

**“This letter in its changing,
uncertain moods”:**

Victorian Self-Fashioning
in Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*

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Thesis Abstract

This master's thesis sets out to examine the vital fashioning of a complex self in Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* through formal and textual analyses based on close readings. Inspired by literary theoretical definitions of self-fashioning by Greenblatt and Foucault, the argument builds on readings by Doyle, Zim, Angvik, and Dollimore, among others. Whereas Greenblattian self-fashioners aspire towards an ideal set by society, the marginalized Wilde attempts to pursue a *Vita Nuova*, plotting an individualistic course that goes awry.

Wilde's self-fashioning project in *De Profundis* can roughly be divided into three, according to the tripartite composition of the letter itself. The first part begins by depicting Wilde as a ruined prisoner. The authorial persona confronts his past in retrospect as a witness narrator, drawing inspiration particularly from Dante's *Inferno* in the process of facing his demons. While a significant factor in Wilde's downfall and moral degradation, Douglas serves as a catalyst in the writer's attempt at purification. Hence, Wilde uses Douglas as a foil to manipulate and "author-ize" the conception of himself as a passivized actor in the tragic story of himself and his ruin.

The second part focuses on Wilde's individualism, his *Vita Nuova*, and his identity as a prisoner. The letter writer's imitation of Christ takes as a model the homonymous genre, a prototype for medieval self-fashioners. The thesis argues that Wilde's take on this genre is blinding for the author, who employs it as an idealising and problematic casting mould. Wilde claims that he does not need religion in addition to morality and reason, yet his continual resort to Christianity proves otherwise, leading to a questioning of his reliability.

Finally, Wilde returns to Douglas in a futile attempt to reconcile with his addressee. In an ambivalent attempt at reconciliation, there are interesting allusions to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The thesis squares with Dollimore in that Wilde's prospect of clearing his name, i.e. his rehabilitation, is a "comforting deception", while it also, as a conventional self-fashioning, results in "not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artifact". However, while the letter should not be dismissed solely as a "defeat" as claimed by Dollimore, it entails indeed a self-deception necessary for the author to survive prison.

Acknowledgements

To begin with, I want to say that this thesis had a “trang fødsel” (= rough start); I have known for a long time, though, that I wanted to work on this intriguing text by Oscar Wilde. After playing with thesis statements centring on the use of personal pronouns or biblical allusions in *De Profundis*, I am glad that I eventually landed on the interesting topic of self-fashioning.

An equal number of ideas has been born off-screen as on-screen. Precisely the screen has been an anchor pile in these strange times, considering the current circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic. However, I have tried to transform irksome thoughts into constructive efforts with the thesis, and I believe I have succeeded. At the same time, and as my supervisor pointed out at an early stage, the writing of a thesis in this exact semester has fitted quite nicely with the hermit life. Lysakerelva has been my companion with her relaxing and inspiring rumble on numerous recreational strolls.

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Lastly, I hope that you, my intended reader, will share my joy in this literary hybrid located at the intersections of fiction and fact, despair and enthusiasm. I can only speak for myself, but this letter has indeed opened new doors for me to what literature can be, and what a vital role it can have. My process of attempting to uncover the literary persona “Oscar Wilde” in *De Profundis* seemed awe-inspiring at first, but, after a while and at a certain point, it turned rather exciting and fun.

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1. Introduction

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900) is regarded as one of the most popular and critically acclaimed playwrights of the late Victorian era and is surrounded by countless myths. Grandson Merlin Holland elaborates on Wilde’s unclassifiable duality that “fascinates, confuses: the Anglo-Irishman with Nationalist sympathies; the Protestant with life-long Catholic leanings; the married homosexual; (...) the artist astride not two but three cultures, an Anglo-Francophile and a Celt at heart” (3). Moreover, Wilde is considered by many scholars to be the “father of aestheticism” (Allitt). His literary achievements count no less than nine plays, various stories and poems, numerous aphorisms, epigrams and essays, his infamous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and last, but not least, a letter written while imprisoned in Reading Gaol from 1895 to 1897. This letter was named *De Profundis*, allegedly by Robert Ross, Wilde’s close friend and literary executor.

Richard Ellmann has called it “an elegy for lost greatness” (482), Rivkah Zim a “pastoral of disgrace abounding” (142), and Jonathan Dollimore “a containment, a tragic defeat of the kind which only ideological coercion (...) can effect” (95). It is no doubt that *De Profundis* is a controversial and complex text, even though it was conceived only as a letter to Wilde’s partner Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas. According to Ellman, it may be regarded as one of the best and most elaborate love letters ever written with its scope of love and hate, its angst and futility, and with its philosophical remarks (515). Moreover, it counts as an example of confessional prison writing where Wilde examines the chain of events that led to his social and personal ruin while expressing his ambivalent emotions towards Douglas. Written during the first months of 1897, the letter was published posthumously in abridged versions in 1905, 1908 and 1949. The text was finally issued to the public in its unabridged form in 1962 by Rupert Hart-Davis (Varty ix). This latest version, re-published in 1999 by Wordsworth, will serve as the primary text for this thesis.

De Profundis has a unique position in Wilde’s work due to its relative great length, versatility, and elusiveness. Originally written as a letter to one individual, the text nevertheless has a literary and fictitious quality attached to it which makes it a true torment to classify (Small 3). This difficulty of categorising the letter reflects its elusiveness. Its versatility is for instance reflected in the fact that it is a unique piece of evidence from a crucial development: the creation of what we today regard as the modern homosexual identity. *De Profundis* was namely written in the wake of one of the key events of the modern gay identity, namely Wilde’s trials in 1895. According to literary critic Robert Dale Parker,

Wilde's trials may be regarded as "a landmark in the public recognition of queerness, particularly for gay men" (195). Despite its unfavourable treatment of homosexual love, *De Profundis* serves paradoxically as a testament from a pivotal period for the "formation of the category of the modern homosexual" (Garlinger 18-19).

1.1. Thesis Statement

Wilde wrote many letters, but none of them as elaborate or significant as *De Profundis*. In a correspondence to his friend More Adey dated 18 February 1897, Wilde himself described the letter as "the most important letter of my life, as it will deal with my future mental attitude towards life, with the way in which I desire to meet the world again, with *the development of my character*" (qtd. in Small 11-12, emphasis mine). In this thesis, I want to examine the authorial persona's character development in *De Profundis* and view it as a self-fashioning as defined by Stephen Greenblatt. Furthermore, I will draw on Michel Foucault's "technologies of the self," a concept I consider being related to that of Greenblatt. Foucault cites "operations on [one's] own [soul], thoughts, conduct, and way of being" ("Technologies of the Self" 18) as a definition of this technology, and I interpret these "operations" to be rhetorical as well as literary devices, e.g. metaphors and intertextual references, which Wilde employs in his self-fashioning. Even though these operations are necessary for the author to survive through writing, he ends up being a "cultural artifact," a term coined by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. I understand Geertz's term to denote a product or construct of various cultural inscriptions in the following Greenblattian sense: "Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artifact" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 256). Wilde's self-fashioning results thus in a combination of contingent and unescapable cultural identities.

Wilde claims himself in his prison letter that "[t]here is in it nothing of rhetoric" (102), and in a later letter he expresses the primary objective of *De Profundis*: to escape the "grotesque pillory" he has been put into (Small 308). Considering this, I would like to prove that the authorial persona's literary and rhetorical devices in *De Profundis*, as well as the letter's formal structure, are expressions of a complex self-fashioning, a staging of the self which corroborates the author's inevitable nature as a cultural artifact, but also his recriminatory obsession with Douglas, which overshadows his own potential for resolution. Ironically, both these factors leave him stuck in the pillory. According to Birger Angvik, *De Profundis* follows the scheme of a parable in Wilde's development through pleasure and pain, and later, in the last months of jail, to an alteration in his frame of mind and mastering of his

own suffering (351, translation mine). Through close readings of the letter, I want to question this assertion by Angvik and look with a critical lens at this “alteration in (...) frame of mind and mastering of his own suffering,” an activity that is fundamental for the author as it both functions as a means to face his trauma in a therapeutical manner, as well as it contributes to his future reputation. My argument opposes Angvik, however, by claiming that Wilde’s development is illusory, thus in the vein of Dollimore and Greenblatt.

One should not underestimate the vital importance of the project of self-fashioning for the author himself, since the letter is his device of dealing with his trauma, but also a device of carving a self for posterity. Nevertheless, this thesis sets out to examine a self that is unstable and dynamic (Angvik 369), “a bundle of contradictions” (Guy and Small 130), and “a non-identical and non-unitary social potential” (Doyle 553). Wilde puts on several poses in the fashioning of his own self, and my thesis sets out to examine some of these. I will argue that the self’s dynamic play with roles can interestingly be interpreted as an attempt to elude and strengthen his marginalisation at the same time. More importantly, though, his volatile role-playing leads to unreliability and inconsistency. In addition, Douglas as a foil character plays an elementary role in Wilde’s fashioning of self, for, as Mark Robson argues in his introduction to Stephen Greenblatt, “self is always in relation to others” (53). Douglas can in this respect be viewed as a laterally reversed representation of Wilde in *De Profundis*, due to the latter’s rendition of the former as scapegoat and offender.

Departing from a desolate starting point, Wilde sees himself from the outside “in [t]his dark cell in convict clothes, a disgraced and ruined man” (4), subsequently becoming a secondary character in the retelling of his own past (Pearson; Angvik). Wilde’s “character” can be regarded as secondary because of his lack of agency in his own story. His relationship with Douglas is one of the major factors leading to his downfall as an artist and a human being; in the letter, though, Douglas acts constructively as one of the catalysts for Wilde’s own therapy of writing: “views and ideas I am here shaping for myself” offer the persona “for the first time since my imprisonment (...) a real desire to live” (Wilde 64). In the second part of the letter, Wilde turns to Christ in search of an example to be followed. The persona describes his insight due to misery, precisely resembling Christ with knowledge of the secret of life, i.e. suffering: “I was one who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. There is not a single wretched man in this wretched place along with me who does not stand in symbolic relations to the secret of life. For the secret of life is suffering. It is what is hidden behind everything” (66). In *De Profundis*, Wilde attempts to come closer to what is real, including the prospect of a radicalized self, i.e. his “*Vita Nuova*” (57).

Before applying the concept of self-fashioning to *De Profundis*, one should be aware of the idea that Wilde probably had different readers in mind when composing the letter, since he seems to address two distinct types of readers, or what I will refer to as the letter's addressee and implied readers. Whereas the addressee is identified as Douglas in the letter heading "Dear Bosie" (Wilde 3) and by the prominent use of the linguistic marker "you," the implied reader "designates the image of the recipient that the author had while writing or, more accurately, the author's image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs" (Schmid). It seems to have been the case that Wilde had different readers in mind when writing *De Profundis*, and my argument is based on the opinion that, in addition to his close friends Robert Ross and More Adey, he also had future generations in mind. As for Adey and Ross, Wilde wrote explicitly in a correspondence dated 18 Feb 1897 that he wanted to have the letter read by them before forwarding it to Douglas (Small 12). Moreover, his complex copying instructions suggest that he wanted to prepare the letter for another, more inclusive, audience (Guy and Small 127-28, cf. Raby 133). This complex readership opens for implications that will be further discussed.

A general approach to the concept of self-fashioning is the process of "taking an interest in oneself (...) ethically and psychologically" (Federico 107). This claim implies that self-fashioning can be interpreted in a rather flexible manner, but I will sketch out further ramifications below that apply to my understanding of the term. Before I started working on this thesis, I had always thought that self-fashioning could be applied to fiction only. But after having read scholarly texts on *De Profundis* and theory on "self-fashioning" as concept, I realised that I could also use it on the letter genre. Wilde can be regarded as an untraditional self-fashioner, because of his marginality and propensity "to batter against the boundaries of [his] own culture" (Greenblatt, "Culture" 231). Michael R. Doynlen has applied the concept of self-fashioning to Wilde's text before me, and I will elaborate on certain ideas he puts forth in his article "Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*: Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal." I want to expand particularly on what he calls Wilde's "homosexual *askêsis*," a concept which "involves a fundamental irony" (551) since Wilde's marginal sexuality discloses, in a paradoxical manner, a space where the author can explore other identities. However, whereas Doynlen argues for Wilde's consistency, I will take hold of the latter's inconsistency which ultimately undermines his objective of individualisation. Also, as Doynlen makes mainly use of Foucault's theory, I will turn to both Foucault and Greenblatt for theoretical support. I will now continue with my understanding of self-fashioning as defined by Greenblatt, the inventor of the term.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

“Self-fashioning” as a term was first introduced by new historicist Stephen Jay Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980). Literary critic Robert Dale Parker explains that Greenblatt began to write generally “about how the self fashions itself, but ended up writing much more about how the self is fashioned by, is almost passive before, broader cultural forces” (263). It is essential to define what is meant by “self.” In his introduction to Greenblatt, Mark Robson strips down the concept for us into four distinct aspects: “(i) ‘a sense of personal order’; (ii) ‘a characteristic mode of address to the world’; (iii) ‘a structure of bounded desires’; and (iv) ‘an element of deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity’” (53). Furthermore, self-fashioning is defined as something which “may suggest the achievement of a less tangible shape: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving” (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 4). Hence, the term can in other words be summarized “to describe the process of constructing one’s identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards, and the conscious effort to strive to imitate a praised model in society” (Mambrol). All these factors may be applied more or less to the Wildean self-fashioning we are concerned with in *De Profundis*. Even though the letter writer is isolated and passivized in prison, or perhaps exactly for this reason, he writes about his self in relation to social forces, both personified by Douglas and designated by “Society. Though, whereas Renaissance authors strove typically to imitate a praised model in society, Wilde fashions a self whose aim is to *resist* societal ideals in his promotion of individualism. When Wilde writes that he finds no use for morality, religion, or reason (58-59), he turns out to be inconsistent in his resistance, as it is exactly these standards or *doxa* (Angvik 391) he turns to, or in Dollimore’s wording: “Resistance from the margins seems doomed to replicate internally the strategies, structures, and even the values of the dominant” (81).

