volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 2, Issue 2

Winter 2019

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 December 2019

Date of Publication: 21 December 2019

Citation: Amelia Hall, 'Elliptical Thinking: Planetary Patterns of Thought in *De Profundis*', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.2 (2019), 247–59.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v2i2.1349.g1468

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Elliptical Thinking: Planetary Patterns of Thought in *De Profundis*

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In an 1881 letter asking a friend to meet his mother, Oscar Wilde writes: 'all brilliant people should cross each other's cycles, like some of the nicest planets'.[1] In comparing the people in his social circle to celestial bodies in orbit, Wilde sets forth an idea that will soon become literalized in images within and surrounding his works. An illustration in *Salomé* (1894) renders Wilde the actual '(wo)man in the moon', through placing his distinguishing physiognomy – slightly drooping eyes and thick full lips – on a white circle [fig. 1]**,** while many cartoons satirizing Wilde's American lecture tour put his head at the centre of a plant that seems to be more sun than flower. An 1881 *Punch* cartoon by Edward Sambourne, 'O.W.', features Wilde's head as the only visible centre of a sunflower, with crisp triangular petals extending outward so rigidly that they appear to emanate from his body [fig. 2]. Another cartoon appearing in *Judge* magazine, entitled 'A Thing of Beauty Not a Joy Forever', features a sunflower-adorned Wilde standing with his head and torso in the centre of an enormous shape of ambiguous identification [fig. 3]. A very large orange circle with small yellow triangles coming off it, the shape could either be an enormous sunflower or, given its absence of a stem and leaves, a sun. Be he the face of the sun or the man in the moon, Wilde is, in all three of these illustrations, combined with a celestial body.

In *De Profundis* (1897) Wilde writes: '[e]very single work of art is the fulfilment of a prophecy. For every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image.'[2] These images, which place Wilde within and at the centre of a cosmic universe, simultaneously fulfil the prophecy provided in his 1881 letter comparing people to planets, and pre-emptively fulfil the prophecy contained in the scientific metaphors of *De Profundis*, which likewise blur the boundaries between human and planet, and describe Wilde as the sun-like centre of many orbits. Moving away from the language of degeneration and biological decay that predominate in Wilde's other works, *De*

Profundis draws its dominant scientific metaphors from astronomy – Wilde asks 'who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?' (p. 1038) and tells his lover Lord Alfred Douglas that 'you forced your way into a life too large for you, one whose orbit transcended your power of vision no less than your power of cyclic motion' (p. 1051). *De Profundis* is constellated by astronomical figures that, with their concomitant notions of circular time and bodies in orbit, provide Wilde with a way to give shape to his constantly revolving thoughts and feelings. Rather than offering teleological notions of time and influence, as metaphors from the biological sciences do, these celestial analogies offer an understanding of time that is cyclical and regenerative, while also inviting us to think of the problem of influence not in terms of moral corruption, but in terms of an imbalance in size and scale.

Fig. 1: Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Woman in the Moon' (1894).

Fig. 2: Edward Sambourne, 'Punch's Fancy Portraits. – No. 37', *Punch,* 80 (25 June 1881), p. 298.

