

FASHIONING THE SELF FROM THE CHASM: DE PROFUNDIS AND THE CHRONOTOPE OF POST-PRISON TIME



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DE PROFUNDIS: A PROLEPTIC AGENDA

One way of describing the letter known as *De Profundis*, Wilde's longest letter (some 50,000 words written in Reading Gaol after his imprisonment for "gross indecency"), is to leave the job to Wilde "himself".¹ Wilde called the letter "the most important letter" of his life and stressed that it dealt with his "future mental attitude towards life": i.e. how he was to confront the world after release, the development of his character, his losses, self-realization and goals.² Given this proleptic agenda I shall concentrate on one narrative strand within the letter: i.e. that of the future. Why the stress on future time? Because it is the continuum in which identity (both self and other) can be forged with relation to the immediate past and the material conditions of the present. This brings me on to the theoretical basis of the essay. Within a semiotic framework, I shall adapt Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope (as a structuring device of narrative).³ I call this management of time and space the chronotope of post-prison time which will consist of a certain "Lac(k)anization" of it.⁴ So, by knitting together these diverse approaches I attempt to account for Wilde's fashioning of the self, whose composition, dynamic, and survival may be seen in terms of economic and phallic laws. This will involve discussion of the letter's addressee, a topic that has not received much detailed criticism.⁵ Rather than insist, as in much contemporary criticism of Wilde, on questions of gender, sexuality and the homophobic,⁶ I shall put emphasis on what I call "the economy of the homomorphic"; which not only focuses on the fashioning of the self but shows how that fashioning is partially dependent on the insistence that the other fashions itself in its own image. If this sounds partially Greenblattian, then it is. But more of this later.

1. NEGATIVE SPACES AND THE SUPREME VICE OF SOCIETY: A SECTION IN WHICH THE PHALLUS MAKES A TIMELY ENTRY

Wilde, in Reading Gaol, was paying his debt to society affirming that what lay before him in the days that remained of his sentence was "to absorb into [his] nature" all that had been done to him and "accept it without complaint, fear or reluctance". This leads to the assertion: "The supreme vice is shallowness" (Hart-Davis 1962: 915-916). This absorption of everything to deepen the soul involves the teaching of the self not to be ashamed of being "the common prisoner of a common gaol" (916). Even though Wilde admits that there were many things he was convicted for that he had not done ("and a still greater number of things" for which he "was never convicted at all") he concludes that he must accept the punishment because "if one is ashamed of having been punished, one might just as well never have been punished at all" (916).

From the Lac(k)anian perspective Wilde seemed to accept the authority exercised in culture and symbolized in the Lac(k)anian system by the Phallus (I capitalize the word to indicate its symbolic worth). On the one hand Wilde is prepared to submit to or accept the punishment that has been meted out to him; on the other (as I shall try to show), in accepting these conditions, he was striving towards what the Phallus can concede (at a symbolic level): namely the following old Lac(k)anian chestnuts (which might have been dispensed with but for the fact that they may still—in the present context—retain some descriptive value): a certain (illusory) power expressed in authority over the self (in forms of perfection or realization), in security, authenticity of meaning, or undivided wholeness of being (which subjects desire but ultimately lack).⁷ The acceptance of the rules, regulations and prohibitions of authority effectively provide the basis for a construction of the self.

2. WILDE AS HOMO ECONOMICUS: BACK TO THE FUTURE OR SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE AND DEBT⁸

In the final paragraph of the letter, which contains one of Wilde's many paradoxes based on a simple antithesis, he claims that: "What lies before me is my past" (957). This involves the question of having to make himself and others (including God) look on his past life with "different eyes". This follows a passage where Wilde asserts his phallic power and claims that things in their essence are "what we choose to make them". However, there

was at least one area that was not open to hermeneutical or ontological negotiation, where the interpretive phallus was apt to shrink into useless detumescence: the question of his debts. Thus one of the connecting themes of the chronotope of post-prison time is one of the material contexts of the letter, the idea of payment. At this point it may be convenient to remind the reader that, although the addressee's name was systematically erased from all early editions of the letter, it was addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie), whose family played such an important part in Wilde's fate.⁹