Doylen argues convincingly for Wilde’s self-fashioning in his article “Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*: Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal.” Doylen’s title may deceive since it is not Wilde’s homosexuality *per se* that is the article writer’s focus; rather, the homosexuality of the author represents an actuating cause or “an aspect of the self – one not necessarily seen as revealing a deep ‘truth’ – that places the subject in a marginal position with social norms” (553). Wilde’s homosexuality is inarguably the reason for his punishment and marginalisation, but according to Doylen, the author “cultivated this position of marginality not to be true to his most ‘authentic’ self, but to develop other ways of being in the world” (555). This draws on Foucault’s notion of “homosexual *askêsis*” which “involves a

fundamental irony: the social marginalization of homosexuals as essentially ‘perverse’ may motivate those individuals to invent self-identifications and social relationships that problematize and undo essentialist notions of the sexual self’ (Doysten 551). In other words, Wilde “invents” many problematizing and undoing “self-identifications and social relationships” in his search of other ways of “being in the world,” without pursuing his homosexuality. Apparently, he considers homosexuality to be a useless and fruitless expedient out of his psychological state. This supports Foucault’s argument that “[t]he relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. To be the same is really boring.... [Sexual identity] limits us, and I think we have (and can have) a right to be free [from it]” (qtd. in Doysten 551). With that said, Wilde’s sexual orientation complemented his identity of minority affiliations as Irishman in England, a prisoner in society, and an individualist among what he himself refers to as the British “Philistines.” In the thesis’s main part, we will see how Wilde plays with his various marginalised positions.

Referring to Foucault’s later writings in *Technologies of the Self* (1988), Doysten bases his understanding of “self-fashioning” on the following definition of “technology of the self” by the French philosopher: a process “which permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain sense of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (“Technologies of the Self” 18). As mentioned in the thesis statement, I choose to regard these “operations” as rhetorical and literary devices: rhetoric, metaphors, comparisons, and intertextual references that Wilde employs to shape his own self. If not synonymous, Foucault’s “technology” corresponds quite closely to Greenblatt’s “self-fashioning” since both concepts deal with the shaping or, more generally, the *art* of the individual; in fact, Foucault’s term refers to its original Greek root, *techne* as “art” (Robson 18). Wilde’s textual self-fashioning is, in this sense, “a conceptualization of ‘the self as a work of art’” (Doysten 551).

With no help from others, but rather with the help of his own imagination and ability to express himself, I agree with Doysten that Wilde attempts in *De Profundis* to transport himself by his own means to another level of “purity [and] wisdom”. Whether he succeeds in reaching a catharsis needs to be discussed in further detail. However, the “once a lord of language” (Wilde 45) uses writing as a means of “effectuating [psychological] operations,” which equals a therapeutic process of writing himself out of “the profound.” Wilde’s writing becomes therapy, in that it seems to have a curative effect on the writer. Even so, I argue that

this is only half the truth since the writing becomes an act of self-deception in that the writer thinks he can alter his past through repentance (Wilde 83). Instead, he glorifies or vilifies himself using rhetorical and literary devices, that equal Foucauldian “operations.”

It should be noted that Foucault has had a considerable influence on Greenblatt’s concept of self-fashioning. Greenblatt uses the term “technology” to denote “art” as well, as something elementary to social interaction: “The ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive *technology* of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform” (Greenblatt, “Culture” 225, emphasis mine). Furthermore, both “ensemble” and “repertoire” are words which are associated with art. Greenblatt and Foucault’s views on art, i.e. self-fashioning, should not be considered as opposing; instead, they seem to complement each other. It is a fact that no matter how one regards the individual, its self-fashioning occurs both in the dynamic play with society, as well as within itself.

In her introduction to *Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1880-1930* (2004), Marysa Demoor asserts that self-fashioning has “entered critical jargon with respect to any period in which individual artists choose to self-mythologise, to, that is, construct an identity in and through language and represent it ‘before an audience’” (Demoor 14). There are three points worth elaborating on here. Firstly, even though Greenblatt focuses on Renaissance authors in his treatment of the concept, self-fashioning is a phenomenon that is not limited to one historical period. Secondly, as for self-fashioning as ‘self-mythologis[ing],’ we will see that Wilde uses several intertextual references in *De Profundis* to craft his own self. Wilde’s fashioning is not therefore limited to the mere process of “constructing an identity in and through language”; it entails also a mythologizing or dramatizing dimension due to Wilde’s specific use of mythic and dramatic references. Thirdly, the author’s self-fashioning becomes a way for him to present himself before an abstract audience, including his addressee and his implied readers, the latter potentially located far away from him both in space and time. Wilde’s text is a telling, yet exceptional, example of aesthetic *fin-de-siècle* literature that can broaden our understanding of the concept of self-fashioning we find in British literature by the turn of the nineteenth century.

In the same vein, Annette Federico examines another Irish aesthete’s memoir in her essay “Irony, Ethics and Self-Fashioning in George Moore’s *Confessions of a Young Man*” (2004). Moore’s and Wilde’s semi-autobiographical works are worth juxtaposing since they both focus on the fashioning of an autobiographical self; also, they date from the same period.

Federico bases her argument in turn on the following definition by Jil Larson: “Self-fashioning is an ethical concept radically different from mid-Victorian understandings of the self as determined by family, social convention, and deontological morality”, to which she adds that the “focus on the inner life is also new, a departure from the Victorian ethos of looking outward to others and defining oneself through vigorous agency with the world” (qtd. in Federico 97). Accordingly, authors such as Moore and Wilde try to dissociate themselves from so-called mid-Victorian understandings that view the self in relation to society and other exterior forces; instead, these authors strive to redirect the focus to autonomy and individualism. This approach becomes even more elucidated in Wilde’s case, considering his physically and socially isolated state in a prison cell, where he only has his memory and some literary texts to rely on. Moreover, his promotion of individualism is an endeavour to liberate himself from society. As a prominent social actor, Wilde makes many references to society and juxtaposes himself often to elements of the Victorian “outside world.” The letter can be regarded as an effort by his persona to disassociate himself from his earlier self, a construct mostly based on public appearance and others’ opinions, whereupon he seeks another independent self, attempting to break free from the stigma attached to his public persona.

Federico argues that late Victorian self-fashioning “gestures towards a new ethical sensibility, for it deliberately undermines cherished Victorian beliefs in character, truth, reality and fidelity to fact” (96), exemplifying this with another work by Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” (1891). In this essay, Wilde reveals what the principal aim of art is: “The final revelation is that lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art” (171). There is a vast difference between artists and what Wilde calls the “[c]harming people such as fishermen, shepherds, plowboys, peasants and the like” or the typical Philistine, who “upholds and aids the heavy, cumbrous, blind mechanical forces of Society, and who does not recognise the dynamic force when he meets it either in a man or a movement” (90). *De Profundis* can be regarded as personal development of the ethical sensibility that Wilde introduced in his essay from some years earlier and seems thus to be a work where he translates theory into practice. His prison letter may in this sense be a continuation of “The Decay of Lying” as an alternative to cherished Victorian beliefs, as a matter of fact returning to those beliefs with another mindset and a recently acquired realisation in prison. As we will see, this realisation is not as straightforward and reliable as it might seem. Hence, parts of *De Profundis* may be interpreted as another essay about the principal aim of art, the “telling of beautiful untrue things,” for one may be tempted to ask, what can be more beautiful for Wilde than a *Vita Nuova*, that is, a new life?

As a whole, *De Profundis* can be interpreted in at least two ways: as a result of a placebo-like illusion, but also as Wilde's testament and his attempt to attain, in Foucault's words, "a sense of (...) immortality." Thus, the letter proves to be a means for the author to ensure and shape his own future reputation. On the one hand, Ignacio Ramos Gay supports the notion of *De Profundis* as a testament Wilde "had conceived (...) as a means of transcending confinement through artistic sublimation" (4). On the other hand, Dollimore renounces the successful value and impact of the letter in his book *Sexual Dissidence: From Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (1991), wherein he claims that Wilde's work exemplifies "a comforting deception" and "a tragic defeat of the kind which only ideological coercion, reinforced by overt brutality, can effect" (95). I want to nuance Dollimore's claims in this quote, though he may be right in parts of it. In addition, Dollimore argues that *De Profundis* "comes to mark a decisive break in Wilde's *oeuvre* and to signal the end of his self-fashioning activities" (qtd. in Doyle 547). Given that this thesis is about self-fashioning, this is a claim that I naturally will differ with.

Besides Doyle and Dollimore, this thesis builds for the most part on readings by Zim and Angvik. Both scholars perform positive and exegetic interpretations of Wilde's *De Profundis*; "exegetic" in the sense that they rely for the most part on close readings of the letter itself, rather than filtering the letter through a biographical lens. In her book *The Consolations of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance from Boethius to Primo Levi* (2014), Zim writes about Wilde's "Pastoral Letter of Disgrace Abounding" (142). She highlights literary traditions which Wilde plays with and explores in his "author-ization" of himself as a literary construct: "a writer could authorize his life's story by drawing on the best literary traditions to console himself in new writing" (158). However, I will question some of her claims, for example that Wilde's "indifference to suffering endorses later nineteenth-century ideas about the function of imprisonment: to reform the criminal by a regime of discipline and punishment" (148). I argue that Wilde is not indifferent in his critique of the "function of imprisonment." Angvik gives us a thorough analysis of *De Profundis* in his book *Oscar Wilde* (2000). I will make use of this in analysing the letter's formal structure, but I will also rely on his interpretation when turning to the authorial persona's nature.

Even though Isobel Murray claims that *De Profundis* "can be seen as 'a partial autobiography'" (qtd. in Guy and Small 123), the reader must keep in mind that both Wilde's portraits of himself and Douglas are, after all, fictionalised literary constructs. Greenblatt writes in his article about "Culture" that "[s]omething happens to objects (...) when they are represented, reimagined, and performed in literary texts" (230). Wilde's representations both

of himself and Douglas are indeed such “objects,” as they are “represented, reimagined, and performed” by Wilde alone. Julia Wood confirms this view, arguing that “[t]he Bosie we read about in *De Profundis* is not the real-life Bosie, but Wilde’s fictionalised account of a man he had not even seen for nearly two years”; thus, “[w]hat the reader must acknowledge is that there is a wide gulf between this fictionalised account of Bosie and the ‘real’ Bosie” (40). Therefore, the readers are advised to read the names of the letter writer and the addressee enveloped by quotation marks. In this respect, it is appropriate to cite Henry James, who meant that “[e]verything Oscar does is a deliberate trap for the literalist, and to see the literalist walk straight up to it, look straight at it, and step straight into it, makes one freshly avert a discouraged gaze from the unspeakable animal” (qtd. in Raby 11).

1.3. Chapter Outline

The main body of this thesis is structured in three chapters, following the basically tripartite division of *De Profundis*. All three chapters are subdivided into three subchapters. The first chapter focuses on the beginning of the letter, opening with a thorough examination of the nature of the authorial persona’s self. The focus shifts then to an exploration of the foil Douglas who serves as an antithesis and a complementary “character” to Wilde. The chapter closes off with a discussion of Wilde as an ascetic who draws inspiration from e.g. Buddhism.

Correspondingly, the middle section of this thesis treats the middle section of the letter. The subchapters are named “Wilde as Individualist,” “Wilde’s *Imitatio Christi*,” and “Wilde as Prisoner.” As we will see, each of these topics is defining factors in Wilde’s self-fashioning. Individualism becomes especially important for the author because of his earlier lack of willpower, which has been a contributing factor to his downfall; yet his individualism proves to be not so straightforward as expected. We will examine Wilde’s imitation of Christ, a self-fashioning prototype with medieval roots (Greenblatt 2-3). Also, Wilde’s interpretation of his own role as prisoner is another aspect of his self-fashioning that will be examined.

The thesis’s final section will first return to Douglas and discuss what has changed, if anything, between the letter writer and addressee. Then, I will take hold of Wilde’s interesting allusions to *Hamlet*, in which he indirectly compares himself to Hamlet and Douglas to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. These juxtapositions to Shakespeare’s characters are another feature of the author’s “author-ization,” which in turn contributes to the depiction of his life as a potentially pathos-evoking story. Before concluding, I will give attention to whether the end of *De Profundis* culminates in a sense of resolution or defeat, or if it concludes with elements of both.

2. Self-Fashioning in *De Profundis*

2.1. The First Part of *De Profundis*. “As much for your sake as for mine”:

Merciless Scrutiny of the Letter Self and His Addressee

“Dear Bosie – After long and fruitless waiting I have determined to write to you myself, as much for your sake as for mine, as I would not like to think that I had passed through two long years of imprisonment without ever having received a single line from you, or any news or message even, except such as gave me pain” (Wilde 3). From the opening of *De Profundis*, an ambivalent tone is set for one of the most remarkable love letters ever written, a letter encompassing many emotions beyond love. The addressee Lord Alfred Douglas is evoked in the standard salutation by the pet name “Bosie” and the grammatical complement “[d]ear,” both words evoking the affectionate relationship that the writer supposedly has with his addressee. However, the reader soon realises that the writer’s primary motivation for writing this letter is not love, but rather a feeling of pain, of having been badly treated; according to Ellmann, the letter “draws its force [exactly] from its author’s sense of being neglected” (479). In the first line, the writer states that he intends to write not solely in the interest of the addressee, but also for his own sake: “as much for your sake as for mine” (Wilde 3).

This concern for his own sake may suggest that Wilde’s letter, by virtue of being an original and crucial self-fashioning project, was never only addressed to Douglas. Arguably, it reaches out to future readers as well. Peter Raby explains that *De Profundis* was intended both as a private and public document from the beginning: it was “Wilde writing to (and for) Douglas; to his close friends; to and for himself.” Besides, “[u]ndoubtedly, in view both of the form and content of the letter and his plans for its immediate copying, Wilde anticipated the possibility that it might, in whole or part, be put before a wider public as an essay in literary autobiography” (133). As mentioned in the introduction, Wilde’s letter to More Adey dated 18 Feb 1897 contained detailed instructions regarding desired copying arrangements of the letter (cf. Small 11-12). There are several implications of this complex implied readership. As such, *De Profundis* can be regarded as Oscar Wilde’s intellectual and philosophical testament, a trait that becomes clear in the letter’s middle section. Before examining this aspect of the letter, we will start by examining the self as depicted in the first part of *De Profundis*.