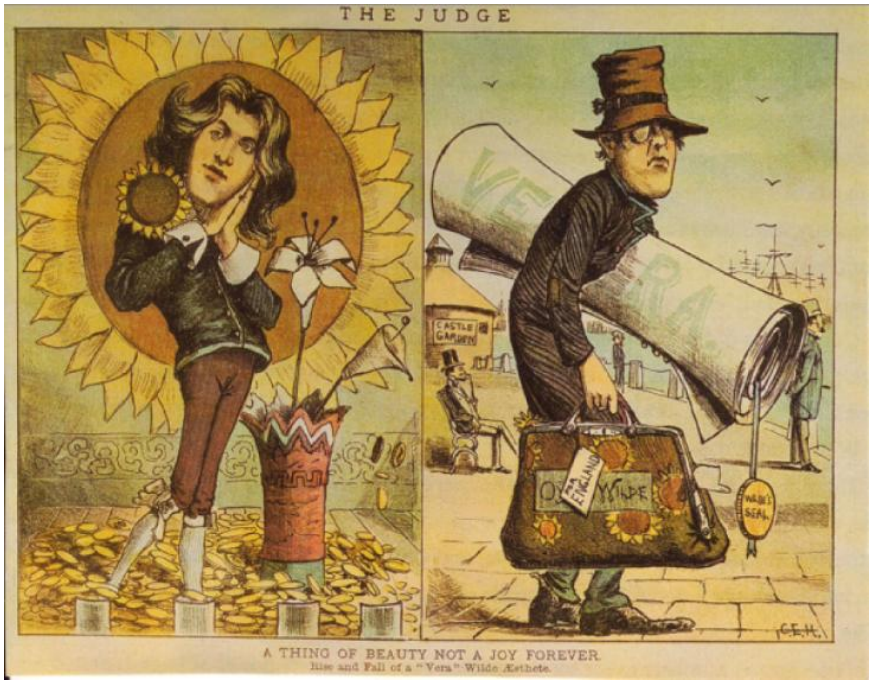

Fig. 3: James Albert Wales, 'A Thing of Beauty Not a Joy Forever', *Judge* (c. 1883).

Although Wilde's relationship to science has been a topic of increasing critical interest over the past two decades and given *De Profundis*' abundance of astronomical language, it is rather surprising that almost no one discusses his use of astronomy. Many essays about Wilde's relationship to science have discussed psychology (Heather Seagroatt), and more recent studies have focused on brain science (Elisha Cohn), biological metaphors of degeneration (Stephan Karschay), and evolution (George Lewis Levine and Michael Wainwright).[3] Those that do discuss Wilde and astronomy tend to focus on mythological meaning, or to give astronomy no more than a passing mention *en route* to an argument about a different topic. For example, Joan Navarre reads *Salomé*'s moon as symbolizing three lunar goddesses,[4] while Kathleen McDougall briefly acknowledges *De Profundis*' combining of planet and parasite metaphor, but only to demonstrate that Wilde's relationship with Douglas was described in scientific terms.[5] Bruce Haley momentarily mentions astronomy so that he can point out that Wilde was not particularly interested in applying the laws of homogeneity and equilibrium to it.[6] This critical oversight likely stems from the fact that Wilde's references to astronomy typically lack the depth and intellectual grounding characteristic of his engagement with other nineteenth-century scientific theories. When Wilde does mention astronomy in his work, it often operates at the level of decoration or symbol – for example, the sky that is 'cloudless, and pierced by one solitary star' in *Dorian Gray* (1890) or the moon that represents female chastity in *Salomé*.[7] Neither of these texts deploy astronomical language in a systematic, scientifically-informed pattern of perceptible metaphor, as *De Profundis* does. Recognizing that Wilde's engagement with astronomy in *De Profundis* substantially departs from his use of it in other works compels us to ask: why is it this text that features patterns pulled from astronomy? Focusing upon Wilde's invocation of the astronomical concept of orbit can provide us with some answers. Though the word 'orbit' is only used twice in *De Profundis*, the text is imbued with the language and forms of these astronomical circles, which render perceptible the thought-processes of a man whose mind, by his own admission, could not stop 'going in […] circles.'[8]

Written under great duress during Wilde's final months in prison, *De Profundis* has long defied generic classification, having been alternately deemed a love letter, elaboration of ethics,[9] dramatic monologue, and spiritual autobiography,[10] and duly dismissed as a text plagued by a disorganized, rambling structure.[11] Such criticisms arise in response to the fact that the text often moves in circles, doubling and tripling back to consider issues already discussed. This essay proposes that *De Profundis*' elliptical thinking is not an obstacle, but rather a key to understanding it, and further, that its elliptical quality is an intentional rhetorical strategy informed by Wilde's sophisticated understanding of astronomy. For the man trapped in prison with a mind moving in circles, astronomy offered forms, patterns, and structures for thinking through his life that were far more useful and pertinent than methods pulled from the biological sciences. Looking outward to help himself see inward, Wilde compares his lover to a satellite planet, calculates the orbit of his soul, and places himself, sun-like, in the centre of a solar-system of social circles.

