Telling the Self:
Narrative and the Art of Memory in
Ecce Homo and De Profundis

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Abstract
Storytelling is a fundamentally human pastime, and here I read Nietzsche and Wilde as representatives of the “storytelling animal” who can be compared on several levels. I suggest that our memory of the past is always a work in progress, a rough draft with which we constantly tinker in our struggle to impose a meaningful narrative on our lives. The “art of memory” is therefore that of a self-fashioning narrative, and both Nietzsche and Wilde see the absence of meaning as an invitation to create a self through this art, that is, through storytelling. This is a playful self-creation; the authors have a keen sense of life’s groundlessness, its lack of fixed rules, and mainly what we find “behind” their narratives is a play-drive. Though possibly we readers of “auto-biographical” narratives like Ecce Homo and De Profundis might learn what it is to play from the stories/lives/selves presented to us in these texts, we cannot learn from them how to play; the authors have played, have created themselves in their own unique ways, and we could only truly imitate them by being different, by playing or creating in our own way.

Keywords
storytelling, autobiography, narrative, memory, imitation, self-fashioning, play,
Nietzsche, Wilde, Dionysus, Christ, Benjamin, Didion
“How could I fail to be grateful to my whole life?—and so I tell my life to myself.”
—Friedrich Nietzsche [Ecce Homo]¹

“The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.”
—Oscar Wilde 1023 [“The Critic as Artist”]²

Introduction

The underlying question that guides our exploration—Who speaks for the human today?—seems to me to beg another: is not the human the animal that speaks for itself? True, Montaigne in the 16th century already called into question the old definition of man as the “talking animal”: “most other animals . . . have means of complaining, rejoicing, calling on each other for help or inviting each other to love; they do so by meaningful utterances: if that is not talking, what is it?” (23). However, I would hasten to point out that while we know parrots can be taught to “speak,” gorillas can be taught to sign, and our dogs and cats are very capable of communicating to us that they want to be fed or played with, none of these animals is capable of narrative: of telling us how they came to the pet store where we found them, or giving us the details of their victory over the rodent with whose carcass they proudly present us. The ability to impose a narrative form on past events (including and especially the events of our mental lives) would still appear to be a uniquely human ability, and it will hopefully not seem unreasonable of me to begin with the (by no means exhaustive) definition of the human as “the story-telling animal.”

Going further, I would even assert that every human is a story (or at least is seen and sees him/herself as one), and that any conception of “the human condition” is largely shaped by this fact. This is because storytelling is inextricably linked to two fundamental aspects of human existence: the need to find meaning (especially in suffering) and the desire for perfection. I should point out that in this paper I will primarily be concerned with the autobiographical aspects of narrative and storytelling, and that in using these terms I am not necessarily referring to their literal definitions, i.e., the actual process of telling (or writing) a story. Although

¹ All citations of Ecce Homo, Beyond Good and Evil, The Birth of Tragedy, and The Case of Wagner refer to Kaufmann’s translation in The Basic Writings. All those of Antichrist, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and Twilight of Idols are from The Portable Nietzsche.
² All citations from Wilde refer to The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde.
this is certainly an important aspect of narrative, the sense in which I will be using the word also implies the much more general (and less conscious) act of narrative that all humans engage in when remembering the past. When we look at a picture of ourselves, for instance, we remember not only the specific scene that is frozen in the photo but also the events that led up to and followed that scene, what we were thinking and feeling at the time and why, and the role that all these events, thoughts and feelings have played in our lives up to and including the present.

Consciously or not, then, earlier events are seen to foreshadow later ones and individual incidents are viewed in a symbolic relationship to the whole; meanings are assigned retrospectively to experiences that may have seemed quite meaningless at the time they were lived. In short, every memory is embedded in the context of our life story as we tell ourselves it has been, and this is true independently of whether we actually “tell” ourselves this story. As St. Augustine writes in what has been called Western civilization’s first autobiography, memories “must be drawn together again, that they may be known . . . so that, not what is ‘collected’ and how, but what is ‘re-collected,’ i.e., brought together, in the mind, is properly said to be cogitated, or thought upon” (218-19). To recollect is not simply to gather memories but to order and integrate them, and thus every act of recollection is in some sense subsumed in the narrative we are continually (re)constructing. The art of memory is a narrative art.

Not only are our memories embedded in narrative, they are shaped and transformed by it as well, and the significance of past incidents and images changes as our story does. A picture of one’s self with a lover and a picture of one’s self with an ex-lover can tell different parts of very different stories, though the picture remains the same. An idyllic moment in an ongoing romance can easily mutate into an uneasy prelude to a bitter break-up without our necessarily being conscious of having retold and revaluated this memory. We view our lives as a story still unfolding, and define ourselves as the product of that story even as we continually reconstruct and revaluate the past to make it account for our present self-image.

My choice of the two central authors of this paper, Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde, is based partly on the fact that both were uncommonly aware of the mutability of memory, and that both recognized and extolled our ability to transform our pasts by revaluating, rethinking, and retelling them. The two autobiographical works I will be focusing on, Ecce Homo and De Profundis (hereafter EH and DP) deal specifically with this aspect of memory. “What lies before me is my past,” writes Wilde at the end of De Profundis, “I have got to make myself look on it with different eyes, to make the world look on it with different eyes, to make
God look on it with different eyes” (DP 957). The idea inherent in this sentence, that the past is not frozen immutably behind us but changes as our present does and also with how we and others look at it, serves simultaneously as a declaration of Wilde’s intention to actively change his past and a tacit admission that no such transformation could ever be final since his past will never be completely overtaken.

Equally important, Nietzsche and Wilde were preoccupied throughout their careers with the questions of meaning and perfection, and were amongst the first to seek personal, secular resolutions to these traditionally universal and spiritual dilemmas, rejecting mankind’s search for meaning in favor of the individual’s creation of it. Both Nietzsche and Wilde were atheists at a time when that label was still a rather exceptional one: both men staunchly opposed religion, morality, and all philosophical systems that made claims to universality, rejecting on both aesthetic and epistemological grounds the idea of any final “answer” or intrinsic meaning to existence. As Julia Brown points out, both

Wilde and Nietzsche inherited the same situation in philosophy: what earlier in the century Engels had called the “despair of reason,” its confessed inability to solve the contradictions with which it is ultimately faced. The flaunting of paradox in each writer . . . is a function of this despair as well as a bid to master it, just as their deployment of aphorism may be seen as a sign of resistance to enter any system. (58)

Likewise, I argue that both Nietzsche and Wilde took great joy in the destruction and revaluation of traditional or “universal” values (what Nietzsche described as “Philosophizing with a Hammer”) and in exposing man’s pretensions even as they preached his possibilities. At the same time, each of them recognized the necessity of assigning meaning to our lives, and especially to our sufferings: “If we have our own why of life,” says Nietzsche, “we shall get along with almost any how” (Twilight 468). Similarly, in describing his life in prison Wilde recalled,

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3 “How One Philosophizes With a Hammer” being the subtitle of Nietzsche’s Twilight of the Idols—though Nietzsche points out in his preface that his purpose is not to completely demolish idols but to touch them “with a hammer as with a tuning fork.”

4 Incidentally, the second half of this aphorism—“Man does not strive for pleasure; only the Englishman does”—could almost be seen as a direct reference to Wilde, who in 1888 was still known best as the lily-carrying flaneur satirized by Gilbert and Sullivan in Patience. If Nietzsche knew of Wilde at all, it was certainly only through this image. Wilde, although acquainted with a
“while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning” (DP 913). The opposition that Nietzsche posed in “Dionysus versus the Crucified” (the last line of EH) is between two methods of finding “meaning in suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence; in the latter case, being is counted as holy enough to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering” (The Will to Power 543). Though both men might justly at the end of their lives have referred to themselves as “the Crucified,” the meanings they imposed on their sufferings were decidedly Dionysian. Nietzsche sought to create meaning through philosophy, Wilde through art—but in the works of both authors the distinction between these two spheres often seems to disappear. Both have been described as viewing the world as a text, and both extolled the possibility of living one’s life as a work of art, of fashioning one’s self as one would a literary character and thus becoming the “poets of our life” (The Gay Science 240). Both Nietzsche and Wilde recognized the self-created nature of the narratives and meanings we impose upon our pasts, and valued their imposition all the more for precisely this reason.

In Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Stephen Greenblatt claims that self-fashioning “involves submission to an absolute power or authority situated at least partially outside the self—God, a sacred book, an institution such as a church, court, colonial or military administration” which is then opposed to a “threatening Other—heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist—[that] must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed” (9). The self-fashioning projects of Nietzsche and Wilde, each in their own way, profoundly contradict this claim. For these men, self-fashioning demanded the rejection of any authority outside the self, and the affirmation of “that which is unformed or chaotic (the absence of order)” (Greenblatt 9) as the opportunity for the creation of their own order. Finding no meaning or value in the orders presented to them, they attached meaning and value to their own “demonic parody” of those orders, and consciously sought to construct themselves in a stylishly “distorted image of the authority” (Greenblatt 9) they opposed: Nietzsche fashioned himself as Antichrist,

few Nietzsche readers including G.B. Shaw and André Gide, never referred to Nietzsche and did not appear ever to have read him.

3 It is perhaps important to point out that in this context “The Crucified” does not refer to the historical Jesus, who Nietzsche praises in The Antichrist as a fellow creator of values and bearer of glad tidings, but rather to the image of “God-on-cross” and its emphasis on divine judgment and the afterlife that Nietzsche sees as Paul’s corruption of Jesus’ message.

4 See, for instance, Edward Said’s The World, the Text, and the Critic.
Wilde as queer aesthete and later (less willingly) as “the infamous St. Oscar of Oxford, Poet and Martyr” (qtd. in Ellman 105). For Nietzsche and Wilde, however, the task of attacking traditional authorities was never the purpose so much as the precondition for their self-creations, the first step towards inventing their own value systems that they would embody in their own personalized and internalized versions of Dionysus and Christ respectively.

