

# **Oscar Wilde and Hubris**

## **Overcoming Ambition and Vanity**

*Notes on Wilde's life and his posthumous writing De Profundis*

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The following contributions were made during the *Oscar Wilde Conference*, organized by Marcus Schneider for May 31 to June 1, 2008, at the Scala Basel, where the eurythmy ensemble *Eurythmiegruppe Stuttgart* (directed by Elisabeth Brinkmann) performed Wilde's one-act play *Salomé*. The play premiered in 1896 at the time its author was serving his sentence in Reading Gaol. The presentation has been edited and some passages have been expanded.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

Yesterday we witnessed an impressive performance of Oscar Wilde's significant play, *Salomé*. The play can provide a key to understanding Wilde's whole life, in that his life also epitomizes a process of spiritual growth. Whoever looks at the surface of Oscar Wilde's biography is likely to miss the spiritual aspect. A superficial glance at Wilde's life might tempt us to pronounce a precipitate judgement: a prodigious rise followed by a terrible fall into perversion, sinfulness and failure? It depends upon one's point of view. Such an attitude allows for no more than a maya point of view. For, in truth, Wilde's last years are marked by a profound psychological change. To prove this we need to cast a brief glance at his life.

### **I. The Glorious Ascent**

Oscar Wilde is born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. His father pursues various interests; he is a doctor, an eye and ear specialist. He also writes books on archaeology and one on Jonathan Swift. Wilde's mother is a writer who translates works of literature and takes pride in her Florentine origins. Oscar has an elder brother, William Wills, and a younger sister, Isola Francesca, who dies at the age of ten.

Wilde attends Trinity College, enthuses over classical languages and the ancient world, particularly Greece. He shows no inclination towards the natural sciences. Rather, he develops into a thoroughgoing aesthete and delights in occasionally displaying the snobbish traits of a

dandy. With his classics tutor and friend, Reverend Mahaffy, he travels to Northern Italy and visits Milan, Venice and Padua.

Upon leaving Trinity College Wilde goes to Oxford and studies art history, history and aesthetics and graduates with a Bachelor of Arts. He encounters well-known personalities of his day who have a great influence upon him. Among them is Walter Pater, who championed the *l'art pour l'art* concept. Another is the more prominent John Ruskin, one of the Englishmen who, as an art historian, discovered the importance of Italy. For several years Ruskin lived in Venice – the guest house *La Calzina* on the Zattere bears a stone plaque preserving the memory of his sojourn – and almost literally eyed up every single stone of the Venetian edifices; the result: his monumental work *The Stones of Venice*. A tinge of this love of the South and of Renaissance art flashed over to Wilde. Moreover, it was Ruskin who paved the way for the aestheticist Empire-theory. Cecil Rhodes was one of his students and disciples.

Thus, in an atmosphere of great erudition, of refined aestheticism and the self-evident belief in England's imperial mission the young Wilde comes of age. He travels to Greece and Rome and makes his literary debut with a poem entitled *Ravenna*, for which he is awarded a prize. Ravenna – the city where Dante died; to him Wilde will come to feel a growing spiritual kinship.

In 1879, the Michael Year, Wilde moves to London where he lives for the next two seven-year cycles. He goes on a lecture tour to America. He writes essays. Everything runs like clockwork; there seem to be no obstacles to his artistic career. In 1884 Wilde marries Constance Lloyd, who bears him two sons. Wilde works for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and edits the journal *Woman's World*. In 1888 he publishes a collection of fairy tales; in 1890 his famous novel *Dorian Gray* comes out.