2.1.1. The Nature of the Self

The self in *De Profundis* appears as an unstable, changing, dynamic, controversial, and self-contradictory subject, and in the letter’s first part the narrator is witness to central events that

depict other persons (Angvik 369). This temporally split self is apparently what James Olney refers to as an “ostensibly objective autobiographical voice in (...) simplex form, which is the voice of a distant historian writing as if transparent and unrelated to the autobiographical subject,” contrary to the duplex form that portrays “contingent selves, separated by time and task, that gradually accumulate and form one highly crafted Self” (qtd. in Pearson 50). Hence, there is a significant difference between the “past I” and the “present I” in *De Profundis*: the latter describes the former through a lens of hindsight and detachedness, also separated by chronology and psychology. In other words, the “present I” or the letter’s narrator has acquired a radically different state of mind. Angvik elaborates that this narrative technique supports the notion that the narrator has not been the main person in the development of his life. This is dramatized formally by the narrator’s portrayal of himself as a subordinate observer who describes main characters and actions that force a life history upon him (369). This is exemplified in an introductory passage, where the authorial persona depicts himself from the outside, “[a]s I sit here in this dark cell in convict clothes, a disgraced and ruined man” (Wilde 4), implying an external point of view which becomes significant in the first part of the letter. This outside approach functions as a means for Wilde to distance himself from the person he once was, considering his past self as someone he cannot relate to in his present state. Equally, it can be something done deliberately to examine the events with the look of an outsider, not becoming more emotionally involved than necessary.

This division of Is makes the narrator temporally dual, or “bitemporal,” as he refers to past episodes with an objective autobiographical voice in simplex form. The self we encounter at the start of the letter is a desolate and desperate self, a writer with a damaged reputation, who is left in an isolated and impoverished state in a prison cell. Also, the present self is in despair, a fact reflected in the next paragraph: “the thought that loathing, bitterness and contempt should for ever take the place once held by love is very sad to me” (Wilde 3). The writer prepares the reader for what is yet to come: not necessarily love, or at least not love in a traditional sense, but a candid expression of deep concern coloured by the emotions of “loathing, bitterness and contempt” for the letter’s primary addressee, Alfred Douglas. In a sharp simile, the writer compares the reading process to a surgical operation or a biopsy, whose aim is to identify the cause of disease: “You must read this letter right through, though each word may become to you as the fire or knife of the surgeon that makes the delicate flesh burn or bleed” (Wilde 4). Here, Wilde attempts to describe the subtle psychological impact of words, anticipating the effect his words will have on his addressee. The reading itself is characterized and intended as a necessary operation for the original addressee to undertake in

order to get rid of his malignancy. Also, this surgical simile reflects the writer's approach to and motivation for the writing process itself as somehow clinical and psychological, but also curative. The curative aspect of the letter is something we will return to below.

As an objective autobiographical narrator writing in simplex form, the letter writer is at liberty to shape the version of his past self the way he wants, yet he chooses to depict himself as a victim of circumstances through e.g. an animal simile: "My judgment forsook me. Terror took its place. I saw no escape (...) Blindly I staggered as an ox into the shambles" (Wilde 10). Zim extracts two valid points in her analysis of this passage: firstly, the "pace of the psychological action is reflected in the rhythm of short sentences mounting to a climax in the simile of the ox led to slaughter;" and secondly, the ox "knows nothing of his fate, but the onlooker anticipates his pain" (155). Through a simile symptomatic of his past behaviour, Wilde the letter writer sees Wilde the naïve earlier version of himself in the act of committing a fatal error, again resulting in an instance where the writer regards his past self retrospectively from a chronologically distant place. Wilde's depiction of his past self as a blinded sacrificial ox conveys emotions of paralysis, helplessness and blindness, as he is faced with a situation he cannot escape. This enhances the reader's empathy towards him. The metaphor may also suggest that the "new Wilde" has reached a new state of insight as he is no longer blind and has indeed "s[een]" or discovered some sort of spiritual "escape" in prison.

In a prose style combining journal and jeremiad, Wilde confronts his past relationship with Douglas in the first part of *De Profundis*. Wilde's biggest blame and shame stem from "the entire ethical degradation" (9) that he allowed Douglas to subject him to as a result of weakness and lack of willpower: "I had always thought that my giving up to you in small things meant nothing: that when a great moment arrived I could reassert my willpower in its natural superiority. It was not so. At the great moment my willpower completely failed me" (Wilde 10). The journal aspect of the text focuses the attention of the writer inwards, examining his own behaviour in the past, while the aspect of jeremiad has an outward focus on the letter's addressee. The latter genre is illustrated in passages describing the minutest details of economic expenses, but also in the writer's attempt to put his addressee on the spot and make him realise the consequences of his own hate-driven behaviour. A jeremiad may be defined as a "long speech or prose work that bitterly laments the state of society and its morals, and often contains a prophecy of its coming downfall." (wiktionary.org). Deriving from the biblical figure Jeremiah, Wilde's jeremiad has the tone of a lamentation where the letter writer laments both his past self and his addressee. Whereas Wilde laments his own past errors, he also criticizes Douglas, who, according to Doylen, is "the embodiment of all the

negatively charged terms of his aesthetic principles” (555) and “a slave to middle-class morality” (556). In simple terms, Douglas becomes a scapegoat onto whom Wilde directs his negative emotions. Douglas’s roles as antagonist and foil will be discussed in further detail in the next subchapter.

In its subjective and detailed reproduction of past events, the opening part of the letter can also be regarded as a personal condensed autobiography, where Wilde describes the crucial events of a specific period of his life, which have led to his present imprisoned state. Angvik proposes that the self draws inspiration from the beginning of Dante’s *Inferno* in *Divine Comedy* in a practical manner (368-9):

Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark, / For the straightforward pathway had been lost. / Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say / What was this forest savage, rough, and stern, / Which in the very thought renews the fear. / So bitter is it, death is little more; / But of the good to treat, which there I found, / Speak will I of the other things I saw there. (Alighieri)

The writer’s purpose of confronting himself and the addressee with their unpleasant mutual past is primarily a purification on the former’s part, much in the same way as the narrator we encounter in Dante’s *Inferno*. As does Dante’s narrator, Wilde seeks catharsis in the relating of his past behaviour and life, what we can call his *vita antica*, which paves the way for his “*vita nuova*” (57). In the first part of the letter, Wilde’s aim is first and foremost to confess and describe his past with all its flaws and sins without holding back. Therefore, both the genres of jeremiad and journal prove useful for the author’s purpose.

In the first part of *De Profundis*, the aim of the authorial persona’s self-fashioning appears to be twofold: “the first [is] to examine exactly what had gone wrong in his relationship with Douglas that had led him to his present predicament, the second being an attempt to recast those events in a way that would imbue them with meaning and give him hope for the future” (Schnitzer 72). The letter writer repeats that he blames himself (Wilde 4, 7). There is therefore another genre to consider here in addition to the journal and jeremiad: in order to be cleansed, he forms the letter, especially the first part of it, as a confession narrative. Zim draws a parallel between Wilde’s letter and Roman senator Boethius’s *Of the Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 524-25), arguing that the “imagery [Wilde] repeatedly used of eradicating obsessive emotions suggests that he regarded writing as a form of spiritual therapy (like the *consolatio* of Boethius’s prisoner), yet the language used to describe his past pain and compulsions is also symbolic of the writer’s current concerns” (145). What Zim implies by “current concerns” is probably Wilde’s intention to “creat[e] a new self to displace the old” (145), literally an attempt at fashioning another self. Wilde’s self-fashioning fulfils, without

doubt, a therapeutic function to some degree; whether Wilde succeeds in “eradicating obsessive emotions” is however something I will return to in subchapter 2.3.1.

What many critics of *De Profundis* tend to downplay is that Wilde writes not primarily to Douglas, even though the letter’s linguistic markers, such as the use of the pronoun “you,” point towards this fact; instead, he writes it, as Peter Raby argues, “to himself” (133). This endorses the notion of the first part of the letter being shaped as a journal. The address to Douglas may be seen merely as a literary strategy which the writer uses to channel his emotional life and ambiguous state of mind. Also, the writer needs an addressee to direct his speech to. Douglas seems to be an obvious choice since he is the one who, in Wilde’s eyes, has contributed to his downfall: “that it was not your father but you who had put me into prison, that from beginning to end you were the responsible person, that it was through you, for you and by you that I was there, never for one instant dawned upon you” (35). Directing the speech literally to himself would probably turn out to be counterproductive.

Fundamentally, the writing itself seems to have a therapeutic effect on the letter writer: “I don’t write this letter to put bitterness into your heart but to pluck it out of mine. For my own sake I must forgive you. One cannot always keep an adder in one’s breast to feed on one, nor rise up every night to sow thorns in the garden of one’s soul” (Wilde 55). According to Zim, Wilde “anticipated that writing about their shared past and offering forgiveness would have a cathartic effect” (144). It is no doubt that the letter has a therapeutic effect on its author; whether it entails a “cathartic effect” will be further discussed in 2.1.3 and 2.3.1.

Speaking of potential catharsis, a sense of tragedy is salient when the letter writer mythologizes his present self “in reverse,” finding himself in “the lowest mire of Malebolge (...) between Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade” (12, 43). Whereas Malebolge is the name for “a pool of filth or a hellish place or condition (...) given by Dante’s *Inferno* to the eighth circle of Hell” (lexico.com), de Retz and de Sade were two scandalous Libertine noblemen, infamous for their wickedness and sodomitic inclination, among other things (Flight; Lichfield). As Angvik suggests, Wilde must descend into the deep psychological mires of Malebolge to be cleansed (368-69). Furthermore, by locating himself between the Frenchmen, Wilde constructs, according to Demoor, an identity through language self-mythologisation and represents it before an audience (14). Wilde’s comparison confirms only his reputation as “the sexual deviant for the late nineteenth century” (qtd. in Doyle 547). In the comparison with the French outcasts, Wilde describes how he pictures his own public persona being dragged into the mire and associated with sexual deviancy. In Doyle’s words, “as *De Profundis* shows, Wilde experienced the public naming of his socially illicit desires as

a direct intervention in his-self-fashioning – as what Foucault calls an ‘objectivation’ of the subject” (554). Apart from supporting the disgrace of Wilde’s public persona, this Foucauldian “objectivation” adds to the process of the mythologising of his “letter persona.”

2.1.2. Douglas as Foil

An important aspect of Greenblattian self-fashioning is that “self is always in relation to others” (Robson 53). It is therefore fruitful and necessary to treat Douglas as a defining factor in Wilde’s own self-fashioning both antithetically and complementarily; this despite the fact that Douglas represents, according to Wayne Koestenbaum, a “wordless presence, a renegade disciple, a disloyal fan, whose lack of fealty and whose silence make the writer write [nevertheless]” (qtd. in Doyle 555). Zim refers to the contrast between Wilde and Douglas, which seemingly and at first sight proves advantageous for the former: “However shallow or selfish the image of his past life appears in the account of the authorial persona who admits moral weakness and pride, there is always a contrast drawn with Douglas’s even worse behaviour” (145). In this manner, Douglas becomes a foil, or in Zim’s words “the adversary, or tempter, as well as temptation or the projection of the obsession that precipitated the protagonist’s fall” (152), a representation resembling Satan in the Fall of Man. At one point, Wilde represents himself revealingly as Eve, in that he wanted “to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world” (68). As foil, Douglas is represented unfavourably in order to enhance the way Wilde’s own flawed and corrupted behaviour is perceived. As Zim argues further, “the representation of the power of the adversary is an important aspect of the authorial persona’s struggle toward self-awareness and self-definition” (152). Having said that, Wilde is not entirely without sin either, a fact supported in his indirect comparison to himself as Eve.

In another intertextual simile, Wilde compares himself to the great lord who raises a lion cub in the third stasimon of Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*: “And the thing grows up and shows the nature of its race, and destroys the lord and his house and all that he possesses. I feel that I was such a one as he” (12). Douglas is the lord’s lion cub, which “grows up to fulfil its nature and destroys everything” (Zim 153). Wilde’s “dramatization” of himself has at least two effects. Primarily, by comparing himself to familiar and classical concepts, the authorial persona compares himself to legendary characters of whom society, or at least the reading elite, already has a preconception; cf. the already-mentioned references to de Sade and de Retz. What Wilde ultimately does is to describe his conception of society’s preconception of himself as a public persona. Secondly, the writer blurs the lines between reality and myth,

while creating a mythical aura around himself, thereby sublimating his self to another sphere far from the prison confines, nevertheless inscribing his place in an “eternity of infamy” (Wilde 62). Worth noting is that he uses these references not in a flattering but rather in a self-sacrificing and unflattering manner: de Retz, de Sade, and the man with the lion cub in Aeschylus’s play are all associated with non-virtuous qualities such as indecency and, specifically the latter, naïveté; they are thus infamous for their vices. These intertextual references validate the theory that Wilde had readers other than Lord Douglas in mind when composing his letter. Also, the particular reference to *Agamemnon* implies that Douglas is an accomplice as the lion cub. In general terms, it seems reasonable that Wilde addresses somebody else; indeed, an audience with the same intellectual background as himself, who has knowledge of the Frenchmen and the Greek playwright. Furthermore, as Zim points out, the quotations from the great tragedian “not only confirmed the prisoner’s sense of his former greatness and evoked pathos,” for “Wilde relied on the affective quality of his writing to convince readers of this assessment of his life” (155). Style and content are in this manner intrinsically woven together in a passage with a hidden rhetoric. In a resigned tone, Wilde proclaims the inevitability of the negative public preconceptions: “I have no desire to complain. One of the many lessons that one learns in prison is that things are what they are, and will be what they will be” (43).

The events taking place at a Brighton hotel some days in October 1894 can be considered the narrative climax of the letter’s first part (Wilde 18-22), a scene where Douglas shows his true nature. When Douglas falls ill with influenza, Wilde relates that he nursed him “with that affection, tenderness and love that, whatever you may think, is not to be procured for money” (19). Wilde becomes infected with the virus from Douglas (Wilde 19) and is confined to his bed, whereupon Douglas reveals his true self: “I told you at length to leave the room: you pretended to do so, but when I lifted my head from the pillow in which I had buried it, you were still there, and with brutality of laughter and hysteria of rage you moved suddenly towards me. A sense of horror came over me, for what reason I could not make out” (Wilde 21). As Gay points out in his article “Myth and Biblical Imagery in *De Profundis*,” Douglas “incarnates a menacing and destructive figure for Wilde (...) [;] rather than a diabolic being, his attributes are those of a nineteenth century vampire more than those of Milton’s Satan” (10). This passage becomes a manifestation of Douglas’s ability to both overwhelm Wilde and suck out his energy in a vampiric manner like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897): “With a wrench, which threw his victim back upon the bed as though hurled from a height, he turned and sprang at us” (262). The effect of this dramatic depiction enhances the

contrast between Douglas as victimizer and the letter writer's victimized "past I," thus making the reader empathize more with the latter.

