



Polysèmes

Revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiales

21 | 2019

(Re)constructions

Image, Memory, and Reconstruction: Alastair's Illustrated Editions for Oscar Wilde's *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta* as Memory Palaces

Image, mémoire et reconstruction : les éditions illustrées par Alastair de La Sphinge et de L'Anniversaire de l'Infante d'Oscar Wilde comme palais de mémoire

Xavier Giudicelli



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/polysesmes/4722>

DOI: 10.4000/polysesmes.4722

ISSN: 2496-4212

Publisher

SAIT

Electronic reference

Xavier Giudicelli, « Image, Memory, and Reconstruction: Alastair's Illustrated Editions for Oscar Wilde's *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta* as Memory Palaces », *Polysèmes* [Online], 21 | 2019, Online since 30 May 2019, connection on 11 June 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/polysesmes/4722> ; DOI : 10.4000/polysesmes.4722

This text was automatically generated on 11 June 2019.

Polysèmes

Image, Memory, and Reconstruction: Alastair's Illustrated Editions for Oscar Wilde's *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta* as Memory Palaces

*Image, mémoire et reconstruction : les éditions illustrées par Alastair de
La Sphinge et de L'Anniversaire de l'Infante d'Oscar Wilde comme palais de
mémoire*

Xavier Giudicelli

Book illustration necessarily involves a form of reconstruction: graphic artists offer a series of visual fragments from which the reader/viewer is invited to recompose the text. Illustrators thereby also suggest a particular vision of—and interpretative itinerary through—the book. I would also argue that book illustration may be akin to a memory palace. Building a memory palace is a well-known mnemonic method—already advocated in Greek and Roman rhetorical treatises (the method of *loci*, the memory journey, or mind palace technique) (see Yates)—whereby the subject builds a mental space, often spacious and grand, around which s/he walks in her/his mind and wherein s/he places the things s/he needs to remember, in the form of pictures, startling enough to trigger the imagination. It is also the principle upon which Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1921-29)—an attempt to map the afterlife of antiquity through a series of panels—is based. “Memory palace” was also the title of an exhibition held in the Porter Gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2013, a physically immersive illustrated story—or walk-in book—displaying fragments of a dystopian novella by British writer Hari Kunzru—about a nightmarish futuristic society, in which all knowledge, culture and images have been wiped out—along with the twenty graphic creations by different designers and illustrators that Kunzru's text had inspired.

The notion of “memory palace” is a paradigm I would like to try out in order to make sense of the word-image relationships within illustrated books, taking as case studies two—hitherto little investigated—illustrated editions of Wilde’s texts done by the same artist, Alastair, both published in the 1920s: a poem, *The Sphinx*,¹ illustrated by Alastair in 1920, and a tale, *The Birthday of the Infanta*,² illustrated by Alastair in 1928. Those two sets of illustrations are, I will contend, akin to memory palaces, as they bear witness to Alastair’s inter pictorial reprising, but also as they require the reader/viewer’s active circulation within a network of texts and images.

German-born polyglot artist Alastair is an eccentric and cosmopolitan figure, whose productions testify to Oscar Wilde’s enduring legacy at the beginning of the twentieth century. Alastair, the *nom de plume* of Hans Henning Otto, Baron von Voigt (1887-1969), led a nomadic existence, living in Germany, Austria, Britain and France; he was thought to be German by English writers, English by German writers and Hungarian by French writers (Arwas 5). He translated some of Wilde’s works into German (*Das Bildnis des Dorian Gray*. Konstanz: Lingua Verlag, 1948) and also illustrated several of Wilde’s texts for both French and British publishers. Besides *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta*, he produced images for a French edition of *Salomé* for the Parisian publisher Georges Crès in 1922,³ as well as uncollected drawings for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the late 1920s (*Dorian Gray in Catherine de Medici’s Mourning Bed*, for example [Arwas 87]). His drawing style, “untouched by the contemporary” according to Robert Ross (qtd in Arwas 8), is reminiscent of the art of the “decadent” 1890s (Arwas 5)—, and also attests to the construction of a camp sensibility, under the aegis of Oscar Wilde, in the early twentieth century.

The illustrated versions of Wilde’s texts by Alastair are both collectors’ items: they are large-format (in-quartos), limited editions (1,000 copies for *The Sphinx* and just 110 copies for *The Birthday of the Infanta*), aimed at bibliophiles. Alastair’s illustrated edition of *The Sphinx* contains a frontispiece, decorations, and nine full-page illustrations (see list of illustrations at the end of the essay) in black, white, and turquoise.⁴ The book had been planned before World War 1,⁵ the illustrations had been printed in Belgium and stored in London during the war years (Arwas 12). It was finally published in 1920, by John Lane, the emblematic publisher of the 1890s in Britain,⁶ who had already issued in 1914 a selection of drawings by Alastair (*Forty-Three Drawings by Alastair*), preceded, like the 1920 *Sphinx*, by a preface authored by Robert Ross, Oscar Wilde’s close friend and literary executor. Alastair’s version of *The Birthday of the Infanta* dates back to 1928 and contains eight tinted plates and a frontispiece (see full list of illustrations at the end of the essay).⁷ It was published by The Black Sun Press/Éditions Narcisse—a Paris-based publishing house run by an American expatriate couple, Harry Crosby and his wife, Mary “Caresse” Crosby (*née* Mary Phelps Jacob)—in two versions, one in French, one in English. Alastair had met the Crosbys in 1927, the year when they decided to start their own publishing house in Paris (Arwas 17). *The Birthday of the Infanta* is one of the first books that they issued; it contains a preface by Harry Crosby. The Black Sun Press would go on to publish many modernist authors, including James Joyce (*Tales Told of Shem and Shaun: Three Fragments from Work in Progress*, 1929) and Ezra Pound (*Imaginary Letters*, 1930). Alastair further collaborated with the Crosbys for an illustrated edition of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and of Crosby’s own collection of poems, *Red Skeletons* (1928).

