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The Author is the Creator of Brief Things: Authorial Simulacra in Oscar Wilde's *Poems in Prose*

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Abstract:

This essay reads Oscar Wilde's *Poems in Prose* (1893-1894) as authorial simulacra: brief self-figurations that stage the modern artist's vulnerability through parabolic form. Reworking Romantic and Decadent topoi, the sequence turns compression, figuration and biblical cadence into instruments for questioning authorial authority as pose rather than stable ground. Its dialogue with Walter Pater's imaginary portraits and Henry James's tales of writers and artists reveals a late-Victorian genealogy of the "diaphanous" protagonist, emptied of interiority and functioning as medium. Wilde's prose poems thus place authorship within an ecology of portable icons, where authority survives as performance calibrated to brevity.

Keywords: Authorial Simulacra, Imaginary Portrait, Oscar Wilde, Parable, Prose Poem

My dear Wilde,
I am confined to my room with gout, but have been consoling myself with *The Happy Prince*, and feel it would be ungrateful not to send a line to tell you how delightful I have found him and his companions. I hardly know whether to admire more the wise wit of 'The Wonderful [Remarkable] Rocket,' or the beauty and tenderness of 'The Selfish Giant': the latter certainly is perfect in its kind. Your genuine 'little poems in prose,' those at the top of pages 10 and 14, for instance, are gems, and the whole, too brief, book abounds with delicate touches and pure English. (Walter Pater, Letter of 12 June 1888, qtd. in Wilde 1962, 219)

1. Introduction

This essay proposes to read Oscar Wilde's *Poems in Prose* (1893-1894) as a deliberately compact arena of self-staging: brief yet dense texts feature fictional simulacra of the author, parabolic

self-figurations in which the modern artist confesses vulnerability while trading permanence for intensity. In this register, their lapidary compression, often aphoristically powerful, operates as a confession of method and of risk. The sequence belongs to a late-Victorian constellation of shorter prose forms, composed of fairy tales, dialogue-essays, and self-reflexive short stories, in which Wilde was exceptionally productive, and it would eventually distil the programme of *Intentions* (1891) into an emblem: what the dialogue elaborates across pages the poem in prose renders as an epiphanic image. The resulting miniatures then enter into a double conversation: formally, with a biblical and scriptural cadence that makes indirection an instrument of judgment; and genealogically with Walter Pater's imaginary portraits and Henry James's short stories about authors, two testing grounds in which authority is staged as posture or scene rather than asserted as doctrine. Wilde's experiment conjoins these lines into a condensed survey of short prose fictions that materialize, within the world of letters, a simulacrum of the author as a ghostly figure. The consequence is that the notorious "decay of prose" reads less as collapse than as a transfer of authorial power from sovereign voice to iterable image.

2. *Wilde the poet in prose*

The prose poems belong to one of Wilde's most productive periods. Contemporaneous with the critical essays that would converge in *Intentions*, they draw on the generic flexibility of the literary essay to stage dialogic explorations of truth and representation in *The Decay of Lying* (1889), judgment and creation in *The Critic as Artist* (1890), socialist politics in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), and identity and masquerade in *Pen, Pencil and Poison* (1891).

Read against these co-ordinates, the *Poems in Prose* appear as generic contraction: what the essays elaborate over pages, the miniatures condense into emblems; what in the essayistic milieu is propounded as doctrine, the parable stages as pose. The shift is not from "argument" to "story," but from argumentation to figuration, in which the reader's task is not to assent to a thesis but to weigh an image. Disseminated through the same periodical sphere of the major essays, Wilde's prose poems are crucially shaped by this intellectual milieu, which bore directly on both their genesis and their reception. *The Spirit Lamp* – an Oxonian aestheticist journal associated with Lord Alfred Douglas – served in 1893 as a proving ground for two pieces, testing tone and audience; the *Fortnightly Review*, a high-profile monthly straddling literary culture and public discourse, gathered four further pieces in July 1894, conferring visibility and a semblance of sequence. The *Fortnightly's* spacious and airy layout and a cadence bordering on secular scripture frame the prose as oratorical yet resistant to conclusive morals. The move from the Oxonian coterie to a metropolitan platform thus registers a shift from experimental intimacy to a public rhetoric of style. That transition also yields a provisional sequence whose opening piece, "The Artist", reads, retrospectively, as programmatic.

That frame matters because it aligns the six pieces with yet another type of shorter prose that Wilde had been reworking since the late 1880s, namely the fairy tale. With *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) Wilde had in effect found a way to fashion a generic outlet for a new tonal cadence: an ironic didacticism where moral clarity is tested rather than dispensed. Whereas a tale like "The Happy Prince" operates through the classical morality structure of the fable, the prose poem as practiced by Wilde required readers to exert their inferential powers and craft an interpretation that a longer (and stylistically simpler) plot might dissolve and render explicit.

From a material angle, the *Fortnightly* context is not incidental. Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small relocate Wilde's essays and journalism within the infrastructures of the late-Victorian culture industry, stressing revision, self-recycling, and strategic placement as professional prac-

tice (2000). In that light, the prose poem looks less like a French import than a late-Victorian solution to problems Wilde had been staging across neighbouring forms: how to dramatize authority without retreating to aphorism; how to expose ethical pressure without sermonising; how to make style bear conceptual weight. The six parables are the strictest test of that wager.

