

THE POET AS A LOVER: OSCAR WILDE'S THE GARDEN OF EROS

Fernanda Korovsky Moura (Leiden University)¹

Resumo: *Although Oscar Wilde is mostly known for his work in the theatre and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), he also produced a great variety of poetry in his lifetime. *The Garden of Eros* is a long poem published in the collection *Poems* in 1881. This poem not only illustrates Wilde's extreme cultural repertoire in Greek and Roman mythology and his expertise in creating poetic imagery but also manifests Wilde's ideas on love and the essence of art, as well as being a declaration of love to poetry. Based on Octavio Paz's (1996) ideas on poetry as the eroticism of language, I analyze Wilde's role as a lover poet, his criticism on modern art and his entreaty for the beauty of art.*

Palavras-chave: *Oscar Wilde; eroticism of language; love; *The Garden of Eros**

"Eroticism and love: the double flame of life."
Octavio Paz (1996: x)

The late-Victorian period was a moment in history when society struggled with a "contradictory mix of cultural assurance and self-doubt" when the strings of the past reluctantly gave way to the brand-new possibilities of the future (Moran 2012: 3). This feeling of social unrest found a great mode of expression through the arts, which transmitted the Victorian uncertainties and paradoxical beliefs in paintings, theatrical performances, narratives, and poems. According to Andrew Sanders (2004: 405), such intellectual efforts of the period were "spent in trying to hold together a universe which was exploding". While the chaotic present burst in the outside world, artists found a medium to manifest their discontent and beliefs in the arts.

¹ Mestre em Inglês: Língua e Literatura pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC) e mestre em Literary Studies pela Universidade de Leiden, na Holanda. E-mail: fernandakm@gmail.com.

As a consequence, several artists undertook the task to contradict dogmas of previous generations, "rejecting orthodox religious belief, mainstream models of gender and sexuality, and established artistic conventions" (Moran 2012: 3). Mainstream culture, however, especially that commended by the traditional middle class, still preached conventional values and "firmly policed the boundaries of 'normal' identity with respect to gender and sexuality, nationhood, class and race" (Moran 2012: 4). As a means to avoid being the target of judgment, artists used strategies such as codes and indirect language to address contemporary issues, especially "to express unorthodox attitudes, particularly in the handling of romantic liaisons and sexual conduct, cross-class relationships and Christian belief" (Moran 2012: 17). That was yet another paradox of Victorian society: it was struggling for a more liberal and enlightened society, but at the same time a community still grounded on ancient conventional principles.

A great number of Victorian thinkers and artists felt the need to counterbalance the social and political disorder of the period with artistic expression. For Walter Pater, a nineteenth-century literary and art critic, the world was a chaos of experiences, where the only escape was through art. Pater was one of Wilde's mentors at Oxford, and his influence on Wilde's works is perceptible. Pater's book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, published in 1873, inspired the creation of an artistic movement called Aestheticism, of which Wilde was a great exponent. *L'art pour l'art*, the motto of Aestheticism, purported that beauty was the only function of art; ideology and social concerns were not supposed to be dealt with by artists. As Wilde wrote in the preface for the English edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1891: "All art is quite useless" (Wilde 2009: 12). In fact, for Wilde, ethics, and arts were completely unassociated. The author wrote a letter to the editor of the *St. James Gazette* in xxx defending his work *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He wrote the following: "I am quite incapable of understanding how any work of art can be criticized from a moral standpoint. The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" (Fraser 2008: 197). Art should only be concerned with what is beautiful. Anne Varty explains that "for Pater and his followers, including Wilde, only the organizing power of art could arrest the rush of time and yield a heightened consciousness to give insight to experience" (1994: x). For Pater, and consequently for Wilde as well, the poetic work was not only playing with words and sounds; it had a deeper and higher meaning. It was beauty itself.

Wilde was a key figure in this period of literary history. Albeit Wilde's literary production is more commonly remembered for his contribution to the *fin-de-siècle* drama², he wrote a remarkable collection of poems during his lifetime. When Wilde was still a student at Oxford University he wrote a poem entitled *Ravenna*, which won the 1878 Newdigate Prize for Poetry, the same award that John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold had won in previous years. By the age of twenty-seven, he published his first collection of poems, named *Poems*, in 1881, claiming his place in the late-Victorian Londonian literary scene. However, he would not write his poetic masterpiece until 1898, after his release from prison for homosexual conduct. It is *The*

² *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1898) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1898) are examples of his most famous plays.