I wish to offer a selective path through Alastair's transpositions of Wilde's texts, a guided tour of Alastair's memory palaces. I will first show that these illustrated versions, whilst being a testimony of the influence of the Anglo-Irish author's works in the early twentieth century—a mausoleum erected to the memory of Wilde—also hold up a mirror to Wilde's texts themselves, which are imaginary reconstructions of worlds—the ancient world (*The Sphinx*) or the Spanish Golden Age (*The Birthday of the Infanta*)—and are based on a dialogue between visual and verbal images. This will then lead me to analyse the practice of inter pictorial reprising which characterises Alastair's illustrations for *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta*: Alastair's images bear the traces of the influence of such *fin-de-siècle* graphic artists—and illustrators of Wilde—as Aubrey Beardsley and Charles Ricketts. A further focus will be on how Alastair stages Wilde's texts, and turns the illustrated book into a theatrical, camp—maybe queer—space.

From Images to Texts to Images

Wilde's *Birthday of the Infanta* is a variation upon Diego Velázquez's 1656 *Las Meninas* (oil on canvas, 318 x 276 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado), as Wilde himself suggested: "One of the stories [...] is about the little pale Infanta whom Velasquez painted" (letter to Mrs W.H. Grenfell, November 1891, *Complete Letters* 493). The dancing dwarf, shown on the frontispiece of the edition illustrated by Alastair recalls Nicolasito (Nicolás Pertusato), the court dwarf kicking the dog in *Las Meninas*. In the story, Wilde offers an imaginary reconstruction of the lavish entertainments devised for the birthday of the 12-year-old Infanta and recreates—or fantasises—the atmosphere of the court of Philip IV of Spain (1621-1665), drawing his inspiration from the paintings of the Spanish court-artist, whose works he greatly admired, as attested in his *Letters*, when, for instance, he tells Robert Ross that Velázquez's portrait of the "Pamfili [sic] Pope"⁸ is "quite the grandest portrait in the world" (letter to Robert Ross, 21 April 1900, *Complete Letters* 1182). In Alastair's last illustration (*The Dead Dwarf*, facing page 36)—the elaborate farthingale gown worn by the Infanta is reminiscent of the dresses of Margarita Teresa of Spain and her maids of honour (Doña Isabel de Velasco, to the right of the Infanta, and Doña María Agustina Sarmiento de Sotomayor, to her left) in Velázquez's painting. In his famous analysis of *Las Meninas* in *Les Mots et les Choses* (*The Order of Things*), Michel Foucault shows how Velázquez's painting is based on the interplay between presence and absence, the absence of the models (the royal couple) and their presence through the reflection in the mirror in the background (Foucault 19-31).⁹ Wilde's story similarly centres on the theme of the mirror, the titular dwarf being an anti-Narcissus who realises his monstrosity by looking at his reflection, which literally breaks his heart and kills him (168). Alastair, for his part, chooses to lay emphasis on the absence of the melancholy king, Philip IV, by contrasting within an image elaborate arabesques and an empty rectangle in the centre (*The Empty Window*, facing page 10), sending back to the disappearance of the king behind the curtains in the text (157). The colour scheme of Alastair's plates is also reminiscent of the umber and brown ochre used by Velázquez in *Las Meninas*.

Wilde's 1894 *Sphinx* is a poem comprising 87 distichs, with each line containing sixteen syllables and an internal rhyme (the central word of the first line rhymes with the last word of the second) and characterised by the use of rare, unfamiliar words ("insapphirine" [an adjective derived from the word sapphire, l. 92, 878], "corybants" [attendants or priests of Cybele, l. 99, 879], "steatite" [a type of mineral, l. 103, 879], to

give but three examples). It consists of a series of exotic visions suggested to the speaker by the presence of a silent sphinx, “watch[ing] [him] through the shifting gloom” (l. 2, 874). A range of mythological and historical figures are mentioned, among whom Egyptian gods (for instance, l. 21, 875), the Virgin Mary (l. 31, 875), as well as the emperor Hadrian and his lover Antinous (l. 33, 876). Thematically, the poem—a variation on the figure of the *femme fatale* and an expression of the romantic and post-romantic fascination for ancient Egypt¹⁰—owes much to Gustave Flaubert’s *Tentation de saint Antoine* (1874)—the word “Mandragores” [the plant mandrake, historically used for narcotic properties, l. 40, 876], the names “Tragelaphos” [a fabulous beast, compounded of a goat and a stag, l. 64, 877] and “Oreichalch” [a kind of yellow copper ore, l. 70, 877], for instance, are borrowed from Flaubert’s text—, as well as to Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835)—in particular, the fantastic visions in the thirteenth chapter of Gautier’s novel¹¹—and to Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Les Chats” (see Aquien 159). It is also indebted to Gustave Moreau’s works, in particular the symbolist artist’s sensuous 1864 *Œdipus and the Sphinx* (oil on canvas, 206.4 x 104.8 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) which finds an echo in Alastair’s crowned, bare-breasted Sphinx on the cover of the edition of Wilde’s poem he illustrated in 1920 [fig. 1]. The profusion of verbal images elicited by the Sphinx in Wilde’s poem is reflected in the fantastic and ambiguous visions suggested by Alastair in the precious edition published by John Lane. In the same way as Mona Lisa, “older than the rocks among which she sits” according to Walter Pater (Pater 80), Wilde’s Sphinx—and Alastair’s graphic rendition of Wilde’s poem—are palimpsests based on the superimposition of artistic and literary reminiscences: they are memory palaces, characterised by echoes, expansions, and mirror effects. Alastair’s illustrations also testify to the “persistence of Decadence” well into the twentieth century, as attested by the constellation of such Post-Decadent

illustrators as Harry Clarke (1889-1931) and Sidney Syme (1865-1941), whose creations have much in common with Alastair's.



Fig. 1: *The Sphinx* by Oscar Wilde, illustrated and decorated by Alastair, with a note by Robert Ross. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head/New York: John Lane Company, 1920, cover page.

PRIVATE COLLECTION.

Alastair not only echoes but also sometimes adds to Wilde's texts by expanding on allusions and suggesting interesting visual parallels. For instance, the reference to the "more than usually solemn *auto-da-fé* in which nearly three hundred heretics, amongst whom were many Englishmen, had been delivered over to the secular arm to be burned" (156), in honour of the king's wedding, an expression of Wilde's fantasised vision of Spanish Catholicism, has elicited an arresting composition by Alastair—the only occurrence in this edition of the use of the colour red (*The Autodafé*, facing page 14). Alastair's plate seems to me to be reminiscent of Francisco de Goya's series of engravings *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (1810-1815) and the raw violence that they convey, for instance in the ironically entitled *Grande hazaña! con muertos!* (*Great feat! With dead men!*) (plate 39, etching, lavis and drypoint, 156 x 208 mm, Madrid, Museo del Prado), in which the layout of the figures is indeed very close to that in Alastair's image, although the torture is different (dismemberment in Goya, vs. burning alive in Alastair).

