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Nuanced Translations: The Search for Unity between Text, Image, and Self in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales

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Nuanced Translations:

The search for unity between text, image, and self in Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales

By Jana Purington

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in English

Linfield College

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Introduction

Meaning no disrespect to Signet Classics, I do not think Oscar Wilde would commend their compilation of his two books of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). Its pages lack the spacious cleanliness of the former and its cover bares none of the latter’s “delicate tracing, arabesques, and massings of many coral-red lines on a ground of white ivory, the colour-effect culminating in certain high guilt notes, and being made still more pleasurable by the overlapping band of moss-green cloth that holds the book together,”¹ the qualities Wilde named in defense of its beauty. Whatever notes the childishly rendered bird and harpy on the outside of my paperback manage to hit must, I imagine, ring flat as to the man lounging under the tree as they do to me (figure 1).

I find this underwhelming design especially disappointing in a text whose author took such care with the look of the original and understood that a book enters the eye before the brain can begin to process the words printed, that a pleasing visual experience will thus enrich the subsequent reading experience. Wilde’s response to publisher Arthur Humphreys in 1894 reflects the opinion he held in 1881 with the release of his first book of verse, *Poems*: “I don’t want a ‘railway bookstall’ book. In England a paper-covered book gets so dirty and untidy: I should like a book as dainty as John Gray’s by Ricketts.”² Eventually he did. After working with Walter Crane on *The Happy Prince*, Wilde began a partnership with the artist Charles Ricketts, which lasted through the rest of Wilde’s writing career.


Few scholars have invested much time studying Wilde’s fairy tales, focusing primarily on their place within the fairy tale genre, their morality, and queer themes latent in the stories. Fewer still examine them as visual, rather than merely literary, texts. Many of these ways of understanding his tales provide valuable insight, convincing interpretations, worthwhile avenues for thought, but by considering the artistic elements of Wilde’s work, we can appreciate the cross fertilization of his abstract, theoretical Aesthetic principles and the tangible objects he produces. Even among the subset of critics who do emphasize the visual aspects of Wilde’s books, attention diverts from the fairy tales to other works, particularly Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrations for *Salome* (1894) and Ricketts’ success with *The Sphinx* (1894). Michael Brooks, Nicholas Frankel, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, scholars studying the visual components of Wilde’s books as well their literary ones, hold *The Sphinx* as the best demonstration linguistic and pictorial elements functioning in tandem. Ricketts learned from his perceived failings with *A House of Pomegranates*: he stripped away any excess detail, making the texture of the handmade paper a visual element; he printed the poem all in capitals to weigh down the words so that the illustrations would not overpower the letters; he drew from multiple styles to render his drawing as eclectic as Wilde’s wide-ranging examples of vice. *The Sphinx*, furthermore, was conceived as an art book, whereas *The Happy Prince* and *A House of Pomegranates*, though carefully designed, must strive to realize Wilde’s artistic intent without the liberty that poetry, the art book designation, and a presumably exclusively adult audience allow. But these constraints make the volumes more interesting. The fairy tale genre lends itself to didacticism which places more thematic weight on his beliefs on art, the individual, and wholeness and, because we expect to read

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picture book illustrations with as much ease as we do the prose, they raise the issue of how image and word should correspond in a way that *The Sphinx* does not.

The search for harmony characterized the Aesthetics movement, and Wilde's desire for at-one-ness permeated not only his writing and artistic sensibility, but informs his thinking about the individual's ideal state of being: as he says in *De Profundis* (1905), "What the artist is looking for is the mode of existence in which the soul and body are one and indivisible."4 In realizing the self, in making it whole, life mimics art. Wilde strove to unite the pictures and prose, along with the tales' themes of oneness between body and soul, and self-realization in conjunction with one another. I aim to treat this paper as I would this book: starting from the outside and working inward, looking first at the book as an object, then, lifting the cover and looking at how text and image function together on the page, and finally, by reading the stories themselves. By considering his ideals of decorative harmony present in the book's physicality and in the marriage between illustration and language, we gain a fuller understanding Wilde's unifying vision.

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The Sum Total

"It is not merely in art that the body is the soul...form is everything."

-Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist"

Dorian Gray understood the book as an object whose exterior affects its reader as does its interior. He "could not free himself from the influence of" that little yellow volume and so ordered "no less than nine large-paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods and the changing fancies of a nature over which he seemed, at times, to have almost entirely lost control." 5 That a man born of Oscar Wilde's mind should go to such lengths to align his surroundings with his temperament makes perfect sense, for in "The Critic as Artist" Wilde states that

The art that is frankly decorative is the art to live with...The marvels of design stir the imagination. In the mere loveliness of the materials employed there are latent elements of culture...By its deliberate rejection of Nature as the ideal of beauty, as well as of the imitative method of the ordinary painter, decorative art not merely prepares the soul for the reception of true imaginative work, but develops in it that sense of form which is the basis of creative no less than of critical achievement. 6 And books have a decorative function. When resting on a shelf or unopened in the hand, we experience a book only through its cover and its binding, the lettering of its title, its

overall design. Coordinating the visual elements of the object encapsulates Wilde's and Aestheticism's larger project of harmony within the self.

The state of the book during the 19th century was, by Wilde's estimation, regrettable. Just as ornate knick-knacks and overwrought furniture crowded Victorian rooms, multiple typefaces and florid decorations competed for attention on the page, haphazardly lain lines of type ran toward the margins allowing little room to breathe, illustrations often looked like fine works complete and independent from the text they accompanied. Nineteenth century book design tried, in short, to impress by each composite part, not by the effect of their sum. Wilde fell into this trap with *Poems*, his first published book of verse and his first attempt to rectify contemporary stylistic blunders, as Michael Brooks notes in “Oscar Wilde, Charles Ricketts, and the Art of the Book.” While the white parchment covers featured a pleasing gold floral pattern, the inside pages bore a clutter of types which, in vying with one another for the reader’s attention, subvert their innate qualities and detract from the overall layout.

His later endeavors, however, yielded results more consistent with his aim to create a book whose appearance corresponded with its contents. Designed by Walter Crane, a prominent illustrator and principal figure in the decorative movement, Wilde's 1888 volume of fairy stories, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, achieves greater unity, with its clean and sparse arrangement. A panel containing a figure crouching before a flaming orb is stamped in black ink stamped onto the cream cover. Below the image, red type growing progressively smaller gives the title, author, illustrators, and year of publication in an inverted pyramid centered above the printer's monogram (figure 2). Inside, thick margins enclose the words top and bottom and push them off-center, nearer
(fig. 2. *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* designed by Walter Crane in 1888. Source: https://www.baumanrarebooks.com/)
(fig. 3. A House of Pomegranates designed by Charles Ricketts in 1891. Source: https://s3.amazonaws.com/picollecta-pics-large/M1371/PIC129465051/TJLYKVBPPYY.jpg)
the bound edge. Neat letter-spacing keeps the stories in perfect rectangles that pair well with the defined borders of Crane’s full page plates and his fellow illustrator’s, Jacomb Hood, insets at the head of each tale.

Although visually successful, *The Happy Prince* did not lead Wilde and Crane to a lasting collaborative relationship like that between Wilde and Charles Ricketts, who decorated the second book of fairy tales, *A House of Pomegranates*, with his artistic partner, Charles Shannon. Ricketts submitted work for Wilde in 1888 when he contributed illustrations for *The Women's World*, where Wilde worked as editor, but their friendship – and partnership – began a year later when Ricketts sent him a copy of an art and literary journal called *The Dial* that he and Shannon produced. As the quality of the cover, vignettes, and organization for the their first issue demonstrated, Ricketts and Shannon shared Wilde's interest in medievalism and innovating book design. After that, save *Salome* (1894), Wilde could accurately say that the pair “decorated all my books for me.”

