

### The Picture of Prisoner C33: Oscar Wilde as Decadent Moralizer and Closet Christian (incomplete draft)

*Instead of trying to be the hero of his own history, he seeks to be the spectator  
of his own tragedy.  
Oscar Wilde on Hamlet*

*[M]ost critics could not see the poetry for the pose.  
Joseph Pearce, The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*

#### An Unreal Husband

Since affection tends to hold hands with at least some degree of resentment, I feel compelled to balance out the unctuous fandom for Oscar Wilde whenever I encounter lopsided lionization of him. Partly due to his enduring persona-construction and partly due to history's sacralizing nature, Wilde tends to be erroneously evoked by civil-rights icons, while he should be enthroned among great yet problematic geniuses instead. I think his flouting of Victorian social norms and love of Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas reward his reputation with undue heroism – or, rather, eclipse or misplace his deserved praise. In this piece I'd like to escort dear Oscar off the wrong pedestal while emphasizing his very moralistic self-judgment that persisted throughout his life of supposed libertinism.

Oscar Wilde was not a social reformer, nor was he a gay-rights activist. Though he was a loving father, he wasn't a good husband, and he wasn't even an adept hedonist. (And he *wasn't* actor Stephen Fry!) Henry James called him an "unspeakable animal" and "a fatuous fool," and G.K. Chesterton considered him "a great artist" but "really a charlatan."<sup>1</sup> Maria Louise Ramé (aka Ouida) denied his cleverness and called him "a successful poseur and a plagiarist."<sup>2</sup> John Ervine said that "he cast such pearls as he had among swine, and then wallowed with the swine at the troughs in the sty."<sup>3</sup> Decades after Oscar's death, Lord Douglas called him "the most conceited man that ever lived"<sup>4</sup> and "a diabolical scoundrel,"<sup>5</sup> while Robert Ross, probably a former lover and surely a good friend, worshipped and remained loyal to him until his own last breath. Wife Constance ended up referring to him as "that Beast."<sup>6</sup> Many reveled in his diamond wit; others were repulsed by his pomposity. Fellow showboats, such as the fiery James Whistler, both admired and resented him. Though he was a slick epigrammatist and aphorist, some might say that his plays are shallower Marlowe or half-baked Jonson more than Shakespeare and, as Andre Michels put it, that "his speeches were brilliant and detailed but ridiculously mannered."<sup>7</sup>

Serial adulterer, instigator, hyper-ambivalent cad – but, undeniably, a genius with a steel-trap mind, virtuosic language and a tender, eager, ever-youthful heart. By the time a little over a decade had passed after his wretched death, "Wilde was a mythic figure: to some, a demon; to others, a saint," writes Philip Hoare, who correctly acknowledges this was the desired product of Oscar Wilde's self-branding.<sup>8</sup> When folks reject artists as demons while neglecting or denying their saintly aspects, my default is to disallow unsavory biography from ruining reception of their admirable art. Although I tend toward this compartmental approach, drawing a line is exceptionally more difficult with one such as Oscar Wilde, because he and his art were so particularly integral. In fact, this is a case in which separation of artist and art would be detrimental; the absence of one diminishes the other. Oscar Wilde *was* his art, and vice versa. And his art is indispensable in understanding the tension between his pretentious folly and his persistent conscience. In *The Eighteen Nineties* Holbrook Jackson contends that Oscar tended to express "the worthier part of himself" in his work while failing his better instincts in his everyday life:

*With many writers, perhaps the majority, it requires no effort to forget the author in the book, because literature has effectually absorbed personality, or all that was distinctive of the author's personality. With Oscar Wilde it is otherwise.<sup>11</sup>*

The strong integration of artist and art in Oscar Wilde allows for both much disapproval and admiration, since he dealt with the monumental task of promoting his flagrant persona while simultaneously analytically judging it – and while pretending that such judgment itself was unnecessary, even wrong. In

general, however, one can enjoy the honey and spit out the bees while appreciating people. (Otherwise, who on Earth would pass muster?) Besides, as actor Cheech Marin perfectly put it, “people are capable of being saints and sinners two seconds apart.”<sup>12</sup> “We cannot go back to the saint,” says Gilbert of Wilde’s *The Critic as Artist*. “There is more to be learned from the sinner.”<sup>13</sup> And, as Wilde wrote to the *St. James’s Gazette*’s editor in 1890, “good people, belonging as they do to the normal, and so, commonplace, type, are artistically uninteresting. Bad people are, from the point of view of art, fascinating studies.”<sup>14</sup>

All in all, I whistle Whistler’s tune: mixing much admiration with some scorn, not only at foolish self-destruction but also at his reprehensible narcissism. Behind the modern praise for Wilde’s celebrated trial repartee I can’t help but think of Constance’s pitiful plaint to the famous Sybil of Mortimer Street about her husband’s deception and what she saw as the ruination of their boys.<sup>15</sup> In his retelling of the Wildean era, Lord Alfred Douglas’s biggest error or intentional aspersion is his blame of Constance, coupled with his almost total self-absolution from Wilde’s rapid downfall. Yes, Douglas certainly was both an affectionate and artistic inspiration for the older lover, and he did provide financial assistance in hours of need, but he was far from innocent in the love triangle. His worst slander against Constance appears in his *Oscar Wilde: A Summing Up*, in which he egregiously says that “there have been many wives...who have stuck to their husbands through thick and thin...Mrs. Wilde, alas, was not one of them.”<sup>16</sup> As for the Wildes’ failed post-prison reunion, Douglas insists that “the blame rests entirely on Mrs. Wilde.”<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, as Eleanor Fitzsimons put it, “Constance had demonstrated an extraordinary degree of compassion and tolerance for a man who...had behaved very badly towards his wife no matter what his nature and motivation.”<sup>18</sup> And thank goodness for Emer O’Sullivan’s recognition of “the unfailingly supportive Constance” and “her capacity for love, constancy, forgiveness and naivety.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite his genuine love for and attraction to Florence Balcombe, his affection for living-goddess Lillie Langtry and, perhaps, as somewhat recently hypothesized by biographer Matthew Sturgis, his romantic smiting by an American woman named Hattie Crocker, bisexual Oscar eventually found a stronger rush in the proverbial forbidden fruit of younger men. “It was like feasting with panthers,” he admits. “The danger was half the excitement...Their poison was part of their perfection.”<sup>20</sup> I suspect that the thrill would have been thinner without the paradigm of societal decency versus transgression. I go farther by insisting that if he *could* have changed public perception of and legal stances toward homosexuality he wouldn’t have wanted to any more than a drinker wishes for non-alcoholic whiskey.

Rampant deception is odious despite sexual orientation and civil-rights disparities, and projecting the current-day applause for “coming out” and revealing one’s authentic self shouldn’t provide ameliorative hindsight. The shame, to which he was far from blind, lies in Wilde’s duplicitous egotism rather than his sexuality. His awareness of his abuse against Constance is evinced repeatedly in his work, such as in the following exchange from *Lady Windermere’s Fan*:

*Lady Windermere: ...Oh! the house is tainted for me! I feel that every woman here sneers at me as she dances by with my husband. What have I done to deserve this? I gave him all my life. He took it – used it – spoiled it! I am degraded in my own eyes; and I lack courage – I am a coward!*

*Lord Darlington: If I know you at all, I know that you can’t live with a man who treats you like this! What sort of life would you have with him? You would feel that he was lying to you every moment of the day. You would feel that the look in his eyes was false, his voice false, his touch false, his passion false... You would have to be to him the mask of his real life, the cloak to hide his secret.*<sup>21</sup>

Mrs. Cheveley of *An Ideal Husband* sums up Wilde’s obvious expectation of comeuppance: “Sooner or later we have all to pay for what we do.” Much of his work is nothing less than broadcast prescience about his expected doom, as the realization of Sir Robert of the same play exhibits:

*The sin of my youth, that I had thought was buried, rose up in front of me, hideous, horrible, with its hands at my throat...And now what is there before me but public disgrace, ruin, terrible shame, the mockery of the world, a lonely dishonoured [sic] death, it, may be, someday...<sup>22</sup>*

Wilde also seems to allow Constance to speak through Lady Chiltern in the following lamentation: "I feel as if you had soiled me for ever. Oh! what a mask you have been wearing all these years!...And how I worshipped you!"<sup>23</sup> Perhaps this passage was inspired by something Constance had once written in a letter to Oscar during their courtship: "I worship you my hero and my god!"<sup>24</sup> She seemed to hope against hope and to experience fresh outrage at each outrage, despite her probably full awareness deep down. James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, a novel that, for me, parallels and is best understood in light of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, echoes this deceptive betrayal with the aborted betrothal of closeted David and his fiancée Hella:

*"But I knew," she said. "I knew. This is what makes me so ashamed. I knew it every time you looked at me. I knew it every time we went to bed. If only you had told me the truth then. Don't you see how unjust it was to wait for me to find it out? To put all the burden on me?"<sup>25</sup>*

No wonder *An Ideal Husband* had its origin at the peak of a conflict with Bosie.<sup>26</sup> Marital infidelity served as a source of both excitement and remorse, and, as Eleanor Fitzsimons observes, "his letters to Constance were Oscar's attempts to throw a lifeline back to his formerly stable family life. But it was growing weaker and weaker."<sup>27</sup> For all of its excitement and the sincere affection for Douglas, Oscar did feel remorse and often expressed it, which was a typical phase in a perpetual cycle. When considering the dual – no, the kaleidoscopic – nature of Oscar Wilde, I find it useful to loosely refer to the more conscientious, sincere version as "Oscar" and the duplicitous, hedonistic one as "Wilde" (the built-in pun very reluctantly intended). And again, I treasure him for his art and his satirical persona rather than his self-annihilating, foolish (and failed) reevaluation of values. Granted, he was not the first or last cad, and none of us are worthy to cast first stones, but credit, good and bad, is due where it's due.

