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> It is as a convict, as a point of application for punitive mechanisms, that the offender is constituted himself as the object of possible knowledge.
>
> - Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

On 27 May 1895, Oscar Wilde was sentenced under the Criminal Law Amendment act of 1885 to two years hard labor for "committing acts of gross indecency with other male persons." In giving Wilde the maximum sentence, along with the clear implication that he would give him a larger one if he could, Justice Wills (the judge presiding over the case) swiftly brought to an end to Wilde's fame and prosperity. In effect the justice doomed Wilde to play two new roles in life—first that of prisoner and then that of exile. These are very different roles from those of the self-proclaimed Professor of Aesthetes and the Dandy. However, these roles would not be his last, for Art often has posthumous roles awaiting those upon whose head it lays its laurel wreath.

When the libel trial against the Marquess of Queensberry began on 3 April 1895, Wilde had two plays running in the West End: *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Not only were these his most commercially successful plays, but the latter continues to be considered his most flawless theatrical piece. Just four years prior to this Wilde had commenced his final climb to the top with the publication of his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The novel's espousal of hedonism, its decadent aspects, and its homoerotic overtones caused a scandal and a critical backlash, which forced Wilde to defend his art by putting himself further into the public spotlight. Yet as Trevor Fisher has pointed out, "Oscar's baiting of the Philistines was deliberate, and designed to create a reaction" (30), thus Wilde was courting this controversy, harnessing it to increase his fame. Following this was the thoroughly decadent and decidedly symbolist *Salomé* (1891). Salomé, the story of Salomé's attempted seduction

of John the Baptist and his subsequent beheading, was banned in England because at the time it was illegal to depict biblical characters on stage. Finally, and in rapid succession, came Wilde's society comedies, propelling him to fame and fortune and setting the stage for his tragic and sudden fall from grace.

Clearly Wilde was at the height of his creative powers as the first trial (the libel trial against the Marquess of Queensberry) began. However for most of his prison sentence, and the few years he was alive after his release, Wilde produced very little artistic output[1]—the poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and the long letter *De Profundis*[2] (1897). For a man of letters accustomed to a life of leisure, prison was a veritable death sentence. In addition to hard labor, prisoners subjected to the separate system[3] were not allowed to talk to each other for any reason—neither was Wilde allowed to write anything until the end of his sentence. This was a far cry from his previous life of lavish spending, decadent pleasure seeking, and periodically composing artistic work. Yet when he was finally allowed pen and paper, Wilde proved that his creative ability had not diminished by composing *De Profundis* in his last months in Reading Gaol. In *De Profundis* Wilde embraces the suffering that characterizes punishment and comes to understand it as a different mode of life. One characterized by pain much in the same manner his previous life was characterized by pleasure—and ultimately exposing the transformative and subversive potential of this presumably oppressive carceral experience.

In direct contrast to this is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Dorian, who sells his soul for eternal youth in order to preserve his uncanny beauty, becomes imprisoned by a decadent discourse that, if not of his own creation, he makes uniquely his own. Here we find the artist rising at full steam, scheming, exploring, and manifesting the myriad possibilities made real in Art. In regards to his identification with the characters in the novel Wilde offers us the following: "I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages perhaps" (Wilde, *Picture* ix). Thus *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a

[1] Wilde did however write letters prolifically during this time, continuing a lifelong trend.

[2] *De Profundis* was written in prison (between January and March 1897) but was left unpublished until 1910 when Robert Ross, his friend and literary executor, published a version without references to Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas—the person to whom the letter is addressed.

[3] The separate system was based on the belief that prisoners had to face up to themselves. The system sought to achieve this by isolating convicts to their cells in order to break their wills by being kept in total silence and in long pointless hours of hard labor.

place where Wilde[4] (and the reader) works out issues of decadence, and the potential effects of the discourse and behavior that make it up, ultimately proving that a presumably liberating discourse such as decadence has the potential to be also both imprisoning and oppressive.

