

Anti-Hellenism and Anti-Classicism in Oscar Wilde's Works. The Second Pole of a Paradoxical Mind¹

Pau Gilabert Barberà

To Jill Kraye, Charles Hope and François Quiviger

On this occasion, PARSA has gathered in Barcelona to reflect on «Classicism and Anti-Classicism as intellectual necessities». Its aim, therefore, is quite clear and is justified by the lack of enthusiasm with which, save honourable exceptions, classical scholars, leaving aside a tyrannical sense of fidelity, have known how to turn Classicism —*stricto sensu* in this case— into the target of their criticism². O. Wilde had an excellent knowledge of classical literature —and of classical world and its culture— as a result of his university studies at Magdalen College, Oxford³ —19th century, second half—, and it is always remembered, with regard to the centuries-old opposition Medievalism / Classicism, that his clear wager was on Greece and its legacy: «... whatever, in fact, is modern in our life we owe to the Greeks. Whatever is an

1. This contribution has been possible thanks to a grant for research in foreign countries —British Library and the Warburg Institute; London, August 2004— bestowed by «l'Agència de Gestió d'Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca (AGAUR)» of the Generalitat de Catalunya.
2. The most emblematic case would be F. Nietzsche's opposition to the rationalism of Socrates and Euripides. Curiously, Nietzsche and Wilde died in 1900 and both advocated a clear revision of every sort of consolidated value.
3. See, e.g.: R. ELLMAN, *Oscar Wilde*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1987, or P. RABY (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, C. U. P., Cambridge 2003 (5th edition), chapter I, «Biography... », by Merlin HOLLAND, 3-18. On his biography, see also: H. SCHROEDER, *Additions and Corrections to Richard Ellmann's Oscar Wilde*, The Author, Braunschweig 1989; M. HOLLAND, *The Wilde Album*, Fourth State, London 1997; S. MORLEY, *Oscar Wilde*, Pavilion, London 1997; S. CALLOWAY, *The Exquisite Life of Oscar Wilde*, Orion Media, London 1997 and D. COAKLEY, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish*, Town House, Dublin 1994.

anachronism is due to mediaevalism» (CA I, CW 1117)⁴. On the other hand, the superb monographs by F. M. Turner and R. Jenkyns, entitled respectively *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*⁵ and *The Victorians and Ancient Greece*⁶ —to which, given Wilde's often Platonic temper, we should add Patricia Cruzalegui: *The Platonic Experience in Nineteenth Century - England*⁷—, explain magisterially to what extent the relation between an entire historical period and the spirit of the ancient Greeks was intense and passionate⁸. And thirdly, it would be absurd not to mention now that Greek friendship of the Irish writer with Lord Alfred Douglas, his beloved or *erómenos*, which finally caused his imprisonment, one of whose results was that famous *epistula, De Profundis*, where he lamented so much not having known how to become a true Greek lover or *erastés*. I could be asked, then, if I have decided in fact to devote capriciously my contribution to the search for an anti-Hellenism which, in O. Wilde's case, rather than unlikely seems even impossible. However, my analysis should be able to show that he possessed and always used a powerful 'weapon', paradox, whose strict application —at least as he conceived it— had to lead him inevitably to anti-Hellenism⁹, although very often his personal feelings triumphed over the orders coming from his privileged mind¹⁰.

* * * * *

4. If I do not indicate otherwise, all the quotations will correspond to: *Oscar Wilde. Complete Works*, Harper Collins, Glasgow 2003 (5th edition) and the numbers in brackets refer to it. I will use the following initials: CA = *The Critic as Artist*; TM = *The Truth of Masks*; DL = *The Decay of Lying*; SMUS = *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*; DG = *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; DP = *De Profundis*; SL = *Selected Letters*; P = *Poems*; S = *Salome*; LWF = *Lady Windermere's Fan*; WH = *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*
5. Yale University Press, New Haven & London 1981.
6. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1980.
7. Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Fondo Editorial, Lima 2006.
8. See also: P. RABY (ed), *op cit.*, chapter 2, «Wilde and the Victorians», by R. GAGNIER, pp. 18-34.
9. This contribution focuses on anti-Hellenism —and anti-classicism in general— in Oscar Wilde's works from a philosophical and ideological point of view. Regarding the literary anti-classicism of Wilde, a subject which demands in my opinion a monographic study, see e.g.: E. WATSON, «Wilde's Iconoclastic Classicism: The Critic as Artist». *English Literature in Transition* 27, 3, 1984, pp. 225-235.
10. In any case, there have been different —and often opposed— evaluations of O. Wilde as an intellectual figure. See e.g.: M.N. ZEENDER, «Oscar Wilde: le jeu du paradoxe», *Cycnos*, 10, 2, 1993, pp. 53-63. In her opinion Wilde's paradoxes are: «écrans de fumée qui masquent sa personnalité véritable... ce n'est guère un hasard s'il avoue avoir un goût tout particulier pour la comédie... il trouve un bon moyen d'échapper à l'ennuyeuse réalité quotidienne, pour ne pas dire à la vie même» (54); «... le jeu intellectuel du paradoxe peut paraître choquant sur le plan de la morale. Mais après tout, qu'importent la moral et la justice quand on ne vit que pour la beauté?» (60). By contrast, H. CATSIAPIS, «Ironie et paradoxes dans les comédies d'Oscar Wilde», *Thalia* 1, 2, 1978, 35-53, considers that, although comedies can seem to be the most frivolous side of his work, they should be seen as an original dramatic form which reveals a philosophical attitude concerning the tragedy and absurdity of life. O.H. SCHIFF, «Nature and Art in Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying*», *Essays and Studies*, 1965, pp. 83-102: «It is this deeply ingrained dialectical habit of mind, rather

Is it possible to define 'paradox' in Oscar Wilde's works?¹¹ Given that my aim is not to discover its univocal 'essence'¹², I will certainly try to find an acceptable and above all useful definition for my purpose but, in any case, it is in Wilde's texts where it must be sought, and I am going to 'surrender' to them willingly. The best known of Wilde's paradoxes, «Life imitates Art» (*The Decay of Lying*), would undoubtedly be a good starting point¹³:

(Cyril): 'But you don't mean to say that you seriously believe that Life imitates Art, that Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality?'. (Vivian): 'Certainly I do. Paradox though it may seem—and paradoxes are always dangerous things—it is none the less true that Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life... A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form... The Greeks, with their quick artistic instinct, understood this, and set in the bride's chamber the statue of Hermes or of Apollo, that she might bear children as lovely as the works of art that she looked at in her rapture or her pain. They knew that Life gains from art not merely spirituality, depth of

than the intellectual irresponsibility of which he is often accused and which his playfulness of tone suggests, which accounts for his greatest power as a stylist. Ideas for Wilde are neither sacred nor absolute; they are to be explored and appreciated and adhered to only so long as they are conducive to illumination and intellectual delight» (101). And J.L. BORGES: «Wilde era un hombre profundo que quería parecer superficial, y esta superficialidad impostada nos ha hecho pasar por alto demasiado a menudo el volumen de un sistema estético y vital de gran envergadura» (quoted by J. LARIOS in *O. Wilde. El Retrato de Dorian Gray*, Quaderns Crema, Barcelona 1998, p.9).

11. See e.g. —besides the articles mentioned in note number 11—: R. BREUER, «Paradox in Oscar Wilde», *Journal of Irish Literature*, 23, 2, 1993, p. 242 and following (he studies Wilde's paradoxes as the result of a long Irish tradition: George Bernard Shaw; William Butler Yeats; Samuel Beckett and Jonathan Swift); K. BECKSON (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1970 (on Wilde's rhetorical paradoxes); M. QUADRI, «Oscar Wilde: Il senso del Paradosso», *Il lettore di provincia* 70, 1987, pp. 75-86 (paradox as provocation against Victorian culture); C. COMOROVSKY, «Paradoxical microstructures in the Drama of Oscar Wilde and Jean Girardoux», *Synthesis* (Romania), 1975, pp. 154-171 (linguistic aspects of Wilde's paradoxes); P.M. HORAN, «Wilde and Joyce: The Importance of Being Paradoxical», *Wild about Wilde. Newsletter* 13, 1992, pp. 6-8 (a brief introduction), or M. Mazuchelli, «I paradossi di Oscar Wilde», *Realtà Nuova* 35, 1970, pp. 704-10 (simply a collection of Wilde's paradoxes).
12. Indeed, Paradox has been studied from many different points of view. See e.g. among others: A) Paradox in Literature and Linguistics and as a mechanism of balance: R. LANDHEER et P.J. SMITH (eds.), *Le paradoxe en Linguistique et en Littérature*, Droz, Genève 1966; R. LANDHEER, «Le paradoxe: un mecanisme de bascule», 91-116; M. BALAT et DELEDALLE-RHODES (eds.), *Signs of Humanity. L'homme et les signes*, Berlin, 1992; R. LANDHEER, «Le paradoxe en la tension d'une contradiction apparente», vol. I, pp. 473-80 and M. RIFATERRE, «Paradoxe et préssupposition», pp. 149-71; B) On the bonds between literary and logical paradoxes: H.P. KAINZ, *Paradox, Dialectic and System*, Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania 1988; T.S. CHAMPLIN, *Reflexive Paradoxes*, Routledge, New York 1988; C) On philosophical paradox: D. OLIN, *Paradox*, Cumen A., London 2003 and M. CLARK, *Paradoxes from A to Z*, Routledge, New York 2002.
13. On Wilde's conception of Art and artists, see, e.g.: J. BROWN, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art*, Univ. Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, London 1997 and L. DANSON, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997.

thought and feeling, soul-turmoil or soul-peace, but that she can form herself on the very lines and colours of art, and can reproduce the dignity of Pheidias as well as the grace of Praxiteles... For this, Art is required, and the true disciples... are... those who become like his works of art... Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation¹⁴. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing... There may have been fogs for centuries in London... But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them' (*DL, CW* 1086).

Paradox is unquestionably 'dangerous' and, bearing in mind the subject of this contribution, it is quite clear that this is so not only to the Victorian mind but also for Plato. Both will have to endure it to be said that everything can be turned upside down, almost as if it were a Greek *katastrophé*. Plato's radical opposition to Art whose only merit seems to be to take us far away from the supreme Reality or Idea¹⁵, makes it unsuitable for transmitting both the spirituality and depth of thought that the Irish writer finds in it¹⁶. Indeed, Wilde, who is often so Platonic but not as if he professed a religion, is much used to contradicting common opinion (*parà dóxan*) and neither wants nor knows how to be 'condescending'. If, with regard to Plato, one could speak of 'the artist' in Wilde's terms, only a philosopher —and by delegation— could be considered as such, since only he succeeds in seeing the Idea to the extent of surrendering to it. But it is the Idea which is at the summit of the hierarchy. On the contrary, Wilde, the proud artist, brings down the Idea from its superior realm in order to locate it in the only place he believes it is really

14. See e.g.: H. SCHIFF, «Nature and Art in Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying*», *op. cit.*, pp. 83-102.
15. As said in book X of Plato's *Republic* (595a), with regard to the bed 'idea', the bed made by a *demiourgós*, simply a copy of the idea, and the bed painted by a painter, a mere copy of a previous copy: «We get, then, these three couches, one, that in nature, which, I take it, we would say that God produces, or who else?... And then there was one which carpenter made... And one which the painter... God... created only one, the couch which really and itself is... And what of the carpenter? Shall we not call him the creator of a couch?». «Yes». «Shall we also say that the painter is the creator and maker of that sort of thing?». «By no means... «this... seems to me the most reasonable designation for him, that he is the imitator of the thing which others produce». «Very good», said I; «The producer of the product three removes from nature you call the imitator?... (translated by Paul Shorey, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1970).
16. A sort of spirituality —let us remember it— which is independent of any ethical code or external influence, finding inspiration in «the Art for Art's sake» as read in the preface of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* by Théophile Gautier (l'Art pour l'Art), and also based upon Kant and Hegel's philosophical thought «whose concept of beauty and art as a mind category with a divine nature excludes any dependence on worldly values and needs» (V. REGGI, *op. cit.*, p. 36. About the relations between French Decadence —Gautier, Balzac, Baudelaire, Huysmans, etc. and Wilde's work, see e.g.: Ph. MCEVANSONEYA, «Oscar Wilde and Decadence in Art», *Irish Studies* 11, 1995, pp. 14-19.

perceptible, that is to say, in the mind of every man who shapes models to which all the rest will adapt itself, exactly as Wilde's image was in great measure the incarnation of Aestheticism —whose 'idea' he also contributed to create¹⁷. The artist is precisely the best 'equipped' man to understand that ancient play of copies and models, but, as we shall see immediately, he opens his eyes not only to the Platonic theory of ideas, but also to Hegel's system of contraries —and also Heraclitean, of course— which permits him to unmask Metaphysics. We see the result in *The Truth of Masks*, a very 'dangerous' one, since it implies to set the Truth free of all univocal meanings into which Western Thought has so often imprisoned it:

«A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realise Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks» (*TM*, *CW* 1172).

