

DE PROFUNDIS

**FRAGILITAS BONI, DOLORUM TEMPUS ET CAPACITAS
INTERPRETANDI**

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I.

February this year is the cruelest of months. Brother is killing his brother. Ukraine is scorched and soaked in blood. From the depths of distress and suffering, we hear: *Exaudi nos Domine*: “Lord, hear our cry.” Indeed, from the depths, we cry to Thee.

PSALM 130, *DE PROFUNDIS* (BIBLIA SACRA VULGATA)

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine;
Domine, exaudi vocem meam. Fiant aures tuæ intendentes
in vocem deprecationis meæ.
Si iniquitates observaveris, Domine, Domine, quis sustinebit?
Quia apud te propitiatio est; et propter legem tuam sustinui te, Domine.
Sustinuit anima mea in verbo ejus:

Speravit anima mea in Domino.

A custodia matutina usque ad noctem, speret Israël in Domino.

Quia apud Dominum misericordia, et copiosa apud eum redemptio.

Et ipse redimet Israël ex omnibus iniquitatibus ejus.

Out of the depths, I call to you, O Lord;

Lord, hear my cry. Let your ears be attuned

To the voice of my pleading.

If you, O Lord, keep an account of iniquities, Lord, who will withstand?

Only with you is forgiveness; because of your law, I have borne you, o Lord.

My soul trusts in his word.

In the Lord, my soul confines.

From the morning watch until night, the Israelites are hoping in the Lord.

Mercy is with the Lord, and with him abundant redemption.

And he will deliver Israel from all its iniquities. (My translation.)

8 In the unmistakable uniqueness of our individual humanity, we cry “out of the depths.” This cry, *lamentatio*, is an expression of our being in the world with Others that narrate our personal story of self-realization. The beginning of knowledge is the experience of the absolute feeling of dependence (Schleiermacher’s *schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*).¹ In 2 Cor 4:7, we read: “Ἐχομεν δὲ τὸν θησαυρὸν τοῦτον ἐν ὀστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν, ἵνα ἡ ὑπερβολὴ τῆς δυνάμεως ᾗ τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ μὴ ἐξ ἡμῶν: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” These ὀστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν, *vasis fictilibus*,² *zerbrechliche Gefässe*, jars of clay indicate that the very depth and breadth of human existence is an absolute feeling of dependence.³

1 “The translation of Schleiermacher’s key phrase ‘das schlechthinnige Abhängigkeitsgefühl’ is a matter of some contention. It has been suggested that the traditional translation (‘feeling of absolute dependence’) is in fact inaccurate and that it should be replaced with the accurate ‘absolute feeling of dependence.’” (Finlay 2005, 81.)

2 Cicero wrote in a *Letter to Atticus*: “Sed heus tu, in felicitatis lancibus et splendidissimis canistris, olusculis nos soles pascere; quid te in vasis fictilibus appositurum putem?” Cf. Follin Jones 1945.

3 In Gen 7:5, we read about Noah, who, never having built a boat before, constructed an ark “according to all that the Lord commanded him.” The ark withstood the greatest storm the world has ever known.

The second part of the “Psalm 130” is a profound expression of trust in God, *professio et declaratio*. The recognition of human misery and the cry for mercy are the genuine “doors of faith,” θύραν πίστεως, *porta fidei* (Acts 14:27). If faith is active participation in the divine life, there is no real separation between the call for mercy and the trust in God. All human efforts do not need to be diminished. On the contrary, the cry for mercy is essentially possible because of trust in God.

A close reading of the “Psalm” discloses its musical character.⁴ The two phrases, *exaudi vocem meam* and *apud Dominum misericordia, et copiosa apud eum redemptio* build the foundation of human existence: the orientation toward God (*desiderium naturale, optio fundamentalis*) expresses human inclination toward Indetermination, Infinity, and Transcendence. It is not a simple antidote to the fear of disorientation which motivates the inclination toward God. It is an authentic quest for relation with the Divine.

Augustine asks in his *Confessions* (10, 20):

Quomodo ergo te quaero, domine? cum enim te, deum meum, quaero, vitam beatam quaero. quaeram te, ut vivat anima mea. vivit enim corpus meum de anima mea, et vivit anima mea de te. quomodo ergo quaero vitam beatam? quia non est mihi, donec dicam: sat, est illic, ubi oportet ut dicam. quomodo eam quaero? (Augustine 2022.)

