYLE, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 78.

³⁶ Among them, see M. ASCARI, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*; M. CAIRNEY, “The Healing Art of Detection: Sherlock Holmes and the Disease of Crime in the *Strand Magazine*”; N. CLAUSSON, “Degeneration, *Fin-de-Siècle* Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story”; A. GLAZZARD, *The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle’s Detective Fiction*; C. PITTARD, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction*; J. CRANFIELD, “Doyle and Evolution”, in J.M. ALLAN and C. PITTARD (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes*, pp. 81-95; C. CLAUSEN, “Sherlock Holmes, Order, and the Late-Victorian Mind”, *The Georgia Review*, 38 (1), 1984, pp. 104-23; R. JANN, “Sherlock Holmes Codes the Social Body”, *ELH*, 57 (3), 1990, pp. 685-708; W. GREENSLADE, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel*, Cambridge and New York, CUP, 1994; R.R. THOMAS, “The Fingerprint of the Foreigner: Colonizing the Criminal Body in 1890s Detective Fiction and Criminal Anthropology”, *ELH*, 61 (3), 1994, pp. 655-83; F. LAWRENCE, “*The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the Man on the Tor, and a Metaphor for the Mind”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 54 (3), 1999, pp. 336-72; L. FRANK, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; H.A. GOLDSMITH, “Darwin and the Detective: Aspects of the Darwinian Worldview and the Sherlock Holmes Stories of Arthur Conan Doyle”, *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 28 (2), 2010, pp. 19-28; J. MCNABB, “Anthropology by Gaslight: Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle and the Anthropology of Detection at the Victorian *Fin de Siècle*”, *World Archaeology*, 49 (5), 2017, pp. 728-51.

³⁷ See A. KINGSTON, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction*, p. 84 and P. BAROLSKY, “The Case of the Domesticated Aesthete”, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 60 (3), 1984, pp. 438-52.

³⁸ See N. CLAUSSON, “Arthur Conan Doyle’s Darker Mystery”, p. 18.

clues to interpret reality and on offering a cohesive narrative that should restore order – in purpose, at least.³⁹ Criminal anthropology is thus presented as one of the possible instruments which Sherlock Holmes has at his disposal to solve the case, a helpful interpretive system to read clues in his suspects' faces. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), for instance, merges the Gothic trope of the animated portrait with atavism so as to foreground the link between the villain and a corrupted ancestor as regards body and (deviant) soul.

Although there are no material portraits in “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client”, the story engages with this trope on a metaphorical plane. In this adventure, Holmes is called upon by the unidentified titular “illustrious client” (although it is heavily implied that the Royal Family might be behind this) to prevent the marriage between an aristocratic young woman, Lady Violet de Merville, and an Austrian nobleman, Baron Gruner. Although this is not the most famous of Holmes's cases, Watson calls it “in some ways, the supreme moment of my friend's career”,⁴⁰ undoubtedly referring to the social prestige of the client, but also possibly hinting at a certain relevance in the outcome of the case itself.

Why would Sherlock Holmes, the ‘tutelary deity’ of British society, be recruited to break up a couple and prevent a marriage? Because Baron Gruner is actually a degenerate: a libertine and uxoricide, a murderer and fraudster. Yet, he is also an aesthete, a cultivated man, a collector of fine Chinese pottery and books. He is handsome and refined, and his *fiancée*, in spite of being warned time and time again about his true nature, refuses to believe anyone but him. As revealed by Kitty Winter, a woman whose reputation was ruined by Baron Gruner (it is inferred that she is now a prostitute), this foe keeps a diary of his conquests, a scandalous book which, if found, could convince Lady Violet to cancel the wedding. Sherlock Holmes is therefore tasked with the retrieval of this “bestly” object, “a book no man, even if he had come from the gutter, could have put together”.⁴¹

Although the parallels with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* mainly rest on the characterisation of the baron, the description of Lady Violet – her ‘portrait’, so to speak – helps us to assess Conan Doyle's drawing on the notion of degeneration. She is presented as “young, rich, beautiful, accomplished, a wonder-woman in every way”.⁴² She is mild and obedient to her father's wishes, save when it comes to her marriage, about which she shows “a will of iron”.⁴³

Lady Violet seems to be a well-rounded young woman, possessing good breeding, beauty and intelligence. Her relationship with her intended, however, betrays some

³⁹ See C. CLAUSEN, “Sherlock Holmes, Order, and the Late-Victorian Mind”; J. KISSANE and J.M. KISSANE, “Sherlock Holmes and the Ritual of Reason”, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 17 (4), 1963, pp 353-62; P. HÜHN, “The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33 (3), 1987, pp. 451-66; J. TAMBLING, “Holmes, Law, and Order”, in J.M. ALLAN and C. PITTARD (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes*, pp. 111-24.

⁴⁰ SIR A.C. DOYLE, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Foreword by R. RENDELL, London, Penguin Books, 2009, p. 984.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 990.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 986.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

concerning signs. To begin with, it is a feeling that borders on idolatry: “To say that she loves him hardly expresses it. She dotes upon him, she is obsessed by him. Outside of him there is nothing on earth. [...] Everything has been done to cure her of her madness, but in vain”.⁴⁴ This first description of the bond between Violet and Gruner already qualifies it as an “obsession” and as “madness” via a diagnostic language that reminds one of insanity. When Holmes insists on meeting the young woman, this impression is confirmed:

There was the lady awaiting us, demure, pale, self-contained, as inflexible and remote as a snow image on a mountain.

“I don’t quite know how to make her clear to you, Watson. Perhaps you may meet her before we are through, and you can use your own gift of words. She is beautiful, but with the ethereal other-world beauty of some fanatic whose thoughts are set on high. I have seen such faces in the pictures of the old masters of the Middle Ages”.⁴⁵

Interestingly, although the rest of the adventure is, as usual, narrated by Dr Watson, this is Holmes’s description. Even if the detective invites his associate to meet the girl in order to possibly give a different portrayal before the case is through, no alternative version will emerge. Holmes’s outline ultimately stands out as the objective, rational one. He compares her to a “fanatic whose thoughts are set on high”, although, ironically, the object of her adoration is a debased person.

This characterisation is consistent with a ‘diagnosis’ of degeneration resting on an excessive proclivity for mysticism, a trait that both Lombroso⁴⁶ and Nordau⁴⁷ stressed as a sign of this condition. Nordau goes so far as to call it “a cardinal mark of degeneration”,⁴⁸ devoting an entire chapter to the topic. Violet is not a motherlike Madonna, a comparison Watson formulates with regard to his future wife, Mary, in *The Sign of the Four*. Rather, she is like the mystics painted by “the old masters”, the school which inspired the Pre-Raphaelites. This mention hardly seems accidental, given that the Pre-Raphaelites had been another of Nordau’s targets, who devoted the second chapter in Book II of *Degeneration* to outline the alleged pathology affecting the Brotherhood.

The description of Violet de Merville, then, seems to openly adopt the language of degeneration, with no sign of deconstruction or mitigation regarding the conclusion drawn by Holmes. Moreover, Violet’s ‘symptomatology’ is relevant to Conan Doyle’s dialogue with the theme of degeneration in that it foregrounds a sense of anxiety about propagation. If Baron Gruner is indeed a degenerate, as will be shortly illustrated, Lady de Merville’s induced fanaticism could be interpreted as a sign of contagion. The contact with a degenerate individual, in other words, represents a real threat to other persons and society at large, so that measures of containment and normalisation are absolutely required.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 991.

⁴⁶ See C. LOMBROSO, *The Criminal Man*, Engl. trans. M. GIBSON and N. HAHN RAFTER, Durham and London, Duke U.P., 2006, p. 313.

⁴⁷ See M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, p. 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ See S. KARSCHAY, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*, p. 2.

A similar rhetoric informs the final paragraph of the description by means of a contrast between Lady de Merville and Baron Gruner: “How a beast-man could have laid his vile paws upon such a being of the beyond I cannot imagine. You may have noticed how extremes call to each other, the spiritual to the animal, the cave-man to the angel. You never saw a worse case than this”.⁵⁰ The terms used to characterise Gruner hint at an atavistic regression to a previous stage of development: he is a “beast-man”, an “animal”, a “cave-man”, that is to say, not fully evolved into a moral, progressed being. Violet, on the other hand, seems to have already transcended this earth and become all spirit, the most perfect version of her own self. This stage, according to Conan Doyle’s spiritualist beliefs,⁵¹ was something to strive for, and could only be attained after death.⁵² Violet’s perfection, however, is marred by her fanaticism, her spirituality threatened by her beastlike companion, so that preventing the marriage becomes a moral as well as social imperative for the detective.

The paragraph is also significant in the context of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in that its lexicon seems to recall a famous review of the novel, according to which “Man is half angel and half ape, and Mr Wilde’s book has no real use if it be not to inculcate the ‘moral’ that when you feel yourself becoming too angelic you cannot do better than rush out and make a beast of yourself”.⁵³ As previously mentioned, Conan Doyle deemed *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as indeed a moral text. Yet, when creating his own characters, he separated the ‘angel’ and the ‘ape’ through a slightly different process from Wilde’s – or Stevenson’s, for that matter. In both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), the moral man and the monster are split through a fantastic/supernatural effect, but each of them continues to be part of the same being, so much so that one cannot survive when the other is killed.

In “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client”, the angel and the beast are set at a clear distance, and must remain so. It is their recombination, as prefigured in a possible marriage, that would bring about the real threat. As a consequence, the deviant character must be safely ‘removed’ so that Violet might regain her former perfection. In short, Violet’s degeneration is a nightmarish possibility, something that Sherlock Holmes must prevent. Her *fiancé*, on the other hand, seems to be beyond redemption. Holmes immediately suggests that he could be more dangerous than Professor Moriarty (i.e. his own Nemesis): this man is to be regarded as an evil genius rather than a common criminal. He is also depicted as “extraordinarily handsome, with a most fascinating manner, a gentle voice, and that air of romance and mystery which means so much to a woman”.⁵⁴ He is, moreover, brilliant: “he collects books and pictures. He is a man with a considerable artistic side to his nature. He is, I believe, a recognised authority

⁵⁰ SIR A.C. DOYLE, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 991.

⁵¹ See C. FERGUSON, “Eugenics and the Afterlife: Lombroso, Doyle, and the Spiritualist Purification of the Race”, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 12 (1), 2010, pp. 64-85.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 70-73.

⁵³ Review in the *Daily Chronicle*, 30 June 1890, quoted in B.T. GATES, “Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*”, *The Victorian Web*, 10 April 2001, <https://victorianweb.org/books/suicide/06g.html> (last accessed on 10 July 2023).

⁵⁴ SIR A.C. DOYLE, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 986.

upon Chinese pottery and has written a book upon the subject".⁵⁵

It might be true that, as Michael Seeneby quips by citing Wilde's famous enthusiasm about it, "a love of [blue] china in a fictional character is not enough to prove Wildean parentage".⁵⁶ However, Baron Gruner exhibits a rather extensive collection of traits which identify him with the prototype of the decadent aesthete. Like Dorian, he is charming, mysterious, and a collector of beautiful objects, a trait that Nordau explicitly associated with degeneration.⁵⁷ Even his name is significant: if Dorian is 'Gray/Grey', the baron is 'Gruner', meaning 'green' in German (he is in fact Austrian). Such a surname also recalls Wilde's essay "Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green" (1885), a literary portrait of Thomas Griffiths Wainwright as an artist and poisoner. If Wainwright had been suspected of poisoning his sister-in-law, Gruner is accused of having killed his wife. The connection is reinforced by the story itself, as Holmes points out that "all great criminals" have "a complex mind", and that "Wainwright was no mean artist".⁵⁸ Here, Conan Doyle seems to be more receptive to Lombroso's theory than Nordau's, in that he acknowledges the thin line separating genius from madness. At the same time, Holmes also says of the baron that he "has the collection mania in its most acute form",⁵⁹ evidently accepting Nordau's pathologising lexicon and categorisation.

Like Dorian, Gruner is shielded by his own beauty, and sets about tricking people into believing in his innocence by virtue of his good looks and pleasant manners. Yet, unlike Basil, Watson is not fooled by this:

He was certainly a remarkably handsome man. [...] In figure he was not more than of middle size, but was built upon graceful and active lines. His face was swarthy, almost Oriental, with large, dark, languorous eyes which might easily hold an irresistible fascination for women. His hair and moustache were raven black: the latter short, pointed, and carefully waxed. His features were regular and pleasing, save only his straight, thin-lipped mouth. If ever I saw a murderer's mouth it was there – a cruel, hard gash in the face, compressed, inexorable, and terrible. He was ill-advised to train his moustache away from it, for it was Nature's danger-signal, set as a warning to his victims. His voice was engaging and his manners perfect. In age I should have put him at little over thirty, though his record afterwards showed that he was forty-two.⁶⁰

Although the baron is more conventionally dark-haired and Oriental-looking, in the vein of the traditional Gothic villain, the description remains remarkably 'Dorianesque'. Older than he looks, he is "swarthy" and his eyes are "languorous", evoking the "saturnine and swarthy" face of George Willoughby, Dorian's ancestor (p. 138). This languor, or saturnine disposition, is also a trait typically associated with both the man of genius and the criminal genius, according to Lombroso.⁶¹

A detail that corroborates this parallel is found in Baron Gruner's lips, representing an outward sign of his criminality that Watson does not fail to detect. In *The Picture*

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 987.

⁵⁶ M. SEENEY, "The Fictional Career of Oscar Wilde", p. 44.

⁵⁷ See M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, p. 27.

⁵⁸ SIR A.C. DOYLE, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 987.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 995.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 996.

⁶¹ See C. LOMBROSO, *Genio e follia*, Milano, Gaetano Brigola, 1872, p. 17.

of *Dorian Gray*'s portrait gallery, Wilde's insistence on this detail establishes a link between the first outward sign of Dorian's degeneration and the possible influence of his ancestors on his descent towards corruption. Here, the baron's lips are plainly called "Nature's danger signal": there is no doubt about how this sign could work in a system of stigmata. If the "cruel, hard gash" is there to warn potential victims, what the latter must do is learn how to correctly interpret such an indelible and unmistakable blemish.

In the semiotic system of the detective story, the cruel mouth is unambiguous: it is there to be decoded and explained through Watson. Degeneration must remain evident, clearly inscribed in the subject's physical features and univocally decipherable by the detective, or by the medical expert, as in this case. There can be no distance between what is shown to the world and the inner reality of the character, between what we are and what we present to the world, if the detective's taxonomical gaze is to be effective. His hermeneutics of the human type depends on collecting reliable clues through a scientific, and therefore repeatable, process.

However, if the baron's degeneration is immediately evident to the detective and the medical expert, the world risks being fooled by his ruse. This turns the aristocratic aesthete into a danger to society, firstly because he is a murderer, and secondly because he threatens to spread his malady by contracting an advantageous marriage and, possibly, having children. The resolution called for by the classic detective story comes here in a rather unorthodox form. While Watson, in disguise, tries to keep the baron occupied, Holmes, guided by Kitty Winter, breaks into Gruner's house and steals his "beastly"⁶² book. The baron reacts but, as he prepares to strike, Kitty takes her revenge by disfiguring the antagonist with vitriol:

he fell upon the carpet, rolling and writhing, while scream after scream resounded through the house. [...] I seized a carafe from a side-table and rushed to his aid. At the same moment the butler and several footmen ran in from the hall. I remember that one of them fainted as I knelt by the injured man and turned that awful face to the light of the lamp. The vitriol was eating into it everywhere [...] The features which I had admired a few minutes before were now like some beautiful painting over which the artist has passed a wet and foul sponge. They were blurred, discoloured, inhuman, terrible.⁶³

This paragraph emerges as noteworthy from multiple perspectives. First of all, the parallels with Dorian's death scene are unmistakable. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we read that "there was a cry heard, and a crash. The cry was so horrible in its agony that the frightened servants woke, and crept out of their rooms" (p. 212). Moreover, the servants are unable to recognise their master in the "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (p. 213) man laying on the ground. In Conan Doyle's story, the same cry resonates through the house, the servants similarly rush in, and they are likewise unable to withstand the horrible view in front of them.

More significantly, the vocabulary used by Conan Doyle clearly evokes the process of a portrait being wiped out: Baron Gruner's face looks like a "painting over which the artist has passed a wet and foul sponge"; his features are "blurred, discoloured". In *The*

⁶² SIR A.C. DOYLE, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 990.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 998.

Picture of Dorian Gray, the act of destroying the portrait devastatingly reverberates on the human subject, reuniting the two separated halves of the same whole and restoring the perfection of the work of art. In “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client”, both the man and his metaphorical portrait are ravaged: the sly enemy needs to be *revealed* for what he is, to the benefit of society.

Another interesting point regards the use of vitriol to achieve this end. As readers of the *Strand Magazine* would have known, vitriol attacks had become more frequent during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, so much so that “vitriol had entered popular culture as a weapon associated with a stereotypical perpetrator: a woman who acted from motives of jealousy and revenge”.⁶⁴ Conan Doyle might thus have chosen to include this detail to offer a ‘realistic’ representation of crime, or at least a popular one, also in keeping with its perpetrator (in this case, a scorned woman). Yet, vitriol, a green acid, is also a remarkable element when seen in the context of Conan Doyle’s interest in occultism and spiritualism. In alchemy, the acronym V.I.T.R.I.O.L. identifies either the philosopher’s stone, or a compound which could unveil the true essence of any material.⁶⁵ Clearly, this is the intended purpose of the entire accident: the baron’s looks are made to reflect his inner corruption, his degeneration. It is therefore possible that Conan Doyle had the villain disfigured by this specific acid as a way to convey this sort of revelation.

Finally, a crucial element resides in the person who disfigures the baron. Holmes, who sometimes breaks the law but follows a strict principle of honour, could never have done it; and yet, it had to be done in order to eradicate once and for all the threat posed by Gruner. Kitty Winter turns out to be a perfect candidate for this: as a woman, according to Lombroso and Victorian gender codes, she is much more likely to resort to this weapon.⁶⁶ Besides, she fulfils a very specific role by embodying the past that returns to exact its toll. No wonder that Holmes’s remark should be “the wages of sin, Watson – the wages of sin! [...] sooner or later it will always come”.⁶⁷

This comment is in line with Basil Hallward’s observation that “sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face” (p. 143), but it also stresses how here, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the past catches up with the baron to mark his face with the signs of his degeneration, making them truly unmistakable, functioning as a clearer warning signal than his cruel mouth. In Holmes’s adventure, there is little space for Aestheticism and its metaphors: degeneration is a social evil that must be traced, categorised, and isolated in order to avoid deadly ‘contagion’.

⁶⁴ K.D. WATSON, “Love, Vengeance and Vitriol: An Edwardian True-Crime Drama”, in A.M. KILDAY and D. NASH (eds), *Law, Crime and Deviance since 1700: Micro-Studies in the History of Crime*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 110.

⁶⁵ See J. READ, *From Alchemy to Chemistry*, New York, Dover Publications, 1995, pp. 44-45 and L. M. PRINCIPE, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 120.

⁶⁶ See K. WATSON, “Love, Vengeance and Vitriol: An Edwardian True-Crime Drama”, p. 110.

⁶⁷ SIR A.C. DOYLE, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 998.

3. Conclusion

Although “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client” does not retrace *The Picture of Dorian Gray* step by step, there are enough contact points between the two texts to allow us to suppose that Conan Doyle looked at Wilde’s novel as an intertextual reference throughout. However, when taking into account how the two authors engaged with the notion of degeneration and with the trope of the portrait, differences emerge too. If Wilde experimented with the Gothic genre to question a monological, positivistic scientific discourse and extol the crucial role of art, Conan Doyle remained within the more normative confines of the detective fiction genre.

While Dorian sets aside his moral sense to go in pursuit of absolute (and immoral) ‘beauty’, wherever he may find it, Baron Gruner, as though in keeping with Lombroso and Nordau’s taxonomy of the degenerate (and the aesthete, in the case of Nordau), seems to lack a moral sense from the very beginning. In “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client”, therefore, the portrait (or portraits, when considering the description of Lady Violet) essentially serves as a compendium of evidence for the pathological traits of the subject analysed by Holmes. There is no allegorical gap between reality and representation: the baron already carries traits that would qualify him as a degenerate, and does not refrain from warning his potential victims through his cruel smile. In addition to this, Holmes sets out to make this correspondence even more explicit by denouncing the baron’s escapades. Finally, whatever threat could have resided in Gruner, even after he loses the chance to marry Lady de Merville, is vanquished by the vitriol attack, which brings back order by having the signs of the aristocrat’s corruption engraved on his face. The structure of the classic detective story, which always strives for a normative solution, would have allowed little else.

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Fin de Siècle, Fin du Globe: Mars Invaders and the End of Beauty as a Transatlantic Phenomenon

Abstract: *The War of the Worlds* is a famous novel by British writer H.G. Wells. Having been serialised in 1897 in *Pearson's Magazine* in the UK and in *Cosmopolitan* in the USA, it is also an early example of globalisation, as it was read simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, unlike other works of the time (especially American) which conjured up social paradises and utopian worlds on planet Mars, Wells' novel introduced into Western imagery the concretisation of a real threat coming from other worlds and capable of destroying the 'civilisation' that Europe and America had painstakingly built. The narrator, sometimes assuming the traits of the *voyeur*, and at other times those of the *flâneur*, becomes the symbol of a crepuscular phase of Western society that is already on its way towards the condition of a *wasteland*. Thanks to a *deus-ex-machina* device consisting in a new and powerful, albeit elementary, coalition between God and biology, the narrator survives the end of beauty, not only in an aesthetic sense, but also as a cultural heritage that should be preserved. As such, he is one of the most interesting and controversial characters of dystopian fiction; and it is not by chance that the novel has had so many sequels, accompanied by pastiches and adaptations, which have turned it into a real cult work transcending time and space. I intend to focus both on the characteristics of the narrator as a transmedia character and on the American reception of the original novel in the phase of transition from the Gay Nineties to the Progressive Era. This is a little investigated subject if compared, for example, to the countless studies on the collective panic that followed Orson Welles' radio play in 1938.

Keywords: Mars invaders. H.G. Wells. *The War of the Worlds*. Dystopian fiction. End of beauty.

1. *The Beginning of the End*

The War of the Worlds is a famous novel by British writer H.G. Wells.¹ The first edition was published by William Heinemann in London in 1898 and, since *The Invisible Man* had already been serialised in *Pearson's Weekly* before coming out as a volume in 1897, the book cover credited Wells as the "Author of *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*".² Actually, *The War of the Worlds* had been serialised as well: both in *Pearson's Magazine* (in the UK) in 1897 and in *Cosmopolitan* (in the US) in 1897-1898: in fact, "soon after *The War of the Worlds* was serialised, but before the publication as a book, the story was reworked and re-located for publication by two American newspapers".³ This fact is significant because it offers

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¹ See H.G. WELLS, *The War of the Worlds*, London, William Heinemann, 1898, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36/36-h/36-h.htm> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

² <https://decollected.net/timeline/> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

³ P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 9.

an example of an *ante-litteram* phenomenon of globalisation.⁴ Moreover, it inspired many sequels⁵ and parodies.⁶ The most renowned adaptation is, without doubt, the radio-drama that made a young Orson Welles famous in 1938, triggering a collective panic that is still studied by psychologists and sociologists;⁷ the work also inspired two cinematographic versions,⁸ as well as a plethora of adaptations for television,⁹ comics and graphic novels,¹⁰ music and theatre performances,¹¹ up to video-installations in the new millennium.¹²

Coming back to Wells' original novel, I wish to underline again its almost contemporary publication in England and in the United States. As a matter of fact, among Wells' works, it "was the first to be serialized and published as a book on both sides of the Atlantic".¹³ We must not forget this while we examine two other intriguing characteristics.

2. *A Serious Topic*

In the first place, in the late 1800s and early 1900s Mars had emerged as "a serious topic of contemporary interest on both sides of the Atlantic":¹⁴ thanks to observation

⁴ The novel was serialised in nine instalments, each of them accompanied by black and white illustrations by Warwick Goble, which Wells did not like. See *The Cosmopolitan*, 12 (6), April 1897; 23 (1-6), May-October 1897; 24 (1-2), November-December 1897. The Christmas issue was published with 72 pages in colour.

⁵ There were several unauthorised sequels, starting with *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (1898) by Garrett P. Serviss, which Robert Crossley describes with these words: "Wells's story of extraterrestrial invasion spawned over the course of the next hundred years a variety of imitations, parodies, and adaptations. But one reply to *The War of the Worlds* deserves particular attention, since it appeared immediately on the heels of the Americanized serial installments of Wells's romance in the United States. No sooner had the last installment of these rewrites of *The War of the Worlds*, complete with the destruction of metropolitan New York and Boston, appeared in the *New York Evening Journal* and the *Boston Post* than a serialized sequel began to run" (R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan U.P., 2011, p. 124). See also the list made by P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 186.

⁶ The first one was C.L. GRAVES and E.V. LUCAS, *The War of the Wenuses*, trans. from the Artesian of H.G. POZZUOLI, Bristol, J.W. Arrowsmith; London, Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co. Limited, n.d. [1898]; one of the more recent parodies is J. MORROW, "The War of the Worldviews", in ID., *Reality by Other Means: The Best Short Fiction of James Morrow*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan U.P., 2012, pp. 67-78.

⁷ Here is the original version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs0K4ApWl4g> (last accessed on 9 April 2023). The radio-drama inspired many volumes and articles. I would like to draw particular attention to Chapter 12 in P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*.

⁸ The two films were respectively directed by B. HASKIN in 1953 (*The War of the Worlds*) and S. SPIELBERG in 2005 (*War of the Worlds*). The latter has also a sequel: *War of the Worlds 2: The Next Wave*, directed by C.T. HOWELL in 2008. See Chapter 14 in P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*.

⁹ See the Anglo-French series *War of the Worlds*, set in contemporary France (2019-) and directed by G. COULIER and R. CLARK, and the British BBC mini-series *The War of the Worlds*, directed by C. VIVEIROS (2019).

¹⁰ See P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, pp. 188-90 and https://waroftheworlds.fandom.com/wiki/Graphic_novels (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

¹¹ See Chapter 15 in P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 190-91.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

made possible by a new generation of telescopes, and by Italian astronomer Schiaparelli's statements about Martian canals,¹⁵ "through the 1890s there were flurries of excitement about the possibility that the inhabitants of Mars themselves might be attempting to initiate contact with the third planet".¹⁶ Those years also saw the publication of novels, or rather *romances*, which – following the spreading "Marsmania"¹⁷ – were entirely or partially set on the Red Planet: as a matter of fact, Wells' novel was not totally new, original, or unexpected. At least twenty romances were published in the United States between 1880 and 1911, such as *The Man from Mars* (by William Simpson, 1891), *Messages from Mars, By the Aid of the Telescope Plant* (by Robert D. Braine, 1892), *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance by Two Women of the West* (by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant, 1893), *A Cityless and Countryless World* (by Henry Olerich, 1893), *Journey to Mars: The Wonderful World, Its Beauty and Splendor, Its Mighty Races and Kingdoms, Its Final Doom* (by Gustavus W. Pope, 1894), *Daybreak: The Story of an Old World* (by James Cowan, 1896), *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (by Garrett P. Serviss, 1898), and *To Mars with Tesla; or, the Mystery of the Hidden World* (by J. Weldon Cobb, 1901).

What strikes a contemporary scholar is that such novels never obtained as much fame as Wells' did. Could it be argued that their literary quality was poorer? Perhaps so, in some cases, but this – to take one example – certainly does not apply to a novel like *Unveiling a Parallel*, which disappeared completely from the scene only to be eagerly rediscovered in the 1990s by feminist critics. A more serious analysis leads us to read these novels as important cultural products of an era that witnessed the end of the Frontier and felt the need to reformulate the Manifest Destiny project.¹⁸ All of these texts feature good and highly 'civilised' Martians as protagonists: on Mars we find utopian governments, which combine economic and political justice with advanced technology; added to that are gender equality, freedom of expression and religion, and often a vegan or vegetarian diet. The Martians usually warn humans against the drift of capitalism, the dangerous pursuit of profit at any cost, and wars.

¹⁵ It was to the Italian astronomer Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli, 'the Columbus of a new planetary world', that Percival Lowell dedicated his volume *Mars and Its Canals*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1906. Schiaparelli's *The Planet Mars (Il pianeta Marte, 1893)* was so famous at the time that it was included as an Appendix in L. POPE GRATACAP's novel *The Certainty of a Future Life in Mars, Being the Posthumous Papers of Bradford Torrey Todd*, New York, Brentano, 1903. Schiaparelli is credited with the observation of Martian 'canals' (which led to the misunderstanding about the planet's habitability) and the Martian toponymy which is still in use today. He was the author of three books now collected in P. TUCCI et al. (a cura di), *La vita sul pianeta Marte. Tre scritti di Schiaparelli su Marte e i "marziani"*, Milano, Mimesis, 1998, pp. 43-77.

¹⁶ R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 111.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. IX.

¹⁸ In 1890 the Bureau of the Census announced that the Frontier was closed, that is, there was no longer any discernible demarcation between 'frontier' and 'settlement'. Three years later, historian Frederick Jackson Turner in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* advanced the thesis that American democracy was rooted precisely in the westward movement of pioneers during the nineteenth century. When the Age of the Frontier ended, it was followed nonetheless by the emerging of new 'frontiers': see, for example, President J.F. Kennedy's "We Choose to Go to the Moon Speech", 1961, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-at-rice-university-on-the-nations-space-effort>, and Robert Zubrin's *The Significance of Martian Frontier*, 1994, <https://space.nss.org/the-significance-of-the-martian-frontier-by-robert-zubrin/> (last accessed on 20 August 2023).

We also ought not to confuse this kind of utopia with the one associated with the American pastoral, dating back to a later period (the 1950s) and which has been well described by Chris Pak as intercorrelated with the dynamics of colonisation and its extraplanetary variant – that is, Terraforming:

Sf narratives of terraforming, as stories of interplanetary migration, colonisation and adaptation, draw from aspects of the American pastoral. This tradition is rooted in images of America and of new lands depicted in literature, travellers' tales and colonial writing since the age of Discovery [...]. The frequent references to and parallels between the terraforming of alien planets and the colonisation of America point to a cyclical unfolding of a specifically American experience.¹⁹

Pak goes on to illustrate the frequency of “representations of alien planets as wilderness landscapes” in sci-fi novels, which show how “potential transformation of these wildernesses into agricultural land or Edenic gardens directed pastoral longing into the future”.²⁰

Although Washington Irving, in one of his political satires of 1809, had already envisaged an invasion of the Earth by the inhabitants of the Moon, I believe it was Wells' novel that firmly established in the Western imagination the idea of a real threat coming from other worlds and capable of destroying the ‘civilisation’ that Europe and America had painstakingly built up. If it is true that, as early as 1871, George Tomkyns Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* had considered the possibility of a German invasion of England, it is also true that, with his novel, Wells went a step further by choosing an invader from outer space. The agenda he proposed to readers/citizens was to prepare for a very strong and ruthless enemy who would sooner or later come and invade us.

Wells' novel testifies the long-feared “end of human hegemony in the universe” and a “global preoccupation with telescopic surveillance”.²¹ Let us turn our attention to the adjective ‘global’, which appears both in the novel (whose *incipit* refers to the Earth as “this globe”) and in later criticism – for example, Peter J. Beck underlines that “although it was not the first fictional work written about Mars, the book has proved instrumental in giving the planet global visibility and a central place in popular culture”.²² The implied idea is twofold: on the one hand, the threat may exceed even that of the Nazis – being on a planetary scale – and, on the other hand, in a prophetic sense, the ‘globe’ must prepare us for a new era of visibility and surveillance.

It follows that, as Robert Crossley writes, in “*The War of the Worlds*, for the first time, the inhabitants of Mars are depicted not as kindlier and nobler versions of ourselves but as monsters of intellect [...]. Mars comes to us in the shape of invasion and imperialist expansion”.²³ *The War of the Worlds* therefore overshadows, amid general indifference, at least ten other romances containing a counter-narration which is

¹⁹ C. PAK, “The American Pastoral and the Conquest of Space”, in ID., *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction*, Liverpool, Liverpool U.P., 2016, p. 59.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 59-60.

²¹ R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 111.

²² P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 4.

²³ R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 112.

radically different from that of invasion. When faced with a crossroads, the history of the West does not seem to look towards utopia and reforms; it does not choose to step back and delegitimise war, violence, colonialism. On the contrary, it chooses war, fear, weapons. We are still paying the consequences of this choice.

In 1897, Wells' novel came to represent precisely that *fin-de-siècle* psychosis concerning a possible total war, a nightmare that would shortly become reality. Preceded by an intense debate about Mars and the Martians, *The War of the Worlds* radically changed utopia into dystopia: "the terror induced by Wells' Martians in 1898 [...] stems from their absolute alienness, their lack of a recognizable psychology, sociology, or politics" and even their "insatiable lust to consume human blood".²⁴

Another concept that was erased, besides utopia, was beauty. This also happened on the opposite side of the Atlantic, where the creed of Aestheticism was not as widespread, but where there was a strong awareness of the magnificence of the natural landscape, both American and cosmic. Edgar Allan Poe had opened the reader's eyes to the beauty of the "cosmical family of Intelligences" with his prose poem *Eureka*,²⁵ and the late nineteenth-century Martian novels mentioned above mostly revolved around depictions of beauty – the beauty of bodies, flowers, gardens, and architecture. For instance, in her *Journeys to the Planet Mars*, Sara Weiss included a dozen plates with drawings of the beautiful Martian flora; and Gustavus W. Pope began the long subtitle of his *Journey to Mars the Wonderful World* with the words, "its beauty and splendor".²⁶ Moreover, the word 'beauty' alone appears fifty times in Pope's novel, not to mention its derivatives or synonyms. To get a taste, let us look at this description of the aurora on Mars:

Sunrise on Mars! The glorious orb of day was rising in the east with a splendor unknown in the terrestrial world, and language is wholly inadequate to describe the magnificent scene. [...] How sublime this matchless Empyrean! far transcending the "deeply beautifully blue" that o'erspreads the Mediterranean, the isles of Greece, over the Vale of Cashmere, so oft the theme of the poet and romancer. The Martian skies are infinitely more lovely. Their prevailing hue might be compared to a delicate heliotrope. [...] what a wealth of glory is lavished there!²⁷

Not only nature, but also the bodies of the Martians are aesthetically perfect: one of them is defined as the "model of manly beauty", and about a woman we read that "her beauty is matchless".²⁸ The creatures and landscapes of Mars are so beautiful that they transcend the existing terrestrial categories to the point of rendering them inadequate:

²⁴ R. MARKLEY, *Dying Planet: Mars in Science and the Imagination*, Durham, NC, Duke U.P., 2005, pp. 123-24.

²⁵ See E.A. POE, *Eureka*, New York, George P. Putnam, 1848, <https://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/POE/eureka.html> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

²⁶ G.W. POPE, *Journey to Mars the Wonderful World: Its Beauty and Splendor; Its Mighty Races and Kingdoms; Its Final Doom*, New York, G.W. Dillingham, 1894, <https://digitalarchive.tpl.ca/objects/359191> (last accessed on 9 April 2023); S. WEISS, *Journeys to the Planet Mars; or, Our Mission to Ento*, New York, The Bradford Press, 1903, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/61253> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

²⁷ G.W. POPE, *Journey to Mars the Wonderful World: Its Beauty and Splendor; Its Mighty Races and Kingdoms; Its Final Doom*, p. 66.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 68, 163.

It were [*sic*] difficult to describe the beauty of this young Martian Princess by any aesthetic standards with which we Terrestrials are familiar, for the Martian ideal belongs to a superior order and is elevated on a higher plane than ours. And this is all the more apparent from the fact that, our usually accepted standards are more or less fallacious, being founded upon erroneous and often crude conceptions of the Beautiful in Nature and Art. Many so-called aesthetic writers have attempted to formulate and classify what they call their Ideals into standards [...]. To attempt the formulation of rules or models of beauty or grace in human beings is as futile as to lay down standards for horses, cattle, birds, flowers, trees or landscapes.²⁹

Previous representations of Martian beauty are cancelled by the new narratives of Martian invasion. Wells' Martians are ugly, wicked, and unsympathetic assassins. Through his work, Wells stages the end of utopia, and with it the end of beauty.

3. *Relocations*

There is another curious fact about Wells' novel. While other novels remained identical even after 'migrating' to America, *The War of the Worlds* underwent a change of setting in the course of its serialised publication: if the story was originally set in England (Berkshire, Surrey, Middlesex, and London are mentioned), its American counterpart was 'translated' (in its literal sense, i.e. 'transferred') into a new Americanised topography, for the obvious purpose of having a greater impact on readers. The perception of the alien threat had to seem not only plausible, but close at hand:

From the very moment of its first public appearance, *The War of the Worlds* underwent such scenic changes. Before it was published in book form, Wells sold the story in serial installments to *Pearson's Magazine* in England and to *Cosmopolitan* in the United States. When the *New York Journal* and the *Boston Post* requested the right to republish the serial in their newspapers in late 1897 and the first month of 1898, Wells agreed, not knowing that the geographical details would be altered. New Yorkers reading their evening papers learnt about the Martians' sackings of such landmarks as the Brooklyn Bridge, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Columbia University Library, and Grant's Tomb. In Boston, readers could track the invasion from Concord to Lexington to Waltham before the Martians headed for Boston Harbor and the industrial center of the city.³⁰

Geolocation is not a minor fact in *The War of the Worlds*. H.G. Wells was driven by what Beck calls a "strong sense of place" and conducted a punctilious search for "topographic verisimilitude" that nevertheless correlated geography with a kind of "intimacy", a sense of territorial belonging.³¹ Wells was even accused of obsessive fussiness, so much so that one scholar has commented: "Non-British readers (like the present author) are bound to face certain difficulties when trying to follow the early chapters because the text is constantly peppered with local place names and references".³² In this connection,

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

³⁰ D.Y. HUGHES, "The War of the Worlds in the Yellow Press", *Journalism Quarterly*, 43, Winter 1966, pp. 639-46, quoted in R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 116.

³¹ P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, pp. 160-61.

³² P. KÁROLY, "The Analogical Alien: Constructing and Construing Extraterrestrial Invasion in Wells's *The*

Bernard Bergonzi had suggested that the novel would need a map of West Surrey,³³ and Andy Sawyer even included one in the Appendix of the 2005 Penguin Classics edition.³⁴

The choice of Woking as the starting point of the story stems from the fact that it was the typical late-Victorian location which, in those very years, was taking “national, even global, visibility”.³⁵ As a consequence, the Americans’ choice to change the geographical setting becomes all the more interesting, since “the original locations in London and Surrey have often been discarded in the interests of ensuring local realism and relevance for the intended audience”.³⁶ It was a marketing operation, a ‘customisation’, as we would say today, resulting in an adaptation to the customer, a kind of personalisation on a local key. As Wells himself admitted, “whereas *Cosmopolitan’s* readership was nationwide, American newspapers served a more localized audience”.³⁷

These are the facts. In November 1897 the *New York Journal*, directed by William Randolph Hearst, asked for permission to publish the novel in instalments in the evening edition. Eager as he was to bolster his growing reputation overseas, Wells agreed, also adding an episode³⁸ and making it clear that no changes were to be made without his consent. On 26 December, the *Boston Post* obtained a similar authorisation. However, “neither newspaper sought Wells’s approval for their plans to rework the geographical details to locations more familiar to their respective readerships”.³⁹ It therefore happened that,

[w]hereas New Yorkers read about Martians landing near Irvington-on-the-Hudson [...] and then attacking New York City, Bostonians followed the Martian advance from Concord, Massachusetts, though Lexington and onto Boston. Instead of being set in and around London and Surrey, the action centred on the USA, with every British location being replaced by a suitable American variant.⁴⁰

I am particularly intrigued by the *Boston Post’s* choice of Concord, not only because of its proximity to Boston, but also for the crucial role it played during the War of Independence. The fact that the Martians follow the same route that the British troops took from Concord to Lexington in 1776 must have had a major impact on readers, not only playing on their sense of geographical belonging (the United States *instead* of the United Kingdom), but also appealing to the roots of their national identity (the United States *against* the United Kingdom). The Martians thus turn out, on a subliminal level,

War of the Worlds”, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), 18 (1-2), Spring-Fall 2012, p. 136.

³³ See B. BERGONZI, *The Early H.G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Novels*, Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1961, p. 127.

³⁴ See P. KÁROLY, “The Analogical Alien: Constructing and Construing Extraterrestrial Invasion in Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*”, p. 146, n. 2.

³⁵ P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 165.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 192.

³⁷ H.G. WELLS, *The Future in America: A Search after Realities*, London, George Bell, 1906, pp. 287-88.

³⁸ The episode had been requested by Heinemann in order to increase the number of the volume’s pages: it is the so-called ‘Soldier Episode’, or ‘Artilleryman Episode’. See P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, pp. 198-99.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 199.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

to be the heirs of those same Englishmen who were called ‘tyrants’ and ‘oppressors’ in the Declaration of Independence. Should we suggest that, for Americans, ‘beauty’ is a component of that ‘pursuit of happiness’ foregrounded in the very Declaration quoted above, we could assume that the Martians, at least as ugly and nasty as the British, embody the fear that such a pursuit might fail. But this relocation also gives the reader hope – the hope that, just as the Americans defeated the British in the past, so could they defeat the Martians today or in the future. Similarly, the idea of Martians marching across the Brooklyn Bridge on Christmas Eve (24 December 1897)⁴¹ speaks volumes about the construction of a threat to the values of Christianity on which much of Western society is based, as well as to the collective imagination, according to which Christmas celebrations are one of the typical expressions of the beauty/happiness we have spoken of.

Who, then, is responsible for preserving this beauty, which is also a piece of happiness? Certainly not the narrator, whose fundamental role is neither resistance nor resilience but, simply, the telling of a story. Just as with Scheherazade, the Melvillian Ishmael, or John Watson, the narrator can do nothing but narrate. And in this case, he is telling the story of what he perceives to be the irreversible decline of beauty. Sometimes assuming the characteristics of a *voyeur*, sometimes those of a *flâneur*, he becomes the symbol of a twilight phase of Western society that is already heading for a wasteland status. Jonathan Jones, a critic for *The Guardian*, used this very term in his 2011 article to describe the devastated London of Wells’ novel – “eerie wasteland”.⁴² And it will only be thanks to the *deus ex machina* of a new and powerful, albeit elemental, coalition between God and Science that the narrator – and, with him, humankind – will be able to survive the end of beauty. This concept of beauty is to be interpreted not only in an aesthetic key, but as a cultural heritage to be preserved.

4. *Just Invaders*

In the same period that we are examining (between the ‘Gay Nineties’ and the ‘Progressive Era’), the adventures of Sherlock Holmes also migrated to the United States, but the setting remained the one chosen by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; on the contrary, Wells’ Martians land in America instead of Europe. And – this being no small detail – not only are they scary, but they are ugly and make ugly noises, too. In 1938, Orson Welles even had to cut the Martians’ noises because they were too frightening for radio audiences. In the original, the Martians simply say “Ulla! Ulla!”, but, when pronouncing this in English, something very similar to ‘ALALÀ’ comes out, which in 1938 would certainly not remind listeners of the ancient Greek war cry,⁴³ also used by Italian poets Giovanni Pascoli and Gabriele D’Annunzio, but of the far more sinister motto of the Fascists.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

⁴² Quoted *ibidem*, p. 13.

⁴³ See <http://www.alpinimilanocentro.it/bollettini/pagine1518/1917-08-09/alala.htm> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

Oscar Wilde used to say that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, and Gustav Klimt wrote something similar: “Those who can see beautiful things have beauty within themselves”.⁴⁴ What about *hearing* beauty or ugliness? These maxims, both of which belong to the period under consideration, can serve as a guide to understanding the end of beauty to which I have alluded. We see / hear beauty as long as we have it inside us, but we stop seeing / hearing it when we lack it. In other words, in order to understand utopias and follow the guidelines of a more just society, we ought to *believe* in beauty – the beauty of an ideal, of the state, of the planet; conversely, if we have emptiness within us, if we have introjected evil, we will lose our capability to recognise the real beauty. And it is here, in this *fin de siècle / fin du globe* full of anxieties, in this “dying world”,⁴⁵ that the Martians arrive as perfect invaders capable of annihilating our species: ugly, deformed, evil, bestial, impossible to look at (and to listen to). As much as the Martians of utopian novels were “comforting”, Wells’ ones are “malevolent”.⁴⁶ Darko Suvin has suggested that Wells paved the way for modern science fiction by offering a model of the ugly, evil alien,⁴⁷ and that he even gave a “Goebbelsian” representation of otherness.⁴⁸

The so-called ‘Gay Nineties’ are a complex period (the phrase was coined only later, in the 1920s, and is now obsolete after being associated with the last decade of the twentieth century, when ‘gay’ took on a new meaning).⁴⁹ They owe their name to the expression used by artist Richard V. Culter, an advertising illustrator for the most popular magazines of the time, including *Cosmopolitan* itself, to refer to a series of his drawings for *Life*. But the ‘gaiety’ is only superficial, for part of those years was marked, in the US, by economic crises, the Panic of 1893, a long depression and periods of severe drought especially in the Plains areas and the West. In contrast, the Progressive Era (1896-1916), which partly coincides with the aforementioned Gay Nineties, can be described as a period of activism and political reforms including civil service regulations, food safety laws, and greater political rights for women and workers; in addition, 15 million immigrants entered the United States. It is also remembered as a period of peace, prosperity, and progress.⁵⁰

What do the Martians have to do with all this? How do these potential space invaders fit into the socio-political framework of turn-of-the-century America? Why were (and still are) readers attracted by the tales of invasion and interplanetary conflicts (*The War of the Worlds* has never been out of print since its publication in 1898)⁵¹ rather than urged by the wise suggestions American astronomer Percival Lowell gave

⁴⁴ Exhibition: *Klimt. L'uomo, l'artista, il suo mondo*, 12 April -24 July 2022, Galleria d'Arte Moderna Ricci Oddi, Piacenza.

⁴⁵ M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, London, William Heinemann, 1895, p. 6.

⁴⁶ R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 141.

⁴⁷ See D. SUVIN, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, New Haven, CT, Yale U.P., 1979.

⁴⁸ See D. SUVIN, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, Kent, OH, Kent State U.P., 1988, p. 78.

⁴⁹ See <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/progressive-era-to-new-era-1900-1929/> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ See R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 13.

them in his three books devoted to Mars?⁵² The vision of ugly and wicked Martians must necessarily be a motivation for the success of the work. The end of beauty, or rather the confinement of beauty to the Earth (or, better still, to the West, and in the form of ruins), suggests that monsters and deformities may exist beyond the borders and beyond the Frontier. The cylindrical object from Space is called ‘The Thing’ when it is not yet known whether *it* is or contains living matter, and only later is it discovered that “the cylinder was artificial”.⁵³ When the object opens, observers expect to see a human form emerge – “possibly something a little unlike us terrestrial men, but in all essentials a man” – but what actually emerges is “something resembling a little grey snake” armed with “tentacles”.⁵⁴ The reaction of the onlookers is mixed with “horror” and “terror”, two words that alternate throughout the chapter. The alien’s body consists of a large head in which the eyes, mouth, and a single ear are distributed in a less-than-anthropomorphic manner; the skin is dark and oily, the limbs are replaced by tentacles, and the entire organism is shaken by constant quivers:

A big greyish rounded bulk, the size, perhaps, of a bear, was rising slowly and painfully out of the cylinder. As it bulged up and caught the light, it glistened like wet leather. Two large dark-coloured eyes were regarding me steadfastly. The mass that framed them, the head of the thing, was rounded, and had, one might say, a face. There was a mouth under the eyes, the lipless brim of which quivered and panted, and dropped saliva. The whole creature heaved and pulsated convulsively. A lank tentacular appendage gripped the edge of the cylinder, another swayed in the air. Those who have never seen a living Martian can scarcely imagine the strange horror of its appearance. The peculiar V-shaped mouth with its pointed upper lip, the absence of brow ridges, the absence of a chin beneath the wedgelike lower lip, the incessant quivering of this mouth, the Gorgon groups of tentacles, the tumultuous breathing of the lungs in a strange atmosphere, the evident heaviness and painfulness of movement due to the greater gravitational energy of the earth – above all, the extraordinary intensity of the immense eyes – were at once vital, intense, inhuman, crippled and monstrous. There was something fungoid in the oily brown skin, something in the clumsy deliberation of the tedious movements unspeakably nasty. Even at this first encounter, this first glimpse, I was overcome with disgust and dread.⁵⁵

The Martians are repeatedly described as “ugly brutes” or “the most unearthly creatures it is possible to conceive”, and it is made clear that they do not wear clothes.⁵⁶ Interestingly, they are one with the cylinders that contain them – “their cyborg bodies

⁵² See P. LOWELL, *Mars*, Boston, Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1895; *Mars and Its Canals*, New York, Macmillan, 1906; and *Mars as the Abode of Life*, New York, Macmillan, 1908. According to the sources consulted here, Wells did not know Lowell when he wrote his novel, although reading *Mars* might have influenced him in the process (see S.J. DICK, *The Biological Universe: The Twentieth-Century Extraterrestrial Life Debate and the Limits of Science*, Cambridge, CUP, 1996). It is true that Wells, in his article “The Things That Live on Mars” (*Cosmopolitan*, March 1908), refers to Lowell as a ‘friend’, but, according to Robert Crossley, if there was friendship it must have been recent, since Lowell is not mentioned at all in *The War of the Worlds* (see R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, pp. 322, 115). In any case, the fact that Wells does not picture Martians “as human look-alikes” rather suggests that “Darwin, not Lowell, is the key intellectual influence on Wells’s Martians” (*ibidem*, p. 113).

⁵³ H.G. WELLS, *The War of the Worlds*, e-artnow, 2015, p. 5, Kindle Edition.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11. This is the description of the first apparition, the first time a cylinder opens (Chapter 4).

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 12, 77, 80.

are hidden by the machines that encase them”⁵⁷ – and their physical monstrosity is of a piece with the war machines: indeed, the tripods with which they set out to conquer the planet are called “monstrous machines”.⁵⁸ Here Wells voices an elaborate critique of the relationship between body and technology. It is true, as Christopher Keep writes, that “Martians’ mechanical prostheses have rendered their bodies obsolete”,⁵⁹ but it is also true that these bodies – almost absent with respect to the size of their heads and tentacles – do not respond to any aesthetic category, do not even have anything that evokes a kind of ethereal, slender, spiritual beauty, but rather confirm a total alienation from the beautiful and the sublime. Both of them – bodies and machines – are capable of evoking disgust and revulsion: but while the former reflect the fear of wilderness (they are brutes, naked and dark-skinned), the latter betray the anxiety arising from an excess of technological progress that seems to anticipate Ray Bradbury’s “mechanical wilderness”.⁶⁰

In a society in which beauty is gradually disappearing, then, the ‘ugly’ presents itself to Western racist ideology both in the form of nature – a nature that is rebellious and deviant, *unearthly*, but still nature – and as artifice: nature and culture are both compromised in this novel, which raises a cry of alarm against Aestheticism on the one hand, and against the emerging mass culture on the other. It is not by chance that, following the sensation caused by the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, the Mercury Theatre on Air found a sponsor in the Campbell Soup Company and changed its name to the Campbell Playhouse (December 1938 - March 1940).⁶¹ Of course, we now know about ‘convergence culture’⁶² and so we know that it was precisely convergence culture that made it possible for a British novel of the late 1890s to *collide* with American radio in the late 1930s, and for fictional Martian metal cylinders to remind real listeners and consumers of the most famous soup can in the Western world.⁶³

The War of the Worlds became one of the first mass products in the world of culture, and perhaps, at least in part, precisely because of its (possibly unintentional) unmasking of ‘beauty’. Wells tells us of the end of beauty by suggesting that we should expect a season of war (World War I would break out seventeen years later). At the same time, he leaves us with a bitter taste in our mouths, because the only way out in the story is through bacteria. This is an ambiguous solution because he positions them on the borderline between metaphysics and science; but still they solve the problem, so much so that the Martian invasion will be downgraded to “more purgative apocalypse than catastrophe”.⁶⁴ After all, I think the most interesting and least investigated line

⁵⁷ S.J. JAMES, “Witnessing the End of the World: H.G. Wells’ Educational Apocalypses”, *Literature and Theology*, 6 (4), December 2012, p. 466.

⁵⁸ H.G. WELLS, *The War of the Worlds*, e-artnow, 2015, p. 28, Kindle Edition.

⁵⁹ C. KEEP, “H.G. Wells and the End of the Body”, *Victorian Review*, 23 (2), Winter 1997, p. 237.

⁶⁰ R. BRADBURY, “The Million Year Picnic”, in ID., *The Martian Chronicles*, New York, Harper Collins, (1951) 2014, p. 177, <https://d-pdf.com/book/3981/read> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

⁶¹ See <https://orsonwelles.indiana.edu/collections/show/3> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

⁶² See H. JENKINS, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, New York U.P., 2006.

⁶³ The company was founded in 1869 – twenty years before Wells’ novel was published. With Welles’ radio-drama the circle was closed.

⁶⁴ H. JENKINS, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p. 465.

in the entire novel is a question one character asks the narrator: “What are these Martians?”, with the answer sounding even more significant: “What are we?” It is, in fact, a different question that projects the former one onto an existential level.⁶⁵

In conclusion, Wells’ novel is fully situated in its time, whether we refer to England or the United States, but it is with regard to the latter that it creates a discontinuity, since it does not fit into the utopian genre but overturns its assumptions. Certainly, Wells is concerned about the end of civilisation and society, a concern he had well highlighted in *The Time Machine*, where it becomes clear that progress may lead to “degeneration” and “extinction”.⁶⁶ On the other hand, by drawing more on the genre of “war-scare literature”⁶⁷ than the scientific-romance field, he offers us a new enemy from outer space on a silver platter, an enemy that will inaugurate a seemingly inexhaustible strand on the level of the imagination, and that will plunge the West into a logic of permanent conflict on the level of reality.

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⁶⁵ H.G. WELLS, *The War of the Worlds*, e-artnow, 2015, p. 42, Kindle Edition.

⁶⁶ From Wells’ letter to the director of *The British Weekly*, 26 June 1939, quoted in P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 37.

⁶⁷ “Wells’s story possessed a strong contemporary resonance at a time of growing tensions between the USA and Spain over Cuba” (P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 206).

