Wilde and Ecocriticism: Some Interpretive Ideas

Elisa Bizzotto

Abstract
Whereas Wilde Studies are constantly opening new directions for debate, they reveal a paucity of criticism from environmentalist perspectives. This should not come as a surprise, since ecocritical approaches may seem incongruous with the anti-mimetic poetics of Aestheticism. Nevertheless, that ecocriticism should be applied to studies on Aestheticism, and hence to Oscar Wilde, is a key issue at the present moment, when the approach shows a wide variety of practices. Moreover, Wilde's texts frequently resist anti-mimesis and evidence contradictions in his positioning on Nature and Art. My contribution aims to bridge this critical gap by giving an overview of current ecocriticism on Wilde and providing analytical glimpses into three of his texts in which the relationship between nature and culture, places and identities, utopian and dystopian societies can be traced. Other ecocritical issues – the role of the environment within a text's power hierarchies, the connections between the oppression and marginalisation of certain groups and their behaviour towards the environment, or the representation of animals – are also foci of analysis. Though initially related to ideas developed by John Ruskin in or around Wilde's Oxford years, these issues are interpreted in the light of recent theories, which bring out the modernity and complexity of Wilde's ecocritical vision, often oppositional to Victorian thinking and anticipatory of twentieth-century stances.

Key-words: Oscar Wilde, ecocriticism, Aestheticism, eco-Aestheticism, John Ruskin, Rachel Carson.

1. Ecocritical Wilde: a preliminary overview

Wilde Studies, a thriving field constantly providing new directions for debate, reveal an undeniable paucity of criticism from environmentalist perspectives. This status should not come as a surprise, if we consider that ecocriticism may appear out of place, or incongruous, with the

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anti-mimetic poetics of the Aesthetic Movement, of which Wilde himself was a staunch advocate. The consequence is that, apart from the authoritative work of Dennis Denisoff, who has been devoting his ground-breaking research to Aesthetic and Decadent ecocriticism in recent years (Denisoff 2021; 2022), contributions on Wilde do not usually, or not yet, include the approach.

Nevertheless, the necessity for ecocriticism to be applied to studies on Aestheticism and Decadence, and hence incorporated into the ongoing research on Wilde, is becoming a compelling issue, when the approach shows a multiplication and ever-growing fluidity of critical practices. Re-reading Wilde's works in the light of ecocriticism, and thus more firmly establishing what might be termed ecocritical Aestheticism – or eco-Aestheticism – seems therefore not only desirable, but also expected. The present contribution will try to bridge this critical gap by exploring three examples taken from the writer's corpus – from "The Selfish Giant", *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* – in which specific ecocritical topics can be traced and proposing interpretive directions for them. In these case studies, themes such as the role of the environment within a text's power hierarchies, the connections between the suffering, oppression, and marginalisation of certain groups and the behaviour towards the environment, or the representation of animals and their rapport with humans, all constitute possible foci of analysis in ecocritical readings of Wilde. So do the relationships between nature and culture, places and identities, and utopia and dystopia.

Although Wilde cannot be described as a key environmentalist, he was no doubt alert to certain forms of ecological awareness that developed in or around the Aesthetic Movement. His appraisals of these responses should necessarily start from a specific formative experience that contributed to his *avant-la-lettre* ecological conscience and activism: the reference is to his volunteer work in support of John Ruskin's efforts towards the conservation and restoration of the countryside. The action coincided with Wilde's first months at Oxford, where he arrived on 17 October 1874, the day after his twentieth birthday. He soon appropriated the philosophy of the Aesthetic Movement he had already had some taste of as an undergraduate at Trinity College (Sturgis 2018: 39-41). Aestheticism was then part of the intellectual and artistic avant-garde in England,

after the publication, in the previous year, of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* by Walter Pater, one of Wilde's teachers and a fundamental influence in the shaping of his own philosophy. It was however Ruskin, another of his Oxford professors, then holding the prestigious Slade Professorship of Fine Arts, who was instrumental in awakening in him a proto-ecological sensitivity.

