

The Figure of Christ
in the Works of Oscar Wilde

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abstract

In this study I consider, by a process of close textual analysis, attention to larger symbolic registers, and comparative reference to other works of the author and his contemporaries, the thematic and structural function of the figure of Christ in the mature writings of Oscar Wilde. I have avoided references to the life of the author as far as possible in my text, partly because biographical criticism, in the specific case of Oscar Wilde, has often interfered with a judicious assessment of his writings--writings that inscribe, as I hope my text demonstrates, a valuable response to certain pressing ethical and aesthetic issues in a complex fin de siècle climate of blurred and shifting values.

In my first chapter, which is devoted to The Happy Prince and Other Tales (1888), I begin by relating these stylised fictions to the arealistic poetics Wilde outlines in his critical dialogue "The Decay of Lying", in order to establish Wilde's connections with his wider intellectual milieu. I then examine the pattern of references by which the life of Jesus is presented as a compelling ethical ideal for the heroes of "The Happy Prince", "The Nightingale and the Rose", and "The Selfish Giant", each of whom discovers true selfhood by a paradoxical renunciation of selfish desire.

Christ's life and ministry effectively become an archetypal model for self-perfection in a world of fractured individual perspectives--the world which, with a more studied complexity, is that of all the later fables in which Wilde's heroes pursue this neo-Hellenic ideal.

Chapter II concerns the more pronounced Christian ethos of A House of Pomegranates (1891), Wilde's second volume of fairy-tales, and in particular the story-teller's novel assertion--through a careful recasting of traditional symbology--that the Galilean's synthetic vision of the living world is, in effect, congruent with aesthetics. By tracing the patterns of imagery and allusion, I argue that Christ's Passion is the design for the young King's attempt to transform his society, according to the tenets of art; that the hero of "The Star-Child" similarly discovers himself, when his valuation of beauty is reformulated through Christ's example; and that the cumulative effect of these parables is to anticipate the forthright aesthetic reading of Christ in The Soul of Man Under Socialism and de Profundis.

My third chapter consists of a detailed examination of Wilde's first major theoretical exposition of Christ in The Soul of Man Under Socialism (1891), in which I compare his formulations with those of his secular-humanist mentors, Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold, and with Wilde's preceding ideas

on ethics, society and the individual. Wilde's human and individualistic portrait, while it connects with liberal theology in particular, and with the tendency of positivist and evolutionary thought in general, is also a considered attempt to restate the nature and conditions of personality in the terms of aesthetics, with Jesus implicitly offered as exemplar of a mode of life founded on a Romantic poetics of individual uniqueness, coherence and integrity. I consider the ways in which Wilde's hedonistic interpretation of the classical ideal prevents him, at the end of the essay, from firmly advancing a novel ethics of worldly involvement, based on aesthetic considerations of order and reconciliation, and exemplified by Jesus; rather, evolutionary theory and Hellenistic ideals are combined at the end in a rather shaky utopian speculation in which the example of Christ and his identification with suffering are outmoded.

In chapter four I consider the structural and thematic paradigm that occurs in three fictive works--the dramas of Salome (1891) and La Sainte Courtisane (1893), and the prose-poem called "The Teacher of Wisdom" (1894)--and argue that in each dramatic encounter of hedonist and ascetic the figure of Christ is evoked in such a way that the moral consequence of the play or prose-poem is qualified and directed. I pay particular attention to the parables of Christian imitation that each

work cumulatively inscribes, and how, by juxtaposition of character, dialogue and allusion to Jesus, a novel psychic validity is accorded to hedonistic practices, even as the ironic disjunction between the overt disciples of Christ, and the true temper of the master, is indicated; I conclude that Christ represents in each context an ethic of selfless and reconciliatory love, an ideal of personal wholeness that the protagonists qua protagonists cannot perceive.

My fifth chapter, on de Profundis (1897), consists of an examination of Wilde's second--and definitive--statement on Jesus. I consider the writer's delineation from three points of view: intrinsically, as a cohesive statement of Christ's universal significance; contextually, as performing a rhetorical function within the work as a whole; and finally, in terms of the preceding theoretical and fictive evocations of this character. I pay close attention to the series of explicit reconciliations Wilde attempts in his disquisition, as he proposes--with reference to classical mythology, Romantic aesthetics, and his own interpretations of the Gospels--that Christ, in his vivid identification with suffering, transforms at last the hedonism of the Greeks into a new aesthetic credo of engagement. This richly evocative portrait, which combines allusions to secular humanism, Romantic art, and Gnostic mysticism, becomes, specifically, the arche-

type for the suffering author-as-subject within the larger scheme of the apologia, and, by extension, for the range of fabular Christlike models that precede it. In my final analysis I propose that Wilde's rhetorical assumption of Christ's vision in de Profundis is the summation of those previous fictions, and a confirmation of the significance of Jesus in a secular, and sectarian, age.

My last chapter concerns the author's attempts, in The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898), to give imaginative scope to the insights of de Profundis in a novel poetics--a poetics that jettisons former ambiguities in favour of a vivid and arresting topicality. I argue that, in his last and most memorable poem, Wilde powerfully advances the doctrine of repentance and self-revelation outlined in de Profundis, by presenting its enactment as a communal imitatio Christi that forges a new kinship; and that, in a world where criminality and virtue are mere arbitrary distinctions, a mutual recognition of fallibility will bind humanity again. Wilde's final fiction--part exhortation, part allegory--seeks a composite image of suffering and reversal, an image that, like Christ's life, offers an ideal of complex integrity to those who view it.

Finally, I include a brief consideration of Wilde's first imaginative presentations of Jesus in the immature Poems (1881)--presentations which,

while not of striking imaginative or theoretical interest in themselves, nevertheless indicate by imagery and thematic function the scope of future explorations. While I draw attention to the range of Wilde's early intellectual concerns in this appendix, I pay particular attention to the writer's keen awareness, at the height of a naïve post-Paterian idyllic enthusiasm, of the urgent imperative of human incompleteness--an incompleteness that coalesces, even at this heady juncture, in the image of Christ.

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a note on the text

One of the problems that faces Wilde's critics is the absence of a definitive scholarly edition of his works. The most accessible collection is J.B. Foreman's The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Intro. Vyvyan Holland (1948; rpr. London: Collins, 1966), and I have referred to this one-volume edition in respect of Salome, La Sainte Courtisane, and The Soul of Man Under Socialism. Robert Ross's two extensive compilations contain other valuable material excluded by Foreman, and I have used Reviews from the First Collected Edition (London: Methuen, 1908), as well as Essays and Lectures (which contains transcriptions of Wilde's early aesthetic lectures in America, 1882). I have also referred to Intentions, from the Second Collected Edition (London: Methuen, 1909).

Happily, Oxford University Press have published two authoritative volumes of Wilde's fiction, both carefully annotated and edited by Isobel Murray; I have therefore chosen to use The Complete Shorter Fiction, the only one-volume collection of Wilde's shorter prose (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979) and The Picture of Dorian Gray (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974) from this series.

All references to Wilde's letters are to Rupert Hart-Davis' splendid edition of The Letters of Oscar Wilde (London: Hart-Davis, 1962). Like

all other commentators on Wilde, I record here my appreciation of this invaluable collection, which must form the foundation of any critical assessment of Wilde.

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1. Jesus and a Model for Selfhood in
The Happy Prince and Other Tales

In this chapter I shall consider Wilde's first mature fictional allusions to the figure of Christ, those found in The Happy Prince and Other Tales (1888),¹ against the background of his wider aesthetic and intellectual concerns. In three of these highly decorative tales--"The Happy Prince," "The Nightingale and The Rose," and "The Selfish Giant"--the author's references to Jesus establish a compelling ethical model for the endeavours of the central characters, as they battle to win community with their fellows in a sadly divided and fractious world. The attractions of Christlike martyrdom become, as we shall see, the most striking indication of a wistful urge for wholeness of self and of community that, in Wilde's work, is a recurring thematic element.

By way of introduction, I shall first examine Wilde's recourse to the fairy-tale genre, both as a formal and thematic response to his intellectual milieu, and as a specific demonstration of his aesthetic theory. In this regard I shall briefly refer to his contemporaneous critical dialogue, "The Decay of Lying" (January, 1889),² in which Wilde sets out the terms of his anti-realist conception of art--a conception, I hope to confirm, that illumines all of the mature fictional and dramatic

works that I shall examine in the course of this study.

The fairy-tale, and fairy-tale conventions, were an increasingly popular literary means in Victorian England of presenting urgent moral problems without reference to Naturalistic demands.³ The stylisation the genre permitted, and the ready employment it offered of situations and characters that were rich with collective associations, was attractive at a time when social and cultural atomisation was dangerously advanced in England. Not only were the previously shared assumptions between a writer and his readers breaking up,⁴ but the integrity of the individual consciousness itself seemed threatened by the disclosures of empirical science and its latest progeny, the infant discipline of psychology.⁵ Wilde, as many critics have pointed out, imbibed this acute awareness of a fracturing and relativist world most noticeably from Walter Pater, in particular from the notorious "Conclusion" to The Renaissance (1873),⁶ in which, as Richard Ellmann observes, individual consciousness is described for the first time in the amorphous terms of water, as "the race of the midstream"⁷--a metaphor from which our own century has not yet recovered. While he shares Pater's concern for the primacy of individual experience, Wilde's more traditional interest in a commonwealth of values, which he first articulates in his precocious

undergraduate essay "The Rise of Historical Criticism" (1879),⁸ is a vital motive in all his mature work, and sharpens his awareness of the enduring communicability of the fairy-tale genre.

More than his aesthetic mentor Pater, Wilde evinces in his essays and fiction a nostalgia for community that is drawn from many sources, but especially from John Ruskin, the great romancer of the Mediaeval city,⁹ and from the author of Culture and Anarchy; this last aspect Pater himself recognised, when he declared that his former student "carries on, more perhaps than any other writer, the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold."¹⁰ Wilde's social concern is translated into fictional terms throughout his work; whether he was writing a critical essay or a story, his method is invariably to express his arguments in an original fable with traditional elements. This story-telling tendency, says George Woodcock, illustrates "the concrete operation of Wilde's mind. Abstractions meant little, unless he could make them live in imagery."¹¹ A close analysis of the tales in The Happy Prince bears this observation out.

Paradoxically, the fairy-tale genre of The Happy Prince enabled the author to depict the post-Paterian universe of partisan visions, "each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world", as the writer of The Renaissance hauntingly describes it,¹² in a popular and accessible

form. Moreover, at the same time that the dangerously solipsistic intellectual climate of the age is dramatically rendered, the style and structure of each tale triumphantly exemplifies Wilde's mature aesthetic theory. At the time of publication he wrote to a friend that the stories are "an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality--to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative",¹³ and this brief statement of intention relates the book to the author's wider intellectual concerns.

Wilde elaborates this germ of theory in the first of his major critical essays, "The Decay of Lying," and his aesthetic views here are pertinent to both the story-teller's method and intention. In the dialogue, which takes place between two languid young post-Arnoldian critics "in the library of a country house in Nottinghamshire",¹⁴ Vivian proposes to Cyril that the "decay of lying" in contemporary English letters signals a dangerous misunderstanding of the true relations of art and life, and of the rôle of the art work in offering to a sceptical era new, outlandish and regenerative modes of action. What follows is a sustained and witty attack on the notions of sincerity and verisimilitude so dear to the Victorian reader--an attack, according to certain later readers, that presages the new aesthetic directions of the early twentieth century.¹⁵ I wish to recapitulate some

of the features of Vivian's argument, both for their specific reference to the fairy-tales, and, more generally, for the habits of thought and style they reveal about their author.

The echoes of Plato, formal, stylistic and conceptual, establish in this dialogue an ironic contrast between the lofty certitudes of the classical period, and the insouciant scepticism of Wilde's fin de siècle world; but they also underline the new prominence of art in a faithless and divided era. Wilde's mouthpiece Vivian slyly turns Plato's admonition of art into an assertion of its value. If the great idealist philosopher believed that art "lies," because it is merely a copy at two removes from the perfect a priori world of forms, Vivian will embrace such wilful deceit, as evidence of the power of art to transform human life. The very "lies" the idealist philosopher fears will be perpetuated are, in an age without belief in enduring forms, vitally important:

Remote from reality, and with her eyes turned away from the shadows of the cave, Art reveals her own perfection, and the wondering crowd that watches the opening of the marvellous, many-petalled rose fancies that it is its own history that is being told it, its own spirit that is finding expression in a new form. But it is not so. The highest art rejects the burden of the human spirit, and gains more from a new medium or a fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or lofty passion, or from any great awakening of the human consciousness. She develops purely on her own lines. She is not symbolic of her own age. It is the ages that are her symbols. (Intentions, pp. 42-3)

Wilde's reference to Plato's metaphor of the cave emphasises his view that, in the 1880s, there are no longer any absolute values for the artist to advance or distort. Art is likewise detached from "reality" (a word which in The Republic signifies the a priori world), and "turned away from the cave" in which ordinary men and women gaze at dim reflections of those perfect forms.¹⁶ Describing "her own perfection", art exists in no facile relation with either a dubious ideality or with everyday life; but in her perfection, which Vivian tells us is created out of the artist's imagination without immediate reference to his or her surroundings, a new ideal may yet be figured forth for humanity to follow. Those who gaze at the "marvellous, many-petalled rose" will discover in its abstract perfection their own unconscious desires, and will be encouraged to enact them in life. The energy of life, Vivian adds, is "simply the desire for expression," and art provides the forms whereby this may be achieved (Intentions, p. 38).

Three years later this idea would be crisply restated by Wilde in the provocative "Preface" to The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891): "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."¹⁷ Spurred on by his own unrealised ideals, Vivian believes that the spectator will be encouraged to embody these perceptions in life. Art, in fact,

succeeds, if its content is unashamedly remote from current existence and its concerns; its suggestive power will then be greater. Vivian declares that "the more imitative an art is, the less it represents to us the spirit of the age The more abstract, the more ideal an art is, the more it reveals to us the temper of the age" (Intentions, p. 43). The art that combines thematic suggestiveness and formal congruity can most successfully bear the burden of the Zeitgeist; in the terms of Wilde's teasing transposition, "it is the ages that are her symbols", because art will inspire the spectator to transfer that unconscious "desire for expression" into life.

Whatever the flaws in Wilde's exposition--and, as even-tempered critics have pointed out, we would do violence to the cheery mood and satiric tone of the dialogue were we to reduce his provocative claims to a cast-iron dogma¹⁸--his proclamation of the non-representational and innovative aspect of art is one important reaction to the severe assaults that Romantic notions of individual integrity and freedom of action were currently undergoing. Certainly, Wilde is trying to find a way, as shall become increasingly clear in the course of the present study, to graft the wider social rôle that his mentors Ruskin and Arnold prescribed for art onto the truly contemporary problems of aesthetics and the individual

consciousness that he found expressed in Pater and the French Decadents.¹⁹ If in "The Decay of Lying" Vivian agrees that the artist's imaginative independence of his age is asserted in his art work, he also suggests that those who appraise the work may be able to shape their own lives with a similar freedom.

It is worth emphasising that Wilde's aesthetic is clearly intended as an antithesis to the deterministic thrall of positive science. The artist, says Wilde's mouthpiece, possesses the secret, "that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style; while Life--poor, probable, uninteresting human life--tired of repeating herself for the benefit of Mr. Herbert Spencer, scientific historians, and the compilers of statistics in general, will follow meekly after him, and try to reproduce, in her own simple and untutored way, some of the marvels of which he speaks" (Intentions, p. 27). Art is the ultimate statement of defiance against Darwinian repetitions, a spirited protestation that individuality will not wither, but consolidate. If "self-perfection", the Hellenic dream that Wilde shares with Arnold and Pater, is to be realised, the rôle of art in offering individual consciousness a model of complex integrity, will be crucial. This is the kind of model the story-teller offers in The Happy Prince.

In these tales the conflicting claims of self

and community are proved to be indissoluble aspects of that true self-perfection that haunts the writer's work; the narrowly egotistical characters who reject others may survive in smug myopia, but they are clearly shut out from the greater self-knowledge of their selfless counterparts. Each parable takes place in an idealised locality, in which urbane counterparts of the stock figures of fairy-tale practise their dramas of mutual misunderstanding. San Juan aptly assesses the structural and thematic conflation that takes place; as each story "dramatises the conflict of interests" between these self-absorbed post-Paterian characters, we are presented with "prismatic glimpses of reality arising from man's necessarily limited understanding."²⁰ Only those characters who assume Christ's transcendent vision of love are able, as we shall see, to grasp a larger personal and public integrity.

In "The Selfish Giant", which chronologically follows "The Happy Prince" and "The Nightingale and the Rose", Christ's symbolic meaning in all these tales is illuminated in a deceptively simple allegory. The deployment of Jesus here is a masterful illustration, as we shall see, of the claims Wilde would make in both of his major Christological essays, The Soul of Man (1891) and de Profundis (1897); in both these works, the writer characterises the Galilean as a great individual moralist, who neither exhorts others

to repentance, nor lays down a code of rules for others to follow. "He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one becomes something," Wilde would write a decade later in de Profundis. "Once in his life each man is predestined to walk with Christ to Emmaus."²¹

This is the impact the Christ-child has on the Selfish Giant. At the beginning of the story, the title-character simply epitomises the myopia that, for the egotistic dandies in the remaining tales, leads to dangerously subjective vision. Behind the high walls of his property, the Giant attempts to keep his beautiful garden for his own pleasure: "'My own garden is my own garden,'" he states with the superb tautology of selfishness; "'anyone can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself'" (p. 110).²² As a result of this extreme post-Paterian exclusivity, his garden remains frozen in the white thrall of winter all year round. The psychic consequences of wilful withdrawal from community could hardly be more efficiently represented.

The unannounced appearance of Christ, in the simple guise of human suffering, initiates the Giant into a new phase of selfhood that the unlucky Water-Rat and Remarkable Rocket of the last tales will not attain. One day, the children who had been chased out of the garden manage to break in, and the springtime returns--with one telling

exception. In a corner of the garden the Giant espies a small boy, "so small that he could not reach up to the branches of the tree, and he was wandering all around it, crying bitterly" (p. 112). The child's pathetic aspect at once inspires in the watching landowner the altruistic motives that are essential for full humanity; his "heart melted as he looked out," and he declared, "'How selfish I have been!'" (p. 112)

The archetype for the Giant's Christian discipleship is St. Christopher, who unwittingly took Jesus on his own shoulders; now the title-figure of this tale takes the child "gently in his hand, and put him up into the tree" (p. 112). Christ's suffering presence, in effect, without doctrine or declamation, has occasioned that "change in the weather" the Giant had earlier hoped would enter the "cold white garden" of his world (p. 111). The moment this self-absorbed figure places his own desires second, his entry into a vital new relationship with all life is heralded by the return of the springtime: "the tree broke at once into blossom, and the birds came and sang on it, and the little boy stretched out his two arms and flung them round the Giant's neck and kissed him" (p. 112). The muted syntactic echoes of the Authorised Bible affirm the moral; Jesus, "who pointed out", Wilde was later to write in de Profundis, "that there is no difference at all between the lives of others

and one's own life" (Letters, p. 480), suggests to the individual how he might be integrated with his community.

The resolution of the story warns of the daunting consequences of a mode of life based on altruism, however. When the child reappears after many years, Wilde highlights the sacrificial aspect of the love he incarnates:

Downstairs ran the Giant in great joy and out into the garden. He hastened across the grass and came near to the child. And when he came quite close his face grew red with anger, and he said, "Who hath dared to wound thee?" For on the palms of the child's hands were the prints of two nails, and the prints of two nails were on the little feet.

"Who hath dared to wound thee?" cried the Giant: "tell me, that I might take my big sword and slay him."

"Nay!" answered the child: "but these are the wounds of Love." (p. 114)

Wilde implies that the compassion the Giant has learnt, through the agency of the child, now enables him to comprehend a mode of love that is founded on a deeper sacrifice. The Giant discovered and practised love by sharing his garden with the children; the Christ-child by laying down his life. In "The Happy Prince" and "The Nightingale and the Rose" the nature and imperative of such Christlike sacrifices, in the interests of a new wholeness both personal and public, form the central theme.

The title character of the first tale is identi-

fied with Jesus himself, in a subtle pattern of implicit references. In the first place, the Prince's uniquely composite vision of his society resembles that of Christ, whom Wilde would call in de Profundis "the first to conceive the divided races as a unity" (Letters, p. 477); and, in the action of the story, the Prince's comprehension is contrasted with the myopic self-interest of his subjects. Yet, as I shall indicate, the Prince's awe-inspiring altruism leads, not to his fellow's advancement, but his own. This tale becomes an affecting and unusual allegory for the subjective value of emotions that in themselves, Wilde elsewhere maintains, are insufficient to substantially change the lives of others.

Ironically, it is only after death and his elevation as a statue "on a tall column" that the Happy Prince is able to perceive the condition of poverty and exploitation that, juxtaposed with the wealth and ease of a few, actually characterises his city. Thus Wilde neatly symbolises the partisan views held by the members of a stratified community: only when raised above the pleasant distractions of his formerly protected life, significantly also behind "a very lofty wall" (p. 97), can this ruler understand complex social realities. The little Swallow, who carries out the Prince's acts of charity, discovers the truth of the statue's perceptions; flying over the city, he "saw the

rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates," and in the nearby lanes he encountered "the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets" (pp. 101-2).

The absence of comprehensive vision in the society at large is amusingly illustrated in the opening paragraphs, by the conflicting interpretations the citizens offer of the beautiful statue. To the Utilitarian town councillor, he is beautiful, but "not quite so useful" as a weathercock; to a "sensible mother," he is a paragon of smug respectability that, because he "never dreams of crying for anything", she can hold up to her son; to the Charity Children he is "an angel," the idealisation of their hopes and dreams, which he clearly is not to the coldly scientific Mathematics Master who "did not approve of children dreaming" (p. 95). These variegated responses emblemise the profound lack of mutual understanding that the action of the story describes; they also illustrate Vivian's argument in "The Decay of Lying" that the spectator accords art with his own perceptions.

Of course, none of these interpretations bears any relation to the Prince's actual deep concern for the plight of his society. The arrival of the self-absorbed Swallow, who hopes, like the Remarkable Rocket of the last tale, that the town

"has made preparations" (p. 96) for his brief sojourn on the way south, enables the Happy Prince to involve himself in the life of his subjects in a manner never possible in his lifetime. Like the Selfish Giant when faced by the suffering Christ-child, the little bird "was filled with pity" by the sight of the tear-filled eyes of the statue; thus begins his own initiation into a new mode of generosity. The Swallow becomes the agent of the Prince's far-reaching altruism: "'I am covered with fine gold,' said the Prince; 'You must take it off, piece by piece, and give it to my poor; the living always think that gold can make them happy'" (p. 102).

Moved by the Prince's sadness, the Swallow begins his task, gradually forgetting his own egotistical concerns out of a growing love for the statue. He becomes, in fact, a kind of disciple, distributing the alms of the master in much the same way--as the instruction above suggests--that Christ's apostles did in the Gospel stories. Indeed, he is not unlike the Holy Ghost itself, that in the form of a dove visits upon Christ's favoured ones the spiritual benison of God.²³

But in this parable the remorseless consequences of Christian imitation are taken to their fullest extent. It is only when the Happy Prince has been reduced to complete anonymity by his deed--"'Dear me! How shabby the Happy Prince looks!'" the Mayor

remarks; "in fact he is little better than a beggar!" (p. 103)--that his task has been completed.

The Prince's divestment of his outer apparel, and his resultant loss of superficial identity, recall Wilde's evocation in an earlier sonnet of the rending of Jesus' garments at Calvary. In "On the Sale by Auction of Keats' Love Letters," (1886)²⁴, this episode becomes an image for the apparent destruction by a callous society of the Saviour's identity:

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? (ll.9-14)

In the poem, Wilde compares Christ's humiliation with the unfeeling dispersal of John Keat's love letters amid the avaricious bidders at Sotheby's, and this identification of the artist-martyr of Shelley's Adonais with the crucified Son of Man has important implications for the author's developing conception of the artist's relations with society. At this stage I would point out the parallels between the dishonoured Christ of the sonnet and the stripped statue in "The Happy Prince"; for, like Jesus in that sestet, it is only when the Prince has been divested of all outer apparel, indeed of all recognisable signs of identity, that his true spiritual beauty is

manifested. The squabbling of the avaricious town councillors recalls the "brawlers of the auction mart" (1.3) who fight over Keats' letters, as well as the soldiers' wrangle for "mean raiment" in the sestet:

Then they melted the statue in a furnace,
and the Mayor held a meeting of the corporation
to decide what was to be done with the metal.
"We must have another statue of course," he said,
"and it shall be a statue of myself."

"Of myself," said each of the Town Councillors,
and they quarrelled. When I last heard
of them they were quarrelling still.
(p. 103)

There is another striking parallel between the Happy Prince and Christ at the end of the story, one that points to the real nobility of sacrifice in a callous world. In an act of self-annihilation the Happy Prince distributes his body literally amongst his subjects, as Jesus did symbolically at the last supper; but for the fin de siècle altruist, the parallel is filled with irony. The celebration of communion, Christians believe, reunites the body of Christ--which is the sum of all who believe--by incorporating his followers in it; but for the Happy Prince, no such general recognition of his deed is forthcoming.

The true significance of his selflessness is not only unperceived by his various beneficiaries--the young playwright thinks one of the Prince's sapphires is a present "from some great admirer," while the match-girl mistakes the

other one for a "lovely bit of glass" (p. 100, p. 101)--but, in concrete terms, is quite futile. Even though "the children's faces grow rosier" as a result of the Swallow's piecemeal distribution of the statue's gold leaf, we know that the oppressive conditions that perpetrate the wretched poverty of their lives will continue; at the end of the story civic power is still firmly vested in the hands of the Mayor and his corporation, with their recognisably middle-class self-interest, false gentility and Utilitarianism, and the rich will no doubt continue making merry in their houses while the beggars sit at the gates. In concrete political terms, then, altruism is of no account. Three years later, in The Soul of Man, Wilde would actually condemn charity for the way in which it blunts the political consciousness of the poor; and the "Happy Prince" certainly exemplifies his view in the essay that charity is "a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution."²⁵

In wider social terms, such charitable gestures may be useless, but in individual terms, the terms in which Christ realised himself fully, such sacrifices are vital. When he divests himself of his wealth, the Happy Prince, and not his community, becomes the recipient of grace--or "perfection", to use the more numinous Wildean term. He is akin to a Gospel character whom Wilde would introduce into both of his later theoretical discussions of Christ. When the rich young man came to Jesus,

seeking eternal life, he was entreated to give up all his possessions in the interests, not of others, but of his own perfection; "it is not of the state of the poor that [Christ] is thinking," Wilde would write in de Profundis, "but of the soul of the young man, the lovely soul that wealth was marring" (Letters, p. 480).

The new integrality the Happy Prince attains is confirmed when the angel chooses the pair as "the most precious things in the city," and henceforward, the altruists of the story will dwell ever close to God: "in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my City of Gold, the Happy Prince shall praise me" (p. 103).

The story of the Happy Prince exemplifies, then, the crucial rôle of others in the individual's attainment of integrity; specifically, it confirms that universal suffering must be acknowledged. The hero of the tale identifies himself with his fellows because he has realised, in his own words, that "more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and women," and he adds that "there is no Mystery so great as Misery'" (p. 101). This is the lesson of Christ. When the Happy Prince willingly dismembered himself for others without thought of recognition or reward, he realises, like Christ, a more beautiful perfection than he had known when his abode had been--in every sense

of the term--Sans-Souci.

But in the following story, "The Nightingale and the Rose," no heavenly consolation is available; the "perfection" attained by the Nightingale through sacrifice is embodied in a work of art. Like Christ, she assumes the burden of the lovesick young student, and gives up her life in a supremely selfless gesture; "what is the heart of a bird," she asks rhetorically, "compared to the heart of a man?" (p. 106). She thereby achieves that which Wilde would say of Jesus several years later in de Profundis: "he realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the secret of creation" (Letters, p. 476).

That "imaginative sympathy" is crucial to the Nightingale's accomplishment, for she represents the Romantic artist, who, as Wilde's comparison of Keats with Christ in "On the Sale by Auction" suggests, is similarly martyred by a hostile society which fails to comprehend the value of his art. In "The English Renaissance of Art" (1882), the most extended of his early lectures on aesthetics, Wilde first makes this connection between the artist's experience, the completed art work, and audience response. His remarks illuminate the artistic parable in "The Nightingale and the Rose":

... while the incomplete lives of ordinary men bring no healing power with them, the thorn-crown of the poet will blossom into roses for our pleasure: for our

delight his despair will gild its own thorns, and his pain, like Adonis, be beautiful in its agony: and when the poet's heart breaks it will break in music.²⁶

In this sonorous passage, the necessary relationship between pain and great art is explicit: the artist's "despair" will be his audiences' "delight," his "pain" will be "beautiful" to his viewers. The reference to Adonis, the martyred fertility God who is the subject of the first Greek idyllic poetry, suggests that the artist's creation becomes his elegy, a beautiful monument to his own sacrifice. This is encapsulated in the figure of roses blooming from the symbolically resonant "thorn-crown." More than this, Wilde asserts here that, in creating fine work out of his suffering, an artist perfects himself--his despair "will gild its own thorns"--and, in so doing, he will bring a "healing power" to those "incomplete lives of ordinary men".

Wilde's story of the Nightingale is an allegory for the all-consuming love and commitment required of Christ's most notable imitator, the artist. In literal terms, the "thorn-crown" of her agony will blossom into a red rose, venerable symbol of love, beauty and perfection, which represents the artwork in whose symmetry and formal coherence the martyrdom of its creator is incarnate.

The rose includes in the reverberance of its mythic and literary associations an image of Heaven itself, and therefore of divine love, as used by

Dante in Il Paradisio. The Nightingale, of course, has been celebrated through European literature for the power and quality of its song, and is therefore an apposite emblem for the artist. To Wilde, the treatment of this bird by Keats in his famous Ode was a direct inspiration, one which he had already reworked in his long poem The Burden of Itys.²⁷ In "The Nightingale and the Rose" the wonderful power of the Bird's song becomes, as we shall see, a potent image for the transformation of experience of which art, according to the arguments of "The Decay of Lying", is capable.

The Story begins with the Student's stagey protestations of unrequited passion, which place him in that long line of ardent and mellifluous suitors that we trace back to Petrarch and the mediaeval conventions of courtly love. In the responses of the Nightingale, listening intently from the holm-oak tree, the vital idealising power of the artist is emphasised:

"Here at last is a true lover," said the Nightingale. "Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not; night after night have I told his story to the stars, and now I see him."
(p. 104)

The post-Platonic artist, as viewed by Vivian in "The Decay of Lying", always figures forth an ideal, a beautiful "lie" which in turn will be embodied in life. In this story, the Nightingale's "true lover" appears to personify the convention itself.

In a sense, then, the Student seems to be

the Nightingale's creation, the ideal lover that she and her predecessors--Petrarch, Sydney, Spenser and the rest--have embodied in song. This explains her excitement: it is the excitement of recognition, proof positive that the images of art may become concrete. This excitement is reinforced in her second reflection, which deliberately echoes the first:

"Here indeed is the true lover," said the Nightingale. "What I sing of, he suffers; what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely love is a wonderful thing."
(p. 104)

The Christlike "imaginative sympathy" that distinguishes the artist from her less perceptive fellow-creatures is soon apparent, in the difference between the bird's response to the suffering lover, and those of her peers. Unlike the other creatures of the Student's garden, who greet his distress with scornful invective--"For a red rose!" they cried; 'how very ridiculous!' and the little Lizard, who was something of a cynic, laughed outright" (p. 105)--the Nightingale "understood the secret of the Student's sorrow, and she sat silent in the oak-tree, and thought about the mystery of Love." Unlike these typically selfish inhabitants of the world of the fairy-tales, the Nightingale is ready to identify herself with the Student's sorrow, and, as we shall see, to accept the grim consequences for herself.

In the Nightingale's resolve to exchange her

life for a red rose, in order that the Student might win his beloved's hand, Wilde skilfully combines a variety of literary and mythic conventions to emphasise the enormity of her sacrifice. It was traditionally believed that the red rose was infused with the songbird's blood, for by pressing itself against the thorn the nightingale is able to sing its song at night and so to resist falling asleep and falling prey to its traditional enemy, the snake.

This connection between the quality of the bird's song and the rose that is infused with its blood acquires a richer meaning, one central to the connection Wilde is making, when we recall the medieval myth that Christ's blood turned the white rose red at the time of his crucifixion. In the image of the rose deepening in colour as the life of the nightingale ebbs away, Wilde is creating a resonant symbol for the Christlike totality of sacrifice art requires of its practitioners. That this symbol of perfection is to be "built" from the bird's music by "moonlight," and nourished with its "own heart's blood," powerfully represents the artist's commitment and her method.

It is the business of art, says Vivian in "The Decay of Lying", to help life express itself in a new form; and the Nightingale's relationship with the Rose-tree, who "shall have no roses at

all this year" without the bird's help (p. 106), accords with this Aristotelian prescription. Only the artist-Nightingale can help nature realise that triumphant new form; she must submit herself to the Rose-tree's invitation, that "the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins and become mine'" (p. 106). If art represents a brilliant refinement of nature, the bird's agonies allegorise the terrible toll exacted of the artist who creates that new form.

It is important in terms of the parable Wilde is constructing, that the Nightingale understand fully the extent of the sacrifice she is called on to make. She signals an acute anticipatory sense of loss, that culminates in a moving assertion:

'Death is a great price to pay for a red rose,' cried the Nightingale, 'and life is very dear to all Yet love is better than life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?' (p. 106)

The Nightingale's touching attempts to communicate with the young Student, and his brusque refusal to take her seriously, is a suggestive figure for the author's acute sense of the current divide between art and its audience. The bird's attempts to reassure the weeping student--"'be happy!' cried the Nightingale, 'be happy, you shall have your red rose ...!'" (p. 106)--meet with complete incomprehension. The artist and her subject, who is also her audience, do not share a common language, even though the latter is susceptible to her influence:

The Student looked up from the grass and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books. (p. 107)

The artist and her audience in this story are literally of different species, and in the Student's terms the bird cannot "speak"; accordingly, the true value of her work will be unrecognised, and her sacrifice unseen.

The Student's reflections on the Nightingale's requiem for the oak-tree underline this complete divorcement of understanding. Pulling "a note-book and a lead pencil out of his pocket", he vividly typifies the middle-class position on aesthetics. Like Mr. Bright, the representative Philistine in Arnold's Culture and Anarchy, he demands of art some practical use. The terms of this demand are representative of middle-class Victorian thought on artistic endeavour:

'She has form,' he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove--'that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good!' (p. 107)

Here Wilde satirises the prevailing assumptions--so ably expressed in the pages of Punch--about the Aesthetic Movement in particular, and artistic endeavour in general. The clear remove the Student

espies between art and life--" 'She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows the arts are selfish' "--is a kind of popular parody of the ideas of a Whistler or a Pater. But in presenting a disjunction between stylistic or formal coherence and the "sincerity" or otherwise of the artist, the Student describes only his inability to understand the real demands of the creative process; indeed, only his own self-absorption is revealed. Wilde would rephrase it crisply three years later in the "Preface" to Dorian Gray: "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." The author's comments on "The Nightingale and the Rose," in a letter written to an interested reader in May, 1888, shortly after the tales were published, are illuminating in this regard:

I like to fancy that there may be many meanings in the tale, for in writing it I did not start with an idea and clothed it in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets and many answers.²⁸

But of this kind of thinking that the story-teller derives from the contemporary French Symbolistes, of the kind of imaginative engagement with art that Wilde is inviting, the Philistine student knows nothing. It is the limitation of his own vision that is made plain in his final exclamation: "What a pity they do not mean anything, or do any practical good!" (p. 107)

The artist's actual commitment to her audience, and thereby to her creation, will in fact be power-

fully demonstrated while the Student is asleep on his pallet-bed. She will literally pour herself into her work, and so will celebrate, in the perfect Rose, the love the true artist feels for her subjects:

She sang first of the birth of love in the heart of a boy and a girl. And on the topmost spray of the Rose-tree there blossomed a marvellous rose, petal following petal, as song followed song. (p. 107)

The blossoming rose will, in short, be an objective correlative for the evolution of love, and this is signified in the deepening colour of the flower. The artist-bird achieves this representation by exercising her "imaginative sympathy," and literally assuming the burden of pain her subjects experience; she "pressed closer against the thorn, and louder and louder grew her song, for she sang of the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid" (p. 108).

It is only when the Artist apprehends the nature of a love that transcends the limits of her immediate situation, however, that the artwork is perfected. Such apprehension is obtainable only when she achieves a total transference of being from herself to her creation:

But the thorn had not reached her heart, so the rose's heart remained white, for only a Nightingale's blood can crimson the heart of a rose.

And the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. (p. 108)

With the climax of this process, the bird

celebrates in the rose a love that in its intensity defies physical life. At this triumphant moment the epoch-making sacrifice of Jesus is directly recalled, so that the author can invest the Nightingale-artist with the same awesome power of imaginative assumption:

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the love that is perfected by death, of the love that dies not in the tomb.

And the marvellous rose became crimson, like the rose of the eastern sky. (p. 108)

The sacrifice calls forth a magnificent correlative, a rose whose symmetry represents the love that Christ embodied in his life and death, and which the artist, in her turn, may similarly realise in her art.

There is a further crucial dimension to the parable, and this brings us back to the issue of the audience's response. In "The Happy Prince," the hero's altruism is completely unperceived, not only by a myopic and complacent governing clique, but by its very recipients; in "The Nightingale and the Rose," the Student and his beloved are incapable of truly valuing the Rose. They are both the offspring of modern book-learning--he is a student, and she the coquettish daughter of a Professor--and the exchange between them reveals that they have been corrupted by a Utilitarian

scale of values. In the young woman, fashion has combined with acquisitiveness to make her rejection of the Student's offering especially callous:

'I am afraid it will not go with my dress,' she answered; 'and, besides, the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers.' (p. 109)

In the terms of the fable, both this young woman and her suitor cannot realise any beautiful suggestion from the Rose, because they lack the imaginative sympathy to see beyond their prejudices. Discussing the story in the letter quoted above, Wilde made this point in forthright terms:

I am afraid I don't think as much of the young Student as you do. He seems to me a rather shallow young man, and almost as bad as the girl he thinks he loves. The Nightingale is the true lover, if there is one. She, at least, is Romance, and the Student and the girl are, like most of us, unworthy of Romance.²⁹

Not only are the Student and the Professor's daughter too selfish to love each other, but they are also too selfish to respond to the abstract beauty of the Rose. Only those with compassion have the true aesthetic instinct, the denouement here suggests; and that is why the Nightingale-artist is the true disciple of Christ.

The Student's petulant reaction to her rejection--he tosses the Rose into the street, "where a cartwheel went over it" (p. 109)--indicates that he clearly has as little appreciation for the flower as the girl. Being a more intellectual

Utilitarian, he will seek consolation in his studies; and his final reflections are a fine parody of the Benthamite notion of utility which the British middle-classes had appropriated. It is the perspective of a Mr. Gradgrind that we recognise--the Gradgrind of the opening scenes of Hard Times:

'What a silly thing love is,' said the Student as he walked away. 'It is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and is always telling one of things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy, and study Metaphysics.' (p. 109)

The irony of Wilde's story is, of course, that whereas in Hard Times the representative Utilitarian learns, through experience, that without love his philosophy is worthless, in "the Nightingale and the Rose", the Student arrives at the opposite conclusion; he begins as an ardent romantic, and concludes as an advocate of computable knowledge. This ironic reversal of what had become a familiar thematic structure in nineteenth century English fiction highlights Wilde's profound pessimism about the real capacity of an audience to "learn", in a didactic sense, from art: on the contrary, such a tale points to a widening divide between artist and spectator, of a manifest failure of the latter to grasp either the artist's intention or achievement.

And yet, in the last analysis, the validity

of the bird's sacrifice, like that of the Happy Prince or the little Swallow, is undiminished. Even though the beautiful Rose is crushed in the street, the Nightingale has realised herself in an awe-inspiring act of self-denial. If the beautiful creation which embodies that perfection has been obliterated at the hands of an insensitive and materialistic audience, her achievement remains undiminished.

Although the story reads as a sobering reflection on the collapse of communication between the artist and her spectators, we must remember that in its readability it becomes, like the Rose, the bird's record and its monument. In composing such a parable its writer assumes, and invites, an audience, and accordingly supposes that at least some of those "many meanings" referred to in the letter above may be apprehended.

In "The Nightingale and the Rose" the bird's imitatio Christi is perfected in a beautiful correlative, the peerless work of art, which Vivian had similarly characterised as a "marvellous many-petalled rose" in which the "wondering crowd" discovers a host of meanings. This delicately couched tale dramatically identifies Christ with the artist, as both figures share an imaginative sympathy for others that initiates self-perfection by a paradoxical denial of self; the Nightingale's passion and death exemplify the author's later

thesis in de Profundis that artistic endeavour is, in essence, a mode of love.

To conclude, we find in these brief but suggestive tales a fascinating series of variations on the meaning of Christ in a fluid and arbitrary world. In "The Selfish Giant," Wilde indicates that, without Christlike sympathy, Pater's exclusivity of self can turn, as it does in "The Devoted Friend" and "The Remarkable Rocket," into a total alienation. Christ personifies a commitment to community, and "The Happy Prince" is a shining allegory for the individual completion that will follow such commitment; "The Nightingale and the Rose" is Wilde's definitive representation of the suffering witness to imaginative sympathy that artists enact. The story-teller is trying to formulate a model personality that incorporates ethics within the canons of aesthetics. As these tales suggest, that model will be increasingly identified with the figure of Christ.

Notes

¹ Oscar Wilde, The Happy Prince and Other Tales (London: David Nutt, 1888); rpr. in The Complete Shorter Fiction of Oscar Wilde, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979). All references to the stories will be made to this edition, hereafter cited as The Happy Prince.

² Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in his Intentions, ed. R.B. Ross (1891; rpr. London: Methuen, 1909). The dialogue originally appeared in The Nineteenth Century (XXV, cxliii, January 1889, pp. 35-56), but had been considerably revised before volume publication. See Stuart Mason, Bibliography of Oscar Wilde (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1914), p. 123.

³ See John R. Reed, "Fairy Tale Design," Victorian Conventions (New York: Ohio Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 29-33. Reed's first chapter contains an excellent discussion of the forms of stylisation and convention in Victorian literature that became more self-conscious towards the end of the century.

⁴ The Aesthetic movement of late nineteenth-century England, with its assertion of the independence and exclusivity of the artist, was perhaps the most obvious symptom of this break-up; see for instance Ian Small, Introd., The Aesthetes: A Sourcebook (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. xi-xxix. Wilde's artistic persona in

the 1880s and '90s can likewise be seen as indicative: his "self-dramatisation," according to John Stokes, "was an implicit attack upon the widespread belief that there was some natural contact between the artist and the audience," (John Stokes, Oscar Wilde, London: Longman, 1978, p. 6). R.J. Green argues that Wilde's personal "despair" with the reading public is registered in his mature critical writings, in which he shifts from the Arnoldian assumptions of his earlier book reviews to the provocative subjectivity of Intentions: this development in Wilde is also to be seen as "paradigmatic of the watershed marking the end of the Victorian age, the age of the great seers listened to by an admiring audience," and the start of the modern age, "whose greatest critics--T.E. Hulme, Pound, Eliot, Leavis--reveal their dislocation and distance from a public no longer 'theirs'" (R.J. Green, "Intentions: An Early Modernist Manifesto," British Journal of Aesthetics, XIII, iv, Autumn 1973).

