

CONVERSING WITH THE ANCIENTS: A REVIEW ARTICLE

Kathleen RILEY, Alastair J.L. BLANSHARD, Iarla MANNY (edd.), *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, XVIII + 382 pp., ISBN 978-0198789260, £75.00.

This is one of those books concerned with the relevance of the past to the present. It shows how history acquires a synchronic dimension – how Oscar Wilde’s adaptations of classical antiquity speak of the ways in which he himself was engaged with his time. For Wilde, classical antiquity and the Victorian age seem to be set side by side, as they had been for Walter Pater – his master in Aestheticism – for whom the two types of sensibility, classicism and romanticism, would be connected in this realm which he called the *House Beautiful*. In the *House Beautiful*, as Pater believed, “the creative minds of all generations [...] are always building together”¹. This idea of a timeless co-existence of ideas and arts is uniquely reflected in the eclecticism of Victorian architecture, and most spectacularly in the design of the Albert Memorial – the fact highlighted by Richard JENKYNS. While tracing classical antiquity’s encroachments on Victorian romantic medievalism, JENKYNS in his *Dignity and Decadence* – a book providing an illuminative cultural context for the volume on Wilde’s response to the legacy of the ancients – asks his readers to both look at this stupendous shrine from afar and take a close-up look. The long view leaves one with the impression of the neo-Gothic ciborium and spires. A closer look, however, focusing on the ornamentation of the classical pedestal, takes one further back in time. Its center is occupied by Homer, with Shakespeare, his hand cupped over his ear, seated a little beneath and listening to the Greek². Wilde followed this good example; and this volume reveals *how* he followed suit.

The results of the close attention he paid to what the ancients had to say are organised by the editors into five parts: the book closes with a section discussing the presence of the Roman world in Wilde’s work; the preceding four sections are oriented mainly towards the legacy of Greece (with exceptions made for Suetonius and Ovid). These sections explore the impact of Wilde’s classical education, engaging with him as a playwright and a prose writer – a reviewer, an essayist and the author of one memorable novel. Though references are made to his poetic works, by the editors’ choice, this volume does not concern Wilde’s poems. His fairy tales are not included either, though one can find their echoes. Save for brief references, Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” is omitted too. Possibly, this is because the story has already been masterly discussed by several critics. Nevertheless, the two Greek contexts introduced in this collection – Greece of the Classical and the Hellenistic periods – make one wish for a chapter that would match the high quality of those others which it includes and refer in more detail also to this story, with its allusions to Plato’s *Symposium* and to Hermeticism.

From the political to the social, the cultural, and the aesthetic, the range of themes in this volume is broad. If, at first glance, several of them seem familiar, this is because of the persistence of the classical world in Wilde, which has been noted in numerous journal articles cited in this collection, and in books, including those authored by the volume’s contributors. This sense of familiarity may be also due to the fact that Wilde, even if he was born out of his time, was nevertheless a child of his age. He was not unique in his admiration for the ancients. His Hellenism followed the Classicism of Shelley, whose features are indeed reflected in the face of Wilde’s imaginary Mr. W. H. (the story invoking Diotima’s discussion of love). It also came after the

¹ W. PATER, *Postscript*, in: *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* [1889], Evanston, IL 1987, p. 241.

² See R. JENKYNS, *Dignity and Decadence: Victorian Art and the Classical Inheritance*, London 1991, pp. 2–6.

Romantic Keats, who adhered to the model of Hellenism as established in the eighteenth century by its pioneer Johann Joachim Winckelmann – as did Goethe, Schiller and Hegel in Germany, and as did Walter Pater, Wilde's admired teacher in Decadent Aestheticism, in Britain. The train of Hellenic influences comes full circle. The Roman inspiration, however, was no less potent; Keats, for instance, before dealing with the fall of Titans in his *Hyperion* (1819), read Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789)³. The trope of collapse was powerful. At the end of the nineteenth century, Rome acquired a very special status, providing an analogy to the British Empire, which inspired pride, but which also created anxiety – the fear of decline. It was Rome as imagined by Wilde's corrupted Dorian Gray (1891) and as depicted in Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) and, much earlier, in Thomas Couture's *The Romans of the Decadence* (1847) – the picture of the patricians' self-indulgence watched with sadness by the great sculpted figures of the past, a painting close to archetypal. For the Decadents, ancient Rome set a model for excess, a contrast to the Augustan ideal (which, for instance, was invoked through the classical, urbane and elegant wit of Max Beerbohm). Wilde's Hellenism, Epicureanism, and his allusions to degenerate Rome constitute an inseparable part of the Hellenism in Britain⁴ and of the British *fin de siècle*.