Ballad of Reading Gaol, a long poem written in the form of a ballad, condemning the inhumanity of the prison system at the time (Varty 1994: v-vi; xxiii-xxiv). These examples ascertain Wilde's lifelong relation with poetry from his schooldays until his death, hence the importance of academically analyzing Wilde's poetic production.

It is unfortunate that Wilde's work as a poet has been neglected in detriment of his more famous plays and his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). In addition, Wilde's literary achievements tend to be overshadowed by his flamboyant personality and tragic life story. Varty (1994: vii) states that "respectable versions of his personal and his professional lives coincided, however, with his cultivation of an outlawed and adulterous life through the practice of homosexuality from 1886 onward. The theme of leading a double life, outwardly beautiful and inwardly corrupt" is the theme of many of his works, as is explicit in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in several poems.

Wilde's excursions in the poetic realm are characterized by his experiments with diverse genres and styles, "always wearing his erudition on his sleeve", as Varty (1994: ix) put it. He wrote ballads in the style of the Pre-Raphaelites, poems of moral sententiousness, erotic religiosity, and romantic poems *à la* John Keats and Samuel Coleridge. This versatility asserts Wilde's flexibility and creativity as a writer, never bound to one style but always seeking new poetic possibilities.

In this way, Wilde's conduct as a poet is in consonance with Octavio Paz's discussions on the relationship between eroticism and poetry: "the former is a poetry of the body and the latter an eroticism of language" (Paz 1996: 2). Eroticism being, in Paz's words, "ceremony, representation", "sexuality transfigured, a metaphor" (Paz 1996: 3), what Wilde does by means of his poetry is to unite words erotically, to give them new meanings and to represent them in verse. Through imagination, Wilde transforms language "into rhythm and metaphor", going beyond a mere transcription of reality (Paz 1996: 3). Indeed, for Wilde, the representation of reality is not art's purpose. As the painter Basil Hallward, a character in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* explains to Lord Henry Wotton while praising the role the young Dorian Gray had on his artwork:

"Unconsciously he [Dorian] defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in itself all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body, –how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is bestial, an ideality that is void" (Wilde 2009: 27-28).

The character conveys the idea that art is the language of the body and of the soul. Art does not represent, it simply *is*; an idea in concordance with Wilde's own beliefs on Aestheticism and on the essence of art. In this context, I believe the poet to be a lover, someone whose object of passion, lust and love is poetry itself. Wilde is a lover.

In this article, I will argue in favor of the poet Wilde as a lover, as an eroticist of language, bearing in mind Paz's ideas on poetry, love and eroticism. For this argument, I will analyze the poem *The Garden of Eros*, written by Wilde and

published in 1881, in which Wilde makes a declaration of love to poetry, "the Spirit of Beauty", and makes a plea for contemporary poets not to let this spirit wither, not to let art fall into a "bestial realism" or a "void ideality".

1. Wilde as a lover

Octavio Paz begins his book *The Double Flame: Eroticism and Love* by explaining the metaphor which composes his title and the epigraph to this article: "The original, primordial fire, sexuality, raises the red flame of eroticism, and this, in turn, raises and feeds another flame, tremulous and blue: the flame of love. Eroticism and love: the double flame of life" (Paz 1996: x). This metaphor of love as a double flame of eroticism and love permeates the discussions throughout his entire book. In my analysis of Wilde's *The Garden of Eros*, I will attain myself to two of his premises: first, of poetry as an eroticism of language; and second, of love as an ideology.

Paz, in the manners of Pater and Wilde, believes in a higher role for poetry. For Paz, the secret of poetry is in the union of *seeing* and *believing*. "What the poem shows us we do not see with our carnal eyes but the eyes of the spirit" (Paz 1996: 2). It is thought-provoking that Paz chooses the word *spirit*, for that is the same word Wilde uses to refer to poetry in *The Garden of Eros*, as I shall indicate in the third part of this article. As Paz puts it, poetry allows us to see the invisible, hear the inaudible, touch the impalpable and unravel other worlds inside our own. And that, he argues, is precisely what happens in an erotic encounter (Paz 1996: 2). Therefore, poetry is an erotic encounter between the lover - the poet -, and his/her beloved - the poem. I was fascinated by Paz's analogy of poetry as an erotic relation, which will never allow me to look at a poem the same way again. Poetry is love. Writing poetry is love making.