Wilde's Knowledge of Astronomy

Wilde's journals and essays written during his time at Oxford indicate that he was familiar with the basic principles and mathematical underpinnings of astronomy, and he could very well have gained his knowledge of astronomy in the course of his classical studies. As Wilde aptly explains in his 1879 essay, 'The Rise of Historical Criticism', 'The study of Greek, it has been well said, implies the birth of criticism, comparison, and research […] a fragment of Pythagorean astronomy set Copernicus thinking on that train of reasoning which has revolutionised the whole position of our planet in the universe.'[12] This statement demonstrates knowledge of the history of astronomy, and allows us to consider the possibility that the study of Greek provided a foundation and starting-point for Wilde's knowledge of astronomy, just as the study of Greek provided the foundation for Copernicus' investigations into the heavens. A reading of Wilde's Oxford notebooks reveals that he encountered the ideas of astronomy in sources other than the classics. His notebooks indicate that in addition to familiarity with the works of Pythagoras and Copernicus he was aware of the

works of William Kingdon Clifford, a mathematician known for his work in geometric algebra.[13] In one notation discussing geometry, Wilde writes 'Abstract Sciences (as Logic Geometry) give us the forms of phenomena'.[14] Wilde's early readings in geometry provided a crucial foundation for the relationship between astronomical language and textual form that *De Profundis* would later trace; in particular, for its explicit and implicit references to 'orbits', which are themselves geometric forms – circles and ellipses.

Apparently continuing his reading in the sciences after his Oxford education, Wilde's adult library contained both Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* (1867) and Clifford's *Lectures and Essays* (1879).[15] The latter contains many discussions of astronomy, some of which connect it to geometry, such as:

> [The geometer] knows, indeed, that the laws assumed by Euclid are true with an accuracy that no direct experiment can approach, not only in this place where we are, but in places at a distance from us that no astronomer has conceived; […] So, you see, there is a real parallel between the work of Copernicus and his successors on the one hand, and the work of Lobatcheswky and his successors on the other.[16]

Although it is not clear to what extent Wilde read Clifford's text, recognizing that its linking together of astronomy and geometry predates *De Profundis* allows us to consider the possibility that *De Profundis*' own imbricating of astronomical and geometrical concepts was influenced by Clifford's work.

Circular Thinking and Cyclical Time

While in prison, Wilde wrote a letter to his friend More Adey describing his purpose for writing, in which he lamented 'I cling to my notebook: it helps me: before I had it my brain was going in very evil circles.'[17] When we realize that *De Profundis* was written to ease a mind that could not stop moving in circles, it makes more sense that the text is densely imbricated with many scientific circles of its own – specifically, the astronomical concept of orbit. The first time Wilde buttresses his circular thinking with direct astronomical metaphor occurs when he asks: 'Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?' (p. 1038) Through saying that the plight of the human soul has an

incalculable orbit, Wilde is also asserting that the soul, like a planet, is constantly in orbit, on a sort of elliptical continuum. The idea of a soul being 'in orbit' allows us to think of it not as something that is either steadily progressing towards good or regressing towards evil, but rather, as something that is moving around in circles. The ambiguous morality suggested by the image of a soul-in-orbit both aligns with and challenges the conceptions of morality in Wilde's other works. On the one hand, the idea of an orbiting soul does seem to suggest that morality is equivocal, a sentiment indicated many places in Wilde's work. But on the other hand, a soul in orbit is not obviously progressing or degenerating in a linear fashion, as, for example, the soul of Dorian Gray seems to. The presence of an orbit metaphor attunes a reader to the importance of circular patterns and renders us better able to locate moments evincing Wilde's circular thought processes in the text.

Beyond giving form to Wilde's ceaseless circular thinking, the astronomical language in *De Profundis* also articulates a cyclical understanding of time that is markedly different from the linear temporality of devolution and degeneration that we typically find in Wilde's works. In *De Profundis*, Wilde observes that 'with us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain' (p. 1009). Here we have an understanding of time and its movement articulated in language that is quite astronomical; like a planet in orbit, time 'revolves' and 'circles' around one person, akin to the sun or star at the centre of a solar system. This celestial conception of circularly moving time finds its most apt articulation in the conclusion to *De Profundis*, where Wilde writes: 'What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes […]. It is only to be done fully by accepting it as an inevitable part of the evolution of my life and character' (p. 1059). Wilde uses 'evolution' here not only in its biological, but also in its revolutionary sense.[18] In placing his past before him rather than behind him, Wilde constructs the story of his life not as a timeline, but rather as a time-circle. Like a planet always in orbit, he looks ahead to see his past is progressing along a circular path, in which his history is always coming up ahead in his future. In its dual evolutionary and revolutionary senses, his cyclical version of time proves to be a positive, regenerative one. This idea finds fuller expression when he writes: 'while