*A House of Pomegranates* was much bolder than its predecessor. Whereas injections of color accented neutral tones on *The Happy Prince*'s cover, beige cloth peeked through the negative space in the red-orange and gold design for Wilde's second volume of stories. A gilt peacock, fruit basket, and fountain surround framed title at the top middle. The natural forms that climb into the title box stop at the cover's base to clear a space for “Oscar Wilde,” written in the same red hue like another type of grass. Both author and title – embellished by flowers – appear in gold on the green binding (figure 3). Not all responded well to the more daring design. A critic for *The Speaker* likened the object on the left - a peacock - to “an Indian club with a house-painter's brush on the top of it” and

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remarked that the fountain to the right better depicted "a chimney-pot hat with a sponge in it." 8 Wilde defended his book in *The Speaker*, maintaining that the individual components of the design were not as important as their combined effect, that the "delicate tracing, arabesques, and massings of many coral-red lines on a ground of white ivory...band[ed by the] moss-green cloth that holds the book together," 9 but constituted the true beauty of the book. A reviewer for *The Magazine of Art* found fault in his justification:

> Mr. Wilde attempts to show that it does not matter what the details of a design suggest...and has nothing to do with the aesthetic quality and value of the design; and this would have been true had Mr. Wilde been speaking of form used in repetition to produce a pattern. Almost any form can be used for this purpose, and a good result obtained; but the..objects [are] separate from the pattern on the cover. They are large, independent features, standing by themselves, and are emphasized by being in gold. Under such circumstances it matters very considerably what the forms may be, though, if the form be beautiful, the object it represents may be a matter of indifference; but, as clever as Mr. Wilde may be, it will puzzle him to discover a single beautiful line or form about this disputed portion of his design." 10

Whether or not Ricketts' cover ornaments are as lovely as Wilde would have, or as disruptive as their naysayers hold, Ricketts realized that the defects in overall book design stemmed largely from the "discord between our pictorial illustrations and our

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8 Rev. of *A House of Pomegranates*, *The Speaker*, November 28, 1891, 648.
unpictorial type”\(^{11}\) and that the remedy lay in “decorative ornament that will go with type and printing, and give to each page a harmony and unity of effect.”\(^{12}\) Crane achieved this, in some of his work, by incorporating the text into his imagery so that the characteristics of the lines in the type and in the illustration relate.\(^{13}\) Though Ricketts agreed that such synchronicity was necessary, he also, like Wilde, saw the Paterian value of the book as a visually pleasing object for its own sake. As Aesthetes, they shared an end goal of a harmonious product with Arts and Crafts practitioners, such as Crane and William Morris. But where Wilde and Ricketts prized the beautiful book for its ability to redeem its craftsman from the status of mindless factory drudge and to lift the owner by stimulating their appreciation of beauty, “Arts-and-crafts decorators,” according to critic Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, “saw art as a fundamentally social, rather than individualistic, activity.”\(^{14}\)

Wilde’s quest for unity extended beyond the verbal and pictorial, and his fairy tales have a particular aural quality. One can hardly wonder at his finely tuned ear. Both his father, William, and his mother, Jane “Speranza,” exposed him to narrative style through their storytelling, the former’s work as a folklorist and the latter’s poetry. Early experience further honed his skill with the spoken word, for as a child, his parents, famous for their conversation, would allow Oscar to sit at the dinner table and, though not allowed to speak, me must have absorbed some of their verbal acuity for he later claimed that “this childhood training in holding his tongue...was responsible for his


\(^{12}\) Ibid.


wagging it so successfully in his maturity.”¹⁵ Between his natural aptitude and formative exposure, Wilde made a name for himself largely as a raconteur before an author. His first forays into the literary world were in poetry, and he brings those concerns to the fairy tales, writing, “The rhythmical value of prose has never yet been fully tested; I hope to do some work in the genre, as soon as I have sung my Sphinx to sleep, and found a trisyllabic rhyme for catafalque.”¹⁶

Its simplicity makes the fairy tale an ideal framework upon which to hang more elaborate imagery and language. Naomi Wood spots Wilde “[m]aking use of aural conventions already well established by the fairy-tale convention, such as ordering events and actions in threes, repeating key phrases and images in order to clarify structure, and using biblical diction and style, the tales are made to be heard, meant to entice.”¹⁷ Many of the stories feature lengthy descriptions of marvela, such as the accounts exotic lands in “The Fisherman and His Soul”; the sentence after sentence of gleaming gems, precious metals, and fantastic beasts may not be necessary to construct a mental image of the place, but Wilde brings music to the Mermaid’s song of the Sea King’s castle “with a roof of clear emerald, and pavement of bright pearl; and the gardens of the sea where great filigrane fans of coral wave all day long, and the fish dart about like silver birds,”¹⁸ of his kingdom where “the cuttlefish who live in the sides of cliffs and stretch out their long black arms, and can make night come when they will it.”¹⁹ Wilde voiced many of his stories before transcribing them; in 1885, for example, he devised the “The Happy

¹⁸ Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 131.
¹⁹ Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 132.
Prince" to entertain a group of friends during a visit to Cambridge. Though Wilde took such pains with the visuals of the books, many of those familiar with both the stories-as-spoken and the stories-as-written felt that they lost some of their vitality on the page. Yeats remarked that “the further Wilde goes from the method of speech, from improvisation, from sympathy with some especial audience, the less original he is, the less accomplished.” That the stories did not retain all of their charm likely attests to Wilde’s skill as a speaker, and perhaps once penned the language becomes to some tastes overwrought and heavy with adjectives, but whether the images conjured be on the page or in the mind, they match the style of the prose. This - the synthesis of verbal and pictorial language into a cohesive whole - mirrors the endeavor to wed the basic physical components of the book and became a central focus, especially for Ricketts, in producing the illustrations.

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How Word and Image Meet

Wilde said he had no more intention of catering to the British public’s taste\(^{21}\) with his fairy tales than he did young readers, and the same holds true in regards to critics and *A House of Pomegranates*’ art, rebutting one negative review printed in the *Speaker* with the assertion that “there are only two people in the world whom it is absolutely necessary that the cover should please. One is Mr. Ricketts, who designed it, the other is myself, whose book it binds. We both admire it immensely!”\(^{22}\) He expressed equal satisfaction with Ricketts’s pictures, though they too, did not garner unanimous praise. The *Athenaeum* claimed that “for combined ugliness and obscurity it would be hard, we imagine, to beat [Shannon and Ricketts]...the grotesque black-and-white woodcuts are hideous to behold. It is, perhaps, as well that the book is not meant for the ‘British Child’; for it would certainly make him scream, according to his disposition, with terror or amusement.”\(^{23}\) Whether or not Ricketts’ images actually carry the power to spark such violent reactions in young readers, one must agree with the *Saturday Review*’s critic who said “they suit the text—a compliment which we are frequently unable to pay to much more commonplace instances of the art of book illustration.”\(^{24}\) Given that the magazine that condemned Ricketts’s illustrations as horrific called Walter Crane’s “charming,” this sameness in tone explains why Wilde’s collaboration with Ricketts outlasted that with Crane: Wilde and Ricketts’s sense of the importance of good design came from the same

\(^{21}\) Written in a letter to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in December 1891.

\(^{22}\) Wilde, Oscar, Letter to The Editor of the *Speaker*, December 5, 1891. *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* 502.

\(^{23}\) “Review of Oscar Wilde’s A House of Pomegranates” *The Athenaeum*, February 6, 1892, 177.

\(^{24}\) “Rev. of A House of Pomegranates,” *Saturday Review*, February 6, 1892, 160.
place. Wilde sought the same harmony in the interplay between text and image as he did the total composition, both of the book and of the self.

Crane’s work for The Happy Prince did not incite near as much discussion as A House of Pomegranates, largely due to its relative tameness. This, however, fits the text. The “charming,” but unremarkable, drawings better suit the stories that the Athenaeum says contain “a piquant touch of contemporary satire...so delicately introduced that the illusion is not destroyed and a child would delight in the tales without being worried or troubled by their application, while children of larger growth will enjoy and profit by them”25 than they would the second volume’s “fleshly style of...writing...[that] wander[s] off too often in to...'Sinburnian' [sic] ecstasy.”26

The contrast between illustrational styles and their relationship to the tales nicely fits into the theoretical framework Lorraine Kooistra lays out in The Artist as Critic. She claims that illustrators have five different ways of visually rendering a text: quotation, impression, parody, answering, and cross-dressing. Artists working in impression and answering both reject the conventional view of illustration as “occup[y]ing a secondary and supportive position... marginal, peripheral, detachable...only gains meaning in relation to the written word [and] can be ignored or omitted without loss.”27 They differ in the extent to which they believe the pictures should diverge from the prose. For Crane this was little. On the basis of Crane’s oeuvre, Kooistra contends that he worked in “[t]he answering approach to image / text relations, which aims to produce a harmonious collaboration in which the picture maintains its independence within a cooperative

26 “Review of Oscar Wilde’s A House of Pomegranates” in The Pall Mall Gazette, 30 Nov. 1891.
27 Kooistra, The Artist as Critic, 9.
relationship."\(^{28}\) While Crane may have produced more free-standing work for other texts, his drawings for *The Happy Prince*, however, seem to more in line Kooistra's *quotation*, in which the illustrator mirrors what the text describes. Each title plate has a clear referent in story. In the plate for "The Remarkable Rocket," the reader can understand, before having read beyond the title, the scene as it appears in the image exactly as it is told in the writing: two boys sleep as firework sputters so feebly its burst fails to rouse them (figure 4).

