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A “Consummate Artist” and “Consummate Rascal:” *De Profundis*, Imaginative Resistance, and
the Queer Erotics of Prison Writing

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I. A Lineage of Prison Writers

“I sit between Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade,” Oscar Wilde writes to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, known affectionately as “Bosie,” from the solitude of his prison cell (54). The letter – given the title *De Profundis* – was the last full work of the Irish aesthete and playwright who fell from stardom into obscurity after his sentencing for “gross indecency,” a crime of homosexuality, in May of 1895 (Tóibín xxiii). In this early statement, Wilde positions himself in a longstanding literary tradition of prison writers; De Retz and De Sade, in particular, had also been convicted of sexual crimes (Losey 429). Prison writing was first defined by H. Bruce Franklin as “literature created by those members of the oppressed classes who have become artists with words through their experience of being defined by the state as ‘criminals’” (xxx). More generally, prison writing accounts for texts written from authors in places of involuntary confinement, servitude, or banishment following the conviction of a crime. Throughout the letter, Wilde continues to draw on the muses of other prison writers: he praises the “perfect lives” of “Verlaine and of Prince Kropotkin,” and later compares his mother kindly to “Madame Roland” (130, 140). Wilde’s greatest inspiration is Dante Alighieri, perhaps the most famous prison writer. As a young student at Oxford, Wilde penned the poems “Ravenna” and “At Verona,” taking up “a Dantean mask to create a fictionalized exile” (Losey 430). In *De Profundis*, Wilde assumes the role in a manner that was no longer so fictionalized.

In its self-announced lineage, *De Profundis* offers a basis to evaluate the aesthetics of prison writing. Firstly, the letter must be read in terms of mimesis, or how the prison materially shapes the text. Gramsci’s theory of the subaltern clarifies how time and language in prison

impress upon Wilde's writing, creating a fluidity of prose and a strategic turn to essentialism. Subsequently, the letter can be read in terms of anti-mimesis, or how the text creatively shapes the prison in acts of expropriative refashioning. Wilde resists the religious indoctrination of the prison by encoding a homoerotic portrayal of Christ. In doing so, Wilde reasserts his imaginative preeminence by employing the body of Christ as a symbol for the fluidity of sexuality and for an ethics of bodily care amongst the imprisoned men. In sum, *De Profundis* – through its creative appropriation and imaginative resistance – acts to disrupt the prison's effacing and oppressive reality.

In the letter, Wilde self-fashions a new identity and wears the mask of a defamed prison writer. Michel Foucault argues that in the late 18th century shift to modern prisons, the performance of punishment was reoriented: "The spectacle of punishment, the body and the blood, gave way. A new character came on the scene, *masked*. It was the end of a certain kind of tragedy; comedy began, with shadow play, faceless voices, impalpable entities" (16-7; emphasis added). The theatre of punishment formerly belonged to public execution, where actors would often reenact crimes and crowds would gather to witness a brutal killing (45). As public execution was replaced by the prison, this element of performance was hidden behind cell walls and could only emerge in self-expressions like writing. The "new character" that arose was *masked*, in that punishment was at once removed from the public eye and paraded more visibly than ever¹. The spectacle subsided but indicators of ongoing punishment – rapid construction of prisons and increases in inmate population – left traces of a system that aimed at the "soul" of its

¹ Angela Davis writes, "Thus, the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives" (15).

victims (16). By identifying with other prison writers, Wilde becomes this new character: both buried in his cell and thrusting himself back into the theatrical spotlight.

Wilde's self-fashioned identity in prison engages in a process of posing. On the one hand, "posing" involves the performance of living out art in everyday life: "[For Wilde], art cannot be confined to the gallery, the museum or the stage: it has to be lived; it can take precedence over reality; it is larger than life" (Wan 9). On the other hand, "posing" involves purposeful visibility, or "placing the body within the field of vision" (10). *De Profundis* is not an autobiography nor a personal letter. In the effort of posing, the letter emerges as an intricate literary work, written by a strategically contrived persona that Wilde bears and intends to share with the world. The performance of the text both engages with prison reality and turns this reality into the object of its art. Only in this imaginative refashioning does truth emerge: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (1142, "The Critic As Artist"). The stakes are higher in prison, but the method is the same. By recasting his public persona, Wilde not only challenges the narrative of defamation on trial but also produces an artistic work that employs the pressures of confinement as features of its self-expressed agency.

De Profundis bears the material influences of the prison yet turns to anti-mimesis such that these conditions are appropriated for creative resistance. Wilde's aestheticism promotes the anti-mimetic notion that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" ("Decay of Lying," 1091). Wilde insists upon the supremacy of art. He believes that it is not the artist's job to imitate nature, but rather it is lying, the "telling of beautiful untrue things," that is the artist's proper objective (1091). Through its imaginative reinvention, art becomes the force that defines history, time, and reality itself. Opposing realism, Wilde's aestheticism thus carries with it the intention

to disrupt and replace reality with artistic creation. The performance of the artist's identity is inherent to this process. In the biography, *Making Oscar Wilde*, Michèle Mendelssohn traces the earlier self-fashioning of the aesthete. In her words, she tells "the story of a local Irish eccentric called Oscar who became an international celebrity called Wilde" (3). In this essay, I concern myself with a different story: the one in which a defamed prison writer called C.3.3 became a patron of queer love called *Saint Oscar*.

