"THE SOUL WITHIN ME BURNED / ITALIA, MY ITALIA, AT THY NAME": WILDE'S EARLY POEMS AND HIS FASCINATION WITH ITALY

Donatella Abbate Badin

Oscar Wilde's life and production are closely associated with France as the work of many critics has amply shown (Satzinger, Lottman, Stokes) and it is only too apt that Paris should have honoured him, though belatedly, with a major exhibition at Petit Palais (2016-2017). A hitherto less explored influence is the life-long love affair with Italy, a country that had a great importance in Oscar Wilde's life and literary production.[1] Three components of his interest in the country, corresponding to three phases of his life, are prominent in an evaluation of the Italian effect on Wilde, namely the aestheticism of the poems following his early visits, the sensationalism of the plays set in Italy (*The Duchess of Padua* and *A Florentine Tragedy*) and, in later life, the outright attraction for a society that was considered more permissive and where Wilde had misplaced hopes of being able to live his life fully, without subterfuges. All three components should be borne in mind in order to fully appreciate the intimate and idealised relationship Wilde entertained with Italy, a relationship which evolved over time but remained constant. The dozen or more poems regarding Italy, which are the subject of this article, may be a minor aspect of his production, but they already reveal an artist imbued with the aesthetics of his age and vitally connected to its concerns thus permitting an assessment of the multiple roles Italy played in British and Irish imaginations.

The poems of his youth, in which he distilled the impressions, emotions and thoughts of his first visits in the seminal Oxonian period, form a multifaceted corpus that can compete with other better known literary views of Italy although, as Ian Small remarks in his introduction to Wilde's *Complete Works*, "Reviewers did not recognize Wilde as a new and significant mediator of Italian or Greek culture as they had Swinburne or Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning" ("Introduction" xxv). Wilde himself took his role as a poet seriously, expecting that fame would come to him through poetry, and although his only renowned poem is *The Ballad of Reading Gaol,* a careful study of the two neglected topics, his early poetic production (examined by Nick Frankel in relation to the poet's national identity) and the influence of Italy, may provide many surprises concerning Wilde's precocious craftsmanship and multitude of interests, while baring the contradictions and binary oppositions of the writer's nature.

1 The reception and influence of Wilde in Italy have been exhaustively studied by Masolino D'Amico and Rita Severi while most other studies concerning Wilde and Italy are of a biographical nature, regarding Wilde's experiences in southern Italy in the last three years of his life (e. g. Arcara, Dall'Orto). Not much has been written, however, on the representation of Italy in Wilde's works.

Wilde and Italy

Italy was the country to which Wilde's mother, Jane Elgee, who had taken up the Italian nom-de-plume of Francesca Speranza, attributed her origins.[2] With such an inheritance it is not surprising that the writer would long for Italy all his life visiting it eight times altogether at critical moments of his existence[3] and writing about it in letters, poems and plays.

Wilde, who was in contact with the Parisian intelligentsia during his frequent stays, and spoke and wrote the language fluently to the point of composing *Salomé* in French, was not equally conversant with Italian culture, except for his devotion to Dante. During his first visits to Italy, he was merely a tourist, contemplating artefacts of the past but distant from the cultural life of the moment. As he spoke no Italian, he had few contacts with local people apart from the occasional lovers of his last period. During his time in jail, however, perhaps foreseeing the possibility of retiring to Italy, he started studying Italian. In 1897 he requested an Italian grammar book, a conversation manual, and a dictionary. Among his other book requests were Dante's *Commedia* in the original and in translation, accompanied by critical works on the subject, Goldoni's comedies in the original, and Baggi's *Prosatori italiani*, an anthology of Italian prose writers (Wright 320). While in Naples with Douglas (1897), he took lessons in conversation three times a week and could proudly write to More Adey: "I am getting rather astonishing in my Italian conversation. I believe I talk a mixture of Dante and the worst modern slang" (*Letters* 966-67). His contacts during the months he spent in Naples were not limited to "rent boys" as he also came in contact with some poets and intellectuals among whom he sought translators for *Salomé*, which he hoped to have staged in Italy with Eleonora Duse in the main role. The scandal that was attached to his name, however, made it difficult for him to be accepted among his peers. The novelist Matilde Serao, for one, fiercely snubbed him in the influential Neapolitan daily, *Il Mattino,* which she had founded.

2 Wilde's mother, Speranza, had changed her name from Frances into Francesca "regarding," as Ellmann writes, "the new name as a brilliant vestige of the Elgee family's origins in Italy, where – according to what she maintained was a family tradition – they had been called Algiati. From Algiati to Alighieri was an easy backward leap, and Dante could not save himself from becoming Jane Elgee's ancestor" (6).