In "Oscar Wilde, Charles Ricketts, and the Art of the Book," Michael Brooks juxtaposes the image at the start of the "The Happy Prince" (figure 5) and *A House of Pomegranates*' title page (figure 6) to demonstrate that "[w]here Crane imitates Wilde's story, Ricketts creates a visual counterpart to his style."\(^{29}\) From his pedestal the Happy Prince - a rendition of Donatello’s St. George - and the Swallow overlook their city and its European, Renaissance architecture executed in linear perspective. The woman featured at the started of *A House of Pomegranates*, as well as being less realistically drawn, exists in an unnaturally orderly garden upon which real time has no bearing and perspective a weaker grip; “the claustrophobic crowding of details”\(^{30}\) mimic the occasions when Wilde’s writing can read like a "catalogue of a high art furniture dealer."\(^{31}\)

\(^{28}\) Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, 17.
\(^{29}\) Brooks, "Oscar Wilde, Charles Ricketts, and the Art of the Book," 309.
\(^{30}\) Ibid.
(fig. 4. Walter Crane illustration for "The Remarkable Rocket," 1888. Source: https://archive.org/stream/happyprinceother90wild#page/132/mode/2up)
(fig. 5. Walter Crane illustration for “The Happy Prince,” 1888. Source: https://archive.org/stream/happyprinceother00wild#page/4/mode/2up )
Ricketts did not stay within the confines of the text, but drew from it. Wilde said of his pictures: "He was delicious on the illustrations, that are not taken from anything in the book, only suggested by it – for he holds that literature is more graphic than art, and should therefore never be illustrated in itself, only by what it evokes." His images match the decadence of the language and clearly draw inspiration from the text they accompany, but are not exact reflections. Such of autonomous illustrations typify impression, where "the artist's principal objective is to chronicle subjective impressions of the reading experience." The pictures' independence was what Wilde most appreciated in them. Ricketts's illustrations fulfilled the ideals of artistic purity achieved through the documentation of one's response to a work Wilde sets out in "The Critic as Artist." Just as the critic's assessment is "the purest form of personal impression, [and] in its way more creative than creation, [because] it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing," the perfect illustration does not "labour under the 'shackles of verisimilitude', but rather deals with the verbal text 'simply as a starting point for new creation'" before becoming completely itself.

But Wilde did not always like the results of such unfettered pictorial renditions of his writing. Although Ricketts considered his illustrations for Wilde's 1894 play the Sphinx "his best work as an illustrator," the author disagreed, telling Ricketts that "your drawings are not of your best. You have seen them through your intellect, not your temperament." Kooistra claims Wilde was wrong on this point, describing how the

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32 Field, Michael (pseud. of Katherine Bradley and Edith), Works and Days (London: J. Murray, 1933), 139.
33 Kooistra, The Artist as Critic, 18.
34 Wilde, Oscar, "The Critic as Artist" in Intentions, 134-5.
35 Kooistra, The Artist as Critic, 17.
36 Qtd. in Kooistra, The Artist as Critic, 98
“large expanses of blank page and the delicacy of the designs respond primarily to the disposition of type on paper [while] the tension of Ricketts's sinuous arabesques also comments on the intricate knottings and interlacings of Wilde's couplets”\(^ {37}\) personify the unified Book Beautiful.

It may be that Wilde would only be pleased if his vision did have some correlation with the artist's. The one book Ricketts did not design for Wilde in the 1890's was *Salome* (1893), and was instead done by the controversial and irreverent artist Aubrey Beardsley. In 1893, Wilde inscribed an original French copy of the play for Beardsley with: “For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance.”\(^ {38}\) Soon after Beardsley published in *The Studio* magazine *J'ai Baise Ta Bouche Iokanaan, J'ai Baise Ta Bouche* (figure 7), a pen and ink drawing of Salome holding up Iokanaan's severed head made in tribute to the play, which so pleased Wilde and John Lane, Wilde's publisher at The Bodley Head, that he received the commission to illustrate the rest of the play. Once hired, it appears that, in Wilde's view, Beardsley lost sight of that invisible dance, for Wilde objected to the work. It was Beardsley drew in the spirit of rebellious autonomy, in *Parody*, rather than *impression*, showing a struggle for dominance between text and image, author and illustrator. Whereas Ricketts merely sets down in pictorial form his interpretation of the stories *A House of Pomegranates*, Beardsley takes the same liberty with adherence to the text in *Salome*, but takes his personal expression further by adding a critical edge. One of Wilde's contemporaries claimed that he disapproved of Beardsley's work because the Japanesque images bore no stylistic connection to the Byzantine text. But because

\(^{37}\) Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, 98.

\(^{38}\) Holland and Hart-Davis, eds., *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 578.
Japanism pervaded aesthetic art and can be seen in Ricketts's satisfactory illustrations, it is more likely Wilde took issue with the content "My Herod is like the Herod of Gustav Moreau – wrapped in his jewels and sorrows. My Salome is a mystic, the sister of the Salammbo, a Sainte Therese who worships the moon; dear Aubrey's designs are like the naughty scribbles a precocious schoolboy makes on the margins of his copybooks." Kooistra makes an in-depth analysis of Beardsley's work for Salome and terms them "visual critiques [that] are incisive relations of both the texts 'unwritten thoughts' – its subversive / textual themes – and its 'invisible dance' of representation." She understands Beardsley's designs' similarity with stage conventions as an attempt to parody performance while criticizing the text; his diminishing the fierce, masculine, living Salome to a beautiful dead woman illuminates Wilde's divided loyalties between progressive sexuality and patriarchal hegemony. Beardsley embodied the themes, but in so doing included a contrary, competing narrative. Wilde, then, it seems, approves of independent illustration, so long as the artist's interpretation shares some resemblance to his own.

Through his work, Beardsley provided a free-standing counter text, Ricketts strove for a more delicate interaction. In "Faithful Infidelity: Charles Ricketts' Illustrations For Two Of Oscar Wilde's Poems In Prose," Jeremiah Mercurio describes how Ricketts refuted Wilde's belief that verbal language out-performs the visual, and in a silent rebuttal, Ricketts had to find a balance between illustrating his interpretation of the text and the text itself. As, "[i]n Wilde's opinion, there is no need for an illustration to reproduce the written text because language can engender an image better than visual

39 Qtd Kooistra, The Artist as Critic, 131.
40 Kooistra, The Artist as Critic, 132.
(fig. 7. Aubrey Beardsley, *J'ai Baise Ta Bouche Iokanaan, J'ai Baise Ta Bouche*, 1893. Source: http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/sites/default/files/2.e.456-1899_610.jpg)
art,41 Ricketts had to “faithfully represent at least some of Wilde’s text”42 to rebel against him. The image on “The Fisherman and His Soul”’s opening page, for instance, marks a subtle refusal to be constrained by the text (figure 8). Rather than drawing the Mermaid as Wilde describes her - a helpless creature pulled up in the Fisherman’s net, wriggling in his grasp to return to the water - Ricketts’ depiction speaks to the sensuality that permeates the narrative. With a candid glance at the viewer, the Mermaid acknowledges her sexuality; she appears more like what the Priest imagines the Sea-Folk to be: a siren who lured the man into the depths, the watery cousin of the witch who give the knife that severs the Fisherman’s soul. Her hips, furthermore, sits at water level and, should the tide sink a fraction lower, will expose her genitals. Were she a mermaid a low tide would expose nothing more than a stretch of scales, but behind the curves of the waves, Ricketts draws a straight line from the center of her pelvis topped by hatching, indicating legs and pubic hair. The Fisherman had no chance of sexual gratification with a mermaid, but by allowing the possibility of her humanity, Ricketts gives form to the sexual undertones in the language. Such a clear departure from Wilde’s story could speak to the “innovative reconfigurations of the relationship between text and image”43 Ricketts displayed in his work for Wilde, for at first glance these details are hardly noticeable, yet their implications reveal how he chose to recreate the essence of the tale rather than literally translate the fiction Wilde writes.