Constance died at 40, a disillusioned, exploited woman. Oscar died at 46, greatly diminished, unwell and unjustly disgraced, a tragic casualty of Wilde's compulsive rebellion against bourgeois life, which had been in tension with his deeply moralistic nature. His gallivanting was not justified by any evident dishonor of the marriage contract or mistreatment by Constance, but seemed almost invigorated by her very cooperation, forgiveness and super tolerance. Sadly, when his heyday faded away, Oscar was judged for his real and perceived sins, while his strong (neither dogmatic nor bigoted) sense of propriety was neglected. Robert Ross once told Cecil Sprigge that "kicking the corpse of Wilde has also been a pleasure to the English people,"<sup>28</sup> so here, contrarily and with genuine love for the man/artist, I hope to kick the *lapse* of Oscar Wilde while also expressing that he should be considered a *treasure* to all people.

Yes, for many of us, as for Wilde, the villain is almost always more compelling than the do-gooder, and his fixation on subversion was not only emulous but introspective as well. Biographer Croft-Cooke goes too far when he says that the conceited Aesthete lacked "the gift of self-criticism,"<sup>29</sup> because I think the puckish veneer belied a harsh judge. Oscar was aware of his cruelty, promiscuity's ultimate void, and the palpable tension between haughty (very often warranted) heresy and his heart's attunement to Church chimes. In an ironic telegram to his friend Ada Leverson, Wilde wrote that he was pained by nothing "except stupidity and morality."<sup>30</sup> Well, he certainly excelled in both stupidity *and* morality. (Most of us can claim excellence in the former, it's safe to say.) Leave it to infinitely perceptive Chesterton to distill my overlong thesis in the following assessment of Wilde-rival James Whistler, who

*gloried in standing as an artist apart from right and wrong. But he succeeded by talking from morning till night about his rights and about his wrongs...A man must be something of a moralist if he is to preach, even if he is to preach unmorality.<sup>31</sup>*

### **The Masked Man Tells the Truth**

I believe that *De Profundis* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are the richest resources for examining the spiritual reality of Oscar Wilde. Croft-Cooke performs overkill again when he says that *De Profundis* “has all the consuming sincerity of an obsessed and deluded man,” which agrees with Lord Douglas’s description of the letter as a “stupid and abominable”<sup>32</sup> product of prison-caused derangement, “a rotten sodomistically inclined letter written by a diabolical scoundrel to a wretched silly youth.”<sup>33</sup> George Bernard Shaw was just as mistaken (or, probably, hyperbolic) when he described it as “nothing more than any record of the squabbles of two touchy idlers.”<sup>34</sup> Also, though compelled by Max Beerbohm’s denial of the letter’s sincerity, and at the risk of seeming to trivialize a hallowed American milestone, I cling to the ambiguous opus as a sort of Wildean equivalent to Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”: inspiration sparked in darkness, clarity risen from forced focus. As Holbrook Jackson puts it, Oscar “was always haunted by the still small voice which broke bounds and expressed itself freely in *De Profundis*.”<sup>35</sup>

Cohered and titled (“faked up,” according to Douglas<sup>36</sup>) by confidante Robert Ross, the letter is Oscar’s elaborate confession of self-undermining folly, though it’s a mixture of both forthrightness and revisionism. And if the author’s obnoxious castigation of Douglas in it seems exaggerated, that’s because it is – for the reprimand is really for himself. Yes, Douglas was the main partner in the tumultuous tango, but I agree with Derek Hudson that burdening him with the bulk of the blame is “unjustifiable,”<sup>37</sup> almost as unjustifiable as Douglas’s imputation of Constance.

Really, the biggest untruth in *De Profundis* is the bizarre rage against beloved Bosie, who is portrayed as an unwelcome distraction from Oscar’s art, an untruth that reminds me of what Camille Paglia’s critique of Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” poem, in which she accuses Plath of “accusing [Ted] Hughes of draining her creative energy – when in fact her work flourished during their partnership.”<sup>38</sup> Again, Oscar seems to reprimand *himself* repeatedly in the letter: “You had no motives in life. You had appetites merely.”<sup>39</sup> “The gutter and the things that live in it had begun to fascinate you.”<sup>40</sup> “Your vanity.” “[Y]ou outstripped all taste and temperance.”<sup>41</sup> “[Y]ou became a thing as terrible to look at as to listen to.”<sup>42</sup> To whom do these criticisms most aptly apply? The true situation can be described by what Ivan says to the “Devil” in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “You are the embodiment of myself, but of just one side of me...only the most loathsome and stupid of [my thoughts and feelings].”<sup>43</sup> The passage in *De Profundis* that reveals this pathology best follows:

*I could have held up a mirror to you, and shown you such an image of yourself that you would not have recognized [sic] it as your own till you found it mimicking back your gestures of horror, and then you would have known whose shape it was, and hated it and yourself forever.*<sup>44</sup>

Wilde’s self-aggrandizement is masquerade; his self-criticism is mask removal. After all, as is written in the letter, “a pedestal may be a very unreal thing” and “a pillory is a terrific reality.”<sup>45</sup> If most of those castigations are really self-recriminatory, along with the outright admissions of wrongdoing and failure, then, far from evading guilt, Oscar’s introspection is quite honest. In his biography of Vladimir Nabokov, Brian Boyd points out that *Lolita*’s reprehensible but often sympathetic “[Humbert] reviles himself insistently throughout the book, calling himself a monster and a pervert,”<sup>46</sup> highlighting a disarming honorable quality: honesty within artful narration and seductive, often exculpatory linguistic virtuosity. Equipped with powerful language and dramatic sense, *Lolita*’s Humbert aestheticizes the statutory rape of a girl with allusive verbosity, and he takes refuge from misery in “the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, *The Critic as Artist*’s Gilbert says that we can use only art to “shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence.”<sup>48</sup> Gilbert also insists that “all fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate...[T]here is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one.”<sup>49</sup> Oscar felt sincere regret and dismay, of course, but he posed – couldn’t help but pose – in the role of Broken Man as artfully as he whipped his wit and sported his wardrobe. “In all important matters,” he wrote to *The Chameleon* in 1894, “style, not sincerity, is the essential.”<sup>50</sup> No wonder Constance referred to him as “a born actor” in a letter to Carlos Blacker.<sup>51</sup> And, as Nicholas Frankel cites in *The Unrepentant Years*, the Wildes’ son Vyvyan “later questioned the sincerity and depth of feeling

underpinning his father's response to his mother's death, by writing acerbically that Wilde had shed 'telegraphic tears of Hibernian sorrow'.<sup>52</sup>

*De Profundis* is both theater and confession; the playwright and the diarist are one. I agree with Frankel that its author was undoubtedly "trying to bring coherence and continuity to the manuscript, in a manner reminiscent of his previous literary works." And Frankel is correct in adding that the composition also sprang from "the need to disburden the self of thoughts, ideas, and feelings."<sup>53</sup> The letter is carefully staged, yet Oscar's candid spirit stole the spotlight. "[M]an is the tool of reality," goes an apt passage in *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath*, Ben Hecht's 1922 Decadent-style novel. "Of unreality he is the God. It is this desire to dominate which inspires him to avoid truths over which he has no sway and to invent myths."<sup>54</sup> In worthy contradiction to my partial trust in *De Profundis* and in polite defiance of Frances Winwar's problematic *Oscar Wilde and the Yellow Nineties*, an older Lord Douglas insisted that Wilde "frequently flatly contradicted himself in consecutive letters and that when he was annoyed or had a grievance, real or imaginary, his statements were apt to be utterly reckless and venomously regardless of truth,"<sup>55</sup> a trait that was certainly conducive to the self-art of Oscar Wilde (not to mention Douglas's own venomous mood swings).

During his trial, when asked about an incriminating letter he had written, Wilde replied, "I said, 'The letter was a beautiful letter, and I never write except for publication.'"<sup>56</sup> Could this be proof of his basic intention for *De Profundis*? Consider this telling spiel by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s Lord Henry Wooten:

*It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style...[S]ometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty crosses our lives...Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthralls us.<sup>57</sup>*

The novel's narration later continues in the same vein: "There were times when it appeared to Dorian Gray that the whole of history was merely a record of his own life...as his imagination had created for him."<sup>58</sup> It's not a stretch to suspect that Wilde saw even his imprisonment and fallen reputation as part of a dramatic sequence of events, especially fitting in that they fulfilled his literary predictions and colored his editorial hindsight. "I thought life was going to be a brilliant comedy," goes *De Profundis*, "I found it to be a revolting and repellent tragedy..."<sup>59</sup> But in art the tragic can be quite aesthetically pleasing, as any fan of ancient Greek drama knows. In *Confessions* (a sort of 4<sup>th</sup>-century *De Profundis* and one of the many books Oscar read in prison) Saint Augustine related his former fascination with stage plays and his realization that "sorrow and tears can be enjoyable."<sup>60</sup> Likewise, in *The Critic as Artist*, Gilbert tells Ernest that everything can be understood through Art "because Art does not hurt us. The tears we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of Art to awaken. We weep, but we are not wounded."<sup>61</sup>

What is Raskolnikov's biggest complaint about his murder in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*? Not pity for the dead old woman nor fear of the law or God, but that the entire situation is "not picturesque, not aesthetically attractive."<sup>62</sup> This sounds like when remorse creeps up on intolerant aesthete Dorian Gray: "How ugly it all was! And how horribly real the ugliness made things!"<sup>63</sup> As Deborah Lutz says in *Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism*, "Wilde mined his transgressions for all the art he could get...To risk exposure, arrest even, fired his imagination on all fronts."<sup>64</sup> And Yeats, after visiting the Wilde household in 1888, recalled his impression that the family's interaction "suggested some deliberate artistic composition."<sup>65</sup> Lascivious, ennui-stricken Des Esseintes, the twisted anti-hero of J.-K. Huysmans' *A Rebours*, the book that is directly responsible for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, thinks that it's "an undeniable fact that anyone who dreams of the ideal, prefers illusion to reality, and calls for veils to clothe the naked truth."<sup>66</sup> "I treated Art as the supreme reality," says Oscar, "and life as a mere mode of fiction."<sup>67</sup> So, he admires Christ for having

*the artistic nature of one whom Sorrow and Suffering were modes through which he could realise [sic] his conception of the Beautiful...the image of the Man of Sorrows, and such has fascinated and dominated Art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing.*<sup>68</sup>

