L'ensemble des métadonnées est accessible en cliquant sur le lien suivant :
http://dx.doi.org/10.21412/leaves_0507

Crosscut voices and broken ideals in "The Happy Prince" by Oscar Wilde

Emmanuel Vernadakis

In *The Importance of Being Earnest,* Lady Bracknell declares that, in England, "[…] education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square" (Wilde 1995, 265). The link between this statement and the present paper lies in the ideological commitment of the fairy-tale under study, one whose instructive character lies at odds with conventional standards. If it does not go so far as to groom children for leading acts of violence in Grosvenor Square, it lampoons God, discredits religion, undermines conformity, impairs respect for authority and discards the Cartesian principle of integrity and wholeness. In short, it is subversive.

The term "voice" is used here to convey the resounding stereotypical, typical or identifiable features that, in Wilde's tale, relate to various "original" pieces of work and hereby echo the philosophical, religious, social and aesthetic commitments of their authors. The subversive quality of "The Happy Prince" stems from the polyphony achieved by using both expected and out of the way intertextual items, "major" and "minor" voices. Among the major, Dickens', Disraeli's or Andersen's are not difficult to identify as the story is set in a utilitarian society, divided into two nations—the rich and the poor—and haunted by orphans, writers-to-be, and little match-girls. The minor voices are less obvious to spot; they belong to Plato and Clement of Alexandria whose works even a sophisticated reader might find unusual to relate to a fairy-tale. Subtly handled, slightly altered or completely distorted, the voices rise in a chorus, a unique polyphony that triggers a dialectic process between historical causes and contemporary effects within a Hegelian frame. The strategy may appear as a field-test approach to the playwright's subsequent dramatic achievement. The fairy tale offers a critical rewriting of the past, both accessible and scholarly, through a strategic break down of stereotypes. In a process of cross-fertilisation through the prism of Platonism and Neo-Platonism, it combines, rather than opposes, the paradigms of Hebrew and Hellene, inherent in Victorian culture. With "The Happy Prince," as later with his drama, Wilde seems to convey meaning through a creative use of various voices favouring the discrete or indiscernible minor voices rather than the blatant major ones.

"The Happy Prince": A Summary

The Happy Prince is a gilded and bejewelled statue, erected on a tall column, "high above the city" (Wilde 1966: 285). It is admired by the city folk for its sumptuousness and the happiness its name makes it stand for. It can talk and express its feelings to a he-swallow. On his way to

Egypt, the swallow stops at the statue's feet to find shelter for the night but gets drenched by the statue's tears.

> "When I was alive and had a human heart" says the statue, "[…] I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter […] And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep." (Wilde 1966, 286)

At the statue's request, the swallow accepts to give away to the poor the statue's wealth—a ruby sword-hilt, two sapphires it had for eyes and the gold leaves it was covered with. This makes the swallow delay its departure to Egypt and, in the process, become sensitive to values such as suffering and misery. When the gold leaves have been distributed, the cold has set in and the swallow feels it is going to die.

> "Good-bye, dear Prince!" he murmured, "will you let me kiss your hand?"
> "I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little Swallow," said the Prince, "you have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you."
> "It is not to Egypt that I am going," said the Swallow. "I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?"
> And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet.
> At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two. It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost. (Wilde 1966, 290)

The art professor declares that, as the statue is no longer beautiful it is no longer useful; the city therefore needs to have a new one. The issue triggers a quarrel for the mayor and city councillors want, each, a statue of himself. The statue is melted in a furnace, but its heart will not melt and is thrown on a dust heap, next to the dead swallow. The bird and the heart are retrieved by an angel and presented to God as the most precious objects of the city. God congratulates the angel for his choice and declares that in his garden of Paradise the bird shall sing for evermore, and in his city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise Him.

According to J.R.R. Tolkien, "the association of children and fairy stories is an accident […] Children neither like fairy stories more, nor understand them better than adults do" (Hunt 2). Similarly, Wilde pointedly declares that *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) is a collection of stories for childlike people from eighteen to eighty, "an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality—to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and

non imitative" (Wilde 2000, 388). This is a statement of intention that relates to Wilde's wider intellectual concerns, particularly to his interest in idealism[1] and his fascination with Plato.