Scholars Brooks and David Peters Corbett examine, like Mercurio, the fraught relationship between Wilde and Ricketts as independent artists and collaborators. Corbett

42 Ibid.
argues that economic pressures made individual artistic identity essential to making art a viable profession; Ricketts "termed [the nineteenth century] the period of competitive painting, i.e. competition to secure attention against other artists, other aims, and other schools." Yet collaboration, by nature, discourages autonomy. Because Wilde thought language superior to visuals, he allowed Ricketts a greater degree of artistic license, letting his writing serve as a basis for new work. To accept this freedom to draw inspiration from the text and channel it in visual mode would be to admit the subordinate position of the image, thus Ricketts was caught between giving up his artistic autonomy at the expense of extolling the power of visual art or sacrificing his identity as an individual artist to vindicate illustration. According to Corbett, Ricketts chose the latter, "Ricketts does depart from the text in a multitude of minor ways but... By taking seriously his role as illustrator Ricketts keeps to his position that the function of art is revelation of what is present, not the creation of what is not." Minute discrepancies between the text and the image, such as those in figure TK, show Ricketts making a tentative step towards autonomy – he transforms the pleading mermaid hauled out of the sea into sexually empowered woman, – but ultimately his pictures do support the text; at first glance his drawings look like straight interpretations of the stories.

The debate over the ambiguity of whether Ricketts' illustrations reflect the tales or depart from them, resist or support Wilde, suits the text itself. The controversy surrounding the making of the book matches its ambivalent reception. In the same way, the fidelity and ready legibility of Walter Crane's images for The Happy Prince mirrors the less elaborately embroidered prose. His faithfulness to Wilde's stories, however, does

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not constitute an act of a submission as it does for Ricketts, for if Corbett is right and a need to establish a name was one of the motivating factors behind Ricketts' defiance, then Crane's position as one of Britain's best illustrators meant that he could approach Wilde's book with traditional notions of accurate depiction. The argument that Ricketts aimed to produce illustrations that surpassed their text is, though, to ignore what Ricketts himself said of the ideal union between word and image:

> illustration begins to dominate and becomes something apart from the text... But this is not right; for not every illustration, no matter how admirable it may seem in itself, is suitable as the ornamentation of a book that is conceived of in a harmonious fashion. These illustrations, once properly related to the typographical forms, should constitute in the set-up of the pages that they are to decorate the high note, the luminous point within the harmony of the page, without, however, being separate from it.46

Unlike Corbett, who stipulates that Ricketts' artistic relationship to Wilde was an adversarial one, Kooistra maintains that the images' departure from the text – or their not departing enough – is not a subversive act, but rather the perfect marriage of writer and illustrator. She cites Ricketts' belief in the Book Beautiful as prove against his aiming to assert the power of the image over that of the word, which would compromise the book as 'a whole in which each portion is exquisite in itself yet co-ordinate.'47 _A House of Pomegranate_'s exterior, paired with sensuous illustrations, the figurative prose, the type, and the page layout harmonize to create a unified whole. Ricketts, then, may not be playing a subtle game of one-upmanship.

47 Kooistra, _The Artist as Critic_, 94.
Working without the intention to translate verbal into visual made Ricketts' illustrations more compelling, more nuanced. Compared to the 1928 edition of *A House of Pomegranates* with images by Ken Kutcher, Ricketts gives us a fuller understanding of the story without repeating verbatim anything from it. At the start of the story, we see a nude, beautiful young man bathing at the edge of a pool surrounded by birds and roses and statues (figure 9). The surroundings are in keeping with the luxury of the palace, his sensual pose latent eroticism in the multiple descriptions of the fair pages and in the hours the Young King spent “gazing, as one in a trance, at a Greek gem carved with the figure of Adonis.”48 His glance into the water, at his own reflection reflects the narcissism that stems from his devotion to beauty. Kutcher, instead, dresses the Young King in decadent 18th century French costume, Beardsley-esque in the refined line work, intricate detailing, and use of dotted lines (figure 10). He stands in the forest where he walks with Death and looks in the mirror and learns that he is the King for whom the slaves and laborers in his dreams have suffered. He shows us what we have already imagined for ourselves, imparting no additional insight or interpretation.

Kutcher’s *quotatio*n illustrations are particularly unsuccessful in the “The Birthday of the Infanta,” when he shows the dwarf looking aghast at his reflection (figure 11). He has given the dwarf a hunched back, and though he does not have a handsome face, it is not one that could break a heart. The imagination, if left to itself, would surely supply a more gruesome visage. In this version, we see too much of the Dwarf, and his checked pants and knee socks contradict his origin in the forest, where he was so isolated that he could remain ignorant of his monstrous appearance. Ricketts keeps his Dwarf in the shadows half hidden by a leafy bough and, though not especially ghastly, the

48 Wilde, *Complete Fairy Tales*, 80.
(fig. 9. Charles Ricketts, illustration for "The Young King," 1891. Source: personal photograph by the author)
And he grew pale, and said: "For what king?"
The pilgrim answered: "Look in this mirror, and thou shalt see him."
It was a monster, the most grotesque monster he had ever beheld.

(fig. 11. Ken Kutcher, illustration for “The Birthday of the Infanta,” 1928. Source: personal photograph by the author)
beginnings of a rough, fur tunic mark the Dwarf as a thing of the wild, outside the cultivated nature of the sun lit garden (figure 12). We can be convinced that he would possess so little self-awareness as to wholeheartedly to believe his delusion of having won the infanta's love.

Ricketts' illustrations exercise the reader's imagination, and therein lies their beauty. Not only do they have aesthetic merit, they convey a parallel narrative harmonizes with the prose, matching the evocative diction and syntax in the subject and quality of line. No tale marries text and image - two distinct but joined entities - better than "The Fisherman and His Soul," which, in the handling of the story, demonstrates Naomi Wood's point that

although the child in this period was thought best kept away from experience, especially sensual experience, Wilde provocatively insists his child readers experience Paterian 'stirring of the senses, [with] strange dyes, strange colors' (Pater 237), and so give themselves over to a sensual pleasure not linked with the moral of the tale, or linked with it in particularly decadent ways, by appealing to the curious, the alien, and the pagan.49

The reader is meant to absorb through osmosis sensual experience, to let these surrogate actors know feelings outside their lived reality and to learn by their example emotions that contribute to the formation of a whole person.

49 Wood, "Creating the sensual child: Paterian aesthetics, pederasty, and Oscar Wilde's fairy tales."
As Much Body As Soul

Wilde’s most famous writing about the sundered body and soul, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was not his first on the subject. Earlier that year, the novel debuted in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, “The Fisherman and His Soul” appeared in *A House of Pomegranates*, and though he would later say that his second attempt surpassed the initial, the fairy tale’s illustrations reinforce the theme in ways the novel does not. Just as it examines the bond between self and spirit more closely than any other of Wilde’s tales, so does “The Fisherman and His Soul” best embody the relationship between text and image. Critics did not reach a census regarding the congruity between Wilde’s writing and Ricketts’ pictures; one remarked that the “book is as delightful as it looks”\(^{50}\) while another holds that, in terms of “quaintness,”\(^{51}\) Ricketts outdoes himself, those these pictorial gems sit amid Wilde’s tiresomely detailed storytelling. Russell Hoban remembers when he, as a child of eight, discovered the story “The Wildeness of the prose [burst] upon me in widescreen, glorious color,”\(^{52}\) so vivid was the writing. It is “the most striking example of this manner [of writing and]...impresses one as having been written with no other purpose than the realization, through the medium of pictorial language, of some huge and intricate scheme of decorative beauty”\(^{53}\) and Ricketts, with the strokes of his pen, captures the ornateness Wilde establishes with words. Physical and abstract - visuals and language, body and soul - have equal importance in creating a unified whole.

\(^{50}\) “Review of Oscar Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates*,” *The Speaker*, November 28, 1891, 648.

\(^{51}\) “Review of Oscar Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates*,” *The Pall Mall Gazette*, November 30, 1891.


One must admit to the agreement between the pictures and the prose. They are both of the "fleshly school."\textsuperscript{54} That the Fisherman should be enchanted by the Mermaid comes as no surprise after Wilde extols her ivory body, the "silver and pearl" of her tail, her breasts as cold as the "waves dashed over" them, the "salt glisten[ing] upon her eyelids."\textsuperscript{55} Ricketts draws in the same timbre Wilde writes. Because of the "ultra-aestheticism of the pictures," the Pall Mall Gazette deems the work "unsuitable for children."\textsuperscript{56} Not an unfair assessment considering Ricketts' taste for the sensual. Like Wilde, he does not shy away from adult passions, but adorns the pages with figures drawn in the Pre-Raphaelite vein in various romantic attitudes, often amid natural settings made neat and tame in the manner typical of Aesthetic artists. His illustrations for "The Fisherman and His Soul," more than those for any other of the stories, embody the sensuality of Wilde's writing, for not only do Ricketts' characters frequently appear in sexualized stances and scant clothing, he also depicts romance. The tale concludes with a scene of the Fisherman, his immaculate body bare save some encircling strands of seaweed, and the Mermaid washed up on shore "clasped"\textsuperscript{57} in each other's arms, with contented smiles upon their lips before a host of dismayed onlookers (figure 13). By posing the lifeless couple so as to reflect the strength of their union – even without control of their bodies they remain together – Ricketts reinforces their adoration of each other that builds throughout the narrative. He arrives through different means to the theme Wilde inlays throughout the story: forbidden love.