But, if by looking at the contents, one may occasionally experience a sense of familiarity, this impression is misleading. It is dispelled on reading the essays, and is replaced by a sense of discovery. The volume engages with texts by Wilde which have not yet received full recognition or those which are regarded as marginal, including his annotations, reviews and notebooks; and when it regards the texts which are well-known, it provides new perspectives. The five thematic categories into which the essays are divided overlap at some points. But how can one easily decide, for instance, whether to allocate *Dorian Gray* to the category of Greek or Roman adaptations? The recurrence of motifs does not mar the structure, either. On the contrary. For, rather than a constant narrative, this volume proposes a continuous discourse – not a tale, but a conversation involving nineteen voices (the Foreword included), its topics re-emerging in the changing contexts. It is a modern symposium.

The themes of particular chapters are briefly indicated in the Introduction. However, since the Introduction is an essay in its own right (it gives a biographical background), the chapter summaries it provides are succinct. This, and the fact that the book does not include abstracts, makes it useful to try to relate its content and highlight the ways in which its authors converse with each other so as to explain the ways in which Wilde conversed with the ancients. In outlining these discussions, I will stress the collection's unity not only as demonstrated through the book's overall theme but also through its arrangement, attempting to show how each essay begins where the one immediately preceding it has ended. For, if there is not an obvious narrative in this volume, there is a potent underlying argument that can be exposed.

The background for these considerations is provided in the Introduction, wherein Kathleen RILEY points out three gateways through which the love of antiquity entered Wilde's life: first, his family home; second, his education at Portora, amidst the mist-wrapped lakes of Fermanagh; and third, his studies at Trinity College Dublin, subsequently completed at Magdalen College, Oxford. RILEY observes that the classical education which Wilde received, rather than merely focusing on memory training, involved an evocation of the ancients' lives, literature, and values. As such, it shaped not only his literary taste but also the course of his life; and poignantly, it led to discord between the bourgeois Victorian mentality and Wilde's attempt at the imaginative recreation of the Hellenic mood through his own lifestyle. But, if the love of classics – and the ancient ideal of the love between men – put Wilde at odds with the Victorian world, it was also his excellence in

³ See M. ASHE, *Keats and Hellenism: An Essay*, Cambridge 1985, p. 75.

⁴ See, for example, D.J. DELAURA, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold and Pater*, Austin, TX 1969.

classical scholarship – the epitome of intellectual discipline – that, as RILEY observes, was recalled by his defence at the point of his fall from grace in the eyes of the Victorian public, at the trial following a suit filed against him, which ended in his imprisonment. Sensuous appraisal and intellectual discipline – these two threads in Wilde’s approach to the ancients are interwoven in this volume.

Part I of this book regards the factors immediately related to Wilde’s classical learning. Alastair J.L. BLANSHARD looks closely at an important aspect of his studies at Trinity College – his acquaintance with John Pentland Mahaffy, Wilde’s most influential guide into the ancient world. He presents a history of the intellectual disagreements between the disciple and the educator: Mahaffy offering a point and Wilde taking it on, only to draw a conclusion strikingly opposite to his teacher’s. For instance, BLANSHARD demonstrates that, while Mahaffy offers an apology for homosexual love, Wilde eulogises it; if Mahaffy sees the Greek spirit as opposite to Catholic faith, Wilde attempts to reconcile the two; and, as regards the question of the education of the labouring class, Wilde’s democratic ideas oppose Mahaffy’s entrenched elitism. Significantly, BLANSHARD argues that their ancient preferences corresponded to their views on politics. Thus, Mahaffy’s pride in the British empire connects with his admiration for the Ptolemaic Egypt of the Hellenistic period, an epoch recalled by him in support of British imperialism and in opposition to Home Rule for Ireland. Wilde’s ideal, in contrast, is located in the Classical period – his admiration is for the independent Greek states – and it chimes with his mother’s support for Home Rule and for Irish nationalism. What emerges is the political relevance of classical studies, the fact that they provided political analogies for current affairs. This point is of importance not only for readers of Wilde, but also for those of Walter Pater and of T.S. Eliot (their intellectual adversary, and also a follower), providing an illuminating context for their ideas of history, tradition, and Classicism as concerning not only the pastness of the past, but also its presence.

