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# Becoming Earnest: Oscar Wilde Refracted

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BECOMING EARNEST: OSCAR WILDE REFRACTED

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Rebecca Alyce Howell  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores four Wildean texts, their techniques, and their purposes, beginning with an introduction to Wilde's life, contemporary culture, and his major educational and ideological influences—a familiarity that is necessary to understand his more subtle and subversive meanings. The second chapter deals with Wilde's pre-incarceration texts, "The Decay of Lying" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The essay serves almost as a guidebook for the writing of the novel and through similarities in theme and vocabulary, perfectly sets up a comparison with the post-incarceration works—*De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*—which will be examined in the third chapter, along with various biographical elements which are necessary to any interpretation of *De Profundis*.

Echoing the relationship between "The Decay of Lying" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *De Profundis* serves as an interpretive tool for *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. In *Reading Gaol* Wilde expounds in great detail upon his theory about Christ, who is one of the three primary figures in the poem (the other two being Charles Thomas Wooldridge and, of course, Wilde himself). The object of this treatment is not to demonstrate some great transformation in Wilde's proclaimed philosophy of life and art, but rather to display the "deepening" of a man who, by discovering that "the secret of life is suffering" (*De Profundis* 1082), realized a hope declared in a confiscated letter passed through prison bars: "Perhaps there may come into my art also, no less than into my life, a still deeper note, one of greater unity of passion, and directness of impulse" (1098).

## DEDICATION

To my parents, who always encouraged me, and to the TMC English professors,  
who guided me with such exceptional wisdom.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iii
LIST OF TABLES .....	iv
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.   A NEW AESTHETIC: FROM MORALITY TO CRIMINALITY .....	7
III.  LIARS AND MURDERERS: THE PERILS OF RESCUING FICTION FROM THE MORASS OF REALISM .....	25
IV.   A NEW INDIVIDUALIST: FROM THEORY TO IMAGINATION .....	48
V.    CONCLUSION.....	71
WORKS CITED .....	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	78

## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde dedicated himself to the belief that knowledge and truth were the direct result of personal experience. Wilde's own personal experience was largely one of pleasure. As a privileged member of the upper-middle class with an Oxford education, Wilde seems to have had little if any personal interaction with the harsher realities of society. Financially secure for the first forty years of his life first through his parents and then through his wife, Wilde never experienced until later the unpleasant realities of survival faced by so many of his less-fortunate contemporaries. But Wilde's trial and incarceration at the age of forty broadened both his experience and perspective. This broadening can be seen through an examination of "The Decay of Lying" and *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, two of Wilde's pre-incarceration works, and compares their rhetorical technique with the only two major works published after his release from prison—*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis*. A close analysis of these texts will, I believe, reveal some of the most significant changes wrought in Wilde the man and author by his experiences in Reading Gaol.

Before his incarceration, Oscar Wilde masked what he believed to be true with several layers of often very controversial rhetoric. Wilde's use of outrageous expressions to voice subversive opinions accomplished his immediate goal: to say what it was that he wanted to say in such a way that those who would disagree would dismiss his "ravings" as witty, if slightly discomforting, banter while allowing those who would agree with him to enjoy a little joke at society's expense. Wilde was able to speak what he believed to be

true without publicly coming out of the intellectual closet, as it were. He kept his audience guessing about what he actually thought. This was the perfect strategy for a man who wanted his audience in particular, and society in general, to question the legitimacy of the opinions and beliefs accepted as *de facto*. As long as he addressed the larger questions of society—i.e., what is morality, what is the obligation of the individual to society, etc., this abstruse form of communication was in Wilde's best interest.

Through this subversive form of interaction with Victorian society Wilde came to see art as a form of non-violent crime and the artist as a type of social criminal. By paralleling the worlds of art and crime, Wilde constructed the perfect stage for the presentation of his ideas on fiction, morality, and experience. Unfortunately, a significant portion of Wilde's readers did not perceive his carefully constructed mask of words, and because of this Wilde's writings eventually contributed to his conviction and incarceration. In Wilde's libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry, his book *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was brought out as a key character witness for the defense. The Marquess's successful presentation of *Dorian Gray* as an immoral book, including the implication that aspects of the novel were autobiographical rendered the author immoral in the public eye. Wilde lost his suit against Queensberry only to be charged with gross misconduct, during the prosecution of which his public writings were again used as evidence of his private life. With that fictional "proof" in the hands of a society which could not see the true goal of his writings, Wilde was ostracized and imprisoned.

As an already thoughtful author, Wilde endured a prison sentence that didn't change his aesthetic ideology, but it did narrow his focus and compel him to hone his

definitions. While Wilde claimed to have never forsaken his philosophy of art as the fashioning of a beautiful thing solely for the artist's personal pleasure, his work following his release was in a style that functioned very differently from anything he had done before. His first publication after prison was his poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in which Wilde forsook his usual rhetoric of the outrageous, ambiguous, and farcical for a language of religion, sincerity, and rebuke. It is not that he had suddenly "got religion"—on the contrary, it seems that the conditions and events he witnessed in prison only reinforced his conviction that the so-called morals and values of Victorian England amounted to nothing more than a social contract of hypocrisy. However, the immediacy and glaring reality of the suffering that Wilde witnessed seems to have wrought in him an unpremeditated change in tactics. Instead of writing a scathing, out-and-out criticism of the society that had no compunctions when it came to the treatment of criminals and the less fortunate, Wilde chose to adopt language and a tone that would meet Victorians where they lived and asked them to act based on what they already claimed to believe as Christians.

This is not to imply that Wilde abandoned his previously employed method of saying two different things at once—a private meaning is certainly preserved in the poem along with the surface one. Indeed, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* reflects a Christology unique to Wilde, but subtle enough to be mistaken for orthodoxy by uninitiated readers. The primary difference between *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and Wilde's pre-incarceration writings is the sense of urgency, of "being there." The author is more present in the ballad than in the distant social criticism of *Lady Windermere's Fan*

(1892), and more sincere in his account of prison than in the fictitious philosophical questioning in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde's works were beautiful in the his own eyes—a realization which is, according to Wilde, the very essence of artistic creation—and the themes they included reflected the observations and preoccupations of the playwright more than a premeditated agenda.

*De Profundis*, a letter written during his incarceration, includes Wilde's stated intention of trying to change the prison system that he called "absolutely and entirely wrong" (*De Profundis* 1097). And *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is Wilde's analysis of the consequences of Victorian society's ideology and the incarnation of his ideal of the sympathetic imagination. Wilde once remarked of his contemporary Wilfred Scawen Blunt: "It must be admitted that by sending Mr Blunt to gaol he [Mr Balfour] has converted him from a clever rhymer into an earnest and deep-thinking poet" (qtd. in Kohl 290). It seems that a similar experience was the catalyst behind the evolution of Wilde's personal philosophy of life and, to use his word, the "deep[ening]" of his person and imagination that is revealed through *Reading Gaol* (*De Profundis* 1097).

That deepening did not mean that Wilde felt obliged to lift the Gnostic veil that obscured his personal convictions; the veil is just as present in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as it is in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The difference between the two is the *modus operandi*: Wilde's novel is easily misunderstood, seeming with every lesson to encourage ideas contrary to the nominal morals of Victorian society. In fact, *Dorian Gray* exemplifies Wilde's definition of art in "The Decay of Lying" and reveals him to be an accomplished "liar." The characters of the novel are exaggerated, the events sometimes

fantastical, and the style idiosyncratic. However, these techniques are left by the wayside after his prison term provided Wilde with ample experience and time to contemplate the effects of sorrow upon the imagination and of suffering upon the soul. The “lies” the artist tells cease to be merely for the sake of entertaining invention or ambiguous criticism.

Rather than using the playful and sometimes provocative tone of his earlier work, in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* Wilde sets a pensive and at times reproachful mood. The truth is no longer told through an inaccessible mask. This time, between the audience and Wilde, both the mask and the meaning behind it are true and equally efficacious. Wilde’s objective shifts from posing philosophical questions about art and morality to directly confronting a geographically and morally specific situation for which, through his poem, he demands both recognition and a solution. In reference to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he declared: “I wrote this book entirely for my own pleasure. . . .Whether it becomes popular or not is a matter of absolute indifference to me” (“Defense of Dorian Gray” 238). *De Profundis* records Wilde’s new motivation: “Society takes upon itself the right to inflict appalling punishments on the individual, but it also has the supreme vice of shallowness, and fails to realize what it has done” (1078). *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is Oscar Wilde’s only (explicitly) artistic communiqué to society after serving his two-year sentence, and, as a call to reform, it is effortlessly accessible.

The following chapters will explore these texts, their techniques, and their purposes in greater detail, beginning with an introduction to Wilde’s life, contemporary culture, and his major educational and ideological influences—a familiarity that is

necessary to understand his more subtle and subversive meanings. The second chapter will deal with Wilde's pre-incarceration texts, "The Decay of Lying" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The essay serves almost as a guidebook for the writing of the novel and through similarities in theme and vocabulary, perfectly sets up a comparison with the post-incarceration works—*De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*—which will be examined in the third chapter, along with various biographical elements which are necessary to any interpretation of *De Profundis*.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### A NEW AESTHETIC: FROM MORALITY TO CRIMINALITY

For those familiar with the works of Oscar Wilde, his cultural and biographical context may come as a surprise. Born October 16, 1854 Wilde was a child of an era known primarily for oppressive rules of morality and repressive concern for appearances. The Victorian Age nevertheless, or perhaps because of these circumstances, provided a unique catalyst for change in artistic sensibilities. The early-to-mid-19<sup>th</sup> century publications of Charles Darwin and D. F. Strauss challenged traditionally accepted views on the origin and purpose of the world and the legitimacy of Christianity. As the structure of knowledge built upon religion began to crumble under the weight of inquiry, art too received a fresh examination. While philosophers dissected and codified the great epistemological shift that was slowly gaining momentum, the artistic community sought to represent similar lines of inquiry through creative innovation. The “moral aesthetic,” as John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold phrased the idea that a work of art had a clear responsibility to instruct society in traditional Christian morality, gave way to works that reflected a more individualized and purely expressive aesthetic (qtd. in Buckley 10). These works reflected the artists as individuals rather than as spokespersons for moralism. Artists were calling the value of strictly mimetic art into question, and as the authority behind Christian morality become more illusory, so did the definition of “goodness” in general and “good art” in particular. Because the terms “criminal” and “immoral” were almost interchangeable in the middle-class Victorian vocabulary, Wilde

would eventually find that the questions surrounding moral goodness and moral art were best explored through the metaphor of laws and criminals.

Wilde's own art and aesthetic theories were built upon, and sometimes a reaction against, the aesthetic theories of the men he studied under while he was a student at Magdalen College, Oxford from 1874 to 1878. There were two men in particular who influenced Wilde's sense of the moral and the aesthetic: John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Wilde encountered John Ruskin, then Slade Professor of Fine Art, quite early in his university career. Ruskin's convictions about art and morality are reflected in Ruskin's 1864 essay "Traffic": "Taste...is not only a part and an index of morality; —it is the *only* morality. The first, and last, and closest trial question to any living creature is, 'What do you like?' Tell me what you like, and I'll tell you what you are" (qtd. in Buckley vii). Ellmann records that Ruskin, having abandoned evangelicalism, adhered to the belief that the morality of an artist could be shown through "fidelity to nature, and by eschewing self-indulgent sensuality" (*Oscar Wilde* 48). Ruskin found truth and beauty in the lines of nature, and his lectures often included defenses of Turner's landscapes, tirades against modernity, and dim prognostications on the mechanization of humanity. His observations went beyond the realm of art and addressed society as a whole. As his 1851-1853 series *The Stones of Venice* reveals, Ruskin was convinced that the lower-class workers of society must be given something to think about, as well as something to do. Also inherent in Ruskin's philosophy was the idea that to demand perfection of a society or an individual was to decry humanity itself.

