

REPARATIVE/REDEMPTIVE READING FROM READING GAOL:
TOWARDS A EUCHARISTIC THEORY OF INTERPRETATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Oscar Wilde anticipates Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading. In 2003's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Sedgwick argues that the hermeneutics of suspicion – whereby the reader exposes the unjust power structures lying beneath the surface of a cultural object – has become endemic to literary studies in a way that limits scholars' political and interpretive impact. She offers reparative reading as an alternative approach that prioritizes the curatorial affects of hope and nurture, enabling scholars to find sustenance in cultural objects made with hostile intent.

Though a very different text from *Touching Feeling*, Wilde's *De Profundis* also articulates an approach to cultural objects that can productively be understood as reparative. Incarcerated for “gross indecency” with other men, Wilde refuses to accept the punitive and disciplinary intent of the prison system, instead re-envisioning its harsh mechanisms as means for spiritual growth and aesthetic development. In my introduction, I compare the two texts, arguing that both ultimately advocate a model of reading that I call Eucharistic. I then outline this Eucharistic model, drawing on Roman Catholic sacramental theology to crystallize the affective motives and political investments of Wilde and Sedgwick's projects. Finally, I situate this Eucharistic model in the current scholarly conversation on queer theory.

In each of the chapters, I analyze how Wilde reparatively engages various aspects of the Christian tradition to nurture his identity as a queer man. The first chapter considers “The Fisherman and His Soul,” a fairy-tale published in 1891’s *A House of Pomegranates*, and argues that Wilde undermines the false binary between sensuality and spirituality by figuring a self-righteous priest and the titular lovestruck fisherman as doubles of one another. The second chapter argues that Wilde embeds baptismal and Eucharistic imagery in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, repackaging the eroticized Catholicism of earlier works to appeal to a mainstream, middle-class Anglican audience. My final chapter returns to *De Profundis*, arguing that we should see the letter as a reparative reworking of the biblical epistles of St. Paul.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Victorian, queer theory, religion, Catholicism, gender and sexuality studies, literature, reading

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INTRODUCTION

I.

“Wickedness,” says Oscar Wilde, “is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.”¹ A characteristic example of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls Wilde’s “anarchic wit,” the phrase also encapsulates the methods of what in 2003’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* she calls paranoid reading.² Authorized by the “masters of suspicion” Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, paranoid reading demythologizes a culture’s concepts of goodness and wickedness, attraction and repulsion, beauty and ugliness by exposing the power struggles hiding behind them.³ The putative claims and incidental exclusions of a text can never be taken at face-value, but must instead be exposed through the tools of critical theory – or, in Wilde’s preferred method, exploded through a witticism that reveals the destabilizing truths culture has disciplined us into denying.⁴

This anarchic wit led Sedgwick to place Wilde alongside these masters of suspicion in 1990’s *Epistemology of the Closet*. In Sedgwick’s account, Wilde identifies and inaugurates another struggle concealed behind twentieth-century identity and culture: the fraught, often violent production of the homo/hetero binary and the ensuing “definitional struggles” that occur

¹ Oscar Wilde, *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1244.

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 148.

³ The phrase “masters of suspicion” comes from Paul Ricoeur, who names Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the fathers of the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Sedgwick uses this latter phrase in her discussion of paranoid reading, identifying these theorists as the progenitors of contemporary critical theory. See *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-127, 138-139 for her engagement with Ricoeur and her account of how the hermeneutics of suspicion came to dominate critical theory; see 123-143 for her overview of the affective and intellectual characteristics of paranoid reading more generally. My summary of paranoid reading draws from this latter section.

⁴ John Schad characterizes Wilde’s wit as explosive and compares him to Nietzsche, noting that both took aim at the same objects (God and morality). Jonathan Dollimore similarly notes how Wilde uses humor to smash essentialism. See *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Eastbourne: Sussex University Press, 2004), 112-115 and *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991), 73.

within individual and cultural consciousness.⁵ Seen through this paranoid lens, the silences and symbols of Wilde's texts articulate a struggle both to reveal and conceal same-sex desire.⁶ Thus, for instance, the doubling of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* evinces the work of a nascent gay subjectivity to conflate desire with identification (i.e.: "I do not love him, I am him!");⁷ the simultaneous suggestiveness and vagueness of Wilde's preferred adjectives "curious" and "subtle" both signal and obscure his sexual preferences.⁸

This paranoid methodology and the account of Wilde it produced have proven immensely influential. Jonathan Dollimore, among the more frequently cited Wilde scholars, "share[s] and strongly endorse[s]" Sedgwick's reading of Wilde, using her insights to advance his own analysis of Wilde as a thoroughgoing anti-essentialist.⁹ And while Paul K. Saint-Amour's description of paranoid reading – which casts the artist as "genius, curse-hurler, puzzle-maker, or remote, impersonal god" and the critic as "master decoder and defender of culture" – emerges primarily from his work on high modernism, it's hard not to see Wilde lurking in the background of such an account.¹⁰ At the height of his powers, Wilde allegedly entered the New World by addressing the customs officer with the words, "I have nothing to declare but my own genius."¹¹

⁵ In her chapter on Wilde and Nietzsche, Sedgwick discusses sentimentality's "pivotal place in the[ir] homo/heterosexual definitional struggles" (141). Her claim that the homo/hetero binary is constitutive of twentieth-century Anglo-American identity and culture is made in the introduction; see *Epistemology*, 1-22.

⁶ Sedgwick observes, "[T]he collapse of homo/hetero with self/other must also have been attractive for the protective/expressive camouflage it offered to distinctively gay content" (160-161). Throughout the chapter, she traces how several key binaries in twentieth-century aesthetics – such as Greek vs. Christian, art vs. kitsch, sentimental vs. antisentimental, abstraction vs. figuration – originate in male-male eroticism; see 131-181.

⁷ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 162. The parenthetical phrase comes from her broader discussion of the slippage between desire and identification in Wilde and Nietzsche; see 157-163.

⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 174.

⁹ Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 29.

¹⁰ Paul K. Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 24, no. 3 (2018): 456. I oversimplify Saint-Amour's words here somewhat. This description of the artist and critic comes in the context of his discussion of the "strong model of subjectivity" modernism remains "lingering[ly] attached" to (456). This strong model of subjectivity is related to the "strong modernism" Saint-Amour aims to correct through "weak modernism" (439). Weak modernism emerges from the weak theory that, in Saint-Amour's account, began in nineteenth-century studies. Sedgwick's rejection of paranoid reading in favor of reparative reading is one of several post-critical approaches that Saint-Amour places under the umbrella of "weak theory"; see 440, 443-445.

¹¹ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 160.

At the height of his notoriety, he gave a speech from the stand that revealed “the love that dares not speak its name” as the secret lying behind the great achievements of Western culture.¹²

Sedgwick borrows this approach in the *Epistemology*, listing the many canonical authors whose work manifests latent homoerotic desire and concluding that “no one can know in advance where the limits of a gay-centered inquiry are to be drawn, or where a gay theorizing of and even through the hegemonic high-culture of the Euro-American tradition may need or be able to lead.”¹³

Recent years, however, have shown that scholars may in fact have reached their limits. While the relentless suspicion demanded by gay theorizing of high culture has been generative for literary studies,¹⁴ it has proven shockingly ineffective at preparing actual queer communities and individuals for any productive political engagement.¹⁵ The “predictive value [of suspicion],” writes Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling*, “...has been nil.”¹⁶ Worse than nil: endless suspicion limits a reader’s range and ultimately renders her less able to respond to the violent struggle she has worked so hard to foresee all along. “[T]he broad consensual sweep of such methodological assumptions...unintentionally impoverish the gene pool of literary-critical perspectives and skills,” Sedgwick observes.¹⁷ “The trouble with a shallow gene pool, of course, is its diminished ability to respond to environmental (e.g., political) change.”¹⁸

¹² “‘The Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare.” Wilde qtd. Frederick S. Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Cultures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 146.

¹³ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 53.

¹⁴ Sedgwick characterizes the methods of paranoia as “very productive” for literary studies (124).

¹⁵ Sedgwick criticizes what she sees as paranoia’s naïve “faith in exposure” (138). Its work to “unveil hidden violence” has grown increasingly irrelevant in a cultural context where, contrary to the predictions of critical theorists, violence has become quite visible; see *Touching Feeling*, 139-143.

¹⁶ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 142.

¹⁷ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 143-144.

¹⁸ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 144.

Having approached the boundaries of critique, this thesis proposes that we should return to the canonical center for resources. It canonizes Oscar Wilde as the patron saint of reparative reading. Reparative reading, as Sedgwick defines it in *Touching Feeling*, permits the reader to relax from the anxious, suspicious posture demanded by paranoia and instead interpret from a posture of vulnerability and hope.¹⁹ Rather than exposing the violent conflict hidden behind a text's silences and symbols, the reader reinterprets those silences and symbols in such a way that they might nourish and sustain her.²⁰ Sedgwick acknowledges that this letting down of one's readerly defenses is a risky move, but given the failure of those defenses to predict an increasingly toxic political and cultural context, she suggests that the risk may be one worth taking as an alternative means of caring for oneself.²¹

Just as we must turn to Sedgwick's late work to find her developing this reparative approach, so too we must turn to the later Wilde to find him developing it as well. It is the Wilde of *De Profundis* that my project centers on – not the effervescent, flirtatious wit of the London social stage, but the mournful, contemplative inmate of Reading Gaol. In this lengthy letter to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde begins to do the same work that Sedgwick does in her chapter on paranoid and reparative reading in *Touching Feeling*. Amidst pain, vulnerability, and a burgeoning sense of mortality, both develop an approach to reading that I call Eucharistic.

The Eucharist is the central ritual in the liturgical life of the Roman Catholic Church.²² It originates in the New Testament account of Christ's final meal with the twelve apostles.

¹⁹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 146.

²⁰ Sedgwick uses the language of nourishment and sustenance to characterize reparative reading; see *Touching Feeling*, 128, 137, 150, 151.

²¹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 137.

²² Benedict XVI observes that "the Church... finds in the Eucharist the very centre of her life." *Sacramentum Caritatis*, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, February 22, 2007, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html, sec. 2.

Knowing that his crucifixion was imminent,²³ Christ breaks bread and gives it to the twelve with the words: “Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.”²⁴ He then takes a cup of wine and passes it to them, saying: “[T]his cup is the New Testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in memory of me.”²⁵ The action symbolizes his impending death on the cross for the sins of the world and institutes a memorial ritual that Christian churches around the world have continued to celebrate to this day.²⁶

The power of this ritual to capture the religious imagination of millions lies, paradoxically, in its rejection of power and acceptance of weakness.²⁷ Take away the centuries of tradition and the gospel narratives, and the crucifixion is nothing more than a routine execution conducted on the fringes of an ascendant Roman empire. The church’s choice to see salvation in this execution is therefore nothing less than a radical reinterpretation. Christ’s death looks like weakness, violence, and defeat, but by the inverted logic of the gospel, weakness becomes strength, violence sustenance, and defeat triumph. Memorializing this act thus enables the Christian to find significance in her own sufferings; like Christ, she carries her cross not because she loves suffering for its own sake, but because she hopes that in submitting to it, she will transform it into a source of healing and nurture.²⁸ St. Paul summarizes this hope: “Therefore I

²³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 1337.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:24 (King James Version). All scriptural references will come from the King James Bible.

²⁵ 1 Cor 11:25.

²⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1350.

²⁷ I draw this emphasis on weakness from Emma Mason and Mark Knight. In a lecture given at the 2019 Ecology and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Studies Conference, Mason drew on Gianni Vattimo’s Christologically informed account of weak thought to produce her own reading of Wordsworth. “Divine Pastoral: Wordsworth and the Weak Things of the World” (paper presented at the Ecology and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Studies Conference, University of Lancaster, Lancaster, UK, September 19, 2019). Mark Knight also discusses Vattimo’s interest in Christ’s *kenosis*, or self-emptying; see review of *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida*, by John Schad, and *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, by Slavoj Žižek, *Christianity and Literature* 54, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 305.

²⁸ “In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ also becomes the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ...and so acquire a new value,” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1368.

take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong."²⁹

What differentiates the Roman Catholic practice of this ritual from that of other denominations is its unique account of what happens at the moment of consecration. Through a miracle called transubstantiation, the wafer and wine change into the suffering body and blood of Christ when the priest speaks the words of consecration.³⁰ The name "transubstantiation" is drawn from Aristotelian metaphysics, which distinguishes between an object's substance (its one, permanent, and unchanging essence) and its accidents (its many changing and incidental features, such as size, shape, color, and age).³¹ Ordinarily, an object's substance remains the same, even if its accidents change; I remain myself, even as I begin to stoop and grow grey hairs. The miracle of transubstantiation, then, is the shocking inverse of nature. The wafer and wine retain their accidental features, looking, tasting, and smelling the same – but substantively and essentially, they are now the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ crucified.³² Many Catholic parishes place crucifixes above the altar in recognition of this miracle: To the eyes of faith, the present presentation of bread and wine and the historic sacrifice of body and blood are one and the same.³³

I conceptualize Wilde and Sedgwick's models through the Eucharist because the sacrament crystallizes the similar affective drives and political investments of what are otherwise two very different texts. Incarcerated in an English prison for the "gross indecency" of loving

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 12:10.

³⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1376.

³¹ The explanation and analogies that follow approximate those found in "The Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist: Basic Questions and Answers," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed March 5, 2020, <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/order-of-mass/liturgy-of-the-eucharist/the-real-presence-of-jesus-christ-in-the-sacrament-of-the-eucharist-basic-questions-and-answers.cfm>.

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1374.

³³ "The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross...The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice," *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1366, 1367.

other men, Wilde wrote his letter page by page, reliant on the generosity of a kind warden.”³⁴ Celebrated as one of the top scholars in her field, Sedgwick writes her essay as a tenured professor at a leading academic institution. Wilde directs his reparative energies towards the details of his own life; although he alludes to figures like Plato and Pater, his primary mode is autobiographical, recounting and re-envisioning himself and his experiences anew. Sedgwick, by contrast, directs her reparative energies towards the methods of literary theory; although she draws freely from her own life and experiences to make her argument, her primary mode is one of academic inquiry, alluding to and advancing the work of theorists such as Paul Ricoeur, Melanie Klein, and Sylvan Tompkins. Wilde, who conducted an on-again, off-again romance with the Catholic Church throughout his life, uses sacramental metaphors throughout the letter.³⁵ Sedgwick’s metaphors are far more wide-ranging, from the ecological to the psychological, and she engages with religion only to bemoan that suspicion, once the prized weapon of progressive academia, is now cavalierly deployed by the “homophobic white-supremacist Christian Identity militia member who would as soon blow me away as look at me.”³⁶

These differences are not trifling, and my goal is not to cram the two texts into a theoretical framework that reduces their complexities or limits their potential relevance for a wide range of scholarly projects. Rather, I aim through the Eucharistic model to draw out their similarities in a way that advances our understanding of Wilde’s religious imagination and usefully unites several diverse strands within contemporary queer theory. The constraints of the thesis mean I necessarily leave many of Sedgwick’s most intriguing metaphors unexamined and

³⁴ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 507, 511-13.

³⁵ Sedgwick herself observes that Wilde “was never far from the threshold of Rome”; see *Epistemology*, 140.

³⁶ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 143. In this same section, she also notes that “secular, universalist liberal humanism” seems to have evaporated in an America where “a vast majority of the population claims to engage in direct intercourse with multiple invisible entities such as angels, Satan, and God” (139, 140).

leave large sections of the 30,000-word *De Profundis* untouched – fields ripe for other future scholarly harvest, but beyond the scope of my project.³⁷

My project defines Eucharistic reading as a model whereby the reader transubstantiates cultural objects made with violent intent into sources of sustenance and healing through a posture of weakness. In the rest of this introduction, I outline how Wilde and Sedgwick develop and engage this Eucharistic theory, and then situate this model within scholarly conversations on queer theory. My chapters consider how this Eucharistic theory guides Wilde’s engagement with the Christian religious tradition in “The Fisherman and His Soul,” *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and *De Profundis*.

II.

*Eucharistic reading transubstantiates cultural objects **made with violent intent***

It does not take a systematic theologian to link violence and Catholicism. Crucifixes and sacred hearts cover the walls of its churches; weeping Madonnas and bleeding saints form its pantheon of heroes. At the heart of it all is the Eucharist – an encounter with a violent act of political power. Far from shielding them from suffering, the Church invites its faithful to accept and even embrace it.

Wilde and Sedgwick likewise accept suffering in the face of political violence. Indeed, Wilde’s letter is remarkable for its quiescence. Though he knows that “the laws under which [he] has been convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which [he] has suffered is a wrong and unjust system,” this recognition does not prompt revolt.³⁸ On the contrary:

I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank-bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one’s finger-tips

³⁷ Jarlath Killeen notes the remarkable word count of *De Profundis*. *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore, and Ireland* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 163.

³⁸ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1020.

grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame – each and all of these things I have got to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try to make into a spiritualising of the soul.³⁹

The minute detail with which Wilde here describes his sufferings recalls the prayer of medieval Christian mystics, who likewise linger on the details of Christ's mutilated limbs and wounded head. A far cry from the elusive Wildean wit of earlier years, the passage does not merely hint at suffering or pain, but fully plunges into both.⁴⁰

Sedgwick's response to state-sponsored violence is likewise characterized by a recognition that revolt is not the only possible path. She begins the chapter by reminiscing on a conversation with friend Cindy Patton. When asked what she thought about the possibility that the AIDS epidemic was a genocidal plot by the government to wipe out gay men, African Americans, and drug dealers, Patton's response was one not of disbelief, but of disinterest: "[E]ven suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy," she says, "...what would we know that we don't already know?"⁴¹ In other words, as Sedgwick goes on to elaborate, what we know about violence and how we respond to it are, in fact, two distinct questions; having "an unmystified and angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions" does not necessitate that we spend every waking hour working to expose and dismantle them.⁴²

This conversation informs Sedgwick's discussion of her own experiences in therapy. She contrasts her own reading of psychotherapy with that of D.A. Miller, who paranoiacally aims to reveal "the intensive and continuous 'pastoral' care that liberal society proposes to take of every

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Sedgwick discusses this hinting, suggestive style in *Dorian Gray*, noting how the book at once combines the "extravagance of flamboyant display" of queer desire and "an extravagance of deniability"; see *Epistemology*, 165.

⁴¹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 123.

⁴² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.

one of its charges.”⁴³ Sedgwick has no patience for such suspicion, reacting, like Patton, with disinterest, even disdain. “As if!” she retorts. “I’m a lot less worried about being pathologized by my therapist than about my vanishing mental health coverage – and that’s given the great good luck of having health insurance at all.”⁴⁴ She recognizes her therapist may well be pathologizing her – and that all therapy may operate with the same invasive, paternalistic intent of the penal system that punished Wilde. Nevertheless, she is willing to take that risk: Like Wilde, she consciously chooses to look beyond the sinister origins of the system surrounding her and instead make its resources – imperfect, limited, and damaging though they might be – “good for her.”⁴⁵ Admittedly, her choice is a far easier one than his. The beneficiary of many decades of queer activism, Sedgwick grapples with her sexuality and her experiences on the comforts of a couch rather than in the confines of a cell. Despite these differences, however, both respond to “a world full of loss, pain, and oppression” not by uncovering even more subtle and hidden exercises of power, but by seeking to care for herself in spite of and even through them.⁴⁶

*Eucharistic reading transubstantiates cultural objects made with violent intent **into sources of sustenance and healing***

The Eucharist presents Christ’s violent death as the bread of everlasting life, and Wilde and Sedgwick encourage an embrace of pain.⁴⁷ For Wilde, this recognition is steeped in Eucharistic imagery of memory, suffering, and embodiment. When urged by well-meaning

⁴³ Miller qtd. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 141.

⁴⁴ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 141.

⁴⁵ Sedgwick derives the language of paranoid and reparative from Melanie Klein, who distinguishes between the suspicious perspective the paranoid subject has on the world and the depressive position, where one releases anxiety and can find safety and nurture in the world. Reparative reading emerges from this latter position, and Sedgwick notes that the move from the paranoid position to depressive position, while risky, enables the subject to practice “what Foucault calls ‘care of the self,’ the often very fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them” (137).

⁴⁶ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 138.

⁴⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1338.

friends to try to forget his incarceration upon his release, Wilde rejects such willful oblivion as inimical to his sense of self. “To reject one’s own experiences is to arrest one’s own development,” he declares. “It is no less than a denial of the Soul.”⁴⁸ This might at first seem like a counter-intuitive claim: Why perpetuate the memory of such traumatic suffering when it can only bring further pain and do greater damage? For Wilde, the answer lies in a secret, sacral power of the soul:

For just as the body absorbs things of all kinds, things common and unclean no less than those that the priest or a vision has cleansed, and converts them into swiftness or strength...so the soul in its turn has its nutritive functions also, and can transform into noble moods of thought and passions of high import what in itself is base, cruel and degrading; nay, more, may find in these its most august modes of assertion, and can often reveal itself most perfectly through what was intended to desecrate or destroy.⁴⁹

Though the passage’s only direct reference to sustenance is in the word “nutritive,” Wilde’s reference to the cleansing power of a priest and a vision evokes the Eucharist. A priest transubstantiates “common” bread and wine into the body and blood of the crucified Christ, and “vision” alludes to that experienced by St. Peter in the Acts of the Apostles. When Peter resists God’s command to eat food that, according to the Levitical law of the Old Testament, is considered unclean, God instructs him to “call not thou uncommon” “what God has cleansed.”⁵⁰ Taken together, the images suggest a redemptive spiritual power that overcomes the malicious designs of another, finding healing and nourishment where harm was meant.

Although her language is secular rather than sacred and psychological rather than sacramental, Sedgwick also envisions a kind of redemptive power enabling her reparative reader’s analysis of cultural objects. She borrows from the object theory of Melanie Klein, which

⁴⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1020-1021.

⁴⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1021.

⁵⁰ Acts 10:15.

outlines two possible responses to objects that exist outside oneself in the world. The first is the paranoid position, in which the subject regards such “murderous part-objects” with a “terrible alertness to the dangers” they pose to her.⁵¹ The second is the depressive position, in which the subject regards those very same murderous part-objects with an eye to how she might re-arrange or “repair” them in such a way that they “offer [her] *nourishment* and comfort.”⁵² Sedgwick aligns the paranoid position with the hermeneutics of suspicion, and views the depressive position as a starting point for her alternative, reparative approach to reading. From this depressive position, the reparative reader can illuminate “the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in *extracting sustenance* from the objects of a culture...whose avowed desire has been not to sustain them.”⁵³

Note the subtle similarities between the two texts: Both Sedgwick and Wilde recognize malicious intent on the part of those creating these cultural objects (“avowed desire...not to sustain”; “what was intended to desecrate or destroy”) and both propose that, despite these intents, the reader can nevertheless find in these objects sources of dignity, selfhood, and care. Additionally, both use the language of food and nourishment when describing this process. Wilde writes of the “nutritive functions” of “the Soul” and Sedgwick writes of “extracting sustenance” from cultural objects. Although Wilde’s imagery is more explicitly Eucharistic, both envision a kind of redemptive interpretive act, in which the reader’s willingness to take risks and expose herself to pain paradoxically allows her to find nourishment and healing.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

⁵² *Ibid*, emphasis mine.