In addition to these chronological and material contexts, Wilde's generic choice of the poem in prose signals a further step in formal experiment, as the form has been traditionally recognized as a privileged site of experimentation with heterogeneous materials (Murphy 1992, 90). After the fables of the late 1880s and the essays of the early 1890s – which already strain genre by combining dialogue, memoir, and manifesto – Wilde turns to a short-prose form with a long, if heterogeneous history, one in many regards considered a sort of “genre-crossing ugly duckling” (Hetherington, Atherton 2020, 22). Despite its marginal status within generic hierarchies, however, many recent accounts have pointed to its centrality in the definition of post-Romantic literary identity, since its foremost practitioner was none other than Charles Baudelaire. As Baudelaire and Rimbaud's *Poèmes en prose* testify, the genre's inherent “hybridity” (Murphy 2021, 67) constitutes a powerful reconfiguration of one of Romanticism's most consequential ideas, that of the fragment (Santilli 2002, 31). As Jonathan Monroe has shown in a seminal study of the form and its origins, the prose poem has its roots in the Romantic idealist revolution, bearing strong connections with the idea of the Romantic fragment, since both forms can be seen as rejecting “literature's — especially poetry's — dream of itself as a pure other set apart in sublime isolation” (1987, 19). Schlegel and Novalis – even before the more frequently cited French masters of the genre, Baudelaire and Rimbaud – enacted in their poetic prose a struggle between fragmented singularity and unified universality that the prose poem embodies with particular aptness.

In this broader historical perspective, the genre's tensions – poetry/prose, lyric/narrative – cease to be the defects that many critics reproached it for¹, but become conditions of work, and its brevity functions as a cognitive device that heightens density and tests boundaries (Hetherington, Atherton 2020, 14-16). In English-language practice the prose poem develops most visibly in the contact zone between lyric and prose, often within magazine and anthology culture; what takes hold is less a transplanted French model than a repertoire of short, hybrid pieces that foreground compression, figuration, and argumentative pressure. Crucially, this genealogy clarifies what is at stake in Wilde's own shift of scale: the form does not simply shorten discourse; it re-engineers its tempo. Where the essay moves by modulation – by turns, hesitations, repartees, and the slow accrual of paradox across voices – the prose poem moves by shock and crystallisation. In the essays that lead to *Intentions*, Wilde can distribute contradiction between speakers, defer closure through dialogue, and let thinking unfold as performance; in the prose poem, by contrast, the same intellectual energy must be carried by a single concentrated figure – an emblem that compels judgement while withholding the discursive scaffolding that usually guides interpretation. Brevity, in this sense, becomes not a limit but a method: it forces argument to survive as image. On these grounds, Wilde's 1893-1894 sequence need not be treated as a detour from *Intentions* but as its most stringent generic contraction: dialogue becomes parable; doctrine returns as pose; and authorship figures itself as a lucid simulacrum calibrated to brevity's demands.

The scholarly debate on Wilde's critical prose has been alive for decades, with scholars arguing for its coherence as both a theory of criticism and a practice shaped by late-Victorian

¹ Most notably perhaps T.S. Eliot, who famously stigmatized the “charlatanism” of the Nineties, and devoutly wished the final disappearance of all “miscellaneous prose poets” (1917, 158).

print culture. A classic point of departure is Herbert Sussman's seminal investigation, which insists that Wilde's critical writing sequence should be read not as detachable epigrams but as new forms of critical discourse devised to express Wilde's "new views," noting that under Wilde's touch the dialogue, the biographical sketch, and even the short story are "reshaped into new literary forms" that give expressing his "deeply Paterian, radically modern sensibility" (Sussman 1973, 109). Sussman further stresses how the dialogues dramatize a Paterian epistemology – intellectual formulations dissolving into impressions – so that the past is approached as a necessary "fiction" and the essays *perform* the very stance they propound (110, 121). Building on that formal insight, Lawrence Danson has in turn read *Intentions* as a program that explicitly recasts criticism as creation, glossing Wilde's often-cited dicta that "the highest criticism is that which reveals in the work of Art what the artist had not put there," that criticism "treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation," that it "is itself an art," "the purest form of personal expression," and that its task is "to see the object as in itself it really is not" – a redefinition that, as Danson underscores, "destabilises the very category 'criticism'" by eroding fixed boundaries between the critic and the thing criticised (Danson 1997a, 80). A decisive material turn is supplied by Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small's *Oscar Wilde's Profession* (2000), which re-centres the essays and journalism within the infrastructures of the late-Victorian culture industry, contests entrenched assumptions about Wilde's professional persona, and re-reads practices of revision and self-recycling as strategic responses to commodified authorship². Completing the picture from the conceptual side, Lawrence Danson's *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (1997b) re-centres *Intentions*, "Mr W.H.," and "The Soul of Man under Socialism" as Wilde's theoretical core, showing how paradox, impersonation, and self-cancellation constitute a performative theory of criticism rather than a detachable manifesto. Taken together, these accounts establish a durable consensus: Wilde's essayism is best understood as a self-reflexive, historically situated practice – criticism as art and as social posture.

On this footing, the *Poems in Prose* present themselves not as a departure from Wilde's critical enterprise but as its parabolic precipitate. What Sussman describes as new critical forms and what Danson (1997a) identifies as the critic's creative authority are here condensed into emblem: dialogue contracts into parable; doctrine returns as pose; and the author figures himself as a lucid simulacrum – a confessional image that deliberately trades endurance for intensity.

Finally, the public stakes of the label "prose poem" in the 1890s are not negligible. The term entered the courtroom in 1895 when Wilde described a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas as "a kind of prose poem"; Justice Wills' sentencing rebuke questioned whether high literary value could excuse moral danger. His logic ran thus: even if such a text is intelligible only to "persons of high culture", it may still be "poisonous for a young man" because its very sophistication makes it more, not less, dangerous (Hyde 1948, 312, 331; Bristow 2022, 267, 367, 385-91). The text of the letter, although it bears a faint resemblance to the *Prose Poems* thematically, is stylistically (and also chronologically) very akin to them:

² Guy and Small have also been key figures in the edition and annotation of Wilde's critical prose in the *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* multivolume editorial project with vol. VI (*Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*) edited by Josephine M. Guy (Wilde 2007) and vol. VIII (*The Short Fiction*) edited by Ian Small (Wilde 2017). My quotations from *Poems in Prose* also refer to this general edition, edited by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson (Wilde 2000). Other notable editions of Wilde's critical prose (equipped with remarkable introductions) are *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Richard Ellmann (Wilde 1982) and the more recent *The Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, edited by Nicholas Frankel (Wilde 2022).