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LORENZO SANTI*

Writing the Occult: A Reading of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*

Abstract: This article examines the rhetoric of the occult in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), also known as *Vril: The Power of the Coming Race*, by placing the novel in the context of the late nineteenth-century Occult Revival. A writer, aristocrat, politician and Secretary of State for the Colonies when Benjamin Disraeli was Prime Minister, Bulwer-Lytton was one of the most eminent occultists of the Victorian age and a firm believer in the redemptive power of magic. As such, he supported the idea that occult practices could provide access to the deepest mysteries of the universe, freeing man from the constraints of materialism and the 'sterility' of the positivist episteme. Interestingly, Bulwer-Lytton had privileged contact with the vast panorama of occultism thanks to his personal acquaintance with Eliphas Lévi, the leading esotericist of the day. By observing Lévi's work, Bulwer-Lytton had the opportunity to expand his knowledge of the occult and refine an imaginary permeated by it. From a literary point of view, this would find significant reverberations in *The Coming Race*, one of the author's most enduring works and perhaps his spiritual testament, a novel which is imbued with an occult imagery that will be carefully deciphered in the course of this analysis.

Keywords: *The Coming Race*. Late-Victorian Occult Revival. Eliphas Lévi. Vril. Hollow-earth fiction.

1. Late-Victorian Occultism

The closing decades of the Victorian era witnessed a revival of occultism in Britain. During this period, an increasing number of people, mostly from the social, cultural and artistic *élite*, turned to magic and occult practices as powerful cognitive tools, triggering what has been called the 'Occult Revival'. This cultural phenomenon manifested itself in a variety of ways, ranging from the publication of occult treatises and periodicals to the creation of societies and institutions dedicated to the transmission of magical wisdom. At the root of the Occult Revival was a general dissatisfaction with the prevailing positivist episteme of the time, the stiffness of Victorian social norms, and the perceived obsolescence of traditional religious teachings. In contrast to these seemingly sterile paradigms, occultists sought a new kind of knowledge and spirituality, believing that magical practices could enable individuals to gain access to the deepest secrets of the universe and reveal the truth hidden beneath the phenomenal dimension.

In his seminal work *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*, Mircea Eliade argues that the origins of modern occultism can be traced back to the figure of Eliphas Lévi.¹ Lévi, *alias* Alphonse Louis Constant, was

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¹ See M. ELIADE, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*, Chicago and

born in Paris on 8 February 1810 into a modest family. After spending a few years as a seminarian at Saint-Sulpice, he decided to abandon religious life in order to become actively involved in the occult, writing a series of works that achieved inordinate fame at the time. His *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie* (1856), *L'Histoire de la Magie* (1859), and *La Cléf des Grands Mystères* (1861) laid the foundations for much of the occult speculation that followed. As Alison Butler states, the “[m]ain doctrine behind all of these books was the antiquity, efficacy and ubiquity of magic. Lévi believed that the symbolism of all religions answered to the one universal faith based upon the doctrines of magic and that, through magic, humanity could repossess the divine powers it once held”.² Throughout his work, Lévi conceived of magic as a synthesis of all forms of knowledge, promoting the idea that occult practices could free the individual from material constraints and provide access to the spiritual world. At the same time, he held an elitist view of magic that was to have a profound influence on the Occult Revival. He openly claimed that only a select few would be able to master the secret doctrine, and repeatedly stressed the need for initiation to gain access to occult knowledge. To borrow Lévi’s own words,

Initiation is a preservative against the false lights of mysticism; it equips human reason with its relative value and proportional infallibility, connecting it with supreme reason by the chain of analogies. Hence the initiate knows no doubtful hopes, no absurd fears, because he has no irrational beliefs; he is acquainted with the extent of his power, and he can be bold without danger.³

Like Lévi, late nineteenth-century occultists had an elitist view of their art. They saw magic as a highly intellectual doctrine that was therefore inaccessible to the illiterate. In this regard, Alex Owen states that “[t]hose who dedicated themselves to the study of occultism and the magical arts referred to themselves as magicians without either apology or irony. [...] The magic that they practiced was part of an elite, scholarly tradition and bore only a passing resemblance to the folkloric traditions of a receding rural Britain”.⁴ As a consequence, late nineteenth-century occultists considered themselves as scholars wholly dedicated to the study of the gnoseological potential of such practices. Since they belonged to an *élite* of a select few, they were not interested in proselytism, that is, in transmitting their knowledge to the masses, but rather in dialoguing with other initiates with whom they shared the same concerns. In this regard, it is clear that late-Victorian occultism was very different from the Spiritualist movement that had spread through Victorian society in earlier years. As Owen goes on to note, late nineteenth-century occultism represented an elitist counterpart to the latter, attaching little importance to the previously celebrated and distinctly bourgeois practice of mediumship and tending to emphasise the relevance of the newly discovered esoteric teachings of the East.⁵

London, The University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 49.

² A. BUTLER, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 111.

³ E. LÉVI, *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, Engl. trans. A.E. WAITE, London, Rider & Company, (1856) 1896, p. 44.

⁴ A. OWEN, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

Given these premises, one cannot help noticing a clear parallel between late nineteenth-century occultism, with its highly intellectual components, and the scholarly breadth of Renaissance magic. Indeed, many of the characteristics of the Renaissance conception of magic seem to reappear within the Occult Revival. For Renaissance magicians, the study of the occult was inseparable from philosophical speculation. Magic was thus seen as the domain of a small circle who regarded it as an enriching source of knowledge. As Anton Faivre aptly observes, in the Renaissance “[e]sotericism was basically a matter for specialists, but while theologians addressed listeners who could understand, these specialists were more likely to address the cognoscenti, who by necessity, were other scholars”.⁶ Scholars such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola or Marsilio Ficino embodied the characteristics of the philosopher/sorcerer who sought to master esoteric practices in order to gain a deeper knowledge of the laws that govern the world. Therefore, they addressed their thoughts to other specialists rather than ordinary people.

Owen’s earlier reflections provide a context for considering another aspect of the Occult Revival, namely its syncretic nature. Nile Green has even coined the definition “global occult”⁷ to convey the mixture of European and non-European elements that underpins this cultural movement. For Green, late nineteenth-century occultism interweaves Western Renaissance magical knowledge with esoteric teachings from other geographical areas, mostly the East.⁸ The encounter between seemingly distant cultural paradigms was facilitated, at the time, both by imperialist policies that exposed Western countries, especially Victorian Britain, to a variety of non-Western cultural phenomenologies, and by the progressive refinement of linguistic, ethnographic and archaeological tools that drew attention to the remains of many ancient civilisations. With regard to the latter, the rediscovery of Egyptian antiquity played a key role in the revival of occultism. Occultists were not deaf to the widespread Egyptomania of those years.⁹ As such, they increasingly turned to Egypt as the cradle of magical thought or, as C.I. Leirich puts it, an idealised land of wonders where man could communicate with the gods and where magical enchantments were performed daily.¹⁰ Such a fascination would find an outlet in the occultists’ constant use of Egyptian imagery in their rituals, writings and reflections, as well as in the various references to Egypt in the literary works of the time.

Scholars have also pointed to the influence exerted by Freemasonry in reviving occultism. As noted by D.A. Harvey, the “institution of Freemasonry, which emerged in its modern form in seventeenth-century Britain, provided a convenient vehicle for the transmission of a variety of esoteric beliefs”.¹¹ Not only did a number of occultists

⁶ A. FAIVRE, *Access to Western Esotericism*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 8.

⁷ N. GREEN, “The Global Occult: An Introduction”, *History of Religions*, 54 (4), 2015, pp. 384-85.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ For more information on nineteenth-century Egyptomania, see D. GANGE, *Dialogues with the Dead: Egyptology in British Culture and Religion, 1822-1922*, Oxford, OUP, 2013.

¹⁰ See C.I. LEIRICH, *The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2009, p. 3.

¹¹ D.A. HARVEY, “Elite Magic in the Nineteenth Century”, in D. COLLINS (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge, CUP, 2015, p. 550.

belong to Freemasonry, but its very structural organisation, rooted in initiation rites and secrecy, provided fertile ground for the growth of this elitist form of magic. In this respect, an evident parallel can be drawn between the initiatory structure of Masonic associations and that of the occult societies founded in the late nineteenth century. Presenting themselves as places where adepts could be introduced to magical knowledge, occult societies became the mainstay of the movement. Throughout the decades, more and more people underwent initiation in order to be admitted and gain access to the occult. Among these institutions, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn occupied a privileged position. Founded in 1888 by William Wynn Westcott, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and William Robert Woodman, the Golden Dawn took the form of an “esoteric society for practicing magicians”,¹² attracting the attention of a number of notable figures of the time, such as Mina Bergson and William Butler Yeats.

As a concluding remark, it is important to underline that the Occult Revival rose in a historical phase of extraordinary technological and scientific progress, namely the Second Industrial Revolution. The groundbreaking technological discoveries of the time bore on the development of the movement in a contrastive way, as occultists increasingly began to assert the existence of hidden forces behind newly discovered phenomena, such as the electromagnetic field or X-rays. As Alison Butler remarks, this “[c]onflation of science and sorcery is characteristic of Victorian occultists and is a key feature in the nineteenth-century revival of magic”.¹³ Far from seeing science and magic as two separate and dichotomous realms, Victorian occultists believed in the existence of an inherent connection between the two, and claimed that science and technology could prove powerful tools in supporting their preternatural speculations.

2. *Edward Bulwer-Lytton and the Occult*

A writer, politician, dandy and, of course, occultist, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873) was one of the key figures in the British Occult Revival. As J. Jeffrey Franklin points out, “[w]hile he [Bulwer-Lytton] of course was preceded in the century by many students of the esoteric and occult, and while many of his famous contemporaries also attended séances or consulted mesmeric physicians, few were as informed or as influential as Bulwer-Lytton. He was a dedicated, life-long student of occult spiritualities”.¹⁴

Bulwer-Lytton’s interests ranged from social and political issues to the arts and the supernatural. With regard to the latter, this writer would come to be known as one of the most informed occultists of his time, drawing on the knowledge of secret doctrines when writing novels such as *Zanoni* (1842), *A Strange Story* (1850), or the later *The Coming Race* (1871). At the same time, his association with the occult played

¹² A. BUTLER, “Magical Beginnings: The Intellectual Origins of the Victorian Occult Revival”, *Limina*, 9, 2003, p. 79.

¹³ A. BUTLER, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic*, p. viii.

¹⁴ J.J. FRANKLIN, “The Evolution of Occult Spirituality in Victorian England and the Representative Case of Edward Bulwer-Lytton”, in ID., *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2018, p. 29.

a key role in refining his own concepts of art as “a religious vocation” and of the artist as “a priest”.¹⁵ In Bulwer-Lytton’s view, the artist, like a shamanic figure, was endowed with the task of capturing realities that transcend the material dimension and crystallising them on the page. In doing so, he was committed to reasserting the value of the spiritual dimension as opposed to the widespread materialism of the time.

Bulwer-Lytton’s connection with occult circles has been the subject of much debate among scholars. There has, for example, been much talk about his alleged membership of the Rosicrucian Order. This misconception was given credence by the author’s grandson, who said that Bulwer-Lytton was a member of the Rosicrucian Society and Grand Patron of the Order. At the same time, he argued that, as this was a secret society, it should come as no surprise that there is no document in Bulwer-Lytton’s papers which might shed light on the connection, nor any mention of it in his correspondence.¹⁶ However intriguing this theory may be, it is hard to get round the notion of there being no official document attesting to the writer’s membership within this circle. In this respect, Christopher McIntosh speculates that Bulwer-Lytton was chosen and elected Honorary Grand Patron of the Rosicrucian Society of Anglia in 1871, without his knowledge, and in fact he never attended any of its meetings.¹⁷ On the other hand, Marie Mulvey-Roberts argues that, if we assume “Bulwer was a member of a Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, his achievements in the arcane terrains of occult fiction may be attributable in part to first-hand experience. But his membership has not as yet been verified and claims such as that put forward by his grandson remain unsubstantiated”.¹⁸ Butler similarly insists that the writer had no connection with that circle, being “falsely rumoured to have served as the Grand Patron of the *Soc. Ros.* in 1871”.¹⁹

If Bulwer-Lytton’s affiliation with the Rosicrucian Society of Anglia seems dubious, it is undeniable that the author corresponded with one of the most important esotericists of the time, the aforementioned Eliphas Lévi, thanks to whom he refined his knowledge of magic and carried out a series of occult experiments. The ritual they performed on the roof of the Pantheon in London in 1861²⁰ and the occult experiments they conducted at Knebworth Castle in the same year are, in this respect, noteworthy.²¹ Bulwer-Lytton’s relationship with Lévi played a fundamental role in the writer’s existential parabola. His acquaintance with this notable figure gave him the opportunity to broaden his knowledge in the field and refine an imaginary that would be permeated by telling echoes. From a literary point of view, this would find

¹⁵ For a deeper understanding of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s view of art, see L. MITCHELL, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters*, London and New York, Hambledon & London, 2003, p. 131.

¹⁶ See R. BULWER-LYTTON, *The Life of Edward Bulwer, First Lord Lytton by his Grandson*, 1913, quoted in M. MULVEY-ROBERTS, *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 157.

¹⁷ See C. MCINTOSH, *The Rosy Cross Unveiled: The History, Mythology and Rituals of an Occult Order*, Wellingborough, The Aquarian Press Limited, 1980, p. 110.

¹⁸ M. MULVEY ROBERTS, *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, p. 157.

¹⁹ A. BUTLER, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic*, pp. 78-79.

²⁰ See R.L. WOLF, *Strange Stories and Other Explorations in Victorian Fiction*, Boston, Gambit, 1971, p. 262.

²¹ See G. GALLI, *Hitler e il nazismo magico. Le componenti esoteriche del Reich millenario*, Milano, Rizzoli, (1989) 2005, p. 39.

significant reverberations in *The Coming Race*, one of the author's most celebrated novels, in which references to Lévi's occult ideas are anything but veiled.

3. The Coming Race: *A Journey into the Occult*

Published few years before Bulwer-Lytton's death, *The Coming Race* (1871) can be regarded as the author's spiritual testament and one of his most enduring works. The novel focuses on an anonymous American protagonist's journey into the bowels of the earth and his encounter with the Vril-Ya, an extremely advanced race of beings whose customs, laws and history are described in detail throughout the narration.

The subject matter of the novel, namely the description of an underground journey and the encounter with apparently far more advanced beings than humans, should not be regarded as Bulwer-Lytton's invention. The novel draws upon a well-established genre in the literary panorama of the time, what Elizabeth Hope Chang calls "hollow earth fiction".²² Such a genre grew out of the attempt to fictionalise the pseudo-scientific theory of the hollow earth, which, although very old, experienced a resurgence of popularity in the nineteenth century.²³ According to Alessandra Calanchi, the modern conceptualisation of the hollow-earth theory can be traced back to the English scientist Edmund Halley (1656-1742), who argued before the Royal Society that the earth was hollow and contained concentric spheres similar in size to planets such as Mars, Venus, or Mercury.²⁴ Halley's theories were later taken up by John Cleves Symmes, a writer and captain in the United States Army, who gave the hollow-earth theory renewed popularity. In 1818, Symmes wrote a handbill addressed to scientists, academics and politicians around the world to promote his idea that the earth was hollow and possibly habitable.²⁵ Soon afterwards, he became the initiator of the hollow-earth fiction genre with the publication of his novel *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery* (1820), a literary translation of his own theoretical reflections. This text, which concerns Mr Seaborn's descent into the bowels of the earth and the encounter with the extremely advanced Symzonians, would have a great influence on a number of later works, including Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) and Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1890), among others (including of course *The Coming Race*).²⁶

In *The Coming Race*, a fictionalisation of the hollow-earth theory is interwoven with a pervasive rhetoric of the occult. In the words of R.L. Wolf, this novel is "[a]t once

²² E. HOPE CHANG, "Hollow Earth Fiction and Environmental Form in the Late Nineteenth Century", *Contexts*, 38 (5), 2016, p. 387.

²³ For a detailed account of the history and development of the hollow-earth theory, see A. CALANCHI, "Una frontiera sotterranea? La *Hollow Earth Hypothesis* negli USA", in J. MARTEN e I. KLAVER (a cura di), *Il (sotto) suolo e l'immaginario*, Fano, Aras Edizioni, 2015, pp. 121-58.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 121-22.

²⁵ See D. GRIFFIN, "Hollow and Habitable Within: Symmes' Theory of Earth's Internal Structure and Polar Geography", *Physical Geography*, 25 (5), 2004, pp. 382-83.

²⁶ See E. HOPE CHANG, "Hollow Earth Fiction and Environmental Form in the Late Nineteenth Century", p. 387.

the climax and the summing up of Bulwer's long love affair with the supernatural".²⁷ If it is true that the book is partly inspired by the model of *Symzonia* and draws upon the paradigms of the hollow-earth fiction, it is also true that it deliberately transfigures key concepts of the Occult Revival, thus testifying to the author's longstanding preoccupation with magic and the supernatural.

Key to the narrative is Bulwer-Lytton's portrait of the Vril-ya, a fully developed underground race provisioned with vril, a miraculous fluid that has been instrumental in the blooming of their civilisation. The term 'Vril-ya' itself, which literally translates as 'the civilised nations', stands out as a reverential tribute to this substance and its paramount role in the life of this race. Indeed, the mastery of vril allows the Vril-ya to fly, heal the most severe wounds and alter the very structure of matter. At the same time, this fluid has a highly destructive power, enabling the Vril-ya to easily annihilate any enemy. Most interesting is the fluid's ability to bestow wisdom and harmony upon its users. Since its discovery, the Vril-ya have undergone an extraordinary process of evolution, freeing themselves from the constraints of earthly passions. As a result of this process, war, hatred, conflict and envy have gradually disappeared from their society, and this race now lives in a seemingly perpetual state of interior peace.

As I will show, Bulwer-Lytton's description of vril seems to draw on a palimpsest of extratextual occult sources that, if duly deciphered, provide crucial information about the hidden meanings standing behind the definition of this fluid. Therefore, it is useful to take a closer look at this passage:

I should call it [vril] electricity, except that it comprehends in its manifold branches other forces of nature, to which, in our scientific nomenclature, differing names are assigned, such as magnetism, galvanism, etc. These people consider that in vril they have arrived at the unity in natural energetic agencies, which has been conjectured by many philosophers above ground, and which Faraday thus intimates under the more cautious term of correlation.²⁸

In this excerpt, the novel's protagonist compares vril to electricity, or more precisely to a synthesis of various phenomena belonging to the electromagnetic field. In doing so, he equates two seemingly dichotomous realms: the mystical and the scientific.²⁹ Viewed through the lens of late nineteenth-century occultism, this correlation takes on a profound significance, functioning as evidence of the interweaving of magical beliefs and scientific discoveries that characterised the period. Eleanor Dobson highlights how the conflation of the electromagnetic field with the occult was central to the Victorian paradigm of the supernatural, as for many late-Victorian occultists "[t]he matter through which light and electrical signals passed was envisaged as the same substance which allowed the spirits to fluctuate between visible and invisible forms".³⁰ Like many of his contemporaries, Bulwer-Lytton believed in the existence of a common

²⁷ R.L. WOLF, *Strange Stories and Other Explorations in Victorian Fiction*, p. 323.

²⁸ E. BULWER-LYTTON, *The Coming Race*, Peterborough, Broadview Press, (1871) 2002, pp. 45-46. In other editions, the book's title appears as *Vril: The Power of the Coming Race*.

²⁹ See L. MITCHELL, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters*, p. 142.

³⁰ E. DOBSON, "Gods and Ghost-Light: Ancient Egypt, Electricity, and X-Rays", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 45 (1), 2018, pp. 119-20.

thread between electricity and the supernatural, and claimed that electromagnetism, if properly harnessed, could unleash hitherto unimagined powers. Writing to John Foster in 1870, the author summed it up perfectly when he said: “I do not mean Vril for Mesmerism. But for electricity developed into uses as yet only dimly guessed and including whatever there may be genuine in mesmerism, which I hold to be a mere branch current of the one great fluid pervading all Nature”.³¹ According to Bulwer-Lytton, electricity might prove an extremely useful tool for accessing the supernatural, eventually developing properties similar to those of the imaginary fluid he described in *The Coming Race*.

At the same time, vril is defined as “the all-permeating fluid”,³² a definition similar to that of “the one great fluid pervading all Nature”³³ in the letter to Foster. This notion, which casts vril as the *logos* in the universe and as the intrinsic principle animating nature, recalls a pantheistic view that was already present in the Renaissance magical tradition. As Antoine Faivre notes, the “word *magia*, so important in the Renaissance imaginary, truly calls forth that idea of a Nature, seen, known, and experienced as essentially alive in all its part, often inhabited and traversed by a light or a hidden fire circulating through it”.³⁴

The Renaissance concept of living nature was revived by nineteenth-century occultists, who postulated the existence of immaterial forces permeating the cosmos. These theories certainly had a major influence on Bulwer-Lytton’s conception of vril. According to Aurélie Choné, for example, the delineation of vril is similar to that of the Odic force defined by Baron Karl Ludwig von Reichenbach, namely a vitalistic substance that circulates in the universe and is associated with electricity, magnetism, and heat.³⁵ There is also a strong resemblance between Bulwer-Lytton’s imaginary fluid and the Indian mystic Swami Vivekananda’s reformulation of the ancient concept of *prana*³⁶ as the synthesis of all energetic phenomena: “What moves the steam engine? *Prana*, acting through the steam. What are all these phenomena of electricity and so forth but *Prana*? What is physical science? The science of *Pranayama* (breath control),

³¹ E. BULWER-LYTTON, “Letter to John Foster” (1870), quoted in L. MITCHELL, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters*, p. 230.

³² E. BULWER-LYTTON, *The Coming Race*, p. 53.

³³ E. BULWER-LYTTON, “Letter to John Foster”, p. 230.

³⁴ A. FAIVRE, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 11.

³⁵ See A. CHONÉ, “La force Vril entre science, fiction et occultisme: les enjeux de la réception ésotérique du roman d’Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race* (1871)”, in F. WILLMANN (ed.), *La Science-Fiction entre Cassandre et Prométhée*, Nancy, Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2011, p. 111.

³⁶ Despite the acclaim it received during the Occult Revival, Swami Vivekananda’s view of *prana* actually derived from a misunderstanding of the original Sanskrit concept presented in the *Upanishads*. To truly grasp the essence of this concept, one must delve into its etymology, where ‘pra-’ means ‘forward’ and ‘an’ corresponds to ‘movement’ or ‘breathing’. Far from being concerned solely with energetic phenomena, the original Sanskrit term refers to a universal, omnipresent vital force, a breath of life in a constant state of creative expansion within the material realm. For a deeper investigation, see K.G. ZYSK, “The Bodily Winds in Ancient India Revisited”, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13, 2007, pp. 105-15 and D.S. ZOHERER, “From *Fluidum* to *Prana*: Reading Mesmerism through Orientalist Lenses”, in L. POKORNY and F. WINTER (eds), *The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 85-110.

by external means".³⁷ Choné also stresses the influence exerted by Mesmerism³⁸ and Galvanism³⁹ on the author's depiction of vril.

While it is true that the above theories may have influenced Bulwer-Lytton, it is my contention that the author's concept of an 'all-permeating fluid' endowed with extraordinary properties was primarily inspired by the occult meditations of Eliphas Lévi, and in particular by his concept of 'astral light'.⁴⁰ Lévi defined the astral light as a universal magnetic force and an "all-penetrating fluid",⁴¹ claiming that its control was the key to all occult knowledge.⁴² By controlling this substance, one could potentially alter the natural cycle of the seasons, simulate daytime during the night, establish instantaneous communication over vast distances, gain insight into events happening on the other side of the globe, and produce healing or damaging effects from afar.⁴³ Bulwer-Lytton's description of the powers of vril sounds similar to that of astral light. In this regard, we read that

These subterranean philosophers assert that by one operation of vril [...] they can influence the variations of temperature – in plain words, the weather; that by other operations, akin to those ascribed to mesmerism, electro-biology, odic force, etc., but applied scientifically, through vril conductors, they can exercise influence over minds, and bodies animal and vegetable, to an extent not surpassed in the romances of our mystics.⁴⁴

Both substances are thus presented as capable of healing and destroying, of building and dismantling. Interestingly, Lévi claimed that the magnetic vibrations of astral light could be controlled by a magic wand and that, when channelled into a human body, would give the magician mastery over them: "By the aid of these vibrations he influences the nervous system of persons made subject to his action, accelerates or suspends the currents of life, soothes or tortures, heals or hurts – in fine, slays or brings to life".⁴⁵ An obvious echo of this description can be found in Bulwer-Lytton's depiction of the Vril-ya and their ability to control an individual's psyche. As such, equipped with a

³⁷ S. VIVEKANANDA quoted in N. GREEN, "The Global Occult: An Introduction", p. 386.

³⁸ Originating from Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), a German physician and graduate of the University of Vienna, Mesmerism soon spread throughout Europe, arguing for the existence of a great magnetic agent that, in the form of a subtle fluid, would pervade all nature and the living world to various degrees. See A. CHONÉ, "La force Vril entre science, fiction et occultisme: les enjeux de la réception ésotérique du roman d'Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race* (1871)", p. 110.

³⁹ At the end of the eighteenth century, the Italian scientist Luigi Galvani noticed that a frog's leg contracted when its muscle and nerve were connected by a metal arc. To explain this phenomenon, Galvani postulated the existence of an electric fluid flowing from the nerve to the muscle, which he called 'galvanic fluid'. This discovery would attract the attention of a number of scientists in the following decades, leading to discussions and debates about the exact nature of the phenomenon. See N. KIPNIS, "Luigi Galvani and the Debate on Animal Electricity, 1791-1800", *Annals of Science*, 44 (2), 1987, pp. 107-108.

⁴⁰ Choné's reading of *The Coming Race* also includes a reference to astral light as a source of inspiration for the depiction of vril. See A. CHONÉ, "La force Vril entre science, fiction et occultisme: les enjeux de la réception ésotérique du roman d'Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race* (1871)", p. 111.

⁴¹ E. LÉVI, *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, p. 11.

⁴² See C. MCINTOSH, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1972, p. 9.

⁴³ See E. LÉVI, *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ E. BULWER-LYTTON, *The Coming Race*, p. 46.

⁴⁵ E. LÉVI, *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, p. 30.

vril-impregnated wand, the Vrilya are able to influence people's minds, hypnotise and control them, or alleviate their fears and anxieties.

Similarly, references to Lévi's occult writings seem to recur in Bulwer-Lytton's description of the physical appearance of the Vrilya. Throughout the story, the Vrilya are described as an anthropomorphic race of extraordinary, if disturbing, beauty. Much like simulacra, they both embody and muddle up human traits. Speaking of one of the Vrilya, the main character claims that it "was the face of man, but yet of a type of man distinct from our known extant races".⁴⁶ Thus, the protagonist's encounters seem to be filled with awe and terror, two interrelated as well as contrasting emotions reminiscent of the Romantic notion of the sublime and, at the same time, of the ancient Greek concept of *thauma*. Indeed, the Vrilya's ideal beauty conceals an uncanny menace, as if a brutal force were hidden beneath the harmony of their forms. As the character claims,

[m]y eyes opened upon a group of silent forms, seated around me in the gravity and quietude of Orientals – all more or less like the first stranger; the same mantling wings, the same fashion of garment, the same sphinx-like faces, with the deep dark eyes and red man's colour; above all, the same type of race – race akin to man's, but infinitely stronger of form and grandeur of aspect – and inspiring the same unutterable feeling of dread.⁴⁷

The Vrilya's face resembles that of the Sphinx, with its harmonious and mysterious features. Interestingly, in *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, Lévi states that

He who aspires to be a sage and to know the Great Enigma of Nature must be the heir and despoiler of the sphinx: his the human head, in order to possess speech; his the eagle's wings, in order to scale the heights; his the bull's flanks, in order to furrow the depths; his the lion's talons, to make a way on the right and the left, before and behind.⁴⁸

Bulwer-Lytton's characterisation of the Vrilya as winged sphinx-like beings seems similar to Lévi's description quoted above. In making such a connection, Bulwer-Lytton effectively equates this subterranean race with the paradigmatic traits of the Sage, portraying them as the custodians of magic and its groundbreaking power.

To explore further the occult elements contained in the novel, it may be useful to draw attention to the belief system of the Vrilya. In addition to their attribution of divine power to vril, this underground civilisation is said to be firmly committed to a particular religious doctrine. They acknowledge the existence of a deity whom they reverently refer to as the 'Divine Creator', the 'Sustainer of the Universe', or the 'Supreme Being'. The Vrilya do not ascribe human attributes to such a being and discourage any speculation as to its nature. Such a characterisation of an indefinable deity who, like a demiurge, orchestrates the laws of the universe, does not proceed along the lines of the Abrahamic religions, with their belief in a paternal and anthropomorphic God. On the contrary, it is reminiscent of the concept of the Supreme Being or 'Great Architect', typical of Freemasonry and of many esoteric doctrines. In presenting such an image,

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

Bulwer-Lytton deliberately departs from Western traditional religious paradigms and, in keeping with a common thread running through late nineteenth-century occultism, offers a perspective in which the occult and religious spirituality are inextricably intertwined.

Bulwer-Lytton's description of the Vril-ya's belief system also allows us to make a final observation about the occult rhetoric of the novel, namely its dialogue with the widespread Egyptomania of the time. *The Coming Race* is in fact replete with references to Egyptian culture. Regarding the religious sphere, for example, we are told that in "writing, they [the Vril-ya] deem it irreverent to express the Supreme Being by any special name. He is symbolised by what may be termed the hieroglyphic of a pyramid, A".⁴⁹ Egyptian imagery is also used to describe the physical appearance of the Vril-ya, as previously emphasised by references to their sphinx-like face. Furthermore, Egyptian features seem to underpin the urban structure of this underground society, as these passages illustrate:

Straining my eye farther down, I clearly beheld at a distance the outline of some large building. It could not be mere natural rock, it was too symmetrical, with huge heavy Egyptian-like columns, and the whole lighted as from within.⁵⁰

Midway in this thoroughfare we stopped at a building that differed from those we had hitherto passed, inasmuch as it formed three sides of a vast court, at the angles of which were lofty pyramidal towers.⁵¹

It is easy to surmise how such descriptions reflected the prevailing fascination with Egyptian antiquity that characterised the late nineteenth century. This enchantment with Egypt and its ancient past was then of a piece with the emergence of a romantic, if somewhat deceptive, view of Egypt as a bewitched realm, an idyllic topography that never really existed. Hence Bulwer-Lytton's further transfiguration of it into the fictional construction of a society where magic, knowledge and moral values were inextricably linked.

4. Conclusion

The result of a unique, creative blend of occultism and hollow-earth fiction, *The Coming Race* (1871) weaves its narrative tapestry around the American protagonist's subterranean journey and his encounter with the winged, sphinx-like Vril-ya, superhuman creatures of piercing, sinister beauty and extraordinary strength. As I have attempted to show, in depicting this underground race, and in describing the miraculous fluid ('vril') with which they are endowed, the novel engaged with the cultural climate of the coeval Occult Revival, an epistemic trend characterised by a strong shared concern with magic and occult practices, and the belief that hidden forces lurk beneath the phenomenal dimension. In this respect, *The Coming Race* seems to draw heavily on the occult writings of Eliphas Lévi, the most important esotericist of the period. In particular, I have tried to show that Bulwer-Lytton's definition of vril

⁴⁹ E. BULWER-LYTTON, *The Coming Race*, p. 73.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

derives directly from Lévi's concept of 'astral light', a supernatural force supposedly pervading the universe and exerting healing as well as destructive powers.

The occult rhetoric of the novel informs both the religious beliefs of the Vril-ya and their social system. The Vril-ya's worship of a nameless, indefinable deity departs from traditional religious paradigms and is more reminiscent of the esoteric and Masonic belief in a Supreme Being and 'Great Architect' of the Universe. Finally, the novel can be said to bear witness to the Egyptomania that prevailed at the time. Indeed, it contains a number of references to Egypt and its ancient culture which serve as a backdrop for the portrayal of a society in which magic, knowledge and moral values intertwine.

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Hyacinths and Narcissi: The Flowers of Uranian Poetry from Decadence to Modernism

Abstract: It was in *Love in Earnest* (1970), one of the rare studies ever written on Uranian poetry, that Timothy d'Arch Smith chose the name 'Uranians' to designate a group of English poets and artists who shared a common love for boys and poetry in a period that went from about 1880 to 1930. These poets resorted to a set of symbols and imagery as a mode to conceal the object of their writings, appropriating *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and modelling a real 'fashion', an artistic attitude that might well be defined as 'Decadent Neoclassicism'. The aim of this article is to examine the uses and functions of flowers in Uranian poetry, and more specifically two peculiar flowers often associated with male-male love as from the late nineteenth century: hyacinths and narcissi. One of the reasons behind their employment goes beyond aesthetic choices, as they are part of those ways adopted to conceal – or, simultaneously, highlight – the Uranian theme. Once outlined the polarities of an aporia of light and shade, candour and censorship, which can be traced in different hues in each and every author and text of my corpus, I will consider the possible Uranian influences on the works of those who, at least in their explicit intentions, would flee from such a poetics: the Modernist poets.

Keywords: Uranian poetry. Mark André Raffalovich. T.S. Eliot. Flowers in literature. Hyacinth. Narcissus.

... here shall be comrades thick as flowers.

JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS, "The Song of Love and Death"

1. *Uranian Poetry, or, Of the Ways of Evasion*

In 1893 John Addington Symonds, already the author of two of the first modern treatises on homosexuality, *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) and *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891), was asked by Bosie Douglas for contributions to his *Spirit Lamp*, the Oxford undergraduate periodical he had just taken over. Symonds's poem about the mythological figure of Leander was published a few months later; there, Leander is described as the "Living image of Uranian Love", an adjective that still passed "without offence".¹ It was in *Love in Earnest*, one of the rare studies published on Uranian poetry, that Timothy d'Arch Smith chose the name 'Uranians' to designate a group of English poets and artists who shared a common love for boys, less often for adult men, to whom they dedicated their works in a period that went from about 1880 to 1930.²

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¹ T. D'ARCH SMITH, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English 'Uranian' Poets from 1889 to 1930*, London, Routledge, 1970, p. 17.

² *Ibidem*, p. xxi.

These poets shared a set of common images and symbols as a strategic way to conceal the object of their writings, appropriating the *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and modelling a real ‘fashion’, an artistic attitude that might well be defined as ‘Decadent Neoclassicism’.

Edward Carpenter, William Johnson Cory, Aleister Crowley, Lord Alfred Douglas, Sholto Douglas, John Gambriel Nicholson, Frederick Rolfe ‘Baron Corvo’, John Addington Symonds, just to mention a few better-known names, produced and shared poems and prose texts, but also pamphlets, essays, photographs, and paintings about boy-love. Their source of inspiration, and somehow a handy justification for their art, when necessary, rested on the concept of Greek *paidierastia*, which was very common within the neoplatonic wave at the university of Oxford and Cambridge at the time. The word ‘Uranian’ comes from the theory of Heavenly Love (*ouránios*) associated with Uranus’s daughter, who had no mother: in ancient Greece, this kind of love was usually felt for boys in a phase of developing maturity who showed signs of intelligence, and with whom a life-long partnership was possible. ‘Calamites’ was another option that d’Arch Smith finally discarded, a word coined by Swinburne for Symonds and his followers after the “Calamus” section of *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman (who always denied any alleged allusion to male-male love in his work and life). ‘Uranian’ was chosen simply because it was frequently used in those circles, and because it was free from the scientific or negative connotations carried by ‘homosexual’, ‘paederast’ and ‘calamite’. The term had in fact become of common use after its adoption by the German activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in a series of studies published from 1864 to 1865 (collected under the title *Forschungen über das Räthsel der mann männlichen Liebe*, i.e. *The Riddle of Man-Manly Love*); both Symonds and Edward Carpenter took on the term (the latter, in *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women*, used it to describe a comradeship love that would bring about true democracy). Oscar Wilde himself must have been acquainted and at ease with the word, as he once wrote in one of his letters to Robert Ross: “To have altered my life would have been to have admitted that uranian love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble – more noble than other forms”.³

Such expressions had to remain unspoken in all contexts in the late Victorian era: if it is true that Uranian poetry was quite widespread and even had its own publications, out of that circle same-sex love was still deemed an ‘abominable vice’ and, also, an illegal act. Still, they found many ways to publish a fair number of poetry collections, moving quite deftly between censorship and self-censorship, and creating a little niche for an affective (more than aesthetic) propaganda out of a hideout in Victorian morality. *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture*, *The Quorum: A Magazine of Friendship*, *The Spirit Lamp*, *Chamaleon*, and *The Savoy* were the titles of the journals that hosted their texts as in a little, private ritual which only a restricted group of people sharing the same homoerotic taste could access or recognise. These works created a network of images and references to classical *topoi* and characters, but also to a post-Romantic, Decadent, and eventually wartime symbolism – flowers, war, death. Between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, before giving way to the semantic ambiguity of Modernism, an

³ O. WILDE, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds M. HOLLAND and R. HART DAVIS, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2000, p. 1019.

anchor of significance was kept in literary texts as well as in social constructions through traditional forms such as the sonnet, the pastoral, and the elegy. Besides prosody and figures of speech, the imagery had to be reassuring, too. In the case of Uranian poetry, saints, myths, narcissi and hyacinths explicitly referred to the neo-Hellenistic culture in vogue, while implicitly pointing to the gay subculture associated with it.

Flowers represent an interesting, almost obsessive presence in Uranian poetry, in most cases to be seen as a post-Romantic legacy, but also as a typical element of a Decadent decorative aesthetics. Although the outcome may often be repetitive, pedantic, and commonplace poetry, a number of more inspired and original works can be found as well. The aim of this article is to examine the uses and functions of flowers in Uranian poetry, and more specifically two peculiar flowers often associated with male-male love as from the late nineteenth century: hyacinths and narcissi. One of the reasons behind their adoption goes beyond aesthetic choices, as they are part of those more or less complex discursive strategies employed to conceal – or, simultaneously, highlight – the Uranian theme. Once outlined the borders of an aporia of light and shade, candour and censorship, which can be traced in different hues in each and every author and text of this canon, I wish to consider possible Uranian influences on the works of those who, at least in their explicit intentions, would take a totally different direction, namely the Modernist poets.

2. *'Making Cattleya' with Flowers: Uranian Love and Floriography*

The continuous movement among genres and semantic fields pivoting on well-known images sinuously draws on escamotages, camouflages, and dislocations meant to conceal the beloved one's sexual identity. Flowers are employed, just like various other codes, to veil meanings and referents in the poems. Several clusters of such images can be traced in Uranian poetry, some of them quite explicit, while others, like flowers, relatively more vague. The reference to classical myths, for example, or to famous gay figures and couples could easily ring a bell to receptive ears: Hadrian and Antinous, Edward II and Piers Gaveston, Zeus and Ganymede, Adonis, Michelangelo, Achilles and Patroclus, and, of course, Hyacinth and Narcissus. Sometimes there were also clear statements concerning the superiority of pederastic passions, or fairly evident contents, whether overtly sensual or spiritual, as when words such as 'guilt', 'shame' or 'foul sin' were attached to the poet's love, the most famous example being Lord Alfred Douglas's "Two Loves" (1894). All this might be accompanied by feelings of regret and nostalgia for the loss and fugacity of youth and its symbols (beardless faces, innocent looks and so forth). More subtle were the allusions to silence, pain and unhappiness as the only possible destiny for the lovers. This fate could be associated with other kinds of forbidden love, but also with Biblical and Christian figures, such as David and Jonathan, Saint Sebastian and other boy saints, or with Christ himself, whose image became more and more present in poetry as war approached.

One could also detect oblique references to 'the prince and the pauper theme', in d'Arch Smith's definition of the representation of a rich man courting a younger, less

well-off boy. Finally, there were flowers, one of the most common elements in lyric poetry, especially from Romanticism onwards, starting with Novalis's blue flower to Oscar Wilde's green carnation. Daffodils – which are the equivalent of narcissi – had already been extolled by William Wordsworth in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1807) in all their golden beauty and glee, while in Book II of *Endymion* (1818), John Keats showed a sleeping Adonis adorned with all kinds of flowers, mixing classical iconography with botanical details as if to represent the body's erotic vulnerability.⁴ Romantic poetry dealt with various forms of longing, more often than not with an indefinite desire, a mysterious aspiration, an unresting spleen, a vague sense of loss and/or unification with the infinite; in this perspective, flowers became an expedient for reflections, or a vehicle for giving vent to one's dissatisfaction with reality.

It was during the Victorian age that flowers were invested with a more 'scientific' symbolism, although 'floriography' (the 'language of flowers') had actually originated in France during Romanticism: *Le langage des fleurs*, the first popular book on the subject, was published in 1819 by Charlotte de La Tour, even if Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) had already introduced the craze in England, to say nothing of the orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's *Dictionnaire du langage des fleurs* (1809), which contained a whole list of flowers accompanied by their symbolic definitions. Floriography soon gained popularity, and publications of various flower dictionaries were quick to follow. They were all quite similar, containing an alphabetical list of flowers with their symbolic meanings and explanations regarding how these metaphorical traits variously derived from classical mythology, folklore, legends, art, poetry, and horticulture.⁵ During the Victorian age, the Romantic features associated with flowers became imbued with deeper secret allusions and worked as a means of covert communication, in a period which also witnessed a growing interest in botany. Indeed, Victorians often exchanged small 'talking bouquets' ('nosegays' or 'tussie-mussies'), which they wore or carried as a fashion accessory.

It is worth recalling that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Robert Tyas had published *The Sentiment of Flowers; or, Language of Flora*, which first came out in 1836 and would be followed by numerous editions up to the end of the century. The strict etiquette that governed social interaction in the Victorian era contributed to the creation of a set of images associated with flowers to express feelings and emotions that could not be spoken aloud; this was absolutely in tune with the sense of secrecy underpinning Uranian poetry, a strategy of communication between lovers (or, most often, a form of liberating soliloquy) while 'inking one's fingers', to reverse Mary Montagu's description of the Turkish *sélam*,⁶ but avoiding the hullabaloo, and dangers, of explicit homosexual references.

⁴ See M. ROBERTS, "The Eroticization of Sleep in the Poetry of John Keats", *English: Journal of the English Association*, 72 (276-277), 2023, pp. 40-54.

⁵ For an engaging survey of floriographical books and the usage of flowers in everyday life during the Victorian age, see M. KIRKBY, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion*, New York, Ballantine Books, 2011.

⁶ The origin of the western language of flowers was probably inspired by the Turkish *sélam*, a method of communicating (especially between lovers) thanks to which it was possible to send messages 'without ever inking your fingers', i.e. through flowers and objects. The recipient had to decode the message by singling out words rhyming with the object in question.

Symbolisation is extremely variable across space and time. European Decadence privileged a certain number of flowers: the rose was one of the Decadent flowers *par excellence* (as it had been in William Shakespeare's sonnets), and also classically Uranian, since in ancient Greece roses were a symbol of pederasty – handsome boys were called 'roses' in homoerotic poems, as in Solon, Straton, Meleager, Rhianus, and Philostratus.⁷ Lilies, orchids, and foxgloves were other allusive flowers easily found in Decadent writers (e.g. Gabriele d'Annunzio, Giovanni Pascoli, Marcel Proust, Wilde) because of their sensual features and perfume, this being another crucial element in Aestheticism from A.C. Swinburne onwards, including some of the authors of the Uranian group (Edmund Gosse, Arthur Symons, Mark André Raffalovich, besides Symonds and Wilde).⁸ After all, the strange beauty of these flowers can be easily associated with the refined, free, exotic, and mellifluous taste of Decadent writers. It is within this framework that we must examine the Uranian language of flowers more closely, because the imaginative influence and identity of these authors would also pervade the works of those who did not belong to their circle.

Similarly to other kinds of Decadent poetry, Uranian verse includes many sorts of flowers, from the most exotic to the most common ones, even though we can find a certain predilection for traditional symbols. The already mentioned "Two Loves" by Lord Alfred Douglas, ending with the famous line "I am the love that dare not speak its name", is a flower-filled Sapphic poem:

I dreamed I stood upon a little hill,
 And at my feet there lay a ground, that seemed
 Like a waste garden, flowering at its will
 With buds and blossoms. There were pools that dreamed
 Black and unruffled; there were white lilies
 A few, and crocuses, and violets
 Purple or pale, snake-like fritillaries
 Scarce seen for the rank grass, and through green nets
 Blue eyes of shy perwenche winked in the sun.
 And there were curious flowers, before unknown,
 Flowers that were stained with moonlight, or with shades
 Of Nature's wilful moods; and here a one
 That had drunk in the transitory tone
 Of one brief moment in a sunset; blades
 Of grass that in an hundred springs had been
 Slowly but exquisitely nurtured by the stars,
 And watered with the scented dew long cupped
 In lilies, that for rays of sun had seen
 Only God's glory, for never a sunrise mars
 The luminous air of Heaven.⁹

⁷ See J. GÉCZI, "The Rose in Ancient Greek Culture", *Practice and Theory in Systems of Education*, 1 (1), 2006, pp. 1-83.

⁸ For the role played by scent and perfume in Victorian literary culture, see C. MAXWELL, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture*, Oxford, OUP, 2017.

⁹ LORD A. DOUGLAS, "Two Loves", 1894, ll. 1-20, <https://poets.org/poem/two-loves> (last accessed on 25 November 2023).

It should then come as no surprise to learn that ‘evening botanist’ was a circumlocution referring to a queer man. The list included the violet for Sappho, the calamus for Walt Whitman, the green carnation for Wilde and his friends, and the pansy for all; since the 1920s, lavender was also associated with non-binary identities.

In one single collection by Mark André Raffalovich, meaningfully titled *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* (1885), there are references to botanical specimen of hyacinth, narcissus, honeysuckle, tuberose, meadowsweet, foxglove, syringa, stramonium (thorn apple), crane’s bill, hibiscus, philadelphus (mock orange), edelweiss, convolvulus, nenuphar (water lily), nettle, clematis, ivy, pelargonium, mimosa, and also abstractions such as flowers of the sea, of death, of the past, of love, of the wind (anemone). In a period when sexologists were attempting to medicalise homosexuality and politicians were criminalising it, Uranians struggled to justify it culturally and to encode same-sex sexualities through the various languages available, as Ed Madden explains in “Say It With Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich”. According to Madden, Raffalovich occupied a peculiar niche:

While other writers of the 1880s and 1890s were attempting to ‘write’ homosexuality through the cultural languages of sexology, decadent aestheticism, or classical literature, Raffalovich turned to the Victorian ‘language of flowers’ – a language of romance and courtship codified in the floral dictionaries and gilt-bound gift books of the period – and he used this sentimental, heterosexual, and usually feminized language to portray homosexual love. *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* marks a noteworthy albeit marginal moment in the larger literary exploration of homosexual identity, and a transitional moment in floral iconography: that cultural moment when Raffalovich coded homosexuality in the clichés of heterosexual courtship, queering the language of flowers.¹⁰

Madden sees the poet’s use of a heteronormative cultural code to articulate homosexual desire as resulting in a doubled text, “a queered one”.¹¹ Raffalovich, the son of a wealthy Russian Jewish family born in Odessa, studied at Oxford and moved to London, where he established a salon also attended by Wilde (who frequently taunted him about the salon and also his physical aspect). Raffalovich is mostly remembered for being John Gray’s lifelong companion and the author of sexological essays in French, rather than for his poetry, which, admittedly, was not particularly successful, although among the best within the Uranian group. He produced his first book, *Cyril and Lionel and Other Poems: A Volume of Sentimental Studies*, in 1884, the same year Kate Greenaway wrote her *Language of Flowers*, a gift book still published today. However, Raffalovich’s volume seemed to mark an end for this flower-code vogue, with “the loss of interest in the language per se and the beginning of a nostalgic sentimentalisation of this Victorian phenomenon”.¹²

On the one hand, Raffalovich seems to appropriate a language already clichéd and outdated; on the other, in an era paradoxically marked by both increasing openness in discussing homosexuality and increasing criminalization of homosexual activity, Raffalovich seems to have chosen an innocuous

¹⁰ E. MADDEN, “Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich”, *College Literature*, 24 (1), 1997, pp. 11-12.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹² B. SEATON, *The Language of Flowers: A History*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1995, p. 93.

code for something otherwise dangerous to represent. The language of flowers was explicitly a language of heterosexual love and courtship – primarily “the language of the love affair” and primarily a feminine code.¹³

Therefore, we could argue that Raffalovich did with earlier Victorian language what T.S. Eliot was to do with Raffalovich’s writing, as I will suggest in the closing section of this study. “By the end of the century”, continues Madden,

homoerotic writing was full of flowers, and by the 1890s, as Neil Bartlett has noted, flowers had become important components of “an elaborate imagery and system of beliefs associated with homosexuality” [...]. Raffalovich’s poetry seems to fall in a moment of transition, a moment when the language of flowers was readily appropriated, its heteronormativity troubled.¹⁴

Thus, Raffalovich can be said to have queered the language of flowers, “a language that was itself part of the very furniture of the Victorian household, those giftbooks featured on the parlor table”.¹⁵ This language of simultaneous evasion and encoding had already been purged from bourgeois sentimentality within *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in which hothouse flowers and orchids became part of a *fin-de-siècle* cult of artificiality. For his part, Raffalovich created a rich bouquet throughout his poetry collection. For example, orchids sometimes peep out, as in “Friends and Lovers”: “Perverse! [...] / Would / The lover of the common rose exclude / (As I his full rose from my buttonhole) / Your scented orchids in this Chinese bowl”.¹⁶ The title *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* is similarly allusive, with the tuberose evoking “dangerous pleasures” and “voluptuousness” (in the Victorian age, its perfume was thought to excite European young ladies) and the meadowsweet standing for “virginity” or “uselessness”. Together, they would symbolise the “nonprocreative and ‘dangerous’ pleasures of homosexual love”.¹⁷ Along the same lines, the atmosphere of silence and secrecy (another trope of Uranian poetry) pervading the book is linked to flowers, as their muteness emerges as a mark of complicit understanding: “If each flower cannot tell, at least each knows”.¹⁸ Interestingly, in the sonnet “Flower of Love”, Raffalovich combines the motif of silence with the images of a rose and an orchid:

Because we sing where loneliness secludes
 The sighing moonlit space for us to meet,
 Nor turn to part until the bitter east
 Our sad and crowded wilderness disclose,
 They call that sickly which perfumes at least
 Our mystic moments: not unlike the rose
 The foreign orchid flutters when ’tis stirred.
 Enough! Enough! Too much the world has heard.¹⁹

¹³ E. MADDEN, “Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich”, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁶ M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *In Fancy Dress*, London, Walter Scott, 1886, p. 56.

¹⁷ E. MADDEN, “Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich”, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹⁹ M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *Tuberose and Meadowsweet*, London, David Nutt, 1885, p. 64.

For Raffalovich, letting flowers speak their coded language is too dangerous: “while the rose is simply cliché, the orchid ‘tells’ too much”.²⁰ And so it was. Reviewing *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Wilde wrote: “To say of these poems that they are unhealthy and bring with them the heavy odours of the hothouse is to point out neither their defect nor their merit, but their quality merely”.²¹ The process of transformation from the “nostalgic, sentimental, heterosexual, and naturalized code” to the “new and wicked meanings”, to use Madden’s words again, had begun, and

by 1911 the floral had become so much a part of homoerotic verse that John Gambril Nicholson would call a collection *A Garland of Ladslove*, punning on the name of the plant. Not only could Wilde in 1895 refer to two young men as “flowers of the narcissus kind” to describe their sexual predilections [...], but an attention to the floral itself was read as a sign of sexuality.²²

If Miss Prism in *The Importance of Being Earnest* could say naturally: “I spoke horticulturally” (II.87), at one point Raffalovich himself stopped writing and turned to the ‘minor art’ of flower arrangement. He was one of the poets who succeeded in strengthening the mythological power of flowers in the *fin de siècle*, ‘catachresising’ their sexual connotation, making them physicalised recipients, parts of the lover’s body; he came just a step behind their final de-romanticisation, before their aestheticist banalisation and final sterilisation carried out by the Modernists.

3. *Narcissi and Hyacinths: Stratifying the Fin de Siècle*

In Greek mythology, the hyacinth originated when Hyakinthos, a youth from Sparta, had his skull accidentally crushed by Apollo’s discus and through the agency of Zephyr, who blew it from its course, while the origin of the narcissus is related to Narcissus’s suicide, after he fell in love with his own reflection and realised that his feelings would never be reciprocated. In *The Sentiment of Flowers*, the 1841 English version of *Langage des Fleurs* by Madame de La Tour, the hyacinth is associated with game and play; it is also described as melancholic, probably for its fate, as it “[...] weeps/all night, and never lifts an eye all day”. Interestingly enough, in the 1858 American version of the book, *The Poetry of Flowers and Flowers of Poetry*, the hyacinth does not symbolise play, but only grief. At the end of the century, in Greenaway’s *Language of Flowers*, white hyacinths symbolise instead a kind of unobtrusive loveliness. Finally, in the more recent *Tussie-Mussies: The Victorian Art of Expressing Yourself in the Language of Flowers* (1993), by Geraldine Adamich Laufer, blue hyacinths are associated with kindness and sport as well as with a vein of platonic friendship/camaraderie. As for the narcissus, its meaning is more stable: the flower suggests egotism, self-love, and self-esteem; the so-called ‘false narcissus’ also symbolises delusive hope. It is noteworthy that the etymology of ‘Narcissus’ comes from the Greek ‘narkào’ (‘to

²⁰ E. MADDEN, “Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich”, p. 20.

²¹ Quoted in T. D’ARCH SMITH, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English ‘Uranian’ Poets from 1889 to 1930*, pp. 30-31.

²² E. MADDEN, “Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich”, pp. 23, 25.

stun'), referring to the intense, penetrating smell of some specimen of this species.

Needless to say, in Uranian poems these two flowers are extremely common and resonant with a stratified symbolic imagery. Incidentally, the Uranian movement is considered to have begun precisely with the publication of the poem "Hyacinthus" by Charles Kains Jackson in *The Artist* on 1 April 1888. The first issue of the fourth volume of *The Spirit Lamp*, the other major publication affiliated with the Uranian movement, included instead the Hyacinthus sonnet by Pierre Louÿs, published anonymously and glossed in these terms: "A letter written in prose poetry by Mr Oscar Wilde to a friend, and translated into rhymed poetry by a poet of no importance". Wilde had written a passionate letter to Alfred Douglas, in which he praised the sonnet Douglas had sent him ("In Sarum Close") and compared the young man to the classical figure of Hyacinthus (the letter was later cited in the infamous trial).²³ Wilde asked Louÿs, who had attended the opening night of *A Woman of No Importance* (hence the allusion to "a poet of no importance"), to translate the letter into French and turn it into poetry to escape blackmail (the use of French was another 'way of evasion', as Symonds would call it, adopted by the Uranian poets). Wilde had written: "I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days", and, in a letter to Robert Ross: "Bosie has insisted on stopping here for sandwiches. He is quite like a narcissus – so white and gold. [...] Bosie is so tired: he lies like a hyacinth on the sofa, and I worship him".²⁴ In Louÿs's sonnet, the poet awaits Hyacinthus's return: "Va! rafraîchis tes mains dans le clair crépuscule/ Des choses où descend l'âme antique. Et reviens,/ Hyacinthe adoré! hyacinthe!/ hyacinthe!".²⁵ Douglas himself would contribute to the April 1893 issue of *The Artist* with a poem titled "Hyacinthus".

