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Corporeal Abjection and Hopefulness in Oscar Wilde's "Charmides" (1881)

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ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the potential relationship between corporality, abjection, and hope in Oscar Wilde's "Charmides" (1881). The main aim of inspecting this connection is to establish how Wilde makes use of abjection in order to defend the idea that sexual dissidence can, indeed, offer the possibility of hope. In other words, the paper focuses on how Wilde describes abject bodies and abject bodily acts in the poem in a way that ultimately defies the social and moral conventions of his period. It argues that acts that may be considered abject –such as same-sex desire– can be hopeful when addressed from a different perspective. This paper hopes to establish a clear connection between the poem, the abject, and Wilde's defiance of the sexual mores of his period.

KEYWORDS: Oscar Wilde; Abjection; Queer studies; Victorian poetry; Hope.

1. THE WILDEAN BODY/IES

The abject and the hopeful may seem, at first glance, almost opposite academic concepts. After all, how is it possible for the abject –a socially and morally suspect category at best– to inspire hope? And how may hopefulness –with its usual promise of better things to come– be abject? This paper addresses these questions by exploring Oscar Wilde's poem "Charmides", and by positioning these themes as important strategies whose combination allowed for the expression of dissident sexualities in the late nineteenth-century. Published in 1881, practically at the beginning of Wilde's career, this poem, I argue, has the potential to make the abject hopeful,

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or, in other words, to inspire hopefulness through its engagement with abjection. Wilde's focus on the corporeal through the poem is the key to understanding how both concepts may be more intimately connected than they appear, especially in Wilde's socio-sexual context. In this sense, this paper ultimately aims to position "Charmides" as an important text within Wilde's *oeuvre*, inasmuch as it allowed him to articulate his own sexual orientation through the combination of two seemingly separate concepts. Apart from this, the poem also gives us information about how Wilde may have manipulated his image in later stages of his career, such as in his American tour of 1882–83. This is due to the fact that "Charmides" evidences his awareness about how the corporeal can impact people's perceptions powerfully when it is presented as ambiguous and departing from the norm.

As stated, Wilde's representation of bodies and bodily acts in the poem is the catalyst that allows him to turn the abject into a potentially hopeful concept. This is perhaps unsurprising if we consider Wilde's life-long complex relationship with the corporeal, and the ambiguous yet significant way in which his physicality affected his life and his work. The protean and symbolic potential of the human body constituted the perfect ground for Wilde to conflate seemingly opposite concepts, because, as stated, he was well aware –due to personal experience– of how bodies could come to be seen as standing for very different realities, depending on how they were represented. Wilde's own body was, in fact, a cause of constant scrutiny during his life. No matter how far back one looks into the aesthete's biography, his physical appearance haunts the perception that relatives, admirers, critics, and public commentators had of him. Michèle Mendelssohn, for example, has identified how in Wilde's time at Oxford his body was already perceived by his fellow students as having a specific meaning. She states that Wilde was automatically regarded, when observed, as a relevant agent in the "Aesthetics v. Athletics" debate –on the side, obviously, of the aesthetic (Mendelssohn, 2018, p. 20). As a result, and in order to signal this collective perception, he was caricaturized in a college cartoon as "horrified, in an awkwardly angular pose amid a field of rushing athletes" (Mendelssohn, 2018, p. 20). The implication behind this is that, even when his public persona as it came to be known later was not yet fully formed, people were able to articulate Wilde's ideological idiosyncrasies (or what they identified as such) by using representations of his body: by picturing him in an "awkwardly angular pose" that had the power to create an image of Wilde that –fairly enough– prioritized the aesthetic and all that it entails over the athletic.

Readings and interpretations of Wilde's body, however, were by no means limited to college satirists. Illustrations of his corporal appearance and minute descriptions of his physicality were to be a constant companion for most of Wilde's life. Another clear instance of this is described in Leonée Ormond's book, *George Du Maurier* (1969). Maurier was a popular caricaturist for the satirical periodical *Punch* during the late Victorian era. Ormond recollects how, in a meeting between Wilde, Du Maurier, and the painter James Whistler,

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Whistler asked the other two: "[W]hich one of you invented the other, eh?" (1969, p. 468). Whistler is, indeed, making a clear reference to the multiple caricatures of aesthetes that Du Maurier supplied for *Punch*, and to their huge popularity among the readers of this periodical. These satirical pictures often included the characters Mautle and Postlethwaite, which represented aesthetes that embodied, in an exaggerated way, many of the features that came to be associated with Wilde.

According to Mendelssohn, thus, the representations of Du Maurier allowed Wilde to form an idea of the physical expectations people had of aesthetes, and to adopt them accordingly (pp. 52–53). She states: "Du Maurier's 1880 *Punch* drawings transformed Wilde's reputation almost overnight. At a stroke, Du Maurier moved him from the fringes of aesthetic culture … to the centre" (2018, p. 53). This implies that Du Maurier's caricatures and Wilde gave each other momentum. Their success grew hand in hand, as Wilde adopted the corporeal postures and appearances of Du Maurier's drawings and, at the same time, these drawings adopted Wilde's physicality and way of dressing.