⁵ The impact of psychological theories of the split or fracturing personality on nineteenth-century fiction is considered by Masao Miyoshi, The Divided Self: A Perspective on the Literature of the Victorians (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1969), and Jacob Korg, "The Rage of Caliban," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXXVII, i (1967). The position of Wilde's only novel, The Picture

of Dorian Gray (London: John Lane, 1891) in this accumulating literature, which is prominently discussed by Miyoshi (pp. 309-20), is the focus of Korg's stimulating article.

⁶ Walter Pater, The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (1873; rpr. London: Jonathan Cape, 1928). The influence of Pater's criticism--particularly this collection of essays--on Wilde's imaginative and theoretical writings, has been widely discussed. Useful perspectives on the subject are to be found in George Woodcock, "The Hard Gem-like Flame," Chapter V of his The Paradox of Oscar Wilde (London: Macmillan, 1948); Wendell V. Harris, "Arnold, Pater and Wilde and the Object As in Themselves They See It," Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, XI (Autumn 1971) pp. 733-47; and Richard Ellmann, "The Critic as Artist as Wilde" and "Overtures to Salome" in his Golden Codgers (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973).

⁷ Pater, "Conclusion," The Renaissance, p. 221. Ellmann refers to this passage in "The Critic as Artist as Wilde," Golden Codgers, pp. 65-6.

⁸ "The Rise of Historical Criticism," in Essays and Lectures of Oscar Wilde, ed. R.B. Ross (London; Methuen, 1908). This essay was originally written as an entry for the Chancellor's Essay Prize (1879) and was not published in the author's lifetime. A number of commentators have drawn attention to Wilde's mature and informed historical sense in

this essay; E. San Juan finds it inscribes an idea of "modernity" that "involves a consciousness expanded in both time and space," and declares that it "anticipates modern archetypal criticism and the disciple of cultural anthropology in its respect and appreciation for other civilisations" ("Aesthetics and Literary Criticism", Chapter III of The Art of Oscar Wilde (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967, p. 97)).

⁹ Ruskin's influence on Wilde's early aesthetic ideas, especially in relation to the younger writer's habitual connection of social harmony with artistic excellence, is most notable in the lectures he delivered in America during 1882, rpr. In Essays and Lectures of Oscar Wilde, ed. R.B. Ross (London: Methuen, 1909). Wilde pays tribute to Ruskin's impact on himself and his undergraduate contemporaries at Oxford in the lecture "Art and the Handicraftsman" (Essays and Lectures, pp. 175-96). The contribution made by the great art critic and social theorist towards Wilde's conception of society, art and ethics is perceptively considered by Woodcock, "The Road-makers", Chapter V of The Paradox of Oscar Wilde, and by Ellmann in "Overtures to Salome" (Chapter III of Golden Codgers). In the latter work Ellmann argues that Ruskin and Pater come to personify for Wilde the conflicting ethical claims that concerned him throughout his writing career.

10 Pater, "A Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde" [Review of The Picture of Dorian Gray], Bookman, I, (November 1891); rpr. in Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 83. The relations between Arnold and Wilde in terms of critical theory are suggestively explored by Harris, in "Arnold, Pater and Wilde and the Object as in Themselves They See It."

11 Woodcock, "The Master of Conversation", Chapter XI of The Paradox of Oscar Wilde, p. 182-3.

12 Pater, The Renaissance, p. 220.

13 Letter to Amelie Rives Chanler with a copy of The Happy Prince, January, 1889; in The Collected Letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 237. This invaluable collection is henceforth designated Letters.

14 "The Decay of Lying," in Intentions, ed. Ross. All future references to this edition appear in the text with the cipher Intentions.

15 See R.J. Green, "Intentions: A Modernist Manifesto", in which the writer argues that Wilde anticipates the concerns and attitudes of the Modernists of a later generation; and Alice I. Perry Wood, "Oscar Wilde as a Critic", North American Review, ccii, (December 1915); rpr. in The Critical Heritage, pp. 345-55. In this last-mentioned article the writer traces the origins of British post-Impressionist thought in Wilde's Intentions.

16 Plato, "The Simile of the Cave," in The

Republic, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 1955), pp. 316-26. Wilde appears to have in mind the passage in which Lee translates Plato thus: "the mind as a whole must be turned away from the world of change, until its eye can bear to look straight at reality, and at the brightest of all realities which is what we call the good" (p. 322). For Wilde, presumably, "the good" is no longer invested in the immutable "reality" beyond appearances, but is a function of the integrity of the artwork itself.

¹⁷ The Picture of Dorian Gray, ed. and introd. Isobel Murray (1891; rpr. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. xxxiv. All future page numbers in this study refer to this authoritative edition with the designation Dorian Gray.

¹⁸ See for instance San Juan, "Aesthetics and Literary criticism," Chapter III of The Art of Oscar Wilde, pp. 75-104, in which he proposes that the effect of unity in Wilde's critical essays is a consequence of style and tone, rather than thesis (pp. 75-6); and Harris, who points out in "Arnold, Pater and Wilde" that Wilde--like Arnold and Pater--"found metaphysics dreary" and avoided precise premises (pp. 734-5). Harris's article, however, presents a most illuminating discussion of the philosophic assumptions and issues these three writers share.

¹⁹ The impact of Gautier, Baudelaire, Verlaine

and others on the solipsistic tendencies of English Aestheticism is recorded in William Gaunt, "A Continental State of Mind", Chapter 1 of The Aesthetic Adventure (1945; rpr. London: Penguin, 1957). Wilde's most ambitious fictive exploration of the individual consciousness, The Picture of Dorian Gray, is in part a response to Huysmans's extraordinary portrait of self-absorption, A Rebours (1884), which Wilde called an "over-realistic study of the artistic temperament in our unartistic age" (Letters, p. 313). For a discussion of Wilde's relations with Huysmans and other French writers see Isobel Murray, "Some Elements in the Composition of The Picture of Dorian Gray", Durham University Journal, LXIV, iii (June 1972), pp. 220-31.

20 San Juan, p. 6.

21 De Profundis, in Letters, p. 480. For more publishing details, see the first note to the fifth chapter. Subsequent page references to this edition will be parenthesised in the text.

22 All further citations to the stories in this chapter will be given in the text.

23 Wilde refers to this archetypal image of the Holy Ghost in one of his early devotional sonnets. In "Ave Maria Gratia Plena" he describes a painting of the Assumption thus: "A kneeling girl with a passionless pale face / An angel with a lily in his hand / And over both with outstretched wings the Dove." See Poems, in The Complete Works

of Oscar Wilde, ed. J.B. Foreman (London: Collins, 1966). This collection is henceforth referred to as Works.

24 Published in The Dramatic Review, II, lii (January 23, 1886), p. 249; rpr. in Works, ed. Foreman. The original manuscript is dated 1 March, 1885, the day before Keats' letters to Fanny Brawne were sold at Sotheby's. See Mason, Bibliography, pp. 59-60.

25 The Soul of Man Under Socialism, in Works, p. 1081. For a complete publishing history, see the first note of the third chapter. All page numbers in the text refer to this edition, which is designated Works.

26 "The English Renaissance of Art", in Essays and Lectures, p. 135. This lecture was first delivered on January 9, 1882, in New York, and was not published in the author's lifetime. See Letters, p. 85.

27 One of the linking poems in Poems (London: David Bogue, 1881; rpr. Works), Wilde's first book, this ornate personal piece presents a narrator who urges a nightingale to "sing on," and so transport him away from unpleasant realities to the idyllic Arcadian world. See the Appendix to this study for a closer examination of Wilde's themes and influences in this anthology.

28 Letter to Thomas Hutchinson, Letters, p. 218.

29 Letters, p. 218.

2. Towards a New Aestheticsm: Christ's Vision in A House of Pomegranates

Wilde's second volume of fairy-tales, largely composed before 1889 but published in toto during November, 1891,¹ describes a crucial expansion of the writer's aesthetic values to incorporate a more complex moral vision. Thematically, Wilde's absorption in the nature and conditions of sacrifice and suffering, individual realisation and social responsibility, is as evident as in The Happy Prince. In the later collection, however, he focuses more specifically on the grounds of the aesthetic credo that, outlined speculatively in "The Decay of Lying" and its companion dialogue "The Critic as Artist", would be definitively expressed in relation to the personality of Jesus in de Profundis. The elaborate and stylised mythologies of Pomegranates return again and again to conflicting models of beauty, and their relation to personal and communal integrity, for what the reader is being asked to consider is the import of various modes of aesthetic apprehension on human relations in every sphere.

Stylistically, the comic ironies of The Happy Prince are replaced by a repetitive Biblical syntax and idiom that, while asserting a homiletic mode, lends to the various pseudo-histories described a seriousness and a "sense of propriety" beyond the reach of simple fairy-tale.² Wilde's themes

are reflected in an increasing attention to vivid and often mannered sensory detail, a witty conflation of nature and artifice that underscores the aesthetic argument. When, to take an example from the most polished and ornate narrative, the hero of "The Fisherman and His Soul" is described as tugging in his nets until "like lines of blue enamel round a vase of bronze, the long veins rose in his arms" (p. 203), the story-teller is reminding us that all apprehension involves an act of selection and expression that necessarily alters random experience. The purposeful artifice of these tales, combined with their exotic settings "remote from reality,"³ surely combine to exemplify--as Eduoard Roditi suggests--the "art of lying" Vivian advocates so spiritedly in Wilde's first dialogue.⁴

In this chapter I shall consider, by chronological reference to each tale, the cumulative function of Christ's ministry and example in the volume as a whole. In these intriguing parables a major vivifying presence is again that of Jesus, avatar of a composite vision of the world that continually challenges and renews those who seek self-completion. The moral ethos of each tale is unmistakably Christian, involving in each case the veracity of The Golden Rule, but the compassion and humility Jesus exemplifies is not simply realised; in anticipation of The Soul of Man, each story illustrates in some degree the difficulties

of the imitatio Christi. To this end a sustained critique of the limited prescriptions of the established Church, in the manner of the author's later poetic dramas, provides a continual ironic contrast to the imperative of Jesus himself. The recurring images of Christlike renewal are the flowering staff, the blossoming thorn-crown, and the heart that--like that of the Happy Prince--breaks in order to be miraculously reconstituted. No doubt the contemporary readers who enjoyed the balance of pathos and wit in The Happy Prince, were puzzled and disappointed by the sombre mood, detailed surfaces, and more ambiguous moral territory of Pomegranates;⁵ but for a later audience these enigmatic tales offer a crucial insight into the mature and reformulated hedonism of the author's subsequent works.

The first tale of the collection is Wilde's most considered fictional attempt to relate a Christlike self-perfection, through imaginative sympathy, with the broader condition of society. Similar in many ways to the plot and theme of "The Happy Prince," "The Young King" contains both a subtler psychology than its predecessor--the sensibility of its hero is presented as a complex formation of heredity, circumstance and history, like that of Dorian Gray--and a far more penetrating analysis of the socio-economic conditions that imperil true Christian relations between men and women. What

is presented, in effect, is a more thoughtful account of the actual circumstances that hamper both private and communal integrity, and one that--in spite of the Renaissance setting--strikingly reflects the contemporary conditions of late-nineteenth century England that Wilde evokes directly in The Soul of Man.

The progress of the title-hero from innocent self-absorption to a Christlike awareness of others, and the paradoxical gain thereby of a greater self-hood, is most obviously repeated in both "The Young King" and "The Happy Prince." For both young rulers, the need to see beyond the sheltered haven, Sans-Souci or Joyeuse, is paramount; from new vantage-points a larger, more upsetting but utterly interdependent human world is discovered, and in attempting to shed past partialities, each young ruler takes as his model the example of Jesus.

In one area, however, "The Young King" significantly alters the paradigm. The title-hero is more precisely an aesthetic hedonist, who--in the manner of Huysmans's Des Esseintes in A Rebours, or the intense and introspective heroes of Pater's Imaginary Portraits (1887)⁶--finds in artistic beauty a consoling raison d'être. Unlike Des Esseintes, however, who ultimately renounces his variant of aesthetics, the young King learns to transfer his instinct for harmonious integration from art to life, to reformulate, in short, the

limited appreciation of beauty he had practised alone in the palace. The key to this transformation is the Passion of Christ, for as Wilde will later make explicit in de Profundis, the Galilean's breathtaking vision of the indivisible world, "the divided races as a unity" (Letters, p. 477), is a profound aesthetic apprehension without which integrity of self or society is unobtainable.

The nature of appearances, and the illusory perfection they suggest, is a recurring theme throughout Pomegranates, and in each case the hero has to learn that a mature aesthetic outlook finds coherence in more complex and less obvious structures. The young King's achievement of an all-embracing vision involves a progressive collapsing of superficial perfections; initially, the idyllic pleasures of the forest where, "bare-limbed and pipe in hand," the goatherd's foster-son lives as a child in innocent revelry, unaware of the grim circumstances of his birth; secondly, the more durable attractions of art, which seem to this young Corydon when he at last inherits his grandfather's crown "a new world fresh-fashioned for his delight" (p. 172).

It is noteworthy that his absorption in art, as the quoted phrase suggests, is quite unabashedly selfish from the beginning, and that his favourite objects of contemplation reveal an unconscious narcissism: a Greek gem carved with the figure

of Adonis, a silver image of Endymion, and a statue of Antinous, "the Bithynian slave of Hadrian," whose marble brow the young King is indeed found embracing (p. 173). Later his almost onanistic self-concentration is pithily emblemised by one of the beautiful fittings of the King's bed-chamber, which is described as "a laughing Narcissus in green bronze [which] held a polished mirror above its head" (p. 174).

This view of art as self-glorification impels the young aesthete to order coronation robes which, beautiful in themselves, are clearly intended to enhance his own esteem:

He saw himself standing at the high altar of the cathedral in the fair raiment of a king, and a smile played and lingered about his boyish lips, and lit up with a bright lustre his dark woodland eyes. (p. 174)

The careless blasphemy of the young King's conceit underlines both his innocence of wider obligations, and his devotion--through the surfaces of art--to himself.

In all these raptures, however, there is the hint that there may be a greater import in beautiful surfaces than he can yet understand; on the eve of his coronation, unaware of the revelations that await him, it is the "mystery" of beautiful things that enthralls him (p. 174). The impact of the three dreams will demonstrate that the King's "passion for beauty" will indeed exercise in time as "great an influence over his life" as his

courtiers predict (p. 172), when he at last decides to change the context of that passion from art to life.

The king's mood of tired exaltation on the eve of his achievement is finely represented in a mellifluous description of his chamber that hints, too, at the troubling revelations to come. While the tapestries on the chamber wall represent 'the Triumph of Beauty,' and all that implies about the King's sense of achievement, a suggestion of other realities intrudes: outside, he sees "the huge dome of the cathedral, looming like a bubble over the shadowy houses," and "the weary sentinels pacing up and down on the misty terrace by the river" (p. 174). The "looming" presence of the church hints at values the young King has yet to comprehend; the tired soldiers keeping watch represent all those who work unnoticed to maintain the ruler's sensibility and estate.

The shattering truth about the unjust social conditions in which the prized coronation robe, sceptre and crown are created is presented in the traditional revelatory form of dreams. The twentieth-century reader can regard these visions as projections of the young King's unconscious sense of his own incompleteness, as a warning against aesthetic hubris. Wilde's hero, indeed, strikingly exemplifies C.J. Jung's account of those who, having "unrealistic ideas or too high an opinion of themselves, or

who make grandiose plans out of proportion to their real capacities", are drastically humbled in their dream lives; "the dream compensates for the deficiencies of their personalities, and at the same time warns them of the dangers in their present course."⁷

As each dream systematically exposes the cruel political economy of the King's realm--his robe is produced by poverty-stricken weavers in the employ of a grasping merchant, the pearl of his sceptre costs the life of a slave diver in eastern seas, and the rubies of his crown cost the lives of "an immense multitude of men" mining in a river-bed for the stones (p. 178)--we realise that Wilde is presenting a vision of the city that, owing much to Ruskin and Morris, insists on the inter-relatedness of all members of society. This awareness, as we shall realise, is also that of Jesus, which Wilde was to sum up neatly in de Profundis thus: "whatever happens to another happens to oneself" [Wilde's italics] (Letters, p. 477).

The climax to this surface-shattering educative process is marked by a confrontation with his own mirror-image, held not by a Narcissus, but by "a man habited as a pilgrim"; in this case the King's face is perceived by himself to be deceptively attractive, and to bear an ironic relation to the poverty and exploitation of his realm. The moment of self-scrutiny is ironically juxtaposed

with a now illusory pastoral beauty:

And he looked in the mirror, and, seeing his own face, he gave a great cry and woke, and the bright sunlight was streaming into the room, and from the trees of the garden and pleasure the birds were singing. (p. 180)

For the young King hence forward, the idyllic "pleasure" of his surroundings has been irretrievably ruptured; his erstwhile admiration of comely surfaces now seems horribly misplaced, as he now realises that "on the loom of Sorrow, and by the white hands of Pain, has this my robe been woven" (p. 180).

As a result of this traumatic experience, the young King awakes literally to a new awareness of the world he inhabits. In determining to remake his life and his kingship in the light of his new sense of an indivisible community, a series of significant allusions confirm the hero's status as an imitator of Christ, who in The Soul of Man is presented as the archetypal individualist, a disturbing moral revolutionary who opposed an ethic of open-ended compassion to the sterile orthodoxies of his day (Works, p. 1082). Like Jesus, Wilde's hero will be rejected by his peers because of their profound misunderstanding of his kingship. For both of them the crisis is emblemised by dress; while Christ was mockingly clad in a "purple robe" and the crown of thorns, the young King refuses his own "robe of tissued gold" and assumes instead his goatherd's clothes and a coronet of wild briar.

In so doing he signals his new egalitarian ideal, but--as with Christ--his followers fail to understand, jeer at his humility, and end by actively desiring his death.

Prior to the three dreams, the young aesthete had regarded his artistic enthusiasms as "journeys of discovery" (p. 172); now he embarks on a new progress, clad in the habit of a pastor, and carrying the "rude shepherd's staff" that is the historical antecedent of temporal and spiritual authority in Christendom. He intends, in the fashion of the Galilean, to identify himself by garb with his humblest subjects: "even as I came to the palace," he declares with reference to his humble beginnings, "so will I go forth from it" (p. 181).

Passing his assembled subjects on the way to the cathedral, the young King is confronted by each of the three estates of his realm, and in each case nobility, commons and clergy reject the radical reordering of traditional relations he espouses. Initially, his attempts to teach a Ruskinian political economy to the privileged classes meet with the self-interest of those who, according to Christ in de Profundis, "waste their freedom in becoming slaves to things" (Letters, p. 480):

And what have we to do with the lives of those who toil for us? Shall a man not eat bread till he has seen the sower, nor drink wine till he has talked with the vinedresser? (p. 180)

Later, after the young penitent has suffered the bad odour of both the populace and the clergy, the nobility conspire to destroy a radical challenge to the system that supports them:

'Where is this dreamer of dreams? ... Where is this King, who is apparelled like a beggar--this boy who brings shame upon our state? Surely we will slay him, for he is unworthy to rule over us.' (p. 183)

Unlike the poet of The Earthly Paradise, who eschews political action,⁸ this "dreamer of dreams" directly challenges their authority; their ruler undermines or "shames" their state because, "apparelled like a beggar," he now identifies himself with the poor and dispossessed, and so confounds the privileged order.

The young King's exchange with those whom he wishes--as Christ did--to awaken to new consciousness, namely the ordinary folk, is a poignant illustration of the hard lesson Wilde taught in The Soul of Man: those whom exploitation and injustice corrupt, the propertyless and voiceless mass of men, are incapable of realising the challenge of freedom. The terms in which the people's spokesman opposes the king's levelling doctrine, urging him to "go back to thy Palace" and restore the Ancien Régime (p. 182), are precisely those of the bewildered slaves after the American Civil War, who "bitterly regretted the new state of things," or of the serfs in revolutionary France who in the Vendée "voluntarily went out to die

for the hideous cause of feudalism" (Works, p. 1082). The young King's subjects scorn what seems--like Jesus' misrepresented claims of kingship--to be a travesty of conventional notions of temporal power: "And the people laughed and said, 'It is the King's fool who is riding by,' and they mocked him" (p. 181). Such is the force of their hostility that, in spite of his calm resolve, even his closest follower deserts him, in the manner of Simon Peter, at the critical hour of commitment: "... and he rode on through the murmurs of the people, and the little page grew afraid and left him" (p. 182). Those whom the hero came to save revile him; as with Jesus, they acquiesce when the authorities decide to execute him publicly, "with drawn swords and nodding plumes, and shields of polished steel" (p. 183).

The most interesting and elaborate rejection the young King undergoes is that of organised religion, as personified by the "old Bishop" who is to crown him in the cathedral (p. 182). This encounter is the one most fraught with irony, and most reminiscent of what Wilde would call in de Profundis the "terrible and paralysing tyranny" of religious Orthodoxy (Letters, p. 486). The official representative of Christ offers a timid emasculated version of his Saviour's mission, utterly compliant with the status quo, for which we have been prepared by the weaver's bitter words in the

first dream: "The priest rides by and tells his beads, and no man has care for us" (pp. 175-6). Now, in this penultimate scene, the Bishop acknowledges the "many evil things" done in the world (p. 182), but also demonstrates how incapable he is of truly following Christ's example of selfless love:

Wilt thou take the leper for thy bedfellow, and set the beggar at thy board? Shall the lion do thy bidding, and the wild boar obey thee? Is not he who made misery wiser than thou art? The burden of this world is too great for one man to bear, and the world's sorrow too heavy for one heart to suffer. (p. 183)

This is obviously a parody of the gospel of Christ, who, the writer reminds us in de Profundis, "took on his shoulders the burden of the entire world" (Letters, p. 477). The young King's determination confirms his own sense of travesty: "Sayest thou that in this house?" (p. 183).

Successively rejected by lords, commons and church, the young King's determination prepares him for the true imitatio Christi. Finally parting company with his interlocutors, "he strode past the Bishop, and climbed up the steps of the altar, and stood before the image of Christ" (p. 183). Contemplation of the divine visage inspires an act of penitence that, once again, only accentuates his distance from the church: "He knelt before the image of Christ He bowed his head in prayer, and the priests in their stiff capes crept away from the altar" (p. 183).

Like the "turbulent priest" in Tennyson's Becket, the young King in his lonely integrity is a threat to the established order, both temporal and spiritual.⁹ As in that famous medieval conflict between church and state, it is the lords temporal who come bursting in to the cathedral, determined to destroy the Christian disciple whose integrity "brings shame upon our state" (p. 183). As with the Happy Prince when reduced by his altruism to "little more than a beggar," the governing class reject a monarch who can no longer serve as a glittering ornament of their authority.

The parallels with Christ's Passion climax with the hero's calm anticipation of martyrdom; after praying, like Jesus at Gethsemane, the young King "rose up, and turning round he looked at them sadly" (p. 183). The extent of his new-found sympathy for others--for his pity here is directed at his assassins, rather than himself--precipitates a miraculous transformation, as he becomes a breathtaking image of a more essential beauty or perfection of self. In de Profundis Wilde was to compare Christ's life to "the most wonderful of poems," because, realising "that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and made an image," he makes of himself "the image of the Man of Sorrows" (Letters, p. 481). Within the conventions of fairy-tale, this is precisely the achievement of the young King before the inspirational "image of Christ"

in the cathedral; the idea he incarnates is that of Christ's in Wilde's apologia, that "Sorrow and Beauty may be made one in their meaning and manifestation" (Letters, p. 478). The terms of the King's transformation are carefully signified in traditional imagery:

And lo! through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies. Whiter than pearls were the lilies, and their stems were of bright silver. Redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold. (pp. 183-4)

If the young King's reward for rejecting a superficial aestheticism is the attainment of a more profound beauty, a striking complex of motifs confirm that Jesus is the model for this self-fulfilment. The blossoming staff recalls that of Tannhäuser, which to a late nineteenth-century audience was a venerable image for the unexpected benison of Christ.¹⁰ This famed knight of German legend returned as a pilgrim from a fruitless quest for the Pope's blessing at Rome, and the flowering of his staff dramatically symbolised God's forgiveness of his sensual sins; in the context of Wilde's fable, the allusion confirms that the young King has realised his perfection through sincere repentance. In particular, the young monarch's budding staff indicts the established clergy for failing

to enact Jesus' all-embracing love--as Tannhäuser too had been spurned at first by an uncharitable Pope.

Likewise, the budding of red roses on the briar-crown echoes that sonorous passage from The English Renaissance to which I referred in my discussion of The Happy Prince, in which the writer asserts that "for our delight the thorn-crown of the poet will blossom into red roses." As I indicated earlier, Wilde's intention in that passage is to characterise the self-perfection achieved by the artist, through imaginative sympathy, in the resonant terms of Christian martyrdom; in this case, the reference confirms that the hero has realised such beautiful completion in his person. Like Christ, the supreme and definitive artist-in-life, the young King successfully "makes of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows."

If the miraculous flowers, "red roses" and "lilies," are traditionally suggestive of Christian martyrdom and regeneration, their depiction above in terms of precious minerals confirms the profundity of the experience. The traditional association of gems with the eternal is drawn on here to indicate the scope of the hero's transfiguration, while there is also an ironic echo of the hero's previous superficial aestheticism. By rejecting the gorgeous artworks of Joyeuse, he has at last arrived at what G. Wilson Knight refers to as a splendid "merg-

ing of nature into the transcendent";¹¹ essentially, a paradoxical refashioning of life in the manner of art, at once of nature and of human craft, and--like Yeats's golden bird--a compelling "artifice of eternity."

The story concludes with an emphatic assertion of divine recognition--"the Glory of God filled the place, and the saints in their carven niches seemed to move" (p. 184)--and the awestruck acknowledgment by all his subjects of his sovereignty. Most significant is that of the Bishop, who, like the Pope in the Tannhäuser legend, had earlier signalled his own limited capacity for love: "'A greater than I hath crowned thee,' he cried, and he knelt before him" (p. 184). The miraculous conflation of nature and art suggests, too, that literally anything is possible to those who are open to experience, those who like Jesus in de Profundis felt "that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death" (Letters, p. 485). The young King's splendid reformulation of himself "out of nature" (Yeats's words for the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium") becomes a striking image, not only for the self-perfection that derives from imaginative sympathy, but for the infinite possibilities of human endeavour and expression; in a sense he has become that peerless and awe-inspiring artwork that, in the earlier tale, the Nightingale

fashions out of her deep imaginative devotion to others.

Thus transformed, Wilde's royal hero becomes a Christlike artist-in-life, one whose beautiful perfection will bring "a healing power to the incomplete lives of ordinary men and women" (The English Renaissance). His triumphant return to the palace "through the midst of the people" may portend a general transformation of the commonwealth, an attempt, perhaps, to recreate the world according to the marvellous ideal of coherence its monarch now represents.

We are left, however, with no hint of the future state of the King's realm, following this personal transformation; Wilde's confident judgement of Christ's political impotence in the Soul of Man--he had "no scheme for the reconstruction of society"--seems exemplified here. In that essay Wilde argues that, because he had no social manifesto, "the Individualism that Christ preached to man could be realised only through pain or in solitude," and that consequently "the ideals that we owe to Christ are the ideals of the man who abandons society entirely, or of the man who resists society absolutely" (Works, p. 1102) [italics mine]. The final sentence, indeed, underlines the distance of the young King from his subjects, so awesome is his achievement: "no man dared look upon his face, for it was like the face of an angel" (p. 184).

When at last he "passed home" through the throng of his subjects, it is unclear whether he will simply return to past intensities--or reconstruct his realm. In other words, the reader is left with an uncomfortable suspicion that a merely private consummation, ironically achieved out of imaginative engagement with his subjects, has been realised by the young King; how this achievement will translate into concrete social action is left unanswered. In the light of the intimate connection the story draws between the conditions of society, and private sensibilities, this conclusion is ultimately unsatisfactory; for unlike "The Happy Prince," in which the interpenetration of private sensibility by public inequalities is implied rather than stated, in "The Young King" that interpenetration, as revealed in the three dreams, is crucial to the hero's self-discovery. The relocation of the hero's aesthetic sense in the more complex plane of social life, and the resultant self-completion this brings about, is convincingly expressed in the glittering symbolism of his appearance; but we are concerned too with the future position of that society, seeing that the nature and extent of its inequalities have been so urgently impressed on us. In these terms the public resolution of the pilgrim's progress is left tantalisingly open-ended.

The grave dangers of a superficial aestheticism in a world of carelessly partial perspectives is the central theme of "The Birthday of the Infanta", the second story in the collection. The tale concerns a physically repulsive dwarf who, engaged to dance at the birthday celebrations of the Spanish king's youngest daughter, innocently mistakes her mocking attentions for genuine affection, and falls blindly in love with her. The crisis of the narrative is the dwarf's shattering realisation, at one stroke, of his own ugliness and of the Infanta's duplicity--shattering, indeed, for the knowledge destroys his childish self-esteem and costs him his life.

Like the erstwhile goatherd-hero of the first tale, the Dwarf is introduced as a figure of pastoral, "running wild through the forest" (p. 192) in which he mistakenly believes in the benignity of all appearances. His mistaken trust in comely surfaces is finely highlighted by the cynical chorus of the very flowers which, while he regards them as "the most marvellous things in the whole world," actually despise his ugliness: "'He should certainly be kept indoors for the rest of his natural life,' they said" (p. 196). Intimately bound up with his simple equation of beauty and goodness is "his complete unconsciousness of his own grotesque appearance" (p. 192). As with the young King before the mirror of silver and, later, the image of Christ,

the Dwarf's first encounter with his own reflection will be a terrible initiation into the duplicity of surfaces, and a revelation of the extent of human malice.

Like the self-conscious but innocent royal aesthete in "The Young King", who discovers "there is Blood in the heart of the ruby, and Death in the heart of the pearl," the anguished Dwarf realises that, even as his own ugliness bears no relation to his generosity of spirit, so transversely the beauty of other surfaces may conceal unexpected cruelties:

So it was he who was misshapen and hunch-backed, foul to look at and grotesque. He himself was the monster, and it was at him that all the children had been laughing, and the little Princess who he had thought loved him--she too had been merely mocking at his ugliness, and making merry over his twisted limbs. (p. 201)

Unlike the young King, the grief-stricken Dwarf is incapable of absorbing this revelation into a wiser vision of selfhood. In his despair he can only rage against his discovery--"Why had they not left him in the forest, where there was no mirror to tell him how loathsome he was?" (p. 201)--and, seeing that a return to innocence is impossible, the only way out is death. As with Dorian Gray in Wilde's most ambitious exploration of self-discovery, dissociation and death are the inevitable result of a refusal to face the self; while Dorian's final eschewal is wilful, however,

the hapless Dwarf has no alternatives.

Unlike the Young King, faced with the powerful example of "the image of Christ", the Dwarf remains ignorant of any wider synthetic vision. The action of the tale, indeed, is set against a background of Catholic fanaticism and bigotry, creating a context in which Christ's example has no place. It is apparent that the stifling formality of the Spanish Court is intimately bound up with the Church, whose "formal etiquette ... governs every separate action in life, and sets limits even to the sorrow of a king" (p. 186). Jesus' regenerative gospel of love has withered into the dreadful offices of the Inquisition, persecuting without mercy those who deviate from orthodoxy, such as the "nearly three hundred heretics, amongst whom were many Englishmen," who were burnt at the stake to celebrate the King's wedding (p. 187). In the arcadian reaches of the forest where he had fashioned "the long-jointed bamboo into the pipe that Pan loves to hear" (p. 196), the Dwarf's simple ignorance of this repressive Zeitgeist enables him to view a passing troop of Inquisition victims as "a beautiful procession", yet another attractive feature of a benign world in which "there was a great deal to look at" (p. 197).

With this kind of slender knowledge about the Church and its position in Spanish society it is not surprising that, at the moment of

peripéteia, the Dwarf has no inkling of Christ's ministry at all; without a transfigurative myth of submission and renewal he has no other recourse than to die, in the words of the Chamberlain, "because his heart is broken" (p. 202). As we shall see in the next story, that venerable image can become, when knowledge and love combine, a symbol for a new completion of the self at the point of death. The miserable end of the Dwarf's life, once his innocent self-image cracks "from side to side,"¹² is, by contrast, a cautionary tale about the premature end of aesthetic innocence.

If the role of the established Church in shaping and stifling conduct provides a telling backdrop to the action of "The Birthday of the Infanta", in the next tale dogmatic Christianity--and its perversion of Christ's message--becomes a vital thematic element in the hero's progress to selfhood. "The Fisherman and his Soul" describes the attempts of its pastoral hero to resist, in a teasing inversion of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid", the encroachment of maturity and self-knowledge. Reversing the scenario of a mermaid hopelessly in love with a prince on land, whom he may not marry unless she gains an immortal soul, Wilde presents a young fisherman who is so infatuated with a mermaid that he is prepared to lose his soul to be with her.

As in the classical tradition of fisherman-

pastoralists, refurbished for Wilde's generation by Andersen and Arnold's "The forsaken Mermaid",¹³ the sea in Wilde's elaborate tale is associated with the free play of the senses, and the noticeably pagan denizens of the deep that the mermaid describes--Tritons, Sirens and so forth (pp. 204-5)--confirm its prelapsarian status. The young fisherman's love for the mermaid he mistakenly captures in his net represents the age-old dream of returning to otium, the blissful and unbridled enjoyment of instinct without conscience. Faced with the mermaid, he is keen to abandon the toil and drudgery of the postlapsarian world: "So sweet was her voice," the narrator tells us, "that he forgot his nets and his cunning, and had no care of his craft" (p. 205). The terms of his fervent proposal to the sea-creature describe a full-throated commitment to Eros that ignores adult responsibilities:

'I will send my soul away,' he cried, 'and you shall be my bride, and I will be thy bridegroom, and in the depths of the sea we shall dwell together, and that thou hast sung of thou shalt show me, and all that thou desirest I will do, nor shall our lives be divided.'
(p. 206)

This breathless and impassioned plea for rapture to the blurring of identity--"all that thou desirest I will do, nor shall our lives be divided"--is a moving assertion of Romantic idealism a la Shelley or Swinburne, a desire to discover by intense passionate experience a transcendent self that belies "Hebraic" calls to conscience. The denouement

of the tale will prove this to be an infantile desire that, taken to its fullest extent, collapses rather than expands personality.

Once the mermaid has explained that his "human soul" debars him from this ecstatic union, he determines to get rid of it, arguing with Benthamite reduction that he does not "know" his soul because he can neither "see" nor "touch" it (p. 205). In this context it seems that Wilde--whose use of the word "soul," as with so many of his contemporaries, is generally rather ambiguous¹⁴--highlights the idea of conscience, or moral sense, rather than the traditional concept of divine and immortal essence. In this allegory of self-dissociation and renewal, the Fisherman who plies his trade between earth and ocean is caught--like Dorian Gray--between the claims of desire and responsibility, youth and adulthood, libido and super-ego.

At this crucial point a professed disciple of Christ enters the story, for the hero in his innocence approaches the Priest for guidance in banishing the soul. This is a turning-point in the young man's history, for his brusque rejection by the pastor obliges him to seek out a young Witch who was "very cunning in her witcheries" in order to realise his desire (p. 208). As with the old Bishop in "The Young King," Jesus' official representative in this tale fails dismally to exemplify his master's teaching; the failure is critical,

because as a result the hero finds more drastic means of self-fragmentation and, ultimately, destruction.

After a night's reflection the young fisherman appeals to the Priest for advice on "how I can send my soul away." With monotonous insistence, he repeats his callow empirical argument: "I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it" (p. 206). The Priest's response, after reminding his interlocutor that the soul is "the noblest part of man," is to condemn the pagan sea-folk outright. Without offering any constructive or consolatory advice, he declares a limit to the redemptive scope of Jesus:

'Therefore, my son, think not any more of this matter, for it is a sin that may not be forgiven. And as for the Sea-folk, they are lost, and they who would traffic with them are lost also. They are as the beasts of the field that know not good from evil, and for them the Lord has not died.' [my italics]
(pp. 206-7)

In the narrowest sense of the word, the reverent father who had earlier been "reading out of the Holy Book"¹⁵ takes a severely Hebraic view of the side of life the Sea-folk represent; in him, the implacable hostility between sensual paganism and ascetic Christianity, or Matthew Arnold's "Hellenism" and "Hebraicism", is sharply personified. In place of understanding or forgiveness, the Priest in fact dismisses the free play of the senses as bestiality, and damns its practice in Jesus' name:

for those that err, he declares, "the Lord has not died."

Bitterly disappointed by this response, the Fisherman passionately pleads the sea-folks' brief but valid happiness in a familiar Wildean image of innocence--"their days are as the days of flowers"¹⁶--and indicates with disarming candour his lack of Christian understanding or knowledge: "What doth it profit me, if [my soul] stand between me and the thing I love?" (p. 207). The echo here of Christ's question in St. Mark VIII. 36--"What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"--which is also quoted to highlight the hero's self-fragmentation in Dorian Gray (Chapter XIX, p. 215), surely provides an excellent occasion for the Priest to enlarge on Christ's meaning; instead, what follows is a further harangue, which contains a revealing if unexpected confession of the official Christian disciple's personal inadequacy:

'The love of the body is vile,' cried the Priest, knitting his brows, 'and vile and evil are the pagan things God suffers to wander through His world. Accursed be the fauns of the woodland, and accursed be the singers of the sea! I have heard them at night-time, and they have sought to lure me from my beads. They tap at the window, and laugh. They whisper into my ears the tale of their perilous joys. They tempt me with temptations, and when I would pray they make mouths at me. They are lost, I tell thee, they are lost. For them there is no heaven or hell, and in neither shall they praise God's name.' (p. 207)

Unintentionally, the Priest admits that "the

pagan things" echo deep impulses in his own psyche; the mythic creatures of both woodland and ocean are also correlatives of his own unexpressed desires, which distract him from the "beads" of his spiritual piety. The clergyman, in short, is no less dissociated from his true self than his parishioner; the young Fisherman may deny the claims of conscience, but the Priest pretends libido can be banished. It is no wonder that the interview ends in failure, with the reconciliatory role of the Church unfulfilled: "And he gave him no blessing, but drove him from his door" (p. 207). As the denouement of the tale will confirm, the Priest is proved lamentably incapable of the compassion and imagination of Christ, and as such personifies--in anticipation of similar censorious figures from later works--the difficulties of discipleship.

Having secured the agency of the young Witch, who tells him to "cut away from around thy feet thy shadow, which is thy soul's body, and bid thy soul leave thee, and it will do so" (p. 213), the Fisherman is able to embrace a life of sensual abandon: "he plunged into the water, and the Tritons blew their horns, and the little Mermaid rose up to meet him, and kissed him on the mouth" (pp. 214-5). His final exchange on the shore with his disembodied soul emphasises, however, the gravity of the split in consciousness he has effected:

And his Soul said to him, 'If indeed thou must drive me from thee, send me

not forth without a heart. The world is cruel, give me thy heart to take with me.'

He tossed his head and smiled. 'With what should I love my love if I gave thee my heart?' he cried.

'Nay, but be merciful,' said his soul: 'give me thy heart, for the world is very cruel, and I am afraid.'

'My heart is my love's,' answered, 'therefore tarry not, but get thee gone.'

'Should I not love also?' asked his Soul.

'Get thee gone, for I have no need of thee,' cried the young Fisherman ... (p. 214)

If the soul signifies conscience, the heart represents, as elsewhere in Wilde's poetry and fiction, the passionate core of personality, the source and site of all desire and experience: "With what should I love my love," asks the Fisherman, "if I gave thee my heart?" The ensuing divorce-ment between the subject, happily "sunk down into the sea," and the Soul that is left on the shoreside, will at last confirm that conscience becomes a selfish parody of itself if it is not informed by the emotions and that a mature and fully realised personality, requires a dynamic interplay between all elements--cerebral and visceral. The Fisherman will discover that he will not be satisfied until the role and veracity of the Soul is acknowledged and integrated into himself.

Each year, as arranged, the Fisherman surfaces briefly to listen to his Soul, who tries unsuccessfully to tempt him with the prizes of the world; first "the Mirror of Wisdom" (p. 219), and then

"the Ring of Riches" (p. 226). On both occasions the Fisherman rejects the promptings of conscience, preferring to remain apart from adult ties altogether: "'Love is better,' answered the young Fisherman, and he plunged into the deep" (p. 226). At the end of the third year, however, the Soul presents him with an irresistible challenge, an image of what the world has to offer that contrasts sharply with the bewildering and rather wearisome worldly details of exotic locales previously described by the Soul. Now he relates how a lute-player entered a riverside tavern:

'... and when he had laid out the carpet on the floor, he struck with a quill on the wire strings of his lute, and a girl whose face was veiled ran in and began to dance for us. Her face was veiled with a veil of gauze, but her feet were naked. Naked were her feet, and they moved over the carpet like little white pigeons. Never have I seen anything so marvellous, and the city in which she dances is but a day's journey from this place.' (p. 226).

As Salome's dance of the seven veils will represent for Herod a poignant figure of the harmony he cannot muster, so the Fisherman is struck by this vision of dynamic equilibrium, in which we cannot--to quote Yeats--"tell the dancer from the dance," so complete and integrated is the image of self-perfection. At last the Fisherman realises that the life of the sea-folk cannot compensate for the complex achievement of a mature consciousness: "he remembered that the little Mermaid had no feet and could not dance. And a great desire came over

him ..." (p. 227). Once he begins to doubt the efficacy of his infantile retreat, he is impelled to leave it for the complex challenge of the land. The call of conscience reasserts itself; reaching "the dry shore," his Soul once more "entered into him," and he sets out to engage with the world. He will discover too late that his lengthy denial of conscience from passion is not easily reconciled, and that the lovely completeness of the mythical dancer will not be so readily achieved in his own life.

His re-emergence into the world is not a success; his Soul, grown callous and deceitful, leads him into cruel and selfish practices, culminating in the near-murder of an obviously Christian merchant who offers him shelter with the words, "Are we not all kinsmen? ... And did not one God make us?" (p. 228). The Fisherman realises too late that his own rejection of the Soul has led to its corruption: "When thou didst send me into the world thou gavest me no heart, so I learned to do all these things and love them" (p. 229). As a result all evidence of a cohesive self breaks down, and, desperate to resist the vicious siren-calls of his own nature, the Fisherman "closed his lips with a seal of silence and with a tight cord bound his hands" and returned to the shore in a hopeless attempt to reunite with the little Mermaid. The sturdy labourer who stood astride

both sea and land in the beginning, "Bronze-limbed and well-knit" (p. 214), is reduced to a pathetic self-divided figure on the same shoreline now, unable to partake of either element.

The long vigil of love--for, enacting Viola's rhetorical figure of love's fortitude in Twelfth Night, he dwells two years in "a house of wattles" and calls daily on the beloved's name¹⁷--brings at last a strange reunion of warring elements; the Fisherman, humbled by his own suffering on the shore, can at last regard his Soul with re-awakened sympathy. After two successive years of self-dissent, and having avoided all the worldly temptations offered by the Soul, the inner dialogue begins again "as he sat in the wattled house alone":

... 'Lo! now I have tempted thee with evil, and I have tempted thee with good, and thy love is stronger than I am. Wherefore will I tempt thee no longer, but I pray thee to suffer me to enter thy heart, that I may be one with thee even as before.'

'Surely thou mayest enter,' said the young Fisherman, 'for in the days when with no heart thou didst go through the world thou must have much suffered.'

'Alas!' cried his Soul, 'I can find no place of entrance, so compassed about with love is this heart of thine.'

