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(Re)writing Wilde's Last Years:
From David Hare's *The Judas Kiss* to Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince*

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De Profundis (1905) is perhaps the most important work and resource for reading and rewriting Oscar Wilde's final years. Guy and Small note that Wilde's notorious letter seems to be 'the least analysed of Wilde's works'.¹ Indeed, *De Profundis* is at once a marginal and a central work in Wilde's oeuvre and possibly the one that best projects towards a responsive and intelligent reading of Wilde as a central author and character on the late Victorian scene. *De Profundis* is a liminal, unstable text that tells of an unstable, contradictory, double character. Wilde's *epistola* is not simply a biographical document, and yet it cannot be fully understood as a philosophical inquiry into the nature of suffering and redemption. In a sense, Wilde wrote his own partial autobiography in *De Profundis*, acknowledging – through a complex exercise of literary artifice and invention – his 'symbolic' status while revealing the very reasons and events that turned his success and celebrity into infamy and failure. Wilde's was to be a dramatic and yet magnificent fall, transforming his social failure into eternal literary fame, translating 'Oscar Wilde' into a global celebrity and cultural icon, a paradigm of otherness to be performed and 'reproduced' in a number of different rewritings and contexts.² In this article, I will focus on David Hare's play *The Judas Kiss* (1998) and Rupert Everett's film *The Happy Prince* (1998) as cultural texts that rewrite and extend *De Profundis* in different ways.

Writing his last years: Wilde's *De Profundis*

After two trials at the Old Bailey on 25 May 1895, Wilde was sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour for acts of gross indecency with other men. He was first sent to Wandsworth Prison and then, in November, after being declared bankrupt, he was transferred to Reading Gaol.³ It was during the last period of his imprisonment that he composed the long letter that came to be known as *De Profundis* – a title suggested by Robert Ross, to whom Wilde entrusted the manuscript

on his release from prison – addressed directly to Douglas, but also to all those who had loved and hated him. With this in mind, as Frankel stresses, ‘it is vital to understand that the picture Wilde draws in *De Profundis* of his relationship with Douglas is shaped by the bitterness of his imprisonment’.⁴ Frankel also quotes the words of Regenia Gagnier, for whom ‘if there had not been an Alfred Douglas, Wilde would have had to invent one [...]. Douglas was the image of all unworthy audiences.’⁵

Wilde, whose successful career had made him a celebrity, now had to face failure and shame for the very first time. *De Profundis* offered him an opportunity to deal with this complex situation in literary terms; indeed, *De Profundis* works on many different levels simultaneously; it is a long letter addressed to Bosie, inhabited by many different texts; there are, of course, many quotations, from the Bible and other literary works, but we can speak of a text, or rather of texts, within the text, as Wilde self-consciously wrote passages, even very long ones, in which there seemed to be less room for immediacy and urgency and more for artifice and (careful) construction.

De Profundis was first published by Ros in 1905 in an abridged version which – omitting all direct references to Douglas, which were included in the later editions such as Rupert-Hart Davis’ 1962 canonical edition – resulted in a powerful essay touching on such diverse topics such as suffering, redemption, the conditions of prison-life, and famously Christ as the precursor of the Romantic movement in life. Wilde, as Small and Guy put it, had undoubtedly thought of these passages – in other words, of what is known as Ross’s *De Profundis* – for future publication.⁶

De Profundis records through the author’s voice what Wilde suffered; in short, there is a meta-textual dimension to the text that is always there, between the lines. One of the most quoted passages in Wilde’s letter is the one in which he offers a portrait of himself and of his position in his own time; he speaks of his literary achievements and skills, with a tone, with an inflection, which powerfully constructs Wilde’s (late-Victorian) celebrity for the generations to come:

I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realised this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realise it afterwards. Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime, and have it so acknowledged. It is usually discerned, if discerned at all, by the historian, or the critic, long

after both the man and his age have passed away. With me it was different. I felt it myself, and made others feel it. Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope. The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring; I made art a philosophy and philosophy an art. I altered the minds of men and the colours of things; there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder. I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or sonnet; at the same time I widened its range and enriched its characteristics. Drama, novel, poem in prose, poem in rhyme, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty. To truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, and showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence. I treated art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction. I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me. I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.⁷

