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Arianna Antonielli, Fiorenzo Fantaccini, Samuele Grassi

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Arianna Antonielli, Fiorenzo Fantaccini and Samuele Grassi

Pen, Pencil, and Wilde:
Wildean Reconceptions
and Rewritings across Time

edited by
Pierpaolo Martino and Lou Pinelli



Preface

Neil Sammells

Bath Spa University (<n.sammells@bathspa.ac.uk>)

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The essays collected here were delivered as papers during the autumn of 2024 at a meeting of the Italian Oscar Wilde Society to commemorate 170 years since his birth.

The venue was the University of Pisa's Gipsoteca di Arte Antica e Antiquarium: an extraordinary collection of plaster casts of classical sculptures. It was a highly appropriate setting for several reasons.

First, Wilde was a brilliant classical scholar, though he worked hard at concealing his diligence while a student of Greek and Latin art and literature at Oxford. Second, he looked to ancient Greece as an historical precedent for male same-sex desire. As he put it in his *A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated*: "To be really mediaeval one should have no body. To be really modern one should have no soul. To be really Greek one should have no clothes" (1966, 1203).

Second, the Gipsoteca is a gallery of fakes. Art, as Wilde insisted in *Intentions* is counterfeit. It is a lie, and all true artists are liars. It is not a "window" on the real; it creates the images which define how we see our world and the ways we represent ourselves to it. "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (1982).

The principal aesthetic category for Wilde, however, was not art but style. As Vivian, or "Wilde", puts it in "The Decay of Lying": "It is style that makes us believe in a thing – nothing but style" (1989). Art stylizes the world; it makes us see it anew and see its beauty. Style is also "attitude": the positions, poses, postures we adopt as we *perform* ourselves. For Wilde, personal identity, the self, was no more "authentic" than the plaster casts in the Gipsoteca.

It is highly appropriate, therefore, that the speakers in Pisa delivered their papers against a backdrop of fake classical sculptures in various attitudes of rapture, distress, and indifference. Some statues were missing limbs, others – and not merely the Greek ones – were missing clothes. Wilde would have been at home there. He would no doubt have struck an attitude of his own. As he says in *The Truth of Masks*, in matters of art criticism, "attitude is everything" (1078).

In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* Wilde develops a particular and hopeful attitude to the future. It is one in which, along socialist lines, the state withers away and the abolition of private property means we will be relieved of the “sordid necessity of living for others” (1079). He also imagines that in that future all manual labour will be done by machines, or robots, and as a result we will all be free to develop our potential as artists.

Of course, what Wilde could not envisage is *our* future, 126 years after his death, in which it is not just manual labour that is done by machines. When he said that “language is the parent and not the child of thought” (1023) he could not know that Large Language Models will now be able to do our thinking for us. Artificial Intelligence now poses us a fundamental question: what is it to be human?

What would Wilde’s answer have been?

To find out, I asked ChatGPT. It constructed for me a dialogue, in the style of Oscar Wilde, in which he and I meet in a champagne bar and discuss the difference between human and Artificial Intelligence. Here it is, unedited:

Title: “The Sparkling Mind”

A dialogue between Oscar Wilde and Professor Neil Sammells

Scene:

A champagne bar of exquisite taste. Golden light bathes marble tables; mirrors double the laughter; and the air fizzes with the bright perfume of wit. Professor Neil Sammells sits with polished calm, a notebook beside his glass. Oscar Wilde reclines opposite, a lily in his lapel and a sparkle in his eye.

WILDE: Ah, champagne! The only thing that makes one feel simultaneously serious and frivolous. It is the drink of balanced contradiction – much like intelligence itself.

SAMMELLS: Contradiction, you say? Then you are suggesting, Mr. Wilde, that intelligence thrives not in the solving of problems but in their elegant postponement?

WILDE: Precisely! To solve a problem is to end a conversation. To illuminate it, however, is to begin a delightful one.

SAMMELLS: And yet, artificial intelligence has no taste for delight. It is efficient, industrious, and tragically humourless – qualities which, in an artist, would constitute a moral defect.

WILDE: My dear Professor, efficiency is the last refuge of the unimaginative. One must never mistake calculation for creation. An algorithm may imitate genius, but it cannot enjoy it.

SAMMELLS: And yet imitation, as you once reminded us, is the sincerest form of flattery. Surely these machines flatter us incessantly? They mimic our language, our patterns, even our vanity.

WILDE: Yes, but vanity, like champagne, loses its sparkle when mass-produced. A human being can be charmingly vain. A machine can only be vainly charming – and the latter is a mechanical tragedy.

SAMMELLS: Still, there is something almost poetic in the attempt – a mirror reflecting us with mathematical precision. Perhaps artificial intelligence is the modern manifestation of Narcissus: a creation that falls in love with our reflection.

WILDE: Then let us hope it never achieves self-awareness, or humanity will drown in its own reflection! No, Professor, the charm of humanity lies in its divine errors. To err is not only human; it is, at times, delightful.

SAMMELLS: You would prefer folly to perfection?

WILDE: Always. Perfection is a sterile art. A rose without a thorn would be a botanical bore. Intelligence without foolishness is mere arithmetic.

SAMMELLS: And yet, we seek to build minds that surpass our own. Do you not fear the day they succeed?

WILDE: Succeed, my dear man? Machines will never surpass us – only expose our limitations. When a typewriter pretends to think, it does not humiliate the author; it flatters him into believing his thoughts were worth imitating.

SAMMELLS: There is comfort in your irony, but I suspect the future will have less humour than you wish.

WILDE: Then the future will be intolerable, for humour is the saving grace of intelligence. It is the soul's champagne – and without it, even the clever become cruel.

SAMMELLS: So you propose we teach our machines to laugh?

WILDE: Teach them to laugh, yes, but never to understand the joke. For once they comprehend irony, we shall lose our last advantage.

SAMMELLS: (raising his glass) Then here's to human absurdity – the one intelligence the machines may never learn.

WILDE: (clinking glasses) To absurdity, Professor! May it continue to be the most intelligent thing about us.

The laughter rises. Outside, the city hums with light. Inside, wit and champagne – human and effervescent – flow without end.

So, there we have it. Wilde prized artificiality above the authentic and the “real”, except ChatGPT would have it, in the matter of intelligence. I shall not attempt to unpeel the layers of irony here.

Wilde declares in “The Sparkling Mind” that it is our capacity for humour, irony, error, and the absurd that make us human. And they will save us from Artificial Intelligence.

Let's hope he is correct and that I am wrong and the future has more humour than I suspect...

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Introduction: Reconceptualising and Rewriting Wilde across Time*

Pierpaolo Martino; Lou Pinelli

Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro;
Università IUAV di Venezia – Università degli Studi di Bergamo
(pierpaolo.martino@uniba.it; lpinelli@iuav.it)

1. “Suggestive for fiction”: Reconceptualising Wilde

“To be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact” (Wilde 2010, 299). This sentence closes Wilde’s essay “Pen, Pencil and Poison” and may be read, like much of what he writes about Thomas Griffiths Wainewright’s crimes, indictment, and post-prison life, as an uncanny anticipation of the Anglo-Irish author’s own future. Like Wainewright, Wilde knew he could evade his trials by fleeing England, “Yet he returned” (294) or chose to stay; “The sentence [...] passed on him was to a man of his culture a form of death” (295); after serving his sentence, “he was no longer the kind light-hearted Janus whom Charles Lamb” – or, in Wilde’s case, many – “admired. He seems to have grown quite cynical” (296); and most tellingly, as many gay and queer writers and scholars have been arguing since the emergence of Gay and Lesbian Studies, “There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture. We cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be” (298). That Wilde should wish to distance himself from the strictures imposed by that Victorian “foolish habit” (299) of reducing reality to fact alone comes as no surprise. Even beyond the infamous accusation of “posing Somdomite” – in the Marquis of Queensberry’s oft-cited misspelling –, Wilde revelled in the fame and notoriety his writings and public persona generated in late Victorian England and beyond, and

* Although this introduction was conceived by the two editors together, section 1 was written by Lou Pinelli, section 2 by Pierpaolo Martino, and section 3 by both.

his iconicity is far from exhausted. His figure has indeed proved “suggestive for fiction” to a great number of subsequent artists, many of whom have adopted, in Neil Sammels’s words, “a Wildean aesthetic grounded in make-believe, in role-playing and the inauthentic” (2025, 569).

These adaptations and rewritings have also generated a wealth of different approaches to his work, which this special issue sets out to explore. In view of this suggestiveness for fiction, his own works continue to elicit varied responses from contemporary critics and thus renew our understanding of the *fin de siècle* and of one of its finest interpreters. Extending what Josephine M. Guy has recently argued in relation to *Intentions* to his oeuvre more broadly, Wilde was “serious and playful simultaneously” across much of his writing, often aiming to “undermin[e] critical authority while extravagantly performing it through a self-conscious display of intellectual virtuosity” (2025, 208). Wilde’s strategy in *Intentions* – and elsewhere, we should add – consists in “wrong-foot[ing] his reader and challeng[ing] their notions of what constitutes intellectual authority” (*ibidem*), thereby inviting readers to participate actively in negotiating the meaning and significance of the texts before them.

In this special issue of *Studi irlandesi*, our aim has been to foreground the many different approaches to Wilde that contemporary critics may draw on in their reassessment of the transnational Irish author. Too often reduced to his sexual identity or his light-hearted witticisms, Wilde emerges in this collection of essays as a serious, though irreducibly playful intellectual who stood at the intersection of the defining discourses of his time, generating questions and proposing solutions that many subsequent artists and critics have continued to grapple with. Whether approached through ecocriticism or the Health Humanities, queer theory or the Gothic, pop culture or theories of the self, Wilde remains a powerful cultural icon whose meanings are constantly reconfigured and re-constellated in an open-ended process of signification and renegotiation.

2. “Insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities”: Rewriting Wilde

Few writers have generated as many afterlives as Oscar Wilde. More than a century after his death, Wilde continues to occupy a singular position within literary and cultural history: at once historical and contemporary, endlessly familiar yet perpetually open to reinvention. His works remain among the most widely read, adapted, translated, and critically reinterpreted texts of the late nineteenth century, while his public persona has acquired a visibility that arguably exceeds that of any other Victorian author (Martino 2023). Wilde survives not simply as a writer, but as a cultural signifier and icon. His extraordinary longevity resides in the capacity of his writings and his self-fashioned image to generate new meanings across different historical moments and cultural contexts (Bristow 2008).

The essays collected in this special issue of *Studi irlandesi* – significantly entitled “Pen, Pencil, and Wilde: Wildean Reconceptions and Rewritings across Time” – also proceed from the conviction that Wilde’s significance lies precisely in this openness to reinterpretation. The contributions gathered here explore the ways in which Wilde is constantly rewritten through acts of reading, criticism, adaptation, reception, and theoretical reconfiguration. Together, they reveal a Wilde who continues to speak to contemporary concerns about desire, embodiment, ecology, celebrity, artistic identity, and cultural memory.

Such an approach is particularly appropriate for an author whose writings repeatedly foreground imitation, performance, citation, and transformation as constitutive elements of artistic creation. The paradoxes of “The Decay of Lying” the provocative formulations of “The Critic as Artist” – in which Wilde famously wrote that “what people call insincerity is simply

a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (Wilde 2010, 101) – and the aesthetic experiments of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* all point toward a conception of art as an ongoing process of reinterpretation. Wilde understood that every act of creation emerges through dialogue with prior texts, images, and traditions. At the same time, he recognized that criticism itself possesses creative power, capable of producing new meanings and new works. To read Wilde today is inevitably to rewrite him; to interpret his work is already to participate in the process through which his cultural significance is continually renewed.

Over the past three decades, Wilde studies has expanded far beyond the biographical and aesthetic concerns that once dominated the field. The emergence of queer theory transformed Wilde into a central figure for the study of sexuality, identity, and modernity. More recently, scholars, as we have seen, have explored Wilde’s connections to environmental thought, material culture, celebrity studies, pop culture, and the medical humanities. Such developments have demonstrated not only the richness of Wilde’s writings, but also their remarkable capacity to engage with intellectual frameworks that emerged long after his death. The essays collected here contribute to this ongoing critical expansion by revisiting familiar texts through innovative perspectives while also recovering neglected aspects of Wilde’s oeuvre and influence.

The title of this collection foregrounds two interconnected concepts: reconceptualisation and rewriting. The first refers to the critical process through which Wilde is repositioned within new theoretical and historical frameworks. The second points toward the multiple forms of textual, cultural, and intellectual transformation that characterize Wilde’s own practice as well as his reception. Rewriting, in this context, encompasses literary influence, adaptation, parody, appropriation, translation, critical revision, and cultural performance. The contributions assembled here demonstrate that these processes are inseparable. Wilde rewrites his predecessors; subsequent generations rewrite Wilde; criticism itself becomes a form of rewriting through which the meanings of Wilde’s texts continue to evolve, while Wilde’s life and work are continuously rewritten in the world of popular culture, particularly in contemporary drama, cinema and music. In this sense, Wildean figures, performances, figurations, and refigurations, can actually help us to read or reread Wilde and his work and to develop *new*, and possibly more fascinating, understandings of them (Martino 2023).

3. Overview of the Special Issue

The collection opens with Camilla Del Grazia’s essay on Wilde’s engagement with Edgar Allan Poe in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”. Examining Wilde’s appropriation and transformation of Poe’s Gothic and detective conventions, Del Grazia shows how parody and comic subversion reshape the grotesque and the logic of ratiocination within a satirical framework. Her analysis highlights Wilde’s ability to transform literary influence into a vehicle for aesthetic innovation and social critique.

Questions of influence also occupy a central place in Michael Davis’s contribution, in which the author revisits the relationship between Walter Pater and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, arguing for a reconsideration of Pater’s influence on Wilde. Focusing on the queer dimensions of Pater’s thought, he reads the novel as an exploration of desire, influence, and male intimacy, revealing Wilde’s complex negotiation with the authority of a queer precursor. Influence thus emerges as a dynamic process of resistance, transformation, and creative reworking.

If Del Grazia and Davis focus on Wilde’s relationship to literary and intellectual predecessors, Laura Giovannelli applies ecocritical perspectives to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, offering a reading that foregrounds the novel’s representations of human and non-human interdependence.

She argues that Dorian's tragedy stems from his refusal to recognise his place within broader networks of life, revealing Wilde's engagement with questions of relationality, environmental responsibility, and the agency of the natural world.

The transnational dimensions of Wilde's imagination are explored in Donatella Badin's contribution on *The Duchess of Padua*. By situating Wilde's early blank-verse tragedy within a tradition that uses the foreign – Renaissance Italy – as a symbolic displacement of domestic political tensions, Badin reveals how the play's subversion of revenge tragedy conventions simultaneously engages with Anglo-Irish ambivalence toward colonial violence and with emergent questions of female agency.

Paolo Bugliani's contribution similarly explores a less discussed part of Wilde's oeuvre, namely his prose poems. In his reading, these short texts constitute a series of parabolic self-figurations in which the artist is rendered not as a psychological subject but as a portable icon, iterable and detachable, whose authority is exposed as performative rather than grounded. Situating Wilde's sequence at the intersection of the French prose poem tradition, the biblical parable, and the "diaphanous" protagonists of Walter Pater's imaginary portraits, Bugliani argues that these brief miniatures enact, at the level of genre itself, the instability of authorial identity.

Lou Pinelli's contribution brings the Health Humanities to bear on Wilde by rethinking "unwellness" – broadly understood as a bodily and existential condition that resists full medicalisation – as a productive political and aesthetic force in his work. Reading *De Profundis* alongside other pre-1895 texts, Pinelli challenges the familiar dichotomy between the pre-prison jester and the post-prison martyr, arguing instead for a coherent philosophy underpinning Wilde's oeuvre – one in which suffering attunes the vulnerable body to the "Symphony of Sorrow" that retrospectively gives shape and meaning to a life and a literary career.

The collection closes with Pierpaolo Martino's reconceptualization of Wilde as one of the first modern celebrities. Focusing on his 1882 American tour and its afterlives in U.S. popular culture, the essay examines Wilde's legacy in American film, music, and performance—through figures such as Al Pacino, Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, and Patti Smith—arguing that his self-fashioning and aestheticism anticipated modern celebrity culture and continue to resonate across media and generations.

Taken together, the essays collected here reveal Wilde as a figure whose significance lies in his capacity to generate new forms of meaning across time. Despite their diverse methodologies and objects of analysis, the contributions share a common commitment to understanding Wilde as a dynamic site of cultural production rather than a fixed historical object. They demonstrate that Wilde's writings continue to invite reinterpretation because they themselves are structured around processes of transformation, mediation, and performance. Whether engaging with Gothic traditions, queer genealogies, ecological thought, transnational imaginaries, artistic self-fashioning, embodied suffering, or celebrity culture, the essays reveal a writer whose work remains extraordinarily responsive to changing intellectual and cultural circumstances.

The essays gathered here also remind us that Wilde's relevance does not derive simply from his apparent modernity. Rather, it emerges from the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities that permeate his writings. Wilde's texts resist closure; they encourage reinterpretation; they invite readers to participate in the creation of meaning. Their afterlives are therefore not external additions to an already completed oeuvre but extensions of a process already embedded within Wilde's own aesthetic practice.

In short, to reconceptualise and rewrite Wilde across time means engaging with an ongoing cultural conversation that stretches across historical periods, national boundaries, and disciplinary formations. The essays in this collection contribute to that conversation by

demonstrating the continuing vitality of Wilde's work and by revealing new possibilities for its interpretation. Collectively, they show that Wilde remains our contemporary (as Kott famously defined Shakespeare) not because he belongs to the present, but because each generation discovers in his writings new ways of thinking about art, desire, identity, suffering, and the world. Wilde's afterlife, in other words, is not a story of survival alone. It is a story of perpetual reinvention—and it is precisely this capacity for reinvention that continues to make him one of the most compelling and fascinating figures of modern culture.

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Wilde's 'Comic Gothic': Echoes of Edgar Allan Poe in "Lord Arthur Savile's Crimes"

Camilla Del Grazia

Independent scholar (<camilla.delgrazia@gmail.com>)

Abstract:

Wilde's admiration for the work of Edgar Allan Poe is well documented both in his letters and in his critical writings. The consonance between some of Poe's theoretical writings, like "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), and Wilde's own Paterian Aestheticism can undoubtedly account for at least part of this appreciation. Recent scholarship has largely neglected to explore the possibilities offered by this literary connection, focusing at most on echoes of Poe's tales "William Wilson" (1839) and "The Oval Portrait" (1842) on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Yet, Wilde's intertextual relationship with Poe is by no means limited to these possible influences. Among the many lines of enquiry opened by this perspective, this paper adopts parodic subversion as a possible interpretive tool to investigate the short story "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", in particular. Drawing on Poe's body of work as a reference point, we can see how Wilde's comedic stance in these stories borrows from both Poe's gothic tales – particularly their use of the grotesque and the carnivalesque – and his "tales of ratiocination" to craft a subtle satire of social conventions and pragmatism.

Keywords: Comic, Edgar Allan Poe, Gothic, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", Oscar Wilde

Although Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe are rarely read alongside one another, the two authors show significant points of contact in their reflections on literature, especially in their shared emphasis on the careful staging of effect and the creation of a unified aesthetic experience. In an excerpt from a now widely known review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, later generally retitled "The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale" (1842), Poe asserts that it is the short story, among prose forms, that allows an author to fully express his genius and achieve the "unity of effect" that he considers the mark of a truly accomplished work (Poe 1986, 446). Everything in a story, from tone to structure to plot,

must be “deliberately” arranged to achieve this “effect”, this “impression”: “In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design” (*ibidem*).

While Wilde does share Poe’s insistence on brevity as essential to achieving true Beauty, understood as “an intense and pure elevation of *soul* – *not* of intellect, or of heart” (483), his critical works nevertheless resonate with the quoted passages of Poe’s critique. In “The Critic as Artist” (1891) he has Gilbert quip that “there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual” (Wilde 2022, 292). Similarly, in “The Decay of Lying” (1891) Vivian contends that “Art creates an incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things” (Wilde 2022, 230). These quotes clearly reveal the influence of Pater’s philosophy on Wilde’s own aestheticism; yet, they also evidence a fundamental correspondence with Poe’s stance on artistic creation.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Wilde’s collection of short fiction in *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories* (1891) also shows a sustained and self-conscious engagement with narrative strategies commonly associated with Poe’s tales. In particular, “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” (originally published in 1887; henceforth LASC), “The Canterville Ghost” (1887) and “The Sphinx Without a Secret” (1887) display both thematic and structural affinities with Poe’s fiction, suggesting a parodic inversion of his tales of mystery and of “ratiocination”. At the same time, these stories draw on other aspects of Poe’s work – most notably his use of irony and carnivalesque subversion – reworking them into Wilde’s distinctive comic and aesthetic mode. While all three stories participate in this parodic engagement with Poe, the present analysis will focus primarily on “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”, where these dynamics emerge with particular clarity.

Two caveats are worth noting before proceeding. First, tracing correspondences between Wilde and Poe at the levels of both aesthetic theory and narrative technique opens a vast field of inquiry. The present discussion deliberately narrows this scope by approaching the question through the lenses of parodic subversion, and by focusing on a single short story. Second, this analysis does not seek to establish, beyond doubt, a pervasive influence of Poe on Wilde – though Wilde’s tendency to draw upon a plurality of literary models is well attested. Rather, it proposes a critical reading of Wilde’s story through a specific prism – Poe’s carnivalesque, his detective stories and his Gothic fiction – in order to observe the effects produced by such a perspective.

In arguing that Wilde enacts some form of parodic subversion of Poe’s tales of mystery and of his tales of ratiocination, some attention to the notion of parody itself is warranted. Linda Hutcheon’s conception, understood as “a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity” (Hutcheon 2000, xii) while perhaps almost too comprehensive, offers a useful lens through which to approach Wilde’s story as well as Poe’s subtle use of irony. This flexible assessment of parody encapsulates well Wilde’s play in LASC: he does not devise a close retelling of one of Poe’s tales, nor an overt spoof of his style, but rather seems to use subtle hints and to merge a variety of possible intertextual references to his macrotext. As the following analysis will show, one of the key structural elements Wilde absorbs and deconstructs from Poe’s tales of mystery is the gradual intensification of narrative rhythm and emotional momentum, through which Poe sustains an ever-heightening tension (Fisher 2004; Stauffer 1996; Joswick 1996; Ekmekçi 2011; Indrusiak 2018, *inter alia*). A thematic one, instead, is the triumph of romance or mystery over rationalism and pragmatism, parodied in LASC, but also in “The Canterville Ghost” and “The Sphinx Without a Secret”.

In addition, as pointed out by Gavin Cologne-Brookes, Poe’s detective fiction already contains an element of ironic subversion: “the pursuit of truth is laced with irony. The urge to subvert to the point of irony remains” (2022, 3). “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), with

its murderous orangutan, and “The Purloined Letter” (1844), which revolves around a possible political scandal and a theft in the queen’s boudoir, are indeed not especially “plausible” (Cologne-Brookes 2002, 3). Poe himself was quite cognisant of the artifice involved in constructing this type of “rational” tale, writing in a letter to Phillip P. Cooke that:

These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key. I do not mean to say that they are not ingenious – but people think them more ingenious than they are – on account of their method and *air* of method. In the “Murders in the Rue Morgue”, for instance, where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unravelling? (Poe 1846)

To be sure, one of the most quoted (and misquoted) maxims attributed to Sherlock Holmes is that “when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth” (Conan Doyle 2009, 111) – a proviso that appears to demand a strong suspension of disbelief even within a supposedly logical process of deduction. The paradox of such carefully constructed rationality seems integral to detective fiction itself. The self-awareness at the heart of this *trompe-l’œil*, according to Cologne-Brookes, makes detective fiction a privileged site of subversion, insofar as its structure already contains the tools for its own undoing when authors engage in metaliterary winks at the implausibility of their own reasoning. This in turn fits with Hutcheon’s notion that parody contains “the potentially conservative effect of repetition” as well as “the potentially revolutionary impact of difference” (2000, xii). Emphasising the potential expressed by parody rather than its undeniable effects, this description proves to be nuanced enough to capture the unsolved paradox(es) that lies at the heart of LASC.

A final concept that requires clarification is that of the carnivalesque. In Bakhtinian terms, the carnival designates a historically situated moment of sanctioned subversion, typically organized around festivity and therefore intrinsically linked to what Bakhtin defines as moments of “crisis”. As he observes, “the feast is always essentially related to time [...] through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man” (Bakhtin 1984, 9). The carnival thus marks a temporary suspension of normative structures and hierarchies, opening a space in which established values may be inverted or destabilised. Within the development of literary realism, this carnivalesque impulse incorporates the logic of the grotesque, whose defining principle is degradation, understood as “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (19). This process does not simply negate meaning but reorients it toward the material. Ultimately, the carnival spirit enables what Bakhtin describes as a radical reconfiguration of perception, insofar as it “offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (34).

Studies on Poe’s grotesque and carnivalesque, among which two recent ones by Ib Johansen (2015) and Timothy Jones (2024), highlight that his tales of mystery often incorporate a comic vein that is expressed along the lines of a “productive confusion between horror and comedy” (Jones 2024, 64). Tales like “King Pest” (1835), “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842), “Hop-Frog” (1849) and even “William Wilson” (1840) deploy the focus on the body and on material effects of the grotesque and the “festive” setting of the carnivalesque – the feast being a site of horrific inversion, rather than celebration. The reversals of order proposed in these tales significantly leads to a final climax – invariably, death – that however ends in a suspension, a deferral of meaning that is never fully reached. The effect on readers may be detachment, for “we remain free to distance ourselves from whatever horrible scenario is being depicted” (Jones 2024, 74). At the same time, the question left unanswered may lead to a reconceptualization:

“in exploring our own brain processes, we are refining our assessment of the sensations that beset us. We are learning to think ever more critically” (Cologne-Brookes 2022, 9).

Examining Wilde’s reuse of Gothic tropes in a comic vein, Neil Sammells (2024) identifies the same subversive potential in both his critical writings – such as “The Critic as Artist” and “The Decay of Lying” – and his fiction, most notably *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), but also his fairy tales and short stories. According to Sammells, Wilde simultaneously deploys the Gothic to widen his narrative range and to reflect on the genre itself, in a manner that (as Hutcheon argues) is characteristic of parody. On the one hand, then, “the Gothic sanctions and enables Wilde’s desire to write humorously and satirically about modern life and to address contemporary notions of cultural and ethical decadence (*fin de siècle, fin du globe*) without holding a mirror up to it and thus contradicting his rejection of naturalism and realism” (Sammells 2024, 98). The Gothic thus provides a mode that occupies an intermediate space between the realistic and the fantastic, allowing Wilde to engage with a real referent without committing to the minutiae of a fully realised realism. On the other hand, Wilde does not adopt the genre unquestioningly, but rather “he is knowingly exploiting it and holding it up for inspection, while attempting to thrill his readership” (100). This also means playing with some of the typical features of the genre, like the double, or the ghost (in “The Canterville Ghost”), or crime (in LASC), or the unspeakable secret (in “The Sphinx Without a Secret”) and turning them on their head.

If Poe may be counted among the possible intertexts for these stories, an additional layer emerges: the subversion appears to target his techniques for constructing suspense, ultimately dismantling them through wit and comedy. Poe himself, however, is no stranger to comic effects or to the use of paradox as a means of defusing tension, as exemplified by “The Sphinx” (1845). The tale unfolds from premises similar to those of “The Masque of the Red Death”: a man retreats from New York to the countryside, seeking refuge from a cholera outbreak in a relative’s “cottage orné” (Poe 2023 [1845], 293). From the opening lines, tension is carefully cultivated: “not a day elapsed which did not bring us news of the decease of some acquaintance. [...] At length we trembled at the approach of every messenger. The very air from the south seemed to us redolent with death” (*ibidem*). Immersed in this macabre atmosphere, the protagonist becomes convinced that he has seen a monstrous figure bearing the mark of a death’s head, which he describes in meticulous detail to his host. The latter, more rational and clear-headed, correctly infers that his guest’s perceptions have been distorted by morbid brooding: what appeared as a distant monster is revealed to be a sphinx moth hanging from a window frame. The narrative thus progresses from ominous beginnings and a crescendo of horror to a final moment of disillusionment, producing an effect of bathos. It also replicates the structure of deduction present in the Dupin tales, although these play on suspense, rather than pure horror.

Wilde’s “The Sphinx Without a Secret” echoes both the structure of Poe’s tale and that of his detective fiction: a mystery is introduced, clues are gradually supplied, and a solution is eventually proposed, though the enigma concerns a different kind of “monster” – a marriageable woman. Courted by a friend of the narrator, who is enamoured with her aura of secrecy, the woman is observed periodically visiting rooms that do not belong to her. When questioned by her fiancé, she adopts a posture of terror and implores him not to pursue the matter further. This refusal precipitates a violent quarrel, leaving the man “mad, frantic” and the woman “dreadfully white” (Wilde 2003, 204). Shortly thereafter, she dies of a cold, and the mystery appears to be resolved: she had rented the room herself and merely sat there reading. The rational narrator offers a simple, even prosaic, explanation: she delighted in the performance of mystery itself, feigning the existence of a secret. The grieving fiancé, however, resists this closure, responding only, “I wonder?” (205), a phrase that pointedly undermines the sufficiency of logical deduction.

As in Poe, the rational voice insists that the “monster” is no monster at all, but here the final displacement of mystery remains incomplete. Although the narrative follows a familiar trajectory from enigma through rising tension to bathos, its open ending defers definitive interpretation, preserving an irreducible residue of romance rather than fully dispelling it.

The same ambivalence, playing between a comic pragmatism and mystery or romance, also characterises “The Canterville Ghost”, as frequently evidenced (Höfele 1999; O’Connor 2004; Markey 2010; Balakrishnan 2011; Ponciano 2025). Arguably, the same is true of LASC. In this short story, a young man of the upper classes on the verge of marriage – Lord Arthur, the eponymous protagonist – attends a social gathering at which a cheiromantist predicts that he will kill a man. Rather than reacting with the terror or psychological disintegration typical of the protagonists in Poe’s tales, Lord Arthur responds with a striking degree of composure and pragmatic resolve. Interpreting the prophecy as an obstacle to be managed rather than a source of existential dread, he concludes that the only way to preserve his marriage and social future is to plan the murder himself with meticulous care. He subsequently makes two unsuccessful attempts to kill distant relatives, each of which ends in comic failure, until he encounters the chiromancer by chance during a nocturnal walk and resolves the situation by killing him directly.

The opening of the story immediately signals some correspondence with Poe’s carnivalesque:

It was Lady Windermere’s last reception before Easter, and Bentinck House was even more crowded than usual. Six Cabinet Ministers had come on from Speaker’s Levée in their stars and ribands, all the pretty women wore their smartest dresses, and at the end of the picture-gallery stood the Princess Sophia of Carlsruhe, a heavy Tartar-looking lady, with tiny black eyes and wonderful emeralds, talking bad French at the top of her voice, and laughing immoderately at everything that was said to her. It was certainly a wonderful medley of people. Gorgeous peeresses chatted affably to violent Radicals, popular preachers brushed coat-tails with eminent sceptics, a perfect bevy of bishops kept following a stout prima-donna from room to room, on the staircase stood several Royal Academicians, disguised as artists, and it was said that at one time the supper-room was absolutely crammed with geniuses. [...]

Lady Windermere returned to the picture-gallery, where a celebrated political economist was solemnly explaining the scientific theory of music to an indignant virtuoso from Hungary, and began to talk to the Duchess of Paisley. (Wilde 2003, 167)

Firstly, the reception at Lady Windermere’s takes place before Easter, thus, according to the Roman calendar, precisely ending Carnival to begin Lent, a time for repentance and sacrifice. Even more significantly, Easter is associated with death and resurrection, therefore subtly anticipating the theme of the story. The crowd assembled at Lady Windermere’s, moreover, is a veritable who’s who of dignitaries, politicians and aristocrats, described with close attention to detail that caricatures their “smart dresses” and “stars and ribands” as costumes. Princess Sophia, loudly declaiming in fashionable French and laughing “immoderately”, also appears as a carnivalesque mask; the collection of human types – peeresses, Radicals, preachers, sceptics, bishops, a prima-donna – basks in the merriment disregarding their differences and Royal Academicians act as critics, “disguised” as them. In typical Wildean fashion, everyone is histrionic, and more than that, everyone has a character to play in Lady Windermere’s script, although – as mused by Lady Windermere herself later in the night – “the world is a stage, but the play is badly cast” (175). The party becomes a masquerade insofar as everyone is compelled to wear a disguise and to present themselves as something they are not. This atmosphere of subtle ridicule initially frames the story as a witty comedy, even though it should be the tale of a crime foreshadowed by the ominous title, immediately hinting at a dissonance that Wilde plays on for the entirety of the short story.

The most immediate “Poesque” referent is “The Masque of the Red Death”, in which Prince Prospero and his court take refuge in a splendid palace to escape a raging pestilence. The feast that Prospero defiantly stages in the face of Death is disrupted precisely by the guest everyone seeks to exclude: Death itself, which figuratively and literally unmasks the partygoers. These prove to be an assembly as varied as that present at Lady Windermere’s, a crowd of “dreams” and “phantoms” (Poe 2023, 174) notoriously described as grotesque: “there was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust” (173). To the description of exquisite décor and revelry, Poe contrasts the slow stride of the masked Death, building a crescendo that gradually suffocates joy and transforms it into dread. At the stroke of midnight, finally, the pendulum that has continuously reminded the revellers of the inevitable signals the arrival of the end, as “Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” (176).

The danse macabre depicted in Poe’s tale is also evocative of the phantasmagoria in the Tapestry Chamber that heralds Virginia Otis’ travel to a supernatural realm and her return at the stroke of midnight in “The Canterville Ghost”, two of the most earnest passages in the short story. Incidentally, the Ghost’s description of the Garden of Death – “there the grass grows long and deep, there are the great white stars of the hemlock flower, there the nightingale sings all night long” (Wilde 2003, 225) – is reminiscent of a similar description in Poe’s “Eleonora” (1842), the Valley of the Many-Coloured Grass, a sort of Eden in which the pure love of the protagonists can blossom and fade as the titular Eleonora dies. Like “The Canterville Ghost”, in this tale, too, Love is the key to peace, and brings absolution on the head of its seeker: “Sleep in peace! For the spirit of Love reigneth and ruleth, [...] thou art absolved, for reasons which shall be known to thee in Heaven” (Poe 2023, 170).

Compared to Poe’s tale, LASC initially lacks the sense of impending doom and foreboding that permeates Prospero’s party and is punctuated by the strikes of the pendulum. As noted above, the “masque” at Lady Windermere’s instead adopts the tone of comedy. However, if in “The Masque of the Red Death” time is incessantly marked by the sound of the pendulum, LASC likewise contains multiple references to time (Nassar 1974, 10). Princess Sophia departs at “nearly half past eleven” (Wilde 2003, 167), and the cheiromantist appears shortly thereafter, invoking the fateful approach of midnight.

With his entrance, parodic reversal comes fully into play. The guests at Lady Windermere’s wear seemingly mismatched masks, and Mr. Podgers, the fortune-teller, is no exception: “well, he is not a bit like a cheiromantist. I mean he is not mysterious, or esoteric, or romantic-looking. He is a little, stout man, with a funny, bald head, and great gold-rimmed spectacles; something between a family doctor and a country attorney” (169). The cheiromantist deliberately inverts generic expectations: instead of adopting the costume and theatricality associated with his profession, he appears as an ordinary, undisguised man. This incongruity immediately parodies the role of the fortune-teller and undermines its authority from the moment of his introduction. In keeping with the incipit, Mr. Podgers’ appearance also defies his very role – to introduce dread into the life of Lord Arthur, hitherto charmed and spotless. Since everyone in the room is a “performer”, playing a part within Lady Windermere’s theatricals, and since he himself does not look the part, the reader is primed to conclude that Mr. Podgers is not, in fact, a cheiromantist at all.

Yet at this point Wilde’s parody operates through “repetition with a difference” (Hutcheson 2000, xii), shifting the tone of the story in an attempt to recover some of the foreboding characteristic of mystery tales:

But when Mr. Podgers saw Lord Arthur’s hand he grew curiously pale, and said nothing. A shudder seemed to pass through him, and his great bushy eyebrows twitched convulsively, in an odd, irritating way

they had when he was puzzled. Then some huge beads of perspiration broke out on his yellow forehead, like a poisonous dew, and his fat fingers grew cold and clammy. Lord Arthur did not fail to notice these strange signs of agitation, and, for the first time in his life, he himself felt fear. His impulse was to rush from the room, but he restrained himself. It was better to know the worst, whatever it was, than to be left in this hideous uncertainty. (Wilde 2003, 173)

The grotesque details of Mr. Podgers' bushy eyebrows twitching oddly; the perspiration on his "yellow forehead"; his fat, cold, clammy hands all contribute to a distinctly un-romantic portrait. Yet they also attest to the very real danger perceived by someone who, until this moment, had performed according to expectations, entertaining the other guests. Someone whom readers moreover suspect of being a fraud, not a "real" fortune-teller at all. Like a romance hero, Lord Arthur has been sheltered by his status and his fortune, until fate comes knocking on his door. Then, in characteristic chivalric fashion, Arthur – whose name is indeed a "speaking" one (see Giovannelli 2001) – presses on, attempting to overcome his sudden fear.

Mr. Podgers then tries with Lord Arthur's other hand, but then, too, "for a moment his face became a white mask of horror" (Wilde 2003, 173), before giving the young man only broken portions of his "vision". The theme of the mask interlaces with that of horror, signifying that although the cheiromantist is trying to defuse the moment, something terrible has just taken place. As readers gather later, when Lord Arthur's fortune is revealed in full, Podgers here becomes a mask of death itself – ironically, his own. Lord Arthur does not miss these signals of dread:

All this time Lord Arthur Savile had remained standing by the fireplace, with the same feeling of dread over him, the same sickening sense of coming evil. [...] He seemed turned to stone, and his face was like marble in its melancholy. He had lived the delicate and luxurious life of a young man of birth and fortune, a life exquisite in its freedom from sordid care, its beautiful boyish insouciance; and now for the first time he became conscious of the terrible mystery of Destiny, of the awful meaning of Doom. (174)

Compared to Mr. Podgers, whose "coarse, fat face" becomes "a sort of greenish-yellow colour" (*ibidem*), Lord Arthur's Classical beauty turns him into the most noble of stones. The grotesque is contrasted with the romantic, while both men feel the grip of fate closing on them. In a tale of mystery – and more specifically in one of Poe's stories – this sequence functions as part of the build-up: a crescendo that leads to the dénouement of a horror bound to destiny. This pattern is a recurring trope in Poe's work: the prisoner's discovery of the pit in "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), the appearance of the vortex in "A Descent into the Maelström" (1841) and the awakening underground in "The Premature Burial" (1844) all deploy the same moment of reckoning – a confrontation with horror before the abyss. In each of these tales, a man faced with impending doom and the shadow of death must rely on his instinct and resources to evade an apparently inescapable fate.

In LASC, the effect is incomplete because of the parodic difference introduced by Wilde in the incipit: doubt. If the cheiromantist does not look like a cheiromantist at all, and if the act of palm reading is presented as a game in which many of Lady Windermere's guests participate, Lord Arthur's reaction appears paradoxical, even disproportionate:

How mad and monstrous it all seemed! Could it be that written on his hand, in characters that he could not read himself, but that another could decipher, was some fearful secret of sin, some blood-red sign of crime? Was there no escape possible? Were we no better than chessmen, moved by an unseen power, vessels the potter fashions at his fancy, for honour or for shame? (174-175)

These lines, which as pointed out later, also seem to satirise the post-Darwinian, Lombrosian tendency to read physical features as sure signs of degeneration and criminality, are again out of context if compared with Lady Windermere's gathering, its brilliant conversation, beautiful dresses (or costumes) and boisterous laughter. In this way, Wilde creates a moment of estrangement, inserting the gothic and mysterious into a context that he has otherwise structured according to the codes of comedy. Death enters the festivity, but it goes unrecognised; readers are caught between the almost exasperated seriousness of Lord Arthur's interior monologue and the carnivalesque parade that frames it.

As the story progresses, the contrast between comedy and mystery – with a touch of detective fiction – is sustained: the structure recalls that of one of Poe's tales, while the tone remains generally associated with Wilde's own theatrical works, except when it turns to a self-conscious caricature of the language and pathos of mystery fiction. The dissonance lies in the constant juxtaposition of life (even mundane life) and death, reality and mystery, pragmatism and romance. Lord Arthur's fate, as read by Mr. Podgers, is that he will soon lose a distant, elderly relative and that he will commit murder.

His initial reaction is a frantic, obsessive rumination on what he has been foretold: rambling through the streets of London at night, he records every person he meets and every sensation, every shadow and colour, every omen he associates with murder, in a distinctly flâneuristic manner reminiscent of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" as well as anticipating Wilde's own *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (see Nassaar 2014, 137). This is the first of two flâneries, both of them pivotal moments in the short story: here, Lord Arthur seems to "absorb" London in its many facets, a collection of impressions or effects that, after some recollection, lead him to his decision-making. The second, taking place near the end of the story, results in the impromptu murder of Mr. Podgers.

In "The Man of the Crowd", the *flâneur* is thus characterised by the narrating voice who is observing him push through the mob:

there arose confusedly and paradoxically within my mind the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of perniciousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense – of supreme despair [...]

[...] this [...] man [...] is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd*. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds. (Poe 2023, 101; 105)

The man of the crowd famously contains multitudes, "*lässt sich nicht lesen*" (105) – refuses deciphering. He is a sort of carnival onto himself, a collection of masks that amazes and terrifies the spectator. As a matter of fact, the narrator himself engages in a similar attitude, watching, as the city grows darker by night, the multitude change faces and habits. The reader of LASC witnesses a similar display in Lord Arthur's flight through London:

with face blanched by terror, and eyes wild with grief, Lord Arthur Savile rushed from Bentinck House, crushing his way through the crowd of fur-coated footmen that stood round the large striped awning, and seeming not to see or hear anything. [...] Murder! that is what the cheiromantist had seen there. Murder! The very night seemed to know it, and the desolate wind to howl it in his ear. The dark corners of the streets were full of it. It grinned at him from the roofs of the houses. [...] Then he wandered across Oxford Street into narrow, shameful alleys. Two women with painted faces mocked at him as he went by. From a dark courtyard came a sound of oaths and blows, followed by shrill screams [...] And yet it was not the mystery, but the comedy of suffering that struck him; its absolute uselessness, its grotesque want of meaning. [...] He walked hastily in the direction of Portland Place, now and then looking round, as though he feared that he was being followed. (Wilde 2003, 177-178)

Like Poe's man of the crowd, Lord Arthur moves through the city without a precise destination, observing its inhabitants and being looked at, though not necessarily noticed. His state of mind, oscillating between thoughts of murder, terror and grief from a keen perception of the grotesque, of the "comedy of suffering", is also reminiscent of the illegible, multiform *flâneur*. The same can be said of his intersectionality, his ability to move from the upper echelons of society to "narrow, shameful alleys".

In pure Wildean fashion, it is only after two encounters – one with "natural" beauty, in the form of rustic country people bringing produce to Covent Garden, and another with finery, comprising a good night's sleep, a morning cup of hot chocolate, a luxurious bath, and a contemplation of the portrait of his beloved fiancée, Sybil Merton – that his horror finally gives way to resolve. To protect her, their pure love, and the future she embodies (again, quite literally, given her name), Arthur sees no other solution than to carry out this fastidious business of murder as soon as possible.

He then begins to plan the murder with meticulous care, mirroring the obsessive attention to detail found in several of Poe's tales that hinge on a crime committed by the protagonist: "The Black Cat" (1843), for example, depicts a man rendered progressively more paranoid by alcohol, who first kills the beloved family cat and then murders his wife, immuring both bodies. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), the protagonist coldly plots the murder of the elderly man in his care and is gradually driven to monomania by the imagined sound of a heartbeat that persists even after the crime. "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), the only tale in which the murder remains undetected, follows a similar structure: the murderer meticulously reveals the plot he has devised, piece by piece. Finally, "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845) also centres on a carefully planned and executed murder, which remains hidden for years before being revealed in a moment of uncontrollable exaltation.

Notably, this final story follows a similar pattern to *LASC*, in that murder provides the protagonist security and happiness for many years; however, Lord Arthur lacks the pivotal moment of 'perversity' that would push him to confess. On the contrary, Poe's tale appears to end where Lord Arthur's begins: Lord Arthur fixates on the word "murder" ("Murder! murder!" he kept repeating, as though iteration could dim the horror of the word", 2023, 177), before quieting down and recovering his self-possession. Poe's unnamed protagonist, on the other hand, mutters to himself "I am safe" to maintain control over his disturbed psyche, until one day he is no longer able to restrain himself:

while sauntering along the streets, I arrested myself in the act of murmuring, half aloud, these customary syllables. [...] now my own self-suggestion that I might possibly be fool enough to confess the murder of which I had been guilty confronted me, as if the very ghost of him whom I had murdered – and beckoned me on to death. At first, I made an effort to shake off this nightmare of the soul. I walked vigorously – faster – still faster – at length I ran. I felt a maddening desire to shriek aloud. Every succeeding wave of thought overwhelmed me with new terror, for – alas! – I well, too well understood that to *think*, in my situation, was to be lost. I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. (Poe 2023, 282-283)

In addition to presenting multiple correspondences with Lord Arthur's nightly wanderings – for instance, the feverish walk that almost turns into a sprint, the repeated word ringing in the protagonist's ears, or the crowd looking on – this paragraph exemplifies well the general form of these tales leading from a planned murder to paranoia. In *LASC*, Wilde alters the progression followed by Poe: from planning, to murder, to calm, to paranoia, to horror becomes horror, to paranoia, to quiet realisation, to murder. The moment of *flânerie*, in both cases marked by

the growing anxiety felt by the protagonist, is then conducive to opposite ends. Removing the asphyxiating crescendo devised by Poe to substitute it with a reinvigorating breakfast and a bath, a move that anticipates the sense of bathos that frequently punctuates the story, Wilde again uses the frame of comedy to recontextualise the mystery, thus parodying it.

Compared to Poe's tales of "planned murder", LASC exhibits a further stylistic difference: the narrator is external rather than internal. In place of Poe's unreliable narrators destabilised by intoxication, frenzy, or criminality, Wilde employs a third-person focaliser who wittily comments on the partygoers, Mr Podgers, and Lord Arthur himself, immediately counterbalancing the murder plot. This oscillation between despair and composure, mystery and pragmatism, ultimately renders the question of Lord Arthur's reliability irrelevant. First, although this is ostensibly his story, he is not its narrator; the narrative voice repeatedly reminds the reader that Lord Arthur would never have spoken of these events to anyone. Second, the effect Wilde appears to aim for is not the suspense characteristic of Poe, but a perpetual dissonance: the reader is never able to settle fully into either mystery or comedy, as each mode rapidly collapses into the other.

Furthermore, Destiny, invoked earlier by Lord Arthur (Wilde 2003, 174), plays an ambivalent role those of Poe's tales that involve murder: demise tends to be the doing of the protagonist himself and his own perverse instinct to sabotage his own plans, or succumb to the voices in his mind. In other words, save perhaps for "The Black Cat" – and even then, the main character plays a role in his own discovery – Destiny is not the main force behind evidence of crime coming to light. In fact, in "The Cask of Amontillado", wrongdoing remains happily undetected. On the contrary, Fate notoriously becomes a strong driving force for action and one that acts inexplicably and even maliciously in tales that deal with the death of a female figure rather than crime and its detection: "Berenice" (1835), "Morella" (1840), "Ligeia", "Eleonora", "The Oval Portrait" (1842), for instance.

In Wilde's "comic gothic", his reworked mystery, Lord Arthur is materially obstructed by destiny. Acting on Mr. Podgers' prophecy, he first attempts to poison the elderly Lady Clementina, a distant relative, hoping to unite the two elements of the prediction. He presents her with a decorative pillbox containing what she believes to be a heartburn remedy, then immediately departs for Venice – a fitting place, if ever there was one, to await the outcome of a murder. Lady Clementina does die, and Lord Arthur returns, even inheriting property she has left him. However, when he later discovers that she never took the poison and had in fact died of natural causes, he is plunged into profound despair: "Lady Clementina had died a natural death after all! The shock of the discovery was almost too much for him" (Wilde 2003, 188). His despair, again a recurrent feature of mystery tales, is usually typical of murder being discovered, or death killing a beloved one, or being overcome by circumstances beyond one's control that directly imperil the protagonist. Here, the parodic contrast emerges from Lord Arthur being melancholic on account of *not* having killed someone – someone he even likes – of crime *not* having been committed. The difference contained in this repetition, that is, is yet again the recontextualization of a familiar trope into the "wrong" tonal frame.

The same happens with his second attempt at murder:

it took him days to get over his terrible disappointment, and for a time his nerves were completely unstrung. His excellent common sense, however, soon asserted itself, and his sound, practical mind did not leave him long in doubt about what to do. Poison having proved a complete failure, dynamite, or some other form of explosive, was obviously the proper thing to try. He accordingly looked again over the list of his friends and relatives, and, after careful consideration, determined to blow up his uncle, the Dean of Chichester. (Wilde 2003, 189)

Lord Arthur's nerves, wound up by his innocence, recover their customary activity only after his common sense dictates a new course of action: dynamite is the "proper" medium. Here, too, Wilde's witticism is deployed in favour of a tonal incongruity that juxtaposes the sphere of society manners – what is proper – and violent crime. The protagonist's methodical listing of his friends and relatives with the objective of finding a suitable prey is also quite discordant, given that Arthur is presented as the loving, heroic youth who would protect his (future) family at any cost. Be that as it may, his plan fails: the dynamite, hidden in a clock, only produces a puff of smoke and much amusement for the Dean's family. This inconspicuous little incident is yet again magnified in Arthur's mind: "he had tried to do his duty, but it seemed as if Destiny herself had turned traitor. He was oppressed with the sense of the barrenness of good intentions, of the futility of trying to be fine" (195).

In both attempts, the pattern of crime construction and the spasmodic anticipation of its resolution, familiar from Poe, is reiterated, but ultimately undermined by the final bathos and by a repetition of events that produces a climax – albeit one rooted in absurdity. A second nightly excursion breaks the cycle: Arthur sits on the Thames' banks, when after some time, "twelve o'clock boomed from the tall tower at Westminster, and at each stroke of the sonorous bell the night seemed to tremble. Then the railway lights went out, one solitary lamp left gleaming like a large ruby on a giant mast, and the roar of the city became fainter" (196). The ominous sound of the bell at midnight shuts off the lights, drenching the city in darkness. While the murder does not take place *at* midnight, but some time after two in the morning, the moment signals a shift in Arthur's perception: everything begins to look dreamlike, evanescent. As the scene is not functional to the crime – which again, takes place sometime later – Wilde's inclusion of this specific trope is also stylistically significant, in that it is a clear signpost of his play with Gothic and mystery tales – perhaps even "The Masque of the Red Death".

Indeed, Mr. Podgers – the harbinger of death but also the victim – does appear after this, leaning suggestively (for Arthur's purposes) over the parapet: "Lord Arthur stopped. A brilliant idea flashed across him, and he stole softly behind. In a moment he had seized Mr. Podgers by the legs, and flung him into the Thames. There was a coarse oath, a heavy splash, and all was still" (*ibidem*). The unceremonious and unplanned death of Mr. Podgers is decidedly unromantic: attacked from behind, the grotesque little man goes down in a suitably grotesque fashion. While scholarly assessments tend to stress the hero's "stolid and task-oriented common sense" (Sammells 2024, 104) and pragmatism (see also McCormack 2004, 103; Giovannelli 2001; Jones 2011), it is not his logic that prevails. He fully embraces the most irrational reasoning, believing that Mr. Podgers' fortune is truthful and actively committing to it before his life can progress on the rest of its "rightful" path. When he does murder the cheiromantist, it is almost by accident, in the most unprepared fashion.

As an aside that would merit further investigation, although Lord Arthur's actions are clearly filtered through an ironic lens that plays on the dissonance between his professed common sense, his lamentations over Destiny, and his careful planning of a murder, his firm belief in the signs deciphered by Mr. Podgers may also be rooted in contemporary theories of criminality. As an ample body of scholarship has shown, the Victorian *fin de siècle* was permeated by what would now be recognised as pseudo-scientific discourses on the physical markers of criminality and the outward signs of degeneration (Stocking 1991; Leps 1992; Greenslade 1994; Lightman 1997; Thomas 1999; Frank 2003; Ferguson 2006; Pittard 2011; Conlin 2014; Karschay 2015, *inter alia*). Wilde – who would shortly become one of the targets of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) – was undoubtedly cognisant of these theories, traces of which surface in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Hanson 2013; Karschay 2015; Ferrari 2017; Raitt 2017; Del Grazia 2023).

LASC likewise combines a grotesque emphasis on physical features with an ironising treatment of the assumption that such traits might reveal moral character or even determine one's future: "could it be that written on his hand, in characters that he could not read himself, but that another could decipher, was some fearful secret of sin, some blood-red sign of crime?" (Wilde 2003, 175). Later, as Lord Arthur wanders through London, he wonders whether others are similarly trapped by fate: "were these the children of sin and misery predestined to their end, as he to his? Were they, like him, merely the puppets of a monstrous show?" (177). Even Wilde's insistence on Mr. Podgers' fleshy fingers, yellow face, "sickly feeble smile," and "sensual mouth" (196) gestures toward a rhetoric of deviance, one that is not entirely negated when Lady Windermere later exposes him as an impostor (199).

After having committed murder, Lord Arthur, far from being besieged by the obsessive fear of being found out, only cares to verify that the cheiromantist is well and truly dead; when a notice appears in the newspaper that his body has been found in what is being classified as a suicide, Lord Arthur's bliss is almost complete. The love match, framed as the pure aim of Lord Arthur's every thought, including his hyper-rational, prosaic, almost stolid reasoning for homicide, is secured precisely by the criminal action. The young man qualifies it as a necessary sacrifice, something never to mention to his beloved Sybil, to spare her not the horror of a nonsensical killing, but rather what he conceives of as his self-sacrifice. The final paradox of comic subversion is underlined by the success of the young lovers' match: "never for a single moment did Lord Arthur regret all that he had suffered for Sybil's sake, while she, on her side, gave him the best things a woman can give to any man – worship, tenderness, and love. For them romance was not killed by reality. They always felt young" (198).

In this paragraph Wilde seems to hint at the paradox that in killing Mr. Podgers, Lord Arthur, with his task-oriented, pragmatic attitude, has chosen to remain firmly within the realm of romance. The death of the cheiromantist makes his romantic prophecy a reality, and obliterates what is, in fact, most probable from the beginning: that, as Lady Windermere suggests in the close of the short story, Mr. Podgers was "a dreadful impostor" (who often borrowed money from her) (199). Despite Wilde's ironic insistence throughout the story on Lord Arthur's "essentially practical" nature and his "common sense" (181; 188), the young man – who, like all heroes, will remain young forever, at least at heart – is ultimately not guided by logic, but by romance.

Sybil's role in the tale is an ambivalent one: under the guise of romance, she unwittingly becomes a catalyst for crime. Her portrait on Lord Arthur's mantelshelf embodies an idealised beauty and innocence:

The small, exquisitely-shaped head drooped slightly to one side, as though the thin, reed-like throat could hardly bear the burden of so much beauty; the lips were slightly parted, and seemed made for sweet music; and all the tender purity of girlhood looked out in wonder from the dreaming eyes. With her soft, clinging dress of *crêpe-de-chine*, and her large leaf-shaped fan, she looked like one of those delicate little figures men find in the olive-woods near Tanagra; and there was a touch of Greek grace in her pose and attitude. Yet she was not *petite*. She was simply perfectly proportioned. (180)

Her youth and innocence, repeatedly emphasised throughout the tale, allow Sybil to incarnate the unspoiled romance and idyllic future that Lord Arthur imagines for himself. Drawing on both Classical ideals and modern detail, she appears almost timeless; indeed, once the prophecy has been neutralised and their future secured, marriage allows both Arthur and Sybil to "always [feel] young" (198). Although Sybil herself is not a prophetess, her name – echoing the Greek Sibyl – and the allusion to votive statuettes foreshadow the theme of sacrifice, a concept Arthur repeatedly invokes to justify the necessity of murder.

Given her role in the story, Sybil also functions as a catalyst for knowledge. Lady Windermere insists that Lord Arthur have his palm read in light of his impending marriage, thereby engineering the meeting between him and Mr. Podgers. This encounter, and the prophecy that follows, propels Lord Arthur from youth into maturity. In a paradoxical apology of murder, the narrator underscores this transformation through what appears to be a tone of pity toward the young man:

He had to choose between living for himself and living for others, and terrible though the task laid upon him undoubtedly was, yet he knew that he must not suffer selfishness to triumph over love. Sooner or later we are all called upon to decide on the same issue – of us all, the same question is asked. To Lord Arthur it came early in life – before his nature had been spoiled by the calculating cynicism of middle-age, or his heart corroded by the shallow, fashionable egotism of our day, and he felt no hesitation about doing his duty. (181)

The contrast between selfishness and love, together with the emphatic sympathy that permeates this paragraph, clashes with the futile motives and criminal action that a strictly rational approach would identify. Yet the distance between these two perspectives creates a space in which readers can perceive the irony of both: a life entirely devoid of romance, and a life dictated by it alone. Sybil, at any rate, remains the muse who enables Lord Arthur to chivalrously “[do] his duty” and enter adulthood on terms that satisfy both the romantic and the rational outlooks.

Compared to Poe's tales that place a female figure at their core (“Ligeia”, “Morella”, “Eleonora”, “The Oval Portrait”, and “Berenice”), Sybil possesses one fundamental advantage: she remains alive. She does not, in other words, become the sacrifice, but instead merely facilitates one – or what is initially presumed to be one. Physically, however, she appears to share several traits with Poe's women, as Poe repeatedly favours “the woman with a ‘classic face’ and ‘hyacinth hair’ [...] With these classic features are usually associated a queenly stature, a pallid brow, bright eyes, and a musical voice” (Stovall 1925, 197).

Moreover, these tales, along with some of Poe's most famous poems, often portray women in ambivalent terms: either young and innocent to the point of childishness, or subtly demonic and dangerously knowledgeable (Stovall 1925; Kot 1996; Carlson 1996; Weekes 2004). In both cases, women arguably function as conduits to higher knowledge: either by instructing the male protagonist through their superior intellect, as in “Morella” and “Ligeia”, or by serving (however unwittingly) as his muse, as in “The Oval Portrait”, “Eleonora”, and “Berenice”. They thus assume the role of a ‘Gothic Beatrice’, guiding the protagonist toward an aesthetic or intellectual ideal rather than a religious one, and invariably accompanying this progress with anguish and death. While Wilde's Sybil Merton likewise acts as a catalyst for Lord Arthur's maturation and innocently draws him toward the realm of death, the trope is ultimately deconstructed, as the murder of Mr. Podgers is revealed to be the price paid not for transcendence, but for a life of blessed romance.

Although the structure of LASC playfully subverts point by point the tale of mystery and of ratiocination, Wilde's conclusion to the story then reveals the success of an aesthetic model that eschews “pure” realism both in Poe and in Wilde in specific steps. First, if in Poe planned murder, aside from “The Cask of Amontillado”, is generally a prelude to the irrational in the sense of paranoia and madness, in LASC the rationally and meticulously planned crime does not come to fruition; instead, it succeeds only when it is unpredictable and unexpected. Second, Lord Arthur is rewarded rather than punished by the fulfilment of his destiny, which he describes as a sacrifice he performed for the greater good: his familial bliss is bought with Mr. Podgers' death. Third, Mr. Podgers' predictions – initially framed as a mere *divertissement* for

Lady Windermere's guests – are, in substance, confirmed. Lord Arthur's behaviour, described by the narrator as essentially pragmatic and action-oriented, is in fact perfectly aligned with the model of mystery and romance, in which Destiny presents an exceptional task to be overcome in a mixture of ingenuity and fate, in the vein of "The Pit and the Pendulum", "A Descent into the Maelström" and "The Premature Burial". Here, the protagonist is saved from death precisely through the murder of the comical, grotesque cheiromancer.

The parody of the Gothic – here specifically a Poesque Gothic, arguably closer to Wilde's sensibility in the light of their common perspective on Beauty and the construction of effect – thus carries a double, seemingly paradoxical significance, in keeping with Hutcheon's account of parody. On the one hand, the detailed depiction of a series of failed murder attempts undermines Gothic conventions and exposes the superficiality of a particular social milieu, as Lord Arthur hyper-focuses on what is "proper" to the detriment of true morals. On the other, the final resolution ultimately confirms the resilience of the paradigm or romance that Lord Arthur takes seriously: one in which the chiromancer, however apparently out of character, does indeed possess the power to predict destiny. While the effect produced by Wilde is therefore unmistakably ambivalent, it nevertheless remains consistent with both his own and Poe's demand for a cohesive, unified narrative – one that resists lingering over overly mundane, explicit, or rational explanations.

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Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and the Anxiety of Queer Influence in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Michael F. Davis

Le Moyne College (<davismf@lemoyne.edu>)

Abstract:

This essay reopens the question of Walter Pater's influence on 1870s Oxford in general and Oscar Wilde in particular, in order to mark it more specifically as queer influence and to suggest that this question of Pater's queer influence on Oxford and the anxiety it gave rise to was the motivating idea and primary concern of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which restages the Oxford moment of the 1870s in the 1880s to explore the questions "can you really influence someone's sexual desire?" and "where does sexual desire come from?". Simultaneously, though less consciously, Wilde works out his own anxiety of queer influence with respect to Pater, symbolically killing off the queer father in a ritual Christian sacrifice that we might take to be the founding murder of modern queer theory.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Queer Influence, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Walter Pater

After completing an undergraduate degree at Queen's College, Oxford, in 1862, Walter Pater stayed on at the university as a private tutor until he was elected as a fellow of Brasenose College in 1864, where he remained on the faculty for another thirty years until his death in 1894. In 1864, he wrote his first essay "Diaphaneité", the first of several essays written during the next decade, in which he undertook the nearly single-minded task of conceptualizing the idea of the "subject of same-sex desire", by which I mean not only the concept of a human subject of same-sex desire, a "character" with both physical and mental attributes ("a latent intelligence within it"), but also the subject of same-sex desire as a topic of inquiry and an area of study (Davis 2002). These efforts were carried out parallel to more social-scientific efforts in Germany in the 1860s, the former culminating in Pater's famous essay on the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci with its famous passage on the *Mona Lisa*, and the latter culminating in the coinage of the term "homosexual", both in the queer year of 1869. Just a few years later, Pater gathered many of

these essays into a volume, originally titled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, published in February, 1873, a work that was organized around a number of queer subjectivities (Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Winkelmann), often as such, as well as a number of associated queer ideas. The book bore a readily recognizable and palpable queer affect. Further, Pater affixed to the volume, a provocative “Preface” and an even more provocative “Conclusion”, both of which privileged the idea of “pleasure”, what we might even call “self-pleasure” insofar as they called for indulging the pleasures of the self. While the “Preface” was new, the “Conclusion” was the conclusion of an earlier essay, “Poems by William Morris”, published in 1868. There it had functioned as the formal conclusion of a Hegelian dialectical argument about the history of same-sex desire, an argument that took for its thesis the Greek body limited to the concrete and at one with itself, and for its antithesis the Medieval body estranged from itself and writhing under repression, from which dialectic it drew out a new synthesis, complete with sublations, now of the *modern* body, which Pater conceived of as a body coextensive with the natural world, circulating natural fluids, and (most remarkably) *organized* around its libidinal desire. In reaching this conclusion, Pater might well have been the first person in history, to conceptualize a subject (here a subjectivity) of (same-sex) desire (Davis 2018a).

When that conclusion reappeared as the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, published by Macmillan, the premier academic publisher in England, it caused an uproar at Oxford and garnered considerable reactionary backlash both from the Oxford establishment in particular and the broad cultural establishment more broadly. Critics were concerned not only about the authorization of such an obviously queer theorem and manifesto – in both senses of the word “queer”, both specifically “gay” and more generally liberally libidinous – but also about the *influence* it might have on Oxford undergraduates and other young male readers. There was a concern, that is – we might say a piqued *anxiety* – that this queer book might make people queer, the very sort of anxiety that we see again now across western liberal and liberalizing democracies, some 150 years later. Just one year after the publication of *The Renaissance*, in February of 1874, Pater’s personal correspondence with such an undergraduate, Balliol College student William M. Hardinge, was exposed, Pater castigated by Balliol Master Benjamin Jowett – notorious for his translation of Plato, which bowdlerized all of its same-sex content – and Hardinge “sent down”. For his part, Pater was warned by the authorities and subsequently passed over for a number of academic appointments (Brake 1994).

It was into this heated environment of Pater’s queer influence on Oxford and the anxiety it raised that a precocious nineteen-year-old Oscar Wilde entered, only months later, in October of 1874, to matriculate at Magdalene College and begin a “Greats” degree. Wilde had already been steeped in the study of “the Greek” at Trinity College Dublin and in his own reading of John Addington Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873), which came out after Pater’s *Renaissance* and which was said to be “Pateresque” in both its content, especially its emphasis on the “aesthetic”, and its style. While Symonds did not broach the attendant topic of “Greek love”, he did not, however, follow scholarly custom and condemn it. Indeed, he would shortly go on to become an important figure in the positive investigation into same-sex desire, Greek and otherwise. In any event, a precocious Oscar Wilde in late adolescence who himself would later become one of the leading figures in that same field of inquiry cannot have missed and was no doubt keenly interested in the idea of “Greek love”, one of the several available, though inadequate, terms for designating and conceptualizing same-sex desire. When he arrived at Oxford in the fall of 1874, he immediately came under the considerable influence of Pater’s now notorious *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. According to Richard Ellmann, Wilde fell under the book’s “spell” in his first term (he would not meet Pater until a few years later)

and “never ceased to speak of it as ‘my golden book’”, perhaps most famously when he was in the docket on trial for “gross indecency” in 1895 (1988, 47). Even after the trial, while he was in prison and writing *De Profundis*, Wilde described Pater’s book as “the book which has had such a strange *influence* over my life” (*ibidem*; my emphasis). According to Ellmann, Wilde had much of the book “by heart”, especially the “Conclusion” that had caused such a scandal (*ibidem*).

As we might expect, Pater’s work heavily influenced Wilde’s early work. We can see it clearly operating in Wilde’s lectures composed for his American tour in 1881–82. It is a little more surprising that we should see it suffusing a mature work like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* a decade later. Indeed, Pater is more present in that novel than he is anywhere else in Wilde’s work, and early readers and critics, who were more versed in Pater than readers are today, were quick to note it. That Pater influenced Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one of the most foundational and long-lasting tenets of the criticism. Ellmann himself rehearses this truism highlighting many of the recognizable, distinctive Paterian phrases in Wilde’s novel. Today still, any careful reader of Pater who reads *Dorian Gray* instantly registers Wilde’s unmistakable habit of almost verbatim citation.

But there is an important difference between Pater’s influence on Wilde’s lectures and his influence on – and in – Wilde’s novel. The former is a kind of ordinary influence in which one author’s work *informs* another’s. It is likely that we can identify this sort of ordinary influence in almost any given work of literature, and this was, for a long time, a common professional practice of critics. Indeed, it remains a not uncommon practice to discern the echoes of earlier authors in later authors and to track the descent of ideas. Sean O’Toole’s recent study, *Dorian Unbound*, the express aim of which is to amass a range of non-Paterian sources for Wilde’s novel, falls into this mode of criticism. But Pater’s influence on and in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a different and more complex sort of influence altogether, in that it is not just one unconscious influence or effect among many others, like those others that O’Toole describes, but is, rather, the major and motivating influence on the novel and, moreover, the perhaps major, self-conscious *theme* of the novel. For this is not just a novel that *has been* influenced but a novel fundamentally *about* influence and it is a novel more particularly about *Pater’s* influence – both on Oxford and on Wilde himself.

I mean to suggest that the events at Oxford in 1873 (the publication of *The Renaissance*, with its queer “Conclusion”, its “influence” on Oxford undergraduates, and the “anxiety of influence” that it gave rise to) and in 1874 (Wilde’s coming under the influence of Pater) are the germ and *raison d’être* of Wilde’s novel. Those events must have provoked in Wilde, who had a deeply philosophical and theoretical mind, the big question “can you really influence someone’s sexual desire or someone’s desiring position?”, whether it is the desire of the young Oxford undergraduates in general, or the desire of the young Wilde in particular. Or to put it in more explicit, more contemporary terms, “can you really make someone queer?”. But these questions must have provoked, in turn, some even deeper questions, namely, “what is sexual desire?” and “where does it come from?”¹.

These are the very same issues that Sigmund Freud, born just two years after Wilde, would shortly take up himself. Just as Wilde took this early interest in the idea of influence, so did Freud take an early interest in Bernheim’s notion of hypnotic *suggestion* and *suggestibility*, translating the French doctor’s “De la Suggestion et de ses Applications à la Thérapeutique” in 1888, just at the time Wilde would begin to write up the idea that had been simmering for some fifteen

¹ John Paul Riquelme registered the significance that Pater’s work had on Wilde’s novel but in overlooking the queer specificity of both Pater and Wilde, he missed its full value (2000).

years, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which he began to write the next year in 1889. And just as Wilde would follow up with an exploration of the origins of sexual desire in his novel, so would Freud follow with his own exploration in his first major work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, completed in 1899 and the work of the next two decades. And just as Wilde would investigate the origin of same-sex desire, so indeed would Freud, culminating in his monograph *Leonardo da Vinci* in 1910, in which, notably, he cites Walter Pater's own essay on Leonardo in *The Renaissance*. What is striking is that Wilde should approximate so closely to some of the major ideas of Freud and psychoanalysis *avant la lettre*, though, of course, he uses the various devices of fiction available to him, including both philosophical fiction and gothic fiction, to carry out his inquiry into the origin of desire, and while he does arrive at some of the same general psychoanalytic concepts that Freud does – including a tripartite model of the psyche, a notion of the repression of desire, and a device to remove the censor and access the repressed – he also arrives at some specific concepts of his own, many of them better, especially those concerning the subject of same-sex desire, Freud notoriously having had one eye wide-open and one eye closed-shut on the subject of the homosexual².

In the opening chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde is concerned to restage and redramatize that important Oxford moment of Paterian influence of 1873-1874 – with some major differences, however. He moves the scene from early 1870s Oxford to contemporary London, where both Pater and Wilde were settled in the 1880s, and he “updates” and otherwise reconfigures the scene. He turns the figure of Pater into the figure of the painter Basil Hallward, giving Pater's words, ideas, and personal characteristics to him. Basil speaks “Paterese” in Richard Ellmann's phrase; expresses Pater's major idea of one's “subjective” or “interested” investment in the work of art; and has Pater's famous reticence about his *particular* investment revealing too much about his *particular* desire. That Wilde should have turned Pater into a painter is perhaps overdetermined. First, there is a very close correspondence between the words “Pater” and “painter”; second, Pater's early work was largely about art, much of it painting, including the famous paintings of Botticelli, Leonardo, and Michelangelo; third, it created a bit of a “screen” for Pater, at once a fictional screen, that covered for Pater and allowed Wilde to depersonalize and appropriate Pater to Wilde's own imaginative ends, and a psychological screen that permitted Wilde to work out some unconscious “desires” toward Pater, whose name of course was identical to the Latin word for “father”, including the unconscious Oedipal desire to kill off the father. Further, in representing Pater as a painter, Wilde is likely conflating him with that other problematic father figure for Wilde, frenemy James MacNeil Whistler³. But it is clearly Pater and Pater's ideas, decidedly not Whistler's, underneath.