'Yet I would that I could help thee,' said the young Fisherman. (p. 233)

Subdued by suffering and experience, the desire of both Soul and senses for reintegration is now mutual. Yet the earlier rapturous desire to merge self into instinct has irretrievably affected the self; having "sunk down into the sea" of the sub-

conscious for so long, the Fisherman's emotions cannot be galvanised in a new and greater direction. His belated wish for a new completion of self is blocked, so "compassed about" is the heart with immature desire. The tragic consequences of the Priest's neglect are now evident; the Fisherman's plunge into infantile sensation has cost him the mature and complex unity of self, and he is caught, as it were, in a dream of an unobtainable otium, in that "backward glance" that is the defining emotion of the pastoral.¹⁸

As so often in Romantic mythologies of self-discovery and fulfilment, the resolution of inner conflict can only be finally achieved by death; the death of the little mermaid, and the resultant drowning of her lover. Once the mermaid's body has been washed up onto the shore, the Fisherman spurns the Soul's attempts to keep him in the world, and resolves instead to relapse into the unconscious life of the sea--permanently. In the wild ecstasy of his grief, voluptuous in its full-throated intensity--"Bitter, bitter, was his joy, and full of strange gladness was his pain" (p. 134)--he achieves a paradoxical completeness through dissolution; like the Keatsian artist of The English Renaissance whose achievement of perfection through pain is figured as the heart that "breaks in music," the Fisherman's acute misery facilitates the final union of self at the point of death. True to his

Romantic sensibility, Wilde affirms the "heart" as final site of reconciliation between conscience and desire, between the world and the flesh:

And his Soul besought him to depart,
but he would not, so great was his love.
And the sea came nearer, and sought to
cover him with its waves, and when he
knew the end was at hand he kissed with
mad lips the lips of the Mermaid, and
the heart that was within him broke.
As as through to the fullness of his
love his heart did break, the Soul found
an entrance and entered in, and was one
with him as before. And the sea covered
the young Fisherman with its waves.
(p. 24)

As we shall see, the beautiful perfection achieved by that broken heart will be symbolised--like the perfection of the Nightingale in The Happy Prince--in a marvellous blossoming of "strange flowers," that are both correlatives for self-perfection and a sign of God's forgiveness.

The coda to the tale returns us to the intransigent Priest, and ringingly affirms through a further restatement of the Tannhäuser Legend that Christ's love extends far beyond the bounds of propriety and restraint. True to his own narrow interpretation of the Gospel, the Priest at first refuses to allow the dead lovers a Christian burial, and repeats his condemnation of the sea-folk at large; likewise, "all who traffic with them" are as "accursed" as the Fisherman and his beloved. Consequently he orders that they are to be buried--like Judas--in an unhallowed field: "and set no mark above them, nor sign of any kind, that none

may know the place of their resting" (p. 235). The Priest's attempts to deny those aspects of creation that lie beyond his ken are soon to be exposed, like that of the Bishop in the first story, as utterly misplaced, and contrary to what Wilde would call in de Profundis "the spirit of the Christ who is not in Churches" (Letters, p. 489).

Three years later, on a "holy day," the Priest undergoes a change of heart himself, that is traceable to the "curious beauty" and sweet odour of certain strange white flowers that cover his altar. The climactic scene of inner change is paralleled by what Wilde once called "the daily miracle" of transubstantiation:¹⁹

And after he had opened the tabernacle, and incensed the monstrance that was in it, and shown the fair wafer to the people, and hid it again behind the veil of veils, he began to speak to the people, desiring them to know of the wrath of God. But the beauty of the white flowers troubled him, and their odour was sweet in his nostrils, and there came another word into his lips, and he spake not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love. And why he so spake, he knew not. (p. 235)

The Priest's belated conversion to the true doctrine of the compassionate Jesus, who, as Wilde was to remark in De Profundis, "would not hear of life being sacrificed to any system of thought or morals," and who "always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man" (Letters, p. 486) is traced to those flowers which, he is told, "come from the corner of Fullers' Field"

(p. 236). Here Wilde delicately alludes to the traditional balladic motif of the briar roses which blossom from the grave of star-crossed lovers, as a sign of divine forgiveness;²⁰ in this context the allusion emphasises the boundless and creative nature of Christ's love. Too late the Priest apprehends the kind of open-ended imaginative sympathy whereby he might have spared the Fisherman from ruinous dissociation when he made his first appeal; the flowers that bloom in the unblessed corner of the field where the "accursed" lovers lie parallel the flowers that bloom in the narrator's imagination over the unblessed grave of the hanged and repentant murderer in the Ballad of Reading Gaol, and similarly affirm that those who fail to abide by the cramping strictures of the established church, are yet subjects of Christ's all-embracing love.

In the last analysis, then, it is the limited prescriptions of Christ's professed disciple that the tale condemns; in the constant struggle for integrity, social as well as individual, the role of the established church should be to reconcile opposing impulses, conscience and instinct, heart and reason, into a larger perfection. It is with this intention that the Priest sets out to recharge the relations of the Church with the world:

And in the morning, while it was still dawn, he went forth ... and came to the shore of the sea, and blessed the sea, and all the wild things that are in it. The fauns also he blessed, and the little things that dance in the woodland, and

the bright-eyed things that peer through the leaves. All the things in God's world he blessed, and the people were filled with joy and wonder. (p. 236)

The Priest's attempts to make amends, to include "All the things in God's world" within a newly integrated vision of the world that, as Wilde later asserts in de Profundis, is the true gospel of Christ, is only partially successful; while his congregation are certainly "filled with joy and wonder," the miraculous signs of perfection the Fisherman had inspired do not reappear. The final sentence of this suggestive and enigmatic tale confirms that such complex integration of self or society is not easily or readily achieved, but has to be fought for, over and over again:

Yet never again in the corner of the Fuller's Field grew flowers of any kind, but the field remained barren even as before. Nor came the Sea-folk into the bay as they had been wont to do, for they went to another part of the sea. (p. 236)

The difficulty of sustaining Christ's synthetic vision, whether of the self or of society, is highlighted also by the denouement of "The Star-Child", in which the redeemed hero only survives "the fire of his testing" by three years, and whose beneficent rule over a city is replaced by cruelty (p. 252). This tale, the last in the collection, restates and clarifies the structure and themes of the first, and--as we shall see--goes some way in dealing with the communal aspect of personal self-perfection

that was left unresolved in "The Young King."

The story concerns a foundling who, growing up to be remarkably beautiful, becomes contemptuous of all who are not as comely as himself. As in the first tale, the hero's immature apprehension of beauty is presented as a narcissistic impulse, morally deadening and consequently destructive of all relationships. The close interconnection of these private and public dimensions is neatly emblemised by the Star-Child's loss of personal beauty--"his face was as the face of a toad, and his body was scaled like an adder" (p. 244)--once his cruelty to others culminates in his rejection of his mother. Unlike the young King, whose shallow self-absorption is deflected to the surfaces of sculpture and painting, the Star-Child is from the beginning obsessed with his own superficial perfection: "he would lie by the well in the priest's orchard and look down at the marvel of his own face, and laugh for the pleasure he had in his own fairness" (p. 241). Gazing without insight or imagination at his apparently perfect image, the Star-Child's narrow conception of beauty becomes the license for an ethics of rigorous exclusion: "he was as one enamoured of beauty, and would mock at the weak and ill-favoured, and make jest of them; and himself he loved" (p. 241).

The wanton cruelty of this behaviour is in pointed contrast to the Christian advice of his

foster-parents and the "old priest," who tries to point out to him the interdependence of "God's world":

Often did the old priest send for him, and seek to teach him the love of living things, saying to him: "The fly is thy brother. Do it no harm. The wild birds that roam through the forest have their freedom. Snare them not for thy pleasure. God made the blind-worm and the mole, and each has its place. Who art thou to bring pain into God's world? Even the cattle of the field praise Him." But the Star-Child heeded not their words, but would frown and flout, and go back to his own companions, and lead them. (p. 241)

The composite vision of the priest, who offers "the love of living things" as the appropriate ethic of an indivisible creation, provides the wider moral framework of the story; the Star-Child has to discover, through personal experience of the kind of cruelty and humiliation he himself has meted out, the veracity of Christ's doctrine of selfless love. When he is at last able to respond to the plight of other "living things," while beset by terrible trials himself, he approaches a profounder self-realisation beyond mere comeliness. When he at last begs forgiveness of his mother for his earlier rejection of her, he exemplifies the value of repentance as later outlined by Wilde in de Profundis:

Of course the sinner must repent. But why? Simply because otherwise he would be unable to realise what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that. It is the means by which one alters one's past.²¹

This realisation initiates the Star-Child into an awareness of a more complex indivisibility than his aestheticism could countenance. Having lost self-absorption after being forced to inhabit "even such a world as he had made for himself in the days of his great pride," (p. 245) the Star-Child's reconstituted image in a polished shield reflects a greater unity of self:

And the Star-Child looked, and lo! his face was even as it had been, and his comeliness had come back to him, and he saw that in his eyes which he had not seen there before. (p. 250)

What the penitent sees in his eyes is the humility that an all-embracing view of life involves; beauty now is bound up with a realisation of "the love of living things," and can no longer be divorced from the lives of others. In this sense the ending of "The Star-Child" resolves the wider social issues of "The Young King", for we are offered such a view of the hero's generous and loving kingship as we are denied in the first story:

Much justice and mercy did he show to all, and the evil Magician he banished, and to the Woodcutter and his wife he sent many rich gifts, and to their children he gave high honour. Nor would he suffer any to be cruel to bird or beast, but taught love and loving-kindness and charity, and to the poor he gave bread, and to the naked he gave raiment, and there was peace and plenty in the land. (pp. 251-2)

This vision of a kind of Owenite democracy, while hardly approaching the radical socialism of The Soul of Man, nevertheless confirms how emphatically

the author relates individual perfection to that of the community. As the Happy Prince and the Nightingale discover, completeness of self involves translating one's synthetic vision into practice.

Like "The Fisherman and His Soul", "The Star-Child" concludes with a sobering reminder of the fragility of such a vision, personal or public; "peace and plenty", whatever the conventions of fairy-tale, will not last for ever:

Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly. (p. 252)

This enigmatic coda, both to the specific tale and the entire volume, confirms the deepening complexity of the author's vision. If "The Young King," for all the intricacy of its social analysis, seems to urge an everlasting, gemlike perfection of self, each successive tale recasts the outlines of the paradigm. Without the privilege of dreams, the Dwarf and the Fisherman in turn discover the cruelty the world conceals; for neither of them is the example of Christ available to transform this shattering insight into a synthetic vision. More fortunate than these, the Star-Child realises the interrelatedness of self and community, suffering and vision, beauty and a larger integrity. If he dies prematurely, like Christ, in the process of enacting his knowledge, the imperative to recover and enact that insight remains.

Notes

¹ Oscar Wilde, A House of Pomegranates (London: Osgood McIlvaine and Co., 1891); rpr. in The Complete Shorter Fiction of Oscar Wilde, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979). All references to the book, hereafter cited as Pomegranates, will be made to this edition, and subsequent page references in this chapter will be given in the text.

At least two of the tales had been composed shortly after the publication of The Happy Prince; "The Young King" first appeared in The Lady's Pictorial Christmas Number, 1888, and "The Birthday of the Infanta" in Paris Illustré, March 30, 1889 (see Mason, Bibliography, p. 364). "The Star-Child" is mentioned in Wilde's correspondence as early as December, 1887--"of course he is not an ordinary baby" (Letter to W. Graham Robertson, Letters, pp. 213-4)--and it is accordingly appropriate to regard Wilde's first major Christological essay The Soul of Man Under Socialism as posterior to Pomegranates, although the book was published several months later. For a full publishing history of the essay, see the first note to the next chapter.

The title of the volume is derived from the lengthy description of worldly pleasures with which the soul tries to tempt the title-figure in "The Fisherman and his Soul," where he describes his

encounter with an exotic "Emperor" who eventually surrendered to him the fabulous "Ring of Riches": "That night, as I lay on a cushion in the tea-house that is in the Street of Pomegranates, the guards of the Emperor entered and led me to the palace" (p. 223). Certainly, the strangeness of the title sets an other-worldly mood that is appropriate to Wilde's enigmatic poetics; see, in this connection, the fifth note to this chapter.

² Epifanio San Juan's phrase, in his perceptive analysis of the characteristics of Biblical style, and its specific application in Wilde's poetic dramas; see "Structure and Style in the Poetic Dramas," Chapter IV of The Art of Oscar Wilde, pp. 114-5.

³ This phrase occurs in Wilde's description of his aims and methods in The Happy Prince, which I quoted in the first chapter: "The stories are an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality--in a form that is ideal and not imitative" (Letters, p. 237).

⁴ According to Roditi, in some of the settings of Pomegranates, Wilde's "art of lying creates and describes mythically what does not exist, and charms and convinces as utterly as if it did exist" ("Prose and the Sublime-II," Chapter II of Oscar Wilde, New York: New Directions, 1947, p. 72). He adds that the writer achieves this aim "by a kind of sublime that emanates, to a great extent, from the vivid description of contrasts, from a more firmly

guided dialectic than that of the earlier tales, and from a greater unity of plot and singleness of purpose in the narrator's atmosphere "(p. 75-6). Roditi's chapter contains an erudite and illuminating comparison of Wilde's methodology, in his mature fiction and poetic drama, with those of his continental contemporaries.

⁵ Cf. Wilde's public response to a baffled and contemptuous reviewer in the Pall Mall Gazette, who had asked "an extremely silly question, and that is, whether or not I have written this book for the purpose of giving pleasure to the British child." The author continues: "Now, in building this House of Pomegranates I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public No artist recognises any standard of beauty but that which is suggested by his own temperament" (letter to the Editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, December 1891; Letters, pp. 301-2). Coming after the acrimonious public debate that followed the publication of The Picture of Dorian Gray, the reception of Pomegranates confirmed Wilde's increasing alienation from a general audience. See Stuart Mason, Art and Morality: a Record of the Discussion which Followed the Publication of The Picture of Dorian Gray (London: Palmer, 1912); and Mason, Bibliography, pp. 365-9, who records that Pomegranates was the least financially successful of Wilde's published books prior to his imprisonment

(1895).

⁶ The tension between individual, aesthetic gratifications, and wider societal ties, is common to all three authors. Huysmans's curious novel, later to be a potent shaping influence on Dorian Gray (see n. 19, Chapter I), describes a determined attempt by its jaded aristocratic hero to realise, in splendid isolation, a range of sensuous and aesthetic experiences. Like Wilde's more innocently self-absorbed young King, Des Esseintes discovers his wilful abdication results in complete spiritual stasis: "torn between desire and satiety, hope and disillusionment, [he is] painfully conscious that his pleasures are finite, his needs infinite" (Robert Baldick, *Introd.*; Huysmans's Against Nature, transl. Baldick, London: Penguin, 1959, p. 13).

Similarly, each of the intense heroes of Pater's Imaginary Portraits (London: Macmillan, 1887) attempts, and fails, to realise a lifestyle according to a distinct philosophic attitude; as Isobel Murray and Rodney Shewan point out (*Introd.*, Complete Shorter Fiction, p. 15; Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism, p. 55), Wilde's royal aesthete in Pomegranates resembles "Duke Carl of Rosenmold," a minor German prince who "symbolises," in Wilde's own words in an appreciative review, "the passion for the imaginative world of art" ("Mr Pater's Imaginary Portraits," Pall Mall Gazette, June 11, 1887; rpr. in Reviews, pp. 172-6). Like the young King, Duke Carl attempts

to turn his palace into a veritable treasure-house, and dies when his small principality is betrayed by his own hostile court to the invading armies of France. "Denys l'Auxerrois" also resembles "The Young King" in some respects: the hero is a beautiful young musician who insigates an artistic revival, as well as a new hedonistic cult, in thirteen-century France, but is killed at last by his superstitious peers in the "great church" as a kind of sacrificial victim (Imaginary Portraits, pp. 85-8).

While both Pater and Huysmans offer Wilde suggestive essays on the problems of aesthetics, the paradigm had been established earlier: Isobel Murray refers to Tennyson's The Palace of Art as "the definitive statement of the dilemma around which Wilde's tales revolve" (Introd., Complete Shorter Fiction, p. 10), for in that poem the narrator's "soul" attempts "at ease for aye to dwell" (stanza 1) in a beautiful palace, from which she flees at last with the remorseful cry "Perchance I may return with others / When I have purged my guilt" (74)--a famous statement of a recurrent Victorian awareness that the artist's "private vision is built on the poverty and suffering of others" (Murray, p. 11). See also Robin Mayhead's discussion of this topic in "The Poetry of Tennyson," from Dickens to Hardy, Part VI of The Pelican Guide to English Literature (London: Penguin, 1958), pp. 232-4.

7 Carl G. Jung, "The Importance of Dreams," in Man and His Symbols (London: Aldus Books, 1964), pp. 49-50.

8 Isobel Murray points out that this phrase echoes William Morris's "Apology" to The Earthy Paradise (1868): "Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time, / Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?" (Complete Shorter Fiction, p. 269, n. 5). Wilde's ironic allusion is perhaps an indication of his own awareness of how Morris had changed from medievalist and aesthete himself to the determined social and political radical of the 1890s.

9 The martyred hero of Tennyson's verse tragedy anticipates Wilde's penitent young ruler in various telling respects: like the erstwhile goatherd-king, Thomas Becket comes of humble parentage, being as a boy "wise in winged things, / And know[ing] the ways of Nature" (I, ii); as a young man, he had been an epicure, "a lover of wines, and delicate meats, / And secular splendours, and a favourer of players" (I, i), but discovers his priestly vocation "in a vision of my sleep" (I, i). He becomes a great defender of the faith, universally revered because "the people know their Church a tower of strength, / A bulwark against Throne and Baronage" (I, i). As he believes the Church "is ever at one with the poor" (I, iv), and--like the young King--actually shares his bounty with them (I, iv), he is despised by the nobility, who oppose his eleva-

tion to the Archbishopric of Canterbury in terms remarkably similar to those of the young King's would-be assassins: "How should a baron love a beggar on horseback, with the retinue of three kings behind him, outroyalling royalty?" (Prologue). His climactic execution in Canterbury Cathedral, with the tacit approval of King Henry II, most obviously resembles the final scene of "the Young King"; likewise deserted by the "craven" clerics of the church, Becket calmly accepts death at the hands of four vengeful knights, "all arm'd with swords and axes" (V, iv), praying for his assassins and urging them not to "harm / One of my flock" (V, iv). It seems likely that Becket offered Wilde another suggestive variation on the endemic tension between true Christian discipleship, and the demands of any given status quo, that he explores in "The Young King."

10 Wilde's imaginative engagement with the legend of Tannhäuser was clearly fired by his appreciation of Wagner's famous opera, which for him represented a powerful example of the rich self-revelatory and suggestive power of art that Vivian applauds in "The Decay of Lying." Gilbert, in "The Critic as Artist," celebrates Tannhäuser thus: "Sometimes when I listen to the overture to Tannhäuser, I seem indeed to see that comely knight treading delicately on the flower-strewn grass, and to hear the voice of Venus calling to him from

the caverned hill. But at other times it speaks to me of a thousand different things, of myself, it may be, and my own life, or of the lives of others whom one has loved and grown weary of loving, or of the passions that man has known, or of the passions that man has not known, and so has sought for" (Intentions, pp. 144-5). Appositely, then, Dorian Gray at the height of his hedonist dedication would sit at the opera, "listening in rapt pleasure to Tannhäuser, and seeing in the prelude to that great work of art a presentation of the tragedy of his own soul" (Chapter XI, p. 135). Wilde's enthusiasm for this overture is perhaps a measure of his aesthetic appreciation for Wagner's transformation of opera, into a "well-rounded, eloquent whole," as opposed to the diffuse combination of music, recitation and libretto that had characterised previous music drama. See Gustav Köbbe, "Richard Wagner," The Complete Opera Book (London: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1922), pp. 91-4. The flowering-staff motif recurs in The Ballad of Reading Gaol (see my last chapter above), and further illustrates the contention Wilde specifically states in de Profundis, that the venerable legend is one instance of Christ's influence on myth and art (Letters, p. 482).

¹¹ G. Wilson Knight, The Christian Renaissance (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 298. Knight discusses the traditional association of precious stones with the eternal in European mythology and literature

on pp. 297-9.

¹² Tennyson's description of the climactic moment in "The Lady of Shalott" (stanza 13), another of that poet's imaginative dissertations on the uneasy relations of art and life; having turned from her tapestry to follow Sir Lancelot, the shattering of the lady's mirror betokens her imminent failure to manage the transition from her own "Palace of Art" to the complex demands of life. Wilde alludes to this poem in Dorian Gray, when Sybil Vane attempts to give up the stage in favour of the hero: "I have grown sick of Shadows." See Chapter VII, p. 86, n. 1.

¹³ Arnold's poem (from The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems, 1849; rpr. Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold, pp. 32-5), which resembles Andersen's tale of the little mermaid in theme and subject-matter, is a major source of Wilde's story. While the little mermaid pines for the prince who is on land, Arnold's Merman yearns for the wife who has deserted him because "I lose my poor soul, Merman! here with thee" (l. 59). As with "The Fisherman and His Soul," Arnold's poem indicts those who turn religion into a narrow and exclusive creed:

Loud prays the priest; shut stands the door.
Come away, children, call no more!
(l. 81-4).

¹⁴ As Wendell Harris observes in "Arnold, Pater and Wilde and the Object as in Themselves They See It," Wilde shares Arnold and Pater's aversion for

precise philosophic definitions (p. 734-5). The recurrent use of the term "soul" in the polemical writings of Wilde and his immediate predecessors in the Romantic-humanist tradition of social and artistic dissent--Arnold, Ruskin, Carlyle--reads more as an assertion of the integrity of individual consciousness, in the face of the mechanistic reductions of the Utilitarians, rather than as evidence of an idealist epistemology per se. Depending on context and subject-matter, the sense of the term in Wilde's work shifts between personality itself (as in The Soul of Man), conscience (most notably in Dorian Gray, in which the portrait represents "conscience" as well as a "monstrous soul-life"), and the more conventional notion of essential being (see Intentions, passim, and de Profundis).

15 In "The Forsaken Merman," the wife who has abandoned her sea-husband and children is similarly depicted in the "little grey church" while her hapless family try to gain her attention: "But, ah, she gave me never a look, / For her eyes were seal'd to the holy book!" (ll. 80-1). As with the Priest in Wilde's tale, the act of piety here is a cover for a fundamental lack of humane feeling on the mother's part.

16 Cf. Wilde's engaging comparison between children and flowers, "who from the twelfth century to our own day have been continually making their appearance in art, under various modes and at various

times, coming fitfully and wilfully as children and flowers are apt to do," in de Profundis (Letters, p. 482).

17 Viola's beautiful image for the constancy of love, when she offers to "Make me a willow cabin at your gate, / And call upon my soul within the house" (I, 5).

18 Peter Marinelli's aphoristic summary in his introduction to Pastoral (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 10.

19 Lamenting the spread of scepticism, Vivian says in "The Decay of Lying" that it is the duty of the Church "to believe in the supernatural, to perform daily miracles, and to keep alive that mythopoeic faculty which is so essential to the imagination" (p. 47-8).

20 MacEdward Leach, Introd., The Ballad Book (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), pp. 22-3. MacEdward remarks of this popular balladic convention that "the folk belief behind this is that the souls of dead lovers pass into the trees or plants that spring from the graves and so the lovers are united after death in a kind of physical way [It is] a device that mitigates the tragedy by symbolising the reunion of the lovers after death."

21 Letters, p. 487.

3. The First Individualist: Jesus in The Soul of Man Under Socialism

The Soul of Man Under Socialism, which was first published in the The Fortnightly Review of February, 1891,¹ contains the first of Wilde's two extended theoretical discussions on the meaning of Christ for the contemporary world. As I shall indicate, the essayist proposes Jesus as the vital historic link between the Classical ideal of self-perfection and what he terms the "New Hellenism" of the future, in which for the first time that ideal will be realised. Christ, whose own life and ministry most powerfully exemplifies such self-realisation, is--like Moses--withheld by Wilde from the promised land, because the mode of life he practised was intrinsically bound up with the unjust historic condition of humanity; once "the terrible truth that pain is a mode through which man may realise himself" (p. 1102) no longer has efficacy in a perfect post-socialist order, Christ's example will have been superseded.

In this chapter I will consider the ways in which Wilde uses the personality of Jesus to advance his own post-Paterian concern with individual and social integrity, and how, having argued for Christ's special prominence in the development of an individualist ethic, the writer backs away from the consequences of his proposition. Wilde comes near

to explicitly incorporating the competing polarities of Hellenic self-development and Hebraic social responsibility into the figure of Jesus; at the last moment, however, his aestheticism is unable yet to allow that suffering may be instrumental in shaping a complex unity of self. The essayist resorts to positivist and evolutionary utopianism to leave Christ behind as the avatar of a mode of perfection founded on transient conditions: "Pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest It was a great work, but it is almost over. Its sphere lessens every day" (Works, p. 1103).

In the summer of 1890, some six months before The Soul of Man was published, Wilde wrote a remarkable letter to a society friend, Mrs. Bertha Lathbury,² that illuminates his intentions in this polemical essay. It is unfortunate that this brief note has escaped critical attention thus far, for in it the writer deftly collates several leading elements of his ideas--ethical, religious, and aesthetic--that in future works he will refine and develop.

The letter begins with an observation Wilde will later turn into the leit-motif of his poetic dramas:

But the Saint and the artistic Hedonist certainly meet--touch in many points. Right and wrong are not qualities of actions, they are mental attitudes relative to the incompleteness of the ordinary social organism. When one contemplates,

all things are good. For myself, I look forward to the time when aesthetics will take the place of ethics, when the sense of beauty will be the dominant law of life: it will never be so, and so I look forward to it.

Wilde would elaborate in The Soul of Man on the similar intensity of passion between the "Saint", the follower of Christ who realises himself "through pain or in solitude" (Works, p. 1102), and the post-Paterian "artistic Hedonist", like Mary Magdalene, whose sensual indulgence Christ forgave because "it was so intense and wonderful" (Works, p. 1086). Both these opposing figures share a passionate commitment that Wilde admires; in the terms of his utopian primer, they have both attained, through differing modes of "Individualism", the perfection that is latent in their personalities. As we shall see, the writer's recognition of the equivalent dedication these modes of life require becomes the thematic and structural crux on which Salome (1891), La Sainte Courtisane (1893) and the Poems in Prose (1894) are based.

In his letter, Wilde goes on to observe that "Right and wrong are not qualities of actions, they are mental attitudes relative to the incompleteness of the ordinary social organism." The quasi-scientific accents of this relativist view of morality reflect Wilde's interest in the theories and researches of the contemporary social Darwinists. He especially admired W.K. Clifford, who in his Essays and Lectures (1879) similarly

explains ethical distinctions in terms of arbitrary and short-lived social pressures; and in his *Commonplace Book*,³ Wilde recorded at length the sociologist's views on non-conformism and individuality that, as we shall see, are transformed into the utopian speculations of The Soul of Man. For Clifford, as Wilde cites, not only is the moral sense in human beings dictated by those internalised strictures he calls "the tribal self," but in certain members of a society the urge to independence of thought and action will result in defiance of these social codes. Such unorthodoxy betokens "the individual self," and therefore a more advanced stage of human evolution.⁴

For Wilde, such ideas enable him to put his own credo of self-perfection on a scientific footing. The case for Individualism as the irresistible future of humanity in The Soul of Man is firmly grounded on positivist sentiment and on evolutionary principles: "To ask whether Individualism is practical is like asking whether Evolution is practical," declares the writer. "Evolution is the law of life, and there is no evolution except towards Individualism" (Works, pp.1100-01).

The author's statement to Mrs. Lathbury, then, that moral values are merely "relative to the incompleteness of the ordinary social organism," becomes the basis of Wilde's semi-Comteian, post-Darwinist, and anarchist utopia;⁵ for once society has been

reconstituted "on such a basis that poverty becomes impossible," and the need for "an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism" has become obsolete, the individual will be able to concentrate on his or her own self-development "to his own lasting gain, and to the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world" (Works, p. 1079).

Wilde also suggests to Mrs. Lathbury the lines along which the self-perfection of the future is to be comprehended. "For myself," he declares, "I look forward to the time when aesthetics will take the place of ethics, when the sense of beauty will be the law of life." This is Wilde's original contribution to moral speculation, that arises directly out of the art theory he provocatively outlines in "The Decay of Lying" and its companion-piece, the dialogue originally called "The True Value and Function of Criticism" (July and September, 1890). In a world without shared values, and seemingly in the grip of certain deterministic laws, aesthetic criteria offer the individual a bold and suggestive means of organising the variegated and potentially divisive elements of the self. Once that "incompleteness of the ordinary social organism" has been resolved, ethical strictures, like government, will wither away, men and women will be able to reconsider their lives according to the tenets currently applicable only to art; "aesthetics" can therefore replace

"ethics," and "the sense of beauty will be the law of life."

The Soul of Man partly reads as an imaginative attempt to formulate a model of personality that takes account of its potential for multiple expansion, while asserting at the same time its essential unity. As I remarked in the first chapter, Wilde was acutely aware of the problems of the fracturing self that psychology and literature were beginning to examine, and The Picture of Dorian Gray, which had just been published in Lippincott's Magazine when Wilde wrote the above letter to Mrs. Lathbury (June 1890), is a significant fictional response to the issue. The essayist's description, in The Soul of Man, of the "true personality" that the eradication of private property and authoritarianism will encourage into being, reflects his desire to transform ethics into aesthetic distinctions:

It will be a marvellous thing--the true personality of man--when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flower-like, or like a tree grows. It will never be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be valued by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich will it be. It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like oneself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The

personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child. (Works, p. 1084)

It is apparent from this evocation that such a personality has resolved the various aspects of consciousness into a complex whole, at once manifold and unified: "It will have nothing," the author writes; "And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich will it be." Self-sufficient, benign, both involved with others and apart, this personality will be distinguished by a simultaneous receptivity and retentiveness: "it will know everything," while at the same time "it will not busy itself about knowledge." Liberated from the need to practise charity towards those around it, it will "love" others for their own uniqueness, and will not interfere with them in their chosen modes of self-perfection. In its symmetry and completion, it will act as an inspiration to others, as, indeed, a complex ideal of perfection that its spectators should translate into the terms of their own lives: "And yet," says the essayist, "while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is." In Wilde's formulation, the Keatsian dictum is realised; "Truth" becomes the complex "Beauty" of the simultaneously expanded and coherent personality, which at last accords with the integrality of art. In comprehending its unique value its spectators

must adopt, by implication, the standpoint of the aesthetic critic; they must allow "beauty," in his expression to Mrs. Lathbury, to "become the dominant law of life."

The central problem of Wilde's fanciful aesthetic reworking of the Hellenic goal of "self-perfection" in the essay, however, is this: in the writer's estimation, the only historical individual who came closest to exemplifying that goal of self-sufficiency, independence and completion was Jesus Christ, who paradoxically embodied a life of commitment to the suffering of others. As we shall see, Wilde's Jesus is presented as the supreme moral individualist of history, as one whose example has kept the Hellenic ideal of self-perfection alive; but one whose realisation of perfection depended on human suffering, and who therefore will become, in the future, an anachronistic example to humanity.

The speculations about the "true personality" lead the essayist to a consideration of Christ. For Wilde admits that "It is a question whether we have ever seen the full expression of personality, except on the imaginative plane of art. In action we never have" (Works, p. 1084). Wilde considers certain historical figures. Caesar and Marcus Aurelius, men who wielded authority, were emasculated by the need to govern; Byron and Shelley, types of the social rebel, were exhausted by the need

to oppose. "What I mean by a perfect man," comments the writer, "is one who develops under perfect conditions; one who is not wounded, or worried, or maimed, or in danger" (Works, p. 1084). Only Jesus Christ, Wilde has to allow, achieved in his lifetime anything like the kind of self-fulfilment he has described.

Although he does not go so far as to say that Christ is the finest exemplar in history of self-perfection, he implies that only Jesus' life and utterances suggest this completion to us. While artists and thinkers such as Darwin, Renan or Keats⁶ may have realised their perfection in their work, Wilde declares that only Christ attained similar heights in his actual existence.

Jesus, if not the institutions that have been created in his name, understood the claims of self-realisation. In Wilde's opinion, the true personality "will be assisted by Christianity, if men desire that; but if men do not desire that, it will develop more or less surely" (Works, pp. 1084-5). Like Arnold, Wilde feels that Christianity may be a source of sweetness and light; like Renan, in "L'Avenir de la Science" and elsewhere, he believes the advance to perfection is, in any event, inevitable.⁷

Significantly, however, while organised religion may be dispensable, its founder as a great individualist is not: the future personality "will

love those who sought to intensify it, and speak often of them." Wilde then adds: "And of these Christ was one" (p. 1101). In so formulating his argument Wilde confirms that his Jesus, like the subject of Literature and Dogma and La Vie de Jesus, is of interest for the human integrity he espoused, not for his possibly divine status. The broad outlines of these opening remarks link Wilde's reflections on Christ with the secular-humanist tradition in nineteenth-century religious thought, whose members from D.W. Strauss onwards attempted to use the tools of historical criticism to describe that historical Jesus who inspired in his contemporaries such tremendous imaginative responses.⁸

Specifically, as I shall indicate, Wilde's attempts in The Soul of Man to assert the human Jesus' continuing validity recalls the more wistful dissent of Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold, both of whom attempted to translate Christ's value into the terms of a sceptical and rational age. Renan is a particularly strong influence on Wilde's conception of Christ; as early as 1877 Wilde had quoted the French philologist's controversial opinion in his La Vie de Jesus (1863),⁹ that Mary Magdalene created the myth of Christ's resurrection, to no less a devout Fundamentalist than W.E. Gladstone himself.¹⁰ In his concluding assessment of the rôle of modern criticism, Gilbert in "The Critic

as Artist" calls the nineteenth century "a turning point in history, simply on account of the work of two men, Darwin and Renan, the one the critic of the Book of Nature, the other the critic of the books of God" (Intentions, p. 216). Wilde refers here to the successive volumes in which the great French critic applied his impressive knowledge of semitic language and culture to a reappraisal of the roots of Christianity.¹¹ The most celebrated of these was La Vie. In this famous and provocative study Renan portrays Jesus as an epoch-making humanitarian whose ministry was characterised by an inner strength, an Assisi-like rejection of societal obligations, and a daunting belief in his own mission.¹² All of these notably humanist qualities reappear in the great Individualist-Jesus of The Soul of Man.

The most original aspect of Renan's study is the relation he draws between Christ and the pastoral Galilean landscape in which the carpenter's son was nurtured, and, drawing on his own tour of the Holy Land in 1862, the Frenchman imaginatively recreated an idyllic rural milieu for Christ's life and ministry.¹³ In particular, he comments on Christ's "poetic" ability to cast his vision in the simple agrarian terms of Galilee, and no doubt this contributes to Wilde's relation of Christ to the artist in de Profundis.

Renan's portrait, avowedly secular, innately

reverential, and combining in its treatment its author's inimitable blend of careful scholarship and ardent lyricism demonstrated that an affection for religious tradition and belief was not incompatible with positivism and empirical enquiry. This combination of elements mattered greatly to Wilde, who opposes dogma on scientific grounds (in "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying," Intentions, p. 14, pp. 189-90), but also cannot countenance the imaginative and ethical consequences that would follow the erosion of faith (in "The Decay of Lying," Intentions, pp. 47-8).

These are the very issues Matthew Arnold sought to address a decade after Renan's book appeared, when he undertook to defend Christianity against its "scientific" critics and to reaffirm its continued ethical and literary power in Literature and Dogma (1873).¹⁴ Arnold shares Renan's respect for historical criticism, and the Frenchman's work certainly indicated to the recently retired Oxford Professor of Poetry how he might approach his subject; but the emphasis in Arnold's theology is different.¹⁵ To Renan the person of Jesus, that is, the individual manner of his life, and the necessary isolation this demanded even as it inspired the many, is the source of his continuing fascination; to Arnold, the precise ethical example of Jesus is of fundamental importance. If Christ for Arnold displays that "sweet reasonableness"

he elsewhere expects of the ideal man of culture, and therefore embodies a superior ethical model to that of the Greeks, he becomes for Renan a man of genius and imagination who, while steeped in the traditions of his people, stimulated society into a new conception of itself.

Wilde's admiration for the entire thrust of Arnold's awesome critical effort--which is evident throughout the younger man's theoretical writings--is most striking of course in "The Critic as Artist," which contains the author's considered reinterpretation of Arnold's critical and cultural values for a self-consciously relativist era. In particular, the distinction the writer of Culture and Anarchy drew between Hellenism, which he defines as "spontaneity of consciousness," and Hebraism, or "strictness of conscience,"¹⁶ remains in Wilde's work--as his consideration in the letter to Mrs. Lathbury of the "Saint" and the "Hedonist" indicates--a very real dichotomy.

As I shall indicate, Wilde is attracted to Arnold's view of Christ as in some way representative of that ideal man of culture, and shares Arnold's concern with the mythoepoic and imaginative value of religion. His own theoretical writing in The Soul of Man and de Profundis reflects, however, a complete lack of interest in Arnold's metaphysical speculations; like Renan, Wilde is more interested in the impact of Christ as a remarkable historical

figure, than whatever a priori or experiential claims his teachings may have as an ethical standard. Certainly, Arnold's tendency to regard literature as the chief repository of ethical and imaginative values finds a ready counterpart in Wilde, who in The Soul of Man asserts that Jesus and the artist share a similar urge to self-perfection. As I shall indicate, however, Wilde prizes Christ's encounters with others for the creativity and independent judgement they reveal, rather than for their didactic value.

In his opening remarks about Christ, Wilde in The Soul of Man compares the Galilean's doctrine quite explicitly with that of the Greeks. He implies by allusion that Jesus' ministry resolves the Hellenic and Hebraic tendencies in Western thought:

"Know thyself!" was written over the portals of the antique world. Over the portals of the new world, "Be thyself" shall be written. And the message of Christ to man was simply "Be thyself." That is the secret of Christ. (Works, p. 1085)

Christ, according to the essayist, is the vital link between the self-perfection of the Greeks and the "New Hellenism" to come. Through him, the Socratic doctrine that for Wilde, as for Arnold in his original discussion of Hellenism and Hebraism, encapsulates the chief tendency of Greek thought, is transferred; by contemplating Christ's message, the reader may grasp what the future with its "larger, fuller, lovelier" Individualism (Works,

p. 1103) will be like.

Wilde's formulation here directly recalls Arnold's view in Literature and Dogma, that Christ's "method" is to transfer Socrates' "Know thyself" into the moral and religious sphere. The allusion to Arnold himself is confirmed in the reflection, "That is the secret of Christ." Arnold in Literature and Dogma characterises Christ's "secret" as an attainment of what he calls the "higher moral self," which involves a renunciation of the corrupt values of the world. This "secret" is the core of Christ's teaching for Arnold, the means whereby his followers may acquire the "temper" of Jesus, one characterised by that "perfect balance" and "sweet reasonableness" of Arnold's critic or man of culture.¹⁷ Wilde's allusions in this passage to both his Hellenic ideals and Arnold's theological work is a means of associating his view of Christ with the secular-humanist tradition of religious thought that Wilde's great critical mentors Arnold and Renan popularly represented.

The emphases Wilde wishes to place on Christ are however, somewhat different. Whereas for Arnold religion involves verifying in one's conduct an absolute moral law, Wilde shifts the focus of Christian discipleship from right conduct to the potential of personality. He declares that "when Jesus talks about the poor he simply means personalities," a view that overturns Renan's view of Christ's

gospel of the poor in La Vie,¹⁸ and that the Galilean did not lay down a fixed dogma of material renunciation; rather, he invites individuals to reconsider their relationship with private property, in the interests of true selfhood. Wilde offers a personal reinterpretation of Christ's message in these words:

You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. Don't imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things. Your perfection is inside you. If only you could realise that you would not want to be rich. Ordinary riches can be stolen from a man. Real riches cannot. In the treasury-house of your soul, there are infinitely precious things, that may not be taken from you. And so, try to shape your life that external things will not harm you. (Works, p. 1085)

Here Wilde takes his suggestion from the text in St. Matthew's gospel that both Arnold and Renan admired, in which Jesus declares that "the kingdom of God is within you," but gives it a characteristic emphasis. Wilde imputes to Jesus the benign self-sufficiency he had admired in the "perfection" of Chuang Tsu, the recently-translated Chinese philosopher whom Wilde had reviewed enthusiastically in April, 1890.¹⁹ As a number of commentators have pointed out, Wilde's own "ideal critic" of "The Critic as Artist" directly reflects the quietism and studied inaction of the Taoist,²⁰ and demonstrates that prior to writing The Soul of Man he was trying to formulate an ideal model of personality that could simultaneously represent

the multiplicity and oneness of the self. The free paraphrases of Gospel exhortations quoted above indicate that Wilde has found his model in Jesus.

Like Chuang Tsu in Wilde's review, his Christ is also an unequivocal opponent of private property; and here Jesus sounds as if he too has been reading William Morris,²¹ although of course Wilde takes his suggestion from the Gospels: "try to get rid of personal property", his Jesus concludes. "It involves sordid preoccupation, endless industry, continual wrong." He adds: "Personal property hinders Individualism at every step" (Works, p. 1085).

Wilde provides evidence for Jesus' rather anarchistic attitude towards possessions by referring to the "wealthy young man" of the Gospels, who comes to Christ seeking eternal life. In the essayist's view, this character is clearly analogous to the sober, industrious, and unimaginative middle classes of Wilde's own day, to whom materialism has become a burden on the self:

And so the wealthy young man who comes to Jesus is represented as a thoroughly good citizen, who has broken none of the laws of his state, none of the commandments of his religion. He is quite respectable, in the ordinary sense of that extraordinary word. [italics mine] (Works, p. 1085)

This young man who confuses virtue with conformity, and value with possessions, allows Wilde to defend the view that social dissent is a sign of healthy

individualism. Christ's advice, that he should "give up private property" because "it hinders you from realising your perfection" (Works, p. 1085), is supplemented a few sentences later by a wilful invitation.

Personality is a very mysterious thing. A man cannot always be estimated by what he does. He may keep the law, and be worthless. He may break the law and yet be fine. He may be bad, without ever doing anything bad. He may commit a sin against society, and yet realise through that sin his true perfection. [italics mine] (Works, p. 1086)

In this last statement, the juxtaposition of the respectable young man's conformity with the wilful iconoclasm of this hypothetical character is striking: clearly the young man is one who "may keep the law and be worthless." Here "sin" becomes a creative act of self-assertion, a synonym for the individual's refusal to accept what Wilde elsewhere in the essay calls "monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" (Works, p. 1091).

Elsewhere in Wilde's contemporaneous theoretical writings, this unorthodox concept of "sin" is mooted with varying degrees of emphasis. Gilbert, for instance, pronounces the thoroughly relativist and circumstantial view of ethics that Wilde briefly touches on in his letter to Mrs. Lathbury; in "The Critic as Artist," what is commonly called right action, Gilbert declares, is merely a function

of arbitrary social pressures, so that "to be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy"; it involving merely "a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability" (Intentions, p. 214). On the other hand, "What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress", for it "increases the experience of the race", and, by "its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type" (Intentions, p. 130).

In The Soul of Man Christ is aligned with this Cliffordian or post-Darwinian view. Following a suggestion in Renan's Vie, that Jesus affected a disdain for the political affairs and pedantic ecclesiastical mores of his day,²² Wilde again presses into service the abjurations of the Gospel saviour to his disciples. Wilde writes:

When they go into the world, the world will disagree with them. That is inevitable. The world hates Individualism. But that is not to trouble them. They are to be calm and self-centred. If a man takes their cloak, they are to give him their coat, just to show that material things are of no importance. (Works, p. 1086)

Here Wilde echoes Arnold--the phrase, "calm and self-centred," suggests not only Arnold's man of culture, but his idealised Shakespeare, who is "self-schooled, self-scanned, self-honoured, self-secure"²³--and of course recalls the benignly indifferent Chuang Tsu of the Speaker review. Like

Renan, Wilde turns Christ's ministry into an individualistic revolt against authority; unlike Arnold, Wilde's Christ does not assert the primacy of absolute moral law, but rather the individual's need to shape his own conduct according to his own lights: "he may break the law," writes the essayist, and yet be fine."

