

FROM POPERY TO PAGANISM: OSCAR WILDE IN GREECE

Leanne Grech (University of Melbourne)

The story of Oscar Wilde's romance with Catholicism began in Ireland. In the summer of 1859, Jane ('Sperenza') Wilde introduced her sons to Catholic worship while vacationing in the South coast of Ireland. After befriending the Reverend Father Prideaux Fox, a chaplain at the Glencree reformatory for Catholic boys, she began to attend Mass at the reformatory with her sons, Oscar and William. Sperenza also made arrangements for the boys to receive a Catholic baptism and religious instruction (Coakley [1994] 112-13).¹ Ellmann has suggested that Oscar was between the age of four and five when his induction into Catholicism took place, although it did not amount to any long-term change in his religious practices (Ellmann [1988] 19). With his childhood behind him, Oscar's interests returned to Catholicism when he was an undergraduate at Trinity College. He befriended a group of Jesuits based in the north of Dublin and began to attend Catholic Masses, just as his mother had in the past (Coakley [1994] 155). In the hope of quelling his son's religious curiosity, Sir William Wilde thought it best to send Oscar to Oxford; he must not have realised that Catholic conversion was rife among Oxford students and scholars, with John Henry Newman being the most distinguished convert of them all. Wilde's tutor, Rev. John Pentland Mahaffy, also encouraged the move. He suspected that Wilde would not be offered a fellowship at Trinity, so he encouraged him to try his luck at Oxford (Ellmann [1988] 35).² After winning a scholarship to Magdalen College, Wilde left Ireland to undertake studies in classics at Oxford in 1874, where his 'Roman fever' intensified.

For the most part, Wilde looked upon Catholicism as an admiring outsider; he lacked the financial independence to convert against his father's wishes and knew that if he succumbed to Catholicism, he did so at the risk being cut-off and disinherited. Throughout his undergraduate years, Wilde was burdened by his hesitation and was further pained when other young converts reminded him of his spiritual dilly-dallying; he said as much in a letter to his friend, William Ward: 'I feel an imposter and a traitor to myself on these occasions and must do something decided' (*Letters*, 20-21).³ Wilde was not satisfied with the Protestant Church and its reliance on rational interpretations of the Bible; he preferred the Catholic approach to faith which was more of an emotional experience, springing from the heart, not the rational mind. A year on, when Ward was in Rome, Wilde urged his Protestant peer to emotionally embrace the spirit of the Catholicism: 'Do be touched by it, *feel* the awful fascination of the Church, its extreme beauty and sentiment, and let every part of your nature have play and room' (March 1877, *Letters*, 39). Although Wilde was not free to *feel* all of this for himself, he took comfort in the thought that Ward might live the dream for him. In the same letter, he also expresses his dejection; fearing that he might not

¹ Some believe this to be a rumored anecdote; there is reason to believe that these events took place based on the Rev. Fr. Fox's account his friendship with Sperenza and the baptism of her sons. The full account is reproduced in Mason (1914) 118-19.

² It is said that after Oscar was accepted into Magdalen college, Mahaffy responded with an especially caustic remark; 'Go to Oxford, my dear Oscar: we are all much too clever for you over here' – Stanford & McDowell (1971) 39.

³ In this letter, Wilde refers to an encounter with two fellow undergraduate students, Macall (a Catholic convert) and Williamson (a future convert); he mentions that the pair 'greeted [him] with much emprossement' (*Letters*, 20-21).

be able to resist the charms of the Catholic faith for much longer, Wilde writes: ‘to go over to Rome would be to sacrifice my two great gods “Money and Ambition.” Still I get so wretched and low and troubled that in some desperate mood I will seek the shelter of a church which simply enthralms me by its fascination’ (*Letters*, 39). In this time of crisis, Wilde desperately needed a change of scene to draw him out of his spiritual slump. He had hoped to spend Easter in Rome but due to strained finances, he had all but given up on the idea and sent his apologies to Ward: ‘I am sorry to say that I will not see the Holy city this Easter at any rate’ (14 March 1877, *Letters*, 41). However, another close friend, David Hunter-Blair, took pity on Wilde and sent him £60 so that he could journey to the ‘Holy city’ as planned (Ellmann [1988] 69-70). Hunter-Blair was himself a Catholic convert and hoped that the atmosphere of Rome would give Wilde the courage to finally commit to Catholicism.