While Wilde re-presents Pater in the figure of Basil Hallward, he re-presents *both* Pater's own portrayal of an aesthetic “ideal of male beauty”, often called “a type of beauty” – phrases that function as early terms for not only the subject but also the object of same-sex desire, in which the subject often collapses into its object – *and* also the typical Oxford undergraduate, who might have been susceptible to or come under queer influence, in the figure of Dorian Gray. Just as Pater's “ideal” was a new, modern variation on the old “Greek ideal”, so, indeed, is Dorian a modern variation on that same ideal. While Pater's ideal was more often than not

² The image of the one eye recurs throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

³ Whistler scholar Elizabeth Boone has gone so far as to suggest that Basil is based on Whistler (2003). While I suspect there is some Whistler mixed in, the Basil's ideas and personality are clearly Pater's and not Whistler's. In fact, while Pater was a queer theorist, Whistler displayed a homophobia in “The ‘Ten O'Clock’ Lecture” (1885) that Wilde registered immediately and answered in “The Birthday of the Infanta” (1891).

imagined in two-dimensional, pictorial terms, as Basil depicts Dorian on his canvas, Wilde's Dorian, however, is imagined in three-dimensional terms. Indeed, as the name "Dorian" might suggest, he is imagined in the three-dimensional terms of Greek *Doric* sculpture and as a sculpture come to life, in the three-dimensional terms of a living, breathing human figure. While Pater might have "painted" this figure, Wilde, like Pygmalion, gives him form and brings him to life.

But if Wilde re-presents the Paterian type and the Oxford type in Dorian, he also re-presents *himself* in Dorian. Wilde famously wrote that he was all three of the principal characters of the novel, and, while Wilde was himself no "type of male beauty" in the ordinary sense of that phrase, he was precisely that "type of male beauty" in the more specialized Paterian sense of the phrase, of a (perhaps still unrealized) type of *desiring subject*, and he was one of those very Oxford undergraduates who had come under the spell of Pater's queer influence. And if Wilde re-presents himself in Dorian, it is in large part in order to re-examine and analyze that significant moment in Wilde's own development fifteen years earlier, from the perspective now of a mature adult and through the medium of the novel. As Wilde's famous comment also helps us to see, though it is perhaps already clear enough, Wilde also represents himself in the figure of Lord Henry Wotton. We can instantly recognize Wilde in Lord Henry. If Basil speaks "Paterese", then Lord Henry speaks "Wildean". Although Lord Henry does appropriate some of Pater's phrases, he speaks primarily in the distinctive mature, wry and clever idiom so characteristic of the Oscar Wilde of the essays.

Let us parenthesize for now the third, seemingly improbable claim that Wilde is also Basil Hallward, step back, and re-assess the scene. Wilde restages the original Oxford scene of 1873-74, between Walter Pater and a composite figure who embodies both the Oxford general type and the particular instance of that type, the young Wilde himself, but he restages the scene in the London present and introduces into it a third figure, this one of the older Wilde. He essentially triangulates the scene much in the way that René Girard will conceptualize triangulation, but without any of Girard's problematic heteronormativity (1966). Here the Pater/Basil figure stands for a model of (same-sex) desire; the Oxford type/young Wilde/Dorian figure represents not only the object of such a desire, but also the imitating subject of that desire; and the older Wilde/Lord Henry Wotton figure represents the one-time imitator object/subject of desire who is now the fresh competitor or rival for the object of desire, challenging Pater/Basil for possession of the younger Wilde, which is to say, of course, possession of himself. According to Harold Blom, to whom I will turn later in the essay, it is from the (Freudian) family romance (here reimagined as queer family romance), that the anxiety of influence extends, and "the strong poet must 'rescue' the beloved Muse from his precursors" (1973, 63)⁴.

The older Wilde/Lord Henry intervenes in the scene, wrests away from Pater/Basil the younger Wilde, and begins to unfold his own queer theory and his own deep inquiry into the nature of same-sex desire. And it is in that competition with, and wresting from the figure of Pater/Basil, whom we might designate as the figure of the queer father, a designation facilitated by Pater's own name, that we might understand that third claim of Wilde's, that he is not only Dorian and Lord Henry, but also Basil Hallward, Wilde identifying with the figure of the father and usurping

⁴ Notably Bloom identifies the young poet with the Greek figure of the ephebe (1973, 67). Here Dorian might be said to be both the young poet and the muse. We might alternatively use René Girard's terms and suggest that Wilde restages the Oxford scandal now as "skandalan", a term Girard takes from the gospel, where it indicates an obstruction, most notably Peter's getting in the way of Jesus, prompting Jesus's rebuke "Get behind me Satan" (Matthew 16:23), the word "Satan" meaning adversary (1996, 198).

and appropriating his paternal function – all so that he might sire himself, or, in another phrase of Harold Bloom’s, “re-beget [his] own self, to become [his] own Great Original” (64).

Thus, beginning from the questions raised at Oxford – “can you really influence someone’s desire?” and “can you really make someone queer” – Wilde sets out upon a course of inquiry that is finally a fictional account of his own experience, Wilde engaging, as Freud would, in a probing and complex self-analysis, as he tries to understand how he himself developed, immediately after Oxford, as a desiring subject⁵. As Wilde’s narrator puts it near the end of chapter four of the novel, “It often happened that when we thought we were experimenting on others, we were really experimenting on ourselves” (2003, 54). If Wilde had come under the powerful influence of Pater’s queer theories at Oxford, then why, when he left Oxford a few years later, did he embark on a course of seemingly heterosexual desire, falling in love with actresses and eventually marrying a woman? Wilde is concerned to investigate this very question, and the investigation is the whole point of the Sibyl Vane chapters, which make up nearly a quarter of the novel. If we ask ourselves, why does Wilde devote so much space to an ostensibly heterosexual romance in what is now generally understood to be a quintessentially queer novel, we might answer that he is trying to understand retrospectively how his desire took the strange turn that it did and, indeed, more generally, how desire operates and plays out in the world.

In the Sibyl Vane chapters, Wilde actually provides two very different answers to this question: one that anticipates late twentieth-century imitative (mimetic) theories of desire and one that anticipates early twentieth-century psychoanalytic theories of desire. And remarkably, I think, he provides these two answers even handedly, though he might provide the former more consciously and the latter more unconsciously. One of the more delightful moments in the novel is when Lord Henry expresses his amused surprise that Dorian, who had just come under the queer influence first of Basil and then of Lord Henry himself and who had been conceptualized as something of blank slate or blank sculpture come to life, a live animate experiment, announces his seemingly heterosexual desire for the actress Sibyl Vane. Lord Henry observes wryly “I thought you must have some curious romance on hand. You have; but it is not quite what I expected” (Wilde 2003, 51). The first explanation that Wilde provides in the novel is the one with which we have become familiar in the last three decades or so, namely that Dorian has *learned* to desire in this way and that he, not unlike the one he thinks he desires, Sibyl, is actually imitating a well-established cultural model: acting a role and performing a desire. If one sends a “blank sculpture” out into the world, especially the world of late-Victorian London, one discovers very quickly that he is not really blank and that there is a limited number of roles and a limited number of available plots of desire, limited, of course, to the primary role of heterosexual subject and the primary plot of heterosexual romance that leads to marriage, a role and a plot cemented by religion, the state, and cultural practice. Wilde had already identified and begun to critique this prevailing cultural plot in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”, first published in 1887, which explicitly ironizes the social *duty* to marry and the closely associated biological *duty* to reproduce, at least for the upper classes who maintained property and power through the structures of primogeniture and inheritance⁶. While Dorian’s role is essentially fixed and prescribed for him, Sibyl, the low-class actress, however, enjoys a wider variety of roles and romantic plots. While Sibyl does play the conventional female gender role of Juliet, she also, however, plays a number of less conventional female gender roles, like Rosalind, Portia, and Imogen, in which the female character claims more

⁵ Freud often engaged in self-analysis, most famously in his analysis of his own dream of Irma’s Injection in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

⁶ The woman Lord Arthur is engaged to is also called Sybil, though with this variant spelling.

agency and famously cross-dresses as a man. Thus, although Dorian's cultural gender/sex role might be culturally fixed and his real-life romance/sex plots circumscribed, Dorian does find in Sibyl and the world of the London *theater* at least, an alternative world in which his ostensible love object might play at being male and thus fulfil for him a legitimate (because Shakespearean and theatrical) alternative same-sex fantasy. This is one reason he depends upon her ability to act, to *create* and *sustain* an alternative *theater* of desire.

But if Wilde has Dorian choose Sibyl as his love-object, it is not merely to make the one superficial point about the cultural construction of (heterosexual) desire, but also to make another deeper point, less consciously, to be sure, if not unconsciously, about the psychoanalytic origins of (same-sex) desire. Indeed, if Wilde is asking the question, "why, after queer Oxford, did I desire female actresses?", and the correlative question "where does my desire come from?", he seems to be answering here, with Freud, "from childhood" and "from within the family romance", though not early childhood as in Freud but later childhood – puberty and adolescence⁷. For the young Wilde/Dorian is not only acting a role but also *acting out* what I would call a "primal fantasy" and an associated "primal scene" from Wilde's early adolescence, both centered on the figure of the younger sister Isola. There is considerable biographical evidence to suggest that Wilde had a special attachment to his sister Isola and, even, what I would call a major psychological investment in her, as the site of the primal fantasy of the female phallus⁸. There is also considerable biographical evidence to suggest that her early death, when she was nine years old and Wilde twelve, constituted a major event and primal scene in Wilde's psycho-sexual development – the scene that is of the castration (death=castration writ large) of the female phallus. This seems to have been a formative moment for Wilde, shaping not only his psychological make-up, but also his sexuality, and his identification as artist. On the occasion of his sister's death, Wilde wrote "all my life's buried there" and composed his first poem, his very first aesthetic act. The life and death of the sister, his psycho-sexuality, and his vocation as artist were all bound up together, and he had very recently revisited and explored this major moment in his formation in "The Birthday of the Infanta", first published in 1889, in which he appears to identify with, and locate his subjectivity in, the figure of the castrated female phallus (Davis 2018b).

It seems to me that Wilde returns to that same scene again in the Sibyl Vane chapters here in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through which he continues to explore its significance not only in his own development but also for a more general etiology of same-sex desire. The name "Sibyl" itself, which is mentioned a total of eighty-five times in the novel, seems to be pointing to that scene. As a word, it suggests very strongly the word "sibling", a word that, though it had had the more general sense of "relative" for centuries, was just acquiring within the new genetic discourse of the late-nineteenth century the modern sense of "brother or sister". And it is notable that the term "sibling" is ungendered and can thus indicate both brothers and sisters and so pivot between the biological sexes. Of course, Sibyl is additionally marked as the sibling/sister of the James Vane character, whose character and plot Wilde developed significantly in his revisions of the novel, further interrogating the sibling relation and further playing out a kind of revenge for the dead sister and the loss of the female phallus. Further, the Greek sibyls were prophetesses, and so we might suggest that it was the figure of the sibling/sister (Isola) who

⁷ Prior to Freud in general, who was the first to locate the origin of desire in infancy and early childhood, it was common (and common sense) to locate it in puberty/adolescence. Pater and Wilde both privilege what Pater calls "early manhood".

⁸ See Ellmann's (1988) biography of Wilde for an account of Wilde's relation to Isola and his experience of her death.

functioned as a prophetess – a predictor and augur of Wilde’s own sexual desire. Meanwhile Sibyl’s surname “Vane” is a double-entendre that means both a directional indicator and, via the homonym “vain” and the cognate “vanity”, perhaps the indicator of a certain ego-formation.

I mean to suggest that it was this investment in the fantasy of the female phallus that very likely led both Wilde and Wilde’s Dorian to resurrect and desire female *actresses*, women with agency who could actually perform and exercise their agency, and who could reanimate the female phallus, which was not only a fantasy in which Wilde was invested but also a fantasy that was, psychoanalytically, closely associated with and contingent to (and very possibly *mistaken for* or *confused with*) the formation and constitution of the male subject of same-sex desire. When Sibyl acts well, she maintains the fantasy of the female phallus, and when she acts “like a man”, even more so. Indeed, when she acts like a man she comes very close to the figuration of the primal fantasy of the female phallus, or the female *as* phallus⁹. But that figuration is merely the theatrical illusion of the female phallus, and when Sibyl stops acting, the illusion collapses¹⁰. The illusion failed, Dorian promptly loses interest and even scorns her. Both Wilde and Dorian must then re-experience her death, her final castration, in order to know again the unconscious origin of desire, in order to individuate now as a queer desiring subject, and in order to set out upon the alternative path of the so-called “aesthetic”, where the word “aesthetic” suggests both a sexual and a professional demeanor. Notably, after Sibyl dies, Lord Henry takes Dorian to the opera where they sit in Henry’s “sister’s box”, a phrase twice repeated and a vivid image and metaphor of the sister’s female genitalia after passing through castration, a passing Wilde had dramatized vividly in “The Birthday of the Infanta” (Davis 2018b).

At this point in the novel, Wilde introduces two new major conceits. The first is the device of the painting. While Wilde may well be drawing on the magic picture tradition, as Sean O’Toole has noted, I think Wilde’s particular use of the magic picture is perhaps best understood in relation to Pater and Freud. Pater had famously written about same-sex desire largely through his analysis of art, including the paintings of Botticelli, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, in large part because visual art (painting and sculpture) had, though the ages, preserved a place and a space for not only the representation of male beauty but also the exploration of the nature of desire. This is, I think, partly Wilde’s complaint about Pater and the reason for his own more radical experiment. If for Pater, real life had to be lived still under the threat of the censor and under both cultural and personal repression, and art was the alternative space for the expression of sexual desire, Wilde, in a signature contrarian move, imagines *reversing* that relation so that art/painting becomes now the space of the censor (the conscience) and the record of repression, and “real life”, the free space of sexual desire. Further, this device might be read as a forerunner of Freud’s couch, also an imaginative invention to remove the censor and allow for the fuller exploration of the unconscious and, of course, unconscious desires. The painting takes on both the function (moral judgment) and the effects (guilt) of conscience, permitting Dorian to form an ego based upon the principles of the Id. He can now pursue and enact a wide range of previously prohibited desires including, of course, same-sex desires.

At just about the same time that the painting is activated, Lord Henry also sends Dorian a book. Here Lord Henry, whom I have marked as the figure of the older Wilde, further displaces Pater/Basil as an influence on Dorian, a displacement nicely imaged at one point with Henry’s taking a cab with Dorian while forcing Basil to travel behind them alone in a separate

⁹ Wilde explores the relation between the female phallus, the male subject of same-sex desire, and castration once again in *Salomé*, which he wrote shortly afterwards, in 1892.

¹⁰ There is a comparable collapse into the real at the end of “The Birthday of the Infanta”.

cab. If Pater and Pater's strange book had been the major influence on the Oxford youth and the young Wilde, then here the older Wilde seems to be *replacing* that book with *another* one, as part of his ongoing effort to wrest himself out from Pater's influence and claim control over himself. Much as *The Renaissance* had influenced Wilde, so this new book now influences Dorian. It is precisely the point that this book is *not The Renaissance* but is generally identified with Huysmans' *A Rebours*, published a good ten years later in 1884. There Wilde discovered an entirely new post-Paterian queer terrain to traverse and so now does Dorian.

While the painting lifts the censor, this new book takes Dorian deeper into the far reaches of proscribed experience (something like Freud's unconscious) and together they lead inevitably to the killing of Basil Hallward. In his relatively free exploration of repressed desire, Wilde arrives, just as Freud will, at the deep, unconscious, so-called "Oedipal" desire to kill the father. Wilde, however, arrives there as part of his primary inquiry into the subject of same-sex desire, a subjectivity in which I suspect the fantasy of killing the father figures much more significantly given its investment in, its commitment to, and its identification with the female phallus. While this is no doubt deeply inspired by Wilde's own desire to kill off the problematic figure of his own father, William Wilde, it seems more limited, however, within the world of the fiction, to the desire to kill off Pater, the substitute, queer father, who is thematized in the novel and whose name, as we noted above, is Latin for "father", and Pater's overwhelming and indeed intolerable influence on such a strong individual as Wilde.

In 1973, Harold Bloom corrected the common ("idealizing") understanding of influence in literary criticism by noting that in many instances, especially those involving strong Romantic writers, influence was a burden to get out from under¹¹. For Bloom, strong poets, on the model of Milton's Lucifer, had to "swerve" away from their predecessors in order to individuate from them, while even stronger ones tried to "complete" their predecessors. For Bloom, as the reference to Milton's Lucifer suggests, this relation of the poet to his predecessor was rooted in the Freudian paradigm of the "family romance", and more specifically in the son's Oedipal desire to overthrow and even, as in the Greek Oedipus story, kill the father. Although Bloom does not follow this suggestion all the way to its extreme to suggest that strong poets want to kill their predecessors, I think that Wilde, who was a much stronger figure than Bloom – does, and if he does, it is for several overdetermined reasons. First, Wilde had an undeniable contrarian impulse to overturn nearly every thinker since Aristotle. That was partly a function of Wilde's extraordinary strength of mind and his equally extraordinary rebellious spirit. He was determined to throw over the accumulated tradition of thought, not only in order to individuate as an original thinker, however, but also to liberate himself as a subject of same-sex desire from an oppressive tradition of thought, especially moralizing thought, all the way from the moralizing of Aristotle all the way down through the moralizing of the Christian intellectual tradition. Second, insofar as the project here, inspired by Pater, is to freely explore unconscious desire, in Freud's spirit of unfettered inquiry, it must lead inevitably to this deepest of desires, registered throughout literature, and of course shortly to be identified and formulated by Freud

¹¹ It is notable that Bloom begins his study of poetry by observing that Oscar Wilde failed as a poet because he was not strong enough to overcome his anxiety of influence vis-a-vis Coleridge and Keats. He then later suggests, ever so slightly, that Wilde might have had an unacknowledged anxiety of influence with Pater, indicated by Wilde's observation in his review of Pater's "Appreciations" in 1890 that Pater had "no disciples", effectively denying his own discipleship. Of course, as I am arguing here, I think Wilde had a strong anxiety of influence with Pater and that it is played out in Wilde's masterpiece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As great a critic as Bloom was, he had no ear and no sense for Pater's *queer theorizing*, nor any sense I think for Wilde's, or, in turn, Wilde's struggle with Pater's.

himself. Third, as noted above, it is not unmixed with what I suspect is his desire to kill his own oppressive father. Fourth, as also noted above, the desire to kill the father seems more extreme in the subject of same-sex desire and perhaps even constitutive of that desire. While Freud maintained that [heterosexual] men “resolve” their Oedipal desires to possess the mother and kill the father, by, under the threat of castration, transferring their desires to substitute women, it seems very likely that many homosexual men do not, that they resist the prevailing Law of desire, accept their own castration and continue to possess the mother, transferring their desire to substitute men instead. Fifth and finally, Wilde had already written about the killing of the prophet in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”, in which he parodies Oedipus (Gr. “swollen foot”) in the chiromancer Podgers who is explicitly marked by his “fat fingers” (Wilde 2003, 164) and parodies as well the very notions of fate and prophecy, particularly fate/prophecy of desire. And he would presently write again about the killing of the prophet in *Salomé* in 1892, and the fate/prophecy of Christian asceticism, which is to say Christian *desire*, where desire is understood as *longing* for the lost object, which in Pater’s formulation is a Christian longing for the lost “Greek” object, where the body was “at one with itself”.

In Chapter 11, Wilde has Dorian dive into the book that Lord Henry had sent him following the death of Sibyl Vane and chart its extraordinary, alternative, queer terrain. The chapter interrupts the plot of the novel in order to take measure of this terrain and catalog everything in it. Cataloging is a constituent feature and generic convention of the epic, from Homer to Milton (and on to Melville in the 19th century) and if Wilde engages in such cataloging here, it is because he has conceptualized in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* nothing short of queer epic, a founding story for modern queer experience. While the chapter unfolds outside of the novel’s plot, roaming widely and freely across alternative space and time, within that plot eighteen years have elapsed, so that when the plot resumes it is now Dorian’s thirty-eighth birthday. This lapse of time might be read as a textual symptom or marker of the passage of time from the Oxford moment of 1873-1874 to the present moment now of 1890 or so, and it brings the plot back, for the first time in a long time, to the figure of Basil Hallward, who had been largely displaced by both Henry and Dorian, in order now to carry out the deep psychological work of killing him off, giving this founding story of modern queer experience its “founding murder”.

In Chapter 12, Wilde stages a preliminary scene between Dorian and Basil, that further reinscribes and further elaborates the association between Basil and Pater, just prior to Chapter 13 and the scene of the murder. Interestingly Wilde gives to Basil a line that echoes the charge levelled against Pater at Oxford in response to the publication of *The Renaissance* and particularly its “Conclusion”, which had urged readers in no uncertain terms to seek their pleasure. Now Wilde has Basil level the charge against Dorian: “You have filled them with a madness for pleasure” (2003, 112). First, this reminds us that Wilde’s whole project had its origin in that Oxford moment and is essentially a thought-experiment that explores the question, “can you really influence someone’s desire” and its close corollaries can you influence someone’s desiring position (and what is desire anyway?) and someone’s desiring practices. Notably, while Pater might have *inspired* this thought experiment, it was not Pater but Wilde who actually *pursued* it. Indeed, when the original charge was leveled against Pater, he was so shocked that he withdrew the “Conclusion”, suppressing it from subsequent editions of *The Renaissance*, and restoring it only much later. While the more reticent Pater proceeded cautiously and kept in line with the Victorian moral order that his work threatened, the bolder Wilde, however, threw caution to the wind, going where Pater would not dare to go. If Wilde gives this line to the Paterian Basil here, it is not only to mark Pater’s own retreat from the avant-garde to a more conservative moral position, but also Pater’s more moral function as a figure of the conscience for Wilde.

In Chapter 13, when Wilde has Dorian show the painting to Basil just before he murders him, Wilde reinscribes and develops the association between Pater and Basil once more, this time resurrecting the rhetoric of that new “ideal of beauty” that Pater had introduced in the 1860s and 70s, and that Wilde had ascribed to Basil in the opening of the novel. Here, Wilde is clearly concerned to have Dorian re-assign that ideal to the Pater/Basil figure and to make *him* responsible for it rather than Dorian, who did not originate the idea but rather pursued it to its (psycho)logical ends. Basil denies it is his picture, but Dorian reminds him of its origin in Pater/Basil’s radical new *idea* of a male *ideal* of beauty:

‘I don’t believe it is my picture.’
 ‘Can’t you see your ideal in it?’ said Dorian bitterly.
 ‘My ideal as you call it...’
 ‘As you called it’. (2003, 116)

That Wilde is intent to recall these original moments of Paterian influence, whether it was the original moment of influence at Oxford in 1873/4 or the fictionalized moment of influence at the beginning of the novel in London in 1890 or so, just before the murder, suggests that he is, indeed, playing out through Dorian his own anxiety of influence and that his having Dorian murder Basil is an imaginative effort to free himself from that influence and fully individuate. It is notable that Wilde has Dorian seize a knife that he had last used to “cut a cord” in order to kill Basil, introducing the metaphor of cutting the (umbilical) cord into the act of killing and suggesting that that killing completes a kind of birthing for Dorian here – a birthing on Dorian’s birthday – a cutting off/castration that marks the birthday just as a castration had in “The Birthday of the Infanta”, a double castration even insofar as it involves the cutting off of a *castrato*.

Also notable, however, is that the murder should be rendered in the vivid imagery of Christian sacrifice. First, Basil, not unlike that other prophet, John Baptist, whom Wilde would shortly go on to depict and dramatize in *Salomé*, appears sexually pure and innocent, maintaining a posture of chaste desire¹². Second, when Basil urges Dorian to pray, he gives the scene a clear religious context, which Dorian further adds to when he notes, in response, that he had already worshipped Basil too much. After suggesting they pray, Basil further develops the religious context, now explicitly invoking the image of Christian sacrifice, citing the biblical verse “Though your sins be as scarlet I will make them as white as snow” (Wilde 2003, 116). While that verse originates in the Old Testament in Isaiah 1:18, it was echoed in the New Testament in Mark 9:3, where it became associated directly with Christ’s purifying sacrifice that “which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Third, Dorian’s stabbing of Basil in “the great vein that is behind the ear” (Wilde 2003, 117), the site of both the vertebral and carotid arteries, appears to be an act of animal sacrifice that would lead to a quick death, though, to be sure, the subsequent stabs suggest some added rage, the filial rage perhaps of Oedipus as he repeatedly beats his father Laius to death¹³. This imagery of Christian sacrifice resembles and anticipates the imagery in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in the opening lines of which Wilde again uses the word “scarlet” before giving a clear allusion to the sacrifice of Christ: “He did not wear

¹² Later in Chapter 16, when Dorian is in the hansom on his way to the docks, he recalls a line of Pater’s – “To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul!” – before thinking “[h]ow the words rang in his ears! His soul, certainly, was sick to death. Was it true that the senses could cure it? Innocent blood had been spilled. What could atone for that?” (Wilde 2003, 134).

¹³ Dorian’s rage may also suggest the brutality of the scapegoat rite. It is possible that Wilde is in some ways reenacting the scapegoating of Pater at Oxford.

his scarlet coat, / For blood and wine are red" (883). Interestingly, once Basil is dead, Dorian thinks of him repeatedly as a "thing", a word that later acquires special value in the famous refrain of Wilde's ballad, "Each man kills the thing he loves" (884), and I think we might read that refrain as a deferred, retrospective gloss of this scene in *Dorian Gray*. If, after being killed, Dorian thinks about Basil as a "thing", it is because Dorian has "killed the thing he loves".

This complicates the scene of the anxiety of influence, Wilde completing not only Pater but also Bloom, in advance of Bloom. Here I would like to turn from Bloom's theory of influence to René Girard's theory of mimetic desire in order to account for what is happening in Wilde's text. Bloom's and Girard's theories are quite similar, each one concerned with the problem of the predecessor and of the imitation the predecessor, though Bloom's extends from Freud's primal scene while Girard's intervenes in that scene (Bloom-style) and reads it a little differently. For Girard, a subject learns to desire by imitating the desires of others (like the desire of the father), and this results in a competition for the shared object of desire. Indeed, I have read the Henry-Basil-Dorian triangle in this way above. More than this, the competition for the object of desire can very well lead to violence. In this particular case, adjusted to the queer scene, we might say that Wilde deploys Dorian to commit violence against Pater/Basil to gain sole possession of the object of desire, which, however, is also *himself*—a kind of self-possession and "self-realization", to use a term important for Pater and Wilde both.

The fact that the violence is rendered as a kind of sacred violence suggestive of the sacrifice of Christ, points us further down the Girardian path, for, for Girard, it was the act of (both animal and human) sacrifice in general and that of Christ in particular that functioned to diffuse the threat of mimetic violence in society and to thereby lay the foundations of a cultural order. Dorian's (overdetermined) murder of Basil might be read, then, not only as Wilde's carrying out the symbolic murder of the queer critical father, the fulfillment of the Oedipal drive, and as the violent climax of mimetic desire, but also *paradoxically*—in a paradox suitable for the prince of paradox—Wilde's execution of a "founding murder" that resolves and diffuses that very mimetic desire and thereby reestablishes a kind of cultural order. We might think of this murder as the founding murder of modern queer theory, through which Wilde plays out and works through his Oedipal struggle and mimetic desires and establishes a new law of the (queer) father(s)¹⁴.

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¹⁴ There is of course a close connection between mimetic desire and mimetic representation (mimesis) that is important for Wilde (cf. "The Decay of Lying", Wilde 2003, 1071-1092) but that I do not have the space to explore here.

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"The Trees Seemed to Sweep Past Him in Spectral Procession": Nature's (Un)sympathy in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Laura Giovannelli

Università di Pisa (<laura.giovannelli@unipi.it>)

Abstract:

Employing an ecological-awareness framework, this article investigates *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by expanding on a panoply of descriptive scenes, actions, mental attitudes, and allegorical allusions that inform the text. Attention is paid to how Dorian Gray falls prey to a self-deception that, in his greedy struggle for existence and sensory gratification, causes him to ignore his entanglement with an underlying order of things and a networked system of interdependence. By considering himself unique and capable of halting the transformative process of growth, Wilde's anti-hero goes "against nature" in a broader sense than that envisioned by Joris-Karl Huysmans in his landmark 1884 novel *À rebours*. The article shows how, as Dorian deludes himself into thinking he can reduce both human and non-human habitats to pliable commodities, a natural world infused with animistic and prophetic forces tends to respond to his deviant behaviour in kind.

Keywords: Biological Laws, Decadence, Egotism, Nature's Sentience, Sympathetic Connections

1. Introduction

As Richard A. Kaye observes in his introduction to a recent edited volume that brings together fourteen new essays on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, encompassing topics such as its sources and thriving afterlife, as well as a range of philosophical, cultural and queer resonances, Wilde's novel "remains a deeply mysterious, stirring, and elusive work" (2025, 1). Fitting with a typically Wildean paradoxical logic, this holds true despite both the book's status as a canonical text and its popularity (or notoriety) with the general public. Beyond Britain and the United States, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was in fact quickly translated, receiving critical

acclaim and international recognition shortly after its initial publication. Kate Hext and Alex Murray similarly underscore the polysemic legacy grounded in the “dizzying variety of Wildes”, confirming how disparate the author’s “interests were and how generative his work and life have been, both within and beyond academic studies” (2025, 2). If we assume that every “generation has selected a version of Wilde that reflects its own anxieties, interests, and aspirations” (*ibidem*), one can certainly count today’s ecological attunement and non-human turn among such repurposings.

Taking cues from the alluring opacity of Wilde’s novel, the present article concentrates on the ways in which Dorian Gray’s narcissistic personality and progressive degeneration prevent him from recognising the value of plurality, constructive interactions and co-evolving diversity. By regarding his surroundings as a mere resource for hedonistic self-assertion and egotistic self-complacency, Wilde’s dark hero dramatically alters a balance that pivots on a dynamic interrelatedness of components: a sentient, hauntingly receptive order of things that informs the very habitat he moves in. While seeking to reduce both human and non-human nature to a commodity or, in the best of cases, a work of art, Dorian becomes the main agent of his own alienation and ultimate annihilation.

As Christopher Nassaar remarked in the early days of Wilde scholarship, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a strange book, “a partly supernatural tale in which the characters are not individuals but symbols that move in a shadowy world of wit and terror” (1974, 37). Our analysis intends to reveal facets of this enigmatic world, which seems to be filtered through an ever-darkening lens and to have Dorian cross the threshold into a “demon universe”. Indeed, one can hardly forget that the character’s Faustian bargain entails “sell[ing] his soul in a fit of rebellion against the laws of God and *nature*” (38, my emphasis).

2. *Dorian Gray’s Bio-ontological Quandary*

“How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. It will never be older than this particular day of June.... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!” (Wilde 2000 [1891], 27-28)

Echoing in readers’ minds for nearly a century and a half, Dorian Gray’s fateful wish has continued to strike deep chords across generations. Regardless of detracting criticism and acerbic accusations of triteness or plagiarism, irrespective of whether the wish simply reanimates a Horatian/Faustian *topos* or cleverly reworks the *hubris* archetype, Dorian’s pronouncement powerfully typifies an ancestral, deep-seated fear of aging and physical deterioration as opposed to a transhuman ideal of eternal youth and immortality. One can, of course, interrogate this fear through a variety of interpretive lenses, from that of a survival instinct woven into the very fabric of life to a reservoir of ancient rituals and religious/philosophical beliefs, from the deep anthropological structures of mythopoiesis to thanatology, from the Jungian sphere of the collective unconscious to Freudian/Lacanian delusions of omnipotence and even transhumanism’s notions of enhancement and life extension, to cite some relevant domains. Should we identify a correlation with Irish mythology, it might be argued that, similarly to Oisín, the Fianna hero who is to suffer the cost of sudden aging and marginalisation upon his return from the realm of Tír na nÓg (the Land of Youth), Dorian is cursed to pay dearly for his self-centred fantasies of agelessness and fanatical devotion to the cult of youth and beauty. At the same time, it must be emphasised that, while Oisín leaves his homeland in the wake of his encounter with a beautiful woman from Tír na nÓg but ultimately goes back, driven by an overwhelming longing

for Ireland and his people, Wilde's contemptuous English aristocrat is fuelled by a narcissistic fixation on the image of *his own* youth and would willingly remain forever removed from the mortal world, as though spirited away by the fairies in the manner of the changeling tradition¹. Differently put, Dorian earns no greatness via heroism, moral fortitude, or emotional attachments. Caught up in a halo of otherworldly magic and sham Hellenic glory, as much as in the greyness implied by his surname, he loses himself in the blind alleys of self-conceit and coldness.

If increasingly enwrapped in a solipsistic aura, Wilde's "overreacher" is however not alone in his aspiration to both transcend the organic boundaries of life and break through societal laws and constraints. In the novel's fictional universe, Basil Hallward's rapturous, sublimated projection of homoerotic impulses into a form of "curious artistic idolatry" (Wilde 2000, 14) directed at his model, along with Lord Henry Wotton's Mephistophelean rhetoric, serve as essential catalysts for Dorian's inner awakening and immersive journey into hedonism. The picture itself, emerging from a unique interpenetration of entrancing and hypnotic energies – from the painter's complete absorption in his compositional craft to the Mona Lisa-like subtle expression of the boy-sitter and his "mesmerizing" (Powell 1984) by the demonic dandy – embodies a "magical artefact", an enchanted object that

literally "recreates" life, renewing Dorian's fading body and absorbing into itself the processes of biological and moral decay that would otherwise engulf the living man. The picture substitutes for Dorian's mortal body so that the biology of aging is expressed not in the man but in the image. The immortality of art – its arrest of time and change – is transferred to the flesh that in normal circumstances would droop and wither as the body made its inexorable way toward death. (Raitt 2017, 164)

Bolstering the framework of scientific connections, Suzanne Raitt gives weight to the thesis that Wilde was familiar with the field of biological sciences concerning cell theory, physiological waste-and-repair processes and metabolic efficiency as a cornerstone of longevity, not to mention Darwinian and Spencerian tenets. She thus contributes to widening the hermeneutic horizon and better contextualising Dorian Gray's "mad wish", namely his morbid will to arrest corporeal decay and his destructive tampering with the natural flow of life. In the novel's possible world, Art is singled out as a means for "compensat[ing] for the limits of biology" until, by the end of the story, "this substitutive economy is exposed as a fantasy" (2017, 165). As "master" and "disciple", a devilish mentor and an overly suggestible acolyte, Lord Henry and Dorian might both be cast as "scientist/artist figures" (168) committed to applying an immoral experimental method of manipulation and corrupting influence on those they pursue. Their coldhearted causal analysis of human behaviour, carried out through an unflinching dissection of their preys' thoughts and reactions, turns them into maliciously inquisitive spectators detached from the shared bonds of humanity. Their harmful intrusion ends by jeopardising any healthy, integral balance across the organic and spiritual realms, so that they must cope with "the effects of an experiment gone horribly awry" (169): an experiment

¹ Wilde's connections to Irish Celtic folklore and oral culture have been investigated by a significant number of critics. Among the earliest, in-depth surveys related to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, see Upchurch 1992; for an updated scholarly contribution on the motif of ageing and gerontophobia in the novel, see Ingman 2018. In a wider sense, one can provocatively assert that "[i]f the English used Ireland as a laboratory in which to test their society, Wilde was happy to use England as a testing-ground for Irish ideas and debates: for, in his mind, the two could not be separated [...]. Wilde had discovered that an Irishman came to consciousness of himself as such only when he left his country. Wearing the mask of the English Oxonian, Wilde was paradoxically freed to become more 'Irish' than he could ever have been back in Ireland" (Kiberd 1998, 21).

of vivisection that, especially in Dorian's case, is primarily and voyeuristically performed on himself, in addition to other victimised subjects².

To date, numerous approaches to examining *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have been proposed which either highlight Wilde's dialogue with what we would now call "pseudosciences" (such as physiognomy, animal magnetism, paranormal sensing), or tap into actual scientific theorisations. Regarding the latter, it is hardly surprising that the broad spectrum of biological inquiry should take centre stage, since the focus on the structure and evolution of living organisms, comprising their systemic interactions, is bound to antiphrastically call attention to Dorian's parable of corrosive infringement upon the intrinsic processes sustaining life. Together with chemistry, medical diagnosing and clinical pathology – the disposing of Basil's body through chemical substances by a blackmailed Alan Campbell, in Chapter 14, soon comes to mind – the biological perspective triggers thoughts on life-driven forces as well as the cycles of birth, growth, illness and decay, this announcing the final stage when tissues and organs can no longer be repaired and must face their inevitable downturn³.

Defying for too long the reality principle linked to transience and organic decomposition – which his painted double does not fail to remind him of, along the uncanny lines of a resurgence of the repressed that also encompasses ugliness and sin – Dorian finds himself locked, so to speak, in a condition of *lusus naturae*, temporarily frozen in the state of an "anomalous specimen" speculating about his exceptional bio-ontological status⁴. But this is not all. Besides his becoming an eccentric embodiment of crystallised youth bereft of soul and divorced from good, he can be said to exemplify an odd phenotype by dint of his family lineage and unique blending of inherited traits. Drawing on Terri A. Hasseler's analysis of the novel from the point of view of Victorian debates on evolutionary theory and physiological determinism, Dorian "is not only the storehouse of a million molecules and fibers, but also the amalgamation of a million ancestors' genetic influences [...] the culmination of thousands of molecules all preformed and predetermined by his ancestors' genes" (1993, 34). Capitalising on the passages from the text where stress is placed on Dorian's nervous system under strain, and the feverish vibrations and throbings of his nerves and tissue strands, Hasseler ventures as far as to compare him to a "Huxleyan predetermined automaton" (31) propelled by "animalistic appetites" (34).

² Raitt further comments: "[Dorian] views himself as having unwittingly unleashed a complex scientific process, toying with the notion that his relationship with the picture is owing to some strange quirk of biochemistry [...]. Lord Henry's self-styled 'experiment' in influencing Dorian transforms flesh into art, body into marble, but Dorian's 'scientific' undertaking works the other way: he exerts an influence on art that turns it into flesh, the painting into his own body [...] the portrait, which was designed to absorb the decay of Dorian's depraved flesh, begins to remind him of what he had sought to repress. It becomes the embodiment of the waste his body has expelled but not destroyed, and thus becomes dangerous to the organism that paradoxically relies on its processes" (2017, 169-170; 174).

³ In this connection, one may also recall the publication, in 1884, of "the British bacteriologist Emanuel Edward Klein's *Micro-organisms and Disease*, a study of 'the relation of micro-organisms to infectious diseases' emphasizing the importance of cultivating micro-organisms 'artificially in suitable media, *i.e.*, outside the animal body,' in order to make them observable and accessible to experimentation" (Weir, Desmarais 2022, 1). Weir and Desmarais underscore that "[l]iterary decadence was clearly identified with the scientific discourses of the day, especially those deriving from the fields of medicine, biology, zoology, and psychiatry" (2). Benjamin Morgan also highlights a trend in decadent fiction exhibiting a "willingness to engage with scientific accounts of nature as declining rather than stable" (2016, 620).

⁴ The following passage is indicative of people's wary reaction to such a black-swan singularity: "He had always the look of one who had kept himself unspotted from the world. Men who talked grossly became silent when Dorian Gray entered the room. There was something in the purity of his face that rebuked them. His mere presence seemed to recall to them the memory of the innocence that they had tarnished" (Wilde 2000, 124).

While conceding that this approach reflects a possibly too rigid focus on scientific materialism and mechanistic agency, it is undeniable that a deterministic thread runs through the narrative. This can be easily detected thanks to a web of ominous and fatalistic undertones that guide the story in various ways, from an interplay of coincidences, premonitions, curious turns and mirrored reversals, to a thick pattern of allusive echoes and symbolically charged scenes. With specific reference to Dorian's "case study", doomed to unfold as a veritable "clinical case", Lord Henry Wotton's initial inferences are worth citing. One will recall that, in Chapter 3, Lord Fermor (Henry's uncle) tells him about the strongly opposed and gossiped-about marriage between beautiful Lady Margaret Devereux and penniless, plebeian Mr Gray, who was killed after a few months in a duel with a Belgian mercenary sent by Margaret's father. In a year's time, this heartbreaking event led to the tragic passing away of the young woman, too. Dorian was thus left an orphan and placed under the care of Lord Kelso, his cruel grandfather. Captivated by this sensational account, Wotton meditates:

So that was the story of Dorian Gray's parentage. Crudely as it had been told to him, it had yet stirred him by its suggestion of a strange, almost modern romance. A beautiful woman risking everything for a mad passion. A few wild weeks of happiness cut short by a hideous, treacherous crime. Months of voiceless agony, and then a child born in pain. The mother snatched away by death, the boy left to solitude and the tyranny of an old and loveless man. Yes; it was an interesting background. It posed the lad, made him more perfect as it were. Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic. Worlds had to be in travail, that the meanest flower might blow [...]. Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow [...]. [Lord Henry] would seek to dominate him – had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own. There was something fascinating in this son of Love and Death. (Wilde 2000, 37-38)

While stepping into his notorious role as a scheming experimenter and mesmeric influencer, Lord Henry is quick to grasp the potential inherent in the Eros/Thanatos dyad, to the point of compellingly foreshadowing Sigmund Freud's key tenets – first articulated in his foundational work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) – regarding the conflicting drives that govern human behaviour, namely the creative, life-sustaining force of the libido and a destructive compulsion toward death. When thinking of Dorian's parched, atrophied body at the instant of his death – "He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (Wilde 2000, 213) – one is indeed tempted to align that iconic image with a primal urge to regress to an inorganic, inert state. Dorian's once full commitment to the pleasure principle dramatically cedes ground to brutal self-erasure: if illusorily aimed at a final eradication of conscience (and the soul), his terminal act of violence seems to be no longer within the individual's control, inescapably bringing about the dissolution of *both* mind and body. The depraved living self on the canvas and the crystallised corporeal self are thus reunited – or, more fittingly, extinguished – in the numbing silence of death, without any metempirical or fideistic hope for revitalisation beyond the earthly.

As we know, Dorian's catabasis is to transcend Wotton's fascination with the hazy possibilities prefigured by a marvellous "romance". Considering again coeval theories of heredity – such as Gregor Mendel's laws of inheritance, or Sir Francis Galton's landmark studies on psychometrics, hereditary genius and the cultivation of the race, i.e. eugenics – there appears to be more at stake in connection with Dorian's ancestry. As a matter of fact, Lord Fermor's allusion to the protagonist's genetic line being populated by romantic and beautiful women and far less deserving men finds a concrete instance in Chapter 11. In this ornate ellipsis and riveting centre of gravity of the text, written in an ultra-refined style and condensing eighteen years of the protagonist's dedication to transforming Life into Art, we learn that, concurrent

with his travels, his captivation by the “yellow book” and whimsical, endlessly expanding collection of aesthetic rarities and philosophical creeds, he could not stay away for too long from the locked room hiding his picture. That musty and forsaken schoolroom, where he used to be confined as a child by ruthless Lord Kelso, is now transmuted into a Gothic chamber of horror, a heterotopic realm in which he continues to confront himself with repressed, excruciating psychic contents, deriving a sadomasochistic pleasure from observing the contrast between his unblemished semblance and the senescent, misshapen body and face seeping through the canvas. These feelings are intensified by brooding thoughts on the ego’s nature, genealogical affiliations and adverse racial legacies, in an escalation of somberness that gestures toward degeneration and possibly teratology, instead of civilised advancement:

He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. 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. [...] Had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own? [...] And his mother with her Lady Hamilton face, and her moist wine-dashed lips – he knew what he had got from her. He had got from her his beauty, and his passion for the beauty of others. She laughed at him in her loose Bacchante dress. There were vine leaves in her hair. The purple spilled from the cup she was holding. The carnations of the painting had withered, but the eyes were still wonderful in their depth and brilliancy of colour. They seemed to follow him wherever he went. (137-138)

The prescient psychological subtlety that informs the definition of man as “a complex multiform creature” actually goes in tandem with a decadent tinge harking back to the “monstrous maladies of the dead”, in a sort of Gothicised overstatement of Walter Pater’s famous passage – in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) – relating to Mona Lisa’s strange beauty, weary eyelids and fantastic reveries, as well as her vampiric assimilation of world-experience and the *maladies* of the soul⁵. Covering the length of two pages, Dorian meticulously goes through his pedigree, dreading the possibility that his dreams might be those from which his wicked progenitors had shrunk, along a spiralling path that causes him to hyperbolically wonder whether his own life might consist in a “recapitulatory” synecdoche for the whole of history⁶. For its part, the portrait of his mother, immortalised in

⁵ If crucial, such discernible parallels have often been pointed out and need no detailed illustration here. The same applies to other echoes in the text (still in Chapter 11 and, notably, in Chapter 2) shaped by Pater’s influential “Conclusion” to the first and third editions of *The Renaissance*. For a discussion of Wilde’s re-elaboration of Pater’s aesthetic views and style from the angle of their darker implications, see Riquelme 2000 and Clausson 2003.

⁶ It is likely no accident that, again in Chapter 11, Dorian’s intellectual development temporarily courts “the materialistic doctrines of the *Darwinismus* movement in Germany” (Wilde 2000, 128). This may remind of the pioneering role played in that context by zoologist and embryologist Ernst Haeckel, who first familiarised with Darwin’s principles through Heinrich Georg Bronn’s 1860 German translation of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859). An energetic Darwinian advocate, Haeckel gave credit to the recapitulation theory, according to which the growth of an individual organism (ontogeny) would partly replicate the evolutionary history of its species (phylogeny). Thus, other echoes may linger beyond the Paterian framework in Dorian’s postulation about “the whole of history [being] merely the record of his own life” (Wilde 2000, 138). Importantly, Haeckel coined the word ‘oekologie’, that is to say, ‘ecology’, the current branch of biology that systematically maps out and assesses the interrelations between organisms and their physical environment. From this point of view, Wilde’s protagonist – an “avatar of Narcissus” (Riquelme 2000, 610) – blatantly runs counter to that mapping, setting out to *dismantle* any relational link, in an ultimately destructive gesture against himself.

a moment of Dionysian, ecstatic frenzy, speaks volumes about the mysticism of the senses and its obscure drifts. With her wine-dashed lips resembling those of a *femme fatale* or a female vampire, Margaret's figure is hued with purple in more than a literal sense, her flashing, piercing eyes also reminiscent of Gothic tradition and magic-portrait tales, as is the case with John Melmoth's facing the terrifying gaze of his painted satanic ancestor in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), one of the multiple hypotexts that undergird *The Picture of Dorian Gray*⁷.

Opening with a reference to the perduring influence of one of Lord Henry's poisonous gifts on Dorian's sensibility – the already mentioned yellow-covered book written in a charmingly jewelled style and centred on a wondrous “young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended” (Wilde 2000, 123) – Chapter 11 emblematically closes with another homage to the “hero of [that] wonderful novel” (138). Although the book's title is never revealed, there is little doubt that the French neurotic aesthete consumed by *ennui*, and destined to reach the height of despair after years of voluntary isolation spent cultivating sensory experiences and extravagant fantasies, is a literary cousin of Jean des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*. Quite significantly, Huysmans's narrator introduces Duc Jean noting how “[b]y a singular, atavistic reversion, [this] last descendant resembled the old grandsire”, across generations marked by an “impoverished constitution”, the “effemination of the males” and “consanguineous unions” (Huysmans 1922 [1884], 16).

Both drawn to the layers of ancient (Greco-Roman and Renaissance) history as opposed to the meagerness of the present, and ill-advisedly assuming that “Nature had had her day” (47), Jean and Dorian are burdened by an ancestral make-up that impairs their free will. Being implicitly invoked are here categories that dovetail with, say, Lombrosian/Nordauian discourse, Lamarckism, French alienists' research on degeneracy and, pertaining to the English context, the dissertations of mental pathologist Henry Maudsley, who published “articles on ‘Heredity in Health and Disease’ in the *Fortnightly Review* (1886), the same journal in which a number of Wilde's own essays appeared” (Mighall 2000, xxxiii)⁸. To put it concisely, the prismatic *Weltanschauung* that characterises *The Picture of Dorian Gray* invests the fidelity to one's nature with ambivalence, intertwining it with a dual thread: on the one hand, individual uplifting and unrestricted self-realisation – be it in a Paterian and psychological sense, or in the biological terms of an optimisation-driven differentiation of cells – and, on the other, “sociobiological reversion”, with Lord Henry emerging as a “specimen of over-cultivation” and Dorian “as one of devolution” combined with “malign nurture” (Foster 1993-1994, 336-337).

⁷ It must be remembered that Maturin, Wilde's maternal grand-uncle, had fashioned his plot around a Byronic-Faustian character – the titular Melmoth the Wanderer – who obtains forbidden knowledge and a prolonged life, while preserving an unnatural youthful appearance thanks to a pact with the Devil. As has been largely established, Wilde's more or less glaring thefts and inspiring sources for the composition of his novel are innumerable, encompassing Walter Pater's *Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), E.A. Poe's “The Oval Portrait” (1842) and “William Wilson” (1839), R.L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Honoré de Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* (1831), among several others. Wilde simultaneously built on classical myths and a subterranean epistemology of male homoeroticism hinging on “Greek love” and “spiritual procreancy”. He also relied on the *Doppelgänger* motif, the Gothic and fantastic modes, Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and folkloric material. Concerning this remarkably polyphonic background, I have offered a comprehensive survey in a previous study (Giovannelli 2007, 44-64). For a specific analysis of the references to nineteenth-century stories pivoting on magic-prophetic pictures, see Powell 1983.

⁸ Apropos Dorian's inherited taint, Mighall adds: “[Dorian's] criminal tendencies derive from his grandfather (from a long line of debauchees), while his intention to marry the lower-class Sibyl Vane suggests that he is in part reverting to maternal type [...] it can be suggested that heredity provides a key to his actions and a scientific alternative to the ‘moral’ emphasis which Wilde complained was too ‘obvious’ in the 1890 version of the novel” (2000, xx-xxi).

If ostensibly the antithesis of a “residual phenomenon” or an evolutionary throwback, Dorian must come to grips with a degenerative predisposition that would aprioristically shift his *Bildung* into a kind of *Rückbildung*, a form of regression (Giovannelli 2007, 17). Considering Charles Darwin’s propositions on the governing principles of the transmutation of species and the factors involved in this non-teleological process, such as chance and conflict, favourable changes and flexible diversifications, one could argue that natural selection played a mean trick on the son of Margaret Devereux and Mr Gray, actually diminishing – rather than increasing – his ability to survive and compete. While Darwin’s lay “myth of beginnings” had already been challenging a series of historical and cultural premises dealing with questions “about the relations of the personal and the social to the natural, about origins, about progress, about endings, about biological and social organicism” (Levine 1988, 2), Wilde’s concurrent reintroduction of predestination and “numinous intelligence” in the trajectory of his character’s life gives rise to an unresolvable paradox.

Might Dorian, at one and the same time, be blessed by the gods and cursed by a natural order “red in tooth and claw”, in the famous Tennysonian phrase? Is he truly adapted to the environment he is born into, so as to successfully navigate the struggle for existence, or has Fortune been conspiring against him since (and even before) his birth? Echoing throughout the novel, these queries suggestively foreground what the mature protagonist will recognise as “Nature[’s] wonderful irony” (Wilde 2000, 126). Stuck in a bio-ontological quandary, Dorian is constantly torn between a pull toward self-overcoming and the burden of congenital abnormality, his “mad hungers” (124) for experience and human finitude, a forged chrysalis of youth and the devastating effects of aging. When taking into account that, on top of this, he has bargained away his soul, the idea of a healthy balance and integrated selfhood is soon ruled out.

3. The “real moral of the story”

One need scarcely point out that the motif of a fractured equilibrium – coupled with a rhetoric of health vs decay, manly neatness vs sickening effeminacy – figured prominently in the initial critical reception of the novel, starting with its earliest 1890 version published in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*. The imbalance was variously ascribed to the text’s uneven structure and clumsily assembled, derivative, vulgar or dull elements; to the characters’ lifeless, puppet-like or “unmanly” demeanour; to a flamboyant indulgence in poisonous excess and prurience, in the style of the French *Décadents*; to a voluptuous, heedless surrender to vice and transgression for its own sake; and, last but not least, to the triggering of a dangerous breach between art and morality. Bearing on this cumulative effect of heterogeneity were also, to this day, the hybrid generic affiliations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which, besides anchoring itself in the novel-romance continuum, incorporates formal or thematic features from the novel of talk, the Gothic-fantastic tradition, the supernatural fairy-tale, the psychological story, and the moral/allegorical fable.

Against the backdrop of outraged and venomous responses from British reviewers and sermonising journalists – in newspapers such as *The Pall Mall Gazette*, the *St James’s Gazette*, the *Daily Chronicle*, and *The Scots Observer* – a minor chorus of voices did grasp the essence of the ethical parable in Wilde’s novel. Yet, the poignant moral lesson linked to the consequences of Dorian Gray’s sinful conduct resonated especially in the English Christian press and among the reading public in the United States, while most journalists at home launched a torrent of censorious critiques⁹.

⁹ For a careful overview of the novel’s immediate reception, see Lawler 1988, 327-353.

One of the favourable exceptions was Walter Pater's review of the 1891 book edition, commending Wilde's epigrammatic style, verbal agility, and treatment of both supernatural themes and natural science. All the same, Pater did not fail to find fault with "a certain amount of the intrusion of real life and its sordid aspects" into the text and with the endorsing of "a kind of dainty Epicurean theory" ("A Novel by Mr Oscar Wilde", *The Bookman*, I, 1891, qtd. in Lawler 1988, 352). Employing the adjective "dainty" with deliberate understatement, and possibly out of concern for repercussions on his own arguments in works like *The Renaissance* – in terms of a conflation of his voice with Lord Henry Wotton's cynicism, and of his artistic-philosophical revalorisation of paganism with the latter's new Hedonism¹⁰ –, Pater further clarifies:

A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr Wilde's hero [...], is to lose, or lower, organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development. (352-353)

Contradicting common assumptions, Pater claims that it is not so much Lord Henry or Dorian, but Basil Hallward – the artist endowed with a profound sensibility and attunement to impressions – who aligns more closely with "a true Cyrenaic or Epicurean doctrine of life" (353). By way of this clarification, readers were encouraged to distinguish between the malevolent elucubrations of Wilde's idle *poseur*, a corrupter of young men promoting the reckless pursuit of sensual delights, and the superior notions of "eudaimonic" pleasure, *ataraxia* and *aponia*, seen as ciphers of a genuinely purposeful and fulfilling existence, in which physical satisfaction must never go to the detriment of one's peace of mind and alleviation of anxiety. Without this harmonious interpenetration, the proper "development of man's entire organism", in Pater's formulation, may not be accomplished.

Galvanised by Lord Henry's proddings, but incapable of attaining the level of adult judgment and compassionate maturity that would allow him thorough insight, "Mr Wilde's hero" might ultimately be bracketed with *underdeveloped* subjects, hovering on the edge of the beast, rather than the angel, as Basil vividly conveys by comparing the picture's grotesque features to "the face of a satyr" (Wilde 2000, 150). Revelling in every new sensation only to abandon it in boredom – or struggling to consign it to oblivion, as happens with Sibyl Vane's grim suicide and the murder of Basil –, Dorian is indeed condemned to sink into moral sordidness, apathy and nihilistic despair, until all is taken from him. His egotism is matched by a form of vacuous curiosity that "becomes the driving force of his life, and to satisfy it he must continue to play rôles" and "shape the lives of others" (Spivey 1960, 167) in perversely random sequence. Alongside this unfolds, of course, the purple thread of Decadence, with its semantic and figurative background steeped in the intense thrills and introversion of the delicate, neurotic personality

¹⁰ Suffice it to say that, in Dorian's musings on Wotton's ideology, the aim of new Hedonism "was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience" (Wilde 2000, 126), in an unmistakable Paterian inflection. Citing Norbert Kohl's lucid remarks on Lord Henry's instrumental, shrewdly crafted "speech of temptation" in the second chapter of the novel – which heralds the awakening of Dorian's impulses toward transgression –, new Hedonism functions as "an ethical alternative to puritanism. It is based on the Epicurean and Cyrenaic schools of philosophy, in which pleasure [...] is the only good in life. In the moral and philosophical debate of the 1870s and 1880s in Oxford, led by F.H. Bradley (*Ethical Studies*, 1876) and T.H. Green (*Prolegomena to Ethics*, 1883), hedonism played an important part, but only as a negative counterpart to the neo-Hegelian, idealistic teachings of 'school' philosophy. Lord Henry's concept of 'self-development' is substantially identical to Bradley's central idea of 'self-realization', which he sees as 'the most general expression for the end in itself'. But Bradley's answer to the question of whether self-realization can consist in 'pleasure for pleasure's sake' is an emphatic no" (1989, 158).

lost in a labyrinth of infinite self-projections. In this perspective, the “voyager becomes a voyeur; unable to encounter the real world, he endures or lives an echo or a reflection or its visual counterpart”, exacerbating his “aesthetic orphan” status (Gordon 1979, 33, 45).

This said, one should not disregard the fact that Wilde did take part in the debate, energetically making his case against scornful or puritanical attacks through a series of letters addressed to the editors of some of the newspapers featuring the reviews. At that stage, before focusing on the expanded version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – published by Ward, Lock and Company in 1891, with the addition of six chapters, a softening of the homoerotic innuendoes and, quite tellingly, the casting of Dorian as unrepentant sinner from start to finish – he underscored that the moral of his story was anything but latent, even sounding too obvious, at the expense of the artistic and dramatic effect:

[It] is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life [...]. Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray* – a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. (Oscar Wilde, “To the Editor of the St. James’s Gazette”, 26 June [1890], qtd. in Lawler 1988, 339)

I think the moral too apparent. When the book is published in a volume I hope to correct this defect. [...] The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment. (Oscar Wilde, “To the Editor of the Daily Chronicle”, 30 June [1890], qtd. in Lawler 1988, 345)

In actual fact, the author was to amend that “defect” in the more richly layered narrative of 1891, having Dorian rebel against conscience until the very end. Wilde, then, wilfully presented his negative hero as unable to temper the extremes of “excess” and “renunciation”, to wisely mediate between curing the soul by means of the senses and vice versa. Dorian is hampered by a failure of connection that, on a larger scale, causes him to ignore his ingrained entanglement with various forms of communal existence and a networked system of interdependence. In the next section, the focus will shift away from the protagonist’s individual anarchism and ensnarement in a hall of mirrors, in favour of shedding light on how an inscrutable higher order – a natural world more infused with animistic and prophetic forces than Darwinian attributes – seems to answer his deviant behaviour in kind.

4. *A Break in Sympathetic Connections: Counter-Responses from a Sentient World*

In her 2021 study *Environment and Economy*, Molly Scott Cato subverts canonical approaches by inviting us to graphically assess ecosystemic imbalance, a hotly debated phenomenon in nowadays’ scientific and political spheres, through Wilde’s “picture-in-the-attic” image:

[Professor in Social Science] Mary Mellor’s description of the capitalist economy as being like Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* is another helpful illustration. In the story, Dorian Gray is a beautiful young man who engages in a variety of unspeakable and dissolute acts, but nonetheless remains physically uncorrupted. The twist in the tale is that he has a picture in his attic, which manifests the physical consequences of his dissolute lifestyle. Mellor argues that the apparent success of our economy in generating luxurious lifestyles and clever gizmos is actually bought at a price extracted out of sight and out of mind – a price that is paid by the world’s poor countries and the planet itself. (80)

This passing nod to Wilde's novel is tailored to blend into a discussion aimed at reorienting global market economy by paying heed to the complexity and delicate internal regulation of natural systems. Hence the exhortation to "reverse our thinking about the environment", which should not be treated as a "problem" but as "the source of everything that we value": as a home, "rather than a treasure chest of resources to be raided and a bottomless pit for our wastes" (6).

Although he does not cite Dorian Gray's flawed schism within the self, ecocritic Harold Fromm similarly alludes to "the dream world of the mind in relation to the ineluctable materiality of the body" (2009, 2), underlining that "the movements to 'save the environment' are not as selfless and magnanimous as might at first appear – we're not doing the 'environment' a disinterested favor – because the distinction between the environment and us is wholly illusory [...] the urgency of the environment is just one more aspect of Darwinian survival" (4). In sum, human *hubris* is bound to reckon with the hard truth of our compatibilities – and responsibilities – within the life environments contiguous to us, since, in the final analysis, one cannot "negotiate with the *données* of human existence" (45).

Applying this epistemological framework to Wilde's text, such *données* can be seen as dramatically enforcing their victory over the "freak variation" symbolised by Dorian's circular obsession with himself and rejection of biological laws. As anticipated, when registering the presence of a larger-than-human sentient world, the narrative seems to juxtapose a materialistic, Darwinian blurring of boundaries – whereby all living things come across as "quite literally related" and "graduat[ing] into each other" (Levine 1988, 17) – with a stronger animistic conception positing non-human entities as somehow conscious and "spirited". Indeed, the motifs of cosmic agency and ineffable intentionality, along with those of fatalism, paranormality and predestination, hold a special place in Wilde's imaginative vision, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* follows the lead. Set against Romantic beliefs buttressing an alchemy of sympathetic connections, affinities and "emotional contagions" that strengthen the bond between the anthropological realm and that of a pantheistic or Christianised *Natura naturans*, Wilde's novel hints at a more secret, wily covenant that might both draw in and mercilessly cast out the human subject, wavering between the poles of benevolence and retributive justice, the Over-Soul's transcendent spirit and Nemesis' punitive force, as it were.

We will now look at a selection of turning points and passages from the text where such a fading flow of cosmic *sympatheia* for egotistic Dorian is detectable. As he advances deeper into hedonistic self-complacency and degeneration, the non-human domain seems to entrench itself and keep its distance as though no longer connected or cooperatively interacting with him. One is tempted to assert that the more Dorian's sympathetic nervous system grapples with his blood pressure, racing heart or adrenaline release, the more the surrounding biosphere gets on the defensive, becoming sullen and judgemental. Apparently, this corollary of semantic subtleties traversing the novel has not been fully explored by critics. Within a limited body of contributions, John J. Pappas's article, published about half a century ago, certainly deserves mentioning. In "The Flower and the Beast: A Study of Oscar Wilde's Antithetical Attitudes Toward Nature and Man in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", Pappas touches on the motifs of non-anthropological nature, and man's place in it, as they surface in Wilde's work through flower and animal imagery. He thus offers an overview of a sequence of increasingly gloomier transmutations from an ostensibly joyful, lovely or tameable environment – epitomised by sunlight, breeze, colourful flowers, butterflies and birds – to a weird, dark, grotesque or hellish scenery, evoked through references to nightfall, clouds and mist, spiders and flies, barking dogs, screaming seagulls and the predatory world in general. Pappas observes how "Wilde, capitalizing the first letter of the word, suggests at different times that 'Nature' is the ultimate power

determining man's fate; that it is the essential standard of truth by which a man's actions are judged; and that it is a teacher instructing man in how to live" (1972, 37). Notably, the novel's rhetorical nuances would signal that "the perceivable phenomena – the birds, the breezes, the flowers – are the function of an immense, impersonal, and ineluctable process, and that this process is the ultimate reality of nature" (*ibidem*).

Expanding on Pappas's commentary¹¹, I would suggest that the "ineluctable process" of Nature's counter-responses to Dorian's behaviour evolves in three stages, in an intensification of postures that range from "lurking indifference" to "malicious scrutiny" and "frightening manifestations". It is a familiar observation that, from the very outset of the plot, alluring descriptions are instrumental in generating an ecstatic, hypnotic atmosphere and synesthetic alchemies which, in differing measures, are interlaced with Preraphaelite, Paterian, and Baudelairean symbolism (Giovannelli 2007, 78-81). The memorable opening of the novel – with its stress on "the rich odour of roses", "the heavy scent of the lilac", and "the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn" (Wilde 2000, 5) – conveys an ensemble of olfactory perceptions preannouncing the opiate intoxication that Dorian will experience via Lord Henry. Qualities like the sensual beauty of the rose, and the fertility associations of the lilac (also symbolising youthful innocence) and the hawthorn (the "fairy tree" acting as a gateway to the spirit world), can of course be read as allegorical indexes of the characters' traits, in a compelling interplay of plant lore and Victorian floriography. All the more so for the honey-coloured, flower-laden laburnum, "whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs" (*ibidem*), and whose lush, radiant beauty made sharper by poisonous blossoms is a clear objective correlative for Wotton's "yellow" insidious presence.

Yet, when viewing them from a less human-centred or cultural/aesthetic standpoint, one is struck by how Basil's studio and annexed garden – a semi-artificial, semi-natural "paradise" tucked away on the outskirts of London – brim with an eclectic tapestry of vegetal and animal life. The paragraph containing the depiction of the laburnum closes with a note on the "sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence round the dusty gilt horns of the straggling woodbine" (*ibidem*). As evidenced by John P. Riquelme, these are

the first instances of personification (branches that feel; bees "shouldering their way" through grass) in a narrative that includes centrally the terrifying coming-to-life of something inanimate. The crossing of the boundaries between human, animal, and insect in the rhetorical figures of the book's second paragraph anticipates what eventually becomes a matter of animation involving creating and destroying life and a matter of the limits defining the human and civilization. (2000, 618)

On the one hand, the bees may again be cast as prefigurations of Lord Henry's sulphurean, dazzling "pollination" of Dorian's mind, or as the mythologised producers of honey – the "food of the gods" used in ancient ritual practices – and, together with the whispering breeze, as heralds of resurrection, immortality and artistic inspiration. The same could be said of the "fantastic shadows of birds in flight" (Wilde 2000, 5) dancing across the curtains of the painter's studio, which might well remind us of time-honoured auguries interpreted via the soaring of birds, to the extent that the proleptic syntagm "fantastic shadows" is to resurface at pivotal moments in the story, capturing Dorian's psychic turmoil and wrestling with the germs

¹¹ This annotation is pertinent, too: "The references to flowers often suggest that external nature can be lovely, creative and integral, and that human nature partakes of these qualities insofar as it is *in consonance* with the qualities of external nature, or insofar as it realizes *its essential self*" (Pappas 1972, 39; my emphases).

of evil¹². On the other hand, bees and birds, along with other exemplars of flora and fauna, simultaneously participate in *their own* processes of sustenance and biosemiotic communication, prospering beyond the frontiers of cognition related to the pathetic fallacy and further human projections. In brief, in Wilde's novel non-human organisms exceed the function of mere receptacles for anthropomorphised significance.

Some eerie, subterranean vibrations can already be discerned in connection with the garden scenes informing the first two chapters. It is worth noticing that, in this outdoor threshold space, part untamed, part designed, the typical Victorian-style carpet bedding leaves room for a freer layout favouring outgrowth and spontaneous vegetation. The meadow grass and informal mixture of common and more prized plant species bring to mind the naturalistic landscape of the so-called "wild garden", first popularised by William Robinson in his homonymous book, *The Wild Garden*, published in 1870, only two decades before Wilde's novel came out. In other words, this is an environment where the anthropogenic signature is relatively light. And, as humans relent their control, non-human sentience seemingly peers out, as the "tremulous" (Wilde 2000, 8) white daisies in the grass are quick in intimating as soon as Basil and Lord Henry step into the garden on that warm June day redolent of spring, talking about the picture and its sitter. While Wotton proceeds to coax the painter into confessing his love for Dorian, the bio-habitat around them keeps watch and somehow eavesdrops in an ambiguously acquiescent way:

Lord Henry smiled, and, leaning down, plucked a pink-petalled daisy from the grass, and examined it. "I am quite sure I shall understand it," he replied, gazing intently at the little golden white-feathered disk, "and as for believing things, I can believe anything, provided that it is quite incredible."

The wind shook some blossoms from the trees, and the heavy lilac-blooms, with their clustering stars, moved to and fro in the languid air. A grasshopper began to chirrup by the wall, and like a blue thread a long thin dragon-fly floated past on its brown gauze wings. Lord Henry felt as if he could hear Basil Hallward's heart beating, and wondered what was coming. (9)

In a similar vein, no physical resistance is exerted when Lord Henry sets out to pull "the daisy to bits with his long, nervous fingers" (10), an innocence-defiling gesture that notably foreshadows the episode in Chapter 13 when Dorian crushes the flower pinned to his coat before murdering Basil, in a fit of wrathful vengeance (149). Yet, as the painter's and dandy's engagement in conversation intensifies – and, even more, in Chapter 2, when Dorian dashes into the garden in the hope of seeking relief from Wotton's spell – one does catch a subcurrent agency pulsating in the glint of sunlight and atmospheric phenomena, amid the vegetation and wildlife, from the noisy "rustle of chirruping sparrows" to the "blue cloud-shadows chas[ing] themselves across the grass like swallows" (15). If Dorian is deeply susceptible to the lure of flowers – being a blooming *fleur du mal* himself – and one of the most iconic scenes in the novel has him bury his face in a bunch of lilacs and drink in their "perfume as if it had been wine" (23), natural cycles also make him aware of the inevitability of aging and generational change, no matter how feverishly he might yearn for eternal youth. For his part, Lord Henry loses no time in appealing to this inexorable law of Nature in order to add fuel to his *carpe diem* panegyric:

"The world belongs to you for a season [...]. The common hill-flowers wither, but they blossom again. The laburnum will be as yellow next June as it is now. In a month there will be purple stars on the clematis, and year after year the green night of its leaves will hold its purple stars. But we never get back our youth." [...] Two green-and-white butterflies fluttered past them, and in the pear-tree at the corner of the garden a thrush began to sing. (25-26)

¹² See Chapters 7, 13, 16 in Wilde 2000, 87, 148, 177.

In a nutshell, underlying the botanical kingdom are stronger regeneration powers than the human subject could possibly conceive of.

The seemingly lighthearted indifference to mankind's destiny, as conveyed by the thrush's song in the excerpt above, turns more sinister as the story progresses. Skipping ahead to Chapter 7, one recalls that, after callously parting ways with Sibyl and reducing her to the reified state of a "trampled flower" (85) and "wounded thing" (86), indirectly driving her to suicide, Dorian wanders aimlessly through the ramshackle East End at night, visibly stunned. As dawn arrives, on reaching Covent Garden he is confronted with a glorious sky hollowing itself into an adamantine "perfect pearl", and his eye is drawn to bunches of uncannily "nodding lilies" (*ibidem*) stacked in the carts rumbling past. As in the previous garden scene, the flowers create the (false) impression of granting "an anodyne for his pain" (*ibidem*). When finally crossing the threshold of his house and beginning to notice the first disquieting signs of corruption in his portrait, it is the "quivering, ardent sunlight" that unsparingly shows 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" (88). What is more, the chapter ends with an unsettling reference to Sibyl which both hints at the myth of the unrequited love between the mountain nymph Echo and Narcissus, as recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and encompasses codes of communication in the biological realm that are foreign – and possibly antithetical – to human mythopoiesis: "A faint echo of his love came back to him. He repeated her name over and over again. The birds that were singing in the dew-drenched garden seemed to be telling the flowers about her" (90). Rather than Dorian's delirious perception, what emerges here is a hidden choreography revolving around non-verbal meaning-making and arcane, quietly menacing animistic energies.