Narcissus appears in the works of a controversial author such as Eric Stenbock and is in full-bloom on the front page of the 1873 poetry collection by Edward Carpenter, one of the major Uranian writers, famous for his studies defending homosexuality, for his collection of gay writing and for having inspired E.M. Forster's *Maurice*. Carpenter published the collection at his own expenses, under the title *Narcissus, and Other Poems*. His "Narcissus" is a long poem in rhyming couplets with a classical bucolic atmosphere telling the story of the mythological figure, and also including a song allegedly dedicated to him by the nymph Echo. No real Uranian connotation can be found in Carpenter's poem, except for the fascination with the mythological figure, which was yet to be queered by the pen of Raffalovich.

In *Cyril and Lionel* (1884), Raffalovich had written: "Ah! dear, learn this, that love has many names".²⁶ The names of these flowers are quite common and intelligible. Together with other classical gay icons, Hyacinth and Narcissus appear as both mythological figures and flowers. In the last poem of the collection, "A Child's Vision",

²³ See L. DOWLING, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 1996, p. 149.

²⁴ O. WILDE, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*.

²⁵ X. GIUDICELLI, "Butterflies, Orchids and Wasps. Polyglossia and Aesthetic Lives: Foreign Languages in *The Spirit Lamp* (1892-1893)", *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* [Online], 78, 2013, <http://journals.openedition.org/cve/930>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.930> (last accessed on 28 July 2023).

²⁶ M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *Cyril and Lionel and Other Poems: A Volume of Sentimental Studies*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1884, p. 27.

a boy that picks “narcissi and hyacinths” has a vision of “a gracious knight of Grecian chivalry”.²⁷ Chivalry is another *topos* of Uranian poetry, strictly connected with the ‘New Chivalry’ spreading between the 1830s and 1850s within the Oxford Movement, which mixed neoplatonic and neogothic ideals and set out to romanticise homoerotic relations between men and boys (later on, it became associated with a right-wing aesthetics of body and discipline). Hyacinth also appears in “The Renewal of Love”:

The Sun did not unfold a sharper grief,
Lost dizzily in sorrow’s labyrinth,
When for the Lady of the laurel-leaf
He sighed, or wept for fairer Hyacinth.²⁸

In the same book, the sonnet “Narcissus” ends with a couplet that perfectly captures gay love through queered language: “A modern symbol of a soul’s desire,/ Narcissus blooms beneath the morning fire”.²⁹ The poem describes empty woods in an essentially traditional pastoral mode: only in the twelfth line do they become “visioned woods of long ago”, a phrase which romantically changes the horizon from a mere description to the poet’s personal experience, ending with an image of the myth. This is a good example of the typical Uranian adaptation of floriography and myth in *fin-de-siècle* poetry, with the progress towards the new century’s Modernist decomposition lying not too far ahead.

In *Tuberose and Meadowsweet*, the two flowers recur quite often: Narcissus can be found in “Mystic Love”, a long sequence of different types of sonnets:

Herald of beauty, well of early grace
And love, could young Narcissus see thy face,
A holy miracle, a marvel fresh,
Before the altar built of lovely stone,
His hearth would surely practise like my own
Soul’s worship in the temple of the flesh.³⁰

The figure also appears in “To Narcissus”, with the explicit address “O fair Narcissus! has he understood/ What pool this is and in what silent wood?”.³¹ The poet begs him to break the spell, to ‘unsay’ the words whispered by a god. Even more evocatively, “A Lover’s Apology” begins with these explicit lines:

When I call Hyacinth or Helen fair,
And Paris-like I love, or like Apollo,
O do not think me false, or my words hollow;
O do not scorn for this my constant care.
For I must climb each step of Beauty’s stair,
And Hyacinth or Jason I must follow,
Must southward hurry like the fleetest swallow,

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

³⁰ M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *Tuberose and Meadowsweet*, p. 22.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

Bearing with me thy kisses everywhere.³²

The poem is quite unambiguous as it goes on saying that Hyacinth must be followed upon “Beauty’s stair”: evidently, this is the right direction to pursue in the progress towards the lover’s ‘private’ self-fashioning – a self-construction through different phases of love (embodied by Hyacinth, but also Helen), already bearing “kisses everywhere”, a line that makes this poem particularly carnal and voluptuous.

In the collection *In Fancy Dress* too, even though the rose seems to appear more frequently, we find a significant recurrence concerning a hyacinth place showing up near Gaveston’s tomb in “As You Like It”: “Then shall I listen to your singing/ That languid music of some one/ Who heard the hyacinth bells ringing/ Ah! for slain Piers of Gaveston;/ In Warwickshire, that haunted us:/ The hyacinth place, the pleasing weather,/ On Blacklow Hill, near Gaveston’s Cross!”³³ In “Rosa’s Chamber”, chestnut hair is visible across “the blue of the hyacinth bells”,³⁴ and there are also references to “eyes the colour of the hyacinth’s blue”.³⁵ Still, the most resounding poem including narcissi and hyacinths in Raffalovich’s poetry is the sonnet “Ganymede of Ida”:

Death, lamentation, music, flowers, and song,
 Worship and scent and much idolatry,
 Incense that burns all day and all night long:
 For those the world’s desire – but not for thee.
 Thy perfect limbs we praise, but not with sighs:
 On the Hellenic brows, O tearless lad,
 Unaltered oleanders Grecian-wise,
 Serene and faultless and forever glad.
 But ah! for Syrian Adonis slain
 Blood-red anemones we twine indeed;
 And hyacinths narcissus-like mean pain.
 Such flowers should never fade for Ganymede,
 But where the ancient waters close and smile,
 For Hylas and the Darling of the Nile.³⁶

We can be sure that anyone vaguely familiar with the things of the world would have recognised the numerous references to Uranism in a poem like this: hyacinths are directly compared to narcissi, both referring to a common, unavoidable feeling such as pain. Pain is what Ganymede experiences, but beauty, and the kind of love associated with these flowers, should never fade for him, as for Hylas and Antinous, “the Darling of the Nile”.

Far from being exhaustive, this list of poetic examples aims to give an idea about how profusely these two flowers, together with their myths, imbued Uranian poetry at the end of the century, particularly in the poet that perhaps more than others epitomised a borderline between two epochs. Narcissi and hyacinths also make their

³² *Ibidem*, p. 56.

³³ M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *In Fancy Dress*, p. 20.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

appearance in an encyclopaedic bouquet in one of the poems of the sequence “Rose Leaves When the Rose is Dead” included in *In Fancy Dress*:

Red lilies when thou lovest me,
 White lilies for all men to see,
 And purple, purple clematis
 A flame against the sky

Heart's ease when men see us apart,
 Sad hyacinth upon thy hearth, –
 But poppies, poppies should we kiss,
 And poppies when we die.³⁷

In the language of flowers, poppies usually mean consolation, but at the end of the nineteenth century, as Paul Fussell observes, the poppy, which traditionally symbolised sacrifice and remembrance in English poetry, also began to convey a sense of homoerotic passion.³⁸

At the end of the Victorian era, the craze of the language of flowers began to vanish. The Great war would change forever not only the symbolism of flowers and its usage, but also the way of living relations with human beings and with technological objects. The time of Victorian sentimentality was running out; poetry would soon be filled with dead branches.

4. *Beyond Victorianism: War, Modernism, and Uranian Flowers*

At the turn of the century, the connotation of flowers developed along two major directions: the imagery related to war and the imagery that was to collide with, and partly be absorbed by, high Modernism. Flowers faded and became part of that ‘heap of broken images’ upon which T.S. Eliot built his Modernist epic. What I would like to point out in these final sections is that Uranian symbolism, in particular the one focusing on Hyacinth and Narcissus, played a significant role in Modernist poetry, and more specifically in Eliot’s works.

I would like to draw on a critical framework underpinned by contemporary paradigms of literary criticism that tend to abolish, or at least soften, the Victorian-Modernist divide, keeping in mind that it was precisely in that period that the First World War and the constructions of masculinity intersected the life and poetry of Eliot. Symbolism, Uranism, and Aestheticism were bound to meet the war itself and the soldiers’ notions of masculinity, resulting into an intensification of the homoerotic element in the poetry written by soldier poets.³⁹ The first to postulate this idea was Paul Fussell in 1975, in his renowned work *The Great War and Modern Memory*. As

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

³⁸ See P. FUSSELL, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford, OUP, (1975) 2013, pp. 247-48.

³⁹ See P. QUERY, “‘They Called Me the Hyacinth Girl’: T.S. Eliot and the Revision of Masculinity”, *Yeats Eliot Review*, 18 (3), 2002, pp. 10-21.

we have already mentioned, Uranism led to two modes of influence in the early twentieth-century poetry: the representation of comradeship and brotherhood associated with pain and loss in war poetry, and the absorption and reformulation of myths and imagery in Modernist writing. In Eliot, the two polarities met, as we shall see shortly.

Recent criticism on Modernism has argued in favour of a continuity, rather than a break, with Victorian poetics, analysing different aspects, from gender to culture and aesthetics. After the classic studies on the transition from the Victorian Age to Modernism by scholars such as Stefano Evangelista, Laura Marcus, and Vincent Sherry, this direction also informs the more recent *Victorian Modernism* (2002) by Jessica Feldman, *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism: Continuities, Revisions, Speculations* (2017), edited by Bénédicte Coste, Catherine Delyfer and Christine Reynier, and *Beyond the Victorian/Modernist Divide* (2018), edited by Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada and Anne Besnault-Levita, among others. The connections we are trying to map here between Uranian decadent neoclassicism and Modernist impersonality follow the same route.

Fussell examined the significance of the historical proximity of the war to the homoerotic artistic movements that preceded it – i.e. Uranians – reaching the conclusion that the world of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, David Jones and others was one “of reinvigorated myth”,⁴⁰ due to a lack of ‘official’ information at the front lines, the resurgence of oral traditions, the desire to attach meaningful frameworks to the otherwise incomprehensible existence of trench soldiers. Myths were found where they could. Even before the war, Uranian poets used to write elegies for the death of imaginary young soldiers – another way of evasion to praise male-male love, false *in-memoriam* testaments for boys who never went to war. The elegies on dead boys were so fashionable at the turn of the century that, by the onset of the war, soldiers were quite familiar with homoerotic images expressed in verse – and in fact homoeroticism, rather than homosexuality, had a more meaningful impact on male artistic consciousness: “Indeed, the matter of male poetic homoeroticism, as opposed to nineteenth century definitions of ‘clinical’ homosexuality, refers not very much to ‘the practice of sodomy’ but rather to ‘a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul’, or, in this case, of the poetic consciousness”.⁴¹

At the same time, Uranian imagery penetrated the works written by authors who fervently repudiated their Romantic past, as in Eliot’s case, evolving into a new, richer symbolic structure which is highly multilayered, allusive, palimpsestic, and metareferential. Narcissus and Hyacinth constitute clusters of those symbols. A first example is to be found in a poem by Ezra Pound, who might actually have stolen it from other contemporaries, or the Coran, or again a nameless ancient Persian poet:

Hast thou 2 loaves of bread
 Sell one + with the dole
 Buy straightaway some hyacinths
 To feed thy soul.⁴²

⁴⁰ P. FUSSELL, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 124.

⁴¹ P. QUERY, “‘They Called Me the Hyacinth Girl’: T.S. Eliot and the Revision of Masculinity”, p. 10.

⁴² D. SWIFT, “Lost and Pound”, *The Paris Review*, 2 October 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/02/lost-and-pound/>.

Hyacinths often appear to be given as a present in Modernist poetry, a characteristic that implies some sort of reliance on, or openness to their symbolism. On the other hand, we will see shortly how Pound was to cut more than one suggestive line from the manuscript of *The Waste Land*.

Another notable author to consider is Hilda Doolittle, an imagist poet close to Pound and William Carlos Williams, whose works are characterised by a powerful imagery and use of classical mythology. One poem is particularly significant for our analysis, i.e. “Evadne”:

I first tasted under Apollo’s lips,
love and love sweetness,
I, Evadne;
my hair is made of crisp violets
or hyacinth which the wind combs back
across some rock shelf;
I, Evadne,
was mate of the god of light.⁴³

Evadne, the mythological figure who refused to marry Apollo and chose a mortal instead, is vaguely reminiscent of the hyacinth girl in *The Waste Land*, playing on light, rock, and hyacinths. Some critics and biographers believe, however, that the major inspiration for Eliot’s featuring of the hyacinth girl was Emily Hale, an American drama teacher and an almost lifelong friend with whom he frequently corresponded (he used to write twice-weekly letters to her).⁴⁴ Quite a conspicuous number of other interpreters believe that the hyacinth girl might instead refer to a man, Jean Verdenal, Eliot’s housemate and intimate friend for a short period in 1910. Verdenal died as a soldier in Gallipoli, drowned in the mud: he is the ‘dead by water’, and it is indeed to him that the poem consecrates much of its symbolism. The entire *Waste Land* might arguably be read as a long, disrupted elegy for his loss.

The first allusion to submerged homosexual connotations in the poem was made during Eliot’s lifetime by John Peter, in 1952, a supposition to which the poet responded with disgusted denials, also trying to stop the circulation of the article by legal action.⁴⁵ Many other critics have however pursued the same line, namely Wayne Koestenbaum, Colleen Lamos, John Mayer, James E. Miller, Peter M. Sacks, and the already mentioned Patrick Query. According to Mayer, the figure of Verdenal has a strong connection with the Hyacinth myth, depicting “a love between males that ends in tragic loss”;⁴⁶ and, back in 1972, Wilson Knight had affirmed that Eliot did not undertake to diminish this significance in his evocation of the myth.⁴⁷ Some doubts remain on this last point, since, on more than one occasion, Eliot would censor his poems so as to silence similar echoes. Apart from his private letters, two cases are par-

⁴³ H. DOOLITTLE, *Hymen*, London, The Egoist Press, 1921, p. 34.

⁴⁴ See L. GORDON, *The Hyacinth Girl. T.S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2022.

⁴⁵ See J. PETER, “A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land* (1952)”, *Essays on Criticism*, 19 (2), 1969, pp. 140-75.

⁴⁶ J.T. MAYER, *T.S. Eliot’s Silent Voices*, New York, OUP, 1989, p. 255.

⁴⁷ See G. WILSON KNIGHT, “Thoughts on *The Waste Land*”, *Denver Quarterly*, 7 (2), 1972, p. 3.

ticularly meaningful: the elimination of the poem “The Death of Saint Narcissus” in the American edition’s proofs of *Ara Vos Prec* (*Poems*, 1920), and the dismissal of “The Love Song of St Sebastian”, written in 1914, intended to be included in *Descent from the Cross* but only published posthumously in *Inventions of the March Hare* in 1996.

“The Love Song of St Sebastian” is an obsessive, sadomasochistic dramatic monologue in which the martyr Sebastian narrates the fantasy of his self-flagellation in the presence of his lover before strangling her. Eliot himself acknowledged the morbid quality of the poem in a letter to Conrad Aiken dated 25 July 1914, where he wrote: “Do you think that the Love Song of Saint Sebastian part is morbid, or forced?”⁴⁸ Probably the poem was composed shortly before the outbreak of World War I, and the mixture of war anxiety, bathhouse atmosphere (as it was said) and mythology is perfectly symptomatic of the situation. Nonetheless, it is quite surprising to see St Sebastian untraditionally portrayed as engaged in a sadomasochistic deadly moment *with a lady*, dying on a woman’s breast: a sort of act *manqué* which is perhaps more suspect than any explicit homosexual representation. Eliot himself tried to negotiate this image in a letter to Aiken: “I have studied S. Sebastians – why would anyone paint a beautiful youth and stick him full of pins (or arrows) unless he felt a little as the hero of my verse? Only there’s nothing homosexual about this”.⁴⁹ On this point, Colleen Lamos – an appealing source for those wishing to know all possible references to homosexuality in *The Waste Land*⁵⁰ – also believes that Eliot’s denial about these aspects in his works (like the suppression of Whitman’s influence) was homophobically motivated.⁵¹ Harold Bloom even insinuated that “Eliot’s true and always unnamed precursor was [...] an uneasy composite of Whitman and Tennyson”.⁵²

Let us consider now “The Death of Saint Narcissus”, a poem recounting

the story of a man who with the sensual self-absorption of Ovid’s Narcissus reenacts several ‘saintly’ deeds: St Augustine’s rejection of Carthage, St Sebastian’s legendary martyrdom at the hands of archers, and the second-century St Narcissus’ seclusion in the desert. The poem begins with a challenge to us, the readers, to differ from the Ovidian Narcissus by examining something other than our own shadows; we are invited to inspect the mangled body of the sacrificed ‘saint’.⁵³

It is a poem imbued with sensuality, through the discovery of new forms of body up to the final, masochistic transformations, when Narcissus enters the human world by taking the shape of a young girl raped in the woods by a drunken old man,⁵⁴ and then the divine world “by sacrificing himself to God in a climactic dance, after which he

⁴⁸ L. BELLOUR, “Eroticism versus Mysticism in T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of St Sebastian’ and ‘Death of St Narcissus’”, *Yeats Eliot Review*, 30 (3-4), 2013, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Letter 58, quoted in C. LAMOS, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust*, Cambridge, CUP, 1998, p. 83.

⁵⁰ Such as the readings of Fresca in her bath present in the drafts.

⁵¹ See C. LAMOS, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust*, p. 34.

⁵² H. BLOOM, *The Breaking of the Vessels*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 21.

⁵³ V. MAHAFFEY, “‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’ and ‘Ode’: Two Suppressed Poems by T.S. Eliot”, *American Literature*, 50 (4), 1979, p. 607.

⁵⁴ A situation which Eliot later recreated more guardedly in “Dans le Restaurant”.

at long last achieved ‘satisfaction’ through the love of his flesh for the ‘penetrant arrows’”.⁵⁵ Mahaffey continues affirming that in this “frenzied death-wish of a tortured, sexually androgynous and narcissistic man – his desire for release, self-extinction, climax, salvation and apotheosis”, there are no traces of Eliot’s characteristic irony, no intellectual response to the story of the saint.⁵⁶ Those rocks, the ones where Narcissus undergoes his metamorphosis, will be found in *The Waste Land* too, but in a totally different mood and style. Behind the self-censorship of the author in these early poems there is clearly the preference for an intellectual approach to his own experience. We also know that Pound had reservations about the acceptability of the early version of “Narcissus” from a letter of 2 February 1915; but “once incorporated into *The Waste Land* manuscript, transmuted into a disembodied desert voice and a handful of dust, Pound granted the Narcissus fragment silent approval”.⁵⁷

It is well known that the Pound-Eliot sodality aimed at reaching that detached, universalistic and ironic attitude that was to mark *The Waste Land*. An attitude of self-conscious disengagement from the Decadent movement, which, nonetheless, persisted in some of the connotations and imagery of later works. At the same time, the product of such a purge is part of a more generalised reticence connoting the male writing of the time as an adaptation to what can be called the ‘hyper-masculine’ ideal of Victorian-Edwardian England, partly due to the rising power of women and their socioeconomic independence. Query reads the entire *Waste Land* “as a representation of an embattled masculine consciousness drawn to the homoerotic but uncomfortable with changing 20th century sexual mores”:

Referring alternately to its hesitancy, ambiguity, homoeroticism, or even misogyny, readers have found it difficult to satisfactorily address the questions raised by the ambivalent sexuality and gender inversions the work presents. Several passages, including but not limited to key moments of *The Waste Land* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, suggest at once an intensity of male-male relations and a dispassion – indeed at times a revulsion – toward male-female relations.⁵⁸

Biographers have long gone in search of Eliot’s ‘true’ sexual preferences, his allegedly repressed homosexuality, or misogyny, or similar tendencies. Needless to say, Eliot’s ‘actual’ possible queerness is of no real interest here – as is often the case, one could virtually write from the perspective of any sexual identity without experiencing it themselves. What is really interesting is how the Decadent ‘bathhouse’ imagery and sentimentality were assumed by an author who seemed to despise both; if irony is one of the devices adopted to filter them, we might still find somewhere “a vehicle for the expression of a homoerotic impulse”⁵⁹ or, at least, its aesthetisation.

⁵⁵ V. MAHAFFEY, “‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’ and ‘Ode’: Two Suppressed Poems by T.S. Eliot”, p. 608.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 608-609.

⁵⁸ P. QUERY, “‘They Called Me the Hyacinth Girl’: T.S. Eliot and the Revision of Masculinity”, p. 4.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

5. *Last Year's Hyacinths: The Waste Land and the Flowers of the Dead*

“Do you remember/ ‘Nothing?’”, demands a voice in *The Waste Land*; in the manuscript edited by Pound there was a reply which was later cut from the final version: “I remember the hyacinth garden”. Numerous meanings could be associated with the hyacinth in *The Waste Land*, although in the final version of the poem the flower is mentioned only once, in the following passage from “The Burial of the Dead”:

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

*Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?*

‘You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
‘They called me the hyacinth girl.’
—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
*Oed’ und leer das Meer.*⁶⁰

Mentioned soon after a quotation from Richard Wagner’s highly evocative opera *Tristan und Isolde*, hyacinths are connected with a vague past, a (female) gender, a (specific) garden, hands full and wet hair, but also with a limbo between life and death, with the impossibility to speak, see, and understand, a heart of light crystallised in silence,⁶¹ the necessary silence after a possible intimacy in a (symbolic?) Hyacinth garden. A Wagnerian quotation, again, closes the short episode as if in a frame. It all sounds as a recollection of something pleasant and painful, mixing “memories and desire”. Reading it along these lines, after what we have pointed out so far, the passage might well seem a drier, more hermetic version of some Uranian verse.

In a poem where any act of intimacy between men and women is presented with detachment and disgust, the silence that envelops this sad, nostalgic recollection is particularly significant. In lines 35-37, hyacinths appear in two variants, related to a (male) “Hyacinth garden”, with a capital letter as if recalling the name of the mythological figure, and to a (female) “hyacinth girl”. In his Notes to the poem, Eliot foregrounded a connection between this episode and the context of the lady and the paralysed husband in “A Game of Chess”, with further analogies with the metamorphosis motif

⁶⁰ T.S. ELIOT, “The Burial of the Dead”, ll. 27-42, in ID., *The Waste Land*, London, Norton Critical Edition, (1922) 2000.

⁶¹ Noticeably, as Sibil, the mythological Hyacinth was also a lover of Apollo, the god of sun and light, truth and prophecy, among other things. Often interpreted as an intertextual echo of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the reference to the “heart of light” might also be associated with Evadne’s love for Apollo and, if linked to silence, with the city of London and its Dantean slothful crowds.

in *The Tempest*: “Those are pearls that were his eyes” (I.ii.476).⁶² In addition to this, Marianne Thormählen has drawn an interesting parallel with “the hyacinth girls” in August Strindberg’s *The Ghost Sonata* (1908).⁶³ Moreover, considering that lines 26-29 of *The Waste Land* coincide with lines 1-5 of the poem “The Death of Saint Narcissus”, there might have been an influence by Nikolai Tcherepnin’s ballet *Narcisse et Echo* (1911), with Vaslav Nijinsky playing Narcisse and Léon Bakst’s scenography. Indeed, Bakst’s image of the nymph Echo dressed in a purple tunic became famous at the time and was known in artistic circles as “a hyacinth girl”.⁶⁴

In their article “Lilacs and Hyacinths: Two Symbols of Sadness in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*”, Mariwan N.H. Barzinji and Ol’ga M. Ushakova analyse the symbolic correspondences between the two specimens in the poem, underlining how the degree of symbolisation and functions of flower imagery changes throughout the text:

In his early poetry flowers can be presented as an element of ekphrastic description ([the] nasturtium in “Suppressed Complex”, 1915) or a direct correspondence (objective correlative) for a certain emotional mood (a dead geranium in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night”, 1917). In *The Waste Land* Eliot employs multidimensional palimpsestic symbolic images with a complex system of allusive references and cultural codes.⁶⁵

The mythological roots of hyacinths connect them to an ancient vegetation deity of death and resurrection, in whose honour the Hyacinthia Holidays were celebrated in spring. In the tenth book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Hyacinth is an ‘April’ deity of resurrection – a trait that perfectly fits the mythical method of *The Waste Land*: “In this context, the ‘hyacinth garden’ and the ‘hyacinth girl’ can be identified with the spring ‘gardens of Adonis’ and ‘the daughters’ of Hyacinth. Also, Hyacinthus is a type of hanged God”.⁶⁶ This frame further projects the use of the flower into the broader context of the anthropological studies by J.G. Frazer and Jessie Weston. According to Northrop Frye, the hyacinth is also associated with the god’s blood,⁶⁷ which allows us to emphasise the connotation of frustrated desire and grief at the loss of the beloved underlying the passage in *The Waste Land*.⁶⁸ It is a matter of fact that flowers are intertwined with death in the poem: they are flowers growing from the dead land, from the stony rubbish, from a lost innocence and a lost garden; they are poisonous and may kill, like the *belladonna*; they can sprout from corpses in your neighbour’s garden. Hyacinths are used as a paradigmatic reminder for a lost lover; as symbols of a hidden love filled with sadness; and as an allegory for all the innocent youths that died on the front line. Moreover, they are flowers culturally and literarily associated with homosexuality

⁶² See T.S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land*, Note to line 126.

⁶³ “The points of contact between Eliot’s and Strindberg’s hyacinth girls are so striking that it is difficult to shake them off as being coincidental” (M. THORMÄHLEN, *The Waste Land. A Fragmentary Wholeness*, Lund, CWK Gleerup, 1978, p. 144).

⁶⁴ M. NASRADEEN HASAN BARZINJI and O. MIKHAILOVNA USHAKOVA, “Lilacs and Hyacinths: Two Symbols of Sadness in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*”, *Philological Class*, 25 (3), 2020, p. 177.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 174.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 175-76.

⁶⁷ See N. FRYE, *T.S. Eliot*, Edinburgh and London, Oliver and Boyd, 1963, pp. 65-66.

⁶⁸ See M. THORMÄHLEN, *The Waste Land. A Fragmentary Wholeness*, p. 144.

and, therefore, sterility, like Mr Eugenides's currants. This, too, is Uranian.

The possible influence of all these sources on Eliot's poetry is a matter of debate. At the same time, limiting or circumscribing them too much would certainly be wrong. On the whole, I believe that Uranian poetry played an important role in Eliot's production, directly or indirectly through other forms of art and cultural references, whether consciously or not. In spite of the difficulties in discerning a borderline, one can say for sure that Eliot's ironic, mythical method was not totally immune to the disowned Romantic sentimentality and 'hideous' Decadence: as is often the case, the process of *inventio* is never pure, nor is it totally innocent. After all, memory always implies desire as well.

More to the point, there are two poems that, in terms of images and spirit, seem to preannounce the hyacinth passage of *The Waste Land*. They are two consecutive poems, "A Garden in Donnington" and "A Narcissus", by Gascoigne Mackie – a minor Uranian poet only loosely connected with the tight-knit group – included in the book titled *Charmides; or, "Oxford Twenty Years Ago"* (1898), in which he retrospectively celebrates his university days:

Do you remember that wild tangled garden
Where once we lingered both of us together
An early summer afternoon alone?
The house that long had stood untenanted
Echo'd and echo'd to your mirthful laugh,
[...] As boys will do,
We talked in careless accents about death,
Of what the hidden years might have in store
For both of us, and of the hopes we shared:
At last descending, touched by boyish whim,
Or charged with sudden prescience of thy doom,
Thou didst stoop down and pick a white narcissus:
Half-sad, half-playful, – adding words like these –

'Receive this flower, and keep it for my sake:
And if hereafter you should change beyond
My recognition: when we meet again
Show me the blossom; so shall I remember
This token of our comradeship and you.'
And then amid the swaying orchard grass,
His cheek irradiate with the rosy glow
Of sunset, to the hum of quivering gnat:
Continued: – 'And if aught should come between
To blur our friendship; or if untimely death
Should steal you from me while I yet survive:
Wait patiently for me beyond the river,
And as I pass, pick me a white narcissus,
So shall we know each other and rejoice.'
And, when at last we rose, the trees were dark,
And ghost-moths fluttered in the orchard grass.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ G. MACKIE, *Charmides; or, "Oxford Twenty Years Ago"*, Oxford, B.H. Blackwell, 1898, pp. 33-34.

It is undeniable that this excerpt may sound like a prequel to the hyacinth-girl episode in Eliot's poem. It is, however, highly improbable that Eliot knew it, as Mackie was a minor poet from Hampshire, where he also took holy orders and lived as a curate. Nonetheless, the incredible resemblance appears even more evident if we assume that the imagery was shared by both: an imagery made of hyacinths as well as (premature) death.⁷⁰

Within a critical framework that resets, questions, and overthrows the Victorian-Modernist divide, it is now time to approach Modernist poetry, together with the literary construction of gender, by taking into account Uranian poetry and investigating its influence on early twentieth-century literature, which subjected it to a process of deconstruction and reformulation. The adoption of new critical lenses (such as Quantitative Criticism and Queer Studies) can reveal these hidden niches, in the attempt to uncover a significant part of the tradition that Eliot and his contemporaries tried to obfuscate.

The Uranian poet often "sought a visibility through which he could remain unseen".⁷¹ That is why Uranian poetry is generally stereotyped, full of clichés, recognisable feelings and imagery: a poetry characterised by poverty of the verse but uniqueness of the theme. As a Modernist and *avant-garde* poet, Eliot smashed well-consolidated myths and symbols, including such out-of-fashion ones as the language of flowers, and conveyed his message by way of broken pieces, broken lines, or a juxtaposition of fragments. In this sense, hyacinths and narcissi may be seen as incorporating both Victorian prudishness and twentieth-century guilt. "If each flower cannot tell, at least each knows", wrote Raffalovich. Silence seems then to play, again and again, a resounding echo throughout literary history: not with a bang but a whimper.

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⁷⁰ Interestingly, in the 1912 version of the book, titled *Charmides and Other Poems Chiefly Relating to Oxford*, there are numerous significant changes, such as the substitution of 'narcissus' with 'the star of flowers' and of 'untimely death' with 'untimely change', and the complete disappearance of the word 'comradeship' from the book.

⁷¹ E. JACKSON JR, *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation*, Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1995, p. 51.

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When the Novel or the Play's the Thing – *Fin de Siècle* Meets Sex, Class, and Literary Ambition

Abstract: The *fin de siècle* had been stirring writers to engage artistry in depicting class permeating society and the oppression of women under Victoria's regime. E.M. Forster's and John Galsworthy's lyrical style allowed them to explore what the Victorians had hidden: disparities between working-class England and upper-crust, and women's lives subjugated to the Empire's demands. In 1879, Henrik Ibsen had published *A Doll's House*, a precursor of what was to come. Forster and Galsworthy were more subtle and yet equally stark in incorporating society and politics into their art. The skilfulness of their invention lies in the ability to cover class, deception, deceit, and unlawfulness while beguiling their readers into a state of unwariness and then confronting them with the unexpected. In *Howards End*, published as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, Forster explores class, subterfuge, social borders and boundaries so as to incorporate into his lyricism the crushing of a last will and testament, theft of property, unmarried motherhood, murder or manslaughter, all the while painting a picture of bucolic charm and purportedly happy families and marriages. Nobel Prize winner Galsworthy's *Man of Property* (the first book in what became known as *The Forsyte Saga*) was published shortly before *Howards End* – similarly combining the poetic with the practical, the idealism that generated hope for a new world in a new century with the expectations that come with the pragmatism of a certain type of Englishman: 'my property', 'my own', 'my wife', 'my life', 'my family', the 'my' being foremost, yet challenged by the changes brought by the *fin de siècle*.

Keywords: Society. Class. Women's status. *Fin de siècle*. Henrik Ibsen. E.M. Forster. John Galsworthy.

1. Introduction

The *fin de siècle* stirred late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers to debate the oppression of women and dominance of class permeating British society. Class stratification was firmly fixed, and women, whatever their class, were subservient in law, politics, and society. Industrialisation brought change through the influx of trade and 'new money'. Decline of aristocratic families' wealth meant that, despite resistance, industrialists gained a foothold through marrying their daughters into established families, creating a solid upper middle class founded on wealth accumulated through acquisition of property. For women, the struggle for property and divorce rights had met with some success.¹ Yet, apart from a few who escaped through inherited

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¹ See D.M. STETSON, *A Woman's Issue: The Politics of Family Law Reform in England*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1982; L. HOLCOMBE, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth Century England*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983; M.L. SHALEY, *Feminism, Marriage and Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., 2020. See also Matrimonial Causes Act 1857, Married Women's Property Act 1870, and Married Women's Property Act 1882: Married Women's

wealth or by defying cultural (and sometimes heterosexual)² diktat, women remained subject to fathers and husbands. Sex-based suppression reached ungovernable heights under Victoria Regina's repressive hand, and status based in class remained transcendent. Nevertheless, E.M. Forster's and John Galsworthy's lyrical style allowed them to explore what the Victorian era had attempted to keep hidden: the gross disparities between working-class England and the upper-crust, and the way demands of Empire subjugated women and denied them freedom.

Class and women's oppression were not limited to the British Empire. Nor was critical literary exposure. In 1879 Henrik Ibsen had published *A Doll's House*,³ which immediately went into stage production at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen. Ten years later it first played in its original form in London,⁴ one production seeing Krogstad, the villain, played by George Bernard Shaw.⁵ Another, opening as the 'official' production midway through 1889, enjoyed a seven-day run in 1897. Janet Achurch, the actress who played Nora, was adjudged a brave woman indeed: at the end of the drama, Nora abandons her husband and children to 'find herself', leaving audiences outraged at a woman's desertion of her role, her place, her responsibilities, her very place in society.⁶ Finding herself was, for Nora, to station herself outside the boundaries not only of husband, hearth, and home, but to live as an outlaw in defiance of the laws of society.

A Doll's House was a precursor of what was to come. Forster and Galsworthy were more subtle, and yet equally stark in their incorporation of society, politics, and law into their art. The skilfulness of their invention is displayed in an ability to write of class, deception, deceit, and unlawfulness in a way that beguiled their readers into a state of unwariness followed by a confrontation with the unexpected (in each case a death resolving a dilemma), albeit it was this that lay at the heart of their writing.

Property Act, 1870 and 1882 | Towards Emancipation? (unc.edu); Married Women's Property and Divorce in the 19th Century – Women's History Network (womenshistorynetwork.org); Divorce – The National Archives; Obtaining a divorce – UK Parliament (last accessed on 1 May 2023).

² This included famous lesbian couples such as Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and other prominent women. See G. STEIN, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, London and Stockholm, Zephyr Books/Continental Book Company, 1947; Gertrude Stein | Poetry Foundation; R. HALL, *The Well of Loneliness*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1928; *The Well of Loneliness: The book that could corrupt a nation* - BBC Culture; V. GLENDINNING, *Vita – The Life of Vita Sackville-West*, London, Penguin Books, 1984; *The Paris Review - The Fabulous Forgotten Life of Vita Sackville-West* - The Paris Review; Trefusis, Violet (1894–1972), writer | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (oxforddnb.com); *The True Story of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* | Time (last accessed on 1 May 2023).

³ See H. IBSEN, *A Doll's House*, in ID., *Four Major Plays*, Oxford, OUP, (1879) 1981.

⁴ After much prompting, Ibsen wrote an alternative ending (with the implication that Nora did not leave) for the German production – a concession he much regretted. See Henrik Ibsen | Nasjonalbiblioteket (nb.no) (last accessed on 1 August 2023).

⁵ See the following studies by M. HOLROYD: *Bernard Shaw – 1856-1898: The Search for Love*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1988; *Bernard Shaw – 1898-1918: The Pursuit of Power*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1989; *Bernard Shaw – 1918-1950: The Lure of Fantasy*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1991; *Bernard Shaw – 1950-1991: The Last Laugh*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1992. See also *The quintessence of Ibsenism: Shaw, Bernard, 1856-1950: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive* (last accessed on 1 May 2023).

⁶ Achurch, Janet (1864–1916) | Encyclopedia.com; Janet Achurch - Oxford Reference (last accessed on 1 May 2023).

Following Ibsen, in *Howards End*, published in 1910, as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth,⁷ Forster explores class, subterfuge, social borders and boundaries – incorporating the acquisitive destroying of a vital codicil to a last will and testament, theft of property, unmarried motherhood, murder or manslaughter,⁸ all the while painting a picture of bucolic charm and happy (or at least settled) families and marriages. Nobel Prize winner Galsworthy's *Man of Property* (the first book in what became *The Forsyte Saga*)⁹ was published in 1906 – shortly before *Howards End* – similarly combining the poetic with the practical, the idealism that generated hope for a new world in a new century with the expectations that come with the pragmatism of a certain type of Englishman: 'my property', 'my own', 'my wife', 'my life', 'my family', the 'my' being foremost, and yet challenged by the changes brought by the *fin de siècle*.

2. *Here Come the Writers/The Writers and their Times*

Son of a Norwegian merchant, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was descended from ship-owners and merchants on both sides of his family. There are conflicting assessments of his early history, some recounting a decline in the family's fortunes from Ibsen's age of about 7 years, others contradicting this and the tale of his father's slide into alcoholism and brutality.¹⁰ It remains uncontroverted, however, that from 15 years of age he trained as a pharmacist whilst developing his skills as a writer, his first play – a tragedy – published in 1850 but not produced, although another was performed that same year. A dramatist, director and producer, Ibsen was propelled into this life when his desire to enter university was foiled by his failing the entrance examinations. His marriage in 1858 lasted four years in straitened financial circumstances, and he lived for the following three decades in Italy and Germany, rarely visiting Norway. Further dispute surrounds whether or how far his writing was influenced by his family circumstances and is biographical, but there appears to be agreement that, despite resisting the characterisation initially, he fell under the spell of Kierkegaard. His European sojourn – or exile, as some described it – ended after some thirty years, when he returned to live in Norway.

E.M. Forster (1879-1970) studied History and Classics at King's College, Cambridge. He was a pacifist, conscientious objector and met Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf. This scant recitation of Forster the man conveys little of his personality and contribution as a writer – albeit Strachey, famous for his *Eminent Victorians*

⁷ E.M. FORSTER, *Howards End*, London, Penguin Books, (1910) 2012.

⁸ This depends upon the character's intention: no one is more surprised than Charles Wilcox, with the self-assurance of class and position, when facing arrest and imprisonment.

⁹ J. GALSWORTHY, *The Man of Property*, 1906, Vol. I; *In Chancery*, 1920, and *To Let*, 1921, published with Vols II and III in ID., *The Forsyte Saga*, London, Penguin/Random House, (1922) 2001.

¹⁰ See R. FERGUSON, *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography*, New York, Dorset Press, 2001; I. DE FIGUEIREDO, *Henrik Ibsen: The Man and the Mask*, Engl. trans. R. FERGUSON, New Haven, CT, Yale U.P., 2019; Henrik Ibsen summary | Britannica (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

and relationship with the artist Dora Carrington,¹¹ and Woolf¹² were public figures with publishing profiles. His mother Anglo-Irish, his father Welsh, Forster became a child of a single parent when, shortly before his second birthday, his architect father, suffering from tuberculosis, died at the age of 32.¹³ Nonetheless, Forster had no need for paid employment. He and his mother inherited sufficient wealth from his father to enable him to travel to Europe (mainly Italy) and India – both providing him with inspiration and copy for his essays, novels, and other literary works. This included literary criticism and co-writing the libretto for *Billy Budd*, the opera created by Benjamin Britten. Committed to democracy, Forster was described as a ‘liberal humanist’, and Virginia Woolf wrote of him that he “says the simple things that clever people don’t say; I find him the best of critics for that reason”.¹⁴

Playwright and novelist John Galsworthy (1867-1933) was born in Surrey, England, the son of a solicitor, his mother and father divided by twenty years and status. Galsworthy’s grandfather was of the *nouveaux riches*, his wealth coming from trade – as a ship chandler providing goods and supplies in the shipping industry, then invested into real estate. Galsworthy’s mother saw this as setting her husband (his father) below her in the class hierarchy, despite his substantial inherited wealth and professional standing as a solicitor. Like Forster, Galsworthy junior had no need for earning a living, being in receipt of a sizable allowance from his father. Nor did he desire to enter the legal profession. Yet, as his father wished, in 1890 he was called to the Bar, having matriculated from New College, Oxford, and entered Lincoln’s Inn as a Reader. Rather than taking on briefs, however, he travelled through Canada inspecting his father’s property holdings, later touring through the Pacific, Australasia, and South Africa.¹⁵ History shows him as encouraged into writing by his wife, with the added fortification coming from two of her friends. Yet writing must have intrigued him earlier, for he hoped to meet Robert Louis Stevenson when arriving in Samoa (the hope was not fulfilled) and, when travelling from Adelaide to South Africa and Cape Town, became friends with Joseph Conrad, then in the British Merchant Navy and working on board as first mate.¹⁶

¹¹ See L. STRACHEY, *Eminent Victorians – Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr Arnold, General Gordon*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1918; *Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Arnold, General Gordon: Strachey, Lytton, 1880-1932: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive* (last accessed on 4 May 2023); M. HOLROYD, *Lytton Strachey – The New Biography*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1994; G. GERZINA, *Carrington – A Life of Dora Carrington, 1893-1932*, London, Pimlico, 1995; Dora Carrington 1893–1932 | Tate (last accessed on 4 May 2023).

¹² See V. GLENDINNING, *Leonard Woolf: A Biography*, New York, Free Press, 2006; I. COATES, *Who’s Afraid of Leonard Woolf? A Case for the Sanity of Virginia Woolf*, New York, Soho Press, 2022.

¹³ For further details see Edward Morgan Llewellyn Forster (1847 - 1880) - Genealogy (geni.com); E M Forster | The British Library (bl.uk); E.M. Forster | Biography, Books, & Facts | Britannica (last accessed on 5 May 2023); J.R. ACKERLEY, *E.M. Forster: A Portrait*, London, Ian McKelvie, 1970; D. BRADSHAW (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster*, Cambridge, CUP, 2007; W. MOFFAT, *E.M. Forster: A New Life*, London, Bloomsbury, 2010.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf Reviews E.M. Forster (Atlantic Monthly, 1927) (oldmagazinearticles.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023). See also Forster, Edward Morgan (1879–1970), novelist and essayist | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (oxforddnb.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

¹⁵ See S. KAYE-SMITH, *John Galsworthy*, London, Nisbet, 1916; H.V. MARROT, *The Life and Letters of John Galsworthy*, London, Heinemann, 1935; D. HOLLOWAY, *John Galsworthy*, London, Morgan Grampian, 1968.

¹⁶ See J. ALLEN, *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad*, New York, Doubleday, 1965; J. BAINES, *Joseph Conrad: A*

Ibsen died in the year *The Man of Property*, the first book in Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*, was published, four years before the publication of Forster's *Howards End*, whilst *A Doll's House* appeared more than twenty-five years before either. This did not detract from the powerful similarity of their themes. Nor did the period of their publication diminish it, *A Doll's House* being printed during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), *Howards End* appearing during Edward VII's rule (1901-1910), with *The Forsyte Saga*'s issue spanning Edward VII through to George V (1910-1936), the final book, *To Let*, published in 1921.¹⁷

The Victorian era spanned more than sixty years, the heir to the throne succeeding at 18 years, reigning from June 1837 to January 1901 as 'Monarch of British Dominions and Empress of India', and enforcing strict standards of private and public morality. The far shorter reign of Edward VII began when he had reached 60 years and was tumultuous compared with that of his predecessor. He toured Europe, became embroiled in scandals, and died in the middle of a constitutional crisis involving a struggle between the Commons and the Lords over Prime Minister Asquith's budget.¹⁸ George V lost the titles signifying 'ownership' of the Dominions and India, saw the House of Commons finally establish supremacy over the House of Lords,¹⁹ lived through the First World War (1914-1918), witnessed the fall of the German Empire under his cousin Wilhelm II, observed his relatives – Tsar Nicholas II (another cousin) and the Tsarina of Russian and their children – slain when the Russian Revolution gave rise to the USSR under Communism, and ruled when the first Labour government came to power.

The campaign for women's rights ran through the decades headed by Victoria, Edward and George, the right to vote finally being allowed to a restricted group of women in 1918 (all women over 21 years not succeeding to suffrage until 1928 – seven years after the final book of *The Forsyte Saga* appeared).²⁰ The class system remained entrenched, despite trade union activism, worker agitation and the founding of the Labour Party (originally as the Labour Representation Committee) in 1900, an alliance between the trade union and socialist movements.²¹

Property lies at the heart of *A Doll's House*, *Howards End*, and *The Forsyte Saga*. Class is central to each tale, with women's lot as the subtext providing the underlying tension. In each book law and money, class and death, or the threat of it, propel the action and its resolution.

Critical Biography, London, Weidenfeld Collection, (1960) 1993.

¹⁷ Several stories based on the Forsyte family appeared later, the whole then becoming known as the 'Forsyte Chronicles'.

¹⁸ Edward VII | Parents, Children, Successor, & Facts | Britannica (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

¹⁹ See Parliament Act 1911.

²⁰ See Representation of the People Act 1918 (suffrage for women over 30 years, being on the Local Government Register or married to a man on it – signifying ownership of land with a rateable value of £5 or upwards, and men over 21 with no property requirement), and Representation of the People Act 1928 (all over 21 years).

²¹ Labour Party | History, Facts, Policies, & Leaders | Britannica (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

3. *The Law and the Turn of the Century*

A Doll's House revolves around a loan contract and guarantee, blackmail, marriage and separation rights, husband right, father right, child custody and 'ownership' of children. *Howards End* sources property rights, marital power and the re-balancing of power through the impact of age and astute pragmatism, spinsterhood and survival without marriage, rescue of the 'wanton woman' and of the child born out of wedlock. *The Forsyte Saga* references rape in marriage, husband right, adultery, separation and divorce, and the law and society's condemnation of a child conceived out of wedlock – even though followed by the errant couple's marriage. Themes are thus common to each of these stories, themes that address the role and rights of women, the potential trap of marriage yet the fate of the woman who refuses to enter it or determines at what cost to leave it, the advantage that marriage may have for the judiciously incisive wife, and the place of children in the social order.

In 1879 a woman had few property rights, despite changes to the law.²² The Married Women's Property Act 1870 granted married women a right to their own wages and property inherited or gained from their own earnings. The Married Women's Property Act 1882 confirmed married women's rights as equal to single and widowed women. Thus, the 1882 Act acknowledged all income and property accrued by a woman, whatever her status, as her own legally and able to be dealt with as she wished. The changes resulted from campaigns that had faltered in 1857 when a Married Women's Property Bill, seen as 'too radical', disappeared from the Order Paper upon the proroguing of Parliament. So, dissatisfied and still determined, ten and twenty years later women succeeded in having the Parliament pass legislation focus on overturning the great lie of the traditional marriage ceremony, when the putative husband declares 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow'. Truth was that the female partner gave up all her 'worldly goods' to her husband's ownership. Coverture governed all married women: in the words of *Blackstone's Commentaries*, upon marriage husband and wife "become one, that one is the husband".²³ Unmarried women were considered legally to be under the care of their fathers. Although single women did have contract and property rights, once married the 'care' was reposed in the woman's husband, coverture depriving her of all independent rights. This left her with no right to enter into contracts, own

²² Similarities existed at least in the Western world, with married women equally deprived of rights (including property rights, voting rights etc.) in Norway and the United Kingdom. The law in England is addressed here. For Norway, see I. BLOM, "The Struggle for Women's Suffrage in Norway, 1885-1913", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 5 (1-4), 1980, pp. 3-22, The struggle for women's suffrage in Norway, 1885-1913: *Scandinavian Journal of History*: Vol 5, No 1-4 (tandfonline.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023); I. BLOM, "Nation – Class – Gender: Scandinavia at the Turn of the Century", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 21 (1), 1996, pp. 1-16, Nation – Class – Gender: Scandinavia at the turn of the century: *Scandinavian Journal of History*: Vol 21, No 1 (tandfonline.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023); I. FLOYSTAD, "Women's History in Norway", in K.M. OFFEN, R. ROACH PIERSON AND J. RENDALL (eds), *Writing Women's History – International Perspectives*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1991, pp. 221-30.

²³ William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* appeared in four volumes, published by Oxford's Clarendon Press over the years 1765-1770. A barrister, Blackstone's career as a jurist saw him appointed as Vinerian Professor of English Law at the University of Oxford, elected a Conservative MP, and appointed a justice of the Court of the Kings Bench.

land or income, or cease cohabiting with her husband, she bound to reside with him wherever the matrimonial home might be. A woman's right to property ownership was limited once she became engaged: if she gifted property to another, once married the husband was entitled by law to recover it, renouncing the gift.

This impacted on Nora. Married to Torvald Helmer, she learns that he is threatened with an early death. A warmer climate is proposed as life-saving treatment, but the family cannot afford this expense. Women had no right to borrow money independent of a man, but Nora cannot stand by. She borrows from Krogstad, a money lender of doubtful repute, forging her father's signature as guarantor. "Twelve hundred dollars. Four thousand eight hundred crowns. That's a lot of money", Nora a year or so later tells an old school friend, swearing her to secrecy. The family travels south, spending a year in Italy, Torvald recovers, and now – the reckoning. Krogstad, a bank functionary whose job is at risk, knowing the signature is forged threatens Nora with exposure. The dilemma she faced which led to her doing the original forgery – how else would she save her husband when the law saw women's signatures as lacking legal status without a male guarantor and her husband opposed borrowing as morally wrong? – returns in another guise. Will she confess to Torvald, or submit to Krogstad's blackmail?

The changes wrought by the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 are reflected in *Howards End*, though a husband's ability to overrule his wife's wishes by ignoring the law remains unchallenged. When Ruth Wilcox dies, having consolidated a friendship with the older of the Schlegel sisters Margaret and Helen, her widower Henry considers whether or not to honour Ruth's last request. She has signed a codicil to her will, leaving Howards End to Margaret Schlegel. Prior to the 1870 and 1882 reforms, married women could own neither property nor income, nor bequeath property by will or otherwise. Though the Married Women's Property Acts now confirm that Ruth is entitled to do this in law, if the property were hers legally, her signature counts for nothing in the face of fixed patriarchal assumptions about family, property and inheritance. Charles Wilcox, Ruth and Henry's son, takes the lead. Deciding that Margaret is an acquisitive, manipulative young woman, he persuades his father that Ruth has been led into error, and the family must retain Howards End whatever Margaret's legitimate claims. At the heart of the exchange is Charles's expectation that the property will come to him, ultimately, as the oldest son and hence entitled by birth to inherit. It is, therefore, "natural and fitting that after due debate they should tear the note up and throw it onto their dining-room fire [...]. The woman who had died did say to them, 'Do this,' and they answered, 'We will not'".²⁴

Property is at the heart of *The Forsyte Saga*, too, though here it is sought to be used as a bribe and absolution from husband to wife. Soames, married to Irene, has made the match of his dreams, though she does not concur. Six overtures it took to have her accept his proposal, Irene's agreement contingent on Soames' acceptance that if the marriage should not work out for them both, it will be ended amicably. Yet once he has won her (as Soames persuades himself he has), he forgets this condition. As, realising her error, Irene withdraws more and more from his company, Soames becomes

²⁴ E.M. FORSTER, *Howards End*, p. 102.

more and more irritated and angry at her failure to be his model of what a wife should be. Far from exhibiting deference, she ignores his overtures, growing more remote. Irene's coldness toward him, when Soames sees himself as having rescued her from penury (she had £50 a year when he married her into a life of more than relative comfort) becomes intolerable. In an infamous scene in *A Man of Property*, the first book of the *Forsyte Saga*, Soames wakes to contemplate his actions of the night before:

The morning after a certain night on which Soames at last asserted his rights and acted like a man, he breakfasted alone.

He breakfasted by gaslight, the fog of late November wrapping the town as in some monstrous blanket till the trees of the Square even were barely visible from the dining-room window.

He ate steadily, but at times a sensation as though he could not swallow attacked him. Had he been right to yield to his overmastering hunger of the night before, and break down the resistance which he had suffered now too long from this woman who was his lawful and solemnly constituted helpmate? He was strangely haunted by the recollection of her face, from before which, to soothe her, he had tried to pull her hands – of her terrible smothered sobbing, the like of which he had never heard, and still seemed to hear; and he was still haunted by the odd, intolerable feeling of remorse and shame he had felt, as he stood looking at her by the flame of the single candle, before silently slinking away. And somehow, now that he had acted like this, he was surprised at himself.²⁵

Before this – the rape of Irene – Soames had embarked on the building of a house, a magnificent mansion designed as the putative matrimonial home, constructed on a hill overlooking a meadow and stream. There, he imagines he and Irene will live, raising the family he wants, to establish himself even more securely in the upper-middle class world he and his extended family now inhabit. Yet in this he is mistaken. His conclusion that the events of “that night” constitute “an incident [...] really not of great moment” is misplaced. Soames errs in his contention that

women made a fuss about it in books; but in the cool judgement of right-thinking men, of men of the world, of such as he recollected often received praise in the Divorce Court, he had but done his best to sustain the sanctity of marriage, to prevent her from abandoning her duty.²⁶

The wedge between the married couple is irreparable. Indeed, it is the house building and accompanying fantasy of marital bliss that precipitate the resolution of the Soames-Irene marriage. Bosinney, the architect of the property designed to consolidate the marriage, is the architect of the ending of it. Having formed an adulterous relationship with Bosinney, upon his death when trampled on by a carriage and horses on a dark and blustery night, Irene leaves Soames.