As Guy and Small observe, ‘Wilde’s summation of his life here does not seem to be addressed only to Douglas; it feels more as if [he] is self-consciously fashioning a version of his life for posterity, and perhaps attempting to control the shape of subsequent narratives about him’.⁸ In the *epistola*, Wilde never questions those controversial aspects of his persona that, although criticized in some Victorian contexts, had helped him achieve his celebrity status, such as his notorious individualism:

People used to say of me that I was too individualistic [...] my ruin came not from too great individualism of life, but from too little. The one disgraceful, unpardonable, and to all time contemptible action of my life was to allow myself to appeal to society for help and protection. [...] Of course, once I had put into motion the forces of society, society turned on me and said, ‘Have you been living all this time in defiance of my laws, and do you now appeal to those laws for protection? You shall have those laws exercised to the full. You shall abide by what you have appealed to.’ The result is I am in gaol.⁹

In this passage, the author – whose very life had been the staging of a very complex *play* in the theatrical space represented by London society (a position that allowed him to be, simultaneously, both inside and outside that space) – refers for the first time to his condition as an outsider, a condition that implies something different from that of the failed artist and man with which *De Profundis* is usually associated with and which fully emerges at the end of the manuscript. Of course, he understands that his biggest mistake was to ‘appeal to’ the laws of that very society he had mocked in his lifetime, and he is able to translate this discovery through a tone which recalls that of his short stories (such as “The Selfish Giant”); in short, he is able to speak about Wilde through Wilde, conveying power and effectiveness to the whole narrative and to its impact on the ‘public’.

Wilde's fall was very often discussed, especially in official late-Victorian contexts, in terms of a parable. Wilde's punishment was considered as the natural outcome for a life lived with the single aim (according to the restricted views of a few people) of pursuing pleasure. Any reader of Wilde knows perfectly well how vital those experiences were for the very existence and substance of his writings; those experiences were in themselves capable of articulating a sort of third space in-between life and art, they were a bridge between street and paper, blood and ink:

People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But they, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approach them they were delightfully suggestive and stimulating. It was like feasting with panthers. The danger was half the excitement. [...] What I do feel ashamed of is the horrible Philistine atmosphere into which you brought me. My business as an artist was with Ariel. You set me to wrestle with Caliban.¹⁰

Wilde, here, is intimating – through the image conveyed by the ‘horrible Philistine atmosphere’ – the discourse on ‘Christ as a pre-romantic figure’, which characterizes one of the best sections of *De Profundis*.

Wilde's narrative – in its self-conscious effort to create a continuum between the private and the public – establishes a very subtle connection between pleasure and sorrow, one which allows him to see them as both fundamental for the full development of the individual:

I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does. There was no pleasure I did not experience. I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine. I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on.¹¹

For the writer ‘to pass on’ meant accessing a completely new territory, in which sorrow rhymed with isolation and desperation with the mortification of the self, a territory which allowed Wilde to rethink and rewrite in fresh and original terms the figure of Christ himself, whose iconicity, according to Wilde – being fostered by Jesus' artistic temperament – inspired artists of different ages:

To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all. To him what is dumb is dead. But to Christ it was not so. With a width and wonder of imagination that fills one almost with awe, he took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom, and made of himself its eternal mouthpiece. [...] His desire was to be to the myriads who had found no utterance a very trumpet through which they

might call to heaven. And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom suffering and sorrow were modes through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he made 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.¹²

The author praises different aspects of Christ: his love for children and for ignorant people, his preference for exceptions over laws, his capacity of conceiving the divided races as unity. Wilde knew Christ's place was with the poets; most importantly, Wilde praised Christ's extraordinary imagination and his capacity of being in tune with different people, to the extent of becoming the other. There is of course a narrative level in *De Profundis* which suggests Wilde identified himself as Christ and yet, as Kelli M. Godwin observes, Wilde used Christ's narrative to position himself in the condition of a sinner worthy of Christ's forgiveness.¹³