The weakening of sympathetic alliances is further reflected in the attitude we have termed "malicious scrutiny", that is to say, a counter-response from the non-human environment that assumes the guise of a cold, disapproving stare materialising in the urban context, too. Among the illustrative examples, one can think of the epilogue of Chapter 10, when, as Dorian returns from the depths of his engrossing reading of the yellow book, the prying eye of a wildly colourful, incarnated sky suddenly intrudes upon the scene: "Cloudless, and pierced by one solitary star, a copper-green sky gleamed through the windows" (121). A more dramatic, istic occurrence is to be found in Chapter 13, as, in the turbulent wake of Basil's assassination, Dorian steps out on the balcony and, instead of getting relief, is staggered by a phantasmatic sight nearly impossible to withstand:

The wind had blown the fog away, and the sky was like a monstrous peacock's tail, starred with myriads of golden eyes [...]. A bitter blast swept across the Square. The gas-lamps flickered, and became blue, and the leafless trees shook their black iron branches to and fro. He shivered, and went back, closing the window behind him. (152)

As the atmosphere darkens with Gothic and decadent undertones, a conspicuous succession of "frightening manifestations" ensues, as though bleakly testifying to how Nature "has her monsters, things of bestial shape and with hideous voices" (130). Indeed, one can hardly miss the grotesque and macabre imagery that permeates Chapter 16, where Dorian's odyssey toward the Docks and the opium den is announced by means of a personified, almost Dantesque hellscape. Here, ghastly, demonic energies appear to turn humans into regressed creatures and automatons, as opposed to the quicker, if somewhat rambling, reactions of animals such as horses and dogs, in an alarming upheaval of the hierarchy of existence:

The moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull. From time to time a huge misshapen cloud stretched a long arm across and hid it. The gas-lamps grew fewer, and the streets more narrow and gloomy. Once the man lost his way, and had to drive back half a mile. A steam rose from the horse as it splashed up the puddles. The side-windows of the hansom were clogged with a grey-flannel mist. [...]

The way seemed interminable, and the streets like the black web of some sprawling spider [...] he could see the strange bottle-shaped kilns with their orange fan-like tongues of fire. A dog barked as they went by, and far away in the darkness some wandering seagull screamed. The horse stumbled in a rut, then swerved aside, and broke into a gallop. (176-177)¹³

In Pappas's words, the whole opium den episode – including the shocking encounters with Adrian Singleton, James Vane, and the woman who exposes Dorian's cover-up as "Prince Charming" – urges us to ponder on how "men are an integral part of nature" and how "their confusing or in any way denying their real relationship to it can be calamitous", potentially leading to "their reduction to a purely animal state of existence and to the most squalid sort of extinction" (1972, 46).

5. Conclusion

Bringing the argument full circle, I wish to conclude with a textual instance adding to the paradigms of both malicious scrutiny and frightening manifestations not from an urban perspective, but through the lens of a countryside scenery that, consistent with Basil's garden, turns out to be tamed and wild in equal measure. Little wonder that, toward the end of Dorian's parable, green surroundings should be divested of any idyllic aura. This time, moreover, the presence of a conservatory showcasing orchids heightens the sensational effect by winking at orchidology (or "orchidomania") among Victorians, for whom these flamboyant exotic specimens not only symbolised sophistication and sensual desire, but also possessed affective sensibility and "almost bestial" traits: orchids were deemed capable of facial mimicry and "inexplicably strange behavior" (Voskuil 2017, 19). Hence Lord Henry's befitting claim to have cut an orchid for his buttonhole, "a marvellous spotted thing, as effective as the seven deadly sins" (Wilde 2000, 185).

As interlude sections meant to convey a sense of (relative) peace in the wake of Chapter 16's underworld storm, and laying the groundwork for the novel's grand finale, Chapters 17 and 18 feature a temporary change of scene, seeing Dorian as master of ceremonies at his rural estate of Selby Royal. In the company of Wotton, he is entertaining some guests at tea-time, including the nimble-minded Duchess of Monmouth, with whom he is flirting, and her elderly husband, intent on describing "the last Brazilian beetle that he had added to his collection" (*ibidem*). All this, comprising the conversation about the commodified insect, is happening within the estate's conservatory, as though an invisible hand were orchestrating the event in the manner of a Chinese-box display. And, indeed, as he withdraws to gather some orchids for the duchess, the whims of fate decree that Dorian be metaphorically transformed into a "flower to look at", in Lord Henry's lexicon. The crucial difference now is that he is not being admired by

¹³ Regarding the urban anthropocene's cluttered scenery and the rendering of a "hyper-sentient city" in Chapter 16, Elisa Bizzotto emphasises Wilde's drawing on the Ruskinian trope of the pathetic fallacy: "The degenerated human underworld of the suburban metropolis mirrors the environmental deterioration conveyed through the characterisation of animal, atmospheric, and architectonic presences in spectral terms [...] an implicit parallel is drawn between human and animal degradation by denouncing the dramatic and de-naturalising effects of progress on animals, which are either deprived of their essence, or whose behaviours signal difficulties and danger. Hence, the dog barks in the dark, the shrieking seagull wanders aimlessly, the horse stumbles and changes pace" (2022, 52-53).

the beguiling dandy, but spied upon by the embodiment of a wrathful, natural(istic) force, i.e. James Vane, set on hunting down “Prince Charming” in order to exact vengeance for his sister Sibyl. James’s inquisitive eyes, fixed on him from behind the glass as if he were an aestheticised botanical specimen, make him faint and collapse like a greenhouse blossom deprived of vigour. Intriguingly, James seems to have left no traceable footmarks on the flower-beds around the building, as if Goddess Flora herself had been conspiring with Justice, craftily sheltering their “retributive agent”. Even the “clear, pine-scented air” (192) of the winter morning misleadingly reinforces Dorian’s illusion of regained freedom.

However, when he understands that the man accidentally killed by Sir Geoffrey Clouston – during the unfortunate hunting expedition for hares and birds – is a sailor, and hurries towards the stables to check whether the corpse is really that of James, all the non-human forms of life he runs across express a willingness to forsake him, starting from a totemic row of trees:

In less than a quarter of an hour Dorian Gray was galloping down the long avenue as hard as he could go. The trees seemed to sweep past him in spectral procession, and wild shadows to fling themselves across his path. Once the mare swerved at a white gate-post and nearly threw him. He lashed her across the neck with his crop. She cleft the dusky air like an arrow. The stones flew from her hoofs. (199)

It will not take long before Dorian realises that such a procession was actually a prelude to his own funeral and unmourned “desiccation”, in consonance with an entirely fitting natural punishment for his indulging in the excesses of solipsism, refusing all the while to acknowledge the import of social responsibility, affective ties, and systemic coexistence.

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The Duchess of Padua: An Italianate Play by Oscar Wilde

Donatella Abbate Badin
Università di Torino (<donatella.badin@unito.it>)

Abstract

This article re-examines *The Duchess of Padua* (1883) by Oscar Wilde within the framework of Italianate drama, Irish cultural politics, and gender studies. It argues that Renaissance Italy functions less as a historical setting than as a symbolic space through which Wilde explores modern concerns such as political violence, dispossession, and social injustice. Focusing on Guido's rejection of revenge and Beatrice's assumption of agency, the essay demonstrates how Wilde subverts the conventions of revenge tragedy to articulate an Anglo-Irish ambivalence toward violence and an emerging ethics grounded in love, restraint, and moral transformation.

Keywords: Gender and Agency, Irish Politics, Italianate Drama, Oscar Wilde, *The Duchess of Padua*

1. Introduction: Wilde and Italy

One may ask why Oscar Wilde, at the beginning of his career as a dramatist, chose Italy – specifically Renaissance Italy – as the setting for one of his earliest plays, *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), a revenge tragedy that contrasts sharply with his later theatrical production. Italy, in fact, occupies a central – though still insufficiently examined¹ – place in Wilde's life and works, functioning not merely as a source of aesthetic inspiration, but as a recurring imaginative and symbolic landscape.

¹ The reception and influence of Wilde in Italy have been exhaustively studied by Masolino D'Amico and Rita Severi while most other studies concerning Wilde and Italy are of a biographical nature, regarding Wilde's experiences in southern Italy in the last three years of his life (e.g. Arcara 2001, Dall'Orto 1997). On the influence of Italy in Wilde's works, Mackie (2012), referring specifically to *The Duchess of Padua*, shows how Wilde uses Italy as a stylised aesthetic past – not a realistic Italy, but a theatrical, art-historical construct. Manganiello (1989) focuses on Dante and Wilde, and Badin (2018) on his early poems.

Wilde's fascination with Italy was not exclusively literary but also deeply experiential. It was shaped by the formative summers he spent there, by his engagement with Renaissance culture during his Oxford years, when he avidly studied John Ruskin and Walter Pater, whose *The Renaissance* he dubbed as "my golden book" that "had such a strange influence over my life" (Wilde 2000, 735). Italy also played a significant role in Wilde's spiritual development, particularly in relation to his attraction to Catholicism. Family connections further reinforced this interest: his mother, Jane Frances Elgee Wilde, who wrote under the Italian *nom de plume* "Francesca Speranza", claimed Italian ancestry through the Algiati family (whence Elgee)².

Unsurprisingly, Wilde's early poetry contains frequent references to Italian history, landscapes, artists, and literary figures (Badin 2018). In a letter to More Adey (Wilde 2000, 1129), the Irish writer describes Dante Alighieri as the supreme "modern poet". In *De Profundis*, written during his imprisonment, he repeatedly refers to the *Divine Comedy* associating his own experience of suffering and moral introspection with the spiritual trajectory of the Italian poet. As Manganiello observes, Dante provides Wilde with a model in which suffering is "transmuted into artistic vision" (1989, 398).

Thanks to Pater and to the fascination of Early Modern English theatrical production, Wilde chose the Renaissance for his debut on stage³. Despite the lack of success of *The Duchess of Padua*, he returned to Renaissance Italy as the setting for another blank verse drama, *A Florentine Tragedy*, drafted between 1894 and 1895, and found in fragmentary form among his papers after his death. In his later days, the Italian peninsula and Sicily became both a refuge and a place of exile for the disgraced writer⁴. Taken together, these elements testify to Wilde's sustained engagement with Italian culture, history, and literary myth.

2. *The Italian Myth in English Culture and Its Role in The Duchess of Padua*

Wilde's decision to set *The Duchess of Padua* and *A Florentine Tragedy* in Renaissance Italy was also shaped by a long-standing Anglophone tradition that associated Italy with political intrigue, moral excess, and heightened theatricality. Eager to establish himself within the theatrical world, Wilde initially turned to tragic sublimity in an exotic historical setting, rather than to the contemporary drawing-room comedy that would later define his reputation. His ambition led him to choose an anachronistic genre and style and emulate – at times closely – the canonical figures of the British stage, including Shakespeare and the authors of Jacobean revenge tragedy, as well as Victor Hugo's historical drama and Shelley's *The Cenci* (Donohue 2013, 34-39). Even the title of the play signals a dual lineage, invoking both Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612) and Hugo's *Angelo, tyran de Padoue* (1835)⁵.

² His mother, Speranza, had changed her name from Frances into Francesca "regarding", as Ellmann writes, "the new name as a brilliant vestige of the Elgee family's origins in Italy, where – according to what she maintained was a family tradition – they had been called Algiati. From Algiati to Alighieri was an easy backward leap, and Dante could not save himself from becoming Jane Elgee's ancestor" (1988, 5).

³ Wilde's very first play was *Vera: or, the Nihilists* (1880) which was staged in New York in 1883.

⁴ Florence was where Wilde reunited with Lord Alfred Douglas after the outbreak of scandal, while Naples served as a temporary haven following his release from prison. His latter day erotic adventures during his many visits to Naples, Sicily, Genoa and other locations are documented in his letters. In total, Wilde's nine visits to the country underscore its enduring importance in his personal and creative life.

⁵ Wilde had initially planned to call the play *The Duchess of Florence* and the stage set he imagined for Act 1 (a market place and a church with a façade in black and white marble) evoked piazza S. Croce. Probably wanting to emulate Hugo's *Angelo, tyran de Padoue*, (1835) he changed the title forgetting to adapt the setting.

In this sense, *The Duchess of Padua* is less concerned with Italy as a historical reality than as a literary construct. As a pseudo-Elizabethan/Jacobean drama modelled on revenge tragedy, it occupies a revealing position within Wilde's complex imaginative engagement with the country. Renaissance Italy functions here as a vehicle through which issues of modern concern are explored for, as he explained to the actress Mary Anderson, the play aims to demonstrate that "the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form" (Wilde 2000, 197). Beneath its ostensibly archaic setting, the play addresses themes such as retributive justice, social inequality, female agency and political violence acquiring at times an "Irish dimension" (Small 2000, 67) and participating in what Robert Haslam (2023) calls "the Irish wars", i.e. the ongoing debate over Wilde's Irishness⁶.

Similarly, Gregory Mackie argues that Wilde's play seeks its modern relevance by staging a historically reconstructed Renaissance world that functions less as a realistic setting than as a medium for articulating contemporary political concerns. In this sense, the play's "theatrical archaeology" may be read as analogous to nationalist discourse, which similarly constructs an aestheticized past in order to give symbolic form to modern experiences of dispossession and political grievance (2012, *passim*).

By revisiting *The Duchess of Padua* through the combined lenses of Italianate drama, feminist critique, and Irish cultural politics, this paper contributes to a relatively limited body of scholarship seeking to reassess the play's significance. It argues that Wilde's revision of the revenge tragedy – culminating in Guido's rejection of violence and in Beatrice's assumption of the role of avenger – reflects not only aesthetic and ethical concerns, but also a distinctly Anglo-Irish ambivalence toward political violence and an emerging attention to female agency. In projecting contemporary debates onto an Italian setting, Wilde anticipates key elements of his later social thought while simultaneously engaging with issues central to late nineteenth-century Ireland.

3. Composition, Production and Early Reception

The Duchess of Padua was written in Paris in 1882, shortly after Wilde's American lecture tour during which he sought to establish connections within the theatrical world. Completed in March 1883, the play represents a deliberate attempt to engage with the long-standing tradition of Italianate drama in English literature and to establish the author as participant in the grand tradition of British theatre. His ambitions for the play were closely tied to the American actress Mary Anderson, whom he envisioned in the role of the Duchess.

Wilde's correspondence with Anderson reveals both the scale of his aspirations and his acute awareness of theatrical prestige. He imagined a collaboration that would elevate Anderson to the stature of Rachel (the nickname of Elisa Félix, the star of the Comédie-Française) and himself to that of Victor Hugo, whose historical plays clearly served as an important model⁷. In one letter, Wilde expressed the hope that the play would enable them to "simultaneously become immortal in one night" (2000, 179), while in another he described it as "the masterpiece of all my literary work, the *chef-d'œuvre* of my youth" (196).

Despite Wilde's enthusiasm, Anderson ultimately declined the role, a decision that significantly undermined his theatrical plans. The reasons for her refusal remain a matter of critical

⁶ For discussions of Wilde and Irishness, cf. Coakley 1994; Kiberd 1995; Haslam 2014, 2023; Markey 2014; Killeen 2015; Eltis 2017.

⁷ "I doubt not for a moment that I can and will write for you a play which, created for you, and inspired by you, shall give you the glory of a Rachel and may yield me the fame of a Hugo" (Wilde 2000, 179).

debate, Donohue suggests that in addition to the play's perceived outdatedness, its imitativeness may have discouraged the actress: it appeared indebted to a "brand of post-Shakespearean dramaturgy", derivative in language, characterization and plot, "a type of drama so pervasive in the culture, and so overlaid with proto-Shakespearean characterizational and rhetorical strategies" to the point of bordering on plagiarism (2013, 25-26).

What was perceived at the time as excessive derivativeness may, from a modern perspective, be reinterpreted as a sort of intertextual experimentation, in which quotation and allusion function as deliberate strategies for situating the work within a broader literary tradition. Wilde himself appears to have adopted this view, since, as Donohue points out, he was "blithely unconcerned about how recognizable echoes of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and other plays in the grand procession of British dramatic tradition" would be taken by his audience (2013, 51). For him, such echoes signaled his inclusion within the British dramatic lineage; for Anderson, however, they constituted a serious flaw.

The play was eventually staged in New York in 1891 by Lawrence Barrett at the Broadway Theatre under the title *Guido Ferranti*. This production shifted the focus from the Duchess to the male protagonist, altering the interpretative balance of the work. Wilde's authorship was not advertised⁸, and although the production was treated with a degree of respect, it ran for only three weeks and failed to achieve either critical acclaim or commercial success. Subsequent adaptations – including a German translation staged in Hamburg in 1904 (Schroeder 2007, 58-71) – met with similarly limited reception, reinforcing the play's reputation as a theatrical failure. In the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in Donohue's reckoning, there were only some amateurish College performances and very few professional English-language productions, the latest being in 2010 at the Pentameters Theatre in London (2013, 16-17). Subsequent musical adaptations, two operas and a symphonic work incorporating fragments of the play⁹, did not help its reputation, unlike what happened with *A Florentine Tragedy* given some fame by Zemlinsky's opera *Eine Florentinische Tragödie* (1915-1916).

For over twenty-five years *The Duchess of Padua* remained unpublished. Wilde had twenty copies privately printed at his own expense but the first official publication appeared only in 1908 when it was included in Ross's edition of the collected works (Donohue 2013, 51).

Wilde later distanced himself from the play. In a letter to Robert Ross dated 29 July 1898, he described it as "unfit for publication", adding that it was "the only one of my works that comes under that category", though conceding that "there are some good lines in it" (2000, 1091).

4. The Duchess of Padua: Plot and Italianate Framework

Set against the backdrop of the violent rivalries that characterized Renaissance Italian city-states, *The Duchess of Padua* centres on a carefully orchestrated plot of revenge. The protagonist, Guido Ferranti, seeks to avenge the murder of his father, a crime for which the Duke of Padua is responsible. The structural and thematic debt to *Hamlet* is immediately apparent: like Shakespeare's prince, Guido is initially driven by a filial obligation to exact vengeance, yet becomes increasingly hesitant as he confronts the implications of his task, particularly after falling in love.

⁸ *The New York Tribune* identified, however, Wilde as the author of the play much to his annoyance, prompting him to write that all art should be anonymous.

⁹ The play inspired two operas, one by the American composer Jane Van Etten (*Guido Ferranti*, staged at the Auditorium Theater of Chicago in 1914) and another by Maurice Le Boucher, *La Duchesse de Padoue* performed at l'Opéra de Paris in 1831. Four fragments from the play were composed in *A Symphony of Sorrows* by Henry Muldrow recorded in 1999 (Englebert 2018).

Rather than killing the Duke outright, Guido resolves to pursue a more elaborate form of revenge. Acting on the advice of the sinister Moranzone, he enters the Duke's service in order to gain his trust and ultimately destroy him in a manner that will inflict psychological as well as physical suffering. The aim is not merely to kill but to do so after revealing the motive for the betrayal by a person the Duke trusted, thereby intensifying the moral impact of the act – a strategy consistent with the conventions of Renaissance revenge tragedy, in which delay and subtlety heighten both suspense and cruelty.

While residing at court and awaiting the opportune moment to act, Guido becomes emotionally entangled with the Duke's wife, Beatrice. This development introduces a destabilizing element into the revenge plot, transforming the play into melodrama as personal desire comes into conflict with the imperatives of vengeance. When the moment arrives, Guido – again echoing Hamlet and the praying Claudius – finds himself unable to carry out the murder. In a decisive departure from generic expectation, the act of violence is instead performed by Beatrice who, weary of her subjugation and determined to assert control over her fate, kills her husband.

Guido's response to this act is one of horror and rejection. Interpreting Beatrice's behaviour as transgressive and unwomanly, he repudiates her, thereby reasserting the gender norms that her action has disrupted. In retaliation, Beatrice accuses Guido of the murder, leading to his imprisonment and condemnation. The final act introduces a shift toward reconciliation: the Duchess, now repentant, attempts to save Guido by exchanging clothes with him so that he can flee to Venice according to a plan she has meticulously organized. Meanwhile she takes the poison that had been prepared to spare him the ignominy of a public execution. Witnessing her self-sacrifice, Guido, overcome with love, stabs himself; recalling the tragic double deaths of Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde and similar narratives. The play thus concludes with the simultaneous destruction of both protagonists, sealing their union in death, in a scene evoking Michelangelo's "Pietà" or Wagner's "Liebestod".

The Italian setting of *The Duchess of Padua*, shaped by stereotypes and melodramatic conventions, is crucial to the play's initial adherence to the conventions of revenge tragedy, particularly its emphasis on the 'subtleties of evil' a capacity for calculated, aesthetically refined cruelty. Guido's planned revenge conforms to this model in its emphasis on delay, indirection and psychological manipulation. Within this framework, revenge is not simply an act of personal retaliation but an ethical obligation governed by a code of honour imposed by Moranzone. The more elaborate and theatrically staged the act, the greater its impact and perceived artistic value. Wilde deliberately adopts those conventions in order to establish generic expectations that he will subsequently undermine.

5. *From Revenge to Ethics: Wilde's Subversion of the Italianate Plot*

Wilde's tragedy, however, undergoes a decisive reversal roughly halfway through, marking a departure from the logic of revenge tragedy and the emergence of what may be termed the play's "modern ideas". Although Guido initially appears committed to fulfilling the traditional revenge script, he ultimately rejects it under the pressure of a newly articulated ethical framework.

His love for the Duchess forces him to recognize that killing the Duke would no longer constitute pure vengeance for his father's death, but would instead become an opportunistic act that conveniently removes an obstacle to his own desire. This realization prompts Guido to refuse to carry out the murder, despite Moranzone's insistence that he complete the ritualized act of vengeance by returning with the Duke's heart "upon the blade" (Wilde 2013, Act III, 76). The moment represents a conscious ethical rupture with the Italianate revenge code.

Guido's refusal inaugurates a new code of behaviour that stands in deliberate contrast to the old framework. Wilde employs the conventions of revenge tragedies precisely in order to dramatize their insufficiency, using the genre as a foil against which Guido's moral transformation can be staged. The shift has been interpreted in religious terms, as a movement from the *lex talionis* of the Old Testament toward the Christian ethics of forgiveness associated with the New Testament. Guido explicitly frames his decision in theological language, asserting that "vengeance is God's" (Wilde 2013, Act III, 54) and must not be usurped by human agents. This moral stance gains additional resonance when read in light of Wilde's well-documented attraction to Catholicism.

Yet Guido's refusal to kill the Duke is not motivated solely by religious ethics; it is also articulated as a matter of civilisation and style. He distances himself from what he characterizes as barbaric practices insisting that true gentility would never sanction the stealthy murder of an old man in his bed, regardless of provocation. That "great gentleman" that was his father would not "be glad to see me coming, / This old man's blood still hot upon my hands" (Act III, 50-51). He would never "have crept at night-time, like a common thief, / And stabbed an old man sleeping in his bed, / However he had wronged him [...]" (Act III, 80-84). Revenge, as Wilde redefines it, must be consistent with a code of honour that privileges dignity over bloodshed. This concern with aesthetic and moral self-fashioning underscores Wilde's broader critique of violence as both ethically degrading and stylistically vulgar.

Equally significant is the role of love in prompting Guido's change of heart. He comes to understand that violence would contaminate his love for the Duchess, which he conceives as a transformative and almost sacred force: "When a man loves a woman, then he knows / God's secret, and the secret of the world / [...] but if bloody murder / Knock at the Palace gate and is let in, / Love like a wounded thing creeps out and dies" (Act III, 115-122). Love, in this vision, is fundamentally incompatible with murder. Wilde thus constructs love as an ethical principle that supersedes the imperative of revenge, reinforcing the play's departure from its generic origins and articulating a more modern moral consciousness. His love for the Duchess forces him to confront the possibility that killing the Duke would no longer constitute an act of filial justice but rather an opportunistic removal of a rival.

At the thematic level, too, the play extends beyond the conventional framework of revenge tragedy. While it draws on the familiar motif of the corruption of innocence within a "venal and iniquitous world" (Donohue 2013, 26), it also develops a broader critique of power, injustice, and social inequality. The arrogance of authority, the experience of dispossession, the persistence of poverty, and the tensions surrounding gender and agency, all contribute to a more nuanced and politically resonant text.

The Italian setting plays a crucial role in enabling this critique. By displacing issues of land, justice, resistance, and violence onto a foreign stage, Wilde is able to explore their moral complexities of political violence without directly invoking contemporary political realities. This strategy allows the play to operate simultaneously within and beyond the conventions of Italianate drama, transforming what might otherwise appear as a derivative exercise in historical writing, into a vehicle for cultural and ideological reflection, a symbolic engagement with Irish concerns.

6. *Italianate Drama and Irish Political Allegory*

One of the most notable dimensions of *The Duchess of Padua* lies, indeed, in its capacity to function as a site of symbolic translocation, in which Irish political tensions are refracted through an Italian setting. Italy operates as a surrogate space that allows Oscar Wilde to explore themes of

injustice, dispossession, poverty, tyranny, and retributive violence without invoking the charged realities of Ireland under British rule. This strategy reflects a broader tendency in nineteenth-century Irish writing, whereby geographically distant settings – Italy, Greece, India, or the Caribbean – serve as coded arenas for the articulation of colonial critique¹⁰. As Declan Kiberd observes, Irish writers frequently displaced “the condition of Ireland into other countries, there to be decoded by a knowing audience” (1995, 327). Beneath this foreign veil, recognisably Irish concerns emerge. In *The Duchess of Padua*, while the conventions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italianate drama are fully deployed, they are inflected with what might be termed an “Irish twist”.

This inflection is particularly evident in what is arguably the play’s most original feature: the reversal of the revenge code. Guido’s decision to settle his score with the Duke psychologically rather than through immediate violence marks a significant departure from the expected logic of revenge tragedy. Although he initially rejoices in the prospect of vengeance, when the decisive moment arrives he repeatedly declares to Moranzone, “I am resolved not to kill this man” (Wilde 2013, Act III, 35, 42, 45).

The play’s crucial reversal suggests that conflict can be averted and violence redirected through moral confrontation rather than bloodshed:

I purpose to ascend to the Duke’s chamber
And as he lies asleep lay on his breast
This dagger and this writing; when he wakes
Then he will know who held him in his power
And slew him not: this is the noblest vengeance
Which I can take. (Act III, 59-64)

6. *Anglo-Irish Ambivalence toward Political Violence*

Although Guido initially conforms to the stereotype of the Italian avenger in his desire for cruel retribution, he also reflects the sensibility of his creator. Like many Anglo-Irish writers, Wilde remains acutely responsive to the intertwined themes of usurpation and retaliation. The injustice experienced by the dispossessed, and their attempts to redress it – even violently – were often viewed with ambivalence: sympathy for the avenger coexisted with anxiety about the consequences of vengeance. As Jarlath Killeen argues, representations of dispossession and landlord tyranny occupy a central place in Irish cultural memory and most of Wilde’s work is “suffused with references to Ireland and the Irish Question” (2015, 426). Wilde’s plot mirrors this ambivalence, moving from an apparent endorsement of Guido’s cause to a moral reorientation, in which the traditional code of honour is revised under the influence of love and ethical reflection.

Influenced in part by the nationalist sympathies of his mother, Speranza, Wilde could readily draw parallels between Ireland and Renaissance Italy – both marked by arrogance, dispossession, and inequality. Yet he stops short of endorsing the violent justice advocated by Moranzone. As Gregory Mackie argues, Wilde’s early drama reveals “a tension between inherited melodramatic structures and a more modern ethical hesitation about the legitimacy of revenge” (2012, 228-229).

¹⁰ Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) wrote about Greece (*Woman or Ida of Athens*, 1809), India (*The Missionary: An Indian Tale*, 1811), Belgium (*The Princess. Or the Beguine*, 1835); Thomas Moore about India (*Lalla Rookh*, 1817) and Matthew Lewis (*Journal of a West India Proprietor*, 1834) about the Caribbean.

The reversal of the revenge code is closely tied to Wilde's particular form of nationalism: that of a Protestant Irishman conscious of his precarious position and wary of revolutionary violence. Guido's change of heart may therefore be read as a speculative political allegory, projecting a resolution to the Irish Question in which justice is achieved without bloodshed and the tyrant is brought to recognition rather than destruction. In this sense, the play gestures toward a constitutional solution, implicitly resonant with the aspirations of Home Rule.

Guido's refusal to kill, thus, becomes an imaginative proposal for peaceful political resolution. Beneath the dramatic *coup de théâtre* lies Wilde's belief that change must occur from within existing structures rather than through their violent overthrow. This ethical trajectory mirrors the Irish political context of Wilde's formative years, particularly the tension between Fenian militancy and constitutional nationalism under Charles Stewart Parnell¹¹. The play may therefore be read as an allegory of the transition from revolutionary violence to parliamentary reform.

7. *Dispossession*

Another central issue in the play, which acquires a distinctly Irish resonance, is dispossession. The revelation of Guido's lineage – as the son of a noble ruler unjustly overthrown – echoes recurrent motifs in Irish cultural memory, particularly those associated with the loss of land and sovereignty. His father, the Duke of Parma, is presented as a figure of legitimate authority, betrayed in exchange for “cities, fiefs and principalities / Vineyards, and lands” (Wilde 2013, Act I, 127-128). This narrative parallels stories regarding the dispossessed Gaelic aristocracy or later victims of landlordism.

Such motifs are also prominent in early nationalist fiction, such as Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1999 [1806]), where The Prince's dispossession serves as a critique of colonial authority. The emphasis on usurpation, property confiscation, and betrayal in Wilde's play closely mirrors historical patterns that shaped Irish experience, particularly under colonial land policies.

As critics have noted, Irish cultural identity in the nineteenth century was deeply structured by narratives of grievance, with dispossession functioning as a central organizing motif. The imaginary Italy of the play becomes a screen upon which tensions related to oppression, justice, and resistance are projected. The figure of the Duke, as the prototype of the Italian villain, occupies a focal position within this political reading.

8. *The Duke as a Colonial Figure*

While the Duke conforms to the conventions of the Italianate villain, he also bears a striking resemblance to literary representations of the Anglo-Irish landlord. Their authority lacks moral legitimacy; their wealth derives from exploitation; and their relationship to their subjects is marked by contempt rather than by a sense of responsibility. The Duke is a figure whose “vileness comes from his intellect”, emphasizing his cynical philosophical detachment, as Wilde wrote to Anderson in his exhaustive description of the play (2000, 196). This characterization aligns him with the stage type of the Machiavel, traditionally associated with Italian political culture in early modern English drama¹². However, Wilde complicates this model by endowing

¹¹ W.J. McCormack's essay “Wilde and Parnell” (1998) highlights the affinities between the two men.

¹² In Early Modern England, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, a complex analysis of power, was taken (on hearsay because it had not yet been translated into English) as a manual of political cynicism and manipulation. The stage type known as “the Machiavel”, usually an Italian, given the reputation Italy had in England, appears in many plays.

the Duke with a distinctly modern (and Wildean) mode of expression: his reliance on paradox, irony, and epigrammatic speech often associated with the stereotypical British gentleman.

The Duke's inverts common values presenting Guido's honesty as ostentation (Wilde 2013, Act I, 262-265), Beatrice's goodness as annoying, (the Duchess is "worse than ugly" she is "good") and poverty as the doors to heaven:

If you are poor,
Are you not blessed in that? Why, Poverty
Is one of the Christian virtues. (Act II, 63-65)

Mocking the cries of the starving crowd as a "serenade" before ordering them to be shot – combines epigrammatic wit with brutal authoritarianism:

You see, Lord Cardinal, how my people love me,
This is their serenade, I like it better
Than the soft murmurs of the amorous lute;
Is it not sweet to listen to? (*Another yell*)
I fear
They have become a little out of tune,
So I must tell my men to fire on them.
I cannot bear bad music! (Act II, 8-14)

The Duke's wit reveals the deep hypocrisy at the heart of political discourse which he emphasizes through "sprezzatura", that characteristic elegant detachment of the Renaissance gentleman. It also, unsettlingly, resembles that of Wilde's own comic characters. The rhetorical strategy of inverting conventional moral values – presenting cruelty as refinement, injustice as necessity, and oppression as benevolence – anticipates Wilde's later use of paradox as a tool of social critique. However, read within an Irish context, such behaviour is closely tied with nationalist depictions of colonial authority.

9. Land, Poverty, and Social Justice

The play's engagement with poverty and social injustice further reinforces its Irish resonance. The suffering of the populace – particularly in the scene of the starving tenants in Act II – strongly evokes post-Famine Ireland. Wilde's depiction of deprivation reflects contemporary debates about land reform and the responsibilities of landlords.

In a letter to Mary Anderson (23 March 1883), Wilde explicitly acknowledged the modern relevance of such scenes, which far from appearing anachronistic would speak to the hearts and minds of an audience that would recognise parallels with contemporary social conditions:

I do not know how it is in New York, but in London where the misery is terrible among the poor, and where the sympathy for them is growing every day, such speeches as the one about the children dying in the lanes, or the people sleeping under the arches of the bridges, cannot fail to bring down the house: they will not expect to find in an Italian tragedy modern life: but the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form. (Wilde 2000, 197)

The Duke's treatment of his subjects is marked by a callous indifference that borders on cruelty. When confronted with complaints that the people are forced to eat bread made of chaff, he responds with cynical irony, suggesting that such food is suitable even for his horses. Simi-

larly, he dismisses the grievance of the population's lack of access to clean water ("They should drink wine; water is quite unwholesome", Wilde 2013, Act II, 45) and answers flippantly to the people's remark that taxes are too high for buying wine: "Then you should bless the taxes / Which make you temperate" (Act II, 48-49). This kind of remarks exposes magnifying them the grotesque contrast between the views of ruling authority and lived reality.

By contrast, the Duchess emerges as an advocate for the oppressed, articulating a powerful critique of inequality. Her speeches evoke urban poverty in terms that resonate strongly with Irish socio-political conditions, positioning her as a quasi-Land League figure.

There are many citizens of Padua
Who in vile tenements live; so full of holes,
That the chill rain, the snow[,] and the rude blast,
Are tenants also with them; others sleep
Under the arches of the public bridges
All through the autumn nights, till the wet mist
Stiffens their limbs, and fevers come, and so—
DUKE And so they go to Abraham's bosom, Madam,
They should thank me for sending them to Heaven,
If they are wretched here. (Act II, 66-75)

This social dimension appears also in Wilde's broader intellectual commitments. In works such as *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891) and in many of his fairy tales (for example "The Selfish Giant" or "The Happy Prince"), Wilde consistently articulates a critique of property relations and advocates for greater social equity. *The Duchess of Padua* may thus be seen as an early dramatic expression of these concerns, embedding social critique within the conventions of historical tragedy.

In this synthesis, whereby the Duke of Padua ultimately embodies a convergence of types – the Machiavel of Italianate tragedy, the paradox-maker of Wildean comedy, and the Ascendancy landlord of Irish nationalist discourse¹³ – the Italian setting becomes a framework through which contemporary political tensions can be explored. The conflict between Guido and the Duke, therefore, exceeds the bounds of personal revenge, acquiring a distinctly Irish resonance as a symbolic confrontation between dispossessed subject and colonial authority. In this sense, the Italianate villain reveals himself to be, in crucial ways, more Irish than Italian.

10. Gender and the Question of Agency

Equally significant is the play's treatment of gender, particularly in the figure of the Duchess¹⁴. Beatrice's transformation from victimized wife to active agent of violence represents a striking departure from both Early Modern conventions and Victorian gender norms. Initially defined by patriarchal structures, she ultimately disrupts them through her decision to murder the Duke. In assuming the role of avenger, she challenges both genre expectations and contemporary assumptions about femininity.

¹³ Generations of irresponsible landlords are represented in Maria Edgeworth's novels *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *The Absentee* (1812). A darker vision of landlordism appears in *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1820) by William Carleton or in *Knockagow* (1873) by Charles Kickham.

¹⁴ The transgressive role of the Duchess has been fully analysed in Worth (1983) and in an MA thesis by Minion Weber (2020).

We first encounter the Duchess after the Duke has ordered his guards to fire upon citizens protesting for bread. In a striking gesture of resistance, she “has gone forth into the square, / And stands between the people and the guard / And will not let them shoot” (Wilde 2013, Act II, 22-24). Her intervention does not merely interrupt the Duke’s command; it symbolically reconfigures the locus of authority by placing her body between state violence and the suffering populace. When the Duke dismisses the people’s plight as divinely ordained, she acts autonomously, instructing her almoner to distribute her wealth and provide bread. At this stage, however, her actions remain compatible with the gendered economy of Victorian philanthropy.

Philanthropy, as Wilde repeatedly suggests, is itself ideologically ambivalent. While conventionally associated to feminine virtue, it also functions as a mechanism that stabilizes, rather than challenges, structural inequality. In “The Soul of Man under Socialism”, Wilde critiques charitable intervention as a form of ideological containment: “The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible” (1994, 1079). From this perspective, Beatrice’s initial gestures of charity can be understood not as resistance but as participation in what might be termed a “compensatory economy of suffering” – one that alleviates symptoms without addressing systemic injustice. Her early role thus corresponds to what feminist critics have identified as the socially sanctioned sphere of female moral influence, a domain that remains carefully circumscribed and politically non-threatening.

Beatrice’s trajectory becomes theoretically significant when she moves beyond this sanctioned role into a discourse of rights. “The poor have rights you cannot touch” (Wilde 2013, Act II, 166), she declares, invoking a proto-political language that disrupts both feudal hierarchy and gendered expectations. Her defiant response to the Duke’s threat – “Sir, by what right?” (Act II, 202-205) – challenges not only the legitimacy of his authority but transforms herself from an object within patriarchal structures into a speaking subject capable of contesting them.

A similar shift is evident in her engagement with what Victorian discourse termed the “Woman Question”. Beatrice’s denunciation of marriage as a form of commodification – “We are their chattels, and their common slaves” (Act II, 224-225) – articulates a critique that prefigures contemporary feminist analyses of women’s legal and economic subordination. Her language of exchange – “bought... sold, and bartered” (Act II, 227-228) – foregrounds the circulation of women as property within patriarchal economies.

Beatrice’s transgression becomes fully legible when understood through the lens of gender performativity. She not only speaks in ways that exceed normative femininity, but also enacts behaviours conventionally coded as masculine: wooing Guido and assuming strategic control over their shared future not only by planning their escape but by removing the main obstacle. Wilde’s early drama repeatedly stages such inversions, a tendency that Declan Kiberd interprets as evidence of his “profound scorn for the extreme Victorian division between male and female” (1995, 39). In this sense, Beatrice does not simply invert gender roles but exposes their constructedness. Her language – “Sit down here... that I may run my fingers through your hair” (Wilde 2013, Act II, 344-348) – appropriates the rhetoric of masculine desire, thereby unsettling the binary logic that underpins Victorian gender ideology.

The act of murder marks the culmination of this trajectory and invites a more complex theoretical reading. While the figure of the female murderess has precedents in both Victorian and Early Modern literature, Wilde’s treatment diverges in significant ways. A productive comparison may be drawn with Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), where violence similarly emerges as a response to systemic injustice. In both cases, the woman’s criminal act can be read not as moral degeneration but as a form of ethical resistance – what might be termed a transgressive assertion of agency within conditions that deny legitimate avenues for

action. Hardy's designation of Tess as "a pure woman" underscores the disjunction between legal guilt and moral integrity; Wilde's Beatrice similarly occupies this unstable space, where crime becomes the vehicle for articulating an otherwise unspeakable injustice.

In contrast, Early Modern drama often displaces female agency by representing women as instigators rather than perpetrators of violence. In John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), Vittoria Corombona embodies the archetype of the Italian *femme fatale* – eloquent, transgressive, yet ultimately contained within a moralizing framework that associates female desire with corruption. Wilde's reworking of this tradition is significant. His Duchess does not merely participate in violence; she claims it as an extension of her subjectivity. From a *fin-de-siècle* perspective, her act may be read as an aestheticized gesture, one that transforms violence into a mode of self-expression. At the same time, it reflects a historically specific anxiety about female autonomy, rearticulated through the idiom of Renaissance Italy.

Guido's reaction to Beatrice's act reveals the persistence of normative gender ideology. His considering her act as unwomanly can be understood as an attempt to restore the symbolic order by reasserting the boundaries of acceptable femininity. Yet this response ultimately fails to contain Beatrice's subsequent self-sacrifice and complicates any straightforward reading of her as either emancipated subject or tragic victim.

From a feminist and historicist perspective, then, Beatrice emerges as a liminal figure, situated at the intersection of competing discourses – philanthropic, juridical, economic, and affective. Her trajectory exposes the contradictions inherent in Victorian constructions of femininity, while simultaneously pointing towards alternative forms of subjectivity. In this respect, *The Duchess of Padua* anticipates Wilde's later exploration of identity as performance, where the stability of social roles is increasingly called into question.

11. *Reassessment and Critical Significance*

Despite Wilde's own ambivalence, *The Duchess of Padua* offers far more than the "good lines" he reluctantly acknowledged. Rather than a mere youthful misstep, the play provides a valuable perspective on his early artistic ambitions and intellectual concerns. It reveals a writer actively negotiating questions of genre, morality, and political representation, while experimenting with dramatic form.

Modern scholarship has increasingly recognized the importance of Wilde's early plays. As Joseph Donohue observes, *The Duchess of Padua*, together with *Vera; or, The Nihilists*, reflects Wilde's determination to establish himself within the contemporary theatre (2013). Although these works lack the formal refinement of his later comedies, they display a seriousness of purpose and a willingness to engage with complex ethical and social issues that anticipate his mature writing.

Particularly significant is the way in which the Italian setting facilitates a symbolic engagement with Irish concerns. By displacing issues of land, justice, and resistance onto a foreign stage, Wilde is able to explore the moral complexities of political violence without directly invoking the colonial situation. This strategy allows the play to operate simultaneously within and beyond the conventions of Italianate drama, transforming what might otherwise appear as a derivative exercise into a vehicle for cultural and ideological reflection.

12. *Conclusion*

The Duchess of Padua occupies a paradoxical position within Wilde's oeuvre. Long dismissed as an immature and overly derivative work, it has nevertheless begun to attract renewed critical

attention as a text that illuminates the formative stages of his artistic development. When read through the intersecting frameworks of Italianate drama, Irish cultural politics, and gender studies, the play reveals a complexity that has often been overlooked.

Wilde's engagement with the conventions of revenge tragedy is neither straightforward nor purely imitative. Rather, he appropriates and ultimately subverts the genre, using its formal structures to stage a critique of violence and articulate an alternative ethical vision grounded in restraint, self-awareness, and emotional integrity. At the same time, his use of an Italian setting enables a subtle but sustained reflection on issues central to nineteenth-century Ireland, including dispossession, social injustice, and the legitimacy of resistance.

The figure of the Duchess, in particular, challenges traditional gender roles by assuming agency within a narrative structure that typically excludes female action, while Guido's rejection of revenge signals a broader rethinking of inherited moral codes. Together, these elements point toward what Wilde himself described as the "modern idea under an antique form", demonstrating that the play's apparent archaism is in fact integral to its critical force.

Reconsidered in this light, *The Duchess of Padua* emerges not as a failed precursor to Wilde's later success, but as a significant and intellectually ambitious work in its own right. Its exploration of violence, power, and identity anticipates many of the concerns that would come to define his mature writing, while offering a distinctive contribution to the study of Irish literature and its engagement with European cultural traditions.

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The Author is the Creator of Brief Things: Authorial Simulacra in Oscar Wilde's *Poems in Prose*

Paolo Bugliani

Università di Pisa (<paolo.bugliani@unipi.it>)

Abstract:

This essay reads Oscar Wilde's *Poems in Prose* (1893-1894) as authorial simulacra: brief self-figurations that stage the modern artist's vulnerability through parabolic form. Reworking Romantic and Decadent topoi, the sequence turns compression, figuration and biblical cadence into instruments for questioning authorial authority as pose rather than stable ground. Its dialogue with Walter Pater's imaginary portraits and Henry James's tales of writers and artists reveals a late-Victorian genealogy of the "diaphanous" protagonist, emptied of interiority and functioning as medium. Wilde's prose poems thus place authorship within an ecology of portable icons, where authority survives as performance calibrated to brevity.

Keywords: Authorial Simulacra, Imaginary Portrait, Oscar Wilde, Parable, Prose Poem

My dear Wilde,
I am confined to my room with gout, but have been consoling myself with *The Happy Prince*, and feel it would be ungrateful not to send a line to tell you how delightful I have found him and his companions. I hardly know whether to admire more the wise wit of 'The Wonderful [Remarkable] Rocket,' or the beauty and tenderness of 'The Selfish Giant': the latter certainly is perfect in its kind. Your genuine 'little poems in prose,' those at the top of pages 10 and 14, for instance, are gems, and the whole, too brief, book abounds with delicate touches and pure English. (Walter Pater, Letter of 12 June 1888, qtd. in Wilde 1962, 219)

1. Introduction

This essay proposes to read Oscar Wilde's *Poems in Prose* (1893-1894) as a deliberately compact arena of self-staging: brief yet dense texts feature fictional simulacra of the author, parabolic

self-figurations in which the modern artist confesses vulnerability while trading permanence for intensity. In this register, their lapidary compression, often aphoristically powerful, operates as a confession of method and of risk. The sequence belongs to a late-Victorian constellation of shorter prose forms, composed of fairy tales, dialogue-essays, and self-reflexive short stories, in which Wilde was exceptionally productive, and it would eventually distil the programme of *Intentions* (1891) into an emblem: what the dialogue elaborates across pages the poem in prose renders as an epiphanic image. The resulting miniatures then enter into a double conversation: formally, with a biblical and scriptural cadence that makes indirection an instrument of judgment; and genealogically with Walter Pater's imaginary portraits and Henry James's short stories about authors, two testing grounds in which authority is staged as posture or scene rather than asserted as doctrine. Wilde's experiment conjoins these lines into a condensed survey of short prose fictions that materialize, within the world of letters, a simulacrum of the author as a ghostly figure. The consequence is that the notorious "decay of prose" reads less as collapse than as a transfer of authorial power from sovereign voice to iterable image.

2. *Wilde the poet in prose*

The prose poems belong to one of Wilde's most productive periods. Contemporaneous with the critical essays that would converge in *Intentions*, they draw on the generic flexibility of the literary essay to stage dialogic explorations of truth and representation in *The Decay of Lying* (1889), judgment and creation in *The Critic as Artist* (1890), socialist politics in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), and identity and masquerade in *Pen, Pencil and Poison* (1891).

Read against these co-ordinates, the *Poems in Prose* appear as generic contraction: what the essays elaborate over pages, the miniatures condense into emblems; what in the essayistic milieu is propounded as doctrine, the parable stages as pose. The shift is not from "argument" to "story," but from argumentation to figuration, in which the reader's task is not to assent to a thesis but to weigh an image. Disseminated through the same periodical sphere of the major essays, Wilde's prose poems are crucially shaped by this intellectual milieu, which bore directly on both their genesis and their reception. *The Spirit Lamp* – an Oxonian aestheticist journal associated with Lord Alfred Douglas – served in 1893 as a proving ground for two pieces, testing tone and audience; the *Fortnightly Review*, a high-profile monthly straddling literary culture and public discourse, gathered four further pieces in July 1894, conferring visibility and a semblance of sequence. The *Fortnightly's* spacious and airy layout and a cadence bordering on secular scripture frame the prose as oratorical yet resistant to conclusive morals. The move from the Oxonian coterie to a metropolitan platform thus registers a shift from experimental intimacy to a public rhetoric of style. That transition also yields a provisional sequence whose opening piece, "The Artist", reads, retrospectively, as programmatic.

That frame matters because it aligns the six pieces with yet another type of shorter prose that Wilde had been reworking since the late 1880s, namely the fairy tale. With *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) Wilde had in effect found a way to fashion a generic outlet for a new tonal cadence: an ironic didacticism where moral clarity is tested rather than dispensed. Whereas a tale like "The Happy Prince" operates through the classical morality structure of the fable, the prose poem as practiced by Wilde required readers to exert their inferential powers and craft an interpretation that a longer (and stylistically simpler) plot might dissolve and render explicit.

From a material angle, the *Fortnightly* context is not incidental. Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small relocate Wilde's essays and journalism within the infrastructures of the late-Victorian culture industry, stressing revision, self-recycling, and strategic placement as professional prac-

tice (2000). In that light, the prose poem looks less like a French import than a late-Victorian solution to problems Wilde had been staging across neighbouring forms: how to dramatize authority without retreating to aphorism; how to expose ethical pressure without sermonising; how to make style bear conceptual weight. The six parables are the strictest test of that wager.

In addition to these chronological and material contexts, Wilde's generic choice of the poem in prose signals a further step in formal experiment, as the form has been traditionally recognized as a privileged site of experimentation with heterogeneous materials (Murphy 1992, 90). After the fables of the late 1880s and the essays of the early 1890s – which already strain genre by combining dialogue, memoir, and manifesto – Wilde turns to a short-prose form with a long, if heterogeneous history, one in many regards considered a sort of “genre-crossing ugly duckling” (Hetherington, Atherton 2020, 22). Despite its marginal status within generic hierarchies, however, many recent accounts have pointed to its centrality in the definition of post-Romantic literary identity, since its foremost practitioner was none other than Charles Baudelaire. As Baudelaire and Rimbaud's *Poèmes en prose* testify, the genre's inherent “hybridity” (Murphy 2021, 67) constitutes a powerful reconfiguration of one of Romanticism's most consequential ideas, that of the fragment (Santilli 2002, 31). As Jonathan Monroe has shown in a seminal study of the form and its origins, the prose poem has its roots in the Romantic idealist revolution, bearing strong connections with the idea of the Romantic fragment, since both forms can be seen as rejecting “literature's — especially poetry's — dream of itself as a pure other set apart in sublime isolation” (1987, 19). Schlegel and Novalis – even before the more frequently cited French masters of the genre, Baudelaire and Rimbaud – enacted in their poetic prose a struggle between fragmented singularity and unified universality that the prose poem embodies with particular aptness.

In this broader historical perspective, the genre's tensions – poetry/prose, lyric/narrative – cease to be the defects that many critics reproached it for¹, but become conditions of work, and its brevity functions as a cognitive device that heightens density and tests boundaries (Hetherington, Atherton 2020, 14-16). In English-language practice the prose poem develops most visibly in the contact zone between lyric and prose, often within magazine and anthology culture; what takes hold is less a transplanted French model than a repertoire of short, hybrid pieces that foreground compression, figuration, and argumentative pressure. Crucially, this genealogy clarifies what is at stake in Wilde's own shift of scale: the form does not simply shorten discourse; it re-engineers its tempo. Where the essay moves by modulation – by turns, hesitations, repartees, and the slow accrual of paradox across voices – the prose poem moves by shock and crystallisation. In the essays that lead to *Intentions*, Wilde can distribute contradiction between speakers, defer closure through dialogue, and let thinking unfold as performance; in the prose poem, by contrast, the same intellectual energy must be carried by a single concentrated figure – an emblem that compels judgement while withholding the discursive scaffolding that usually guides interpretation. Brevity, in this sense, becomes not a limit but a method: it forces argument to survive as image. On these grounds, Wilde's 1893-1894 sequence need not be treated as a detour from *Intentions* but as its most stringent generic contraction: dialogue becomes parable; doctrine returns as pose; and authorship figures itself as a lucid simulacrum calibrated to brevity's demands.

The scholarly debate on Wilde's critical prose has been alive for decades, with scholars arguing for its coherence as both a theory of criticism and a practice shaped by late-Victorian

¹ Most notably perhaps T.S. Eliot, who famously stigmatized the “charlatanism” of the Nineties, and devoutly wished the final disappearance of all “miscellaneous prose poets” (1917, 158).

print culture. A classic point of departure is Herbert Sussman's seminal investigation, which insists that Wilde's critical writing sequence should be read not as detachable epigrams but as new forms of critical discourse devised to express Wilde's "new views," noting that under Wilde's touch the dialogue, the biographical sketch, and even the short story are "reshaped into new literary forms" that give expressing his "deeply Paterian, radically modern sensibility" (Sussman 1973, 109). Sussman further stresses how the dialogues dramatize a Paterian epistemology – intellectual formulations dissolving into impressions – so that the past is approached as a necessary "fiction" and the essays *perform* the very stance they propound (110, 121). Building on that formal insight, Lawrence Danson has in turn read *Intentions* as a program that explicitly recasts criticism as creation, glossing Wilde's often-cited dicta that "the highest criticism is that which reveals in the work of Art what the artist had not put there," that criticism "treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation," that it "is itself an art," "the purest form of personal expression," and that its task is "to see the object as in itself it really is not" – a redefinition that, as Danson underscores, "destabilises the very category 'criticism'" by eroding fixed boundaries between the critic and the thing criticised (Danson 1997a, 80). A decisive material turn is supplied by Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small's *Oscar Wilde's Profession* (2000), which re-centres the essays and journalism within the infrastructures of the late-Victorian culture industry, contests entrenched assumptions about Wilde's professional persona, and re-reads practices of revision and self-recycling as strategic responses to commodified authorship². Completing the picture from the conceptual side, Lawrence Danson's *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (1997b) re-centres *Intentions*, "Mr W.H.," and "The Soul of Man under Socialism" as Wilde's theoretical core, showing how paradox, impersonation, and self-cancellation constitute a performative theory of criticism rather than a detachable manifesto. Taken together, these accounts establish a durable consensus: Wilde's essayism is best understood as a self-reflexive, historically situated practice – criticism as art and as social posture.

On this footing, the *Poems in Prose* present themselves not as a departure from Wilde's critical enterprise but as its parabolic precipitate. What Sussman describes as new critical forms and what Danson (1997a) identifies as the critic's creative authority are here condensed into emblem: dialogue contracts into parable; doctrine returns as pose; and the author figures himself as a lucid simulacrum – a confessional image that deliberately trades endurance for intensity.

Finally, the public stakes of the label "prose poem" in the 1890s are not negligible. The term entered the courtroom in 1895 when Wilde described a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas as "a kind of prose poem"; Justice Wills' sentencing rebuke questioned whether high literary value could excuse moral danger. His logic ran thus: even if such a text is intelligible only to "persons of high culture", it may still be "poisonous for a young man" because its very sophistication makes it more, not less, dangerous (Hyde 1948, 312, 331; Bristow 2022, 267, 367, 385-91). The text of the letter, although it bears a faint resemblance to the *Prose Poems* thematically, is stylistically (and also chronologically) very akin to them:

² Guy and Small have also been key figures in the edition and annotation of Wilde's critical prose in the *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* multivolume editorial project with vol. VI (*Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*) edited by Josephine M. Guy (Wilde 2007) and vol. VIII (*The Short Fiction*) edited by Ian Small (Wilde 2017). My quotations from *Poems in Prose* also refer to this general edition, edited by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson (Wilde 2000). Other notable editions of Wilde's critical prose (equipped with remarkable introductions) are *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Richard Ellmann (Wilde 1982) and the more recent *The Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, edited by Nicholas Frankel (Wilde 2022).

Dearest of all Boys – Your letter was delightful – red and yellow wine to me – but I am sad and out of sorts – Bosie – you must not make scenes with me – they kill me – they wreck the loveliness of life – I cannot see *you*, so Greek and gracious, distorted by passion; I cannot listen to *your* curved lips saying hideous things to me – don't do it – you break my heart – I'd sooner be rented [i.e. blackmailed] all day, than have you bitter, unjust, and horrid – horrid – I must see you soon – you are the divine thing I want – the thing of grace and genius – but I don't know how to do it – Shall I come to Salisbury – ? – There are many difficulties – my bill here is £49 for a week! I have also got a new sitting-room over the Thames – but you, why are you not here, my dear, my wonderful boy –? I fear I must leave; no money, no credit, and a heart of lead – Ever your own. (cited in Bristow 2022, 77)

The prose poem's refusal of didactic clarity – its elusiveness, its resistance to paraphrase – was perceived as part of its threat. A form that withholds its moral while deploying scriptural authority and aesthetic refinement becomes legally as well as aesthetically suspect. Whatever else the episode shows, it confirms that Wilde conceived these miniatures as instruments, not ornaments: brief forms designed to act upon readers.

These were never private exercises in style; they were brief instruments designed to produce effects – ethical disorientation, ironic recognition, the suspense of judgment – that operate precisely *because* the form withholds resolution. The sequence does not illustrate doctrines; it stages attitudes. It does not preach; it poses. And in that posing, it makes visible the instability of the very categories – Artist, Disciple, Master, Doer of Good, Judge – through which authority, whether moral, aesthetic, or theological, claims to speak.

3. Parables of artistic authority

Wilde's poems in prose sequence present a peculiar scriptural tone and structure, a view that complicates and enriches further the prose poem context in which they appear. The prose poem, after its mid-century French origins in Bertrand (whose *Gaspard de la Nuit* appeared posthumously in 1842) and Baudelaire (whose *Petits poèmes en prose* began appearing in 1861), became a signature form of European Decadence by the 1880s and 1890s. Wilde's engagement arrives not after but during this flowering, offering one of its most theologically inflected variations. In a recent appraisal of the *fin-de-siècle* heritage of the form, Murphy has claimed that Wilde's poems in prose “adopt the English *Bible* as literary model, employing an archaic diction, syntax and pacing in ironic parables” – accounts by Frank Harris, W.B. Yeats, and André Gide confirm that Wilde told these stories orally before writing them down – and that the spoken versions “were simpler than the published ones”, which add “Hellenic references and trains of prepositional phrases” that “simulate a formulaic primitivism” (Murphy 2021, 85). Read alongside this stylistic profile, Rachel Blau DuPlessis's observation that Wilde's pieces “provide a blandly ironic *détournement* of Christianity” – turning sacrifice into “masochistic desires,” healing into “busybody meddling,” and revealing “unintended consequences” that “detour their sanctified conventionalized morals” (2014, 31) – clarifies the ethical pressure exerted by the brief form. DuPlessis's argument is specifically about how Wilde's miniatures invert Christian topoi without straightforward mockery – they “detour” rather than demolish scriptural authority. For example, in “The Doer of Good,” Christ's miracles produce morally ambiguous outcomes: the healed leper indulges in luxury, the formerly blind man pursues desire, the forgiven woman walks “the pleasant way” of sin. The form mimics scriptural cadence and expectation while exposing the instability of redemptive logic itself. This is the “blandly ironic” quality DuPlessis describes – an effect that depends on scriptural simulation, not parody.

These brief proses thus redeploy the canonical didactic codes of parable and fable against themselves, since they normally offer a form of lesson while withholding its moral, supplying a posture rather than illustrating a prescription. In this sense, the sequence is less an appendix to the tales and essays than a compact *ars poetica* in which authorship is rendered as image and tested under the pressure of brevity. A more capacious frame comes into view if Wilde's parabolic idiom is read where several conversations intersect.

Modern accounts of the parable construe it as a figure of indirection, routing meaning through scene and delay so that understanding arrives as inference rather than fiat (Kermode 1979, 23–29). At the same time, the relation between text and reader is not merely technical but covenantal: biblical narrative establishes an implied contract that withholds, tests, and thereby binds the reader into an interpretive community (Damrosch 1987), a dynamic that suits Wilde's miniatures, which solicit judgement rather than dispense it. In a complementary vein, accounts of the Bible's resistance to novelistic closure stress its openness, reticence, and demand on the reader – features that, when transposed to *fin-de-siècle* prose, help explain why Wilde's pieces read as deliberately non-synthetic emblems that require completion in the act of reading, even though they remain always free from definite interpretation. Just as Gabriel Josipovici argues in *The Book of God* that biblical narrative withholds closure and demands iterative re-reading, Wilde's parables refuse to “stop” interpretation – each encounter opens new valences rather than confirming a fixed moral. In his now classical account, Josipovici compares this process to the writing of Proust, where

a pattern is presented and asks to be read in one way, but subsequent events show that it should have been read quite differently; often, further events suggest that the first reading was in fact the correct one, but there is nothing to assure that this is the point at which interpretation must stop. (1988, 86)

Wilde's miniatures operate on this principle: they provide enough narrative closure to constitute a scene, but the ethical valence of that scene remains suspended, requiring – but never rewarding – the reader's judgment.

Wilde's prose poems lift those devices into a late-Victorian theatre of authorship: they present allegorical masks of authorial roles (Artist, Disciple, Christ as “Doer of Good,” the penitent “Master,” the judged Man) rather than first-person lyric voices. Crucially, the sequence evacuates autobiographical interiority in favor of type-figures. Except for the oblique internal focalization in “The Artist” (“there came into his soul”, Wilde 2000, 173), the pieces refuse first-person address: the depicted role – Artist melting bronze, Narcissus's pool speaking, Christ healing, the youth weeping – becomes a portable icon, iterable and detachable, rather than an expression of subjective experience. In this key, the sequence's scriptural surface is not an archaism but a mode of thinking calibrated to scale – a way to make style bear ethical and epistemic weight in a few lines. When “The Artist” opens with “One evening there came into his soul the desire to fashion an image” (*ibidem*), the phrasing – archaic, third-person, without psychological interiority – makes the creative act legible as *event* rather than *process*. The syntax of parable converts subjective experience into portable, iterable form, and style thereby bears epistemic weight: what matters is not *why* the artist desires, but *what he does* and *at what cost*. Because Wilde's language explicitly trades on biblical expectancy, a compact epigraph can intensify the argument about duration and intensity: “choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:25) resonates with *pleasure that abideth for a moment* versus durable sorrow; likewise, “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5) echoes the sequence's antiphonal temporality.

Yet where Baudelaire's prose poems – as Murphy's (1992) analysis demonstrates – stage urban *shocks* and *flâneur* encounters ("Perte d'auréole," "La Soupe et les nuages"), Wilde evacuates this metropolitan contingency almost entirely. His parables occur in abstract or mythic space: "the Valley of Desolation," "the House of Judgment," "a round city" (unnamed, generic), the pool where Narcissus dies. Only "The Doer of Good" gestures toward urban particularity (the city with "fair pillars of marble," streets, painted women), but even there the locale functions allegorically, not socially. Where Baudelaire's brevity captures *velocity* – the jolt of the crowd, the violence of modernity, the sudden dislodging of the poet's halo in traffic – Wilde captures *stasis*: the suspended moral scene, the tableau awaiting judgment. This generic difference is crucial. Wilde uses the prose poem not to compress the city but to distill the *ethical posture*, producing a miniature not of action but of attitude, not of event but of stance.

It is specifically the issue of authority that can be interestingly connected to an ironic diminishing of the figure of the artist, one that will prelude the ironical treatment found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s portrait of the aesthete. As irony in Wilde's universe can be accounted for as a sort of tutelary deity, we can think of one of its most peculiar results – as Jure Gantar diffusely demonstrates – as that of eroding the concept itself of literary (and more broadly cultural) authority insofar as it mimics the syntax of authoritative pronouncements – the maxim, the verdict, the serious theoretical claim – while exposing that authority as a performative effect rather than a stable ground of truth (2015). In Gantar's account, Wilde's epigrammatic irony gains much of its force by coupling a contrarian reversal with a highly controlled logical and rhetorical structure: it does not merely negate a commonplace, but *rebuilds* it on alternative premises, producing what looks like a persuasive "judgment" while keeping the ground of judgment unstable (125). That is crucial for questions of authority: the epigram borrows the *form* of the authoritative pronouncement (balanced sentence, inductive movement, impression of cogency) and turns it into an arena where what counts as "sense," "proof," or "valid evaluation" is itself at stake (*ibidem*). At the level of character and dramatic voice, Gantar suggests something analogous: authority circulates through socially coded idioms – what he calls "the discourse of power and hegemony" – which Wilde (and Wilde's characters) can strategically appropriate, making "authoritative" speech appear as a transferable cultural register rather than a stable entitlement (94). While Gantar analyzes epigrammatic irony primarily in Wilde's plays, essays, and conversation, his framework applies equally to the prose poems, where authority appears as a transferable stylistic effect rather than an ontological ground. The parabolic voice – archaic, third-person, declarative – *sounds* authoritative, but what it authorizes remains perpetually in question.

This aspect is peculiarly visible in "The Artist," who is represented as both an author in the process of creating ("there came into his soul the desire to fashion an image", Wilde 2000, 173), and who already has produced art ("this image he had created himself", 174). The piece offers no psychology of inspiration, only an economy of exchange. Not much of the creative impulse is described or explained, much in the vein of the lapidary economy of the overall moral, which in the piece is centred around the overcoming of eternal sorrow by momentary pleasure. The opening proposition announces absolute scarcity with liturgical emphasis: "there was no other bronze save the bronze of the image of *the Sorrow that endureth for Ever*" (173). The Artist *cannot create without destroying*. The bronze for "*Pleasure that abideth for a Moment*" exists only as the melted remnant of "*Sorrow that endureth for Ever*". This is not evasion of the creative process but a parable *of* that process: art requires sacrifice, and intensity is purchased by dismantling permanence. To fashion pleasure, the artist must melt sorrow; creation is re-founding, not invention *ex nihilo*. The monument – "set [...] on the tomb of the one thing

he had loved” – is “[given] [...] to the fire” (*ibidem*), and out of that desecration is cast an image of *pleasure that abideth for a moment*. The ethical cost is not veiled: private grief becomes public emblem, and endurance is melted into intensity. The temporal antithesis structuring “The Artist” – *sorrow that endureth for ever* versus *pleasure that abideth for a moment* – finds scriptural precedent in Hebrews 11:25, which contrasts “the pleasures of sin for a season” with enduring affliction, and Psalm 30:5, where “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning”. Wilde secularizes this rhythm: intensity supplants duration as the measure of value, and the parable sanctions an aesthetic economy in which permanence is not preserved but consumed. Formally, the piece performs its doctrine through paired antitheses (“for Ever”/“for a Moment”), biblicalising diction (“abideth,” “endureth”), and the paratactic hinge that marks conversion (“and he took [...] and set it [...] and gave it to the fire”, 2000, 173-174). What remains is a lucid authorial simulacrum: not a confessional “I,” but an attitude rendered as icon – portable, iterable, answerable (Bugliani 2022, 106-108).

“The Doer of Good” stages the unintended consequences of redemption as a sequence of three encounters, each revealing the moral ambiguity of grace. Christ enters “a round city” and finds a young man “whose hair was crowned with red roses and whose lips were red with wine,” reclining on “a couch of sea-purple” in a house hung with garlands and torches (Wilde 2000, 174). When Christ asks, “Why do you live like this?” the young man replies, “But I was a leper once, and you healed me. How else should I live?” (*ibidem*). The logic is impeccable and devastating: the miracle licenses indulgence. Christ next encounters a young man pursuing “one whose face and raiment were painted” – a figure of desire whose “eyes [...] were bright with lust” (*ibidem*). To Christ’s reproach, the youth answers, “But I was blind once, and you gave me sight. At what else should I look?” (175). When Christ addresses the woman herself – “Is there no other way in which to walk save the way of sin?” – she turns, recognizes him, and laughs: “But you forgave me my sins, and the way is a pleasant way” (*ibidem*). Each figure cites the miracle itself as justification for post-redemptive behavior that violates the presumed *telos* of healing. The piece does not mock healing but exposes its moral ambiguity: grace may license indulgence rather than virtue; forgiveness may authorize rather than reform; sight may reveal lust rather than truth. The closing encounter intensifies this estrangement. Christ finds “a young man who was weeping” and asks why. The reply: “But I was dead once, and you raised me from the dead. What else should I do but weep?” (*ibidem*). The suggestion is chilling: life *after* miracle is unbearable precisely because meaning has been fulfilled and exhausted. Resurrection becomes elegy; the return to life is experienced as loss. The piece refuses to resolve whether the weeping marks gratitude, despair, or existential vertigo. What is clear is that the Doer of Good has *done* good – healing is real, resurrection is real – but the outcome is not virtue. The parable withholds the moral while supplying the scene, and the reader is left to adjudicate a question the text will not answer: if grace does not produce goodness, what does it produce?

The artist, then, is reduced to an almost allegorical mask, incorporeal and flimsy. A similar dematerialization can be seen in a more radical way in “The Disciple”, which is an ironic rewriting of the myth of Narcissus. The piece is shaped around the figure of the pathetic fallacy through which the spring where Narcissus dies in the myth is now able to speak. But the key ironic reversal lies not in speech but in motive. The Oreads arrive to comfort the pool, assuming it mourns Narcissus’s beauty: “We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he” (Wilde 2000, 173). The pool’s reply dismantles their assumption: “But was Narcissus beautiful?” When the Oreads protest – “Who should know that better than you?” – and remind the pool that Narcissus “would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty” (*ibidem*) – the pool offers the piece’s devastating confession: “But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and

looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored" (*ibidem*). The pool is *also* a narcissist. The piece stages not one-sided adoration but mutual self-regard mistaken for love. Neither Narcissus nor the pool sees the other; each sees only a reflection of the self. This is not merely "value as refraction", but a parable of aesthetic solipsism: both artist and audience, both subject and object, both lover and beloved, are locked in reciprocal projection. The disciple learns nothing from the master because the master is merely a surface for the disciple's self-contemplation – and vice versa. The title, "The Disciple," becomes bitterly ironic: discipleship, in this account, is not imitation or apprenticeship but mirroring without recognition, a relation in which neither party exists for the other except as occasion for self-regard. Value is recast as refraction rather than representation; the authorial figure functions as a surface that returns to the beholder an image of their investments.

"The Master" inverts the logic of *imitatio Christi* by staging envy of martyrdom rather than of virtue. The piece opens in "the Valley of Desolation" where Joseph of Arimathea, descending from the hill after Christ's burial, encounters "a young man who was naked and weeping. His hair was the colour of honey, and his body was as a white flower, but he had wounded his body with thorns and on his hair had he set ashes as a crown" (Wilde 2000, 175). Joseph assumes the youth mourns Christ: "I do not wonder that your sorrow is so great, for surely He was a just man" (*ibidem*). The young man's reply upends this assumption: "It is not for Him that I am weeping, but for myself" (175-176). He then catalogs his own miracles in language that closely echoes the Gospels:

I too have changed water into wine, and I have healed the leper and given sight to the blind. I have walked upon the waters, and from the dwellers in the tombs I have cast out devils. I have fed the hungry in the desert where there was no food, and I have raised the dead from their narrow houses, and at my bidding, and before a great multitude of people, a barren fig-tree withered away. (176)

The accumulation is meticulous, comprehensive – every Christological sign is reproduced. Yet the conclusion breaks the pattern: "All things that this man has done I have done also. And yet they have not crucified me" (*ibidem*). The youth desires martyrdom as the authentication of power. The piece diagnoses a perverse envy: imitation without suffering is incomplete; authority requires *passion* (in both senses – suffering and intensity). If martyrdom is the sign of the elect, its absence invalidates the miracle-worker. The youth has performed every proof but lacks the final credential. The piece is Wilde's most explicit interrogation of the *author-function*: charismatic authority, it suggests, is secured not by what one does but by what is done *to* one. The miracle is secondary; the spectacle of suffering is primary. "The Master" parodies both the Decadent cult of suffering-as-credential and the sacrificial logic undergirding notions of artistic genius. The artist must not only create but must be *seen to suffer* for creation. Without the cross, the miracles are indistinguishable from conjuring. The piece withholds judgment on whether this logic is true or pathological – but it exposes the logic with surgical clarity.