Douglas's blindness is one of the recurrent themes towards the end of the first part of *De Profundis*: "I saw that you realised nothing of what you had done" (35). This characterization contrasts to Wilde's newly acquired insight, which he has acquired in prison, but it also throws Wilde's own past blindness into relief. The simile Wilde uses for himself as a blinded sacrificial ox, has already been mentioned; in describing his position between Douglas and his father, Wilde employs another animal metaphor: "His hatred of you was just as persistent as your hatred of him, and I was the stalking horse for both of you, and a mode of attack as a mode of shelter" (33). Also, both these animal metaphors describe the author's feeling of submission and lack of individuality, because Wilde's role in the hateful father-son-relationship is merely instrumental: "in your war of hate with your father I was at once shield and weapon to each of you" (Wilde 42). Wilde portrays himself as doubly abused, as someone / something used for both offence and defence. Douglas is depicted as victim as well, but then of his own self-love, and, even more importantly, of his hate towards his own father, as he is described as "a puppet worked by some secret and unseen hand to bring terrible events to a terrible issue" (Wilde 27), and "sombre figure of a tragic show" (Wilde 40). These notions will be further discussed in 3.3.2.

Wilde asks rhetorically what happens if he were going to leave love behind in prison: "I said to myself: '*At all costs I must keep Love in my heart. If I go into prison without Love what will become of my Soul?*'" (37). However, this "love" consists of other things which appear between the lines. An ambivalent form of love characterized by self-love towards himself, is a defining motivation for the letter writer, both in the past and the present:

I could if I had chosen have torn you to pieces with bitter reproaches. I could have rent you with maledictions. I could have held up a mirror to you, and shown you such an image of yourself that you would not have recognised it as you 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 for ever. (Wilde 37)

Wilde seems to draw thematic inspiration from his gothic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) in this spine-shivering passage. As Angvik points out, the contrastive approach, with constant ambivalence in the portrayal of Douglas, emerges when the letter writer says that he will not do what he in fact is doing (374). In other words, the difference between the description of the conditional clauses (cf. "I could have...") and the actual intention (i.e. the rest of the clauses) is blurred, since the latter overshadows the former. This results in an actual attempt of holding up the mirror to Douglas, reflecting in turn Wilde's original intention,

which he states at the beginning: to confront his addressee with the latter's behaviour (cf. the surgical simile in 2.1.1.). Angvik makes another important point when he argues that the text opposes its author's intentions, since the monotonous listing of traumatizing events and the lack of control of the writing act leads to the lack of control of the writer himself (375). The author encourages the reader to believe in the dichotomy set between Wilde the victim and Douglas the victimizer, while the monotonous selective listing told by only one of the parties is truly not in the letter writer's favour. His maniacal and mechanical repetitions (Angvik 374) suggest that there is more to this unequal and personal treatment of matters than meets the eye. In her and Liz Stanley's co-written article "Letters as / not a genre," Margaretta Jolly writes that it is not "necessary to say that letters are deliberate lies, although we might want to be suspicious of the assumption that they are the spontaneous outpourings of the true self. Rather, we need to see a subtle interchange between fantasy, writing and relationship" (93). This view of the letter as an unreliable genre corroborates with the notion of Wilde and Douglas as devised literary constructs (cf. Wood).

Another inconsistent trait within Wilde's exceedingly negative portrayal of Douglas is the stark contrast it constitutes with the former's depiction of the latter in letters written before the imprisonment. In those, Douglas is depicted as a "slim thing, gold-haired like an angel,' 'a white flower,' '[m]y sweet rose, my delicate flower, my lily of lilies,' 'dearest of created things,' 'white narcissus in an unknown field,' 'the supreme, the perfect love of my life,' 'sweetest of all boys, most loved of all loves'" (qtd. in Doyle 555). This undivided praise is also referred to in *De Profundis*: "I compare you to Hylas or Hyacinth, Jonquil or Narcisse, or someone whom the great god of Poetry favoured, and honoured with his love" (25). All these flattering and equally exceedingly positive affectations, apparently written by a love-drunken lover, represent a striking counterpoint to the gloomy picture which Wilde paints of his ex-lover in *De Profundis*. It is simple for the reader to get caught up, not to mention be manipulated, by Wilde's recriminations and rhetoric against Douglas. Perhaps more revealing, then, is Wilde's inconsistency when portraying Douglas, but also the letter writer's own self-pity, in his process of describing himself as passivized victim. As Small and Guy argue in their critical analysis "Reading *De Profundis*," Wilde's "construction of himself as aggrieved victim may have more to do with rhetoric than reality, and thus [hi]s tragic persona may also be largely a fiction" (131). This applies none the less to the portrait of Douglas, because Guy and Small's claim resonates with what I stated lastly in the introduction, that both Wilde and Douglas become 'Wilde' and 'Douglas' in *De Profundis*, i.e. literary constructs that contain more fiction than biography. We need to take into consideration Wilde's predilection for

blurring the lines between life and art; in other words, employing fantasy in the depiction of his and Douglas's relationship. Also, we should consider the author's tendency of simplification in his selective rendering of past events, a tool he uses to gain empathy from his readers. When the reader sees through this one-dimensional style, one may ask how much empathy the author gains after all.

2.1.3. Wilde as Ascetic

I will now move on to Wilde's identity as a prisoner and focus more precisely on his ascetic approach. Subchapter 2.2.3. will deal with Wilde as prisoner as well, but then in a social context in relation to the prison system; however, this part focuses more on asceticism as described in the first part of the letter and covers the individual aspect of Wilde's prisoner identity. Wilde describes his ascetic life thus: "But we who live in prison, and in whose lives there is no event but sorrow, have to measure time by throbs of pain, and the record of bitter moments" (18). Both sorrow and pain are intrinsic part of Wilde's present life, and sorrowful suffering plays an indispensable role in the writer's newly acquired identity, or what Zim calls "his new authorial persona: the actual and existential prisoner" (151). In another passage Wilde describes the overall importance of suffering, which "is the means by which we exist, because it is the only means by which we become conscious of existing; and the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the warrant, the evidence, of our continued identity" (Wilde 18). "Warrant" can mean two things in this context: either an authorization or a justification. Either way, the past is regarded by the author as something crucial in the crafting of his "continued identity." As a consequence, Wilde seems to be stuck in the past, as he keeps revolving around the same centre of throbbing pain caused by Douglas. The ascetic deems it necessary to hold on to the memory of his past as prisoner; however, this may instead be an indication of not being able to liberate himself from it.

Wilde is inspired by both Western philosophy and Eastern religion in his newly acquired role as an ascetic. Even though he asserts explicitly in the letter that "neither religion, morality nor reason can help me" (59), the influence of these *doxa* is evident. Thus, the letter writer is inconsistent. Both in *De Profundis* and "The Critic as Artist," Wilde draws inspiration from *rationalist* Baruch Spinoza, more precisely the philosopher's statement from his *Ethics* that "sorrow (...) is a passage to a lesser perfection" (qtd. in "The Critic as Artist" 215). This claim implies that sorrow makes a man humbler and more appreciative of the "small things" in life. Moreover, Wilde's citation of William Wordsworth's "The Borderers" reveals his view on suffering as something mysterious and infinite: "Suffering is permanent,

obscure and dark | And has [sic] the nature of Infinity” (qtd. in Wilde 57). Wilde finds in suffering the inspiration for the refrain that runs throughout the letter: “The supreme vice is shallowness. Everything that is realised is right” (4, 34, 109). The prisoner’s capacity of realisation is therefore closely linked to suffering and sorrow.

Revolving time and a desire for liberation are two notions Wilde borrows from Eastern religions such as Buddhism. Wilde’s approach to himself in this suffering role, i.e. the ascetic part of his self-fashioning, resembles that of a Buddhist monk. In a philosophical manner, the writer reflects on his recently acquired understanding of time: “Suffering is one long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain” (Wilde 45). The prisoner identifies with his fellow inmates with the collective pronoun “we,” a pronoun which importantly excludes Douglas who “[h]ardly, if at all, can (...) see across so wide a waste” (45). This “waste” may represent a temporal kind of waste hinting at the vastness between past and present, but also the social disparity between Wilde and Douglas. More importantly, though, this “we” seems also to exclude the reader. Zim argues that this pronoun “invites [Wilde’s] readers’ understanding and sympathy for them all” (151). One may agree with Zim that this use of the collective pronoun would make the reader empathize more with the narrator, whereas it is also possible to turn it the other way around, perceiving the effect to be rather the opposite. Wilde and his fellow inmates become then a “we,” and the reader forms another party together with Douglas as outside non-prisoners. The “wide waste” seems then to be a result of the ascetic’s self-pitying style, which ultimately runs the risk of making the reader empathize less with him.

Moreover, Wilde resembles a Buddhist in his depiction of time as *Kalachakra*, a term defined as “cycles of time, with time being a measurement of change, both externally in the world and the universe, and internally within the body” (Berzin). Having conceived time as linear before, the prisoner has yet acquired a conception of time as circular; his inspiration from Buddhism becomes obvious. The conception of time as revolving around a suffering centre echoes another Buddhistic term, namely *dukkha*. As Kelly Robinson argues in her article “Reading Oscar Wilde’s Spirituality in *De Profundis*,” the prisoner’s “emphasis on suffering echoes the first noble truth of Buddhism, *dukkha*, translated as ‘suffering, anxiety’” (222). Pain is as important for the Buddhist monk as for Wilde: “Time seems to circle round one centre of pain” (45). In the same way as the Buddhist, Wilde attempts to discover his goal by developing his own character, and Kenneth Morgan argues that, for the Buddhist, “[t]his development comes only through control of the mind and purification of the emotions” (68).

We have already seen that Wilde attempts to purify his emotions in a Dantean fashion. However, Wilde's lack of moderation and inconsistent rhetoric, both of which make themselves felt in the text as textual embodiments of his "control of the mind," indicate that he is not able to control his mind; rather, he struggles to steer the letter in a consistent and trustworthy direction. Despite his struggles, Wilde's aim of purification links to his primary intention in the letter as described to More Adey: "it will deal (...) with the development of my character." This character development leads arguably and eventually to a placebo-like *moksha* for the author, a "liberation or release" (Olivelle), but certainly not "a tragic defeat of the kind which only ideological coercion, reinforced by overt brutality, can effect" (Dollimore 95). Wilde's approach to *moksha* will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

Wilde continues his description of life in prison, specifically the fixed monotony of it:

The paralyzing immobility of life, every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern, so that we eat and drink and walk and lie down and pray, or kneel at least for prayer, according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula – (...) seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless change. (Wilde 45)

Zim argues that "the qualification ("or kneel at least ..." which emphasizes the inner life of the spirit as the distinguishing, but also unknowable, feature of personhood) restores some individuality to the prisoners" (151). Zim's opinion is one way to look at it. However, I argue on the contrary that the "pray[ing]" and the other elements which are "according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula" make the prisoners not individual *per se*; instead, these acts are non-individualising, as these acts unify the prisoners as a collective group of ascetics. What Wilde describes is the monotonous life of the prisoner, which is not a unique life at all, but rather a life that is "paralyzing[ly] immobil[e]," "regulated after an unchangeable pattern," and dictated by an "iron formula." All these features widen the gap between writer and reader.

The first part of *De Profundis* encompasses many conflicting emotions, a fact that supports the notion of the self as complex (Angvik 369). The self-same emotions render the letter narrator inconsistent and unreliable, as he employs hidden rhetoric to persuade his readers. His treatment of Douglas as foil will be further developed in part 2.3.1. Also, Wilde's depiction of himself as an ascetic prisoner are central aspects of his innovative and spiritual approach to fashioning a new self, a link I will investigate further in 2.2.3. But first, we will examine the equivocal role of the individualist in the letter's central section.

2.2. The Second Part of *De Profundis*. “Simply the continuance, by means of development and evolution, of my former life”: Wilde’s Questionable Ambitions for His *Vita Nuova*

The middle section of *De Profundis* stands out from the rest as “an intricate, multifaceted spiritual treatise” (Kelly 210). For the most part it is not addressed to Douglas, but instead to an implied reader, “giving way to a more introspective tone” (Kelly 212). The tone is distinctly different and more essayistic, resembling that in Wilde’s earlier essays such as “The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (both published in 1891). The writer appears to have three foci in this part of the letter: (1) a presentation of himself as an individualist in the layout of his *Vita Nuova* (Wilde 57); (2) a romanticizing interpretation of the figure of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels and Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (1863); and (3) a representation of himself as prisoner and pariah of the “heavy, cumbrous, blind mechanical forces of Society” (Wilde 90). This part of the thesis will investigate each of these, arguing that they are connected to Wilde’s self-fashioning as defined by the previously mentioned theorists and scholars. Moreover, all three foci have in common that they resist society’s impact on the individual, thus opposing a traditional Greenblattian perspective on self-fashioning, where the aim is to aspire towards society-praised ideals. Wilde’s self-fashioning can nonetheless be interpreted as a “comforting deception,” as claimed by Dollimore (95). There are several indications that the letter, though curative, is something the author conceives in order to distance himself from society and, perhaps more interestingly and importantly, himself. In this manner, Wilde’s *Vita Nuova* project may be interpreted as a castle in the air or an illusion.

