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Wilde's Final Act

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Wilde's Final Act

If Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, the lengthy confessional letter written from prison to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, were a work of drama, it would have been the comprehensive capstone on his oeuvre and have received a much more significant response than it has. No critic fails to mention Richard Ellmann's infamous preface when he calls it, "a love letter... One of the greatest, and the longest, ever written" (Ellmann 4). However, although it may possess the generic conventions of a love letter, it likewise includes features of different genres. Critics, most significantly Josephine Guy and Ian Small, have dabbled with the idea that the letter is not simply just a letter, but rather something more. They go so far as to claim that even though the text hinges on indisputable autobiographical facts and events, due to the similarities between the letter and Wilde's prior works of fiction, essays, drama, and his writing process, it is possible to assert that the letter is a pretext for a new work of fiction or an essay.

More than a preface or pretext for prose genres, however, the letter also shares the conventions of late Victorian drama, and the dramatic conventions specific to Wilde. The so-called love letter can in particular be seen as a dramatic work created with the signature elements of style and formal dramatic structure embodied in Wilde's plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *De Profundis* was written not only as an autobiography, a love letter, or a portrait of a tormented, imprisoned mind, but also as a performance: a highly crafted, paradoxical play in the same style as Wilde's dramatic repertoire, a work of drama desperately intended for publication, disguised as a "love letter." In turn, this reliance on a specific set of dramatic conventions will enable readers to envisage Wilde, less wild and more calculated than formerly perceived. Wilde truly believed his life to be this dramatic work, in the most formal sense.

When Oscar Wilde wrote the letter in prison, he trusted it to the care of Robert Ross, his literary agent, and gave him specific instructions to make two copies of the document, transcribing from handwriting to typed text, one for Lord Alfred and one for Wilde to keep for himself. Wilde also instructed Ross to put a fifty-year seal on the letter. In 1905 when Ross first publicly released the letter in a heavily abridged edition, excluding any references to Lord Alfred, and breaking the fifty-year seal, he published it with the name *De Profundis*, Latin for “from the depths.” Due to the disruption of the seal, translation, transcription, and titling, there are authenticity issues that one might acknowledge. As a result of these factors, *De Profundis* stands as Wilde’s most infamous but least critically analyzed work (Guy and Small 48). However, most significantly in the second half of the twentieth century, a body of criticism surrounding *De Profundis* has somewhat flourished and a conversation surrounding the text has been made public.

In 1985, Bruce Bashford examined *De Profundis* by analyzing Wilde’s critical views as revealed through the text and ultimately claiming that Wilde uses his work to create his own critical theories. His article, “Oscar Wilde as Theorist: The Case of De Profundis” had been preceded by his previous works which analyzed Wilde’s critical views in his essays “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist.” In this previous article, Bashford claims that “Wilde defines a principle by which meanings originate in art and criticism” and believes that “Wilde’s analysis of criticism has enough development and coherence to earn recognition as a theory of criticism” (Bashford 395). Bashford believes that Wilde is conveying a critical theorization of the possibility of individual self-development. Bashford builds on this idea in the article on *De Profundis*, again asserting that behind the veneer of Wilde’s work is the construction of a formalist critical theory of self- realization with an even greater scope. Bashford insists that this

new critical theory overwrites his own previous theory about Wilde's essays, but in constructing a new theory, the former is discarded, and as a result this new theory "lacks development" as Wilde has underestimated the difficulties he has created in *De Profundis* (395). The theory that Bashford ascribes to *De Profundis* says that the soul is only able to realize its potential by ridding itself of all passions, culture, and possessions: total asceticism. This process is realized through the teachings of Jesus Christ and is divided into two stages: the first being "a stripping down or casting off of all that might encumber the soul" (395), and the second being "bringing the soul's power to bear on all of the individual's experiences" (396). Bashford says that the theory he extrapolates from *De Profundis* is complimented by the ambiguous component that "the final state is produced by principal and method," and he notes that Wilde fully intended this theory for real life application with the results of widening the soul's "capacity to spiritualize" (396), until it is fully realized. What is ambiguous about this theory, says Bashford, is the uncertainty about who Wilde envisioned the product of this application being perceived by, either the subject or the audience, the people who perceive the subject. Bashford also acknowledges that because of Wilde's confined state in prison, the product of the theory does not allow for a variety of outcomes; it only calls for positive outcomes (398), and since Wilde is an artist, these outcomes may only be released as an expression (399). This theory is primarily based upon the assumption that through the notion of Jesus Christ, sympathy results from sorrow, which is why the outcome must be optimistic (400). Bashford questions how apt this comparison to Christ is in relation to the way that other artists create their work and ultimately claims it to be a much weaker, but larger in scope, theory that Wilde has constructed through the vehicle of his work.

M.C. Anderson's 1989 article, "Document of Division: Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*," discusses the origins of the contradictory contents of *De Profundis* and the resulting consequences (Anderson 1). It begins by assessing the multiple reasons for writing the letter, stemming from the relationship between Wilde and Lord Alfred and the need for catharsis (1). Anderson claims that an ulterior motive for the letter persists, which is "the need to vindicate himself by transferring responsibility for his plight" (2), and for Lord Alfred's reputation to suffer (4). Anderson then claims that partial catharsis was achieved through the writing of the letter, but because of subsequent letters that Wilde wrote to others including Ross, one knows that catharsis was not fully achieved (5). Anderson notes that theatrical effects are used in the letter, addressed to a "two-fold audience" to "persuade both Douglas and society that he has been notoriously abused by them" (7). He claims that through gestures and "extravagance of claim," critics agreeably view Wilde as "theatrical in his self-contemplation," and that he views himself, and wants other to view him, as a tragic victim (7). Anderson also discusses Wilde's perception of Christ as completely aesthetic, how he uses his associations to Christ to validate his own suffering, and the large value he places on the act of suffering. Ultimately, Anderson judges that Wilde was unable to achieve "full self-knowledge" (10) from writing the letter.

