

Oscar Wilde. 'Camma', a Severe and Hedonic Aesthetic Correction of Plutarch's Ethics¹

Pau Gilabert i Barberà²
Universitat de Barcelona (University of Barcelona)

To Francisca Moya, Maria Ginart and Enric Monforte

We are about to commemorate the first centenary of Oscar Wilde's death in Paris (30-XI-1900)³. Having an excellent knowledge of Greco-Roman writers, acquired throughout his university years at Magdalen College, Oxford⁴, it would be unusual if he were not intellectually indebted, even though only just to confront him, to one of the great classical educators of the Western character and sensibility. Since Plutarch is regarded mostly as a master of judgement, dignity, and restraint, and Wilde as excelling in the art of stirring one's boldness in all spheres, the latter's correction of the former's assumptions is guaranteed. Here you have a remarkable example -in my opinion and hoping to prove it or, at least, to lay the foundations of its verisimilitude-: the poem 'Camma', one more of his poems dealing with a classical topic or of classical inspiration. It reads as follows:

As one who poring on a Grecian urn
Scans the fair shapes some Attic hand hath made,
God with slim goddess, goodly man with maid,
And for their beauty's sake is loth to turn
And face the obvious day, must I not yearn
For many a secret moon of indolent bliss,

¹ This article was published in the *Actas (Proceedings) del VII Simposio Internacional sobre Plutarco de la Sociedad Española de Plutarquistas*. Mallorca (Spain), 2000, pp. 305-14.

² Ordinary teacher in the Greek Philology Department at the University of Barcelona, *Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes* 585, 08007 Barcelona. Telephone: 934035996; fax: 934039092; e-mail: pgilabert@ub.edu; personal web page: www.paugilabertbarbera.com

³ For a general approach to Oscar Wilde and his work, see eg: *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge, 1997 and BECKSON, K. E., *The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia*, New York, 1998. Regarding the bibliography on O. W., see eg: MIKOLYZK, T., *Oscar Wilde: an annotated bibliography*, London, 1993; MIKHAIL, E. H., *Oscar Wilde: an annotated bibliography of criticism*, London, 1978 and MILLIARD, C., *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde*, London, 1967. Regarding his biography, see eg: ELLMANN, R., *Oscar Wilde*, London, 1984; HOLLAND, M., *The Wilde Album*, London, 1997; MORLEY, S., *Oscar Wilde*, London, 1997; CALLOWAY, S., *The exquisite life of Oscar Wilde*, London, 1997; SAWERS, G. A., *A ladder for Mr. Oscar Wilde*, Reading, 1997; COAKLEY, D., *Oscar Wilde: the importance of being Irish*, Dublin, 1994; KNOX, M., *Oscar Wilde: a long and lovely suicide*, New Haven & London, 1994 and GASPARETTO, P. F., *Oscar Wilde: l'importanza di essere diverso*, Milano, 1981. Regarding criticism and interpretation, see eg: BASHFORD, B., *Oscar Wilde: the critic as humanist*, London, 1999; MAHAFFEY, V., *States of desire; Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and the Irish experiment*, Oxford, 1998; NELSON, W., *The creative 1890s: essays on W. E. Henley, Arthur Symonds, Oscar Wilde*, New Haven & London, 1998; VARTY, A., *A preface to Oscar Wilde*, London, 1998; *Oscar Wilde: the critical heritage*, London, 1997; GILLESPIE, M., *Oscar Wilde and the poetics of ambiguity*, Gainesville, 1996; GENTZ, R., *Das erzählische Werk Oscar Wildes*, Frankfurt, 1995; SCHMIDGALL, G., *The stranger Wilde: interpreting Oscar*, London, 1994; *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde. Princess Grace Irish Library Series*, 8, 1994; SMALL, I., *Oscar Wilde revalued: an essay on new materials & methods of research*, Greensboro, 1993; MILLER, R. K., *Oscar Wilde*, New York, 1992; *Critical essays on Oscar Wilde*, New York & Oxford, 1991; RABY, P., *Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge 1988 and NASSAAR, C., *Into the demon universe: a literary exploration of Oscar Wilde*, New Haven & London, 1974.

⁴ As well as at Portora. However, I find it unnecessary to mention them here. With regard to everything related to his academic education, see eg the excellent biography by R. Ellmann.

