

IMPOSSIBLE PROMISE: THE CHILD AND THE  
ANDROGYNE IN THOMAS KILROY'S *THE SECRET FALL OF  
CONSTANCE WILDE AND MY SCANDALOUS LIFE*

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**Abstract:**

In *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* and *My Scandalous Life*, the impossible ideals of perfect harmony between the sexes and perfect innocence are symbolically represented by the figures of the Androgyne and the child. In a process that illustrates the Wildean paradox that "each man kills the thing he loves," Oscar and Constance Wilde on the one hand, Alfred Douglas and Olive Custance on the other, fight each other over possession of their children, in that very act destroying both the ideal of androgynous harmony and that of childish innocence. Only by performing their worst nightmares, embracing the darkness within themselves, and acknowledging that innocence contains its own corruption, can the characters restore some form of equilibrium.

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Thomas Kilroy has noted that a playwright who writes about historical characters can only do so by finding gaps in the historical record that can be filled with invention and imagination. For him it

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became possible to write a play about the relationship between Constance Wilde, Oscar Wilde, and Lord Alfred Douglas when he came to believe that “these three . . . were deeply traumatized growing up by the actions of their own fathers.” At the time of the composition of what became *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (1997), Kilroy was “helped in this understanding by the awful litany of [child] abuse appearing daily in the media,” the exposure of which he saw as “a great cathartic revelation,” and which led him to reread the familiar Wilde story with the idea “that something like this happened to all three principals in the play” (Kilroy, “Wildean Triangle” 15-16). Patrick Mason, who directed the original Abbey Theatre production of *The Secret Fall*, confirms that two biographical facts about the historical characters were pivotal to the development of the play: Constance’s refusal to allow Oscar to see his children after his release from gaol, and her crippling fall down the stairs of the Wildes’ home in Tite Street when Oscar was abroad (Mason 140).<sup>1</sup> To round out his theme, Kilroy seized on two other snippets of information gathered from his reading about Wilde that have a much shakier historical foundation: an account of the arrest of Constance’s father for indecent exposure,<sup>2</sup> and André Gide’s unreliable suggestion that Alfred Douglas had expressed an erotic interest in Oscar’s young son Cyril (Mason 140).<sup>3</sup> Kilroy exploits such suggestions for his imaginative reconstruction of the psychological motivations of the three characters in the Wildean love triangle.

Throughout *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*,<sup>4</sup> the character of Oscar Wilde is tormented by the need to see his children. His desire to find private solace in the innocence of his sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, is offset by his own public post-trial status as a “corruptor of young men” (SF 41) deemed by society unfit to be a father, and by his memory of the promiscuous and cruel behaviour of his own father, William Wilde, whose two illegitimate and unacknowledged daughters ended up dying horribly in a fire when Oscar was sixteen. In Kilroy’s imaginative reconstruction, Constance Wilde’s need to protect her children’s innocence by keeping them away from their father after his release

from prison—or rather, from the dubious attentions of his young companion, Alfred Douglas or “Bosie”—has roots in her own father’s record of “corrupt[ing] the innocent” (SF 23), most devastatingly herself as a young girl—the “secret fall” revealed towards the end of the play. It was Bosie’s “monstrous father” (SF 32), the Marquess of Queensberry, who accused Oscar Wilde of being a “sodomite,” and it was partially out of hatred for this “mad little man” that Douglas encouraged Wilde to bring a libel action against him: “when we first took the case there was no doubt that we would defeat my wretched father” (SF 43). The case famously backfired, and eventually led to Wilde’s arrest and conviction for the crime of which he had been accused by Queensberry.

After Oscar Wilde’s death, the historical Alfred Douglas married Olive Custance and had a son, Raymond. The older Douglas is the sole protagonist of Thomas Kilroy’s one-act play *My Scandalous Life* (2004),<sup>5</sup> which forms a counterpoint to *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*. Approaching the end of his life, and having failed as a husband and father, Douglas exclaims at one point in *My Scandalous Life* that he is “haunted by children”—or rather “haunted by the child” (SL 22). The particular “child” haunting him, his now middle-aged son Raymond, is mentally disturbed, and in the course of his monologue Douglas tries to assign blame for the deterioration into madness of what he claims had been “a bright boy full of sunshine” (SL 15) to a range of people: his wife Olive, who “hated Raymond” (SL 22); her father, “that monster Custance” (SL 19); Oscar Wilde’s friend Robbie Ross, the “notorious bugger,” “noble protector of the Wilde children,” and “corruptor of—boys” (SL 14); and ultimately himself and the Douglas curse inherited from his father. If “each man kills the thing he loves,”<sup>6</sup> in both *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* and *My Scandalous Life*, the child’s the thing.

