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Exile and Exodus: Dante, Wilde, Joyce

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This paper reads Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* and the 'Aeolus' episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses* together via their usage of Dante, asking what productively emerges from considering this medievalism side by side. The resonance of Dante, in particular his *Commedia*, is shown to align with a shared concern of difficulty and ambiguity: both texts depict the act of rereading Dante. Struggling with exile of various kinds and facing the problem of representing these states, both texts attempt to generate new aesthetic modes through Dante's example. This article therefore contends that both texts make use of a Dantean poetics here called the purgatorial mode and that *Purgatorio* appears as a forerunner of these works. Wilde's *De Profundis* embeds the reader within layers of reminiscence to create the experience of a difficult middle, proclaiming a redemptive future even alongside what Benjamin Bateman has called its 'messy messianism'. Joyce's 'Aeolus', meanwhile, dramatises the movement of *Purgatorio*, the ascent to perfection through exile as allegorised by Dante via the biblical exodus of the Israelites. What this aesthetics of exile achieves is not so much a clear answer to the problems of representation that Wilde and Joyce faced as a difficult middle.

Introduction: 'A single Florentine'

On a tour of the United States of America in April 1882, Oscar Wilde wrote to Helena Sickert about the conditions in American prisons. Describing one cell in Lincoln, Nebraska, he alighted on a particularly poignant detail, a copy of Dante's *Commedia*: 'Strange and beautiful it seemed to me that the sorrow of a single Florentine in exile should, hundreds of years afterwards, lighten the sorrow of some common prisoner in a modern gaol' (Holland and Hart Davis, 2000: 166). Wilde gives the impression of having been struck suddenly by this observation; though one of the lectures he delivered during his time in America shows this phrase, 'sorrow of a single Florentine in exile', held a special pull for him. In 'The English Renaissance of Art', a lecture delivered earlier that year, we find the following: 'nothing which has ever interested men or women can cease to be a fit subject for culture. I might remind you of what all Europe owes to the sorrow of a single Florentine in exile at Verona' (Wilde, 1991: 20). This sense of exile as aesthetically productive, in 'lightening sorrow' or accruing 'interest', enables us to read Wilde's later incarceration back into even this early period; it also calls to mind the position of other Irish artists in exile, such as James Joyce, who likewise locates Dante at the pinnacle of literary achievement (D'Arcy, 2014: 2). Yet on closer reading, the work of Wilde and Joyce reveals the two authors actively struggling with this notion of the benefits of exile. In this essay, Dante emerges as a difficult model to emulate, with both authors facing a difficult middle, an ascent up their own artistic Mount Purgatory.

The productivity of Dante's sorrowful exile helps to draw a line of continuity between Wilde in his early and late phases, when he reads Dante in his own cell. Wilde's 1878 poem 'Ravenna'; his 1891 theoretical work 'The Critic as Artist'; his late *cri de coeur,* written early in 1897, *De Profundis*: all of these works reference the same flashpoints of sorrow. 'Ravenna' uses the 'steep stairs and bitter bread,' which Cacciaguida informs the Dante-pilgrim will be the fruits of exile in *Paradiso* canto 17, as a springboard for its own reverie; 'The Critic as Artist' contains, almost as a set-piece within its Platonic dialogue, a synopsis of the *Commedia* in its entirety, *Inferno, Purgatorio* and *Paradiso. De Profundis* threads memories of a lifetime of Dante reading into its diffuse structure. This specifically Dantean aesthetic strain—which particularly in *De Profundis* becomes a tragicomic mode where the sorrow of exile is enacted and yet also redeemed artistically— is precisely what I want to explore in this article.

After Wilde's death, *De Profundis* was published in truncated form in 1905; there is evidence this mode survived in a queer martyrology enthusiastically emerging in its wake. In particular, Anna, Comtesse de Brémont, framed this tragicomic mode as one of purgation: 'his soul had won the victory over the flesh, that his genius arose with renewed strength, beauty and purity out of those depths of suffering and gave to the

world the crowning master-piece of his pen in *De Profundis*' (de Brémont, 1911: 161).
[1]This sentimental, heavily theological reading sees Wilde as a Saint Sebastian, redeemed
through his suffering and displaying the iniquity of the homophobic apparatuses that
punished him for his 'great feminine soul' (de Brémont, 1911: 199). Wilde is framed
sensationally as a tragic scapegoat: '[w]ith the most relentless cruelty, the blind forces
of humankind against the victim, which it makes suffer for its own secret sin, were let
loose from the leash of justice … one of the most terrible examples in history of the fear
of the soul that is inborn in every human being' (de Brémont, 1911: 162).

These fantastical–perhaps opportunistic–terms are not too distanced from the
way James Joyce, in his 1909 article for *Il Piccolo della Sera* on 'the Poet of "Salomé"',
framed Wilde's downfall as displaying by way of paradox 'the truth inherent in the soul
of Catholicism: that man cannot reach the divine heart except through that sense of
separation and loss called sin' (*OCPW*: 151). The notion of the scapegoat, and the downfall
of the Irish man owing to scandal in a sexually repressive society, held significance
for Joyce, with Charles Stewart Parnell and Wilde being two particularly notorious
and formative examples.[2] Joyce, while operating in a similar mode to the Comtesse de
Brémont, whose book he later owned while writing *Ulysses* in Paris, is not as blindly
celebratory.[3] In his article, he avoids the thorny implications of claiming Wilde's
incarceration was somehow redeemed by a purgative literary work. Nevertheless, his
emphasis in this essay is on how his works stand in defiance of a hostile public: 'exiled
and dishonoured, [he was] to hear the chorus of righteous men recite his name along
with that of the unclean spirit … he was undoubtedly a scapegoat' (*OCPW*: 148–150).
A distinctly colonial dynamic of this post-trial reception of Wilde emerges in Joyce's
figuration: 'His fantastic myth, his work … are now divided booty' (*OCPW*: 151). By
means of accessing the 'divine heart' through sin, Joyce saw *De Profundis* in similar
terms to de Brémont, namely as a 'true' expression of his 'soul'. But he added to this
spiritual discourse another sense of injustice: in Wilde's exile and dishonour, Joyce saw
a dynamic that seemed generally applicable to the way the spoils of the colonised were
subsumed into imperial hegemony. Hélène Cixous, in her compendious book on Joyce's
many exiles, saw this article as in fact registering 'a piece of self-analysis by Joyce …
The necessity of separation and of "sin" for creation makes him at last offer himself
as scapegoat' (Cixous, 1976: 452). Perhaps we can say Joyce saw not just himself,

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[1] On this 'almost wholly fictitious' book, see Stetz (2013: 239).