While BLANCHARD examines the inspiration which was personal and direct, Gideon NISBET focuses on the influence mediated through literature. He casts light on Wilde as an annotator – a promising classical scholar engaged with John Addington Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets*. The Wilde from NISBET’s essay is a young classicist who, eventually, instead of continuing to work on Symonds’s *Studies*, decided to imitate Symonds’s style. Considering a lesser known aspect of Wilde’s work – such as his remarks on Symonds’s “The Women of Homer” – this essay reveals Wilde’s independence and perceptiveness in judgment, noting his claim that Penelope, on Odysseus’ return, actually lost the goal in her life. NISBET’s essay also indicates Wilde’s early interest in Euripides and Aristophanes. The annotations by Wilde are also examined by Iain ROSS, who looks at Wilde’s copy of Herodotus. In ROSS’s “‘Very Fine & Semitic’: Wilde’s Herodotus”, the annotations provide a context for ROSS’s own very fine focus on Wilde’s poem. ROSS starts with Wilde’s single mention of Herodotus in “Humanitad”, regarding this poetic reference in the context of Wilde’s comments. The annotations and comments, in turn, are viewed in the light of the intellectual rivalry between two nineteenth-century approaches to Herodotus: George Rawlinson’s criticism of Herodotus’ historical unreliability and romanticism and Joseph Williams Blakesley’s praise for these very same qualities. ROSS’s essay outlines a change in Wilde’s position: from that influenced by Rawlinson, as manifested in Wilde’s annotations, to that reflecting Blakesley’s admiration for Herodotus’ imaginative powers, as visible in Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying”, where Wilde praises the artist’s ability to tell stories artfully rather than to supply verifiable facts, thus using Herodotus to engage with a contemporary issue – a critique of literary realism.

Concluding the section on Wilde’s education, Joseph BRISTOW directs readers’ attention to notebooks and the influence of *Literae Humaniores*, the course known as “Greats”, in Oxford. Reading excerpts from Wilde’s ‘Philosophy’ notebook – Wilde’s commentaries on the questions of philosophy and legislature; on Bacon and John Elliott Cairnes; and on John Austin’s and Henry Maine’s conclusions about the abstract meaning of sovereignty – BRISTOW explores the ways in which Wilde handles the question of abstraction, indicating the formative impact of Greats. From Wilde’s use of the Greek high dot – to separate the steps taken in reasoning – to his dialectical

method of comparing and juxtaposing ancient and moderns, BRISTOW explains how Wilde's methods reveal the intellectual discipline of Greats. It is the same essential quality which, as RILEY notes in her Introduction, was stressed at the Old Bailey by Wilde's legal advisor in his (futile) attempt to save his client's reputation in the eyes of Victorians.

