

## Names are Everything: For Oscar Wilde, Posing as a Letter and Visiting Card

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**Abstract:** This paper considers two artefacts created by Oscar Wilde: The manuscript of ‘*Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*’, and an example of a visiting card bearing Wilde’s post-prison pseudonym, ‘Mr Sebastian Melmoth’. The Victorian obsession with categorisation acted as a ‘panoptic’ surveillance mechanism, creating a self-conscious and self-monitoring society. In contrast, Wilde adopted a transgressive and performative approach to ‘self-consciousness’, to naming and constructing the self, and the ‘self as artist’. Wilde’s prison experience left him defiantly convinced of both his own and the artist’s importance, despite bearing the ravages of a brutal incarceration. A comparison of these two artefacts aims to show that Wilde renamed the self to reclaim the artist.

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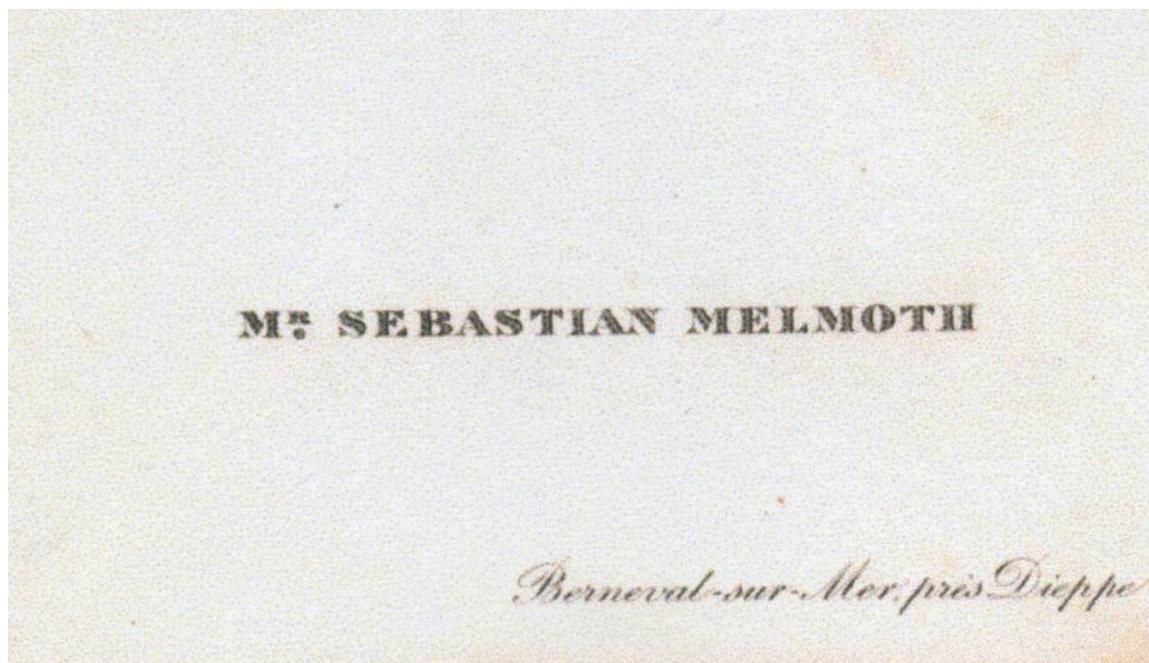


Figure 1: Wilde’s visiting card as ‘Sebastian Melmoth’ (© Callum James)

The rise and fall of Oscar Wilde has been seen as a Victorian spectacle that debuted the modern obsession with celebrity, enacted the martyrdom of the artist, and witnessed the emergence of the ‘homosexual’ as a type.<sup>1</sup> In these readings, the significance and symbolism of Wilde is championed, but these narratives come at the expense of a balanced reading of the final years of Wilde’s life, making it the inevitable playing out of a last act of a tragedy. By considering two artefacts created by Wilde: The manuscript of *Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*<sup>2</sup> (*Letter: In Prison and in Chains*), which appeared in expurgated form as *De Profundis*; and an example of a visiting card using Wilde’s post-prison pseudonym of ‘Mr Sebastian Melmoth’, we can not only see how late Victorian society worked to create self-

<sup>1</sup> See Dollimore et al.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, shortened to *Epistola*.

conscious self-monitoring individuals, but how Wilde acted in opposition to this, by a conscious exploration and assertion of the individual as an artist, right up until his death.