As Michel Foucault states:

> I do not think that it is possible to say that one thing is of the order of "liberation" or and another is of the order of "oppression"…no matter how terrifying a system may be, there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience…on the other hand, I do not think that there is anything that is functionally—by its very nature—absolutely liberating. Liberty is a practice. (*The Foucault Reader* 245)

Thus, one can view Decadence, a presumably liberating practice, as oppressive or even carceral—just as one can see the prison system, a presumably oppressive practice, as liberating. As both Decadence and the subjugation of the body to the prison system contribute to the artist in his construction/conception of the self (or to use more Wildean wording—utilize different modes of life to narrate the self), these experiences can be seen as limit experiences—a technology of the self which is essentially an experience that pushes the boundaries of the self. This relates to the way we exist and how we perceive and create that existence. The ways in which both Wilde and Foucault propose to deal with these ontological issues are remarkably similar: the former proposes that we treat life as a work of art, as does the latter, the first calls it life as a work of art, the second the arts of existence. Both agree that existence is a life-long project, and both were in their lives and works committed to pushing the limits.[5]

Though the examples above give one the general idea of how Wilde and Foucault are linked in regards to how they view issues of the self, it is important to understand just how much their strands of thought connect and thus why certain tools that Foucault left us form a useful framework through which to view Wilde's work. Understanding the parallels in their thought will allow us to examine the evolution of these ideas in the realm of art—a strange and wonderful place. To this end we must first take a look at the Victorians and the parallels between their society and ours. The foremost connection is that many of the technologies (discursive and otherwise) of contemporary society were first deployed in the nineteenth century. The spreading

[4] "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" (Wilde 3).

[5] Both Wilde and Foucault promote the blurring of the distinction between art and philosophy. As O'Farrell states, "Foucault had long wanted to be able to describe his own work as art to break down the traditional divisions between art and intellectual knowledge" (118). In *De Profundis* Wilde states, "I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art" (Wilde 1017).

of the British Empire, upon which the sun never set, over swaths of the world ensured that these technologies (techniques of power, industrialization, Darwinism, methods of organization, etc.) were well dispersed. The best analysis of this phenomenon is Foucault's seminal *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Here Foucault traces the history of punishment from the end of the medieval period, through the change from sovereign power to that of disciplinary power, the labor of refining that new power, to its deployment in the Victorian period and the establishment of a disciplinary society. Further, the highly influential concept of the carceral, and by extension the forms of power associated with a disciplinary society, are based on Jeremy Bentham's[6] Panopticon prison design—which was the authoritative design in prison architecture.

We must then consider the connections Wilde brings into play. As a late Victorian he has a distinctive place in the history of Western literature, he is a bridge to modernism, and as such is a figure of transition. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example, is a novel that captures the mood of this medium towards an intense focus on the individual. Wilde's work and celebrity were certainly forward looking, for example, in his career he made extensive use of his image, discarding one when it was no longer useful and adopting new ones as he saw fit—thus making his identity fluid and malleable. The unique position that Wilde has with past and present, the space he occupies in literary history, and the fact that over a century after his death his plays are put on, his epigrams are in use, his works adapted in diverse mediums, all point to both the continuing relevance of the issues Wilde worked out in his art and his enduring legacy.

The remainder of this essay will explore how the carceral, a presumably inherently oppressive system, can also have the opposite of its intended effect: in short how the prison too can be a site of liberation. The carceral/disciplinary system effects punishment upon the individual by claiming the individual's body in the name of offences committed against the social body. The body, placed in an austere institution and subjected to disciplinary power, is then transformed into a docile one by strict organized training, observation and surveillance. Though the subject is supposed to emerge from this experience of punishment reformed, the sad truth of the matter is that much more

[6] Bentham was extraordinarily influential in the Victorian period. His philosophy (Utilitarianism) was a "synthesis of economic, political, and social thought," which was essentially hedonistic in its ethics in that it relied on a pleasure over pain principle. Called either felicific calculus or moral arithmetic, a formula was developed which could serve as guide in any given choice or action. Its economy was laissez faire and its beliefs secular. It should also be noted that early in the Victorian era Benthamites were able to effect reforms in the penal code (Altick 115-141).