A Platonic Frame

The plot develops simultaneously on two levels as the action shifts from the city the Happy Prince had reigned over before he died to the top of the column on which his statue stands now he is dead. The action that runs on the upper level draws on the sources of idealism as it promotes such values as altruism, disinterested philanthropy and love, compassion and self-sacrifice. The sensible, frustrated and down-to-earth characters that evolve on the lower level epitomize a utilitarian society, which, as the end of the tale demonstrates, is embedded in a culture of self-worship.

> "Why can't you be like the Happy Prince?" asked a sensible mother of her little boy who was crying for the moon. "The Happy Prince never dreams of crying for anything."
> "I am glad there is some one in the world who is quite happy," muttered a disappointed man as he gazed at the wonderful statue.
> "He looks just like an angel," said the Charity Children [...]
> "How do you know?" said the Mathematical Master, "you have never seen one." (Wilde 1966, 285)

Several actions conceived on one of the two levels also have an impact on the other level. The structure, however, creates a discrepancy between two parallel versions of reality, for the impacts of the same actions are not in step. For example, while on the upper level the Happy Prince is sorrowful and ends up literally heartbroken, on the lower level he is praised for his being happy; that is for what he is *not*. As the protagonist's antiphrastic name reveals, the link between the two, otherwise impervious spheres is irony.

This structure echoes Plato's theory of forms as developed in the allegory of the cave. The upper level harbours truth and stands for the realm of forms or ideas which, according to Plato, is out of our grasp as far as our soul is prisoner to our body (*The Republic*, VII). Thus, when he was alive the Happy Prince could not grasp truth. "Now that I am dead" he says, "they have set me up here so that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep" (Wilde 1966: 286). As in Plato's theory, because the statue is no longer a living person his soul is not a prisoner to his body. He therefore can access truth, still inaccessible to his living subjects, blinded as they are by self-worship, naivety, superficiality etc. The starving playwright who finds a sapphire—the Happy Prince's first eye—

[1] Idealism is denounced as dangerous in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* and is disparagingly caricaturized in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. However, it also provides one of the most fertilizing concepts that inspire Wilde's oeuvre.

left by the swallow next to his writing material, cannot recognise the statue's altruism; instead the precious stone is taken as a "present from some great admirer" (Wilde 1966, 289); the little match-girl mistakes the other eye for "a lovely bit of glass" (Wilde 1966, 289); and the City Councillors, to whom clothes make the people since they can only trust appearances, are unable to recognise charity in the statue's divestment in which they can only perceive "shabbiness" (Wilde 1966, 291). Thus, although the statue and the bird die by helping the poor, their actions go unperceived. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, the Happy Prince's subjects that evolve on the lower sphere of action can only perceive the forms' shadows—and have it all wrong.

Agape and Eros

In keeping with the Platonic frame of the structure, the characters who interact on the upper sphere must be symbolic embodiments of forms or ideas. The Happy Prince who cares for the poor and offers his beauty, belongings and body parts to relieve their misery is an altruist. His self-sacrificial divestment makes of him the epitome of a selfless, spiritual love. This sort of love represents a core value of Christianity, *agape*, a Greek word whose Latin translation, *caritas*, gave "charity." The Swallow is an aesthete, idiosyncratically and sensuously drawn to beauty. The narrative has it "flying [...] after a big yellow moth" (Wilde 1966, 285), a private hint that makes the Swallow a follower of Wilde's friend, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, an American expatriate painter, champion of the art for art's sake theory, whose signature was in the shape of a butterfly. The Swallow's attraction to beauty has an effect upon his senses; he is also sensuous (it is a "he"-swallow). His love for the beautiful is motivated by desire. Thus, his falling in love "with the most beautiful Reed" makes him stay back, in the north of Europe, to make love to her, while his companions had flown off to Egypt weeks before. Besides, etymologically, an aesthete is one who engages all of his or her senses. The Swallow therefore stands for *eros*, another sort of love driven by desire, the bodily counterpart of the spiritual *agape*. In a Victorian frame of mind, *eros* and *agape*, the ideals embodied by the protagonists, can appear antagonistic.