⁵³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150-151, emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ I draw this emphasis on risk from Alan Jacobs, who in *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* argues that if the Christian truly aims to love her neighbor in the act of reading, preventing errors or escaping temptation cannot be her highest goal. Instead, she must seek to read the text on its own terms, subjecting herself to the questions it poses and assessing herself by the standards it advocates. Drawing from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacobs writes: “[M]onological reading – reading the text in one’s own voice, refusing to be put to the question by the other – is safer than dialogical reciprocity, but only because it does not risk anything in the act of reading. The

Eucharistic reading transubstantiates cultural objects made with violent intent into sources of sustenance and healing

Transubstantiation emerges from the belief that there is a deeper, truer reality beyond what appears on the surface. The wafer does not merely look like bread, taste like bread, and smell like bread, but – prior to consecration – *is* bread, in an essential and substantive sense. The miracle of the sacrament, however, is that this essence is not a permanent one; the words of the priest change what looks like bread, tastes like bread, and smells like bread into something else entirely. Eucharistic reading operates in a similar manner: While the reader does rely on a “depth” model of reading rather than a “surface” one, she does not presume that the meaning that arises from those depths is permanent or unchanging.⁵⁵ Though the “accidents” of the cultural object she interprets might remain the same, its substance can change through her reparative reading. To put it in literary, rather than metaphysical terms: Though the symbol might remain the same and retain its structure, form, or language, the meaning or content symbolized can change through interpretation.⁵⁶

reading self is preserved inviolate, but at the cost of being unable to learn anything from the reading experience...It is a game in which one trades in the possibility of winning for the security of being immune to loss” (33-34). Though Jacobs makes his points in theological rather than in affective language, his argument strikes me as remarkably cognate with Sedgwick’s. Sedgwick characterizes the hermeneutics of suspicion as a self-defensive “self-confirming” approach to reading: The reader, by unveiling ever-increasingly subtle and hidden acts of power, “demonstrate[s] that, guess what, you can never be suspicious enough” (136, 142). It is, in other words, an approach through which the reader can never lose, but – in its exclusive focus on negative affect and the exposure of sinister motives – it is also an approach through which the reader can truly never win (136-138). Reparative reading, by contrast, accepts risk as a necessary part of pursuing pleasure (137, 150) and is motivated by love: “Among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love” (128). See “Contexts and Obstacles,” in *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 9-35 for Jacobs’s argument.

⁵⁵ This distinction between depth and surface reading comes from Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s introduction to surface reading, which I will briefly address later on. “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 1-21.

⁵⁶ I here approximate the position of Gianni Vattimo, who writes: “[T]o think means only an enjoyable taking in of the spiritual forms which are handed down... Truth is a product of interpretation.” “Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought” in *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 48, 50. Vattimo’s thought will later enter into my argument more fully.

Wilde not only engages in such Eucharistic interpretation, but he does so in explicitly sacramental language. Having identified “a fresh mode of self-realization” as his goal, he considers at length what role religion might play in developing that mode.⁵⁷ The passage is a characteristically contradictory one. Although keen to engage with religious symbolism in his project of self-realization, Wilde claims to reject the symbols of orthodoxy: “Everything to be true must become a religion...But whether it be faith or agnosticism, its symbols must be of my own creating. Only that is spiritual which makes its own form.”⁵⁸ Yet the passage belies his declaration of symbolic independence; only a few sentences prior, he envisions a religious order modeled on Catholicism:

When I think about religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who *cannot* believe: the Confraternity of the Fatherless, one might call it, where on an altar, on which no taper burned, a priest, in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblessed bread and a chalice empty of wine.⁵⁹

The image encapsulates Wilde’s engagement with religion throughout the letter. Far from a clean break or a fresh start, he begins an extended meditation on Christ only a few pages later, reimagining him not as a god who dies to atone for the sins of the world, but as an artist who dies to deepen the aesthetic experiences of those who follow in his footsteps.⁶⁰ Emptying Catholic symbolism of its logocentric theological content, Wilde refills those same symbols with the meanings that will enable him to survive his time in prison. *De Profundis* might look like

⁵⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1018.

⁵⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1019-1021.

⁵⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1019.

⁶⁰ Wilde models the approach to cultural objects advocated by Gianni Vattimo who, as summarized by Peter Carravatta, holds that: “If...we no longer believe in...making *tabula rasa* of all that we inherited in order to seek some ‘new’ foundation...then our condition is that of dealing with the amass of existing interpretations which we can summon or even invent to make sense of the world. However, these interpretations will be marked by the gesture of appropriation and thus inevitably of distortion, or twisting...we might even say of misreading.” “Introduction: What is ‘Weak Thought’? The Original Theses and Context of *il pensiero debole*,” in *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, trans. Peter Carravatta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 4.

religion, it might sound like remorse, it might smell like repentance – but essentially and substantively, it is something else entirely.⁶¹

Although the Kleinian images that Sedgwick adopts are far more abstract than Wilde’s religious imagery, the readerly approach she advocates is essentially the same. Confronted with the “murderous part-objects” that exist in the world, the depressed Kleinian subject and the reparative Sedgwickian reader do not respond to this threat by seeking out new, non-murderous objects – as if one could ever find an object fully liberated from the violent forces of history. Rather, she makes use of the objects already present in the world around her, organizing them into a “whole” that she can “identif[y] with and [which] offer[s] her nourishment and comfort in turn.”⁶² However, this whole, as Sedgwick is careful to stress, “is not like any pre-existing whole” – not, in other words, like the logocentric, transcendental whole of religious orthodoxy, nor even like the all-explaining ideological narratives of Marxism or psychoanalysis.⁶³ It is instead a “local” and “contingent” whole,⁶⁴ “assembled to one’s own specifications” and entirely dependent on the unique needs and positionality of the subject in question.⁶⁵ The murderous-part objects, like the celebrant, chalice, and candle of Wilde’s religious imagination, remain the same – but they now symbolize meanings conducive to self-care, self-recognition, and self-creation.

Indeed, as if to demonstrate her own theory, Sedgwick subtly transubstantiates the keyword of her essay. Although she lifts the word “reparative” from Klein, by the time the book was released in the early 2000s, it had acquired a far more sinister connotation for the gay

⁶¹ Ellis Hanson highlights how Wilde reverses religious shame in *De Profundis*. His reading of the letter has guided my conceptualization of this thesis and my reading of the letter in Chapter 3. *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 99-107, 291-296.

⁶² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

⁶³ Ibid. Paul K. Saint-Amour notes Sedgwick’s frustration with the master metanarratives of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud; see “Weak Modernism,” 444.

⁶⁴ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.

⁶⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

community. The *OED* cites the use of the word “reparative” in a homophobic clinical context as early as 1965 and cites common usage of it as such by 1993.⁶⁶ Using the word at all is a risky choice from a queer woman who not only acknowledges seeing a therapist, but also admits that she’s not especially interested in dismantling any “pastoral” or paternalistic drives animating modern therapeutic practice. But by taking this risk, Sedgwick envisions a reading practice centered not just on queer survival, but queer pleasure and queer hope, thereby repairing and redeeming and a term designed to damage.⁶⁷ “Reparative” sounds the same when spoken, looks the same on the page, and even smells of the therapeutic and curatorial – but essentially and substantively, it is something else altogether.

Eucharistic reading transubstantiates cultural objects made with violent intent into sources of sustenance and healing through a posture of weakness

Veiled in linen, monstranced in gold, venerated by millions: The Eucharist is Catholicism at its strongest and most powerful – or so it would seem. The eyes of faith see through the gilded trappings and recognize the Eucharist for what it is: a show of weakness rather than strength and humility rather than mastery. Christ’s death, re-presented in the sacrament, is the ultimate act of weakness. God chooses to surrender the strength and power of divinity, steps into the pain and oppression of human history, and suffers that pain and oppression through violent death. St. Paul names this choice in his letter to the Philippians, calling it *kenosis*, or self-emptying – a self-emptying mirrored in the posture of the believer during Mass, when she kneels, opens her mouth, and receives the tasteless bread on her tongue.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Reparative,” accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/view/Entry/162654?redirectedFrom=reparative&>.

⁶⁷ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 144, 146.

⁶⁸ Philippians 2: 5-11. Mason cites this *kenosis* passage in her discussion of Vattimo, and Knight also mentions Vattimo’s interest in *kenosis*; see note 27. Carravetta likewise evokes Christ’s kenotic incarnation when, summarizing Vattimo, he writes: “Vattimo draws attention to the fact that...we are still ultimately human beings...participat[ing] in a world of relations marked by contracts, negotiations, limitations, beliefs, change, life

Though Sedgwick and Wilde certainly write with force and intensity, they are allied in their critique of strength as a mode of thought. In a passage that recalls Pater's emphasis on ephemerality and transience, Wilde proclaims that the artist must only be "concerned with what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself."⁶⁹ Similarly, Sedgwick argues that strength is not the only, nor even the best way to understand cultural objects. Drawing from affect theorist Silvan Tomkins, she highlights the possibilities of weak theory. Rather than "insist[ing] that everything means one thing,"⁷⁰ weak theory looks to "unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller."⁷¹ It resists the temptation to collapse all phenomena into one metanarrative and instead pays attention to the small, "everyday theory" we practice to make sense of our experiences and interactions with other people.⁷²

What makes Wilde and Sedgwick's arguments so compelling is that they do not merely write *about* weakness as a hypothetical or possible heuristic, but rather, as Paul K. Saint-Amour writes, "theorize *from* weakness as a condition endowed with traits and possibilities of its own."⁷³ Rather than writing with the critical distance one would expect of a leader in her field, Sedgwick frankly confesses her own implication in the paranoia she critiques, acknowledging that her previous work helped tighten its stranglehold on critical theory.⁷⁴ More poignantly and vulnerably, she draws from her own experience of frailty as a woman with terminal breast

and death...[A] distortion is present in any act of communication or interpretation... The hallowed issue of truth, then, is brought down to earth, literally" (4, 7, 8). Hanson notes that Wilde associates the kneeling posture of the Eucharist with fellatio (249), as does Frederick Roden (152).

⁶⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1020.

⁷⁰ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 136.

⁷¹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.

⁷² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 144, 145. Though Sedgwick's interest in "everyday theory" comes from Tomkins, it also resembles Vattimo's claim that "The experience to which we... must remain faithful is above all and largely that of the everyday, which is also and always historically qualified and culturally dense" (40).

⁷³ Saint-Amour, "Weak Modernism," 439.

⁷⁴ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 146.

cancer. Meditating on “three very queer friendships” she has formed – one with a healthy sexagenarian, one with a tricenarian with cancer, and one with a tricenarian with HIV – she writes that “the brutal foreshortening of...queer life spans”⁷⁵ means that these bonds will never fit the structures of heterosexual generation in which “an older person...love[s] a younger as someone who will someday be where she now is, or vice versa.”⁷⁶ Within fifteen years, the sexagenarian is the most likely to still be alive and thriving. But, absent the disciplinary force of these structures, the friends experience one another more “intensely,” “intimately,” and “immediately.”⁷⁷ The weakness, humiliation, and limitation of mortality enables greater attention to the “piercing bouquet of a...friend’s particularity,” as Sedgwick puts it in the *Epistemology* – a weakness and attention that the cultural critic, in the critical distance of her skepticism and suspicion, could stand to learn from the cancer patient.⁷⁸

Attention to the particularity of “flower-like” friends is an apt summary of *De Profundis*; Wilde ruminates at great length on Christ – “the first person who ever said to people that they should live flower-like lives”⁷⁹ – and on Lord Alfred Douglas, whose title “ma[kes] his name sound like the name of a flower.”⁸⁰ And as with Sedgwick, this attention to particularity is borne of weakness, humiliation, and limitation. Wilde is even less shy about his abjection than Sedgwick; he openly praises humility as the key to his “fresh mode of self-realization” and exhorts Douglas to “come down in the dust and learn it beside me.”⁸¹ Weakness also shapes the form, or rather, formless-ness of the letter. Apart from the refrain, “whatever is realized is right,” the letter shows virtually no discernable emotional or structural unity – a lack due at least in part

⁷⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 148.

⁷⁶ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 23.

⁷⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1035.

⁸⁰ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1035.

⁸¹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1018.

to the exigencies of writing in a prison.⁸² Wilde candidly acknowledges this failure for what it is as he concludes: “How far I am away from the true temper of soul, this letter in its changing, uncertain moods, its scorn and bitterness, its aspirations and its failure to realise those aspirations, shows you quite clearly.”⁸³ Yet even amidst these failures – and the inevitable tedium of Wilde’s catalogue of Douglas’s particular and petty cruelties – great beauties emerge. Conventional critical wisdom holds that distance and detachment produce the strongest insights. Wilde and Sedgwick suggest that those who look on them they love through tears may be those who see most clearly.

III.

Michel Foucault famously conceptualized the way we speak of sexuality and power through another Catholic sacrament: the confessional.⁸⁴ By demanding that the Christian identify and speak even his most fragmentary and ephemeral impulses, the Church “transform[ed]...desire into discourse.”⁸⁵ Such discourses have only multiplied and the sites of our confessions have only grown; we now confess to readers through the pages of a spicy novel or memoir, to our therapists and doctors, to the state and to technology companies. Moreover, these discourses have given birth to what Foucault calls “reverse discourses” – the redemptive turn by which individuals whose desires are subject to containment and control “speak [on their] own behalf, to demand that [their] legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which [they] were disqualified.”⁸⁶ The sexual “secret” revealed by the reverse discourse is thus recast as a good one rather than a bad one, a reason for

⁸² Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1020.

⁸³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1059.

⁸⁴ Foucault, *A History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 17-35, 58-73. The rest of this paragraph summarizes Foucault’s general argument throughout the volume.

⁸⁵ Foucault, *History*, 21.

⁸⁶ Foucault, *History*, 101.

joy rather than for shame. Speaking ones sins in the confessional is transformed into coming out of the closet.⁸⁷

The reverse discourse has long been central both to queer theory and to Wilde studies. As Heather Love writes, “Homosexuality is indelibly marked by the effects of reverse discourse...Pride and visibility offer antidotes to the shame and legacy of the closet; they are made in the image of specific forms of denigration. Queerness is structured by this central turn...”⁸⁸ Wilde incarnates this turn to perfection: he reworks Catholicism to help create “the homosexual as a species” from the chaos of decadent sexualities,⁸⁹ and in *De Profundis* radically reinterprets the figure of Christ to sustain himself during his time in prison.⁹⁰

Given the impact this confessional/discursive model has had, the need for a Eucharistic model of reading may seem dubious. Admittedly, the change is a slight one. The central character (Wilde), the plot twist (redemption), and the setting (Catholicism) remain the same; the only change is moving from one sacramental metaphor (confession) to another (the Eucharist). How does a specifically Eucharistic model contribute to our understanding of Wilde, queer theory, and, potentially, of other texts?

My reasons are three. First – the Eucharistic model presumes “the good secret.” Foucault contrasts the modern West’s *scientia sexualis* that emerged from the Catholic confessional with

⁸⁷ Hanson observes: “In the reverse discourse, confession is ironized as something like coming out” (292).

⁸⁸ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 203. Rasmus R. Simonsen also notes the centrality of a quasi-Christian redemptive turn for queer theory in an article on Wilde’s “The Star Child.” “Dark Avunculate: Shame, Animality, and Queer Development in Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Star-Child,’” *Children’s Literature* 42, no. 1: 22-23.

⁸⁹ The language of “homosexual as species” is borrowed from Foucault, who discusses a broad movement in the West from sexuality as act to sexuality as identity (42-43). Sedgwick observes that the *fin-de-siècle* could not have predicted this shift, and that the creation of the homo/hetero binary would have puzzled a generation where “a rich stew of male algolagnia, child-love, and autoeroticism, to mention no more of its components, seemed to have as indicative a relation as did homosexuality to the whole, obsessively entertained problematic of sexual ‘perversion,’ or more broadly, decadence”; *Epistemology*, 8-9. Hanson’s book focuses on the ways in which decadent sexuality and Catholic sexuality mutually constructed one another. His introduction (1-26) provides a helpful overview of this process.

⁹⁰ Hanson specifically cites *De Profundis* as “a fine example of Foucauldian reverse discourse” (294).

the pre-modern, non-Western *ars erotica*, observing that while both rely on a secret in the production of truth, only the latter assumes that “truth is drawn from pleasure itself.”⁹¹ The redemptive turn of the confessional relies on the revelation of an ugly secret; only when we speak the sinful truth hiding inside our souls do we receive forgiveness and absolution. In this respect, the confessional anticipates the paranoia of Freud and, to a lesser extent, Marx and Nietzsche. Just like the penitent who places his faith in the revelation of his secrets, so too does the paranoid reader place his faith, as Sedgwick puts it, in the exposure of ideology. Thus, while a reverse discourse might aim to proclaim “the good secret” of queer desire, it necessarily relies on a model that assumes all secrets are shameful.

The Eucharist is just the opposite: Its redemptive turn centers on the revelation of a good secret hidden beneath a painful and violent surface. The meal that appears insufficient and indifferent contains the secret of divinity and the body that appears defeated and disfigured contains the secret of salvation. In this respect, it better serves the reparative goals of the reverse discourse. As she moves from critiquing paranoia to envisioning the possibilities of the reparative, Sedgwick quotes an email from Joseph Litvak: “It seems to me that the importance of ‘mistakes’ in queer reading...has a lot to do with loosening the traumatic, inevitable-seeming connection between mistakes and humiliation...Doesn’t reading queer mean learning, among other things, that mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises?”⁹² The Eucharist teaches that very same queer lesson, reparatively rereading all of history as a good, indeed a felicitous mistake.⁹³ Other scholars – including Foucault – have recognized these alternative affordances of

⁹¹ Foucault, *History*, 57.

⁹² Litvak qtd. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 147.

⁹³ I refer here to the *felix culpa* – the Christian belief that the fall of Adam was a happy one because it revealed the more glorious redemption gained in Christ. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Felix culpa, n.,” accessed March 13, 2020, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/view/Entry/242894?redirectedFrom=felix+culpa#eid>.

religion for interpretation and theory, but none to my knowledge have actually proposed reclaiming them.⁹⁴ This thesis aims to begin filling that gap, recovering the reparative resources of religion that critical theory has long – if understandably – neglected.

Second – the Eucharistic model fully embraces abjection. According to Foucault’s account, the Church increased the rigors of the confessional in the wake of the Counter Reformation.⁹⁵ No longer could a penitent merely name the commandments she had broken; instead, she must identify “all the insinuations of the flesh: thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the body...and [their] effects must be pursued down their slenderest ramifications.”⁹⁶ The Church, to use Sedgwick’s language, demanded a paranoid reading of one’s inner self, a relentless, searching examination and exposure of the sin lying behind even one’s most seemingly innocent thoughts. The Church’s real power – and the power of the discourses of sexuality that followed in its wake – lay not in its forceful repression of sexuality, but in its ability to subtly and insidiously deploy sexuality.⁹⁷

John Allen Quintus discusses the significance of this theological concept for Wilde. See “Christ, Christianity, and Oscar Wilde,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 525 and “The Moral Prerogative in Oscar Wilde: A Look at the Fairy Tales,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 53, no. 4 (Autumn 1977): 715-716.

⁹⁴ Foucault highlights the remnants of an *ars erotica* in the Catholic tradition: “But it should be noted that the *ars erotica* did not disappear altogether from Western civilization...in the direction and examination of conscience...in the search for spiritual union and love of God...[in t]he phenomena of possession and ecstasy...were undoubtedly effects that had gotten out of control of the erotic technique immanent in this subtle science of the flesh” (70). Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best have also identified the alternative approaches afforded by religion. In their 2009 article on surface reading, they trace the origins of the symptomatic they reject in favor of surface reading. Symptomatic reading begins in the Gnostic and early Christian interest in allegory and hidden truth, but in the nineteenth century is repurposed by Marx and Freud, who seek to plumb hidden depths “not on the religious model of revealed meaning, but on the demystification of illusion” (5). It is worth noting that I disagree with Marcus and Best’s interpretation of Sedgwick’s reparative. In their reading, Sedgwick advocates “receptiveness and fidelity to a text’s surface, as opposed to suspicious and aggressive attacks on its depths,” thus anticipating their own model of surface reading (10-11). I see Sedgwick arguing not for the abandonment of a depth model of reading, but rather for a model that recognizes the faint but tantalizing possibility of a good surprise hidden (or created) beneath a text’s surface. As she writes: “Because there can be terrible surprises there can also be good ones...Hope is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates” (146).

⁹⁵ Foucault, *History*, 19-23.

⁹⁶ Foucault, *History*, 19.

⁹⁷ Foucault, *History*, 113-14.

But what happens, Sedgwick asks, when the deployment of discourse is not so subtle? What happens when the abjection demanded by power is more intense than that experienced by the penitent, quietly whispering the story of his sins to a priest sworn to silence? “[W]hile there is plenty of hidden violence that requires exposure,” she admits, “there is also, and increasingly, an ethos where forms of violence that are hypervisible from the start may be offered as an exemplary spectacle rather than as a scandalous secret.”⁹⁸ To me, writing from the vantage point of 2020, Sedgwick’s account of “violence that was from the beginning exemplary and spectacular, pointedly addressed, meant to serve as a public warning or terror to members of a particular community” feels remarkably prescient, both in terms of U.S. politics and in terms of queer theory as a field.⁹⁹ Increasingly, scholars are considering what it might mean to theorize from “hypervisible,” “exemplary and spectacular” abjection – precisely the kind of abjection celebrated in the Eucharistic, crucified Christ. Jack Halberstram, in his 2011 *The Queer Art of Failure*, imagines a model that, instead of “locat[ing] the plucky queer as a heroic freedom fighter in a world full of Puritans,”¹⁰⁰ accepts “futility, sterility, emptiness, loss, negative affect in general, and modes of unbecoming.”¹⁰¹ In 2007’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love similarly attends to and reads from “feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, resentment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness.”¹⁰²

Even scholars looking towards the possibilities and potentialities of queer future do not paint a sanitized queer *eschaton*, filled with an unending banquet of erotic delights and free from

⁹⁸ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 140.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Jack Halberstram, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 150.

¹⁰¹ Halberstram, *Queer Failure*, 23.

¹⁰² Love, *Feeling Backward*, 4.

violence, pain, or loss. In one of the most memorable chapters of his 2009 *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz draws on Amiri Baraka's grisly 1967 play *The Toilet* to cast his vision of a queer utopia, always becoming but never arrived. The play centers on two high-school boys, lovers, but pitted against each other in a bathroom fight after school. Foots, popular and surrounded by a posse, originally refuses to fight Jerry Karolis, as someone else has already done so and he has been dragged to the bathroom bloody and defeated. But Karolis, rising from a crumpled heap on the floor, declares that he "want[s] to fight" Foots.¹⁰³ He does so and nearly wins; Foots defeats him only with the assistance of his posse, and Karolis is left on the bathroom floor, bleeding and bruised once again. The play's final tableau is wordless: Foots returns to the bathroom alone and "kneels before the body, weeping and cradling the head in his arms."¹⁰⁴

Muñoz locates queer futurity in this moment of "wounded recognition,"¹⁰⁵ seeing in its paradoxical fusion of tenderness and violence the possibility of new "horizons" that neither deny pain nor see it as the sole reality in a broken world.¹⁰⁶ He does not identify this moment as a Christian *pietà*, nor does he mention the intriguing fact that *The Toilet* was published the same year as *The Baptism*, another play by Baraka which explicitly takes on the interstices of religious expression and queer life.¹⁰⁷ But it is precisely these moments that Eucharistic reading explores, considering how spectacular moments of ugliness, vulnerability, and violence may reveal more than strength, suspicion, and mastery.

¹⁰³ Baraka qtd. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 89.

¹⁰⁴ Baraka qtd. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 90. Cf. John 19:37.

¹⁰⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 90.

¹⁰⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 91.

¹⁰⁷ "Amiri Baraka," Poets.org, American Academy of Poets, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://poets.org/poet/amiri-baraka>.