When in the midmost shrine of Artemis
 I see thee standing, antique-limbed, and stern?
 And yet –methinks I’d rather see thee play
 That serpent of old Nile, whose witchery
 Made Emperors drunken, -come, great Egypt, shake
 Our stage with all thy mimic pageants, make
 The world thine Actium, me thine Antony!⁵

Who is this stern and venerable Camma related to the goddess Artemis? In fact, it is Plutarch –and only him- who mentions her just where he is certainly entitled to do so, that is, in *Mulierum Virtutes*, chapter XX, 257 F–258 C; and also where the story of an extraordinary courage, a product of firm convictions, must necessarily embarrass those who claim that *éros* and *philia* are an exclusive heritage of men in love, that is, in *Amatorius*, chapter XXII, 768 B-D, devoted to confronting pederastic and conjugal loves, as it is well known. In both works Camma becomes the emblematic paradigm of fidelity taken up to the limit, murder included –or rather “execution”-, although that who puts such fidelity to the test does it appealing to the guidance and protection of an overwhelming love which he finds permissive with the infringement of the laws of decorum. Let us read it in this version:

‘Although there is an abundance of examples of this –at least to you who are fellow countrymen and initiates of the god- yet I hardly think it right to pass over the story of Camma of Galatia. She was a very beautiful woman married to Sinatus the tetrarch. Sinorix, the most powerful of the Galatians, fell in love with her and killed Sinatus, since he was unable to obtain the lady’s consent either by force or persuasion while her husband was alive. Now Camma had a refuge and a consolation for her tragedy in serving as hereditary priestess of Artemis. She spent the greater part of her time in the goddess’ temple and received no one, though many kings and potentates came to woo her. Yet when Sinorix dared to propose marriage, she did not shun his overtures or reproach him for past deeds, as if an act inspired by his kind regards and love for her could have nothing wicked about it. So he trusted in this and came to the temple and asked her to marry him. She met him, gave him her hand, led him to the altar of the goddess, and poured as a libation a phial of hydromel which was, it seems, mixed with poison. Thereupon she drank off half of it herself as though it were a toast and gave the rest to the Galatian. When she saw that he had swallowed it, she shouted loud and clear in triumph and uttered the dead man’s name. ‘It was’, she cried, ‘dearest husband, because I was awaiting this day that I have endured my tortured life without you. Now rejoice and take me. I have avenged you on the vilest of creatures, sharing death with him as gladly as I did my life with you’. So Sinorix was carried out in a litter and died shortly after. Camma lived through that day and the following night and is said to have expired with the greatest courage and good cheer’ (Ἀφθονίας δὲ παραδειγμάτων οὐσης πρὸς γ’ ὑμᾶς τοὺς ὁμοχώρους τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ θιασώτας, ὅμως τὸ περὶ Κάμμαν οὐκ ἄξιόν ἐστι τὴν Γαλατικὴν παρελθεῖν. Ταύτης γὰρ ἐκπρεπεστάτης τὴν ὄψιν γενομένης, Σινάτω δὲ τῷ τετράρχῃ γαμηθείσης, Σινόριξ ἐρασθεὶς δυνατώτατος Γαλατῶν ἀπέκτεινε τὸν Σινάτον, ὡς οὔτε βιάσασθαι δυνάμενος οὔτε πείσαι τὴν ἄνθρωπον ἐκείνου ζῶντος. Ἦν δὲ τῇ Κάμμῃ καταφυγὴ καὶ παραμυθία τοῦ πάθους ἰερωσύνη πατρῶος Ἀρτέμιδος· καὶ τὰ πολλὰ παρὰ τῇ θεῷ διέτριβεν, οὐδένα προσιεμένη, μνωμένων πολλῶν βασιλέων καὶ δυναστῶν αὐτήν· τοῦ μέντοι Σινόριγος τολμήσαντος ἐντυχεῖν περὶ γάμου, τὴν πείραν οὐκ ἔφυγεν οὐδ’ ἐμέμψατο περὶ τῶν γεγονότων, ὡς δι’

⁵ According to the O. U. P. (2000) edition.

εὐνοίαν αὐτῆς καὶ πόθον οὐκ ἄλλη τινὶ μοχθηρία προαχθέντος τοῦ Σινόριγος. Ἦκεν οὖν πιστεύσας ἐκεῖνος καὶ ἤτει τὸν γάμον· ἢ δ' ἀπήντησε καὶ δεξιωσαμένη καὶ προσαγαοῦσα τῷ βωμῷ τῆς θεᾶς ἔσπεισεν ἐκ φιάλης μελλίκρατον, ὡς ἔοικε, πεφαρμακωμένον· εἶθ' ὅσον ἡμισυ μέρος αὐτῆ προεκπιοῦσα παρέδωκε τῷ Γαλάτῃ το λοιπόν· ὡς δ' εἶδεν ἐκπεπωκότα, λαμπρὸν ἀνωλόλυξε καὶ φθεγξαμένη τοῦνομα τοῦ τεθνεῶτος· “Ταύτην” εἶπεν “ Ἐγὼ τὴν ἡμέραν, ᾧ φίλτατ' ἄνερ, προσμένουσα σοῦ χωρὶς ἔζων ἀνιαρῶς· νῦν δὲ κόμισαί με χαίρων· ἡμυνάμην γὰρ ὑπὲρ σοῦ τὸν κάκιστον ἀνθρώπων, σοὶ μὲν βίου, τούτῳ δὲ θανάτου κοινωνὸς ἠδέως γενομένη.” Ὁ μὲν οὖν Σινόριξ ἐν φορείῳ κομίζόμενος μετὰ μικρὸν ἐτελεύτησεν, ἢ δὲ Κάμμα τὴν ἡμέραν ἐπιβίωσασα καὶ τὴν νύκτα λέγεται μάλ' εὐθαρσῶς καὶ ἰλαρῶς ἀποθανεῖν.”⁶.

