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The Bearer of the Wound of Lost Community

‘The weight of a lover’s arm on your shoulder is not a sensation you can ever enjoy now, nothing can ever be worth what was done to you, nothing can change that, but oh it almost does. We’re walking your streets. . . .’
(Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man: A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*).

One of the key ways in which the myth of Wilde is proliferated is, of course, through his being appropriated as a gay icon. For many who identify as gay, his sufferings are imbued with heightened significance since they have come to signify the struggle for gay equality. The battle over which minority group can legitimately call his sufferings theirs has been underpinned by the notion that the group in question plays the role of recipient and the apology becomes articulated on their behalf.

In the previous chapter the philosophical and political ramifications of this move were discussed, with reference to the attempt by Peter Tatchell, of the gay rights group ‘Outrage!’ to secure a formal Pardon for the suffering caused to Wilde. Here, the personal and emotional responses of some gay individuals are discussed, as the impact of Wilde’s sufferings upon the homosexual ‘community’ is evaluated.

The gay historian and researcher Jeffrey Weekes notes that Wilde’s sufferings becoming a focal point through which the cause of gay rights could be articulated was in evidence a hundred years ago. When interviewing older gay men ‘who were coming to maturity at the beginning of this century’, he notes, ‘many of them spontaneously commented on Oscar Wilde and what an influence he had been. There was a sense that these disasters could happen to you because of your feelings . . . it gave them a sense of something to struggle against.’¹

Gay people in the twenty-first century respond personally to him, often finding in him a consoling presence as they struggle with their own sexuality. Actor Simon Callow confesses that he ‘fell head over heels in love with Oscar Wilde’ when he was thirteen years old. ‘It was understood that he (Wilde) was a “homo”. . . . I rather thought that I

was too. . . . I could only think of him as “Oscar”. I had made a friend.’² Through him many gay men come to terms with their sexuality by feeling as if he has ‘helped’ them. Author Neil Bartlett writes emotionally of his visit to Wilde’s grave in Paris, where he managed not to cry while he laid flowers on Wilde’s tomb. His pilgrimage was at the same time a journey in which he would search for his roots, finding Wilde to be his spiritual ancestor.

Bartlett was drunk, writing late at night about his pilgrimage to Wilde’s grave. When he made the pilgrimage, he placed flowers on the grave, ‘out of real love and respect.’ He dressed up so that men stared at him. He smoked a cigarette in Wilde’s honour and then returned to London. ‘Darling it’s all for you’,³ he writes. ‘We’re doing all this for you. I wish you could be here to see us’. Everything he does, the gestures of love, even to his lover, is in Wilde’s memory. Yet most of all he is struck by the hopelessness that, ‘I can’t make it up to you, and it doesn’t justify what they did to you’.

Wishing that his own freedom could be somehow reparation for Wilde’s incarceration, he mourns for his own powerlessness to change the past. Bartlett’s own freedom, his *own* identity, has Wilde the wounded martyr at its foundations. Nothing can justify Wilde’s suffering but, ‘I wanted to tell you nevertheless’, he writes. Yet Bartlett also expresses more ambivalent feelings. In the second letter, beginning ‘Oscar you fat bitch’, he tells Wilde he had dreamt about him. He had dreamt that Wilde’s hand was upon his face and that he was taking up all the room in bed, ‘big and fat like I’ve been told you were.’ Wilde was in his bed and he could not sleep, he could not ignore his presence. Half asleep he would brush against Wilde’s skin, and then, he writes, ‘I’d feel your hand on my face.’ The irrefutability of Wilde’s presence is both a positive and a negative thing, to be both celebrated and struggled against.

At the end of the book it is Saturday night and he is walking through London’s Bow Street, scene of Wilde’s arrest. ‘I hear as many insults as if this was still the city in which crowds collected outside Bow Street to abuse Wilde’, he writes. A car slows down, ‘a single word of abuse is shouted, and with that word the whole night is taken away from you.’⁴ He is strolling along, holding hands with his boyfriend, not because he is making a statement but because he has neglected to maintain the secrecy expected of him. ‘And then the laughter begins. This laughter converts you into a spectacle’ and, ‘the image you present is suddenly on their terms not yours.’⁵ The evenings lost and the moments taken away through such abuse are mourned as Bartlett is in turn reminded of Wilde, who, on his transfer to Reading Gaol, as cited earlier, stood on Clapham

Junction surrounded by a jeering mob. The echoes of Wilde's sufferings are never far away.