Dearest of all Boys – Your letter was delightful – red and yellow wine to me – but I am sad and out of sorts – Bosie – you must not make scenes with me – they kill me – they wreck the loveliness of life – I cannot see *you*, so Greek and gracious, distorted by passion; I cannot listen to *your* curved lips saying hideous things to me – don't do it – you break my heart – I'd sooner be rented [i.e. blackmailed] all day, than have you bitter, unjust, and horrid – horrid – I must see you soon – you are the divine thing I want – the thing of grace and genius – but I don't know how to do it – Shall I come to Salisbury – ? – There are many difficulties – my bill here is £49 for a week! I have also got a new sitting-room over the Thames – but you, why are you not here, my dear, my wonderful boy –? I fear I must leave; no money, no credit, and a heart of lead – Ever your own. (cited in Bristow 2022, 77)

The prose poem's refusal of didactic clarity – its elusiveness, its resistance to paraphrase – was perceived as part of its threat. A form that withholds its moral while deploying scriptural authority and aesthetic refinement becomes legally as well as aesthetically suspect. Whatever else the episode shows, it confirms that Wilde conceived these miniatures as instruments, not ornaments: brief forms designed to act upon readers.

These were never private exercises in style; they were brief instruments designed to produce effects – ethical disorientation, ironic recognition, the suspense of judgment – that operate precisely *because* the form withholds resolution. The sequence does not illustrate doctrines; it stages attitudes. It does not preach; it poses. And in that posing, it makes visible the instability of the very categories – Artist, Disciple, Master, Doer of Good, Judge – through which authority, whether moral, aesthetic, or theological, claims to speak.

3. Parables of artistic authority

Wilde's poems in prose sequence present a peculiar scriptural tone and structure, a view that complicates and enriches further the prose poem context in which they appear. The prose poem, after its mid-century French origins in Bertrand (whose *Gaspard de la Nuit* appeared posthumously in 1842) and Baudelaire (whose *Petits poèmes en prose* began appearing in 1861), became a signature form of European Decadence by the 1880s and 1890s. Wilde's engagement arrives not after but during this flowering, offering one of its most theologically inflected variations. In a recent appraisal of the *fin-de-siècle* heritage of the form, Murphy has claimed that Wilde's poems in prose “adopt the English *Bible* as literary model, employing an archaic diction, syntax and pacing in ironic parables” – accounts by Frank Harris, W.B. Yeats, and André Gide confirm that Wilde told these stories orally before writing them down – and that the spoken versions “were simpler than the published ones”, which add “Hellenic references and trains of prepositional phrases” that “simulate a formulaic primitivism” (Murphy 2021, 85). Read alongside this stylistic profile, Rachel Blau DuPlessis's observation that Wilde's pieces “provide a blandly ironic *détournement* of Christianity” – turning sacrifice into “masochistic desires,” healing into “busybody meddling,” and revealing “unintended consequences” that “detour their sanctified conventionalized morals” (2014, 31) – clarifies the ethical pressure exerted by the brief form. DuPlessis's argument is specifically about how Wilde's miniatures invert Christian topoi without straightforward mockery – they “detour” rather than demolish scriptural authority. For example, in “The Doer of Good,” Christ's miracles produce morally ambiguous outcomes: the healed leper indulges in luxury, the formerly blind man pursues desire, the forgiven woman walks “the pleasant way” of sin. The form mimics scriptural cadence and expectation while exposing the instability of redemptive logic itself. This is the “blandly ironic” quality DuPlessis describes – an effect that depends on scriptural simulation, not parody.

These brief proses thus redeploy the canonical didactic codes of parable and fable against themselves, since they normally offer a form of lesson while withholding its moral, supplying a posture rather than illustrating a prescription. In this sense, the sequence is less an appendix to the tales and essays than a compact *ars poetica* in which authorship is rendered as image and tested under the pressure of brevity. A more capacious frame comes into view if Wilde's parabolic idiom is read where several conversations intersect.

Modern accounts of the parable construe it as a figure of indirection, routing meaning through scene and delay so that understanding arrives as inference rather than fiat (Kermode 1979, 23–29). At the same time, the relation between text and reader is not merely technical but covenantal: biblical narrative establishes an implied contract that withholds, tests, and thereby binds the reader into an interpretive community (Damrosch 1987), a dynamic that suits Wilde's miniatures, which solicit judgement rather than dispense it. In a complementary vein, accounts of the Bible's resistance to novelistic closure stress its openness, reticence, and demand on the reader – features that, when transposed to *fin-de-siècle* prose, help explain why Wilde's pieces read as deliberately non-synthetic emblems that require completion in the act of reading, even though they remain always free from definite interpretation. Just as Gabriel Josipovici argues in *The Book of God* that biblical narrative withholds closure and demands iterative re-reading, Wilde's parables refuse to “stop” interpretation – each encounter opens new valences rather than confirming a fixed moral. In his now classical account, Josipovici compares this process to the writing of Proust, where

a pattern is presented and asks to be read in one way, but subsequent events show that it should have been read quite differently; often, further events suggest that the first reading was in fact the correct one, but there is nothing to assure that this is the point at which interpretation must stop. (1988, 86)

Wilde's miniatures operate on this principle: they provide enough narrative closure to constitute a scene, but the ethical valence of that scene remains suspended, requiring – but never rewarding – the reader's judgment.