Walter Pater was, besides Ruskin, the scholar Oscar Wilde was most eager to meet when he arrived at Oxford. Their meeting did not take place until Wilde's third year, but reading Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) during his first term made Wilde aware of the great differences between his two idols. Pater had studied under both John Ruskin and Oxford professor of poetry Matthew Arnold. Although most modern scholars consider Arnold a great Victorian moralist, he was in fact campaigning in both his writings and his classrooms for a more aesthetic philosophy of art. Concerned by the effects of rigid religious ideas on realms of art and thought, Arnold examined the origin of his contemporary standard of morality as part of a plea for intellectual integrity. In his opinion, society's recalcitrant attitude towards changes in standards of morality and art is the direct result of a religiously misguided but stubbornly championed understanding of human nature. Dealing with this question extensively in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold sought to answer the dilemma faced by men such as Pater and Wilde, who found themselves trapped by the narrowly confined category of socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior and expression. This moving away from the "moral aesthetic" caused no small stir within a culture that Jerome Buckley describes as rampant with "moral hypocrisy. . . deliberate sentimentalism. . . (and) social snobbery" (3). Arnold identified the cause of his culture's hypocrisy, describing society in terms of rules and obedience:

. . .[T]hey have been led to regard in themselves, as the one thing needful, *strictness of conscience*, the staunch adherence to some fixed law of doing we have got already, instead of *spontaneity of consciousness*, which tends continually

to enlarge our whole law of doing. They have fancied in themselves to have in their religion a sufficient basis for the whole of their life fixed and certain forever, a full law of conduct, and a full law of thought, so far as thought is needed. . . .

(Arnold 145-146)

While he adopted and perhaps even exaggerated Ruskin's disinterest in the perfection of society, Pater largely rejected the majority of Ruskin's philosophy, finding in Arnold's gospel of intellectual liberation the impetus behind the formation of his own aesthetic.

Aside from channeling some of Arnold's ideas, Walter Pater drew the attention of his students, eventually including Wilde, to the relativity of truth and the transience of human life. Pater believed that the quest for truth, like the quest for social perfection, was pointless. He taught that the responsibility of each person was to fully experience and enjoy the sensations of life, in particular those sensations inspired by works of art. His portrayal of life as a highly individual experience driven by the quest for sensational experience instead of illusory objective truths became a sort of epicurean gospel. For a time, Oscar Wilde wholeheartedly embraced Pater's philosophy of art for art's sake, a mantra both Pater and Wilde saw exemplified in the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) who ignored matters of politics and society in his art, choosing instead to concentrate his creative powers on the transcendent nature of Beauty itself. For Pater and Wilde, this was to glory in art.

Although he would eventually transcend both Ruskin and Pater, Wilde's interaction with each man had a life-long effect on him. According to Richard Ellmann, Wilde sought Pater for a philosophy of the senses, and Ruskin for the instruction of his

soul (*Oscar Wilde* 49). Wilde called Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*: "my golden book" (47), and in *De Profundis* Wilde called it "that book which has had such a strange influence over my life" (1079). Ellmann references a letter Wilde wrote to Ruskin, in which Wilde says: ". . .from you I learned nothing but what was good" (50). Coming to ideological maturity in the midst of a split intellectual heritage, with the morality of Ruskin on the one side, and the aestheticism of Pater and Rossetti on the other, Wilde developed a theory of morality and aestheticism unique to himself. Wilde claimed that it was this hedonistic challenge in Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* that most influenced his philosophy:

A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy. . . . To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. (Beckson 289)

In later editions of his *History*, Pater removed the last sentence for fear of its being taken too literally. Indeed, for Wilde the flame and the ecstasy took on a sensual aspect that, for a time, eclipsed everything else in Pater's theory. Wilde would eventually come to recognize, as Buckley describes it, that Pater's conception of "[g]reatness in art...could, therefore, be attained only by a great personality, by an Epicurean of the higher kind, having no commerce with the amoral hedonism of the Aesthete, capable rather of seeing life in all its relations as a harmonious whole" (182). Far from valuing a

non-moral life or art that cut the artist off from all social responsibility and involvement, Pater simply had no interest “[i]n the ‘sordid’ or the brutal, the ‘realistic’ for its own sake. . .it was art’s single function to heighten reality, to elevate, to provide, without direct didactic intent, some final guide to conduct” (ibid). For Pater the new aesthetic served as a moral muse, replacing the “fixed law of doing” with a new morality in which the only standards were experience and beauty (Arnold 145). His vision for the world was not one of amorality, but of a society where art championed ideas that could be realized and not merely left on the canvas or page as ideals.

The realization of ideas through art became one of Wilde’s great inspirations, although at first the challenge seems merely to have been to capture the idea through art, rather than to see it understood and implemented. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the way Wilde chose to deal with a society of “philistines”, as he liked to call them, after the example of Matthew Arnold. After leaving Oxford in 1878, Wilde was more than ever confronted with the unreceptive nature of the middle-class Victorian’s attitude toward the new aesthetic and its prophets. Considering himself a great individualist, Wilde was unwilling to long align himself with any particular group or creed. He was also unwilling to conform to a society that seemed to prize conformity of behavior and opinion above all else. These circumstances were complicated by the fact that, as a writer, this same society was his primary audience. To alienate them was to consign himself to obscurity. Instead of being discouraged by or frustrated with his environment, Wilde found in his circumstances the opportunity to create perhaps his greatest work of art: himself. His solution was a master-stroke of the subversive for which he is now

famous. He developed a personae that turned the acceptance of appearances to his own advantage. When in company Wilde adopted a habit of speaking and behaving in a way that built a castle of contradictions upon the quicksand of paradox. With one fell stroke, Wilde preserved himself as an individualist, and became the incarnation of the artist as a social criminal.

The advantage of setting himself up as a paradox was two-fold: first, the public's assumption that Wilde was an artist who spoke and wrote in exaggerated, sometimes shocking terms was interpreted by his social peers as eccentric and entertaining and therefore not entirely sincere. Thus Wilde was able to artistically express his ideas without actually making a serious point that would require his audience to give significant pause. For example, according to Regenia Gagnier, Wilde was once asked what he thought about a psychologist's theory that all persons of genius were insane. His response—that all sane people must therefore be “idiots”—must have appeared to be merely an off-the-cuff witticism (*Idylls* 152). For a long time this assumption sustained Wilde's status as an acceptable member of society's guest list. The second (and personal) advantage was Wilde's freedom to express his mistrust and criticism of his company and audience from a position of relative safety. When Wilde declared that he lived in constant fear of “not being misunderstood,” he was alluding to this tenuous security (qtd. in Holland 3). His position depended upon the narrow-minded members of his society not understanding what he was truly saying. Had any of his company taken his “idiots” comment seriously, they would have seen that Wilde's response is not so much a condemnation of the intellect of his “sane” contemporaries as it is an expression of his

deep dissatisfaction with the pre-packaged knowledge and opinions of society. His decrying sanity by aligning it with idiocy is a criticism of a society that behaves as though it is comprised of idiots, a society that desperately tries to function as though there are no questions to be asked of mankind and one's experience.

The efficacy of this mask of foppish dismissal was especially important in light of Wilde's philosophy of mankind's knowledge and experience. For Wilde true knowledge was the result of experience and an individual's sensory exploration was the most valid form of knowledge. This seeking out of knowledge through the senses is gleaned from Pater's notion of happiness, as recorded and affirmed in Wilde's diary entry of June 21, 1890: "the whole problem of life turns on pleasure—Pater shows that the hedonist—the perfect hedonist—is the saint. 'One is not always happy when one is good; but one is always good when one is happy'"(Ellmann 306). This ideal, in Wilde's interpretation, translates into the equation of goodness with the pursuit of happiness. In his public life, this pursuit of happiness and knowledge was manifested through his delight in his art and his determination that he was obligated to please only himself. More than anything else, Oscar Wilde was pleased to challenge the *status quo*, and much of his art was created to fulfill that desire.

It was this individualistic disregard for popular opinion that eventually led to Wilde's identification of the artist with the criminal. Just as the criminal is one who flouts laws prescribed by social contract, the artist transgresses against the social mores. Wilde appropriated acts of crime for his fictional work (for example: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime"), turning the rebellion of the criminal against the

law into a metaphor for the individual's intellectual and moral rebellion against a "fixed law of doing" (Arnold 145). Unfortunately, Wilde's general readership could not see beyond his choice of imagery and subject matter. It would be a mistake to assume, as a large part of his audience assumed, that, because Wilde often wrote plots including murder, corruption, and criminals, he was exalting those behaviors. Those elements were useful to Wilde as he sought to pose a myriad of questions to his audience—questions he struggled with himself as an artist who, while in Paris in 1883, aligned himself for a short time with a group of artists and thinkers who called themselves *Les Décadents*. In his book *The Devil's Advocates: Decadence in Modern Literature* (1989), Thomas Whissen describes artistic decadence as

simply another way of looking at the world, and like any other *Weltanschauung*, it is, at bottom, a defense against *dread* (emphasis mine). . . . In a world hasty to accept wrong answers but reluctant to ask the right questions, decadence insists on raising those questions: Why are we here? Why do we bother? How do we face the unknown—or the known, for that matter? (xv)

It seems natural, then, that an artist who would be attracted to Decadence would, in defiance of the "fixed law of doing" (Arnold 145), set his sights on those aspects of life that had always been seen as forbidden fruit: the secret, avoided, "immoral" categories. This desperation to understand the side of human nature that had been so long vilified was accompanied by a desire to explore the criminal side of society that came with it. Upper- and middle-class Victorian society commonly held that there existed a line not just in refinement, but in the moral nature of the social stratum separating them from the

lower classes of East London. Wilde used his artistic abilities to subtly tear down the studied distinction made between Victorian society's upper and lower classes. His work reveals a perceptive grasp of human nature as he strove to display the fact that the difference between the upper and lower classes was not one of moral nature, but of the situational environment in which the moral nature was formed and functioned. The differences of education, temperament, and wealth are, in Wilde's eyes, sufficient to explain what is considered immoral in a wealthy man and criminal in a poor man. But by dealing with the manifestations of "immorality" in the lower classes through his writing, Wilde ran the risk of being labeled a sympathizer of all things immoral. Indeed, his very position as an artist was all the upper-class public needed to start down that way of thinking.

It fact, it seems that many Victorian readers had forgotten or suppressed the legacy of the link between art and crime, first as a forensic appreciation of a violent crime as an aesthetic scene and later as a recognition of the creativity inherent in a successful criminal venture. In 1827, long before Wilde began his own treatment of the topic, Thomas De Quincey had introduced a strange appreciation of the aesthetics of crime with his lecture "On Murder as One of the Fine Arts." De Quincey claimed to have found his lecture accidentally, telling his audience that it was the secret publication of an underground London group calling themselves "The Society for Connoisseurs of Murder" (De Quincey 339). It is more likely that De Quincey wrote the lecture himself. The lecture is an exercise in practiced irony, referring to murder as "an improper line of conduct" (341) and proclaiming that before a murder is committed, it must be viewed

morally, but once done it is subject to aesthetic critique: “Enough has been given to morality; now comes the turn of Taste and the Fine Arts. . .as it is impossible to hammer anything out of it for moral purposes, let us treat it aesthetically, and see if it will turn to account that way” (344).

De Quincy had already separated aesthetic analysis from moral judgment, and one wonders if Wilde had applied this view to human nature. If he believed what he said in his preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, that “it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (Dorian 3), then art is free to be as moral or immoral as humankind is itself. Finding Victorian morality insufficient for the demand of his desires and indeed incapable of living up to the morality it idolized, Wilde saw the deep flaw of imperfection in the root of humankind and turned to aestheticism and decadence as the means of best fulfilling De Quincy’s conviction that “even imperfection itself may have its ideal or perfect state” (334). Why live in hypocritical denial of one’s own nature merely for the approval of a broken society, especially when one so wholeheartedly embraces Pater’s notion of success?