\textsuperscript{54} "Review of Oscar Wilde's A House of Pomegranates" in The Pall Mall Gazette, 30 Nov. 1891.
\textsuperscript{55} Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 130.
\textsuperscript{56} "Review of Oscar Wilde's A House of Pomegranates" in The Pall Mall Gazette, 30 Nov. 1891.
\textsuperscript{57} Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 177.
And in the morning the sea, for it had been troubled. And with him went the monks and the musicians, and the candle-bearers, and the swing- ers of censers, and a great company.

(fig. 13. Chaules Ricketts, illustration for “The Fisherman and His Soul,” 1891. Source: personal photograph by the author)
(fig. 14. Chrales Ricketts, illustration for “The Fisherman and His Soul,” 1891. Source: personal photograph by the author)
THE FISHERMAN AND HIS SOUL

"I pray thee let me go, for I am the only daughter of a King, and my father is aged and alone."

(fig. 15. Ken Kutcher, illustration for "The Fisherman and His Soul," 1928. Source: personal photograph by the author)
While the writing in this love scene conveys a passion Ricketts captures visually, he makes sensuous moments that have no such inherent sensuality (figure 14). In the picture accompanying the Soul's second return to the Fisherman, Ricketts creates an erotic charge. Here, the Fisherman leans out of the tide, statuesque, with a sea frond placed over his groin. His soul stands above him, draped in a cloak that covers his right shoulder before spilling onto his leg, which rests raised against his staff. His thigh is about all it covers. Ricketts gives this ethereal being the same physical Grecian perfection of its master. This speaks more to the feel of the text than the words themselves, for this scene has a kind of auto/homoeroticism more in line with the suggestiveness of the story as a whole than with the actual plot. The Soul displays a deep love for the Fisherman, returning each year to try to rejoin the heart it was forced from and goes “weeping away over the marshes”\(^{58}\) after each rejection, but Ricketts sexualizes the Soul’s devotion.

Compared to Kutcher's, Ricketts's work seems fairly libidinous. On Ricketts' frontispiece for the story, which does not illustrate any particular scene, the Mermaid raises out of the water as the Fisherman, nude save only a hat and a well-placed basket, crouches beside her amid a flurry of swirling waves, composed of curving lines that hint at the art nouveau whiplash but instead end neatly in a curl (figure 8). He looks furtively to the side while she holds one of his fingers to her mouth and confronts the viewer, eyeing them coyly. Were this scene to be acted out, the languid characters would move little - maybe shifting on the rocks or turning the hand to meet a new part with a kiss. Kutcher, however, pauses them mid-action (figure 15). Instead of relaxing with his love, Kutcher’s fully clothed Fisherman triumphantly hauls the Mermaid, who he depicts as a sanitized, unsexed creature with a well defined tail and no suggestion of legs or human

\(^{58}\) Wilde, *Complete Fairy Tales*, 146.
genitalia, from the surf. Yet though Kutcher draws them in motion, they feel frozen; by keeping their gestures small and echoing the tenor of the language, the words propel Ricketts' figures and they move with the story, feel as though they carry the movements through.

Ricketts makes them seem aware of their bodies, and the Mermaid, with her direct gaze and flirtatious grin, seems particularly at ease in her own. This comfort with physicality becomes problematic in a society that thinks of the body and its pleasures as sinful and soul corrupting. The Priest champions this thinking, telling the Fisherman that “love of the body is vile...and vile and evil are the pagan things God suffers to wander through His world.”59 He undermines the soul’s metaphysical import by centering his condemnation of the Mermaid on the bodily temptations she and the other pagan creatures bring, their “whisper[ings] of...perilous joys”60 that draw his thoughts from heaven back to earth. He never explicitly says they tempt him sexually but the language he uses implies that sex is one of the things they offer and his argument that the soul’s worth transcends physical value seems perfunctory when he focuses so much on denial of carnal gratification. According to his conception of man, the spirit lives housed within flesh whose wants, if not repressed, could debase its inhabitant and he represents a conventional morality hostile to difference and “is far too concerned with the purely materialistic in his puritanical obsession with bodily propriety.”61

To Killeen, this is especially absurd when “‘love of the body’ is hardly overemphasized in this section of the text. What the Fisherman falls in love with after all are not the physical charms of the Mermaid which are hardly described beyond, but

59 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales 135.
60 Ibid.
61 Killeen, The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde, 148.
rather the opportunity she represents for another way of life, as expressed through her beautiful and exquisite tales of the underworld.\textsuperscript{62} But to say that the Mermaid's looks have no hold over the Fisherman would be to oversimplify. The Fisherman tells the Priest that "She is fairer than the morning star, and whiter than the moon. For her body I would give my soul, and for her love I would surrender heaven."\textsuperscript{63} Later, it is to see legs that the Fisherman decided to go with the Soul. Ricketts' mermaid is like a siren, like the pagan things the priest hears.

Wilde opposed Christine doctrine, as it was enforced by the Church, because it insists on relegating physical experience as an inferior mode - prone to corruption and hungry for sensation. Were it not for its earthward pull, the soul would be unencumbered in its heavenly pursuits. The mind, then, must always suppress physical wants and, by not accepting such yens as a component of a life fully lived, it creates an insurmountable breach within the self. In an effort to reconcile the corporeal and the ethereal, Wilde inverts the paradigm of pious soul and wilful body. Having fallen in love with and joined the Mermaid beneath the waves, the Fisherman's loosed Soul yearly attempts to lure his old master away from his love with recounts of strange lands. The Soul does not act as one would expect of "God's noble gift," and instead tries to corrode the Fisherman's devotion just as the pagan creatures cloy at the Priest praying in his room.

Wilde diverges from the usual assignment of purity, and casts the Soul as the wayward influence. What the Priest named "the noblest part of man"\textsuperscript{64} in fact needs the body to retain its decency, for without a heart it cannot love and travels to the farthest corners of the world to experience every possible exotic sensation. For all its pleasure

\textsuperscript{62} Killeen, \textit{The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde}, 150.
\textsuperscript{63} Wilde, \textit{Complete Fairy Tales}, 136.
\textsuperscript{64} Wilde, \textit{Complete Fairy Tales}, 134.
seeking, though, it is truer than the body, and the Fisherman grows fickle, leaving the Mermaid when he hears the Soul's story about dancing feet. The other years when the Soul returned and recounted its adventures, the Fisherman could resist because he thought love better than wisdom or riches, but after years with the Mermaid the promise of young dancing feet becomes too much. Thus contrary to the Church's belief that love of the body is vile, the Fisherman's pure love for the soulless Mermaid proves the least worldly.

By condemning the Fisherman's love for the Mermaid, Wilde establishes the Priest as the "The Fisherman and His Soul"'s closed-minded antagonist, more concerned with punitive aspects of doctrine than those stressing empathy. In spite of its unforgiving attitude towards the unorthodox, however, it also demonstrates a wisdom the Fisherman must die to realize. Unlike the merchants who refused to take the Fisherman's soul because it was "not worth a clipped piece of silver," the Priest knew the evil of severing the spirit from its mortal skin. Remonstrating the young man, the Church simultaneously represents the hypocritical morality of a religion founded in love it does not display while espousing unity between a sum and its parts. Like "[t]he young pagan, [Wilde] long[ed] to make the spirit and body one, but [found] such union elusive."

A desire for oneness permeates all of Wilde's life and work. Harmony underlies his aesthetic principles and governed the appearance of his books; he shared the Paterian belief that the greatest art's matter matches its form. This story and The Picture of Dorian Gray expressly wrestle with the consequences of divorcing soul and body. Ellmann argues throughout his touchstone biography that Catholicism constituted a lasting

65 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 136.
66 Ellmann, Oscar Wilde, 142.
preoccupation and influence, not a religious curiosity with which Wilde intermittently flirted. Much of Wilde scholarship, Ellmann maintains, underestimates the influence Catholicism had on Wilde.