However, Oscar, who acted the role of “Man of Sorrows,” was *really* sorrowful; behind the sad-face mask was a sad face, and his inner humility was a vigilant torch. I think Chesterton put it best when he wrote that Wilde “sometimes pretended that art was more important than morality, but that was mere play-acting. Morality or immortality was more important than art to him and everyone else.”<sup>69</sup> During their courtship, Constance contended that “there is no perfect art without perfect morality, whilst you say they are distinct and separable things.”<sup>70</sup> With all due respect to then Ms. Lloyd, it seems that, as with so much else, that was something Oscar *said* without fully believing. Many of his letters reveal lucidity in regard to his fault; in them he sought to *explain* his actions rather than defend them. Oscar understood that outsiders saw his path to prison as “a combination of absolute idiocy and vulgar bravado,”<sup>71</sup> and he certainly didn’t need his plummet from the pedestal to understand the need for humility and sorrow for sin. He was aware of the scorpion’s sting before he climbed onto its back. His eventual cuckqueaning of Constance was prefigured as early as the first days of their marriage. Matthew Sturgis makes this point in his biography of Wilde, in the context of Oscar’s initiation into the world of *A Rehearsal* and its paradoxical endorsement of and indictment of its libertine scenario:

*At the very moment that he was embracing the happy conventions of marriage, he found himself beguiled by an image of defiance – against convention, against nature, against morality, against the grain. But the poison of the book was slow-working. The honeymoon was still to be enjoyed.*<sup>72</sup>

Chesterton called Wilde a charlatan, clarifying that he was one who was “sufficiently dignified despite the tricks that he employs.” In *Dorian Gray* we can see Oscar’s crystal-clear grasp of the consequences of poor behavior. The novel says and portends all. It’s Oscar at his most lucid about the problem of hubristic transgression; it’s Wilde at his Decadent best, but also at his Decadent worst, because the book is so very bloody moralistic, providing “a great and august moral lesson,” as Douglas put it.<sup>73</sup> To illustrate what I believe was Oscar’s witting or unwitting intention for the alleged decadence in *Dorian Gray*, I ironically employ a passage from diabolical, lascivious, proto-Decadent Comte de Lautreamont’s controversial *Songs of Maldoror*:

*For if I let my vices seep through in these pages, people will believe even more in the virtues which shine through them; and I shall put such high and glorious haloes around those virtues that the greatest geniuses of the future will sincerely be grateful to me.*<sup>74</sup>

When Oscar’s novel was attacked as immoral (of all inanities!), he defended it as a warning against “all excess,”<sup>75</sup> and while expressing his dismay in a letter to Arthur Conan Doyle he wrote: “My difficulty was to keep the inherent moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect, and it still seems to me that the moral is too obvious.”<sup>76</sup> John Allen Quintus nails it best when he writes that *Dorian Gray*’s “‘moral’ is that an absence of spirituality, of faith, of regard for human life separates individuals like Huysmans’ *Des Esseintes* and Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* from humanity and makes monsters of them.”<sup>77</sup> The more Dorian gorges on sordid fruits, the more ghoulish the portrait of him (his visible soul) becomes. I always associate this concept with the following excerpt from the ever-comparable *Giovanni’s Room*, in which, after the taboo affair has lost luster and weakened under outside pressures, protagonist David perceives his lover differently: “Giovanni’s face...hardened before my eyes, began to give in secret places, began to crack...the beautiful brow began to suggest the skull beneath...It became a stranger’s face.”<sup>78</sup>

“I swear to you, gentlemen, I don’t believe a single word, not one, of what I’ve scribbled just now,” the unnamed narrator of Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* writes,<sup>79</sup> later relating that Heinrich Heine denied the possibility of true autobiographies, expecting all autobiographers to lie.<sup>80</sup> But humbler Oscar exposes his true self with his own candid Tragedian chorus. “An exhibitionist compulsion” compels artists

into self-revelation, as G. Wilson Knight puts it in *The Christian Renaissance*, “and Wilde could not remain content with his social mask...So, as though compelled by an instinct for self-revelation, he half-willingly exposed his life to society’s revulsion.”<sup>81</sup> In addressing Wilde’s bizarre and self-defeating behavior during his cross-examination at the trial, Andre Michels posits that his “deepest thoughts were at times exactly contrary to what he meant in his destructive statements.”<sup>82</sup> As he often did, Wilde expressed a telling introspection to artist William Rothenstein in the summer of 1897, acknowledging the underachievement and degradation his vices harvested:

*I know simply that a life of definite and studied materialism, and a philosophy of appetites and cynicism, and a cult of sensual and senseless ease, are bad things for an artist...I was all wrong, my dear boy, in my life. I was not getting the best of me.*<sup>83</sup>

Again and again I see parallels in Augustine’s *Confessions*: “The truth, of course, was that it was all my own self, and my own impiety had divided me against myself.”<sup>84</sup> And again and again *Dorian Gray* proves itself a precise gauge with which to measure its author: “But the picture?...It held the secret of his life, and told his story.”<sup>85</sup> Since Oscar Wilde was a lie wrapped in a myth inside a persona, it’s hard to pin the true tale on the dandy. He’s always “blurring the line between fact and fiction, theory and story, authentic and fake,” to appropriate Emer O’Sullivan’s description of Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr W.H.”<sup>86</sup> “You lie so much you have come to believe all your own lies,” says *Giovanni’s Room*’s title character.<sup>87</sup> But, sooner or later, as Wilde’s Gilbert put it, the masked man tells the truth.<sup>88</sup> And the supposed Decadent preaches against “ethical degradation.”<sup>89</sup> Real life is *both* “brilliant comedy” and “revolting and repellent tragedy.” In it we weep and *are* wounded. The natural arc of human lives can be boiled down to the concluding titles of both acts in Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* opera: “Put on the costume” and “The comedy is finished.”

#### “You Make Me What I Would Not Be”

Penitent Dmitri in *The Brothers Karamazov* admits his former love of depravity, including the pleasurable *shame* that falling into depravity’s abyss produces: “...I’m even pleased that I’m falling in just such a humiliating position, and for me I find it beautiful.”<sup>90</sup> This is important in grasping the seemingly invincible entrapment of transgressions, particularly in Oscar Wilde’s case. Transgressive acts themselves are only half the thrill, if that. Often, both the deed and the nausea of conscience drive the debauched. “This pleasure comes precisely from the sharpest awareness of your own degradation,” says *Notes from Underground*’s narrator, “from the knowledge that you have gone to the utmost limit...that you no longer have a way out.”<sup>91</sup> “I know not why death came into my heart,” laments the Czar in Wilde’s *Vera, or the Nihilists*. “Perchance the cup of life is filled too full of pleasure to endure.”<sup>92</sup> A parallel with Augustine is appropriate again:

*I must now carry my thoughts back to the abominable things I did in those days, the sins of the flesh which defiled my soul...Foolhardy as I was, I ran wild with lust that was manifold and rank...I was foul to the core, yet I was pleased with my own condition...*<sup>93</sup>

And the sudden change in tone of Oscar’s “The Sphinx” is most illustrative:

*Get hence, you loathsome mystery! Hideous  
animal, get hence!  
You awake in me each bestial sense, you make me  
what I would not be.  
You make my creed a barren sham, you wake foul  
dreams of sensual life...*<sup>94</sup>

It's obvious that Oscar didn't fully buy his own hogwash. His indulgence at the expense of his marriage and fatherhood did not fulfill him or put him at ease. "You are the divine thing I want," he wrote to his addictive Bosie, "the thing of grace and beauty."<sup>95</sup> But Bosie *wasn't* that thing. Our end-all is really open-ended. (*Citizen Kane's* Rosebud is not a beloved sled, nor Marion Davies' vagina.) Oscar Wilde desired *desire*, which is the basic problem of *jouissance* that frustrates us all. "Desire, despair, desire, so many monsters," goes an apt Annie Lennox lyric. G. Wilson Knight associates this conflicted polarity with one of Oscar's key literary models, Shakespeare: "This torment is written into Shakespeare's sonnets, where he, over-full of 'sweetness', turns to 'bitter sauces' and 'poison' for remedy (Sonnet 118)."<sup>96</sup> Sorrow became Oscar's "new world." "[T]he secret of life is suffering," he wrote. "It is what is hidden behind everything."<sup>97</sup> The other universal fact is entropy, and human lives tend to thrive and degrade in acute arcs. Wilde expected not only destiny but also ignominy to catch up with him throughout his life. Passages such as "The Morgue yawns for me"<sup>98</sup> run through his letters, and he notes that "the note of Doom like a purple thread runs through the gold cloth of *Dorian Gray*."<sup>99</sup> That purple thread was pulled early on by perhaps the person with the deepest influence on Wilde, the one who irresponsibly introduced Schopenhauer to such an impressionable and imitative person at a young age, the one who rejoiced that sin itself is the highest reason to live, his mother, Lady "Speranza" Wilde, eventually concluded that "despair outlasts all."<sup>100</sup> Kierkegaard made the point that weakness allows one to sin "but then [one] becomes so despondent over his sin that he perhaps sins again and sins out of despair."<sup>101</sup> Similar to the heroin addict, the despaired sinner gives up trying since it seems that cessation is impossible. "The supreme vice is shallowness,"<sup>102</sup> according to Wilde, but all vice is deathly deep. The spirit may be willing, but the flesh isn't weak; it's often too strong.