The characters' fulfilment is achieved through a chiasmic process of cross-fertilisation—by means of turning tables. Indeed they interact upon each other from the moment they meet. The initially cocky, *eros*-driven Swallow gets initiated to a new perception of life which makes him forget his egotistical concerns and achieve self-realisation by serving the statue. Before he dies, he therefore wants to perform his love for the Prince by a chaste and respectful hand-kissing, a token of *agape*; while the Happy Prince, who thanks to the stories the Swallow has told him about Egypt and other far-off lands, realises that there is more than the ugliness of his city to lay eyes on and gets a broader sense of the world's beauty, encourages him to an

eros-driven performance: "will you let me kiss your hand?" the Swallow asks; and the statue answers: "You must kiss me on the lips, for I love you" (Wilde 1966, 291). The kiss, which brings together a multitude of thematic and symbolic threads, marks the climax of the story. Instead of opposing sensuality and religious, *eros* and *agape*, it combines them.

Unsurprisingly, once more the above process draws on the sources of Platonism, patterned as it is after Diotima's principles, as developed by Socrates in *The Symposium*. According to Socrates, love is an act of giving; therefore, lovers must essentially be givers, not receivers of love (Socrates 204, a-b). So are the Happy Prince and the Swallow who graciously give each his love to others and to each other. Besides, love's teleology is to possess the good and the beautiful for ever (Socrates 204, a-b), but what love wants is not beauty for beauty's sake but rather reproduction and birth *in* beauty (Socrates 206, b). There are two ways to give birth in beauty; some are pregnant in their bodies and seek immortality through physical offspring, others are pregnant in their souls and these give birth to virtue, beautiful discourses, wisdom, beautiful deeds and poetry (Socrates 207, d). In Wilde's tale, both the Happy Prince and the Swallow are made pregnant in their souls. The Prince generates beautiful deeds and virtue within the swallow's soul which, in turn, generates personal satisfaction physically expressed by warmth: "'it's curious,' he [the Swallow] remarked, 'but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold.' 'That is because you have done a good action, said the Prince'" (Wilde 1966: 287). The Swallow also gives birth to wonderfully lyrical stories "of what he had seen in strange lands" (Wilde 1966: 290). As for the Prince, his act of giving birth in beauty is symbolically represented by the crack made in his leaden heart when he kisses the Swallow. The process leads to a cross-fertilisation between *agape* and *eros*, and accomplishes a cross-patterned self-fulfilment. Thanks to the Swallow's action, if only for a short time, "the children's faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played games in the street. 'We have bread now!' they cried" (Wilde 1966, 290). There is no further reason for the statue to be grieving on the misery of his subjects. Thus, although divested, the Prince eventually grows happy and comes to be his name: the Happy Prince. On the sphere of forms, the story suggests, divestment inspired by *agape* may well stand for beauty. The Prince's self-fulfilment is stamped with the seal of "*kalonkagathon*" as Plato calls the combination of the good and the beautiful (Howatson 302, 516).

However, the coupling of *eros* and *agape* which gives birth to goodness and beauty and a culmination of happiness is short-lived for the protagonists. It lasts the time of the exchanged kiss. Theirs is a love/death kiss whose overemotional charge is set off by irony. The kiss comes to an end with the crack in the statue's heart which the narrator attributes to "a dreadfully hard frost" (Wilde 1966, 174).

The aesthetics of the fairy-tale as a form offer Wilde the opportunity to sustain a taboo issue. The Eros/Thanatos-kiss between the protagonists in "The Happy Prince" breaks the rules of conventional representations of love. Not merely because the motive is uncommon—and it is not very common—but because it submits a quite overtly homosexual episode in a work of children's literature. We can measure the boldness of the deed by comparing it to the ending of *Salomé*, Wilde's symbolist drama written in French three years later. In *Salomé*, the same motif[2]—an Eros/Thanatos kiss between the eponymous heroine and the prophet Iokannan—revisited for theatre, accounts for the censor's decision to ban the play from the English stage.