**Narrative, Meaning, and Perfection**

Before moving into a deeper examination of these writers, I should probably make clearer the connections I am drawing between narrative, meaning, and (especially) perfection. The link between narrative and meaning should be a fairly obvious one, for just as the desire for meaning is an ineluctable aspect of being human, so storytelling is an attempt to weave the loose ends of experience into a meaningful whole. As David Carr writes: “Life can be regarded as a constant effort, even a struggle, to maintain or restore narrative coherence in the face of an ever-threatening, impending chaos at all levels” (91). A great deal of what we call mental health resides in our ability to view our life story in a positive way: to comfortably recollect uncomfortable incidents in our past and judge them as instructive or “character-building”; to discover a sense of purpose and a feeling that our life is meaningful and “leading somewhere”; to recognize a narrative consistency in and between our actions and our ideals; and to be able in general to retrace our paths with a certain aesthetic self-satisfaction.

The connection between storytelling and the desire for perfection is a bit trickier. In the recent anthology *Being Human* compiled by the President’s Council on Bioethics, the desire for perfection and the longing for immortality are represented as definitive characteristics of the human condition. Conspicuously absent from the anthology, however, is any discussion of the ways that humans seek immortality and perfection through art. For instance, the single Shakespearean sonnet chosen for the anthology (Sonnet XII) ends with the conclusion that “nothing ‘gainst Time’s scythe can make defense / Save breed to brave him, when he takes thee hence” (702). In keeping with the anthology’s thinly veiled pro-life agenda, editor Leon Kass makes sure to attribute to Shakespeare the idea that procreation is the “one sure weapon against death” (436) conveniently ignoring the theme of Shakespeare’s subsequent sonnets that poetry is also a defense against time and death, that “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives
this, and this gives life to thee” (Shakespeare, “Sonnet VII” 705). Admittedly, if we take the word “immortality” literally then the idea of achieving immortality through art is just as ridiculous as the idea of achieving it through procreation—few today labor under the delusion that human civilization has an infinite future before it, and on the timeline of eternity a millennium is hardly distinguishable from a microsecond. Perfection, however, is a different matter entirely: a sentence, a sonnet, and a symphony can all be perfect. Who could change a note of Beethoven’s Ninth without doing damage to it? And if a thing might be considered “perfect” to the degree that one could not conceive of its being changed for the better, might not one look upon one’s life in the same way?

Beyond the particular examples of perfection that art can sometimes offer, it is important to note that characters from both fictional and historical narratives constantly serve as models for our real lives, inviting self-comparisons and/or imitations by authors and audiences alike. As Wilde pointed out in his famous dictum “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life” the standards by which we judge our actions and personalities are frequently set for us in art: we might yearn to be as resourceful as Odysseus, as strong-willed as Sethe, as cool as the Fonze, or even as depraved as Fyodor Karamazov. The qualities of the idealized selves we fashion in our minds and strive to imitate are frequently drawn piece-meal or wholesale either from fictional characters or from real people whose lives have achieved the status of literature: “Think of what we owe to the imitation of Christ, of what we owe to the imitatio n of Caesar” (Wilde 985 [“The Decay”]).

In this light, Nietzsche and Wilde’s efforts to “give style” to their lives by surveying “all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit[ting] them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye” (The Gay Science 232) can be seen not merely as attempts at self-perfection but as genuine manifestations of it. In artfully narrating a personal history in which one would wish nothing to be different, in which any alteration could only be seen as detrimental, one can in a sense perfect oneself through “imitating the techniques of the artists, viewing oneself at a distance, and coming to see all the details of one’s life as fitting together into a dynamic unity” (Brown 59)—a unity in which “even the blunders of life have their own meaning and value” (EH 710). And even if one insists on separating one’s life from one’s life

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7 See also, for example, the conclusion to “Sonnet XIX” on the same page: “Yet do thy worst, old Time! Despite thy wrong, / My love shall in my verse ever live young.”

8 The line is from “The Decay of Lying” in The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde (982).
story, the perfection of the latter would still appear to be (at worst) a step in the right direction.

Of course, all this depends on a rather subjective and relativist definition of perfection, but this type of definition is implicitly present any time one refers to a work of art as being “perfect.” Indeed, many of the things that are presented to us as a priori examples of artistic perfection have not always been considered so, and some have even been “improved” upon in the past. Until the 1830s, for instance, audiences saw only Nahum Tate’s “happy-ending” version of King Lear, and even after the original was restored cultural arbitrators like Samuel Johnson and Coleridge professed a preference for Tate’s version. Many poets have been known to obsessively tamper with their work even after it is “finished,” and people are often surprised to learn that Mozart’s Requiem was actually completed by another musician after his death. If one views “perfection” from a Platonic perspective (which seems to be the kind that Kass has in mind) then in fact no work of art can ever be perfect, since it can only be an incomplete imitation of something that is itself an incomplete imitation of an ideal form (and thus poetry must be banished from Plato’s ideal Republic). And yet it is precisely this type of spiritualization of perfection, this banishing of our highest aspirations to some invisible other world, that Nietzsche and Wilde spent their lives protesting. According to them, if perfection is possible at all it must be possible in this world, and more specifically for something to be perfect it must be considered perfect by a particular individual. “Things,” writes Wilde, “are in their essence what we choose to make them. A thing is, according to the mode in which one looks at it” (DP 957). To view something as perfect is to make it perfect; thus it is with art, thus with memories, thus with life.

Seen in this light, the ambition “to be the poets of our life” and to live one’s life as a work of art is both a manifestation of the human animal’s desire for perfection and a rejection of the traditional ideals of perfection that have been advertised by religion and metaphysical philosophy. Importantly, this more secular ambition of aesthetic self-perfection cannot be universalized, since to become a work of art a person must live his/her life differently than anyone has done thus far, and indeed must embrace the human animal’s capacity for diversity as its most salient and perfectible trait. “There is no one type for man” says Wilde, and there

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9 With this in mind it is no wonder that such a view and its historical proponents should be excluded from Kass’ anthology, which itself is rather like a stew of canonic dogmatisms, watered down through time and/or translation, peppered with the occasional Twainian cynic, and smelling sweetly of good traditional American values. Actually, it is rather amazing that Christ, who Wilde considers the unparalleled example of a life lived as art, is nowhere to be found in Being Human, though the anthology includes excerpts from Genesis, Job, Revelations, and Sirach.
“are as many perfections as there are imperfect men” (Wilde 1087 [The Soul of Man]). Humanity cannot achieve perfection through narrative, only individual humans can do so—and perhaps not even humans themselves but the stories they tell, the stories they become.

Dionysus vs. the Crucified

Nietzsche and Wilde’s efforts to assign their own meanings to existence are all the more significant in light of the personal calamities that enveloped their lives. As Brown says, one can read into the fates of both men “some strange new mutation of the possibilities of tragic heroism, the madness and collapse of the one find[ing] its pendant in the imprisonment and prostration of the other” (58). Nietzsche’s career was pockmarked with chronic (and likely psychosomatic) bouts of ill health that included crippling migraines and sporadic descents into near blindness, and his physical sufferings were compounded by both a profound loneliness and by the utter critical and commercial failure of all his books, without exception, during his lifetime (or at least within its lucid portion). For Wilde, conversely, the immense popularity he had once enjoyed as both an artist and a social figure made his later public disgrace and imprisonment for sodomy (together with his subsequent bankruptcy and permanent forced estrangement from his children) all the more agonizing. Moreover, in reading Ecce Homo and De Profundis we cannot help but be aware of the tragedies that followed their compositions: Nietzsche’s mental collapse occurred while he was half-way through correcting the proofs for Ecce Homo, and it was twenty years before the text (which opens with the plea: “Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else” [EH 673]) was finally published. In the meantime, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche had succeeded in linking her brother’s name to German nationalism and anti-Semitism, movements she supported but which Nietzsche had rabidly opposed and excoriated in Ecce Homo and elsewhere. To add absurdity to exploitation, the proclamation of Peter Gast (one of the few disciples Nietzsche garnered while sane) over Nietzsche’s grave—“Holy be thy name to all coming generations”—was applauded whilst the unpublished words of the deceased—“I have a terrible fear that one day I will be pronounced holy: you will guess why I publish this book before; it shall prevent people from doing mischief with me” (EH 782)—gathered dust in his sister’s desk. Even the book’s eventual publication did not prevent the Nazis and others from citing Nietzsche’s work to support causes he would undoubtedly have abhorred.
In Wilde’s case, although the central tragic event of his life provoked rather than coincided with De Profundis, the story of his post-prison existence is if anything more terrible than the story of his downfall, which (today at least) carries a certain sense of grandeur and has inspired numerous plays and films—a fact Wilde would certainly have appreciated. In prison, Wilde could still view the future with some hope, and speak optimistically “of again asserting myself as an artist” (DP 917). Following his release, however, Wilde was able to produce only a single poem, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” after which he gave up writing altogether, claiming, “The intense energy of creation had been kicked out of me” (Ellman 571). Wilde’s existence in his final years is horrible even to read about: exiled to the continent, a social pariah even amongst the Parisians, abandoned by most of his friends, divorced by his wife, living in poverty, racked by the ill health he had acquired in prison and subsequently nurtured on a steady diet of absinthe, tobacco, and promiscuity, the man whose plays had once held the stages of Europe could now be seen panhandling along the boulevards. More frequently, Wilde would loiter about cafés in hopes of bartering his still potent conversational skills for food and drink, politely adjourning if he began to draw stares. Richard Ellman tells the story of how Graham Greene’s “father and another schoolmaster were sitting in a Naples café when a stranger, hearing them speak English, asked if he might join them for coffee. He looked vaguely familiar, but they did not recognize him during the hour and more that they were charmed by his conversation. He left them to pay for his drink, which was ‘certainly not coffee’” (Ellman 558). The artistic rebirth to which Wilde had aspired in prison was less tenable outside its walls, where a dead martyr might be made a saint but a living one could only be a nuisance, and Wilde was eventually driven more completely than ever into the arms of the hedonist lifestyle for which he had ostensibly been condemned and ostracized.