Third – Eucharistic reading accepts limits. If to make a confession is to perform a paranoid reading of oneself, that confession can quickly become limitless. Foucault quotes a seventeenth-century confession manual: “Examine diligently, therefore, *all* the faculties of your soul: memory, understanding, and will. Examine with precision *all* your senses as well... Examine, moreover, *all* your thoughts, every word you speak, all your actions. Examine even unto your dreams, to know if, once awakened, you did not give them your consent.”¹⁰⁸ Such a task, as penitents like Martin Luther and Ignatius of Loyola found, is paralyzing; the self, ever suspect, is overwhelmed by the endlessness of its desires and the limitlessness of its imagination – desires far beyond what confession can articulate and analysis can reveal.¹⁰⁹

Eucharistic reading, by contrast, accepts limitations. “The perversity of Christian theology,” writes Mark Knight, “lies in the way that it undermines an understanding of God as transcendent.”¹¹⁰ Eucharistic reading continues this project of undermining, seeing in the crucified Christ divinity evacuated of power and humanity freed from the need to produce master metanarratives or track down and expose all the hidden workings of power. It takes its cues from Gianni Vattimo, an Italian philosopher known for his concept of *pensiero debole*, or “weak thought.” Truth, for Vattimo, emerges not from temporal correspondence to transcendental essences or structures, but is “a product of interpretation” created through our constant dialogue with “what has been handed down to us as our heritage.”¹¹¹ He analogizes this process to the ways in which different generations interact with the beautiful “monuments” of their history: “individuals, groups, societies, and epochs recognize” the beautiful, “seeing themselves within

¹⁰⁸ Segneri qtd. Foucault, *History*, 20. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁹ The scrupulosity of Luther and St. Ignatius is well-documented and is frequently mentioned in contemporary texts on mental health. See, for example, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Jesse S. Armstrong, *Clean Hands: Philosophical Lessons from Scrupulosity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 19-20.

¹¹⁰ Knight summarizes Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Christianity in *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (309).

¹¹¹ Vattimo, “Weak Thought,” 50, 49.

it...and thereby constituting themselves as groups.”¹¹² However, while the beautiful monuments might stay the same, the meanings that they symbolize to these different groups and ages do not; Vattimo recognizes “the possibility for [the monuments] to include other contents and traditions.”¹¹³ This interpretive construction of truth is a “weak” process in that it does not aspire to step outside the limitations of history “to a fundamental normative structure,”¹¹⁴ but in a Heideggerian act of humility, accepts history’s “controlling horizon[s]” and recognizes that “no one ever starts from scratch, but rather from a faith, a belonging to, a bond.”¹¹⁵ Vattimo names the affective drive to engage in this process of humility and relationality *pieta*. The name deliberately recalls the *kenotic* self-emptying of Christ, who likewise cedes his claim to divine transcendence and willingly enters into history out of *pieta* for humanity.¹¹⁶ It also recalls the Eucharistic meal of the Catholic, who holds the bleeding, broken body of Christ in her hands and, recognizing herself in him, reinterprets his suffering to sustain her as she navigates her own. Though perhaps the least well-recognized of these theorists, Vattimo recognizes and articulates what the rest of them cannot or do not: that an acceptance of life’s contingencies and particularities is not a radical departure from canonical Christian heritage, but rather a return to the queer, paradoxical claim at its core.

IV.

When I first suggested the idea of this project to a classmate, he immediately objected. Citing Sedgwick’s harsh words on the American religious and political climate, he cautioned against a religious reading of her project. The same objection could well be applied to Wilde.

¹¹² Vattimo, “Weak Thought,” 49.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Vattimo, “Weak Thought,” 50.

¹¹⁶ See notes 27 and 68 for more on Vattimo’s engagement with *kenosis*.

Some readings of his life view his deathbed baptism not as a genuine conversion, but a violation – an anxious attempt by Robert Ross to cleanse his friend and former lover of his sins and secure him a seat among the church triumphant.¹¹⁷ By considering Sedgwick through a Eucharistic lens, am I baptizing her against her will as well? And does reading *De Profundis* through a religious lens of repair only reinforce Ross’s misinterpretation of Wilde’s life and death and force a prodigal, preposterous son into a false posture of repentance?

Possibly. I will return to the question of Wilde’s deathbed baptism in later chapters, but for the purposes of this introduction, let me address this question as it relates to Sedgwick. In his introduction to *Modernism/Modernity*’s recent edition on weak theory, Paul K. Saint-Amour does not explicitly link Sedgwick’s work on weak theory to any sort of religious tradition, but he does link her to Vattimo. Although they have different views on the so-called “masters of suspicion” – Sedgwick reads Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as perpetuating strong theory, while Vattimo reads them as enabling weak thought – they concur in their argument that we must abandon strength, instead adopting a localized approach that looks for the contingent, ephemeral ways authors eke out healing, hope and selfhood from unlikely sources.¹¹⁸ By teasing out the religious possibilities of Sedgwick’s reparative reading, therefore, I aim to advance a conversation initiated by Saint-Amour and other scholars working in this post-critical space.

Moreover, while Sedgwick does not explore the reparative possibilities of religion in *Touching Feeling*, we see what I would argue are the beginnings of a reparative reading of Catholicism in the midst of the paranoid project that is *Epistemology of the Closet*. She argues

¹¹⁷ Quintus, for example, comments: “His deathbed conversion to Catholicism was as abrupt as the last-minute reversals that so often occur in his poems and essays; the conversion was the act of a frightened and dying man, not an announcement of new-found faith. (He was nominally Roman Catholic for less than a day.) See “Christ, Christianity,” 526.

¹¹⁸ For Saint-Amour’s outline of the differences between these two figures, see “Weak Modernism,” 440-444.

that for all its ostensible prohibition of same-sex love, the Catholic Church actually promotes such love in its members. In her chapter on Wilde, Nietzsche and the sentimental, she writes:

The assumption I have been making so far, that the main impact of Christianity on men's desire for the male body – and the main stimulus it offers to that desire – is prohibitive, is an influential assumption beyond Wilde and Nietzsche. It is also an assumption that even (or especially) those who hold and wield it, including Wilde...know is not true. Christianity may be near-ubiquitous in modern European culture as a figure of phobic prohibition, but it makes a strange figure for that indeed. Catholicism...is famous for giving countless gay and proto-gay children the shock of the possibility of adults who don't marry, of men in dresses, of passionate theatre, of introspective investment, of lives filled with what could...be called the work of the fetish...And presiding over all are the images of Jesus...often in extremis and/or in ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored.¹¹⁹

It is a provocative re-reading: Here, instead of yet another one of the master metanarratives to be exposed by the reader, Catholicism looks uncannily like a source of gay-identity formation, comparable to camp. Dozens of Wilde scholars, such as Frederick Roden, Ellis Hanson, and Jarlath Killeen, have reacted to Sedgwick's provocation, producing ever-more curious and subtle readings of the ways in which Wilde reworks various elements of the Catholic tradition to suit his own needs as a gay man and artist.¹²⁰

It is in this specific religious subfield of Wilde studies that my thesis intervenes. I draw both on Sedgwick and on these Wilde scholars throughout, considering how the patterns, images, and symbols they identify may be read reparatively.¹²¹ And just as the work of such Wilde scholars has stood or fallen on the effectiveness of their close readings, so must my project.¹²² Having identified the Eucharistic interpretive theory I see Wilde articulating in *De Profundis*, I

¹¹⁹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 140.

¹²⁰ Sedgwick draws out these words in Wilde's own writing; see *Epistemology*, 174.

¹²¹ Thus, for instance, while Sedgwick's work in the *Epistemology* to identify themes such as vicariousness (146-157), identification (157-163), secrecy (163-167), and addiction (171-78) in Wilde proved invaluable for my own reading of him, I often recast these insights in a more hopeful and reparative fashion.

¹²² Sedgwick talks about "fascination" when discussing Wilde; see *Epistemology* 166, 174.

will use it to consider earlier texts, highlighting how he reconfigures religion to help develop his identity and sense of self. If these close readings feel as though they're bringing us closer to Wilde's whimsical, perverse spirit – if they give us a better sense of his remarkable religious imagination – if they bring sorrow, delight and surprise, then I've succeeded in my aims.

Sedgwick writes that the goal of the paranoid is to stave off negative affect and stop a reader from being caught off-guard by an unexpected instance of oppression hiding beneath the surface of a seemingly innocuous or enjoyable text.¹²³ The reparative, by contrast, actively pursues such enjoyment, risking the realities of violence to seek out joy and pleasure – a pursuit comparable, one might argue, to that of Christ, “who,” according to St. Paul, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.”¹²⁴ My reading of Wilde and Sedgwick certainly takes such risks. Whether or not it will vindicate itself remains to be seen.

¹²³ Sedgwick, “Paranoid/Reparative,” 130-131, 136-138.

¹²⁴ Hebrews 11:2.

CHAPTER 1
“FISHERS OF MEN”:
EROTIC AND RELIGIOUS REPAIR IN “THE FISHERMAN AND HIS SOUL”

The year was 1886. Oscar Wilde had comfortably established himself as a bourgeois Londoner.¹ His home, immaculately designed and impeccably furnished, welcomed the city’s brilliant and beautiful. His wife, a burgeoning advocate of dress reform and other proto-feminist causes,² had given birth to their two sons, christened Cyril and Vyvyan in the Church of England.³ His wit, famously exercised from the lecture stand, was now turned on other authors and artists in the pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Dramatic Review*.⁴

The foundations of the House Beautiful, however, were soon to be shaken.⁵ Wilde met a young man named Robert Ross on a visit to Oxford in 1886,⁶ and by the following year, invited him to live with the family in their Tite Street home.⁷ The invitation would change his life. Ross, a precocious seventeen-year-old boy with “the face of Puck,” seduced Wilde into what biographer Richard Ellmann and many other scholars believe was his first gay encounter.⁸

In a certain sense, the affair marked a new phase in Wilde’s aesthetic and literary development. His productivity skyrocketed in the years following; beginning in 1887 with *The Canterville Ghost*, he published a story or dialogue every year until the final version of *The*

¹ Richard Ellmann observes: “For more than two years Wilde had restlessly performed his roles as husband and father. Whistler dubbed him ‘*le bourgeois malgré lui*...’” *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 275.

² Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, 283-84. I say “burgeoning” because Constance Wilde’s formal speaking and advocacy engagements took place after the birth of their two sons.

³ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 266.

⁴ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 286, 288.

⁵ Using the title of one of Wilde’s essays, Ellmann refers to the Tite Street home Wilde shared with his family as “the House Beautiful” (258).

⁶ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 275.

⁷ Although Maureen Borland, Ross’s biographer, indicates that Ross’s mother “arranged” his boarding at Tite Street, an invitation from Wilde himself was presumably extended at some point. *Wilde’s Devoted Friend: A Life of Robert Ross* (Oxford: Leonard Publishing, 1990), 19.

⁸ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 275.

Picture of Dorian Gray was printed in 1891.⁹ As Ellmann writes: “At Oxford, Wilde had made the problem of becoming or not becoming a Roman Catholic the nub of much of his verse. He was able to make his experience of marriage and counter-marriage the center of his career in prose. Homosexuality fired his mind. It was the major stage in his discovery of himself.”¹⁰

Yet in another sense, Wilde’s initiation into queer love marks the culmination of a journey started long ago. From his student days, Wilde’s imagination linked same-sex eroticism and Catholicism.¹¹ Many of his Oxonian friends had or would swim the Tiber, and though Wilde would not take the plunge until his deathbed, he repeatedly dipped his toes in the river.¹² An early letter to friend William Ward hints at the erotic undertow drawing him Romeward. “I rise sometimes after six,” he described his morning routine, “but don’t do much but bathe, and although always feeling slightly immortal when in the sea, feel sometimes slightly heretical when good Roman Catholic boys enter the water with little amulets and crosses round their necks and arms that the good S. Christopher might hold them up.”¹³ Far from stifling or repressing his desires, Catholicism gave him a language to identify and articulate them.

In light of these proclivities, it is unsurprising that Wilde’s deflowering would occur at the hands of “Little Robbie,” whom he met at Oxford and who would eventually convert to Catholicism himself.¹⁴ Though Ellmann frames Wilde’s engagement with Catholicism and his

⁹ “Appendix A: Chronological Table,” in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1248.

¹⁰ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 281.

¹¹ Many scholars have noted the eroticism of Wilde’s early Catholic poetry and letters. See, for example, Frederick Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 129-137.

¹² Ellmann notes that the conversion of David Hunter Blair prompted several other Magdalen students to follow in his footsteps (53) and traces Blair’s attempts to convince Wilde to do so as well (54, 69, 73, 74).

¹³ Wilde qtd. Frederick Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 129. Roden observes: “Catholicism...is an opportunity to suggest homoeroticism” (129). Chris Mounsey also quotes this passage to demonstrate the link between eroticism and Catholicism in Wilde’s mind; see *Being the Body of Christ: Towards a Twenty-First Century Homosexual Theology for the Anglican Church* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 27.

¹⁴ Wilde qtd. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 277; Borland, *Devoted Friend*, 156.

engagement with homosexuality as two distinct phases in his artistic and personal development, the ongoing resonances between the two complicate such a linear account.¹⁵ Ross's boyish charms resurrected not merely the erotic desires that Wilde had buried beneath the trappings of bourgeois felicity, but the religious yearning as well.

It is in this context that I want to consider "The Fisherman and His Soul," one of the four tales in *A House of Pomegranates*, Wilde's 1891 collection of fairy stories. Along with Elizabeth Goodenough and John-Charles Duffy,¹⁶ I argue that the story should be situated in the wake of Wilde's first same-sex experience and thus, as Chris Mounsey puts it, "represents the topos for his paradoxical dealings with the church and with sexuality."¹⁷ However, while Mounsey helpfully suggests that "The Fisherman and His Soul" operates as a variation on *Salomé*,¹⁸ he falls prey to the pitfalls of Foucault's repressive hypothesis and reads the tale assuming that "sex and religion are vitally but mutually exclusively important."¹⁹ The binary is not so pure, nor the story so simple. As Ellis Hanson observes, Wilde constantly operates in a "dialectic of shame and grace," where sin and saintliness, sensuality and spirituality, erotic and divine love fuel one another.²⁰ Thus, although the tale features the "familiar Victorian dichotomy between pagan sensuality and Christian asceticism," with the Fisherman representing the former and the priest

¹⁵ Other critics, even those interested in Wilde's religious imagination, tend follow this narrative arc. Ellis Hanson, for instance, lists several periods in Wilde's life where his Romish leanings are more pronounced – a list from which the 1880s and early 1890s is curiously absent. Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 257. Roden likewise argues that the Catholic poetry and letters of the 1870s represent Wilde's inability to combine "sensual nature and stark religion" (137) and that the 1880s were a period where Wilde's aesthetics were "Hellenic" (137). This trend is quite puzzling, given the work that these critics have done to illuminate Wilde's religious imagination, and I use their insights to correct what strikes me as an incorrect biographical arc.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Goodenough, "Oscar Wilde, Victorian Fairy Tales, and the Meanings of Atonement," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 23, no. 3 (1999): 339 and John-Charles Duffy, "Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, no. 2 (2001): 327.

¹⁷ Chris Mounsey, *Being the Body of Christ: Towards a Twenty-First Century Homosexual Theology for the Anglican Church* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 31.

¹⁸ Mounsey, *Being the Body*, 30.

¹⁹ Mounsey, *Being the Body*, 17.

²⁰ Hanson first introduces this phrase on page 29; it serves both as a title for one of his chapters (27-107) and the lens through which he reads all of Wilde.

representing the latter, Wilde shows that the dichotomy “is a false one,” “resolved” by the story’s miraculous conclusion.²¹ I build on Hanson’s argument in this chapter, highlighting how Wilde complicates the false binary of sensuality and aestheticism by embedding subtle parallels between the Fisherman and the priest not just at the conclusion, but throughout the entire story. The two characters function as inverted doubles of one another; virtually everything that the Fisherman does in pursuit of the Mermaid correlates either to the sacramental duties or theological convictions of the priest. This inversion advances the reparative project that began at Oxford and, as critics have discussed, would reemerge in *Salomé*,²² *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,²³ and the prison writings,²⁴ namely, recasting the Christian tradition as paradoxically reliant on the very queer love it aims to exclude and eliminate. Writing on “The Happy Prince,” the titular tale of an earlier collection of fairy stories, Robert K. Martin says, “Wilde clearly points out...[that] it is Eros which lies at the heart of Agape.”²⁵ “The Fisherman and His Soul”

²¹ Hanson, *Decadence*, 98. Hanson’s discussion of the story may be found on pages 97-99.

²² As I mention in note 18, Mounsey first directed my attention to the possibility that “The Fisherman and His Soul” could be seen as a version of *Salomé*. However, because I disagree with his central premise – that religion and sexuality are “mutually exclusively important” (17) – the reading of *Salomé* that informs my analysis of this fairy-tale comes from Hanson, who conversely argues that *Salomé* represents Wilde’s belief that “ethics and aesthetics, spiritual belief and sensual beauty are by no means mutually exclusive” (275). His discussion of the play may be found on pages 262-279.

²³ Donald L. Lawler and Charles E. Knott discuss “The Fisherman and His Soul” as a nascent version of the themes of doubling, body, and soul that Wilde would consider in *Dorian Gray*. “The Context of Invention: Suggested Origins of ‘Dorian Gray,’” *Modern Philology* 73, no. 4 (June 1976): 389-398. John Allen Quintus likewise links the stories on the basis of these themes. “The Moral Prerogative in Oscar Wilde: A Look at the Fairy Tales,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 53, no. 4 (Autumn 1977): 710.

²⁴ Wilde himself identifies the link between the fairy tales and his later work. Having finally realized the importance of suffering in his ethical and aesthetic development, he observes in *De Profundis* that he had intuited this earlier on: “The other half of the garden [i.e.: suffering] had its secrets for me also. Of course all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my art. Some of it is in ‘The Happy Prince’: some of it is in ‘The Young King,’ ... a great deal of it is hidden away in the note of Doom that like a purple thread runs through the cloth of *Dorian Gray*: ... it is one of the refrains that make *Salomé* so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad.” *De Profundis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1026. For other critics who have noticed the link between the fairy tales and the prison writing, see Quintus, “Moral Prerogative,” 715; Goodenough, “Meanings of Atonement,” 340; Hanson, *Decadence*, 99; and Jarlath Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore, and Ireland* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 173.

²⁵ Martin, “Oscar Wilde and the Fairy Tale: The Happy Prince as Self-Dramatization,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 16 (1979): 74.

makes the same essential point, thereby nurturing an identity whose desires lay outside the boundaries of its ostensible orthodoxy.

Wilde's inversion begins on the level of plot. As many commentators on the story have observed, the plot of "The Fisherman and His Soul" is a defiant inversion of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid."²⁶ Andersen's tale tells the story of a young mermaid who yearns not only to marry a human prince with whom she has fallen in love, but through their marriage to gain the immortal soul that she lacks. Though she fails to win the prince's heart, her devotion is rewarded: She ascends into the heavens and joins "the daughters of the air," a group of ethereal beings who may eventually earn an immortal soul if they do good deeds for 300 years.²⁷ Wilde's Fisherman, by contrast, sheds his soul with the help of a wicked witch and descends into the depths of the sea to give his heart to the mermaid whom he loves. His Soul, now heartless, travels across the earth in search of wisdom and wealth. It returns once each year to tell the Fisherman of its discoveries, in hopes that the Fisherman will abandon the mermaid and reunite with it.

The Fisherman resists the Soul's temptations twice, but when the Soul tells him of a dancing girl with beautiful feet in a nearby city, he leaves the Mermaid to go see her. While on the way, the Soul successfully deceives the fisherman into theft and violence. Appalled by the

²⁶ Duffy, "Gay-Related Themes," 333; Mounsey, *Being the Body*, 30; Christopher S. Nassaar, "Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and Other Tales and *A House of Pomegranates*," *The Explicator* 60, no. 3 (2002): 142; Christopher S. Nassaar, "Andersen's 'The Shadow' and Wilde's 'The Fisherman and His Soul': A Case of Influence," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50, no. 2 (Sept. 1995): 218; Kate Pendlebury, "The Building of *A House of Pomegranates*," *Marvels & Tales* 25, no. 1 (2011): 133. Pendlebury further contextualizes Wilde's inversion in the *fin-de-siècle* moment. She quotes Martha Vicinus's observation that queer writers of this period often "drew on Classical myth and Bible stories for inspiration, 'reinterpret[ing] common myths, den[ying] or revers[ing] familiar metaphors and privileg[ing] the mannered, the irrational, and the inexplicable'" (133). Naomi Wood also quotes this point in her discussion of the fairy tales; see "Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales," *Marvels & Tales* 16, no. 2: 161.

²⁷ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid," in *Hans Andersen's Fairy-Tales*, Second Series, ed. J.H. Stickney (Boston, 1915; Project Gutenberg, 2010), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/32572/32572-h/32572-h.htm>.

evil of his Soul, the fisherman returns to the seashore, only to find that the mermaid has died and her body has washed up on the shore. Holding her in his arms as the tide comes in, his heart breaks and the Soul rejoins his body as he drowns. When the lovers are found, they are buried in unconsecrated ground at the order of the village priest, who hates the Sea-folk and condemns the Fisherman for relinquishing his soul to be with the Mermaid. Later, however, flowers bloom over the grave and are brought into the chapel where the priest conducts a service. Inexplicably moved by them, he preaches on the love of God rather than the wrath of God and blesses the sea and all the Sea-folk. The benediction, though poignant, is ineffectual: Flowers never blossom again over the grave, nor do the Sea-folk stay in the bay, moving on to another part of the sea.

At first glance, the story might seem like typical Wildean parody and critique. The generic and narratological conventions of fairy-tale correlate with Wilde's role as a middle-class man of the house; indeed, he dedicated *A House of Pomegranates* as a whole to his wife and individual stories to various women of his acquaintance.²⁸ But even as he operates within these conventions, Wilde subverts them: The Fisherman sinks – quite literally – to the Mermaid's level rather than raising her to his;²⁹ the Soul leads the Fisherman astray rather than on the straight and narrow;³⁰ and the death of the lovers fails to generate any sort of lasting communal or individual transformation. Andersen concludes "The Little Mermaid" with a moral call to action: "good child[ren]" can lessen the time that the daughters of the air spend toiling to gain their souls with

²⁸ "Appendix C: List of Original Dedications in Wilde's Published Works," in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1254. Goodenough contextualizes the tales in Wilde's experiences as a new father (39).

²⁹ Pendlebury comments: "Andersen's plot is inverted, for it is not the mermaid who must gain a soul to marry an earthly prince, but a young fisherman who must lose his to be united with a beautiful mermaid in the mysterious idyll of the sea folk" (133).

³⁰ Pendlebury notes that "the soul...partake[s] of paradoxically unspiritual behavior" (133).

“good conduct.”³¹ Wilde’s story, by contrast, seems amoral at best, immoral at worst.³² Early reviewers commented on this lack of moral clarity,³³ leading Wilde to snipe that he had written *A House of Pomegranates* with “about as much intention of pleasing the British child as . . . the British public.”³⁴ It is a characteristically apt rejoinder: Wilde did not aim to please these readers at all, but rather to disrupt their expectations and conceptions of what constituted fit reading material for children.³⁵

If, however, Wilde did not aim to please his public, he certainly did aim to please himself. Though he deploys inversion as a mode of critique in “The Fisherman and His Soul,” his most important work in the story is not critical, but constructive. While Wilde’s inversion of Andersen enables him to eviscerate the trite morality of bourgeois domesticity,³⁶ his inversion of Christian symbolism enables him to do something far more positive and far more radical: to

³¹ Andersen, “The Little Mermaid.”