[2] Fraser (2016: 72–74) details Parnell as a model for Joyce's investment in patterns of betrayal. Froula (2009) is illumin-
ating on the connections one can make between Joyce, Wilde and Parnell.

[3] For a list of the books Joyce owned in Paris prior to publishing *Ulysses*, see <https://www.jjon.org/libraries/paris-lib-
rary>.

but a pattern, an exilic aesthetics, speaking to Irishness in general in the sorrow of a single Dubliner. In examining *Ulysses*, this essay will show how exile gains a broader connotation in this context: that of Ireland's colonised position as a kind of exile akin to the Israelites in Egypt, requiring purgative transformation into exodus.

This essay will ask what productively emerges from thinking about Wilde's and Joyce's exiles simultaneously, by tracing a specifically Dantean aesthetics of exile across both *De Profundis* and *Ulysses.* These writers both dramatise 'exile' in Dantean terms as a state of suffering to be worked through towards 'redemption'. Because of its Dantean inheritance, this literary exile never quite evades the charge of instrumentalising suffering, inhabiting a difficult middle, an ambiguous tragicomic vision where the suffering of the present is oriented towards a spiritually liberated future—refiguring exile as exodus. This orientation and this middleness means that *De Profundis* and *Ulysses* deploy a peculiarly Dantean mode of representation which I will term the purgatorial mode.

The New Life: Exile and *De Profundis*

It is hard to characterise *De Profundis*: even its name is a matter of contention. Wilde intended a similarly Vulgate title, 'Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis', while in 1905, after his death, his literary executor Robert Ross gave it the title it usually bears. Ian Small, tracking the text's manifest complexities, steadfastly terms it 'the prison manuscript' (Small, 2003: 88). The letter, addressed to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, retraces Wilde's life pre-incarceration and his experience of prison, but also seems to digress into a discussion of suffering, beauty, Christ, and art, promising some profound relationship between them. It seems the only appropriate single term for *De Profundis* is 'multifaceted': displaying epistolary directness and literary elusiveness and allusiveness, an exemplar of tragedy while also a theoretical text about tragedy, an autobiography that becomes an extended rumination on theology. The sincerity of Wilde the prisoner might understandably be taken as the dominant rhetorical pose across the work, but its complex nature demands an attentiveness to Wilde the aesthete's irony as well. For this reason, I will begin by thinking about Wilde's style.

One of the most salient features of *De Profundis* is Wilde's use of parataxis. A particularly Dantean moment uses paratactic appositions to lend weight to the force of his prison epiphanies. A vivid example of this paratactic rendering of suffering at this time is found in his Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary, given in the same edition as *De Profundis*:

> Crimes may be forgotten or forgiven, but vices live on: they make their dwelling house in him who … has become their victim: they are embedded in his flesh: they spread over him like a leprosy: they feed on him like a strange disease: at the end they become an essential part of the man: no remorse however poignant can drive them out: no tears however bitter can wash them away: and prison life, by its horrible isolation from all that could save a wretched soul, hands the victim over … to be possessed and polluted by the thoughts he most loathes… (Wilde, 2018a: 47)

With each successive colon, each paratactic addition, the sentence defers completion and heaps on a new suffering. Leaving clausal relationships unstated, parataxis usually affords the temporal experience of a continued present, placing readers directly in a difficult middle. Without the connective tissue afforded by hypotaxis, such prose often presents events undigested, uninterpreted for a reader. Most disturbingly, this temporal middle palpably renders the monotony of prison suffering Wilde describes in *De Profundis*: 'Suffering is one long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons' (Wilde, 2018b: 143).[4] Setting up a distinction between the mundane pain of the prison as an institution and the exquisite pain an artist willingly endures, the registers of *De Profundis* likewise run through a virtuosic scale between the direct demotic of intimate conversation and a biblical pulpit blast.

This terminology of 'exquisite pain' stems from Ellis Hanson's lucid reading of *De Profundis*. His lyrical reading of the above quote from the Clemency Petition likewise draws out the Dantean aspects of Wilde's parataxis: 'As his sentences progresses (if it can be said to progress), his words emerge into broken rituals with characteristic gestures, isolated and mechanical, that they are doomed to repeat. They become archetypes of suffering arranged in grim procession as though they were figures in a biblical allegory or Dante's inferno' (Hanson, 2003: 103). The aptness of this observation lies in the fact that Wilde presents prison as a 'horrible isolation from all that could save a wretched soul': an *inferno* where no salvation is possible. Extending Dantean parallels further, Wilde suggests *contrapasso*, the poetic union in Dante's afterlife of sin with sinner, and consequent divine punishment, by suggesting that vices become 'embedded in his flesh'. It is clearly part of Wilde's rhetorical stance to suggest that the prison, because of its cruelty, is a space that forecloses the possibility of spiritual redemption. Yet, as this paper will argue, *De Profundis*' broader audience (including

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[4] These sentences were chosen by Robert Ross to open *De Profundis* in his edited version; the 2018 editor Frankel notes that 'very' was added to the first sentence, and this variant is what is most often quoted.

the religious prison governor, Lieutenant James Nelson, who granted him some of the books he had petitioned for) seems to demand not an infernal but a purgatorial mode.

De Profundis explicitly invokes Dante by suggesting the letter is in some fashion a *Vita Nuova,* a 'new life': '[Humility] is the last thing left in me, and the best: the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived: the starting point for a fresh development ... It is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life, a *Vita Nuova* for me' (Wilde, 2018b: 171). This early work–a sonnet cycle connected by prose passages–suggests certain obvious parallels with *De Profundis*: it is an autobiography dealing with Dante's grief, which occurs over the loss of his lover Beatrice, often written in a chastising mode in which Dante castigates himself for youthful naivety. But that is where the more obvious parallels end. Why does Wilde invoke this text? I propose two basic categories of answer: the first relates *Vita Nuova* to its place within literary history, and the second thinks about what *Vita Nuova* means for Dante's aesthetics.

