



Rivista di poesia comparata

Direttore responsabile: Francesco Stella

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DAVID CHARLES ROSE, *Oscar Wilde's Elegant Republic: Transformation, Dislocation and Fantasy in fin-de-siècle Paris*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 669, L73.99.

I. David C. Rose, the eminent Oscar Wilde scholar (current president of the *Société Oscar Wilde* as well as the creator of THE OSCHOLARS, the online resource of Wilde academic lore who can also boast the enhancing merit of graduating, like Oscar himself, at Oxford's Magdalen College), has recently published a hefty, knowledgeable and witty study dedicated to Wilde's Paris (and to the Paris in Wilde), which will not disappoint all those who have long admired the Irish writer and who, consequently, wish to find him discussed in a fresh and innovative way.

To start with, Rose continuously investigates, questions and often dismantles the many 'given' aspects of Wilde which, throughout the years, have been taken for granted by a score of respected and – so far – trustworthy critics (including the unexpected Philippe Jullian and Richard Ellmann), who then have – in turn – handed down, without troubling to trace or double-check their sources, what's turned out to be a series of rumours based not so much on hearsay, but –worst – on 'almost-weres' and 'wish –it-were-so's' which, by dint of being repeated, time after time, have since acquired the honourable status of being 'hard facts'. Hence, Rose can easily endorse Tydeman and Price's opinion (concerning the 1891 Parisian 'genesis' of *Salomé*) that: 'we are forced to glean what enlightenment we can concerning the play's evolution and composition from casual allusions, codicological evidence and from not necessarily reliable remarks culled from the assorted memoirs of Wilde's contemporaries' (pp. 343-44).

Rose, consequently, throws a new light (in Chapter Three) on Wilde's reception and literary standing within the Parisian avant-garde circles he frequented in the 80s and 90s, reaching the conclusion, shared by A. Roitinger (whom he quotes): «in reality, the sympathy shown to Wilde was not so much pro-Wilde as anti-English » (p. 52). Rose also delves (in Chapter Fourteen) into the sincerity and actual entity of Sarah Bernhardt's involvement (in her planned collaboration with Wilde), in what turned out to be their failed London staging of *Salomé*, deducing that, anyway: «one suspects that had she played it, she would have left us with a very different view of the piece, much modified and even transmogrified to suit her» (p. 360).

II. Earlier on, at the onset of my review, I mentioned Rose's 'fresh and innovative' approach, notable in its presenting the double, complementary, perspective of Wilde's place in Paris and that of Paris in Wilde, or, to put it in Rose's own words (in the 'Preface'), his study aims at: 'reconstructing the Parisian social and cultural milieu in which Wilde was explorer, participant, hero, and ultimately victim, and to chart his wanderings there' (p. *xiv*).Indeed, the title itself of his book alludes both to Oscar and to the Paris of the *finde- siècle*, since 'it is taken from a remark of Wilde's that in politics he espoused an *elegant republic*' (p. 21).

Rose divides his book into fifteen chapters, of which four are exclusively on Wilde and Paris (Chapters Five, Eight, Fourteen and Fifteen), whereas the rest deal with 'themes and case studies' which highlight, in copious detail, a single aspect of Parisian life (the theatres and the dance-halls, the salons and the studios, the cafés and the cafés-concerts, the cabarets and the academies, the brothels and the restaurants, etc.), but also the role played therein by different segments of society (artists, deviants, foreigners [mainly 'good' and 'bad' Americans], women, waiters, dandies, cocottes, princes, beggars, etc.) in which it clearly emerges that – unlike London, say – it was 'the Street', and not 'the Home', which defined Parisian life since *that* was recognised as *the* place 'to see and to be seen' (p. 202). All these 'themes and case studies' always contain, at the some point, a relevant reference to Wilde and to his attitude towards the main topic discussed in that specific section. Thus, in Chapter Twelve ('Paris and the Good American'), Wilde is quoted as saying that:

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«Americans, according to their own explanation, visit France in order to complete their education, and the French have to tolerate people who are so fascinatingly unreasonable as to attempt to finish in a foreign land what they have never had the courage to begin in their own» (p. 261).

In his ‘Conclusion’, Rose clarifies that: «Paris is experience fractured, diversified [and] in this work I have suggested that the City of Paris itself was unstable in its social and spatial forms, that its institutions shared and contributed to this, and that its inhabitants did likewise» (p. 423). How does this apply to Wilde himself and, even more so, how does this ‘random and discontinuous’ Paris reflect on Oscar’s own life and work? «Within this reading of Paris» – Rose writes in the final page of his book: «Paris was for Oscar Wilde the essential other site, not merely a place for cultural tourism or tolerated exile, but the city in which his multiple and multiplied selves were in harmony with their surroundings, where he was no longer an outsider. In a world of floating signifiers, his paradoxes could take shape and sharpen» (p. 424).

Given Rose’s academic capabilities, one would be hard put – for some time – to come across a further Wilde-related project as worthy as this. The up-to-date Bibliography alone, which runs to 45 pages, is to be treasured by all those who take a serious interest in Wilde’s work.

(Alex R. Falzon)

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