Without actually stating that Christ himself urges his followers to sin, Wilde implies that Jesus recognised the healthy motives of self-realisation that might underly such action. Here Wilde most radically departs from Arnold and Renan, to propose that Christ had a far more open and dynamic approach to questions of conduct than many of his disciples have allowed.

Wilde asserts the creative independence of Christ from his day with reference to the story of Mary Magdalene. The biblical episodes concerning her were clearly favourites of Wilde's; not only is she featured prominently in the major thematic developments of both The Soul of Man and de Profundis, but the idea that Jesus forgave her adultery "not because she repented, but because her love was so intense and wonderful" is a crucial thematic element of his early blank-verse tragedy The Duchess of Padua (1883)²⁴ and informs, as I shall indicate in the next chapter, his delineation of the tragic heroine in Salome (1891). What clearly fascinated Wilde was the "sinful" nature of her

love, for which Jesus forgave her. For Wilde, Jesus recognises that she is, in short, the type of the truly individual self, who is seeking a mode of self-realisation:

There was a woman taken in adultery. We are not told the history of her love, but that love must have been very great; for Jesus said that her sins were forgiven her, not because she repented, but because her love was so intense and wonderful. Later on, a short time before his death, as he sat at a feast, the woman came in and poured costly perfumes on his hair. His friends tried to interfere with her, and said that it was an extravagance, and that the money that the perfume cost should have been expended on charitable relief of people in want, or something of that kind. Jesus did not accept that view. He pointed out that the material needs of Man were great and very permanent, but that the spiritual needs of Man were greater still, and that in one divine moment, and by selecting its own mode of expression, a personality might make itself perfect. The world worships the woman, even now, as a saint. (Works, p. 1086)

Christ forgives the "woman taken in adultery" because of the intensity of her experience, not because of any remorse she may evince; he recognises, in short, that the desire for self-realisation may take many forms. The poetic dramas and prose-poems of the 1890s would explore this attitude, which the author had already stated in the letter to Mrs. Lathbury I referred to above: "The Saint and the artistic Hedonist certainly meet--touch in many points." The moment in which the Magdalene expresses her gratitude by pouring those "costly perfumes" into Christ's hair is also the "divine moment" of her self-perfection, achieved

in a manner inexplicable to the unimaginative disciples, who urge instead an act of charitable relief, "or something of that kind."

The sinner, in effect, is as keen a student of individualistic perfection as the saint; indeed, because her sensual indulgence was "intense and wonderful" she is able to comprehend the "secret" of selfless renunciation Jesus represents, and to demonstrate her appreciation in a beautiful action.

Like the artist-individualists that Wilde prizes elsewhere in the essay, the Magdalene chooses a unique "mode of expression" for her perfection. Her relationship with Jesus vindicates Wilde's assertion towards the end of the essay: "Selfishness always aims at creating around it an absolute uniformity of type," he writes. "Unselfishness recognises an infinite variety of type as a delightful thing, accepts it, acquiesces in it, enjoys it" (Works, p. 1101).

The encounter between Christ and Mary Magdalene prefigures, therefore, a transformed society, based not on the outmoded mores that pertain to an unjust social order, but on the spontaneous and selfless encounters of freely co-operating individuals. "It is only in voluntary associations," the writer had observed earlier in his essay, "that man is fine" (Works, p. 1082).

In the ensuing paragraph, Wilde translates

the ethical repercussions of the Magdalene's encounter with Christ into practical and contemporary terms. Here he echoes William Morris, by declaring that "with the abolition of private property, marriage in its present form must disappear"²⁵ (p. 1086). He goes on to explain that:

Individualism converts the abolition of legal restraint into a form of freedom that will help the full development of personality, and make the love of man and woman more wonderful, more beautiful, and more ennobling. Jesus knew this. He rejected the claims of family life, although they existed in his day and community in a marked form. (Works, p. 1086)

Here Wilde makes it clear that the "legal restraint" that marriage embodies is one aspect of the general conformity that stifles individuals. Christ's aim, according to the essayist, is to oblige men and women to make creative decisions, without reference to the imposed claims of others; later he expands on how insidious these claims can be when they are disguised by the "prizes and awards" society confers on its more acquiescent members. In such cases people "go through their lives in a sort of coarse comfort, like petted animals," unaware that they have become poor imitations of other people, "wearing practically what one may call other people's second-hand clothes, and never being themselves for a single moment" (Works, p. 1087). It is worth noting that Wilde here overturns Renan, who points out that Jesus believes firmly in the indivisibility of marriage, and indeed

was implacably opposed to fornication;²⁶ for the writer of The Soul of Man, the story of the Magdalene, and Christ's rejection of his own family in St. Matthew's Gospel, are sufficient pretexts for the unorthodox claims against marriage he ascribes to Jesus.

'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?' he said, when he was told they wished to speak to him. When one of his followers asked leave to go and bury his father, 'Let the dead bury the dead,' was his terrible answer. He would allow no claims whatsoever to be made on personality. (Works, p. 1087)

Wilde concludes his defence of Christ's individualism with an original and provocative declaration: "he who would lead a Christlike life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself" (Works, p. 1087). As Christ recognised that each personality will achieve its perfection "by selecting its own mode of expression," he accordingly cannot countenance slavish and unimaginative imitation of himself: this is the crux of his Individualism, the vital message that his life and teaching embody.

It is essential that--like Mary Magdalene--the individual realises his or her perfection in a mode equivalent to Christ's, but different from it:

All imitation in life and morals is wrong. Through the streets of Jerusalem at the present day crawls one who is mad and who carries a wooden cross on his shoulders. He is a symbol of the lives that are marred by imitation ... There is no one type of man. There are as many perfections as there are imperfect men. And while to the claims of charity

a man may yield and yet be free, to the claims of conformity no man may yield and remain free at all. (Works, p. 1087)

In these ringing phrases Wilde initiates a crucial theme of subsequent work, notably of Salome and Poems in Prose (1893), in which the implications of this idea for Christ's followers are imaginatively explored. The parable of the mad cross-bearer illustrates Wilde's conviction that, once a "mode" of perfection has been pursued by one person, there is no guarantee that it is viable as a means of self-realisation for others. The true meaning of Christ, then, is that he inspires the individual to realise, through his or her own particular genius, the aspirations of the Greeks to self-perfection.

Having made this ringing assertion, Wilde moves into a discussion of the future state that will allow such Individualism as Christ and his equivalents have anticipated. Insisting that Art has been "the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known" (Works, p. 1090), Wilde argues at length that, in spite of the sedulous pressures of a society threatened by the self-assertion of the artist, these creators anticipate the new Hellenism: "the past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be." He concludes: "The future is what artists are" (Works, p. 1100).

Yet, if Christ anticipates the Individualism of the future, Wilde's final acclamation of the

"New Hellenism" confirms that Jesus' Hebraic insistence on morality, however creative it may have been in the specific circumstances of his society, will be outmoded. It will be outmoded, the essayist declares, because "pain" will no longer exist:

But it must be remembered that while sympathy with joy intensifies the sum of joy in the world, sympathy with pain does not really diminish the amount of pain. It may make man better able to endure evil, but the evil remains. Sympathy with consumption does not cure consumption; that is what Science does. And when Socialism has solved the problem of poverty, and Science solved the problem of disease, the area of the sentimentalists will be lessened, and the sympathy of man will be large, healthy, and spontaneous. Man will have joy in the contemplation of the joyous life of others. (Works, p. 1102)

Wilde goes on to affirm that a "larger, fuller, lovelier" mode of individualism, realised in concert with others rather than in opposition to them, is the inevitable evolutionary future of humanity. That is why Christ, who in his determined pursuit of self-perfection through pain had anticipated this more advanced stage, will be outmoded:

And yet, Christ did not revolt against authority. He accepted the imperial authority of the Roman Empire and paid tribute. He accepted the ecclesiastical authority of the Jewish Church, and would not repel its violence by any violence of his own. He had, as I said before, no scheme for the reconstruction of society. But the modern world has schemes. It proposes to do away with poverty and the suffering that it entails. It desires to get rid of pain, and the suffering that pain entails. It trusts to Socialism and Science as its methods. What it aims at is an Individualism expressing itself through joy. This Individualism will be larger, fuller, lovelier than

any Individualism that has ever been. Pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest. It has reference to wrong, unhealthy, unjust surroundings. When the wrong, and the disease, and the injustice are removed, it will have no further place. (Works, p. 1103)

Christ, who in his life and teaching exemplifies the Hellenic ideal, and has thereby inspired humanity to embody it for themselves, is nevertheless incapable of suggesting the general achievement of this laudable aim. For the essayist, however, his importance does not end here. In that he represents the major historical example of a life fully perfected through "reference to wrong, unhealthy, unjust surroundings," any individual attempt at such perfection under current conditions must take cognisance of him. To attempt that finer Individualism "expressing itself through joy" would, under such conditions, be misplaced"

The evolution of man is slow. The injustice of man is great. It was necessary that pain should be put forward as a mode of self-realisation. Even now, in some places in the world, the message of Christ is necessary. No one who lived in modern Russia could possibly realise his perfection except by pain A Nihilist who rejects all authority because he knows authority to be evil, and welcomes all pain, because through that he realises his personality, is a real Christian. To him the Christian ideal is a true thing (Works, p. 1103).

In the present life of the world, Christ's ideals of "resistance" and "isolation" still represent a powerful mode of self-realisation. Wilde's advocacy of "Science" and "Socialism", and his confident

assertion that human suffering, although a "great work," is "almost over" (Works, p. 1103), cannot detract from Christ's continuing validity.

To conclude, in The Soul of Man, Wilde draws on the differing portraits of his predecessors to create a Jesus who celebrates the triumph of individual assertion over received orthodoxy, over the "gross kind of over-fed barbarism" that authority establishes amongst us (Works, p. 1087). In a skeptical age ranging around for ideals, the theological or ethical validity of Jesus gives way to the aesthetic, which means that he represents one means amongst many of ordering and expressing the complex energies of the self; his example compels because, in the circumstances in which he lived--and Wilde is careful to analogise them with his own--he utilised human suffering as the most appropriate mode of self-fulfilment.

Wilde's intellectual acumen and energy are engaged in this essay with the search for a world from which pain has been banished, a utopia in which Christ's life and work will continue to inspire, but will be outmoded as specific example. "When the wrong, and the disease, and the injustice are removed, pain will have no further place," he writes towards the end of The Soul of Man. "It will have done its work. It was a great work, but it is almost over. Its sphere lessens every day" (Works, p. 1103).

In ensuing works the confident tones of this affirmation will be searchingly tested. In a series of studies Wilde will consider how successful or otherwise hedonistic practices are as a means of attaining self-perfection; his explorations will draw him continually back to the compelling example of Christ's imaginative commitment to others, whatever reversals or trials this might have involved for himself. In each of these works, Wilde will demonstrate that even the professed imitators of Jesus have difficulty realising the profound nature of his example. As Wilde the story-teller and dramatist focuses more precisely on the meaning and conditions of Christian imitation in the world as it is, so the utopianist's faith in the veracity of "joy," and the primacy of pleasure, fades away. As we shall see, these fictive studies also prepare the reader for the climactic revelation of the nature of suffering, and the meaning of Christ, from the transformed aesthetic viewpoint of de Profundis.

Notes

¹ The Soul of Man Under Socialism, in the Fortnightly Review, XLIX, ccxl (February 1891), pp. 292-319; rpr. as The Soul of Man (London: privately printed, 1895); and in Works, ed. Foreman, pp. 1079-1104. I shall use the abbreviation The Soul of Man throughout this study. All page numbers refer to Works, and are given in the text.

² Letters, p. 265. Mrs. Lathbury was the wife of Daniel Conner Lathbury, editor of the Guardian 1883-99. Hart-Davis dates the letter "Summer 1890."

³ Rodney Shewan is the only critic to my knowledge who has perused Wilde's Commonplace Book for the 1880s. My remarks about Wilde's view of W.K. Clifford are based on the quotations from the Commonplace Book that Shewan includes in Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 106-7.

⁴ These views of Clifford's are paraphrased by Wilde in the Commonplace Book. See Shewan, pp. 106-7.

⁵ A significant influence on Wilde's utopian vision is that of Ernest Renan, whose youthful work "L'Avenir de la Science," written in 1848, had recently been published (1890). In this youthful paeon to the scientific spirit--as is Wilde's own essay "The Rise of Historical Criticism" (1879),

which he also wrote as a young man in his mid-twenties--Renan appropriates Compté's three-phased view of history (the mythic or religious, the analytic, and finally the synthetic) in order to present this last period as one in which complete understanding will have been realised; imaginative insights will combine with historic knowledge, and the scientific temper with a religious sense of oneness with nature. Humanity, now beyond the reach of material want, will be guided to perfection by a race of philosopher-scholars, in whom all collected human knowledge will be incarnate. See H.W. Wardman, Ernest Renan: A Critical Biography (London: The Athlone Press), 1964, pp. 30-49.

Renan's programme, which combines classical ideals with the utopianism of a Compté or a St. Simon, clearly has its impact on the "New Hellenism" of The Soul of Man. When Wilde declares that "Science will bring about, with Socialism, the material upliftment of society," he is affected by the youthful Renan's religious faith in empirical enquiry in every sphere. Wilde's enthusiastic recourse to science, we must remember, includes the infant social sciences as well as the physical. He shares Renan's positivist optimism and his classical ideal of the harmonious human being, but his socialist political economy is closer to that of William Morris and the Fabians. On the roots of Wilde's socialist ideas, see R.D. Thomas,

"The Soul of Man Under Socialism: An Essay in Context," Rice University Studies, LI, i, (Winter, 1965).

⁶ Each of these writers is celebrated at the opening of The Soul of Man for having realised "the perfection that was in him, to his own incomparable gain, and to the incomparable gain of the whole world" (Works, 1079). At the end of "The Critic as Artist" the French philologist and the great theorist of Evolution are credited with having rendered the nineteenth century "a turning point in history" because of their respective discoveries about religion and nature (Intentions, p. 216). Keats, whose impact on Wilde is partly considered in the last chapter, was undoubtedly Wilde's favourite nineteenth-century poet. It is apparent that each of these men, in their particular sphere, "realised" themselves in the individualist terms that Wilde prized, and had suffered censure at certain times for their commitment to their work.

The imaginative impact of Darwin's discoveries on Wilde has yet, I think, to be adequately assessed. In evaluating J.S. Mill, Wilde once wrote that "a man who knew nothing of Plato and Darwin gives me very little" (Letter to W.L. Courtney, January 1889, Letters, p. 237), thereby presenting the axes of much of his thought: Plato for the applicability of his ideas to aesthetics, and the author of The

Origin of Species for the revelations about history, culture and development he gave to his era.

⁷ This belief is prevalent throughout Renan's writings. Renan's general philosophic outlook, combining an implacable belief in critical scrutiny, progress, and a dilettante's enjoyment of the uncertainty of final causes, is cogently outlined by Wardman, Renan, pp. 1-5. See also William G. Hutchinson, Introd., The Poetry of the Celtic Races and Other Studies, transl. Hutchinson (London: Walter Scott, 1896).

⁸ See Albert Schweitzer, The Search for the Historical Jesus, transl. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles, 1911), pp. 1-13, 293-328.

⁹ Renan, The Life of Jesus, transl. C.E. Wilbour (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1927). All references in this study are to this edition, which is designated La Vie.

¹⁰ As an undergraduate Wilde sent Gladstone a devotional sonnet, "On the Recent Massacre of the Christians in Bulgaria," in the hope that the great Liberal statesman would help him to find a publisher. The first indication of Wilde's enthusiasm for Renan--and for Mary Magdalene--appears in the writer's gloss of line 3-4, "And do we owe thy rising but to Her / Whose love of thee for all her sin atones?" Wilde writes: "The lines 3 and 4 are perhaps a little obscure, the allusion is of course to Mary Magdalene being the first

to see our Lord after his Resurrection, and bringing the news to the Disciples; Renan says somewhere that this was the divinest lie ever told" (Letter to W.E. Gladstone, 14 May, 1877, Letters, pp. 37-8). As Renan in chapter XXVI had asserted that the Magdalene's "lie" resulted in the myth of the Resurrection (La Vie, p. 230-1), this is rather a daring opinion for a young writer to offer to one of the most famous Christian fundamentalists in England, at a time when Renan was highly disapproved of by orthodox Christians on both sides of the Channel. For Contemporary English estimates of Renan, see William Barry, Ernest Renan (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895), and Hutchinson, Introd., The Poetry of the Celtic Races.

11 Wardman, Renan, pp. 70-2; and Hutchinson, Introd., The Poetry of the Celtic Races.

12 See Wardman, "The Vie de Jesus," in Renan, pp. 72-91.

13 The impression the Galilean countryside made on Renan is constantly evoked throughout La Vie. See for instance Renan's reminiscence in the introduction of his travels there, especially pp. 28-30.

14 Arnold, Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1873). All references in this study are to this edition.

15 Arnold evidently thought Renan rather too cavalier in his treatment of religion. In "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" Arnold assesses La Vie in terms of its contribution to criticism, and finds that Renan's "attempt is, for criticism, of the most real interest and importance, since, with all its difficulty, a fresh synthesis of the New Testament data." However, the Frenchman's attempted synthesis is "perhaps premature, perhaps impossible, certainly not successful," because of the changeability of his assumptions: "for criticism, M. Renan's first thought must still be the truer one, as his new casting so fails more fully to commend itself" ("The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold, ed. A. Dwight Culler, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963, p. 253). The charge of flightiness here represents Arnold's consistent attitude towards Renan, which turns philosophically, according to William Robbins, on Arnold's continual recourse in his religious writing to idealist fundamentals that were foreign to the French writer. Renan and Arnold, in their theology, represent two humanist responses to scepticism: the former relishes the new philosophic indeterminacy, while the latter regrets it. For a comprehensive study of the unresolved tension between experiential validity and a priori fundamentals in Arnold's religious essays, see William Robbins, The Ethical

Idealism of Matthew Arnold: A Study of the Nature and Sources of his Moral and Religious Ideas (London: Heinemann, 1959). Robbins discusses Arnold's relation to Renan on pp. 88-9, 131-3.

Wilde's critical and Christological writings indicate that, while he respected the rigour, perception, and anxious concern for community in Arnold's theoretical work, he responded more imaginatively to the combination of lyrical reverie and erudite positivism that characterised the theology of Renan.

16 "Hebraicism and Hellenism," Chapt. IV of his Culture and Anarchy, (London: Smith and Elder, 1869); rpr. in Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold, pp. 407-75.

17 See chapter II, "Religion Given," and chapter VII, "Testimony of Jesus to Himself," in Literature and Dogma, especially pp. 200-14.

18 Wilde's interpretation of Christ's sense of the "poor" reads rather like a counter to Renan, who argues in Chapt. XI of La Vie that Jesus literally preached "Ebonionism," that is, a doctrine of exclusive redemption of the poor (pp. 115-8).

19 "A Chinese Sage," in The Speaker, I, vi (February 8, 1890), pp. 144-6; rpr. in Reviews, ed. R. Ross (London: Methuen, 1908), pp. 528-38.

20 Both Roditi and Woodcock suggest that Chuang Tsu's mystical cult of inaction, and his suspicion of property and organised government, were telling

influences on Wilde: Isobel Murray, however, argues convincingly after a careful comparison of Chuang Tsu with Wilde's review and "The Critic as Artist" that Wilde, rather than borrowing ideas from the Taoist philosopher, recognises a similar cast of mind to his own. See Roditi, "The Ethics of the Dandy," in Oscar Wilde (New York: New Directions, 1947), pp. 182-5; Woodcock, "Paganism and Christianity," pp. 85-8; and I. Murray, "Oscar Wilde's Absorption of 'Influences': The Case History of Chuang Tzu," Durham University Journal, LXIV, I (December 1971), pp. 1-12.

21 R.D. Thomas parallels Wilde's socialist programme with that of Morris in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism: An Essay in Context," pp. 86-7.

22 See "Development of the Ideas of Jesus Respecting the Kingdom of God," Chapter VII of La Vie; especially pp. 89-92.

23 Arnold, "Shakespeare," in The Strayed Reveler, and Other Poems (1849); rpt. Poetry and Criticism, p. 26.

24 The adulterous heroine of this derivative and unwieldy blank-verse tragedy cries out in her death-throes, "Perchance my sin will be forgiven me. I have loved much" (Act V)--a direct echo of Jesus' reason for forgiving the woman taken in adultery. See The Duchess of Padua (1883; rpt. Works, 576-646.

25 See Thomas, p. 86.

26 see "First Sayings of Jesus," La Vie, p. 72.

4. Saints and Hedonists:

Modes of Christian Imitation in Three Works

To trace Wilde's continuing interest in the nature of Christ and his meaning for potential followers, it is necessary to turn from the brilliant commercial stage successes of the early 1890s to those works which, by all accounts, were the projects that mattered most to the author of Lady Windermere's Fan and A Woman of No Importance.¹ In Salome (1891), La Sainte Courtisane (1893), and the Poems in Prose (1894), the Irish writer recreates the confused metaphysical and ethical world of the Alexandrine or later Graeco-Roman period² as an apposite background for his own deepening absorption in the claims of Hellenic indulgence and Hebraic renunciation, of "joy" or "pain", as means to the end of a novel self-perfection. These issues, as I pointed out in the last chapter, had concerned the polemist in The Soul of Man. His observation to Mrs. Lathbury in the letter quoted in that chapter, that "the saint and the artistic hedonist meet--touch in many points,"³ becomes the thematic and structural crux of a series of precise yet suggestive imaginative studies, in which it is demonstrated how essentially similar Cyrenaicism and asceticism are as psychic states--and indeed, in the two dramas, and the prose-poem called "The Teacher of Wisdom," these modes are posed as

dialectical opposites, accidental adversaries whose dramatic configuration begs a greater psychic unity. Self-perfection is the ardent quest of the conflicting principal characters in each of these three works, and in the clash of each pair of "saint" and "hedonist"--Jokanaan the prophet and the Princess of Judaea in Salome, Honorius the cenobite and the Alexandrian courtisan Myrrhina of La Sainte Courtisane, and the unnamed "Young Hermit" and the "Young Robber" of the prose-poem--Wilde dramatises the claims of his Hebraic and Hellenic avatars with insight and skill.

As I shall argue, each confrontation is a phase in a progressive exploration of this theme, culminating at last in a conscious abandonment by the Young Hermit of his position because of larger moral interests--the larger moral interests personified, in each of these three studies, by the figure of Christ. Christ provides the moral reference-point for the action in these works, personifying as he does a bold new creative impetus in the relations of men and women, that overturns the prevailing notions of saintly or sensual self-absorption. The dramatic business of the protagonists in Salome, La Sainte Courtisane and the prose-poems is to find in their own lives a way of translating the complex ethical imperative of Jesus into action--of finding a new mode that subsumes former categories. For in these pieces

Wilde reconsiders the confident post-Darwinist assertions in The Soul of Man that the Christian concern with "pain" will in the future be outmoded, and explores the vitality of Christ's example in a divisive and hedonistic world analogous, he implies in each case, to his own.

I. Salome

Wilde's elaborate and original one-act tragedy, composed in French during October and November, 1891, and translated by the author into English in 1893,⁴ embodies his most powerful and extended fictive exploration of the true grounds of Christian imitation. Although the play has received a great deal of critical attention,⁵ commentators have generally failed to appraise the crucial thematic function of the figure of Jesus in positing a reconciliatory moral exemplar for the principal characters. In the terrible confrontation between the princess Salome and the prophet Jokanaan--between a hedonist pagan, and the great ascetic harbinger of Christ⁶--a series of references and allusions to Jesus' nature, gospel and ministry establish a moral framework that significantly qualifies the audience's responses; while the awful desires of the female voluptuary are curiously condoned, the severe chastity and detachment of the "Hebraic" anchorite are exposed as a severely limited mode

of Christian discipleship. As I shall demonstrate, the advent of Christ's selfless and creative love in the moribund classical world of the play obliges an audience to re-examine conventional moral reactions--a re-examination, as I shall suggest, that Wilde's immediate spectators were not prepared to make. In this section I intend tracing the pattern of Christian references, in order to argue the novel ethical ramifications of the play.

Thematically, the action of Salome most powerfully represents the author's observation to Mrs. Lathbury that "the Saint and the artistic Hedonist certainly meet--touch in many points." As my analysis will indicate, indulgence and renunciation are presented as polarised aspects of the human urge to "self-perfection" that Wilde outlines in The Soul of Man, and here the mediating rôle of the Tetrarch Herod, who by turns responds to each of the protagonists' postures, is crucial in establishing their mutual psychic validity.

If both "Saint" and "Hedonist" are equivalent, however, in terms of their inner conviction, the real failure in this dark allegory of psychological travail is that of Jokanaan the prophet. This self-proclaimed harbinger of a new Christian ethos demonstrates in his encounter with Herod's step-daughter that he fails to understand Christ's meaning; in the terms of The Soul of Man, he reveals unwittingly how difficult an individualised

"imitation" of Jesus can be. For all his appearance of self-sufficiency, and his righteous isolation from a depraved court in the name of the Messiah, Jokanaan adamantly refuses the kind of human contact in which he could embody that Messiah's love. Violently rejecting Salome, he drives her ardent desires for a kind of human interaction the Judaean court does not provide into a frankly erotic fixation--a fixation that intensifies as his withdrawal becomes more determined. I shall now consider the stages whereby Jokanaan's identification with Christ is ironically contrasted with his actions.

The prophet aligns himself with the Messiah from his first disembodied utterances of the play, that issue out of his cistern-prison beneath the stage; but the contrast he thereby invites between his witness, and the example of his master, is not to his credit. The crucially regenerative nature of Christ's advent is signalled in this first acclamation, which also highlights the confused religious and ethical milieu of Herod's pagan court. Into the opening discussion between several courtiers and soldiers about "the gods," the prophet's voice intrudes with a contrasting conviction. The desultory conversation of the soldiers and courtiers, who are gazing down from a terrace at Herod's feast for his Roman guests, characterises the confused ethical and religious values of the Tetrach's court.

While the Nubian gods are apparently "very harsh," and require the sacrifice of "fifty young men and a hundred maidens" twice a year (p. 553), and the Cappadocian deities are either dead or in hiding, we are told that the Jews noisily and pedantically dispute about their religion: "The Pharisees, for instance, say there are angels, and the Sadducees declare that angels do not exist" (p. 553). Juxtaposed with the scholasticism of a moribund Hebrew tradition⁷ is the frank epicureanism of the Tetrach, at whose feast "wine of three sorts" is apparently served, and whose wife, Herodias, "wears a black mitre sewn with pearls, and whose hair is powdered with blue dust" (p. 553).

Into this babel of opinions and postures the voice of Jokanaan suddenly intrudes with a powerful evocation of the advent of Christ. The scope of the prophet's acclamation is large, his imagery traditional but vivid,⁸ and his message that of regeneration:

After me shall come another mightier than I. I am not worthy so much as to unloose the latchet of his shoes. When he cometh, the solitary places shall be glad. They shall blossom like the lily. The eyes of the blind shall see the day, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened. The new-born child shall put his hand upon the dragon's lair, he shall lead the lions by their manes. (pp. 553-4)

The baffled and contemptuous reactions of his hearers, aptly summed up by the First Soldier who declares "It is impossible to understand what

he says" (p. 554), combined with the dramatic effect of his disembodied voice arising out of a cistern, emphasises the complete isolation in which the lone harbinger of the new order is placed. Moreover, the prophet's ringing words introduce the message of Jesus into the play; but if Christ is signified in terms of universal harmony and renewal, as one who will heal human divisions and instigate a new era founded on mutual trust and love, Jokanaan by contrast clings throughout the play to his own "solitary place" below the stage, condemns his fellows in suspiciously lurid language, and refuses contact with the one character who is not only as chaste and proud as himself, but who shares his contempt for the world around him.

Jokanaan's second utterance follows Salome's appearance on the terrace a few moments later, for which the audience has been prepared by the Syrian's ecstatic descriptions of the beautiful and virginal Princess. We have also been told by the onlookers more about the prophet, who came "from the desert," where a "great multitude used to follow him" (p. 554); and in this announcement of Christ's coming, the holy man anticipates in potent symbols Christ's overthrowing of the corrupt Graeco-Roman order: "The centaurs have hidden themselves in the rivers, and the sirens have left the rivers, and are lying beneath the leaves of the forest" (p. 555). Nevertheless, these pagan

creatures are not vanquished; one is reminded of Wilde's early poetic statement of the clash between Christianity and Hellenism in the sonnet "Santa Decca," where the poet wonders whether a pagan god, "chewing the bitter fruit of memory," might not still be hidden in the forest: "Nay, but see, / The leaves are stirring: let us watch awhile."⁹ In Jokanaan's case the reference to the sirens "lying beneath the leaves of the forest" suggests that there are sensual aspects of his own make-up that he has not sufficiently quelled; but at this stage in the play his words confirm that Jesus, whom he calls "the Lord" and "the Son of Man," represents a moral order at variance with the palpably selfish and sensual one of Herod's court.

Salome, the pagan step-daughter of Herod, shares the Christian ascetic's profound alienation from the world of Herod's court. When she first enters the terrace, her revulsion for that life is akin to Jokanaan's more specific denunciations, although hers is based on different premises:

SALOME. How sweet the air is here! I can breathe here! Within there are Jews from Jerusalem who are tearing each other in pieces over their foolish ceremonies, and barbarians who drink and drink, and spill their wine on the pavement, and Greeks from Smyrna with painted eyes and painted cheeks, and frizzed hair curled in twisted coils, and silent, subtle Egyptians, with long nails of jade and russet cloaks, and Romans brutal and coarse, with their uncouth jargon. Ah! how I loathe the Romans! They are rough and common, and they give themselves

the airs of noble Lords. (p. 555)

Salome, an untutored sensualist, is thoroughly alive to the mendacity and confusion of her society, not because it perverts religious values as it does for Jokanaan, but because of her vivid sensory apprehensions. Her contemptuous description of the various guests at Herod's banquet reflects the miasma of corrupt Hellenic and Hebraic elements at court: simpering Alexandrian Greeks, loutish "barbarians," emasculated Egyptians, and domineering Romans jostle with sophisticated and spiritually bankrupt Jews. Salome recognises the absurdity in all of them; thus she can sense that the Jews are ridiculously detached from actualities, while the various representatives of pagan culture are too far enmeshed in them.

It is appropriate, then, that the first utterance of the prophet that Salome hears should concern the imminent overthrowal of the pagan world. Having left the feast to escape her step-father's unwelcome attentions, the young princess recognises in the accents if not the sense of the prophet the same resolute integrity, born of contempt for the world, that characterises herself. This equivalency is symbolically suggested by Salome's identification of herself with the moon,¹⁰ in which she finds her own fierce chastity reflected. The terms of her comparison implicitly condemn the mores of her society; the moon is "cold and chaste,"

and "she has a virgin beauty," because, in the Princess' estimation, "She has never given herself to other men, like the other goddesses" (p. 555). Intrigued by what she hears from below, she orders Jokanaan's guards to bring him onto the terrace, and when she encounters him, she apprehends the same determined abstinence. "I am sure he is chaste like the moon is," she reflects aloud; "He is like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver" (p. 558). Being impervious to the substance of his threats and exhortations, because she is ignorant of the theological framework that supports them, Salome nevertheless recognises the integrity they share.

The initial contact between saint and hedonist suggests, then, the considerable grounds for contact between them; yet the tragedy of Salome is precipitated when her interest in her psychic counterpart is violently repulsed. In flat contrast to the regenerative love of Jesus that he claims to celebrate, the prophet of the Messiah cannot perceive the underlying grounds of Salome's attraction to him. As an imitator of Christ his failure is made plain in his fateful meeting with the princess, and this part of the play is worth analysing in detail.

When the prophet emerges from his cistern-dungeon in response to the princess' orders, he begins at once to denounce his captors in a

lurid and provocative manner. We notice that these ferocious denunciations of Herod and Herodias are delivered with scant regard for their presence or absence from the terrace; Jokanaan is clearly not concerned with personal encounters, but in public condemnation, and only specifically addresses Salome when it becomes unavoidable. In his dealings with the court, then, Jokanaan hardly recalls the compassionate spirit of Christ, whose advent would "gladden the solitary places" and who will thus dissipate hatred and violence.

Salome, of course, is incapable of responding to the content of Jokanaan's invective, but can appreciate the tone and music with the sensitivity of a true hedonist. The impact Jokanaan makes on her is powerful and unprecedented, and soon turns--as her vivid sensual imagery indicates--from initial shock at his accidental strangeness, to fascination at their essential similarity:

SALOME. But he is terrible, he is terrible!

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. Do not stay here, Princess, I beseech you.

SALOME. It is his eyes above all that are terrible. They are like black holes burned by torches in a Tyrian tapestry. They are like black caverns where dragons dwell. They are like the black caverns of Egypt in which the dragons make their lairs. They are like black lakes troubled by fantastic moons ... Do you think he will speak again?

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. Do not stay here Princess. I pray you do not stay here.
(p. 558)

Salome's images point to the troubled hidden depths of his personality, to the psychic "dragons" that may belie his outer aspect. As I have suggested, his chastity, being as fiercely inviolate as her own, gives Jokanaan a special allure in Salome's eyes. But as her fascination deepens, and he begins to realise that his interlocutor has a personal interest in him that has nothing to do with his prophetic rôle, he becomes afraid and rejects her. Unlike Christ in The Soul of Man, who advocated a new honesty and vitality in the relationships of men and women, Jokanaan's psychic stability is immediately threatened by the princess, who after all, had simply begun with the desire to "look closer" at him. His rejection is couched, revealingly enough, in strongly physical terms, and hints at the corresponding power she is having on him:

JOKANAAN. Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her looking at me. Wherefore does she look at me with her golden eyes, under her gilded eyelids? I know not who she is. I do not wish to know who she is. Bid her be gone. It is not to her that I would speak.

SALOME. I am Salome, daughter of Herodias, princess of Judea. (p. 558)

Jokanaan refuses all contact because he senses in his interlocutor's personal interest a radical challenge to his renunciation of the flesh; and the princess' proud assertion of her name, lineage and position affirms her own sense of worth and identity. Determined to repulse this challenge,

Jokanaan resorts to more specific condemnation, but his feverous abjurations--as her ironic inversion of his own imagery confirms--only heightens his attractiveness in her eyes:

JOKANAAN. Back! Daughter of Babylon!
Come not near the chosen of the Lord.
Thy mother hath filled the earth with
the wine of her iniquities and the cry
of her sins hath come up to the ears
of God.

SALOME. Speak again Jokanaan. Thy voice
is wine to me. (p. 558)

The only response, ironically enough, that Jokanaan can make to Salome is to direct her brusquely to the forgiveness of Christ himself. By directing her to the "Son of Man," Jokanaan admits his own inability to share anything with her himself: and the contrast with Jesus in Wilde's earlier essay, who forgave Mary Magdalene her sins "not because she repented, but because her love was so intense and wonderful," is telling, and clearly reveals the limitations of Jokanaan's mode of Christian discipleship. Salome's ignorant paganism infuriates him so much, however, that he abruptly abandons this posture:

SALOME. Speak again! Speak again, Jokanaan, and tell me what I must do.

JOKANAAN. Daughter of Sodom, come not near me! But cover thy face with a veil, and scatter ashes upon thy head, and get thee to the desert and seek out the Son of Man.

SALOME. Who is he, the Son of Man? Is he as beautiful as thou art, Jokanaan?

JOKANAAN. Get thee behind me! I hear in the palace the beating of the wings

of the angel of death. (p. 558)

To the compassionate disciple of Christ it should be apparent that Salome's physical interest and her inner needs are closely bound up with each other, and that more than simple lust is involved in her ardent response to the prophet. But Jokanaan is incapable of psychological insight, because he is unable to admit human feeling; and it is these stinging rejections that impel Salome towards a purely sensual apprehension of the prophet. Jokanaan only has recourse to Jesus in order to extricate himself from a situation that is already, at this early stage, too demanding for him. The allusion to Christ's temptation by Satan in the wilderness--"Get thee behind me!"--underlines the inadequacy of the prophet's discipleship: for thus far Salome has not specifically "tempted" him at all, and his condemnation--"cover thy face with a veil, and scatter ashes upon thine head"--indicts him far more than it does her.

Ignorant of the professed theological grounds of Jokanaan's chastity, receptive of the smothered cry for community she senses in him, she now reaches out to him in the only way she knows how--through her senses. The synaesthetic imagery in which she describes him is remarkable for its almost hypnotic devotion to detail, which becomes--as a number of commentators have well observed--almost an ecstatic paeon to the mode of physical

apprehension that she exemplifies.¹¹

The unexpected suicide of the Young Syrian--who had been hopelessly infatuated with the princess--does not deter Salome, but rather confirms how determined she is to focus her desires on the prophet. This incident rouses Jokanaan to direct her once again to Christ's forgiveness, and, in so doing, his own lack of charity is again highlighted. Salome's monotonous iterations are met, after the compassion of Jesus has again been ironically juxtaposed with Jokanaan's intransigence, with a final rejection:

SALOME. Let me kiss thy mouth.

JOKANAAN. Daughter of adultery, there is but one who can save thee, it is He of whom I spake. 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.

SALOME. Let me kiss thy mouth.

JOKANAAN. Cursed be thou! Daughter of an incestuous mother, be thou accursed!

SALOME. I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan.

JOKANAAN. I do not wish to look at thee. I will not look at thee, thou art accursed, Salome, thou art accursed.

He goes down into the cistern. (p. 560)

Jokanaan's manifest inability to offer Salome any kind of sympathetic emotion himself is strikingly at variance with the Galilean, who comes "to all who call on him"; by contrast the prophet chooses

the seclusion of his cell over the complications of human engagement, and the breakdown in communication is total. Salome's final resolution that "I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan" is a warning that she will be only temporarily distracted from her object. The unexpected entrance of Herod, Herodias "and all the COURT" (p. 561) provides a welcome dramatic relief from the accumulated intensity of the encounter between Saint and Hedonist; but the obsessive interest her step-father displays in her will presently provide Salome with the vehicle she needs.

The moral correction that Christ's ministry offers the world of the play is deepened and extended in the ensuing dialogue between Herod, who enters the terrace in search of his step-daughter, and his courtiers and guests. Amid the range of opinions expressed by pedantic and spiritually sterile Jews on the one hand, and crudely practical Romans on the other, both of whom confirm the decadence of Hebraic and Hellenic sensibilities, the miracles of Christ--variously reported and interpreted--suggest a powerful epoch in the life of this world that is beyond the comprehension of these speakers.

The guests are discussing the significance of the prophet's announcement from the cistern of "the Saviour of the world." Tigellinus, the representative worldly Roman, notes that "It is

a title that Caesar takes" (p. 561); the First Nazarene, however, informs the curious Herod about the Messianic tradition, and thereby provokes an argument amongst the Jews:

FIRST NAZARENE. It was not concerning Caesar that the prophet spake these words, sire.

HEROD. Not of Caesar?

FIRST NAZARENE. No, sire.

HEROD. Concerning whom, then, did he speak?

FIRST NAZARENE. Concerning Messias who has come.

A JEW. Messias hath not come.

FIRST NAZARENE. He hath come, and everywhere he worketh miracles.

HERODIAS. Ho! ho! Miracles! I do not believe in miracles. I have seen too many. (To the Page): My fan!

FIRST NAZARENE. This man worketh true miracles. Thus, at a marriage which took place in a little town of Galilee, a town of some importance, He changed water into wine. Certain persons who were there reported it to me. Also he healed two lepers that were seated before the Gate of Capernaum simply by touching them.

SECOND NAZARENE. Nay, it was blind men that he healed at Capernaum.

FIRST NAZARENE. Nay, they were lepers. But He hath healed blind people also, and He was seen on a mountain talking with angels.

A SADDUCEE. Angels do not exist.

A PHARISEE. Angels exist, but I do not believe that this Man hath talked with them.

FIRST NAZARENE. He was seen by a great multitude of people talking with angels.

A SADDUCEE. Not with angels.

HERODIAS. How these people weary me!
They are ridiculous! (p. 564)

The down-to-earth sentiments of Herodias confirm the spiritual bankruptcy of the Jewish commentators: their faith has dwindled into a series of doctrinal pendants ("Angels do not exist"; "Angels exist, but I do not believe that this man has talked with them") and an unimaginative dependence on empirical evidence ("Certain persons who were there reported it to me"). Their myopic quibbling confirms Christ's vital currency for this world; significantly, in this setting of partial vision and jaded sensibilities, it is only Herod, who in a sense epitomises this world, who is awed by these garbled reports of the Messiah. The revelation of Christ's power over death redoubles the force of his impact on the Tetrach:

HEROD. No matter! But let them find Him, and tell Him from me, I will not allow Him to raise the dead! To change water into wine, to heal the lepers and the blind ... He may do these things if He will. I say nothing against these things. In truth I hold it a good thing to heal a leper. But I allow no man to raise the dead. It would be terrible if the dead came back. (p. 565)

Herod's response to the revelation of Christ, by turns awed, intrigued and shocked, especially his fear that "the dead" may come back, with all the probable repercussions for a man who has been responsible for as many murders as he has, illuminates the psychic struggles that the

confrontation of Jokanaan and Salome will dramatically embody for him.

The tragic divorcement of all these characters, Romans and Jews, from a regenerative moral and spiritual order is sadly apparent in these discussions, a divorcement that will be vividly confirmed in the searing realisation Salome voices after her successful destruction of the prophet. The untutored and seemingly fiendish princess will display a far truer intimation of the transcendent love that Jesus personifies than his prophet ever managed.

The dramatic climax is set in motion when Herod gives way to the erotic impulses that Salome has aroused in him. Fired by the princess' obstinate refusal to acknowledge his presence, and unaware of her utter concentration of will and desire on the prophet he so admires, Herod beseeches her to dance for him. In return he offers her anything he possesses, "even unto the half of my kingdom" (p. 568); to satisfy his own urges he is ready to dismember the state itself, that external image of his own integrity.

Yet his recurring sensual absorption with the virginal princess is counterbalanced throughout this scene by his obvious awed respect for the prophet Jokanaan. Refusing to hand him over to the Jews, who are too hidebound by dogma to perceive the holy man's significance, Herod declares that

his prisoner is "a holy man," one "who has seen God" (p. 563). The ruler of Judaea is imaginatively caught between the physical charms of his daughter-in-law, and the spiritual rigour of the prophet. As long as Herod balances precariously between the contrary impulses they by turns inspire, he embodies a tentative reconciliation of their extreme postures in himself.

Once Salome has danced for the Tetrarch, he is obliged to grant her any request; and thus she demands, and receives, the "head of Jokanaan" on a shield (p. 573). This causes an overturning of the shaky equilibrium in the now horrified ruler's mind. After a vivid expression of triumph and self-assertion over the severed head--surely one of the most awful spectacles of English drama--the princess moves into an ecstatic affirmation of love that provides the key to her dreadful behaviour. As she articulates her experience her conclusions propel her from the specific circumstances, to a transcendent appeal that is almost mystical in its dimensions:

SALOME. ... Ah, Jokanaan, Jokanaan, thou wert the only man that I have loved. All other men are hateful to me. But thou, thou wert beautiful! Thy voice was a censer that scattered strange perfumes, and when I looked on thee I heard a strange music. Ah! Wherefore didst thou not look at me, Jokanaan? Behind thine hands and thy curses thou didst hide thy face. Thou didst put upon thine eyes the covering of him who would see his God. Well, thou hast seen thy God, Jokanaan, but me, me, thou didst never see. If thou hadst seen me thou

wouldst have loved me. I, I saw thee, Jokanaan, and I loved thee. Oh, how I loved thee! I loved thee yet, Jokanaan, I love thee only I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor fruits can appease my desire. What shall I do now, Jokanaan? Neither the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion. I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me. I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire Ah! ah! Wherefore didst thou not look at me, Jokanaan? If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me. Well I know that thou wouldst have loved me, and the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death. Love only should one consider. (p. 574)

This anguished outburst is, in effect, an eloquent appeal for love, from one who realises too late the profound impulses behind her desire for the prophet. His appeal lay, as her earlier responses implied, in his distinctive integrity from other men, who are "hateful" to her. Salome is now powerfully aware of the strong potential accord between them: "If thou hadst seen me thou wouldst have loved me. I, I saw thee, Jokanaan, and I loved thee." Her evocation of his mouth, "a censer that scattered strange perfumes," and of the "strange music" she had heard when faced with him, confirms the fundamental level of her responses to him, in spite of the overt message of condemnation and judgment he had delivered; in other words, the extent of Jokanaan's inner dissociation between his cerebral and emotional selves is signified. Salome knows the prophet better than he knew himself; and if we recall the essayist's assertion that

"the secret of Christ" is to be oneself (The Soul of Man), the extent of Jokanaan's failure as the witness of Jesus is apparent.