Jarlath Killeen corroborates Ellmann’s view in his analysis of “The Fisherman and His Soul,” bringing the importance of Catholicism to the fore. Most of his attention he devotes to considering how elements of Irish folk-Catholic ritual manifest and their suppression under British imperialism, but ends his study as Wilde concludes his story: with emphasis on the spiritual and bodily union. He notes the inclusion of the Eucharist - “the most perfect reconciliation between body and soul, the sensuous and the spiritual...given as a gift to all the people”67 - which draws attention to the flesh / spirit dichotomy and tries to heal the spirit with the consumption of Christ’s blood and bone. Killeen describes the holy morning, three years after the Fisherman and his Mermaid had been lain in an unmarked corner of the Field of the Fullers, when “strange flowers...of curious beauty”68 from that plot of land covered the altar, and so mystified the Priest that once he performed the Eucharist he spoke of God’s love, not his wrath. This change of heart, though, does little good to the dead lovers, for after from that single bloom, “never again in the corner of the Fullers' Field grew flowers of any kind, but the field remained barren even as before,”69 and nor could the Priest’s blessing the Sea-folk bring them back after he had damned them.

Though the end of the tale takes a sorrowful turn, sorrow is necessary for the reunification of the Fisherman’s composite parts. Love for the Mermaid once left the Soul without a heart; with her gone the Fisherman’s heart broke and “through the fullness

67 Killeen, The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde, 158.
68 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 177.
69 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 179.
of his love his heart did break, the Soul found entrance and entered in, and was one with
him even as before.” 70 This keeps with the views Wilde expressed on sorrow in De
Profundis, when he defines sorrow as “the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is
at once the type and test of all great art. What the artist is always looking for is the mode
of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is
expressive of the inward in which form reveals.” 71 He explains further:

Behind joy and laughter there may be a temperament, coarse, hard, and callous.

But behind sorrow there is always sorrow. Pain, unlike pleasure, wears no mask.

Truth in art is not any correspondence between the essential idea and the
accidental existence... Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward
rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with
spirit. For this reason there is no truth comparable to sorrow. 72

Suffering reunites the Fisherman and his Soul and, as Killeen so nicely says, “It is only
through the Love wrought in brokenness that true totalisation can be achieved.” 73

70 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 176.
71 Wilde, De Profundis, 56.
72 Wilde, De Profundis, 56-7.
Beauty Born of Sorrow

In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde famously discourages his readers from drawing out of art any moral conclusions, a near impossible task when the protagonist’s misbehavior leaves his life empty and his soul withered. Wilde gave this caution three years earlier in “The Devoted Friend,” a tale that appears a tract extolling reciprocity until the very end, when the Duck says to the Linnet, “telling a story with a moral,...that is always a very dangerous thing to do.”74 On their faces, most of the stories in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates* likewise seem to have clear-cut moral dimensions. Just as Dorian Gray teaches us the dangers of pure hedonism, readers can come away from the fairy tales sure in the knowledge that heartlessness, hypocrisy, and sanctimoniousness are undesirable qualities. To leave it at that, though, would be precisely the kind of prescriptive encouragement “to be good or to conform to popular standards of behavior”75 and other such “hallmarks of puritanism Wilde dislikes.”76 So he tinkers with the genre’s typical formula. Characters usually suffer as a result of some sin; in Wilde’s imagined worlds, they must atone for kindness. By muddying the waters of moral instruction, he dismantles the prescriptive morality common in fairy tales and reconstructs his own. His precepts stress the need for empathy and individualism, self-realization and art, for wholeness.

Wilde’s concerns, though, should not become constrained as an “ism,” which, as his disavowal of them indicates, serve no one well; blanket definitions of right and wrong smother, whereas reacting with compassion and tailoring judgement as the situation

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74 Wilde, *Complete Fairy Tales*, 55.
76 Ibid.
demands allows for growth. The two texts containing anti-pedantic statements also
disparage unquestioning acceptance of the pervading moral codes. Whereas Dorian
“never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal
acceptance of creed or system...no theory of life seem[ing] to him to be of any
importance compared with life itself,” the Miller in “The Devoted Friend” adheres to a
set of “noble ideas” despite evidence that they fail to serve their intended purpose:
maintaining friendship. In speech, the Miller advocates mutual giving between friends
and, after promising Hans an old wheelbarrow, uses this premise to justify monopolizing
Hans’ time, whose garden - his source of income - then goes to ruin. Without any money
saved, Hans starves in the winter, but rather than help Hans through a difficult season, the
Miller refuses to loan him any food, saying that “Flour is one thing, and friendship is
another, and they should not be confused. Why, the words are spelt differently, and mean
quite different things.” The Miller never delivers the wheelbarrow in return for baskets
full of Hans’ primroses, it seems he consider flowers and friendship synonymous. His
system of one-sided exchange is not conducive to sustained good feeling and, in this
instance, ends the relationship when Hans wanders lamp-less into a blizzard, loses his
way, falls into a puddle and drowns. As Killeen notes, Wilde “has written a story with a
moral, a moral which highlights the discrepancy between the bourgeois rhetoric of
friendship and philanthropy and the actual practice of it.”

For Wilde, decoration and narrative within the book containing this antipreaching parable must be in dialogue with one another. Similarly, in the text, word must

78 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 42.
79 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 44.
80 Killeen, Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales, 80.
match deed. We see this at once with the egoistic Miller, who could sermonize from the start of one winter to the next without moving an inch from his imagined pulpit. The feebleminded Hans proves the inverse to be true. He, the Miller says, has "only the practice of friendship; some day you will have the theory also."81 Had Hans properly understood that in order for the theory - the assumption of reciprocity - to work, the Miller must make good on his bargains before he can fairly ask another favor, he would have realized that the promise of a wheelbarrow does not equal flowers, timber, and months of labor. Mentally, he could not fully reason through his actions. Thus ignorant, Hans could not adapt his behavior to fit his lived experience and dies for it.

Because the Miller’s hypocrisy directly causes Hans’s death, he engenders the reader’s scorn. We know not to follow his negative example, but Wilde does not offer a promising alternative. Hans garners our sympathy - at least to an extent, for his foolish loyalty or stupidity leaves him gallingly complicit to his treatment - but his grim reward fails to make his giving mindset a more attractive ideology. His kind nature made him so well-liked that “Everybody went to Hans’ funeral,” but he will never know that his death “is certainly a great loss to every one.”82 And to add insult to injury, the Miller takes the seat of honor and bemoans the irksome presence of the wheelbarrow he never delivered and used to coerce his “best friend”83 into servitude; Hans’s goodness goes completely unthanked. Perhaps the Miller’s son has the healthier attitude. Though upon offering to give Hans “half his porridge and show him my white rabbits,”84 the Miller launches into a lecture outlining why such a gesture would ruin Hans: it might incite jealousy or lead

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81 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 51.
82 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 54.
83 Ibid.
84 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 44.
Hans to ask for credit, muddling friendship and flour. Seeing that his son has been poorly educated, he tries to teach him that “One always suffers for being generous.”

The son’s charitable impulse is by no means excessive but, like Hans, other characters in *The Happy Prince* “spoil,” as Wilde put it in “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” “their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism.” In “The Happy Prince,” for instance, rather than migrate to warmer Egyptian climes, the Swallow stays with the statue of the Happy Prince and becomes a kind of angel, couriering the Prince’s ornaments to the poor. Because of their commitment to others and to each other, however, the Swallow dies of cold and the Happy Prince of a “leaden heart...snapped right in two.” Wilde does not follow their souls to reassure us of reward in the afterlife, instead staying with their corpses, picked over and discarded by city officials. This constitutes one of the tales’ major points of contention: what moral can we derive if behaving selfishly makes us deplorable, but acting selflessly leads to an untimely end with no surety of heaven? Such ambiguity surrounding the virtue of sacrifice makes Wilde’s fairy tales more complex than their conventional counterparts. Fairy tales usually keep the focus on the main character, and after their deaths, the author tends not to expand, as Wilde does, the narrative to describe the world, unchanged, in their absence. This weakens Beckson’s assessment in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* that “some of [Wilde's] short stories – especially 'The Happy Prince'... - though necessarily tinted with his peculiar coloring, would satisfy the most exacting moralist by their tone of 'poetic justice.'” There is poetry, but no justice for the charitable lovers whose devotion and

85 Wilde, *Complete Fairy Tales*, 54.
87 Wilde, *Complete Fairy Tales*, 20.
88 Beckson, *Oscar Wilde*, 262.
empathy are rewarded by a burial in the dump heap or for the nightingale whose lifeblood
is tossed into the gutter.