In *The Secret Fall*, the symbolic function of the child is indicated by the representation of the Wildes’ sons as small puppets, dressed variously in nightgowns and sailor suits, manipulated by attendants who act throughout the play as “stage hands and puppeteers, dressers, waiters and Figures of Fate” (SF 11). In the scene in which Constance

relives her secret fall, her father is also represented by “a gigantic puppet: Victorian gentleman, red cheeks, black moustache, bowler hat, umbrella, frock-coat” (*SF* 66). Patrick Mason notes that one source for Kilroy’s deployment of puppets and their attendant figures was Oscar Wilde’s description in *De Profundis* of Alfred Douglas as an instrument of Doom:

It makes me feel sometimes as if you yourself had been merely a puppet worked by some secret and unseen hand to bring terrible events to a terrible issue. But puppets themselves have passions. They will bring a new plot into what they are presenting, and twist the ordered issue of vicissitude to suit some whim or appetite of their own. (Wilde qtd. in Mason 141)

As characters manipulated by impersonal outside forces, but with their own overt or hidden motivations, the child/father puppets express one of the play’s overarching themes: the tension between fate, the pressure of societal expectations, and individual responsibility. Through their symbolic stylization, the archetypal figures of the child and father also come to stand for abstract and contrasting notions of purity and corruption, or innocence and abuse of power.

In *The Secret Fall*, Alfred Douglas tells Constance Wilde: “Oscar needs me. I am his inspiration. He needs you. With you he finds peace. He needs the children—” (*SF* 29). Oscar’s complementary needs are symbolically represented by the child puppets—“I must see them!” he cries of his children in the play’s opening scene—and the figure of the Androgyne, which he insists he “must have” and “will have” (*SF* 20). The latter figure appears on stage towards the beginning of the play, “in a moment of white magic to Oscar’s wand,” as a living “statue . . . reclining, naked, rear view, on a classical plinth.” For Oscar, this “man-woman . . . , Plato’s divided egg united once more in a single, perfect sphere,” embodies “the dream of Paradise restored, the undivided

Adam, whole and intact, where there is no man, no woman, no duality, no contrary, no grotesque fumbling towards the Other because the Other resides within oneself" (*SF* 20). Oscar's contention that this dream of perfection has haunted authors from Leonardo to Shakespeare and Balzac suggests that he is speaking as an artistic creator about an artistic trope. Artists such as these, in order to free themselves from the traditional concept of external inspiration in the form of a female muse, adopted an androgynous creative model and shared the "'common belief . . . that to be artistic one must have the unique combination of masculine and feminine elements found in hermaphrodites and homosexuals'" (Fassler qtd. in Rado 157). In the play, Oscar is speaking as one of these male authors who "represent their creative minds as if they are characterized by a balance of sexually charged energies, fueling their artistic impulses with oppositional tensions" (Rado 12). One of the questions with which Constance presents her husband is how this ideal can be reconciled in the real world with his relationship with his wife and children.

The androgynous ideal is, as Catriona MacLeod points out, "an aesthetic construction, outside nature and beyond human understanding" (31). Kilroy's Oscar Wilde, however, sees Alfred Douglas as the androgyne incarnate, the "man-woman descended . . . as a golden boy in whites into a London drawing room" (*SF* 20)—a construct that suggests "the primacy of the 'masculine' side" of Oscar's androgynous equation (MacLeod 15), which problematizes the position of Constance, Oscar's wife. Indeed, many classical statues of androgynes are "modeled after adolescent boys, puberty being the critical moment of sexual indeterminacy and liminality" whereby "the youth occupies the middle position between feminine softness and masculine hardness and rigidity, between feminine passivity and masculine activity, between the contourlessness of the female and the clear outlines of the male" (MacLeod 40-41). As an ideal, however, such androgyny seems tangible only "in the tantalizing contours of a marble statue" (MacLeod 38). Indeed, in Kilroy's play, the ironic

transformation on stage of the androgynous "statue" into the less than perfect flesh-and-blood Bosie, who competes with Constance for her husband's attentions, suggests that Oscar's vision is, as Nicholas Grene suggests, of "the impossible" (80).

