

Prisoner-Self as Artist: The Narrative of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*

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What lies before me is my past.
I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes,
to make the world look on it with different eyes,
to make God look on it with different eyes.

- Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

On the evening of February 28, 2021, a mural appeared on the old brick walls of Reading prison in Reading, England. Made by the anonymous popular street artist named Banksy, the mural depicts a prisoner scaling down the prison walls with a rope wringed together not from bedsheets but from the pages of a typewriter. The mural represents the prison's most famous inmate, the well-known nineteenth-century aesthete and writer Oscar Wilde, and draws support for those trying to turn the now-defunct prison into an art center. As Banksy states, "Oscar Wilde is the patron saint of smashing two contrasting ideas together to create magic. Converting the place that destroyed him into a refuge for art feels so perfect we have to do it" ("Banksy pledges" para. 10). The type-written sheets of words create a "magic[al]" passage for escaping not just prison itself but also historical realities, whereby words can transform worlds.¹ Banksy's mural speaks to the continued contemporary relevance of Wilde, Reading prison, and arguably above all, the issue of Wilde's striking aesthetic perspective in, and on, prison.

For Wilde, the two seeming contrasts of prison and art were, indeed, in need of being brought as close together as possible. The depth of Wilde's association between prison and art in his prison narrative *De Profundis*, however, is often obfuscated or mystified in the critical literature, not least of all because the association remains perplexing, unusual, and difficult to parse out. In her study *Oscar Wilde*, Ruth Robbins observes, "It [*De Profundis*] is the nearest thing Wilde wrote to an autobiography, but it was written under very difficult conditions, [...] part of the aim of which is to reaffirm the subject's subjectivity, and to resist the structures of subjection that are implicit in any prison regime" (164). While Robbins usefully asserts that *De Profundis* "reaffirm[s] the subject's subjectivity," she nevertheless contends that his prison writings depart from aestheticism and in fact "renunciat[e] [...] Wilde's aesthetic theory" (164, 176). Similarly, Michael Patrick Gillespie in *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* claims that Wilde's prison writings "stand distinctly apart from the writings that preceded Wilde's incarceration" (157).²

In this familiar view, prison is conceived as a defining break in Wilde's self and especially his prior aestheticism. In this essay, I propose to show how Wilde's prison writings are intimately connected with his aestheticism. What did Wilde mean to convey about the self, the past, and art within the words of this significant and oft-discussed prison narrative? And how does his prison narrative express an understanding of an aestheticism that, despite not deferring to history, remains nonetheless historical and political? This essay investigates such questions and issues, which are poised at the

intersection of discussions in Wilde studies, aestheticism, and carceral studies. As I read it, the prison narrative, in delving into his self and reconstructing his past, extends and deepens his prior aestheticism. Wilde does not seek to *escape* prison through words but rather to go deeper into the prison experience in order to approach the prisoner-self as artist. I argue that Wilde's narrative turns prison captivity into a form of reflective self-release, one in which the prisoner-self is recognized as an artist-self, while simultaneously contesting the legal- and state-authorized narrative pronounced by Victorian England.

As the narrative's Latin title begins to suggest, *De Profundis* emerges "out of the depths" of the physical and mental abjection of an imprisonment that was historically and politically situated.³ Quite literally so, Wilde penned his narrative page by page from January to March 1897 within the prison walls of Reading, writing on the "one quarto sheet of paper per day" received from (and returned to) prison officials (Robbins 167).⁴ He served the majority of his prison sentence in Reading. Indeed, "the remaining eighteen months" of his two-year sentence, as Matthew Sturgis notes; the new liberal chief of the prison, Major James O. Nelson, not only allowed him access to books but also permitted him to write, something very unusual for prisoners of the time (Sturgis 602, 608–610; Robbins 167). While the long narrative is ostensibly a letter addressed to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, affectionately named Bosie, the narrative is essentially about his self, composed as a way to rewrite the terms and history of his imprisonment.⁵ And while the letter speaks openly to Bosie with an intimate first- and second-person perspective, its construction of a personal narrative of self-development and self-release suggests it was meant to be deliberately overheard by others—especially by all those in the future who would be in a position to look at and judge Wilde not from the eyes of the Victorian state but rather "with different eyes" (*De Profundis and Other Prison Writings* [DPOPW] 161).⁶

