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Resonant Unwellness: Oscar Wilde, the Physics of Sound, and the Politics of Suffering

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Abstract:

This article challenges the dichotomy between Oscar Wilde's pre-prison "jester" persona and his later "gay martyr" myth by examining "unwellness" as a political and existential condition. Through the lenses of Health Humanities, resonance, and attunement, it argues that health and well-being are central to Wilde's aesthetic-political stance. By re-evaluating *De Profundis* as an articulation of a transformative philosophy of life-as-art, this article reveals a physics of sound in Wilde's broader oeuvre where suffering becomes a material force for creation. Ultimately, incarceration is seen as a catalyst for a retrospective attunement to a lifelong note of sorrow, where the vulnerable body becomes a resonant site for a transformative philosophy of art.

Keywords: *De Profundis*, Health Humanities, Oscar Wilde, Resonance, Unwellness

1. Introduction

As was famously recollected by André Gide, Wilde "did not converse: he narrated" (1949, 2). His prowess at table talk naturally fed into the construction of some of his best tales, the final form of which was the result of a series of re-tellings and re-adjustments that happened over many dinners and social situations, in dialogue with various audiences. As Gide evokes, "of his wisdom or indeed of his folly, he uttered only what he believed his hearer would relish; he served each according to his appetite, to his taste" (3). This meant, Gide quickly adds, that because Wilde's first aim was "to amuse", "many of those who thought they knew him only knew the jester in him" (*ibidem*). Indeed, as the oft-abused aphorisms and the oft-represented society plays show, Wilde was a master of comedy and of social situations. This image congealed, over time, into the

Wilde-as-jester trope which still informs our way of looking at his often caustic remarks about Victorian moral standards and the associated notion of respectability.

Wilde's three trials and his consequent imprisonment in 1895 equally marked a fundamental, albeit sombre stage in his career, one which has had far-reaching consequences on the ways in which we tend to talk about Wilde today. This latter stage is often equated with the suffering and oppression he sustained as a queer writer who bore the brunt of a system so intent on chastising anyone who evaded moral or sexual norms. This equally widespread understanding of Wilde has congealed over time into what Richard A. Kaye aptly termed a "Wilde-as-Gay-Martyr myth", in particular for a generation of gay liberation activists and queer critics who were claiming civil rights and mainstream representation for themselves (2004, 192). Wilde, as experienced by subsequent generations of readers and critics, seems to inhabit a tension between the figure of the light-hearted story-teller who knows how to captivate and charm his audience and that of the victim of a strict heterosexual code which punishes the sexually and politically unruly subject.

This impression of him, albeit to some extent faithful to the texts penned by Wilde, may generate a false dichotomy between Wilde before the trials and Wilde in prison and after, thereby jettisoning any continuities between the two figures. Moreover, it contributes to perpetuating the misconception whereby Wilde's final years were spent in solitude and agony – a misconception that works like Nicholas Frankel's *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (2017) have done much to put to rest. In what follows, I will make a specular movement to Frankel's volume: while his work shows how combative and active Wilde still was after prison, my interest in this article is, rather, to show how Wilde's sombre tones, and in particular his engagement with sorrow and suffering, take pride of place among the themes he discussed in the texts he produced before and during his imprisonment. In particular, I am interested in the notion of being "unwell", of not feeling quite oneself – the sort of sensation that tells us that something is off, a sort of discomfort that does not necessarily signify illness or disease but which has to materialise in some shape or form in our bodily reality.

I purposefully use a vague term ("unwellness") to explore the various manifestations that a lack of health and well-being may display in conjunction with the political and existential background animating Wilde's life and work. Philosopher Elizabeth Barnes has recently gone to great lengths to disentangle the notion of well-being from health, arguing that the two concepts, while recently reunited by the World Health Organization, serve different purposes and are constitutively separate (see Barnes 2023, 66-93). However, for Wilde the question of health and that of well-being are not philosophical in nature but experiential, especially during his imprisonment: as several critics have noted, he suffered the harshly punitive and ultimately insalubrious atmosphere of the late Victorian prison system he found himself in, with Sir Edmund Frederick Du Cane's notoriously unyielding policies and attitudes towards the incarcerated diminishing both the health and the well-being of those who were serving time¹. It is no coincidence, in this sense, that Wilde should appeal to the existing authorities in his post-prison years, arguing for a substantial reform of the penal system predicated *both* on health and well-being: besides listing "hunger", "insomnia", and "disease" among the "permanent punishments authorised by law in English prisons", in his 23rd March 1898 letter to the *Daily Chronicle* he famously also numbers "the production of insanity" among the "result[s]"

¹ See Laura Giovannelli's well-documented, and recent contribution for an overview of the reforms taking place within the prison complex at the time (2023, 81-89). For a shorter discussion of prison and prison reform at the time, in particular in relation to punitive labour, see also Christian Gerzso (2019, 1029-1032).

of incarceration and argues for a more lenient treatment of prisoners through the concession of a few rights that would make life in prison more manageable, such as access to books, freedom in letter-writing, and the possibility of receiving visitors (Wilde 2013, 202, 204-206).