9

How, then, do I seek You, O Lord? For when I seek You, my God, I seek a happy life. I will seek You, that my soul may live. For my body lives by my soul, and my soul lives by You. How, then, do I seek a happy life, seeing that it is not mine till I can say, It is enough! in that place where I ought to say it? How do I seek it?

Searching for God means seeking a beatific life. Augustine is very resolute: despite not knowing how he can search for God, he will inquire and explore.

4 “Psalm 130” has received a lot of attention from the world’s most acclaimed composers: Bach, Handel, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Mozart, to name but a few, set this psalm to music.

The ultimate reason for seeking God is nothing less than the life of his very soul: *quaeram te ut vivat anima mea*. This is the search for a solid foundation, which stands in clear opposition to the inauthenticity of ungrounded commitments. Seeking God is not an easy and indolent excuse for rigorous thinking; on the contrary, it empowers and frees a human being for the task of thinking without subscribing to the Enlightenment's unsubstantiated trust in human reason and calculative rationality. It is precisely the trust in God that intensifies the art of asking primordial questions.

"Psalm 130" offers a generous legitimization of human existence oriented toward God as a form of life. There are other possibilities of this legitimization, including Heidegger's "arrogance of thinking (*Anmaßung des Denkens*)."⁵ Following Nietzsche, Heidegger considers philosophy as nothing if it is not arrogant. Furthermore, it should be arrogant as a persistent overbearingness of the human voice. The task of philosophy is to disclose the necessity of a radical reflection in and from itself (*Notwendigkeit einer radikalen Besinnung in ihr selbst und aus ihr selbst heraus*): "Thinking does not overcome metaphysics by climbing still higher, surmounting it, transcending it somehow or other; thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the nearness of the nearest." (Heidegger 1977a, 230–231.)

Since hermeneutic truth is the truth of interpretation, we will always understand our human condition in our *status viatoris* in the horizon of human finitude. Our self-knowledge is the knowledge mediated by language, history, and culture.⁶ The truth of ourselves unfolds hermeneutically. Being not self-

5 "Philosophische Forschung ist und bleibt Atheismus, deshalb kann sie sich, die 'Anmaßung des Denkens' leisten, nicht nur wird sie sich leisten, sondern sie ist die innere Notwendigkeit der Philosophie und die eigentliche Kraft, und gerade in diesem Atheismus wird sie zu dem, was ein Großer einmal sagte, zur 'Fröhlichen Wissenschaft.'" (Heidegger 1979, 109–110.) The English translation reads: "Philosophical research is and remains atheism, which is why philosophy can allow itself 'the arrogance of thinking.' Not only will it allow itself as much; this arrogance is the inner necessity of philosophy and its true strength. Precisely in this atheism, philosophy becomes what a great man once called the 'Joyful science.'" (Heidegger 1985, 113.) See Amthor 2012. Cf. also Wierciński 2010, 211–219 (i.e., the chapter "From the 'Necessary Atheism of Philosophy' to a Religion beyond Theism and Atheism").

6 For Ricoeur, a human being is a mediated self: "The subject is never given at the beginning. Or, if it were so given it would run the risk of reducing itself to a narcissistic

transparent, we acknowledge our finitude. Seeing ourselves with limited clarity (obscure = ἐν αἰνίγματι = *aenigmaticam*; 1 Cor 13:12: βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, *Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate*), we acclaim:

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine;
Domine, exaudi vocem meam. Fiant aures tuæ intendentes
in vocem deprecationis meæ.

З глибини я взиваю до Тебе, о Господи: Господи, почуй же мій
голос! Нехай уші Твої будуть чулі на голос благання мого!

Из глубины воззвах к тебе, Господи; Господи, услыши глас мой.
Да будут уши твои внимлюще гласу моления моего!

II.

There is a cry from the depths that is not an opening to Transcendence. On the contrary, it is a decisive voice of accepting death as the transgression to nothingness. Moreover, it is a symphony of voices, masterfully put together by Dmitri Shostakovich in his *Fourteenth Symphony*. Shostakovich reportedly answered his critics in *Testimony*:

11

They [Critics] read this idea in the Fourteenth Symphony: “Death is all-powerful.” They wanted the finale to be comforting, to say that death is only the beginning. But it’s not a beginning, it’s the real end, there will be nothing afterward, nothing.