The connection between creativity in art and crime fascinated Wilde, and when he wrote the essay “Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green” (1891) exploring the interaction between art and crime he began by addressing Victorian society’s view of the artistic nature: “It has constantly been made a subject of reproach against artists and men of letters that they are lacking in wholeness and completeness of nature. As a rule this must necessarily be so. . . To those who are preoccupied with the beauty of form nothing else seems of much importance” (*Essays* 73). In other words, the nature of the artist is not

so much incomplete as it is single-minded. Wilde's defense centers not on the qualifications of a work of art but on those of the artist, creating a definition of the artist that could include personalities such as Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. The subject of "Pen, Pencil and Poison," Wainewright was born in 1794. Wilde describes him as a poet, a painter, and a critic. A capable member of the art world, Wainewright was also an infamous forger and uncommonly skilled with poisons. Ironically stating that the "fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose" (97), Wilde's point is that there "is no essential incongruity between crime and culture. We cannot rewrite the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be" (98). A man's life must be taken as a whole, and the lives of artists must be considered honestly, according to who they really were, not according to what society, determined to have beautiful art originate in "good" men, would make them out to be. Wilde created a parallel between those who transgressed against society physically or financially and those who did so intellectually or creatively.

Careful to broaden the distinction between the two categories but convinced that a metaphor of crime was the best vehicle for expressing how he viewed his own interaction with society, Wilde built upon the foundation laid by those who had already made connections, albeit more directly, between art and crime. Although a criminal separates himself from the masses by a violent act, the artist harms no one. Society is not obligated to take part in the creations of the artist. In Wilde's opinion, this autonomy is both the motivation for and the end of art, as he observes in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891):

Crime, which, under certain conditions may seem to have created individualism, must take cognizance of other people and interfere with them. . . But alone, without any reference to his neighbors, without any interference, the artist can fashion a beautiful thing; and if he does not do it solely for his own pleasure, he is not an artist at all. (270)

While Art may be a crime against Victorian morality, morality is not an object or person to be offended, and therefore the artist is not a true criminal because he does not disrupt anyone or destroy property. So it is that the truest individualist is not the criminal but the artist. His primary goal in creation is to please himself, and, without the complication of interfering with the life of another, the question of the morality of the artwork is a purely personal one.

It was this theory of art and the artist that prompted Wilde to bemoan the use of art as a means of telling the truth. Aside from his staunch belief that half-truths were the best truths available to mankind, a conviction he advertised with every paradoxical quip, Wilde became convinced that aestheticism was not a creed to be embraced, but a problem to be explored. This early transition in his philosophy of art effectively removed him from the cause of art for art's sake and established his mode of artistic expression for the rest of his life. The Victorian and mimetic idea that the artist was to tell the truth through art included at least two assumptions that were, for Wilde, unacceptable. The first was simply the presumption that there was an objective truth to be represented or expressed through art. The second popular assumption was that if a thing was not true, it had no place in public works of art. In other words, Wilde had to combat the wide-spread belief

that art should replicate reality, and that reality is defined by moral conviction. These prescriptive rules relegated art to the role of a guideline. Generations of artists and critics had taken sides on Horace's declared purpose of art "to delight and instruct." Wilde, true to form, modified Horace and concluded that, since truth was largely a matter of experience, art should delight and inquire.

Wilde found his means of inquiry and his mode of individualism in the midst of strict Victorian morality through his unique theory of artistic criminality. Believing that, for the intellectual, art formed a parallel with the crimes of the destitute, Wilde began to view art as the non-violent crime that allowed him to express his socially and morally "criminal" nature—a nature that rebelled against the arbitrary laws and simple answers accepted by so many of his contemporaries. He rejected the responsibility of the artist to produce moral and didactic art. While he wrote poems and created characters that flew in the face of Victorian ideals, a large part of his own moral sense demanded that he turn the tables on society, revealing all of its own immorality. Well aware of society's tendency to equate the "immoral" with the "criminal," Wilde made in his plays a mockery of society as corrupt. Take, for example, Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, who interviews a suitor for her daughter's hand. She inquires as to his age, financial situation, and housing arrangements (including the fashionability of the neighborhood). He qualifies in all these areas, but Lady Bracknell ultimately disqualifies the young man on the basis of unknown parentage—for the ideal candidate is not only comfortably solvent, but also of impeccable descent. Careful never to actually offend the audience he poignantly portrayed, Wilde nevertheless employed all his witticism and apparent

flippancy against a society that overlooked the mortal sins of envy and deceit while arranging marriages as though they were impersonal business transactions.

Wilde's covert crimes of criticism through art were eventually eclipsed by a trial that threatened to transition Wilde the individualist from the experiences of intellectual inquiry and art to the experiences of the convicted lawbreaker. When Wilde went to trial charged with gross misconduct in 1895, his status as a champion of the creative process attracted the attention of critics and budding proto-psychoanalysts. By the early 1890's Max Nordau, J. F. Nisbet, Francis Galton, and Havelock Ellis had all written books on the connection between men of genius and moral degeneration. Josef Breuer and Freud published the history of Anna O. and other cases in *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895. While Freud's first major solo work would not be published until 1900, the field that would eventually be called psychoanalysis was already coming into existence. The popular assumption seemed to be that only a mind deranged could conceive of inventing and extolling the "immoral," as his novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* had been accused of doing. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, one of Wilde's contemporary's, wrote a book in 1888 (the English translation was published in 1891) entitled *Man of Genius*, proposing that creative genius was a form of hereditary insanity. Lombroso's general analysis of men of letters is eerily reminiscent of Wilde's art and personality. Wilde's penchant for paradox and exaggeration resulted in a public reputation hinging on excess and hubris. His literary style was no less peculiar and stylized, and all these were factors that, according to Lombroso, pointed towards insanity and could be labeled "morbid phenomena" (qtd. in Gagnier, *Idylls* 148).

Because the charges against Wilde included an accusation of homosexual activity, the consternation of the Victorian upper-class later sought reassurance in Lombroso's 1899 work entitled *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies*. Published two years after Wilde's release from Reading Gaol, Lombroso's new book, in combination with *Man of Genius*, only encouraged the reactionary Victorians in their condemnation of Wilde. *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies* declared that a divergent sexual appetite resulted from a lack of interest in science and altruism, and from the financial comfort that allows the criminal "an over-abundant diet"—a description that again fit Wilde with his aesthetic philosophy and his well-known reputation for appreciating the culinary arts (qtd. in Gagnier, *Idylls* 148). In Lombroso's way of thinking an unusual need for sexual gratification is the surest sign that the brain is unbalanced. Needless to say, these theories thrilled the Victorian moralists, seeming not only to vindicate their discomposure when confronted with Wilde, but also to ease their burden of association: Wilde may be a member of the upper classes, but his behavior is the result of madness. The fact that so many embraced Lombroso's rantings demonstrates the degree to which the majority of Victorian society had entirely failed to comprehend or had refused to accept the true complexity of Wilde's writings. Far from quibbling over the cause of immorality, Wilde was questioning the very standards of morality itself. Throughout his works, Wilde proposes that society's entire understanding of evil and, as Wilde terms it, sin, is faulty—and it is to this firm denial of reality that art owes its dark reputation.

Perhaps in Wilde's case that reputation was not helped by the fact that Wilde often used common words, but with a definition specific to his own use. As a result, the

uninitiated would have had difficulty in identifying any sort of moral compass. That is probably what Wilde intended, at least in part. His artistic inquiry often focused on the arbitrary standards of morality in his own society, and he even went so far as to encourage “lying”—that is, to think and see beyond the realm of physical reality and the limitations of traditional presuppositions. Two of his earliest publications serve as prime examples of the artist exploring similarities and distinctions within the worlds of art and crime: “The Decay of Lying” (1891), and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). In his essay “The Decay of Lying” Wilde extols the virtue of imagination and invention in art, setting up an opposition to the dreary realism of contemporary popular fiction. “The Decay of Lying” suggests that the real travesty in fiction is for the artist strictly to imitate life, to follow blindly the rules of reality. Through the themes of crime vs. immorality, art, and artistic responsibility in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde examines the creed of the Aesthetes. His belief in the necessity of imagination and inquiry in art is consistently represented throughout all of his work. What does change is Wilde’s use of the “lie,” his own acknowledgment of the interaction between reality and art. Before his time in prison, Wilde seemed content to express himself in his own terms, with little or no desire for the comprehension of the audience to extend beyond a laugh. His motivation appears to be more cathartic than overtly revolutionary. In the next two chapters we will see how the lie transforms from a term for imagination and dissimulation, as it is used in “The Decay of Lying” and *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. The lie becomes a tool of clarity and a call to action in the realm of physical reality through the post-incarceration works *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis*. These works

demonstrate the effect of the artist's experiences, observable as the goal of Wilde's art develops beyond expressions of the disconnected individualist seeking knowledge through the pursuit of Paterian ecstasy, and becomes a judgment of society and the state of the individual within it.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LIARS AND MURDERERS: THE PERILS OF RESCUING FICTION FROM THE MORASS OF REALISM

Wilde's developing aesthetic theories finally came together in one of his first published essays "The Decay of Lying" (1889). This brief treatise on the nature of fiction and the role of the imagination in artistic creation employed the trope of the "liar" and "lying" to describe the artist and his work. The next step was naturally to write a work of fiction exemplifying his aesthetic philosophy, and so Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—which first appeared as a story in the July 1890 issue of the Philadelphia *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*—was published in England in an expanded and revised version in April 1891. In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde practiced all that he had preached in "The Decay of Lying," demonstrating his conviction that the role of art was to invent and challenge. However, the public's outraged response to *Dorian Gray* and the aesthetic philosophy the novel embodied revealed a disconnection between Wilde's intention and the practical execution. According to Richard Ellmann, Wilde "insisted that the book had struck a moral note and had been misread" (*Oscar Wilde* 349-350). The confusion over the moral message of the book was caused in part by the hyper-sensitivity of middle-class Victorians to anything touching standards of morality, but it was also due to the unique vocabulary invented by Wilde and unknown to his general readership.

"The Decay of Lying," in which much of Wilde's aesthetic vocabulary is defined, deals with his theories on imagination and art. By presenting his ideas as a conversation between two characters, Vivian and Cyril, Wilde is able not only to present his own

ideas, but also to respond casually to the various opinions and traditional views of his audience. The conversational structure also provides the advantage, as I have already hinted, of keeping the treatment at a laymen's level—thereby allowing for a leeway in thoroughness that might not have been considered legitimate if the essay had been presented as the systematic theory of an academic. This is not surprising, as the whole concept of a systematic aesthetic philosophy would have been loathsome to Wilde.

Wilde does, however, include definitions for the common terms that take on specific and unique meaning in his essay. When Wilde remarks, "If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once," his definition of imagination begins to take shape ("Decay of Lying" 292). A mind limited by fact cannot be truly imaginative. Thus, when Wilde proceeds from what is unimaginative to a call for "Lying in art," the reader begins to understand that Wilde's definition of lying has more to do with the expressions of the imagination than with truth-telling. Nature, too, is specified "to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture" ("Decay of Lying" 300-301). This conception of nature is in response to the Romantics, whose definition of Nature, according to Wilde, allowed men to "only discover in her what they bring to her" (301). Wilde's validation of instinct liberated the notion of convention in art. At one point in "The Decay of Lying" Wilde mentions one of his favorite artistic genres: "Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation, its love of artistic convention, its dislike to the actual representation of any object in Nature, and our own imitative spirit" ("Decay of Lying" 303). It is Wilde's aversion to mimetic art and his delight in convention that drives his aesthetic theory in

general. In particular, “The Decay of Lying” is an effort to highlight the lack of convention in contemporary fiction. After all, in Wilde’s philosophy of art, truth itself “is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” (“Decay of Lying” 305), and art is “a veil, rather than a mirror” (306). The realization of this aesthetic philosophy, however, required a whole new way of thinking about art, and it is to this end that he challenges his readers to consider afresh the purpose of art. He hoped to inspire a “Renaissance of art” (“Decay of Lying” 292) by convincing his contemporaries that “the object of art is not simple truth, but complex beauty” (302).