Yet despite the tragedies that surround them, the central theme of both Ecce Homo and De Profundis is not a questioning or condemnation of fate, but rather a complete acceptance and affirmation of the most seemingly awful episodes in their authors’ lives. Like Boethius awaiting his execution in The Consolation of Philosophy, the task to which Nietzsche and Wilde set themselves is the explanation of their sufferings as being valuable, as being good for them—to discover the “end and purpose of things” through the recollection of their lives’ “true nature” (Boethius 20). Like Boethius, Nietzsche and Wilde are concerned with showing the necessity of all things, and with proving that the best and worst incidents of one’s life are inextricably linked. Unlike The Consolation of Philosophy, however, Ecce Homo and De Profundis scorn finding meaning and comfort through reference to a higher
power, a “supreme good” that “mightily and sweetly orders all things” (Boethius 80). In these works, fate is not seen as a benevolent architect or an underlying reason that shapes all things towards a greater good; rather, fate is an arbitrary and often malevolent fiction that must be embraced nonetheless: “Accepting oneself as if fated, not wishing oneself ‘different’—that is in such cases great reason itself” (EH 687; first italics mine). This philosophic outlook, that one must accept and affirm all of one’s life (past, present, and future) if one is to affirm any of it, Nietzsche terms “amor fati,” or “love of fate,” a philosophy that demands “that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it . . . but love it” (EH 714). Wilde, somewhat shockingly (and thus somewhat characteristically) comes to call this outlook “Humility,” a condition that requires him “to absorb into my nature all that has been done to me, to make it a part of me, to accept it without complaint, fear, or reluctance” (DP 916) as essential to his continuing saga of self-realization. In terms of the ambition of narrative self-perfection discussed in my introduction, and the idea of perfection as that which could not be changed for the better, the intimate connection of these credos—“amor fati” and “Humility”—with the art of memory should be clear.

Destroying the Subject, Constructing the Self

Both Nietzsche and Wilde share the paradoxical distinction of having been at once critics of the “subject” (i.e., the classic humanist notion of the subject as an indivisible, autonomous agent) and gurus of the “self” (i.e., of the realization and development of what is most unique in each of us). For these men, the self is not something that exists automatically but something that must be discovered, constructed, and continually adapted. Nietzsche, whose name is often bundled into an unholy trinity of self-deconstruction with Marx and Freud (whom he clearly anticipates in Ecce Homo with the assertion that “consciousness is a surface” [EH 710]), vehemently denied the existence of a single, unchanging self at the center of our being and denounced “the subject” as “the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum.” (The Will to Power 269). As Stanley Corngold points out, however, Nietzsche does not reject all theories of the self on principle, but only “weak theories of the self, e.g., as pure spirit, as an indestructible monad, as the agent of introspection, and so forth” (98). Nietzsche’s ambivalent view on this matter can be readily observed in this passage from Beyond Good and Evil:
The belief that regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an atomon: this belief ought to be expelled from science! Between ourselves, it is not at all necessary to get rid of “the soul” at the same time. . . . But the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as “mortal soul,” and “soul as subjective multiplicity,” and “soul as social structure of the drives and affects” want henceforth to have citizens’ rights in science. (210-11)

Nietzsche sees the self as a continually shifting battleground of habits and desires, some of which are observable through introspection and some of which are not. The “I” of which we speak posits continuity but is in fact in a state of constant change, much like the river that Heraclitus (one of Nietzsche’s few heroes) could not step into twice. Nonetheless, Nietzsche believes we have the potential to fashion some sort of “subject-unity” as “regents at the head of a communality” (The Will to Power 271) by vigorously integrating, structuring, and valorizing our disparate impulses. Importantly, this regency can also “reach backwards,” as Alexander Nehamas says, “and integrate even a discarded characteristic into the personality by showing that it was necessary for one’s subsequent development” (Nehamas, Nietzsche 185). When this happens, the discarded characteristic is altered and revaluated in terms of its function in the still-evolving narrative of the subject’s life.

Although not cited nearly so often as Nietzsche on the subject, Wilde also anticipated many of the objections that twentieth century theory would make to the humanist conception of the autonomous agent. In “The Critic as Artist” Wilde rejects the idea that an individual can be held responsible for the consequences of his/her actions, and declares, “The one person who has more illusions than the dreamer is the man of action. He, indeed, knows neither the origin of his deeds nor their results” since all human action “passes into the great machine of life which may grind our virtues to powder and make them worthless, or transform our sins into elements of a new civilization” (1023). And though Wilde’s views on the essential contingency of all action lead him to conclude, (as only Wilde could), “When man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is poet” (1024). He hints as well at the puppetry inherent even in description with the precocious observation that language “is the parent, and not the child, of thought” (1023). Yet the idea that the autonomous self (even in thought) might be a fiction is not necessarily a problem for Wilde who, in contrast to Nietzsche, prized fictions above all other things. Wilde believed fervently in the power of art to transform existence, calling it...
“our spirited protest. Our gallant attempt to teach nature its proper place” (970 [“The Decay”]).10 To live life as a work of art did not for Wilde require any daring or heroic action, or even necessarily any artistic creation beyond the realization of the best aspects of one’s own nature: “the life that has for its aim not doing but being, and not being merely, but becoming” (1041 [“The Critic”]). Thus “the only civilized form of autobiography” for Wilde “deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one’s life; not with life’s physical accidents of deeds or circumstance, but with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind” (1027 [“The Critic”]). To live life as a work of art one must be able to describe one’s inner life as a work of art, to tell the story of one’s mental and spiritual becoming.

It is this type of inner-life-story, or intellectual autobiography, that is being told in Ecce Homo and De Profundis—which partly accounts for their many peculiarities as autobiographies. Both works challenge traditional notions of autobiography and narrative, and some scholars have questioned whether Ecce Homo can rightly be called an autobiography at all, since it can hardly be said to accurately tell the story of Nietzsche’s “life” (his childhood and schooling, for instance, are barely touched upon, and his mother and sister go almost unmentioned). Yet the notion that an autobiographical work should conform to some normative and/or linear standard of narrative is myopic and even absurd, since the particular style of narration in any such work is as vital to the depiction of its author/subject as the story it tells. In telling stories to others, we distinguish ourselves both through the particular series of events that constitute our lives and through the distinctive style of our telling. Our styles of narration are linked to our styles of thought and remembrance, and through these styles we fashion our selves in our own minds much as we attempt to fashion a certain image of our selves in the minds of others.

In Nietzsche’s case, his refusal to describe his life in a traditional manner is perfectly consistent with his lifelong attack on systemization and with his philosophy of perspectivism—the idea that the best way to understand a thing is to interpret it from a variety of different perspectives rather than trying to discover the “thing-in-itself” (a concept he denounced as a philosophical fiction). Nietzsche’s

10 This quote also demonstrates neatly the most essential difference between Nietzsche and Wilde, and indeed reads like a positive revaluation of Nietzsche’s critique of the artist in Beyond Good and Evil; here he says the artist is able to “find the enjoyment of life only in the intention of falsifying its image” (261). Of course, Nietzsche had earlier espoused a similar view in The Birth of Tragedy, and Wilde in De Profundis (while not abandoning his enshrinement of art) shifts sharply away from his earlier love of art’s more superficial manifestations, explicitly switching his Hellenic allegiance from Apollo to Dionysus (DP 927-28).
personality and ideas cannot readily be separated from his style: if he attempted to construct a straightforward narrative of his life he could not do justice to the life he was attempting to describe. Thus, *Ecce Homo* is closer to a photo album than a memoir, as Nietzsche examines trends and moments in his life through a characteristic series of short aphoristic passages that do not always appear to build on or even agree with each other. The book takes the form of four chapters, deliciously titled “Why I am so Wise,” “Why I am so Clever,” “Why I Write Such Good Books” and “Why I am a Destiny.” In the first chapter Nietzsche discusses his father (who also went insane and who died when Nietzsche was five), his health, his “warlike” nature, the dangers that both pity for humanity and the nausea induced in him by humanity pose for him, and his need for solitude. The second chapter is perhaps the most classically “autobiographical,” though it deals mainly with “small things—nutrition, place, climate, recreation” which Nietzsche claims “are inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important thus far” (*EH* 712). Nietzsche discusses his diet, the places he has lived, his reading habits and love of music, and his relationship with Wagner. In the third chapter, by far the longest, Nietzsche reviews in order all of his books with the exception of *The Antichrist* (the first book in what he intended to be a four-part *Revaluation of All Values*), which he was withholding from publication until *Ecce Homo* had paved the way for it. In the final chapter Nietzsche discusses his contributions to philosophy, dubbing himself “the first immoralist” (*EH* 782) and ranking his critique of Christian morality and his call for a revaluation of all values as his (and perhaps anyone’s) greatest gift to humanity.

Ironically, it is the third chapter (“Why I Write Such Good Books”) that comes the closest to “traditional” narrative. For one thing, it is (almost) linear—describing the course of his literary career from 1872 to 1888. Moreover, in dis-

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11 The metaphor of the photo album is even more applicable if one thinks of photography in its earliest forms, when those who were photographed had to remain still for sustained periods of time, and when each daguerreotype captured not a “flash” of time but a duration of patient posing.

12 Some critics have seen in the unbridled egotism of these titles a sign of Nietzsche’s impending madness. It seems obvious to me, however, that besides being extremely amusing these titles are quite consistent with Nietzsche’s intention in *Ecce Homo* of making clear who he actually is. Even today, many readers of Nietzsche have trouble realizing that he is frequently being ironic, and it seems to me that these hyperbolic assertions (though I’m sure he meant them literally as well) are a not-so-subtle hint that Nietzsche does not always take himself completely seriously, a stylistic reiteration of his claim that he would sooner be “a buffoon” than a “holy man” (*EH* 782).

