Christ as the "Romantic Artist": Romanticism and Suffering in *De Profundis*

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Abstract
Written during Oscar Wilde's imprisonment at Reading Gaol, *De Profundis* (1897) is to a considerable extent the writer's retrospective manifesto. In this article, I suggest that Wilde's definition of Christ as the embodiment of "the supreme romantic type" and "the romantic temperament" testifies to his long-lasting attempt at reconciling artistic and ethical concerns within the tenets of Aestheticism. Wilde first posited an explicit connection between the Romantic temperament and Aestheticism in his lecture on "The English Renaissance of Art" (1882). However, in *De Profundis* his views on the Romantic temperament give new meaning to his claims on art and morality, on the role of sorrow, and on the importance of pursuing a form of individualism divested of self-interest. Accordingly, Wilde's last prose writing illuminates his conception of the Romantic spirit from an aesthetic as well as an ethical perspective.

Key-words: Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, Romanticism, Aestheticism.

1. Introduction: contexts and echoes

That Oscar Wilde's aesthetic philosophy suggests a continuity with the literature and culture of the Romantic period is well known. In Italy, Mario Praz was one of the first critics to see Decadence as the last stage of Romanticism, arguing that the sensuousness and eroticism inherent to *fin-de-siècle* literature were the result of an organic process begun in the early nineteenth century. Praz, who considered Wilde's distinctive voice to be the echo of poets such as Byron, Shelley, and Keats, mediated by Swinburne, traced a convincing paradigm that largely dispels ideological discontinuities between Romantic, Victorian, and *fin-de-siècle* culture (Praz [1930] 2015: 3, 9).

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Wilde's first volume of poetry already foregrounds this triangulation. Published in 1881, *Poems* is rife with allusions to poets and texts that reveal his preoccupation with the legacy of the Romantic period, as the song *Endymion (for Music)* and the poems *The Grave of Keats* and *The Grave of Shelley* suggest. Moreover, *Helas*, the sonnet that opens the volume, clearly illuminates his aesthetic agenda and his search for a paradigm in which Romanticism and Aestheticism could converge. The first two lines enucleate the poet's willingness "[t]o drift with every passion till my soul / Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play" (Wilde 2000b: 156), and draw a dual trajectory that, I contend, was to remain central to Wilde's aesthetic reflection. With its sharp infinitive clause, the first pentameter echoes Walter Pater's much contested credo in what had become the controversial "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, that is, "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (Pater [1893] 1980: 189). Also, the second line overtly pays homage to the Romantic idea – celebrated by Coleridge, Shelley, and Emerson, among others[1] – of the poet's mind as an Aeolian harp responding to external influences.

Ensconced in *Helas* are issues that Wilde was to explore in a more consistent way over the following years, namely the need to mediate between the Aesthetic and Decadent search for ravishment and the Romantic quest for an individuality that would transcend the limits of sheer subjectivity. The year after *Poems* was published, the writer posited the existence of an evolutionary pattern connecting the Romantic spirit with Aestheticism in the lecture "The English Renaissance of Art", which he delivered in New York in January 1882. Wilde thus described the Romantic spirit as a new Renaissance, an aesthetic renovation which, like the rebirth witnessed by fifteenth-century Italy, promoted a new awareness concerning the individual and the cultivation of the beautiful[2]. He looked over the relationship

[1] See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Aeolian Harp* (1796); Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ode to the West Wind* (1820); Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Maiden Speech of the Aeolian Harp* (1883).