In *My Scandalous Life*, "impossible" is also the word used by Alfred Douglas to refer to the haunting image of the idealized child: "The impossible promise of that innocence untouched" (*SL* 20). Douglas claims that, when he was in prison, the message that "innocence is not of this world. [...] That innocence beguiles us because it cannot be possessed," was carried to him in his cell by Jesus in the form of a 12-year-old boy (*SL* 30). Douglas's vision of the idealized (pre-) adolescent boy, like Oscar's vision of the Androgyne, is an aesthetic construct of innocence and perfection that cannot be actualized in the real world. Indeed, Douglas's very attempt to possess the beautiful and perfect child in the real world can only evoke images of the monstrous and the grotesque, the uncanny doubles of the beautiful and the perfect. For Oscar Wilde, too, the insistence that he must have Bosie, Constance, and the children in his life is at bottom a quest to possess an ideal of wholeness and perfection that is not of this world, an ideal, moreover, that is increasingly corrupted the more its actualization is pursued.

Thomas Kilroy has written that one of the great paradoxes in the history of art is "how persons who are capable of monstrous behaviour are also capable of creating sublime beauty upon the page or stage" ("Page to Stage" 57-58). These are also the questions Constance wrestles with: "What is the connection between [Oscar's] foul behaviour and the beauty of what he writes? Can anyone ever answer that question?" (*SF* 39). The action of the play and its theatrical devices are used to explore that tension between life and art. *The Secret Fall* opens with the tormented couple shortly before their deaths, waiting to re-enact pivotal scenes of their lives. They perform these scenes on a white disk, like a circus ring, where they are put through their paces and applauded by the attendants. In this context, the disk is used to represent the confining nature of the public arena—the realm of the social or the "real." At other moments in

the play, for example when the Androgyne appears on stage, the disk stands or hangs against a wall, as a moon or wafer, and suggests an image of wholeness and perfection—the realm of art or the “ideal.”

Constance suggests to Oscar that in their case, the “real” has not received the attention it deserves: she wants to tell the events of their lives from a new perspective, “to face myself, to face, finally, what it was that made me end up like this. [...] I want myself restored to me now. As I really am” (*SF* 12-13). Oscar’s story has received much attention, “but this time there has to be mine as well! You and I. Our – marriage. Our–children” (*SF* 17). Constance’s quest to face herself as she “really” is, however, is complicated by the play’s Brechtian emphasis on performance, through its use of puppets, masks, costume changes, and choreographed movement: paradoxically, the “real” self can only be discovered and faced via a process of ritual re-enactment, which allows the historical characters to be removed from their actual experiences even as they experience the events all over again. In the course of a process of ritual unmaking-and-becoming, one reality is dismantled and another is put together. This ritual performance is cathartic: it eventually allows the characters, at least to some degree, to come to terms with their lives and even to envisage a possible future.

The question Constance wishes to explore with Oscar is, “what it was that made me end up like this. Here. With you” (*SF* 12). In particular, she asks, “Why did I marry you, Oscar?” (*SF* 15). Constance is dimly aware that something “[u]nspeakable. Evil” (*SF* 16), something she has “sort of – blotted out” (*SF* 23), is connected with her initial attraction to her husband. Significantly, during the re-enactment of their courtship scene, Constance confesses to Oscar that her father, a respectable barrister, had been arrested for trying “to corrupt the innocent” (*SF* 23), a revelation that anticipates her acknowledgement later in the play of her father’s abuse of her, the repressed childhood secret behind her fall down the stairs of her home—an acknowledgement she will only be able to attain with Oscar’s help. Oscar remarks in his turn that he despises his father, and tells Constance the story, disguised as a fairy

tale, of his sister and two half-sisters (three “princesses”) and the cruel father who sent them “away to die” (SF 25). For Constance, Oscar embodies a dark side of her psyche she can barely allow herself to acknowledge: “It was . . . as if I were meeting someone out of my most disturbing dreams, half-realized, but now here it was, the thing itself. I immediately decided I was going to marry him” (SF 21). Conversely, Oscar sees in Constance the real-world fulfillment of a “dream of perfection,” a phrase he had used in the earlier scene to describe the figure of the Androgyne. He is “ecstatic” that Constance is not “contaminated by life” (SF 22). Whereas the marriage allows Constance to embrace a darkness Oscar denies she possesses, for Oscar it constitutes an ideal and symbolic union of male and female principles where there would be no “grotesque fumbling towards the Other” (SF 20). His strange request at the time of his marriage proposal to Constance, that she be his “sister” (SF 25), has its roots in that dream of “Paradise restored” (SF 20) as much as in his wish to find a replacement for the idealized “princess” sisters of his childhood.