often than not this experience brings about recidivism and ultimately career criminals.[7] Thus, throughout its history the prison has proven time and time again that, despite constant reform to the system it is inadequate in the functions it solemnly promises to society. Its failure is stark and remains unchanged for centuries. As we will see below, over a century ago Oscar Wilde would suffer from the effects of the prison both while in gaol and after his release. However the question we must ask now is: does the oppressive tendency of this system, and its many mechanisms and auxiliary technologies, necessarily connote the stifling of individual progress/development? Is it the case that an individual cannot use the space to liberate heretofore-unknown aspects of the self? In order to answer these questions we will begin by examining Wilde's time in prison,[8] his treatment, the conditions, his day-to-day routine, etc. Following this we will examine his encounter with suffering as a limit experience, one in which he pushes on the limits he set for himself earlier in life (i.e. a life of pleasure). Lastly, will be a discussion of Wilde's delineation of his artistic future in *De Profundis*—the potential he sees in his prison experience and how he proposes to reshape his being in relation to it. In other words how he proposes to change the way he creates his art and make his life in light of his new experiences.

It is commonly assumed that Oscar Wilde spent the entirety of his sentence at Reading Gaol. In fact, Wilde's role as convicted prisoner begins at Pentonville Prison in north London. Pentonville was opened in 1842 and was considered a model penitentiary; it was also the prison, which with its opening, introduced the separate system from the USA into Britain:

> The central idea [of the separate system] was to keep prisoners apart from one another much as possible: as part of the punishment and to discourage further corruption from mixing with hardened criminals… Within this system the chaplain played an important part, encouraging the prisoners to turn away from their previous ways and to look to religion. The disadvantage of the system lay in the negative psychological effect of the total isolation and associated solitary confinement when in a cell; it was claimed that prisoners had gone mad from the intensity of the silence. (Stokes 30-31)

Known as one of the greatest conversationalists in recorded history, this must have been a silent hell for Wilde. On 4 July 1895, just over a month after arriving at Pentonville, Wilde was transferred to

[7] This can be clearly seen, not only in statistics, but in contemporary television programs such as Gang Land (History Channel) and Lock Up: Raw (MSNBC), amongst many others.

[8] The greatest resource for this is Anthony Stokes' *Pit of Shame: The Real Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Stokes position as a warder in Reading Gaol for over twenty years not only gives his study insight, but also allowed him a unique access to prison documents.

Wandsworth Prison; in late November he was finally transferred to Reading Gaol.

Reading Gaol has a long history; in fact for almost five hundred years there has been a county gaol in Reading.[9] This places Reading Gaol in an interesting position for it has, as an institution, gone through the entire change from sovereign power to disciplinary power. As Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish*, at the end of the medieval period there began a change in the way to punish. In the medieval period the power came from the king (who was bestowed this by God); thus to break the law was to offend the king, and the king had the right to exact bloody revenge upon the body of the condemned. This punishment was therefore necessarily brutal and violent; it was also a public spectacle where thousands gathered.[10] The Enlightenment/Age of Reason changed this, for the power no longer comes from the king, it is now that of the people. Slowly but surely the spectacle ceases and punishment is taken into the shadows in order to be more "humane"—in order to hide our shame and increase control. Techniques are created, techniques of coercion, subjugation, training and surveillance, a new form of power is produced and deployed—disciplinary power. Reading Gaol went through this entire process and carries on to this day.

At Reading, Wilde would acquire the last of many names he would bear, C.3.3.[11] This was the number of his cell; it was on C block (the ward that held convicted prisoners), C3 landing, cell number 3.[12] The cell, like all others in Reading, was 13 ft. (length) x 7 ft (width) x 10 ft (height). The cell was sparse, containing a stool, a small table, shelves, a drawer, and a copper basin for washing and the like. A prisoner was allowed six gallons of water a day for all needs including waste. Every morning the prisoner would remove his/her[13] own

9 Its location has of course been moved during the five centuries of its existence.

10 The last public execution held at Reading Gaol was that of John Gould. At Reading public executions took place on the roof of the gaol because that was the place with the most even surface. There were an estimated 4,000 people in attendance (most of whom, as usual for public executions, were women). Gould remained alive for two minutes before his life ended and was left on display for an hour (as was the custom). Following this all other executions were held privately. For a full account of John Gould's crime and punishment see Stokes (68-72). For the entire history of executions at Reading sees Stokes "Chapter 4: Executions".