I feel that you must look truth right in the eyes. Often composers haven’t had the courage for that, even the greatest ones, like Tchaikovsky or Verdi. Just think of *The Queen of Spades*. Gherman dies and then

ego, self-centered and avaricious—and it is just this from which literature can liberate us. Our loss on the side of narcissism is our gain on the side of narrative identity. In the place of an ego enchanted by itself a self is born, taught by cultural symbols, first among which are the stories received in the literary tradition. These stories give unity—not unity of substance but narrative wholeness.” (Ricoeur 1986, 132.)

comes music which was described by the old cynic Asafiev as “the image of a loving Liza hovering over the corpse.” What is that? The corpse is just that, and Liza has nothing to do with it. It doesn’t matter to the corpse whose image hovers over it.

Tchaikovsky gave in to the seduction of solace—you know, the best of everything in this best of all possible worlds. Something will hover over your corpse too. Liza’s image or some banners. This was a cowardly act on Tchaikovsky’s part.

And Verdi did exactly the same thing in *Otello*. Richard Strauss entitled one of his tone poems *Death and Transfiguration*. Even Mussorgsky, certainly a just and courageous man, was afraid to look truth in the face. After Boris’s death in *Boris Godunov*, the music moves to such a major key that you can’t be any more major.

To deny death and its power is useless. Deny it or not, you’ll die anyway. But understanding that is not tantamount to bowing to death. I don’t make a cult of death, I don’t praise it. Mussorgsky didn’t sing the praises of death either. Death in his song cycles looks horrible, and most important, it comes before it should.

It’s stupid to protest death as such, but you can and must protest violent death. It’s bad when people die before their time from disease or poverty, but it’s worse when a man is killed by another man. I thought about all this when I orchestrated *Songs and Dances of Death*, and these thoughts also found reflection in the Fourteenth Symphony. I don’t protest against death in it. I protest against those butchers who execute people. (Volkov 1984, 181–182.)

Shostakovich does not shy away from expressing his rage about the political crimes happening at that time. His composition carefully explores the phenomenon of death as it shows itself in human life in all its diversity. His faithful companion is as ever poetry. He reaches to Federico García Lorca.

DE PROFUNDIS

Los cien enamorados
duermen para siempre
bajo la tierra seca.
Andalucía tiene
largos caminos rojos.
Córdoba, olivos verdes
donde poner cien cruces,
que los recuerden.
Los cien enamorados
duermen para siempre.

DE PROFUNDIS

The hundred lovers
rest forever
in the parched ground.
Travel through Andalusia
long red roads.
Green olive trees stand around Cordoba,
where a hundred crosses are to be erected
to commemorate the dead.
The hundred lovers
rest there forever. (My translation.)

13

Shostakovich concludes his journey with the poets with the memorable verses by Rainer Maria Rilke from *The Book of Images*:

Der Tod ist groß.
Wir sind die Seinen
lachenden Munds.
Wenn wir uns mitten im Leben meinen,
wagt er zu weinen
mitten in uns.

Death is almighty.
We are its
cackling mouth.
When we perceive ourselves immersed in life,
death ventures to cry
immersed in us. (My translation.)

For Shostakovich, death is indeed almighty, all-powerful: “Всевластна смерть!” This truly frightening experience motivated him to compose music by strengthening his relationship with his fellow human beings. The *Fourteenth Symphony* allowed him to come to terms with the inevitability of his own death. The emotional emptiness of this prelude is typical of a grief that is so exhausted that it cannot even speak its name. There are many ways to commemorate the death: a gravestone, a simple cross, or a symbolic reminder. As a tribute to all who have died in pain, Shostakovich offers his music to the memory of others. Like Miłosz in the poem “You Who Wronged”:

14

You who wronged a simple man
Bursting into laughter at the crime,
And kept a pack of fools around you
To mix good and evil, to blur the line,

Though everyone bowed down before you,
Saying virtue and wisdom lit your way,
Striking gold medals in your honor,
Glad to have survived another day,

Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
You can kill one, but another is born.
The words are written down, the deed, the date.

And you'd have done better with a winter dawn,
A rope, and a branch bowed beneath your weight.

Washington, D.C., 1950 (Miłosz 2001, 103.)

Poetry and music allow their compositional instability, (dis)harmony, and tension to evoke the uncertainty, pain, and suffering that is caused by war. Listening today to Shostakovich, it is difficult not to feel his wise indication (*formale Anzeige*) of the demoralizing senselessness, emptiness, and inhumanity of any war.