Instead of the full-blooded engagement of the Messiah with his fellows, to which both he himself and the Nazarenes at Herod's court have testified, Herod's prisoner "didst put upon thine eyes the covering of him who would see his God"; and that contemptuous possessive adjective emphasises the exclusive nature of this act of piety. Clearly, the greater revelation of universal love that will make the solitary places "blossom like the lily," and which depends on the selfless expression of that imaginative sympathy the reported miracles of Christ epitomise, is not available to the prophet: "Well, thou hast seen thy God, Jokanaan, but me, me, thou didst never see."

As long as the Baptist had been intent on keeping his knowledge of "his" God to himself, the real meaning of Christ had evaded him. Christian discipleship, as Wilde implies in the fairy tales and states in The Soul of Man, involves recognising the urgent imperative in another's situation. Salome's face, in fact, should have reflected Christ's, as the "Son of Man" reflects the plight of all others. Salome had recognised Jokanaan's need; but she herself had been condemned before any communication was possible between them.

The tragic consequences of this neglect are

movingly expressed by the princess in rich sensual images, that convey the desperate physical sense of need she experiences still:

I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor fruits can appease my desire. What shall I do now, Jokanaan? Neither the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion. (p. 574)

Submerged in this impassioned declaration is an ironic echo of Christ's continual comparison in the Gospels, particularly in St. John, between the sustenance of the world, and the enduring grace of God:

... whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

(St. John 4: 14, 6: 51)

Salome, alive to the mendacity and corruption of her world, ignorant of theology, or any moral dogma, but responsive through untutored experience only to the appetites and wiles of the flesh, had been awoken by the Baptist to the prospect of a richer mode of being that he, with cruel irony, cannot fulfill. In her unappeased rage and frustration she had used her sensuality as a tool to extract a terrible revenge from her would-be lover; the pathetic inadequacy of her action is apparent in

the implied contrast between the fulfilled Christian life, and her own gnawing hunger. In his resolute integrity Jokanaan had reflected her own condition, and inspired her with the glimpse of a new life they might shape together; it is in this sense that the princess declares that "I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire." Yet the avowed prophet of Jesus was temperamentally incapable of rising to the full challenge that Christian discipleship, the playwright concludes, actually entails.

The hopeless prospect of what might have been drives Salome to a feverish acclamation; suddenly the scope of her lament is broadened, to include an intuition of that transcendent love the prophet could only express in symbols, but not in actuality. The sheer force of her experience, like the stupendous heat required by precious stones for their gestation, evokes in her a revelation of the transfigurative power that Christ incarnates:

Ah! ah! Wherefore didst thou not look at me, Jokanaan? If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me. Well I know that thou wouldst have loved me, and the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death. Love only should one consider. (p. 574)

Here, in essence, stripped of the carnal context that engenders it, is the gospel of Christ: "the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death. Love only should one consider." This,

then, is the conclusive indictment of the declared prophet of Jesus, that in his violent and unequivocal rejection of the Princess of Judaea's appeal he spectacularly wasted an opportunity to exercise and explore the redemptive gospel of his master; to practice, in individual terms, the kind of selfless and creative love that Jesus personifies. On the contrary, having falsely accused a fiercely defensive virgin of actual promiscuity--"Thou didst treat me as a harlot, as a wanton, me, Salome, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judaea!"--he in fact impels her to exploit the only means of self-expression her world offers. The tragedy of Salome, in short, concerns the arousal and frustration of a dormant yearning for greater self-realisation, a yearning that, finally, is the desire to explore, exchange, and share love.

Certainly, the deed Salome accomplishes--the decapitation of the prophet--is a revolting one, and Herod's horrified response frames those of the audience: "She is monstrous, thy daughter, she is altogether monstrous. In truth, what she has done is a great crime. I am sure that it is a crime against an unknown god" (p. 574). Yet in this powerful soliloquy Wilde demands empathy for the murderess' plight, by highlighting the complex of motives that have driven her on. Her strange rapture, not unlike the ecstatic mood of Cleopatra, as she draws a curious sensual delight out of her

own dissolution in the last act of Shakespeare's tragedy, inhibits the alienation of the audience. Indeed, understanding Salome's tragedy involves a suspension of conventional moral responses that his contemporary audience appears to have been unwilling to make, if we are to judge by the banning of the play from the stage by the Lord Chamberlain--with wide public approval--in 1892.¹²

To sum up, Wilde in Salome gives imaginative credence to his assertion that ascetic and voluptuary modes of existence are inspired by the same laudable motives, and that piety without imagination or charity is as worthless and life-denying as rampant and unchecked sensuality. Indeed, compared with the cruel denunciations of Jokanaan, the "monstrous" action of the daughter of Herodias is a kind of creative assertion of identity in a corrupt and divided world that provides no scope for her unconscious aspirations for love, and the greater realisation of self this entails.

In this, the most extended, cohesive and powerful of his imaginative explorations of Christian imitation, Wilde demonstrates that the truly personalised doctrine of Jesus calls for a degree of openness, imagination and sympathy that the avowed disciple cannot attain. In this confrontation between opposing moral avatars, the common perception of the adversaries in the mind of Herod presents a tentative balance, or stasis, that is all too

swiftly overturned; only the play itself, as aesthetic structure, stands as an image for the complex unity both Salome and Jokanaan, in their contrary ways, are seeking. The pattern of references to the ministry and ethos of Christ, focussed at last in Salome's affirmation of the power of love, suggests a model of individual integrity that offers Wilde's sceptical world, no less than Herod's moribundly pagan one, a sorely needed renewal.

THE VOICE OF JOKANAAN. The Lord has come. The son of man hath come. The centaurs have hidden themselves in the rivers, and the sirens have left the rivers, and are lying beneath the leaves of the forest. (p. 555)

II. La Sainte Courtisane

La Sainte Courtisane, which was written in 1893, but survives as a near-complete fragment,¹³ represents a refinement and recasting of the encounter of saint and hedonist in Salome. Here the protagonists are maturer versions of their counterparts in the earlier play: Myrrhina is a beautiful and experienced courtesan of Alexandria, for whom the virginal Salome's ardent desires have become the basis for a way of life; Honorius, the overtly Christian disciple, practises his denial of the world and the flesh in the monastic seclusion of the Thebaid Valley, deliberately holding his peace and refusing, in the righteous manner of

Jokanaan, to exhort a sinful world to repentance.

Once again, the lessons of Salome are restated. In the same way that Herod's step-daughter evinces an understanding of love more vital than any emotion the prophet of Jesus can muster, so the true disciple in Courtisane--as the title suggests--is the worldly Myrrhina. In a fresh variation of a favourite Gospel story Wilde vindicates the Magdalene's example, and asserts, through the stylised exchange of values his characters practise, that physical indulgence is a sure road to redemption--surer, the denouement suggests, than renunciation.

The self-proclaimed imitator of Christ, on the other hand, abandons his witness in favour of the lures of the hedonistic world beyond his cavern, because fundamental questions about human interdependence had been begged by his ascetic lifestyle. Wilde had commented in The Soul of Man on the ideals of resistance and isolation that Christ's imitators have practised:

Man is naturally social. Even the Thebaid became peopled at last. And though the Cenobite realises his personality, it is often an impoverished personality that he so realises. (Works, p. 1102)

The genuine imitator of Jesus in this play cannot afford to ignore the larger human community, even though he has rejected its hedonistic mores; private spirituality can be as impoverishing for personality as worldly indulgence, unless it exists in some vital relation to others. The action of this brief

and mannered drama inscribes once again Christ's gospel of imaginative sympathy as a perplexing ideal for self-perfection, one that values the sinner, and condemns the falsely exclusive penitent.

In my analysis of the stylised verbal and semantic patterns of Courtisane, which, as John Reed points out, represents a striking fin de siècle variation on the imagistic resources of dramatic language, as well as a uniquely ironic version of the Magdalene-motif in Victorian literature,¹⁴ I shall try to establish the way in which the references to Christ control and direct an audience's moral assumptions and responses. For the vision of Christ once again transcends the limited grasp of his ascetic followers, as in Salome, and is seen to incorporate the most determined sinner. Here, as we shall see, the special rights of the hedonist self-perfectionist are more boldly stated than examined. In Courtisane we can sense Wilde moving closer to a radical restatement of societal transgressions. Courtisane, like all the works I am considering in this chapter, is one of the author's most significant imaginative counters to the ethical tendencies of conventional Victorian writing.

The opening dialogue between Myrrhina and the anonymous tillers of the lands near the Thebaid valley serves a similar dramatic function as the scene between Herod's soldiers and courtiers at

the beginning of Salome; the action of Courtisane is set against a similar background to that of the Biblical drama, namely the moribund later Hellenic world to which Christianity offers a new ethical and metaphysical imperative. The Alexandrian visitor, having first established that she has come in search of "the beautiful young hermit who will not look on the face of woman" (p. 701), initiates a discussion about "the gods" that the two labourers worship. The simple peasants reveal by their answers that in this world, although a perplexing host of deities apparently abound, each man keeps his god to himself: "We do not show our gods to anyone," they observe. "If we showed them to anyone they might leave us" (p. 702). Once again, as in Salome, the playwright evokes an age of theological confusion, and private visions, that is analogous to his own.

The opening scene between Myrrhina and the unnamed peasants who farm near the Thebaid also operates dramatically as a preface to the actual confrontation of saint and hedonist. While the dialogue exposes the overt conflict of values between the principal figures, it hints at the concealed ambiguities in their respective postures that the actual confrontation will force into the open. I shall briefly characterise the saint and the hedonist as they appear in this first discussion, referring both to their declared profiles, and to

the hidden contradictions in each case that bely their adopted modes, before moving into an analysis of the dramatic encounter in the second scene.

Myrrhina, who declares at once that she is in search of "the beautiful young hermit who will not look on the face of woman" (p. 701), splendidly epitomises in this first scene a mode of frank sensual engagement with a hedonistic world that, we shall later realise, is ultimately as life-denying as Honorius' asceticism. Although the two men respond to her initial approach with vivid images of fertility and mythic power--her tunic "is the colour of green corn," and she has "bird's wings upon her sandals"¹⁵--they observe that her garment "is like the young corn troubled by the shadows of hawks when she moves" (p. 701). Just as Salome's comparison of Jokanaan's eyes with "black lakes troubled by fantastic moons" hints at the psychic currents beneath his resolute façade, so the disturbing "shadows" here suggest an inner restlessness that has prompted Myrrhina's quest in the *Thebaid*.

Beside these credulous devotees to myriad supernatural powers, Myrrhina reveals the more sophisticated scepticism of an urbane hedonist. She has heard about the monotheism of the Jews, as outlined for her by "a sophist," and which clearly has some attraction for her; but she mentions too those--like herself, we infer--"who have no gods to worship," and who accordingly are popularly

received with scorn (p. 702). (In Salome the Roman visitor Tigillenus tells Herod that, indeed, the "Stoics" at whom people laugh "kill themselves ... they are ridiculous people."¹⁶) Myrrhina's rather morbidly reflective mien belies her glitteringly sensual appearance, and already prepares us for her volte-face at the end of the play.

In particular, her response to the issue of mortality is revealing: while those that are dead are "terrible," she admits that "Death is the only god I am afraid of" (p. 702). Here Myrrhina recalls Herod, who murmurs upon hearing of Christ's power over death that "it would be terrible if the dead came back;" both the Tetrarch and the Alexandrian voluptuary unconsciously suggest here that they are unwillingly haunted--like Dorian Gray in Wilde's novel--by the ghosts of previous misdemeanours. While her attraction to Honorius seems avowedly sexual, it is actually Myrrhina's intimations of her own mortality that have drawn her to the hermit's proud rejection of the world. Her anxious questions indicate that if the hermit can resist her physical beauty, her own life of amoral indulgence will be profoundly challenged.

Honorius, the cenobite whose renunciation of "the face of woman" has drawn the spiritually insecure courtisan, is clearly associated in these opening exchanges with Christ's regenerative mission. Like the pagan creatures who flee at the coming

of the Messiah in Jokanaan's acclamation, the two labourers declare that a "centaur" gave up his cave to Honorius; in an alternative version of the story, they add, the holy man found a "unicorn" in the cavern, which "knelt down and worshipped him" (p. 702)--an appropriate response, as this fabled beast traditionally symbolises Christian chastity.

Yet the answers the simple tillers give to their gorgeous Alexandrian interlocutor indicate some ambivalence in the ascetic's position. Not only are both observers entirely ignorant of his calling--"One of the gods whom he has offended has made him mad," the Second Man suggests; "We think he has offended the moon" (p. 702)--but they themselves superstitiously maintain him in his pious isolation. The disjunction between the humble but necessary toil of these workers, and the parasitic disdain of the hermit, is not to his credit:

MYRRHINA. What does he do, the beautiful young hermit? Does he sow or reap? Does he plant a garden or catch fish in a net? Does he weave linen on a loom? Does he set his hand to the wooden plough and walk behind the oxen?

SECOND MAN. He being a very holy man does nothing. We are common men and of no account. We toil all day long in the sun. Sometimes the ground is very hard.

MYRRHINA. Do the birds of the air feed him? Do the jackals share their booty with him?

FIRST MAN. Every evening we bring him food. We do not think that the birds of the air feed him.

MYRRHINA. Why do ye feed him? What profit have ye in so doing?

SECOND MAN. He is a very holy man.
(p. 703)

Pious withdrawal, in the ingenuous explanations of these men, almost becomes a synonym for idle scrounging. The ironic parallel with a truly self-sufficient ascetic like St. Francis of Assisi, whom Wilde would characterise in de Profundis as the only true Christian since Christ,¹⁷ and who indeed fruitfully coexisted with "the birds of the air," underlines the point: the superstition of these rural labourers works to the hermit's material advantage.

Honorius' studied indifference, indeed, not only to his benefactors, but to the plight of others in general, is illustrated in the story the two men relate about three lepers, who "once called to him" for help, but in vain (p. 703). It is clear from the labourers' remarks that Honorius actively resists acknowledging his ties with others, and this raises hard questions about the validity of his mode of Christian discipleship. In De Profundis, Wilde would be able to state unequivocally the Christian lesson implicit in his fairy-tales and poetic dramas, that--in spite of differences of perception--"Whatever happens to another happens to oneself" (p. 477). In Courtisane Myrrhina's intrusion into the Cenobite's life demonstrates that any mode of withdrawal that ignores the human

community is, in fact, a false Christian discipleship.

As with Salome, the confrontation ensues when the ascetic is summoned from his cavern by the hedonist. Myrrhina embarks at once on a calculatedly seductive evocation of her life in Alexandria, a life given over to sexual indulgence without regard for consequences, amid surroundings of casual but ostentatious luxury:

My chamber is ceiled with cedar and odorous with myrrh. The pillars of my bed are of cedar and the hangings are of purple. My bed is strewn with purple and the steps are of silver. The hangings are sewn with silver pomegranates and the steps that are of silver are strewn with saffron and with myrrh ... (p. 704)

Here the impress of overwhelming physical opulence, built up through the ponderous repetition of colours and materials in a rigorously leashed syntax, is akin to the Princess Salome's ecstatic celebration of Jokanaan's body, in which physical details become the elements of a powerful litany. Similarly, Myrrhina's speech becomes a haunting panegyric to a Cyrenaic lifestyle, one in which the courtesan--whose name, of course, is derived from the heady perfume that powerfully contributes to the synaesthetic impact of this passage--moves with ease and assurance. In a sybaritic world, it seems, she is absolute monarch of all she surveys: "From the uttermost parts of the earth my lovers come to me," she declares; "the kings of the earth come to me and bring me presents" (p. 706). Indeed,

such is her power that she can even affect remarkable saturnalian inversions: "I made the Prince my slave, and his slave who was a Tyrian I made my Lord for the space of a moon" (p. 706). She becomes, in effect, the narrator of a journey through a world in which she herself is heroine, exemplar and guide, a kind of Beatrice, Dante and Virgil rolled into one. Myrrhina creates, in short, an elaborate mosaic, in which each episode of her hedonist's odyssey is a descriptive vignette studded with brilliant sensory detail. These combine to form a quintessential image of indulgence that almost reads as an expression of those universal fantasies which lurk, according to Lord Henry Wotton's pre-Freudian psychology, in every receptive mind.

The climax of the courtesan's seductive discourse takes the form of a direct appeal to the hermit, whose paltry physical condition Myrrhina describes by way of contrast with her own voluptuous lifestyle. This compels him into a spirited defence of Christian renunciation, in which he tries to explain the motives for his isolation in the Thebaid; but this reduction of inward faith to outward expression costs him his faith. Like the superstitious but canny workers, he discovers that "If we showed [our gods] to anyone they might leave us" (p. 702).

The key word of his hasty exposition is love--the love of God, personified in Jesus, that has

prompted his retreat into the Thebaid. He seizes, appropriately enough, on the word as Myrrhina uses it, in order to give it a meaning that conflicts with her sensual interpretation:

MYRRHINA. ... I will clothe you in hyacinth and put honey in your mouth. Love--

HONORIUS. There is no love but the love of God.

MYRRHINA. Who is he whose love is greater than that of mortal men? (pp. 704-5)

Myrrhina reveals a surprising readiness to hear the hermit's dissertation before he delivers it; yet that dissertation is disappointing. He recounts, in unevocative accents and stilted syntax, the legends attached to Christ's birth, and the prophetic tradition which he vindicates; and concludes his review of Jesus' messianic rôle by rather flatly repeating his first assertion: "There is no love like the love of God nor any love that can be compared to it" (p. 705).

Only when he focuses on the physical, does conviction enter the hermit's assertions. He declares that "The body is vile," and that "God will raise thee up with a new body which will not know corruption, and thou will dwell in the city of the Lord and see Him whose hair is like fine wool and whose feet are of brass" (p. 705). The negation of the flesh, he argues in rather Pauline terms, is crucial to a meaningful spiritual regeneration, and he uses Myrrhina's faltering attempt at reapplying sensual categories to clinch his argument.

With unconscious accuracy, he cites the thief who died with Jesus at Calvary:

MYRRHINA. The beauty ...

HONORIUS. The beauty of the soul increases till it can see God. Therefore, Myrrhina, repent of thy sins. The robber who was crucified beside Him he brought into Paradise. (Exit

MYRRHINA. How strangely he spoke to me. And with what scorn did he regard me. I wonder why he spake to me so strangely? (p. 705)

Myrrhina is, of course, akin to the robber Christ forgave on the cross. The disciple of Christ has indicated the extent of the Saviour's redemptive vision, and suggested to his visitor how her previous mode of life may initiate her into a relationship with Jesus; but his own ironic distance from true perfection, hinted at by his abrupt exit after these utterances, is about to be dramatically posed against that of the hedonist. The "strangeness" with which Honorius has spoken to her points to the struggle she has precipitated in the holy man, which shortly afterwards will propel him in the direction of Alexandria.

With neat dramatic logic, an exact exchange of values now takes place, with the rôles of saint and sinner being reversed. Reappearing from his cave, Honorius declares that "the scales have fallen from my eyes, and I see now clearly what I did not see before" (p. 705); the combined impact of the beautiful courtesan's appearance, and her panegyric, have annihilated his faith. John Reed

has succinctly described the psychological truth of this reversal: "Honorius, in his coldly frightened virtue, once having glanced up from his straight road, is irrevocably influenced and lost."¹⁸

Indeed, the cenobite has done more than merely notice a female avatar of the lifestyle he has so far denied; expression has reduced his deeply felt truth to a few tame phrases. As Dorian Gray had discovered, "it is expression that gives life to things,"¹⁹ and similarly Honorius' failure to articulate his faith more vividly has proved critical. Whereas Myrrhina had given expression to a vision, however ultimately inadequate, that clearly arose out of deeply-felt experience, Honorius' tame repetition of platitudes implies an imaginative failure to realise his faith in his own terms. Accordingly there is some bitterness in his final rejoinder, before retracing Myrrhina's footsteps to the fleshpots of Alexandria: "Why didst thou come to this valley in thy beauty? Why didst thou tempt me with words?" (p. 705).

The voluptuary's change of heart is more conscious and explicit. Myrrhina declares that "I have repented of my sins and I am seeking a cavern in this desert where I too may dwell so that my soul may become worthy to see God" (p. 705), and her anguished appeals to the ascetic not to leave the Thebaid seem to confirm her sincerity. The problem of mortality first revealed in discussion

with the two labourers has been solved: by withdrawing from the world she will be able to contemplate "the wonder of [Christ's] birth and the great wonder of [his] death also," and in answer to Honorius' reproaches she admits her unconscious motives in coming to the Thebaid valley:

HONORIOUS. Why didst thou tempt me with words?

MYRRHINA. That thou shouldest see Sin in its painted mask and look on Death in its Robe of Shame. (p. 705)

To the wiser sensualist sin and death are now synonymous, and the dazzling richness of appearances merely hides this reality. Beneath her overtly sensual fascination for a man who, by virtue of his inaccessibility, had been a temptation, was an unspoken need to confront these larger issues that her hedonist lifestyle failed to resolve.

The resolution of Courtisane, then, affirms that the hedonist is the genuine penitent, that although she has chosen "a dangerously rich road to virtue," in John Reed's words,²⁰ she can grasp--like Mary Magdalene, and like the thief at Calvary--the true extent of Christ's love. Moreover, she exemplifies Lord Henry Wotton's pre-Freudian relation of "sin" and self-development:

We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. [*italics mine*]²¹

In Courtisane "sinful", that is to say sensual behaviour, becomes indeed a mode of purification, a means whereby the individual can exorcise his demons and approach a more profound self-realisation than that available to the defensively tight-lipped ascetic, whose isolation is grounded in fear of the world, rather than experience of it. Not only then do the saint and hedonist "meet--touch in many points," but indeed they implicitly converge in the figure of "la sainte courtisane", a finer moral type than the mere ascetic. In effect, the action of the play exemplifies a passage from The Soul of Man:

Personality is a very mysterious thing. A man cannot always be estimated by what he does. He may keep the law, and yet be worthless. He may break the law, and yet be fine. He may be bad, without doing anything bad. He may commit a sin against society, and yet realise through that sin his true perfection. (Works, p. 1086)

In his second imaginative essay about indulgence and renunciation, sainthood and hedonism, the author demonstrates that both modes are contrasting approaches to Jesus, and confirms the intimations a distraught, untutored Salome had evinced of a greater mode of love. For Myrrhina, more fortunate than Salome in her actual experience of the world, those intimations of Christ's love will become a reality.

III. The Poems in Prose

In the six short pieces published collectively as the Poems in Prose (July, 1894)²², Wilde brings to his continuing interest in Christian imitation the dynamics of an untried literary mode. In the hands of Baudelaire, the definitive master of the prose-poem in France, and Wilde's immediate influence²³, this short prose form resembles by turns the epigram, the meditation and the allegory, being always distinguished however by unity of mood and an intense "poetic" concentration of language. Because of the variety of its possible manifestations, and the lack of precedents in English, it becomes for Wilde a peculiarly malleable vehicle for his unorthodox ethical concerns, as it allows him to combine the evocative resources of poetry with a narrative reduced to its essentials. In the Poems in Prose Wilde synthesises the pithy epigrammatic fables he told friends and acquaintances²⁴ with the rich suggestiveness of those imagistic occasional poems he had published during the 1880s;²⁵ in effect, to the provocative content of these oral tales he adds the synasthaesic detail that in Salome and La Sainte Courtisane betoken the elaborate surfaces of a corrupt hedonist world.

Several of Wilde's critics, following W.B. Yeats' opinion that Wilde embroidered his oral stories with superfluous description, thereby marring

the impact of the originals--"he caught up phrases and adjectives for their own sake, and not because they were a natural part of his design"²⁶--have failed to appreciate the thematic significance of these elaborations. Like Myrrhina's detailed depiction of her life in Alexandria, or the catalogue of riches whereby Herod tries to sway Salome from her resolution, the reference to "the house that was of marble" and "the hall of chalcedony and the hall of jasper" in the prose-poem called "The Doer of Good", for instance, evokes the Cyrenaic world in which the Christ-figure of the parable has to operate, and thereby suggests, as we shall see, why his lone acts of altruism are so ineffectual. Similarly, the lengthy and detailed indictment of the Man in "The House of Judgement", which was also added in the written version,²⁷ gives crucial depth to the existential plight in which this character finds himself, and upon which the denouement turns.

If as a consequence of these additions the narrative pace is slowed, and the action seems clogged by stifling detail, then the author has succeeded; for in The Poems in Prose Wilde is not telling stories, but emblemising a moral and psychological condition. Ennui and myopia are the dominant features of a hedonistic Graeco-Roman world that, Wilde again implies, parallels his own, a world in which the specific practice of love

that Christ exemplifies is ultimately found to be the surest path to self-realisation. This is the fundamental message of "The Teacher of Wisdom," the last and longest of the six pieces in the collection. This prose-poem represents a kind of thematic culmination of the others, as well as echoing in style and format the two plays I have been discussing. The real problems of hedonistic practice are explored in the preceding pieces, and these I shall consider first.

i

From a stylistic point of view these brief works most strikingly recall the idiom, rhythms and syntax of the King James Bible, embellished with the ornate, physical descriptions that signify the corrupt late Alexandrian world of the poetic drama. The Biblical echoes are apposite, because structurally several pieces resemble the Gospel parables of Christ, or rather, a parody of those parables. Thematically, several of the items--"The Doer of Good", "The House of Judgment", and "The Master"--overturn conventional Gospel situations and responses. Before considering these specific studies of Christian imitation, I shall briefly examine "The Artist," the prose-poem that establishes the hedonistic ethos of the others, and the companion pieces called "The Disciple" and "The Master", both of which turn on the unworthily selfish motives that discipleship as a psychological condition

may conceal.

"The Artist," which of all the prose-poems is most epigrammatic in form, concerns a sculptor who melts down his own image of "The Sorrow that endureth Forever," composed in memory of his dead beloved, in order to fashion a new image of "The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment" (p. 252). This artist symbolically rejects the "worship of pain" Wilde had accredited to Christ in The Spoul of Man, and which the first statue had represented: it had been "a sign of the love of man that dieth not," and a symbol of "the sorrow of man that endureth for ever" (p. 252). By recasting his original monument, then, the sculptor asserts the imaginative transcendence of art over life, with its universal condition of suffering, and implies that the pursuit of "joy as it flies," to use Blake's words, is a laudable goal. This first prose-poem, in short, is a pithy affirmation of the Hellenistic or post-Paterian ideal of self-concentration, in direct defiance of Hebraic realities, with art enlisted as the champion of that ideal.

If "The Artist" establishes the hedonistic world of the prose-poems, and provides a raison d'etre for several of its habitues, the second piece confirms how difficult it is for an individual to prevail against a world built on such selfish gratifications. Jesus himself is the unnamed "Doer of Good" of the title, and in this series of revamped

Gospel incidents Wilde asserts once again the futility of individual acts of charity, no matter how well-intentioned they might be. This prose-poem is his definitive fictional embodiment of the dictum in The Soul of Man that "Charity creates a multitude of sins" (Works, p. 1079). The Messiah in this mock-parable reappears to several recipients of his healing powers, and in each case the former leper, blindman and harlot have turned or reverted to the sensual pleasures of a sybaritic world. Jesus' last encounter encapsulates the argument: charitable interference in the lives of others, no matter how well-intentioned, may have grave consequences:

And when He had passed out of the city
He saw seated by the roadside a young
man who was weeping.

And He went towards him and touched the
long locks of his hair and said to him,
"Why are you weeping?"

And the young man looked up and recognised
Him and made answer, "But I was dead
once and you raised me from the dead.
What else should I do but weep?" (p. 254)

Here Wilde rephrases the argument against charity in The Happy Prince; an altruistic practice may enrich its practitioners, but have ruinous effects on its recipients. This parable illustrates Gilbert's remark in "The Critic as Artist," that "it is well for his peace that the saint goes to his martyrdom. He is spared the sight of the horror of his harvest" (Intentions, p. 131). No facile assumptions about intentions and consequences in

the sphere of human relations can be made by anyone.

It is apparent, moreover, that Christ fails in this parable because--as the gorgeous settings of the action signify--the prevailing aspect of the world is a hedonist one. Individual acts of charity are futile, even counter-productive, in a world which prizes sensual abandon and indulgence. The merely glancing impact of Christ himself is confirmed by all his erstwhile converts, but most tellingly by the rueful admissions of the Lazarus-figure, to whom life in this world is a hollow gift. For the would-be imitator of Jesus, the author suggests, there are no pat formulae for dealing with others; implicitly, the need for specific and imaginative responses is restated.

The inherent problems of Christian imitation in an unsympathetic world are even more strongly highlighted in "The Disciple" and "The Master," in which--as the titles suggest--there is a thematic parallel, although the settings are distinctly different. Both prose-poems concern the selfish motives that often lie behind discipleship: in "The Disciple," the pool into which Narcissus gazed is represented as being inconsolable at his death, not because of the wonder of the gazer, but "because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw even my own beauty mirrored" (p. 255). It is often oneself, the parable implies, that one is really admiring in the act

of worship; once again Wilde is indicating the hazards for community in a world of fracturing perspectives, in which even the altruist may be tainted by its selfish values. The consequences of hedonism are nowhere more powerfully emblemised in Wilde's work than in this intriguing primer to Freud's more deliberate studies of Narcissism as a verifiable mental condition.

The myopia that self-absorption encourages is also the theme of "The Master", which, like "The Doer of Good," directly reworks the Gospel history of Christ's life. The action of this prose-poem takes place immediately after Jesus' crucifixion, "when the darkness came over the earth" (p. 256), and recalls Wilde's characterisation of unimaginative discipleship in The Soul of Man. In that essay the writer refers to "one who is mad and carries a wooden cross on his shoulders" through the streets of modern-day Jerusalem; "he is a symbol," Wilde adds, "for the lives that are marred by imitation" (Works, p. 1086).

"The Master" concerns just such an act of unimaginative mimicry. In this brief tale, Joseph of Arimathea passes a beautiful young man in the Valley of Desolation, who is apparently mourning Christ's death on the cross. In answer to his tender solicitations, however, Joseph receives an unexpected protestation:

"It is not for Him that I am weeping,
but for myself. I too have changed water

into wine, and I have healed the leper and given sight to the blind. I have walked upon the water, and from the dwellers in the tombs I have cast out devils. I have fed the hungry in the desert where there was no food, and I have raised the dead from their narrow houses, and at my bidding, and before a great multitude of people, a barren fig-tree withered away. All things that this man has done I have done also. And yet they have not crucified me." (p. 256)

This slavish imitator of Jesus simply reveals by this exhaustive and unoriginal catalogue that he has completely misunderstood the purpose of the Master's charitable deeds; what he mistook for crowd-pleasing antics aimed at impressing a "great multitude of people," were in Jesus' career specific responses to human needs. Even martyrdom, especially in an age of uncertain values, can become attractive as a means of achieving an instant of universal recognition; and Eduard Roditi points out that, in the confused and decaying Alexandrine world of the first centuries AD, there were numerous would-be messiahs seeking congregations throughout the Mediteranean area.²⁸ The fault of this would-be Christ-figure is to confound altruistic practice with selfish desire, and this confusion of ascetic gesture and self-regard is implied in the juxtaposition of his beautiful appearance with the self-conscious "ashes" and "wounds" he has inflicted on himself (p. 256).

The parable inscribes, in short, a misunderstanding of the genuine requirements of Christian imitation. Real discipleship involves

imagination, selflessness and courage; false discipleship--which, Wilde implies, too often assumes the name of real discipleship--is characterised by self-gratification, like that of the pool in the preceding prose-poem. Martyrdom, when the result of a genuine identification with others, had been celebrated by Wilde in The Happy Prince; but in this prose-poem the reader discovers that there are often more ignobly self-reflexive impulses behind it.

The case for creative and selfless discipleship will be powerfully exemplified in "The Teacher of Wisdom"; but we must first consider the conclusive indictment of hedonism, of the search for pleasure for its own sake, contained in the penultimate work of the collection. "The House of Judgement" powerfully portrays the hidden psychic consequences of a hedonism so extreme that all moral considerations have been obliterated, exactly as they were for Myrrhina in Courtisane. The personal history of the representative "Man" in this prose-poem reads as an ultimate expression of the "New Hedonism" of Lord Henry Wotton in Dorian Gray, for the subject here has devoted himself to a quintessence of selfishness breath-taking in its extent and intensity.

His biography is presented as damning evidence at his trial by God, a device which enables Wilde to spell out the extent of the Man's activities

before the surprising denouement; contrary to the view of those commentators mentioned earlier, the author's addition of God's detailed indictment in this version is vital to the sense of the parable.

The curious anomie the Man expresses becomes more striking by contrast with the varied and detailed catalogue of his sins, and emphasises how utterly dissatisfying such a mode of life must ultimately be. In answer to God's charge that "Even into Hell will I send thee," the Man reveals the joylessness that actually follows a life devoted to pleasure; for he declares that he cannot be sent to perdition "Because in Hell have I always lived" (p. 258).

The full horror of what we would now call his existential dilemma is sharply delineated in this conclusion; an all-consuming concentration on self, to the total exclusion of "the cry of My afflicted," in the words of God's indictment (p. 258), has not only destroyed all psychic equilibrium ("in Hell have I always lived") but has also starved out all traces of idealism, and with it even the conception of a better mode of life: "never, and in no place, have I been able to imagine [Heaven]" (p. 258).

If we recall the essayist's ideal in The Soul of Man that in the future "joy" will become the keynote of the social order--"Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval" (Works, p. 1101)--"The

House of Judgement" confirms that hedonism in the world as we know it, with its complex ethical choices, distinctions and demands, is unworkable as a philosophy. The careless gratifications of those erstwhile Christian converts in "The Doer of Good" become in this prose-poem the hopeless nullity of the irretrievable sybarite, who at the end of such a life cannot even conceive of an idea such as "joy."

When Wilde came to write of Jesus in de Profundis he would speak of the Nazarean's sympathy including "the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich" (Letters, p. 476). "The House of Judgement" exemplifies their condition. What the "Man" in this prose-poem clearly lacks is the loving example of Christ, who in The Soul of Man gladly forgave the sinner Mary Magdalene, because of the sincerity of her passion. In de Profundis Wilde would state explicitly that Jesus, that exemplar of beautiful self-perfection, understands the worthy impulse that the voluptuary conceals behind her lifestyle; as I indicated in my discussion of The Soul of Man, before composing the Poems in Prose he had begun to formulate a doctrine of redemption through sin. In his apologia he would declare that Christ, indeed, had a special affinity for the forlorn avatars of perfection through pleasure: "he has far more pity for the rich, for the hard Hedonists,

for those who wear soft raiment and live in King's houses." He added: "Riches and Pleasure seemed to him to be really greater tragedies than Poverty and Sorrow" (Letters, p. 480).

The subject of "The House of Judgement" is indeed the hardest of the Hedonists. Wilde implies that such a personality is ripe for the loving example of Christ; perhaps, like his female equivalent Myrrhina, he may yet be led to another ideal beside the inflexible choices offered by God in this prose-poem.

ii

The exploration of Christian discipleship culminates with "The Teacher of Wisdom," which not only clarifies the thematic business of the preceding pieces, but relates directly to the poetic dramas. In this work, which is the longest of the Poems in Prose and the one that most resembles an allegory rather than a parable, the saint-hedonist configuration of Salome and Courtisane reappears, and the clash of conflicting ethical modes--clarified here by the studies in the preceding prose-poems of Christian discipleship in practice, and Cyrenaicism as a psychic state--is enacted with renewed vigour. Here the protagonists are a Christ-like Hermit, spiritual kin of Jokanaan and Honorius, who contends against the intrusions of a dedicated hedonist, in this instance a young Robber "of evil and beautiful face" (p. 261).

In this final version of a now familiar paradigm, Wilde's dramatic focus shifts to the anchorite, who is able at last to achieve that which eluded the overt disciples of Jesus in the plays: a new integrity of being, inspired by Christ, that involves relinquishing former practices and habits of thought. The structural organisation of events in Salome symbolises a greater psychic wholeness than either protagonist attains; in Courtisane, Myrrhina's progress from dedicated sybarite to sincere penitent indicates how indulgence might presage a new realisation of self. The progress of the young Hermit in "The Teacher of Wisdom," demonstrates how his predecessors failed to exemplify the meaning of Christ; in his turn, he discovers how even the pious must change in order to understand that meaning.

It is peculiarly fitting, then, that the "Teacher of Wisdom" of the title is the most obviously Christ-like of the three figures I have mentioned, although Jesus is never mentioned by name in the story. The young hero of this prose-poem is "as one filled with the perfect knowledge of God" from his childhood, who like the twelve-year old Jesus in Jerusalem impresses his spiritual elders "by the grave wisdom of his answers" (p. 258). Like the Messiah, he leaves his family in adulthood "and went out into the world that he might speak to the world about God", and gathers a select group

of disciples around him--eleven in number!--as well as drawing "a great multitude also of people [who] followed him from each city" (p. 259). Into the same decaying Graeco-Roman world of the poetic dramas he introduces a new order:

for there were at that time many in the world who either knew not God at all, or had an incomplete knowledge of Him, or worshipped the false gods who dwell in groves and have no care of their worshippers. (p. 258)

Unlike Christ, however, the young preacher finds that exhorting the world to share his "knowledge" of God is strangely debilitating: "Why is it that I am full of sorrow and fear, and that each of my disciples is as an enemy that walks in the noonday?" (p. 259). In a tense debate with his Soul that resembles the agonised dialogues of "The Fisherman and His Soul", he realises the lesson Honorius had similarly learnt to his cost: articulation of faith into the terms of others destroys it. He discovers that the kind of unimaginative discipleship that does not lead to individual integrity is a drain on his spiritual resources; in this sense his followers have become his foes, because they are now completely dependent on him for guidance and leadership.

The sheeplike behaviour of the "multitude" of his followers illustrates how little they have learnt about selfhood from him. "Wilt thou send us away hungry?" they wail, tellingly confusing spiritual and physical needs, once he has announced his intention of leaving them to their own devices.

When at last they turn away unwillingly to go, their erstwhile reliance on him is underlined by the terse narration: "And his disciples went away sadly, and the multitude of people returned to their own homes. And many died on the way" (p. 260).

Thus far the mode of withdrawal and renunciation exemplified by the cenobite in Courtisane seems to be espoused; but it is important to note that spiritual richness, as this metaphor suggests, is confused with material wealth not only by his disciples, but by the Teacher himself.

Later on the Hermit, as he now becomes, will tell the young Robber who accosts him that his knowledge of God "is more precious than all the purple and pearls of the world" (p. 260), but the truth is that the act of hoarding reduces his knowledge to little more than a material superfluity. The robber will unconsciously recognise this, by demanding this knowledge from him as if it were readily exchangeable, like some commodity: "Give me, forthwith, this knowledge of God that you possess, or I will surely slay you" (p. 260). The Hermit, in effect, is guilty of an act of spiritual egotism as blinding as that of Jokanaan, and his climactic encounter with the Robber will, as we shall see, force him into a new realisation of this.

As with his counterpart in Courtisane, the Hermit deserts the world, and, "having found a

cavern in which a Centaur had once dwelt, he took it for his place of dwelling" (p. 260). This act parallels Honorius' arrival in the Thebaid, and likewise symbolises the successful advent of Christianity over the moribund Hellenic ethos. As with his two ascetic predecessors, however, the Hermit's attempts at detachment, in order to preserve his "knowledge of God," end in failure; he discovers that the wider net of human interaction cannot easily be eschewed. Significantly, the cave he has chosen for its apparent seclusion from the world lies close to the prevailing trade routes of the region, and it is thus that he encounters the "young man of evil and beautiful face" who carries the sort of material goods, "purple and pearls," that the Hermit had earlier compared with his own spiritual knowledge: "The pearl of great price thou hast divided," his Soul had told him in the venerable imagery of the Gospels, "and the vesture without seam thou hast parted asunder" (p. 259). In the confrontation with this young man who "robbed the caravans of the merchants" the Hermit will discover that, until egotism is recognised and renounced, his "knowledge of God" is no more valuable than the goods stolen by his worldly counterpart.

The Robber's obvious devotion to the things of this world evokes in the watching cave-dweller a sympathetic response; but it is a response tempered by his fear of losing even his skirt-hold

on God. Accordingly, although he "looked at him and pitied him," the young Hermit refrains from interfering because "he knew that he who speaks a word loses his faith" (p. 261). The parallel with Honorius, who although he subsisted off others, would not aid the passing lepers, and with the Baptist whose insecurities prevented him from responding openly to Salome, is clear; in all three cases the tug of human relations is denied because of psychic insecurities none of them dare admit.

But as with the saintly cavern-dwellers of Courtisane and Salome, the Hermit cannot prevent the direct intrusion of the curious hedonist. The young Robber notices the look of "pity" in the anchorite's eyes, and demands to know the cause of it. There follows a dialogue not unlike the encounters in the plays, in which the Hermit's determination to resist true interaction is unflinching:

"I have pity for you," the Hermit said, "because you have no knowledge of God."

"Is this knowledge of God a precious thing?" asked the young man, and he came close to the mouth of the cavern.

"It is more precious than all the purple and the pearls of the world," answered the Hermit.

"And have you got it?" said the young Robber, and he came closer still.

"Once, indeed," answered the Hermit, "I possessed the perfect knowledge of God. But in my foolishness I parted with it, and divided it amongst others."

Yet even now is such knowledge as remains to me more precious than purple or pearls."

And when the young Robber heard this he threw away the purple and the pearls that he was bearing in his hands, and drawing a sharp sword of curved steel he said to the Hermit, "Give me, forthwith, this knowledge of God that you possess, or I will surely slay you. Wherefore should I not slay him who has a treasure greater than my treasure?"

And the Hermit spread out his arms and said, "Were it not better for me to go unto the uttermost courts of God and praise Him, than to live in the world and have no knowledge of him? Slay me if that be your desire. But I will not give away my knowledge of God."

And the young Robber knelt down and besought him, but the Hermit would not talk to him about God, nor give up his treasure ... (pp. 261-2)

It is no wonder that the Robber responds so literally to the Hermit's metaphor; his blunt demand for this "treasure greater than my treasure" is an ironic confirmation of the ascetic's unconscious spiritual pride that has reduced his "knowledge" to a hoardable object. The alacrity which which he responds, indeed, to his interlocutor's threats, even going so far as to "spread out his arms" in an ostentatious expectation of martyrdom, reveals to what extent he refuses to allow the claims of others to intrude; death, and the confident expectation of going "unto the uttermost courts of God," becomes preferable to a demanding life of fellowship. The resolution of the story will confirm how dangerously perverted the erstwhile Teacher of Wisdom's sensibilities

have become. Wilde's judgment in The Soul of Man that "although the Cenobite realises his personality, it is often an impoverished personality that he so realises" (Works, p. 1102) is pertinent indeed to the Hermit at this point.