Another contemporary gay figure, Simon Callow, captures the symbolism which becomes linked to this wider response of mourning. 'This is where the story . . . became moving and frightening', he notes. 'This is how society dealt with gays. The account of his years in prison, of the derision during his rare public exposures and transit from one gaol to another. . . . On railway platforms or at the prison gates where he was spat at – are almost impossible to read. The dandy, the connoisseur . . . trudging round the courtyard, slopping gruel, sitting in his faeces-sodden prison uniform, tearing his fingernails picking oakum. All this for being gay.'⁶ The feeling of shock is instigated by the barbaric nature of Wilde's sentence and public humiliation. The horror, the initial shock of his fall, is followed by the irresistible impulse to try to imagine what it was like for him and, in so doing, to relive the moment of its inception.

Yet amongst the feelings of regret, grief and sorrow at Wilde's downfall is an Oedipal ambivalence towards his presence within gay culture. As well as being a figure who offers comfort, Wilde can also be invoked as a wounding device in order to perpetuate suffering. His prominence as a famous gay personality can provide a focus for homophobic attitudes and their accompanying emotions of fear and disgust. 'The Wildean model was not just ours', notes Alan Sinfield. 'It was prescribed in the dominant culture,' he writes. 'When I was at school "Oscar" was an abusive term for anyone who became known for doing things with other boys', to the extent that, 'other ways of being gay became difficult to conceive.'

Thus, woven into the pattern of gay experiences of him as a healer figure, is the image of him as a source of wounding. He is also a means through which the dominant culture can hurt and attack gay men by using Wilde's image as a weapon, so that the invocation of his name and reputation can become a cause of the very suffering for which he purports to be a figure of comfort. Therefore, 'as well as being our Christ Wilde was our Judas.' To this effect, Sinfield notes how, if Wilde is invoked as a gay martyr it 'encourages a notion of gay men as destined by self-destructive urges to humiliation and defeat.' Thus 'we can just as easily blame him for one hundred years of oppression.'⁷ To the gay sensibility Wilde can be both healer and wounder, defender and betrayer: a source of oppression as well as liberation.

Angela Mason, director of the gay pressure group Stonewall, also draws attention to this ambivalence and duality. 'Oscar Wilde has in fact two legacies', she claims. 'One has been a legacy of shame and humiliation – of homosexuality. And the other legacy is a legacy of resistance, of

freedom and development: an idea that through our sexuality we can reach out to more profound freedoms and more profound human truths. It's a contradictory legacy.'⁸ The contradiction is something individuals must work out for themselves and, one way or another, the modern gay man still lives with Wilde's legacy. The shadow cast by Wilde's trials is a long one and it may not only be men who identify as homosexual who live under its shade. Thus Mason notes, 'Mothers fear the feminine in their sons. They're frightened of bringing up their boys to be sissies, to be homosexuals. And behind all that I think, is the ever-present symbol of Wilde's ritual trial and humiliation. . . . What happened to him still has a profound effect on the English psyche.'⁹

Certainly, this omnipresent fear of the feminine aspect of the male is something still pertinent in contemporary culture and attitudes to homosexuality predominantly derive from such fears. Because the popular image of Wilde is of the homosexual-as-dandy, and because he is undoubtedly the most prominent gay historical figure, as Sinfield points out, images of the feminised male become attached to his image. These images are rarely endorsed by society at large, even today, even in these comparatively more tolerant times.

According to Sinfield, Wilde's sufferings represent a warning as to what can happen to men who blur the distinction between masculine and feminine by choosing to flaunt their inclination, not merely towards their own gender, but towards a flamboyant and insouciant tradition of 'high camp' inherited from Wilde. Thus some responses to Wilde's legacy involve a wounding, not only of gay men but also, potentially, of heterosexual boys, who may continue to be subjected to scrutiny and ridicule at a vulnerable stage in their sexual and psychological development.

There is, therefore, a tendency for Wilde's sufferings, his trials and imprisonment, to be conceptualised by those identifying as gay as a *wound*. This wound is to something more than Wilde himself: it is sustained by the gay community as a whole. Negative social messages, which have been internalised by the individual, re-emerge, finding their expression in the image of Wilde, whose camp irony, wit and style could not ultimately protect him from the machinations of a vindictive and heartless society. Marcel Proust (1875-1955), himself a homosexual, believed that 'one cannot serve this Eros without becoming a stranger in society . . . without incurring a mortal wound.'¹⁰ It is the 'mortal wound' of Wilde's trials, imprisonment and subsequent exile which has been transcribed by some human rights groups in the present day as a wound to the homosexual community, and which created a demand for

an apology in conjunction with that community.

This image of Wilde the dandy is underpinned by the view that, to a great extent, gay history itself is a river of suffering, with camp irony as its dam. Simon Callow's description, quoted earlier, of the contrast between dandy and degraded prisoner, points to the hopelessness which lurks behind interpretations of, and responses to, Wilde's fate. From the grieving response activated by such a discovery comes the demand for an apology on behalf of all those other figures past and present who are linked to him by a shared experience of homophobic prejudice.