The reader is faced with Wilde's doubleness.¹⁴ His narrative positions him in-between saint and sinner, he is a Christ-like figure (suffering his own crucifixion) who is paradoxically asking for forgiveness.¹⁵ Wilde's doubleness can be conceived as part of that process of becoming immortal. According to Fenton Johnson his imprisonment, as we will see with Hare and Everett, elevated his life from the merely brilliant to something closer to the immortality – sainthood – to which he aspired.¹⁶ This kind of celebrity – achieved through martyrdom – is written in Wilde's story; it is, in other words, part of him. We read Wilde through his personal tragedy as, today, we listen to Kurt Cobain and, in a way, to John Lennon, proleptically through the lenses offered by our knowledge of the tragic epilogues of their existences. Johnson insists on how any approach to Wilde should dispense with specific or restrictive labels, such as the one which identifies him with the archetypal 'gay writer'.¹⁷ It would be more appropriate to think of him as a contemporary outsider; in this, *De Profundis* rearticulates the concept of (social) failure into something different: the failed man (and artist) becomes a self-conscious loser, an outsider, who refuses to come to terms with reality, or who can find no place within it, 'Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me',¹⁸ he states in *De Profundis*.

De Profundis is rich in contradictions and in this sense, as suggested above, it resembles Wilde himself, who loved to take different, even contrasting, positions. In the manuscript, the same event is often recorded several times, each time showing a different mood of the author, and this does not allow us to read *De Profundis* as a reliable, authentic autobiography. From this perspective, *De Profundis* should be approached as Wilde's literary testament, as a work that, as we have already seen, cannot be reduced to a specific function and which, as such, suggests the best way to read it, to access Wilde as a literary icon. Every expression, sound, or passage of Wilde's *epistola* is the fruit of the most self-conscious effort. In his annotated edition of Wilde's prison writings Frankel – after evoking early responses to the *epistola*, notably those of E. V. Lucas, for whom the value of the letter is in 'the triumph of the literary temperament over the most disadvantageous conditions', and Max Beerbohm, who famously wrote that 'one does not seem to read a written thing. The words sing' – notes that 'the power of *De Profundis* derives ultimately from its majestic and impassionate prose'.¹⁹ In short, in *De Profundis* Wilde turned suffering into beauty, sorrow into music.

Staging Wilde's last years: *The Judas Kiss* by David Hare

One of the most lyrical, musical, powerful (and most quoted) passages from *De Profundis* can be heard towards its conclusion. It represents the perfect synthesis of the life and meaning of a cultural icon, of a celebrity whose failure and fall gave birth to the myth of the outsider, of the loser, of the artist who, learning to say 'no', turned art into a better place to live:

All trials are trials for one's life, just as all sentences are sentences of death; and three times have I been tried. The first time I left the box to be arrested, the second time to be led back to the house of detention, the third time to pass into a prison for two years. Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.²⁰

This iconic passage was chosen by David Hare as the epilogue of his 1998 play *The Judas Kiss*, which focuses on Wilde's days immediately before his arrest and after his release from Reading Gaol. More specifically, Act 1 – significantly entitled 'Deciding to Stay' – takes place at the Cadogan hotel in between the second and third trials, while Act 2 – 'Deciding to Leave' – is set in Naples and recounts his last days with Bosie. During a talk given at The American Library in Paris, Hare reveals how the genesis of the project goes back to when he was asked by director Mike Nichols to write a biopic on Wilde. Bored of finding himself trapped in the role of a reporter, he discovered that the best sections of what he was writing were – according to Nichols – about the most mysterious and less known moments of Wilde's life, as for instance his Naples days. For Hare, 'what lies at the heart of Wilde is mystery'.²¹ In this sense, the two acts of the play investigate two great mysteries in Wilde's life, that is why, given the chance he was offered to leave England, he decided to stay at Cadogan hotel to be arrested and after his release from prison he returned to Bosie.

Hare's professional background and the specific moment of his artistic involvement with Wilde is of great significance to the play. As Andrew Calcutt observes, when 'Hare came to the British stage he was one of a batch of controversial, left-wing playwrights which also included Edward Bond [...] and Howard Brenton. By the mid-90s Hare had become a highly respected, if somewhat staid, figure', to the extent that he was offered a knighthood in the very year his Wildean play was staged. 'Once an outsider on the fringes of British theatre, Hare', Calcutt adds, became 'one of its most admired dramatists'.²² In a way, Hare's parable represents an inversion of Wilde's, who, once a successful dramatist, turned, in his last years, into an outsider and a pariah.