Paz asserts that the very operation of poetry is erotic: "the poetic image is an embrace of opposite realities, and rhyme a copulation of sounds" (1996: 3). The best poet, as the best lover, is the one who manages to "embrace" and "copulate" with passion, pleasure and imagination. By eroticizing language, the poet encounters pleasure when he/she writes. Pleasure becomes an end in itself. Beauty gives pleasure as poetry – or art – gives pleasure. Beauty is the condition for art to give pleasure, to evoke love. As the Aesthetes believed, beauty is the sole function of art. *L'art pour l'art*.

Pater, one of Wilde's mentor and chief name in the Aesthetic movement, believed that "in the modern world of doubt, isolation and flux, the love of beauty for its own sake was the only way to give meaning and purpose to existence: "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (Moran 2012: 122). Pater refers to "the love of beauty" expressed in poetry as a "gem-like flame" in a similar imagery as Paz when he calls to love and eroticism, both manifest in poetry, as the double-flame of life. Moreover, Pater argues that keeping this flame alive is "success in life". In the same manner, the poet should keep the flame of art – which is also the flame of love – burning to find beauty, ecstasy, pleasure. This is the plea that Wilde makes in *The Garden of Eros*, as I will discuss in the next section of the present article.

The goal of poetic language is not to communicate. On the contrary, what poetry aims at is to give pleasure; and what the poet seeks is to find ecstasy in this erotic relationship. "The poem presents us with another sort of communication, one governed by laws different from those that rule the exchange of news and information. The language of the poem is everyday language, yet that everyday language says things quite out of the ordinary" (Paz 1996: 5). Although we recognize the words on a poem separately; together they provide singular meanings. The poet unites the words, "copulates" word with word if you will, and through imagination, by seeing "with the eyes of the spirit" and eroticizing language, the poet makes the invisible visible. It is an act of love.

Having addressed Paz's discussion on poetry as an eroticism of language, I now turn to another of his propositions which will guide my analysis of Wilde's *The Garden of Eros*: love as an ideology. Based on the assertion that poetry is an act of love and that its goal is to give pleasure through beauty, it may seem a paradox to refer to love as an ideology. However, that is not the case, as I will go on to argue.

According to Paz, it is important to make a distinction between the amatory feeling and the idea of love. "The former belongs to all times and places; in its simplest and most immediate form it is the passionate attraction we feel toward one person out of many" (Paz 1996: 34). In this way, the amatory sentiment is universal, felt by everyone, everywhere and in all times; it has been an ever-present motif in literature throughout the centuries. On the other hand, "sometimes reflection of love becomes the ideology of a society; then we find ourselves in the presence of a way of life, an art of living and dying, an ethic, an aesthetic, and an etiquette" (Paz 1996: 34). Love, as Pater's idea of poetry and all artistic expression, heightens our consciousness and gives insight into our experience. By Paz's choice of words ("ethic", "aesthetic", and "etiquette"), it is possible to connect his argument of love as an ideology to the aesthetic movement in poetry. Although Wilde considered the spheres of ethics and aesthetics as distinct and separate, Paz's proposition of love as an ideology does not regard ideology in a sense of morality, which the Aesthetes abhorred. Rather, it refers to ideology as a group of beliefs and experiences. In the same manner as art was seen only for art's sake by the followers of the Aestheticism, so is love revered simply for love's own sake by the lovers. The lover has no other ambitions rather than being in love. Being in love is ultimately the role of the poet.

Love as an ideology is not attainable to everyone. On the contrary, Paz affirms it to be the privilege of the "aristocracy of the heart", to those who own "qualities of the spirit" (Paz 1996: 35). Again, the word *spirit* is used by Paz in parallel with Wilde, since the poet refers to poetry in *The Garden of Eros* as the "Spirit of Beauty". In these terms, Paz's "aristocracy of the heart" encompasses the poets, who more than any other has a deep knowledge of the qualities of the Spirit.