The idea of payment in the letter takes two forms: one which pertains to Wilde, the other which applies to Douglas. The first form of payment, which was hermeneutically non-negotiable, was related to the paying of monetary debts left unpaid by bankruptcy. The second form of payment (which related to Douglas) was the symbolic honouring of the past in the form of a kind of settling of the wages of dissipation (a form of unreturnable return). So Wilde's notion of future selves can be seen literarily (Wilde as bankrupt) and metaphorically (Douglas as morally bankrupt).

Like most sections of the letter the thematics of bankruptcy can hardly be separated from the abiding binary presence/ absence of Douglas. Wilde begins his discussion of his future economic life by reminding Douglas of the past, the extent of his losses, the deleterious effects of maintaining a friendship with him, the extent of the debts accrued on account of Douglas' immoderate demands, and the impossibility of restitution. He reminds Douglas that he had spent his art, life, name and place in history on him and that even if Douglas' family had "all the marvellous things in the world at their command" it would not be enough to repay "one tithe of the smallest things" that had been taken from him, or "one tear of the least tears" that had been shed (952). This is hardly to be wondered at given Wilde's notorious fashioning of himself:

I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realised this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realise it afterwards. Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime and have it so acknowledged ... The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring ... (912)

This exercise in positive self-fashioning at the "expense" of Douglas establishes the impossibility of adequate repayment in terms of non-monetary metaphorical forms of debt. Wilde follows these assertions with the phrase, "of course, everything one does has to be paid for" thus drawing himself and

Douglas into a complex of symbolic/ economic relations. However, what Wilde has lost cannot be repaid—the signs of art, life, name, place in history have no adequate exchange value in the economy of inter-personal relations.

3. LITERAL DEBTS: FROM THE HAPPY PRINCE TO THE DOOR-SCRAPER: CONFISCATION AND THE LAW

Wilde explains how his being made bankrupt (a condition laid at the Queensberry family's door for reneging on their promise to honour the payment of the court costs of Wilde's trials) involved the confiscation of all his property ("everything in fact from *The Happy Prince and Lady Windermere's Fan* down to the stair-carpet and the door-scraper of my house ..." (952)). The law forces debtors like him "to pay every one of his debts", and if he fails to do so leaves him as "penniless as the commonest mendicant who stands in an archway, or creeps down a road" (954). Wilde is aware that not only had the law taken everything he possessed but everything he was going to possess in the future.¹⁰ This included his interest in the family estate which draws the comment: "Your father's seven hundred pence - or pounds is it? - stand in the way, and must be refunded"; a reminder that it was the unpaid court costs which the Queensberry family had promised to pay that precipitated Wilde's complete financial ruin.

However, the following paragraph indicates that forms of insolvency predated the trials ("Even when I am stripped of all I have, and am ever to have, and am granted a discharge as a hopeless Insolvent, I have still got to pay my debts" (952)). A long list of dinners at the Savoy, and suppers at Willis's brings out something of the sumptuousness of life with Douglas, and the way in which Wilde fashions the expenditure in terms of how much of it was directed towards Douglas' tastes (Wilde slipping in phrases such as "Dagonet 1880, I think, was your favourite wine?"). Douglas seems fashioned not only as co-consumer but also as an ingrate incapable of appreciating the generosity that had been lavished on him. At the same time, although Wilde shared in this opulent way of life, he tends to represent himself as remaining on the outside—a more sober man, the creative intellectual drawn in by the excessive demands of the young profligate.

