

Sincerity OR Style? Dionysus versus the Dandy¹:

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. . . what are the three demands for which my wrath, my concern, my love of art has this time opened my mouth?

That the theater should not lord it over the arts.

*That the actor should not seduce those who
are authentic.*

That music should not become an art of lying.

-Friedrich Nietzsche (The Case of Wagner 636)

One of the chief causes that can be assigned for the curiously commonplace character of most of the literature of our age is undoubtedly the decay of Lying as an art, a science, and a social pleasure. . . . Lying and poetry are arts — arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other and they require the most careful study, the most disinterested devotion.

-Oscar Wilde (“The Decay of Lying” 1073)

The similarities between the aesthetics of Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde continue to receive sustained attention—even though, as is the case with most of Nietzsche’s English-speaking contemporaries, they probably never read one another. In his memoir, Wilde’s close friend André Gide writes that when he read Nietzsche, he was “astonished less” (15) by the philosopher’s ideas because he had already encountered them in Wilde. Thomas Mann wrote the first extended comparison of Nietzsche and Wilde. As Mann observes, Nietzsche and Wilde contemplate the individual as an aesthetic project, undertaken against the bourgeois and philistine values that they both equally despise. Although Mann concludes that they “belong together as rebels, rebels in the name of beauty,” each granting style pride of place in their philosophies, he passes the final verdict that there is “something almost sacrilegious about discussing Wilde, ‘a dandy,’

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alongside Nietzsche, ‘the German philosopher’” (158). Recent critics, such as James Allen, build on Mann’s comparison to discuss Nietzsche and Wilde together as immoralists who “delighted in turning morality on its head, telling us that the modern idea of *good* is actually *bad*, and the modern idea of *bad* is probably *good*” (392).

Not all critics agree that Nietzsche and Wilde are similar in their aesthetic philosophies. David Thatcher argues that Nietzsche and Wilde are only superficially similar in that they are both aesthetic thinkers, particularly in regard to their shared inclination towards the aphoristic style, and he insists rather that their actual aestheticisms are fundamentally opposed. Indeed, Nietzsche reviles Wilde’s *l’art pour l’art* aestheticism, writing in *Twilight of the Idols* that art “is the great stimulus to life: how could it be thought purposeless, aimless, *l’art pour l’art*?” (93). Wilde, on the other hand, contends that art exists for its own sake, apart from any grounding in life, writing in “The Decay of Lying” that the “only beautiful things . . . are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art” (1077).

This difference between Nietzsche’s and Wilde’s aestheticisms is accounted for in their opposing attitudes towards nature as envisioned by the tragic worldview, which comprehends the inevitability of suffering to life. As Alexander Nehamas claims, Nietzsche interprets life as if it were an unfolding literary text, with this manner of interpretation serving as an existential strategy to combat the problem of nihilism, the Schopenhauerian impression that life, as sheer suffering, is otherwise meaningless. While Nietzsche accepts the tragic wisdom that suffering is ubiquitous and necessary to life, he disagrees with the limitations that Schopenhauer places on art in *The World as Will and Representation* and instead upholds art as an effective existential strategy for dealing with the pessimism (eventually, nihilism) that follows the tragic worldview. Whereas for Schopenhauer the aesthetic perspective is fleeting, a mere break from life-as-suffering, for Nietzsche the aesthetic perspective can facilitate a beautifying representation of reality which allowed the Homeric Greeks to experience themselves. As Sebastian Gardner writes, “as they supposed themselves to appear to their divine [Olympic] spectators” (601). It is in *The Birth of Tragedy* that Nietzsche introduces the concept of “aesthetic justification” by which he means that the highest dignity of existence is to be found in the interpretation of life as a work of art, thereby overcoming nihilism. For Nietzsche, tragedy is the genre that exemplifies how aesthetic justification operates to overcoming nihilism because it apprehends the Schopenhauerian wisdom that life is essentially

suffering yet affirms life exactly for what it is, by facilitating a ‘primal Oneness’ [Ur-Eine] with nature. Tragedy is historically constituted by the confrontation between two worldviews, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, to which tragedy arises as an artistic platform of reconciliation between these two primal impulses. Tragedy does not deny the wisdom that life is suffering, but affirms the sufferer in primordial unity with other sufferers seeking the beautifying representation of life at the surface of tragic art.