This is how mourning for Wilde, as experienced by gay respondents to his fate, has been initiated: through a communal sense of suffering in which his wound is also that of the gay 'community' for whom he is a popular figurehead. Wilde's fate expresses what is less easily articulated without such a focal point: the existential sadness accumulated by a sense of personal and historical oppression which otherwise might lack root or origin. During the debates surrounding the Poets' Corner ceremony and the posthumous apology, the need to mourn the tragedies perpetuated by homophobic prejudice became crystallised around him.

Through him, and through the act of an apology to his memory, those in the present, for whom homophobic prejudice is still an issue, can mourn all those in the past who may have shared a similar fate. Figures from the past who were not well-known, 'ordinary' men who died in obscurity and whose individual names are now forgotten, can be called into the contemporary imagination in order to shape and articulate this community of outsiders: the mourners and the mourned-for. Thus out of a shared sense of exclusion comes a new kind of belonging, a community based upon the wounds sustained by subjection to the outcast condition.

A community emerges, with Wilde as its key figurehead, in which the unifying factor is the experience of abuse, social ostracism and suffering. Jeffrey Weekes notes, 'the moment when we have something in common is the moment when somebody tries to take our children away, prosecute us, shout at us, or do unpleasant things.'¹¹ Another way in which an idea of homosexual community has been conceptualised is as the 'Homintern', a word purportedly first coined by W.H. Auden in 1941. Its meaning, derived from 'Comintern', meaning a Communist International, 'was meant to convey the idea of a global homosexual community.'¹²

Although the term did not denote a community united by mourning as such, the idea behind it, which is to remember and record the names of famous and not-so-famous homosexuals throughout history,

is tantamount to an act of memorialisation. The names and dates of the dead are followed by an epitaph-style quotation from their work. Community emerges through the act of memorialising the dead, a factor which itself renders it simultaneously as an act of mourning. Instead of a single figurehead, the Homintern is a collection of names, each of equal importance. It can be comprised of anyone the compiler of the names wishes to be included, since it is an imagined community constructed and recovered from the past.

In her comparative study of the affinity between the cultures of Hellenic Greece and late-Victorian Oxford as perceived by homosexual men in the latter culture, Linda Dowling has identified a phenomenon similar to this. Communities and cultures from the past are invested with Utopian ideals in order that the identities of those in the present culture might have a model upon which to draw, as well as a coherent link with the past. She described it as a ‘metaphysics of community’, to indicate that it is a non-tangible one, constructed from memory and imagination.¹³

Through the debates surrounding the posthumous apology Wilde’s tragedy became a catalyst for the mourning response of minority groups, allowing the cathartic release of emotions affiliated to the wound of lost community. In terms of the quest to formulate a posthumous public apology to Wilde’s memory (the ‘reparation’ strand of the mourning urge), a cultural tug-of-war was played out between contending minority groups. Written into this cultural tug-of-war was the hope of ‘healing’ the wound of lost community, which was predicated upon the question of to which human rights group the apology should be addressed in the present. In other words, if the public apology were articulated to him but also on behalf of the wound of homophobic prejudice in general, a coherent link would be established between his suffering and the collective suffering of the gay community. Of course, Wilde is already a gay icon, and was so before the centenary. However, the concern here is not simply with his iconic status in general but rather the meaning of, and the mourning for, his tragedy.

As a public figure and a cultural icon who was sent into exile, Wilde has sustained the wound of exclusion experienced by those with ‘marginalised’ identities. As the bearer of the wound of lost community, Wilde, through the story of his fate, has attached to him a myth of exile. This has simultaneously been adopted as one of the collective myths of the marginalised group, predominantly but not exclusively, the gay community. Through the public mourning for his tragedy which characterised the centenary, he has come to represent the *collective*

grief, engendered by the loss of community, and to be a means of its finding expression.

What is more, because Wilde is a *famous* homosexual, an artist and a historical figure, his tragedy has about it a certain glamour, through which what it is to suffer is made *worthwhile*. He suffered because he was a genius, because he was unique and because he was wittier than his enemies. His persecutors, described by Christopher Hitchens as 'plodding oafs and heavies', can be cast in the role of mediocre and vindictive philistines. By default, those who identify with his plight can cast their 'persecutors' in a similar role: as inferior beings who lack the capacity to understand what it is to be *different, special, extraordinary*.