Paz asserts there are fundamental differences between the Eastern and the Western ideologies of love. Since Wilde is part of the Western tradition in literature, I will focus on his discussion of Western love ideology. Paz argues that the western philosophy of love has been developed outside of and sometimes at odds with the official moral religion. Similarly, aesthetic poetry was also regarded as "a rebellion against morality" by the traditional Victorian society, as Moran puts it. According to the author, "because it rejected a dogmatic function for art, it seemed a self-indulgent

and perverse philosophy, devoid of serious social purpose and obliquely connected to a sexually ambiguous, possibly homosexual, sub-culture" (Moran 2012: 121). Love ideology and love poetry have always been censored and regarded with suspicion by moralists.

Furthermore, love in the western tradition is a choice - not a fate, as believed in the East -, "love is the offspring of philosophy and of the poetic sentiment that transfigures into an image everything it touches"; love has become a *cult* (Paz 1996: 38; 40-1). Therefore, love permeates the beliefs of a society in a certain time and period. These ideas of love invariably change as we move from country to country - in the West or in the East, for instance -, from time to time - medieval ideas of love are no longer the same in our modern society -, and from person to person. In opposition to the amatory sentiment, which is universal and perennial, love as an ideology is contextual. Although Wilde's poem partakes of the aesthetic premise of art for art's sake and, in consequence, the idea of love for love's sake, it cannot escape being itself an ideology after all. Wilde's poem illustrates his own ideas on the relationship between love and poetry, and on the role of the poet. At the close, his love ideology is inevitably influenced by his social role: a lover poet in late-Victorian England.

After commenting on Paz's ideas of poetry as an eroticism of language, and of love as an ideology, I will now turn to Wilde's poem *The Garden of Eros* to discuss the work of Wilde as a poet/lover, and his ideology of love manifest in his verse.

2. "Spirit of Beauty! Tarry still a-while"

The Garden of Eros was one of five long poems first published in 1881 as part of the collection *Poems*. According to Varty, these poems follow a seasonal sequence, each of them representing the tone of the season in question. *The Garden of Eros*, being the first of them begins with "It is full summer now"; and the last poem *Humanitad* starts with "It is full winter now", completing the cycle (Varty 1994: xviii).

Like Pater and other nineteenth-century thinkers, Wilde was discontent with the way modernity was shaping the arts, rendering it a "bestial realism". As the painter Basil Hallward states in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, echoing Wilde's own concerns: "We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty" (Wilde 2009: 29). In his poem, it is possible to identify invocations "of the idyllic pastoral values of the ancient world" over "a picture of destructive nineteenth-century industrialization" (Varty 1994: xviii). In a search for a poetic voice almost completely gone in the modern era, the "Spirit of Beauty", Wilde evokes poets of other generations, especially the romantics and pre-Raphaelites, as I will demonstrate in a close reading of certain passages of the poem.

The work of Wilde as a lover in this poem is awe-inspiring: the manner with which he "copulates" the words, giving attention to the combination of sounds and providing meanings beyond the ordinary is a true declaration of love. Wilde's close relationship with these nearly three hundred lines, the time he dedicated to them, the care with which he addressed each verse is a genuine erotic relation. In addition,

throughout the poem, Wilde addresses the "Spirit of Beauty", which I contend is poetry itself. Ultimately, he dedicates the poem to his beloved: poetry itself. It is a declaration of the lover poet to the beloved poetry by means of eroticized language.

One of the most beautiful ways of eroticizing language is by means of metaphors and poetic imagery. By doing this, the poet uses imagination - an essential element in eroticism, according to Paz - to transform ordinary language into a piece of art. *The Garden of Eros* is filled with rich poetic imagery and metaphors. Wilde begins the poem in "full summer" (l. 1). However, autumn will soon "lend his hoarded gold to all the trees" (l. 5), and the breeze will sweep away summer's treasures. The image of autumn turning the leaves golden and blowing the summer away illustrates the passing of the season in an extremely poetic manner, which is, therefore, erotic.

