

Turns in the Road

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Edited by
Dan P. McAdams,
Ruthellen Josselson,
and Amia Lieblich

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DE PROFUNDIS: PRISON AS A TURNING POINT IN OSCAR WILDE'S LIFE STORY

WILLIAM TODD SCHULTZ

Some have divided playwright Oscar Wilde's life up into two discrete "acts." There is the ascent, marked by clear achievement, artistic success, and celebrity. Then there is the fall, beginning with a doomed relationship and ending in disgrace. Personologist Henry Murray (1981) once proposed the existence of an Icarus complex, a personality dynamic characterized by a rapid rise and an equally rapid descent. In broad outline, Wilde's story fits that theme. He flew too close to the sun, and he fell to earth.

Act One of the life augured nothing but unending triumph. Wilde attended Trinity and Oxford, winning several first prizes along the way, most notably the Newdigate Prize for his poem "Ravenna." He published a book of poetry and a scandalous work of fiction, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which gave voice to several of Wilde's subversive philosophies. His notoriety, already fairly well-established, grew into a kind of fame, and he embarked on a lecture tour in the United States, giving talks on home decoration, of all things, and the philosophy of aestheticism, which extolled beauty above all else. His plays, including his last, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, enjoyed success on the stage, and his essays, among them "The Critic as Artist" and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," showed a daring and proliferating mind at work. Wilde was a shameless provocateur. His aphorisms—"Leading a double life is the only preparation for marriage" (Schmidgall, 1994)—tended to have a certain sting to them. If he sometimes found himself attacked in the press or made fun of, he still gave the appearance of feeling more or less bullet-proof. His sense of style and his intellect

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both were forces to be reckoned with, and for a time they sustained him. Even attacks on his assumed homosexuality met with resistance, because after all he was a married man and the father of two sons.

Act Two of the life is a story of the shift from fame to sudden infamy. Here Wilde's wit did not carry the day, and in fact may have hastened his fall. As the end result of a sequence of strangely fateful events described more fully later, Wilde found himself in prison, serving two years hard labor. He died broke, reviled, and largely alone. The shamelessness and daring on which he had staked his reputation finally fomented his ruin.

In this chapter I examine Wilde's "crash" narrative. Most straightforwardly, it represents an exemplary instance of a psychological turning point. He even described it as such. He speaks of an epiphany in prison, a self-realization in which he sees, for the first time, into his true nature. On the other hand, many have questioned Wilde's sincerity. Did prison really make Wilde into a different and better person, humbler and less attached to the charms of the shallow life, or was that simply a tale Wilde elected to tell about himself, a kind of "press-release" concealing connections between current behavior and personal history (Wiersma, 1988)?

I start the chapter by summarizing the features of the turning point episode Wilde constructed. After that, I compare Wilde's experience to what is known through research about turning points in general. I finish by highlighting the significant questions Wilde's case raises: To what extent is it representative, and to what extent distinctive? I begin with Wilde's self-analysis. By what combination of circumstances did he meet with his ruin, and how did he come to narrate it while in jail?

WILDE'S "CRASH" NARRATIVE

Wilde's fall resulted from what his principal biographer (Ellmann, 1968) called a "beserk passion," an affair with a volatile and by all accounts self-consumed young dilettante, Lord Alfred Douglas. This affair attracted more than the usual amount of interest, partly as a result of Wilde's celebrity and partly because of actions taken by Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry. The story has received considerable attention in the past decade or so. A film, *Wilde*, was devoted to it, as were several plays, including *The Judas Kiss* and *Gross Indecency*. A number of biographies and scholarly monographs and papers also make it their focus (see, for instance, Buckler, 1989; Gopnik, 1998; Knox, 1996). All seem to portray Wilde either as a victim of repressive social forces or as the somewhat fatuous architect of his own ruin. Likewise, some regard Wilde's prison turning point as mostly

genuine, and some see it as tendentious and artificial. I return to such questions later. For now, I simply want to set down the facts.

After urging his son to stay away from Wilde for fear of what the liaison might do to his family's reputation, the Marquess, meeting with no success, sent a card to Wilde's club accusing him of "posing" as a "sodomite" (sic). This Wilde apparently found both impudent and libelous. After much encouragement by Douglas, Wilde sued Queensberry, and lost—or to be more precise, Wilde dropped the charges after learning that the defense planned to produce witnesses (all younger men) who would testify to having sexual relations with Wilde. The press made much of this turn of events, the implications quickly became unignorable, and Wilde soon found himself charged with "gross indecency." The first trial resulted in a hung jury, and the second in Wilde's conviction to two years hard labor.