Hebrew and Hellene

Eros and agape are two forms or ideas of love, a Greek one and a Christian one. As we shall see, more "Christian" and "Greek" thematic and symbolic threads find their ways in the story. Christian and Greek offer two cultural paradigms which, in their quest for new values, the Victorians considered in conflict. In the multi-tiered context of Victorian society, "A hundred years of Science, the Industrial Revolution, and a revitalised and triumphant rationalism had only made the problem of cultural integration more pressing" (DeLaura 139). By addressing Christian and Greek themes, symbols and values, Wilde's tale echoes the so-called Hebrew and Hellene cultural dichotomy, defined by the German poet Heinrich Heine and imported to England by Mathew Arnold (Gay II, 451)[3]. Simplifying to a great extent, it originally opposes the values symbolically embodied in British 19th-century imagination by Jerusalem and Athens, Christ and Apollo through the dialectics between ethics and aesthetics, two paradigms that, in spite of their being part of the grounding, remain antagonistic and a source of pervading dualism running within Victorian culture. By the end of the century, and especially through the work of Walter Pater, the dichotomy turns into a conflict between sensuality and a "religious" impulse (DeLaura 178).

The dialectical and shifting nature of the cultural values exposed in "The Happy Prince" suggests that in it, Wilde espouses a reconciliatory position. Thus, on the upper sphere of action, which harbours truth, the Prince and the Swallow prove to be crossbreeds of Hebrew and Hellene. The Happy Prince is a work of art, a statue, emblematic of idolatry, which, nonetheless, epitomises Christian charity, *agape*-love and ethics. In the Hellene context, the swallow is a love bird, sacred to Isis and Venus (Walker 410). But the Swallow also carries out the Prince's acts of charity, and is therefore evoking the Holy Ghost that, in the form of a dove,

[2] Although not overtly homosexual.
[3] Although this opposition considers that "Jews and Christians are […] quite close in meaning" and in this respect in contrast with Hellenes, the expressions are taken symbolically to designate not a faith or a community but an ethos and a training, "to characterize […] an inborn as well as a learned spiritual orientation and style of thinking, rather than a certain nation" (Gay II, 151).

"visits upon Christ's favoured the spiritual blessing of God" (Willoughby 24). By taking off the gold the statue is covered with, piece by piece, and giving it to the poor, the swallow achieves the Hellene-oriented ideal of self-realisation through a Hebrew-oriented "right-action" performance[4]. In the process, he becomes aware of a social reality he had not perceived before: "the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates [...] the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets," and his love for the Happy Prince deepens. His Hellene-centred *eros* for the statue feeds on the statue's Hebrew-oriented *agape* for the poor. The private intensities inherent in Walter Pater's critical posture as exposed in the Conclusion to his *Studies in the History of Renaissance*, are thus combined with a moral concern, essential to Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin[5]. The plot seems to graft on Pater's sensuous poetics Ruskin's social imperative. And as Wilde was well acquainted with both, we may even go as far as suggesting that the characters of the statue and the swallow may have been directly inspired respectively by Ruskin and Pater; in which case the story can also read as a wish-fulfilment: as they had not been in tune in real life, Wilde might have wished to accommodate his mentors' voices in the ideal field of fiction.

Wilde's synthesis of the opposing paradigms is further illustrated by the dialectics between the different symbolic values the characters' actions are endowed with. Thanks to the swallow's agency, the statue manages to give away his body parts among his subjects. The final outcome of the act is consumption of food: "'We have bread now!' they cried" (Wilde 1966, 290). Given the idol-like quality of the statue, the episode draws on *theophagy* (the feeding on a god), known in Greece as *sparagmos*, a Dionysian ritual at the origin of tragedy. The act involved the rending of a he-goat who stood for Dionysus. The bits of raw flesh were then shared among the worshipers who swallowed them (Paglia 94-96). Yet the distribution of the Happy Prince's body among his subjects also evokes Christ's Last Supper. The more so as the food the poor are happy to share is bread, which in Christ's Last Supper explicitly represented his body. This Christian act of *theophagy* is still commemorated by Holy Communion—during which, by means of synecdoche, by swallowing a portion of bread, the worshipers are in communion with Christ.

