

City Lyrics in a “Sensible Age”: Intermediality and Intersensoriality in Oscar Wilde’s ‘*Impression Du Matin*’ (1881) and “Symphony in Yellow” (1889)

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Abstract: This paper examines the cross-fertilization between different art forms in two of Oscar Wilde’s city lyrics: ‘*Impression du Matin*’ (1881) and “Symphony in Yellow” (1889). These impressionistic poems epitomise Wilde’s synaesthetic sensibility and transformative intertextuality whereby the poet translates his visual and aural experiences into poetry. The paper also investigates the functions of intermediality in Wilde’s aesthetic and ideological standpoint, and demonstrates how the Wildean dandy figure, aligned with the Baudelairean “painter of modern life”, conveys his perception of metropolitan modernity in these two poems of intermedial significance.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, intermediality, synaesthesia, metropolis, dandy

As Wilde writes in “Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green” (1885), “in a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other” (Dowling and Wilde 203). Accordingly, Wilde frequently makes use of the cross-disciplinary potential of different art forms to influence each other. This paper will analyse the complex synaesthetic interrelations of painting and music in two impressionistic poems, ‘*Impression du Matin*’ (1881) and “Symphony in Yellow” (1889). Although the notion of intermediality is a later construct, it will be argued that Wilde already pioneers the use of different media in translating his impressions of Victorian London into poetic cityscapes. Specifically, the paper focuses on the intermedial presence of James McNeill Whistler’s paintings in Wilde’s city lyrics. Investigating the functions of intermediality in Wilde’s aesthetic and ideological standpoint will lead me to a discussion of the figure of the cosmopolitan dandy-*flâneur*. The Wildean dandy depicts his urban experience as an acute observer of the *fin-de-siècle* Victorian *milieu*, and transmits his- often subversive- vision of contemporary London society in the two poems through the use of different media.

As W. J. T. Mitchell observes, there is no such thing as a ‘pure medium’- “all arts are composite arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media” (qtd. in Rippl 20). The umbrella term “intermediality” refers to the border-crossing between different media. Challenging media boundaries is made possible by the affordances of transmediality (Bruhn and Schirmmacher 12). In other words, sharing transmedial features fosters intermedial translation between various media. The shared characteristics, however, manifest themselves in very different ways in various media on account of the constraints imposed by medium specificity. The interplay between Wilde’s use of transmediality and medium specificity provides a key interpretative framework to offer a new understanding of the way the Wildean dandy transmits his aesthetic principles. Wilde’s poetry acts as an interface between different media that cooperate in channelling the dandy’s aesthetic perception and cosmopolitan experience.

In his complex, intermedial city lyrics, Wilde has recourse to the fields of poetry, visual art and music, exploiting the dynamics of synaesthesia as a literary device. Synaesthesia consists in describing a sensation in terms of another sensation. Through a blending of the senses, the stimulation of one modality (e.g.: seeing) simultaneously produces sensation in a different modality (e.g.: hearing). In the two poems under study, Wilde translates his visual and aural experiences into the language of poetry. Essentially, Whistler’s paintings for Wilde are the source medium he converts into poems. Therefore, these poems are instances of extracompositional intermediality, or more specifically intermedial transposition (Wolf 131).

Drawing on the Paterian aesthetics of music as the supreme art form, an important medium is music in Wilde’s impressionistic lyrics. Music contextualises Wilde’s metropolitan poems in the wider framework of the aesthete’s impressionistic poetry. Smulders observes that the sections “Wind Flowers”, “Flowers of Gold”, ‘*Impressions du Théâtre*’ and “The Fourth Movement” in Wilde’s volume of *Poems* take the shape of a classical symphony. The first two movements are in sonata-allegro form, but the second one is slower in tempo. The sprightly third *scherzo* is then followed by a fourth movement or finale (Smulders 289). Music and sound effects can also be revealed in the individual poems: Wilde has recourse to Tennyson’s stanzaic form in most of his pictorial impressions. He adopts the *redondilla*, an envelope quatrain composed of tetrameter lines rhyming A-B-B-A (Smulders 289). The *redondilla* is significant in the relationship of sound and image given its symmetry creating a poetic framing technique for these cityscapes capturing fleeting impressions of beauty within the metropolis, as if they were impressionistic paintings.