This outcome was disastrous for Wilde in several different ways. First of all, he lost everything one could lose. He never saw his sons again, his wife finally divorced him, he was bankrupted, and while he was imprisoned, his mother died. Second, the hard labor really *was* hard, a punishment Wilde must have been utterly ill-equipped to endure. He was made to exercise on a prison treadmill six hours daily. He slept on a plank bed. After one month, he began his work—either postbag-making, tailoring, or picking oakum. He could communicate with the outside world only after three months, and his visitations were few and far between. Following a transfer to Reading Prison, the source for a later poem titled, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," Wilde was allowed to receive some books and to write one page of prose per day that, when finished, needed to be turned over to the warden each night. Capitalizing on this small privilege, Wilde initiated what was to become his sole personal statement about the causes for and meaning of his degradation. The statement assumed the form of a letter written to Lord Alfred Douglas, but was later published posthumously under the title *De Profundis*.

What follows is an examination of Wilde's effort to impose on his fall the organizing structure of a conversion narrative. But Wilde is up to more than just that. As a consequence, the text seems sometimes to be operating at cross purposes. On one hand, Wilde uses *De Profundis*, especially in its early sections, as a vehicle for attacking Douglas personally. He imagines Douglas will not have an easy time reading the letter, but urges him to go on, chiefly because he feels, or says he feels, Douglas needs to face certain unpleasant facts about himself. "If, as you read what is here written, [your pale face] from time to time becomes scorched as though by a furnace blast, with shame, it will be all the better for you. The supreme vice is shallowness. Whatever is realised is right" (Wilde, 1905/1996, p. 28). Wilde presumes to affect a therapeutic role. If he appears only to be indulging his rage at

Douglas's assorted weaknesses, then it is a rage with salutary potential—or so he says.

As Wilde goes on, however, Douglas drops out of the picture altogether, consigned to a mere off-stage presence. Soon the focus stays on Wilde himself, and the vitriol characterizing these initial segments of the work disappears. The impetus now seems to be of a different order. Wilde works to wring from his ruin a story not of disaster (though the disaster is never denied) but triumph—a triumph of the soul. That is, discarding the relatively simplistic trope of the Icarus tale, Wilde invents what for him may have been a necessary modification—he falls from a false grace to one that seems in hindsight much more true.

Central to all this is Wilde's use of the turning point metaphor. He invokes the term itself several times—as he must do, particularly if the tale's aim is salvation. Although he certainly dwells on “the tragically critical moment of all my life” (1905/1996, p. 7), “the crash of my life” (p. 21), “the ultimate and terrible moment” (p. 21), calling it a “gigantic psychological error [in which] my will power completely failed me” (p. 8), he does so only to set up a contrast between the tragic on one hand, and what he has made of it on the other. He is led to reflect on the “two great turning-points” in his life: when his father sent him to Oxford, an episode of great achievement, and when “Society” sent him to prison, an episode of great shame. But this shame gets immediately displaced by what Wilde calls his “ultimate discovery” (p. 45), the “starting point for a fresh development” (p. 45), a “new life” or “Vita Nuova” (p. 45), as Dante (whom Wilde was reading at the time) would have it. What precipitated such a momentous shift? Suffering, it seems. “Sorrow, then, and all it teaches one,” Wilde writes, “is my new world” (p. 51).

Wilde speaks next of the characteristics of this world—its phenomenology—and of the psychological qualities of the turning point itself. First of all, it allows for a seeing into the essence of things. “It really is a revelation,” he said. “One discerns things one has never discerned before. One approaches the whole of history from a different standpoint” (1905/1996, p. 52). It also defies intellectual determination, obeying an inscrutably internal logic. Wilde does not so much reach a conclusion but finds one ready-made, preformed. “It has come to me right out of myself,” he wrote.

So I know it has come at the proper time. It could not have come before, nor later. Had anyone told me of it, I would have rejected it. Had it been brought to me, I would have refused it. As I found it, I want to keep it. I must do so. It is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life, a Vita Nuova for me. Of all things it is the strangest. One cannot give it away and another may not give it to

one. One cannot acquire it except by surrendering everything that one has. (1905/1996, pp. 45–46)

In a sense, one waits for a dawning, because as Wilde also explains, “Everything must come to one out of one’s own nature. There is no use telling a person a thing that he does not feel and can’t understand” (1905/1996, p. 28).