As already suggested, the statue's *agape* for his subjects, sustained by the Swallow's *eros* for the statue, bridges the gap between happiness and misery, between the statue's dictated and actual selves. In the *Old Testament* in which many characters meet the destiny inscribed in the meaning of their names[6], self-realisation often consists in becoming one's name. Wilde

[4]The terms are Matthew Arnold's.
[5] See, for instance, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865).
[6] See, for instance, Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Le Livre des prénoms hébraïques et bibliques*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1993, Ch. X, « Lève-toi et va à Ninive », pp. 35-38.

explores the issue in "The Happy Prince" before reprising it in his 1895 masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The bringing together of Christian *agape* and Greek *eros*, of ethics and aesthetics is part of Wilde's project to combine the Hebrew and Hellene not merely in terms of interplay but of *cross*-fertilisation. "The Happy Prince" may well be defined as a *cross*-patterned performance of two *cross*breed characters who achieve a *cross*-patterned fulfilment of their identities. The term "cross," a fundamentally Christian one, is essential in terms of structure and symbolism. It also introduces, as it shall be argued, a Christian use of Plato's theory in the frame of the tale.

Neo-Platonism

The cross is here endowed with structural value. The column the Happy Prince stands on is a vertical axis which, on a symbolic level, outlines the historical channel of communication between the city and its guardianship, earth and heaven, man and God. Inscribed under historical and cultural heritage, it is emblematic for the city's identity and stands for stability, tradition, religion and ethics. On the other side, the Swallow's trajectory along the skyline, from northern Europe to Egypt, outlines a horizontal axis which stands for action, otherness and difference. Besides, the Swallow is a great storyteller and his narratives about exotic places make of him a cosmopolitan, too. The meeting between the Happy Prince and the Swallow is, then, circumscribed by two crossing trajectories: the vertical axis of stability, identity, tradition, *agape* and ethics, and the horizontal axis of change, action, difference, *eros* and aesthetics. The above cross-like scheme converts Platonic idealism to Christianity, so to speak. Amended by Christianity, during the first centuries of our era, Plato's philosophy gave rise to neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism offers a good precedent for intertwining Hebrew and Hellene; yet not quite in the same line of reasoning as Wilde's fairy-tale. "The Happy Prince" echoes one of the louder voices that spoke for neo-Platonism in Egypt, the swallow's homeland; it seems to have been written in response to a series of episodes described in *Exhortation to the Greeks*, a neo-Platonist Christian pamphlet by Clemens Alexandrinus or Clement of Alexandria.

Neo-Platonism is a 3rd-century comprehensive revision of Platonism which met a religious need by showing how the individual soul might reach God (Howatson 365). The Primitive Church is the backdrop for most of Wilde's table talk at Oxford and Cambridge (Ellmann 374), as it is Dr Chasuble's benchmark in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Neo-Platonism and the Primitive Church also inspired Wilde's unfinished French-titled drama, *La Sainte Courtisane*