Recycling and Reprising

Alastair's illustrations for *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta* thus appear as memory palaces, tests of the viewers' visual and literary reminiscences, allowing for an examination of the recycling and reprising processes often at work in book illustrations. This is all the more apposite if we consider the fact that those two texts had already been illustrated by Charles Ricketts (with the help of Charles Shannon, in the case of

“The Birthday of the Infanta”¹²) in the 1890s, during Wilde’s lifetime. In fact, Alastair’s picturing of *The Sphinx* in particular testifies to a dual influence. His images first evoke those designed by Charles Ricketts for the 1894 edition of *The Sphinx* published by John Lane/The Bodley Head. Interestingly, both Ricketts’s and Alastair’s editions were published twenty-five years apart by the same publisher. Moreover, Alastair’s plates are reminiscent of the works of Aubrey Beardsley.



Fig. 2: *The Sphinx* by Oscar Wilde, illustrated by Charles Ricketts. London: John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1894, cover page.

Download for free at <http://cnx.org/contents/87c5a178-1aff-467c-9231-3a8979b83519@2.1>

One example of that reprising could be provided by the cover page designs of *The Sphinx* illustrated by Ricketts and Alastair, cover pages being key elements in the construction of horizons of expectations. Where Ricketts offers a somewhat sober composition inspired by both Japanese (Frankel 2000, 159) and Hellenistic styles [fig. 2], Alastair [fig. 1] immediately plunges the reader into a more erotic atmosphere through the details of the half-naked Sphinx and the phallic candelabra—the latter reminding one of those frequently found in Aubrey Beardsley’s images, for instance in the censored title page for the English edition of *Salomé* (Reade 274; also see Beardsley’s *The Eyes of Herod*, Reade 279 and *Enter Herodias*, Reade 285). Alastair’s composition is also more theatrical than Ricketts’s: curtains cut across the image; the opposition between the candelabra, on the one hand, and the rounded shapes of the moon crescent and the curtains on the other, reads as an allusion to questions of gender and sexuality.

A comparative analysis of the title page by Ricketts and the frontispiece by Alastair for their respective versions of *The Sphinx* corroborates that first impression. Ricketts’s image [fig. 3] is a variation on *Melencolia I* by Albrecht Dürer (copper engraving, 1514, 238 x 168 mm, Städel Museum, Frankfurt-am-Main). The two figures represented on Ricketts’s frontispiece—an angel inspired by the winged figure in Dürer’s *Melencolia I* on the left and

the Sphinx on the right—are connected by an arabesque, which covers almost the whole space of the page (Frankel 2000, 157 sq). A correspondence is suggested between the figure of the arabesque (which is echoed throughout the two illustrated books by Alastair considered in this article) and the poem itself, which consists of a series of fantastic visions tracing spirals around the figure of the Sphinx, who remains forever mute and enigmatic. The attempt at defining the mythical creature leads to a proliferation of notations and endows the writing with a decorative dimension, emphasising “the power of words to reflect one another” (Aquièn 158, my translation). Meanwhile, Alastair places on the frontispiece of his edition the mythical figure of Ashtaroth [fig. 4], mentioned in the thirty-fourth stanza of the poem (“Or That young god, the Tyrian, / Who was more amorous than the dove of Ashtaroth?” [l. 67-68, 877]). Ashtaroth, Ishtar, or Astarte, is a goddess of Middle Eastern mythology assimilated to Aphrodite in ancient syncretism.¹³ What the frontispiece shows is a portrait of a hermaphrodite Venus: the figure has breasts but also takes the shape of a phallus, thereby recalling the hermaphroditic god Terminus which Beardsley had designed for a title page of *Salomé* censored by his publisher John Lane (see Stead 168). The homoerotic dimension of Wilde’s poem is thus unveiled from the outset by Alastair, more clearly than by Ricketts, while Ashtaroth’s side-glance is a reminder of Beardsley’s oblique perspective on Wilde’s *Salomé*, whose *risqué* subtext the *fin-de-siècle* artist playfully highlighted in such illustrations as *The Toilet of Salomé* (Reade 281 and 287).

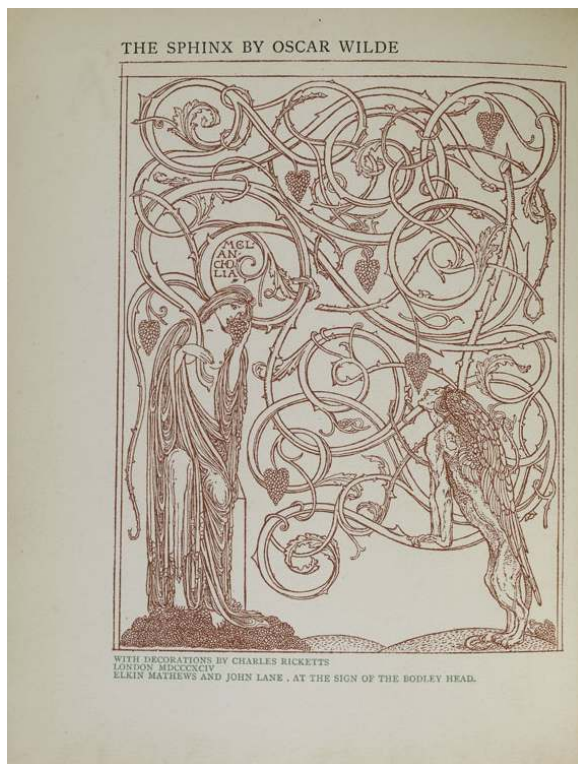


Fig. 3: *The Sphinx* by Oscar Wilde, illustrated by Charles Ricketts. London: John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1894, title page.