As an aesthete, Ruskin put art at the centre of his interests, claiming that it had the superior scope of elevating humanity as well as its practitioners, through the commitment it required. Convinced that artisanship was a core part of artistic work, Ruskin abhorred industrialisation, which brought neither dignity nor quality to its products and producers, and also had obnoxious effects on the environment. The subject of various reflections throughout his career, these ideas were most eagerly expressed in the 1860s and 1870s, in such writings as *Unto This Last* (1860) or *Fors Clavigera* (1871), as well as in the 1870 "Lectures on Art", delivered at Oxford to inaugurate his tenure as Slade Professor – the first ever – and setting the tone for the courses that Wilde himself would soon attend. Ruskin's oppositional stances towards industrialisation ran parallel to the ideal of a co-operative society, which he identified with the Middle Ages of guilds, small towns, and rural communities. In such a society, based on family aggregations and dependant on labour and craftsmanship, humanity and the environment harmoniously and synergistically co-existed (Ruskin [1871] 1907: 147, 336). With the goal in mind of reviving that lost utopia, Ruskin wrote and lectured on the impossibility for art to be dissociated from the natural environment and fought against the fatal consequences of profit, machinisation, and industrialisation – among which were not only pollution and the tragic life conditions of the lower classes, but also urban ugliness. In his view, no art was possible if nature were destroyed, industries spoiled the land- and town-scape, and social injustice became widespread (Wilmer 2017: 551-552). Ruskin, moreover, argued that cities should be surrounded by green belts, with gardens and orchards meant to purify the air and beautify the environment, thus paving the way for Ebenezer Howard's Garden City Movement at the turn of the century. In the controversial *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), a passage Howard himself would quote in *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* ([1898] 1965: 50) claimed that residential areas should provide houses

> in groups of limited extent, kept in proportion to their streams, and walled around, so that there may not be festering and wretched suburb anywhere, but clean and busy street within, and the open country without, with a belt of beautiful gardens and orchards round the walls, so that from any part of the city perfectly fresh air and grass, and sight of far horizon, might be reachable in a few minutes' walk. (Ruskin 1905: 183-184)

In order to realise his vision, Ruskin resorted to pedagogic and proselytising actions, which included the involvement of students in the restoration of a road in the Oxford countryside between the autumn of 1874 and the following spring. The enterprise was meant to facilitate local peasants and carriers in their daily activities, but along with it came the side effect of teaching privileged Oxonians the edifying value of physical work (Hewison 2016: 94). For Ruskin, educated in the strict Calvinist-Evangelical doctrine, industriousness was a virtue, while any form of labour should be beneficial, in terms of usefulness and not of mere profit, to both the individual and the community. Wilde, one of the students involved in the road reconstruction, would recognise the importance of the experience, and of Ruskin's ethos, in a letter of June 1888, written to present a copy of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* to his former master. On the occasion, he declared:

> the dearest memories of my Oxford days are my walks and talks with you, and from you I learned nothing but was good. How else could it be? There is in you something of prophet, of priest, and of poet, and to you the gods gave eloquence such as they have given to none other, so your message might come to us with the fire of passion, and the marvel of music, making the deaf to hear, and the blind to see. (Wilde 2000: 349)

Starting from this experience with Ruskin's thought and pedagogic methods, but also considering his boyhood experiences in blissful communion with the Irish countryside (Sturgis 2018: 28), it seems possible to trace in Wilde a concern for the environment that substantiates ecological readings of his work. For all his anti-Romantic and anti-mimetic disparagement of nature in "The Decay of Lying" (1889) and "The Critic as Artist" (1890) that would hardly be reconciled with any attempt at eco-Aestheticism, it is a fact that elsewhere Wilde points to contrasting directions, indicating not only Ruskin's influence, but also quite independent developments in his own ideological positioning with respect to such categories or

concepts as environmental justice, the pastoral and the idyll genres, the country-city binary, or urban environment. As anticipated, three case studies will be analysed to exemplify this stance.

2. "The Selfish Giant": broken idyll and environmental injustice

The first case study comes from the "The Selfish Giant", one of the stories in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), where the rapport between nature and human beings shows different degrees and modalities of co-existence, with relevant reflections on the concept of 'environmental justice'. The story's *incipit* depicts an ideal society aligned with the idyll genre, in which each person has an apparently fulfilling place and is appreciated for their personal worth, despite the persistence of power hierarchies:

> Every afternoon, as they were coming from school, the children used to go and play in the Giant's Garden. It was a large lovely garden, with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers like stars, and there were twelve peach-trees that in the springtime broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, and in the autumn bore rich fruit. The birds sat on the trees and sang so sweetly that the children used to stop their games in order to listen to them. "How happy we are here!" they cried to each other. (Wilde [1966] 1994: 283)