In *De Profundis*, Wilde rewrites (or perhaps better put, writes over) history and state law, treating prison as a site for artistic reckoning with those parts of the past, intimate and personal in nature, which elide authoritative historical and legal narratives *about* him. The state, after all, judged him guilty of gross indecency and sentenced him to two years of hard labor and prison time within a system that was anything but intimate. Nineteenth-century British prisons systematically disrupted and broke the self, as seen most prominently in the design of the separate and silent system. This system, adopted by imperial Britain from the study of U.S. prisons in the early part of the century, was designed to punish and control prisoners by separating prisoners from one another and maintaining utter silence between them (Brady 85, 90; Crone 48, 53). For up to 23 hours a day, prisoners were kept isolated in small cells that were separated from other cells by "thick stone walls" barring communication and self-disclosure across cells (Brady 85, 95). As Robbins describes it, then, "In all the terms of the world, Wilde has become nothing in his prison guise except a prisoner, defined entirely by his crime and his punishment, defined, not by himself, but by others" (170).

Yet in the prison narrative, the prisoner finds an occasion to speak for him or herself, to turn to the self for understanding. Wilde positions himself as *such* a self—neither as a passive-self robbed of agency nor solely as a prisoner-self robbed of autonomy within prison walls, but rather as a self who can write his self anew; that is also to say, he positions himself *in prison as an artist*. The laws, histories, and factual rationalizations of state power, which had punished him with a criminal sentence and defined him as a prisoner, are not the terms with which Wilde, as prisoner-artist, concerns himself.⁷ Prison becomes not a site to escape in order to return back to something (e.g., normal society, non-prisoner life, and so on) but rather a site of artistic self-change, one which promotes neither the death of self nor the denial of aestheticism. Towards precisely this point, the following lines, written inside the walls of Reading with a sense of self-resolve, epitomize Wilde's own expressed aims for the prison narrative:

Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. But, somehow, I have got to make both of these things just and right to me. *And exactly as in Art one is only concerned with*

what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself, so it is also in the ethical evolution of one's character. I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. [...] The important thing, the thing that lies before me, the thing that I have to do, or be for the remainder of my days one maimed, marred, and incomplete, is to absorb into my nature all that has been done to me, to make it part of me, to accept it without complaint, fear, or reluctance. [...] It is only by realising what I am that I have found comfort of any kind. [...] The fact of my having been the common prisoner of a common gaol I must frankly accept, and, curious as it may seem to you, one of the things I shall have to teach myself is not to be ashamed of it. (DPOPW 104–105, my italics)

The writing of the prison narrative is to bring prison *nearer* to him rather than to distance himself from it; it is to bring his prisoner-self in direct contact with his artist-self.

What the narrative is *not*, patently, is either a moral or a legal argument (DPOPW 103). He does not appeal to philosophical or moral debates about right and wrong or about heaven and hell, going as far as to say that “[n]either Religion, Morality, nor Reason can help” one in prison (DPOPW 103). Importantly, it is also not a factual or historical argument, one that for example would detail the history and occasion of Wilde’s trials and imprisonment. To briefly contextualize this history for readers: Douglas’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, was infuriated by the pair’s relationship and, in an attempt to humiliate Wilde and end the pair’s relationship, sought to “spread vile scandals” about Wilde (Sturgis 510). One day in February of 1895, Queensberry public left a card in a club for Wilde to contact him—a card where he had scrawled with maliciously intended words, “For Oscar Wilde...Somdomite [*sic*]” (Sturgis 539–540). Wilde was distraught with Queensberry’s public humiliation and decided he would sue Queensberry for criminal libel (Sturgis 540–541). The libel case, begun on April 3, 1895, included a cross-examination of Wilde in which literary works from both Wilde and Douglas were used as evidence of Wilde’s sexual relationship with Douglas and with other young men (Sturgis 549–552). After several days of court proceedings in which six young men were brought into court as witnesses and testified of their sexual relations with Wilde, Wilde ended up withdrawing his case of criminal libel against Queensberry (Sturgis 561–562). But the evidence of his sexual relations from cross-examination of his own criminal libel suit inadvertently incriminated him within a court of law.⁸ Male sexual relations were prohibited and governed by the Criminal Law Amendment Act (Robbins 6). The state therefore proceeded to try Wilde for gross indecency and, ultimately, in May 1895 he was convicted of this charge.⁹