In 1891, around the time of the second lunar node, the portentous encounter with Lord Alfred Douglas occurs – a young man aged twenty-one, the man who seemingly turns out to have ruined Oscar Wilde. Lord Douglas was of aristocratic descent, yet belonged to a kind of decadent aristocracy founded on pride and prestige rather than on genuine values. The intellectual levels of the two friends were highly discrepant, and what Alfred loved most about Oscar was the latter's fame and popularity. He loved Wilde "on the pedestal" and was hoping to work his way up on Wilde's achieved glory. Wilde fell in love with the young man with blond hair and fair skin. His novel *Dorian Gray* had just been published. The protagonist's forename alludes to an association with homoeroticism. As every connoisseur of Ancient Greece knows, the practice of homosexuality was ascribed to the *Dorians* who had settled in pre-classical Greece. Wilde gave Alfred an autographed edition of *Dorian Gray* and helped the not quite excellent student to pass an exam at Magdalen College in Oxford. It evidently is a fateful encounter, whose story and context may well reach back into previous earthly lives. It would not suffice to apply conventional psychological terms in order to

explain the unfathomable drama that unfolds between and around these two people in the years to follow.

In December 1891, the very year he meets Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde writes the play *Salomé* in French in Paris. Perhaps it is precisely these peculiar circumstances and the turn of events that throw light on the intricately aestheticized nature of the play, whose dialogues reach distinct mantric cadences at intervals.

In 1893 the original French version was published, after British censors had initially refused publication of an English version. Only in the following year is the English version licensed to come out. Its translation into English is provided by Lord Douglas.

For the poet the translation comes to be a source of dissatisfaction and pain, since it is teeming with “schoolboy faults”, as Wilde puts it. Even so, Wilde tolerates his friend’s inadequate literary competence with indulgence and generosity.

Then the last of Wilde’s plays is created, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, perhaps his most brilliant and wittiest society comedy. It is a cutting satire on the shallowness of British aristocratic mores and a firework display of fierce sarcasm, in part masterly disguised as pleasurable delicacies. Thus writes a man “on the pedestal” who believes he has the world at his feet and that it gratefully, or at least respectfully, welcomes whatever he sprinkles among the wide public.

## **II. The Descent**

The staging of the play, which is a great success, is immediately followed by the prelude of the next chapter in the playwright’s life. In the club Wilde frequents in Alfred’s company, Alfred’s father, Lord Queensberry, leaves a visiting card with an insulting message: “To Oscar Wilde posing as a sodomite” – a misspelled term denoting a homosexual, and in a broader sense, a term for any sort of ‘perverted’ sexual behaviour. Two factors favour this course of events: Queensberry’s evident eagerness to become a talking point in public as well as a law previously amended in England for stricter control of homosexual practices (the Amendment Act). These laws, meant to safeguard Victorian societal pretence, are obviously applied selectively only to those who dare to assume a non-hypocritical attitude and who overtly foster their inclinations.

Queensberry wanted to make the public think that he was striving to rescue his son from a profligate. However, Bosie – as Wilde soon came to call his friend – abused Oscar financially, ran up debts at Wilde’s expense, always wanting to dine in the finest clubs and restaurants. Only the most expensive wines could please him, with everything being put on Wilde’s bill. Moreover, he rang Wilde’s doorbell intuitively at the very moments when the latter was going to work. For Bosie’s sake Wilde would often postpone his work for hours, only to find that Bosie would selfishly claim the saved hours for himself.

How does Oscar Wilde respond to Queensberry's denigratory attack? At this stage Wilde is firmly convinced that he can lord it over the public and need not tolerate anything of this sort. At first he believes he can give the "funny little" aristocrat a bop on the nose with the help of a solicitor and files a libel suit. But all of a sudden everything goes awry and things take a different turn. Letters written by Wilde to Bosie, which the latter has given to his father, are made public in the course of the trial. You know well what can be read into a letter, if one is minded to do so. Male prostitutes are called to the witness box. A father-son-tragedy is also dragged into the scandal. The issue is being over-hyped.