Shostakovich brilliantly shows through the way he modifies poetic verses he uses and brings them together with music that human life is one cycle; the end is the beginning. Taking seriously the univocal notion of death as the permanent cessation of the integrated functioning of the human being in the world, Shostakovich firmly believed that Art will last forever.

III.

And there is another cry from the depth: Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* (cf. Wilde 1994, 980–1059). A long letter to “Bosie” (Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas) is a monological journey of discovery through self-interpretation, a pilgrimage to the source of artistic vocation and creativity.

Like Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae* (cf. Boethius 2022) written in 523 A.D., in one-year imprisonment, while awaiting his trial, Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* is a letter from H. M. Prison Reading authored between January and March 1897, “*in carcere et vinculis*.” It is difficult not to see the reference to St. Paul's “Letter to the Ephesians,” where the Apostle writes to the pagans (6:20): “ὑπὲρ οὗ πρεσβεύω ἐν ἀλύσει, ἵνα ἐν αὐτῷ παρρησιάσωμαι ὡς δεῖ με λαλῆσαι.” In King James's translation, we read: “For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”

Oscar Wilde writes from the prison with a clear state of mind: he is the real Elder (πρεσβεύω), respected as trustworthy, loyal, and knowledgeable, an absolute genius who can boldly express what needs to be said in this horrible hour of distress and need. He gives powerful testimony to the fundamental bond between the truth spoken and the thought of his own life. His confident address (παρρησία) expresses his unreservedness in speech. It is “a modality of truth-telling”⁷ Wilde does not offer in his letter one overriding argument.

7 “Parrhesia is not a skill; it is something which is harder to define. It is a stance, a way of being which is akin to a virtue, a mode of action. Parrhesia involves ways of acting, means

Since it is a genuine self-discovery, the letter gives him an opportunity to look at his life and love from different perspectives. He boldly states: “I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art.”

De Profundis is a hermeneutic reading of Wilde’s life *par excellence*. He examines the events in his life, not for the sake of reliving them as they were, but to experience them in their *Wirkungsgeschichte*. It is not a form of *Wiederleben* and *Nachleben* but experiencing them as the events that formed and transformed his life. Writing the letter is a very constructive and productive process of unweaving his life. It is definitely not a conceptual undertaking toward producing a rational narrative of his life. The coherent narrative embraces all the conflicting interpretations that are not aiming at reaching a final conclusion, but rather present an unstable equilibrium in his life. Since weaving historically was perceived as a predominantly female activity, unweaving offers a more gender-inclusive vision of a human being as an acting and suffering person (*l’homme agissant et souffrant*).⁸ *De Profundis* is very intimate and intense, and it is precisely because of its particularity that it is universal. It does not offer any

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magisterial reading of life but invites every reader to work on the meaning of life, and follow the logic of one’s life story while telling the truth of being in the world with Others. It is this *incommunicabilis proprietatis* that is proper to a person as a single individual. Wilde is very conscious of creating a participatory ethos by embracing endless possibilities of interpretation without prioritizing a particular reading *ex-cathedra*.

For Plato (Book X of *The Republic*), “poetical limitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them.” In a conversation with Glaucon, Socrates laments the temptation of the beautiful verses and calls Homer “the great captain and teacher of the whole of that charming, tragic company.” It is precisely in this context

brought together with a view to an end, and in this respect it has, of course, something to do with technique, but it is also a role which is useful, valuable, and indispensable for the city and for individuals. Parrhesia should be regarded as a modality of truth-telling, rather than [as a] technique [like] rhetoric.” (Foucault 2012, 14.)

8 In her 2007 poem cycle *Niemand’s Frau*, Barbara Köhler returns to Homer’s *Odyssey*. By offering her reading of Penelope’s unweaving of Laertes’s shroud, she provides an alternative to a teleological meaning behind Odysseus’s inner journey home. See Köhler and Wolfensberger 2007. Cf. Paul 2013 and Johnson 2019.

that Socrates makes his famous statement that “a man is not to be revered more than the truth” (Hofstadter and Kuhns 1976, 30). Reexamining his life, Wilde attributed Bosie’s negative influence on him to his lover’s lack of artistic integrity and intellectual rigor. The most devastating thing was the lack of the synthesis of life and work. Acknowledging the intellectual potential as well as the danger of the paradoxes, Wilde can consistently repeat: “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.” (*The Decay of Lying*; in Wilde 1994, 1071–1092). It is a very gloomy prospect when there is not much to imitate.