This was a point noted by Michael Bracewell, who has talked of having two posters in his room as a teenager, one of David Bowie in his make-up phase, the other of Oscar Wilde. 'I worshipped them both with equal passion, and for the same reason. They made being different look glamorous.'¹⁴ Certainly, in terms of the emergence of a gay identity, this kind of perception of Wilde can assist the process of coming to terms with what it is to be homosexual by attaching a positive meaning to being 'different'. For Wildean scholar Neil McKenna, however, Wilde's image has become too sanitised, reproduced without thought for the struggle Wilde endured in order to be what he was. As a result, the harsh reality of his sufferings, 'the truth of the struggle he fought for his sexuality, the horror of his punishments . . . are in danger of being overlooked and forgotten'.¹⁵

Wilde's punishments were undoubtedly horrific and, in many respects, the extremity of what he suffered has been compromised by the commodification of his image. However, McKenna's perception of him as a martyr to the 'cause' of gay rights reveals more about McKenna himself and his need for a sympathetic figurehead than it does about Wilde. The extent to which Wilde consciously fought for the rights of the emerging gay rights movement is questionable. He did express sympathy with the movement, writing to the activist George Ives that 'I have no doubt that we shall win, but the road is long and red with monstrous martyrdoms.' He argued, 'nothing but the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act would do any good.'¹⁶ Yet he never actively involved himself in the gay movement in any ostensibly political capacity, either before or after his imprisonment, nor is there sufficient evidence to support the idea that he chose to martyr himself for the wider cause of homosexual rights.

Certainly, in his famous courtroom speech he defended homosexuality, arguing that, 'the love that dared not speak its name' was 'the noblest form

of affection' and that, it is, 'so much misunderstood that . . . the world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.'¹⁷ Yet this speech was made when he was being questioned directly about his lifestyle and forced to respond because he was in a court of law. He defended himself with recourse to a Greek model of same-sex passion, in which the aim was spiritual love as opposed to sexual desire, because he was trying to save himself from imprisonment, which he had every right to do.

He did see himself as suffering for Douglas, and sacrificing himself to save the young man he loved, but this sacrifice was chiefly on a personal scale: he was trying to save Douglas from his father. In a letter addressed to Douglas from Holloway while he was awaiting trial he wrote, 'It is in prison that I am going to test the power of love. I am going to see if I cannot make the bitter waters sweet by the intensity of the love I bear you.' He continues, 'I am determined not to revolt but to accept every outrage through devotion to love.'¹⁸ Wilde's concern at this time in his life was with how he was going to survive the horrors that awaited him rather the wider political implications of his suffering for other homosexuals, and it was his love for Bosie that he hoped would help him through his suffering.

A figure much more closely aligned with radical gay politics, as well as far more outspoken about the need for reform, was Douglas himself, who, in his letters of protest concerning Wilde's imprisonment, spoke out vehemently against the injustice of the law against homosexuality. In an article written for *The Mercure de France* in 1895 Douglas wrote of Wilde, 'if, being by nature a man who preferred the physical beauty of a man to that of a woman . . . why should he be punished by any man or group of men?'¹⁹ Douglas argued that when a man is sexually attracted to or in love with another man, the law should not intervene. Even if Wilde had committed 'indecent acts' with male prostitutes, Douglas demanded, 'What right, in the name of liberty, justice and common sense, has society to imprison and torture him?' Aligning himself with the French legal code, in which homosexuality was not against the law, he claimed that such matters are for the conscience of the individual. 'The imprisonment of Oscar Wilde', he wrote, 'is a sham and an outrage to civilisation' and, 'liberty and Justice demand his liberation.'²⁰

For many people Wilde is a martyr to the cause of homosexual rights who saw his destiny of destruction as a sacrifice in the name of this wider cause and his tragedy represents the struggle of the gay rights movement for legitimacy. Because of what he suffered there frequently occurs a deeply personal identification with him on behalf of the minority group, in which his sufferings figure as a controversial and poignant symbol

of what is suffered in the name of 'difference'. It is this identification, running parallel with moral indignation at what he suffered, which fuelled the drive for a public apology.

Running counter to this over-identification is a resistance to his status as a gay iconic figure. This resistance falls into two main groups: the homophobic reactions of those who are uncomfortable with his sexuality, and those who genuinely feel too much attention is paid to his sexuality at the expense of his writings. The latter – chiefly scholars of Wilde who are concerned with his literary rehabilitation – form a key part in the struggle with Wilde's legacy and will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter. These two forms of resistance can of course overlap. It may be that the invocation of his literary legacy masks a discomfort with the issue of his sexuality and becomes a way of attempting to direct attention away from something about which the respondent themselves feels awkward.

Wilde's acceptance into Poet's Corner signified his acceptance by the Church, yet the Dean of Westminster stressed that this acceptance was not on account of his sexuality but his writings. A spokesperson for the Abbey told *The Daily Telegraph* the year before the ceremony that 'Wilde's lifestyle doesn't have a bearing on the decision. He is being judged as one of the greatest of nineteenth century writers'.²¹ The Dean, possibly anxious to stress that Wilde's acceptance into Poet's Corner did not have wider implications for the Church's stance on the issue of homosexuality was a case where emphasis was placed upon the writings in order to detract from this still contentious issue within the Church.

