

**Oscar Wilde. *De profundis*: a severe judgement of Sophocles as a poet.  
(On the occasion of the twenty-fifth centenary of Sophocles' birth)<sup>1</sup>**

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To Maria Salvador

Someone like O. Wilde<sup>3</sup> who in *The Critic as Artist*, wrote: “Whatever, in fact, is modern in our life we owe to the Greeks. Whatever is an anachronism is due to mediaevalism”<sup>4</sup> is logically expected to have held Sophocles in high esteem, even –why not?– at the top of the Greek tragic art and triumphing over every sort of obscurantism. We verify, however, that since his estimation is held *in carcere et vinculis*, i.e. when a scrupulous examination of conscience is for him inevitable and he needs to obtain both pity and compassion, there is room for shades and accuracies:

“I had said of Christ that he ranks with the poets. That is true. Shelley and Sophocles are of his company. But his entire life also is the most wonderful of poems. For 'pity and terror' there is nothing in the entire cycle of Greek tragedy to touch it. The absolute purity of the protagonist raises the entire scheme to a height of romantic art from which the sufferings of Thebes and Pelops' line are by their very horror excluded, and shows how wrong Aristotle was when he said in his treatise on the drama that it would be impossible to bear the spectacle of one blameless in pain. Nor in Aeschylus nor Dante... in Shakespeare... is there anything that, for sheer simplicity of *páthos* wedded and made one with sublimity of tragic effect, can be said to equal or even approach the last act of Christ's passion” (166-7)<sup>5</sup>.

It goes without saying that, being a prisoner, it is not the famous and audacious creator of paradoxes who is writing now, but, on the other hand, only by means of paradox and anachronism can he bring together modernity and mediaevalism, and even tragedy and romanticism. And so, addressing himself to a world which in good measure was fascinated both by the “pan-hedonic” instigation of aestheticism and the sophistication of decadence, he maintained that, only from the bareness of the innocent's pain and in opposition to Aristotle's statement<sup>6</sup>, tragedy or, perhaps better, the effect of the performance of tragedies attains an incomparable degree of romantic sublimity. All over Western Culture, Paganism and Christianity

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<sup>3</sup> As an introduction to his biography, bibliography and personality, see e. g.: Bashford, 1999; Beckson, 1998; Calloway, 1997; Ellmann, 1990; Holland, 1997; Knox, 1994; Mikolyzk, 1993; Sawers, 1997; *The Cambridge Companion...*, 1997 and Varty, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> The Project Gutenberg Etext of *Intentions*.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations and numbers in parentheses will correspond to *O. Wilde. De Profundis and Other Writings*. London: Penguin Classics, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. Cap XIII, 2: “... it is obvious to begin with that one should not show worthy men passing from good fortune to bad” (οὔτε τοὺς ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρας δεῖ μεταβάλλοντας φαίνεσθαι ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν -translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe, *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965).

have known different confrontations and symbioses, and once again they become now two opposite poles, at least in the heart and mind of someone who, from his *metánoia* or repentance, needs to associate himself with purity but not, as often happens in Greek tragedy, with the abhorrence that is peculiar to inherited stains and insurmountable destinies. Sophocles certainly remains safe and sound after Wilde's rigorous selection, but it is quite evident that for the Wilde of *De profundis*, neither Antigone nor Oedipus, for instance, could ever be compared with Christ's purity, in just the same way that the performance of their respective tragedies does not effect the same degree of *kátharsis* on account of, in this case, the exact application of the Aristotelian definition of tragedy<sup>7</sup>.