Towards the end of *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, the youthful Alfred Douglas tells the audience “[h]ow it all ended”: how he “outlived them both. . . . Married, settled down. . . . Perfectly normal being once more. Not like that dreadful little shit I used to be. Absolutely not. No. Normal! Normal! Normal!” (SF 64-65). It is this older, “normal” Bosie who is the focus of Kilroy’s later play *My Scandalous Life*. Soon after Oscar Wilde’s death, Douglas renounced his homosexuality, converted to Catholicism, and married Olive Custance – a woman whose father had wanted a son rather than a daughter, and who spent her childhood “trying to be a boy” to “impress Daddy” (SL 13). With hindsight, Douglas realizes that he and his wife had been “attracted to each other’s sexual shadow, she to [his] feminine side and [he] to her masculine.” He argues they might have been better off living “like brother and sister,” because, as had been the case with Oscar and Constance, their motivations for marrying each other ran at cross-purposes from the very outset:



[...] I was busily trying to be manly. Exactly what she didn't want. What she wanted of me was something – sexually ambiguous. While I was desperately seeking – sexual definition for myself. Impossible odds, don't you think? What a sexual zoo it all is, when you think about it! (SL 22).

The tension between Bosie's quest for definition and Olive's quest for ambiguity (or for the "real" and the "ideal" in the case of Constance and Oscar) manifests itself in the characters' attitudes towards the offspring of their marriage, their children.

Oscar embraces the ideal at the expense of his real-world family. Throughout *The Secret Fall*, his desperate requests to see his children say more about his own artistic needs than the needs of his sons. For him, Cyril and Vyvyan represent a state of grace and an escape from the desires of the flesh, and there is a sense in which they are to him more symbol than reality. While Kilroy's play and the historical record do show Oscar to have been a loving and dedicated father, his need for Constance and the boys to be pure and innocent and "not of this world" is also shown to be a selfish need. This is revealed in the story Constance tells at the beginning of Part Two. When she was spending a day with the boys at Brighton beach, she suddenly saw Oscar come running towards them: "The children! He cried. The children! Tears streaming down his face. Are they all right? Yes, of course they're all right, I said. Oh, my God, he cried, collapsing on the sand beside me. I was asleep and dreamt that they had been swept out to sea!" (SF 49). Not having the children would upset Oscar's equilibrium in his desire for wholeness, a desire that also explains the dream he shares with Douglas after his release from prison, at the end of the play, in which the boys will come and visit and the four of them will have "such fun" (SF 60-61). This fantasy, of possessing both the idealized Androgyne (Douglas) and the innocent Child (Cyril and Vyvyan) is exploded by the real-world Bosie, who furiously rejects the image of the "holy family" and cruelly tells Oscar that the boys are "gone forever." Soon afterwards, he himself abandons Oscar because there is "nothing left here" (SF 64).

Constance relentlessly pursues the real at the expense of the ideal, by trying to keep her children safe from the predatory dangers of the world around them. The belief that she should protect her sons at all costs emanates as much from her own childhood trauma as from an objective assessment of the actual circumstances. However, in keeping the boys away from social and moral scandal—from “all that—filth!” (*SF* 58)—she also does them harm by denying them the genuine love of their own father. Indeed, as Douglas and Oscar both suggest at different times, the “filth” may be “in [her] own mind” (*SF* 58). The children miss their father and when Constance explains that “sometimes one’s Papa can be cruel,” Vyvie puts his finger on her secret motivation for separating the boys from Oscar when he asks, “Was your Papa cruel, Mummy ...?” (*SF* 62). The futility of her protective impulse is shown when “the puppeteers whisk the puppets away in a wild, childish run and they are gone.” The invalid Constance complains that the children “keep running away from me and I cannot follow.” For her, too, there will in the end be “nothing left” (*SF* 62).

Just before he is publicly disgraced, Oscar tells his wife: “[t]here is no distinction, my dear, between what is gross and what is sublime in art” (*SF* 40). This rather glib pronouncement about art deepens into a philosophy of life after he has suffered in prison and embraced his degradation: “We are born to live with contradiction. I used to hold contradiction in a single phrase. Now I am learning to hold contradiction in my heart” (*SF* 54). Alfred Douglas reiterates Oscar’s sentiment to Constance, but also explains how such contradictions are resolved in the world of social reality: “Everything runs together and runs in and out of everything else. But human beings cannot abide such glorious confusion. So, they invent what is called morality to keep everyone and everything in place” (*SF* 56). It was public morality that cruelly condemned Oscar to two years’ hard labour for trying to put his androgynous ideal into practice—that is, for “subversion of society” and holding its “ordering” in contempt (*SF* 41). Yet for Constance, the erasure of boundaries and the absence of private morality are concepts that open the door to child abuse, which is why she reacts with disgust

when Bosie follows his recitation of "the testament of the beloved apostle, St Oscar" (*SF* 56-57) with a request to see the two boys. Oscar, the artist, can erase boundaries and reconcile his love for Bosie with his love for his children; Constance, the realistic parent trying "to make childhood possible. For as long as possible" (*SF* 67), insists that lines have to be firmly drawn.