[2] Wilde was not alone in drawing an analogy between Romanticism and the Renaissance, as suggested by the history of the Victorian reassessment of Romantic poetry. To mention but a notable example, John Russell Lowell, who edited an American edition of *The Poetical Works of John Keats* in 1854, claimed that the Romantic poet was a perfect "example of the *renaissance* going on almost under

between art forms, between form and feeling, and between the verbal and the visual, and this examination allowed him to trace a genealogic line that sees Keats as the forerunner of Aestheticism:

> Byron was a rebel and Shelley a dreamer; but in the calmness and clearness of his vision, his perfect self-control, his unerring sense of beauty and his recognition of a separate realm for the imagination, Keats was the pure and serene artist, the forerunner of the pre-Raphaelite school, and so of the great romantic movement of which I am to speak. (Wilde [1882] 2009: 119)

Central to "The English Renaissance of Art" is the coalescence of Romanticism and Aestheticism that Wilde had hinted at in *Helas*. He sees Keats as the "absolute incarnation" of the "artistic spirit" of the nineteenth century, and praises Goethe for the "supreme æsthetic faculty" that enabled him to define and represent "beauty in terms the most concrete possible" (Wilde [1882] 2009: 119, 111). Again, these claims, and the decision not to provide "any abstract definition of beauty, any such universal formula" (p. 111), establish an intentional dialogue with Pater. In the Preface to *The Renaissance*, the latter had remarked that "Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness" (Pater [1893] 1980: xix). Wilde embraces Pater's idea but strengthens it through a new sensitivity for the individual. The Romantic temperament, in his view, sparked a cultural and artistic renovation that developed during the nineteenth century, just like Provençal poetry, in Pater's account, contained the germs of the Renaissance spirit[3]. It is this

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our own eyes, and that the intellectual ferment was in him kindled by a purely English leaven" (Lowell 1891, I: 244; emphasis in the original).

[3] A key element of Wilde's notion of the Renaissance was the rediscovery of Hellenism and Medievalism. He conceives them as two modes of thought that enable him to trace an evolutionary line connecting Byron, Shelley, and Keats to the Pre-Raphaelites, to Swinburne and Pater, and – although he does not mention him explicitly – John Addington Symonds. By alluding to Goethe's *Faust, Part Two* (1832), and implicitly to Symonds's *Renaissance in Italy* (1875-1886), Wilde claims that it is "from the union of Hellenism, in its breadth, its sanity of purpose, its calm possession of beauty, with the adventive, the intensified individualism, the passionate colour of the romantic spirit, that springs the art of the nineteenth century in England, as from the marriage of Faust and Helen of Troy sprang the beautiful boy Euphorion" (Wilde [1882] 2009: 112).

spirit that fostered the search for new subjects and forms, making it possible for Romantic literature to embrace "the intricacy and complexity and experience of modern life" (Wilde [1882] 2009: 112), and to express beauty in its multifarious manifestations.

As George Stavros aptly remarked, Wilde's multiple pronouncements on the Romantics in works such as "The English Renaissance of Art" and "The Critic as Artist" ([1890] 1891) are built on clashing criteria involving "feeling and thought, form and content, the beautiful and the good, the Keatsian and the Wordsworthian" (Stavros 1977: 35). Stavros's references to the Paterian dimension at work in Wilde's reading of the Romantics are, of course, well-grounded and convincing. However, the critic only briefly dwells on Wilde's last prose writing, *De Profundis*, which in my view constitutes a pivotal stage in his aesthetic theorisation.

The letter that Wilde addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas during his two-year imprisonment at Reading is to a considerable extent a retrospective manifesto. According to Wilde's biographer Richard Ellmann, the epistle is structured as a long dramatic monologue (Ellmann [1987] 1988: 487). I argue that this narrative form also enables Wilde to reassess the role of the artist and the function of art within a framework bent on reconciling Aestheticism and Decadence with his conception of the Romantic spirit. More to the point, I suggest that Wilde's definition of Christ as the embodiment of "the supreme romantic type" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 181) testifies to a theoretical reflection that places aesthetic concerns within a novel ethical perimeter grounded in human sympathy and in the epistemic value of suffering, two elements that are central to his reading of the Romantics. *De Profundis*, in other words, paves the way for a new interpretation of Wilde's views on the role and function of art, as well as on the importance of pursuing a form of individualism rooted in sympathy and thus divested of self-interest.