And, applying his theories strictly, Wilde proves that he knows how to create and propose new models of searchers for —at least— double truths. Philosophy should become young, iridescent, winged, foolish; it should be set free of the sadness of responsibility and become addicted to pleasure. Philosophy, in short, should be a bacchante who worships Dionysus because, only thus, after having become used to the wine of intellectual boldness, it will be capable of questioning everything. If from Philosophy we pass to the philosopher, that Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* could be the emblem:

(Having dinner at Lady Agatha's): He played with the idea... tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her wine-stained robe and wreath of ivy, danced like a Bacchante over the hills of life... He felt that the eyes of Dorian Gray were fixed on him, and the consciousness that amongst his audience there was one whose temperament he wished to fascinate seemed to give his wit keenness and to lend colour to his imagination. He was brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible (*DG*, *CW* 43)¹⁸.

17. Bearing in mind the title of my contribution, it might be worth taking also into account anti-aestheticism in 19th century; see e.g.: B. RICHARDS, «Wilde and Anti-Aestheticism», *Wildean* 20, 2002, pp. 14-27.

18. On the «praise of folly» and its relation to Erasmus and the whole Renaissance tradition, see e.g.: M. QUADRI, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

Maybe now we shall be able to understand much better another of Lord Henry's sentiments and even to try to find an acceptable definition of 'paradox' in Wilde:

«The way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test reality we must see it on the tight rope. When the verities become acrobats, we can judge them» (*DG, CW*42).

What might be, then, 'paradox' for Wilde? In accordance with what we have just read, it might be an epistemology of Truth attempting to discover it just in the middle of an intellectual tension generated by two poles, which, being both the common cause of it, both also claim it as their own. Truth is, therefore, an acrobatic idea or notion that walks on the tight rope and runs all the time the risk of falling down and being extinguished. And, furthermore, let us pay attention to the fact that Dignity has passed in the end from the result of the method to the method itself, that is, from the Truth to Paradox.

The clearest consequence of those acrobatics is a double vision of everything to the extent of not seeing anything at all, a sort of relativist proclamation — Protagoras?¹⁹— which should not 'frighten'²⁰ because, instead of the image of

19. Remember, for instance, Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1, 216-219: «Protagoras also holds that 'Man is the measure of all things', of existing things that they exist, and of non-existing things that they exist not; and by 'measure' he means the criterion, and by 'things' the objects, so that he is virtually asserting that 'Man is the criterion of all objects', of those which exist that they exist, and of those which exist not that they exist not. And consequently he posits only what appears to each individual, and thus introduces relativity» (translated by R.G. Bury, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1967); Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 11, 6, 1062 b 13: «Protagoras said that man is the measure of all things, by which he meant simply that each individual's impressions are positively true. But if this is so, it follows that the same thing is and is not, and is bad and good, and that all the other implications of opposite statements are true; because often a given thing seems beautiful to one set of people and ugly to another, and that which seems to each individual is the measure» (translated by Hugh Tredennick, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1972); Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanea* 6, 65: «The Greeks say, and Protagoras was the first, that a reasoning can be opposed to any other», and Seneca, *Letters* 88,43: «Protagoras declares that one can take either side on many questions and debate it with equal success—even on this very question, whether every subject can be debated from either point of view» (translated by Richard M. Gummere, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1963).
20. But totally rejected, for instance, by John Ruskin, an intellectual figure who was certainly respected by Wilde, thus confirming to what extent Wilde's intellectual attitude in Victorian times was brave and daring. Here is Ruskin's thesis, which quite evidently takes Protagoras into account: «From these ingenious views the step is very easy to a further opinion, that it does not much matter what things are in themselves, but only what they are to us; and that the only real truth of them is their appearance to, or effect upon us. From which position, with a hearty desire for mystification, and much egotism, selfishness, shallowness, and impertinence, a philosopher may easily go so far as to believe, and say, that everything in the world depends upon his seeing or thinking of it, and that nothing, therefore, exists, but what he sees or thinks of» (*The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E.T. COOK and A. WEDDERBUM. George Allen, London 1903-12, 5, 202; cited by B. RICHARDS, *op. cit.*, p. 19). On the other hand, Walter Pater, although in the preface of *The Renaissance* he maintained that the duty of the critic is «to see the object as in itself it really is», added: «the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly» (*The Renaissance*, Macmillan, London 1910, VIII).

the tight rope —an inheritance in some sense of those tight strings of Heraclitus's bow and lyre which symbolised the tension of life?²¹—, now the chosen image will be the flow or ceaseless stream of a passionate and excited river of ideas —Heraclitus once more?²² What really counts, above all, is the 'free play of mind', the true antidote against stupidity or, in other words, after having acknowledged the existence of a pole or norm, the rights of its contrary must be vindicated; to sum up, we all must be antinomian:

«The man who sees both sides of a question, is a man who sees absolutely nothing at all. Art is a passion, and, in matters of art, Thought is inevitably coloured by emotion, and so is fluid rather than fixed, and, depending upon fine moods and exquisite moments, cannot be narrowed into the rigidity of a scientific formula or a theological dogma» (*CA* II, *CW*1144).

(Gilbert): 'Anything approaching to the free play of the mind is practically unknown amongst us. People cry out against the sinner, yet it is not the sinful, but the stupid, who are our shame. There is no sin except stupidity'. (Ernest): 'Ah! what an antinomian you are!'. (Gilbert): 'The artistic critic, like the mystic, is an antinomian always' (*CA*, *CW* 1153).

In the previous texts Wilde has already revealed to us some of the influences on his thought and, for my part, I have suggested two more. It is quite obvious that all of them, whether classical or not, are the base —single and indivisible— upon which rests his critical spirit toward any subject. Nevertheless, given that in this case I am concerned with analysing anti-Hellenism in Oscar Wilde —and as a classical philologist—, I have preferred —with regard to the central body of my contribution— to focus on his Greek influences and to approach all the rest in the footnotes throughout my contribution.

Indeed, Heraclitus must be mentioned in my opinion in the first place²³. The philosopher of Ephesus is for Wilde the most suitable antidote against any mind poisoned by fixations and stereotypes. In the following passage he does not refer to him explicitly but he summarises his 'wisdom' brilliantly: constant change and flow, minds which are well trained to perceive the contraries, and, above all, one superior Unity or *Lógos* which transforms his intellectual audacity into a demonstration of coherence rather than a trifling folly:

21. Remember for instance the fragment B 51 *DK*: «They do not understand how, when it diverges, it converges with itself; harmony of the tension that goes and comes back, as in the case of the bow and the lyre».
22. Remember the fragment A6 *DK*: «Heraclitus says... that everything flows and nothing stays fixed, and, comparing everything existing with the stream of a river, says that you could not enter twice the same river», or B36 *DK*: «It is death to souls to become water, and it is death to water to become earth. Conversely, water comes into existence out of earth, and souls out of water».
23. About the influence of Heraclitus on Wilde, see e.g.: V. REGGI, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

«The true critic... will seek for beauty in every age and in each school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought or stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realise himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions. For what is mind but motion in the intellectual sphere?» (*CA II*, *CW* 1144-45)²⁴.

A good instance, as seen, of Heraclitean wisdom or of its philosophical legacy in prose that Wilde, however, does not hesitate to include in one of his verses with all the concision which is peculiar to the poetical language and in a poem symptomatically entitled 'Panthea', where the divine nature of the Whole knows how to turn into a perfect unity what seems to be independent: «... all life is one, and all is change» (*P*, *CW* 832)²⁵.

Another influence would be, as so often in Wilde, Plato or, still better, his most Socratic dialogues, although the great master of Athens, i.e. Socrates, never gives up all hope of understanding what Justice, or Beauty, etc. is in itself. Wilde, on the contrary, in spite of being truly dialectical, he is also anti-Socratic in the sense that, from a different system of thought, he tries to bring into harmony the truth on one side and falsehood, opinion, the ultimate sensation and one's last mood on the other:

«Dialogue, certainly, that wonderful literary form which, from Plato to Lucian, and from Lucian to Giordano Bruno... creative critics of the

24. Remember for instance the fragment B 10 *DK*: «Couplings, entire and non-entire things, convergent divergent, harmonious inharmonious, from all things One and One from all things».
25. The «ceaseless change» is a commonplace in Wilde's works; only the paralysing immobility of prison seems to be able to stop it: «The paralysing immobility of a life, every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern, so that we eat and drink and walk... according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula: this immobile quality, that makes each dreadful day in the very minutest detail like its brother, seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless» (*DP*, *CW* 1009-10). Other instances of a possible Heraclitean influence on Wilde might be the following: «You must read this letter right through, though each word may become to you as the fire or knife of the surgeon that makes the delicate flesh burn or bleed» —*DP*, *CW* 981—; *cfr.* with B 58 *DK*, which is controversial. I follow in this case A.C. KAHN, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, C. U. P., Cambridge 1979: «Doctors who cut and burn and torture their patients in every way complain that they do not receive the reward they deserve»; «People whose desire is solely for self-realisation never know where they are going. They can't know. In one sense of the word it is, of course, necessary, as the Greek oracle said, to know oneself. That is the first achievement of knowledge. But to recognise that the soul of a man is unknowable is the ultimate achievement of Wisdom... Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?» —*DP*, *CW* 1038— *cfr.* with B 46 *DK*: «You will not find the limits of the soul... whatever way you take; so deep is its reason»). And with regard to the system of contraries: «Wherever there is a man who exercises authority, there is a man who resists authority» (*SMUS*, *CW* 1178).

world have always employed, can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression... By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view, and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things, gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress, and really illumine the idea more completely, or from those felicitous after-thoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme... To know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods. For what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one's last mood» (*CA II*, *CW* 1143).

And, finally, the Sophists, who were precisely so despised by Socrates in Plato's dialogues and who were also responsible in great measure for the so called «Greek Enlightenment». It was inevitable for him to be inspired by them—and he wanted to be—because they were the great masters of relativity in all sorts of truths. For a man who, as a result of a good knowledge of mankind's tortured history of Ethics, was able to assert, like the Ernest in *The Critic as Artist*, that: «If we lived long enough to see the results of our actions it may be that those who call themselves good would be sickened with a dull remorse, and those whom the world calls evil stirred by a noble joy» (*CA I*, *CW* 1121); for a man who in *Lady Windermere's Fan* makes Lord Darlington say: «Do you know I am afraid that good people do a great deal of harm in this world. Certainly the greatest harm they do is that they make badness of such extraordinary importance. It is absurd to divide people into good and bad» (*LWF*, *CW* 423)²⁶, and Lady Windermere: «How strange! I would have publicly disgraced her (Mrs. Erlynne) in my own house. She accepts public disgrace in the house of another to save me... There is a bitter irony in things, a bitter irony in the way we talk of good and bad women... Oh, what a lesson!» (*LWF*, *CW* 455); for a man who passes from «A woman of no importance» to «A man of no importance»; and, above all, for a man who is conscious of his intellectual value: «To truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, and showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence» (*DP*, *CW* 1017), for a man like this,

26. In *Salome*, the Fifth Jew dares to say: «No one can tell how God worketh. His ways are very mysterious. It may be that the things which we call evil are good, and that the things which we call good are evil. There is no knowledge of anything. We must needs submit to everything, for God is very strong. He breaketh in pieces the strong together with the weak, for He regardeth not any man» —*S*, *CW* 594—; original text in French: « On ne peut pas savoir comment Dieu agit, ses voies sont très mystérieuses. Peut-être ce que nous appelons le mal est le bien, et ce que nous appelons le bien est le mal. On ne peut rien savoir. Le nécessaire c'est de se soumettre à tout. Dieu est très fort. Il brise au même temps les faibles et les forts. Il n'a aucun souci de personne » —O. WILDE, *Salomé*, Flammarion, Paris 1993, p. 107).

it was impossible not to protect himself under «the mantle of the Sophist»: Protagoras, Gorgias, etcetera:

(Vivian): 'My article is really a most salutary and valuable warning. If it is attended to, there may be a new Renaissance of Art'. (Cyril): 'What is the subject?'. (Vivian): 'I intend to call it 'The Decay of Lying: A Protest''. (Cyril): 'Lying! I should have thought that our politicians kept up that habit'. (Vivian): 'I assure you that they do not. They never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation. How different from the temper of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility... No, the politicians won't do. Something may, perhaps, be urged on behalf of the Bar. The mantle of the Sophist has fallen on its members. Their feigned ardours and unreal rhetoric are delightful. They can make the worse appear the better cause, as though they were fresh from Leontine schools, and have been known to wrest from reluctant juries triumphant verdicts of acquittal for their clients, even when those clients, as often happens, were clearly and unmistakably innocent' (*DL, CW 1072*)²⁷.