3 Wilde had first visited Italy with his mother and brother as a young boy. The sojourns in Italy in which the Italian poems originate took place in summer 1875 and spring 1877 (with J.P. Mahaffy). He returned to Italy in May 1894 (Florence with Douglas); Sept. 1897 to Jan. 1898, Naples, Capri, Sicily with Douglas; twice in 1899: February from Nice to Genoa, to visit his wife, Constance's tomb; April from Switzerland to S. Margherita; 1900, two weeks travelling in Sicily with Harold Mellor, one of his wealthy admirers who invited him to stay with him in Gland (Switzerland) and to visit Palermo and Rome with him.

Wilde's early travels to Italy

Much like the young men of the classical Grand Tour with their "bear-leaders", the twenty-year-old Oscar visited Italy in 1875 with his former Trinity Classics Tutor, J.P. Mahaffy, taking in Venice, Padua, Verona, Milan, Bologna and Florence, but stopping short of Rome for lack of money to his bitter regret, as he bemoaned in the poem "Rome Unvisited". [4] In the second trip, after following Mahaffy to Greece via Genoa and Ravenna, he finally reached Rome, where his Catholic friend, David Hunter Blair, had arranged an audience with Pope Pius IX. On that occasion he also visited Naples, where he was to return after his release from prison.

The Italy of his "boyish holidays" ("Hélas" 156) which took place during Wilde's Oxford years, had been, as for the young men of the past, a virtual "academy" where he would steep himself in the spirit of the Renaissance, which he had been introduced to by the contrasting teachings of Pater and Ruskin.[4] The time he spent touring Italy, producing poems that conveyed the seduction of the Mediterranean, but also experiencing the lure of the Catholic religion, were fundamental in honing his aestheticism.

Youthful Oscar's travel impressions are conveyed by both his letters home and the poems he composed in the late seventies, all of them revised and collected by him, mainly in the section titled "Rosa Mystica" of *Poems* 1881, after their individual publication in journals and magazines. Together they constitute a sort of *carnet de voyage*, a travel account where Wilde experiments with many themes and modes, and seeks for his voice.

The letters, chiefly addressed to his parents during his first voyage to Italy, contain few personal touches and, on the whole, are rather conventional in the images of Italy they project and the time-worn epithets they use. The poems, which often draw from the letters, instead, contain more elaborate personal impressions conveyed in a dazzling language and staging an array of selves. Clearly, Italy, besides being an inescapable subject for a budding poet, had also had a stronger emotional impact than appears in the letters, making him declare effusively in "Sonnet on Approaching Italy" (also known as "Salve Saturnia Tellus" from a verse of Virgil's *Georgics*) that his soul burned at the name of "Italia, my Italia" which was "the land for which my life had yearned" (27).

The dozen or more poems inspired by his travels number among his earliest poetic endeavours, published mostly in student journals (e.g. the Trinity College *Kottabos)* but also in the influential *Dublin University Magazine* or *The Month and Catholic Review.* Surprisingly, as Frankel points out, the journals were all Irish, although at that

4 While both Ruskin and Pater preached the doctrine of aestheticism, Ruskin coupled beauty in art to morality while Pater to hedonism; the former found his ideal in the Gothic and the Middle Ages, the latter in the Renaissance. They would have especially disagreed over the idea that the production of beauty could be an end in itself: for Ruskin, self-justified amoral art was anathema. For more insights into the differences between Wilde's two masters see the chapter devoted by Richard Ellmann to the topic.

time Wilde had already moved to England (119). The only one of his Italian poems to appear in England was "Ravenna" (Newdigate prize, 1877), which like other prize-winning poems was published by Thomas Shrimpton of Oxford in 1879.

The representation of Italy in *Poems* 1881

Wilde's compositions inspired by Italy, an important part of the 1881 collection of poems, have not been recognized as a discrete group and are included in the customary dismissal of his early poetry, being considered insincere, sophomoric, and a vain display of a student's newly acquired tools. Yet, this group of compositions deserves special attention, if not for the quality of the verse, then at least for the richness and complexity of the topics explored. The Italian poems, actually, dwell on unusual Italian themes – not only blue skies or art and antiquities, but also the temporal power of the Pope, the new Italian state, Dante, and the pains of exile – telling us much about the poet and his times and, especially, about the views that were held in Ireland on post-Risorgimento Italy. Moreover, they do it with a virtuoso technique that shows Wilde's precocious mastery of formal matters, displaying for instance, as Joseph Bristow remarks, a "classically informed knowledge" of Shelley and Swinburne, of English Romanticism and Pre-Raphaelite poetry that he often imitates or even plagiarizes (74).