A more direct refutation of the attempts to focus the Poets' Corner ceremony upon Wilde's status as a figurehead for the gay community came from Allison Pearson who, writing in *The Evening Standard*, criticised gay actor Ian McKellan for affiliating Wilde with the gay rights movement. She wrote, 'I was sorry to see homosexual members of the congregation using the occasion to invoke the playwright as a martyr to the gay cause.'²² Wilde, she claimed, 'would have regarded the unsmiling protests of militant gays with the same mirth as he treated militant anything else.'²³ His relevance, 'was for all times and persons of all sexual orientations.'²³

Although not ostensibly homophobic, her refutation of McKellan's claim upon Wilde was based upon the premise that no single minority group has the right to claim him as a figurehead. Although she does not explicitly say so, her point raises the issue that those who do claim him as a spokesperson for their particular cause are excluding others who might want to celebrate him simply because they do not identify

with a particular minority group. Yet Wilde is a figure who has come to mean different things to different people and the squabble over who and what he represents is part of the process of trying to make sense of his legacy.

The Irish Response

Although a relatively new area of critical enquiry, claims for Wilde as an Irish nationalist and, more generally, as an Irish writer and icon, are also made. Ian Small has observed that this seems to have come into being in the 1990s, as the centenary progressed. Some discussion circulated about his inclusion in ‘the pantheon of Irish nationalists’, as well as claims that his rehabilitation revived ‘the perennially simmering debate about which nation pre-partition Anglophone Irish writers spiritually belong to.’²⁴ Whereas there is a plethora of gay responses to Wilde, with comments pertaining both to his role in contemporary gay culture and his personal effect upon individuals, there is less material concerning how and in what way his tragedy might have affected contemporary Irish individuals. The exceptions to this are those responses recorded by Irish academics. The explanation for this is that the ‘cause’ of his downfall was his homosexuality, a factor which strengthens claims for him as a gay icon and, for many, indicates that the reparation to be made to him should be made as a gesture against homophobic intolerance.

However, no one, as far as is known, has suggested that an apology should be made to the Irish nation for Wilde’s sufferings. Yet it has been argued that his trials represented the persecution of an Irishman by the English. One such argument emanates from the Irish academic Terry Eagleton, whose stage play *Saint Oscar* (1989) cites Wilde’s Irishness as the reason why the English authorities sought to destroy him: he was a ‘foreigner’, an intruder who had had the audacity to impose himself upon Society. ‘No Irishman can receive a fair hearing in an English court’, quips Eagleton’s Wilde.²⁵ ‘The Irish’, notes Eagleton in his Introduction to the text, ‘have to keep remembering their own history because the English keep forgetting it’ and, for Eagleton, ‘Oscar Wilde’s treatment at the hands of a brutal, arrogant British Establishment is being acted out once more in Ireland today, with brutality of a different kind.’²⁶ It is perhaps surprising then, that material pertaining to a link between Wilde’s sufferings and that of the Irish nation is thin on the ground.

In the 1990s though, the commemoration of Wilde by means of a statue outside his home in Merrion Square would come to symbolise a change in attitudes to homosexuality in Ireland. Paula McCarthy notes, ‘Long after monuments have ceased to fire the imagination, they continue to

document a developing culture, revealing who or what it was important to commemorate at a given time. . . . This commemoration will serve as an indication to future generations of changing attitudes in Ireland at the close of the twentieth century.’²⁷ Yet, she observes, ‘it has taken nearly *one hundred* years for an Irish body, public or private, to *risk* suggesting that we might consider Oscar Wilde worthy of commemoration.’²⁸

Another reason for a lack of attention to Wilde’s sufferings as an Irish issue may be that many people often do not realise that Wilde was Irish. He left Ireland when he was twenty and his plays, for which he is most renowned, depict life in *English* society. He adopted the mannerisms of the English aristocracy. For Merlin Holland, ‘Wilde’s Irishness does not manifest itself in his work in the same way as a writer like Joyce. It comes more subtly in nuances of style, or in the elements of an Irish oral tradition.’²⁹ However, where claims have been made for Wilde as an Irish icon it has often been on account of that very quality which induced him to consciously assimilate into his personality the traits of an English gentleman: the quality of the Irishman as *outsider*. Thus, notes Jerusha McCormack, ‘For Wilde, it was the issue of language which sealed his sense of displacement. . . . he arrived as an outsider, attuned to the double-speak of the empire at home.’³⁰