‘*Impression du Matin*’, first published in the *World*, begins the sequence “Wind Flowers” in *Poems* (1881, 1882), establishing a key note for the sonata-allegro movement (Smulders 289). This four-stanza meditation on the beauty of modernity is a piece of synaesthetic literature, mingling our senses and providing a fleeting impression of an urban landscape in Victorian London. Always in quest of new sensations, the speaker’s engagement with beauty becomes clear through the aesthetic evocation of metropolitan images, such as the fog and the gaslight, recalling the imagery of “The Decay of Lying” (1891):

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? [...] At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. [...] They did not exist till Art had invented them (Dowling and Wilde 184).

The above passage is crucial to interpret intermediality in ‘*Impression du Matin*’, since the essay exemplifies the Wildean principle of Life imitating Art. Wilde here deploys the device of *quaesitio* through a series of rhetorical questions in order to expose his views on the relationship between Art and Life. The extract’s plethora of cascading questions imitates the flow of the poem whereby the “yellow fog came creeping down the bridges”, and, by way of an *enjambement*, the entire composition. As a literary *collage* made up of a number of intertextual echoes, the essay shares a common lexical field with ‘*Impression du Matin*’. The recurrent urban imagery of the fog and “the gas-lamp’s flare” does not only shine a light on the importance of Wilde’s perception of modernity, but it also demonstrates how Wilde’s early poem affirms the ideas later proposed in his essay. If Life imitates Art, then the dandy’s metropolitan experience is moulded in the poetical representation of the London cityscape. Nevertheless, the relationship between the poem and the essay is even more complex, since the source medium for the poem, as it will be demonstrated, is Whistler’s painting. Ultimately, Wilde’s poetry and prose borrow elements from Whistler’s art and transpose his painting into the medium of literature. Again, as voiced in “Pen, Pencil and Poison”, the arts borrow from each other.

The poem clearly inscribes itself into the impressionist tradition, given the French title and its paratextual connections evoking Monet's *Impression, soleil levant* ("Impression, sunrise", 1872, 1. Figure). The painting represents a hazy *Le Havre* harbour with the vague shapes of boats in the background and the redness of the rising sun. The horizon seems to have disappeared; sky and water have become one, the hues of clouds, mist and sea are merged together in the foggy morning harbour. Among the impressionists, it was Whistler who embodied, for Wilde, the very essence of "cosmopolitan intellectual sophistication" (Sturgis 178). Wilde and Whistler were neighbours in Tite Street, Chelsea which was the geographical epicentre of the new "aesthetic craze" they represented (Cox 71). Situated on the edge of the expanding London city, between the age-old King's Road and the Thames, Tite street and the bohemian inhabitants of its independent studio-houses would soon challenge the values of the age and embody a new aesthetic art and architecture well into the twentieth century (Cox 28). Although Wilde complained that Tite street was a rather "horrid address", in the "Keats House", as he called it, "he was at the centre of an artistic *milieu* that both nurtured and defined his own identity as an aesthete" (Cox 88). The new intellectual and artistic epoch that originally began in Paris eventually developed in that quarter of Victorian London.



Fig. 1. 'Impression, soleil levant' by Claude Monet, 1872

'*Impression du Matin*' epitomises the influence of Whistler's impressionism on Wilde's poetry. Whistler, like the ageing Turner, also found himself "drawn to the murky, misty, mysterious Thames" (Cox 25). This is where his eerie, serene *Nocturnes* were born. Capturing the momentariness of metropolitan experience by the river Thames would soon become an obsession for him. Reverting to the "pure and unpolluted art of Japan", Whistler struggled to "successfully combine the ethereal Japanese style with the grim reality of London" (Cox 25). The eccentric American painter ended up in a notorious lawsuit which hit the headlines in 1878. His 1875 painting entitled "Nocturne in Black and Gold- the Falling Rocket" (2. Figure) was displayed in 1877 in the Grosvenor Gallery which warmly welcomed paintings rejected by the Royal Academy. Wilde reviewed the painting in *The Dublin Magazine*, and described it as "certainly worth looking at for about as long as one looks at a real rocket, that is, for somewhat less than a quarter of a minute" (qtd. in Cox 88).