In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde is concerned with the liberation of the imagination and the enjoyment of its creations. Although it does not surface until the middle of the essay, the premise of Wilde’s philosophy is simply that “art never expressed anything but itself” (“Decay of Lying” 313). This axiom frees art and the artist from all constraints related to providing an example for society and to the criticism of its role as a moral compass. According to Wilde, the subject matter of art is indifferent to moral or ethical judgment (Wilde also implies that the more indifferent we are to the subject matter, the more honest our appreciation of the work can be, existing for the sake of Beauty and the artist alone). Wilde’s theory also liberates art from the weighty burden of reproducing or re-presenting things as they are already. This is why Wilde chooses to use the term “lying” for art and “liar” for the artist—not because they speak in deceptions, but because they produce a creative depiction of the world that is divergent from their present reality.

As Wilde's Vivian explains, the object of the liar, within the realm of art, is "simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure" ("Decay of Lying" 305). It is an argument not against some notion of objective truth, but rather an exhortation to abandon a simply mimetic method of art in favor of an imaginative and creative one. Wilde briefly mentions and analyzes the popular realists who went "directly to life for everything"—Hardy, James, de Maupassant, Zola, etc. . . ("Decay of Lying" 293). Through Vivian, Wilde scorns the works of the realists and the naturalists, contending that the transposition of "real life" to the page is not artistic invention at all, but merely "dull facts under the guise of fiction" (293). Bad art is, according to Wilde, the result of raising nature and life to ideals.

It is the imagination that conceives of life as it might be, something entirely "other" than the known reality. In fact, while considering Émile Zola, the father of naturalism and Wilde's contemporary, Wilde declares: "In literature we require distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power. We don't want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower orders" ("Decay of Lying" 296). This desire for art to ignore certain aspects of reality is consistent with Wilde's aversion to pain and suffering, as well as a testament to the imagination's ability to transcend the harshness of life. Wilde calls art that focuses on the dark aspect of life "wrong not on the ground of morals, but on the ground of art" ("Decay of Lying" 296). His criticism is purely that of a reader who is bored by the trudging commonness of realism's characters: "They have their dreary vices, and their drearier virtues. The record of their lives is absolutely without interest. Who cares what happens to them?" (296). In other words,

why would he spend his time reading about the boring people next door? The difference between a book that creates a focused reproduction of reality with all its unpleasant aspects and one that creates a recognizable but original world is the difference, in Wilde's words, between "unimaginative realism and imaginative reality" ("Decay of Lying" 299).

It was the popularity of unimaginative realism in literature that compelled Wilde to express his frustration and concern for art produced in a culture that was preoccupied with pragmatic certainties: "if something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify, our monstrous worship of facts, Art will become sterile, and Beauty will pass away from the land" ("Decay of Lying" 294-295). This idea is central to Wilde's aesthetic in "The Decay of Lying" as he seeks to reverse the common conception that art imitates life. On the contrary, he argues, life is very much the product of art. He recounts the story of a hostess's comparison of a real sunset to one of Turner's paintings and the obligation felt by a young woman of his acquaintance to emulate the choices of a serial heroine. This anecdotal evidence supports Wilde's theory that through the inspiring creativeness of the individual, art leads the way for life. Once an individual has been exposed to a work of art, all correlating realities are in turn judged by that idealized standard—i.e., an actual sunset is compared to a painted one. Wilde also observes that life, unfortunately, often "gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness" ("Decay of Lying 301). This seeming contradiction is merely an explanation for the slow and incremental progress of society, for, if art is "really a form of exaggeration. . . and selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of over-emphasis" (302) then it is

inevitable, as Wilde said, that “Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar” (305).

Wilde experienced society’s reluctance in the face of artistic progress when his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was published in 1891—the same year that “The Decay of Lying” was republished as part of a four-essay volume entitled *Intentions*, which also included the essay “Pen, Pencil, and Poison.” A faithful application of Wilde’s aesthetic philosophy, the novel chronicles the moral corruption of a young man after he sells his soul to attain eternal youth. Convinced by the flippant Lord Henry Wotton that the key to life is happiness through experience, Dorian embarks on a life of sensory exploration. Because his pursuit of happiness is entirely egocentric, Dorian progresses down an ever more slippery slope of wrongdoing, immorality, and eventually crime. The portrait reflects the effects of his choices, and not only ages but also acquires the physiognomy of an evil-doer. For decades Dorian appears not to age at all. At the end of the tale, Dorian is exhausted by the weight of his guilt and attempts to reverse the effects of all his evil by doing a good deed. Upon discovering that no number of good deeds can redeem him, Dorian attempts to destroy the painting, but only succeeds in destroying himself. The final page of the novel describes a servant discovering the “withered, wrinkled, and loathsome” body of an old man lying in front of the portrait of the beautiful and young Dorian Gray (*Dorian Gray* 213).

All the rules for imaginative fiction as laid down in “The Decay of Lying,” are exemplified in *Dorian Gray*. Wilde’s first and only novel was a unique blend of the escape from realism championed in “The Decay of Lying” and the concerns of the

budding modernists. The romantic ideal of a young man coming to know himself and his world through experience became an entirely new proposition once nature was no longer the chosen environment for that discovery. As Arnold had expounded and Wilde's aesthetic rebellion displayed, modern England was transitioning from a culture content with codified knowledge to a people awakened to uncertainties—and in a time when absolutes seemed to be falling apart, it was only appropriate for fiction to take on an aspect of unreality as well.

Centered on one magical trope, a portrait that can reflect the deteriorating soul of its subject while leaving Dorian eternally young, Wilde's imagination produced a work including the elements of fairy tale, morality play, and crime novel. The living portrait and the postponement of aging are conventions of classic fairy tales (for example Grimms' "Snow White" of 1812 [English trans] and Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" of 1756), but in *Dorian Gray* these connections surpass the common practice of connecting two people. Here the picture functions as a window into the soul and as the harbinger of consequences to come. As he explores deeper and deeper into society's underworld, Dorian's gift of eternal youth serves to expose the dichotomy between appearances and reality. Neither of these themes—the deferment of consequences or the failure of things to appear as they are—were foreign to the literature of Wilde's day. But while Dickens and Thackeray punish their characters in good time through the loss of finances and social standing, both very realistic outcomes in ideal worlds where most wrongs are made right, Wilde besets his Dorian with the image of his own evolving doom. This doom takes a unique form, for the reader assumes

that the ultimate result will merely be the loss of Dorian's good looks which is, in his own words, the loss of "everything" and sufficient motive for suicide (*Dorian Gray* 28). The absurdities of the novel, such as the one just mentioned, are examples of what Wilde meant by "lying" in art. While the reader acknowledges that it would be a very foolish young man, indeed, who killed himself at the first sign of a wrinkle, Dorian Gray is nevertheless, a fascinating and entertaining figure reminiscent of fairy-tale archetypes.

As a morality play, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has its *Dr. Faustus* moment with Lord Henry playing the part of Mephistopheles. Lord Henry flatters Dorian on his remarkable good looks and then laments: "Our limbs fail, our senses rot. We degenerate into hideous puppets. . . . There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth" (*Dorian Gray* 25). This prompts Dorian to respond with the cry: "If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now" and to collapse on the couch "as though he was praying" (*Dorian Gray* 28). And, miraculously, all the effects of life's wear and tear upon Dorian's body are transferred to the portrait. This transference is effectually a redemption from the effects of the fall of man as described in Genesis, for, in evangelicalism, it is at the moment when Adam replaces the image of God with an image of himself that the consequence of aging and death is introduced. Of course, this novel is also a fairy tale, so there is no divine being, only an unknown source of power that allows Dorian to make his own portrait a temporary scapegoat. Perhaps this is another nod to the morality play, for the characters always rise to heaven or descend to hell alone—with or without their good works.

*Dorian Gray* the crime novel realizes both the convention of “The Decay of Lying” and the aesthetics of crime described in “Pen, Pencil, Poison.” For example, the body of the murdered painter, Basil Hallward, is entirely broken down by a chemical compound and nothing is left of the corpse but “a horrible smell of nitric acid (*Dorian Gray* 166). Dorian’s aversion to the miasma of chemicals is only matched by his horror at the sight of a body he had just rendered lifeless. Dorian’s egocentricity is always made manifest by his aesthetic concerns. Aspects of the crime novel observable in *Dorian Gray* also include scenes of disguise, premeditation, and the hiding of evidence. Most uniquely, the role of the hounding detective is replaced by a conscience, taking the form of the portrait. More than any external consequence Dorian is trying, with every sin of omission and commission, to escape from himself. (In this sense, *Dorian Gray*, as a crime novel, is a psychological one and comparable in many ways to the work of Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849), the poet whom, according to Ellmann, Wilde admired even more than he did his idols Whitman and Emerson (167).)

The convergence of fairy tale, morality play, and crime novel in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exemplifies Wilde’s autonomy from the strict categories of genre and from the realism he so abhorred. But Wilde’s personal success in creating a work that embodied his own aesthetic theory did not translate into a sweeping success in the public eye. In fact, readers were so unsure of what to make of the novel that the general reaction was absolutely polarized. Because *Dorian Gray* was an accurate reflection of his own conviction that fiction should be imaginative reality, Wilde’s novel offers no exposition or analysis of its characters. The ambiguity of the final scene is intentional—we will

never know if Dorian's death was suicide or an unexpected consequence of trying to break the magical contract. The reader is left unguided, free to contemplate the moral of the story in terms of personal proclivity—and that appears to be exactly what each Victorian reader did! Because the tale includes murders, suicides, homosexuality, drug use, etc. . . . many readers and reviewers railed against *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, seeming to find the novel to be entirely without morality, let alone a moral.

Robert Mighall's introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* includes some helpful history of the book's reception. The review in W. E. Henley's *Scots's Observer* called the novel fit only "for the Criminal Investigation Department" and declared it a threat to the "public morals," pronouncing the book "false art. . . false to human nature—for its hero is a devil; it is false to morality—for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity" (Mighall x). The review in the *Daily Chronicle* began: "Dullness and dirt are the chief features of *Lippincott's* [the journal in which *Dorian Gray* was serialized] this month," continuing to identify the moral of the story:

[being] that when you feel yourself becoming too angelic you cannot do better than rush out and make a beast of yourself. There is not a single good or holy impulse of human nature, scarcely a fine feeling or instinct that civilization, art, and religion, have developed throughout the ages as part of the barriers between Humanity and Animalism that is not held up to ridicule and contempt in *Dorian Gray*. . . . (*Dorian Gray* 217)

On the other hand, the *Christian Leader* gave the novel a glowing endorsement:

With a subtle power it portrays the gilded paganism which has been staining these latter years of the Victorian epoch with horrors that carry us back to the worst incidents in the history of ancient Rome. . .in the tragic picture of Dorian Gray's life. . .Mr. Wilde has performed a service to his age. . . .We can only hope that it will be read and pondered by those classes of British society whose corruption it delineates with such thrilling power, and that it may be a means of preserving many young lives from the temptations by which they are surrounded. (*Dorian Gray* 219)

Certainly, Wilde was not too distressed by these reactions. His own preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was contained a number of paradoxes and aphorisms, two of which spoke precisely to the situation: "Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital" (*Dorian Gray* 4). The second aphorism, "When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself," explains Wilde's reaction to the reviews his novel received (4). Through letters to the editors, Wilde responded to these disparate reviews with complacence. For example, to the editor of the *Scots Observer*, Wilde replied: "For if a work of art is rich, and vital, and complete, those who have artistic instincts will see its beauty, and those to whom ethics appeal more strongly than aesthetics will see its moral lesson" ("Defense of Dorian Gray" 249). This is perhaps the best explanation of what Wilde meant by his aphorism in the novel's preface: "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (*Dorian Gray* 4), and certainly the reactions of his readers seemed to prove it true.

But Wilde responded to those who called his book immoral with more than a repetition of his theory that all art is exempt from the exercise of moral and ethical judgment. With a tone of little asperity and great disbelief, Wilde expressed his surprise that the novel's moral, which he had feared was too obvious, had become the subject of so much doubt and debate. To the editor of the *St. James Gazette* Wilde defended his work, saying "it is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: all Excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment" ("Defense of Dorian Gray" 240). Writing to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, Wilde added: "the real trouble I experienced in writing the story was that of keeping the extremely obvious moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect" (245). In fact, Wilde illuminated the entire purpose of his novel for all Victorian Philistines when he declared in yet another letter to the editor of the *St. James Gazette*: "What my story is, is an interesting problem" ("Defense of Dorian Gray" 244). Had his readership taken the time to read beyond the elements of virtue and evil that were, according to Wilde, necessary "for the dramatic development of this story. . . . Otherwise the story would have had no meaning and no plot issue," they would have realized that Wilde has indeed carefully constructed an examination of science and religion, the individual and society, and theory and experience (248). As Michael Gillespie noted in the preface to the 2007 Norton edition, the novel is "determined to explore the contradictory elements of human nature without falling back on conventional pieties" (xi).