³² Several readers have commented on the ethical ambiguity of the tales. Pendlebury argues that the tales avoid the neat moral resolutions of Christianity, and that the pomegranate’s complex status in both classical and Christian mythology indicates this lack of ethical clarity (124-141). Justin T. Jones contends that the tales reject middle-class morality as a bridle on artistic freedom. Characters either resist morality altogether, die when they accept morality, or accept an aesthetic where beauty comes from Christ’s image, but not Christ himself. Though the tales participate in the genre of Christian fairy tales, they ultimately show the reader whatever the reader wants them to show. “Morality’s Ugly Implications in Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales,” *SEL* 51, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 883-903. Michelle Ruggaber contrasts the relatively simplicity and moral clarity of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* with the moral ambiguity of *A House of Pomegranates*, arguing that the former was intended to instruct children and the latter intended to prod adults into questioning their concepts of ethics and aesthetics. “Wilde’s *The Happy Prince* and *A House of Pomegranates* : Bedtime Stories for Grown-Ups,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 46, no. 2 (2003): 141-153.

³³ Wood cites several early reviewers who recognized the sensuality and unusual morality of the tales (167-168). *The Pall Mall Gazette* noted that the stories were “unsuitable for children,” though this was primarily for the overwhelming amount of aesthetic detail that Wilde includes. “Unsigned review, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 November 1891, p. 3,” in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (New York: Routledge, 2005), 125.

³⁴ Wilde qtd. Pendlebury, “Building,” 130. Ruggaber also cites this response (143).

³⁵ Ruggaber claims: “*A House of Pomegranates* consists of stories of a dark nature with complex plots, which, while they can still be enjoyed by children, are meant to challenge and destabilize the expectations of adults” (132).

³⁶ Jones observes that Wilde’s fairy tales “resist the authority of shallow, bourgeois morality by flouting the conventions of the conventional fairy-tale” (885). Duffy counterpoises “the Victorian middle-class ideal of the ‘gentleman’ or the ‘manly Christian’” with the child-like sensibility of the tales, arguing that the rejection of the former and the valorization of the latter in the fairy tales is one of Wilde’s responses to homophobic religious discourse (345).

imagine how the queer love represented by the Fisherman and the Mermaid might sustain and be sustained by Christianity.³⁷

That queer love sustains Christianity is obvious enough from the story's conclusion. The flowers that blossom on the grave of the fisherman and the mermaid mysteriously move the priest to speak on God's love rather than on his wrath and to extend the blessings of the church to the Sea-folk and other mythological creatures whom he earlier anathematized.³⁸ As Ellis Hanson and John Allen Quintus observe, Wilde lifts this image from *Tannhäuser* and reuses it in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, where it takes on an even more explicitly Christian association.³⁹ The poem's narrator, having watched a harrowing execution, imagines flowers growing out of the dead man's grave as a sign of divine compassion for his suffering: "They think a murderer's heart would taint/Each simple seed they sow./It is not true! God's kindly earth/Is kindlier than men know,/.../Out of his mouth a red, red rose!/Out of his heart, a white!/For who can say by what strange way,/Christ brings his will to light."⁴⁰ Marginalized by the rigid morality of the priest, the love of the Fisherman and the Mermaid returns as the story's moral and emotional core.⁴¹

³⁷ Because the Fisherman is male and the Mermaid is female, it may seem like a stretch to characterize their love as "queer." However, as John-Charles Duffy observes, their love transgresses the boundaries between species and, since the Mermaid has a tail rather than a vagina, it is non-reproductive and therefore sodomitical (333, 342).

Andersen resolves the difficulties of cross-species love by giving the little mermaid legs (and, by implication, female sex organs); Wilde, by contrast, pointedly refuses to resolve the morphological differences between the Fisherman and the mermaid. Naomi Wood also notes the perverse nature of the Fisherman and the Mermaid (166).

³⁸ Critics who claim that the flowers indicate God's blessing of the Fisherman and the Mermaid's love include Duffy, "Gay-Related," 342-43; Nassaar, "Andersen's 'The Shadow,'" 224; Quintus, "Moral Prerogative," 715 and "Christ, Christianity, and Oscar Wilde," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 523.

³⁹ Hanson observes "the Priest of his tale has become the criminal justice system" (98). Quintus's comparisons to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* may be found in "Moral Prerogative," 714-15 and "Christ, Christianity," 523.

⁴⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 895.

⁴¹ Duffy mentions "marginalization" as another gay-related theme that Wilde takes on in the fairy tales (333).

It is not merely the flowers themselves that reveal the queer undertones inflecting Wilde's theology, however, but the specific adjectives that he selects to describe them. Writing on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick situates the text in an emerging discourse of homosexuality that correlated same-sex desire with the "unnatural" craving for drugs and counterpoised it to the "natural" hunger for food.⁴² In this context, the Paterian adjectives Wilde uses again and again in the novel – "curious and subtle," "monstrous, strange, and terrible" – suggest not merely the decadence that was increasingly being linked with homosexuality, but the deviancy of the drug addict as well.⁴³ Hanson notes that these "Paterian adjectives" are precisely the words used to describe both the flowers and their affective influence on the priest:⁴⁴ "...he saw that the altar was covered with *strange* flowers that he had never seen before. *Strange* they were to look at, and of *curious* beauty, and their beauty troubled him, and their odor was sweet in his nostrils...the beauty of the white flowers troubled him, and their odour was sweet in his nostrils."⁴⁵

Given these broader discursive resonances, the flowers play a doubly perverse and doubly powerful role at the story's conclusion. The priest offers his congregation the purest and most sacred of food: He unveils the Eucharist for them to adore and preaches the word of God for them to read, mark, and inwardly digest. Yet he does so under the influence of the "strange," "curious," and, by extension, "unnatural" influence of the flowers, an influence so potent that it drives him and all the congregation to excess. "The people we[ep]" at his words and the priest's

⁴² Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 174.

⁴³ See Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 174, 175, respectively.

⁴⁴ Hanson, *Decadence*, 98. Hanson later discusses how Wilde applies these same adjectives to the Catholic Church (266-270). Naomi Wood notes the presence of these adjectives in the fairy tales more broadly, and also highlights Sedgwick's analysis of them as indicators of "unnatural and vitiated appetites" for drugs and transgressive sexuality (162).

⁴⁵ Wilde, "The Fisherman and His Soul," in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 258.

eyes are “full of tears,”⁴⁶ bathed in the same salt water that streams down the Fisherman’s face as he cradles his dead beloved and in which she swam before he broke her heart and ended her life.⁴⁷ And when the priest learns from the deacons that the flowers come from the corner of the Fuller’s Field where the Fisherman and the Mermaid are buried, his excess only grows. The next morning, he goes to the sea “with the monks and the musicians, and the candlebearers and the swingers of censers, and a great company, and c[omes] to the shore of the sea, and bless[es] the sea, and all the wild things that are in it. The Fauns also he blesse[s], and the little things that dance in the woodland, and the bright-eyed things that peer through the leaves.”⁴⁸ The sheer abundance of the participants and the list-like prodigality of the sentences reflect the wide, all-encompassing embrace of Wilde’s queer theology. “All the things in God’s world he blessed,” the scene concludes, “and the people were filled with joy and wonder.”⁴⁹ Queer love not only enables Christian faith, but extends it, influencing the priest to bless even more people with the boundless and bounteous depths of God’s love.⁵⁰ As Duffy writes: “The tale...presents the realm outside the pale of Christian blessedness as precious in its own right...that which a traditional Christian sensibility would judge accursed (homosexuality) yields an unsurpassed and ‘curious beauty’ which leaves the circle of Christian respectability looking...bleak by comparison.”⁵¹

If the story’s ending clearly illustrates that queer love might sustain Christianity, the converse – that Christianity might sustain queer love – is far less clear. Wilde begins the story by

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Mounsey characterizes the as “the outcast medium” “where [the Fisherman] had been happiest” (33). The salt tears of the priest and the congregation thus mark another moment where what has been declared outcast returns to the center.

⁴⁸ Wilde, “Fisherman,” 258-9.

⁴⁹ Wilde, “Fisherman,” 259.

⁵⁰ Pendlebury notes that the final scene “gesture[s] to a more encompassing ethic” (136).

⁵¹ Duffy, “Gay-Related,” 344. Wood likewise notes that the fairy tales advocate “spiritual procreancy” via “immersion in sensual experiences” and situates this advocacy in the pro-pederasty discourse of Oxford Hellenism (167).

opposing the love of the fisherman with the faith of the priest; all that the Fisherman does for love of the mermaid, the priest rejects out of faith in God. While the Fisherman opens his ears to the nightly songs of the mermaid and delights in her sensuous descriptions of life under the sea, the priest condemns the mythological creatures that come to his house at night and closes his ears to the “perilous joys” they whisper through his window.⁵² The Fisherman would gladly give his soul to possess the body and the love of the Mermaid; the priest decries “the love of the Body [as] vile” and proclaims the Soul to be “the noblest part of man...given to us by God that we should nobly use it.”⁵³ Unsurprisingly, when the Fisherman comes to the priest to ask him how he can lose his soul, the priest reacts with shock and anger. “Away! Away!” he rebukes the Fisherman, chasing him out of the house, “Thy leman is lost, and thou shalt be lost with her.”⁵⁴ The religious austerity of the priest thus serves as a foil to the erotic sensuality of the Fisherman; to pursue one set of desires precludes pursuing the other.

Yet for all this apparent opposition, Wilde figures the priest and the Fisherman as doubles of one another. Hanson comments, “Wilde’s most important strategy for making his own God was to rewrite or reinterpret the Bible” – a strategy that is particularly pronounced in “The Fisherman and His Soul.”⁵⁵ The whole story may be seen as a reversal not merely of “The Little Mermaid,” but of Christ’s claim that “it shall profit a man [nothing] to gain the whole world and lose his soul.”⁵⁶ The Fisherman twists these words as he begs the priest to help him get rid of his

⁵² Wilde, “Fisherman,” 238. Hanson, writing on *Salomé*’s Jokanaan, notes that his “speech has an erotic flair, even though it is a panegyric against...sexual transgression” (272); like the saints of the Catholic tradition, the Baptist’s words evoke the very sins he finds so offensive (16-18). The priest’s words function much the same way, belying the revulsion the mythological creatures arouse in him and revealing his underlying desire for the delights they offer.

⁵³ Wilde, “Fisherman,” 238.

⁵⁴ Wilde, “Fisherman,” 239.

⁵⁵ Hanson, *Decadence*, 233. Pendlebury (127, 133), Wood (160-61), and Goodenough (340) likewise note Wilde’s strategy of biblical inversion and subversion in the tales. Duffy discusses the specific verses Wilde alludes to at length (333); where relevant, I cite him.

⁵⁶ Mark 8:36.

soul, turning Christ's radical call to obedience on its head to justify radical disobedience to the call of the priest: "Father, the Fauns live in the forest and are glad, and on the rocks sit the Mermen with their harps of gold. Let me be as they are, I beseech thee, for their days are as the days of flowers. And as for my soul, what doth my soul profit me, if it stand between me and the thing I love?"⁵⁷

This seeming disobedience, however, contains within it a paradoxical form of obedience. The Fisherman's desire to be like the Sea-folk and live his days "as the days of flowers" reads at first like a mere repetition of his desire to live life without a soul, as plants and animals do.⁵⁸ But as Wilde will eventually observe in *De Profundis*,⁵⁹ it is precisely this kind of "flower-like" life that Christ commands his listeners to lead in the Sermon on the Mount: "Consider the lilies of the field...they toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these...if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the fire, shall he not much clothe you, O ye of little faith?"⁶⁰ The imagery foreshadows the redemptive flowers that blossom at the story's end, but it also gestures towards the obedience that enables the flowers to grow in the first place. Although the priest does not recognize it, the Fisherman's desire to exchange his soul for the love of the Mermaid is a deeply Christian one. Concerned neither for the past nor the future, nor even for eternity, the Fisherman abandons his nets and the livelihood they provide, joyfully giving up all to pursue a present life with the Mermaid. Such reckless abandon finds justification in the aesthetic contributions of Wilde's contemporaries, recalling "the tragic *Liebestod* endings"⁶¹ of Wagner

⁵⁷ Wilde, "Fisherman," 238.

⁵⁸ Wilde, "Fisherman," 238.

⁵⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1035.

⁶⁰ Matthew 5:28-30. Wilde alludes to this passage in *De Profundis* (1034).

⁶¹ I pull this quote from Wood (160), who focuses on Pater's influence in the stories and briefly mentions Wagner as another homoerotically-resonant influence. She does not, however, discuss how these figures' queer approach to temporality manifests in the stories.

and Pater's description of art as that which "profess[es] frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."⁶² But it also, through Wilde's inverted readings of the Bible, finds justification in the Sermon on the Mount and the choice of the apostles to "straightaway [leave] their nets" and follow Christ.⁶³

Indeed, for all his outrage and disgust at the Fisherman, the priest fails to remember that the founder of his order began his career as a fisherman and that his first appearance in the gospels is in a boat, casting his net into the sea – exactly where we find the Fisherman at the story's beginning. Wilde, never above a pun on names, may well have had the gospel passage in mind when Christ summons Peter and Andrew from their boat by saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."⁶⁴ If so, it would mark another instance where the Fisherman paradoxically obeys Christ's commands better than the priest does. He does not catch a man in his net – that would be too overt – but he does catch a half-human, half-otherworldly being in his net and pursues her with reckless abandon. The priest, by contrast, has no converts to his name, and his anger at the disruptions of the Fauns and Sea-folk during his nightly prayers suggest that he places greater importance on maintaining his own purity and piety than in ministering to the needs of his congregation.

If the Fisherman is a kind of priest, he likewise celebrates a kind of mystic sacrifice. Roman Catholic theology claims that the priest stands "in persona *Christi Capitis*," that is, in the place of Christ the head, as he administers the sacraments of the church.⁶⁵ Though the theological claim certainly serves to reify the disciplinary powers of the church, making obeying

⁶² Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 121.

⁶³ Matthew 4:20.

⁶⁴ Matthew 4:19.

⁶⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 1548.

one's priest equivalent to obeying Christ, it also reveals the paradoxical role of the priest during Mass. The priest not only acts in the place of Christ, but sacrifices Christ as well; the act of consecration converts the wafer into the crucified Christ, bringing his sacrificial death into the present. Thus the priest, in a certain sense, sacrifices a double of himself – a double with whom he is immediately reunited by ingesting the Host into his body.

Seven years after the publication of *A House of Pomegranates*, Wilde would articulate this theme of doubling and expiation far more directly. Drawing on his own experience of watching the execution of a British trooper for murdering his wife, Wilde writes *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* – a poem that is as theological as it is autobiographical.⁶⁶ As Hanson and Jarlath Killeen observe, Wilde apotheosizes the British trooper, figuring his sufferings as coextensive with the sufferings of Christ on the cross and represented in the Mass.⁶⁷ The poem's refrain names the theological principles of identification and expiation that undergird the sacrament: "And all men kill the thing they love,/By all let this be heard,/.../The coward does it with a kiss/The brave man with a sword!"⁶⁸ The statement, though striking for its directness, is not a new idea for Wilde; he had long conflated Christ, kisses, and knives.⁶⁹ As many scholars have noted, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also contains these Eucharistic images of doubling and

⁶⁶ Ellmann discusses the autobiographical background for the poem (503-504).

⁶⁷ Hanson identifies these themes not just in *The Ballad*, but in *De Profundis* as well (98-107); Killeen, *Faiths*, 162, 180-185. Goodenough writes that the fairy tales "are...sad and graphic portrayals of expiation and renunciation, failure and death" (340). Sedgwick also discusses the religious valences of vicariousness and identification in Wilde. Though she does not explicitly name the Catholic Mass in her discussion of *Dorian Gray*, *The Ballad*, and *De Profundis*, she does note that Wilde's "framing and display of the male body [is] placed in the explicit context of the displayed body of Jesus...as a visual index of vicarious expiation" (148). In her reading of Wilde, the slippage between identification, vicariousness, and suffering all become part of the (implicitly gay) twentieth-century concepts of "the sentimental," "the prurient," "kitsch," etc. that are scorned by modernism (62, 131-181). Her identification of these themes has proven invaluable to my own analysis.

⁶⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 899.

⁶⁹ Hanson comments on *The Ballad* and *De Profundis*: "Evidently, Wilde was the sort who killed with kisses and flattering words, though knives also play an important part in the prison writings...Like the knife of the surgeon, the knife that kills can also make us whole" (102-3).

expiation.⁷⁰ Donald L. Lawler and Charles E. Knott observe that the portrait represents Dorian's soul, manifesting the effects of crime, sin, and aging while Dorian himself retains his youth and beauty.⁷¹ This testament to his deeds eventually so disgusts Dorian that he decides to eradicate it and attacks it with a knife. But rather than eliminating the scapegoat portrait, the act reunites him with it: His soul re-enters his body, bringing his sins with it, and the spotless beauty of the portrait is restored.

Salomé also considers these themes, albeit somewhat more obliquely.⁷² Like Dorian, she too finds herself enticed and repelled by the voice of conscience, represented in her case by Jokanaan, the play's name for John the Baptist.⁷³ And like Dorian and the portrait, Salomé and the Baptist are, as Ellis Hanson argues, "inverted mirror image[s]" of one another;⁷⁴ the "sensuous body of the saint" is realized in him and the "unexpected spirituality of the hedonist" in her.⁷⁵ So overpowering is Salomé's lust for Jokanaan and so intense her anger at his rejection of her advances that she demands that this double have his head cut off with a sword. It is only as she cradles his severed head in her arms and weeps over his death that she at last attains her desire and kisses his blood-stained mouth. Small wonder that the British public rejected both of these texts so vehemently. Not only did the plots of both foreground erotic passion and sexual sin, but they reenacted the drama that the English had long ago expelled from their churches: the

⁷⁰ See, for example, Roden, *Same-Sex*, 142-145 and John Schad, *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 96-97, 102. Schad names other *fin-de-siècle* writers who connected homoeroticism and the Eucharist and may have inspired Wilde and, like Sedgwick, links Dorian's portrait with the crucifixion.

⁷¹ Lawler and Knott, "Context," 395-97; the following sentences reproduce Lawler and Knott's argument. John Allen Quintus also notes "the doppelgänger theme" of separation between body and soul in *Dorian Gray*; see "Moral Prerogative," 710.

⁷² Mounsey argues that *Salomé* can be seen as a version of "The Fisherman and His Soul"; see note 18.

⁷³ Lawler and Knott argue that Dorian has removed his conscience from himself by wishing that the portrait would age instead of him (395).

⁷⁴ Hanson, *Decadence*, 275.

⁷⁵ Hanson, *Decadence*, 277. See pages 274-79 for his discussion of how the two are doubles of one another.

Roman Catholic Mass.⁷⁶ Strictly confined to the pages of the Bible and the spirit of the believer by the 39 Articles,⁷⁷ Christ's passion returns to the present in Wilde's texts, invading the bourgeois bookshelf through the pages of *Dorian Gray* and proposing to tread the boards of the London stage in *Salomé*.⁷⁸

Or, in the case of "The Fisherman and His Soul," to be read to middle-class children at bedtime. The same patterns that Wilde would develop in these later works are present in this earlier text. As in *Salomé*, Wilde opposes the ascetic and the aesthetic; the priest's contempt for the flesh and sexuality echoes that of Jokanaan, and the Fisherman's adoration of the body of his beloved echoes that of Salomé. And as in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde creates for his protagonist a double at once spiritual and sensual, who must be destroyed before an expiatory reunion can occur. The Fisherman, like Dorian, takes a knife to his Soul; per instructions from a witch, he stands on the seashore at moonlight and cuts his shadow away from him, thereby releasing his soul from his body.⁷⁹ The Soul, once released, strongly resembles the portrait of Dorian: not only does it look exactly like the Fisherman, the same way that Dorian's portrait at first looks exactly

⁷⁶ Hanson notes that Christ's invitation to eat his body and drink his blood is "oddly Salomesque" (274).

⁷⁷ The 39 Articles explicitly reject transubstantiation as "repugnant to the plain words of Scripture" and "giv[ing] occasion to many superstitions," instead declaring that "the Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten...only after a heavenly or spiritual manner." "Articles of Religion," in *The Book of Common Prayer, And Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Use of The Church of England; Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David* (Cambridge: John Baskerville, 1762), 680, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=_sYUAAAAQAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA19-IA284.

⁷⁸ Schad argues that *The Importance of Being Earnest* subtly evokes a Christ who had been metaphorically forced offstage by a secular culture, and then observes that *Salomé* was literally forced offstage for representing biblical characters (109-110, 112). I would argue that, for *Salomé* at least, the rejection springs not from secularism, but from the anti-Catholicism endemic in Victorian Britain. Hanson suggests the converse: Salomé's attraction to Jokanaan is the spiritual attraction of the eventual convert, an attraction experienced by the many Victorians who first were drawn to Catholicism because of its sensuous beauty (274).

⁷⁹ Lawler and Knott identify "The Fisherman and His Soul" as a potential source-text for *Dorian Gray* and highlight that both Dorian and the Fisherman attack their souls, the latter using a knife to remove his soul from his body and the former stabbing the picture that represents his soul with a knife, thereby enabling his soul to reenter his body (395-397). Although he does not mention the stabbing that occurs in both texts, Quintus likewise notes that *Dorian Gray* features the same separation of body and soul that "The Fisherman and His Soul" does; see "Moral Prerogative," 710.

like him, but it also evokes the same kind of classical comparisons.⁸⁰ Lord Henry delights in Dorian Gray's "beauty such as old Greek marbles kept for us," and Basil Hallward likewise declares that "What...the face of Antinous was to late Greek sculpture...the face of Dorian Gray will some day be to me."⁸¹ As the Fisherman arrives on the shore and prepares to remove his soul, the narrator describes him as "Bronze-limbed and well-knit, like a statue wrought by a Grecian," and after he cuts his Soul away from him, it shifts from a shadow into a human shape that is "even as himself."⁸² And just as Dorian casts his soul away from him, hiding it up in the attic so it cannot interfere with his life of pleasure, so too the Fisherman sends his soul away, leaving it to wander across the world in search of hidden knowledge and secret treasure that will entice him to unite with it once more.⁸³

These peregrinations, and the violent act that precedes them, mirror the sins of Dorian Gray and Salomé. The former wanders through the opium dens, churches, and brothels of London after murdering Basil; the latter commands the execution of her beloved Baptist, who before his captivity wandered in the wilderness, proclaiming the name of the Lord. More importantly, however, they recall the sins of the Israelites, who in the atoning liturgy prescribed

⁸⁰ Lawler and Knott note that both *Dorian Gray* and "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." mention the Greek ideal of friendship as a resource for art (394); they do not mention that this Greek aesthetic ideal recurs in "The Fisherman and His Soul."

⁸¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd, and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 39, 12. The link between the classical aesthetic and erotic ideal and the Christian Eucharist may seem like a strained one, as the two traditions are generally opposed. However, many critics have noted that the two traditions informed and stimulated one another in Wilde's imagination. See, for example, Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 136-141 and Roden, *Same-Sex*, 128-137, 141, 149, 151; Hanson, *Decadence*, 258-61. Critics who situate Wilde's combination of classical and allusions in the context of Oxford and/or Oxford Hellenism include Goodenough (341), Hanson (237-39), Roden (155), Duffy (328), and Kate Pendlebury (127), and Wood (156-170).

⁸² Wilde, "Fisherman," 243.