De Profundis is a hymn to love in prose as delightful and moving as Edith Piaf’s song:⁹

If the sky should fall into the sea
And the stars fade all around me
Of the time that we have known dear
I will sing a hymn to love
We have lived and reigned we two alone
In a world that’s hinder very own
With its memory ever grateful
Just for you, I’ll sing a hymn to love

I remember each embrace
The smile that lights your face
And my heart begins to sing
Your arm, the hands secure
Your eyes that said “be sure”
And my heart begins to sing

If one day we had to say goodbye
And our love should fade away and die
In my heart, you will remain, dear
And I’ll sing a hymn to love

9 “Hymne à l’amour” was translated into English as “Hymn to Love” by Eddie Constantine. Edith Piaf recorded it on her album *La Vie En Rose. Édith Piaf Sings in English* (1956).

Those who love will live eternally
In the blue, where all is harmony
With my voice raised high to Heaven
Just for you, I'll sing a hymn to love

He unites all those who loved before ... (Piaf 2022.)

18 Some readers might be tempted to call Wilde a secular Messiah. His most significant question was about liberating a human being toward being free to address everything that transgresses simple boundaries carefully established by different close-minded cultures and streams of thought. His distaste for inauthenticity and social cowardliness was constantly and carefully nourished by a symbiosis of life and art in order to intensify the feeling of being alive in the world. The whole world was a stage to him. Performing on this stage was his highest vocation, both in terms of living his life to the fullest and writing his most memorable pieces. Consistently living up to his maxim that the best way to resist temptation is to yield to it, Wilde's life and love are nurtured by the imagination. Its indisputable potential builds pathways of creativity and responsivity (also responsibility) in human ways of dealing with the challenges of the increasingly polarized world.

Love is fed by the imagination, by which we become wiser than we know, better than we feel, nobler than we are: by which we can see Life as a whole: by which, and by which alone, we can understand others in their real as in their ideal relations. Only what is fine, and finely conceived, can feed Love. But anything will feed Hate. (*De Profundis*.)¹⁰

Wilde's comparing himself to Christ is a reference at the deepest ethical level: like Christ, he wants to achieve the betterment of society by educating people toward reinterpreting the values in their lives. His initial self-pity turns into pitying the crowd that pitied him:

10 Cf. Prewitt Brown 1997.

Everything about my tragedy has been hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style. Our very dress makes us grotesques. We are the zanies of sorrow. We are clowns whose hearts are broken. We are specially designed to appeal to the sense of humour. On November 13th 1895 I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress and handcuffed, for the world to look at. I had been taken out of the Hospital Ward without a moment's notice being given to me. Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was of course before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed, they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob.

For a year after that was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. That is not such a tragic thing as possibly it sounds to you. To those who are in prison, tears are a part of every day's experience. A day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy.

Well, now I am really beginning to feel more regret for the people who laughed than for myself. Of course when they saw me I was not on my pedestal. I was in the pillory. But it is a very unimaginative nature that only cares for people on their pedestals. A pedestal may be a very unreal thing. A pillory is a terrific reality. They should have known also how to interpret sorrow better. I have said that behind Sorrow there is always Sorrow. It were still wiser to say that behind sorrow there is always a soul. And to mock at a soul in pain is a dreadful thing. Unbeautiful are their lives who do it. In the strangely simple economy of the world people only get what they give, and to those who have not enough imagination to penetrate the mere outward of things and feel pity, what pity can be given save that of scorn?

I have told you this account of the mode of my being conveyed here simply that you should realise how hard it has been for me to get anything out of my punishment but bitterness and despair. I have however to do

it, and now and then I have moments of submission and acceptance. All the spring may be hidden in a single bud, and the low ground-nest of the lark may hold the joy that is to herald the feet of many rose-red dawns, and so perhaps whatever beauty of life still remains to me is contained in some moment of surrender, abasement and humiliation. I can, at any rate, merely proceed on the lines of my own development, and by accepting all that has happened to me make myself worthy of it.

People used to say of me that I was too individualistic. I must be far more of an individualist than I ever was. I must get far more out of myself than I ever got, and ask far less of the world than I ever asked. Indeed my ruin came, not from too great individualism of life, but from too' little. The one disgraceful, unpardonable, and to all time contemptible action of my life was my allowing myself to be forced into appealing to Society for help and protection against your father. To have made such an appeal against anyone would have been from the individualistic point of view bad enough, but what excuse can there ever be put forward for having made it against one of such nature and aspect? (*De Profundis*.)