II. Mimesis: How the Prison Shapes the Text

Responding to a questionnaire asking, 'What is your aim in life,' a 23-year-old Oscar Wilde wrote, "success: fame or even notoriety" (Mendelssohn 21). Wilde's rise to celebrity brought the success that the young dandy sought; imprisonment, on the contrary, was the bearer of neither fame nor notoriety. Once the spectacle of his trial had passed, Wilde endured a descent into anonymity – into a crushing "slough of despond²" (251). In *De Profundis*, Wilde speaks of this loss of individual identity: "In the great prison where I was then incarcerated I was merely the figure and letter of a little cell in a long gallery, one of a thousand lifeless numbers, as of a thousand lifeless lives" (84). The extravagant Irishman, who travelled to Oxford and rose to an esteemed rank of artists in England, was suddenly cast to the nameless outskirts of society.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci coins the term 'subaltern,' which I draw on for its relation to time. Gramsci's first use of the word is to describe a class of people "at the margins of history" who elude or are ignored by systems of representation (Liguori 129). Gramsci theorizes two forces in society: structure and superstructure. "Structure" refers to material and

² Mendelsohn borrows the phrase from Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The "Slough of Despond" is "the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run" (11). A prison writer himself, Bunyan provides an image that aptly describes the overwhelming nature of prison and its pressures of religious reconciliation.

objective conditions, while “superstructure” refers to ideological forces like politics and religion (Gramsci 191). Gramsci says that structure and superstructure are not separate but rather exist in a constant and real “dialectical” exchange (193). That is, the material conditions of a society create the ideologies of that society, but so too do the ideologies help to enforce those material conditions. The reciprocity of structure and superstructure is what Gramsci calls the “historical bloc” (192). To read the subaltern as “at the margins of history” is to consider the classes of people who slip outside of this active process and fragment into marginality.

In the most literal terms, the 19th century prison reforms involved the isolation of prisons. Pentonville, where Wilde was first held, was turned into “a house of secrets” and visibility to the incarcerated was denied by the placing “a firm barrier [...] between the prison and the public” (Pratt 384). While traces remained, prisons certainly began to exist on the fringes of society. The historical alienation of prisons involves a process of temporal inertia. The movement of history necessitates the background of time, such that falling outside of the active process of the historical bloc coincides with falling outside of the progression of time. In other words, time advances, but the subaltern does not experience its movement. This temporal reading captures modern punishment: when one enters prison, they remain stagnant – trapped in a monotonous and backward drag of time – as the outside world continues to progress. Interpreting the prison as “at the margins of history” frames the carceral punishment as a seizing of time itself.

This punishment of ‘doing time’ leads to historical anonymity. Dante explains how those in Hell see the future but not the present: ““You seem to see in advance all time’s intent, [...] but you seem to lack all knowledge of the present”” (X.97-99). As in the Gramscian reading, the imprisoned souls suffer because they see the historical progression of society but know that their

present experience will always be stolen. In *De Profundis*, Wilde is aware of his existence outside of the flow of time: “It is always twilight in one’s cell, as it is always midnight in one’s heart. And in the sphere of thought, no less than in the sphere of time, motion is no more” (89). Time in prison becomes so unchanging that it fails to exist at all. As the “motion” of time ceases, Wilde – and all those imprisoned – are doubly cast to the margins of history. The shackling of one’s time against the background of a progressing society is as fundamental a punishment as prison will ever inflict.

The stagnation and monotony of prison life cause time to collapse into fluidity. Wilde explains how suffering in prison is infinite and temporally indivisible:

Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain. The paralysing immobility of a life every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern, so that we eat and drink and lie down and pray, or kneel at least for prayer, according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula: this immobile quality, that makes each dreadful day in the very minutest detail like its brother, seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless change (89).

Wilde insists that “time itself does not progress,” and yet it still “revolves” around the suffering of the imprisoned men. He describes a paradoxical co-presence of stasis and fluidity in being outside the progression of time; that is, one is both stuck in stagnation and moving in a disorienting flow. Regenia Gagnier interprets *De Profundis* as written in the form of a prison schedule, arguing that Wilde serializes his memories and “reconstructs [the world] to a time

scheme as rigid as that in prison” (342). While influential to studying confinement’s material effects on the text, her reading captures only a partial view of prison time. Time in prison does not become rigid like the “unchangeable pattern” of a schedule; rather, the repetition of every “minutest detail” results in a “paralyzing” of both time and space. Since every moment of imprisonment is exactly the same, time blends into itself day after day until it forms one blurry flow. The blending of time and space³ in prison produces a reality that is vague and amorphous. Prison time – in its infinite monotony – becomes an atemporality that is fluid and monistic, rejecting the rigid division of daily activity⁴.

De Profundis predominantly exhibits a fluid form of writing that mirrors this more complete conception of prison time. Wilde is known to write concisely and to convey profound meaning in short expression. He boasts this talent in *De Profundis*: “I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram” (100). However, the letter features uncharacteristically long sentences and paragraphs. One such example occurs in the “hate blinded you” diatribe that Wilde delivers after recalling the first threatening letter that Bosie’s father wrote. The single paragraph carries on for nearly four pages without break. The glaringly long paragraph also consists of glaringly long sentences that are stretched out with the use of colons:

As soon as I had read the letter, with its obscene threats and coarse violences, I saw at once that a terrible danger was looming on the horizon of my troubled days: I told you I would not be the catspaw between you both in your ancient hatred of each other: that I in

³ From prison, Nawal El Saadawi writes, “time is no longer time. Time and the wall have merged into one” (31).