Moreover, seen within the context of anti-degeneracy sentiment and the struggle against sexual “deviancy”, the punishment inflicted on Wilde, as Laura Giovannelli has aptly put it, amounted to “a collective exorcism performed against ‘enervation’ and ‘degeneracy’ with a view to reintegrating a positive, healthy, and masculine discernment” (2023, 79). Within the punitive prison system, health was undoubtedly connected to the ideological and political plane, intended as it was to humiliate prisoners in the interest of breaking them and turning them into obedient subjects. My contention is that questions relating to health and well-being are in fact central to Wilde’s oeuvre, especially as they intersect with his own aesthetic ideals and his political stance on society – an aspect currently undervalued in the existing Wilde scholarship.

In order to show the blatant absence of approaches in Wilde Studies pertaining to health and well-being even beyond his imprisonment, I will briefly discuss the case of Bunbury, which has been the object of much interpretation and speculation. Many critics have rightly highlighted the comedic effect the term and its use in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) are supposed to elicit, while W.H. Auden, Joel Fineman, and Christopher Crafts – amongst others – have found in the play’s permanent invalid and covert activity subterranean allusions to homosexuality (see Coppa 2025, 324). Other recent readings have taken Bunbury’s comedic veneer to conceal more radical contents, as evidenced by Deaglán Ó Donghaile’s interpretation of it as representative of class mobility and as a mirror image of “the moribund state of capital” (2020, 182, 193). Paradoxically, what has not quite been registered in the existing scholarship is precisely the fact that Bunbury is *a permanent invalid* whose fragile *health* is used by Algernon to elude social responsibilities: the central, essential quality of the fictional figure is taken for granted – perhaps because of its “familiarity” to anyone who has ever tried to get out of unwelcome situations via a dead relative or an unwell parent – but would merit a more extensive discussion.

When Algernon first uses Bunbury as an excuse in Act 1, Lady Bracknell replies, using a characteristically Wildean paradox, that “Health is the primary duty of life” (Wilde 2008, 261), thereby aligning poor health with unethical, antisocial behaviour. “Well, I must say, Algernon”, Lady Bracknell had said, “that I think it is high time that Mr Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd” (*ibidem*). “Unwellness” is here equated with indecisiveness, a vice that threatens to hinder the perpetuation of the social system by means of its immobility. The social hierarchy upheld by Lady Bracknell and the machinations of capital it is predicated upon need to keep moving in order to remain immutable, and Bunbury’s poor health – though fictive – is a threat that needs to be taken care of. When Bunbury is declared to be dead by Algernon in Act 3, it is the speech act itself which determines the outcome: when Lady Bracknell inquires about Bunbury’s whereabouts, Algernon replies first that he does not live in that house and then that he died because his “doctors found out that Bunbury could not live” (297). To this Lady Bracknell responds that she is glad that “he made up his mind at the last to some definite course of action, and acted under proper medical advice” (*ibidem*). In a classically Wildean subversion of common sense, the fictional figure of Bunbury is seen by Lady Bracknell – *the* mouthpiece of Victorian upper-class ideology – as an indecisive character who could not produce the kind of health required of upstanding citizens; when he is “finally got rid of” (*ibidem*), she rejoices at the prospect of going back to business as usual. The poor health of a non-existent character, in other words, was standing in the way of a political reproduction of a social system where every

cog must of necessity function properly in order for known hierarchies to be perpetuated. The intermediary references to Bunbury being “exploded” or “found out” (*ibidem*) reinforce this politicised understanding of the character, as Ó Donghaile (2020) has already shown.

This admittedly cursory discussion of Bunbury’s health and its relationship with the Victorian social system already shows how questions pertaining to well-being are always already political in Wilde, though they are camouflaged in the society plays through comedic devices. This tension between a shining surface and a more profound and politicised depth connects the jester-like quality of Wilde as a “great *viveur*” (Gide 1949, x) – what Gide dubbed Wilde’s “amusing phantom” (2) – with the serious subversive content he concealed in plain sight. The three trials uncovered the sexually subversive undercurrents of both his persona and his works, and the experience of incarceration contributed to creating a new atmosphere within which Wilde managed to perceive and articulate a more nuanced understanding of life, sorrow, and creation – one which ought to be taken, I contend, as a broader political and existential statement about the state of things *outside* of prison.

2. *A Symphony of Sorrow*

As Matthew Bradley has recently pointed out, “as in part a survey of his life and career before prison but written from prison, *De Profundis* is the only substantial work that Wilde wrote that straddled these two phases of his life, shaping them into a relationship” (2025, 330). It is only natural, then, that we should turn to *De Profundis* to unsettle the dichotomy described in the opening of this article. In one of the passages where Wilde asks Lord Alfred Douglas to think about their past and the young man’s mistreatment of, and ingratitude towards him, the Irish author reminds his former lover of the latter’s “conduct to [him] at Brighton from October 10th to 13th, 1894”, before adding quite a lengthy incidental paragraph on the difficulty of remembering precise dates for those who live outside of prison, in contrast to his own heightened sense of time and memory as an inmate (2013, 60-61). The long passage that follows will be broken down into three separate but interlinked movements.