Wilde similarly associates tragedy with the existential strategy of aesthetic justification. While Nietzsche’s relationship with him was more antipodal, Wilde was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer; Joseph Pearce writes that “Schopenhauer’s pessimism would only partially eclipse Wilde’s latent Christianity, creating a hybrid whose contradictions and confusions masked his true meaning, even from himself” (82). Like Nietzsche, Wilde held that life required justification along the lines of art in order to overcome the nihilism that follows the realization that suffering is essential to life. Wilde held that the antidote to nihilism was individuation, or the burden of cultivating oneself as a work of art expressed by the body, a process that I elaborate upon later in this paper. Wilde’s mode of aesthetic justification, however, does not seek to redeem nature itself. Opposing Nietzsche, Wilde aligns more closely with Schopenhauer in limiting the possibilities of art towards nature and holds that nature lacks aesthetic possibilities and is actually in itself anti-aesthetic. For Wilde, aesthetic justification does not overcome nihilism by aesthetically affirming natural life as suffering, but rather evades nihilism by escaping from nature into the aesthetic. In “The Decay of Lying” Wilde writes that “[n]othing is more evident than that Nature hates Mind” (1073). Wilde thus advocates that the individual must position himself aesthetically against nature through stylized expression or artistic form. Similar to how the artist selects a genre in order to give form to his or her work, the individual must conform his or her personality according to stylistic characterizations conveyed through manners and appearances, thereby constituting what Wilde understands to be the life lived in accordance with the “Mind.” For Nietzsche, art is essential to the vitality of natural being, a medium for affirming “primal oneness” while for Wilde art is sheer artifice, the striking of an outlandish pose.

This stark difference between the aesthetic philosophies of Nietzsche and Wilde does not, however, account for the radical transformation Wilde underwent while imprisoned in Reading Gaol. A letter Wilde wrote to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, during Wilde’s two-year sentence in Reading Gaol, *De Profundis* has received less critical attention than Wilde’s other works, largely on account of its apparent betrayal of his earlier *l’art pour l’art* aestheticism. In the first half of the

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epistle, Wilde recounts the course of his relationship with Douglas, and in the second half he explains his spiritual rebirth as an artist in the image of Jesus Christ. As observed by Lawrence Danson, “[f]or some readers, *De Profundis* is [Wilde’s] greatest work because it is the one in which he realized for the first time in his life the vital importance of being earnest” (92-93). Deprived of audience and agency in the world, the formerly whimsical and irreverent Wilde renounced his *l’art pour l’art* aestheticism, along with his self-styled image as a dandy, when he wrote *De Profundis* to come to more sincere terms with his tragic fate. W. H. Auden writes that “Wilde’s life was like a drama, and in reading his letters chronologically there is an excitement similar to that of watching a Greek tragedy in which the audience knows what is going to happen but the hero does not” (5). Wilde himself writes in *De Profundis* that “I thought my life was going to be a brilliant comedy . . . I found it to be a revolting and repellent tragedy” (23). Wilde’s life had become a tragedy, and so he developed a new aestheticism that affirmed, rather than rejected, suffering as the basis of life.

This paper compares Nietzsche’s (at the time of writing *BT*²) and Wilde’s respective aestheticisms as interactions with the “spirit of revenge” that is the platonic legacy in the West. Although the tragic view of life comprehends the limits imposed on life by nature, this view does not in itself succumb the individual to life-negating pessimism but rather precedes the possibility of aesthetic justification. By contrast, the “spirit of revenge” engenders hatred towards life on account of its tragic qualities and therefore culminates in the repudiation of nature as suffering. Whereas Nietzsche rejects Plato’s definition of poetry as a lie in the *Republic* and affirms life as an aesthetic phenomenon, the early Wilde, out of disgust for the tragic view of nature, accepts Plato’s judgement

² It is important to note that Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy changed significantly following *BT*; Gardner identifies that Nietzsche’s post-*BT* can be divided into two phases, the first corresponding to *Human, All Too Human* which posits a pro-science, anti-art stance in which Nietzsche addresses art not as an aesthetic possibility, but rather modern cultural art which he perceives as promotional of nihilism because it is no longer grounded in the tragic worldview, and the second corresponding to *The Gay Science*, in which Nietzsche explores how the existential project of aesthetic justification could be transferred from the sphere of art to the sphere of theoretical culture. Gardner insists, however, that Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy as it relates to his depiction of the Homeric Greeks and tragedy remains fundamentally similar, particularly if detached from *BT*’s tendency towards rhetorical overstatements and the context of its Wagner-worship. Although I draw liberally from Nietzsche’s later works on matters that do not contradict his earlier aesthetics, this paper focuses emphatically on Nietzsche’s aestheticism at the time of *BT*. For it is *BT*, for its rhetorical qualities, that strikes the most compelling convergences with and divergences from Wilde’s own aestheticism. Finally, to account for the full arc of the development of Nietzsche’s aestheticism would breach the scope of this short paper.