The whole affair becomes public knowledge, and the masses increasingly derive pleasure from the case. A storm is brewing. Who is going to win? Oscar Wilde, the world-famous writer, or the powerful British society that Wilde had often enough exposed to mockery? Wilde's solicitor and close friends advise him to leave the country and wait for the dust to settle on the matter. Had he followed their advice, Wilde would undoubtedly have escaped conviction. Yet, he would have considered the alternative to be an act of cowardice. He didn't want to evade the challenge – not *that* way. He wanted to chance a test of strength. To him, pride and vanity were not compatible with flight. These two motivating forces of Wilde's remarkable character make him underestimate the true societal balance of power. Out of the blue, the Queensberries from all over Great Britain creep out of their hiding places and, strengthened by herd instinct, seek revenge on the writer.

In May 1895, Wilde is imprisoned and sentenced to two years' hard labour, the maximum sentence allowed in a case like his. He is convicted of "gross indecency" committed in private with same-sex persons. Wilde has become, so to speak, the first exhibit confirming the authority of the Amendment Act.

### **III. The Return of the Prodigal Son**

We have now come to the genesis of the *spiritual* turning point in this man's life, and we shall dwell upon this aspect in detail. My attention was drawn to this spiritual layer in Wilde's life by virtue of a survey written by Daniel N. Dunlop.<sup>1</sup> In 1905 Dunlop reviewed the first abridged edition of Wilde's notes taken in prison, which had just been published under the title *De Profundis*. It was the most stirring book he had ever read, as Dunlop himself asserted. Dunlop directed his attention to the psycho-spiritual, almost alchemical, metamorphosis that Wilde's soul had undergone in prison, a process which *De Profundis* – written in the form of a long letter to his friend Bosie – bears unique witness to. Dunlop's review translated into German was printed in the May issue, 2008, of *Der Europäer*. Wilde's psychological development is usually underestimated or simply ignored. Yet it seems to me that it contains

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel N. Dunlop, "Seelenläuterung durch Leid – Das Beispiel Oscar Wildes." In: *Der Europäer*, April 2008. Dunlop was an occultist, Theosophist and later an Anthroposophist and friend of Rudolf Steiner. See Thomas H. Meyer's biography titled *D. N. Dunlop: a Man of our Time*, London: Temple Lodge, 1992.

within it the very seeds of his entire *subsequent* development that will extend into succeeding earthly existences. One must not be misled by the fact that in the three years *after* his release Wilde did not produce any significant writings and that he occasionally fell into his former faults and foibles. Thus, he meets Bosie again, and even while in exile in Paris he fosters relations with a whole lot of, more or less, beautiful young men. He visits Rome once again; Pope Leo XIII receives him in seven private audiences. In Paris he has an operation performed on his ear – possibly indicating a certain spiritual hearing loss – and dies on November 30, 1900, at age 46 in the *Hôtel d'Alsace*, Quartier Latin, after having received a conditional baptism and the last rites. Today, the house bears a memorial inscription commemorating his stay there.

From the point of view of his spiritual growth the final phase of Wilde's life is rather insignificant when compared to the time spent in prison. A psychological-spiritual change as experienced by Wilde need not, and probably cannot, manifest itself in one earthly life. But a new soul resides and stirs within the old body.

At this point, let us cast a fresh glance through other peoples' eyes at some of the attributes Wilde possessed when entering this phase, so as to better understand their profound metamorphosis.

One of Wilde's contemporaries, a playwright himself, observes: "In a certain sense Mr. Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre." So George Bernhard Shaw sees in Wilde a man who plays with everything.

Another poet writes: "My first meeting with Oscar Wilde was an astonishment. I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all over night with labour and yet all spontaneous. ... I noticed, too, that the impression of artificiality that I think all Wilde's listeners have recorded, came from the perfect rounding of the sentences and from the deliberation that made it possible. ... I think, too, that because of all that half-civilized blood in his veins, he could not endure the sedentary toil of creative art and so remained a man of action, exaggerating, for the sake of immediate effect, every trick learned from his masters, turning their easel painting into painted scenes." William Butler Yeats, a contemporary of Wilde, emphasizes the playwright's tremendous ease and mastery in creating language and artistic form. Brilliance and elegance of style flow from his pen.