Subsequently, the author is ravished by the notion that, despite the fact that autumn will come "too soon indeed", it is yet summer, and he describes the garden that belongs to Eros, filled with flowers that had lingered since Spring: daffodils, harebells, narcissus, violets, and others. It is significant that this garden should belong to Eros, because Eros is the Greek god of love, who tends "to personify abstract desire" (Brunel 1996: 414). This beautiful garden, according to the voice of the poem, "should be trodden by Persephone / When wearied of the flowerless fields of Dis" (l. 19-20); it should be "danced on by the lads of Arcady" (l. 21); and it is the place where one might find "the hidden secret of eternal bliss" (l. 22). Wilde's erudition is evident in this passage as well as throughout the entire poem. As Varty points out, this poem "is steeped in classical imagery drawn from the world of literature which Wilde had come to know intimately through his study of ancient Greek and Latin" (1994, p. xviii). In the aforementioned extract, he makes reference to Persephone, the queen of the underworld in Greek mythology, who, tired of her flowerless kingdom, should look for the garden of Eros. The boys of Arcady, an idyllic place of harmony and pristine nature in Greek mythology, should also leave their paradise in order to dance in the garden of Eros. This garden is described by Wilde as the most perfect place, where even "the hidden secret of eternal bliss can be found". The beauty evoked by the poet's choice of words and imagery gives pleasure to the reader, who rejoices from this erotic encounter with the poetic language and the imaginary summons of such idyllic place.

In the garden of Eros one can also find "the flowers which mourning Herakles / Strewed on the tomb of Hylas" (l. 25-6). Herakles is the Greek name given to the hero Hercules, who loved the youth Hylas. Reminiscences of their love can therefore be found in the garden of Eros, which is represented by the flowers of Hylas' tomb that are also part of the garden. The Garden of Eros is a place where all types of love are welcome and hailed, including the homoerotic love between Herakles and Hylas.

The garden is also filled with "creamy meadow-sweet / Whiter than Juno's throat" (l. 44-45). Meadow-sweet is delicate white flowers which the poet compares to Juno's throat. Juno is the Roman goddess of marriage and childbirth. Again, Wilde makes a reference to love: the flowers in the Garden of Eros are whiter, so purer and more innocent than the throat of the goddess. Marriage and childbirth represented by Juno would stain the purity of love for love's sake.

Furthermore, the flowers in the garden of Eros are "Fairer than what Queen Venus trod upon / Beneath the pines of Ida" (l. 49-50). Through this comparison, Wilde places the flowers in the garden superior to those found near Mount Ida in Crete, where Queen Venus walked. Queen Venus is the Roman goddess of love, beauty, sex, desire and fertility. Venus is the Roman name for Aphrodite, the mother of Eros in Greek mythology. The relationship with love is thus represented again in the previous extract: not even the queen of love and desire could find more beautiful flowers than those growing in the garden of Eros. In addition, in the garden one can find "budding marjoram which but to kiss / Would sweeten Cytheraea's lips" (l. 53-54). Cytheraea is another name for Venus or Aphrodite. Hence, the marjoram in the garden is even capable of sweetening the lips of the goddess of love. The whole description of the garden beautifully written by the poet distinguishes it as a place where love is worshiped.

In this first part of the poem, Wilde compares all the various flowers in the garden of Eros with Roman and Greek divinities, with legendary and real places; yet nothing seems to be parallel to the garden of the god of love itself. Then Wilde begins what I believe to be the second part of his poem from line 67 onward. The poetic voice pleads: "Nay, pluck it too, it is not half so sweet / As thou thyself, my soul's idolatry!" (l. 67-68). This is the first time that the poet addresses his beloved: his "soul's idolatry", poetry itself. At this moment, he states that all those incomparable flowers in the garden of Eros can be plucked because none of them is "half so sweet as" poetry itself.

The poetic voice goes on to argue that all other elements of the garden would yield to his soul's idolatry. For poetry, ox lips shall "weave their best tapestry" (l. 70); for her, "the woodbine shall forget its pride / And veil its tangled whorls" (l. 71-72). When poetry enters the garden, even "the wood-gods" and "old Pan" are jealous (l. 74). In the garden, the poetic voice sings to poetry, his soul's idolatry. He sings about "how sad Proserpina / Unto a grave and gloomy Lord was wed" (l. 85-86); he pipes to her "that Grecian tale / How Cynthia loves the lad Endymion" (l. 91-92); and, if the poet's "flute can breathe sweet melody", they "may behold Her face who long ago / Dwelt among men by the Aegean sea" (l. 97-99). All of these are love tales and motifs that inspired legends and poems before. The poet, illuminated by the "Spirit of Beauty", writes his own poetry in the garden, blessed by the atmosphere surrounding him.