or the Woman Covered with Jewels.[7] Clement of Alexandria[8] is a 3rd-century neo-Platonist, pre-congregation canonized Father of the Primitive Church. In his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, a work which undertakes religious advocacy, he contrasts Christian decency with the filthiness of pagan rites, and insists on the absurdity of the Greeks to bow-down before insensible statues. Their attitude, according to Clement, gives away their confusion and foolishness; for, indeed, they worship art instead of divinity—a detail that would not have gone unnoticed by Wilde. In tune with Plato's mistrust regarding art, Clement describes various golden and bejewelled statues of his time, like "the statue of Zeus at Olympia, and that of Polias at Athens, [which] were executed of gold and ivory [...] or the one executed in sumptuous style [with] filings of gold, and silver, and lead [...] and of Egyptian stones, [...] fragments of sapphire, and hematite, and emerald, and topaz" (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/020804.htm). The Happy Prince, too, is "gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt" (Wilde 1966, 285). Wilde's statue, therefore, seems to have taken heed of the above description; the more so as lead, also mentioned by Clement, is the material the Happy Prince's heart is made of. Then, Clement's *Exhortation* alludes to swallows. As they show no respect to statues, the audience is invited to learn from them: the swallows we read in the text, "fly to these statues, and void their excrement on them, paying no respect [...]; but not even from them have you learned the senselessness of images" (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/020804.htm). However, the rather abject example upon which Clement invites the audience to build is echoed by Wilde *in defiance* of the original. Eventually, Clement's *Exhortation* makes a point offering various examples of governors short of money that either stripped-off the gold from the above statues or melted them. "Dionysius the tyrant [...] stripped off the golden mantle from the statue of Jupiter in Sicily [...] And Antiochus of Cyzicus, being in difficulties for money, ordered the golden statue of Zeus [...] to be melted" (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/020804.htm). In short, the nature, features and traits of character attributed to the protagonists of the fairy-tale draw on Clement's pamphlet which also provides the red thread that runs from the worship of a statue to its melting. There is, of course, a difference in the outlook. In keeping with the antiphrastic title, "The Happy Prince" challenges Clement's values, some of which were still binding in Wilde's days and perhaps are still in ours.

Regardless of the details, the divergence between Clement's neo-Platonist outlook and Wilde's is made manifest in the fairy-tale's ending which, instead of focusing on the characters' souls that have eventually reached God, and thereby come to an end that exalts a world made of

[7] Neo-Platonism and the Primitive Church constitute a still uncharted territory in the field of Wilde studies.
[8] Wilde might have come across Clement's works via the French Symbolist poets and novelists he made friends with in Paris. Pierre Louys, for instance, to whom Wilde dedicated *Salomé*, had a copy of Clemens' works in his bookcase.

ideals, refers to their bodies fixed in a materialistic City of Gold and Garden of Paradise. Read against Clement's *Exhortation,* Wilde's tale draws on sixteen centuries of Christian practice in order to show how unfair some of its principles can prove to be in the present. The purpose is to stimulate the audience's critical understanding of culture. The subversive quality of this intention doesn't lie in the action itself, which shows that Christianity has had its day;[9] it is to be found in the dialectics the rewrite of the Christian Canon entails within the Victorian cultural standards.

According to Victorian standards, the tale's ending is satisfactory. It sounds edifying. because it offers a moral solution voiced by God in person. While the egotistic Mayor and Town Councillors are still quarrelling, the generous bird and philanthropic statue praise God. This is Victorian poetic justice, in keeping with Miss Prism's definition of fiction in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "The good end[ed] happily and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means" (Wilde 1995, 273). Still, as this is not what reality means, such an ending can hardly fit Wilde's "attempt to mirror modern life." If we focus on what the text does rather than on what God says, the ending may open up to new, less conventional perspectives and produce stronger and abiding impressions. And, indeed, on a close reading, the text draws a quite uncommon portrait of God.

A Portrait of God for Childlike People between Eight and Eighteen

If Wilde's God is a memorable figure, He is so for rather unexpected reasons. Given the Platonic frame of the fairy-tale, God must be placed on the upper level of action, the one that harbours ideas or forms. Thus, both God and the statue have access to knowledge and truth; the former, presumably, more so than the latter. With the statue's statement in mind "though my heart is made of lead, I cannot choose but weep" (Wilde 1966: 285), the reader is then prompted to compare the statue's and God's attitudes towards their subjects. The information about God provided in the closing lines, both direct and indirect, serves this purpose. The assessment, however, cannot be in His favour.