Likewise, for Declan Kibberd, Wilde ‘learned what it was to be an outsider, an uninvited guest, an Irishman in England.’³¹ ‘On one side he duplicated many of the attributes of the coloniser. . . . On another, more subversive level, he pointed to a subterranean, radical tradition of English culture, which might form a useful alliance with Irish nationalism and thus remain true to its own deepest imperatives.’³² Wilde’s tendency to invert and overturn the values he adopted makes him a prime subject for Irish iconic status since a political subversiveness that is both radical and rebellious can be read into his motives. His perspective as an outsider gave him the objectivity which enabled him to satirise and critique the English. For Fintan O’Toole it was the sense of exile which compelled Wilde towards the theatrical demeanour which was his mode of expression and self-presentation, making his ‘Irishness’ the key to his very being:

The meaning of this self-conscious and intricate theatricality is close to the centre of Wilde’s career, because it is the meaning of exile itself. Exile is a form of self-dramatisation, the assumption of a role, the tailoring of one’s personality to an alien audience. Exile makes things that are unconscious – language, gesture, dress, the accoutrements of nationality – conscious. It forces the exile to

become a performer. And that performance involves ambiguity. It involves being who you are while being who you are playing. . . . And so the notion of play-acting itself becomes an inextricable part of the Irish ambivalence, an essential image of the doubleness of the exile's condition.³³

In his reading of, and response to, the subject of Wilde's exile, O'Toole forges a link between how he thinks Wilde himself experienced his exiled state, and how the Irish individual (O'Toole himself?) experiences a similar condition. His reading of Wilde is therefore predicated upon a personal identification with this particular mode of exile, the Irishman abroad, around which is configured another image of the outsider. Wilde's status as an Irish icon emerges out of his iconic representation of this defining Irish experience. Wilde has become a means of debating what it signifies to be Irish, (or to be gay), a way for members of the public to explore and understand their own experience, in each case, of being or feeling like an outsider.

Thus, when O'Toole argues that exile and the condition of exile makes things that are unconscious conscious, it is not simply in relation to Wilde's own experience of exile that this claim is plausible. It is also true of him after his death, through the responses generated by his tragedy, through, in fact, public mourning itself, since his tragedy brings into consciousness the wound of lost community sustained by subjection to cultural and historical marginalisation.

However, during the debates surrounding the Westminster ceremony and the posthumous Pardon, no direct attempt was made to articulate a similar apology to the Irish community for Wilde's sufferings. Yet the connections which some scholars have made with Irish Nationalism do suggest that this might be a legitimate possibility. On account of the Irish Nationalist sentiments that might be uncovered in his writings and in those of his mother, whose influence upon her son can never be overstated, a claim can be made for Wilde as an Irish martyr, and for his sufferings as an Irish issue. What is more, the image of Wilde as an exile expresses something which is a familiar Irish theme: the notion that the Irish are a community somehow perpetually homeless and without roots. Richard Pine argues that 'Living thus outside history, in parenthesis, the Irish mind, perceiving both its uniqueness and its helplessness, gives itself to the cultivation of difference.'³⁴

For those with Irish connections, the oppression and marginalisation perpetrated by the Great Famine (1846-1851) constitutes a 'wound' to the Irish nation. During the Famine thousands of Irish peasants emigrated

to America where they lived in exile, or died during transportation. The descendants of the émigrés lost contact with their culture and with it their ancestral roots back in Ireland. The Great Famine is a classic example of a wound of lost community, in this case, to the Irish community, or nation. Through it was created a disconnection with the past, leading to a forsaken sense of belonging within the wider context of a national and cultural heritage. Declan Kibberd notes that ‘In just over a century a language spoken by millions withered to almost nothing. . . . Few enough people outside the ranks of cultural nationalism have been able to admit to the traumatising effect of the loss of Irish on the personality of citizens.’³⁵ As noted by Terry Eagleton’s Wilde, ‘they take away our land and language . . . someone’s in pain somewhere but nobody knows who.’³⁶

As such this wound has never adequately been mourned because of a failure on the part of the English nation to recognise its part in the Irish suffering and the extent of English culpability is a much-debated issue. 1996 saw the one hundredth and fiftieth anniversary of the sailing of the fleets of ships taking the Irish émigrés to a destiny of exile in America. On her visit to London in 1995, the Irish president Dr. Mary Robinson urged the British Government to make a formal apology in time for this anniversary. Speaking of the importance of its commemoration she stated that, ‘the commemoration . . . does not simply open old wounds.’ Rather, it would ‘foster a sense of historical reconciliation, a willingness to shoulder appropriate responsibility . . . and a capacity to express genuine regret for what was done or left undone.’ As she left London, she told the Government, ‘even now it is not too late to say sorry.’³⁷