Three years ago is a long time for you to go back. 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. Between myself and the memory of joy lies a gulf no less deep than that between myself and joy in its actuality. (61)

This passage, as Karen Tongson has recently pointed out in reference to *De Profundis*, “slips into present tense narration that demands notice in an otherwise retrospective narrative structure” (2025, 893): Wilde is interrupting his narration of the past with Bosie and situating himself as a prisoner whose life is punctuated by bouts of pain and suffering which he cannot escape. Joy, Wilde adds, is a distant feeling he has no memory of; all he can remember when looking back on his life is pain and “bitter moments”. In a sort of gloomy elaboration on the well-known Lockean notion of diachronic identity (see Gordon-Roth 2025), Wilde suggests that “the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the warrant, the evidence, of our continued identity”: awareness of suffering in the present and the past is what seemingly ensures that prisoners like Wilde do not lose their sense of themselves. Wilde, as a prisoner, continues to coincide with himself only by virtue of suffering and of his memory of suffering. Prisoners know they exist, Wilde posits, inasmuch as they have suffered, remember suffering

in the past, and continue to suffer in the present. In this first passage, Wilde is creating a common, existential ground among all those who find themselves in the same position – he situates himself within a collective body whose painful existence echoes his own.

Having thus set the scene in the present, Wilde returns to his past narration, indulging first in a hypothetical scenario where his relationship with Douglas was peaceful and pleasurable:

Had our life together been as the world fancied it to be, one simply of pleasure, profligacy and laughter, I would not be able to recall a single passage in it. It is because it was full of moments and days tragic, bitter, sinister in their warnings, dull or dreadful in their monotonous scenes and unseemly violences, that I can see or hear each separate incident in its detail, can indeed see or hear little else. (Wilde 2013, 61)

Here, Wilde finds in his relationship with Douglas the supporting example of his thesis whereby suffering creates memory and identity, but with a twist: in addition to guaranteeing the existence – and a self-consciousness and self-coincidence in existence – of prisoners, suffering enables people in general to remember events in detail. Wilde is projecting his current positionality (a prisoner) and his own state of mind (pain) onto his past, so that his own backward gaze is tinged by dark-coloured spectacles. Interestingly, recollection of the past is here made possible not only through the visual register (“I can *see* [...] each separate incident in its detail”), but also through Wilde’s own aural capacity (“I can see *and hear* each separate incident in its detail”). Remembering, Wilde begins to suggest here, is not simply about seeing with one’s mind’s eye; it is also a matter of attunement, as the final passage in the paragraph makes clear:

So much in this place do men live by pain that my friendship with you, in the way through which I am forced to remember it, appears to me always as a prelude consonant with those varying modes of anguish which each day I have to realise; nay more, to necessitate them even; as though my life, whatever it had seemed to myself and to others, had all the while been a real Symphony of Sorrow, passing through its rhythmically-linked movements to its certain resolution, with that inevitableness that in Art characterises the treatment of every great theme. (*ibidem*)

In this final movement, Wilde finds a consonance between his conflictual “friendship” with Douglas and “those varying modes of anguish” that inform his incarcerated existence. His emphasis on the different ways in which he has to “realise” or even “necessitate” anguish, with the latter verb doubling down on the register of necessity (“I *have* to *necessitate*”), anticipates the “inevitableness” that closes the passage, thereby linking the existential agony produced and repeated over time by Douglas to the artful composition of a performance that builds on previous elements before reaching its “resolution”. In true Wildean spirit, Life indeed imitates Art here. As Ellis Hanson (2003) insightfully argued, Wilde is here resorting to the decadent language of sadomasochism in his characterisation of his relationship with Bosie, and this in turn informs his own approach to artistic creation. Crucially, Wilde is attempting to turn the “grotesque comedy” of his trials into a more serious “tragedy” through artistic creation (120). As Christian Gerzso has recently put it, “*De Profundis* afforded Wilde with the opportunity of rewriting his downfall as an aesthetically compelling event: a tragedy that could elicit pity in his readers, including Douglas, instead of the public mockery he suffered throughout those years” (2019, 1028).

However, to conflate this description with the inevitability of tragic resolution in drama is to miss Wilde’s emphasis on the sonic. His past life is a “prelude” that is “consonant” with his current position in prison; the various events punctuating his life with Bosie were in fact part of a larger “Symphony of Sorrow”, made up as it was of “rhythmically-linked movements” leading to a resolution. This image clearly builds on the previous passage – the second movement presented just before this last one – where Wilde described his access to the past through the

visual and aural register at the same time. Perhaps, if this is indeed a tragedy he is attempting to create, it is an opera or a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where music naturally guides the audience through the events on stage. In fact, it seems to be a performance that one may fully appreciate only in retrospect, when our ears have become attuned to the melody and are able to perceive the harmonious, organic whole. Time is of the essence here: our perception of the work of art encompasses different senses but also different moments in its unfurling, reconfiguring our own relationship with time and renewing our understanding of known elements in our past.