2.2.1. Wilde’s Individualism

In the second part of *De Profundis*, the letter self steps markedly forward. As Molly Robinson Kelly asserts in her article “Reading Oscar Wilde’s Spirituality in *De Profundis*,” Wilde’s temporary liberation from his addressee and their shared past permits him to focus more on a direct fashioning of his self and an expression of his ambitions for his “New Life” in a more introspective style: his “Montaigne-like shaping of his ideas in writing, and the practical, self-directed spirituality he discovers therein, allow Wilde to wrest his ideas away from Bosie and the past, and to redirect them instead to the individualism that has always been his stronghold” (222). The adjective “Montaigne-like” derives from the French philosopher of that name, known for a dense stream-of-consciousness style, resembling Wilde’s own: “[t]he

author's unbridled and energetic thought process is reflected directly, *en direct* so to speak, in its vigorous, almost restless writing" (Kelly 218). In his article "Thought as Style: Montaigne's Essays," Jared Marcel Pollen writes:

Montaigne engages his style through what he calls, "la peinture de la pensée" ("the painting of thought.") The writer confronts the blank page as the blank canvas of the mind, and as the mind adjusts itself to a topic in the act of unpacking it, so do the "high" and "low" styles of the voice. As he says while apologizing for one of his signature digressions: "My style and my mind alike go roaming." It is this mimetic representation of intellectual process that defines Montaigne's technique; and technique, as Oscar Wilde says, is really personality.

The same blend of "high" and "low" styles of the voice permeates the middle section of Wilde's letter. An example of this is when Wilde justifies why "[n]either religion, morality, nor reason can help me at all" (59), illustrated by the passage on reason: "Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. But, somehow, I have got to make both of these things just and right to me" (59). As Pollen describes Montaigne's style, which in turn can be used to describe Wilde's, there are two thought processes at play here: "the voice of the mind discovering the subject, and the 'other voice' of the mind interjecting on itself to reflect as it makes the discovery" ("Thought As Style: Montaigne's Essays"). Essentially, this Montaignesque style results in a monologue that interacts with itself, as if it were a dialogue, resembling thus "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist." This technique of discovering and reflecting is essential in Wilde's process of attempting to fashion a new self, a technique which he himself designates as nothing less than "personality."

The aim of "somehow" in Wilde's previous quote refers probably to the leitmotif of the letter's middle section, which is individualism. As Ian Small points out in his footnotes to the letter, Wilde "uses the term 'individualist' in two distinct senses." Spelt as here, with a small letter, it "refers simply to a process of self-realization, or realizing one's personality" (244). Wilde writes that "I am far more of an individualist than I ever was. Nothing seems to me of the smallest value except what one gets out of oneself. My nature is seeking a fresh mode of self-realisation. That is all I am concerned with" (57). Put differently, this self-realisation is Wilde's attempt of fashioning a new independent and individualistic self. This desired individualisation entails a radical transformation and a significant importance for the author, who regards his past self as anti-individualistic due to Douglas's domination of his willpower: "The basis of character is willpower, and my willpower became absolutely subject to yours. It sounds a grotesque thing to say, but it is none the less true" (9). The first task Wilde sets himself to do in his *Vita Nuova* is to liberate himself from any negative feeling, especially bitterness, towards Douglas: "the first thing that I have got to do is to free myself

from any possible bitterness of feeling towards you” (Wilde 58). As Kelly rightfully claims, bitterness and anger “must be overcome by forgiveness because these negative emotions are destructive to the person who feels them, not necessarily to the person who is their object” (216). Besides, Wilde’s “central management strategy is to frame his entire calamity as a learning experience that will help him become a more fully realized, wholly developed individual” (Kelly 216), an approach previously illustrated by the passages from Dante’s *Inferno*. When Wilde “chooses” to return to Douglas, as we will see in part 2.3.1., we may question whether the former succeeds in “overcom[ing] (...) these negative emotions,” or is stuck in a vicious circle.

We have already seen several examples of Wilde inscribing himself in older literary traditions with his prison letter, an intertextual strategy that is significant also in the letter’s second part. Wilde’s *Vita Nuova*, in other words his “fresh development (...) [and] fresh mode of self-realisation” (Wilde 57), is one of this section’s central topics. The letter writer borrows the Italian term from another of Dante’s literary works with the same title: a collection of poetry about a poet’s love for an idealised woman, who is a dream of the sublime and holy in love, thereby an abstraction rather than a woman in flesh and blood (Fehr and Aardal). The fact that the initial implication of *Vita Nuova* implies an abstract idealisation has a crucial significance for Wilde’s own use of the term, since we may question the authenticity of this new life project of his. Zim argues that “no man is entirely the author of his own life in reality, but insofar as art reflected the grotesque tragedy of modern life, a writer could authorize his life’s story by drawing on the best literary traditions to console himself in new writing” (158). In this context, the verb “authorize” gains another literal meaning: Wilde’s “author-ization” becomes the process of creating his own authorial persona through the works of other authors, using literature which resonates with himself.

De Profundis is in this manner a literary collage, which draws heavily on other literary traditions, an effect that intriguingly undermines Wilde’s alleged individualism. In the previous quote, Zim alludes to what Wilde writes in one of his self-reflecting moments: “[o]ne of the many lessons that one learns in prison is, that things are what they are and will be what they will be” (43). One of the things Wilde refers to with this statement is his worsened reputation caused by the trials, leading in turn to a disgrace of his name: “I had disgraced that name eternally. I had made it a low byword among low people. I had dragged it through the very mire” (46). Therefore, it becomes a vitally important matter for Wilde to plan a new life, with an alias since his name has been irredeemably dishonoured: “as *my* name, once so musical in the mouth of Fame, will have to be abandoned by me” (112).

After he was released, Wilde adopted the name “Sebastian Melmoth,” taken from his grand-uncle Charles Maturin’s novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (Tóibín 78). The use of an alias makes this new life seem a cover operation, a means for Wilde of distancing himself from his earlier self and negative connotations attached to his surname. This dissociation from his earlier self does not correspond to his own qualification of a ‘New Life,’ which he expresses as “simply the continuance (...) of my former life” (68); in fact, it seems like this conclusive change of identity is an attempt to distance himself further from the celebrated author he once was.

Even though Wilde states explicitly that religion does not help him in search of a ‘new life’ (59), his individualistic approach seems to draw significantly from Christianity. The letter writer seems to contradict himself, because of the inconsistency between his “theoretical” premises and his “practical” approach to individualism. It turns out that his individualistic quest for his self is not actually that independent, as it is partly facilitated by religion. To pursue his individualism, the letter writer turns first to forgiveness, a component central to Christian ethics as described for example in Colossians 3:13: “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (BibleGateway). Furthermore, Wilde writes that “I would not a bit mind sleeping in the cool grass in summer, and when winter came on sheltering myself by the warm close-thatched rick, or under the penthouse of a great barn, *provided I had love in my heart*” (58, emphasis mine). This necessity of love echoes in a conspicuous manner the beginning of chapter 13 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, which speaks of love as something indispensable: “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (BibleGateway). Also, Wilde writes that “I do not write this letter to put bitterness into your [Douglas’s] heart but to pluck it out of mine. For my own sake I must forgive you. One cannot always keep an adder in one’s breast to feed on one, nor rise up every night to sow thorns in the garden of one’s soul” (55). Apart from the biblical language here, as elucidated by Zim (144), this passage resonates in turn with Jeremiah 4:3: “Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns” (BibleGateway). This is a passage that substantiates the theme of repentance and forgiveness, as well as it has obvious religious connotations.

Altering his past through writing becomes one of Wilde’s primary missions. The middle section of *De Profundis* can thus be regarded as a thought experiment by the author or a manifestation of a desire to change his reputation assisted by Christian values. Departing

from the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the letter writer asks why the sinner must repent, answering simply “because otherwise he would be unable to realise what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that. *It is the means by which one alters one’s past*” (83, emphasis mine). The letter writing itself represents a concrete means for the ruined author to improve his reputation. Zim elaborates on this, stating that “the way one alters one’s past for oneself and the world is by writing about it; writing in the context of the crises of imprisonment speaks to the future more authoritatively than any other self-impression considered by readers to be the product of easier, more comfortable, less pressing circumstances” (163). Wilde’s prison circumstances prove to be a factor which adds to the letter’s urgency and the reader’s empathy towards the writer, driving the message even more forward than if the letter had been written from outside prison. Nevertheless, one may question Wilde’s naivety. He actually cannot alter his past since, all in all, the Greeks are right: “The Greeks thought that [i.e. altering one’s past] impossible. They often say in their gnomic aphorisms, ‘Even the Gods cannot alter the past’” (Wilde 83). However, it appears that it is sufficient for Wilde to *fool himself* into believing that by writing about the past, he is able to change it. This self-deception may be what Dollimore has in mind when he writes that “it is exactly then, when the past is potentially most informative in relation to a present vulnerability, that our relation to it runs the risk of becoming most conservative: we find in the past an explanation of the present which is also a comforting deception” (95). This “comforting deception” may in Wilde’s case be a delusion which allows him to alter his past by writing about it, and it becomes in this manner a placebo for him in the fabrication or authorization of his own reputation. This harks back to the cleansing of emotions he strives for when attempting to free himself from bitterness towards Douglas, as it is his own needs that are in focus, not others’ eventual conception of his writing as placebo.

In its manner of turning negative emotions into positive counterparts, *De Profundis* can be regarded not only as a confession narrative, but also an original conversion narrative. Zim observes that “Wilde’s account of his past and evaluation of his new spiritual development in prison resemble a conversion narrative” (143). Even though Wilde claims that he refutes religion, it is possible to regard *De Profundis* as a conversion narrative in the traditional sense, as “a seventeenth and eighteenth century [sic] religious genre, in which a convert offers the testimony of his (...) spiritual rebirth within a new Church or faith” (EuropeanConversionNarratives). The author draws on elemental Christian ethics in his Vita Nuova project. However, Wilde’s conversion entails a more literal meaning of the word, since it concerns primarily the process of converting negative emotions into positive and

constructive counterparts: “I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me (...) the silence, the solitude, the shame—each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience” (59). This quote strengthens the idea that the writing itself, apart from being a means to convert negative emotions, is a therapeutic process for the author, who was “once a lord of language” (45): the author can convert his trauma and negativity through remastering words in the medium of a letter. Also, one may argue that the letter is an attempt at a spiritual rebirth within a new faith: the faith of the individual.

Since Wilde writes himself that he does not find any use for religion (59), it is legitimate to question his consistency when he chooses to dedicate a considerable part of the letter’s middle section to the figure of Jesus Christ. On closer reflection, however, it may not be that strange, since Christ can be regarded as the quintessential personification of a *vita nuova*, since he died and was resurrected to new life. What Wilde ultimately does by referring to Christ is that, apart from making use of a medieval genre (Robson 54), he makes use of his imagination, an ability he regards as defining both for Christ and himself as artist: “the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flamelike imagination” (70). Imagination is the most important skill for artists in their work of depicting other peoples’ lives and minds, an ability Douglas importantly lacks: “What an entire lack of imagination!” (Wilde 22). It is closely linked to empathy, which Wilde describes on several occasions as “the faculty ‘by which, and by which alone, we can understand others in their real as in their ideal relations’” (34). Christ’s humility becomes an indispensable factor for the author, who once was anything but humble: “The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring: (...) I altered the minds of men and the colours of things” (56). However, it seems that Wilde’s definition of being humble is restrictive and slightly deceptive, as he defines it as the “frank acceptance of all experiences, just as Love in the artist is simply that sense of Beauty that reveals to the world its body and its soul” (69). What Wilde refers to as “humility” may, in other words, be a combination of empathy and realism, coloured by arrogance. For, as Ellman points out, *De Profundis* “suffers from the adulteration of simplicity by eloquence, [and] by an arrogance lurking in its humility” (484). This becomes then another factor that destabilizes the author’s sincerity and consistency.

2.2.2. Wilde’s *Imitatio Christi*

As Greenblatt suggests, “fashioning may suggest the achievement of a less tangible shape,” and “the recurrent model for this fashioning is Christ” (2). A significant part of *De*

Profundis's middle section is modelled after this specific medieval genre. Wilde's retelling of Christ in *De Profundis* has a reverent and pompous style, which can seem to enhance the distance between subject and object: "One always thinks of him as a young bridegroom with his companions, as indeed he somewhere describes himself, or as a shepherd straying through a valley with his sheep in search of green meadow or cool stream, or as a singer trying to build out of music the walls of the city of God, or as a lover for whose love the whole world was too small" (72). Wilde is inspired and awe-filled by the "young Galician peasant imagining that he could bear on his own shoulders the entire world: all that had been already done and suffered, and all that was yet to be done and suffered" (70). However, the former discovers many features of himself in the latter, which results in an idiosyncratic reading with a purifying purpose, diminishing the distance between subject and object. Gay argues that Wilde's "personal and whimsical figuration of Christ unmask[s] the graduated assumption of a new self constructed on biblical grounds by means of inner depuration" (3). Depuration is the keyword here since Wilde's identification with Christ implies a cleansing of the former's soul, for "[w]hen one comes in contact with the soul it makes one simple as a child, as Christ said one should be" (73). Moreover, Wilde's "unmask[ing] [of] the graduated assumption of a new self" supports the fact that the letter writer's imitation of Christ reveals illusory aspects of his own self-fashioning.

Angvik claims that Wilde's reading of Christ is liberatingly free from Christian belief and Christian dogmatics, and it is independently free from exegesis and the traditional forms of biblical readings (389). I agree with Angvik, that there is agnostic objectivity in Wilde's reading of Christ, but the reading seems not to be devoid of exegesis. In fact, Wilde reads Christ in a personal and self-*fashioning* manner, as he discovers several characteristics that he strives for himself: artistic imagination, boundless mercy, independent individuality, and even love for his enemies. Also, Christ's ambition of all-encompassing compassion is a source of inspiration for the suffering prisoner, who identifies with the former as the ultimate compassionate human being or even an Agnus Dei: "if (...) a friend of mine had a sorrow, and refused to allow me to share it, I should feel it most bitterly" (86). Like Wilde, the only thing Christ cannot stand is "those who are made stupid by education – people who are full of opinions not one of which they can understand, a peculiarly modern type, and one summed up by Christ when he describes it as the type of one who has the key of knowledge, can't use it himself and won't allow other people to use it, though it may be made to open the gate of God's Kingdom" (81). Wilde's autobiographical reading may therefore be interpreted as a subjective reading, where he, on the one hand, compares himself to Christ with ulterior

motives. On the other hand, the misleading know-alls are a timeless sort of people who Wilde compares with his contemporary “British philistines” (81).