11 It is under this name that Wilde would publish *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.*

12 Reading Gaol was redesigned in 1844 in the Pentonville design, which was itself based on the Panopticon design. This design was "in the shape of a four-spoked wheel" (Stokes 34) with each spoke radiating from the center, in the center was "a large open area that commanded a full view of all wards as the radiated out from it; enabling security and control to be maintained from a single, central point by a minimum of prison officers" (34).

13 Since its beginnings men, women, and children have been prisoners at Reading. Women

waste and dump it in the allotted area outside the cell. Every cell also included a Bible and a prayer book. Wilde's diet at this time consisted of two pints of rice milk and a pound and a half of coarse bread daily, every other day a half-pound of meat and potatoes was served and on some days soup. The diet caused Wilde suffer from acute diarrhea and contributed to his extreme weight loss and declining health in prison, it also made his cell rank with the stench of his own waste. For most of the day prisoners were kept in their cells in isolation, the only exception to this was during the long hours of hard labour, and the one hour of exercise. To ensure their silence prisoners were made to wear a 'Scottish cap' (a leather hat that covered the face and had two slits for the eyes) at all times when not in their cell.

Though Wilde clearly had it hard in prison as he says in *De Profundis* "I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws" (Wilde 1027), and this was no less true during his incarceration. While in Pentonville for example Wilde received a visit from Prison Commissioner R.B. Haldane, one of the most powerful people in the prison system at the time. Haldane first got Wilde books, to which Pentonville's governor (i.e. warden) strongly protested as it went against the rules of the separate system. Haldane also got Wilde transferred[14] from Pentonville to Wandsworth where there was a more sympathetic chaplain, and eventually to Reading Gaol. The governor at Reading was the by the book Colonel Isaacson whom Wilde detested. Wilde complained about Isaacson and the latter was promoted to another prison, with the much more liberal-minded Major Nelson replacing him. Nelson was sympathetic to Wilde and gave him more books, even going so far as set aside money to acquire more for him, and eventually allowed him to write. In addition to the assistance from Haldane there was George W. Palmer, owner of the Palmer biscuit factory at Reading (the town), and a family friend of Wilde's. Palmer, being an outstanding and influential person in Reading was part of Reading Gaol's Visiting Committee. The Prison Act of 1877 formed visiting Committees, which consisted of an independent group of citizens "who could come into a prison at any time, inspect and investigate any issues, and award punishments on prisoners over and above the authority of the governor…[they] answered only to the Prison Commission and the Government" (Stokes 81). Thus Wilde had help on the inside, which made his prison experience smoother, just a bit more bearable, and ultimately allowed him to to survive and to compose his letter to Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, *De Profundis*.

prisoners were held at Reading until the 1915. In 1951 Reading was reclassified as a borstal correctional institution (i.e. juvenile detention center).

[14] Wilde's fifteen books followed him throughout.

When Oscar Wilde met Bosie in 1891, Wilde was beginning the peak of his career, as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had recently been published and was very much in the public eye at the time. They quickly became inseparable; this attachment would persist even after their deaths' as both men are continually defined by each other. The relationship began well enough as Bosie introduced Wilde to the seedy underground Victorian homosexual scene—indeed it was through Bosie that Wilde would meet the many rent boys he feasted with. Wilde was so enamored that he essentially abandoned his family to be with his lover. Though all seemed well at first, Bosie's temper soon got the best of him. He would often throw childish tantrums where he would become angry and cruel. Eventually Bosie's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, got wind of their relationship and began harassing Bosie and then Wilde. This situation came to a head when Queensberry left his card for Wilde at the Albemarle Club inscribed: "For Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite [sic]." After all the harassment (on several occasions Queensberry tried to disrupt Wilde's plays) Wilde had had enough and began legal proceedings to prosecute Queensberry for libel. This of course had disastrous consequences for Wilde: losing meant that he was open to a counter suit and eventually imprisonment. It is worth noting here that while many of his friends and family asked Wilde to flee the country, seeing that the trial was clearly impossible to win, Bosie was not one of these, as he wanted to see his father publicly humiliated. Because of the intensity of their relationship and the effect it had on Wilde's life, at the end of his prison sentence he would write a long love letter to Bosie (*De Profundis*). Here he would give his account of their relationship and its disastrous effects, as well as delineate the grand possibilities for his post-prison development as individual and artist.