Superficially, these two objects seem to contradict each other: one is an essential but disposable piece of ephemera, bearing an assumed name – another one of Wilde’s many masks; the other is a 55000-word document, composed when he was stripped of all names, which is perceived to be an epic autobiographical outpouring, the last testament of a man who had finally cast all masks aside. However, each artefact shows Wilde to still be the ‘Prince Paradox’<sup>3</sup> he had always been, each encapsulating the dichotomies he played with throughout his life and work, and continuing his use of contradictory and oppositional statements to provoke a re-evaluation of the values of society, the individual and of art itself.

In Wilde’s work, the themes of role-playing, the fluidity of identity and the literal naming of things are explored by the situating of his characters in a social *milieu* that is tightly constrained by the boundaries of convention. In life, too, he self-consciously adopted poses and played the persona of ‘Oscar Wilde’ within High Society. The price one pays for transgressing boundaries – and the even greater price the self pays if one capitulates to them – are also integral themes of his work and his aesthetic and political position regarding the role of art in modern society. These themes are still clearly visible in the *Epistola* and the visiting card, despite the perception that the trials and imprisonment created a humbled Wilde that elevated suffering above his ideals of art and beauty.

An obsession with rules and labelling was an integral part of the Victorian ‘panoptic’ system of social control, where the individual had to be seen to conform to rigidly defined norms, and obliged to be self-conscious and self-monitoring. The strict definitions of what constituted the correct behaviour within society can be seen in Victorian etiquette literature.<sup>4</sup> The function of etiquette (a word derived from the Old French, *estiquet*, meaning *label*) was to act as a system that regulated social interaction, proscribing and prescribing the actions of all those who moved in the ‘right circles’. This is clearly seen in the conventions regarding the use of the visiting card, which acted as a proxy for the person.

The use of these cards, and the rituals surrounding their use, was a mandatory form of ‘status theatre’.<sup>5</sup> The company you kept, or whose cards surrounded yours in the deliberately displayed collection, acted as a visible endorsement and a means of networking, akin to today’s social media systems – like an exclusive Victorian Facebook group. The card was needed to gain entry to that world, and it was intended as a means of regulating membership of Society and keeping out undesirables. It was the means by which you were seen by your peers – literally: You would not gain admittance to anyone’s home and be seen in person without having first left your card as a virtual fragment of yourself. Without your card-based persona, you did not exist:

the stress laid by Society upon the correct usage of these magic bits of paste-board, will not seem unnecessary, when it is remembered that the visiting card, socially defined means, and frequently is, made to take the place of one’s self.<sup>6</sup>

Visiting cards have assumed totemic importance in the story of Oscar Wilde. Not only were they part of the trappings of the social world he satirised, the craze for the photographic carte-de-visite has given us many of the most familiar images of Wilde. The constructed poses in the series of photographs by Napoleon Sarony give us visual evidence to accompany the eye-

<sup>3</sup> Oscar Wilde and Robert Mighall, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Penguin Classics* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) p.186.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Curtin, *Propriety and Position: A Study of Victorian Manners* (Garland: 1987)

<sup>5</sup> Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season* (London: Croom Helm, 1973) p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Davidoff, *ibid*, p.42.

witness accounts of the impact Wilde made, and helped to spread his fame.<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, it was the Marquess of Queensberry's action, in leaving his card with a potentially libellous statement in his own handwriting, which triggered the chain of events that led to the creation of both the *Epistola* and 'Sebastian Melmoth'.