Oscar Wilde must think that, in spite of all their mistakes, the Sophists never made that of believing that innocents never need to be defended. And, when something like that really happens, it is much better to have our minds well trained to turn upside-down prosecutor's thesis and to make the opposite credible. «Triumphant verdicts of acquittal» and «innocents» create in this case an evident and ingenious paradox, but very probably, in spite of the appearances, in spite of the «mask», Wilde is not trying to make readers laugh but to transform those who are incautious into good professionals of caution.

So far the attempt—whether I have succeeded or not—to find out «the hardly hidden secrets» of a dangerous instrument. This might be the reason why, although just a few moments ago we have read in *De Profundis* that Wilde was proud of his great intellectual skills, he does not hide on other occasions—and in the same text—that: «The trivial in thought and action is charming. I had

27. Of Gorgias of Leontini, remember, for instance: Plato, *Phaedrus*, 267b: «... Tisias and Gorgias... who make small things seem great and great things small by the power of their words, and new things old and old things the reverse» (translated by H.N. Fowler, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1913). At issue, then, is the well-known technique of Antilogic, «the essential future is the opposition of one logos to another either by contrariety or contradiction. It follows that... when used in argument it constitutes a specific and fairly definite technique, namely that of proceeding from a given logos, say the position adopted by an opponent, to the establishment of a contrary or contradictory logos in such a way that the opponent must either accept both logoi, or at least abandon his first position» (G.B. KERFERD, *The Sophistic Movement*, C. U. P., Cambridge 1995, p. 63). Very often in Wilde's works there are characters who also seem to be true Victorian sophists. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for instance, Lord Augustus says that Mrs. Erlynne: «She explains everything. Egad! She explains you. She has got any amount of explanations for you—and all of them different» (*LW, CW 434*).

made it the keystone of a very brilliant philosophy expressed in plays and paradoxes. But the froth and folly of our life grew often very wearisome to me» (*DP*, *CW*987). A good sign, indeed, of intellectual honesty!

* * * * *

Consequently, the moment has arrived to test if Wilde really believes that he must play with that so much admired Hellenic and classical legacy to the extent of putting it 'on the tight rope'. And certainly the weapons to 'attack' it do not seem to come from Greece but from the «Christian experience of affliction *in carcere et vinculis*», as written in *De Profundis*. Of course, I shall need very probably to 'temper' this last statement both in the course and at the end of this section, but, for the time being, it is worth looking for the clarity of the opposite poles. Therefore, we shall read in the first place how he justified his admiration, apparently unconditional, for the Renaissance, that is, for the restoration of classical joy and beauty which left behind the dark medieval masochism²⁸:

But it is rarely in the world's history that its ideal has been one of joy and beauty. The worship of pain has far more often dominated the world. Mediaevalism, with its saints and martyrs, its love of self-torture, its wild passion for wounding itself, its gashing with knives, and its whipping with rods—Mediaevalism is real Christianity, and the mediaeval Christ is the real Christ. When the Renaissance dawned upon the world, and brought with it the new ideals of the beauty of life and the joy of living, men could not understand Christ. Even Art shows us that. The painters of the Renaissance drew Christ as a little boy playing with another boy in a palace or a garden, or lying back in his mother's arms, smiling at her... Even when they drew him crucified they drew him as a beautiful God on whom evil men had inflicted suffering. But he did not preoccupy them much. What delighted them was to paint the men and women whom they admired, and to show the loveliness of this lovely earth... and to find the presentation of the real Christ we must go to mediaeval art. There he is one maimed and marred; one who is not comely to look on, because Beauty is a joy...

28. There were occasions, however, on which he lamented that «the Hellenic hours» of joy did not respect the self-restraint which is peculiar to Holy Week. 'Sonnet' (Written in Holy Week at Genoa) «I wandered in Scoglietto's far retreat, / The oranges on each o'erhanging spray / Burned as bright lamps of gold to shame the day; / Some startled bird with fluttering wings and fleet / Made snow of all the blossoms; at my feet / Like silver moons the pale narcissi lay: / And the curved waves that streaked the great, green bay / ... life seemed very sweet. / Outside the young boy-priest passed singing clear, / 'Jesus the son of Mary has been slain, / O come and fill his sepulchre with flowers.' / Ah, God! Ah, God! those dear Hellenic hours / Had drowned all memory of Thy bitter pain, / The Cross, the Cross, the Soldiers and the Spear» (*P*, *CW*769).

The evolution of man is slow... Even now, in some places in the world, the message of Christ is necessary Christ did not revolt against authority... He had, as I said before, no scheme for the reconstruction of society. But the modern world has schemes... It trusts to Socialism and to Science as its methods... For what man has sought for is, indeed, neither pain nor pleasure, but simply Life... The new Individualism, for whose service Socialism, whether it wills it or not, is working, will be perfect harmony²⁹. It will be what the Greeks sought for, but could not, except in Thought, realise completely, because they had slaves, and fed them; it will be what the Renaissance sought for, but could not realise completely except in Art, because they had slaves, and starved them. It will be complete, and through it each man will attain to his perfection. The new Individualism is the new Hellenism (*SMUS, CW 1196-7*)³⁰.

In spite of their respective slaves, Greece and the Renaissance pursued the same ideal: the perfect harmony that results from an accepted and enthroned individualism. There was a medieval age with its saints and martyrs, its love of self-torture and its wild passion for wounding, which did not know how to discover the beauty of life and the joy of living. Later on, the light of the Renaissance came at last, thus transforming Christ into a misunderstood figure and substituting him with men and women who smiled. And there will be, in short, a new era because there is evolution, socialism, project, science and method. A new Hellenism is coming nearer, then, which will be based upon the attainment of personal perfection. Needless to say, I have chosen this text since, if every pole is by definition an extreme point, the evident utopia of *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* seems to move it to a longer distance, thus magnifying the contrast with its

29. Wilde's confidence in evolution is based, among others, upon Herbert Spencer —and William Kingdon Clifford. Because of his conviction that biological life is in process of evolution, Spencer held that knowledge is subject to change. It is also based upon Hegel's notion of a critical and historical spirit which works and gains freedom constantly. On the other hand, Spencer's social evolutionism pursues «an increasing individuation», although probably individualism as defended by Wilde also finds inspiration in J.S. MILL's *On Liberty* (1859). Wilde falls into line with the Darwinists, too, who were politically progressive and believed that human beings were social, creative and collaborating by nature. In fact, the three great aesthetic masters of British 19th-century Britain were three great social critics: John Ruskin wanted a world without poverty; William Morris wanted it without social classes, and Wilde aimed at a world free of social intolerance and conventional thought and behaviour; see, e.g.: R. GAGNIER, *op. cit.*, 18-28, and M.S. HELFAND and Ph.E. SMITH, «Anarchy and Culture: The Evolutionary turn of Cultural Criticism in the work of Oscar Wilde», *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 20, 2, 1978, pp. 199-216.

30. See, e.g.: V. REGGI, «Oscar Wilde and the New Hellenism», *Irish Studies* 11, 1995, pp. 36-38; he defines it as a Wilde's journey through the «labyrinth of French Decadence, Pater's original fusion of Empiricism and Hegelian Philosophy, and all the echoes of contemporary artistic experimentation» (36).

opposite³¹. But in fact we are dealing with a topic in Wilde's works, which is also present, for instance, in his poems where paradox shines, too:

'The artist' (poem in prose): One evening there came into his soul the desire to fashion an image of *The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment*. And he went forth into the world to look for bronze. For he could only think in bronze. But all the bronze of the whole world had disappeared, nor anywhere in the whole world was there any bronze to be found, save only the bronze of the image of *The Sorrow that endureth for Ever*. Now this image he had himself, and with his own hands, fashioned, and had set it on the tomb of the one thing he had loved in life. On the tomb of his dead thing he had most loved had he set this image of his won fashioning, that it might serve as a sign of the love of man that dieth not, and a symbol of the sorrow of man that endureth for ever. And in the whole world there was no other bronze save the bronze of this image. And he took the image he had fashioned, and set it in a great furnace, and gave it to the fire. And out of the bronze of the image of *The Sorrow that endureth for Ever* he fashioned an image of *The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment* (*P*, *CW* 900)³².

The other pole, of course, is the acceptance of suffering and sorrow as an inevitable human experience, and very soon we will find those shades I mentioned before:

«I used to live entirely for pleasure. I shunned suffering and sorrow of every kind. I hated both. I resolved... to treat them, that is to say, as modes of imperfection... My mother... used often to quote to me Goethe's lines... *Who never ate his bread in sorrow, / Who never spent the midnight hours / Weeping and waiting for the morrow, / He knows you*

31. In one of his sonnets Wilde seems to ask Christ to become Hellenic or Arcadian in order not to spoil the harmony of the beauty of life. 'Sonnet' (On Hearing the *Dies Irae* in the Sistine Chapel): Nay, Lord, not thus! white lilies in the spring, / Sad olive-groves, or silver-breasted dove, / Teach me more clearly of Thy life and love / Than terrors of red flame and thundering./ The hillside vines dear memories of Thee bring: / A bird at evening flying to its nest / Tells me of One who had no place of rest: / I think it is of Thee the sparrows sing. / Come rather on some autumn afternoon, / When red and brown are bur-nished on the leaves, / And the fields echo to the gleaner's song. / Come when the splendid fullness of the moon / Looks down upon the rows of golden sheaves, / And reap Thy harvest: we have waited long (*P*, *CW* 772).
32. Although we also find in his poems a clear lack of confidence concerning the dictatorship of passion: 'Helas': To drift with every passion till my soul / Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play, / Is it for this that I have given away / Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control? / Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll / Scrawled over on some boyish holiday / With idle songs for pipe and virelay, / Which do but mar the secret of the whole. / Surely there was a time I might have trod / The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance / Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God: / Is that some dead? Lo! with a little rod / I did but touch the honey of romance — / And must I lose a soul's inheritance? (*P*, *CW* 864).

not, ye heavenly powers... Clergymen... talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation. One discerns things one never discerned before... What one had felt dimly, through instinct, about art, is intellectually and emotionally realised with perfect clearness of vision and absolute intensity of apprehension. I now see that sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great art. What the artist is always looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible» (*DP, CW1023-24*).

«I remember talking once on this subject to one... woman... I said to her that there was enough suffering in one narrow London lane to show that God did not love man... I was entirely wrong... Now it seems to me that love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world... I am convinced that there is no other... been built out of Sorrow, it has been built by the hands of Love, because in no other way could the Soul of man, for whom the world was made, reach the full stature of its perfection» (*DP, CW1025*).

The man who is writing now is not the intellectual juggler who plays with the idea letting it escape and recapturing it. He is a man condemned to two years of hard labour facing a still worse and humanly unavoidable situation, that of reviewing a whole previous personal evolution and, in his case, discovering himself as the victim both of himself and of a repressive society which is alien in every realm to the playful spirit of Dionysus. However, the repentant man does not annihilate the aesthete or sensualist. Not at all; the revelation of the positive value of affliction is not only an «intellectual» *anagnórisis* but also an «emotional» one, and «triumphs» over him —so to speak— thanks to its absolute «intensity of apprehension» and its «supreme emotion». As a consequence, paradox continues to accompany him, since, contrary to what was intended by the puritan morality of those who condemned him, the wicked sensuality of pleasure —so Hellenic!— is not removed in order to embrace the exclusively ascetic spirituality of repentance, and punishment provides him with a Christian ‘passion’, but with a passion after all. Wilde must think very probably that God does not like to punish the sinner absurdly; on the contrary, like those Greeks who philosophized with love —later on I will approach this theme—, the aim of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world and the amount that prisoner Wilde happened to experience is the attainment of perfection. Indeed, human beings should perceive, as intensively as possible, the revelation —not mystery— of lacking³³

33. A kind of thought which *mutatis mutandis* can also be found, for instance, in Miguel de Unamuno’s *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* and, in England, several years later, in C. S. Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*. «Porque Dios se nos revela porque sufre y porque sufrimos; porque sufre exige nuestro amor, y porque sufrimos nos da el suyo y cubre nuestra congoja con la congoja eterna e infinita... El que no sufre, y no sufre porque no vive, es ese

(Love —*éros*— is in the first place the desire for anything and, secondly, for what it happens to be lacking? —*Symposium* 200e).