Bosie's ambiguity is the pivot around which the conflict between Oscar's idealism and Constance's realism revolves. Lover and tormentor to Oscar, potential brother and rival to Constance, beautiful androgynous boy and pathetic monster, Douglas is perilously poised between innocence and its corruption, unable to stop himself from betraying what is most dear to him. MacLeod points out that, while in classical antiquity the androgyne was a symbol of perfection in art, the birth of a hermaphrodite in the real world was cause for horror. This paradox presages

the uncanny doubleness that will mark the androgyne's future: monstrosity in the real world versus perfection in the aesthetic realm. [...] This unsettling link between the beautiful and the grotesque will underpin the concept of the androgyne in its literary incarnations. Doubleness is inherent in the structure of the androgyne's name. (32)

As the paradoxical real-world incarnation of the androgynous ideal, Douglas is beautiful as well as grotesque, and monstrous as well as perfect. This doubleness is borne out by his ambiguous attitude to the Wildes' children—both beautiful boys. In Part One of *The Secret Fall*, as Constance escorts the children up to bed, watched by Oscar, Douglas addresses the audience: "And then there were those two children. Made things frightfully complicated, the children. (*Short pause*) Adorable things—" (*SF* 26). A few moments later he adds, "And that's another thing! This frightful slander that's being passed about everywhere. I never interfered with those children. Never!" (*SF* 27). Constance's angry refusal in Part Two to allow Bosie to see the two boys before he goes

abroad sparks the same vehement protest: "I would never harm a child. Never! [...] If Oscar were here he would be pleased that I admire the beauty of his sons. Very simple. Very pure" (*SF* 58). Part of Bosie may well believe that he is speaking the truth, but by protesting too much he also undermines the veracity of his claim.

In *My Scandalous Life*, the ageing Douglas recollects that his own son Raymond was "a beautiful child," but adds that "the truth is never beautiful like that" (*SL* 14). This more mature Bosie realizes, on some level, that innocence invites its own corruption; that the "promise of innocence untouched" is therefore "impossible" in the real world:

Very odd thing, physical beauty. It can be like a deformity, you know, a sort of blight. You mightn't think it now, to look at me, but I suffered that myself when I was young. Innocence. Once we try to possess innocence, then all is—destruction! Yes, I was beautiful—once. Means nothing now. (*SL* 30)

The "young chaps" with whom Douglas nevertheless surrounds himself in the real world, whom he feeds "scrumptious buns and tarts" and whose "boyish chatter" makes him feel "young again" (*SL* 24), only serve to reinforce that insight. He dimly, if rather pathetically, comes to the realization that, as MacLeod puts it, "the divine androgyne," the idealized youth, is accessible to human beings "only in the form of a mystery or paradox" (31)—in Bosie's case, through the mysterious workings of his Catholic faith: "In Heaven one can be absolutely anything one wishes. I intend to be a child. Forever" (*SL* 20).

In the first part of *My Scandalous Life*, while his wife Olive is dying in her upstairs bedroom, Douglas admits with difficulty that his son Raymond is "a lunatic" (*SL* 12). In the play's second half, Olive has recently died and it is Raymond, temporarily released for the funeral from the "asylum" (*SL* 21), who now occupies, unseen, an upstairs bedroom. Douglas's initial claim that his son is "perfectly fine, now, perfectly normal again" (*SL* 22), is contradicted by his subsequent

admission that he had “always known” there was “something eating him away” (SL 32). The madness, he contends, was caused by a conspiracy between Olive’s father and Robbie Ross to “corrupt [his] son” (SL 14). In Douglas’s allegation, the “upright Colonel” and the “sodomite” were responsible for turning “a bright boy full of sunshine into a blithering lunatic” (SL 14-15). Bosie soon concedes that he is lying, however, and that Raymond is suffering from an inherited condition, aggravated by the ugly and protracted tug of war for possession of the boy between Olive and her father on the one hand, and Douglas and his mother on the other. In claiming to protect Raymond from “[t]hat monster Custance” and “that filthy little queen, Ross” (SL 19), Douglas is projecting onto his son his own personal past trauma involving his “monstrous” father (SF 32) and Oscar Wilde, the man accused by the latter of posing as a “sodomite.”