2. The re-evaluation of the Romantic ethos

Among the books that Wilde read while at Reading Gaol was Dante's *Vita nuova* (1292-1294), where the Italian poet looks back on his personal and spiritual growth with reference to his idealised love for Beatrice. This reading of Dante's text clearly points to Wilde's spiritual awakening. In fact, when focusing on Wilde's

addressee, Lord Alfred Douglas, as well as on the retrospective and introspective narrative of *De Profundis*, the parallels are explicit. Indeed, the writer describes his experience as a "New Life" or "*Vita Nuova*" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 163, 172). At the same time, his new awareness is not triggered by a sudden revelation; rather, he defines his spiritual progress as "the continuance, by means of development and evolution", of his "former life" (p. 172). Accordingly, he starts a process of introspection by tracing a diachronic parable that leads to a re-evaluation of his life and art.

Wilde's aesthetic self-reassessment develops in line with an ethical perspective that acknowledges the shaping, epistemic potential of suffering and sympathy and is also closely related to his views of the Romantic temperament[4]. The relevance that the epistle attributes to suffering is manifest, for instance, in the claim that "sorrow is the most sensitive of all created things" and vibrates to external influences "in terrible and exquisite pulsation" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 160). Against the search for ravishment, Wilde now presents suffering as the condition that enables the mind to be receptive, and thus to access, and creatively process, knowledge and experience, including the awareness of one's own and other people's pain.

Wilde's numerous quotations in *De Profundis* also show the extent to which this allegedly rehabilitated outlook draws lymph from the Romantic tradition. For example, he resorts to a passage from Thomas Carlyle's translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-1796) to illustrate the reconciliatory power of suffering:

Who never ate his bread in sorrow,
    Who never spent the darksome hours
Weeping, and watching for the morrow, –
    He knows you not, ye heavenly Powers. (Wilde [1897] 2005: 169)

[4] By using the term 'epistemic' I refer to Wilde's belief that sorrow is instrumental in widening the individual's knowledge of oneself as well as of the world. The adjective is therefore meant in its etymological sense, related to *episteme* or, as Michel Foucault argued in *The Order of Things*, to "the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice" (Foucault [1966] 1970: 168).

Despite the reference to divinity, and Wilde's actual concern with Christianity in *De Profundis*, the importance he places on sorrow seems to be disentangled from religious doctrines and more related to human knowledge. As such, it includes agency and self-expression, and therefore art. The echo from Wordsworth's play *The Borderers* (1842), "Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark, / And has the nature of infinity" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 163), associates pain with what is permanent, even though the experience of pleasure is equally important for one's individual growth. "To regret one's own experiences", Wilde states, "is to arrest one's own development. To deny one's own experiences is to arrest one's development" (p. 166). Self-knowledge, and the horizons opened by such awareness, depend on the way one deals with the burden of experience itself, including pain, as opposed to denial, compunction, or remorse.

From this perspective, *De Profundis* expands on issues that were central to Romantic philosophy, and especially to Hegel's and Blake's dialectical thinking. In Blake's case, spiritual progress and the development of knowledge are based on the need to subsume, rather than obliterate, contrary states. In this sense, his best-known pronouncement lies in the following claim, which concludes "The Argument" introducing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (Blake [1793] 1994: 29). Blake's positions certainly have theological foundations, largely stemming from his rejection of Swedenborg's Manichean tenets in *Heaven and Hell* (1758). However, as Alexander Regier (2018: 173) rightly suggests, Blake's argument is not strictly religious, but foregrounds a conflict between contrary states or forces that is pivotal to his views on human existence and art.