for the first year of my imprisonment I did 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 […] "What a beginning! What a wonderful beginning!"" (p. 1038) In conceiving of his ending as a new beginning, Wilde evinces a formulation of time that is circular rather than end-oriented. Just as any point in a circle can be a beginning and an ending simultaneously, at this point in his life the beginning and the ending are the same.

Recognizing that the image of a soul in orbit and a sense of cyclical time are present in *De Profundis* enables us to see that there are scientifically-informed, non-biologically-based ways in which Wilde understood morality and human progress. If we return to the paragraph where Wilde first uses the image of a soul in orbit, we discover a complex constellation of planetary metaphors, whose purpose goes well beyond the mere literalization of thinking in circles. Wilde writes: '[t]he final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in a balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there still remains oneself' (p. 1038). In these lines, Wilde specifically associates the practice of astronomy with the performing of evaluative measurements, as the heavens are to be weighed, quantified, mapped out, and calculated. This linking of astronomy with the process of measuring enables us to consider the possibility that *De Profundis*' astronomical metaphors are deployed in attempt to 'measure out' or evaluate aspects of Wilde's life.

Bodies in Orbit

When we turn to the language Wilde uses to describe his relationship with Douglas, we find him using ideas from astronomy to evaluate their relationship – orbits, cyclical motion, and the gravitational powers exerted by larger and smaller bodies of influence. This becomes particularly apparent when he attempts to figure out what went wrong between them. Wilde again employs the astronomical metaphor of human beings in orbit, but this time, he adds something new: a consideration of size. He writes:

> *There* was the one great psychological error of our friendship, its entire want of proportion. You forced your way into a life too large for you, one whose orbit transcended your power of vision no less than your power of cyclic motion, one whose thoughts, passions and actions were of intense import, of wide interest, and fraught, too heavily indeed, with wonderful or awful consequence. Your little life of little whims and moods was admirable in its own little sphere. […] It should have continued in its own sphere after you left Oxford. (p. 1051. Emphasis in the original.)

In describing himself as a being with a large orbit and claiming that Douglas has an orbit-like 'cyclic motion' that is transcended by his own, Wilde appears to be comparing himself and Douglas to large extra-terrestrial objects. But Wilde adds something to the person-as-planet metaphor that extends beyond being simply a clever demonstration of how he sits, sun-like, at the centre of many social circles. These astronomy metaphors come coupled with considerations of size and gravitational force. In a playful literalizing, Wilde uses knowledge of the gravity exerted by extra-terrestrial bodies to describe the gravity of the situation with Douglas and suggests that he was the massive influencing body – the gravity-exuding force – in his and Douglas' relationship. In an argument that boils down to 'I'm big, and you're small. Too small to handle me', Wilde seems to suggest that the forces between them were imbalanced. Continuing to assert that he is 'large and in charge', Wilde proceeds in the rest of the astronomy-laden paragraph to 'shrink' Douglas down to size, using 'little' three times to describe him. More specifically, in describing Douglas' life as contained within a 'little sphere', Wilde associates Douglas with a small spherical planet that forces its way, unwelcome, into a larger planet's orbit.

In comparing himself to a planet around which Douglas orbits, Wilde yet again provides the prophecy that was to be fulfilled a few years later in another image of him – this time, a satirical caricature by Max Beerbohm, 'Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas' (1914), in which a very large, very round Wilde sits across the table from a tiny Douglas, who seems to be his satellite [fig. 4]. The vast difference in size between these two men underscores the way in which the Wilde of *De Profundis* uses celestial language to emphasize that he is (like the Wilde in this illustration) the gravitational centre of the universe he creates. When Wilde uses astronomy to demonstrate that the problem in his relationship with Douglas was its 'entire want of proportion,' he gives a

framework with which to understand the problematic influence that differs substantially from the suggestions of corruption that were implied during the questioning at his trials. Namely, rather than being a morally corrupting influence, Wilde was an 'outsize influence'. The problem in his relationship with Douglas was not that he corrupted Douglas, but rather, that his life was too large for Douglas to handle.