⁴ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* consists of a single day, where the narrator catalogs every action in almost painful diligence. The last line of the novel explains that this daily schedule needed to be followed for a decade, or “three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days. The three extra days were for leap years” (139). The impact of the final line is unmistakable: the monotony of reading Solzhenitsyn’s work is something that the narrator would need to endure thousands of times over, implying that time will collapse into one hazy flow.

London was naturally much bigger game for him than a Secretary of Foreign Affairs at Homburg: that it would be unfair to me to place me even for a moment in such a position: and that I had something better to do with my life than to have scenes with a man drunken, *déclassé*, and half-witted as he was. You could not be made to see this. Hate blinded you. (74-75).

Wilde's profuse use of colons is observable throughout *De Profundis*. As a result, the paragraphs, sentences, and ideas of the letter flow in a loose and strung-out manner. Variations of the phrase "hate blinded you" are repeated six times in this paragraph alone. From a formal perspective, the long-running ideas and insistent repetition results in a text that bloatedly melts thoughts into each other and opposes any definite structure⁵. The text itself thus exhibits both a stasis in its reiteration of ideas and a fluidity in its winding delivery of those thoughts.

Put simply, the effect of Wilde's verbosity and repetition is a fluid prose that mimics the blending together of time and space in prison. Even in his serialized recollections, Wilde drags out the writing and repeats specific times without clear distinction; remembering Bosie's lack of care for him when he was sick, Wilde in the same paragraph writes, "I wait till eleven o'clock and you never appear [...] At eleven o'clock you came into my room" (63). Presumably, Wilde is speaking of eleven o'clock at night in the first instance and eleven o'clock in the morning in the second. Nonetheless, Wilde does not provide any explicit date or suggestion of midday/midnight status to confirm this assumption. Rather, he writes of two identical times ("eleven o'clock") followed by two inverted actions ("you never appear" and "you came into my room"). Here, the

⁵ In "To Be, One Has to Be Somewhere," Joane Martel focuses on the loss of well-defined time in isolation: "the practice of solitary confinement is such that the foundation of a prisoner's temporal structuration of her activities become seriously altered. In fact, entry into segregation marks the end of one's mastery over time" (597).

of their crimes occurs collectively. Wilde develops a unified image where the burdens of their crimes are absolved into a single absence. A musicality⁶ emerges in the stanza underlining the communal chanting qualities of the ballad. The first line “And I and all the souls in pain” contains eight, consecutive monosyllables that offer a quick and light rhythm to the words. The melodic tone continues through the stanza’s end-rhyme scheme (ABCBDB) where the every-other-line oscillation creates a similarly lively sound. While most ballads are comprised of quatrains, Wilde employs sestets to draw out the length of the sound and avoid any abrupt stops in rhythm. The poem strives for communal representation in its musical tone and use of an essentialized voice.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde’s turn to a language of collectivity links the formation of prison community to a spiritually shared revelation of suffering and beauty. At the beginning of the letter, Wilde emphasizes the pain of the prison “we,” rather than of the imprisoned “I,” as he says, “[...] weep as we weep in prison where the day no less than the night is set apart for tears” (45-6). More than simply minimizing himself, Wilde insists upon a tacit or even spiritual bond between him and the other men: “I have said of myself that I was one who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. There is not a single wretched man in this wretched place with me who does not stand in symbolic relations to the very secret of life. For the secret of life is suffering. It is what is hidden behind everything” (110). Through shared suffering – that “one very long moment” – the imprisoned gain knowledge to the secret of life:

⁶ In *Our Lady of the Flowers*, forty years after Wilde’s letter, Jean Genet invokes *De Profundis* to say that the inmates sing with the same somber musicality: “that wonderful blossoming of dark and lovely flowers [...] was mentioned, almost sung, by the prisoners—their song became fantastic and funeral (a *De Profundis*), as much so as the plaints which they sing in the evening, as the voice which crosses the cells and reaches me blurred, hopeless, inflected” (62).

which is, the pervasiveness of suffering itself. Even as a global celebrity, Wilde only stood in relation to the temporary fashions of his time. It is those imprisoned, Wilde insists, that have access to a deeper and more timeless truth about “the meaning of Sorrow, and its beauty” (161). Wilde repeats the word “wretched” before both “man” and “place” to create an inseparability between the prison and the imprisoned, held together by the ubiquity of their desolation and their unique knowledge of beauty’s underlying presence in suffering. Surrounded entirely by male bodies, Wilde’s use of “we” establishes an ethics of communal care⁷ and concern amongst the incarcerated men. Despite their physical separation, they suffer as one body and together they revel in the supreme beauty of their own abjection.