The struggle culminates with the Robber's affirmation of his hedonistic credo. "'Be it as you will," he finally answers; "as for myself, I will go to the City of the Seven Sins, that is but three days' journey from this place, and for my purple they will give me pleasure, and for my pearls they will give me joy'" (p. 262). Like Alexandria in Courtisane, and the town which Christ enters in "The Doer of Good," the City of the Seven Sins represents the life of complete sensual and material indulgence against which the Hermit's anchoritism is a protest: "the ideals we owe to Christ," observes the essayist, "are the ideals of the man who abandons society entirely, or of the man who resists society absolutely" (The Soul of Man, p. 1102).

Faced with the imminent loss to faith of his antagonist, the Hermit's pity is strongly roused; but his devotion to his own well-being still holds him back. His inner struggle is aptly represented by his trailing after the Robber--who intends exchanging his despised material goods for the only "pleasure" and "joy" available to him--and anxiously beseeching him to return to the spiritual consolation

of the desert. But because the Hermit refuses to give up the "knowledge of God which is more precious than purple and pearls," as the Robber also puts it (p. 262), the would-be sinner remains determined to ignore his entreaties and to enter the city.

The climactic moment comes as the Robber nears the "great scarlet gates" of the City, and like Jesus in "The Doer of Good," he hears within "the sound of much laughter" (p. 262). At last the wider claims of humanity, which Jokanaan had so successfully resisted to his cost, overrule the Hermit's egotism, precipitating the Robber's rescue, and--unwittingly--his own. Rushing forward, the Hermit symbolically gives up his selfish dependence on God for a more daring connection with man--whereas before he "was as one clinging to the skirts of God" (p. 260), he now catches the hedonist "by the skirts of his raiment" (p. 262)--and enters into a new relationship with others, based on the mutual recognition of value, instead of isolation. "'Stretch forth your hands, and set your arms around my neck, and put your ear close to my lips,'" he tells the Robber, "'and I will give you what remains to me of the knowledge of God'" (p. 262).

Instead of opening his arms to welcome his own destruction, the Hermit now embraces the other open-heartedly, knowing as he does so that the act

of embracement will cost him his knowledge. But the great paradox of Christian redemption is now represented: for the act of surrender becomes the moment of initiation into a new and more powerful relationship with God. Recalling the selfless surrenders of The Happy Prince or the Little Nightingale, and the acute imaginative empathy of the Young King and the Star-Child, the fable confirms that the roots of Christian imitation lie in the situation of others, in the encapsulating commandment: "love your neighbour as yourself."

The denouement of the prose-poem proposes that it is only when all selfish endeavour, spiritual or secular, is jettisoned in favour of others, that a real identification with them can in fact take place; and this is finely represented when Jesus, appearing in the redemptive guise of the Book of Revelations, "raised the Hermit up" and addresses him in much the same way as the anchorite had himself communicated with the Robber. Christ's final "kiss" symbolises the new alignment of disciple and saviour:

And He raised the Hermit up, and said to him: "Before this time thou hadst the perfect knowledge of God. Now thou shalt have the perfect love of God. Wherefore art thou weeping?" And He kissed him.
(p. 263)

Truly individualised discipleship, then, involves an identification with others so intense that not only are all formal strictures and methods futile--as "The Doer of Good" and "The Master" suggest--but even private theocracy, the spiritual

and psychic benefits of contemplation, must be abandoned. In "The Teacher of Wisdom" Wilde asserts that the ascetic may well be as self-regarding as the voluptuary, and illuminates the obsessive reserve of the saintly avatars of Salome and Courtisane. If these two dramas explore the fitness for Christian imitation of those who hedonistically indulge in the life of the world, and their ability to comprehend the real meaning of Christian love, so in this final prose-poem the author demonstrates that the would-be followers of Christ, the professed exemplars of his doctrine, need to explore relationships with the world they too often despise in such a way that courage, imagination and selflessness are called into play. "And so he who would lead a Christ-like life," the writer of The Soul of Man had said, "is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself"; and had added that "all imitation in life and morals is wrong" (Works, p. 1087). "The Teacher of Wisdom," in concert with the other prose-poems and the two poetic dramas in particular, fictively asserts the paradox that the individualism Christ personifies is founded on a commitment, without dogma or prescription, to the world fractiously inhabited by others. In his penultimate work, Wilde will at last graft this perception of Jesus onto his view of the artist, and will subsume ethics, as he announced in "The

Critic as Artist," into a larger, aesthetic category of human experience.

Notes

¹ There can be little doubt that Wilde regarded Salome as his most successful dramatic achievement; his anger at its last-minute banning from the stage of the Palace Theatre, London, in 1892 nearly caused him to leave England for Paris (Letters, pp. 316-19). When, in 1897, he evaluated his contribution to modern drama, he told Lord Alfred Douglas (who had helped him with the translation) that he had made the most "objective" literary form a "personal mode of expression," while at the same time "enlarging--at any rate in the case of Salome--its artistic horizon" (Letters, p. 589).

It seems probable that he intended completing a series of plays in the mode of Salome, but that the deadlines of commercial theatre--and the vagaries of his private life--prevented him from realising his object. His squabbles with Lord Alfred Douglas, the dissolute young nobleman who from 1891 onwards was Wilde's constant, upsetting and frequently unwanted companion, undoubtedly drew out the process of preparing Salome for publication in French and English (1892-4). In de Profundis Wilde accuses Douglas of interfering with the completion of La Sainte Courtisane and The Florentine Tragedy in December, 1893, two plays "of a completely different type" to his current commissioned project, An Ideal Husband (Letters, p. 427). A year later, Wilde

had all but completed amplified versions of both La Sainte Courtisane and The Florentine Tragedy, and shortly before he decided to instigate the disastrous libel action against Douglas' father, The Marquis of Queensbury, he wrote to the theatrical producer George Alexander that "I hope to send you, or read you, the vital parts of my Florentine play" (Letters, p. 383)--but the turbulent events of the next two months brought this project to an abrupt halt.

In April 1894 Wilde declared to Douglas his intention of writing a play called The Cardinal of Avignon--"If I had peace, I would do it"--but this project never advanced beyond a rough scenario (Letters, p. 355). After his imprisonment Wilde again wrote to Douglas that he was anxious to begin a play "religious in surroundings and treatment of subject" (Letters, p. 589), presumably similar to Salome and La Sainte Courtisane, but again these plays did not materialise. All Wilde's biographers are left with are the names he mooted to André Gidé at this time--Ahab and Jezebel and Pharoah (Letters, p. 649, fn. 3)--and the possible dramatic encounter of Wilde's voluptuaries and penitents they might have inscribed. Wilde is not the first writer, in short, whose popular success intruded on his personal designs; that it should have happened to him, the advocate of artistic independence, was an irony that probably he himself

could best appreciate. See Mason, Bibliography, p. 583-5.

² Wilde's recreation of the jaded late classical world resembles the interests of the French Decadents in the same period, and for similar reasons. Roditi points out that Flaubert's La Tentation de St. Antoine, which Wilde once intended translating into English (Letter to W.H. Henley, September, 1888; Letters, p. 233), is one of the chief sources of Salome (Roditi, p. 58). Both Roditi and Woodcock draw attention to Wilde's obvious relation in La Sainte Courtisane to Anatole France, from whose lengthy novel Thais the Irish writer draws details of plot and setting (Roditi, p. 59; Woodcock, p. 85). Both Roditi and San Juan offer illuminating commentary on the aspects of syntax, imagery and idiom that Wilde learnt from the Decadents; like them, his evocation through hypnotic rhythms and vivid physical detail of a jaded and insecure world becomes an apposite vehicle for his own contemporary concerns. See Eduoard Roditi, "Prose and the Sublime --II," Chapter II of his Oscar Wilde; and E. San Juan, The Art of Oscar Wilde.

³ Letters, p. 265. For a full discussion of this letter in relation to Wilde's ideas, see chapter II of this study.

⁴ Salome (1893; English transl., London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894); rpr. Works,

pp. 552-75. All page numbers in this section refer to this edition.

As Douglas receives no acknowledgment on the title-page (although the play is dedicated to him), it is clear that Wilde took over the translation from the original French himself. In de Profundis he refers to Douglas's attempted translation as "unworthy of you, as an ordinary Oxonian, as it was of the work you sought to render" (Letters, p. 432). See Letters, p. 326, 344fn, 426, 432-3. The vexed question of who assisted Wilde with the original French is tackled comprehensively by Clyde de L. Ryals, "Oscar Wilde's Salome," Notes and Queries, V, ii (February 1959), pp. 56-7, who concludes from the available evidence that the playwright's originality of conception, idiom and structure was scant affected by his friends' suggestions of syntactical and semantic changes.

⁵ Salome was originally greeted with revulsion and scorn upon its publication; an anonymous Times writer labelled it "an arrangement in blood and ferocity, morbid, bizarre, repulsive, and very offensive in its adaptation of scriptural phraseology to situations the reverse of sacred" (23 February, 1893; quoted in Letters, p. 355, fn. 4). Since then it has run the gamut of twentieth-century opinion. For James Joyce, one of the first commentators on its originality, it is primarily an outstanding aesthetic parable, "a polyphonic

variation on the rapport of art and nature" ("Oscar Wilde: The Poet of Salome", in Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. R. Ellmann, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969, p. 60); for W.B. Yeats, it emblemises a portentous moment in western civilization, namely the hiatus between the Hellenic and Christian millenia (Ellman, "Overtures to Salome," p. 40, and San Juan, p. 123). Mario Praz, surveying the varied forms of nineteenth-century Romanticism, calls the play "very near a masterpiece" because of its parodic relation to previous conventions (San Juan, p. 298); this view is echoed by John R. Reed, who considers the structural and symbolic dynamics a crucial instance of a changing artistic milieu (Reed, p. 56). In terms of twentieth-century drama, San Juan and Ellmann have found that it anticipates Pound, Yeats, and Beckett, both in terms of structure and characterisation (Ellmann, p. 41; San Juan, p. 129). Other critics have examined the text as an elaborate test-case for psychoanalysis (for example Edmund Bergler, M.D., in "Salome, the Turning Point in the Life of Oscar Wilde," Psychoanalytic Review, V, 43, 1956); for Christopher Nassar, it is a dramatic embodiment, indeed, of the tensions in the mind of Herod ("Daughters of Herodias," in Into the Demon Universe, p. 95-7). Ellmann sees it as a dramatic enactment of the struggle between two opposing late Victorian perspectives, between the Ruskinian concern for the social function of art, and the Paterian advocacy

of private experience, with Wilde himself as the vacillating figure of Herod in the middle ("Overtures to Salome"); for Kate Miller, Salome is a sinister revelation, on the other hand, of the misogynist tendency that women have to fight (Sexual Politics, London: Virago, 1977). Faced with all these intriguing readings Wilde might well have repeated his remarks in another context to W.E. Henley: "Beauty of form produces not one effect alone, but many effects I pity that book on which critics are agreed. It must be a very obvious and shallow production" (Letter to Henley, December 1888, Letters, p. 234).

6 Wilde's Jokanaan, as Rodney Shewan observes in Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism (London: Macmillan, 1977), is obviously very much aware of Christ's exploits and ministry (p. 136). As this is something which none of the Gospel accounts of the Baptist's career confirm, Jokanaan's conscious acclamations of Christ the Saviour--which render him more a disciple than a prophet--represents a crucial addition by the playwright to strengthen Jokanaan's confessed alignment with Jesus. This is a notable example of Wilde disagreeing with Ernest Renan, whose Baptist loses contact with Jesus and is not fully aware of his significance. See La Vie, pp. 123, 126.

7 Wilde may have had in mind Renan's erudite exposition on this phenomenon in La Vie, pp. 49-50.

8 Wilde has drawn Jokanaan's imagery from

the Authorised Version of the Gospels, especially those of St. Matthew, XIV, 3-16, and St. Mark, VI, 17-28.

⁹ "Santa Decca," ll. 13-14, in Poems. In "The Rise of Historical Criticism," Wilde had cited Heine's view of the uneasy cohabitation of Hellenicism and Hebraism at the advent of Christianity: "The old fable that the Greek gods took service with the new religion under assumed names has more truth in it than the many care to discover" (Works, p. 1109).

¹⁰ Many commentators have examined the structural and thematic function of the moon in Salome. In one sense, Salome is a decadent equivalent of Keats' hero in Endymion, who is infatuated with the moon. Rodrey Shewan remarks appositely that the moon is "a symbol, a structural device, and a device of characterisation"; principally it "becomes a symbolic reference point for individual responses" (p. 138). San Juan calls the moon "an emblem of Salome's cruel virginity and Jokanaan's purity" (p. 128).

¹¹ Several critics have paid close attention to the psychological dynamics Salome's discourse inscribes. Shewan observes that "Salome's attraction ... is expressed entirely in visual terms. She thinks her way into imagery, and thence into feeling" (p. 140). San Juan likewise describes her rhetorical achievement thus: "Circular and densely metaphoric,

dynamic yet restrained, her manner of address represents perfectly the oracular style which stimulates strong emotion" (p. 117). Roditi's analysis of the novel poetics of the sublime that Wilde and the French decadents were embodying is the most precise and comprehensive of these commentaries. See "Poetry and the Sublime--2," in Oscar Wilde.

12 "That tragic daughter of passion appeared on Thursday last," Wilde wrote to Campbell Dodgson on 23 February 1893," and is now dancing for the head of the British public" (Letters, p. 333). It might be fairer to say that the British public beheaded Salome, however; at the end of June, 1892, while the play was in production at the Palace Theatre, London, the Licensor of Plays for the Lord Chamberlain banned the play under an old law forbidding the stage representation of Biblical subjects. The general approval, even satisfaction, of both critics and laymen alike was as distressing to the playwright as the fact of the censorship: "I am very much hurt not merely at the action of the Licensor of Plays," he wrote to William Rothenstein, "but at the pleasure expressed by the entire Press of England at the suppression of my work" (Letters, p. 318). Only two critics, William Archer and G.B. Shaw, protested at the action; Archer, dramatic critic for The World, observed that Salome was banned "at the very moment when the personality of the author is being held

up to ridicule, night after night, on the public stage, with the full sanction and approval of statutory infallibility" (Letters, p. 317, fn. 1). The hostile newspaper reviews of the published version confirmed, as I indicated in n. 5, that Salome was too outlandish for popular tastes (Letters, p. 335). It is worth recording that Wilde seriously considered emigrating as a result of the episode (Letters, pp. 316-8).

¹³ La Sainte Courtisane, in Works, pp. 701-5. I shall use the abbreviation Courtisane throughout. All page numbers in this section refer to this edition, and are given in the text. In de Profundis Wilde describes how Alfred Douglas interrupted the completion of the play (November 1893). During 1894-5 Wilde prepared a second and completed draft that his friend, Mrs. Ada Levenson, kept on his behalf during his years at Wordsworth and Reading Gaol (1895-7); this she restored to him thereafter. Unfortunately Wilde mislaid it in a Parisian taxi-cab (1898) and this version has never come to light. (Wilde's comment on this incident: "a taxi-cab is a very proper place for it.") The extant fragment was first published in 1908, alongside Salome, in Robert Ross's fourteen-volume edition of Wilde's work (London: Methuen & Co.). See Letters, p. 390, 392, 427.

¹⁴ John R. Reed, "The Magdalene Redeemed," in Victorian Conventions, pp. 75-7. Reed observes

that "Wilde's brief dramatic fiction epitomises the change that has taken the convention of the fallen woman. From pitiable, to sympathetic, to sanctified, the Magdalene had become one of the most remarkable literary types" (p. 76).

15 San Juan, The Art of Oscar Wilde, p. 110: "In the fearful excitement of Myrrhina's interlocutors, Wilde projects images of fertility, lunar influence, and elemental animalism that qualify our conception of the princess' role as a character whose intelligence stems from a fine voluptuous worldiness."

16 Salome, p. 561.

17 de Profundis, p. 487: "Of course, just as there are false dawns before the dawn itself, ... so there were Christians before Christ. For that we should be grateful. The unfortunate thing is that there have been none since. I make one exception, St. Francis of Assisi He understood Christ, and so became like him ... the life of St. Francis was the true Imitatio Christi: a poem compared to which the book that bears that name is merely prose."

18 Reed, p. 76.

19 Chapter XI, Dorian Gray, p. 107.

20 Reed, p. 77.

21 Chapter II, Dorian Gray, p. 18.

22 Poems in Prose ("The Artist", "The Doer of Good", "The Disciple", "The Master", "The House

of Judgement", "The Teacher of Wisdom"), the Fortnightly Review, LIV, cccii (31 July 1894), pp. 22-9; rpt in Works, pp. 863-7. All page numbers in this section refer to this edition, and are given in the text.

²³ Roditi, "Poetry and the Sublime (2)," pp. 62-3.

²⁴ Wilde's splendid gifts as a raconteur may well be the one point all his biographers agree on, and many of his contemporaries affirm that the stories he published represent a small fraction of those he actually told. Many of these tales also involved Biblical themes or characters, and several were transcribed by such listeners as André Gidé, W.B. Yeats and Mrs. Gabrielle Enthoven, a theatre historian, who published a small collection called Echoes in a limited edition (London: n.p., n.d.). See Letters, p. 809, fn. 3. For a comprehensive discussion of Wilde's story-telling ability, and its relation to the narrative and expository structures of his work, see George Woodcock, "The Master of Conversation," Chapter IX, in The Paradox of Oscar Wilde, pp. 171-92.

²⁵ In such occasional poems of the 1880s as "Le Jardin des Tuileries", "Les Ballons", "Symphony in Yellow", and "Impression du Matin", Wilde demonstrates his acquaintance with French art and literature. These brief impressionistic pieces--as their titles suggest--attempt to capture vivid

sensory impressions through physical images. Eduoard Roditi describes how Wilde gradually refined and developed his poetic abilities during the 1880s, shedding the derivative, generalised and posturing verses of Poems (1881) for the more precise imagistic and syntactic language of direct apprehension ("Poetry and Art History," Chapter II of Oscar Wilde), pp. 9-39.

²⁶ W.B. Yeats, Introd., The Happy Prince and Other Tales, in Volume III, The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde (New York: Random House, 1923), pp. ix-xvi; rpr. in The Critical Heritage, p. 397-9. Other critics who have echoed this viewpoint include Roditi, "Poetry and the Sublime (2)," pp. 63-4, and Woodcock, "The Master of Conversation," pp. 176-7.

²⁷ As recalled by Yeats, and transcribed in his Introd., The Critical Heritage, p. 398.

²⁸ Roditi, p. 67-8.

5. A Poetics for Living: Christ and the Meaning of
Sorrow in de Profundis

de Profundis¹ contains Wilde's definitive study of Jesus, in which he recapitulates and refines the formulations and suggestions of preceding works. This monumental attempt at self-revelation includes a view of Christ as a synthetic persona whose life and ministry offer his followers a complex model for aesthetic self-completion. As my discussion will make clear, Wilde's Jesus becomes the great reconciler of the various polarities that his work inscribes. In this chapter I shall offer a detailed elucidation of Wilde's final portrait of Jesus both intrinsically, and in terms of its rhetorical function within de Profundis. Finally, I shall consider this portrait in relation to the preceding fictional and dramatic work examined in this study, in an attempt to demonstrate how vividly and comprehensively Wilde's imaginative writings anticipated the ethical and aesthetic views of de Profundis.

The central imaginative act of the epistle is the author's identification with Christ, who is presented in a richly evocative series of reflections as the great historical model and inspiration of the writer's reformulated aestheticism. The identification is suggested by allusion at climactic points along the highly discursive path

of Wilde's narration, so that the optimistic conclusion, its tone of hope and tentative assurance, reads as confirmation of the writer's new Christlike integrity and humility. The most unified and coherent part of the letter, however, is the dissertation on Christ, and the nature of suffering. Wilde's final portrait of Jesus draws together many strands from the rich complex of his ideas, and in so doing epitomises both the originality of his thought and his intimate ties with the central humanist tradition in European thought. In returning to a favourite subject Wilde demonstrated Gilbert's view in "The Critic as Artist", that "he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives." This earlier persona added, "To know something about oneself one must know all about others" (Intentions, p. 172).

Jesus had been characterised in The Soul of Man as the great individualist, who "put forward" the idea of pain "as a mode of self-realisation." Now Wilde extends this definition; not only is Christ "the supreme Individualist ... of history" (p. 479) because of the unique nature of his self-realisation, but he is the exemplar of "the artistic life," the one human being who gave to his own history the complex integrity that elsewhere exists only in achieved art. Effectively, he is therefore the supreme artist, for "that which is

the very keynote of romantic art was to him the proper basis of actual life" (p. 485). Romantic art, asserts the writer in a characteristic synthesis of Coleridgian poetics via Pater,² is all work that is made "from within through some spirit informing it" (p. 482), and the life of Jesus exemplifies this "keynote." In Christ "we can discern ... that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between classical and romantic art, and makes Christ the true precursor of the romantic movement in life" (p. 476) [italics mine]. Accordingly, "his place is with the poets" (p. 479), because "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" (p. 482).

Wilde makes it apparent that Christ exemplified in his life the author's Romantic views of art. "Truth in art", Wilde writes in the meditation on sorrow that precedes his introduction of Jesus, "is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward made expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit" (p. 473). Those who wish to incorporate these aesthetic ideals into their lives, are always in search of the lifestyle most suggestive of these qualities, "that 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" (p. 473).

Experience has now taught him, the author goes on, that "Sorrow" is the supreme mode of the artistic life, because of the complex but indivisible unity, the "extraordinary reality" it gives to all existence.

A vital relationship with the universality of suffering, in short, offers the most profound aesthetic completion to one's life:

Of such modes of existence there are not a few: youth and the arts preoccupied with youth may serve as a model for us at one moment Music, in which all subject is absorbed in expression and cannot be separated from it, is a complex example, and a flower or a child a simple example of what I mean: but Sorrow is the ultimate type both in life and Art. (p. 473)

Christ, Wilde confirms hereafter, provided humanity with the definitive example of this "mode of existence." To Christ, "Sorrow and Suffering were modes through which he could realise his conception of the Beautiful," and his genius was to make his own life a reflection of this insight:

And feeling ... that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he makes of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated Art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing. (p. 481)

This image, that of the universal experience of suffering, enables all men and women to conceive, as Jesus did, "the divided races as a unity" (p. 477).

Here, then, is an elaborately presented explanation of both Christ's motives and his achievement,

that ignores purely theological or moral assumptions. In one sense, Wilde's characterisation of Jesus exemplifies the concern of the Romantic poets to transcend, via the imagination, the limitations of nature, and the "perfection" Christ realised certainly echoes the recurring Romantic concern with the essential unity of the individual consciousness. It is important to notice, however, that Wilde's original contribution to Romantic poetics effectively qualifies the vague idealism of Romantics such as Blake or Shelley. Like his fellow secular Christologists Renan and Matthew Arnold, Wilde conceives of Jesus as a charismatic human being, whose original impact on the world has been imaginatively transformed by later generations.

As an undergraduate under the sway of positivist and empirical enthusiasm, Wilde had observed in "The Rise of Historical Criticism" (1879) that the appearance of great individuals in history was invariably followed by mythopoeic accretions that the critic was obliged to decipher.³ In de Profundis he approvingly interprets Christ's miracles as imaginative responses to the "charm of his personality," and cites several ingenious interpretations (p. 478). As I shall indicate, Wilde's general method is to withstand the intrusion of the supernatural into his schema, and in this way the idealising tendency of earlier Romantics is filtered through the empirical concerns of his

more immediate intellectual mentors. The dissertation on Christ, indeed, contains passing tributes to Renan and Arnold: the Breton's Vie de Jesus is referred to as "that gracious Fifth Gospel, the Gospel according to St. Thomas one might call it" (p. 479),⁴ while the "true temper" of the artist is compared to "what Matthew Arnold calls the secret of Jesus" (p. 477).⁵

Wilde advances beyond his secular mentors, however, in his assertion of Christ's relation to art. His Jesus, like Arnold's, is indeed an avatar of "sweet reasonableness," a kind of apotheosis of culture; but, closer to Renan's approving reference to the naturally "poetic" talents Christ's parables reveal, the "young Galilean peasant" of Wilde's portrait demonstrates a unique creative gift.

It is this imaginative power that links him with artists. "The very basis of his nature," writes Wilde, "was the same as that of the nature of the artist, an intense and flamelike imagination". (p. 476) The artist's ability to transform disparate elements into a complex symmetry, his "sense of Beauty," was in Christ an ability to comprehend the inherent oneness of humanity: "He realised in the entire sphere of human relations," the writer continues, "that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation" (p. 476).

The artist-critic of the nineteenth-century who has absorbed "the best that is known and thought in the world," in the phrase from Arnold that Gilbert repeats in "The Critic as Artist" (Intentions, p. 175), is Christ's spiritual descendant--with this telling difference. While Wilde's earlier model aesthete prizes "contemplation" and a necessary divorcement from active human intercourse and its responsibilities (Intentions, p. 170-3), Jesus sought out those who suffered: "Those of whom I have spoken, who are dumb under oppression and 'whose silence is heard only of God,' he chose as his brothers" (p. 481). Such commitment to "the entire sphere of human relations" is what distinguishes Christ, and the deeper mode of aesthetics he personifies, from both the artist and the earlier "artist-critic" of Intentions.

The shift in the grounds of Wilde's aesthetic theory can be clearly seen in his judgement of Marius the Epicurean, Pater's most ambitious attempt to deal with the ethical consequences of an aesthetic view of life.⁶ The following observations lead at once into Wilde's discussion of Christ in de Profundis:

In Marius the Epicurean Pater seeks to reconcile the artistic life with the life of religion in the deep, sweet and austere sense of the word. But Marius is little more than a spectator: an ideal spectator indeed, and one to whom it is given "to contemplate the spectacle of life with appropriate emotions," which Wordsworth defines as the poet's true aim [sic]: yet a spectator merely, and

perhaps a little too much occupied with the comeliness of the vessels of the Sanctuary to notice that it is the Sanctuary of Sorrow that he is gazing at.

I see a far more immediate and intimate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist. (p. 476)

This assessment of Marius--and of his creator--turns on an expression of Pater's of which Wilde had once been fond. In his essay on Wordsworth in Appreciations (1889), Pater writes that the "aim" of culture is "to witness this spectacle [that it, all life] with appropriate emotions." Gilbert paraphrases this passage in "The Critic as Artist," in defending the cultivated inaction of the artist-critics of the future: they should "set themselves to witness with appropriate emotions the varied scenes that man and nature afford" (Intentions, p. 176).⁷ In Wilde's elaborate critical dialogue, the allusion to his mentor at Brasenose College serves to reinforce his commitment to private intensities; for the writer of de Profundis, the same reference--mistakenly attributed to Wordsworth himself!--now signals a new awareness of distance. Pater failed to reconcile "the artistic life", the life based on aesthetic principles, with the religious impulse, because his fictional hero Marius took only a cautious part in that "entire sphere of human relations", with all its resultant moral complexities, in his grave search for a satisfying philosophy of life. Unaware, therefore, of what

Wilde calls the "extraordinary reality" of suffering, Marius' limited aesthetic sense is directed only at appearances, "the comeliness of the vessels", and does not enable him "to notice it is the Sanctuary of Sorrow he is gazing at." Wilde, by comparison, will draw "a far more intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist", for in so doing he will propose that true aesthetics does indeed take proper account of the trying demands of social existence. Jesus, in short, provided in his own career an aesthetic resolution of the supposed conflict between art and life--a resolution that Pater himself, in the final tentative pages of Marius the Epicurean, could barely hint at.

Wilde clarifies his view of Jesus' awesome imagination with reference to St. John's Gospel. The imagination, being "the basis of all spiritual and material life," is really "simply a form of love" (p. 484). This is Christ's insight, the insight of all who perceive the universality of human suffering. Anticipating his association of this idea with Jesus, Wilde observes in the long transitional passage before his introduction of Christ "that Love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world." He goes on to add that "if the worlds have indeed, as I have said, been built out of Sorrow, it has been by the hands of Love,

because in no other way could the Soul of man, for whom the worlds are made, reach the full stature of his perfection" (p. 474). This, in essence, is the vision Christ personified: it is only by a leap of the imagination, not faith, that the mind can comprehend the beautiful integrity that sorrow affords the world. This argument, and its crucial emphasis on the aesthetic sense--the human impulse to order, and to shape--is earlier put with attractive felicity.

Love is fed by the imagination, by which we become wiser than we know, better than we feel, nobler than we are: by which, and by which alone, we can understand others in their real as in their ideal relations. (p. 445)

The sense here of the world permeated by the shaping force of the "imagination" reflects Wilde's own imaginative response to St. John's Gospel. The opening passages of the Gospel that the writer singles out for special praise (p. 484) may well have suggested, with their formulation of the Word given body, the writer's conception of Jesus as artist:

[Christ] sees all the lovely influences of life as modes of light: the imagination itself is the world-light, τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου: the world is made by it, and yet the world cannot understand it: that is because the imagination is simply a manifestation of Love, and it is Love, and the capacity for it, that distinguishes one human being from another. (p. 486)

Johannine theology is translated, in effect, into a new aesthetic, and thoroughly humanist, creed: Jesus embodies the awesome shaping power of the

imagination, and invites others to explore their potential, for "it is Love, and the capacity for it, that distinguishes one human being from another."

Christ's profound effect on the imagination of succeeding generations is based, therefore, not on his standing as a moral exemplar per se, but because of his daunting achievement of self-perfection through absolute individualism. Like great art, he "creates that mood by which alone he can be understood" (p. 483), rather than adumbrating an inflexible moral doctrine. For Wilde, he simply wants to awaken his fellows to their own potential; his enduring achievement is to hold out to those who encounter him the idea that human consciousness can transform every possible kind of experience. "It is to me a joy to remember," Wilde observes, in reflecting on Christ's impact on others, "that if he is 'of imagination all compact,' the world itself is of the same substance" (p. 483).

Wilde had made approving reference, as I demonstrated in chapter three, to Christ's imaginative ethical judgements in The Soul of Man. This argument he takes up and repeats in de Profundis. Christ, as a great individualist, recognised that each human being deserves a unique moral valuation: "for him there were no laws: there were exceptions merely" (p. 485). As in The Soul of Man, Wilde cites certain Gospel episodes that exemplify this,

including again those concerning the "wealthy young man" and Mary Magdalene. More than this, he credits to Jesus a bold and novel insight into the validity of the traditional idea of "sin":

But it is when he deals with the Sinner that he is most romantic, in the sense of being most real. The world had always loved the Saint as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of God. Christ, through some divine instinct in him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man ... in a manner not yet understood of the world he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful, holy things, and modes of perfection. It sounds a very dangerous idea. It is so. All great ideas are dangerous. That it was Christ's creed admits of no doubt. That it is the true creed I don't doubt myself. (p. 487-7)

Here Wilde combines a venerable strain in Christian thought, one given particular currency at different periods in the history of the Church, and especially at times of social and ideological fluidity,⁸ with his contemporary positivist and Darwinian cast of mind. It is important to see in the special virtue of "sin" here a reconsideration of his earlier positions.

In "The Critic as Artist" Gilbert had speculated about the eventual disappearance of ethics as a separate category of human knowledge; "conscience," he declared, "must become merged in instinct before we become fine." If this happy event takes place, sin will be "impossible" because

they can do everything they wish without hurt to the soul, and can wish for nothing that can do the soul harm, the soul

being an entity so divine that it is able to transform into elements of a richer experience, or a finer susceptibility, or a newer mode of thought, acts or passions that with the common would be commonplace, or with the uneducated ignoble, or with the shameful vile. (Intentions, p. 215)

If conscience becomes instinctual, then external moral prescriptions will--like governments--wither away, and the aesthetic criteria which Gilbert in the same passage asserts "make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, variety and change" (Intentions, p. 214-5), will be the only ones that need apply.

In de Profundis, however, Wilde leaves aside Utopian speculations to re-examine the efficacy of sin under extant conditions, the conditions of universal pain and reversal that, to the prisoner writing from his cell in Reading Gaol, now seem intrinsic to human experience. Sin is not simply "the colour-element in modern life", as it was for Gilbert, the means by which one asserts one's individuality in relation to an intolerant society; it becomes, in recollection, a vital phase in self-discovery. This is why the sinners Christ forgave "are saved simply for beautiful moments in their lives" (p. 486); the moment of repentance is also the moment of acceptance, the means by which one comes closer to realising the full range and extent of one's intellectual and emotional resources. "Repentance" is a vital component of the experience of sin, if that experience is to

be properly assessed, valued, and then integrated into the completed artwork of one's history:

Of course the sinner must repent. But why? Simply because otherwise he would be unable to realise what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that. It is the means by which one alters one's past Christ, had he been asked, would have said--I feel quite certain about it--that the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept he really made his having wasted his substance with harlots, and then kept swine and hungered for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy things in his life. (p. 487)

In formulating this special virtue of sin, Wilde draws on a number of sources on the fringes of orthodox Christian theology, and reflects too the recurring obsession of such later Romantics as Baudelaire and Rimbaud, who sought to discover in the consciousness of degradation the elements of a new and purified selfhood.⁹ The prison book-lists for 1895 and '96 reveal that Wilde was studying the history and ideas of the early Church quite extensively, as well as reading more general Christian literature such as Dante, Renan and Newman.¹⁰ In Milman's History of Latin Christianity or Farrar's St. Paul he may have encountered the beliefs of Gnostic writers such as Carpocrates and Epiphanes, who preached the value of promiscuity for those of the spiritually elect who are incapable of losing their knowledge of the divine.¹¹

Wilde was probably influenced by the more contemporary examples of such continental writers as Dostoyevsky and Verlaine, both of whom sought

to garner from degradation, censure and imprisonment a religious ethic of transfiguration. George Woodcock has pointed out how Wilde as a reviewer had applauded the all-embracing "pity" of Dostoyevsky, "for those who do evil as well as for those who suffer," as the distinguishing characteristic of his knowledge of "life in its most real forms."¹²

For Verlaine Wilde had always a special reverence. In de Profundis, while considering the difficult task of imitating Jesus, the writer refers to the recently-deceased French poet as "one of the most perfect lives I have come across in my own experience" (p. 488). Wilde clearly empathised with Verlaine's search for something like a mystical Catholic quietism out of his vicious experiences; accordingly, he is "the one Christian poet since Dante" (p. 488).

But for Wilde, we must remember, the commitment to an aesthetic apprehension of something that resembles Christian repentance is foremost. Wilde cites Christ's moral judgements in the Gospels as persuasive arguments for this view: Mary Magdalene, in breaking the vase of perfume over Christ's feet, is expressing the "beautiful moment" of her realisation of sin (p. 486). In these sonorous and evocative passages Wilde offers his most extended explanation of his private observation in the letter to Bertha Lathbury that "the saint and the hedonist meet--touch in many points";

the sinner, indeed, becomes the saint, and these extreme tendencies of human aspiration are merged in a new model of consciousness that corresponds in impact to the work of art.

Perhaps the most fascinating and richly suggestive aspect of Wilde's Christ in de Profundis is his rôle as reconciler of the dichotomy between Hellenism and Hebraism. As we have seen, the tension Matthew Arnold had espied between these currents in European thought runs throughout Wilde's work, especially as he tended to trace his aesthetic concerns, as did Pater, back to the Greeks. At the conclusion of The Soul of Man the joyous and unfettered Individualism of the future is called "the New Hellenism," from which Jesus, the avatar of Hebraic responsibilities and "the worship of pain," is summarily banished. But throughout the later meditation on Christ Wilde establishes a series of telling contrasts and comparisons between Jesus' life and values, and those of the Greeks, which confirms Christ's achievement of a novel synthesis. The inescapable conclusion is that the man who was "the precursor of the romantic movement in life" fused the ethical concerns of the Jews with the aesthetic impulse of the Greeks, and created in himself a potent symbol of a future ideal culture. In so doing he revealed the limitations of the old Hellenic culture that he echoes and yet replaces.

Early on in his presentation of Jesus Wilde remarks that his life "has fascinated and dominated art as no Greek god ever did", because in spite of their comely appearances, "the white and red of their fair fleet limbs", the Hellenic deities actually epitomised such vices as cruelty, pride and lust (p. 481). While the Greek genius could produce no gods that could inspire real admiration and love, "Out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth had come a personality infinitely greater than any made by myth and legend" (p. 481). Significantly, the only "deep suggestive figures of Greek mythology" were the fertility deities Demeter and Dionysus, both of whom were traditionally associated with rebirth and regeneration, as well as the propagation and development of human culture.

Yet, notable as these figures were for the progress of humanity, for "religion" and for "art," they were outmoded by the human Jesus, who conflates the religious and artistic urges of his species in his own life and ministry. Wilde metaphorically renders this supersession by pointing out how the symbols of natural growth and human industry traditionally connected with Demeter and Dionysus were given a distinctive beauty and meaning by Christ: he was "destined to reveal to the world the mystical meaning of wine and the real beauty of the lilies of the field as none, either on Cithaeron or at Enna, had ever done it" (p. 481).

This transformation of imagery represents in symbolic terms the superior vision of Christ over that of the most "suggestive" Hellenic deities. Wine, the symbol of Dionysus, and of the art of viticulture he taught to men, is transformed by Wilde's Jesus into a potent image of his own sacrifice for humanity; the flowers in the meadows of Enna from which Pluto, in seizing Demeter's daughter Persephone, initiated the mythic story of seasonal rebirth associated with Demeter, become as "the lilies of the field" images of the beautiful completeness Christ expounds to his fellows.

Christ, in effect, being the great archetypal romantic artist-in-life, imbues the natural world around him with a far profounder symbolic truth and beauty that the Greeks, for all their devotion to self-development, could attain. Furthermore, Christ's unique Hebraic valuation of "sin" powerfully transcended the Hellenic approach to conduct, with its marked fatalism. Wilde's interpretation of Christ's creed stresses that the Hebraic genius for right action could be fused with the Hellenic emphasis on beauty:

The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that. It is the means by which one alters one's past. The Greeks thought that impossible. They often say in their gnomic aphorisms "Even the Gods cannot alter the past." Christ showed that the commonest sinner could do it. That it was the one thing he could do. (p. 487)

It is clear from the juxtaposition of Greek and

Christian ethical perspectives--Wilde is quoting loosely, as Rupert Hart-Davis points out, from Aristotle and Pindar¹³--that Christ's conception of self-realisation was a far more dynamic one, that it took a much broader account of the range of experiences and viewpoints available to the individual, and that a Greek ideal like "self-perfection" only really becomes possible when the Hebraic insistence on morality and repentance are incorporated. Once again Christ is the great Artist whose breadth of imagination enables him to weave this finer model of self-perfection from the rival strands of European thought.

Wilde also points out, following Renan,¹⁴ that Christ's advent fulfilled certain yearnings of the Classical world, as well as of the Hebraic; for while Jesus took his suggestion for self-creation as "the Man of Sorrows" from the Song of Isaiah, and thus seemed to fulfil Jewish prophecy (p. 481), his appearance was also prefigured in Roman literature. "Christ found the type, and fixed it, and the dream of a Virgilian poet, either at Jerusalem or at Babylon, became in the long progress of the centuries incarnate in him for whom the world was waiting" (p. 481-2). While he insists that Jesus was not necessarily fulfilling some divine plan, but merely responding in his own way to an idea in the prophetic literature of his people--"For every expectation that he fulfilled, there was

another he destroyed"--Wilde's cross-reference to Virgil's predictions in his fourth Eclogue¹⁵ reinforces the reader's sense of Christ's synthetic achievement: in himself, he resolves these two incomplete and rival cultures into a new and more complex whole.

It is fitting, therefore, that Wilde indicates that his view of Jesus is largely drawn from the Gospel of St. John, "or whatever early Gnostic took his name and mantle" (p. 484), for--as the qualification I have quoted indicates--that gospel has always been regarded by scholars as most permeated with Greek thought. In his Leben Jesu (1835) D.W. Strauss observes that John substitutes the Hellenic notion of Divine Sonship for the Jewish Messianic conception of Christ, and in the Johannine emphasis on Christ's presence in the hearts of his followers, rather than on his Second Coming, the influence of the Alexandrian Logos doctrine and of neo-Platonic ideas about pre-existence are evident.¹⁶ Wilde, as a devoted student of Renan's Johannine-flavoured Christology, would have known this well. By relating Christ's romantic imagination to the "world-light" that makes and dwells in the world (St. John, I, 1-12) Wilde emphasises the Greek contribution to our traditional understanding of Jesus, and lends credence to his own view that Christ's meaning incorporates both Hellenic and Hebraic elements.

Further, Wilde cites the particular pleasure of reading the Gospels in the Greek language; not only does it realert us to "the naïveté, the freshness, the simple romantic charm" of these testaments (p. 483), but "it is extremely probable that we have the actual terms, the ipsissima verba, used by Christ" (p. 483). Drawing on contemporary theories that Greek was the lingua franca of the entire ancient world,¹⁷ Wilde advances a pleasant fancy that, metaphorically, suggests the reconciliation Jesus achieves. "It is a delight to me to think," he continues, "that as far as his conversation was concerned, Charmides might have listened to him, and Socrates reasoned with him, and Plato understood him" (p. 483). By way of corroborating his theory Wilde then quotes appreciatively from his Greek Testament those utterances of Christ which echo the aphoristic style and the pastoral setting of much Greek literature. His gloss of St. John's version of Christ's death serves two purposes: it affirms Wilde's belief in Christ's humanity, by excluding the possibility of resurrection, and it confirms that Jesus consciously achieved that "self-perfection" the Greeks had sought:

... his last word when he cried out "My life has been completed, has reached its fulfilment, has been perfected," was exactly as St. John tells us it was: τετέλεσται : no more. (p. 483-4)

The most remarkable aspect of Christ's great

work of synthesis is in Wilde's excursus on his life as "the most wonderful of poems" (p. 477). The tragic elements in his history outclass any achievement in literature, transcending, in particular, all the Aristotelian categories of Greek tragedy; nowhere in art is there anything that "for sheer simplicity of pathos wedded and made one with sublimity of tragic effect can be said to equal or approach even the last act of Christ's Passion" (p. 478). Yet Christ's life is not merely the greatest tragedy in the European tradition; its total meaning is more richly affirmative than this, and responds to an ancient ancestral memory.

Yet the whole life of Christ--so entirely may Sorrow and Beauty be made one in their meaning and manifestation--is really an idyll, though it ends with the veil of the temple being rent, and the darkness coming over the face of the earth, and the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. One always thinks of him as a young bridegroom with his companions, as indeed he somewhere describes himself, or as a shepherd straying through a valley with his sheep in search of green meadow or cool stream, or as a singer trying to build out of music the walls of the city of God, or as a lover for whose love the whole world was too small. (p. 478)

Here Wilde calls into play the entire pastoral tradition in Greek poetry, including both the celebration of an ideal natural existence in the idylls of Theocritus and Bion, and the transformation of sadness at death into joyous acceptance of the continuance of life that elegaic poetry, also known

as idyllic, records.¹⁸ Wilde refers to the various rural personae Jesus chooses for himself in the Gospel--the "young bridegroom," "the shepherd," "the singer," "the lover"--which all correspond to the conventional aspects of the shepherd-poet who is both the creator of the Greek idyll and the principal performer in it, just as Christ is in relation to his own life.

In Medieval and Renaissance poetry, Jesus was in fact grafted onto the shepherd-singer of the idyllic convention, pastor happily combining the sense of shepherd and of priest;¹⁹ this conflation represented a major imaginative attempt to square Classical themes and conventions with those of Christianity. Wilde's image of Christ the pastoral singer whose life was his song therefore represents a powerful and suggestive attempt to close, with reference to a venerable literary convention, the Hellenic-Hebraic divide that concerned Arnold and Pater.

In terms of the elegaic form of the idyll, Wilde's characterisation of Christ is especially apposite. The original subject of the elegy was Adonis, who like Dionysus and Demeter was a fertility god associated with seasonal decay and regeneration, and in the elegies of Theocritus the sorrow of his followers at his death becomes at last a hymn of consolation.²⁰ The analogies between Adonis, the slain fertility god whose rebirth is symbolised

in the springtime, and Jesus are obvious, and Wilde does not have to spell out this rich vein of continuity between Classical and Christian literature.