Finally, the period's aesthetic classicism supplies the cultural inflection of this scriptural cadence: the Hellenic overlay that stiffens, ornaments, and authorizes Wilde's idiom belongs to a broader late-Victorian habit of splicing biblical and classical registers in order to stage ethical reflection as form (Evangelista 2009). Murphy's account of the cycle sits precisely at this junction, describing printed "ironic parables" that heighten simpler oral tellings with Hellenic allusion and patterned prepositional trains – a calculated primitivism that renders doctrine as pose (2021, 85-86). Read together, these strands explain why Wilde's brevity is not merely compact but cognitive: the short scene compels judgement, and the biblical-Hellenic surface secures the authority of that demand without closing it.

In “The House of Judgement”, judgement turns upon imaginability. Hell is bearable because it has already been lived; Heaven is refused because it cannot be imagined. The piece opens “in the House of Judgment” where “the Man came naked before God” and “God opened the Book of the Life of the Man” (Wilde 2000, 171). What follows is a threefold indictment, each section cataloging the Man’s sins in escalating detail. The first recounts social cruelty: “Thy life hath been evil, and thou hast shown cruelty to those who were in need of succour, and to those who lacked help thou hast been bitter and hard of heart” (*ibidem*). The second condemns aesthetic and sexual transgression: “Thy life hath been evil, and the Beauty I have shown thou hast sought for, and the Good I have hidden thou didst pass by. The walls of thy chamber were painted with images, and from the bed of thine abominations thou didst rise up to the sound of flutes” (*ibidem*). The third accuses betrayal and ingratitude: “Evil hath been thy life, and with evil didst thou requite good, and with wrongdoing kindness” (*ibidem*). To each accusation, “the Man made answer and said, ‘Even so did I’ ” (*ibidem*). The confession is absolute, unmitigated – no defense, no extenuating circumstance, no appeal to grace. God then pronounces sentence: “Surely I will send thee into Hell. Even into Hell will I send thee” (172). The Man’s reply arrests the judgment: “Thou canst not” (*ibidem*). When God demands a reason, the Man answers, “Because in Hell have I always lived” (*ibidem*). The reply echoes Marlowe’s Mephistopheles in *Doctor Faustus*: “Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it” (2022 [1604], Act I, Scene 3, 74). Eschatological futurity collapses into present condition; damnation is not a destination but a state already inhabited. The sentence is impossible because it has already been executed. God then attempts the opposite: “Seeing that I may not send thee into Hell, surely I will send thee unto Heaven. Even unto Heaven will I send thee” (Wilde 2000, 172). Again, the Man replies, “Thou canst not” (*ibidem*). When asked why, he confesses, “Because never, and in no place, have I been able to imagine it” (*ibidem*). The inability to imagine Heaven is epistemological, not volitional. The Man does not *refuse* Heaven; he cannot *conceive* it. Damnation, in this account, is a failure of figuration, not of desire. The piece ends with silence: “And there was silence in the House of Judgment” (*ibidem*). Judgment stalls not on a deficit of will but on a deficit of image; the limit of moral experience is the limit of representation. Heaven is unavailable not because the Man is unworthy but because he lacks the imaginative apparatus to construct it. The piece refuses consolation: neither Hell nor Heaven is possible, and the Man remains suspended in a juridical limbo where sentence cannot be passed because the categories of punishment and reward have been exhausted or rendered inoperative. Judgment stalls not on a deficit of will but on a deficit of image; the limit of moral experience is the limit of figuration. If “The Artist” confesses the cost of refounding and “The Disciple” the economy of attention, “The House of Judgment” confesses the boundary of vision. In each case authorship appears as image under test.

4. *Disciple and Master*

This parabolic, scripturally inflected prose, with its allegorical recasting of the artist-figure as flimsy icon rather than psychological subject, connects to the Continental tradition of post-Romantic prose poetry, but its evacuated, transparent protagonists point toward another proximate source: Walter Pater’s prose experiments in the imaginary portrait (Bugliani 2022, 106). As a matter of fact, Wilde’s prose interweaves with Pater and also with Henry James’s stories of writers and artists, and if we consider the span between 1873 (the year of “The Madonna of

the Future” by Henry James³) and 1894 (the year of Pater’s death), we perceive that Wilde was part of a florilegium of brief works concerning the existence of the creator of artifacts. In the wake of James’s “Madonna,” the relevant lineage unfolds in a compact but telling sequence. Pater develops the artist-portrait type most explicitly beginning in 1885 with “A Prince of Court Painters”, followed by the paired experiments “Denys l’Auxerrois” and “Sebastian van Storck” (1886), and “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” (1887), all collected in *Imaginary Portraits* (1887). Pater’s earlier “The Child in the House” (1878) belongs to a different strand of his work – the autobiographical memoir-essay – and the fragment “An English Poet” (also 1878), though it prefigures the artist-portrait, remained unpublished in Pater’s lifetime and only partially develops the type. Meanwhile, James returns to the artist-figure in the mid-1880s: “The Author of Beltraffio” appears in 1884, followed by Pater’s “A Prince of Court Painters” in 1885 and, the next year, Pater’s paired experiments “Denys l’Auxerrois” and “Sebastian Van Storck” (1886). Pater continues with “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” in 1887 – the same year he gathers the first collection of *Imaginary Portraits* – while James extends his own inquiry into artistic vocation and discipline with “The Lesson of the Master” (1888) and later “The Private Life” (1892).

By the end of the decade, Wilde enters this continuum with “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” (1889) – itself an *imaginary portrait* of Shakespeare’s supposed male muse, filtered through a fictional critic (Cyril Graham) and a narrator, and thus Wilde’s most direct engagement with Pater’s form. The 1890 *Picture of Dorian Gray* then radicalizes the portrait-motif by making the artwork itself the protagonist (the portrait ages while Dorian does not), turning Pater’s device inside-out. In 1890, alongside *Dorian Gray*, Wilde publishes “The Critic as Artist,” pushing the artist-figure toward questions of interpretation, performance, and ethical pose. The early 1890s then become especially dense: Pater contributes “Hyppolitus Veiled” (1889, though published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in May 1889) and “Apollo in Picardy” (1893), while James, in 1893, publishes a cluster of texts – “The Middle Years”, “Greville Fane”, and “The Real Thing” – that reframe authorship through late style, professional identity, and the problem of “the real”. Wilde concentrates the motif into the explicitly parabolic micro-forms published together in the *Fortnightly Review* in July 1894: “The Artist”, “The Doer of Good”, “The Disciple”, “The Master”, and “The House of Judgment”. (A sixth piece, “The Teacher of Wisdom,” appeared in the December 1894 issue of the *Speaker*).

Pater’s leading role is especially important, and not only for Wilde⁴. His defining influence in shaping the form and fortune of modern prose literature has been always remarked, although desultorily. His *de facto* invention of the form of the imaginary portrait is very interesting to Oscar Wilde’s prose not primarily for the issue of portraiture – which Wilde would pursue in his two portraits of 1889 and 1890 – but in what Lene Østermark-Johansen has labelled the “ghostly transparency” of their protagonists, a feature whose function is that of diverting the

³ First listed by F.O. Matthiessen as the first of his short fiction concerning writers and artists, where he was “writing from the heart of his aesthetic conviction” (1944, 3).

⁴ On Walter Pater’s formative presence behind Wilde’s aesthetic positions – whether framed as stylistic apprenticeship, the inheritance of “impressionist” critical vocabulary, or (in some accounts) the sexual politics of influence – see Parkes 2011, 45-76. On Pater’s afterlife within James’s late-Victorian aestheticism (especially as James “transposes” Paterian theory into fictional form), see Salmon 1999. For a foundational earlier discussion of James’s relation to the aesthetic tradition (with attention to Arnold and Pater as key coordinates), see Berland 1962. For a queer-theoretical account that situates James’s *fin-de-siècle* “aesthetic” types and the problem of labeling/identity (a context in which Pater’s legacy is frequently backgrounded), see (Haralson 2003, 54-78). Finally, for a focused study of aestheticism in *The Tragic Muse* (including the figure of Gabriel Nash) that tracks the intellectual climate to which Pater is central, see Baker 1973.

attention from them to their author: “Pater the conjuror of ghosts, the master of language or of puppets emerges as the real protagonist” (2014, 5). The artist-figure becomes a medium through which Pater’s own aesthetic and ethical preoccupations can be projected, tested, and withdrawn without commitment. This technique – making the fictional author so flimsy that the biographical author’s presence becomes paradoxically more palpable, though ever oblique – is precisely the lesson Wilde adapts in the *Poems in Prose*.

Yet Pater was not implicit narcissist. His turn to the ghostly is not mere stylistic mannerism, but a response to a transformation in human subjectivity under modernity. In the early, unpublished essay “Diaphaneïté” (1864), written when Pater was twenty-five, he describes a moral and aesthetic type characterized by transparency, evanescence, and refusal of typological legibility:

It does not take the eye by breadth of colour; rather it is that fine edge of light where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point. It crosses rather than follows the main current of the world’s life. The world has no sense fine enough for those evanescent shades which fill up the blanks between contrasted types of character – delicate provision in the organization of the moral world for the transmission to every part of it of the life quickened at single points! For this nature there is no place ready in his affections. This colourless, unclassified purity of life it can neither use for its service, nor contemplate as an ideal. (2014, 77-78)

This “colourless, unclassified purity” describes a subjectivity that cannot be instrumentalized (“the world [...] can neither use [it] for its service”) nor converted into stable identity (“nor contemplate [it] as an ideal”). The diaphanous nature exists in the “blanks between contrasted types”, functioning as transmission rather than presence, medium rather than message. Pater’s imaginary portraits embody this logic: their protagonists are “evanescent shades” who serve as conduits for aesthetic and ethical intensities without consolidating into coherent selves. Wilde’s Artist, Disciple, and Master extend this principle to the limit: they are not even individuated enough to be called “characters,” but are rather allegorical masks through which authorship as stance becomes briefly visible before dissolving.

The description in “Diaphaneïté” anticipates the figuration of the artist in Wilde’s *Poems in Prose* with uncanny precision. The Artist who melts *sorrow that endureth for ever* to cast *pleasure that abideth for a moment* is defined not by psychological depth but by a single gesture – an act of refounding that “crosses rather than follows the main current of the world’s life”. The Disciple (Narcissus’s pool) exists only as a reflective surface, a “fine edge of light” where self-regard meets its double. The Master, weeping because “they have not crucified me” (Wilde 2000, 176), embodies the paradox of a nature for which “there is no place ready in [the world’s] affections” (Pater 2014, 78) – seeking martyrdom precisely because his diaphanous authority requires the world’s violence to become legible. And the Man in the House of Judgment, who has “always lived” in Hell and “never [...] been able to imagine” Heaven (Wilde 2000, 172), represents the epistemological limit of the diaphanous: a transparency so absolute that neither damnation nor salvation can register as category. In each case, the figure exists in the “blanks between contrasted types” (Pater 2014, 17), refusing instrumentalization, evading moral classification, transmitting intensity without consolidating into identity.

Pater’s diaphanous type and Wilde’s parabolic miniatures share a common wager: that the most vivid articulation of authorship in modernity comes not through consolidation of voice or assertion of presence, but through strategic transparency – a technique that makes authority visible precisely by refusing to ground it.

5. Conclusion

Wilde's *Poems in Prose* occupy a singular position at the intersection of three late-nineteenth-century formal and ethical experiments. First, they inherit from Baudelaire and the French tradition the prose poem's hybrid form – a genre that, as Murphy demonstrates, was especially suited to Decadent sensibilities because it refused both the utility of prose and the lyricism of verse, creating a “lawless zone” (Stetz 2006, 629) in which meaning operates through compression, deferral, and ironic withholding. Second, Wilde adapts the biblical parable's covenant with the reader: these miniatures demand judgment while refusing to supply it, drawing on scriptural authority (archaic diction, antiphonal temporality, the rhythms of Hebrews and the Psalms) to create an expectation of moral instruction that is systematically deferred or inverted. Third, and most proximately, Wilde extends Pater's technique of the “ghostly” or “diaphanous” protagonist – a figure so transparent, so evacuated of interiority, that it functions as surface rather than subject, medium rather than message. Where Pater's imaginary portraits use this transparency to “transmit [...] life quickened at single points” (Pater 2014, 77-78) across historical and aesthetic distances, Wilde deploys it to make authorship itself – not as biographical presence but as ethical and aesthetic posture – briefly visible in parabolic form.

What is at stake in this convergence is the question of authority. Gantar argues that Wilde's irony destabilizes cultural and literary authority by appropriating its rhetorical forms while exposing authority as “a performative effect rather than a stable ground of truth” (Gantar 2015, 125). The *Poems in Prose* enact this logic at the level of genre and figure. They *sound* authoritative – archaic, declarative, balanced – but what they authorize remains suspended. “The Artist” does not *prescribe* the sacrifice of permanence for intensity; it *enacts* that exchange as *fait accompli*, leaving the reader to determine whether this is lament, doctrine, or aesthetic necessity. “The Doer of Good” does not *condemn* the post-redemptive indulgence of the healed leper or the forgiven woman; it stages their logic (“[But] you healed me. How else should I live?”, Wilde 2000, 174) with such impeccable clarity that condemnation and justification become indistinguishable. “The House of Judgment” does not *resolve* the Man's confession that he has “always lived” in Hell and “never [...] been able to imagine” Heaven (172); it lets the silence speak. In each case, the parabolic form creates the expectation of adjudication – this is what parables *do* – but withholds the verdict. The reader is placed in the position of the judge, but the criteria for judgment are precisely what the parable has placed in question.

If Pater's diaphanous figures exist in order to “refine [the elements of our moral nature] to the burning point” (2014, 77) – to serve as sites of aesthetic and ethical intensity without consolidating into identity – Wilde's parabolic miniatures perform a parallel operation at the level of form. They are *portable icons* of authorship: iterable, detachable, answerable to no single context. The Artist melting bronze, the pool confessing its narcissism, the Master weeping for want of crucifixion, the Man standing naked before God – these are not characters, but attitudes rendered as image. They do not develop, do not acquire depth, do not invite identification. They exist as brief flashes of stance, frozen at the moment of ethical crisis or aesthetic decision, and then withdrawn. This is the formal achievement of the *Poems in Prose*: they make visible the author-function (Foucault's term, but Pater and Wilde anticipate the concept) as neither sovereign presence nor dissolved absence, but as *pose* – a momentary configuration of authority, style, and judgment that can be assumed, tested, and abandoned without remainder.

If Murphy is correct that Wilde's prose poems “adopt the English Bible as literary model” and “simulate a formulaic primitivism” (2021, 85), we must add that this simulation is not nostalgic but diagnostic: it uses scriptural form to expose the instability of the very categories – Artist, Master, Disciple, Judge – through which authority claims to speak.

The public stakes of this experiment became violently clear in 1895, when the term “prose poem” entered the courtroom and Justice Wills declared such writing “poisonous” precisely because effective (Murphy 2021, 85-86). What made the form dangerous was not its content but its elusiveness: it mimicked authority, demanded interpretation, and refused to settle. These were never ornamental exercises. They were – and remain – brief instruments designed to act upon readers by making the ground of judgment visible as contested terrain. In this sense, Wilde’s *Poems in Prose* are less a coda to Decadence than a manifesto in miniature: a demonstration that authority, in modernity, can be neither secured nor abandoned, but only performed – and that performance, at its most rigorous, looks like parable.

Yet this calibration to modernity – to what can be captured in the fleeting moment – returns us to the founding insight of the prose poem tradition itself. Baudelaire’s definition of modernity in *The Painter of Modern Life* provides the theoretical ground for the aesthetic wager Wilde’s sequence enacts:

By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whole other half is the eternal and the immutable. Every old master has had his own modernity; the great majority of fine portraits that have come down to us from former generations are clothed in the costume of their own period. They are perfectly harmonious, because everything [...] combines to form a completely viable whole. This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. (Baudelaire 1965, 13)

Wilde’s *Poems in Prose* take this dialectic – the eternal and the ephemeral, permanence and metamorphosis – and perform it at the level of authorship itself. Where Baudelaire locates modernity in the “costume” of the present moment, in the transitory surfaces that future generations will read as period markers, Wilde compresses the entire dialectic into emblematic gestures: the Artist who melts *sorrow that endureth for ever* to cast *pleasure that abideth for a moment* enacts, in miniature, Baudelaire’s account of art as the union of the immutable and the fugitive. The parable’s archaic, scriptural diction – its claim to the “eternal” – is precisely what makes the ephemeral visible as choice rather than accident. Modernity, in Wilde’s hands, is not the rejection of the eternal but its strategic appropriation: the eternal becomes a costume, a pose, a transferable surface through which the fugitive – the authorial stance, the momentary intensity – can be staged, tested, and relinquished.

Baudelaire insists that “this transitory, fugitive element [...] must on no account be despised or dispensed with”. Wilde’s achievement is to have treated authorship itself as that transitory element: not a fixed identity anchored in biography or doctrine, but a series of brief, contingent configurations – Artist, Disciple, Master, Judge – each calibrated to modernity’s demand for metamorphosis. The prose poems thus complete the trajectory begun in Baudelaire’s urban miniatures and extended through Pater’s imaginary portraits: they render the author as a function of form, a pose legible only in its enactment and withdrawal. In doing so, they demonstrate that in modernity, the authorial “costume” is not what conceals the artist but what makes the artist briefly – fleetingly – visible. The simulacrum, in this sense, is not a degraded copy of presence but the only form presence can take when calibrated to the tempo of the fugitive and the contingent. Wilde’s parables, read in this light, are portraits not of the artist as eternal type but of the artist as modern condition: ephemeral, iterable, and – like all things modern – already in the process of vanishing even as it comes into view.

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Resonant Unwellness: Oscar Wilde, the Physics of Sound, and the Politics of Suffering

Lou Pinelli

Università IUAVdi Venezia; Università degli Studi di Bergamo
(lpinelli@iuav.it; luca.pinelli@guest.unibg.it)

Abstract:

This article challenges the dichotomy between Oscar Wilde's pre-prison "jester" persona and his later "gay martyr" myth by examining "unwellness" as a political and existential condition. Through the lenses of Health Humanities, resonance, and attunement, it argues that health and well-being are central to Wilde's aesthetic-political stance. By re-evaluating *De Profundis* as an articulation of a transformative philosophy of life-as-art, this article reveals a physics of sound in Wilde's broader oeuvre where suffering becomes a material force for creation. Ultimately, incarceration is seen as a catalyst for a retrospective attunement to a lifelong note of sorrow, where the vulnerable body becomes a resonant site for a transformative philosophy of art.

Keywords: *De Profundis*, Health Humanities, Oscar Wilde, Resonance, Unwellness

1. Introduction

As was famously recollected by André Gide, Wilde "did not converse: he narrated" (1949, 2). His prowess at table talk naturally fed into the construction of some of his best tales, the final form of which was the result of a series of re-tellings and re-adjustments that happened over many dinners and social situations, in dialogue with various audiences. As Gide evokes, "of his wisdom or indeed of his folly, he uttered only what he believed his hearer would relish; he served each according to his appetite, to his taste" (3). This meant, Gide quickly adds, that because Wilde's first aim was "to amuse", "many of those who thought they knew him only knew the jester in him" (*ibidem*). Indeed, as the oft-abused aphorisms and the oft-represented society plays show, Wilde was a master of comedy and of social situations. This image congealed, over time, into the

Wilde-as-jester trope which still informs our way of looking at his often caustic remarks about Victorian moral standards and the associated notion of respectability.

Wilde's three trials and his consequent imprisonment in 1895 equally marked a fundamental, albeit sombre stage in his career, one which has had far-reaching consequences on the ways in which we tend to talk about Wilde today. This latter stage is often equated with the suffering and oppression he sustained as a queer writer who bore the brunt of a system so intent on chastising anyone who evaded moral or sexual norms. This equally widespread understanding of Wilde has congealed over time into what Richard A. Kaye aptly termed a "Wilde-as-Gay-Martyr myth", in particular for a generation of gay liberation activists and queer critics who were claiming civil rights and mainstream representation for themselves (2004, 192). Wilde, as experienced by subsequent generations of readers and critics, seems to inhabit a tension between the figure of the light-hearted story-teller who knows how to captivate and charm his audience and that of the victim of a strict heterosexual code which punishes the sexually and politically unruly subject.

This impression of him, albeit to some extent faithful to the texts penned by Wilde, may generate a false dichotomy between Wilde before the trials and Wilde in prison and after, thereby jettisoning any continuities between the two figures. Moreover, it contributes to perpetuating the misconception whereby Wilde's final years were spent in solitude and agony – a misconception that works like Nicholas Frankel's *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (2017) have done much to put to rest. In what follows, I will make a specular movement to Frankel's volume: while his work shows how combative and active Wilde still was after prison, my interest in this article is, rather, to show how Wilde's sombre tones, and in particular his engagement with sorrow and suffering, take pride of place among the themes he discussed in the texts he produced before and during his imprisonment. In particular, I am interested in the notion of being "unwell", of not feeling quite oneself – the sort of sensation that tells us that something is off, a sort of discomfort that does not necessarily signify illness or disease but which has to materialise in some shape or form in our bodily reality.

I purposefully use a vague term ("unwellness") to explore the various manifestations that a lack of health and well-being may display in conjunction with the political and existential background animating Wilde's life and work. Philosopher Elizabeth Barnes has recently gone to great lengths to disentangle the notion of well-being from health, arguing that the two concepts, while recently reunited by the World Health Organization, serve different purposes and are constitutively separate (see Barnes 2023, 66-93). However, for Wilde the question of health and that of well-being are not philosophical in nature but experiential, especially during his imprisonment: as several critics have noted, he suffered the harshly punitive and ultimately insalubrious atmosphere of the late Victorian prison system he found himself in, with Sir Edmund Frederick Du Cane's notoriously unyielding policies and attitudes towards the incarcerated diminishing both the health and the well-being of those who were serving time¹. It is no coincidence, in this sense, that Wilde should appeal to the existing authorities in his post-prison years, arguing for a substantial reform of the penal system predicated *both* on health and well-being: besides listing "hunger", "insomnia", and "disease" among the "permanent punishments authorised by law in English prisons", in his 23rd March 1898 letter to the *Daily Chronicle* he famously also numbers "the production of insanity" among the "result[s]"

¹ See Laura Giovannelli's well-documented, and recent contribution for an overview of the reforms taking place within the prison complex at the time (2023, 81-89). For a shorter discussion of prison and prison reform at the time, in particular in relation to punitive labour, see also Christian Gerzso (2019, 1029-1032).

of incarceration and argues for a more lenient treatment of prisoners through the concession of a few rights that would make life in prison more manageable, such as access to books, freedom in letter-writing, and the possibility of receiving visitors (Wilde 2013, 202, 204-206).

Moreover, seen within the context of anti-degeneracy sentiment and the struggle against sexual “deviancy”, the punishment inflicted on Wilde, as Laura Giovannelli has aptly put it, amounted to “a collective exorcism performed against ‘enervation’ and ‘degeneracy’ with a view to reintegrating a positive, healthy, and masculine discernment” (2023, 79). Within the punitive prison system, health was undoubtedly connected to the ideological and political plane, intended as it was to humiliate prisoners in the interest of breaking them and turning them into obedient subjects. My contention is that questions relating to health and well-being are in fact central to Wilde’s oeuvre, especially as they intersect with his own aesthetic ideals and his political stance on society – an aspect currently undervalued in the existing Wilde scholarship.

In order to show the blatant absence of approaches in Wilde Studies pertaining to health and well-being even beyond his imprisonment, I will briefly discuss the case of Bunbury, which has been the object of much interpretation and speculation. Many critics have rightly highlighted the comedic effect the term and its use in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) are supposed to elicit, while W.H. Auden, Joel Fineman, and Christopher Crafts – amongst others – have found in the play’s permanent invalid and covert activity subterranean allusions to homosexuality (see Coppa 2025, 324). Other recent readings have taken Bunbury’s comedic veneer to conceal more radical contents, as evidenced by Deaglán Ó Donghaile’s interpretation of it as representative of class mobility and as a mirror image of “the moribund state of capital” (2020, 182, 193). Paradoxically, what has not quite been registered in the existing scholarship is precisely the fact that Bunbury is *a permanent invalid* whose fragile *health* is used by Algernon to elude social responsibilities: the central, essential quality of the fictional figure is taken for granted – perhaps because of its “familiarity” to anyone who has ever tried to get out of unwelcome situations via a dead relative or an unwell parent – but would merit a more extensive discussion.

When Algernon first uses Bunbury as an excuse in Act 1, Lady Bracknell replies, using a characteristically Wildean paradox, that “Health is the primary duty of life” (Wilde 2008, 261), thereby aligning poor health with unethical, antisocial behaviour. “Well, I must say, Algernon”, Lady Bracknell had said, “that I think it is high time that Mr Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd” (*ibidem*). “Unwellness” is here equated with indecisiveness, a vice that threatens to hinder the perpetuation of the social system by means of its immobility. The social hierarchy upheld by Lady Bracknell and the machinations of capital it is predicated upon need to keep moving in order to remain immutable, and Bunbury’s poor health – though fictive – is a threat that needs to be taken care of. When Bunbury is declared to be dead by Algernon in Act 3, it is the speech act itself which determines the outcome: when Lady Bracknell inquires about Bunbury’s whereabouts, Algernon replies first that he does not live in that house and then that he died because his “doctors found out that Bunbury could not live” (297). To this Lady Bracknell responds that she is glad that “he made up his mind at the last to some definite course of action, and acted under proper medical advice” (*ibidem*). In a classically Wildean subversion of common sense, the fictional figure of Bunbury is seen by Lady Bracknell – *the* mouthpiece of Victorian upper-class ideology – as an indecisive character who could not produce the kind of health required of upstanding citizens; when he is “finally got rid of” (*ibidem*), she rejoices at the prospect of going back to business as usual. The poor health of a non-existent character, in other words, was standing in the way of a political reproduction of a social system where every

cog must of necessity function properly in order for known hierarchies to be perpetuated. The intermediary references to Bunbury being “exploded” or “found out” (*ibidem*) reinforce this politicised understanding of the character, as Ó Donghaile (2020) has already shown.

This admittedly cursory discussion of Bunbury’s health and its relationship with the Victorian social system already shows how questions pertaining to well-being are always already political in Wilde, though they are camouflaged in the society plays through comedic devices. This tension between a shining surface and a more profound and politicised depth connects the jester-like quality of Wilde as a “great *viveur*” (Gide 1949, x) – what Gide dubbed Wilde’s “amusing phantom” (2) – with the serious subversive content he concealed in plain sight. The three trials uncovered the sexually subversive undercurrents of both his persona and his works, and the experience of incarceration contributed to creating a new atmosphere within which Wilde managed to perceive and articulate a more nuanced understanding of life, sorrow, and creation – one which ought to be taken, I contend, as a broader political and existential statement about the state of things *outside* of prison.

2. *A Symphony of Sorrow*

As Matthew Bradley has recently pointed out, “as in part a survey of his life and career before prison but written from prison, *De Profundis* is the only substantial work that Wilde wrote that straddled these two phases of his life, shaping them into a relationship” (2025, 330). It is only natural, then, that we should turn to *De Profundis* to unsettle the dichotomy described in the opening of this article. In one of the passages where Wilde asks Lord Alfred Douglas to think about their past and the young man’s mistreatment of, and ingratitude towards him, the Irish author reminds his former lover of the latter’s “conduct to [him] at Brighton from October 10th to 13th, 1894”, before adding quite a lengthy incidental paragraph on the difficulty of remembering precise dates for those who live outside of prison, in contrast to his own heightened sense of time and memory as an inmate (2013, 60-61). The long passage that follows will be broken down into three separate but interlinked movements.

Three years ago is a long time for you to go back. But we who live in prison, and in whose lives there is no event but sorrow, have to measure time by throbs of pain, and the record of bitter moments. We have nothing else to think of. Suffering – curious as it may sound to you – is the means by which we exist, because it is the only means by which we become conscious of existing; and the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the warrant, the evidence, of our continued identity. Between myself and the memory of joy lies a gulf no less deep than that between myself and joy in its actuality. (61)

This passage, as Karen Tongson has recently pointed out in reference to *De Profundis*, “slips into present tense narration that demands notice in an otherwise retrospective narrative structure” (2025, 893): Wilde is interrupting his narration of the past with Bosie and situating himself as a prisoner whose life is punctuated by bouts of pain and suffering which he cannot escape. Joy, Wilde adds, is a distant feeling he has no memory of; all he can remember when looking back on his life is pain and “bitter moments”. In a sort of gloomy elaboration on the well-known Lockean notion of diachronic identity (see Gordon-Roth 2025), Wilde suggests that “the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the warrant, the evidence, of our continued identity”: awareness of suffering in the present and the past is what seemingly ensures that prisoners like Wilde do not lose their sense of themselves. Wilde, as a prisoner, continues to coincide with himself only by virtue of suffering and of his memory of suffering. Prisoners know they exist, Wilde posits, inasmuch as they have suffered, remember suffering

in the past, and continue to suffer in the present. In this first passage, Wilde is creating a common, existential ground among all those who find themselves in the same position – he situates himself within a collective body whose painful existence echoes his own.

Having thus set the scene in the present, Wilde returns to his past narration, indulging first in a hypothetical scenario where his relationship with Douglas was peaceful and pleasurable:

Had our life together been as the world fancied it to be, one simply of pleasure, profligacy and laughter, I would not be able to recall a single passage in it. It is because it was full of moments and days tragic, bitter, sinister in their warnings, dull or dreadful in their monotonous scenes and unseemly violences, that I can see or hear each separate incident in its detail, can indeed see or hear little else. (Wilde 2013, 61)

Here, Wilde finds in his relationship with Douglas the supporting example of his thesis whereby suffering creates memory and identity, but with a twist: in addition to guaranteeing the existence – and a self-consciousness and self-coincidence in existence – of prisoners, suffering enables people in general to remember events in detail. Wilde is projecting his current positionality (a prisoner) and his own state of mind (pain) onto his past, so that his own backward gaze is tinged by dark-coloured spectacles. Interestingly, recollection of the past is here made possible not only through the visual register (“I can *see* [...] each separate incident in its detail”), but also through Wilde’s own aural capacity (“I can see *and hear* each separate incident in its detail”). Remembering, Wilde begins to suggest here, is not simply about seeing with one’s mind’s eye; it is also a matter of attunement, as the final passage in the paragraph makes clear:

So much in this place do men live by pain that my friendship with you, in the way through which I am forced to remember it, appears to me always as a prelude consonant with those varying modes of anguish which each day I have to realise; nay more, to necessitate them even; as though my life, whatever it had seemed to myself and to others, had all the while been a real Symphony of Sorrow, passing through its rhythmically-linked movements to its certain resolution, with that inevitableness that in Art characterises the treatment of every great theme. (*ibidem*)

In this final movement, Wilde finds a consonance between his conflictual “friendship” with Douglas and “those varying modes of anguish” that inform his incarcerated existence. His emphasis on the different ways in which he has to “realise” or even “necessitate” anguish, with the latter verb doubling down on the register of necessity (“I *have* to *necessitate*”), anticipates the “inevitableness” that closes the passage, thereby linking the existential agony produced and repeated over time by Douglas to the artful composition of a performance that builds on previous elements before reaching its “resolution”. In true Wildean spirit, Life indeed imitates Art here. As Ellis Hanson (2003) insightfully argued, Wilde is here resorting to the decadent language of sadomasochism in his characterisation of his relationship with Bosie, and this in turn informs his own approach to artistic creation. Crucially, Wilde is attempting to turn the “grotesque comedy” of his trials into a more serious “tragedy” through artistic creation (120). As Christian Gerzso has recently put it, “*De Profundis* afforded Wilde with the opportunity of rewriting his downfall as an aesthetically compelling event: a tragedy that could elicit pity in his readers, including Douglas, instead of the public mockery he suffered throughout those years” (2019, 1028).

However, to conflate this description with the inevitability of tragic resolution in drama is to miss Wilde’s emphasis on the sonic. His past life is a “prelude” that is “consonant” with his current position in prison; the various events punctuating his life with Bosie were in fact part of a larger “Symphony of Sorrow”, made up as it was of “rhythmically-linked movements” leading to a resolution. This image clearly builds on the previous passage – the second movement presented just before this last one – where Wilde described his access to the past through the

visual and aural register at the same time. Perhaps, if this is indeed a tragedy he is attempting to create, it is an opera or a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where music naturally guides the audience through the events on stage. In fact, it seems to be a performance that one may fully appreciate only in retrospect, when our ears have become attuned to the melody and are able to perceive the harmonious, organic whole. Time is of the essence here: our perception of the work of art encompasses different senses but also different moments in its unfurling, reconfiguring our own relationship with time and renewing our understanding of known elements in our past.

In the prose poem “The Artist” (1894), we similarly find the importance of sorrow and creation. As is known, here an omniscient, God-like narrator tells us of a man who wants to create “an image of *The Pleasure that abideth for a moment*” (Wilde 2010, 219). In order to achieve that, the man needs bronze, “[f]or he could only think in bronze”, but there is no bronze left in the world apart from that which he used to create “the image of *The Sorrow that endureth forever*” (*ibidem*). He thus decides to repurpose that same material to create his image: he transforms the image of *The Sorrow that endureth forever* into that of *The Pleasure that abideth for a moment*. The biblical tone of this poem in prose is hard to miss: the narrator is far from what is happening, as if viewing the events from high above; there are repetitions that are clearly superfluous, as when the narrative emphasises that “all the bronze of the whole world had disappeared” before making the same point again, though in a different way (“nor anywhere in the whole world was there any bronze to be found”); the preference for parataxis and coordinating conjunctions clearly recalls the narrative structure of scripture; and the archaic third-person singular verb endings in -eth point to a time before our modern age (*ibidem*). In Nicholas Frankel’s interpretation, the man in the prose poem acts “in accord with Paterian notions about life’s brevity and the importance of living for the moment”, and the ultimate message of the tale is that “creativity comes from the vanquishing of sorrow, which is less permanent than it seems at first” (Wilde 2018, 194, 188). Seen retrospectively, from Wilde’s imprisonment, this tale may in fact suggest that artistic creation emanates from death and grief: even those artifacts that seem to celebrate the temporary joys of life in fact repose on the sorrow that endureth forever. Wilde seems to suggest between the lines that if pleasure may only be provisional and dependent on context, grief may last for a whole lifetime. To put it succinctly, temporary pleasure is predicated on the sacrifice of eternal grief – a sacrifice, it ought to be noted, which is made necessary by the impossibility of finding the same material (bronze) anywhere else but in one’s past creation.

Traces of Wilde’s previous annotations are preserved in the autograph manuscript version housed at the Morgan Library in New York². What is striking about the sentences Wilde subsequently erased is the repetition of the statement “He could only think in bronze”, which opens and closes the original manuscript. Indeed, even in Gide’s account of the last part of Wilde’s life, the recounting of this tale is accompanied by an emphasis on the same concept:

‘They believe,’ Wilde began, ‘that all thoughts are born naked ... They don’t understand that I can not [sic] think otherwise than in stories. The sculptor doesn’t try to translate his thought into marble; he thinks in marble, directly.

‘There was a man who could think only in bronze. And one day this man had an idea, the idea of joy, of the joy which dwells in the moment. And he felt that he had to tell it. But in all the world, not a single piece of bronze was left; for men had used it all. And this man felt that he would go mad if he did not tell his idea.’ (1949, 11)

² The manuscript has been digitised and is now available on the website: <<https://www.themorgan.org/collection/oscar-wilde/manuscripts-letters/13>> (05/2026).

In the first paragraph reported here, Wilde seems to emphasise the fact that content and form go together: it is not possible to isolate what one thinks from the material – whether “stories” or “marble” – one has at one’s disposal: just as the man in “The Artist” can only think in bronze, Wilde seems to have declared that he could only think in stories. In the second paragraph, we have, in embryo, the story as it will be published in the *Fortnightly Review*, with the significant absence of the image produced through the recycling of the material. There is no mention, as yet, of pleasure and its fleeting nature; what dominates the story at this early stage is the author’s intuition about joy and the visceral need for bronze in order to think that idea properly.

Reading this prose poem in retrospect, after our discussion of *De Profundis*, allows us to notice the continuity between Wilde-as-*raconteur* and Wilde-as-martyr: both figures emphasise a vital connection between life and art, between suffering and artistic creation, though the “martyr” seems to produce this understanding from a very specific – and political – location. If the sort of hedonism and aestheticism that characterised Wilde’s life before prison was predicated on the sacrifice of ever-lasting sorrow and grief, as “The Artist” seems to suggest, it is prison that provided him with the material to conceive of this relationship. In a sort of maieutic of suffering, incarceration as an existential and political situation questioned Wilde in order to elicit responses he already knew, to some extent; all it did, it could be argued, was provide him with the material he needed in order to conceptualise suffering-as-living-as-creating. The insalubrious atmosphere of the prison, which was detrimental to Wilde’s health and well-being, was the catalyst that accelerated his process of retrospective recognition and prompted him to re-attune his own body to the Symphony of Sorrow that had inexorably led him through life. In existential terms, Wilde articulates in *De Profundis* how a certain oppressive condition (prison) may generate in us a renewed and sobering understanding of our past that is truly transformative: looking back, we start seeing all those “rhythmically-linked movements” that have inevitably led to our present gloomy situation, as if we were the protagonists of a tragedy who realise only too late, and only at a price, that we are in fact carrying out an unheeded prophecy of doom.

Thinking about his life before prison, Wilde goes so far in *De Profundis* as to identify a few works which, in his view, already contained this intuition about sorrow. It is here that Wilde gestures to “The Artist”, but only after referring to “The Happy Prince”, “The Young King”, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “The Critic as Artist”, *Salomé*, and even “The Soul of Man under Socialism”: the sheer number of works he can think of off the top of his head demonstrates precisely that he may have realised only too late that an important element in his literary production revolved around sorrow, rather than simply pleasure and aestheticism. Unlike what he mentions in reference to the other works, however, the plot of “The Artist” is recollected in an inverted order: “[...] in the prose-poem of the man who from the bronze of the image of the ‘Pleasure that liveth for a Moment’ has to make the image of the ‘Sorrow that abideth for Ever’ it is incarnate” (Wilde 2013, 113). As was mentioned above, it is in fact the other way around in the original story: the man has to make the image of the Pleasure that abideth for a moment from the bronze of the image of the Sorrow that endureth forever. Although this misquotation is no exception within *De Profundis* and may easily be explained by Wilde’s lack of access to texts (other than John Bunyan and the Bible), it may seem significant that Wilde reverses the original order of the story. It may be tempting to see in this inversion of the original order of events a sort of Freudian slip on Wilde’s part – a slip which in fact reinforces what he has been thinking about, namely that prison has changed his outlook on life and has made him realise just how central suffering has always been in it. This interpretation would indeed be in line with what Ian Small termed the “expressive paradigm predicated of the oeuvre” (2003, 86); that is to say, the fact that his works are often explained in relation

to his life, even when, Small argues, there are material differences in the preparation of his manuscripts that should point us in a different direction. What view could be produced, however, if we were to move away from the “psychologizing imperative” which, in Hanson’s view, has characterised most readings of *De Profundis* (2003, 101) and attempted to articulate a philosophy of creation through Wilde’s text?

In view of Gide’s assertion that Wilde was a charming story-teller who adapted his own tales to the audiences he was facing, we may tentatively see this blunder as a variation on the original mythologem offered in “The Artist”. Due to *De Profundis*’s status as a “semi-private” text – Small’s definition (2003, 90) – which Wilde never revised for publication, it could be argued that *De Profundis* as a manuscript intended for “restricted circulation” (*ibidem*) could be reframed as a conversation piece which addressed Douglas, Robert Ross and More Adey and created yet another persona to make sense of Wilde’s recent incarceration. The retelling of “The Artist” in reverse order – from the material of momentary pleasure to the creation of eternal suffering – is in this sense an apt variation provided by Wilde to renew his friends’ understanding of his existential parable.

If this aspect of his summary of “The Artist” has been recorded in all modern editions, the fact that Wilde resorts to the notion of ‘incarnation’ in reference to it has not been emphasised. Our previous discussion of thinking as a creative process that requires the proper materials has shown that for Wilde it was impossible to conceive of a “naked” thought, as Gide reported (1949, 11). The parable of “The Artist” seems to suggest, however, that transformation may be another form of creation where translation, as he is reported to have said in Gide’s booklet, is not a viable possibility. Put differently, Wilde’s philosophy insisted both on the originality of the thought born *with* the appropriate material and on the possibility of repurposing previous materials for a different use: just as the man in the story recycles the bronze of eternal grief to make a bronze of momentary pleasure, Wilde builds on his previous prose poem to make sense of his imprisoned self, resignifying both in the process. It is within this context, I contend, that Wilde’s definition of “The Artist” as incarnating his intuition about sorrow as a condition of existence and a horizon of creation ought to be understood: the idea of sorrow as a fundamental part of life and literary creation acquires a body (becomes “incarnate”), a material specificity, only when Wilde retrospectively becomes attuned to its presence in his past life.

This material incarnation, combined with the emphasis on the sonic highlighted above, naturally produces an interpretation of sorrow as something imperceptible and yet animating the whole world, perhaps in one of the two senses suggested by Virgil’s “*lacrimae rerum*” in the *Aeneid* or, as Wilde puts it in his interpretation of the Latin expression, “the tears of which the world is made, and of the sadness of all human things” (2013, 66)³. In a later passage, Wilde builds on this image by amplifying the almost impalpable quality of this truth:

You have yet to learn that Prosperity, Pleasure and Success may be rough of grain and common in fibre, but that Sorrow is the most sensitive of all created things. There is nothing that stirs in the whole world of thought or motion to which Sorrow does not vibrate in terrible if exquisite pulsation. The thin beaten-out leaf of tremulous gold that chronicles the direction of forces that the eye cannot see is in comparison coarse. It is a wound that bleeds when any hand but that of Love touches it and even then must bleed again, though not for pain. (91)

³ Interestingly, Wilde interprets the Latin genitive as a subjective, meaning “the world’s tears [for humanity]”, opting for the implication of pessimism, but in the original expression there remains an ambiguity that may point in a different, (grammatically) objective direction: “the tears for the world”, where sadness does not pervade all of history but simply the scene Aeneas is contemplating (i.e. the fall of Troy).

The bodily, but almost atmospheric quality of sorrow is here emphasised through reference to its “stirring”, its “vibration” and “pulsation”, as if it were a group of infinitesimal particles that move in all directions. The image of the “thin beaten-out leaf of tremulous gold that chronicles the direction of forces that the eye cannot see” reinforces the imperceptible, and yet physical quality of sorrow as a sort of energy moving bodies and objects. In the Penguin Classics edition, Colm Tóibín suggests that Wilde is here referring to “the gold leaf used by bookbinders with which Wilde would undoubtedly have been familiar” (Wilde 2013, 248, n. 62), whereas Nicholas Frankel reports Rupert Hart-Davis’s suggestion that this may be an allusion to “the Gold-Leaf Electroscope, used to detect charges of static electricity” before plumping for a safer “weathervane, which was often covered with thin gold-leaf so as to maintain brightness and prevent corrosion” (Wilde 2018, 150, n. 228). Regardless of its usage, the gold leaf referenced by Wilde is a minute object that is subject to the subtlest changes in atmosphere – changes which, it ought to be stressed, go well beyond the realm of the visible despite clearly remaining within the bounds of the physical world. Building on Christological allusions which will become explicit in the text, the subsequent reference to the “wound that bleeds” further suggests that sorrow is, in Wilde’s view, a barely perceptible force in the world which has tangible and visible effects on our bodies: it represents each body’s ultimate vulnerability to atmosphere and context.

Although Wilde has often been taken to task for his musical inaccuracy, Kimberly J. Stern has recently documented all the ways in which Wilde used musical metaphors and theories in order to gesture to a metaphysical plane. In her well-documented account, she argues that “For Wilde, music was distinguished by its ability to transport listeners beyond familiar ways of thinking and talking about the world” (Stern 2023, 57). Indeed, the “Symphony of Sorrow” reconstructed in this section has shown as much: the political situation of incarceration has provided the material with which Wilde has realised – in both senses of the term, namely has *recognised* and has *made tangible* – the paramount importance of sorrow as a force in the world. However, Stern goes on to argue that for Wilde “To limit this power – by tethering music to reason, language, or the physical world – was to reject a deeper emotional and spiritual experience of life itself” (*ibidem*). Our discussion has in fact shown that it is from within the *physical* world that Wilde learns to distinguish the subtle vibrations and pulsations of suffering, as a vulnerable body that is open to the vagaries of existence and the political context where he is located. It is thus the *physics* of sound Wilde is interested in: the bodily effects every situation can have on him not only as a prisoner but first and foremost as a vulnerable creator of beautiful things.

3. *Resonance and Attunement*

In her monograph *Is Literature Healthy?* (2016), Josie Billington recounted her experience in leading a reading group for the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society at the University of Liverpool. During these reading sessions, patients of health clinics were invited to meet up every week and spend hours reading aloud together, before joining a discussion monitored and recorded by professionals and moderators. In contrast to psychotherapy, which may sometimes lead patients to become unreliable narrators of their past and present (see Strawson 2004), this reading aloud together created echoes in people suffering from specific conditions that helped them articulate what they were feeling in new and revealing ways. This clinical activity has clearly shown that reading is in fact a specific form of thinking that can dispense with the known and often produces unexpected results even in those who may at first feel discouraged or out of touch with their feelings. Literature, Billington argues, “can summon a voice that does not exist under the ordinary conditions of life”, lending legitimacy

to the aspects of one's personality that may have been obfuscated or positively concealed in one's past, never to be retrieved (2016, 106). These experiences suggest that a transformative revelation about ourselves, "is not consciously *there* until the book, in the very unfolding of its explicit formulation in the reader's mind, finds the implicit and inarticulate matter that was, only half-consciously, in latent need of such release" (*ibidem*).

Although Wilde did not have access to many books in prison, our previous section has shown how profoundly different his outlook on life seems to be in *De Profundis* from the Wilde-as-jester trope everyone was familiar with. In retrospect, his own past is re-interpreted via new categories like sorrow and the bodiliness of sound. Beyond his own references, mentioned above, to his literary oeuvre in relation to sorrow – which would merit an extensive discussion elsewhere –, it is essential to continue our reconstruction of his philosophy of sorrow through the metaphors of sound he uses in *De Profundis*. In order to better articulate the physics of sound Wilde draws on – in contrast to Stern's *metaphysics* of sound –, an analysis of the recognition scene in "The Birthday of the Infanta" will be provided.

Towards the end of the fairy tale, when the Dwarf ventures into the Infanta's palace and ends up in the gilded hall of mirrors, he first realises that his appearance is, as all the people around him had been saying behind his back, "monstrous", and that "there is a fine line between funny and ridiculous" (Pinelli 2022, 104). Catching a sight of himself in the looking glass, the Dwarf is at first bewildered about it, as he believes he is seeing an extension of the room he is in, one which functions as a double of reality. His recognition of the situation is prepared for through recollection of a similar experience in the forest:

Was it Echo? He had called to her once in the valley, and she had answered him word for word. Could she mock the eye, as she mocked the voice? Could she make a mimic world just like the real world? Could the shadow of things have colour and life and movement? Could it be that—? (Wilde 2010, 168)

The kind of *anagnorisis* that is starting to dawn on this tragic protagonist is anticipated, like Wilde's future recognition in prison, by recollection and the aural register. It is a retrospective account of what has happened which makes sense for the present, and this allows the Dwarf to create a bridge between his past experiences in the natural world and his current, bemusing situation in the gilded prison of the aristocracy. Through an internal focalisation, the narrator reports the Dwarf's thoughts to the reader, as the character is puzzling in front of his own self-reflection just as he was once confounded by the echoes of his own voice in the valley. The Platonic undercurrent of the passage is hard to miss, as evidenced by the notion of "a mimic world" and the reference to "the shadow of things", as if the Dwarf were ventriloquising the language of the very originator of ancient *anagnorisis*: as Piero Boitani has shown, the first instance of *anagnorisis* in the Greek language may be found in Plato's *Theaetetus*, where Socrates goes so far as to mention his own "sight in mirrors, when it flows in such a way as to transpose left and right" (quoted in Boitani 2021, 10). From its origin, then, the notion of recognition, which Aristotle would later synthesise as a passage from ignorance to knowledge (see Boitani 2021, 11ff.), is tied to the mirror and the potential *mis*recognition it may engender, and Wilde seems here to gesture to this tradition.

The reference to Echo, a nymph who famously fell in love with Narcissus but was prevented from communicating with him other than in echoes of his words because of Hera's (or Juno's, in Ovid's account) punishment, shifts the register from the visual to the aural, ultimately linking appearances and sounds inextricably together – precisely as occurs in classical mythology, where Echo and Narcissus are two sides of the same coin, though their respective myths revolve around sound and sight respectively. The Dwarf's philosophical questions about reality and appearance

are interrupted by his turning around and realising that the same unique object he received from the little Princess, the white rose, is also held by his double in the mirror. It is here that the illusion of a “mimic world” collapses, as the unique rose and his unique love of the Princess are mirrored in his reflection: just as he had learnt to tell Echo apart from his own voice, the Dwarf, unlike Narcissus, reconnects the image in the reflecting surface to his own self, thus achieving a pitiable and fearful recognition of his own (supposed) monstrosity.

This allusion to Echo and, by extension, to Narcissus brings to mind another of Wilde’s prose poems, “The Disciple”, where “the pool of his pleasure” at last reveals that it “loved Narcissus because, as he lay on [its] banks and looked down at [it], in the mirror of his eyes [it] saw ever [its] own beauty mirrored” (Wilde 2010, 221). In a classic Wildean subversion of received knowledge, the pool seems to “out-Narcissus” Narcissus: its sorrow is not caused by the grief connected to his death, but by the loss of its own reflection in his eyes. As happens in the case of the Dwarf, the visual register invites the pool to revel in an act of illusory self-reproduction, namely an act which is based on the illusion of the possibility of reproducing one’s self as a selfsame other. When this illusory mirror of reality collapses, death (in the case of Narcissus) and suffering (in the case of the Dwarf and the pool) appear, bringing their tragic protagonists to an arresting realisation.

That Wilde resorts to the aural register in his own case and in that of the Dwarf suggests that we should think of this paradigm of tragic recognition in different terms. It could in fact be argued that we have here a perfect example of what literary critic Rita Felski aptly calls “attunement”: a process whereby we are “drawn into a responsive relation” and an experience based on the “presence” of something (an art work, in Felski’s case, one’s own appearance and life in retrospect, in the Dwarf’s and Wilde’s situations), “attunement is about things resonating, aligning, coming together” (2020, 41, 42). Felski emphasises that attunement addresses “art’s palpable force and vividness: how it can affect us in ways we struggle to verbalize or explain” (42). Indeed, this is precisely what Billington realised in her clinical activity: literature allowed patients to express the inarticulate matter that had sedimented in their bodies, lending it an ear and a voice. If recognition has to do with re-reading a known situation and disclosing new meanings in it, moving from ignorance to knowledge, Wilde’s experience and his oeuvre emphatically shift the focus both to the immediacy of the aural and the *longue durée* of interpretation as they are mediated by unwellness. Attuning to the frequencies and tunes of the past through recollection, Wilde and the Dwarf transform known notes into a new symphony, making present once again what seemed to be far removed, stored away in the folds of the past. If art constituted, for Wilde, “my great primal note by which I had revealed, first myself to myself, and then myself to the world” (2013, 77), this note may be rearranged into new symphonies through time, by means of a process catalysed by unwellness. This revelation to the world depends on the specific arrangement of the notes contained in one’s art and persona, and time is, as was argued above, of the essence.

“This, precisely, is what it means to become attuned”, Felski argues: “forms of alignment, a coordinating of senses, affects, bodies, and objects that can happen with or without linguistic support” (2020, 72). It is an “act of synchronization or modulation, how phenomena are changed over time by resonating or aligning” (76). The notion of attunement is thus predicated on resonance, the physical phenomenon whereby different objects may vibrate at similar frequencies when placed in the same space. As Wai Chee Dimock argued in her 1997 field-defining essay on resonance, “This primarily aural and primarily interactive concept” is concerned with “frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places” (1061). From

the theoretical perspective granted by resonance, “meanings are produced over and over again, attaching themselves to, overlapping with, and sometimes coming into conflict with previous ones” (1062). Within this context, Wilde’s statement to Gide, on reading the latter’s long prose poem *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897), that he should never “write *I* anymore” because “In art, don’t you see, there is no *first* person” (Gide 1949, 28) may be pushed beyond the grammatical to tentatively grasp at something that forms the basis of Wilde’s philosophy: in spite of – or perhaps precisely *in view of* – the self-invention he continued to resort to throughout his life (see Frankel 2021), Wilde continually attempted to move away from the sort of masturbatory self-coincidence of Narcissus into a view of a resonant self which required fine-tuning on his part and attuning on the recipient’s end. What Wilde is telling Gide is not simply to move away from the personal “I”, but to see himself constantly in dialogue with his context, his past memories, so that new notes may be sounded and new symphonies may be composed. Like anti-Narcissuses, Wilde and the Dwarf stand as examples of what it means to attune oneself to one’s bodily presence in the present and the past through suffering without slipping into the pitfalls of egomaniac self-identification.

This process of bodily recognition is in line with Wilde’s poetics as articulated in *De Profundis*. As he famously asserted, “Modern life is complex and relative. Those are its two distinguishing notes. To render the first we require atmosphere with its subtlety of *nuances*, of suggestion, of strange perspectives: as for the second we require background” (2013, 92). Once again, Wilde fuses his philosophy with the language of sound and resonance, using “note”, as in the reference above, as a byword for an intrinsic quality. Complexity and relativity, he moves on to argue, are “rendered” – a quintessentially artistic term, which may point to the pictorial arts, music, literature or even translation – through “atmosphere” and “background” respectively. If the latter term is neatly inscribed within the visual register, it could be argued that “atmosphere” points to something more diffuse and difficult to capture: it is a palpable and yet often inconspicuous presence which structures our perception of reality. Interestingly, Wilde once again fuses the visual with the broadly perceptual in reference to complexity and atmosphere: while “nuances” and “perspectives” are words derived from the pictorial arts, “suggestion” gestures to a broader sense of implicit allusion, with the sonic being blended with the visual or abstract.

In the next sentence, he argues: “That is why sculpture has ceased to be a representative art; and why music *is* a representative art; and why Literature is, and has been, and always will remain the supreme representative art” (*ibidem*). The expression “representative art” may be taken to coincide with mimetic art, one which strives to represent real life and real objects – as opposed, that is, to abstract art, where the interest resides rather in the forms and colours of the art. Sculpture, despite being perhaps the most representative of the arts he mentions here, is now found to be hitting the mark a bit too low, but music and especially literature – the only term of the three that deserves a capital letter – are emphatically pronounced representative arts: they are within the purview of the physical world, as they attempt to reproduce not only a specific – we could say *objective* – background, as sculpture may also do, but also a peculiar atmosphere, an additional but ultimately intrinsic quality that pervades the artwork, allowing it to resonate with different readers and listeners. If the background Wilde identifies as necessary to art’s relativity is essential inasmuch as it is objectively inescapable, the atmosphere which renders its complexity is a desired intrinsic quality of the artwork that guarantees its successful fruition by a wealth of different readers and listeners. Without this atmosphere, an artwork has no futurity and remains tethered to its own original background. This is, after all, the danger of narcissistic self-reproduction: if art and the world continue in their constant march without stopping to cultivate a sense of atmosphere, their aesthetic and

existential value will become non-existent. That Lady Bracknell emphasises the importance of health for the reproduction of the *status quo*, then, enables us to see the disruptive force that unwellness can be: it changes “atmosphere” and helps us cultivate a different sense of ourselves, thereby ensuring that we do not perpetuate our “background”, so that new meanings may be disclosed and new symphonies heard.

If we look at the broader context around Wilde’s use of the aural register in reference to the body’s susceptibility, we will realise that it ties in with contemporary scientific studies that were coming to see the human body not only as an object to be measured and dissected, but first and foremost as a “sort of sounding-board, which every change of consciousness, however slight, may make reverberate”, as William James famously wrote in the 1880s (1884, 191). This view of the embodied mind had profound consequences on late Victorian culture and continues to resonate with present-day theories of embodied affectivity, where resonance plays a central role in defining the scope and intensity of our affects (see Fuchs and Koch 2014). This discussion of Wilde as a vulnerable creator of beautiful things via sorrow, attunement, and memory is an ideal first step in reconfiguring our understanding of his aesthetic and political theories of creation and in creating a bridge between his pre-prison jester-like storytelling qualities and his post-prison martyr-like earnestness. However, future work will have to return to the scientific and philosophical background informing his semi-private letter as well as his previous work, while attuning to the atmosphere created by *longue durée* of his subtle theorising.

In conclusion, this article has shown that Wilde finds through the ultimate vulnerability of the body – its responsivity to atmosphere and the complexity it may engender – a renewed understanding of reality predicated on sorrow. While his oeuvre rests on a specific historical and material background that begs to be discussed in all its detail, as Small famously argued, it could be argued that the political atmosphere that allows Wilde to hearken back to his past life as though it was a Symphony of Sorrow should also make us alert to the resonances this retrospective listening produces and to the attuning we, as readers and critics, should operate.

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Oscar Wilde in America: Then and Now

Pierpaolo Martino

Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro
([<pierpaolo.martino@uniba.it>](mailto:pierpaolo.martino@uniba.it))

Abstract:

The present article reconceptualizes Oscar Wilde as one of the first modern celebrities, arguing that his 1882 American tour – organized by Richard D'Oyly Carte to promote the operetta *Patience: or, Bunthorne's Bride* (1881) – established a new model of performative authorship grounded in spectacle, mediation, and self-fashioning. Through lectures, interviews, costume, and photography, Wilde transformed the writer into a reproducible cultural surface, pre-announcing modern celebrity culture. The essay situates this American moment as foundational to Wilde's transhistorical afterlife in American popular culture. It examines his intermedial legacy in cinema and contemporary performance art, with particular attention to Al Pacino's docu-film *Wilde Salomè*, which stages a modern cinema star's identification with Wilde. The article further traces Wilde's negotiated presence through figures such as Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, and Patti Smith, arguing that Wilde's aestheticism functions as transferable "social energy" across media and generations. Wilde thus emerges not simply as a Victorian author, but as a foundational architect of American pop modernity.

Keywords: America, Cinema, Music, Performance, Wilde

1. Intro: Oscar Wilde and American Cinema

As the American scholar – and specialist in Decadence Studies – David Weir observes “the best illustration of the pop-culture afterlife of decadence has to be the remarkable posthumous career of Oscar Wilde who died in 1900” (2018, 110). Weir draws attention to the striking fact that “the online Internet Movie Database (IMDb) lists Wilde as ‘screenwriter’ of roughly 250 films, almost 100 more than those credited to Ben Hecht, possibly the most prolific screenwriter in cinema history” (*ibidem*). A significant number of these credits are for “film adaptations of his stage plays, which were extremely popular in his own day. Moreover, film versions of Wilde's plays span the entirety of cinema history, from silent era to the present” (Weir 2018, 110).

Wilde's influence on cinema, and on American cinema in particular, cannot, however, be confined to film adaptations of his works alone as indeed Kate Hext has brilliantly shown in her recent book entitled *Wilde in the Dream Factory: Decadence and the American Movies*:

Wilde's larger presence in American pictures [...] was established from the industry's beginning. [...] To this emerging movie world, Wilde's star potential was clear. He had always been a countercultural force and on-screen it would be no different [...] Some of the industry's biggest names [...] translated Wilde's characters, motifs, and wit into original screenplays across a range of genres from the first gangster films, B-movie horrors, and films noirs, to screwball comedies and big-budget musicals. As they did so, they helped create the image of Wilde we have today: as naughty, audacious, modern. (Hext 2024, xv-xvi)

This essay argues that Wilde's relationship with America is not merely an episode in his biography, nor simply a story of transatlantic reception. Rather, Wilde inaugurates in the United States a new model of performative authorship – one in which the writer/artist becomes spectacle, commodity, and media construct. His 1882 American tour did not simply make him famous; it established a template for modern celebrity culture grounded in self-fashioning, theatricality, serial self-reproduction, and strategic engagement with the press. In this sense, Wilde emerges not only as a precursor of Hollywood but as one of the earliest architects of what would become American pop modernity.

A fascinating example is the American director/actor and pop celebrity Al Pacino, who alongside creating some of the most iconic (“naughty and audacious”, Hext 2024, xvi) characters in the history of cinema is also a devoted admirer of Wilde. Pacino's 2011 celebrated docufilm *Wilde Salomè* documents a period in which Pacino performed in a production of *Salomè* directed by actress and theatre director Estelle Parson at Los Angeles' Wadsworth Theatre – playing the role of Herod with Jessica Chastain in the role of Salomè – 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 musical accompaniment, a choice which surprised both audience and critics, but which – as Al Pacino explains in the film – allowed the audience to become entranced by Wilde's own *music*, by the “magic”, of his words. Indeed, *Salomè* is arguably the most sonorous and overtly musical of Wilde's works.

For Al Pacino – and, by extension, for the audience – the film constitutes both a journey and, more significantly, an ongoing process. As he acknowledges in the opening sequences, it becomes an undertaking through which he effectively rewrites not only the play, but Wilde himself. *Wilde-Salomè* thus stages Pacino's self-declared “love affair with Oscar Wilde” – an author he professes to admire for his “fragile power” – while simultaneously articulating his own desire to interrogate Wilde's afterlife within contemporary culture (Martino 2023). In a manner that recalls his engagement with Shakespeare in the 1996 docudrama *Looking for Richard*, Pacino adopts a quasi-investigative approach, travelling to major cultural capitals – London, Dublin, Paris, and New York – in order to cast light on the historical and aesthetic contexts of Wilde's work, and to develop a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which *Salomè* was conceived. In a sense, the sequences depicting Wilde and his milieu constitute a *film within the film* – a biopic nested within the broader framework 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 linked, in different and at times unpredictable ways, to Wilde's world. Alongside Wilde's nephew Merlin Holland who provides biographical details and acute observations about Wilde as an uncomfortable figure within Victorian society, we have American intellectual Gore Vidal referring to Wilde – who in his opinion is the

author of the first ever play “on nothing”, namely *The Importance of Being Earnest* – in terms of one of the early socialists and a sharp political thinker, something that explains why he was imprisoned in Reading Gaol; as Vidal insists, the English government “feared him not for sex but feared him for his ideas” (Bracewell 1997).

The film also includes a significant contribution from Tom Stoppard¹, who, in addition to recounting details about Wilde being accused of posing as a *so(m)domite* on the infamous card written by Queensberry, interprets Wilde’s decision not to leave the country during the famous afternoon at the Cadogan Hotel, as a deliberate act of self-fashioning, signaling his determination to become a martyr for posterity. On the other hand, Irish global celebrity Bono, 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. Interestingly, Bono – who, in the interview, speaks of Wilde as the only writer who can take on Shakespeare – also points to the character Salomé’s destructive power of sexuality, projecting towards Wilde’s own destiny and fall.

The most fascinating sequences of the film, however, are those in which Pacino enacts pivotal episodes from the author’s life. If in Dublin we see him visiting Wilde’s birthplace and the National Gallery of Ireland (featuring paintings of both Salomé and John the Baptist), saluting Wilde’s memorial sculpture in Merrion Square, saying “we love you for everything you’ve given us and we will continue to”; some minutes later we watch him performing Wilde in London’s Cadogan Hotel room, with two actors from his company in the roles of Ross and Bosie.

Subsequently – after observing him visit Wilde’s London house in Tite Street and other sites associated with the author – Pacino reads passages from *De Profundis* and “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”, affirming how the real irony is that the prison informs the two works which are considered his best. Interestingly, the prison section of the film hosts a number of sequences from Gilbert’s 1997 biopic *Wilde*, staging a form of intertextuality which points to Wilde’s complex intermedial position within contemporary popular culture.

One of the most compelling – and, to some extent, moving – sequences of the film occurs when Pacino acknowledges his personal debt to Wilde. “You marry”, he observes, “your favourite writer”, and in doing so become “half of each other”. In the final part of the docufilm, Pacino is shown on a train, a sequence that not only visually embodies the notion of the film as a journey but also acquires particular resonance through the interplay of *Salomé*’s symphonic yet dramatic conclusion with Wilde’s iconic lines from “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”: “Each man kills the thing he loves”, which Pacino delivers with extraordinary intensity. In the very last scene of the film, we have Pacino in a desert, giving voice to Wilde through the famous lines from *De Profundis* in which Wilde affirms that “All trials are trials for one’s life, just as all sentences are sentences of death”. What we have in *Wilde Salomé* is, indeed, a modern celebrity investigating the life of the first real pop celebrity in the history of modern literature. More specifically, we have an American film star investigating the success of a writer who became *big* in America first and then in Britain.

Some of America’s most prominent cultural figures, meanwhile, have engaged with Wilde and his world in one way or another, including Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, and Truman Capote. Interestingly, Waldrep observes that Truman Capote – author of the *novella* *Breakfast at Tiffany* (1958), which was adapted into one of the most iconic films in the history of American cinema (directed by Blake Edwards in 1961) –, as a talented journalist and “in his performance of the role of serious writer [...] paralleled Wilde in his use of self-promotion and the ability to

¹ Stoppard’s 1974 play *Travesties* interestingly focuses on Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

sell himself” (2004, 79). Capote shared Wilde’s conversation skills, arguing that “great conversationalists are in fact really monologists, and illustrated this principle via the televised talk show” (81). Like Wilde, Capote thought of his self *as theatre*, something which emerges in his extraordinary self-interview entitled “Nocturnal Turnings” – included in the collection *Music for Chameleons* (1980) – in which he investigates his many sides: the alcoholic, the genius, the drug addict and the homosexual, in a way which recalls Wilde’s writing in *De Profundis*.

2. Then: Wilde’s American tour and the making of an international celebrity

Wilde became an international celebrity during his 1882 tour of the United States; like any contemporary pop star, in order to become a proper celebrity, he first needed to be *big* in America. The opportunity arose from the success of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta, *Patience; or, Bunthorne’s Bride* (1881), which focused on the look and manner of the aesthete in the character of Bunthorne. Richard D’Oyly Carte, the show’s producer, offered Wilde a series of promotional lectures to provide American audiences with the chance to see a real-life aesthete; as Ellmann observes:

[Richard D’Oyly Carte] was particularly willing to bring over the purported model for Bunthorne because Americans had little direct information about the type, and no history of the mockery of it such as du Maurier’s. Of course, the United States had a subculture which was dissatisfied with money and power, but this had no single and famed exponent. Neither the shirt-sleeved Whitman, nor the bearded Longfellow, nor the tense Emerson could remotely be thought of as Gilbert’s model. (1987, 144)

It is worth noting that Wilde’s American tour has been at the centre of several recent analyses, especially by American scholars such as Roy Morris, Joy Shannon and David. M. Friedman, commenting on a very prolific and attractive area of Wilde Studies. Interestingly, major Wilde scholars of the last 50 years are American, from Richard Ellmann to Michael Gillespie, from Shelton Waldrep to Michael Davis.

Wilde’s American tour² pre-dates a practice that would become widespread in the 1960s, when British rock and pop artists, such as the Beatles, promoted their albums through extended tours of the United States (Martino 2023). Significantly, Wilde did not associate his name with the high art of Lyric Opera, but rather with operetta, a form of middle-brow entertainment. In this sense, he undertook a kind of “pop tour” before the advent of pop itself, in a process in which the operetta served to publicize Wilde, rather than the other way around.

Wilde’s American performances involved both sound and vision. Legend has it that on his arrival in New York a customs official asked him if he had anything to declare, Wilde promptly answered: “I have nothing to declare except my genius” (Morris 2013, 1)³. Wilde’s famous epigram is, among other things, a sign of his astonishing linguistic and conversation skills: “in an attempt to transcribe his unique style of lecturing, one American Journalist went so far as to devise a system of diacritical marks to represent the elaborate pauses and inflections that Wilde would use to manipulate his audience” (Waldrep 2004, 66).

Indeed, Wilde’s speech was music; he was a master improviser who understood that engaging in society – that is, in any form of social interaction – is, in Schutz’s terms, akin to “playing music

² Key studies on the American tour include: Morris 2013; Friedman 2014; Mendelssohn 2018.

³ Wilde famously said, in an epigram addressed to André Gide, to have put “all his genius into his life and only his talent in his works”.

together" (Schutz 1976). In this musical performance, in which he blended different genres (stories, philosophy, wit), very often form becomes more relevant than content. Wilde's epigrams⁴, which he would effortlessly insert into his speeches with the same elegance and cool of his characters on the stage, were in a sense the melody around which he improvised in different contexts.

The young dandy, intent on becoming a star, prepared meticulously for his American tour, paying close attention to his attire and commissioning costumes from his tailor. Contemporary accounts of his early appearances in the United States recall his green overcoat and Polish cap. Most significantly, hundreds of photographs were taken of the aesthete striking various poses during the tour. Among these, the famous Sarony portraits – depicting Wilde in a characteristic costume for the American tour, complete with velveteen jacket, knee breeches, and his iconic long hair – capture not only his distinctive appearance but also his remarkable capacity for self-promotion. As Kerry Powell observes "celebrity images had market value, then as now", but:

Sarony's portraits were also distinguished by a lifelike spontaneity unusual for the time – a variety of poses, gestures and expressions that made his work stand out from the dull sameness of most photography. Notwithstanding the long exposure times of up to a full minute, Sarony was able to avoid the stiff, wooden poses that make the photographs of most of his contemporaries seem so unlikelike. (Powell 2009, 21-22)

Interestingly, in his sessions with Wilde, "posing the sitter was Sarony's primary function [...] and by all accounts he was meticulous, demanding and even tyrannical in doing it". Like Basil Hallward in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "Sarony seemed actually to project himself into the poses of his subjects" (22). Once again in Wilde's American tour, life was imitating art, even though, it is worth noting that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was to be published some eight years later.

Wilde's careful orchestration of his public image may also be read, retrospectively, through the lens of Debord's analysis of modern visual culture. In thesis 6 of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Debord argues that the spectacle is not merely a collection of images but "a social relation among people, mediated by images" (Debord 2014, 2). Long before the full emergence of twentieth-century mass media, Wilde seems intuitively to grasp this dynamic. His lectures, interviews, costumes, and especially his photographic portraits did not simply represent him; they constituted the very medium through which his relation to the American public was organized. The "real-life aesthete" promised by D'Oyly Carte was already a mediated construct, a carefully stylized surface circulating through newspapers, cartes-de-visite, and illustrated magazines. In this sense, Wilde's American tour looks towards a culture in which personality becomes inseparable from its visual reproducibility, and in which fame depends upon the strategic management of appearance.

Wilde was acutely aware, "as he had been at Trinity and Oxford, that he had no talent for oratory. He repeatedly confessed as much in America. What he had to do was to cultivate a way of charming rather than coercing his audience" (Ellmann 1987, 147). Moreover, having never delivered a lecture before, he sought guidance after finalising his agreement with the Carte organisation, from Hermann Vezin, an American actor and drama critic then working in London – who had previously collaborated with John Hare and Charles Kean, among others – for elocution and gesture lessons (Friedman 2014, 51). Wilde prepared his first lecture in America, probably waiting to measure the cultural temperature before doing so. The first of the

⁴ A 2004 documentary entitled *Happy Birthday Oscar Wilde* directed by Bill Hughes for Wilde's 150th birth anniversary celebrates the epigrammatic dimension of his work. Among those performing his epigrams we have Bono, Gavin Friday, Annie Lennox, Gabriel Byrne, Geoffrey Rush and Liam Neeson.

three major lectures he delivered in the States was entitled “The English Renaissance of Art”, the remaining two were entitled “The Decorative Arts” and “The House Beautiful”, to which he later added a fourth lecture entitled “The Irish poets of 1848”.