By adopting this voice, the text replicates the material conditions of prison community⁸. In *No Friend But the Mountains*, Behrouz Boochani writes, “The simplest way to gain status is to identify with a group [...]. Depending on a group or a collective identity masks loneliness” (123). By identifying with those in similar pain, the prison writer can combat the alienation of their circumstances. Boochani says that a “shared language” emerges amongst the incarcerated due to this bond (123). The essentialist language of the text mirrors the intimate community created amongst inmates in prison – ‘*the others*’ whom Wilde inseparably identifies with. In the presence of these other men, Wilde finds a certain solace that prevents his self-harm. He later says that his religious conversion in prison taught him that “there was no difference at

⁷ In prison, Wilde sent letters to other inmates, and he continued to send money to his “pals” after his release (Stoneley 475). Early biographers note that these relationships mirrored his former behaviors of courting working-class men. However, in a letter to Reginald Turner, Wilde insists that the friendships were not sexual, saying of his closest friend, “I had better say candidly that he is not ‘a beautiful boy’” (qtd. in 475). While coded in erotic terms, Wilde’s exchanges with his fellow inmates were never fulfilled sexually and signal a shift to an interest in the caring of other male bodies.

⁸ John Irwin and Donald R. Cressey famously divided “inmate culture” into three encompassing groups – “thieves,” “inmates,” and “legitimates” – in an essentialist attempt to segment the tight community that forms in prison (147-8).

all between the lives of others and one's own life" (119). Bound as one body, the men avoid alienation and exhibit care for their shared well-being. In this sense, the effects of the prison community mimetically impress into the essentialist language of the letter.

As subaltern spaces, 19th century prisons enforced silence and suppressed representation. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak offers an interpretation of Gramsci that focuses on the subdual of language. She argues that the subaltern fails in "representing," or "speaking for" themselves; instead, they are defined by the dominant speech of the colonizers (70). Not only were prisoners spoken for, but they also lived in strictly enforced silence. The prison system was called "the great silent machine," since speaking was prohibited (Gagnier 339). Silence was even maintained as "prisoners wore masks during exercise [...] to prevent any noise" (Pratt 384). Wilde required the intervention of a new warden to allow him to compose *De Profundis*; the letter was his first writing in two years (Tóibín xxv). An abridged version of the letter was published in 1905, five years after his death, while Wilde released "The Ballad of the Reading Gaol" in 1898 under his cell number "C.3.3" (ix). Wilde speaks to his forced marginality: "I had lost my name, my position, my happiness, my freedom, my wealth. I was a prisoner and a pauper" (118). Wilde certainly struggled to speak for himself; newspapers⁹ around the globe captured the events of the trial, while the Irishman remained silently tucked away in his cell (Cohen 4). *De Profundis* is an attempt to write back against these mechanisms of censorship by posing as a newly self-fashioned voice: the suffering and unfairly outcasted prison writer C.3.3.

⁹ Cohen examines columns covering the trials, saying that "at no point did the newspapers describe or even explicitly refer to the sexual charges made against Wilde" (4). A struggle in *De Profundis* is to represent the unrepresentable. With homosexuality being illegal and ill-defined, Wilde must *speak* about 'the love that dare not speak its name.'

In turning to essentialism, Wilde strategically engages the prison as a subaltern space in order to amplify this plea. *De Profundis* condemns prisons, as Wilde “excoriates the un-Christian system of penal incarceration” and raises the “public’s consciousness” towards these injustices (Fludernik 346). In the political effort, his writing can be seen as a type of “strategic essentialism,” as Spivak argues that essentialism is already imposed onto subaltern discourse and thus should be engaged with pragmatically (184). Prison populations are already written about as non-individuated bodies of criminals, who, as a group, belong on the outskirts of society. Instead of rejecting this narrative, a subaltern can temporarily identify with the essential characteristic (their shared incarcerated status) in order to promote a political cause (the bettering of prison conditions), such that they mobilize their efforts in a simple and unified manner. Wilde says that Jesus “took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom, and made himself its eternal mouthpiece” (120). Similarly, Wilde’s use of strategic essentialism speaks for the men, as he develops an image of representational care and community amongst the imprisoned. This approach humanizes the inmates and emphasizes their unjust treatment.

While Wilde attempts to represent the imprisoned as a unified body, his use of essentialism is problematized by his celebrity. Peter Stoneley confirms that Wilde “was very probably the only upper middle-class, university educated person in the prison,” and the incarcerated population had generally low rates of literacy (474). As an educated man and global star, Wilde’s voice was destined to be heard over his fellow inmates. Even if essentialism promotes their similar concerns, Wilde clearly communicates on behalf of those who were less able to speak than he was. Clare Westall says, “within prison writing there is an ongoing and complex negotiation between the individual story and its communal representativeness, its ability

to speak for a group and about common experiences as it expresses the fate of a single body and voice” (5). Because of Wilde’s privileged position in the subaltern space, *De Profundis* acts as the telling of one story on behalf of others, reminding us of the absences and erasures inherent to prison writing.

III. Anti-Mimesis: How the Text Shapes the Prison

If the structure of the early prison was concrete walls and steel gates, then the Gramscian superstructure – which bound together those fences – was Protestant Christianity. In the late 18th century, a wave of prison reforms occurred in Europe and led to the invention of the modern prison. These reforms began out of practicality, since the aftermath of the American Revolution caused England to be “deluged by crime” (McGowen 85). Additionally, there was a moral interest that “rejected the idea of punishment as spectacle” and sought to move away from the “callousness” of public execution (85). Underlying this moral interest was the growing prominence of evangelic Christians in England. A leader in the movement was Jonas Hanway, who, “part of [this] rising evangelic tide that inspired many advocates,” put religion at the forefront of prison reform (86).