In the sequence, Wilde begins what I argue to be the third part of the poem from line 103 on, when the poet begins to address his beloved as "Spirit of Beauty". Although the poet found his way to the garden of Eros, where he could be enlightened by his "soul's idolatry" and sing to the "Spirit of Beauty" through verse, he feels that this Spirit is fading away and that the lover poets are disappearing. Nonetheless, he pleads the Spirit to linger, for there are still a few poets who can be considered lovers, some poets who still love poetry: "Spirit of Beauty! tarry still awhile / They are not dead, thine ancient votaries; / Some few there are to whom thy radiant smile / Is better than a thousand victories" (l. 103-6). The poetic voice affirms himself to be one of those few who still worship poetry: "I, at least / Have done so, made thy lips my daily food, / and in thy temples found a goodlier feast / Than this starved age can give me, spite of all / Its new-found creeds so sceptical and

so dogmatical" (l. 110-14). In this passage, besides confirming himself to be still a lover poet, Wilde makes a clear criticism to the modern world of the late-Victorian era, which was "starved" of spirituality and still based on the belief of dogmas, and age that has "lost the abstract sense of beauty", as Basil Hallward put it (Wilde 2009: 29).

However gloomy that age seemed to be for the poet, that place where no "Cephisos, not Ilissos³ flows" (l. 115), when poetry was so disrespected by the modern society who "break on whirling wheels the limbs of Art" (l. 196), a time when "the crowded factories beget / The blindworm Ignorance that slays the soul" (l. 197-8), he still pleaded the "Spirit of Beauty" to stay, because, like him, there were others who could still be considered lover poets: John Keats, the romantic poet, "Whose very name should be a memory / To make thee linger, sleeps in silent rest / Beneath the Roman walls" (l. 122-4); Lord Byron, "him at least thy love hath taught to sing" (l. 138); William Morris, the enthusiast of the pre-Raphaelites, "our sweet and simple Chaucer's child, / Dear heritor of Spenser's tuneful reed, / With soft and sylvan pipe has oft beguiled / The weary soul of man in troublous need, / And from the far and flowerless fields of ice / Has brought fair flowers to make an earthly paradise⁴" (l. 157-62); and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the painter and poet, who "bears his name / From Dante and the seraph Gabriel, - / Whose double laurels burn with deathless flame / To light thine altar; He too loves thee well" (l. 199-202). These poets are, in Wilde's opinion, lovers, who eroticize language and for whom love, as well as poetry, is an ideology – an ideology based on beliefs and experiences,

Wilde asserted that for the lover poet, poetry, the "solemn Spirit", is "a better image of his age / In all his pity, love, and weariness, / Than those who can but copy common things, / And leave the Soul unpainted with its mighty questionings" (l. 213-16). In this way, Wilde agrees with Pater in the belief that poetry heightens our consciousness and gives the insight to experience. At the same time, Wilde complies with Paz's idea that poetry turns everyday language, the "copy of common things", into art by the intervention of the "Spirit of Beauty", which only the "aristocracy of the heart", the lover poets, can reach. That is the eroticism of language.

In the last stanzas of the poem, Wilde develops his ideas on the role of poetry for the modern society by means of a declaration of love. He claims that the new poets of his age, "these new Actaeons boast too soon / That they have spied on beauty" (l. 223-4). The new poets are not part of the "aristocracy of the heart", they cannot reach the "Spirit of Beauty", although they boast that they have spied on it, because their "rude eyes peer at my mistress through a telescope!" (l. 228). New technologies, illustrated in the poem by the example of the telescope, prevented most of Wilde's contemporary poets from seeing "with the heart". Instead, they searched the "Spirit of Beauty" through a mechanic lens: an unacceptable proceeding for a true lover poet.

Wilde goes on to discuss the uses of technology for a poet and a lover: "Can it assuage / One lover's breaking heart? what can it do / To make one life more beautiful, one day / More godlike in its period?" (l. 231-4). The answer is surely

³ Cephisos and Ilissos are rivers in Athens, Greece.