It is possible to state in this sense that Wilde's body was seen by the 1880s as both weak –or unathletic– and aesthetic, but to pinpoint this binary as the impact of his corporal appearance would be deeply reductive. When Wilde went on his American tour (1882–3), his body was put, once again, into the spotlight, as public commentators focused more and more on it. This attention evolved into even greater scrutiny when Napoleon Sarony, a famous New York celebrity photographer, took a series of pictures of Wilde in January 1882. Most of Wilde's photographs that are well-known and easily accessible today were taken during his sessions with Sarony. Indeed, these photographs became instantly popular, and Wilde himself is said to have been quite satisfied with them (Hofer & Scharnhorst, 2010, p. 139), as they managed to encapsulate his highly aesthetic poses and costumes, and a facial mixture of hauteur and ennui. As Joseph Bristow argues: "[T]hese portraits – which represent him in languid poses, memorably dressed in such quaint items of clothing as velvet breeches, silken hose, and opera pumps – ensured that he immediately turned into a familiar icon" (2022, p. 32). Consequently, Mendelssohn claims that "Sarony created a new Wilde" (2018, p. 68), as his mass-produced photographs of the young Oscar soon became collectibles, which led to Wilde's physicality being commercialized as the most powerful image of aestheticism. Not much later, advertisers began a commercial campaign that was based on using Wilde's physical image to sell a wide range of products (including, among others, corsets and ice cream), because of the deep-seated belief that American women "preferred aesthetic men" such as Wilde (Mendelssohn, 2018, pp. 84–85)[i].

In this sense, Wilde's corporality became a capitalized commodity: his image was used mercenarily to attract customers and to sell many different kinds of products that were thus associated with the aesthetic ideal, potentially catering to women's tastes. However, by late January 1882, Wilde's body and appearance were entangled in much more complex cultural issues. On the 21st, *The Washington Post* published a caricature in which Wilde was standing

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alongside a "wild man from Borneo", and asked its readers the question: "[H]ow far is it from this to this?" (Anonymous, 1882, p. 4). Soon enough, a number of American phrenologists produced what they believed to be a nuanced analysis of Wilde's physique in order to further the attack started by *The Washington Post*. They claimed that "[N]ature never makes any gross mistakes, she never puts the brain of a man of mental brawn and vigor [sic] into a cavity faced by such a physiognomy as that of Oscar Wilde" (as cited in Mendelssohn, 2018, p. 96), and they reported Wilde's bodily features in the following terms: "a large and well-developed nose, a broad mouth, with full lips opening over large, prominent teeth, the upper lip a shade too short, and eyes very full, large and handsome … arched by delicately lined eyebrows … [which make him] almost effeminate in apparent lack of vigor and force" (as cited in Hofer & Scharnhorst, 2010, p. 116)

Both representative fragments seem to have the same purpose: to question Wilde's masculinity and to highlight his femininity. In just a month, the man who was positioned as the image of aestheticism, and as a selling point for women, due to his perceived attractiveness, was being compared with a primate and signalled as inadequately effeminate. This situation only became more and more pronounced as Wilde's American tour progressed. After the aesthete's meeting with Walt Whitman, a public observer would comment that Wilde's "offenses against common decency" must be similar to those committed by Whitman himself, while at the same time arguing that Wilde's "fine physique" was being squandered in effeminate aesthetic pursuits (as cited in Beckson, 1974, p. 21). During the following months, all kind of journalists and commentators seemed to have developed an obsession with speculating about Wilde's body and what made it "effeminate". Mendelssohn states, thus, that "[I]nterviewers became investigative reporters who studied Wilde's body for clues" (2018, p. 150). As such, some of these self-proclaimed investigative reporters claimed that Wilde had "soft effeminate flesh", and others focused on "[t]he almost boyish fullness and effeminacy of his face", while yet others expressed their concern as to why this "tall and manly figure" had "a certain womanly air" (as cited in Hofer & Scharnhorst, 2010, p.68, p. 121, p. 141). This obsession with linking Wilde's physique to the feminine became so intense that by March 1882, only two months after his arrival in the United States, a journalist referred to him using the feminine pronouns "she/her": "[H]ave you seen her? Well, why not say 'she'?" (as cited in Mendelssohn, 2018, p. 150).

This whole situation reached a new climax of public derision when, during the first semester of 1882, a newly-composed and developed minstrel show called *Patience Wilde; or Ten Sisters of Oscar* toured the States alongside Wilde himself (Hofer & Scharnhorst, 2010, p. 135). This would not have been especially peculiar were it not for the fact that the main role was played by Leon Edel, an extremely popular female impersonator. Mendelssohn, in her nuanced research about the impact that this show had on American audiences and on Wilde's life, claims that: "[O]ne of *Patience Wilde*'s peculiarities was that its fictional storyline gestured at the true history of Aestheticism … Since Shakespeare's day, gender fluidity had been a

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dramatic commonplace, rich in farcical potential and occasions for sexual exploration. As audiences watched 'The Only Leon' in *Patience Wilde* they might become conscious that Aestheticism signalled strange new gender worlds" (2018, p. 152).In fact, the whole of Wilde's American tour can be regarded as a signal towards "new gender worlds", inasmuch as it made manifest the idea that the way in which an individual's body is perceived as "masculine" or "feminine" is by no means a fixed category but depends, rather, on the perspective of those who observe said body. For while Wilde's body was being connected to the "feminine" in most papers across the United States, it seems to have been connected with precisely the opposite, the epitome of masculinity, in certain areas of the country.