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Wilde, as the troubadour of the sanctity of human relations, composes and sings the glory of friendship, the glory of connection between friends like David and Jonathan,¹¹ and the drama of the relationship between Casius and Brutus, Judas and Jesus. Wilde's sensitivity to the contingency of fate, especially with regard to friendship, helps him to treasure the value of friendship despite unfaithfulness and betrayal. While in prison, Wilde tried to find solace and friendship in reading and occasionally in writing. He is a reminder and testimony to the fierce appetite for the culture of questioning, for addressing the question of what it means to question the question without subscribing to the established patterns of thought toward the primordial practice of thinking, the piety of thinking (*Frömmigkeit des Denkens*).¹²

11 For the influence of 1 and 2 Samuel on Oscar Wilde, see Harding 2013, 403–406.

12 At the end of his essay "The Question Concerning Technology" (*Die Frage nach der Technik*), Heidegger states: "Thus questioning, we bear witness to the crisis that in our sheer preoccupation with technology we do not yet experience the coming to

“The Love that dare not speak its name” in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the “Love that dare not speak its name,” and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. (*De Profundis*.)¹³

Oscar Wilde teaches contemporary readers that life of the mind and love will save humanity. His life was devoted to the moral imperative of Beauty. Its summoning power and an arresting quality form and transform us. Receiving and transmitting the love frequency in the sympathetic resonance (*vibration sympathetique*), we can sensitize our tuning to the vibrations in the cosmos and let them have their way.

21

* * *

Being discloses itself in the Beautiful as a powerful interplay of ἀλήθεια, of concealment and unconcealment (*Verbergung/Entbergung*). In the happening

presence of technology, that in our sheer aesthetic-mindedness we no longer guard and preserve the coming to presence of art. Yet the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes. The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become. For questioning is the piety of thought (*das Fragen ist die Frömmigkeit des Denkens*).” (Heidegger 1977b, 35.) See Beck 2017. 13 Lord Alfred Douglas’s poem “Two Loves” was first published in *The Chameleon* in December 1894. For Wilde’s trial, cf. Wilde 2022.

of unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*), Being's self-disclosure is brought to shine (φαίνεσθαι).¹⁴ Since "the horizon of interpretation changes constantly, just as our visual horizon also varies with every step that we take" (Gadamer 2006, 61), the Beautiful is the self-attesting radiance of truth.

Reading a text is a spiritual exercise of patient discovery of the world of the text that is mysteriously unveiling in front of our very eyes. Inhabiting the world of the text is the most challenging exercise for an artist who, like the virtuoso, finds the path through the labyrinth of meaning to arrive at home. This homecoming does not have a singular meaning. On the contrary, it is interpreted in every instance anew. And the necessity to interpret and face the interpretation discloses the inescapability of hermeneutics. Hermeneutic generosity, which happens in the tension between sympathy and critique, is not so much a question of the gracious and benevolent attitude of the reader toward the text, but the intellectual and moral imperative *par excellence*.

22 Hermeneutic reading is a serious engagement with the Other that has a powerful transformative character. It forms and transforms the reader. It discloses before the reader the world of the text that is always bigger than the world of the author and the reader. This disclosure is a graceful reminder that there is always something new that will uncover in front of us. Thus, the task of interpretation is an infinite task. And we are invited to participate in listening to the disclosure of Tradition and speak in a voice that expresses what needs to be said here and now. It will never be a final word, never a closure, but always a disclosure, which calls for further unfolding. We are the guardians and caretakers of this revealing word (*Wächter und Hüter des Wortes*) and, thus, put in charge of carrying it with uttermost attention and love.