and deems life anti-aesthetic. From a Nietzschean perspective, Wilde's agreement with Plato indicates that Wilde has succumbed to the spirit of revenge; Wilde has inherited the platonic negative attitude towards nature and, in a gesture against nature, positions art as its enemy and "style" as a gesture of rebellion against nature. I then interpret *De Profundis* as Wilde's account of his gradual recovery from the spirit of revenge, in which Wilde, similar to the early Nietzsche, develops an aestheticism that is not *l'art pour l'art* but rather affirms life along tragic lines.

II

In "Book X" of the *Republic*, Socrates declares poetry the enemy of philosophy and so banishes it from his Republic. As a metaphysical idealist, Plato is interested in the relation between poetry and universal truth, and it is on this basis that Socrates argues that poetry is flawed mimesis. For Plato, art is intrinsically deceptive, since art is the flawed representation of reality which tries to pass itself off as accurate to what it represents. Conveying the impression that he is not radically alone or unique in disparaging poetry, in *The Apology* Plato has Socrates suggest that philosophers and poets have been enemies since time immemorial: "there is an ancient quarrel between it and ancient philosophy, which is evidenced by such expressions as that "dog yelping at its master". . . and the myriad other signs of this ancient opposition of theirs" (13). In a notable essay, Glenn Most explores the validity of Plato's claim that these lines indicate a longstanding historical quarrel between pre-Socratic philosophy and poetry and concludes that there is no philological evidence to suggest that they do (19-20). Most suggests that these lines rather betray the philosopher's prejudice; Plato invents the myth of an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry in order to justify his personal hostility towards poets. Most speculates as to whether or not Plato's polemic against poetry is part of his personal vendetta against the writers of comedies, particularly Aristophanes, for their roles in the accusations which eventually led to Socrates' execution (14). Although the dialogue of "Book X" might very well be motivated by Plato's petty grievance against the poets for humiliating Socrates, for Nietzsche, Plato's grievance against poetry indicates a more profound disdain towards life itself.

In *BT*, Nietzsche depicts Socrates as the "theoretical type" that represents the faith that reason will penetrate the depths of reality to reveal universal truth beneath the mere appearances, coverings, and veils that disguise life. For Socrates, tragedy is merely a "seductive veil of beauty fluttering before his eyes" (109). Nietzsche sustains this argument about Socrates even through to *TI*, writing that "the wisest men of all ages have judged alike: *it is no good*. Always and everywhere one has heard the same sound from their mouths -- a sound full of doubt, full of

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melancholy, full of weariness of life, full of resistance to life” (39). As a great philosopher, Socrates possesses the tragic wisdom that life in its natural state inevitably involves suffering, degeneration, and death, the wrath of time-bound nature. Whereas the tragic artist affirms life in light of this inevitability, Socrates disdains life for its central tragic quality. In revolt against tragedy which he finds intolerable, Socrates sets up a new faith which transcends time, a metaphysics which permits him to escape from the world into ideas. Like the ghost of Hamlet’s father that beckons his son to seek revenge on its behalf, Socrates is the vengeful ghost haunting Western philosophy. Plato condemns tragic poetry because it affirms the unstable world from which Socratic philosophy seeks to escape. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche calls Plato “the greatest enemy of art Europe has yet produced” (589-590). The sensuous pleasures of poetry prompt the passions and encourage the bodily life which is subject to the forces of nature, thus undermining the purpose of philosophy, which is intellectual and spiritual transcendence. Opposing himself against Socrates, Nietzsche undertakes the project of restoring authenticity to Western philosophy, to become a philosophy which confronts and affirms life and explores possibilities for a world which is comprehendingly tragic. In *GS*, Nietzsche writes that he wants to “learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly” (763). Philosopher George Grant eloquently summarizes Nietzsche’s personal relation to this undertaking in characterizing Nietzsche as a “convalescent. He is recovering, step-by-step, from the spirit of revenge.” He is recovering “from the long history of revenge in the race. In that history, the greatest revenge . . . took the form of belief in the transcendence of timeless eternity” (54).