The prison narrative, in contrast, endorses and affirms the noesis of the prisoner-self, which is given precedence over the state’s externally imposed accusations, definitions, mores, laws, and narratives. Wilde’s prison narrative posits an avenue for the prisoner-self to construct not historical knowledge as much as a story involving self-knowledge, and thereby to make sense of one’s past differently through a (present) story that recoups the self. As he puts it, the “important thing” is to capture what has happened in prison, to “accept” it, and to “absorb” it into his self. The claim that he has “to make everything that has happened to me good for me” underscores this point: namely, by encouraging his self to process and absorb the sensations of prison, he can enrich his art and in this sense make prison something “good for [him].” That Wilde seeks to integrate imprisonment into his self, to be able to recognize himself as a “common prisoner” with an aim of art (as explicitly stated in the italicized lines quoted earlier) indicates that prison is to play an enabling, rather than disabling, role in his artistic and personal self-development.

This preference for and prioritization of subjective phenomenon evidenced in the prison narrative is not a new emergence from imprisonment but rather is itself a development from Wilde’s long-held aestheticism and aesthetic theory, thereby placing the prison narrative *De Profundis* contiguously among his other literary writings. One can note clear resonances with aestheticism when considering again the line where he writes, “And exactly as in Art one is only concerned with what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself, so it is also in the ethical evolution of one’s character” (DPOPW 104). This position in no uncertain terms harkens more broadly to the philosophy of aestheticism and more particularly to Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*,

a work which had a lasting influence on Wilde. Wilde had first come under the grip of aestheticism as an undergraduate concentrating on the Greats curriculum at the University of Oxford—a period of his life that simultaneously saw him placing his faith and his sexuality not merely into question but also remaking them into a kind of aesthetic experiment (Ellmann, *Four Dubliners* 3, 16–17, 20). Richard Ellmann reminds us, too, that in *De Profundis* Wilde makes an explicit reference to Pater's book as having had a “strange influence” on him (*Four Dubliners* 11–13).¹⁰

When the imprisoned Wilde asserts that “[n]either Religion, Morality, nor Reason can help” him, but that “Art” can, one can recognize the influence of Pater's aestheticism, a view which promotes a personal and sensual relationship to life (*DPOPW* 103–104). According to aestheticism, sensations, or impressions as they are referred to in Pater's study, play an essential role in life; these sensations are subjectively experienced and lack an objective ordering principle (Pater 119).¹¹ As Pater delineates:

Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (119)

Wilde's prison narrative reminds us, however, that the prisoner-self has a “swarm of impressions” that are more powerful, concentrated, and severe than those of everyday experience. The intensified, or two-fold, aspect of the prisoner-self's impressions is that they are not only “ringed round [...] by that thick wall of personality” but also by the thick wall of prison itself. In a prison letter written to Ross on April 1, 1897, Wilde makes a metaphor of such a two-fold state when he describes his sense of isolation as not limited to the physical prison walls but as involving the isolation of the self as a receiver of impressions: “Of course from one point of view I know that on the day of my release I shall be merely passing from one prison into another, and there are times when the whole world seems to me no larger than my cell, and as full of terror for me” (*DPOPW* 163).

While aestheticism encourages the experience and study of sensations, it does so not with a disregard for the historical, which is conceived to be already implicitly present, but with an eye towards what in a work or in a writer goes beyond the historical condition to become something *aesthetically*, and not just historically, valuable (Pater 82). The aesthetic element, Pater outlines, always has an individual, or personal, quality to it; it is, one might say, the product of an individuum within a historical era that nevertheless is not bound to the era (82).¹² In such a manner, Wilde's prison narrative seeks to move his own impressions beyond the historical conditions (e.g., the facts of his prison time, the history of nineteenth-century prisons, the occasion of his trials, and so on) into something aesthetically (i.e., something superhistorically) valuable by way of his individual construction. So while *De Profundis* does “resist the structures of subjection that are implicit in any prison regime,” as Robbins asserts, it does so in a reassertion, *not* in a “renunciation,” of aestheticism (Robbins 164, 176). Indeed, in ascertaining that his aim is “Art,” Wilde turns to the writing of words during his incarceration precisely as an activity driven and informed by aesthetic theory (*DPOPW* 103–104).