Tellingly, the connection between Douglas’s own traumatic relationship with his father and the story he invents about the cause of Raymond’s madness is a man by the name of “Littlechild”: the private detective Douglas claims to have hired to spy on Custance and Raymond bears the same name as “the chap who dug up the dirt on Oscar Wilde for my father the Marquess of Queensberry” (SL 18). The detective, uncoverer of hidden secrets, therefore comes to stand for something like “the old figure of Fate” (SL 18). For both Alfred and Raymond Douglas, it is the curse of the father, the genetic flaw causing the violent and unstable Douglas temperament, that leads to the inevitable destruction of the child’s innocence.

The inevitable link between victim and victimizer, between innocence and corruption, is given shape in two contrasting memories Douglas has of Raymond as a child. In the first recollection, the innocent child occupies an Eden-like setting: “Such a beautiful child, playing on the grass at Aston farm, Olive arched above him like a white bird, the Avon flowing steadily beyond them, all pulsing with life. I was so happy then, so happy” (SL 14). In the second recollection, the setting is ominous, “the summer boiling away outside the window, the trees heavy with heat and growth, the garden raging in colour and beyond,

the river – . . . the water like heavy, molten metal between the greenery” (SL 32). In this garden of chaos, the child turns predator:

This feral child moved. It waddled forward, hunting head thrust out for prey. . . .

The rat-boy advanced through the grass as through his familiar element. With a kind of careless acceptance of what was convenient to him he lifted up an open, pronged shears and lunged at his mother’s vulnerable back. (SL 33-34)

In his memory, Douglas runs to save his wife from her murderous son, only to find her coming towards him “carrying the sleeping child in her arms, his arms and legs loosened in perfect peace, his face lost in her shoulder” (SL 34). The monster Douglas is setting out to slay turns out to be of his own making. Bosie’s earlier sense that everything in the scene he was witnessing “was placed with a kind of precision. My wife. My son. And I behind the glass,” and his awareness that his own focused concentration “upon the child in the blinding summer sun . . . was not – love” (SL 33) suggests that the scene is as much a projection of his own damaged psyche onto his wife and child as it is a premonition of his son’s inexorable fate.

The image of mother and sleeping child of Douglas’s memory has a grotesque counterpart – an uncanny double – in the actuality of the play’s final scene, when Eileen, Olive’s Irish maid, carries the catatonic, puppet-like adult Raymond down the stairs to face Douglas:

. . . *The door is kicked open.*

*EILEEN stands there holding the limp figure of RAYMOND in her arms, his legs and arms hanging down, his head turned away, out of sight, on her shoulder. She puts him down and he leans into her, unable to stand on his own.* (SL 37)

Earlier, Douglas had described the figure of Eileen as “that Irish giantess standing guard at the foot of [Raymond’s] bed, watching over him like some primeval mother” (SL 34), but also as the one forcing him into submission during his violent seizures, as in “an appalling wrestling match” (SL 25). Like the symbolic puppets of the father and children in *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, Raymond and Eileen, in their mute roles, take on symbolic qualities as the protective/destructive mother and the innocent/damaged child, in which they are joined by Douglas as the loving/monstrous father. It is in these final moments of the play that Bosie acknowledges that the Douglas blood ties him fatefully to his son. Here, also, he senses a future for himself, “beyond the grave,” that is not that of an eternal Heavenly child: “A line of dim figures out of a mist, upon the Highland moors, some blood-boltered, some with bloodstained hands, some hacked with the most grievous wounds and, then, unmistakably in this stygian parade, a place waiting for myself. (Pause) And a place for Raymond!” (SL 35). Peace can only be found in the embrace of this darkness at the heart of the self: “We’re going to take our places, you know, he and I! Yes, in that dim line of figures on the darkened moor, the bloodied family of Douglas, all violence come to an end” (SL 37).

The need to embrace the darkness inside oneself as a way of finding peace is a recurring theme in Kilroy’s oeuvre that goes back at least to *Talbot’s Box* (1977). Working man and mystic Matt Talbot proclaims in that play that the darkness is “in every man, woman ‘n child born into the world. Most go round, runnin’ from it, with fear in der faces but there’s no peace till ya walk through it into some kinda light” (46-47). Talbot calls the darkness God, and “Gawd is wan!” (58). In *The Secret Fall*, Oscar tells Constance that there is “so much truth in failure and destruction” (SF 14), and Douglas reiterates that notion in *My Scandalous Life*: “at the very heart of existence is this well of failure and . . . to look into this black pool is to cleanse oneself, forever, of all illusion, about others, about oneself” (SL 26). Douglas recognizes that there is a connection with Raymond, “in all the wreckage of his mind

and body" (*SL* 26): "He is in me and I am in him. This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine! Amen" (*SL* 50). For both Oscar and Douglas, the realization of the saving grace of failure occurs in prison, where each of them sees a vision of Christ. It is also through Oscar's prison degradation that Constance is led to her own epiphany: "Christ came in the dirt, obvious, isn't it? I followed him! Followed him down into the dirt. And loved him there in my bowels" (*SF* 50).