Why the references to the past? Part of the chronotope of post-prison time includes the idea that if Wilde is to pay materially for the past then Douglas will need to honour some debts of his own, which introduces the notion of *symbolic exchange and debt*. "And what is true of the bankrupt" Wilde stresses, "is true of everyone else in life. For every single thing that is

done someone has to pay" (953). This, however, will not take the form of financial remuneration but "atonement": "Even you yourself - with all your desire for absolute freedom from all duties, your insistence on having everything supplied to you by others, your attempts to reject any claim on your affection, or regard, or gratitude - even you will have some day to reflect seriously on what you have done, and try, however unavailingly, to make some attempt atonement" (953). Wilde explains that this will not be possible, but the fact that Douglas will not be able to do so will be a part of "his [Douglas'] punishment". There is a sense in which, paradoxically, the pound of flesh will need to be exacted, but its very impossibility will be part of the punishment. Within the metaphorical terms of economy, the exchange value of Wilde's loss is nothing. And it is this lack, in what might be seen as a precursor of the Lac(k)anian view of subjectivity, which will, as a condition of being, be its own punishment. Lack, though, is insufficient currency. It would promise no return (on the unreturnable), and so the only thing left for Douglas is to acknowledge the unpayable debt. What this means is that Douglas will have to go through a process of self-realization (as Wilde claimed he himself had to) which will involve the recognition and worth of the other:

You can't wash your hands of all responsibility, and propose with a shrug or a smile to pass on to a new friend and a freshly spread feast. You can't treat all that you have brought upon me as a sentimental reminiscence to be served up occasionally with the cigarettes and liqueurs, a picturesque background to a modern life of pleasure like an old tapestry hung in a common inn ... Either today, or tomorrow, or some day you have got to realise it. (953)

This introduces what might be called an economy of the homomorphic: Wilde wants Douglas to fashion himself in his own image as penitent and to become fully cognizant of what he has done (as society must realize what it has done to Wilde in the way of punishment). The reason why Douglas must atone has to do with another notion which characterizes Wilde's future life: self-realization through the faculty of imagination. Otherwise Douglas may "die without having done so", which would result in a "starved, unimaginative life". Wilde bids Douglas to "remember that imagination is the quality that enables one to see things and people in their real as in their ideal relations ... I have had to look at my past face to face. Look at your past face to face ..." (953). The future is to be characterized (as a moral imperative) by the two men following parallel paths of self-realization and understanding; in the absence of the unreturnable return the two men are

joined in the mutual homomorphic business of deepening the self and avoiding trivialization.

4. MORE MORAL IMPERATIVES AND THE ZEITGEIST OF AN AGE THAT HAS NO SOUL: PHALLUS EXCHANGE STANDARD¹¹

Earlier in the letter Wilde had drawn Douglas's attention to the fact that when he (Wilde) used to suggest that Lady Queensberry should supply her son with the money he wanted, Douglas always replied that he could not ask his mother for more than she was giving because her income was already inadequate to one of her position and tastes. Wilde's reply is that "You were quite right about her income being one absolutely unsuitable ... but you should not have made that an excuse for living in luxury on me: it should on the contrary have been a suggestion to you for economy in your own life" (946). This economy of life brings Wilde to another form of exchange value:

The fact is that you were, and still are I suppose still, a typical sentimentalist. For a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it ... The intellectual and emotional life of ordinary people is a very contemptible affair. Just as they borrow their ideas from a sort of circulating library of thought - the *Zeitgeist* of an age that has no soul - and send them back soiled at the end of each week, so they always try to get their emotions on credit, and refuse to pay the bill when it comes in. You should pass out of that conception of life. As soon as you have to pay for an emotion you will know its quality, and be the better for such knowledge. (946)

Given the lack of any adequate return for his generosity, Wilde constructs a kind of Phallic exchange standard —Phallic because it functions as a moral imperative: it makes Douglas liable. Here emotions become commodities with their use and exchange values. "Intended on the one hand", to adapt Baudrillard's words, "for the abstract finality of the "needs" that they "satisfy", and on the other hand to the structural form that governs their production and exchange".¹² So despite Wilde's assertion that reforms in morals were a piece of "unscientific cant" (935), behind his arguments is the moral imperative, bound to a law of value, that Douglas should develop and improve within the homomorphism described above —something which involves the renunciation of the "intellectual and emotional life of ordinary

people". Douglas has been living on credit too long, and abuses the political economy of inter-personal relations by simply refusing to pay the bill: he is able to congratulate himself and revel in the moral rectitude of saving his mother money, but only at Wilde's expense. Wilde, here, may be compared to a national bank pouring money into a failing currency: his investment makes no return and only serves to line the pockets of others.