Hare had always been fascinated by Wilde's life, yet in *The Judas Kiss* he is less interested in Wilde's biography than in 'the authorial persona created in his texts, especially in his resolute adherence to a life lived in art'.²³ From this perspective, a key passage in Act 1 contains a very relevant exchange between Bosie and Wilde:

BOSIE: Oh Oscar, I beg you... I beg you, do not give up.

WILDE: Give up? Give Up? Why should it matter? 'Shall I give up?', 'Shall I carry on' Either? Neither? Guilty! Not guilty! How can it make a blind bit of difference? The simple

fact is: I am cast in a role. My story has already been written. How I chose to play it is a mere matter of taste. The performance of the actor will not determine the action.²⁴

Hare's focus is on the fatal destiny of the Wilde character. The fatalism which emerges from this passage, and more in general from the play as a whole, connects in an important way with issues of class, another key area of interest for Hare. Wilde – though fascinated by the aristocracy – was not, unlike Douglas, an aristocrat, and this, of course, turned him into a victim of Victorian classism.

During an exchange between Ross and Wilde at the end of Act 1, Ross overtly points to the class difference between Wilde and his lover, exclaiming that Bosie 'escapes prosecution because he is a lord!'²⁵ Discussing with Ross and Wilde the eventuality of Oscar being arrested, Douglas ironically invokes the influence of the name Queensberry on English politicians, and on the possibility of defending his lover, through his friend George Wyndham, a Member of Parliament, to which Wilde replies, 'I wish I shared your faith in the English. Nation to them is just as important as class. They have united in hatred of the foreigner. Yes, because I'm Irish'.²⁶ Wilde's Irishness and middle-class background turned him into the perfect scapegoat to be prosecuted by the English class system. And yet Wilde decides to stay, to face his destiny and to complete the 'story' that has already been written, albeit 'unfinished':

WILDE: Yes. I can run but I choose not to. Die of embarrassment in some hovel abroad? Admit to society they have driven me out? No, I will not give them that pleasure. [...] If I run now my story is finished. For as long as I stay it is not at an end, I prefer my story unfinished.²⁷

Within the economy of the play, this choice turns Wilde not only into a martyr but also, and most importantly, as we have seen, into an immortal icon for future generations of outsiders.

One fascinating aspect of the play is undoubtedly its style. Hare defines Wilde 'the most quotable writer of all time' and notes how his epigrams turn 'upside-down the conventional wisdom'.²⁸ Terry Eagleton – who, like Hare, approaches Wilde in terms of an 'Irish socialist' – considers the Wildean epigram 'a piece of linguistic perversity, which seizes upon some English commonplace and rips it inside out, deconstructs it, stands it on its head'.²⁹ Wilde's epigrams stand

for – and literally contain – a caesura, an interruption, a critical hiatus in relation to the order of discourse that is capable of generating a short-circuit in verbal communication. Hare embraces Wilde’s taste for paradox and inversion, his capacity for unmasking English hypocrisy through language, and yet in his play he escapes the cliché of having Wilde speaking through aphorisms (a choice which defines many rewritings of Wilde’s life both in literature and cinema) and invents all Wilde’s dialogues. Especially in Act 2, Hare’s words convey a sense of urgency, and yet they seem to powerfully connect with some of the best passages written by Wilde – the suffering man – in *De Profundis*, as emerges in this final, intense exchange between the protagonist and Bosie:

WILDE: Ideally, I like to drink anise. My favourite anise is the second. I drink it not because it makes me sleep – nothing makes me sleep – but because at the moment I drink it I *believe* that I shall sleep. An illustration of the perfect usefulness of science. The position necessary to make me sleep does not exist. But the potion that provides the illusion that I shall does.

BOSIE: Yes.

WILDE: Indeed.

He stubs out his cigarette.

I drink the second anise. I am filled with the conviction: ‘I shall sleep tonight’. Belief is everything. Faith is everything.

He is thoughtful a moment.

It is the same with love.

BOSIE: With love?

WILDE: Yes.

BOSIE: In what way?

WILDE: The vulgar error is to think that love is a kind of illusion.