13 Actually, this is not quite true: characteristically, Nietzsche problematizes a completely chronological reading of his books by placing *Twilight of the Idols* before *The Case of Wagner* (*Wagner* came first, though both were written in 1888 along with *The Antichrist* and *Ecce Homo*).
cussing his writings Nietzsche tells the story of the development of his thought over time, finding even in the faults of his earlier works the embryos of his later insights. In a body of work, which many have found to be a jumble of contradictions, Nietzsche traces a coherent and consistent progression of thought. In discussing his Untimely Meditations, for instance, Nietzsche claims that in praising Wagner and Schopenhauer he was actually praising himself by projecting his own values onto them, asserting that the “essay Wagner in Bayreuth is a vision of my future, while in Schopenhauer as Educator my innermost history, my becoming, is inscribed” (EH 737). Thus, while Nietzsche claims that in Human, All-Too-Human “I liberated myself from what in my nature did not belong to me” (EH 739), this liberation is not represented as a radical about-face but rather as an explicit realization of themes that had already been implicit in his earlier works. In this, Nietzsche is being true to what he calls the “biographer’s task: they must reflect upon their subject on the principle that nature takes no jumps” (qtd. in Nehamas, Nietzsche 195). In telling the story of his books, Nietzsche is also fashioning an image of himself as an author by showing how, in Nehamas’ words: “a single figure emerges through them, how even the most damaging contradictions may have been necessary for that figure or character or author or person (the word hardly matters here) to emerge fully from them” (Nehamas, Nietzsche 195).

At the same time, Nietzsche’s peculiar style of narration disrupts his readers’ ability to draw systematic connections between his life and his work. Indeed, if one were to select the most singular characteristic of the “single figure” that Nehamas finds in Ecce Homo it would have to be its or his constant multiplicity, his strategic irreducibility. Nietzsche himself says that his “dual series of experiences, this access to apparently separate worlds, is repeated in my nature in every respect: I am a Doppelganger, I have a ‘second’ face in addition to the first. And perhaps also a third” (EH 681). Nietzsche’s multiplicity is constantly exhibited through what he describes as “the most multifarious art of style that has ever been at the disposal of one man” (EH 721), and his idiosyncratic manner of narration powerfully reiterates his assertion that “facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations” and that the world and everything in it “has no meaning, but countless meanings” (The Will to Power 267). The way Nietzsche writes reflects the way he thinks and remembers as well, and each passage is as much a demonstration of “How One Becomes What One Is” (Ecce Homo’s subtitle) as an attempt to explain it.

The style of Ecce Homo is thus emblematic of the paradox at the heart of the book: Nietzsche’s attempt to construct a self-portrait while simultaneously denying the existence of an irreducible and unchanging self that can be portrayed. Returning
to the photo album metaphor, one could say that the self one sees in each photograph is different from the self in every other photograph, as well as from the self who is presently interpreting the photographs (although that self is in some sense a compendium of all the previous selves he is viewing). Furthermore, the selves in the photographs are continually changing through the shifting interpretations of the viewer, who is in turn changed by his acts of interpretation.

“One pays dearly for immortality,” says Nietzsche, “one has to die several times while still alive” (EH 759). This aphorism, perhaps the most famous from *Ecce Homo*, expresses beautifully the way in which the process of narration inevitably destroys the narrator: in completing *Ecce Homo* (or any book) the “I” who was writing it is replaced by the “I” who has written it, the revaluation that the former “I” has imposed on the past has itself become part of a new past. The “I” who was writing *Ecce Homo*, however, is not destroyed but “immortalized,” and now in fact “one labors under it” (EH 759) as one’s present self continually struggles to live up to and expand on one’s deeds and the story one has told of them. For Nietzsche, each book that he creates is the work of a different person; a different stage of his selfhood, and the story of “How One Becomes What One Is” is not a story that can really be told since in telling it one becomes a different person. While he is writing his books, Nietzsche is the creator of Zarathustra as well as of the narrators of *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Antichrist*, and *Ecce Homo*; once he has written them, however, he is their survivor. In writing *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche wished to separate the man Friedrich Nietzsche from his books, to make clear that “I am one thing, my writings are another matter” (EH 715) and thus to sabotage any attempt by his readers to comfortably unify his life and his work, to comprehend them from a single perspective or through a single interpretation.

With Wilde the situation is somewhat different, as perhaps the central ambition of Wilde’s artistic project was to make his life and his work inseparable, to fashion out of everything he had said, done, and written the image of a single unified work, a masterpiece of many parts. This is not to say that Wilde necessarily believed in the reality of a constant unchanging self any more than Nietzsche, only that he never believed that reality should be allowed to stand in the way of art. And while he detested the notion that a single meaning could be drawn from life, Wilde nonetheless believed that one’s life story could and should be viewed as a unified whole, and that the “past, the present, and the future are but one moment in the sight of God, in whose sight we should try to live. Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of Thought. The Imagination can transcend them, and move in a free sphere of ideal existences” (DP 956-57). This
passage might seem rather odd coming from a man who earlier in the same letter had claimed to have no interest whatsoever in religion or metaphysics, but it makes a great deal of sense if one realizes that to live in “the sight of God” for Wilde means that one should strive to live one’s life as if one were its author and critic as well as its protagonist, to integrate each experience into the context of one’s story as a whole. And though one might well imagine that Nietzsche would scoff at Wilde’s reference to a “free sphere of ideal existences,” Wilde’s meaning here is once again more artistic than spiritual. Both Wilde and Nietzsche would doubtlessly agree that such an idolatrous view of our imaginative powers invites a falsification of life: Wilde, however, chooses to attach the highest value to such falsifications, and therein lies the most deep-seated difference between the two men.

The “narrative” forms of Ecce Homo and De Profundis are designed not only to impose meaning on the past but also to withstand the uncertain events of the future. “At every single moment of one’s life,” writes Wilde, “one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been” (DP 922). Thus to affirm the past and the present is to affirm the uncertain future as well. At the same time, it is important to note that neither Nietzsche nor Wilde believed in justifying the present through the future, i.e., through the notion that present misfortune is only a necessary step towards some future goal. Both believed that the “goal” of the past should only and always be the present, and felt that living for the purpose of a continually deferred future (e.g., heaven) was in some sense a betrayal of life. “A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself,” says Wilde—referring to politicians and others whose ambitions are tied almost entirely to their careers—“invariably succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it.” On the other hand, “People whose desire is solely for self-realization never know where they are going. . . . The Final mystery is oneself” (DP 934). Similarly, Nietzsche claims that to “become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion what one is,” and for that reason takes great pride in being “always equal to accidents; I have to be unprepared to be master of myself” (EH 710; 683). For each man, there can be no goal to life beyond the process of living it, and the style of our stories is the means through which we can justify even the most tragic or futile ends: “To hold in honor in one’s heart even more what has failed, because it failed—that would go better with my morality” (EH 692). Thus the mark of the highest nature is to value even and especially the disasters of one’s life, to be able “to turn every ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’” (251 [Zarathustra]) and thus to discover in one’s own life-story not a happy ending but an artful telling, a beautiful being.
The Meaning of Life: Judging the Void

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” writes Joan Didion; “We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. . . . We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (Didion, The White Album 11). The power, one might even say the necessity of story-telling has long been recognized in psychotherapy, where numerous “studies have shown that victims of loss and violence are helped in their recovery by telling a story about what happened to them, that so doing engenders a transformation from victim to survivor” (Phelps 56). Even apart from the case of trauma victims, however, “the value of shaping one’s experience into story form extends far beyond the therapeutic. Storytelling is an essentially human act that enables all of us to make sense of our lives and to feel integrated as members of a community” (Phelps 55). In telling one’s story one transforms one’s experiences into a more comprehensible and personally stylized form from which a meaning can more easily be drawn, and in exchanging stories people often find comfort through a feeling of shared beliefs or a collectivized sense of common experience.

There is, however, a darker side to this therapeutic function of narrative: psychological trauma can arise not only from traumatic experiences but also from an inability to find meaning in ordinary experience, from the isolation that occurs when we cannot integrate our stories with those of others, from a sense of inconsistency or inadequacy in the retrospective narratives we create. What happens when we can no longer tell our lives to ourselves in a meaningful way? Or even when we realize that the meanings we have assigned (or believe we should assign) are arbitrary, naive, and self-imposed? In the title essay of her book The White Album, Didion writes about a time in her life when she “began to doubt the premises of all the stories [she] had ever told [her]self” (11), a condition that led her to check into a psychiatric clinic which described her as “a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses and increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress” (14). Having come to view her life as the impromptu performance of what she had long believed to be a legible script, Didion relates the effects of her melancholy revelation: “I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable

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14 Phelps makes references to the works of Judith Herman (173-95) and Frank Ochberg.
sequence, images with no ‘meaning’ beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience” (The White Album 13). Fittingly, the essay is written in a non-linear episodic fashion, passing through a series of non-sequential autobiographical events that do not appear to be meaningfully connected. Digging deeper, however, one discovers that there is still an Augustinian “re-collection” taking place, a coherent narrative being constructed through the jarring disavowal of linearity and coherence. It is in fact the story of Didion’s narrative disillusionment, of how she came to believe that “all narrative was sentimental . . . all connections were equally meaningful, and equally sense-less” (The White Album 44). Despite its rejection of narration’s ability to explain, the entire essay still functions as an explanation for its closing line, in which Didion claims, “Writing has not yet helped me to see what it [her experiences, the events of the late 60s] means” (The White Album 48).15 The desire pervading her narrative is thus a strange but by no means uncommon one: a desire to reconcile oneself to the essentially arbitrary nature of experience, to impose some meaning on one’s sense of meaninglessness, to explain one’s inability to offer explanation.

For Nietzsche and Wilde, this paradoxical desire is a starting point, a precondition for their work rather than a subject of it. To find meaning in an inherently meaningless world for them demands the affirmation of what is most unique, mutable, and relative in the world (e.g., art) in place of what is standard, constant, and monolithic (e.g., morality). To accomplish this, both thought it necessary (indeed, desirable) to reject the narcotic comfort of collectivity, to abandon the ambition for any higher standard of judgment, any prepackaged explanation of life that humanity might purchase in bulk. Their affirmation of ambiguity is constantly reflected in their aphoristic styles and love of paradox, in their celebration of the uncertain as a potential playground for endless interpretation. They desire not only to be the poets of their life but the judges of it as well, and to pass sentence not only on their own existence, but on existence in general. Though both men suffered greatly, their narratives are intended to interpret their suffering as valuable: it is precisely in this act of attaching value to life that they find its meaning.