Download for free at <http://cnx.org/contents/87c5a178-1aff-467c-9231-3a8979b83519@2.1>



Fig. 4: *The Sphinx* by Oscar Wilde, illustrated and decorated by Alastair, with a note by Robert Ross. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head/New York: John Lane Company, 1920, Frontispiece [Ashtaroth]. Download for free at <http://cnx.org/contents/df7f1876-f813-44c4-95d4-53f56d65c775@1>

The final illustration of the 1920 version of *The Sphinx* by Alastair is also worth comparing to Ricketts's last plate in the 1894 edition. Alastair [fig. 5] pictures an androgynous, emaciated Christ, reminiscent of the figures in Egon Schiele's works (for instance *Seated Male Nude [Self-portrait]*, 1910, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 150 cm, Vienna, Leopold Museum). The figure in both Alastair's and Ricketts's images is to be linked to the allusion to the Crucifixion which concludes Wilde's poem ("[...] leave me to my crucifix / Whose pallid burden, sick with bread, watches the world with wearied eyes" [l. 172-174, 882])—a Christic figure whose white body against a black background is offered to the viewer's eyes in Alastair's image and may remind one of the ecstatic St. Sebastian, gazing up at the skies, painted by Guido Reni (oil on canvas, 127 x 92 cm, Genoa, *Palazzo Rosso*), so valued by Wilde and repeatedly mentioned in his works.¹⁴ A homoerotic dimension was present but more discreet in Ricketts's *Sphinx* [fig. 6], insofar as the androgynous Christ was represented with his back turned (see Cooper 178 on androgyny in Ricketts). Alastair turns the figure around, offers a frontal view of the body of Christ and points more clearly to the union between *eros* and *thanatos*. In Ricketts's image there are two spiral-like shapes, in which male figures reminiscent of William Blake's depictions of male bodies are pictured; Alastair's plate, on the other hand, features a single turquoise circle against which a clean-shaven, androgynous Christ stands out. A hand (or a foot) appears at the bottom left of the composition, an image of a fragmented body, cut up into parts and fetishized.¹⁵



Fig. 5: *The Sphinx* by Oscar Wilde, illustrated and decorated by Alastair, with a note by Robert Ross. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head/New York: John Lane Company, 1920, "...Leave me to my crucifix, / Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches the world with wearied eyes, / And weeps for every soul in vain" [facing page 34].

Download for free at <http://cnx.org/contents/df7f1876-f813-44c4-95d4-53f56d65c775@1>

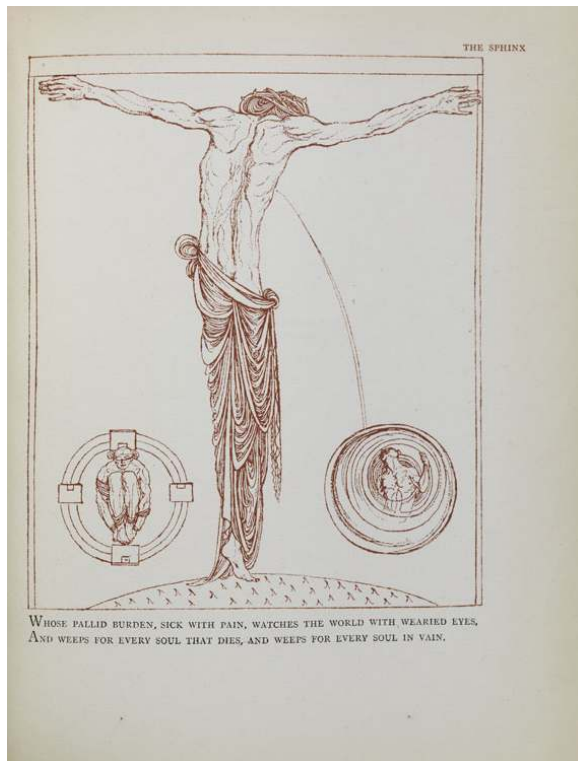


Fig. 6: *The Sphinx* by Oscar Wilde, illustrated by Charles Ricketts. London: John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1894, "Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches the world with wearied eyes, / And weeps for every soul that dies, and weeps for every soul in vain" [final illustration].

Download for free at <http://cnx.org/contents/87c5a178-1aff-467c-9231-3a8979b83519@2.1>

Alastair's illustrations for *The Birthday of the Infanta* are also to be compared with Ricketts's and his partner Shannon's work for the first edition of *A House of Pomegranates*, published in 1891 (*The Birthday of the Infanta* being the second tale in the collection). The 1891 edition only contains one liminal illustration for *The Birthday of the Infanta*. Interestingly, the choice made by the artists is to picture a show-within-the-story, "the semi-classical tragedy of Sophonisba" (a Carthaginian princess who poisoned herself rather than submit to Roman servitude and marry an enemy) performed by puppets for the pleasure and entertainment of the Infanta (158). Possibly taking his cue from Ricketts and Shannon, Alastair lays much emphasis on theatricality, on performance in his "staging" of both *The Birthday of the Infanta* and *The Sphinx*.¹⁶

The Page as a Stage: Queer Memory Palaces?

One of the thematic threads that runs through Alastair's illustrations for *The Birthday of the Infanta* is that of dancing, from the dancing dwarf of the frontispiece to the depiction of the "dancing boys from the church of Nuestra Señora del Pilar" (159; *The Dancers of the Virgin*, facing page 20) and that of the grape-treaders ("At vintage time came the grape-treaders, with purple hands and feet, wreathed with glossy ivy and carrying dripping skins of wine" [165]; *The Dancers of the Virgin*, facing page 20). Whether in the Catholic or in the pagan ritual, the androgyny of the figures is brought to the fore. The theme of dancing paired with that of androgyny also appears in Alastair's imaginary portrait of Antinous for his 1920 illustrated version of *The Sphinx* [fig. 7], in which Hadrian's lover is pictured as an epicene dancer emerging from—or melting with—a floral background and

turned into a new Loïe Fuller, the American ballerina who so much inspired both writers and visual artists at the turn of the century (see Ducrey and Garelick). Alastair was himself a dancer, who performed “mime dances” in society, for instance in the Paris salon of Baroness Elsie Deslandes in 1914 (Arwas 5). I would tend to read this omnipresence of dancing not only biographically but also intertextually/interpictorially, as the dissemination throughout Alastair's works of Salomé's “dance of the seven veils”, the laconically described performance (“Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils”, *Salomé* 140) which is the very essence of dance and was pictured by Alastair in his 1922 edition of Wilde's play.¹⁷