It was Wilde's awareness of the complexity of life that compelled him to write, as Ellmann put it so well, "out of a debate between doctrines, not from a doctrine,"

revealing the *modus operandi* for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Other scholars have noticed Wilde's inclusion of contending theories as well. Regenia Gagnier chronicles Wilde's interaction with evolutionary science when she cites Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand in their observation:

[A]t Oxford Wilde reconciled evolutionary science and philosophical idealism. Specifically, he rejected any methodological individualism that saw the individual as the basic social unit and identity as analyzable apart from society, in favor of Herbert Spencer's and William Kingdon Clifford's theories of cultural evolution, in which individuals inherited their characteristics from their cultures. (Gagnier, *Wilde and the Victorians* 25)

While this may seem to contradict Wilde's philosophy of the individualist, it is important to remember that Wilde advocated the resistance against being defined by something outside your experience. This understanding of the formation of the individual assumes that there is a framework in which a person can be raised or persuaded to adopt beliefs that contradict their personal experience—that is, their culture.

Expanding on Wilde's interest in the individual in relation to culture, Joseph Carroll examines the novel through the lens of "two competing visions of human nature" (287) in "Aestheticism, Homoeroticism, and Christian Guilt in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" (2005). The first "vision" is social science according to Darwin, who implies in the conclusion to his *Descent of Man* (1871), that the evils of human nature are linked to our physicality, the marks of our having not yet completed our evolution:

[W]e must acknowledge. . . that man with all his noble qualities. . .with his godlike intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin. (1690)

The second view of human nature is “the traditional Christian conception of the soul” (Carroll 287). The two competing systems, Darwinism and Christianity, “share certain concepts of the human moral and social character, but they couch those concepts in different idioms, and they would invoke wholly different casual explanations for how human nature came to be the way it is” (287). Beyond a difference in Darwinism and Christianity on the subject of the explanation for human nature’s state is their solution to the existence of evil in human nature. For Darwin, as mentioned earlier, human nature is linked to evil through the physical. Thus, in Darwinism, human nature’s progress away from evil is connected to, if not dependent upon, physical progress through evolution.

Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that an individual progresses away from evil through spiritual means, and in spite of their physicality. For example, the Apostle Paul declares:

For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. . . .Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:22-24)

In the minds of many church-going Victorians, the opposition of Christianity to Darwinism was far from subtle. Charles Hadden Spurgeon (1834-1892), one of the most

well-known of 19<sup>th</sup>-century England's Baptist preachers, spoke to thousands of church attendees every Sunday morning for forty years—the majority of those years at London's famous Metropolitan Tabernacle. Never reluctant to address contemporary ideas, Spurgeon addressed Darwin's theory of evolution in 1886 in a sermon entitled "Hideous Discovery:"

In its bearing upon religion this vain notion is, however, no theme for mirth, for it is not only deceptive, but it threatens to be mischievous in a high degree. There is not a hair of truth upon this dog from its head to its tail, but it rends and tears the simple ones. In all its bearing upon scriptural truth, the evolution theory is in direct opposition to it. If God's Word be true, evolution is a lie. I will not mince the matter: this is not the time for soft speaking. (Spurgeon 397)

Spurgeon is clearly in the business of establishing objective truth—the existence of which we already know Wilde doubted. But the popularity of Spurgeon's sermons and their publication in newspapers, both in London and throughout the British Empire, is evidence of the question in the minds of many Christians as to whether or not the theory of evolution and the claim to scriptural infallibility could peacefully co-exist.

Of course, Wilde is not interested in solving the debate. Wilde presents this problem of the source and meaning of human nature as just that: a problem. He doesn't argue for Darwinian evolution or Christianity's story of creation and the fall of man. He is concerned, as ever, with experience. Perhaps, for Wilde, experience trumps these cosmological questions. In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde's primary character is confused by competing theories on the nature of man, a crucial issue when it comes to the question of

how man is to be made happy. Lord Henry Wotton tells Dorian that “the body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. . . .The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it” (*Dorian Gray* 21). In this theory, there is only a kind of existential quest for gratification and experience. But Dorian’s desire is never satiated, and his conscience—the image in the picture frame— drives him to suicide. Either Dorian feels guilt because he has not, in Arnold’s terms, evolved to the state where he can rightly balance the aspects of his nature (morality and intellect), or he feels guilty because he has internalized an understanding of what Carroll calls the “Christian pathos” (288). Either way, Dorian’s experience is the same.

But Wilde describes Dorian’s experience with the portrait with a loaded term: “It had been a like a conscience to him” (*Dorian Gray* 212). It is the question of conscience that links religion and science with the issue of society and the individual. Is the mirror actually a reflection of Dorian’s own conscience? Or is it a visual representation of how Dorian’s Christian society would see him if they knew all his secrets? We must not forget the reputation of the “immoral” artist and the interchangeability of the words “immoral” and “criminal” within Wilde’s broader social context. In the relationship between the book and the reader, it seems clear that Wilde has drawn a metaphoric connection between himself as an “immoral” artist and Dorian as a “criminal,” and again between his artistic expression and Dorian’s crimes. More than just a picture of the character Dorian’s conscience, the portrait doubles as the “unjust mirror” (*Dorian Gray* 212) of society’s “strictness of conscience” (Arnold 145). In other words, Dorian and his crimes parallel the artist and his “immorality.” Dorian’s image in the portrait changes after Dorian’s does

things that would be universally condemned—like murder, but also for less certain evils such as his opium use. While *Dorian Gray* is certainly a criticism of extreme aestheticism, it does question the legitimacy of a socially codified morality.

Encompassing the questions associated with religion, science, culture, and the individual is the exploration of what happens to a person when he or she tries to live as though the consciousness of man is only two-dimensional. Dorian lives as though what seems to be true in theory is actually true in life. Having jettisoned any working definition of morality, Dorian is not even able to tell when he has crossed from immorality and into criminality. For example, when the hitherto innocent young man jilts his actress fiancé Sybil Vane, an action more amoral than immoral, she promptly commits suicide. Her decision produces Dorian's response: "So I have murdered Sybil Vane...murdered her as surely as if I had cut her little throat with a knife" (*Dorian Gray* 96). Dorian's own death, the ultimate consequence of his choices, stands in interesting contrast to Lord Henry's comment that "nothing makes one so vain as being told that one is a sinner. Conscience makes egoists of us all" (99). Of course Hamlet mused: "conscience does make *cowards* of us all" (emphasis mine) (Shakespeare 1208). Hamlet was describing cowardice in the face of death, which also makes cowards of us all. And yet Dorian later tells Lord Henry that, while he doesn't fear "Death" itself, "it is the coming of Death that terrifies me" (*Dorian Gray* 195). It seems that conscience made Dorian a coward as well—he knows that he deserves to die, and yet he does not want to surrender the experiential pursuits that condemn him. Dorian wants to go on living even though he knows that "[t]he wretched peasant who has just died is better off than I am"

(*Dorian Gray* 194). The reader is left to consider the possibility that Dorian has come to believe, perhaps even on an unconscious level, that the hedonistic philosophies of Lord Henry which have captivated him for so long have actually betrayed him.

The death of Dorian reveals, I think, a pervasive doctrine that ultimately fails and was designed to fail. A reckless hedonist and untempered aesthete, Dorian has a life which fails to meet the fulfillment he thought was promised by Lord Henry's "new Hedonism" (*Dorian Gray* 25). This criticism of hedonism reflects the growth in Wilde's understanding of Pater's philosophy. Wilde, the one-time hedonist now echoes the more lofty ideals of his mentor. In fact, Pater immediately identified his pupil's work as an example of what not to do. Pater's review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* observed:

A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr Wilde's hero—his heroes are bent on doing as speedily, as completely as they can, is to lose, or lower, organization, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development. (Pater, "Novel by OW" 221)

Pater seems to have been the only published critic to discover, however incompletely, the fault of excess around which Wilde so intentionally built his tale. As noted earlier, the majority of Wilde's audience entirely failed to see the point, dismissing the book as the product of a corrupt mind.

Wilde responded to those who called his book corrupt by proclaiming to the editor of the *St. James Gazette*: "I wrote this book entirely for my own pleasure, and it

gave me very great pleasure to write it. Whether it becomes popular or not is a matter of absolute indifference to me” (“Defense of Dorian Gray” 238). As Wilde intended, his word choice and lack of narrational exposition left a wide range of interpretations open. Take for example the passage quoted earlier: “the body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. . . .The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it” (*Dorian Gray* 21). The average member of Victorian Christian society would assume evangelical definitions for the words “sin,” “temptation,” and “purification.” With those meanings, this passage essentially implies that man should not be concerned with a divine being who has labeled certain things “sin,” but rather should give in to natural desires and relieve itself of the longing. That is, in fact, exactly what Lord Henry’s character is saying—and the application of that philosophy brings about Dorian’s death. But what is Wilde saying?

Lord Henry’s whole philosophy is just the exaggeration of one optional approach to life; the novel certainly includes a criticism of the Decadent movement in the final outcome of such a hedonistic philosophy. Wilde cares, not about the terminology or the socio-religious connotations of the character’s theories, but about the whole question of how one ought to live. If we adopt Wilde’s conviction that “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (*Dorian Gray* 4), it is clear that Wilde intended the novel, not as a manual for corruption, but as a kind of fictional and intellectual exploration. “Sin” and “temptation” are merely his culture’s labels for offense and desire. The evangelical interpretation assumes that there is a divine being to be offended—in his novel Wilde is calling even that fundamental premise into question. In doing so, Wilde also questions

the traditionally accepted definitions of good and evil. If the rules that have hitherto been functioning as the standard of morality are in fact based upon a false premise—that God wrote the rules down and gave them to mankind to follow—then perhaps there is actually a different standard of morality under the rule of science, or even simply according to the desires of man. Certainly, in the language of the times, Wilde’s novel was immoral. But perhaps Wilde would have been gratified had his readers had the perspicacity to recognize that *Dorian Gray*’s transgressions against the social conscience were intended to raise questions, not eyebrows. Unfortunately, undiscerning readers allowed the mask of the novel—the immoral plot and subject matter—to entirely obscure the legitimate issues raised in the novel.

In spite of Wilde’s protestations that a work of art cannot be subjected to ethical analysis, Victorian readers were not yet prepared for the literature produced by the creative artist of Wilde’s “Decay of Lying.” Wilde had written a novel that reflected his interest in experience and revealed his sensitivity to “the revelation of personality through choice and preference” (Gagnier, *Idylls* 22). As “The Decay of Lying” stipulated, Wilde had employed invention and imagination in his novel. Not bound by realism, he created a recognizable world with familiar dilemmas and fantastical situations— every reader is familiar with the tension between desire and restraint, but no reader has a portrait that grows in their place. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not only fulfilled Wilde’s stylistic and ideological prescriptions for charming art, but also exemplified his dictum that art “is a veil rather than a mirror” (“Decay of Lying” 306). Through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde created a world that, instead of recreating the world as we know it, created an

exaggerated example of human experience—a world in which the physical and external (social) consequences of unbridled hedonism are temporarily suspended.

Unfortunately, there was no one to draw a veil over the artist's life—those who were uncomfortable with Wilde's works did not ask questions. Instead, they made accusations. Contrary to the assertion of *Dorian Gray*'s narrator that “society is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those both rich and fascinating,” Victorian society was all too eager to believe that Wilde was the paradox-spouting Lord Henry in public, and the morally-deteriorating Dorian Gray in private (*Dorian Gray* 136). This reputation, born from fiction, preceded Wilde into the courtroom in 1895, some four years after the publication of *Dorian Gray*. Wilde had glorified the youth and beauty of a young man and questioned the moral *status quo*. These circumstances alone were enough to cast doubt upon his “moral” character, and to justify the accusation of every publically reprehensible wrong conceivable. I say publically reprehensible because implicit in the charge of gross misconduct that would be leveled against Wilde in 1895 was an accusation of homosexual activity, and like so many other Victorian immoralities, homosexuality was only immoral if it became public.