Thus, in *BT* Nietzsche offers his vision of a music-making Socrates (46), a philosopher who is also an artist. Nietzsche’s general task is “to show how life, philosophy and art may have a profound relationship to one another without philosophy being shallow or the life of the philosopher filled with lies” (*Philosophy* 12). Under the intuitive certainty that the Greeks achieved the highest culture in the world, Nietzsche argues that tragedy’s central role in conveying knowledge about the gods indicates that Greek culture more honestly confronted the tragic conditions of life than does Nietzsche’s own contemporary culture, which had inherited the platonic denial of the world.

Named respectively after the sun-god of poetry and reason and the satyr-god of wine and ecstasy, the Apollonian and Dionysian are antagonistic yet also complimentary mentalities that drove the development of Greek tragedy. The latter had its origin in the orgiastic festivals and dithyrambs dedicated to

Dionysus, whose mythical dismemberment, death, and rebirth are at the spiritual center of classical tragic storylines. The Dionysian mentality represents the pursuit of meaning through a passionate and intoxicating engagement with nature, even in confronting the inevitability of suffering and death. The Apollonian mentality, which represents the human faculty of reason, as well as a human's sense of individual identity as distinct from the external world, is the driving force behind everything that looks "simple, transparent, and beautiful" (67) in art. The Apollonian mentality imposes the illusion of order and measure upon a disorderly and chaotic universe, fulfilling the human desire to retreat from suffering into a rational universe that is finite and predictable. The great achievement of Greek tragedy is the reconciliation of the Apollonian and the Dionysian through the transposition of a narrative constructed of Apollonian structural elements founded upon Dionysian reality. In viewing tragedy, the audience suffers vicariously the downfall of the tragic hero before the gods, which are Apollonian symbols that encase chaos and senseless suffering in beautiful forms indicative of rational, meaningful design. The poetic portrayal of fate incarnated in mythological deities, and the depiction of a tragic hero who resists though ultimately submits to the wrath of those deities, casts suffering into an aesthetic light. In chaining itself with Prometheus' manacle to the stones of fate, the audience forgets the singularity of its own particular suffering, instead seeing itself as swaying in the tides of fate in which all people suffer. Nietzsche writes in *BT*, "[u]nder the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man" (37). This aestheticizing of suffering simultaneously facilitates distance between the sufferer and his or her particular suffering thus enabling joyful aesthetic contemplation, but also an overturning primal Oneness with humankind as fellow sufferers and a cosmic sense of belonging to the world. "The tragic artist," writes Nietzsche in *TI*, "is *not* a pessimist—it is precisely he who *affirms* all that is questionable and terrible in existence, he is *Dionysian* . . ." (6).

III

Rather than the self-styling of a hedonistic cult, which recalls the dandy as its representative rather than a serious thinker, early-to-middle-period Oscar Wilde's *l'art pour l'art* aestheticism is grounded in the Kantian philosophic contract between the universal feeling of sympathy and the struggle to communicate one's innermost self in universally understandable terms (Pease 97). In the nineteenth century, the aestheticism movement in continental Europe sought a conception of art as distinct and separate from morality, utility, and pleasure through its

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prioritization of the expression of the private self, which was hindered by these societal forces. Pease notes that the movement in England was additionally a revolt against the industrial forces which were particularly influential in that country, including “utility, rationality, scientific factuality, technical progress, middle-class conformity, industrial capitalism, democratic levelling, athleticism, sexual mores and oppressive moralism” (98). Wilde’s own definitions of his aestheticism are nebulous at best, although it is clear that the individual is conceived along the lines of an uncultivated work of art whose existential burden is to pursue the expression of a private, true self (which is roughly analogous to the trope of being one’s “best self”) through the making of materialistic, consumer choices that reflect the more general aspiration towards the beautiful. Towards this end, the human body is regarded as an artistic canvas for depicting one’s idealized version of oneself, and as such the individual is indivisible from his/her art. Wilde’s aestheticism aspires to emancipate the individual from social, political, and religious spheres on the basis that beauty alone gives value to life; the banality of social and religious mores and political utility hinder the expression of the self by holding back art from elevating life (Pease 98).