In *De Profundis* (1897)[15] Wilde's subject becomes that of suffering and how it may liberate the soul. The work was written in prison and clearly demonstrates a mode of life characterized by suffering much the same way the decadent's is characterized by pleasure. Through this Wilde utilizes the technologies of self-exposition, self-ordering, and self-invention encoded in various symbols (Christ, poets, and art). Through his subjugation to the power of the carceral by the prison system, a presumably oppressive experience, Wilde is able to find freedom from the discourses that had previously bound his behavior. His body being worked upon by power, his soul becomes free to earnestly participate in the examination. As an author however

[15] Though written in 1897 *De Profundis* was not published until 1905. Robert Ross, who expurgated all references to Boise, edited this version. It was not until 1962 that the entire letter was published accurately.

he is in a unique position in that he can use his self-invention to self-narrate, leaving behind the artifacts of this process, for "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" (Wilde, *Picture* 17). The prison experience can then be seen as another form of limit experience in that it forces the self to observe and catalogue the self, to scrutinize the self, creating another extreme form of the examination and pushing at the boundaries of its definition. Because it was written in prison *De Profundis* offers particular insights that are ripe for such analysis.

In terms of limit experiences in *De Profundis*, Wilde pushes the boundaries he had set for himself concerning pleasure as a mode of existence. In prison his new mode of life is suffering, as he says:

> But, we who live in prison, and in whose lives there is no event but sorrow, have to measure time by throbs of pain, and the record of bitter moments. We have nothing else to think of. Suffering—curious as it may sound to you—is the means by which we exist, because it is the only means by which we become conscious of existing; and the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the warrant, the evidence, of our continued identity. (Wilde, *CW* 990)

Thus it is clear that through suffering the prisoner affirms his existence; further it comes to form the very evidence of identity. This evidence is produced by self-examination (remembrance), through which the prisoner is able to assert his existence and avoids losing his identity to the system that subjugates him. Suffering assists in the definition of the self, for without the outside world through which to define himself and in the solitary confinement of the cell, there is a necessary turn inwards which, though painful, contextualizes the individual (both historically and in relation to the self). Immersed in an existence of punishment characterized by suffering Wilde is forced to affirm his existence through something other than mere pleasure. In this way he ceases to be mastered and becomes master of himself. Though it is clear that his body belongs to the prison system, Wilde here reclaims his soul by reconstructing his outlook in relation to what he is experiencing. As he writes:

> Sorrow, then, and all it teaches one, in my new world. I used to live entirely for pleasure. I shunned sorrow and suffering of every kind. I hated both. I resolved to ignore them as far as possible, to treat them, that is to say, as modes of imperfection. They were not part of my scheme of life. They had no place in my philosophy. (*Complete Works* 1023)

Wilde jumps from one extreme to another; he calls suffering "the secret of life" and sorrow "the supreme emotion of which man is capable." This is a far cry from the pleasure-seeking decadent he used to be. Indeed he goes so far as to say that, "Other things [pleasure] may be illusions of the eye of the appetite, made to blind the one and cloy the other, but out of Sorrow have worlds been built, and at the

birth of a child or a star there is pain" (1024). Evidently Wilde realizes that in being blinded by sensual experiences he became a slave to pleasure: in short that he was imprisoned by the very desires through which he sought liberation.