Because Wilde was to a great extent a victim of the English, and because he was a prisoner and an exile on account of his treatment by the English authorities, his plight has resonances with the Great Famine. In order to highlight this connection with reference to Wilde’s imprisonment, Davis Coakley quotes Seamus Heaney who wrote ‘At this distance and in this particular light there is indeed a way of seeing Oscar Wilde, a felon of our land’ as, ‘another prisoner in an English Gaol.’³⁸ What is more, through *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde utilises, ‘a metre that had been used by the Young Ireland poet Denis Florence McCarthy to express the pain and anguish of the Irish nation.’³⁹ Owen Dudley Edwards also believes that in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* Wilde ‘wholly identifies with the criminal classes’. Because his parents, ‘transmitted to their son something of what it meant to be a privileged remnant in a country which had wiped out its lowest class’, the result was that ‘he could speak for the downmost doomed when his time came’, so that ‘the horror of the Famine stalked . . . in the Ballad of Reading Gaol.’⁴⁰

For Bernard O'Donahue, Wilde's act of destruction, which constituted an act of self-sacrifice for the absolution of society, was an essentially Irish gesture. He argues that 'sacrifice as an idea pervades the Irish cultural tradition.' Wilde's challenge to Queensberry, he maintains, was a way of 'challenging the world to be ashamed of its wrongs.'⁴¹ According to O'Donahue, Wilde offered himself as a scapegoat for the redemption of English society's wrongs because he understood that 'the scapegoat . . . is an important metaphorical device which can be used to absolve society of its guilts by freeing it from marks of shame.'⁴² There is no evidence to support O'Donahue's claim in terms of anything Wilde specifically said regarding his tragedy, nor is there anything in his actions throughout his arrest and trial to suggest that his downfall was a gesture on behalf of the Irish people. Certainly he saw himself as an Irishman rather than completely assimilating an exclusively English identity. When his decision to stay in the country to face arrest became known, his mother told him, 'If you stay you will always be my son, but if you go I will never speak to you again', a threat that might have activated Wilde's Irish pride, while his brother is quoted as saying that Wilde was to stay and face trial, 'like an Irish gentleman'.⁴³

Wilde was conscious that his was an act of sacrifice but it was, as mentioned earlier, to save Bosie from his father. Later, during the writing of *De Profundis*, his close identification with Christ became his mode of conceptualising his fall. He was more drawn to the idea of being a hero to humanity than to any specific social group, the exception to this perhaps being other prisoners, of whom he wrote, 'I side with the prisoners: I was one and I belong to their class now.'⁴⁴ Ultimately, whether or not these claims for Wilde's plight as being synonymous with the collective suffering of the Irish people provide a plausible case for him as the bearer of the wound of lost community for the Irish community depends heavily upon the nature of a given individual's identification with Wilde.

If such an individual is Irish and identifies with the Irish element in Wilde then the idea of Wilde as a martyr for Irish suffering is more persuasive. Through the story of his exile he can represent the plight of the Irish people, while at the same time effecting a healing for its collective sufferings. The nature of this healing, and of Irish mourning throughout the centenary, largely assumed the form of gestures of public commemoration in Wilde's native country and was reflected in the claims made upon him by many contemporary Irish writers. In addition, he was commemorated by two Irish rock singers: Bob Geldof, who attended the

premier of *Wilde* in 1997, and Van Morrison, whose album *Too Long in Exile* pays tribute to Wilde.⁴⁵

In summary then, citing the examples of two historically marginalised communities it has been shown how, as part of the struggle to play out the 'reparation' strand of public mourning, there has been a battle between opposing ideas of how Wilde should be remembered. That is, the formation of a posthumous apology, in order to be coherently expressed, has tried to address itself to the question of who or what his sufferings represent in the present.

However, if there was a handful of marginalised groups who sought, with reference to his sufferings, to claim him as a bearer of the wound of lost community, there was also some resistance to his status as a figurehead for marginalised identities. To some extent this resistance was noted earlier in respect of those figures, for whom the 'mythic' Wilde posed either a scholarly or a moral problem. Yet there was at least one 'cause', the supporters of which directed criticism at him for *failing* to assist them in their political struggles.

The Feminist Response

One marginalised group from which he does come under fire is the women's rights movement, for whom the idea of Wilde as an ally seems to be particularly problematic. Scrutinising his writings and his personal actions for signs of misogynist tendencies, Wildean scholars with a feminist agenda have criticised his approach to women's issues and argued that he was, at best, indifferent to these political struggles. In his work on women's role on the Victorian theatre, Kerry Powell is critical of Wilde. This is not simply because he regards Wilde as having failed to support a revolutionary theatre project initiated by the actress Elizabeth Robins, but because, by implication, Wilde failed to see how such a project might further the women's movement as a whole.