> "Bring me the two most precious things in the city," said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird.
> "You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me." (Wilde 1966, 291)

God enjoys opulence and luxury in His city of gold wherefrom He gives orders to His ministers who toil for His glory throughout His Empire. He congratulates them when they do not confuse

[9]Wilde would not have competed with Darwin on that field.

external appearance and intrinsic value and serve him well. However, there is an inconsistency in terms of narrative coherence. With the closing paragraph, there is a shift in the story line which, stylistically speaking, discards the protagonists relegated as they are to a lesser level of action. This is demonstrated through God's use of first person marks of possession or appropriation (*my garden*, *my city*, *praise me*). The statement therefore displays an object-oriented universe which, centred as it is around the speaker, leaves little space for the protagonists to exist. Although the Happy Prince and the Swallow are the main characters of the story, the closing statement reduces them to mere functions. This might have been consistent within the Platonic frame of the fairy tale, had God's outlook been less earthly-minded and indeed hegemonic. In narrative terms, Wilde has his God corrode the functional role of the protagonists. He makes of Him a stage manager whose role is to transform the former heroes into puppets. As such, He proves to be rather naughty. For, indeed, conforming to a fairer poetic justice, a reader might have expected for the Prince and the Swallow to live united in the afterlife. The City of Gold and Paradise are different places according to the biblical authorities that inform the statement.[10] God is less concerned with them than with his own person. He expects obedience by all; and indeed, although not a clear order, his closing statement is a typical performative that triggers a performance of the action to which it refers (Austin 5-11). The bird and the statue are expected to obey. They must, therefore, still be praising God today.

Wilde's shrewdly oblique depiction of God may be read as the stereotyped portrait of a monarch. It may well have been inspired by Queen Victoria whose poise, no doubt, inspired some of Lady Bracknell's haughty postures, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But if we stay within the strict frame of the fairy-tale and group the characters conforming to their behaviours, God should rank with the Mayor and City Councillors who also itch for being praised. God is not in keeping with the ideals He should embody. In addition, he proves to be totally ignorant about nature. Any of the Councillors should have known better about swallows than God who requires of the little bird to sing in his garden for evermore. One doesn't need to be an ornithologist to make the difference between a nightingale and a swallow; but God seems unaware that a swallow's song is more of a racket that in the long run may turn into a nuisance and spoil the peaceful serenity of Paradise.

The ending then shows that, if the parallel levels of action stand respectively for the ideal and actual worlds in Plato's theory, there is no certitude that, throughout the course of History,

[10] The City of gold in which God placed the statue and the garden of Paradise in which he put the bird are two different places. The city of gold can either be Jerusalem (the city of God in the Old Testament) or New Jerusalem in the book of Revelations (Rev. 21:18-24); the garden of Paradise (Gen. 2:8) is in Mesopotamia.

there will always be the same difference between the two. For, if we try to identify the ethics—let alone the aesthetics—that prevail in God's realm, we are disappointed to realise that the difference between God and the Mayor is only functional. God is a monarch and therefore has no Town Councillors to dispute his authority. The philosophical and moral superiority of the upper sphere turns into a matter of hierarchy and power. Thus, God cannot be placed on a higher level than the Prince, His ethically superior. Wilde's God will be remembered for having ruined His own garden by his foolishness, a trait of character typical with rulers. His function in the tale is purely mechanic and Wilde may have used Him as a *deus ex machina*, a mere trick for Greek dramatists to offer a morally satisfactory solution to the audience. This may also indicate that the fairy-tale author was a born dramatist.

Conclusion

A reader will probably retain the relationship between the statue and the swallow, one whose effectiveness is hinged on the striking dialectics produced by an unsuspected use of unexpected sources. Even if the reader does not identify the voices of Plato and Clement of Alexandria, even if Wilde's unearthing, *remastering* and adjusting them in order to obtain the required polyphonic critical perspective remains obscure to them, the reader cannot miss the striking dialectics it produces between giving and… giving—giving to one and giving to the many. Charity and desire, *agape* and *eros*, go hand in hand. Their union leads to death which is also birth. Out of the crack of the broken heart, pregnant with Eros/Thanatos, springs Wilde's conception of *kalonkagathon*, an offspring draped in irony. Instead of being aggressive—as irony is expected to be—this irony is kind, generous and engaging. It points to the continuity of life whose essence is change.