The painting triggered an indignant complaint of John Ruskin's who, in his review for the *Fors Clavigera*, apostrophised Whistler's art as "wilful imposture" and "never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" (qtd. in Cox 54). The subsequent conflict culminated in a trial. To Whistler, the fight against Ruskin was "the fight be-

tween the brush and the pen” (qtd. in Killeen 98). The painter won the trial which turned out to be a triumph defending his artistic principles. The collision has significant resonances in a Wildean fairy tale titled “The Remarkable Rocket” (1888). Besides hinting at the “verbal fireworks” between Ruskin and Whistler, Wilde may have alluded to his own personal conflict with Whistler in the fairy tale, since the painter accused him of “stealing his best lines and making money out of their relationship” (Killeen 98). Their turbulent friendship was “fuelled by a combination of admiration, jealousy, and acute narcissism” (Cox 87).



Fig. 2. “Nocturne in Black and Gold- The Falling Rocket” by Whistler (1875)

Whistler’s influence on the genesis of *Impression du Matin* is clear, since the subtle nuances of his painting titled “Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge” (1872, 3. Figure) are translated into poetry through the synaesthetic depiction of the Thames at dawn. The reader of *Impression du Matin* is confronted with the depiction of a visual artwork instead of the possibility to contemplate the cityscape itself. Therefore, the poem also represents a type of *ekphrasis*. As Clüver defines it, *ekphrasis* is “the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system” (qtd. in Bruhn and Schirmacher 148). The poem is not so much the depiction of the early morning London, but rather that of a painting which grasps that fleeting moment. The scene is thus intermedially translated through two media (Wagner and de Gruyter 286). Due to the poem’s ekphrastic values, the urban impression is first perceived by means of a painterly representation, and only then is it translated indirectly into the language of poetry. Moreover, Whistler’s nocturnal riverscapes are themselves complex iconotexts, drawing on Chopin’s musical cascades and Ando Hiroshige’s (1797–1858) Tokaido woodcuts depicting bridges (Wagner and de Gruyter 287, 4. Figure). Whistler played a decisive role in spreading Japonism in England (Schlombs and Andô 87), and Wilde had already seen a revelatory exhibition on Japanese art at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris as early as 1867.

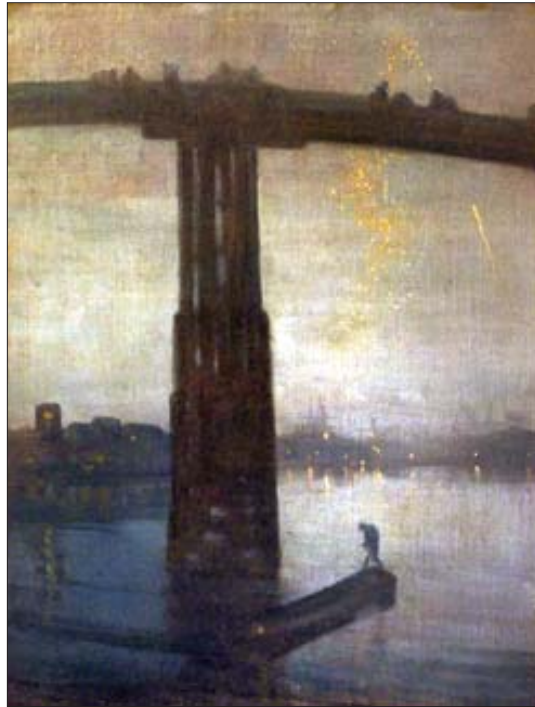


Fig. 3. “Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge” by Whistler (1872)



Fig. 4. “Man on horseback crossing a bridge” by Hiroshige (1835-1837)