And finally one more instance: "An aesthete! That isn't saying much. Walter Pater" – one of Wilde's tutors at Oxford – "was an aesthete, a man who revelled in the enjoyment and re-creation of beauty, and life he revered with coyness and demureness, replete with decency. An aesthete is by nature thoroughly decent. Yet Oscar Wilde was utterly indecent, replete with tragic indecency. His aestheticism was something like a tense pain. The precious stones which he was pretending to explore with elation were like shattered eyes numbed with the inability to bear the sight of life. He was ceaselessly sensing the impending doom of life. He was

perpetually shrouded in tragic anxiety. He was relentlessly tempting providence. He was insulting the world of appearances. And he was sensing how fate was lurking in the dark only to pounce on him from the shades.”<sup>2</sup>

It was Hugo von Hofmannsthal who rendered this portrayal of Wilde. However, I do not share his view of Wilde’s having continuously scented a sense of fatality hanging over him. He was a genuinely reckless epicure who savoured his imprudence to the full until misfortune befell him.

Overnight, he is goaded out of all his bonds and commitments, out of all the public prestige. Fame has been his constant companion for many years. Wilde is a pivotal literary figure for numerous young poets; he embodies a new aestheticism in literature, overflowing with inspiration and creativity. He even writes fairy tales. At the same time he vies with fate and displays a sort of graceful vanity, rather than a shallow one devoid of grace. At times he deliberately acts like a snob. Wilde believes he is made for exceptions, not for rules, as he himself claims. And now he loses everything: prestige and position, wife and children – in other words, all those values modern society deems worth striving for.

As a tribute to his genius Constance offers him an allowance, yet on condition that he should never see Bosie again. She dies in April 1898 without the married couple having ever met again.

We shall now turn our attention to the experiences Wilde undergoes in prison where, after early 1896, he begins writing a letter of denunciation, justification and vindication to his friend Bosie. It is, in fact, a love letter, even if not in the traditional sense of the word. Wilde considers it his duty not only to unsparingly account for his own deeds and misdeeds, but also to open his young friend’s eyes to the latter’s own flaws. He feels jointly responsible for Bosie’s turning a blind eye to certain foibles, as he himself has encouraged them by his own indulgence and tolerance.

Soon after his conviction Wilde is faced with incidents that begin to trigger a chain of sweeping changes within him.

Let us turn our attention to some passages from *De Profundis*<sup>3</sup>. I begin with a crucial experience in Wilde’s life which clearly exemplifies the contrast between his social position before and after the decisive event.

“On November 13<sup>th</sup> 1895 I was brought down here [to Reading Gaol] from London. From two o’clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress and handcuffed, for the world to look at. I had been taken out of the

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Funke, *Oscar Wilde*. Hamburg: Rororo Monographie, 19<sup>th</sup> ed. June 2006, p. 168; excerpt transl. by C. Vlad.

<sup>3</sup> The manuscript was written on prison paper between January and March 1896. Before that, Wilde was not granted permission to write. Every page filled was taken away from him. In the end he was allowed to read and correct everything in context.

Hospital Ward without a moment's notice being given to me. Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was of course before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed, they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob.

For a year after that was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. That is not such a tragic thing as possibly it sounds to you. To those who are in prison, tears are a part of every day's experience. A day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy.

Well, now I am really beginning to feel more regret for the people who laughed than for myself. Of course when they saw me I was not on my pedestal" – an expression Bosie used to illustrate how he preferred Wilde – "I was in the pillory. But it is a very unimaginative nature that only cares for people on their pedestals. A pedestal may be a very unreal thing. A pillory is a terrific reality. They should have known also how to interpret sorrow better. I have said that behind Sorrow there is always Sorrow. It were still wiser to say that behind sorrow there is always a soul. And to mock at a soul in pain is a dreadful thing."<sup>4</sup>

In order that he can endure prison life, Wilde bolsters up his courage: "*At all costs I must keep Love in my heart.*" He realizes that nobody can be ruined except by his own hand. He awakens to a sense of responsibility towards each and every thing that unfolds. He gains that level of merciless self-knowledge that anyone who nurtures spiritual aspirations is sooner or later certain to experience.