Reflecting on contemporary life in the early twentieth century, Walter Benjamin claimed that storytelling was already becoming a lost art, and that “Less

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15 Didion’s most recent autobiography, The Year of Magical Thinking, about the events surrounding the death of her husband, explores even more profoundly the themes of meaning, suffering, and narrative. The White Album, however, poses more succinctly and explicitly the problems I am dealing with here.
and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. . . . It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us . . . were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences (83). According to Benjamin, the role of the storyteller has been largely usurped by the mass production of literature and by the mass media; instead of stories we are fed a mass (or mess) of verifiable, plausible “information” that is selected and edited for us as if we were children being tucked into bed by our nanny. “Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without being shot through with explanation” (89). The most dramatic and tangible cause of the decline of storytelling, however, Benjamin locates in the First World War, from which “men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience. . . . A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body” (84).

Expanding on Benjamin, Shoshana Felman describes these veterans as having been unable to find any “social or collective space in which to integrate their death experience. Their trauma must remain a private matter that cannot be symbolized collectively. It cannot be exchanged, it must fall silent” (27-28). The traditional justifications for death and suffering—patriotism, duty, religion, etc.—had for countless survivors been exploded in the trenches along with so much else. Human experience had been devalued along with the very idea of the human, of our eternal importance in the grand scheme of things. An abyss had been opened, and in it could be found no suitably unassailable vantage point from which the monstrous totality of our sufferings could be comprehended and judged.

Nietzsche foresaw the approaching spiritual market crash of the twentieth century, which he summarized in his (in)famous pronouncement “God is dead” and prophesized eerily in Ecce Homo by predicting that “when truth enters into a fight with the lies of the millennia, we shall have upheavals, a convulsion of earthquakes, a moving of mountains and valleys, the like of which has never been dreamed of . . . all power structures of the old society will have been exploded—all of them are based on lies: there will be wars the like of which have never been seen on earth” (EH 783). In The Juridical Unconscious Felman claims that legal justice systems have increasingly striven to assuage the devaluation of experience that Benjamin

16 This statement could easily be seen to apply to Nietzsche (a man ahead of his time in so many ways), who generally preferred correspondence to conversation even with his closest friends. Wilde, conversely, was a raconteur of genius—a fact noted by his friends and enemies alike.
described, and she points to the Nuremberg trials (and especially the Eichmann trial) as attempts to collectivize the trauma of the Second World War through legal means, specifically through the courts’ ability to place history itself on trial in the name of the silent victims of oppression (including and especially the dead). “One longs for justice,” she argues, and we are forced to place our “hopes in legal justice because the only secular redemption comes from the law,” despite the fact that “the law offers no ultimate redemption and no final day of judgment” (Felman 18). The law cannot offer ultimate redemption because it is unavoidably forced to partake in the same violence and oppression it has been empowered to condemn, and thus “Judgment Day is both concrete (particular, political, historical) and doomed to remain historically, eternally deferred” (Felman 18).

Rather than attempting to fill the spiritual void with some new secular arbitrator of justice, Nietzsche and Wilde chose to embrace this void as a gauntlet that challenges us to create our own meanings, an invitation for individuals to become themselves the judges of existence, to pass sentence on their lives without reference to any precedents or values that they themselves had not created or affirmed. To them, the submission of one’s personal sufferings to some collectivized and officially sanctioned attempt at catharsis could only represent an even greater devaluation of experience, a dissipation of life’s most unique and powerful ingredients into the bland and conciliatory concoction of the melting pot. Moreover, neither man desired to condemn history, though both sought to separate themselves not only from collective verdicts, but from negative ones in general. The challenge for them did not lie in judging existence so much as in acquitting it, the challenge of pardoning even its most senseless and terrible crimes. The ideal judge for this endeavor would be one who could find grounds to forgive anything in the name of everything, who would discover in the gravest litany of charges an opportunity for the most meaningful of pardons.

It is only by understanding Nietzsche’s preference for individual affirmation over collective prosecution, for a malleable void over a rigid guiding dogma, that we can understand his assertion that “I contradict as has never been contradicted before and am nevertheless the opposite of a No-saying spirit. I am a bringer of glad tidings like no one before me; I know tasks of such elevation that any notion of them has been lacking so far; only beginning with me are there hopes again” (EH 783). The glad tidings that Nietzsche brings are inseparable from his annihilation of traditional values and standards of judgment, for it is precisely this annihilation that allows us to assume the mantle of judgment for ourselves and thus to rehabilitate our traumas as we see fit.
As one might expect of a prison document, *De Profundis* is saturated by the theme of judgment, a theme with which Wilde must continually grapple in his attempt to assign meaning to his sufferings. In retelling the story of his imprisonment, Wilde seeks to reclaim authorial responsibility for his fate by retrospectively passing sentence on himself, by portraying his legal trials and the petty feud that prompted them as incidental instruments in the service of Wilde’s own overarching narrative scheme. Although it is written as a letter to Alfred Douglas (letters were all Wilde was permitted to write in prison,) *De Profundis* often reads more like a letter written by Wilde to himself, and indeed Wilde, intending it for posthumous publication, did not actually send it to Douglas until he had been released and allowed to copy it, for fear that Douglas might immediately burn it upon receipt (which he later did). The first half of the letter, which is rife with bitterness and melancholy, is a denunciation of Douglas and his father as equal authors of Wilde’s disgrace, and in recollecting his relationship with Douglas Wilde blames himself “for allowing an unintellectual friendship . . . to entirely dominate my life” (*DP* 874), and “for the entire ethical degradation I allowed you [Douglas] to bring on me. The basis of character is will-power, and my will-power became absolutely subject to yours” (*DP* 877). This is Wilde at his lowest point, bemoaning his fate and heaping blame upon himself and others.

Yet the despairing narrative that Wilde has related to this point serves primarily to set the stakes of his coming revaluation. The volta occurs when Wilde concludes “the end of it all is that I have got to forgive you. I must do so. I don’t write this letter to put bitterness into your heart, but to pluck it out of mine. For my own sake I must forgive you” (*DP* 912). Rejecting all that he has written thus far, Wilde declares that “neither you nor your father, multiplied a thousand times over, could possibly have ruined a man like me” and says he “must take the burden from you and put it on my own shoulders” (*DP* 912). Wilde then proceeds to paint an exalted portrait of his life and career prior to his fall, and begins to describe the doctrine of “Humility” that prison has allowed him to discover and his determination “to make everything that has happened to me good for me” (*DP* 915). Imposing a new logic on his past, Wilde claims that while he doesn’t “regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure . . . , to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also” (*DP* 922). Discoursing on the truths that can be found only through suffering, Wilde begins to tell the story of his life in such a way that his imprisonment becomes a necessary condition for his further self-development, an opportunity to rehabilitate a previous existence that he has
since judged incomplete. Though he never devalues his earlier life as popular artist and public aesthete, Wilde’s “humble” new narrative shows that life to be but the brilliant first act of a much grander tragedy, incomplete in itself and only perfectible through the addition of an equally beautiful sequel, one that Wilde is even now in the process of composing.

Like Nietzsche, Wilde claims that all of his later revelations had actually been “foreshadowed and prefigured” in his earlier work (DP 922). In a brief but brilliant paragraph, Wilde describes how the theme of suffering as necessary to a fully lived life can be seen to pervade much of his art, pointing especially to his prose poem “The Artist.” Intriguingly, at this point Wilde actually misremembers his own poem. While “The Artist” tells the story of a sculptor who for lack of bronze is forced to melt down his “image of The Sorrow that endureth Forever” in order to fashion “the image of The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment” (863). Wilde in De Profundis actually reverses this, claiming that the artist had melted down the “Pleasure that liveth for a Moment” to make the “Sorrow that abideth Forever” (DP 922). Though Wilde was of course denied access to his own works in prison (most had been taken out of circulation anyway after Wilde’s conviction) one cannot help but wonder if a man possessed of Wilde’s encyclopedic memory and intense artistic egoism could actually have been unaware of this mistake. Whether or not Wilde was conscious of revising his work, however, I think it safe to say that the revision can be read as intentional—for the poem that Wilde recreates in his memory describes just what he is doing in De Profundis: melting down the philosophy of pleasure he had formerly espoused in order to fashion a philosophy of sorrow, reconstructing his past to make it justify and beautify his present, reevaluating his previous life on the assumption that his present situation is meaningful, valuable, and just.

In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche is faced with a similar task in regard to his health: the task of explaining how the wretched physical condition that had obligated his early retirement as a professor and that frequently forced him into days or weeks of vegetative convalescence was an essential aspect of the destiny he had become and was still becoming. Typically, Nietzsche comes to view his sickness as an inestimable gift that allowed him to leave behind teaching and scholarship and to devote himself entirely to his own work.17 This is how he interprets the shattering physical breakdown that drove him from the Chair of Philology he had held since the age of

17 Of course, Nietzsche does not discredit his previous existence as a scholar, claiming that “It shows my prudence that I was many things and in many places in order to be able to become one thing—to be able to attain one thing. I had to be a scholar, too, for some time” (EH 738).
twenty-five in Basle, a period that he has earlier described as his “minimum” (EH 678):

Here it happened in a manner I cannot admire sufficiently that, precisely at the right time, my father’s wicked heritage came to my aid—at bottom, predestination to an early death. Sickness detached me slowly: it spared me any break, any violent and offensive step. . . . My sickness also gave me the right to change all my habits completely; it permitted, it commanded me to forget; it bestowed on me the necessity of lying still, of leisure, of waiting and being patient.—By that means, of thinking.—My eyes alone put an end to all bookwormishness—in brief, philology: I was delivered from the “book”; for years I did not read a thing—the greatest benefit I ever conferred upon myself—that nethermost self which had, as it were, been buried and grown silent under the continual pressure of having to listen to other selves (and that is after all what reading means) awakened slowly, shyly, dubiously—but eventually it spoke again. Never have I felt happier with myself than in the sickest and most painful periods of my life: one only need look at The Dawn or perhaps The Wanderer and His Shadow to comprehend what this “return to myself” meant—a supreme kind of recovery—The other kind merely followed from this. (EH 743-44)

In this passage Nietzsche’s idea of transforming an “it was” into a “thus I willed it” is incarnate. His sickness is portrayed as a necessary precondition to his later work, a sine qua non of his literary greatness. Even the loss of his ability to read, which one cannot imagine him to have been particularly joyous about at the time it occurred, is described as “the greatest benefit I ever conferred upon myself.” The fact that this evaluation is retrospective, that it represents only how “that long period of sickness appears to me now” (EH 680) is irrelevant; by imposing this positive narrative on his past Nietzsche is actively “exploit[ing] bad accidents to his advantage” (EH 680); in judging his sickness to be a gift he makes it one as well.