What prevents Sophocles from being put on the same level with Christ or, in other words, what exalts Christ towards an artistically superior category? Popular piety would adduce simply the *empeiria*, experience or verification of the correspondence between Christ's words and actions, but the artist's temper, which is used to abandoning reality to the extent of being capable both of objectifying and modelling it at his discretion, must obviously follow other parameters:

“Christ's place indeed is with the poets. His whole conception of humanity sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realised by it. What God was to the pantheist, man was to him. He was the first to conceive the divided races as a unity. Before his time there had been gods and men, and, feeling through the mysticism of sympathy that in himself each had been made incarnate, he calls himself the Son of the one or the Son of the other, according to his mood (166)... but out of his own imagination entirely did Jesus of Nazareth create himself... This is why he is so fascinating to artists” (173).

One could think, therefore, that Christ, as if he were a Platonic philosopher –in good measure a mystic one-, according to Wilde, wants and knows how to ascend through degrees of abstraction in order to attain the Archetype and, finally, rather than with individuals, to “sympathize or commiserate” with Mankind. Not at all. Jesus of Nazareth's unique art of imagination consists precisely of descending in order to find Mankind in individuals, to the extent of imagining himself, a single man as well, as the incarnation, here and now, of the Archetype. Notwithstanding, following Gautier, Baudelaire and Huysmans, Wilde affirmed with pride that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life”<sup>8</sup>. The artist not only grasps the everlasting Idea, taking it as the form in order to model the bare and shapeless matter<sup>9</sup>, but he also surpasses the very same Idea, so that he creates and incarnates it in fact. Consequently, the true artist is both a creator and the creation, poet and poem, *poietés* and *poíema* –or *poíesis* turning into *poíema*- and Jesus did create a sort of sublime man and incarnate him:

“To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all... And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom suffering and sorrow were modes through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it

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<sup>7</sup> Cap. VI, 2-3: “Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of certain magnitude... it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions” (ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἔχουσης... δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαινουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν -*idem*).

<sup>8</sup> “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life... A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher” (The Project Gutenberg Etext of *Intentions. The Decay of Lying*).

<sup>9</sup> “Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style” (*idem*).

becomes incarnate and is made an image, he made of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing” (171).

Very seldom has it been stated with such resolution that, unless the idea (*eidéa or idéa*) becomes image (*eikón*), it hardly accomplishes its shaping mission of tangible reality<sup>10</sup>, and probably for the same reason Plato also realized that, without the help of his image –not myth- of the cave, his metaphysical programme was in fact unintelligible since it was unimaginable as well<sup>11</sup>. But I should underline now that, once again in the case of O. Wilde, the great herald of *L’art pour l’art*, it is paradoxical, excessive and even absurd that, in order to establish a true comparison with Jesus, the poet *par excellence*, Sophocles must show something more than the result, *poíema*, of the process of his literary creation, i.e. his *poíesis*. Indeed, the fictitious protagonists of his tragedies –he himself remains excluded, of course-, leaving aside that they inherit a congenital impurity, are implicitly accused because of their true incapacity to incarnate real suffering, and thus to become a valid reference as having been certainly lived and represented.

Unlike Jesus, Sophocles is not a poet or “creator” of himself -his self-creator-, nor are Antigone, Oedipus, Electra or Philoctetes. But Sophocles did create all of these and, although they are not the result of his sole imagination, they were presented by him as an artistic and beautiful image which, once it is contemplated, effects in its turn the purification of similar passions. Human suffering becomes incarnate and is made an image in them, i.e. in Antigone, Oedipus, Philoctetes, etc. –they are as much ours as Christ is-, and have become incarnate all through the centuries every time the performance of their respective tragedies has called Western audiences to a contemplative or theatrical event –*theáomai*- thus proclaiming their Hellenic cultural inheritance.