In one of the most insightful moments in *De Profundis*, when Wilde's ridiculous blame of Douglas cools, he admits that only he (himself) could have ruined himself and that he deserves pitiless self-indictment. After saying that he squandered his gift of genius, Oscar confesses that he *sought* the plunge: "Tired of being on the heights I deliberately went to the depths in search of new sensations... Desire, at the end, was a malady, a madness, or both."<sup>103</sup> Far from raising the dawn of his relationship with Bosie to the heights of Romeo and Juliet, he locates it below ground level. One of the most popular Wilde quotations comes from *Lady Windermere's Fan's* Lord Darlington: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."<sup>104</sup> Well, Oscar Wilde was the star of the gutter. "[I]t is only in the mire that we met" goes *De Profundis*,<sup>105</sup> and team Wilde/Douglas chased poisonous panthers indeed. (Men doing this with young girls is equally disturbing.) Rather than a faithful, stable duo, the two tended to be volatile and mutually destructive (which tends to be evidence for rather than against love, at least in many cases). Pitiably, Wilde received both the displaced affection and scorn that Lord Douglas owed his estranged father, the hard Marquess of Queensberry. Poet Marc-Andre Raffalovich slammed the couple as "debauched,"<sup>106</sup> and after encountering Wilde sometime in 1893, Max Beerbohm wrote that "he looked like one whose soul has swooned in sin."<sup>107</sup> A letter young Andre Gide wrote referred to Douglas as "the young Lord whom Wilde seems to have depraved to the marrow."<sup>108</sup> "Why is your friendship so fatal to young men?" *Dorian Gray's* Basil asks the title character. "You have filled them with a madness for pleasure. They have gone down *into the depths* [italics added]. You led them there."<sup>109</sup> More from the novel: "There are moments, psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fibre [sic] of the body, as every cell of the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses."<sup>110</sup>

The external moral constructs that Wilde mocked so deftly weren't solely to blame for his guilt. *He* believed in his guilt; *he* thought of many of his actions as sordid. That's really all that should matter here. Again and again Oscar pretended to espouse nihilistic rejection of dichotomous morality, from the mouth of the Fifth Jew in *Salomé*, for example: "It may be that the things which we call evil are good, and that the things which we call good are evil."<sup>111</sup> A noble attempt at bullshit – but *not* Oscar's true conviction. The following passage from Slavoj Žižek's *The Parallax View* sums up what I'm trying to say:

*[W]hat, in fact, gives pleasure to the Sadeian hero? Is it the mere 'return to the innocence of nature,' the unconstrained following of the laws of nature that also demand destruction, or is pleasure nonetheless inherently linked to the moral Law it violates, so that what gives us pleasure*



*is the very awareness that we are committing a blasphemy? This ambiguity between innocence and blasphemous corruption is irreducible.*<sup>112</sup>

Contradictory to his snobbery and high intellect, Wilde seemed to prefer low-hanging pleasures, even after his prison-wrought remorse. Constance was right when she said that he seemed unimproved by his punishment.<sup>113</sup> It's hard to teach an old rogue new tricks. Oscar was very candid in a letter to Robert Ross after prison: "Yes: I saw Bosie, and of course I love him as I always did, with a sense of tragedy and ruin."<sup>114</sup> Coincidentally, Mrs. Artbuthnot of *A Woman of No Importance* says: "It is my dishonor that has made you so dear to me. It is my disgrace that has bound you so closely to me."<sup>115</sup> Likewise, after reuniting with Bosie against his promise to Constance and better judgment, Wilde wrote to Ross, "[T]he mere fact that he wrecked my life makes me love him."<sup>116</sup> This audacious reunion was a forgone conclusion even in prison, of course, as is obvious in the following excerpt from a letter to Douglas:

*I have had moments when I thought it would be wiser to separate. Ah! Moments of weakness and madness! Now I see that I would have mutilated my life, ruined my art, broken the musical chords which make a perfect soul. Even covered with mud I shall praise you, from the deepest abysses I shall cry to you.*<sup>117</sup>

For all of his real and dramatic cries from the "deepest abysses,"<sup>118</sup> and for all of *De Profundis*' regret and call for reformation, it didn't take very long for new Oscar to become the same old Wilde again – and to outmatch the audacity of his and Bosie's (non-sexual) reunion with even more audacious trysts with boys. He dishonored Constance repeatedly and wasted her charitable monetary allowance on drink and frivolity, without reserve. (Even if Bosie had been the spouse and Constance had been the mistress, such behavior deserves scorn.) Augustine admits in *Confessions* that his "own love of mischief" made him sin<sup>119</sup> and then observes that as a foolish youth he "cared for nothing but to love and be loved,"<sup>120</sup> which is an almost verbatim prefiguration of something Wilde wrote in a letter: "I must love and be loved, whatever price I pay for it."<sup>121</sup> However, the most Augustinian (and Dostoyevskian) moment lies in this line: "A man's very highest moment is...when he kneels in the dust and beats his breast, and tells the sins of his life."<sup>122</sup> Oscar identifies this salvational moment in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol": "How else but through a broken heart/May Lord Christ enter in?"<sup>123</sup>

### **Thou Art: Christ**

I agree with Yeats that at least half of Oscar Wilde's posthumous fame is due to fans considering him a martyr. He certainly put the "art" in "martyrdom." One shouldn't be surprised that, as Andre Michels pointed out, Guido Reni's *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* was one of Oscar's favorite paintings, for more than its homoeroticism.<sup>124</sup> His art was used to simultaneously capitalize on suffering's aesthetic quality and numb the pangs of conscience. One could call Wilde the arrow-impaled, self-styled Saint Sebastian of *De Profundis*. With good reason, the scenario of the convict who "finds Jesus" – from Eldridge Cleaver and Chuck Colson to the likes of Myra Hindley and Mansonite "Tex" Watson – is usually met with rolled eyes and sneers. We've heard it all before, and our own self-righteous indignation and sense of cold justice tend to squelch our belief in their belief. However, I'm careful not to assume that every instance is a ruse designed to gain sympathy or inspire parole. Sometimes convicts realize that prisons aren't needed for imprisonment and that they were in worse cells on the outside. Oscar wondered if perhaps prison is necessary to understand humility and repentance<sup>125</sup>; Apostle Paul's joyous prolificacy happened while imprisoned in Rome; Dostoyevsky found spiritual freedom and a love of life during a long sentence of hard labor; Eldridge Cleaver cast off violent racial hatred as an inmate, and Nelson Mandela emerged more vital than ever after almost 30 years of imprisonment. The situation is like when a person gets a terminal illness and regards life itself with more appreciation from then on.

Diverging from his basic scorn for *De Profundis*, something Lord Douglas wrote about Oscar's Christology in *Oscar Wilde and Myself* is quite interesting:

*Critics abroad have said: "There is too much about Christ in De Profundis," overlooking the fact that the book is, from the first page to the last, inspired by Christ — that no man who had not found Christ could have written that book, nor lived as the man who wrote it did live. In England, one heard it said that it is absurd to believe that an agnostic, a sensualist would turn to religion, and the blasphemous statement has been made that this book is, in its way, no more sincere than the dying confessions of many prison cells, the greasy cant that officious chaplains win from fawning prisoners.*<sup>126</sup>

By today's standards Oscar's Christian overtones in prison would deserve suspicion – had he not been Christian-curious all his life. One simply can't appreciate *De Profundis* and overlook its rather effusive passages on Christ. For those who laud the man as a secularist icon they may be an inconvenience; for fundamentalist believers they may be considered sacrilegious. Philippe Jullian concludes that Oscar's strong Catholic affinity was due to his "theatrical" nature,<sup>127</sup> and Oscar said as much: "The artistic side of the Church and the fragrance of its teaching would have cured my degeneracies."<sup>128</sup> Of course, no surprise to anyone familiar with Wilde, his typical ambivalence applied to theological feelings as much as anything else. On one hand he wrote in a letter to William Ward in 1877:

*I have dreams of a visit to [Cardinal] Newman, of the holy sacrament in a new Church, and of a quiet and peace afterwards in my soul...I get so wretched and low and troubled that in some desperate mood I will seek the shelter of a Church which simply enthalls me by its fascination.*<sup>129</sup>

On the other hand, he made a seemingly unequivocal denial of Christianity to Robert Ross: "No, Robbie, it isn't true."<sup>130</sup> But flat-out negative statements aren't necessarily permanent convictions. Christopher Hitchens' compelling criticism of her notwithstanding, I think Mother Teresa's private ambivalence of faith, which was revealed in some of her letters, helps illustrate the natural pendulousness of belief and disbelief, alternating feelings of presence and loneliness. Consider the following letter excerpt from the early 1960s: "[T]he place of God in my soul is blank. There is no God in me – when the pain of longing is so great – I just long & long for God...He is not there..."<sup>131</sup>

Though Franny Moyle, author of *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs. Oscar Wilde*, thinks that the "Christianization" of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is "uncharacteristic of Oscar" and probably due to Constance's influence,<sup>132</sup> I think it's rather obvious that Oscar and Christianity were magnetized to each other, and much of his work is parabolic in a biblical sense. Contrary to Moyle's conclusion, the Christianizing tendency was quite *characteristic*. For instance, the narrator speaks of "this restless pain that gnaws at my heart,/And the red wounds of thorns upon my brow" in "The Artist's Dream."<sup>133</sup> Also, this passage from his "Humanitad" tells much:

*Nay, nay, we are but crucified, and though  
The bloody sweat falls from our brows like rain,  
Loosen the nails – we shall come down I know,  
Staunch the red wound – we shall be whole again...*<sup>134</sup>

Unsurprisingly, *De Profundis* also abounds with self-made morality and auto-salvation, and Christ is presented as a patchwork doll of Aesthetic fantasies of the ideal artist and individualist. Wilde had a tendency to mix biblical metaphors, cherry-pick scriptural ideas and innovate theological concepts. However, though I do think Oscar's Christology is part of his tailor-made "*carpe diem* religion," as Chesterton called it,<sup>135</sup> and one of appropriation and embellishment rather than dogmatic adherence, it falls in line with his usual way of reshaping all things to meet his own artistic and egotistic needs. I'm reminded of a statement by the narrator in Albert Camus' *The Fall*, another book that is applicable to *Dorian Gray*, and vice versa: "But too many people now climb onto the cross merely to be seen from a greater distance."<sup>136</sup> The martyred Christ was the perfect metaphor for Wilde's obsessive self-dramatization. However, G. Wilson Knight doubted that any other subject possessed the dramatic agency of Christ: "[Jesus] is in himself

the incarnation the poet accomplishes in art. He creates in his imagination his own poetry then acts it, making himself protagonist in his own drama.”<sup>137</sup> In other words, Knight believed that Christ actually accomplished what Wilde and poets like him strove for.