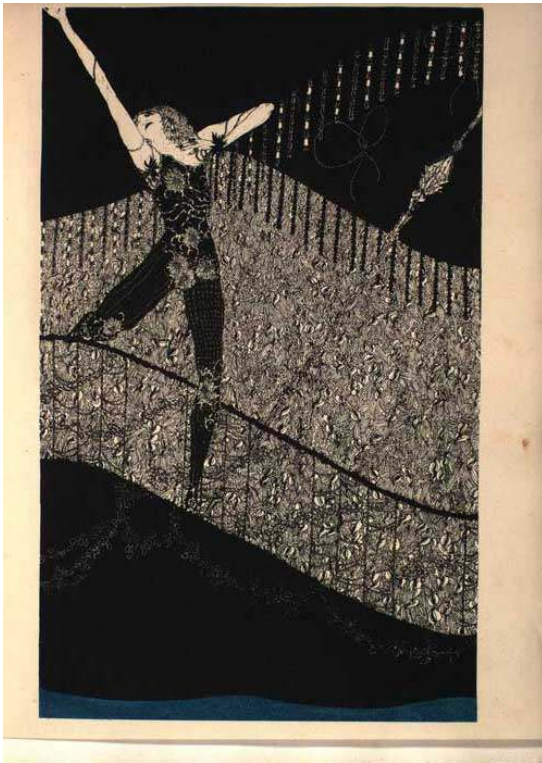


Fig. 7: *The Sphinx* by Oscar Wilde, illustrated and decorated by Alastair, with a note by Robert Ross. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head/New York: John Lane Company, 1920, “Sing to me of that odorous green eve when crouching by the marge / You heard from Adrian's gilded barge the laughter of Antinous” [facing page 16].

Download for free at <http://cnx.org/contents/df7f1876-f813-44c4-95d4-53f56d65c775@1>

Dancing expresses the fluidity of identity—gendered or otherwise—the dancer being able to transform him/herself at will, as Loïe Fuller did: in the numerous accounts of Fuller's performances—her “serpentine dance” or “fire dance”, for instance—a lot of emphasis was placed on her metamorphoses through the interplay of costume and multi-coloured lighting (see Ducrey 448-466). In Alastair's plate, the strong contrasts between black and white are evocative of the lighting effects resorted to by Loïe Fuller. The dance of Salomé, and of Loïe Fuller, may partake of those “phantom images” discussed by Georges Didi-Huberman in his 2002 essay founded on Didi-Huberman's research into the life and works of Aby Warburg, *The Surviving Image*. Elaborating on Warburg's concept of *Nachleben* (survival or afterlife), Didi-Huberman defends a conception of time—and of art history—that is non-linear, dynamic, based on untimely returns and resurgences, notably surfacing through forms and gestures. Alastair's dancing, epicene, snake-like bodies could provide an illustration of that survival of images: the serpentine line obsessively recurs in

Alastair's images, from the "coiled Nereid" (facing page 20) to the portrait of the Young Tyrian (facing page 22), for instance. That serpentine line could provide a metaphor for the process of viewing/reading Alastair's creations: they require back-and-forth, oscillating movements between a whole network of texts and images, thereby also "queering" time, suggesting a non-linear temporality, an untimeliness which blurs the traditional binary opposition between past and present.

As an illustrator, Alastair turns the page into a stage, and the reader/viewer into an active spectator whose memory as well as senses are appealed to, causing a reading event in which the reader "operates superimpositions, collages, montages which make up a dialectical image" (Louvel §19). Moreover, the camp sensibility that one can perceive in Alastair's picturing of *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta* is linked to the enhanced theatricality that pervades both illustrated books, such theatricalization being one of the trademarks of camp according to Susan Sontag's seminal 1964 "Notes on Camp". The camp aesthetic developed by Alastair is also an "epicene style" (Sontag §11), characterised by an emphasis on hybridity. The figure of Isis and Osiris [Fig. 8] appears as a kind of synthesis of the illustrator's vision of *The Sphinx*. The artist does not merely represent what is in the text, namely the submission of Isis to Osiris ("[...] when Isis to Osiris knelt", l. 21, 875) or repeat what Ricketts had done (the 1894 edition does not picture that fragment of the text). Alastair depicts a double-headed, androgynous creature, combining the black and turquoise colours used in several of the illustrations. Male and female characteristics form a harmonious union of opposites that reminds one of the yin and yang of Chinese philosophy. This image can also be considered as a comment on the object that contains it. An illustrated edition is indeed a dual entity, a hybrid creature juxtaposing two disparate semiotic systems, which echo, complete—or sometimes stand in tension with—each other, and whose reading/viewing produces a

“pictorial third”, “a visual movement in the reader/viewer’s mind by the passage between the two media” (Louvel §32).



Fig. 8: *The Sphinx* by Oscar Wilde, illustrated and decorated by Alastair, with a note by Robert Ross. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head/New York: John Lane Company, 1920, “O tell me, were you standing by when Isis to Osiris knelt?” [facing page 12].

Download for free at <http://cnx.org/contents/df7f1876-f813-44c4-95d4-53f56d65c775@1>

Just like the Sphinx, referred to through the oxymoronic phrase “exquisite grotesque” (l. 12, 874) in Wilde’s poem, the universe in which Alastair motions the reader/viewer is characterised by an aesthetic of incongruity, hybridity and *in-betweenness*. It is a world that blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, between good and bad taste—a possibly *kitsch* universe, a notion etymologically related to recycling (in German *kitschen* originally means the gathering of dirt in the streets and, by extension, recycling clichés). Yet my contention is that the reinterpretation of Wilde’s texts by Alastair results in a playful redefinition of identity, which ultimately may be related to queer as defined by Judith Butler (see Butler) and “troubles” gender categories and fixed hierarchies. Alastair’s illustrations for *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta* are a form of visual and creative criticism of Wilde’s texts and they delineate the contours of a camp, and queer, memory palace for the reader/viewer to wander in.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alastair. *Forty-Three Drawings by Alastair*. Preface by Robert Ross. London: John Lane, 1914.