In the depiction of ephemeral urban landscapes, both Whistler and Wilde capture the beauty of what they perceive as modernity. Whistler’s painting technique using quick, loose brushstrokes to capture the momentariness of impression gets into verbal expression in Wilde’s *‘Impression du Matin’*. The poem deploys the intersensory representation of fugitive moments in the metropolitan cityscape with the explicit mention of the terms “nocturne” and “harmony”. In the initial harmony of the poem, an ironic pun can be revealed: Wilde, an admirer, but at the same time a jealous artist-friend of Whistler’s, was in the habit of mocking the painter. As Whistler often changed the title of his paintings, the first two lines of the poem poke fun at the painter:

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
 Changed to a harmony in gray

Furthermore, the mention of “nocturne” and “harmony” is an example of explicit reference or intermedial thematization, since media other than literature are overtly mentioned in the poem. Breaking down the constraints of medium specificity and exploiting the possibilities of transmediality, Wilde takes one step further. By using the term “nocturne” in his poem, he immediately unifies the visual and the aural. On the one hand, “nocturne” is a painting of a night scene, but it is also a soft, dreamy, meditative piece of music. The synaesthetic marrying of sound and picture is in accordance with the Horatian *ut pictura poesis* (“as in painting, so in poetry”), which constitutes the governing principle of the poem. Nevertheless, instead of *competing* against each other, poetry and the visual arts coexist and cooperate within the poem in order to convey Wilde’s aesthetic ideas.

It is striking to see how the aesthete contemplates “beauty in the material products of imperialist excess, industrial contamination, and social inequity” (Smulders 288). In Wilde’s poetic depiction of the yellow fog creeping down the bridges over the Thames, the different hues and nuances of the colour yellow powerfully pervade the poem: the barge with ochre-coloured hay evokes Monet’s series of ‘*Meules*’ (“Haystacks”, 1890–1891), while the yellow fog is creeping down the entire city, and, through an *enjambement*, the whole poem.

The yellow fog came creeping down
 The bridges, till the houses’ walls
 Seemed changed to shadows, and St. Paul’s
 Loomed like a bubble o’er the town.

The explicit mention of the synaesthetic term “harmony”, the metrical pattern of iambic tetrameter and the simplistic, paratactic sentence–structure establish a state of harmony in the first three stanzas. Nonetheless, the animal–nature of the creeping yellow fog and the “shadows” create an uncanny sensation of general unease. To this effect contributes the use of expressions suggesting uncertainty, such as “seemed changed” and “loomed”. This stanza already foreshadows the spectral appearance of a lonely woman in stanza 4.

The initial harmony is dramatically perturbed by the approaching dawn. In the last stanza, the sexually sensitive male–gaze suddenly catches sight of the silhouette of a loitering woman.

But one pale woman all alone,
 The daylight kissing her wan hair,
 Loitered beneath the gas-lamp’s flare,
 With lips of flame and heart of stone.

The contrasting conjunction “but” and the hypotaxis used upset the harmony of the poem (Wagner and de Gruyter 290). In metrical terms, the trochaic inversions anticipate the appearance of femininity not only in the form of the approaching dawn, but also in the figure of the pale woman. Wilde notes in “The Critic as Artist” (1891) “the immoral effeminacy of using trochaic and tribrachic movements” in writing, since these measures ending with weak syllables were deemed effeminate in the nineteenth century (Dowling and Wilde 358). Accordingly, the trochees appearing in the midst of a regular iambic rhythm upset the prosodic harmony of ‘*Impression du Matin*’, and foreground a substantial change in the choreographics of looking from a panoramic view of the city to the *premier-plan* representation of the lonely woman. “Her image, like a fading but prolonged echo of nocturnal pleasures” spoils the harmony of the early morning scene (Boyiopoulos 1029). Moreover, with the alarming presence of dawn, a jarring shift in perspective can also be revealed: we move from the detached perspective of an observer to a voyeuristic glimpse into the London *demi-monde*, coupled with a moralising tone. The speaker paradoxically voices a value judgement on the loitering woman through the use of derogatory vocabulary. The conspicuous image of her “lips of flame”,

sensually echoing the act of “kissing” referred to in the second line of this stanza, is in sharp contrast with the dull, grey, mundane reality of modern London. While the “lips of flame” would certainly not pass unnoticed in the greyness of the city, the invisible “heart of stone” is transformed into a significant metaphor indicating emotional cruelty. The “heart of stone” epitomises the sex-worker’s overexhaustion in her routine and incapacity for love. The evaluative language of these specific attributes raises important questions. Does the speaker know the woman described? Otherwise, how can he presume that she has a “heart of stone”?