Wilde's prose poems lift those devices into a late-Victorian theatre of authorship: they present allegorical masks of authorial roles (Artist, Disciple, Christ as “Doer of Good,” the penitent “Master,” the judged Man) rather than first-person lyric voices. Crucially, the sequence evacuates autobiographical interiority in favor of type-figures. Except for the oblique internal focalization in “The Artist” (“there came into his soul”, Wilde 2000, 173), the pieces refuse first-person address: the depicted role – Artist melting bronze, Narcissus's pool speaking, Christ healing, the youth weeping – becomes a portable icon, iterable and detachable, rather than an expression of subjective experience. In this key, the sequence's scriptural surface is not an archaism but a mode of thinking calibrated to scale – a way to make style bear ethical and epistemic weight in a few lines. When “The Artist” opens with “One evening there came into his soul the desire to fashion an image” (*ibidem*), the phrasing – archaic, third-person, without psychological interiority – makes the creative act legible as *event* rather than *process*. The syntax of parable converts subjective experience into portable, iterable form, and style thereby bears epistemic weight: what matters is not *why* the artist desires, but *what he does* and *at what cost*. Because Wilde's language explicitly trades on biblical expectancy, a compact epigraph can intensify the argument about duration and intensity: “choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:25) resonates with *pleasure that abideth for a moment* versus durable sorrow; likewise, “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5) echoes the sequence's antiphonal temporality.

Yet where Baudelaire's prose poems – as Murphy's (1992) analysis demonstrates – stage urban *shocks* and *flâneur* encounters ("Perte d'auréole," "La Soupe et les nuages"), Wilde evacuates this metropolitan contingency almost entirely. His parables occur in abstract or mythic space: "the Valley of Desolation," "the House of Judgment," "a round city" (unnamed, generic), the pool where Narcissus dies. Only "The Doer of Good" gestures toward urban particularity (the city with "fair pillars of marble," streets, painted women), but even there the locale functions allegorically, not socially. Where Baudelaire's brevity captures *velocity* – the jolt of the crowd, the violence of modernity, the sudden dislodging of the poet's halo in traffic – Wilde captures *stasis*: the suspended moral scene, the tableau awaiting judgment. This generic difference is crucial. Wilde uses the prose poem not to compress the city but to distill the *ethical posture*, producing a miniature not of action but of attitude, not of event but of stance.

It is specifically the issue of authority that can be interestingly connected to an ironic diminishing of the figure of the artist, one that will prelude the ironical treatment found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s portrait of the aesthete. As irony in Wilde's universe can be accounted for as a sort of tutelary deity, we can think of one of its most peculiar results – as Jure Gantar diffusely demonstrates – as that of eroding the concept itself of literary (and more broadly cultural) authority insofar as it mimics the syntax of authoritative pronouncements – the maxim, the verdict, the serious theoretical claim – while exposing that authority as a performative effect rather than a stable ground of truth (2015). In Gantar's account, Wilde's epigrammatic irony gains much of its force by coupling a contrarian reversal with a highly controlled logical and rhetorical structure: it does not merely negate a commonplace, but *rebuilds* it on alternative premises, producing what looks like a persuasive "judgment" while keeping the ground of judgment unstable (125). That is crucial for questions of authority: the epigram borrows the *form* of the authoritative pronouncement (balanced sentence, inductive movement, impression of cogency) and turns it into an arena where what counts as "sense," "proof," or "valid evaluation" is itself at stake (*ibidem*). At the level of character and dramatic voice, Gantar suggests something analogous: authority circulates through socially coded idioms – what he calls "the discourse of power and hegemony" – which Wilde (and Wilde's characters) can strategically appropriate, making "authoritative" speech appear as a transferable cultural register rather than a stable entitlement (94). While Gantar analyzes epigrammatic irony primarily in Wilde's plays, essays, and conversation, his framework applies equally to the prose poems, where authority appears as a transferable stylistic effect rather than an ontological ground. The parabolic voice – archaic, third-person, declarative – *sounds* authoritative, but what it authorizes remains perpetually in question.

This aspect is peculiarly visible in "The Artist," who is represented as both an author in the process of creating ("there came into his soul the desire to fashion an image", Wilde 2000, 173), and who already has produced art ("this image he had created himself", 174). The piece offers no psychology of inspiration, only an economy of exchange. Not much of the creative impulse is described or explained, much in the vein of the lapidary economy of the overall moral, which in the piece is centred around the overcoming of eternal sorrow by momentary pleasure. The opening proposition announces absolute scarcity with liturgical emphasis: "there was no other bronze save the bronze of the image of *the Sorrow that endureth for Ever*" (173). The Artist *cannot create without destroying*. The bronze for "*Pleasure that abideth for a Moment*" exists only as the melted remnant of "*Sorrow that endureth for Ever*". This is not evasion of the creative process but a parable *of* that process: art requires sacrifice, and intensity is purchased by dismantling permanence. To fashion pleasure, the artist must melt sorrow; creation is re-founding, not invention *ex nihilo*. The monument – "set [...] on the tomb of the one thing

he had loved” – is “[given] [...] to the fire” (*ibidem*), and out of that desecration is cast an image of *pleasure that abideth for a moment*. The ethical cost is not veiled: private grief becomes public emblem, and endurance is melted into intensity. The temporal antithesis structuring “The Artist” – *sorrow that endureth for ever* versus *pleasure that abideth for a moment* – finds scriptural precedent in Hebrews 11:25, which contrasts “the pleasures of sin for a season” with enduring affliction, and Psalm 30:5, where “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning”. Wilde secularizes this rhythm: intensity supplants duration as the measure of value, and the parable sanctions an aesthetic economy in which permanence is not preserved but consumed. Formally, the piece performs its doctrine through paired antitheses (“for Ever”/“for a Moment”), biblicalising diction (“abideth,” “endureth”), and the paratactic hinge that marks conversion (“and he took [...] and set it [...] and gave it to the fire”, 2000, 173-174). What remains is a lucid authorial simulacrum: not a confessional “I,” but an attitude rendered as icon – portable, iterable, answerable (Bugliani 2022, 106-108).