By 1993, Jay Losey was writing about the connections between *De Profundis* and Dante, specifically in the genre of exile writings. His article, "Aesthetics of Exile: Wilde Transforming Dante in *Intentions* and *De Profundis*" discusses Dante's depiction of an artist in exile compared to Wilde's portrayal, and the allusions to Dante, both direct and indirect, that Wilde makes in the letter. Losey suggests that Wilde is not only exiled by being in prison, but also by Victorian society, as a result of which he "ridicule[s] homophobic Victorians" (Losey 429). He argues that, in a Dantean fashion, Wilde "transforms a personal meditation on his own experience into a

critique of the Judeo- Christian beliefs Victorians profess to follow.” This creates a “hellish” vision of “late- Victorian culture in decline” (430) as Wilde constantly aestheticizes exile. Losey argues that by getting involved with the charges against Lord Alfred’s father, Wilde is going against the artist’s unspoken law of “remain[ing] free of society and its rules” (430), and thus becomes a contemporary version of Dante in the *Commedia*. Losey believes that Wilde’s text is a spiritual autobiography due to its conversational presentation that blurs the lines of life and art (440). Through the motif of the artist in exile, Wilde follows Dante, however, Losey adds, “unlike Dante, who strives to meet Beatrice in Paradise, Wilde welcomes the torments of the Inferno,” and refers twice to Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade who reside in the eighth circle, perhaps “to dramatize his emotional condition” since they were also convicted of sexual misconduct like Wilde (441). Losey notes that this association “acknowledges his fascination with sexual perversion, lust, lechery, and murder—all themes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” as well as his interest in social outcasts (441). Losey goes on to make a connection that Wilde viewed a prisoner reading Dante in his cell while he was in America, and how one of the few books that Wilde had access to in the beginning of his time in prison was the Cary translation of the *Commedia* (442). This connection works to explain the underlying fascination and correlations that preexisted Wilde’s mind before he wrote *De Profundis* from his own cell. Ultimately due to the incessant Dante allusions and references when discussing Douglas’ flaws, Losey claims that Wilde presents himself, unknowingly to Douglas, as “a late-Victorian Virgil, guiding and teaching Alfred the pilgrim” (445), and that the exile enables life to become art (447).

In 1999, Michael Doylen writes through the lens of queer theory. His article, “Homosexual Self- Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal,” notes how strangely small the

body of criticism is for *De Profundis*, even in criticism from “gay male scholarship” (547). Doyle uses Cohen to discuss how this work made Wilde a pivotal and defining figure as a “new ‘type’ of male sexual actor” and simultaneously fixed him as “*The* sexual deviant of the late nineteenth century” (1-2; Cohen qtd. in Doyle 547). In his article, Doyle claims that, contrary to other scholars, he believes that *De Profundis* indicates “the elaboration in new directions of Wildean self-fashioning” (Doyle 547). He discusses how Wilde’s body of work, both before prison and after, seem to center around the idea of Foucault’s phrase, “Ethics of existence” (549), and act as a critique of Victorian morality, ethics, heteronormativity, conformity, and that *De Profundis* is not fundamentally different from his earlier work, just showing a “further resistance to social norms” (549). Doyle claims that Wilde, “instead of affirming his identification as ‘homosexual,’ practiced an ethics of self-invention premised on a notion of the self as a non-identical and non-unitary social potential” (553). Instead of taking the path of his homosexual contemporaries, passions toward the same sex function for Wilde as a facet of the self instead of a dark secret or revealing truth, socially marginalizing the subject (553). Wilde embraces his marginalized position because he is constantly self-fashioning and developing “other ways of being in the world,” in an effort to realize agency under superior displays of power which can erase the line between public and private life at a whim (553-4). The letter, Doyle writes, represents the acknowledgement of the societal intervention in the course of Wilde’s self-fashioning, as he becomes reduced to nothing more than a perverse homosexual (554). Now in prison, *De Profundis* reveals how Wilde must continue to self-fashion, as a completely separate entity from any existing social codes including religion, morality, and reason, resulting in total individualism all due to his perverse sexuality (558).

By combining elements of the critical reception of *De Profundis*, such as Anderson's notion of the two-fold audience, Losey's fictionalization in the style of Dante with Alfred as pilgrim, as well as Doylen's notion of the self-fashioning sexual male actor, one may begin to see how *De Profundis* can be received as a dramatic work. However the dramatic conventions of the period also influenced Wilde's construction of *De Profundis*. The drama of the Victorian era, known early for melodrama and sensational plays, which exhibited the lives and conflicts of the common working class and often involved direct interaction with the audience, a focus on domesticity, and musical interludes, took a drastic turn in the late century with playwrights like Pinero, Ibsen, Jones, Shaw, and Wilde, who shifted towards portraying Victorian decorum. In the 1890s, these new plays had turned from melodrama to society dramas and more romantic melodramas (Witt). The Society dramas were obsessed with formality, as Gavin Witt explains:

These plays used a set of stock characters and situations to present conventional themes emphasizing bourgeois morality. Sentimental heroines, ingenuous young bachelors, scheming servants, harsh parents, foolish aristocrats, and women with a past were the familiar characters. These archetypal figures would struggle in endless variations against such common obstacles as jealous misunderstandings, mistaken identities, compromising letters, hopeless love, and betrayal of affections. (Witt)

Playwrights such as Wilde, Ibsen, and Shaw embraced these comedies of manners that now, instead of relating to the working class, were making social comments about the morals and ethics of the aristocracy. Witt argues that Wilde "lulled his audience into a feeling of comfortable recognition—which he then overturned with paradoxes, epigrams, and inversions of expectations" (Witt). These signature elements set Wilde apart from Shaw and Ibsen, who were working with similar conventions in a more realist mode. All three playwrights in late Victorian

England were functioning through a distinct set of tropes, character types, and expected form, but doing something new at the same time.