If autobiography in Ecce Homo and De Profundis serves in some ways as a means to an end—a means of finding meaning in one’s past—it is important to point out that it is no less a means to a beginning. In telling their stories Nietzsche and Wilde do not seek to forge a tidy conclusion but rather to pave the way for the
next chapter in their development. Nietzsche’s alleged purpose in writing Ecce Homo was to prepare the world for his forthcoming Revaluation of All Values, and De Profundis was meant both to herald and to enact the personal artistic renaissance that Wilde hoped for upon his release. In a passage that can be seen to mirror the course of De Profundis itself, Wilde recalls how “for the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else, and can remember doing nothing else, but wring my hands in impotent despair, and say ‘What an ending! What an appalling ending!’ Now I try to say to myself, and sometimes when I am not torturing myself do really and sincerely say, ‘What a beginning! What a wonderful beginning!’ It may really be so. It may become so” (DP 935). For it to become so, Wilde must make it so by realizing the aspirations he has laid out. It is one thing to pardon the past, but is quite another to live with this judgment continuously intact—it is a judgment under permanent appeal, one that must be passed and re-passed again and again. “One can realize a thing in a single moment,” says Wilde, “but one loses it in the long hours that follow with leaden feet. It is so difficult to keep ‘heights that the soul is competent to gain.’ We think in Eternity, but we move slowly through time” (DP 921). De Profundis itself demonstrates this as, near its conclusion, it regresses into bitter ruminations on Wilde’s bankruptcy before regaining the tone of “Humility” that permeates its powerful conclusion. And though it is not nearly so easy to find places within Nietzsche’s text where the struggle to maintain his love of fate reveals itself, the circumstances of his mental breakdown seem to more than call into question his claims of having “overcome” his pity.

Yet the fact that neither of these authors fulfilled the ambitious projects that these works were meant to begin—Nietzsche never finished his Revaluation and

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18 Benjamin in fact claims that the possibility of continuation is one of the essential differences between the story and the novel, and says, “there is no story for which the question of how it continued would not be legitimate” (100).

19 In a sense De Profundis is both a prologue and an epilogue: it is a prologue to the post-prison renaissance for which Wilde yearns, but it is also (as a document specifically intended for posthumous publication) written as an epilogue to Wilde’s “complete work”—his life as art.

20 It is important to note that Revaluation of All Values was never finished. Nietzsche’s mental collapse occurred as he saw a horse being beaten by its owner in the street; falling to the ground, Nietzsche threw his arms around the horse and repeatedly professed through tears that he felt its pain. Also significant in this respect is the fact that Nietzsche in Ecce Homo does not discuss the fourth book of Zarathustra—the book in which Zarathustra overcomes his pity for all the “higher men” who are still unable to create their own meanings or to appreciate the glad tidings that Zarathustra brings. The obvious explanation for this is that Zarathustra IV had only been printed privately and was not available to the public, but one might also read into this omission an instance of Nietzsche’s falling short of Zarathustra, in the face of whose words he claimed he was often “unable to master an unbearable fit of sobbing” (EH 702).
Wilde wrote but one more work—should in no way call into question their success either as beginnings to as-yet-unlived chapters or as ends in themselves. For even as Wilde claims that by producing “one more work of art I shall be able to rob malice of its venom, and cowardice of its sneer, and to pluck out the tongue of scorn by the roots” (*DP* 917) he is in fact doing all those things by writing *De Profundis*, and will do them again in writing *Reading Gaol*. The selves that have been fashioned through these narratives stand frozen in time, inoculated against subsequent developments as “whatever was life in [them] has been saved, is immortal” (*EH* 675). And although these books remain ever subject to the transforming powers of interpretation, the judgments inscribed in them are nevertheless the judgments that stand before us today, and the stories they tell are the stories that remain. “For creators are hard,” says Zarathustra, “And it must seem blessedness to you to impress your hand on millennia as on wax. Blessedness to write on the will of millennia as on bronze—harder than bronze, nobler than bronze. Only the noblest is altogether hard” (326 [*Zarathustra*]). In retelling their lives Nietzsche and Wilde have taken action against their pasts and impressed their own meanings upon them; in judging their sufferings to be necessary, beautiful and meaningful they have acquitted existence of any wrongdoing against them. And though the selves who have passed these judgments must in a sense be sacrificed, dumped into the wake of their fashioners’ transient passage, the narratives in which these selves are forged have made them watertight and durable, have made them literature, have made them hard.

**Perfection and the Imitation of Art**

Earlier I claimed that narrative can serve as a vehicle for a certain type of aesthetic self-perfection, the creation of one’s self as a literary character and of one’s life as a work of art. To perfect one’s life in this fashion requires the development of a unique style of living and of expressing one’s life. For Wilde, the artist of life achieves this style through developing a “mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which Form reveals” (*DP* 919). To make one’s life a work of art, one must discover and accentuate through style and selection what is most unique to his/her particular brand of existence. The mental history one narrates must be echoed in the manner of its telling, and the narrator must constantly seek from the rough material of past incidents to forge symbols that illuminate his life as a whole (as Wilde does with his review of “The Artist”).
Although Nietzsche would probably be highly skeptical of Wilde’s ambition to make his self “one and indivisible,” he does claim that in the story of anyone who has “given style” to their character we will recognize “how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!” (The Gay Science 232). To exhibit a single taste in this respect does not necessarily require consistency or unity so much as singularity; the character that this taste has formed must show distinctiveness in both habit and departure from habit, in action and motivation, in triumph and failure, in thought and expression. If one takes sufficient pride in this singularity to be unabashedly prejudiced in its favor, then one should also recognize how the subtraction or substitution of any portion of one’s story would irreparably alter the uniqueness of the character that has been fashioned through it. In realizing the uniqueness of one’s life, and in attaching the utmost value to this uniqueness, one can thereby realize its perfection: the flawlessness inherent in anything one would never desire to change.

One advantage of an artistic conception of perfection is that creating a “perfect” narrative in no way precludes future perfections of the same source material: upon finishing one story, the storyteller becomes free to approach his/her life from a different perspective, to discover another way in which that life might perfectly be told. I have already discussed how any act of narrative must in some sense destroy its narrator, since in the act of telling one’s story one changes from character to storyteller and then from the person who is telling the story to the person who has told it. The consolation, for the writer especially, is that one’s told or written self now has an independent existence. Moreover (if one’s narrative has been constructed with the proper style and “Humility”) a version of one’s story—and thus a version of one’s self as its main character—has now been perfected. Once this particular story/character has been fashioned, the narrator places it on display and returns once more to his/her Sisyphean task. At this point, the task of judging and interpreting this story is transferred from narrator to audience (though the narrator has now become part of this audience as well). Having already been judged unique and perfect by the self21 who has “told” it, this story/character now stands ready to facilitate the realization of uniqueness in others (for it is most often through interpreting the singular that we can discover what is most singular in our

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21 The “self” referred to here is meant to be distinct from the character or told/written self; this self could be seen as the nexus between the story that has been told and the life that has been lived, as the multiplicity of drives, instincts and memories that separate and connect the liver and the teller.
styles of interpretation). Henceforth, the uniqueness of this story (as of any work of art) might to a great extent be demonstrated precisely through the range of unique interpretations it generates, and the singularity of its character through its audience’s inability to assign a single interpretation to it: the written self will remain hard precisely to the extent that it remains complex, controversial and irreducible.

The transfer of judgment from author to audience is reflected in the very title of *Ecce Homo*, which refers to Pontius Pilate’s words (“This is the man!”) as he presented Jesus to the mob. If Nietzsche is in one sense playing Christ here he is of course in another sense playing Pilate, both by standing in judgment over his life and by refusing to recognize divinity or holiness where others might be inclined to find it; he also plays Pilate by refusing to make the final verdict, by releasing his character to the final judgment of the crowd. We, his readers, are thus free to receive his (Nietzsche’s and/or Pilate’s, if not also Christ’s) message or to pardon Barabas in his stead—to re-inscribe what he sees as the original sin of dogmatic morality by turning a deaf ear to his (own) glad tidings. In a sense, Nietzsche expects and hopes to be condemned by the masses (in his term, which is not meant metaphorically, the “herd”), since the majority of people are incapable of creating their own values and therefore “must crucify him who invents his own virtue” ([Zarathustra]). Nietzsche’s playful and ironic title thereby also gives a positive meaning to the commercial failure and chronic misunderstanding of his books: in refusing to recognize him the herd is in fact confirming his value, his individuality.

The greatest danger that audience and posterity pose for Nietzsche is therefore not one of repudiation but rather of imitation. Although Nietzsche encourages his ideal readers—those “philosophers of the future” for whom he offers *Beyond Good and Evil* as a prelude to their own projects—to create their own values, it is vital to his task that the values they create be different from the ones he himself has created. This is the dangerous paradox of narrative self-fashioning: “Success in creating yourself may cause its own failure. For if others in fact imitate you, if your way of life appeals enough to the rest of the world and can become a paradigm of how life can be lived, then what distinguished you from the world” (Nehamas, *Art of Living*).