If my comment would not seem excessive, I should even dare to say that Wilde’s option in favour of Christ and to the detriment of Sophocles when he evaluates his poetic value is also the consequence, probably an unconscious one, of a clear hyper-evaluation of himself, even in the sad circumstances of *De Profundis*. Indeed, he celebrates the will, talent and genius that he showed, thus becoming himself the image of Aestheticism, so that, *mutatis mutandis*, he tends to appreciate similar skills in other people or to regret the lack of them. It is already a commonplace to mention “the narrow boundaries of ‘Art for Art’s shake’, the artist’s complete absorption in

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<sup>10</sup>See as well e.g.: “The song of Isaiah, 'He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him,' had seemed to him to prefigure himself, and in him the prophecy was fulfilled. We must not be afraid of such a phrase. Every single work of art is the fulfilment of a prophecy: for every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image. Every single human being should be the fulfilment of a prophecy: for every human being should be the realisation of some ideal, either in the mind of God or in the mind of man” (172).

<sup>11</sup> Plato’s *Republic* 517b: ‘This image then, dear Glaucon, we must apply as a whole to all that has been said likening the region revealed through sight to the habitation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul’s ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear... is likely if in this point too the likeness of our image holds’ (Ταύτην τοίνυν, ἣν δ’ ἐγώ, τὴν εἰκόνα, ᾧ φίλε Γλαύκων, προσαπτέον ἅπασαν τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν λεγομένοις, τὴν μὲν δι’ ὄψεως φαινομένην ἔδραν τῆ τοῦ δεσμοτηρίου οἰκῆσει ἀφομοιοῦντα, τὸ δὲ τοῦ πυρὸς ἐν αὐτῇ φῶς τῆ τοῦ ἡλίου δυνάμει· τὴν δὲ ἄνω ἀνάβασιν καὶ θεᾶν τῶν ἄνω τὴν εἰς τὸν νοητὸν τόπον τῆς ψυχῆς ἀνοδὸν τιθεῖς οὐχ ἀμαρτήσῃ τῆς γ’ ἐμῆς ἐλπίδος, ἐπειδὴ ταύτης ἐπιθυμοῦμεν ἀκούειν... εἰκὸς γάρ που οὕτως, εἶπερ αὖ κατὰ τὴν προειρημένην εἰκόνα τοῦτ’ ἔχει -translated by Paul Shorey, *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970).

his own sensations”<sup>12</sup>, and probably for the same reason we should not be surprised that, in spite of the mediaevalist, i.e. dark, nature of any anachronism -as said before-, he has not been able to avoid that of requiring from Sophocles the accomplishment of the precepts of the nineteenth-century Aestheticism.

On the contrary, Christ is as modern as Aestheticism, and only from the latter’s principles does Wilde seem to be capable of appreciating the former’s value. It is only Christ’s beauty, or perhaps better, his capacity to turn into an image his singular personal sensitivity, life and suffering that fascinates the artist –Wilde- and forces him to make common cause with the Best One. It does not matter that logically Jesus is not the poet or creator of all the images he left, such as “his final burial in the tomb of the rich man”. What certainly counts is both his imagination and genius, which gave rise –from Wilde’s singular evaluation of Jesus, of course- to a later, centuries-long iconographical tradition. To sum up, what really counts is the stimulus that Jesus himself represented for others to develop their own imagination, i.e. their poetic capacity<sup>13</sup>, to the extent of turning him into the idyllic shepherd of an idyllic Arcadia:

“... the coronation ceremony of sorrow, one of the most wonderful things in the whole of recorded time; the crucifixion of the Innocent One before the eyes of his mother and of the disciple whom he loved... and his final burial in the tomb of the rich man, his body swathed in Egyptian linen with costly spices and perfumes as though he had been a king's son. When one contemplates all this from the point of view of art alone one cannot but be grateful that the supreme office of the Church should be the playing of the tragedy without the shedding of blood... and it is always a source of pleasure and awe to me to remember that the ultimate survival of the Greek chorus, lost elsewhere to art, is to be found in the servitor answering the priest at Mass... Yet the whole life of Christ -so entirely may sorrow and beauty be made one in their meaning and manifestation- is really an idyll, though it ends with the veil of the temple being rent, and the darkness coming over the face of the earth, and the stone rolled to the door of the sepulchre. One always thinks of him as a young bridegroom with his companions, as indeed he somewhere describes himself; as a shepherd straying through a valley with his sheep in search of green meadow or cool stream” (167-8).