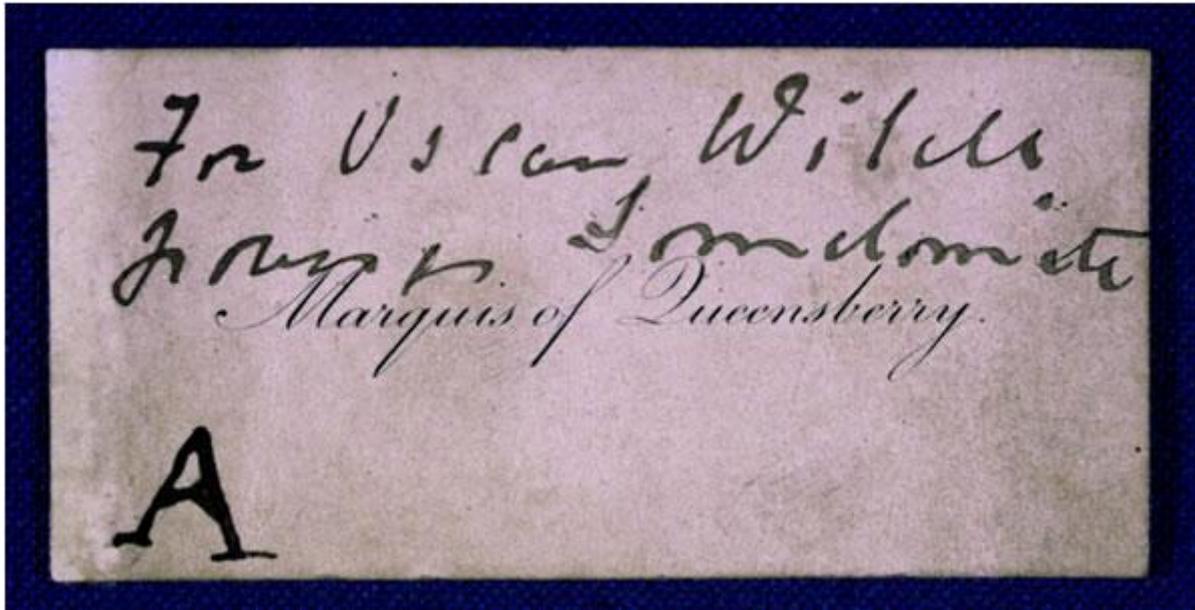


Figure 2: Marquess of Queensberry's visiting card <sup>8</sup> (© National Archives)

By leaving his card at Wilde's club, the Albemarle, Queensberry had provided evidence that could not be disputed, so his defence had to be the proof that what he had written was true. There has been much debate about the wording on Queensberry's card, but the consensus is that it reads, 'For Oscar Wilde, posing as (a) So(m)domite'. His misspellings have been seen as mistakes, but acted as a means of widening the interpretation of the handwritten accusation. He need only prove that Wilde was 'posing' as a sodomite – the charge of sodomy was notoriously difficult to prove. When the defence succeeded in this, Wilde was forced to drop the case and was arrested himself. He would eventually be found guilty of gross indecency and sentenced to hard labour for bearing 'the love that dare not speak its name.'<sup>9</sup>

Wilde had known from birth that the actions of naming or not naming had an almost magical power; that identities could be constructed and played with, and appearances could be deceptive: For Wilde, his name was his *complete* name of Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, and one he took pride in. He was named Oscar Fingal by his nationalist mother, as a conscious act of invoking the mythic power of Irish legend – so he could never be just 'plain Oscar'.<sup>10</sup> His mother, Jane, had used the pseudonym of 'Speranza' to write in the Irish republican journal *Nation*. Later, he became known as the dandy and aesthete, 'Oscar Wilde', self-consciously cultivating this public persona. Under this name, he would be successful and fêted, only to be stripped of both name and reputation on his imprisonment.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel A. Novak, 'Sexuality in the Age of Technological Reproducibility', in *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008) p.77.