Part II moves from university rooms to playhouses, if some of the reconstructed Greek-theatre productions were staged on university premises. John STOKES discusses Wilde's engagement with plays performed in Greek by undergraduates and with the classical plays by British authors, their imitative spirit culminating in John Todhunter's *Helena in Troas*, noting that Wilde's attitude to the Greek productions was one of both interest and critical reserve. STOKES also views the astounding variety of Wilde's own theatrical output – comprising melodrama, verse drama, a symbolist play, and society comedies – as linked to his interest in the “synaesthetic” effect of the Greek drama, with poetry, sculpture, architecture and music inextricably combined in a Greek performance. While Wilde was interested in diverse aspects of a stage production – including space and architecture, thus, also plastic arts (sculpture and ceramics) – STOKES explains that his dominant interest was with psychology rather than with “plasticity”. Significantly, he argues that Wilde's approach to the ancient plays anticipates an experimental modernist approach to classical models even if, admittedly, Wilde stopped short of the modernist experimentation to create his society comedies. Wilde's prioritising of “psychology” over “plasticity” is also confirmed by Clare L.E. FOSTER, who observes that it is psychological realism, rather than “plasticity” (or, a concern with the accuracy of the set) that prevails in Wilde's society plays. Characteristically, Wilde's social comedies satirise the audience. This satirical target, FOSTER explains, appeared as the effect of a shift taking place in the theatre: from the concept of the audience as an elite society coming to watch a play to that of the audience as the Victorian *beau monde* critically reflected on the stage. Wilde participated in this general shift from the audience-centered to the text-centered theatre, or from the concept of drama as a performance for a specific audience to that of drama as a text to be interpreted. In the 1880s, FOSTER says, the very special audience for which the play was staged was constituted by the “Greek club”, who could understand the ancient play performed in the original language. The effect of the audience's gathering was, thus, self-complimentary self-recognition. They were in the limelight. Reading Wilde's reviews of the Greek plays – and noting their semi-parodic tone and the fact that Wilde talks a lot about architecture and costume to avoid talking about the text delivered in Greek – FOSTER reveals Wilde's ambivalent attitude to these classical performances. She shows that, on the one hand, Wilde found their exclusivist nature rather embarrassing. On the other hand, however, due to the relative unintelligibility of the ancient language, these Greek performances foregrounded formal and structural qualities of the Greek plays, such as would be reflected in Wilde's society comedies in later years.

It is with the comedies that the interest stays in the following essay by Isobel HURST, showing in Wilde an ideal playwright who could combine the comic with the tragic, and also one who restored Euripides to recognition after his literary reputation had been destroyed through the criticism of August W. Schlegel. HURST traces the interweaving of the comic and the tragic in Wilde's plays back to Menander's bitter New Comedy and to Euripides' tragedy with a happy ending. She also explains the two reasons behind Wilde's preference for Euripides. The first is the psychological realism of Euripides' plays (a point addressed in the papers by STOKES and FOSTER). The second is of a more personal nature: it is due to Euripides' “belatedness” – the fact that his coming at the end of an era made him a figure of that era's decadence, which also turned him into an ancient foil to Wilde, coming at the end of the Victorian epoch. Narrowing HURST's Euripidean focus, Kostas BOYIOPOULOS regards the influence of Euripides on Wilde's *Salome* as a representation of a new type of drama (a symbolist passion play) which, he claims, arose as the inversion of the Aristotelian tragedy. He finds the model for this inversion in Euripides' *Hippolytus* and shows that the theoretical justification for the new genre is delivered by Wilde's mouthpiece, Gilbert in *The Decay of Lying*. The imaginary Gilbert, BOYIOPOULOS explains, provides readjustments to Aristotle's theory of tragedy by replacing fear with awe, the spiritual with the sensuous, and

catharsis with the cold emotion of art – all of these being trademarks of the Decadent Aestheticist sensibility. These three deviations from Aristotle are supplemented with yet another shift, apparent both in ancient *Hippolytus* and in Decadent Aestheticist *Salome*: it is a move from the Aristotelian emphasis on the tragedy's serious theme, considered as *spoudaios*, to the theme of unrequited love, or *himeros*, trivial if viewed from the perspective of a *polis*. Also, in *Salome* the emphasis is put on a single theatrical effect rather than on the Aristotelian integrity of plot; this device is epitomised, BOYIIOPOULOS observes, by the episode in which the love-smitten Narraboth drops dead in front of Salome, simply unseen by her. A similar effect, he notes, appears in Wilde's fairy tales. On the force of this essay's argument, Euripides' *Hippolytus* becomes the archetype of a Decadent symbolist play.