- Aquien, Pascal. *Oscar Wilde : les mots et les songes*. Croissy-Beaubourg : Aden, 2006.
- Arasse, Daniel. *On n'y voit rien* (2000). Paris : Gallimard, "Folio Essais", 2005.
- Arwas, Victor. *Alastair: Illustrator of Decadence*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1974.
- Babuscio, Jack. "Camp and the Gay Sensibility". *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. David Bergman (ed.). Amherst: U of Massachussetts P, 1995, 19-38.
- Beronä, David A. *Alastair: Drawings and Illustrations*. London: Dover Publications, 2011.
- Butler Judith. *Gender Trouble* (1990). London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Calloway, Stephen. *Charles Ricketts: Subtle and Fantastic Illustrator*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1979.
- Cambray, Carole. *Crise de la représentation dans la Salomé d'Oscar Wilde et chez ses illustrateurs*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Université Strasbourg II, 2000.
- Cooper, Emmanuel. *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the last 100 Years in the West*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Crosby, Harry. *Red Skeletons*. Illustrated by Alastair. Paris : Éditions Narcisse, 1928.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *L'Image survivante : histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*. Paris : Éditions de Minuit, "Paradoxe", 2002 [*The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*. Trans. Harvey Mendelsohn. University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 2016].
- Ducrey, Guy. *Corps et graphies : poétique de la danse et de la danseuse à la fin du XIX^e siècle*. Paris : Honoré Champion, "Romantisme et Modernités", 1996.
- Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde* (1987). London: Penguin Books, 1988.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (1874). *Œuvres complètes*. René Dumesnil et Albert Thibaudet (eds.). Paris : Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", vol. I, 1936.
- Foucault, Michel. *Les Mots et les choses : une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966). Paris : Gallimard, "Tel", 1995 [*The Order of Things: An Archeology of Social Sciences*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1970].
- Frankel, Nicholas. "Excavating *The Sphinx*". *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books*. Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 2000, 155-175.
- Frankel, Nicholas. *Masking the Text: Essays on Literature and Mediation in the 1890s*. High Wycombe: The Rivendale Press, 2009.
- Garelick, Rhonda. *Electric Salomé: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.
- Gautier, Théophile. *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). *Œuvres*. Paolo Tortonese (ed.). Paris : Robert Laffont, "Bouquins", 1995.
- Gautier, Théophile. *Voyage en Espagne, suivi de España* (1843). Patrick Berthier (ed.). Paris : Gallimard, "Folio classique", 1981.
- Gautier, Théophile. *Le Roman de la momie* (1857-1858). *Romans, contes et nouvelles*. Vol. 2. Pierre Laubriet (ed.). Paris : Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 2002.
- Gautier, Théophile. « Inès de Las Sierras ». *Émaux et camées* (1872). *Œuvres poétiques complètes*. Michel Brix (ed.). Paris : Bartillat, 2004.

- Gautier, Théophile. *L'Orient* (1877). Sophie Basch (ed.). Paris : Gallimard, "Folio classique", 2013.
- Giudicelli, Xavier. *Portraits de Dorian Gray : le texte, le livre, l'image*. Paris : PUPS, 2016.
- Joyce, James. *Tales Told of Shem and Shaum: Three Fragments from Work in Progress*. Paris : The Black Sun Press, 1929.
- Kunzru, Hari. *Memory Palace*. London: V&A Publishing, 2013.
- Lorrain, Jean. *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901). Hélène Zinck (ed.). Paris : Flammarion, "GF", 2001.
- Louvel, Liliane. "A reading event The Pictorial Third". *Sillages critiques* 21 (2016), last accessed September 27, 2017. URL : <http://sillagescritiques.revues.org/5015>
- Nelson, James G. *The Early Nineties: A View from the Bodley Head*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1971.
- Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1893). Adam Phillips (ed.). Oxford: Oxford UP, "The World's Classics", 1986.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Illustrations by Alastair. Introduction by Arthur Symons. Paris : Éditions Narcisse, 1928.
- Pound, Ezra. *Imaginary Letters*. Paris : The Black Sun Press, 1930.
- Reade, Brian (ed.). *Aubrey Beardsley*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1987.
- Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp" (1964). <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html> (last accessed October 2, 2017).
- Stead, Évanghélia. *La Chair du livre : matérialité, imaginaire et poétique du livre fin-de-siècle*. Paris : PUPS, 2012.
- Stetz, Margaret D. and Mark Samuels Lasner. *England in the 1890s: Literary Publishing at the Bodley Head*. Washington DC: Georgetown UP, 1990.
- Stoker, Bram. *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903). Kate Hebblethwaite (ed.). London: Penguin Classics, 2011.
- Warburg, Aby. *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1929). <http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/collections/warburg-institute-archive/bilderatlas-mnemosyne/mnemosyne-atlas-october-1929>, last accessed October 2, 2017.
- Wilde, Oscar. *L'Anniversaire de l'Infante* (1889). Illustrated by Alastair. Preface by Harry Crosby. Paris : The Black Sun Press/Éditions Narcisse, 1928.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Birthday of the Infanta* (1889). *The Complete Short Stories*. John Sloan (ed.). Oxford: Oxford UP, "Oxford World's Classics", 2010.
- Wilde, Oscar. *A House of Pomegranates*. Design and decorations by Charles Ricketts and Charles Haslewood Shannon. London: James R. Osgood McIlvaine & Co, 1891.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Joseph Bristow (ed.). Oxford: Oxford UP, "Oxford World's Classics", 2008.
- Wilde, Oscar. *Salomé*. Pictured by Aubrey Beardsley. London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894.
- Wilde, Oscar. *Salomé* (1893). Dessins d'Alastair. Paris : Georges Crès, 1922 (1927).
- Wilde, Oscar. *Salomé* (1893-1894). Pascal Aquien (ed.). Paris : Flammarion, "GF", 1993.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Sphinx*. With decorations by Charles Ricketts. London: John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1894. <https://archive.cnx.org/contents/4ee68efc-cc76-4d95-a107-4f268de24664@2/the-sphinx-by-oscar-wilde-with-decorations-by-charles-ricketts-1894>, last accessed October 2, 2017.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Sphinx* (1894). Illustrated and decorated by Alastair. London: John Lane, 1920. <http://qa.cnx.org/contents/338YdvgT@1/1920-edition-of-The-Sphinx-dec>, last accessed October 2, 2017.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Sphinx* (1894). *Complete Works*. Merlin Holland (ed.). Glasgow/London: HarperCollins, 1994, 874-883.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (1908). Robert Ross (ed.). 15 vol. New York: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1993.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Rupert Hart-Davis and Merlin Holland (eds.). London: Fourth Estate, 2000.