This happened when, in April 1882, Wilde arrived in Leadville, Colorado. Leadville was regarded by its contemporaries as a rather dangerous and brutal mining town, with which aestheticism seems to have had little to do (Mendelssohn, 2018, pp. 180–182). In spite of this, Wilde made a good impression on the town by exalting the strength and masculine spirit of its inhabitants. As a consequence, the local press described him in the following terms: "[Wilde is] not so effeminate as some people would have the public believe" (as cited in Mendelssohn, 2018, p. 182) and called him "the athletic-looking aesthetic" (Hofer & Scharnhorst, 2010, p. 139) –in stark opposition to the very first satirical cartoon that, in Oxford, portrayed Wilde as weak and un-athletic. However, if the account given in Leadville of Wilde's body demonstrates something, it is the mutability of the perception that the general public had of Wilde's figure, and the way his body was constantly used in order to ascribe gender-related labels to him. Depending on whether he was being praised or criticised, he was represented either as an athletic and masculine man, capable of attracting women systematically, or as an effeminate and primitive being, whose ambiguity placed him alongside a female impersonator.

The increasingly complex exchange between Wilde's body, the American press, and gender norms seems to ultimately have had a direct effect on Wilde's own consciousness about the many potentialities of representing bodies as signals –or symbols– of other concerns. In this sense, "Charmides" demonstrates that Wilde was aware of how bodies can be ascribed specific meanings in connection to gender and sexuality, even before his American Tour. His personal experience can be traced in the poem, as he plays with the public's expectations of what is normal and what is abject; thus, the corporeal becomes in this poem a productive way to explore gender and, more importantly, sexuality. Even if "Charmides" was published before Wilde's American tour, its lines already reflect his experiences at being perceived in specific ways due to his corporeality, in Oxford and in Du Maurier's cartoons. Furthermore, a careful analysis of the corporeal and the abject in the poem can shed light on how, for Wilde, the speculation surrounding his body in the United States could have been a hopeful process, inasmuch as it allowed him to be aware of the possibility of playing with one's appearance to transmit a specific message to the public, an awareness for which Wilde would, indeed, become famous and preserved in both his own and contemporary culture. Before analysing the poem, however, it is important to take a closer look at the concepts of the abject and the hopeful

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as they figure in it, and to establish a clear connection between them and the corporeal, so that an even more complete image of the relevance of physicality in Wilde's works can be delineated.

2. THE ABJECT AND THE HOPEFUL

When working with a concept such as the abject it is necessary, first of all, to refer to Julia Kristeva, who defined it in her seminal *Powers of Horror* (1982) as the feeling that draws one to "the place where meaning collapses": "[N]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (1982, p. 2). In other words, Kristeva sees the abject as a deep sense of rejection of realities, objects, or, more importantly, bodies that are on a liminal state between the "normal" and the "abnormal", between what is, perhaps, natural, and what cannot be culturally or socially accepted. The rejection is caused, more precisely, by the ambiguous state of the abject that, as Kristeva once again states, is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982, p. 4). Kristeva, thus, defines a type of terror, of deep and instinctive rejection that is deeply connected to those elements of life that have the power to disrupt rules and categories, permeable elements that may appear where they are not expected and that, in this sense, have the potential to disorientate individuals profoundly. There are, however, two important aspects related to abjection that we might consider now. First, we might ask ourselves, for the purposes of this paper, how are bodies connected to abjection? And secondly, how can something that causes deep rejection be associated with the hopeful?

To answer the first question we must look at the work of later scholars who developed Kristeva's original idea and positioned it more clearly within its socio-cultural context. Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, argues that Kristeva's abjection indicates the "constitution of a proper social body, the processes of sorting, segregating, and demarcating the body so as to conform to but not exceed cultural expectations" (1994, p. 193). This means that, for Grosz, the abject helps to create a sense of what is appropriate, acceptable, or even "normal", as it installs in the minds of individuals a rejection of those bodies that do not fit within the conventional categories of heteropatriarchal societies. In this sense we could say that the abject body would be, more precisely, the body that "disturbs identity, system, order" and that in doing so "exceed[s] the cultural expectations" of what society regards as the corporeal norm. In this sense, Wilde's own body could be considered abject, inasmuch as it had the capacity to ambiguously disrupt gender norms depending on what each observer sought to see in it, thus

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always exceeding cultural expectations for either its perceived surplus of femininity or masculinity.

Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, goes a step further by positioning the abject as directly connected to sexual mores. According to Butler, the repudiation produced in heteronormative cultures by queerness "suggests that heterosexuality and homosexuality are mutually exclusive phenomena, that they can only be made to coincide through rendering the one culturally viable and the other a transient and imaginary affair" (2011, p. 74). This leads to an "abjection of homosexuality" that ensures that sexual dissidence acts as prop for heterosexuality by identifying it with the disruptive workings of the abject. This entails that those who deviate from traditional sexual mores can be considered "a domain of abject beings", a domain in which "[t]he abject designates … those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the [heteronormative] subject" (Butler, 2011, p. xii). This means, in other words, that a) the abject can be –and is– socially constructed so as to validate some lifestyles and to cause social rejection of others; and b) that the abject body can be, simply, a homosexual body that refuses to conform to the straight lines of conventional desire and is, in consequence, rejected by society and relegated to "'uninhabitable' zones of social life". When a body is abjected, Butler finally argues, it becomes excluded, encapsulated in "the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic" (2011, p. 140).

Natalie Wilson takes this idea and complements it by arguing the following: "As Butler contends, these abject bodies serve as deviations from the cultural norm and are not constructed via cultural discourses as bodies that matter in society. Here, her theory revolves around actual bodies in culture and explores the way in which various types of abjected bodies – deformed bodies, homosexual bodies … – are not allowed the same cultural weight or importance as 'normal' bodies" (2016, p. 164). We can say, therefore, that Wilde's body is abject due to the following reasons. First, its "cultural weight or importance" is not the same as that of a "normal" body, but rather is a capitalized spectacle used to generate debate or sell products. His very status as a human being seems to be questioned as he becomes an object of speculation and an example of "unmanly" femininity. Secondly, by reason of his sexual orientation, made public at the time of his trials in 1895 (but already a source of much scrutiny, ever since the journalists of the American tour began their campaign to blur the lines of Wilde's gender), it is possible to state that his body is abject, inasmuch as it does not receive the status of a heteronormative individual and is, therefore, relegated to the "uninhabitable" zones of social life.

In other words, and to summarize, Wilde's body was seen as abject because it was regarded as an object of speculation and because of his sexual orientation that placed him within the category of the socially undesirable. However, despite the fact that Wilde led a successful and acclaimed public life until his trials, he seems to have been conscious of how his body –having been seen as abject, as unfit, during his college years and his American tour–

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had the potential to become once again the source of criticism and rejection –as, indeed, it came to be during his prosecution and the ensuing scandals. This consciousness is reflected especially in "Charmides", in which, as has been stated before, the hopeful and the abject are entangled so that they create a specific orientation for the reader, in which rejection may, indeed, have its own perks.

When examining the way in which hope and the abject body intersect in Wilde's poem, however, one has to be careful to provide a detailed description of exactly what kind of hope is the one Wilde seems concerned with. Hope has traditionally been configured as a positive concept in Western culture, reminiscent of faith, Christianity, and moral rewards. This, according to Adam Potkay, is due to the appropriation of the term by Judeo-Christian dogma, which starkly contrasts with the notion of hope that was more common in Ancient Greece, in which it was not something necessarily positive or desirable in itself (2022, p. 5). Wilde's approach to the term –and the one I follow in this paper– is closer to the one identified by Christopher Castiglia. According to Castiglia, hope has the potential to be positive, but only inasmuch as it "challenges present social conditions insofar as they fail to live up to a reader's ideals … hope is [then] socially transformative [as] [h]opeful ideals generate social engagement … by providing the standard against which the already existing world is measured" (2017, p. 6). Castiglia, then, sees hope as a transformative experience: by realising how one does not fit in society, how one is *abjected* by it, one may confront the very tenets of this society and engage with the constricting standards that regulate it, thus producing hope in the struggle to improve society and in the possibility of a better future through this struggle. A "perpetual openness to the as-yet-untried" (Castiglia, 2017, p. 4) defines this conception of hope, one that does not rely on faith and on the blind promise of positive things to come but rather believes in disrupting and challenging social mores in order to produce new models that are better suited to dissidence and dissimilarity.

Thus, the abject and hope share, both in Castiglia's definition and in Wilde's text, a starting point: both are experiences marked by a rejection from society. However, the abject, in its very inability to fit and in its propensity to, as Kristeva states, "disturb identity, system, order" (1982, p. 4), to disrespect borders and rules, may be, after all, an intrinsically perfect state from which to generate hope. This conception, furthermore, fits with recent scholarship on aestheticism, which values how this artistic and cultural current –which Wilde's works, as stated previously, clearly represent– was inherently revolutionary in its way of facing socially accepted codes. In this way, Dustin Friedman argues that aesthetes, including Wilde, found value "in the possession of homoerotic desire not despite but because [they lived] in a culture where such feelings are condemned" (2019, p. 4). Indeed, Friedman claims that Wilde, among others, relished his sexual dissidence, as his literary works allowed him to express it in a veiled way that was, nonetheless, more liberatory than the restrictive and criminalising legal and medical discourses on sexuality of his period (2019, pp. 1–7). Friedman's notions are clearly

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visible in "Charmides", as Wilde's creation of a text in which the abject and the hopeful work together was, mostly, as will be shown in the next section of this paper, a way to defy society and defend or articulate his own queerness. After all, both the abject and the hopeful in the poem are strongly related to the author's queerness and to sexual dissidence in general.