At one point he writes from prison: "my friends must face the fact that ... I am not in prison as an innocent man. On the contrary, my record of perversities of passion and distorted romances would fill many scarlet volumes ... and so, though the particular offence required by the law did not find part amongst my perversities of passion, still perversities there were, or else why am I here? It may be a terrible shock to my friends to think that I had abnormal passions, and perverse desires, but if they read history they will find I am not the first artist so doomed, any more than I shall be the last."<sup>5</sup>

As we can see, there is a remarkable harshness in his self-analysis. What's more, Wilde explicitly demands that one of his friends listen to what has really occurred, as a chance for their friendship to survive. He wants his friends to know this facet of his life as well, and then either go on accepting him, or turn their back on him.

In prison Oscar Wilde also experiences sublime and deeply stirring episodes, which to others may seem to be but trifling matters to be ignored; yet, they leave a lasting impression on him

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<sup>4</sup> Oscar Wilde, "De Profundis." *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* [1948]. Ed. J. B. Foreman. London: Collins, 1966, p. 937.

<sup>5</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Eds. Holland, Merlin, and Rupert Hart-Davis. London: Fourth Estate, 2000, p. 784-787.

– acts of kindness which bear the seeds of a strong impetus to inner metamorphosis. The following is a beautiful example thereof; it concerns one of Wilde’s friends who stood by him through thick and thin: Robert Ross, referred to as Robbie. “Where there is Sorrow there is holy ground. Some day you will realise what that means. You will know nothing of life till you do ... When I was brought down from my prison to the Court of Bankruptcy between two policemen, Robbie waited in the long dreary corridor, that before the whole crowd, whom an action so sweet and simple hushed into silence, he might gravely raise his hat to me, as handcuffed and with bowed head I passed him by. Men have gone to heaven for smaller things than that. It was in this spirit, and with this mode of love that the saints knelt down to wash the feet of the poor, or stooped to kiss the leper on the cheek. I have never said one single word to him about what he did. I do not know to the present moment whether he is aware that I was even conscious of his action. It is not a thing for which one can render formal thanks in formal words. I store it in the treasury-house of my heart. I keep it there as a secret debt that I am glad to think I can never possibly repay. It is embalmed and kept sweet by the myrrh and cassia of many tears. When Wisdom has been profitless to me, and Philosophy barren, and the proverbs and phrases of those who have sought to give me consolation as dust and ashes in my mouth, the memory of that little lowly silent act of Love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity, made the desert blossom like a rose, and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken and great heart of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

There are other numerous arcane and genuine exegeses on Sorrow and its potential to be transmuted into new ethics and beauty. The spirit of the artist pervades the lines.

Wilde reads the Old and the New Testament, and he studies *De imitatione Christi* by Thomas à Kempis. He takes a close look at the life of St. Francis of Assisi. When he speaks of Christ, he does so above all to elucidate the question: why is Christ of such tremendous significance to the *arts* in the time to come?

A few further examples illustrate Wilde’s spiritual immersion that was setting in:

“Most people live *for* love and admiration. But it is *by* love and admiration that we should live. If any love is shown us we should recognise that we are quite unworthy of it. Nobody is worthy to be loved. The fact that God loves man shows that in the divine order of ideal things it is written that eternal love is to be given to what is eternally unworthy. Or if that phrase seems to you a bitter one to hear, let us say that everyone is worthy of love, except he who thinks that he is. Love is a sacrament that should be taken kneeling, and *Domine, non sum dignus* should be on the lips and in the hearts of those who receive it. I wish you would sometimes think of that. You need it so much.”<sup>7</sup>

Another passage allows us to gain insight into this alchemical soul-furnace where fundamental properties of the soul are transformed or moulded into being. Once again Wilde

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<sup>6</sup> Wilde, “De Profundis.”, op. cit., p. 906.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 930-931.



speaks of Christ: “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.