I’ve a feeling that the Wildean Christ would look a lot like Byron, wear knee-high velvet pants, and sport a carnation and a cane. And, of course, he’d have “Lord Christ’s heart and Shakespeare’s brain,” to use Wilde’s own words.<sup>138</sup> It’s also likely that he disbelieved in Christ’s divinity, the Resurrection and Original Sin (a fundamental biblical concept that, as Cambridge’s Jan-Melissa Schramm points out, Christ retained).<sup>139</sup> Saint Augustine applies once more: “My conception of you [God]...was a fiction based on my own wretched state...I had not even an inkling of the meaning of the mystery of the Word made flesh.”<sup>140</sup> Chesterton was right to admit the power in Wilde’s religious conception, but perhaps he also was right to see a basic desolation in it. Likewise, Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer found it problematic that Salvador Dali tended to use Christian symbolism without its substance: applying it to an “impersonal ‘everything’...in order to get relief from meaninglessness by connotation”<sup>141</sup> and using the name of Christ as “a contentless banner which can be carried in any direction for sociological purposes.”<sup>142</sup> I can’t help but think of a passage from “Chanting the Square Deific” by Walt Whitman (who was admired by and admired Wilde): “From this side, lo! the Lord Christ gazes – lo!...All sorrow, labour, suffering, I, tallying it, absorb in myself,/Many times have I been rejected, taunted, put in prison and crucified, and many times shall be again...”<sup>143</sup> Regardless, I find it hard to deny the respectful vibe in what Oscar writes to friend Sam Ward: “Since Christ the dead world has woke up from sleep. Since him we have lived.”<sup>144</sup> This is echoed in what Kirillov says about Christ in Dostoyevsky’s *Devils*: “The whole planet and everyone living on it is sheer madness without that one man.”<sup>145</sup>

It’s undeniable that Oscar was caught up in deep spiritual warfare. As Andre Michels puts it, “the enormity of his anxiety [was] comparable only to his exaggerated quest for beauty.”<sup>146</sup> Of course, as Chesterton observes, “he desired all beautiful things – even God.”<sup>147</sup> Along with Fantazius Mallare, with Des Esseintes, with his own Dorian, Oscar reached, as described in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “that degree of unbearable suffering when a proud heart painfully shatters its own pride and falls, overcome by grief.”<sup>148</sup>

### Suicide by Art

Though Wilde’s sexuality is integral to his identity, his negative fate can be attributed to an even larger element: the Icarus-like consequences that all heartstrong, outlandish artists risk. I think something comic-book maestro Dave Sim wrote in his 1990 introduction to *Jaka’s Story*: “...I never considered Oscar a ‘homosexual character’ *per se*...First, last and always (to me) he is an Artist and the tragedy which befell Wilde, I can’t view in any other context than ‘society vs. the Artist.’”

In June of 1890 Oscar wrote to the editor of *The Daily Chronicle* on the subject of his Dorian Gray character:

*[H]e is extremely impulsive, absurdly romantic, and is haunted all through his life by an exaggerated sense of conscience which mars his pleasures for him...It is finally to get rid of the conscience that had dogged his steps from year to year that he destroys the picture; and this in his attempt to kill conscience Dorian Gray kills himself.*<sup>149</sup>

I believe that this is an overt self-description as well as a central clue to Oscar Wilde’s essential suicide. Many religious folks may blame his homosexual lifestyle for his demise, but the central cause was his arrogance. Like many men and women with confident, humorous exteriors, he was privately embattled and unsure. He practiced the pleasure principle – oh, did he practice! – but, as I keep repeating, he wasn’t a true believer in his own invincibility and spiritual autonomy. Though the adventure of societal transgression thrilled him, there’s no evidence that he ever viewed his sexuality as truly sinful. In fact, later in life Lord Douglas insisted that his former lover “gloried in it.”<sup>150</sup> I do think there was an aspirational, even (pseudo?) spiritual, aspect to his eventual total immersion in homosexuality. G. Wilson Knight finds in Plato’s

*Phaedrus* three qualities of sexual love: one of only lust, one of weakness before temptation and one with an honorable “aspiring course.”<sup>151</sup> Beyond Oscar’s high praise of this sexual orientation and its historical significance and grandeur, which he addressed eloquently as trial defendant, there seems to be a grasping for transcendence via what he saw as the ideal human form; though, in light of the *Phaedrus* classification, his sexual attraction and indulgence were of lust, weakness *and* idealistic aspiration – all three. Knight went far out on a limb in his assessment of this:

*Wilde as aesthete knew both the fascination and the danger of the transcendent housed in the material. Through young male beauty he saw an eternal, jewel-like, perfection. But his experience of it, as of rich stones too, was ambivalent, balanced between eye-lust and transcendence. Almost lust was transcendence; or rather the lust aroused was a lust for the transcendent. This was Wilde’s star; it...should somehow, if joined to love, be the heart of a great good: a Christian good.*<sup>152</sup>

Jerusha Hull McCormack also emphasizes this perceived loftier essence of the homosexual underground, so to speak, in *The Man Who Was Dorian Gray*: “[F]or the movement found its uncategorized state gave it a freedom to conceive of itself as innocent and spiritual, the stirrings of a new artistic and spiritual brotherhood that would rectify an exhausted civilization.”<sup>153</sup> To repeat what was stressed earlier, though the subversiveness of his sexuality certainly drove him, Wilde’s sense of both exciting and bothersome shame wasn’t reaped from only the sexuality itself. Rather, the titillation seemed to lie in the legal/social tension, which is largely alien and unobtainable today, as well as in the adventurous age-old novelty of adultery. Despite his prideful recklessness Wilde craved some kind of correction, if not by his own hand then by another’s. This led to what I call Oscar’s suicide by art: his foolish “duel” with Douglas’s hotheaded father, John Douglas, the Marquess of Queensberry, was a headlong rush toward doom. I think Andre Michels put it best when he said that “Wilde caused his own loss – he provoked it. He did all he could to make it happen.”<sup>154</sup> Another passage from *The Man Who Was Dorian Gray* sums this up:

*Raffalovich nods a little distractedly, then leans eagerly towards [John] Gray. But Oscar is so damned foolish. Taking such huge risks. Everyone knows that the Criminal Law Amendment Act will be invoked unless it is flouted repeatedly – and publicly. Why does Oscar goad his public this way? Why act the agent provocateur? Does he not know he cannot win this?*<sup>155</sup>

Perhaps Wilde wanted to prove, as he wrote to Henry Marillier, “that the artistic life is a long and lovely suicide” indeed.<sup>156</sup> After all, a young Wilde, fascinated and inspired by an Anglican heresy case against a Reverend Bennett, once wrote that he wanted “to go down to posterity as the defendant in such as case as ‘Regina versus Wilde.’”<sup>157</sup> He got his warped wish in the long run.

Far from being a “funny little man,” to use his son’s taunting words, Queensberry was a formidable and unrelenting foe when pushed into action. However, he wasn’t the rabid Inquisitor that he’s usually made out to be. In the midst of recurring tragedy, he was already sensitive about the apparent suicide of his other son, who was rumored to have been one of Prime Minister Lord Rosebery’s male lovers. As gossip-fanned flames grew and Douglas’ impudence stoked Queensberry’s laughable suspicion that his son and Wilde were guilty of *pretending* to be homosexual lovers, the insistence on the cutting of all ties with the flamboyant giant intensified. It was obvious that nothing but bad things could come from further challenging the explosive father, but Wilde filed the futile, ridiculous libel suit nonetheless, spurred by the drama of it all. Had the punishment he’d expected – even *wished* for – finally arrived? “I must go as far as possible,” he wrote to Andre Gide, “something must happen...something else.”<sup>158</sup> Was the void too full of emptiness? Yes, Wilde expected consequences, but they surely surpassed his expectations. When Peter Bogdanovich asked Orson Welles if the Mercury Theater’s cast thought that the *War of the Worlds* broadcast would cause such a disturbance as it had, Welles replied that, besides the predictable hubbub, “the size of it, of course, was flabbergasting.”<sup>159</sup> Wilde didn’t foresee *how far* the drama would go. To sue for libel was not just foolhardiness on his part; it was an atomic blast.

As fans of Oscar Wilde we can't help but get chills when we read transcripts or watch dramatic portrayals of his slick repartee during the famous indecency trial, but once the giddiness fades we should shake our heads and frown at the cavalier display. "Instead of expounding his theory of art as an enhancement and expansion of life, he presented himself as amoral artist and scorned the moral mob," Richard Ellmann writes of this.<sup>160</sup> Such problematic levity is paralleled by *Lolita's* Humbert again, which is nicely perceived by Brian Boyd when he points out that Humbert "addresses the jury parodically, facetiously, as if to mock the idea that he might really want to exonerate<sup>161</sup> himself before his readers." Wilde, when asked if he kissed an Oxford servant, said, "Oh dear no. He was a peculiarly plain boy." McCormack credits that single response as the fatal blow to Wilde's legal survival: "With that sentence he sentenced himself."<sup>162</sup> Perhaps yet another line from *The Critic as Artist* puts it best: "A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal."