Before proceeding to analyse the poem and how abject bodies and physicalities are used in it in order to create a sense of hopefulness that is clearly related to queer experience, it is important to take into account that the poem itself constitutes an orientating reference, in regard to both Wilde's life and the way in which he, as Friedman argues, managed to defy the condemning legal and medical discourses of his era. According to Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), most of Western society is oriented in such a way that it contemplates heteronormative tradition as the only valid way through which to live one's life (2006, pp. 91–92). She calls this general orientation towards sexual mores "collective direction" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 15), inasmuch as it is validated, just like Butler's argues of heterosexuality, through the iteration of its validity and its contrast with other orientations that are not as common. Ahmed claims, however, that sometimes "sexual desire orientates the subject toward some other [realities] … by establishing a line or direction" (2006, p. 70).

In other words, the sexual orientation of authors such as Wilde, whose desire departs from the accepted norms of the approved collective direction of his period, might have led him towards a new direction of his own that, instead of being collective, is highly personal and seeks, therefore, to disrupt the sexual and reproductive structures enforced by heteronormativity. More importantly, Ahmed also establishes that to seek an orientation or direction of one own's that transgresses the boundaries of the collective leads to a process of disorientation, as facing those realities that usually remain hidden or inarticulate is an experience that implies that "the edges of [the] world disappear", as it, in other words, shatters the common frames of reference within which we are traditionally educated (2006, p. 157). The ensuing "'disalignment' of the horizontal and vertical axes [of heteronormative culture], allow[s] the oblique to open up another angle on the world" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 172). This means that to be disorientated, to disalign oneself from the patterns of tradition, allows for the contemplation of other realities that may embrace, for instance, queerness. Ahmed follows this train of thought by specifying that, as a consequence, this opening up of another angle on the world, as disorientating as it might be, is also a hopeful process: "[disorientations] offer us the hope of new directions [which may be] reason enough for hope" (2006, p. 158).

Undoubtedly, and in summary, Wilde's use of the abject to articulate a sense of hopefulness that is intimately related to his sexuality constitutes a disorienting experience. Curiously enough, disorientation, as defined by Ahmed, has many elements in common with both abjection and hope. The three terms are related to the opening of new possibilities by changing one's perspective on what is "normal". In this sense, the abject, with its social function of marking those experiences that can "disturb identity, system, order" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4), is clearly connected with hope's potential for social transgression and the breaking

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of those norms within the social order that restrict one's existence. In turn, both these terms are complemented by the transgressive power of disorientations as Ahmed understands them, inasmuch as they allow for a different view of the world that defies the "collective direction" of heteronormative culture, and this view may, in addition, be hopeful as it may give an individual a new way to live their life. It is then, perhaps, unsurprising that both these concepts can be used to analyse a poem in which Wilde's use of the corporeal is very close to the abject, and whose ending seems to be a promise of hope for those who, like Wilde, practice sexual dissidence within a largely heteronormative society. Abject corporal transgression appears in "Charmides" as the way towards a better future, even if it does so in a veiled and metaphorical way that confirms how new perspectives on the world may be opened up if one dares to disturb the order of the socially accepted, just as the aesthetes, and, more specifically, Wilde, have always tried to do.

3. "CHARMIDES" AND THE POWER OF TRANSGRESSION

In 1881, Wilde published a short collection of poems entitled *Poems*. The volume, however, seemed to be an anticipation of Wilde's later fall from grace with the Victorian public. Isobel Murray, for instance, claims that, leaving aside *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), Wilde's poetry remained "critically unfashionable" and "unread" for most of the late Victorian era and the twentieth century (1997, p. xv). The main reason for this, as Murray identifies, is that some of the poems were seen by contemporary critics as obscene and perverse, especially "Charmides". For, despite Iain Ross's claim that the collection "represented Wilde's attempt to establish a reputation among English readers as a serious literary artist" (2013, p. 71), this specific poem deals with an anathema of Victorian culture: rape. And, even more scandalously, it does so while at the same time continually referencing the Hellenic tradition of same-sex desire. As Ross states: "[F]amously, the volume was solicited for the library of the Oxford Union and then returned on the grounds of plagiarism 'of a number of better-known and more deservedly reputed authors' … One of the unintended consequences of this eclectic ventriloquising of English poetic tradition was the importation of anachronistic Hellenist gestures" (2013, p. 72). These "Hellenist gestures", however, may be far from an unconscious importation, led by Wilde's being inspired by other artists. These gestures hold, in fact, many of the keys to why this poem can be read as expressing Wilde's own queerness.