Linking the struggle by female actresses in this period to achieve greater and more central parts, Powell argues that, 'the struggle for theatrical reform was basically a woman's cause.'⁴⁶ He concludes that after their meeting, 'Robins, the ascetic, feminist revolutionary of the theatre of the 1890s, had foreseen a different outcome for Wilde, and through him for the theatre itself, and on a rainy afternoon in late 1894 looked at him as at a stranger, having nothing more to say.'⁴⁷ Of course, it is highly plausible that Wilde simply did not regard her venture as financially feasible, or possibly was unimpressed by Robins personally. Yet that his failure to support the venture has come to be viewed by Powell as such a politically negligent gesture in respect of

the women's movement shows the extent to which minority groups and those concerned with their causes harbour expectations of Wilde as a figurehead of marginalised identities.

Because of Wilde's prominence as a gay figure, and because of his importance as a representative of the contemporary gay sensibility, the historical ramification of a failed alliance between the figure of Wilde and the feminist movement is that this failed alliance extends to the gay movement in general. For feminist scholar Eve Sedgwick, the impact of the Wilde trials upon political alliances between gay men and other marginalised groups was such that Wilde's cultural presence 'went with a loss of interest in, or hope for, political struggle in general', so that 'political alliances between gay men and other, comparably oppressed groups were not cultivated.' The impact of this upon the women's movement was 'a loss of interest in the fate of real women.'⁴⁸

The potential for mutual understanding between gay men and women, as well as mutual sympathy with each other's experiences, might seem to point to a natural alliance between the two groups. To invoke an idea that is something of a cliché as well as a generalisation, many women feel that gay men 'understand' them better than straight men, and gay men often display greater empathy with the feminine experience. Wilde's image has been popularised as a feminised man, a camp gay figure whose mannerisms and clothing *simulate* those of a woman. One case that reflects such cultural perceptions is that of a photograph of a person dressed as Salome taken in the 1890s. The picture was thought to have been Wilde himself but it was, in fact, Alice Guszalewicz, an actress of the period.

The idea that Wilde might impersonate a woman is plausible because, as argued by Alan Sinfield, he is popularly perceived as a camp gay man whose homosexuality led him to explore a feminine role. However, rather than reading this as a positive affirmation of the feminine experience, Wilde's impersonation and/or simulation of feminine mannerisms and traits is more often read as a mockery of women, making it difficult to construe him as a figure who is sympathetic to their political position. What is more, with Wilde as an influential figurehead whose presence continues to shape the gay sensibility in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the presence of misogynistic tendencies and political indifference to women's issues within Wilde himself may encourage such attitudes in contemporary gay men. The effect of this is that many women may mistrust gay men, feeling that they are not genuinely supportive of contemporary women's issues.

Thus, as well as offering the potential for healing the wound of lost

community, Wilde is sometimes a scapegoat, blamed for the failure of some minority groups to achieve reconciliation. Such a blaming process is not only part of the public mourning for Wilde, in which responses to his fate were being explored, and where some of these involved the perhaps taboo idea that he was after all, only human. It also belongs within the wider spectrum of mourning the wound of lost community that cultural and historical marginalisation has perpetrated. Finding someone to blame is common in the mourning response in respect of tragedies, and the oppression sustained by such marginalised groups is a tragedy on a worldwide, centuries-old scale.

It is a tragedy that has been mourned in conjunction with Wilde through antipathy as well as sympathy towards his wounds. Thus, in this confusion between his sufferings and those of the groups who identify with him, sometimes blame was directed at Wilde's persecutors (the authorities, the popular press), whilst for other respondents this blame was directed at Wilde himself, for, as it were, 'letting the side down'. The impetus to apologise for his sufferings, to identify and to discern within them a myth of the outsider that speaks to the politically and culturally *specific* experiences of the marginalised twentieth century human subject has formed part of a narrative of mourning, which has been in evidence throughout the centenary of Oscar Wilde. Competing against these discourses of celebration and commemoration are those of blame, refusal, resentment and disappointment: that he was not radical enough, not politically sensitive enough, or sufficiently personally sympathetic to the idea of 'causes' to champion any of theirs.

So far this work has explored the popular strand of Wilde's rehabilitation, in which there has been a struggle to claim him as a figurehead for numerous minority issues and in which focus was upon his tragedy: his imprisonment and the perceived injustice of that imprisonment, and his homosexuality. Such responses have been described as being consistent with the phenomenon of public mourning, the first stage of which is to articulate an apology to Wilde's memory. The subsequent stage of this process is the mythologizing of Wilde as the story of his resurrection moves from reparation to repudiation of his death through the proliferation of his image and the story of his downfall.