The idyll, an old and well-established literary form, describes a self-sufficient microcosm, organised "in circular patterns: a circle is a simple, 'natural' form, which maximises the proximity of each point to the centre of the 'little world', while simultaneously sealing it off from the vast universe that lies outside its perimeter" (Moretti 2005: 44). In English literature, the idyll has very often taken the form of village fiction, an underlying model in "The Selfish Giant". The Giant's property is initially emblematic of an idyllic social system in which different categories of human beings live in happiness, and both the flora and fauna have harmonious roles and functions: the vegetation, rich and gaudy, partakes of the children's joyous presence in the garden, while the birds sing merrily. The presence of birdsong is a thematic milestone in the story, also present at a crucial point of its second part, after the garden has been closed to children and the unwise decision has led to the narrative anticlimax. Then it is the linnet's lovely chant that again heralds the euphoric return of spring and the children to the

garden. Wilde's idyll also holds evident similarities with Ruskin's idea of a society, a kind of *hortus conclusus* in which

> we will have no untended or unthought-of creatures on it; none wretched but the sick; none idle but the dead. […] We will have plenty of flowers and vegetables in our gardens, plenty of corn and grass in our fields, – and few bricks. We will have some music and poetry; the children shall learn to dance to it and sing it; perhaps some of the old people, in time, may also. (Ruskin [1871] 1907: 96)

Yet the Ruskinian community of the *incipit* is destroyed when the Giant resists the collective spirit by building a wall to keep children – and hence life, joy, and cooperation – out of his property. The act negatively rewrites Ruskin's plan of erecting (natural) barriers to protect residential aggregations from the aesthetically and environmentally abject and indirectly shows its potential faults and dangers. In fact, it ends up by opposing any formulation of organic society and can therefore bring nothing but trouble: the children's absence runs parallel to perpetual winter, which bans birds, plants, and flowers from the garden. This decision has serious consequences not only for the children and the environment, but also for the Giant, who, once alone, experiences the uselessness and emptiness of his power:

> The poor children had now nowhere to play. They tried to play on the road, but the road was very dusty and full of hard stones, and they did not like it. They used to wander round the high wall when their lessons were over, and talk about the beautiful garden inside. "How happy we were there," they said to each other.
>
> Then the Spring came, and all over the country there were little blossoms and little birds. Only in the garden of the Selfish Giant it was still winter. The birds did not care to sing in it as there were no children, and the trees forgot to blossom. […] The only people who were pleased were the Snow and the Frost. […]
>
> "I cannot understand why the Spring is so late in coming," said the Selfish Giant, as he sat at the window and looked out at his cold white garden; "I hope there will be a change in the weather."
>
> But the Spring never came, nor the Summer. The Autumn gave golden fruit to every garden, but to the Giant's garden she gave none. (Wilde [1966] 1994: 283-284)

The passage's first paragraph may be taken as evidence of 'environmental injustice', for it records the discrimination and

oppression based on race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, or – as is the specific case of Wilde's story – age and aligned with the disrespect for the environment (Garrard 2004: 26-27; Landrigan, Rauh, Galvez 2010). As Ynestra King observes in a famous statement of ecocritical scholarship, such beliefs rest on the consideration that:

> A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity. Ecologically, environmental simplification is as significant a problem as environmental pollution. Biological simplification, i.e., the wiping out of whole species, corresponds to reducing human diversity into faceless workers, or to the homogenization of taste and culture through mass consumer markets. Social life and natural life are literally simplified to the inorganic for the convenience of market society. Therefore, we need a decentralized global movement that is founded on common interests yet celebrates diversity and opposes all forms of domination and violence. (King 1987: 20)

In "The Selfish Giant", the violation of a fundamental right for children – i.e. playing outdoors, in healthy natural places that follow the seasonal cycle – coincides with the abuses perpetrated on the environment. And vice versa: neglecting or damaging the environment by assuming that nature always takes its course, independent of human behaviour – in the case of Wilde's tale, by assuming that spring always comes, independent of the Giant's actions on it – is harmful for both the ecosystem and humanity, especially for their most vulnerable components, as is the case of children (Stephens 1996; Emmett 2011).