In this process the self is represented as a broken fragment—the leaden heart of the statue—and the unity of the self can only be symbolically attained, through synecdoche—the fragment standing for the whole. "The Happy Prince" seems to promote an anticipatory model of post-modern deconstruction, one which discards the principle of wholeness on behalf of the fragment. To Oscar Wilde, an Irishman and a pagan, monarchy, monotheism and the holistic cult of one are unsatisfactory. In which case, "The Happy Prince" may read as an ironic comment to the Western commitment to wholeness lampooned by the agency of Plato's philosophy through its (problematic?) evolution overtime. This is a romantically reformulated version of Hegel's philosophy that gives love a critical and dialectic role in the onward march of mind. To which we may add Wilde's sense of topsy-turviness, and art of crossbreeding. If the Happy Prince managed to become his name by giving out his body parts to those who were in need of them, then self-fulfilment, the story seems to say, can only be achieved through

fragmentation. Self-realisation is here made possible through the agency of otherness. Embodied by the Swallow, otherness is action.

We need only turn the bird into action, the noun "swallow" into the verb "swallow" for us to see that it also embodies a symbolic unity through fragmentation. Its role as a noun, i.e. as a bird, is priest-like. He *enacts* the ritual shattering of the Prince's body. As a verb, to swallow designs an act that can symbolically *restore* the Prince's body to a full whole. This happens through the historical and anthropological connections existing between the Dionysian ritual of *sparagmos* (shattering) and the Christian ritual of Communion, both embedded in synecdoche. The Christ-like qualities of the statue suggest that Communion is part of the isotopy of divestment. Thus, ironically, the reader of "The Happy Prince," who gobbles its supposedly edifying Christian ending, is taken in by assuming the whole story as a full piece of edifying Victorian literature. This is a good reason for the suspicious reader to let himself or herself accept, appreciate, or be drawn by the full story. In which case, the fairy-tale is surreptitiously educational.

So are Wilde's plays. In "The Happy Prince" we found the outline of several structural, thematic and symbolic paradigms later developed in his drama. The structure on parallel levels, as well as the eros/thanatos kiss, is reprised in *Salomé*, thus giving rise to a new study of the fragment as philosophical issue, through the prophet's severed head. In line with the rejection of the principle of wholeness and unity, the theme of self-fulfilment by becoming one's name in *The Importance of Being Earnest* opens new avenues to our understanding of identity as a flexible set of changing features embedded in contingency rather than in permanence.

Education yields fruits. Lady Bracknell's voice proves to be prophetic; for her fears of acts of violence by the educated "mass" were justified in the ninety-fifties by the Beat Generation and its emblematic angry young men. They were not confined to Grosvenor Square as, under different denominations, they also found their way in Paris during the riots of May 68 and elsewhere. Has Wilde's tale participated in the awareness of the young against the establishment? This is not for us to tell. But had there been a Revolution of the Educated in Wilde's own time, there is no doubt the son of Speranza would have been a leading figure. Be it as it may, "The Happy Prince" may still be seen as a piece of excellent literature for children and with it Wilde's voice can still convey knowledge and achieve awareness of self and otherness in our time. Its subversive power opens up new creative ground. Especially so as the myths of the individual, social and national unity are still in the process of being replaced by a willingness to explore, understand and make good use of fragments.

Bibliography

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Harvard University Press. 1962.

Cambridge MS: Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks* (*Fathers of the Church, Exhortation to the Heathen*), Trans. William Wilson. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2. Eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. < http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/020801.htm, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0208.htm >.

DeLaura, David. *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater*. University of Texas Press, 1969.

Gay, Peter. *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.

Howatson, M. C. and Ian Chilvers. *Concise Companion to Classical Literature*. Oxford: OUP, 1993.

Hunt, Peter. *An Introduction to Children's Literature*. Oxford: OUP, 1994

Ouaknin, Marc-Alain. *Le Livre des prénoms hébraïques et bibliques*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1993.

Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. Desmond Lee. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1955.

Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry* [1888]. London: McMillan, 1920.

Walker, Barbara G. *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*. New York: Harper, 1988.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. J. B. Foreman. William Collins: London, 1966.

---. *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis. London: Fourth Estate, 2000.

---. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. J. M. Guy. Vol. 4 London: OUP, 2006.

---. *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*. Ed. Peter Raby. Oxford: OUP, 1995.

Willoughby, Guy. *Art and Christhood. The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde*. London: Associated UP, 1984.