<sup>8</sup> Note Queensberry's use of the French 'Marquis' rather than 'Marquess.'

<sup>9</sup> This quote from Bosie's poem, *Two Loves*, has become a euphemism for homosexuality.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*. Film and TV tie-in edition. edn (London: Penguin, 1997) p.16.

AND this Deponent

Oscar Jugal O'Flaherty Mills Wilde  
On oath saith as follows:

I am a dramatist and  
author - I take great interest  
in matters of art and reside  
at 16 Fife St S. W.  
I am acquainted with the  
defendant and with many  
members of his family.  
I first became acquainted  
with the defendant, to  
my knowledge in 1892 -  
I remember ~~ing~~ lunching  
on one occasion with Lord  
Alfred Douglas at the  
Cafe' Royal. It was  
the defendant  
in 1893 -

INDUCTABLE FORMS  
Sch. II.-14.  
165A.  
DEPOSITION.  
(Inner Sheet.)

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Figure 3: Deposition by Wilde in the 1895 libel trial, stating his full name, and his occupation as 'dramatist and author - I take great interest in matters of art.' (© National Archives)

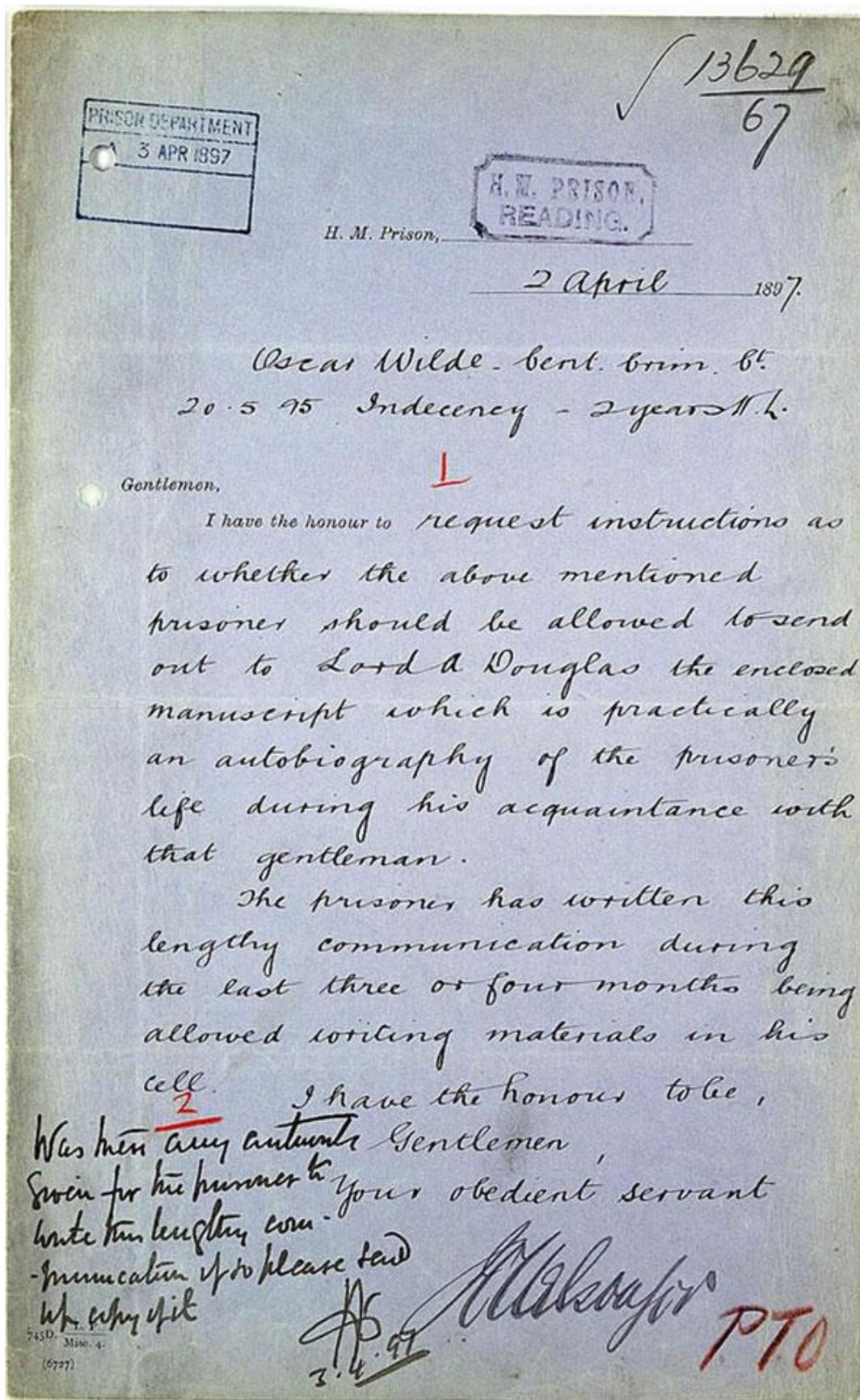


Figure 4: Covering letter by Major Nelson, showing the type of blue foolscap paper used by Wilde for the *Epistola* manuscript. (© National Archives)

Wilde had courted controversy and even notoriety, but bringing the family name to disgrace was a source of shame. In prison, ‘Oscar Wilde’ was replaced by a functional label, ‘C.3.3.’ – the number of his prison cell. He would choose to embrace this, and it would become the first *nom de plume* he used after leaving prison, when *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was published. By the time of his release, his wife and sons had adopted the name ‘Holland’ to be rid of the infamous Wilde name, and ‘Oscar Wilde’ was now *persona non grata*. After leaving prison, he would be obliged by the etiquette of the time to have a visiting card to ‘take the place of the self.’<sup>11</sup>

The small white card should bear the name, in capitals, across its centre and a basic address in the bottom right corner. However, there was no obligation to use his real name, and so Wilde was able to conjure up a whole new disguise in the space of two words. He chose the pseudonym ‘Sebastian Melmoth’, a name that echoes some of the themes found in the *Epistola*, a name even more mythically resonant than his own. Drawing on the legend of Sebastian, the twice-martyred saint, and the title character of his great-uncle’s novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Wilde neatly summarised his status as the archetypal outcast. As ‘Sebastian Melmoth’, he would embody the paradoxical: both divine and damned, victim and predator.