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22 This is a less hyperbolic paraphrase of Wilde’s claim, in “The Critic as Artist,” “the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation” (1027).

23 The applicability of this aphorism to Wilde’s life is too obvious to require exposition.

24 And arguably the same danger is/was/will be posed for Christ. See the later discussion of Wilde (39).
runs the risk of losing its distinctiveness and being assimilated into the commonplace. For this reason Nietzsche takes great pains in *Ecce Homo* to assure even (or rather especially) his most enthusiastic readers that “there is nothing in me of a founder of a religion. . . . I want no ‘believers’” (*EH* 782). Nietzsche desires readers, but readers who will follow in his footsteps by questioning him the way he has questioned others. The Preface to *Ecce Homo* closes with Zarathustra’s adage that “One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil. And why do you not want to pluck at my wreath?” (190 [*Zarathustra*]). To be a “faithful” Nietzschean, one must discover where one disagrees with Nietzsche, and furthermore one must *desire* to disagree with him.

The relationship between imitation and aesthetic self-fashioning is thus a problematic one: the narrative of a successful self-fashioner can serve as a blueprint for future projects, but only if one views its author/narrator/character “not as an educator but as one who has educated himself and thus has experience” (qtd. in Nehamas, *Nietzsche* 71). The artists of living must tell their stories with the caveat that “those who want to imitate them must develop their own art of living, their own self, perhaps to exhibit it for others but not so that others imitate them directly. Imitation, in this context, is to become someone on one’s own; but the someone one becomes must be different from one’s model” (Nehamas, *The Art of Living* 10). This can be true not only of the praxis of our reading but also that of our writing: in donning so many masks and assuming so many stances within and throughout his works, Nietzsche strives to make himself inimitable even to himself. The particular character that is left behind in each of his works must be unique, and his books must be different not only from everyone else’s but also from each other; to die several times one must live and tell several different lives. And although Wilde did not wish to separate his life from his works to the extent that Nietzsche did, the range of genres that he inhabited as an artist (plays, poems, stories, dialogues, essays, and a novel) reflected his ambition to complicate his author-image with a variety of masks. For both men, the diversification of their style became an essential marker of their individuality and thus a means of resisting imitation; indeed the threat of self-imitation became a constant impetus to eschew the comfortable repetition of their previous work and seek constantly for new means of expression, new avenues of development.

Yet although one cannot perfect one’s story simply by mapping it straightforwardly onto the life of another, there nonetheless remain ways in which one can imitate a fellow poet of life without compromising either one’s own uniqueness or that of one’s model. The most general method is to imitate by disavowal, to honor
one’s idols by rejecting them as they have rejected theirs. This method requires that we be able to “hate [our] friends” (190 [Zarathustra]) as Zarathustra exhorts us to do, and in viewing the lives of those we respect and admire we must look for the places at which we can diverge, discover the untrodden paths from which we can echo in our own words the dictum of Nietzsche’s bizarre prophet: “‘This is my way; where is yours?’—thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ For the way—that does not exist” (307 [Zarathustra]). This is why Nietzsche claims that one’s choice of “enemies” is in many ways more important than one’s choice of friends, since “strong” selves are largely fashioned by what they oppose, and since the “strength of those who attack can be measured in a way by the opposition they require: every growth is indicated by the search for a mighty opponent—or problem; for a warlike philosopher challenges problems, too, to single combat” (EH 688). To imitate Achilles, we must find our own Hector; to imitate Nietzsche we must seek him as a great opponent—as he sought Socrates, Jesus, and others; we must attack him as a show of respect. To attack something, for Nietzsche, is not to dishonor it but rather the opposite, and one should always keep in mind, with regard to his hyperbolic and provocative style, that the selves Nietzsche puts forth in his books are meant to invite opposition, that in reading him we should ideally feel ourselves to be in “single combat” with the ideas he puts forth (even if we are conquered by many of them).

In challenging one’s idols one can also subversively imitate their styles, as Wilde does with Plato in his dialogue “The Decay of Lying.” In using the dialogue form, Wilde is both imitating Plato and imposing his own style on the Athenian’s signature genre. Unlike what happens in Plato’s dialogues, for instance, Wilde’s secondary interlocutor never becomes a complete yes-man to his main speaker, and in fact the unresolved doubts of the former serve continually to deflate the hyperbolic witticisms of the latter and undermine our total acceptance of the ideas presented in the work. Wilde’s dialogue also follows in the footsteps of one of Plato’s most famous attacks: in The Republic, Plato (through Socrates) challenges the popular idea that artists have a privileged access to truth and denounced all works of art as mere “imitations thrice removed from the truth, [that] could easily be made without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances only and not realities” (Plato 383). Just as Plato in The Republic attacks art in the name of truth, so Wilde in “The Decay of Lying” attacks truth in the name of art. In De Profundis, Wilde claims that the dialogue was inspired by a conversation he had had with André Gide in which he had claimed that “there was nothing that . . . Plato . . . had said that could not be transferred immediately into the sphere of Art,
and there find its complete fulfillment” (DP 923). Although Wilde rejects metaphysics, his own philosophy in a sense imitates Plato’s and turns art itself into the world of Platonic ideal forms that life never completely lives up to, the very world from which Plato had claimed all art to be “thrice removed.”

In the context of this essay, it is important to note that imitation is performed not only through action but through narrative, through telling one’s story in such a way that it can be seen to resemble the story of someone else, through creating one’s own character in the image of another. This is especially true when our models for imitation are fictional. In claiming that life imitates art, Wilde primarily meant to point out that the meanings and values we attach to things are constantly derived from art. In saying that Hamlet “invented” the “pessimism that characterizes modern thought” and that “The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy” (983 [“The Decay”]). Wilde did not mean to imply that nobody was sad, pessimistic or melancholy before Hamlet. Rather, Wilde meant that Hamlet so beautifully personified a type of melancholy that the very concept of melancholy is fundamentally altered and influenced by it. In our cultural consciousness, the character of Hamlet has become the Platonic ideal of the melancholy man, and if we wish to convince ourselves of the grandeur and artistic depth of our depression we need only show how our sorrows imitate his.

Ideally, the imitation of art should be a two-way street, a symbiotic imitation rather than a parasitic one. In depicting ourselves through reference to literary characters we should not only show how we are similar to them but also how they are similar to us: how the characters we take for our examples are in themselves incomplete versions of our own idealized self-image, how the aspects of their style that we value as most unique and worthy of imitation are to a large extent created through our own unique interpretations. To offer an example: in reinterpreting Milton’s Satan as the real hero of Paradise Lost, Percy Shelley and the other Romantic poets in some way showed Satan to be simply imitating the conceptions of heroism that they had brought to the work.

The primary literary figure that Nietzsche created as a model for imitation was Dionysus, whose presence pervades his writings from his first book (The Birth of Tragedy) to his last (Ecce Homo). Although it may at first seem odd that Nietzsche (a virtual teetotaler) would choose the god of wine for his own personalized deity, several characteristics make Dionysus a fitting choice. Firstly, Dionysus is always

25 In Wilde’s model, of course, the ideal forms provided by art are not previously fixed but are always capable of being written and rewritten; they are created and exalted by humans rather than being inscribed, eternal and immutable, in the ethereal consciousness of some higher power.
seen as a two-faced deity: he is generous and cruel, creative and destructive, mortal and immortal (he was the only one of the major Grecian gods to have a mortal parent). Furthermore, as that god of theater and tragedy who Nietzsche sees as the “original hero” for whom “all the celebrated figures of the Greek stage—Prometheus, Oedipus, etc.—are mere masks” (73 [The Birth of Tragedy]). Dionysus exemplifies Nietzsche’s idea of achieving immortality through a series of deaths; in the cult of Dionysus destruction and creation are interwoven and ritual dismemberment is a precondition to rebirth. Thus, Nietzsche might be seen to be imitating Dionysus when he describes himself as a “Doppelganger” with a dually privileged “access to apparently separate worlds” (EH 681), as well as in his depiction of authorship as a series of immortalizing self-immolations.

Yet Nietzsche’s Dionysus is also a highly personalized one, and there is certainly a sense in which Dionysus becomes an imitation of a Nietzschean ideal, particularly through Nietzsche’s non-alcoholic reinterpretation of Dionysian intoxication as “a passionate-painful overflowing into darker, fuller, more floating states; an ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life as that which remains the same, just as powerful, just as blissful, through all change; the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow that sanctifies and calls good even the most terrible and questionable qualities of life; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction” (The Will to Power 539). Nietzsche’s adoption of Dionysus as a model thus hinges on a reciprocal imitation: while Nietzsche strives to create himself in the two-faced image of his deity, he also creates Dionysus as the god of his own idiosyncratic brand of tragedy, as a symbol of the “preference for questionable and terrifying things” that Nietzsche claims “characterizes strong ages and natures” (The Will to Power 450). Dionysus in Nietzsche’s work can thus be seen to imitate Nietzsche’s own task of affirming the entire “large-scale economy” of life “which justifies the terrifying, the evil, the questionable—and more than merely justifies them” (The Will to Power 451). The relationship is closer to a cross-pollination than a straightforward imitation of A by B.

As opposed to characters who have been created through (auto)biography, fictional characters might be seen as more resistant to the plundering of singularity that imitation threatens, as having a distinct advantage over historical models through their increased malleability, their greater susceptibility to the personalized interpretations that can turn imitation into a symbiotic process. This difference is much slighter than one might suppose, however, since the self one creates through narrative is always in some sense a fictional character, alive only in the interaction
between text and interpreter. Moreover, in creating (and/or imitating) fictional models self-fashioners still run the risk of having their uniqueness co-opted through unimaginative recreations of their own creations/imitations. A good analogy can be found in acting: in playing Stanley Kowalski, for example, all actors must imitate the words and actions that Stanley performs in the text. Imaginative actors will strive to imitate the personalized version of Stanley that they have interpreted from the text, and their version of Stanley will in some ways be an imitation of themselves: Brando as Stanley is also Stanley as Brando. Unimaginative actors, conversely, might strive simply to imitate the performance of another actor: if one sees several performances in which the actor playing Stanley is trying to imitate Marlon Brando playing Stanley, eventually even the singularity of Brando’s original performance will come to seem less original. To bring this analogy back to the example of Nietzsche and Dionysus, one could say that Nietzsche’s individuality would not be threatened by someone else adopting Dionysus as a model for imitation, but it would be threatened if they were to adopt Nietzsche’s personal Dionysus.