In *Heretics* Chesterton makes a good observation about the society in which a man such as Oscar could meet such a disproportional demise:

*In the fifteenth century men cross-examined and tormented a man because he preached some immoral attitude; in the nineteenth century we feted and flattered Oscar Wilde because he preached such an attitude, and then broke his heart in penal servitude because he carried it out... The age of Inquisition has not at least the disgrace of having produced a society which made an idol of the very same man for preaching the very same things which it made him a convict for practising [sic].<sup>163</sup>*

Indeed, the harsh sentence was odious and underserved, and the biggest irony of it is that his primary foe, Queensberry, was at the time an outspoken, spiteful atheist who spat at "Christian tomfoolery,"<sup>164</sup> rather than a fanatic in a rabid moral majority. Also, despite the law and threat of oppressive penalties, gay society flourished under a "don't ask, don't tell" policy of sorts, while saner analyses of its nature were increasing (such as J.A. Symonds' *A Problem in Greek Ethics* and *A Problem in Modern Ethics* and Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*). Acknowledging that the Home Office's swift punishment of Oscar was "exceptional,"<sup>165</sup> Nottingham University's Harry Cocks does point out that legislative leaders in the Victorian era

*regarded the prosecution of "unnatural crimes" as a distasteful duty at best, and not as something that should be officially encouraged except in the most flagrant cases, or when it involved the military. To assume that some nebulous and repressive "Victorian morality" animated their decisions in this area is not correct.<sup>166</sup>*

Chances are, Wilde would have been okay if he hadn't precipitated the backlash with such rash tactics, and a popular rationalization of his apparent willful defiance of both the courts of the law and public opinion is a mostly manufactured admiration for social justice-driven adamancy that just wasn't shared by the besieged genius. For instance, in *Wilde's Women* Eleanor Fitzsimons proclaims that "Oscar Wilde is, quite correctly, held as a gay icon who railed against the ignorance and prejudice of those who would deny the authenticity and appropriateness of love between two men."<sup>167</sup> I must almost wholeheartedly disagree. Much of that notion is a retroactive perception generated by contemporary social sensitivity and legality. Even if the laudable sexuality activism of today existed in that very different era, it doesn't follow that rather aloof, self-centered Wilde would have been part of the vanguard. Rather, I believe that he defended his own aesthetic preferences above all and that his "work is too varied and too contradictory for him to be read as a gay or a queer author," as concluded by The Royal Shakespeare Company's Mark Ravenhill, someone "who like many gay men before" initially saw a belonging kind in Oscar "as part of an attempt to create a personal gay canon."<sup>168</sup> Whenever pressed on this topic I'll always let comic-book author/artist Dave Sim state it best, in regard to his fictitious depiction of the category-defying Aesthete in *Jaka's Story*: "...I never considered Oscar a 'homosexual character' *per se*... First, last and always (to me) he is an Artist and the tragedy which befell Wilde, I can't view in any other context than 'society vs. the Artist.'<sup>169</sup>

It's true that Wilde did, in so many words, express his appreciation for erotic love between men with considerable flair, and he enjoyed flouting convention in general, but there certainly doesn't seem to be any concrete evidence of a conscious, systematic guardianship of sexual minorities in him – any more than he actually fought for women's rights beyond some shining pro-female statements in works, letters and his affiliation with *The Woman's World* magazine. If anyone should be credited with a conscientious defense of gay individuals' safety and dignity back then, it's Lord Alfred Douglas. The outspokenness of his youth wasn't all antagonistic bluster. Besides his intention "to use the occasion of the trials to expose the hypocrisy of the establishment," as Richard Dellamora points out,<sup>170</sup> he bravely claimed that he knew many men – of high society and even Parliament – who indulged in the same secret behavior. The following passage from Douglas's letter to *Truth* in 1895 shows his championship:

*These tastes are perfectly natural congenital tendencies in certain people (a very large minority), and that the law has no right to interfere with these people, provided they do not harm other people; that is to say when there is neither seduction of minors nor brutalisation [sic], and where there is no public outrage on morals.*<sup>171</sup>

Of course, Douglas' fiery temperament, inherited from his father, no doubt, stoked an almost opposite vehemence many years later, when he dedicated much of his time and talent to perpetually stomping on Oscar Wilde's memory and legacy. Also, he became quite an active enemy of his former proclivity and what he saw as the detrimental world of perverse sexuality in general – again, with his father's singular rancor. Amidst the nationalistic animosity against Germany in World War II England, Douglas wrote, "It is just as important to civilization [sic] that Literary England should be cleansed of sex-mongers and pedlars [sic] of the perverse, as that Flanders should be cleared of Germans."<sup>172</sup> And he dismissed Robert Ross from *The Academy*, at T.H. Crosland's insistence, writing, "I no longer care to associate with persons like yourself who are engaged in the active performance and propaganda of every kind of wickedness, from Socialism to Sodomy."<sup>173</sup> Incensed by the release of incriminating passages from *De Profundis*, and by Ross in general, Douglas conceived *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, which prompted Ross to preemptively quit his position at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.<sup>174</sup> Seeking an end to Douglas's obsessive action against him, Ross sued for libel, for which Douglas was imprisoned in Brixton for a little less than a week, but Ross withdrew the case when he lost favor. Unsated, Douglas still tried to further Ross's ruin – to the point of petitioning the King to put pressure on Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, Ross's friend and defender.<sup>175</sup> The defamation became literarily immortalized in Douglas's petty, creepy poems *The Rossiad* and *The Man Named Ross*. To disgruntled Douglas, Ross was a living reminder of both Oscar Wilde's allure and infamy, and crushing Ross was an essential attack on Wilde himself.

Douglas also testified for the defense in the outlandish Noel Pemberton Billing trial, which involved a production of Wilde's *Salome*, the alleged "sadist" and lesbian Maud Allan, conspiratorial homosexuality (linked to perceived German decadence) and even obtuse paranoia with the nature of the clitoris. Douglas was among men who supported the notion that Wilde had conceived the play *for the purpose of* attracting and exciting perverts to undermine decent society.<sup>176</sup> To help explain the situation that allowed for such bigotry, Philip Hoare sums up the social climate of World War I Britain, pointing out that "the world changed from a liberal society which, if not condoning aberrant sexual behaviour [sic], at least appeared to tolerate it, to a world which blamed its ills on such practitioners and associated them with the enemy."<sup>177</sup> In spite of his cruel offense against Robert Ross and the general disgust for his former sexual predilection, the older, reformed and apparently bitter Douglas did show glimmers of civil regard, if not compassion, for the gay community, particularly in *Oscar Wilde: A Summing Up*:

*The violent prejudice against homosexuality which existed in those days – half of it, as I believe, simulated and hypocritical – made it almost literally impossible for anyone to say a good word for any person who was known to be addicted to it.*<sup>178</sup>

And:

*I have, as I hope is well known, nothing but abhorrence for homosexuality, but I have not changed the views I expressed...If I happened to have a friend who was a homosexual...I would still feel as indignant if he or she were badly treated as I did forty-five years ago.*<sup>179</sup>

The common overestimation of the Victorian era's sexual repression and underestimation of its sexual efflorescence obscures two facts: that much affectionate physical contact among male friends was given as normal manliness and natural camaraderie, and that *effeminacy and dandyism* were perceived as perverse threats to the masculine order. So, I believe the Douglas is correct in emphasizing that "even in 1895 a man in England could not very well be 'arrested' and tried because someone had written him a 'disgusting letter.'"<sup>180</sup> The generated infamy, based on "decent" society's despisal of same-sex love (more against male-to-male relations than lesbian ones, curiously – and unsurprisingly), was part and parcel to Wilde's penchant for showboating and creating a spectacle. "His whole career had been built on his ability to get himself noticed by shocking, provoking and then winning over his audience," Franny Moyle correctly notes.<sup>181</sup> "Now I am going to explode," says the Rocket in Wilde's "The Remarkable Rocket." "I shall set the whole world on fire, and make such a noise that nobody will talk about anything else for a whole year." Before it burns out, the Rocket rejoices: "I knew I should create a great sensation."<sup>182</sup> Like the Rocket, Wilde was attracted to reckless notoriety more than self-preservation. As much as he was apart from the lower strata of Victorian society, he loved to both satirize and provoke the sterile and sterilizing bourgeoisie, probably feeling in his heart that the underlings were preferable, genuine and free of whitewashing. *The Christian Renaissance* is useful yet again:

*Wilde's less idealistic engagements were prompted by (i) the instinct...to plunge low when the disparity between the near-integrated self and the community becomes unbearable...and (ii) by a genuine liking for the lower orders of society; not any deep and lasting love for any one person, but a lightning thrill in the very disparity and sexual ratification of human unity.*<sup>183</sup>

We needn't rehash the rather heartbreaking details of the subsequent imprisonment that traumatized Oscar both mentally and physically, and opened the path to his premature death. However, I do think that his short-lived reformation and unsurprising relapse of responsibility amounted to the second phase of his gradual "suicide." Wilde's frustrating, repellent fickleness is assessed masterfully in a passage from *The Eighteen Nineties*:

*[T]here is little doubt that the complete Oscar Wilde was the living and bewildering personality which rounded itself off and blotted itself out in a tragedy which was all the more nihilistic because of its abortive attempt at recuperation – an attempt which immortalized itself in the repentant sincerity of *De Profundis*, but almost immediately fell forward into an anticlimax of tragedy more pitiful than the first.*<sup>184</sup>

In other words, you can take the man out of prison, but it's often impossible to take the prison out of the man.

### **Some Rogues Lead to Rome**

Freedom is terrifying because in it we can become our own harshest jailers. "At the end of all freedom is a court sentence; that's why freedom is too heavy to bear," says the narrator of Camus' *The Fall*.<sup>185</sup> Excess is not always a preponderance of free choice but often a crushing avalanche of self-incarceration. Perhaps the law of anarchy is worse than the law of law. Each time we come down from our ill-gotten highs we vow to resist temptation and to finally abandon abandon. Brevity is the soul of self-discipline. Oscar Wilde, the moralistic Decadent, the unheroic genius, the Christian pagan, the ugly Aesthete and threadbare dandy, longed for redemption from a delicious cycle, a painful pleasure. "Of course the sinner must repent," he writes in *De Profundis*. "It is the means by which to alter one's past."<sup>186</sup> As we

saw earlier, Oscar had a fundamental trust in Christian spirit-cleansing power. “I suppose sinners should have the high place near Christ’s altar?” he wrote to Douglas. “I know at any rate that Christ would not turn me out.”<sup>187</sup>

To call Oscar Wilde ambivalent would be an epic understatement. Especially in spiritual conflict, the human heart is perpetually pendulous. In *De Profundis* in particular Oscar runs the gamut of moods, perspectives and convictions. He claims that morality, religion and reason don’t help him; he refuses to regret living for pleasure and says that “sins of the flesh” don’t matter.<sup>188</sup> Yet he admits that he “threw the pearl of [his] soul into a cup of wine,”<sup>189</sup> which is cut from the cloth of “The House of Judgment,” in which Wilde has God say that “thine idols were neither of gold nor of silver that endure, but of flesh that dieth.”<sup>190</sup> Deeply troubled, Dorian Gray exemplifies the penitent soul in his desire to finally change his ways: “A new life! That was what he wanted... He would never again tempt innocence. He would be good.”<sup>191</sup>