In “The English Renaissance of Art”, Wilde advanced a reconsidered notion of aestheticism, one in which his own aesthetic taste can be understood as necessarily impure. It is well known that in *Économimesis*, Derrida (1981) offers a reading of Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment in *The Critique of Judgment*, demonstrating how the idealist framing of the aesthetic as an ontological question – with its implicit emphasis on purity – necessarily excludes attention to the material and historical forces that continually shape representational practices and aesthetic experience. Wilde was acutely aware of these forces and calibrated his aesthetics accordingly. In this sense, his discourse was capable of reconciling, or more precisely *harmonising*, complex dichotomies such as body and soul, external and internal, in a highly sophisticated and intelligent manner.

It is essential to recall that Wilde’s conception of beauty emerged from a complex process of harmonization of the aesthetic doctrines of his two mentors, namely Ruskin and Pater – even though Wilde’s mature thought ultimately reveals a more substantial debt to Pater. For Ruskin beauty was inextricably linked to moral goodness, while for Pater it could have the taste of evil. If Ruskin was interested in religion, Pater was more attracted by the excesses of mysticism; moreover, Ruskin’s *credo* privileged conscience and discipline, while Pater’s was a doctrine centred on imagination, and which considered beauty as contextual experience.

Wilde’s capacity to synthesize divergent – even antithetical – perspectives lent considerable force and originality to the ideas he advanced during his American tour. The opening section of his first lecture represents a remarkable literary *performance*, in which the author juxtaposes and harmonises a multiplicity of voices and visions:

Among the many debts which we owe to the supreme aesthetic faculty of Goethe is that he was the first to teach us to define beauty in terms the most concrete possible, to realise it, I mean, always in its special manifestations. So, in the lecture which I have the honour to deliver before you, I will not try to give you any abstract definition of beauty – any such universal formula for it as was sought for by the philosophy of the eighteenth century – still less to communicate to you that which in its essence is incommunicable, the virtue by which a particular picture or poem affects us with a unique and special joy; but rather to point out to you the general ideas which characterise the great English Renaissance of Art in this century, to discover their source, as far as that is possible, and to estimate their future as far as that is possible. I call it our English Renaissance because it is indeed a sort of new birth of the spirit of man, like the great Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century, in its desire for a more gracious and comely way of life, its passion for physical beauty, its exclusive attention to form, its seeking for new subjects for poetry, new forms of art, new intellectual and imaginative enjoyments: and I call it our romantic movement because it is our most recent expression of beauty. (Wilde 1913, 111-112)

Commenting on “The English Renaissance of Art”, Ellmann observes, with characteristic elegance, that “by beautifying the outward aspects of life, [Wilde] would beautify the inner ones” (1987, 157), and adds that here Wilde would discuss

the desire for a more gracious and comely way of life, the passion for physical beauty, the attention to form rather than content, the search for new subjects of poetry, for new forms of art, for new intellectual and imaginative enjoyments. The new Euphorion was, as Goethe had foreseen, the product of mating Hellenism and romanticism, Helen of Troy and Faust. [...] It was the capacity to render, not the capacity to feel, which brought true art into being. And once in being, art conferred upon life a value it had not heretofore had. Its creations were more real than the living. [...] Wilde was piecing together his later discovery that life imitates art. (157-158)

The lecture – conceived as a powerful script and brilliantly performed by Wilde in his theatrical Dandy persona across various American stages – was first delivered in New York on 9 January. Records and eye-witness accounts recount how Wilde captivated his audience not only through the content of his address but also through his striking attire and highly distinctive mode of delivery. His costume consisted of a dark purple coat and knee breeches, black hose, and low shoes adorned with bright buckles; the coat was lined with lavender satin, and rich lace frills appeared at the wrists and as tie-ends over a low turn-down collar. His hair was worn long, either parted in the middle or combed over. He entered the stage draped in a circular cavalier cloak, and his voice – clear, effortless, and unforced – was accompanied by measured shifts in posture, the head occasionally inclined toward the supporting foot, maintaining throughout an overall impression of composure and repose.

What Wilde succeeded in presenting – and, indeed, in selling – was not so much a set of precepts as a carefully fashioned personality. Stern has recently reconsidered the American tour in light of Wilde's commitment to aesthetic education, interpreting his costume as a "deliberate study in pedagogical style" (2019, 59). As Stern observes,

by approaching the task of lecturing as a kind of performance, Wilde wished to do more than simply profess truths about art: inspired by the examples of Mahaffy and Ruskin, he visibly embodied the figure of teacher as artist. His audiences would not merely imbibe his lessons; they would see those ideas manifested in the flesh. (*Ibidem*)

Wilde's personality and performances soon became the object of intense and often polarized debate as he traversed the United States on a demanding tour that continued until 27 December. Many took his proclaimed mission "to make this artistic movement the basis for a new civilization" to heart (Hofer and Scharnhorst 2010, 99), and in his wake craft societies flourished and museum patronage expanded. In letters home, Wilde exulted that he was a greater genius than Dickens; such personal adulation, he claimed, necessitated the employment of three secretaries. As he wryly remarked, "one writes my autographs all day for my admirers, the other receives the flowers that are left really every ten minutes. A third whose hair resembles mine is obliged to send off locks of his own hair to the myriad maidens of the city, and so is rapidly becoming bald" (Wilde 2000, 126).

On 18 January Wilde met Walt Whitman. Having previously praised Whitman's work in the local press, Wilde sought an introduction, and after some initial hesitation the older poet agreed to receive him. Their conversation, which centered on contemporary poetry and the so-called aesthetic school, reportedly grew tense when Wilde declared that he could not attend to any writer who failed to attract him through charm of style or beauty of subject. Whitman objected that one who pursues beauty as an end in itself is "in a bad way", maintaining that beauty is a consequence rather than an abstraction. Wilde responded with characteristic flexibility, professing agreement (Friedman 2014). Wilde was fascinated by the Whitman of *Leaves of Grass*, who famously proclaimed: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then I contradict myself, / I am large, I contain multitudes" (Whitman 2009, 103). This celebration of multiplicity offers a suggestive parallel to Wilde's own self-fashioning. The Whitmanian idea of plural identity has continued to resonate across generations of American culture: Nobel Prize (for literature) winner Bob Dylan – often regarded as a disciple, in different ways, of both Whitman and Wilde – significantly titled the opening track of his 2020 album *Rough and Rowdy Ways* "I Contain Multitudes". Similarly, Todd Haynes's film *I'm Not There*, which explores Dylan through a series of fragmented and multiple personae,

approaches artistic identity as an *assemblage* of selves – an interpretative framework based on the notion of multiplicity that also invites comparison with Wilde’s performative and protean conception and projection of self/selves.

A few weeks after his arrival in New York, Wilde recognized the need to deliver an additional lecture alongside “The English Renaissance of Art” and consequently composed not one but two new lectures: “The Decorative Arts” and “The House Beautiful”. The former was closely connected to “The English Renaissance”, drawing extensively on the examples of Ruskin and William Morris. In “The Decorative Arts” – which was first presented in Chicago, with Wilde moving “fluently from point to point, not worrying much about organization, trusting to what quickly became dependable patter” (Ellmann 1987, 183)⁵ – the author famously declared that “All great art is decorative, but that not all decoration is art” (Friedman 2014, 160):

To illustrate that [...] point, [...] Wilde disdained the then-current American fashion for painting sunsets and other natural phenomena on china [...] he said [sunsets] ‘if beautiful enough should be painted [on canvas], handsomely framed and hung on walls’ [...] Wilde then went on to declare that virtually nothing made by a machine could qualify as beautiful; that art is the result less of exuberant feeling than of excellent technique; that art schools should be housed in elegant buildings; and that craftsmen are more likely to produce beautiful things when surrounded by beautiful things themselves. Even the *Tribune* acknowledged that these teachings were received by an ‘orderly and appreciative’ crowd that presents ‘not the slightest suggestion of rowdiness or ridicule’. (*Ibidem*)⁶

The second lecture he added, “The House Beautiful”, was even more prescriptive. As Morris notes, it constituted a “top-to-bottom survey of modern houses and, most particularly, their furnishings” (2013, 124). In this lecture, Wilde’s performative abilities – his theatrical enunciation – proved, more than in other cases, to be of paramount importance, complemented by his gestures, as he “metaphorically walked through ‘the house commenting on the mistakes he had observed’” (Friedman 2014, 183-184). Wilde’s recommendations were notably precise and exacting:

Within the house: the hall should not be papered, since the walls are exposed more or less to the elements by the frequent opening and closing of the door, it could be wainscoted with some of America’s beautiful woods [...]. Don’t carpet the floor: ordinary red bricks tiles make a warm and beautiful floor [...]. Colours resemble musical notes: a single false colour or false note destroys the whole. Therefore, in decorating a room one keynote of colour should predominate. [...] On the walls secondary colours should be used [...] Don’t paper [the ceiling]; that gives one the sensation of living in a paper box, which is not pleasant. [...] As regards style of furniture, [the] most liked in England, and the one which is most suitable in every way for you, is that known as Queen Anne furniture. (Wilde 1994, 915-916)

After offering observations on the presence and placement of a piano in the home, as well as on the importance of flowers – and after providing guidance on the manner of dress for both men and women residing there – Wilde emphasizes that “today more than ever the artist and a love of the beautiful are needed to temper and counteract the sordid materialism of the age” concluding that “there is nothing in common life too mean, in common things too trivial, to be ennobled by your touch, nothing in life that art cannot raise or sanctify” (925).

⁵ Focusing on Wilde’s second lecture Ellmann writes: “Modern dress was ignoble, as could be seen in sculptures [...] There must be schools of art, and these must be in more immediate relation with trade and manufacturing than now. Art should portray the men who cover the world with a network of iron and the sea with ships” (1987, 183).

⁶ Interestingly Wilde, while objecting to machine-made articles, allowed that machinery could in some ways free people for better use of time.

A fourth lecture entitled “The Irish Poets of 1848” was first delivered in San Francisco at the end of March and subsequently in several other cities. In it, Wilde focused on nineteenth-century Irish figures such as William Smith O’Brien, John Mitchel, Charles Gavan Duffy, Thomas Davis, James Clarence Mangan, and, notably, his mother, Speranza, who had instilled in the young Oscar “a love and reverence” for the poets of ’48. As Mendelssohn observes, in discussing these figures Wilde was obliquely “addressing the explosive situation playing out in real time back home” (2018, 177), without explicitly referencing contemporary leaders such as Parnell and Davitt; in this sense,

[Wilde’s lecture] by drawing historical parallels, he reframed current events in Ireland as part of a vast, cosmopolitan panorama of world events unfurling across time and space. By these lights he reckoned that the Celtic imagination was responsible for ‘all the great beauties of modern literature’ in Europe. Its ‘chords of penetrating passion and melancholy had touched ‘men so widely different as Goethe and Napoleon, influencing the work of many poets, from Byron to Keats and Lamartine’ [...] Diverting the conversation from Celts to cosmopolitans, deflecting from the present to the past, from this to that, from X to Y – these manoeuvres were to become his lifelong strategy for discussing topics that were personal emotional, or controversial. (177-178)

The tour was undoubtedly a success and in his correspondence with friends at home Wilde recounted some of its most memorable episodes. Recalling a lecture in Leadville, a mining town in the Rocky Mountains, he wrote: “I spoke to them of the early Florentines, and they slept as though no crime had ever stained the ravines of their mountain home” (Wilde 2000, 161). On this occasion, Wilde also descended – much to the delight of his audience – to the bottom of a silver mine in a bucket, where he dined, drank whiskey, and smoked a cigar, all as a prelude to the main event:

Then I had to open a new vein, or lode, which with a silver drill I brilliantly performed, amidst unanimous applause. The silver drill was presented to me and the lode named ‘The Oscar’. I had hoped that in their simple grand way they would have offered me shares in ‘The Oscar’ but in their artless untutored fashion they did not. Only the silver drill remains as a memory of my night at Leadville. (162)

While in the bar that same evening, surrounded by miners and their female companions, Wilde noticed a sign reading, “Please don’t shoot the pianist; he is doing his best”, which he later described in his short essay *Impressions of America*, as “the only rational method of art criticism he had ever come across” (Wilde 1906, 31). Back in England, he recalled this with evident delight; writing: “I was struck with this recognition of the fact that bad art merits the penalty of death, and I felt that in this remote city, where the aesthetic applications of the revolver were clearly established in the case of music, my apostolic task would be much simplified, as indeed it was” (Sherard 1906, 226).

3. Now: Wilde’s afterlife in America

Wilde was an easy, if not eager target in America. A few mocked his poetry and his ideas, including the self-assured Scot Archibald Forbes who found Wilde’s knee breeches particularly repellent; some, at their peril, mocked his utterances and style and if a few newspapers took his side, most tried to make him look foolish. Particularly, Wilde’s gender bending and coded performances were scorned publicly; he was mocked as a degenerate in satirical cartoons, a monkey with a flower in such papers as *Harper’s Weekly* and the *Washington Post*, but good or bad press was, for Wilde, secondary to his aim of being the news, inhabiting the story, occupying the space.

It must be emphasized that for Wilde newspapers primarily represented opportunities for interviews, which constituted a highly valuable platform for the cultivation of his celebrity. During his 1882 North American tour he sat for at least 176 interviews (Marland 2022), each of which he approached as a carefully staged performance in its own right. As Hofer and Scharnhorst observe:

Wilde often conducted an interview as if it were a performance. The interviewer would arrive to find him playing the part of the idle aesthete, lounging in a chair or on a sofa. Wilde would leap to his feet, shake the interviewer's hand, and offer him a seat. At the first prompt he would deliver a scripted line (e.g., 'No art is better than bad art' [...]). The conversation would end at a predetermined moment when his manager or valet would enter the room, interrupt the talk, and explain that the poet had another appointment. (2010, 4)

Here again, Wilde appears strikingly modern: the interview becomes a staged event in which visibility itself is the commodity, exemplifying what Debord would later identify as lived experience being displaced by its spectacular representation. Interviews, as Wilde recognized, were a product of modern American society, useful bridging platforms between popular media – the press and the theatre – whose aim was less to *inform* readers than *form* an image or product to be consumed. Celebrity interviews first emerged in American newspapers in the early 1870s, and traveling lecturers provided a convenient source of material for reporters. While figures such as Henry James and Mark Twain criticized this emerging culture of celebrity – despite Twain himself being a literary celebrity both in America and abroad – Wilde, like Whitman, embraced it, establishing a model of performative self-presentation that would resonate for generations to come. Interviews, in this sense, became a crucial resource in the construction of public personae, a precedent that would be widely exploited by twentieth-century celebrities.

As Rob Marland, editor of *Oscar Wilde: The Complete Interviews* (2022), observes “many of Wilde’s American interviewers, who came expecting to meet a buffoon or huckster, were compelled to admit that his conversational powers and the range of his expertise and interests were impressive” (Marland 2022, 14). Indeed, as Hofer and Scharnhorst note:

In his interviews Wilde touched on a wide range of topics, including American architecture, Chinese porcelain, the state of the American theater, Irish Home Rule and the Land League, the American expatriate painter James McNeill Whistler, and his plan to visit Japan and Australia. He freely expressed his opinion of such American writers as Whitman, Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, and Howells and of such British authors as Milton, Shelley, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and Tennyson. [...] He was never bereft of opinions, especially irreverent ones. (2010, 4)

It is important to emphasize that, while some newspapers and journalists attacked Wilde, such criticism paradoxically reinforced his confidence. They could ridicule him, but they could not divert public attention from his presence. In this sense, prolonged derision became a form of tribute, enabling Wilde to engage directly with the public, circumventing the gatekeeping role of the press. During his twelve months in America, he honed the art of mocking his mockers – a dynamic that, in many respects, anticipates the mechanisms of contemporary celebrity culture. Much of this was achieved through his epigrams, which, as Eagleton observes, a Wildean epigram “seizes upon some [...] commonplace and rips it inside out, deconstructs it” (2001, 4).

In Greenblatt’s terms, Wilde’s epigrams may be understood as condensed packets of what he calls “social energy”: forms of discourse that circulate through a culture, accumulating, redirecting, and redistributing affective and ideological charge across different contexts (1988). Wilde did not merely produce aphorisms; he released into the public sphere portable

verbal devices capable of moving between lecture hall, newspaper column, drawing-room conversation and later dramatic dialogue. Their power lay precisely in their mobility. Each repetition did not simply reproduce meaning but reactivated and renegotiated it within a new social situation. In this sense, Wilde's American tour becomes a laboratory of circulation, where aestheticism transforms from doctrine into transferable cultural currency.

Wilde – as a man and artist fully immersed in consumer culture – frequently recycled his epigrams across plays, essays and everyday conversation; indeed, as Matthew Sturgis observes:

Wilde's first reputation was as a wit: a sayer of smart things. From his last days at university he was celebrated – or mocked – as master of the ingenious epigram, the provocative paradox, the witty side, or the extravagant conceit. And it was a reputation that endured. Indeed, even after his literary success in the 1890s, it remained a common trope that, however sparkling his writings might be, they were but pallid reflections of his verbal exuberance and wit – or ingenious vehicles for the same. For, if other recorded his conventional flights, so too did Wilde. He used and re-used, many of his sayings in his published works – in his two great 'duologues' ('The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist'), in his one novel, in his four plays, and in the several epigrammatic manifestos that he contributed to the periodical press. (2020, vi)⁷

In this respect, a parallel may be drawn between Wilde and the quintessentially American icon Andy Warhol, himself described as "of the Wilde sort", who "brought seriality to new heights (or depths) by signaling that it was all that art was – indeed, that it could ever be" (Waldrep 2004, 100). Warhol, who famously characterized himself as a "deeply superficial person", treated the trivial as paramount and the paramount as trivial – a sensibility that resonates with Wilde, the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play whose subtitle aptly describes it as "A trivial comedy for serious people" (Bockris 1989).

Glick, in her insightful study *Materializing Queer Desire: Oscar Wilde to Andy Warhol*, observes that "Andy Warhol [...] has very much in common with early incarnations of the queer aesthete or dandy such as Oscar Wilde" (2009, 152). As she notes, this connection "was not lost on Warhol's contemporaries", citing the words of art curator and critic Henry Geldzahler – the protagonist of Warhol's eponymous 1964 film – who remarked:

I've written about Andy that only Oscar Wilde, as far as I know, was able to the same extent to invent a way of behaving with people who were at the margin of society. That whole aesthetic, *Yellow Book*, Aubrey Beardsley, Ronald Firbank, was invented by the aesthete Wilde. Andy in the sixties did something like that also, that lifestyle. (Shore, Tillman 1995, 130)

In short, as Glick puts it "like his predecessor Warhol used his effeminacy, aesthetic costume, intimacy with objects and celebrity connections to advertise himself as a highly polished, aesthetic surface" (2009, 152).

A central preoccupation for both Wilde and Warhol was, of course, fame itself. Since his college days, Wilde had known that he would be "famous, and if not famous, notorious" (Ellmann

⁷ Sturgis notes that "there have, over the years, been many anthologies of Wilde's aphorisms. Indeed, he together with his wife, Constance, was responsible for the first collection – called *Oscariana*. [...] Since then the process has never ceased [...]. Certainly, over the decades a definite canon has emerged. The same epigrams have become – repeated, reordered, re-enjoyed" (2020, vi-vii). In a way, the many collections of Wilde's (extraordinarily *musical*) epigrams published over the years have played the same function that *Best of* or *Greatest Hits* collections of songs by famous pop artists have played in the world (and market) of popular music.

1987, 45), while Warhol – described by Marwick as “the embodiment of spectacle”⁸ – sought to make “being famous more famous” (Lebowitz cited in Waldrep 2004, 97), a strategy that would come to define Warhol Enterprises during the 1980s. As Waldrep observes, in the later part of his career Warhol replaced the artists and outsiders who had populated the Factory in the 1960s – muses such as Edie Sedgwick and Nico, actors such as Joe D’Alessandro and Paul Morrissey, and the avant-rock band The Velvet Underground – with wealthy socialites, celebrities and royals, effectively retreating into the world of the jet set. Significantly, he transformed his renowned magazine *Interview* into a publication “almost wholly about fame”:

The process of becoming famous [was] chronicled either in the one-paged bios of hunky young stars that always began each issue or in the main section, which usually included an interview with the cover star based on a “conversation” at lunch with Andy and either another editor or a friend. Each cover, though rarely by Warhol, expressed the Warhol mystique at that time: a celebrity almost instantly recognizable, is painted in faux-pop style in which the person’s face appears as if on a poster [...]. The iconic treatment of anyone who appeared on the cover also added to the idea that the cover has a ‘star’ each issue. (Waldrep 2004, 97-98)

Wilde himself, as we have seen, sat for numerous interviews during his American tour and his image – albeit often rendered in caricature – appeared on the cover of several magazines.

Among the artists peopling Warhol’s factory in the 1960s there were, of course, The Velvet Underground. Their music embodies a dynamic interplay of light and darkness, love and sorrow, beauty and dissonance – qualities that resonate throughout much of Wilde’s work. Lou Reed’s solo debut album, *Transformer* (1972), features the seminal track “Walk on the Wild Side”, whose narrative of early 1970s transvestitism and homoerotic relationships echoes the fascinating connection – Bracewell identifies (1997) – between the later Oscar Wilde and the London underworld. Yet in Reed’s work, composed in the early 1970s, the “wild side” is not portrayed as a site of danger or criminality, but as a space in which identity, and particularly conceptions of gender, can be reimagined. As Reed’s biographer DeCurtis observes:

‘Walk on the Wild Side’ celebrates the sexual transformations of Holly Woodlawn, Jackie Curtis, and Candy Darling, three transgender Factory stalwarts and the stars of Warhol ad Paul Morrissey’s 1971 satire of the feminist movement, *Women in Revolt*. [...] It’s not as if Reed knew those characters at all [...] ‘Walk on the Wild Side’ is more than a song. It’s a slogan, and an invitation. Its title distils Reed’s primary symbolic value: to expose people to worlds they might never have become aware of otherwise. In the early seventies, millions of people were standing on the brink of taking a walk on the wild. All they needed was a little push, and Reed provided exactly that. (2017, 151-153)

In this context, the “wild side” can also be understood as the “Wilde side”, conceived as a threshold, a liminal, and even “risky” space in which conventional or essentialist notions of identity can be interrogated and reimagined.

Another American artist inhabiting the Wilde side is the poet and singer Patti Smith, who on Sunday, 30 October 2016, delivered a reading of Wilde’s final major prose work, *De Profundis*, in the former Chapel of Reading Gaol. The performance, which lasted over three hours, opened with a striking *a cappella* rendition of her thematically resonant song “Wing”. In 2020, Smith engaged further with Wilde by composing a personal letter – addressed to, and in a sense in dialogue with, Wilde – as the introduction to the Folio special edition of *De*

⁸ Marwick also notes how “Warhol perceived that with conceptual art (and here the term ‘art’ includes his films) you could outrage people and gain enormous publicity through people simply being made aware of the concept, without ever having actually to view the painting, sculpture, or film” (Marwick 2002, 200).

Profundis (2020). With her androgynous presentation and nuanced, committed approach to gender, Smith demonstrates a profound artistic and conceptual indebtedness to Wilde.

Wilde's trans-historical reappearances can be, in this perspective, productively understood through Greenblatt's notion of "negotiation" (1988), whereby literary and cultural texts are not passively inherited but actively reworked within shifting fields of power, desire, and ideology. Wilde's persona does not simply survive; it is renegotiated at each historical juncture. Warhol's aesthetic surface, Reed's "wild side", and later Patti Smith's devotional return to *De Profundis* do not replicate Wilde but enter into a dynamic exchange with him, appropriating certain elements (dandyism, theatricality, queer liminality, epigrammatic defiance) while re-situating them within new cultural struggles. What circulates, therefore, is not a stable Wilde but a flexible repertoire of gestures, poses, and conceptual energies continually adapted to new social formations.

In this sense, in 2009, the Chicago indie band Company of Thieves released a song entitled "Oscar Wilde", which can be read as a Dorian Gray song. Its sound, heavily reminiscent of the late Smiths – particularly of Johnny Marr's distinctive guitar work – complements lyrics that evoke Wildean themes. The song features a line in which the narrator refers to an Oscar Wilde "confrontation" and is populated by imagery that strongly resonates with Wilde's only novel: from allusions to Dorian's double life to the imperative to live as though life itself were a matter of style – a precept likely drawn from Lord Wotton. Commenting on the song's promotional video, Wilde scholar Salamensky observes:

[...] dressed, in a video of the song in a schoolboy uniform, and humorously depicted as 'French Club President,' 'Debate Team Captain,' 'Choirmaster,' 'Kung Fu Club Yellow Belt,' and in other ways "Most Likely to Succeed", (singer) Schatz, like her bandmates, is spirited and bright – undoubtedly someone whom Wilde, were he alive today, would like far more than the dim, dull scholars who read and study his work. (2012, 155)

A folk-infused atmosphere defines the 2015 song "Stars" by the Canadian new-folk band Mahones, whose lyrics are animated and enriched by (deconstructed) Wildean epigrams, including the famous line from *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars". By contrast, American singer Marchelle Bradanini's 2020 single "Oscar Wilde" is characterized by a sound evocative of Americana artists such as Lucinda Williams and the late Bill Frisell.

Returning to 1882, it is noteworthy that Wilde's American tour began in New York, where he delivered three lectures: the first, "The English Renaissance of the Arts", on 9 January 1882 at Chickering Hall; the second, "The Decorative Arts", on 11 May 1882 at Wallack's Theatre; and a final lecture on 27 November at Parepa Hall in Yorkville, devoted to "The Practical Application of the Principles of Home Decoration, with Observations on Personal Dress and Ornaments". Today, several of the aesthetic principles articulated in these lectures find renewed expression in a contemporary New York cultural space dedicated to the Anglo-Irish writer himself. The Oscar Wilde NYC, a bar and restaurant unique of its kind, is located in the NoMad district at 45 West 27th Street, Manhattan, in a building that formerly housed the headquarters of the Prohibition Enforcement. As stated on its official website, the venue defines itself as "a public place for private affairs" and seeks to embody the spirit of Oscar Wilde by celebrating life through Victorian sophistication and glamour⁹.

⁹ The Oscar Wilde bar in New York exemplifies the contemporary cultural afterlife of Wilde through an immersive aesthetic experience that merges late Victorian decadence with modern urban glamour. Its lavish décor – characterized by marble surfaces, antique objects, mechanical floral installations, and explicit textual references to Wilde's works – transforms the act of dining and drinking into a performative engagement with literary heritage.

We may conclude by echoing Richard Ellmann's observation that Wilde's American tour constituted "an achievement of courage and grace, along with ineptitude and self-advertisement" (1987, 195), through which Wilde successfully naturalized the term aesthetic within American culture. Although his doctrines were often dismissed as effeminate, Ellmann contends that they nonetheless represented the most sustained and incisive critique of materialistic vulgarity that the United States had yet encountered. More importantly, Wilde's aesthetic principles exerted a lasting influence on successive generations of American artists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Wilde's journey across space – from Ireland to England, to the United States, and later to continental Europe – thus becomes a temporal journey, in which his aestheticism operates as transferable social energy, repeatedly negotiated within new historical conjunctures. Musicians such as Lou Reed and Patti Smith, alongside artists, directors, and actors including Andy Warhol and Al Pacino, demonstrate a keen awareness of the significance of "being" or "playing" Oscar within their respective cultural contexts, revealing Wilde as a subversive and critical figure whose persona can be productively performed and reimagined – perhaps now more than ever.

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Quotations from Wilde's corpus, statues dedicated to the author, and themed cocktails contribute to a space in which literature is not merely referenced but materially and symbolically enacted. While explicitly devoted to Oscar Wilde, the venue is also strongly influenced by the imaginative universe of Lewis Carroll, a convergence that invites reflection on the affinities between the two writers. Both figures, contemporaries linked to Oxford and Victorian culture, employ humor, irony, and fantasy to challenge social and literary conventions, albeit through different modes – Carroll via nonsense and absurdity, Wilde through paradox and aestheticism. Their juxtaposition within the bar underscores their shared capacity to combine playfulness with critique and helps explain their enduring relevance in popular culture. The Oscar Wilde bar thus functions as a space in which literary traditions are reactivated and reinterpreted, allowing visitors to inhabit a fantastical yet critical "other" world that mirrors the imaginative experience of reading Wilde or Carroll themselves.

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Miscellanea



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Ecofeminist Tropes of the Ocean in Contemporary Irish and Galician Poetry*

Manuela Palacios

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
(<manuela.palacios@usc.es>)

Abstract:

The present study examines the oceanic tropes of ecofeminist relevance featured in the recent poetic production of two Atlantic communities with comparable cultural and environmental features: Ireland and Galicia. The focus will be on current renderings of an endangered ocean and the role that female authorship and configurations of femininity play in them. Among its aims, this article will assess whether there have appeared new poetic tropes that may convey the altered ecological conditions of the seas and whether current ecofeminist ocean tropes succeed in drawing attention to the common materiality and destiny of human and more-than-human nature. The poems under analysis are taken from anthologies and individual poetry collections from the last two decades.

Keywords: Atlantic Ocean, Ecofeminism, Galician Poetry, Irish Poetry, Oceanic Tropes

1. Introduction

Ireland and Galicia – an autonomous region in northwestern Spain – have found in the Atlantic Ocean both a daunting barrier and an auspicious gateway. Through history, this ocean has put many lives at risk, those of fishermen and other seafarers, but has also been the path taken by expectant emigrants to the American continent. Besides these socioeconomic factors, there has been an increasing ecological awareness about the health of oceans in the twenty-first century that has opened new avenues of

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inquiry into the impact of human activity on the oceans' ecological balance. Initiatives as varied as the environmental activism of The Ocean Movement, and debates in academic disciplines such as ocean studies and ecocriticism, all converge to highlight the urgent need to reconsider our relationship, both material and symbolic, with the ocean (Pujolràs-Noguer, Hand 2023).

This article is concerned with the role played by women in present-day poetic configurations of the ocean. It will be primarily informed by current ecofeminist debates and their scrutiny of the interrelations of human, in particular female, and more-than-human nature, alongside their social and ecological implications (Estévez-Saá and Lorenzo-Modia 2018). The ocean is an especially pertinent frame of reference for a comparative study of Irish and Galician poetry because of its flexible boundaries that foster in-betweenness and transnational bonds, thereby potentially interrogating the idea of national affiliation and stimulating, as Pujolràs-Noguer and Hand advocate in their research on Indian Ocean literature, communal, porous and self-questioning identities rather than fixed or stagnated ones (2023, 134). Proof of such communal identity is, among others, the fact that Ireland and Galicia share the foundational myth of the Sons of Míl as their foreign, navigating forebears (McKevitt 2006). This article, however, is shifting the focus to current renderings of an endangered ocean and to the role that female authorship and configurations of femininity play in them. Ecopoetry is a singularly apt genre for this subject-matter since, as Payne, Shaughnessy and Veiga have argued in their collection of Irish and Galician ecopoetry, it "reflects a growing awareness of the fragility of the ecosystems we inhabit" (2021a, 11).

The 1980s witnessed the progressive incorporation of women poets into the, until then, highly patriarchal Irish and Galician literary fields (Nogueira Pereira 1997, 82-83; Cannon 2021, 93) to the point that the poetic generation of the 1990s was characterized, both in Ireland and Galicia, by a conspicuous rise in the number of women poets (Dacosta 1997, 18; Guinness 2004, 21-23). The patriarchal backbone of these two Catholic and rural-based communities may partly explain the relatively late impact of Western feminism on their respective literary fields. Since this breakthrough of women poets, there has been a parallel upsurge of tropes that relate women's renewed personal and social aspirations to the domain of sea navigation (González Fernández 2005; Palacios 2009). In renowned Galician writer Xohana Torres's poem "Penelope" ([1992] 2004, 251) the female speaker stated her determination to navigate through her words "Eu tamén navegar"¹, which later became the rallying cry of Galician feminism. The woman's empowering stance in Torres's poem was similarly expressed in Luisa Castro's collection *Baleas e baleas* (Whales and Whales), although the latter occasionally added the poetic persona's ecological concern with plundering fishing practices: "Nunca máis darei creto a meu avó / roubando peixe espada nas costas irlandesas" ([1988] 1992, 52)². The environmentally aware approach became more evident with the sinking of the Prestige oil-tanker off Galicia's Atlantic coastline in 2002, as has been well studied by María Xesús Nogueira Pereira (2022; also in Acuña Trabazo, Nogueira Pereira 2022). The contemporary Irish literary field, meanwhile, has experienced, since the 1990s, an analogous development that began with the presentation of empowered female navigators, as in Mary O'Malley's "The Grannuaile Poems" in her collection *Where the Rocks Float* about the namesake pirate queen: "I am Gráinne, Queen of men, / mistress of a thousand ships" (1993, 69). Likewise, Celia de Fréine's *imram-odyssey*, voices the speaker's precarious albeit determined wanderlust: "At last I discover a small boat to store hope in, one / that welcomes me on board and steers me on my journey" (2010, 15). Progressively, Irish poetry has been

¹ I to sail too (unless otherwise stated, all translations from Galician into English are mine).

² Trans.: Never again will I give credence to my grandfather / plundering swordfish off the Irish coast.

accommodating more ecologically sensitive stances such as those in Mary O'Malley's *Valparaíso* (2012) and *Playing the Octopus* (2016), which will be the object of analysis in this article.

The present study aims to examine the oceanic tropes of ecofeminist relevance featured in the recent poetic production of these two Atlantic communities, Galicia and Ireland. Some of the questions that will guide this inquiry are the following: which are the present-day dominant tropes of the ocean? And, more pressingly, have there appeared any new tropes that convey the altered ecological conditions of the seas? Have gender-marked figurations intervened in the production of these new tropes? Do the common vulnerability and exploitation experienced by women and nature continue to inspire ecofeminist readings of nature poetry? The ecocritical question arises as to the potential impact of poetic female ocean figurations on the empirical conditions of female and oceanic existence. Furthermore, following Astrida Neimanis' focus on transcorporeality (2017), this article wants to assess whether female nature, and more specifically female ocean, tropes succeed in drawing attention to our common materiality and, hereby, to the common destiny of human and more-than-human nature. Finally, along the lines of Søren Frank's differentiation between "historical time" and "broad present" (2022), one question to pose is: are current configurations of the ocean primarily nostalgic of a former, less damaged environment, or is there a penchant for the representation of a dystopic future?

The corpus of poems to be analysed has been selected from recent anthologies of ecopoetry such as, in the Irish case, *Empty House. Poetry and Prose on the Climate Crisis* (Kinsella, O'Mahony 2021) as well as from individual poetry collections like Mary O'Malley's *Valparaíso* (2012) and Nessa O'Mahony's *The Hollow Woman on the Island* (2019). The chosen time frame, 2012-2021, is meant to outline recent developments in ecological awareness in Ireland as rendered by the already consolidated presence of women poets in this country. Similarly, the Galician corpus will have recourse to anthologies such as *No seu despregar* (Otero, Tembrás 2016a; As they unfurl), *13. Antoloxía da poesía galega próxima* (Nogueira Pereira 2017a; 13. Anthology of proximate Galician poetry) and *Aquén do mar. Cantos de serea na luz da fin da terra* (Nerium 2023; This side of the sea. Sirens' songs in the light of the earth's end), with the aim to identify those tropes of ecofeminist relevance that have been ideated since the Prestige-oil-spillage motivated poetry in 2002 and 2003, with a special focus on writers born in the 1980s and after.

2. Irish Poetry: The Self-Questioning Stance

Mary O'Malley has been a longstanding activist in Irish environmental education. One of her collections of poetry, *Valparaíso* (2012), is partly concerned with her experience as a writer in residence aboard a research vessel, the RV *Celtic Explorer*, run by the Irish Marine Institute with the mission of examining marine life. That an Irish woman writer may have had access to this experience and to the publication of poetry about it is already an aspect of feminist relevance, given the impediments posed to women writers by a long-standing patriarchal bias in the Irish literary field (Ní Dhuibhne 2021). O'Malley's book is of special relevance to the present article because of its parallel inquiry into the ecological predicament of the ocean and the various female figurations fostered by the maritime setting. One central ecocritical question that haunts this collection of poems is that concerning the compatibility, or lack of it, of human aspirations to know the ocean, or to render it in artistic form, with the ocean's welfare. In this respect, O'Malley often makes use of a self-questioning mode that resembles the "interrogative mode" proposed by the ecofeminist critic Lee Quinby: "[...] ecofeminism is most formidable in its opposition to power when it challenges its own assumptions" (1990, 124). Along this

line, the Irish poet not only questions capitalist plundering practices but also the well-intended methods of human scientific and artistic inquiry. The poem "At Jardin des Plantes" (2012, 13-14) is a good example of this introspective approach, as it sets "story" against "mid-ocean" and the alliterative /b/ in "begin" against that in "broken": "The sea begins where the story has broken / and it is richer than heaven / especially in mid-ocean" (ll. 1-3). Similarly, the early male explorers of sea-depths who failed to see the minute ocean creatures unknowingly saved the latter from human depredation:

Inside the diving bell a man
who might have saved or loved them
saw nothing. His blindness became wisdom

and they were left alone for years [...] (ll. 10-13)

However, more perseverant explorers eventually identified these "twilight creatures" and investigated and turned them into exhibits, which leads the poetic persona to wonder about humans' deadly gaze: "[...] what we manage not to notice / until it is presented tagged and dead / a story on a glued vase, in jaggged pieces" (ll. 34-36).

A poem such as "Crew" (2012, 72), however, vindicates the attention that poetry may pay, and has actually paid in epic accounts of the Argonauts' adventures, to ordinary sailors, the present-day equivalent of whom are the blue-collar workers, essential for the research vessel to function, but without any protagonism in the resulting scientific publications: "[...] Science will publish / but the poet put them higher, young, wild / as the fine cliff flowers, the sea-promised" (ll. 6-8).

O'Malley, a woman poet, is here advocating the poet's faculty for acknowledging the manual workers' contribution to the expedition and, although seemingly tongue in cheek, recalls the canon of epic poetry: "It would be spurious to make comparisons / with the Argonauts but [...]" (ll. 1-2). The author is setting poetry against science, "the poet put them higher" (l. 1), while other poems like "Jardin des Plantes" are more critical with both arts and science in their renderings of the material world. However, there is an empowering claim in "Crew" about the poet's responsibility in her choices that is especially fitting for a woman poet writing in a literary tradition which often excluded female writers. Thereby, the interrogation of power structures, even of the relative power that a poet may flaunt, needs to be understood within the patriarchal context in which a woman's claim to power is a daring act of rebellion.

A similar destabilization of patriarchal power is that achieved through the reference to Penelope in O'Malley's "Thalassa" (2012, 73): "The captain is Penelope. Sirens beware" (l. 8). Not unlike the character of Penelope in the aforementioned namesake poem by the Galician writer Xohana Torres, O'Malley intervenes in the classical account of *The Odyssey* to transform the patiently waiting Penelope into a daring seafarer. Another feminist response to maritime epic poetry is that found in O'Malley's "The Lusiads" (2012, 69), in which a shipwrecked Luís de Camoê's is reduced to the humiliating position of a drowning man who begs for the female poetic persona's help: "[...] *Signora, throw me a rope or jump in / but for the love of God stop gaping and do something*" (ll. 7-8).

The presence of the "feminine" in O'Malley's *Valparaíso* is often rendered in subtle, non-obtrusive ways by using the pronoun "she" to refer to the ship and the ocean, as well as by portraying the sea through female-related imagery and by presenting the daily routines on the research vessel in terms of domestic life. However, in a collection that abounds in references to deteriorating ecosystems, there stands out a poem which performs a feminist and ecological

re-reading of the classical myth of Leda and the Swan and of W.B. Yeats's poetic version of this myth ([1923] 1990, 241). Thus, "Whom the Gods Love" (2012, 33) presents, through five three-line stanzas, Leda as a female ecologist who removes the tar from the swan's feathers as a consequence, the reader infers, of an oil spill. With O'Malley's characteristic wit and humour, the poem is not about the classical tale of the rape of Leda by Zeus, but about the all too human female ecologist's efforts to wash "the oil, black on black, off his feathers" (l. 4). This Leda, however, is not a victorious ecofeminist heroine, since the poem maintains, with bitter irony, the abandonment by Zeus of his human prey: "Left, she takes off her gloves. / There is tar on her wrist. It's like that, the end" (ll. 14-15). Rather than the divine semen that will bring about a genealogy of war and destruction, and rather than the knowledge and power that she is expected to have been impregnated with as implied in Yeats's poem, this ecologist Leda is simply marked by the remaining stain of tar.

Whether through their engagement with *The Odyssey*, the myths of the Argonauts, the rape of Leda by Zeus or with *The Lusiads*, the poems by O'Malley analysed here share the determination to re-read the poetic tradition from a standpoint that combines a feminist and ecological commitment. With her characteristic inquisitiveness, O'Malley interrogates the effect of human endeavours, even those of apparently benign sea-life research and poetry, on natural habitats, and if ever tempted to privilege poetry over science, she does so to subvert the patriarchal literary tradition by vindicating her role as a woman and feminist poet. Her noteworthy configuration of Leda as an ecologist who cleans the tar from Zeus's swan feathers does not merely bring the Greek myth to the present but, with its depiction of a recurrent image of pollution in current news reports, also puts forward a critique of the alarming ongoing contamination of aquatic ecosystems.

A remarkable figuration of subaquatic womanhood is featured in Nessa O'Mahony's collection of poems *The Hollow Woman on the Island* (2019). Divided into three parts, the central section of the book includes the poem that gives the title to the collection (31). The trope of the hollow woman has as its source the poet's experience with ovarian cancer, an existential threat that prompts reflections on the common materiality of human and more-than-human nature that recall Astrida Neimanis' elaboration on Stacy Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality (2017, 33, 77). O'Mahony's hollow woman submerges in the sea water and her body, "rounded off / by the water's oscillation" (ll. 12-13), turns into a stone that may eventually be picked up by a beachcomber and taken home as a memento or placed as a grave top. The blending of woman and water, together with the eroding effect of the sea on the human body, render death as a natural process that affects all living creatures. Furthermore, non-organic entities, such as the stone, are also presented as undergoing continuous transformations.

The stone actually becomes the protagonist of the following poem "The Hollow Woman at Bohea" (32), which constitutes an apt post-humanist rendition of nature as an observing participant and agent of knowledge, as opposed to anthropocentric conceptions of "the human being as a distinct, distanced observer of the world" (Karhio 2022, 103). Like Mary O'Malley's imaginative poems of speaking animals – e.g. "Cetorhinus maximus" (2012, 77), "The Rat" (2016, 41) – censuring humans' hubris and interested appropriations, O'Mahony has the stone speak and guide the human, urging the latter to be affected by nature and not, as is most often the case, affecting it: "[The stone] tells you to listen; / the fork in the unmarked road / is the very place / the cuckoo calls" (ll. 8-11). Another concern shared by O'Malley and O'Mahony is that of the hammered rivalry between scientific knowledge and the humanities. O'Mahony's poem "From a Beachcomber's Manual" (2019, 17) adds, after the title, the piece of news that inspired the poem: "On reading that Irish students are asked to abandon arts for 'stem' subjects", STEM being the acronym of Science,

Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. O'Mahony chooses a marine trope to underline the role of language and imagery in our perception of the natural world. Grammar and naming may seem deficient encodings for the multifarious optical effects of nacre but, despite their limitations, they are necessary tools that frame the human definition of the natural world:

Nacre is the noun
for the iridescent inner lining
of bivalves and molluscs;
nacreous, the adjective. (ll. 1-4)

Imagery, however, is the tool employed by dreamers, poets and artists; it may be inexact and misleading, which is the reason why John Locke deprecated its use in his chapter "The Abuse of Words" from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* where he maintained that: "[...] all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions" ([1690] 1959, 146). O'Mahony, nevertheless, displays her ironic skills and comments:

Dreamers gave us mother of pearl
and you know what trouble
dreams got us into.
Stick to the facts,
google if unsure. (ll. 12-16)

O'Malley's and O'Mahony's poems are of relevance to the ecocritical and post-humanist debate in that they evince these poets' awareness of the constrictions of language in its rendering of nature, thereby also signalling the limits of a post-humanist and post-anthropocentric approach. However, both writers celebrate the poet's imagination and its capacity to put the human in the place of the Other, rendering the point of view of more-than-human nature. As women poets, they both assume the responsibility of interrogating human overpowering centrality and bring to the fore nature's role as an agent of knowledge.

This analysis of Irish poetry will end with a brief discussion of the poem "Untitled" by Saoi O'Connor included in the anthology *Empty House. Poetry and Prose on the Climate Crisis*, edited by the poets Alice Kinsella and Nessa O'Mahony (2021) and published by Doire Press in collaboration with the grassroots environmental network "Friends of the Earth". In her introduction to the book, Alice Kinsella refers to eco-anxiety about climate change as the main motivation for putting together the texts – prose and poetry – of this collection, which is her modest contribution to environmental activism. Kinsella refers to the first definition of eco-anxiety provided, in 2017, by The American Psychological Association: "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (2021, 17) and argues that fear, however, should not be paralyzing, because: "it's only by acknowledging the very real threats that we have any hope of preventing them" (19). *Empty House* is, therefore, a call to action to take care of our *oikos*, the Greek word for home.

In Saoi O'Connor's "Untitled" (2021, 167-168), the poetic persona must come to terms with the paradox of both loving and fearing the ocean. The speaker recalls that the attachment to this coastal landscape, which goes back to childhood years, "taught me how to love being fluid" (l. 13). The symbiosis of human and more-than-human nature, this "fluid" identity, reminds us that over 50% of the human body is made of water. This proves the common materiality and transcorporeality between human life and the ocean. Fear, however, is caused by the awareness that "we will be the last / when our children are born / these rocks will be underwater" (ll. 33-35). Even if the battle against the rising levels of the sea might be lost – "there is no saving these

rocks / the sea will take them back” (ll. 38-39) – the speaker nevertheless learns a lesson from the ocean, “her unyieldingness” (l. 19), which becomes the inspiration to continue the environmental struggle in spite of the daunting obstacles: “[...] / to march with 10,000 people at your back / the rocks are unconquerable but we are endless / we go on and on and on” (ll. 22-24).

3. Galician Poetry: Transcorporeal Figurations

What kind of environmental approach can Galician poetry have at present and what role can the “feminine” play in it, considering the prominence of the medieval *Cantigas de amigo* (Songs for the beloved) in which a female voice on the seashore yearns for the return of the male seafarer? The figuration of a woman navigator, such as Xohana Torres’ determined and outspoken Penelope, had to wait until the 1990s, a decade with a conspicuous and stimulating incorporation of women writers to the Galician literary field. More-than-human figurations comparable to the navigating Penelope were, at the time, those of whales and other cetaceans (Palacios 2018; Fernández Naval 2023). The literary presence of environmental concerns, which until then had been largely ancillary to other worries, such as the socioeconomic transformation of the territory and its landscape, had its turning point in 2002 and 2003, after the sinking of the Prestige oil tanker off Galician shores with its devastating pollution of the coastline of Portugal, Spain and France, as mentioned above.

Anthologies constitute an apt repository to take the pulse of environmental concerns thanks to their overview of a particular period of time and its related subject matter. In this respect, the anthology *No seu despregar* (Otero, Tembrás 2016a; As they unfurl) brings together a selection of poems by Galician-language writers born between 1985 and 1997. Although many began writing already in their adolescence, most of their literary production became public after the shock of the Prestige crisis in 2002, a traumatic object lesson in environmental education. Since this anthology brings together young writers who are expected to advance new poetic insights, its Introduction cannot bypass the far from easy definition of poetic “novelty” and, to this purpose, quotes César Vallejo’s words on what is wrongly considered as “new poetry”. In fact, Vallejo’s observations are of relevance to other cultural demarcations such as that of “environmental poetry”. Vallejo criticises those understandings of “new poetry” that simply consider the introduction of lexicon about state-of-the art technology and fresh cultural or social formations. Instead, he claims, the focus should be on the way new circumstances and instruments elicit: “novos temperos nerviosos, fondas perspicacias sentimentais, amplificando profecías e comprensións e dosando o amor” (Otero, Tembrás 2016b, 10)³. In a similar fashion, it seems reasonable to claim that environmental poetry is not that which merely contains environmentally-related lexicon, but poetry that gives expression to a new sensibility towards and expands prefigurations of the relation between human and more-than-human nature. Such is also the aim of the collections of ecologically-centred poetry *22 ecopoemas contra o cambio climático* (Concello de Santiago 2023; 22 ecopoems against climate change) and *A Different Eden. Ecopoetry from Ireland and Galicia / Un Edén diferente. Ecopoesía de Irlanda e Galicia* (Payne, Shaughnessy, Veiga 2021b).

Another anthology that collects poetry of the same generation of writers as that in *No seu despregar* is *13. Antoloxía da poesía galega próxima* (Nogueira Pereira 2017a), which provides an informative survey of the poetry written by authors born through the 1980s and 1990s, with their first books of poetry published after the Prestige crisis. As millennials, they grew up

³ Trans.: new temperaments, profound emotional insights, thereby expanding prefigurations and understandings, and appraising love.

in a period that witnessed the continuing expansion of gender equality in Galicia, an aspect that, at least in what concerns ecological concerns, has reduced the gender gap in comparison with previous generations. In her introduction, the editor (Nogueira Pereira 2017b) identifies a number of features shared by the poets brought together in this collection, in spite of their heterogeneity. One is the condition of precarity, mainly caused by the financial crisis of 2007 and its long-lasting impact on the job market. As a consequence, many of these young writers have had to leave their community and look for opportunities elsewhere. Their poetry abounds in notions of loss, displacement and estrangement, especially with regard to the landscapes, coastal or rural, of their childhood and adolescence, as showcased by Jesús Castro Yáñez's poem "Baltar, 1:00 AM, Agosto" (Baltar, 1:00 AM, August) where the poetic persona declares "Calamos coma quen camiña / sonámbulo á desaparición dun lugar" (2017a, 212)⁴. The geographical references of these poets, thereby, extend beyond the local and bring together localities that share, rather than a historical connection, a symbolical one of common vulnerability, as in the reference to the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl in Samuel Solleiro's "Cabalos Przewalski" (Przewalski Horses): "im-axinaos, galopando no céspede azul eléctrico, bébedos sempre de radioactividade para ti" (162)⁵.

Some of the writers in *13. Antoloxía da poesía galega próxima* have been actively involved in cultural projects around ecological degradation, such as the one caused by mining, monoculture forests and forest fires: *Versus cianuro. Poemas contra a mina de ouro de Corcoesto* (Caldeirón 2013; Versus cyanide. Poems against the Corcoesto gold mine), *Versos no Olimpo. O monte Pindo na poesía galega* (Fernández Naval, Villar 2013; Verse on Mount Olympus. Mount Pindo in Galician poetry). The repertoires of images in *13* render a bleak perception of the environmental present and pending future, as illustrated in the poetry by Oriana Méndez: "[...] como tamén comezou a alterarse a temperatura / mansamente na dirección do xeo" (Nogueira Pereira 2017a, 112)⁶. Another feature that Nogueira identifies as common to this group of writers is their questioning of the capacity of language to depict reality (2017b, 15), a sign of self-interrogation that was also identified in the Irish writers discussed above. Likewise, there abound in both literary fields sarcastic allusions to the literary tradition and its picturesque rendering of nature, an apt example of which is Samuel Solleiro's "OM": "Os sapos cantan oh estanque dos pexegueiros floridos. / Escribo poesía convencional" (Nogueira Pereira 2017a, 164)⁷.

Of special relevance for this article is the marine imaginary deployed by the young writers in these anthologies, as in the case of Helena Salgueiro's choice of a wild coastal landscape that her poetic persona refuses to leave: "todo o meu corpo arrecende a sal e a terra mollada [...] / que é o que busco senón / o non marchar, o non fuxir? Eu son de aquí" (Otero, Tembrás 2016a, 79)⁸. Lara Dopazo Ruibal's persona equates boundless spaces with a desperate need for vitality: "tragarei todo un deserto se fai falla / todo o mar / para sentir que estou viva" (Nogueira Pereira 2017a, 86)⁹. It should be mentioned that one signal of the reduction in the gender gap of this generation is the male poets' attention to women's sea-related tasks. Thus, Ismael Ramos refers to the domestic task of fish evisceration to convey a disenchanting sense of life: "Túa nai ensinoute a manexar o coitelo. Limpar as tripas do silencio" (184)¹⁰. In consonance with the

⁴ Trans.: We remain silent like someone / sleepwalking towards the disappearance of a place.

⁵ Trans.: imagine them, galloping on the electric blue lawn, always drunk in radioactivity for you.

⁶ Trans.: [...] much like the temperature has also begun to change / gently towards the ice.

⁷ Trans.: Toads sing oh pond of the blooming peach trees. / I write conventional poetry.

⁸ Trans.: my whole body smells of salt and wet earth [...] / what is my pursuit but / not to leave, not to flee? I am from here.

⁹ Trans.: I will swallow the whole desert if necessary / the whole sea / so as to feel alive.

¹⁰ Trans.: Your mother taught you how to handle the knife. To remove the innards of silence.

above, shipwreck and drowning are frequent tropes among both male and female poets. Noelia Gómez provides a good illustration of transcorporeality that reveals the common destiny of human and more-than-human animals: “No fondo hai cristais / imaxes do naufraxio / pegadas dunhas mans de muller. / O corpo dun paxaro” (Otero, Tembrás 2016a, 117)¹¹.

Galicia suffered recently from the widespread pollution of its Atlantic waters due to a shipment of plastic nurdles that fell out of the charter vessel Toconao in early December 2023. Will the recurrent accidents of plastic pollution of the sea mobilize artists and writers, as well as environmentalists and society at large, the way the Prestige oil spill did in 2002 and 2003? Marine plastic pollution is not a new phenomenon and Galician poetry has already denounced it in explicit verse, as in Daniel Asorey’s collection *Transmatria*: “O mar é de plástico, / as xardas saboroso poliuretano, / propilenos as maragotas, / polímeros felices as bocas dos golfinhos” (2019, 19)¹².

Regarding marine female tropes with an environmental scope, Galician poetry may not display at present one distinct and influential figuration like that of the whale in the late 1980s and 1990s, as was the case in Luisa Castro’s collection *Baleas e baleas* (1988), and in Ana Roman’s *Arden* (1998) and in her later collection *Estremas* (2010). The trope of the whale in this poetry had an important anthropocentric focus in its expression of women’s self-affirmation. In her inaugural speech on joining the Galician Royal Academy for instance, Xohana Torres claimed that “[u]nha muller pode converterse en balea polo simple feito de querer cambiar de forma” (2001, 24)¹³. These writers’ figurations of the whale, however, also posed important questions about the porous liminality between human and nonhuman mammals, between women and animality, and also introduced, to varying degree, concerns of ecocritical value as they pondered the evolution of the species.

Nevertheless, it is not rare to find now a recurrent presence of transcorporeal bodies that conflate woman and fish, often in the context of a human romantic relationship either, to celebrate its joys or to lament its agonies. Although this figuration might risk being tagged as an anthropocentric appropriation of sea-life for the expression of human emotions, it nonetheless gives expression to an ecocritical awareness of the intimate bonds between human and more-than-human nature, as well as to the revaluation of the often-denigrated association – also among some feminist scholars – of woman and animal (Puleo 2017, 10). Lara Dopazo Ruibal’s imaginary around the “illa peixe”¹⁴ shows the strong attraction of the female speaker to the fish that awaits her daily: “na beira da auga agarda por min / – como cada día – / o gran peixe” (Nogueira Pereira 2017a, 88)¹⁵. Similarly, the poet renders the intense emotional struggle of writing through the comparison of human skin with fish scales: “a pel queimada que / escama coma un peixe” (94)¹⁶. The woman’s scaled skin also appears in a poem by Andrea Nunes Brións in a context of bitter disappointment with love: “e cáenme as escamas do meu peito / polas veces en que escollín sentar na lareira dos teus ollos / (agora vermellos, coléricos) (60)¹⁷. Less striking is the poet’s association of sexual desire with the sea tides: “e reprímome ó dicir que devezó

¹¹ Trans.: At the sea bottom there are glass pieces / images of the shipwreck / prints of female hands. / A bird’s body.

¹² Trans.: the sea is plastic, / sarda fish tasty polyurethane, / wrasses propylene / joyful polymer the mouths of dolphins. I would like to thank María Xesús Nogueira Pereira for drawing my attention to this poem.

¹³ Trans.: a woman can turn into a whale for the mere sake of wanting to change her shape.

¹⁴ Trans.: fish island.

¹⁵ Trans.: on the water’s edge is waiting for me / – like any other day – / the big fish.

¹⁶ Trans.: the burnt skin that / gets scaled like a fish.

¹⁷ Trans.: and the scales fall from my bosom / for the times I chose to sit by the hearth of your eyes / (now red, choleric).

/ por abrirme en mil mareas” (66)¹⁸. Sexuality is similarly rendered in sea-life terms by Alicia Fernández: “e dou coa forma de orixinar pérolas / soamente ao humedecer no teu colo” (44)¹⁹.

One additional anthology with a broad repertoire of exclusively women-authored poems on Galicia’s coastal landscape is that coordinated by Alexandre Nerium, the pen-name of Francisco Manuel López Martínez, a poet and sailor who currently works as a guide at the Fishing Museum in the Galician coastal town of Finisterre. The selection of women poets, most of them Galician but also of other nationalities and linguistic backgrounds, is justified by Nerium when he states that *Aquén do mar. Cantos de serea na luz da fin da terra* (2023) aims to pay homage to women – both female writers and women working for the local fisheries – whose labour has often been silenced (7)²⁰. A recurrent female figuration in the collection, as the title makes explicit, is that of the siren/mermaid, which constitutes an inspiring blending of the human and more-than-human animal and would require an independent study of its own given the prominence of this trope in Galician, but even more so in Irish folk-inspired literature.²¹

The poetry in *Aquén do mar* does not evince a distinct concern with the present-day vulnerable state of the Atlantic Ocean, and mainly focuses on the historical, social, cultural and emotional dimension of the celebrated lighthouse at Finisterre. Nevertheless, the ecological interest of this poetry arises from its rendering of the multifarious engagements of human pursuit in the sea. Nerium himself refers to ancient practices in which women, by shouting from the rocks, guided the fishermen through the fog, and adds information about his own mother’s work as a woman involved in the fisheries: “Miña nai saía cada mañá, descalza, á cabeza un paxe cheo de maragotas, pintos ou fanecas, e tiña que andar polas aldeas 20 ou 30 quilómetros para vender o peixe e logo regresaba pola noite con patacas e o necesario” (qtd. in Veiga 2023, 203)²². In her afterword to the collection “Espellos de luz” (Mirrors of Light), the poet Eva Veiga refers to a twofold significance of the ocean that includes the eternal feminine: “Augas oceánicas que nos remiten ao indeterminado, á disolución, á nada substantial, mais tamén á súa condición proteica e de seo adventicio, maternal” (204-205)²³. Veiga singles out the attention that these poems pay to the female body, a characteristic feature of women-authored writing, which searches for a reappropriation of the body to free it from patriarchal constraints (206). Situated on the Costa da Morte (Coast of Death) with its countless shipwrecks, Finisterre is the dwelling of both the living and the dead, thereby highlighting human and more-than-human common materiality as well as the natural cycles of transformation. Its peripheral location fosters alternative thought to dominant models, Veiga claims, and challenges the globalizing homogenization of the subject (207).

¹⁸ Trans.: and I repress myself on saying I yearn / to unfurl into a thousand tides.

¹⁹ Trans.: and I find the way to form pearls / on just getting wet in your arms.

²⁰ Trans.: This side of the sea. Sirens’ songs in the light of the earth’s end.

²¹ Although the sirens in *The Odyssey* were winged monster women, later traditional figurations have imagined the siren as a hybrid woman-fish creature. *Aquén do mar* may be pointing to both renderings through the respective illustrations of woman-bird by Isabel Pintado (Nerium 2023, 79) and woman-fish by Luisa Valdés (117).

²² Trans.: my mother left every morning, barefoot, with a basket full of either wrasses or pouting, and had to walk from one village to another, twenty or thirty kilometres, to sell the fish, and then returned at night with potatoes and other necessary things.

²³ Trans.: Oceanic waters that invoke indeterminacy, dissolution, a substantial void, but also their protean condition, the adventitious, maternal bosom.

4. Conclusion

Ireland and the autonomous community of Galicia in northwestern Spain have comparable environmental and cultural features. A significant factor, from the geographical point of view, is their situation on the Atlantic coast of western Europe, which has of late been facing all kinds of environmental challenges such as plastic pollution and oil spilling. From the sociocultural point of view, there stands out the upsurge of women writers due to the impact of, among other societal circumstances, the feminist mobilizations of the 1970s. The parallel rise of women writers and ecological awareness in the late twentieth century in both communities raises questions about the possibility of conceiving new literary configurations of the ocean that may be conditioned by considerations of gender. This article began by posing a number of specific questions regarding recent figurations of the ocean with an ecofeminist import, and the subsequent discussion of a selection of poems by Irish and Galician writers from the last two decades has engaged with those questions.

Among the new figurations that render the current ecological vulnerability of the earth's waters, that of Leda-turned-ecological-activist, proposed by Mary O'Malley, brings together the attention to female agency and environmental concern. On the other hand, woman-fish identifications, common in today's Galician poetry, put the focus on transcorporeality and the common materiality and destiny of human and more-than-human nature. Thus, the perceived vulnerability of woman and nature, that was identified as the cornerstone of ecofeminism in the 1990s, continues to be an essential force in contemporary women-authored poetry in Ireland and Galicia. On the other hand, dystopia is not a futuristic literary mode but a pressing one ushered in by plastic pollution and rising sea levels, as both Irish and Galician poetry expose. As for the impact of this poetry on the empirical conditions of existence of human and more-than-human nature, the collaboration of writers in both communities with grassroots ecological movements in festivals, publications, and public interventions highlights the need to join forces to effect any kind of possible change.

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Sally Rooney and the Politics of Post-Celtic Tiger Disability Aesthetics: Neurodiversity and Endometriosis as Metaphor

Enrica Zaninotto

Università degli Studi di Verona (<enrica.zaninotto@univr.it>)

Abstract:

This essay surveys the exclusion of neurodiversity from the first wave of Cultural Disability Studies by analysing Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017). It locates the protagonist, Frances, within a feminist disability discourse that reconsiders her disabilities through interdisciplinarity. Frances' endometriosis is connected to the notion of crisis and linked to post-boom Ireland by remarking its neoliberal traits. The essay likewise accounts for her presumed autism and tackles the issues raised by fictional representations of ASD. A double reading of autism is suggested in the form of C-PTSD. The article concludes by contextualising Frances' disabilities in relation to both Irish disability tradition and theorised Post-Celtic Tiger disability aesthetics.

Keywords: Autism, Disability Studies, Neurodiversity, Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, Sally Rooney

1. On Neurodiversity, Feminism, and Literary Ethics

In fiction, the representation of female disability has often occupied an ambivalent position, working as a reflection of existing social biases. Many proclaimed feminists have metaphorised women's mental and/or neurological dis/ability¹ to account for the marginalisation and suppression of able-bodied womanhood within a ruling patriarchal system. Sandra Gilbert and Susan

¹ Using "dis/ability" instead of "disability" aligns with Dan Goodley's theorisation on the dis/ability complex occurring at the level of the individual. "The dis/ability complex refers to the complicated though necessary ways in which disability-ability and disablism-ableism feed into the production of one another" (2014, 51). The binary oppositions imply that non-able-bodiedness can exist and be understood only in dialogue with its opposite, namely body normativity.

Gubar radically set forth this agenda by asserting that literary representations of mentally and/or neurologically impaired women function “as asocial surrogates” (1979, xi). This paved the way for a long tradition of feminist criticism that sees disabled women’s embodiment as a social performance orchestrated on the written page to advance social critique. Said predisposition is the scholarly manifestation of a much widespread tendency to metaphorise and neglect dis/abled women’s voices. This propensity, which alludes to feminist theory’s incompleteness, as, till the 1980s, there was no interest in addressing the interactions between gender and dis/ability (Morris 1996b, 5), has been contrasted by the rise of Feminist Disability Studies. Since feminist issues and ethics are interweaved with dis/ability, Feminist Disability Studies “recognizes the power of identity, at the same time that it reveals identity as fiction; [...] [it] seeks equality, and it claims difference” (Garland-Thomson 2002, 28). Adopting a feminist disability viewpoint has to do with more than scholarship about women with dis/abilities. It elucidates the pioneering processes of identity formation that lie at the core of contemporary tactics of exclusion and, as such, it reconfigures dis/ability under a self-aware and inclusive lens (Garland-Thomson 2005, 1557).

Literature of and around dis/ability is informed by material accounts of lived dis/ability. Socio-cultural narratives about what dis/ability entails are, in their turn, influenced by fictional accounts, often produced by able-bodied authors. Their relationship is mutual: as Leonard Kriegel claims, “the image [of the disabled] exists in literature because the reality exists in life” (1987, 33). Scholarly interest in this matter has been palpable since the first wave², testifying its relevance in shaping past and current discourses on dis/ability and correlated social, cultural and affective practices. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson encapsulates this construct in the notion of “the normate”, referring to the corporeal materialisation of culture’s collective narrative which puts limitations on the lives of people with “deviating bodies” (1997, 8). David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder similarly argue that “literary representation bears on the production and realization of disabled subjectivities, in the manner in which those representations are disseminated and consumed” (2000, 9). Disability, Tobin Siebers concurs, presents a challenge to the representation of the body, since “the disabled body changes the process of representation [...]. Different bodies require and create new modes of representation” (2008, 54). All these theorisations, born independently, point at a collective apprehension for the material impact of fictional narratives. They highlight how disability narratives do not stand on their own, detached from the lives of those who read and write them, but render instead “fictional depictions [...] and public interpretation of actual events [...] mutually sustaining social artifacts” (Freeman Loftis 2015, 20). This rhetoric, pertaining to a mutual, and often damaging, dialogue between literature and cultural perception, is accurate for representations of dis/abled women and neurodivergent individuals.

To grasp the change from a physical disability paradigm to a growing neurodivergent dimension one has to be cognisant of both disability’s cultural history and Neurodiversity Studies. Reflecting a departure away from the visual in favour of the perceived invisible, the emergent interest in neurodiversity reminds us of dis/ability’s wide spectrum of fluctuation. It deconstructs what we think we know of dis/ability and how we have been conditioned to materially imagine it and look at it. Neurodiversity Studies does not stand for a collective

² The first wave of Critical/Literary Disability Studies took place from 1990s to early 2000s. It distinguishes itself from being US-based, as opposed to the UK-based social modelist categorisation. Its main feature is a prominent interest for physical disability and correlated literary implications. On the contrary, the second wave of Cultural Disability Studies, currently underway, focuses on mental and neurological disability and criticises its predecessors for marginalising neurodiversity and its representational analysis.

absorption for the academic topic of the moment; rather, it reflects a broader revolution that is reframing the understanding of human embodied variety. “Neurodivergent” and “neurodiversity”, developed in online autism activist communities in the 1990s, have in this sense been both intentionally adopted in scholarly conversations on dis/ability to depathologise neurological difference. The notion of neurodiversity thus relates not solely to differences in neurology, but to “perceived variations seen in cognitive, affectual, and sensory functioning differing from the majority of the general population of ‘predominant neurotype’³, more usually known as the ‘neurotypical’ population” (Bertilsson Rosqvist, Stenning and Chown 2020b, 1). Therefore, it refers to a manifestation of cognitive design that can absorb autism, PTSD, epilepsy, ADHD, schizophrenia, depression, and more.

While this dynamic may seem to mirror a social modelist division by neglecting a medical standpoint, studies on neurodiversity move forward. They embrace an inclusive comprehension of human minds and the way they function bioculturally, meaning in constant interaction between biological adaptations and cultural constructs (Carroll *et al.* 2017, 2). This allows to see our cognition as a physical part of our body (Murray 2008, 8), leading the discussion back to the issue of visibility. Under this lens, physical, sensory, and cognitive⁴ dis/abilities merge to highlight how their rhetoric originates from the body, and outside of its vessel it is further shaped through conceptual transmission. As a consequence, “disabilities are not *either* physical facts or discursive constructs, but both” (Osteen 2008b, 2).

Seeing the physical and the mental as co-existing, while in a cartesian sense they are permanently separated, equals denying a vision of reality that positions intersectional conversations at the basis of its reasoning and inherent (mal)functioning. We are not body-and-mind, separated, but bodymind⁵. The physical and the cognitive do not only influence one another, but, acting as one, they also give rise to each other (Price 2015, 268).

The embodied and the discursive dialogue within a dis/ability context inevitably clash with the material. Revised feminist theory reenters the conversation by connecting biocultural theory, neurodivergence and our surroundings through the formulation of the “misfit”: “Misfitting serves to theorize disability as a way of being in an environment, as a material arrangement. [...] A misfit occurs when the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it” (Garland-Thomson 2011, 594).

The interdisciplinarity of the biocultural also hints at the broad scope of neurodiversity. Since every brain is different, unique in its formation and development, neurological diversity is limitless (Irish 2025, 3). Asserting that there is no limit to neurological variation means that every human, regardless of the presence of a diagnosis, falls within the spectrum of neurodiversity, as each of us senses, feels – emotionally –, thinks – cognitively – and reacts to life differently.

Given that Disability Studies does not posit a power disparity between physical and cognitive dis/abilities, the nature of initial frictions seems a residue of historical forces and sensationalist

³ Developed by Bradley Irish (2025), the notion of neurotype refers to a form of neurological style. We can thus speak of a neurodivergent neurotype, or, more specifically, of a dyslexia neurotype or an autism neurotype. Nonetheless, while developed within Neurodiversity Studies, this notion does not refer specifically to neurodivergence alone.

⁴ Cognitive disability and intellectual disability are not synonyms. The former relates to a wide range of symptoms and conditions pertaining to the neurodiverse dimension, while the latter addresses individuals displaying IQ parameters measured to be below average.

⁵ The notion of bodymind was formulated by Margaret Price (2015) to address the understanding of body and mind as one single entity which works together and is simultaneously affected by the other. This idea reinforces the vision of the brain as a physical part of the body, and consequently of the neurological dimension as worthy and equal of scholarly recognition as the physical.

framings. Across history, the fate of people with physical disabilities has been moulded by their ability to dissociate themselves from their cognitively disabled peers, a phenomenon arising from internalised oppression fostered by institutionally reinforced disability hierarchies (Mitchell, Snyder 2000, 3). The focus on visibility, combined with medicalised practices that have for long relegated the cognitively dis/abled to asylums, has resulted in a public and systematically implemented disparity. Forced to undergo a regime of procedures that precluded them from being recognised as visible citizens, cognitively disabled people have likewise been omitted from social participation, in ways that their physically impaired counterparts have not. Therefore, “while physical disabilities have been constituted as political identities in similar terms, cognitive disabilities have not enjoyed the same levels of collective and politicized identity” (Fraser 2018, 11). This also explains why the disability rights movement and the Social Model have originated from the actions of physically dis/abled activists, while the cognitively dis/abled still to this day struggle to form a stable network. The history behind the formulation of neurodiversity in virtual autism advocacy groups is an exemplification of this narrative.