The young Oxford student came to Italy at the height of his aesthetic phase and, in his reaction to Utilitarianism, he saw the country as one where beauty (including that of religious practice) was part of everyday life. In this phase of his life, when being surrounded by beautiful objects (as, for instance, by his famed "blue china")[5] was of the utmost importance, the beauties of Italy are an incentive to match them with the beauty of verse. Wilde exploits all the literary conventions regarding Italy, all the rhetorical devices in his possession. He piles simile upon simile, accumulating enumerations to create an impression of riches appealing to all the senses, playing with synaesthesia much before perfecting these techniques in *Salomé* or in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The poems are overwritten but dazzling in their excesses. There is a plethora of crimson and gold; of colours and sweet sounds; of sunsets, dawns and moonlight; of nightingales and lilies. As Ellmann wrote, these colours and symbols "recur often enough to suggest that he wants them to echo and re-echo", creating a sort of "personal pageant" (66). Wilde, in effect, sees nature through the prism of wealthy artefacts and materials (gold, silver, rubies, sapphires), which figured so prominently in the decorative arts of the Gilded Age.

Wilde's construction of Italy in the sonnets and longer poems is created through impressions – a painter's brush stroke coupled with a musician's harmonies – depicting

5 As a student at Oxford, after buying two large vases of Sèvres porcelain, Wilde was supposed to have remarked "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china" (reported by Ellmann 45).

a country where lushness of colours and sounds dominates all spheres, as in this cloying extended metaphor describing a sunset in his prize poem "Ravenna":

> The sky was as a shield that caught the stain
> Of blood and battle from the dying sun,
> And in the west the circling clouds had spun
> A royal robe, which some great God might wear,
> While into ocean-seas of purple air
> Sank the gold galley of the Lord of Light. (53-54)

"Sonnet written at Genoa," in which "oranges […] / Burned as bright lamps of gold […] / Like silver moons the pale narcissi lay" and "curved waves […] streaked the sapphire bay" (33) may well be the epitome of Wilde's style in this period for the brightness of precious minerals, the presence of emblematic flowers, the opposition of sun and moon, the variety of colours. Anything apt to awaken sensuous responses in the audience is resorted to. One gets the impression that Wilde was not enamoured with Italy, but with his ability to create beautiful, bejewelled images of Italy. Yet often the display of sensuous imagery is a device used to introduce a contrast with the poet's aspirations to simplicity and spirituality, as in this poem when the singing of a "young boy-priest" reminds him of Christ's Passion, "The Cross, the Crown, the Soldiers, and the Spear" (33).

Paganism and spirituality in the poems

Several of the poems frame a Christian or spiritual core within a sensuous semi-pagan aesthetic structure. "Graffiti d'Italia," with its three parts ("San Miniato," part I and "By the Arno" parts II and III), counters personifications (moon, dawn and morning) and mythical and symbolic objects (the nightingale, the lily) with the poet's meditative mood as he ascends towards the house of Fra Angelico "who saw the heavens open wide" (6). As Ellmann, a fine detector of Wilde's contradictions, wryly sums up, "San Miniato" presents Fra Angelico "among the nightingales, and among the unchastened oleanders and myrtles. The Christian scene is more than faintly subverted by the pagan birds" (56).

Wilde's solid classical background can be detected in the frequent recurrence of Greek mythology and a pastoral atmosphere used per se or as the background to spiritual revelation. This is particularly noticeable in "Ravenna", intended for an academic audience. Immersed in the pagan natural world that surrounds the city, the narrator of the poem perceives that "once again / the woods are filled with gods we fancied slain" and dreams a "Hellenic dream" of "goat-foot Pan" and "startled Dryad maid" (50), of "laughing shepherd-boy/ Pip[ing] his reed" and of "Lethe's waters, and that fatal weed / Which makes a man forget his fatherland" (47). The dream, however, is interrupted by the chiming of the bells and the speaker is brought back to thoughts of "black Gethsemane" and a more spiritual dimension (50).

Many of the Italian poems are, indeed, structured around the theatrical pose of a tormented believer (as Wilde actually was at the time), torn by the dialectical opposi-

tion of soul and the senses. We tend to forget that, as Ronald Schuchard writes, "[t]he encrusted portrait of Wilde as priest of paganism, apostle of aestheticism, host of homoeroticism and victim of Victorian culture" must also "accommodate the image of Wilde as spiritual voyager" (371).

The desire to be in Italy, in point of fact, besides having the usual motivations – climate, the enjoyment of nature, and of the common European heritage of art, culture, and history – is strongly linked to Wilde's life-long fascination with Catholicism that reached a peak in the mid-seventies and recurred throughout his life, culminating in his deathbed conversion. Rather than a thought-out theological conviction, however, at this early stage his interest in Catholicism was of an aesthetic nature. In a letter to his friend William Ward written during the first visit to Italy, he urged him to "feel the awful fascination of the Church, its extreme beauty and sentiment" and expressed the desire to "seek the shelter of a Church which simply enthrals me by its fascination" (*Letters* 31). "The very word fascination," writes Ellis Hanson, "resounds throughout Wilde's letters and fiction, often in a Roman Catholic context" (267). Being at Oxford in the wake of the Oxford movement and closely connected to people captivated by the aestheticism of Catholic rituals affected Wilde's attitude towards religion and, consequently, his idea of Italy. His two visits came at a time when he contemplated "going over"; at Oxford he consorted with High Church people or even converts to Catholicism. This phase culminated in the 1877 visit to Rome and the audience with Pope Pius IX, arranged and paid for by his friend David Hunter Blair, which, however, failed to lead to a conversion. Indeed, almost in the same days, he was visiting the graves of Keats and Shelley in the Protestant cemetery of Rome and writing in a secular drift about the two poets, while also conceiving the long poem "Ravenna" which is quite critical of religion, being a politically correct composition intended to earn him the Newdigate prize.[6] Wilde himself ironized about his being caught "in the wiles of the Scarlet Woman" (*Letters*, 30-31), at the same time confessing, "I have suffered very much for my Roman fever" (31). The poems are a report of these sufferings and vacillations.