First, in simple terms: the *Vita Nuova* precedes and predicts Dante's great masterpiece, the *Commedia*. Precipitated by grief and separation, the *Vita Nuova* prepares the ground for an eventual reconciliation as the pilgrim journeys to Paradise in the later epic. Richard Ellmann suggests in his biography that Wilde was therefore anticipating a redeemed future that would follow as a development of this preparatory, purgative work (Ellmann, 1987: 484). In short: after the *Vita Nuova*, a Comedy. Certainly, this is a persuasive reading in the light of the passage above, which sees 'Humility' as the virtue that provides a fresh artistic slate for his 'new life, a *Vita Nuova*'. And indeed, there are times in the letter when Wilde 'constructs his entire literary production as a seamless text', as one critic puts it (O'Malley, 2004: 175). But there are problems of oversimplification with this first answer. This reading could lend weight to the suggestion that Wilde's religiosity in *De Profundis* is merely a strategic repentance or worse, a renunciation of his sexuality. Another passage complicates this impression: 'This new life, as through my love of Dante I like sometimes to call it, is, of course, no new life at all, but simply the continuance, by means of development, and evolution, of my former life' (Wilde, 2018b: 191). The question of Wilde's intentions for his post-prison career are somewhat moot, but here he underlines that he is not invoking *Vita Nuova* in a completely repentant mood. The second answer to my question seems more apposite in this light: we should see the invocation of this text as part of a deeply personal engagement with Dante's aesthetic project. In March 1897, while writing *De Profundis*, Wilde requested he be permitted to access the *Vita Nuova* and its English translation (Holland and Hart Davis, 2000: 682n2). Clearly, Wilde was referencing the text because he remembered it, rather than because he had it open before him as he wrote; the lack of books, as it has done for countless other prison writers, forced him

to rely on other means. As we shall see, so many of Wilde's references to Dante in *De Profundis* are mediated through memory and the autobiographical mode he adopts, despite Ellmann's claim that 'only Dante's *Inferno* fixed his mind' in prison (Ellmann, 1987: 465). This mediation through memory itself is apt when we are thinking of that text; Giuseppe Mazzotta points out that in the *Vita Nuova* 'the self is a nexus of memories, fantasies, and a will to write poetry' (Mazzotta, 2014: 216).

There are times in the text when the memories appear to come to Wilde as he is writing, although this appearance is probably misleading. One particularly affecting moment occurs as he remembers reading Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* ('that book which has had such a strange influence over my life') at the moment in the text when he has resolved to 'learn how to be happy'. In this book, he reads Pater reading Dante, and recalls

> how Dante places low in the Inferno those who wilfully live in sadness, and going to the College Library and turning to the passage in the *Divine Comedy* where beneath the dreary marsh lie those who were "sullen in the sweet air," saying for ever through their sighs,
>
>> Tristi fummo
>> nell'aer dolce che dal sol s'allegra.[5]
>
> I knew the Church condemned *accidia*, but the whole idea seemed to me quite fantastic, just the sort of sin, I fancied, a priest who knew nothing about real life would invent. Nor could I understand how Dante, who says that "sorrow remarries us to God," could have been so harsh to those who were enamoured of melancholy, if any such there really were. I had no idea that someday this would become to me one of the greatest temptations of my life. (Wilde, 2018b: 181–183)

This passage enacts a somewhat virtuoso reading of a reading of Dante. Pater in fact refers twice in quick succession to this same passage in *Inferno* (7), where the pilgrim and Virgil encounter those punished for the sin of avarice. Immoderate attitudes to money, both hoarders and spenders, are punished there (meaning Wilde's own profligacy is implicated in this passage), and in the quoted lines, this avarice is depicted as a kind of self-hatred and ingratitude for the created world. But Wilde brings in other ideas to bear on his reading; there are references to the monk's sin of torpor or *acedia*, and to *Purgatorio* ['sorrow remarries us to God': in the original, a sweet sorrow, i.e. '*buon dolor ch'a Dio ne rimarita*'] (*Purg*: 23.81). Even in this situation, with memories

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[5] The passage comes from *Inf* 7.121–22; Longfellow translates as: 'We sullen were | In the sweet air, which by the sun is gladdened'.

of readings laced between each other, Wilde is reading vertically across Dante's *Commedia*, despite Ellmann's claim. No reading of Dante is complete if it just rests on the *Inferno*; the redemptive passages in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are vital components for any reading. But this is a virtuosic feat of comparative Dante scholarship in, let us remember, a prison environment. For example, Pater doesn't include the Italian: Wilde has supplied this for us, as it makes Pater's eventual judgement against Michelangelo's Neoplatonist disavowal of the sensory world make more sense.

Importantly for *De Profundis*, Wilde resolves this seeming contradiction in Dante with reference to his autobiography. His own experience is the answer to the puzzle he encountered as an undergraduate. To add a further layer of autobiographical depth to this rich passage: the line about having 'wilfully lived in sadness' arises in Pater's examination of Michelangelo's own dire straits, so this is a moment of queer reading, where Wilde identifies with and simultaneously effaces his own connection to a canonical gay artist, refracted through the figures of Pater and Dante.

Pater himself indulges in a queer, closeted technique of disclosure nested within layers of reference. The line in Pater reads: 'the thought again and again arises that he is one of those who incur the judgment of Dante, having *wilfully lived in sadness.* Even his tenderness and pity are embittered by their strength' (Pater, 2010: 45). This judgement—Pater himself covers over whether it is he or Dante who is condemning—spurs a long comparison between Michelangelo and Dante, at first inviting contrast: Dante 'sanctifies all that is presented by hand and eye' whereas Michelangelo is Neoplatonist—hence the charge he is 'sullen in the sweet air', wilfully living in sadness instead of enjoying the delights of the material world. At the same time, he lists Michelangelo's resemblances to Dante, including the 'surfeiting of desire', and 'the tendency to dwell minutely on the physical effects of the presence of a beloved object on the pulses and on the heart' (Pater, 2010: 48–50).