Wilde’s aestheticism does not merely demand the *expression* of a private self that is naturally present in every person, but its complete invention altogether. Wilde privileges form/appearance above all other aspects of artistic creation. Form is not merely the signifier of art but is also its subject: the artist “gains his inspiration from form, and from form purely, as an artist should” (“The Critic as Artist” 1148). The expression of the self as a work of art involves the synthesis of the body (the physical manifestation of the individual in the world) and the soul (which stands for the spiritual, imagined vision of oneself that receives expression). Wilde writes that it “is not merely in art that the body is the soul. . . . Form is the beginning of things . . . it is form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under the conditions of beauty” (1148-1149).

Wilde’s conception of the individual as an aesthetic project is underpinned by a dual opposition between form/appearance and the “nature” that it is meant to overcome. “What Art really reveals to us,” writes Wilde, “is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition” (1071). Apart of nature is the uncultivated state of the person before they have acquired artistic form, the state in which individual self-expression is subject entirely to the forces of nature accounted for in the tragic worldview. In disavowing nature, Wilde liberates the self from its predetermined existence to become “unnatural,” thereby empowering the individual to correct

nature's errors and disfigurements and to transcend nature. Wilde writes that nature

has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out. . . . It is fortunate for us, however, that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have had no art at all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place. (1071)

Nature lacks premeditated design, which for Wilde is the basis for any kind of intellectual-philosophical life or artistic potentiality. Whereas for Nietzsche the tragic view of life is aesthetically fertile in that it informs one half of the Dionysian-Apollonian duality that renders tragic art possible, for Wilde nature cannot serve art because it is apathetic towards beauty in its indiscriminate destruction of all things, particularly of the human body (as ravaged by the forces of time, *per se*). With its total apathy towards form or design, nature is more likely to bore its audience, of which the artist is a disapproving member, than it is to inspire any kind of awe or aesthetic appreciation. Wilde thus aspires towards an art which is entirely form, of which *The Importance of Being Earnest* is perhaps representative, with all its dallying characters who undertake hapless personas while fixating upon word game-induced, trifling confusions. William Archer argues that the work "imitates nothing, represents nothing, means nothing, is nothing, except a sort of *rondo capriccioso*, in which the artist's fingers run with crisp irresponsibility up and down the keyboard of life" (106). *The Importance of Being Earnest* avoids representation of nature to the extent that it "approaches pure form as nearly as words have ever been able to do" (107).

The opposition drawn between art and nature leads Wilde to agree with Plato that art, in an important sense, is a lie. In "The Decay of Lying" (not uncoincidentally a Socratic dialogue) Wilde writes that "lying and poetry are arts — arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other and they require the most careful study, the most disinterested devotion" (1073). For Wilde, the notion that art is a lie is entirely positive, since this lie is positioned against nature. Wilde aligns his notion of art as a lie with Plato's "noble lie," pointing out that "just as those who do not love Plato more than Truth cannot pass beyond the threshold of the Academe, so those who do not love Beauty more than Truth never know the inmost shrine of Art" ("The Critic as Artist" 1073). In contrast to Plato, Wilde disavows any essential mimetic purpose in art and argues for the ideal opposite: art should rectify, rather than mirror, nature with all its disfigurements. For Plato, art is unsuited to the imitation of nature; for Wilde, nature is unsuited to imitation by art. Whereas Plato is content with discarding poetry altogether, Wilde appropriates Plato's definition of art as a lie for a new conception: art is indeed a lie, although this lie is cast against nature which offers only suffering to

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humankind, thereby establishing art as the stylistic vehicle of aesthetic truth and freedom from nature.

Although in their final judgements on art they differ entirely, Plato and Wilde's conception of art along the lines of a lie arises, in each case, from the rejection of the tragic worldview that Nietzsche in *BT* presents as partially constitutive of tragic art. Following their negative judgements of life as inevitable suffering, Plato and Wilde reach the same conclusion that "*it is no good*" and seek to escape from nature into what Wilde calls "the Mind" (1073), which is the center of philosophical and artistic activity. Plato retreats from the world into metaphysics; Wilde, on the other hand, rejects nature for aesthetics, writing that "while meta-physics had but little real interest for me, and morality absolutely none, there was nothing that either Plato or Christ had said that could not be transferred immediately into the sphere of Art and there find its complete fulfilment" (*De Profundis*, 26). Suggesting that his own ideas fulfill the teachings of Plato by transferring his interests from metaphysics and morality to aesthetics, Wilde retreats from nature and the suffering it entails into the stylization of the self as the ultimate aesthetic project. Wilde's absorption of what, from a Nietzschean perspective, strongly recalls the spirit of revenge is starkly expressed in Wilde's definitive claim that "Nature hates Mind" (1073).