⁶ Translated by W. C. Hembold. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969: *Cf. Mulierum virtutes* 257E- 258C, translated by Frank Cole Babbitt. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968: ‘There were in Galatia two of the most powerful of the tetrarchs, distantly related to each other, Sinatus and Sinorix. One of these, Sinatus, had married a maiden, Camma by name, conspicuous for her form and beauty, but even more admired for her virtues. Not only was she modest and fond of her husband, but she was also quick-witted and high-minded, and unusually dear to her inferiors by reason of her kindness and benevolence. A thing that brought her into greater prominence was the fact that she was the priestess of Artemis, whom the Galatians especially reverence, and was seen magnificently attired always in connection with the processions and sacrifices. So Sinorix fell in love with her, and not being able to prevail upon her either by persuasion or force as long as her husband lived, he committed a horrible deed, and treacherously killed Sinatus. Then, without allowing much time to elapse, he commenced to woo Camma, who was spending time in the temple and bearing Sinorix’s lawless transgression in no pitiful nor abject manner, but with a spirit that showed sense and bided its time. He was persistent in his suit, and seemed not to be at all at a loss for arguments that had some plausibility, to the effect that in all other respects he had shown himself a better man than Sinatus, and had made away with him for love of Camma and not because of any other nefarious intent. The woman’s denials at the first were not too peremptory, and later, little by little, she appeared to be softened; for her relatives and friends also brought pressure to bear upon her by way of service and favour to Sinorix, who held such very great power, and they tried to persuade and coerce her. Finally she yielded, and sent for him to come to her, on the ground that the consenting and pledging should take place in the presence of the goddess. When he had come, she received him kindly and, having led him to the altar, poured herself and bade him drink the rest; it was poisoned mixture of milk and honey. When she saw that he had drunk, she uttered a clear cry of joy, and, prostrating herself before the goddess, said: “I call you to witness, goddess most revered, that for the sake of this day I have lived on after the murder of Sinatus, and during all that time I have derived no comfort from life save only the hope of justice; and now that justice is mine, I go down to my husband. But as for you, wickedest of all men, let your relatives make ready a tomb instead of a bridal chamber and a wedding”. When the Galatian heard these words, and felt the poison already working and creating a disturbance in his body, he mounted a chariot as if to try shaking and jolting as a relief, but he got out almost immediately and changed over into a litter, and in the evening he died. Camma endured through the night, and when she learned that he had come to his end, she died cheerfully and happy’ (Ἦσαν ἐν Γαλατία δυνατώτατοι τῶν τετραρχῶν καὶ τι καὶ κατὰ γένος προσήκοντες ἀλλήλοις Σινᾶτος τε καὶ Σινόριξ· ὧν ὁ Σινᾶτος γυναῖκα παρθένον ἔσχε Κάμμην ὄνομα, περίβλεπτον μὲν ἰδέα, σώματος καὶ ὥρα, θαυματοζομένην δὲ μᾶλλον δι’ ἀρετὴν· οὐ γὰρ μόνον σώφρων καὶ φίλανδρος, ἀλλὰ καὶ συνετὴ καὶ μεγαλόφρων καὶ ποθεινὴ τοῖς ὑπηκόοις ἦν διαφερόντως ὑπ’ εὐμενείας καὶ χρηστότητος· ἐπιφανεστέραν δ’ αὐτὴν ἐποίει καὶ τὸ τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος ἰέρειαν εἶναι, ἣν μάλιστα Γαλαταὶ σέβουσι, περὶ τε πομπᾶς αἰεὶ καὶ θυσίας κεκοσμημένην ὁρᾶσθαι μεγαλοπρεπῶς. Ἐρασθεὶς οὖν Σινόριξ, καὶ μήτε πείσαι μήτε βιάσασθαι ζῶντος τοῦ ἀνδρὸς δυνατὸς ὧν, ἔργον εἰργάσατο δεινόν· ἀπέκτεινε γὰρ δόλω τὸν Σινᾶτον, καὶ χρόνον οὐ πολὺν διαλιπὼν ἐμνάτο τὴν Κάμμην ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ ποιουμένην διατριβὰς καὶ φέρουσιν οὐκ οἰκτρῶς καὶ ταπεινῶς ἀλλὰ θυμῷ νοῦν ἔχοντι καὶ καιρὸν περιμένοντι τὴν τοῦ Σινόριγος παρανομίαν. ὁ δὲ λιπαρῆς ἦν περὶ τὰς