Another way Douglas can achieve the goals of atonement is by speaking to his brother, Percy, and allowing him to read the letter that is in the process of being written, just as Douglas is implored to allow his mother (whose weakness is seen to be a contributory factor to Douglas's selfishness 945f.) to read sections of it. So part of the future should be characterized by the circulation of the letter amongst the Douglas family —something which was never to be realized. This connects these passages, through the chronotope of post-prison time, to Wilde's concern about history and how he will be viewed in the future (e.g. Wilde's attempt to provide, in Barthes' terms, an alternative proairetics (Barthes 1975:19)). The letter, then, itself is to enter into the relations of use and exchange value. It is to be a kind of commodity catalyst which remains stable but which will provoke others into change by converting their vision of people and past events. One of the proleptic functions of the letter as catalyst is in its use value: i.e. its role in changing Lady Queensberry's mistaken view that Wilde, as older man, exercised a negative influence over her son. Wilde rouses himself on the matter to excoriate Douglas as the negative other:

I need not ask you what influence I had over you. You know I had none. It was one of your frequent boasts that I had none, and the only one indeed that was well-founded. What was there, as a mere matter of fact, in you that I could influence: Your brain? It was undeveloped. Your imagination? It was dead. Your heart? It was not yet born. Of all the people who have ever crossed my life you were the one, and the only one, I was unable in any way to influence in any direction. (945)

This disclaimer seems to invalidate, or make futile, one of the dominant strands of the chronotope of post-prison time: i.e. Wilde's seeming efforts to influence Douglas for the better. In this Wilde seemed to be asking a lot from a man he had characterized as from "the mad, bad line" and who he portrayed, amongst other things, as witless, remorseless, reckless, thankless, heartless and feckless. Douglas, in short, was a bad investment.

5. A NAMELESS MEETING ACROSS THE CHASMS

Despite the rather inauspicious signs which Wilde finds in Douglas's character, part of the chronotope of post-prison time deals with a possible meeting between the two men after Wilde's release from prison. If the meeting takes place it will be under circumstances that will divest Wilde of two of the principle categories that might define him: he will be a man who belongs to no place and will have no name. Given that "Society" will have no place for him after prison, Wilde is destined to wander a homeless man, although "Nature, whose sweet rains fall on just and unjust alike" will have "clefts in the rocks" where he might hide. Benign nature, if it serves to offer a homeless home and purify (it will "cleanse" Wilde in "great waters"), will also serve to hide Wilde from the eyes of others and erase the visible signs of his existence: "she will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt" (955). The "clefts" in which Wilde will hide could be said to form an important part of his identity with relation to any future meeting with Douglas. This will relate to a series of lacks: lack of home, lack of name and what might be called a certain "lack of common ground" between the two men.

6. ABANDONING A NAME, ONCE SO MUSICAL IN THE MOUTH OF FAME: A FEW SPECULATIONS FROM THE CHASM

Towards the end of the letter Wilde outlines "the conditions, circumstances, and the place" of a meeting with Douglas. Within these paragraphs Wilde indicates, as described above, that society will have no place for him and goes on to name the possible place where a meeting may take place:

At the end of a month ... I will, if I feel able, arrange ... to meet you in some quiet foreign town like Bruges ... For the moment you will have to change your name. The little title of which you were so vain - and indeed it made your name sound like the name of a flower - you will have to surrender, if you wish to see me; just as my name, once so musical in the mouth of Fame, will have to be abandoned by me, in turn. (955)