The longing for Rome "unvisited" – clearly not an antiquarian Rome, but the Rome of the Popes – is represented as a "steep and long" climb on the "sacred way", a painful pilgrimage ending with the offer, on his side, of "a barren gift of song" and of the experience of the "dark night of the soul," the condition of being unable to reach "Him who now doth hide his face" ("Rome Unvisited" 10). His ascent to San Miniato ("See, I have climbed the mountain side") is also like a pilgrimage culminating in the theatrically desperate lines "My heart is weary of this life / And over-sad to sing again" and in the prayer to the Virgin Mary, "Show to the world my sin and shame" ("San Miniato" 6). The sin the persona of the poet feels guilty of is that of letting himself be

6 The Newdigate prize instituted in 1827 in memory of Sir Roger Newdigate, was, and still is, awarded to undergraduate students of the University of Oxford for the best composition in verse.

attracted by the sensuous beauty of the world, of indulging in "dear Hellenic hours" drowning "all memory" of Christ's "bitter pain" ("Sonnet Written in Holy Week at Genoa" 33).

Wilde's religiosity, however, was not exempt from aestheticism. Sumptuous ceremonies fascinated him. What he most desired to see in Rome "unvisited," for instance, were the magnificent rituals in the Vatican:

> When, bright with purple and with gold,
> Come priest and holy Cardinal,
> And borne above the heads of all
> The gentle Shepherd of the Fold. ("Rome Unvisited" 8-9)

On the other hand, the pomp of the Easter ceremonies in St. Peter's, symbolised by those same "silver trumpets" he had yearned to hear in "Rome Unvisited," leads the poet to contemplate the simplicity of Christ's life:

> My heart stole back across wide wastes of years
> To One who wandered by a lonely sea,
> And sought in vain for any place of rest. ("Easter Day" 37)

The description of an Annunciation by Beato Angelico seen in Florence exalts the sobriety of the painter's execution, as compared with the speaker's elaborate fantasies drawn from his classical repertoire: the myth of Danae being made pregnant by "a rain of gold" or of Semele's "white limbs" being caught by fire. The depiction of the "supreme mystery" of the Annunciation elicits instead an image of great simplicity matching the austerity of the painting:

> Some kneeling girl with passionless pale face,
> An angel with a lily in his hand,
> And over both with outstretched wings a Dove. ("Ave Maria" 41-42)

Politics: An Irish Bias

Wilde's religious fervour, whether favouring simplicity or pomp, does not only add spirituality to his poetry but also strikes a political note. The pagan joy, conveyed by lush imagery throughout "Sonnet on Approaching Italy," conflicts with the flat allusion to the recent political events in Italy, namely the Pope's purported imprisonment in the Vatican*:*

> But when I knew that far away at Rome
> In *evil bonds a second Peter lay,*
> I wept to see the land so very fair. (27)

Fervent Catholics in Ireland and elsewhere in the world were shocked by the Pope's self-imposed captivity when the temporal rule of the Church ended with the birth of a unified Italy, with Rome as its capital. Wilde, too, as an Irishman, often voiced mixed feelings about the Italian Risorgimento: Rome in "Urbs Sacra Aeterna" is a "city crowned by God, discrowned by man" and defiled by "[t]he hated flag of red and white and green" (35). In "Italia," the conquest of the country is described as a failure

and Italy as “fallen” in spite of the fact that “clamorous armies stride / From the North Alps to the Sicilian tide!” because “Rome’s desecrated town / Lies mourning for her God-anointed King” (38). By taking this position Wilde goes against the opinions held by liberal-minded intellectuals at Oxford and in England who were generally in favour of unified Italy expressing admiration for the heroes of the Risorgimento and the new king. The repeated occurrence of lines like the above in Wilde’s poetry, therefore, counters the tenets of his intellectual milieu, but if Wilde’s stance is contextualised bearing in mind his Irish origins, it will not appear surprising. There had, actually, never been much understanding between Italian and Irish nationalists, and when the new Italian state tried to make Rome its capital, anti-Italian sentiments became widespread in Ireland influencing also a Protestant Irishman as Wilde was.[7]