It becomes clear now: the duties of virtue are given priority over any desire of obscure origin; the beloved, freely chosen, is given priority over all the possible benefits offered by the holder of a superior power –in other words, fidelity *adversus* adulterous seduction; seclusion, and honours paid to the virgin Artemis, and deaf ear to Aphrodite’s demands; cleverness and feigning, expectant for righteous vengeance, and, finally, heroic, proud self-immolation; in short, a very good reference, at least for those who aspire to leave an indelible legacy of integrity and coherence. We realise soon, though, that this Wilde’s particular Grecian urn –on which he is also able to discover beautiful images of an idealised antiquity, as John Keats had done before–arouses raging reactions against the dreadful annihilation of desire and passion; just the kind of annihilation, based at least on Platonic and Stoic directives, which Plutarch felt quite strongly attracted to⁷.

Being Wilde an enthusiastic observer of Attic works of art, and a concupiscent admirer of bodies of gods, goddesses, youths, and maidens, which have embellished life –to the extent of longing to fix his eyes on them in order to no longer see a reality that has become rude and unacceptable–, the sole presence of the precious Camma makes him claim rights he will not renounce. He knows well the punishment paid by Sinorix many centuries before for a *hýbris* like his own, and he also knows the sacredness of a certain setting, the shrine of Artemis, where all boldness becomes sacrilege. But, to Wilde, there should be no restrictions on desire, and of course he banishes them from his horizon as he stands within the boundaries of poetic fiction. Camma, despite her archetypal fidelity –and who knows even if “thanks” to it–, majestic as she stands, with a figure of ancient contours, and of immeasurable beauty, drives him “logically” – from an hedonic point of view, of course– to covet a night of unforgettable ecstasy.

Although in a poetic sense, Wilde has evidenced a personal creed sacrilegious and iconoclast enough to excuse him from respecting sacred areas or untouchable figures. ‘Charmides’, another one of Wilde’s most vital poems, could be the authentic evidence that, to him, passion must prevail over any paralysis caused by religious fear. Precisely, that bold and sensual Greek youth returning home from Sicily, anchors in a small beach near Corinth, and rushes to sneak into the temple of Pallas Athena. The priest has blown out the lamps and the guard has closed the bronze doors. He can hardly breathe, though driven by passion, faced with the prospect of violating that cruel chastity. He caresses her neck, unfastens her breastplate, exposes her bosom, and raises her

δείσεις, καὶ λόγων ἐδόκει μὴ παντάπασιν ἀπορεῖν εὐπρέπειαν ἐχόντων, ὡς τὰ μὲν ἄλλα Σινάτου βελτίονα παρεσχηκῶς ἑαυτὸν ἀνελών δ’ ἐκεῖνον ἔρωτι τῆς Κάμμης μὴ δι’ ἑτέραν τινὰ πονηρίαν. ἦσαν οὖν τὸ πρῶτον ἀρνήσεις οὐκ ἄγαν ἀπηνεῖς τῆς γυναικός, εἶτα κατὰ μικρὸν ἐδόκει μαλάττεσθαι· καὶ γὰρ οἰκεῖοι καὶ φίλοι προσέκειντο θεπαπεία καὶ χάριτι τοῦ Σινόριγος μέγιστον δυναμένου, πείθοντες αὐτὴν καὶ καταβιαζόμενοι· τέλος δὲ συνεχώρει καὶ μετεπέμπετο πρὸς ἑαυτὴν ἐκεῖνον, ὡς παρὰ τῆ θεῶ τῆς συναινέσεως καὶ καταπιστώσεως γενησομένης. ἐλθόντα δὲ δεξαμένη κατέσπεισεν ἐκ φιάλης, καὶ το μὲν ἐξέπιεν αὐτὴ τὸ δ’ ἐκεῖνον ἐκέλευσεν· ἦν δὲ πεφαρμαγμένον μελίκρατον. ὡς δ’ εἶδε πεπωκότα, λαμπρὸν ἀνωλόλυξε καὶ τὴν θεὸν προσκυνήσασα, “ μαρτύρομαί σε,” εἶπεν, “ ὦ πολιτίμητε δαῖμον, ὅτι ταύτης ἔνεκα τῆς ἡμέρας ἐπέζησα τῷ Σινάτου φόνῳ, χρόνον τοσοῦτον οὐδὲν ἀπολαύουσα τοῦ βίου χρηστὸν ἀλλ’ ἢ τὴν ἐλπίδα τῆς δίκης, ἣν ἔξουσα καταβαίνω πρὸς τὸν ἕμὸν ἄνδρα. σοὶ δ’, ὦ πάντων ἀνοσιώτατε ἀνθρώπων, τάφον ἀντὶ θαλάμου καὶ γάμου παρασκευαζέτωσαν οἱ προσήκοντες.” Ταῦτα δ’ ἀκούσας ὁ Γαλάτης καὶ τοῦ φαρμάκου δρῶντος ἦδη καὶ διακινουῦντος τὸ σῶμα συναισθόμενος ἐπέβη μὲν ὀχήματος ὡς σάλῳ καὶ τιναγμῷ χρησόμενος, ἐξέστη δὲ παραχρηῖα καὶ μεταβάς εἰς φορεῖον ἐσπέρας ἀπέθανεν. ἡ δὲ Κάμμα διενεγκοῦσα τὴν νύκτα καὶ πυθομένη τέλος ἔχειν ἐκεῖνον, εὐθύμως καὶ ἰλαρῶς κατέστρεψεν).