In this sense, the prison narrative can, and ought to, be viewed as a kind of Wildean aesthetic theory or treatise—one in which the sensation of sorrow, in particular, converses between the condition of prison and the production of art. In other words, sorrow, a central sensation, or impression, that dominates the prisoner-self, is simultaneously the sensation developed and utilized by the prisoner-artist. Wilde writes:

[T]here is about Sorrow an intense, an extraordinary reality. I have said of myself that I was one who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. There is not a single wretched man in this wretched place along with me who does not stand in symbolic relations to the very secret of life. For the secret of life is suffering. (*DPOPW* 110)

Sorrow felt in prison, that is, has a way of blurring realms between the ordinary realm of history and the superordinary realm of the superhistorical, between the self-as-prisoner and the self-as-artist.¹³

So too his statement that only *understanding* the prison and justice system is “wrong and unjust” does not help a prisoner convey that the prisoner-self is not in a position to strictly rationalize about prison or about systemic injustice but must undergo and process a “swarm of impressions,” above all the impression of sorrow (*DPOPW* 104, 110; Pater 119).

Bereft of the authority to change or escape his or her condition, yet overwhelmed with sorrow, the prisoner-self must come face-to-face with the impressions of sorrow. This prisoner-self, for whom “tears are a part of every day’s experience,” is *not* the self of an authoritative figure, such as a historian or a lawyer, but rather of a “wretched” figure in a “wretched” place (*DPOPW* 133).¹⁴ It is the self of one who is “*despised and rejected of men*”: the prisoner, the criminal, the felon, the exile (*DPOPW* 121). In contradistinction to the “continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves” that Pater describes as the self’s experience of ephemeral impressions, Wilde indicates the prisoner-self has a continual and persistent impression of sorrow “in prison where the day no less than the night is set apart for tears” (Pater 119; *DPOPW* 46, 133). Sorrow, in this sense, becomes a key impression for the prisoner-self, but an impression without material resolution for in prison, sorrow leads only to sorrow. At the same time, this sensual impression of the prisoner-self brings one nearer to the realization of the artist-self. As Wilde writes, quoting lines from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (translated by Thomas Carlyle), “Who never ate his bread in sorrow, / Who never spent the midnight hours / Weeping and waiting for the morrow, / He knows you not, ye Heavenly Powers” (*DPOPW* 109).

Such a line, among other religious references and figures in the prison narrative, most notably Jesus Christ in the latter part, needs to be understood in the spirit of art, even though it appears at the surface to call up religion. Recall Wilde’s own words where he states that his aim is not religion but art (*DPOPW* 103–105). He states too, “When I think about Religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who cannot believe” (*DPOPW* 103). Leela Gandhi notes, “Always a self-endangering gesture for the sake of others, the aesthetics of sacrifice realize themselves perhaps most vividly in the figure of Wilde’s Christ, invoked in *De Profundis* as an exemplar of imaginative sympathy” (174). Ellmann contends that “Wilde not only describes Christ without recognizing his divinity, but blends Christianity with aestheticism” (*Oscar Wilde* 514). Guy Willoughby’s *Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde* differs widely from the general scholarly consensus surrounding the question of Wilde’s non-religious treatment of Christ. According to Willoughby, Christ is treated in a religious manner, with *De Profundis* depicting the perfect development of Wilde’s aesthetic through its configuration of Christ as a transcendent figure (111, 133–134). Willoughby, furthermore, neglects to account for Wilde’s lifelong fraught relationship to Christianity.

Wilde’s depiction of Christ is, in my view, a self-identification with Christ as a model for the prisoner-artist, or the artist exiled from common society, who manifests sorrow. The following Biblical verse from Isaiah quoted by Wilde refers to Christ and Wilde as much as it speaks to the prisoner-artist in general: “*He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him*” (*DPOPW* 121). Christ is seen as exemplary for his capacity as an artist to see beyond the realm of the visible and socially acceptable because of his position as an exile banished from society. Wilde writes, “[Christ] realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation. He understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind, the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich” (*DPOPW* 114). The depth, scope, and character of Christ’s sorrow, then, merits Wilde’s consideration of him as a model for the prisoner-artist. Wilde’s prisoner-self identifies with Christ’s self predominately because the impressions of sorrow bring both beyond the visible and the historical present to art and the superhistorical. If Wilde is to redeem *his* past, then he will do so through the model of Christ as a prisoner-artist.