Wilde also emphasizes the turning point’s inevitability, invoking a clearly tragic-type narrative trope. He refers repeatedly to “my lot” and to the entire episode’s “certain resolution.” We all get meted out “different fates,” Wilde says, and disaster seems to be his. This particular narrative choice deserves to be highlighted, because it determines the structure for Wilde’s entire system of reference. Rather than adopting a psychological perspective, or one that might point up the essential randomness of life, Wilde asserts a more mystical framework. He imagines himself as a kind of puppet worked by “unseen hands.” As he declares toward the end of the letter, “I am conscious now that behind all this beauty, satisfying though it may be, there is some spirit hidden of which the painted forms and shapes are but modes of manifestation, and it is with this spirit that I desire to become in harmony. . . . The Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature—this is what I am looking for. It is absolutely necessary for me to find it somewhere” (1905/1996, p. 89).

The irrefutably interior quality of the experience guarantees its validity, according to Wilde. It cannot be embedded in or subjected to any kind of scientific or philosophical analysis. It is almost, for this reason, isolated from doubt. Morality, religion, and reason—Wilde explicitly rejects each. They cannot help him, he says. “I have to get it all out of myself. Nothing seems to me of the smallest value except what one gets out of oneself” (1905/1996, p. 46). He alludes to feeling an independence from “the external things of life” which have “no importance at all” (p. 46). The sense of the moment’s individuality is enhanced, with Wilde portraying the experience as deeply personal, unique, and unrepeatable.

Finally there is the question of the turning point’s momentariness. On this point Wilde seems to be of two different minds. If he chooses to play up the sudden explosiveness of his change of view, he still cannot quite resist a narrative based on gradualness. As he says at one point, “It is of course no new life at all, but simply the continuance, by means of development and evolution, of my former life” (1905/1996, p. 54). On the other hand, Wilde’s manner of speech consistently implies an irreducible present. “*Now* I am approaching life from a completely new standpoint” (p. 50), and “*Now* for the first time since my imprisonment I have a real desire for life” (p. 51), or “I *now* see that sorrow . . . is at once the type and test of all great art”

(p. 52). He even, with all the benefit of hindsight, isolates (or invents) the decisive moment when the spirit opened up to him.

I had absolutely nothing left in the world but one thing. I had lost my name, my position, my happiness, my freedom, my wealth. I was a prisoner and a pauper. But I still had my children left. Suddenly they were taken away from me by the law. It was a blow so appalling that I did not know what to do, so I flung myself on my knees, and bowed my head, and wept, and said, "The body of a child is as the body of the Lord—I am not worthy of either." That moment seemed to save me. I saw then that the only thing for me was to accept everything. Since then—curious as it will no doubt sound—I have been happier. It was of course my soul in its ultimate essence that I had reached." (1905/1996, pp. 58–59).

The mawkish drama of the scene, Job-like in its intensity, encourages more than a little doubt. Did it happen or did Wilde reconstruct it? He seems to anticipate the question, for he warns us of his story's curiousness. He doubts we will believe him. But by mixing his change metaphors, referring simultaneously to slow evolution and sudden *involution*, Wilde hedges his narrative bets. There is a stricken quality to his change, yet it results from the simple development of his former life. Looked at in this way, Wilde seems to be saying he is the same, only different. He discovered something—suffering—that he understood the meaning of, at least unconsciously, all along. He even speaks of how "all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my books," through which a "note of doom" runs "like a purple thread" (1905/1996, p. 55).

We can now summarize the features of Wilde's individual turning point narrative with an eye toward comparing it to more nomothetic hypotheses. It is characterized by, as Wilde explains, an *irrefutably interior and inevitable seeing into the essence of things which defies all intellectual determination, and which gradually evolves into a moment of unmistakable discovery*. It leaves in its wake a new viewpoint, mirroring what philosophers of science refer to as a paradigm shift. But this comparison, too, has its qualifications, because Wilde wants to impress on us the emotional qualities of his shift, not its intellectual flavor. It is not something he thought himself into. It revealed itself to him only after everything else fell away.