Pater assigns Dante importance in his own critical practice. Even though Pater is most associated, of course, with the 'Renaissance', Pater's medievalism displays an important element of queer rebellion within his Renaissance-oriented critical project, inhabiting a difficult middle between limiting Victorian conceptions, and therefore sets precedent for Wilde's aesthete Dante, or even Joyce's modernist Dante. For Pater, 'that rupture between the middle age and the Renaissance … has so often been exaggerated' (Pater, 2010: 10). As Straub writes, 'Pater argued for the dissolution of the period's conventional temporal categorization … turning the Renaissance into a highly flexible state of individual and collective consciousness which erupts at certain points of time' (Straub, 2009: 109–110). This Renaissance is defined by a queer defiance of

orthodoxies: 'that assertion of the liberty of the heart in the middle age, which I have termed a mediaeval Renaissance' (Pater, 2010: 16). Pater's medievalism is thus one that chafes against the more conservative prevailing winds in Victorian medievalism.

An example that has parallels in *De Profundis* occurs in the opening chapter of *Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, 'Aucassin and Nicolette', which concludes with a long untranslated quotation of medieval literature. In the 1877 edition of the *Renaissance*, Pater writes that this is 'a passage in which that note of rebellion is too strident for me to translate it here, though it has its more subdued echoes in our English Chaucer' (Pater, 2010: 146n17).[6] This closeted style, embedding disclosure within dense thickets of allusion and reference, finds analogy in Wilde's reminiscence of reading Pater. There are more parallels: the passage from 'Aucassin and Nicolette' is about preferring hell to heaven, a note Wilde would strike in similarly medievalist terms in *De Profundis*, even still courting outrage. Referring to how he has been castigated by society, placed in hell with the Marquis de Sade and Gilles de Rais (the child-murdering protagonist of Huysmans' 1891 medieval-gothic novel, *Là-Bas*), he says, 'I [do not have] any doubt but that the leper of mediaevalism, and the author of *Justine*, will prove better company than Sandford and Merton' (Wilde, 2018b: 141).

Just as Dante is contrasted positively with Michelangelo for his ability to 'sanctify' the world of the flesh without recourse to Neoplatonism, the medieval seems to reserve a particular strength in a Paterian aesthetics for its queer ambiguities. The Victorian reception of Dante was caught between sacralising and secularising impulses, 'often blithely downsizing the transcendental and theological dimension of his texts' (Straub, 2009: 11).[7] In *De Profundis,* Wilde applies a sacred interpretation to a secular situation, imparting his text with religious profundity even in his style, while also paradoxically upending more earnest religious feeling by comparing Christ to an artist. Analysing Wilde's fairy tales, Jarlath Killeen identifies an anticipation of this paradoxical strain in his heartfelt invocation of traditional Marian iconography in 'The Nightingale and the Rose' and 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (Killeen, 2007: 43, 133). This sacral secularism, turning the water of parables and miracles to the wine of art, implies transcendence is always the explicit content of any given Dante reference, but a secularising bathos lurks paradoxically in the background. Seeing both poles, the reader inhabits a difficult middle, left within a contradiction. Pater especially values in Dante the 'fineness of

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6 This closeted style seems to have been diagnosed by a young Joyce in a letter of August 1906 when reading Wilde's *Dorian Gray*: 'The central idea is fantastic … If he had had the courage to develop the allusions in the book it might have been better' (LIII: 150).
7 cf. Ellis, 1988: 102–34.

touch' and 'the placid and temperate regions of the *Purgatorio*—a realm of gray but clear light:—it is there that the delicacies alike of the visible and the invisible world, really tell' (Pater, 1892: xx). Though Wilde says society sees him already in the Inferno, and defiantly claims it would be better than the heaven of Victorian moralists, perhaps it is the grey clarity of Purgatory we should turn to when thinking of Wilde's Dantean exile in prison: Pater's regard for Dante's queer impurities enables in Wilde's *De Profundis* a purgatorial mode.

Defining the purgatorial mode are basic categorical features, drawn from Dante: the middleness of Purgatory itself, spatially and morally; the groundedness in temporal reality in contrast to the fantastical realms beyond its borders; the sense of a struggle in ascending towards redemption; the difficult—perhaps superstitious—sense that there is a redeeming of suffering in the first place. Framed by this mode, Wilde's incarceration is cast into a fraught and possibly even unpalatable light. This notion of the redemptive prison letter has been a source of critical divergence (O'Malley, 2004: 167–175). Jonathan Dollimore has read *De Profundis* as deeply reactionary, a 'supreme instance of containment', while on the other hand Philip K. Cohen has, in arguing the opposite, only served to bolster Dollimore's diagnosis: '[Wilde's output in] 1894 amply documents the state of inner dissonance and fragmentation in which Wilde entered the trials and prison. But he left Reading Gaol on May 19, 1897, with a thoroughly integrated vision of God, self, and society' (Dollimore, 1991: 95; Cohen, 1979: 235). 'Redemption' takes on a profoundly violent and homophobic meaning here. Perhaps this critical discussion misses what Wilde says in the text itself: 'I must accept the fact that one is punished for the good as well as for the evil that one does', and 'Religion does not help me … My Gods dwell in temples made with hands' (Wilde, 2018b: 179, 173). As we have seen, Wilde does not renounce pleasure; it is precisely because so much violence can be invested in the term 'redemption' that it becomes, in his hands, an aesthetic doctrine rather than the climax of a conventional life-narrative. The familiarity of this tactic for any reader of Wilde is pertinent. The bathetic effect of Christ-as-artist is that it represents a continuation and development of Wilde's own infamous figuration of life-as-art, incorporating both a historicist scepticism inspired by Renan's *Vie de Jésus* and sincere love for Catholic aesthetics (Schramm, 2013: 255). In fact, it must once again be stressed that no, it is not the case that Wilde could write his way into redeeming the conditions he was thrown into. No prisoner is capable of this, and certainly no critic or warden either. Nevertheless, Wilde wrote in prison knowing his release into a new life was inevitable. He wrote with minimal resources at his disposal, under the mistaken impression that Lord Douglas had callously ignored his imprisonment, yet he was also

writing towards a future where his exile was to continue, and his fears of poverty and the loss of his children were to be realised.[8]