The title of the poem, for instance, already guides the reader towards queer desire between men. In this respect, Patricia Pulham indicates that "Charmides, the name Wilde chose for his protagonist, provides a significant clue to the homoeroticism that underlies this poem" (2020, p. 155). This is because *Charmides, or Temperance* (380 BC), is one of Plato's dialogues in which Socrates expresses his interest towards an "exquisite [male] youth" (Bristow, 2022, p. 49). Wilde would have come into contact with this text during his college

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years at Trinity College, Dublin. According to Bristow, the author's "evolving interest in homosexual culture" can be dated back to his days at this institution, which began in October 1871 (2022, p. 49)[ii]. There, Wilde was hugely influenced by his tutor John Pentland Mahaffy, whose *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Meander* (1874) Wilde helped to edit, and in which Mahaffy deals quite freely with the homoerotic component of social life in ancient Athens. In this text, Mahaffy describes Charmides in these terms: "[his] appearance … is described just as we should be describing the reigning belle at a flower show – surrounded by a crowd of gentlemen in attendance, and causing quite a sensation when she comes in" (Mahaffy, 1874, as cited in Bristow, 2022, p. 49). Apart from this, the poem also gestures towards same-sex desire between men through references to the classical past in the sense that its plot is an adaptation of Lucian's *Amores* (date unknown), which "is a dialogue that compares the love of women to the love of boys, and decides that the latter is preferable" (Pulham, 2020, p. 158). Pulham, indeed, argues that the poem's gestures towards classical antiquity can be read as clear orientating devices towards desire between men: "[S]uch slippages between love and philosophy clearly gave Wilde ways in which to simultaneously veil and express his desire for men" (2020, p. 156).

This desire, as stated before, can be seen through Wilde's use of the abject and the corporeal together. The poem, much like Wilde's own queerness, is rather unconventional and subversive. In it, a beautiful young man, Charmides, secretly "rapes" a statue of Pallas Athenea by baring it of its clothing and caressing it in a sexual way. He is punished by Athenea herself, who drowns him at sea, only for his corpse to become the object of desire of a tree nymph, who also "rapes" his body. Artemis, furious at this transgression, punishes the Dryad by killing her as well. Aphrodite, however, decides to intervene and convinces Persephone to allow both of them to have a happy eternal afterlife together and in love in Hades.

This brief account of the poem makes it obvious that it does not deal directly with same-sex desire. There are, however, numerous elements within it that make it rather obvious that "Charmides" is thought to direct the reader's attention towards a kind of love and sexuality that is as taboo and as queer as a story of romance between members of the same sex would have been in the Victorian period. Bristow already reads in this and other poems "traces of homoerotic desire" (2022, p. 51), which is scarcely strange considering, for instance, how Charmides desire for Athenas's statue is described as being the same that Zeus felt towards "Troy's young shepherd prince" (Wilde, 1881/1998, p. 56). This is, without a doubt, a reference to Ganymede, cup-bearer to the gods and Zeus's *eromenos*, apart from a clear reference to homoerotic desire, for obvious reasons, in the Victorian era. To desire a statue of Athena in ancient Greece would have been, thus, as anathema as the desire that Zeus felt towards Ganymede during Wilde's period. Therefore, whereas the transgression of Charmides might not seem to be something peculiarly immoral to a Victorian reader, this reference to queer desire surely would.

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Apart from this, Charmides's physicality and beauty are constantly described through the poem by making references to other figures of same-sex desire from ancient Greece's mythology: "[I]t is young Hylas, that false runaway / Who with a Naiad now would make his bed / Forgetting Herakles" (Wilde, 1881/1998, p. 58), or "[T]he stealthy hunter sees young Hyacinth / Hurling the polished disk" (Wilde, 1881/1998, p. 62). As the plot of the poem develops, furthermore, it keeps deviating from Victorian heteronormative morality. For instance, such are the terms in which Wilde describes Charmides' rape of Athena's statue: "And nigher [he] came, and touched her throat, and with hands violate / Undid the cuirass, and the crocus gown, / And bared the breasts of polished ivory, / Till from the waist the peplos falling down / Left visible the secret mystery / Which to no lover will Athena show / … And then his lips in hungering delight / Fed on her lips … / … And paddled with the polished throat, and pressed / His hot and beating heart upon her chill and icy breast" (1881/1998, p. 56). This description served as the main source of scandal for Victorian critics. Oscar Browning, in fact, a close friend of Wilde's, wrote an article for the Academy about the poem stating that "the story, as far as there is one, is most repulsive; [Wilde] has no magic to unveil the hideousness of a sensuality which feeds on statues and dead bodies" (as cited in Beckson, 1974, p. 32). And while, of course, statues are an important part of the poem, I argue that there is, indeed, an important element of sensuality around dead bodies that can be connected to the proposed conception of the abject as hopeful.