That good things do not come from good deeds leads Beckson to ask, "What,
pray, are many of Wilde's short stories, such as the 'Young King' and 'The Happy Prince,'
but artistically embroidered pleas for social reform?" 89 Yes, what pray are they? The tales
certainly do, as Beckson says, have a strong socialist - or, even, an anarchist - thread
running through them. Wilde does not explicitly champion a government-less state in the
story. However, because the individual action of the statue and the swallow prove
fruitless, as does the young King's refusal to don the royal garb fabricated at the expense
of the laborers who crafted them, we know Wilde acknowledges that change cannot be
effected from individual acts of kindness. In "The Happy Prince," the Swallow strips the
prince of everything thing that made him valuable as a thing of beauty and subsequently
both find a resting place in the trash heap while the gifts that once made the statue
valuable will only alleviate the recipients' poverty, not end it. The Young King has no
more efficacy. Though ordained by God, when he rejects his coronation attire the poor
tell him that he only robs them of their employment, dehumanizing work, but work that
sustains them. Both tales seem to be socialist. Actually, though, instead of advocating a
new form of governance, which will only constrain people, they could well reflect
Wilde's desire for a state without government, in which the artist can thrive. Richard
Ellman, sums it up nicely:

by its creation of beauty, art reproaches the world, calling attention to the world's
faults by disregarding them, so the sterility of art is an affront or a parable. Art
may also outrage the world by flouting its laws or by indulgently positing their

89 Beckson, *Oscar Wilde*, 266.
violation. Or art may seduce the world by making it follow an example which
seems bad but is really salutary.

In these ways the artist moves the world towards self recognition, with at least a
tinge of self-redemption, as he compels himself towards the same end.\textsuperscript{90}

In a materialistic culture, "[t]he supreme vice is shallowness,"\textsuperscript{91} for it stimies self-
development, and many are guilty of it. Portraying the protagonists as noble in spite of
their surroundings, Wilde seems to extol self-sacrifice as the ultimate virtue, yet to laud
martyrs ignores the blatant futility of their actions - the Prince’s sapphire eye will buy the
young playwright coal for a time, but eventually his hearth will again grow cold. The
ineffectuality of the bird and the statue’s actions reiterate Wilde’s criticism of charity,
which “creates a multitude of sins.”\textsuperscript{92} It perpetuates, he claims in “The Soul of Man
Under Socialism,” the immoral institution of private property, for by using private
property to remedy the evils inherent in its unequal distribution, altruism creates a
cosmetic improvement that blinds the wealthy and the wanting to the severity of the
wounds this system inflicts. Thus society never fully heals because it never recognizes
itself as unhealthy or perceives the need to reorganize.

Private property is not only economically damaging to the majority; it also
degrades them as individuals. Under an industrialist, capitalist system, private property is
a prerequisite for individualism, the betterment and full realization of one’s personality.
Few have the luxury of spending their time in pursuits that bring them joy or refine their
tastes. Necessity requires that most labor as “beasts of burden” and, so compelled by
monetary concerns, their “work will not be good for [them], will not be good in itself,
\begin{footnotes}
\item[90] Ellmann, \textit{Oscar Wilde}, 329.
\item[91] Wilde, \textit{De Profundis}, 46.
\end{footnotes}
and will not be good for others.”

While the poor have not the opportunity to consider individualism, private property has misguided the rich who do. They equate person with possessions, seek to acquire rather than to grow, thinking “that the important thing was to have, and did not know that the important this is to be [or that t]he true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but what man is.”

The court and the crowds in “The Young King” prove guilty of this idolatry when, at his coronation, the young King appears in the Church dressed in his shepherd’s garb and crowned by a circlet of wild briar. Looking like a beggar, the nobles accuse him of bringing “shame upon our state,” the commoners scorn him and do not know him as their lord, yet before the altar, light twists round him and weaves itself into “a king’s raiment.”

An allegory for Christ, the young King understands that material riches “hinder you from realising your perfection...[that y]our personality does not need it,” that only within will you “find what you really are”; renunciation of worldly goods, not the wealth they displayed, made him worthy of divine anointing.

God ordains the young King and fashions him a costume with no pecuniary value, made without exploitative labor practice, and though this moves the justness of his ascendance beyond doubt, it complicates the rejection of the man-crafted clothes. The young King will not touch the items stained by the sorrow, pain, blood, and death of their makers, but his subjects remonstrate him when he appears without them, informing him “By you pomp we are nurtured, and your vices give us bread.”

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95 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 92.
96 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 97.
98 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 92-3.
gesture of pity incites Michelle Heath to write in her essay on the tales’ troubling ends, “Wilde...censures any ideal of self-sacrifice. Discussing sympathy and suffering, Wilde compares sympathy with suffering as akin to animal instinct.”\(^9\) She is right in this - Wilde admits that “sympathy with pain does not really diminish the amount of pain.”\(^10\)

Yet the inefficacy of the young King’s action does not entirely rob it of its value. Performing an altruistic deed to alleviate guilt for having what others lack or to conform to conventional moral standards feeds an unfair social structure and wrongfully gratifies the giver. Performing an altruistic deed because it accords with what one feels to be step toward self realization obeys “the message of Christ to man: simply ‘Be thyself.’”\(^10\) As Jody Price more astutely states, “charitable gestures may be [socially] useless, but in individual terms ... such sacrifices are vital.”\(^10\)

Neither the young King nor the Happy Prince act out of the lesser form of sympathy - the kind born of a sense of guilt or obligation. What Jack Zipes says of the latter holds true for the former: “the more he sacrifices himself, the more he becomes happy and fulfilled. As a Christlike figure, the prince represents the artist, whose task is to enrich other people's lives without expecting acknowledgement or rewards...Implicit in this tale is the idea that society is not yet ready to appreciate the noble role of the artist, who seeks to transform crass living conditions and beautify people's souls through his gifts.”\(^10\) They do not imitate society’s morals, they act in the spirit of individualism and

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\(^10\) Zipes, Jack, afterword to The Complete Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde, 209-10.
in ways that make them most truly themselves. Behind his castle walls, the Happy Prince knew only happiness, "if pleasure be happiness," but from his pedestal he observes "all the misery and all the suffering of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep." 104

That he experiences sorrow and becomes a fuller person reflects Wilde's views on the relationship between art, sympathy, and the individual he explains in De Profundis. Here, he lays out his own moral credo, which is less a credo, and more a call to emulate Christ whose "morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be" 105 and not that of society which, though it claims to have a basis in Christian ideals, shows little of the Holy Son's forgiveness. Christ's extreme compassion made him, by Wilde's reckoning, the ultimate individualist, for it enabled him to value others as feeling souls like himself. They were not for him the starving masses; they were many individuals in a shared plight. And because for Wilde, "Wilde held that art was 'the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known,' so the better the artist the more perfect his imitation of Christ." 106 Wilde does not deny that sacrifice on an individual scale is ultimately fruitless, but that is not the reason people act selflessly; they do so because suffering is "the supreme emotion of which man is capable, [and] is at once the type and test of all great art. What the artist is always looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible." 107 People act out of sympathy because that is the most beautiful thing they can do.

104 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 12.
105 Wilde, De Profundis, 87.
106 Ellmann, Oscar Wilde, 359.
107 Wilde, De Profundis, 56.
This gives new brightness to the otherwise bleak ending of “The Nightingale and the Rose.” The beauty of the bird’s music manifests itself in the rose, growing from bud “pale as the feet of the morning” to a flower the “delicate” pink of a kiss as her song strengthens, to a crimson bloom the color of a “ruby,” the color of a “heart”108 when she reaches her crescendo. At this moment, the thorn pierces her heart; at the moment of greatest pain her artistic achievement is at raises to its peak: she made something so exquisite that the “Moon heard it, and...forgot the dawn.”109 Even though the Student squanders the rose – the soundless echo of the nightingale’s song – on a girl as vapid as himself, the Nightingale has not, as it at first seems, died for naught. She has experienced and embraced the purest emotion and in so doing becomes both an artist and a thing of art, and attained its highest ideal: “the unity of a thing with itself...the soul made in incarnate”110 and her soul seeps into the flower. Comparing “The Nightingale and the Rose” to “The Remarkable Rocket,” Quintus reflects that “Perhaps the true artist suffers more than the false one.”111 There is no perhaps about it. As Price contends, “The Nightingale is the representation of the artist, who Wilde identifies with Christ and his ability to embrace the multiplicity of human experience through an empathetic imagination.”112

The martyrs, then, of Wilde’s fairy tales are not symbols of futile sacrifice, but those who in their resemblance to Christ show acceptance of suffering to be the mark of a great artist, for Christ having suffered most, is the ultimate artist. As Elizabeth

108 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 29.
109 Wilde, Complete Fairy Tales, 30.
110 Wilde, De Profundis, 57.
Goodenough claims, the stories “articulated Wilde’s vision of pain as the redemptive heart of life. The doctrine of physical anguish and self-giving developed in [the fairy tales] prefigure...his later ennoblement of suffering as ‘the supreme emotion’ in De Profundis.”\textsuperscript{113} While in prison Wilde writes that his realization of the necessity to experience pain as well as pleasure develops in his texts: “Of course all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my books. Some of it is in The Happy Prince, some of it in The Young King, notably in the passage where the bishop says to the kneeling boy, ‘Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art?’ a phrase which when I wrote it seemed to me little more than a phrase.”\textsuperscript{114} This may seem like the retroactive editing of a desperate man. It is not. Rather, it reiterates the views on art, Christlike empathy, and individualism his expresses in writings predating his sentence.