With Part III the interest moves from Wilde as challenging Victorian sensibility – repairing the reputation of Euripides and distancing himself from the elitism of the Greek performances – to Wilde as inspired by the ancients in his thoughts on the empire (the impact of Plato) and on the self and art (the influences of Euripides and Heraclitus). Part III closes with Wilde fascinated by France and Paris, which to him epitomised the elegant charm of Parnassianism, as well as the allure of Hellenistic decadence.

In the chapter opening this section, Leanne GRECH, exploring Wilde's engagement with Plato (rather than, as is frequent in the criticism, with Wilde's neo-Platonism as a code for homosexual love), highlights the political aspect of this interest. She presents Wilde's polemic with Benjamin Jowett's project of Greats – Plato's *Republic* featuring prominently in the course – as employed in the service of the British Empire. She argues that Jowett, while following in Matthew Arnold's steps by insisting on classical education, viewed it as indispensable in the training of civil servants who would scrupulously execute rules and protocols without questioning their economic aim to exploit colonies. GRECH explains that the Victorian idea of Hellenism was used for the entrenchment of the ruling class, the "Greek club" (the point raised earlier, in the theatrical context, by FOSTER). Wilde, however, used Plato for different ends. Instead of approaching the *Republic* as an apologia for the empire, or regarding it as a practical tool in the training of its officials, as GRECH indicates, he used it as an inspiration for proposing his own version of Utopia and to urge an alternative educational project – one that would foreground individual experience. The educational import of classical studies in Wilde's personal life, in turn, is explored by RILEY in an essay demonstrating how his classical education at Oxford – in particular his familiarity with Euripides – served to deepen his self-reflection in prison. As viewed in this chapter, the influence of Euripides goes beyond the shaping of the literary form (the aspect stressed in Chapters 7 and 8). In his later years, as RILEY claims, Euripides provided Wilde with ancient analogies for the Christian notions of self-sacrifice and the redemptive power of love, the Euripidean autarkic *philia* seen as prefiguring Christian *caritas*. Regarding Euripides' *The Madness of Heracles*, RILEY claims that, to Wilde, Theseus anticipates Christ, and the redeeming love in the ancient play becomes reflected in the redemptive suffering as portrayed in the New Testament. Those analogies, RILEY indicates, provided Wilde with the patterns for creating his own self-narrative in the prison letter, which he wrote *De Profundis*.

While Euripides demonstrated to Wilde the potential of redemptive love, Heraclitus instructed him, Kate HEXT explains, in the evanescent nature of life. HEXT focuses on Heraclitus' idea of flux and on Wilde's Heraclitan imagery, examining their meanings in Wilde's essay "The Critic as Artist", in his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and in his poignant literary letter, *De Profundis*. Benjamin Jowett's lectures and Pater's *Renaissance* – exposing the views of the famous classicist and the renowned Hegelian, respectively – provide the context for these explorations. HEXT indicates four different kinds of implications which are yielded in Wilde's work by the Heraclitan echoes. First, there is the sense of the fleeting nature of a moment (as it was stressed in Pater's radically Heraclitan vision of life) and its intellectual consequence – the idea of the radically anti-essentialist self, or of the selfhood without a stable core. Wilde embraced Pater's philosophy, and HEXT notes how he was deeply disappointed by Pater's censored and expurgated version of *The Renaissance*. Second, there is a reflection of the Heraclitan flux in Wilde's practice

of art criticism, his criticism having never been limited to any ideology, ever open to contradiction, interspersed with passages in which Wilde cheerily negates his earlier statements. Third, there is the Heraclitan idea of impermanence carried to its radical conclusion in Cyrenaicism as espoused by Dorian Gray and his intellectual guide, Lord Henry (though neither of them a mouthpiece for Pater or for Wilde). And finally, HEXT demonstrates that, in *De Profundis*, there is a sense of alienation from the flux of life, and that this sense of imposed stillness is traumatic.