Within this form and style of late Victorian playwriting, and in addition to his personal inclination for paradox, Wilde had distinct elements to his dramatic writing process. Josephine Guy and Ian Small have written extensively about Wilde's dramatic writing process and their research has shown that Wilde's quirks of writing can be considered habitual, appearing over and over in his dramatic drafts. Working from multiple drafts simultaneously was common for Wilde; he would write and rewrite sections and then have them all in front of him as he revised. Also, Wilde kept lists of leftover lines and would reuse them in new works, which shows how formally consistent his works are since he can use and reuse lines originally written for past works. He would also craft dialogue before assigning it to a designated speaker, so essentially creating jokes and dialogue without a specific character in mind most of the time, "free standing blocks of dialogue" as Guy and Small refer to it. In addition, a striking feature specific to Wilde is his use of a numerical system for organization within his drafts. Guy and Small describe, "his revisions do not develop in a simple linear fashion... the movement between first and final thoughts was therefore relatively fluid" (Guy and Small 54-5).

This method of multiple drafts seems to account for the much-debated repetitive nature of *De Profundis* as variations of episodes of lavish dinners, vicious verbal fights, accounts of Christianity, and insults recur incessantly in the typed text available to modern readers. Robert Ross was the only figure with immediate access to the handwritten manuscript prior to publication, and it seems to be possible that the false starts and repetition in the text can be symptoms of Wilde's dramatic writing process, specifically working with more than one draft at a time. Could his drafts have been mishandled and sifted into an incorrect order, or simply not

properly organized according to his number and letter system? The authenticity issues, along with the issue of the broken seal and abridged versions, that surround the management, or rather mismanagement, of the text seem certainly possible. It seems inconclusive and altogether unconvincing, to simply assume that the letter was intended to be completed as is currently published, if it was finished at all. We know that Wilde had aspirations to continue his literary career. Could *De Profundis* be the final, unfinished manuscript of Wilde's dramatic works?

Guy and Small compare this mode of editing and writing to copying and pasting in a word processing document (53-4). Can one assume that the heavily edited folios were intended to be part of the final letter, especially considering that Wilde did not simply dispose of written work but rather recycled for future projects? Have those edited pages been included in the published version? One must consider the consequences either way of Ross' decisions when it came to which folios were published, in what order, and how much of Wilde's edits were included in the final product. This convoluted history of the text paired with Wilde's complex writing process raises questions about the text in relation to the author's intentions. However, it is conclusive that the elements such as the number system and use of multiple drafts that were signature to Wilde's process of creation for dramatic works are certainly present in the creation of *De Profundis*.

Besides the dramatic writing process, *De Profundis* also shares many signature dramatic elements with Wilde's plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, including absent centers and missing critical moments, absent or unconfirmed mothers, paradoxical devices, and the theme of unconditional resurrection.

For Wilde, the crux of the dramatic play hangs on absent moments that never actually happen, yet every other action and moment depends on these nonexistent moments. All events,

speeches, and actions of the dramatic work can be directly connected to and motivated by these missing moments; thus the plays center around events that do not actually transpire. For *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the absent moments consist of the elopement of Lady Windermere and Lord Darlington, and Mrs. Erlynne's confession to her daughter that she is Lady Windermere's mother. Wilde deprives his audience of the two scenes that matter most to the play and signifies the absent center with the phrase "the brink of ruin." Much like a Venn diagram, the two missing pieces of the play have much in common that can be boiled down to the parallels between Lord Darlington and Mrs. Erlynne, essentially combining it into one absent center instead of two, with Mrs. Erlynne as the controlling figure, and an unconfirmed mother to Lady Windermere, by her own lack of admission.

When Mrs. Erlynne rushes over to Lord Darlington's flat and finds Lady Windermere there waiting for him she says, "Oh, you are on the brink of ruin: you are on the brink of a hideous precipice" (Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan* 30). She clearly labels the absent center of the play, the moment that would have been climatic, as the "brink of ruin." Mrs. Erlynne speaks as if Lady Windermere will fall off the edge of the play if she leaves her husband for Lord Darlington, but simultaneously she is also pointing out the other absent center of the play, her almost confession of motherhood. At this moment when Lady Windermere is almost going to leave her husband, Mrs. Erlynne is on the verge of confession as she, who was devoid of care for her child's entire life, takes pains to convince her she must go back to her husband and child, insisting on family life, that she must take care of her child, and that her husband loves only her; but Mrs. Erlynne never confesses. Wilde pushes Mrs. Erlynne into the role of the mother, caring about the decisions that her daughter makes in a private discussion, and while she bears the situation, she rejects the label of mother because it would ruin her freedom. Both moments cease

to happen as the words are never spoken, and instead Wilde diverts the attention of the audience and characters to the title of the play as a sort of comic foil to substitute for the lack of the moment. Lady Windermere's fan, the material object sitting on the couch, takes the place of the confession and elopement; it steals the attention of the room and reveals Mrs. Erlynne's hiding spot; but Lady Windermere has already left, and therefore we are left with lack: a fan to carry the invisible weight of an almost fatal mistake. At the ball Lady Windermere says to Lord Darlington, "A useful thing, a fan, isn't it" (19), and indeed it is. The fan moves back and forth constantly at its holder's whim, yet it never goes anywhere, perhaps symbolizing the motion of running in place. Like the entire production of the play, the action goes back and forth, yet the critical events never take place and the center remains absent.