But, if we saw Wilde contrasting the Hellenic and Renaissance praise of life and joy with that of affliction, with the previous praise for the shining spirit of the Renaissance or restoration of Classicism he will now contrast its condemnation. Let us read it:

To me one of the things in history the most to be regretted is that the Christ's own renaissance, which has produced the Cathedral at Chartres, the Arthurian cycle of legends, the life of St. Francis of Assisi, the art of Giotto, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, was not allowed to develop on its own lines, but was interrupted and spoiled by the dreary classical Renaissance that gave us Petrarch, and Raphael's frescoes,

lógico y congelado *ens realissimum*, es el *primum movens*, es esa entidad impasible y por impasible no más que pura idea. La categoría no sufre, pero tampoco vive ni existe como persona. ¿Y cómo va a fluir y vivir el mundo desde una idea impasible? No sería sino idea del mundo mismo. Pero el mundo sufre, y el sufrimiento es sentir la carne de la realidad, es sentirse de bulto y de tomo el espíritu, es tocarse a sí mismo, es la realidad inmediata... El dolor es la sustancia de la vida y la raíz de la personalidad, pues sólo sufriendo se es persona. Y es universal, y lo que a los seres todos nos une es el dolor, la sangre universal o divina que por todos circula. Eso que llamamos voluntad, ¿qué es sino dolor?» (Miguel DE UNAMUNO, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, Editorial optima, Colección Odisea, Madrid 1997, pp. 219-20. «God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world» (C.S. LEWIS, *The Problem of Pain*, Fount Harper Collins Publishers, London 1977, p. 74). William Nicholson, the author of the screenplay of *Shadowlands* by Richard Attenborough, on Lewis's life and work summarises very well when he makes him say: «Where was God on that December night? Why didn't he stop it? Isn't He supposed to love us? And does God want us to suffer? What if the answer to that question is yes? I'm not sure that God particularly wants us to be happy. I think He wants us to be able to love and be loved. He wants us to grow up. I suggest to you that it is because God loves us that he makes us the gift of suffering. Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. We are like blocks of stone out of which the sculptor carves the forms of men. The blows of his chisel, which hurts us so much, are what make us perfect... We think our childish toys brings us all the happiness there is and our nursery is the whole wide world. But something must drive us out of the nursery to the world of others. And that something is suffering ... If you love someone, you don't want them to suffer. You can't bear it'. *Cfr.*: «We are perplexed to see misfortune falling upon decent, inoffensive people, worthy people ... How can I say with sufficient tenderness what here needs to be said?... let me implore the reader to try to believe... that God... may really be right when He thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed: that all this must fall from them, warning them in advance of an insufficiency that one day they will have to discover» (*The Problem of Pain*, p. 77), and also: «The terrible thing is that a perfectly good God is in this matter hardly less formidable than a Cosmic sadist. The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe that there is any use in begging for tenderness... But suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless... Well, take your choice. The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't» (C.S. LEWIS, *A Grief Observed*, Faber and Faber, London 1966, pp. 37-8).

and Palladian architecture, and formal French tragedy, and St. Paul's Cathedral, and Pope's poetry, and everything that is made from without and by dead rules, and does not spring from within through some spirit informing it. But wherever there is a romantic movement in art there somehow, and under some form, is Christ, or the soul of Christ. He is in *Romeo and Juliet*, in the *Winter's Tale*, in Provençal poetry, in 'The Ancient Mariner', in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', and in Chatterton's 'Ballad of Charity'... Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, the note of pity in Russian novels, Verlaine and Verlaine's poems, the stained glass and tapestries and the quattro-cento work of Burne-Jones and Morris, belong to him no less than the tower of Giotto, Lancelot and Guinevere, Tannhäuser, the troubled romantic marbles of Michael Angelo, pointed architecture, and the love of children and flowers... in classical art there was but little place, hardly enough for them to grow or play in, but which, from the twelfth century down to our own day, have been continually making their appearances in art... coming fitfully and wilfully, as children, as flowers (*DP, CW*1032-33).

The great paradox, the free play of the mind, would have been of course to find in the same text, with regard both to Christ and Medievalism on one side and to the Renaissance on the other, the logos of the prosecutor and that of the defender, both being besides passionate and written by the same person. But here one can only appeal to the memory of what was read in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, since, from the dark medieval world and the «maimed and marred Christ» which was so peculiar to it, we pass now to an unfortunately interrupted «Christ's own renaissance» opposed to the Classic Renaissance, which was «made from without and by dead rules and did not spring from within through some spirit informing it». It does not matter that, afterwards, in this catalogue of 'romantic' works and authors —and, therefore, highly significant from his point of view—, we even come across the 'romantic' and Renaissance artist —at least chronologically— Michael Angelo, who has been saved from the fire because of his 'troubled' romantic marbles. It does not matter, indeed, for the condemnation of the Renaissance and of Classicism in general has been so severe that one could conclude that Wilde's Classicism-Paganism died in the prison of Reading. If so, it is quite clear that the intellectual play is over, because in his mind the truth and the spirit of Christianity will never be again 'on the tight rope', so that we should check if, out of prison, his skills in criticism of everything and everyone wakes up once more as would be expected of a true paradoxical mind. In the meantime, the praise of Christ in *De Profundis* —opposed to the previous sad Christ— should be examined, and it is easy to infer that, thanks to it, the anti-Hellenism we have been looking for will increase remarkably:

Nor is it merely that we can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between the

classical and romantic movement in life, but the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist — an intense and flame like imagination. He realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation. He understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind, the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich (*DP, CW 1027*)³⁴.

Christ's place indeed is with the poets. His whole conception of Humanity sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realised by it» (*DP, CW 1027*).

I had said of Christ that he ranks with the poets. That is true. Shelley and Sophocles are of his company. But his entire life also is the most wonderful of poems. For 'pity and terror' there is nothing in the entire cycle of Greek tragedy to touch it. The absolute purity of the protagonist raises the entire scheme to a height of romantic art from which the sufferings of Thebes and Pelops' line are by their very horror excluded, and shows how wrong Aristotle was when he said in his treatise on the drama that it would be impossible to bear the spectacle of one blameless in pain. Nor in Aeschylus nor Dante... in Shakespeare... is there anything that, for sheer simplicity of pathos wedded and made one with sublimity of tragic effect, can be said to equal or even approach the last act of Christ's passion (*DP, CW 1028*).

And, above all, Christ is the most supreme of Individualists... Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their life a mimicry, their passions a quotation. Christ was not merely the supreme Individualist, but he was the first in History» (*DP, CW 1029-30*). To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all... And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom suffering and sorrow were modes through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he made of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing (*DP, CW 1031*).

34. He was, then, the opposite pole to the Greek gods: «For the Greek gods... were not really what they appeared to be... Apollo... had been cruel to Marsyas and had made Niobe childless. In the steel shields of Athena's eyes there had been no pity for Arachne; the pomp and peacocks of Hera were all that was really noble about her; and the Father of the Gods himself had been too fond of the daughters of men. The two most deeply suggestive figures of Greek Mythology were, for religion, Demeter, an Earth Goddess, not one of the Olympians, and for art, Dionysus, the son of a mortal woman to whom the moment of his birth had proved also the moment of her death. But Life itself from its lowliest and most humble sphere produced one far more marvellous than the mother of Proserpina or the son of Semele. Out of the Carpenter's shop at Nazareth had come a personality infinitely greater than any made by myth and legend, and one, strangely enough, destined to reveal to the world the mystical meaning of wine and the real beauties of the lilies of the field as none, either on Cithaeron or at Enna, had ever done» (*DP, CW 1031-32*).

...out of his own imagination entirely did Jesus of Nazareth create himself... He was the denial as well as the affirmation of prophecy. For every expectation that he fulfilled there was another that he destroyed (*DP, CW*1033).

He felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death (*DP, CW*1034-35).

It may be that the *anagnórisis* of his anti-Classicism was not caused by the Greek Legacy and that only Christ and Christianity opened his eyes. Nevertheless, given that paradox in Wilde is also based upon a Greek base of different identity: at least Heraclitean, Sophistic and Platonic, we can perfectly understand that one further reason to praise Christ is precisely the fact that paradox becomes incarnate in him. Indeed, the perfection of Christ's personality is not distant, dead and spiritless like the one of Palladian architecture —Wilde *dicit*. Christ, quite paradoxically, comes near to imperfection³⁵. He, the perfect man, understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind; he also understood the paradoxical misery of those who live for pleasure and the paradoxical poverty of the rich. Christ is open to everybody because he is paradoxically the supreme individualist. His presence and acts are the denial as well as the affirmation of prophecy. And unlike a stereotyped Jew he seems paradoxically to find inspiration in Heraclitus's philosophy for he understands that life is changeful, fluid and active. Wilde believes quite firmly that Christ, rather than the son or result of Hebrew Legacy, is the unexpected son, the one who invents himself, the man endowed with a rich imagination which is paradoxically astonishing in the sense that it was unpredictable in his context³⁶. And, furthermore, Wilde prefers to define him in Greek terms, that is: Christ is a poet, a creator *par excellence*.

Christ's place indeed is with the poets. Sophocles is of his company, so that, first, we could even hope that Greek tragedy will be saved from the fire. But it is not so; Wilde maintained that, only from the bareness of the innocent's pain and in opposition to Aristotle's statement³⁷, tragedy or, perhaps better, the effect of the performance of tragedies attains an incomparable degree of romantic sublimity. From his *metánoia* or repentance, he needs to associate himself with purity but not, as often happens in Greek tragedy, with the abhorrence that is peculiar to inherited stains and insurmountable destinies. Neither Antigone nor Oedipus, for instance, could ever be compared with

35. See also: «But in a manner not yet understood of the world he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful holy things and modes of perfection» (*DP, CW*1037).

36. The contrast of his temper with his tragic end is also paradoxical: «Yet the whole life of Christ... is really an idyll, though it ends with the veil of the temple being rent, and the darkness coming over the face of the earth, and the stone rolled to the door of the sepulchre. One always thinks of him as a young bridegroom with his companions... » (*DP, CW*1029).

37. Aristotle. *Poetics*. Cap XIII, 2: «... it is obvious to begin with that one should not show worthy men passing from good fortune to bad» (translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1965).

Christ's purity, in just the same way that the performance of their respective tragedies does not effect the same degree of *kátharsis* on account of, in this case, the exact application of the Aristotelian definition of tragedy³⁸.

What prevents Sophocles from being put on the same level with Christ or, in other words, what exalts Christ towards an artistically superior category? Given that his whole conception of Humanity sprang right out of his imagination, one could think that Christ, as if he were a Platonic philosopher—in good measure a mystic one—, according to Wilde, wants and knows how to ascend through degrees of abstraction in order to attain the Archetype and, finally, rather than with individuals, to «sympathize or commiserate» with Mankind³⁹. Not at all. Jesus of Nazareth's unique art of imagination consists precisely of descending in order to find Mankind in individuals, to the extent of imagining himself, a single man as well, as the incarnation, here and now, of the Archetype. The artist not only grasps the everlasting Idea, taking it as the form in order to model the bare and shapeless matter⁴⁰, but he also surpasses the very same Idea, so that he creates and incarnates it in fact. Consequently, the true artist is both a creator and the creation, poet and poem, *poietés* and *poiéma*—or *poíesis* turning into *poiéma*— and Jesus did create a sort of sublime man and incarnate him.

Very seldom has it been stated with such resolution that, unless the idea (*eidéa* or *idéa*) becomes image (*eikón*), it hardly accomplishes its shaping mission of tangible reality. But it is excessive and even absurd that, in order to establish a true comparison with Jesus, the poet *par excellence*, Sophocles must show something more than the result, *poiéma*, of the process of his literary creation, i.e. his *poíesis*. Indeed, the fictitious protagonists of his tragedies—he himself remains excluded, of course—, leaving aside that they inherit a congenital impurity, are implicitly accused because of their true incapacity to incarnate real suffering, and thus to become a valid reference as having been not only represented but also lived. Unlike Jesus, Sophocles is not a poet or 'creator' of himself—his self-creator—, nor are Antigone, Oedipus, Electra or Philoctetes. But Sophocles did create all of these and, although they are not the result of his sole imagination, they were presented

38. Cap. VI 2-3: «Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of certain magnitude... it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions» (*idem*).

39. We can see it in the following opposition Sphinx / Christ (the poet, after explaining all its terrible loves and victims, wants the Sphinx to be far from him and chooses Christ): «Get hence, you loathsome mystery! Hideous / Animal, get hence! / You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me / What I Would not be. / You make my creed a barren sham, you wake foul / Dreams of sensual life, / And Atys with his blood-stained knife were better / Than the thing I am. / False Sphinx! False Sphinx! by reedy Styx old / Charon, leaning on his oar, / Waits for my coin. Go thou before, and leave / Me to my crucifix, / Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches the / World with wearied eyes, / And weeps for every soul that dies, and weeps for / Every soul in vain» (*P*, *CW*882).

40. «Art takes life as a part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style» (*DL*, *CW*1078)

by him as an artistic and beautiful image which, once it is contemplated, effects in its turn the purification of similar passions. Human suffering becomes incarnate and is made an image in them, i.e. in Antigone, Oedipus, Philoctetes, etc. —they are as much ours as Christ is—, and have become incarnate all through the centuries every time the performance of their respective tragedies has called Western audiences to a contemplative or theatrical event —*theáomai*. It is quite obvious, then, that Wilde has not been able to avoid the anachronism of requiring from Sophocles the accomplishment of the precepts of the nineteenth-century Aestheticism.