According to Wagner, the poem inscribes itself into Victorian misogynistic male discourse on femininity which “turns the female body into a potentially dangerous object of religious-erotic desire” (296). Certainly, “the daylight kissing her wan hair” confers grace by suggesting a halo, but the final metaphors position the woman as street-walker (Smulders 293). Despite the apparent intimacy between the observer and the woman, it can be argued that, instead of suggesting a misogynistic undercurrent, the focalizer’s use of such *clichéd* language as “heart of stone” undermines the traditional male bourgeois ethos of contemporary Victorian period. The observer in the last stanza denigrates contemporary male discourse on femininity, paradoxically adopting, for a moment, the angle of vision of Victorian masculinity through the use of hackneyed language. From the viewpoint of the modern reader, Wilde could have enclosed the expressions “lips of flame” and “heart of stone” in inverted commas, indicating the subversive shift in poetic diction.

The description of the sex-worker becomes at once an acute critique of contemporary society and a rejection of utilitarianism. The cosmetics, makeup and decorative jewellery used by the woman for purposes of self-display and seduction imply that, by a metonymical shift between the red lips and the “prostitute”, the woman herself becomes a commodity. Challenging the notion of woman as commodity, the dandy himself is, through his self-conscious artificiality, refinement of taste and exotic connoisseurship, dependent on the very commodities of capitalist consumerism. Distinguishing himself from the dull, mundane mediocrity of contemporary society, he thrives in the very *milieu* the values of which he subversively criticises (Felski 99). The scarlet lips, golden hair and paleness may as well refer to the figure of the ephebe, incarnating Wilde’s aesthetic ideal of male beauty. Even if the sex-worker is apostrophised as a “woman” in the poem, the attributes suggest ambiguity of gender. The terms “loitering” and “all alone” are parts of a shared semantic field between *Impression du Matin*’ and Wilde’s later decadent poem “The Harlot’s House” (1885) depicting the nocturnal activity of the moonlit street. In *Impression du Matin*’, the poet deals with the “prostitute” as a type. Wilde subversively reflects upon the deplorable condition of marginal elements of modern society. Compared to the medium specificity and the specific pictorial affordances of Whistler’s art, the poetical power of language and the possibilities offered by transmediality enable Wilde to tell even more about society than Whistler in his painting.

Nevertheless, to the limits of medium specificity, “Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge” and *Impression du Matin*’ share common leitmotifs. The painting’s almost monochromatic colour palette evokes the monotony of life in the modern metropolis. Similarly, the poem’s lexical field echoes the technical jargon of Victorian London. The gas-lamp epitomises the greatest technical advance at the time, and the vocabulary of gas-lighting creates *l’effet de réel*. Although Wilde later objects to literary realism in his “Intentions” (1891), he describes elements with striking topographical precision even in his impressionistic poetry with explicit references to the river Thames and important landmarks, such as Saint Paul’s Cathedral, a symbol of the growing metropolis.

Another significant shared point of reference is the motif of the bridge anchoring both the poem and the painting in the context of Victorian sexual-politics. The bridges over the Thames (and especially Waterloo Bridge, also known as the “Bridge of Sighs”) are a prevalent literary *topos* of female suicide and represent the *locus classicus* of fictional suicide scenes (Nicoletti). Thomas Hood’s 1844 poem titled “The Bridge of Sighs” focuses on the tragic immediacy of a “prostitute’s” suicidal leap into the river Thames. The woman’s unknown and dubious past conveys a sense of perplexity

and makes Hood’s poem a possible intertext to Wilde’s *‘Impression du Matin’* and Whistler’s painting. Wilde, Whistler and even Hood aestheticize the objects of contemplation. They capture what is beautiful; the young, lonely and abandoned, nameless casualties of society are the objects of their scrutiny. As Nicoletti remarks, “the moral sewer” of the Thames is the metaphor of London’s “urban depravity” in contemporary poetry and visual arts (Nicoletti).