Charmides, the "over-bold adulterer, / A dear profaner of great mysteries" (Wilde, 1881/1998, p. 60), in raping Athena's statue is, of course, taking advantage of an inanimate body, one that, according to Ross, must have been imposing, and fear-inspiring: "an Ancient and rudimentary wooden idol that would have made a grotesque object of sexual attention – certainly a … genuinely perverse one" (2013, p. 73). Furthermore, Charmides's corpse becomes in turn the object of sexual desire for the Dryad. She becomes infatuated with his "pale body", and, not knowing that the object of her desire is actually a corpse, she "yield[ed] her treasure unto one so fair, / And lay beside him, thirsty with love's drouth, / Called him soft names, played with his tangled hair, / And with hot lips made havoc of his mouth", and, after a while, she "[r]eturned to fresh assault, and all day long / Sat at his side, and laughed at her new toy" (Wilde, 1881/1998, p. 63). In other words, the poem describes two rapes of two inanimate or dead bodies.

These acts, then, take as objects of sexual desire and experimentation the abject. For, if we go back to Kristeva's definition of the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982, p. 4), we find that the poem and its representation of sexual desire verge, indeed, on this disturbance of borders and rules. The bodies that are eroticized and, consequently, violated in the poem's plot, belong to a bordering position, to the in-between; as they represent a recognizable, human-like corporality mixed with elements that are purely non-human: marble

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and dead flesh. Wilde does not respect the borders, positions, and rules of both Victorian sexual convention and historical propriety, and, in consequence, he "disturbs identity, system, order". As Kristeva explains: "The abject is related to perversion … [It] is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (1982, p. 15).

In the case of the poem, bodies, in their association with illicit and perverse desire, manage to replicate this feature of the abject. Athena's statue and Charmides's corpse being positioned as objects of sexual desire constitutes a perverse act because the poetic voice does not deny their alleged sanctity, the prohibition they should impose on sexual desire, while at the same time corrupting this same prohibition. This corruption, in fact, manages not only to place these "forbidden bodies" at the core of the poem's storyline, but also to portray their sexual impact as something worth rewarding, or hopeful. Aphrodite and Persephone grant Charmides and the Dryad the possibility to consummate their love and keep it for eternity, and so it seems that the abject, with the perversion it entails, becomes here something to be desired, an act of wilful transgression that waits for a reward in the afterlife.

Wilde states in the poem's penultimate stanza that Charmides, "whose life had been / A fiery pulse of sin, a splendid shame, / Could in the loveless land of Hades glean / One scorching harvest from those fields of flame / Where passion walks with naked unshod feet" (1881/1998, p. 72). And it is in this ending, precisely, where we might find that the disorientating process, through which the abject acts in the poem have come to break the system of Victorian sexual mores, has led to a sense of hopefulness. For while it is true that there is no explicit or, indeed, implicit, mention of same-sex love or desire in the poem, the bodies represented in it can easily be read as queer. This reading of the bodies is possible not only due to the repeated identification of Charmides with mythologized characters related to same-sex desire, but also thanks to the epistemological similarity between the abject body and queerness. As Judith Butler points out, performativity manages to create norms not only by force of "reiteration", but also by means of "exclusion": "And in the case of bodies, those exclusions haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed" (2011, p. 140). The status of the bodies that are presented as objects of erotic desire in the poem –one a statue, the other a corpse– haunt, obviously, the sexual acts in which they are (unwillingly) engaged.

By placing the abject as sexually desirable, Wilde is delving into the "strictly foreclosed", and, in doing so, he is challenging the meaning of abjection itself. As a consequence, the bodies that cause this abjection or perversion can easily be identified with the queer, and with a questioning, therefore, of its status as a strictly foreclosed identity. To quote, once again, from Butler: "[t]he abjection of homosexuality can take place only through an identification with … abjection" (2011, p. 74). In this sense I propose that the sexually desirable bodies represented in Wilde's "Charmides" can –and, indeed, should– be read as orientating devices towards the queer. The fact that these bodies are engaged in abjection signals their relation to queer identities that were also considered abject in the late nineteenth-

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century. In other words, we can interpret the bodies represented in the poem as well as the sexual acts that surround them as queer, because of their close relationship with the abject, as well as because of their ensuing potential to disrupt and question the "normal".

The poem's references to same-sex desire in ancient Greek mythology, and the fact that it was considered perverse upon its reception, add to the significance of the abject acts that appear in it, to position it as a queer poem. What I am arguing, after all, is that Wilde made a queer use of some of the elements within the poem so that he could signal to same-sex desire in a covert way and be able to discuss it in relation to a potential hopeful future (or afterlife). Wilde's queer use of desire, bodies, and abjection in his poem was used in order to become fainter, as his best chance of being at all. Unable to discuss same-sex desire and its consequences openly, he portrayed two acts whose abjection would have been considered equal to that of a queer act of sexual desire. The difference, of course, was that while he could write about the rape of statues and corpses in a free manner, he could have never done so if he were to discuss same-sex desire openly.