So what can one call this space that fills the absent center? Jacques Derrida would insist on the term, "freeplay" (Derrida 365). The space is certainly not empty, as it holds an abundance of what if's and almost's, but instead, nothing happens, thus the play revolves around moments that do not exist. Derrida's freeplay can be defined as the unknown space that fills the lack of center: exactly its purpose in the play. If one views the absent centers of the play as a clashing between past and present, it is as if they void each other out. Like the motion of the fan back and forth, the past and present clash, yet go nowhere. The elopement of Lady Windermere and Lord Darlington represents the present, while Mrs. Erlynne's motherhood confession represents the past. Derrida says that freeplay is in tension with the past and the present (369), which is why their clashing leads to the lack. The past is in tension because history, or the "tradition of truth" (369), is neutralized when freeplay is put into use, and the present is in tension because freeplay is a disruption of the present; it is the interplay of absence and presence. Essentially, freeplay disrupts and questions both the past and the present because it preexists them. The moments that

never happen were never going to happen, yet so much depends upon them. And “so much” can be defined to mean every line and every scene of the play depends upon these moments. These two moments, one deriving from the past and one from the present, manifest in the same moment in time, cancelling each other out, leaving a black hole that is the center of the play. Wilde goes even further to name both Mrs. Erlynne and Lady Windermere, Margaret. A Margaret from the past and a Margaret from the present, clash in this single moment, the one moment they will never share as mother and daughter because their relationship is never verbalized and confirmed. Mrs. Erlynne practically calls out to Derrida as she labels the “brink of ruin,” the black hole that will engulf them if they let it, and yet since it cannot have the women, it sucks the moment from the play.

When Lord Darlington is confessing his love for Lady Windermere, he gives her a chance to save the stability of the play. He says, “There are moments when one has to choose between living one’s life, fully, entirely, completely—or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands. You have that moment now. Choose!” (Wilde, *Windermere* 23). Lord Darlington is saying that Lady Windermere is the one with the power to choose her own fate. The words, “living one’s life,” are representative of the play, a performance, just as life was a performance to Wilde. If she gives in to Darlington, she chooses to fill the center of the play with their elopement moment, but instead she defers her decision to the scene with Mrs. Erlynne in Lord Darlington’s flat, and under the influence of Mrs. Erlynne, Lady Windermere chooses the “degrading existence” by not choosing Lord Darlington. However the words can also be understood in reversal with the fulfilling life as choosing her husband and the degrading existence as eloping with another man. The phrase, “that the world in its hypocrisy demands,” can be understood to mean what Wilde demands of

the play—and he demands hypocrisy, illusions, paradoxes, and masks. Therefore, Lady Windermere must inevitably choose to decenter the play, because it is what Wilde desires.

At the end of Act IV right after Mrs. Erlynne has left, Lady Windermere paraphrases her when speaking to her husband. She says, “To shut one’s eyes to half of life that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice,” and then, “Because I, who had shut my eyes to life, came to the brink. And one who had separated us—“ (51). Again the edge of the play is pointed out, and although Lord Windermere cuts her off before she finishes speaking, Mrs. Erlynne is implied as the “one who had separated us,” but perhaps it can also mean Lord Darlington, the man who confessed his love for Lady Windermere and asked her to choose between him and her husband. Lord Darlington and Mrs. Erlynne share a great deal in common, besides the fact that they are the instigators of the absent center and that Wilde projects their moments, the absent centers, onto each other. In theory, Lord Darlington’s objective is to elope with Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne’s objective is to confess her motherhood to her daughter. These are the events that need to happen for the play to have a center. Instead, Lord Darlington makes the confession (of love), and Mrs. Erlynne elopes with Lord Augustus. By first clashing the past and present Margret’s together and then projecting the objectives of the absent center instigators onto each other, Wilde has created a conundrum.

In a similar fashion, *The Importance of Being Earnest* centers entirely on an absent character that does not actually exist. Ernest, as he is depicted in the play, is literally a walking contradiction, a black hole in the center of the play that Jack and Algernon dig **into** deeper with each word they divulge during their performances of Ernest. The single, empty, fictional character is used as a pivotal device for Jack and Algernon to escape from their daily lives through the mode of performance, thus creating another Venn diagram-like absence, as

experienced previously in *Lady Windermere's Fan* through Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Darlington. Along with the signature absent center, issues of parental ambiguity also arise through Jack. To compliment Ernest, Wilde has provided a verb to accompany the act of performing as a fictional character: bunburying. And, with each layer of performance, the audience is put at a remove from Ernest, this enormous lack that fills the motivations of the play. Not only are Jack and Algernon “confirmed and secret Bunburyist[s]” (Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* 300), but they also fill their performative character with desires for love and stability through marriage. They attempt to use the black hole, which is Ernest, as a vehicle to obtain the women of their choice, just as “the brink of ruin” was similarly used in the hopes of capturing Lady Windermere.

In addition to being a space, or lack thereof, occupied by two characters, Ernest also represents the perpendicular nature of where business meets pleasure, both for Jack and Ernest, and for the audience as a viewing experience. The text reads, “ALGERNON: How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town? JACK: Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?” (296). At this moment, Jack has just entered the play as Ernest and comes to town for pleasure. This immediate connection between Ernest as a performance, and the business/ pleasure inversion is automatically invented and then carried and expanded upon throughout the play, underscoring the idea that business can be pleasure, and pleasure can be business, just as Jack can be Ernest, and Ernest can ultimately be Jack.

At least for a time, a similar confession of identity is also averted in *Earnest*. Wilde writes, “ALGERNON: Did you tell Gwendolyn the truth about your being Earnest in town, and Jack in the country? JACK: [in a very patronizing manner]: My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!” (313). Almost as if advising Mrs. Erlynne directly, Jack

instructs that nice girls do not deserve the truth. Yet, because the finale of the play reveals that Jack is in fact Ernest, by deceiving Gwendolyn, Jack is actually telling her the truth, completing the paradox.

During the second act of *Earnest*, there is an attempt to seal away the missing center by destroying the deception. During the scene where Jack returns to his home after he has killed off Ernest, Wilde writes:

CHAUSABLE: Dear Mr Worthing, I trust this garb of woe does not betoken some terrible calamity?

JACK: My brother.

MISS PRISM: More shameful debts and extravagance?

CHAUSABLE: Still leading a life of pleasure?

JACK [*shaking his head*]: Dead!

CHAUSABLE: Your brother Ernest is dead?