The visual ability, among all of the five senses, is the most involved in the question of dis/ability. Through the eyes we can detect whether a person uses a mobility aid to move and exist in the world, if they miss a limb, are blind, or if they sign. The normative paradigm, omnipresent since humans’ conception, instructs us to look at the other and detect whether they conform to the norm. Partly unconsciously, this normative paradigm also deviates our emotional responses on the basis of the scale of “abnormality” the disabled subject showcases. Cognitive dis/abilities escape the power of the gaze. This signals another significant difference that has contributed to their marginalisation, both socially and academically. “The person with disabilities”, writes Lennard Davis, “is visualized, brought into a field of vision, and seen as a disabled person. [...] The body of the disabled person is seen as marked by the disability. [...] Disability is a specular moment” (1995, 12). The invisibility of neurodiversity lacks both mirroring and spectacularisation. Its seriousness cannot be measured, nor does it allow for firm psycho-emotional judgement: the physically normative gaze holds way more power than the cognitive normative gaze.

United by a shared intention to decolonise their medical identification, physical dis/abilities and neurodiversity also differ in matters of actual diagnostic procedures. While it is true that there is no such thing as a fixed dis/abled identity, a common consensus exists, on both a scientific and a socio-cultural dimension, regarding what a physical or sensory dis/ability is and what it presupposes. Neurodiversity, on the contrary, has been defined as a moving target: its definition will continue to fluctuate due to the interactions between neurotypical individuals and the institutions that seek to extend its colonisation (Chapman 2020, 219).

Autism in particular does not have a single neurological basis. The lack of medical consensus implies that no comprehensive definition of autism exists: it is, hence, “an extremely unstable category” (Osteen 2008b, 10), a “floating term working through loose generic association” (Murray 2008, 28). First delineated by Dr. Leo Kanner in 1943, autism has acquired from the very beginning the label of a psychological rather than an organic disorder or, alternatively, a defence mechanism of the individual (Waltz 2023, 58). Its semantics, pointing at autism as a condition of the self, has implemented this idea, constructing it from the outside in the form of a psychiatric diagnosis. The foundational language attached has consequently been one of pathology. In the definition provided by Laura Schreibman, this connotation seems apparent: “[a]utistic disorder, or autism, is a *severe* form of *psychopathology* evident before the age of 3 years old. It is a *disorder* characterized by a unique constellation of *severe* and *pervasive* behavioral *deficits* and excesses” (2005, 2; my emphasis).

The neurodiversity movement is challenging this vision by promoting a counter-narrative that rethinks the deficit model, but there is much to be done on that matter. Its rhetoric still lies in the hands of medical practitioners, who establish boundaries to who can define ASD at a broad scale. It follows that first-person stories are seldom included in this picture. This omission contributes to generate a philosophical and political debate, rather than a purely scientific discussion regarding who is entitled to frame the condition (Smukler 2005, 22).

As of 2022, autism is still listed in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), and its broad range of characteristics continue to be understood as symptoms. Among them Simon Baron-Cohen and Patrick Bolton mention: lack of eye contact, inability to make friends, odd approaches to other children – who tend to ignore the autistic subject – and consequent lack of social awareness, lack of imagination, aloneness and special interests (1993, 3-4). While all these characteristics are indicative of ASD, their gravity is not univocal among neurodivergent individuals, and nor is their frequency. It is this peculiar cluster that dictates a diagnosis, as some of these characteristics can be found separately among neurotypicals.

Despite the variety in symptomatology, autism lacks a unifying biological marker. This fluidity, special of autism, contributes to its ongoing public fascination, testified by the growing presence of potentially autistic portrayals in fiction following the boom in neuroscientific research of the 1990s. Deprived of a specific origin and typified by a variegated body of manifestations, autism, more than a medical condition, acquires the cultural attributes of narrative. “[The] diagnoses of autism are essentially storytelling in character, narratives that seek to explain contrasts between the normal and the abnormal” (Duffy, Dorner 2011, 201). Operating at a time when the notion of autism is still up for discussion, twenty-first century autism narratives are, more than ever before, responsible for the discourse they generate. Despite this responsibility, the influence of autism’s rhetoric remains pervasive. Most contemporary autism narratives perpetuate stigma by reflecting a non-autistic portrait of the autistic world and, in so doing, reiterating the narrative first advanced by psychiatric and psychological professionals. The “symptoms” of autistic characters tend to be reduced, as for all other dis/abilities, to stereotypes to highlight the disparity between the disabled and the non-disabled. The autistic narrative becomes a narrative of normalcy. Inscribed in a circular discourse between fiction and reality, autism narratives serve the same purpose that disability narratives have had since the nineteenth century. They generate uncanny feelings, evoke fascination in the able-bodied reader and promote a normative canon for both the body and the mind. This result can only be achieved by remaining faithful to the prime attitudinal rhetoric of ASD.

Reducing disabled representations to tropes indicates, as Tom Shakespeare observes, “that the person’s individuality can be ignored, as the impairment label becomes the most prominent and relevant feature of their lives” (2014, 95). This is specifically truthful for autism, whose codification and subsequent representation have deprived autistic people of traits deemed constitutive of the human condition: among all, empathy. In his foundational study, Baron-Cohen argues that children and adults with autism suffer, to various degrees, of “mindblindness”, namely of the inability, caused by a ToM (Theory of Mind) deficit, to both read and comprehend the mental states of others and to predict their behaviour (1995, 5). Hypotheses like this one – which was later revealed to be false – are especially damaging, as they enforce an othering discourse around neurodiversity. The narratives the dominant majority tell become the story people believe in. The discourse of autism suggests its representation. To change the narrative, the root cause must be addressed and challenged.

2. Does Frances have a ToM? Narrating crisis through disability

Frances, the leading character of Sally Rooney's debut novel, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), is a university student of English at Trinity College, Dublin, who navigates her young womanhood in an extremely unstable period of Ireland's political and economic history: the Post-Celtic Tiger. Preceded by two decades of economic boom and social growth, known as Celtic Tiger (1995-2007), Post-Celtic Tiger years are the result of industry collapse and overall financial instability. The recessionary atmosphere creates, particularly among young adults, a decadent environment of precarity that places a strong emphasis on individual accountability (Kiersey 2014, 356). Said focus on individual agency is one of the prominent themes among Post-Celtic Tiger novels.

Despite the unfavourable economic spirit, post-2008 Irish fiction enjoyed a period of renewed literary proliferation. One of the reasons for such fertility is to be found in the climate preceding the recession, since, as Anne Enright notes in *The Guardian*, "it was hard to write in Ireland during Tiger times" (Jordan 2015). The spark of creativity in the face of decline takes the form of a critique to the neoliberal politics promoted by the government. Its consequences persist long after the actual recession. In an interview from 2017, Claire Kilroy observed on this matter that:

[t]here weren't many significant literary debuts during the boom [...], but, since the collapse, there has been enormous activity and the big prizes and advances have returned to Irish literary fiction. It's happening because in recent years it is acceptable to not be in 'gainful' employment, so people had permission to write again. (Burke 2017, 20-21)

Contemporary Irish prose takes, in this period, two main forms, both reflective of Ireland's stagnation. The former group is composed by novels that reflect an antique modernist style as a symptom of national fragmentation, while the latter, more prolific, centres on conventional realist novels by young Irish women (Darling 2023, 348). The self-assurance of women's writing is epitomised by Sally Rooney. More than a best-selling author and literary prize winner, Rooney, who has been baptised "the literary voice of Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland" (Patterson 2020), is the leading figure of this new generation of female writers.

Rooney's prose style, reminiscent of the classic *bildungsroman* structure, positions young female characters in conversation with both themselves and the outer world, creating a fertile ground for self-discovery and identity-formation in times of uncertainty. Her protagonists face family trauma, economic scarcity, abandonment issues, aloneness, self-harming tendencies and dysfunctional romantic dynamics. Her fiction emerges as novels of formation and/or emancipation. This form is nonetheless adapted to the contextual elements of recessionary Ireland in order to pinpoint the structural violence to which individuals are exposed to, as well as the crises' enduring impact on the self (Barros del Río 2025, 105).

The very choice of adapting the *bildungsroman* informs us of a deconstructive principle that the author may have adopted. The resonance of the *bildung* and the *bildungsroman* in critical and creative explorations of the Irish economic boom lies, for Eóin Flannery, in their alignment with a broader Celtic Tiger narrative that frames progress as destiny (2022, 103). Economic prosperity is fated, and so is the protagonist's psycho-emotional development. Rooney's reliance on the coming-of-age novel is, in a post-boom setting, compelling. In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances is painted as a young woman who relies on the men in her life – first her father and then Nick – for money: her wage is not sufficient to maintain herself and she barely has enough money to buy food. Her emotional world is similarly disturbed and unstable. By the end of the

novel, despite partially awakening to her introspection, she does not show significant signs of amelioration in relation to her self-concept and interpersonal vulnerability. Both her relationship with money and her individuality are precarious, and not destined. The progressive form clashes with the austere content of the Post-Celtic Tiger, reinforcing literature's critique to state policies.

The bodies of Rooney's female leading characters are also as defected as the society they inhabit. Their minds are wounded and result in the inability to form meaningful bonds, as well as to have proper face-to-face adult conversations. Frances, like Marianne in *Normal People* (2018), searches for self-validation in a Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland that, on the contrary, does nothing but reinforce their lack of worthlessness and self-love. The circular relationship between the self and the nation does not allow for external projections. "Formally conservative [...], such [recessionary] fictions warrant attention not for their literary innovation but their recapitulation of systems of affect" (Flannery 2022, 12). The neoliberal paradigm informs affect and shapes young Irish women, vulnerable and fragile, into – supposedly – self-sufficient beings incapable of disentangling their individuality to solicit aid beyond themselves. This trait is epitomised in the absence of psychotherapeutic support, which none of Rooney's leading characters, including Frances, neither request nor mention. As the author observed in an interview, the structural deficiencies of neoliberalism mould her character's precarious and fragile conduct, underscoring the system's failures to provide ethical sensibility to both personal and shared suffering (Nolan 2017).

The Post-Celtic Tiger period is itself a crisis: a crisis of economics, faith, affect, and of the body. Rooney's novels, as recessionary novels, have crisis as a core theme, favouring their inscription into a long literary tradition that has developed on, and as a result of, crisis. Jean-Michel Ganteau expands on this tradition as follows:

the literary text has always been dependent on evocations of crises [...]. Not only does it represent the crisis that it chooses as its object of observation, but it incorporates it into its very structure, the plot being reliant on *agôn*, complication, resolution [...]. Crisis lies outside the plot *and* is a formal ingredient of any plot. (2025, 19)

Rooney's works have indeed been categorised as "crisis novels", a designation that illustrates how personal and individual accountability can coexist in tension with feelings of impotence and constraint generated by globalisation (McGlynn 2022, 7). In *Conversations with Friends*, the crisis is external and internal, in the protagonist's body-mind. Frances's behaviour is, as the present reading demonstrates, resonant with the cluster of symptoms that dictates ASD. Her psychology is likewise dysfunctional and falls beyond the boundaries of self-acceptance. Her body is, the reader learns halfway through the novel, chronically ill: after enduring turbulence and delays caused by medical inefficiency, Frances is diagnosed with endometriosis. The diagnosis is narrated and received with tones of uncertainty:

The doctor told me that I had a problem with the lining of my uterus [...]. He said the cells were benign, meaning non-cancerous, but the condition itself was incurable and in some cases progressive. It had a long name which I had never heard before: endometriosis. He called it a 'difficult' and 'unpredictable' diagnosis [...]. The doctor said 'we' wanted to prevent the pain from becoming debilitating or 'reaching the level of a disability'. (Rooney 2022, 270)

Despite being non-cancerous, endometriosis has much of the traits that cancer has. The illness requires medical surveillance through time, as it can degenerate and invade other parts of the uterus. The doctor advises Frances to start a pain therapy program that, while it cannot properly kill the "damaged" cells in the way chemotherapy does to cancer, it can prevent its symptomatic

degeneration. Diverging in terms of cure – and care –, endometriosis, contrarily to cancer, cannot be cured. Once a woman is diagnosed with it, her health will never be restored. Both cancer and endometriosis appear to be “energetic” diseases that, in different ways, fight and challenge the biology of the human body they inhabit and the medical treatments the patient has to follow. In this way, endometriosis acquires the characteristics and the military tone that Susan Sontag has attributed to cancer: abnormal growth, refuse to consume, and lack of control on the illness (2002, 63). Endometriosis colonises the uterus: its benign nature does not balance the debilitation and the symptoms it causes since, like cancer, it is progressive and can turn into a dis/ability.

It is significant here that the word “disability” only appears once in the entire novel, that is in the passage cited beforehand. Frances, despite having endometriosis and arguably being neurodivergent, is not “obviously disabled”. To be “obviously dis/abled” is to use a wheelchair or to have a prosthesis. Recognising who is “obviously dis/abled” brings back the question of visibility and the power of the gaze. Neither endometriosis nor autism can be “visually diagnosed”. Frances could easily pass for able-bodied, meaning that her disabilities escape its conventional categorisation: they escape sight’s force. Disability passing blurs the divide between dis/ability and normalcy, since it defines “the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as ‘normal’ ” (Brune, Wilson 2013b, 1). The narrative framing of the disease on the part of Rooney, too, can be said to hint at the act of passing. The unbearable pain Frances suffers first significantly appears – unnamed and minimised – in chapter three. It is only in chapter twenty-seven, out of thirty-one, that her pain is given recognition through diagnostic procedures. Its severity is nevertheless evident from the beginning, with language choices that point at intensity and absence of control:

I tried to sit up and then felt a *strange, wrenching* pain in my pelvis, which made me gasp out loud. [...] I was *exhilarated* by the *seriousness* of my pain, like it might change my life in an unforeseen way. [...] I was bleeding. It was just period. I put my face in my hands. My fingers were trembling. [...] I was a hot pain, *like all my insides were contracting into one little knot*. (Rooney 2022, 22; my emphasis)

When the pain becomes unbearable, Frances heads to the hospital. The A&E doctor barely pays attention to her, mistakes her symptomatology for pregnancy and is unable to convey an accurate diagnosis. In a neoliberal environment, Frances overcomes the unconscious instinct not to ask for help and is met with a return to a mandatory individuality. Few weeks pass before she is assigned an appointment for an ultrasound. The discrimination she undergoes as a woman and now dis/abled is double, and reinforced by the nature of the illness being the epitome of her womanhood: her reproductive organs. An additional indication of endometriosis’ need to embrace a Feminist Disability Studies discourse is, in this sense, found in the illness’ constant denial by the hands of gynaecologists, both in fiction and lived embodied experience.

Later on, Frances’ diagnosis puts a formal end to her identity as a non-disabled woman: “I had the sense that something in my life had ended, my image of myself as a *whole* or *normal* person maybe. I realised my life would be full of mundane physical suffering” (275; my emphasis). The diagnosis disrupts the self, in so far as she now lacks self-recognition and is compelled to create and integrate a new identity, as chronically ill, into her consciousness. This aspect is strengthened by the lack of knowledge surrounding endometriosis: Frances had never heard of it. The author’s decision to portray her protagonist suffering from this condition hints at the disinformation regarding the illness in Ireland (Alfárez Mendiá 2023, 154). More broadly, it alludes to the precarity of Irish bodies within an unstable socio-economic context. As Arthur Frank affirms, “[i]llness is a crisis of self in the specific sense of an uncertainty that one’s self is still there as an audience” (2013, 56). The crisis that chronic illness and/or dis/ability represent lies as foundation for their narration.

Frances' endometriosis disrupts her characterisation and codifies her liminality. It produces an impulse to control the body. This same need is found in life stories by autistic individuals, who have agreed on the condition's strong physical component (Murray 2008, 9). Differently from neurodiversity, the narration of endometriosis in the novel is a contextual fact that enforces the protagonist's marginalisation. The first self-description we have of Frances is that of a young woman who, from her adolescence, has lacked self-esteem and displayed clear signs of communication difficulty: "I didn't have close friends and at lunchtime I read textbooks alone in the school library [...]. I was lonely and felt unworthy of real friends. I made lists of the things I had to improve about myself" (Rooney 2022, 8). Aloneness, set aside her on-and-off relationship and then friendship with Bobbi, has been omnipresent throughout her life. Prior to her diagnosis, social awkwardness, bisexuality and economic dependency already defined her otherness. Compared with Bobbi – intelligent, wealthy, outgoing, and healthy –, Frances is everything her only friend is not. Bobbi is the criterion for comparison to which Frances aspires but will never manage to reach. Born and raised in New York by Columbia professors of Jamaican descendants, Bobbi, who moved to Dublin as a teenager, is not affected by Irish ancestry. Frances, on the contrary, both lives and embodies the consequences of the Post-Celtic Tiger. The spectrum of traits she personifies concretises her fictional persona in the form of a non-conventional female protagonist. Rooney's choice to paint Frances as dis/abled allows a narrative deconstruction that sets the novel in opposition to the typically English tradition of disability narratives. The conspicuous emphasis of disabled characters in literature, from Victorian times onward, had followed a systematic pattern that placed non-able-bodied as marginal subjectivities. The disabled figure served no purpose in the narrative, aside from accentuating their physical, sensory and/or cognitive singularity. This scheme was perpetuated throughout the "post-Victorian" period, including Edwardian, Modernist and Post-modernist fiction. Contemporary literature, conversely, exhibits an alternation of this trajectory by placing the dis/abled figure as the leading character. The novel under examination is a great illustration of this new paradigm.

Rooney's subversion of this modality paves the way for a new mode of representation that emphasises the individual and their dis/ability. In *Conversations with Friends*, this emphasis takes on subtle connotations: words pertaining to the semantic field of dis/ability are seldom mentioned. Discourses and reflections around dis/ability, either by the author or her characters, never appear. Dis/ability is present, but invisible to those who experience it through third parties. Above all, it is invisible or denied by the dis/abled person who cannot sustain her own vulnerability. After the diagnosis, Frances refuses to acknowledge her newfound identity. She mourns her past as non-disabled, and dismisses her present by keeping Bobbi and Nick in the dark about the prognosis:

I never told Bobbi about the ultrasound or the meeting with the consultant. By refusing to admit that I was sick, I felt I could keep the sickness outside time and space, something only in my own head. If other people knew about it, the sickness would become real and I would have to spend my life being a sick person. (Rooney 2022, 308)

Frances rejects the sick role that the medical establishment has attributed to her personhood. She refuses to submit to the medical model. Nonetheless, this decision seems to originate more from an inability to accept the self, than from a critique to the institution. The ambiguity of her characterisation frames dis/ability in precarity and uncertainty. Both her endometriosis and her supposed autism function in this way. The narrative ambivalence of neurodivergence is found in the absence of allusions to the condition: neither Frances nor Rooney ever mention

the possibility of ASD's involvement in the plot. This negligence does not render this reading less valid: if we take Baron-Cohen' and Bolton's diagnostic list as point of departure for the protagonist's cognitive and behavioural analysis, Frances' belonging to the autistic spectrum is rather crystal clear. Embarking in a seemingly diagnostic reading of the protagonist puts the critic in an undesirable position that takes on the attributes of medical evaluation: the acts of reading, observing, and evaluating are shared by both the critical practitioner and their medical equivalent (Murray 2008, 17). To avoid the disruptive ableist force of diagnosis, the reading that follows remains faithful to the principles of Neurodiversity Studies by combining the cognitive with the emotional. It rejects a pathological vision of autism and recognises that fictional representations of dis/ability are not comprehensive portraits that can account for the real functioning of the condition. This analysis has consequently purely critical purposes that seek to elucidate post-postmodernist strategies employed to represent autism in fiction. The considerations that will result from it do not aim to stigmatise or categorise, in any shape or form, autistic people and their embodied experience.

Frances' characterisation shows discrepancies as it relates to cognitive, affective and sensory sides of the self. The most evident feature that categorises her as an unstable person and places her in resonance with autism lies in her personality. Three times overall throughout the novel it is stated, either through self-acknowledgement or external judgement, that Frances does not have a proper personality. Not having a personality means not having an identity. Frances' identity, as much as autism in clinical terms, escapes definition: "Bobbi told me she thought I didn't have a real personality [...]. Mostly I agreed with her assessment. At any time I felt I could do or say anything at all, and only afterwards think: oh, so that's the kind of person I am" (Rooney 2022, 19). Her lack of identity permeates all spheres of her life: she does not know what career to pursue, how to interact with people in conversation and, ultimately, she cannot detect her emotions. Frances escapes the realm of feelings by taking shelter in systematic patterns of emotional avoidance. Avoidance allows her to obscure, at once, both the possibility of being on the spectrum and of self-neglecting relationships because of trauma. In her romance with Nick, this elusion takes the form of an internet communication that shapes their liaison more in the cyberspace than in real life. This same cyberspace represents the key to a false intimacy (Zhou, Hou 2025, 10). Through the internet, vulnerability is circumvented. In the virtual reality of their relationship, Frances can avoid being in touch with her true sensations and distance the possibility of both having and connecting with her "real personality".

The prominent role of the internet and of internet (non-)communication in the novel alludes to an impactful parallel with autism. Literary criticism on autism has suggested that its spectrum of metaphors reflects the propensity, within postmodern societies, to experience isolation due to technology. "[W]e have come to understand our state of affairs as autistic, a metaphor for the lack of communication among states and individuals in the late capitalist reality of the postmodern world" (Kravitz 2010, 40). The evasive potential of technology and non-physical communication is used by Frances to control all the relationships in her life, including the one with her alcoholic father, with whom she mostly communicates through phone calls. By emotionally detaching from the figures in her life that could create internal turmoil, she both consciously and subconsciously reinforces her incapability to self-analyse. The rejection of introspection as synonym for emotive hybridity designs, again, her character by means of ambiguity: "I couldn't decide how to feel about it, or what it meant" (Rooney 2022, 134). Nevertheless, Frances' lack of clarity with regards to her emotional world does not make her less human, as Baron-Cohen and colleagues would have suggested. She does have a Theory of Mind: what she lacks is the aptitude to comprehend the origin, nature and intensity of her

feelings. The author's focalisation on her relationship patterns does, in this regard, place further emphasis on her "emotionless" world and facilitates a reading centred on autism.

Frances' affective vacancy creates the most uncertainty in her interactions with Nick that, for the entirety of the work of fiction, remain susceptible to her moves. While both parties verbalise this absence, the issue is not confronted directly. Nick chooses sarcasm, in his turn showing avoidant tendencies: "And I am sorry, he said. / I smiled mechanically, and said: oh, for hurting my feelings? [...] / Sure, if you have any, he said" (110). Both Frances and Nick evade direct vulnerability. While it is plausible to assert that Frances does so as a result of her cognitive atypicality, other readings are possible. A leitmotif of the *bildungsroman* is in fact trauma, shaped as childhood trauma resulting from emotional and physical neglect and abandonment. According to the DSM-5, trauma takes place when a person is exposed to major life-threatening incidents, meaning actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 271). Recent studies have opposed this exclusive vision, proving that trauma can also result from repeated daily events. This is the case of C-PTSD (Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), also known as Complex Trauma. C-PTSD has been categorised as a disorder specifically associated with stress that refers to "the effect that chronic or repeated trauma can have on self-organisation-related-mechanisms" (Maercker *et al.* 2022, 60). The difference between C-PTSD and PTSD lies in the cluster of symptoms associated with the diagnosis, as the former includes both PTSD symptoms and chronic disruptions of the self in the form of affect dysregulation, negative self-concept, and difficult forming and maintaining relationships (*ibidem*). The proximity in symptomatology between trauma and ASD is relevant in so far as individuals with autism, C-PTSD or PTSD and attachment disorders experience a similar range of indicators with close outcomes in affective and behavioural functioning (Lever, Geurts 2016; Haruvi-Lamdan *et al.* 2020). This closeness often leads to misdiagnoses and diagnostic overshadowing (Au-Yeung *et al.* 2019).

This kind of trauma at work appears more insidious, since the traumatic events to which the female individual is subjected to are enacted by the same people she loved and trusted more (Brown 2004, 469). Frances is the only child of a divorce. Her parents are the source of her developmental trauma. Her father is emotionally absent and self-medicates by getting drunk. Her mother is emotionally immature and does not take the adequate time to listen to her daughter. She grows up in an unpredictable environment, where chaos reigns: her father's swinging mood sometimes even causes eruptions of violence. She has to learn to behave and exist quietly. She is forced to choose coldness and false safety over sensitivity and unpredictability: "I learned not to display fear [...]. I was like a cold fish" (Rooney 2022, 49). She puts on a façade to cope with repeated traumatic events. In this way, the only escape to chaos is control: through control, Frances learns to predict the signs of possible disruption. Control is the window through which she can survive beyond the chaos of her home and family life. Growing up, she is forced to adapt this mode of behaviour to the relationships she forms as an adult. It is a way to survive without facing the root cause of her emotional dysregulation. Her life moves in autopilot. Affective distance serves to protect herself, and social media interactions are a safe way to do so. Through the epistolary form, she puts up a performance of the self that maintains said sense of control (Darling 2021, 545).

Unworthiness dominates Frances' character. Her self-esteem is so low she is unable to make and hold eye contact – also a core indicator of ASD. Her impotence in this regard is repeatedly stated, fostering her proximity to the spectrum. In social situations, her insecurity reaches its peaks and paves the road to dissociation: "At this point I felt a weird lack of self-recognition, and I realised that I couldn't visualise my own face or body at all" (Rooney

2022, 39). As a typically neurodivergent individual, Frances is cognisant of her intelligence and resorts to it in order to make herself feel better. Her intellect acquires value only in so far as it can be utilised to sense superiority and surveillance:

My ego had always been an issue. I knew that intellectual attainment was morally neutral at best, but when bad things happened to me I made myself feel better by thinking about how smart I was. When I couldn't make friends as a child, I fantasised that I was smarter than all my teachers, smarter than any other student who had been in the school before, a genius hidden among normal people. (34)

Frances' high consideration of her brain does not compensate for the physical repulsion she perceives. Self-injury is used to both take the upper hand on the pelvic pain she cannot control and to suppress her trauma. Both actions result from deep-seated feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem. The encounters with her father cause most of the episodes of self-harm. In these occasions, two characteristics common of autism are combined: sensory sensitivity to cleanliness and self-injurious behaviour (SIB). The most frequent forms of SIB performed by autistic children and adults include self-biting of the hands and wrists and head banging, while other disruptive behaviours, such as self-slapping or self-scratching, are less common (Schreibman 2005, 46). Frances pinches her skin every time she feels overwhelmed by her surroundings. Hearing the voice of her father elicits anxieties regarding personal hygiene: "his drunkenness made me feel unclean. I wanted to shower or eat a fresh piece of fruit" (Rooney 2022, 120). The agitation escalates when the stimulus becomes visual, arising executive functioning difficulties and disgust, as in the following episode:

When I opened the door, I could hear nothing inside the house. The hall smelt of damp and of something worse than damp too, something slightly sour. A refuse sack was tied up and abandoned under the hall table. [...] The smell was so rancid that it felt physical, like heat or touch. Several half-eaten meals had accumulated around the table and countertops, in various states of *decay*, surrounded by dirty tissues and empty bottles. The fridge door was ajar [...]. Standing in his house was like watching someone familiar smile at me, but missing teeth. I wanted to hurt myself again, in order to feel returned to the safety of my own physical body. (181-182)

Viewing Frances as neurodivergent allows the reader to combine these traits and form a coherent picture of her character. This perspective can then inform on aspects of her sensitivity, cognition and behaviour. It is both shaped mechanically by the self and inscribed in an outer world that fortifies its negative connotations. Her dis/ability, experienced either as chronic illness or neuroatypicality, or both, is constructed bioculturally, in conversation with the environment. Her conception of self as non-able-bodied is inevitably moulded by internalised ableism. The only written allusion to dis/ability makes this point apparent. The idea we get of her characterisation eventually reinforces the foundational methodology that novelists have followed to portray autistic individuals in their works. This paradigm, reiterated by Murray, argues that "within narrative, autism works to create a space, figured precisely because of how the condition is perceived to function, that, rather than allowing for the presentation of autism within the terms of the autistic individual, [...] reflects back upon the non-autistic-world" (2008, 13). This mode of narration favours standardisation over singularity of representation. The dis/abled character becomes a prototype to be reiterated in successive works, employing the same set of distinctive qualities. Standardisation benefits metaphorisation, since the character is deprived of human individuality and made to comfort to social critique. The insertion of Frances into a Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland explains this idea.

3. *Frances and Post-Celtic Tiger disability aesthetics*

The analysis of Frances' dis/abled body through the lens of Irish Studies opens the possibility for at least two readings. The former relates to the Irish body as a location of (semi) colonial subjection to the British ruling class, while the latter focalises on the Post-Celtic Tiger as a metaphor for instability. Both readings follow a metaphorical pattern that sees disability aesthetics as, to borrow Mitchell's words, "an exceptional textual fate in that it is deployed in literary narrative as a master metaphor for social ills" (2002, 20). Disability as master metaphor functions as a locus of social critique and representational subjugation. The literary/social body becomes a vehicle for the materialisation of discussions around the nation. The idea of the social body serves in this sense to talk about the connection between the country's public sphere and the privacy of individuals: citizenship is the measure of goal of its health (Gilbert 2007, 8). Combining Irish disability aesthetics tradition to the peculiarity of recessionary Ireland serves to access an inclusive understanding that regards the historical, the political and the cultural as co-occurring sites of the human experience.

Compared to the mother country and ruling power, Ireland is located in a subordinated position of inferiority. Declan Kiberd notes that this subjectivity develops as a form of (semi) colonialism with strong economic and cultural connotations:

As far as the Irish were concerned, colonialism took various forms: political rule from London through the medium of Dublin Castle; economic exportation by planters who came in various waves of settlement; and an accompanying psychology of self-doubt and dependency among the Irish, linked to the loss of economic and political power but also the decline of the native language and culture. (1995, 6)

The body earns attributes common to racial otherness: inferiority, dysfunction, backwardness, femininity and degeneration. Irish otherness is made to coincide with its Celtic foundations, fostering a sense of barbarism. This narrative functions, within the Anglo-Irish semicolonial discourse, as a narrative for disability (Quirici 2015, 77). Irishness is constructed fragmentally and in opposition to Englishness. It is the location of non-Englishness, where bodily deviation resides. This ideology contributed to envision Ireland, as Mark Mossman observes, as "a dysfunctional space in relation to the normalized, modern discursive space actually defining it – a set of discourses possessed by the able-bodied, franchised British policy makers [...] and imposed upon the disabled and disfranchised Irishry" (2009, 57). The Irish social body is a symbolic dis/abled body. In the materiality of colonialism, too, the English body is fit and non-disabled: by the end of the Victorian period, Britishness, a symbol for Englishness, became synonym of fitness, whiteness, and masculinity (Davis 2006b, 9). Britain's colonies thus acquired a symmetrical symbolism. The colonial context of nineteenth century Ireland in particular formed a unique environment for the emergence of a social connotation of disability, with most inhabitants viewed by the administration as impaired and needing both cultural and political rehabilitation (McDonnell 2007, 93). As a result of this paradigm, the Irish body is culturally relegated to a detrimental imaginary marked by social exclusion and bodily difference: the Irish (dis/abled) body is necessarily a woman's body. Some historical events, like the Irish Potato Famine (1845-1852) and the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), further contribute to shape Ireland as England's crippled sister. This tradition narrates the Irish body as a fragmented and decadent body.

Ireland's lameness permeates nineteenth and twentieth century imagination and persists even after its political independence. The colonial past of Ireland affects its contemporary historical culture. Intergenerational trauma runs in the veins of young Irish adults who never experienced colonisation themselves. Ancient colonial misery continues, illuminating present

narratives. Discourses on present-day politics, society and affectivity of Ireland cannot be resolved without resorting to its colonial ancestry. After the economic boom, this tradition is revisited and updated to account for both past ideologies and present concerns. Young Irish writers who publish during Post-Celtic Tiger years seem to be aware of this opportunity and decide to put it into practice, giving rise to interdisciplinary conversations that foment a regeneration of Irish fiction. Rooney comments on this in an interview with Alex Clark in *The Guardian*: “if you look at the social change that has emerged in those years since the crash in Ireland, I think it speaks to a deep cultural shift that has taken place in part maybe because of the recession” (2018).

This cultural shift is mirrored in the body. The Irish body is materially malnourished and starved due to the recession. While there is no famine, the crash has obvious consequences on food pricing and Irish people’s self-sufficiency. Sometimes, following the housing crisis, the Irish body is also homeless. The austerity of the Post-Celtic Tiger does not attack embodiment directly, but it does affect all its surroundings. Neoliberal policies promote vulnerability and fragility and ostracise the body. Post-Celtic Tiger corporeality is perfectly dis/abled. It is a body in recovery that requires surveillance and treatment, as much as the economy from which it originated. Within neoliberalism, this need is never met accordingly: the body is left in a perpetual state of waiting. The individual wishes to be rehabilitated – as in “brought back to normalcy” –, but faces obstacles, inefficiencies, and ignorance on behalf of the institutions designed to recover it. The Post-Celtic Tiger itself is the very disabling event that causes the Irish body to become once again dis/abled.

In post-economic boom fiction of female authorship, women’s bodies gain prominence as a narrative location of blame for the overindulgence of the Tiger period (Bracken, Harney-Mahajan 2017, 2), figuring an imaginary that undergoes a similar evolution to traditional Irish disability aesthetics exposed beforehand. The victimisation of womanhood builds the female body as doubly stigmatised. It is dis/abled because it is owned by a woman, and because this woman is Irish. This same Irishness is dis/abled and abnormal. The narrative of Post-Celtic Tiger disability aesthetics therefore takes on the connotations proper of Feminist Disability Studies.

4. *Conclusions*

The bodymind of Frances does not become dis/abled as a result of Ireland’s post-boom decadence. Its marginality is not intended to critique the establishment in the way earlier non-intersectional feminist theorists would have argued. If *Conversations with Friends* had been set in Tiger years, Frances would have still been dis/abled, as she would have carried the weight of her Irishness on her body. Her body is both a manifestation of this tradition and the additional outcome of the Post-Celtic Tiger.

She is malnourished and struggles to regularly buy herself food. She lives in a city apartment that she can afford only thanks to her father’s money. Her millennial anxieties deriving from family dysregulation and intergenerational semicolonial subjugation are both reflected in her chronic pain and her neurodiverse mind. Endometriosis’ chronicity is itself a symbol for the individuality to which young Irish women are left to. This individuality is made of self-neglect resulting from the absence of external help, as Frances does not see a therapist, nor does she receive proper gynaecological treatment. The possibility of undergoing surgery in order to remove endometriosis from her uterus is not contemplated: the body cannot be rehabilitated. The medical practitioners marginally featured as part of the illness’ narration partake this dynamic and display either intellectual ignorance or indifference. Her affinity with the autistic spectrum captures the fragmentation of the reality she inhabits. The incongruous behaviours that define her character epitomise crisis and precariousness.

Dublin, as the heart of the recession, is another core symbol of this instability. Frances moves through the city without having clear points of reference (the only precise geographical indication given to the reader is Trinity College, Dublin). Set aside university, her transfers throughout the capital city of Ireland speak of economic instability and precarity as she never spends money herself and is either invited to events, or Nick provides for her. What we capture from this reading is the manner in which metaphorical symbolisms invade every possible sphere of the character's life. Rooney's prose encapsulates the essence of recessionary Ireland specifically because the protagonist lives multiple crisis of the self, and her surroundings are equally ambiguous.

The characterisation of Frances serves to outline the politics of representation that have defined, and continue to define, Irish embodied history. Her physicality highlights how, to be deemed inclusive, a reading of Irishness has to acknowledge both past and contemporary cultural disability history. These two perspectives continue to dialogue and inform the ideological framework that stands, at a subconscious level, behind a work of fiction.

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Voices



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“The Answer to Every Problem”? Narratives of Boomtime Ireland: *Service* by Sarah Gilmartin, translated by Valeria Raimondi In Conversation with the Author and her Italian Translator

Loredana Salis

Università di Sassari (<lsalis@uniss.it>)

Abstract:

Born in Limerick in 1982, Sarah Gilmartin is one of Ireland’s most talented literary voices of this decade. An arts journalist and a lecturer at DCU, she made her debut with short stories that have appeared in *The Dublin Review*, *The Tangerine* and *The Stinging Fly*, with *The Wife* receiving the Máirtín Crawford Short Story Award in 2020. Her novel *Dinner Party* (2021) was shortlisted for the Irish Book Award and the Kate O’Brien Award, and *Service* (2023) was top book of summer for *The Washington Post*. In 2025, Gilmartin became the Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at DCU, and *Service* was published as *Il ristorante* in Valeria Raimondi’s translation. What follows explores the creative work of both Gilmartin and her Italian translator, with special attention to *Service* and its compelling read.

Keywords: Celtic Tiger, Food Culture and Gender, #MeToo, Sarah Gilmartin, *Service*

As Sarah Gilmartin’s *Little Vanities* is due for release on 21 May 2026, we look back at her second novel, *Service* (2023; *Il ristorante*, 2025), in conversation with both its author and its translator.

The story is set in and around a trendy restaurant in Dublin, “two streets over from the Dáil” (Gilmartin 2023, 9), at the height of the Celtic Tiger, the economic boom that saw Ireland’s transformation from one of the poorest countries in Western Europe to the second with the largest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in 2022 (Statista 2023). This was also a time in which the Irish Citizens’ Assembly was making recommendations aimed at shifting from a 1930s view of gender roles to

a modern, equality-focused and inclusive framework¹. ICA reports in 2021-2022 endorsed significant amendments to the Irish Constitution to bring gender equality up-to-date and to remove what was deemed as “sexist” language. A Special Joint Committee on Gender Equality was established to devise an implementation strategy, leading to the formulation of proposed referenda held in March 2024². By then, the global network #MeToo movement had emerged, motivated by the drive to change “culture [...] and relationships that perpetuate sexual and gender-based violence” (me too.), while the UN had been promoting the “Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women”³.

Service by Sarah Gilmartin results largely from those energies and transformations, to which it responds, echoing their vibrations and reflecting the intricacies of gender relations within the private and the public spheres. There is more to this outstanding and thought-provoking novel, however for, if on the one hand the story exposes patriarchal discourse and denounces the physical and verbal abuse still suffered by women within the household and in the workplace, on the other, *Service* reflects on contemporary Ireland through the lens of boomtime Ireland, where “opportunities had taken decades – centuries – to filter down”, writes Gilmartin (2023, 10), and which had finally (*finalmente*) “diventate realtà” (2025, 10), as Valeria Raimondi’s insightful translation reads. Time is indeed of the essence in the novel: the action takes place between 2007 and 2017, and it moves back and forth along the line of that vibrant decade. Narrated in the first person by protagonists Hannah (a waitress), Daniel (the Head Chef) and Julie (his wife), the novel opens with recollections of the past (“that summer”, Gilmartin 2023, 9), and ends in the present (“the three of us are silent”, 251) as it dreams of a different future (“with each new kilometre, pulling us away from the land towards the water”, *ibidem*), a future that will possibly have made peace with the past (“like a small shoal of fishes trying to get back to sea”, *ibidem*). Individual stories merge with and reflect the (his-)story of a people and of a country, Ireland, with the *hip* restaurant called “T” representing a miniature nation as well as being a catalyst to its profound cultural transformations since the 1980s.

¹ As reported in the ICA webpage, “the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality was established by Oireachtas resolution in July 2019 to ‘consider gender equality and make recommendations to the Oireachtas to advance gender equality by bringing forward proposals to: challenge the remaining barriers and social norms and attitudes that facilitate gender discrimination towards girls and boys, women and men; identify and dismantle economic and salary norms, that result in gender inequalities, and reassess the economic value placed on work traditionally held by women; in particular, seek to ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in the workplace, politics and public life; recognise the importance of early years parental care and seek to facilitate greater work-life balance; examine the social responsibility of care and women and men’s co-responsibility for care, especially within the family; and scrutinise the structural pay inequalities that result in women being disproportionately represented in low pay sectors’” (The Citizens’ Assembly).

² “On 8 March 2024, Irish citizens were asked to vote in two referendums to change [the Irish] Constitution. The first Referendum concerned the concept of Family in the Constitution. The second Referendum proposed to delete an existing part of the Constitution and insert new text providing recognition for care provided by family members to each other. There were two separate votes on whether you wish to make the proposed changes to the current text of Article 41 of the Constitution. The proposed amendment to the Constitution was put to the people on Friday 8 March 2024. The proposal was rejected by the people” (The Electoral Commission).

³ See <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/resolutions/ga_res_by_topic.htm#1> (05/2026).

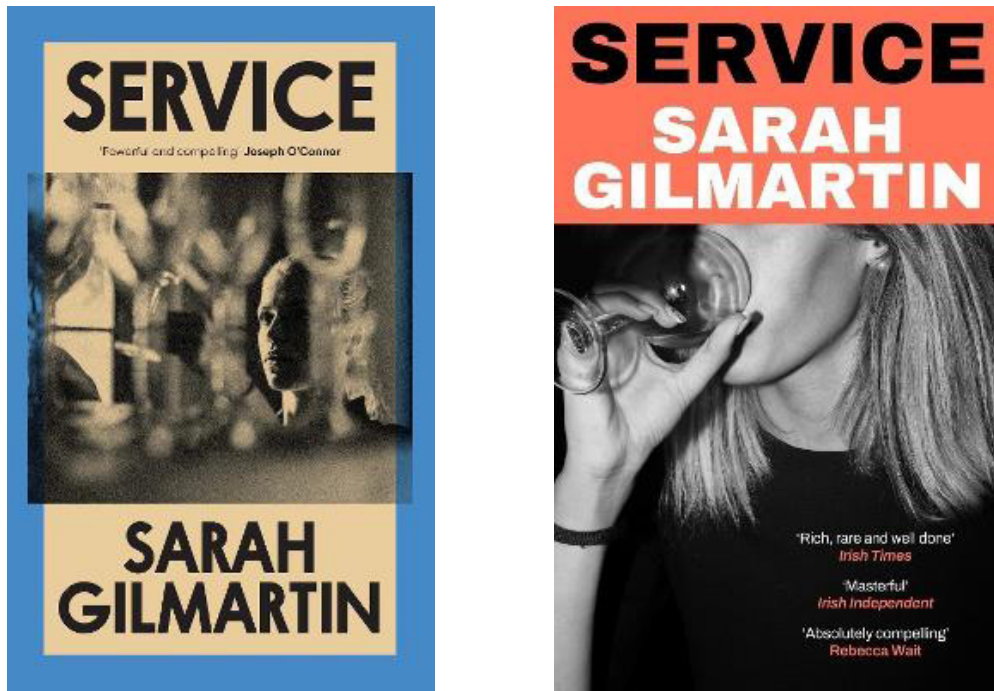


Figure 1 – Hardback cover (right) and Paperback cover (left) of *Service*

The term “service” as a title, however, situates the story’s epicentre not so much on the place (as suggested in the eponymous *ristorante* of the Italian translation) but on the question of finances, of capital value, of something (a service of some sort) that is done or received in exchange for money. And money is, no doubt, crucial to the world recounted by Gilmartin. Appearing to be at least on a par with time, money is significantly associated with food, in a social and cultural context where the memory of poverty and of “An Gorta Mór”, the Great Famine of 1845-1852, are very much alive still today, to the extent that for some, certain “graves” may be still “walking”⁴. The Great Hunger – that “greatest social disaster of 19th century Europe” – had “something of the characteristics of a low-level nuclear attack”, as Terry Eagleton has observed, not only because “the Irish population of almost 8.2 million shrank by a third”, but also because “starvation and disease killed 1.1 million” and “emigration claimed another 2 million” (Kelly 2012, 2). Its legacy is reflected in the language (it has been dubbed the Irish “holocaust”, Fogarty 2017; Rutledge 2023), and it cannot be underestimated considering, for instance, that over 70 million people of Irish descent live outside the island of Ireland today⁵. The long-term effects

⁴To echo W.B. Yeats’ words from Scene 1 of his verse drama *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), where a character named Teig says: “They say that now the land is famine struck / The graves are walking” (Yeats 1953, 2). The lines are quoted as an epigraph to John Kelly’s study, *The Graves are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People* (2012).

⁵See <<https://www.ireland.ie/en/irish-diaspora/>> (05/2026). See also Salis (2019), “[t]he Irish are today one of the largest diaspora communities in the world. This ‘diverse array of people’ scattered throughout the globe view Ireland ‘as a place of origin’, and ‘claim some connection with her, either directly through emigration or indirectly through descent from emigrants’ ” (29).

the Great Famine has had on the Irish psyche⁶ must also be taken into account. A starving and starved nation turned into a “foodie nation” (Deleuze 2012), to the point that, over the past three decades, food has received unprecedented attention from academics, media and cultural operators as well as society at large. Interest in food may partly owe to Ireland’s traumatic past, as noted, but also to “a new self-confidence bolstered by the [country’s] growing economy”: during the Celtic Tiger, in fact, “dining out ceased to be reserved only for special occasions and became a regular activity – encouraged in part by reviews, food writing and restaurant criticism. Restaurant options soared and the country became heavily invested in and *obsessed with food*” (Cawley, O’Mahony 2021, 183; my emphasis).

Service is recounted against the backdrop of that Ireland, a nation whose vision of and attitude to food had changed radically, as we learn, also, through Daniel Costello’s self-narrative. A working-class hero in his own right and a self-made man, the Michelin-starred chef is a pivotal character in the novel. Likewise, his restaurant kitchen becomes a microcosm of a nation that (feels it) has moved beyond its traumas and tradition, and where food acts both as a vehicle for cultural transformation and liberation, and as the agent of self-creativity and of exuberance, in contrast with past stringencies and limitations. This gives rise to its second connection, its link with sex. The restaurant and its kitchen turn into a hotbed of corruption and abuse, both verbal and physical, vis-à-vis the traditional family kitchen in its idealised version as a safe place, the heart of the domestic realm. A private space, the family home stands in stark contrast to the “T”, where private and public clash, as do past and present, and where dissonant notions of food, of nourishment and of cooking also collide. In this atmosphere, nostalgia kicks in, every so often: it does so in the shape of Hannah’s parents visiting from the countryside (Thurles, Co. Tipperary), and again through Julie’s reminiscences of her youth, when she and Daniel first met, a couple united by a passionate love, and by their common backgrounds, values and ideals.

Service is a fascinating novel, whose strength and allure lie in Gilmartin’s ability to explore and articulate the complexity of interpersonal relations and to narrate the contradictions, the ingenuities and the ambiguities of our contemporary world, suspended between the hegemony of profit, of social media and of the politically correct, where the question of power and gender roles remains unresolved to a large extent, and where the past holds up a sometimes disturbing mirror of truth. “In this age of misandry, we’re the answer to every problem” (Gilmartin 2023, 217), says Daniel, relieved and arrogant, as he celebrates a unanimous verdict that says that he is “Not guilty” (*ibidem*), while that “fifty-year old infant” (243) clearly is.

What follows expands on these themes, as it further investigates *Service*, in conversation with Sarah Gilmartin, first, and then with Valeria Raimondi, the novel’s Italian translator, whose work sheds light on the world brought to life by the Irish author.

LS: Can you tell us about the novel, what inspired it, and how did you develop the story?

SG: I had written a short play in 2019, a two-hander that was performed at a festival, and one of the actors subsequently asked me if I would write her a monologue for an audition at The Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theatre. There were no real parameters, other than a first-person voice, and the one that emerged was a waitress character in a fine-dining Dublin restaurant at the height of the Celtic Tiger. This monologue turned out to be an early draft of what became

⁶ For the impact of the Great Famine on mental health, see research work carried out by Oonagh Walsh, Professor of Gender Studies at Glasgow Caledonian University: “Tracing the Legacy of Great Hunger Trauma”, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYpmXsdAFPw>> (05/2026).

the first page and a half of the novel, in Hannah’s perspective. I’d worked as a waitress in my 20s – not in Dublin, largely in the US – and the intensity, buzz, fun, pressures and dangers of that world had clearly remained with me, on an unconscious level, because the monologue came very easily. What happens in the book is fiction, but my knowledge of the environment, and the problematic sexist culture of the noughties more generally, helped to inform it.

LS: The story is set and revolves around a trendy restaurant in Dublin and its staff, the head chef most especially. Where does your knowledge of that world, its hierarchy and vocabulary originate from?

SG: I had waitressed in quite fancy restaurants in New York, so I knew the world from that perspective, had observed the riches, luxuries and celebrities, the whiff of power. The chef’s chapters, on the other hand, took an amount of research. I am a terrible cook and have no real interest in improving, so I read many interviews with chefs in the media, books like Anthony Bourdain’s *Kitchen Confidential* (2000), and watched a lot of TV shows like *MasterChef Professionals*, in order to get a sense of the pressurised environment in which acclaimed chefs like Daniel Costello must operate on a daily basis. This was essential research when it came to creating his voice and character, and to understanding his worldview. But for a novel to come to life, the imagination has to take over at some point, and much of the vocabulary, the mindset of the chef, comes from my imagining of how a man like that might speak, act and behave – both before and after #MeToo; likewise, how that might change from Celtic Tiger Ireland to a country in recession.

LS: Service is a highly intertextual, theatrical and cinematographic novel. Can you tell us something about your relation to the literary tradition and the canon? Has anyone suggested a stage or film rendition of the novel? Who would you pick up for the role of Daniel Costello?

SG: It’s hard to speak generally about an Irish literary canon, but there is certainly a distinct vibrancy in setting, voice and character – a kind of aliveness – in the novels and stories of Irish writers that I admire, the ones I return to again and again: John McGahern, Edna O’Brien, Anne Enright and Claire Keegan. I’m thinking now of McGahern’s tyrannical father figures; O’Brien’s flighty, freedom-seeking country girls. Joseph O’Connor, another beloved Irish writer of highly cinematic, theatrical novels, compared *Service*, with its trio of perspectives, to Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer* (1979). I hadn’t figured out that connection myself, but I had studied the play under Frank McGuinness’ riveting tutelage in University College Dublin some years before, and perhaps it was there all along, as an unconscious blueprint. The monologue origins of *Service* gave an automatic theatricality to the book. The retrospective narrative – I’m thinking here of Hannah’s sections – also has an inherent dramatic quality: a character inviting the reader into her world, her story, showing them what happened, and typically in retrospective narratives, where it all went wrong. Daniel’s pompous nature, his buffoonery, is also quite theatrical in tone. As is the setting of the restaurant: very colourful, obviously sensual, one of those worlds that resets itself, like theatre, every day a new show, a new set of customers, the tables quite literally set and reset. It’s a place that many people know but don’t really know. Most people have been to a restaurant, but what goes on behind the scenes? Closed off worlds. That kind of thing makes for interesting fiction. The dramatic rights were acquired in 2024 by a UK production company, Dash Pictures. The rights have recently been renewed. Dominic West was one actor I could imagine in the role of Daniel, though I think (forgive me, Dominic) he might be too old now to play the younger version of Daniel. He would still be excellent in the present-tense storyline. Colin Farrell would be great too. Alison Oliver is an Irish actress who I would love for Hannah. Maybe Eva Birthistle or Caitriona Balfe for Julie.

LS: The novel resonates with powerful sentences. I could list a dozen, at least. One for all: “It’s OK, Hannah. You’re OK” (Gilmartin 2023, 194). These are Daniel’s words to Hannah, immediately after he has abused her. Two deliberately strong and ambivalent lines.

SG: Yes, lines with ambivalence hold the reader’s attention, remain longer in the memory, provide a deeper connection to the text, and are particularly important when dealing with big themes and subject matter such as sexual assault. This is a line of dialogue, and in keeping with reality, I like the dialogue in my novels to be loaded with subtext. To Hannah it is clear that what has just happened between them is wrong and not something she wanted to happen. Daniel knows this too but he’s a man who is used to getting what he wants and is happy, now that he has gotten or taken what he wanted, to rationalise it, both to himself and to her. I think there’s also a warning implicit in his words: nothing bad has happened here, and as long as you agree with that, you will be ok.



Figure 2 – Photo of Sarah Gilmartin

LS: One final question. How does Sarah Gilmartin become such a great writer?

SG: I’ve been very lucky to have had the means and opportunity to study creative writing at university in UCD (University College Dublin), under teachers like Éilis Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Enright and Frank McGuinness. Anne’s tutelage in particular was a huge help when it came to writing my first novel *Dinner Party*. I’m not sure I would have gotten there without her guidance and the generative learning environment of the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programme. Outside of college, I’ve also benefited greatly from Claire Keegan’s writing workshops. She has such a unique way of looking at structure and is gifted in her ability to impart this knowledge to her students.

LS: *Little Vanities is being released in a couple of months. What next?*

SG: I've just started my fourth novel, which is at such an early stage that it's hard to talk about, but it's my first novel set outside Dublin – in my home county of Limerick during the recession.

LS: *Finally, a curiosity. The name of the restaurant (there's a contest going on among students of my Contemporary Literature course). What does "T" stand for?*

SG: "T" is deliberately enigmatic in order to get readers (Irish in particular, but delighted that your students are doing likewise) to hypothesise about the restaurant name and potential real world parallels, even though such a restaurant doesn't exist.

Valeria Raimondi has worked as a literary translator for over thirty years. Her interest in contemporary Irish literature began with Edna O'Brien, whose lucid and uncompromising attention to women's lives left a lasting mark on her. The search for truth, the tension between belonging and independence, and the subtle, often fraught dynamics between men and women — within families as much as within society — continue to shape the work of writers such as Anne Enright, Sarah Gilmartin and Claire Keegan. That continuity is what most deeply informs her interest in Irish fiction as a translator. She is currently working on the Italian translation of Sarah Gilmartin's first novel, *Dinner Party* (to be published by Marsilio by the end of 2026).



Figure 3 – Photo of Valeria Raimondi



Figure 4 – Cover of *Il ristorante*

LS: How did you approach the work of translation?

VR: I have been translating literary fiction for many years, and my work always begins with a careful analysis of the novel. I was lucky because I got to read *Service* before the publisher decided to acquire it, and I loved it. So when they offered me the chance to translate it, I already had a clear idea of the work ahead.

LS: What were your major challenges in translating the novel?

VR: At first glance, *Service* may seem like a straightforward novel, but it is layered with complexity and remarkable psychological depth. Throughout the translation process, I remained constantly aware of the tense dynamics between Daniel and the women working in his restaurant, of his distorted relationship with his wife, and of the fragile construction of his masculinity. Rendering this level of complexity in another language was my greatest challenge.

LS: How does Service translate into Il ristorante? What other options did you consider, if any?

VR: Honestly, I think keeping *Service* as the title would have been a better choice. Translators rarely have a say in the matter, though. Decisions about titles usually belong to the marketing department. *Service* captures the ambiguity of the restaurant's dynamics much more effectively.

LS: "It's OK, Hannah. You're OK" (Gilmartin 2023, 194). Daniel's words to Hannah, following his abuse. Two deliberately ambivalent sentences.

VR: The sentence “It’s OK, Hannah. You’re OK” is one of the most disturbing moments in the novel. Its apparent simplicity conceals a profound act of manipulation. Daniel is not comforting Hannah; he is asserting control over the narrative of what has just happened. By declaring that “it is ok,” he attempts to normalise the violence. By telling her “you are ok,” he implicitly defines her emotional reality for her, denying her the space to name the abuse for what it is. In translating this passage, it was crucial to preserve that deliberate ambiguity and the chilling calmness of the tone. The sentences had to sound almost banal — and precisely for that reason, deeply unsettling.

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Writings



Five Poems

Luke Morgan

(<lukemorganwriter@gmail.com>)

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Introduction Note

Men – particularly Irish men – are notoriously bad at telling one another they love each other. For this reason, I am frightened yet proud to be introducing five love poems to various men in my life. One for a friend, one for a professor, one for my father, one for my uncle, and one for my landlord.

In a cultural context obsessed with terms like “the manosphere” and “male loneliness epidemic”, oftentimes we can forget that most men still have good hearts. Many men find it difficult (even awkward) to relate to one another, particularly in later years. While others meet for tapas dinners and mimosa brunches, we tend to prefer the uncomplicated bonding experience of sport. It’s easier for us to play-fight than hug; to make eye contact with our pints instead of each other. It could be said that this image of an Irish male fumbling for the words beyond his reach is a cliché. But there’s at least a little truth to every stereotype.

Thankfully, there is still the defining light of poetry to reveal what sometimes cannot be expressed overtly. I state this in the comfortable knowledge that none of my mused men will likely ever seek out or read these works. The fact that they have been written (and now witnessed by you, dear reader) has clarified the importance they play in my life. These men are rendered here, I hope, in the way I long to keep them: as Heaney says, “perfected in my memory”.

It was either this or five-a-side...and I’m hopeless at football!

Luke Morgan

“Long Way Round”

The world never seemed so possible as it did
 when Ewan McGregor and Charlie Boorman
 rode their dirt track motorbikes
 from traffic-lit London to GoPro-shuddering Mongolia,
 beamed into the living room where we watched
 with our Dad, who promised us how,
 one day, we *three amigos* would set out
 like they had, take on the open sky,
 eat a sheep testicle or two, pitch tents
 and sleep in defiance of stars.

On the weekends he had us,
 we huddled round with cups of tea,
 biscuit crumbs spelling a trail on our chests,
 to join boyish Ewan and Charlie,
 confront a mosquito bump on a forehead,
 dab diesel from an eyeball, encounter
 a glacier, alien-blue, in Anchorage.

Little did we know then, as SUVs got pulled
 out of rapids where the Road of Bones
 turned to rivers in Magadan,
 and we fell asleep under the sparkle
 of each episode's credits, how
 he'd hoist us over each shoulder
 and carry us up the stairs, leaving
 before we woke the next morning
 to begin his long meandering journey
 back to us again.

“Tritina for Jim Rogers”

For one unusually warm October afternoon
 on one of Minnesota's 10'000 lakes,
 the retired professor Jim Rogers was all mine.

As he recalled Mayo roots, this “Davitt blood of mine”,
 I steered our flimsy canoe. I was in the afternoon
 of my prime, but at 72, he was the lake's

true disprover – he did not dwell on the lakes
 he'd fallen into, just shared his time with mine.
 Though my paddle rowed us both all afternoon,

the lake's ripples that afternoon were his, not mine.

“Two Months to Go”

for Ryan

Two months to go
and you're paying close attention
to the construction of things:
a hotel wall isn't grouted properly,
the cables of a townhouse are exposed,
a foam board ceiling is clot-marked with damp.

You fret that you aren't capable
but I've watched you smooth a wooden beam
across setting concrete, careful as caressing a forehead.
In the mornings, you layer words
on top of one another, re-draft ideas
like tucking live-wires crusted with plaster dust.

Two months to go
and while you can only view your graft
moments you stop to lean on a shovel,
your engineering partner sees it all
as the scaffolding falls on your newest project;
the one who's grown feet and a heart

and will always hold
the meticulous angles
of the ones who built her.

“Banjo”

My landlord's learning to play the banjo.
The silence of my ceiling – his floor –
is now finger-plucked
with a failing confidence.

I prefer the banjo to Willow,
his yappy cocker spaniel,
the only female company
either of us had in forever.

A year ago, I met him searching
for her along the bohareen.
He was so nervous to tell me
he had to increase my rent,

I found myself finishing his sentences.
 This Christmas, he left eye contact
 in the kitchen, showed up at my door.
 He thrust a crumpled 50 into my hand,
 mumbled, "Buy yourself something nice."

I returned his money to him
 as a framed photograph of Willow.
 "Arrah what'd you go doing that for."
 The closest he got to affection
 that stormy season.

Tonight again, I hear the banjo
 struggling through the cold walls.
 I send my heart up halfway to meet him
 as he wills that reluctant instrument to speak.

"Education"

for David

How to wear tracksuit bottoms to the opera.
 How to flood your face with laughter
 until the vein in your forehead asserts.
 How to dip into the water at Salthill
 first thing in the morning, and not brag about it.
 How to send back the bad wine,
 yet chuckle when it's proven you can't tell
 the difference between a 15 and a 90.
 How to say, "greetings".
 How to cry, and brag about it.
 How to get excited about business ventures
 you know will probably never happen,
 feel the excitement carry you anyways.
 How to drink the good wine.
 How to switch between debate and craic
 like *finger snap* that.
 How to get the difficult scalp –
 just behind the ear – with a razor.
 How to be bald without a beard.
 How to get a letter published in the Irish Times
 made up of a single pun.
 How to forget to boil the kettle
 while stewing in grief, make the tea anyways.
 How to carry a coffin.

How to say “Clones” like everyone is in
on the joke, until we are.
How to realise the bit in the introduction
where you explain the poem
is often better than the poem itself.
How to count out 580 chocolate raisins.
How to send the email to Oxford
because, feck it, someone has to get in.
How to wonder if university
would have made a difference
without realising you’re the person
others aspire to be.



“Knowledge is sacrifice” Two Poems by Antonio Riccardi

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Translated by William Wall
([<williamwall@gmx.com>](mailto:williamwall@gmx.com))

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Antonio Riccardi’s *Il profitto domestico* (1996) tells the story, in numinous fragments, of Riccardi’s family home at Cattabiano near Parma. The present texts are translations of two of the poems from the collection but I have chosen to use the versions that appear in the later collected poems (2022) for reasons that I will make clear.

“Abramo” is dedicated to his namesake Antonio Riccardi, a priest born in 1810, and “Reliquia” (“The Relic”) centres on Dositeo Riccardi, a young epileptic who lived between 1859 and 1878 – a short life and one full of pain, the existence of whom Riccardi became aware of by accident when he stumbled on the official record – epilepsy having been a notifiable disease at the time.

The critic Alberto Casadei described the book’s mechanism very well:

[L]e sezioni della raccolta, le sottosezioni, le poesie – come le stanze, gli anditi, le scale dell’antico podere di Cattabiano, proprietà dei Riccardi da più di cinquecento anni – portano nel segreto di una famiglia, evocato per schegge, frammenti, attraverso le vicende dei suoi componenti, remoti e vicini, che della rappresentazione di quel segreto sono insieme attori e personaggi. Poema familiare che, nel suo dare struttura narrativa a universali tragici quali l’amore, il possesso, la morte – individuati da serie foniche e dunque simboliche come soldi-colpa, casa-corpo, cose-ricordi, rovine-reliquie –, rappresenta un unicum nella poesia e nella lingua italiana del secondo Novecento. (Casadei in Borio 2015)¹

¹ [T]he collection’s sections, subsections, and poems – like the rooms, passages, and stairs of the ancient Cattabiano estate, property of the Riccardi family for more than five hundred years – lead to the secret of a family, evoked in flakes and fragments, through the experiences of its members, both remote and close, who are themselves both actors and characters in the representation of that secret. A domestic poem that, in giving narrative structure to tragic universals such as love, possession, and death – identified by phonic and therefore symbolic series such as money-guilt, house-body,

When I began working on the translations I was dismissive of the differences between the earlier editions and the collected poems but very quickly realised that they were significant. I'm a poet, a novelist and a translator, not a scholar of literature, and these variations intrigued me. Let's look at one simple example.

"The Relic", the sixth part of the sequence contains certain apparently minor variations. For example, both the 1996 and 2015 editions open with a simple declaration "Il giorno va sotto. Sale l'inferno / in questa casa"². The 2022 anthology, on the other hand, begins "Il giorno della sagra³ va sotto / e in casa sale l'inferno". In the earlier edition this is followed by a speculative line about the existence or otherwise of hell – "*se esiste o se è vuoto / non si può dire*"⁴ – but the 2022 edition eliminates this line and moves immediately to the voice of the young person, Dositeo, to whom the poem is dedicated: "*Non accusatemi, non accusate / chi vi è stato devoto...*"⁵. In the earlier versions, Dositeo claims to have been devoted "to this house", in the later it is "you" (plural), probably the family or certain members of it, that he addresses directly. This use of direct speech throughout the collection brings to mind, as Casadei signalled, voices crying from a darkened stage-set, and each of the revisions serves to make the speech more personal, more direct.

But the most striking difference comes in the last two lines of the section. In both the 1996 and 2015 editions, he threatens to kill his father "*e io ucciderò mio papa / come un ladro*"⁶. The 2022 version, however, refers to his father much more formally as "*Signor Padre*" and the lines run thus: "*e io vi ucciderò come un ladro / amatissimo Signor Padre*". Again the "*vi*" here is the second person plural, the formal address of the nineteenth century, already putting some distance between the speaker and his parent, but the phrase "*amatissimo Signor Padre*"⁷ shifts the register very much into the ironic. It is, I suspect, a reference to the letters exchanged between Giacomo Leopardi and his father Count Monaldo Leopardi.

In Riccardi's poem, the young epileptic Dositeo complains that he loved his father and begs for his father's love in return ("*ma guarisco solo se mi amate*"⁸) and in Leopardi's letters we find a similar dynamic at work in which the poet begs for his father's love and respect. The young man in Riccardi's poem is an epileptic whose story has been cancelled by the family; Leopardi was a hunchback whose father never really came to terms with his deformity.

Throughout the collection, the cuts and occasional additions of the later edition point to a process of reduction, a tendency towards a more essential, more suggestive and less concrete form. The effect of the whole is to create a magic lantern show of delicately coloured scenes, moments of luminous intensity and emotion, but with an underlying narrative both epic in

things-memories, ruins-relics – represents a unique example in the poetry and language of the late twentieth century. (Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine).]

² Trans.: The day goes down and hell / rises in this house.

³ Trans.: The day of the festival he goes down / and all hell breaks loose in the house.

Strictly speaking, the word "sagra" has no equivalent in English. A complex word with links to the sacred, it can refer to the sanctification of a place, an object or a religious group, the festival of a patron saint, or the consecration of a church, a commemoration of the dead, or of military heroes; more recently a festival devoted to a locally prized product, a harvest or even a fair – e.g. La Sagra della Focaccia, the Festival of The Focaccia.

⁴ Trans.: *whether it exists or is empty / one cannot say.*

Italics follow the original text where direct speech is always italicised.

⁵ Trans.: *Don't accuse me, do not accuse / him who was devoted to you...*

⁶ Trans.: *and I will kill my father / like a thief.*

⁷ Trans.: *most beloved Signor Father.*

⁸ Trans.: *but I will heal only if you love me.*

scope and private in sensibility that creates couplets – to extend Casadei's insight – of home/work, God/shame, reason/passion/, relics/wealth, faith/profit, pain/silence, property/loss, disease/love, ancestors/futures and many more surprising associations.

Translation can be high fidelity but never perfect and the age-old conflict between the literal and poetic only adds to the problem. The word "sagra" (see footnote 3) is a perfect example, but there are other losses that cut deeper. The absence in English of a formal register for pronouns, for example, makes the archaic form of address in "vi", with its connotations of profound respect and even subservience to the father, impossible to convey – compounded by the fact the "you" in English was originally the formal and is identical in both singular and plural!

However, the dramatic intensity of a desperate young man claiming that his "*faith [...] is a staff with a goat's head doubled*" and that he will slaughter his "*most beloved*" father like a thief, or the voice of the priest struggling with his unconfessable sin and "the word of Christ / in the small hours of the night" speaks to us from the darkness in Riccardi's lyrical voice in a manner that is entirely comprehensible to modern audiences in any language.

These poems come to us from the abyss of history, without context, stripped of all that we associate with identity and personality. They arrive like fragments of paper rescued from a fire. I am reminded of a beautiful and tragic Irish song called "An Mhaighdean Mhara" ("The Sea Maiden") which we know was once much longer but which now survives only in three acutely rendered images with voices. *Il profitto domestico* is just such an arrangement of fragments – haunting, intense, suggestive, unsettling and beautiful.

William Wall

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“Abramo”

Monologo e una coda

Per Antonio Riccardi (1810-1887), sacerdote

Sarei Abramo
ma di una famiglia, di un piccolo
popolo buono in una sola casa
a Cattabiano.

Una colpa però ci trapassa
per sanarci.
So solo che è per sanità
non per denaro e non so altro.
E so poco anche di Dio.

Io sono quello che da solo
lascia una traccia ai miei
che poco sapranno del potere
dei nostri doveri e niente
della pietà avuta in destino.

*

Ognuno è il modo che il mondo
soltanto gli concede e allora
ogni cosa rimane come decisa
e segnata: l'esempio dei Santi
le stagioni della terra con i frutti
i soldi e le parole di Cristo
nell'ora più fonda del giorno
quando i morti volano al buio.

Dio è spirito, l'anima tribolazione.
Ora sto a casa e curo i bachi da seta.

*

Eppure qualcosa ci leverà la terra
e le cose per un castigo
e se avrete il centuplo lo patirete
ogni giorno con una pena nuova.

*

Sono io la colpa di questa rovina.
Non dico per me, che sono perduto
ma per i miei che vengono senza sapere
dico per loro la mia colpa
che disfa in cenere e vergogna.

“Abraham”

Monologue and Coda

For Antonio Riccardi (1810-1887), priest

I would be an Abraham
but just for a family, for a few
decent people, a single homestead
at Cattabiano.

Guilt touches us
to heal us.
I only know it is for our good
not for money or God knows what.
And I know little of God.

I am one of those who alone
bequeaths a mere trace for my people
who will know little of the farm,
of our duties, and nothing
of this piety inherited like fate.

*

We are only the way world
lets us be and so
everything remains as ordained
and foreknown: the example of the Saints,
the seasons of the year and their fruits,
money – and the word of Christ
in the small hours of the night
when the dead fly in the darkness.

God is spirit; soul is suffering.
I am at home now. I'm tending to the silkworms.

*

And yet something will relieve us of this farm
and the stock as a chastisement
and even if you should have it a hundredfold
you would live every day a new torment.

*

I am to blame for this ruin.
I confess not for myself who am lost
but for my heirs who come unknowing,
I declare for them my guilt
rotting in ash and shame.

È stato un buco nelle cose, l'amore
per lei e sono precipitato.
Retribuisce con l'oro matto
il male dei padri nel cuore dei figli.

*

Ho visto tutto: cosa è stato e come sarà.
Il prossimo tempo viene da questa radice
con la giusta miseria per chi resta...

Il giorno che lei è morta io non l'ho salvata
non ho avuto il coraggio di restare
e come un ladro sono scappato.

Sulla sua pietra legge chi passa
NON DIRE AD ALCUNO
PERCHÉ SONO MORTA

*

Un sapere per misura.
La scienza di Dio chiede tempo
osservazioni e prove:
nel pulviscolo più lento
che deposita sui mobili di casa
riconosco la varietà del mondo
non sempre la sua verità.
Questa campagna tiene il fiato
nelle mattine di fine estate
quando passano le cicogne d'argento.

*

Sapere è sacrificio

mangio la storia del primo figlio
e lui scompare
né corpo, né cose, né ricordi
cancello ogni traccia, la memoria
del predestinato
che porta il nostro nome
nato per segno stellare
dopo accadimenti infausti
un giorno segnato col fuoco
nella casa al centro del potere.

*

Love for her was a rift
in the world, and I plunged in.
The evil of the father in the son's heart
repaid in fool's gold.

*

I have seen all: as it was and shall be.
The coming times will grow from this root,
with a just measure of misery for those who
remain...

The day she died I did not save her
I could not find the courage to stay
and like a thief I slunk away.

Let the passerby read on her gravestone
TELL NO ONE
WHY I DIED

*

A thought to provide a scale.
The knowledge of God requires time
observation and proof:
in the slow dusting of the universe
on the furniture of the house
I recognise the complexity, but not always
the truth, of the world.
This land holds its breath
mornings at the end of summer
when the silvered storks pass by.