⁸³ Lawler and Knott link the Soul's "adventures in the world" with "the misadventures of Dorian's soul" as reflected in the portrait, noting that split between the body and soul that both Dorian and the Fisherman experience results in one half of the split turning to evil (396-97). Roden and Hanson also suggest a theme of wandering in *Dorian Gray*, the former noting that Wilde wrote the novel "while...travelling within the London homosexual subculture" (141) and the latter describing the novel's protagonist "wandering through London streets at night in search of mysterious sins" (326). Schad highlights that the theme of Christ's wandering in Egypt in Wilde's poem "The Sphinx" (111).

by Leviticus, place their sins through the hands of a priest on the head of a goat, who is then sent to wander in the wilderness, exiled for the sins of the people.⁸⁴ This Levitical liturgy is reenacted by the priest, who, himself acting as Christ the head, places his hands over the chalice and the wafer and consecrates them – an act that both brings Christ the crucified scapegoat into the church and releases the sins of the people onto the scapegoat.⁸⁵ Wilde does not show us this act in “The Fisherman and His Soul,” but we know it occurs because the priest in the final scene raises a consecrated Host for the people to worship. These resonances account for the phobic reaction of the priest when the Fisherman asks him how he can be rid of his soul: his rejection stems from the recognition that is at the heart of fear. Like Salomé and the Baptist, and like the portrait and Dorian, the Fisherman shows the priest himself, refracted back through a mirror that reveals transgressive passion as the invert of Christian love and the carnal sensuality that animates the strictest asceticism.⁸⁶

Rejection, however, is not the final word; the Soul’s journey continues and eventually ends with the meeting of the lovers. In this section of the story, the parallels between the priest and the Fisherman grow even more marked. Like the Christ in whose person the priest stands, the Fisherman undergoes a series of three temptations designed to entice him away from his beloved. The Fisherman successfully overcomes the first two temptations with language

⁸⁴ Leviticus 16:1-34.

⁸⁵ “Canon,” The Holy Mass, accessed February 1, 2020, <http://www.theholymass.com/part3.htm>.

⁸⁶ Hanson (103) and Killeen (164, 181) highlight the importance of the scapegoat for Wilde in the prison writings. Ann Astell reads Wilde as the example par excellence not merely of the Christian conception of the scapegoat, but of René Girard’s concept of scapegoating as the root of all culture: “Wilde gestures toward what Girard, in his description of the scapegoat mechanism, calls a *méconnaissance*, society’s ‘misrecognition’... For Wilde, Christ is the victim par excellence in whom all the scapegoats, the outcast artists, find their true identity.” “My Life is a Work of Art: Oscar Wilde’s Novelistic and Religious Conversion,” *Renascence* 65, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 188-205. Sedgwick also cites Girard in the *Epistemology*; his observation about the mimeticism inherent in calling someone a snob (i.e.: it takes one to know one) guides her assertion that the homophobic practice of sentimentality-attribution works in the same mimetic fashion (152). She does not, however, draw from Girard’s religious understanding of mimeticism, despite discussing religion’s role in Wilde’s thought.

reminiscent of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, responding to the first temptation by declaring that "Love is better than wisdom" and to the second by proclaiming that "Love is better than riches."⁸⁷ The third temptation, however, he ultimately yields to; leaving the sea, he returns to the shore, where the Soul "g[ives] a great cry of joy...r[uns] to meet him, and enter[s] into him."⁸⁸ Reunited, the two venture to see a young maiden who, like Salomé, dances with veils and "naked...feet...like little white pigeons."⁸⁹ The Soul, however, has deceived the Fisherman. Instead of taking him to see the dancing girl, he takes him to a series of cities and directs him to commit a crime in each: stealing a silver cup, smiting a child, and eventually killing a man who offers them hospitality.

Horried at the state of his Soul, the Fisherman decides to return to the Mermaid. In order to withstand the influence of his Soul, he temporarily takes on a kind of asceticism. "I will bind my hands that I may not do thy bidding," he tells the Soul, "and close my lips that I may not speak thy words, and I will return...to the little bay where she is wont to sing, and I will call to her and tell her the evil that I have done and the evil thou has wrought upon me."⁹⁰ Here, as when he professes his love of the Mermaid to the priest, his words echo Christ's in the Sermon on the Mount. After telling his auditors that "whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her in his heart" – the very sin that drew the Fisherman away from the Mermaid – he says, "if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee...and if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee, for it is profitable that one of thy members should perish, than that thy whole body be cast into hell."⁹¹ Even more strikingly,

⁸⁷ Wilde, "Fisherman," 248, 252. Duffy notes these same biblical allusions here (333).

⁸⁸ Wilde, "Fisherman," 252.

⁸⁹ Ibid. In *Salomé*, this phrase technically refers to the moon, but since Salomé herself is frequently compared to the moon, it may by extension be applied to her; see *Salomé*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 583.

⁹⁰ Wilde, "Fisherman," 255.

⁹¹ Matthew 5:28-30.

however, his words echo those of Jokanaan to Salomé, who commands her to go to the shore of the sea and confess her sins to the Son of Man: “Go seek Him. He is in a boat on the sea of Galilee, and He talketh with His disciples. Kneel down on the shore of the sea, and call unto Him by His name. When He cometh to thee (and to all who call on Him He cometh), bow thyself at His feet and ask of Him the remission of thy sins.”⁹² Though earlier in the story, the Fisherman seems like Salomé’s double, with his overwhelming desire to possess the body of the Mermaid and his willingness to violate religious prohibitions to do so, here he seems far more like the double of the Baptist, eschewing the temptations of the senses and naming his sins on the shore of the sea to one who has the power to forgive them.

Ultimately, however, the confession on the shore commanded by the saint and the kiss demanded by the sinner are, for Wilde, one and the same.⁹³ The Fisherman returns to the shore and lives the life of a hermit for two years, building himself a house of wattles and doing daily devotions to the Mermaid, calling for her to return to him every morning, noon, and night. At the beginning of the third year, his prayer is answered: the Mermaid’s body floats across the waves “like a flower” and washes up on the shore.⁹⁴ As the Fisherman holds her in his arms and weeps over her, Wilde’s language grows distinctly sacramental:

Weeping as one smitten with pain, he flung himself down beside it, and he kissed the cold red of the mouth...weeping as one trembling with joy, and in his brown arms he held it to his breast. Cold were the lips, yet he kissed them. Salt was the honey of the hair, yet he tasted it with a bitter joy. He kissed the closed eyelids, and the wild spray that lay upon their cups was less than salt to his tears.

And to the dead thing he made confession. Into the shells of its ears he poured the harsh wine of his tale. He put the little hands round his neck, and with his fingers

⁹² Wilde, *Salomé*, 591.

⁹³ Both Hanson (274) and John Schad (95) quote an observation from one of Wilde’s letters: “But the saint and the artistic Hedonist certainly meet – touch in many parts.” Schad builds on this quote, noting that “ten years later, [the saint and the sinner] also kiss” (95) when Wilde kisses a seminarian behind the altar in Palermo. This latter observation directed by attention to the confluence of these images in “The Fisherman and His Soul.”

⁹⁴ Wilde, “Fisherman,” 257.

he touched the thin reed of the throat. Bitter, bitter was his joy, and full of strange gladness was his pain...

But the young Fisherman...called on the little mermaid and said, "Love is better than wisdom, and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men. The fires cannot destroy it, nor can the waters quench it. I called on thee at dawn, and thou didst not come to my call. The moon heard thy name, yet hadst thou no heed of me. For evilly had I left thee, and to my own hurt had I wandered away. Yet ever did thy love abide with me, and ever was it strong, nor did aught prevail against it, though I have looked upon evil and looked upon good. And now that thou art dead, surely I will die with thee also."⁹⁵

By having the Fisherman make a confession to the Mermaid, Wilde invokes one of the fiercest controversies in the Victorian religious landscape: auricular confession. As Hanson discusses in some detail, the concept of auricular confession shocked many Victorian Protestants, as it inserted a mediator between the individual Christian and God and compromised the modesty of Victorian women and children by directing them to confess their sins to an unmarried man.⁹⁶ By having the Fisherman not merely make a confession, but find pleasure in it,⁹⁷ Wilde simultaneously foreshadows Dorian's fascination with the "dim shadow[s]" of the "black confessionals...[where] men and women whisper through the worn grating the true stories of their lives" and stokes the worst evangelical fears about the nature of the confessional.⁹⁸ The dead mermaid who listens to the story of his sins not only resembles Salomé, whose "final, necrophilic kiss spiced with the taste of blood" concludes the play, but also resembles the Catholic Church of the Protestant imagination.⁹⁹ Various compared to a vampire, a pagan cult, and the biblical whore of Babylon, Catholicism was not merely a religious but a specifically

⁹⁵ Wilde, "Fisherman," 257.

⁹⁶ Hanson, *Decadence*, 280-296. Hanson views *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *De Profundis* as "reversal[s]" of the "redemptive and disciplinary intention of auricular confession" (296); the deliberate vagueness with which Wilde describes his sins and the sins of his characters constitutes a revision of the sacrament that anticipates post-modernity's skepticism about language's capacity to represent truth.

⁹⁷ Hanson discusses the pleasures of the confession (291).

⁹⁸ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 101. Hanson discusses Dorian's fascination with the confessional at length (283-291).

⁹⁹ Hanson, *Decadence*, 266.

sexual threat in the eyes of the Protestant establishment.¹⁰⁰ Replacing the priest with a dead beloved suggests that a physically non-generative, even decaying love might, paradoxically, be the most fruitful and spiritually generative.¹⁰¹

That suggestion, as Wilde knew, was as Catholic as it was queer. The imagery in the passage – a bitter-tasting cup, a confession like “harsh wine,” and a heart broken in love’s supreme sacrifice – connotes the dying, Eucharistic Christ as well as the sacrament of confession. This converts the scene into a kind of *pietà*, as the biblically infused language of love that the Fisherman speaks to the dead mermaid evokes Christ’s mother.¹⁰² As Duffy and Hanson note,¹⁰³ the Fisherman’s words resemble those of the beloved young bride in the Song of Songs, who declares that “Love is as strong as death...the coals thereof are fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.”¹⁰⁴

These Old Testament words, through the often-torturous gymnastics of patristic and medieval typological interpretation, become those of the New Testament church, speaking passionately of Christ her lover and, through this ecclesiological interpretation, they become those of Mary his mother as well.¹⁰⁵ Hanson, writing on *Salomé*, notes the similarly odd juxtaposition of bridal desire and virgin purity as she holds the head of the Baptist in her arms: “Salomé also resembles the Blessed Virgin...[she] makes much of her virginity, as she sees in it the mirror of the moon...Her final long monologue, spoken to the dismembered head...[she]

¹⁰⁰ Hanson, *Decadence*, 263-267.

¹⁰¹ Duffy highlights the “unproductive love” shared by characters of different species across several of the fairy tales (333-335).

¹⁰² Hanson notes the final *pietà* at the conclusion of Wilde’s play *The Duchess of Padua*, where two adulterous lovers receive God’s forgiveness and die in one another’s arms (95).

¹⁰³ Duffy, “Gay-Related,” 333; Hanson, *Decadence*, 278.

¹⁰⁴ Song of Songs 8:6-7.

¹⁰⁵ Many theologians and church historians discuss the dual interpretation of the beloved in the Song of Songs as a figure who foreshadows the both Virgin Mary and Christ’s bride, the Church. See, for example, Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 42-72.

could have quoted almost word for word from the Shulamite bride.”¹⁰⁶ Wilde glides along the chain of these symbols in the passage above, arousing discomfort as they signify lover and beloved, male and female, mother and son, virginity and iniquity all at once. That discomfort only increases when the Soul, seeing in the broken heart an entrance for itself, reunites fully with the Fisherman, penetrating him as the waves pound the shore and send all three – finally united as one body, heart, and soul – to their watery grave. The priest’s command that they be buried in an unmarked grave at the corner of the Fuller’s Field only confirms the inverted erotics that quicken Wilde’s theological imagination.

As we have seen, however, what the priest marginalizes returns to the center. In John’s Gospel, Christ declares, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.”¹⁰⁷ The Fisherman, the Mermaid, and the Soul do not abide alone, but die together, and bring forth not fruit, but a flower. This flower changes very core of the priest’s sacramental life; no longer proclaiming a God of wrath, the substance of his sermon changes to reveal a God of love. The revelation carries him beyond the walls of the church and to the shores of the sea, where he grants the blessings of the church to the depths that brought forth the Fisherman and his beloved. “Love only should one consider,” says Salomé in her penultimate lines of the play – words that could well have concluded the priest’s sermon.¹⁰⁸ Just as the priest blesses “all the things in God’s world,” so too Wilde baptizes all the loves in God’s world, loves sacred or profane, violent or gentle, sensualist or ascetic, or – as is most often the case in his works – loves that bind both up in one.

¹⁰⁶ Hanson, *Decadence*, 278.

¹⁰⁷ John 12:24.

¹⁰⁸ Wilde, *Salomé*, 604.

Yet neither Salomé nor the priest is given the final word. Wilde repeatedly denies the efficacy of his Eucharistic miracles; as Michelle Ruggaber observes, the tales prompts readers to question “the efficacy of religious institutions.”¹⁰⁹ Salomé is crushed to death by soldiers at Herod’s command; Dorian’s reunion with his soul leaves him lifeless on the attic floor; the flowers that bloom out of the heart of the executed trooper exist only in the imagination of the narrator of *The Ballad*; and the flowers that blossom over the grave of the Fisherman and the Mermaid never arise again, nor do the blessings of the church keep the sea-people in the bay.¹¹⁰

Scholars have speculated on the significance of these grim endings. Justin T. Jones argues that even the fairy tales that seem the most redemptive ultimately fail to produce any “authentic moral transformation”; the tales thus reflect Wilde’s commitment to “the artist’s aesthetic prerogative over ugly reality and its moral authority.”¹¹¹ Mounsey declares that the ending of “The Fisherman and His Soul” indicates Wilde’s “exit from organized religions,”¹¹² while Quintus observes that “sudden reversals” are characteristic of Wilde’s endings and that,¹¹³ even if the endings are “without consequence,” they still reflect the Christian imagination of their author.¹¹⁴ Kate Pendlebury notes that ephemerality and ambiguity characterize the morality of tales,¹¹⁵ and Elizabeth Goodenough similarly sees Wilde as the rare believer honest enough to admit that “whatever sacred moments of sacrificial love arise amid the world’s wanton cruelty ... come as fleeting miracles.”¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹ Ruggaber, “Bedtime Stories,” 145.

¹¹⁰ Hanson, *Decadence*, 98.

¹¹¹ Jones, “Ugly Implications,” 895, 895.

¹¹² Mounsey, *Being the Body*, 34.

¹¹³ Quintus’s words here describe the ending of Wilde’s poem “The Sphinx,” though they can be applied to the fairy tales as well. See “Christ, Christianity,” 520.

¹¹⁴ Quintus here comments on the Nightingale’s death in “The Nightingale and the Swallow,” noting that the sacrifice of the titular Nightingale represents Christ even if her death is not ultimately efficacious. See “Christ, Christianity,” 519.

¹¹⁵ Pendlebury, “Building,” 129, 136-140.

¹¹⁶ Goodenough, “Meanings of Atonement,” 348.

To these persuasive interpretations, I would only add a brief biographical and theoretical remark. Though Ross's presence certainly marked a return of Catholicized eroticism to Wilde's life, neither man would commit to the Church as any serious source of spiritual truth or sustenance until years later, Ross in 1894 and Wilde, if at all, in 1900. "The Fisherman and His Soul" emerges from an intrigued, exploratory posture towards these rediscovered erotic and religious delights. Publicly, Wilde still wore the mask of the respectable married man, even as his disgust at Constance's bloated post-partum body pulled them further and further apart.¹¹⁷

Such softness, such weakness, such tentativeness, also characterizes his approach to the Eucharistic expiation and reunion that recurs in his texts from this period. Willing to flirt with the possibility of individual instances or moments of transformation, Wilde cannot persuade himself of their permanent or fixed significance. Watching Dorian watch the Mass, the novel's narrator revels in the sensuous details of the drama that presents the "pallid wafer that at times, one would fain think, is indeed the 'panis caelestis' the bread of angels."¹¹⁸ "At times," "fain think" – this is not the confident conviction of the priest's pre-Eucharistic prayer that proclaims, "It is truly fitting and just, proper and beneficial, that we should *always and everywhere* give thanks unto Thee, holy Lord, Father *almighty, everlasting* God, through Christ our Lord."¹¹⁹ Wilde had neither interest in or need for such absolute, atemporal claims at this point in his aesthetic and religious development. Moving past the marked sensuality and eroticism of the fairy tales, *Dorian Gray*, and *Salomé*, Wilde disguises himself even more cunningly in the costume of bourgeois respectability. He turns his eyes from the mythical past to modern present and from tragedy to comedy, burying homoeroticism and Catholicism even more deeply beneath

¹¹⁷ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 266.

¹¹⁸ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 135.

¹¹⁹ *Resources for the Extraordinary Form of the Mass*, "Latin-English Hand Missal for the Traditional Latin Mass," <http://www.extraordinaryform.org/handmissals/HandMissal.pdf>.

the parody and mockery that skirts across the surface of his society plays. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, the bearer of this buried burden is an invisible, phantom-like fool whose name, fittingly enough, is “Bunbury.”

CHAPTER 2 BUNBURYING AND BAPTISM, OR, THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ADOPTED

In December of 1894, John Francis Bloxham published “The Priest and the Acolyte” in the first – and only – edition of *The Chameleon*.¹ Placed next to Wilde’s “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young” and Lord Alfred Douglas’s “Two Loves,” Bloxham’s story is deliberately designed to shock.² An Anglo-Catholic priest falls in love with his young acolyte, who requites with equal ardor. Upon being discovered, the two decide to consecrate their love in death. The priest poisons the chalice containing the sacrament and administers it to the acolyte and himself. The story concludes with the two lovers locked in erotic, Eucharistic embrace: “The sad-faced figure of the crucifix hung there in its majestic calm. On the steps of the altar was stretched the long, ascetic frame of the young priest robed in the sacred vestments; close beside him...lay the beautiful boy in scarlet and lace. Their arms were round each other; a strange hush lay like a shroud over all.”³ It’s hard to imagine a story more perfectly pitched to please the author of *Salomé* and “The Fisherman and His Soul.”

Yet Wilde remained unimpressed. “The story is, to my ears, too direct: there is no nuance: it profanes a little by revelation,” he wrote to friend Ada Leverson. “God and other artists are always a little obscure.”⁴ Such obscurity would characterize Wilde’s own portrayal of Bloxham in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As Christopher Craft observes, Wilde transforms the “undergraduate of strange beauty” into a “lady considerably advanced in years”: John Francis Bloxham becomes Lady Bloxham, the woman to whom Jack lets his house in Half-Moon Street.⁵

¹ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 428.

² Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 298-299.

³ John Francis Bloxham, *The Priest and the Acolyte* (London, 1907; Project Gutenberg, 2019), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/60229/60229-h/60229-h.htm>.

⁴ Wilde qtd. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 428.

⁵ Christopher Craft, *Another Kind of Love: Male Homosexual Desire in English Discourse, 1850-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 123.

Bloxham's presence is thus changed beyond recognition and inaudible to all but those who have ears to hear.⁶

This transformation guides my reading of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play hinges on two crucial absences: the absence of Bunbury and the absence of Jack's real father.⁷ Critics have made sense of these absences in a number of ways. Jonathan Dollimore argues the play demonstrates Wilde's anti-essentialism; human subjectivity is no more sincere or substantial than the masks that Jack and Algernon wear in their pursuit of pleasure and marriage.⁸ Similarly, Craft sees the play as "a withering critique of the political idea...that anyone's sexuality, inverted or otherwise, could be natural or unnatural at all."⁹ Brigitte Bastiat suggests that Wilde anticipates the contributions of Judith Butler, enacting a kind of gender parody.¹⁰ Wilde thus emerges as a proto-postmodernist, constructing subjectivity as pure performativity and truth as nothing but disguises.

Other critics, however, detect a note of sincerity hidden behind all the puns and plot twists. John Schad places the play in Wilde's overall critique of secularization, arguing that Wilde makes "an intuitive link between being queer and being Christian" in a context where religion was growing increasingly nominal.¹¹ Jarlath Killeen contends that Anglo-Catholicism's

⁶ Cf. Matthew 11:15. Craft notes the importance of hearing in the play (124), arguing that the homophonics of the play's central pun connote its homoerotics (130-139).

⁷ It should go without saying that this insight about absences is not original to me, but turns up repeatedly in scholarship on the play. My aim merely is to produce a (somewhat) new account of these absences.

⁸ See Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 6-18 for an overview of Wildean anti-essentialism; see pages 16-17 for these themes in *Earnest*, where Dollimore highlights Wilde's ironic use of mask imagery.

⁹ Craft, *Another Kind*, 112.

¹⁰ Bastiat, "The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) by Oscar Wilde: Conformity and Resistance in Victorian Society," *Cahiers Victorians and Édouardiens* 72 (2010): 55. Bastiat acknowledges that the play invites multiple readings – including an anti-essentialist reading in which Wilde "debunk[s] the very notion of seriousness" (59) and a satirical reading in which Wilde "tackle[s] serious subjects but did not believe his public would understand his attempts at turning traditions and preconceived notions upside down" (59).

¹¹ John Schad, *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 96. For Schad's discussion of *Earnest*, see pages 95-6, 105-6, and 109-113.

rejection of the gender norms and nuclear family of mainstream Victorian Anglicanism shapes its homosexual subtext.¹² Ellmann notes that Wilde was under a good deal of psychological duress during the composition of *Earnest* and that his escalating conflict with the Marquess of Queensberry made him transpose the themes of sin, repentance, and regeneration that appear in *Dorian Gray*, *Salomé*, and *An Ideal Husband* into a high-comic key.¹³

I ally myself with this latter group of critics, seeing in *The Importance of Being Earnest* traces of the Catholic themes that had preoccupied Wilde in earlier works, obscured and twisted almost beyond recognition. However, I rely repeatedly on the anti-essentialist Craft throughout my analysis, not only because his reading is so persuasive, but because the arc of his argument mirrors the arc of the Christian narrative: the queer excess and anti-essentialism represented by bunburying, by punning, by the nonsense Algernon repeatedly talks are “ritually expelled” in favor of marriage, of inheritance, of the “name of the Father” – only to have these despised and rejected queer elements return and reunite within the heterosexual happy ending.¹⁴ Craft’s language glancingly and tantalizingly alludes to the religious resonances hidden deep within *Earnest*, but his analysis of them remains underdeveloped; on the rare occasion where he does discuss the religious language in the play, he reads it as a mere signifier for queer desire rather than as the product of an imagination whose religious and erotic elements mutually stimulate one another.

¹² Jarlath Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore and Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 138-161.

¹³ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 417-423.

¹⁴ Craft, *Another Kind*, 115. Craft uses the language of resurrection to describe this process: “Passing away only to be passed on, Bunbury is buried, and buried alive, within the duplicitous precincts of the presumptively ‘natural’ male subject...Apparently not every explosion, however terminal, implies a death. In Bunbury’s end is Ernest John’s beginning” (138). I include this quote to indicate why Craft’s argument was so suggestive to me. For the sake of space, I will not mention every instance where his language is religiously inflected, but his rhetoric informs my argument throughout this chapter.

I also rely on Killeen, to whose reading of the play I am indebted. Like him, I see Wilde resisting the gender norms of Protestantism's patriarchal "muscular Christianity" by embedding the queer valences of Catholicism throughout the play.¹⁵ However, while Killeen sees Wilde drawing on the resources of the specifically Anglo-Catholic tradition to stage his resistance, I argue that he also uses the resources of the very same biblical, prayer-book Protestantism he mocks. Building on the work of these critics, this chapter rereads *The Importance of Being Earnest* with an eye to the ways in which Wilde cunningly repackages Catholic and erotic themes of earlier works to make them palatable to an Anglican audience. Though he famously derided consistency as "the last refuge of the unimaginative," in *Earnest* Wilde consistently and imaginatively engages the Eucharistic and baptismal images that repeatedly emerge in his work, queering them more subtly than in any earlier text.¹⁶

Halfway through the first act, Algernon delivers one of the play's best-known axioms: "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his."¹⁷ It may be a tragedy for Algernon, but for the audience, men's inability to become like their mothers forms the central comedy of the play. *The Importance of Being Earnest* focuses on the strategic ways women make the constraints of patriarchy work in their interests.¹⁸ For Wilde, women have

¹⁵ Killeen's discusses Anglo-Catholicism's resistance to muscular Christianity (140-156).