“The Doer of Good” stages the unintended consequences of redemption as a sequence of three encounters, each revealing the moral ambiguity of grace. Christ enters “a round city” and finds a young man “whose hair was crowned with red roses and whose lips were red with wine,” reclining on “a couch of sea-purple” in a house hung with garlands and torches (Wilde 2000, 174). When Christ asks, “Why do you live like this?” the young man replies, “But I was a leper once, and you healed me. How else should I live?” (*ibidem*). The logic is impeccable and devastating: the miracle licenses indulgence. Christ next encounters a young man pursuing “one whose face and raiment were painted” – a figure of desire whose “eyes [...] were bright with lust” (*ibidem*). To Christ’s reproach, the youth answers, “But I was blind once, and you gave me sight. At what else should I look?” (175). When Christ addresses the woman herself – “Is there no other way in which to walk save the way of sin?” – she turns, recognizes him, and laughs: “But you forgave me my sins, and the way is a pleasant way” (*ibidem*). Each figure cites the miracle itself as justification for post-redemptive behavior that violates the presumed *telos* of healing. The piece does not mock healing but exposes its moral ambiguity: grace may license indulgence rather than virtue; forgiveness may authorize rather than reform; sight may reveal lust rather than truth. The closing encounter intensifies this estrangement. Christ finds “a young man who was weeping” and asks why. The reply: “But I was dead once, and you raised me from the dead. What else should I do but weep?” (*ibidem*). The suggestion is chilling: life *after* miracle is unbearable precisely because meaning has been fulfilled and exhausted. Resurrection becomes elegy; the return to life is experienced as loss. The piece refuses to resolve whether the weeping marks gratitude, despair, or existential vertigo. What is clear is that the Doer of Good has *done* good – healing is real, resurrection is real – but the outcome is not virtue. The parable withholds the moral while supplying the scene, and the reader is left to adjudicate a question the text will not answer: if grace does not produce goodness, what does it produce?

The artist, then, is reduced to an almost allegorical mask, incorporeal and flimsy. A similar dematerialization can be seen in a more radical way in “The Disciple”, which is an ironic rewriting of the myth of Narcissus. The piece is shaped around the figure of the pathetic fallacy through which the spring where Narcissus dies in the myth is now able to speak. But the key ironic reversal lies not in speech but in motive. The Oreads arrive to comfort the pool, assuming it mourns Narcissus’s beauty: “We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he” (Wilde 2000, 173). The pool’s reply dismantles their assumption: “But was Narcissus beautiful?” When the Oreads protest – “Who should know that better than you?” – and remind the pool that Narcissus “would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty” (*ibidem*) – the pool offers the piece’s devastating confession: “But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and

looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored" (*ibidem*). The pool is *also* a narcissist. The piece stages not one-sided adoration but mutual self-regard mistaken for love. Neither Narcissus nor the pool sees the other; each sees only a reflection of the self. This is not merely "value as refraction", but a parable of aesthetic solipsism: both artist and audience, both subject and object, both lover and beloved, are locked in reciprocal projection. The disciple learns nothing from the master because the master is merely a surface for the disciple's self-contemplation – and vice versa. The title, "The Disciple," becomes bitterly ironic: discipleship, in this account, is not imitation or apprenticeship but mirroring without recognition, a relation in which neither party exists for the other except as occasion for self-regard. Value is recast as refraction rather than representation; the authorial figure functions as a surface that returns to the beholder an image of their investments.

"The Master" inverts the logic of *imitatio Christi* by staging envy of martyrdom rather than of virtue. The piece opens in "the Valley of Desolation" where Joseph of Arimathea, descending from the hill after Christ's burial, encounters "a young man who was naked and weeping. His hair was the colour of honey, and his body was as a white flower, but he had wounded his body with thorns and on his hair had he set ashes as a crown" (Wilde 2000, 175). Joseph assumes the youth mourns Christ: "I do not wonder that your sorrow is so great, for surely He was a just man" (*ibidem*). The young man's reply upends this assumption: "It is not for Him that I am weeping, but for myself" (175-176). He then catalogs his own miracles in language that closely echoes the Gospels:

I too have changed water into wine, and I have healed the leper and given sight to the blind. I have walked upon the waters, and from the dwellers in the tombs I have cast out devils. I have fed the hungry in the desert where there was no food, and I have raised the dead from their narrow houses, and at my bidding, and before a great multitude of people, a barren fig-tree withered away. (176)

The accumulation is meticulous, comprehensive – every Christological sign is reproduced. Yet the conclusion breaks the pattern: "All things that this man has done I have done also. And yet they have not crucified me" (*ibidem*). The youth desires martyrdom as the authentication of power. The piece diagnoses a perverse envy: imitation without suffering is incomplete; authority requires *passion* (in both senses – suffering and intensity). If martyrdom is the sign of the elect, its absence invalidates the miracle-worker. The youth has performed every proof but lacks the final credential. The piece is Wilde's most explicit interrogation of the *author-function*: charismatic authority, it suggests, is secured not by what one does but by what is done *to* one. The miracle is secondary; the spectacle of suffering is primary. "The Master" parodies both the Decadent cult of suffering-as-credential and the sacrificial logic undergirding notions of artistic genius. The artist must not only create but must be *seen to suffer* for creation. Without the cross, the miracles are indistinguishable from conjuring. The piece withholds judgment on whether this logic is true or pathological – but it exposes the logic with surgical clarity.

Finally, the period's aesthetic classicism supplies the cultural inflection of this scriptural cadence: the Hellenic overlay that stiffens, ornaments, and authorizes Wilde's idiom belongs to a broader late-Victorian habit of splicing biblical and classical registers in order to stage ethical reflection as form (Evangelista 2009). Murphy's account of the cycle sits precisely at this junction, describing printed "ironic parables" that heighten simpler oral tellings with Hellenic allusion and patterned prepositional trains – a calculated primitivism that renders doctrine as pose (2021, 85-86). Read together, these strands explain why Wilde's brevity is not merely compact but cognitive: the short scene compels judgement, and the biblical-Hellenic surface secures the authority of that demand without closing it.