In "The English Renaissance of Art" Wilde actually criticises Blake for "the remoteness of his vision" and the "technical incompleteness" of his work (Wilde [1882] 2009: 119). These were flaws from which, he believed, Keats's poetry was exempt. Still, I would argue that Wilde's belief that the experience of pleasure should be complemented with that of sorrow is in keeping with Blake's theory of contrary states. This argument is confirmed by the

emphasis that they both place on humility[5]. In *De Profundis*, Wilde celebrates humility as the one quality that can give ultimate meaning to sorrow and human experience:

> Now I find hidden somewhere away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is Humility. […] It is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life, a *Vita Nuova* for me. (Wilde [1897] 2005: 169)

This passage is somewhat reminiscent of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, although Wilde eventually departs from Blake's statements. In "The Argument" of the poem, Blake introduces the story of Rintrah, the "just man" in "The Vale of Death" whose place is usurped by a villain deceivingly walking "In mild Humility" (Blake [1793] 1994: 28). The incident plays on the motif of the importance of humility as a condition that can elevate the human spirit but also prompt to deceit. In *De Profundis*, instead, Wilde depicts humility as a central component of an introspective process that may lead to a dramatic and crucial self-realisation, which he also sets against his previous life.

Wilde's emphasis on humility is all the more interesting when one thinks that, back in 1881, he had planned to insert in the title page of *Poems* a quotation from the letter that Keats addressed to John Hamilton Reynolds shortly after the publication of *Endymion* in 1818. Following the negative reception of the poem, and the scathing reviews that had appeared in periodicals such as *Blackwood's*, Keats continued to state his firm belief in beauty. At the same time, he also voiced his scorn for the public, who failed to understand the way he had enacted this aesthetic principle in *Endymion*: "I have not the slightest feeling of humility towards the public or to anything in existence but the Eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the Memory of great men" (Keats 2011, I: 266)[6]. Yet again, in Wilde's

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[5] See also Chadwick (2009: 51), who suggests that Blake and Wilde realised that "opposites lead to wisdom and extremes are an aspect of the natural capacities we have as humans. They are there, waiting, demanding, available". For a wider investigation of Wilde's critical dialogue with Romantic tropes, mythographies and legendary figures, see Bristow and Mitchell (2015).

[6] On this point, as well as on Wilde's decision to have the quotation removed before *Poems* was published, see Ellmann ([1987] 1988: 132) and Foss (2013).

retrospective assessment, the cultivation of the beautiful must be accompanied by humility. Along with the experience of sorrow and its acceptance, humility creates a triangulation whose effects he opposes to morality, reason, and religion:

> Morality does not help me. I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws. […] Religion does not help me […], for like many or all of those who have placed their heaven in this earth, I have found in it not merely the beauty of heaven, but the horror of hell also. […] Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. (Wilde [1897] 2005: 165)

Wilde rejects Manichean views to embrace antinomies, and he openly refuses morality, religion, and reason in that they shackle individual freedom and hinder self-realisation, a claim that is consistent with Blake's reproach of institutions as "mind-forg'd manacles". In this sense, *De Profundis* suggests that while Wilde was serving his sentence at Reading, he further elaborated on the Romantic temperament, from Blake's acceptance of contrary states to Keats's pronouncements on the revealing power of suffering.

Insofar as he developed a secularised version of the Christian ideals that he had learned from Milton, Keats believed in the salvific function of sorrow, whose experience coincides, as with Blake, with the inevitable transition from a state of innocence to the exposure to and acceptance of misery. In his letter to John Hamilton Reynolds of 3 May 1818, Keats defined life as "a large Mansion of Many Apartments", where each chamber represents a specific stage in one's growth as an individual, a transition that brings with it a progressive, inevitable experience of pain and misery. The first of these chambers, Keats writes, is the

> infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think [...]; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle – within us – we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man – of convincing

ones [*sic*] nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression. (Keats 2011, I: 280-281)