In the prose poem “The Artist” (1894), we similarly find the importance of sorrow and creation. As is known, here an omniscient, God-like narrator tells us of a man who wants to create “an image of *The Pleasure that abideth for a moment*” (Wilde 2010, 219). In order to achieve that, the man needs bronze, “[f]or he could only think in bronze”, but there is no bronze left in the world apart from that which he used to create “the image of *The Sorrow that endureth forever*” (*ibidem*). He thus decides to repurpose that same material to create his image: he transforms the image of *The Sorrow that endureth forever* into that of *The Pleasure that abideth for a moment*. The biblical tone of this poem in prose is hard to miss: the narrator is far from what is happening, as if viewing the events from high above; there are repetitions that are clearly superfluous, as when the narrative emphasises that “all the bronze of the whole world had disappeared” before making the same point again, though in a different way (“nor anywhere in the whole world was there any bronze to be found”); the preference for parataxis and coordinating conjunctions clearly recalls the narrative structure of scripture; and the archaic third-person singular verb endings in -eth point to a time before our modern age (*ibidem*). In Nicholas Frankel’s interpretation, the man in the prose poem acts “in accord with Paterian notions about life’s brevity and the importance of living for the moment”, and the ultimate message of the tale is that “creativity comes from the vanquishing of sorrow, which is less permanent than it seems at first” (Wilde 2018, 194, 188). Seen retrospectively, from Wilde’s imprisonment, this tale may in fact suggest that artistic creation emanates from death and grief: even those artifacts that seem to celebrate the temporary joys of life in fact repose on the sorrow that endureth forever. Wilde seems to suggest between the lines that if pleasure may only be provisional and dependent on context, grief may last for a whole lifetime. To put it succinctly, temporary pleasure is predicated on the sacrifice of eternal grief – a sacrifice, it ought to be noted, which is made necessary by the impossibility of finding the same material (bronze) anywhere else but in one’s past creation.

Traces of Wilde’s previous annotations are preserved in the autograph manuscript version housed at the Morgan Library in New York². What is striking about the sentences Wilde subsequently erased is the repetition of the statement “He could only think in bronze”, which opens and closes the original manuscript. Indeed, even in Gide’s account of the last part of Wilde’s life, the recounting of this tale is accompanied by an emphasis on the same concept:

‘They believe,’ Wilde began, ‘that all thoughts are born naked ... They don’t understand that I can not [sic] think otherwise than in stories. The sculptor doesn’t try to translate his thought into marble; he thinks in marble, directly.

‘There was a man who could think only in bronze. And one day this man had an idea, the idea of joy, of the joy which dwells in the moment. And he felt that he had to tell it. But in all the world, not a single piece of bronze was left; for men had used it all. And this man felt that he would go mad if he did not tell his idea.’ (1949, 11)

² The manuscript has been digitised and is now available on the website: <<https://www.themorgan.org/collection/oscar-wilde/manuscripts-letters/13>> (05/2026).

In the first paragraph reported here, Wilde seems to emphasise the fact that content and form go together: it is not possible to isolate what one thinks from the material – whether “stories” or “marble” – one has at one’s disposal: just as the man in “The Artist” can only think in bronze, Wilde seems to have declared that he could only think in stories. In the second paragraph, we have, in embryo, the story as it will be published in the *Fortnightly Review*, with the significant absence of the image produced through the recycling of the material. There is no mention, as yet, of pleasure and its fleeting nature; what dominates the story at this early stage is the author’s intuition about joy and the visceral need for bronze in order to think that idea properly.

Reading this prose poem in retrospect, after our discussion of *De Profundis*, allows us to notice the continuity between Wilde-as-*raconteur* and Wilde-as-martyr: both figures emphasise a vital connection between life and art, between suffering and artistic creation, though the “martyr” seems to produce this understanding from a very specific – and political – location. If the sort of hedonism and aestheticism that characterised Wilde’s life before prison was predicated on the sacrifice of ever-lasting sorrow and grief, as “The Artist” seems to suggest, it is prison that provided him with the material to conceive of this relationship. In a sort of maieutic of suffering, incarceration as an existential and political situation questioned Wilde in order to elicit responses he already knew, to some extent; all it did, it could be argued, was provide him with the material he needed in order to conceptualise suffering-as-living-as-creating. The insalubrious atmosphere of the prison, which was detrimental to Wilde’s health and well-being, was the catalyst that accelerated his process of retrospective recognition and prompted him to re-attune his own body to the Symphony of Sorrow that had inexorably led him through life. In existential terms, Wilde articulates in *De Profundis* how a certain oppressive condition (prison) may generate in us a renewed and sobering understanding of our past that is truly transformative: looking back, we start seeing all those “rhythmically-linked movements” that have inevitably led to our present gloomy situation, as if we were the protagonists of a tragedy who realise only too late, and only at a price, that we are in fact carrying out an unheeded prophecy of doom.