BOSIE: Is it not?

WILDE: No. It is the fault of bad poets who encourage this mistake. ‘I am completely enraptured’ lovers say, as somehow they were being deceived. When the affair ends they say, ‘I have been stripped of my illusions.’ When they cease to love, they say, ‘Oh. I see him clearly now.’

BOSIE: Are they not right?

WILDE: No, Bosie. The reverse is the truth.

The two men look at each other.

The everyday world is shrouded. We see it dimly. Only when we love we see the true person. The truth of a person is only visible through love. Love is not the illusion. Life is.³⁰

Hare points to how Wilde developed a ‘complete identification with the Christ story’ but notes how, if in the Catholic religion you have the belief that ‘if you give love, you will be rewarded’,

Wilde ‘got nothing in return’.³¹ Yet, as twenty-first century readers and fans, we continue to love and perform him.

The Judas Kiss was first presented by the Almeida Theatre Company, in association with Robert Fox and Scott Rudin, at the Playhouse Theatre, London, on 12 March 1998, with a cast featuring Liam Neeson as Oscar Wilde. This was not a particularly successful production, whereas the 2012 revival, directed by Neil Armfield at London’s Hampstead Theatre, with Wilde played by Rupert Everett and Bosie by Freddie Fox, was a much more convincing effort.

Everett’s recent memoir, *To the End of the World. Travels with Oscar Wilde* (2020), interestingly features the same structure of *The Judas Kiss*, with – as the author confesses – the first half of the book ‘written while making a film [and which] remained a wonderful dream’ and the ‘second half written on waking from the nightmare of having made it’.³² The book documents the ten years the actor dedicated to *The Happy Prince* film project and interestingly starts with Everett’s involvement in the new production of *The Judas Kiss*. The author defines Hare’s play as ‘a marvellous play that has been performed once before in the UK to disastrous effect, savaged by the press in reviews that even our excellent production cannot quite bury’.³³ The main problem of the 1998 production had to do with the casting of Liam Neeson, described by Hare as ‘the island’s most famous heterosexual’.³⁴ Everett, a long-term fan of Wilde – even though apparently physically closer to the Bosie character – became instead the perfect Oscar. In the memoir he asks himself a series of key questions about Wilde and his decision to stay at the Cadogan Hotel:

Why does Wilde not run when he has a chance? Does he know that his place in history is being carved as he sits there waiting to be arrested? Or does he, as David Hare infers, simply think that if he gets bail he and Bosie can still dine at Willis’ that night [...]? Is he immobilised by indecision (Hamlet), or carrying his cross all the way to Reading Gaol (Jesus)?³⁵

In the first Act, Robbie urges Wilde to leave for the station, while Bosie wants him to stay; but, as Everett knows, ‘it is finally immortality that Oscar is playing for – not life’.³⁶ Commenting on his performance as Oscar during a sold-out night in London, he writes:

just a century ago a man, Oscar could be imprisoned and ruined simply for being gay, but tonight [...] a homosexual stands on equal ground with the rest of society. [...] Oscar winks at me in the mirror as I apply more eyeliner.³⁷

In the memoir, Oscar becomes a character with whom the writer constantly interacts in a fascinating dialogue with a past which becomes our now. We travel, in short, with Oscar through Rupert finding ourselves part of the incredible world that Everett – the multi-talented (writer, actor, director) – creates with his film.

Filming the outsider: Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince*

Everett's *The Happy Prince* stands almost as a cinematic variation and expansion of Act 2 of Hare's play, recounting Wilde's magnificent fall and his last 'gutter' days as a pariah and exile, first in France and then in Italy. Everett rewrites Wilde starting from those years and experiences, which are usually left outside conventional narratives about him. In this sense, Ken Hughes' *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960) had Oscar – charmingly played by Peter Finch with an Irish accent – coolly refusing to speak to Bosie on the railway station platform before he headed off to his unimaginable future, while Gilbert's acclaimed film *Wilde* (1997) – based on Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography, and in which Stephen Fry plays Oscar in a performance that exceeded the screen to become a kind of visual reincarnation of Wilde for the late nineties – halted after a sentimental embrace between the reunited Oscar and Bosie in Naples.