Though it may seem that Wilde is merely exchanging one extreme for another, he does recognize that, "What the artist [of the self] is always looking for is that mode of existence in which the soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward…the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit" (1024). Thus Wilde is figuring out what was only hinted at in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that what one should seek in being is an artistic life, by this I mean a life that is being made itself into a work of art, one that is balanced between body and soul, the sensual and the spiritual. In fact they should complement each other in such a way that one becomes a visible symbol of the other, making existence/being an expressive project that can only rightly be achieved by being an active participant in one's own creation. Wilde does this in prison through self-reflection and self-narration, in being allowed to write he is able to work on/out himself.

Thus the relationship between the body and soul that is desired is one of balance. Further, Wilde recognizes that "it is tragic how few people ever 'possess their souls' before they die" (1021) and later upon his shedding of the bitterness that threatened to consume him at the beginning of his prison sentence, "It was of course my soul in its ultimate essence I had reached" (1030). These lines demonstrate an intricate knowledge of the workings of the body and soul, which can only come about as the result of long meditation or self-refection, in short, an intense self-examination. Yet, if one does not possess one's own soul who does? The answer to this would have to be the numerous discourses that exercise power over it. It seems then that it is only through the process of suffering and self-examination that the soul may be brought back into the fold of the self and cease to be a mere prison for body.

In addition to this revelation, Wilde proposes to reshape himself as an artist in relation to his prison experience by using what he has learned about himself to construct a mode of art that is new to him. He begins delineating this by stating, "If I ever write again, in the sense of producing artistic work, there are just two subjects on which and through which I desire to express myself: one is 'Christ as precursor to the Romantic movement in life': the other is 'the Artistic life considered in its relation to Conduct'" (1034).

In the first, "Christ as precursor to the Romantic movement in

life," Wilde sees in "Christ not merely the essentials of the supreme romantic type, but all the accidents, the wistfulness even, of the romantic temperament also" (1034-1035). In this way Wilde observes in Christ the manifestation of the full potential of the Romantic, "He [Christ] felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped in any form was death" (1034). What is most important here is that Wilde is recognizing the how active existence should be, and by extension how inactive his previous existence had become. In Christ, he sees room for qualities he had not yet fully explored in his person—sympathy as morality, the love of ignorant people, and the need for repentance. The latter Wilde views as "the means by which one alters one's past" (1037). This is notable for here he is finding, through the story of Christ, his own need and ability to alter his past, to relate to it (and himself) in a different manner, through a different system. Ultimately he concludes:

> The charm about Christ, when all is said…[is that] 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. (1037)

Thus like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, everyone is predestined, without knowing, to sharing one's deepest concerns with Christ, through this recognizing him, and through him recognizing life. For in sharing one's deepest concerns with Christ one is at once sharing them with oneself. This confession and subsequent recognition is not to/of Christ the person, but the divine within us all. As in art, on this road, one has only what one brings. That Wilde compares Christ's function to that of Art is significant for in this way he brings everything back to living life as a work of art (one of his own central tennets). Thus he is reconstructing his philosophy from the ground up, replacing certain structures with others and actively participating in his own ontological project. In this way he is organizing his own being.

The other subject Wilde proposes to center his possible future artistic productions on, "the Artistic life in relation to Conduct," is a remarkably appropriate one considering it was Wilde's own artistic life and its relation to his conduct that landed him in gaol in the first place. With this however he seems to want to assert that an Artistic life is not one which essentially leads to punishment. Claiming that those "whose desire is solely for self-realization never know where they are going" (1038), he thus highlights the uncertainty of the journey of the self in life, even for those to whom it is a conscious and active project. Wilde also notes the importance of recognizing "that

the soul of man is unknowable…[that] the final mystery is oneself" (1038). He equates this realization with wisdom, the ultimate wisdom in fact, and in this way demonstrates his desire to search his soul and through it overcome the experiences he has gone through—essentially to rewrite himself in such a way that at the end of his life *he* will be satisfied with it. This is a stark change from the man who sought fame at all costs, for he no longer wishes to define himself through the way others see him, but through the way he sees himself. In *De Profundis* Wilde sees the potential for a fluid refashioning of his identity as an individual and an artist, but sadly these things would remain in the realm of potentiality.