Moral tension can sunder the soul. One senses the sublime while hearing the growl of baser appetites. “What animals we are,” Oscar wrote after spending the night with a French prostitute in the time before he relegated himself to male lovers.<sup>192</sup> In *The Brothers Karamazov* the earthy Gruschenka says to Dmitri: “Tomorrow the convent, but today we’ll dance. I want to be naughty... I’m a beast, that’s what. But I want to pray... wicked as I am, I want to pray!”<sup>193</sup> (Very few encapsulations of Oscar Wilde’s ambivalence are so precise.) For the most part, his language isn’t that of a true libertine; it’s the language of someone who is searching for something beyond false liberty. Huysmans went through the same crucible, so did Aubrey Beardsley and Baudelaire, so did Paul Verlaine, and, curiously enough, each one of them converted to Catholicism. Even John Gray, Wilde’s former “Dorian”-nicknamed intimate, eventually became a priest, and his “Person in Question” is a *Dorian Gray*-like moral lesson about the consequences on hedonism. (I do not imply that these conversions also were sexuality “cures.” The two aspects may be mutually exclusive, and what I know of conversion therapy seems problematic if not odious.) And, of course, Lord Douglas also experienced a reformation, and later in life he wrote extensively about his youthful folly, immorality and irreligiousness, and admitted that he “behaved foolishly and rashly (and even, perhaps, sometimes wickedly).”<sup>194</sup>

There was actual despair found in those dissolute lives, and those lives came down to what Barbey d’Aureville, extremist dandy and yet another Catholic convert, told Baudelaire in regard to *Fleurs du Mal*: “[I]t only remains for you to choose between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the Cross.”<sup>195</sup> Similarly, *Fantazius Mallare* chronicles the excesses of its anti-hero title character, who, in a crushing breakdown of sanity and identity, utters these powerfully helpless words: “Pity me. This is the cross.”<sup>196</sup> There also exists compelling speculation about Catholicism’s peculiar attractiveness for gay men (*not* to be confused with criminal pedophiles) in that era, notably in Frederick Roden’s *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture*. The nature of Oscar’s acceptance into the Church has been contested, but I wonder if it was an embracement that was a long time coming rather than a desperate last-minute act. In fact, of his *A Summing Up*, Lord Douglas explained that “it is precisely this assurance that Wilde died a Catholic that has enabled me to undertake the task of writing this book.”<sup>197</sup> Despite his parents’ aversion to the Catholic Church, Oscar was quite friendly with men of the cloth, particularly Cardinal Newman, and he felt the Church’s pull all his life. Even his son, Vyvyan Holland, claimed that his father, during younger years, “might have become Catholic if not for his family’s aversion for the Church.”<sup>198</sup>

G.K. Chesterton, who moved from atheism to Anglicanism to Catholicism relatively late in life, wrote in *The Catholic Church and Conversion*: “The moment men cease to pull against [the Church] they feel a tug towards it.”<sup>199</sup> He also wrote that the reluctant convert “is not afraid of finding the Church out, but rather of the Church finding him out.”<sup>200</sup> Oscar resisted conversion all his life, which evinces the pull. Perhaps one of the most honest, non-hyperbolic admissions by him is found in a letter to William Ward: “I am weaker and more self-deceiving than ever... [T]o go over to Rome would be to sacrifice and give up my two great gods ‘Money and Ambition’.”<sup>201</sup> In strong and self-aware moments Oscar’s heart snapped back to the idea of the Cross, which is probably, I admit, more talismanic than creedal. For instance, in “The Sphinx”: “False Sphinx!... Go thou before, and leave/me to my crucifix.”<sup>202</sup> Interesting that when it became evident that he lost Florence Balcombe to Bram Stoker, Oscar asked for the return of a golden cross he’d gifted to her, writing that “the little cross will serve to remind me of the bygone days.”<sup>203</sup>



Those aforementioned reformed Decadents had different rationales for their choices, and Oscar's eventual roll into the arms of religion, being such a neat denouement, might have satisfied the aesthete more than the pilgrim in him. "The Church is a house with a hundred gates," writes Chesterton (whose conversion had a notably aesthetic aspect), "and no two men enter at exactly the same angle."<sup>204</sup> In Oscar's younger days, Trinity College professor John Mahaffy aided in the transition from "Popery to Paganism," and his in-depth *Social Life in Greece* supposedly sparked the allure of homosexuality in impressionable minds (despite the quite meager focus on male-to-male erotic love in the book). As Lord Douglas put it decades later, "Greece prevailed over Rome; the lure of paganism proved stronger than the urge of Christianity."<sup>205</sup> However, in the end, it seems, the pagan backslid into popery. Though there is some ambiguity surrounding Oscar's lucidity near the end of his life, I think the evidence for genuine conversion is fairly strong. Robert Ross, who remained loyal to Oscar until the very end, insisted that the conversion was a desired, conscious choice. And, again, Lord Douglas's belief on the matter is quite clear:

*As he was undoubtedly received into the Catholic Church on his death-bed, any Catholic – indeed any Christian, Catholic or not – is entitled, nay bound, to believe that he did ultimately realise [sic] and admit the sinfulness and wickedness of what he had been doing. I do not doubt it for a moment myself...Wilde's conversion was the result of many days and hours of mortal agony.*<sup>206</sup>

Many years earlier, a friendly priest wrote presciently of Oscar:

*Behind his superficial veneer of vanity and foolish talk there is...something deeper and more sincere, including a genuine attraction towards Catholic belief and practice. But the time has not come...There will come someday...a crisis in his life when he will turn to the Ark of Peter as his only refuge.*<sup>207</sup>

Likewise, Father Bowden wrote to him in letter: "[God] allows you to feel the sting of conscience and the yearnings for a holy pure and earnest life."<sup>208</sup> The soul-searching and affection for the very Christianity Oscar supposedly countered are too strong to ignore. Also, the loudest heretic is often the sincerest adherent.

Really, all we need to do is consult *A Rebours* again, not only due to its direct influence on Wilde and his work, but because of its insightful demonstration that total libertinism can't slake spiritual thirst. Des Esseintes, under the influence of the likes of Schopenhauer and the Marquis de Sade, "flouting the precepts of Catholicism"<sup>209</sup> and denying God's existence, seeks to offend the idea of Christ by indulging in profane acts – with one exception: he's awestruck by Church music, particularly the *Christus factus est* and the *De Profundis*,<sup>210</sup> which is based on a line from the Bible's 130th Psalm. (Robert Ross was wise, not manipulative, to give Oscar's most famous letter its name.) Not only does "the sting of conscience" wake the sinful sleeper, but, often, as it goes in Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, "forth from the abyss a voice proceeds."<sup>211</sup> After a novel's worth of hedonism and perversity, Des Esseintes cries "[M]y heart is sick with me!" This "immoral" book concludes with a striking plea with God to pity the existential unbeliever who is "the galley-slave of life who puts out to sea alone, in the night, beneath a firmament no longer lit by the consoling beacon-fires of the ancient hope!"<sup>212</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*'s Father Paisy insists that a worthy, lasting alternative, "another, higher value of man" apart from Christ's example, hasn't yet been found,<sup>213</sup> and even Nietzsche was careful to note that killing the idea of God leaves only an absurd void if a whole other foundation isn't discovered. Consider some of Walter Pater's words on *Dorian Gray*:

*A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness...is to lose or lower organization, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development.*<sup>214</sup>

Just like Des Esseintes, Dorian has a soft spot for the Church's rituals and vestments, and though he has a "soul hungry for rebellion" and sometimes "[looks] on evil simply as a mode through which [to]

realise [sic] his conception of the beautiful,”<sup>215</sup> he has “a wild longing for the unstained purity of his boyhood.”<sup>216</sup> I’m reminded of the ambiguous Christian conversion of the title character in *Marius the Epicurean* by Walter Pater, who was such a deep influence on Oscar, which is illustrative of what the originator of dear Dorian Gray may have experienced in real life. I think the phrase “*anima naturaliter christiana*” (“a naturally Christian soul”)<sup>217</sup>, adopted and made more famous by Pater in that novel may be applicable to Oscar Wilde himself.

On one hand he slammed religiosity (often completely accurately), and on the other hand he expressed regret that he hadn’t taken refuge in the Church before sinking into disgrace. As a non-Catholic I don’t want to be mistaken as an apologist, for much of the Roman Church’s history and concepts raise my brow, and I don’t think salvation requires parish registration, but I do think that Oscar was compelled by what he saw as a general loveliness in Christianity, as well as a sense of moral fallenness. “He loved so much to multiply his souls that he had among them one soul at least that was saved,” Chesterton wrote of this.<sup>218</sup>

Ironically, though it took about 110 years and in spite of its official stance on homosexuality, the Vatican praised Oscar Wilde several years ago in its official newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*. Citing his conversion, the article called him “a man constantly looking for the beautiful and the good,” and described his life as “an existential path...toward that Promised Land.”<sup>219</sup> The article’s statement supports my basic guess about Oscar: that all the vacillations, quips, masks, Decadent decorations and tough talk were smoke from a painful but hopeful fire. Nihilism lurks in teleology – and vice versa. Much of his work “is sensitivity crying out in darkness,” as Francis Schaeffer said of poet Dylan Thomas.<sup>220</sup> “He felt there, felt amid the stirring of some wonderful new hope within himself,” goes a line in *Marius the Epicurean*, “the genius, the unique power of Christianity...”<sup>221</sup> I do hope that the unheroic genius broke from the mire, where he sat “between Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade,”<sup>222</sup> and rose from the depths into true freedom. Perhaps everything became clear in his murkiest moment, and the following stanza from his “Flower of Love” came to life before he died:

*From the wilderness of my wasted passion I had  
struck a better, clearer song,  
Lit some lighter light of freer freedom, battled  
with some Hydra-headed wrong.*<sup>223</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Chesterton, G.K., *A Handful of Authors: Essays on Books & Writers*, ed. Dorothy Collins (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953), 143.
- <sup>2</sup> Fitzsimons, Eleanor, *Wilde's Women: How Oscar Wilde Was Shaped by the Women He Knew* (New York: Overlook Buckworth, 2015), 202.
- <sup>3</sup> Pearce, Joseph, *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), XVI.
- <sup>4</sup> Hoare, Philip, *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy, and the Most Dangerous Trial of the Century* (NY: Arcade Publishing, 1997), 153.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.
- <sup>6</sup> Holland, Merlin, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2000), 1041.
- <sup>7</sup> Michels, Andre, "Oscar Wilde: Aesthete and Homosexual," *The Letter* 9 (1996), 5, accessed October 2014, <http://theletter.ie/andre-michels-oscar-wilde-aesthete-and-homosexual/>
- <sup>8</sup> O'Sullivan, Emer, *The Fall of the House of Wilde: Oscar Wilde and His Family* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016), 15
- <sup>11</sup> Jackson, Holbrook, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1966), 81.
- <sup>12</sup> Marin, Cheech, *Cheech is Not My Real Name...But Don't Call Me Chong!* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 169.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1994), 1040.
- <sup>14</sup> Holland, *Complete Letters*, 430.
- <sup>15</sup> Belford, Barbara, *Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius* (New York: Random House, 2000), 258.
- <sup>16</sup> Douglas, Lord Alfred, *Oscar Wilde: A Summing Up* (n.p.: The Richards Press, 1940/1961), 95.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.
- <sup>18</sup> Fitzsimons, *Wilde's Women*, 289.
- <sup>19</sup> O'Sullivan, *Fall of the House*, 416.
- <sup>20</sup> *Complete Works*, 938.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 521.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 520-521.
- <sup>24</sup> Moyle, Franny, *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs. Oscar Wilde* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2011), 74.
- <sup>25</sup> Baldwin, James, *Giovanni's Room*, in *Baldwin: Early Novels and Short Stories* (NY: The Library of America: 1998), 355.
- <sup>26</sup> Fitzsimons, *Wilde's Women*, 228.
- <sup>27</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, 221.
- <sup>28</sup> Hoare, *Last Stand*, 137.
- <sup>29</sup> Croft-Cooke, Robert, *The Unrecorded Life of Oscar Wilde* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1972), 158.
- <sup>30</sup> Fitzsimons, *Wilde's Women*, 249.
- <sup>31</sup> Chesterton, G.K., *Heretics* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006/1905), 127-128.
- <sup>32</sup> Douglas, Lord Alfred, *Oscar Wilde and Myself* (New York: Duffield & Company, 1940/1961), 163.
- <sup>33</sup> O'Sullivan, *Fall of the House*, 155.
- <sup>34</sup> *Complete Works*, 14.
- <sup>35</sup> Jackson, *Eighteen Nineties*, 88.
- <sup>36</sup> Douglas, *A Summing Up*, 8.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.
- <sup>38</sup> Paglia, Camille, *Break Blow Burn: Camille Paglia Reads Forty-Three of the World's Best Poems* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 174.
- <sup>39</sup> *Complete Works*, 873.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 874.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 876.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 877.

- <sup>43</sup> Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volochonsky Farrar (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1880/1990), 637.
- <sup>44</sup> *Complete Works*, 898-899.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 937.
- <sup>46</sup> Boyd, Brian, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 230.
- <sup>47</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir, *Lolita* (New York: International Vintage Books Random House, Inc., 1955/1997), 301.
- <sup>48</sup> *Complete Works*, 1038.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1020.
- <sup>50</sup> Robbins, Ruth, *Oscar Wilde* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 21.
- <sup>51</sup> Holland, *Complete Letters*, 1041.
- <sup>52</sup> Frankel, Nicholas, *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 226
- <sup>53</sup> Frankel, *Unrepentant Years*, 76
- <sup>54</sup> Hecht, Ben, *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* (Chicago: COVICI-McGEE, 1922), 109.
- <sup>55</sup> Winwar, Frances, *Oscar Wilde and the Yellow Nineties* (Garden City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940), xi.
- <sup>56</sup> Ellman, Richard, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 447.
- <sup>57</sup> *Complete Works*, 84.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 892.
- <sup>60</sup> Augustine, of Hippo, Saint, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York, Penguin Classics, 1961), 56.
- <sup>61</sup> *Complete Works*, 1038.
- <sup>62</sup> Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1866/1981), 479.
- <sup>63</sup> *Complete Works*, 100.
- <sup>64</sup> Lutz, Deborah, *Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 194.
- <sup>65</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, 177.
- <sup>66</sup> Huysmans, Joris-Karl, *Against Nature (A Reboours)*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Penguin 1884/1959), 21.
- <sup>67</sup> *Complete Works*, 912.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 927.
- <sup>69</sup> Chesterton, *Handful of Authors*, 143.
- <sup>70</sup> Sturgis, Matthew, *Oscar Wilde: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2018, 2021), 274.
- <sup>71</sup> Hart-Davis, Rupert, *The Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1979), 240.
- <sup>72</sup> Sturgis, *Oscar Wilde: A Life*, 293.
- <sup>73</sup> Douglas, *A Summing Up*, 106.
- <sup>74</sup> Lautreamont, *Maldoror and Poems*, trans. Paul Knight (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 153
- <sup>75</sup> Jullian, Philippe, *Oscar Wilde: A Gallic view of his whole extraordinary career, drawing on fresh sources*, trans. Violet Wyndham (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 168.
- <sup>76</sup> Holland, *Complete Letters*, 478.
- <sup>77</sup> Quintus, John Allen, "The Moral Implications of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 22 (1980): 6, accessed April 26, 2016, <http://www.jonescollegeprep.org/ourpages/auto/2016/4/25/62654730/Moral%20Implications.pdf>
- <sup>78</sup> Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, 281.
- <sup>79</sup> Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *Notes From Underground*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (New York: Bantam Books 1864/1992), 44
- <sup>80</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 45.
- <sup>81</sup> Knight, G. Wilson, *The Christian Renaissance: with interpretations of Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe and new discussions of Oscar Wilde and the Gospel of Thomas* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962), 294.
- <sup>82</sup> Michels, *The Letter*, 6.
- <sup>83</sup> Holland, *Complete Letters*, 891.
- <sup>84</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 118.
- <sup>85</sup> *Complete Works*, 78.
- <sup>86</sup> O'Sullivan, *Fall of the House*, 280.
- <sup>87</sup> Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, 148.
- <sup>88</sup> *Complete Works*, 1045.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 877.

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- <sup>90</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 107.
- <sup>91</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 7.
- <sup>92</sup> *Complete Works*, 687.
- <sup>93</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 43.
- <sup>94</sup> *Complete Works*, 842.
- <sup>95</sup> Croft-Cooke, *Unrecorded Life*, 139.
- <sup>96</sup> Knight, *Christian Renaissance*, 286.
- <sup>97</sup> *Complete Works*, 920.
- <sup>98</sup> Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, 580.
- <sup>99</sup> *Complete Works*, 922.
- <sup>100</sup> Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, 498.
- <sup>101</sup> Kierkegaard, Soren, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. Howard Vong and Edna Vong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1849/1980), xiii.
- <sup>102</sup> *Complete Works*, 874.
- <sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 938.
- <sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.
- <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 881.
- <sup>106</sup> Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, 391-392.
- <sup>107</sup> Lutz, *Pleasure Bound*, 194.
- <sup>108</sup> Jullian, *A Gallic view*, 303.
- <sup>109</sup> *Complete Works*, 118.
- <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.
- <sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 563.
- <sup>112</sup> Zizek, Slavoj, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 93.
- <sup>113</sup> Jullian, *A Gallic view*, 270.
- <sup>114</sup> Belford, *A Certain Genius*, 285.
- <sup>115</sup> *Complete Works*, 475.
- <sup>116</sup> Holland, *Complete Letters*, 943.
- <sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 651.
- <sup>118</sup> *Complete Works*, 651.
- <sup>119</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 47.
- <sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>121</sup> Belford, *A Certain Genius*, 287.
- <sup>122</sup> *Complete Works*, 947.
- <sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 859.
- <sup>124</sup> Michels, *The Letter*, 13.
- <sup>125</sup> *Complete Works*, 933.
- <sup>126</sup> Douglas, *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, 114.
- <sup>127</sup> Jullian, *A Gallic view*, 53.
- <sup>128</sup> *Complete Works*, 583.
- <sup>129</sup> O'Sullivan, *Fall of the House*, 171.
- <sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.
- <sup>131</sup> Theresa, Mother, *Mother Teresa - Come By My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta"*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C. (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 210.
- <sup>132</sup> Moyle, *Constance*, 137.
- <sup>133</sup> *Complete Works*, 824.
- <sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 801.
- <sup>135</sup> Chesterton, *Heretics*, 55.
- <sup>136</sup> Camus, Albert, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York, Vintage Books, 1956), 133.
- <sup>137</sup> Knight, *Christian Renaissance*, 52.
- <sup>138</sup> *Complete Works*, 923.
- <sup>139</sup> Schramm, Jan-Melissa, "Wilde and Christ," in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 258.
- <sup>140</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 153.
- <sup>141</sup> Schaeffer, Dr. Francis A., *The God Who is There*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 68.
- <sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

- <sup>143</sup> Whitman, Walt, *Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy (New York: Penguin Books, 2004/1977), 458.
- <sup>144</sup> Jullian, *A Gallic view*, 49.
- <sup>145</sup> Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *Devils*, trans. Michael Katz (Oxford, UK: Oxford World's Classics, 1871/1998), 693.
- <sup>146</sup> Michels, *The Letter*, 11.
- <sup>147</sup> Chesterton, *A Handful of Authors*, 146.
- <sup>148</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 759.
- <sup>149</sup> Holland, *Complete Letters*, 436.
- <sup>150</sup> Douglas, *A Summing Up*, 7.
- <sup>151</sup> Knight, *Christian Renaissance*, 285.
- <sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-290.
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- <sup>154</sup> Michels, *The Letter*, 4.
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