The image of the pallid woman is another common motif in those representations. The pale woman in Wilde’s *‘Impression du Matin’* evokes Théophile Gautier’s *‘Symphonie en Blanc Majeur’* in *‘Emaux et Camées’* (1852) as a poetic intertext. Wilde’s poetic impressions are much indebted to Gautier’s symphonic poem, “that flawless masterpiece of colour and music” (Raby and Wilde 65), not merely for its music, but also for the intermediality of the colour white traditionally associated with innocence and purity. This is significant, since it demonstrates how literary and pictorial media are unified in *‘Impression du Matin’*. Behind the subtle depiction of pallid white women in Gautier’s poem, the emotional cruelty of the *femme fatale* can be revealed. Likewise, in Wilde’s *‘Impression du Matin’* the “pale woman” is endowed with a “heart of stone” suggesting her cruelty. The perplexing plethora of enumerations and the amplification of *quaesitio* create considerable tension in Gautier’s *‘Symphonie’*. The puzzling enigma of Gautier’s white ladies culminates in a powerful oxymoron “*implacable blancheur*” (“whiteness sans merci” in Timothy Adès’s translation).

Who shall melt that heart’s repose,
thaw its ice-bound reverie,
introduce a tint of rose
in that whiteness sans merci?

The theme of the *femme fatale* as the erotically menacing object of the *fin-de-siècle* male gaze in the London *demi-monde* is a prevalent *topos* in Victorian literature (Wagner and de Gruyter 280). With regard to the intermedial significance of the colour white, Whistler’s 1862 painting titled “Symphony in White No.1: The White Girl” (1862, 5. Figure) is attested to have been “the most beautiful painting Wilde had ever seen” (Sturgis 229). This painting would establish the new aesthetic school, a “fleshly school” which represented in England the new breed of art first conceived in Paris (Cox 18). “The White Girl looked almost sickly with the pale, virginal Joanna Hiffernan standing upon a ruggedly masculine wolf-skin, with its fierce teeth projecting out of the frame” (Cox 16).



Fig. 5. “Symphony in White No.1: The White Girl” by Whistler (1862)

The *fin-de-siècle* male gaze centred on the image of the *femme fatale* and the importance of the focalizer in *Impression du Matin* lead me to a discussion of the dandy-*flâneur* as a discursive literary figure creating a singular perspective on the modern world surrounding him. The dandy as a type is a key figure to decipher the functions of the poem's intermediality. In his 1863 essay, *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* ("The Painter of Modern Life"), Charles Baudelaire theorizes the notion of the artist as a "man of the world" (qtd. in Davis and Dierkes-Thrun 2). Davis's observation of the Wildean dandy as the embodiment of the Baudelairean "man of the world" supports my argument that the cosmopolitan figure of the dandy is an omniscient outsider who creates a unique perspective in poetry. He contemplates the city "with a certain spirit of inquiry that Baudelaire specifies as curiosity" (Davis and Dierkes-Thrun 2). As Baudelaire observes:

the word 'dandy' implies a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of all the moral mechanisms of this world; but, from another aspect, the dandy aspires to cold detachment, and it is in this way that [he] who is dominated, if ever anyone was, by an insatiable passion, that of seeing and feeling, parts company trenchantly with dandyism (Baudelaire 18).

Due to his intellectual curiosity, this peculiar "kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness" (Davis and Dierkes-Thrun 3) scrutinizes the city tinged with yellowish decadent tones in "Symphony in Yellow" (1889) to expose his metropolitan experience. As opposed to *Impression du Matin*, "Symphony in Yellow" belongs to a later, less prolific but even more accomplished decadent phase of Wilde's poetry. It was first published in the *Centennial Magazine: An Australasian Monthly Illustrated* and echoes *Impression du Matin* in its evocation of central London. "Symphony in Yellow" also synaesthetically mingles music and the heraldic colour of decadence, as its title suggests. In "Symphony in Yellow", the dandy's powerful presence as a discursive literary figure epitomises his heightened sensibility which lies at the very heart of his personality. In *Impression du Matin*, the importance of visual and aural perception gets into expression primarily through Wilde's aesthetic predilection and fascination with Whistler's painting. While in that early poem, the dandy's preoccupation with aesthetic form and pictorialism are prevalent, in "Symphony in Yellow", the darker shadows of sensual Decadence would become much more pronounced.