It is in the difficult middle of its ambiguities that we can come to an understanding of the potential the purgatorial mode held for Wilde. Benjamin Bateman has written on Wilde's 'messy messianism', relating the above-mentioned formal complications of *De Profundis* with a complex aesthetic-ethical philosophy of Christ: 'Wilde's attachment to Christ's formal flawlessness, and his equivocal aspiration to replicate it, does not produce perfection in his own messianic narrative. If anything, it serves to ritually underscore the gulf between them that is figured forth in the letter's formal incoherence. In the place of eternal life Wilde offers an expansive subjectivity' (Bateman, 2018: 47). Wilde's Christ, though, can behave suspiciously like Wilde, with a line from Dante (not the Bible) stamping poetic authority through his imagery: 'He was the first person who ever said to people that they should live "flower-like" lives … Dante describes the soul of man as coming from the hand of God "weeping and laughing like a little child," and Christ also saw that the soul of each one should be "a guise di fanciulla, che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia"'. Thinking of this line from *Purgatorio* canto 16—and the poignancy children held for him in his incarcerated state—Wilde then offers a reading of *both Dante's imagery and Christ* that supports Bateman's view. He aligns the purgatorial mode with these particularly Wildean/Paterian ideas of beauty and transience: 'He felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death' (Wilde, 2018b: 219). For Wilde, this middleness and uncategorisability enables the developing child, Christ, himself, Dante's *Purgatorio*, and, surely, his prison letter to align.

Most notably, the purgatorial mode demands struggle, a pilgrimage towards that perfection of form implied by the paradisiacal, visionary figure of Christ. After all, this is the entire drama of Dante's *Purgatorio* as many souls struggle through pain and suffering to attain the state of perfection necessary to enter Paradise. This Christian turn is precisely not just about Wilde's own soul therefore, or 'sin', but part of a defiant strategy for him to incorporate his own suffering into a comic artistic project. Certain early readers perceptively see it in these lights; Max Beerbohm claimed that though he might seem 'dragged through the mire', he 'was still precisely himself … still playing with ideas, playing with emotions', while George Bernard Shaw read *De Profundis* not at 'the level of sentimental tragedy' as 'the British press' would have it,

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[8] 'But my two children are taken from me by legal procedure. That is and always will remain to me a source of infinite distress, of infinite pain, of grief without end or limit' (*De Profundis*: 163).

but an 'extraordinary' work with '*comedic*' priorities (Beckson, 1970: 249, 244). As those italics suggest, we would be reading somewhat against the grain to describe *De Profundis* as comedic in the vein of *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Indeed, considerable interpretative work is required to reach this conclusion, given what the text itself says, addressing Lord Douglas: 'I thought life was going to be a brilliant comedy, and that you were to be one of many graceful figures in it. I found it to be a repellent tragedy' (Wilde, 2018b: 109). But Shaw's perspective makes more sense when thinking of 'comedic' not in the theatrical but in the Dantean sense, where truth wears an aesthetic mask—'*quel ver c'ha faccia di menzogna*' [that truth which has the face of a lie] (*Inf*: 16.124)—and where suffering is incorporated into one long vision: 'If I can produce even one more beautiful work of art[,] I shall be able to rob malice of its venom' (Wilde, 2018b: 181).

Wilde justifies the idea of an aesthetic approach to Christ through Dante:

> But while Christ did not say to men, "Live for others," he pointed out that there was no difference at all between the lives of others and one's own life. ... Since his coming the history of each separate individual is, or can be made, the history of the world. ... Art has made us myriad-minded. Those who have the artistic temperament go into exile with Dante and learn how salt is the bread of others and how steep their stairs. (Wilde, 2018b: 207)

Wilde then launches into yet another paratactic list of the affordances of great art, before capping it off with Christ's own unique achievement, one that enables (like Dante) suffering to be expressed and aesthetically redeemed:

> ... feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom Sorrow and Suffering were modes through which he could realise his conception of the Beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, [Christ] makes of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated Art. (Wilde, 2018b: 207–9)

With the reference to salt bread and steep stairs, the deep personal identification of Wilde with Dante re-emerges here, this time in a way that seems to become a programmatic statement of aesthetic priorities. As mentioned above, this exact moment is found in his early poem 'Ravenna', stemming from the moment Cacciaguida, in *Paradiso*, foretells the Dante-pilgrim's eventual exile. This moment in the *Commedia*, evidently significant throughout Wilde's career, is reread here in prison as the foundation of the beginnings of a new aesthetic redemption. It is by journeying through this exile that

Wilde hopes to make his suffering monumental in scale, with Christ's own exquisite pain as a model (Hanson, 2003: 118).

A View of Dublin: Exodus and *Ulysses*

In *De Profundis*, the purgatorial mode aestheticises the spiritual and spiritualises the aesthetic. Wilde's autobiography becomes a stylised performance of memory and criticism; the prison grates give way and a broader, more long-lasting exile emerges. Turning to Joyce, we can see these precise aspects of the purgatorial mode reworked. Joyce's modernist Dante is not Wilde's. While abounding in dense references to Dante's *Commedia*, Joyce's *Ulysses* renders the spiritual at the subtextual level, and inhabits more definitely an ambiguous mode that refuses even to promise 'redemption'.

Joyce will not have read *De Profundis* in the form that I have to make my readings. The letter's autobiographical aspects were obscured by Ross on its initial publication. We have seen Joyce considered Wilde a 'scapegoat' (*OCPW*: 150), one whose pain was useful to the coloniser, and itself eerily close to martyrdom. But further than this, *Ulysses* exhibits an extension of this purgatorial aesthetic. There are similarities: it is set in a recent past (Ireland in 1904) that looks radically different in the light of a coming future (Ireland in 1922), much as the *Commedia* is set in 1300 and was written over 20 years later, during Dante's exile. *Ulysses* also persistently stages the necessity of exile to return—implied in the presence of the Homeric intertext, which centres on the home-seeking of the hero.