The epilogue of this section demands in my opinion a great deal of tactfulness. I will not approach, since it is not my concern, everything related to Wilde's religious beliefs and feelings. Were they sincere?⁴¹ Were they not? Was Wilde's vision of Christ coherent and, in any case, acceptable according to the parameters of 'orthodoxy', etcetera?⁴² Although it seems to me quite obvious that Wilde admired sincerely the figure of Christ until the end of his life, I should dare to say that, with regard to Christianity and Christians, after having left the prison and after a true repentance for his errors⁴³, his critical spirit does not refuse to 'attack' if necessary⁴⁴. And I mention this because, bearing in mind that I have been examining —and I will continue to do it— his constant taking into consideration of the two poles of any subject, thus following the laws by which paradoxical minds are ruled, perhaps it would be worth reading his *Selected Letters* in order to pay attention to some significant passages. It has nothing to do, of course, with trying to redeem the above-condemned Hellenic or Pagan Wilde's 'vices'; it has rather to do with trying to test whether the final 'curses' —so to speak— and ironies opposed to the previous praises confirm or not the effectiveness of the method, of his method. Indeed, he has been warned that he will not receive his financial allowance if he meets Bosie again but, this time, it is he who will condemn the opponent. He has travelled to Rome and, being conscious that he, as the incarnation of scan-

41. G. WOODCOCK, *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde*, T. V. Boardman & Co., Ltd., London and New York 1949, holds, for instance: «Wilde's initial interest in Christianity perhaps came from the fact that he was greatly moved and aesthetically excited by the beauty of the Catholic Ritual» (72), and, if we bear in mind what can be read in the *Selected Letters* regarding his travel to Rome after getting out of prison, this «being greatly moved and aesthetically excited by the beauty of the Catholic Ritual» lasted until the end of his life

42. See, e.g.: J.A. QUINTUS, «Christ, Christianity and Oscar Wilde», *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33, 4, 1991, pp. 514-527; J. ALBERT, «The Christ of Oscar Wilde», *The American Benedictine Review* 39, 4, 1988, 372-403; E. RODITI, *Oscar Wilde*. New Directions Books, Norfolk, CT 1947 and P.K. COHEN, *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press / Associated Univ. Presses, Rutherford 1978.

43. «A man's very highest moment is, I have no doubt at all, when he kneels in the dust, and beats his breast, and tells all the sins of his life» (*DP*, *CW* 1050).

44. It is not surprising if we bear in mind that: «on his first day of freedom after two years of imprisonment, Oscar Wilde appealed to a Jesuit retreat house on Farm Street in London, seeking refuge there. He received a reply saying he could not be accepted on the impulse of the moment and the matter must be considered for at least a year» (in J. ALBERT, *op. cit.*, 400-401).

dal, would never be received by the Holy Father, he gets his blessing in the simplest way. On the other hand, he had proclaimed his admiration for the also 'romantic' St Francis of Assisi⁴⁵, but when he becomes obliged to be wedded to Poverty, he finds out that he disagrees with him totally:

I lived in silence and solitude for two years in prison. I did not think that on my release my wife, my trustees, the guardians of my children, my few friends... would combine to force me by starvation to live in silence and solitude again... I never came across anyone in whom the moral sense was dominant who was not heartless, cruel, vindictive, long-stupid, and entirely lacking in the smallest sense of humanity. Moral people, as they termed, are simple beasts. I would sooner have fifty unnatural vices than one unnatural virtue. It is unnatural virtue that makes the world, for those who suffer, such a premature Hell (*SL* 321-22)⁴⁶.

We came to Rome on Holy Thursday... to the terror of... all the Papal Court, I appeared in the front rank of the pilgrims in the Vatican, and got the blessing of the Holy Father —a blessing they would have denied me (*SL* 356).

Like dear St Francis of Assisi I am wedded to Poverty: but in my case the marriage is not a success: I hate the Bride that has been given to me: I see no beauty in her hunger and her rags: I have not the soul of St Francis: my thirst is for the beauty of life: my desire for its joy (*SL* 352)⁴⁷.

45. And, when doing it, Wilde's genius and irony shine again: «There is something unique about Christ... so there were Christians before Christ. For that we should be grateful. The unfortunate thing is that there have been none since. I make one exception, St. Francis of Assisi» (*DP*, *CW* 1037).

46. Sometimes he is far more vindictive: «It is very unfair of people being horrid to me about Bosie and Naples. A patriot put in prison for loving his country loves his country, and a poet in prison for loving boys loves boys. To have altered my life would have been to have admitted that Uranian love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble —more noble than other forms» (*SL* 327). And, on other occasions, even Robert Ross, his great and loyal friend, is «attacked»: «The only thing that consoles me is that your moral attitude toward yourself is even more severe than your attitude toward others. Yours is the pathological tragedy of the Hybrid, the Pagan-Catholic. You exemplify the beauty and uselessness of Conscience... I often wonder what would have happened to those in pain if, instead of Christ, there had been a Christian» (quoted by J.A. Quintus, *op. cit.*, p. 526).

47. As far as religion, morality or reason are concerned, it might be true, then, that he is not capable of going beyond the limits that he himself establishes in *De Profundis*, too: «Neither religion, morality, nor reason can help me at all. Morality does not help me. I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws... Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at. My gods dwell in temples made with hands; and within the circle of actual experience is my creed made perfect and complete: too complete... for like many or all of those who have placed their heaven in this earth, I have found in it not merely the beauty of heaven, but the horror of hell also. When I think about religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who cannot believe... Every thing to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its ritual... and praise God daily for having hidden Himself from man... If I may not find its secret within myself, I shall never find it» (*DP*, *CW* 1019-20).

* * * * *

The Picture of Dorian Gray, a novel which is really difficult to classify⁴⁸ and which has been evaluated from different points of view, sensibilities and even moral codes, it is the best text in my opinion to examine this constant play of opposites of Wilde's. At any rate, I should dare to say that, among the literary works written by Victorian philhellenic writers containing a clear exaltation of certain Hellenic values, there is no other which questions in such a radical way the principles of Hellenism or, at least, no other dares to show their disastrous results. As far as Wilde is concerned, Aestheticism implies necessarily the restoration of Hellenism —at its most hedonistic, of course—, but his intellectual honesty, if am not mistaken regarding the final meaning of the novel, leads him to provide with anti-Hellenic reasons the enemies of the Greek Legacy —and his enemies, too, who will pursue and finally bring him to prison—, although the Irish writer always prefers the risk of an intense life to falling into the paralysis of the so called «Victorian self-restraint».

Lord Henry Wotton, in great measure the literary transcription of Wilde himself defines perfectly the sort of extreme sensibility which is peculiar to an *aisthētēs*, that is, a man who is always open to every kind of sensation, even the most delicate:

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flamelike as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect... The sullen murmur of the bees... The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ (*DG, CW* 18).

Sight, touch, smell... : an aesthete can only dialogue with the visible world, and Lord Henry will mention very soon the «gods» since his true nationality and religion are Greek, while he seems to suggest that the «single God» —to whom he does not refer explicitly— demands that the tangible world be re-

48. With regard to the authors and literary works in which he might have found inspiration, see e.g.: P. WHYTE, «Oscar Wilde et Théophile Gautier: le cas du Portrait de Dorian Gray», *Bulletin de la Société Théophile Gautier* 21, 1999, pp. 279-294. He maintains that Wilde knows Gautier through Pater and Swinburne, who admired Gautier very much. Concerning the literary works in which Wilde might have found inspiration for his *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he suggests: «*Melmoth l'homme errant* (1820) de Maturin; *La Peau de Chagrin* et autres récits de Balzac; *Le Portrait Ovale* de E.A. Poe (1842), *Le Portrait* de Gogol (1839-1842), *À Rebours* de Huysmans (1884), etc.».

nounced in order that the intelligible one, which is eternal and immutable, be embraced. Therefore, he wants to open Dorian's eyes to the hedonistic intensity of becoming (*gignesthai*), the only real and short-lived pleasure, given that gods took back very soon what they give. Is that an illogical and absurd operation? Certainly not, for only the joy of the visible world can save men and women from a premature death:

'The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible...Yes, Mr. Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you, or have to content yourself with those mean triumphs that the memory of your past will make more bitter than defeats... Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing... A new Hedonism, that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol' (*DG, CW31*).

Lord Henry considers that medievalism has lasted against History, if History is understood as the natural evolution of human beings, that is, the result in its turn of a universal evolution process. Medievalism has been the anti-natural parenthesis of a process which began with the Greeks, so that we must recover the Hellenic ideal and even go beyond it, but, above all, we must definitively abjure fear, self-mutilation, self-denial and the strangulation of our impulses in order to recover the soul of human beings, which has grown sick because of the effect upon them of the poison of so many aborted temptations:

'I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream, I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal, to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal, it may be. But the bravest man amongst us is afraid of himself. The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also' (*DG, CW28-9*).

As far as Dorian Gray is concerned, we see immediately the results of such an hedonist *paideía* and they even go beyond the logical limits that at least Lord Henry has always respected. The fear of losing his beauty in the near future is so intense that, with the inestimable help of Wilde's literary imagination, Dorian decides to avoid the inexorable process of growing old by masking himself with his present and highest beauty, devilishly alien —having given his soul— to any sort of change and, as a consequence, transformed into a singular permanent young man:

'How sad it is!' murmured Dorian Gray, with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. 'How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older... 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!... Your picture has taught me that. Lord Henry Wotton is perfectly right. Youth is the only thing worth having. When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself!' (*DG, CW* 33-4).

From now on, everything happens very fast and following a destiny marked by his own decision. Just as he already possesses a beauty which has become fixed for evermore at its peak, he also wants to possess all that is pleasant and beautiful. He will fall in love with Sibyl Vane or, in fact, with the Sybil who «used to stir his imagination» although she does not correspond to the true one. He will also want her to be «pure» of change and transformation just as he had imagined she was, and, having noticed his error of perception, he leaves her and leads her to suicide. First he feels a sincere remorse and thinks that he has been very cruel, but an aesthete cannot waste his time on trifles, so that with the bad influence of Lord Henry's cynical advice, he reaches the most beneficial conclusion. His aim is not to be a Greek tragic hero: «It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded» (*DG, CW* 80). Tragic Greek heroes are expected to assume the burden of their fault up to their last consequences, for there are certainly other ways of being Greek which exclude hedonism. Lord Henry affirms that true tragedies are hardly «artistic». Some of them, like Sibyl's, are beautiful on account of their «dramatic effect», but she deceived Dorian Gray and in consequence it was logical and acceptable to leave her. He must live fearlessly and intensively, and Dorian proclaims, then, his adhesion to the Hellenic ideal or to what paradoxically will be the same: an unlimited hedonism that will kill him:

He felt that the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him — life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins — he was to

have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all (*DG, CW* 83-4).

Then he loathed his own beauty, and, flinging the mirror on the floor, crushed it into silver splinters beneath his heel. It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for... His beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery (*DG, CW* 157). He looked round, and saw the knife that had stabbed Basil Hallward... As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that mean. It would kill the past and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. He seized the thing, and stabbed the picture with it... When they entered they found, hanging upon the wall, a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognised who it was (*DG, CW* 158-9).

What a dreadful and non-aesthetic end for an aesthete! What a paradox! This time it seems really that the two poles, as if it were a question of the absolutes Good and Evil, cannot in some way neutralize each other. Notwithstanding, the true paradox has to do very probably with the fact that a full life, one which is worth being called «Hellenic», must run the certain risk of loosing correctives such as *timor sui*, *timor societatis* and *timor Dei* to the extent of dying, if necessary, in the course of that «adventure». But in the opposite pole represented by Victorian morality one also finds death, that one which kills all impulses from the very beginning in order to bring them into the oppressive darkness of the cave of self-restraint. Maybe Lord Henry was right after all, and life and *empeiría* are the same thing, or, in other words, everyone coming from anti-Hellenism —anti-hedonism— should embrace the new Hellenism —hedonism—, while —we infer— everyone embracing it should balance it in its turn with the weight of a well-pondered anti-Hellenism:

The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly, that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to one's self... The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion: these are the two things that govern us (*DG, CW* 28).

Soul and body, body and soul... how mysterious they were! There was animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality. The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade... As it was, we always misunderstood ourselves and rarely understood others. Experience was of no ethical value. It was merely the name men gave to their mistakes. Moralists had, as a rule, regarded it as a mode of warning, had claimed for

it a certain ethical efficacy in the formation of character, had praised it as something that taught us what to follow and showed us what to avoid. But there was no motive power in experience. It was as little of an active cause as conscience itself. All that it really demonstrated was that our future would be the same as our past, and that the sin we had done once, and with loathing, we would do many times, and with joy (*DG, CW* 54).