Unlike in the stories Goodenough cites, Wilde does not describe anguish in “The Selfish Giant”; the boy's abuse occurs off stage. Yet “The prophet of individualism, Christ according to Wilde felt sympathy for mankind in ways that led him to realize ‘his perfection through pain.’”\textsuperscript{115} She does not, however, look at the implications Wilde's Christianity bore on the role of the artist.

Wilde fills his pages with martyrs, but “The Selfish Giant” contains the most full fledged Savior surrogate. Isolated by greed, the Giant ousts the children from his garden and subsequently walls himself off in a self made arctic chamber of hell. Yet when they find a crack, slip into the forbidden space, and bring in the spring with their joy, his “heart melted” with the snow. He shows the full measure of his penance by participating in and

\textsuperscript{114} Wilde, \textit{De Profundis}, 63.
\textsuperscript{115} Goodenough, "Oscar Wilde, Victorian Fairy Tales, and the Meanings of Atonement," 341.
encouraging their play, lifting the small boy into the last of the frost covered branches. The Giant's change lasts; he does not rebuild the walls he knocked down that afternoon when winter first lifted, even though the boy he loves most does not return. After many years he reappears and "on the palms of the child's hands were the prints of two nails, and the prints of two nails were on his little feet."

As well as bearing the stigmata, the boy proves himself the Christ child by telling the Giant not the be angry for his wounds and instead invites him to his "garden, which is Paradise."

The child who spurs the Giant's repentance spurs his salvation, for after he opens his garden gate to the children, the heavenly ones open for him. His reward, however, is not a happy life. It is death. The reader can discern the moral – be kind and generous and know that nothing is unforgivable – but if the story instructs the reader to emulate the Christ child, it does so not because Wilde rewards him, but because the Giant has hope after sinning and after suffering. We come to sympathize with the Giant, so we want for him the possibility of redemption, which only exists if compassionate people do.

Although not in so direct a reincarnation as in "The Young King" or "The Selfish Giant," a Christ-like compassion figures in the "The Nightingale and the Rose." Wilde states in De Profundis that "The only people I would care to be with now are artists and people who have suffered: those who know what beauty is."

He would be with the Nightingale, who hears the student moaning of unrequited affection and sings to relieve his anguish. Wilde's perfect artist does not imitate life, rather makes something both completely new and at one in form and function. Because the Nightingale sings from

117 Wilde, The Complete Fairy Tales, 39.
118 Wilde, De Profundis, 50.
“sorrow... the supreme emotion of which man is capable,”\textsuperscript{119} she manages “[w]hat the artist is always looking for[; a] mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward in which form reveals.”\textsuperscript{120}

Her rose imitates art because it is born of music, of a song dedicated to an ideal - love - that has no physical shape, save its place in the things it inspires and inhabits.

“Sometimes,” Wilde said, “I think that the artistic life is a long and lovely suicide, and am not sorry that it is so.”\textsuperscript{121} So the Nightingale orchestrates her own end. She may be at her artistic peak for only one night, yet that night stretches beyond its natural limit, when, upon hearing her, the moon halted in its arc.

The fairy tales, Wilde wrote, mark “an attempt to treat a tragic modern problem in a form that aims at delicacy and imaginative treatment; it is a reaction against the purely imitative character of modern art.”\textsuperscript{122} The Nightingale brings into existence something perfectly new and perfectly itself, yet the student for which it is was made lacks the both the depth of character and the imaginative nature to appreciate it. Instead he returns to the study of logic, philosophy, and history, which are explanatory rather than generative endeavors – pursuits indicative of an “age [in which] to be practical is everything” and imitation trumps originality.

But if we should imitate anything, it should be the Nightingale, who, with a heart pierced by sorrow, approaches perfection - at-one-ness - through pain; it should be the love she sings of so that we might feel for others and expand ourselves through Christ’s imaginative empathy; it should be the song itself. We should aspire to the state of music,

\textsuperscript{119} Wilde, \textit{De Profundis}, 56.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Qtd. Ellmann, \textit{Oscar Wilde}, 270.
\textsuperscript{122} Quintus, "The Moral Prerogative in Oscar Wilde: A Look at the Fairy Tales," 711.
“in which all subject is absorbed in expression and cannot be separated from it.”123 Wilde hopes to realize this kind of self-containment in the seamless composition of the books that house stories advocating wholeness and in the fluid conversation between his words and their illustrations.

123 Wilde, De Profundis, 56.
Conclusion

Since their original publications, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates* have been reimagined many times, both in the minds of readers and on the page. Some iterations, such as Brentano’s 1913 edition of *The Happy Prince* illustrated by Charles Robinson, well-known for his work for fairy tales, share similar decorative principles with their predecessor. Like Crane and Ricketts, Robinson takes great care with the page layout, keeping it clean and open. Though the fine, fluid line of the border at the start of “The Selfish Giant” does not find its ideal match in the heavy, serifed type, its smooth curves and the studied interruptions to the straight edge gives visual weight without over-burdening with detail (figure 16). And while Wilde’s collaborators had only black and white to work with, Robinson’s color plates unite text and image through hues and their textures, the watercolor mimicking the softness of the snow and delicacy of the blossoms (figure 17).

The Glasgow School artist Jessie M. King decorated *A House of Pomegranates* in 1915, and she too works in watercolor. Highly stylized and with greater emphasis on outlined forms, and her pictures have similarities with Ricketts’s. Just as Ricketts echoed the line quality of his drawings in his lettering, King contrives a print for the titles of her illustrations that compliments the image (figure 18). Her cover design, a deep navy overlaid with gold, extends from the front, across the spine to the back, much like Ricketts’s controversial allover design for *A House of Pomegranates*. The composition’s geometric arrangement, broken by curved shapes and lines, and the typeface have art nouveau referents (figure 19). Ken Kutcher illustrated *A House of Pomegranates* thirteen years after King, in 1928, and whereas King’s style resembles Ricketts’s - especially his
THE SELFISH GIANT

In her hand she had a spray of wild hemlock that was blossoming.

work for The Sphinx - Kutcher’s refined line work, intricate detailing, and use of dotted lines clearly take inspiration from Beardsley. Though Wilde grew to loath Beardsley, the author thought he had, at least for a time, caught sight of the dance of the seven veils and so could render his poetry in corresponding visual form.

It is hard to guess how Wilde would regard these new incarnations of the tales tinged by the sensibilities of the artists whose work he met with either momentary or lasting approval, whether they manage, as he believed Ricketts did, to meld language and decoration into unified whole. Both Beardsley and Ricketts were very much of the 1890’s and though their styles differed, it’s interesting that future illustrators of Wilde’s art employ similar design elements. This may be to a large extent because those Robinson, King, and Kutcher were heavily influenced by prevailing styles of the fin-de-ciccle and thus could not to escape the stylistic hallmarks of such influential figures as Ricketts and Beardsley. But it may also speak to Wilde’s prose which as much of its time as the visual art. The different illustrators work in different veins, yet each feels as much like the 1890’s as Wilde’s writing does.

Each of Kooistra’s modes of illustration has its place and its benefits. When teaching is the goal, quotation and answering clarifies and reinforces the message; cross-dressing and parody sometimes offer a critical reading that asks the reader to reevaluate the text; for Wilde’s intended audience, “for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find simplicity in a subtle strangeness,”124 impression, steeped in essence of the text and sharing some fundamental quality, provides the fullest experience. The translation of verbal to visual, though less exact, is richer for the subtly and allows both languages to speak in the same tone; rather than functioning as discreet

forms of communication printed on a single paper, nuanced translations bring harmony to the page itself and between the bound pages.
Works Consulted


Print.