Ulysses begins with Stephen Dedalus, who formerly appears in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* keen to use 'silence, exile and cunning' to his artistic ends (*P*: 208). For most of his career, it is through this character that Joyce tends to articulate a connection to Dante, and existing scholarship reflects this fact. Lucia Boldrini has convincingly suggested that Stephen's poetics of epiphany in *Stephen Hero* was informed by Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, while his *Convivio* enfolds Stephen's ideas of literary creation in *Ulysses* (Boldrini, 2004: 136, 160−1). Anne Marie D'Arcy has clarified that the relationship of Stephen Dedalus the character to Dante, whether in the failed, formative draft *Stephen Hero,* in its condensation and refinement into *Portrait*, or in *Ulysses*, is informed by a strong autobiographical identification (D'Arcy, 2014: passim). James Robinson, in his book about Joyce's use of Dante, has framed this exile as an already failed strategy by the time *Ulysses* begins, with Stephen returning from a self-imposed exile on the continent to mourn his mother's death. Stephen is read as part of a general Joycean attempt to redefine his art away from exile towards a sense of 'community' in his later career (Robinson, 2016: 9−10). For Robinson, the character

Stephen therefore becomes a way to question a self-imposed exilic identity that is often synonymous with Joyce himself: 'In *Ulysses* [Dante's] presence is fundamental to Joyce's exploration of the shortcomings and failures of this ... Joyce's reading of Dante remains bounded by the parameters of his initial encounter and the double terms of Dante's uneasy orthodoxy' (Robinson, 2016: 86).

But perhaps this line of development from exile to community is not so neat; after all, a more flexible reading of Dante would have been entirely available to Joyce, and, more importantly, Stephen Dedalus is not simply a punching-bag character to be entirely disavowed. One example is in 'Scylla and Charybdis', which even with its parade of careful ironies (Stephen doesn't even believe the theory he delivers to a handful of Dublin literary personalities, for example), seems like something of a manifesto moment within the novel: here, Stephen uses the life-story of Shakespeare to craft a vision of artistic creation that could be mapped onto his own. He even states twice that 'reconciliation' rests on 'sundering'–one of many paradoxes abounding in this overtly Wildean moment of homosocial fictionalised Platonic dialogue masquerading in literary-critical guise. This notion accords with a generally Dantean aesthetics of alienation (or exile-at-home) that Robinson diagnoses: 'The hermeneutic strategy of the Dante-pilgrim on his journey through the otherworld seems to be predicated upon just such a repeatedly emphasized separation between the protagonist as "reader" and the ... localities that he interprets as a form of eschatological "text"' (Robinson, 2016: 89). Joyce turns this hermeneutic strategy onto a rigorously mapped realism, upending the Wildean definition of exile away from the self to incorporate an externalised political realm.

The exilic moment I want to explore specifically in relation to Wilde and Dante is in 'Aeolus', an episode which Robinson does not touch on in his study of Joyce and Dante. Doing so augments his reading of Dantean aesthetics and their role in Joyce's work, especially by thinking in relation to the purgatorial mode of Wilde's aesthetic turn in *De Profundis*. Mary Reynolds has noted the Dantean abundance in this episode, particularly in the section headlined 'RHYMES AND REASONS', where Stephen thinks across the entirety of the *Commedia* across five or so lines of densely allusive text as he evaluates his own unfinished poem (Reynolds, 1968: passim). It is worth quoting this dense section in full:

> RHYMES AND REASONS
>
> Mouth, south. Is the mouth south someway? Or the south a mouth? Must be some. South, pout, out, shout, drouth. Rhymes: two men dress the same, looking the same, two by two.

> *. . . . . la tua pace*
> *. . . . . che parlar ti piace*
> *. . . . . mentreche il vento, come fa, si tace.*
>
> He saw them <u>three by three, approaching girls</u>, in green, in rose, in russet entwining, ***Per l'aer perso*** <u>in mauve, in purple</u>, *quella, quella pacifica oriafiamma,* in gold of oriflamme, ***<u>de rimirar fé piu ardenti</u>****.* But I old men, penitent, leadenfooted, underdarkneath the night: mouth south: tomb womb.
>
> —Speak up for yourself, Mr O'Madden Burke said. (*U*: 7.713–725)[9]

Like Wilde revisiting his Oxford days, it appears that a given reference to Dante gives way to another and then another in the memory, as if thinking about Dante is impossible unless you have read–and reread–the entirety of this work. In his thoughts, Stephen takes three rhymes–the *Commedia* rhymes in interlocking threes–immediately preceding the 'Paolo and Francesca' scene in *Inferno* canto 5 (bolded), then quotes something else, moving to canto 29 of *Purgatorio* (underlined), then to *Paradiso* canto 31 (bold and underlined). The connections between these words are not obvious to just any reader of Dante–in fact, Reynolds said it reminded her of a graduate seminar led by a particularly adept teacher (Reynolds, 1968: 454). Boldrini also notes the 'rhythmical mirror-reflection of the parts in the whole and the whole into the parts' in this passage is inherited from the circular dances of *Paradiso*, and that the passage anticipates the dancing girls of *Finnegans Wake* (Boldrini, 2004: 146–7). What we have here is a brief tour through the entirety of the *Divine Comedy*, just as in Wilde's bravura recounting of it in *The Critic as Artist*, but recalled instead through impressions, colours, associations, and snippets of information. Ultimately, Stephen compares Dante's rhymes to his own, taking as a model the Divine Pageant in *Purgatorio* canto 29: Dante's rhymes are ladies dancing in a ring, while his are two old men whom Dante refers to as '*onesto e sodo*', honest and solid.

The abundance of Dante here shows not only the extent of Stephen's memorization but also the esoteric and synaesthetic nature of his points of reference–he is thinking about rhyme as introducing an ineffable visual colour to reading. The line '*mentre che il vento, come fa, si tace*' refers to the wind that buffets the lustful in *Inferno* canto 5 dying down so that they can better hear the story of Paolo and Francesca–so what is suggested here in Stephen's reading is a profoundly sensorial understanding of reading Dante. Hearing clearly is seeing clearly. In terms of Aquinas' philosophy, this would be colour, because it 'moves sight', only this is an intellectual kind of sight (*Summa*

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[9] Joyce (2008: 114). For ease of reading, and following Joycean convention, I cite episode number and then line number of the Gabler edition in-text. As I say in the following paragraph, I have added bold and underlined emphases.