* * * * *

I should like to open now a brief chapter devoted to the Wilde's double use of the Platonic image of the cave⁴⁹. In my opinion this is an important topic

49. Plato, *R.* 514a-517d (translated by Paul Shorey, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1970): «Next', said I, 'imagine (*apeikason*) our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this. Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light (*anapeptamēnen*) on its entire width. Conceive them (*idē*) as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire which is burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built as the exhibitors of puppet-shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets'. 'All that I see', he said. 'See (*idē*) also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals, as well wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking, and others silent'. 'A strange image you speak of', he said, 'and strange prisoners'. 'Like to us', I said. 'For to begin with, tell me do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows (*tās skías*) cast from the fire on the wall (*prospiptoúsas*) of the cave that fronted them (*eis tō katantikry*)?' 'How could they', he said, 'if they were compelled to hold their heads unmoved through life?'... 'when one of the passers-by uttered a sound, do you think that they would suppose anything else than the passing shadow (*tēn parioúsan skían*) to be the speaker?'... 'such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows (*tās skías*) of the artificial objects'... 'This image then' (*eikóna*), dear Glaucon, we must apply as a whole to all that has been said likening the region revealed through sight to the habitation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul's ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear'... 'do not be surprised that those who have attained to this height are not willing to occupy themselves with the affairs of men, but their souls ever feel the upward urge and the yearning for that sojourn above. For this, I take it, is likely if in this point too the likeness of our image (*eikóna*) holds'. «Myth, fable, simile, allegory, etc.», are some of the terms with which Plato has been 'corrected'. Aside from myth, 'allegory' has been undoubtedly the most accepted because of Martin HEIDEGGER and *The Essence of Truth. On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, Continuum, London & New York 2002, translated by Ted Sadler (Original title: *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*, Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, Frankfurt am Main 1988). At any rate, Heidegger hastens to add: «We speak of an 'allegory', also of 'sensory image' (Sinn-Bild), of a sort that provides a hint or clue. The image is never intended to stand for itself alone, but indicates that something is to be understood, providing a clue as to what this is. The image provides a hint — it leads into the intelligible, into a region of intelligibility (the dimension within which something is understood), into a sense (hence sensory image). I do agree with him, of course, but probably it is worth remembering once again that Plato says simply «this image... we must apply». Therefore, it is a question of a *prosaptēa eikón* that Plato does not seem to consider a *hypónoia*, the Platonic term for *allegoría*.

and, once more, Wilde's genius, his capacity to go from one pole to the other—in this case, to «go into» and «to go out of» of the cave—astonishes us. Let us begin by presenting first the explicit reference, that is, the dialogue between Cyril and Vivian in *The Decay of Lying*. Vivian has tried to make Cyril understand that, against common opinion, it is life which imitates Art and not the reverse. Cyril has acknowledged it finally but, in his turn, he expects his interlocutor to acknowledge at least that «Art expresses the temper of its age». However, Vivian denies it:

‘Art never expresses anything but itself. This is the principle of my new aesthetics... Of course, nations and individuals... are always under the impression that it is of them that the Muses are talking, always trying to find in the calm dignity of imaginative art some mirror of their own turbid passions, always forgetting that the singer of life is not Apollo but Marsyas. Remote from reality, and with her eyes turned away from the shadows of the cave, Art reveals her own perfection’ (*DL*, *CW* 1087)⁵⁰.

Here is an excellent instance of Platonic orthodoxy: the superior serene dignity of Art opposed to the cavernous realm of life; Apollo opposed to Marsyas; light and perfection opposed to the shadowy and cavernous reality of the world; and, needless to say, «revelation» is the name for the passage from darkness into light. Wilde's fidelity to the model is such that nothing leads us to think of the possibility of a different one, but he does create it. We have mentioned before Dorian's cruelty to Sibyl, but we have not examined its details:

(Sibyl): ‘Dorian...before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night and Portia... The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came... and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night... I became conscious that the Romeo was hideous, and old... that the words I had to speak were unreal... You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is... I have grown sick of shadows... Suddenly it dawned on my soul what it all meant... Take me away... I hate the stage. I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire’... (Dorian): ‘You have killed my love... You used to stir my imagination... I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had genius and

50. The same idea appears in the letters: «... the poem (‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’) is too autobiographical... real experiences are alien things that should never influence one, but it was wrung out of me, a cry of pain, the cry of Marsyas, not the song of Apollo. Still, there are some good things in it» (*SL* 328).

intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid' (*DG, CW71-2*).

It is quite clear that the underlying model is the same. Sibyl's reality and truth were but shadows. She has always lived in the prison of appearances waiting for the man who will set her free. Her prison fellows were falsehood and imposture; and, finally, she has entered the light and has understood the sense of everything because there is a higher reality of which the human one is but a reflection. But Dorian Gray's words contradict absolutely the spirit of the Platonic image of the cave, and they also contradict the above-mentioned passage of *The Decay of Lying*. Indeed, we were told there that Art belongs to a superior realm which is far away from the shadows of the cave. Dorian believes it as well and he wants Sibyl to continue to be devoted to Art. But, if she wants to give up being an artist, it is precisely because she has left behind the prison of falsehood which is so peculiar to that sort of life. Dorian is asking her, therefore, and quite paradoxically, to continue to be married to Art in the dark cave and not to go out of it and enter the light of reality. And, if we are still in doubt and think that in fact we have got entangled, the last words of the aesthete confirm that we are right, since the dark cave is, according to Dorian, the logical and natural site of «dreams and shadows» and Sibyl should never have become «shallow». And a further remark: that man who is demanding that Art, which is strange to reality, remain in the cave is himself simply a false mask living in the open air while his true face remains hidden at home! No comment.

To present the next passages, which also belong to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, certainly implies a higher risk because I cannot prove that the underlying model continues to be Plato's cave. However, I should like to run it for Lord Henry «attacks» once again, and, if I am not completely mistaken, Wilde might be taking advantage of this opportunity to correct Platonic Metaphysics precisely by means of the Platonic image:

‘The worship of the senses has often... There had been mad wilful rejections, monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial, whose origin was fear... Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life and to save it from that harsh uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly, yet it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself... Of the asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing. But it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment. There are few of us who have not sometimes wakened before dawn, either after one of those dreamless nights that make us almost

enamoured of death... when through the chambers of the brain sweep phantoms more terrible than reality itself... Gradually white fingers creep through the curtains... dumb shadows crawl into the corners of the room and crouch there. Outside, there is the stirring of birds among the leaves, or the sound of men going forth to their work, or the sigh and sob of the wind coming down from the hills... and yet must needs call forth sleep from her purple cave. Veil after veil of thin dusky gauze is lifted, and by degrees the forms and colours of things are restored to them, and we watch the dawn remaking the world in its antique pattern... Out of the unreal shadows of the night comes back the real life that we had known... a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret, the remembrance even of joy having its bitterness and the memories of pleasure their pain' (*DG, CW* 99-100).

According to Lord Henry, it is not difficult to imagine the History of Asceticism in the Western World as a nightmare imprisoned in the chambers of our brains. Terror has always dominated Western citizens to the extent of abjuring their intellect. They have not known how to enjoy sensations and passions and, what it is even worse, every time they have «sought to starve them into submission», they have turned them in fact into savage and animal ones, thus adopting «monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial». We have been prisoners for centuries. The time has arrived, consequently, to restore the passionate experience, save ourselves from puritanism and condemn both «the asceticism that deadens the senses and the profligacy that dulls them». The nightmare —i.e. ourselves— must abandon definitively the cave, not in order to start a vertical ascent towards the Intelligible region but to get in touch once again with a world, here and now, which sends us the sound of the stirring of birds among the leaves, of the wind coming down from the hills or of men going forth to their work. If so, the unreal shadows of our intellectual night will disappear and, as a consequence, we will be capable of reacting against an asceticism that never seems to die, above all in the Victorian age. For Wilde, the Platonic image of the cave is undoubtedly a great find and his prisons were a terrible and painful personal experience. Referring both to the fictitious and to the real ones, he succeeds in speaking about almost all the prisons which oppress and have oppressed mankind for centuries. It is not surprising, then, that he vindicates a Greek harmony and a Dionysian state of mind which will make prisons impossible for evermore:

Mankind has been continually entering the prisons of Puritanism, Philistinism, Sensualism, Fanaticism, and turning the key on its own spirit: But after a time there is an enormous desire for freedom —for self-preservation (41)⁵¹.

51. R. ELLMANN. *Wilde*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1987 (the numbers in brackets refer to it).

I approve of Moréas and his school for wanting to re-establish Greek harmony and to bring back to us the Dionysian state of mind. The world has such a thirst for. We are not yet released from the Syrian embrace and its cadaverous divinities. We are always plunged into the kingdom of shadows. While we wait for a new religion of light, let Olympus serve as shelter and refuge. We must let our instincts laugh and frolic in the sun like a troop of laughing children. I love life. It is so beautiful (328-9).

Cunningham Graham, who had been in prison himself, wrote Wilde a letter full of praise, and Wilde, in thanking him, replied, 'I... wish we could meet to talk over the many prisons of life — prisons of stone, prisons of passions, prisons of intellect, prison of morality and the rest. All limitations, external or internal, are prisons — walls, and life is a limitation' (526).

And, finally, a brief passage of *De Profundis*. The literal terms are now «heights» and «depths» and not «open air» and «cave». In consequence, we are dealing only with a hypothesis, but I should dare to say that it is a credible one. We know perfectly well what was Dorian's end was, but there was a time when he was convinced that he had to enter the cave and not to live out of it. The text mentions neither the term nor the concept but they are —I suspect— in Wilde's mind. At any rate, the fictitious experience of the fictitious Dorian turns out to be a premonition of his real fall:

The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a *flâneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the meaner minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation (*DP*, *CW* 1017).

Nemesis has caught me in her net: to struggle is foolish. Why is it that one runs to one's ruin? Why has destruction such a fascination? Why, when one stands on a pinnacle, must one throw oneself down? No one knows, But things are so (*SL* 302).

* * * * *

As the creator of a character such as Dorian Gray, as a creator of paradoxes and, therefore, both wanting and knowing how to show the two poles of a very similar life which ended so disastrously, O. Wilde should have foreseen and defended himself against what might be called «the true risks of Greek love». He knew very well the key-texts of so called «Platonic love» and his mind was well «equipped», then, to evaluate the extent of those serious warnings in them, which revealed the meaning, at first sensual but finally transcendent, of the adjective «Platonic», difficult to be assumed by an aesthete

who wants to enjoy any sort of pleasure⁵². Diotima and Socrates state quite clearly, at the end of the *Symposium*, that the physical beauty of adolescents can be not only the first step, abstraction after abstraction, of a marvellous *anábasis* towards the ideal Beauty⁵³ but also the *faux pas* towards a definitive *katábasis* into the prison of flesh and matter. Or, still worse, their words reveal that Platonic lovers, exactly as they transform themselves from being young and ignorant into being mature and wise, thus experiencing the two phases or poles of a single existential travel, need first and must despise later the physical beauty of adolescents, which is a very poor version of another non-material and perfect one: Beauty in itself:

52. On Platonic Love and Greek Love in general, see, e.g.: B.S. THORNTON, *Eros. The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*, Westview Press, Oxford 1997; E. GALÁN, J. *Amor y sexo en la antigua Grecia*, Ediciones Temas de Hoy, Madrid 1997; I. SINGER, *The Nature of Love I From Plato to Luther*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1996; W.A. PERAY, *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago 1996; C. OSBORNE, *Eros Unveiled. Plato and the God of Love*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1994; D. HALPERIN, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, Routledge, New York - London 1990; A. W. PRICE, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989; B. SERGENT, *La homosexualidad en la mitología griega*, Alta Fulla, Barcelona 1986; F. GALLIANO, J. LASSO DE LA VEGA, F.R. ADRADOS, *El descubrimiento del amor en Grecia*, Coloquio, Madrid 1985; C. CALAME (ed.), *L'amore in Grecia*, Laterza, Bari 1984; J. MAZEL, *Les métamorphoses d'Eros. L'amour dans la Grèce antique*, Presses de la Renaissance, Paris 1984; B.R.S. FONE (ed.), *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature. Readings from Western Antiquity to the Present Day*, Columbia University Press, New York 1983; F. BUFFIÈRE, *Eros adolescent. La pédérastie dans la Grèce antique*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1980; K.J. DOVER, *Greek Homosexuality*, Duckworth, London 1978; H.I. MARROU, *Historia de la educación en la Antigüedad*, Edit. Univ. de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires 1976; J.C. FRAISSE, *La Notion d'Amitié Dans la Philosophie Antique*, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris 1974; D.P. VERENE, *Sexual Love and Western Morality*, Jones and Bartlett Publishers, Boston - London 1972; J.A. SYMONDS, *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, Haskel House Publishers Ltd., New York 1971 (1st ed. 1901); L. ROBIN, *La théorie Platonicienne de l'amour*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1964.
53. «He (Diotima says) who would proceed rightly in this business must not merely begin from his youth to encounter beautiful bodies. In the first place... if the conductor guides him aright, he must be in love with one particular body, and engender beautiful converse therein; but next he must remark how the beauty attached to this or that body is cognate to that which is attached to any other, and that if he means to ensue beauty in form, it is gross folly not to regard as one and the same the beauty belonging to all... his next advance will be to set a higher value on the beauty of souls than on that of the body, so that however little the grace that may bloom in any likely soul it shall suffice him for loving and caring, and for bringing forth and soliciting such converse as will tend to the betterment of the young; and that finally he may be constrained to contemplate the beautiful as appearing in our observances and our laws, and to behold it all bound together in kinship and so estimate the body's beauty as a slight affair. From observances he should be led on to the branches of knowledge, that... an turning rather towards the main ocean of the beautiful may by contemplation of this bring forth in all their splendour many fair fruits of discourse and meditation in a plenteous crop of philosophy; until... he descries a certain single knowledge... When a man has been thus tutored in the lore of love, passing from view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will be revealed to him... a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature... First of all, it is ever existent and neither comes to be nor perishes...» (210-211, translated by W.R.M. Lamb, *Loeb Classical Library* 1983).