And once again for Wilde the obstacle that Sophocles’ creations cannot overcome must be “the crucifixion of the Innocent One”. Not even the sacrifice of Antigone, who was loyal to the dictates of her conscience and decided to prefer Mankind’s laws to human laws, due now to the anachronism of weighing her on a Christian balance, could ever make disappear the stain of her suicide. And, obviously, there is no human imagination which, without the help of a great deal of hermeneutical violence, can turn the usually afflicted and tormented protagonists of Sophocles’ tragedies into the idyllic bridegrooms of an idyllic world<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> See e. g.: Gaunt, 1975, p. 166 and Behrendt, 1991; Brown, 1997; Danson, 1997; Franci, 1977; Raby, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Magdalen might be the best instance: “Those whom he saved from their sins are saved simply for beautiful moments in their lives. Mary Magdalen, when she sees Christ, breaks the rich vase of alabaster that one of her seven lovers had given her, and spills the odorous spices over his tired dusty feet... All that Christ says to us by the way of a little warning is that every moment should be beautiful, that the soul should always be ready for the coming of the bridegroom, always waiting for the voice of the lover” (178).

<sup>14</sup> Not even Wilde is capable of embellishing his tragedy: “I remember that I used to say that I thought I could bear a real tragedy if it came to me with purple pall and a mask of noble sorrow, but that the dreadful thing about modernity was that it put tragedy into the raiment of comedy, so that the great realities seemed commonplace or grotesque or lacking in style... Everything about my tragedy has been

Consequently, I should not continue taking a way that, anachronism after anachronism, would lead us to absurdity. After all, it might even seem that these last reflections of mine are already the result of a wrong choice. However, it certainly has nothing to do, as a classical philologist and because of a sort of stupid professional spite, with the desire to correct or temper Wilde's enthusiasm for Christ as a poet –in his case, a true aesthetic and spiritual conversion- which he opposes to that which he feels for Sophocles. In spite of the coldness that is peculiar to any analysis, the former very often more detectable when the latter aims at being objective, by no means should I want to go the wrong way. On the contrary, I have always thought that it is in *De profundis* where we read some of the most beautiful pages, rather sentimental than aesthetic ones, about the personal experience of a Christian *kátharsis*<sup>15</sup>. Paradox did help Wilde, that is to say, the one he found in the very centre of Christ's personality. If in Plato's *Symposium* we read that "éros is firstly the desire of anything and, secondly, desire of what it may lack" (200e), Wilde, a genuine Platonic, does believe in a possible desire or lack in Christ that makes more human His inhuman Perfection, thus being capable of approaching to the sinner, i.e. Wilde himself, just as the tragic human experience, i.e. the prison, arouses in him the *éros* or desire for Jesus and his Perfection:

"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... in a manner not yet understood of the world he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful holy things and modes of perfection... the sinner must repent... The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation... it is the means by which one alters one's past. The Greeks thought that impossible" (178-9).

"Now it seems to me that love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world... the world has indeed... been built of sorrow... because in no other way could the soul of man, for whom the world was made, reach the full stature of its perfection" (162).

Therefore, Christ was essential for Wilde. But what I should like to remark is that the both severe and *de profundis* re-examination of the ethical value of his person and actions or, in other words, a new *poíesis* or self-creation continues in fact to need Greek tragedy, its model, –and, obviously, the Sophoclean one-, which is more human and less severe with regard to the purity or innocence of its main protagonists:

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hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style; our very dress makes us grotesque. We are the zanies of sorrow" (183).