Following this thought, what if the tables were turned and Wilde himself was the misleading know-all who invokes the right to know the secret of life and attempts to lure the reader, in this manner becoming a reverse Philistine? His eloquence and wit are persuasive, but the reader may be reluctant to trust the quondam bon vivant who has ended up as a prisoner. Also, Wilde’s megalomaniac assessments of himself do not weigh in his favour: “I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age” (55) and “I wanted to eat of the fruit of all of the trees in the garden of the world” (68). In this context, Wilde’s heretic knowledge can be regarded as something powerful and potentially dangerous, which strengthens in turn his identity as outcast. In this context, it is natural to draw a parallel to Christ who was accused of blasphemy, a type of heresy, as in Mark 14:63: “The high priest tore his clothes. ‘Why do we need any more witnesses?’ he asked. ‘You have heard the blasphemy.’” (BibleGateway). One must take into account that both Christ and Wilde were regarded by many contemporaries as misleading, since they both represented something different and subversive as part of a minority. This fact becomes even clearer in Wilde’s reading of Christ, both in *De Profundis* and his earlier essay “The Soul of Man under Socialism.”

Wilde’s fascination for, and identification with, Christ can namely be traced back to his 1891 essay “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” where he praises the Saviour as one of the first individualists, or even anarchists. Anne Varty writes that Wilde in this essay “represents Christ as a subversive, asocial agent, who challenged traditional orthodoxies” (xix), in other words a heretic. Wilde himself nuances this by describing Christ as someone who “made no attempt to reconstruct society, and consequently the individualism that he preached to man could be realised only through pain or in solitude” (278). According to Simon Critchley, we find the same emphasis on “pain [and] solitude” in *De Profundis*. Hence, the prisoner’s privilege of suffering and isolation is argued to facilitate his access to individualism, for “it is only in and through the experience of imprisonment that Wilde is able to become himself, to deepen what he relentlessly calls his individualism into a subjectivity defined by the transfiguration of suffering” (“Oscar Wilde’s faithless Christianity”). Critchley argues further that Wilde is able to find himself through this individualism, but “himself” in this context becomes a relative and restrictive concept. Even though Wilde writes that his aim is to pursue his past self, cf. “this New Life is the continuance of my former life” (68), there are several factors indicating that he is obliged to leave his past self in favour of a radically

other “self,” or what he calls a future self that serves as a camouflage for something else. Furthermore, Wilde the essayist argues that the “ideals that we owe to Christ are the ideals of the man who abandons society entirely, or of the man who resists society absolutely” (278). The author does not use the word “anarchist” explicitly either in *De Profundis* or “The Soul of Man,” but the individualist he moulds of Christ fits precisely to a definition of individualism as the “absence of government and absolute freedom of the individual, regarded as a political idea” (ordnett.no). Wilde’s potential anti-philistine and anarchistic ideas can be interpreted as subversive and potentially dangerous for a society which rejects a focus on the individual, an interpretation which is reflected in Wilde’s own claim that “all great ideas *are* dangerous” (83).

Wilde sees many similarities between himself and the son of God in his personal reading of Christ. Not least is this because of the latter’s own outcast identity, which makes him “*despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*” (76). Wilde borrows Isaiah’s words to portray Christ and implicitly also himself. Moreover, Christ’s imagination is another feature which links the two of them: “he is ‘of imagination all compact’” (78). This is an obvious reference to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “The lunatic, the lover and the poet | Are of imagination all compact” (qtd. in Small 266). The author’s fascination with Christ is evident in “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” where Christ serves as the ultimate ideal for the aspiring individualist: “It does not matter what he is as long as he realises the perfection of the soul that is within him. All imitation in morals and in life is wrong” (257). Interestingly, Wilde seems to refute his own *imitation* of Christ pre-emptively by this claim, since he states that “all imitation in morals (...) are wrong.” This is another feature which adds to Wilde’s inconsistency. However, in *De Profundis*, Wilde quotes his earlier essay and writes also that “he who would lead a Christ-like life must be entirely and absolutely himself” (69), because Christ is a man made for exceptions: “Christ had no patience with the dull lifeless mechanical systems that treat people as if they were things, and so treat everybody alike: as if anybody (...) was like aught else in the world. For him there were no laws: there were exceptions merely” (Wilde 80-81). Christ as man of exceptions represents an ideal for the author, who also was “made for exceptions, not for laws” (59).

Wilde’s reworking of Jesus Christ may be an argument supporting the former as a man of exceptions, but also of megalomania and contradictions. As Kelly asserts, the reworking is also a “discussion (...) that is simultaneously a spiritual and artistic manifesto, meant to serve as a foundation for [the former’s] future art” (211). Wilde praises Christ as the “palpitating centre of romance,” because of his ability to create himself “out of his own imagination

entirely” (77). Christ becomes in this manner “the most supreme of Individualists” (Wilde 73). It is no wonder that Christ is such a tempting figure for Wilde or a figure he desires to be identified with. There is a certain element of hero worship in this elaborate and devoted representation of Jesus Christ, not unlike that of a Christian believer. However, this worshiper’s focus is primarily on Christ’s individualism, not the latter’s miracle-making or the implications of his being God’s son. In an unapologetic manner, Wilde juxtaposes himself to Christ in one of the most important and illustrative passages in the letter. His disgraceful appearance at Clapham Junction evokes an atmosphere resembling the crucifixion at Golgotha, but unlike Christ who, according to Luke 23:34, uttered “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (BibleGateway), Wilde seems to have limited compassion for the “jeering mob” (88) even in hindsight: “to mock at a soul in pain is a dreadful thing. Unbeautiful are their lives who do it” (88). This is another indirect attack on the British Philistine, who “does not recognise the dynamic force when he meets it either in a man or a movement” (90). Guy and Small argue that this passage represents a “hubristic self-assertion (in Wilde’s comparison of his own suffering with the agony of Christ), and lachrymose self-pity” (130). Combined with Wilde’s focus on humility, passages like these strengthen the idea that the “Wilde that emerges from the whole manuscript is a bundle of contradictions” (Guy and Small 130). This supports in turn Angvik’s description of the self of *De Profundis* as an unstable, changing, dynamic, controversial, and self-contradictory subject (369).

2.2.3. Wilde as Prisoner

We have already seen in 2.1.3. that Wilde’s fashioning of his prisoner identity is an important aspect of his general self-fashioning. There is a critical tone in the second part of the letter as well, but instead of being directed towards Douglas, the critique is levelled at society and its unrighteous privilege to “inflict appalling punishments on the individual,” because of its “supreme vice of shallowness, and [hence] fails to realise what it has done” (61). However, Wilde exhibits an ambivalent attitude towards the prison system. On the one hand are Wilde’s feelings of shame and disgrace which stem from his conviction, one of the bitter pills Wilde has had to swallow: “The fact of my having been the common prisoner of a common gaol I must frankly accept, and (...) one of the things I shall have to teach myself is not to be ashamed of it. I must accept it as a punishment, and if one is ashamed of having been punished, one might just as well never have been punished at all” (Wilde 61). However, his critique of society’s treatment of the criminal is equally important, a critique he finds on

ideas originally put forth in “The Critic as Artist”: “Society often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer” (216). Wilde as “intellectual experimentalist” is the prime example of this “dreamer,” that is, a subject who represents potential danger and subversion through dreaming, i.e. non-conformity and originality. Also, Wilde writes in his earlier essay, that “in the opinion of society, contemplation is the gravest sin of which any citizen can be guilty, [while] in the opinion of the highest culture it is the proper occupation of man” (216). In other words, to “go with the flow” is the safest and most respectable thing to do, while to “be thinking outside the box,” as Wilde attempts to do with his dreaming in *De Profundis*, is “the gravest sin of which any citizen can be guilty” (216). On the contrary, this form of contemplation can also be an expression of the illusoriness of the letter writer’s self-fashioning.

Nevertheless, having been put in prison is a formative experience for the writer of *De Profundis*, for the obvious reason that there would not be any suffering nor attempt of self-realisation if he had not been imprisoned in the first place. Shame and disgrace thus become indispensable elements in the acknowledgement of his present state. According to Max Nelson, there are “[c]ertain passages in *De Profundis* [which] do seem to credit prison with strengthening and deepening their author’s nature, but only to the extent that, by subjecting him to intolerable, constant, and thoroughgoing misery, it g[ives] him something against which to muster all his creative energies and all his verbal powers” (“Suffering Is One Very Long Moment”). One could put a question mark by this “strengthening and deepening” of Wilde’s nature, at worst dismiss it as escapist dreaming. I agree, however, with Nelson that these intellectual experiments give Wilde something to “muster all his creative energies and all his verbal powers” considering that they entail a therapeutic function. Zim argues further that Wilde’s “indifference to suffering endorses later nineteenth-century ideas about the function of imprisonment: to reform the criminal by a regime of discipline and punishment” (148). Yet Wilde seems not indifferent to suffering, as it is precisely the *acknowledgement* of suffering and pain that proves meaningful for the author in his quest for a *Vita Nuova*: “Now I find hidden away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all” (57). However, Zim is correct when calling Wilde’s pain a paradoxical privilege (152), as the suffering has opened new doors for the author despite his being subject to punishment.

Inspired by Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Zim draws a fitting link between the function of the prison system in general and the prisoner as depicted in *De Profundis* in particular. In a passage referring primarily to American prison systems, though transferable to

prison systems as a whole, the French philosopher writes that “[i]mprisonment, with the purpose of *transforming the soul and conduct*, made its entry into the system of civil laws” (*Discipline and Punish* 123, emphasis mine). In Wilde’s case as prisoner, there is the tension between his own technology of transforming the soul as a consequence of his individualism on the one side, while on the other side there is the forced “transforming of the soul and conduct” as defined and desired by the system itself. Wilde’s transformation of the soul deviates clearly from the norm, since his motivation for transforming his soul presents itself as an original response to society’s desire for regimentation: he wishes to break free from the strict regime through individualism. Foucault refers to French prison material from the beginning of the nineteenth century, more specifically *Motifs du Code d’instruction criminelle* by G.A. Real, in the description of the function of the prison, which is to foster zealous workers through unification:

the vices of upbringing, the contagion of bad example, idleness (...) have given birth to crime. Well, let us try to close up all these sources of corruption; let the rules of a healthy morality be practiced in the *maisons de force*; that, compelled to work, convicts may come in the end to like it (...) it will soon become a pure life; soon they will know begin to know the regret for the past, the first harbinger of a love of duty. (qtd. in *Discipline and Punish* 234)

As already mentioned, Wilde’s silent act of dreaming or contemplation, a term he himself alludes to in “The Critic as Artist” (216), is exactly an example of Real’s “bad example [and] idleness.” Contemplation, an act of visually and physically doing nothing, is understandably regarded by society as something fruitless. As Wilde writes: “The more mechanical people, to whom life is a shrewd speculation dependent on a careful calculation of ways and means, always know where they are going, and go there” (84). On the one hand, Wilde wants to overcome this “mechanical” directedness with his contemplative individualism. On the other hand, what Real advocates, is a conversion for those who are directionless, cf. “convicts may come in the end to like it,” in other words, a case of conversion therapy. What happens in *De Profundis*, however, is that Wilde pursues his own conversion process, as described in 2.2.1., i.e. the attempt of turning negative emotions into positive counterparts, which may lead to “a pure life” as well, yet with an entirely different approach. Wilde’s spiritual purification does not imply any manual labour or enterprise, though, which is the primary approach for the “blind mechanical forces of Society” (90). Fundamentally, Wilde reinterprets Real’s passage in an individualistic manner since it is the individual, not the uniform subject, which is at the centre of the former’s ideological project.

Zim elaborates on this notion of objectivization, claiming that “Wilde’s *Epistola* evinces a bitter irony but does not subvert th[e] principle of reformation, which it supports

vigorously” (148). However, Wilde’s reformation *per se* cannot be regarded as traditional, but rather original, since he attempts to dissociate himself from morality, religion, and reason, or what Angvik refers to as *doxa*. Wilde regards himself to be like Christ the antinomian, who is exempt from these laws: while he refers to himself as “one of those who are made for exceptions” (59), he refers to Christ correspondingly as a man “for [whom] there were no laws: there were exceptions merely” (81). Angvik claims that it is such an individual liberation from *doxa*, read into and out of the story of Christ, which allows the personality of the individualist to be unified with formal perfection (391). This echoes what Wilde himself writes about the chief concern of Art: “We are no longer in Art concerned with the type. It is with exception we have to do” (86). In the same vein, Wilde says about Christ: “his entire life also is the most wonderful of poems” (71).

Like his approach to a *Vita Nuova*, Wilde’s failed endeavour at liberation from *doxa* can be interpreted as only a futile intellectual experiment. This can be demonstrated by the following quote from *De Profundis*: “I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who *cannot* believe: the Confraternity of the Fatherless one might call it, where on an altar, on which no taper burned, a priest, in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblest bread and a chalice empty of wine” (59). The idealised scenario of a ceremonial non-religious fraternity ends up being a contradiction, as Wilde is not able to escape religious terminology in his idealisation of a “non-religion.” Moreover, the desire Wilde discovers and transmits in the reading of the Scriptures forges the connection of Christ with the individualist, who should break free from mechanical forces to become the individualist, artist, creator, poet who can unify a unique personality with a unique form (Angvik 392). Wilde employs Christ, the quintessential Christian figure, to advocate for non-religious issues, an act that becomes paradoxical as well. This is an example of how *De Profundis* becomes a formal embodiment of the same kind of exception Wilde finds in Christ, through the fact that the complex letter resists labels or definitions, e.g. by its several paradoxes.

At this point it is relevant to return to Zim’s previous claim, for if there is subversion in *De Profundis*, as Zim asserts there is, it is subtle and characterized by paradoxes. Wilde the prisoner differs from his fellow inmates in that he uses his isolation and difference in a constructive manner, as a means of developing his own spirit and self, even though the process may ultimately prove to be a delusion. The imagination becomes a central component in Wilde’s spiritual journey, mentioned earlier in “The Critic as Artist” as “the means by which the subject resists normalization and cultivates a unique Individualism” (Doyle 556). The individual represents thus a potentially subversive and contrastive actor to the Philistine,

who “upholds and aids the heavy, cumbrous, blind mechanical forces of Society, and does not recognise the dynamic force when he meets it either in a man or a movement” (90). We see “blindness” as a recurrent motif, also discussed in 2.1.1. and 2.1.2. Moreover, Wilde attempts to develop a “new ethical sensibility,” as described by Federico (96); in other words, Wilde tries with *De Profundis* to break loose from the “blind mechanical forces of Society.”