¹⁶ Wilde qtd. Jure Gantar, *The Evolution of Wilde's Wit* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 128.

¹⁷ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Carol T. Christ, Alfred David, et. al (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 2234. Patrick M. Horan flags this quote as evidence of the high regard in which Wilde held his mother, using it as the epigraph for the introduction to his study of "Maternal Presence in the Works of Oscar Wilde"; see *The Importance of Being Paradoxical: Maternal Presence in the Works of Oscar Wilde* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997), 13. However, it was Victoria White's scholarship on Wilde that first directed my attention to Wilde's depiction of the maternal. She offers a searing critique of Wilde's sexism, arguing that any feminism in his work stemmed from his ambivalent admiration of his mother, whose classist tendencies powerfully influenced her son. "Women of No Importance: Misogyny in the Work of Oscar Wilde," in *Wilde the Irishman*, ed. Jerusha McCormack (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 159.

¹⁸ My argument here parallels Killeen's. Killeen contrasts the behavior of Jack and Algernon, who constantly try to hide their duplicity, with that of the women characters, who "are comfortable and at ease with paradox and contradiction" (155). He attributes Jack and Algernon's need for duplicity to their attempt to live up to "the muscular Christian ideals" of respectability and duty (152), and he attributes the women's comfort with duplicity to

a unique ability to reinvent themselves through marriage. When a woman marries, she erases the identity she was given at birth, gaining a new name and new identity through her husband; when a man marries, by contrast, he perpetuates the identity he was given at birth, passing his father's name on to a wife and children.¹⁹ Though *Earnest* postdates the spike in bigamy-plot sensation novels of the 1860s and 1870s, it nevertheless engages the same themes of feminine artifice and subversion.²⁰ Lady Bracknell begins by rejecting Jack's request for Gwendolyn's hand out of genteel horror at his handbag heritage and speaks throughout the play as the voice of Victorian social norms and class prerogatives. But in one of the many third-act revelations, we learn that Lady Bracknell comes to this role not by birth, but by marriage.²¹ In Act III, she reveals that she married Lord Bracknell with "no fortune of any kind" – and, since aristocratic titles pass from husband to wife but not from wife to husband,²² it's equally possible that she married him with "no title of any kind" as well.²³

Anglo-Catholic Ritualism. Ritualism not only ignores the dictates of nature through its account of the sacraments, but it also was, in the account of its detractors, a movement of effeminate priests and forceful women (147-156). Ritualism thus enables the female characters to succeed not by blatantly rejecting gender norms and "nature," but "by working within Victorian conventions...[and] continually exploiting them for their own purposes" (152). Jack and Algernon must therefore abandon their "schizoid muscular Christian" lives and "become Ritualists like the other characters" (152). While I agree that the play advocates the subversion of society's expectations from within and that the women are much better at this subversion than the two male protagonists, I argue that marriage, rather than Ritualism, is the source of the women's subversive power. Though Wilde will draw on Catholicism at other points in the play, he in this instance lampoons the Victorian Protestant obsession with marriage.

¹⁹ I draw this emphasis on escaping the identity given at birth from Craft, who traces how Wilde's anti-essentialist project defies patriarchal logocentrism and "delegitimizes any claim of ontological authority or natural reference" through queer, proto-Derridean puns and a plot that "installs a death or termination at the origin of male subjectivity" (109). He also notes that the state permitted Constance Wilde to legally change her own last name and that of their two children to "Holland," thus "rescinding Wilde's right to propagate the Name of the Father" (139). Craft's argument about the erasing the "paternal signifier" and the "Name of the Father" may be found on pages 109-139.

²⁰ Maia McAleavey identifies 270 novels from 1850 onwards that adhere to what she calls bigamy plot, and notes that while the plot gradually waned in popularity over the course of the century, 53 bigamy plots were nevertheless published in the 1890s. *The Bigamy Plot: Sensation and Convention in Victorian Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1, 2, 168.

²¹ Bastiat also notes that Lady Bracknell married into her upper-class position (57).

²² Hannah Furness, "Civil partners of knights and peers should get honorary title just like wives do, MP argues," *The Telegraph*, July 2, 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9368303/Civil-partners-of-knights-and-peers-should-get-honorary-title-just-like-wives-do-MP-argues.html>.

²³ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2258.

Indeed, Lady Bracknell is the only character whose ordinary identity we are never privy to; although we know the full name – Christian, maiden and family – of every single other character, we never are told what Lady Bracknell’s full name was at birth. More than Gwendolyn, more than Cecily, more even than bunburying Algernon and John Jack Ernest Worthing Moncrieff, Lady Bracknell has thoroughly eradicated her given identity and created a new one for herself.²⁴ This triumph accounts for the praise of mothers scattered throughout the play – praise that, given Lady Bracknell’s continual efforts to frustrate the courtship of Jack and Gwendolyn, would otherwise be baffling – as well as the fierceness with which Gwendolyn and Cecily compete for the coveted title of Mrs. Ernest Worthing.²⁵ In what Tony W. Garland calls a “contest of naming,” the two women begin their teatime tête-à-tête by calling one another by their Christian names and a variety of endearments, thus avoiding the paternal inscription and the name of the father.²⁶ When each learn, however, that the other threatens her quest to become Mrs. Ernest Worthing, they immediately revert to calling each other “Miss Fairfax” and “Miss

²⁴ Horan’s study demonstrates that Lady Wilde performed similar acrobatics of identity and name-shifting. Much like Lady Bracknell, her origins are somewhat mysterious: Her baptismal record has never been found and scholars remain uncertain of the exact date and location of her birth (17). Nevertheless, just as Lady Bracknell “never dream[s] of allowing” her lack of fortune “to stand in the way” of her social climbing, so too Lady Wilde didn’t allow her uncertain origins to hold her back from developing new ones. She was an accomplished poet, using the pseudonym “Speranza” (16). Additionally, Horan writes, “she knew that a noble family lineage was a prerequisite for social ascendancy; consequently, she popularized the notion that her ancestral name Elgee was a corrupt form of ‘Alighieri,’ thereby claiming descent from Dante. In actuality, her great-grandfather Charles Elgee was a bricklayer from County Durham” (17).

²⁵ Although Jack calls Lady Bracknell “a Gorgon” and “a monster, without being a myth,” in the four-act version of the play, he is far more complimentary to mothers: “After all, what does it matter whether a man has ever had a father and mother or not? Mothers, of course, are all right. They pay a chap’s bills and don’t bother him. But fathers bother a chap and never pay his bills. I don’t know a single chap at the club who speaks to his father” (2234, 2233n6). Killeen also argues that Lady Bracknell’s acceptance of duplicity makes her the true hero and victor of the play (148-152)

²⁶ Garland argues that Wilde gives men some power of naming, but not nearly as much as he gives women: “Men may name themselves,” but it is women who “name others to exert power and ultimately provide the inevitably happy ending.” “The Contest of Naming Between Ladies in *The Importance of Being Earnest*,” *The Explicator* 70, no. 4 (2012): 272. Bastiat similarly observes that it is Lady Bracknell who has “the power of decision, the power of money, and the power of language” (57). Killeen also notes the remarkable power she possesses over the fates of other characters (150).

Cardew” – a sharp reminder that while escape from the ordinary, paternal identity is possible, it hasn’t occurred for either yet.²⁷

But while marriage might be the strategy by which Gwendolyn, Cecily, and Lady Bracknell reinvent themselves, it holds no such possibilities for Jack and Algernon. Perhaps inspired by the subversive ingenuity of the marital model, they look to the church for resources and select baptism as the means by which they will remake themselves. When Jack tells Algernon that he has come to London to propose to Gwendolyn, the other replies with distaste: “I thought you had come up for pleasure? I call that business.”²⁸ It may begin as business, but the business of marriage quickly skids into the sacrament of baptism for both of them. “Gwendolyn, I must get christened at once – I mean we must be married at once,” Jack fumblingly proclaims to his beloved.²⁹ In the next act, Algernon likewise bumbles through his response to Cecily: “I must see [Dr. Chasuble] at once on a most important christening – I mean a most important business.”³⁰

Like marriage, this at first may seem like an odd choice: Why choose as a means of escape from the name of the Father the very process that perpetuates it? But even as Wilde collapses the dreary duties of the bourgeois man – finding a profession (business) and finding a wife (marriage) – into a single sacramental task, he imbues that task with distinctly queer resonances. In several four-act versions of the play, Dr. Chasuble speaks what Craft describes as “an outrageous chain of gay metonyms” that recall Wilde’s own erotic exploits:

Oh, I am not by any means a bigoted *paedobaptist*...You need have no apprehensions [about immersion]...*Sprinkling* is all that is necessary, or indeed, I

²⁷ Garland notes that the switch to the use of last names serves as “an attempt to secure the other woman’s unmarried status” (273).

²⁸ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2244.

²⁹ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2230.

³⁰ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2247. Craft observes: “In the shuttle of self-representation, being itself must slip on a name or two” (128). The same may be said of the play’s sacramental economy: In the shuttle of self-representation, being itself must slip on a sacrament or two.

think, advisable...I have two similar ceremonies to perform...A case of twins that occurred recently *in one of the outlying cottages* on your estate...I don't know if you would care to *join them at the Font*. Personally I do not approve myself of *the obliteration of class distinctions*.³¹

“[T]he obliteration of class distinctions” becomes in Craft’s reading a gesture to Wilde’s frequent patronization of young male prostitutes, and “paedobaptism” and “join[ing] at the Font” a euphemism for the acts of gross indecency he would perform with them.³² Even the seemingly innocent word “cottages” corresponds to an accusation of Queensberry’s: “at a house called ‘The Cottage’ in Goring....[Oscar Wilde] did solicit and incite...the said acts.”³³ Wilde thus inserts “Bunburied significations” throughout his sacramental symbolism,³⁴ leading Dr. Chasuble to comment that “corrupt readings seem to have crept into the text.”³⁵

Yet while Craft’s reading is provocative, he does not dig quite deep enough in search of the buried Mr. Bunbury. The “corrupt,” queer readings that have “crept” into the text are neither original to Wilde, nor unique to his erotic experiences. Craft highlights how the play teeters between “natural,” teleological marriage and “unnatural,” queer Bunburying, ultimately integrating them in an “irreducible isomorphism.”³⁶ A closer look, however, reveals another binarism integrated into an “irreducible isomorphism”: that of the “unnatural” family structure of adoption and the “natural” family structure of blood relations – an isomorphism authorized by the sacrament of baptism itself. From the very beginning of his gospel, St. John establishes baptism as kind of non-sexual reproduction: “But as many as received [Christ], to them [God] gave the power to become sons of God...Which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the

³¹ Craft pulls together a series of quotes from earlier drafts of the play (125). He does not emphasize these phrases in the block quote, but discusses each of them individually in the paragraph following the block quote.

³² Craft, *Another Kind*, 125.

³³ Queensberry qtd. Craft, *Another Kind*, 125.

³⁴ Craft, *Another Kind*, 125.

³⁵ Wilde qtd. Craft, *Another Kind*, 125.

³⁶ Craft, *Another Kind*, 137.

flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”³⁷ Similarly, St. Paul describes baptism in terms of adoption, writing in the epistle to the Galatians that “when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son...that we might receive adoption as sons” and in the epistle to the Romans that the Christian has received “the Spirit of adoption” from God.³⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer* echoes these images: In the order for paedobaptism, the minister baptizes the child, prays for him, and then announces to the congregation that “this child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ’s Church” – a biblical, ecological image of adoption that connotes unnatural, artificial insertion and penetration.³⁹ Far from “creeping” into the text, Wilde’s “corrupt readings” of baptism merely revive the queer potentiality that has lain dormant within the tradition all along.

This queer potentiality governs Jack’s character arc throughout the course of the play. Although born with the name Ernest John Moncrieff, he eludes the name of the father not through any efforts of his own, but instead through the intervention of “an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition,” Mr. Thomas Cardew.⁴⁰ Tellingly, although Cardew does endow Jack with some property, he does not give him his own name, instead naming him for the destination of the “first-class [train] ticket...in his pocket.”⁴¹ Yet even this new identity proves insufficient to escape the paternal inscription. As Cecily’s guardian, Jack has been placed in the position of adoptive father. This position, as he explains to Algernon, forces him to “*adopt* a very high moral tone” when in the country and to adopt an altogether new identity when in in town.⁴²

³⁷ John 1:12-13.

³⁸ Galatians 4:4-5, Romans 8:15.

³⁹ “The Ministration of the Publick Baptism of Infants to be used in the Church,” in *The Book of Common Prayer, And Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Use of The Church of England; Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David* (Cambridge: John Baskerville, 1762), 332, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=_sYUAAAQAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA19-IA284.

⁴⁰ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2232.

⁴¹ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2232.

⁴² Wilde, *Earnest*, 2226, emphasis mine.

Upon learning that Gwendolyn will only marry a man “of the name of Ernest,” he seeks to permanently inscribe this latter adopted identity upon himself through christening – a form of adoption.⁴³

Algernon’s status as adopted is far less obvious than Jack’s, but the play hints at it as well. Algernon attempts to assert his cousinly authority over Gwendolyn by objecting to her private conversation with Jack at the end of Act I. Gwendolyn quickly reminds him that he has no natural authority in the situation and uses the language of adoption to do so. “Really, Gwendolyn, I don’t think I can allow this at all,” Algernon says, to which she quickly retorts: “Algy, you always *adopt* a strictly immoral attitude towards life. You are not quite old enough to do that.”⁴⁴ And like Jack, Algernon adopts the identity of Ernest Worthing and seeks to seal that identity upon himself through baptism.

Ultimately, however, these attempts to erase the paternal inscription and establish a new identity come to nothing. Jack learns that his adopted identity of Ernest isn’t, in fact, adopted: He was given his father’s name, Ernest John Moncrieff, at birth. But while the play appears to thwart Jack’s escape from the paternal inscription and fix the name of the father on him forever,

⁴³ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2230. I am far from the first to observe the crucial role baptism plays in *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the attempts of the characters to create a new identity. Peter Raby, for instance, notes that “With all its artifice, Earnest concludes with a spectacular set piece of pleasure and affirmation, in which the self-created John Worthing christens himself to his own immense satisfaction...The self-christening certainly triumphs – although, as the four-act version indicates, a more thorough re-birth may be appropriate.” “Wilde, and How to Be Modern: or, Bags of Red Gold” in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Considerations*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 158-159. Similarly, John Sloan observes that “One of the play’s central images, as one commentator has pointed out, is baptism – the symbolic reminder of man’s guilt and spiritual rebirth, here comically overturned by characters who, reclaiming the past are allowed effectively to rebaptize and name themselves.” *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 163. Brigitte Bastiat sees baptism as the means by which the characters enact a Butlerian gender parody; Jack and Algernon’s attempts to baptize themselves as Ernest “imitate a model with no origin since Ernest never existed in the first place.” “The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) by Oscar Wilde: Conformity and Resistance in Victorian Society,” *Cahiers Victoriens & Édouardiens* 72 (2010): 55. Bastiat’s argument ultimately proved most helpful in forming my own. Viewing baptism as a non-originary origin dovetails with Craft’s reading of the play as a Derridean comedy in which the “natural” origin of bourgeois heterosexism is exposed as “an irreducible secondariness that...should but cannot authorize all that comes after” (109). I address the non-originary origins of baptism later on.

⁴⁴ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2235, emphasis mine.

in reality, it actually affirms and enables that escape. Jack's real name is Ernest John, which, as Craft points out, is merely a combination of the two names he adopted while Bunburying.⁴⁵ Moreover, he discovers this identity not through the direct intervention of a father, but through a series of circuitous enquiries to mother figures – first to Miss Prism, then to Lady Bracknell, and then, finally, to the army lists.⁴⁶ Even in these lists, Jack finds a maternal rather than a paternal presence; as Joel Fineman points out, “all the names of the fathers in the list that [he] reads begin with the name of the mother... ‘Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff.’”⁴⁷ The escape continues to the final word of the play, where Jack simultaneously confirms the heterosexist order by claiming the name he inherited from his father and undoes it by making a pun on the double, homonymic meaning of “earnest/Ernest”⁴⁸ – a pun being that which, in Craft's words, “cunningly erases...the semantic differential by whose contrary labor the hetero is both made to appear and made to appear natural, lucid, self-evident.”⁴⁹

It is not simply Jack's name itself that simultaneously confirms and undoes the heterosexist order, however; the process by which he receives his name does so as well. The only way the Christian name of the natural father can be inscribed on a son is through an act that imitates the supernatural, adoptive fatherhood of an invisible, silent God – God being one of the play's many absent fathers, along with General Ernest John Moncrieff and Lord Bracknell. John Schad observes: “British theatre censorship clearly prohibited the portrayal of any biblical character...in this sense, the Victorian Christ was forever offstage, confined to the page...the house of the theatre is lonely...God is *not* in the house and the Bible and its characters *cannot* be

⁴⁵ Craft, *Another Kind*, 115.

⁴⁶ Garland highlights how Wilde gives “the authority to name...to the matriarchal figure of Lady Bracknell” in the final scene; instead of having Dr. Chasuble christen Jack, it is Lady Bracknell who informs him of his true identity and “sanction[s] his existence as Ernest” (274).

⁴⁷ Joel Fineman, “The Significance of Literature: ‘The Importance of Being Earnest,’” *October* 15 (1980): 82.

⁴⁸ Craft, *Another Kind*, 133-138.

⁴⁹ Craft, *Another Kind*, 133.

staged.”⁵⁰ *Earnest*, therefore, may be seen as a subtle retort to the censor.⁵¹ Having fused his erotic and religious desires in *Salomé* and had his attempt to display them denied by the censor,⁵² Wilde responds with what Craft calls “a complete and completely parodic submission.”⁵³ In the same way that he parodies the marriage plot through the “extreme formalism” of his submission to it and hints at homoeroticism through the titular pun, he simultaneously submits to the censor’s interdict and hints at his defiance of it.⁵⁴ He repeatedly evokes Christ’s forbidden presence through the use of the word “christening” and repeatedly mocks Christ’s demanded absence through the many absent fathers that drive the baptismal plot.⁵⁵ Wilde would later speak lovingly of “the Christ who is not in Churches.”⁵⁶ Here, he subtly reminds the audience of the Father God who is not found in theatres.

Moreover, the family that Jack winds up with at the end of the play also evinces the link between baptism and queer erotics in Wilde’s imagination. Killeen argues that the play deliberately engages the “Anglo-Catholic challenge to the traditional family.”⁵⁷ “Brother Ernest” – that is, Algernon in disguise – returns unexpectedly from the dead and greets the flabbergasted “Brother John”; Gwendolyn and Cecily likewise form a “sisterhood” soon after their meeting.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Schad, *Queer Fish*, 109, 112.

⁵¹ Killeen also sees the play as Wilde’s contribution to a religious controversy: “[T]he opposition to modernity and its Protestant engine is deflected... This is still a fight, but the fight is more subtly inflected” (161).

⁵² Schad highlights the censor’s ban of *Salomé* (109-110).

⁵³ Craft, *Another Kind*, 112.

⁵⁴ Craft, *Another Kind*, 113.

⁵⁵ Schad makes this same point but with a different piece of dialogue; he highlights the moment where Jack quotes Christ’s words to the women caught in adultery – “who has the right to cast a stone?” – to Miss Prism as a moment where “Christ himself... is almost onstage... but not quite” (109).

⁵⁶ Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1039, 1020.

⁵⁷ Killeen, *Faiths*, 157. Rejection of the heteronormative, nuclear family structure was not a new theme for Wilde. As Frederick Roden and Dollimore observe, Wilde discusses the dissolution of family life in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. See *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 139 and *Sexual Dissidence*, 9, respectively.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

The end of the play confirms this Anglo-Catholic challenge: Jack becomes “Brother Ernest,” retains “Brother Algernon” and can call the masculine Lady Bracknell “Aunt Augusta.”⁵⁹

While Killeen is right to note that the challenge the play’s ending poses to the patriarchal family order is a religious one, I would argue that Wilde borrowed not from the Anglo-Catholic movement, but from the mainstream Anglicanism of his bourgeois audience. In the order of service for baptism in *The Book of Common Prayer*, it is not the child’s biological mother and father who present him for christening; instead, it is the godparents of the child who present him to the priest, confess their faith on his behalf, and are charged with his spiritual care and nurture.⁶⁰ Additionally, the *BCP* specifies that each child is to have three godparents – two female godparents and one male godparent for a female child, and one female godparent and two male godparents for a male child.⁶¹ According to Lady Bracknell, “Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished on you by your fond and doting parents” – so we can likely assume that Jack’s baptism was done by the book.⁶² Ernest John Moncrieff’s family of origin, then, is just as queer as the teleological one he winds up with at the play’s conclusion.⁶³ He begins with two dads and a mom; he concludes, as Peter Raby observes, with a brother/son in Algernon, a daughter/sister in Cecily, and a kissing cousin in Gwendolyn.⁶⁴ To

⁵⁹ Killeen, *Faiths*, 161.

⁶⁰ “Publick Baptism of Infants,” 334, 336, 338.

⁶¹ “Publick Baptism of Infants,” 338.

⁶² Wilde, *Earnest*, 2262.

⁶³ Once again, my argument parallels Killeen’s. In his reading, Jack and Algernon must learn to reject the muscular Christianity of their Protestant context and accept the Ritualism represented by the female characters (see note 18). Jack’s discovery that he actually belongs via baptism to the Ritualist clan that he has sought to join all along thus recalls the experience of Newman, whose conversion to Catholicism came in the form of a discovery that he was really Catholic all along, and Wilde himself, whose reluctance to convert was due to the fact that his mother had already baptized him in the Catholic Church as a child. Jack is thus an “always already” Ritualist via baptism (160). I argue that, for all the play’s emphasis on the heterosexist order, Jack is “always already” part of a queer family through baptism.

⁶⁴ Peter Raby, “How to Be Modern,” 158.

play on Algernon's words in Act I: Jack comes to "realize that" in baptism, as in marriage, "three is company and two is none."⁶⁵

Yet baptism is not the only strategy whereby Jack and Algernon seek to reinvent themselves. Their first tactic is bunburying, Algernon's "incomparable expression" for creating a fictional double that enables one to pursue pleasure beyond the constraints of the paternal identity.⁶⁶ Critics have traced the queer resonances of Wilde's neologism – the most obvious of which is its punning allusion to anal sex – and highlighted its various connections to Wilde's own erotic adventures in London's gay underground.⁶⁷

What I want to highlight, however, is the religious resonances of bunburying and the ways in which Jack and Algernon's misadventures faintly echo the Eucharistic sacrifices that appear in Wilde's earlier works. As Jarlath Killeen rightly argues, the play enacts a kind of transubstantiation.⁶⁸ No sooner does Jack reveal he has a double than he declares his intent to kill him: "I'm not a Bunburyist at all," he replies to Algernon.⁶⁹ "If Gwendolen accepts me, I am going to kill my brother. Indeed, I think I'll kill him in any case."⁷⁰ This he does, only to watch Ernest be resurrected not once, but twice:⁷¹ first in the form of Algernon, and second in the form of Jack himself, who learns that his name "is Ernest after all."⁷² Just as the believer mysteriously joins Christ's death and resurrection in the Mass, so too do Jack and Algernon join in the mysterious death and resurrection of Ernest.⁷³

⁶⁵ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2227.