Fig. 4: Max Beerbohm, 'Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas' (1914).

In his *Commonplace Book*, Wilde notes that 'modern science has shown us that both ethics and motion are results of molecular action: motion in one direction may be an ellipse, in the other a moral sentiment.'[19] This early recording's linking together of elliptical motion with morality and modern science aptly speaks to *De Profundis*' method of invoking the astronomical metaphor of orbit in order to describe the progress of the soul and problems of influence – when the soul is in orbit, morality becomes not a question of straight linear progress, but rather, a continuous, elliptical concept; when Douglas forces himself into a life 'whose orbit transcend[s] […his] power of cyclic motion', influence becomes not a question of moral corruption, but rather, a question of outsize influence (p. 1051). Rather than motion in one direction being an ellipse or moral sentiment, the

elliptical motions Wilde constructs and goes through in *De Profundis* become the text's moral sentiment. Moreover, this notion of an 'ellipse' can aid us in articulating exactly what formal properties of *De Profundis* make it such an elliptical read. Rather than offering us witty, pointedly paradoxical statements as he did in other works, Wilde offers a text of elliptical reasoning, in which ideas, emotions, and astronomical motifs constantly cycle in and out of play. Wilde notes this elliptical, ever-changing quality of his writing at *De Profundis*' end: 'How far I am away from the true temper of soul, this letter in its changing, uncertain moods, its scorn and bitterness, its aspirations and its failure to realise those aspirations, shows you quite clearly' (p. 1059). The strategic overlapping of literal and figurative ellipses in the text bespeaks that same artistic quality that Max Beerbohm noted, upon saying that *De Profundis* is 'the artistic essay of an artist' in which 'he was still playing with ideas, playing with emotions.'[20]

Generic Possibilities

Reflecting upon his writing in *De Profundis*, Wilde notes that 'whatever is first in feeling comes always last in form' (p. 1051). In tracing *De Profundis*' patterns of astronomical language, we learn how densely layered circular forms helped Wilde give shape to his constantly revolving thoughts and emotions. If we recall from geometry that circles are considered a 'special case' of the ellipse, then we might categorize *De Profundis*' distinguishing formal characteristic to be its elliptical thinking – in both the semantic and geometric sense. Thus, the astronomical metaphors which help give perceptible form to these elliptical patterns of thought are, in the end, the most apt scientific metaphors through which Wilde could give shape to his thoughts. More broadly, recognizing that *De Profundis* is constellated with celestial patterns enables us to better answer the question of genre that it raises: beyond being a love letter, theological exposition, or personal essay, it can also be understood as a star chart, of sorts, made by a man looking outward beyond the borders of his earthly prison to the structures of the skies, which aid him in tracing the paths of the most influential bodies in his life and help him to make sense of what happened when his

worlds collided and then fell apart. In keeping with the abundance of circular patterns that are constructed in *De Profundis*, astrological charts typically feature a round circle, which contains symbols for astrological signs and explanations of the signs. Wilde may have seen such a chart during his lifetime, given that he asked a friend in 1885 'Will you cast the child's horoscope for us? […] My wife is very anxious to know its fate, and has begged me to ask you to search the stars.'[21] Moreover, the more scientifically-rigorous astronomical charts of the nineteenth century were often bounded by a circular border, and featured a map of the cycles of stars and planets as they rotated through the sky. The astronomical chart provides a fitting generic classification, then, for a text characterized by thinking in circles, in which a man tries to make sense of the planet- and star-like people who come into his orbit. In some sense, *De Profundis* was Wilde's attempt to 'search the stars' that crossed his life, as he spent his time in prison not only with a mind which could not stop moving in circles, but which was also in ceaseless contemplation of the many circles of which he had been a part; his wider social circle, his intimate inner circle, his circles of influence, and the way in which his life had 'come full circle' since the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This chart of orbits provides a map of Wilde's universe, with Wilde at its centre. Despite asserting that it cannot be done, in *De Profundis* Wilde tries to 'calculate the orbit' of his own soul and chart a course for his future.