Everett emphasises how these films are not able to convey what society really did to Wilde in terms of punishment, both in prison with hard labour, and after prison, in exile, which could be considered another form of imprisonment. In this perspective, Everett's idea – which expands Hare's – of the last great vagabond of the late nineteenth century, the celebrity famous for being famous, the pop idol on the skids, becomes a potent and poignant story to address. Focusing on the origins of the project in his memoir, Everett confesses:

Several years ago, encouraged by the success of my first book of memoirs [2006], I turned my attention to screenwriting my dream being to create work for myself as an actor [...]. Oscar Wilde in exile seemed to be the obvious choice. If the only role I was permitted to

play in world cinema was the gay best friend, then I would take it all the way back to the prototype.³⁸

As emerges from this passage the film becomes a dialogical site in which two *lives* – Everett’s and Wilde’s – meet and redefine themselves; interestingly, in *The Happy Prince* Everett is both director and main actor of Wilde’s drama. As Peter Bradshaw observes, ‘that of Wilde is a part Everett was born to play, and he does it with exactly the right kind of poignantly ruined magnificence’.³⁹ Besides, Everett can be defined as an outsider in the world of cinema, one who, as we have seen through his memoir, suffered discrimination because of his homosexuality. In this sense, the film establishes a fascinating dialogue across time and space between two artists and actors who have lived as outsiders.

In Everett’s film, the actor/director takes us through the devastating horror of poverty and humiliation, which, however, Wilde faces with gallows humour and wit. In one of the first sequences we see him vomiting in agony on his deathbed before declaiming: ‘Encore du champagne!’⁴⁰ In this sense, even in his last, very difficult days, Wilde, the lifelong performer and man of theatre, found a new world to perform to, where the stars were rent boys, petty thieves, and street urchins. He was endlessly being cited for extraordinary empathy and generosity with people, while at the same time being an incredible snob. Wilde’s most interesting feature is his determination to escape fixed identities, which implies a capacity to harmonize dissonant, contrasting positions. The film shows how the appeal of Wilde was his humanity. He had some of the bad traits most of us have as human beings, that is snobbery, greed, vanity, and egomania, but he got caught out for it. As Everett himself notes, many people desire to throw themselves over the edge, but most of them have a natural constraint and natural borders before going that far, pulling themselves back. Wilde, for some reason, didn’t.

Commenting on the film – and comparing it to screen portrayals by Morley, Finch, and Fry – Merlin Holland affirmed that Everett’s can be considered probably the most fascinating of the biopics on his grandfather.⁴¹ Whereas Gilbert’s film with Fry is very intellectual, Everett’s is mostly emotional.⁴² If it is true that in Wilde there is both the intellectual and the emotional, at this stage

of his life the author is living on what is left of his emotions, and that is exactly what Everett excels at conveying. On a stylistic level, Everett was inspired by what happens when the brain starts to collapse and how it throws off images and ideas and starts to play with a kind of spatial awareness. More specifically, he was impressed by his own father's death and how his brain was falling apart, coming up with bubbles of memory. There is, indeed, a sort of feverish dimension, a magical, dreamlike quality to the film, with a room that seems to shrink and expand (with his brain's last memories) as Wilde dies.

One key scene of the film portrays an iconic event where in Clapham Junction train station Wilde is transferring trains on his way to prison⁴³ and is left for thirty minutes on the platform to be yelled at and spat on. It is the rush hour and the policeman escorting him is just reading the newspaper while a big crowd gathers around him. In a way, what happens is one of the most extraordinary scenes in the whole of Wilde's life. A man, who until recently had been the most famous, lauded author in London, is reduced to being spat on by a crowd of commuters. Wilde himself describes the event – and its lasting effect on him – in *De Profundis*:

On November 13th, 1895, I was brought down here 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 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.⁴⁴

The Clapham Junction episode is – as emerges from Wilde's words – an extremely strong and dramatic scene, which significantly resembles a moment from the passion of Christ (and as we have seen, in *De Profundis* Wilde is insistently fascinated with the Christ figure). Experiences and humiliations such as these, suffered by the man during the last years of his life, and recounted by the writer in *De Profundis*, turned him into 'Saint Oscar', the first homosexual martyr of history.⁴⁵ Significantly Wilde's connection with the Queensberry family was, again, at once a gender and a class transgression. In another sequence Everett shows Wilde with a portrait of Queen Victoria by

his deathbed; he died one year before her, and the film hints that Wilde's vindictive treatment was part of the ugly sense of shame and mortification at aesthetic indulgence which the manly and masculine slaughter of the First World War was supposed to redeem.⁴⁶