The Marquess of Queensberry introduced Wilde's so-called immorality to the public in 1894. A controlling and jealous man, the Marquess of Queensberry was convinced that Wilde was corrupting his son, and took every opportunity presented him to insult and defame Wilde. The Douglas's had been estranged for some time prior to the trial, and the son, Lord Alfred, was only too eager to encourage Wilde to humiliate Queensberry in court by bringing a libel suit against him. Far outstripped in wealth,

Wilde had a mediocre prosecutor who was obliged to take on some of the most famous barristers of the time. One of these, Mr. Carson, “suggested that *Dorian Gray* was perverted” (Ellmann 449). Wilde responded: “That could only be to brutes and illiterates. The views of Philistines on art are incalculably stupid” (449).

Wilde embraced the notion that a society and its individuals should be inextricably linked, and he wrote his novel as he did because he believed in “the inheritance of progressive characteristics: precisely because life imitates art, art should be progressive” (Gagnier, *Wilde and the Victorians* 25). He could not explain to the willfully ignorant masses in general, and the courtroom in particular, that his novel was not intended to extol the virtues of controversial behavior, but rather was *designed* to pose questions, to expose the insufficiencies of man as he tried to systematize, quantify, and (de)moralize human experience. Wilde recognized that “Lord Henry is what the world thinks me,” and indeed that was how the lawyers described him (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 319). It must have been to Wilde’s great distress that no one saw the flaw in Carson’s argument: Wilde did not embody the whole of Lord Henry’s advice—by making Oscar Wilde the equivalent of a fictional character, the humanity that Wilde had not allowed Lord Henry was also denied Wilde during his trial. But perhaps the guilt of the jurors can be somewhat mitigated when we remember the mask that Wilde had so carefully constructed. He was known for exaggerated opinions and the flippant dismissal of facts. Wilde had set the value of things as they were at naught, favoring instead a manufactured representation of things as they should be.

This profound disconnect between Wilde and the power of reality over him may have been the result of an always comfortable life. Perhaps Wilde's aversion to "the brotherhood of man" as a "most depressing and humiliating reality," as expressed in "The Decay of Lying," came from the total lack of physical suffering in his own life (297). Until the proceedings of his libel suit against Queensberry, Wilde's idea of suffering was incurring debts as he went out to the most fashionable eateries in London or failing to gain recognition for his art. But all of that was about to change.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A NEW INDIVIDUALIST: FROM THEORY TO IMAGINATION

Wilde's trial and ultimately his imprisonment resulted in the creation of two final written works—*De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. *De Profundis* was written in 1897, while Wilde was still in prison, but because it was a private letter, it was not published until 1909—nine years after Wilde's death. When Robert Ross, Wilde's life-long friend and executor of his estate, first published the letter, Ross edited the contents to conceal the fact that *De Profundis* was in fact a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas. In the letter Wilde reproaches Douglas for his behavior both before and during Wilde's incarceration, but it is primarily an expression of Wilde's self-recrimination for not having broken with Douglas at any one of the several opportunities Wilde had had to do so. Wilde's examination of the defects in Douglas' character, specifically Douglas' selfishness and lack of compassion, eventually grew into a treatise on the value of imaginative sympathy and an analysis of Wilde's interpretation of the Christ figure as the ultimate individualist. While Wilde embraced the notion of the individualist during his university years as he contemplated the interaction between the individual, society, and progress, it is explained in greatest detail and most thoroughly developed in *De Profundis*. Wilde's interpretation of the Christ figure is the greatest interest in relation to his last work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Published anonymously in February of 1898, almost a year after Wilde was released from Reading Gaol, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* poetically parallels the execution of Christ with the execution of a murderer known to the

inmates of Reading. It was through *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* that Oscar Wilde revealed his convictions on morality—the sense of morality that had been vehemently declared non-existent by so many who had reviewed *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The question surrounding his morals eventually landed Wilde in prison. The rumors of homosexuality that had swarmed around Wilde since his Oxford days culminated with his libel suite against The Marquess of Queensberry. When the thirty-six year old Wilde had first met Lord Alfred Douglas in 1891, shortly after the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Alfred was a twenty-year-old student at Magdalen College. By 1894, their intimate relationship had so consumed Lord Alfred, or “Bosie” as his mother and Wilde called him, that his father, Queensberry, was convinced that Wilde was “taking Bosie over” (Ellmann 424). When Bosie’s eldest brother Drumlanrig died on October 29, 1894, in what his father believed was a homosexual scandal, Queensberry became determined to protect Lord Alfred from a similar fate. Finding Bosie deaf to all his ranting protestations, the hot-tempered Queensberry focused his attention on Wilde. Had it not been for Wilde’s unflagging tenderness of heart towards Bosie, this strategy probably would have realized Queensberry’s goal. A spoiled and egocentric young man, Bosie on several occasions displayed such heartless and dismissive behavior towards Wilde that the now famous playwright vowed to permanently forsake their friendship.

Yet each time Wilde thought he had renounced Bosie once and for all, the charming young man would play upon Wilde’s affections, enticing him back. In January 1895 the two men went off to Algeria to escape Queensberry’s barely contained wrath.

Their return in February was almost immediately marked by a communiqué from the Marquess of Queensberry. The inscription was never definitely identified at the time, but according to Richard Ellmann, Wilde probably deciphered “To Oscar Wilde, ponce and Sodomite” (438). Ellmann maintains that Queensberry actually wrote: “To Oscar Wilde posing Sodomite”; regardless of the actual phraseology, this insult provoked Wilde to toy with the idea of bringing a libel suite against Queensberry. Wilde recorded in *De Profundis* that Bosie badgered him until it became a reality: “You [Bosie] thought simply of how to get your father into prison. . . [even saying] that my going bankrupt was really a splendid score’ off him as he would not then be able to get any of his costs out of me” (CW 1057-58).

To get Queensberry acquitted, the barrister Edward Carson was obligated to prove the accusation of sodomy reasonable enough to satisfy a jury. Evidence of Wilde’s proclivities seemed to rise up unbidden. A prostitute, frustrated by the competition presented by young male prostitutes, led a detective to the apartment of Alfred Taylor, who had introduced Wilde to a number of young men and boys. In the apartment, the detective found a record of all the names and addresses of the men Wilde had encountered. Most of the young men on the list were persuaded to give evidence against Wilde. Queensberry, too, had managed to collect evidence against Wilde in the form of letters written from Wilde to Douglas. As the evidence piled up, the general feeling was against Wilde, and the trial transformed from a libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry into a defense of public sensibilities. Instead of Queensberry, Wilde was on trial, and the proceeding that Wilde had at first considered with little seriousness quickly

turned ugly. Because of the evidence against Wilde, the Marquess was declared justified in calling him a sodomite, and Wilde was in turn charged with gross misconduct on April 5, 1895.

These are the circumstances that promoted the popular notion that Wilde was indicted because of his morally outrageous behavior. In fact, the only reason Wilde was taken to trial to answer misconduct charges was that his lawyer, Clarke, had chosen to read a series of letters from Queensberry to his ex-wife and son. Clarke's goal was to demonstrate Queensberry's distressed state of mind at the time of the conflict with Wilde. But while Queensberry's letters revealed a man desperate to save his son from what he believed was Wilde's corrupting influence, the letters also involved the names of William Gladstone and Lord Archibald Roseberry. Wilde had to be prosecuted lest it appear that Gladstone and Roseberry had favored Wilde because they were themselves homosexual—as Queensberry, who had begun to suspect almost every London male of homosexuality, implied in the letters (Ellmann 450). The first painful and humiliating prosecution of Wilde lasted one month, and when the jury was unable to reach a verdict, a new trial ensued. The second trial lasted only three days, and, on May 25, 1895, Wilde was convicted of gross misconduct and sentenced to two years' imprisonment and hard labor. It almost seems as though the entire situation did not become real for Wilde until he heard the sentence. His cry of “My God, My God” and near fainting exhibited real shock, as if he had never considered conviction a real possibility (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 477).

Because of the distortions of the truth presented in his trial, and because of the deep sense of betrayal Wilde felt when he considered Douglas' role in his life and present circumstances, Wilde was determined to prepare a record of events according to his own experience and perspective. This record took the form of a letter written during the last year of his incarceration: *De Profundis*. Beginning as a scathing rebuke of Lord Alfred Douglas but including long sections on aesthetics and Wilde's personal philosophy, *De Profundis* reveals a man changed by prison and pain. But new experiences in prison were not the only catalysts of change. Stripped of social position, family, material possessions, and even abandoned by Douglas, Wilde was left to reconstruct a new and sustaining sense of self.

Throughout *De Profundis* we can see Wilde's new identity slowly begin to center around the suffering of Christ. Written in the same year as "The Decay of Lying" and *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" had expressed his pre-incarceration opinion on the value of pain: "[The modern world] aims to get rid of pain and the suffering that it entails. . . . What it aims at is an Individualism expressing itself through joy. . . . Pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest" (*Soul* 288). After a year and a half in prison Wilde was ready to analyze the valuable effects of pain upon the individual. He believed that his own suffering, which he calls "one long moment" in time that "circle[s] round one centre of pain" (*De Profundis* 1065) had revealed to him the "holy ground" that can only be known through sorrow (1067). Deprived not only of decent food, living accommodations, and moral support, but also of all resources for intellectual pursuits like books and writing paraphernalia, he

discovered that “sorrow is the most sensitive of all created things. There is nothing that stirs in the whole world of thought or motion to which sorrow does not vibrate in terrible if exquisite pulsation” (*De Profundis* 1067).

From this realization, a new aesthetic through sorrow emerged. The formerly dedicated sensualist described his own transformation:

I used to live entirely for pleasure. I shunned sorrow and suffering of every kind. I hated both. I resolved to ignore them as far as possible, to treat them, that is to say, as modes of imperfection. . . They had no place in my philosophy. . . during the last few months I have, after terrible struggles and difficulties, been able to comprehend some of the lessons hidden in the heart of pain. . . It is really a revelation. One discerns things that one never discerned before. . . What one had felt dimly through instinct, about Art, is intellectually and emotionally realised with perfect clearness of vision and absolute intensity of apprehension. . . .

Sorrow is the ultimate type both in Life and Art. (*De Profundis* 1081)

Part of Wilde’s satisfaction in this revelation, as he calls it, is the recognition that “behind sorrow there is always sorrow. Pain, unlike Pleasure, wears no mask” (*De Profundis* 1081). Finding absolute honesty in the suffering that unites body and spirit, Wilde also found a new maxim for a whole life: “Pleasure for the beautiful body, but Pain for the beautiful soul” (*De Profundis* 1082). The term Wilde chose to use in describing those painful experiences was “humility.” The term first appears towards the beginning of the letter in reference to how Wilde planned to handle his “horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute Humility” (*De Profundis* 1074). What Wilde meant by

the word was not fully explained until later, when he discussed pain and the artist's life being one of "self-development. Humility in the artist is his frank acceptance of all experiences" (1084).

His observations on the influence of suffering and humility led to another change, this time not in his philosophy of life but in his theory of the imagination. As we saw in "The Decay of Lying" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's notion of imaginative thinking was closely tied to fictional unreality and the preference of the creative medium over an imitative one (*Decay* 303). Perhaps "expansion" is a better term for what happened to Wilde's theory of imagination, for there is nothing in *De Profundis* to suggest that he no longer valued the role imagination played in his original terms. Rather, for the first time, he came to understand the value of making poverty and suffering the subject of art. His use of the word "imagination" in *De Profundis* refers not to the right of fiction to escape from the doldrums of realism, but to the ability of the artist to sympathize with the plight of another human being, both personally and through art. He defines imagination as "the faculty by which, and by which alone, we can understand others in their real as in their ideal relations" (*De Profundis* 1057). Wilde reproached Douglas several times for his failure in the realm of personal sympathy—his inability to imagine Wilde's situation in prison and Douglas' resulting heartless abandonment of Wilde during his prison term (1073). Indeed, it is not only a failing of Douglas' nature, but in the nature of an entire class unfamiliar with suffering: "The poor are wiser, more charitable, more kind, more sensitive than we are. In their eyes prison is a tragedy in a

man's life. . . something that calls for sympathy. . . .With people of our rank it is different. It makes a man a pariah" (*De Profundis* 1072).