This symbolic exchanging or replacing of names (a kind of metaphoric "deflowering") for anonymity results in a form symbolic devaluation which

links to the idea of homomorphism: just as Wilde had lost his social-artistic position so Douglas, through the loss of his name, is no longer to be marked by his social status. Wilde here takes upon himself the phallic power in expressed forms of authority over the self and the other. Wilde, having submitted himself to the rules, regulations and prohibitions of authority, now, in the Phallic exchange, takes them up himself to lay down the law (of the Father) to Douglas. Wilde, having established the conditions of the meeting, adds: "I hope that our meeting will be what a meeting between you and me should be, after everything that has occurred". This provides one of the enigmas of the concluding paragraphs of the letter because Wilde seems ambiguous about what the meeting "should be".

On the one hand the substitution of names will allow Wilde to cash in, as it were, on anonymity, for the meeting seems to herald a possible reconciliation between the two men. This interpretation appears to receive some support from Wilde's talk of love ("Even if I had not been waiting [for a letter] but had shut the doors against you, you should have remembered that no one can possibly shut the doors against Love for ever ... There is no prison in any world into which Love cannot force an entrance" (956)). Here in the symbolic reversal, which involves an ironic exchange, Douglas, as the bearer of love, is put into the position not of the man of bad credit who never honours his debts but of a criminal who will force an entrance. This entrance (following his metaphorical deflowering) will not be into the usual deposit (the bank), but the place which holds the sexual dissident, or the man who has enjoyed forbidden pleasures. The symbolic debt will be paid for through satisfying what lies behind all investment: desire. (The structure here, given the way I have worded it, might serve another form of desire: that of vulgar Freudianism.)

On the other hand, the possible future coming together, if it occurs, will threaten to reveal an unbridgeable rift between the two men. Earlier Wilde had written that he hoped that between himself and art there was no gulf (936) but Wilde suggests at the end of the letter that an enormous gulf had always separated him from Douglas, which, given the recent past was even wider: "In old days there was always a wide chasm between us, the chasm of achieved Art and acquired culture: there is a still Wider chasm between us now, the chasm of Sorrow ..." (956).

However, the idea of gulfs or chasms, either within the self or between the self and Douglas, does not seem to stand in the way of a reconciliation: "but to Humility there is nothing that is impossible, and to Love all things are easy" (956). So the entire economy of symbolic exchanges with their unpayable debts is conducted in the name of Eros, whose wings will bridge

the chasms of art, culture and suffering which threaten to separate the two men. Despite vitriolic attacks on Douglas, the living embodiment of the *Zeitgeist* of an age that has no soul, his place in Wilde's future cannot be dispensed with. He may be the negative other, but his place as lover can be assured by subordinating himself to something which resembles Foucault's analysis of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century administration of punishment (Foucault 1975). By subjecting himself to an internalized House of Correction he can become worthy of continued acceptance. Becoming a worthy object of affection, he can join in the struggle to avoid the death of mutual desire, which seems so important to the integrity of Wilde's self. This involves a particular view of history. Two paragraphs after the passage on the chasms which separate, Wilde asserts that the past is not "irrevocable" and that things are in their essence "what we choose to make them". (Earlier in *De Profundis* Wilde had characterized the past as a "Symphony of Sorrow" (884) which tended to reinforce the unchangeable nature of a determinist history endowed with, in hindsight, a fixed and recoverable thematics).¹³

As a *seme* (a semantic possibility, and a gap) this passage could be interpreted in many ways: did Wilde, towards the end of the letter, begin to lose heart in his rejection of Douglas or his construction of him? Would this account for an ambiguous relation to history as fixed, predetermined, and yet open to hermeneutical negotiation? Did a flexible or negotiable model of history offer the possibility of changing his fashioning of Douglas? Had Douglas' presence/ absence become so vital to Wilde's sense of self that its loss would entail the loss of that self?