JACK: Quite dead. (323)

First, the business/ pleasure inversion is again mentioned, business indicated by Miss Prism's words of "shameful debts and extravagance" and pleasure indicated by Chausable's response, "a life of pleasure." This resuscitation of the inversion presents the notion that the missing center comes always as the intersection of the Venn diagram, when Jack and Algernon are both accessing the absent center at the same time. Jack has come to report the death of Ernest, business, while simultaneously, Algernon is present as Ernest to obtain Cecily's hand in marriage, love which indicates pleasure. While Jack attempts to vacuum-seal the gaping hole of Ernest shut, he fails because there is not one entrance to seal, but two: Jack's side and Algernon's side. Metaphysically, the task is impossible while one man performs as Ernest; only

when they are Ernest in tandem, when Cecily and Gwendolyn come to the realization that they are both engaged to Ernest, can the center be filled with the information soon presented by Miss Prism.

However, as with *Lady Windermere's Fan*, motherhood, although revealed to some extent, is never fully grasped because neither the character nor the reader ever meet Jack's mother. When it is revealed that Jack was the baby that Miss Prism lost in the handbag, the connection is made that Jack and Algernon are brothers sharing the same mother, and that Jack's name is actually Ernest, the original absent center of the play is filled with the truth. However, it is simultaneously ejected because the mother does not exist due to an authorial choice. Wilde could have made the mother to be Lady Bracknell or Miss Prism, but he chooses to not do so. The viewer does not know who the mother of Algernon and Jack truly is because she does not exist within the sphere of the play. Jack and Algernon reopen the absent center of the Venn diagram before it entirely shuts through the lack of maternal confirmation. Both men come from the womb of the same woman, yet the freeplay of the womb is never determined or overwritten. The mother represents origin, and without total confirmation of this origin, the centers in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* remain absent.

Ian Small and Josephine Guy suggest in *Studying Oscar Wilde* that *De Profundis* is a fictionalized work or a work that is patched together (perhaps accidentally) by pieces of text that Wilde wrote with different purposes in mind. They say that he goes off on many false starts and total irrelevancies, such as the Jesus Christ and *Hamlet* bits. They believe that some of *De Profundis* was indeed intended as a letter for Douglas, but certainly not all of it. To take this a step further and rise above the suggestion of a fictionalized narrative, if we consider these missing moments and absent centers to be a signature element of the Wildean dramatic work, by

locating the corresponding moments and center in *De Profundis*, one may claim that the autobiographical letter format functions as a vehicle for Oscar Wilde's final play, rendering it a highly crafted work of drama rather than an autobiographical account or a love letter.

This signature absent center exists two-fold in *De Profundis*, a final Venn diagram: it is the moment when Wilde lets himself get taken downtown to be arrested and does not resist or attempt escape, and then again when he is unable to protest against his prison sentence in court, both moments where he is unable to object. Every other moment in the trajectory of the letter revolves around this one moment. It is the epicenter of the potential humiliation, agony, and everything in-between that Wilde experiences and then constructs in narrative form. This lack of action or rebellion portrayed as a moment of paralysis, a feeling or lack thereof, becomes familiar in Irish literature to come, specifically Joyce, who wrote of his first book, "I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city" (Joyce 253) in a letter to Constantine Curran in 1904. Wilde, the flamboyant individual, who always had an opinion: to leave and reject Ireland, to come to England, to be a central figure in Aestheticism, to marry, to love another man instead—essentially becomes Joyce's Eveline at her great moment, frozen at the gate, thinking of her mother. Wilde becomes infected with the paralysis that plagues Joyce's Dublin, the city that Wilde rejected. Wilde writes, "at the great moment, my willpower completely failed me" (Wilde, *De Profundis* 11), which is later referenced and underscored with the phrases "the crash of my life" and "consenting to my own ruin," (26). Wilde, like Eveline, chooses not to act at the "great moment," the critical moment where it matters most. His inability to act is perceived through two moments captured in the text:

The letter I received from you on the morning of the day I let you take me down to the police court to apply for the ridiculous warrant for your father's arrest was one of the

worst you ever wrote, and for the most shameful reason. Between you both, I lost my head. My misjudgment forsook me. Terror took its place. I saw no possible escape, I may say frankly, from either of you. Blindly I staggered as an ox into the shambles. I had made a gigantic psychological error. I had always thought that my giving up to you in small things meant nothing that when a great moment arrived I could reassert my willpower in its natural superiority. It was not so. At the great moment my willpower completely failed me... I had allowed you to sap the strength of my character, and to me the formation of habit had proved to be not Failure merely but Ruin. Ethically you had been even still more destructive to me than you had been artistically. (10-11)

Phrases like “I let you take me down,” “I saw no possible escape,” and “blindly I staggered as an ox into the shambles,” show the submissive nature of this moment. The crux of Wilde’s life hangs here on this missing moment when he was not able to rebel or act in his own defense. This absent center of his life accrues to words unsaid, things not done. The ox metaphor shows just how weak and blind Wilde truly was in this moment. He “staggered as an ox into the shambles,” a piece of live meat walking into the butcher shop, just as Eveline is described in the penultimate line of “Eveline” as “passive, like a helpless animal” (Joyce 41). Additionally, the phrase “the great moment” works here as “the brink of ruin” works in *Windermere*, to directly label the void, the absent center of the text.