Far from being “the first intellectual from Ireland” dismantling “imperial ideology from within its own structures,” as Kiberd purports (32), in these poems Wilde appears, on the contrary, as a supporter of the imperial dream of papacy and, possibly, of other forms of imperialism. As “questions of Catholicism slip into questions of Irishness” (Frankel 120), his Irishness comes to the fore in the Italian poems, while the poetic production that followed his move to England in 1879 “embrace[s] England as a topic” and shows the desire to “inhabit an English cultural tradition,” as Frankel argues (123). In poems such as “Ave Imperatrix,” writes Frankel, “the poet seems to inhabit an England imagined as the visible center of the British Isles” (123), while in “The Conquest of Time” the use of the pronoun "We" “identifies the poem's speaker as English, himself subject to the process of imperial decline” which the poet sorrowfully perceives. Both the Italian and English poems can thus be seen to be tinged at times by imperialist sympathies, but the 1881 edition of *Poems* shows an important distinction between the poems published in Ireland, where Wilde espouses the positions of his fellow-Irishmen, and those published in England where he speaks from an English point of view even when addressing Italian subjects. In “Ravenna,” intended for an official, Protestant audience, the Oxford jury of the Newdigate prize for example, he exults that “Dante’s dream is now a dream no more” (51), in other words that Italy is finally a country and not a geographic entity, and he celebrates with enthusiasm the coronation in Rome of Victor Emanuel II, the first king of united Italy, whose entrance in the new capital had made the Pope a prisoner of the Vatican:

> at last
> Italia’s royal warrior hath passed
> Rome’s lordliest entrance, and hath worn his crown
> In the high temples of the Eternal Town!
> The Palatine hath welcomed back her king,
> And with his name the seven mountains ring. (“Ravenna” 51)

To Hunter Blair, who complained about his changed position, Wilde replied “You must know I should have never, never won the Newdigate if I had taken the Pope’s

7 See Barr, Finelli and O’Connor on the complex relationship between Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento.

side against the King's" (Hunter Blair 137-8 quoted by Ellmann 91). However, his position towards Italy in "Ravenna" was not the only occurrence of a change of heart dictated by opportunism. When the 1881 volume was published, an anonymous reviewer of *The Spectator* commented on Wilde's inconsistencies: "In one poem Mr Wilde breathes out execrations against Italy for the irreverence done to the Pope and in another panegyrizes Mazzini for driving the Pope out of Rome" (*The Critical Heritage* 36). The poem mentioned is "Humanitad," a rather garbled philosophical and political composition, in a long section of which Wilde celebrates Mazzini and a moment of the Italian Risorgimento in which the children of the "most blessed among nations and most sad" had risen at the call of the republican politician. The day he commemorates is that of the battle of Aspromonte[8] in which for the "dear sake" of "Our Italy! Our mother visible! / […] the young Calabrian fell." The short battle pitted the Republicans, who were trying to fulfil the dream of a unified Italy with Rome as its capital, against the Monarchy that protected the frontiers of the Papal states betraying thus, as Wilde implies, the revolution. Gone is Wilde's former staunch defence of the Pope's rights to rule over Rome and its territory! The poem actually exalts Mazzini, "the great triumvir," for the role he had played in 1849 and 1862, attempting both times to free Rome from the Pope,[9] an event which, when it finally took place in 1870, filled Wilde with indignation. Mazzini, instead, is termed emphatically as the one "Who on Rome's lordliest shrine / lit for men's lives the light of Marathon, / and bare to sun-forgotten fields the fire of the sun!" His feat of bringing liberty to Rome makes him superior to the conquerors of ancient times:

> […] no mightier conqueror
> Clomb the high Capitol in the days of old
> When Rome was indeed Rome, for Liberty
> Walked like a bride beside him. ("Humanitad" 99)

Comparisons, like the one above, between the past, "when Rome was indeed Rome", and the present are a popular *topos* in the literature regarding Italy, but Wilde uses the standard of the past to measure different and opposing modern realities. While the enemy of the Pope is exalted in "Humanitad," in "Urbs Sacra Aeterna," Ancient Rome that "ruled the whole world for many an age's span" is belittled in comparison to its present role as the city where pilgrims converge to "kneel before the Holy One, / The prisoned shepherd of the Church of God" (35). That same "Holy One", so exalted and pitied in several poems, however, is ridiculed in "Humanitad" as "an old man who grabbled rusty keys" (99) or as "a vile thing" lurking "within / Its

8 Aspromonte is a mountainous region of Calabria where in 1862 the Italian King's army defeated a group of republican followers of Garibaldi and Mazzini who were attempting to free Rome from the Pope and make it the capital of Italy Very few rebels escaped and Garibaldi was wounded and imprisoned.

9 Mazzini had played an important role in the establishment of the short-lived republic of Rome in 1849, becoming the leader of the triumvirate that ruled over it. In 1862, shortly after the partial unification of Italy, he joined forces with Garibaldi in his failed attempt to make Rome the capital of Italy.

sombre house, alone with God and memories of sin" (100). Similarly, the Church, for which Wilde had felt so deeply, is defined here as "That murderous mother of red harlotries" (100).