Thinking about his life before prison, Wilde goes so far in *De Profundis* as to identify a few works which, in his view, already contained this intuition about sorrow. It is here that Wilde gestures to “The Artist”, but only after referring to “The Happy Prince”, “The Young King”, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “The Critic as Artist”, *Salomé*, and even “The Soul of Man under Socialism”: the sheer number of works he can think of off the top of his head demonstrates precisely that he may have realised only too late that an important element in his literary production revolved around sorrow, rather than simply pleasure and aestheticism. Unlike what he mentions in reference to the other works, however, the plot of “The Artist” is recollected in an inverted order: “[...] in the prose-poem of the man who from the bronze of the image of the ‘Pleasure that liveth for a Moment’ has to make the image of the ‘Sorrow that abideth for Ever’ it is incarnate” (Wilde 2013, 113). As was mentioned above, it is in fact the other way around in the original story: the man has to make the image of the Pleasure that abideth for a moment from the bronze of the image of the Sorrow that endureth forever. Although this misquotation is no exception within *De Profundis* and may easily be explained by Wilde’s lack of access to texts (other than John Bunyan and the Bible), it may seem significant that Wilde reverses the original order of the story. It may be tempting to see in this inversion of the original order of events a sort of Freudian slip on Wilde’s part – a slip which in fact reinforces what he has been thinking about, namely that prison has changed his outlook on life and has made him realise just how central suffering has always been in it. This interpretation would indeed be in line with what Ian Small termed the “expressive paradigm predicated of the oeuvre” (2003, 86); that is to say, the fact that his works are often explained in relation

to his life, even when, Small argues, there are material differences in the preparation of his manuscripts that should point us in a different direction. What view could be produced, however, if we were to move away from the “psychologizing imperative” which, in Hanson’s view, has characterised most readings of *De Profundis* (2003, 101) and attempted to articulate a philosophy of creation through Wilde’s text?

In view of Gide’s assertion that Wilde was a charming story-teller who adapted his own tales to the audiences he was facing, we may tentatively see this blunder as a variation on the original mythologem offered in “The Artist”. Due to *De Profundis*’s status as a “semi-private” text – Small’s definition (2003, 90) – which Wilde never revised for publication, it could be argued that *De Profundis* as a manuscript intended for “restricted circulation” (*ibidem*) could be reframed as a conversation piece which addressed Douglas, Robert Ross and More Adey and created yet another persona to make sense of Wilde’s recent incarceration. The retelling of “The Artist” in reverse order – from the material of momentary pleasure to the creation of eternal suffering – is in this sense an apt variation provided by Wilde to renew his friends’ understanding of his existential parable.

If this aspect of his summary of “The Artist” has been recorded in all modern editions, the fact that Wilde resorts to the notion of ‘incarnation’ in reference to it has not been emphasised. Our previous discussion of thinking as a creative process that requires the proper materials has shown that for Wilde it was impossible to conceive of a “naked” thought, as Gide reported (1949, 11). The parable of “The Artist” seems to suggest, however, that transformation may be another form of creation where translation, as he is reported to have said in Gide’s booklet, is not a viable possibility. Put differently, Wilde’s philosophy insisted both on the originality of the thought born *with* the appropriate material and on the possibility of repurposing previous materials for a different use: just as the man in the story recycles the bronze of eternal grief to make a bronze of momentary pleasure, Wilde builds on his previous prose poem to make sense of his imprisoned self, resignifying both in the process. It is within this context, I contend, that Wilde’s definition of “The Artist” as incarnating his intuition about sorrow as a condition of existence and a horizon of creation ought to be understood: the idea of sorrow as a fundamental part of life and literary creation acquires a body (becomes “incarnate”), a material specificity, only when Wilde retrospectively becomes attuned to its presence in his past life.

This material incarnation, combined with the emphasis on the sonic highlighted above, naturally produces an interpretation of sorrow as something imperceptible and yet animating the whole world, perhaps in one of the two senses suggested by Virgil’s “*lacrimae rerum*” in the *Aeneid* or, as Wilde puts it in his interpretation of the Latin expression, “the tears of which the world is made, and of the sadness of all human things” (2013, 66)³. In a later passage, Wilde builds on this image by amplifying the almost impalpable quality of this truth:

You have yet to learn that Prosperity, Pleasure and Success may be rough of grain and common in fibre, but that Sorrow is the most sensitive of all created things. There is nothing that stirs in the whole world of thought or motion to which Sorrow does not vibrate in terrible if exquisite pulsation. The thin beaten-out leaf of tremulous gold that chronicles the direction of forces that the eye cannot see is in comparison coarse. It is a wound that bleeds when any hand but that of Love touches it and even then must bleed again, though not for pain. (91)

³ Interestingly, Wilde interprets the Latin genitive as a subjective, meaning “the world’s tears [for humanity]”, opting for the implication of pessimism, but in the original expression there remains an ambiguity that may point in a different, (grammatically) objective direction: “the tears for the world”, where sadness does not pervade all of history but simply the scene Aeneas is contemplating (i.e. the fall of Troy).