‘In that state of life above all others, my dear Socrates’, said the Mantinean woman, ‘a man finds it truly worth while to live, as he contemplates essential beauty. This, when once beheld, will outshine your gold and your vesture, your beautiful boys and striplings, whose aspect now so astounds you and makes you and many another, at the sight and constant society of your darlings, ready to do without either food or drink if that were any way possible, and only gaze upon them and have their company’ (211d-).

Consequently, Alcibiades’s efforts to assert the powers of his somatic beauty while sleeping with Socrates are completely useless. Indeed, Socrates has already glimpsed the summit of the Ideal hierarchy, Beauty-Good, and as a result, being a master rather than a lover, he possesses a virtue which could make his pupil —beloved in earlier times— better: «For then what a stupendous beauty you must see in me, vastly superior to your comeliness!» (218e: *améchanon toi kállos horóieis ân en emoi kai tês parâ soi eumorphías pâm-poly diaphéron*). And the truth is that Wilde did not want to —or very probably could not— go over the two stages or poles which have just been mentioned, but the paradox of life opened his eyes to a reality that this time —*De Profundis* shows it— quite surely he would have liked not to have experienced. Here is the result of his friendship with that «Greek boy»⁵⁴ whom he did not know how to face; here are, too, the consequences of not paying attention to the message sent by a logos which taught Greek lovers to revise —I apologise for the anachronism— their *ars amandi*:

The gods are strange. It is not for our vices only they make instruments to scourge us. They bring us to ruin through what in us is good, gentle, humane, loving. But for my pity and affection for you and yours, I would not now be weeping in this terrible place (*DP, CW* 995).

I thought life was going to be a brilliant comedy, and that you were to be one of many graceful figures in it. I found it to be a revolting and repellent tragedy, and that the sinister occasion of the great catastrophe... was yourself, stripped of that mask of joy and pleasure by which you, no less than I, had been deceived and led astray (*DP, CW* 998).

You came to me to learn the Pleasure of Life and the Pleasure of Art. Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful, the meaning of Sorrow, and its beauty (*DP, CW* 1059).

I blame myself for allowing an unintellectual friendship, a friendship whose primary aim was not the creation and contemplation of beautiful things, entirely to dominate my life... You could not understand the conditions requisite for the production of artistic work... my life, as long as you were by my side, was entirely sterile (*DP, CW* 981).

54. «Dearest of all boys... I cannot see you, so Greek and gracious, distorted with passion» (*SL* 111). «I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days» (*SL* 107).

«You were one out. It was the triumph of the smaller over the strong which somewhere in one of my plays I describe as being 'the only tyranny that lasts' (DP, CW 984-5).

«Ethically you had been even still more destructive to me than you had been artistically» (DP, CW 985).

«... that beautiful unreal world of Art... had I not let myself be lured into the imperfect world of coarse uncompleted passions, of appetite without distinction, desire without limit, and formless greed» (DP, CW 1014).

«She —Douglas's mother— talks of the influence of an elder over a younger man... It is one of her favourite attitudes towards the question, and it is always a successful appeal to popular prejudice and ignorance. I need not ask you what influence I had over you. You know I had none. It was one of your frequent boasts that I had none, and the only one indeed that was well-founded. What was there, as a mere matter of fact, in you that I could influence? Your brain? It was undeveloped. Your imagination? It was dead. Your heart? It was not yet born. Of all the people who have ever crossed my life you were the one, and the only one, I was unable in any way to influence in any direction» (DP, CW 1048).

«... my soul was really dead in the slough of coarse pleasures, my life was unworthy of an artist: you can heal me and help me (SL 278).

I know simply that a life of definite and studied materialism, and a philosophy of appetite and cynicism, and a cult of sensual and senseless ease, are bad things for an artist: they narrow the imagination, and dull the more delicate sensibilities» (SL 296).

Plutarch, in *De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos*, 1073 B-C, explains that the last «son» of Platonic *éros*, that is, that *éros* defined by the Stoa as «an impulse to make friendship caused by the appearance of beauty» (*epibolé philopoïias dià kállos empainómenon*)⁵⁵ seemed in fact absurd (*átopos*) for, in spite of following apparently the long tradition of pederasty —at least with regard to terminology—, they maintained that adults were handsome (*kaloî*) while adolescents were ugly (*aischroî*); and not only this, but they also held that adults fell in love with ugly adolescents and gave up loving them when they became handsome⁵⁶. Plutarch excelled in the art of denouncing the Sto-

55. Stob. *Ecl.* II 91,10. *SVF* III 935.

56. «All members of the school, however, are involved in the absurdity of the philosophical tenets of the Stoa that are at odds with the common conceptions on the subject of love. For their position is that, while the young are ugly (*aischroî*), since they are base and stupid (*phaúloi kai anoétoi*), and the sages are fair (*kaloî*), none of these who are fair is either loved or worth loving. And this is not yet the awful part. They say further that, when the ugly have become fair, those who have been in love with them stop. Now, who recognises love like this, which at the sight of depravity (*mochthería*) of soul together with depravity of body (*sómatos mochthería*) is kindled and sustained and at the birth in them of beauty together with prudence accompanied by justice and sobriety (*phrónesis metá kai sôphrosýnes*) wastes away and is extinguished? Lovers like that, I think, do not differ at all

ic self-contradictions, but not to the extent of confounding his readers. On the contrary, he gives them further information to be able to understand that adolescents are ugly on account of being still thoughtless (*anoéttoi*), while wise men, after having finished both an intellectual and personal journey that everybody should make, are inevitably handsome. Adolescents must be taught by adults, who are already masters —not lovers—, for whom what counts most is the talent (*euphyiá*) of their young pupils —in fact all of them, given that, if being limited, it can be developed—, and so they can speak about a minimal beauty thanks to which, according to the laws of pederasty, they fall in love with them. Nevertheless, true beauty, that is, the possession of the science of virtue (*areté*) belongs to adults and these ones, as soon as they have finished their educational mission, that is, after the ugly adolescents have become handsome, give up loving them in order to search for new disciples.

As a matter of fact, Stoicism takes Diotima's words to their last consequences and follows the model of master which is represented by the Socrates at the end of the *Symposium*. What could Wilde expect of Bosie Douglas, of his Greek boy? He could contemplate his beauty, be inspired by it and, if his aim was to become a true Greek *erastés*, he had to extract from him and out of himself an intellectual and not somatic beauty⁵⁷. But, according to his words, the reverse was the case, thus confirming that Diotima and the Socrates who despised Alcibiades had already shown a short cut in order to avoid an old way which was not intellectual and which was really dangerous. It was certainly Wilde, as adult, and not Bosie, who was expected to know that compassion is not always a good adviser; that comedy in its pureness is as strange and rare as a whole life without tears, without the frequent and hu-

from gnats, for they delight in scum and vinegar but palatable and fine wine they fly from and avoid. And in the first place there is no plausibility in their assertion that love is incited by what in their terminology they call a semblance of beauty (*epagogón tou érotos*), for in the very ugly and very vicious (*en aischístois kai kakístois*) a semblance of beauty could not appear if in fact, as they say, depravity of character (*mochthería tou éthous*) defiles the outward form. In the second place, it is utterly at odds with the common conception for the ugly person to be worth loving because he is going to have beauty some day and is expected to get it and has become handsome and virtuous (*kalós kai agathós*)... for love, they say, is a kind of chase after a stripling who is undeveloped but naturally apt for virtue (*théra ateloús mèn euphyoús dè meirakíou prós aretén*)... We... convict their system of doing violence to our common conceptions and turning them inside out with implausible facts and unfamiliar terms... For there was nobody trying to keep the zeal of sages about young men from being called a «chase» or «making friends» if passion is not part of it; but one ought to call «love» what all men and women understand and call by the name: *All of them botly desired to be couched by her side in the bride-bed*.

57. (Diotima): «So when a man's soul is so far divine that it is made pregnant with these from his youth, and on attaining manhood immediately desires to bring forth and beget... and if he chances also on a soul that is fair and noble and well endowed, he gladly cherishes the two combined in one; and straightway in addressing such a person he is resourceful in discoursing of virtue and of what should be the good man's character and what pursuits; and so he takes in hand the other's education. For I hold that by contact with the fair one and by consorting with him he bears and brings forth his long-felt conception» (209b-c).

man experience of tragedy; that joy can also be a mask and, behind it, there can be waiting someone who will cause a real *katastrophé*; that pleasure, when it becomes the only pole of an unstable balance which needs another one to survive, may well spoil human beings; that he should have dominated and should not have been dominated; that his superior character —or was it not?— should have «triumphed» over Bosie's inferior one; that art and Ethics are not always two completely different realms; that passion not only causes enthusiasm but, when it lacks any sort of limit, may well turn inevitably into something base and ugly; that he should have the positive influence in order to develop Bosie's little brain, awaken his dead imagination and give him the heart he had not; and, finally —as seen some pages above—, that he should have avoided being fascinated by destruction and being drawn into the abyss.

In a letter (12-II-1894), which is addressed to Ralph Payne, Wilde writes: «Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be —in other ages, perhaps» (*SL* 116). A brief report of the theses defended by Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in addition to an also brief passage from the transcriptions of the trials of O. Wilde shows how difficult it was to accept the transcendent dictates of Platonic love or, in other words, how many Victorians need to correct Plato in order to take him back to that earlier sensualism upon which his philosophy had been based. Here is in the first place the definition of the ideal:

The love that he bore him (Basil Hallward/Dorian) —for it was really love— had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual. It was not that mere physical admiration of beauty that is born of the senses and that dies when the senses tire. It was such love as Michelangelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself. Yes, Basil could have saved him. But it was too late now... There were passions in him that would find their terrible outlet, dreams that would make the shadow of their evil real (*DG, CW* 92).

The 'Love that dare not speak his name' in this country in such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michaelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michaelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the 'Love that dare not speak its name', and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glam-

our of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.⁵⁸

And, later on, we pass from the *noûs* to the acknowledgement of the importance of the physical presence; to the passion which is peculiar to the Romantic spirit —with all senses ready to *aisthánesthai*—; to the Greek spirit —from this point of view anti-Platonic—; to leaving behind the mad opposition body / soul; to the difficult balance between vulgar realism and empty idealism —Basil is not H. Wotton but he knows how to put ideas «on the tight rope», too. Afterwards, soul, brain and will become dominated by the appearance of a body, and, finally, it is not the Idea which is worshiped but its visible incarnation; to sum up —according Basil—: a dangerous madness which, once more paradoxically, it is not good either to lose or to keep. Lord Henry, on the other hand, appeals to Psychology in order to find an answer to such an enigmatic question. Sometimes he seems to acknowledge Plato's right to an ideal *anábasis*, but his true thesis is that intellect is in itself an exaggeration and, therefore, we cannot trust it:

(Basil Hallward): 'His personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before... The merely visible presence of this lad... Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body —how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void' (*DG, CW* 23-4).

(Basil Hallward): 'Dorian from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you... I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me, you were still present in my art... I only knew that I had seen perfection face to face, and that the world had become wonderful to my eyes —too wonderful, perhaps, for in such mad worships there is peril, the peril of losing them, no less than the peril of keeping them' (*DG, CW* 89).

(Henry Wotton): 'From a psychological point of view, how interesting he was! The new manner in art, the fresh mode of looking at life, suggested so strangely by the merely visible presence of one who was unconscious of it all... the mere shapes and patterns of things becoming, as it were, refined, and gaining a kind of symbolical value, as though

58. R. ELLMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 435.

they were themselves patterns of some other and more perfect form whose shadow they made real: how strange it all was! He remembered something like it in history. Was it not Plato, that artist in thought, who had first analyzed it? Was it not Buonarrotti who had carved it in the coloured marbles of a sonnet-sequence?' (*DG, CW* 40).

(Henry Wotton): 'This young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves... is a Narcissus, and you —well, of course you have an intellectual expression and all that. But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face' (*DG, CW* 19)⁵⁹.