IV

In *De Profundis*, Wilde depicts his public downfall and imprisonment in Reading Gaol as the fulfillment of his devotion to aesthetic self-stylization. Wilde emphasizes that his devotion had detached him from concern for others:

I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. . . . I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. (44-45)

John Quintus notes that Wilde's "own experience accounts for his return to the dreadful consequences individuation invites, for Wilde knew that his eccentricity, his egotism was largely responsible for his downfall" (524). Wilde, who as an artist was most essentially a playwright, lived permanently as an actor, always costumed and always acting out his self-chosen role on the stage, treating those in his company as his spectators. His self-stylization as a work of art depended upon the reception of his stage-appearance by an audience that consisted, at the height of his celebrity, of the general public which Wilde calls the "smaller natures and meaner minds" of his society (31). One such "smaller mind," the one that proved

to be the most instrumental in his downfall, was Lord Alfred Douglas himself, to whom Wilde writes in *De Profundis* that it “did not occur to me that you could have the supreme vice, shallowness” (31). In *The Decay of Lying*, Wilde writes that life “holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in fiction” (1085). Yet it was Wilde himself who had become a mirror held up to his own audience, a reflection of the shallowness of the public according to whose standards he fashioned himself artistically. Wilde’s betrayal by the public, the same public that once fawned over the antics of his aesthetic displays and delighted in his fashion and popular plays, yet jeered and spat at him from the boarding platform during his transfer from Wandsworth Prison to Reading Gaol, demonstrated to Wilde the consequences of investing his aesthetic worth in his reception by the public. In light of the apparent failure of his *l’art pour l’art* aestheticism, in *De Profundis* Wilde undertakes to outline a new theory of art grounded in “sorrow” and “all that it teaches” (51).

Humiliated, poverty-stricken, and with every aspect of his life regulated and controlled, Wilde could no longer retreat from his suffering into artistic self-expression as he had done as a free man. He writes, “I thought I could bear a real tragedy if it came to me with purple pall and a mask of noble sorrow, but that the dreadful thing about modernity was that it put tragedy into the raiment of comedy, so that the great realities seemed commonplace or grotesque or lacking in style” (70). Wilde had previously dismissed tragedy as a mere artform among many, ignoring the Dionysian roots which ground the genre in the comprehension of human suffering. In *De Profundis*, Wilde thus seeks reconciliation with nature/suffering towards which he had previously expressed hatred: “[Nature] will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole” (76). Wilde understands his reconciliation with nature as a recovery, a process which will render him “whole.” Like Nietzsche, he is a convalescent recovering from the spirit of revenge. Wilde writes that he “is seeking a fresh mode of self-realization. That is all I am concerned with. And the first thing that I have got to do is to free myself from any possible bitterness of feeling against the world” (46). In writing this, Wilde aspires to cleanse himself not only of his feelings of bitterness towards the individuals who wronged him by colluding in his downfall, but also his feelings of bitterness towards his own tragic self. Thus, Wilde thus understands the project of his new aestheticism as overcoming the spirit of revenge present in his former aesthetic philosophy.

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In formulating his new theory of art, Wilde selects the Christian messiah Jesus Christ to serve as the perennial tragic model for overcoming the spirit of revenge and affirming life. In *De Profundis*, Wilde legitimizes his conception of Christ as the secular image of perfection on the authority of his selfless love for those who suffer, thus affirming Wilde's personal intimacy with Christ as a fellow sufferer. Counteracting the hate and resentment that formerly characterized his understanding of the relationship between tragic wisdom and the Mind, Wilde emphasizes that love is the measure and scope of the imagination. Christ is the word-become-flesh affirmation of Wilde's thesis that the "imagination is simply a manifestation of love, and it is love and the capacity for it that distinguishes one human being from another" (66). By this measure, Christ is the most imaginative, and therefore also the most individualistic, of all artists. Christ's authenticity as *the* tragic model furthermore rests in Wilde's belief that Christ is the one who has suffered most. In addition to his suffering on the cross, Christ takes upon his shoulders all the sufferings of humanity, "the sufferings of those whose names are legion and whose dwelling is among the tombs: oppressed nationalities, factory children, thieves, people in prison, outcasts, those whom are dumb under oppression and whose silence is heard only of God" (56-57) and shows them the beauty in their suffering. Although he suffers the most and therefore has the most reasons to hate life, Christ does not succumb to the spirit of revenge. Instead, Christ expresses his love for life-as-suffering by emphasizing its aesthetic value, thereby performing a kind of "aesthetic justification." Wilde writes that "love in the artist is simply the sense of beauty that reveals to the world its body and its soul" (55).