⁷ Regarding the Stoic heritage in Plutarch, see e.g: BABUT, D., *Plutarque et le Stoïcisme*, Paris, 1969 and GILBERT, P., *L’Érotic (Erotikós). Diàleg filòsofic sobre Eros o la confrontació dels amors pederàstic i conjugal*, Barcelona, 1999 (preliminary study). With regard to the Platonic one, see e.g the *Actas del V Congreso Internacional de la I. P. S.*, 1999.

peplos up to her waist thus reaching the most secret of mysteries. The poet realises that this story is not for those unacquainted with the sin of lovers and, certainly, all joy obtained through Charmides' eyes, lips, arms, and whole body, utterly indulging in a sacrilegious passion, seems designed to scoff at chastity or, taking it to our ground, at Camma and all other examples of biocidal temperance.

However, I think it is worth mentioning that this story suspiciously resembles one appearing in *Amores*, of the pseudo-Lucian⁸, whose main character is a Praxitelian statue of Aphrodite, on one of whose thighs once appeared a black stain caused by an impetuous, long-as-a-night kiss given by another passionate, no less sacrilegious youth. And I mention this because it might not be sheer coincidence that the model preferred by hedonic Wilde, taken from the two most similar classical works devoted to confronting pederastic and conjugal loves, is the pseudo-Lucian's, which does not tip the balance in any particular favour, whereas in Plutarch's *Amatorius* –which we must bear in mind is one of the two sources of the story of Camma-, conjugal love, fidelity, peace and composure are granted all kinds of blessings.

It is my opinion that it does not matter much that, like Sinorix, these two heroes of something similar to a pagan crusade against virtue finally expiate their crime by dying in the sea: the latter after jumping off a cliff, the former after being beaten by the force of such stern sea waves as the wrath of outraged Athena. And it may still matter less that pro-marriage Plutarch of *Amatorius* remains loyal to the most classical Platonism, to which Wilde is so much indebted throughout his personal and literary life. He seems to claim, indeed, the significance of desire's accomplishment itself, up to the point of thinking little of any further consequences and, in addition, he is well aware that the Platonism which attracts him so much, the erotic one, evolved from the unrestrained praise of physical beauty in *The Charmides* to the Socratic rejection of Alcibiades' body in the final part of *The Symposium*.

There must be few texts so strongly asserting an apology for pleasure, and also arguing into the suitability of its practice from such Hellenic assumptions and imagery, as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* –let us forget for a moment the tragic, “antiaesthetic” final fate of the main character. Master and apprentice, adult and youth, Victorian transcriptions –recognising that the cases are not precisely the same- of those *erastai* and *eromenoi* of Antiquity, bequeathed us a high-pitched rallying cry for that freedom which overcomes atavistic fears. Lord Henry Wotton speaks as follows: “I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, really to every dream –I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we should forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal”⁹.

Therefore, according to this bon vivant aristocrat, the secret of a happy life or, rather, of a new, blessed era, undoubtedly lies in the assumption, once and for all, of the Hellenic cultural nationality –for so long delayed in England, where Gothic art goes on “wreaking havoc”-; this is the only nationality that, usually filling us with joy, deserves our wholehearted support. The medieval, castrating *memento mori* would have been definitely left behind, so that, in its turn, contemporaneity would definitely arise on the foundations of life and light rather than on death, grief, and darkness. Notwithstanding, Dorian Gray, described as follows, will outdo his master by Wilde's own decision:

“The worship of the senses has often, and with much justice, been decried, men feeling a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves ... But it appeared to Dorian Gray that the true nature of the senses had remained savage and animal merely because the world had sought to starve them into submission or to kill them by pain... Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism

⁸ Chapters 15 and 16.

⁹ P. 23 Penguin Classics, 1985.

that was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day... It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly; yet, it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself... There are few of us who have not sometimes wakened before dawn, either after one of these dreamless nights that make us almost enamoured of death, or one of those nights of horror and misshapen joy, when through the chambers of the brain sweep phantoms more terrible than reality itself, and instinct with that vivid life that lurks in all grotesques, and that lends to Gothic art in its enduring vitality, this art being, one might fancy, especially the art of those whose minds have been troubled with the malady of reverie. Gradually white fingers creep through the curtains, and they appear to tremble. In black fantastic shapes, dumb shadows crawl into the corners of the room, and crouch there. Outside, there is the stirring of birds among the leaves, or the sound of men going forth to their work, or the sigh and sob of the wind coming down from the hills... and yet must needs call forth sleep from her purple cave. Veil after veil of thin dusky gauze is lifted, and by degrees the forms and colours of things are restored to them, and we watch the dawn remaking the world in its antique pattern... Out of the unreal shadows of the night comes back the real life that we had left off... a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret”¹⁰.