It must be said that “flux” seems also the word that can be applied as a description of Wilde’s changing intellectual allegiances to antiquity. But even though antiquity’s influence is multi-faceted, in the most general terms it can be organised as coming in two stages. In the 1870s and 1880s Wilde’s initial commitment was to Classical Greece; his later allegiance, more typical of the 1890s, was to the Greece of the Hellenistic period, as influenced by Rome. These two imaginary homelands are presented by Stefano EVANGELISTA as overlapping in Wilde’s ambivalent experience of Paris. To Wilde, France was synonymous with artistic freedom, the opposite of the Victorian England. Paris itself, as EVANGELISTA explains, had for him two meanings. Wilde’s first interest was with the Parnassian movement, connected with his admiration of the classical Greek ideal. His later fascination, incited by Huysmans’s *Against Nature* (Chapter 11 of *Dorian Gray* being what EVANGELISTA terms “a mini *À rebours*”), led to a darker Decadent phase in his art. EVANGELISTA captures this shift in interests and sensibility as the moment of transition from Paris as the imaginary Athens of the Classical period to Paris as Hellenic Alexandria, cosmopolitan and decadent.

In this last essay of Part III, concerned with Paris as an aesthetic equivalent of the ancient cities, EVANGELISTA takes his reader from Athens to Alexandria. The next step – in Part IV of the book – is transitional: it is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, its legacy both to Greece, through Plato and Socrates, and to Rome, through Suetonius, Petronius, and Ovid.

The novel’s plot is read by Marylu HILL as juxtaposed with Socrates’ account of a young man’s moral decline following an intellectual seduction by a supremely intelligent older man, “the drone” who awakens in the youth wayward impulses (a desire for democracy that flips into tyranny). The novel is regarded in the context of Socrates’ warning against the corruption which occurs when passions replace reason; but it is also considered in the light of the Socratic understanding of *eros* as a glimpse of desire aroused by beauty, which ultimately becomes a thirst for wisdom. Yet HILL states that Dorian and his tutor fall short of the Socratic ideal, that neither Wotton nor Dorian – the Alcibiades kind of youth, a young man unfit to become a philosopher – merit sympathy, both of them having forfeited philosophy for philandering. In this sense, the novel is a criticism rather than endorsement of the New Hedonism. Whilst HILL stresses the novel’s critical vein in its presentation of hedonistic excess, Nikolai ENDRES claims that the inspiration for Dorian’s excess – the guarantee of impunity afforded by his deceptively fresh looks – came from Suetonius’ *Lives* and Petronius’ *Satyricon*. The two works were taught in Greats and provided a more direct inspiration for Dorian Gray’s sexual adventures, as ENDRES argues, than the Greek model in *Symposium*. The essays by HILL and ENDRES seemingly contradict each other in that HILL views *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a (Socratic) critique of brute sensualising while ENDRES, in contrast, sees in it a reflection of lugubrious lasciviousness (coming from Roman models). But this contradiction is only apparent if one assumes that Wilde’s novel critiques what its plot reflects. In the following chapter, Iarla MANNY extends the scope of Roman references in *Dorian Gray* to Ovid: in particular, to Ovid’s version of the myth of Orpheus and Euridice, which, if compared with Vergil’s rendering of it, significantly shortens the time of Orpheus’ mourning for his wife. MANNY proposes that there arises a parallel between Orpheus’ curtailed period of grief and Dorian’s bewailing Sybil only for an instant. Further, he proposes that Orpheus’ subsequent misogyny creates a resonance for Oscar Wilde’s deep-set fear of women. By moving beyond the Ovidian context, MANNY also indicates an earlier Greek parallel: the one arising between the theme of a woman’s death as treated in *Dorian Gray* and as used in Euripides’s *Alcestis*.