Wilde arguably responds to Keats when he claims that "[s]uffering is one very long moment" and cannot be divided "by seasons" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 159), which still makes for a linear view based on a developmental, continuous pattern rather than on moments endowed with specific significance or Wordsworthian "spots of time". Like Keats, Wilde figuratively identifies sorrow with a spatial dimension in that he claims that "whatever house" he entered was "a house of mourning" (p. 168). As Ian Small rightly suggests, this expression is moulded on a passage from *Ecclesiastes* 7:2: "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting" (p. 291). This biblical origin is compatible with Wilde's view on the redemptive quality of suffering, but it also implies a conflation of Judeo-Christian and secular values conveyed through an intermingling of biblical and literary allusions. Again, as regards his admiration for Keats, it should be underlined that in 1885 Wilde had purchased some of the poet's letters at an auction at Sotheby's (Wilde 2000a: 254). However, he felt indignation at the rudeness with which the transaction was handled and, in the sonnet *On the Sale by Auction of Keats's Love Letters* (1886), he compared those greedy auctioneers with the Roman soldiers gambling for Christ's robe during the crucifixion[7].

Like Keats, Wilde considered sorrow as an essential part in one's spiritual growth. For the Romantic poet, the development of the soul was key to the development of one's own identity, and this transition is possible insofar as one experiences misery and pain. In the letter that he wrote to his brother George and his sister-in-law Georgiana on 21 April 1819, Keats defined the world as "the Vale of Soul-Making" and argued that the existence of "a World of Pains and troubles" is necessary "to school an Intelligence and make it a soul" (Keats 2011, II: 102). Wilde shared this Romantic, secular conception of the salvific function of suffering, as well as its

[7] "Is it not said that many years ago, / In a far Eastern town, some soldiers ran / With torches through the midnight, and began / To wrangle for mean raiment, and to throw / Dice for the garments of a wretched man, / Not knowing the God's wonder, or his woe?" (Wilde 2000b: 166).

acceptance, together with an ultimate reference to the faculty that Keats termed "Negative Capability", and extended its implications to artistic creation.

3. Christ as the Romantic artist

As Alison Hennegan fascinatingly suggests, *De Profundis* articulates an alchemic transformation of suffering. Throughout the epistle, the critic argues, Wilde strives "to transmute raw Pain (a wordless cry) first into Suffering (pain articulated) and then into the higher form of Sorrow, the fruit of suffering, transformed into wisdom" (Hennegan 2007: 230). Such an alchemic experience allows the cultivation of the beautiful and the reaching towards a harmonious unity of form and content:

> I now see that sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great art. What the artist is always looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals. (Wilde [1897] 2005: 170)

Wilde embraces a central tenet of Christianity, but he unburdens it from religious dogma and fits it into an aesthetic paradigm. The indivisibility of body and soul, the union of flesh and spirit, corresponds to the unity of form and content, but also to the harmonious convergence of beauty and sorrow which is the ultimate proof of an 'aesthetic truth'. The search for a sense of beauty and awe in spite of hardship is based on a sympathetic imagination that shares the same assumption as Keats's notion of "Negative Capability", that is, the ability to accept "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" – and one may well add sorrow – without the pursuit of logic (Keats 2011, I: 193-194). As a consequence, within Wilde's aestheticised theology, Christ stands out as the perfect embodiment of the Romantic artist:

> we can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between the classical and romantic movement in life, […] the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist – an intense and flamelike imagination. He realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation. (Wilde [1897] 2005: 173)

From the short stories included in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) to "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), Wilde's prose is rife with biblical allusions and narratives of self-sacrifice[8]. Possibly influenced by Ernest Renan's *La Vie de Jésus* (1863) – which he read while at Reading – Wilde most clearly rejects orthodox views in order to craft a personal, non-doctrinal, and aesthetic theology. In *De Profundis*, he defines Christ as "the precursor of the romantic movement in life" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 181) because of his imaginative powers and sympathetic ethos, which enabled him to relate in a non-interested way to human beings and exalt beauty in the face of sorrow and sin.