The purpose of imprisonment was not only to atone for one’s crimes but to also become indoctrinated during this reconciliatory process: “by ‘reformation’ [Hanway] meant *religious conversion*” (86, emphasis added). In terms of prison design, the most influential text was *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales*, written by John Howard. Like Hanway, Howard’s interest in prison reform was driven by “religious disposition” (87). Foucault describes how religious ideology was steeped into the material constructions of prisons:

[Prison isolation] enables [the inmate] to go into himself and rediscover in the depths of his conscience the voice of good; solitary work would then become not only an apprenticeship, but also an exercise in *spiritual conversion*; [...] The cell, that technique of Christian monachism, which had survived only in Catholic countries, becomes in this protestant society the instrument by which one may reconstitute both *homo oeconomicus* and the religious conscience (122-3, emphasis added).

The prison reforms were determined by Protestant beliefs in asceticism and repentance. The effort to create a culture of the “*homo oeconomicus*,” or economic man, demonstrates the intersections of the Protestant work ethic and the demands of capitalism. These forces fashioned the prison such that being incarcerated came along with the expectation of being religiously converted.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde details a religious conversion to Catholicism and expounds his identification with Christ. Since Wilde was born into an Anglo-Irish Protestant family and known for his decadence, many critics question the validity of this conversion. Even contemporaries of Wilde, who were more generous to the artistic value of the letter, doubted its sincerity; E.V. Lucas called it “a ‘counterfeit,’ artificial and insincere” (qtd. in Buckler 98). But there is no need for skepticism. Wilde’s aestheticism thrives on a process of appropriative refashioning and Catholicism offers an imaginative alternative to the rigidity of Protestantism. The influence of Christianity over the text is inextricable from its performance. As a result of the 19th century prison reforms, religion bears down on Wilde to implore his conversion and indoctrination into Protestantism. In return, religion is the ideology that is exploited in the text’s anti-mimetic act of resistance. As such, *De Profundis* employs Christianity – particularly, the figure of Christ – as a

mechanism to encode homoerotic desire within spirituality and to reassert agency over the prison.

Even from the early pages of the letter, before he addresses his conversion, Wilde presents himself as a Christ-like figure in his mercy and forgiveness. He accuses Bosie of being “the absolute ruin of [his] Art” (49). In the attacks, Wilde describes how he would unquestionably forgive Bosie for his transgressions – as in the time that he forgot to visit the ill-struck aesthete:

I waited naturally to hear what excuses you had to make, and in what way you were going to ask for the forgiveness that you knew in your heart was invariably waiting for you, no matter what you did; your absolute trust that I would always forgive you being the thing in you that I always really liked best, perhaps the best thing in you to like (63).

Wilde faults Bosie for neglecting the bodily care of his lover. Nonetheless, like Christ, Wilde was always prepared to absolve Bosie of his sins. In doing so, Wilde says that he would selflessly bear Bosie’s troubles as if they were a cross on his back: “I must take the burden from you and put it on my own shoulders” (99). As a result of his artistic supremacy, Wilde assures himself that Bosie would always remain committed to him: “no matter what you wrote or did, you were absolutely and entirely devoted to me” (57). Even when sinned against, Wilde remains confident that Bosie will return to his forgiving arms. As such, Wilde frames himself like Christ: a supremely merciful man, who endured the pain of sinners like Bosie and attracted absolute devotion from his followers.

In contrast, Bosie is framed as antithetical to Christ in his addiction to bodily desires and lack of imagination. Wilde accuses Bosie of living an extravagant lifestyle: “You demanded

without grace and received without thanks. You grew to think that you had a sort of right to live at my expense and in profuse luxury” (50). Bosie’s gluttony is rebuked by Wilde. Later, he mocks Bosie for threatening suicide when he had not responded to him for six days: “you made what I must admit was a most pathetic appeal, and ended with what seemed to me a threat of suicide, and one not thinly veiled” (60). Whereas Christ’s willing death “gave the world its most eternal symbol,” Bosie’s threat of suicide is a pitiful spectacle that lacked all artistic grace and subtlety (116). As such, even Bosie’s threats of suicide were diluted by a shallow worldliness. Wilde puts this repeated attack in literary terms: “With very swift and running feet you had passed from Romance to Realism” (46). Framed as an anti-Romantic, Bosie does not have the imagination to escape his superficial desires: “Your terrible imagination [was] the one really fatal defect of your character” (74). Bosie’s lack of imagination and passage into Realism offends the tenets of aestheticism and puts him at odds with the imagined Romantic lover that Wilde seeks.

With Bosie proving insufficient, Wilde frames Jesus as a counterpoint: or in other words, as the ideal of homoeroticism. Whereas Bosie lacked imagination, Jesus exhibits creativity in the most passionate form: “The very basis of [Jesus’s] nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flamelike imagination” (114). Similarly, while Bosie falls into Realism, Jesus stands as the first and most influential Romantic: “It is the imaginative quality of Christ’s own nature that makes him this palpitating centre of romance” (122). Bosie is “blinded by Hate,” and yet again it is Jesus who proves that “Love is more beautiful than Hate” (119). In all the areas where Bosie failed as a lover, Jesus succeeds: He is imaginative where Bosie is not, He is a Romantic where Bosie is a Realist, and He is defined by Love where Bosie is by Hate. In these places of contrasts, Jesus’s attributes are described in sexually valent language. His

imagination is “intense and flamelike,” which contradicts a standard vision of Christ as embodying temperance and asceticism. Christ’s imaginative nature is the “*palpitating* centre of romance,” in that all things beautiful excitably emanate from Him. Without being able to speak openly about homosexuality, Jesus substitutes¹⁰ for Wilde as the perfect male lover that Lord Douglas could never be.