At the intersection of Aestheticism and the culture of male homosexuality in Victorian London, the dandy celebrates beauty and the triumph of artifice over nature. The dandy-esque paraphernalia of the "silken scarf" and the "rod of rippled jade" are a *recherché* catalogue of his connoisseurship. Through a metonymical shift of self-conscious aesthetic representation, the figure of the dandy is artificially impersonated in the poem. As Felski observes, "impersonation and disguise were often obligatory techniques of survival for the late-nineteenth-century homosexual rather than simply markers of adherence to a fashionable aesthetic philosophy" (104). Calloway asserts that the dandy's quintessential feature is "creating oneself afresh each day as a work of art" (Raby and Wilde, Ch. 3, 51). The dandy's self-fashioning is in accordance with "the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions" (Baudelaire 44). The jade, as a precious stone, is a symbol of the dandy's refinement of taste, acquisitiveness and hedonistic excess. More broadly, jewelled imagery and gemstone texture are omnipresent in Wilde's writing. There is a "dialectical playfulness between fixing the impression through permanent, precious materials, and destabilising it through tropes of change" (Boyiopoulos 1035). The juxtaposition of telescopic similes and the insect analogies implied are not only examples of "elegant artifice", but also allude to "fragility, slighthness and transience" (Smulders 295).

An omnibus across the bridge
Crawls like a yellow butterfly,
And, here and there, a passer-by
Shows like a little restless midge.

Wilde's pioneering telescopic impressionism captures life in the modern city through gemstones, precious minerals and insects. The extensive use of insect-imagery and its aural connotations, and

more specifically the “restless midge”, elucidate a claustrophobic sense of alienation in the hustle and bustle of the city, echoing Baudelaire’s invocation of Paris in *‘Les Sept Vieillards’* (1857):

Teeming, swarming city, city full of dreams,
Where specters in broad day accost the passer-by!

With the evocation of the crowded metropolis, Wilde’s “Symphony in Yellow” immediately summons the figure of the Baudelairean dandy. The dandy’s complex kaleidoscopic vision of the city enables him to observe, evaluate, analyse and judge the ideas and values of a given world from the angle of vision of an outsider. His genuine interest in alterity and free cosmopolitan spirit render him more than just an idle loiterer in the streets of *fin-de-siècle* bohemian Paris, the fancy drawing rooms of Victorian England, the exotic brothels of Algeria or amidst the archaeological remnants and departed glories of the ir retrievable Classical past. As an outsider, he is an active observer.

The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird’s, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite (Baudelaire 19)

Wilde was fond of Baudelaire’s writing. In 1874, Wilde was in Paris with Robert Sherard, in company of a coterie of “febrile, Baudelaire-obsessed young poets” gathering at *Le Chat Noir* to drink absinthe and discuss Baudelaire’s decadent work (Sturgis 280). “They adopted its distinctive taints of pessimism and nervous hypersensitivity, its stylistic complexity and its fascination with depravity” (Sturgis 280). Wilde was under the pervading influence of Baudelaire’s decadent verse, especially *‘Les Fleurs du Mal’* (1857). He writes of the effect of Baudelaire’s poetry:

let its subtle music steal into your brain and colour your thoughts, and you will become for a moment what he was who wrote it [...]and your soul will grow eager to know more, and will feed upon poisonous honey (qtd. in Killeen, ‘Oscar Wilde’ 50).