As noted by Kate Hext, Wilde's Christ "repositions life's values from the heavens to the human heart" (207). Rather than an otherworldly figure, Wilde's Christ is an artist in the human medium; Wilde claims that Christ loved ignorant people because he "knew that in the soul of one who is ignorant there is always room for a good idea" (65). Wilde envisions the true Christian as one who overcomes the spirit of revenge out of love for the beautiful. It is impossible, however, to overcome the spirit of revenge entirely, for such would effectively render one without sin; Wilde thus concludes that there have been no true Christians except Christ.³ As the one who wrote in *The Anti-Christ* that "there was only one Christian and he died on the cross" (5), Nietzsche would have resonated with some aspects of Wilde's conception of Christ. To be clear, Nietzsche repudiates Christianity (and its messianic figurehead) on the grounds that

³ In the same breath Wilde also claims Francis of Assisi a true Christian, but clearly of a lower order.

Christianity is life-denying in its vengeful spirituality that sanctifies the lust for torture and final destruction of its enemies. However, as noted by Walter Kaufmann (360), Nietzsche distinguishes a pre-Christianized Jesus-figure that models not a religion based on faith in “virtues” which serve merely as covers for vengefulness, but rather a genuine religion based in “doings” which carry a moral demand that can be met only by someone whose inner life is “blessedness in peace, in an *inability* to be an enemy” (26). Nietzsche’s Christ is tragic just as Wilde’s is; in *AC*, Nietzsche notes that the life of so innocent a leader could end only in crucifixion by his own followers.

Wilde’s conception of Christ as a tragic figure leads him to interpret the crucifixion as a life-encompassing tragedy sustained by its Eucharistic reenactment in the Catholic Church, with which Wilde flirted throughout his life. This meta-tragedy is re-enacted through the ritual of communion:

When one contemplates all of this from the point of view of art alone one cannot but be grateful that the Supreme Office of the Church should be the playing of the tragedy without the shedding of blood: the mystical presentation, by means of dialogue and costume and gesture even, of the Passion of her Lord; and it is always a source of pleasure and awe to me to remember that the ultimate survival of the Greek chorus, lost elsewhere to art, is to be found in the servitor answering the priest at mass. (57)

Wilde’s interpretation of Catholic liturgical practice as tragic reenactment casts Christ as a tragic hero and the crucifixion as a Greek tragedy. Wilde’s Christ is neither an omnipotent nor an omniscient divine figure, but rather the victim of fate which inflicts suffering upon humanity, in line with Nietzsche’s conception of the “Fates” in *BT* that symbolize the inevitability of suffering. Wilde’s Christ is not a divine dealer of justice; he does not punish the wicked and reward the good. Wilde is uninterested in moral judgement, the restitution for one’s suffering and punishment for one’s sins that take place only in the Christian afterlife. In subjecting Christ to the injustice of fate, Wilde fashions Christ into a tragic model who is powerless to intervene in his tragic destiny, just as Wilde believes he was powerless to intervene in the succession of events that condemned him to Reading Gaol. “To each of us, Wilde writes, “different fates are meted out. My lot has been one of public infamy, of long imprisonment, of misery, of ruin, of disgrace, but I am not worthy of it—not yet, at any rate” (42). Christ, whose fate is to take on and die for the sufferings of humanity (56-57), is alone worthy of his fate. It is in his role as a tragic hero that Christ assumes the mantles of supreme individual and the supreme artist; even in captivity, Wilde’s Christ creatively reinterprets his destiny and invents himself as a redeemer of humankind, thus

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overcoming sorrow and vindicating his life-tragedy as an artistic process of becoming. Wilde writes that the “strange figures of poetic drama and ballad are made by the imagination of others, but out of his own imagination entirely did Jesus of Nazareth create himself” (62). In this, Christ fulfills the equivalent role of Dionysus in Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy as the figure who confronts the tragic reality of life and, without retreating from it, justifies suffering and its inevitability as essential to the aesthetic phenomenon that is life.