Douglas' lack of imagination not only rendered him incapable of sympathy, but in Wilde's mind it also kept Douglas from "creating" himself as an individual and an artist—a feat highly valued by Wilde, who remarked: "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 one's self" (*De Profundis* 1075). Wilde treated Douglas to a discourse on Christ as "the most supreme of Individualists" (1087). This portrait of Christ, which is also a picture of the ultimate Romantic hero, is directly linked to Wilde's expanded definition of "imagination":

To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all. To him what is dumb is dead. But to Christ it was not so. With a width and wonder of imagination, that fills one almost with awe, he took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom, and made of himself its eternal mouthpiece. (*De Profundis* 1089)

Wilde identified Christ as paragon of individualism in "The Soul of Man under Socialism"—an individualism realized in the abandonment of society and the pursuit of perfection through the resulting pain: "Christ made no attempt to reconstruct society and consequently the Individualism that he preached to man could be realized only through pain or in solitude" (*Soul* 286). Wilde's prison term had provided both pain and solitude, and this experience impacted his Christology. In *De Profundis*, Christ is the supreme individualist because of his ability to empathize, as Wilde implied when he challenged

Douglas to follow “what Matthew Arnold calls ‘the secret of Jesus’. . .that whatever happens to another happens to oneself” (*De Profundis* 1085). Christ created a “whole conception of Humanity [that] sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realized by it” (1085). In Wilde’s mind it was Christ’s power of imagination that fueled his ability to empathize, and it was this same power that made Christ a true “Individualist”. It is through the study of the gospels that Wilde is convinced of Christ’s imaginative conception of mankind:

Of late I have been studying the four prose-poems about Christ with some diligence. . . . And while in reading the Gospels. . . I see this continual assertion of the imagination as the basis of all spiritual and material life, I see also that to Christ imagination was simply a form of Love, and that to him Love was Lord in the fullest meaning of the phrase. . . .Most people live *for* love and admiration. But it is *by* love and admiration that we should live.” (*De Profundis* 1091-92)

Wilde saw Christ’s teachings as a type of creative fiction—a fiction employing the skill of lying described in “The Decay of Lying”—because Christ spoke to his audience as though he was speaking to the people they should be, not to the people they were. For example, Wilde remarks that Christ was “the first to conceive the divided races as a unity” (*De Profundis* 1085). Wilde’s Christ used his imagination to conceive of a world according to his own paradigm, then taught and interacted with the world as though that paradigm was reflected in reality. After all, Wilde may have viewed Christ’s claim to divinity as a metaphor for his own theory of the imagination’s relationship to the realm of physical experience: “Time and space, succession and extension, are merely

accidental conditions of Thought. The Imagination can transcend them, and move in a free sphere of ideal existences” (*De Profundis* 1119). Wilde’s Christ goes even further than the unifying of the races—he entirely abolishes the distinction between divinity and humanity by calling himself both the Son of God and the Son of Man “according to his mood” (1119). The “idyll[ic]” life and fine morals of Christ are further complimented by the fine artistry of the tale: “. . . is there anything that for sheer simplicity of pathos wedded and made one with sublimity of tragic effect can be said to equal or approach even the last act of Christ’s Passion?” (*De Profundis* 1086).

In Wilde’s analysis, the “idea of a young Galilean peasant imagining that he could bear on his own shoulders the burden of the entire world” had a great deal more to do with Christ creating an image of himself for himself than with any sacrificial gift of his life (*De Profundis* 1085). According to Wilde, people only see Christ as an inspirational figure because Christ was, first and foremost, fully himself. Everything Christ did was for himself: “To live for others as a definite self-conscious aim was not his creed. It was not the basis of his creed. When he says ‘Forgive your enemies,’ it is not for the sake of the enemy but for one’s own sake that he says so. . . .” (*De Profundis* 1088). This living according to what is necessary and best for oneself is tempered by the imagination that teaches the ultimate sameness of every human experience. In fact, the individualist is realized *through* imaginative empathy and the recognition of the commonness and universality of human experience—it is this idea that gives mankind what Wilde calls a “Titan personality” (*De Profundis* 1089). Christ’s perfect execution of this philosophy of

life makes him both Wilde's supreme individualist and supreme artist. Christ's art is the incarnation, a work of art which Wilde declares is Christ himself:

And feeling with the artistic nature of one to whom Sorrow and Suffering were modes through which he could realise his conception of the Beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he makes himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated Art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing. (*De Profundis* 1089)

By creating himself according to his own ideals and experience Wilde's Christ achieved the kind of everlasting fame sought by Achilles and Beowulf, but it is an immortality achieved through life rather than death. Because Christ is so often artistically represented dying by wrongful execution, and not dying the glorious death of a warrior, those images of Christ elicit the empathy that both acknowledges Christ the wronged individualist and expands the "Titan personality" of the viewer (*De Profundis* 1089). In this way, empathy strengthens and diversifies the individualist.

Some may detect in Wilde's admiration of Christ as artistic individualist a subtle note of camaraderie—for example, when Wilde says: "out of his own imagination entirely did Jesus of Nazareth create himself" (*De Profundis* 1091). Wilde certainly sees himself as a Christ-like figure both in terms of self-realization as a work of art, imaginative creativity, and suffering. The similarities even continue into the realm of rules and laws. At the beginning of *De Profundis*, Wilde writes: "I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws" (1076). Later, Wilde describes Christ: "For him there were no laws: there were exceptions merely" (*De*

*Profundis* 1093). While we can never really know whether Wilde reinterpreted himself through the character of Christ or interpreted Christ in light of his own self-perception, we can see that while *De Profundis*' account of Christ began as an analysis of the character in Wilde's reading, it ends as a comparison study—perhaps Wilde was not exempt from his own belief that people will always see themselves in a work of art.

Wilde's interpretation of Christ becomes of supreme interest when reading his final published work *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Back in 1891 in "The Decay of Lying" Wilde had written that Charles Reade (1814-1884), former Dean of Arts at Magdalen, had wasted "his life in a foolish attempt to . . . draw public attention to the state of our convict prisons" (300). His argument against Reade's choice of subject matter was a reflection of Wilde's belief that the cold, hard truth was not a topic conducive to the production of creative fiction. Wilde's personal experience compelled him yet again to make an adjustment in his views. As displayed through his essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," Wilde saw society as a whole responsible for the state of man. This idea gripped Wilde during his prison term. After his release from Reading Gaol on May 19, 1897, he set about writing *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, the poem that was to be his only completed work post-incarceration. It was, I believe, designed to express through poetry what Wilde had written to Douglas in prose in *De Profundis*:

Society takes upon itself the right to inflict appalling punishments on the individual, but it also has the supreme vice of shallowness, and fails to realise what it has done. When the man's punishment is over, it leaves him to himself: that is to say it abandons him at the very moment when its highest duty towards

him begins. It is really ashamed of its own actions, and shuns those whom it has punished, as people shun a creditor whose debt they cannot pay, or one on whom they have inflicted an irreparable, an irredeemable wrong. (*De Profundis* 1078)

If there was any chance that Victorian society did not realize the effect prison had on its occupants, Wilde was determined to enlighten them. With *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, the author so often suspected of being disingenuous unmasked his convictions in no uncertain terms.

In 1897, a year after his release, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was published identifying “C.3.3” as the author—using Wilde’s cell-block number to hide his identity. Long before his own prison experience Wilde had remarked of his contemporary Wilfred Scawen Blunt: “It must be admitted that by sending Mr Blunt to gaol he [Mr Balfour, the magistrate] has converted a clever rhymer into an earnest and deep-thinking poet” (qtd. in Kohl 290). There are many who would arrive at the same conclusion concerning Wilde. Speaking of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* in a letter to Leonard Smithers, his publisher, Wilde “confessed that the ‘subject is all wrong and [the] treatment too personal’—by which he meant ‘too autobiographical’” (Beckson 243). In hopes that life would take its cue from art, Wilde takes life as his subject: the poem begins as an account of a hanging, but ends a treatise on the responsibility of society for its fellow human beings.

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* poetically records the execution of Charles Thomas Wooldridge, who was convicted of murdering his wife—according to Ellmann, Wooldridge had “slit [her] throat with a razor” (90). In Wilde’s poetic account, the entire inmate population was distressed by the company of a man they knew was condemned to

death and the hanging that eventually removed him from their company. Wilde describes the apparent calm resignation of the condemned man, and the fear in the hearts of the other inmates who watched him as they took their daily hour of exercise:

So with curious eyes and sick surmise  
We watched him day by day  
And wondered if each one of us  
Would end the self-same way  
For none can tell to what red Hell  
His sightless soul may stray.” (*Ballad 249*)

Wooldridge is put on suicide watch “lest himself should rob / Their scaffold of its prey” (250), but Wilde’s concern eventually comes to focus upon the effect on free individuals of condemning a man to death and then resolutely watching him die. Even the guards are described as discomfited into a stony silence when in the presence of the condemned man:

For he to whom a watcher’s doom  
Is given as his task,  
Must set upon his lips,  
and make his face a mask.  
Or else he might be moved, and try  
To comfort and console:  
And what should human Pity do  
Pent up in Murderer’s Hole?  
What word of grace in such a place  
Could help a brother’s soul? (*Ballad 250*)

A large part of Wilde’s grief and outrage over this situation centers not so much on the issue of execution in relation to the victim but on the ability of people to rejoice in the execution of another human being, and to imprison their fellows in such morbid conditions. Through the poem, Wilde draws a direct connection between the executed murderer and a society of murderers when he writes of the condemned man and those

who watched him die: “He had but killed a thing that lived, / Whilst they had killed the dead” (*Ballad 257*). As he tells us, it is not only those condemned to die who succumb to death:

Each narrow cell in which we dwell  
Is a foul and dark latrine,  
And the fetid breath of living Death  
Chokes up each grated screen,  
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust  
In Humanity’s machine. (*Ballad 262*)

Instead of a natural and timely death reducing men (as well as women and children) to the dust from which they came, it is the relentless “machine” of man and his crushing tools of so-called justice that convert living souls to dry powder. The use of the word “dust” brings to mind the origins of man according to Genesis 3:19: “for out of it [the ground] wast thou taken; For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”. This is a statement made while God curses “our grand parents,” as Milton calls Adam and Eve, for the first commission of sin (Milton 354). Shakespeare also used “dust” in description of the dead—for example, when Queen Gertrude tells her mourning son “do not...seek for thy noble father in the dust” (Shakespeare 1192), or when Hamlet wonders:

What [a] piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals; and yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? (Shakespeare 1204)

We can almost hear Wilde finish Hamlet’s speech: “Man delights not me” (Shakespeare 1204). But Wilde must appeal to humankind as he never has before, for, like Hamlet, Wilde cannot accept the tyranny of a fixed fate, and rather than spending any time

shouting out “who’s there” to the darkness, Wilde addresses his thinly veiled malediction to those who are unquestionably present. It is death and dust, the physicality of man’s existence that ultimately unifies human experience. Thus, in Wilde’s mind, regardless of an ultimate being or fate in the universe, responsibility for the state of all mankind must lie most immediately in the hands of other men. This is why the model of Christ the imaginative, empathetic individualist of Wilde’s *De Profundis* is so important—in Wilde’s opinion it is men fashioned after Christ’s representation who would be able and willing to defy society in defense of prisoners, their suffering fellow men.