The final line of the letter may lead to a plausible reply (if a little psychologism is allowed). "Perhaps", Wilde concludes, "I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful, the meaning of Sorrow, and its beauty" (957). This in turn puts the letter back into the context of the discourse of self-realization; only here Wilde fashions himself as the necessary other half in the pedagogical relation between teacher and pupil. Now the letter can be seen, not so much as a confession (as a number of critics have represented it: e.g. Gordon 1970; Kail 1979)¹⁴ but as a pedagogical tract, in the epistolary form. The final justification within the chronotope of post-prison time is that the *proleptic* Wilde will continue the work of edification —not only in instructing and improving Douglas but, to return the word to its Latin root (*edificare*), to continue the process of construction. Why? Because this "edification" of Douglas, within the terms of the letter, is the negative "other" so necessary to the construction of the positive self —the loss of the one, in gulfs or chasms, could all too easily lead to the loss of the *Other*. This would entail, from the Lac(k)anian point

of view, not only the loss of the "other" as *objet petit a* (if this is understood as a necessary and indistinguishable complement to the self)¹⁵ but also the loss of the desiring self, because the complement, the negative in Douglas' case, would remove the binary structure upon which a sense of positive identity was based.

And this is where the present study, with its theoretical debts to semiotics, Lac(k)an and Bakhtin, partially overlaps with Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Greenblatt observes that self-fashioning in sixteenth-century England is achieved "in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile" (9), a role Wilde ascribes to Douglas. This "threatening Other", for the Renaissance self-fashioner has to be attacked and destroyed; however, *fin-de-siècle* Wilde cannot go so far because the effect would be intermedicene. Another aspect of the generalizations that Greenblatt extracts from his readings of constructed selves from More to Shakespeare can be moulded more fully to fit the Wilde fashioned in this article. Greenblatt concludes his introduction (which may serve as part of my conclusion) that: "... self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien, that what [sic] is produced in this encounter partakes of both the authority and the alien that is marked for attack, and hence that any achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss" (9).

Within this Greenblattian framework what might have looked at the beginning like an incompatible mish-mash of theoretical approaches can be combined into a theoretical mongrel to fashion the portrait of Wilde concocted here. The chronotope of post-prison time can be seen as one of perpetuation and survival: economic and Phallic laws must be obeyed (Wilde must pay his literal debts and accept the law. But in accepting the law he perpetuates it by attempting to exercise it over Douglas while using it to construct a coherent self and realize desire). Douglas' debts cannot be paid, but as lack is insufficient currency which would promise no return, Douglas is to acknowledge the unreturnable. What this means is that Douglas will have to go through a process of self-realization (just as Wilde claimed he himself had to) in order to maintain the economy Wilde was setting up in the letter; this involves the recognition and worth of the other. Given the lack of any adequate return for his generosity, Wilde constructs a kind of Phallic exchange standard —Phallic because it functions as a moral imperative (although there can be no literal payment there is still a law of obligation), and because Douglas must be primed to fulfil his role in the realization of desire. Here emotions and attitudes become commodities with their use and exchange values. Eros functions not only as the classical god of

love but as he does within the modern mythology of psychoanalysis as the great preserver of life. Although Wilde tends to privilege suffering over pleasure he is not prepared to go "beyond the pleasure principle".¹⁶ he stops at desire. It could be said, in a variation on a theme found in Derrida's "White Mythology", that the "general economy" that Wilde sets up is one that attempts to profit from reconciliation but is based upon the threat of an irreducible loss, an "expenditure without reserve", which (rather than cash in on union/ love) menaces him with an unbridgeable gap.¹⁷ In the absence of the unreturnable return the two men are to be joined by the terms of a one-way pedagogical exchange, and through the homomorphic business of deepening the self and (through love/ desire) avoiding gaps, chasms and trivialization. This was the future. The alternative, perhaps, would only have added to the already painful and rebarbative present —symbolic loss of self and other. ✎

NOTES

¹ The title *De Profundis* was not chosen by Wilde (Hyde 1976: 408) but by his literary executor, Robert Ross. The letter was written in Reading Gaol but never posted. See Hart-Davis (1979: 152f.) for a brief overview of the letter's publishing history. All references to the text are to the Collins edition (1978). At the risk of teaching the reader to suck eggs... prolepsis is, of course, taken from Genette (1980).