Theologiae: I.77.3). Stephen is therefore adopting the terms of medieval aesthetic ideas but adapting them to his own reading practices. For example, in introducing a metatextual allegorical reading of the Divine Pageant, which comes at the top of Mt Purgatory in the Garden of Earthly Delights, he goes from *Inferno* V up past all of hell and the entire ascent of Mt Purgatory, and then back down into the inferno again for '*per l'aer perso*', and then back up again past Mt Purgatory for 'in mauve, in purple'. This is because in the Divine Pageant, sandwiched between the dancing girls and the two dependable old men, are four women in purple symbolising the cardinal virtues. But Joyce draws a multilingual connection between the sound of '*per l'aer perso*' and purple, as if one suggests the other, even though one describes the murky air of hell and the other the rich robes of virtue. Just as Joyce draws attention to the careful cadence of Dante's rhymes in the above-treated lines, he also draws connections between sin and virtue. This dynamic recalls the Cixous quote from earlier, which sees the journey through sin as a foundational step in a Joycean aesthetics. Joyce saw the murk of the *Inferno,* '*l'aer perso*', embedded within the 'purple' vision of secular virtue fulfilled at the end of *Purgatorio.*

In flattening the geography of Dante's afterworld, Joyce performs a similar trick to Wilde, who made his purgatory take on particularly infernal characteristics. In ending with the final line of *Paradiso* 31, which translates to 'he made mine eyes gaze still more ardently', Joyce either compares Dante to Stephen and finds Stephen's vision lacking, or indeed makes Dante the subject, 'he', who makes Stephen read ever more intently. Dante calls this Pageant in l.133 of *Purgatorio* 29 '*il pertrattato nodo*': the above-treated knot. Joyce ties a knot himself through the Divine Comedy, presenting it as its own kind of Divine Pageant—its wheeling colours moving Stephen's inner sight, but also blurring the lines between perdition and redemption, hell and paradise. Just as Wilde's college library rereadings of Dante leapt vertically, Joyce's preferred mode of reading Dante here is also vertical. When we come to discuss Stephen's 'Parable of the Plums' later, we will see how this sight is a kind of utopian possibility for redemption, of a piece with the Christ-like artistry of Dante in *De Profundis.*

It's also worth thinking about how this Dantean dance sits within the chapter's immediate context. The section 'RHYMES AND REASONS' concludes with O'Madden Burke enjoining Lenehan to give a speech, but also seems poetically (read: coincidentally) to comment upon Stephen's own wordless reverie. Yet even beyond this section we have two kinds of reading juxtaposed against each other: Stephen wheeling obscurely through the poem as it resides in his memory, and the newsmen physically bringing up a newspaper and, no less obscurely, showing how a code was embedded within it alluding to the Phoenix Park killings in 1882. 'Aeolus' is in the process of dramatising

a literary universe; Leopold Bloom also, prior to this, contrasts with Stephen in his material focus on the facts of literary production. Following Bloom's perspective, 'Aeolus' provides a place of publication, variants, copies, physical interactions with the proofs, spell checking, the material usefulness of the inscribed surface, the sound of the printers, the Jewish practice of reading the Torah 'backwards' (to use Bloom's word), collaborative effort with Red Murray, the foreman, the typesetter—whose work is so tactile Bloom remarks he 'Seems to see with his fingers' (*U*: 7.215)—and the mysteriously medieval figure of Monks. In short, Stephen's literary universe is not one of 'quirefolded papers' (*U*: 7.175)—quire being another word recalling the textual production of the Middle Ages. Embarrassed by the plodding letter he has been sent to deliver, he speaks and thinks of his literary products, which are items of the memory. After Bloom exits, rhetorical performances are delivered *ex tempore*, including Stephen's carefully-worded 'Parable of the Plums'.

Broadly enough, the movement of the episode is one from a montage-like scene of production to an extended sequence of kinds of reception, capped off by Stephen's parable, which is both reception and production. The question at hand becomes dominated by questions of literary evaluation: what is *good*? Stephen's production and reception, like Wilde's, is haunted by Dante. A striking commonality between these scenes of reception is that they centre around different excerpts as examples of rhetoric. The first is resoundingly mocked (it is Bloom who can see potential value in it, but only as a commodity, going down like 'hotcakes'). Then three performances follow, offered as examples of good rhetoric. It would do a disservice to the ironies of *Ulysses* to suggest that they simply 'get better' as the chapter goes on, but they get progressively longer. These pieces all appear to be different but also deal with the same topic with different levels of directness: Moses and the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness. First is a fragment of a sentence about a statue of Moses, the second is a longer, overt allegory about the exodus, drawing parallels between the British Empire and the Egyptian oppressors. Stephen's long so-called 'parable' (lacking a moral, unlike most parables) is revealed to have had some connections to the other slices of rhetoric after all, titled 'A Pisgah Sight of Palestine'–Pisgah being the mountain from which the Promised Land was revealed to Moses. In it, extensive detail is used to recount how two older Dublin women, one religious and one secular, ascend Nelson's column in the centre of Dublin, and look out. They eat plums together and, in a strikingly sexual image, spit out the stones from the top of the column. Their actual view is left, however, to the imagination.

Figuring the exodus as a single ascent to see the 'Promised Land' is an explicitly Dantean reading of this parable offered by Stephen's title. Dante placed the garden of

earthly paradise–which, as we have seen, visually and allegorically displays the ends of all secular virtue, all ethics and politics–at the top of Mt. Purgatory. There is nothing necessary about this placement, or indeed of figuring purgatory as itself a kind of ascent; it is a choice for Dante to use this imagery. In doing so, and by making purgatory a place on Earth, subject to worldly temporality, he makes *Purgatorio* a poem overtly concerned with the world as it is, in a problematic middle space without easy resolution except *through* the exile of sin, culminating in a vision of paradise on earth (hence the pageant recalled by Stephen in 'RHYMES AND REASONS').