*

Knowledge is sacrifice

I consume the story of the first born
and he disappears –
nor corpse, nor effects, nor memories –
I erase every trace, the memory
of the predestined
who carries our name
born under an unlucky star
after inauspicious happenings
on a day marked by fire
in the house at the heart of the holding.

*

So che la vita ci trapassa e resta
niente e non si tiene: le cose
in casa, i soldi nella latta dei dolci
e la pena di non dire, di non avere
altre parole per un tempo nuovo.

*

Spianare le cifre e i conti del potere
senza lettere di credito, senza sospesi.
Adempirò anch'io
come i miei prima di me
il merito con la fatica.
Se succede qualcosa restate
e non vendete.

*

[Coda]

Scurano 17 Xbre 1863, sul far del giorno...
don Antonio scrive a suo padre
Pier Giovanni, a Cattabiano

*... non si va in Paradiso
se non per mezzo della morte.*

I know life passes through us and nothing
remains and we cannot stay it. The things
of the house, the coins in the sweet-tin
and the pain of not telling, of not having
other words for a new time.

*

Reconciling the accounts of the holding
without letters of credit, without overdraft.
I too am fulfilled
like my parents before me
by the justification of hard work.
If something happens stay
and do not sell out.

*

[Coda]

Scurano 17 Oct. 1863, in the course of the day
Don Antonio writes to his father
Pier Giovanni, at Cattabiano

*... there is no reaching Paradise
except by the transport of death.*

“La reliqua”

per Dositeo Riccardi (1859-1878), epilettico

La fortuna si misura in soldi
altre volte con le reliquie.
Della rovina dei miei io non ho colpa
ma ne conservo la misura e la scena.

*

In primavera si era visto
un segno stellare sulla casamatta
e poi una nascita sfortunata.
L'anno, il 1859.

“The Relic”

For Dositeo Riccardi (1859-1878), epileptic

Fortunes are measured in silver
otherwise in relics.
In the ruin of mine I bear no guilt,
still I set down the scale and setting.

*

In springtime appeared
in the casement a signifying star,
later an unlucky birth.
The year was 1859.

Il figlio del primo figlio
riceverà il centuplo con la paura
e avrà in premio la veglia interna.

*

Per sette giorni ha tenuto
una chiave d'oro
sotto la lingua per guarigione.

Nessuno ha mai saputo di certo
né la madre s'è mai rassegnata.

*

Nel punto più basso dell'orbita
finalmente il giorno andava sotto
con tutti i suoi presagi.

Avevano sentito entrare qualcuno
dalla parte della loggia, la mattina.

Era coperto d'erba medica e di cardi,
diceva senza poterlo giurare
ma ancora tremando di paura
come chi ha visto qualcosa,
la più giovane di casa.

Segni indecifrabili però
erano comparsi sulle scale
e nelle stanze di mezzo.

*

*Vedrete che Dio vi darà
il mio sangue da bere.
In questa casa cresce ogni cosa
anche il veleno...*

The first born son of the first born
is cursed with fear a hundredfold
and blessed in turn with silent vigilance.

*

For seven days he kept
a golden key
under his tongue for the cure.

no one knows for certain
not even his mother
if he ever surrendered it.

*

At the lowest point of orbit
at last the day went down
with all of its forebodings.

That morning someone was heard
to enter from the loggia.

A figure dressed in herbs and thistles
according to the youngest of the house
who could not swear to it
who spoke still trembling
as if what he saw were real.

Bewildering symbols however
were scattered on the stairs
and in the middle rooms.

*

*Behold God will give you
my blood to drink.
In this house everything grows
even poison...*

Rimarranno tre
 Odet, Sesto, l'Artemisia
 a tenere il segreto dei segni
 sulle scale e nelle stanze di mezzo
 e nessuno saprà mai
 di un altro quarto,
 il primogenito Dositeo.
 Nessuno di noi, mai più.

*

In casa ogni sua cosa
 è andata perduta
 insieme col nome.

*Tengo dell'oro sotto la lingua
 per guarire, come da suo consiglio
 carissimo Signor Padre
 ma guarisco solo se mi amate....*

Abitiamo la stessa casa e niente
 sappiamo del suo piccolo inferno.
 Né corpo, né cose, né ricordi.

*

Il giorno della sagra va sotto
 e in casa sale l'interno.

*Non accusatemi, non accusate
 chi vi è stato devoto...
 ma sappiate che la fede per me
 è un bastone a due teste di capra
 e io vi ucciderà come un ladro,
 amatissimo Signor Padre.*

*

*Di questa misura sarò misurato
 e qui sarò sepolto, in questa casa
 nelle stanze di mezzo
 come dentro una macchina
 con le mie scarpe di ferro.*

There remained but three,
 Odet, Sesto, Artemisia,
 to keep the secret of the signs
 on the stairs and the middle rooms,
 and no one will ever know
 a certain fourth,
 the first born Dositeo.
 None of us, ever again.

*

At home everything
 was lost
 together with his name.

*I keep gold under my tongue
 for the cure, according to your advice
 dearest Signor Father,
 but I heal only if you love me...*

We live in the same house
 knowing nothing of his small hell.
 Nor body, nor effects, nor remembrances.

*

Pattern Day goes down
 and all hell breaks loose in the house.

*Do not accuse me, do not accuse
 him who was devoted to you...
 You should know that faith for me
 is a staff with a goat's head doubled
 and I will slaughter you like a thief,
 most beloved Signor Father.*

*

*By this scale I will be measured
 and here I will be buried, here in this house
 in the middle rooms
 as in the works of a machine,
 with my iron shoes.*

*Conosco il fondo di questa famiglia
vedo le azioni che ognuno vede
e tengo la mia vita in pari al beneficio
come fossi solo al mondo.*

*

Qui tutti hanno sempre abitato
nel regno dei morti, per abitudine
per vocazione...

 e infatti, ancora
nella stanza che forse era sua
sotto la campana di vetro soffiato
un animale in posa araldica
punta alla farfalla di stoffa
come se tutto fosse vivo e vero.

*

È poco un inferno per me

*ma sappiate ch'io ho più dolore
che vita in avanti a voi,
amatissimo Signor Padre...*

*I have sounded the depths of this family
and I see what everyone sees,
I declare my life equal to the benefit
as if I were alone in the world.*

*

Here everyone has lived
in the kingdom of the dead, by habit
by vocation...

 and indeed, even still,
in the room that was most likely his,
under the bell of blown glass
an animal in heraldic pose
points at a knitted butterfly
as if all were alive and actual.

*

Hell means nothing to me

*but know that I have more pain
than you have life in front of you,
most beloved Signor Father...*



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Tiziano Rimoldi, *Stato e Chiesa in Irlanda. 1914-2014*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2023, pp. 776. €55,00. ISBN: 978-88-15-38385-3.

Stato e Chiesa in Irlanda. 1914-2014 fornisce un'esauritiva, dettagliata e oltremodo puntuale disamina storico-giuridica delle relazioni tra Stato e Chiesa in Irlanda, che si spinge vieppiù a scandagliare i complessi termini d'influenza che dette relazioni hanno cagionato rispetto all'assetto costituzionale del Paese, al relativo sistema legale, e all'azione dell'Esecutivo. Non manca, peraltro, un'analisi "inversa", densa di contenuti e riferimenti dottrinali e storici, rispetto all'ambito di influenza che queste tre ultime componenti hanno determinato nell'evolversi dei rapporti tra la Chiesa cattolica e la Repubblica. Il lavoro mette a fuoco, segnatamente, la complessa strutturazione di questi ultimi, non agevolmente o semplicisticamente identificabile in un modello di separazione, atteso il fattore legato all'influenza della religione cattolica sulle istituzioni statali, la cui portata trascende sotto molti aspetti il dato letterale delle disposizioni della Costituzione. Il profondo vaglio effettuato dall'Autore, conseguentemente, scruta con verso minuzioso e consapevole tutte le fonti primarie, e i più salienti riferimenti giurisprudenziali, senza lesinare ricorso, al contempo, all'analisi dei lavori parlamentari, e alla pubblicistica di settore. La ricerca, assai articolata e approfondita, assume connotati di pregio indiscutibile, riprendendo filoni d'indagine che esibiscono spunti interessanti e di certo arricchimento per il settore del diritto ecclesiastico comparato.

Mario Ferrante

Eavan Boland, *Citizen Poet: New and Selected Essays*, edited by Jody Allen Randolph, with a foreword by Heather Clark, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2024, pp. 448. \$24.99. Paperback. ISBN: 9781324074281.

Few poets in contemporary Ireland have left as indelible a mark as Eavan Boland (1944-2020). Both in her poetry and prose, she redefined the possibilities of Irish writing by placing

women's experience, domestic space, and ordinary lives at the heart of national and literary narratives that had long excluded them. *Citizen Poet: New and Selected Essays*, edited by Jody Allen Randolph, offers a timely consolidation of Boland's prose writings. It gathers some of her most influential essays together with more recent reflections, underscoring her dual role as poet and public intellectual. The volume not only reinforces Boland's standing as a leading Irish poet-critic but also allows us to appreciate the coherence of her critical vision across several decades.

The collection brings together a wide selection of Boland's key essays, many originally published in her volumes of essays, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995) and *A Journey with Two Maps* (2011), as well as in journals, edited volumes, and introductions to anthologies. They are organised chronologically, giving the reader a sense of the continuity in Boland's thinking.

Citizen Poet opens with a foreword written by Heather Clark and a preface by Jody Allen Randolph, and it is divided into three parts devoted to Boland's earlier volumes of essays. Recurring themes and concerns of Boland's selected essays are the silencing of women in Irish literary tradition; the importance of lived experience as legitimate poetic subject matter; the uneasy relation between national identity and private life; and the responsibilities of the poet as both artist and citizen. In these essays, Boland insists that poetry is not only an aesthetic act but also a civic one: a way of negotiating the individual's position within a collective memory.

The foreword by Heather Clark pays tribute to Boland and her resistance to the male-oriented Irish poetic tradition that is liable to the simplified versions of Irish womanhood. Highlighting the significance of Boland for Irish literature, Clark puts into words that "Ireland has expanded its figurative borders because of writers like Boland, whose works confronted and challenged the nation's endemic sexism" (xiii). She makes references to Boland's earlier poems and essays with an emphasis on how Boland's poems redefine and portray the multiplicity and complexity of Irish women's experiences and challenge patriarchal literary tradition.

Jody Allen Randolph, in the "Preface", underlines the significance of *Citizen Poet* for Boland's oeuvre by claiming that "it forms the most complete single volume of Boland's essays available in any format" (xv). Randolph's preface offers a rich introduction to Eavan Boland's literary evolution, tracing her journey from a displaced teenager to a pioneering voice in Irish poetry and criticism. It highlights her early essays, such as "The Weasel's Tooth" (1974), published in the aftermath of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, which reflect her nascent engagement with nationalistic politics and communal responsibility – themes that matured over decades. Notably, her use of womanhood as a lens on nationhood emerges as a defining strength, evident from her first prose pieces for the *Dublin Review* in 1965, written as a Trinity undergraduate, to her influential works like *Object Lessons* (1995) and *A Journey with Two Maps* (2011). This preface sets the stage for understanding Boland's enduring impact on how women's poetry shapes cultural narratives.

The first section consists of the selected pieces from Boland's first volume of essays, *Object Lessons*. These essays articulate her early and forceful challenge to the Irish literary canon, insisting on the visibility of women's lives and voices. Pieces such as "Lava Cameo", "In Search of a Nation", and "Outside History" are now regarded as foundational texts in Irish feminist criticism, where Boland redefines the relationship between private experience and national history. Together, the essays trace Boland's struggle to locate a language for women's subjectivity in an Irish poetic tradition that had systematically excluded it. They also illustrate her belief that the personal and domestic are not marginal but central to the work of poetry.

The second part of the collection revisits Boland's later essays from *A Journey with Two Maps*, where her reflections expand beyond the Irish context to engage with international women poets such as Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath. Essays like "The Rooms of Other Women Poets" and "Becoming an Irish Poet" map out a transatlantic dialogue that situates Irish women's writing within a broader feminist literary framework. Here, Boland reflects more explicitly on the responsibilities of the poet as both artist and citizen, refining her vision of the "citizen poet". These essays demonstrate the maturity of her critical thought, combining personal narrative with broader cultural analysis and underscoring her position as both a national and international voice.

The final section of the volume, titled "Uncollected Prose: A Selection", stands as the true locus of the book, crystallising her enduring legacy as a feminist essayist and citizen-poet through a treasure trove of previously unpublished or lesser-known works spanning decades. This anthology's capstone draws from her early reflections in "The Weasel's Tooth" (1974), a sharp critique likely probing the predatory undercurrents of literary and societal expectations, to her later, more intimate explorations, culminating in the powerful, unfinished draft "From Daughter" (circa 2007) – a raw mosaic of letters, journal entries, and poetic fragments that poignantly captures the "incoherence" of balancing motherhood with the demands of poetic creation. Interwoven with this are incisive pieces like "Virtual Syntax, Actual Dreams" (2003), which delves into the digital age's impact on creative consciousness; "Islands Apart" (2008), reflecting on geographical and cultural isolation; and timely interventions such as "A Woman Without a Country: A Detail" (2014), "The Conscripted Poet" (2017), "Collaborate" (2017), "Diversity in Poetry" (2018), "What Does the Poet Look Like?" (2019), and "The Poet and Community" (2019), which interrogate the intersections of gender, nationhood, exile, and communal responsibility in poetry. By foregrounding these uncollected pieces alongside her latest essays, this section not only honours Boland's evolution from a young Irish poet navigating patriarchal barriers to a mature voice advocating for inclusive, woman-centred literary discourse but also underscores the book's overarching theme: the poet's vital role in reshaping cultural narratives through personal and political testimony.

Of particular note is the inclusion of "Daughter", an essay previously unpublished, which makes this volume especially valuable. More than a simple addition, "Daughter" deepens our understanding of Boland's lifelong preoccupations with lineage, identity, and generational memory. In this essay, Boland turns her attention to the intimate relationship between mother and daughter, exploring how personal bonds are shaped by cultural silence and historical absence. The essay resonates strongly with the themes of inheritance and erasure that permeate her earlier writings, yet it also feels distinctive in its emphasis on intergenerational dialogue.

This volume of essays consolidates Boland's reputation as one of the foremost theorists of Irish poetry in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It demonstrates how her essays complement her poems, offering a theoretical backbone to her creative practice. For students of Irish Studies, women's writing, and cultural memory, the volume will become an indispensable resource. More broadly, *Citizen Poet* invites us to reconsider the role of the poet in society. At a time when questions of identity, inclusion, and belonging are at the forefront of cultural debates, Boland's insistence that poetry must account for silenced voices is more relevant than ever. She challenges us to view literature not as a retreat from reality but as an intervention in it.

Citizen Poet, New and Selected Essays is both a tribute and a challenge. It reminds us of Boland's extraordinary contributions as poet, critic, and citizen, while also urging us to continue the work she began: to expand the canon, to question inherited narratives, and to acknowledge

the civic dimensions of art. As we read these essays, we encounter not only Boland's acute intelligence but also her moral imagination – her belief that poetry can and must engage with the lived realities of its time. For Irish Studies, and for the wider field of literary scholarship, this volume is a landmark.

Okaycan Dürükoğlu

Stephen Rowley, *Kindling Ashes*, London, Austin Macauley Publishers, 2024, pp. 205. Paperback. £9.99. ISBN: 978-1-0358-5224-6.

Stephen Rowley's *Kindling Ashes* concludes his trilogy on the Northern Ireland Troubles with a lyrical and deeply reflective novel. On the surface, it narrates the story of Daniel and Deirdre, lovers divided by sectarian circumstance. Beneath this narrative, however, lies a layered meditation on political violence, religious identity, personal guilt, and the elusive nature of peace within the Northern Ireland context. The prose is consistently poetic and evocative, lending the novel both emotional tact and symbolic richness. It is a text that bears witness not only to the historical trauma of the region but also to the moral imperative to remember – and to do so cautiously.

The novel's structure reflects its central preoccupation with fire and its aftermath. Divided into four parts – “Torched”, “Scorched”, “Charred”, and “Ashen” – each section corresponds to key historical events and emotional stages in the characters' lives. “Torched” evokes the beginning of the Troubles with the burning of houses on Bombay Street in August 1969, an event widely regarded as the catalyst of the conflict, and it is here that Daniel and Deirdre's tentative early romance takes shape amid the violence that displaces them. In “Scorched”, the horror of the Dunmurry train bombing is recounted in an understated register, marked by the narrator's haunting reflection on the mingling of ashes: “Do you think they mixed, eventually?” (91). Rowley's presentation of such events is notably restrained. His intention appears to be to present the facts as simply and clearly as possible, resisting sensationalism in order to show empathy with the victims. This stylistic economy, far from neutral, creates a narrative space where grief and trauma can be confronted without emotional excess.

In “Charred”, the Omagh bombing becomes both literal and metaphorical. As Daniel reflects on the end of his relationship: “as if a fire has gone through me and burnt my inside” (147) – Rowley intensifies the emotional terrain without rhetorical excess. The final section, “Ashen”, places the reader in a world where personal and political energies are spent. The ashes of past violence are not framed as closure, but as unstable ground upon which an imperfect peace attempts to stand. The use of fire as both a destructive and regenerative agent underscores the emotional logic of the novel: things are not reborn from ash, but they may still be understood.

Religion, in this text, is neither dogmatically condemned nor sentimentally reclaimed. Rather, it is rendered as a kind of emotional ecology, a system of interdependent beliefs, emotions, and responses that shape how individuals relate to themselves and to others in a sectarian world. Within this ecology, faith and disbelief are shifting forces that sustain, constrain, and reshape human relationships. Daniel becomes increasingly anti-theist, reacting to the violence “justified” by religious difference, while Deirdre's robust Catholicism stands as a counterpoint, embodying a wounded but persistent spiritual identity. Eddie, Daniel's cousin, functions as a figure of comic relief and moral evolution. He begins the novel as a caricatured bigot but grad-

ually becomes an advocate for pluralism. His humor may be read as a mechanism of defense – a quality he has developed to cope with the violence. Through these intersecting journeys, Rowley examines religion as a force that can both sanctify love and justify hate, capable of wounding and sustaining in equal measure. The spiritual toll of sectarianism is deeply felt in these pages, not only through plot but through tone.

The “Epilogue” marks a tonal and generic shift toward the mythopoetic. Recalling Heaney’s line that “the end of art is peace” (1979, 58), the narrator relates a dream of burial grounds where Catholic and Protestant dead rise, play, and mix without concern for their origins. In this vision, the dead are reconciled through shared games, symbolic gestures – such as drawing crescents on children’s foreheads – and mutual laughter. “Crematoriums are more a place of reconciliation than confrontation” (Rowley 2024, 204), the narrator muses, gently reconfiguring death as a space for understanding. The entire scene is rendered in euphemistic and poetic language, blurring dream with ritual and softening historical antagonism into symbolic healing. The phoenix motif on the cover – a green-eyed bird surrounded by sectarian colors, rising yet stained by blood – finds its analogue here. The dead appeased to their graves with a sense of belonging which suggests a vision of difference that is shared rather than opposed.

Rowley’s prose is marked by intertextual resonance, from the Heaney epigraph to the father’s cryptic aphorism: “Writers, son, live under the volcano, at the foot of the hills, just where the land touches the sea... amidst heaps of ashes... and they celebrate the Day of the Dead” (203). This line recalls Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947), evoking the notion of the writer as one who remains close to destruction in order to give voice to it. The dreamlike burial scenes of the epilogue offer a gentle echo of All Souls’ Day, suggesting that the dead are understandably better disposed at reconciliation than the living and represent a point of departure rather than arrival. Rowley, like Lowry and Heaney, turns to literature not as escape but as reckoning.

At the core of *Kindling Ashes* lies a feeling of unrelieved guilt: for having left Northern Ireland, for not having done more, for not having spoken sooner. That moral pressure animates the novel’s narrative ethics. In giving voice to the muted aftermaths of violence, and in portraying characters who yearn for but do not achieve spiritual peace, Rowley avoids the seductions of closure. His novel remains an open-ended act of testimony – graceful, painful, and deeply humane. While the fire may not reignite, the warmth of the potential of respectful remembrance flickers, tentative but enduring.

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Zhuo Li

Salomé Paul, *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy: Feminist Myths of Monstrosity*, New York-London, Routledge, 2024, pp. 214. Paperback. €55.99. ISBN: 9781032288888.

As Marina Carr herself stated in “Dealing with the Dead” (1998), writing is being in “conversation with [...] the ghost of the dead writers [...] writing’s about the courage to sit down and face the ghosts [...]”. It’s about going over the other side and coming back with something new, hopefully; gold, possibly” (191). It is new and gold indeed that we bring back after the reading of the very well-researched monograph by Salomé Paul, *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy: Feminist Myths of Monstrosity* (2024).

In “Introduction: The Gender Politics of Tragedy”, the author carefully plots the development of Carr’s plays. She shows how Carr’s characters are not born monsters, as often believes the common view of the legacy of the classical drama, but they become so, because of the restrictive roles of the patriarchal order in contemporary Ireland and in Western world at large. She compares Greek tragedies and her contemporary transpositions captures the moment in which women’s identities and experiences transform them into the terrifying monsters of patriarchal oppression.

Other researchers have described the influence in her work of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, but the author maintains that there is not yet “any study tracing Carr’s journey into transposing Greek tragedy on the contemporary stage and analysing the devices and strategies that she has been implementing throughout her career to overturn the patriarchal purpose of classical drama in order to create feminist theatre out of it” (12). The novelty of her exploration of Carr’s transpositions lies in a variety of interconnected perspectives, but she privileges the feminist perspective to overcome the traditional binary opposition of female characters into “good” and “bad” women.

Paul uses the term “transposition” as an umbrella term which falls into the broader category of “transtextuality”, as used by Gérard Genette, which helps Carr’s inclusion of Greek tragedy in her theatre.

Carr’s first play was *Low in the Dark* (1989), followed five years later by *The Mai*, both of which posited her as a central figure on Irish stage. Critics soon understood that she was disrupting the traditional conventions of patriarchy both in terms of canonical authorship but also in terms of dramaturgical form and dramatic content. She privileged the use of Greek mythology and tragedy to discuss the canon of women’s agency and subjectivity in her plays.

By the Bog of Cats... (1998) is Carr’s first play that derives explicitly from a Greek tragedy, Euripides’ *Medea*. Hester Swaine, the protagonist, is in love with Carthege Kilbride, her lover for fourteen years and father of the little girl Josie. The grief arises when Carthege leaves Hester to marry Caroline, a rich young woman. Carthege’s mother has never accepted Josie as a granddaughter because she was born out of the wedlock with a “tinker”. Moreover, the couple Carthege and Caroline are meant to settle in place of Hester on the bog. This action demonstrates not only a sexist a racist attitude, which emarginates and makes invisible those who are “Other” on basis of gender and ethnicity, but also illustrate social expectation in Ireland. The play ends with Hester’s burning her house and finally killing herself and Josie. These two events can be interpreted as a further explanation of how the three pillars of traditional Ireland, Nation, Church and Family were put into question.

Carr uses a similar approach in *Ariel* (2002), in which she employs plot elements from *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*. Ariel is the story of an Irish family, The Fitzgeralds, over a ten-year period during the Celtic Tiger era. The action is set in Fitzgeralds’ house and deals with the disappearance of Ariel after her sixteenth birthday, just when Fermoy, the patriarch, is running for election to the Dáil. Only late, will it be discovered that he sacrificed his

daughter for political success. What is interesting in *Ariel* is that Carr starts her transposition drawing a parallel between Fermoy and Agamemnon in *Iphigenia at Aulis* who must sacrifice his daughter to enable the Greeks to sail to Troy.

Carr's *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *On Raftery's Hill* (2000), which form the Midlands cycle, are pervaded by a sense of doom. These plays are not directly based on Greek tragedy but Carr interweaves many classical intertextual similarities.

The Mai is a memory play, recounted by Millie, The May's daughter, who, like a modern *seanchí*, remembers some of the events occurring during her childhood and leading to her mother's suicide. It is a story of loss and despair that haunted her grandmother Fraochláan and her great-grandmother before her.

Portia Coughlan tells the story of the titular character and her profound dissatisfaction with her family life. Her incapacity to be happy is gradually connected to the loss of her twin brother, who makes some ghostly appearances. The second act deals with Portia's suicide. As in *The May*, the chronological order is disrupted in the final act. Portia is still alive and there is the revelation of her incestuous relation with Gabriel, which recalls that of Portia's parents, thus reinforcing a tragic perpetuation of fatal actions that doom the family.

Incestuous relationships are also the theme of *On Raftery's Hill*, perpetrated by the patriarch Red, a farmer and land owner, on his two daughters Dinah and Sorrel.

Ten years later after the production of *Ariel*, Carr started to write new works based on Greek tragedy. These plays acknowledge more explicitly their connection to classical drama as they retain the classical diegesis of the ancient tragedies.

The first play of this new cycle transposing Greek tragedy is *Phaedra Backwards* (2011), which premiered in the U.S. The author states that *Phaedra Backwards* "relies roughly on Euripides' *Hippolytus*" and Carr offers a "complete reversal of the structure of the classical myth and tragedy in that play" (6). *Phaedra Backwards* opens with Theseus informing Phaedra of Hippolytus' death before moving back to relate not only the actions leading directly to that tragic event, but also to the history of Phaedra's family. The play also presents the humanisation of the Minotaur, who is not a ferocious monster as in classical literature and drama which corresponds to the de-humanisation of Theseus. When Theseus kills him, his heroic nature is reframed through the lens of toxic masculinity.

Hecuba (2015), which premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Company Swan Theatre in Stratford upon Avon in the U.K., is based on Euripides' *Hecuba*. Carr experiments a new form of dramatic speech mingling dialogue and soliloquies as well as narration and enactment, which helps Carr's to cast a new light on Hecuba, who is not portrayed as a monstrous character anymore.

In *Girl on an Altar* (2022), produced by the Kiln Theatre in London and based on Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Carr significantly changes the order of actions as the play starts with the sacrifice of Iphigenia and ends with the murder of Agamemnon. Thus, Clytemnestra does not kill Agamemnon immediately after his return but months or years later.

In 2021, *iGirl* was performed on the main stage of the Abbey Theatre. *iGirl* is not even a transposition of other tragedies but "a postmodern epic poem dealing with death, loss, and extinction. *iGirl* involves a variety of characters from a wide range of sources (ancient mythology, history and autobiography) and from different historical periods (prehistory, antiquity, medieval and contemporary time)" (8). However, the recurrent apparition of characters such as Antigone, Oedipus and Jocasta bear witness of the centrality of classical drama in Carr's theatre.

The author is adamantly clear that Carr's feminist transpositions of Greek tragedy have not emerged in a void. She traces the origins of the Greek tragedy and she maintains that Carr understands that tragedy in 5th century B.C.E. was used to define how men and women should live in the new-city state and what was the culture of the Athenian democracy. The genre thus

became a “distinctive Athenian cultural product”. Greek tragedy was as “a form of socio-political institution [...] [and] a form of propaganda” (14) and accomplished even more than one aim. It controlled, stereotyped and marginalised women, foreigner and slaves and reassured audience and citizens that the societal order, which persists in western consciousness, would have been maintained. Carr is aware of all this and, for this reason, she is strongly committed to challenge and subverts gender expectations.

In the first chapter, “From ‘Woman’ to Women on Stage”, Paul shows how Carr sets out to dismantle the binary opposition between “bad” and “good” women. In classical Greek tragedy the “Woman” was conceived as having a “normative function” and her representation showed ideologically what she was and was not allowed to do to comply with the gender expectation of patriarchy. Woman was “other” from men and Western mythology was built on the patriarchal order of woman as Virgin Mother or Eve since she simultaneously stands as the “source of life” and the “the downfall” of man. Womanhood dramatised by figures like Clytemnestra, Medea, Phedra and Hecuba underlines the definition of what woman is, or can be, or can go within a political model that is controlled by men. Carr deconstructs this vision and approaches the characteristic features of tragic women from a different angle. She defines a new conception of the categories of the “monstrous” and “sacrificial” women embedded in classical drama.

In Greek tragedy, women monsters include Clytemnestra, Medea, Phaedra and Hecuba as they embody the model of the vindictive women that must be feared. Clytemnestra and Hecuba have lost several children, Medea has been dismissed by her husband, and Phaedra has been killed by the goddess Aphrodite to punish Hippolytus’ impiety. Nonetheless, their reactions are “excessive” because they alienate the audience’s initial sympathy for their causes, turn them into monsters and, finally, confirm Greek men’s worst fears about women. Fear is a powerful emotion and Clytemnestra, Medea, Phaedra and Hecuba embody a vision of “woman” that is a threat to the male supremacy structuring Athenian democracy.

Hecuba appears to be the monster-woman *par excellence*. Unlike in Euripides’ version, in Carr’s transposition, Hecuba does not kill Polymestor’s sons nor blind him. It was the Greeks who performed these deeds and Carr’s reversal of these tragic actions illustrates a “radical” inversion of the “moral hierarchy” of the classic dichotomy, which oppose the barbarians to the Greeks.

The title of the play *Phaedra Backwards* provides information concerning Carr’s approach to this other classical figure of a woman monster. The play is famous for the outraged reaction of Phaedra’s shamelessness as she openly declares her guilty passion to her stepson. In Carr’s play Hippolytus is already dead when the play starts, and Phaedra offers a different insight into the events. She claims that Theseus, as he was an ageing patriarch that women are not looking at him anymore, was almost “favouring” Phaedra’s deed to rip through his son, thus making Hippolytus’s tragic death a consequence of the toxicity of hegemonic masculinity. Carr therefore introduces Theseus’s responsibility in Hippolytus’s condemnation to death and his desire not only to get justice for Phaedra but also for asserting dominance over his son.

Carr’s approach to *Medea* is similar for showing the grip of patriarchy on the conception of that figure as a monster, but the deconstruction of Medea’s monstrosity is embedded in the myth through intertextuality for two of her Midland plays: *Portia Coghlan* and *By the Bog of Cats*.... Portia embodies the representative of the “unwomanly woman”, but Portia does not grow monstrous because she has been forced into the realm of womanhood.

Carr’s examination and deconstruction of Medea are more significant in *By the Bog of Cats*.... She changes the circumstances leading the Medea-like figure to perform the murderous act. In Euripides’ tragedy the infanticide is an act of revenge against Jason’s betrayal and the wish not to leave her children in the enemies’ hands. Medea’s considerations are those that have more

influenced Carr's transposition of the myth. Scholars have given various contrasting interpretations of the infanticide as "an act of love", "an irrational deed on the impulse of a moment", "psychological or mythological", but I agree with the author's conclusion that "the connection between Hester and Josie emerging from the gender switch of Medea's sons implies that the child is subjected to the same marginalisation and discrimination as her mother" (54).

Clytemnestra is another "unwomanly woman" like Medea, and the author shows how she

appears in *Girl on an Altar*, which is based on Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the first play of *The Oresteia* trilogy. The figure of Clytemnestra also inspires the course of action undertaken in *Ariel*, which transposes the same classical tragedies as *Girl on an Altar* with the addition of Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*, the second play of *The Oresteia*, to a modern Irish setting. (55)

Clytemnestra, however, does not kill her children, but her husband Agamemnon, to usurp his male power. However, this action relates to the situation as a mother whose husband has killed their daughter, a specific feature that Carr uses in both of her transpositions to redeem Clytemnestra from her classical monstrosity.

Carr's decision to start both *Ariel* and *Girl on an Altar* with Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* helps to redeem Clytemnestra from her murderous violence and this alters and modifies the impact of her characterisation in *Agamemnon*. Aeschylus plays with the primordial myth of the chaotic matriarchy, as compared with the order that follows from the implementation of patriarchy. Carr exposes the falseness of that patriarchal tale as the first acts of both *Ariel* and *Girl on an Altar* are based on the submission of women to patriarchy. Women holding power is intended to be ephemeral. In *Ariel*, Frances acts as the head of the house for a short period and in *Girl on an Altar*, Clytemnestra's time in power for ten years seems of no importance. Carr's use of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* overturns the depiction of matriarchy's destructiveness in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. The tragedy sustaining the whole trilogy is indeed triggered by a woman killing a man, which establishes a strong dichotomy between male and female, and female self-assertion comes only at the cost of annihilating the Other. In *Ariel* and *Girl on an Altar* however the trigger of the tragedy is the killing of an innocent and young girl by her father seems greatly ironical as it shows the destructiveness of patriarchy rather than matriarchy.

The tragic end of Carr's many female characters emerges even more clearly in the classical model of sacrificial woman, which relies completely on women's acceptance of the destiny created for them by men, even at the cost of their life. Two types of women are specific in Greek tragedy: Polyxena and Iphigenia.

In Carr's *Hecuba*, Polyxena is not innocent for her secret love affair with Achilles. This demonstrates the agency she had before the fall of Troy and thus increases her alienation at the time of the play. Carr still leans on the lack of women's agency, but she overturns its reception. In Euripides' *Hecuba*, Polyxena willingly accepts her sacrifice as there is no choice offered to the character. This illustrates the patriarchal vision that woman is free if she submits to the destiny decided for her by man. Carr erases this dimension as Polyxena does not understand what they are doing to her and focuses on the obliteration of Polyxena's agency.

In Euripides' *Hecuba*, the willing submission to men is pleasurable and gives way to a powerful sexualisation associated with the murder of a young woman: Polyxena is stabbed and her body is half naked. Carr retains the requirement of half nudity but prevents the eroticisation of the action. Therefore, the physicality of the action is central to the re-conception of that action that is more a slaughter than a ritual. Unlike the characters in Euripides' tragedy, Hecuba attends the action, thus heightening the emotional implication of mother and daughter's helplessness. Carr's shows the extreme implication of women's reification required by patriarchy.

Carr's goes further in the reification in *Girl on an Altar*. Iphigenia does not even appear on stage; she stands as a mere prop to the story but Carr highlights the symmetry between these two sacrifices in classical tragedy mentioned in her transposition of *Hecuba* as a justification for Polyxena's death. Like Polyxena, Iphigenia has been murdered half naked, her throat has been slit with a knife by Agamemnon. Thus, the sacrifice is not fully dramatised but only its outcome. Clytemnestra, like Hecuba, relates the events to the audience and arrives after her daughter has been killed. It is through her reaction that Carr underlines how a young girl has been butchered like an animal in a field. This expresses the position of women in patriarchal society, which does not consider them humans equal to men and "are disposable cattle available to be slaughtered in order to strengthen male domination and patriarchy" (63). Furthermore, at the end of the chapter the author expands the category of "women" into pluralised, heterogeneous identities – characters like the Minotaur – who resist easy categorisation.

In the second chapter, "Feminist Resistance to Patriarchal Myths", Carr's transpositions rely on the feminist concept of the "resisting reader", which draws attention to patriarchal control of the characters' voices, and the author makes a distinction between adaptation (a new retelling), to which the Carr's plays of the Midlands cycle belong, and appropriation (a complete transformative re-writing that changes the meaning), to which belongs Carr's plays from *Phaedra Backwards* onward. The author also maintains that myth is universal and therefore is continuously re-written according to different times and places. This shows Greek tragedies can acquire diverse meanings, but Carr's transpositions draw a connection between the cultural and sexual politics of fifth-century Athenian society and twentieth-century Irish society and the Western World in general. Her plays show attention to the ancient male authors' patriarchal control on the characters' voices. In Carr's *Hecuba*, for example, the events of the fall of Troy are not a war but, in her words, a "genocide". This is the backbone of Carr's dramatic strategy. As the Greeks were the winners, Trojan history has been obliterated and substituted by the Greek "version" of that history. The civilisation conflict is at the basis of Carr's *Hecuba*, who is redeemed in her adaptation because in Euripides' tragedy was easy, according to Carr, to discharge Hecuba as a Trojan, an enemy and especially a woman. In this respect, monstrosity associated with this classical figure does not only highlight the sexist conception of women, but also the racist vision of non-Greek peoples. Carr thus unifies the classical dichotomy opposing the Greek to the barbarians and this dichotomy invites caution on judging who is the civilised and who is the uncivilised, especially in post-colonial contexts. Similarly, in the rest of the chapter every female character – from Phaedra in *Phaedra Backwards* to Clytemnestra in *Girl on an Altar*, to Antigone in *iGirl*, to The Mai in *The Mai*, to Hester in *By the Bog of Cats...* and to Portia in *Portia Coughlan* – to mention only a few, try to adopt strategies of feminist resistance to recover their agency, but their attempts and their subjective experiences remain within the domain of patriarchal control over their lives.

In the third chapter, "Writing Like a Woman", the author draws on practices such as Hélène Cixous' "écriture *feminine*" and Adrienne Rich's "revision", who approached classical writing from a feminist perspective to change the androcentric "horizon of expectations" and reconceptualises, for example, the figures offered from classical mythology. Carr's adaptations and appropriations therefore manifest a process of reassessing dominant narratives of history and cultural memory to (re)-inscribe unrepresented female experiences in which women are not only the subjects but also the authorial narrators. Carr thus gives voice to women characters who have been silenced and submitted to men's words and actions by the classical tragedians. In *The Mai*, *iGirl* and *Hecuba*, Carr places the characters of Millie, the Mai's daughter, Jocasta and Hecuba in an authorial narrator position in the attempt to gain subjectivity and agency. The authorial narration is also present in Carr's other Greek tragedies because the female protagonists' ability

to tell their stories sheds light on the distortion of “reality” emerging from the objectification of women in men’s narrative. According to the author, Carr thus shows her feminist intentions not only through the topic and characterisation but also by the form of her play.

In the fourth chapter, “Feminist Tragedy”, the author shows how the gender imbalance in Greek tragedy emerges from Aristotle’s notion of Mimesis, which provides both the tragic story and the tragic form. The patriarchal project of classical theatre is thus constructed both narratively and structurally. The hero, who performs the tragic action, is the central character in the Aristotelian conceptualisation of tragedy and the central character of the genre pertains to men only. In the fourth century however, women violate Aristotle’s assumptions about what they should be like. Nonetheless, women never stand as the tragic heroes and they never occupy centre stage. Even if they function as catalysts, agents and instruments of the play they “are never an end in themselves” (142).

Mimesis has been questioned by Bertold Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* – the “alienation effect”, a theatrical device to distance the audience from emotional involvement in the play and make the spectators acquire a critical position. As epic theatre aims to uncover the ideology structuring and ruling over society, feminists have used several techniques devised by Brecht – including the *Verfremdungseffekt*, the historicization, and the *gestus* – to analyse and create new representations of gender, which reveal and question the system of oppression and alienation of women by patriarchy. In Carr’s appropriation, the Midland cycle epitomises the concept of “broken realism” and shows characters which are not anachronistic nor atavistic, but depicts a deterioration of certainty in contemporary Irish society. The disruption of traditional realism is further explored in her adaption to coin a new genre – epic tragedy – which Carr uses in *Phaedra Backwards* and in *iGirl* to create a tragic epic. The author sees Carr’s works, especially in the appropriation of Greek tragedies and the devices used in them, perfectly in line with many Brechtian tenets. Carr’s appropriations therefore foresees the possibility of the birth of a new form of theatre, where myth considered “unalterable” can become “alterable”.

What emerges from the “Conclusion: A Threshold towards an Inclusive Theatre” is that Carr is still aware that both her adaptations and appropriations are far from eliminating fear, injustice, and patriarchal constraints and that happiness is still to be reached. However, she optimistically confides in the new genre of epic tragedy to create critical awareness of traditional tragedies and to point towards a more inclusive gender-aware future.

Paul’s monograph is an innovative book where one chapter smoothly moves into another and demonstrates assimilation of the work of many other scholars in the field. The secondary sources that Paul has consulted to create her interdisciplinary framework are many, ranging from adaptation theory, classical tragedy, feminist critiques and performance studies. However, the theoretical density of her analysis may challenge the less-expert reader in the various fields of research she draws on.

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Monica Randaccio

Mary O'Donnell, *Walking Ghosts*, Cork, Mercier Press, 2025, pp. 251. €16.99. ISBN: 9781917453226.

The past year has been extremely productive for Mary O'Donnell, a writer who has crossed genres in many ways, from poetry to fiction, to academic essays. Her fourth collection of short stories, *Walking Ghosts*, came out in May last year, her latest novel *Sweep the Cobwebs off the Sky* was launched last March and a new poetry collection is expected by the end of the year. Her writing is characterised by great power of observation of the human condition and keen attention to the changing shades of Ireland's life and society. This is particularly remarkable in *Walking Ghosts*, whose seventeen stories were written over the span of several years, some of them having been published elsewhere before being gathered in the present volume.

The title story, "Walking Ghosts", sets the mood and provides a *fil rouge* across the various stories, most of them dealing with people haunted in various ways, often by their past, or persecuted by loneliness and isolation, by decisions taken or not taken, by undisclosed secrets. In "Peach Jam", for example, the narrator, who is also a writer, reflects that "there were secrets everywhere to be uncovered" (81). And these hidden secrets become ghosts haunting the protagonists, unable to come to terms with themselves and with a society in flux.

The stories can be grouped thematically, regardless of the order of publication in the book, as clusters of issues and imagery connect some stories to others, while others share theme, context or setting.

The title story, "Walking Ghosts", is about a land transaction, and it is a land full of ghosts, past and present. After her mother's death, Jane has to deal with the house and the land. Her encounter with a Protestant tenant farmer turns into a source of embarrassment, as she unintentionally offends him, quoting a few lines from the Ulster loyalist song "The Green Grassy Slopes of the Boyne". This is the only story in the collection in which sectarian tensions are hinted at. In other stories situations specific to Irish life are dealt with, for example in "Like Queens, Not Criminals" the protagonist, in her early forties, travels to London for an abortion in the 1990s. "And now Roberta" the doctor asks her "just what are you going to do about the state of things in your country? Can you do something for the women who cannot afford to come here?" (74). The social issue is both enhanced and concealed by the narrative technique of the first-person narrator addressing the unborn child and imagining what it must have been for him/her. The London urban landscape that marks "Like Queens, not Criminals" also recurs in "Peace, Love and Pushpanna", set in the 1970s, shedding light on a young couple's visit to their London relatives. A casual involvement with the Krishna movement enables the protagonist and first-person narrator to catch a glimpse of a possibility of change and of a new beginning, epitomised by the food metaphor of the new flavours she discovers in the meal offered after the opening ceremony at the Krishna centre. In a similar way, the gay man and his transgender partner in "I'm so Lucky" face prejudice and marginalisation, metaphorically expressed by the wall they have to climb to get back home after having lost their key.

In other stories social issues are addressed through contrast or opposition. This is what happens in "All We Can Do Is —", in which the richness of tourists on a Canary island is shockingly juxtaposed to the arrival of exhausted and dying immigrants from Mali. The narrative organization of the text interlaces two stories, the wealthy Russian couple doing suspicious business and the Malian refugees, all this seen through the eyes of an Irish couple on holiday. Jack and Maddie meet the Toporovs on the beach, the man constantly speaking on his mobile phone. Interestingly, the word "topor" in Russian means axe or hatchet, thus implying a subtext of violence especially in relation to their impatience with African immigrants in Russia. The

refugees' arrival is anticipated by "African selling shawls and dresses" (156) as well as "sunglasses on the beach or in the street" (162), and the final part of the story is unexpected, the refugees arriving from the sea look like ghosts in a verbless sentence: "from the water – like sea-spectres – wading straggling people, slipping from an overloaded disintegrating boat" (170).

Also "Luck" is set in Spain, in the Andalusian town of Nerja, where a nameless Irish tarot reader has been forced to move after a dangerous liaison with the English diplomat's wife. He is the epitome of secrets and of the revelation of secrets. He has developed his skills as a con man, but is also aware that the women who turn to him suffer "from the global disease, loneliness" (43). His past and his own secrets turn against him when an embittered middle-aged woman approaches him for a reading. This is his secret made flesh, as he recognizes her as the woman he had deceived years ago in Dublin (51).

As a matter of fact, most stories deal with loneliness and human isolation, in both women and men. For example, the opening story, "Cocoa L'Orange", is set during the Covid lockdown and focuses on the way creativity can counteract isolation and mutual embitterment. Jake's aimlessness after having been forced to close his chocolate enterprise mirrors his neighbour Ned, "a locked-down once fashionable greengrocer" (10). The two men silently acknowledge one another's presence through a glance or a nod, in an unspoken attempt of mutual support. The tension of Jake's "civilised getting along" (15) with his wife Sasha is emphasised by her online work, which gives a purpose to her days. Jake misses his work and the kind of artistry implied in the creation of new recipes, a creativity that can hardly be replaced by preparing dinner. He reacts taking out "a set of moulds" and melting cocoa with "intense orange essence and a hint of chilly" (21), spreading the mixture on his face and body as a form of tattoo, a new identity and a form of survival. The chocolate solidifies and firms "like a mask" (22), to replace the masks made necessary by the spreading virus.

An ideal link leads to the context of the following story, "Stories about Fat People", set in a creative writing course. Ollie, the only male participant, has been made redundant from the restaurant he worked in and is now trying to reinvent himself, which casts a bridge to Jake, with whom he shares "restlessness" (26) in the attempt to find a new outlet in life. He perceives loneliness at the heart of the unnamed text proposed by the course instructor, which is in fact "Fat" by Raymond Carver.

In a similar way, "The Stolen Man" deals with creative writing and the attempt to find a new perspective in life. Once again, in contrast with O'Donnell's priority of giving attention to women and the female experience, a man is at the centre of the story, attending an MA programme as a mature student at Galway University after his marriage has gone to pieces. Persecuted by the thought of his bisexual ex-wife, writing becomes a form of rebirth, the context of a new city and a new house "helps him forget" (108) and gives him a "sense of renewal" he did not expect at the age of forty-nine (109). Details of the activities of the course and the characteristics of the tutors intermingle with folkloric elements widely interspersed in the text. As a matter of fact, the story in a way is a rewriting of W.B. Yeats's "The Stolen Child", a poem that has always fascinated Mary O'Donnell. The title itself with its shift from stolen child to stolen man anticipates the various references to fairies and the fairy world that remarkably characterise the story. The "blackthorn hedges on the fort" (107) opening the second paragraph have a deep symbolic resonance as the tree was believed to be inhabited by fairies and anticipate the climax of the fairy dance that engages the protagonist in the final part of the story. This is gradually but also more insistently introduced, first with the "fairy fort in the field" he sees from his window (113). The use of alliteration in a way foreshadows the mysterious music he

hears, “a ceilí [...] in full swing right in the house”, “Music you could dance to” (117), eerily appearing, disappearing and reappearing. Like the changeling in Yeats’s poem, O’Donnell has the protagonist go “with a fairy, hand in hand” to counteract a world “too full of weeping”. The final paragraph displays a crescendo of intensity, “Happily he dances, being wanted”, he is “included”, then “possessed” (119) and Yeats’s world full of weeping becomes a thing of the past, as “He will weep no more” (119).

In line with the recurring presence of writers and artists in her fiction, Mary O’Donnell has a writer also at the centre of “Peach Jam”, coming and going to and from an artists’ colony known as “Retreat by the Loch”. Deborah is haunted by the memory of her first love she is now trying to trace back, on Facebook, driving past his house and finally sending him a postcard “after forty years” (89).

Other ghosts haunt Dervla, the academic who in “Lifting Skin” is obsessed with the perspective of ageing and decides to undergo cosmetic surgery, and so takes a “four-month break from the Department of Celtic Studies” (187), where her interests involve the Crone in Irish literature, the feminine archetype she does not want to become. Emphasis is given at the opening of the story to the fashionable dark sunglasses she wears in self-protection during recovery, especially to avoid “misguided interest” (187) in her healing face. Therefore, she avoids crowded places and retreats to the isolated Neptune Bay where nobody can see her face and ask questions. Notably, the isolated beach is described as “deadly and haunted” (191), in the same way as the haunting obsession with ageing persecutes her. And in her attention to language, Dervla considers the language of medicine that is “like a piece of elastic” when applied to women. “An abortion was called an ‘operation’ [...] but a facelift was always called a ‘procedure’ ” (190). Her “illusion of youthfulness” (188) clashes with the abuse of domestic violence she is an involuntary witness to, as the young mother, now her neighbour, asks for help: “The woman from next door practically fell into the hall, bubbles of blood beading a split lower lip. Her mouth opened soundlessly for a moment, revealing blood-vivid teeth. The nose was skewed sideways and also bled. The skin beneath one eye was livid though not broken” (193). Her choice of plastic surgery and the scars it leaves are set vis-à-vis the wounds and scars, visible and invisible, in the young woman’s face, who wonders with “a puzzled concerned expression” (196) if the same thing has happened to Dervla too.

The issue of ageing is dealt with more directly in a group of stories in which Mary O’Donnell displays the variety of practical and emotional problems related to ageing women. In “The Capital of Outer Mongolia” the traditional Sunday dinner gathering all the women in the family provides the opportunity to reveal both the burden of the past in a dysfunctional family and the masked aggressiveness of the elderly mother, Honoria, subtly acting as a powerful matriarch behind her apparent helplessness. Geography obsesses Honoria, who is trying to complete the paper’s crosswords puzzle and is ready to spoil her daughter’s Christmas travel plans in the same way as she forced her asthmatic late husband to go to the desert. On the other hand, the past haunts her daughter Kay, “ambushing her with memories” (56). The lexical choice suggesting battles, soldiers, military operations, underlies Honoria as a tyrannical mother who “never cared much for motherhood or marriage” (56). Kay recalls the violence exerted on the younger adopted daughter Sorcha, now living in Australia, as far as possible from the family, the “slappings and beatings, the cane that hung from a hook in the kitchen” aimed at “disciplining Sorcha” (57). Using the medical metaphor of “an unhealed atrial scar”, Mary O’Donnell emphasises Kay’s sense of guilt as a powerless spectator, a “bystander” (57). Honoria’s monstrous maternity falls back on her only natural daughter, now in charge both of her mother and her aunt Rose.

An ideal link connects “The Capital of Outer Mongolia” to “Coins for the Ferryman”, in a way a response to the previous story with reference to the responsibility and commitment involved in taking care of an ageing ailing mother. Like Kay, Laura is a bystander, in that the story opens with her dog’s casual discovery of a corpse in the area where she usually has breakfast. The body frames the text, appearing with particular relevance at the beginning and end of the story. Within this frame, attention is cast on Laura’s thread of thoughts, reflections and worries, while she indulges on her only moment of peace in her day. The choice of the neutral word “body” rather than “corpse” and the use of short sentences and of alliteration emphasise the emotional distance Laura enacts, in particular in a verbless sentence: “Upstream, a weir, where a heron would wait on a rock in the silver-gray cascade” (216). This stylistic choice makes the weir a catalyst, a metaphorical barrier between the accidental discovery of the body and her everyday commitments. She reflects on the trial of dementia and on the burden that is assigned to her, the “plastic aprons, gloves and never-ending nappies” considering elder care in the oxymoronic “senile infantile” (219). We realise she has deliberately stopped giving her mother her medication in an attempt “to accelerate the natural process” (220). Like Kay in “The Capital of Outer Mongolia”, Laura is alone, her siblings having settled down abroad, her brother interestingly in Australia (220) like Sorchia. Reproducing the ancient tradition of placing coins on the eyes of the deceased to pay Charon the ferryman to cross the river Styx, Laura enacts on the body the ceremony she hopes to set up for her mother soon.

In “Edna” the elderly lady is not sick, she is independent and moves freely around the city, but she is certainly lonely and eager to fill the void she feels. The Dublin cityscape with specific references to locations and streets provides a backdrop for her activity, as she walks the Dublin streets looking for homeless people, especially young ones, offering them help in terms of money, food, water, a word of understanding and comfort, and a hug: “Without thinking, she hugs the girl, who looks about the same age as her daughter Flo, currently living in the Middle East” (139). However, Edna unexpectedly discovers that her material and physical generosity can damage somebody’s precarious balance. The young man she approaches in Nassau Street is one of the invisible people and his verbal and physical reaction to her touch is a shock: “he bucks to his knees and pushes her hard in the stomach. ‘Don’t TOUCH me or I’ll fuckin’ lamp ye. Don’t fuckin’ TOUCH me!’” (152). She has invaded or broken his private space.

As an alternative to ageing, Mary O’Donnell faces the loneliness of disability in “Wheelchair Plaza”. Jon’s opening sentence “You could say I had another life once. No, twice. No, many times. Another life in another place” (198) introduces his reflections on life and casts a backward look at the life he used to lead in Hong Kong before a car crash made his life “a fuckin’ disaster” (206). The story displays with tender bitterness but also humour a day in Jon’s life at the centre of occupational therapy he attends regularly, giving attention both to the disabled person and his caretaker, his sister Maud.

O’Donnell exploits a different trend in “The Creators”, a story that mixes ecological concerns and the conventions of dystopian narrative and that recalls her early story “The Deathday Party” published in her first collection *Strong Pagans* in 1991. The story is set in Scotland, or rather in Caledonia, in the twenty-second century – reference is made to “the previous century, around 2082” (136). The increase of population and the consequences of climate change and global warming have radically transformed the world, where “sheep are now bred exclusively in Greenland and Antarctica”, and the protagonist Alistair teaches his class of “perspiring children” “in the heat of January” (122). Subtle references to George Orwell and Margaret Atwood create an entire world of entrapment and control, where the best-looking women are randomly selected to work in the Garden Isles, namely Mull, Iona and Lewis, where “Everything planted

and grown [...] is for our consumption" (123). Fiona, Alistair's wife, is chosen to be sent to work in the Garden Isles, and "There is no opt-out clause" (120) in a dictatorial social frame. The story sheds light on Fiona and Alistair's last evening together, realising that having a child is the only way for her to be released from the Garden Isles: "Liabilities such as pregnant women are immediately dismissed from the Garden Isles, returned to Mainland" (134). Notably, the choice to use the Simple Present Tense forms emphasises the immediacy of a perspective future and the risks involved in change.

Not unlike "The Creators", "The Space between Louis and Me" is a sort of dystopic story, in which the first-person narrator, who works in an addiction centre, acquires a virtual man after reading an ad in the paper. Exploiting special visual devices, Louis materializes before her in virtual reality: "Every pore of his skin, every small hair behind the shells of his ears, his beautiful neck, his startling golden-brown eyes were *real*" (103). The streak of humour that underlies the story does not dispel the deep sadness at the heart of a narrative centred on the protagonist's loneliness and impending ageing: "Now I am fifty-one and feel the downturn of my life, the change that comes the high days have passed [...] Now I really need art" (99). Louis is in fact the art she is looking for.

Walking Ghosts is a rich and complex collection of stories that deserve attention and consideration in the variety and diversity of topics, themes, images, setting and narrative strategies, highlighting the protean quality of Mary O'Donnell's writing. The collection displays continuity and cross-connections with previous stories in the attention to the constant changes in Irish society and to the effects they may have on individual sensitivity. The time span from the past of the 1970s to the future of a dystopian world provides a mirror for the complexity of the present, in which ghosts continue to walk. Readers familiar with Mary O'Donnell's work will find a new challenge in this volume, while new readers will have the opportunity to approach one of Ireland's most resonant voices.

Giovanna Tallone

Evelyn Conlon, Rebecca Pelan, eds, *After the Train. Irishwomen United and a Network of Change*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2025, pp. 151. €30.00. ISBN: 9781068502309.

After the Train is a collection of essays that read like stories. And as a matter of fact, the volume is at the crossroads between the history of the feminist organization Irishwomen United and the individual stories of the women who actively took part in a process of change in the social and political life of women in Ireland from the 1970s onwards.

Edited by writer and activist Evelyn Conlon and academic Rebecca Pelan, *After the Train* is a work with multiple purposes, as it follows the steps of actions taken and goals reached in a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of Irishwomen United, with the aim to retrieve voices that deserve to be remembered. Not by chance is the book dedicated "To the Unknown Woman", the woman who was oppressed by social and ethical mores, the woman who tried to change the status quo, and the woman who can now appreciate and enjoy egalitarian reforms.

The title *After the Train* makes open reference to the "contraceptive train" event in May 1971, when a group of activists of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement travelled from Connolly Station in Dublin to Belfast to buy contraceptives which were illegal in the Republic.

The subtitle *Network of Change* highlights change as a keyword in the determination to face and take action in issues ranging from contraception to rape, to equal job opportunities and pay, to welfare for unmarried mothers, to gay rights.

The volume is divided into three parts, opening with a page of "Glossary of Terms" including data about Irish political life, public organizations and names such as Gay Byrne, the host of *The Late Late Show* that provided visibility to the activities of Irishwomen United. A "Foreword" by former President Mary McAleese is followed by two Introductions by each of the editors, and by eighteen essays, some of which are individual works, others the result of collective writing. The brevity of many of the essays suggests that the editors have chosen to offer as wide a range of voices as possible, rather than allow a lower number of contributors to write at great length. The result is a mosaic of views, personal accounts, critical opinions, first-person testimonials and recollections, sometimes with an academic stance, but mostly with impressionistic individual perspectives.

The "Foreword" by Mary McAleese points out how different the position of women in Ireland is in 2025 if compared to 1975, the year which saw the beginning of Irishwomen United, highlighting the different backgrounds of the women involved but especially the commitment and the effort made to make change possible. She also describes her own role as legal advisor of the Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform as well as the advice she was requested to give when setting up the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, but in particular, following the volume's subtitle, she praises "the network of women and groups who changed this country in so many ways" (xiii) as "evidence of what can be achieved when women gather to change the world" (xiv).

"Untold Spark" is the evocative title Evelyn Conlon gives to her "Introduction", in which a detailed account of personal experiences highlights her "feminist awakening" (6) and her engagement in contraception programmes as well as the establishment of a *crèche* at Maynooth University; her contribution opens and closes with the Sunday afternoon meetings at 12 Pembroke Street, which she considers "monumental education" (4), and references to such meetings recur regularly in the various essays. She makes clear that the present volume is intended as "one step in the acknowledgement, remembrance, and celebration of those who went before" (7) thus pointing out the collective enterprise of the work done over the years.

In the second "Introduction" Rebecca Pelan reproduces the volume's title, "After the Train. Irishwomen United and a Network of Change", starting with a detailed presentation of the journal of Irishwomen United *Banshee*, printed between 1976 and 1977. The explanation of the choice of the title is engaging, in that the intention was to reverse the original negative connotation of the screeching woman announcing death and provide it with a "powerful meaning" (9), namely giving voice to women. Pelan lists the well-known various forms of exclusion exerted on women in Ireland, from the marriage bar, to the unavailability of contraception, to male-only institutionalised customs. Interestingly, she highlights a parallel event that took place in Brisbane in 1965, when two women "chained themselves to the brass foot-rail of the public bar of Brisbane's Regatta Hotel, in protest at the exclusion of women from public bars" (13), thus anticipating part of the action taken by Irishwomen United in Ireland. Pelan describes the contents of the Charter of demands that was republished in all the issues of *Banshee*, which in a way is a sort of constitution of the organization besides stating clear objectives.

The eighteen essays presented here do not follow a specific chronological, thematic or alphabetical order and in their diversity they are all quite short, with very few exceptions that however do not extend over five or six pages. It will be virtually impossible to take all essays into account in detail in this context, but the variety of related texts is extensive, each of them giving voice to individual perspectives.

For example, several discuss among the various initiatives the occupation of the Federal Union of Employers (FUE) offices, an event that academic and activist Ursula Barry describes as “part of a campaign to force a backdown by government over a derogation of EU equal pay directives” (24). In a similar way, trade unionist Anne Speed recalls her participation in *The Late Late Show* when she pointed out she “had never met a low-paid man lower paid than a low-paid woman” (113). Equal pay was one of the big issues of those years, marked by other provocative radical actions, such as the invasion of the Forty Foot in Sandycove, a traditional male bathing place, or painting graffiti in the men-only Fitzwilliam Lawn Tennis Club, or the request to be served pints of beer in pubs, all of these challenging and openly defying an apparently unchangeable status quo.

Contraception was one of the major concerns of Irishwomen United, and probably one of the most important steps was the Contraception Action Programme (CAP) that allowed for the equal distribution of sexual knowledge and access to contraception for women in Ireland. Perhaps the most daring initiative was a shop selling contraceptives openly and illegally, together with a stall that moved in working-class areas with the same purpose.

A collective essay presents the various steps that led to the opening of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, with a first meeting in July 1977 and a “significant amount of hard work and research” (34), along with specific training, often emotionally demanding; as Ger Moane, activist in feminist and LGBTQ+ politics, writes, “Our first task was to educate ourselves about rape and sexual assault [...] it was a hidden crime, rarely reported, and rarely prosecuted” (35), and concern with rape within marriage was part of the project. The text reports the contributions of several people who offered support, acknowledging their names and activities, from the automated answering machine made available by Charles Haughey, to the appointment of Anne O'Donnell as administrator, to the assistance of Garda Stations, to the everyday work of volunteers, such as Rebecca Pelan herself. In a similar line, Anne Connolly's essay “The Well Woman Centre” reconstructs the difficulties of making clinics a reality with a full range of contraception services and assistance in the possibility of abortion, facing the obstacles of having no public awareness and no doctors: “When the Well Woman Centre opened its doors in the basement of 63 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin, in late January 1978, it was met with a deafening silence” (39). Again, the role of media and of Gay Byrne in particular gave the Well Woman Centre “a strong platform” (43) for visibility.

Mary Higgins relates the development of Cherish in her contribution “Children Have Equal Rights in Society Here (Cherish)”, established in 1972 by a group of single mothers. The name Cherish was taken from the 1916 Proclamation which declared that Ireland would “cherish all the children of the nation equally”. This was not the case in Ireland in 1972, where the stigma of single pregnant women and of illegitimacy was a reality. Campaign led to change that occurred with the introduction of the unmarried mother's allowance and the abolition of the status of illegitimacy; however, the essay describes sharply but lucidly the conditions of pregnant unmarried girls in both Catholic and Protestant-run institutions, the lack of options and choices except concealment or adoption. Higgins recounts the uneasy task of providing some form of shelter and assistance, having no experience but with stubborn determination (72). Mary Robinson became President of Cherish in 1973 and continued her work with the organisation until she was elected President of Ireland in 1990.

A number of contributions deal with the formation and development of women's publishing houses as well as women's studies programmes at third level education. Writer Mary Rose Callaghan, for example, describes the beginnings and growth of Arlen House in her essay “Arlen House: A Pioneer of Irish Publishing”. Callaghan recounts the determination of the founding

member Catherine Rose in publishing her own book, *The Female Experience: The Story of the Woman Movement in Ireland*, considered unmarketable by Mercier in Cork. This was in 1975, “Arlen House was born” (31). Historian, activist and Dominican nun Margaret Mac Curtain and poet Eavan Boland had their books published by Arlen, which at first devoted its attention mainly to politics and social affairs, education, history and biography, later to extend its interest to fiction too. Inspired by the London based Virago Press, Arlen House started to bring back to print writers like Kate O’Brien and Nora Hoult among others, thus giving new life to women writers risking oblivion. On the other hand, Mary Flanagan and Marianne Hendron focus on the need felt at the time “to empower women by making information more widely available” (63), which led to the Irish Feminist Information (IFI) training course and then to Women’s Community Press. Their essay “Remembering Feminist Publishing of the 1980s” points out that “IFI can be seen to be a continuation of IWU’s assertion [...] that information is power” (63) and their radical publications included lesbian and gay books at a time when homosexuality was considered a crime. The essay mentions the setting up of Attic Press in 1984 “as an imprint of IFI” (64), and the topic is discussed by Mary Paul Keane, who had worked for Wolfhound Press, in “Attic Press: A Reflection”. Keane contextualises the foundation of Attic Press at a difficult time for Ireland and for Irish women, and yet it was a brave and challenging enterprise, which like Women in Community Publishing devoted its energy also to training thanks to the Government Training and Funding Agency: “We were successful and trained women in the art and skills of community publishing” (78). The publication of *The Best of Nell*, a collection of Nell McCafferty’s articles for *The Irish Times*, with an introduction by Eavan Boland, was followed by titles on history and social sciences before casting attention to contemporary women’s fiction. Notable names in this respect are Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Evelyn Conlon, Melissa Murray and Linda Cullen.

Irishwomen United had a crucial role in decriminalizing homosexuality, and some essays deal with lesbian and gay rights as discussed in the Pembroke Street meetings on Sunday afternoons. These meetings represented regular appointments for the attendees, provided a forum for discussion regarding contraception, divorce, abortion, for projects and practical action, but were also an opportunity for developing friendships or same sex relationships. Recollections of the place are vivid, Evelyn Conlon defines the room “not strictly a confined space, more a crossroads, where minds met, argued, planned, revolted and moved forward” (3); Ger Moane has aural and visual memories: “We could hear the buzz before we entered the room. It was packed with women – sitting on chairs, on the ground, on the windowsills” (81); and Betty Purcell highlights the emotional side of such meetings: “Butterflies in the tummy; a sense of mission. The world was really changing, and we were the makers of that change” (99).

Other essays shed light on the entertainment provided by the Women’s Disco (Joni Crone), on the crucial significance of feminist readings (Mary O’Donnell), or on the personal development that underlies most of the testimonials, such as in Sandra Stephen’s “Fabulously Blasphemous: Finding Myself in Irishwomen United”.

The volume closes with the reproduction of the “Charter of Irishwomen United” in Appendix I, and a “Chronology of Changes Relevant to Women in Ireland 1861-2024” in Appendix II, followed by a detailed bibliography. A set of iconographic material is inserted in the book, reproductions of posters and placards, of leaflets announcing public meetings, of stamps issued to mark 1975 as International Women’s Year, of *Banshee* magazine covers, of photos of demonstrations or pickets, most of them from private archives and published here for the first time. This adds value to a collection whose aim is not to forget the passionate work of

Irishwomen United to provide a forum for discussion but also for concrete and practical action in making at least some form of change possible. After fifty years, *After the Train* represents an apt celebration of all the efforts made and the dreams come true.

Giovanna Tallone

Luca Sarti, *Voci di Erin. Il fairy tale irlandese nel terzo millennio fra identità, tradizione e nuove narrazioni*, Napoli, UniorPress, 2024, pp. 298. ISBN: 978-88-6719-310-3.

Recensire questo volume di Luca Sarti è per me quasi un atto dovuto, per almeno due ragioni. Innanzitutto per la tematica affrontata, dal momento che coincide in buona parte con quello che è stato il mio principale campo di ricerca, a partire dai tempi del dottorato e fino a pochi anni fa. In secondo luogo perché l'autore chiama direttamente in causa il frutto più concreto di quel lavoro, la mia monografia sul *fairy tale* irlandese, nella quale, fra l'altro, avevo proposto una ridefinizione di tale genere nel più ampio contesto della tradizione narrativa irlandese.

Voci di Erin è un'opera costituita da quattro parti ben distinte, ognuna dotata di una propria specificità. Tuttavia, come suggerisce il titolo stesso, c'è un elemento che fa da collante a tutto il testo ed è l'Irlanda, anzi Erin. Più precisamente, come si evince dal sottotitolo, l'interesse dell'autore è focalizzato sulla tradizione narrativa irlandese sotto le specie, per così dire, del *fairy tale*. Questo genere – che viene reinterpretato, alla luce della mia sopra citata proposta teorica, come una categoria onnicomprensiva dei racconti in cui si narra di incontri e/o scontri fra piano definito e piano indefinito (soprannaturale) della realtà – assurge a emblema e punto di convergenza degli altri due concetti che indirizzano e sostanziano l'intera opera: *Irishness* e *storytelling*. Sulla base di questi tre pilastri l'autore imbastisce un complesso percorso dall'indubbio valore scientifico, non fosse altro che per aver colmato una lacuna: in tanti, infatti – compreso il sottoscritto – si erano “concentrati sul periodo che intercorre tra il Medioevo e il Novecento”, ma mancava, quanto meno in Italia, una “mappatura in forma sistematica delle storie raccontate, trascritte e soprattutto riscritte a più di cento anni di distanza dal famoso *Revival*” (11), come rimarcato da Rossella Ciocca nella Prefazione.

Al libro di Sarti, tuttavia, si possono ascrivere anche altri meriti, non ultimo la passione genuina con cui l'oggetto di ricerca viene esaminato e sviscerato, una passione che l'autore non cela e con cui cerca anzi di contagiare il lettore, tanto da avvertire l'urgenza di allegare al testo un'appendice fotografica intitolata “Un'estate irlandese nel Munster”, una suggestiva e inattesa carrellata di immagini che, nel mostrarci alcuni scorci di un preciso angolo d'Irlanda, sembrano volerci suggerire quanto sia intimo e prezioso il legame che spesso (ma non sempre) si crea tra uno studioso e il contesto nel quale e/o per il quale conduce la sua ricerca.

Ma riavvolgiamo il nastro. Nella breve Introduzione, che si apre significativamente con una citazione dello *storyteller* contemporaneo Eddie Lenihan (protagonista assoluto del terzo capitolo), l'autore sintetizza il contenuto, i paradigmi e le finalità dell'opera, ribadendo la necessità di colmare un gap a suo avviso presente negli *Irish Studies* e nei *Fairy Tale Studies*. Di conseguenza conclude: “Lo scopo principale di questa monografia risiede quindi nel tentativo di offrire un contributo che indagli sui motivi che, nel terzo millennio, spingono tutta una serie di scrittori e scrittrici a trascrivere o rielaborare, raccogliere e (ri)narrare gli *Irish fairy tales*” (18).

Tale scopo viene specificamente perseguito nella seconda parte del libro. Nella prima, intitolata “Il *fairy tale* nell’Irlanda otto-novecentesca: questioni di *Irishness*”, Sarti si impegna a costruire e chiarire le basi teoretiche del suo discorso, prima ripercorrendo la storia d’Irlanda secondo la prospettiva dell’*Irishness* e dell’ultrascolare relazione intessuta con la madrepatria britannica, poi soffermandosi sul Celtic Revival e dunque sul ruolo svolto dalla letteratura e dal folklore nel processo di emancipazione culturale e politica irlandese.

Il primo capitolo, “*Eire*, la colonia fantasma”, ci introduce nell’acceso dibattito concernente lo status di colonia dell’Irlanda e la conseguente opportunità di riconoscerla come oggetto di studio dei *Postcolonial Studies*. Con la sua documentata disamina, Sarti mette chiaramente in evidenza come l’Irlanda sia un’“entità problematica per la teoria postcoloniale” (28) e sente anzi la necessità di ridefinire la questione in termini di “colonia fantasma”, riferendosi da un lato alla “‘trasparenza’ dell’Irlanda [...] alla sua assenza in tante teorie postcoloniali”, dall’altro alla “sua posizione ‘liminale’, al confine tra due ‘mondi’ – uno ‘anglo’ e uno ‘celtico’ ” (36-37). Ad ogni modo, dal paragrafo specificamente dedicato alle vignette satiriche pubblicate nel corso del XIX secolo sulla rivista *Punch* (43-55) emerge un’idea fortemente derisoria e discriminatoria degli irlandesi, raffigurati, di volta in volta – come si evince dalle illustrazioni a corredo del testo – nelle vesti di scimmie, maiali, piovre, vampiri e mostri. La reazione a tanta acredine si riassume, secondo Sarti, in un’opera di ribaltamento dei pregiudizi inglesi, che si concretizza nel cosiddetto “Celtic Revival”, a cui è dedicata l’ultima sezione del primo capitolo (55-69), e che consiste sostanzialmente in un recupero e rivalutazione delle radici celtiche: “Trasformando la loro immagine negativa di gente superstiziosa, non evoluta e irrazionale, essi [i revivalisti] costruirono quindi un’immagine positiva, autodefinendosi un popolo religioso, tradizionale ed emotivo. Se discendere dai Celti era per gli inglesi una ‘colpa’, per gli irlandesi diventò un tratto distintivo, una qualità, addirittura un ‘vanto’ ” (57). Di fronte al “dilemma significativo”, tipico di una realtà coloniale, della lingua da utilizzare per dare corpo a tale opera di riscossa culturale, l’adozione dell’inglese da parte di alcuni autori – primo fra tutti Yeats – non si configurò come un tradimento, ma come la scelta strategica di chi voleva raggiungere un pubblico più ampio. Inoltre, richiamandosi a due voci autorevoli della teoria postcoloniale quali Homi Bhabha e Benedict Anderson, Sarti sottolinea come, tra fine Ottocento e inizio Novecento, in Irlanda sia avvenuto l’incontro/scontro tra due mondi che dà vita a “uno spazio ibrido, un ‘terzo spazio’, che corrisponde a quello anglo-irlandese” (63). Un concetto di terzo spazio che sarà ripreso più avanti.