I move next from Wilde to theory, partly to see whether or not Wilde's narrative can be assimilated into current research and partly to provoke that research, so to speak, into responding to the individual instance. This, after all, is one of the chief functions of psychobiography and what makes it, in my view, indispensable. By confronting theory in a way it alone can, the single case has the capacity to tell us what we know and what remains to be discovered. In fact, I would go so far as to say that genuine understanding

of turning points can advance only if substantial use is made of actual lived lives in the process of eruption.

THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF WILDE'S "TURN"

In outline, the facts of Wilde's case seem to square with much current thinking about the general structure of turning point experiences. Wheaton and Gotlib (1997), for instance, although admitting that turning points are difficult to define, are open to alternative formulations, and suffer from a definite lack of precision, do nonetheless describe assorted features of the concept that make for a good match with Wilde. According to these authors, a turning point is (a) a "disruption in a trajectory, a deflection in a path," (b) more than a temporary detour, and (c) knowable only after the fact, only postdictively (1997, p. 1). Turning points are narrated events with long-lasting consequences, in other words. Also, whatever change in the direction of the life course occurs, it must be nonnormative in the sense that we can define changes in direction only with respect to the individual's previous trajectory. The person is his or her own control group. His or her life is what preestablishes the baseline from which the departure occurs.

An idea of special relevance for Wilde's case concerns the role of psychosocial resources. Such supports in the face of trauma, something Wilde lacked entirely, having lost his family, his reputation, and his wealth, actually may mitigate potentially upsetting transitions, according to Wheaton and Gotlib. They "buffer," soften, or even prevent change (1997, p. 10). Having little or no psychosocial resources in place may have precipitated a more intense crisis for Wilde, it seems. Prison left no option but to change, or at least to imagine that possibility.

Wethington, Cooper, and Holmes see turning points as shifts in the meaning, purpose, or direction of a life and stress that they "must include a self-reflective awareness of, or insight into, the significance of the change" (1997, p. 217). Under this definition, "self-realizations or reinterpretations of past experiences may bring on a turning point" (1997, p. 217). What most frequently triggers such self-reinterpretations? Changes in important relationships, according to Wethington et al., including divorce or a serious breakdown in a close relationship, especially when reparation seems unlikely. In this scheme, turning points emerge out of a discovery of one's limitations. We learn how certain people are beyond our control, and we find we must "discover how to accept and adapt" (1997, p. 225). This describes Wilde's case nicely. He lost his lover, he lost his wife, and he lost his talent, at least for a time, and found in suffering a kind of peace, or a way of reenvisioning his life. The trigger is loss, and the turning point follows from figuring out

how self needs to change to accommodate. Many of Wethington et al.'s respondents used the term "fresh start" to describe the kinds of identity shifts they made. So did Wilde, who spoke of his "ultimate discovery" being "the starting point for a fresh development" (1905/1996, p. 45).

Clausen (1993) regards turning points as perceptual reinterpretations or reorientations directed at the self and requiring changes in perceived identity. He listed four types—reformulations of life role, of life perspective, of life goals, or of self, the latter including profound realizations about one's strengths and weaknesses. Wilde's view of the world changed. He discerned things he had never discerned before, and he embraced a worldview revolving around the curative value of suffering. He also came to terms with the ways in which his preprison identity led him on a path toward ruin, and asserted in its place a postprison identity committed to forgiveness, love, sorrow, and humility.

So Wilde's case is not significantly anomalous, at least. In broad terms his epiphany jibes with current thinking. But what about in *specific* terms? Is Wilde's case as exemplary as it appears? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. In what follows I take up a number of subsidiary questions, beginning with the turning point's trigger.

The Narrative Spur

Loss of loved ones or of important relationships seems central to the narrative demand for a turning point. It forces a reevaluation of self and of life goals and values. It demands that we reassert who we are or make fresh commitments to what we believe in. It also can give rise to an explicit reconsideration of worldview in that we must somehow explain to ourselves and others why the loss occurred, why we or others have been singled out for suffering (for the effects of loss on personality and creativity, see Schultz, 1996, 1998, 1999). Of course, some people respond to loss not by redefining themselves in any way but by staying who they are, by becoming, one might say, even more the same. The story of Job comes to mind. In the face of unimaginable suffering of every possible sort, Job remains steadfast in his faith. He does not so much change as endure. So the obvious question is, "Why does loss lead to a turning point in some but not in others?"