But there is a further powerful way in which Wilde's reference to elegaic conventions extends his view of Christ: for intrinsic to the effect of elegy is the amelioration of sorrow by the beauty of the song of grief itself.²¹ Added to this idea is a related awareness that, in spite of its admiration for nature and simplicity, the elegy enshrines a paradox: it represents a powerful example of man's artistry, becoming, indeed, an image of his creative ability to transform his experiences. Accordingly, we may see Christ's life as a great elegy, "so entirely may Sorrow and Beauty be made one in their meaning and manifestation"; that life is the ultimate vindication of the aesthetic view that the most shattering emotions and episodes in one's life may be integrated into a total design where global form dictates final content, where "manifestation" becomes "meaning". Likewise, his history affirms that, like all the singer-performers of the pastoral tradition, one must consciously create this design oneself: "feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom Sorrow and Suffering were modes through which he could realise his conception of the Beautiful," Jesus therefore "makes of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated Art as no

Greek god ever succeeded in doing" (p. 481).

In his awesome comprehension of the fullness of human experience, and of the great effort of consciousness needed to integrate it all, Christ, for Wilde, succeeds in recharging Hellenism with his own vision.

He is charming when he says, "Take no thought for the morrow. Is not the soul more than meat? Is not the body more than raiment?" A Greek might have said the latter phrase. It is full of Greek feeling. But only Christ could have said both, and so summed up life perfectly for us. (p. 485)

Wilde's Christ, in the final estimation, achieves a series of reconciliations, each of which overlaps with and complements the others: ethics dissolve into aesthetics; religion is absorbed into art; Hebraism and Hellenism combine; the gap closes between life and art. However doubtful the author's own claims to creative discipleship may be at the end of de Profundis, the power, insight and surprise of his final portrait of the man Jesus reads as a complex coda to a body of work that enshrines a determination to save the Nazarean for a secular world, and to recharge that world with the integrity of art.

Indeed, that is the charm of Christ, when all is said. He is just like a work of art himself. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one becomes something. And everybody is predestined to his presence. Once at least in his life each man walks with Christ to Emmaus. (p. 487)

In the context of de Profundis, the function of the exposition on Jesus is to suggest that the author is nearing, through the force of his experiences, a Christlike state of self-knowledge. Like Jesus, the writer has been faced with "the hard Hedonists ... those who waste their freedom in becoming slaves to things" (p. 480), as vividly personified in the person of Lord Alfred Douglas; like Jesus also, he has taken over "in pity and kindness" his friend's responsibilities (p. 425), and in the process has lost everything himself--family, reputation, livelihood, even personal liberty. Yet his aim, he repeats to his correspondent throughout, is to resist any feelings of bitterness or resentment, and especially towards the man whose selfishness, he claims, has caused this downfall; Douglas's culpability, too, must also be imaginatively assumed, even in these circumstances: "I cannot allow you to go through life bearing in your heart the burden of having ruined a man like me I must take the burden from you and put it onto my shoulders" (p. 465). Like Christ, in effect, he must refrain from censuring his adversary, but rather try to awaken the dormant imagination that prevents Douglas from understanding his own conduct: his constant iteration, therefore, is that "the supreme vice is shallowness. Whatever is realised is right."

Whatever our assessment of this identification

with Christ--and it can certainly be argued that Wilde mars his rhetorical purpose by lapses into self-pity and recrimination at various points in his discourse--it is important to understand the resolution towards which the writer is moving. Wilde is suggesting that, by accepting all his punishing experience with full humility, he will attain the complex perfection that only Christ, and his most imaginative and selfless followers, have ever achieved: like the prodigal son, who by facing the viciousness of his deeds transformed them into "beautiful and holy incidents in his life" (p. 487), the writer will discover a profound new affinity with the entire human and natural world (pp. 509-10). He emphasises throughout, moreover, the major lesson that Christ in de Profundis embodies: that only personal experience and discovery of these realities is of value:

Nor am I making any demands on Life. In all that I have said I am simply concerned with my own mental attitude towards life as a whole: and I feel that not to be ashamed of having been punished is one of the first points I must attain to, for the sake of my own perfection, and because I am so imperfect. (p. 471)

Whether or not the writer will succeed in bringing, as a consequence, "a still deeper note, one of greater unity of passion, and directness of impulse" into his art (p. 489), he is ready now to transfer his insights to conduct and to become, like Jesus, an artist in life. Having

had all externals taken away from him, he may regain in their place an inner completion hitherto unknown to him:

But so my portion has been meted out to me; and during the last two months I have, after terrible struggles and difficulties, been able to comprehend some of the lessons hidden in the heart of pain. Clergymen, and people who use phrases without wisdom, sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation. One discerns things that one never discerned before. One approaches the whole of history from a different standpoint. What one had felt dimly through instinct, about Art, is intellectually and emotionally realised with perfect clearness of vision and absolute intensity of apprehension. (p. 473)

What he "had felt dimly" about Art was exactly that wholeness that sorrow affords life: the "revelation" of his traumatic experience is his new awareness that, when the aesthetic sense is operative in actual conduct, it is sorrow that is seen to accord life a wonderful completion, to suggest, in the words I quoted towards the beginning of this chapter, "that 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" (p. 473).

Wilde's delineation of Christ, and the elaborate act of identification that accompanies it, throws his preceding fictive evocations of the Galilean into vivid relief. When he writes, at a point in his dissertation on Jesus, that there are two subjects he would like to write about in the

future--"one is 'Christ, as the precursor of the Romantic movement in life': the other is 'the Artistic life considered in its relation to Conduct" (p. 484)--the irony is twofold. Not only do the subjects of Christ and the "Artistic life" combine in de Profundis itself, but the stories, dramas and parables I have examined in this study anticipate these more explicit formulations. In their different ways, and under different specifics of plot, genre and setting, each fable confirms that individual realisation depends, ultimately, on a full and unabashed acknowledgment of the intrinsic pain and reversal of human existence; that true beauty or completeness of self begins in the denial of the superficial attractions that the world may offer in place of human involvement; and that Christ is the archetype for this acknowledgment and the mode of life that flows from it.

In the fairy tales, the poetic dramas, and the Poems in Prose, various false modes of hedonism are dramatised, but those who are committed to such gratifications fail to achieve that "perfection through joy" that the confident essayist of The Soul of Man espouses. As we have seen, those like the Tetrarch Herod and the Man in "The House of Judgement" who hang back from human involvement are lost in a self-created limbo of spent will and desire: "Never, and in no place," says the condemned Man, "'Have I been able to imagine

[Heaven].'" The more fortunate hedonists advance, like Wilde himself in de Profundis, to a Christlike realisation of wider suffering, and imaginatively transform this apprehension into a personal knowledge. The heroes of The Happy Prince and Pomegranates exemplify this imaginative assumption, and the greater selfhood it engenders; Salome unconsciously approaches it, when in her anguish she cries out that "Love is greater than death. Only love should one consider." Myrrhina is the fully achieved sainte courtesane, who consciously changes her entire mode of life once the search for pleasure has been revealed as a "painted mask" over the mysteries of love and death.

Of course, the Happy Prince and the Little Swallow are innocent exemplars of the change from selfish insularity to a Christlike intercourse and exchange with the world; both statue and bird are to be partly rewarded by eternal residence in a more wonderful version of the walled garden the Happy Prince inhabited in life, a rather literal-sounding "City of Gold" in which they will eternally praise God. Similarly, the young King apparently becomes a resident of such a city too, as he returns to his palace with "the face of an angel" and a glittering ensemble of seeming jewels and gold leaf. While the enigmatic resolutions of "The Fisherman and His Soul" and "The Star Child" imply less straightforward relations between will and achievement, such obvious

rewards become less tangible in the still more stylised versions of this paradigm written after The Soul of Man; "Heaven," for the Man in the House of Judgement, has shrunk to the operations of a single mind, as indeed, Hell has also. In "The Teacher of Wisdom", the enigmatic wholeness-through-loss that Christ personifies cannot be represented in material terms, and the title-character's analogies with a "pearl of great price" and a "vesture without seam" are ironic reductions that he has to abandon in order to understand his master Jesus aright. Likewise, The Teacher of Wisdom cannot ascend, in the manner of the Happy Prince, to what he calls "the uttermost courts of God," but will embrace the more exacting life of the world.

Further, the surround in which these journeys to self-discovery take place also changes, from the idyllic setting of "The Selfish Giant", or "The Nightingale and the Rose", to the corrupt and fractured worlds of Herod's court and of Alexandrian Egypt, in which the lures of hedonism have become altogether more sinister and beguiling. In this sense, the Happy Prince at play in the sunlit confines of Sans Souci may stand as an innocent aesthete of the 1880s to Salome's decadent of the 90s, who has to struggle for self-expression in an altogether more complex setting. The Poems in Prose moreover represent the hazards and pervasive malaise such a hedonistic milieu fosters: the action of "The

"Doer of Good" confirms what is implied in "The Happy Prince" and "The Young King", that a would-be Christlike disciple will be hard-pressed to prevail in a world of such manifest temptations, while "The Master", indeed, inscribes a warning that self-regard may even take the guise of Christian discipleship.

Such complexities, however, only confirm the vital currency of Christ's message for these jaded habitues--even for those who, like the characters in "The Doer of Good", have lapsed into the habits of a sybaritic world. Through the very intensity of their lifestyles these later figures may be closer to the profundity of sorrow than their self-important ascetic counterparts, who are too often--like the Baptist, the Thebaid dweller, and the Teacher of Wisdom--cleft in a false image of their own righteousness. The plight of Myrrhina, Salome and the Man in "The Teacher of Wisdom" confirms Wilde's view in de Profundis, that Christ understands how the intensity of sin may be transformed by the imagination into the elements of a new self-realisation; that "Riches and Pleasure seemed to him to be really greater tragedies than Poverty and Sorrow" (p. 480).

In The Soul of Man Wilde had carelessly dismissed the Christian ideals of "abandoning" or "resisting" society; but in de Profundis the writer resolutely rephrases the Christian ideal to the world, and thereby presages a far more dynamic

transformation of society and the individual than the glib prescriptions of "Socialism" and "Science" in the earlier essay really allow. In focusing at last on the inner change that must shape all wider conduct, the writer of de Profundis is in accord with the "secret" of Arnold's Jesus--except that, of course, for Wilde the imaginative feat involved is an initiation into a more complex mode of aesthetic apprehension, rather than a moral enactment per se. The societal transformation anticipated in "The Young King" and "The Star-Child" become, in de Profundis, the brief and province of all those who realise with Jesus the indivisible nature of humanity, "the divided races as a unity." As we shall see in the final chapter, The Ballad of Reading Gaol represents the author's most overt attempt to transpose that vision into resolutely social terms--an attempt that involves, most strikingly, a novel poetics of direct utterance.

Ultimately, Christ's function in the fairy tales, Salome, Courtisane and "The Teacher of Wisdom" is to personify the shaping power of the imagination, "by which, and through which," says the writer of de Profundis, "we can understand others in their real, as in their ideal relations" (p. 445). This fundamentally aesthetic practice is the "secret" of Jesus, the real sense in which, as Wilde asserted in The Soul of Man, the Galilean's essential message to humanity was "Be thyself." To be oneself, the Happy

Prince and the Young Hermit discover, is to be all others simultaneously; for "while Christ did not say to me, 'Live for others,' he pointed out that there was no difference at all between the lives of others and one's own life"; and consequently, "since his coming the history of each separate individual is, or can be made, the history of the world" (p. 480).

At the end of de Profundis the author, having presented his fables as self-revelation--"Of course all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my art. Some of it is in "The Happy Prince"; some of it in "The Young King": ... in The Soul of Man it is written down simply and in letters too easy to read: it is one of the refrains whose recurring motifs make Salome so like a piece of music" (p. 475)--and having associated himself with the Passion of Christ, serves notice that he too will translate Christ's vision of the indivisible and suffering world into conduct. Like Christ, he will become the supreme artist, whose daily existence will have the penetrating coherence and symmetry that, like the "marvellous, many-petalled rose" of art in Vivian's analogy, will offer an image of completeness to all imaginative spectators. In the last analysis the author-as-subject offers himself as the Christlike hero of his own narrative, and both exemplifies and supersedes all others. His traumatic relationship with Alfred Douglas has become, like Charles Kingsley's accusations of Dr. Newman, the occasion for a new

definition of the Christlike self.²² Like the eloquent defender of the Catholic faith, the author of this aesthetic apologia writes, in his concluding paragraph, to a wider audience beyond his correspondent:²³

What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes, to make the world look on it with different eyes, to make God look on it with different eyes. This I cannot do by ignoring it, or slighting it, or praising it, or denying it. It is only to be done by fully accepting it as an inevitable part of the evolution of my life and character: by bowing my head to everything that I have suffered. How far away 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 realise those aspirations, shows you quite clearly. But do not forget in what a terrible school I am sitting at my task. And incomplete, imperfect, as I am, yet from me you may have still 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. Your affectionate friend

OSCAR WILDE

Notes

¹ De Profundis, ed. F.B. Foreman (1905, 1908; repr. London: Collins, 1949); authoritative edition in Letters, ed. R. Hart-Davis, pp. 423-311. For the complicated publishing history of this lengthy epistle, see Letters, p. 423-4. All page numbers in this chapter as to this edition, and are given in the text.

² Pater translated Coleridge's organicism into purely aesthetic concerns in his essay on "Style," in Appreciations (London: Macmillan, 1889). Wilde commented favourably on this essay in his review of Appreciations. See "Mr. Pater's Last Volume," in The Speaker, I, vi (February 8, 1890) pp. 144-46; repr. in Reviews, ed. R.B. Ross, pp. 538-45.

³ See "The Rise of Historical Criticism," in Works, p. 1130-1.

⁴ The compliment to Renan is especially apposite: Renan himself had praised the Galilean countryside through which he had travelled in 1862 as being "the fifth Gospel," because of the light it shed on the circumstances of Christ's ministry. See La Vie, p. 28.

⁵ Arnold remarks in Literature and Dogma: "But there remains the question what righteousness really is: the method and secret and sweet reasonableness of Jesus" (chap. XII). See

Hart-Davis, Letters, p. 472; fn. 1.

⁶ Pater, Marius the Epicurean: his Sensations and Ideas (London: Macmillan, 1884). Marius' literal and metaphoric journey in search of a satisfyingly comprehensive lifestyle is one of the sources for Dorian Gray's own ventures. On the relations between Pater's novel and Dorian Gray, see Isobel Murray, Introd., The Picture of Dorian Gray; and "Some Elements in the Composition of The Picture of Dorian Gray," University of Durham, V, lxiv (1972), pp. 220-31.

Pater's tentative approaches in Marius the Epicurean towards an acknowledgment of divinity is perceptively analysed by U. Knoefelmacher, in Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963).

⁷ Intentions, p. 176. Wilde quotes the same passage from Pater's essay in his review of Appreciations. See "Mr. Pater's Last Volume," in Reviews.

⁸ See Tim Dowley, ed., The History of Christianity (London: Lion Publishers, 1977), passim. The poetic dramas and the Poems in Prose, of course, reflect such periods.

⁹ Baudelaire is singled out as being especially representative of the modern spirit in both "The Critic as Artist" (Intentions, 165-6) and in de Profundis itself (p. 480). The French poet's influence on the format and style of the Poems in

Prose is referred in the last chapter.

¹⁰ The booklists Wilde compiled and submitted to the Home Office between 1895 and '96 are reprinted in Letters, p. 405-6, 416-7, 423. It is apparent from this selection that Wilde was interested both in general surveys of the development of religious ideas, and in how specific individuals translated these ideas into personal testimony. Jan B. Gordon has drawn attention to the confessional mode of many of these writers, and their influence on the themes and structure of de Profundis. See "Wilde and Newman: the Confessional Mode," in Renaissance, IV, xxii (1970).

¹¹ "The Gnostics," in The History of Christianity, pp. 90-100. It is probable, however, that Wilde already knew about Gnostic ideas beforehand, as the Poems in Prose and the poetic dramas reflect these explicit formulations.

¹² "A Batch of Novels," Reviews, p. 159. See Woodcock, "Paganism and Christianity," p. 77.

¹³ Hart-Davis, Letters, p. 487, fn. 1.

¹⁴ La Vie, p. 56.

¹⁵ Hart-Davis, Letters, p. 482, fn. 1.

¹⁶ Schweitzer, Historical Jesus, pp. 86-8.

¹⁷ Wilde demonstrates his acquaintance with contemporary German theology in this remark; see Schweitzer, "Questions Concerning the Aramaic Language," in Historical Jesus, pp. 269-79.

¹⁸ See H.E. Toliver, Pastoral Forms and

Attitudes (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971). My remarks on the Pastoral are largely derived from Toliver's comprehensive study of this subject.

¹⁹ Peter V. Marinelli, Pastoral (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 10.

²⁰ Helen Cooper, Pastoral: Medieval into Renaissance (Ipswich: D.S. Brewer, 1977), p. 6.

²¹ Wilde's acquaintance with the pastoral tradition obviously stemmed from his undergraduate studies in the classics, in which of course he excelled. As I point out in the Appendix to this study, much of his early poetry is broadly pastoral in theme and format, and includes, amongst others, a mellifluous tribute to the first known idyllist, "Theocritus" (Poems, 1881). A devoted reader throughout his life of Arnold's poetry, he was especially fond of Thyris and The Scholar-Gypsy, Arnold's own excursions into elegy, which he mentions appreciatively throughout his correspondence (cf. Letters, pp. 60, 490, 779). His early sonnet "The Grave of Keats" (Poems) may be regarded as an ornate excursion into the elegaic convention, with its concluding lines: "And tears like ours shall keep your memory green / And make it flourish like a Basil tree." In an undergraduate letter Wilde had moreover favourably compared Arnold's Thrysis to Adonais (Letters, p. 60), Shelley's famous elegy on the death of Keats, and a powerful imaginative influence on

Wilde's own conception of the artist-martyr Keats.

22 Jan B. Gordon draws certain analogies between de Profundis and Newman's great work of spiritual autobiography and theological defence, both in method and intention: "The effectiveness," he writes, "of both Newman's Apologia and de Profundis depends on the way in which each man gives an account of how his mind 'moved' to conviction, so that the reader can be persuaded of its honesty" ("Wilde and Newman: The Confessional Mode," p. 185). The structural and thematic similarities between these works is the culmination of Wilde's lifelong respect and admiration for the erstwhile leader of the Oxford Movement, a respect founded on the "fine 'temper' in which he always wrote" (Letters, p. 274), rather than a sympathy for Newman's theology--although, as is well documented, Wilde throughout his life was attracted to the ritualism and certitude of the Catholic Church (see Letters, pp. 19, 20, 33, 564, 821-2). I expand on the youthful poet's near-conversion to Rome in n. 7 in the Appendix.

23 In a covering letter to his future literary executor, Robert Ross, Wilde makes it clear that de Profundis is intended, ultimately, for posterity: "Some day the truth will have to be known: not necessarily in my lifetime or in Douglas's: but I am not prepared to sit in the grotesque pillory they put me into for all time" (Letter to Ross from H.M. Prison, Reading, 1 April 1897, Letters, p. 512). As

well as sending a copy of the letter to Douglas, Wilde instructs Ross to extract certain passages (including substantially the dissertation on Christ and the nature of sorrow) for private distribution to friends (Letters, pp. 513-4). From these passages Ross prepared the expurgated de Profundis that was published posthumously (de Profundis, London: Methuen, 1905).

6. The Community Restored: Christ and
The Ballad of Reading Gaol

The Ballad of Reading Gaol, published in February 1898, after a long and difficult gestation in Berneval and Naples,¹ represents Wilde's most ambitious attempt to offer Christ's life and ministry as the reconciling agent in a far harsher universe than he had previously allowed. Abandoning the poetics of all his fictive work since "The Decay of Lying,"² Wilde attempts to render the hard actualities of a world finally divorced from the "dear Hellenic hours"³ of earlier pastoral refuges, the world "built ... out of Sorrow" referred to in de Profundis; a world in which the divisive tendencies of the post-Paterian era have become the sordid cruelties of a Dantesque prison-hell, in which the unfortunate inmates suffer apart from each other and those who arbitrarily condemn them. In this context, the imperative of Jesus is more urgent than ever; for, while the mood of so much of the poem is one of scorn and revulsion at the plight of those in the thrall of "Humanity's machine" (V, 7), and a significant part of the Ballad is taken up with an angry protest at the contemporary prison service,⁴ the narrative continually asserts that, in the universality of human guilt and sorrow, lies the prospect of regeneration--of that fond Hellenic ideal of self-perfection.

The choice of the ballad genre, with its traditionally direct, colloquial diction and its ready assumption of an attentive audience, is the most striking indication of the poet's desire to impress the immediate subject-matter--the trial, imprisonment and execution of an anonymous Horse Guardsman, the "Trooper C.T.W." of the dedication⁵--and the wider theme of human guilt and recognition upon his readers. In effect, of course, as Arthur Symonds long ago pointed out, Reading Gaol is actually more meditation than ballad;⁶ like its counterpart of a century before, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,⁷ it is a consciously literary exercise that--while laying stylistic and thematic claim to contemporary appeal and general significance--asserts in sum the peculiar consciousness of its author. The balladic subject-matter is the occasion for the author to define his own experience and its value: as Wilde wrote to Frank Harris later in 1898, "the more objective a work of art is in form, the more subjective it is in matter."⁸ However, unlike the drama, prose-romance, or fairy-tale, Wilde's recasting of balladic form enables him to create a narrator who both participates in and reflects on the action, an "I" that speaks through the strictures of genre of its creator. If de Profundis attempts to offer the teller's life as his definitive subject to posterity,⁹ Reading Gaol likewise proposes

in an accessible form to Wilde's own era that "C.C.3"'s vision, at last, is the burden of the poem.

That vision involves the painful realisation by all involved in the guardsman's tragedy--narrator, prisoners, C.T.W. himself--of the urgent value of repentance, whereby "the moment of initiation" into a new wholeness both personal and communal is forged. The composite vision of Christ in de Profundis, whereby the individual may gain, through humility and love, "an extended, a Titan personality," (Letters, p. 480) is exemplified in the Ballad. In the last analysis Reading Gaol concerns the indivisible community of fellow penitents that suffering, and mutual selfless pity, creates:

And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn. (IV, 23)

In trying to organise and integrate his harrowing material the poet returns at last to the example of Christ, whose suffering, humility and imagination vivifies individual and social endeavour. As I hope to demonstrate, the sequence of Christian references offers thematic and structural coherence to a text that, arguably, is the most well-read and least understood long poem of the fin de siecle.

At the beginning, the condemned man is ambiguously linked with Christ--specifically, with Christ's martyrdom, and its significance for his followers. This is at once implied in the first

stanza of Part I, in which the narrator outlines the trooper's fateful deed with stark brevity:

He did not wear his scarlet coat,
 For blood and wine are red,
 And blood and wine were on his hands
 When they found him with the dead,
 The poor dead woman whom he loved,
 And murdered in her bed. (I, 1)

Here is the stock material of innumerable ballads: a man, probably a soldier, kills his sweetheart in a sensational and drunken act of violence. The situation is so archetypal that no motive is even presented; what is of interest to a folk audience is the resultant plight of the ballad hero, which MacEdward Leach says is always "a man becoming man and facing the one moment in life that destroys or reveals all."¹⁰ The emphatic reference to the "blood and wine" that were on his hands not only confirms his guilt, but evokes too the powerful imagery of the Eucharist, implying that he repeats the death of Christ by murdering his beloved. Trooper C.T.W., already the everyman of traditional balladry, is also the universal parricide who destroyed Jesus; the "blood and wine" is both the sign of Cain and the sign of Christ's "new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of their sins" (Matthew 26: 29). Later the relationship between his crime and his eventual self-perfection, activated by the subject's repentance, is confirmed in a bold recollection of these opening lines: "And the crimson stain that was of Cain / Became Christ's snow-white seal"

(V, 17).

In Part I itself, however, the deft but resonant invocation of Christ's sacrifice to human dissociation in stanza 1 anticipates the ringing credo, that "each man kills the thing he loves," whether he is punished for it or not (I, 7-9). This declaration confirms that what the trooper has "on his hands" is precisely the mark of Cain, and his culpability is only more obvious and, in a sense, more honest than most. Having discovered the trooper's probable fate ("that fellow's got to swing"), the narrator recognises the universal burden of guilt hinted at in the first stanza:

I only knew what hunted thought
 Quickened his step, and why
 He looked upon the garish day
 With such a wistful eye;
 The man had killed the thing he loved,
 And so he had to die.

*

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
 By all let this be heard,
 Some do it with a bitter look,
 Some with a flattering word.
 The coward does it with a kiss,
 The brave man with a sword! (I, 6-7)

If Christ's death is alluded to as the archetypal instance of fratricide, the guardsman is a more obvious accomplice than most of the disciple who betrayed his master "with a kiss." As man's atomistic selfishness is universal, Trooper C.T.W. surely no more deserves punishment than his gaolers; and in a harrowing catalogue of negatives beginning with "He does not die a death of shame / On a day of dark disgrace" (I, 10) C.C.3 imagines in a series

of precise, vivid images the last days of the condemned man's life, in ironic contrast to all those fellow-sinners who escape censure (I, 10-16).

Yet, in presenting his subject as a victim of man's arbitrary justice in a divided world, Wilde suggests in these stanzas that the man in the condemned cell may himself become a Christlike martyr to human dissociation; through the experience of acute suffering and remorse, he may leave the company of Judas to become an unwitting imitator of the Man of Sorrows himself. As the narrator imagines the guardsman's emotional state before the execution, a series of telling parallels with Christ's Passion highlight the sufferer's changing status: like Jesus, he has been condemned by both civic and ecclesiastical authorities, by the "shivering Chaplain robed in white" as well as the "Sheriff" and the "Governor" (I, 12); he prays too "for his agony to pass," as does Christ at Gethsemane and later at Golgotha (I, 16); on the eve of death his throat is afflicted by a "sickening thirst," like the sufferer's on the Cross (I, 14). The process climaxes in stanza 16, when Trooper C.T.W. realises that the Chaplain, "shivering" with guilt as well as cold, is a modern equivalent of the Jewish high priests who condemned Christ to death; at the point of death the guardsman feels "upon his shuddering cheek / The kiss of Caiaphas" (I, 16). From being one of Judas' companions, Trooper

C.T.W. has become--like the Galilean--one of his victims, ironically betrayed by the Chaplain who should exemplify Christ's loving ministry.¹¹

The peculiar horror of the narrator's description of the hanging derives from the stark physical details--the hangman "with his gardener's gloves," the "hammer-blows" of the doctor's watch, the "little roof of glass" at which the condemned man stares in the hanging shed¹²--all of which convey the livid consciousness of the sufferer, trying "to weep" and "to pray" at the prospect of death. These stanzas imply that, in as much as he becomes acutely aware of his deeds and their significance, he may achieve Christ's stature; and this idea--which derives from Wilde's assertion in de Profundis, that "the moment of repentance is the moment of initiation"--will be developed and confirmed as the trooper actually approaches the moment of death imagined by C.C.3 in Part I.

Yet at this preliminary phase the narrator is anticipating the movement of his subject's mind, for it is apparent in Part II that Trooper C.T.W. is far from repentance or self-realisation. As in the opening stanzas of Part I, "his step seemed light and gay" while walking in the exercise yard, and although he clearly regrets his captivity and longs for freedom--he gazes with "a wistful eye" on that recurring image of liberty, the "little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky" (II,

1-2)--he evinces a bold insouciance out of keeping with the gravity of his plight. Rather than self-examination, he in fact looks forward to the extinction of awareness altogether:

And twice a day he smoked his pipe,
 And drank his quart of beer:
 His soul was resolute, and held
 No hiding-place for fear;
 He often said that he was glad
 The hangman's day was near. (III, 4)

There is a subtle disjunction in these lines between the prisoner's rather dogged display of appetite--the "pipe" and "beer" being, of course, the privilege of the doomed man, spared the usual diet of lime-ridden "bitter bread" described in Part V--and his apparent inner calm. That his soul is defensively "held" like a stockade against the prospect of fear hints at an inner struggle to stifle all troubling reflection; it is accordingly not surprising that "he said that he was glad / The hang-man's day was near." Nevertheless, his successful intransigence in the face of his crime is confirmed on the last night of his life, when he is described "as one who lies and dreams / In a pleasant meadow-land," a puzzle to the watching warders who are used to some signs of remorse (III, 14).

While the guardsman is unrepentant, however, a remarkable transformation is about to take place among the watching prisoners, as they begin imaginatively to assume the burden of his guilt. Each

of the nameless "souls in pain" of Part I who is trapped, as the narrator later puts it, "in his separate hell" (IV, 2) in morbid attachment to "the great or little thing" that has brought him to Reading Gaol, will forge an unexpected community of sympathy with his fellows. Focused on the plight of the condemned man, the sheer force of the convicts' emotional involvement initiates them into a communal Christian imitatio that renders them all kin. Trooper C.T.W.'s fate presents an occasion for Christ's private and social gospel to be realised, as the "crimson stain" of human fratricide, represented by his execution, becomes through the imaginative intervention of the inmates the "snow-white seal" of a new fraternity.

The progress from self-absorption to sympathy steadily develops during Parts II and III, as the prisoners "gaze with dull amaze" at the determinedly cheerful Trialist (II, 5-6). The extent of the deepening concentration on his plight is registered in the narrator's changing nominative, from the "I" of Part I to the "we" of Part II; but the morbidity and despair heretofore felt by the prisoners is highlighted by C.C.3's only actual encounter with the guardsman, as they wordlessly pass each other "like two ships that pass in storm" shortly before the Trialist's removal from the commonyard (II, 12). This futile meeting seems to confirm for the narrator their hopeless but deserved alien-

ation, without at this stage suggesting a common bond between them:

A prison wall was round us both,
Two outcast men we were;
The world had thrust us from its heart
And God from out His care;
And the iron gin that waits for Sin
Had caught us in its snare. (II, 13).

At this point the condemned man's presence merely reminds the narrator of his own wretched plight; while he laments his "outcast" status, he acknowledges its rightness in the terms both of God and the world. It is apparent that prisoner C.C.3's pity for the other is, in fact, self-reflexive. Obsessed with his own guilt, and incapable of transcending it in the interests of a profounder reintegration of the self, his pangs of sympathy simply reveal that accidia which, we are told in de Profundis, characterises those who have not understood Christ's vision of suffering and sin, "beautiful, holy things, and modes of perfection" (Letters, p. 486).

The prisoners' imaginative identification with the guardsman gathers momentum in Part III once he has been sentenced "in the black dock's awful pen" and removed to exercise alone in the Debtor's Yard (II, 11). No longer actually faced with the pathetic bravery of his "cricket cap" and buoyant step, his fellow inmates focus on his irreversible fate, forgetting "the bitter lot / That waits for fool and knave" (III, 10) as they

begin to experience the "terror" of guilt he himself has avoided thus far. The unconscious exchange between the prisoners is vividly evoked in stanzas 7-10, in which the numbing, mindless monotony of gaol routine becomes a spontaneous ritual of sympathy, an outward expression of the emotion they share:

We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones,
 We turned the dusty drill:
 We banged the tins, and bawled the hymns,
 And sweated on the mill:
 But in the heart of every man
 Terror was lying still. (III, 9)

The insistent charge of those blunt verbs-- "sewed," "broke," "turned," "banged," "bawled," "sweated"--in a suitably formulaic metre and syntax, is offset by the ominous apodosis, in which trochaic stress--and an unsettling continuous tense--combine to affirm the pervasive "Terror ... lying still" beneath all this frenetic activity. Lost amongst these tasks is the regular church service, not a source of spiritual strength or consolation but another senseless privation to be "bawled" through like all the other turns of "Humanity's machine," as C.C.3 later calls it (V, 7). This grim parody of Christian observance contributes to the gathering indictment of organised religion--the most biting and savage in Wilde's fictive work--which the poet opposes at last with "the spirit of the Christ who is not in churches" (Letters, p. 489).

The heightening tension in Part III climaxes

with the convicts' discovery as they "tramped in from work" a few days later of a freshly dug grave, obviously intended for the condemned man (III, 10-11). As this portends his execution "ere one dawn grew fair," the gruesome sight compells a desperate effort of will and imagination from the prisoners; with each "soul intent / On Death and Dread and Doom," the inmates abandon self-absorbtion completely in an awesome attempt to intercede for the one "who had to swing." That night will be devoted to a communal prayer of such intensity that they hope to expiate his crimes, shedding "as molten lead" their tears "for the blood we had not spilt" (III, 16). The sacrifices of the Christ-like heroes of fairy-tale are here reformulated; whereas the Happy Prince or the Young King assume the collective suffering of others, in Reading Gaol it is the members of a community who take up an individual's fate as their own--with powerful regenerative consequences for both.

While a novel community of fellow-sufferers is being fused, however, the subject of their compassion steadfastly resists self-appraisal. Unaware both of his crime, or the vigil of the others, the guardsman's untroubled sleep "as in a pleasant meadow-land" is ironically juxtaposed with the wakeful torment of the prisoners:

But there is no sleep when men must weep
 Who never yet have wept:
 So we--the fool, the fraud, the knave--

That endless vigil kept,
 And through each brain on hands of pain
 Another's terror crept.¹³

Alas! It is a fearful thing
 To feel another's guilt!
 For, right within, the Sword of Sin
 Pierced to its poisoned hilt,
 And as molten lead were the tears we
 shed
 For the blood we had not spilt. (III,
 15-16)

It is the privilege of this motley society of outcasts, "the fool, the fraud, the knave," to experience with Christ the suffering of others. By such imaginative endeavour, Wilde wrote in de Profundis, Jesus "gave to man an extended, a Titan personality." If the first stanza quoted above reiterates that it is "another's guilt" they are feeling, the second highlights the unselfish courage of the prisoners; the vengeful blade of the guardsmen is now turned upon themselves, for it becomes the "Sword of Sin" that likewise turns them into victims--evincing tears of such grief that they issue forth "as molten lead". Like the "casque of burning steel" into which the sky is turned by the narrator's feverish imagination, when he first hears of the trooper's fate (I, 5), the "molten" tears signify the profound self-shattering torment the convicts are experiencing.

Acute suffering, as the writer of de Profundis observes, liberates the self from old partialities; "pierced to [the] poisoned hilt" by C.T.W.'s deed, the intercessors will indeed die from past loyalties

in order to be reborn in the venerable imagery of St. Matthew's Gospel: "he that loseth his life for my sake will find it" (11: 39). The extent of the prisoners' empathy, to the crucial point of remorse itself, is powerfully evoked in an allusion to Christ's lowest emotional moment on Calvary:

All through the night we knelt and prayed,
 Mad mourners of a corse!
 The troubled plumes of midnight shook
 The plumes upon a hearse:
 And bitter wine upon a sponge
 Was the savour of remorse. (III, 18)

At the nadir both of the long night and of his emotional resources, with the utter darkness a portent only of the guardsman's coming death, the narrator experiences the repentance of the murderer who as yet lies asleep. Prostrate in humility and "mad" grief, C.C.3 in effect relives Christ's despair before his own death on the Cross, when the "bitter wine upon a sponge" offered on a reed by those who watched him gave him a paltry respite before death. The Gospel reference confirms the prisoners' profound imitatio, as they live out the Saviour's own despair and agony in their concern for the condemned man.

The doubts and fears that assail the narrator and his fellows at this bleak point are personified, in the following lengthy sequence, as "crooked shapes of Terror" (III, 19) that beset each man at his prayers, and distract him with a mocking parody of his intentions: "with subtle sneer,

and fawning leer, / They helped us at our prayers" (III, 25). Like the fawns of the woodland who "make mouths" at the praying priest in "The Fisherman and His Soul," these frightening apparitions figure forth the penitents' own fears, although they are terrifyingly real to the thoroughly distraught prisoners:

To men whose lives were held in gyves,
 And whose feet might not be free,
 Ah! wounds of Christ! they were living
 things,
 Most terrible to see. (III, 24)¹⁴

The bizarre vision of these "antics" reinforces our sense of a controlling imagination dangerously obsessed with fear and horror, and--given that these stanzas fall into the jarringly decorative archaisms of Wilde's older "romantic" style¹⁵--surely suggest the awesome struggle of that narrator on behalf of his fellow inmates.

With a mere hour to go before the execution, the prisoners' "Hope" that the murderer has sought absolution for his deed is described as "dead," and their urge to intercede is exhausted: "We did not dare to breathe a prayer, / or to give our anguish scope" (II, 31). With remorseless precision, Wilde depicts the despair of the convicts in images of lifelessness, sterility and decay: in their anguish they are "as men who through a fen / Of filthy darkness grope" (III, 31); imagining death, their tongues are "thick with thirst" (III, 33); once drained by futility, they sat "like

things of store in a valley lone" (III, 34), as if deprived of human resemblance. At last, at the fateful stroke of eight, the entire body of prisoners expresses its pity for the guardsman in an involuntary wail, "like the sound that frightened marshes hear / From some leper in his lair" (III, 35). The cumulative effect is to suggest a complete psychic and physical exhaustion, an expense of spirit on behalf of Trooper C.T.W. that is awesome in its dimensions.

Yet the anguished vigil of mourning, and the "savour of remorse" each has tasted, is not to be in vain; as the prisoners utter their "wail / Of impotent despair" at the apparent hopelessness of his plight, an answering sound is suddenly heard. Irresistibly fusing the trooper's last apprehensions with his own imagination, the narrator evokes the seering moment of the murderer's repentance:

And as one sees most fearful things
 In the crystal of a dream,
 We saw the greasy hempen rope
 Hooked to the blackened beam,
 And heard the prayer the hangman's snare
 Strangled in a scream.

And all the woe that moved him so
 That he gave that bitter cry,
 And the wild regrets, and the bloody
 sweats,
 None knew so well as I:
 For he who lives more lives than one
 More deaths than one must die. (III,
 36-7)

At the horrific moment of death, the convicts' prayers are strangely answered; Trooper C.T.W.'s "bitter cry" betrays his realisation of guilt at

last, and the emotions that impell his half-strangled "prayer" initiate him into the veracity of sorrow. The listening narrator's response is immediate and heartfelt, for he realises that the condemned man's expiation, "the woe that moved him so," is shared by himself--a fellow-sinner humbled by the other's suffering into a new apprehension of his own fate. This, we remember, is Christ's "creed" in de Profundis, that the virtue of sin is the painful renunciation it obliges of the individual:

But why? Simply because otherwise he would be unable to realise what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that. it is the means whereby one alters one's past. (Letters, p. 487)

C.C.3 realises with the force of a revelation why he has understood the other's plight, "the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats"; like the apologist in de Profundis, his affinity with the universal condition of human sorrow arises from his own acceptance of pain.

The force of this discovery moves him to a haunting encapsulation of Christ's central credo: "he who lives more lives than one / More deaths than one must die." It is the challenge of Jesus' disciples to engage so profoundly in the sufferings of others that, living "more lives" than their own, they will perforce experience what Wilde in de Profundis called "the secret of life," the universality of suffering that unifies all existence

(Letters, p. 473). The convicts' instinctive pity for the condemned murderer has led them by degrees to recognise, not only their own need for repentance and the deeper vision it engenders, but the common burden of human sorrow. The concluding lines of stanza 37 assert the narrator's recognition that his sins enable him, like Christ, "to perceive the divided races as a unity" (Letters, p. 477) and so to offer unconditional love.

Part IV of the poem charts the awed mood of the prisoners on the day after the execution. It is clear that, while the familiar forms are being enacted, each man has been so deeply affected by the hanged man's fate, that they have all unconsciously exchanged places with him:

Out into God's sweet air we went,
 But not in wonted way,
 For this man's face was white with fear,
 And that man's face was grey,
 And I never saw sad men who looked
 So wistfully at the day. (IV, 3)

Gazing up "wistfully" at the sky, like their former companion, the shocked and numbed inmates are unable to imagine the guardsman's redemption, or their own; the horror of his death still absorbs them, as "The Memory of dreadful things / Rushed like a dreadful wind" through each mind (st. 8).

The sight of the dead man's gaze, merely "a stretch of mud and sand / By the hideous prison wall" (IV, 10), prompts a fervid meditation on the murderer's present state. In flat contrast to the callous neglect of the authorities, who

buried him in "the unblessed spot" without due ceremony or recognition, the narrator imagines how "all the woe that moved him so" could precipitate a Christlike self-perfection, a beautiful new integrity that is figured in the familiar "roses" of Wildean imagery. Conflating the "heart that breaks in music" from The English Renaissance with the lovely blossoms of forgiveness and completion that bloom for the selfless heroes of "The Nightingale and the Rose" or "The Young King", C.C.3 recasts the venerable briar-roses motif of Christian balladry in a heartfelt vision:

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,
 Since the barren staff that the pilgrim
 bore
 Bloomed in the great Pope's sight?
 (IV, 15)

This allusion to Tannhäuser, whose "barren staff" flowered as a sign of God's forgiveness for his indulgences, is precise and apposite; not only is it a numinous symbol for the wide-ranging love and purpose of Christ, but it implicitly condemns the heartless strictures of a Chaplaincy that--like the "great Pope" who initially spurned Tannhäuser--refuses Christian rites to the guilty man. As with the little Nightingale of the earlier story, the rose that "would ... whiter blow" with the nourishment of the penitent's heart signifies a wonderful perfection gained through suffering--a perfection that "brings [Christ's] will to light."

But the evocation of roses "red, red" and "white" is merely a vision; in the case of Trooper C.T.W., the unblessed spot / Will sterile be and bare" (IV, 13), and the reference to the fabled Christian knight is a bitter irony that condemns the abjurations of the established church in the terms of its founder. The authorities' denial of "root or seedling" (IV, 13) to the guardsman's grave recalls the Priest's similar edict in "The Fisherman and his Soul": "set no mark above them, no sign of any kind, that none may know the place of their resting" (Pomegranates, p. 235).

The narrator's indictment of the established church gains especial force, moreover, from a complex of allusions to the unfeeling burial of Ophelia in Hamlet. When Wilde's mouthpiece reflects that--in place of the beautiful flowers that would express Christ's forgiveness to his fellow prisoners--"The shard, the pebble, and the flint, / Are what they give us there" (st. 16), he is recalling the callous remarks of the Priest who is unwilling to grant Christian rites to an apparent suicide in Shakespeare's tragedy:

She should in ground unsanctified have
lodg'd,
Till the last Trumpet. For charitable
prayer,
Shards, flints, and pebbles, should be
thrown on her. (V, 1, 188-90)

The attitude of this "churlish Priest" (as Laertes angrily calls him) clearly resembles that of the

Caiaphas-Chaplain of Reading Gaol, who--we are presently told--"would not kneel to pray / By his dishonoured grave" (st. 22). Implicitly, the dead murderer buried in that unmarked "stretch of mud and sand" by the prison-wall (st. 17) is associated with the innocent maid Ophelia, whose death also indicts a corrupt society; he, although clearly a sinner, will not--as the prison authorities think--"taint / Each simple seed they sow" (st. 14), but like Ophelia would send forth beautiful and transfigurative blooms.

The narrator's vision of the roses that might blow over the "dishonoured grave" recalls Laertes' evocation of his sister's flower-like redemption after death: "from her fair and unpolluted flesh, / May violets spring" (V, 1, 199-200). The contrast between the innocent maid (whom Laertes earlier calls a "rose of may"), and the vengeful lover of Reading Gaol, serves to highlight the depth and scope of Christ's forgiveness; even the most obdurate and sinful human being may be perfected through repentance, as Christ's "strange way ... brings His will to light."