Why this focus by all three writers on the law and, at the heart of the stories, women's disadvantage under it? Being admitted to the Bar, it is unsurprising that Galsworthy peppered the *Forsyte Saga* with allusions to reported cases, though not naming them. Fifteen years before *The Man of Property* was published, rape in marriage arose as a side issue in *R v Clarence* when the husband was alleged to have infected his wife with gonorrhoea. Transmission of this and other sexually transmitted diseases from

²⁵ J. GALSWORTHY, *A Man of Property*, in ID., *The Forsyte Saga*, Chapter 4, “Voyage into the Inferno”, p. 264.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

husbands to wives was not uncommon at the time:²⁷ repressive attitudes toward sexual intercourse in marriage meant men, married as well as single, frequented brothels or exploited street walkers. *R v Clarence* saw the House of Lords address whether Clarence was guilty of inflicting grievous bodily harm upon his wife. She contracted the gonorrhoea through sexual intercourse with him. He, suffering from the disease, did not tell her of his condition. This was the issue: did the failure to advise render Clarence guilty. If she knew, would she have submitted? Rape was not directly before the court. Prosecutors bowed to Chief Justice Hale's diktat from centuries earlier – that rape in marriage was no crime, consent to sexual intercourse with the husband being pre-determined by consent to marriage: no renegeing was allowed.²⁸ Only one judge agreed inflexibly with Hale. The others in varying degrees questioned or said the matter should be left for the future.²⁹ Women activists were not persuaded. Josephine Butler and her cohort campaigned unremittingly for women's right to bodily integrity and relief from maltreatment and abuse through laws that oppressed women.³⁰

Crusaders were making their mark in other areas, their concerns taken up by perceptive turn of the century writers. Ibsen focused not on contract and property rights alone. *A Doll's House* also underscored women's lack of rights regarding children. Thus when Nora leaves Torvald behind, closing the door on her marriage, she leaves behind the children, too. This meant that when the play was performed, not only did deserting a husband play ill with audiences. So did Nora's child desertion. Yet Nora had no choice. Children born in marriage became the property of the father: he held all rights to custody; his wife, their mother, held none. Women activists did not stand for this, either. Like the Butler campaign for women's rights against male sexual supremacy, Caroline Sheridan Norton and women like her fought for women's rights against omnipotent fatherhood.³¹ Like Nora, Caroline Norton separated from her husband. She then spent years fighting to change laws that obliged her to abandon her children to a man whose rights were sacrosanct, however he treated the children and however he had treated her. Ironically, however, had she not married George Norton, the children she bore would have been safe from his paternal rights. This theme of the 'fatherless' child was taken up by Forster in *Howards End* and Galsworthy in *The Forsyte Saga*.

Like Irene, Margaret and Helen Schlegel are daughters of a deceased academic. Though being financially independent at a modest level and not as poorly off as Irene,

²⁷ Syphilis is, for example, at the heart of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. See H. IBSEN, *Ghosts*, 1881, in ID., *Four Major Plays*.

²⁸ See Hales *History of the Pleas of the Crown* (also *Hales Pleas of the Crown or, A methodical summary of the principal matters relating to that subject*), 1680, first published 1736, *Pleas of the crown: or, A methodical summary of the principal matters relating to that subject* (archive.org) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

²⁹ See *R v Clarence* (1888) 22 QBD 23; J.A. SCUTT, "Consent in Rape: The Problem of the Marriage Contract", *Monash University Law Review*, 3 (4), 1977, pp. 255-88, Scutt, Jocelyne A --- "Consent in Rape: The Problem of the Marriage Contract" [1977] *MonashULawRw* 5; (1977) 3(4) *Monash University Law Review* 255 (austlii.edu.au) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

³⁰ See J. BUTLER, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, Cambridge, CUP, (1896) 2011; BBC - History - Josephine Butler (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

³¹ See C. SHERIDAN NORTON, *Observations on the Natural Claim of the Mother to the Custody of her Infant Children: As Affected by the Common Law Right of the Father*, Cambridge, CUP, (1837) 2012. See also J. BAILEY, *Parenting in England 1760-1830: Emotion, Identity, and Generation*, Oxford, OUP, 2012.

marriage is the conventional solution for all of them. Nonetheless, each takes a very different path when it comes to matrimony and maternity. Irene marries Soames to save herself from penury, unwisely thinking that a prenuptial agreement to end it if she wishes will be honoured. As for Margaret, despite the philosophical differences between them, she becomes Mrs Wilcox, a supportive yet quizzical wife to Henry. This marital alliance makes her stepmother to his and Ruth's children, bearing none of her own. Much earlier, Helen falls madly in momentary love with Paul, the younger Wilcox son but the Wilcoxes cannot abide the notion of her coming into their family, seeing her as an acquisitive social climber endeavouring to inveigle Paul into an unwelcome alliance. Yet the Schlegel sisters are united in their belief in women's rights and most particularly women's suffrage, viewing women's independence as central to women's existence. Nevertheless each in her own way tolerates Henry Wilcox's disregard for – even despising of – the women's vote. As Helen writes in a letter to Margaret, when staying at Howards End as a guest at the opening of the novel:

I am having a glorious time. I like them all [...]. I do really feel that we are making friends. The fun of it is that they think me a noodle, and say so – at least, Mr Wilcox does – and when that happens, and one doesn't mind it's a pretty sure test, isn't it? He says the most horrid things about women's suffrage so nicely, and when I said I believed in equality he just folded his arms and gave me such a setting down as I've never had [...]. I couldn't point to a time when men had been equal, nor even to a time when the wish to be equal had made them happier in other ways. I couldn't say a word. I had just picked up the notion that equality is good from some book – probably from poetry or you.³²

Despite this self-abnegation of her commitment to women's rights, Helen reveals her capacity for liberated thought and action when she decides to bear a child out of wedlock. The father is a young man whom the sisters befriend after a musical performance and a misunderstanding about a mislaid umbrella. Helen makes her decision, embracing the law that makes full responsibility for the pregnancy, the birth and the child fall upon her as the mother. On the one hand, this relieves her of the quandary that faced Nora and Caroline Norton in lack of mother-right. On the other (being unmarried) Helen must battle social opprobrium of a different kind, and must find financial support independent of a man. Although acting outside the social norms of the *fin de siècle*, Irene is far more conventional. Separated from Soames, she becomes enamoured of his cousin, 'Young' Jolyn. Her son Jolyn, known as Jon, is a consequence of their affair and is born before Soames divorces her and before she and Jolyn marry. Jon, like Helen's son, 'Baby', is a bastard but, unlike the latter, he grows up in a conventional family setting of father and mother without knowing of his irregular status. Marriage of the parents did not make an illegitimate child legitimate until the Legitimacy Act 1926 and by adoption that same year under the Adoption Act. Children of single parent mothers remained 'illegitimate' until legislative change toward the end of the twentieth century.³³

³² E.M. FORSTER, *Howards End*, pp. 3-4.

³³ See J.M. EEKELAAR, "Reforming the English Law Concerning Illegitimate Persons", *Family Law Quarterly*, 14 (1), Spring 1980, pp. 41-58, and K. GIBSON, *Illegitimacy, Family, and Stigma in England, 1660-1834*, Oxford, Oxford Academic Books, 2022.

At the time, laws – whether governing children born in wedlock or out of it – favoured male interests. For the male child born in marriage, inheritance rights followed. The male child born outside marriage (like the female child) gained no rights in relation to his father. For women, bearing children during marriage left them without rights whilst bearing them outside it left them in a state of practical and social disapprobation. Unmarried mothers were despised and cast out of society. The ‘fallen woman’ was a standard trope in nineteenth-century literature just as it was a reality for women who, often, labouring as servants in aristocratic or upper-class households fell victim to the predations of the head of household or the household sons. Bastard children were also born by women labouring in factories or serving in shops, or to women of higher social standing who fell victim to philanderers. The family’s solution for the latter was to consign them to an asylum or convent.³⁴ For working-class women the solution was infanticide or going on the streets to work as prostituted women, for getting a job as the mother of an infant or small child was difficult in the absence of childcare or stay-at-home relatives to take responsibility with the mother out at work. Baby-farming might be a possibility but too often led to babies being starved or otherwise illtreated, so was no real option at all.³⁵

Women bore the burden of opprobrium surrounding foundlings, or bastard or illegitimate children, and as baby-farmers were subject to criminal action for failure to care properly for them. Abortion was illegal, resorting to killing a child for whom the single mother had no resources to care was murder,³⁶ and charges of murder, manslaughter and criminal neglect dogged women in the baby-farming industry, with Margaret Waters, Amelia Dyer, Amelia Sach and Annie Walters, and Rhoda Willis executed respectively in 1870, 1896, 1903 and 1907, and in the colonies (Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand) Frances Knorr and Minnie Dean in 1894 and 1895.³⁷ The

³⁴ See for example J.J. MATHEWS, *Good and Mad Women – The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth-Century Australia*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1984; R. RICHARDSON, “Foundlings, Orphans and Unmarried Mothers”, 15 May 2014, Foundlings, orphans and unmarried mothers | The British Library (bl.uk) (last accessed on 29 May 2023); K. ROUSER, “A Young Woman’s Delicate Reputation”, Heroes, Heroines, and History: A Young Woman’s Delicate Reputation (hhhistory.com) and “Plight of the Unmarried Mother in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century”, 21 March 2016, Heroes, Heroines, and History: Plight of the Unmarried Mother in the late 19th and Early 20th Century (hhhistory.com) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

³⁵ See for example B. WAUGH, *Baby-Farming*, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, London, Kegan Paul, 1890; A. COSSINS, *The Baby Farmers: A Chilling Tale of Missing Babies, Shameful Secrets and Murder in 19th-Century Australia*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2014; M. HILTZ, “A 19th Century Nightmare: Victorian Baby Farms”, 1 June 2021, A 19th Century Nightmare: Victorian Baby Farms | The Vintage News (last accessed on 29 May 2023); J. STUART-BENNETT, *Motherhood, Respectability and Baby-Farming in Victorian and Edwardian London*, London, Routledge, 2022.

³⁶ Infanticide as an alternative to murder (reducing murder to manslaughter) was introduced by the Infanticide Act 1922 (causing newly-born child’s death when ‘not fully recovered from the effect of giving birth’ to the child and ‘balance of her mind was then disturbed’), Infanticide Act 1922 (vlex.com) (last accessed on 5 May 2023), repealed by the Infanticide Act 1938, which amended the definition to include killing during lactation and limited the age of the ‘newly-born’ child to 12 months after birth, Infanticide Act 1938 (legislation.gov.uk) (last accessed on 5 May 2023). See also K.-A. COUZENS, “‘Under the act ... it was not necessary to put a girl on trial for murder’: The Infanticide Act (1922)”, 31 October 2022, Infanticide Act (1922) and the Emma Temple case (ltomhistory.org) (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

³⁷ See K. LASTER, “Knorr, Frances Lydia (Minnie) (1867-1894)”, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Biography - Frances Lydia (Minnie) Knorr - Australian Dictionary of Biography (anu.edu.au) (last accessed on

Infant Life Protection Act 1872 was introduced as a direct consequence of the predations of baby-farming and a Select Committee on the Infant Life Protection Bill of 1896 heard evidence on the industry resulting in the Infant Life Protection Act 1897. The Children Act 1908 followed. Focusing attention on baby and children's vulnerability and need for protection from exposure to the rapaciousness of 'carers' desirous of making money out of women needing somewhere to place their illegitimate children was vital. At the same time, women had to wait until the Abortion Act 1967 for some relief from the criminalisation of abortion under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861.³⁸ As for employment, childcare, and wages, despite women's industrial rights being strongly pursued by women and women's organisations, few women were as advantaged as Irene and Helen in giving birth to children when unwed. The struggle for equal pay in the forefront of claims for equality figured highly from at least the middle and late nineteenth century, as did the right to vote.³⁹ Legislation to enable women to enter Parliament and public office came in the early part of the twentieth century, but in the United Kingdom the Equal Pay Act 1974 and the Equality Act 2010 have still not ended the pay gap and the pensions gap is even less ameliorated.⁴⁰

How, then, do Ibsen, Forster, and Galsworthy resolve the dilemmas they visit upon their protagonists in plotting *A Doll's House*, *Howards End*, and *The Forsyte Saga*?

4. *Class and a Mystery – Why? Who? And How?*

The similarities in pursuit of making transparent the politics of women's position in law and society at the *fin de siècle* are reflected, too, in the resolution featuring in each of the authors' tales. In *A Doll's House* it is Krogstad, the villainous blackmailer; in *Howards End* it is Leonard Bast, in so many ways an innocent abroad; in the *Forsyte Saga* it is the renegade architect Bosinney. Contrasting with these men of indeterminate but lesser social class, the plot of each work sees middle-class men of property in control. Helmut Torvald rules the household that populates *A Doll's House*. Soames, the 'Man of Property', is the anchor holding together the Forsyte family. In *Howards End* Mr Wilcox is in charge. Yet their existence, and the hold each has on his kingdom

29 May 2023); L. HOOD, "Story: Dean, Williamina (1844-1895)", Dean, Williamina – Dictionary of New Zealand Biography – Te Ara (last accessed on 29 May 2023); K. LASTER, "Frances Knorr: 'She Killed Babies, Didn't She?'" in M. LAKE and F. KELLY (eds), *Double Time: Women in Victoria, 150 Years*, Melbourne, Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 148-56; J.A. ALLEN, *Sex and Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women Since 1880*, Sydney, OUP, 1990.

³⁸ The Abortion Act 1967 requires two medical practitioners to authorise termination of pregnancy. Otherwise, pregnancy termination is unlawful and the criminal provisions of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 remain in England, Wales and Scotland but are repealed for Northern Ireland, although abortion services remain limited there, so most women continue travelling to England. See my following contributions: J.A. SCUTT, Abortion rights – and wrongs (eastangliabylines.co.uk) (last accessed on 18 July 2023); Abortion, infanticide, murder – does the legal system differentiate? (eastangliabylines.co.uk) (last accessed on 18 July 2023); *President's Report – CEDAW People's Tribunal*, 20-23 June 2020, https://www.cedawinlaw.com/_files/ugd/99a552_211b3ad2c4ae41d588a668613a86532b.pdf (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

³⁹ See Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub (last accessed on 29 May 2023); J.A. SCUTT, *Wage Rage for Equal Pay – The Long, Long Struggle*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan [forthcoming].

⁴⁰ See The Judge's Report 2022 (cedawinlaw.com) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

or castle, is made less secure by women whose family origins lie in the gentility of academe (Irene and Margaret) or government bureaucracy (Nora), each possessing no or lesser finance. This destabilising of the household head comes despite women's lack of formal power, their lower legal and financial status, their social status dependent upon the principal man who governs their lives and their world. Irene, Nora and Margaret bring into the lives and hence into the world of Soames, Torvald and Henry Wilcox a man of lesser or indeterminate social class and status (Krogstad, Bast and Bosinney), disrupting their security in their own position and unbalancing their universe.

Torvald Helmer's attitude toward his wife is one of tolerant though patronising indulgence, especially when it comes to money. Borrowing money to save Torvald's life means Nora must repay it. With no income of her own, she must juggle housekeeping monies to cover repayments. This she does with great flair combined with abstemiousness when it comes to her own needs. The discussion between her and Torvald in the context of Christmas present purchases illustrates this well. To Torvald's acknowledgement that he knows "only too well how Christmas runs away with the housekeeping", Nora gratefully accepts "Ten, twenty, thirty, forty", declaring effusively "thank you, thank you, [...] This will see me quite a long way". She displays "all the things" she has bought for the children and servants, "And so cheap!" (whilst acknowledging that beyond the "dress material and some handkerchiefs for the maids [...] dear old Anne Marie should have had something better"). For herself, she "doesn't really want anything". Yet, when Torvald presses her, she, "toying with his coat buttons, and without looking at him", says hesitatingly that he "could always give me money [...]. Only what you think you could spare. And then I could buy myself something with it later on". This is her way of securing more – not a gift for herself, but money to repay the loan. Yet, because she must maintain the loan as a secret to preserve Torvald's role as provider, he accuses her (albeit in jocular fashion) of "frittering [it] away on all sorts of useless things". Accusing her of spending his money on sweets and turning her into a brainless spendthrift, he tells her she cannot deny her inability to "hold on to the money" he gives her: "You can't deny it, Nora dear. [*Puts his arm around her waist.*] My pretty little pet is very sweet, but it runs way with an awful lot of money. It's incredible how expensive it is for a man to keep such a pet".⁴¹

Her desperation is covered up by her efforts to play the ingenue, lacking financial good sense and imbued with feminine wiles and smiles concealing her deception. Her eagerness to fulfil the commercial obligation of the loan, to retrieve the IOU through paying it off, is now compounded by having to deal with the greater danger posed by the moneylender. Back before the lifesaving trip south, when Nora is forced to forge her father's signature, it is to Krogstad the loan shark she goes, never anticipating that he might know full-well what she has done and use it against her as leverage, in turn, against her husband. Torvald is about to take up the lucrative post of bank manager, a career advance that will see the family secure and settled financially. Krogstad, his modest little job at the bank under threat, threatens Nora with exposure unless she uses her influence to prevent her husband's kicking him off the ladder he has begun to

⁴¹ H. IBSEN, *A Doll's House*, pp. 3-4.

climb through his employment at the bank, rehabilitating his lost respectability from having some years ago “got himself mixed up in a bit of trouble”. Nora resists. She will not be blackmailed. Believing her husband will recognise her fidelity as a wife whose sole purpose was to save him, she rejects Krogstad’s demand. Far from understanding, Torvald charges Nora with wilfulness and a criminal disposition, so lacking in character that she is unfit to rear his children. Suddenly, her eyes are opened to Torvald’s vision of who she is: a plaything fit for nothing other than feeding his desire, the keeper of the house through her dependency upon his financial bounty, the mother to ‘his’ children. No recognition of her steadfast will in seeking to save his life, her ingenuity in financing the trip south, her resistance to Krogstad’s pressure. When she declares she is leaving to find herself, Torvald cannot believe she will go:

Helmer: I just can’t understand it, it’s so incredible. But we must see about putting things right. Take that shawl off. Take it off, I tell you! I must see if I can’t find some way or other of appeasing [Krogstad]. The thing must be hushed up at all costs. And as far as you and I are concerned, things must appear to go on exactly as before. But only in the eyes of the world, of course. In other words you’ll go on living here; that’s understood. But you will not be allowed to bring up the children, I can’t trust you with them [...]. Oh, that I should have to say this to the woman I loved so dearly, the woman I still [...]. Well, that must be all over and done with. From now on, there can be no question of happiness. All we can do is save the bits and pieces from the wreck, preserve appearances.⁴²

When the reprieve comes, Krogstad returning Nora’s IOU, Torvald thinks they can go on as before. Nora’s error will be covered up, Torvald’s reputation will be safe and saved. For Nora, this is not enough. Her life as the doll in the doll’s house is ended.

What of Irene? Soames’ desire to penetrate her iciness and lack of desire for him through building a wondrous house overlooking an expanse of land and forest and stream is foiled. Bosinney is the architect he employs to fashion the design and oversee construction. Yet Bosinney is ultimately the architect of Irene’s journey out of Soames’ life. Initially resisting her attraction to him, eventually Irene succumbs to Bosinney’s buccaneer character, his poetic demeanour, her romantic illusion of him as an antidote to Soames’ sewn-up starchiness. Soames sues Bosinney for a minor sum of money owed on the building contract, knowing that Bosinney cannot possibly pay. Despairing, walking in the fog, Bosinney dies under the wheels of a horse-drawn carriage, a collision that finishes whatever alliance there was between Soames and Irene. She leaves him:

He entered, pale, his hands moist with perspiration, dreading to meet her, burning to meet her, ignorant of what he was to say or do.

The maid Bilson was in the hall, and in answer to his question: “Where is your mistress?” told him that Mrs Forsyte had left the house about noon, taking with her a trunk and bag.

Snatching the sleeve of his fur coat away from her grasp, he confronted her:

“What?” he exclaimed; “what’s that you said?” Suddenly recollecting that he must not betray emotion, he added: “What message did she leave?” and noticed with secret terror the startled look of the maid’s eyes.

“Mrs Forsyte left no message, sir.”

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 76.

"No message; very well, thank you, that will do. I shall be dining out."⁴³

And so, the marriage ends – or at least by separation, until Soames initiates divorce much later, having employed private detectives to spy on Irene.

For *Howards End*, the resolution comes not with marriage breakdown, but with a wife in ascendancy, the marriage intact. Margaret, having been wrongly robbed of Howards End, the house bequeathed to her by Ruth Wilcox at her death, succeeds to the property by the will of her husband, Henry (the husband of them both, seriatim):

"Then I leave Howards End to my wife absolutely," said Henry. "And let everyone understand that; and after I am dead let there be no jealousy and no surprise."

Margaret did not answer. There was something uncanny to her triumph. She, who had never expected to conquer anyone, had charged straight through these Wilcoxes and broken up their lives.⁴⁴

Yet, what price the winning?

"In consequence, I leave my wife no money," said Henry. "That is her own wish. All that she would have had will be divided among you. I am also giving you a great deal in my lifetime, so that you may be independent of me. That is her wish, too. She also is giving way a great deal of money. She intends to diminish her income by half during the next ten years; she intends when she dies to leave the house to her – to her nephew, down in the field. Is all that clear? Does everyone understand?"⁴⁵

It is here that Leonard Bast's role in *Howards End* finally coming back to Margaret as it ought to have, those years ago, comes into view. The nephew "down in the field" is Helen's illegitimate child by Leonard: Leonard who, from an indeterminate background and 'lower' class, had a wish to join the cultural ambience of the Schlegel sisters and their ilk. Leonard who, honourably, married a fallen woman he sought to save from dependence on streetwalking for money and survival. Ironically, Henry Wilcox is implicated in Mrs Bast's downfall: he employed her services when abroad in Cyprus. He is implicated in Leonard's loss of a position, too: acting upon Wilcox's advice, Leonard left a secure post to take another on Wilcox's recommendation, only to find the advice misguided. In the upshot, egged on by Helen and accosting the Wilcox family at Howards End, Leonard in pursuit of justice is killed by Henry's son Charles. To his shock and horror, Charles is charged, convicted, and sentenced to prison. Thus it is that Leonard's death brings about resolution.

Margaret secures Howards End. Helen can live there, rather than in ignominy and penury as an unmarried mother. Leonard Bast's son becomes secure in the Schlegel embrace and gains status as the inheritor of Ruth Wilcox's beloved property, which becomes in turn the beloved property of his aunt Margaret. And, at last, Margaret learns the truth as the family members say goodbye, following Henry Wilcox's revelation that Howards End will come to her:

Then it was Dolly's turn. Anxious to contribute, she laughed nervously, and said: "Good-bye, Mr

⁴³ J. GALSWORTHY, *The Forsyte Saga*, p. 286.

⁴⁴ E.M. FORSTER, *Howards End*, p. 360.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

Wilcox. It does seem curious that Mrs Wilcox should have left Margaret Howards End, and yet she gets it, after all.”

From Evie came a sharply drawn breath. “Good-bye,” she said to Margaret, and kissed her.

And again and again fell the word, like the ebb of a dying sea.

“Good-bye.”

[...] Margaret saw their visitors to the gate. Then she returned to her husband and laid her head in his hands. He was pitiably tied. But Dolly’s remark had interested her. At last she said: “Could you tell me, Henry, what was that about Mrs Wilcox having left me Howards End?”

Tranquilly he replied: “Yes, she did. But that is a very old story. When she was ill and you were so kind to her she wanted to make you some return, and, not being herself at the time, scribbled ‘Howards End’ on a piece of paper. I went into it thoroughly and, as it was clearly fanciful, I set it aside, little knowing what my Margaret would be to me in the future.”

Margaret was silent. Something shook her life in its inmost recesses, and she shivered.

“I didn’t do wrong, did I?” he asked, bending down.

“You didn’t, darling. Nothing has been done wrong.”⁴⁶

And yet – and yet, had Margaret secured Howards End way back then, at the death of Ruth. If she and Helen had moved in, to make a life of their own, independent of reliance upon men, if ...:

From the garden came laughter. “Here they are at last!” exclaimed Henry, disengaging himself with a smile. Helen rushed into the gloom, holding Tom by one hand and carrying her baby on the other. There were shouts of infectious joy.

“The field’s cut!” Helen cried excitedly – “The big meadow! We’ve seen to the very end, and it’ll be such a crop of hay as never!”⁴⁷

5. Conclusion – Sex, Class, and Literary Ambition

At the *fin de siècle* and for decades before, women’s activism was pronounced. Women were agitating for marital property rights, separation and divorce rights, married women’s rights in relation to child custody and access, equal pay, the right to stand for public office and voting rights.⁴⁸ In 1861 Sophia Jex Blake and six other women had run a case up to the House of Lords demanding that they be allowed to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh.⁴⁹ Jex Blake had already completed her first year successfully, an initiative that led the six other women to enrol. Initially, the notion that a woman should qualify for university study was accepted. Yet with six more women this was then renounced. Hence, the need for women’s legal action. The court said ‘No’, claiming that as no woman had sought to enter university before, it was evident that

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 361.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 362.

⁴⁸ See statutes and sources cited earlier.

⁴⁹ See *Jex Blake and Ors v Senatus Academicus of the University of Edinburgh, and the Chancellor Thereof* (1873) 10 SLR 549, *Jex-Blake and Others v. Senatus Academicus of the University of Edinburgh, and the Chancellor Thereof* [1873] ScotLR 10_549 (27 June 1873) (bailii.org) (last accessed on 29 May 2023); *Jex-Blake and Others v. Senatus Academicus of the University of Edinburgh, and the Chancellor Thereof* | [1873] SLR 10_549 | Scottish Court of Session | Judgment | Law | CaseMine (last accessed on 29 May 2023); J.A. SCUTT, “Sexism in Legal Language”, *Australian Law Journal*, 59 (10), 1985, pp. 163-64.

universities were 'not a place for a woman'. This proposition was, of course, logically unsustainable – for it meant that never could women be admitted as always, it would be said, no woman had applied. The decision led to that inevitable outcome. Richard Pankhurst, husband to Emmeline Pankhurst and father of Christabel, Sylvia and Adela – all of whom figured in the struggle for women's enfranchisement – was junior counsel on the *Jex Blake Case*.

This was not the only instance where women's rights were fought through the courts. Galsworthy's centring of women's rights and the wrongs visited upon women by violent and errant husbands in *The Forsyte Saga* led to his referencing (though not by name) *R v Jackson* as well as *R v Clarence*.⁵⁰ The latter was taken up in the Soames-Irene clash resulting in Soames' rape of his wife, whilst the former was alluded to though did not feature in the action. There, a husband engaged in an attempted exercise of forced cohabitation when he kidnapped his wife – although in that case, the court said he had no right to do so. Husband right did not extend to the right to capture a wife and hold against her will, simply because she had consented to marriage and, hence, to living with her husband. The House of Lords in its discussion in *R v Clarence* some twenty-five years later did not observe the contradiction that sexual intercourse against a wife's will in marriage was purportedly validated by her consent to wed.⁵¹

Forster's focus on property and women's rights or lack of them in marriage, and Forster and Galsworthy's inclusion of illegitimacy and its impact on women reflected women's activism of the time which was gaining traction world-wide. Albeit twenty years earlier, similarly for Ibsen, his work evidently influenced by local women's agitation. In Norway, the 1840s saw the number of single women rise substantially, nationally registered at 42%, with an associated campaign for women's right to enter trades. This was reflected in the passage of the Crafts Act 1839 and the Trade Act 1942, granting single and married women the right to engage in trade and crafts until then reserved for men of a certain class.⁵² The legislative change is seen as generated to relieve fathers and husbands of the financial responsibility for their daughters and wives. At the same time, women's voices were not absent from the debate. Women are recorded as campaigning from at least 1814, the date Norwegian researchers Eirinn Larsen, Hide Danielsen, and Ingeborg W. Ovesen set as key in the struggle for Norwegian women's equality. The Norwegian Association for Women's Rights was established in 1884, its origins in women whose activism predated founding of that national organisation.⁵³ A century earlier, Mary Wollstonecraft travelled for three months through Scandinavia, in Norway visiting Risør, Helgera, Larvick, Tonsberg,

⁵⁰ See *R v Clarence* (1888) 22 QBD 23; *R v Jackson* (1891) 1 QB 671, 1891_1_q.b._671.pdf (warwick.ac.uk) (last accessed on 29 May 2023), and J.A. SCUTT, *Women and Magna Carta – A Treaty for Rights and Wrongs*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

⁵¹ See J.A. SCUTT, "Consent in Rape – The Problem of the Marital Contract", *Monash University Law Review*, 3 (4), 1977, pp. 255-88, Scutt, Jocelynne A --- "Consent in Rape: The Problem of the Marriage Contract" [1977] *MonashULawRw* 5; (1977) 3(4) *Monash University Law Review* 255 (austlii.edu.au) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

⁵² See E. LARSEN, H. DANIELSEN and I.W. OWESSEN, *Norsk Likestillingshistorie 1814-2013*, Bergen, Fagbokforlaget, 2013; The history of Norwegian equality (kjonnsforskning.no) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

⁵³ See The Borgen Project, "Blog – Latest News", 1 April 2022, Women's Rights in Norway - The Borgen Project (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

and Oslo (at that time Kristiana), Moss, and Friedriksten, searching for her former partner Gilbert Imlay's lost ship's treasure.⁵⁴ Years before *A Doll's House* was published, in her socio-political commentary Wollstonecraft ruminates on prison reform, divorce law, and the discriminatory repudiation of Queen Caroline upon her being accused of adultery during her marriage (1776-1782) to the mad King Christian VII of Denmark and Norway. All this was well known to Ibsen, most particularly through playwright Michael Beer's *Struensee*, written in 1827 and finally reaching the stage in 1856, having been banned by King Frederick William III of Prussia.⁵⁵

Feminist activism in Italy and Germany was a likely inspiration for Ibsen, too. He spent the years from 1862 to 1889 with intermittent journeys, only, to Norway from Sorrento and Rome (1862-1868) and Dresden and Munich (1868-1889). Laws governing woman's place in Europe mirrored those in Scandinavia and Britain. Activism was afoot, there, too, with an impressive pedigree. *The Book of the City of Ladies*, one of Christine de Pizan's many works, was published in 1405, along with *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, advocating for women's recognition as ethical beings and rights in education and commerce.⁵⁶ Her books were popular, remaining in publication despite her death, estimated as 1430. Her aphorism "Every kingdom divided in itself will be made desolate, and every city and house divided against itself will not stand", reflecting upon the French Civil War, appeared in *The Book of Peace*.⁵⁷ For Ibsen, this struck close to home, the essence of the resolution of *A Doll's House*. His sojourn in Germany also exposed him to feminism located in the advanced industrialisation of Germany. Women played a role in trades and professions, particularly prominent in education as schoolmistresses.⁵⁸ It should not go unnoticed that Mrs Linde discloses at her meeting with Nora that she (like Galsworthy's Irene) married not for love but for survival then upon her husband's death "had to fend for [herself], opening a little shop, running a little school".⁵⁹

Personal relations played a part in these three's lives as writers, too. Female influence for Galsworthy lay in his wife's persuasion, along with two female friends, that he pursue writing. Forster's relationship with his widowed mother was reputedly close (as an adult, when not travelling he lived with her until her death at 90 in 1945), so that

⁵⁴ See M. WOLLSTONECRAFT, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, London, Cassell & Company, (1796) 1889, The Project Gutenberg eBook of Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, by Mary Wollstonecraft (last accessed on 5 May 2023); *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, ed. C.H. Poston, Lincoln, NE, University of Nebraska Press, (1796) 1976.

⁵⁵ See Queen Caroline Mathilde – The Royal Danish Collection (kongernessamling.dk) (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

⁵⁶ See C. DE PIZAN, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: Or the Book of the Three Virtues*, London, Penguin Classics, (1405) 1985, and *The Book of the City of Ladies*, London, Penguin Classics, (1405) 1999.

⁵⁷ C. DE PIZAN, *The Book of Peace*, eds K. GREEN, C.J. MEWS and J. PINDER, University Park, PA, Penn State U.P., (1412-1414) 2008. See also P. ALLEN, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250-1500*, Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, Vol. II; K. GREEN, "Preface", in C. DE PIZAN, *The Book of Peace*, University Park, PA, Penn State U.P., 2010.

⁵⁸ See R.J. EVANS, *Feminism and Female Emancipation in Germany 1870-1945: Sources, Methods, and Problems of Research*, Cambridge, CUP, 2008, *Feminism and Female Emancipation in Germany 1870-1945: Sources, Methods, and Problems of Research* | Central European History | Cambridge Core (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

⁵⁹ H. IBSEN, *A Doll's House*, p. 11.

this surely influenced his literary work. Ibsen's personal history includes fathering an illegitimate child (Hans Jacob Henriksen [Birkendalen], 1846-1914), whom he is said to have supported financially despite not meeting him,⁶⁰ and his son, Sigurd, born in wedlock, became Prime Minister of Norway in Stockholm, leading the political movement that resulted in Norway's independence from Denmark and Sweden.⁶¹

Not only women's rights and the playing out of sexual relations through discriminatory practices and sexual intimacy created the climate for these writers of imagination as the nineteenth century turned to the twentieth. Class as represented by the propertied solid middle-class was juxtaposed against class – indeterminate, for those men who did not 'fit' into the social stratum programmed for 'all' men (Bosinney, Bast, Krogstad), and determined by marriage for women who fitted into their husband's position or, like Irene before entering into matrimony with Soames and when she left it until regaining her class position when marrying Jolyn (albeit he resisted categorisation as middle-class, propertied, orthodox – unlike Soames), 'betwixt and between' in the hierarchy of position. This 'betwixt and between' role applied to Margaret and Helen, too – Margaret ultimately entering the solid, middle-class, propertied set through marriage, and Helen retaining her dubious class categorisation through unconventional motherhood, though saved by her sister and, ironically, her sister's marriage.

Therefore, Galsworthy, Forster, and Ibsen drew upon universal themes of women's rights – and wrongs. In this, they chronicled their times with perceptive invention. They narrated the growth of the propertied classes through a trajectory dictated by an unimaginative claim to identity and power. Middle-class identity and power were built on the accumulation of land, houses, and assets, overriding personal politics where they might challenge cultural and class advancement. Masters of their time, these writers understood the way in which their age denied to women the autonomy they enjoyed as men of their world. Not content with this as women's lot, they employed their art to parallel women's political demands for freedom.

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⁶⁰ See Why do Ibsen's children die? | Tidsskrift for Den norske legeforening (tidsskriftet.no) (last accessed on 29 May 2023). See also T. VAN LAAN, *Life and Works: A Biographical Essay*, Life and Works: Ibsen Society of America (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

⁶¹ Government.no, "Sigurd Ibsen Norwegian Prime Minister in Stockholm 1903-1905", 10 April 2012, Sigurd Ibsen - regjeringen.no (last accessed on 29 May 2023).

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ELISABETTA D'ERME*

“Se solo Wilde fosse vivo per vederti”: la lunga ombra di Oscar Wilde sull’opera di James Joyce

Abstract: The ideal dialogue established by James Joyce with Oscar Wilde is not immediately obvious, but one feels bewildered when its hidden ‘borrowings’ are revealed, starting from “Telemachus”, the very first episode of *Ulysses*. How can one *not* feel puzzled when discovering that the famous “cracked mirror of a servant girl” referred to by Stephen Dedalus as “a symbol of Irish art” is not Joyce’s, but Wilde’s conception? Joyce drew on Wilde not only to talk about the fate of Irish art, as in the article he dedicated to him in Trieste’s *Piccolo della Sera* on 24 March 1909, but also to allude in his writings to the theme of homosexuality. As a matter of fact, Joyce’s entire work overflows with debts, references, allusions and quotations, more or less explicit, to Wilde’s texts. One need only mention Stephen Dedalus’s habit of speaking in aphorisms and epigrams, in apologies and parables. Their very common condition of exiles/artists would be enough to read their works and biographies in the light of some parallelism. If, in “Telemachus”, Joyce has Buck Mulligan proclaim that “We have grown out of Wilde and paradoxes”, in this contribution I will try to show how far this is from reality. Wilde inhabits not only *Ulysses*, but also – and especially – *Finnegans Wake*, where Joyce thematises the topic of the ‘fall’ and traces the ultimate ‘portrait’ of a long series.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde. James Joyce. Exile. Art. Ireland.

1. *Esuli disonorati e artisti traditi*

Il dialogo ideale instaurato da James Joyce con Oscar Wilde non è immediatamente palese, ma lascia spiazzati quando ne emergono i ‘prestiti’ nascosti, di cui già solo il primo episodio dell’*Ulisse*, “Telemaco”, è colmo. Come non restare interdetti, ad esempio, nello scoprire che il famoso “specchio incrinato di una serva” definito da Stephen Dedalus “un simbolo dell’arte irlandese” non è farina del sacco di Joyce, ma di Wilde? Joyce non attinse a Wilde solo per parlare delle sorti dell’arte irlandese, ma anche per alludere nei suoi scritti al tema dell’omosessualità ed infine per rispecchiarsi (con i dovuti *distinguo*) nell’immagine del martire esule, come appare evidente nel ritratto che Joyce gli dedicò in occasione di una rappresentazione al Teatro Verdi di Trieste della *Salomé* di Richard Strauss. In “Oscar Wilde: il poeta di ‘Salomé’”, pubblicato il 24 marzo 1909 su *Il Piccolo della Sera*, Joyce mette l’accento sulla condizione di esule che aveva caratterizzato l’esistenza del drammaturgo irlandese. Condizione che, sappiamo, fu anche il tratto distintivo della vita di Joyce, e che già sarebbe sufficiente a giustificare un’analisi comparata tra i due autori, le loro opere, i loro obiettivi. Ed è proprio la comune condizione di esuli ed artisti che Neil Sammells sottolinea nel

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saggio “Oscar Wilde, Quite Another Thing”, citando la seguente dichiarazione di Wilde: “Essere irlandesi significa essere esuli: patire l’esilio è condividere il destino dell’artista, essere artisti significa essere politici”.¹

Non è questo, però, l’unico legame che unisce gli autori di *The Picture of Dorian Gray* e di *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, perché l’opera di Joyce trabocca di debiti, riferimenti intertestuali, allusioni e citazioni, più o meno esplicite, riguardanti testi di Wilde: un fiume che, ben prima dell’articolo per *Il Piccolo della Sera* del 1909, sarebbe tracinato fino a *Finnegans Wake*, come è già stato evidenziato da diversi studiosi successivi a James S. Atherton, con il suo *The Books at the Wake: A Study of Literary Allusions in James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake* (1959), tra i quali Franklin Walton (1977), Grace Eckley (1989), Jean-Michel Rabaté (1994), Catrin Siedenbiedel (2002) e Margot Gayle Backus (2013).²

Escludendo una lettera del 1906, che esamineremo più avanti e in cui, da Roma, Joyce informava il fratello Stanislaus di aver letto *Dorian Gray* in italiano, l’articolo del 1909 sul “poeta di ‘Salomé’” è il primo testo di Joyce in cui è evocato Wilde. In questo stadio iniziale, l’articolaista sembra avere più familiarità con la biografia del suo connazionale che non con i suoi scritti. Da una rapida scorsa ai titoli contenuti nella biblioteca triestina di Joyce, appare però evidente che il suo interesse per Wilde risale almeno al 1904, anno di pubblicazione della copia da lui consultata di *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (in un’edizione stampata privatamente a Londra), opera per la quale, nel 1909, Joyce addirittura chiese (ed ottenne) da Robert Ross i diritti per la traduzione in italiano. Come sottolinea Dominic Manganiello, Joyce si era infatti reso conto che Wilde condivideva i suoi ideali libertari, grazie alla lettura di un testo in cui, “recalling Bakunin and anticipating Stephen’s *non serviam*, Wilde states that disobedience is man’s original virtue”.³

Un confronto fra l’incipit del primo racconto di Joyce, “The Sisters”, pubblicato sullo *Irish Homestead* il 13 agosto 1904, e l’inizio del *fairy-tale* wildiano “The Nightingale and the Rose” induce inoltre a pensare che Joyce avesse letto almeno le fiabe della raccolta *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). Così recita un passo della fiaba di Wilde: “‘Here at last is a true lover,’ said the Nightingale. ‘Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told his story to the stars and now I see him’”.⁴ E queste le prime righe del racconto joyciano: “There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke. Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of window: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly”.⁵ Casualità? In Joyce c’è sempre molto poco di casuale.

¹ N. SAMMELLS, “Oscar Wilde, Quite Another Thing”, in P. HYLAND and N. SAMMELLS (eds), *Irish Writing. Exile and Subversion*, London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1991, p. 119 (traduzione mia).

² Cfr. sezione finale dei Riferimenti bibliografici.

³ D. MANGANIELLO, *Joyce’s Politics*, London, Routledge, 1980, p. 220.

⁴ O. WILDE, “The Nightingale and the Rose”, 1888, in ID., *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. G.F. MAINE, London, Collins, 1948, p. 292.

⁵ J. JOYCE, “The Sisters”, in ID., *Dubliners*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1914, p. 7.

Alla fortuita lettura romana di *Doriano Gray dipinto*,⁶ nel 1906, seguono le acquisizioni di *An Ideal Husband* (Leipzig, Tauchnitz, 1907) e *Intentions* (Leipzig, English Library, 1907). Come attesta Richard Corballis, Joyce si procurò poi anche l'edizione in lingua originale di *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Leipzig, Tauchnitz, 1908) nella versione del 1891,⁷ testi che campeggeranno vistosamente nell'*Ulisse*, mentre la maggior parte delle altre edizioni presenti nella biblioteca triestina sono del 1909 o successive: *Salome* (Leipzig, Tauchnitz, 1909), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Leipzig, Tauchnitz, 1909), *A Woman of No Importance* (Leipzig, Tauchnitz, 1909), *Selected Poems* (London, Methuen, 1911). Non c'è però copia di *The Importance of Being Earnest*, che Joyce mise in scena a Zurigo con la compagnia “The English Players” al Theater zur Kaufleuten il 29 aprile 1918. Al termine della prima rappresentazione, egli salì sul palco e gridò: “Urrà per l'Irlanda! Il povero Wilde era irlandese, e anch'io lo sono”. Questa fu una delle rare volte in cui Joyce avrebbe proclamato con orgoglio la propria irlandesità in pubblico, e il catalizzatore di questa espressione di appartenenza nazionale era stato proprio l'ostracizzato autore del *De Profundis*.

Wilde, come sua madre – Jane Francesca Elgee, detta ‘Speranza’, che, sebbene protestante, era stata una fervente attivista in tema di nazionalismo – nutriva sentimenti repubblicani. Certo, come annota Enrico Terrinoni nella sua introduzione a *Il ritratto di Dorian Gray*, “non è il caso di dipingere Wilde come una sorta di rivoluzionario pronto a morire per l'Irlanda”; tuttavia, egli era pur sempre profondamente cosciente delle sue radici, connesse a

un'irlandesità, *sui generis* e idiosincratca, ma legata in maniera inscindibile alle sorti e agli obiettivi della sua arte. [...] Per Wilde, secondo Neil Sammells, l'Irishness “incarnava sia la condizione determinante sia lo scopo ultimo delle sue fatiche artistiche”; ovvero, in due parole, “l'esilio e la sovversione”. Due parole chiave importanti per tanti altri scrittori irlandesi – Joyce *in primis*.⁸

La rappresentazione teatrale di *The Importance of Being Earnest* che aveva risvegliato in Joyce l'orgoglio nazionale ebbe peraltro, sin da subito, strascichi legali che coinvolsero uno degli attori amatoriali, l'addeito consolare Henry Carr. Joyce, solito regolare i suoi conti su carta, farà apparire Henry Carr in vesti poco simpatiche nell'*Ulisse*, nella conclusione di “Circe”, episodio che, per inciso, ricorda più di ogni altro le cupe descrizioni wildiane degli spazi urbani in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Già le prime righe di “Circe” (le cosiddette ‘indicazioni di regia’) sembrano rimandare al sordido East End notturno evocato da Wilde.

In “Oscar Wilde: il poeta di ‘Salomé’”, Joyce non si esprime nel dettaglio sulla *pièce*, ma piuttosto esordisce con un commento sull'appropriatezza del nome ‘Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde’. Come Oscar, il figlio di Oisín nel ciclo feniano, anche Wilde era stato tradito e aveva trovato la morte “nel fiore dei suoi anni, mentre sedeva

⁶ Cfr. O. WILDE, *Doriano Gray dipinto*, trad. it. B. CHIARA, Napoli, Edizioni Bideri, 1906.

⁷ Cfr. R. CORBALLIS, “Wild Essence of Wilde: Joyce's Debt to Oscar in *Ulysses*”, in U. BÖKER, R. CORBALLIS and J.A. HIBBARD (eds), *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde during the Last 100 Years*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2002, p. 160.

⁸ E. TERRINONI, “Oscar Wilde, l'irlandese”, introduzione a O. WILDE, *Il ritratto di Dorian Gray*, trad. it. E. TERRINONI, Milano, Mondadori, 2021, pp. XII-XIII.

a tavola, incoronato con false foglie di vite e discutendo di Platone”. Joyce vede Wilde come un prodotto della cultura vittoriana alla quale apparteneva anche Jane Francesca, la madre, il cui temperamento sarebbe ‘rivissuto’ nel figlio, che, “a partire da se stesso, decise di mettere in pratica una teoria della bellezza in parte originale, in parte derivata dai libri di Pater e Ruskin, ma [ciò] finì per attirare su di lui lo scherno del pubblico”.⁹

2. *The fall* (FW 1.15)

A parere di Joyce, il drammatico epilogo della carriera di Wilde “esule disonorato” e “artista tradito” era prevedibile, perché egli si era circondato di “una serie di amici indegni”, e non ci sarebbe da stupirsi del fatto che la sua caduta fosse stata “salutata da un urlo di gioia puritana”. Wilde era il “capro espiatorio” di una società malata e le sue abitudini sessuali risultavano “il prodotto logico e ineluttabile del sistema universitario anglosassone”.¹⁰ Fu proprio quel sistema che avrebbe finito per distruggerne anche la reputazione letteraria.

Questi temi dovevano aver preoccupato Joyce già da tempo, se affidabile è la testimonianza riportata da Richard Ellmann, secondo cui W.B. Yeats dichiarò che, nel 1902, un giovanissimo Joyce gli aveva parlato di Wilde e del fatto che “dopo una vita disordinata si era convertito al cattolicesimo sul letto di morte. Mi disse che sperava che quella conversione non fosse stata sincera. Non sopportava il pensiero che alla fine egli avesse rinnegato se stesso”.¹¹ Ancora nel 1909, l'autore esprimeva questa sua preoccupazione nell'articolo su *Salomé*.

Se Joyce apprezzava il genio del suo compatriota, era però decisamente spaventato dalle contingenze che avevano fatto precipitare Wilde dalle vette del successo agli abissi dell'ignominia. Ed è proprio il tema della Caduta che diventa cruciale nella storia del multiforme protagonista di *Finnegans Wake*, al quale qui ci riferiremo come ‘HCE’, ossia ‘Here Comes Everybody’. Inizialmente sarà una caduta simbolica, come quella dalla scala del manovale Finnegan, i cui effetti hanno però la *magnitudo* di un tuono primordiale che porta con sé i detriti di un'esplosione atomica. Successivamente, subentra per HCE la caduta nella stima dei suoi concittadini, dopo che egli è accusato di aver commesso, di notte, atti osceni nel Phoenix Park di Dublino. Si tratta di un altro ‘capro espiatorio’ che, non a caso, è denominato anche “great white caterpillar” (FW 33.23),¹² ovvero il “grande bruco bianco”, come Lady Colin Campbell aveva notoriamente definito Wilde. Il numero delle occorrenze legate a Wilde presenti in *Finnegans Wake* è impressionante: sono oltre 150 e spesso si tratta di giochi di parole sul suo nome pieni di maliziosi doppi sensi, come in questa serie di esempi: “Fingal Mac Oscar **Onesine Bargearse Boniface**” (FW 46.18); “Wildewide” (FW 98.2); “usque-**bauched** the **ersewild** al-e-conner” (FW 319.4); “askormile eskermillas” (FW 350.21); “Ascare winde” (FW 374.29); “Oscan

⁹ J. JOYCE, “Oscar Wilde: il poeta di ‘Salomé’”, in ID., *Lettere e Saggi*, a cura di E. TERRINONI, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2016, pp. 732-33.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ R. ELLMANN, *James Joyce*, trad. it. P. BERNARDINI, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1964, p. 130.

¹² L'edizione inglese di riferimento è *Finnegans Wake*, London, Penguin, 1992.

wild” (FW. 419.24); “oscaasleep asleep” (FW 476.22); “Oscarshal’s winetavern” (FW 536.21), “woylde” (FW 588.3) e “the moskors” (FW 622.24).¹³

Particolarmente numerose sono le allusioni in *Finnegans Wake* ai processi di Wilde e alla condanna per ‘gross indecency’, soprattutto nei passi in cui Joyce ricostruisce il caso di HCE e la relativa, infinita inchiesta ‘giudiziaria’, ovvero nei Capitoli 3 dei Libri II e III. Nel brano che segue, ad esempio, è evidente l’associazione tra HCE, accusato di tutti i mali del mondo, ed il ‘povero’ Wilde. Entrambi, nel momento della loro destituzione, cercano il perdono e l’intercessione delle mogli (‘lady’): “Pity poor **whitheoath!** Dear gone mummeries, goby! Tell the **woyld** I have lived true thousand hells. Pity, please, lady, for poor O.W. In his profundust snobbing I have caught. [...] Pity poor Haveth Childers Everywhere with Mudder!” (FW 535.26-35).

3. Una vestaglia gialla

In realtà, per comprendere la forte influenza esercitata da Wilde sull’opera artistica di Joyce, basterebbe leggere con attenzione l’episodio che apre l’*Ulisse*, “Telemaco”, in cui Wilde è per così dire ‘mascherato’ da Buck Mulligan. L’episodio è ispirato a un preciso momento della biografia di Joyce, ovvero al suo breve soggiorno nella Martello Tower a Sandycove, dove, nel settembre del 1904, fu ospite di Oliver Joseph St. John Gogarty (1878-1957), benestante studente di medicina e futuro medico, poeta e scrittore. La loro fu un’amicizia complessa, tutta ancora da scoprire. Richard Ellmann, nella sua biografia di Joyce, ci dice che Gogarty era un misto di rozza spiritosaggine e ambizione. Nella torre, Joyce fu inoltre infastidito dalla presenza di un terzo ‘incomodo’, l’inglese Samuel Chenevix Trench. I due amici litigarono e, nel romanzo, Gogarty sarà trasposto nello statuario e pingue Malachi Mulligan (detto ‘Buck’, ovvero ‘cervo’), che apparirà di primo mattino sulla piazzola di tiro della torre con indosso una discinta vestaglia gialla, mettendo in scena una blasfema parodia della messa. Già solo la stazza di Buck Mulligan ed il colore della sua vestaglia dovrebbero metterci sull’avviso. L’indumento è giallo come il girasole wildiano evocato anche in *Finnegans Wake*: “Mr Lhugewhite Cadderpollard with sunflawed beautonhole” (FW 350.11). E, se l’iconografia wildiana non fosse ancora abbastanza chiara, Joyce ci informa che – una volta abbigliato – Mulligan indossa un “panciotto giallo primula” (U.1.33).¹⁴ Il giallo riapparirà in “Circe”, in cui in una frase parentetica si legge che “*Dall’alto di una torre Buck Mulligan in veste da buffone – multicolore – pulce e giallo e berretto da clown a riccioli e sonagli*” (U.5.1157).

Prima di arrivare all’incipit dell’*Ulisse* (scritto tra il 1914 e il 1921), dobbiamo fare una digressione e, come anticipato, tornare al 1906, a Roma, dove Joyce aveva temporaneamente trovato un lavoro presso la banca Nast-Kolb & Schumacher. Il 12 agosto di quell’anno egli scrisse al fratello Stanislaus, rimasto a Trieste, una lettera che solleva molti dubbi sulla natura della sua amicizia con Gogarty:

¹³ In questi passi, come in seguito, grassetto e sottolineature sono di chi scrive.

¹⁴ Dove non diversamente indicato, *Ulisse* è nella traduzione di E. TERRINONI, Milano, Bompiani, 2021.

Stavo tornando a casa per pranzo dalla banca quando ho incontrato Nora per strada, che agitava un giornale e diceva: “Indovina l’ultima, indovina chi si è sposato!”... Quando mi ha mostrato il giornale ho creduto prima che fosse una burla, poiché avevo immaginato che Gogarty si trovasse o a New York o in viaggio verso l’Italia, e – come gli avevo promesso – seguitavo a controllare gli annunci sulla “Tribuna” in cerca di un suo messaggio. Ma suppongo che sia vero. So che dev’essere un segno di progresso e di esperienza veder cadere le proprie illusioni, una per una. Questa particolare perdita non è proprio adatta a essere discussa per lettera.¹⁵

Nella lettera successiva (16 agosto), Joyce comunicava al fratello di essersi immerso nella lettura del *Dorian Grey* [sic], in traduzione italiana, mentre nella missiva del 19 agosto lo avrebbe informato di non aver ricevuto “Nessun messaggio da Gogarty”, aggiungendo: “immagino che non oserebbe presentarmi a sua moglie”. Scrisse poi:

Ho appena finito “Dorian Grey” [sic]. Certi capitoli ricordano Huysmans, cataloghi di atrocità, elenchi di profumi e strumenti. L’idea dominante è fantastica. Dorian è bellissimo e diventa terribilmente malvagio: ma non invecchia mai. Invecchia il suo ritratto. Immagino l’uso che avrà fatto di certi brani il pubblico ministero contro Wilde (1895). Non è molto difficile leggere fra le righe. [...] Se avesse avuto il coraggio di sviluppare le allusioni contenute nel romanzo sarebbe stato meglio. Sospetto che l’abbia fatto in alcuni libri stampati privatamente. Come il suo imitatore irlandese.¹⁶

L’“imitatore irlandese” a cui l’autore allude è Gogarty, che nel 1903 si era iscritto al Trinity College a Oxford per partecipare al concorso di poesia del Newdigate Prize, a suo tempo vinto da Wilde. Le riflessioni su *The Picture of Dorian Gray* prefigurano inoltre le divagazioni sulle ambiguità dei legami maschili, più o meno rispettabili, presenti nel dramma *Esuli* (*Exiles*, 1918) e nell’*Ulisse*, alle cui prime pagine ora torniamo. Dopo essere sbucato sulla piazzola di tiro, Mulligan si fa la barba, armato di una ciotola piena di sapone, di un rasoio e uno specchio. In risposta a una chiamata, lo raggiunge da basso Stephen Dedalus (sorta di *alter ego* di Joyce da giovane):

- Guardati, disse, bardo tremendo. Stephen si chinò in avanti e scrutò, nello specchio di fronte a sé, incrinato di traverso da una crepa, i capelli ritti. [...]
- L’ho fregato dalla camera della sguattera, disse Buck Mulligan. [...] Ridendo di nuovo, sottrasse lo specchio agli occhi sbircianti di Stephen.
- La rabbia di Caliban quando non riesce a vedere il proprio volto allo specchio, fece. Se solo Wilde fosse vivo per vederti. Ritraendosi e puntando il dito, Stephen disse rancoroso:
- È un simbolo dell’arte irlandese. Lo specchio incrinato di una serva. (U.1.9-10)

Qui siamo nell’esclusivo dominio di Wilde. Infatti il paragone con Calibano, oltre ad essere una chiara allusione all’animalesco Caliban in *The Tempest* (1610-1611) di William Shakespeare, è una citazione dalla “Prefazione” a *Il ritratto di Dorian Gray*, con i suoi strali satirici rivolti contro la mentalità vittoriana filisteica, sia nel caso in cui essa (realisticamente) scorga il proprio volto riflesso nello specchio, sia che (illusoriamente) non riesca a visualizzarlo. Anche la paternità della massima che segue è di Wilde, rimandando al dialogo platonico “La decadenza della menzogna” (“The Decay of Lying”), incluso nella raccolta saggistica *Intentions* (1891). Si tratta del celebre passo

¹⁵ J. JOYCE, *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. R. ELLMANN, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, pp. 93-94 (traduzione mia).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 96 (traduzione mia).

in cui Cyril e Vivian discutono la questione se l'arte debba imitare la natura, o se invece non debba essere la natura a imitare l'arte. Secondo Wilde, una mera imitazione della natura “would reduce genius to the position of a cracked looking-glass”,¹⁷ ossia incatenerebbe il genio alle crepe di uno specchio incrinato.