The homoeroticizing of Christ centers around an ethics of bodily care that Bosie refuses Wilde. Speaking of the Last Supper, Wilde compares Jesus’s betrayal by Judas to his betrayal by Lord Douglas: “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 [...] his submission, his acceptance of everything” (116). Jesus is deceived by Judas in an act of homosocial affection, a “kiss.” While the kiss is not explicitly homosexual, it is an intimate act of care between two men that is employed to deceive the merciful Christ. In the parallel to Bosie, there is slippage from the homosocial into the homoerotic: this same intimacy is what blinded Wilde to Bosie’s deception in their clearly romantic relationship. Just like Christ, Wilde would forgive Bosie in “his submission” and “acceptance of everything.” The submissive nature of the two men, again, is encoded with sexual undertones. The mercy of Christ also stands in contrast to Bosie: whereas Lord Douglas neglected the bodily care of Wilde when he was sick, Christ’s forgiving and accepting nature exemplifies an unending devotion to the wellbeing of other male bodies. Wilde writes that Christ’s “mere presence could bring peace to

¹⁰ This framing of Jesus could likewise be read as autoerotic, since Wilde poses himself as Christ. Such a reading would find companion with *Our Lady of the Flowers*, which Jean-Paul Sartre describes as “the epic of masturbation” (10). He argues that Genet’s masturbation is “an act of defiance, a willful perversion of the sexual act” (10). While not as explicit, the hints of autoeroticism in *De Profundis* reinforce an intimate connection between male bodies: Wilde and Jesus’s bodies become sites of each other’s interconnected homoeroticism. Trapped between cell walls, such a physical expression of sexual desire is resistant to both religious standards and prison confinement.

souls in anguish, and [...] those who touched his garments or his hands forgot their pain” (117). In Wilde’s conception, the devotion of Christ to His male followers is more than just an interest in spiritual wellbeing. There is a physical and homoerotic engagement that intermingles with the spiritual: in *touching* “his garments” and “his hands,” all suffering men are brought to peace in Christ’s presence.

This portrayal of Christ serves to announce the supreme beauty of male homosexuality. Wilde’s sentencing for *gross indecency* incites connotations of corporeality and gluttony. The word “gross” can refer to “the flesh of large animals” and is often used to mean “overfed, bloated with excess, unwholesomely or repulsively fat or corpulent” (OED). Wilde combats this view¹¹ of homosexuality as monstrously excessive, reframing the narrative to make it loving: “All Christ says to us by way of a little warning is that *every* moment should be beautiful, that the soul should *always* be ready for the coming of the Bridegroom, *always* waiting for the voice of the Lover” (127). Jesus as Bridegroom is male-gendered, and in Christianity, the union of the believer’s soul with Christ is rendered a consummation. Wilde hardly hides the allusion to homosexuality, as he writes that all Christians – both men and women – should be ready for His “coming of the Bridegroom” and His “voice of the Lover.” However, Jesus as “Lover” is not an image of carnal desire but rather a symbol of homosexuality’s grace and beauty. Wilde draws on the Hellenistic idealization of male same-sex relations: “Men who are sliced from the wholly male original seek out males, [...] they feel affection for men and take pleasure in lying beside or entwined with them. In youth and young manhood this sort of male is the best because he is by

¹¹ David Foster passingly regards how Christ is “rendered in something like homoerotic pastoral” in *De Profundis* (104). His reading is well-supported, as many early modern writers – bound by the Christian-informed sexual politics – used renditions of Theocritan and Virgilian pastorals to encode homosexuality (Guy-Bray 5).

nature the most manly” (192a, *Plato’s Symposium*). Wilde later says that Jesus “regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful, holy things, and modes of perfection” (128). Rejecting the view of homosexuality as vile and excessive, Wilde tailors the Christian belief that all sin is absolved through Christ such that homosexuality is not only acceptable but beautiful, holy, and perfect.

The turning of sin into beauty occurs directly in the idealized body of Christ. Wilde describes the crucifixion in Orientalist terms: “his body [is] swathed in Egyptian linen with costly spices and perfumes as though he had been a King’s son” (116). Christ’s body is exoticized in His “Egyptian linen” and “costly spices and perfumes.” The Decadent tradition revered the male body when adorned in fanciful, non-Western wear. As in *Salomé*, this fetishizing of the male body was often linked to Orientalism – to rendering the body “exotic” (Im 361). The eroticizing of Christ in foreign clothes, however, departs from His typically nude imagery: “[Images of Jesus] have, indeed, a unique position in modern culture as images of the unclothed or unclothable male body, often in extremis and/or in ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored” (Sedgwick 140). The body of Christ is normally gazed upon in its exposed¹² flesh. Sedgwick believes that there is a horror in placing the male body next to Christ’s nakedness: “The squeam-inducing power of texts like *De Profundis* and *Reading Gaol* [...] may be said to coincide with a thematic choice made in each of them: that the framing and display of the male body be placed in explicit context of the displayed body of Jesus” (148). Wilde certainly confronts the abjection of prison life, as Beasley observes how his prison writing turns “filth” and “disgust” into aesthetic categories (255). Even so, the aestheticizing of bodily

¹² Leo Steinberg famously traces the “demonstrative emphasis” on the “genitalia of the Christ Child, or of the dead Christ” in his book *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1).

suffering is always underpinned by an artistic subtlety and aim for decency. Contrary to Sedgwick's belief, Wilde displays the exotic and *clothed Christ* whose beauty absolves all sin and whose grace turns homosexuality into something marvelous.