The spirit of Walter Pater's sensualism pervades this and other texts of O. Wilde⁶⁰, but quite surely *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is the most explicit concerning the confessed idolatry of sensualism, of the least metaphysical Plato and, still more astonishing and difficult to imagine —if we did not have the example of the great artists and philosophers of the Renaissance—, of the least ascetic Neoplatonism. Wilde cannot assume the «purest» nature of Platonic philosophy nor is he interested in the radical mysticism of Plotinus⁶¹. The nameless defender of the theory in accordance with which that actor, William Hughes, was Shakespeare's beloved, his great love, inspiration and creative stimulus, and even a kind of a skilful midwife who helped him to «bring forth», brought down the Idea from heaven to the stage of the material world. And there, incarnated in a stage actor, it «sensualized» Shakespeare, not in the vulgar way Alcibiades intended to sensualize Socrates in the *Symposium*, but leaving aside certainly the so-called *timor Dei*, too much a He-

59. *Cfr.*, for instance, these verses of his poem *Pantbea*: «... to feel is better than to know, / And wisdom is a childless heritage, / One pulse of passion —youth's first fiery glow,— / Are worth the hoarded proverbs of the sage: / Vex not thy soul with dead philosophy, / Have we not lips to kiss with, hearts to love and eyes to see! (*P, CW* 830).

60. See, e.g.: P. CRUZALEGUI, *op. cit.*, sixth part: I, II and III.

61. In order to abandon definitively the material world. Indeed, matter, in his pyramidal system with the One at its summit, is totally undetermined (*aoristía pantelés* —III 4,1,5-17), incorporeal (*mé sôma* —II 4,8,2), privation and lack of form (*stéresis, ou morphé* —II 4,14,14-15); it is still not (*me ón* —II 5,4,10-14), it is only a mirror which captures images (*kátōptron* —IV 3,11,7-8), but it takes no part in what it captures; even worse, it is an ornamented corpse (*nekrôn kekosmeménon* —II 4,5,18); it is an appearance (*eídolon* —II 5,5,21-25) and, given that it is privation and total lack (*penía pantelés* —I 8,3, 16), it does not possess any good (*medên par'hautês agathôn échousan* —I 8,3,36-37); on the contrary, it is absolute evil (*aischrón* —II 4, 16, 24), the essential evil (*tô óntos kakón* —I 8,5,9) it lacks any sort of form (*ámorphon* —I 6,2,13-16) and becomes constantly (*ginómēna aeí* —II 4,5,27). For the soul, therefore, the arrival of matter means death. Human beings have no other option but to leave the material world or, at least, «this is the life which is peculiar to... happy and divine men: separation (*apallagē*) from the rest of things, escape (*phygē*) of the one who is alone towards the One (VI 9,11,51)... in order to receive the One (VI 7,34,7-8)... and see the One (I 6,7,9). This is the true objective of the soul, that is, to possess that light, contemplate the one who is light in itself... leave it all (*aphēle panta* —V 3,17,38).

brew legacy, to adopt the Hellenic and Renaissance one, that is, love or *éros* (desire). Everything we are going to read now forgets the teachings of Diotima and Socrates and chooses pleasure, passion, sex in the soul, the analogy between intellectual enthusiasm and the physical passion of love, folly and the unconditional surrender to the beloved's beauty; to sum up, it chooses friendship born of desire, transformed into a mode of self-conscious intellectual development:

...the sensuous element in Art... Surely, in that strange mimicry of life by the living which is the mode and method of theatric art, there are sensuous elements of beauty that none of the other art possess... There is no passion in bronze, nor motion in marble. The sculptor must surrender colour, and the painter fullness of form. The epos changes acts into words, and music changes words into tones. It is the Drama only that... uses all means at once, and, appealing both to eye and ear, has at its disposal, and in its service, form and colour, tone, look and word, the swiftness of motion, the intense realism of visible action... There was, however, more in his friendship than the mere delight of a dramatist in one who helps him to achieve his end. This was indeed a subtle element of pleasure, if not of passion, and a noble basis for an artistic comradeship. But it was not all that the Sonnets revealed to us. There was something beyond. There was the soul, as well as the language, of neo-Platonism. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom', said the stern Hebrew prophet: 'The beginning of wisdom is Love', was the gracious message of the Greek. And the spirit of the Renaissance, which already touched Hellenism at so many points, catching the inner meaning of this phrase and divining its secret, sought to elevate friendship to the high dignity of the antique ideal, to make it a vital factor in the new culture, and a mode of self-conscious intellectual development. IN 1492 appeared Marsilio Ficino's translation of the 'Symposium' of Plato... In its subtle suggestions of sex in soul, in the curious analogies it draws between intellectual enthusiasm and the physical passion of love, in its dream of the incarnation of the Idea in a beautiful and living form... there was something that fascinated the poets and scholars of the sixteenth century. Shakespeare, certainly, was fascinated by it, and had read the dialogue... When he says to Willie Hughes, 'he that calls on thee, let him bring forth / Eternal numbers to outlive long date', he is thinking of Diotima's theory that Beauty is the goddess who presides over birth, and draws into the light of day the dim conceptions of the soul... Friendship, indeed, could have desired no better warrant for its permanence or its ardours than the Platonic theory, or creed... that the true world was the world of ideas, and that these ideas took visible form and became incarnate in man... There was a kind of mystic transference of the expressions of the physical world to a sphere that was spiritual, that was removed from gross bodily ap-

petite... who had talked of 'the folly of excessive and misplaced affection' had not been able to interpret either the language or the spirit of these great poems, so intimately connected with the philosophy and the art of their time. It is no doubt true that to be filled with an absorbing passion is to surrender the security of one's lower life, and yet in such surrender there may be gain, certainly was for Shakespeare' (*WH, CW* 323-7).

It is quite obvious that Wilde believed that Bosie would mean for him what William Hughes meant for Shakespeare according the nameless man who talks to Erskine in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* However, life put him —always according to his confession— on the other pole from which another vision of Greek pederasty was possible. *De Profundis* confirms this and shows him — he shows himself—, as seen before, not playing with the ideas and putting them «on the tight rope» but evaluating objectively the null gain of his friendship with Bosie. Indeed, the elder gave without receiving almost anything in return save the ethical misery into which, as he confesses, he was possible already inclined to fall and which, in addition, was often «served» to him by his beloved.

As a philologist, I must read and analyse texts and not judge the ethical behaviour of their authors. Neither have I done it, although the bare report of the implacable logic of the Platonic «erotic» philosophy almost leads us to do it, nor will I do it now. I would rather to point out that, in spite of all the humiliations that Wilde suffered because of Victorian morality and law, in spite of his two years' stay in prison and hard labour, his economic and spiritual ruin —that is, the unbearable pain caused by having been separated definitively from his two sons—, his exile and so on, Wilde could not renounce the stimulus of the physical presence of the one who had hurt him and would hurt him once again. The artist who had formulated the most astonishing paradox by maintaining that life imitates art and not the reverse, the man who had dared to think of Christ as also an artist, the greatest, who had invented himself from a radical solitude and individualism, this very artist, a human being after all, out of prison, was incapable, paradoxically, either of living alone or of creating without the help of a visible model who provided him with a suitable atmosphere:

(Letter addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas, august 1894): Dear, dear boy, you are more to me than any one of them has any idea; you are the atmosphere of beauty through which I see life; you are the incarnation of all lovely things. When we are out of tune, all colour goes from things for me (*SL* 121).

(Letter addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas, 20 may 1895): My child: ... What wisdom is to the philosopher, what God is to this saint, you are to me... be happy to have filled with an immortal love the soul of a man who now weeps in hell, and yet carries heaven in his heart... You

have been the supreme, the perfect love of my life; there can be no other (*SL* 137-8).

(Letter addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas, 31 august 1897?): I feel that my only hope of again doing beautiful work in art is being with you. It was not so in old days, but now it is different, and you can really recreate in me that energy and sense of joyous power on which art depends. Everyone is furious with me for going back to you, but they don't understand us. I feel that it is only with you that I can do anything at all (*SL* 305-6).

Later on, as is well known, there will be further bitter experiences:

(Letter addressed to Robert Ross, 2 march 1898?): The facts of Naples are very bald and brief. Bosie, for four months, by endless letters, offered me a «home». He offered me love, affection, and care, and promised that I should never want for anything. After four months I accepted his offer, but when we met at Aix on our way to Naples I found that he had no money, no plans, and had forgotten all his promises. His one idea was that I should raise money for us both... when my allowance ceased, he left... It is, of course, the most bitter experience of a bitter life; it is a blow quite awful and paralysing, but it had to come, and I know it is better that I should never see him again. I don't want to. He fills me with horror (*SL* 330).

He saw him again, of course. Logic cannot explain it. One could appeal to the objective chronicle of events and to instances coming from Literature. Before him, for example, John Addington Symonds, the author of *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, which was published for the first time in 1883, vindicated the noble nature of Greek homosexual passions by pointing out that they were endowed with a spiritual value and were used for the benefit of society. He himself, a married man like Wilde, lived passionate love stories with a Venetian gondolier and a Swiss peasant⁶². After him, in E. M. Forster's *Maurice* (1914), Clive Durham, one of the three main protagonists of the novel, discovers himself when in the Greek texts he finds his feelings described calmly and exquisitely⁶³. E. Waugh wrote in 1945 *Brideshead Revisited*, where he still vindicates the value of the Arcadian experience⁶⁴ of many university stu-

62. See, e.g.: P. GROSSKURTH (ed.), *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds. The Secret Homosexual Life of a Leading Nineteenth-Century Man of Letters*, Random House, New York 1984. And with regard to Wilde: N. MCKENNA (ed.), *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, Century, London 2003.

63. In Plato's *Phaedrus*: «... he saw his malady described exquisitely, calmly, as a passion which we can direct, like any other, towards good or bad» (E. M. Forster. *Maurice*, Penguin Books, London 1972, p. 67).

64. See, e.g: B.R.S. FONE, «This other Eden: Arcadia and the Homosexual Imagination», *Essays on Gay Literature* (S. KELLOG ed.), Harrington Park Press, New York 1985, 13-35.

dents who, in and out of Oxford, love each other before assuming the responsibilities which are peculiar to adult life and marriage. Or one could appeal as well to more contemporary analyses from the point of view of Sociology and Psychology, which consider colleges as they really were: closed male worlds «free» of women where fellows and students were logically led towards homosociability, towards homoerotism and, in some cases, towards homosexuality⁶⁵. The fact that in these colleges —Platonic academies *sui generis* transferred to 19th century England— Plato was read and explained —needless to say, his *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* among others—, and the fact that «great scandals» rose whenever Eros very logically appeared, was also a paradox that Wilde never had to create since it blossomed all by itself, encouraged by favourable circumstances.

Notwithstanding, this sort of analysis corresponds to later times. Wilde, on the contrary, lived himself a wide range of contradictions that he did not succeed in rationalising. Or it might be that he did so every time he remembered that paradox, precisely by putting the fundamentalism of traditional and orthodox logic on the tight rope, permits oneself to neutralize opposite poles which are often lived simultaneously:

(Letter to Robert Ross, 21 September 1897): I cannot live without the atmosphere of Love: I must love and be loved... When people speak against me for going back to Bosie, tell them that he offered me love... I shall often be unhappy, but still I love him: the mere fact that he wrecked my life makes me love him. *Je t'aime parce que tu m'as perdu!* is the phrase that ends one of the stories in *Le Puits de Sainte Claire* — Anatole France book— and it is a terrible symbolic truth (SL 308)⁶⁶.

Very probably, Wilde kept his hope that Bosie loved him after all, since, *mutatis mutandis*, he resembles a bit that paradoxical prisoner in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* who died by hanging:

The man had killed the thing he loved, / And so he had to die. / And all men kill the thing they love, / By all let this be heard, / Some do it with a bitter word, / The coward does it with a kiss, / The brave man with a sword! (BRG, CW 899).

O. Wilde —let us bear it in mind— wanted to be Basil Hallward, and to him (Basil-Wilde) the visible presence of Dorian-Bosie revealed the perfection of the Greek spirit. We notice now that, in order to enjoy it, the sensual Platon-

65. See, e.g.: L. DOWLING, *Hellenism & Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1994, and once more: P. CRUZALEGUI, *op. cit.*, sixth part.

66. And also: «Bosie. I love him, and have always loved him. He ruined my life, and fir that very reason I seem forced to love him more: and I think that now I shall do lovely work... whatever my life may have been ethically, it has always been romantic, and Bosie is my romance» (SL 309).

ism helped him while the metaphysical one disturbed him. In this affair, then, he decides to be Platonic and anti-Platonic. «The secret life» of Oscar Wilde⁶⁷ proves that very often he did not know how to be in the balance and embraced anti-Platonism in order to experience an exclusive or preeminent sensual Hellenism. And so he betrayed his paradoxical mind, since, in spite of frequent Western dreams —like that of some Victorians in this case— of a Hellenism which is exclusively sensual, the fact of despising Plato's metaphysics and the most ascetic aspect of Greek thought and sensibility means denying the other pole of its very essence.

67. See: N. McKENNA (ed.), *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, Century, London 2003.