Ultimately Wilde acknowledges: "I hope to live long enough, and to produce work of such a character, that I shall be able at the end of my days to say, 'Yes: this is where the artistic life leads a man'" (1038). Unfortunately this was not to be. Why then was Wilde's project derailed? Why did the myriad potentials he saw not come into existence? Here Foucault can provide a possible answer. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault outlines the effects of the deprivation of liberty by law and "the simultaneous system that has historically been superimposed on the juridical deprivation of liberty" (271):

Prisons do not diminish the crime rate: they can be extended, multiplied or transformed, the quality of crime and criminals remains stable or, worse, increases.

— Detention causes recidivism; those leaving prison have more chance than before of going back to it; convicts are, in a very high proportion, former inmates.

— The prison cannot fail to produce delinquents…[it] also produces delinquents by imposing violent constraints on its inmates; it is supposed to apply the law, and to teach respect for it; but all its functioning operates in the form of an abuse of power. The arbitrary power of administration.

— The conditions to which the free inmates are subjected necessarily condemn them to recidivism: they are under the surveillance of the police; they are assigned to a particular residence, or forbidden others.

— Lastly, the prison indirectly produces delinquents by throwing the inmates family into destitution. (265-268)

Tragically in the three years of his life after release Wilde would fall into the trap of most of these effects. To begin with, he quickly went back to his old ways, eventually going so far as to continue his relationship with Bosie (much to the dismay of both his wife and Bosie's

family).[16] This culminated in the infamous Naples Experiment, where for various months they lived together in a house in Naples, Italy. this ended when they ran out of money (having been cut off from all sources) and Bosie had left. In addition, though he was no longer in England and therefore no longer subject to English law, since his decadent behavior continued (and eventually consumed him) he could be considered a recidivist. It has already been demonstrated that power was exercised on Wilde and his fellow inmates at Reading Gaol: the violent constraints he went through, the abuse of power, and the administration of his body. While in exile, for some months, the Marquess of Queensberry had him followed by private investigators he hired to ensure that Wilde's relationship with his son did not resume. He was also outcast from his own country and ultimately Wilde's family was left destitute. Because Wilde lost the libel trial against Queensberry he had to pay the Marquess' legal fees, leading to the auction of all of Wilde's belongings at the house on Tite Street, leaving his wife and children without a home and penniless. In addition to this his wife, Constance, and children had to leave England for the continent, as well as change their names. Hence, Wilde clearly fell prey to the post-carceral effects of the prison system.

A century later the crime Wilde was convicted of, and severed two years hard labor for, is no longer a crime in England. The historical context in which Wilde found himself made it a crime punishable by law. Wilde did however commit a crime for which only he could hold himself accountable. Far from simply living in flagrant defiance of the rules of his society, or a mere crime of moral turpitude, his crime was that he squandered his gifts: his genius, a loving and devoted wife, two beautiful children, and a brilliant career: in short a crime against his self. All of this brings us to the unfortunate conclusion that Wilde failed in his project, and this perhaps is the greatest tragedy of his life —that through a combination of internal and external factors Wilde was unable to bring himself back from the depths. Like Dorian, he gives up, unwilling to be an active participant in his own existence; in fact, he surrendered himself to the life of a pauper, begging his friends for money, drinking himself to death, drowning his sorrows and regrets in brandy and absinthe in the seedy cafes of Paris, and ultimately dying in a cheap hotel, penniless and without having produced a work of art in years. Yet, in *De Profundis* Wilde resists the very system that enslaves him. Wilde used his connections to gain access (albeit limited) to books and writing utensils. This coupled with experiences are the raw materials for creating his art. In writing

[16] In fairness one must mention that for some time after his release Wilde refused to see Bosie, but as in the past Bosie eventually wore Wilde down and the later acceded to his wishes.

a love letter to his homosexual lover from prison, and further using the medium to expose the possibilities of freedom he finds in that site of oppression, Wilde practiced freedom—a kind of liberation few before or since have practiced.

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