In doing so, Wilde draws on the Oxford Movement, which used Christian martyrdom as a vehicle for homoeroticism. Led by John Henry Newman, the Movement was a "precursor of the aesthetes of Oscar Wilde's generation" as Newman "found freer sexual self-expression amid the gymnasia of ancient Athens" (Janes 2). Newman shunned Protestantism and moved to Catholicism where erotics could be more easily entwined with spirituality. By integrating this freedom of sexuality, religion became "a site for the construction of concepts of sexual deviance" (3-4). What is more, the deviant spirituality relied on notions of homosexuality as interlaced with suffering:

Visual images and imaginary visions of suffering in ecclesiastical contexts could be used to develop concepts of male same-sex desire that projected the self as dutiful and penitent rather than shameful. Idealizing the person and body of Christ as an unmarried queer martyr provided both a model and a substitute for same-sex relationships (5).

By identifying with Christ and using Him as a substitute for Bosie, Wilde inspires a vision of male same-sex desire that refuses the stigmas of gross indecency. Instead, he places suffering – of a beautiful kind – at the heart of homosexuality. Wilde's conversion to Catholicism can be read as an erotic defiance to pressures of being converted to Protestantism. Moreover, the identification is far from limited to just Wilde and Christ. It is suffering that brings together all of the male bodies in prison. Their spiritual bond is forged through the common revelation that sorrow underlies the highest form of beauty: namely, male homosexuality. As such, Christ's

martyred body becomes a homoerotic repository for the essentialized prison population and their shared forms of suffering.

Wilde's homoerotic engagement with Christ leads to the ultimate point that sexuality is fluid and cannot be encaged. In Hellenistic times, sexuality was undefined and erotics were natural to life; Protestant Christianity was the force that shamefully categorized homosexuality:

Wilde's search for an ethical alternative to Christian morality was at least partially motivated by Christianity's stigmatization of same-sex desires and practices. In ancient Greek [...] philosophies, they discovered an ethics by which male same-sex passion might be placed on par with, if not held superior to, heterosexual passion (Doyle 552).

In an earlier work, Wilde proclaims that he will usher in the "new Hellenism" ("Soul of Man Under Socialism," 1197). He views himself in line with antiquity, where homosexuality was free to be practiced. The 19th century saw the height of Christian stigmatization, as Foucault says, "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). The homosexual was thrust into scientific discourse and borders were drawn around human identities. But Wilde is clear to insist that Jesus Himself did not share this tendency to categorically regulate human bodies: "Christ had no patience with the dull lifeless mechanical systems that treat people as if they were things" (126). In fact, Wilde asserts that Jesus firmly believed in the fluidity of life and condemned attempts to encircle it: "[Jesus] felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death" (125). The fluid erotics of this suggestion are inherently queer, as being queer implies transgressing boundaries. Far from this ideal, the closeting of Wilde took its most literal form in his prison sentence. Wilde experienced the physical boundaries, and eventually the "death," of such confinement around his

homosexuality. For this reason, Wilde is now celebrated as “Saint Oscar,” a martyr¹³ for queer love (Mendelssohn 3). Yet, the legend of *Saint Oscar* presents himself far more defiantly in the text. *De Profundis* insists that the fluidity of sexuality – in its artistic and idealized form – defies the sharp enclosure of category or imprisonment, as Jesus Himself affirms the boundless beauty of homoerotic desire.

In this culmination, *De Profundis* resists indoctrination in an anti-mimetic appropriation of the prison conditions. The fluidity of the writing seemed to originally reflect the temporal stagnation of prison, and yet Wilde uses Christ to invert the dynamic and endorse a transgression of queer erotics. Likewise, the coinciding turn to essentialism appeared as an erasure of agency, but Wilde employs the body of Christ to eroticize an ethics of care amongst the spiritually bounded bodies of the incarcerated men. In turning Jesus into an object of homoerotic desire, Wilde defies the religious pressures of the 19th century; he speaks within the bounds of Christian vernacular but encodes a powerful retort – one where Jesus validates, rather than condemns, his sexual crimes. In doing so, the text paradoxically exploits the influences of the prison over it: the same fluidity and essentialism¹⁴ that was imposed by physical confinement are used to support the uncapturable romance of homosexuality. In “The Truth of Masks,” a young Wilde proclaimed, “A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” (1173). Prison writing deals in performance, paradox, and anti-mimesis. Here, the effects of the prison on the text are the same effects which liberate it from the prison’s grasp. Such an inversion of influence reestablishes the preeminence of Wilde’s art and enables the text to imaginatively resist a

¹³ The “Oscar Wilde Temple” at Studio Voltaire is monogrammed with “C.3.3” but recontextualizes “Wilde’s humiliation as part of a martyrdom narrative, elevating him to the status of a saint” (Craig).