Although for Wilde Christ is *the* tragic figure, like Nietzsche he traces the philosophical origin of tragic art back to the oppositional forces which are foundational to the historical development and overall *ethos* of tragedy. For Nietzsche and Wilde, much of contemporary art is unedifying because it fails to capture and address the fundamental forces of the human spirit; contemporary art has retreated from comprehension of Dionysian truth into Apollonian structure/style, relying upon allegorical forms to transmit didactically moral and philosophical platitudes. In his critique of Richard Wagner, Nietzsche’s favorite example of the corruption in contemporary art, Nietzsche claims that he is motivated to write so that “the actor should not seduce those who are authentic” and that “music should not become an art of lying” (*CW* 636). Out of a similar concern about the authenticity of contemporary art, Wilde writes that “we call ours a utilitarian age, and we do not know the uses of any single thing. We have forgotten that water can cleanse, and fire purify, and that the earth is mother to us all” (*De Profundis* 90). Like Nietzsche, who turns towards to ancient Greece to find the highest model for culture, Wilde also turns towards the Greeks for a kind of art that deals with the essential: “Greek art is of the sun and deals directly with things. I am sure that in elemental forces there is purification, and I want to go back to them and live in their presence” (90). For Wilde now, classical tragedy is the genre that confronts reality in the most authentic way because it affirms life in light of the inevitability of suffering. Wilde even identifies the birth of tragedy in Dionysus, writing that the most suggestive figure from Greek mythology concerning art is “the son of a mortal woman to whom the moment of his birth had proved also the moment of her death” (61).

In the Nietzschean spirit of *BT*, Wilde re-conceives the project of cultivating the individual as an authentic work of art as analogous to the reconciliation of the contradictory impulses which are reflected in the relationship between appearance and essential underlying truth⁴ in tragic art. When addressing the human being as

⁴ To clarify, “essential truth” by no means refers to a *metaphysical* reality that resides beneath artistic superficiality. In the case of Nietzsche and Wilde, this “essential truth” refers to the Silenus’s Schopenhauerian wisdom that life is “essentially” suffering, a truth which cannot be confronted directly by an audience but must be mediated through artistic “appearances.”

a work of art, Wilde represents the dichotomy of appearance and essential truth in terms of the “body” and the “soul,” concepts that harken back to Wilde’s earlier aesthetic philosophy but now function quite differently to conceptualize a comprehension of tragic wisdom rather than a retreat from it. Allison Pease observes that Wilde writes in the tradition of the “Victorian Sage” about the vital relationship between the soul, which represents self-knowledge and passion, and the body, which is the artistic representation of the soul (107). “What the artist is always looking for,” Wilde writes, “is the mode of existence in which body and soul are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals” (52). For Wilde, form no longer signifies escapism from nature, but rather is the medium for expressing one’s self as a sufferer. Wilde characterizes Jesus Christ according to the body-soul dichotomy: “God had given [Christ] at his birth the soul of a poet, as he himself when quite young had in mystical marriage taken poverty as his bride: and with the soul of a poet and the body of a beggar he found the way to perfection not difficult” (67). Christ, the ultimate artist, assumes the appearance of a beggar because he has within him the soul of one who suffers as a beggar suffers. Although the Dionysian is typically associated with the body, in the context of Wilde’s conceptual dichotomy the Dionysian should be paired with Wilde’s non-metaphysical notion of the soul, as both concepts encapsulate an awareness of tragic wisdom about life-as-suffering that can be confronted and addressed only in artistic representation. The body, like the Apollonian, is the form or aesthetic appearance through which tragic wisdom can be mediated and represented to the world.

The argument that tragedy is the proper genre for witnessing the reconciliation of conceptual dualities (the Apollonian/Dionysian, the body/soul) extending from the tragic insight that life is suffering can thus be applied equally to the early aestheticism of Nietzsche and the late aestheticism of Wilde. Contrary to the sharp distinctions drawn from Wilde’s early aestheticism, the late Wilde prioritizes in his aesthetic thinking the realization that “sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great art” (52). For Nietzsche and Wilde then, the artist is one who suffers and refashions himself as an authentic individual in confrontation with suffering as inscribed in his own relationship with his art. For both Nietzsche and Wilde, the artist must suffer—not only because suffering renders him or her beautiful, but also because he or she makes suffering beautiful. And suffering draws individuals together, as an audience seated before the tragic stage of life.

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