Wilde, raised in Dublin by a nationalist mother sympathising with Catholicism, but attending Protestant schools (Portora and Trinity), had absorbed both the Catholic hostility towards the Risorgimento and the new Italian state, and the Anglo-Irish admiration for these same objects. The contradictory allegiances of his society are reflected in his poetry. One must not, however, consider Wilde a hypocrite playing the devout Catholic or the fierce anti-clerical depending on his targeted audience. "Contradictoriness was his orthodoxy", writes Ellmann, quoting Wilde's admission that "My next book may be a perfect contradiction of my first" (143). And so were his poems, sometimes condemning modern Italy, sometimes exalting it; lamenting the fate of the Pope or singing paeans to the conquerors of Rome; favouring bright paganism and deriding grey religion or professing his longings for faith and asceticism; and ruing his enjoyment of sensuous beauty. As John Sloan argues, the contradictoriness may be attributed to his origins: "Caught between the clashing irreconcilable claims of Protestant and Catholic nationalism, and of Englishness and Irishness, [h]is is the anarchy of the mind and heart" (104). Or, more simply, the reason for the contradictions may be, as Frankel suggests in his article, the place of publication of the poems. Most Italian poems were first published in Irish magazines and addressed Irish audiences. What cannot be contested is that Wilde was able to see both sides of a question and identify with them using different viewpoints as triggers for the production of an aesthetic object, an ambition much more important than consistency or truth to one's feelings. No matter what side Wilde took, however, the poems show that his interest in Italy was keen and multi-faceted although his loyalties were changing.

Wilde and Dante

The great veneration Wilde showed for Dante as a poet of visions and of exile is another aspect of his interest in Italy. Dante, "the supreme modern poet" who had explored "all the complexities of the modern soul" is constantly present in his thoughts and poetry, a source of inspiration and a subject for his writings. The Italian poet had been a household name since Wilde's earliest years as his mother, Speranza, who claimed a hypothetical kinship with the Alighieri family, had translated some of his poems (Wright, 57). The Italian poet features prominently in Wilde's early poetry as well as in his prose works, especially in the essays of *Intentions,* in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" and, especially, in *De Profundis,* as both Dominic Manganiello and Jay Losey have illustrated. Indeed, "The figure of Dante," writes Manganiello, "casts his shadow over Wilde's imagination from the outset of the latter's literary career" (394).

It was the theme of exile to which Wilde particularly responded, creating, as Losey argues, "an aesthetic of exile" (430) in tune with the rhetoric of exile, whether politi-

cal, religious, artistic or linguistic, which resonates in much Irish literature. The young student had read the *Divine Comedy,* a cult text among the Victorians and the Pre-Raphaelites, and was familiar with Cacciaguida’s prophecy in *Paradiso* XVII, 58-60, in which Dante’s grandfather foretells the poet’s future exile: “Tu proverai sì come sa di sale / Lo pane altrui e com’è duro calle / lo scendere e il salir per l’altrui scale” (in Sinclair’s translation: "Thou shalt prove how salt is the taste of another man's bread and how hard is the way up and down another man's stairs"). Wilde had first referred to this prophecy, also reproducing Cacciaguida’s pun on the name of Dante’s patrons, the Scala (meaning stairs in Italian), in an 1875 letter to his mother where he describes Dante as “weary of trudging up the steep stairs […] of the Scaligeri when in exile at Verona” (*Letters* 11). The words from the letter reappear in the first-person sonnet spoken by Dante, “At Verona,” inspired by Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s narrative poem, “Dante at Verona”, and the eponymous painting, as well as being quoted in the elegiac prize-poem “Ravenna,” a long section of which is dedicated to Dante who had lived, died and been buried in the city. In both poems Wilde dwells on the humiliation of Dante’s politically motivated exile which, as Jay Losey points out, “has become a literary paradigm of the artist pitted against institutional authority” (429). A personal touch is added in the longer poem as the speaker establishes a kinship with the Italian poet by addressing him by name;

> Alas! my Dante! thou hast known the pain
> of meaner lives – the exile's galling chain,
> Oh How steep the stairs within king’s houses are,
> And all the petty miseries which mar
> Man’s nobler nature with the sense of wrong. (“Ravenna” 48)

In the sonnet, the lines about the stairs (which reappear verbatim in “Ravenna”) had offered the occasion for a further pun on the name of Dante’s patron, Cangrande della Scala, meaning in Italian “the great Hound of the stairs”:

> How steep the stairs within Kings’ houses are
> For exile-wearied feet as mine to tread,
> And O how salt and bitter is the bread
> Which falls from this Hound’s table. (“At Verona” 46)

Notwithstanding the facetiousness of repeated puns, the sonnet conveys the anguish of the Italian poet who feels betrayed by his native city and longs for death, thus providing a parallelism for the theatrical death wish often voiced by the persona of Wilde in his early poems. In this first Dantean visitation, Wilde indeed prophetically identifies with Dante’s plight long before experiencing personally the “salt and bitter bread” of alienation and exile. Even in those early days as an Irishman in England, in spite of his efforts to fit in, Wilde was an outsider trying to compensate for a sense of otherness through his eccentricities. If to this we add that his sexuality did not conform to the prevailing norms of masculinity, we may understand that he could easily sympathise with Dante’s exclusion, implying that he, too, in spite of his popularity at Oxford, had known the bitterness of something like exile. One of his masks, in fact, was that of the non-conformist and the outsider.