It would be impossible not to see the implicit reference made to Plato’s image of the cave, of *The Republic*, book VII (514a-517d), even if we did not know, which is not the case, that Sybil Vane “knew nothing but shadows” and that she “thought them real” until Dorian appeared and released her soul from “prison”¹¹. The Middle Ages seem to perpetuate themselves in England through Gothic art –Neo-gothic, actually-, and a furious argument arises between those who uphold it as the bearer of British national essence and those who, on the contrary, boldly choose to embrace the spirit of Ancient Greece¹². Wilde –it is impossible to think otherwise- belongs to the latter group, and it is irrelevant that just a moment ago, reasoning by analogy, we saw him reaching –in a literary sense only- into medieval darkness while talking about horrible, therefore medieval, dreams; about no less horrible, and also medieval, nights –who knows if about a whole life, or about centuries in the history of a whole nation. The bedroom –or, more accurately, our brain- then becomes our cave, and dark, unreal shadows rule in both places, ready to instil some disease in us.

This time, though, it will not be necessary to think about humans as being released by a human hand and unselfishly exposed to light, as it happened with the prisoner of the image, who would find it difficult for his former fellows to believe him if he were to go down to rescue them¹³. Indeed, in this case, and thanks to the world and to Nature which wrap-caresses them, that is, thanks to the invaluable gift of the senses, humans will feel alive again and will remember-retrieve –*anamnesis* is a must- that which we never should forget: life made endless presence by itself and in itself. Not duties or regrets emerged from a black abyss, but birds, leaves, mountain breezes, and men going to work, invite us to a horizontal existential trip, which opposes vigorously to the metaphysical ascension inherent in the literal, orthodox Platonic interpretation of the image of the cave. The lifting dark lint veils, and the world we gradually

¹⁰ Pp. 144-6 Penguin Classics, 1985.

¹¹ These three quotations belong to the Penguin Classics edition, 1985, pages 96-7.

¹² For a general approach to this theme, see *e. g.*: GILABERT; P., “Medievalismo versus Helenismo en la Inglaterra Victoriano-Eduardina. *A Room with a View* de E. M. Forster como ejemplo”. *Actas del Congreso Nacional de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Clásicos* (Alcalá de Henares 1999). Madrid, 2001, pp. 445-483.

¹³ Pl. *R.* 516 c-d.

contemplate again, are not mere rungs in a Platonic ladder climbing up to a summit beyond the material world, as it actually happens in the myth with regard to the images reflected in the water and to the night light, or the light coming from the stars fixed in the vault of heaven, all of them are the threshold of the sun, and the sun is, in its turn, the threshold of true, everlasting Light¹⁴.

Plato delights us with splendid images deserving to be copied, but he is not right; neither him nor the secular Platonism in which Plutarch takes part at different levels, according to different studies. And yet, in *Amatorius*, however, although it is not difficult to imagine Camma enjoying licit sexual union with her husband, it is obvious that the example it sets is brandished –please forgive me for using such anachronism- as the *Malleus Malleficorum* of the time. Wilde has not lived yet through the experience of his relation with Lord Alfred Douglas –which many a time became an agonising experience¹⁵-, and not yet, of course, through the slanderous trials he had to endure, the sentence to two years’ hard labour, and the confrontation with himself in *De profundis*. We cannot even perceive the Wilde of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*¹⁶, the end of which already makes obvious a severe revision of past attitudes together with a warning about the risks of an excessive aestheticism¹⁷. The Wilde of ‘Camma’ is an unrepentant agitator of extinguished feelings, of life relinquishers, on the verge of extinction by the weight of a dark, and above all, ugly –antiaesthetic- medieval tradition turned into an identifying mark of the Victorian Age, which he regarded as thoroughly hypocritical. His intention, then, is to recollect Camma poetically not for the greater honour and glory of a devastating asceticism, but in order to proclaim the aesthetic –and, therefore, in his view, ethic- right to accomplish desire, especially in the fictitious setting of literature where he imagines he is contemplating a Grecian urn.

The identity of Camma is not accessible to everybody, only to those who are well-trained and have found in Plutarch’s *Mulierum Virtutes* what they were looking for, and even to those who dared to read *Amatorius* and are able to set the excellence of the Sinatus-Camma model against all homophile relations, obscene to all Victorian standards. They already know the alternative heterosexual option of a free mind, which, to Wilde, must certainly constitute in itself another pleasure not to be given up.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 516 a-c.