In “The House of Judgement”, judgement turns upon imaginability. Hell is bearable because it has already been lived; Heaven is refused because it cannot be imagined. The piece opens “in the House of Judgment” where “the Man came naked before God” and “God opened the Book of the Life of the Man” (Wilde 2000, 171). What follows is a threefold indictment, each section cataloging the Man’s sins in escalating detail. The first recounts social cruelty: “Thy life hath been evil, and thou hast shown cruelty to those who were in need of succour, and to those who lacked help thou hast been bitter and hard of heart” (*ibidem*). The second condemns aesthetic and sexual transgression: “Thy life hath been evil, and the Beauty I have shown thou hast sought for, and the Good I have hidden thou didst pass by. The walls of thy chamber were painted with images, and from the bed of thine abominations thou didst rise up to the sound of flutes” (*ibidem*). The third accuses betrayal and ingratitude: “Evil hath been thy life, and with evil didst thou requite good, and with wrongdoing kindness” (*ibidem*). To each accusation, “the Man made answer and said, ‘Even so did I’ ” (*ibidem*). The confession is absolute, unmitigated – no defense, no extenuating circumstance, no appeal to grace. God then pronounces sentence: “Surely I will send thee into Hell. Even into Hell will I send thee” (172). The Man’s reply arrests the judgment: “Thou canst not” (*ibidem*). When God demands a reason, the Man answers, “Because in Hell have I always lived” (*ibidem*). The reply echoes Marlowe’s Mephistopheles in *Doctor Faustus*: “Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it” (2022 [1604], Act I, Scene 3, 74). Eschatological futurity collapses into present condition; damnation is not a destination but a state already inhabited. The sentence is impossible because it has already been executed. God then attempts the opposite: “Seeing that I may not send thee into Hell, surely I will send thee unto Heaven. Even unto Heaven will I send thee” (Wilde 2000, 172). Again, the Man replies, “Thou canst not” (*ibidem*). When asked why, he confesses, “Because never, and in no place, have I been able to imagine it” (*ibidem*). The inability to imagine Heaven is epistemological, not volitional. The Man does not *refuse* Heaven; he cannot *conceive* it. Damnation, in this account, is a failure of figuration, not of desire. The piece ends with silence: “And there was silence in the House of Judgment” (*ibidem*). Judgment stalls not on a deficit of will but on a deficit of image; the limit of moral experience is the limit of representation. Heaven is unavailable not because the Man is unworthy but because he lacks the imaginative apparatus to construct it. The piece refuses consolation: neither Hell nor Heaven is possible, and the Man remains suspended in a juridical limbo where sentence cannot be passed because the categories of punishment and reward have been exhausted or rendered inoperative. Judgment stalls not on a deficit of will but on a deficit of image; the limit of moral experience is the limit of figuration. If “The Artist” confesses the cost of refounding and “The Disciple” the economy of attention, “The House of Judgment” confesses the boundary of vision. In each case authorship appears as image under test.

4. *Disciple and Master*

This parabolic, scripturally inflected prose, with its allegorical recasting of the artist-figure as flimsy icon rather than psychological subject, connects to the Continental tradition of post-Romantic prose poetry, but its evacuated, transparent protagonists point toward another proximate source: Walter Pater’s prose experiments in the imaginary portrait (Bugliani 2022, 106). As a matter of fact, Wilde’s prose interweaves with Pater and also with Henry James’s stories of writers and artists, and if we consider the span between 1873 (the year of “The Madonna of

the Future” by Henry James³) and 1894 (the year of Pater’s death), we perceive that Wilde was part of a florilegium of brief works concerning the existence of the creator of artifacts. In the wake of James’s “Madonna,” the relevant lineage unfolds in a compact but telling sequence. Pater develops the artist-portrait type most explicitly beginning in 1885 with “A Prince of Court Painters”, followed by the paired experiments “Denys l’Auxerrois” and “Sebastian van Storck” (1886), and “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” (1887), all collected in *Imaginary Portraits* (1887). Pater’s earlier “The Child in the House” (1878) belongs to a different strand of his work – the autobiographical memoir-essay – and the fragment “An English Poet” (also 1878), though it prefigures the artist-portrait, remained unpublished in Pater’s lifetime and only partially develops the type. Meanwhile, James returns to the artist-figure in the mid-1880s: “The Author of Beltraffio” appears in 1884, followed by Pater’s “A Prince of Court Painters” in 1885 and, the next year, Pater’s paired experiments “Denys l’Auxerrois” and “Sebastian Van Storck” (1886). Pater continues with “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” in 1887 – the same year he gathers the first collection of *Imaginary Portraits* – while James extends his own inquiry into artistic vocation and discipline with “The Lesson of the Master” (1888) and later “The Private Life” (1892).

By the end of the decade, Wilde enters this continuum with “The Portrait of Mr W.H.” (1889) – itself an *imaginary portrait* of Shakespeare’s supposed male muse, filtered through a fictional critic (Cyril Graham) and a narrator, and thus Wilde’s most direct engagement with Pater’s form. The 1890 *Picture of Dorian Gray* then radicalizes the portrait-motif by making the artwork itself the protagonist (the portrait ages while Dorian does not), turning Pater’s device inside-out. In 1890, alongside *Dorian Gray*, Wilde publishes “The Critic as Artist,” pushing the artist-figure toward questions of interpretation, performance, and ethical pose. The early 1890s then become especially dense: Pater contributes “Hyppolitus Veiled” (1889, though published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in May 1889) and “Apollo in Picardy” (1893), while James, in 1893, publishes a cluster of texts – “The Middle Years”, “Greville Fane”, and “The Real Thing” – that reframe authorship through late style, professional identity, and the problem of “the real”. Wilde concentrates the motif into the explicitly parabolic micro-forms published together in the *Fortnightly Review* in July 1894: “The Artist”, “The Doer of Good”, “The Disciple”, “The Master”, and “The House of Judgment”. (A sixth piece, “The Teacher of Wisdom,” appeared in the December 1894 issue of the *Speaker*).