Again, another missing moment occurs, this time during the trial when Wilde is sentenced to jail. Wilde writes:

Had I cared to show that the Crown witnesses – the three most important – had been carefully coached by your father and his solicitors, not in reticence merely, but in assertions, in the absolute transference, deliberate, plotted, rehearsed, of the actions and

doings of someone else onto me, I could have had each one of them dismissed from the box by the judge, more summarily than even wretched perjured Atkins was. I could have walked out of court with my tongue in my cheek, and my hands in my pockets, a free man. The strongest pressure was put on me to do so. I was earnestly advised, begged, entreated to do so by people whose sole interest was my welfare, and the welfare of my house. But I refused. I did not choose to do so. I have never regretted my decision for a single moment, even in the most bitter periods of my imprisonment. Such a course of action would have been beneath me. (Wilde, *De Profundis* 37- 8)

At this critical moment in the course of his real life, Wilde refused to act by saving himself when he had the opportunity to do so, just as Eveline refuses to act to save herself from her life in Ireland. Rather than acting, they embrace the paralysis. Mrs. Erlynne runs at the end of play, fleeing the entire work, but Wilde and Eveline stay. Wilde constructs himself as being “earnestly advised” to act and get himself out of the situation, and Frank calls desperately to Eveline to join him on the ship, just as Jack and Algernon use Ernest to get themselves out of unfavorable situations, but Wilde would not evade the consequences of his actions, however unjust they might be; rather he chose to endure the humiliation and humility.

Like the business/ pleasure inversion, courage and cowardice also become inverted in these situations in a formal sense. The strong language at the end, “But I refused. I did not choose to do so. I have never regretted my decision...” comes off as severely affirmative and self-assured; however these words can be easily undermined by the confidence of the conditional tense to connote opportunities for escape. It is also important to note the theatrical language embedded in this lack of moment. Wilde uses terms such as “coached,” “rehearsed,” “course of action,” the image of a free man walking out with his hands in his pockets: all phrases that

connote that Wilde either is thinking as a dramatist as he writes this, thinks of his life as a dramatic work, or is using these terms as a device of recognition to the reader to convey that this is a theatrical production. This refusal to act and use of theatrical terms work to signify the hypocritical element of the performative self. Either way, the inclination and use of dramatic language, along with the notion of performance, is noted during this critical moment.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the absent centers are born or originate from the absent or unconfirmed mothers, the lack of origin within the womb of freeplay. For *De Profundis* to be considered Wilde's final dramatic work, it must reveal the absence of mother at the center, and it does but not in the form of a female woman. Instead, the absent mother in *De Profundis* is Lady Ireland, the mother country that Wilde rejected for England. Representing Ireland as a woman was a literary and political commonplace by the mid-19th-century, in such incarnations as the Shan Van Vocht, Cathleen ni Houlihan, or Dark Rosaleen, so Wilde's adoption of this familiar trope is not unusual. Because England has disowned him by putting him in prison for being who he was, and Wilde had chosen to reject Ireland, he becomes devoid of a mother country, adopted or biological. Again like Joyce's Eveline, when the critical moment comes, paralysis sets in, the inability to act, and Wilde is staring at the gates as the ship pulls away, thinking of his dead or absent mother, just like Eveline. Wilde's references to Ireland in *De Profundis* are scarce, but noteworthy. The first comes during a passage on Jesus Christ and mythology, where Wilde writes, "in the whole Celtic myth and legend, where the loveliness of the world is shown through a mist of tears and the life of a man is no more than the life of a flower, 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" (71). The reference to Celtic mythology evokes images of beauty in

suffering through the “mist of tears” and “life of a flower.” Yet, these poetic acts of suffering do not compare to the martyrdom of Christ because it is not enough to die for the “loveliness of the world” or the beauty of a flower; there must be a nobler cause, and in that sense, this line reveals Wilde’s rejection of Ireland, as if Celtic mythology is unable to achieve a greater and more universal meaning.

The second reference to Ireland in *De Profundis* occurs a few pages later during the section on Jesus Christ. Wilde writes, “It was always supposed that Christ talked in Aramaic. Even Renan thought so. But now we know that the Galilean peasants, like the Irish peasants of our own day, were bilingual... I never liked the idea that we only knew of Christ’s own words through a translation of a translation” (78). Here Wilde reveals an acceptance of Celtic revivalism as his use of “our” shows possession of the bilingual Irish peasants, while it seems as if Wilde is almost aligning his written words with that of Christ, and of the Irish peasants: bilingualism resulting in a “translation of a translation” that is ultimately misunderstood. Still this does not change that he emigrated from Ireland, and these two direct references to Ireland are weak and fail to show much substance or feeling. By disowning his mother country, and then having his self-adopted country disown him, the absent mother, or cultural origin, of Wilde remains absent, lost in the womb of freeplay, cannot be confirmed, and remains a void. Paralysis sets in during the critical moment because Wilde is still with Ireland, even though he has rejected her. In a reversal of the scenario in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, where the mother (Mrs. Erlynne: similar linguistic sound to *Ireland*) rejects her child, when a child rejects a mother, she always takes him back, especially Lady Ireland, but still the mother must remain unconfirmed until full assimilation and approval has been achieved on both sides. Similarly as Lady Windermere and Ernest have the same Christian given names as their parents, Wilde writes about his surname that

he has “disgraced that name eternally” (46); therefore he can never be reconfirmed (in his eyes) to Ireland.

Readers know Wilde most significantly for the moments of paradox in his dramatic works, and even *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. These signature paradoxical moments occur near the end of the plays where everything suddenly works out for the better, the big secrets are revealed, when coincidence meets opportunity, and the conflicts within the play become resolved. Paradox works to bring out the real signature element of these moments—unconditional redemption. This structure of unconditional redemption functions as the bare bones of the Wildean dramatic work. It is the relentless hope and optimism that governs his work, but often goes undetected due to the heavy use of paradox and contradictions used to mask it. As a major figure in the Aesthetic movement, Wilde worked to reveal that nothing existed at the heart of his inversions and paradoxes. That instead of this truth that the reader or viewer seeks, there was instead, a lack of deeper meaning: Art for art’s sake. However, while this may be true of his fictional works, one must ask how much credence the notion carries when applied to the dramatic work that is Wilde’s life.