Wilde's reading of Christ's life gives voice to a form of Romantic humanism that sees sympathy as the natural response to the awareness of inequality and pain, and its exercise as the effect of the imaginative mind. From this perspective, Wilde's claim that Christ "ranks with the poets" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 174), along with Sophocles and Shelley, should come as no surprise. Indeed, shortly after the publication of *Laon and Cythna* in 1817, Shelley stated in a letter to William Godwin that the core elements of his poetry were

> sympathy and that part of the imagination which relates to sentiment and contemplation. I am formed, if for anything not in common with the herd of mankind, to apprehend minute and remote distinctions of feelings whether relative to external nature, or the living beings which surround us, and to communicate the conceptions which result from considering either the moral or the material universe as a whole. (Shelley 1954: 29)

As Robert Mitchell (2007: 173ff) has convincingly illustrated, Shelley's poetry and prose are grounded in a conception of sympathy as a force that fosters a frank encounter among fellow human beings against and despite inequalities. Moreover, in Shelley's political view, sympathy identifies an emotional state in tune with the spirit of social reform. In his manifesto, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), Shelley posited

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[8] See Schramm (2013: 256-257), who suggests that, beginning with "The Young King" (1888), most of Wilde's short stories are underpinned by a recurring pattern based on "recognition, self-sacrifice, redemption". This palimpsest, Schramm contends, treasures Christ's message while unsettling "orthodox Christian premises". On Wilde's deep fascination with the parables, exemplary life and unique personality of Jesus Christ, see also Arata (2003) among recent contributions.

a triangulation between moral good, the imagination, and sympathy, qualities which he believed might be effectively endorsed by poetry:

> A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. (Shelley 2002: 517)

Similarly, Wilde treasures sympathy for its moral as well as its artistic significance. By defining Christ as the embodiment of "the supreme romantic type" and "the romantic temperament" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 181), he also outlines new standards of conduct, including the possibility of reconciling the cultivation of the self with sympathy and altruism. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism", he argued for an "unselfish and unaffected" (Wilde 2007: 263) form of individualism inspired by the life of Christ, and in *De Profundis* he states that Christ's perpetual search for man's soul opened the door to a compelling representation of the inarticulate and unvoiced world of human misery.

One final point should be made with reference to Wilde's conflation of Romanticism, Aestheticism, and the Christian imagery in *De Profundis*. While stressing the role of Christ's imagination and sympathetic morality "as the basis of all spiritual and material life" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 180), Wilde foregrounds the Keatsian ideal of the artist as a chameleon who is able to respond to what lies outside the boundaries of subjectivity. Keats notably opposed his idea of the selflessness of the poetical character to "the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" (Keats 2011, I: 386), and in "The Decay of Lying" ([1889] 1891) Vivian similarly claims that Wordsworth's shortcoming was apparently his deficiency to see in Nature anything but himself:

> Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there. He went moralizing about the district, but his good work was produced when he returned, not to Nature but to poetry. (Wilde 2007: 83)

In keeping with Christ's example, then, Wilde's "fresh mode of self-realisation" (Wilde [1897] 2005: 184) rests on the ability to establish sympathetic relationships with other people, and this renewal is

made possible by pursuing a cultivation of the self that is divested of self-interest. In this sense, *De Profundis* reveals, as Jan-Melissa Schramm perceptively argues, Wilde's desire to "articulate" his encounter with Christ. As the embodiment of disinterested love, his parable provides the ultimate source of consolation against the inequalities of society and the injustices enforced by institutions. Coexisting with this hopeful view, however, is also Wilde's "very human fear" that the Saviour might "pass unrecognized" (Schramm 2013: 260).

Wilde's engagement with the Romantic ethos and temperament, as his final prose writing reveals, was a long-lasting and complex process. Beginning with the poetic appreciation of the works of Shelley, Keats, and, to a lesser extent, Wordsworth and Byron, it developed over time into an articulated reflection that encompassed aesthetic as well as moral issues. And, in *De Profundis*, Romanticism and Aestheticism seem to be reconciled – thanks to their common search for new creative standards that might lift the mind and the spirit, explore subjectivity, and delve into the alchemies of Beauty.

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