Wilde's treatment of children becomes even more semantically charged when considering that the figure of the child in Western literature has often been construed as a metaphor for minorities and marginalised subjects: not only the colonised (Ashcroft 2001), but also women and non-binary people, or the physically or intellectually disabled (Mills and Lefrançois 2018). Thus through the children trope, Wilde might as well be implicating the oppression of subjects falling outside the category of childhood, but similarly sharing a condition of weakness, dependence, and even subjugation towards authority, with little or no social agency; these are the typical victims of environmental injustice, but also of injustice *tout court*. Joseph Bristow's argument that "The Selfish Giant" reveals "that a fundamental component in strengthening modern democracy is the

urgent need for grown-ups to respect children's liberties, as well as learn from what it means to be a child" (Bristow 2017: 2) can hence be applied to an ecocritical reading of the story. Among the liberties of children that modern democracy should guarantee is the right to enjoy a healthful natural environment.

3. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: the pathetic fallacy and the sentient city

If we agree with Denisoff's claim that Wilde's novel engages "with the concept of the artwork and even, conceivably, the artist as organic, regenerating processes rather than artificial objects" (Denisoff 2021), then we should admit that proto-ecological issues, along with the principles of organicity and regeneration (which necessarily encapsulates the opposite process of degeneration), are ingrained in the text throughout. This engagement is apparent in the description of the urban environment, meant both in its natural elements – animal life, in particular – and built components, which together characterise the city space as sentient.

In chapter XVI of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) – the second case study here examined – the protagonist records the urban decay of *fin-de-siècle* London. Alone in a cab, Dorian is travelling through the East End and heading towards the Docks, the city's seediest area, with an opium den as his destination. His dark side is surfacing, more and more out of his control, and the environment, increasingly degraded for the effects of industrialisation and metropolitan life, reflects not only the corruption and decay of its inhabitants, but also the hero's own:

> A cold rain began to fall, and the blurred street-lamps looked ghastly in the dripping mist. The public-houses were just closing, and dim men and women were clustering in broken groups round their doors. From some of the bars came the sound of horrible laughter. In others, drunkards brawled and screamed.
>
> Lying back in the hansom, with his hat pulled over his forehead, Dorian Gray watched with listless eyes the sordid shame of the great city […]. (Wilde [1966] 1994: 133)

The degenerated human underworld of the suburban metropolis mirrors the environmental deterioration conveyed through the characterisation of animal, atmospheric, and architectonic

presences in spectral terms. Such an effect is rendered through the rhetorical figure of the pathetic fallacy, theorised by Ruskin in volume III of *Modern Painters* and indicating the misattribution of human feelings and features to either inanimate things, non-human beings, or natural phenomena (Ruskin [1856] 1903: 201-220). This misattribution, or misperception, often takes anthropomorphic forms, and as such has been appropriated by ecocritical studies. Lawrence Buell, in particular, includes the pathetic fallacy within the semantic field of anthropomorphism and notes the frequency with which ecocritical studies utilise it as a projection of the human desire to believe that nature sympathises with one's condition (Buell 2005: 134). Though not directly referring to the trope, Serenella Iovino also discusses "the author's rhetorical artifice of depicting natural elements as sentient organisms" in her ecocritical reading of Curzio Malaparte's *The Skin* (1949) in order to highlight a vision of nature and humanity in which "everything is a body, and everything is ripped and exposed. Like the bodies of people and animals, the land, the sea, the sky, and the volcano are also bodies" (Iovino 2016: 29). Wilde applies the pathetic fallacy to urban settings with analogous objectives: just like its inhabitants, the London he portrays is a disrupted place. It appears as a labyrinth, an irrational jumble, in which even an expert cabdriver gets lost:

> The moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull. From time to time a huge misshapen cloud stretched a long arm across and hid it. The gas-lamps grew fewer, and the streets more narrow and gloomy. Once the man lost his way and had to drive back half a mile. A steam rose from the horse as it splashed up the puddles. The sidewindows of the hansom were clogged with a grey-flannel mist. (Wilde [1966] 1994: 134)

In a subsequent passage, the author lays emphasis on the alienating effects of progress in a landscape of proto-industrial archaeology by again using the pathetic fallacy to describe urban elements, as when the kilns are perceived as having fire tongues. Moreover, an implicit parallel is drawn between human and animal degradation by denouncing the dramatic and de-naturalising effects of progress on animals, which are either deprived of their essence, or whose behaviours signal difficulties and danger. Hence, the dog barks in the dark, the shrieking seagull wanders aimlessly, the horse stumbles and changes pace:

Then they passed by lonely brickfields. The fog was lighter here, and he could see the strange, bottle-shaped kilns with their orange, fanlike tongues of fire. A dog barked as they went by, and far away in the darkness some wandering sea-gull screamed. The horse stumbled in a rut, then swerved aside and broke into a gallop.