Bruner (1999) sees, not loss exclusively, but "trouble" or jeopardy as the engine of narrative. Any kind of trouble will do, just so long as a "canonical state of the world" has been disrupted (1999, p. 324). If it is true that most mental acts, having grown automatic, go on without the benefit of consciousness, then jeopardy or error might force consciousness—the need for narrative—to spring into action. As long as the "same old story" succeeds, we feel no need to imagine a new one. But as Bruner writes, when faced with difficulties, "one may be forced to fashion an omnibus

Self [i.e., a completed, organizing, assimilating narrative] to cope with the jeopardy in which we have been put" (1999, p. 324). Moreover, trouble "may be not only the engine of narrative, but also the impetus for its elaboration" (p. 324).

This all seems persuasive, but the question remains (as Bruner himself acknowledges). Most people when in jeopardy tend either to justify the canon of the life or to make up excuses. Why do some reject these two options and author a new identity instead? Allowing that we know much too little about what predisposes us to such reflection, Bruner does offer a few hints. First of all, some have too little time for metacognitive activity of the sort required for significant alterations to identity. Second, some personalities apparently exhibit low needs for cognition; they are not motivated to exercise their mental faculties. Third, certain contexts may have the effect of heightening the agentive role, such that we experience a revival of self-agency not only in talk but also in behavior (Bruner, 1999, pp. 324–325).

The life of Wilde suggests additional possibilities. Another spur to identity reconsideration and the adoption of a turning point narrative might revolve around perceived guilt that, in the event, also would heighten the sense of self-agency, at least retrospectively. In *De Profundis* Wilde repeatedly asserts his culpability: "I will begin by telling you that I blame myself terribly. As I sit here in this dark cell in convict clothes, a disgraced and ruined man, I blame myself. In the perturbed and fitful nights of anguish, in the long monotonous days of pain, it is myself I blame. . . ." (Wilde, 1905/1996, pp. 2–3). If a subject implicates self in the very generation of jeopardy, that seems to call for "learning a lesson"; and in those who by dint of intelligence, temperament, imagination, or whatever, appear more driven to integrate selfhood, the end result of the "lesson" might assume the form of a turning point. Such seems to have been the case for Wilde, at least. His lack of will power sealed his doom—as he notes at different times during the letter—so he elevates this self-determined catastrophe into its own realization: He embraces the effect of his misguided and ill-considered agency. At the same time, it is as if Wilde seems to be saying, "I can't believe I could have been so stupid, so easily taken in, so heedless, so will-less, and it will never happen again because *I learned*." To not repeat the errors of the past virtually requires a new perspective.

As for Bruner's ideas, Wilde certainly had plenty of time for metacognitive reflection (prison has even produced a virtual genre of self-reflective writing), and his mind and context were such that there would have been a peculiarly high need for cognition. In fact, the tone of the letter conveys the impression of a strong desire to understand or explain something almost beyond understanding. In several different senses, then, Wilde's situation provided an optimal environment for self-realization. Its characteristics—

jeopardy, time for metacognitive reflection about self, desire and talent for such cognition, perceived blame and consequent need to learn from a mistake—might even make up a generalizable change “setting.”

The Narrative Structure

Having been the kind of playwright who, according to one critic, “deliberately lets the machinery of his plots show until the plays become near-parodies,” Wilde was certainly skilled at the manipulation of dramatic form (Brockett, 1977, p. 488). By imposing a structure on his experience, it comes as little surprise that Wilde seems to have scripted *De Profundis* and the events surrounding it very much like a play, right up to his enlightenment and catharsis.

Aristotle's *Poetics* includes a lengthy consideration of the characteristics of effective tragedy, among other things. In it he compares different types of action, and notes how “a complex action is one wherein the change of fortune is accompanied either by recognition (*anagnorisis*) or reversal (*peripeteia*), or by both,” and how this recognition or reversal, when most successful, appears inevitable—it unfolds within the plot structure itself (1958, p. 21). Recognition is “a change from ignorance to knowledge of a bond of love or hate between persons who are destined for good fortune or the reverse” (pp. 21–22). Reversal “is a change of the situation into its opposite,” which accords with the probable or unavoidable (p. 21). It means, even more specifically, that a situation that seems to or is intended to develop in one direction suddenly develops in the reverse direction. The third element mentioned by Aristotle is suffering or *pathos*. For Aristotle, the best kind of character is the truly tragic: “A man who is neither outstanding in virtue and righteousness nor [who through] wickedness and vice falls into some misfortune, but through some flaw. He should also be famous or prosperous . . .” (p. 24).