The last part of this volume focuses exclusively on Wilde’s Roman inspirations: his deployment of the sensational and the transgressive and his use of Plautus’ theme of mistaken identity,

with both Plautus and Wilde exploiting the scandalous. In the chapter opening this section, Philip E. SMITH II, while admitting that Wilde's preference was for Greece, speaks of Wilde's thorough knowledge of Roman history and familiarity with ancient historians as manifested in his criticism of Tacitus and Livy. He demonstrates that if Wilde was critical of Tacitus' and Livy's insistence on the representation of the criminal and the scandalous, it was the very essence of the sensational that he himself foregrounded in what is now considered as his darker Decadent period. The related theme of Wilde's decadent fascination with transgressive Rome is developed by Shushma MALIK. Epitomised by the lives of Tiberius, Nero, and Elagabalus, such decadence is discussed as inspiring an interest which Wilde shared with Huysmans and George Moore, and as pursued in the tradition established by Thomas De Quincey. The essay traces a transition in Wilde's attitude: from a fascination with cruel aestheticism to a critique of it. Thus, MALIK draws attention to Wilde's eulogising of the poisoning as artful murder in "Pen, Pencil and Poison", contrasting it with De Quincey's view of this form of killing as totally unglamorous. In *Dorian Gray*, she indicates the references to the degenerate tyrants – from Tiberius, to Nero, to Caligula, to Elagabalus – but she points out that now, in Wilde's only novel, the crimes are committed for pragmatic rather than artistic reasons. Finally, in Wilde's "Epistola", as she shows, the emperors are significant by their absence. While the moments recalled in Wilde's prison letter as shared with Bosie reflect an indulgence that could almost match the profligacy of Nero and Elagabalus, in the reflective missive *De Profundis*, Wilde decidedly refutes this kind of decadent excess. Finally, Serena S. WITZKE probes the meanings behind the excesses of the brothers in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and behind the cruelties perpetrated by the twins in Plautus' *Menaechmi*. She argues that *The Importance of Being Earnest* not only reflects the ancient play but also provides a Decadent reading of Plautus. In Wilde's re-writing, *Menaechmi* is not only a comedy on the theme of a sibling's mistaken identity, but as WITZKE explains, also a comedy about the two siblings being tragically robbed of their identities. Once the true identity is restored to each of them, they stop behaving scandalously. By meticulously cross-examining the plots of the plays, WITZKE reveals numerous analogies, noting that Wilde became familiar with the convention of the New Comedy (set by Menander) through Plautus and Terence. Closing this volume, her essay also further substantiates STOKES's observation that, by adapting ancient models, Wilde indeed anticipated the modernists.

The above summaries emphasise the underlying argument shared by the essays in this volume if their point, their common denominator, is construed not only as Wilde's uses of classical antiquity, but also as the contemporaneity of the past. The logic revealed in their arrangement is not linear. Rather, two general groups of effects – political and aesthetic – of Wilde's classical education can be seen to emerge and to crisscross. First, the Greats course is shown to have encouraged Wilde to think of the past and the present as intimately related. His classical education is shown to have furnished him with analogies to contemporary political and social issues and inspired his own attempt at utopia. While this volume probes the influence of classical models on his theatrical output – and his juxtaposition of "plasticity" and "psychological realism" – it also indicates the socially exclusivist effect of the Victorian classics course, of which he disapproved.

Second, Wilde's classical learning is discussed by the contributors as providing him with literary and quasi-literary models to interpret, transvalue and re-adapt. The book makes one realise the breadth of his Greek and Roman references. It shows how he engages with ancient historians – by calling on Herodotus to prioritise the imaginative over the factual, or by deriving from Livy, Suetonius and Tacitus inspirations for the sensational in *Dorian Gray*. It also explains how he adapts the literary Roman models, including Petronius's *Satyricon*, Ovid's rendering of Orpheus and Euridice's story, and Plautus' *Menaechmi*. But if Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* goes back to Roman Plautus, as is demonstrated here, then no ancient dramatist, as this volume reveals, can match the Greek Euripides in his scope of influence on Wilde – both literary and personal, both aesthetic and ethical. Finally, the reflection of the Classical Greek and Hellenic worlds in Wilde's work is made complete through the essays pointing to his reading of Homer, the influence of Menander, his literary adoption of the Socratic pattern of seduction,

his transvaluation of Plato and his manifold adaptation of Heraclitus' idea of the impermanence of things.