It is significant that Joyce explicitly foregrounds a queer realism by incorporating this parable (a truth which has the face of a lie, possibly), resisting closure and including supposedly incidental details like the coins needed for the plums, or 'the plumjuice that dribbles out of their mouths' (*U*: 7.1026). The 'messy present' or 'difficult middle' afforded by such realism can be read as a 'suprahistorical' view over exile, as explained by Matthew Fogarty, whose Nietzschean reading of Henry Flower and 'Nausicaa' bears similarities with my understanding of *Ulysses* as realism in a purgatorial mode (Fogarty, 2023: 372–3).[10] In analysing the Dantean fourfold allegory of the 'Plumtree's potted meat' motif in *Ulysses*, Blake Leland explains: 'For Joyce, the dimension of allegory is grounded in *this* world, especially in the body, fallen, carnal, and merely human' (Leland, 2014: 42). This exoteric carnality makes explicit, intensifies and politicises the obscenity latent in Pater's admiration of Dante for disavowing Neoplatonism, and the remark of Wilde's that his gods 'dwell in temples made with hands'. This queer politics to Joyce's depiction of Stephen Dedalus is evident, for example, in Joseph Valente's reading of *A Portrait*: Stephen's desire and dread of the male body is drawn into a troubled series of symbolic associations with the educational system, and thereby simultaneously with Wilde and colonialism (Valente, 2012: 232). By *Ulysses*, Stephen's notion of purgatorial ascent involves both the realism of a view of Dublin and the queer joys of plums: of plum juice, of stones spat from the summit.

Stephen's two titles for his oration, alliterating on the letter 'P' just as Dante uses seven Ps to structure the sins purged in *Purgatorio*, shows yet another route into the interpretation-resistant nature of the parable, its messy present. Joyce reuses the purgatorial mode of Dante to introduce a way of thinking about the vantage over Dublin he offers the reader, just as Dante reuses the psalm about exodus, and its quotation in the Latin Mass, to prime a kind of reading of *Purgatorio*.

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10 Fogarty suggests *Ulysses*, lacking resolution, is a postcolonial *Bildungsroman* in the vein suggested in Castle 2017. Perhaps a beneficial line of inquiry would be to see how far *De Profundis* (or Ellmann's biographies of Joyce and Wilde) might also conform to this definition.

'In exitu Israël de Aegypto'
cantavan tutti insieme ad una voce
con quanto di quel salmo è poscia scripto.

'In exitu Israël de Aegypto'
with what is written after of that psalm,
all of those spirits sang as with one voice.

<div align="right">(Purg: 2.46-8, trans. Mandelbaum)</div>

Dante's use of a liturgical psalm (113 in the Latin Vulgate and Greek Septuagint, 114 in the King James Version), the first line of which is woven into his rhyme and metrical scheme, has pedigree: the 'Epistle to Can Grande', often attributed to him, uses this line to explain how allegory works, layering three additional meanings over and behind the literal one. The line is shown to open out into a vision of a redemptive, loving Christian cosmos in the face of tremendous suffering. Here in this passage, the souls arrive at Purgatory singing this psalm, before they ascend the mountain and reach Paradise. The psalm itself is sung in the *tonus peregrinus*—the pilgrim's tone—which is a particularly rare mode in Gregorian chant, resembling a minor key and sharing a commonality with the Aeolian mode.[11] This so-called 'wandering mode' introduces more variability in the musical scale than other modes in Gregorian chant. Dante here asks a readership familiar with the psalm to imagine this wandering, and to imagine musically something that enacts, almost as an overture, the eventual working through of suffering by the Dante-pilgrim, and indeed the souls in Purgatory that are themselves wandering pilgrims. In the 'Parable of the Plums', we are presented with a modernist, realist version of this sort of scene-setting: another manifesto moment in *Ulysses* like Stephen's Shakespeare lecture in 'Scylla and Charybdis', with two 'pilgrims' suffering before their spiritual reward of—in lieu of the Garden of Earthly Delights—a view over the current state of affairs. This separate, privileged vantage over Dublin they share in is, perhaps, what Joyce aspires to; the irreverent pleasure implied by the sexual image of them eating plums and spitting stones from the column, likewise. This is not to suggest that the 'Parable of the Plums' easily yields to a single overriding interpretation, but rather to show how the technique is translated into a modern idiom. Far from shirking exile in favour of community, as Robinson interpreted it, Joyce uses Dante in 'Aeolus' to bring about a purgatorial mode within the everyday, a kind of exile to be found even in the centre of Dublin.

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11 As far as I can tell, this is just a coincidence. Joyce does not explicitly reference this psalm in 'Aeolus'. For more, see Lundberg (2011).

Conclusion: *il pertrattato nodo*

This essay, like all other essays on literary medievalism, has shown that writers moonlight as readers. This much is unsurprising. Both Wilde and Joyce's adoption of Dantean modes, however, are important for providing a perspective on lifelong reading and rereading habits, partly because the *Commedia* is a text demanding such dedication from its readers.

Wilde, according to a famous anecdote originating with Max Beerbohm Tree, used to sign the books he had read. From this, Joseph Bristow claims he 'provocatively contended' therefore, that reading is a kind of ownership over the text (Bristow, 2004: 12). Certainly, his reading was itself a generative process. Emphasis is often laid on Wilde's writing, his self-fashioning–proxies for his celebrity, perhaps. It seems less attention is given to his reading. This impression strikes me as wrong, not least when discussing an author for whom the critic was an artist; reading has to be creative for Wilde.

Likewise, Joyce—whose reading habits have generated much more attention, largely because of scholarly attention to the baffling and daunting interlace of reference in his works—places high importance on the capabilities of readers and new reading strategies for his aesthetic project, as I have argued previously (Green, 2023: passim). Medieval readers tended not to distinguish between allegory and allegoresis—that is, the mode of composing an allegory and the mode of reading allegorically into a text (Kriesel, 2018: 111). This attitude meant that, while Dante is placed authoritatively over any reader of the *Commedia*, medieval readers understood that they underwent a process of collaboration with him in creating meaning. It has been this essay's contention, in surveying their attitudes to Dante's work, that Wilde and Joyce likewise placed significance on this kind of blurring of the distinction between reception and creation.

The purgatorial mode might therefore be described best as priming a reading practice, where the reader is left to inhabit its middleness. This purgatorial reader traverses the paratactic ambiguities of *De Profundis* by mapping it against the personal readings of Dante that Wilde provides as if for demonstration. This same purgatorial mode of reading gains a wider political salience through the exhibitions Joyce provides in 'Aeolus'. Yet the question of whether these texts complete journeying through exile to some eventual reconciliation surely must be answered in the negative. What Wilde and Joyce recognized in Dante's exile was not so much heroism, and certainly not triumph: instead, they realised exile as a process, a pattern for their art. True to the pattern, their works are still wandering.

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests

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