In *The Secret Fall*, in the course of the ritual re-enactment of Oscar's public disgrace, Constance gradually makes the connection between her marriage and the childhood trauma she has blotted out in her memory:

It was as if I married him a second time in that disgusting prison but this time not the bride in cowslip yellow . . . , oh no, this time naked in the bed of filth. You see, I saw Papa, too, in that cage, degraded, loving, generous, reviled, monstrous Papa. I loved two criminals, you see. Papa-Oscar. Oscar-Papa. (*SF* 47)

Her marriage to Oscar allows her to relive her most disturbing "dream," the violation of the innocent child she was by the father she loved: "you were drawing me into horror, step by step, like a dangerous guide, the horror of myself. You have made me brave, Oscar" (*SF* 66). Constance's confrontation of her paradoxical feelings for the father who loved and abused her also destroys Oscar's fairy tale construction of her. "You're uncontaminated by life, Constance. That's what you said. What utter rot! You needed to invent me because you couldn't face life as it really is. Uncontaminated! How more contaminated could I be?" (*SF* 66). Constance faces the paradox that her own "loving, generous" father can be "monstrous" at the same time, but can only translate that recognition into an imperfect compromise where her own children are concerned, given that "[t]hey and I have to live in the real world" (*SF*



67) – the “real world” being the social and moral realm of late Victorian England.

At the end of Part One of *The Secret Fall*, after Oscar’s imprisonment, Constance tells the audience, “People keep asking me questions: What will you do now, Constance? And what will you tell the children?” (SF 47-48). At the end of Part Two, once the secret reasons behind the marriage of Oscar and Constance have been exposed and faced, these questions can be answered. Constance will refuse Oscar access to his children, but she will remain married to him, as his “sister” (SF 67). Her final words of the play, just before her death, are addressed to her children, in a letter in which she strongly defends the father whose love she found it imperative to deny them, and the “terrible, strange vision” for which he sacrificed everything: “All his troubles arose from his own father, from the way his father crushed something within the soul of his own son. But your father is a great man” (SF 68). Oscar’s final worries about his sons – “Cyril is the one I worry about most. He is such a perfectionist that he may do something terrible with his life. (Pause) Constance, I am still their father–” (SF 67) – reiterate the tensions between fate and agency, between impersonal force and personal responsibility, at the heart of the play.

In *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, the tension between the demands of society to perform certain roles (husband, wife, father) and the private depths of the individual psyche is embodied by a series of theatrical metaphors, in a complex interplay between character and audience. The attendants who prepare the characters for performance and applaud them with clappers after each scene highlight the play’s structural and thematic emphasis on performativity. Their presence brings out the ritual function of theatre as well as the inexorability of fate: the events in the scenes they make the characters re-enact have, after all, already happened, just as the events in the play that contains them are scripted from beginning to end and are repeated with each performance. Within the play’s re-enacted scenes, Oscar, Constance, and Bosie observe each other’s performances. For example, during the performance of the strange courtship scene between Oscar and

Constance, Douglas “poses, an ‘audience’ to what is going on” (SF 21), and “applauds daintily” at the conclusion of the scene (SF 26). When Constance takes her children upstairs to bed, and assures them that their absent father loves them very much, “Oscar, away to one side, watches all this” (SF 26). When Oscar and Bosie make love in the next scene, Constance stands facing out into the audience and “pays no attention to this” (SF 27). In these instances, the “public” reactions of the witnessing characters serve as expressionistic depictions of their conscious or repressed awareness of the hidden or private aspects of their own and others’ lives.