In this attempt at liberation, Wilde is critiquing the prison system, dismissing it as “absolutely and entirely wrong” (85). The prison writer writes that “I would give anything to be able to alter it when I go out” (85), and his reason tells him that “the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system” (59). He proposes that punishment “may be inflicted in such a way that it will heal, not make a wound, just as alms may be given in such a manner that the bread changes to a stone in the hand of the giver” (85). Wilde touches on essential questions concerning the aims and consequences of imprisonment and punishment. Fortunately for Wilde, he is able to make use of his imprisonment in a constructive manner by writing about his suffering, but the premises for his imprisonment are nevertheless bad. Zim operates thus with wrong premises when she claims that Wilde’s “indifference to suffering endorses later nineteenth-century ideas about the function of imprisonment” (148). Wilde is not indifferent to imprisonment since what he expresses towards the “function of imprisonment” is exactly resistance and reluctance.

The second part of *De Profundis* continues in the same vein as the first as an extended monologue but, owing to its noticeably introspective tone, this part’s style resembles the written dialogue style one finds in earlier works of Wilde, such as “The Critic as Artist” and “The Decay of Lying,” in addition to being reminiscent of Montaigne. The focus here has been on three topics tied to self-fashioning: the letter writer’s individualism with focus on his *Vita Nuova*, an autobiographical reading of Jesus Christ in an imitation of Christ, and a representation of Wilde’s newly acquired identity as prisoner. All these foci contribute to the concept of self-fashioning, where the author’s conception of himself is conveyed through the lens of other literary works, the figure of Christ, or society. Wilde strives to dissociate himself from society, opposing thus a traditional Greenblattian approach to self-fashioning. However, it seems that he lures himself into a deception, illustrated by the fact that he stumbles upon many paradoxes in his “contemplation.” Also, this notion of deception is illustrated in that he writes that he can alter his past through repentance (83). The writing becomes in this manner a placebo, but the deceptive act may be sufficient for the author, who is not receptive to nor interested in readers’ conceptions of his *Vita Nuova* project.

2.3. The Third Part of *De Profundis*.

“What lies before me is my past”: A Final Sense of Resolution, or Defeat?

2.3.1. Return to Douglas

In the final part of *De Profundis*, Wilde returns to the genre of the personal letter with a direct address to Douglas and more prominent use of the pronoun “you.” We encounter the same reproachful tone as in the letter’s beginning, with an equal focus on details, accusations, and the subject’s trauma. Angvik defines this part as a chronicle, which develops a meticulous record of everything that the chronicler considers to be relevant based on his own perspective (394); in other words, a subjective account of shared past events. One effect of this selective and hyperbolic style is that the details run away with the author due to the prisoner’s emphasis on suffering, a motif examined in 2.1.3.: “time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle around one centre of pain” (45). Angvik identifies this painful point of rotation as being the author’s unresolved traumata towards Douglas, as the narrator approaches Bosie again with moods of complaint, whining and repetitions (394).

The unbalanced plaintive chronicle contrasts Wilde’s own musical metaphor on how language should be, as something which “requires to be tuned, like a violin: and just as too many or too few vibrations in the voice of the singer or the trembling of the string will make the note false, so too much or too little in words will spoil the message” (102). This conflict between message and intention becomes yet another example of Wilde’s inconsistencies. In this case, the vibrations become far too many and the message is therefore in danger of being spoiled. This underpins communication theorist Marshall McLuhan’s catchphrase, that “The medium is the message” (*Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*). This means that the genre Wilde employs, the personal letter, is a personal genre, which easily can obstruct the message, which in turn can be sensitive and sore. At the same time, the letter, with its flexible characteristics, is an ideal genre for Wilde to express the various aspects of his self-fashioning. This flexible use of the letter genre is what Liz Stanley refers to as “‘genres-for-them,’” genres which makes some authors’ “letters, memoir, diary, essays, theory, novels, distinctive and different from the same ‘forms’ or ‘genre-examples’ written by others” (Jolly and Stanley 100). Wilde has therefore formal premises to mould it the way he “wants,” with elements of journal, jeremiad and essay, among other genres. However, I put “wants” in quotation marks here, as the composite text seems to wrestle against its author, a fact due to the discrepancy between the letter’s actual message and the author’s intentions. This is also

reflected in Wilde's "choice" of returning to Douglas in the letter's final section, as mentioned in 2.2.1.

Wilde's intention of re-establishing the relationship between himself and Douglas misfires. Varty argues that Wilde's "engagement with Douglas throughout the composition had been so vivid that he had hoped to have taken his lover with him on his journey through purgatory to beatification, teaching him humility, forgiveness and love to match his own and to permit their reunion on restored terms" (xi). The most important words here are "had hoped to," which indicate Wilde's naïve and optimistic attitude towards a "reunion on restored terms." However, another keyword is "teaching," which refers to the fact that Wilde assumes an even more explicit pedagogical role here than in the middle section's treatise. Wilde's role as teacher gives weight to the idea of the text as an epistle or "a letter, especially a formal or didactic one" (dictionary.com). In fact, Wilde's own working title for the letter was *Epistola in carcere et vinculis*, a title which "emphasizes genre and context," as the letter is an epistle "by a prisoner writing in prison and in literal chains" (Zim 148).

Wilde's motive with this teaching may be to "regain" his role as the wiser older part in the relationship, or, as in Linda Dowling's words, "to restore the true relations between older lover and younger beloved, *erastēs* and *erōmenos*, which had been so inverted in their actual friendship, returning to the 'hearer/inspirer' dyad of Dorian and Platonic love" (150). As we saw in 2.1.2., this is exemplified by Wilde himself when he refers to the two of them as Aeschylus's lord and lion cub, implying their reversal of roles. However, Wilde's instructive tone in the last part of the letter, which is based on imbalanced platonic love, can ultimately be interpreted as a futile attempt to restore an idealised relationship with Douglas, since he tries to restore something which has never been the case. It is not until later in hindsight in prison that Wilde realises Douglas's covert shrewdness, which made Douglas the more experienced of the two: "[y]our defect was not that you knew so little about life, but that you knew so much" (4).

Zim's claim discussed in 2.1.1. involves a misconception of Wilde's ambivalent retreatment of his trauma. She writes that "the imagery [Wilde] repeatedly used of eradicating obsessive emotions suggests that he regarded writing as a form of spiritual therapy" (145). When the letter writer returns to Douglas at the end of the letter, we may ask whether the former really has succeeded in "eradicating [his] obsessive emotions." This is yet another example of several instances where the author seems to be struggling with his own letter. The return to Douglas with the same bitter undertone as in the beginning is then revealing, especially since it returns after a part where the writer focuses solely on himself as an aspiring

individualist. In the second part it is as if he almost had forgotten about Douglas. Also, the fact that Wilde writes that “for my own sake I must forgive you,” followed by “[o]ne cannot always keep an adder in one’s breast to feed on one, nor rise up every night to sow thorns in the garden of one’s soul” (55), leads to questioning whether Wilde’s “obsessive emotions” towards Douglas really have been eradicated, or that he on the contrary is entering deeper into his own misery in a delusive act.

2.3.2. References to *Hamlet*

Towards the end of the letter, Wilde makes other significant intertextual references, this time to Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet*. Zim explains that “as a former dramatist, Wilde’s authorial persona infers character in a realistic manner for a moral purpose and sought to teach Douglas about human nature and the deficiencies of Douglas’s nature in particular” (148); hence the dramatical references become instructive metaphors. Whereas Wilde compares himself to the play’s protagonist, Douglas is compared to Hamlet’s “friends” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who in actuality are sycophants instructed by Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle and stepfather, to spy and report on Hamlet. Wilde writes that the two schoolfellows “realise nothing” of Hamlet’s torment, because “[t]hey are the little cups that can hold so much and no more” (105); they are, in other words, social imbeciles who do not realise anything of what is happening around them before it is too late. This description supports Douglas’s blindness brought up in 2.1.2.: “I saw that you realised nothing of what you had done” (35). Interestingly, this also contrasts with how Wilde describes Douglas in that the latter “knew so much” (4), resulting in yet another of the letter writer’s inconsistencies.

However, one may argue that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in other words Douglas, become victims of circumstances even more than Hamlet, who “casts [them] in a play of his own” (Garber 501) by signing their death sentence with a fake royal signature. In a dramatically ironic fashion, this is actually what is being done by Wilde himself, as he, with the letter, puts Douglas in the pillory, hence the uncensored portrait of Douglas in the first and third part. This is yet another example of a reversal of roles that can be seen as a vengeful act by the letter writer. Consequently, Wilde’s vengeance may originate from Douglas’s unjust intervention in the former’s life: “Deliberately and by me uninvited you thrust yourself into my sphere, usurped there a place for which you had neither right nor qualifications, and having by curious persistence, and by the rendering of your very presence a part of each separate day, succeeded in absorbing my entire life, could do no better with that life than

break it in pieces” (106). The active verbs “usurp,” “absorb” and “break in pieces” connote violence and abuse, verbs chosen by Wilde to describe Douglas’s forced intrusion.

At a closer look, Wilde’s reference to *Hamlet* seems to fit the letter writer’s depiction of his own “tragedy.” Marjorie Garber writes in *Shakespeare After All* (2004) that British drama’s quintessential play is “a private chronicle, the story of a history gone awry, and wrenched into tragedy” (468). Wilde writes in *De Profundis* about Hamlet in the following terms: “[i]nstead of trying to be the hero of his own history, he seeks to be the spectator of his own tragedy” (105), a description that echoes several descriptions of himself as passivized bystander to and protagonist in his own tragic downfall, cf. 2.1.1. Zim writes that the “idea of ‘real tragedy’ is a paradox which assumes that, if life imitates art, it follows the generic course determined by its author” (157). Less paradoxically, perhaps, is the fact that Wilde regards his life as a tragedy, both because he sees it in a non-objective retrospect, but also because his conception of the dichotomy between life and art is, and has always been, fluid: “I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction” (56). Whereas Christ represents a positive ideal for Wilde, he finds a more ambiguous model in the main character of “the most famous of all English dramas” (Garber 467). Hamlet has “the nature of the poet and he is asked to grapple with the common complexities of cause and effect, with life in its practical realisation, of which he knows nothing, not with life in its ideal essence, of which he knows too much” (Wilde 105). This distribution of knowledge parallels Wilde’s conception of himself, hence “I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction” (56). Moreover, Ophelia describes Hamlet as “the glass of fashion and the mould of form” (qtd. in Garber 470). This description resonates with Wilde’s own megalomaniac conception of himself as one “who stood in symbolic relations with art and culture of [his] age” (55). Thus, these theatrical terms from *Hamlet* are close at hand for the Victorian playwright, who not only sees Douglas in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but also sees himself in Hamlet.

One effect of this self-dramatization, or this application of Shakespearean juxtapositions, is the depiction of the lives of both Douglas and Wilde as having followed a manuscript in a fatalistic and predetermined course. Moreover, Wilde implies that as a prisoner, he is conceived as a melancholic *commedia dell’arte* character without any free will: “We are the zanies of sorrow. We are clowns whose hearts are broken. We are specially designed to appeal to the sense of humour” (87). These metaphors enhance the instrumentality of his role as prisoner and his deprivation of liberty as well as individuality, resembling thus the animal metaphors examined in 2.1.1. and 2.1.2. The depiction of himself as “zan[y]” and “clown” contrasts as well as discredits the ambitions of his *Vita Nuova* and the individualism

promoted in the letter's middle section. Whereas Wilde depicts himself as a clown, Douglas is described in similar terms as a marionette: "It makes me feel sometimes as if you yourself had been merely a puppet worked by some secret and unseen hand to bring terrible events to a terrible issue" (27), cf. 2.1.2. The link to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two characters that can be interpreted as marionettes as well, is thus conspicuous. Also, even though Wilde writes that he does not want to compare Douglas with the two of them, it is exactly what is being done in the text (Angvik 395). This is another discrepancy between the author's actual words and intention.

Wilde encapsulates Douglas's lack of realisation, but also his inconsiderateness of not secluding their private matter to privacy, in another dramatical metaphor. There, he compares the latter's quarrel with his father to something between a comedy and a tragedy: "your mistake was in insisting on its being played as a tragi-comedy on a high stage in history, with the whole world as the audience, and myself as the prize for the victor in the contemptible contest" (Wilde 104). On one hand, Wilde's dehumanized role is once again emphasized along the same lines as of the helpless animal metaphors "blind[ed] (...) ox" (10) and "stalking horse" (33). On the other hand, Douglas is depicted as publicity-seeking but also acting on his Freudian instincts in the "contemptible contest" against his father. As Wilde writes to Douglas in another correspondent passage of *De Profundis*: "In your hideous game of hate together, you had both thrown dice for my soul, and you happened to have lost" (34). Wilde is hereby reduced to a prize of a "hideous game of hate," in other words the winning object in a contest, reduced to something that belongs on a pedestal. Wilde's role as an exhibited object return to him in Douglas's words, which haunt the former in his darkest hours: "*When you are not on your pedestal you are not interesting*" (22). This notion of being reduced to an exhibit relying on appearance parallels Wilde's relating of his own crucifixion at Clapham Junction, where he writes that "when they saw me I was not on my pedestal. I was in the pillory. (...) A pedestal may be a very unreal thing. A pillory is a terrific reality" (88). This proves that being in the pillory as a ruined public character is the author's ultimate disgrace.

Speaking of exhibition, Wilde perceives his appearance through dress to be of great importance. This outward inescapable feature supports Greenblatt's notions of real-life theatre and role-playing, central aspects to self-fashioning. Garber argues that Hamlet thinks "in theatrical terms [,] (...) moralizes on his mourning clothes as a kind of 'show,' [and] assumes the role of fool or antic, with a disarranged costume to match" (472). The same theatrical terms can be applied to Wilde's depiction of himself as prisoner: "As I sit here in this dark

cell in convict clothes, a disgraced and ruined man” (4), but also in “our very dress makes us grotesques” (87). The notable focus on dress ties to another metaphor where Wilde compares his own life to a play: “Everything about my *tragedy* has been hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style; our very dress makes us grotesque” (Wilde 87, emphasis mine). It is obvious that dress *per se* has a significant part in Wilde’s fashioning of himself. The notable focus on appearance and performance, not to mention drama, echoes Greenblatt’s idea of theatricality, as demonstrated by Thomas More’s *Utopia*: “he participated in it as an actor among the rest – if the theatrical metaphor expresses his inner sense of alienation and his observation of the behaviour of the great, it also expresses his own mode of engagement in society” (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 29). Thus the drama becomes another casting mould, which fits Wilde’s purpose to glorify or vilify himself, but also contextualize his part in society.