After some time they left the clay road and rattled again over rough-paven streets. Most of the windows were dark, but now and then fantastic shadows were silhouetted against some lamplit blind. He watched them curiously. They moved like monstrous marionettes and made gestures like live things. He hated them. A dull rage was in his heart. As they turned a corner, a woman yelled something at them from an open door, and two men ran after the hansom for about a hundred yards. The driver beat at them with his whip. (Wilde [1966] 1994: 134)

In Wilde's hyper-sentient city, Ruskin's pathetic fallacy turns out to be disseminated and polymorphic: it encompasses a variety of natural presences and inanimate components in the urban space. Finally, in a complex rhetorical turn, Wilde applies it even to humanity, which has been at first de-humanised as "fantastic shadows" or "monstruous marionettes", but then becomes partly re-humanised through a comparison with "live things". Wilde's appropriation and reinvention of the Ruskinian trope represents his most powerful device to show that estrangement is ingrained and pervasive in the urban anthropocene.

4. *The Importance of Being Earnest*: pastoral *à la* Wilde

Further clues for discussion of the author's work from ecocritical perspectives are offered by *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), the third case study analysed. Wilde's last comedy is, in fact, centred on the pastoral genre, though at the same time on the debunking of traditional binaries within the stock elements of what could be defined a *fin-de-siècle* pastoral. The play positions the country as opposed to the city, thus replicating a basic dichotomy of British culture. In the text, Wilde superficially delineates the English countryside according to the canons of the pastoral model, hence as the place of innocence, organicity, peace, and communion with nature, in contrast with the urban environment. By doing so, he seems to endorse Ruskin's ideas, whose relevance in the development and interpretations of the pastoral genre in ecocritical terms has been highlighted by Greg Garrard: "As ecocriticism has developed

through collections on specific writers such as John Ruskin and Henry Thoreau, pastoral remains one of the tropes necessarily explored" (Garrard 2004: 55).

However, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* it soon becomes clear that the pastoral gets distorted through the recurring Wildean lenses of parody and nonsense. This distortion is most evident in the third act, during the meeting between Gwendolen and Cecily, who are embodiments of the city and the country respectively. Wilde's resistance against culturally accepted beliefs comes through the implication that the two places can represent both utopian and dystopian environments, as the following dialogue indicates:

GWENDOLEN: Are there many interesting walks in the vicinity, Miss Cardew?

CECILY: Oh! yes! a great many. From the top of one of the hills quite close one can see five counties.

GWENDOLEN: Five counties! I don't think I should like that; I hate crowds.

CECILY: (*sweetly*): I suppose that is why you live in town?

GWENDOLEN bites her lip, and beats her foot nervously with her parasol.

GWENDOLEN: (*looking round*): Quite a charming room this is of yours, Miss Cardew.

CECILY: So glad you like it, Miss Fairfax.

GWENDOLEN: I had no idea there were anything approaching good taste in the more remote country districts. It is quite a surprise to me.

CECILY: I am afraid you judge the country from what one sees in town. I believe most London houses are extremely vulgar.

GWENDOLEN: I suppose they do dazzle the rural mind. Personally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country – if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death.

CECILY: Ah! This is what the newspapers call agricultural depression, is it not? I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it just at present. It is almost an epidemic amongst them, I have been told. May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax? (Wilde [1966] 1994: 399-400)