As aestheticism encourages, Wilde’s reading and utilization of the Bible and Biblical figures in Reading and in his prison narrative suggests the Bible meant something to him at that “particular

moment" (*DPOPW* 104). While prisoners at Reading had access to the Bible as part of a program of religious education and moral reform, as Rosalind Crone observes, they "were kept from straying to other parts of the book through the task of memorising set verses" (60).¹⁵ In other words, the program was regimented to prescribed verses that authorities deemed acceptable to their own institutional purposes—not to the purposes of art. Wilde, however, with his special privileges, was able to read the Bible as an aesthetic activity.¹⁶ To this point, Leanne Grech observes, "The willingness to consume the Bible as an aesthetic text meant that it was possible for Wilde to establish a literary relationship with Christ, although he no longer believed in religion" (234).

In deriving a personal and artistic, rather than a religious, meaning from traditionally religious figures like Christ, *De Profundis* once again centers the capacity of the prisoner-self to process and transform impressions of sorrow in spite of the authority of the prison system—which is also to say, to be a prisoner-artist. Wilde is said to have stated to a warden in Reading who had befriended him, "If I write any more books, it will be to form a library of lamentation" (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 517). A sorrowful, broken, and isolated Wilde could envision his cell number, C.3.3., to be the sign for a new beginning for his life, a life and literature derived from an aesthetic theory of sorrow begun in *De Profundis*. His cell number, with the letter "C" being the third letter of the alphabet, comes out to 333, a Biblical allusion for a new beginning.¹⁷ The signature of the first edition of his poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as C.3.3. also affirms Reading as a place for the personal and artistic rebirth of his self "[b]ecause the man was one of those / Whom Christ came down to save" (*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* 25). Thus, like Christ who had lived the sympathy of sorrow directly with those he sought to extend it to such that his *life was art*, so Wilde appears to suggest that imprisonment had led him (Wilde) to a deeper practice of aestheticism (*DPOPW* 114, 115-116).¹⁸

Indeed, in a "wretched place," banished from society and from all those he loved, an artistic, super-historical process was at work, one historically conditioned agents could neither account for nor see—he was to change the past, "to make the world look on it with different eyes, to make God look on it with different eyes" (*DPOPW* 110, 161). Such is the artistic activity of the prisoner-self reaching an internal turning point that goes beyond or through the historical condition to "something individual," that is to an artist-self who, while related to, nonetheless distinguishes him or herself from, the historical condition (Pater 82).¹⁹ In such a way, Wilde's prison narrative creates not so much a 'history from below' as a super-historical story in the manner of literature. Such an aestheticist take on history, one captured in Pater's familiar albeit perhaps misconstrued proclamation of "art for art's sake," functions moreover as indirect subversion (121). If experience is dependent on and drawn from impressions that have no objective principle or objective organization, as aesthetes like Pater and Wilde would maintain, then the prisoner-self is an artist implicitly undermining state authority (i.e., an authority reflected in prison wardens, court judges, members of the clergy, and so on) wherever he or she assimilates the "swarm of impressions" in prison for his or her own aims or development and not the aims of prisons. Thereby too authoritative narratives of the state—circumscribed in dominant facts, laws, and histories—are rendered as mis-fact, mis-law, and mis-history when the impressions of the "wretched" prisoner-self are centered and prioritized. *De Profundis's* turn, then, to the prisoner-self acts as an immanent claim for the subversion of (state) authority.

To be sure, more direct political criticisms of the prison system can of course be found in Wilde's writings. In the essay "Pen, Pencil, and Poison" from 1885, Wilde writes that, in contrast to the murders and imprisonment of Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, prison was largely the place of the poor: "Crime in England is rarely the result of sin. It is nearly always the result of starvation" (88). He criticizes poverty and the prison and justice system in his 1891 essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (25). In *De Profundis*, too, he writes, "The prison-system is absolutely and entirely wrong. I would give anything to be able to alter it when I go out. I intend to try" (*DPOPW* 131). Private letters as well as letters written to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle* from 1897 and 1898 further document an explicit repudiation of the treatment of prisoners in British prisons who are "brutalised below the level of any

of the brute-creation,” as well as his frantic pleas for prison reform (*DPOPW* 207). However, the prison narrative is less interested in a rational critique of the prison and justice system and is more interested in what prison and its impressions can mean for self and artist (*DPOPW* 103–104).