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.”<sup>8</sup>

Here is another relevant excerpt: “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 incidents in his life. It is difficult for most people to grasp the idea. I dare say one has to go to prison to understand it. If so, it may be worth while going to prison.”<sup>9</sup>

And finally a passage indicating the inner change taking place in Wilde: “St Francis of Assisi ... God had given him at his birth the soul of a poet, as he himself when quite young had in mystical marriage taken Poverty as his bride; and with the soul of a poet and the body of a beggar he found the way to perfection not difficult. He understood Christ, and so he became like him. We do not require the *Liber Conformitatum*<sup>10</sup> to teach us that the life of St Francis was the true *Imitatio Christi*: a poem compared to which the book that bears that name is merely prose. Indeed, that is the charm about Christ ... 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.”<sup>11</sup>

#### **IV. Stages of Christian Initiation**

The passages cited, which could easily be expanded, elucidate the way a person comes to tread the path of Christian initiation – without originally having striven for it, that is, without having sought it in a deliberate or conscious pursuit over the years. From a higher spiritual standpoint one could speak of it in terms of a prenatal resolution made by that self that, in the context of hierarchical beings, predetermines the manner of its re-birth. The first stages of Christian initiation are clearly perceivable in the sequence of events in Wilde’s life beginning with the year 1895: detention, flagellation and the Crowning with Thorns – just think of the experience at Clapham Junction. The implication of foot washing can also be inferred. Through suffering, Wilde has realized that it is more important to serve others than one’s own

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 933.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 933.

<sup>10</sup> A collection of texts – compiled by Fra Bartolomeo in the 14<sup>th</sup> century – comparing the life of St. Francis of Assisi with Christ’s life.

<sup>11</sup> Wilde, “De Profundis.”, op. cit., p. 933-934.

petty ego, as impressive as this ego may seem to the world. As to the remaining stages of the Passion and to the extent their completion was brought about in the case of Wilde – this is left to the reader to decide.

Wilde undergoes all these phases at the time *Salomé* is premièred. It is staged on February 11, 1896, at the very time Wilde is writing *De Profundis*. In this context the two writings are related to each other. In *De Profundis* Wilde portrays his own *psychological* Baptist-like destiny. He too is beheaded, for, he indeed loses everything that has hitherto been essential to him: glory, prestige, literary independence, his friends and his family.

As Marcus Schneider mentioned yesterday in his reflections, it was probably not pure chance that these twists of fate in Oscar Wilde's life were unfolding shortly before the Kali Yuga came to an end, i. e. at a pivotal moment in history when a new spiritual light was beginning to pour into mankind. With his soul having trod a burdensome and agonizing path, Wilde emerges as a seeker after that very light. Therefore, he may be regarded as an archetype of the many spirit-seekers who become clairvoyant by experiencing a Passion of the soul.

## **V. From Lucifer to Christ**

In a figure analogous to Wilde's fate we can identify a kind of archetypal key in the history of humankind. At the same time it symbolizes, as it were, both a pattern to be followed and an admonishment to recoil from to whomever goes in spiritual quest now and in the future. For the time being let us turn our attention to the archetype. We encounter him in the crucial moment of transition when Jesus of Nazareth, after having laid aside the ego that had clothed his personality, sets out for the banks of the Jordan and for the Baptist, where the Christ ego is to enter the egoless sheaths of Jesus. On his way this "unique being", as Rudolf Steiner calls the Jesus-sheaths freed of the ego, has three encounters: with two Essenes, with a leper and then with a man who seems to have been through an ordeal similar to Oscar Wilde's. "The wretched man", upon encountering the portentous sheaths-being, "felt the urge to thus speak to this being. 'In my life I have attained high ranks. And at all times as I rose to new ranks, I felt at my ease, and many a time was I overwhelmed with a thought, saying to myself: what an exceptional man you must be if your fellow men raise you to such heights, if you have achieved such great success upon earth. What an outstanding man you are! I was blissfully happy. Yet it happened that I soon lost this bliss. It happened in *one* night. And once, as I had just fallen asleep, a dream came over me with such intensity that I dreamt I was feeling ashamed of dreaming such thing. I dreamt a being was standing in front of me asking: who then, has raised you to such greatness? And who has led you to so high a rank? I felt ashamed, wondering how it was conceivable at all that such a question be put to me in my dream. For it was so plain to me that I was exceptional, and that I had obviously attained the high ranks by means of *my* great virtues. And as the being had spoken to me thus, I was filled in my dream with an ever deeper growing sense of shame towards myself, in my dream' – thus did the