Joyce vi aggiunge una nota di denuncia anti-coloniale, associando all'elemento dello specchio quello della serva, oggettivazione di un'Irlanda assoggettata dagli inglesi. Mulligan e Dedalus evocano dunque Wilde, irlandese e figlio di una rivoluzionaria repubblicana, al fine di illustrare la loro visione del ruolo dell'artista e delle sorti dell'arte irlandese stessa. Mulligan, aspirante architetto di un'Irlanda 'ellenizzata', si comporta tuttavia nei confronti dell'amico come un vile cortigiano, dispensando dettagli sulla vita privata di Stephen a chiunque possa assicurargli una bevuta, un vantaggio sociale o una risata, e trattandone le capacità (cioè la sua arte) come se fossero risorse da sfruttare. Quando poi Mulligan lo paragona al selvaggio Calibano, Stephen controbatte facendo propria l'immagine dello specchio deformante di Wilde e denunciando così le bieche intenzioni dell'amico: ridicolizzarlo, negare il suo genio e trasformare la sua arte in un oggetto di cui tutti si possono appropriare, come appunto lo specchio di una serva. Alla fine di “Telemaco”, la rottura tra i due amici è formalizzata attraverso la restituzione – altamente simbolica – della chiave della torre da parte di Stephen a Mulligan. Nonostante ciò, nella mente di Stephen la questione è evidentemente ancora aperta. Nel terzo episodio, “Proteo”, egli è solo sulla spiaggia di Sandycove, *brooding* sulla sua vita e sul rapporto con Buck, del quale peraltro indossa degli indumenti usati (oltre ai pantaloni, un paio di scarpe):

Il suo sguardo meditava sulle scarpe a pianta larga, scarti di un cervo *nebeneinander*. Contò le crepe del cuoio liso dove il piede d'un altro s'era annidato al calduccio. Il piede che batte sul selciato in tripudio, piede di cui mi *disamoro*. [...] Amico fidato, anima gemella: l'amore di Wilde che non osa pronunciare il suo nome. Mi lascerà ora. E la colpa? Così come sono. Così come sono. Tutto o niente. (U.3.76)

L'evocazione dell'“amore che non osa pronunciare il suo nome” (“The love that dare not speak its name”, dalla poesia “Two Loves” di Lord Alfred Douglas) è velata di ambiguità e rimanda non solo alle citate lettere che Joyce inviò a Stannie nel 1906, ma anche alla futura reiterata rielaborazione in *Finnegans Wake* (ben sei occorrenze) di un passo del *De Profundis* in cui Wilde faceva riferimento all'incontro con Douglas, eco che consente a Joyce di giocare su variazioni dell'idea ‘ma t'ho incontrato o troppo tardi o troppo presto’. È allora lecito chiedersi se l'impetuoso Malachi Mulligan nell'*Ulisse* e il fidato Cranly in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* non fossero stati per Stephen qualcosa di più di “a staunch friend and a brother soul” (U. 3. 450). Mentre Stephen cammina lungo la spiaggia di Sandycove, con ai piedi le scarpe usate di Mulligan, comprende che la loro amicizia è finita, come anni prima si era conclusa quella con il serio Cranly. Si può allora ipotizzare che ‘emanciparsi da Wilde’ volesse dire per Joyce che questo tipo di amicizie intime maschili erano un'esperienza legata alla giovinezza: per questi legami non ci sarebbe stato posto nella solitudine dell'esilio del quale l'artista ha bisogno per creare.

¹⁷ O. WILDE, “The Decay of Lying”, 1891, in ID., *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, p. 921.

4. *Paradossi*

Quando, all'inizio dell'*Ulisse*, Buck Mulligan afferma con una nota di disprezzo di essersi emancipato insieme a Stephen Dedalus “da Wilde e dai paradossi”, verrebbe da pensare che Joyce stia implicitamente sottolineando quanto la letteratura irlandese moderna – e gli autori irlandesi come lui – sia andata affrancandosi dall'eredità dell'estetica wildiana:

– Lei stimola la mia curiosità, disse Haines amabilmente. Si tratta di un qualche paradosso?
 – Poh! fece Buck Mulligan. Da Wilde e dai paradossi ci siamo emancipati. È alquanto semplice. Ha la prova algebrica che il nipote di Amleto è il nonno di Shakespeare e lui stesso il fantasma di suo padre. (U.1.33)

Eppure, l'uso della provocazione intellettuale, dei paradossi e dell'ironia deve considerarsi uno dei grandi lasciti di Wilde alla scrittura irlandese novecentesca, un'eredità benefica che seguita a plasmarla. Infatti, a dispetto del secco giudizio di Mulligan, una delle caratteristiche principali dell'introverso Stephen è proprio la sua abitudine ad atteggiarsi come un esteta e a parlare per aforismi ed epigrammi, apologhi e parabole. Stephen parla insomma come un personaggio delle commedie di Wilde, o come Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dedalus ama stupire i propri interlocutori esprimendosi con paradossi degni del Principe Paul Maraloffski in *Vera o i nichilisti* (*Vera; or, The Nihilists*), tragedia che andò in scena nell'agosto del 1883, durante un secondo soggiorno americano di Wilde. Nel suo debutto teatrale, l'esordiente drammaturgo denunciava trasversalmente lo sfruttamento dell'Irlanda guardando alla Russia del regime zarista. La *pièce* racconta della giovane locandiera Vera Sabouroff, che, unitasi convintamente ai nichilisti, viene coinvolta in un complotto per assassinare lo Zar. La storia è ispirata all'attentato del 1878 al governatore di San Pietroburgo, Fëdor Trepov, per mano di Vera Ivanovna Zasulič. Nella finzione scenica, in cui brilla la figura del cinico Principe Paul (che snocciola una serie di fulminanti e ormai famosi epigrammi), Vera finirà per sacrificare la propria vita pur di salvare il nuovo Zar, un ex nichilista di cui si è innamorata e che ha la sensibilità di un monarca riformista.

Allo Zarevitch wildiano si deve la battuta sul popolo affamato, rivolta al padre despota: “Vi hanno chiesto pane, e gli avete dato pietre”,¹⁸ parole poi rivisitate da Nathanael West in *Signorina Cuorinfranti* (*Miss Lonelyhearts*, 1933): “Signorina Cuorinfranti, le consiglio di dare sassi ai suoi lettori. Quando chiedono pane non dategli *cracker* come fa la Chiesa, né suggeritegli – come fa lo Stato – di mangiare *brioche*. Spiegategli che non di solo pane vive l'uomo e dategli sassi”.¹⁹ Passo che, a sua volta, ispirò alla scrittrice irlandese Mary Beckett il titolo del suo grande romanzo sui Troubles, ossia *Give Them Stones* (1987). Molta era la curiosità suscitata in Europa, a fine Ottocento, dalle rivolte che serpeggiavano in Russia. Il tema aveva affascinato anche Victorien Sardou, in particolare nel suo dramma *Fédora* (1882).

¹⁸ O. WILDE, *Vera o i nichilisti*, Atto II, trad. it. E. TERRINONI, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2020, p. 91.

¹⁹ N. WEST, *Signorina Cuorinfranti*, trad. it. R. DURANTI, Roma, E/O, 1988, p. 18.

Davvero singolare è la triangolazione che si venne a creare, una decina di anni più tardi, tra *Vera o i nichilisti*, “Matcham’s Masterstroke” (il primo, e vantato, componimento in prosa di Joyce) e il racconto a premio “For Vera’s Sake” di Philip Beaufoy, apparso su *Tit-Bits* il 1 maggio 1897, in cui si descriveva l’attentato organizzato da un gruppo di nichilisti. Come racconta Stanislaus Joyce in *My Brother’s Keeper*, il popolare *penny-weekly* premiò “For Vera’s Sake” preferendolo a “Matcham’s Masterstroke”, che Joyce, ancora alunno dei gesuiti al Belvedere College, aveva spedito a *Tit-Bits* sperando di racimolare qualche ghinea. Protagonisti del suo racconto erano un diplomatico russo, un nichilista e una ‘strega sorridente’. Il racconto rifiutato dal settimanale venne poi trionfalmente eternato venticinque anni dopo nell’*Ulisse*, insieme al concorrente Beaufoy, del quale però Joyce non conobbe mai la vera identità.

Philip Beaufoy era lo pseudonimo di Philip (Zaleg) Bergson (1871-1947), giornalista e scrittore di libri per bambini e di una serie di manuali di suggerimenti pratici, quali *How to Succeed as a Writer*, *Sinners Down the Centuries* e *The Secret Power: A Handbook to the Art of Living*. Come suo padre, Michael Bergson (1820-1898), Philip era anche un musicista. Aveva quattro fratelli e altrettante sorelle. A tutto questo va aggiunto il dato non irrilevante che Beaufoy era il fratello dell’artista e occultista Moina Mathers, moglie di Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, e del famoso filosofo Henri-Louis Bergson, Premio Nobel per la letteratura, uno dei pensatori più importanti del primo Novecento le cui teorizzazioni ebbero un ruolo decisivo nell’ambito delle trasposizioni diegetiche del flusso di coscienza. (Leggendo la produzione letteraria di Philip Bergson, si è indotti a pensare che Zaleg potesse essere causa di imbarazzo per il suo geniale fratello, cui seguì la decisione di ricorrere a uno pseudonimo.) Joyce non era a conoscenza della vera identità di Beaufoy, ma il suo nome ne aveva attirato l’attenzione sin da quando era giovanissimo, perché *Tit-Bits* accoglieva spesso racconti di Beaufoy e quel *penny-weekly* era una delle rare pubblicazioni che circolavano in casa Joyce.

Le strane coincidenze che legano la Vera di Wilde a quella dell’oscuro Beaufoy, che in “Circe” accusa il povero Leopold Bloom di essere “[a] plagiarist. A soapy sneak masquerading as a literateur” (U. 15.22.23), confluiscono in ulteriori connessioni tra la famiglia Bergson e l’autore dell’*Ulisse*. Questa volta il filo rosso da seguire, e che ci riporterà a Wilde, si intreccia con l’interesse di Joyce per l’occultismo. Come accennato, Beaufoy era il fratello di Moina Mathers (1865-1928), amica di W.B. Yeats e co-fondatrice, insieme al marito, dell’Ordine Ermetico della Golden Dawn, di cui era la Grande Sacerdotessa. Nota anche come la ‘Veggente’, la Mathers è stata un’esoterista, maga cerimoniale e scrittrice. Moina e Samuel Liddell svilupparono metodi di pratica magica, rituali e tecniche per invocare divinità e spiriti. Dopo la morte del marito, ella divenne ‘Imperatrix degli Ermetisti’ e fondò un nuovo ordine occulto che chiamò *Alpha et Omega*. Nonostante il manifesto interesse di Joyce per questi temi, la sua biografia ci porta a pensare che l’occulto fosse per lui qualcosa di cui prendersi gioco in quanto forma presunta di pseudo-conoscenza. Le testimonianze del fratello Stanislaus indicano però che, soprattutto nel periodo successivo alla morte della madre, Joyce lesse molti testi teosofici di autori come Emanuel Swedenborg, William Blake, Madame Blavatsky, il colonnello Henry Steel Olcott, Charles Webster Leadbeater e Annie Besant.

Nota è poi la sua connessione con George Russell, evocato anche nell'*Ulisse*, segnatamente in "Scilla e Cariddi", l'episodio che più di ogni altro è popolato da fantasmi e spettri, *in primis* il padre di Amleto. Non a caso, in quest'episodio la citazione da *Il ritratto del signor W.H. (The Portrait of Mr W.H.)*, che vedremo nel dettaglio più avanti, è funzionale all'idea che Dedalus ha maturato relativamente a cosa sia un fantasma. Anche l'ironico rifiuto delle aporie da parte di Stephen, durante la sua disquisizione su Shakespeare, può interpretarsi come un debito nei confronti dell'assunto wildiano sulle sfumature poliedriche e multiple della 'verità'.

"Scilla e Cariddi" oggettiva inoltre un ulteriore anello di congiunzione tra Joyce, Wilde e l'occultismo. Infatti, nella sua biblioteca parigina Joyce aveva una speciale edizione della *Occult Review*, in cui figuravano i "Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde" (*Psychic Book Club*, London, 1924), messaggi che sarebbero stati trasmessi direttamente dal Purgatorio dall'autore del *De Profundis* alla medium spiritualista irlandese Hester Travers Smith (1868-1949). In quelle testimonianze psichiche, a ventiquattro anni dalla sua morte, Wilde si sarebbe scagliato, tra l'altro, contro le 'scandalose nefandezze' dell'*Ulisse*. Per Joyce, ciò doveva suonare come un invito a nozze, tanto che quelle invettive contano ben otto occorrenze in *Finnegans Wake*. Anche dietro a questa storia – come spesso succede in Joyce – c'è in realtà un regolamento di conti. Infatti, la sensitiva Travers Smith era la figlia di Edward Dowden, uno studioso di Shakespeare del quale Joyce si era fatto beffe (per il tramite di Stephen Dedalus) sempre in "Scilla e Cariddi". Hester aveva cercato di vendicare il padre (per il tramite di Wilde) sulla *Occult Review*, ma Joyce riuscì anche stavolta ad avere l'ultima parola: "I do not credit one word of it from such and suches mistraverses" (FW 538.6).

5. Ritratti e dipinti

Diversi critici hanno discusso in merito all'influenza esercitata da *The Picture of Dorian Gray* su *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*,²⁰ notando come entrambi i romanzi privilegino disquisizioni di teoria estetica e come, al momento della loro pubblicazione, siano stati considerati pruriginosi o immorali. In entrambi si colgono inoltre allusioni critiche al dominio coloniale britannico.

Qui vorrei però porre l'accento su un ulteriore aspetto, ovvero il valore attribuito da Joyce e Wilde al paradigma del ritratto ('portrait') e del dipinto ('picture'). Nel 1889, quando in ambito letterario circolavano già *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) di Henry James e gli *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) di Walter Pater, anche Wilde usò il termine 'portrait' nel titolo di un racconto-saggio sull'identità del misterioso dedicatario dei

²⁰ Si vedano, ad esempio, D. MANGANIELLO, "Through a Cracked Looking Glass: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*", in D.A. BEN-MERRE and M. MURPHY (eds), *James Joyce and His Contemporaries*, New York and Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1989, pp. 89-98; V. MAHAFFEY, "Père-version and Im-mère-sion: Idealized Corruption in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", *James Joyce Quarterly*, 50 (1-2), 2012-2013, pp. 245-61; R. CORBALLIS, "Wild Essence of Wilde: Joyce's Debt to Oscar in *Ulysses*".

Sonetti shakespeariani, ovvero *The Portrait of Mr W.H.*, prontamente citato da Joyce nell'*Ulisse*, nel contesto dell'episodio della biblioteca (“Scilla e Cariddi”):

“Il più brillante di tutti è quel racconto di Wilde,” disse Best, brandendo il suo brillante taccuino. “Quel *Ritratto di W.H.* dove dimostra che i sonetti sono stati scritti da un certo Willie Hughes, un uomo tutto *bues*”.

“Per Willie Hughes, no?” chiese il bibliotecario quacchero. O Hughie Wills? William Himself. W. H.: chi son io?

“Voglio dire, *per* Willie Hughes,” convenne Best, correggendo abilmente la sua glossa. “Naturalmente è tutto un paradosso, cioè, Hughes e *bews* e *bues*, i colori, ma in che maniera particolare l'elabora. È l'essenza stessa di Wilde, cioè. Il tocco leggero.” Il suo sguardo sfiorò leggermente i loro volti mentre sorrideva, biondo efebo. Essenza addomesticata di Wilde.²¹

A fine episodio, l'erudito bibliotecario del Trinity College chiederà a Stephen se intenda scrivere un libro sulla sua paradossale tesi riguardante l'identità di Amleto, aggiungendo: “Dovresti farne un dialogo, cioè, tipo quelli platonici che ha scritto Wilde”.²² Un'eco delle *Intentions* si registra in effetti anche nelle discussioni filosofico/religiose tra Stephen e Cranly in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Nel titolo del suo romanzo, invece, Wilde mise in primo piano il lessema ‘picture’. Se Pater, James e, in seguito, Joyce stesso puntarono metaforicamente sul ‘portrait’ letterario, privilegiando la componente della descrizione narrativa di un dato soggetto, il capolavoro di Wilde ci pone in senso più letterale di fronte a un dipinto: a un manufatto che, nella dimensione diegetica, assume una misteriosa vita autonoma all'insegna dell'allegoria e del fantastico, con il subentrare di alterazioni e modifiche fisiologico-anatomiche di immagine e tela nel corso del tempo. Agli albori dell'‘opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica’, per dirla con il celebre studio del 1935 a firma di Walter Benjamin, Wilde era del resto già attento alle possibilità prospettate dalla fotografia, come si deduce dal suo racconto “The Sphinx Without a Secret: An Etching” (1887), che ruota attorno alla fotografia di una donna misteriosa. Analogamente, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* la casa di Lord Henry è piena di fotografie del giovane amico, ben diciotto, anche se esse, a differenza del ‘ritratto magico’ e del suo trionfo finale sull'immanenza e sulla degenerazione, possono solo cogliere momenti distinti e fugaci dell'effimera bellezza del protagonista, sbiadendosi e ingiallendosi con il trascorrere degli anni. Per contro, il dipinto che immortala Dorian Gray – nel suo pieno fulgore e in un momento di incantata suggestione – risponde a una fenomenologia ibrida che oscilla tra la pittura e la fotografia, transcendendo entrambe. Si potrebbe affermare che Wilde lasciasse qui trasparire l'interesse per un nuovo medium artistico in grado di incorporare e riprodurre in modo dinamico il movimento stesso. Il quadro che si trasforma, con un'immagine che mirabilmente muta sotto gli occhi dell'osservatore, suggerisce che i tempi di una nuova arte sono vicini. L'opera iconica al centro di *The Picture of Dorian Gray* è insomma dotata di qualità che anticipano il futuro della *moving picture*, ovvero del film. Il passaggio avverrà di lì a poco, nel 1895, anno spartiacque dei processi e della

²¹ J. JOYCE, *Ulisse*, trad. it. M. BIONDI, Milano, Nave di Teseo, 2020, pp. 311-12.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 334.

carcerazione di Wilde, ma anche data storica in cui i fratelli Lumière brevettarono a Parigi il *cinématographe*.

Da parte sua, Joyce fu pronto a raccogliere quel messaggio e comprese più di ogni altro autore dell'epoca le potenzialità che, per la letteratura, si celavano nel mezzo cinematografico, del cui linguaggio egli si appropriò. Basterà qui menzionare il suo ricorso ai flashback e a tecniche riconducibili a montaggio e dissolvenze, ma anche gli effetti speciali alla Georges Méliès o situazioni che ricordano i film di Leopoldo Fregoli e André Deed (Cretinetti), in particolare negli episodi di "Circe" e "Rocce erranti" dell'*Ulisse*. La simultaneità di immagini in movimento su molteplici schermi cinematografici e televisivi, l'accavallarsi di voci, notizie, storie, dialoghi, parole e suoni, di scariche elettriche e frammenti musicali è alla base dell'invenzione del mondo rappresentato in *Finnegans Wake*. Ed è nel *Wake* (Libro I, Capitolo 4) che Joyce ci offre un 'autoritratto' ultimativo: quello di Shem the Penman, il figlio ribelle di HCE e ALP, il quale "used to stipple endlessly inartistic portraits of himself" (FW 182.18-19). Shem the Penman, il plagiatario che – novello *body performer* come gli attuali Franko B o Marina Abramović – fa di sé una scandalosa opera d'arte, scrivendo sul suo corpo la storia del mondo con un inchiostro indelebile prodotto con i propri escrementi ("ex stercore turpi [...] encaustum sibi fecit indelebile", FW 185.28), per poi svanire "doriangrayed" (FW 186.8) nel Capitolo 7:

and the first till last alshemist wrote over every square inch of the only foolscap available, his own body, till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integument slowly unfolded all marryvoising moodmoulded cyclewheeling history [...] but with each word that would not pass away the squidsself which he had squirtscreened from the crystalline world waned changreenold and doriangrayed in its dudhud. (FW 185.33-35-186.1-8)²³

alshemista primo fino all'ultimo, scrisse su ogni pollice quadrato dell'unica carta formato protocollo disponibile, il proprio corpo, finché mediante la propria corrosiva sublimazione un tegumento del tempo presente continuo non svolse lentamente tutta la sua storia ciclorotante, marivodaggiamente muffomorale [...] ma con ogni parola che non scomparirebbe quella creatura calamaresca che aveva schermospruzzato dal mondo cristallino svanì chagreenvecchia e più *doriangreyesca* nella sua dudhudmagia. (FW 185.33-35-186.1-8)²⁴

Ad emergere è dunque l'ultimo, definitivo, 'inartistico' ritratto finale dell'artista, che, ormai non più giovane, si scrive onanisticamente addosso, schizzando nero di seppia.

6. Per concludere

L'eredità di Wilde è stata, per Joyce, imprescindibile. Affascinato dalla sua storia di esule-martire, in cui subito si identificò, Joyce si avvicinò per gradi all'opera del connazionale irlandese. Benché, stranamente, la sua prima lettura di *The Picture of Dorian Gray* fosse in traduzione italiana, il romanzo scatenò in lui una serie immediata di reazioni legate anche al difficile rapporto di amicizia con Oliver St. John Gogarty, il

²³ Integument= skin – Dud= dead skin + deadhand + hud= magic/illusion/charm + Hud= cappuccio/cappa.

²⁴ Qui in traduzione italiana di L. SCHENONI, Milano, Mondadori, 2001.

Buck Mulligan dell'*Ulisse*, personaggio in cui convergono molti rimandi alla figura di Wilde. Il 1909 fu per Joyce l'anno del confronto più intenso con i testi di Wilde, che sarebbero confluiti come un fiume carsico nell'*Ulisse* e in *Finnegans Wake*.

Quello tra Joyce e Wilde può dirsi un confronto durato una vita, che non si è limitato a questioni di modalità e ricezione del linguaggio artistico, comportando precise scelte strategiche ed esistenziali. Riecheggiando Wilde, a Trieste Joyce dichiarò a Oscar Schwarz: “La mia arte non è uno specchio messo dinanzi alla natura. È la natura che riflette la mia arte”.²⁵ Wilde era però l'esule del quale Joyce non volle seguire la via del martirio, ed è forse per questo che il tema della Caduta e delle sue terribili conseguenze diventò per lui un'ossessione destinata a percorrere l'intero *Finnegans Wake*, il suo ultimo libro. Joyce era cosciente del fatto che – se voleva evitare cadute ignominiose – doveva uscire vittorioso dalle battaglie perse dai suoi idoli eretici: Ario, Giordano Bruno e, naturalmente, lo stesso Wilde. A differenza di quest'ultimo, tra la vita e l'opera d'arte, Joyce preferì assegnare il primato all'opera.

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PIERPAOLO MARTINO*

Wilde, Beardsley and Beyond. *Salomé* in the Cinema: From Charles Bryant to Al Pacino

Abstract: Cinematic versions of Oscar Wilde's works – and life, such as 2018 *The Happy Prince* by Rupert Everett – span the entirety of cinema history from the silent era to the present age. *Salomé* is undoubtedly the most *decadent* of Wilde's plays; the author's debt to the Symbolist poets clearly emerges here in the disturbing music which characterises Wilde's literary *score*. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the play had an enormous influence on cinema and on popular music. The 1923 silent version directed by Charles Bryant is considered one of the first art films ever made in the history of cinema. The highly stylised costumes, exaggerated acting and minimal sets created a screen image much more focused on atmosphere and on conveying a sense of the characters' individual heightened desires than on conventional plot development. The film was shot completely in black and white, matching the illustrations done by Aubrey Beardsley in the printed edition of Wilde's play. The most recent filmic version of *Salomé* – the 2011 celebrated docufilm *Wilde Salomé* by iconic director and actor Al Pacino – documents, instead, a period in which Pacino performed in a production of *Salomé*, directed by actress and theatre director Estelle Parson at Los Angeles' Wadsworth Theatre, while he was also making a movie documenting the mounting of the show and shooting a narrative film version of the play. The film is for Al Pacino, and of course for the audience, a journey, and, most importantly, a *process* in which Pacino re-writes not only the play but Wilde himself. The film stages, indeed, Pacino's 'love affair with Oscar Wilde' and his desire to explore Wilde's legacy in contemporary culture.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde. *Salomé*. Cinema. Aubrey Beardsley.

1. *Oscar Wilde on Film: Performing Oscar in-between the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*

The online Internet Movie database lists Wilde – as David Weir has recently observed – as a “screenwriter of roughly 250 films, almost 100 more of those credited to Ben Hecht, possibly the most prolific screenwriter in cinema history”. Weir notes that “many of Wilde's IMDb credits are for film adaptations of his stage plays, which were extremely popular in his own day”, but he also stresses how “film versions of Wilde's plays span the entirety of cinema history from the silent era to the present”.¹ Interestingly, a consistent part of these films was shot in the 1990s and indeed Julia Wood notes how, although the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) has always commanded interest and curiosity, “it has been since the mid-1990s that there has been

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¹ D. WEIR, *Decadence. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2018, p. 110.

a revaluation of Wilde's cultural legacy, as well as a re-examination of public feeling towards him".² During the 1990s there were, indeed, a multitude of events, publications and intermedial adaptations commemorating the centenary dates of Wilde's life, which, in between the two millennia, was to become a paradigm of otherness, difference and resistance to the 'order of discourse', to echo Michel Foucault, a paradigm to be performed and *reproduced* in a number of different contexts.

This reproduction also took place within the end-of-the-century's fascination for (and *consumption* of) British heritage cinema,³ which often translated into the success of biopics based on a conservative idea of history as a simplified model of great individuals, providing a coherent version of identity,⁴ strongly at odds with postmodern – but also *Wildean* – views of the self as unstable and 'fictional'. This process turned *Oscar Wilde* into a (film industry) commodity; yet, as often happens, in Wilde's discourse this very form of consumerism was also able to activate critical processes, that is, spaces of reception and re-articulation of Wilde's paradigm of outsidership, through productions – as, for instance, Todd Haynes's 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine*, which salutes Wilde's birth in terms of the advent of the first British pop star of history – based on creativity, unpredictability, and transgression of any pretence of faithfulness.⁵ Before focusing on *Salomé's* afterlife in the cinema, it is important to stress how Wilde's most influential *play*, namely *Oscar Wilde* (his life as theatre), has been reproduced on the screen.

One of the most successful films of the late 1990s was Brian Gilbert's acclaimed but – as we will see – too reassuring 1997 biopic *Wilde* based on Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography; here Stephen Fry plays Oscar in a performance which exceeded the screen to become a kind of visual reincarnation of Wilde for that period.⁶ As Wood observes, in the late 1990s

the image of Stephen Fry became sufficiently associated with Wilde's that the two figures were discussed in conjunction, as if they were the same person. In terms of the mourning urge, the substitute or surro-

² J. WOOD, *The Resurrection of Oscar Wilde. A Cultural Afterlife*, Cambridge, The Lutterworth Press, 2007, p. 8.

³ British heritage films produced in the 1980s and 1990s – following a trend started by Hugh Hudson's *Chariots of Fire* (1981) – show a tendency to articulate "a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of the privileged classes". In short, the heritage films, which very often portray the white community in a semi-rural Southern England, avoid addressing the social and racial diversity of a changing Britain. In doing so, those films reinvent "an England that no longer existed [...] as something fondly remembered and desirable" (A. HIGSON, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980*, Oxford, OUP, 2003). See also R. MURPHY (ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s*, London, BFI Publishing, 1999.

⁴ See H. SHACHAR, *Screening the Author. The Literary Biopic*, London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 3.

⁵ See N. SAMMELLS, *Wilde Style. The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde*, Harlow, Longman, 2000.

⁶ In 1998, a bronze memorial named *A Conversation with Oscar Wilde*, sculpted by Maggi Hambling, was unveiled in Adelaide Street by Stephen Fry himself. Inscribed with Wilde's famous epigram words "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars", the memorial depicts him rising from a granite sarcophagus. The idea, as Hambling said, is that he is "rising, talking, laughing, smoking from this sarcophagus and the passer by, should he or she choose to, can sit on the sarcophagus and have a conversation with him" (L. REYNOLDS, "Is the Oscar Wilde Memorial a Bench?", *Londonist*, 1 November 2016, <https://londonist.com/2015/07/is-the-oscar-wilde-memorial-a-bench>, last accessed on 13 October 2023). Interestingly, the idea of a permanent memorial was suggested by the late gay film director Derek Jarman. Several prominent figures, including former Labour leader Michael Foot, leading actress Dame Judi Dench and Irish poet Seamus Heaney, supported the cause. The unveiling also saw Dench and Nigel Hawthorne read an extract from *A Woman of No Importance* (1893).

gate Wilde, satiated the demand for an incarnation of Wilde. Fry, in fact, answered the need for a figure who could play Wilde, not merely on stage or in film, but continually, upon the stage of the centenary.⁷

Besides physical resemblance, Fry shares Wilde's eclectic approach to writing: he has written novels, autobiographical pieces, and plays (like *Latin! Or Tobacco and Boys*, 1980), and worked for television and cinema (not only as an actor, but also as a director of famous films such as *Bright Young Things*, 2003, which he adapted after Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*). Nevertheless, as Robert Tanitch observes in his encyclopaedic work *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, "Fry had a physical similarity to Wilde but not the emotional range as an actor to manage the hubris at the end. He tones Wilde down. There was no flamboyance, no energy, no sparkle. He was gentle, shy and softly spoken, a sad, somewhat detached Oscar, who identified with *The Selfish Giant*".⁸

In short, *Wilde* was a film that perfectly fitted with the late 1990s' British heritage *Zeitgeist*, in which cultural products were very often devised for an easy, pleasant form of consumption; as French wrote in *The Observer*, "for all its sexual frankness, *Wilde* is a discreet work that amuses and moves us, but never shocks or disturbs".⁹ O.S. Buckton points in this sense to the continuity between *Wilde* and the string of Hollywoodian adaptations of his literary texts in the following years – namely, *An Ideal Husband* (with two 1999 versions directed respectively by Oliver Parker and W.P. Cartlidge), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002), and *Dorian Gray* (2009)¹⁰ – noting how this embracing of "Wilde by mainstream cinema has come to the cost of sacrificing the most cryptic, transgressive aspects of his depiction of sexual identity".¹¹ And yet, in a short article entitled "Playing Oscar", Fry himself – besides speaking about his lifelong obsession with Wilde and of how he prepared to play Oscar – declared that "Wilde's courage lay not in his 'alternative sexuality' but in the freedom of his mind".¹²

⁷ J. WOOD, *The Resurrection of Oscar Wilde*, p. 105.

⁸ R. TANITCH, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, London, Methuen, 1999, pp. 72-73. This reference, as well as the main topics investigated in this paper, are all highlighted in detail in my recent *Wilde Now. Performance, Celebrity and Interminality in Oscar Wilde*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, which is here a fundamental source.

⁹ R. TANITCH, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, p. 73.

¹⁰ Regenia Gagnier observes how, by means of the character of Lord Henry, Wilde managed to catch "the essence of modern economic man when he named the cigarette the perfect type of a perfect pleasure because it left one unsatisfied. For this reason, of course, the cigarette is the perfect commodity" (R. GAGNIER, "On the Insatiability of Human Wants: Economic and Aesthetic Man", *Victorian Studies*, 36 [2], Winter 1993, p. 299). Interestingly, in Wilde's iconic story it is Dorian who, under the influence of Wotton, surrenders to consumerism and yet, despite the 'exquisite' quality of the treasures he collects, he feels ultimately restless and unfulfilled. This very restlessness informs the portrayal of Dorian in adaptations and rewritings within contemporary popular culture, from major American productions such as Albert Lewin's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945) and Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009), to cult film versions like Massimo Dallamano's *The Secret of Dorian Gray* (1970) or Allan A. Goldstein's *Dorian*, and Will Self's literary parody *Dorian, an Imitation* (2002). In a way, Dallamano's film has really captured the decadent atmospheres of Wilde's book by setting the story in the present, which at that time coincided with the late 1960s' sexual revolution; this, of course, gave the director ample opportunity to explore the world of swingers, uninhibited sex and gender bending through the eyes of the curious Gray.

¹¹ O.S. BUCKTON, "Wilde Life: Oscar on Film", in K. POWELL and P. RABY (eds), *Oscar Wilde in Context*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013, p. 354.

¹² S. FRY, "Playing Oscar", in O. WILDE, *Nothing... Except my Genius*, ed. A. ROLFE, London, Penguin, 1997, p. XIX.

In the 2010s Rupert Everett identified with the protagonist of another story by Wilde, namely “The Happy Prince”, writing, directing and playing Oscar in a film released in 2018 and entitled like Wilde’s story, focusing on the years left out from Gilbert/Fry’s narrative (that is, his post-prison ones, in which he played the role of the pariah and exile first in France and then in Italy). Interestingly, Everett rewrites Wilde starting from the very years and experiences which are usually expunged in conventional accounts. For instance, Ken Hughes’s *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960) had Oscar – played by Peter Finch with an Irish accent – coolly refuse to speak to Bosie on the railway station platform before he headed off to his unimaginable future, while Gilbert’s *Wilde* halted after a sentimental embrace between the reunited Oscar (famously played, as we have seen, by Fry) and Bosie in Naples.

Everett insists on how, when watching these films, one finds it difficult to grasp what society really did to Wilde in terms of punishment, both in prison with hard labour, and after prison, during an exile that could be considered another form of imprisonment. In this sense, Everett’s idea of the last ‘great vagabond’ of the late nineteenth century, of the celebrity famous for being famous, and the pop idol on the skids,¹³ becomes a very potent and poignant story to address. A story that, in a way, complements Haynes’s narrative about Wilde’s self-invention as a pop icon and the fall of glam stars such as Brian Slade in *Velvet Goldmine*.

In his film, Everett takes us through the devastating horror of poverty and humiliation, which however Wilde faces with gallows humour and wit. Tellingly, in one of the first sequences of the film we see him vomiting in agony on his deathbed before declaiming: “Encore du champagne!”. Here the director has clearly been influenced by Peter Ackroyd’s *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) and David Hare’s 1998 stage play *The Judas Kiss*, in whose 2012 revival, directed by Neil Armfield, Wilde was played by Everett himself.

In a way, even in his last, very difficult days, Wilde, the lifelong performer and man of theatre, found a new world to perform to, where the stars were rent boys, petty thieves and street urchins. He was endlessly being cited for extraordinary empathy with people, while at the same time being an incredible snob, as well. Again, Wilde’s most interesting feature is his determination to escape fixed identities, which also implies a capacity to harmonise dissonant, contrasting positions.¹⁴

The film also shows how the enchantment of Wilde was his humanity; although the iconic writer had some of the bad traits most of us have, as human beings – that is, snobbery, greed, vanity and egomania – he appeared to overcome them. As Everett himself notes, many people are tempted to throw themselves over the edge, but most of them perceive a natural constraint and natural borders before going that far, so that they eventually step back, while “Oscar Wilde for some reason, didn’t”.¹⁵ In this sense,

¹³ See S. PROKOPY, “Interview: What Oscar Wilde Means to Rupert Everett, and the Most Poignant Scene in *The Happy Prince*”, *Third Coast Review*, 29 October 2018, <https://thirdcoastreview.com/2018/10/29/film-interview-rupert-everett/> (last accessed on 13 October 2023).

¹⁴ See T. EAGLETON, “The Doubleness of Oscar Wilde”, *The Wildean*, 19, July 2021.

¹⁵ S. PROKOPY, “Interview: What Oscar Wilde Means to Rupert Everett, and the Most Poignant Scene in *The Happy Prince*”.

commenting on the film – and comparing it to screen portrayals by Robert Morley, Finch and Fry – Merlin Holland affirmed that Everett’s can be considered as probably the most fascinating of the biopics on his grandfather. While Gilbert’s film was very intellectual, Everett’s is mostly emotional.¹⁶ If it is true that, in Wilde, there is both the intellectual and the emotional component, at this stage of his existence the author is living on what is left of his emotions, and that is exactly what Everett excels in conveying.

In the film, Everett is both the director and main actor of Wilde’s drama; as Peter Bradshaw observes, “that of Wilde is a part Everett was born to play, and he does it with exactly the right kind of poignantly ruined magnificence”.¹⁷ Besides, Everett can also be defined as an outsider in the world of cinema, who suffered discrimination because of his homosexuality. In this sense, the film establishes a fascinating dialogue between two artists and actors who have always lived out of the box. Focusing on the director’s stylistic choices, Everett was inspired by what happens when a brain starts collapsing and how it throws off images and ideas and starts playing with a kind of spatial awareness; more specifically, he was really impressed by his own father’s death and seeing how his brain was falling apart, coming up with bubbles of memory.¹⁸ There is, indeed, a sort of feverish dimension, a magical, dream-like quality to the film, especially when we are faced with a room that seems to shrink and expand as Wilde dies (in tune with his brain’s last memories).

One of the most intense scenes of the movie refers to a real event: the sad circumstance when, in Clapham Junction train station, Wilde was transferring trains on his way to prison and was yelled at and spit on by others on the platform for thirty minutes. It was the rush hour and the policeman escorting him was reading the newspaper while this big crowd gathered around him. In a way, what happened is one of the most extraordinary scenes in the whole of Wilde’s life. A man who had recently been the most famous, lauded and wanted author in London, was reduced to being spat on by a crowd of commuters.¹⁹ This is an extremely strong and dramatic episode, which even reminds of the Passion of Christ. Experiences and humiliations such as these, suffered by Wilde during the last years of his life, would turn him into ‘Saint Oscar’, the first homosexual martyr of history. It is also important to stress that Wilde’s connection with the Queensberry family amounted to both a gender and a class transgression; in this sense, in another sequence Everett shows Wilde with a portrait of Queen Victoria

¹⁶ See D. ALBERGE, “Oscar Wilde’s Grandson ‘Terribly Moved’ by Rupert Everett’s Biopic”, *The Guardian*, 5 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/jun/05/oscar-wilde-grandson-terribly-moved-rupert-everett-biopic-merlin-holland> (last accessed on 13 October 2023).

¹⁷ P. BRADSHAW, “*The Happy Prince* Review – Rupert Everett is Magnificent in Dream Role as Dying Oscar Wilde”, *The Guardian*, 22 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/22/the-happy-prince-film-review-rupert-everett-oscar-wilde> (last accessed on 13 October 2023).

¹⁸ See K. PAGE-KIRBY, “It took a decade for Rupert Everett to get ‘The Happy Prince’ made – and in the end, he had to do it himself”, *The Washington Post*, 19 October 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/2018/10/19/it-took-decade-rupert-everett-get-happy-prince-made-end-he-had-do-it-himself/> (last accessed on 13 October 2023).

¹⁹ A permanent plaque commemorating Wilde on Platform 10 at Clapham Junction was unveiled in July 2019 as part of a combined project by Wandsworth LGBTQ+ Forum and Studio Voltaire. David Robson, chairman of Wandsworth LGBTQ+, explained that, at a time when people are still under threat because of their sexuality, the plaque would act as a reminder that hate crime is not tolerated in the rail industry.

by his deathbed; he died in 1900, one year before her, and the film hints that his vindictive treatment was part of the sense of shame and mortification linked to a form of aesthetic indulgence that the ‘manly’ and ‘masculine’ slaughter of the First World War would arguably redeem.

In the script, Everett also imagines Wilde, *in extremis*, befriending a young Parisian rent boy and his kid brother, holding them spellbound with “The Happy Prince” story. Everett’s recent memoir *To the End of the World. Travels with Oscar Wilde* – which documents the ten years the actor dedicated to the film project – significantly opens with the memory of little Rupert in his bed listening to his mother reading him “The Happy Prince”: “[I]ntroducing me to Oscar Wilde is Mummy’s most audacious move, and her greatest contribution to my emotional development”, and it was through Wilde’s stories that Everett learned “for the first time that there is a thing called love and that it usually has a price”.²⁰

In the very first sequence of the film, we see Wilde recite, to his entranced sons, the iconic tale of a statue who allows a swallow to denude him of all his gold in order to feed the poor. The story of “The Happy Prince” was included in the collection *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, published in May 1888 and extremely well-received.²¹ As Matthew Sturgis writes in his recent biography of Wilde, at the time of its publication “there was general recognition that, although there was much for children to enjoy, the stories were likely to appeal rather more to adults”.²² When reviewing the collection, Walter Pater wrote that “there is a piquant touch of contemporary satire which differentiates Mr Wilde from the teller of pure fairy tales”.²³ And yet, in these stories, which very often involve an ultimate sacrifice on the part of their main characters, the satire seems to be “subordinated to a sadness unusual in fairy tales”.²⁴

Focusing on “The Happy Prince” story, Jarlath Killeen insists on the assumption that “it is society that must align itself with the Prince, not the Prince who must somehow forcibly alter society. The Prince does not overthrow capitalism, but he sets an example of radical self-sacrifice for others to follow”. In this perspective, “the major point is that only the Prince and the Swallow are blessed by God which justifies them both. Wilde’s story offers a Catholic response to social problems rather than either a socialist or a realist one”.²⁵ Therefore, we can state that “in Everett’s hands, the ‘The

²⁰ R. EVERETT, *To the End of the World. Travels with Oscar Wilde*, London, Abacus, 2020, pp. 14-15.

²¹ Among recent rewritings of *The Happy Prince* collection, one should mention *Wilde Stories*, a 2016 artistic transmedia project designed by Athena Media. The project brings together Irish artists like composer Michael Gallen and visual artist Felicity Clear, committed to re-imagining the stories in a broadcast collaboration with *RTE lyric fm*. Each reading/performance by actors/narrators Robert Sheehan, Lauren Coe and Brian Gleeson, together with Gallen’s music, is followed by a commentary offered by Wilde scholars such as Anne Markey, Jarlath Killeen, Eleanor Fitzsimons, and Merlin Holland. All five readings are available as podcasts on Soundcloud, while the original artworks were brought together in a Live Event which took place in Temple Bar in October 2016. The project website, with links to podcasts, videos, musical performances and a project blog, is accessible at <http://www.wildestories.ie/index.html>

²² M. STURGIS, *Oscar: A Life*, London, Head of Zeus, 2018, p. 364.

²³ K. BECKSON (ed.), *Oscar Wilde, The Critical Heritage*, London and New York, Routledge, 1970, p. 60.

²⁴ R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 282.

²⁵ J. KILLEEN, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, p. 38. See also A. MARKEY, *Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales. Origins and Contexts*, Kildare, Irish Academic Press, 2011, in which the author extensively

Happy Prince' tale becomes an ambiguous parable for Wilde's passion and (possible) redemption, the unhappy prince who makes a lonely discovery that love is the only thing worth worshipping".²⁶ This tale is indeed a story that somehow reflects Wilde: we have a gilded, jewelled character who is gradually stripped of everything and ends up being thrown on the rubbish heap. And yet, even then, Wilde experienced a different kind of happiness, one which allowed him to retain his irony and humour.

In a sense, what we have in Everett's film is life as *writing*, since the film recounts the great drama of Wilde's life by constructing the whole narrative on the powerful intertext represented by the story of "The Happy Prince". As a fairy-tale constantly retold by contemporary cinema, Wilde's life as writing tends to become immortal. Thanks to these filmic portrayals, Wilde the outsider has thus become an eternal icon. This very sense of eternity is also what defines one of the most fascinating characters created – or, better, recreated – by Wilde, namely Salomé.

2. *Beardsley and Beyond. Salomé in the Cinema, from Charles Bryant to Ken Russell*

Salomé – which Wilde originally wrote in French in 1892 – is undoubtedly the most *decadent* of his plays; the author's debt to the Symbolist poets clearly emerges here in the disturbing music and in the powerful images which nourish Wilde's literary script, or *score*. The play had an enormous influence on twentieth-century cinema and music (both classical and popular). As Alice Condé observes:

The figure of Salomé was adopted from the biblical Gospels of Matthew 6. 21-29 and Mark 14. 6-11. The daughter of Herodias, named as 'Salomé' by Flavius Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* (c. 93- 94 A.D.), but not mentioned in this text as responsible for the death of John the Baptist (Iokanaan, in Wilde's version), is a girl whose dance pleases her stepfather (and uncle) Herod Antipas so much that he promises her whatever she desires. On her mother's advice she asks for the head of John the Baptist. From these short biblical and historical passages a whole host of Salomé's emerged in visual art and literature. In the nineteenth century, Salomé attained the characteristics of a decadent *femme fatale*, becoming the emblem of female nature in its most fearful and appealing state. Her dance became the dance of a sexually alluring woman, and the fatal request for John the Baptist's head was reinterpreted according to the stereotype of fatal female sexuality. The fact that this is a holy man's head only intensifies the perversity of the tale.²⁷

The influence and the impact of the Salomé character and, most importantly, of Wilde's play on twentieth-century arts were highly significant. It is worth starting from the iconic 1923 silent version directed by Charles Bryant, considered one of the first art films in the history of cinema. Here, the highly stylised costumes, exaggerated acting,

explores Wilde's connections with Irish folklore in the conception and writing of his tales.

²⁶ P. BRADSHAW, "The Happy Prince Review – Rupert Everett is Magnificent in Dream Role as Dying Oscar Wilde".

²⁷ A. CONDÉ, "A 'shadow of white rose in a mirror of silver': The Disembodied *Femme Fatale* in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*", in L. GIOVANNELLI and P. MARTINO (a cura di), *Wilde World. Una tavola rotonda su Oscar Wilde*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2022, pp. 70-71.

minimal sets, and absence of all but the most necessary props created a screen image much more focused on atmosphere and on conveying a sense of the characters' individual heightened desires than on conventional plot development. The film was shot completely in black and white, matching Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for the printed edition of Wilde's play (although, as is widely known, Wilde was not particularly fond of them). In a fascinating study, Susan Owens focuses on the complex genealogy of the 'Beardsley-Wilde' project, stressing how

the production history of Beardsley's illustrations for the English edition of *Salomé*, played out during the late summer and autumn of 1893, was complex and fraught. A number of the illustrations that Beardsley submitted contained such outrageous instances of nudity and eroticism that they were completely suppressed or partially censored by the publishers. Despite these editorial interventions, what most astonished critics on the play's publication in February 1894 was, firstly, the pointed anachronism of Beardsley's use throughout of a bold black-and-white style derived from Japanese prints to illustrate a play set in Ancient Judaea, and, secondly, the apparent irrelevance of some of the illustrations' subjects, such as Salomé at her toilette, an episode that does not occur in the play. In addition to these problems, an extra-textual staffage of satyrs, dwarves and putti appear in many of the designs where they point and grin directly out at the reader, flash erect penises and stick out their tongues, and generally amount to a carnivalesque subversion of the ostensible subjects. However, on another level Beardsley used the illustrations to make a range of more subtle and complex jokes about Wilde and his play, and incorporated numerous pointed references to three principal targets: the author's homosexuality; the censorship of the stage version of *Salomé*; and the plagiarism of which Wilde had widely been accused in reviews of the first French edition of the play. These jokes, which largely went unmentioned in the critical response to the illustrations, were tailored to amuse Beardsley's own social circle.²⁸

Wilde objected to the artwork exactly because much of it – *The Woman in the Moon*, *A Platonic Lament*, *Eyes of Herod*, *Enter Herodias* – included grotesque and obscene caricatures of himself. As he said,

They are cruel and evil, and so like dear Aubrey, who has a face like a silver hatchet, with grass-green hair [...]. They are all too Japanese, while my play is Byzantine. My Herod is like the Herod of Gustave Moreau – wrapped in jewels and sorrows. My Salomé is mystic, the sister of Salambo, a Sainte Therese who worships the moon; dear Aubrey's designs are like naughty scribbles a precocious schoolboy makes on the margins of his copybook.²⁹

The 1923 film centered on Russian-born stage and film actress Alla Nazimova, who also wrote the script under the pseudonym of 'Peter M. Winters' and who, legend says, employed only homosexual actors as a homage to Wilde. And yet, as Tanitch observes,

Nazimova's *Salomé*, a slip of a girl in a slip, was a pouting 1920s 42nd street vamp, who looked all set to audition for the chorus of a Broadway musical, *The Dance of the Seven Veils* was in the manner of Loïe Fuller enveloped in tulle. Jokanaan, his body white as snow, looked quite demented. Herod was a grotesque, rouged baby. The executioner was played by a giant. The scantily clad, half-naked cast wore extraordinary headdresses and waved palms.³⁰

²⁸ S. OWEN, "Aubrey Beardsley and *Salomé*", in K. POWELL and P. RABY (eds), *Oscar Wilde in Context*, p. 112.

²⁹ J.P. RAYMOND and C. RICKETTS, *Oscar Wilde. Recollections*, London, Nonesuch Press, 1932, pp. 51-52.

³⁰ R. TANITCH, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, p. 159.

Instead, in a study beautifully entitled “*Salomé* on the Screen, or the Dance of the Seven Arts”, David Weir prizes the film, insisting on how

Nazimova’s *Salomé* [...] is undeniably a remarkable mixture of several arts. The *mise-en-scène* incorporates *art-nouveau* design elements borrowed from the *fin de siècle* mixed with a contemporary art-deco fashion sense identified with the Jazz Age. This sense of aesthetic mixture also obtains in the performance of the actors, with most of them using the exaggerated, pantomime style common to many films of the silent era but with Nazimova adopting a more naturalistic manner, no doubt the product of her experience on the stage as one of the premier interpreters of the plays of Henrik Ibsen in the early twentieth century. The wildly hybrid nature of Nazimova’s *Salomé* is, paradoxically, something that makes it true to Wilde’s play and to the decadent tradition generally, which is nothing if not hybrid.³¹

Weir notes how Nazimova aims “to incorporate multiple arts (poetry, painting, sculpture, dance, etc.) into the filmic representation of Wilde’s play”. On the other hand, “Wilde himself participates in the decadent-symbolist tradition of one art crossing over into the domain of another when he describes *Salomé* as ‘coloured’ and ‘musical’”; of course, colour and music were “unavailable to Nazimova in 1922, working in the medium of silent, black-and-white film. Hence her efforts to produce an ‘art film’ (the term did not really exist until the 1960s) were handicapped from the start”. Nonetheless, adds Weir, “as writer, director and producer of the film, aided by Natacha Rambova, her production designer, Nazimova very nearly succeeded in creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a ‘total work of art’ that had once had the operas of Richard Wagner as principal exemplar”.³²

One of the most hybrid and experimental filmic versions of Wilde’s play is Carmelo Bene’s 1972 *Salomé*, a psychedelic re-writing characterised by extremely fast cutting, obsessive/repetitive dialogues and an intelligent satire. For the cult Italian actor and director, *Salomé* represents “the impossibility of martyrdom in a current, no longer barbaric, but exclusively stupid world”.³³ Interestingly, when asked to describe his work at the 1972 Venice Film Festival, Bene used the word ‘degenerate’. In his experimental and profoundly grotesque vision, we have close-ups of peeling skin and of female buttocks spanked with feathers, while an actor speaks as he lustily eats grapes from a woman’s body; in a Last Supper scene, Christ appears with vampire fangs, while in the second half of the movie a Christ-like figure tries to crucify himself. The film also features beautiful and evocative sequences, in which human faces interrogate and are interrogated by the moon, and a use of cutting and colours which seems to anticipate Derek Jarman’s aesthetics. As Gideon Bachmann puts it: “Bene is on the screen (in the part of Herod) practically the whole time”, and he also notes how “his favourite form of delivery is to slobber the words across dripping lips, not always intelligibly, to repeat them, to have a second voice speak them simultaneously, and to writhe pitifully the while, in close-up before up”,³⁴ in what we perceive as a very clever

³¹ D. WEIR, “*Salomé* on the Screen, or the Dance of the Seven Arts”, in L. GIOVANNELLI and P. MARTINO (a cura di), *Wilde World. Una tavola rotonda su Oscar Wilde*, pp. 63-64.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 43.

³³ C. BENE and G. DOTTO, *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, Milano, Bompiani, 1998.

³⁴ G. BACHMANN, “*Salomé*”, *Film Quarterly*, 26 (2), 1972, pp. 20-23, quoted in R. TANITCH, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, p. 173.

and respondent tribute to Wilde's extraordinary musical approach to language in the play. Interestingly, in the film – which also features a bald and naked actress Veruschka wearing colourful jewels only, and powerfully recalling the Living Theatre – Salomé was played by the black American model Donyale Luna, who had worked with the American pop artist Andy Warhol.

In another (cult) filmic version of the play, that is, British director Ken Russell's controversial *Salomé's Last Dance* (1988) – which, like Bene's work, was read in terms of an experimental approach to Wilde's text – we are faced with an adaptation in which characters are at once inside and outside the play. On 5 November 1892, Wilde and Bosie find themselves in a Victorian male brothel run by Alfred Taylor – the man who procured rent boys for Wilde and who was similarly convicted of gross indecency in 1895 – and watch a private performance of *Salomé* (which had just been banned in England by the Lord Chamberlain's office). In this performance, all the roles are played by prostitutes or their clients, and each actor plays two roles, one in the brothel and the other within the play, with Bosie being featured as John the Baptist. According to Weir, “the play-within-the-film device is one means of realizing the pop-culture appeal of Wilde himself, who was after all, something of a pop-culture celebrity in his own day”.³⁵ In this perspective, as Neil Sammells puts it in his pioneering study *Wilde Style*, “the progressive aspect Wilde chose to develop and emphasize has become powerfully influential upon modern ‘pop cultural’ versions of dandyism which are similarly crystallized around notions of style and attitude”.³⁶

3. Wilde *Salomé* by Al Pacino

The most recent version of *Salomé* – that is, the 2011 celebrated docufilm *Wilde Salomé* by director and actor Al Pacino – documents a period in which Pacino performed in a production of *Salomé*, directed by actress and theatre director Estelle Parson at Los Angeles' Wadsworth Theatre – with him performing the role of Herod and Jessica Chastain as Salomé – while he was also making a movie documenting the mounting of the show, and shooting a narrative film version of the play. The Los Angeles performance was actually a staged reading in modern dress, with no music, a choice which surprised both critics and audience, but which – as Al Pacino explains in the film – allowed the latter to “become entranced by Wilde's words”, by their “magic”/music.