In the company of Mahaffy and George MacMillan, Wilde made his way to Genoa and was set to travel directly to Rome. As George Macmillan observed, Mahaffy had another plan in mind:

[Wilde] is just now rather fascinated by Roman Catholicism, and is indeed on his way to Rome, in order to see the glories of the religion which seems to him the highest and most sentimental. Mahaffy is quite determined to prevent this if possible and is using every argument he can to check him. (*Letters*, 44)

Realising that his former pupil was on the brink of conversion, Mahaffy intervened by convincing Wilde to take in the sights of Greece instead of going to Rome. In a letter to his wife, he boasted of his triumph: ‘we have taken Oscar Wilde with us, who has of course come round under the influence of the moment from Popery to Paganism’ (Stanford & McDowell [1971] 41). From Corfu, Wilde enthusiastically announced the sudden change in his travel itinerary on a postcard to another Oxford friend named Reginald Harding:

I never went to Rome at all! What a changeable fellow you must think me, but Mahaffy my old tutor carried me off to Greece with him to see Mykenae and Athens. I am awfully ashamed of myself but I could not help it and will take Rome on my way back. (*Letters*, 44)

Though Wilde had good reason to be ‘awfully ashamed’ of using Hunter-Blair’s money for another purpose, the prospect of seeing the grand ruins of Greece made it a worthy betrayal. At the time, this sort of expedition was uncommon because it was fraught with danger; as H. Montgomery Hyde expresses it, ‘the roads were bad, brigands infested the byways, and visitors who strayed from the main carriage ways were liable to be kidnapped’ (Hyde [1975] 28). As a lover of the classics, Wilde could not resist the opportunity to venture to Hellas and was excited to follow Mahaffy, despite the risks involved.

In *Santa Decca*, Wilde responds to Greece, beginning with his arrival on the island of Corfu.⁴ The poem ends with a postscript mentioning Corfu and the title of the work is named after a mountain in this region of Greece. In a stark contrast to the aforementioned postcard, *Santa Decca* launches into a mournful catalogue of the Pagan gods who have been displaced by Christianity:

The Gods are dead: no longer do we bring
To grey-eyed Pallas crowns of olive-leaves!
Demeter’s child no more hath tithes of sheaves,
And in the noon the careless shepherds sing,
For Pan is dead, and all the wantoning
By secret glade and devious haunt is o’er:

⁴ *Santa Decca* first appeared in Wilde’s 1881 anthology, *Poems*: Mason (1914) 309.

Young Hylas seeks the water-springs no more;
Great Pan is dead, and Mary's Son is King.

And yet – perchance in this sea-tranced isle,
Chewing the bitter fruit of memory,
Some God lies hidden in the asphodel.
Ah Love! If such there be, then it were well
For us to fly his anger: nay, but see
The leaves are stirring: let us watch a-while.
(*Santa Decca*)