² See the opening sections of the letter and one written to More Adey on the writing of *De Profundis* (Hart-Davis 1962: 419).

³ The chronotopes, to simplify Bakhtin, are coordinating principles of any narrative. In short, a chronotope tries to give an account of what kinds of event govern a narrative and how these events are organized in time (Bakhtin 1981: 250).

⁴ I use the spelling I usually adopt when writing Lacan's name —as a means of keeping in mind the importance of lack to Lac(k)anian theory— and remind myself and my readers that my deployment of Lac(k)an is as subject to lack as anything else. In using Lac(k)an I am not so much interested in exploring the mechanisms of the unconscious as in adapting some Lac(k)anian ideas to suit my own aims. As Althusser claimed, as Lac(k)an's ideas gradually pass into the public

domain, critics tend to use what they find in their own ways, and to their own profit (Althusser & Balibar 1971: 13).

⁵ Wayne Koestenbaum's essay, "Wilde's Hard Labour and the Birth of Gay Reading" (in Boone & Cadden 1990) addresses the role that Douglas played in the letter. Although I limit the addressee here to Douglas, an argument might be made for the letter indirectly addressing other readers like Douglas' family, Wilde's friends, the prison authorities, and even future generations.

⁶ Four fairly recent books which have made an impact in these areas of discussion on Wilde are Dollimore (1991), Cohen (1993), Edelman (1994) and Sinfield (1994). Of course, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991) has inspired much research into questions of the homosocial and homophobic.

⁷ For Lac(k)an's *Phallus*, as it were, see "The signification of the phallus" (1977: 281).

⁸ Here I adapt the title of Baudrillard's book entitled *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993).

⁹ For an account of the letter's publishing history see Hyde (1976) and Roitinger (1980).

¹⁰ Much anxiety about his financial future was brought about by the terms of an allowance he was to receive from his estranged wife. For the terms see Ellmann (1988: 468, 522-523). Lord Queensberry brought about Wilde's bankruptcy by suing him for the costs of the first trial (Wilde, at the instigation of the Queensberry family, had originally tried to sue Lord Queensberry for libel but lost the case).

¹¹ This title is borrowed from Baudrillard (1993: 114) and has only the most peripheral relation to the context in which he uses it (i.e. he is analyzing the economy of the body as a sign).

¹² These words actually describe the situation of material goods, language and sexuality (the body) since the Industrial Revolution. However, they work just as well in the present context which could be "economized" in a similar way if space permitted (Baudrillard 1993: 114).

¹³ To justify this claim it is worth quoting the passage more fully. Wilde wrote that:

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 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. (884)

¹⁴ I agree with Rodney Shewan that the letter, while containing confession, is a "curious hybrid" (Shewan 1977: 194), but would add the dimension of pedagogical tract which, as far as I can make out, has not been suggested.

¹⁵ The term *objet petit a* (short for *objet petit autre* —literally "the little object of the other") can be understood, very simply, as anything which is outside the self (voice, gaze, etc.) but not perceived as such. Lac(k)an, however, in a translator's note to *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* refused to define the term, leaving readers to make up their own minds (Lacan 1979: 282). The definition I offer here has been influenced by Kaja Silverman's way of seeing it in her book *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983).

¹⁶ It is beyond the pleasure principle where the life instinct (Eros) encounters its aim and opposite (Thanatos) (Freud 1961).

¹⁷ See the Exergue to the essay. I have adapted the words of the translator's note which reads (and quotes from Derrida): "For Derrida, the "general economy" is the one that shows how metaphysics's eternal attempt to *profit* from its ventures is based upon an irreducible *loss*, an "expenditure without reserve" without which there could be no idea of profit" (Derrida 1982: 209).

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