Another aspect of Dante's influence is Wilde's use of ecstatic visions often of women and of salvific love. The closing lines of the sonnet "At Verona", in which Dante states that he possesses "what none can take away, / My love, and all the glory of the stars" (46), besides alluding to the vision of stars which concludes each section of *The Divine Comedy*, also offers the occasion for comparisons with the Irish poet's own aspirations: love of a Beatrice-like woman and a glimpse of something uplifting like Dante's stars.

Unlike Dante's visions of Beatrice, however, the women he describes in the early poetry are closer to the women of the "fleshly school of poetry" like, for instance, the marble-throated lily girl of "Madonna Mia" in front of whom he feels "o'ershadowed by the wings of awe / Like Dante when he stood with Beatrice" (118). Allusions to Beatrice are also to be found in "La Bella Donna della Mia Mente" or in "Flower of Love", in which Wilde bemoans his sensuous love for a woman because it has kept him from the sort of visions Dante had had:

> […] Had I not been made of common clay
> I had climbed the higher heights unclimbed yet, seen the fuller air, the larger day
> …….
> I had trod the road which Dante treading saw the suns of seven circles shine,
> Ay! perchance had seen the heavens opening, as they opened to the Florentine.
> ("Flower of Love" 126)

Unlike the missed vision in "Flower of Love," in "Amor Intellectualis" Wilde has a seven-fold vision, echoing the seven planetary heavens in Dante's *Paradiso,* which, he claims, is the most important finding of his literary explorations. The intertextual dialogue between poets becomes polemical in the sonnet "A Vision", in which Dante is reproached for not including in his underworld the three great Greek playwrights, Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides. Wilde feels it is his duty to put things right by creating his own classical Pantheon and rewriting a scene where Dante interrogates Beatrice as to the identity of three hieratic figures.

As much as Wilde at this stage enjoyed identifying with Dante, whether as a lover, a visionary poet, or an exile, it is only in the bitter days of his imprisonment that *The Divine Comedy* became vital for him. The allegory of the descent into hell in order to re-emerge in a Paradise of love and divine revelation held his attention especially in the composition of *De Profundis*, as Joseph Losey has amply demonstrated in his "The Aesthetics of Exile" which also studies the presence of the Italian poet in Wilde's essays and prose work.

Keats and Homoeroticism

The theme of exile in Wilde's youthful poetry, however, was not only limited to Dante: Italy, indeed, is consecrated as the land of literary exile by the long section of "Ravenna" dedicated to Byron as well as by the two sonnets "The Grave of Shelley" and "The Grave of Keats," written after a visit to the Protestant Cemetery in Rome.

The sonnet on Keats, indeed, can be said to have escaped the general neglect of Wilde’s early poetry for the one often-quoted line: “The youngest of the Martyrs here is lain, / Fair as Sebastian, and as foully slain” (36) in that it introduces a theme which is latent in Wilde’s early writings, the sensuous attraction for the male body as exhibited in Italian art and in real life. The key lies in the allusion to St. Sebastian, a homoerotic symbol as may be deduced from the explanatory note to the sonnet:

> As I stood beside the mean grave of this divine boy, I thought of him as a Priest of Beauty slain before his time; and the vision of [Guido Reni’s] Saint Sebastian came before my eyes as I saw him at Genoa, a lovely brown boy, with crisp, clustering hair and red lips, bound by his evil enemies to a tree and, though pierced by arrows, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned gaze towards the Eternal Beauty of the opening Heavens. (36)

Throughout his visit to Italy, Wilde had been aware of the erotic attraction of Italian art. His first published prose piece, a review of the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in London (*Dublin University Magazine*, July 1877) displays his attraction for the limbs of beautiful boys who could compete with “the Charmides of Plato”:

> Guido's St. Sebastian in the Palazzo Rosso at Genoa is one of those boys, and Perugino once drew a Greek Ganymede for his native town, but the painter who most shows the influence of this type is Correggio, whose lily-bearer in the Cathedral at Parma, and whose wild-eyed, open-mouthed St. Johns in the 'Incoronata Madonna' of St. Giovanni Evangelista, are the best examples in art of the bloom and vitality and radiance of this adolescent beauty. (“The Grosvenor Gallery 1877” 6)

One of the causes of Wilde’s love for Italy, the admiration for the masculine body which was sublimated in the many lines of aestheticizing enthusiasm in his writings of the 1870s, would be acknowledged overtly in his later life and confirmed by his repeated visits to the country. However, this admiration found no echo in his writings apart from a few letters to friends. His early writings, instead, and especially the Italian poems, converted the necessity to conceal and disguise into “something rich and strange.”