Not only does *De Profundis* seem to be written in the style of a theatrical play, but the structure of unconditional redemption also indicates that Wilde believed his life to be representative of a play, and that unconditional redemption would be his saving grace. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, this moment reveals that Jack and Algernon are actually brothers, that Miss Prism left him in a handbag at the train station, and that Jack’s name is truly Ernest after his father, enabling him to marry Gwendolyn due to his revived familial social status and his name. The happy ending transcends all characters in the work and all ends are satisfied—except the question of who Jack and Algernon’s mother actually is and why no explanation of

her history is given on her behalf. Similarly, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the paradoxical ending entails a last interaction where Mrs. Erlynne has the chance to confess her motherhood to her daughter but again resists, she flees the play, and Lord Augustus announces that he and Mrs. Erlynne are eloping, just as Lady Windermere and Lord Darlington might have earlier in the previous acts. The trust is fully restored to the Windermere marriage and Lady Windermere never has to face the shame about who her mother truly is. Lady Windermere says, "Because I, who had shut my eyes to life, came to the brink. And the one who had separated us—" (Wilde, *Windermere* 51). She acknowledges the void by referring to the "brink" and though love is restored to the couple, the refusal to confess her motherhood to her daughter still leaves the center of the play inherently absent. Just as with *Earnest*, the name of Ernest is realized in the ending, acknowledging the "brink" or the absent center of the play, but the mystery of the unfulfilled mother still remains. Also, Lady Windermere (Margaret) and Jack (Ernest) both share the same Christian name as their mother and father, respectively. Both paradoxical endings, while they exclude motherhood, favor the preferable outcomes for the characters' lives. No matter the deceptions and indecencies that Lady Windermere or Jack have taken part in during the course of the plays, they are ultimately avenged at the end and presumably go on to lead happy and truthful lives.

Based on this structure of unconditional redemption, *De Profundis* presents the limitless hope that Wilde experiences while in prison for his relationship with Lord Alfred, his comeback in the world of literature, and the restoration of his reputation. As a character in his own dramatic work, Wilde believes that he will have his own paradoxical ending where everything will work out in his favor. His incurable optimism will see that beyond the letter, he will he exit prison, and

will reunite with Lord Alfred for a short time; however, the result is a paradox that he had not expected or accounted for.

Evidence to suggest that Wilde applied this structure of unconditional redemption to the dramatic work of his life is most often invoked through examples of Jesus Christ in *De Profundis*. One particular passage where Wilde references Christ begins:

Christ's place was with the poets. His whole conception of Humanity sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realised by it. What God was to the Pantheist, man was to him... More than anyone else in history he wakes in us that temper of wonder to which Romance always appeals. There is still something to me almost incredible in the idea of a young Galilean, peasant imagining that he could bear on his shoulders the burden of the entire world: all that had been already done and suffered, and all that was yet to be done and suffered... (Wilde, *De Profundis* 70)

First Wilde places Christ with the poets, or rather brings the poets up to the level of Christ. Then he becomes intrigued by the idea of how much suffering Christ endured, with the greater purpose of humanity in mind. The juxtaposition of these two elements seems to obliquely reference Wilde himself, first by being a writer and second by the amount of suffering he endures by accepting his fate of two years of jail time and refusing to run or act against what was happening to him. By choosing to bear the burden of suffering with dignity, and by placing the “conception of Humanity” at a literary level, Wilde positions himself as a Christ-like figure, a martyr for the sake of art.

The unique element about a martyr like Jesus Christ is that he gets a resurrection. Wilde continues:

...In the whole of Celtic myth and legend, where the loveliness of the world is shown through a mist of tears and the life of a man is no more than the life of a flower, 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. The little supper with his companions, one of whom had already sold him for a price: the anguish in the quiet moonlit olive-garden: the false friend coming close to him so as to betray him with a kiss: the friend who still believed in him, and on whom as on a rock he had hoped to build a house of refuge for Man, denying him as the bird cried to the dawn: his own utter loneliness, his submission, his acceptance of everything..."

It is difficult to read this passage without thinking of Wilde himself as the subject. The elaborate dinners with Lord Alfred depicted in *De Profundis* reference the "little supper" of the Last Supper, the false friend who sold him out and betrayed him with kisses would be Lord Alfred, the friend who still believed in him could be Robert Ross, the man whom Wilde trusted with the text itself, and the hope of building "a house of refuge for Man" with this friend, could be Wilde's hopes for the very text of *De Profundis*. The last line seems to pay tribute to Wilde's experience in prison and the total submission that he experienced during his great moment when he was unable to act. It seems as if this passage could be read entirely concerning Wilde in place of Jesus Christ, as interchangeable figures. He goes on to refer to Christ as "the most supreme of individualists" (73), and then to explain his weakest moment when Wilde found out that his son had been taken away from him. He writes, "I did not know what to do, so I flung myself on my knees, and bowed my head, and wept and said, 'The body of a child is as the body of the Lord: I am not worthy of either.' That moment seemed to save me. I saw then that the only thing for me was to accept everything" (73). This revelation is reached by physical anguish of the body and

the absolute submission of the mind rendered by the words “to submit everything.” Wilde continues the epiphany; “It was of course my soul in its ultimate essence that I had reached... Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their life a mimicry, their passions a quotation. Christ was not merely the supreme Individualist, but he was the first in history” (73).

By “reaching his soul,” Wilde is able to elevate himself to the level of Christ, the most supreme Individualist. Wilde believes that he had to be crucified because Jesus Christ had to be crucified before he was resurrected. Crucifixion represents the symptom, or condition, of resurrection. Wilde was required to endure the suffering and the temporary death to obtain resurrection, and in turn absolute existence that transcends life, art, and death. Wilde identifies himself with the suffering Christ figure awaiting resurrection. The last line of the work underscores his affiliation with Christ and his belief in his unconditional redemption: “Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful, the meaning of Sorrow, and its beauty” (114). The letter closes with this line, with hope, after all the suffering, insults, and everything in between; he never lost faith that he would be redeemed. Wilde believes himself to be the “chosen one,” like Jesus Christ, who was put here to teach Lord Alfred, and the world, the beauty of suffering and the suffering of love.