¹⁵ Regarding the “queer” Wilde, see e. g: PEARCE, J., *The unmasking of Oscar Wilde*, London, 2000; FRYER, J., *André & Oscar Wilde, Beardsley, Beerbohm*, Bologna, 1999; O’CONNOR, S., *Straight acting: popular gay drama from Wilde to Rattigan*, London, 1998; HARE, D., *The Judas kiss*, London, 1998; SINFIELS, A., *The Wilde century: effeminacy. Oscar Wilde and the queer*, London, 1994; COHEN (ed.), *Talk on the Wilde side: towards a genealogy of a discourse on male sexualities*, New York, 1993 and SUMMERS, C., *Gay fictions: Wilde to Stonewell: studies in a male homosexual literary tradition*, New York 1990.

¹⁶ Regarding this significant Wilde’s novel, see eg: BALLESTEROS, A., *Narciso y el doble en la literatura fantástica victoriana*, Cuenca, 1998.; GILLESPIE, M. P., *The picture of Dorian Gray: “what the world thinks me”*, New York, 1995; SATZINGER, C., *The French influences on Oscar Wilde’s The picture of Dorian Gray*, Lewiston, Lampeter, 1994.; UPCHURCH, D., *Wilde’s use of Irish Celtic elements in The Picture of Dorian Gray*, New York, 1992; *Wilde, O. The picture of Dorian Gray: authoritative texts, backgrounds, reviews and reactions, critics*, New York, 1988; MAIER, W., *Oscar Wilde, The picture of Dorian Gray: eine kritische Analyse der anglistischen Forshung von 1962 bis 1982*, Frankfurt, New York, 1984; BA, P., *Dorian Gray: un mito vittoriano*, Urbino, 1982 and COCTEAU, J., *Le portrait surnaturel de Dorian Gray*, Paris, 1978.

¹⁷ Regarding Art and Aestheticism in Wilde’s work, see e. g: BROWN, J., *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde’s philosophy of art*, Charlottesville, London, 1997; DANSON, L., *Wilde’s intentions: the artist in his criticism*, Oxford, 1997; OJALA, A. *Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde*, Helsinki; ZELTER, J., *Sinnhafte Fiktion und Wahrheit: Untersuchungen zur ästhetischen und epistemologischen Problematik des Fiktionsbegriffs im Kontext europäischer Ideen und englischer Literaturgeschichte*, Tübingen, 1994; BEHRENDT, P., *Oscar Wilde: eros and aesthetics*, London, 1991; FRANCI, G., *Il sistema del dandy: Wilde, Beardsley, Beerbohm*, Bologna, 1977 and GAUNT, W., *The aesthetic adventure*, London, 1975.

Now then, Wilde, in the second half of the 19th century, beyond excelling in the art of rubbing salt into the wounds of a hypocritical society, cannot be aware yet of the meaning conferred to the goddess Artemis by a forthcoming whole tradition of mythological studies. This meaning unfolds in J. P. Vernant's *La mort dans les yeux*:

*“Artemis serait d’abord la déesse du monde sauvage, sur tous les plans: les bêtes sauvages, les plantes et les terres non cultivées, les jeunes tant qu’ils ne sont pas encore intégrés à la société, civilisés ... Plutôt que d’espace de complète sauvagerie ... il s’agit des confins, des zones limitrophes, des frontières où l’Autre se manifeste dans le contact qu’on entretient régulièrement avec lui, sauvage et cultivé se côtoyant ... Artemis n’est donc pas sauvagerie ... est par excellence la Courotrophe. Elle prend en charge tous les petits, ceux des animaux et ceux des humains ... Les enfants des hommes, elle les conduit jusqu’au seuil de l’adolescence qu’ils doivent, en lui abandonnant leur vie juvénile, franchir avec son accord et son aide”*¹⁸.

Thus, it becomes clear that the widow Camma, precisely because she becomes a widow after the experience of a seemingly perfect marriage, does not belong to the group of those who refuse to get rid of the wild, anomic sphere of youthfulness, but to the group of those who take the responsibilities implicit in adulthood. For her, this is a stage of her life she already left behind; therefore, when she decides to act under the protection of the goddess Artemis, she does so in order to vindicate a purity she offers her murdered husband. Wilde was not aware at all, though, that today's readers of his poem, on the brink of the 21st century, do have the possibility, and in fact the duty, of magnifying Sinorix's sacrilege even more, because of his utter contempt for a goddess who is actually asking him to behave as a civilised adult who respects the marriage fidelity of others, even if, by the surviving spouse's own decision, it endures beyond the grave.