That Wilde's *De Profundis* makes use of these structural elements—consciously or not—seems almost impossible to deny. In prison Wilde comes to an *anagnorisis* about his love–hate relationship with Douglas, in the end affirming the power of love and forgiveness over the hate that can blind human beings. An initially promising situation—the affair itself—suddenly transforms into its opposite—ruin—and the outcome, as Wilde expresses it over and over again, has about it the aura of fatedness or inevitability. In other words, there is a clear *peripeteia*. Wilde also portrays himself as very much the tragic figure. He is neither virtuous nor wicked to begin with, and his suffering arrives by way of a flaw—in this case his utter lack of will power. In the event, Wilde even happens to be both famous and prosperous, so the resulting *pathos* becomes all the more gripping.

Even the basic categories of conflict typically met with in play structure seem evident. One person is at odds with another (Wilde versus Douglas/Marquess). One person—Wilde—also is pitted against a group, force, or idea; Wilde is the artist at war with a society bent on denying his individual expression. Finally, Wilde grapples with himself in the sense that, most fundamentally, he depicts a conflict between sensual and spiritual elements, between instinct and wisdom.

In a manual written for playwrights, Downs and Wright (1998) describe the "structure of formula." Most plays begin with an *event*, a moment of uniqueness or happening in the characters' lives—an unusual incident, special occasion, or crisis. There is a *basic situation* and a *disturbance* that causes an opening balance to come unglued. At some point the protagonist makes a *major decision* resulting in conflict. This comes to define what the play is about and forces the protagonist to move forward against great odds. Conflicts, crises, obstacles, and complications of different sorts intensify, action rises, and somewhere along the way a *dark moment* is visited on the protagonist—for a time his goal seems almost unattainable. The beginning of the end commences with an *enlightenment*, and according to Downs and Wright, this enlightenment (a) must not come out of the blue (no *deus ex machina*), (b) must not be immediately predictable, and (c) must emerge naturally out of a developing plot line. The play then concludes with a *catharsis*.

Wilde plots *De Profundis* in a similar fashion. There may be various ways to fit Downs and Wright's template over Wilde's narrative, but one such possibility might go something like this: The event or happening is Douglas's word to Wilde that his father, the Marquess, is taking every opportunity to trash their coupling and wants them to desist. Already a crisis of sorts, the basic situation gets even further "unglued" when the Marquess accuses Wilde of being a sodomite. The leaving of the calling card, then, functions as the "disturbance." Now comes a major decision leading to overt conflict, this being Wilde's suit against the Marquess for libel. The protagonist—Wilde—presses forward against great odds. He stands up for his right to be an individual. Action rises as Wilde drops the charges, then gets tried himself. The guilty verdict seems like the best candidate for the dark moment. Here Wilde begins to wonder whether his goal—self-understanding—may elude him. Prison looms, and Wilde, though many encouraged or even expected him to do so, chooses, like Socrates, not to escape via exile. Then comes enlightenment, the recognition of the value of sorrow and suffering; a naturally emerging revelation given the basic plot line, yet not immediately predictable. For Wilde, this realization does come more or less out of the blue, except for the fact that he tells us he intuited it all along. It was, as he himself declares, "foreshadowed" in his early life.

As for the turning point or enlightenment specifically, locking one's self into generic plot structure almost requires it. Wilde, of course, naturally thought like a playwright. But in doing so, there is a sense in which he predetermined the outcome of his narrative. There would be no curtain call until he found some way of imagining the protagonist's triumph. It is as if his life demanded a play. And who better to script it?

The Epiphany

This question has most to do with how to *analogize* turning points and with which analogy best captures Wilde's case. As Wheaton and Gotlib note, the turning point concept seems "essential" yet "problematic" (1997, p. 3). Comparing it via Wilde to other clearly established tropes of change—some applied to personality, some not—may suggest potential refinements.

Kuhn's (1970) notion of a paradigm shift comes immediately to mind. Paradigms are conceptual frameworks or models that, much like perceptual sets or *gestalts*, create a tendency to "see" some data and not others. More than that, the paradigm actually preselects certain facts as meaningful, because "in the absence of a paradigm or candidate for paradigm, all of the facts that could possibly pertain . . . are likely to seem equally relevant" (Kuhn, 1970, p. 15)—an untenable state of affairs. Under conditions of what Kuhn called normal science, paradigms tend to be relatively binding, appropriately open-ended, and oriented toward the solution of minor puzzles or problems within a given field, scientific progress amounting to a tinkering with the mostly "known."