A hermeneutic reading of literature opens before the reader the world of the text. It encourages a rigorous and critical engagement with the text and the world of the text as well as the world of the reader without subscribing to established and thus predictable ways of interpretation. The unpredictability of literary engagement is not a postulate for the sake of achieving liberation from

14 The happening of truth (*Geschehen der Wahrheit*) is an event, not only at the origin of the work of art, but also in every case, when the artwork is interpreted in its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. See Lammi 1991. See also Dostal 2021.

the conventional and obvious, but an insight into the nature of understanding that calls for openness toward the unknown, unexpected, and even conflicting interpretations. Since the interpretation always begins from within a history of interpretation, what we understand is the meaning of the original text in its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Literature as an infusion of beauty in life offers us the unprecedented opportunity of investigating, questioning, and reinventing ourselves. It gives us a chance to entertain different possibilities of maturing as human beings and exploring our identities by narrating our own life stories. We can increase our understanding of ourselves and the world by getting educated through literature. Literature can assist us in our existential task of facing life and in our lifelong self-education, not in the sense of cumulating more knowledge about ourselves and the world, but in the sense of understanding ourselves. Gadamer believes that we can only learn through conversation.¹⁵ In such conversation, our social world has its growing possibilities. And only in conversation does language fulfill itself.

If reading literature will help us to grasp the hermeneutic nature of self-knowledge, to become uneasy about apparently easy and self-explanatory meanings, to get attentive and diligent in close reading, then we will sharpen our engagement with reality that permanently escapes being put into words. Hermeneutic reading is a vocation (*vocatio*) and, as such, is a response to the call of the Other. Thus, it is not limited to the reading of the text, but the totality of human existence in the world with the Other and everything that calls for understanding. Hermeneutic reading as *vocation* embraces *invocatio* et *provocatio*. It is a call from the Other that requires responsivity and responsibility. A hermeneutic reading is an ethical activity. Experiencing the polyphonic character of understanding and interpretation, and witnessing the conflict of interpretations, a hermeneutician is convinced that no single interpretation can exhaust the irreducible excess of meaning. Therefore, a hermeneutic

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15 Cf. Gadamer 2002. "The Gadamerian notion of conversation is of considerable significance to the contemporary philosophy of education. Like in a genuine conversation, the participants in the event of education learn from each other by listening to each other. In that respect, education promotes a culture of listening to each other. In a genuine conversation, we situate the understanding of the other in the horizon of our own understanding." (Wierciński 2019, 267–268.)

reading is a participation in the infinite task of interpretation by offering a reading that invites subsequent readings instead of suffocating the voices that sound unfamiliar and strange. Attempting to understand what the text says means constantly reflecting on our presuppositions and preunderstandings and placing what needs to be understood in its *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

Oscar Wild's decay of lying "as an art, a science, and a social pleasure" persuasively discloses that:

[...] what is interesting about people in good society [...] is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask. It is a humiliating confession, but we are all of us made out of the same stuff. (*The Decay of Lying*.)

24 His painful constation that the "dreadful universal thing called human nature" is "a most depressing and humiliating reality," and it means that we "differ from each other purely in accidentals" (ibid.). Unfortunately, we put far too much stress on analyzing those differences in accidentals instead of living "the highest art [that] rejects the burden of the human spirit" (ibid.). The term "the narcissism of small differences" (*Narzissmus der kleinen Differenzen*), as coined by Freud (1991, 131, 305), describes the tension between close groups wanting to (over)emphasize details of differentiation. Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (*Civilization and Its Discontents*) deals with the uneasiness in the culture by highlighting the clash between the desire for individuality and the expectations of society. A hermeneutic reading that is genuinely faithful to detail helps one understand the importance of differences without falling prey to narcissistic tendencies. Neither simple multiplication of distinctions and differences for the sake of making them and fighting over them for the pleasure of fighting nor an artificial avoidance of differentiation, in order to evade tension and conflict, can serve as sound advice. What can successfully lead us through the long routes of interpretation is the logic of an argument elaborated on in the horizon of an unstable equilibrium.

"Hermeneutics and Literature" appears as a double issue of *Phainomena*. It is always a pleasure to work with and for this journal, especially in a precious collaboration with Dr. Andrej Božič. We are very grateful to the authors from around

the globe who worked with us toward bringing together different expressions of the word's innate power with its claim that captivates us as writers and readers. We are indebted to the reviewers whose discrete influence is felt by authors and editors. It is because of the dedicated work of so many scholars that we are able to offer a hermeneutic voice for the critical reception of literature. "Hermeneutics and Literature" is not a question of (un)disciplined interdisciplinarity, but rather an insight into a hermeneutic nature of understanding that requires disciplined transdisciplinarity. We hope that reading literature in this destitute time (*dürftige Zeit*) will help us to understand that virtually any time is a destitute time. Our radical responsibility is to recognize that *our time* is the opportune time (καιρός) to respond to the voices that speak to us.

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