⁶⁶ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2226.

⁶⁷ Craft contends that "[Bunbury is] a collection of signifiers that straightforwardly express their desire to bury in the bun" (118) and spends several pages exploring the play's gay allusions (116-128).

⁶⁸ Killeen, *Faiths*, 157.

⁶⁹ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2227.

⁷⁰ Wilde, *Earnest*, *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Killeen, *Faiths*, 157.

⁷² Wilde, *Earnest*, 2263.

⁷³ Killeen, *Faiths*, 157.

What Killeen does not discuss, however, is the role that Bunbury plays in Wilde's subtextual sacramental economy. Like Ernest, Bunbury is also fated for death; as Craft writes, it is only when Bunbury is "ritually expelled" that "the irreducibly divided male subject" is "integrated."⁷⁴ Even though Algernon proclaims that "nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury," he finds himself killing his beloved invalid a mere two acts later.⁷⁵ He responds to Lady Bracknell's inquiries with a fumbling, "Oh! I killed poor Bunbury this afternoon. I mean, poor Bunbury died this afternoon."⁷⁶ When Lady Bracknell presses him for details, his words are astonishingly prescient: "My dear Aunt Augusta, I mean he was found out! The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean – so Bunbury died."⁷⁷ Wilde himself would be "found out" soon after the play's premier; just four days after *Earnest* opened, the Marquess of Queensberry would deliver the infamous and poorly spelled note that ignited the lawsuits that ultimately led to Wilde's arrest, trial, and incarceration.⁷⁸ Jack's words about the death of wicked brother Ernest are similarly prophetic. He decides to chalk his doppelganger's death up to a "severe chill" in Paris⁷⁹ – exactly where Wilde himself would die five years later.⁸⁰

While the play might seem all froth and whimsy upon first reading, when situated in the broader arc of Wilde's life and work, its more serious, sacramental undertones emerge.⁸¹ Wilde was no Bloxham, and his play neither concludes with dying lovers clasped in one another's arms

⁷⁴ Craft, *Another Kind*, 115, 114.

⁷⁵ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2227. Craft also highlights Algernon's sudden obliviousness (131).

⁷⁶ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2256.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Ellmann notes that *Earnest* opened on Valentine's Day of 1895 (430) and gives the date written on the back of Queensberry's card as February 18 (438).

⁷⁹ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2234.

⁸⁰ "Appendix A: Chronological Table," in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1250.

⁸¹ Killeen likewise notes the subtlety with which Wilde embeds his sacramental imagery, commenting: "The laughter distracts purposely from the serious purpose of the text...the Real Presence is diffused through the comedic Ernest; the baptismal regeneration ceremony through the hilarious desire for a potent Christian name; the conversation narratives are only suggested via the debate over name changes...the priest looks like a woman" (161).

nor directly acknowledges the nature of his transgressive erotic desires and religious beliefs. Instead, he conceals his passions in a pun and does not even permit the person whom the pun names to make an entrance. The slaughter of doppelganger Bunbury to appease the generic conventions of comedy and the teleology of the marriage plot recalls the deaths of Dorian, of the Fisherman and the Mermaid, and of Salomé and the Baptist, as well as auguring Wilde's own crucifixion on the altar of public opinion.⁸²

That these sacrifices are bloodless and occur offstage only reinforces their religious significance. As Schad writes: "Wilde's recurring intuition [is] that God hides his face ...Algernon...conjures up his imaginary friend Bunbury, and Bunbury too is finally 'exploded.' But then that is precisely the fate of the Victorians' imaginary friend, God."⁸³ Having consistently framed his own aesthetic development through the dialectic of the classical and the Christian, Wilde evokes both traditions in the death of Bunbury. Its bloodlessness parallels the bloodless sacrifice of the Mass and, as Craft notes, its location offstage parallels the offstage deaths of Greek tragedy.⁸⁴ Craft further observes that *Earnest* continued to play several weeks into Wilde's trials, providing London "an almost too ready diptych" that counterpoised "gay insouciance" with "bourgeois retribution," "evanescent...signification" with "a brutal travesty in which the author would be nailed to the specificity of his acts," and "crime" with "punishment."⁸⁵ Craft is right to recognize the dual dramas as a diptych, but his binarism is perhaps too neat. At the Old Bailey, the scene of the punishment, Wilde would use Christian and classical allusion to name his crime; at the St. James, the scene of the crime, he used Christian

⁸² Craft also links Bunbury's death with Dorian's (118) and uses the language of "teleology" to characterize Wilde's depiction of marriage (112, 131).

⁸³ Schad, *Queer Fish*, 99, 112.

⁸⁴ Craft calls Bunbury's death "an offstage parody of the tragic *sparagmos*" (114). Roden notes that it is "the absence of corporeality" in the Mass that Dorian finds so compelling (142).

⁸⁵ Craft, *Another Kind*, 138-139.

and classical allusion to hint at it.⁸⁶ The subtlety of his technique perhaps explains why even critics as brilliant as Craft have seen the play as a heartless piece of pure performativity. Dismissing a silent and invisible presence as mere *hocus pocus* or sleight of hand has a long and distinguished history in Anglophone letters.

In a certain sense, Wilde invites such dismissal: The reunion that occurs after the expiatory sacrifice of Bunbury and “wicked brother Ernest” is comically and absurdly fortuitous.⁸⁷ Not only do the deaths of Bunbury and Ernest allow Jack to unite with Gwendolyn in marriage, but they also enable him to reunite with the very same queer double whom he has killed off. As Craft explains: “Jack discovers himself to be, as indeed he has always been, both himself and his own fictive other.”⁸⁸ Wilde thus repeats the reunions he has staged in earlier texts: Just as the Soul reunites with the Fisherman, and the Fisherman with the Mermaid, just as Dorian’s soul reunites with his body, and his body’s beauty with the painting; so too John Worthing reunites with Ernest John Moncrieff, and Ernest John Moncrieff with Gwendolyn Fairfax.

The different outcomes of these reunions – death in the first two and marriage in the third – in no way undercuts their similarity. If anything, the seeming dissimilarities provide a perfect example of Wilde’s strategic use of inversion. By recycling material from the fairytales that reviewers found “unsuitable for children”⁸⁹ and the novel they found “unmanly, sickening and

⁸⁶ Roden highlights Wilde’s dual use of biblical and classical imagery in his speech at the Old Bailey (146-47), as does Naomi Wood, “Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales,” *Marvels & Tales* 16, no. 2: 164.

⁸⁷ Craft also highlights the absurdity of the conclusion, arguing that the “axiomatic...and absurd ending” “is part of Wilde’s “complete and completely parodic submission to heterosexist teleology” (131, 112).

⁸⁸ Craft, *Another Kind*, 115.

⁸⁹ “Unsigned review, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 November 1891, p. 3,” in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (New York: Routledge, 2005), 125.

vicious”⁹⁰ for his greatest triumph, Wilde further highlighted the hypocrisy and shallowness of his audience. Unable to plumb the depths of divine or erotic passion, he offers them a mere sprinkling from the font; unable to stomach sacrifice, he gives them cucumber sandwiches. Craft rightly observes that the alveolar and labial consonants smacking and tonguing their way throughout the play – tea, muffins, bread and butter, tea-cakes – evoke the exploded Bunbury and the oral and anal delights he symbolizes.⁹¹ But he stops short of recognizing their deeply religious significance as well. Wilde’s choice to “stage [Bunbury’s] expulsion as an act of ingestion, as an insistently oral practice” is not just an instance of his “rigorously inverting wit.”⁹² It is a decision informed by the inverted Eucharistic logic whereby the believer consumes the scapegoat whom he has pronounced accursed. Ellmann gets nearer the truth when he links Algernon’s “mild gluttony” with Salomé’s “fearsome lechery” and Dorian’s “unnamable sins.”⁹³ Concealed within Algernon’s idle munching on muffins is not only Salome’s bloody bites of the Baptist’s mouth, nor the “harsh wine” of the Fisherman’s confession, but the silent, tasteless meal that contains them all.

The sacramental roots of these seemingly secular images account for the high-stakes language surrounding baptism throughout the play. In the four-act version, Dr. Chasuble explicitly rejects baptism as a purely symbolic ordinance, oddly insistent on its genuine spiritual significance.⁹⁴ After Lady Bracknell’s interference threatens to render the two christenings and the two marriages to the two Ernests impossible, Jack tells the clergyman that baptism “wouldn’t

⁹⁰ “Unsigned notice, *Athanaeum*, 27 June 1891, p. 824,” in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (New York: Routledge, 2005), 85.

⁹¹ Craft, *Another Kind*, 119. Fineman also notes the “labial phonemes of Bunbury” (82).

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 422. Killeen (154) also comments on the collapse of sexuality into the orality of food

⁹⁴ Killeen cites Canon Chasuble’s belief in baptismal regeneration as evidence that he is an Anglo-Catholic priest (158). Chasuble’s status as such serves as the point of departure for his argument.

be of much practical use to either of us.”⁹⁵ “I am grieved to hear such sentiments from you, Mr. Worthing,” the clergyman responds, dismayed. “They savour of the heretical views of the Anabaptists...Baptismal regeneration is not to be lightly spoken of. Indeed by the unanimous opinion of the fathers, baptism is a form of new birth.”⁹⁶

His refusal to speak lightly of baptism mirrors the attitude of both Cecily and Gwendolyn, who react to the news of the men’s impending christenings with a mixture of awe and horror. “For my sake you are prepared to do this horrible thing?” Gwendolyn asks Jack.⁹⁷ Cecily likewise asks Algernon: “To please me you are ready to face this terrible ordeal?”⁹⁸ In the immediate context of the play, the question is of course ridiculous: Even given wicked brother Ernest’s susceptibility to chills, the simple act of sprinkling is unlikely to harm the two dashing heroes who bunbury about with such vigor. But in the wider context of Wilde’s life and work, the question of what baptism signifies is a vital one. Can the “irresistible fascination” of a new Christian name effect the same kind of transformation that the “strange and curious” flowers” on the altar do?⁹⁹ Can the violent expulsion and oral reunion of mysterious Mr. Bunbury generate any sort of genuine rebirth?

As in “The Fisherman and His Soul,” the answer seems to be a tentative “yes” – but only in specific moments and specific cases. Gwendolyn and Jack get their miraculous ending, just as the priest and the sea-people do: he gets his name and she gets her man. But the miracle does not extend beyond them to the other couple. While the fictive Ernest may turn out to be a real person, the fictive Bunbury does not, and while Gwendolyn gets to realize her “ideal [of]

⁹⁵ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2260.

⁹⁶ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest, The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 412.

⁹⁷ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2255.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2230.

lov[ing] someone of the name of Ernest,”¹⁰⁰ Cecily’s “girlish dream” of the same bliss remains unfulfilled.¹⁰¹ Indeed, even Gwendolyn and Ernest John’s marital and nominal miracle doesn’t seem built to last. “Gwendolyn, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth,” confesses Ernest to his bride.¹⁰² “Can you forgive me?”¹⁰³ “I can,” she readily responds, “For I feel sure you are to change.”¹⁰⁴ Just as the priest’s blessing fails to make a permanent home for the sea-folk in the bay, so too does the baptismal miracle fail to make Ernest John into a man who speaks the truth.

If the explosion of Bunbury and the name of the father fail to make Ernest John a man who speaks the truth, the same cannot be said for his creator. The secrets that Wilde buried deep within the puns and parody would be “quite exploded” in the days and weeks to come by a father figure whose presence had long haunted Wilde. After he successfully barred the Marquess of Queensberry from entering the St. James Theatre for the premiere of the play and lobbing carrots at the playwright, Queensberry made his presence felt, as John Dawick observes, “on a more public and exposed stage.”¹⁰⁵ Jack’s omitted quip from the four-act play – “But fathers bother a chap and never pay his bills. I don’t know a single chap at the club who speaks to his father” – becomes eerily prophetic.¹⁰⁶ Queensberry delivered his note to Wilde’s Albermarle Club and successfully provoked him to the legal battle that he would lose so spectacularly.¹⁰⁷ Compared to a *Christus victor* by *The New York Times* after the opening night of *Earnest*¹⁰⁸ – “Oscar Wilde

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2237. Craft observes that Cecily’s desire to marry an Ernest goes ignored (131).

¹⁰² Wilde, *Earnest*, 2263.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ John Dawick, “Oscar’s Last First Night or, the Impossibility of Exhausting Earnest” in *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde During the Last 100 Years*, ed. Uwe Böker, Richard Corballis and Julie A. Hibbard (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 14-15.

¹⁰⁶ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2233n6. Dawick also links this line with the Marquess of Queensberry (15).

¹⁰⁷ Ellmann’s account of the note and the subsequent trials may be found on pages 438-478.

¹⁰⁸ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 430-431.

may be said to have at last, and by a single stroke, put his enemies under his feet” – Wilde would descend to the depths of despair and the limits of himself in the stand, in gaol, and on the Continent.¹⁰⁹ It is this final and most profound moment of weakness that my final chapter will explore – a moment, interestingly enough, where the question of baptism’s significance assumes great aesthetic and biographical importance.

¹⁰⁹ *Cf.* Romans 16:20: “And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.”

CHAPTER 3
“A PRISONER OF CHRIST JESUS”: *DE PROFUNDIS* AS ANTINOMIAN EPISTLE

The preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* declares: “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.”¹ As with many of Wilde’s witticisms and epigrams, these words prove prophetic. At the moment of his greatest peril, Wilde plunges to the depths. No longer content with surfaces or masks, he writes *De Profundis*, a 30,000-word prison letter in which he excoriates Douglas for his shallowness and exalts pain as the path to greater depth in art, in life and in oneself.² “There is not a single wretched man in this wretched place along with me who does not stand in symbolic relation to the very secret of life,” he declares. “For the secret of life is suffering. It is what is hidden behind everything... Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol.”³

The letter has proven remarkably divisive among critics. Jonathan Dollimore has famously lamented *De Profundis* as Wilde’s surrender. Broken by the forces of the penal system, he abandons his earlier anti-essentialism and collapses into the very sincere, bourgeois subject he mocked in other works.⁴ Ellis Hanson, by contrast, views the letter not as a break with Wilde’s earlier philosophy, but as continuous with it, and not as a defeat, but as a triumph. “A fine example of Foucauldian reverse discourse,”⁵ *De Profundis* shows Wilde retelling his story such that “his love for Douglas becomes the mode of his salvation.”⁶ Other critics have agreed, highlighting how images and themes from the poetry, prose stories and fairytales reemerge in *De*

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd, and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 17.

² Jarlath Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore and Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 163.

³ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd, and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 1024, 1026.

⁴ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991), 95-98.

⁵ Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 294

⁶ Hanson, *Decadence*, 104. See pages 103-107 and 293-296 for Hanson’s discussion of *De Profundis*.

Profundis and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.⁷ Frederick Roden stakes out a middle ground, arguing that while the Catholic themes in Wilde's work persist, he no longer conceals them; the text serves as "a 'coming out' into Love, personified in the human figure of Christ."⁸

Taking my cues from Roden and Hanson, I aim in this final chapter to highlight how, paradoxically, Wilde wears his depth close to the surface. What had before been buried beneath the politesse of society comedy and the parable-like language of the fairy tales now rises to the fore. Wilde figures both himself and Douglas as a Eucharistic Christ, excoriated and exiled in the hope of eventual reunion, and traces the same themes of baptismal renaming that occur in *The Importance of Being Earnest* in their lives.

In his previous works, Wilde draws on the figure of Christ to create a doubling effect among his various characters: the rigid purity of the Jokanaan and the perverse passion of Salomé unite in their bloody, Eucharistic embrace; the ritual sacrifice of Bunbury enables Jack and Algernon to shuffle from name to name and identity to identity; and the Fisherman's transgressive love for the mermaid parallels the priest's passion for God. In *De Profundis*, he finally names this doubling effect as explicitly Christological. "[Y]ou were as remote from the true temper of the artist as you were from what Matthew Arnold calls 'the secret of Jesus,'" he scolds Douglas.⁹ "Either would have taught you that whatever happens to another happens to oneself."¹⁰ This, as John Allen Quintus and Frederick Roden observe, is an ethical claim that

⁷ See Chapter 1, note 24 for a discussion of the links between the fairy tales and the prison writing.

⁸ Frederick Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Cultures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 146. See pages 145-153 for Roden's discussion of *De Profundis* as a whole.

⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1027.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Hanson comments on this quote: "[Wilde] says that everything that happens to another also happens to oneself, an unlikely assertion that relies for its effect on the figure of Christ as he suffers for our sins" (101). Schad, writing on *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, similarly observes: "Wilde's Christ endures a double and self-reflexive death" (104).

crowns sympathy as the supreme moral value.¹¹ But it is also Wilde's means of undoing the binary between ordered and disordered love, between natural and unnatural passion.¹² The wide embrace of Christ's love gathers sinner and saint alike to his bosom, and the transformative power of his imagination integrates them both into himself. The Fisherman thus may serve as Christ's type just as well as the priest, and Salomé just as well as the Baptist. In the epistle to the Romans, St. Paul asks, "Shall we continue in sin, such that grace may abound?" and promptly answers with a horrified "God forbid!"¹³ Wilde's epistolary answer to that same question is the answer of the antinomian, that is, a resounding "yes."¹⁴ Several pages later, he writes: "[Christ's] primary desire was not to reform people...he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful, holy things, and modes of perfection."¹⁵ Wilde had long hinted at this "dangerous idea" through the sacrificial erotics that occur both offstage and centerstage in his earlier works.¹⁶ In *De Profundis*, he proclaims, with almost Pauline authority and indignation, the Christological center of his inverted gospel.

De Profundis, therefore, may be seen, as Hanson aptly puts it, as a "painful spectacle of mutual crucifixion."¹⁷ This at first might seem like a profound misunderstanding of the letter.

¹¹ Roden, *Same-Sex*, 149; John Allen Quintus, "Christ, Christianity, and Oscar Wilde," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 515, 526-27 and Quintus, "The Moral Prerogative in Oscar Wilde: A Look at the Fairy Tales," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 53, no. 4 (Autumn 1977): 710-716.

¹² Hanson discusses Wilde's rejection of this binary (which he calls "the dialectic of shame and grace") throughout his writing (93-107, 294-96).

¹³ Romans 6:1a-2a.

¹⁴ Wilde explicitly identifies himself as an antinomian in the letter (1019). Critics have pointed out his antinomianism as well, including Hanson (104, 270), Killeen (188), and Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage Press, 1988), 275. Although Quintus does not use the language of antinomianism, he notes Wilde's attraction to the theological concept of the *felix culpa* – that Christians should celebrate the "happy fault" that allowed them to experience such glorious salvation in Christ; see "Moral Prerogative," 715 and "Christ, Christianity," 524-525. Killeen similarly comments that Wilde resembles "Augustine the Catholic penitent...recognizing the fortune of his fall into sin" (170).

¹⁵ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1036-1037.

¹⁶ Ibid. Schad notes the presence of this "dangerous idea" in *Salomé*, where one of the Nazarenes mentions the "dangerous doctrine...that cometh from Alexandria...that God is in what is evil." John Schad, *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 111.

¹⁷ Hanson, *Decadence*, 102.

Wilde's own self-comparison to Christ is understandable, given the publicity and pain of his fall from grace.¹⁸ But his endless catalogue of his grievances against Douglas and damning assessment of the younger man's character would seem to preclude reading the latter as a Christ figure.¹⁹ But when the letter is considered not merely as a love letter or a piece of prison writing, but specifically as a biblical epistle, the Christological parallels between the two men emerge. Drawing both on the biblical tradition and the classical tradition of pederastic pedagogy,²⁰ Wilde takes on the role of an apostle, instructing Douglas on how he might transform his experiences of sin "into the beautiful and holy incidents of his life" in the same way that Wilde himself has done.²¹ Hanson observes that "Wilde had spiritual aspirations for Douglas,"²² and Killeen notes that the letter serves as "a spiritual biography of Douglas" in which Wilde imagines himself as a martyr who "tak[es] 'everything on his shoulders' and redeem[s] Lord Alfred Douglas."²³ Douglas has yet to respond to Wilde's exhortation; unlike in *Salomé* and "The Fisherman and His Soul," we are not privy to any ultimate union between the saint, cloistered and in chains, and the sinner, wandering freely through the temptations of the world. Yet the language that Wilde

¹⁸ Many critics have noticed Wilde's self-comparison to Christ. See, for example, Quintus, "Christ, Christianity," 517; Schad, *Queer Fish*, 102, 1077; Hanson, *Decadence*, 5, 99, 104, 105, 237; Roden, *Same-Sex*, 146-151; Killeen, *Faiths*, 173-174; Elizabeth Goodenough, "Oscar Wilde, Victorian Fairy Tales, and the Meanings of Atonement," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 23, no. 3 (1999): 339 and Chris Mounsey, *Being the Body of Christ: Towards a Twenty-First Century Homosexual Theology for the Anglican Church* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 30.

¹⁹ Roden, for instance, sees Wilde drawing a contrast between Christ and Douglas. Although the two "exist as alternative lovers, one in flesh and the other spirit," Christ is the decisively the superior: "Wilde takes Bosie to task on his failure to be Christ. The...youth is compared with Christ and found to be wanting" (148, 151).

²⁰ Both Roden and John-Charles Duffy highlight how Wilde draws on the classical *erastes/eromenos* model of pederasty in *De Profundis*, and Roden specifically notes how Wilde's fuses this model with the Christian tradition; see Roden, *Same-Sex*, 147 and Duffy, "Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, no. 2 (2001): 338-339. Hanson comments that Wilde figures "seduction as a form of education" (269) and "transfigure[s] Christ into a classical pederast and aesthete" (238). Naomi Wood highlights the fusion between Greek pederasty and Christianity in the fairy tales (157). She notes that Wilde frequently performed his tales in front of groups of "disciples" (164), thereby performing the parabolic model of Christianity and the *ars erotica* of pederasty and "tutor[ing] the young reader in love, what it means to love, and how one achieves it" (166). "Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales," *Marvels & Tales* 16, no. 2: 156-170.

²¹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1037.

²² Hanson, *Decadence*, 278.

²³ Killeen, *Faiths*, 168, 174.

uses to instruct Douglas and to describe his own experiences echoes these earlier texts, indicating his ultimate hope that the two will meet again in a reunion as spiritually and erotically charged as those he could create in his writing. It is no accident that in his instructions to Robert Ross on sending the letter to a copyist, Wilde describes the letter as an “encyclical letter” and entitles it “*Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*.”²⁴ The letter deliberately invokes the apostles and could well be summarized in St. Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “Be ye followers of me, even as I am also of Christ.”²⁵

In his earlier writings, Wilde imagines the Eucharistic Christ as a flower, as a marred and ugly countenance, and as a prisoner. All of these images return in *De Profundis*, and are applied not only to Wilde, but to Douglas as well – a pedagogical technique that enables Wilde to position the younger man for the transformation that will enable their meeting. In an early poem entitled “*Quia Multum Amavi*,” Wilde compares the male-male spiritual ardor of the priest for Christ with a lover’s erotic passion for his beloved: “Dear Heart, I think the young impassioned priest/When first he takes from out the hidden shrine/His God imprisoned in the Eucharist,/.../Feels not such awful wonder as I felt/When first my smitten eyes beat full on thee/And night-long before thy feet I knelt/Til thou wert wearied of idolatry.”²⁶ The lines are characteristically prescient; decades later, in a full reversal of the poem’s analogies, Wilde’s

²⁴ Wilde qtd. Killeen 172. Killeen discusses the Catholic valences of *De Profundis* at length. He compares it to Augustine’s *Confessions* and Newman’s *Apologia*, and hypothesizes that Wilde may have drawn on the popular and clerical discourses surrounding the imprisonment of Pope Pius IX in 1870 to conceptualize his own incarceration (168-73). Roden also compares the letter to a Catholic *apologia* in the style of Augustine and Newman (145-46). Hanson discusses the papal (105) and Augustinian (106) resonances of the letter as well, and mentions Wilde’s enjoyment of St. Paul glancingly (16-17, 268). None of these critics, however, name the specifically Pauline resonances of the *De Profundis*.