Yates, Frances. *The Art of Memory*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.

APPENDIXES

Full list of illustrations

***The Sphinx* by Oscar Wilde, illustrated and decorated by Alastair, with a note by Robert Ross. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head/New York: John Lane Company, 1920. [1,000 copies]**

Frontispiece [Ashtaroth].

1. "O tell me, were you standing by when Isis to Osiris knelt?", facing page 12.
2. "And did you watch the Egyptian melt her union for Antony?", facing page 14.
3. "Sing to me of that odorous green eve when crouching by the marge / You heard from Adrian's gilded barge the laughter of Antinous", facing page 16.
4. "Or did you when the sun was set climb up the cactus-covered slope / To meet your swarthy Ethiop whose body was of polished jet?", facing page 18.
5. "Or had you shameful secret quests and did you hARRY to your home / Some Nereid coiled in amber foam with curious rock crystal breasts?", facing page 20.
6. "Or that young god, the Tyrian who was more amorous than the dove / Of Ashtaroth", facing page 22.
7. "Or did huge Apis from his car leap down?", facing page 24.
8. "Or Pasht, who had green beryls for eyes", facing page 30.
9. "...Leave me to my crucifix, / Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches the world with wearied eyes, / And weeps for every soul in vain", facing page 34.

***L'Anniversaire de l'Infante* par Oscar Wilde. Illustrations par Alastair. Paris : The Black Sun Press/Éditions Narcisse, 1928 [nom du traducteur non précisé]. [100 copies + 10].**

Frontispice, *Le Nain qui danse* [*The Dancing Dwarf*].

1. *La Fanfare* [*The Fanfare*], facing page 2.
2. *La Reine nostalgique* [*The Nostalgic Queen*], facing page 4.
3. *La Fenêtre vide* [*The Empty Window*], facing page 10.

4. *L'Autodafé* [*The Autodafé*], facing page 14.
5. *Les Danseurs de la Vierge* [*The Dancers of the Virgin*], facing page 20.
6. *Les Singes de Barbarie* [*The Barbary Apes*], facing page 24.
7. *Les Fouleurs de raisin* [*The Grape-Treaders*], facing page 31.
8. *Le Nain mort* [*The Dead Dwarf*], facing page 36.

NOTES

1. *The Sphinx* was first published, with decorations by Charles Ricketts, by John Lane/The Bodley Head in 1894.
2. *The Birthday of the Infanta* was first published both in French and in English in the periodical *Paris illustré* in 1889 (n° 35, 30 March 1889) under the title “L’Anniversaire de naissance de la petite princesse”, then in the collection *A House of Pomegranates* in 1891 by Charles Osgood McIlvaine & Co, with illustrations by Charles Ricketts and Charles Haslewood Shannon. “The Birthday of the Infanta” was one of the first texts by Wilde to be translated into French, the translation being by Stuart Merrill, an American friend of Wilde’s who lived in Paris (and wrote in French) and who would help Wilde review the French manuscript of *Salomé*, published in Paris by the *Librairie de l’art indépendant* in February 1893 (Ellmann 353).
3. Carole Cambray offers an in-depth analysis of the illustrations of *Salomé* by Alastair in *Crise de la représentation dans la Salomé d’Oscar Wilde et chez ses illustreurs*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Université Strasbourg II, 2000. According to her, the technique used by Alastair was drypoint on a metal plate, the design being then transferred onto a precious fabric before being printed photomechanically on paper (152).
4. This edition is fully downloadable on http://cnx.org/contents/df7f1876-f813-44c4-95d4-53f56d65c775@1/1920_edition_of_The_Sphinx,_de, last consulted October 2, 2017.
5. The images had indeed been presented at an exhibition in June 1914 (Leicester Galleries, Leicester Square, London). I consulted the catalogue of that exhibition at the Robert Ross Memorial Collection (University College, Oxford) in October 2017.
6. The Bodley Head, originally a bookshop, located on 6B Vigo Street in London and founded on October 10, 1887 by John Lane and Charles Elkin Mathews, is probably the most famous publishing house of the 1890s in the United Kingdom. It was from 1889 that Mathews and Lane embarked on a publishing venture. They published some of the most famous authors of the time, such as Max Beerbohm, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, John Davidson, and Oscar Wilde. The Bodley Head is also behind the magazine *The Yellow Book*, which is considered by many as the epitome of the *fin-de-siècle* spirit in the United Kingdom (for more details, see Nelson as well as Stetz and Lasner). Alastair met John Lane in London before World War 1; the publisher saw in Alastair “another artist of Beardsley’s originality” (Arwas 7).
7. For copyrights reasons, it has unfortunately been impossible to reproduce here images from the illustrated version of *The Birthday of the Infanta* by Alastair. The volume can be accessed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (<http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb316498927>, last accessed October 2, 2017) and at the Bibliothèque littéraire Doucet (<http://www.sudoc.fr/190857447>, last accessed October 2, 2017). Some of the images can be retrieved from the Internet.
8. Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Innocent X*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, 141 x 119 cm, Rome, Galleria Doria-Pamphilj, a painting which later inspired Francis Bacon (*Study after Velázquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953, oil on canvas, 153 x 118 cm, Des Moines, Iowa, Des Moines Art Center). A

reference to Velázquez also appears in the nineteenth chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (“A man can paint like Velasquez and yet be as dull as possible” [*Dorian Gray*, 179]).

9. Also see Daniel Arasse’s interpretation of the painting (Arasse 177-216).

10. Since Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, Europe had been fascinated by Egyptian antiquity and artefacts, an “Egyptomania” exemplified in literature by Théophile Gautier’s *Roman de la momie* (1857-1858), or Bram Stoker’s *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903), for instance.