This volume is highly informative. It is also inspiring. Its conclusions and observations can serve as starting points for wide-ranging literary explorations. Eliot scholars, for instance, are provided with an illuminating context for Eliot's use of Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, rather than Euripides' *The Madness of Heracles*, in the epigraph to *Marina*. This is a poem in which Eliot decided not to reveal the source beneath the motto, explaining later that it did not matter whether the epigraph were attributed to the Roman or the Greek author⁵. And he joked that he used Seneca instead of Euripides to tease the cognoscenti, the "classical men", for the Roman drama would be less known than the Greek to those who received a formal education in classics⁶. But was his intention also to avoid citing Euripides – a trademark of Wilde's Aestheticism, as this volume shows – as a motto to a modernist poem? Would he actually want to stamp a Decadent Aestheticist mark on a modernist work? Scholars of Wilde, in turn, will find the considerations regarding Wilde's interest in the idea of the "plastic" nature of Greek art and his, eventual, prioritising of psychology over plasticity an enlightening context for "The Sphinx Without a Secret", where the beauty of Lady Alroy, the eponymous Sphinx (an allusion also to Pater's *Gioconda*), is described as "psychological, not plastic"⁷. It will also be an indispensable reference for exploring Wilde's satiric uses of the decadent motifs – Wilde's poking fun at the society of "The Tired Hedonists" inclined to profess "a sort of cult for Domitian"⁸ – though one recalls that Wilde mocked not only the decadent Roman poses but also the language inspired by Pater's Apuleian euphemism. This latter direction has been indicated, for instance, in Linda DOWLING's discussion of the motif of "the fatal book" in her *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin De Siècle* (Princeton 1989). Notably, these two points, while concerning Wilde, involve a consideration of Pater. But that is hardly surprising if one remembers that "Wilde had boldly and publicly trumpeted what Pater whispered"⁹. Those readers who will want to hear the Paterian whisper behind Oscar Wilde's statements should be satisfied, because *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity* has its older twin: *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception, and Aestheticism* (Oxford 2017), edited by Charles MARTINDALE, Elizabeth PRETTEJOHN, and Stefano EVANGELISTA, the last of whom has also contributed to the present collection.

Wilde attempted to live a Greek lifestyle in a Victorian setting, which left him with an exorbitant price to pay. But it also left his audience with classical tradition rendered contemporary again. The Foreword to this volume, by writer and actor Edward PETHERBRIDGE, uniquely honours Wilde by doing what Wilde strived to do – showing that the past is present. It poetically evokes a sense of the contemporaneity of both the classical world and of Wilde himself. It speaks of Wilde's personal presence in his work, of the Wilde analogies as valid references to an individual life – of the classically trained actor, a profession which Wilde celebrated – and of the ancient spirit recalled during Classical Greek Dance Festival at the beginning of the twenty-first century, just as it had been recalled at the end of the nineteenth century by the plays performed in Greek (though, this latter, to a different, exclusivist effect). Importantly, the Foreword speaks not only of the antiquity's

⁵ Eliot to John Hayward, 30 October 1930, in: V. ELIOT, J. HAFENDEN (edd.), *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, vol. V: 1930–31, London 2014, p. 369.

⁶ See W. EMPSON, *Argufying*, ed. by J. HAFENDEN, London 1987, p. 365. See also as quoted in: C. RICKS, J. McCUE (edd.), *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, vol. I: *Collected and Uncollected Poems*, London 2015, p. 776.

⁷ O. WILDE, *The Sphinx Without a Secret*, in: *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Centenary Edition*, Glasgow 1999, p. 205.

⁸ O. WILDE, *The Decay of Lying*, in: *Collins...* (n. 7), p. 1073.

⁹ M. LEVEY, *The Case of Walter Pater*, London 1978, p. 21.

current relevance but also about its lasting capacity to stir enjoyment. This last feature should not be forgotten when praise for this volume is rendered in academic terms, describing it as innovative, informative, carefully edited, equipped with a comprehensive, meticulously crafted thematic index, a requisite book for both a scholar in literary Aestheticism and a classicist.

Anna Budziak
University of Wrocław