The realisation that there is no one to carry on the rituals of ancient Greek religion is saddening for Wilde; with four words, he dramatically pronounces the death of the ancient divinities: 'The gods are dead' (1). Athena has been forgotten – 'no longer do we bring/ To grey-eyed Pallas crowns of olive-leaves!' – and Persephone is equally deprived of her 'tithe of sheaves' (1-3). At line five, the absence of Pan haunts the Greek landscape; the mountain-side is no longer a place for Pagan revelry, 'For Pan is dead, and all the wantoning/By secret glade and devious haunt is over' (5-6). It is not until line eight that Wilde reminds his readers that Christianity has come at the cost of Pagan culture: 'Great Pan is dead, and Mary's son is King'. The exact phrase 'Great Pan is dead' also appears in Plutarch's treatise, *On the Obsolescence of the Oracles*. Plutarch demonstrates the existence of bad spirits by presenting the story of Thamus, the Egyptian sailor who was summoned by a mysterious voice and instructed to 'announce that Great Pan is dead' as soon as he neared Palodes (*Mor.* 419 C). When Thamus repeated the message, it was met with a 'great cry of lamentation [...] mingled with exclamations of amazement' (*Mor.* 419 D). In the Christian tradition, the event is interpreted quite differently as a sign of Christ's birth, not the mischievous work of a demon, as Plutarch suggests (Harvey [1959] 304). It is significant that Wilde refers to Jesus as Mary's Son, a title which acknowledges both the importance of Mary in the Catholic tradition and also emphasises Jesus' human vulnerability. The poet concedes that 'Great Pan' was cancelled-out by a god who entered the world as an infant and depended on the care of the Virgin Mother. Although Wilde was greatly affected by Catholicism at Oxford, his poem addresses the rise of Christianity but does not rejoice in its coming. As soon as he reached Corfu, Wilde fixed his attention on the Pagans and was moved to wonder why the ancient gods had to disappear and whether it was possible to recover this loss.

In the vein of the Romantic Hellenic revival, the second stanza entertains the fancy that one of the Pagan gods remains hidden 'in the asphodel', 'chewing the bitter fruit of memory' (10-11). There is hope that 'some god' might suddenly appear before the traveller as he wanders around the 'sea-tranced isle' (9-11). Yet, the reference to asphodel seems to negate this hope in so far as it emphasizes the gulf between man and the Pagan gods, who are either with the dead, dwelling on the plains of asphodel in the Underworld, or hiding among the asphodel flowers on earth, which are also associated with death. The poet's fantasy is deflated as he comes to realise that the gods are likely to be angry after suffering thousands of years of neglect: 'if such there be then it were well for us to fly his anger' (12-13). The poet is not frightened off by the chance of a run-in with a vengeful divinity, rather, he seeks to re-establish his connection with the ancients and waits for a revelation to occur – 'the leaves are stirring: let us watch a-while' (14). The idea of watching and waiting for a Pagan god to rise from the dead entails that Christ is not enough for Wilde. Based on the Oxford letters, we know that the young man who travelled to Greece spent several years

agonising over the question of his allegiance to Catholicism; this poem confirms that his devotion to Christ and Catholicism remained unsteady. Christ may be the God and king that modern man worships, but the poet in Wilde is not satisfied. He refuses to let go of the Greek gods and resents that the coming of Christ has forced the old divinities to die or to hide from the world. That said, *Santa Decca* does not exactly advocate the rejection of Christ; it is more indicative of Wilde's longing for a connection with both the Christian and Pagan traditions. It is the lament of a modern romantic who despairs because the ancient ways have passed and exist only in the imagination.