11. “The Birthday of the Infanta” also attests to Wilde’s taste for the orientalism of both Gautier and Flaubert. Wilde drew from Gautier’s *L’Orient* and *Voyage en Espagne*, as well as from Gautier’s poem “Ines de la Sierras” for his descriptions.

12. According to the catalogue of the British Library (<http://explore.bl.uk/BLVU1:LSCOP-ALL:BL01003923544>, last accessed October 2, 2017), the plate illustrations are by Charles Haslewood Shannon, and the title page, text illustrations, decorations and endpapers were designed by Charles Ricketts.

13. One of the most famous mentions of Astarté in *fin-de-siècle* literature is Jean Lorrain’s 1901 novel *Monsieur de Phocas* (whose subtitle is *Astarté*). The cult of the semitic goddess of love, beauty and the sea was associated to sacred prostitution for the Phenicians and required human sacrifices, children’s holocausts, as well as hangings and crucifixions.

14. See for instance Oscar Wilde, “The Tomb of Keats” (*Irish Monthly*, July 1877), *Collected Works*, vol. XIV, 3-4, or “The Grosvenor Gallery” (*Dublin University Magazine*, July 1877), *Collected Works*, vol. XIV, 12.

15. This echoes *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the titular character’s body is fragmented; his beauty is in reality reduced to three anatomical details: “Yes, he was certainly very handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair” (*Dorian Gray*, 17). This reduction of the body to three physical traits partakes of the logic of the fetish that the text puts into place: Dorian’s body is often expressed through synecdoche. This paradoxical logic whereby parts are cut up in order to express the harmonious beauty of the whole often appears in several illustrations of the novel (Giudicelli 236-242).

16. Interestingly, *The Birthday of the Infanta* had been transposed into an opera, *Der Zwerg* (*The Dwarf*), by the Austrian composer Alexander von Zemlinsky, in 1922, just six years before Alastair’s illustrations.

17. For an in-depth analysis of the graphic versions of the “dance of the seven veils” by the different illustrators of *Salomé*, see Cambray 192-198.

ABSTRACTS

This essay focuses on the illustrations by German-born, polyglot artist Alastair (the *nom de plume* of Hans Henning Otto, Baron von Voigt [1887-1969]) for two editions of Wilde’s texts published in the 1920s: a 1920 version of the poem *The Sphinx* published by John Lane (a frontispiece, decorations, and nine full-page illustrations) and a 1928 version of the tale *The Birthday of the Infanta* published in Paris by The Black Sun Press/Éditions Narcisse (eight plates and a frontispiece). Alastair’s illustrated versions of Wilde’s texts testify to the enduring legacy of the Anglo-Irish author’s works in the twentieth century. What I first wish to show is that Alastair’s creations also hold up a mirror to Wilde’s texts themselves, which are imaginary reconstructions of worlds—the ancient world (*The Sphinx*) or the Spanish Golden Age (*The Birthday of the Infanta*)—

and are based on a dialogue between visual and verbal images. The second part of this essay offers an analysis of the inter pictorial networks upon which Alastair's illustrations for *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta* are based: Alastair's images are memory palaces which bear the traces of the influence of such *fin-de-siècle* graphic artists—and illustrators of Wilde—as Aubrey Beardsley and Charles Ricketts. A further focus is on how Alastair stages Wilde's texts in his images, how he turns the illustrated book into a theatrical space and fosters an aesthetic of incongruity, hybridity and in-betweenness: a kitsch or camp aesthetic, characterised by a non-linear, "queer" temporality.

Cet article se propose d'analyser les illustrations de l'artiste polyglotte allemand Alastair (nom de plume de Hans Henning Otto, baron von Voigt [1887-1969]) pour deux éditions de textes de Wilde publiées dans les années 1920 : une version de 1920 du poème *The Sphinx* (*La Sphinge*) publiée par John Lane/The Bodley Head (un frontispice, des décorations et neuf illustrations en pleine page) et une édition de 1928 du conte *The Birthday of the Infanta* (*L'Anniversaire de l'Infante*) publiée à Paris par The Black Sun Press/Éditions Narcisse (huit planches et un frontispice). Ces versions illustrées des textes de Wilde témoignent de la postérité des œuvres de l'auteur anglo-irlandais au XX^e siècle. Cet article s'emploie en premier lieu à montrer que les créations d'Alastair se font également le reflet des textes mêmes de Wilde, qui sont des reconstructions imaginaires de mondes anciens – l'antiquité dans *The Sphinx*, le Siècle d'or espagnol dans *The Birthday of the Infanta* – et se fondent sur un dialogue entre images visuelles et textuelles. Une deuxième partie est consacrée à l'analyse des réseaux inter picturaux sur lesquels Alastair s'appuie pour mettre en images *The Sphinx* et *The Birthday of the Infanta* : les planches d'Alastair sont des palais de mémoire qui portent la trace de l'influence d'illustrateurs fin-de-siècle de Wilde, comme Aubrey Beardsley ou Charles Ricketts. L'accent est enfin mis sur la façon dont Alastair met en scène les textes de Wilde dans ses images, sur la manière dont il fait du livre illustré un espace théâtral et donne naissance dans ses illustrations à une esthétique de l'incongruité, de l'hybridité et de l'entre-deux : une esthétique kitsch ou *camp*, qui se caractérise par une temporalité non-linéaire que l'on pourrait peut-être qualifier de « queer ».

INDEX

Keywords: book illustration, word/image, memory palace, inter pictoriality, camp, kitsch, queer
oeuvre citée *Birthday of the Infanta* (The), *Sphinx* (The)

Mots-clés: livre illustré, texte/image, palais de mémoire, inter picturalité, kitsch, camp, queer

AUTHORS

XAVIER GIUDICELLI

Xavier Giudicelli is Senior Lecturer at the English Department of the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne, where he teaches British and American literature as well as translation, and a member of CIRLEP (Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Languages and Thought). His research interests include Oscar Wilde, *fin-de-siècle* art and literature, and word and image studies. He authored a monograph entitled *Portraits of Dorian Gray: le texte, le livre, l'image* (Paris, PUPS, 2016), which proposes an analysis of illustrated editions of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He co-edited a collection of essays on *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 2015 and edited an issue of *Études anglaises* on Wilde and the arts in 2016. He also works on the rewriting and reinterpretation of Victorian and Edwardian literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and on Alan Hollinghurst.