In *The Happy Prince* we have sequences of Wilde in London, Dieppe, Paris, Naples – in each of these cities and villages Everett, as he confesses in his memoir, finds spaces of almost religious connection with Wilde. Significantly, the film opens and ends in Paris where Oscar died on 30 November 1900. In the script the director imagines Wilde, *in extremis*, befriending a young Parisian rent boy and his kid brother, holding them spellbound with 'The Happy Prince' story. Everett's 2020 memoir indeed opens with the memory of little Rupert in his bed listening to his mother reading him 'The Happy Prince': 'introducing me to Oscar Wilde is Mummy's most audacious move, and her greatest contribution to my emotional development'. It is through Wilde's stories that Everett learns 'for the first time that there is a thing called love and that it usually has a price'.⁴⁷

The first sequence of the film shows Oscar Wilde in happier times reciting, to his entranced sons, the iconic tale of a statue allowing a swallow to denude him of all his gold to feed the poor. The story was included in the collection entitled *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* published in May 1888, which was extremely well-received. As Matthew Sturgis writes in his recent biography of Wilde, at the time of its publication 'there was general recognition that, although there was much for children to enjoy, the stories were likely to appeal rather more to adults'.⁴⁸

Writing in 1888, an *Athenaeum* reviewer noted that 'there is a piquant touch of contemporary satire which differentiates Mr Wilde from the teller of pure fairy tales',⁴⁹ and yet in these stories, which very often involve an ultimate sacrifice on the part of their main characters, the satire seems to be, as Ellmann puts it, 'subordinated to a sadness unusual in fairy tales'.⁵⁰ Focusing on *The Happy Prince* story, in his 2007 monograph on Wilde's fairy tales, Jarlath Killenn writes that

it is society that must align itself with the Prince, not the Prince who must somehow forcibly alter society. The Prince does not overthrow capitalism, but he sets an example of radical self-sacrifice for others to follow. The major point is that only the Prince and the Swallow are blessed by God which justifies them both.⁵¹

From this perspective, in Everett's film the embedding of "The Happy Prince" tale becomes an ambiguous parable for Wilde's passion and (possible) redemption, the unhappy prince who makes a lonely discovery that love is the only thing worth worshipping,⁵² something which also emerges in the last act of *The Judas Kiss*. *The Happy Prince* is indeed a story that somehow reflects Wilde: we have a gilded, jewelled character who is gradually stripped of everything and ends up being thrown on the rubbish heap. And yet, in a sense, even then, as we have shown, Wilde experienced a different kind of happiness, one which allowed him to retain his irony and humour. The film recounts the great drama of Wilde's life constructing the whole narrative on the powerful intertext represented by the story of *The Happy Prince*. What characterizes Everett's film is, in this sense, a fairy-tale-like quality. As a bitter-sweet fairy tale constantly retold by contemporary cinema and drama, Wilde's life as writing becomes immortal.

In conclusion, Hare's play and Everett's film focus on Oscar's dramatic yet magnificent fall, portraying the alterity of a writer whose liminal position can serve as a lens through which to read and deconstruct our (success-obsessed and self-centred) age. This fall – which, as we have seen, Wilde writes about so effectively in *De Profundis* – is a source of inspiration, not only for Hare and Everett but also for writers, directors, and actors who have performed Wilde's paradigm of outsidership using different artistic languages, questioning the idea of polarity, and inviting us to cross the boundaries between genders, bodies, art forms and, most importantly, between innocence and guilt, failure and success. These rewritings allow us not only to re-read Wilde from new perspectives, but also to rewrite him ourselves, turning Oscar Wilde into a critical perspective for reading the world.

¹ Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, 'Reading *De Profundis*?' *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 49.2 (2006), 123-49 (p. 123).

² See Pierpaolo Martino, *Wilde Now. Performance, Celebrity and Intermediality in Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Palgrave Macmillan 2023).