While, as Ian Small writes in his Introduction to the Oxford University Press edition of the *Poems and Poems in Prose*, “[m]ost accounts of Wilde’s writing have tended to be dismissive of his early works, particularly the poetry, which has often been regarded as second-rate and derivative” (xv), these juvenile poems must be seen as evidence of his variety of interests and moods and of his precocious craftsmanship. They mix the aestheticism of his impressions of natural scenery, art and cityscapes with bouts of often theatrical self-searching. Human love and divine love, paganism and mysticism go hand in hand, while intimate religious verse alternates with political religious verse (in support of the Pope) which, in its turn, is in contrast with public political verse (in support of the Italian king). In politics, he goes from monarchical feelings to mild republicanism. The attractions of the flesh contrast with an aspiration to ascetical simplicity. Pan, Christ and Eros call in turn for his enthusiastic attention. *The stark contrasts in this exploratory phase are indicative of Wilde’s wavering between various constructions of self and Italy, and bear* testimony of the confusion re-

garding his views on life and his role as an artist in the early years of his career. Such contradictoriness, however, should not be regarded as a shortcoming, but as a sign of Wilde's belief in the autonomy of art and in the superiority of lying and wearing masks as opposed to reflecting reality. As Wilde quipped, "Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known" ("The Soul of Man" 142).

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*. Trans. John D. Sinclair. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 1961.

Barr, Colin, Michele Finelli, and Anne O'Connor, eds. *Nation/Nazione: Irish Nationalism and the Italian Risorgimento*. Dublin: UCD Press, 2014.

Beckson, Karl, ed. *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2003.

-----. "Commentary." *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. 1: Poems and Poems in Prose.* Ed. Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 219-316.

Blair, David Hunter. *In Victorian Days.* London: Longmans, 1939.

Bristow, Joseph. "Oscar Wilde's Poetic Tradition from Aristophane*'s Clouds* to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*." *Oscar Wilde in Context*. Ed. Kerry Powell and Peter Raby. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014. 73-87.

D'Amico, Masolino, ed. *Oscar Wilde: Opere*. Milano: Mondadori, 2004.

-----. "Oscar Wilde in Naples," *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*. Ed. C. George Sandulescu. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994. 76-81.

Dick, Susan et al., eds. *Essays for Richard Ellmann: Omnium Gatherum*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989.

Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Knopf, 1988.

Frankel Nick. "'Ave Imperatrix': Oscar Wilde and the Poetry of Englishness." *Victorian Poetry* 35.2 (1997): 117-37.

Hanson, Ellis. *Decadence and Catholicism.* Cambridge, MA*:* Harvard UP, 1998.

Holland, Merlin. *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006.

Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland*. London: Vintage, 1996.

Losey, Jay. "The Aesthetics of Exile: Wilde Transforming Dante in *Intentions* and *De Profundis*." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920.* 36.4 (1993): 429-50.

Lottman, Herbert. *Oscar Wilde à Paris*. Paris: Fayard, 2007.

Manganiello, Dominic. “The Consolation of Art: Oscar Wilde and Dante.” *Essays for Richard Ellmann: Omnium Gatherum.* Ed. Susan Dick et al. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989. 394-401.

Powell, Kerry and Peter Raby, eds. *Oscar Wilde in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014.

Sandulescu George, ed. *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994.

Satzinger, Christa. *The French Influences in Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’ and ‘Salomé.’* New York: Mellon, 1994.

Schuchard, Ronald. “Wilde’s Dark Angel and the Spell of Decadent Catholicism.” *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*. Ed. C. George Sandulescu. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994. 371-96.

Severi, Rita. “‘Astonishing in my Italian': Oscar Wilde's First Italian Editions, 1890-1952.” *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*. Ed. Stefano Evangelista. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 108-23.

-----. *L’anima dell’uomo. Oscar Wilde in Italia*. Palermo: Novecento, 1998.

Sloan, John. *Oscar Wilde*. Authors in Context. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.

Small, Ian. “Introduction.” *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde. Vol. 1: Poems and Poems in Prose*. Ed. Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. ix-xxvi.

Stokes, John. “Wilde and Paris.” *Oscar Wilde in Context*. Ed. Kerry Powell and Peter Raby. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014. 60-70.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Letters*. Ed. Merlin Holland. London: Henry Holt, 2000.

-----. *The Complete Works, Volume 1: Poems and Poems in Prose*. Ed. Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

-----. “The Grosvenor Gallery 1877.” *Miscellanies*. David Price, 1908 (Reprint Project Gutenberg).

-----. *Poems*. London: Bogue, 1881.

Wright, Thomas. *Oscar’s Books*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2008.