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[1] Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde,* ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), p. 116.
[2] Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 980–1059 (p. 1032). Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.
[3] See Heather Seagroatt, 'Hard Science, Soft Psychology, and Amorphous Art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *Studies in English Literature,* 38.4 (1998), 741–59; Elisha Cohn, '"One single ivory cell": Oscar Wilde and the Brain', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17.2 (2012), 183–205; Stephan Karschay, 'Normalising the Degenerate: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Marie Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan*', in *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin De Siècle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 168–208; George Lewis Levine, 'Darwinian Mind and Wildean Paradox', in *Darwin the Writer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 149–85; and Michael Wainwright, 'Oscar Wilde, the Science of Heredity, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *English Literature in Transition*, 54.4 (2011), 494–522.
[4] Joan Navarre, 'The Moon as Symbol in *Salome*: Oscar Wilde's Invocation of the Triple White Goddess', in *Refiguring Oscar Wilde's Salome*, ed. by Michael Y. Bennett (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 71–86.
[5] Kathleen McDougall, 'Oscar Wilde: Sexuality and Creativity in the Social Organism', *Victorian Review*, 23.2 (1997), 212–26 (p. 221).
[6] Bruce Haley, 'Wilde's "Decadence" and the Positivist Tradition', *Victorian Studies*, 28.2 (1985), 215–29 (pp. 217–18).

[7] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 17–159 (p. 96).
[8] Wilde, letter to More Adey (25 September 1896), in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 666.
[9] Michael Doylen reads *De Profundis* as 'an elaboration of an ethics' which enables Wilde to 'resist the medical-juridical classification of himself' as a sexual deviant; Jonathan Dollimore argues that *De Profundis* evinces 'conscious renunciation of [Wilde's] transgressive aesthetic'; and Regenia Gagnier suggests that *De Profundis* is a text in which Wilde 'deplore[s] his materialism and sensuality as a weakness'. See Michael R. Doylen, 'Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*: Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27.2 (1999), 547–66 (pp. 561–62); Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 95; and Regenia Gagnier, 'Wilde and the Victorians', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 18–33 (p. 20).
[10] William Buckler, for one, argues that it is a 'spiritual autobiography' allowing for 'the imaginative illustration of [Wilde's] aesthetic of the self'. See William E. Buckler, 'Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic of the Self: Art as Imaginative Self-Realization in *De Profundis*', *Biography*, 12.2 (1989), 95–115 (p. 95).
[11] Richard Ellmann suggests that *De Profundis* is plagued by a 'disjointed structure' and Philippe Jullian disparages *De Profundis* as a 'venomous dossier'. See Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 515, and Philippe Jullian, *Oscar Wilde*, trans. by Violet Wyndham (New York: Viking Press, 1969), p. 350.
[12] Wilde, 'The Rise of Historical Criticism', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 1198–241 (p. 1240).
[13] Wilde, *Commonplace Book*, in *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making,* ed. by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 203, 207; and Wilde, *Notebook kept at Oxford*, in *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks*, ed. by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, pp. 15, 86.
[14] Wilde, *Commonplace Book*, p. 13. Emphasis in the original.
[15] See Wainwright, 'Oscar Wilde, the Science of Heredity, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', p. 496.
[16] William Kingdon Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, 2 vols, ed. by Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), I, p. 300.
[17] Wilde, letter to More Adey, p. 666.
[18] The *Oxford English Dictionary* also gives the less common definition of 'evolution' as 'wheeling, twisting, or turning'.
[19] Wilde, *Commonplace Book*, in *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks*, ed. by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, p. 125.
[20] Max Beerbohm, *A Peep into the Past and Other Prose Pieces*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (Brattleboro: The Stephen Greene Press, 1972), p. 38. *Internet Archive*.
[21] *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde,* ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, p. 262. See also Wilde, *Notebook kept at Oxford*, in *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks*, ed. by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, which contains two more references to astrology. One quotation suggests that it 'appears also in astrology which Comte says is the first systematic attempt to frame a philosophy of history' (p. 8). The other suggests 'astrology and alchemy mark the time before poetry and science had been differentiated' (p. 22).