“Symphony in Yellow” is a poem very much *à la Baudelaire*, feeding upon that “poisonous honey”. The composite poem is highly monochromatic in hues. On the one hand, the colour palette is limited: the adjective “yellow” appears four times in the poem. On the other hand, its various shades are depicted gradually through an excess of enumeration, and ultimately mingle with green, both colours symbolizing decadence. The obsessive monochromatism is amplified by cacophonous sound-effects including discordant eye-rhymes (“hay”- “quay”) and near rhymes (“wharf”- “scarf”; “elms”- “Thames”). The images of the butterfly and the midge epitomize ephemeral beauty and fleeting lives in a machine age. The omnibus is like a butterfly, but at the same time “butterfly” rhymes with “passer-by”, indicating the insect-like, “diminished scale of human experience” within the metropolis (Smulders 295). In the final stanza, the buzzing sounds are eventually silenced, “coming to a standstill in a static image of the river Thames” (Doran 60). The Thames is described as “a rod of rippled jade” echoing the paired arrangement of Wilde’s *‘Impressions’*: *‘Le Jardin’* and *‘La Mer’* (1882). “The long rods of polished steel” in the engine room in *‘La Mer’* recall the lily’s “rod of dusty gold,” in *‘Le Jardin’*, hence the unity of composition in that arrangement. This image of the “phallic rod” as a celebration of mechanical power in the face of nature’s force thus becomes recurrent in Wilde’s impressions of beauty set in the machine age (Smulders 292).

The urban experience described in “Symphony in Yellow” is that of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (1845) in that a sensation of anxiety, rootlessness and estrangement can be revealed in tracing the individual in the urban environment (de Vries 333). The city is in constant flux. Taking in the expanding city in full often becomes challenging for an idling *flâneur*. The dandy, however, embraces an omniscient, panoramic perspective of the flux of urban life. Although a vagabond, the cosmopolitan dandy makes himself at home all over the world. By intermedially fixing his synaesthetic metropolitan impressions, he acquires citizenship of the world.

To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense and impartial spirits (Baudelaire 19).

The dandiacal gaze supposes an acute observer of the expanding metropolis and the marginal elements of Victorian society.

this solitary mortal endowed with an active imagination, always roaming the great desert of men, has a nobler aim than that of the pure idler, a more general aim, other than the fleeting pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call 'modernity' (Baudelaire 22).

The decadent dandy perceives elements of modernity through the use of intermediality in his poetry. Wilde's poetic impressions exploiting the affordances of various media thus become a harbinger of modernity. Even if dandyism, as Baudelaire observes, "is a setting sun; like a declining star, [...] magnificent, without heat and full of melancholy", it is "the last flicker of heroism in decadent ages" (Baudelaire 46).

In conclusion, this paper has retraced how the figure of the wandering dandy-*flâneur* would become the "painter of modern life" in two of Wilde's impressionistic city lyrics of intermedial significance. It has been argued that Wilde makes use of intermedial translation to verbally express his visual and aural experiences in his impressionistic poetry. The paper has also dealt with Whistler's impact on Wilde's cityscapes. Wilde's multi-sensory pursuit of beauty in an industrial age, his questioning of generic boundaries in art, his preference for contemplation over action, prioritizing artifice over nature clearly demonstrate his profound intellectual engagement with Aestheticism. While his earlier *Impression du Matin* focuses on the beauty of modernity from an aesthetic perspective, the later decadent "Symphony in Yellow" is the metonymic evocation of the dandy as an elaborate artifact. The *flâneur's* exterior exploration in *Impression du Matin* gives way to the interior experience exemplified by the dandy's exotic connoisseurship, marking a shift in Wilde's impressionistic poetry from Aestheticism to Decadence. The dandy's voyeuristic gaze and the choreographics of looking have gained particular importance in Wilde's city lyrics. Within the spatiotemporal topography of Victorian London, the objects of the dandy's contemplation embrace the beauty of the city, along with the materiality of scientific advances, as well as contemporary society. The functions of intermediality are thus unified in the figure and perspective of the Wildean dandy. It has been demonstrated that, due to his erudition and synaesthetic sensibility, the dandy mingles the visual and the aural in his cityscapes. Transmedial phenomena and intersensoriality thus play a key role in Wilde's perception of modernity and his depiction of beauty in a scientific age.

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