Che cosa fu effettivamente il Celtic Revival, almeno dal punto di vista folklorico-letterario, lo scopriamo nel secondo capitolo, “Protagonisti di altri mondi, protagonisti del passato”. Il capitolo si apre con un *excursus* teorico che si sofferma sulla definizione e classificazione dei generi della narrativa orale – mito, leggenda, fiaba, racconto popolare – attraverso un esame dei contributi di diversi studiosi quali Malinowski, Thompson, Bascom, Zipes, Tatar, Teverson (71-79). Senonché, ravvisata la fluidità della materia e tenendo conto della peculiarità del repertorio irlandese, l’autore opta per la già menzionata revisione terminologica, in virtù della quale tutta la tradizione narrativa identificabile nella dialettica definito/indefinito viene ricompresa sotto l’ombrello del *fairy tale* (79-85). Coerentemente con tale scelta, il sottoparagrafo seguente (85-94) è incentrato sul concetto di *fairy* e sulla genesi degli esseri soprannaturali irlandesi per eccellenza, i *fairies* appunto, a partire da uno specifico studio di Massimo Conese, che si richiama a sua volta a quanto espresso in merito da Yeats nella sua prima antologia folklorica. Il secondo capitolo si chiude proprio con una sintetica, ma a mio avviso esaustiva, rassegna delle principali antologie di racconti della tradizione orale irlandese pubblicate a cavallo fra Ottocento e Novecento (94-106). Dall’opera pionieristica – e controversa – di Thomas Crofton Croker fino ai frutti più

maturi del Celtic Revival, rappresentati dalla triade Yeats-Lady Gregory-Stephens, passando per Kennedy, Lady Wilde e gli statunitensi McAnally e Curtin, Sarti delinea un quadro esemplare dell'incontro tra folklore e letteratura in Irlanda che funge da "punto di partenza, termine di paragone indispensabile per l'analisi delle raccolte di *fairy tales* pubblicate nel terzo millennio" (106).

La seconda parte del libro, intitolata "Il *fairy tale* irlandese nel XXI secolo: fra trascrizioni e rielaborazioni", si suddivide in ulteriori due capitoli: "Preservare e diffondere storie locali nell'era globale", forse il capitolo che più mi ha intrigato, incentrato com'è su un tema, lo *storytelling*, oggi più che mai attuale – ma troppo spesso travisato o invocato a sproposito – e su una figura decisamente affascinante, lo *storyteller* Eddie Lenihan, e "Nuove narrazioni per nuove generazioni", che costituisce probabilmente il contributo più originale dell'opera.

La prima sezione della seconda parte (109-123), soffermandosi sull'egemonia esercitata da Walt Disney e sull'influsso che le sue trasposizioni cinematografiche hanno avuto sulla ricezione, più o meno distorta e banalizzata, della tradizione fiabesca europea, si rivela come un elogio indiretto della genuinità delle fiabe irlandesi, che a detta dell'autore sono state preservate dalla disneyficazione imperante – salvo che per il caso di *Darby O'Gill and the Little People*, film Disney del 1959 ispirato appunto a un *fairy tale* irlandese – e forse, proprio in virtù della loro singolarità, "faticano a uscire dai propri confini e a conquistare il 'grande pubblico'" (123), mentre continuano a riscuotere successo in patria, a dimostrazione di una forte identificazione, tuttora presente, fra *storytelling* e *Irishness*. Tale aspetto emerge con forza nella sezione seguente, dedicata alla "magia dello *storytelling* orale" – concetto che viene qui opportunamente esaminato nel suo significato primario – e alla sua incarnazione più emblematica, lo *seanchaí* Eddie Lenihan (124-133). A proposito di incarnazione, è interessante notare come l'innata narratività irlandese sia materialmente identificata da Sarti nel castello di Blarney e nella sua "pietra dell'eloquenza", un'attrazione turistica che è anche un simbolo della "passione e la predilezione per lo *storytelling*", nonché della "credenza negli esseri fatati, la cosiddetta *fairy faith*" (130), ingrediente essenziale di tale narratività.

Ma è appunto nella biografia e nell'opera instancabile di Eddie Lenihan che l'autore riconosce l'essenza stessa della narrazione orale e del suo radicamento nella storia e nella cultura irlandesi. Identificato innanzitutto come "un raro esempio di conservatore di storie", a Lenihan viene anche attribuito il merito di essere "un preservatore di simboli 'naturali', di luoghi del paesaggio irlandese ritenuti 'sacri'", tanto da riuscire a far deviare il tracciato di un'autostrada pur di non far abbattere un biancospino che, secondo la tradizione, era abitato da *fairies* (132-133). All'interno di una smisurata "produzione crossmediale", che annovera libri, audiocassette, CD, DVD, documentari e podcast che hanno l'obiettivo di mantenere vivo e rendere fruibile a un ampio pubblico uno dei più ricchi patrimoni narrativi del nostro pianeta, Sarti si focalizza su *Meeting the Other Crowd* (134-140), un volume del 2003 che comprende *fairy tales* raccolti in circa tre decenni. La scelta non è casuale, in quanto, già dal titolo, quest'antologia si presenta come il racconto di un incontro con il mondo indefinito dei *fairies*, un mondo parallelo "oscurato dall'avanzamento tecnologico, nonché dalla presenza di forme di espressione culturale egemoniche" (136). Dall'accurata descrizione dell'opera emerge chiaramente come essa si ponga in stretta continuità con quanto fatto un secolo prima sotto gli auspici del Celtic Revival, senza contare che nei *fairy tales* raccolti da Lenihan è possibile ravvisare quel "lato oscuro" (140-148) che li contraddistingue rispetto agli standard fiabeschi impostisi da un secolo a questa parte. Sarti coglie anche l'occasione per ritornare sul concetto di "terzo spazio", ovvero sulla natura ibrida di un'antologia che deriva tanto dall'incontro fra oralità e scrittura, quanto dalla fusione linguistica e culturale fra inglese e irlandese, tema a cui viene dedicato un apposito sottoparagrafo (148-158).

Nell'ultima sezione del capitolo, giocando sull'ambivalenza dell'aggettivo (*ever*)green, l'autore sottolinea sia l'intimo legame dei *fairy tales* irlandesi con la natura e con il paesaggio nei quali

sono ambientati, sia l'attualità del loro messaggio, in quanto veicoli di un approccio rispettoso e responsabile nei confronti del mondo naturale – anche se ritengo eccessivo parlare di “una concezione del mondo che è possibile definire ‘animistica’ ” (167). Infine, per restare al lato più contemporaneo dell'opera di Lenihan, vengono esaminate le sue “rimediazioni” della tradizione irlandese (164-168), ovvero il ricorso ai nuovi canali offerti dalla rivoluzione digitale per diffondere i suoi contenuti narrativi, così che questi da locali diventano sostanzialmente “glocali”.

Il quarto e ultimo capitolo si apre con un'estesa e approfondita analisi di una categoria specifica, i *retellings* per bambini, questi ultimi divenuti, già a partire dall'Ottocento, i destinatari privilegiati delle fiabe, benché in origine esse si rivolgessero a un pubblico adulto. L'autore evidenzia, richiamandosi all'idea genettiana di transtestualità, come quello fiabesco sia un *retelling* più complesso rispetto ad altri, dato che si fonda su “ ‘più’ ipotesi o un ipotesto che, generalmente, rappresenta il prodotto di una stratificazione di narrazioni piuttosto che di un singolo racconto ‘originale’ ”; si tratta in sostanza, per citare Cristina Bacchilega, di “testi che sono già ‘plurali’ perché in essi è possibile individuare più di un solo ipotesto” (171-172). Pertanto, al di là del pubblico di riferimento, le raccolte prese in esame permettono a Sarti di osservare in che modo una parte non trascurabile della tradizione irlandese viene preservata e tramandata alle nuove generazioni. Questo ci riconduce al concetto di *Irishness*, dal momento che è su tale caratteristica che si appunta l'attenzione dell'autore e che rende le fiabe in questione “alternative” rispetto a un canone ormai (purtroppo) consolidato. La selezione del materiale analizzato è fatta secondo criteri particolarmente stringenti, in modo da circoscrivere in maniera coerente e pragmatica l'ambito della ricerca: antologie eterogenee (cioè non monotematiche), pubblicate nel primo ventennio del XXI secolo, riguardanti esclusivamente l'Irlanda, ricche di illustrazioni e rivolte a bambini dai sette anni in su; di conseguenza, tutto ciò che non è rivisitazione di storie della tradizione e che non rispetta i suddetti criteri viene escluso. Ecco allora che “questa modesta indagine introduttiva” (177) si concentra su appena cinque antologie, due provenienti dalla Repubblica d'Irlanda, due dall'Ulster e una dalla diaspora (Stati Uniti), quasi a rimarcare la persistenza di quel “terzo spazio” anglo-irlandese (e americano) nel quale si conserva e rielabora il patrimonio narrativo dell'Isola di Smeraldo, per usare una perifrasi cara a Sarti.

L'*Irishness* dei racconti antologizzati viene sottolineata attraverso un'accurata “analisi (para) testuale” (180-197), dalla quale emerge come tanto gli elementi testuali – temi, luoghi, personaggi, registro linguistico – quanto quelli paratestuali, ovvero le illustrazioni (a colori) che accompagnano il testo, restituiscano al lettore la chiara impressione di storie profondamente radicate nel paesaggio e nella cultura irlandesi. Peraltro, ribadendo come questi racconti non sempre si concludano in maniera lieta e non sempre risultino appropriati a un pubblico infantile (198-203), Sarti evidenzia – ancora una volta – il loro essere alternativi al modello disneyano.

Il paragrafo dedicato ai “*retellings* per giovani adulti” permette all'autore di spostare il discorso dall'identità culturale a quella di genere, in particolare sulla condizione e la percezione della donna nelle fiabe, una cui svolta è individuata nella seconda metà del Novecento grazie a una serie di riscritture femministe. Queste ultime sono definite “contro-egemoniche”, in quanto sovvertono la fiaba di matrice disneyana, “non-normative”, dal momento che presentano trame, personaggi e prospettive che deviano dalla norma, e “attiviste”, poiché, come nota Bacchilega, si assumono il compito di combattere una visione egemonica non più accettabile e di suscitare nei destinatari una risposta adeguata, anche attraverso l'uso di più canali mediatici. Ne deriva così un fiorire di “fiabe postmoderne” in cui “si assiste a una ‘rottura’ dei confini di genere, inteso sia come ‘genere’ fiabesco, sia come ‘gender’ ” (210).

Esemplari in tal senso risultano gli adattamenti femministi della scrittrice irlandese Deirdre Sullivan, in particolare la “pluripremiata raccolta” *Tangleweed and Brine*, pubblicata nel

2017 e destinata, come detto, a un pubblico di giovani adulti. All'incrocio tra femminismo e postmodernismo, si tratta per Sarti di un'opera "che sovverte il modello fiabesco egemonico attraverso contenuto e forma – raffigurando personaggi ed epiloghi non-normativi e usando tecniche narrative e un linguaggio 'anticonvenzionali'. Le protagoniste di questi adattamenti, più o meno giovani, più o meno belle, sono donne consapevoli di essere 'intrappolate' in un mondo dominato da uomini" (214). Insomma, racconti adatti a stimolare riflessioni e prese di posizione rispetto a tematiche ancora troppo attuali quali discriminazione e violenza di genere. Tuttavia, quasi a dimostrazione della non canonicità del *fairy tale* irlandese, solo una delle storie incluse nella raccolta proviene dalla nostra isola: *Fair, Brown and Trembling*, ossia la variante irlandese della celeberrima Cenerentola, trascritta per la prima volta da Jeremiah Curtin, versione di cui l'autore si serve per illustrarne trama e caratteristiche principali (218-226). Il distacco dal canone fiabesco si denota nel lieto fine non atemporale ma inserito in una temporalità umana e sociale, la cornice realistica e non fantastica (con tanto di toponimi gaelici, come già evidenziato per altri *retellings*) e la presenza della religione (le due sorelle cattive vanno a messa).

Dopo "uno sguardo rapido" a due rivisitazioni di questa fiaba incluse in due delle cinque raccolte per bambini esaminate in precedenza, giungiamo finalmente al *retelling* di Deirdre Sullivan, che ha il merito (e il coraggio) di ribaltare la prospettiva e stravolgere il contenuto stesso del racconto. La protagonista non è più Trembling ma Fair, che protegge piuttosto che vessare la sorella minore, fino a sacrificarsi per salvarla dalla meschinità di un personaggio maschile che da eroe si trasforma in antagonista, nel quadro di una società di stampo chiaramente patriarcale. La narrazione è in seconda persona, così da favorire l'immedesimazione nella protagonista, e un'insolita (per una fiaba) enfasi è data all'interiorità di tutte e tre le sorelle, ciascuna dotata di una propria personalità. Appare pertanto giustificato da parte di Sarti affermare, sulla scorta di Lidia Curti, che "le ri-narrazioni incluse in *Tangleweed and Brine* possono definirsi 'pericolose' per il modello fiabesco egemonico, ma 'curative', vitamine per l'anima, per chi è alla ricerca di storie e personaggi 'diversi' in cui immedesimarsi" (240).

Nel brevissimo paragrafo conclusivo l'autore ribadisce il senso più profondo della sua ricerca, ossia l'aver messo in evidenza la diversità e persino l'unicità dei *fairy tales* presi in esame, capaci di dischiudere "universi da esplorare, labirinti da risolvere e un caleidoscopio di possibilità da considerare", riconnettendosi così, aggiungo io, all'idea di pluridimensionalità che aveva guidato a suo tempo il sottoscritto nella ridefinizione del genere *fairy tale*. Da ricercatore coscienzioso, Luca Sarti si congeda affermando che la sua opera va considerata come un punto di partenza e non di arrivo, tanto da suggerire lui stesso dove condurre ulteriori e più approfondite indagini.

L'ampiezza e l'eterogeneità della bibliografia giocano senz'altro a favore del rigore scientifico del testo, così come il fitto apparato di note, benché ce ne sia qualcuna che appare sovradimensionata e il cui contenuto avrebbe meritato di essere trattato più distesamente nel corpo del testo. Lo stile è piano e scorrevole e la lettura procede quasi sempre spedita e senza intoppi. Qualche refuso qua e là salta all'occhio – penso, ad esempio, alla nota 51 di p. 129, dove in una stessa riga troviamo "Glasglow" e "scozzesse"(!) – così come qualche scelta lessicale non sempre perspicua – mi chiedo, ad esempio, perché usare i termini "collezionista/i" e "collezionare" come sinonimi di "raccolgitore/i" e "raccolgiere", o perché non tradurre in italiano i nomi dei sovrani inglesi. Ciò che conta, tuttavia, è la certezza di essere di fronte a un'opera che per acume, originalità e raggio d'azione merita il plauso di tutti gli studiosi e i cultori di *Irishness* e *storytelling*, interessati o meno che siano al genere *fairy tale*.

Vito Carrassi

Riccardo Michelucci, *Il giorno in cui morì la musica. La strage della Miami Showband e l'Irlanda nel caos*, Milano, Milieu edizioni, 2025, pp. 233. € 18,00. ISBN 979-12-82104-06-7.

Una nuova fatica di Riccardo Michelucci, noto cultore della storia e dell'attualità irlandesi, che si legge come un libro giallo, pur essendo invece un saggio. Tratta, a cinquanta anni dai fatti, della strage ai danni della Miami Showband, il più popolare gruppo musicale irlandese di quel tempo, avvenuta nella notte del 31 luglio 1975 vicino al confine tra la Repubblica irlandese e la provincia britannica dell'Irlanda del Nord: tre dei cinque membri di quel gruppo musicale presenti in quel momento vennero sterminati da terroristi lealisti della Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) che erano però – come spesso accadeva – al tempo stesso membri del reggimento territoriale dell'Esercito britannico Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), ed erano guidati da un capitano in incognito dei servizi di intelligence dello stesso Esercito britannico, Robert Nairac.

Michelucci illustra nei dettagli questa storia truce, rimasta non chiarita per decenni, avvenuta in uno degli anni più violenti dell'ultima fase (1969-1998) del conflitto anglo-irlandese (o *Troubles*, cioè 'guai' o 'triboli', eufemismo quasi vezzeggiativo già applicato al periodo 1919-1923 del medesimo conflitto), conflitto che l'autore illumina con efficacia nei suoi complessi elementi anche per un lettore che ne ignori tutto. E descrive magistralmente che cosa quello stesso gruppo musicale rappresentasse nella cultura musicale popolare irlandese delle *showbands* tra anni Sessanta e anni Settanta, e come la sua fine violenta affrettasse l'esaurirsi di quel fenomeno culturale e di costume.

L'autore ripercorre la formazione della cosiddetta 'banda di Glenanne' (dal luogo di una fattoria usata per tenere e distribuire all'occorrenza le armi e gli ordigni esplosivi), che apparentemente coincideva con la brigata del Mid-Ulster della UVF, molti dei cui membri erano al tempo stesso soldati dell'UDR dell'Esercito britannico, il reggimento territoriale delle Sei Contee che era stato creato nel 1970 per assorbire i membri dei disciolti B-Specials, la polizia ausiliaria volontaria unionista, sciolta per avere apertamente partecipato nel 1969 ai pogrom ai danni dei civili cattolici che avevano fatto riaprire il conflitto anglo-irlandese. L'UDR si dimostrò essere una toppa ben peggiore del buco, e ciò ovviamente per disegno, non per "deviazione" ("deviazioni" che, anche in altri contesti e paesi, in realtà non sono per nulla tali). La doppia appartenenza, a una banda di assassini lealisti impegnati nello sterminio di civili cattolici e a un reggimento ufficiale dell'Esercito britannico, favoriva naturalmente il prelievo di armi ed esplosivi dalle caserme dello stesso UDR, e il potersi muovere in uniformi dell'Esercito: "A partire dall'autunno del 1971 dalle caserme dell'UDR iniziarono a sparire enormi quantità di armi e munizioni. Spesso non era neanche necessario sottrarle dai depositi, perché molti soldati avevano l'abitudine di portarsele a casa e i controlli erano tutt'altro che rigorosi" (48).

Ma la 'banda di Glenanne' era molto di più della brigata locale della UVF, e dei locali soldati volontari territoriali dell'Esercito britannico. Infatti, come illustra Michelucci, i suoi esponenti di punta erano al tempo stesso informatori della squadra politica (Special Branch) della polizia ufficiale dell'Irlanda del Nord, il Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), e agenti locali del servizio segreto inglese MI5, guidati inoltre da ufficiali dei servizi segreti dell'Esercito britannico. Quanto all'MI5 (che sarebbe la sezione dello Special Intelligence Service – il servizio segreto civile - competente per la sicurezza interna del Regno Unito), esso era impegnato in quel momento in una faida riguardo alla giurisdizione sul conflitto anglo-irlandese con i colleghi dell'MI6 (la sezione del medesimo SIS invece competente per lo spionaggio all'estero), e la ideazione dei peggiori attentati di cui i lealisti della 'banda di Glenanne' furono i meri esecutori era parte anche di tale faida.

L'autore racconta le truci vicende di questo micidiale conglomerato nel corso degli anni, descrivendone le origini e i protagonisti, ma al tempo stesso ampliando il panorama e illustrando la fondazione e i primi delitti della UVF a opera (ma con incoraggiamento da parte di politici unionisti) di Gusto Spence nel 1966, e le parti in causa – come l'Ordine d'Orange – del secolare conflitto riaperto come conseguenza dei pogrom unionisti del 1969. Michelucci segue i comandanti della brigata del Mid-Ulster della UVF (prima Billy Hanna [1929-1975], poi Robin Jackson detto "lo Sciacallo" [1948-1998], che dopo avere assassinato il primo il 27 luglio 1975 gli succedette al comando) e i loro uomini più legati alle operazioni descritte, come il proprietario della fattoria e armeria di Glenanne, James Mitchell (1920-2008), riservista della polizia ufficiale RUC e al tempo stesso organizzatore di eccidi, e come Harris Boyle e i fratelli Somerville.

Viene ripercorsa la interminabile serie di delitti che vedevano vittime civili scelte soprattutto sulla base dell'odio confessionale o *sectarianism*, e assai raramente membri dello IRA (Esercito Repubblicano Irlandese) o in generale del movimento repubblicano, che erano in teoria quelli contro cui le bande armate lealiste combattevano. Non si trattava solo del tradizionale odio contro nazionalisti e cattolici degli unionisti dell'Irlanda del Nord, tenuto vivo e rinfocolato periodicamente dall'Ordine d'Orange e dai politici unionisti: era l'applicazione di una pratica contro-insurrezionale standard, impiegata di fatto universalmente dagli Stati contro ogni genere di insorti o guerriglieri in tutto il corso del ventesimo secolo, infischandosene delle leggi internazionali e dei diritti umani. In Inghilterra questa pratica, vista nelle guerre coloniali cui aveva partecipato, venne trasformata in sistema teorico dall'allora colonnello Frank Kitson in due volumi pubblicati a distanza di una decina d'anni, il secondo all'inizio dei nuovi *Troubles* in Irlanda¹. La teoria sosteneva che alle bande degli insorti si dovessero contrapporre "contro-bande" organizzate localmente, che era meglio figurassero come indipendenti dallo Stato coinvolto; e che, non potendosi ovviamente cancellare le cause del conflitto, per togliere l'acqua al pesce guerrigliero si dovesse colpire la popolazione civile presso cui i ribelli si basavano, di preferenza mediante le "contro-bande", in modo che la popolazione (in questo caso quella nazionalista e cattolica dell'Irlanda del nord-est), terrorizzata ed esasperata, smettesse di fornire rifugio o di appoggiare gli insorti. Non ci si meraviglia quindi che chi passava al vaglio i candidati a diventare membri dello Ulster Defence Regiment fossero la squadra politica della RUC e la intelligence militare britannica della provincia, e non è quindi casuale che la maggior parte dei soldati dello stesso reggimento fossero al contempo membri di gruppi terroristici lealisti. Non è nemmeno strano che le stesse bande armate lealiste fossero occultamente dirette, tramite infiltrazione il più delle volte accettata dai lealisti stessi o almeno dai loro capi, dalla intelligence militare britannica, dalla squadra politica della RUC e dalle due sezioni del servizio segreto inglese. Il nostro autore finge meraviglia, a scopo drammatico: e in effetti la propaganda dello Stato britannico, amplificata dai mass media inglesi e dalla maggior parte delle agenzie di stampa (anche se in modo meno totalitario di quanto sia avvenuto in tutto l'Occidente dalla caduta del muro di Berlino), presentava il conflitto come uno scontro religioso tra folli terroristi repubblicani e altrettanto folli terroristi lealisti. Lo stesso Stato britannico vi figurava soltanto come mediatore e forza d'ordine la cui presenza impediva che tali folli si scannassero a vicenda e che scannassero l'intera popolazione. La medesima propaganda negava con assoluta certezza che vi potesse essere collusione alcuna tra gli organi dello Stato e i terroristi lealisti. Un simile sospetto (per quanto ben fondato) non poteva che essere frutto della propaganda dei guerriglieri repubblicani, anche quando persone che con i repubblicani irlandesi non avevano nulla a che fare, come alcuni giornalisti più indipendenti

¹ Frank Kitson (1926-2024), *Gangs and Counter-gangs*, London, Barrie and Rockliff, 1960, e il più noto *Low Intensity Operations*, London, Faber and Faber, 1971.

e come i sacerdoti cattolici Raymond Murray e Denis Faul, individuavano i chiari indizi della collusione tra forze dello Stato e terroristi.

I delitti della 'banda di Glenanne' avevano di solito luogo nella zona di competenza della brigata del Mid-Ulster della UVF, a sud del lago Neagh, prevalentemente nelle contee di Tyrone, di Armagh e di Down. L'assassinio di una coppia di contadini cattolici di fronte al loro bambino di due anni, occorso nel 1973 dopo una lunga serie di altri omicidi settari di civili innocenti, spinse i due sacerdoti summenzionati "a denunciare apertamente l'inerzia delle autorità nell'individuare i responsabili di questi crimini" (55). Furono padre Murray e padre Faul a coniare il termine di "Triangolo della morte" per la zona in cui quest'onda di delitti aveva luogo, anche se solo in seguito poterono rendersi conto pienamente della collusione (non dell'inerzia) tra le autorità e gli assassini lealisti. Le uccisioni attribuibili alla 'banda di Glenanne' fino al massacro della Miami Showband furono molte decine, e continuarono anche in seguito, fino al cosiddetto processo di pace. Ma l'episodio più atroce prima del massacro di quei musicisti furono gli attentati di Dublino e Monaghan del 17 maggio 1974, il 'Venerdì nero' in cui quattro autobombe, tre nella capitale della Repubblica, una nella città vicino al confine, uccisero 33 civili, compresi vari bambini. A posteriori si sa che l'intera operazione, pur condotta dalla brigata del Mid-Ulster allora guidata da Billy Hanna, era stata ideata e organizzata dalla squadra politica della RUC e dai curatori inglesi della brigata lealista, cioè il servizio segreto militare e l'MI5. "Le bombe di venerdì 17 maggio facevano parte di un piano decisamente troppo sofisticato per essere state opera soltanto dei paramilitari lealisti" (94); e quegli ordigni esplosivi richiedevano competenze tecniche che la UVF non possedeva. Come nota Michelucci, l'attacco ebbe luogo durante lo sciopero generale unionista che pose fine agli accordi di Sunningdale, un tentativo di risoluzione pacifica del conflitto che anticipava gli accordi di Belfast del 1998: era naturale che settori dell'apparato statale britannico contrari agli accordi volessero contribuire a farli saltare. L'autore ripercorre e descrive vividamente molti dei delitti della 'banda di Glenanne', ponendoli sullo sfondo degli sviluppi politici, e dà giustamente molto spazio all'attentato di Dublino e Monaghan, sempre indagando sulla personalità delle vittime. Anche se da allora gli omicidi di civili cattolici continuarono, sembra che il capobanda Billy Hanna, che si riteneva un soldato, fosse sempre più a disagio per la morte di bambini nelle stragi di Dublino e Monaghan, tanto da essere considerato da alcuni suoi commilitoni un rischio per la sicurezza. E sembra che la sua opposizione alla pianificazione dell'attacco alla Miami Showband segnasse il suo destino, spingendo Robin Jackson – con ogni probabilità autorevolmente "consigliato" – a sbarazzarsi di lui pochi giorni prima dell'azione.

Un racconto parallelo che fa Michelucci è quello che riguarda la biografia di Stephen Travers, il bassista della Miami Showband, uno dei due sopravvissuti alla strage. Attraverso di lui fa la descrizione della scena musicale irlandese di quegli anni: tra le sette e ottocento *showbands* (gruppi musicali composti da un numero di musicisti tra gli otto e i sei) si aggiravano con successo nelle balere e negli auditori di tutta l'isola, suonando diversi generi di musica di intrattenimento moderna, dal rock'n'roll al country, dal soul al pop, facendo le cover di cantanti e di gruppi famosi, come Elvis o come i Beatles, o, come la Miami Showband, creando le proprie canzoni, evitando però ogni brano di musica con valenza politica (che erano invece il pane delle bande repubblicane e di quelle unioniste). Il grande successo di tali *showbands* in entrambe le parti dell'Irlanda divisa, con fenomeni di adorazione dei divi simili a quelli che avvenivano in altri paesi (in particolare il cantante della Miami Showband, Fran O'Toole, poi perito nella strage, aveva un grande numero di *groupies* adoranti), dipendeva anche proprio dal fatto che si trattava di musica d'evasione, non impegnata, che dal 1969 permetteva soprattutto agli spettatori delle Sei Contee di astrarsi dalla realtà terribile del conflitto. L'autore ripercorre

la storia della Miami Showband, la band più famosa dell'Isola, chiamata da alcuni "i Beatles irlandesi", i cui sei membri nel 1975, al tempo del massacro, erano Fran O'Toole (cantante e pianista), Des "Lee" McAlea (sassofonista), Tony Gherarty (chitarrista), Stephen Travers (bassista), Brian McCoy (alla tromba) e Ray Miller (batterista). Si noti che mentre due di loro (O'Toole e Travers) provenivano dalla Repubblica, gli altri quattro erano del nord-est dell'isola, due cattolici e due protestanti (questi ultimi McCoy e Miller).

I due racconti di Michelucci, quello politico e quello musicale, convergono al momento del massacro ("Il giorno che morì la musica", 101-111). Alla fine di un concerto a Banbridge, nel nord (il gruppo musicale suonava cinque o sei sere a settimana, e un paio di queste serate avevano in genere luogo nelle Sei Contee), mentre il batterista Miller andava ad Antrim dai suoi genitori, gli altri cinque, che invece tornavano a Dublino, vennero fermati sul loro furgoncino Volkswagen prima dell'alba del 31 luglio 1975 ad un posto di blocco dell'Ulster Defence Regiment nella campagna deserta vicino al villaggio di Buskhill. I posti di blocco dell'esercito o della polizia erano comuni in quel clima di guerra, e i cinque musicisti non si preoccuparono più di tanto. Il posto di blocco era però dedicato proprio a loro, e quella decina di soldati del reggimento territoriale locale dell'Esercito britannico erano tutti membri della Ulster Volunteer Force e quindi della 'banda di Glenanne'. Comparve in macchina un ufficiale inglese che sembrava dare ordini al gruppo, con ogni probabilità il capitano dell'intelligence militare Robert Nairac (che due anni dopo venne catturato ed eliminato dallo IRA), e due dei soldati (Harris Boyle e Wesley Somerville) cominciarono apparentemente a perquisire il retro del furgone, mentre i cinque musicisti erano allineati al margine della strada. Di colpo vi fu una violentissima esplosione, che ridusse in pezzi i due lealisti, e a quel punto gli altri soldati/terroristi cominciarono a sparare ai musicisti. Des "Lee", colpito di striscio, si finse morto, e così fece Stephen Travers, colpito invece in pieno, seppur non mortalmente, da una pallottola dum dum. Gli altri tre, tra i quali Brian McCoy, che paradossalmente era figlio del Gran Maestro dell'Ordine di Orange della contea di Tyrone, vennero massacrati a raffiche di mitra e a colpi di pistola.

Il piano di chi indirizzava i lealisti era alquanto machiavellico, mostruoso e bizzarro: un ordigno a tempo doveva essere nascosto dentro al furgone della Miami Showband, ordigno che sarebbe esploso oltre il confine, polverizzando i cinque musicisti. In tal modo si sarebbe sostenuto che quella *showband*, la più famosa e apprezzata dell'Irlanda, trasportava in realtà esplosivi per conto dell'Esercito Repubblicano Irlandese, e si sarebbe posto fine al fenomeno delle stesse *showbands*, che di fatto unificavano l'intera isola (cosa che in effetti comunque avvenne). Come ha scritto infatti la giornalista Anne Cadwallader citata da Michelucci,

le sale da ballo erano uno dei pochi luoghi in cui le due comunità [la cattolica/nazionalista e la protestante/unionista] potevano ancora mescolarsi e vivere insieme come se niente fosse. Continuare a frequentarle nonostante il clima di terrore che regnava nel paese era anche una forma di ribellione e pensavamo che nessuno avrebbe mai potuto prendere di mira le sale da ballo, né tanto meno i musicisti. (126)

Inoltre, se il piano fosse riuscito, si sarebbe messa ulteriore pressione sul governo di Liam Cosgrave a Dublino, che era già assolutamente anti-repubblicano e che perciò aveva di fatto impedito le indagini sugli attentati del 17 maggio 1974, affinché varasse nuove e ancora più draconiane misure contro il repubblicanesimo irlandese. Solo il fatto casuale che l'ordigno era difettoso, o che probabilmente i due lealisti che lo stavano piazzando avevano toccato un contatto provocandone l'esplosione prematura, aveva impedito la riuscita del piano.

L'autore illustra poi le reazioni politiche alla strage (anche a quell'epoca il coinvolgimento degli apparati dello Stato britannico era evidente), e dà minuzioso conto delle indagini senza

risultato (o delle finte indagini che servivano a coprire gli ideatori britannici del massacro e il loro principale agente tra i lealisti coinvolti, lo “Sciacallo” Robin Jackson). Segue poi le vite dei due sopravvissuti alla strage, in particolare la vita e la ricerca di Stephen Travers, che a pochi anni di distanza da esso cominciò a impegnarsi per individuare i mandanti del massacro, e il graduale svelarsi tramite prove giudiziarie e testimonianze, soprattutto dopo gli accordi di Belfast del 1998, della collusione tra gli apparati statali britannici e gli esecutori, gli assassini lealisti.

Scriva il Michelucci alla fine dell'opera:

Fin dal mio primo incontro con Stephen Travers ho capito che la tragedia della Miami Showband era terribilmente paradigmatica della collusione tra i gruppi armati lealisti e le cosiddette forze di sicurezza britanniche negli anni del conflitto anglo-irlandese. I retroscena di quel lontano massacro spiegano alla perfezione quali furono le dinamiche coloniali che lo scatenarono e lo alimentarono per quasi tre decenni. (225)

Verissimo. Un racconto avvincente e serrato, che si legge come un romanzo ma che non lo è. “Saggistica narrativa”, come definisce il libro Michelucci, ma assolutamente priva di “particolari inventati o dialoghi immaginari” (*ibidem*). Per il lettore italiano, non solo una finestra sui sordidi aspetti della guerra contro-insurrezionale inglese in Irlanda, ma qualcosa che riecheggia vicende stranamente simili che si svolgevano qui in Italia qualche decennio fa.

Carlo Maria Pellizzi

Barry Houlihan, Patrick Lonergan, Máiréad Ní Chróinín, eds, *Druid Theatre 1975–2025*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2025, pp. 465. Paperback. £29.99. ISBN: 9781350542594

Since its foundation in 1975, Druid Theatre has occupied a distinctive and influential position within modern Irish theatre. Emerging from Galway rather than Dublin, the company has consistently demonstrated that the most vital dramatic engagements with Irish identity, history, and place need not originate from the traditional metropolitan centre. *Druid Theatre 1975–2025*, edited by Barry Houlihan, Patrick Lonergan, and Máiréad Ní Chróinín, is a timely and substantial volume that marks the company's first fifty years by combining an extended introductory essay with six plays and six shorter contextual introductions. The result is both an anthology and a critical act of recovery, one that documents Druid's achievements while also clarifying the cultural logic that has shaped the company's work.

In the opening essay, “Introduction: Druid and New Irish Playwriting, 1975–2025”, the editors make their purpose clear from the outset. Druid, they write, has

played an essential role in the development of new Irish writing for the stage” [through] supporting emerging dramatists, premiering works by established playwrights and reassessing older plays, many of which would otherwise have been unjustly forgotten (8).

That formulation is important because it captures the dual movement that has long characterised Druid's artistic practice. The company has not simply produced new work, nor has it merely revived older texts. Instead, it has continually brought the two activities into relation, allowing theatrical recovery itself to become a mode of innovation. This anthology, the editors explain, seeks to celebrate those achievements “by collecting six key plays from the company's

first 50 years” and by including introductory essays that offer “a sense of Druid’s distinctive approach to making theatre” while also “highlighting possibilities for future publications, and for future productions too” (*ibidem*). Particularly striking is the account given of Druid’s rootedness in Galway and the west of Ireland. Quoting Garry Hynes’s statement from the programme for the company’s opening season, the editors recall her insistence that

Theatre has for long been regarded as a night time fancy of the elite. I feel it must be an expression for the community in which it is rooted, serving its educational, recreational and creative needs. If it fails in this it will not survive. (*ibidem*)

This principle of rootedness is shown to be neither provincial nor restrictive. On the contrary, Druid’s Galway base becomes the condition of its imaginative reach. As the editors note, the company has brought plays “from parish halls around Ireland to Broadway” and in doing so has explored Irish life through an ongoing engagement with “the cultural and social history of the island of Ireland” (*ibidem*). In this respect, the volume offers a persuasive model of how regional theatre can function as a national and indeed international force.

The anthology’s structure reinforces this argument effectively. Of the six plays included, several are especially worthy of note for the way in which their introductory essays illuminate Druid’s broader artistic development. The section on M.J. Molloy’s *The Wood of the Whispering* is particularly valuable. Garry Hynes is quoted as observing that any attempt to explain why Druid produced the play “is also an attempt to explain Druid’s artistic policy” (18). This is a revealing claim. Molloy’s drama, rooted in rural Galway, economic stagnation and emigration became for Druid a means of articulating its own theatrical commitments. The introduction records Hynes’s view that the play was “strikingly relevant” because its characters had “an ambiguous attitude towards Ireland and towards what it is to be Irish” (19). Such ambiguity, as the editors show, became central to Druid’s later work. The discussion of the 1983 production’s opening image is equally memorable. Fintan O’Toole described how, after de Valera’s idealised rhetoric of Ireland as a pastoral national space, the audience saw Sanbatch Daly “picking fleas and lice from his hair”, an opposition that moved “beyond the ironic to the absurd” and then “beyond the absurd to some kind of meaning, some kind of hope” (*ibidem*). This is an excellent instance of the volume’s ability to show how Druid reimagined neglected plays through performance.

Geraldine Aron’s *Same Old Moon* is another welcome inclusion. The introduction explains that the play was commissioned by Druid for Galway’s quinquennial year in 1984 and was met with remarkable enthusiasm, with box office records showing “over 98 per cent attendance” across its initial run (88). This contextual detail is useful but more significant is the essay’s account of the play’s thematic preoccupations. Brenda Barnes, even as a child, imagines herself as an explorer and this is neatly linked to Druid’s own development as a company “exploring new work and finding international audiences as well as those in their home city in the west of Ireland” (*ibidem*). The essay is particularly good on the play’s hybridity of place and identity and it demonstrates how Aron’s drama registers Galway, London, memory, migration, and family without reducing any of them to a single coherent narrative.

Tom Murphy’s *Conversations on a Homecoming* occupies a central place in the volume, and rightly so. The introduction notes that the play “emerged” from Murphy’s association with Druid, premiering in Galway in 1985, and is now remembered as “a major breakthrough, both for the company and the playwright” (163). For Druid, the production “firmly established them as champions of new Irish writing”, while for Murphy it was “a kind of homecoming” (*ibidem*), the first time one of his plays premiered in his home county. The account of the play’s development out of *The White House* is especially helpful, allowing the reader to see how Murphy’s revisionary

process paralleled Druid's wider artistic interest in return, reworking, and historical excavation. Particularly telling is Murphy's own statement that the play is about "the way that you analyse the past and how you look at the present situation that you're in", with retrospection forming "part of the fabric and make up of the play" (163). The later discussion of Druid, Murphy is equally illuminating, especially the observation that placing *Conversations* at the start of the cycle turned it into "a kind of excavation of Irish history" (164).

Vincent Woods's *At the Black Pig's Dyke* demonstrates the company's willingness to stage difficult and politically charged work. The introduction links the play's development to mummification traditions and to Stafford's interest in the strawboy mask as a metaphor for "the dark underbelly of border violence" (240). The production history is equally revealing. Premiering as Druid's one hundredth production in 1992, the play received immediate acclaim and toured widely, even as its Derry run was disrupted by masked protestors. Far from diminishing the production's significance, this response helped cement Druid's reputation as a company willing to platform "courageous new voices in Irish theatre" (*ibidem*).

Nancy Harris's *The Beacon* brings the anthology to the present. The introduction is strong on Harris's emergence as a major dramatist and on the significance of Jane Brennan's casting as Beiv. Brennan's remark that "I was married to a playwright so I know a lot about that single minded approach to the work" (360) offers a vivid point of entry into the play's concern with art, compulsion, and interpretation. Harris's own comment, "I do think the unconscious is the most interesting thing" and that "Visual artists are never trying to explain themselves" (*ibidem*), is equally well chosen. It captures the modernity of the play, but it also demonstrates its continuity with Druid's longer interest in memory, place, and the unstable meanings of artistic expression.

The negatives of this volume are few while the positives are manifold. Given the anthology format, some introductions are necessarily brief and more extended scholarly engagement with the afterlives of particular productions would have been invaluable. There is also an understandable emphasis on the celebratory. Yet these are minor reservations in a volume that is so evidently useful, well-conceived and historically important. The editors have produced more than a commemorative publication. They have assembled a compelling account of Druid's role in reshaping modern Irish theatre through new writing, recovery work and a sustained interrogation of place, memory and identity. Students and scholars of Irish theatre, modern drama, performance history, and cultural memory will find *Druid Theatre 1975–2025* an invaluable resource. The volume demonstrates with clarity that Druid's achievement lies not only in the plays it has staged but in the particular theatrical imagination it has brought to them. That imagination, rooted in Galway yet never bounded by it, has altered the landscape of Irish theatre for half a century.

Robert Finnigan

M.G. Cronin, *Revolutionary Bodies: Homoeroticism and the Political Imagination in Irish Writing*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2022, pp. 207. Hardback. £80.00. ISBN: 9781526135421.

In recent years, scholarship within Irish Studies has increasingly turned its attention to the intersections between sexuality, politics and literary form. Michael G. Cronin's *Revolutionary Bodies: Homoeroticism and the Political Imagination in Irish Writing* represents a significant

intervention within this evolving field. Rather than offering a conventional literary history of gay writing in Ireland, Cronin instead examines how depictions of the homoerotic male body have functioned as sites for imagining revolutionary political possibilities. By bringing together readings of authors such as Brendan Behan, John Broderick, Colm Tóibín and Jamie O'Neill, Cronin's study offers a sustained exploration of the relationship between sexual desire and radical political imagination in Irish literature.

In the introduction, "Wilde Atlantic Ways: Homoeroticism, Irish Literature and Revolution", Cronin situates his argument within a broader theoretical and historical framework. Beginning with Oscar Wilde, whose work functions as a recurring point of reference throughout the book, Cronin argues that Wilde anticipated many of the intellectual concerns that animate the study. As he explains, the central problem of the book concerns "the relationship between styles of writing homoerotic passion and styles of writing which cultivate a hopeful revolutionary imagination" (9). For Cronin, Wilde's essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" provides an especially important conceptual foundation, since it links sexual freedom with broader forms of social transformation. Wilde's insistence that "the proper aim [...] is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible" (*ibidem*) becomes, for Cronin, a starting point for examining the ways in which literary depictions of homoerotic desire can also function as critiques of capitalist social relations. Cronin's introduction is particularly effective in demonstrating the ways in which literary form itself can operate as a vehicle for political thought. Drawing upon theorists such as Raymond Williams and Joseph North, Cronin argues that literature should not simply be read as a reflection of historical conditions. Rather, literary works possess a dynamic capacity to shape political imagination. As he notes, approaches that treat literature merely as historical documentation risk suppressing "the actual work on material [...] which is the making of any work of art" (11). By foregrounding aesthetic form, Cronin therefore positions his study as an example of literary criticism that seeks to intervene in cultural debates rather than simply observe them.

The first chapter, devoted to Brendan Behan, establishes the book's central methodological approach. Cronin reads Behan's *Borstal Boy* (1958) as a text in which political radicalism and homoerotic desire intersect in complex ways. The prison environment of the novel provides a space in which the narrator's encounters with other male bodies become intertwined with a broader critique of imperial authority. In this context, Cronin suggests that the homoerotic male body functions not merely as an object of desire but also as a symbolic site for imagining forms of solidarity and resistance. Equally compelling is Cronin's discussion of John Broderick's fiction in the second chapter. Broderick's novels, published during the 1960s, depict a recognisably modern figure of the homosexual at a moment when Irish society was undergoing significant cultural transformation. Cronin demonstrates that Broderick's work complicates the narrative of progressive liberalisation often associated with post-war Ireland. Instead of presenting homosexuality as a "social problem" awaiting resolution, Broderick's fiction constructs what Cronin describes as an unsettling constellation of figures, including "the 'homosexual', the 'fallen woman' and the republican 'gunman'", each of whom represents forms of disruptive social difference (27). In doing so, Broderick's work challenges the modernisation narrative that has frequently shaped interpretations of mid-twentieth century Irish culture.

Cronin's analysis of Colm Tóibín's fiction offers another important contribution to the study. Focusing particularly on novels such as *The Story of the Night* (1996), Cronin situates Tóibín's work within the broader historical context of the emergence of modern lesbian and gay political movements, and the neoliberal restructuring of global capitalism. He argues that Tóibín's gay male characters often embody the political rationality of neoliberal subjectivity.

Yet Cronin also demonstrates that the aesthetic texture of Tóibín's prose frequently destabilises these ideological frameworks. As he notes, when Tóibín's novels focus most intensely on the male body, they generate "affects which unsettle the hegemonic 'common sense' which the novels are otherwise committed to endorsing" (29).

The later chapters of the book shift from individual authors to broader literary genres. In his discussion of the coming-out narrative and the historical romance, Cronin demonstrates how these narrative forms have shaped the representation of gay male identity within contemporary Irish fiction. These novels, he argues, give imaginative expression to the tensions between liberation and assimilation that characterise modern LGBTQ+ politics. While some texts reproduce the ideological assumptions of neoliberal culture, others generate what Cronin identifies as more radical political possibilities. Particularly striking is Cronin's analysis of spatial imagination within recent Irish fiction. Examining novels by writers such as Keith Ridgway and Barry McCrea, he argues that literary representations of urban space can reveal the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. These novels, Cronin suggests, function as examples of "chronotopic writing in which styles of writing social space generate modes of temporal reasoning" (30). In other words, the depiction of particular environments enables authors to explore broader historical processes and political transformations.

Much of the intellectual energy of *Revolutionary Bodies* derives from Cronin's engagement with Marxist and Queer theoretical traditions. Drawing upon thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse and David Alderson, he develops a sophisticated account of the relationship between sexuality and capitalist modernity. As Cronin observes, the apparent liberalisation of sexual norms within contemporary culture should not necessarily be understood as a form of genuine liberation. Instead, it often represents what Marcuse famously described as a system that can "extend liberty while intensifying domination" (27). By situating literary texts within this broader theoretical framework, Cronin provides readers with a compelling analysis of the contradictions inherent in contemporary sexual politics.

The negatives of this study are few while the positives are considerable. At times, the theoretical density of Cronin's argument may prove challenging for readers unfamiliar with the critical traditions upon which he draws. Nevertheless, these theoretical discussions are generally well integrated into the broader analysis and rarely feel superfluous. Indeed, one of the book's principal strengths lies in its ability to connect detailed literary readings with larger political and philosophical questions. Overall, *Revolutionary Bodies* represents a significant contribution to the study of Irish literature and queer theory. Cronin's analyses are consistently thoughtful, rigorous and intellectually ambitious. By exploring the ways in which representations of homoerotic desire intersect with revolutionary political imagination, the book opens new avenues for understanding the relationship between sexuality, aesthetics and radical politics. Scholars working in Irish Studies, queer theory and modern literary criticism will find this study both stimulating and invaluable.

Robert Finnigan

C.K. Gott, *Experience, Identity & Epistemic Injustice within Ireland's Magdalene Laundries*, London-New York-Dublin, Bloomsbury, 2022, pp. 248. £29.99. ISBN: 978-13-5025-446-6.

L'opera di Chloë K. Gott rappresenta un intervento teorico e, al tempo stesso, "politico" volto a scardinare non solo il silenzio storico che ha avvolto le Magdalene Laundries, ma anche le strutture di potere che continuano a delegittimare le sopravvissute nel presente. Al centro della riflessione di Gott non si trova solo l'intento di documentare gli abusi fisici e psicologici subiti dalle donne, ma anche la volontà di analizzare come le istituzioni abbiano minato la loro capacità di essere riconosciute come soggetti portatori di conoscenza. Alla base dell'argomentazione risiede la tesi che queste istituzioni non siano state semplici luoghi di internamento, bensì parte integrante di quella che James Smith definisce "architecture of containment"² dell'Irlanda post-indipendenza. In un nuovo Stato impegnato a costruire un'identità nazionale basata sulla purezza morale cattolica³, le donne che trasgredivano le norme venivano percepite contemporaneamente come vulnerabili e minacciose, rendendo necessaria la loro rimozione dalla società per il "bene comune". Gott descrive questo approccio come "vicious paternalism", un sistema che, con la motivazione della protezione, disciplina le donne, privandole però di ogni capacità decisionale sulle proprie vite.

Questo contenimento è stato accompagnato e sostenuto da una vera e propria "epistemology of ignorance", definita dall'autrice come un sistema attivamente mantenuto in cui "knowledge about and acknowledgement of survivor voices is not prioritized" (1). Secondo l'autrice questa mancanza di conoscenza non è una lacuna accidentale di dati, ma un rifiuto politico e sociale di validare l'esperienza dei soggetti marginalizzati, garantendo che la narrazione ufficiale rimanga incontestata. Questo confine della conoscenza è stato blindato dalla chiusura degli archivi delle congregazioni religiose, che rimangono tuttora inaccessibili ai ricercatori e alle stesse sopravvissute, impedendo una piena ricostruzione storica e una reale assunzione di responsabilità. Gott sottolinea come questa segretezza abbia permesso alle istituzioni di mantenere la loro invisibilità per decenni, perpetuando il trauma delle donne attraverso l'oscuramento dei dati.

L'analisi si sposta poi sul modo in cui le Magdalene Laundries sono state prima cancellate dalla cultura contemporanea irlandese e poi "recuperate", non per iniziativa istituzionale, ma attraverso i media e le arti. Opere come il dramma *Eclipsed* (1988) di Patricia Burke Brogan e documentari come *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998) hanno obbligato il paese e l'opinione pubblica a confrontarsi con una realtà che molti "had chosen to ignore but, invariably, already knew" (Smith 2007 in Gott 2022, 8). Un momento di importante presa di coscienza è stato il caso delle tombe di High Park nel 1993⁴. Gott critica la retorica ufficiale di quella che viene definita da Pine "anti-nostalgia" adottata dallo Stato nelle scuse di Enda Kenny del 2013:

² Smith definisce "architecture of containment" il sistema istituzionale dell'Irlanda post-indipendenza volto a rendere invisibili i soggetti "indesiderabili". Il sistema funzionava con una sinergia tra Stato e Chiesa, legittimando l'internamento, da un lato, come protezione delle donne "vulnerabili", dall'altro come regolatore delle minacce per la moralità pubblica (in Gott 2022).

³ L'articolo 41.2 della Costituzione del 1937 formalizzava il ruolo della donna all'interno delle mura domestiche, facendone un pilastro della purezza morale cattolica nazionale: "[...] by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved".

⁴ Nel 1993, la scoperta di una fossa comune nei terreni del convento di High Park a Dublino portò alla luce lo scandalo delle Magdalene Laundries in Irlanda. Quando l'ordine religioso decise di vendere parte del terreno, le suore chiesero e ottennero il permesso di riesumare 133 corpi dal cimitero del convento per cremarli e spostarli. Di molte donne non esistevano certificati di morte ufficiali e alcune non avevano nemmeno un nome di battesimo, ma venivano identificate solo con nomi religiosi o con numeri. Questo evento costrinse le autorità a indagare. I resti trovati a High Park furono cremati e risepolti nel cimitero di Glasnevin a Dublino.

[...] anti-nostalgia's vision frames the past as inherently unstable and traumatic, encouraging audiences to be grateful that they have escaped. (Pine 2011 in Gott 2022, 163)

Tale strategia narrativa tenta di relegare il trauma in un passato oscuro e remoto per presentare l'Irlanda contemporanea come un'entità "illuminata", sfuggendo dalla responsabilità per il dolore che continua a manifestarsi nella vita quotidiana delle donne. Come scrive Gott, "The projection of what is unjust onto the past allows shame to be represented here as a collective shame that does not affect individuals in the present" (*ibidem*).

Il perno su cui ruota l'intera opera è il concetto di *epistemic injustice*, elaborato da Miranda Fricker e inteso come "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (2007 in Gott 2022, 20). Questo danno si articola in due forme interconnesse: l'"ingiustizia testimoniale" e l'"ingiustizia ermeneutica". L'"ingiustizia testimoniale" si manifesta nel "deficit di credibilità" attribuito alle donne a causa di pregiudizi identitari: reputate delle peccatrici, la loro parola era considerata priva di valore. Questo processo iniziava già al momento dell'ingresso, quando i nomi venivano sostituiti da numeri o nomi di sante per annullare il sé precedente. Dall'altro lato, l'"ingiustizia ermeneutica" si verifica quando le sopravvissute, a causa del loro isolamento, non dispongono delle risorse relazionali e concettuali fornite dalla società e non sono in grado di dare senso alla propria sofferenza. Immerse in un sistema dominato dalle categorie di "peccato" e "penitenza", le donne non disponevano di un linguaggio pubblico per descriversi come vittime di abusi, rimanendo intrappolate in un silenzio alimentato dalla vergogna.

Per contrastare questo sistema di silenziamento, Gott propone la storia orale non solo come fonte di dati, ma come strumento di resistenza che assegna alle sopravvissute il ruolo di "experts on the subject of their own experiences" (2022, 158). La risorsa principale utilizzata per la ricerca di Gott è l'archivio del progetto "Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History"⁵ che permette di sfidare le narrazioni ufficiali, come quella prodotta dal "Rapporto McAleese" del 2013⁶. Gott critica tale rapporto per aver ignorato quasi ottocento pagine di testimonianze fornite dalle sopravvissute, preferendo i resoconti di medici e poliziotti e minimizzando le accuse di abusi fisici. Ciò rappresenta una reiterazione dell'ingiustizia testimoniale a livello istituzionale, dove lo Stato fa un passo indietro rispetto alle scuse di Enda Kenny del 2013, tornando a una posizione in cui evitava di assumersi la responsabilità dei danni causati alle sopravvissute delle Magdalene Laundries.

Un ulteriore elemento di analisi nel testo di Gott è rappresentato dal tema del silenzio. Il silenzio delle donne non deve essere letto solo come assenza di voce, ma anche come una strategia di sopravvivenza in un ambiente dove "both voice and silence pose risks" (Patterson 2000 in Gott 2022, 73)⁷. L'autrice afferma che il silenzio può nascere dal senso di umiliazione,

⁵ "Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History" è un progetto di ricerca collaborativa del Governo irlandese, finanziato dall'Irish Research Council. Il progetto è stato guidato da Katherine O'Donnell dell'University College Dublin e si è svolto principalmente tra il 2012 e il 2013. L'obiettivo generale dello studio è stato quello di approfondire la comprensione del sistema delle Magdalene Laundries, attraverso la raccolta e lo studio delle testimonianze di persone direttamente o indirettamente legate a queste istituzioni. Il progetto mirava a intervistare le sopravvissute e i loro familiari, le suore che lavoravano nelle Magdalene Laundries, e i visitatori ricorrenti come, ad es., i medici che periodicamente si recavano a esaminare le donne internate.

⁶ Nel 2013, un'inchiesta guidata dal senatore irlandese Martin McAleese, ufficialmente conosciuta come il "Rapporto McAleese", tentò di far luce sul ruolo del governo e della polizia irlandese nell'internamento di giovani donne nelle Magdalene Laundries e sulla mancata protezione dei loro diritti come lavoratrici.

⁷ All'interno degli istituti, la regola del silenzio era imposta per impedire amicizie e aumentare la produttività. Tuttavia, molte sopravvissute lo trasformarono in tattica di sopravvivenza: tacere davanti alle autorità diventava un modo per preservare uno spazio interiore sottratto al controllo istituzionale. Anche dopo l'uscita, il silenzio fungeva da protezione, evitando la "visibilità" di un'identità rovinata.

ma può anche essere uno spazio di resistenza contro un sistema che pretende di interpretare la vita delle donne senza ascoltarle.

L'argomentazione di Gott vuole dimostrare che la guarigione dal trauma non può prescindere dal riconoscimento della credibilità e dell'autorità intellettuale di chi è stato ridotto al silenzio. La resistenza delle donne si manifesta anche come "a descent into the ordinary" (Das 2007 in Gott 2022, 141): il tentativo di ricostruire un sé rispettabile attraverso la maternità e gli atti quotidiani, cercando di recuperare quel capitale sociale negato in precedenza.

Solo attraverso questo ascolto attivo sarà possibile impedire che la storia venga di nuovo sepolta, oscurando così la memoria materiale del trauma:

We talk so often in Ireland about a "culture of silence" around abuse. This suggests that those who have been abused are not speaking out, not giving testimony. It is time to recognise that we don't have a culture of silence, we have a culture of not listening. (Pine 2019 in Gott 2022, 201)

L'opera di Gott non è dunque solo un racconto di fatti avvenuti, ma un monito contro la persistenza di una cultura che non è tanto del silenzio, quanto del "non ascolto".

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Francesca Salvadori

María Amor Barros-del Río (ed.), *Transcultural Insights into Contemporary Irish Literature and Society: Breaking New Ground*, London-New York, Routledge, 2025, pp. 230. £155.00. ISBN: 9781003428350.

María Amor Barros-del Río definisce la curatela, *Transcultural Insights into Contemporary Irish Literature and Society: Breaking New Ground*, come un volume collettivo che vuole approcciarsi per la prima volta alla letteratura irlandese nell'ottica dei Transcultural Studies, un ambito di ricerca interdisciplinare che analizza i processi di interazione, scambio e ibridazione tra culture. Questo approccio consente di analizzare in un'ottica nuova le diverse culture nella

società globalizzata e fluida, superare la concezione che le identità nazionali siano statiche e omogenee, adottare, come sostiene Ralf Haekel, un'ottica "post-nazionale" che superi le dinamiche di colonialismo e decolonialismo nella costruzione di una nazione.

Nell'introduzione viene delineato il contesto storico e teorico in cui si colloca la raccolta di saggi. Barros-del Río ricorda come le origini dei Transcultural Studies vengano solitamente attribuite all'antropologo, sociologo e filosofo, Fernando Ortiz che negli anni Quaranta del Novecento studia le trasformazioni culturali nei contesti coloniali; arrivando poi a sostenere che il termine "acculturazione" non sia sufficiente a descrivere in modo esaustivo le reciproche influenze interculturali fra madrepatria e territori colonizzati. A partire dagli anni Novanta, queste riflessioni vengono sviluppate dalle teorie di Homi K. Bhabha sul "third space", di Mary Louise Pratt sulle "contact zones" e dal filosofo tedesco Wolfgang Iser che elabora il concetto di "transculturality". Su queste basi teoriche si sviluppano gli attuali Transcultural Studies, la cui flessibilità metodologica permette l'analisi dei processi di circolazione, contaminazione e negoziazione culturale in una prospettiva globale e interdisciplinare.

Da queste premesse si evince lo scopo del volume, cioè applicare l'approccio transculturale per interpretare la natura dinamica della società irlandese contemporanea attraverso la sua letteratura. I contributi raccolti mostrano come la prospettiva transculturale possa offrire nuove chiavi di lettura per interpretare la società irlandese contemporanea mettendo in discussione il concetto di "Irishness". La cultura irlandese, soggetta a pregiudizi e interpretazioni folkloristiche assodate, dimostra invece di essere dinamica e sensibile alle trasformazioni che hanno investito il paese dalla seconda metà del Novecento a oggi quali: l'ingresso nell'Unione Europea; gli anni della Celtic Tiger; la crisi economica del 2008; il rilancio economico successivo; le dinamiche migratorie; la crescente multiculturalità della società irlandese; il referendum sul matrimonio egualitario; la legalizzazione dell'aborto e il progressivo declino dell'influenza della Chiesa cattolica, anche a seguito dello scandalo delle Magdalene Laundries.

All'introduzione seguono dieci saggi divisi in tre sezioni tematiche. La prima "Texts that Blur Frontiers: The Island of Ireland and Beyond" raccoglie contributi dedicati a opere letterarie del Novecento, ma reinterpretate in ottica transculturale: attraverso la figura di Roger Casement in *Ulysses*, viene evidenziato come le esperienze di mobilità, esilio e confronto con l'alterità abbiano contribuito a ridefinire tanto l'identità individuale quanto la critica dell'imperialismo britannico. Invece, i saggi dedicati a Ciaran Carson, Marin Sorescu e Seán Dunne, condividono una riflessione sul ruolo della traduzione poetica come pratica di resistenza culturale e attraversamento dei confini politici e linguistici fra Irlanda, Romania e Russia. La seconda sezione, "Transcultural Writers and Global Entanglements", si concentra su *case studies* della narrativa contemporanea irlandese in cui emergono le forme di mobilità, ibridazione e marginalità. I contributi dedicati a Leland Bardwell, Evelyn Conlon e Ken Bruen evidenziano come gli spazi urbani, le migrazioni e le identità diasporiche diventino luoghi privilegiati di contatto transculturale. In particolare, la *crime fiction* di Bruen offre un'interessante riflessione sul rapporto tra multiculturalismo e violenza sociale: le trame dei singoli casi sono secondarie, mentre risulta centrale la critica sociale al contrasto che vede, da un lato, il boom economico a seguito della Celtic Tiger, e dall'altro la corruzione politica e il razzismo. La terza sezione, "Irish Social Diversity and Contemporary Literature in Dialogue", esplora la rappresentazione letteraria delle questioni femminili, di genere e le fragilità mentali e mediche. Tematiche attuali e politicamente rilevanti, che emergono anche in relazione ai processi di globalizzazione che hanno interessato la società irlandese negli ultimi decenni. Un percorso di progressiva secolarizzazione culturale che permette l'emersione di tematiche prima considerate tabù come l'aborto fra le giovani generazioni – tema della *young adult fiction* –, la rappresentazione delle identità queer, la rappresentazione dell'HIV/AIDS nel teatro irlandese, e i fenomeni di migrazione post Brexit.

In chiusura del volume viene proposta una riflessione di Gerry Smyth tra passato, presente e futuro degli Irish Studies in una contemporaneità segnata da crisi ambientali, ridefinizioni identitarie e crescente interconnessione. Smyth amplia ulteriormente la prospettiva del volume invitando a ripensare gli studi irlandesi in chiave interdisciplinare e transculturale, sottolineando come le categorie nazionali tradizionali risultino ormai insufficienti per interpretare la complessità dell'Irlanda contemporanea nel contesto globale.

Concludendo, la raccolta, anche grazie alla varietà dei temi affrontati, rappresenta un importante tassello degli Irish Studies. Pur muovendosi prevalentemente nell'ambito letterario, i saggi dialogano costantemente con la sociologia, la storia culturale, gli studi sulla mobilità e le scienze politiche, offrendo una visione complessa e stratificata dell'Irlanda contemporanea. La raccolta mostra come la letteratura possa costituire uno spazio privilegiato di negoziazione identitaria e di dialogo interculturale.

Alessandra Lana



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Donatella Abbate Badin (<donatella.badin@unito.it>), formerly Full Professor of English Literature at the University of Turin, Italy, has worked in the fields of English, Irish and American literatures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specializing on poetry (G.M. Hopkins, Kinsella, Wilde) as well as on representations of Italy in Irish literature. She has published several books and essays on Thomas Kinsella and translated his poetry into Italian. Her research on travel to Italy has led to publications regarding Lady Morgan, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Thomas Moore, Sean O’Faolain, Elizabeth Bowen and others. She is the editor of a critical edition of Lady Morgan’s *Italy*, vols. 1 and 2 for Pickering and Chatto (2010).

Paolo Bugliani (<paolo.bugliani@unipi.it>) is Lecturer of English Literature at the University of Pisa. His research focuses on the historical and theoretical study of various forms of life writing between the Romantic period and early Modernism, particularly the essay, biography, and biographical narrative. He is currently completing a study on the legacy of Romanticism in the works of several Modernist authors (Woolf, Mansfield, Forster, and Joyce). He has edited new editions of *Mrs Dalloway* and *Ulysses*, both published by BUR - Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli in 2024.

Michael F. Davis (<davismf@lemoyne.edu>) is Professor of English at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, NY. He has published more than a dozen essays in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century English, Irish, and European literature, including essays on Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Anatole France, Rainer Maria Rilke, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. He is the co-editor of *Wilde’s Other Worlds* (Routledge 2018) and is currently completing books on Walter Pater and James Joyce.

Camilla Del Grazia (<camilla.delgrazia@gmail.com>) is a Post-doctoral Researcher in English Literature at the University of Pisa, within the PRIN project “Reviving ‘The Liberal’: Literature and Politics between Britain and Italy, 1821-23 (RevLib)”. Her research interests include Nineteenth century and late-Victorian literature; she is also interested in contemporary fantasy fiction and its deconstruction of conventional narrative strategies in relation to the representation of the city.

Sarah Gilmartin's short stories have been published in *The Dublin Review*, *New Irish Writing*, *The Tangerine* and *The Stinging Fly* and shortlisted for the RTÉ Francis MacManus Short Story Award. She won the Máirtín Crawford Short Story Award in 2020. She is co-editor of the anthology *Stinging Fly Stories* (2018). Her novels *Dinner Party: A Tragedy* (2021), *Service* (2023) and the forthcoming *Little Vanities* (2026) are published by ONE. *Service* was a *Washington Post* top books of summer and included in the *Irish Times* list of the best Irish fiction of the 21st century (2025). She won Best Playwright at the inaugural Short+Sweet Dublin festival and was the 2025 Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at Dublin City University. She is also a critic who reviews fiction for the *Irish Times* and has an MFA from University College Dublin.

Laura Giovannelli (<laura.giovannelli@unipi.it>) is Full Professor of English Literature in the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics, University of Pisa. She co-edits *Synergies: A Journal of English Literatures and Cultures*. Her research mainly focuses on British Aestheticism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Ecocriticism and Posthumanism, as well as postcolonial and contemporary literature in English. Among her recent works are the essays "Between Forgery and Idealising Confabulation: Thomas Chatterton's Middle Ages" and " 'Move along these shades in gentleness of heart': William Wordsworth, Ecological Empathy, and a Reading of 'Nutting' ", both published in 2026.

Pierpaolo Martino (<pierpaolo.martino@uniba.it>) is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Bari Aldo Moro. His fields of enquiry include Wilde Studies, Modernism, Postcolonial and Cultural Studies and Word and Music Studies. He is the author of *Mark the Music. The Language of Music in English Literature from Shakespeare to Salman Rushdie* (Aracne 2012), *Wilde Now. Performance, Celebrity and Intermediality in Oscar Wilde* (Palgrave 2023) and *Scritti dal Basso. Tra jazz e letteratura* (Shake 2025). He is a founding member of the Italian Oscar Wilde Society and series editor of *InCarnations: Studi e prospettive sull'Ottocento britannico* (ETS).

Luke Morgan (<<https://www.lukemorgan.ie>>) is an Irish poet and filmmaker. He was the recipient of the Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award 2025, an award given annually by the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota. *Blood Atlas*, his third collection from Arlen House, was published in 2025 and completed with the assistance of a bursary from The Arts Council of Ireland. His other two collections are *Beast* (2022), and *Honest Wall* (2016). As well as poetry, he is also part of an award-winning Irish filmmaker duo "Morgan Brothers", with his brother, the composer Jake Morgan. Among their recent work is the film *The Boat* which was Executive Produced by Brendan Gleeson and longlisted for an Academy Award. He lives and works in Galway, Ireland.

Manuela Palacios (<manuela.palacios@usc.es>) lectures on Anglophone literature at the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain). She has edited, translated and written about Irish, Galician and Arabic poetry. With the Irish writer Mary O'Donnell, she has co-edited the anthology *To the Winds Our Sails. Irish Writers Translate Galician Poetry* (Salmon Poetry 2010). She is the editor of *Forked Tongues. Galician, Basque and Catalan Women's Poetry in Translations by Irish Writers* (Shearsman Books 2012) and of *Migrant Shores: Irish, Moroccan & Galician Poetry* (Salmon 2017). She is the author of *Us & Them. Women Writers' Discourses on Foreignness* (Frank & Timme 2023) and has co-edited *Eco-Fictions, the Animal Trope and Irish Studies*, a monographic issue of *Estudios Irlandeses* 15.2 (2020).

Lou Pinelli (<lpinelli@iuav.it>) (they/them) lectures in English and Comparative literature at IUAV University of Venice and at the University of Bergamo. After studying at Oxford and Bologna, they completed a Double Degree PhD on Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir (University of Bergamo and the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle). Their research interests include Oscar Wilde and the English *fin de siècle*; Virginia Woolf and British Modernism from a transnational perspective; the resonances between literature, philosophy, and science; and gender and sexuality studies.

Valeria Raimondi is a leading professional in the general fiction publishing sector, having built a multifaceted career in Italy's major publishing groups. She has worked as a reviewer for prestigious publishers such as Longanesi, Rizzoli, Mondadori and Feltrinelli, where she selected and evaluated literary works. In her work as a translator, she has published the Italian translations of over 30 books, mostly novels. She has consolidated her managerial experience by holding the position of editor at Feltrinelli and subsequently serving as editorial director at De Agostini.

Loredana Salis (<lsalis@uniss.it>) is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Sassari. Her research interests include 19th century gender(ed) narratives, exile narratives and adaptations of the canon. She has published monographs on the uses of myth (2009) and the stage representations of the migrant other (2010) in contemporary Irish literature, and articles on E. Gaskell, H. Martineau, Dickens, G. Eliot, A. Machen, L. Lowe, Wilde, Stevenson, E. O'Brien, M. Carr, F. McGuinness, M. Morrissy, and S. Heaney. She has translated Dickens' theatre (2013), W. B. Yeats' prose (2015) and two plays by G. B. Shaw (2022). She edited a monographic issue of *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* dedicated to the Irish Diaspora (2019). She has also edited Constance Markievicz's *Prison Letters* (*Lettere dal carcere*, Angelica 2017) and Markievicz's political writings (*Scritti politici*, Angelica 2022).

Neil Sammells (<n.sammells@bathspa.ac.uk>) holds an Emeritus Professorship from Bath Spa University, UK, and is the founding editor of *Irish Studies Review*. He is the author of books on Tom Stoppard and Oscar Wilde, and of *Why Read Wilde?*, to be published by Routledge in December 2026.

William Wall (<williamwall@gmx.com>) is the author of nine novels, six collections of poetry and three of short fiction. His work has won, and been shortlisted for, many prizes both in Ireland and abroad and has been translated into many languages. He translates from Italian and holds a PhD in Creative Writing from UCC (<<https://williamwall.net/>>).

Enrica Zaninotto (<enrica.zaninotto@univr.it>) is third-year PhD candidate in English Literature at the University of Verona. Her project analyses female disabled portraits in Neo-Victorian fiction through Feminist Disability Studies lens. Her research interests mainly revolve around Disability Studies.

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