By having Oscar and Constance re-enact scenes from their own lives, Kilroy draws attention to the self as having both inherent and performative aspects. The playwright places his actor-characters both outside of and within the play’s action. In the former role, as “actors,” they acknowledge the presence of the theatre audience; in the latter, as “characters,” they are unaware of being watched. The doubleness of the device also has the effect of making the theatre audience aware of their own position as spectators. On the one hand, they are hidden public observers of the intimate details of the private lives of others, and in that sense Kilroy’s play offers a study “of theatre itself as accomplice to voyeurism and exploitation” (Murray 132); on the other hand, the audience is invited to experience theatre as communal ritual, whereby they collectively act as witnesses to the cathartic healing and transformation of the characters on stage. Constance acknowledges the coercive presence of the audience at the beginning of *The Secret Fall*, when she alerts Oscar to the demands of public expectation: “They’re waiting for us, Oscar. Back there. In the darkness. . . . Waiting to put us through our paces” (SF 17). By the end of the play, however, the role of the audience is positively transformed, along with the characters, when Oscar, in the year of his death, anticipates the moment of the vindication of his sacrifice: “There are times when I see the mist of the future lift. I see them there, in rows, standing. And, you know something? They are applauding me –” (SF 68). As the play ends shortly after these

words have been uttered, the applause upon its conclusion actualizes Oscar's vision in the living moment, serving as a sign of the audience's public approval as well as private understanding of that vision.

Christopher Murray has noted that at the core of Tom Kilroy's work lies the notion of "theater as community, as image of the very healing process which the drama itself indicates is necessary if the alienated state of modern man and woman is to be addressed" (128). At the end of *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, both main characters are dying; they have reached an approximate understanding of each other, an uneasy truce in which they agree to disagree about life and art. Yet even Constance acknowledges the power of Oscar's "terrible, strange vision" that will outlive them both (SF 68). In art, the ideal of perfection prevails, even (or especially) in the face of life's compromises and failures. In the final moment of the play, the artist's vision is made flesh when the human figure of Oscar is transformed into the symbolic figure of the Androgyne:

*The figure of OSCAR rises to full height, back to audience, and throws both hands in the air. A piercing sound and light change, high, white spot. At once all the costume, together with the hat and wig, fall off to reveal the naked Androgyne who now poses before the white disk, a flare of white light, then black out and the play ends. (SF 69)*

Yet even as the applause that follows the black-out actualizes in the real world Oscar's premonition of a time in the future when his "terrible, strange vision" will be acclaimed, the play's final theatrical moment also underlines the impossibly utopian nature of that vision. For the actual embodiment of the Androgyne in the final scene, Oscar's "single, perfect sphere," his "dream of perfection," must of necessity be a failure, and the figure's realization can only draw attention to its inevitable doubleness: while the Androgyne is an emblem of fluidity and transcendence of boundaries, the figure simultaneously depends for

its effect upon the audience's recognition of the difference between male and female. Since "sex and gender boundaries are always fluid and not fixed, the androgyne remains a body continually at war with itself. Constantly poised between self-enunciation and self-erasure, this figure never attains the ideal state of harmony toward which it gestures" (MacLeod 180-81).<sup>7</sup> The final theatrical moment of *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* therefore embodies not only Oscar's triumph as a creative artist for the ages, but also his human failure as a husband and father in the real world.

## Notes

1. In January 1895, while Oscar was abroad, "Constance tripped on a loose stair-carpet in the House Beautiful and fell from top to bottom of the long flight" (Amor 155). She badly injured her arm and subsequently developed a spinal condition that may have been related to the accident. With the title of his play, Thomas Kilroy says he intended "to echo the Victorian theme of the 'fallen woman,' which is also in Wilde's work," as well as "Constance's inner trauma with her own father" (Townsend).
2. Frank Harris claimed that the scandal surrounding Horace Lloyd involved homosexuality, but he was later corrected by Robert Ross, who wrote that the charge against "Horatio" Lloyd was "for exposing himself to nursemaids in the gardens of the Temple" (Ross qtd. in Amor 15). According to Bentley, however, Constance's brother Otho confirmed that "it was 'Horatio,' his grandfather, who thus erred and strayed, and not 'Horace,' his father" (Bentley 13).
3. Gide wrote, "I was questioning him [Douglas] one day about Wilde's two sons; he laid great stress on the beauty of Cyril (I think) who was quite young at the time, and then whispered with a self-satisfied smile, 'He will be for me'" (Gide qtd. in Amor 183).
4. In all page references that follow the title of this play will be abbreviated as *SF*.
5. In all page references that follow the title of this play will be abbreviated as *SL*.
6. Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."

7. Perhaps for this reason, the final scene was omitted in the 2008 Guthrie Theatre production of the play, directed by Marcela Lorca. Although this production did represent the naked "statue" of the Androgyne in the earlier scene, where it is subsequently transformed by the attendants into Alfred Douglas, not all reviewers recognized the figure as a statue, or grasped its symbolic significance. See, for example, Quinton Skinner's description of the scene in his review for *City Pages*: "Much of the trouble involves Lord Alfred Douglas ..., Oscar's longtime lover, first introduced facing away from us, nude, while Wilde extols the object of his passion's androgynous charms."

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