In that sense, from “out of the depths” of Reading’s sorrow, Wilde’s narrative comes to render palpable the relation between the prisoner-self and the artist-self as its own kind of aesthetic theory. So while for Pater the “swarm of impressions” of experience are “ringed round” a self shielded from others such that “no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us,” Wilde suggests something profound that modifies the meaning of such aestheticism immanently. Pater’s aestheticism involves an irresolvable dilemma when it comes to the question of a ground upon which a self can stabilize given that impressions remain not just subjective and ephemeral but also accordingly fraught with misunderstandings and mis-histories. Wilde’s prison-developed aestheticism, however, suggests this ground is sorrow and that the past is to be known as a history of sorrow. In prison, the ephemerality of numerous impressions becomes replaced with the constancy of sorrow, such that life becomes experienced not as a frenzy of fleeting and momentary sensations but rather as a perpetual sensation of sorrow.

Wilde’s *De Profundis* aims to bring its readers nearer to the impressions of prison as an activity of the development of the artist-self, for the prisoner-self’s sorrows *are* strong enough to pierce that “thick wall of personality” which stands between selves (Pater 119). He writes: “If there be in it one single passage that brings tears to your eyes, weep as we weep in prison where the day no less than the night is set apart for tears. It is the only thing that can save you” (*DPOPW* 46). Prisoners, that is to say, are not at all those without a self; rather they are prisoner-artists whose selves are recreated by the prevailing impression of prison. To rise to the depths of sorrow—so Wilde counter-intuitively conveys ought to be the aim of a self who ‘invites’ themselves to prison. As he puts it at one point, “The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that: it is the means by which one alters one’s past. [...] It is difficult for most people to grasp the idea. I dare say one has to go to prison to understand it. If so, it may be worthwhile going to prison” (*DPOPW* 128). Thus rather than distancing oneself from prison, Wilde avers that the prisoner-self may find not merely sorrow but may find the bedrock of life and art itself.

Wilde’s prison narrative thus turns “some of the lessons hidden in the heart of pain” into a form of self-release from both the state-sanctioned punishment of Reading and from the self-occupied self driven by satisfaction, as “the secret of life is suffering” (*DPOPW* 109, 110).²⁰ Through impressions of sorrow the prisoner-self in the prisoner’s cell is simultaneously brought nearer to the artist-self, who, in stepping beyond the historical present, can “alter[] one’s past” and change its meaning: the prison narrative is the artist’s narrative (*DPOPW* 128).

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Notes

¹ Wilde, to be sure, had never used a typewriter in prison at all, but rather handwrote on sheets tightly controlled by prison authorities (Robbins 167).

² According to Gillespie, “The discourses of *De Profundis* and ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ develop in a linear fashion not seen in the canon since Wilde’s earliest creative efforts. No longer able to depend upon readers to read pluralistic intentions into the lines that he produced, Wilde seemed less willing to introduce it himself” (158). To be clear, Gillespie does not ascribe this change in his literary works *strictly* to his imprisonment but rather to the way in which the trials and subsequent imprisonment altered the Victorian reception of Wilde