wretched man speak to himself. ‘Then I took to flight, but no sooner had I fled than the vision appeared anew in another shape and said: ‘*I have raised you and taken you to a high rank.*’ And in him I perceived the Tempter of whom the Scriptures tell that he had been the Tempter in the Garden of Eden before. Hereupon I awoke, and I have found no peace of mind ever since. I gave up my rank, deserted my home, my everything, and henceforth have I been wandering about, idling away the time. And now my path leads me to you, a stray man, a beggar.’ And the very moment the man had uttered the words – the Akasha Record has it – the wraith reappeared and positioned himself before Jesus of Nazareth, who in the selfsame moment disappeared. Thereupon the vision vanished and the man was abandoned to his fate.”<sup>12</sup> These are Rudolf Steiner’s reflections on the *Fifth Gospel* presented in Munich on December 10, 1913. He talks about an archetypal occurrence. Pride goes before a fall, the proverb says. A man is portrayed, a man full of self-conceit, a man to whom the spirit of hubris that has guided him is *revealed* in his fall. It is Lucifer. The revelation is profound.

This awareness dawns on Oscar Wilde in a similar manner; the artist’s soul has attained to initiation through the experience of sorrow. Yet, with him it does not occur in an encounter with the sheaths-being but in the encounter with the real Christ with whom “once at least in his life each man walks ... to Emmaus”, as Wilde writes in *De Profundis*.

So we are faced with a kind of archetype of human evolution – inasmuch as Luciferic forces have a hand in it. The challenge for man is to unravel it.

There is a further relevant aspect in Wilde’s experience: the descent into the depths of our own soul where selfhood is to be confronted. It represents one of the two fundamental trials of the soul which the modern spirit-seeker is predestined to experience. In the lecture cycle *Wonders of the World, Ordeals of the Soul, Revelations of the Spirit* Rudolf Steiner shows that it pertains to the painstaking quest of the modern spiritual seeker to reach the two extreme poles of soul ordeals. Striving towards the outer world, he is seized by a terrible sense of void. He gets lost if he is not capable of taking Christ with him. At the opposite pole he enters his own self. What does he find there? Ferocious egotism. He can get burned on it if he’s not capable of taking Christ along, or in Rudolf Steiner’s own words: “The Christ impulse works as a disintegrating force, as a destructive influence upon our selfishness. How peculiar: the deeper we descend with the Christ impulse into our own selves, the less egotism is able to harm us. We then enter deeper and deeper into our own inner selves, and by penetrating with the Christ impulse our egotistic drives and passions we learn to perceive the human being. We learn to know all the secrets of this wonder of the world which is Man. Indeed, the Christ impulse enables us to go much further. If we were deprived of it [while descending into our inner selves – TM], we would bounce back like a rubber ball and would not be able to enter into our own selves, down into the sphere of our own inner constitution. But with Christ we

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<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Aus der Akasha-Forschung, Das Fünfte Evangelium*, CW 148. Lecture delivered on December 10, 1913; excerpt transl. by C. Vlad.

permeate through ourselves, and we emerge out of ourselves, so to say, on the opposite side. So that if we go out into the universe finding the Christ principle everywhere in the widths of space, we also find on the other side – if we penetrate below into the nether world – all the impersonal, freed from our own selves. Either way we find something that transcends our own selves. In the universal spheres we are neither dissolved nor atomized, we find the world of the upper gods; below we enter the world of the true gods.”<sup>13</sup>

As we can see, while in prison Oscar Wilde realized much of what is required on this second path.