The bodily, but almost atmospheric quality of sorrow is here emphasised through reference to its “stirring”, its “vibration” and “pulsation”, as if it were a group of infinitesimal particles that move in all directions. The image of the “thin beaten-out leaf of tremulous gold that chronicles the direction of forces that the eye cannot see” reinforces the imperceptible, and yet physical quality of sorrow as a sort of energy moving bodies and objects. In the Penguin Classics edition, Colm Tóibín suggests that Wilde is here referring to “the gold leaf used by bookbinders with which Wilde would undoubtedly have been familiar” (Wilde 2013, 248, n. 62), whereas Nicholas Frankel reports Rupert Hart-Davis’s suggestion that this may be an allusion to “the Gold-Leaf Electroscope, used to detect charges of static electricity” before plumping for a safer “weathervane, which was often covered with thin gold-leaf so as to maintain brightness and prevent corrosion” (Wilde 2018, 150, n. 228). Regardless of its usage, the gold leaf referenced by Wilde is a minute object that is subject to the subtlest changes in atmosphere – changes which, it ought to be stressed, go well beyond the realm of the visible despite clearly remaining within the bounds of the physical world. Building on Christological allusions which will become explicit in the text, the subsequent reference to the “wound that bleeds” further suggests that sorrow is, in Wilde’s view, a barely perceptible force in the world which has tangible and visible effects on our bodies: it represents each body’s ultimate vulnerability to atmosphere and context.

Although Wilde has often been taken to task for his musical inaccuracy, Kimberly J. Stern has recently documented all the ways in which Wilde used musical metaphors and theories in order to gesture to a metaphysical plane. In her well-documented account, she argues that “For Wilde, music was distinguished by its ability to transport listeners beyond familiar ways of thinking and talking about the world” (Stern 2023, 57). Indeed, the “Symphony of Sorrow” reconstructed in this section has shown as much: the political situation of incarceration has provided the material with which Wilde has realised – in both senses of the term, namely has *recognised* and has *made tangible* – the paramount importance of sorrow as a force in the world. However, Stern goes on to argue that for Wilde “To limit this power – by tethering music to reason, language, or the physical world – was to reject a deeper emotional and spiritual experience of life itself” (*ibidem*). Our discussion has in fact shown that it is from within the *physical* world that Wilde learns to distinguish the subtle vibrations and pulsations of suffering, as a vulnerable body that is open to the vagaries of existence and the political context where he is located. It is thus the *physics* of sound Wilde is interested in: the bodily effects every situation can have on him not only as a prisoner but first and foremost as a vulnerable creator of beautiful things.

3. *Resonance and Attunement*

In her monograph *Is Literature Healthy?* (2016), Josie Billington recounted her experience in leading a reading group for the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society at the University of Liverpool. During these reading sessions, patients of health clinics were invited to meet up every week and spend hours reading aloud together, before joining a discussion monitored and recorded by professionals and moderators. In contrast to psychotherapy, which may sometimes lead patients to become unreliable narrators of their past and present (see Strawson 2004), this reading aloud together created echoes in people suffering from specific conditions that helped them articulate what they were feeling in new and revealing ways. This clinical activity has clearly shown that reading is in fact a specific form of thinking that can dispense with the known and often produces unexpected results even in those who may at first feel discouraged or out of touch with their feelings. Literature, Billington argues, “can summon a voice that does not exist under the ordinary conditions of life”, lending legitimacy

to the aspects of one's personality that may have been obfuscated or positively concealed in one's past, never to be retrieved (2016, 106). These experiences suggest that a transformative revelation about ourselves, "is not consciously *there* until the book, in the very unfolding of its explicit formulation in the reader's mind, finds the implicit and inarticulate matter that was, only half-consciously, in latent need of such release" (*ibidem*).

Although Wilde did not have access to many books in prison, our previous section has shown how profoundly different his outlook on life seems to be in *De Profundis* from the Wilde-as-jester trope everyone was familiar with. In retrospect, his own past is re-interpreted via new categories like sorrow and the bodiliness of sound. Beyond his own references, mentioned above, to his literary oeuvre in relation to sorrow – which would merit an extensive discussion elsewhere –, it is essential to continue our reconstruction of his philosophy of sorrow through the metaphors of sound he uses in *De Profundis*. In order to better articulate the physics of sound Wilde draws on – in contrast to Stern's *metaphysics* of sound –, an analysis of the recognition scene in "The Birthday of the Infanta" will be provided.

Towards the end of the fairy tale, when the Dwarf ventures into the Infanta's palace and ends up in the gilded hall of mirrors, he first realises that his appearance is, as all the people around him had been saying behind his back, "monstrous", and that "there is a fine line between funny and ridiculous" (Pinelli 2022, 104). Catching a sight of himself in the looking glass, the Dwarf is at first bewildered about it, as he believes he is seeing an extension of the room he is in, one which functions as a double of reality. His recognition of the situation is prepared for through recollection of a similar experience in the forest:

Was it Echo? He had called to her once in the valley, and she had answered him word for word. Could she mock the eye, as she mocked the voice? Could she make a mimic world just like the real world? Could the shadow of things have colour and life and movement? Could it be that—? (Wilde 2010, 168)