In the ensuing sequence, the entire prison system is starkly exposed as a terrible monument to human dissociation, gruesome evidence that all men, however unthinkingly, "kill the thing they love." Again, it is Christ's loving vision of the indivisible unity of the world that frames

the exposure, and explains its declamatory tone:

This too I know--and wise it were
 If each could know the same--
 That every prison that men build
 Is built with bricks of shame,
 And bound with bars lest Christ should
 see
 How men their brothers maim. (V, 3)

In this grim context of regulated alienation, it remains to the hanged man's fellow outcasts to intercede for him, to forge a more genuine community of Christ's followers from their mutual suffering. This idea is expressed in one of the most memorable stanzas of the ballad,¹⁶ one that follows a final condemnation of the Chaplain who, like Ophelia's "Churlish Priest," fails to witness Christ's loving forgiveness:

The Chaplain would not kneel to pray
 By his dishonoured grave:
 Nor mark it with that blessed Cross
 That Christ for sinners gave,
 Because the man was one of those
 Whom Christ came down to save.

Yet all is well: he has but passed
 To Life's appointed bourne;
 And alien tears will fill for him
 Pity's long-broken urn,
 For his mourners will be outcast men,
 And outcasts always mourn. (IV, 22-3)

The funeral urn is the pivotal image of stanza 23; like the "dishonoured grave," such a receptacle no longer betokens the respect of the living for the deceased, but is "long-broken" through disuse in a callous and fractured world. The vase can only be reconstituted by the "alien tears" of those who recognise their own state in his. Only those who have been humbled by suffering themselves will

be able to understand; open like the writer of de Profundis to the authentic condition of the world, these "outcast men" alone form a genuine Christian church. As Christ in de Profundis made himself the spokesman of the "voiceless world of pain" all men and women inhabit (Letters, p. 481) so his true imitators are those dispossessed of the world, for "outcasts always mourn."

In Part V, having expressed in fervent accents the cruel degradations of gaol existence, the narrator enlarges on the grace or self-perfection that awaits such "outcast men." The outrages inflicted by the prison system are real and manifest, for instead of restorative flowers that may "heal / A common man's despair," only the "poison weeds" of human depravity bloom--as they do in Hamlet's imagination¹⁷--in these stifling confines (V, 5); every insult, privation or callous act experienced by the inmates brutalises consciousness. This idea is deftly represented by the exact correlation of external punishment with inner conflict: "every stone one lifts by day," the narrator declares, "Becomes one's heart by night" (V, 9). The solution, as the writer of de Profundis attests, is not to resist, to cultivate resentment and hatred, but to accept all these degradations as one's due:

The important thing, the thing that lies before me, the thing that I have to do, or be for the brief remainder of my days one maimed, marred, and incomplete, is to absorb into my nature all that has been done to me, to make it part of me,

to accept it without complaint, fear, or reluctance. The supreme vice is shallowness. Whatever is realised is right. (Letters, p. 469)

The supreme example of such self-integration is, of course, Jesus, he who successfully bore "on his own shoulders the burden of the entire world" (Letters, p. 477) and made his life an image of this achievement. In seeking to imitate the humility of Christ, Wilde turns in the Ballad to the traditional Christian imagery of the heart, hardened by perseverance in sin, that Jesus' love tries to enter. Once more in Wilde's work, the breaking heart that signifies the loss and regaining of selfhood is evoked; in this instance, it breaks not "in music" or into beautiful bloom, but into the sweet odour with which Mary Magdalene anointed Christ as an expression of her love:

And every human heart that breaks
 In prison-cell or yard,
 Is as that broken box that gave
 Its treasure to the Lord,
 And filled the unclean leper's house
 With the scent of costliest nard.

Ah! happy those whose hearts can break
 And peace of pardon win!
 How else may man make straight his plan
 And cleanse his soul from sin?
 How else but through a broken heart
 May Lord Christ enter in? (V, 13-14)

The allusion here to the "alabaster box of ointment of spikenard" which Mary "broke ... and poured on [Christ's] head" (Mark 14: 3) recalls Wilde's discussion of the Gospel incident in in The Soul of Man, in which he concludes that "in one divine moment, and by selecting its own mode of expression,

a personality might make itself perfect" (Works, p. 1086). In the context of the suffering inmates of Reading Gaol, the deliberate surrender of a "human heart" is likewise an expression of a greater faith, a dramatic release from the hold of selfishness. As the Magdalene gained her perfection--"the world worships her, even now, as a saint"--by giving up her most precious possession, so the convict who accepts his share of a universal burden of suffering and abandons egotism will realise the lesson of Christ: "he that loseth his life for my sake will find it."

In this light, the litany of prison abuses that precedes the stanzas quoted above--each one a stone that "becomes one's heart by night"--actually forces each man to give up the "costliest nard" of his jealous self-possession and to enter an elect community, those whose endurance of "Man's grim Justice" prepares them for grace. Shortly after he began writing the Ballad, Wilde related the process to himself in these terms:

You must not think of me as being morbidly sad, or wilfully living in sadness, that sin which Dante punishes so terribly. My desire to live is as intense as ever, and though my heart is broken, hearts are made to be broken: that is why God sends sorrow into the world. The hard heart is the evil thing of life and art. I have also learnt sympathy with suffering. To me, suffering seems now a sacramental thing, that makes those whom it touches holy ... I now make no more exorbitant claims on life: I accept everything. I am sure it is all right.¹⁸

The penultimate section of the Ballad closes on

this affirmative note; the inmates who have discovered humility and acceptance, through a Christlike sympathy for Trooper C.T.W., may now look forward to a redeemed relationship with life. The loving example of Jesus will become an ever-present reality, for those fortunate sufferers in whose selfless lives the Galilean has intervened:

How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in?

This, in the narrator's final estimate, is the achievement of the condemned man himself; because he experienced remorse at last, he resembles his fellow criminal on the hill at Golgotha, who was saved because he asked Jesus to "remember me when thou comest into the kingdom" (Luke XXIII: 42-3). In the last sequence of Part V, the narrator establishes a contrast between the nameless and humiliated victim of "Man's grim Justice," and the salvation that awaits him through Christ's intervention:

And he of the swollen purple throat,
And the stark and staring eyes,
Waits for the holy hands that took
The thief to Paradise;
And a broken and a contrite heart
The Lord will not despise.

*

And with tears of blood he cleansed the
hand,
The hand that held the steel:
For only blood can wipe out blood,
And only tears can heal:
And the crimson stain that was of Cain
Became Christ's snow-white seal. (V,
15, 17)

The relentless monosyllabic rhythms, vivid colour imagery and violent synecdochal treatment of the

victim (variously signified by "eyes," "throat," "hands," and "tears") combine in these stanzas to reinforce Christ's central imperative: the ancient mutual enmity of men, emblemised by Cain's "crimson stain," is only healed and resolved by Christ's sacrifice if Cain's descendants accept and confess their own culpability. Accord, both public and private, depends on the "wild regrets, and the bloody sweats" of all in Judas' company; Christ's "seal" can only bind the human family together if his humility, imagination and selflessness are reaffirmed in the lives of his followers. Wilde was later to make this point with simple clarity in a letter to his literary executor: "Christ did not die to save people, but to teach people to save each other."¹⁹ The seering image of remorse, the "tears of blood," confirms that "only tears can heal" in the case of the murderer as with his fellow prisoners; like them, "a broken and a contrite heart" presages his redemption.

In the last lines of the Ballad, Wilde's narrator reminds us, once more, of the universal implications of the disgraced trooper's history:

And there, till Christ call forth the
dead,

 In silence let him lie:
No need to waste the foolish tear,
 Or heave the windy sigh:
The man had killed the thing he loved,
 And so he had to die.

And all men kill the thing they love,
 By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
 Some with a flattering word.

The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword! (VI, 2-3)

This final exhortation is made directly to the reader--that same reader who, elsewhere in Wilde's canon, is addressed with the irony and defensiveness of a post-Paterian individualist, ever uncertain about his audience and their expectations. At the end of this poem which is to be "heard" by all potential readers, the author asserts the communality of those who, breaking out of selfish insularity, have grasped Christ's "whole conception" of humanity (Letters, p. 477); those who, seeing beyond the "windy sigh" of casual pity, are shaken by the killer's extreme sentence into an awareness of their complex but undeniable kinship:

And all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard ...

Wilde's final extended fictive work, for all its varied moods, tangential reflections, and uncertain structure, is a deeply moving and persuasive affirmation of the writer's fundamental humanism, an attempt to redefine the "Christian polity" that Newman believed to exist no longer in a libertarian and relativist age.²⁰ If the aesthetic tenets of de Profundis have receded in the author's sheer revulsion at human cruelty and degradation, the commitment to Christ's consoling and synthetic vision remains. Resigning at last his posture as artist, even as he demands a wider audience, Wilde attempted hereafter to make of his life a resonant and unified

statement in the manner of Jesus, "the precursor of the Romantic movement in life"; his success or otherwise, in the last four years of his life, lies outside the scope of this study.²¹

Notes

¹ The Ballad of Reading Gaol was first published, in book form, on February 13, 1898 (London: Leonard Smithers); rpr. in Works, ed. Foreman. All references in this chapter are to this edition, which is cited in the text as Reading Gaol.

Wilde began writing the Ballad in the summer of 1897--he first refers to it in a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, dated 7 July (Letters, p. 620)--while staying at Berneval-sur-Mer, near Dieppe, to which small resort he had moved after his release from Reading in May. He was still at work on the poem in September, when he left Berneval for Naples, and the final draft was completed there at Posilippo in January, 1898. See Mason, Bibliography, pp. 407-16; and Letters, pp. 703-4.

As Wilde was living apart from his most important literary advisors during this period--including Frank Harris, then Editor of the Fortnightly Review, his future literary executor Robert Ross, and Leonard Smithers, his publisher--his letters contain the frankest account we have of the author's difficulties during composition. The correspondence begins on a buoyant, optimistic note--"Poetry is a difficult art," he writes to More Adey on 19 July, "but I like most of what I have done" (Letters, p. 623)--with a considered attempt to outline to some correspondents a mood of resolution that fosters the poem (see

the extract from a letter to Carlos Blacker on p. 273 of this chapter). Throughout there are interesting discussions concerning style, genre and literary allusions, as on pp. 675-80, and problems of diction and expression in specific stanzas (see, for instance, p. 680). Later letters record Wilde's increasing difficulties in sustaining the tempo and mood of creation; one of the reasons he left Berneval was that Italy offered him "my only chance" of completing the poem (letter to Carlos Blacker, 13 September; Letters, p. 639), although once there the author admitted that "I find it difficult to recapture the mood and manner of [the poem's] inception. It seems alien to me now--real passions so soon become unreal--and the actual facts of one's life take different shape and remake themselves strangely" (Letter to Stanley V. Makower; Letters, p. 647). Wilde's final assessment of the poem was that it lacked the resolution he had desired for it. See n. 4.

² It is clear throughout Wilde's correspondence at this time that he was strongly conscious of new stylistic directions in Reading Gaol. Before undertaking the poem, he wrote to Frank Harris in June, 1897, that "words, now, to me signify things, actualities, real emotions, realised thoughts I no longer make roulades of phrases about the deep things I feel. When I write directly to you I speak directly. Violin-variations don't interest me" (Letters,

p. 607). Later he wrote to a former Magdalene colleague that the Ballad represented "a new style for me, full of actuality and life in its directness of message and meaning" (letter to W.R. Paton, August 1897; Letters, p. 639), while to his editor he proposed that "the standard by which the poem is to be judged is not that of lyrical beauty, but of realistic presentation and actuality, at least by a sane critic, if there is one outside Bedlam" (letter to Leonard Smithers, December 1897; Letters, p. 689).

³ A phrase used by the youthful author of Poems in an early description of the antagonism between Hellenic pleasure and Christian penitence:

Ah, God! Ah, God! those dear Hellenic
hours
Had drowned all memory of Thy bitter
pain,
The Cross, the Crown, the Soldiers and the
Spear.

("Sonnet written in Holy Week at Genoa," ll. 12-14)

⁴ Wilde wrote to Ross that he sought to "make ... propaganda" about the conditions he had endured, and insisted on adding those stanzas in Part V dealing with these abuses (19 October, 1897; Letters, p. 661).

On 27 May, 1897, the first of Wilde's letters on the subject of prison reform was published in the Daily Chronicle; this eloquent diatribe was inspired by the summary dismissal of Thomas Martin, a warden at Reading Gaol whom Wilde had befriended, and who lost his position for giving a biscuit to

an imprisoned child. The letter, which was published under the heading "The Case of Warder Martin, Some Cruelties of Prison Life", undoubtedly contributed to a gathering outcry that at last found expression in the Prison Reform Bill (August, 1898). A further letter by Wilde on the subject of the penal system was published in the Daily Chronicle on May 24, 1898, the day on which the House of Commons began debating the second reading of the bill. The Ballad itself, to Wilde's evident delight, was quoted during this debate. See Letters, pp. 554, 568-74, 722-26, 728.

⁵ The dedication to the Ballad reads:

In Memoriam

C.T.W.

Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards.

Obiit H.M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire,

July 7th, 1896.

Charles Thomas Wooldridge, who was executed at Reading Gaol during Wilde's term of imprisonment, "is said to have cut his wife's throat in a very determined manner, she having excited his jealousy, and (so far as the evidence went) greatly annoyed him" ("The Execution at Reading," unsigned report in the Reading Mercury, July 10, 1896; rpr. in Mason, Bibliography, pp. 426-7). The reporter adds that Wooldridge received the ministrations of the Chaplain "in a thoroughly proper spirit, and appeared truly penitent and resigned to his fate"--a fact which Wilde, of

course, altered, in his evocation of a condemned man resiliently unrepentant until the last moment.

At first Wilde intended disguising the identity and circumstances of the man he was commemorating, but finally agreed on the near-explicit dedication printed above (see Letters, p. 678, fn. 3). The air of verisimilitude it fosters is further evidence of Wilde's determined abandoning in the Ballad of his previous arealistic poetics.

⁶ Signed review, Saturday Review (12 March 1898), 1, xxxv, pp. 65-6; rpr. Beckson, The Critical Heritage, pp. 218-221. Symons writes: "the poem is not really a ballad at all, but a sombre, angry, interrupted reverie; and it is the subcurrent of meditation, it is the asides, which count, not the story, as a story, of the drunken soldier who was hanged for killing a woman" (p. 220).

⁷ Several commentators have drawn attention to the similarity of metre and phraseology between the two ballads; see, for instance, San Juan, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol and the Image of the Human Condition", chapter VI of The Art of Oscar Wilde, pp. 216-7; Christopher Nassar, "Hades and Finale", Chapter V of Towards the Demon Universe, pp. 165-8; and Averil Gardner, "Oscar Wilde's Swansong", The Dalhousie Review, LV, i, (1974), pp. 70-1. These resemblances (invite) a comparison and a contrast, as Nassar observes, between the Mariner's crime, suffering and ambiguous attainment of redemption,

and that of the condemned guardsman in Reading Gaol.

⁸ Letter to Frank Harris, 13 August 1898 (Letters, p. 759). Wilde was referring to Shakespeare; of his own poem, he had earlier observed in another letter to Harris that it "is too autobiographical" to be artistically successful (February, 1898; Letters, p. 707-8).

⁹ See n. 23 to the last chapter, on Wilde's covering letter to Robert Ross with de Profundis.

¹⁰ MacEdward Leach, Introd., The Ballad Book (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), p. 3. Leach's ensuing remarks on the tendency of traditional balladic narrative to concentrate on climactic action offer an apposite comment on the opening of Reading Gaol: "the slow elements and the undramatic elements are dropped and only the hard core of tension remains--the moment of drama ... What matters the details that brought this about? They are all different and yet all the same in that they bring man to his dramatic moment. The folk are not concerned with why, for they are not introspective or analytical. Rather they are concerned with the drama of the moment and the character's reaction to it" (pp. 3-4).

¹¹ Wilde wrote to his editor of this figure: "By 'Caiaphas' I do not mean the present Chaplain of Reading: he is a good-natured fool, one of the silliest of God's silly sheep: a typical clergyman in fact. I mean any priest who assists at the unjust

and cruel punishment of man" (letter to Leonard Smithers, November 1897; Letters, p. 676).

¹² Wilde's achievement here is illuminated by his discussion, in a letter to Robert Ross, of the difficulties of conveying a vivid impression of the innocuous objects of prison life: "In point of fact, describing a prison is as difficult artistically as describing a water-closet would be. If one had to describe the latter in literature, prose or verse, one could merely say it was well, or badly, papered: or clean or the reverse: the horror or prison is that everything is so simple and commonplace in itself, and so degrading, and hideous, and revolting in its effect" (8 October 1897; Letters, p. 655).

¹³ It is of passing interest to note that Wilde regarded these stanzas as a recreation of his own experience: writing to Ross, who was proof-reading this section of the poem, the author requested that the original "arid vigil" be altered to "endless" or "ceaseless," "because the vigil was rich in psychological experiences" (8 November 1897; Letters, p. 671).

¹⁴ E. San Juan rightly points out that these "forms of fear" resemble the "spirits blast" that the Ancient Mariner encounters in Part V of Coleridge's poem; "Unlike the spirits in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, who are properly agents of purification, these 'crooked shapes of terror' suggest the anarchy of the prisoners' world" (The

Art of Oscar Wilde, p. 216).

15 Wilde defended the archaisms of this section thus: "As regards the spirits, I think the grotesqueness of the scene to a certain degree makes their speech possible" (Letter to R. Ross, 8 October 1897; Letters, p. 655).

16 The last four lines of this stanza were chosen by Wilde as his epitaph, and were duly inscribed on Joseph Epstein's monument in the cemetery of Père Lachaise, to which the writer's body was removed in 1909. See Letters, p. 863; and H. Montgomery Hyde, Oscar Wilde: A Biography, p. 486-8.

17 Cf. Hamlet's first evocation of the corrupted Danish court, which he later refers to directly as a "prison":

... 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross
in nature
Possess it merely. (I, 2)

18 Letter to Carlos Blacker, July 1897 (Letters, p. 621).

19 Letter to Robert Ross, March, 1898; Letters, p. 709. Wilde adds characteristically: "This is, I have no doubt, a grave heresy, but it is also a fact."

20 Newman's phrase for the "old idea" of a medieval order, founded on Thomist philosophy, in his defence of Pius IX's Syllabus of Errors (1864), that document which placed the Catholic Church implacably against the tendencies of the age; quoted by Harold L. Weatherby in a valuable discussion

of Newman's attempts to defend Catholicism, "Introduction", Cardinal Newman in His Age: His Place in English Theology and Literature (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1973), pp. 1-3. For Wilde's undergraduate attraction to Newman's theology, see n. 8 to the Appendix.

²¹ No thorough examination of this topic has as yet been written, but there exist two valuable discussions of Wilde's interest, during his last years, in Christ: "Paganism and Christianity," Chapter VI of Woodcock's The Paradox of Oscar Wilde, and "Oscar Wilde," in G. Wilson Knight, The Christian Renaissance (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1962). Both of these writers draw heavily on the accounts by Wilde's biographers of the exiled writer's impressive courage, quietude and generosity, and his oft-expressed interest in Jesus; in Woodcock's opinion, "according to his lights, he ended his life as a good Christian and an equally good pagan, humble in his banishment and jesting like an antique philosopher when he knew his death was near" (p. 104). Wilson Knight states more forthrightly that "Christ is a key to Wilde's life", and maintains that--although we require "a much deeper knowledge of the forces in play than we at present possess"--the analogy between them illuminates the fin de siècle writer's personal history. With Christ's example of loving self-sacrifice before us, Wilde's life becomes intelligible: "This is not to say that

his actions were right, but rather they are at least tragically justified Wilde's life was a drama, and seen in all its excess, its brilliance, its degradation and its tragedy, it has the form needed to correspond to the matters contained" (pp. 298-300). See, also, the accounts by the following reliable biographers of the author's last years, the first two of which had known him well: Robert Sherard, The Life of Oscar Wilde (London: Methuen and Co., 1906); Laurence Housman, Echo de Paris (London: Jonathan Cape, 1923); Hesketh Pearson, (London: Methuen, 1946); H. Montgomery Hyde, Oscar Wilde: A Biography.

After much deliberation on the matter in his final years, Wilde at last completed his imitatio by a formal declaration: on the night before his death he was received by Fr. Cuthbert Dunne C.P. into the Catholic Church, thereby resolving an ambiguous relationship with the most durable of Christian institutions that had its origins in an undergraduate enthusiasm. See Stuart Mason, "A Note on Oscar Wilde's Reception into the Catholic Church", in Bibliography, pp. 116-9; and Letters, pp. 857-9, in which Robert Ross (himself a devout Catholic) refers to his difficulties in finding, during Wilde's last years, a priest capable of "a rather grave intellectual conflict. It would have been no use getting an amiable and foolish man who would have treated him like an ordinary person and

entirely ignored the strange paradoxical genius which he would have to overcome or convince" (letter from Ross to Adela Schuster, 23 December 1900; Letters, p. 859).

Appendix: Christ and Postlapsarian Ethics in Poems

Wilde's first published book, the laconically titled Poems (1881),¹ has been consistently disparaged since its first appearance for numerous glaring weaknesses: derivativeness, insincerity, formal and thematic confusion.² The poet himself, who at the time of publication applauded the musicality of his verses--"I would sooner have any power or quality of 'song' than be the greatest sonnet-writer since Petrarch"³--conceded in later years that his youthful poetry represented a melifluous record of "the most flower-like years of one's life,"⁴ his undergraduate days at Oxford: "delightful days," he remarked in a revealing discussion of Pater's influence on his prose, "in which there was far more rhyme than reason."⁵ Nevertheless, a considered reading of this unwieldy collection already indicates to what extent Wilde is dealing imaginatively with the major intellectual and aesthetic issues of his career, and it is instructive to examine their early appearance in the light of later achievements.

While the most striking feature of the volume is Wilde's intellectual and emotional attachment to Greek thought and literature, especially Platonic notions of "the beautiful" and the prelapsarian enthusiasms of idyllic poetry, several of the poems demonstrate an antithetical fascination with the Christ-figure which

anticipates future developments. The treatment of the founder of Christianity is paradoxical: on the one hand, he is used as an unattractive foil for "Hellenic" free enquiry and engagement, much in the manner of Swinburne's anti-Christian postures in Poems and Ballads (1866)--as an embodiment of unlovely "Hebraic" strictures on conduct, whose "requiem", the poet enthuses in The Garden of Eros, has been sung at last by Swinburne himself.⁶

On the other hand, Jesus is also depicted as a compelling victim of human callousness, whose fortitude and integrity troubles the would-be pastoralist in The Burden of Itys and Humanitad. These evocations, which are amongst the more attractive and original thematic elements of Poems, reflect the immature writer's own crisis of faith during the late 70s, which nearly led to his conversion, Newman-like, to Roman Catholicism;⁷ his eventual abandonment of this idea, albeit unwillingly, is interestingly recorded in those sonnets which give early evidence of Wilde's perpetual critique in maturer works of institutionalised dogma.

I will begin this study, then, by referring to the way in which the poet extricates the human Jesus from an outmoded rubric in the devotional sonnets of Rosa Mystica, the second section of the volume. It is significant that the orthodoxy the poet chooses is Roman Catholicism--the poems record, broadly speaking, an abortive pilgrimage

to the Eternal City--which for Wilde's era represented the most determined resistance to the evolutionary and "scientific" currents of the age; by implication, the writer is rejecting too those other variants of the faith, in which sceptical tendencies had already undermined their claims to an infallible spiritual authority.⁸

The section begins with the suitably reverential mood of a would-be penitent ("Sonnet on Approaching Italy", "San Miniato"), and concludes with a fervid celebration of "The New Helen", avatar of Grecian sensuousness who pointedly overthrows Our Lady ("before whose mouldering shrine / To-day at Rome the silent nations kneel"). In between, the poet laments his own lack of faith ("ah! The way is steep and long / That leads unto thy sacred feet," he remarks in "Rome Unvisited"), but, more particularly, the failure of the Roman church to embody Christ's ministry. The charge against Rome in "Sonnet On Hearing the Dies Irae Sung in the Sistine Chapel" is revealing; it turns on an institutional failure to witness to the remarkable personality of Jesus:

Nay, Lord, not thus! white lilies in
the spring,
Sad olive-groves, or silver-breasted
dove,
Teach me more clearly of Thy life and
love
Than terrors of red flame and thundering.
The enpurpled vines dear memories of
Thee bring:
A bird at evening flying to its nest
Tells me of One who had no place of
rest:

I think it is of Thee the sparrows sing.
 Come rather on some autumn afternoon,
 When red and brown are burnished on
 the leaves,
 And the fields echo to the gleaner's
 song.
 Come when the splendid fulness of the
 moon
 Looks down upon the rows of golden
 sheaves,
 And reap thy harvest: we have waited
 long.

Here is Wilde's first attractive dissertation on Christ; evoked--in the manner of Keats's allegoric "reaper" in To Autumn--as a splendid figure of pastoral, for whose personality all of nature becomes a rich correlative, the "One who had no place of rest", and who yet lived in harmony with his environment, indicts by contrast the church founded in his name, with its vague ritual abstraction of "terrors of red flame and purple thundering." The poet's direct imaginative engagement is apparent in the abrupt exclamations and imperatives--"Nay, Lord, not thus!" "Come rather," "Come when"--and an evocation of natural abundance, appropriately enough, in the resonant imagery of the Messiah's Gospel parables ("lilies", "sparrows", "vines"). Reworking Christ's status as the Good Shepherd, Wilde's conception hints at future possibilities of synthesis between Hellenic and Christian models, even as it first indicates Wilde's mistrust of the dogmatic institutions that parody the master.

Similarly, in "Easter Day," the fragile integrity of the homeless Christ of St. Matthew's Gospel is juxtaposed with the "Holy Lord of Rome," borne

"like some great God" upon "the necks of men": the elevation of the Church above its members, in contrast to the humble anonymity of its founder, is the thematic crux of the poem. Significantly, these two sonnets record the poet's reactions to the rituals of the Vatican, about which the preceding poems had been fancifully speculating, and confirm that for this pilgrim the fortitude of a very human Jesus exercises a far greater imaginative appeal than any creed.

In the next sonnet, "E Tenebris," the poet's rather showy disillusion, both with himself and the Church, concludes with an evocation of Christ that moves from the omnipotent and mystical, to a recognition of the mutual humanity of Saviour and penitent:

Nay, peace, I shall behold, before the
 night,
 The feet of brass, the robe more white
 than flame,
 The wounded hands, the weary human face.
 (ll. 12-14)

The compelling humanity of that visage remains, even as the poet rejects the institutionalised Church in favour of "The New Helen," and concludes Rosa Mystica with a buoyant impression of a journey, significantly, to "the shores of Greece" (Impression de Voyage).

Throughout the remainder of Poems, the Church is specifically condemned for the craven supplication it demands of its members; clearly, compared with the proud humanism of his Hellenic enthusiasms,

whether Apollonian or Dionysiac, Christianity seems a shameful regression--an uncritical dependence on outmoded forms.

Yet the long neo-Keatsian poem The Burden of Itys, which opens with playful insouciance ("This English Thames is holier far than Rome," 1) confirms the would-be idyllist's realisation that his desire to "Let elemental things take form again" (29) is a delusion; the unpalatable "Truth" is that humanity is caught up in a bitter "strife" to regain the well-being once garnered from Christian observance:

I would forget the weary wasted strife,
The riven veil, the Gorgon eyes of
Truth,
The prayerless vigil and the cry for
prayer,
The barren gifts, the lifted arms, the
dull insensate air! (41)

Here the dogma and ritual initially lauded in Rosa Mystica is both futile and demeaning; if "the riven veil" suggests Christ's death, the last line confirms that he has not risen again for the beseeching participants in the "dull insensate air" of the Church. Nevertheless, "wearying and wasted" as it may be, that "cry for prayer" represents an urgent human impulse--even though this observer attempts, without necessarily succeeding, to "forget" its actuality.

A stanza later, the poet is nevertheless obliged to recognise his own fallibility in an unwilling encounter with Christ's rejected features:

Sing louder yet, why must I yet behold
 The wan white-face of that deserted
 Christ,
 Whose bleeding hands my hands did once
 enfold,
 Whose smitten lips my lips so oft have
 kissed,
 And now in mute and marble misery
 Sits in his lone dishonoured House and
 weeps, perchance for me? (43)

These lines record the remarkable impact, yet again, of that "weary human face" the sonneteer had sought in "E Tenebris." The would-be Arcadian tries to avoid Christ, because the Galilean's "wan white face" alerts him to himself; this is neatly represented in the connecting "hands" and "lips" of Saviour and supplicant, meeting as if in mirror-image to confirm their mutual humanity. Christianity as an institutional faith may have been rejected, but the "deserted" Christ is still a powerful source of moral, "Hebraic" imperatives, significantly associated with those "Gorgon eyes of Truth".

Following the melifluous studies in form and genre of Wind Flowers, the third section of the volume, Wilde returns briskly in the linking poem called Panthea to a forthright rejection of "Hebraic" questions of conduct. Here, the soulful pastoral nostalgia of The Garden of Eros and The Burden of Itys is transformed into a kind of evolutionary pantheism after Swinburne, a vigorous and unequivocal transference of Pater's aesthetic epicureanism into life: "Nay, let us walk from fire unto fire,
 / From passionate pain to deadlier delight"

(stanza 1). (The echo here of the "Conclusion" to The Renaissance, in which Pater refers to the "hard, gem-like flame" of consciousness, is obvious).

Following this spirited invocation, the poet proceeds to mock the Christian insistence on penitence and obedience directly, "our vain endeavour / For wasted days of youth to make atone / By pain or prayer or priest" (5). Recalling the "weary wasted strife" of The Burden of Itys, Wilde roundly asserts through the imagery of the Resurrection that, Christ being a mere mortal without redemptive power, the observances of the Church are meaningless:

Victim and wine and vow are all in vain,
The tomb is sealed; the soldiers watch;
the dead rise not again. (15)

In this instance Wilde's dedication to a post-Paterian "hot hard flame with which our bodies burn" (19) is vindicated, as the poem ends with an effusive declaration that, through passionate experience, "The Universe itself shall be our Immortality" (30).

Yet the problem of conduct in a faithless era has not been satisfactorily resolved, although the series of love lyrics that follow Panthea attempt to enact the passionate doctrines of that poem (Quia Multum Amavi, for instance, boldly asserts that the poet's worship of his beloved outclasses that of "the young impassioned Priest" performing the Eucharist). Indeed, the fervid accents and frantic rush of increasingly vague but grandiose

images in Wilde's pantheistic expostulation ("the Kosmic Soul," "that great Symphony," "the live world's throbbing heart," et al) render it the most unconvincing of the lengthy "Hellenic" poems.

In Humanitad, the final long poem of the volume, Wilde attempts a sober, comprehensive examination of these "Hellenic" modes of behaviour, both hedonistic and stoical, and arrives at a penetrating image of their inadequacy in the figure of Christ. As the title indicates, this rambling and diffuse work is a forthright attempt to resolve the opposing ethical tensions voiced throughout the volume; in a phrase, that resolution concerns understanding Christ's nature and function aright, as an urgent imperative to human completeness that presages Wilde's later work. Although the poem employs the lavish pastoral description and mannered expostulation of The Burden of Eros or The Burden of Itys, and to begin with affects sonority in place of sense, the highly discursive argument does assume vivid imaginative shape with the introduction of Jesus. In this intriguing if over-lengthy work Wilde re-examines the preceding "Hellenic" postures, and explains their inadequacy with reference to "that deserted Christ."

In attempting to explain his lack of faith in the Greek concept of self-perfection and inner harmony--"To make the Body and the Spirit one / With all right things" (63)--the poet is brought

back, after much digressive lamentation, to that compelling "weary human face" of Jesus:

But we have left those gentle haunts
to pass
With weary feet to the new Calvary,
Where we behold, as one in a glass
Sees his own face, self-slain Humanity,
And in the dumb reproach of that sad
gaze
Learn what an awful phantom the hand
of Man can raise. (69)

The poet evokes Christ in order to signal an unwilling but determined awakening to maturity; leaving the "gentle haunts" of Hellenic idealism, he once again finds in the Galilean's features his own human incompleteness reflected, "as ... in a glass." What was implicit in The Burden of Itys is now forthrightly stated; Jesus, the mirror-image of suffering humanity, destroys any facile assumptions about a private perfection, by insisting on the terrible reality of that "red hand of Man." The message that the would-be idyllist had rejected in The Garden of Eros and The Burden of Itys is pithily expressed in the following stanza:

... we were vain and ignorant nor knew
That when we stabbed thy heart it was
our own real hearts we slew. (70)

The poet's new awareness of Christ's significance does stem, however, from his Hellenic admiration of man; as with the devotional sonnets I discussed from Rosa Mystica, it is not Jesus' divinity that impresses, but the insistent and courageous humanity he represents. The fatal dissociation "of endless centuries" (70) inscribed in his cruci-

fixion is powerfully evoked in the resonant imagery of the Passion, as Wilde attempts to transform the venerable story into a myth of our mutual implicatedness:

Being ourselves the sowers and the seeds,
 The night that covers and the lights
 that fade,
 The spear that pierces and the side that
 bleeds,
 The lips betraying and the life betrayed;
 The deep hath calm: the moon hath rest:
 but we
 Lords of the natural world are yet our
 own dread enemy. (71)

Recasting the ecstatic pantheism of Swinburne, who in his long poem Hertha had characterised a vague mother-goddess figure as being one with all manifestations of life--"The deed and the doer, the seed and the sower, the dust which is God" (stanza 8)--Wilde asserts the execution at Calvary as a perpetual human reality (in stanza 54, lamenting political divisions in contemporary England, the poet had attacked capitalist exploitation as "the seed / Of things which slay their sower", and in the later stanza the image accordingly insists on the public dimensions of Wilde's argument). Elsewhere in the poem, syntactic relations from stanza to stanza often complicate the poet's exposition; in the stanza quoted above the uncertain construction of the sentence is apposite, as it reinforces the comparison in the final couplet between the "natural world", with its Wordsworthian harmony, and the supposed exemplars of evolutionary progress, who are yet "our own dread enemy."

In these striking lines, which demonstrate a refreshing compound of image and idea after the wordy expostulation, shaky syntax and awkward rhetorical flourishes of the rest of the poem, Wilde signals the direction--wittingly or unwittingly--of future Christologies. If the Saviour's suffering visage presages the impact of "the image of Christ" on the penitent young King in Pomegranates, the portrait of Jesus in The Ballad of Reading Gaol, composed nearly twenty years later, is also anticipated, in that murder likewise signifies in that poem the shocking parricide whereby "each man kills the thing he loves"; likewise, Judas Escariot will be evoked once more as an unpalatable kinsman of all those whose "kiss" is a macabre parody of a real affection.

Humanitad concludes with a fervent hope that the terrible significance of Christ's history may be understood by all his fellows, and acted upon:

Nay, nay, we are but crucified, and though
 The bloody sweat falls from our brows
 like rain,
 Loosen the nails--we shall come down
 again I know,
 Staunch the red wounds--we shall be
 whole again,
 No need have we of hyssop-laden rod,
 That which is purely human, that is God-
 like, that is God. (73)

Here Wilde renders the perennial human conflict that Christ's fate represents in vividly dramatic terms, as a struggle between erstwhile victim and vanquishers to "be whole again"--to reunite in a splendid but hard-won camaraderie that dissolves

ancient divisions. The struggle is powerfully enacted in the supple, urgent rhythms and syntax of the stanza, while the vivid imagery of pain and exertion also conflates these accidental protagonists: the "bloody sweat" that pours from "our brows" includes both the suffering of the Jesus-figure and the desperate lengths of his persecutors, anxious to "loosen the nails" and restore him to community. The final couplet affirms the poet's new-found faith in a future "whole" humanity, achieved by a mutual transcendence of petty divisions that will facilitate self- and societal perfection without Hebraic strictures:

No need have we of hyssop-laden rod,
That which is human, that is Godlike,
that is God.

The exact nature of the transformation is unclear, but the force of the imagery is convincing; the poet imagines a new construct of ourselves in which Hebraic caution is subsumed by Hellenistic aspiration, so that both the "hyssop-laden rod" (associated with Jewish purification rites) and the "little rod" of "Helás!" become superfluous. Only then will we advance, according to Wilde's post-Darwinian, Semi-Comteian schema, to a novel, Godlike status; by being "purely" human, the distinction between the secular and the divine will disappear.

Unspecific as Wilde's aspiration is in this peroration, it offers intriguing glimpses of the future: the implication that Christ's imperative

will one day no longer pertain anticipates the spirited utopian arguments of The Soul of Man, in which Christ's achievement of self-perfection "through pain" will be superseded in a hedonist and anarchist future. More, these skirmishes with the traditional imagery of Christ sketchily presage the great resolutions of de Profundis in which Jesus not only personifies a "whole conception of humanity," but through the power of his imagination, contains both secular and divine categories in one:

Before that time there had been gods and men. He alone saw that on the hills of life there was but God and Man, and, feeling through the mysticism of sympathy that in himself each had been made incarnate, he calls himself the Son of the One or the Son of the other, according to his mood. [italics mine] (Letters, p. 477)

Such resolutions are beyond the reach of the immature writer of Poems; he has to discover that those "red wounds" he wishes to staunch in Humanidad are, in a resolutely cruel universe, vital to full humanity.

Notes

¹ Oscar Wilde, Poems (London: David Bogue, 1881); rpr., with all Wilde's later poetry, in The Poems of Oscar Wilde, Vol. IX of The First Collected Edition (London: Methuen, 1908); and in Works, pp. 709-802. All references to the poems will be made to this edition. Wilde's first book consists largely of the verses he had published in a number of magazines during the preceding five years, as well as several previously unreleased verses. A full bibliography of each individual item in Poems is provided in Mason, Bibliography, pp. 281-319.

² A representative selection of contemporary reviews is reprinted in The Critical Heritage, ed. Beckson, pp. 33-54. The tenor of much future criticism was established by Oliver Elton (later Professor of English at Liverpool University), who rejected the author's presentation copy to the Oxford Union because its verses, besides being "thin" and "immoral", are "for the most part by a number of better known and more deservedly reputed authors ... whose works have furnished the list of passages which I hold in my hand at this moment" (quoted in H. Montgomery Hyde, Oscar Wilde, p. 59). More thoughtful later accounts of Wilde's influences, technical achievements and thematic explorations are contained in Arthur Ransome, "Poems", Chapter III

of Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study (London: Methuen, 1912); Eduoard Roditi, "Poetry and Art-History," Chapter II of Oscar Wilde; Epifanio San Juan, "Image and Rhetoric in the Early Poems," Chapter I of The Art of Oscar Wilde; and Rodney Shewan, "Art and Pastoral," Chapter I of Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism, who remarks perceptively that Wilde "is restricted, as Roditi observed, by the vocabulary and metaphoric patterns of his classical training, which can accommodate neither his Romantic attitudes nor adequate reference to the contemporary world" (p. 9). Nevertheless, this critic notes Wilde's successful thematic development in Poems "from a pained awareness of modern man's fragmented consciousness, through an invocation of various poetic and political liberationists, to an iconoclastic assertion of man's intrinsic supremacy which aptly reverses a Christian image [in Humanitad] to proclaim the 'perfect creed' of Hellenism" (p. 16). My reading of this last-mentioned poem offers a qualification of Shewan's view.

³ Letter to Violet Hunt, 22 July 1881; Letters, p. 79.

⁴ Letter to Louis Wilkinson, 28 December 1898; Letters, p. 772. A Radley schoolboy, Wilkinson was about to go up to Oxford, when Wilde wrote to him that "I envy you going to Oxford: it is the most flower-like time of one's life. One sees the shadow of things in silver mirrors. Later

on, one sees the Gorgon's head, and one suffers because it does not turn one to stone."

⁵ "Mr Pater's Last Novel", in The Speaker, I, vi (February 8, 1890), pp. 144-46; rpr. in Reviews, pp. 538-45.

⁶ Wilde alludes here to Swinburne's notorious attack, in his Hymn to Proserpine, on Christ: "Wilt thou yet take all, Galilean, but these thou shalt not take, / The laurel, the palms and the paeon, the breasts of the nymphs in the brake." For the mature Wilde's thoughtful reappraisal of Swinburne's poetry, see his review of Poems and Ballads, Third Series: "he has his limitations, the chief of which is curiously enough, the entire lack of any sense of limit. His song is nearly always too loud for his subject" ("Mr Swinburne's Last Volume", Pall Mall Gazette, June 27, 1889; rpr. Reviews, pp. 519-23)--a view which twentieth-century criticism has tended to confirm. Useful perspectives on Swinburne's poetic and theoretical contribution to Aesthetics are to be found in Ian Small, Introd., The Aesthetes: A Sourcebook, and R.V. Johnson, "The Emergence of Aesthetics," Chapter II of Aesthetics (London: Methuen, 1969).

⁷ Wilde's undergraduate letters of 1875-7 record his deepening fascination with Catholicism, clearly fired by his first visit to Italy in the summer vacation of 1875 (see Letters, pp. 4-11). In 1876 he read Newman, Pusey and other Catholic

writers with great admiration, and--amid the protests of his protestant family--planned a pilgrimage to Rome in April, 1877. A letter to a fellow student, William Ward, records his spiritual doubts during this period: "I have dreams of a visit to Newman, of the holy sacrament in a new church, and of a quiet and peace afterwards in my soul. I need not say, though, that I shift with every breath of thought and am weaker and more self-deceiving than ever" (March 1877; Letters, p. 31). As it turned out, the intended pilgrimage was put off, because Wilde's former Greek tutor, John Portland Mahaffy, persuaded him to visit Greece instead: "I am awfully ashamed of myself but I could not help it and will take Rome on my way back" (letter to Reginald Harding, 2 April 1877; Letters, pp. 34-5). As the poems of Rosa Mystica suggest, however, the belated tour of Italy was not a success; reawakened to humanistic and aesthetic concerns by his visit to Greece, the poet records his disappointment with the stultifying effect of Catholic ritual, and--although his interest in Newman's career and writings never abated--he did not again evince an interest in converting to Rome until after his release from prison. See H. Montgomery Hyde, "Ireland and Oxford," Chapter I of Oscar Wilde: A Biography, pp. 30-40; and Letters, pp. 16-35. Richard Ellmann shrewdly considers the habits of thought this early Catholic

enthusiasm reveals in "The Critic as Artist as Wilde" (Golden Codgers).

⁸ The ultramontane tendencies of the Roman Church, ever a source of controversy in England, and vigorously defended by Newman in Part VII of the Apologia Pro Vita Sua (pp. 275-310), culminated in the promulgation of the Doctrine of Papal Infallibility by the Vatican Council on July 13, 1870, along with a considered and intricate denunciation of the "pantheism, naturalism, and absolute rationalism" of the modern era. (See the transcription of this document in "The Impending Crisis," Chapter XII of The Conflict Between Religion and Science, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1873, pp. 344-51). That the youthful Wilde was interested in the consequences and difficulties of this doctrine is indicated by his recommendation to William Ward of the official account of the 1869-70 deliberations, The Vatican Council: Eight Months at Rome during the Vatican Council, by Pomponio Leto, transl. John Murray (1876), as "a really wonderfully dramatic book." Wilde was intrigued, characteristically, by the dramatic possibilities of these events: "How strange that on the day of the Pope publicly declaring that his Infallibility and that of the Church were identical a fearful storm broke over Rome and two thunderbolts fell from heaven. It reads like the talkative ox of Livy (bos locutus est) and the rain of blood, that were always happen-

ing" (17 July 1876; Letters, pp. 17-18).

As an undergraduate impressed by the dignity and certitude of the Catholic faith, and particularly by Newman's elegant defence of it--"I think that his higher emotions revolted against Rome but that he was swept on by logic to accept it as the only rational form of Christianity," he wrote to William Ward (22 July 1876; Letters, p. 20)--Wilde was clearly susceptible to the Roman challenge to the tendencies of the age: "I don't know what to think about it [infallibility] myself," he confessed to Ward (Letters, p. 18). For the mature aesthete of Intentions, as Gilbert's graceful tribute in "The Critic as Artist" to Newman's style and personality indicates, "a mode of thought which seeks to deny the supremacy of the intellect" presents, at last, an insuperable difficulty (Intentions, pp. 96-7).

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