⁴ *The Earthly Paradise* is also a book by Morris published in 1868-70, in which he collected mythological tales.

negative. The lover, as well as the poet, does not need the "modern miracles" of the modern age (l. 231), which Wilde calls "the Age of Clay" (l. 234). Wilde uses the expression "Age of Clay" in a reference to the Age of Iron, the Bronze Age, or the Stone Age; all of which were periods in ancient history, of primitive men. Wilde is making a claim that his society has gone backward; instead of evolving to a higher spirituality, it has retreated to an age of almost irrationality, of "ignorant Titans" (l. 237). To move forward, the poet has to feel with the heart, to love without restrictions, and ultimately to evoke beauty through the eroticism of language.

Unlike the poets who are not lovers, Wilde had another inheritance. He asserts his distinction: "I was nurtured otherwise, my soul / Passes from higher heights of life to a more supreme goal" (l. 245-6). In Pater's words, Wilde's consciousness was heightened; he was destined to art, to poetry. Moreover, he has now a new goal, an even more supreme goal: to spread his love ideology through poetry - or his poetry ideology through love - and retain the "Spirit of Beauty" on still awhile, to keep its flame alive.

The poetic voice suddenly realizes that the dawn is approaching, "the yellow iris wearily / Leans back its throat" (l. 253-4), and he is transported from his thoughts and pleads back to the garden of Eros, where "the almond blossoms gleam, / The corncrake nested in the unknown field / Answers its mate, across the misty stream / On fitful wing the startled curlews fly, / And in his sedgy bed the lark, for joy that Day is nigh, / Scatters the pearlèd dew from off the grass" (l. 260-5). The garden is completely awake and full of life. The poet greets the new day but urges his beloved poetry to go: "let us go, why soon / The woodmen will be here; how we have lived this night / of June!" (l. 275-6). This is how the poem ends: the night of poetic ecstasy and erotic pleasure has ended, and they must leave before the woodmen arrive. Wilde may have used the word "woodmen" as a metaphor for his contemporary non-lover poets, who cut words and destroy poetry. In a similar cyclical structure as his book *Poems*, the lyrical voice in *The Garden of Eros* returns to the place where his poem started and from which sprang all his reflection about love and art: the garden of Eros.

3. Final considerations

By means of this analysis of Wilde's poem *The Garden of Eros* I aimed at bringing to light Wilde's work as a lover poet, who eroticizes language in the most beautiful manner. His poem *The Garden of Eros* is filled with poetic imagery and metaphors, eloquent illustrations of Paz's ideas of the eroticism of language. In addition, I proposed to shed light on Wilde's ideas on love and poetry, which, in my view, are manifest in this particular poem. Just as Paz considers ideology of love "an art of living and dying, an ethic, an aesthetic, and an etiquette" (1996: 34), I contend that Wilde's *The Garden of Eros* unfolds his ideology of the role of poetry in relation to love. It is not a coincidence that the garden in which the poet manifests his pleas to the "Spirit of Beauty" belongs to Eros, the god of love. I believe Wilde's argument in this poem is in congruence with Paz's idea that the poet is a lover and an essential member of the "aristocracy of the heart". Wilde positions himself in the poem as a

lover poet, one of the few who still remains to evoke the "Spirit of Beauty". In addition, *The Garden of Eros* is also a manifesto against the commodification of art of the nineteenth century, which led to the loss of beauty. Although Wilde was a pupil of Pater and an avowed Aesthete, who preached art for art's sake, his poem goes beyond the preoccupation with form and high-brow references to Greek and Roman mythology: it is a declaration of love to poetry.

O POETA COMO AMANTE: O JARDIM DE EROS, DE OSCAR WILDE

Abstract: Embora Oscar Wilde seja mais conhecido por seu trabalho no teatro e seu romance *O Retrato de Dorian Gray* (1890), ele também produziu uma grande variedade de poemas durante a sua vida. *O Jardim de Eros* é um poema longo publicado na coleção *Poems* em 1881. Esse poema não só ilustra o imenso repertório cultural de Wilde sobre mitologia grega e romana e sua perícia na criação de imagens poéticas, mas também manifesta as ideias de Wilde sobre o amor e a essência da arte, além de ser uma declaração de amor à poesia. Com base nas ideias de Octavio Paz (1996) sobre a poesia como o erotismo da linguagem, neste artigo eu analiso o papel de Wilde como poeta amante, suas críticas à arte moderna e a sua súplica pela beleza da arte.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde; erotismo da linguagem; amor; *O Jardim de Eros*.

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