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:1. Hanson (105) and Killeen (172-73) note that Wilde aims to speak with the apostolic authority of the pope within the letter, but neither mentions the apostolic authority of St. Paul.

²⁶ Wilde, “*Qui Multum Amavi*,” in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 840. Roden argues that the male-male love of the priest and Christ suggests that the erotic love of the narrator is also male-male (132-133).

male-male erotic passion for Douglas results in his imprisonment in an English gaol, where he compares his spiritual sufferings to those of the Eucharistic Christ.²⁷ Throughout the letter, Wilde reimagines Christ as an infinitely sympathetic man of sorrows, who takes on the pain of the world and ignites the romantic movement in art by the sheer force of his personality – a reimagination, as many critics have noted, borne of Wilde’s own need to imbue his sufferings in prison with ethical and aesthetic meaning.²⁸

Yet Wilde is not alone in his prison: Douglas, unawares, sits right beside him. Lamenting the lack of empathy that led Douglas to try to publish some of their earlier correspondence, Wilde writes: “If Hate blinded your eyes, Vanity sewed your eyelids together with threads of iron... The imagination was as much in prison as I was. Vanity had barred up the windows, and the name of the warder was Hate.”²⁹ The contrast is marked and deliberate. Wilde’s body, though in chains, nevertheless finds spiritual freedom in the words and example of Christ, comparing his daily exercise of reading the gospels in Greek to “going into a garden of lilies out of some dark and narrow house”; Douglas, though free in body, nevertheless is imprisoned in spirit, wandering hatefully from pleasure to pleasure like the heartless Soul in “The Fisherman and His Soul.”³⁰

Concealed within the opposition, however, is an invitation. Though it might seem as though Wilde is urging Douglas to regret their earlier life of pleasure, the nature of his exhortation is, as Hanson observes, far more complex than that.³¹ Wilde refuses regret, seeing

²⁷ Many critics have discussed how Wilde compares himself to Christ (see note 18), but Killeen specifically highlights the sacramental nature of the comparison: “Wilde...consistently compares himself to the suffering Christ, a sacrament to the needs of the world” (173).

²⁸ Killeen comments on *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: “This need to transform potentially limiting experiences into opportunities for spiritual, Christian sacraments is also evident in Wilde’s final great work” (180).

²⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1009.

³⁰ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1033. For more on images of wandering in Wilde, see Chapter 1, note 83.

³¹ Hanson observes that while Wilde expresses regret and shame for his actions, he never expresses regret for homosexuality (101, 103-4, 293-96). Instead, “Sins become precious works of art that decorate and sustain his own Christian tragedy...He engages a homophobic discourse in a manner that transforms homosexuality into poetry” (295).

his earlier life of hedonism as a necessary and beautiful phase in his own self-development.³² “I don’t regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure,” he declares.³³ “I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does to the full...But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also.”³⁴ Douglas’s failure, then, is not his choice to enjoy the many sins the world has to offer. Rather, his failure is his refusal to develop his personality and deepen the significance of those sins through sorrow and sympathy – the two great virtues of Wilde’s Eucharistic Christ. Like the Fisherman, Wilde wants to sink to the depths of love and pain alike; Douglas, as of the writing of the letter, is content to stay safely on the shore.

This subtle distinction accounts for the seeming hypocrisy that critics have noticed in the letter. Killeen observes that Wilde wants to have it both ways, vacillating “between self-confession and self-justification,”³⁵ and Hanson notes that “[s]hame is contagious in the letter,” spreading from Douglas to Wilde and back again.³⁶ Wilde castigates Douglas for his habit of writing nasty letters – yet what could be nastier than the minutely detailed account of Douglas’s actions that Wilde writes? He frames Douglas as a treacherous Judas and himself as the tear-stained Christ – yet in a letter written on the cusp of his imprisonment at Reading in 1895, he worships Douglas as “a golden-haired boy with Christ’s own heart in you.”³⁷ He laments the

³² Quintus highlights this aspect of Wilde: “Wilde argues further that Christ’s ministry appeals most profoundly to people who suffer because sufferers will ‘realize’ themselves and exemplify the spirit of Christ through their acquaintance with grief.” “Christ, Christianity,” 524. Goodenough similarly notes that Wilde “liken[s] self-realization to at-one-ment” (343).

³³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1026.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Killeen, *Faiths*, 169. Killeen reads this vacillation as Wilde working in two ethical and aesthetic modes, one Protestant and one Catholic. The Protestant mode fuses the puritanical insistence on moral superiority with the liberal Protestant demystification of Christ performed by writers like Matthew Arnold; the Catholic mode embraces self-castigation and models its exhortations on the authority of the pope (162-173).

³⁶ Hanson, *Decadence*, 100; for development of this point, see 100-102.

³⁷ Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas, 2 Courtfield Gardens, May 1895, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 651. Hanson first drew my

ugliness of his fate and his existence in prison: “Everything about my tragedy has been hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style. Our very dress makes us grotesques. We are the zanies of sorrow. We are clowns whose hearts are broken.”³⁸ Yet he longs to show the “golden-haired boy” the ugliness of his own spiritual countenance: “I could have held a mirror up to you, and shown you such an image of yourself that you would not have recognized it as your own till you found it mimicking back your gestures of horror, and then you would have known whose shape it was, and hated yourself forever.”³⁹ Wilde remembers one of the pair’s many fights in which, terrified by Douglas’s anger, he worries that the younger man might have a knife on his person – yet in the very first pages of the letter, he commands him to “read the letter over and over again until it kills your vanity...though each word may become to you as the fire or knife of the surgeon.”⁴⁰ Who, we want to ask, is the real hero here, and who the real villain? Who is really to blame for the lovers’ separation, and who ought to bear the burden of shame and suffering?

The answer, as it turns out, is both – and neither. Writing on *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Killeen comments that the poem “reveals a universal truth...: we are all both victims and perpetrators.”⁴¹ *De Profundis* operates in much the same way. Distorted through the dark glass of Wilde’s warring anger and hope, Douglas emerges as the despised double whom Wilde nevertheless longs to see face to face once more.⁴² John-Charles Duffy attributes Wilde’s anger

attention to this letter; see *Decadence* 238, 278, 292-93. Roden notes the implicit comparison between Douglas and Judas (150) in *De Profundis*, as well as the explicit comparison to Christ in an earlier letter (147).

³⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1041.

³⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1004. Roden suggests this point: “However, by the *De Profundis* letter...Wilde’s love for Bosie had...been transformed into something as ugly as Dorian Gray” (147).

⁴⁰ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 980-981. Hanson first drew my attention to this particular instance of doubling (102-103).

⁴¹ Killeen, *Faiths*, 180.

⁴² I draw this point in part from Hanson, who notes that the “widening of the frame of reference for shame takes place through Wilde’s identification with Christ” (100). Hanson never explicitly uses the language of doubling, but his discussion of the similarities between Wilde and Douglas in the letter is located in a chapter entitled “The Dialectic of Shame and Grace” and is framed by a discussion of the “mutual crucifixion.” I also draw from and disagree with Schad (96-102), who argues that Wilde anticipates the thought of Bersani and borrows from the negative theology of Judaism by rejecting “philosophy’s invitation to go face to face” (98) and instead “seeing history from behind” (101).

at Douglas to the latter's inability to live up to the spiritual ideal of the *erastes/eromenos* dynamic: "This explains the reproach which Wilde heaps upon both his own head and Douglas's in *De Profundis*: Wilde faults Douglas for keeping their relationship at a lower, sensual level, and himself for allowing Douglas to keep it there when he, as the older lover, should have been nurturing Douglas's spiritual and intellectual development."⁴³ Roden also comments on this dynamic, arguing that Wilde reinvents himself as an *eromenos* to Christ's *erastes*.⁴⁴ These analyses, however, fall short of recognizing the full extent of Wilde's subversion. Wilde does not merely Christianize the *erastes/eromenos* model, as Roden suggests, but he does so by adopting the righteous, rebuking tone of the very St. Paul who condemns such love. "Awake," Paul writes to the Corinthians, "...for some have not the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame."⁴⁵ Yet a mere two chapters prior, he writes with aching beauty of the supremacy of love in all things: "Charity never faileth...and the greatest of these is charity."⁴⁶ Wilde, vacillating between scorn and love, rage and longing, writes in much the same way: "Love can read the writing on the remotest star, but Hate so blinded you that you could see no further than the narrow, walled-in, and already lust-withered garden of your own desires."⁴⁷ Condemned to read nothing but the Bible while in Wandsworth prison, Wilde refashions the insights of its most explicitly homophobic author to bring Douglas to his knees.⁴⁸

Yet for all his frustration with Douglas, Wilde knows he has himself failed to live up to his spiritual ideals.⁴⁹ Paul writes: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect...but...forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things

⁴³ Duffy, "Gay-Related," 338.

⁴⁴ Roden, *Same-Sex*, 147.

⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:34.

⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:8, 13.

⁴⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 999-1000.

⁴⁸ Killeen, *Faiths*, 165.

⁴⁹ Killeen and Hanson both make this point; see references in notes 35 and 36, respectively.

which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁰ Wilde echoes this desire for perfection, writing of the city of God, “far off [and] like a perfect pearl” and of his own slow, imperfect attempts to walk towards it: “One can realise a thing in a single moment, but one loses it on the long hours that follow with leaden feet...yet I must...be filled with joy if my feet are on the right road and face set towards the ‘gate which is called Beautiful,’ though I may fall many times in the mire and often in the mist go astray.”⁵¹

The crux of Wilde’s anger with both himself and with Douglas, then, is their mutual inability to live up to their full Christ-like potential. The only advantage the teacher has over the disciple is being further along the process of perfection. Wilde writes that Christ came “to reveal to the world the mystical meaning of wine and the real beauty of the lilies of the field.”⁵² This revelation has long been manifest to him; he embeds it in the climaxes of *Salomé* and “The Fisherman and His Soul,” and in *De Profundis* describes himself as one “to whom flowers are part of desire” and for whom “[t]here is not a single colour hidden away in the chalice of a flower...to which by some subtle sympathy with the very soul of things, my nature does not answer.”⁵³ He sees in Douglas the potential to realize this revelation, but finds himself drawn up short again and again by the shallowness of the young man’s behavior. Rather than sipping spiritual wine from the Christ-like chalice of the flower, Douglas delights in “the marvellous *fine champagne* served always at the bottom of the great bell-shaped glasses that its bouquet might be better savoured by the true epicures of what was really exquisite in life.”⁵⁴ Douglas’s ravenous consumption of these oral delights disturbs Wilde not because they are wrong, but because they

⁵⁰ Philippians 3:12-14.

⁵¹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1025, 1026.

⁵² Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1032.

⁵³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1057.

⁵⁴ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1055. Italics original to the text.

are incomplete. Douglas might possess Salomé's sensuousness and the Fisherman's capacity for love – but until those qualities are transformed by self-sacrificing sorrow and sympathy, they remain unrealized and imperfect. "I have had to look at my past face to face," he reminds his errant, erstwhile lover.⁵⁵ "Look at your own past face to face...The supreme vice is shallowness. Whatever is realized is right."⁵⁶

Immediately after giving this advice, Wilde urges Douglas to speak to his brother Percy about his past, in hopes that the wisdom of the elder brother will succeed where the wisdom of the elder lover has failed. It is a suggestive piece of advice that recalls the familial metaphors of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Indeed, seen in a certain light, *De Profundis* plays out in tragic form the same struggles of names and naming that occur in *Earnest*. Like Ernest/John Worthing, Wilde finds his name bandied about, not only by the public more generally, but by the irresponsible younger brother/double who cheerfully assumes false names. Learning that his mother has died, Wilde's grief takes the form of a meditation on names: "She and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honored...I had disgraced that name eternally. I had dragged it through the very mire. I had given it to brutes that they might make it brutal, and to fools that they might turn it into a synonym for folly."⁵⁷

Such grief explains his anger when he learns that Douglas intends to put that same name "on the fore-page" of a volume of poetry and when the young man sends his remembrances to the incarcerated Wilde under the assumed name of "Prince Fleur-de-Lys."⁵⁸ Douglas views himself as "the graceful prince of a trivial comedy" and acts with Algernon's boyish insouciance – a performance that Wilde, imprisoned in part for his willingness to put his name beside

⁵⁵ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1056.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1010.

⁵⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1011, 1006.

Douglas's in *The Chameleon*,⁵⁹ cannot but regard as blatant insolence.⁶⁰ Sounding not dissimilar from Jack as he rebukes Algernon for appearing as "wicked cousin Ernest" in the garden of the Manor House, he scolds Douglas for making free with a name on which he has no right to presume: "The dedication of verses to me when I was in prison would have seemed a sort of silly effort at smart repartee, an accomplishment which in your old days of dreadful letter-writing...you used openly to pride yourself and about which it is your joy to boast."⁶¹

The irony of the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest* reproaching another writer for a "silly effort at smart repartee" is overwhelming – but so too, we must remember, was Wilde's pain. His name was not merely ruined, but taken from him altogether. Like Jack in the climactic moments of *Earnest*,⁶² he finds himself stripped of a name and identity: "I myself, at that time, had no name at all. In the great prison where I was 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."⁶³ And like Jack, he turns to mother church in quest of a new name and new identity. Upon moving to the Continent, he adopts the name "Sebastian Melmoth." The first name evokes St. Sebastian, the young Roman guard-turned-Christian-martyr who remains an icon in queer and Catholic art,⁶⁴ and the last name is one from his mother's family of origin; Charles Maturin, the author of the gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*, was Wilde's great-uncle on his mother's side.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ "But I go to prison...for your friend's undergraduate magazine 'and the Love that dares not tell its name'" (996).

⁶⁰ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1006.

⁶¹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1012.

⁶² John Schad notes Jack's momentary experience of namelessness in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (95).

⁶³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1006-1007.

⁶⁴ Killeen (3, 39, 178-180), Hanson (105), and Roden (153) all note the queer and Catholic valences of Wilde's chosen Christian name. Hanson specifically highlights St. Sebastian's persistence in queer art.

⁶⁵ Killeen discusses Maturin's relationship to Wilde (3, 39, 179).

As Roden, Killeen, and Hanson point out, this self-stylization as a kind of “queer martyr” was a conscious one on Wilde’s part.⁶⁶ Upon the publication of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, he wrote to Ross that the work would beatify him “as the Infamous St. Oscar of Oxford, Poet and Martyr.”⁶⁷ Perhaps prepared by the relentless reinvention that occurs in *Earnest*, Wilde repeatedly christens himself anew – an eccentricity understandable for one who, Donatist-like, doubted the true power of the institutional church even as, Augustine-like, he felt himself inexorably drawn to the mercy and beauty it claimed to dispense.⁶⁸ He received the pope’s blessing at least seven times while in Rome, but was not baptized until he lay on his deathbed in Paris.⁶⁹

But what, we might ask along with Algernon, about Douglas? “What about the profligate Ernest?”⁷⁰ Having meditated at length upon the sufferings and example of Christ for the artist, Wilde concludes the letter by returning his attention to “that unfortunate young man” who, like Judas, has betrayed him but whom, like Peter, he longs to reinstate.⁷¹ The final pages of *De Profundis* resound with the apostolic authority that Wilde found so attractive in the pope and in St. Paul.⁷² In language reminiscent of both *Earnest* and “The Fisherman and His Soul,” he envisions what his life will be like upon his return to the world and prepares Douglas for their eventual meeting. As in the latter, he imagines reunion and renewal on the shores of the sea.

⁶⁶ The language of “queer martyr” is drawn directly from Roden (153). Killeen (173-74) and Hanson (105-7) also see Wilde figuring himself as a martyr.

⁶⁷ Wilde qtd. Hanson, *Decadence*, 105.

⁶⁸ Roden notes Wilde’s ambivalence towards the institutional church: “By March 1900 he had distanced himself from the institution of the Roman Church but still felt the pull of its trappings” (154). See note 24 for critics who discuss Augustine as an inspiration for Wilde.

⁶⁹ Killeen (16), Hanson (99), and Roden (154) all mention that Wilde received the pope’s blessing seven times.

⁷⁰ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Carol T. Christ, Alfred David, et. al (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 2234.

⁷¹ Wilde, *Earnest*, 2237, 2238.

⁷² Other critics have noted Wilde’s invocation of apostolic authority, but none name it as specifically Pauline. See notes 24 and 25.

Planning “to go at once to some little seaside vision abroad” with loyal disciples Ross and More Adey, he hopes to find both cleansing and meaning in the ocean:⁷³ “The sea...washes away the stains and wounds of the world...The Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature – this is what I am looking for and in the great symphonies of Music, in the initiation of Sorrow, in the depths of the Sea I may find it.”⁷⁴ And as in the former, he demands that his beloved surrender his old name and take on a new one as a testament to his devotion:

I will, if I feel able, arrange through Robbie to meet you in some quiet foreign town like Bruges, whose grey houses and green canals and cool still ways had a charm for me, years ago. For the moment you will have to change your name. The little title of which you were so vain – and indeed it made your name sound like the name of a flower – you will have to surrender, if you wish to see *me*; just as *my* name, once so musical in the mouth of Fame, will have to be abandoned by me in turn. How narrow, and mean, and inadequate to its burdens is this century of ours! It can give to its Success its palaces of porphyry, but for Sorrow and Shame it does not keep even a wattled house in which they may dwell: all it can do for me is to bid me alter my name into some other name, where even mediaevalism would have given me the cowl of the monk or the face-cloth of the leper behind which I might be at peace.⁷⁵

As the passage indicates, even the authoritative commands Wilde issues Douglas ultimately emerge from a place of weakness. What begins as an order rapidly collapses into a lament for secularization.⁷⁶ The Fisherman in the pre-industrial past of fairyland can build himself a house of wattles and spend each day calling for his beloved mermaid, and Jokanaan is recognized even by his foes as a prophet and a man of God.⁷⁷ Yet no such possibilities remain open “to one so modern as [Wilde].”⁷⁸ Even his petition to take on the “monk’s cowl” was denied: When he

⁷³ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1056.

⁷⁴ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1057.

⁷⁵ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1057-1058.

⁷⁶ This, broadly, is how Schad reads Wilde; throughout his chapter, he highlights the ways in which Wilde “intuit[s]...a link between being queer and being Christian” (96) in a world where the generative, productive morality of bourgeois capitalism has superseded the paradoxical Christian ethic of self-sacrifice (94-115). Killeen also comments on the yearning for an older, more mystical world in the final pages of the letter, attributing it to Wilde’s desire for the folkloric Catholicism of his Irish roots (175-178).

⁷⁷ Hanson notes the biblical basis for Herod’s ambivalent admiration of the Baptist in *Salomé* (270-71).

⁷⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1057.

asked the Farm Street Jesuits for a six-month retreat after his release, the brothers replied that they would need a year to consider his request.⁷⁹ The response made Wilde dissolve into tears in the drawing-room of friends.⁸⁰

This lament in turn converts into a frank confession of frailty and a plea for grace. “How far I am from the true temper of soul, this letter in its changing, uncertain moods, its scorn and bitterness, its aspirations and its failure to realize those aspirations, shows you quite clearly,” he admits.⁸¹ “But do not forget in what a terrible school I am sitting at my task.”⁸² Wilde ends his epistle in neither anger nor despair, but in hope: “And incomplete, imperfect, as I am, yet from me you may still have much to gain. You came to me to learn the Pleasure of Life and the Pleasure of Art. Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful, the meaning of Sorrow, and its beauty.”⁸³ As in “The Fisherman and His Soul” and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, no definitive answer can be given and no final word can speak for all.⁸⁴ Douglas may, like Algernon, decide against changing his name, and Wilde’s dreams of their reunion may prove as ephemeral the flowers that bloom on the grave of the Fisherman and the Mermaid. Having plummeted to the very depths of sorrow and read the symbols of life to his own great peril, Wilde writes from a posture of weakness and humility. Conditional verbs and unrealized hopes are the only gifts he has to offer Douglas. Placing these hard-won treasures in the hands of one whose life of preposterous prodigality had left Wilde penniless and in prison was nothing less than a radical act of faith.

⁷⁹ Killeen (178) and Richard Ellmann mention this event. *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 528.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* See also Hanson, *Decadence*, 259.

⁸¹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1059.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Roden comments on the ambiguity of *De Profundis*: “Christ – and Wilde – crucified are represented in this work. Neither claims to have all the answers” (146).

That faith would be vindicated on almost every count. Wilde and Douglas would in fact meet again and the two would spend several months together on the shores of the Mediterranean.⁸⁵ And though Douglas would be separated from Wilde by the intervention of his family,⁸⁶ he would spend the rest of his life walking in Wilde's footsteps – to the confessional, to the witness box and eventually to prison.⁸⁷ He converted to Catholicism just over a decade after Wilde's death in 1911.⁸⁸ When in the following year Arthur Ransome published a book on Wilde that hinted at the destructive role Douglas had played in the author's life, Douglas sued for libel. To demonstrate the truth of Ransome's characterization, Ross unveiled the hitherto-unpublished sections of *De Profundis*. In a stunning reversal, Douglas found himself listening to Wilde's words as he stood in the stand for a libel suit, much the same way Wilde had listened to the prosecutor read Douglas's words as he stood in the stand on charges of gross indecency.

Ransome won the suit, prompting Douglas to write his own account of their relationship in *Oscar Wilde and Myself* and, later, in his *Autobiography*. Unsurprisingly, his story cast Wilde as the villain and himself as the savior, claiming that he was “born into this world chiefly to be the instrument...of exposing and smashing Wilde's cult and the Wilde myth.”⁸⁹ Yet after he was sent to prison for libel of Winston Churchill, he wrote a series of sonnets entitled *In Excelsis* – his own “smart repartee” to *De Profundis*.⁹⁰ Far from smashing the Wilde cult, Douglas spent his days serving as its most faithful – if reluctant – acolyte.

⁸⁵ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 547-556.

⁸⁶ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 552-56.

⁸⁷ I draw the historical details throughout this paragraph and the following from Ellmann's account of Douglas's life after Wilde's death (587-588).

⁸⁸ G.A. Cevasco, “Douglas, Lord Alfred Bruce,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi-org.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/10.1093/ref:odnb/32869>.

⁸⁹ Douglas qtd. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 587.

⁹⁰ Ellmann notes that the poems were “a riposte to *De Profundis*” (587).

As for Wilde, his story ends in weakness and in failure. Dying of what was diagnosed as meningitis in a Parisian hotel,⁹¹ it is unclear whether he even assented to the baptism administered by the Passionist priest whom a frantic Ross managed to locate.⁹² As Ellmann observes: “The application of sacred oils to his hands and feet may have been a ritualized pardon for his omissions or commissions, or it may have been like putting a green carnation in his button-hole.”⁹³ Similarly, we will never know if that final baptism was the genuine repentance of a prodigal or whether – as would be the case if his mother had in fact had him baptized into the Catholic Church as a child – whether it was a beautiful performance utterly empty of theological significance.⁹⁴

This thesis does not aim answer such questions definitively – nor could it. Seeing through a glass darkly at a pano-play of Wilde signifiers, it can only guess at what went on in the depths at the last. “Hope,” writes Sedgwick, “often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments or part-objects she encounters or creates.”⁹⁵ Given the creativity with which Wilde organized the jumbled, contradictory, and even damaging fragments of the religious traditions he encountered, we might cautiously speculate that he concluded in hope.

⁹¹ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 577, 582.

⁹² Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 584.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 19-20.

⁹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 146.

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