For Al Pacino, and of course for the audience, the film records a journey and, most importantly, a *process* in which Pacino re-writes not only the play, but Wilde himself. The film stages, indeed, Pacino's “love affair with Oscar Wilde” – an author he loves, as he confesses, “for his fragile power” – and his desire to explore Wilde's legacy in contemporary culture. In a fashion that recalls his approach to rewriting Shakespeare in his 1996 documentary *Looking for Richard*, Pacino visits different world capitals (London, Dublin, Paris, New York) in order to learn more – and provide insights to

³⁵ D. WEIR, *Decadence. A Very Short Introduction*, p. 111.

³⁶ N. SAMMELLS, *Wilde Style*, p. 121.

the spectators – about the world of Wilde, thus gaining a deeper understanding of how *Salomé* was conceived.

In a way, the sequences about Wilde and his world seem to make up ‘a film within the film’, a biopic in the larger frame of the Los Angeles rehearsals and performance footage. In order to investigate Wilde’s complexity and multiplicity, Al Pacino stages fascinating dialogues with several writers and celebrities who, in different and at times unpredictable ways, are linked to Wilde’s world. Besides Oscar’s nephew Merlin Holland, who provides biographical details and acute observations about Wilde as an uncomfortable figure within Victorian society, we have Gore Vidal referring to the author in terms of “one of the early socialist and a very good political thinker”, a portrayal which contributes to explaining why he was imprisoned in Reading Gaol; as Vidal remarks, the English government “feared him not for sex but feared him for his ideas”.³⁷ The film also features a precious contribution by Tom Stoppard,³⁸ who, besides dwelling on the Marquess of Queensberry’s infamous card and its accusation of Wilde posing as a sodomite, associates the author’s decision not to flee abroad, during the fatal afternoon at the Cadogan Hotel, with a determination to become a martyr for posterity.

The most fascinating sequences are, however, those in which Pacino himself *stages* phases of Wilde’s life. When in Dublin, he visits Wilde’s birthplace and the National Gallery of Ireland (featuring paintings of both *Salomé* and John the Baptist), and salutes Wilde’s statue in Merrion Square, saying “we love you for everything you’ve given us and we will continue to”. Some minutes later, we can watch him performing Wilde in London’s Cadogan Hotel room, with two actors from his company in the roles of Robert Ross and Bosie. After visiting Wilde’s house in Tite Street and other Wilde-related locations, Pacino reads passages from *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, underlining how ironic it is that the prison should inform the two works considered his best. Interestingly, the prison section of the film hosts a number of sequences from Gilbert’s 1997 *Wilde*, drawing on a form of intertextuality which points to Wilde’s complex intermedial position within contemporary popular culture.

One of the most fascinating and moving sequences of the film is the one in which Pacino acknowledges his debt to Wilde; in a way “you marry”, he says, “your favourite writer”, and you become “half of each other”. In the final part of the docufilm, Pacino appears on a train: besides perfectly translating the idea of his film as a journey, this image becomes particularly relevant on the grounds of the association of *Salomé*’s symphonic and yet dramatic ending with Wilde’s iconic lines from *The Ballad of the Reading Gaol*, namely “Each man kills the thing he loves”, which the actor reads with extraordinary intensity. In the very last scene, we see Pacino in a desert, giving voice to Wilde himself through famous passages from *De Profundis*, such as “All trials are trials for one’s life, just as all sentences are sentences of death”. In short, in Pacino’s film we can perceive a degree of urgency and directness in approaching and narrating Wilde as a pop icon and celebrity. What we have in *Wilde Salomé* is nothing less than a postmodern celebrity investigating the life of the first real celebrity in the history of modern literature.

³⁷ See P. MARTINO, *Wilde Now. Performance, Celebrity and Intermediality in Oscar Wilde*, p. 34.

³⁸ It is worth recalling that Stoppard’s 1974 play *Travesties* focuses on Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Quite sadly, the film, which premiered at the 2011 Venice Film Festival, had a very limited distribution. However, in 2014 it was published by Universal in a special box-set double DVD, an edition which perfectly responds to Wilde's intermedial potential. The DVD³⁹ can be considered as both a media resource and a space capable of investigating the fascinating dialogic relationship involving image, music and literature. If, according to Barry Brummett, "a text is a set of signs related to each other insofar as their meanings all contribute to the same set of effects or functions",⁴⁰ then the DVD, and in particular *Wilde Salomé*, stands as a "multimodal text",⁴¹ one where the visual, musical and literary components enter into a fascinating dialogue which allows them to constantly redefine themselves. The 2014 DVD edition features two discs suggesting the image of two films – the *Wilde Salomé* documentary in disc 1 and the *Salomé* narrative film, plus a Q&A at London's BFI with Pacino, Chastain, and Fry, in disc 2 – interrogating and mirroring each other, with the reader/viewer invited to negotiate and create his/her own space within the cinematic process of construction of Wilde and his play. Once again, Oscar seems to ask each of us (and not only Al Pacino) to be *part of his life and plays*.

4. *Salomé in Pop Culture*

It is important to stress how music is a central aspect in Wilde's play. During her most intense and fascinating speech at the end of the play, Salomé, seizing Jokanaan's head, utters the following words:

³⁹ As Paul McDonald notes: "Digital Versatile Disc or Digital Video Disc (DVD) [...] introduced [in 1996] a new media object. Videocassettes had always remained a linear medium, working along the single plane of record, play, rewind and fast-forward. DVD, however, provided access to many different sources of content via menus. DVDs increased the storage capacity of video software units, providing space for the inclusion of other types of content beyond the main programme. By multiplying textual content, DVD has raised questions over whether there is a core or essence to the video commodity" (P. McDONALD, *Video and DVD Industries*, London, BFI, 2007, p. 1). The DVD has also posed new challenges for specialists in the field as well as literary scholars, forcing them to keep pace with the ongoing transformation of the landscape of media and culture industries. As Bryan Sebok observes: "The fact that the DVD entered into and helped define a shift in technology and culture from 'analog' to 'digital' is of paramount importance to the processes involved in making DVD meaningful. 'Digital' suggests a massive shift in culture and industry, away from a particular understanding of technology and technology-user interface into an age of instant, random access to information and entertainment" (B. SEBOK, *Convergent Hollywood; DVD, and the Transformation of the Home Entertainment Industries*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2007, p. 227). Many commentators have underlined the analogy existing between DVDs and the Internet, not only for the hypertextual structure of their interface – allowing each user to freely, creatively (and *vertically*) construct his/her reading of the text – but also for the encyclopaedic access to knowledge they both offer. In short, we are faced with a shift from a critical discourse *on* the text, linked to contents strictly related to the film or series (as shown by critical paratexts), to a larger public discourse *about* the text, expanding its context. For further details, see M. FRANCHI, "Il vecchio e il nuovo. Il DVD e l'ambivalenza della comunicazione in epoca digitale", in L. QUARESIMA and V. RE (a cura di), *Play the Movie. Il DVD e le nuove forme dell'esperienza audiovisiva*, Torino, Kaplan, 2010, pp. 16-31.

⁴⁰ B. BRUMMETT, *The Rhetoric of Popular Culture*, London, New Delhi and Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2006, Second Edition, p. 34.

⁴¹ G. KRESS and T. VAN LEEUWEN, *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*, London, Arnold, 2001.

Ah, Jokanaan, Jokanaan, thou wert the only man that I have loved. All other men are hateful to me. But thou, thou wert beautiful! [...] There was nothing in the world so white as thy body. There was nothing in the world so black as thy hair. In the whole world there was nothing so red as thy mouth. Thy voice was a censer that scattered strange perfumes, and when I looked on thee I heard a strange music.⁴²

The “strange music” Salomé seems to hear while looking at Jokanaan is actually the complex music the audience hears via the compelling sonic textures and sensual rhythms created by Wilde, especially through the repetitions and variations of key imperatives such as “you must not look at her”, uttered by Herodias; “Let me kiss thy mouth”, which Salomé addresses to Jokanaan; and Herod’s “dance for me, Salomé”. As Robert Ross reported in one of the first editions of the play, “Wilde himself, in a rhetorical period, seems to have contemplated the possibility of his prose drama for a musical theme. In *De Profundis* he says: ‘The refrains, whose recurring motifs make *Salomé* so like a piece of music, and bind it together as a ballad’”.⁴³ Interestingly, it was the only play by Wilde set to music by a major composer writing on the cusp between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, namely Richard Strauss. As Kerry Powell remarks,

Strauss, who saw *Salomé* in max Reinhardt’s production at the Kleines Theater in Berlin in 1901, used an abridged German translation of Wilde’s text as the libretto of an opera more famous than the play which inspired it. First performed in Dresden in 1905 to a reported thirty-eight curtain calls, Strauss’s violent score was the outcome of his realisation that Wilde’s play “was simply calling for music”.⁴⁴

We could add that *Salomé* is still calling for music, that is, for musical rewritings, adaptations and tributes from contemporary musicians coming from very different areas. Interestingly, in Al Pacino’s *Wilde Salomé*, Irish global celebrity Bono, the singer of U2, focuses on Wilde’s universal appeal “not just for gay people, but for anyone who feels that their part in their society is being marginalised”. Bono, who, in the interview, speaks of Wilde as the only writer “who can take on Shakespeare”, also points to Salomé’s destructive power of sexuality, a possible hint at Wilde’s own destiny and fall. Lynn Ramert establishes an interesting connection between Wilde and Bono:

One element that links these men is that they put themselves out in front of the world for the sake of their art. [...] Oscar Wilde paved the way for modern artists to insist on ambiguity in both life and art and on the active performance and enjoyment of life. Artists such as Bono and U2 carry on the tradition of a unique Irish spin on personality performance and the creation of thought-provoking, deeply felt, and yet also often thoroughly entertaining works of art.⁴⁵

It is worth mentioning here the 1991 song by U2, entitled *Salomé*, an outtake from the *Achtung Baby* sessions, where Bono quotes from Wilde’s play via the lines “Baby please / Baby don’t say no / Won’t you dance for me / Under the cherry tree”. These lines are sung on a hypnotic, danceable bass line, with the effect of turning the song

⁴² O. WILDE, *Salomé*, in ID., *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p. 604.

⁴³ R. ROSS, “A Note on *Salomé*”, in O. WILDE, *Salomé*, London, Bodley Head, 1907, p. XVI.

⁴⁴ K. POWELL, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, Cambridge, CUP, 1990, p. 37.

⁴⁵ L. RAMERT, “A Century Apart: The Personality Performances of Oscar Wilde in the 1890s and U2’s Bono in the 1990s”, *Popular Music and Society*, 32 (4), October 2009, pp. 457-58.

into a mini play, a musical/theatrical adaptation of *Salomé*. Another song from *Achtung Baby*, namely *Mysterious Ways*, represents a further tribute to Wilde's play by Bono, who, in the opening stanza, sings "Johnny, take a walk with your sister the moon / Let her pale light in to fill up your room / You've been living underground, eating from a can / You've been running away, from what you don't understand".

In the late 1980s another iconic artist, Australian singer Nick Cave, paid a direct tribute to Wilde by rewriting *Salomé* in a drama consisting of five extremely concise acts, or, better, "mini plays",⁴⁶ respectively entitled "The Seven Veils", "Dialogue with the Baptist", "Salomé's Reward", "The Chop", and "The Platter". Some acts are so terse ("Salomé's Reward", for instance, consists of only twenty-six spoken words) that one can assume Cave conceived *Salomé* to be appreciated more as a poetic exploration in *abjection* than as material for a live performance. And yet, at a different level, one has the impression that we are faced with a score to be performed by the reader, with a form of writing whose very clusters, dissonances, and broken rhythms perfectly translate Cave's post-punk and, to an extent, goth musical aesthetics.

Play One, entitled "The Seven Veils", opens with the character of a young girl representing the Vestal Virgin, who, in the work's economy, has the function of announcing the title of each of the five acts (or plays). She tells the audience that they are going to watch (or read, or *listen to*) the story of Salomé and John the Baptist in five parts, defining it a "mess of thorns". This verbal/semantic cluster of ritual and religion, pleasure and pain powerfully connects with Wilde and with his practice and conception of opposite stances as simultaneity.

In his rewriting of Wilde, Cave interestingly mixes high and low language, the biblical and the colloquial, as when Herod asks the princess: "What ails thee, my precious Salomé? What is it that has put your pretty little nose so *out of joint*?" Cave's carnivalesque stance seems almost at odds with the extreme, cynical and almost punk Salomé character, with her aggressive disturbing sexuality. Interestingly, while Wilde names Salomé's dance in an iconic stage direction ("Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils"), Cave's Salomé triumphantly introduces herself as a young girl would do with a pop song: "Music! Let's have some life! Your Majesty, 'The Dance of the Seven Veils'". King Herod's voyeurism is brought to an abrupt end in coincidence with the entrance of John the Baptist; it is worth underlining that Cave decided to forgo the queen's presence and chose to stage the relationship between Salomé and men only.

In Act/Play 2, entitled "Dialogue with the Baptist", Cave's Salomé is engaged in a sexual activity of self-gratification – while Wilde's character yearns for Iokanaan's love – in which the man, the sacred prophet, does not seem to be necessary to satisfy her. The fact that Salomé is experiencing sexual pleasure while simultaneously eating an apple provides an insight into the psychological structure of her character. Salomé is the threatening other, as she revels in the taste of a forbidden fruit. John the Baptist significantly speaks of Salomé's "Cloven gender", referring to her 'split' gender in Wilde's text, exhibiting signs of ambiguity and a variable oscillation between masculine and feminine attributes.

⁴⁶ N. CAVE, *King Ink*, London, Black Spring Press, 1988, pp. 68-75.

Act/Play 3 is provokingly entitled “Salomé’s Reward”. If a reward is usually bestowed upon a person as a recognition for doing good, in this case she gets rewarded for acts of evil; Cave’s idea is however profoundly Wildean, conceiving Salomé herself as a disturbing and yet fascinating ‘work of art’ distancing itself from any moral implication.

In the stage directions of Act/Play 4, entitled “The Chop”, Cave makes reference to the remarkable painting by Puvis de Chavannes, *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* (1869), to which the scene should resemble in light of the presence of a negro with an axe. While, in the picture, John the Baptist is kneeling with his hands roped and Salomé’s head appears as modestly inclined, as she is clasping her cloak to cover her body, Cave smashes the sexual taboo and once more presents Salomé in an act of sexual self-gratification. What we have here is an intersemiotic association, which again powerfully chimes with Wilde, who not only was a master in describing portraits and paintings in his literary and critical works, but often invited to think and conceive reality through the lens of the arts.

In the last act, entitled “The Platter”, we are again faced with Salomé’s disturbing abject eroticism. The executioner enters with John the Baptist’s head on a platter and offers it to Herod, affirming that this is the head of John the Baptist “minus the tongue”, which Salomé demanded for herself, in a profoundly ambiguous, open finale. Cave’s fascinating rewriting of Wilde’s play reflects his idea and practice of art as an open space, inhabited by angels and daemons, beauty and ugliness, a world in which the voice of the singer and the pen of the writer translate Wilde in terms of multiplicity and unpredictability.

More recently, besides U2 and Nick Cave, English songwriter Pete Doherty paid a personal and lyrical tribute to Wilde through his ballad *Salomé*, included in his 2009 solo album *Grace/Wasteland* and containing several lyrical references to Wilde’s play. Interestingly, in the song, Doherty mentions another *mythical* dancer: Isadora Duncan, one of the greatest performers of all times, who in a sense stands as a modern counterpart for Salomé. At the end of the song, the singer adds that, as she dances, she “demands the head of any bastard on a plate”. Most probably, Doherty is “the bastard” in question, appearing as though hypnotised and consenting to give his own head, while Salomé could stand for his ex-partner, super-model Kate Moss.

Other songs based on Wilde’s play include Kim Wilde’s *House of Salomé* (1981), in which the singer mixes 1980s synth-pop and Arabian melodies, and *Dance of the Seven Veils* by Velvet Underground founding member John Cale (1991), which features dark, hypnotic piano figures and spoken words by Judy Nylon. A very specific and extremely relevant space in contemporary pop culture is held by The Smashing Pumpkins’ *Stand Inside Your Love* (2000) and, more specifically, by the video of the song directed by British director W.I.Z. and based on singer Billy Corgan’s idea. A fascinating black and white filmic adaptation of the play, this stands as a tribute to Beardsley and it takes us to where we started, that is, to Bryant’s silent film version.

As a concluding remark, we can note how the many afterlives and filmic adaptations of *Salomé* are able to show how, in Wilde’s discourse, the visual and the aural are necessarily complementary. Through *Salomé*, we are once again invited to inhabit landscapes and soundscapes in which each of us – readers, spectators, and listeners – ultimately becomes the real protagonist of that constitutionally *open* play entitled *Oscar Wilde*.

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MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLES

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Transitionality, Memory and Creative Transmutation in Fiona Perry's *Alchemy* (2020)

Abstract: This essay examines Fiona Perry's *début* collection of free verse, *Alchemy* (2020), from the perspective of archetypal psychology and attachment theory. It argues that alchemical symbolism, specifically *nigredo* imagery, serves to poetically explore the critical notions of change and transition as pedagogical spaces for developing a deeper understanding of life through memory, trauma, loss, and displacement. This process of *learning through transitionality* is also mediated by the widespread and expressively intensified occurrences of many symbolic, mnestically-loaded and affectively-biased objects of everyday use exerting the function, like Winnicott's transitional objects, of psychic organisers and developmental facilitators in the most critical stages of the speaker's process of personal growth. Moreover, they open up a transitional third space of experience, where the *mundus imaginabilis* and the playful, poetic uses of verbal language act therapeutically as metaphysical intermediaries in the dialogue between conscious and unconscious, matter and spirit, time and eternity, the trivial and the sacred.

Keywords: Transitional objects. Transitional (third) space. Alchemy. Contemporary poetry. Memory. Mourning. Attachment theory.

Fiona Perry is a relatively little-known yet remarkably talented author. Originally from Northern Ireland, she is now an Oxford-based poet and fiction writer; she has lived in Australia and New Zealand and previously worked as an environmentalist in a unitary authority. She is now a teacher, editor, and proofreader. Her short story "Sea Change", a beautifully written and mysterious dream-focussed tale about family loss and return from the dead, was awarded the first prize in the 15th Bath Flash Fiction Award in June 2020. Her short fiction was shortlisted in the Australian Morrison Mentoring Prize in 2014 and 2015. She contributed poetry to the *Label Lit* project for National Poetry Day (Ireland) in 2019. Her first collection of verse, *Alchemy* (2020), was a Silver Medal winner in the Poetry Book Awards 2021.

1. *Alchemy*

*Alchemy*¹ includes 36 poems in free verse on several heterogeneous subjects. First, there is the theme, reminiscent of Alice Munro's work, of memory retrieval through the storytelling of collective and autobiographical experiences. This issue is central in

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¹ F. PERRY, *Alchemy*, Dublin, Turas Press, 2020. All quotations from the poems will refer to this edition.

the poignant “A History of the World”, a poem set during the British experience of World War II. Here, the syntropic imagery, showing the affective bonds and intergenerational care of daily family life (“pad into the kitchen, / wrap custard creams in tissue paper”, ll. 6-7), is interpolated at regular intervals with the sudden, entropic intrusions of air bomb announcements (“*Get Out. Bomb*”, ll. 2, 21), conveyed by the symbolic figure of a young soldier knocking at the door. Autobiographical memory emerges in the reminiscence of the strong emotional connection with the beloved dead, such as the author’s father, as in the recollection of family life through long, detailed lists of everyday memory objects, used by Perry in the poignantly autobiographical “Memory Box” to connect with and make sense of the past.

Many environmental issues also permeate the collection, such as the human-landscape relationships, in both the natural and urban contexts of Australia, New Zealand, England and Ireland which can be detected in the many detailed references to wild and garden plants, insects, birds, fish and wild animals, and serve to unveil the secret correspondences between the different realms of biological life. This can be detected in the almost hypnotical and clairvoyant vision of the “cross-stitch of tui whistles” beheld by the speaker on a “confectionery-pink / cherry blossom” (“*Spellbound*”, ll. 1, 4-5), where the beautiful song of these native New Zealand birds shares the same poetic space with a plant, the cherry tree, which is of a relatively more recent acquisition in that country. This coexistence can be made on the basis of the metaphysical connection between the sensory qualities they convey: acoustically, the contrasting combination of sudden, sometimes soulful tui’s calls, made of bellbird-like notes with clicks, coughs and more rough wheezing sounds corresponds, on the tactile plane, to the regular/irregular shape and surface texture of the cherry branches, this latter being straight-grained, with a satiny and smooth texture, but at the same time interspersed with brown pith flecks and small gum pockets. Moreover, the tui’s characteristic white throat tufts, visible on their dark blue, green, and bronze-coloured throats, chromatically stand out as a very light shade of pink-red, then is chromatically similar to the cherry blossoms on the dark brown branches of this tree.

Related to these issues are also the political and social problems of cultural displacement and the identity crisis afflicting ethnic and gender outsiders in contemporary urban and suburban landscapes. This theme is compellingly personified by the transhistorical figure of the “Jesus Woman”, protagonist of the eponymous poem, whose twelve female disciples emblematically represent all classes of history’s oppressed women, such as a working-class single mother who delivers her stillborn baby “into a storm drain on Good Friday and ran away” (l. 16), itself reminiscent of Christ’s crucifixion and death at Calvary, or a young “schoolgirl”, victim of forced marriage in an “unfamiliar country” (ll. 13, 14). The theme is also present in the autotelic and collective narrative voice of the “ape men” (l. 1), the Māori warriors of “*Heroes*”, who show, in the double-layered context of the nineteenth-century New Zealand Wars and the de-humanising and degrading conditions of life suffered by contemporary aboriginals in today’s suburbia, the inconsistency of the difference between morality and the need for survival, the former being “a luxury for the privileged” (l. 26), because “survivors” (l. 26), once drawn out the epic plot of historical narrative, “cannot afford to be heroes” (l. 27).

The themes of disease, death, mourning and rebirth, the economy of human life cycles (birth, childhood, adulthood and old age), the visionary contemplation of the metaphysical breaches from one state of existence to another, the emotional and heightened perception of the thresholds between the visible and the invisible world, the intermingling of everyday trivia with the numinous of the sacred, religious and magical domains, the pairing of political consciousness and spiritual awareness are widely distributed in all poems of the collection. They testify of this author's fundamentally religious, magical, and Irish sensibility, especially when she merges pre-colonial Gaelic oral traditions and legends, "prayer, family myths and song lyrics",² into a series of autodiegetic narratives whose protagonists are always caught from the privileged observation point of being on the brink between life and death, reality and imagination, matter and spirit. This is the case, for instance, of the fascinating storytelling provided by the famous three-day-old Irish baby saint who tells his story in "St Rumbold's Well". During the brief span of his short life, the intimate, holistic connection between the protagonist and the Irish natural landscape is condensed to the extent that the human and the natural gradually merge into each other in a series of diegetic literalised metaphors ("I become a pebble by virtue of my swaddling / clothes", ll. 6-7), in the clairvoyant and prophetic vision of this threshold character, who lives on the brink between life and death and is thus able to behold their indissoluble coexistence and potential transcendence (see the prophetic image of "water locked / underground gleaming like mercury near / [his] future burial site", ll. 23-25), and in the implied author's unyielding political engagement against the Catholic child abuse cases related to the Tuam Babies.³ The poem's closure shows the latter with visionary poignancy when the baby saint becomes the champion of the Tuam victims by "Solemnly" (l. 35) pronouncing a sort of magical injunction, a performative speech act meant to exert the apotropaic effect of defending all children (his "tiny brothers", l. 35) from future abuse by infusing in them the cathartic energies of nature and the communal sharing of collective memory ("our stories have been infused in / raindrops", ll. 36-37), an uncompromised determination in waiting for retributive justice to punish the guilty adults ("sit tight as unexploded bombs in / still water", ll. 38-39), and the certainty of the relentless might of their mothers' grief, which "will right all wrongs" like a cathartic "tsunami of / [...] tears" (ll. 40, 39-40).

In "Róisín Raharuhi", perhaps the most intriguing and technically accomplished poem of the collection, these issues reach a higher level of expressive and thematic refinement when the dogmatic narrowness of a Catholic priest, who coldly relegates an unbaptised dead child, half Irish and half Aboriginal, to the "no man's / land of limbo – a frozen room / for the nameless" (ll. 2-4), is ruthlessly faced with the proud determination of her father, who resolves to dig a grave near her mother's tomb, to

² Author's self-presentation at: <https://www.writing.ie/resources/writing-poetry-alchemy-by-fiona-perry/> (last accessed on 21 May 2023).

³ The "Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home" was an Irish Catholic maternity home for unmarried women and their children; it was active between 1925 and 1961. From 2012 to 2020, the institute was at the centre of controversies and investigations on suspected cases of illegal adoptions and premature death among resident children.

grant his daughter a burial in “consecrated / ground” (ll. 9-10). The detached, almost an affective poetic voice which dominates in ll. 1-12 then leaves place to that of the father, who, through a series of juxtaposed poignant and determined affirmative clauses traces, in a climactic *crescendo*, the child’s path through death, renewal and eternal life. He describes her as a polymorphic living being, who first assumes all forms of natural life (“bird’s / shadow”, “marram-grass”, “seafowl howls”, ll. 15-16, 19, 22), then gleams in transcendent supernatural beauty “leaping like a flame!”, “back arched, limbs air-swaddled” (ll. 24, 25), and later grows elder until she lives her life perpetually, in a triumphant transfiguration of natural life into embodied eternity. This event occurs emblematically in the Māori *otherworld* of Te Reinga, the place where the spirits of the dead climb the pōhutukawa tree to live forever, and in the “curragh to Tech Duinn” (l. 40), a name for the Irish *otherworld* where the child will carry an emblem of her aboriginal origins (the valued carved “pounamu” stone, l. 43). Here, her perpetual existence will be protected by her family bonds (“my / ancestors”, ll. 47-48) and not by what has been proved as spiritually sterile cultural conventions, such as the Catholic religious dogma which initially relegated her to the limbo (“The angels / wouldn’t have me”, ll. 46-47). The formerly unnamed child, discriminated against because of her premature death, becomes at the end of the poem the enunciative voice who culturally and ontologically reappropriates her name and identity in this new existential dimension. She does so by breaking the barriers between life and death, the emptiness of religion and the fullness of spiritual experience, through the direct address to her mother and the sudden revelation that the Irish/Aboriginal name she has now, “*Róisín Rabarubi*” (l. 50), is the same she had received by the latter before her birth, thus before the setting of any religious dogma.

2. *Change, Transitionality, and Alchemy*

All these issues (memory; life, death, and rebirth; existential separation-metaphysical relatedness; cultural and geographical localisation-displacement; magic, supernaturalism, and the mysticism of everyday life) pinpoint the critical notions of *change*, i.e. the modifying act or punctual event through which something becomes different or is altered from its previous state of existence, and *transition*, i.e. the diachronic transformative process of passing from a previous change event to a subsequent one, affecting individuals on the physical, emotional, and psychological levels to make them *other*. It is, therefore, easy to understand the author’s choice for the symbol of alchemy as the unifying image and title of the collection, as this ancient discipline’s central end goal, the gradual and systematic transmutation of physical matter and the adept’s psyche from base chemical states and elementary psychic processes towards higher and more refined ones, is directly concerned with the archetypes of Change (what it is, how it can be reached) and Transition (through which stages and with what results).

“Distillation” and “Transmutations” are the only poems in the collection explicitly referring to alchemical procedures in their titles. Still, they condense this symbolic core as a key to understanding the other poems also, in direct connection with the

overall notions of *change* and *transition*. “Distillation” refers to the laboratory process of alchemical purification, consisting in boiling a liquid to rapid evaporation and condensation as vapour (*distillatio*), itself a metaphor for the conversion of an element of the compound into another, to form, through subsequent sublimation, a perfect unity (the fifth element).⁴ The image serves to convey the notion of *transformation* as a metaphysical process in which any change of existential state, from health to disease, from death to mourning, leaves something behind as the rest of a modification now happened and ended (the “puddle / wax of a thousand / blessed candles burnt / in a kitchen shrine”, ll. 1-4; the memory of injections to morphine mixed with the cries of pain of the sick and the empathy of relatives, who share the suffering: “sinewy / morphine cries [...] / muted transmissions / of constant sorrow”, ll. 7-10). At the same time, this transformation guides the process to its necessary development into perfection and purification of matter and psyche, that is, towards a new start. In the end, disease and collectively shared family grief are transfigured into archetypal elements of transmutation leading from death to renewed life since the memory of the lost beloved ones is the *rest* which testifies to the accomplishment of the refinement produced on individual conscience, whose durability is similar to the olfactive, metaphysical and almost mystical lastingness of the “scent of jasmine” (l. 15). This image is reminiscent of the alchemical process of stone purification, where long-term work over matter ends up by showing the compost’s essential purity (“Just essence / of the thing, / crystalline”, ll. 12-14), but is not exempt from grief and suffering (as a commonplace for the philosophical *distillatio*, the beads of liquid which accumulate in the sides of the vessel are often metaphorised, in alchemical literature, as “tears”).⁵ In the poem’s closure, a new distillation process, this time conclusive, unfolds under the eyes of the speaker. Still, with a significant difference: now it is a minute incident of everyday life, in the form of a “tea bud unfurling, / water-wakened, / in a cup” (ll. 16-18), which functions as a vehicle for a new distillation metaphor, whose triviality closes the circle around the punctual traumatic events of death and mourning, therefore taking the alchemical process of transmutation back to the habitual, repetitive and consequently change-resistant behaviours of everyday life.

In “Transmutations”, the image of the Stowe Gardens’ Temple of Ancient Virtues, with its well-known sculptural figures (Epaminondas, Lycurgus, Socrates, Homer) embodying a series of enlightened ideals (prudence, virtue, wisdom, and honour), functions as a special vehicle for the subject’s capacity to trespass the apparent limits separating time and space, life and death, past and present, old and young. This experience occurs through the production and relative fruition of the mathematical, Pythagorean perfection of a sudden, spontaneously uttered child song. This song, emitted by the poetic I’s daughter, is described as a sort of pre-conscious kind of music emerging to consciousness. The speaker perceives it as “molecular scales, before / notes” (ll. 8-9),

⁴ See the corresponding entries in L. ABRAHAM, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, Cambridge, CUP, 1998.

⁵ Instances of this can be observed, among many others, in John Frederick Houpreght’s *Aurifontina chymica* (1680, p. 26), Sir George Ripley’s “Cantilena” (1450?, stanza 188), and John Cleveland’s “On the Arch-Bishop of Canterbury” (1647, l. 38).

then as an unexpected, phonetically sounding intimation of alchemical perfection, “unadulterated as gold ingots” (l. 9). These latter, like the potable, cathartic *aurum* of the alchemists, ascending from the innermost depths of matter and psyche, and passing through the mouth (the vehicle of the communication of virtue, both in ancient oration and in poetry), elevate the listening adept-mother to the symbolic status of kingship (spiritual perfection), characteristic of the *rubedo* stage, that is, the final major transmutative step in the *magnum opus*: “glide / from her mouth up into the vault / fanning out, ribboning towards / to anoint the crown of her head” (ll. 9-12; my emphasis). Analogously as in the *rubedo* stage, the poem’s closure shows how the alchemical perfection attained by virtue manifests a powerful environmental force as a “reverberation” (l. 13) spreading all around the child, affecting her attentively listening speaker by infusing new life force in her “veins” (l. 13) and penetrating in her “opened throat” (l. 14), as in an intimate reversed bird’s feeding from baby-bird/child to mother. This reverberation echoes the latter’s cathartic, life-giving effects in a more subtle and spiritual plane, now physically inaudible and transpersonal, transhistorical, where “a multitude of suspended fossils / in the masonry” (ll. 16-17) of this monumental memorial object, are suddenly revived and brought back into existence (“creak and burst into life”, l. 17). Thus, change and transformation become, as in an alchemical *opus*, the privileged *loci* of transmutation, places where the heightened perception of sudden, epiphanic intimations of essential transcendence breaches the entropic process of historical transience.

Perry has recently clarified the close relationship existing between the transhistorical and collective dimension of change and transition, related to the alchemical archetype, and the minutest events characterising what she terms as the “ebb and flow of everyday life as it is lived”⁶ and instead related to the personal experience and family history of individuals. As she stated recently, *Alchemy* is meant to “provide a glimpse into how life events, ancestry, nature, political landscape, and culture gradually alter or influence a person’s inner chemistry or ‘break the heart open’”.⁷ The final quotation is a rewording of the closure of Mary Oliver’s “Lead”,⁸ whose poignantly ecstatic speaker, but at the same time, a practically aware and unobtrusive knower of the natural world as one of predators and prey, life and death, eternity and transience, warns the reader against human’s inattentiveness to the sacredness and beauteousness available in every passing moment of ordinary nature’s life-cycles. Hence, the loon’s song, coming out from its “elegant beak” (l. 11) and crying out “in the long, sweet savouring of its life / which, if you have heard it, / you know is a sacred thing” (ll. 12-14), as well as its “speckled” and “iridescent” (ll. 21, 22) beauty are inevitably destined, in Mary’s Olivers’ vision, to decay and death. The intersection between the human and the natural world evidences the limits of human consciousness and language in grasping such an encounter. This is due to our unheeding lack of awareness of the sacredness which inheres in the unexpected confrontation with the living *other*. The last five lines of the

⁶ See her already quoted self-presentation at: <https://www.writing.ie/resources/writing-poetry-alchemy-by-fiona-perry/> (last accessed on 21 May 2023).

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ M. OLIVER, *New and Selected Poems*, 2 vols, Boston, Beacon Press, 2005, Vol. I, p. 54.

poem (“I tell you this / to break your heart, / by which I mean only / that it break open and never close again / to the rest of the world”, ll. 26-30) have been inserted in the epigraph of *Alchemy*, and constitute, as Perry herself has declared, “a personal mission statement”⁹ setting the intention of the book: that of exploring the very essence of the human condition as a process of relentless transition from one moment of change to the next, a process interspersed with passing but, at the same time, self-transmuting moments of heightened perception of transcendence, whose perfect Pythagorean *ratio* and cosmologic scope is nevertheless essentially unknowable by the human mind. Furthermore, the “lead” of Oliver’s title also implicitly provides Perry with the starting point of this process. This becomes evident for two reasons. In the alchemical *opus*, the *prima materia*, that is, the raw material, both physical and psychological, out of which philosophical gold will become manifest in the final *rubedo* phase, is properly lead. Secondly, this metal symbolises, in the Western Esoteric worldview as well in archetypal psychology, the Saturnian frame of mind of the initially unaware and depressed individual-adept who copes with the inevitability of death, loss and decay in life during the *nigredo* stage, that is, the incipital phase of the alchemical process.¹⁰

3. *Life as an Alchemical Laboratory*

In the human lifelong process of growth, where the “ebbs and flows of life as it is lived” are integral, not incidental, parts of the individual and collective path to wisdom, the phenomenon of *learning through transitionality*, that is, the acquisition of new knowledge and self-awareness during peculiar moments of passage from one existential state to another, is crucial to gain a thorough understanding of the originality and freshness of Perry’s application of the alchemical symbolism to the minutest incidents of everyday life.

In alchemy, specifically in the esoteric one, the *magnum opus* has to be intended as a process of psychological development through which any change occurring in the alembic serves as an externalised metaphor for a corresponding passage of state, in the adept’s psyche, from baser and more elementary to higher and more conscious emotional and cognitive processes, and it is for this reason that Jung equals it to the process of individuation, i.e. the lifelong psychological growth towards the full awareness of one’s *Self*, evolving as a constant dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious parts on the psyche.¹¹ Moreover, during this process, the perception of death, loss and decay, which are distinctive of material life as transience and loss and felt as potentially insurmountable obstacles in the depressive blackness of the *nigredo* stage, are destined to be overcome by the clarity of vision and enlightenment of insightful whiteness of the *albedo*,¹² which immediately precedes *rubedo*, the final goal stage. To the esoteric

⁹ AA. VV., *Celebrating Fiona Perry’s Début Collection of Poetry*, Alchemy, Turas Press YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow3bKnikeME&t=307s> [minute 18:43 to 19:10].

¹⁰ See J. HILLMAN, *Alchemical Psychology*, Thompson, CT, Spring Publications, 2010 (2021), pp. 82-94.

¹¹ C.G. JUNG, *Psychology and Alchemy*, London, Routledge, (1944) 2008, pp. 3, 35, 346, 475-83. See also M.-L. VON FRANZ, *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology*, Toronto, Inner City Books, 1980, p. 76.

¹² J. HILLMAN, *Alchemical Psychology*, pp. 124-201.

adept, life is a laboratory,¹³ a unique opportunity to refine the understanding of one's spiritual essence and transmuting potential through the meticulous and meaningful observation of these privileged moments dominated by change and transitionality.

Analogously, to Fiona Perry, life possesses a strong pedagogical force. It is a special place of learning in which individuals, family groups, and even entire Nations act as ever-moving subjects, in an incessant transit from unawareness to awareness, through passing moments of keen apprehension of the secret relationships between the inner and outer realities, past and present, matter and spirit; moments that are always incomplete, yet revelatory, as temporary steps in a lifelong process of progressive growth and becoming.

In *Alchemy*, this pedagogical force emerges in particular conditions that threaten or potentially threaten to sever our innate capacity to maintain a perceived continuity in our personal identity over time, to be safely alone within ourselves, and at the same time, force us to develop a nearly supernatural, if not divine, capacity to creatively evolve in line with the titanic, exogenous forces that unremittingly subject us to change, loss and the inevitability of psychologic development. These traumatic or potentially traumatic experiences, both personal and collective, are those that Perry calls "life's milestones",¹⁴ such as birth and death, war, and disease.

In "Postpartum", for instance, life begins as a "naked" and "bloodied wake of birth" (ll. 1, 12). Here, the images of the "universe" with "too many doors" (l. 4) and that of the dreamed "terrifying flower / unfurled overnight" (ll. 4-5) give a mother the clairvoyant vision that her new-born baby is both a threshold to an unimagined potential of personal growth and the foundation of an unfamiliar new world, where old parameters are about to be irrevocably replaced with new ones ("Everything / is unfastening around me", ll. 12-13) and where she is imperatively called upon to find new meanings to this experience, to "allow the stars to realign" (l. 15). In "Transmutations", the regenerating force of the daughter's song even crushes ("creak and burst", l. 17) the deadly *inertia* of the fossils' timelessly suspended existence, in the between and in the meanwhile of life and history, then exerting more powerful energy now, to bring them into life again, than what was necessary for getting them to death and stamping their traces in stone, millions of years ago. In both poems, birth is an evolution-inducing moment, working abruptly and distressfully, leading through trauma or potential trauma to a clearer understanding of life and its secret dynamics.

On the other side of the existential *spectrum*, death is an *Ananke* endowed with feral and, at the same time, aesthetic ineluctability, as it occurs in "Panthera", where the regal elegance of a sinuous feline body coexists with the animal's belonging to a "shifting / legion inclined / to swallow a child" (ll. 26-28). Formally, death befalls suddenly in the text, as a presupposition tacitly assumed beforehand at the beginning of the speaker's lyrical monologues and then revealed to the reader without any or few indications of the context of this event. This phenomenon takes, for instance,

¹³ S.J. LINDEN, *Darke Hieroglyphics. Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, (1996) 2008, pp. 8-9.

¹⁴ AA. VV., *Celebrating Fiona Perry's Début Collection of Poetry*, Alchemy [minute 18:33].

the form of the abrupt image of a baby in a coffin (“The Incorruptible”), to which the reader has not been prepared in advance, whose “hair was spread over sateen / in her resting place” (ll. 11-12), and stands out in sharp contrast with the preceding metaphoric description of her energy, when she was still alive, as a “steady archer / taking aim in a forest” (ll. 3-4). In “Unburden”, similarly as it occurs in the already mentioned “Róisín Raharuhi”, death becomes the occasion of a metaphysical, mutual-aid relationality between the dead and the living, and it manifests itself as a fatal event, already occurred before the *zero* point of narration. In this case, this expressive effect is conveyed through the paradigmatic juxtaposition of a series of verbal instructions and remembered moments of family life given by the dead to those who are still alive, with the intent of accompanying them step by step to their departure, as if the dead were the loving sentinels of the living, monitoring and protecting their beloved ones for the rest of the time they still have to live (“Talk to the / uniformed boy at your bedside”, “Demand / that it is noted in the coroner’s / report what a handful I was”, “Describe how you carried me / over the threshold / [...] on our wedding day”, “Now ask the nurse / for stronger medicine, my love”, ll. 6-7, 12-14, 16-17 and 18, 24-25). Death reveals its alchemical transmuting potential by acting on the subject through trauma and distress to display the cathartic force of the *nigredo* phases of existence. In “Panthera, this potential is inscribed in the feline’s “patient amber / eyes” (ll. 21-22), where the inspired speaker can “decipher” (l. 22) the animal’s transindividual, archetypal significance (“you / are more black hole / than substance”, ll. 22-24), as well as numinous nature, like a Blakean tiger, elusive to intellect yet irresistibly charming and awe-inspiring (“a moveable trap door”, l. 25).

In “A History of the World”, another emblematic life’s milestone, war, bursts into a British family’s everyday life spreading its disintegrating effects on the people’s bodies and minds (“dismembered by bombs, skewered by shrapnel”, l. 13). Then it propagates as a devastating cultural epidemic which makes the victims learn and then communicate violence in turn (“raped and taught to kill”, l. 14); finally, it ends up perverting all family bonds, under the sign of the terrible and irretrievable bereavement of a deadly embrace indistinctly involving the living and the dead, old and new generations (“They’ve thrown us half-alive on our mothers’ / corpses in open graves”, ll. 15-16). Similarly, in “Misfirings”, *Alzheimer’s* disease advances despite the loving care of the patient’s family, eroding personal memories and affection with the mechanistic irreversibility of an aseptic plethora of medical terms spreading over the closing lines as memory loss devastates the human brain, wearing-out meanings through senseless formal redundancy: “a short circuit to the neuronal / loop running from the orbital frontal / cortex to the cingulate gyrus, / striatum, globus pallidus, thalamus and back / to the frontal cortex” (ll. 26-30). Yet, in both cases, trauma becomes the litmus paper which makes emotional bonds emerge and strengthen. In “A History of the World”, the framed iteration of the five verses on the bombing alert at the beginning and end of the poem is overcome by the central part of the text, where homeless people on the run still maintain the solidity of daily family life, under the silent, but at the same time, eloquent and overarching presence of eternity (“The stars shouting silently”, l. 9). In “Misfirings”, the progression of the disease is similarly overcome by a sudden intrusion in the

observers' consciousness, of an analogous form of timeless wisdom and a metaphysical apprehension of the absolute plane of existence when the speaker finally realises that "We are not the authors of our / own thoughts" (ll. 24-25) and that the patient's brain, "even when broken, is a miniature / universe. A wonder" (ll. 31-32).

In a last emblematic poem ("Breakers"), which is worth mentioning, these "life's milestones" acquire the archetypal status of existential breakers, "heavy ocean-wave[s] which break [...] violently into foam against a rocky coast or in passing over reefs or shallows" (*OED*, "breaker", n.¹, 5). Here the author metaphorically relates them to "foaming diamonds / released from saltwater" (ll. 13-14), alluding to those unexpected moments of revelation during which the unusual, unfamiliar components of life with all their crushing, overwhelming and even distressing load and at the same time, evolution-inducing potential, suddenly break through our otherwise repetitive and customary existences. Hence, the reference to "saltwater" and "foaming diamonds" as double-layered alchemical symbols of dynamic renewal (water, foam), and at the same time, of the inevitability of suffering (salt)¹⁵ reminds us of the essential function of "life's milestones" as soteriological means to perfection (diamond) and purification (water), during individuation and psychological growth.

As in the blackest depths of the *nigredo* stage, where purification necessitates a passage into *mortificatio*, the metaphorical 'killing' of one's Ego-centredness by physical and psychological asceticism, penance, and abstinence, also in these poems, transcendence is caught through the experience of transience in all its different and potentially painful, distressing forms. As we have seen, this effect is reached, in the collection, at the actantial plane, when the characters of these poetical narrations face off these "life's milestones" and then break the barriers between time and eternity to gain access to the absolute, which is beyond historical time and space, and allows them to collect the noetic knowledge which is necessary to evolve through trauma and loss, "knowing full well a permanent transmutation has taken place" through sorrow ("Psychopomp", l. 20).

Perry uses two other devices to convey this crucial symbolic core, itself consistent with the notion of learning through transitionality and symbolically reminiscent of the positive, cathartic aspects of alchemical *nigredo*. The first device is the insertion, throughout the collection, of recurring objects of everyday use having the function of transitional objects; the second device is the recourse to figurative language, more specifically, metaphor, simile, and synecdoche in connection with the paradigms of change, memory and the overcoming of loss during the already mentioned "life's milestones".

4. *Transitional Objects and Figurative Language*

With the term 'transitional object', I refer to D.W. Winnicott's studies on specific soft toys or blankets to which young children develop intense and persistent attachments during the first phases of their cognitive and emotional development.¹⁶ According to

¹⁵ J. HILLMAN, *Alchemical Psychology*, pp. 54-81.

¹⁶ D.W. WINNICOTT, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", in ID., *Playing and Reality*,

Winnicott, in the case of a satisfying and ‘good-enough’ mother-child relationship, the child can safely and serenely transfer the essential properties of the mother (keeping safe, nurturing) to the object and, through this latter, mature the capacity for self-soothing, which is, in turn, fundamental in any healthy process of psychological growth and emotional autonomy development, without experiencing any traumatic sense of loss.¹⁷ Winnicott began to study the phenomenon of transitionality when he served as a consultant paediatrician to the children’s evacuation programme during the Second World War, and he formulated his ideas through direct observation of children who had been separated from their mothers during perhaps the most traumatic situation ever.¹⁸ He discovered that this attachment is a crucial phase of Ego development, when the child establishes a sense of self, distinct from all other parts of the external environment and grows as an independent young adult, overcoming the emotional stress implied in the inevitable separation from the mother.¹⁹ Moreover, this attachment testifies to the insurgence of the mental process of reality-testing, that is, the capacity to objectively evaluate an emotion or thought against real life and to distinguish one’s inner world of thoughts and feelings from the external world.²⁰ Transitional objects, then, are essential tools in the process of learning through everchanging experiences and a form of spontaneous self-healing in case of trauma or potential trauma. Moreover, they facilitate the transition from emotional dependence to independence.

In Perry’s collection, household objects of everyday use abound, from the “stroking glassy-eyed china cats” (“Freedom”, l. 11) to the “wrap(ped) custard creams in tissue paper” (l. 7) of “A History of the World”, from the “heirloom tea set” of “Unburden” (l. 12) to the “covered / mixing bowl of bread dough” mentioned in “Small Comforts” (ll. 1-2). For a series of reasons which will be examined now, they regularly display the essential qualities of Winnicott’s transitional objects: emotional attachment; close connection with past experience and memory; insurgence in critical moments of change; function of developmental facilitators during the individual’s growth process.²¹

First of all, the speaker has developed a form of persistent emotional attachment to them, to the extent that she even assumes rights over them, as in the case of the objects left by the deceased father in the family house of “Timepiece”, that shuffle in the poetic I’s mind as juxtaposed lexemes, jumbled in the textual space in a desperate try to keep in touch with him, through them (“old biscuit tins, the mouth of / figurines, cracks between floorboards, / teacups, U-bends”, ll. 29-31). Secondly, like Winnicott’s transitional objects, Perry’s are mnestically loaded, as they are closely related to the

London and New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 1; originally published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34, 1953, pp. 89-97.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁸ E. ELLSWORTH, *Places of Learning. Media, Architecture, Pedagogy*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 59.

¹⁹ C.J. LITT, “Theories of Transitional Object Attachment: An Overview”, *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 9, 1986, p. 384.

²⁰ D.W. WINNICOTT, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena”, pp. 11-13.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 5, 15. See also D. METCALF and R. SPITZ, “The Transitional Object: Critical Developmental Period and Organiser of the Psyche”, in S.A. GROLNICK et al. (eds), *Between Reality and Fantasy*, New York, Jason Aronson, 1978, p. 105.

speaker's happy past, where care, presence, and soothing were regularly experienced and exchanged. An example is the eight remnants of her family life, meticulously listed in "Memory Box" ("a Sutton Seed Packet", "Thomas à Kempis' Imitation of Christ", "a crochet needle", "a wage slip", "a photo of Sloan Street", "a CD of Puccini's Gianni Schicchi", "a pigeon's life ring", "a family bible", ll. 1, 4, 8, 11, 15, 18, 22 and 25). In other instances, the affective link is to the Nation's collective past, as in the flashing reminiscences of Māori's heroism during the New Zealand Wars, and here mediated by reference to the "tomahawk" ("Heroes", l. 11).

Thirdly, and analogously as transitional objects, which appear in the child's life during periods of relative distress and insecurity, where the sense of separateness from the mother is felt as stronger, similarly, these special objects also occur and even thicken quantitatively in the poems where "life's milestones", transitionality and change dominate the imagery. In "Memory Box", for instance, the lyrical space is saturated by the lexical presence of the already-seen memory objects related to the speaker's deceased father. In "Swimming", the reference to the "new dresses / sewn by your mother" (ll. 16-17) symbolises individual memory's power to recombine the present, in which separation is felt as real, with the happy past of relationality and togetherness, therefore re-composing the fragments of life to form a new and renewed experience heading forward to the future, as a patient seamstress makes a new dress for a young girl.

As in Winnicott's transitional objects, in *Alchemy*, these objects of everyday use not only occur in critical moments of change (birth, death, war and disease). They also facilitate the poetic I's transition from one phase of life to the next, thus acting as developmental facilitators. For instance, in "Distillation", "a thousand / blessed candles burnt / in a kitchen shrine" (ll. 2-4) to honour the memory of the deceased carry a strong emotional load – the attachment to the beloved one now disappeared – as they rekindle the memory of his "last upright / embrace cushioning [her]" (ll. 5-6). This image then evolves from transitionality to loss overcoming when the speaker's consciousness lingers on the "scent of jasmine / tea buds unfurling, / water-weakened, / in a cup" (ll. 15-18), itself a diegetic metaphor for the self-healing process of transmutation through distillation, that is the alchemical process of purification through separation of previously mixed substances, that has just taken place also in the internalised dimension of her psyche as a process of emotional differentiation from the beloved one and culminating in autonomy and independence ("Just essence / of the thing, / crystalline", ll. 12-14).

Finally, a special kind of memory object, a handful of symbolic bird tarot cards mentioned in "Bird Tarot" and left to the speaker by a now absent "you", also functions in this case as a transitional object, in the specific sense Winnicott and others ascribe to the adults' use of analogous items of self-comfort to alleviate the anxieties of life (such as mobile smartphones,²² but also objects kept from the deceased and used to cope with bereavement).²³ Here, however, tarots are used in the more profound

²² See M. SHARIF, "The 'Mastery' of the Swipe: Smartphones, Transitional Objects and Interstitial Time", *First Monday*, 21 (10), 2016, pp. 1-27; I. MACRURY and C. YATES, "Framing the Mobile Phone: The Psychopathologies of an Everyday Object", *CM: Communication and Media*, 11 (38), 2016, pp. 41-70.

²³ C. WAKENSHAW, "The Use of Winnicott's Concept of Transitional Objects in Bereavement Practice", *Bereavement Care*, 39 (3), 2020, pp. 119-23.

sense, namely to cope, through the mediation of symbol, with the unending, lifelong work of putting inner, invisible realities in dialogue with outer, visible ones. Moreover, the ornithological imagery of this deck further reinforces the connection with the domain of transitional objects, as it is very common, among children and adults, to elect a non-human animal as an item of self-comfort during periods of crisis and transition. This is the case of companion pets, who, similarly to stuffed animals but with a significant increase in the possibilities of relationality and emotional reciprocation inherent in the interaction with another living being, function as higher forms of psychic mediators within the lifelong process of personal development and individuation.²⁴

In “Bird Tarot”, non-human imagery takes the form of a series of birds with strong symbolic undertones and becomes the liminal third space of experience in which the speaker negotiates and gives meaning to the sense of loss for the death of the beloved one. This goal is reached by being ready to intuitively behold the everlasting metaphysical connection between the inner reality of the psyche, where spirit transcends relative space-time bonds into sudden clairvoyant insights, eidolically breaching into the absolute, and the outer reality of everyday life, rooted in the prosaic here-and-now unawareness of a “neighbours’ TV aerial [,] barbecue[s]” (l. 1), “chips” (l. 3), a “kitchen window” (l. 8), a “vanilla pancake” (l. 8), and aviaries “decorated with / web, ghouls and candles” (ll. 9-10) for the consumerist and conventional version of the eve of All Saints’ Day, Halloween. This interpolation between spirit and matter, absolute and trivial reality, clairvoyant sight and objective notation of the minute particulars of everyday life are again consistent with the overall symbolism of *nigredo*, where higher and lower realities still coalesce in the compost before they are sublimated and purified. In the poem, these opposing realities can be detected in the choice of these tarot birds, as the list ranges from the lofty symbolism of the “Ibis” (l. 1), an ancient lunar symbol of occult knowledge, and the Egyptian version of Hermes as Thoth, as this latter is depicted with the head of this bird and is a tutelary deity of alchemy,²⁵ to the triviality of the pigeons, occurring two times in the text as many couples of birds (“a pigeon [...] / watched by another”; “A pair of wood pigeons”, ll. 3-4 and 7).

Whereas the “Ibis” is oriented towards the vertical symbolic plane of ascent and is depicted as a mystical sentinel of the mystic otherworld of esoteric initiates since it stands as an “incumbent” (l. 1) presence watching over the pettiness of “TV aerial[s]” and garden “barbecue[s]” (l. 1), and is separated from the context as an elevated, stylised shape, similar to a “cloud”, against the “sky” (l. 2), the pigeons are on the other hand located on the horizontal plane of trivial life, since they are busy at eating “chips” (l. 3), in the first case, and at copulating on a “brick wall / outside the kitchen window” (ll.