To demonstrate how certain Wilde is of his unconditional resurrection as a product of his suffering, the following lines present his unhinging optimism and wish fulfillment at a time when all has been lost in his life. Wilde writes, “If I realise what I have suffered, Society should realise what it has inflicted on me: and there should be no bitterness on either side” (61); “Sometimes when I am not torturing myself do really and sincerely say, ‘What a beginning! What a wonderful beginning!’ It may really be so. It may become so” (85); and “you should have

remembered that no one can possibly shut the doors against Love for ever” (113). Lines like these frame the letter with the poignant hope and faith that Wilde felt and truly believed.

Throughout the text, he never lost confidence that he would be redeemed, and that his prison time was less of an ending, and actually a beginning, giving him a platform to be resurrected and rise from the ashes, to become absolutely the figure of the most supreme of individualists. Wilde writes, “I have to transform into a spiritual experience.” He understands that he must endure torment and deprivation from his extravagant life and embrace total asceticism. The only way to become a phoenix and rise from the ashes is to burn and smolder in the flames first.

However, although Wilde remains hopeful until the last line of the letter, he never achieves resurrection after the letter is completed, as he never is able to attain the revivification that equates or surpasses his previous success before his fall to ruin. While Wilde does leave prison and reunites with Lord Alfred for a short time, instead of a life filled with love, literary success, the support of his children, and public acclaim, he never again produces a great work of literature and becomes the producer of prison-based poems and reform letters, changes his name to Sebastian Melmoth and writes under the pen name C33, his cell number in Reading Gaol.

Instead of resurrection and unconditional redemption, the protagonist is faced with a different sort of paradox than the characters in the former two plays. Wilde had believed that his life was a dramatic work like the ones he produced. He believed in this, but despite his belief, he failed at his own vision. He believed in the formal dramatic structure, the missing critical moments, absent centers, and the unconditional redemption. His belief in this consistency was his not his failure, but his ruin. In *De Profundis*, he writes, “The fatal errors are not due to man’s being unreasonable: an unreasonable moment may be one’s finest moment. They are due to man’s being logical” (31). Because as a playwright Wilde developed a style that continually

produced successful plays, he came to rely on his formal dramatic structures. However, when it came to self-construction in the play about his life, the conventions that were successful in his plays failed to translate the same way in his life -writing. Thus the typical reliance on dramatic conventions falls short when Wilde applies the dramatic formula to his life in *De Profundis* because human existence cannot be manipulated in the same fashion that a drama can be. Life rarely provides “happy endings.” Believing absolutely in his style and form past the dramatic and fictional realm was Wilde’s fatal flaw because real life cannot ever equate to drama. He expected the outcomes that he granted his characters, but was not fulfilled.

Instead of a paradox, Wilde, who had previously been essentially living the life of one of his characters, is presented with a reverse paradox: that however much one may hope and truly believe, the reality is that in real life, matters do not work out like they do in Wilde’s plays; life cannot be calculated by form and consistent conventions. Physical existence and reality had been tangled because he believed reality to be fiction. He had led a fictionalized life, racking up debts and always expecting the paradox, the happy ending. This is where the dramatic comedy and social realism fail to align in the classic dramatic structure of the play; the play falls through after the curtain falls on the stage. The paradox is that no paradox exists after the play ends, no matter how theatrically Wilde writes about and lives his own life. In *Windermere*, Lord Darlington relays that “we are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars” (Wilde, *Windermere* 37): Wilde’s philosophy in life and in his plays is that the stars align for those in the gutter, but in *De Profundis*, Wilde’s final dramatic work, the paradox is that the stars have already died and no longer exist, having exploded hundreds of years ago; this is the real paradox of life. Wilde had gravely miscalculated the metaphysics of existence because in reality, one must act to claim their second chance.

Mrs. Erlynne does not get to escape the play and elope with Lord Augustus untarnished as her confession of motherhood must catch up to her and she must deal with her mistakes. “Jack” or Ernest, while his name and marriage may have worked out in the play, does not get to walk away as a free man after leading a double life for years as he has to own up to his faults eventually. The real play of life does not end once the curtain closes, and it does not function through the same conventions as fictional plays. Wilde consciously lived his life as a work of art, as a dramatic performance, filled with extravagant living, lavish dinners, and complete rejection of his home for a country he better liked, while racking up debts the entire time and openly deceiving the law, because he was an individualist and he believed that his unconditional redemption would ultimately work out in the end. He did not comprehend that decisions come with consequences, and that it was possible to not be resurrected, to die on the cross never being redeemed. Wilde gambled everything on his belief in the power of the form of dramatic convention.

De Profundis was given life as a work of literature in the world, but not the life that Wilde had intended for it. Containing all Wilde’s signature elements of drama: the writing process, the absent centers, missing moments, unconfirmed mothers, and unconditional resurrection, the pretext for the final play remains unfinished, a ghostly existence of sunken, echoing voices of characters, scenes, and masks, not quite buried at sea, but nowhere close to breaking the surface. Wilde would not have craftily numbered the pages or heavily edited a simple letter, often times filling the margins and any available space, for no reason. He would not write and rewrite and rewrite passages to a lowly undergrad like Boise who probably lacked the respect, intellect, and attention span to even read a letter from Wilde of that length and depth. The letters of famous writers generally do not emulate their formal narrative or dramatic

structures. Wilde wrote this letter with purpose, and further even requested duplicate copies to be made. Richard Ellmann was correct when he said that *De Profundis* was the greatest love letter ever written, because it was not just a love letter, it was a great playwright's final attempt to write the play of his life that was never realized.

However, this reading presents a less radical Wilde than has been perceived: a Wilde who instead of acting wild, is actually *acting Wilde* in relying on his own predetermined form, structure, and model for the performative self. Perhaps *De Profundis* is actually realized perfectly because the redemption and rescue never happen confirming the ultimate absent center, and Wilde knew that it was never going to be.

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