Like so much in Wilde’s life and work, the history and reception of the prison manuscript that became known as *De Profundis* is complicated and open to often contradictory interpretations. His intentions cannot be fully known, due to the problem of establishing a definitive text and title for the work. What is known is that it was written between January and March 1897, as a letter addressed to Bosie, Lord Alfred Douglas. It was composed on blue stamped prison foolscap paper,<sup>12</sup> apparently one page at a time, after a long period during which he had been denied books, pen and paper, or any of those things that would confirm him as ‘Oscar Wilde’ rather than ‘C.3.3.’ Each evening, the page would be removed, and the entire document would not be handed to him until the day of his release.

What we also know is that Wilde named the 55000-word document, *Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*, and would not have known it as *De Profundis*. This was the name chosen by Robbie Ross for that part of the manuscript published five years after Wilde’s death, in 1905. This confusion has persisted ever since: Ian Small has outlined its publication history as being a series of differing excerpts of the original, but bearing the same name, due to legal reasons (especially a potential libel action by Douglas), and the difficulty of establishing the textual integrity of the various transcripts of the original text.<sup>13</sup>

Wilde’s early death has robbed us of knowing what the *Epistola* may have become. As a result, various critical evaluations have been established using the initial perception of *De Profundis* (i.e. *From the Depths*) as an authentic cry from the heart, an act of contrition; the *apologia* that society wanted to extract from him. After the first unabridged version of *De Profundis*, in 1949, the persona of a suffering and contrite Wilde was challenged by the new voice of an outraged and aggrieved Wilde, addressing a careless and faithless lover. The overall effect is unguarded yet eloquent; the writer, having been stripped of any signifying name, is finally seen without a mask, without his previous poses.