¹⁴ Similarly, Michael Moon argues that Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* appeals interconnectedness and uses flowing poetics to capture the “‘fluidity,’ substitutability, and indeterminacy of masculine identity and sexuality” (856-7).

predetermined confinement to prison discourses. By posing in the theatrical spotlight and self-fashioning the mask of a defamed prison writer, Wilde not only retorts the public narrative but produces an artistic invention that impresses itself back onto prison. Wilde forces these conditions into an object of his own creative design and thus suggests that the prison may imitate the text far more than the text may imitate the prison.

In engaging the fluidity of experience, the letter draws on aestheticism's most central and controversial work: Walter Pater's *the Renaissance*. In his infamous "Conclusion," Pater describes the flow of "impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent," which appear before one as they engage with art (153). As such, the viewer captures the sensations and images of the artwork in their purest form, even just for that fleeting moment of individual embrace. Pater says, "Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world" (153). Only in isolated experience can the viewer engage with artistic beauty on this personal and sensuous level; in doing so, the viewer creates a unique, flowing world of their own imaginative design. Fundamentally, the creativity of prison writing¹⁵ is an act of resistance, since it is an assertion of individuality: "For Wilde, language itself is the primary arena within which agency is asserted" (Foster 89). Simply by writing, Wilde defies his status as 'one of a thousand lifeless lives' and he avows his artistic autonomy – one that is self-fashioned and not easily confined. In the letter, he writes, "And, above all, Christ is the most supreme of Individualists" (118). Forced into solitary confinement, Wilde creates a new world – a reality that breaks up the dominance of the prison – as he follows the lead of Christ, his ever-purposeful inspiration. In doing so, Wilde asserts his individualism

¹⁵ Imagination is also integral to one's survival in prison, as Boochani writes, "the only people who can overcome and survive all the suffering inflicted by the prison are those who exercise creativity" (128).

and regains agency through an act of imagination that is as beautiful, witty, and erotic as anyone could expect from the fanciful Irishman. The world that Wilde creates, we can call: *De Profundis*.

IV: From the Literary to the Activist

On April 11th, 1895 the weekly publication *London Figure* wrote of Wilde's trials, "it will not be the first time that a consummate artist has also been a consummate rascal" (qtd. in Holland xxxii). In the letter, Wilde says that prison made him defiant: "For prison-life, with its endless privations and restrictions, makes one rebellious" (112). While prison writing is inherently political and dissident, Wilde seems to downplay the rebellion of his life before imprisonment. Like many artists, Wilde was always a rascal. He was a colonial subject who traveled to the heart of imperial Britain and staked his claim as "conquering Irishman" (Mendelssohn 33). He promoted artistic plagiarism and drew many rivalries – James Whistler, famously – in his unapologetic dedication to aestheticism (Bruder 174). He embedded homosexuality into the decadence of his literature and into the dandiness of his hair and clothes (Gupta 79). He was politically vocal, espousing anarchist beliefs that contributed to his sentencing (Wan 10). In "Soul of Man Under Socialism," before his own imprisonment, Wilde had already called for an end to penal injustice: "[O]ne is absolutely sickened, not by the crimes that the wicked have committed, but by the punishments that the good have inflicted [...] When there is no punishment at all, crime will either cease to exist, or, if it occurs, will be treated by physicians" (1182). In the letter, Wilde tells a story about the beauty of homosexuality, opposing

this image of him as a ‘rascal.’ Yet, his defiance in the text and assertion of artistic agency affirms *De Profundis* to be the crowning monument in a long life of radical politics.

Prison writing – as a practice – necessitates an interest in political activism. Anoop Mirpuri argues that prison writing must not be viewed as an entirely independent form of literature: “such canonization *reifies* an understanding of the prison as a separate, bounded, and ontologically distinct space, such that prison writing comes to be seen as categorically opposed to that which takes place in the so-called free world” (43). In my analysis, I hope to have demonstrated an alternative to such an insular and voyeuristic interpretation of prison writing – an understudied and ontologically bound field. Firstly, I have tried to draw attention to how much of our ‘literary canon’ is already works of prison writing: Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, De Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life Ivan Denisovich*. Certainly, more recent works of prison writing will soon be included: Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers*, El Saadawi’s *Memoirs From A Women’s Prison*, Dowlatabadi’s *Missing Soluch*, Soyinka’s *The Man Died*, Thiong’o’s *The Devil on the Cross*, and Abbott’s *In the Belly of the Beast*. I provide these examples to prove that we do not need to limit prison writing simply to ‘writings about prison,’ since we have not done so in the past. Secondly, I hope that my analysis – while focusing on the carceral positioning of the text – has elucidated the rich aesthetic and resistant value of *De Profundis* that far exceeds the tropes of “rawness, immediacy, and authenticity” in how prison writing is normally read (Mirpuri 43). By doing so, the work situates itself both in a literary lineage and in a world beyond that which is enclosed by the prison walls.

If read broadly and purposefully, prison writing could help stimulate the political momentum needed to widely oppose penal injustice. The historical and geographical breadth of prison writing at once affirms the pervasiveness of punishment and liberates the text from the shackles of bounded interpretation. Much work is left in the continued publication and critical engagement with prison writing. Angela Davis identifies “representations of prisons in film and other visual media” as a primary reason why prisons have become a desensitized reality in our life (18). She believes that it will require “a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond the prison” (19). If nothing else, I hope that reading *De Profundis* offers an imaginative resistance that disrupts this reality and inspires work towards a future that is free of carceral horror.

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