Pater’s leading role is especially important, and not only for Wilde⁴. His defining influence in shaping the form and fortune of modern prose literature has been always remarked, although desultorily. His *de facto* invention of the form of the imaginary portrait is very interesting to Oscar Wilde’s prose not primarily for the issue of portraiture – which Wilde would pursue in his two portraits of 1889 and 1890 – but in what Lene Østermark-Johansen has labelled the “ghostly transparency” of their protagonists, a feature whose function is that of diverting the

³ First listed by F.O. Matthiessen as the first of his short fiction concerning writers and artists, where he was “writing from the heart of his aesthetic conviction” (1944, 3).

⁴ On Walter Pater’s formative presence behind Wilde’s aesthetic positions – whether framed as stylistic apprenticeship, the inheritance of “impressionist” critical vocabulary, or (in some accounts) the sexual politics of influence – see Parkes 2011, 45-76. On Pater’s afterlife within James’s late-Victorian aestheticism (especially as James “transposes” Paterian theory into fictional form), see Salmon 1999. For a foundational earlier discussion of James’s relation to the aesthetic tradition (with attention to Arnold and Pater as key coordinates), see Berland 1962. For a queer-theoretical account that situates James’s *fin-de-siècle* “aesthetic” types and the problem of labeling/identity (a context in which Pater’s legacy is frequently backgrounded), see (Haralson 2003, 54-78). Finally, for a focused study of aestheticism in *The Tragic Muse* (including the figure of Gabriel Nash) that tracks the intellectual climate to which Pater is central, see Baker 1973.

attention from them to their author: “Pater the conjuror of ghosts, the master of language or of puppets emerges as the real protagonist” (2014, 5). The artist-figure becomes a medium through which Pater’s own aesthetic and ethical preoccupations can be projected, tested, and withdrawn without commitment. This technique – making the fictional author so flimsy that the biographical author’s presence becomes paradoxically more palpable, though ever oblique – is precisely the lesson Wilde adapts in the *Poems in Prose*.

Yet Pater was not implicit narcissist. His turn to the ghostly is not mere stylistic mannerism, but a response to a transformation in human subjectivity under modernity. In the early, unpublished essay “Diaphaneïté” (1864), written when Pater was twenty-five, he describes a moral and aesthetic type characterized by transparency, evanescence, and refusal of typological legibility:

It does not take the eye by breadth of colour; rather it is that fine edge of light where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point. It crosses rather than follows the main current of the world’s life. The world has no sense fine enough for those evanescent shades which fill up the blanks between contrasted types of character – delicate provision in the organization of the moral world for the transmission to every part of it of the life quickened at single points! For this nature there is no place ready in his affections. This colourless, unclassified purity of life it can neither use for its service, nor contemplate as an ideal. (2014, 77-78)

This “colourless, unclassified purity” describes a subjectivity that cannot be instrumentalized (“the world [...] can neither use [it] for its service”) nor converted into stable identity (“nor contemplate [it] as an ideal”). The diaphanous nature exists in the “blanks between contrasted types”, functioning as transmission rather than presence, medium rather than message. Pater’s imaginary portraits embody this logic: their protagonists are “evanescent shades” who serve as conduits for aesthetic and ethical intensities without consolidating into coherent selves. Wilde’s Artist, Disciple, and Master extend this principle to the limit: they are not even individuated enough to be called “characters,” but are rather allegorical masks through which authorship as stance becomes briefly visible before dissolving.

The description in “Diaphaneïté” anticipates the figuration of the artist in Wilde’s *Poems in Prose* with uncanny precision. The Artist who melts *sorrow that endureth for ever* to cast *pleasure that abideth for a moment* is defined not by psychological depth but by a single gesture – an act of refounding that “crosses rather than follows the main current of the world’s life”. The Disciple (Narcissus’s pool) exists only as a reflective surface, a “fine edge of light” where self-regard meets its double. The Master, weeping because “they have not crucified me” (Wilde 2000, 176), embodies the paradox of a nature for which “there is no place ready in [the world’s] affections” (Pater 2014, 78) – seeking martyrdom precisely because his diaphanous authority requires the world’s violence to become legible. And the Man in the House of Judgment, who has “always lived” in Hell and “never [...] been able to imagine” Heaven (Wilde 2000, 172), represents the epistemological limit of the diaphanous: a transparency so absolute that neither damnation nor salvation can register as category. In each case, the figure exists in the “blanks between contrasted types” (Pater 2014, 17), refusing instrumentalization, evading moral classification, transmitting intensity without consolidating into identity.

Pater’s diaphanous type and Wilde’s parabolic miniatures share a common wager: that the most vivid articulation of authorship in modernity comes not through consolidation of voice or assertion of presence, but through strategic transparency – a technique that makes authority visible precisely by refusing to ground it.

5. Conclusion

Wilde's *Poems in Prose* occupy a singular position at the intersection of three late-nineteenth-century formal and ethical experiments. First, they inherit from Baudelaire and the French tradition the prose poem's hybrid form – a genre that, as Murphy demonstrates, was especially suited to Decadent sensibilities because it refused both the utility of prose and the lyricism of verse, creating a “lawless zone” (Stetz 2006, 629) in which meaning operates through compression, deferral, and ironic withholding. Second, Wilde adapts the biblical parable's covenant with the reader: these miniatures demand judgment while refusing to supply it, drawing on scriptural authority (archaic diction, antiphonal temporality, the rhythms of Hebrews and the Psalms) to create an expectation of moral instruction that is systematically deferred or inverted. Third, and most proximately, Wilde extends Pater's technique of the “ghostly” or “diaphanous” protagonist – a figure so transparent, so evacuated of interiority, that it functions as surface rather than subject, medium rather than message. Where Pater's imaginary portraits use this transparency to “transmit [...] life quickened at single points” (Pater 2014, 77-78) across historical and aesthetic distances, Wilde deploys it to make authorship itself – not as biographical presence but as ethical and aesthetic posture – briefly visible in parabolic form.