2.3.3. Resolution or Defeat: A Coda

Before concluding, I would like to draw attention to the letter’s crux, that is, whether *De Profundis* culminates in a sense of resolution or if it ends rather in the author’s defeat. Angvik claims that the only tragical defeat the reader may find in Wilde is the one produced by critics when they, in commenting and paraphrasing criticism, find intentions they expect to find based on their own preconceptions (406). Unfortunately, this claim becomes too superficial, since certain evidence points towards the possibility that the letter writer acknowledges some sort of defeat at the end of the letter after all. As discussed in 2.3.1., Wilde’s return to Douglas is a revealing move: after having focused on himself and his individualism in the middle section, he returns to his addressee in the third part with an equally obsessive tone as in the first part. This may indicate that Wilde’s mindset stands still in a status quo circular movement around a throbbing nexus of pain (cf. 2.1.3.), and the monotonous chronicle-like tone reveals the author’s sense of being stuck. Also, the letter writer has an evident yearning to reconcile with his addressee, yet the terms on which he wants to do this are naively idealistic and optimistic, since those terms build on an unrealistic model of the ‘hearer/inspirer’ dyad of Dorian love (Dowling 150). Instead, it is as if Wilde’s co-dependency on Douglas surfaces in this attempt at reconciliation.

Conversely, other proof supports the letter as the opposite of a defeat. If we yet again turn to the aspect of style, we can draw from it an indirect enthusiasm and vitality in the “vigorous, almost restless writing” (Kelly 218). Although considerable parts of the letter’s first and third parts are the results of maniacal and obsessive outbursts, Wilde’s resoluteness and urgency are features that must be taken into equal consideration. In his tour-de-force

writing the letter writer makes vivid use of his imagination. His revolving around Douglas entails a positive outcome for the author: “Wilde’s authorial persona recollect[s] the past, mentally circling (again and again) his conflicts with the adversary, in order to reinvent the past, accommodate himself to its image, and finally inscribe that image in a new form” (Zim 163-64). This act of reinventing his past, with subsequent re-accommodation and re-inscription of himself, becomes paradoxically a means to progress.

Wilde concludes *De Profundis* with yet another soaring of thoughts alluding to Aristotelian notions of the relativity of time: “Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you that it is irrevocable, do not believe them. The past, the present and the future are but one moment in the sight of God (...). Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of thought” (113-14). This philosophical remark echoes the notion of revocable past as discussed in 2.2.1.: “The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation (...) It is the means by which one alters one’s past” (83). Wilde addresses both himself and Douglas by this claim, for if Douglas is willing to repent, it is, according to Wilde, not too late. The author thinks it not too late for himself either, for, as we also saw in 2.2.1., the “way one alters one’s past for oneself and the world is by writing about it” (Zim 163). This is obviously an infeasible project; however, it seems that it is sufficient for the author to *believe* that he can do it. Regarding the letter as a testament for future generations, Wilde assumes perhaps that his account of things, being the most victimized, is the most compelling version for his implied readers, instead of turning to dry biographical and historical sources.

Another topic that is linked to Wilde’s sense of resolution or defeat is his treatment of homosexual love. Despite his being exceedingly candid and explicit about other matters, Wilde leaves the reasons for his enduring love towards Douglas unsaid. This is one of the biggest ellipses in *De Profundis*. The reason why Wilde leaves this unaddressed could be that he does not find it important for the reader; note that Douglas was, after all, the letter’s addressee. However, we have already seen that Wilde must have had other readers in mind, whom he did not want to include in this confidential matter. Also, one must take into account the fact that Douglas had carried out the ultimate breach of faith towards Wilde before by publishing Wilde’s letters, what Wilde refers to as “so vulgar a sacrilege” (42). Wilde did probably regard their love to be something that the public did not have the right to know about, nor the basis to understand. Their love is the ultimate taboo since it is an example of what does not fit with Victorian society’s standards. Thus, it is potentially the most subversive element of *De Profundis*. Even though homosexual love permeates the letter, it is only addressed once explicitly, and then by the euphemism “the love that dares not speak its

name” (26). Colm Tóibín claims that Wilde’s and Douglas’s “stamp and seal of (...) love came from their enormous attraction to each other, their need for each other, and something difficult to define and explain which is at the core of homosexual experience in the era before gay liberation” (60). This enigmatic “something,” which relates possibly to Wilde’s co-dependency towards Douglas, is one of the factors that makes *De Profundis* such an intriguing read.

3. Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to examine the authorial persona's self-fashioning which makes itself felt through formal features and textual and rhetorical devices in *De Profundis*. Also, the thesis serves as a nuanced contribution in the scholarly discussion about Wilde's prison letter, a text which unfortunately has been subject to frequent neglect and misunderstanding. My aim for this thesis has been to read Wilde's letter through a new historicist lens, thereby combining the close reading approach of new criticism and the self-fashioning approach of new historicism. Even though the letter has no clear-cut divisions, I have treated the letter as tripartite and identified topics linked to each of the three parts. The topics have in turn been linked to the overall concept of self-fashioning. With reference to the overall structure, the letter can be seen to have a circular composition whose beginning and end focus on the relationship between letter writer and addressee. The fact that the letter writer has the same recriminatory tone towards the addressee in these outer parts adds to the notion of circularity. However, the letter's middle section differs significantly by its prominent weight on the self and its different style and tone.

Starting with an overall formal analysis, the first part of the thesis has dealt with the nature of the unstable, changing, dynamic, controversial, and self-contradictory self (Angvik 369). The authorial persona paints emotive and contrastive portraits of himself and his addressee, which reveal the former's self-pitying and melodramatic nature. In these portraits, Wilde employs epic intertextual references from Dante's *Inferno* and Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* to evoke pathos. Also, the letter writer compares himself to the scandalous libertines Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade, thus enhancing the preconceptions of himself as a persona non grata. Furthermore, Douglas is an embodiment of all negatively charged terms, a portrait which contrasts with Wilde's descriptions of him in earlier letters. The third subchapter has described Wilde's ascetic mode acquired while in prison. Wilde attempts to acquire a "lesser state of perfection" (Small 215) through suffering. There are various resorts to Eastern and Western philosophy, which result in the author's inconsistency when claiming that he has no use for morality, religion, or reason. The reader must see through Wilde's unbalanced and potentially manipulative rhetoric in order to fathom the overall picture of the author's intentions.

The second part of the thesis has dealt with the three following aspects of Wilde's self-fashioning: individualism, an imitation of Christ, and the depiction of himself as prisoner as opposed to society. Wilde's individualism is presented and dramatized formally by the fact

that the author turns the focus from Douglas to himself. As argued by Kelly, there is a strong comparison between Wilde's style in the letter's middle part and that of the French philosopher Montaigne, as well as Wilde's earlier essays. Primarily, the *vita nuova* he draws for himself can be regarded as a futile project, if one considers the original Dantean meaning. His "author-ization," i.e. his dependence on other classical literature, throws a spanner in the works of the individualist, who seems to be lacking in individualism after all. Also, his rejection of religion proves unreliable when his individualism is expressed in precisely biblical terms. Secondly, Wilde's admiring imitation of Christ originates in the latter's charitable and potentially subversive qualities, qualities which are contrasted to those of the misleading and indulgent Philistine. Thirdly, the letter writer's role as prisoner has been explored further, departing from Foucauldian notions about the prisoner in *Discipline and Punish*, while discussing arguable claims made by Angvik and Zim.

At the end of the letter, Wilde returns to Douglas with the same tone as is found in the letter's beginning. Through the style of a chronicle, Wilde's obsession with minute details and a substantial apportioning of blame point towards the fact that his "eradication of obsessive emotions" towards Douglas is ineffective; instead, the author seems to be stuck in the past. Besides, Wilde's allusions to *Hamlet* are suggestive of how he perceives the roles both of himself and Douglas. This play of dramatic references leads the mind to Greenblatt's notion of the theatre as an "institution of fraudulent representation" (Robson 79); in fact, *De Profundis* can by its numerous dramatic references be seen as another of the playwright's theatrical works. Apart from raising several issues concerning the individual versus the collective, Wilde's self-fashioning in *De Profundis* is a literal and fascinating staging of the self. This staging lends its force by e.g. the various and frequent intertextual references. However, the self's inconsistency and unreliability enhance the reader's sense of Wilde's self-fashioning as being illusory and fraudulent.

That being said, the vital importance *De Profundis* has for its author should not be dismissed. Dollimore goes as far as to claim that "Wilde's own proto-decentring of his own subjectivity cost him his life" (25). It is true that, through his rhetoric, Wilde substantiates prejudicial conceptions of himself in the letter and somehow kindles his already-established negative conception of himself as pariah, an act which leads to a kind of social suicide. Even though that is the case, I argue that what Dollimore calls Wilde's "proto-decentring" is rather a means for the author to survive life in prison. I agree then with Regenia Gagnier, who writes that Wilde "constructs a self that enables him to withstand the insanity threatened by the confinement of prison life" (qtd. in Doylen 550). The letter-writing with its self-fashioning-

project have both a curative and life-sustaining function for the prisoner, who seems not to care about others' evaluations of his work. Instead, he appears to be a writer who writes first and foremost in order to survive. In this respect, *De Profundis* manages to simultaneously strengthen and elude Wilde's marginalisation as set by society.

There are at least three sources of unreliability in *De Profundis*. Firstly, Wilde strives to cover many aspects of his own self or his various identities in the letter. The authorial persona's dynamic self/-ves can be interpreted as a resistance to not wanting to be limited to one specific identity with a firm set of prejudices. His fear of being disgraced in the pillory (Wilde 88) can give the grounds for this, but also his artful approach to describing himself through several intertextual references. Also, there is reason to believe that the letter writer strives to find a unified identity as an ascetic prisoner, as his self-fashioning is contradictory and inconsistent. This owes to the fact that he relies on religion, morality and reason, in Angvik's terms *doxa* which he explicitly rejects. Secondly, the letter's formal amalgamation can be interpreted as an expression of Wilde's fear of being labelled. The letter encompasses various genres such as the personal letter, journal, jeremiad, essay, and dramatic analysis. In this manner, the letter becomes an example of what Stanley describes as "“genres-for-them,”" that is, author-specific genres. One implication of this genre amalgamation is the letter writer's problematic interchange of narratorial stances. Wilde's desire to take on several narratorial roles is ambitious and remarkable; however, it turns out to have a counterproductive effect, since this switching weakens his reliability. In other words, he cannot point to a transcendental, stable and solid subject which can be the centre for and have a firm foundation in coherent meaning (Angvik 369). Thirdly, Wilde's depiction of Douglas and his use of the collective pronoun "we" when talking about himself as prisoner may cause the reader to empathize less with Wilde, contrary to the author's intention. Zim formulates this quite clearly when she writes that Wilde's "premise as a writer – to sympathize is to understand – required that he move readers to respond to an illusion of reality rendered with the intensity and persuasiveness of rhetorical art" (149), something which he ultimately and unfortunately fails to do when unveiled.

In a written communication to Robert Ross dated 1 April 1987, Wilde cites the main motivation for writing his letter to be a desire of redeeming his name:

Some day the truth has to be known: not necessarily in my lifetime or in Douglas's: but I am not prepared to sit in the grotesque pillory they put me into, for all time: for the simple reason that I inherited from my father and my mother a name of high distinction in literature and art, and I cannot, for eternity, allow that name to be the shield and catspaw of the Queensberrys. I don't defend my conduct. I explain it. (Small 308)

As readers we may ask whether Wilde succeeds in *De Profundis* in redeeming his name. Instead of a redemption-seeking self, readers are faced with a self-contradictory subject who is mainly concerned with recriminations against Douglas and unwittingly substantiating preconceptions surrounding their public personas. The portrait of Douglas as scapegoat is counterproductive and works against its painter since it, in a backfiring manner, reveals more about Wilde's bitter and denunciatory nature. Ultimately, the author's possibility for redemption is overshadowed by his numerous recriminations and inconsistent traits. This resonates in turn with McLuhan's quote, that "[t]he medium is the message," proving that Wilde's choice of the personal letter as expression for a potential redemption is eventually a difficult strategy, and Wilde's implied readership, i.e. his future audience, poses thus a potential problem. The implications of the complex and ambivalent readership of *De Profundis* are a topic that needs further research.

Wilde's self-fashioning in *De Profundis* can be regarded as a "cogitation in writing," with vital significance for the author himself as the writing entails curative and meaningful purposes. Nevertheless, one may also regard the writing to be a psychological deception, for, finally, Wilde's self-fashioning is no exception among Greenblattian self-fashioners. As Greenblatt writes himself: "Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artifact. If there remained traces of free choice, the choice was among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated by the social and ideological system in force" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 256). This resonates in turn with one of Dollimore's claims, that "[r]esistance from the margins seems doomed to replicate internally the strategies, structures, and even the values of the dominant" (81). Ultimately, Wilde is not able to escape his identity as "cultural artifact" in the examination of his various, yet marginal roles set by culture: the author, the ascetic, the individualist, the imitator of Christ, and, last but not least, the prisoner. In a more positive sense, though, Wilde's self-fashioning in *De Profundis* becomes a survival technique for the author, who has no other alternative than to write in order to remain alive. As he says himself in the letter: "While I was in Wandsworth Prison I longed to die. It was my one desire" (63), but later, because of his writing, he "feel[s] quite differently" (63). These quotes by the author himself verify the vitality and necessity of his self-fashioning. Greenblatt's following affirmation summarizes Wilde's ambivalent self-fashioning in *De Profundis*: "in our culture to abandon self-fashioning is to abandon the craving for freedom, and to let go of one's stubborn hold upon selfhood, even selfhood conceived as a fiction, is to die" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 257).

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