From Corfu, Wilde sailed past the Ionian islands to the mainland port of Katakolon, which is still thought of as the gateway to Olympia. At the time of Wilde's vacation the original site of the Olympic games was being excavated by German archaeologists. Making the most of his connections, Mahaffy arranged to visit the site with his companions; thereafter, Wilde claimed to have witnessed the unearthing of Olympian marbles including the white arm of Apollo and Hermes of Praxiteles (Ellmann [1988] 72).⁵ Wilde has not left us with any written details about his impression of Olympia, but as Ian Ross has shown, we can gather an idea of his experience through the published accounts of his travel companions. Mahaffy and Macmillan both responded to Olympia with mixed feelings, being excited to see the newly unearthed finds, but equally saddened to realise that so little was left of the Temple of Zeus. In his article, 'A Ride Across the Peloponnese', George Macmillan admitted that the reality of Olympia did not measure up to his fantasy; he recalls standing among 'the relics of departed glory', looking on as 'mere fragments' of the Greek past were 'being unearthed and restored to the light of day' (Macmillan [1878] 553). In his travel guide, *Rambles and Studies in Greece*, Mahaffy expresses his displeasure upon seeing the 'exceedingly ugly' excavation work which had 'defaced' the sacred site with mounds of earth, trenches, wheelbarrows and planks (Mahaffy [1878] 287). Putting aside their initial disappointment, both travellers were astounded by the beauty of the west pediment sculptures representing the battle between the Centaurs and Lapiths; they also mention seeing fragments of temple metopes featuring the labours of Heracles. Although these artefacts were 'huddled together' in 'wretched' work sheds, Mahaffy and Macmillan did not underestimate the significance of the German team's discoveries (Mahaffy [1878] 296). Mahaffy had no reservations about equating the quality of the Olympian marbles with the Elgin marbles; he anticipated that 'the greater part of the splendid pediment sculptures, [would] henceforth rank with the grandest relics of the highest and purist Greek art' (Mahaffy [1878] 290). We can never be certain of Wilde's response to Olympia, but it is possible that he shared the same feelings as Macmillan and Mahaffy. He was alongside them as their moods shifted between disillusionment and delight, furthermore, the wistfulness of *Santa Decca* reveals that the reality of Greece induced a bittersweet response. Like Macmillan and Mahaffy, he was thrilled to be in Greece but the modern landscape also made him conscious of the 'departed glory' of Greek antiquity.

The excitement of watching the archaeological excavations at Olympia was crowned with a ten day journey on horseback through the Peloponnese (Hyde [1981] 28-29). When Wilde, Mahaffy and MacMillan arrived at Argos, they stopped to explore the remains of a Hellenistic theatre; this site became the subject of Wilde's

⁵ Ellmann suspects that Wilde was telling tall-tales to his friends, but concedes that the head of Apollo was discovered days before his arrival and the sculpture of Hermes followed shortly after his departure: Ellmann (1988) 72.

poem, *The Theatre at Argos*.⁶ Once more, Wilde returns to the familiar trope of mourning for the loss of the ancient Greeks; in particular, the first stanza of this poem contemplates the death of Greek Tragedy:

Nettles and poppy mar each rock-hewn seat:
 No poet crowned with olive deathlessly
 Chants his glad song, nor clamorous Tragedy
 Startles the air; green corn is waving sweet
 Where once the Chorus danced to measures fleet;
 Far to the East a purple stretch of sea,
 The cliffs of gold that prisoned Danae;
 And desecrated Argos at my feet.

(*Theatre at Argos*, 1-8)

Wilde's impression of the theatre draws attention to the abandonment and silence of the place. The man-made marble theatre is in a state of disrepair as 'nettles and poppies mar each rock-hewn seat' (1). Looking upon the empty performance space, Wilde is struck by the lost music of Greek poetry: 'No poet crowned with olive deathlessly/Chants his glad song, nor clamorous Tragedy/ Startles the air' (2-4). It is odd that he should describe the song of the Greek poets as a 'deathless' chant, when *The Theatre at Argos* responds to the passing of the oral poetic tradition. The poetry of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles are still celebrated because they survive in text; their songs, on the other hand, are never to be recovered. The same can be said of the singing, dancing chorus, forever absent now that 'Green corn is waving sweet/ Where once the chorus danced to measures fleet' (4-5).