The kind of *anagnorisis* that is starting to dawn on this tragic protagonist is anticipated, like Wilde's future recognition in prison, by recollection and the aural register. It is a retrospective account of what has happened which makes sense for the present, and this allows the Dwarf to create a bridge between his past experiences in the natural world and his current, bemusing situation in the gilded prison of the aristocracy. Through an internal focalisation, the narrator reports the Dwarf's thoughts to the reader, as the character is puzzling in front of his own self-reflection just as he was once confounded by the echoes of his own voice in the valley. The Platonic undercurrent of the passage is hard to miss, as evidenced by the notion of "a mimic world" and the reference to "the shadow of things", as if the Dwarf were ventriloquising the language of the very originator of ancient *anagnorisis*: as Piero Boitani has shown, the first instance of *anagnorisis* in the Greek language may be found in Plato's *Theaetetus*, where Socrates goes so far as to mention his own "sight in mirrors, when it flows in such a way as to transpose left and right" (quoted in Boitani 2021, 10). From its origin, then, the notion of recognition, which Aristotle would later synthesise as a passage from ignorance to knowledge (see Boitani 2021, 11ff.), is tied to the mirror and the potential *mis*recognition it may engender, and Wilde seems here to gesture to this tradition.

The reference to Echo, a nymph who famously fell in love with Narcissus but was prevented from communicating with him other than in echoes of his words because of Hera's (or Juno's, in Ovid's account) punishment, shifts the register from the visual to the aural, ultimately linking appearances and sounds inextricably together – precisely as occurs in classical mythology, where Echo and Narcissus are two sides of the same coin, though their respective myths revolve around sound and sight respectively. The Dwarf's philosophical questions about reality and appearance

are interrupted by his turning around and realising that the same unique object he received from the little Princess, the white rose, is also held by his double in the mirror. It is here that the illusion of a “mimic world” collapses, as the unique rose and his unique love of the Princess are mirrored in his reflection: just as he had learnt to tell Echo apart from his own voice, the Dwarf, unlike Narcissus, reconnects the image in the reflecting surface to his own self, thus achieving a pitiable and fearful recognition of his own (supposed) monstrosity.

This allusion to Echo and, by extension, to Narcissus brings to mind another of Wilde’s prose poems, “The Disciple”, where “the pool of his pleasure” at last reveals that it “loved Narcissus because, as he lay on [its] banks and looked down at [it], in the mirror of his eyes [it] saw ever [its] own beauty mirrored” (Wilde 2010, 221). In a classic Wildean subversion of received knowledge, the pool seems to “out-Narcissus” Narcissus: its sorrow is not caused by the grief connected to his death, but by the loss of its own reflection in his eyes. As happens in the case of the Dwarf, the visual register invites the pool to revel in an act of illusory self-reproduction, namely an act which is based on the illusion of the possibility of reproducing one’s self as a selfsame other. When this illusory mirror of reality collapses, death (in the case of Narcissus) and suffering (in the case of the Dwarf and the pool) appear, bringing their tragic protagonists to an arresting realisation.

That Wilde resorts to the aural register in his own case and in that of the Dwarf suggests that we should think of this paradigm of tragic recognition in different terms. It could in fact be argued that we have here a perfect example of what literary critic Rita Felski aptly calls “attunement”: a process whereby we are “drawn into a responsive relation” and an experience based on the “presence” of something (an art work, in Felski’s case, one’s own appearance and life in retrospect, in the Dwarf’s and Wilde’s situations), “attunement is about things resonating, aligning, coming together” (2020, 41, 42). Felski emphasises that attunement addresses “art’s palpable force and vividness: how it can affect us in ways we struggle to verbalize or explain” (42). Indeed, this is precisely what Billington realised in her clinical activity: literature allowed patients to express the inarticulate matter that had sedimented in their bodies, lending it an ear and a voice. If recognition has to do with re-reading a known situation and disclosing new meanings in it, moving from ignorance to knowledge, Wilde’s experience and his oeuvre emphatically shift the focus both to the immediacy of the aural and the *longue durée* of interpretation as they are mediated by unwellness. Attuning to the frequencies and tunes of the past through recollection, Wilde and the Dwarf transform known notes into a new symphony, making present once again what seemed to be far removed, stored away in the folds of the past. If art constituted, for Wilde, “my great primal note by which I had revealed, first myself to myself, and then myself to the world” (2013, 77), this note may be rearranged into new symphonies through time, by means of a process catalysed by unwellness. This revelation to the world depends on the specific arrangement of the notes contained in one’s art and persona, and time is, as was argued above, of the essence.