²⁴ See C. PERIN, “Dogs as Symbols in Human Development in Interrelations Between People and Pets”, in B. FOGLE (ed.), *A Symposium on the Human-companion Animal Bond*, Springfield, IL, Charles C. Thomas, 1981, pp. 68-88; E.S. PAUL and J.A. SERPELL, “Childhood Pet Keeping and Humane Attitudes in Young Adulthood”, *Animal Welfare*, 2, 1993, pp. 321-38; A.H. KATCHER, “The Future of Education and Research on the Human-animal Bond and Animal-assisted Therapy. Part B: Animal-assisted Therapy and the Study of Human-animal Relationships: Discipline or Bondage? Context or Transitional Object?”, in A.H. FINE (ed.), *Handbook on Animal-assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice*, San Diego, Academic Press, 2000, pp. 461-73.

²⁵ H.B. WERNERS, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*, New York, Continuum, 2006, entry “Ibis”.

7-8), in the case of the “wood pigeons” (l. 7). The ascetic loneliness of the Ibis as a single, isolated bird contrasts with the trivial togetherness of the coupled, plural wood pigeons of ll. 7-8. Whereas the Ibis stands on the houses’ rooftop, in a somewhat remote position from the context, the pigeons are instead involved in it, as they occupy more public and popular topical spaces: the clocktower of “St Michael at the North Gate” (l. 3), in central Oxford, and “a brick wall / outside the kitchen window” in the speaker’s home (ll. 7-8).

Ornithological symbolism becomes more intriguing in the other two birds mentioned in the poem. “A nesting magpie” (l. 5) introduces in the text the myth of the eternal return, as Eliade would term it,²⁶ a religious and esoteric belief common in the cultures of all times, according to which each thing on Earth corresponds to a sacred, celestial counterpart. This becomes evident in the seme of CYCLICITY, which dominates the imagery in the lines dedicated to the magpie, from its “nesting” (l. 5) activity (a seasonal occupation which may occur from June to December, related to natural lifecycles and the symbolism of the circle, due to the form of its characteristic round-shaped nest), to the fly of the bird, who “swoops towards [the speaker’s] head again and again” (l. 5), a movement which is soon mirrored by the action of the speaker and the topical place, an area of water surrounded by land, where this action occurs, as she observes the bird while she “cycle[s] / around Lake Monger” (ll. 5-6). The popular magpie’s symbolism related to witchcraft, unscrupulousness and doubleness, due to its liking for shiny objects,²⁷ is moreover redoubled through the image of the “long-necked turtles” (l. 6), the *Chelodina colliei*, which is characteristic of the habitat of Lake Monger, a large urban wetland on the Swan Coastal Plain in suburban Perth, in Western Australia, and known among experts as underwater apex predators, and opportunistic carnivores.²⁸ Again, in this image, everyday reality (“nesting”, a tourist’s “cycling” around a lake) reveals unexpected breaches into the world of symbols and soul images, as suggested by the metaphysical coalescence of different planes of reality via the common circle/cyclical imagery.

A last ornithological image closes the series of five emblematic birds in the poem with an unexpected symbolic twist that anaphorically gives additional undertones to the other ones. The “Wedgewood-blue budgie”, which “flutters around and aviary” (l. 9), can be interpreted as both a real bird with blue plumes (a small parrot, very common in many Western houses) and an artificial bird, as it may also refer to the graceful cameo-like birds which are sometimes depicted on a special kind of eighteenth-century stoneware blue pottery known as Jasperware and still sold worldwide. Here the metaphysical interpenetration between the absolute and the relative, spirit and matter, is conveyed through this imaginal ambiguity, as the bird is both a natural bird, related to transience and an artificial bird pointing to eternity, possibly with Yeatsian undertones (one thinks of the artificial golden bird of “Sailing to Byzantium”). This interpenetration can be symbolically related to the symbolic parrot’s mediating function,

²⁶ M. ELIADE, *Cosmos and History. The Myth of The Eternal Return*, Engl. trans. W.R. TRASK, New York, Bollingen, (1959) 1964, pp. 17-21.

²⁷ H.B. WERNES, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*, entry “Magpie”.

²⁸ D. MOLL and E.O. MOLL, *The Ecology, Exploitation and Conservation of River Turtles*, Oxford, OUP, 2004, p. 124.

in archetypal psychology, between conscious and unconscious.²⁹ At the same time, its “blue” colour is reminiscent of the receptive capacity of the learning mind during the transitional phases of individuation.³⁰ Furthermore, its round movement equates it to the Magpie via the seme of CYCLICITY, while its sad song (“singing plaintively”, l. 10) is reminiscent of the sacredness of this period of the year (the All Saints’ Eve) and then contrasts with the triviality of the “trick or treaters” (l. 10) who playfully and lightly celebrate Halloween. Death is then a composite image in which the sacred and the profane coexist. The parrot represents this double-layered symbolism displaying one of the most typical characteristics of the living symbols of the collective unconscious, the simultaneous coexistence, or *coniunctio*, of complementary opposites, in a perpetual, dynamic (*syzygial*) relationship.³¹

In a more general sense, in “Bird Tarot”, ornithological imagery serves Perry to convey the symbolism of the alchemical bird, or “bird of Hermes”, an image used in alchemy to indicate the phase in which the vapours of the compost ascend in the alembic during the ascensional stages of *distillatio* and *sublimatio* and the subsequent phases when they precipitate as purified, spiritualised matter.³² The coalescence of triviality and loftiness, natural life and the absoluteness of eternity, which can be perceived in these images, confirms this impression. Moreover, the recourse to the tarot symbolism adds a specific characteristic to these birds: they function as a third, mediating space of experience between life and eternity, unawareness and spiritual knowledge. In this connection, thus, they exert the same function of Corbin’s *mundus imaginalis*, the liminal frontier made up of collective, archetypal symbols, serving as an intermediary between conscious and unconscious, human and divine, matter and spirit, time and eternity,³³ during the process of individuation in which the subject learns about himself by imaginatively *reading* and interpreting, through synchronicity and symmetric logic, his life as a book of meaningful sings, leading to the centre of his personality, the Self.³⁴ As such, these birds, when read intuitively as tarots by the speaker and indirectly by the reader, and due to their close connection with personal and family memory, also function as transitional objects, psychic organisers and metaspaces of the creative negotiation between past and present awareness, presence and loss, life and bereavement, reality and imagination, internalised and externalised experience.

In this regard, Winnicott himself stressed the importance of transitional relatedness with objects within the processes of symbolisation and play, characteristic of artistic behaviour and an intermediate area of experience for the development and exercise of

²⁹ M.-L. VON FRANZ, *Individuation in Fairy Tales*, Dallas, Spring, 1977, pp. 49-50.

³⁰ J. HILLMAN, “Alchemical Blue and the *Unio Mentalis*”, in C. ESHLEMAN (ed.), *Sulfur I*, Pasadena, California Institute of Technology, 1981, pp. 33-50.

³¹ See C.G. JUNG, “The Psychological Aspects of the Kore”, in ID., *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, eds G. ADLER and R.F.C. HULL, Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., (1941) 1980, Vol. IX/1, pp. 182-203, p. 191, and *Psychological Types*, in ID., *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, eds G. ADLER and R.F.C. HULL, Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., (1921) 1976, Vol. VI, pp. 479-80.

³² L. ABRAHAM, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, entry “Bird of Hermes”.

³³ H. CORBIN, *L’imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d’Ibn Arabi*, Paris, Flammarion, 1958, p. 196.

³⁴ C.G. JUNG, “Concerning Mandala Symbolism”, in ID., *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, eds G. ADLER and R.F.C. HULL, Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., (1950) 1980, Vol. IX/1, pp. 355-84, p. 357.

creativity in adult life as means, universally shared by humans, of coping with life's difficulties.³⁵ Furthermore, other scholars, such as V.H. Rosen (1964), Susan Deri (1978), Ruth Miller (1978), and P.W. Pruyser (1983), "believe that the basis for active, creative activity in adult life is the capacity for existence in the intermediate space between reality and fantasy and that the child's attachment to an inanimate [transitional] object represents the prototype of this capacity".³⁶

In the perspective of transitionality, creative imagination is a third behavioural space mediating between the individual and the internalised-externalised planes of experience during individual psychological development. This space also corresponds to all playful and artistic uses of language, as L.S. Vygotsky puts it in a seminal work on this subject,³⁷ that is, the figurative modes of communication that go beyond the limits of conscious, rational, and Aristotelic modes of thought and communication to purposely activate the mechanisms of fantasy, symbolisation, and the myriad generalisations, substitutions, displacements, and condensations which are consistent with what Matte Blanco would term as 'symmetric logic', the non-logic of the unconscious.³⁸

In Perry's *Alchemy*, this third linguistic space of transitional relatedness, mediated by creative thinking and artistic language, dominates in all poems of the collection, through the widespread presence of metaphor, simile and synecdoche, in direct connection with the overall paradigms of change, memory and the overcoming of loss across "life's milestones". These three figures of speech emblematically point to the poeticity of language as a symbolic liminal space between reality and imagination, conscious and unconscious, similarity and difference, due to the Jakobsonian bipolarity between the metaphoric axe of similarity or substitution and the metonymic axe, where one topic suggests another via contiguity (closeness in space, time, and psychological association, including synecdoche as a contiguity-based figure of speech).³⁹ Correspondingly, in Perry, we find a profusion of extended metaphors, such as the already analysed "breakers" ("Breakers"), which point by similarity to the dominant theme of the "life's milestones", or the "brown snake" (title and l. 1), itself allusive, in "Brown Snake Awakens in the Everywhen", up to the speaker's fleeting "memories" (l. 11), these being similar to "fast-moving / currents" (ll. 11-12) which come and go in her floating mind. Furthermore, in the poem, this metaphor also syntagmatically progresses through simile ("like", l. 6) and synecdoche, as the snake is described as moving "like an embodied soundwave into the tree / shadows" (ll. 6-7), so that the image simultaneously alludes to different perceptions in one single sense impression involving sound, sight, and touch. Moreover, the symmetric logic of this unconscious-based poetic language goes further when the speaker explicitly compares the snake to the

³⁵ D.W. WINNICOTT, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", pp. 5-6.

³⁶ C.J. LITT, "Theories of Transitional Object Attachment: An Overview", p. 387.

³⁷ L.S. VYGOTSKY, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood", 1930, Engl. trans. F. SMOLUCHA, *Soviet Psychology*, 28 (1), 1990, pp. 84-96.

³⁸ I. MATTE BLANCO, *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets. An Essay in Bi-logic*, New York, Routledge, (1975) 2018, pp. 88-99.

³⁹ R. JAKOBSON, *Language in Literature*, eds K. POMORSKA and S. RUDY, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, (1969) 1987, pp. 25, 105.

“mathematical symbol for / *similar to*” (the sign “~”, ll. 2-3) through another simile (“as”, l. 2), then equating, on the plane of visual shapes (the shared sinuousness of form), the organicistic, animal domain with the abstract, graphemic plane (itself redoubled semantically through reference to the seme of LIKENESS). Finally, the expressive use of italics in “*similar to*” (l. 3) exerts the function of allowing the syntagm to stand out from the surrounding sentence in a way that is analogous to the impression given to the speaker at the snakes’ sudden emergence from the “rushes” (l. 1) and whose emotional salience is similar to the unexpected arousal of unconscious, memorial fragments from the inmost, *reptile*, then innate and automatic, depths of the human psyche.

5. *Conclusions*

In her poignant investigation of the overwhelming experiences of change and transition, Perry uses alchemical imagery and transitional objects to present individual growth as psychic space, a liminal dwelling on the borders between the inside and the outside, but also a zone of protection, reception and projection, where many existential binary opposites (me/not-me; past/present; life/death; unawareness/awareness; togetherness/separation) dynamically interact in the mysterious extra-rational domains of attachment and affect, along the winding path leading to psychological integration and spiritual wholeness. Evolving through symbol and intuitive imagination, the poetic text becomes a sort of extended soul-making laboratory, where the endless oscillations between adversities and moments of epiphany, incessantly tell, as sea waves “rolling in, again and again, like beautiful new beginnings” (“The Forest Fire”, l. 33), the eternal plot of the living as an embodied alchemy of the soul.

In this stunning *début* collection, then, besides revealing the assured hand of a seasoned writer, the literary treatment of alchemy is not merely conventional, as in Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* (1988) or in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books, nor unserious, as in the long tradition of alchemical satire which spans from Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologue and Tale” (1387-1400) and Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1610) to Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988) and Fidelis Morgan’s *Unnatural Fire* (2000).⁴⁰ Rather, Perry uses this cultural code through structural transposition, as she deeply integrates alchemical imagery, including its doctrinal assumptions and conceptual frameworks, as form and theme in her poems. To this extent, this talented and promising poetry collection can be numbered along with other “serious”⁴¹ treatments of alchemy in contemporary English literature, spanning from the outstanding examples of Yeats’ and Heaney’s alchemical verse to other more recent literary prose works using alchemy to focus, as in Perry’s writings, on the significance of life’s transitional *nigredo* processes as meaningful occasions for mental, emotional, and spiritual metamorphosis.⁴²

⁴⁰ For deeper insights into the conventional and satirical treatment of alchemy in literature, see A. LEMBERT, *The Heritage of Hermes. Alchemy in Contemporary British Literature*, Leipzig, Galda + Wilch Verlag, 2004, pp. 43-74.

⁴¹ I take this term from S.J. LINDEN, *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, p. 99, and A. LEMBERT, *The Heritage of Hermes. Alchemy in Contemporary British Literature*, p. 53.

⁴² One thinks of, among many others, Patrick Harpur’s *Mercurius, or, The Marriage of Heaven and Earth*

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INTERVIEWS

ELISA BIZZOTTO*

An Interview with Joseph Bristow on *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings from Arrest to Imprisonment* (New Haven, Yale U.P., 2022),
and Other Views on Wilde

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EB: Good afternoon, Professor Bristow. I have had great pleasure of reading *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings from Arrest to Imprisonment* and it's impressive, really. I was wondering how you could have written such a detailed and exceptionally well-researched volume.

JB: The pandemic had much to do with the concentrated period of writing that I dedicated to *Oscar Wilde on Trial*. Towards the end of 2019, I had a working draft, and once we reached March 2020, when we weren't supposed to be moving around at all, I was polishing each chapter. Eventually, at the end of summer 2020 I'd produced an enormous manuscript of 366,000 words, including 40 illustrations and 9 appendices. I sent it off to Yale University Press, where the editor looked at it in despair. "It's far too long," he said. "You've got to find a way of stripping it down." So, I devoted many hours doing my best to reduce it in size, and by the following summer, in 2021, I had removed 100,000 words. I submitted the radically revised draft, which was promptly sent out for review. There were, a few months later, several helpful suggestions for revision. By the autumn of 2021, the manuscript was formally accepted.

Still, it took a long time for such a lengthy study to make its way through production, since books for some presses moved fairly slowly during the pandemic. In any case,

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given the length of the book, it was rather complicated to get through the copyediting process. To be sure, I had considerable copyediting support. However, when the first set of proofs came through, which must have been at the end of 2021, there were no fewer than 800 corrections. We kept going through fresh sets of proofs all the way through March or April 2022. My hope is that scarcely any errors remain.

EB: I have enjoyed your writing style. You have a way of telling stories that is really engaging.

JB: It's very kind of you to say so. Besides taking pleasure in writing *Oscar Wilde on Trial*, I learned so much from working on it. I began researching the project in the early 2010s, knowing only the bare outlines of the Wilde trials. Assuredly, I understood that John Sholto Douglas, the 9th Marquess of Queensberry, left at one of Wilde's clubs a semi-literate visiting-card that accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite." (Queensberry's misspelling of 'sodomite' is notorious.) And I also knew that Wilde's subsequent libel case against Queensberry foundered once the Marquess's defence counsel Edward Carson made it plain that his client's accuser had indeed enjoyed sexual intimacies with young men. (Wilde's counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, withdrew the case, which resulted in £677 in legal expenses that pretty much bankrupted Wilde.) Still, I didn't understand that much about the Crown's rapid decision to prosecute Wilde for sexual conspiracies and misdemeanours on the basis of the inculcating evidence that had been aired during the libel trial. I was unaware, too, of the technical reasons that the first Crown prosecution resulted in a hung jury, and I had little knowledge of the unfairness of the second Crown prosecution, which was spearheaded by the aggressive Sir Frank Lockwood, who wanted a conviction at any cost. I also had to find out about the procurer Alfred Somerset Waterhouse Taylor, a 33-year-old son of a cacao manufacturer who had squandered a large legacy. Taylor made money by providing Wilde with sexual contacts, and he likely had other well-off clients who benefited from his services. (Wilde, during the first criminal prosecution, was tried alongside Taylor. In the second trial, since the charges of conspiracy had been withdrawn, the two men were tried separately.)

So, I spurred myself into action by preparing a plenary talk on the trials, with a focus on "Oscar Wilde's Sexual Practices" – just to share what my research had so far taught me about the pleasures Wilde enjoyed with other men. It was my first foray into this area. The talk took place at a conference called *Taking Liberties*, which was held at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and I remain extremely grateful to the organisers for that opportunity. This was in 2012. An essay based on the conference presentation appeared in *Feminist Theory* in 2016.¹

As I started developing my talk for *Taking Liberties*, I consulted the three published records of the trials. The first, which appeared in 1906, was issued anonymously in

¹ See J. BRISTOW, "The Blackmailer and the Sodomite: Oscar Wilde on Trial", *Feminist Theory*, 17 (1), 2016, pp. 41-62.

Paris. Called *The Trial of Oscar Wilde*, it was brought out by Charles Carrington, who had originally run a clandestine erotica business in London. The volume claims to be based on a shorthand record, and, in all truth, it's a very messy edition, and it's never been taken very seriously. It is certainly from a shorthand record of some kind, and I would imagine the shorthand had been transcribed by people who were either not native speakers or writers who had a good command of English but didn't have much knowledge of London, because proper names, especially the names of streets, are spelled phonetically. Still, *The Trial of Oscar Wilde* contains some very intriguing features. One vital point that emerges from this document is that it shows that the word 'sodomy' was articulated during the criminal proceedings by the young male prostitutes who were what we call 'suborned witnesses', ones who were undoubtedly manipulated by the Crown prosecution. The 1906 volume, then, is significant because the countless newspaper reports tend not to refer to sodomy, since there was great reluctance, especially towards the end of the Victorian period, for newspaper editors to print such a sensitive word.

The second volume is *Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried* (1912) by Christopher Sclater Millard, a great Wilde scholar who completed the excellent *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (1914) under the pseudonym 'Stuart Mason'.² The 1912 book, which was issued anonymously, is far longer and much more dependable than its erratic 1906 predecessor. The study, which run to almost 500 pages, emerged from Millard's meticulous compilation of newspaper cuttings. This part of his newspaper clipping collection was bought at a major sale of Wilde-related materials at Dulau & Co., London, in 1928. These albums, which formed part of some seventeen scrapbooks that Millard maintained, were purchased by a Japanese collector, Hisao Homna, and they have recently become available in digitised form at Jissen University, Tokyo.³

Now, what is interesting about the 1912 volume is that it doesn't contain the word 'sodomy'. For this reason, Millard sanitises some of the proceedings. I think Millard wanted to make quite sure that there was nothing written down in the book that would make it liable to prosecution for obscenity. Millard had to exercise caution for other reasons as well. His study of the trials, it is worth remembering, was published not long before a terrible court case that was brought by Lord Alfred ('Bosie') Douglas, who had been intimate with Wilde since 1891 and who had suffered harassment from his father, John Sholto Douglas, for his involvement with Wilde. At the time that Millard's book volume appeared, Douglas's personal life had gone through a massive transformation. He was now a Catholic convert, a married man, a father, and a truly reactionary conservative. Even more to the point, he had renounced his homosexual past and (at least publicly) abominated his notorious association with Wilde, although his position changed in the 1920s through the time of his death in 1945.

² Millard's bibliographical research on Wilde's *oeuvre* was aided by another scholar, Walter Ledger.

³ Millard's albums of press clippings on the trials are held at Jissen University, Tokyo: https://www.jissen.ac.jp/library/info_collection/wilde/eng/linkto_archives_eng.html

Douglas began libel proceedings against the various parties that had been involved in issuing Arthur Ransome's *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1912). Although Ransome does not mention Douglas's name, he made a dangerous insinuation. Seven years before, Methuen had published a carefully edited volume containing extracts from the long 40,000-word letter that Wilde composed during his final months in HMP Reading. This letter, in its complete form, is addressed to Douglas, and many of Wilde's remarks about Douglas are scathing. (It took until 1962 before the complete text of the document appeared in Rupert Hart-Davis's monumental edition of Wilde's letters.) Called *De Profundis*, a title taken from Psalm 129 in the Vulgate and applied by the publisher, the slim volume included selected passages from the letter that focus mainly on Wilde's experiences in jail. The editor, who was Wilde's literary executor Robert Ross, took pains not to implicate Douglas anywhere in its pages. (At the time, there were serious tensions already developed between Douglas and Ross.) In many ways, the 1905 edition, which was very well received, marked the first decisive step towards restoring Wilde's literary reputation. Still, in 1912 Ransome boldly stated: "the Letter, a manuscript of 'eighty close-written pages on twenty folio sheets,' was not addressed to Mr Ross but to a man to whom Wilde felt that he owed some, at least, of the circumstances of his public disgrace."⁴ Douglas realised that the unnamed "man" was himself. So, the following year, Douglas was in court railing against Ross, Ransome, the publisher, and the Times Book Club for writing, publishing, and distributing the 1912 study. (He lost his case, which involved some very embarrassing scenes for him in court.) Understandably, in the circumstances Millard had to be careful not to say anything untoward about Douglas in *Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried*. Consequently, Millard's otherwise impressive book suffered from inevitable limitations.

In 1948, the historian, lawyer, and later MP H. Montgomery Hyde brought out his own edition of the court proceedings for a legal series in London. He went back to Millard's 1912 volume and sifted the contents. I don't think Hyde carried out much new work. There was a copyright dispute that took place in the mid-1960s over who owned the transcripts of the trials, and the judge could see that Hyde had essentially re-worked Millard's comprehensive volume. In the early 1960s, Hyde produced for Penguin a freshly edited version of the 1948 book that became the standard study. (The American company Dover issued this new edition as *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* in the United States.) Once again, this revised edition doesn't mention sodomy. It basically does what the Millard book had done, but it contains useful editorial commentary on the law under which Wilde was tried. (This was the eleventh section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which put a wholesale ban on sexual acts between men. The 1885 law, which for the first time proscribed the unspecified crime of 'gross indecency', sent thousands of men to jail. This punishing legislation, which carried a maximum two-year jail term, was partly decriminalised in 1967.) Hyde's attention to Wilde's trials garnered increasing interest in the 1950s because of the political initiatives

⁴ A. RANSOME, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*, London, Martin Secker, 1912, p. 157. Ransome relied on Ross for much of his information.

to bring about homosexual law reform. The detailed Wolfenden Report, which was commissioned by the government and came out in 1957, was central to this movement. Two films about the Wilde trials, both of which premiered in 1960 (the one directed by Ken Hughes, the other by Gregory Ratoff), represented the growing popular interest in the persecution of queer men. Hyde, I should add, was very active in the reform campaign. He lost his seat as an Ulster Unionist MP because of his support for lifting the ban on consensual intimacy between men and also for abolishing the death penalty.

After consulting these three studies, I also started reading many of the recently available digitised newspaper reports that had come available through the British Newspaper Archive. Immediately, I could see that information that one might imagine would have made its way into the three volumes from 1906, 1912, and 1948 didn't appear in them. So, it began to intrigue me, and eventually I decided that I needed to produce a new transcript of the trials based on the newspapers. I had to learn about newspaper history and the different editorial predilections of each section of the press, along with the distinctive ways in which they reported on controversial criminal cases in court. It soon became evident that there were other sources that were not digitised that I needed to investigate. I discovered a couple of newspaper clipping albums in UCLA's William Andrews Clark Library, which contain extensive cuttings from a source that is still not available in electronic form: *The Star*. This radical evening newspaper gained notice as the first to report explicitly on the so-called 'Jack the Ripper' murders in 1888. *The Star* exercised a great deal of latitude when it came to sexual controversies. It reported, for example, quite widely on the Cleveland Street Affair, in which police detectives uncovered a male brothel in London during 1889-1890. And when it focused on the Wilde trials, *The Star* reported not only in detail but also in a largely non-judgmental way. Furthermore, it ran an illuminating exchange of letters about the unfairness of the trial proceedings and the press's involvement in trying Wilde through journalism (that is, condemning Wilde before his trial had come to an end). It was surprising for me to discover that the poet Robert Buchanan, who had been responsible for the disreputable attack on the "Fleshly School of Poetry" in 1871 and who later excoriated the imperial author Rudyard Kipling as a 'hooligan' in the 1890s, defended Wilde's reputation in *The Star*.

The other newspaper that gained increasing significance in my research was *Reynolds's*, a weekly broadsheet that had its origins in the Chartist Movement. It was always left-of-centre. It wasn't progressive on all fronts, and its outlook changed from editor to editor. It went, for example, through an anti-Semitic phase. By the time Wilde stood in court, however, it took a broad-minded and sympathetic approach to his plight.

EB: I'd never heard about *Reynolds's Newspaper*. Could you say something more about it? What kind of position did it take on the Wilde trials?

JB: *Reynolds's Newspaper* was the print medium that was most critical of the very idea that the witnesses who were testifying against Wilde – several of whom were

blackmailers, extortionists, and sex workers – were protected by the police and that their evidence was tainted evidence. (This was a point that Wilde’s defence, Sir Edward Clarke, made emphatically in court.) *Reynolds’s* contains detailed and measured accounts of the Wilde trials, all the way through from the libel case that Wilde took out against the Marquess of Queensberry to the two criminal prosecutions on behalf of the Crown. Later, *Reynolds’s* had no hesitation in publishing an exposé about the widespread scandal of male prostitutes who engaged in blackmailing men in London. Moreover, after Wilde’s death in late 1900 *Reynolds’s* carried important notices about his modest temporary gravesite at Bagneux in Paris. In 1905, it is worth noting, *Reynolds’s* reminded readers of the thoughtful position it had taken on Wilde’s ordeal in court. At the start of a compassionate review of *De Profundis*, the newspaper observed: “*Reynolds’s Newspaper* was the only journal which had the courage and honesty to say a word for the brilliant and unhappy man Oscar Wilde, and the only newspaper to publish special information as to his career after leaving gaol. Other journals were too Christian-like to imitate Christ.”⁵

EB: Could you tell me how your interest in Wilde arose?

JB: I had an interest in Oscar Wilde before I joined UCLA in 1996. In the early 1990s, I completed an edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest* for Routledge. I’d also written an essay on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for a book that also came out more than thirty years ago, called *Sexual Sameness, Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing*, again published by Routledge. The problem for me writing about Wilde at that moment was that I’d never seen any Wilde archives. I didn’t really know the secondary literature in great detail, and although I think there are some commendable aspects to this earlier research of mine, it is the case that I’d produced a workaday student’s edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and a plausible discussion of *Dorian Gray* with little sense of its surrounding contexts. In 1995, when I was interviewed for the position in Victorian literature at UCLA, it was made clear to me that the search committee was interested in hiring a colleague who would be motivated to work with the Oscar Wilde collections at the Clark Library. I knew a little bit about the Clark Library from reading about other scholars who had visited it, but I didn’t know really anything about the scope of the collection. At the time, I was a visiting scholar at Stanford University for a year, and so I made a couple of visits to UCLA during 1995-1996 when I learned that UCLA was interested in appointing me. On one of these visits, I went to the Clark, and I was overwhelmed. I had no idea that the core collection relating to Oscar Wilde contains over 5000 items. And those 5000 items, mostly letters and manuscripts, are augmented by hundreds of items of ephemera, from theatre posters and programmes to advertisements for Wilde’s American tour, receipts for groceries and hotel bills, and so on. Wilde tended to keep everything that had ever passed through his hands, including such surprising documents as a uranalysis. They were always stored. I wouldn’t call him a hoarder, but he kept everything meticulously. He

⁵ [ANON.], “Oscar Wilde’s Prison Cry”, *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 25 February 1905, p. 2.

retained his manuscripts. He saved pretty much all his correspondence, and he seems to have done so in a systematic way. He also maintained his notebooks, including ones from his university days.

As time went by, I began to understand more about Wilde's working methods. Just over twenty years ago, I was invited to edit the variorum edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for Oxford University Press. It was my first venture into serious textual editing, and through that project I learned more about Wilde than I ever imagined. I was guided through the editorial process by Ian Small, who is very experienced in the field. In the early 2000s, I had some sabbatical leave and worked around the clock every day. It took me about 15-16 months to mark up the variants on the 1890 and 1891 texts as well as complete the introduction and the annotation. I drew the manuscript to a conclusion at the end of 2003, and the volume came out in early 2005. So, these activities have shaped my formation as an Oscar Wilde scholar. Every other major project that that I've undertaken since has enhanced my knowledge of his life and work.

EB: Is there any other project on Wilde you are going to complete – either publications or research – in your near future?

JB: There are a couple of editorial projects. One is finishing up with Rebecca N. Mitchell and Yvonne Ivory what will likely come to two volumes of Wilde's unpublished and uncollected writings, which we might finish in summer 2024. I've edited Wilde's lectures in North America and Great Britain, which were brought together by Millard for the *Collected Works* edition in 1908, although an earlier scholar, Richard Butler Glaenzer, had done significant editing in relation to some of these presentations. I'm also coming towards the end of editing Wilde's somewhat fragmented draft of a review-essay that is usually known as '*The Women of Homer*', which derives from Wilde's engagement with a chapter in John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets: Second Series* (1876). The other project that I've been developing since summer 2022 is an edition of Wilde's hefty "Philosophy" notebook, in which he prepared notes for his final examinations in Literæ Humaniories at Oxford in 1878. This manuscript contains 143 folios, all of which contain Wilde's reflections on such works as Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, along with a wealth of Victorian sources, including John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic* and Edward Caird's *Critical Account of the Philosophy of Kant*. This is proving to be a very illuminating editorial exercise, which I'm conducting with Sophie Rickless, a doctoral student at UCLA. The notebook reveals Wilde's astounding breadth of reading in ancient literature and philosophy as well as modern social thought.

EB: Now I have quite a broad question. You seem to me to have espoused several approaches as a Wilde critic. Is there any perspective which has suited you the most and about which you think you've been more successful, more impactful, as a scholar?

JB: My graduate education at the University of Southampton, where I was taught by Isobel Armstrong, was very much based on critical theory. We were reading at the time a great deal of Lacan, a great deal in translation – which is in itself quite problematic – Blanchot, Derrida, Foucault, etc. These were all key figures for us when we were engaging with poststructuralism, and then we were also learning about structuralism and its origins in figures such as Saussure. When I look on my intellectual trajectory, it is very clear that by the later 1990s my research became much more historical. I always feel I had a very good intellectual grounding in theoretical approaches as a graduate student, although it didn't really train me much in historical research methods. Since graduating from my Ph.D., I've had a developing interest in social history. And I'm interested in social history not as historical summary, but in the ways in which it assists us in conceptualising what is going on within the culture more largely when we start studying such phenomena as court trials. In other words, I'm interested in the conceptual work that we can do when we're looking at proceedings as complicated as those that Wilde endured.

EB: Do you think this interest in social history is somehow connected to your Foucauldian studies?

JB: Foucault was largely a historian of the social sciences and in some ways the sciences: all his work is, especially the *Lectures at the Collège de France*, which are truly imposing. He was so very well trained himself in thinking about historical processes, especially in relation to what he named as “discourses”. And he was very interested in discursive formations that became hegemonic. I still find much of his work a huge resource, though less so his interventions into debates about sexuality, although they provide a theoretical outline about the ways in which sexual discourses can define behaviours and identities. But it's the earlier scholarship, such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*, that remains incredibly influential and offers enduring value. So, that part of Foucault's great scholarship stays with me, and, as we know, his amazing corpus has been so influential.

Recently, Foucault has been immensely helpful for me when trying to understand the concept of blackmail. At the moment, I'm thinking about developing a book on queer blackmail. It will take a while to see if it's viable. In Wilde's era, blackmail was a fairly new-fangled word, since it had previously been used to describe payments that were given to robber barons in Scotland. In the 1880s, blackmail becomes a commonly used term for characterising threats that are made to individuals, usually on the basis of some kind of political scandal largely involving the exposure of financial corruption or sexual indiscretions. Why, we might ask, did many men who were blackmailed for homosexual activity feel very nervous about going to the law? Because the law would likely entail further exposure, which might in turn lead to criminal prosecutions – not just for ‘gross indecency’ (the misdemeanour under the 1885 law) but also (under the provisions of an 1861 law) sodomy, a felony that carried a sentence of up to ten years in jail.

So, as I've said, I'm considering developing a study of queer blackmail, one that broadens out from *Oscar Wilde on Trial*. The study would also enlarge upon the findings of Angus McLaren's fine book, *Sexual Blackmail*, which came out in 2002. Most likely, the project would begin in the mid-18th century and explore the topic all the way through the 1960s. The partial decriminalisation of the 1885 law, under which Wilde was tried, took place through the Sexual Offences Act 1967. Certainly, the 1885 law remained on the statute books until the Sexual Offences Act 2003 but it was removed from the civilian law courts through the 1967 legislation. And that removal was significant because it largely, though not exclusively, brought an end to homosexual blackmail outside the military. (The ban on queer people in the armed forces was at long last lifted in January 2000.)

EB: *Oscar Wilde on Trial* also contains extremely accurate, informative, and innovative perspectives on Wilde's life. I'd like to hear your opinions on the most recent biographical criticism about the author.

JB: Yes, I'm particularly grateful for the recent scholarship of Nicholas Frankel and Matthew Sturgis, both of whom have made extraordinary contributions to our knowledge of Wilde's personal and professional career. In *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (2017), which looks at Wilde's post-prison life in France and Italy, Frankel tackles very impressively such matters as Wilde's regrettable involvement in the Dreyfus affair, his lively sexual escapades in Paris, his painful separation from Douglas in Naples, and the fact that Douglas was perhaps not quite the terrible person certain commentators have made him out to be. As Ransome's 1912 study shows, we've long had a received version of Bosie as the one who manipulated Wilde into taking a needless libel action against Queensberry. Subsequent commentators, such as the unreliable Frank Harris, who produced a sensational biography of Wilde in 1916, assumed that Douglas ignored Wilde during the prison sentence. Certainly, we understand that Bosie was a very headstrong person and that he was also a spendthrift (he squandered a huge inheritance from his father within less than two years), but in later years he wasn't exactly mean towards Wilde, who was equally poor at budgeting. In fact, when Douglas had the funds available, he gave Wilde plenty of money during the post-prison years, and he also made sure that Wilde had cash when the author was in decline at the shabby Hôtel d'Alsace on the rue des Beaux-arts in Paris. (In his 1929 *Autobiography*, in which Douglas makes amends for his previous hostility towards Wilde's memory, he includes an appendix that reproduces from his pocket-book the payments he made to his former lover from February to November 1900. The total is a substantial £332, which amounts to around 40,000 Euros in today's money.)⁶ Douglas, too, covered many of the expenses for Wilde's admittedly quite ordinary funeral in early December 1900. For Wilde, of course, no amount of generosity could prevent him from running up debts. By the time of his death, he owed the

⁶ See A. DOUGLAS, *The Autobiography of Lord Alfred Douglas*, second edition, London, Martin Secker, 1931, p. 323. Douglas's *Autobiography* first came out in 1929.

forbearing proprietor of the Hôtel d'Alsace, where he had been living for months, the large sum of £112.

By comparison, Matthew Sturgis's magnificent biography, which came out first as *Oscar: A Life* (2019) in Britain and was revised (and reset) as *Oscar Wilde: A Life* (2022) in the United States, is a comprehensive, finely detailed, and thoughtful account. It's now the standard biography and it's largely reliable. Moreover, it is very much a reference work. Sturgis's monumental study doesn't propose a thesis of any kind. Nor should it, in my view. And it's naturally more dependable than Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* (1987) because, as we have known for years, Ellmann's study contains numerous smaller and some larger mistakes from beginning to end. I'm particularly grateful to have Sturgis's biography available on Kindle through Amazon because it's a fully searchable text. I think it will be more than half a century before anybody will choose to surpass it.

EB: Going back to *Oscar Wilde on Trial*, the book offers massive amounts of sources, mainly from the 1890s, to help contextualise the Wilde trials. Would you like to say something more on your method of critical investigation?

JB: One of the aspects of my research for *Oscar Wilde on Trial* involved studying journalism closely and subjecting it to quite an exacting analysis. The searchable British Newspaper Archive led me to many unexpected discoveries. One controversy that I didn't know about until I started looking at the news press from this period was the importance of *Gatty v. Farquharson*, which I mention in the first chapter of *Oscar Wilde on Trial*. In my original, over-length book manuscript, I had a long section on this particular libel trial brought by a Liberal candidate during a parliamentary election in West Dorset. The Tory incumbent Henry Farquharson publicised a disreputable accusation against Charles Gatty, who was a well-connected member of the establishment. Gatty, who won his case, claimed that his opponent had slandered, if not libelled, him for some kind of homosexual misdemeanour when he was a schoolboy. I had no idea that there was a published record of the trial. Much to my amazement, there happened to be a copy in the School of Law Library at UCLA. And so, I started looking closely at the way the trial proceeded, how the threats of sexual exposure were handled, and how Farquharson's language echoed the kind of threats associated with homosexual blackmail. It was also interesting to see that Gatty won his case. (Lockwood acted as Gatty's prosecution, while Clarke defended Farquharson.) Moreover, there was also the case of a Conservative politician Edward de Cobain, who was from Northern Ireland. De Cobain's was an equally well-publicised trial, which resulted in a prison sentence. The more work I did on blackmail cases and on men who had resisted allegations of homosexual criminality in the 1880s and 1890s, the more surprised I was to discover how much of this material came into the public realm, even if the word 'sodomy' wasn't used much in the reports, if at all. There were certainly accusations of 'grossly indecent behaviour', although the precise nature of such indecencies was seldom made explicit. Interestingly, some men who sought to

defend themselves against threatening letters and sexual exposure would go into court, and on occasion they won their cases.

EB: I'm quite surprised that men went to court to defend themselves from such accusations. Thinking about the lives of authors we, as literary scholars, know best, thinking about Walter Pater, for example, who was accused and probably blackmailed for a homosexual relationship he entertained as an Oxford don, but did his best to keep the thing concealed, you wouldn't normally think that men could find the courage to defend themselves in court.

JB: Let's think about Pater's case first. For Pater in the early 1870s, the prospect of his intimacy with a student threatened his university career, and it was in the interest of everyone involved, including the Regius Professor of Greek and Master of Balliol College, Oxford, Benjamin Jowett, to handle the matter with due discretion. Exactly what happened to Pater has involved considerable speculation among modern scholars. Billie Andrew Inman, in a deeply researched essay, has explored what may well have occurred once a handful of Pater's contemporaries at Oxford assumed that he had been engaging in intimate correspondence with William Money Hardinge, an undergraduate at Balliol who later maintained a friendship with Pater.⁷ From what we can tell, Pater's sisters, with whom he maintained a home in North Oxford, did what they could to prevent a scandal from breaking. Had Pater suffered any exposure, his position as a tutor at Brasenose College would have been in tatters, and it would also have caused embarrassment to both the college in particular and the university more broadly.

Let's consider the larger historical scope of homosexual blackmail. I've been learning about the various Threatening Letters Acts, which go back to 1757. There's a crucial one in 1825, which Charles Upchurch has discussed in great detail.⁸ And then there are the Libel Act 1843 and the Larceny Act 1861. Importantly, the 1861 act says that it is a felony to accuse or threaten to accuse either a person to whom such accusations shall be made, or any other person of any other crimes, with the view or attempt to extort or gain from the person. The law, as I mentioned before, is not using the word "blackmail" yet. Instead, the term is extortion. Blackmail does not appear in English law until the Theft Act 1968.

Extortion was a very serious crime. Still, four months before he passed judgement on Wilde's case, Justice Alfred Wills, who abominated homosexuality, felt obliged to consider whether attempted blackmail was worse than the allegation of committing acts of 'gross indecency'. In early 1895, Wills reluctantly imposed a tough sentence on

⁷ See B.A. INMAN, "Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William M. Hardinge", in L. BRAKE and I. SMALL (eds), *Pater in the 1990s*, Greensboro, NC, ELT Press, 1989, pp. 1-20.

⁸ See C. UPCHURCH, *Before Wilde: Sex between Men in Britain's Age of Reform*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2009, pp. 95-100. Upchurch develops his discussion of the 1825 act in "Beyond the Law": *The Politics of Ending the Death Penalty for Sodomy in Britain*, Philadelphia, Temple U.P., 2021, pp. 106-15.

20-year-old Harry Turner for three attempts at blackmailing his former employer, a man called Walter Hughes Silver, who was a member of a well-known firm of London merchants. Now, what is so fascinating about this case is that Wills believed that Silver had likely been committing one of the worst-known offences to the law, and he assumed that, instead of going into court and suffering exposure, perhaps a man like Silver should have committed suicide. Suicide, in Wills's view, afforded the only possible escape for queer men from the persecution of extortion. I'd like to go to the Metropolitan Police records, if they are available, and dig deeper into the background of this astounding case. The other intriguing case that I discovered was a police raid on a gay party that took place in Fitzroy Square in August 1894, which included several people with whom Wilde had connections. Twenty-five men were arrested. I went through the whole list, and I found that several of them had histories of blackmailing other men. My discussion appears in an online Australian journal.⁹

EB: They made a living of blackmail, basically.

JB: Yes, they made a living through blackmail. The other document I consulted at the Clark was very exciting. It was prepared for publication, but it was never published because friends of Wilde's discouraged the writer, J.H. Wilson, from circulating what was a contentious attack on the police and the judiciary. Wilson, a liberal-minded man from Newcastle upon Tyne, was appalled by the injustice Wilde had suffered. In the summer of 1895, he conducted research in London to find out exactly what these blackmailers had been up to and how they had been suborned, and also how they had been shielded from incriminating themselves by the prosecution. In his pamphlet, *Some Gentle Criticisms on English Justice*, Wilson talks about the ways in which the legal setup was such that the blackmailers largely had protection from the authorities.

EB: You say that the piece was never published in its time. So, when was it published?

JB: The copy of *Some Gentle Criticisms* at the Clark Library, in a sense, is a preprint. John Stokes was the first to write about it in the 1990s, after he had discovered it in the Clark Library.¹⁰ I have never seen a copy of it anywhere else. I don't think there's a copy in the Eccles Collection, which is the second largest Wilde archive, in the British Library. More Adey, who did much to safeguard Wilde's legal affairs during the two-year prison term, wrote to Wilson on several occasions and stated that the publication of *Some Gentle Criticisms* would create even more problems for Wilde at the early stage of the jail sentence. During his incarceration, Wilde himself was not happy with any friends or supporters making protests on his behalf in the press. This

⁹ See J. BRISTOW, "Homosexual Blackmail in the 1890s: The Fitzroy Street Raid, the Oscar Wilde Trials, and the Case of Cotsford Dick", *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 22 (1), 2018, pp. 1-25, <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/AJVS>

¹⁰ See J. STOKES, "Some Gentle Criticisms of British Justice", in ID., *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations*, Cambridge, CUP, 1996, pp. 39-64.

was one of the reasons that Wilde didn't want Bosie approaching English and French journals with statements that would draw further amounts of unwelcome publicity. Meanwhile, Douglas had been warned not to visit Wilde in prison – a precaution that Wilde mistook for negligence, which in turn resulted in much of the bitterness he expresses towards Bosie in *De Profundis*.

EB: I'm very much looking forward to reading your work on sexual blackmail. It will open new paths for Wilde studies. Now I have one last question. What are your ideas on Wilde and Italian culture? Most critical attention has been paid to Wilde and French culture, less on Wilde and Italian culture, despite Wilde's deep love for the country and its literature. Having your ideas on the topic would be important.

JB: I think there's more to be done. We've got a newish book which I really like. It's the study by Renato Miracco (*Oscar Wilde. Il sogno italiano*, 2020). He knows about the Italian material in a way that most other readers do not. Now there's much research to be carried out on Wilde, Naples, and Sicily in late 1897 as well as the period that Wilde spent in these places as well as Rome six months before he died. (It was in spring 1900 that Wilde used a Kodak camera to take some memorable photographs in Rome, including several of himself.) The whole field of Wilde's time in Italy remains under-investigated. One of the scholarly tasks that we also need to complete is connect certain elements about Wilde's life in the late 1890s and the various queer communities that had developed in Italy. One such location is Wilhelm von Gloeden's home in Taormina, where he took the famous photographs of young male nudes. (Wilde likely visited von Gloeden in December 1897.) Another is Capri. In this period, Capri brought together a group of bohemian artists and writers as well as queer socialites. Kristin Mahoney has recently published remarkable material on this unique social circle, which largely developed around Compton Mackenzie and Faith Mackenzie.¹¹ Then we need to consider Posillipo, a place that is supposed to be, as far as I know, still a very chic, luxurious suburb of Naples, correct?

EB: It is, it is. Very upper class.

JB: And very beautiful. So, we have Lord Rosebery, the former Liberal Prime Minister, residing in his villa at Posillipo at the time when Wilde and Douglas decided to settle there in autumn 1897. There had been sensitivities between Rosebery and the Douglas family. Several years before, the truculent Queensberry had threatened Rosebery during a holiday that the politician was taking at Bad Homburg. The conflict focused on the Marquess's anger that the Liberal government had preferred his oldest son Francis for a seat in the House of Lords over and above himself. Rosebery employed Francis, known also as Viscount Drumlanrig, as a private secretary, and also, in 1893, made him a Lord-in-Waiting. In October 1894, during a hunting party,

¹¹ See K. MAHONEY, "An Extraordinary Marriage: The Mackenzies and the Queer Cosmopolitanism of Capri", in EAD., *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family*, Cambridge, CUP, 2022, pp. 95-125.

the 27-year-old Francis most probably committed suicide shortly before he was to be married. There's always been speculation, as I point out in the book, about Francis's death from a fatal gunshot wound to his mouth. It has been widely touted that Francis feared homosexual exposure. (The evidence is far from conclusive.) There has always been rumour-mongering, too, about Lord Rosebery's sexuality. The homophobic Queensberry counted Rosebery among the 'Snob Queers'. Nonetheless, one matter is for sure: when Lord Rosebery discovered that Douglas and Wilde were at the Villa Giudice, he was nervous about it. Now, it's no accident that Wilde and Douglas chose Posillipo, they went there for a reason, and I don't think Miracco explains that.

The other issue that we really need to know about is the role that the magnificent Grand Café Gambrinus played in queer culture in the 1890s. Now the Gambrinus is glorious; it is like a palace. Incredible vaulted ceilings, beautifully decorated. It must be regarded as one of the finest cafés in southern Italy, if not the greatest. It must have been a place where many artists came together, and I would imagine quite a lot of queer people were gathering around that. I don't think we know very much about the sociability of it all. The Gambrinus appears to be comparable in terms of its cultural significance to the Café Royal on Regent's Street in London. There is one further matter about Wilde and Italy, on which I'd be grateful to know your thoughts. Do we have anything on the Italian commentaries about Wilde's trials, imprisonment, and post-prison life in the newspapers? Because, you know, the Italian news press was very developed.

EB: There is indeed something. There's an article by Matilde Serao, an Italian journalist who wrote for *Il mattino*, the main Neapolitan daily. She was probably the first woman journalist in Italy. She was very critical, even very harshly so, of Wilde and his behaviour with young men. Serao thought it was immoral. This may be unexpected, because she is famous for being quite a modern, advanced woman. Yes, there is something, but I'm sure something more can be found.

JB: Interesting. I'd love to see that. The expatriate English writer Norman Douglas, who moved to Posillipo in 1897, mentions Serao's name, and he recalls that she had confused him at the time with Alfred Douglas.¹²

The other important material on Wilde and Italian culture comes through Rennell Rodd, a very close friend of Wilde's from his Oxford days. Rodd was fluent in Italian, and Wilde obviously took a sexual interest in him. In 1877, he dedicated 4 lines of Italian poetry to his friend, which Rodd inscribed inside his collection *Songs of the South* (1881): "Al tuo martirio cupida e feroce / Questa turba cui parli accorrerà; / Ti verranno a veder sulla tua croce / Tutti, e nessuno ti compiangerà" ("At your martyrdom, the greedy and cruel crowd whom you have been addressing will assemble;

¹² See N. DOUGLAS, *Looking Back: An Autobiographical Excursion*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1931, pp. 376-77.

all of them will then will come to see you on your cross, and none will have pity for you").¹³ Gideon Nesbit has discovered, Rodd takes these lines from *Postuma* (1877) by Olindo Guerrini.¹⁴ Guerrini also had a strong interest in Vera Zasulich, the Russian political activist whose career forms the loose basis for Wilde's early play *Vera* (1880). (Sadly, like several of Wilde's friendships, the one with Rodd resulted in a breakup. Rodd cut off communications with Wilde in 1882. They parted ways over Wilde's effusive comments about Rodd's poetry in an essay titled "L'Envoi", which Wilde furnished for an American edition of Rodd's poetry titled *Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf* (1882). I sense that Rodd feared that Wilde was suggesting that they were an intimate couple. He went on to be a career diplomat, and his family became noted members of English high society.)

There are some further connections. When Wilde was in jail, he was reading Dante obsessively, in the original. I learned more about that because I went to the National Archives at Kew for about four days in 2017. And it was absolutely extraordinary discovering this material about Wilde's prison reading. I was able to compare the official prison records with the related Robert Ross materials held at the Clark, which also focus on Wilde's incarceration.

EB: Let me close by thanking you for sharing such a range of insights into Wilde's career and his legacy.

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¹³ The lines in Italian appear in Rodd's presentation copy of *Songs in the South*, which is held at the British Library: General Reference Collection 11653.c.34. The copy was sold for £11 at Sotheby's on 27 July 1911 (STUART MASON [CHRISTOPHER SCLATER MILLARD], *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde*, London, T. Werner Laurie, 1914, p. 185).

¹⁴ See G. NISBET, *Greek Epigram in Reception: J.A. Symonds, Oscar Wilde, and the Invention of Desire, 1805-1929*, Oxford, OUP, 2013, p. 269; [OLINDO GUERRINI], *Postuma: Canzoniere di Lorenzo Stecchetti (Mercurio) edito a cura degli amici*, Bologna: Presso Nicola Zanichelli, 1877, p. 133. Guerrini's poem contains allusions to Dante's *Purgatorio*, Giacomo Leopardi's *Bruto Minore* (1824), and Ugo Foscolo's *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1798). My thanks to Rita Severi for this information.

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WEERAPPULIGE NIPUNI DISSANAYAKE*

An Interview with Sanjena Sathian

Sanjena Anshu Sathian is an Indian American writer born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia (USA), by parents from South India. Since ever passionate about writing, the author entered Yale University after high school, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 2013. After receiving the valuable “Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans” – specifically for immigrants and their children – which allowed her to study at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she graduated in Creative Writing with a Master of Fine Arts degree (2019). She first worked as a journalist in San Francisco and as a reporter in Mumbai. Her works include articles and novels focusing on social and cultural identity issues related to immigration.

Sathian is one of the youngest and most respected Indian American writers and journalists on the literary scene. Beyond her artistic career, she teaches at Emory University in Atlanta. Her debut novel *Gold Diggers* (New York, Penguin Press, 2021) is an engaging story built around the social pressures on an immigrant family, gold thefts and alchemy in pure Indian tradition.

My closeness to that tradition, combined with the experience and curiosity of my lecturer Simona Beccone, led us to choose this novel as the object of research and focus of my thesis.¹ I started from evaluating the possibility of including *Gold Diggers* among the literary texts that activate the alchemical code. In the course of a deeper analysis and interpretation of this work from an alchemical perspective, many compelling social issues emerged as well. In 2023, holding a one-to-one interview with Sanjena Sathian offered me a precious opportunity to better assess what I had analysed and discovered during my research.

WND: To open our interview, I would start with a personal question: beyond the word ‘writer’, how would you define what you do in life?

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¹ See W.N. DISSANAYAKE, *The Alchemical Code in Gold Diggers by Sanjena Sathian: Chrysopoeia and California Gold Rush*, BA Thesis, Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics, University of Pisa (Supervisor: Professor Simona Beccone; Date of discussion: 16 February 2023).

SS: So, writing novels is my main work, and I also do some screenwriting. I teach. Teaching is fundamental to me. I teach at Emory University, which is here in Atlanta, Georgia. Yes, so these are the things that I professionally do.

WND: Was there a particular event or literary work that led you to write novels?

SS: I'm sure you're similar, but if you grew up reading, you love many books. I grew up reading Enid Blyton's novels, Salman Rushdie and Anita Roy. The writer I think spoke to me the most in Graduate School is Hanif Kureishi, who wrote a story called *The Buddha of Suburbia* – and Zadie Smith, who is also crucial to me. I wrote my thesis about Zadie Smith when I was in college.

WND: How have you experienced your relationship with American society as a second-generation immigrant?

SS: I mean, it's so complicated, as you know. I grew up feeling like this was the only place I would ever feel at home. This is the place of my nationality, my passport, all those things. But I also grew up in the American South in a very conservative environment in the years after 9/11. And so, during that time, it was not very easy to have brown skin in America. No one knew whether you were Muslim or weren't; there was horrible Islamophobia, there was awful discrimination, and you could just feel that you sort of weren't welcome. In the days after 9/11, I was 10 when it happened. My parents were much more afraid than I thought I had realised then. Someone came to my dad and said, "Do you need help staying in the country?" and he said, "We're citizens, you know?". And they said, "You need to be careful, like something bad is going to happen to people who look like you". It's easy to forget that, I think. I don't know how old you are, but many people have forgotten that era: when there was a war, and America was just invading. But that's always how it goes, right? We often know the least about the generation just a few years older than us. But that era of American politics shaped the American politics we live through now, right? You don't get Trump without Bush. And I think Trump was so bad that people have forgotten that Bush was also like a war criminal. And so, I was growing up in that era of America where I knew that America was my home, but I also felt a little bit like an outsider. And I think things have changed, in part because the number of Indians who've immigrated to the US has gone up and up and up over time. We're a relatively wealthy immigrant group here. Still, it's a strange diaspora to be a part of because you both have a lot of privilege because people are coming here on tech visas, they're coming to be doctors, they're coming to get to university, so you have all of this social and cultural and often economic privilege. However, then there are other ways where you're still an outsider. So that's the diaspora I grew up in.

WND: What led you towards conceiving this novel?