Amid the weed-ridden, derelict structure of the theatre, Wilde evokes the memory of Danae, the mythical princess of Argos. Danae was imprisoned in a bronze chamber by her father and impregnated by Zeus, in the form of a golden shower. Wilde's poem intertwines the rape of Danae with the ruin of the theatre; on the horizon the lay the 'Cliffs of gold that prisoned Danae' and 'desecrated Argos at my feet' (7-8). The connection between Danae and the theatre is that of vulnerability. Danae is ravaged by Zeus, whereas the theatre is ravaged by time and nature. So much of Greek culture has been left to slip away; for Wilde, ancient sites like the theatre at Argos stand as a physical reminder of all that has been lost. However, the second stanza of the poem undermines the initial air of nostalgia by insisting that we should not 'mourn the days of old', given that the present world is also in a terrible state of decay:

No season now to mourn the days of old,
 A nation's shipwreck on the rocks of Time,
 Or the dread storms of all-devouring Fate,
 For now the peoples clamour at the gate,
 The world is full of plague and sin and crime,
 And God Himself is half-dethroned for Gold!

(*Theatre at Argos*, 9-14)

Here, the poem takes a sudden shift in direction, as Bobby Fong observes: '[t]he allusion to the Christian God in the last line is a surprising twist to a sonnet full of nostalgia for the Greek past' (Fong [1979] 9). Fong argues that this shift from Pagan

6 I am referring to the poem that is included in Isobel Murray's *Oscar Wilde: Complete Poetry* (1997: 22). 'The Theatre at Argos' was not included in Wilde's first published anthology, *Poems* (1881), and was excluded from the posthumous collections selected by Robert Ross and subsequent editors of Wilde's poetry (Fong [1979] 8).

to Christian content ‘reflects Wilde’s [Catholic] preoccupations during those months’ of travel (Fong [1979] 9). On July 21st, 1877, *The Theatre at Argos* was published in *The Pilot* which was a Catholic, Irish nationalist newspaper based in Boston (Fong [1979] 3). Although the poem begins as a sort of elegy for Greek Tragedy, the decision to target it towards an audience of Irish Catholic readers implies that Wilde’s Christian message was of greater immediate importance. The final lines of *The Theatre at Argos* create the image of a fallen world, devastated by war, plague, sin, crime and greed. The loss of ancient Greek culture and structures is saddening at first, but by the end of the poem, Wilde urges his Catholic readers to pay more attention to the present day evils that threaten to estrange them from God. It is as if Wilde is suggesting that judgment day is nigh and we are all in desperate need of salvation. On a personal level, Wilde could be directing criticism towards himself when he dramatically states that God is ‘half-dethroned for gold’. He too had prioritised gold before God. Wilde had previously referred to Money as one of his ‘great Gods’ and avoided converting to Catholicism because he was not prepared to jeopardize his income. Evidently, Mahaffy’s tour of Greece did not cause Wilde to forget his passion for Catholicism and the guilt that accompanied his inaction – it followed him, even in Argos.

On route to Greece, Mahaffy famously remarked that his talented young protégé had made the shift from Popery to Paganism; of course, Wilde’s poems prove that the reverse is also true. Wilde was not staunchly devoted to Christianity or Paganism, but placed his allegiance somewhere in between. Classical and Christian content appear side-by side in the poems in an uncomfortable state of opposition. As we see in *The Theatre at Argos*, what begins as a lament for Greek Tragedy can suddenly transform into a Christian contemplation of the evils which increase the distance between humanity and God. In *Santa Decca*, Wilde is struck by the loss of the Pagan gods. Amid the asphodels on Corfu, he resents Christ for bringing about the ruin of the old religion. From the biographical resources available to us, we come to understand that the Christian-Pagan dichotomy reflects Wilde’s position as a classicist and a Christian who was compelled by the Catholic community at Oxford, but lacked the freedom to join the faith of his choosing. If the worship of Christ was not enough for Wilde, it is equally true that his immersion in the culture of Greek antiquity did not settle his spiritual discontent. What we can safely say on the matter is that the Christian-Pagan conflict was a productive opposition which inspired the undergraduate Wilde. Although the tension is not resolved in his poems, he revisited the topic later in his life and endeavoured to marry the two traditions in his literature of the 1890s.

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