Nonsensical as it appears, this conversation plays on received ideas on the environment to finally suggest that the country is not an idyllic place, nor is the city dystopic, but that they are both governed by coinciding social dynamics. The city can be elegant, but also vulgar and sordid, as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* demonstrates all too well; the country is unrefined, yet offers a recognised position in society, since owning a country estate is a most distinctive sign of wealth and aristocracy. Both, in the end, can become the expressions of escapist urges, as the play eminently shows. Whilst Jack flies from the country to the city by inventing a reckless brother who needs redemption and does so to avoid the responsibilities he encounters in his presumed Arcadia, Algernon flies to the country by creating an invalid friend in need of his assistance and does so to avoid the responsibilities towards his family in London. Governed by analogous social dynamics, the two settings can be consequently perceived as interrelated Bakhtinian chronotopes, or, even better, as "knowable communities" in Raymond Williams's sense, for they are tightly connected on the ground of social convenience and class contiguity, despite geographical distance (Williams [1973] 1975: 165-181). Both based on the same restricted and homogeneous network of upper-class and aristocratic society (p. 166), country and city in Wilde's play symbolise knowable communities to one another.

Wilde's adaptation of Ruskin's ideal of interclass organic society into an exclusive aristocratic community is further evidence of how, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the author debunks received ideas on the environment mostly by engaging with traditional culturemes in surreal terms. By doing so, he shows the ideological bias inherent in binary oppositions and simplifications, which necessarily exclude grey zones. In the play, Wilde anticipates the refusal of such contrasting dynamics as country *versus* city, humanity *versus* nature, or nature *versus* culture, which are not alien to today's ecocritical debate. Narratives about the environment in the play align with his overall poetics in embracing radical pluralism, relativism, and oppositionality as epistemological attitudes and beliefs.

5. The Giant's silent spring: ecocritical 'fables for tomorrow'

The complexity and modernity of Wilde's ecocritical stances discussed so far become especially apparent when reconsidering

"The Selfish Giant" by bringing forth the striking thematic and rhetorical continuities it shares with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the founding text of current ecocriticism. In particular, Wilde's story functions as a model for Carson in the points in which it depicts the non-arrival of spring on account of the Giant's unfair actions towards children and reclamation of the natural beauty of the garden all for himself. Similarly, the first two paragraphs of *Silent Spring* concentrate on the idyllic past of an organic society, where flora, fauna and humanity lived happily, as juxtaposed to the desolate present, whose main signs of out-of-the-ordinariness are the lack of birdsong and a perpetual winter-like condition:

> THERE WAS ONCE a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings.
>
> Along the roads, laurel, viburnum and alder, great ferns and wildflowers delighted the traveler's eye through much of the year. Even in winter the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow. The countryside was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life, and when the flood of migrants was pouring through in spring and fall people traveled from great distances to observe them. Others came to fish the streams, which flowed clear and cold out of the hills and contained shady pools where trout lay. So it had been from the days many years ago when the first settlers raised their houses, sank their wells, and built their barns.
>
> Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community […]. There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example – where had they gone? […]. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh. (Carson [1962] 2002: 1)

Although the literary origins of Carson's study are widely recognised – John Keats's portrayal of silent nature in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (1819) was inspirational for the book's title and central themes; the

title of Carson's eighth chapter, "And No Birds Sing", is moreover a literal quote from Keats's poem – no connection seems to have hitherto been made between Carson and Wilde. This is surprising, particularly when considering the centrality in both authors of the birdsong trope, with its sudden interruption being synecdochical for the advent of an unblooming spring. In fact, the common rhetorical figure establishes immediate textual affiliations between *Silent Spring* and "The Selfish Giant", whose narrative climaxes both depend either on the presence or absence of singing birds. Even more patently, Wildean motifs are developed in Carson not simply within certain literary conventions, but more specifically within the typical conventions of the fairy-tale genre, with a most characteristic opening formula – "There was once a town" – and the subtitle for the book's *incipit* session being the quite unequivocal *A Fable for Tomorrow*.

Like Wilde's tale, however, *Silent Spring* begins as a fabulist utopia to soon morph into a bleak dystopia, whose "terrifying imagery" of "sorcery and dark fairy tales, [with] the poisoned forest and, most of all, the eerily silenced town" (Sideris 2008: 361) challenges and subverts many of the genre's articulations, most specifically its normative happy ending. Relevant principles, forms, and practices of Wilde's ecocritical vision – present not only in "The Selfish Giant", but also in the sentient and spectral cityscape of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and, more obliquely, in the fake-Arcadian countryside of *The Importance of Being Earnest* – underlie the general structure, motifs, imagery, and tropes of Carson's book. And recognising this connection is almost tantamount to saying that Wilde's work is not only related, but also preliminary, to current scholarship and debate in the field of ecocritical studies.

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