<sup>15</sup> Although he will also obtain his purification by means of the Greek adoration of Nature: "I have a strange longing for the great simple primeval things, such as the sea, to me no less of a mother than the Earth. It seems to me that we all look at Nature too much, and live with her too little. I discern great sanity in the Greek attitude. They never chattered about sunsets, or discussed whether the shadows on the grass were really mauve or not. But they saw that the sea was for the swimmer, and the sand for the feet of the runner. They loved the trees for the shadow that they cast, and the forest for its silence at noon. The vineyard-dresser wreathed his hair with ivy that he might keep off the rays of the sun as he stooped over the young shoots, and for the artist and the athlete, the two types that Greece gave us, they plaited with garlands the leaves of the bitter laurel and of the wild parsley, which else had been of no service to men. We call ours a utilitarian age, and we do not know the uses of any single thing. We have forgotten that water can cleanse, and fire purify, and that the Earth is mother to us all. As a consequence our art is of the moon and plays with shadows, while Greek art is of the sun and deals directly with things. I feel sure that in elemental forces there is purification, and I want to go back to them and live in their presence" (207-8).

“The gods are strange. It is not our vices only they make instruments to scourge us. They bring us to ruin through what in us is good, gentle, humane, loving. But for my pity and affection for you and yours, I would not now be weeping in this terrible place (119)... I thought life was going to be a brilliant comedy, and you were to be one of the graceful figures in it. I found it to be a revolting and repellent tragedy” (124).

Wilde knows perfectly well that at these moments he is the actor in a true process of tragic irony -leaving aside that Aristotle did not appreciate its evident tragic effect-, which leads him not from purity but from human goodness towards perfection. Nevertheless, he does not aim at being compared with Christ, since there was *hybris* in him, and this detail, a highly significant one, does bring him closer to the tragic Sophoclean creations: “I was to many an arbiter of style in art; the supreme arbiter to some... and would have remained King indeed, had I not let myself be lured into the imperfect world of coarse uncompleted passion, of appetite without distinction, desire without limit” (147). Consequently, from the perspective that time and distance offer, he can only contemplate his life as a classical tragic experience of rise and fall, thus verifying painfully that the *katastrophé* is for human beings something more than a remote possibility. Wilde maintains that his audacious fall into the depths, that place where Ethics is shadowed by darkness to the extent of disappearing, was deliberate, but it is quite evident that, when he enters the prison, he discovers “anagnorically” the real magnitude of the tragedy, his tragedy, and the *ékplexis* or surprise hits him as if he were a Sophoclean Oedipus:

“The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a *flaneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the meaner minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation” (151-2).

A singular application of Aristotelian precepts –since in many moments this famous *epistula* looks like the written performance of a tragedy- would demand that the effect of reading it upon his beloved Bosie was as much a didactic<sup>16</sup> as a cathartic one: “You came to me to learn the pleasure of life and the pleasure of Art. Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful –the meaning of sorrow and its beauty”. Certainly a hard lesson and purification<sup>17</sup>, since “... behind sorrow there is always sorrow. Pain unlike pleasure –and the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is writing it-, wears no mask” (210-11).

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<sup>16</sup> As a result of considering himself a Greek lover (*erastés*), Wilde regrets in fact –not only with regard to his beloved Bosie, but also concerning himself- not having acted as a pedagogue, as an adult who should never have forgotten his responsibilities: “I blame myself for allowing an unintellectual friendship, a friendship whose primary aim was not the creation and contemplation of beautiful things, entirely to dominate my life” (99)... But most of all I blame myself for the entire ethical degradation I allowed you to bring on me. The basis of character is will power, and my will power became absolutely subject to yours” (103).

<sup>17</sup> Let us think of his advice: “You must read this letter right through, though each word may become to you as the fire or knife of the surgeon that makes the delicate flesh burn or bleed” (98); in my opinion, this is advice with Heraclitean echos: “Doctors cut, burn, and torture the sick, and then demand of them an undeserved fee for such services” (B 58 *Diels-Kranz*, translated by William Harris, Prof. Em. Middlebury College, <http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/Heraclitus.html>).

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