In any case, the corporeal and abject acts described in the poem are a good example of Friedman's conception of the aesthetes as using a system of their own to express their sexual desires at the margins of the legal and medical discourses surrounding sexuality at the time. And, in this sense, this sample of abjection is hopeful because, following Castiglia's conception of hope, it poses a social challenge to the (queer) reader in the sense that it exposes the identification of dissident sexualities with abjection in the period and, thus, has the potential to create consciousness about the unfairness of the social and cultural heteronormativity of the Victorian age. "Charmides", after all, "provid[es] [a] standard against which the already existing world is measured" (Castiglia, 2017, p. 6), inasmuch as it clearly uses the abject and the references to the classical past to signal the way in which same-sex desire was regarded in the late nineteenth century, while at the same time rewarding abjection with an ending that promises a better future. As disorientating as this may be for Wilde's contemporaries, to read the poem as the promise of a reward for what is considered abject may have represented, for its queer readers and for Wilde himself, a way of offering a better reality in the future through keeping an open mind on the "as-yet-untried" (Castiglia, 2017, p. 4). Furthermore, Wilde's use of the body, of the corporeal, not only shows his acquired consciousness of the body's potential to signify what cannot be articulated. It also demonstrates his sense of how the corporeal can be liberating, because, even when regarded as abject, it can be used to signal the deficiencies of a restricting system and the hope that may yet be found in the future for those whose body does not fit in that system, as long as they are willing to rebel against it.

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4. CONCLUSIONS

As different as the abject and the hopeful may seem at first glance, they both share some common features. The abject carries with itself, due to its ambiguous position as something that does not fit within established categories, the possibility to disrupt these categories, to break them and to explore new forms of being. The hopeful, on the other hand, can be understood as a feeling that goes beyond mere faith in the future, and, contrarily, as a sense of social injustice against which one is called to rebel, if one wants to live in a reality that is accepting of the individual's peculiarities and what makes them unable to fit in the "collective direction" of society. Wilde's poem "Charmides" clearly demonstrates how these two concepts may interact, connect, and offer productive ways of understanding how he rebelled against his socio-cultural sexual context and managed to articulate his own queer desires, without adopting the condemning language of that context.

As disorientating as the connection between the abject –that which is deemed undesirable by predominating mores and traditions– and the hopeful may be at first glance, it is important to bear in mind Ahmed's idea that disorientations may be hopeful as long as they, much like hope itself, show us new ways of facing reality that are more likely to embrace difference (2006, p. 158). Wilde's masterful use of the corporeal to connect the abject, the hopeful, and the queer, is yet more evidence of the many ways in which he understood how bodies may go beyond physical structures and have meanings ascribed to them, an understanding of physicality that, doubtlessly, helped him play with his image during his American tour, in which his body itself remained at the centre of a –rather abject– controversy. The corporeal is thus, in the poem, the main channel through which Wilde points to the new–queer– reality that might be hidden behind the heteronormativity of "collective directions". The identification between the abject and the queer and the ensuing reward of these concepts shown in "Charmides" may be, admittedly, disorientating for Wilde's contemporaries, but it is still a way of pointing towards a possibility that could become reality if hopefulness –in its most combative sense– is fostered and practiced.

"Charmides" can be read, therefore, as a key text within Wilde's psycho-sexual and socio-cultural development. In its exploration and negotiation of how what is regarded as abject can also become hopeful, the poem engages with and criticizes in a veiled manner the sexual and moral foundations of the period. Taking into account how, by 1895, he fell prey to the condemning social and legal discourses that surrounded the study of dissident sexualities during that time, the poem's importance must be re-assessed as an example of Wilde's rebellious and queer quest to express himself at the margins of the socially-accepted. Expressing desire for the abject –be it a dead body or a member of one's same sex– was a dangerous endeavour during the late-nineteenth century, yet one that Wilde undertook and made hopeful by showing his readers that transgressing socially established systems may be rewarding. Beyond this, "Charmides" also demonstrates Wilde's earlier consciousness about

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the potential of the corporeal to express a (queer) personality, to play and express his beliefs, and to manipulate the public's perception of his carefully curated persona, as the American tour demonstrates. In this sense, a rather unpopular and highly-criticized poem from Wilde's early career can, in my opinion, open new venues of research within the author's –and aestheticism's– way of rebelling against oppressive mores by using the corporeal, the abject, and the hopeful in a rather *queer* –yet productive– combination.

NOTES

[i] It is important to bear in mind Bristow's claim that "[O]ne of the main reasons that Wilde agreed to turn himself into a such a spectacle … was that it promised to put him on a firm financial footing" (2022, p. 32).

[ii] Of course, it is rather impossible to know exactly when Wilde's erotic encounters with other men began. A series of early scholars on the topic and biographers, such as Rupert Croft-Cooke, Neil McKenna, and Molly Whittington-Egan, think that they date back to as early as the 1870s. Despite his growing intimacy with men before his American tour (such as Frank Miles, Lord Ronal Sutherland Gower, and Rennell Rodd), the first hard evidence supporting Wilde's sexual interactions with other men is from his relationship with Robert Ross, which began in the early years of his marriage, in 1886 (Bristow, 2022, p. 56). Despite this, it is obvious, based on the poems, the aforementioned growing intimacy with other men, and his collaboration with Mahaffy, that Wilde was attracted to this topic from the moment he started his university years. My interpretation of "Charmides" completely supports this notion.

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