This idea is fully consistent with what we know about Wilde’s stance on the tension between authority and progress. Richard Ellmann took a quote from one of Wilde’s university commonplace books in which Wilde writes: “Progress in thought is the assertion of the individual against authority” (42). Only those individuals able to separate themselves from the fear of authority, or even from the established forms, will be able to assist in the advance of society as a whole. In Wilde’s view of human nature, the evolution of society must occur through the widespread progress of individuals—the macrocosm of society evolves through the progress of the microcosm of the individual. Wilde sees the evil in each individual’s experience as the result of the oppression or neglect of the crowd: the proprietor of established forms. Thus, Wilde believed that when one person committed a murder, and when a small group of people carried out an execution, society as a collective of individuals was responsible. In Wilde’s own words “[t]he evolution of man is slow. The injustice of man is great” (*Soul* 289).

Wilde had examined the universality of human experience and social evolution through individual rebellion in critical form before his incarceration, but in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, he presents the same ideas through art. Finding himself no longer looking down on the plight of the world and lecturing as one only limitedly affected by its state, in his prison cell a cry is wrenched out of him, the only response he can offer, as one who now witnesses and fears physical destruction. Wilde's poem cries out for a scheme, for a new social order—one that will forsake such a pitiless "morality." Wilde included hope in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," and it carries over, although unmentioned, into *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Wilde's hope is found in the proclamation that the cure for humanity's ills is not dependent upon anything but itself: there is something that can be *done*. According to Wilde, there is a "better way" that man can realize on his own.

Not by chance does he choose the language of religion. As the primary text of Christianity—the formally embraced religion of Britain during the Victorian Age—and the source of the Gospels he mentioned dwelling upon in *De Profundis*, the Bible made the care of one person for another the most important of all commandments. For any Victorian familiar with the Gospels, Wilde's frequent allusions to Christ, his disciples, betrayal, and martyrdom would have done much more than compare any person in the prison to Christ. It would have raised up memories of the biblical parables and the teachings of Jesus, who went so far as to say that whenever a person fed the hungry, clothed the naked, housed the stranger, or visited the prisoner out of love for Jesus, it would be the same as doing those things for Christ himself (Matt. 25: 35-45). By using the language of professing Christians to explore the ideals of a progressing society Wilde

shows that, regardless of ideology, the action to be taken is the same: mankind as a whole must care for itself through the concern of one individual for another.

Of course, the two-fold interpretation in this chapter only became possible after Wilde's death. Although Wilde wrote *De Profundis* before *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, *De Profundis* was not published until 1909, nine years after his death. This means that for almost twelve years Wilde's friend Robert Ross, to whom Wilde had entrusted *De Profundis*, was the only person who had access to Wilde's personal Christology. With only an uninformed reading of *Reading Gaol* it is possible to suppose that there was some great reformation in Wilde's aesthetic and religious philosophy. But that simply is not so. As we have already seen from his interpretation of the Christ figure in *De Profundis*, Wilde was using the name Christ, but he had a very non-traditional character in his own mind. In *Reading Gaol*, the blood of Christ is no longer a metaphor for the spiritual cleansing that unites man with God, but for the cleansing of wrongs that separate men from one another. Take for example Wilde's description of the society and individuals responsible for the execution of Charles Thomas Wooldridge:

And with tears of blood he cleansed the hand,  
the hand that held the steel:  
For only blood can wipe out blood,  
And only tears can heal:  
And crimson stain that was of Cain  
Became Christ's snow-white seal." (*Ballad* 264)

There is no hierarchical relationship here, only a concern for the necessary equality of persons and consequences—here, it is specifically the impartial justice of blood for blood, mirroring the blood of Christ shed, according to Christ, to save the lives of men.

Of course, “Christ’s snow white seal” has nothing to do with the Lutheran stamp of salvific purity that is transferred from Christ to sinners—a process called “justification”. Distinguished Professor of Theology Millard Erickson describes justification as the process by which men are “declared to have fulfilled all that God’s law requires. . . . Historically, it was this issue that preoccupied Martin Luther and led to his break from the Roman Catholic Church” (Erickson 968). Wilde’s legendary and previously mentioned contemporary, C. H. Spurgeon, preached on this idea to the thousands of Victorians who flocked to London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle on Sunday mornings. The many quotes from Spurgeon’s writings compiled by Tom Carter include several on the importance Spurgeon assigned to justification—one such reads: The doctrine of justification by faith through the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ is. . . .the very salt of the gospel. It is impossible to bring it forward too often. . . .It is the foundation doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Carter 116). The term and theology of “justification” was well known and highly controversial in the various denominations of Victorian Christianity. It is the idea of a judge declaring a man free from guilt in the eyes of the law—in the case of Christian justification it is divine law. But Wilde replaced the notion of the justification of man with divine law. Wilde’s ideal is an affirmation of Christ as the perfect individualist, who set the example for humanity,

so that at the present moment all who come in contact with his personality, even though they may neither bow to his altar nor kneel before his priest, yet somehow find that the ugliness of their sins is taken away and the beauty of their sorrow revealed to them. (*De Profundis* 1085)

Wilde's Christ is concerned with the justification of a man to himself—instead of being seen as righteous in the eyes of God by following a seemingly arbitrary set of rules—Wilde is suggesting that men treat their fellows in such a way that they can declare one another righteous. The standard of that righteousness is the same standard that Wilde sees in Christ: the application of empathy and the action that it demands. This is yet another example of progress through the individual and through the individual's recognition that what happens to one person happens to all, as Wilde described in *De Profundis*.

But justification is not the only idea taken from Christian theology and redefined by Wilde; sin and salvation are transformed as well. For example, Wilde writes:

Ah! Happy they whose hearts can break  
And peace of pardon win!  
How else may man make straight his plan  
And cleanse his soul from sin?  
How else but through a broken heart  
May Lord Christ enter in? (*Ballad* 264)

The theological notion of sin traditionally centers on its separating properties: sin is that which separates man from the Creator because it is an act of rebellion. In effect, it is the idea that man was designed to do one thing a certain way and has instead decided to ignore that purpose and follow his own inclinations. Before the beginning of his prison experience, Wilde's definition of sin was comparable to his definition of crime—simply an act that went against socially acceptable behavior. As in *Dorian Gray*, sin was predominantly linked to individual desire and its relationship to the framework of a moralizing society. In the context of *Reading Gaol*, that definition has almost inverted. Instead of encompassing only those who flout society, "sin" in *Reading Gaol* applied to society as a conglomerate guilty of the same crimes. The sin committed by society was

not just the sin of condemning its fellow men to live out prison sentences in squalor before gladly depositing them at the poorhouse to be forgotten. Each member of society has sinned by failing to follow Christ in fostering a sense of imaginative sympathy.

Through his use of the name of Christ in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde uses the professed values of Victorian society's moralists to rebuke them. Somehow the moralism of the Victorians had resulted in a society that appeared to place little value upon compassion. But for Wilde's Christ, as he pointed out in *De Profundis*, it is "by love. . .that we should live," not by laws (1092). In fact, in the Bible the rewards of heaven and the punishments of hell are often framed in terms of love and hatred towards others. The laws of the God of the Bible were intended to be obeyed out of love and with love, as the apostle John recorded: "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (I John 4:20).

And that's just what *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was: an act of love. Wilde's experience in prison had perfected his own sense of "imaginative sympathy" (*De Profundis* 1085). Within a few days of his release he wrote a letter to the *Daily Chronicle* "deploring the cruelty to imprisoned children at Reading Gaol" (qtd. in Beckson 262). He wrote another letter, the following year, describing the horrors of prison life and the indifferent injustice of the prison system. But *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is his *magnum opus*. In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, he is not concerned with wit, clever verbiage, a defense of aestheticism, or even religion; he wants results. He demands *action*, a demand that flies in the face of the seemingly complacent and theory-oriented Wilde of the days

before his incarceration. No longer able to remain removed from the lives of his less fortunate fellow men by the now irrelevant barriers of birth, wealth, education, and taste, Wilde's *Reading Gaol* analyzes the state of society with a new sense of urgency.

When Wilde described the condemned men of Reading Gaol, it was not to tell a pathetic story—for that *would* have been simple mimesis and a waste of artistic ambition. No, Wilde's goal was to make each individual member of his audience choose a side. They could count themselves with Judas and Caiaphas, who with a kiss approved of the evil done to another, or they could count themselves with Christ, Wilde, and the individualists—the lovers of men. But before a reader could count oneself among the Judas' or the Christ's, one would have to identify one's current position. Wilde throws down this challenge by saying:

And all men kill the thing they love,  
By all let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword! (*Ballad* 265)

This, the final stanza of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, separates Wilde's readers into two categories: those who passively condone the abuse of their fellow men, and those who actively participate in sustaining the survival of an abusive justice system guided by a rigid and uncompassionate moralism. Wilde hoped for an option beyond the contemporary definitions of moral and immoral and for a system of social discipline with resources beyond torturous imprisonment and execution. This is why he created a model for those who would escape those oppositions—the model of “the spirit of the Christ who

is not in Churches” (*De Profundis* 1097) by showing that his Christ’s “morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be” (1093).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

Of course, as mentioned earlier, Wilde's audience did not have access to his Christological and moral manual, *De Profundis*, until eleven years after *Reading Gaol* was published. The popularity of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is therefore a testimony to Wilde's successful creation of a work of art that both reflected his own perspective and was accessible to his readers. According to Richard Ellmann, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* sold "as no poem had sold for years," selling over eighteen hundred copies in the first month. Thousands of more copies were printed between the first release in February 1899 and the seventh printing in June (Ellmann 559). While the reviews of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had centered almost entirely upon the moral nature of the work, reviews of *Reading Gaol* focused primarily upon the artistic quality and moving nature of the piece. The perceived ambiguity of Wilde's moral sense in *Dorian Gray* had eclipsed the more important questions he was addressing there. Because *Reading Gaol* used familiar allusions and was anonymous, the readers were able to focus upon the message of the poem, rather than the plot. This is the literary realization of the mask Wilde had tried so hard to create with his life, the mask of insincerity that deflected his audience from taking his true opinions seriously.

This same tactic appeared differently in Wilde's attempts at literary mask-making. For him, I believe, a literary mask is a device that effectively communicates concerns or interests to the reader without explicitly revealing the author's position on the issue. *Dorian Gray* was a tool for provoking thought, but it failed to be a successful mask for

Wilde's interests because the readers could not see beyond the immoral actions in the plot—whether those actions were interpreted as an encouragement toward or a warning against immorality. The novel failed to inspire a new way of thinking. In fact, it failed even to that part of its purpose apparent to readers. This was the result of the disconnect between Wilde and the practical outcome of the issues he was addressing. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the issues of aestheticism and moralism seem to be largely ideological—important but not urgent. Wilde's experiences in prison inspire a sense of crisis that is expressed through the impassioned language and the undeniable clarity of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The primary difference between *Dorian Gray* and *Reading Gaol*, as far as how they were understood in their time, is simply the fact that, whether by design or happy accident, *Reading Gaol* employed terms and imagery that could be interpreted favorably by a moralistic public while, at the same time, harboring an entirely private meaning for Wilde. This is a successful literary mask. *Reading Gaol* was not only the incarnation of Wilde's thoughts and theories, but it was also a clear and effective message to the readers. They did not have to agree with his personal vision of Christ to understand what Wilde was saying about the inhumanity of prisons and the responsibility of one human being to another.

Wilde's ability to express his own ideas while keeping the overall message accessible to his audience reflects a leap in his maturity as an artist and as a thinker. In many ways *Dorian Gray* illustrated the immoral but did not provide a definition for the moral. *Reading Gaol* provided both—a portrait of the immorality of man and a vision of the morality of compassion. It was Wilde's personal experience that imbued him with a

sense of the importance of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and with the absolute necessity for a change in the prison environment he described. When Wilde was in prison writing *De Profundis* he expressed the desire that “there may come into my art also, no less than into my life, a still deeper note, one of greater unity and passion, and directness of impulse. Not width but intensity is the true aim of modern art” (*De Profundis* 1098).

Wilde realized that hope in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, proving that the deepening of an artistic nature and the confirmation of imaginative sympathy through experience is the surest way to instill a work of art with an intense and specific sense of purpose.

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