Indeed, Wilde could not foresee that the “secret moon of indolent bliss”, coveted not by Sinorix but by himself as he contemplates the Grecian urn, would convey a double-transgression disposition in the future, so it should not come as a surprise to see him abandoned to the presentation of an alternative model of feminine behaviour so widely known as that of the Egyptian Cleopatra. Herself a serpent, who wittingly uses her charms to enthrall not petty tetrarchs but emperors, and who commits suicide later by allowing the bite of a symbol of royalty. A snake, or asp –who is to deny, then, that the savageness or Artemis' kingdom is without any parallel able to surpass it? Symbol of a “vital” conception of life, she knows how to do full justice to love and the joy of the senses. Her kingdom, the great Egypt, could jolt even the English drama with its mimic performances, because, according to Wilde, there exist certain stages where death, rather than life, lurks; but, after all, he is satiated with unreal passions. Since the saving reference now is Egypt and Cleopatra, England, and the whole world, should become a colossal Actium; and all the male citizens of the world, Antonies. The *aisthesis* set up as supreme rule, demanding a fidelity higher than that wickedly granted to obscure State-Empire motives –please bear in mind that Great Britain had then its own State-Empire as well-, would change, then, a shady, gloomy, centuries-old scenery, which even included defeats and suicides¹⁹. It is clear now that the story of love and death, of *éros* and *thánatos*, whose main players are those two martyrs of a cause that was to be reborn periodically, like a Phoenix, gets

¹⁸ Paris, 1985, 16-19.

¹⁹ By the way, if I am allowed to introduce a little bit of humour in this significant hedonic tragedy, it is worth remembering that, in accordance with the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Cleopatra in fact “was attractive rather than beautiful”, that is to say, more aesthetic than canonical. Therefore, who knows if tragedy could have been avoided if the reverse would have been the case?.

stronger in Wilde's mind as an illustrating lesson questioning all the existing "Camma models"²⁰.

At this stage, it seems unavoidable to get back in our path and wonder: What about Plutarch? What is precisely his role in all this Wilde's poetic exercise of confirmation of the values of aestheticism? Certainly, we can start from the following evidence: Wilde proves his good knowledge of that extensive mosaic of Plutarch's reflections and proposals, which constitute the *Moralia*, and the Irish writer, as many others like him, gets closer to it on the search for both information and "humanistic doctrine". The aim of this short essay is not to define the distinctive features of Plutarch's ethics, if such a thing were possible, him being such an encyclopaedic, eclectic author, and, above all, such a proficient maker of an ethic framework of multiple references, as it is widely known. What is important is to turn philosophic reflection into a guide for existence and, in this sense, Camma represents just one more paradigm mixing strength, courage and temperance, to be followed in order to mould our spirit and to keep all kinds of annoying, undesirable somatic outbursts at bay. At least Stoicism and Platonism help him in his duty of giving reasons to several abdications and ascetic exercises. Since Plutarch is not Plotinus, and is nowhere near his annihilator-of-the-corporal-aspect-of-human-nature "mysticism", Wilde is well aware that the writer of Chaeronea opens the door to joy, to pleasure and to a long list of needs of men and women living here and now –*Amatorius* would prove this in a reliable way. But Wilde, at this stage, is holding a sort of pagan crusade in favour of *hedoné*, and everything implying a heroic renounce seems to him *antiaesthetic* by definition, ugly, sorrowful, and ethically reprehensible. Undoubtedly, we may think he is doing so because of an exclusive verbal, spiritual radicalism, but, in my opinion, if his whole work, with a variety of periods of "tenor" and "baritone" aestheticism, is carefully analysed, maybe we can all be made to believe – as I do- that he is satisfied with far less. In fact, he feels disgust at the inner tearing imposed to humans by the age-old metaphysical barbarism, real as life itself –or as real as the moralist Victorianism he had to live in and endure-, condemning them to a distressing experience of their corporeality²¹. He is determined to denounce it by all means, and Plutarch's Camma, despite being worth of deserving his attention, is nothing more than an excuse to insist on the same. In other instances, though, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* –and, as I mentioned before, despite the revision of aestheticism it already means-, he bequeaths us an accurate *lógos* of his particular creed –(Lord Henry Wotton speaks again):

"Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul²². Soul and body, body and soul –how mysterious they were! There was animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality. The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade. Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the psychical impulse began? How shallow were the arbitrary definitions of ordinary psychologists! And yet how difficult to decide between the claims of the various schools! Was the soul a shadow seated in the house of sin? Or was the body really in the soul, as Giordano Bruno thought? The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with matter was a mystery also"²³.

²⁰ Wilde seems to be in love with this topic, since in 'Ravenna' and in this case speaking of a palace and George Gordon, Lord Byron, he writes (according to the O. U. P. edition of his poems (2000): "Byron dwelt here in love and revelry/for two long years – a second Anthony, who of the world another Actium made!"

²¹ It is worth remembering that the title of the first chapter of M. Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* is still "Nous les Victoriens".

²² Page 26 Penguin Classics, 1985.

²³ Pages 65-6 Penguin Classics, 1985.

Therefore, I dare say that, to end up talking about a mystery that many humans surely perceive as such, and to do so on the occasion of an essay to be read a few days off the hundredth anniversary of his death, is, if you do not find it too arrogant on my side, a good way of paying him a small tribute.