## VI. Epilogue

After having witnessed here on these two days a beautiful presentation which throws a new light on Oscar Wilde’s life and work within the framework of the anthroposophic movement and the Anthroposophical Society, we may now ask: how can Wilde’s life acquire meaning for people in a spiritual scientific movement? In what way does it inspire emulation or caution?

Wilde’s life can reveal how the lower ego can free itself from vanity, for instance. The process of purification from vanity in Wilde’s case is a radical one. Every person with spiritual aspirations will undergo it in the long run.

According to a remark made by Rudolf Steiner to Walter Johannes Stein, there are three enemies of the soul which are harmful to life: Ambition, Vanity and Untruthfulness. But in a spiritual movement, he added, they have a *devastating* impact.<sup>14</sup> I think the time will come when the rather tragic events in the history of the Theosophical, and later Anthroposophical, Movement and Society in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century will be reconsidered *under the aspect of this very statement made by Steiner*. For, it gives a clue as to the primary motives behind the conflicts and tragic developments of those organizations. It will be more fruitful than thousands of pages of justifications and vindications, or of denunciations and apologies. Steiner’s word is emblematic of the crux of all these grave, rather fatal, developments.

We see in Oscar Wilde a man who is thoroughly prepared for his next incarnation upon earth to be wary of falling prey for a second time to the three aforementioned vices, especially the vice of vanity – vices very difficult to perceive since they are situated in a realm where one can get burned unless one enters it with the guidance of Christ. It also takes courage to realize that these vices must be completely eradicated for the very reason that they have not only a harmful, but an absolutely *devastating* effect upon spiritual development.

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<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Weltenwunder, Seelenprüfungen und Geistesoffenbarungen*, CW 129. Lecture delivered on August 27, 1911; excerpt transl. by C. Vlad.

<sup>14</sup> See *Mitteilungen aus der anthroposophischen Arbeit in Deutschland*, Nr. 38, Michaeli 1966.

If regarded from this point of view, Oscar Wilde's life functions as a compelling example of the need to overcome these three terribly plain and yet so challenging traits – ambition, vanity and untruthfulness. Therein lies the premonitory nature of his life.

On the other hand, it also shows that it is possible – in his case through a profound soul-ordeal rooted in the fatal implications of an erstwhile karmic involvement – for the lower ego to decrease, so that the higher ego in us – the Christ ego – can increase, to use the words of the Baptist. Through this process the soul assumes the shape of a chalice which receives something higher than itself. The soul, thus, becomes the Holy Grail. This is the development Oscar Wilde strove for in his greatest and most majestic moments and which he eventually brought to completion. And *this* is what posterity will remember him for – rather than what some biographers have deemed to be of major importance and what they have meticulously recorded – namely the incidents and occurrences he experienced after his release from prison, which occasionally let him relapse into former frailties.<sup>15</sup>

Whoever unsparingly pursues his own quest for self-knowledge thereby undergoing a purgatory process as Wilde did, or experiences a similar purification from vanity, will realize the uselessness of such a quality of the soul. The eminent Laurence Oliphant equally toiled his way through this level of awareness, though with him it was a process of deliberate self-education. He who unsparingly directs the acquired cognitive faculties at his own self – as we know, it is easier to apply merciless scrutiny to *others* than to oneself – can, even in the worst turmoil of the soul, cry out with Oscar Wilde not “What an ending! What an appalling ending!” but “What a beginning! What a wonderful beginning!”

#### **Additional bibliography:**

Barbara Belford, *Oscar Wilde – Eine Biographie*, Zürich 2004.

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<sup>15</sup> Wilde's sole literary production on his release from prison was *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* – which here cannot be dealt with in further detail – portraying the fate of a fellow prisoner sentenced to death and hanged.