The assumption could be that this is primarily a private letter revealing the true self, while Wilde was hidden away from the world. Consequently, the text has been seen as an anomaly, marking a break with Wilde’s earlier writing, and not really part of his body of work. However, investigation by scholars such as Small into its production history offers clear evidence that there was always the expectation of other readers, not just Douglas himself. This begins with the circumstances of its creation, during which every page was read

<sup>11</sup> See Figure 1 and Note 6.

<sup>12</sup> See Figure 4: Wilde’s intention was for the document to be sent first to Robbie Ross and Ross would send it on to Douglas.

<sup>13</sup> Josephine M. Guy, and Ian Small, *Studying Oscar Wilde: History, Criticism, and Myth* (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 2006)

and monitored by the prison authorities. This undermines the notion of the *Epistola* being created in a private and spontaneous confessional mode. Wilde had already been granted book privileges by Major Nelson, the new prison governor, and thus had finally obtained the tools of his trade – a library of sorts, and writing materials.<sup>14</sup> He now had the means to recreate his working environment and reassert himself as an artist.

Wilde's instructions to Ross regarding the letter<sup>15</sup> make it obvious that he was aware that if he merely sent the original manuscript to its intended recipient, it would probably be destroyed, perhaps even without being read. The prison document was copied, and a typescript was sent to Douglas – who did, indeed, destroy it after reading the first couple of paragraphs. But Wilde had taken steps to preserve his work for posterity. This indicates that he regarded it as more than a cathartic self-justification, but a continuation of his oeuvre. Ross described Wilde's manuscript as 'the last prose work he ever wrote',<sup>16</sup> rather than just a letter, and by giving the handwritten document to the British Library, ensured that Wilde's actual words still exist in a form that cannot be misinterpreted.

More interesting still, is the fact that Wilde made specific choices about the paper stock and layout of the copies. He asked for two copies to be made, one for himself, which was to be 'on good paper such as is used for plays' and stipulating that 'a wide rubricated margin should be left for corrections'. This is in keeping with what is known of Wilde's working methods, indicating an intention to revise and rework the material, either as an edited version of the document or as a basis for another work.<sup>17</sup> The sheer size of the document argues against the idea that it was intended simply as a letter to Bosie, and Ross's Preface to the 1905 edition of *De Profundis* quotes Wilde's instructions and thoughts about the work at great length. In it, we see how the ability to write again gave Wilde his sense of self back, and that self was an artist: 'expression is to an artist the supreme and only mode of life. It is by utterance that we live'. Regaining his voice gave him hope for the future.<sup>18</sup>

If the expurgated version of the document published as *De Profundis* is compared with the *Epistola*, it is obvious that the original is a much more balanced if paradoxical work. *De Profundis* seems to show a man who has come to his senses, seeking redemption in the suffering caused by the prison experience and the loss of face. There is an embracing of humility and for Wilde's contemporary champions an embarrassing identification with Christ. However, the perception of *De Profundis* as a meditation on the nature of suffering and tragedy is due to its truncated nature; it begins at that point in the original manuscript where Wilde has looked to the past and what has brought him to his current circumstances. This emphasises what would have been only one side of Wilde's theme – an outline of his experiences as a kind of martyrdom. This is Oscar in the pose of Saint Sebastian.