SS: I have been working on trying to write a novel about the Atlanta suburbs where I grew up for probably 12 years. I started working on it when I was younger than you

and put it aside a couple of different ways; the writing was bad and uninteresting. And then, when I went to Graduate School, I got a Master's in Fine Arts, which I think is a particularly American way to study. To become a writer, you're paid to work on your fiction or poetry for two years. So, when I went to get my graduate degree, I suddenly had nothing to do but write. I was being paid to write fiction, which is very rare. And during that time, I returned to that material, and my taste changed a lot. So, I had gone from reading very serious writing for several years to wanting to write a little more playful stuff. So, I was reading a lot of people who do modern magic realism, like the American writer George Saunders and Miranda July; I love Haruki Murakami, the Japanese novelist. There's a playfulness that I got from all of their work that changed the way I was writing, changed the way I was thinking. And so, I started writing a project about immigrants who steal and drink gold, and I didn't think I was writing anything about my childhood growing up; I thought I was writing just this fun, strange story about people stealing and drinking gold. And then, at some point, I realised I needed to decide where the story is set, like where they are doing all of this. Then I realised, well, I know the world I came up through very well, I know the Atlanta suburbs, so I set it there. So, it actually kind of worked backwards into writing about the world that I came from. It was a short story at first and a lighthearted idea. Wouldn't it be weird to steal and drink gold? And then, because the conceit of the gold was so interesting to me and I needed stuff around it to make it work, I ended up returning to the material about my childhood and then combining that with the second half of the book in California, where I spent my 20s. So, the combination of those two grew out of necessity. I just had an idea that I had to follow.

WND: What about the gold thefts? Are they real?

SS: Actually, when I was growing up here, there was a spate of gold thefts around the Atlanta suburbs. It happened in California and Texas, and New Jersey. Basically, anywhere where there were rich Indian people or upper-middle-class Indian people, there was gold to be stolen. And so, there was some organised crime where local gangs realised that those Indian people kept a lot of gold in their houses, stake out the house, watch, wait and see. Indians leave the country often, so people leave and go home to India every December around Christmas. And so, you have a month to break into someone's house and take some of their gold. So this happened when I was a kid. It didn't happen to my family, but I heard rumours about it, and my mom kept saying that she thought it was Indian people behind it. And I remember saying, "That's crazy; there's no way it's other Indian people". And she was like, "You mark my words, they know, and they have some connection to the community. It's happening from the inside because they know whose houses they are, where to look for the gold in the house, and when people will be out of the house". I found that interesting. And I thought it would be cool to imagine what kind of suburban Indian woman would become a gold thief and what kind of person that would be. And that's how I got Anjali.

WND: Of all the characters in *Gold Diggers*, which one do you feel closest to and share a common ground with?

SS: I probably look like I have the most in common with Anita because she is put together as a young Indian woman, and I originally started writing the book from her perspective. I wanted it to be the story of a woman whose mother was a gold thief and what it did to their relationship. But as I wrote her, I realised that she was not the right voice for me. The main problem is that she's defined by her ambition. She'll do anything to succeed, which means that she's not very much fun. She's very boring. She gets a little more interesting later, but I didn't want to spend hundreds of pages with her. The book became fun for me when I discovered Neil's voice. The idea was about this mother and a daughter, but then I couldn't tell the story when I was writing from the two of their perspectives. So, I took a step back and wondered who else would be in the picture. And I was like, maybe it's a neighbour, perhaps a guy who is in love with Anita and was fascinated by this family for some reason. And he has his own story to tell. As soon as I imagined the possibility of a third person looking in on their drama, that's when I got Neil. It became very clear who Neil was, what I was going to do with that voice, and I could separate parts of myself into Anita, parts of myself into Anjali, and the bulk of me into Neil. Neil and I are obviously very different in many ways, but I felt like I could write a 15-year-old boy and a 27-year-old graduate student in history who's doing a lot of drugs. I felt that I got just enough of myself in Neil and the fact that he was male, that he had qualities that were not like me, that he's more of a screw-up than I ever have been meant that there was space between him and me. So, I could give him a little bit of me and leave room. I think that's a productive place for any fiction writer, you choose a character and give them a little bit of you, but then you have to make up the rest because otherwise, I get stuck if one character is exactly me and everyone else is not me. I need to be able to say, "A little bit of me goes here; a little bit of me goes there".

WND: Did you plan to include alchemy and magic realism from the very beginning, or was it a later addition?

SS: It was a little bit of both. The gold theft came first, and then I realised that I didn't want my characters to have to turn that gold into cash. I didn't want to have to write about money laundering or foreign bank accounts or things that would be required if you are a gold thief and you use the gold for money. So, then I had to think, "what else do people use gold for?", and I took maybe a couple of weeks to think that over when I was working on other things just wondering, "OK, if I have these gold thieves, I don't want them to use it for money, what else could they use it for?", and at some point I decided "what if they drink it" and "what if it's ambition". I don't really know how I got there: I just decided and it just came. I think the reason it probably came to me is that in the Indian diaspora I grew up in, the most prized possession was ambition. What you wanted was to be the ambitious one, and you wanted to be the one who succeeded. And so, when you're thinking about what the most valuable

currency is, it's going to be ambition. The magic was my idea first and then I started doing more research because, when I'm writing magic especially, I like to read about myth, fable, and other traditions to see if I can get ideas. So, I was reading a lot about alchemy, and I realised that there is a record of people that tried to make gold for years and years. I think I knew what alchemy was, although it didn't click. I hadn't realised that I returned to this thing that humans are always trying to return to, which is gold is so beautiful and we want it for ourselves, in an unlimited supply. And I realised that I had created a magical device in my book that was very similar to what the history of alchemy was. So, then I started reading more and understood that I wanted the logic of the alchemy to infuse the book. The fact that there is a separate plot where Anjali is making her own attempts to brew gold, that was just a completely different plot that came up later when I was drafting, because I realised that she had her own desires, which were bigger than "I want to get into a good school" because life has passed her by and she hasn't had that opportunity. So, I wondered what she would want, and thought that her desire could be linked to this more ancient, universal desire that a lot of alchemists had, which is, "I feel that time is passing me by, I feel myself growing old, I worry that I will not be young and powerful and beautiful anymore". And that's so universal. So, I was really excited about the idea that I could show you the spectrum of desire: how desire manifests when you're a teenager, how it shows up as ambition, how it shows up as greed, and how it shows up as a desire to live forever.

WND: Since alchemy does not seem to play such an important role in American culture, did you have difficulty researching relevant documents, or did you rely on your family's cultural heritage?

SS: Yes, it was mostly reading. I think this happens a lot for children of immigrants. Our parents know things because they lived them. But I was not having everything passed down to me. If I had come to my mom and said, "What do you know about drinking gold?" she would have answered, "Yeah, someone, somewhere, must have done it" [*laughter*]. She has not spent her life obsessing over it. But if you live in India, Sri Lanka, or in the 'motherland', there is probably more and I had to just research it. When my grandmother read the book, she said, "This is not how Ayurvedic gold drinking goes. It goes like this!". I did not know that was real, but OK [*laughter*]. The family research helped when I spent a lot of time talking to my maternal uncle, who attended IIT Bombay. He helped with the research on that chapter, and his wife, my aunt, answered many questions about growing up in Maharashtra in that period because my family is from South India, so I did not know much about what it would have been like to grow up in Dadar. I had lived in Mumbai when I was in my 20s, but I didn't know what Dadar in the 1980s, that middle-class neighbourhood in the heart, was like. I did not know IIT Bombay. So, talking to my family was very cool for those sections, the 1980s India chapters.

WND: How long did you stay in India during your twenties?

SS: I lived there for two years between 2015 and 2017, and I was there again in 2019, and I got locked out during the pandemic [*laughter*]. But Bombay especially is an extraordinary place, it's so alive, with 21 million people. It's like New York and Los Angeles combined with a little of London. So, getting a relationship with India that wasn't just mediated through my parents was particularly important to me. They had their particular idea of what India meant, and, for them, it's a fairly conservative Brahman South Indian on my mom's side. There's something very exciting about going to where your parents are from or that you have some parent's connection to and being able to encounter it on your terms. So that's what it was for me. Living in Mumbai was my chance to experience India outside of its definitions.

WND: I think every reader has his/her own interpretation when reading a work. In the case of *Gold Diggers*, what is the message you want to convey to your readers?

SS: Not sure there is a message. I can tell you what I was dealing with when I wrote. I wanted to understand whether the ambition I had been raised with was the essential thing required to succeed in a new country, or whether it did damage. And the answer is: both. You have to have it, and also can be too much, and I also wanted to understand how much desire was greed. When does the desire to become yourself and articulate your identity step into greed? When does that cause damage? And so, I think there's less of a message and more of a set of questions that the book circles all the time. And it's funny because, now that the book has been out for a while, a lot of people, when they talk to me about it, want to know what my 'solution' is to the problem of ambition. Like, so are you still ambitious? Of course, I am [*laughter*]. Is it good? Sometimes, not always. I think it's really dangerous. I learned a lot about the idea of desire as I was writing it, which is that some of the things that I was raised to believe were good values. Fundamental American values are also the things that make America terrible. People tell you that the gold rush is this moment of American ambition where gold was discovered in California, which was exciting.

There was a huge boom in industry along with that quintessential American period of history where everyone was innovative and entrepreneurial. I was told that as a kid, and now in adulthood, and I ask myself "Is it always good to be innovative and entrepreneurial? Isn't a lot of damage in there?". The land grabs leading up to and around the gold rush caused many Indigenous peoples to be dispossessed of their lands. There was forced labour. Immigrants who came to seek their fortune were killed, lynched, raped, and attacked. These things that we call 'incredible American experiences' are also completely laced with violence. And so, the message I'm interested in is finding out how both of those things can be true.

WND: In the novel, there is an association between gold and ambition. Where did the idea of associating these concepts come from?

SS: I just decided it, and then I had to explain later [*laughter*]. So, it's not all very clearly mapped out. But it made sense when I worked it out later. Ambition is the

most prized currency in the corner of Indian America I come from, and gold is a gift you give to people; I'm sure it's similar in Sri Lankan communities. You give someone gold on an auspicious occasion, right? This I'm actually wearing is my baby gold, from when I was born; I still wear it frequently. Someone gives you this and says this is your financial security. It's like giving people a stock or a bond. It's financial security, but it also has that extra auspicious, sometimes religious component with people saying, "I am endowing this gold with all of my hopes for you and your success". And that happens. It happens when you're born, on important birthdays, when you get married, if you get married. So, all of these moments where we endow gold with that meaning, it just made it easy to say, "Well, of course, that's what the gold contains", because the magical device that I'm using, I'm literalising something that's already true. I'm just adding magic to something already true, like we all invest all these cultural and social meanings into gold.

WND: During my research, I noticed that the names of your characters have also a special meaning related to Indian culture, or to the culture of gold (e.g. Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity). Did you choose the names for their real meaning or according to a personal taste?

SS: I choose the first name that hits me and stick with it for the most part. In some cases, there are these accidents afterwards where you realise, oh, I named this person the Goddess of Prosperity. So maybe that was in the back of my mind. The funny thing about Hinduism is that there are so many gods and so many meanings that you'll accidentally hit on a symbol, no matter what you do. So, I tend not to start with a symbol, but I hit on a symbol accidentally. Hinduism goes on forever. There's such a huge pantheon of gods.

WND: Has the alchemical code been activated in a conventional or satirical sense?

SS: One of the funny things that happen when learning about alchemy, as you probably realised from your research, is related to poetry, the language of poetry, and literary criticism; a lot of it comes from alchemy. If you go through any Shakespeare play, you see metaphors of alchemy everywhere because it's one of the best symbolic, religious, and spiritual languages for discussing the concepts of change (internal, poetic, adolescent), desire, and all of that. Alchemy gives us a vocabulary for it. And so again, I didn't have to create it, it's just there. The connections are already linked, and one of the great things that come up when you discover something like that is synchronicity. You just start to see connections everywhere. And that's when you know that you have something worth writing. It is when you can move associatively and do not have to reverse or engineer it from the forward-back. About satire and things like that, yes. I think it depends on who reads the book. Some people read it as a straight satire. People have called it a comic novel or a satire, but I don't think it's just that. I think I use comedy as a component of realism. If you like Rushdie, you've probably heard him say this. He says that "magical realism isn't unreal to the immigrant". When

he's using magical realism, he does it because it's a way of better exploring what reality feels like for the person he's writing about. I think comedy is similar: it is a kind of realism. If you see the world as inherently absurd as I do, as Nikolaj Gogol did, or as Kafka did, then your job is to include the satirical element as part of your realism. So, it's not just a joke; it's not just a comedy. That's my hope, anyway.

WND: In your opinion, can alchemy still have any role in science and other fields of knowledge, or is it bound to remain a 'metaphysical' discipline?

SS: I don't know. I've heard from people who read the book that they believed that what I called 'magic' is real to them, so it's real to some people. I think of myself as a set of metaphors. I think it's a beautiful set of languages for trying to describe what it is to want more and to want to make more, but it feels poetic and metaphorical to me. But that's just me.

WND: What advice would you give to people living in a similar social context as your novel's characters?

SS: I think it can be really lonely to feel like you're an outsider, but it's also our best advantage. You don't belong anywhere completely, but because you don't, you can see the world in ways other people can't. This Zadie Smith essay was the heart of my thesis about her book, *Speaking in Tongues*, and it's a speech she gave on the eve of Obama's election. She's British but biracial and talking about Obama, a multiracial man. And she talks about how there's a kind of person who lives in what she calls a 'Dream City'. It's someone who comes from multiple places. They might have a multi-racial background, be immigrants or children of immigrants, or have some complexity that makes them feel like they don't fit anywhere in particular. And she says that is the most significant advantage because everyone who feels like they don't fit somewhere, in particular, belongs to this place called 'Dream City'. And the people who live in 'Dream City' can interpret the world more powerfully, jump into other people's world-views more easily, be empathetic and curious. I read that and thought, wow, that's me. Zadie Smith and I are very different demographically for families, but we have a thing in common: a postcolonial background and multiplicity. And so, I think feeling like an outsider sucks [*laughter*], but it also gives you the power to see what others can't. That was transformative for me. So maybe that's something good to think about.

WND: Do you think that *Gold Diggers* can be included among the texts that activated alchemy, or would you consider it differently?

SS: I think it's a lot of different kinds of novels in one, but I like that people can see it in different ways. Some people would call it an 'immigrant novel', or others say an 'Asian American novel', 'magical realism', 'satire'. I think if that grouping of the novels about alchemy is helpful to you to conceive of it, then sure, put it there!

NOTES & REVIEWS

ANDREA LUPI*

Lyndall Gordon, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse*, London, Virago Press, 2022, pp. 496, ISBN 9780349012100

Lyndall Gordon's most recent biographical work, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* (2022), inevitably calls to mind her previous, notorious attempts at sketching the often contradictory, intricate life of one of the twentieth century's most sphinx-like men of letters: T.S. Eliot. While it could be questioned whether something remains to be said about Eliot, as also witnessed by the recent significant body of biographical investigations into his private life and literary career, Gordon's book deviates from the norm by approaching the life writing of the author of *The Waste Land* through the heretofore untouched archive of correspondence between the poet and Emily Hale.¹ The addressee of a sequence of 1131 letters spanning between 1930 and 1957, at the peak of Eliot's fame, Hale first gravitated around 'young Tom' as a friend of his cousin, Eleanor Hinkley, and only later became a lover, a confidante, a friend, and occasionally a proof-reader – in other words, a 'Hidden Muse'. Freed from the fifty years of embargo imposed on them upon Eliot's pressing request, the materials concerning the relationship with Hale, previously stored at Princeton, were only made available in 2020 and are now accessible to readers thanks to Gordon's vivid portrayal of the decades regarding Eliot and Hale's intense, intimate bond.

In the "Preface" and the first chapter, Gordon clarifies that the content of her biographical exploration is of extraordinary and unprecedented relevance as the letters to Hale "grant a new lens" (p. 2) and "reveal how much he used his life – its particular scenes, the people he encountered and private feeling – to inject poems with jolts of authenticity" (p. 5). Indeed, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* performs a sort of surgical operation in bridging the gulf between the literary, intellectual life of a titanic figure and his secluded, private, and often burdened daily existence. Impracticable though it might seem at first glance – Eliot being a supporter of the notion that art is a "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" – Gordon constructs a narrative out of the liminal threads linking the private and public spheres while inviting us to answer the questions posed between the lines: "Does Eliot's relationship with Hale help affect our image of him? And if so, how might this shift our understanding of his life and works?"² Although, in the wake of Poststructural-

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¹ See R. CRAWFORD, *Young Eliot: From St Louis to The Waste Land*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015; R. CRAWFORD, *Eliot After The Waste Land*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022; M. HOLLIS, *The Waste Land: A Biography of a Poem*, London, Faber & Faber, 2022.

² T.S. ELIOT, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in ID., *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. F. KERMODE, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, p. 40.

ism, one might be tempted to challenge the outmoded practice of reading literature through the lenses of biographical events, this threat is promptly dispelled by the author's scrupulous remark that it was Eliot himself who confided that his correspondence with Hale would highlight aspects as yet left unexplored. In a letter written at the beginning of their weekly (or even more frequent) exchanges, Eliot indeed stressed his sense of moral affection and reverence towards her more than other people: "I feel, you see, a far greater responsibility towards you than towards anybody in the world, an unlimited responsibility".³ As Dante's journey through Hell and Purgatory is ultimately appeased by the saintly presence of his heavenly guide, Beatrice, Gordon brings to light the role of Hale as a guiding figure in the context of Eliot's life and works.

Amongst the various episodes featured by this comprehensive and well-documented biography, some inevitably stand out more than others. Their first memorable encounter, which occurred on 17 February 1913, is explored through the posthumous recollection of the event as well as the theatrical, literary dimension involved in it. In her meticulous reconstruction, Gordon reminds us how their first meeting at Harvard took place in the context of a stunt show put up by Eliot's cousin along the lines of Jane Austen's *Emma*. If the connection with the world of drama is no coincidence – Hale would later become an actress and a drama teacher – it is also explored here in relation to his invitation to see Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* at the Boston Opera House a few days later, an event "momentous enough to provide the earliest scenes for *The Waste Land*" (p. 33). Another episode worth mentioning regards their second encounter in London in 1923, during the most turbulent phase of Eliot's marriage with Vivienne Haigh-Wood, in the wake of which he sent Hale his collection of poems, *Ara Vos Prec*, as a gift. This detail does not go unnoticed with Gordon, who, echoing Arnaut Daniel's cry for pity, suggests that he began "to look towards beatitude as a counter to the 'hell' he experienced with Vivienne" (p. 111), a beatitude that would draw him near to Hale and religion.

The most vivid chapters of the book are, nonetheless, devoted to the central years of their relationship, i.e. 1930-1947, the period when the majority of the correspondence between the two was produced. Gordon heavily relies on the sustained epistolary exchanges of these decades for two main reasons: one is the presence of Hale in Eliot's creative process as well as the lurking of her figure in the poems and plays themselves, and the other rests on the possibility to capture the natural, human processes that led to transformations and divergences in Eliot's character and behaviour, with parallel reverberations on their relationship. As regards the latter, it is worth quoting Eliot's reprimand to Hale for not being a constant correspondent:

Writing to a correspondent who cannot respond tends to become merely a chronicle, or a record of the sort of thing one says to oneself, rather than to another: in either case to become rather self-centred. Besides, we both continue to develop and change; and I can register and examine the changes in myself as well as you much better in regular interchange of letters.⁴

³ T.S. ELIOT, "04/02/1931", in ID., *The Eliot-Hale Letters*, ed. J. HAFFENDEN, 2022, [tseliot.com, https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/116](https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/116) (last accessed on 2 March 2023).

⁴ T.S. ELIOT, "16/07/1933", in ID., *The Eliot-Hale Letters*, ed. J. HAFFENDEN, 2022, [tseliot.com, https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/1253](https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/1253) (last accessed on 2 March 2023).

Gordon brilliantly demonstrates such shifts in their relationship, moving from a growing intimacy and depression on Hale's side in 1936 to Eliot recoiling from the possibility of marrying her after Vivienne's death in 1947. Ranging from the letters to the biographical events, including occasional forays into commentaries and speculations, Gordon shows how their tie proved to be "exhausting as well as life-giving" (p. 231), until Hale's presence would fade into a shadow, in concomitance with their mutual decision to reduce the frequency of their exchanges. Juggling the contradictions and the ambiguities of a relationship kept alive by the echoes of affectionate messages, promises, and disclosures, Gordon's narrative is scattered with interrogatives and conjectures. This is an example of a writing praxis in which the hand of the biographer does not force meaning into the events, but compellingly proceeds to lay out gaps and silences for further investigation.

The second reason why one would find *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* a resourceful tool for Eliot Studies is the attention devoted by the author to unexplored patterns in Eliot's poems and plays. Indeed, the title owes its formulation to a line of "The Burial of the Dead" which supposedly draws on a recollection of the meeting with Hale. "To see Emily Hale and Vivienne Eliot in the ur-scenes of *The Waste Land*", as Gordon wishes to clarify, "is not to suggest there is no other way to approach the poem. It speaks to all of the un-lived life, the degradation of promiscuity and the need for spiritual renewal" (p. 92). The complexity of bringing together life and literature has always been a primary concern for Gordon, dating back to her 1988 claim that "[t]he crucial problem is to discern the bonds between life and work in a way that will do justice to the poetry and plays which are, after all, central acts in his life".⁵ For example, she looks at these bonds when mentioning Eliot's confession to Hale that "there is no need to explain 'Ash Wednesday' to you. No one else will understand it" (emphasis in original), positing Hale as the identity behind the "Lady of Silences".⁶

In this regard, it is also worth mentioning how Gordon organises the chapters dedicated to the gestation of "Burnt Norton", the first of the *Four Quartets* and a text sparked by the encounter with Hale at Chipping Campden in 1935, an event that would capture Eliot's poetic imagination and resonate in the poem. Even more interestingly, I would argue, are the sections in which the author delves into Hale's presence in the plays, as is the case with *The Family Reunion* (1939) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949). Going beyond the idea of a muse's passive role, Gordon exposes Hale's position as a "consultant", the "first to be shown an incomplete draft [of *The Family Reunion*]" (p. 242). Although only few of Hale's letters to Eliot have survived, scholars can benefit from the clues disseminated in the book and their potential to open future horizons, considering for instance how Hale's professional background as a drama practitioner might have informed Eliot's dramatic production.

A broader examination of *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* also allows readers to appreciate the presence of other female figures throughout his life, women

⁵ L. GORDON, *Eliot's New Life*, Oxford, OUP, 1989, p. 7.

⁶ T.S. ELIOT, "03/10/1930", in *Id.*, *The Eliot-Hale Letters*, ed. J. Haffenden, 2022, tseliot.com, <https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/12> (last accessed on 2 March 2023)..

who “came closer and saw him in ways men did not” (p. 1). Gordon’s biography sets out to compare different, competing models of womanhood, but only as far as such models emerge as crucial for a detailed portrait of Eliot’s private life. She of course recalls Vivienne Haigh-Wood’s troubled marriage with Eliot, her nervous breakdowns and later committal before her death, mentioning Eliot’s recognition of the ‘years of agony’ which, nonetheless, kept his poetic vein alive. Then, at the time when Hale’s presence was slowly vanishing, Mary Trevelyan came to the fore by virtue of her spiritual affiliation with Eliot, assuming a role of guardianship over her *protégé*. The author also mentions Valerie Fletcher, Eliot’s second wife, remembering her passionate efforts to honour the life and works of her husband. But many others are the women surrounding Eliot’s literary life whom Gordon touches upon, chapter by chapter – such as Virginia Woolf, Lady Ottoline Morrell, Mary Hutchinson, and Nancy Cunard – carrying out a nuanced examination of their relationship with the poet that shows how “[e]ach of the women in Eliot’s life brought out a facet of the enigma he presented” (p. 321).

Of additional value to this edition are the featured illustrations that visually inspire the reader’s imagination and help piece together the episodes recounted throughout the book. Alongside Hale’s numerous portraits, ranging from childhood to mature age, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse* includes little gems such as Hale’s portrait with Boerre, the elkhound Eliot gifted her in 1938 to keep her company, or a 1935 picture Eliot himself took at Stamford House, in Chipping Campden. Gently kneeling with her snow white dress, a cigarette in her left hand and a tin can full of flowers on her side, Emily has a beatific smile and, differently from other occasions, faces the photographer with an admiring gaze. There, in that instant, not far from the sacred garden where the roots of “Burnt Norton” would sprout, one may catch a sense of the roses that “[h]ad the look of flowers that are looked at”, Emily being the rose the poet gazes at, fixes in his memory, and makes immortal through his verse and the vest pocket Kodak he had bought years before.⁷ Along more academic lines, a substantial body of notes follows the epilogue and provides textual references to navigate the frequent citations Gordon offers to readers. The notes, as well as a remarkable and up-to-date bibliography and a comprehensive index, constitute an excellent tool for those who wish to further investigate the role of Eliot’s private connections in steering his public and literary output. What is nonetheless missing, and would have been much appreciated, is a chronological timeline of both Eliot and Hale’s lives and works to keep at hand so as to help experts and non-experts move freely across the chapters.

The opening of the Hale letters in 2020, and the publication of their digital versions under John Haffenden’s editorship on *tseliot.com*, represent the beginning of a unique phase for Eliot Studies. Many are the truths and the aspects still to be uncovered and delved into in Eliot’s life and works. Gordon had prophetically foreseen this in her *Eliot’s New Life*, where she claimed that “[w]ithout [Hale’s] letters to Eliot, and perhaps even with them, the whole truth can never be known, for there is no end

⁷ T.S. ELIOT, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, eds C. RICKS and J. McCUE, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, p. 180.

to the nuances of a relationship”.⁸ More than providing final answers, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse* proves thus a suitable starting point and valuable companion to interpret the entangled connections between Eliot and Hale, Eliot and other women, and a superb example of how archival research still holds immense prospects for Modernist literature.

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⁸ L. GORDON, *Eliot’s New Life*, Oxford, OUP, 1989, p. 147.

ANGEL ANTONIO DE OLIVEIRA AMATA*

Giulio Milone e Camilla Del Grazia (a cura di), *Immagini e paesaggi della Toscana nella tradizione letteraria e artistica europea*, Lucca, Edizioni La Vela, 2022, pp. 252, ISBN 9791280920140

In March 2020 the entire world came to a dramatic turning point due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our homes were no longer just a hearth, but they turned into a refuge against the calamity that was dangerously spreading all around us. In the months of confinement, people re-evaluated the importance of outer spaces and, after the shattering early phase of crisis, humanity slowly tried to renegotiate its relationship with the external world and its beauties.

With this premise, the volume *Immagini e paesaggi della Toscana nella tradizione letteraria e artistica europea* should be read as not only a collection of papers, but as a ‘love letter’ to Tuscany itself, written by virtually taking a glance at the region throughout the centuries. As a matter of fact, the importance given here to the natural landscape and the artistic treasures of Tuscan cities allows one to assess relationships involving people and nature alongside the significance of art and culture, while foregrounding travelling – which, in the post-COVID era, no one may take for granted anymore – as affecting the soul and heart of visitors and tourists.

Edited by Giulio Milone and Camilla Del Grazia, this volume brings together a selection of the contributions presented at the International Conference *Immagini e paesaggi della Toscana nella tradizione letteraria e artistica europea* held at the civic library “A. Betti” in Bagni di Lucca in September 2021. Organised by the Fondazione Culturale “Michel de Montaigne” and academic members of the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics of Pisa University, the event saw the gathering of national and international experts who, coordinated by Marcello Cherubini, Roberta Ferrari and Laura Giovannelli, discussed the influence of Tuscany on English and American authors across the centuries.

Starting from the Middle Ages, Italy has been a renowned pilgrimage destination and its attractiveness enormously increased in the wake of the Grand-Tour fashion in the eighteenth century, when travellers from all Europe came to the *Bel Paese* to discover its beauties. Among Italian regions, Tuscany grew in importance in the early decades of the following century: thanks to its artistic heritage, mild climate and unspoiled landscapes, it soon became a ritualistic step for European visitors and, even more so, for the English ones. Florence, Pisa, Lucca, Leghorn (Livorno), and the Appennines became privileged destinations and favourite subjects for literary and artistic works. The volume intends to bear witness to this cultural phenomenon by

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illustrating the presence of Tuscany in works ranging from the early nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

Mary Shelley is the *fil rouge* connecting the three opening essays. In “‘The most civilized district of Italy’: Mary Shelley’s Tuscan Tales Between History, Literary Echoes and Politics”, Nicoletta Caputo focuses her attention on two of Shelley’s stories, “A Tale of the Passions” and “The Brother and Sister: An Italian Story”, respectively published in 1823 and 1832. Drawing on her experience in Tuscany, Shelley sets them in the region during the Middle Ages, when the domain was torn by the struggles between Guelphs and Ghibellines and family feuds. In the former story, Caputo highlights the meaning of ‘passion’, which “is shown as being something protean, something that is transferable from the private, domestic sphere to the public, political one” (p. 21). Although set in medieval Tuscany, the tale purports to create a bridge between past and present, as the social struggles it illustrates echo those fought in Naples in 1820-1821 against the Bourbon monarchy and the Pope. Caputo also underscores the main difference between “A Tale of the Passions” and “The Brother and Sister: An Italian Story”: while the former ends with the ruin of the female figure and the triumph of war and masculine violence (which also characterises other texts by Shelley, e.g. *Valperga* and *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*), the latter, with its happy ending, conveys a message of what “we would call ‘ethic of care’”, showing that “peculiarly feminine propensity to emphasize relationships, empathy and compassion, to see humanity as interconnected and to pay greater attention to the needs of others” (p. 34). Caputo stresses the important role played by Tuscany (and Italy in general) in Mary Shelley’s life, not only as her second home, but also as a land capable of attracting exiles and freedom fighters thanks to its long history of oppression and division.

Together with Elizabeth Stisted and Francesca Alexander, Mary Shelley is part of the female trio Paolo Fantozzi takes into account in “*This Fairest of Lands. Tradizioni e leggende popolari tra la Val di Lima, l’Appennino negli scritti di Mrs Stisted, Francesca Alexander e Mary Shelley*”, where he examines the significant influence of local folklore and legends on some of their writings, namely Stisted’s *Letters from the By-Ways of Italy*, Alexander’s *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, and Shelley’s *Valperga*. Stisted first travelled to Italy in 1827 with her husband, visiting Venice, Florence (where the couple hosted an old Walter Scott), and Rome; they eventually settled in Bagni di Lucca, where they bought the villa nowadays known as ‘Villa Barbagli’. Fantozzi proceeds to draw attention to *Letters from the By-Ways of Italy*, a book Mrs Stisted wrote to pay off the family’s debt after the construction of the Anglican church and the cemetery in Bagni. *Letters* invites the reader to explore hidden spaces in Val di Lima and it can be considered as a fresco of life in Bagni di Lucca and its surroundings from 1830 to 1845 (p. 41). Francesca Alexander, on the other hand, came to Italy, namely to Florence, in 1852. She soon forged affective links with those in need, as she would help them not only financially, but also morally, lending a sympathetic ear to their condition. Fantozzi specifically highlights her friendship with John Ruskin (as shown in *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, edited by Ruskin himself) and with poet Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani, who lived in the mountains of Abetone and was described by Alexander as an extraordinary woman (p. 49). As for Mary Shelley, Fantozzi focuses on *Valperga*,

a story whose characterisation of the frightful witch owes much to the legends told by the farmers of Val di Lima, a territory abounding in tales of magic and sorcerers.

Mary Shelley is also the protagonist of Jocelynn A. Scutt's essay, "'Of light and electrics': A Tale of Mary Shelley in Tuscany", which foregrounds the author's contacts with the Tuscan environment and climate, in particular thunderstorms. Scutt begins by mentioning 1816, famously known as 'the year without a summer', a very cold time-span fostered by the devastating effects of the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia. The phenomenon was so violent that it changed the global atmosphere for the whole year, also leading to the condensation of dark clouds that caused the famous stormy night in Geneva, when *Frankenstein* was first conceived. In 1818, after the first edition of the novel was published, Shelley visited Italy with her husband, stopping at Bagni di Lucca, where she eventually witnessed the breathtaking electrical storms that were striking the region. Interestingly, Scutt suggests that the particular Tuscan climate in that period could have influenced Shelley in writing the second version of *Frankenstein*, where the power of electricity plays an even more pivotal role.

Tuscany has always been a favourite topic with British travelogues, the literary genre Paolo Bugliani takes into account in his essay on William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, entitled "Dire quasi la stessa Italia: William Hazlitt e Leigh Hunt di fronte ai paesaggi toscani". Hazlitt's *Notes of a Journey through France and Italy* (1826) bears witness to the philosophical inclination of its author, whose view of travelling can actually be seen as mainly intellectual and still drawing on the principles of Enlightenment. Hazlitt takes different kinds of notes, focusing not only on the beauty of the landscape, but also on sociological and ethnographic features (p. 88). This is clearly exemplified by his comments on the Florentine carnival, when he ponders on the value of masks, which do not differentiate one person from another, but rather unify those who wear them in a sort of grotesque body (p. 91). Hunt, on the contrary, provides us with an almost literary account of his journey in his *Autobiography* (1850), realigning himself with the second Romantic generation along with Shelley, Byron, and Keats. For example, he describes the murder of Count Guiccioli as if it were an event reminiscent of a gothic romance (p. 96), and he often connects Italy with the supernatural, for instance when he describes Siena as a 'ghosted house', as Hawthorne would do. Hunt's journey through Tuscany was indeed an important moment in his life, which allowed him not only to get in touch with the region's beauty and suggestiveness, but also to test his capability to convey and translate his experience to the English reader.

In her essay "Tuscany in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*: The 'Thinned' Arcadia and its Role in the Romance", Camilla Del Grazia stresses the role Tuscany plays in Nathaniel Hawthorne's quest for the "poetic or fairy precinct" (p. 101), suggesting that *The Marble Faun* might be seen as a reshaped version of the author's *French and Italian Notebook* (1871). Hawthorne visited both Rome and Florence, and the two cities deeply marked him: the former because of the contrast between its sublime traits and its dirtiness, on both a material and spiritual level; the latter for putting him at ease, owing to its warmer climate (Hawthorne visited Florence in summer, while he used to live in Rome through the winter) and because it granted him the necessary time and space to concentrate on his recollections. For this reason, Rome can be considered

as a non-place, while Florence is inhabited by “real” people (p. 107). Thus, the Tuscan city provided Hawthorne with a proper inspiration for *The Marble Faun*, a text imbued with references and echoes linked to the geography of the territory and its ‘enchanted’ landscapes, showing quite different features from the author’s motherland. Del Grazia also underlines the main differences between Florence and Rome as highlighted in Hawthorne’s romance: despite its glorious history and artistic relevance, Rome emerges as morally corrupted, while Florence (with Monte Beni) represents a sort of *locus amoenus*, a *felix* Arcadia. In the end, a final comparison is drawn between Italy and America: while the former exhibits evident contrasts between its architecture and the land (this being a sign of a nature-culture cleavage), the latter still allows the human to merge with the environment, envisaging a natural harmony capable of stimulating one’s imagination. Del Grazia concludes by arguing that *The Marble Faun* reflects Hawthorne’s thoughts on Italy: although the country has not suffered yet from the same effects of time and history affecting Rome, Monte Beni is bound to slowly face the same destiny; conversely, young and unspoiled America could be a ‘new muse’ for authors.

Gabriele Corsani’s “Janet Ross e Vernon Lee: due dimore alle pendici della collina di Maiano, a est di Firenze” deals with two female authors who were connected to the small town of Maiano, near Florence, at the end of the nineteenth century: Janet Ross and Vernon Lee. Despite living in the same town, the two never met, but they shared the same passion and respect for the area that welcomed them. This is testified by the care they put into the restoration of their two villas, Poggio Gherardo and Palmerino. Ross renovated her mansion with the help of several antiquarians, who provided different exotic decorations, reflecting her Victorian *gusto* for extravagant ornamentation. She could be considered as a kind of New Woman by virtue of her knowledge of Renaissance art and history, her ability as a singer and guitar player, her drawing and writing skills, and her prowess in the kitchen and orchard, as Corsani remarks. Analogously, Lee stands out as a woman of immense culture. She loved being surrounded by intellectuals from Florence, whom she would later include in her private circle. Besides, Poggio Gherardo and Palmerino share a series of architectural features, namely the door, *la soglia*, capable of dividing but also of bringing together (p. 147), and the passages and windows that opened directly onto the landscape, reminding of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s descriptions in the poem *Casa Guidi Windows* (p. 151). Last but not least, both authors boast an important literary output that confirms their love for Italy and its history: Lee’s *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880) and Ross’s *Italian Sketches* (1887) are but two examples of their Italian publications. By interlacing the architectural taste with the literary interests of these two women, Corsani reflects on how Maiano was fundamental for the lives of Ross and Lee, who now rest in peace in the region that gave them such new energies.

Marco Canani’s “Sulle orme toscane di Byron, Shelley e i Brownings. Il discorso del turismo e il paesaggio romantico nelle *anthoguides* di Anna Benneson McMahan” introduces us to the concept of ‘anthoguide’, a term he proposes to define the production of the American author Anna Benneson McMahan. Canani focuses his attention on three of her texts: *Florence in the Poetry of the Brownings* (1904), *With Shelley in Italy* (1905), and *With Byron in Italy* (1906). These anthoguides consist in

anthologised guidebooks in which the function of the editor proves crucial. More specifically, her goal is to explore the relationship that the Brownings, Shelley and Byron established with the Italian landscape, and to icastically convey it to the reader. McMahan invites the tourist who reads her book about the Brownings to virtually follow the footsteps of the couple by concentrating on some of their poems linked to their sojourn in the Tuscan city; the reader can thus identify himself/herself with the spouses while visiting the same places, and this is possible thanks to the hybrid nature of the anthoguide itself (p. 181). *With Shelley in Italy* and *With Byron in Italy* present the same structure: the life and the poetry appear as closely connected, with an apparatus of photos of the landscape and sites of cultural significance that aim to capture the tourist-reader's attention. Canani highlights the importance of the anthoguide as a particular type of guidebook that plays on different communicative codes and genres, resulting in something unique. McMahan's anthoguides, in particular, are able to give prominence to the idea and implications of travelling and to promote a new kind of literary tourism: a "pilgrimage" (p. 195), as the author herself calls it.

With Luca Baratta's essay, "'Like Moths to the Lighthouse': dissolvenze fiorentine in *The Soul's Gymnasium* di Sir Harold Acton", we enter the literary world of Sir Harold Mario Mitchell Acton, an English author who lived in Florence and died there in 1994, leaving his properties to New York University and the British Institute of Florence. Here the focus is on *The Soul's Gymnasium*, Acton's anthology of tales published in 1982. After a brief introduction to Acton's life and his love for Florence and its history, witnessed by such books as *The Last of the Medici* (1930) and *The Last Medici* (1932), Baratta outlines the structure and the themes of *The Soul's Gymnasium*. The first two stories, "The Marchesa Carrie" and "Leo's Ivory Tower", are built on Acton's personal memories of real Anglo-Florentine characters. The triptych composed by "St Gabriel", "Fin de Race" and "Flora's Lame Duck" is devoted to the theme of the inevitable demise of life. The eponymous story, "The Soul's Gymnasium", dwells on the absurd behaviour of a dandy who is probably affected by some kind of mental disorder, and his misadventures with a young American student. "Codicil Coda", "A Phantom Botticelli" and "Morning at Upshott's" reflect on the theme of nostalgia, not so much for a place as for past glory. The final story, "The Narcissus Elegy", focuses on a failed writer who owes his ephemeral fame simply to the unpredictable dictates of fate. This concluding tale provides a most suitable conclusion for such a heterogeneous book: it is an auto-ironical satire on the literary mediocrity and the false literary myths fostered by critics, but it is also an elegy on dreams' ability to preserve human naïveté (p. 210). Despite the presence of different themes, the *fil rouge* that connects all these tales is decadence and corruption, in a physical sense (the degeneracies of mass tourism) and on a moral level, as epitomised by the apathetic rich. The only antidote to corruption is beauty: it acts as a universal *panacea*, capable of alleviating the pains and sufferings of the present but also of laying the foundations for a brighter future. Importantly, Baratta underscores how Florence remains the real protagonist of the anthology, pointing to Acton's love for the city, which can be compared to an Eden that, just like the Biblical one, constantly risks surrendering to corruption.

In “Distanza, sdegno e trasfigurazione: lo sguardo di Rachel Cusk in *The Last Supper*”, the closing essay of the volume, Giulio Milone analyses Rachel Cusk’s *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy* (2009). The title of the book evidently recalls the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci, while at the same time referring to two main focuses of the author’s journey to Italy, that is, Italian art and food (p. 227). Cusk is a lingering and ambivalent presence in the text, as the reasons for her journey to Italy are unknown. The reader is only aware of her interest in D.H. Lawrence, as the travelogue opens with an epigraph from *Sea and Sardinia*. Annoyed at the immobility, hypocrisy and bigotry of their fellow countrymen, Cusk and her family leave England for Italy for three months. Milone highlights how Cusk’s journey seems modeled on the nineteenth-century Grand Tour, since it starts in April at the Newhaven port, then passing through France and Italy. During the journey, Cusk engages with Italian culture, reading literary reports and learning the language. The first stage is Liguria, followed by Tuscan Garfagnana. Milone observes how, in Barga, Cusk and her family end up feeling overwhelmed by frustration, which results in an abrupt change of the narrative point of view from the first person to a collective plural represented by her husband, her daughters, and herself. The next stage is Lucca, whose walls seem to divide the internal past from the external present (p. 236). The journey continues through different cities: Assisi, Rome, Naples, and Positano, each of them working as a backdrop where Cusk philosophically reflects on the search for a sense in one’s actions. As Milone points out, *The Last Supper* is not to be approached as a guide to Tuscany or Italy, but as the diary of a troubled mind who is seeking for new meanings and directions in her art by critically observing the world around her.

This book offers precious insights into the role Tuscany has played in the lives of various authors who, starting from the early nineteenth century, visited Dante’s native land and were fascinated by the richness of its natural landscapes and secular history, as well as by its difference from the English and American territories. For them, Tuscany was not only a source of inspiration: it was a life experience which left an indelible mark on their souls, thus influencing not only their works specifically set in this region, but somehow their entire literary production. The colourful territory, which alternates beaches, hills, Apennines and cities, represents a place where people and nature live in symbiosis, even recalling Edenic images of an ideal society. At the same time, though, this garden runs the risk of being destroyed by corrupting forces: if, for nineteenth-century authors, these forces were the political powers that limited individual freedom, today it is mass tourism and pollution that put the environment at risk.

Analysing works belonging to different ages and literary genres, written by both canonical authors and minor literary figures, this volume should be considered as an original contribution to the wide-ranging debate on Anglo-Italian cultural relations, suggesting that much more is still to be discovered about Tuscany and its longstanding appeal on foreign travellers.

ALESSIA GUIDI*

Elisa Segnini and Michael Subialka (eds), *Gabriele D'Annunzio and World Literature: Multilingualism, Translation, Reception*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2023, pp. 424, ISBN 9781399506854

Adopting a global and cross-cutting lens, *Gabriele D'Annunzio and World Literature: Multilingualism, Translation, Reception* focuses on D'Annunzio's transtemporal influence as the most charismatic as well as controversial, but internationally known, Italian figure in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From a transnational perspective, Elisa Segnini and Michael Subialka state that D'Annunzio's appropriation of foreign literature and engagement with multilingual and translingual writing denotatively conveys a syncretic approach towards various forms of art and poetry. Within the logic of these considerations, translation and adaptation must be regarded as a representative transnational phenomenon of Decadence and Symbolism. In the context of the European *fin de siècle*, D'Annunzio's *oeuvre* is said to go beyond linguistic, cultural and political borders, fostering an ambivalent tendency to both cosmopolitanism and nationalism. If his polyphonous writing and "poetics of fusion", as Segnini and Subialka assert, promote a recontextualisation of the author within World Literature, highlighting the degree of the circulation and reception of his works, D'Annunzio's longing to internationalise Italian literature helps us put new emphasis on his "complex legacies" (p. 19) and affiliations with aesthetic models across the globe.

In order to provide a polycentric view of this prominent figure, Segnini and Subialka bring together the reflections of different scholars from twelve countries (Italy, France, Belgium, Austria, Spain, UK, USA, Canada, Russia, Egypt, Argentina, and Japan). This interesting volume is divided into four sub-topics which revolve around the international networks and literary exchanges allowing to place D'Annunzio in a World Literature framework.

The first section, "A Poetics of Fusion: Cultural Appropriation, Multilingualism, Translingual Writing", explores D'Annunzio's customary blending of artistic and literary material from variegated sources. The critical dialogue with Latin and Greek masterpieces, the use of Japanese poetic forms, the translation and rewriting of European authors are the main practices that converge in his vision of *Weltliteratur*. In this respect, Pietro Gibellini's contribution on "D'Annunzio and the Greek and Latin Classics" calls attention to D'Annunzio's knowledge of classical literature, alongside those of Italy and France, and to the echoes of Homer, Virgil, Seneca, Horace, Sappho, Ovid and Pindar in his work, situating him at the threshold of both the ancient and modern world. Mariko Muramatsu's chapter, "D'Annunzio and Japonism", tracks traces of Japanese culture and literature in D'Annunzio's poetry, uncovering the exoticism of

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his artistic focus as well as a broader aesthetic fascination with European *Japonisme*.

After this deep reflection on the incorporation of Orientalism in D'Annunzio's poetics, Elisa Segnini highlights how the multilingual aspect of his *oeuvre* relies on a perceptive outward gaze and a dialogue with foreign languages. More specifically, her chapter "Il *Piacere* as a Multilingual Text and its Afterlife in Translation" deals with the tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, the role of translation and the various intra- and interlinguistic stratifications of D'Annunzio's 1889 novel. Sarah Zappulla Muscarà and Enzo Zappulla's "'The essence of the race': *La figlia di Iorio* and Italian Dialects" concentrates on *La figlia di Iorio* and its translation into dialects as a way to boost the play's popularity, taking the examples of the Sicilian version by Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, the adaptation in Abruzzo dialect by Cesare De Titta and the Neapolitan dialect parody by Eduardo Scarpetta. At the end of this part, Filippo Fonio's contribution on "The 'Latin sister': D'Annunzio's Relationship to the French Language" offers an exhaustive overview of D'Annunzio's 'extraterritoriality' in connection with his Francophone writing and an innovative literary strategy based on linguistic experimentation.

The second section of the book, "Translators as Transcultural Negotiators", examines D'Annunzio's collaboration with his translators and the value of the translation process as "an inter-cultural practice that should retain the 'foreignness' of the original" (p. 21). In "Gabriele D'Annunzio and Georges Hérelle: Virility, Machismo and the Homoerotic", Clive Thomson presents some relevant aspects of Georges Hérelle and D'Annunzio's multi-layered interactions, drawing on their correspondence and other documents preserved by the translator. If Thomson focuses on Hérelle's intellectual admiration of and homoerotic drive towards the Italian author, in "After Hérelle: André Doderet, the (In)visible Translator" Annalisa Ciano shifts the attention to André Doderet, a French translator but also a playwright and novelist, who furthered the resurgence of interest in D'Annunzio's work after the events of Fiume, associating him with "a voice of the new Latin Renaissance" (p. 141). Stefano Evangelista's "'An Artist in Translation': D'Annunzio, Arthur Symons and Symbolist Drama" sheds light on the translation strategies applied by the poet and critic Arthur Symons to three of D'Annunzio's dramas (*The Dead City*, *La Gioconda*, and *Francesca da Rimini*). Evangelista underlines that, while Symons advocated the importance of producing unexpurgated versions of these works, their English reception was attenuated by the famous actress Eleonora Duse, who succeeded in making "D'Annunzio's art accessible to a morally scandalized audience" (p. 22). The personal and professional relationship D'Annunzio had with his translators is also the main topic of Adriana Vignazia's "Gabriele D'Annunzio and Karl Gustav Vollmoeller: From Classical Culture to the Attractions of Motor Power". In particular, she considers the German translations by Vollmoeller, the reception of D'Annunzio's *oeuvre* in German-speaking countries, and the link between creative writing and translation.

The third section, "D'Annunzio's Global *Fin-de-siècle* Reception", focuses on the impact of D'Annunzio's personality and the dissemination of his aesthetic principles all around the world. The appropriation of Dannunzian style and artistic vein paved the way for a literary renewal in various geopolitical areas in the name of a so-called

'modernity's transformation'. Noriko Hiraishi's "Fin-de-Meiji as *Fin-de-siècle*: D'Annunzio and Japanese Literature" examines D'Annunzio's influence and reception in *fin-de-siècle* Japan, underlining how his writings are able to designate new values and images of 'modern' men and women (for example, that of a *femme-fatale* heroine). The reconfiguration of gender models as part of D'Annunzio's innovation is also a point traced in Assumpta Camps's chapter on "D'Annunzio's Feminine Archetypes, Nationalist Ideology and Catalan Modernism". Exploring the Catalan reception of D'Annunzio's female archetypes, Camps tries to identify the distinctive elements of Catalan Modernist production derived from the Dannunzian feminine prism. Instead, a political overview is central to Arturo Larcati's "Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Austrian Reception after Italy's Entry into the War", which demonstrates how "D'Annunzio became the most important polemical target for the reactions of Austrian writers" (p. 233). During the "intellectual war", he was associated with Italy's entry into the Great War by the Austrian literary establishment, embodying all the negative features attributed to Italians. Only the figure of Stefan Zweig swam against the tide through his effort to separate D'Annunzio's artistic brilliance from his politicised persona.

The fourth section of the book, "Complex Legacies", delves into D'Annunzio's global reception and includes a selection of case studies based on different geographical, cultural and social contexts in order to illustrate the impact and popularity dating back to, and following, this inimitable author's lifetime. In "D'Annunzio and Argentina: from Elitism to Mass Nationalism", Sandro Abate sheds light on the reception of D'Annunzio's works in Argentina and the crucial role of the Italian diaspora for the poet's access to the Spanish-speaking world. In addition, Abate maps out three different stages from the 1890s up to the Second World War, emphasising D'Annunzio's relationship with some key figures as Guido Boggiani and Giovanni Del Guzzo. On the contrary, a political point of view is offered in "Gabriele D'Annunzio in the United States: Politics and Stereotypes", where Guylian Nemegeer and Mara Santi claim that D'Annunzio had gained considerable authority in the USA before the 1930s thanks to his reputation as an excellent opinionist and his role in both the First World War and the Fiume episode. However, the increasingly widespread misconceptions regarding D'Annunzio's correlation with Italian Fascism were to fuel scepticism and reservations about him, regardless of the repeated attempts to reconsider his poetic profile in American academia.

Elda Garetto and Sofia Lurie's chapter, "The Myth of Gabriele D'Annunzio in Russian Culture, 1890-2010: From 'Songs of the Native Land' to the 'Winged Cyclops'", shifts the attention to D'Annunzio's reception in Russia: after the notoriety achieved between 1900 and 1914, he totally disappeared from the literary scene during the Soviet era, with his personality starting to entice the public again from the 1990s to the present. A study on D'Annunzio's reception in the Arabic-speaking world is carried out in "From 'Great Italian Poet' to 'Fascist Writer': D'Annunzio and Arabic Culture" by Hussein Mahmoud and Christine Samir Girgis. This chapter illustrates how D'Annunzio's image has been shaped by the Arabian media, cultural magazines and academic establishment from the 1930s to nowadays. Although D'Annunzio's involvement in colonial history and his link with fascism ended by obscuring his deeper

political and literary identity, “he was known in Egypt as ‘the Great Italian Poet’ until the late 1930s” (p. 24). In his chapter on “Morlach’s Blood in Fiume’s *Mensa*: D’Annunzio and the Intimate Adriatic”, Russell Scott Valentino analyses the relationship between Italy and independent territories that would become Yugoslavia through the Luxardo brand’s trajectory from Zadar (Croatia) to Italy. The name ‘Luxardo’ is reported on the ‘maraschino’ bottle “where, just beneath ‘Cherry Brandy’, one finds the words *Sangue Morlacco*, below which appears this explanatory phrase: ‘Il liquore cupo che alla mensa di Fiume chiamavo ‘Sangue Morlacco’” (p. 316). Valentino speaks in terms of ‘Dannunzian Marketing’ in order to show how D’Annunzio’s popularity has survived in the worldwide public imagination. Ikuho Amano’s “Infatuated with *Il Vate*: Mishima’s Transnational Mimesis of D’Annunzio as Decadent Poet, Patriot and Celebrity” deals with the transcultural impact of D’Annunzio on Yukio Mishima, considering that “the personality and aesthetic credos of the Japanese writer attest to undeniable synergies with his Italian Modernist predecessor” (p. 330). Moreover, Amano uses the concept of ‘transmisis’ in order to weigh the impact of the Dannunzian model on Mishima’s literary adaptation and public persona, detecting a useful example of cross-cultural translation and emulation.

In the last chapter of the volume, “D’Annunzio in the Twenty-First Century”, Elisa Segnini and Michael Subialka concentrate on the role of translators with an eye to our contemporary context, sharing a diversified set of interviews about the translation of D’Annunzio’s texts all around the world. Assuming that “the global reception of D’Annunzio continues to unfold with new translations, adaptations and responses” (p. 357), Segnini and Subialka want to emphasise the boundless interpretations his *oeuvre* and artistic vision still lend themselves to.

In conclusion, *Gabriele D’Annunzio and World Literature: Multilingualism, Translation, Reception* unveils global reception dynamics and the multifaced dimensions of Dannunzian Decadence, “bridging aesthetic and political modernity in provocative but challenging ways” (p. 3). By encouraging scholars to rethink D’Annunzio in the World Literature context, the volume seeks to demonstrate how his output must be re-read through a new planetary map, a transnational territory based on multilingual interweavings. Engaging with D’Annunzio’s open attitude and outward gaze also means foregrounding his tendency towards transculturation and syncretism within a complex system of translation, adaptation, and circulation. In this light, the contributions gathered in this book succeed in re-evaluating D’Annunzio with a ‘denationalised’ eye and in tracing a deep line of continuity between the international networks of Decadent exchange and various artistic expressions of mobility and migration, colonialism and politics.

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- Titles of paragraphs and sections (if any): font size 14, *Italicised*, with the first letter of each major word capitalised. Sections may be further divided into numbered subsections; all second-level headings must be in lower case (except for proper nouns and the first letter of the first word)
- Abstract, keywords, long quotations (more than 3 lines) and footnotes: font size 10
- Number pages progressively (upper right-hand corner)
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“” Double quotation marks are also used for

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- Use footnotes, not endnotes
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- Footnotes may include references to bibliographic sources as well as concise comments and explanations
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- All sources must be acknowledged and listed in full at the end of the paper
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