³ On Wilde's trials and his imprisonment see the recent and exhaustive monograph by Joseph Bristow, *Oscar Wilde on Trial. The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022).

⁴ Nicholas Frankel, 'Introduction', in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 12.

- ⁵ Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986), p. 180.
- ⁶ Guy and Small, p. 129.
- ⁷ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings*, ed. by Colm Tóibín (London: Penguin 2013), p. 100.
- ⁸ Guy and Small, p. 30.
- ⁹ Wilde, pp. 134-35.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ¹³ Kelli M. Godwin, 'Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*: A Narrative of Sexual Sin and Forgiveness', *The Explicator*, 67.1 (2008), 58-61 (p. 60).
- ¹⁴ See Terry Eagleton, 'The Doubleness of Oscar Wilde', *The Wildean*, 19 (2001), 2-9.
- ¹⁵ On the Christ figure in *De Profundis* see also Jan-Melissa Schramm, 'Wilde and Christ', in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. by Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 253-60.
- ¹⁶ Fenton Johnson, 'De Profundis, 1895-97; published 1905 and 1962', in *50 Gay and Lesbian Books Everybody Must Read*, ed. Richard Canning (New York: Alison, 2009), p. 84.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-5.
- ¹⁸ Wilde, p. 158.
- ¹⁹ Frankel, p. 16.
- ²⁰ Wilde, pp. 158-59.
- ²¹ 'Sir David Hare @ The American Library in Paris, 12 June 2014', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUoLe2M5P60> [accessed 4 November 2023].
- ²² Andrew Calcutt, *Brit Cult: An A-Z of British Pop Culture* (London: Prion, 2000), pp. 30-1.
- ²³ Heather Marcovitch, 'The Judas Kiss, Gross Indecency, Velvet Goldmine: The Postmodern Masks of Oscar Wilde', in *Quintessential Wilde: His Worldly Place, His Penetrating Philosophy and His Influential Aestheticism*, ed. by Annette M. Magid (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), p. 140.
- ²⁴ David Hare, *The Judas Kiss* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 37.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- ²⁸ *Hare @ The American Library*.
- ²⁹ Eagleton, 'The Doubleness of Oscar Wilde', p. 4.
- ³⁰ Hare, p. 97.
- ³¹ *Hare @ The American Library*
- ³² Rupert Everett, *To the End of the World. Travels with Oscar Wilde* (London: Abacus, 2020), p. 119.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ³⁴ *Hare @ The American Library*
- ³⁵ Everett, p. 35.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- ³⁹ Peter Bradshaw, 'The Happy Prince Review – Rupert Everett is Magnificent in Dream Role as Dying Oscar Wilde', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/22/the-happy-prince-film-review-rupert-everett-oscar-wilde> [accessed 4 November 2023].
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Holland and Everett first met in 2011 when Wilde's nephew asked the actor to read some passages from Wilde for the unveiling ceremony of the renovated Oscar Wilde tombstone at Père-Lachaise in November 2011.
- ⁴² Dalya Alberge, 'Oscar Wilde's Grandson "Terribly Moved" by Rupert Everett's Ciopic', *The Guardian*, 5 June 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/jun/05/oscar-wilde-grandson-terribly-moved-rupert-everett-biopic-merlin-holland> [accessed 4 November 2023].
- ⁴³ It is interesting to note that in 2016 Everett read *The Ballad of the Reading Gaol* at *Inside: Artists and Writers in Reading Prison*, an intermedial series featuring exhibitions and readings organized by the immersive art group *Artangel* in the notorious prison where Wilde served his sentence from 1895 to 1897.
- ⁴⁴ Wilde, *De Profundis*, p. 133.
- ⁴⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Saint Oscar* (Derry: Field Day, 1989).
- ⁴⁶ On this aspect see John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002).
- ⁴⁷ Everett, pp. 14-15.
- ⁴⁸ Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus, 2019), p. 364.
- ⁴⁹ Unsigned Notice, *Athenaeum*, 1 September 1888, p. 186, in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Karl Beckson (London and New York: Routledge, 1970), p. 60.
- ⁵⁰ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin 1987), p. 282.
- ⁵¹ Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 38.

⁵² Bradshaw, *The Happy Prince* Review.