Unfortunately, by excising the references to Bosie, Ross presented only one half of Wilde's story, and removed the published version from its original context. In its entirety, it has been plausibly argued that it is a continuation of Wilde's philosophy of art<sup>19</sup>, placing him in the philosophical tradition of continental aesthetic theory. Wilde delighted in the pleasures of the mind and spirit, and his celebration of Art as separate from the temporal and mundane harks back to the Romantic's conception of Art as the eternal reality, and the artist as an

<sup>14</sup> Ellmann, *ibid.*, pp.476-9.

<sup>15</sup> Oscar Wilde and Rupert Hart-Davis, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Hart-Davis, 1962) pp.423-511.

<sup>16</sup> Oscar Wilde and Ian Small, *De Profundis: 'Epistola: In Carcere Et Vinculis', The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde Vol. II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p.311.

<sup>17</sup> *Complete Works, II*, p.13.

<sup>18</sup> *Complete Works II*, p.311.

<sup>19</sup> Julia Prewitt Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville; London: University Press of Virginia, 1997)

intercessor or priest. This is reflected in even the earliest version of *De Profundis*, where Wilde gives the almost blasphemous rendering of Christ as Artist not Redeemer.

Throughout his work, Wilde played with the partial, fragmentary and ambiguous rather than the whole fixed and unambiguous products of Victorian categorisation. In this it is striking how he uses the form and styles used by the early German Romantics: the use of the aphorism as ‘fragment’, wit, irony and allegory. These were all techniques used by writers and philosophers such as Novalis and the Schlegel brothers. The fragment carries its own sense of unity, much as each piece of a shattered holographic image carries within it a perfect replica of the larger original.

These are literary forms that allow for the many contradictions and paradoxes of an open mind and a creative imagination while a Hegelian dialectic gave philosophical rigour to the intellectual ideas. Knowing that Wilde used paradox as a form of dialectic, there cannot be a true reading of the prison document without the antithesis of the sacred and suffering; a consideration of the dark side of the artist, the transgressive pursuit of art and inspiration, even to the point of undertaking a Faustian pact. This is Melmoth – powerful and almost superhuman, but ultimately damned.

If we look at the visiting card of ‘Sebastian Melmoth’ as a ‘fragment’, of a shattered but still whole artist, we can see how Wilde intended to continue embodying contradictory principles once he was released from prison. Sebastian is the saint shot by arrows, who survives that attempted martyrdom. Melmoth is a character who operates beyond natural Law, seemingly immortal and appearing in and disappearing from prisons and other places of incarceration, in search of the person who will take his place. Sebastian is an ambiguous figure. There is a conception of Sebastian that ‘confirms the common cultural dogma that sees the homosexual male as a death-tempting, Faustian experimenter in the fast lanes of contemporary erotic life.’<sup>20</sup> This description is equally valid regarding the perception of Wilde as exhibiting reckless, destructive, almost suicidal behaviour. It also highlights the characteristics of Melmoth, who is actually a death-tempting Faustian, but who is also presented as the romantic beloved in his relationship with Immalee/Isadora. The persona of Sebastian Melmoth says, ‘I am divine and I will live forever’. This shows that Wilde was broken but unbowed. He knew he had:

a sort of eternity of fame to a sort of eternity of infamy, and sometimes seem to myself to have shown, if indeed it required showing, that between the famous and the infamous there is but one step, if as much as one.<sup>21</sup>

As a result, he casts himself as an almost mythological figure, bigger than the society that shunned him. He is back to being the creator of his own narrative and characterisation. Wilde reclaims himself by these two new acts of self-fashioning: the act of writing the letter, the narrative of his truth, and the statement of record of his point of view. Then, there is the creation of a new name, comprising both the diabolical and divine, as a declaration of himself as an almost mythic – and certainly, fictional – character, an immortal who is not bound by the rules of the mortal society that both lauded and derided him.

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<sup>20</sup> Richard A. Kaye, ‘Losing His Religion’, in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures* ed. by Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (London: Routledge, 1996) p.87.

<sup>21</sup> *Complete Works II*, p.102.

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