- and his work: "The trials in which he involved himself in the spring of that year [1895] brought an end to the ambiguity produced by the delicate intra- and extra-textual equilibrium upon which contemporary perceptions of his writings had rested" (12-13).
- ³ Wilde himself suggested a title for the work: *In Carcere et Vinculis*, meaning "in prison and in chains." The posthumously published book bore, however, another title that Ross had given to it—*De Profundis*, meaning "out of the depths" (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 510; Robbins 168). The title's Latin appears in the first line of the Vulgate version of Psalm 130, which in English translation reads: "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord; Lord hear my prayer" (Robbins 168).
- ⁴ Upon release from Reading, Wilde received all his written sheets from prison officials, who had saved each sheet; Wilde then handed them over to his friend and literary executor—and eventually the letter's editor—Robert Ross (Meyerfeld xi; Robbins 167).
- ⁵ As Richard Ellmann observes, "The most important thing about *De Profundis* is that it is a love letter," meaning that it is a love letter to, or for, Bosie (*Oscar Wilde* 515). I am suggesting it is a love letter more to *himself* than to Bosie.
- ⁶ While Wilde had asked Ross to pass the letter on to Douglas, according to Douglas, Ross only gave him several pages, which he did not read; he read the letter only after Wilde's death (Douglas, *Oscar Wilde and Myself* 146-148). Moreover, the first English publication of *De Profundis* in 1905, as Ellmann says, was "abridged" by Ross and "omitted all reference to Douglas" (*Oscar Wilde* 587).
- ⁷ The Judge, Mr. Justice Wills, stated that this was "the worst case I have ever tried," justifying Wilde's harsh two-year sentence with these words: "[T]he crime of which you have been convicted is so bad. [...] People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame. [...] I shall, under such circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows" (Sturgis 580-584; Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 477).
- ⁸ As Peter Robinson puts it, "Wilde had [...] gone to the law unwisely to seek redress. He then had the law turned upon him" (301).
- ⁹ Robbins notes "gross indecency" identifies relations between two males, but "does not name specific acts or tendencies" and that the Criminal Law Amendment Act "did not use the word 'homosexual' at all" (6).
- ¹⁰ Ernst Bendz further observes, "Pater's writings appeared to him in the light of unapproachable models of consummate outward form and high intellectual aim, exercising upon him, as he himself acknowledged, a curious fascination" ("Reminiscences" 214). For an in-depth account of how Wilde's writings were influenced by Pater (as well as by Matthew Arnold), see Bendz's *The Influence of Pater and Matthew Arnold in the Prose-writings of Oscar Wilde*. However, it is worth pointing out that Bendz holds, contrary to my argument in this essay, that *De Profundis* has not "much to remind one of Pater" but does remind one of Arnold (*The Influence of Pater* 64, 67).
- ¹¹ Pater and aesthetes like him promoted neither morals per se (such as their well-known contemporary Matthew Arnold, who held positions aestheticism typically rejected, as can be seen in his *Culture and Anarchy*) nor merely art as such, seeing these as essentially abstractions or idealizations; rather they emphasized the sensual and particular experience of both art and life.
- ¹² In this sense, art has a superhistorical quality to it.
- ¹³ The very first line of *De Profundis* conveys how the sensation of sorrow has been an important driving force for Wilde's prison narrative: "After long and fruitless waiting I have determined to write to you myself, as much for your sake as for mine, as I would not like to think that I had passed through two long years of imprisonment without ever having received a single line from you, or any news or message even, except such as gave me pain" (*DPOPW* 45).
- ¹⁴ The passage reads, "To those who are in prison, tears are a part of every day's experience. A day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy" (*DPOPW* 133).
- ¹⁵ For a historical account of this program, see Rosalind Crone's "The Great 'Reading' Experiment: An Examination of the Role of Education in the Nineteenth-Century Gaol."
- ¹⁶ During time served in Reading, he further drew on his knowledge of the Greek language to read the Bible in Greek (Frankel 65).
- ¹⁷ Wilde would have known the general symbolic meanings of 333 within the Biblical tradition, which includes, for example, the foundational Trinity doctrine. Wilde was raised Christian, and his mother, who bore profound influence on him, was particularly dedicated to Catholicism. He further developed an interest in Catholicism during his years at Oxford, even becoming acquainted with "a local group of Jesuits" (Sturgis

- 52–53). On his deathbed, he was baptized into the Catholic Church (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 583–584; Sturgis 713–714).
- ¹⁸ Aestheticism holds that art and life are intimately and concretely linked. As the authoritative biographer Ellmann states, Wilde’s “theme is not, as is often supposed, art’s divorce from life, but its inescapable arraignment by experience” (*Oscar Wilde* xvi).
- ¹⁹ Pater might describe this individuality as the movement of an artist “of his age” towards one’s “own temper and personality” (82).
- ²⁰ Wilde’s allusive remarks spoken to André Gide in a post-prison meeting can be seen as a comment on this self: “But dear, promise me: from now on never to write *I* any more. [...] In art, don’t you see, there is no *first* person” (Gide 28). Punning on the subject-positions in which narratives are typically written (e.g., first person, second person, third person), Wilde approaches now the “I” from the position of the prisoner-self. Gide recalls this meeting in his personal recollections of his encounters with Wilde in the brief book, *Oscar Wilde: A Biography*.

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