What is at stake in this convergence is the question of authority. Gantar argues that Wilde's irony destabilizes cultural and literary authority by appropriating its rhetorical forms while exposing authority as “a performative effect rather than a stable ground of truth” (Gantar 2015, 125). The *Poems in Prose* enact this logic at the level of genre and figure. They *sound* authoritative – archaic, declarative, balanced – but what they authorize remains suspended. “The Artist” does not *prescribe* the sacrifice of permanence for intensity; it *enacts* that exchange as *fait accompli*, leaving the reader to determine whether this is lament, doctrine, or aesthetic necessity. “The Doer of Good” does not *condemn* the post-redemptive indulgence of the healed leper or the forgiven woman; it stages their logic (“[But] you healed me. How else should I live?”, Wilde 2000, 174) with such impeccable clarity that condemnation and justification become indistinguishable. “The House of Judgment” does not *resolve* the Man's confession that he has “always lived” in Hell and “never [...] been able to imagine” Heaven (172); it lets the silence speak. In each case, the parabolic form creates the expectation of adjudication – this is what parables *do* – but withholds the verdict. The reader is placed in the position of the judge, but the criteria for judgment are precisely what the parable has placed in question.

If Pater's diaphanous figures exist in order to “refine [the elements of our moral nature] to the burning point” (2014, 77) – to serve as sites of aesthetic and ethical intensity without consolidating into identity – Wilde's parabolic miniatures perform a parallel operation at the level of form. They are *portable icons* of authorship: iterable, detachable, answerable to no single context. The Artist melting bronze, the pool confessing its narcissism, the Master weeping for want of crucifixion, the Man standing naked before God – these are not characters, but attitudes rendered as image. They do not develop, do not acquire depth, do not invite identification. They exist as brief flashes of stance, frozen at the moment of ethical crisis or aesthetic decision, and then withdrawn. This is the formal achievement of the *Poems in Prose*: they make visible the author-function (Foucault's term, but Pater and Wilde anticipate the concept) as neither sovereign presence nor dissolved absence, but as *pose* – a momentary configuration of authority, style, and judgment that can be assumed, tested, and abandoned without remainder.

If Murphy is correct that Wilde's prose poems “adopt the English Bible as literary model” and “simulate a formulaic primitivism” (2021, 85), we must add that this simulation is not nostalgic but diagnostic: it uses scriptural form to expose the instability of the very categories – Artist, Master, Disciple, Judge – through which authority claims to speak.

The public stakes of this experiment became violently clear in 1895, when the term “prose poem” entered the courtroom and Justice Wills declared such writing “poisonous” precisely because effective (Murphy 2021, 85-86). What made the form dangerous was not its content but its elusiveness: it mimicked authority, demanded interpretation, and refused to settle. These were never ornamental exercises. They were – and remain – brief instruments designed to act upon readers by making the ground of judgment visible as contested terrain. In this sense, Wilde’s *Poems in Prose* are less a coda to Decadence than a manifesto in miniature: a demonstration that authority, in modernity, can be neither secured nor abandoned, but only performed – and that performance, at its most rigorous, looks like parable.

Yet this calibration to modernity – to what can be captured in the fleeting moment – returns us to the founding insight of the prose poem tradition itself. Baudelaire’s definition of modernity in *The Painter of Modern Life* provides the theoretical ground for the aesthetic wager Wilde’s sequence enacts:

By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whole other half is the eternal and the immutable. Every old master has had his own modernity; the great majority of fine portraits that have come down to us from former generations are clothed in the costume of their own period. They are perfectly harmonious, because everything [...] combines to form a completely viable whole. This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. (Baudelaire 1965, 13)

Wilde’s *Poems in Prose* take this dialectic – the eternal and the ephemeral, permanence and metamorphosis – and perform it at the level of authorship itself. Where Baudelaire locates modernity in the “costume” of the present moment, in the transitory surfaces that future generations will read as period markers, Wilde compresses the entire dialectic into emblematic gestures: the Artist who melts *sorrow that endureth for ever* to cast *pleasure that abideth for a moment* enacts, in miniature, Baudelaire’s account of art as the union of the immutable and the fugitive. The parable’s archaic, scriptural diction – its claim to the “eternal” – is precisely what makes the ephemeral visible as choice rather than accident. Modernity, in Wilde’s hands, is not the rejection of the eternal but its strategic appropriation: the eternal becomes a costume, a pose, a transferable surface through which the fugitive – the authorial stance, the momentary intensity – can be staged, tested, and relinquished.

Baudelaire insists that “this transitory, fugitive element [...] must on no account be despised or dispensed with”. Wilde’s achievement is to have treated authorship itself as that transitory element: not a fixed identity anchored in biography or doctrine, but a series of brief, contingent configurations – Artist, Disciple, Master, Judge – each calibrated to modernity’s demand for metamorphosis. The prose poems thus complete the trajectory begun in Baudelaire’s urban miniatures and extended through Pater’s imaginary portraits: they render the author as a function of form, a pose legible only in its enactment and withdrawal. In doing so, they demonstrate that in modernity, the authorial “costume” is not what conceals the artist but what makes the artist briefly – fleetingly – visible. The simulacrum, in this sense, is not a degraded copy of presence but the only form presence can take when calibrated to the tempo of the fugitive and the contingent. Wilde’s parables, read in this light, are portraits not of the artist as eternal type but of the artist as modern condition: ephemeral, iterable, and – like all things modern – already in the process of vanishing even as it comes into view.

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