Since all characters created through narrative are in some sense fictional, it is certainly possible to imitate historical (or even contemporary) figures in the same symbiotic fashion that one can imitate other characters from literature. This is what Nietzsche in Ecce Homo claims to have done with Wagner and Schopenhauer in his Untimely Meditations, and this is what Wilde does more fully with the character of Christ in De Profundis. Earlier, in The Soul of Man under Socialism, Wilde had claimed that “he who would lead a Christlike life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself. . . . It does not matter what he is, as long as he realizes the perfection of the soul that is within him. All imitation in morals and in life is wrong” (1087 [The Soul of Man]). To imitate Christ in this sense means to be different from everyone else, including Christ. In De Profundis, a substantial portion of the letter is devoted to the “intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist” (DP 922). Of course, there can be no single “true” life of the artist since the lives of all true artists must necessarily be different, as the life of Christ was different—unless we assume that in referring to “the artist” Wilde is speaking specifically of himself, initiating his symbiotic imitation. Wilde writes at length on Christ’s message and Christ’s life—calling the latter “the most wonderful of poems”—and in praising the potential beauty of “the spectacle of one blameless in pain” (DP 924) he lays the ground for an aesthetic validation of his own misfortunes through his unique imitatio Christi.
It is vital to remember, however, that even if Wilde’s description of Christ as a “blameless sufferer” is intended to invite some comparisons to his own life, it is nonetheless precisely this image of himself as an innocent victim that Wilde is striving to overcome. In order to transform his story from that of a senseless catastrophe into a beautiful tragedy, to acquit life of any injustice against him, Wilde must judge himself guilty. Yet this does not prevent him from attaching value to his guilt, and thus the point at which Wilde most truly aligns himself with Christ is when he places Jesus on the side of the sinner:

The world had always loved the Saint as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of God. Christ, through some divine instinct in him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man. His primary desire was not to reform people, any more than his primary desire was to relieve suffering. To turn an interesting thief into a tedious honest man was not his aim. . . . But in a manner not yet understood by the world he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful, holy things, and modes of perfection. It sounds a very dangerous idea. It is so. All great ideas are dangerous. That it was Christ’s creed admits of no doubt. That it is the true creed I don’t doubt myself. (DP 933)

Here, we see Wilde projecting his own philosophy onto Christ: there can be “no doubt” that this is Christ’s creed because it is the creed of the Christ that Wilde has created in his mind and in his letter, the Wildean Christ that he has set himself to imitate. Wilde probably did truly credit this “dangerous idea” to Christ, but he is equally crediting himself with the dangerous idea of attributing this idea to Christ: the dissemination of dangerous ideas thus becomes a Promethean crime of which both are unquestionably guilty. Furthermore, in interpreting Christ as the figure who realized the beauty of the sinner Wilde is preparing himself to realize the beauty of his own sins and where they have led him:

Of course the sinner must repent. But why? Simply because otherwise he would be unable to realize what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation. More than that. It is the means by which one alters one’s past. The Greeks thought that impossible. They often say in their gnomic aphorisms “Even the Gods cannot
alter the past.” Christ showed that the commonest sinner could do it. That it was the one thing he could do. Christ, had he been asked, would have said—I feel quite certain about this—that the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept he really made his having wasted his substance with harlots, and then kept swine and hungered for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy incidents in his life. It is difficult for most people to grasp this idea. I dare say one has to go to prison to understand it. If so, it may be worthwhile to go to prison. (DP 933)

In this passage Wilde assumes a dual role: he is both Christ and the prodigal son. He is the one who shows that the past can be altered and the one who is actually altering his past through acceptance and repentance. The major sin that Wilde repents, of course, is not his homosexuality or his hedonist lifestyle but rather his “absurd action” (DP 878) of appealing at Douglas’ behest to a social order he had spent his life opposing and disrupting. In De Profundis the very idea of repentance is transformed: the version of repentance Wilde embodies in Christ’s prodigal son and then strives to imitate does not demand that one wish never to have performed an action; rather, in repenting one transforms an action that was terrible at the time it was performed into an action that is beautiful in retrospect. Just as the prodigal son’s past is justified by his beautiful moment of repentance, by his realization that he should repent, so Wilde’s going to prison becomes worthwhile because it allows him to discover why it may be worthwhile to go to prison.

Like Nietzsche with Dionysus, Wilde creates in Christ a uniquely interpreted literary model that his life can be shown to resemble. This is why he can say that Christ “does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one becomes something” (DP 934). Wilde does not need to actually compare himself to Christ, because through his revisionist reading of Christ he shows us how he is discovering and becoming himself. In writing on Christ, Wilde is practicing what he had earlier called “the highest Criticism,” finding in the story and character of Jesus the starting point for his own creation and inscribing through his account of them “the record of [his] own soul” (“The Critic” 1027). The story he finds becomes inseparable from the story of him finding and telling that story, and from the value that story comes to hold for him. Through his unique interpretation of Christ, Wilde creates himself as a unique and inimitable interpreter; through his creative and laudatory criticism of a fellow artist of life, Wilde invites future creative criticisms of his own life’s work. Although Christ in De Profundis remains
a vaguely religious figure, the religion he comes to symbolize is closer to Wilde’s own art-worship than any version of Christianity practiced hitherto, and the example he sets is an artistic rather than a moral one. In many ways, it is more a case of Wilde converting Christ than of his being converted by him.

Conclusion

I began this paper with the assertion that every human is a story—it might perhaps be more accurate to say that every human is many stories, not (or at least not only) in the sense that every life encompasses many tales, but in the sense that each existence is open to a wide array of tellings, to what Benjamin describes as “that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” (93). Whether we tell ourselves these stories through speech, through writing, or through memory alone the fact remains that the past is always a work in progress, a rough draft with which we constantly tinker (consciously or not) in our struggle to impose a meaningful narrative on our lives. The form that this narrative takes (linear, non-linear, moralizing, ironic, etc.) is important only to the extent that it reveals our styles as narrators, and what we think of as our “self” is fashioned as much through the method of our memory as through its content. If we are writers, or even gifted raconteurs, it is possible to perfect and solidify many versions of our allotted draft and many versions of ourselves as its main character—though the price we pay is that in the process of creating these characters we cease to be them (if ever we were them). Even if our narrative ambitions are tied solely to the art of memory, however, we may still with equal enthusiasm struggle towards an aesthetic self-perfection in story form, a constantly adapted recollection of our personal history as a beautiful and stylish saga, a tale in which every incident has its own significance, from which no event could be extracted without damaging the whole; a tale we would never change and would never wish to change.

The fact that the meanings we find in these stories are arbitrary, that they have no meaning in themselves, that the form of perfection they enable has no significance beyond its own pronouncement, might seem to some objectionable, depressing, even nauseating. It does not have to be so. The void before us is not half empty or half full: it is full of emptiness. It offers no answers and gawks with dead unblinking eyes as we suffer, plod, and strive. We may choose to ignore this emptiness, to bemoan it, to condemn it, or to plug it with whatever filler has been
handed or handed down to us. We may also choose to embrace it, to dance before it, to serenade it with laughter and song, to paint it in brilliant colors and stuff it with whatever meaning we see fit. The authors I have been discussing, Nietzsche and Wilde, chose to love it. In the absence of meaning they found an invitation to create their own, a task they considered challenging, ennobling, and joyous: “I do not know any other way of associating with great tasks than play: as a sign of greatness, this is an essential presupposition. The least compulsion, a gloomy mien, or any harsh tone in the throat are all objections to a man; how much more against his work!” (EH 714). The stories Nietzsche and Wilde impose on their lives in *Ecce Homo* and *De Profundis* reflect this play-drive even as they struggle to come to terms with enormous trauma: they play with the past, with the meaning of the past, with themselves as characters, and with the characters they have chosen to imitate. The selves fashioned in these works do not tell us how to play; they cannot; they play by their own rules, as must we. At the same time, if we are willing to free ourselves from the desire for answers or axioms, we might be able to glean from these narratives what it is to play: what it means to transform the past, to consciously inscribe meaning on existence, to fashion a striking and stylish character from the decaying remnants of a Cartesian cogito.

“The duty of imposing form upon the chaos does not grow less as the world advances” (Wilde 1055 [“The Critic”]). As our traditional reservoirs of meaning continue to grow murkier and shallower, as the divine and political justice systems in which we have placed our hopes prove increasingly oppressive or nonexistent, as the concept of human “dignity” becomes too laughable even to laugh at, the potential value of affirming the void, of affirming play, may for many become more and more evident. It may for some provide the basis for a new dignity, a dignity whose value originates in affirming the relativity of all values, in demanding from the concept of dignity no more meaning than they themselves have placed in it, have judged it to contain.

I have defined the human as the story-telling animal, but what does this really mean? Are there any “limits” on the possible implications of such a definition? We tell stories because what we find in them, what we need from them, does not exist outside those stories (or inside them, for that matter). We tell ourselves that our lives have meaning, that perfection is possible, that what we value is valuable, that we are unique individuals. Or at least we attempt to do so. Does the fact that we need stories to convince ourselves of these ideas make them worthless, or does it make storytelling that much more worthwhile? If we recognize the necessity of our delusions, does that make us more or less delusional? If all meanings and values are
the products of interpretation, then what is the meaning and value of interpretation? There are of course no answers: these choices are arbitrary, but perhaps they are all the more important for that reason. Every animal that is troubled by these questions must judge and speak for itself.

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### About the Author

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[Received 2 June 2006; accepted 10 July 2006; revised 21 August 2006]