“This, precisely, is what it means to become attuned”, Felski argues: “forms of alignment, a coordinating of senses, affects, bodies, and objects that can happen with or without linguistic support” (2020, 72). It is an “act of synchronization or modulation, how phenomena are changed over time by resonating or aligning” (76). The notion of attunement is thus predicated on resonance, the physical phenomenon whereby different objects may vibrate at similar frequencies when placed in the same space. As Wai Chee Dimock argued in her 1997 field-defining essay on resonance, “This primarily aural and primarily interactive concept” is concerned with “frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places” (1061). From

the theoretical perspective granted by resonance, “meanings are produced over and over again, attaching themselves to, overlapping with, and sometimes coming into conflict with previous ones” (1062). Within this context, Wilde’s statement to Gide, on reading the latter’s long prose poem *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897), that he should never “write *I* anymore” because “In art, don’t you see, there is no *first* person” (Gide 1949, 28) may be pushed beyond the grammatical to tentatively grasp at something that forms the basis of Wilde’s philosophy: in spite of – or perhaps precisely *in view of* – the self-invention he continued to resort to throughout his life (see Frankel 2021), Wilde continually attempted to move away from the sort of masturbatory self-coincidence of Narcissus into a view of a resonant self which required fine-tuning on his part and attuning on the recipient’s end. What Wilde is telling Gide is not simply to move away from the personal “I”, but to see himself constantly in dialogue with his context, his past memories, so that new notes may be sounded and new symphonies may be composed. Like anti-Narcissuses, Wilde and the Dwarf stand as examples of what it means to attune oneself to one’s bodily presence in the present and the past through suffering without slipping into the pitfalls of egomaniac self-identification.

This process of bodily recognition is in line with Wilde’s poetics as articulated in *De Profundis*. As he famously asserted, “Modern life is complex and relative. Those are its two distinguishing notes. To render the first we require atmosphere with its subtlety of *nuances*, of suggestion, of strange perspectives: as for the second we require background” (2013, 92). Once again, Wilde fuses his philosophy with the language of sound and resonance, using “note”, as in the reference above, as a byword for an intrinsic quality. Complexity and relativity, he moves on to argue, are “rendered” – a quintessentially artistic term, which may point to the pictorial arts, music, literature or even translation – through “atmosphere” and “background” respectively. If the latter term is neatly inscribed within the visual register, it could be argued that “atmosphere” points to something more diffuse and difficult to capture: it is a palpable and yet often inconspicuous presence which structures our perception of reality. Interestingly, Wilde once again fuses the visual with the broadly perceptual in reference to complexity and atmosphere: while “nuances” and “perspectives” are words derived from the pictorial arts, “suggestion” gestures to a broader sense of implicit allusion, with the sonic being blended with the visual or abstract.

In the next sentence, he argues: “That is why sculpture has ceased to be a representative art; and why music *is* a representative art; and why Literature is, and has been, and always will remain the supreme representative art” (*ibidem*). The expression “representative art” may be taken to coincide with mimetic art, one which strives to represent real life and real objects – as opposed, that is, to abstract art, where the interest resides rather in the forms and colours of the art. Sculpture, despite being perhaps the most representative of the arts he mentions here, is now found to be hitting the mark a bit too low, but music and especially literature – the only term of the three that deserves a capital letter – are emphatically pronounced representative arts: they are within the purview of the physical world, as they attempt to reproduce not only a specific – we could say *objective* – background, as sculpture may also do, but also a peculiar atmosphere, an additional but ultimately intrinsic quality that pervades the artwork, allowing it to resonate with different readers and listeners. If the background Wilde identifies as necessary to art’s relativity is essential inasmuch as it is objectively inescapable, the atmosphere which renders its complexity is a desired intrinsic quality of the artwork that guarantees its successful fruition by a wealth of different readers and listeners. Without this atmosphere, an artwork has no futurity and remains tethered to its own original background. This is, after all, the danger of narcissistic self-reproduction: if art and the world continue in their constant march without stopping to cultivate a sense of atmosphere, their aesthetic and

existential value will become non-existent. That Lady Bracknell emphasises the importance of health for the reproduction of the *status quo*, then, enables us to see the disruptive force that unwellness can be: it changes “atmosphere” and helps us cultivate a different sense of ourselves, thereby ensuring that we do not perpetuate our “background”, so that new meanings may be disclosed and new symphonies heard.

If we look at the broader context around Wilde’s use of the aural register in reference to the body’s susceptibility, we will realise that it ties in with contemporary scientific studies that were coming to see the human body not only as an object to be measured and dissected, but first and foremost as a “sort of sounding-board, which every change of consciousness, however slight, may make reverberate”, as William James famously wrote in the 1880s (1884, 191). This view of the embodied mind had profound consequences on late Victorian culture and continues to resonate with present-day theories of embodied affectivity, where resonance plays a central role in defining the scope and intensity of our affects (see Fuchs and Koch 2014). This discussion of Wilde as a vulnerable creator of beautiful things via sorrow, attunement, and memory is an ideal first step in reconfiguring our understanding of his aesthetic and political theories of creation and in creating a bridge between his pre-prison jester-like storytelling qualities and his post-prison martyr-like earnestness. However, future work will have to return to the scientific and philosophical background informing his semi-private letter as well as his previous work, while attuning to the atmosphere created by *longue durée* of his subtle theorising.

In conclusion, this article has shown that Wilde finds through the ultimate vulnerability of the body – its responsivity to atmosphere and the complexity it may engender – a renewed understanding of reality predicated on sorrow. While his oeuvre rests on a specific historical and material background that begs to be discussed in all its detail, as Small famously argued, it could be argued that the political atmosphere that allows Wilde to hearken back to his past life as though it was a Symphony of Sorrow should also make us alert to the resonances this retrospective listening produces and to the attuning we, as readers and critics, should operate.

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