Why do paradigms shift? When "existing rules" persistently fail to make the puzzles "come out as they should" (Kuhn, 1970, p. 68). As this failure continues, a search for new rules begins, and the new rules eventually get assembled into a new paradigm. Change is a function of unsuccessful efforts to make meaning—in other words, because existing in a state of thwarted meaning-making constitutes a paradigmatic crisis. This sounds very much like Bruner's notion of canonical disruption. In both instances an accepted story has broken down and a need for story-making has been mobilized.

This analogy seems partly to capture Wilde's predicament in *De Profundis*. The old story, the old personal myth, no longer meets Wilde's needs. Though he had once espoused the "trivial in thought and action," the "froth and folly of life," and "lived entirely for pleasure," in prison he feels a need to shape new views and ideas: "I see fresh developments in art and life, each one of which is a fresh mode of perfection. I long to live so that I can explore what is no less than a new world to me. . . . [Before prison] I shunned suffering and sorrow . . . I resolved to ignore them, to treat them, that is to say, as modes of imperfection. They were not part of my scheme of life.

They had no place in my philosophy" (1905/1996, p. 51). But now Wilde comprehends the lessons "hidden in the heart of pain" (p. 52).

Under the old paradigm, suffering was ignored. Wilde's scheme of life demanded that it be treated like an inconsequential datum. It was not relevant for understanding. In the wake of his ruin, however, it became anomalous, and a new scheme of life was created to accommodate it. This new scheme, once established, allowed Wilde to discern things he had never discerned before. It opened up a new world, just like a new paradigm brings with it "new" perceptions.

On the other hand, Wilde did not think himself into his new view. It descended on him. He speaks as if he found it, not as if he assembled it to deal with puzzles that were not working out as they should. Wilde places himself squarely in the realm of revelation, of religious awakening, not in the realm of science. This fact recommends two different modes of understanding, Christian conversion and Zen satori.

William James takes up conversion in a pair of chapters from *Varieties of Religious Experience*. He identifies what he feels to be two forms, the volitional type and the type by self-surrender, but then essentially discards the former because even when conversion seems willed and deliberately sought after, "The very last step must be left to other forces and performed without the help of [the will's] activity" (1997, p. 230). James considers self-surrender the vital turning-point of the religious life. To relinquish control is to throw our conscious selves on the mercy of powers, such that "when the new centre of personal energy has been subconsciously incubated so long as to be just ready to open into flower, 'hands off' is the only word for us, it must burst forth unaided!" (James, 1961, p. 175). Revelation "sweeps in like a sudden flood" (p. 179).

In James's scheme the feelings that "fill the hour" of the conversion experience include (a) a sense of higher control (in illustrating this he describes a case strikingly similar to Wilde's, in which a man throws himself on his knees and prays as he had never prayed before); (b) a state of assurance, trust, and confidence; (c) a perception of truth not known before whereby "the mysteries of life become lucid" (p. 200); (d) an intuition of "clean and beautiful newness within and without" (p. 203); and, most characteristically, (e) an ecstasy of happiness (James, 1961).

It is hard not to be struck by how very closely James's account resembles Wilde's reconstruction. Religious conversion, it seems, may represent a primary narrative form with which to construct sudden identity change. Wilde certainly speaks of having surrendered to an incubated truth that burst forth: "Whatever beauty of life still remains to me is contained in some moment of surrender" (1905/1996, p. 71). He recounts a sense of higher control in the form not of God but of destiny or Fate. He tells Andre Gide, "I knew there would be a catastrophe . . . I was expecting it . . . Prison has completely

changed me. I counted on it for that" (1949, pp. 20–21). He calls his insight irrefutable, he talks of perceiving reality for the first time, and he realizes that now, by virtue of his epiphany, he can at last be truly happy.

Like conversion, the Zen notion of *satori*—a seeing into the true essence of things—also requires self-surrender. One achieves the state not by thinking or relying on logic or reason but by cultivating a frame of mind consisting of openness and a readiness to receive truth. *Satori* is intuitive in nature. It is a realization rather than a solution. It is interior and personal and cannot be imposed from without. Because it seems to those who receive it like a mental upheaval or catastrophe, its effects on one's moral and spiritual life are nothing short of revolutionary—it gives rise to a lasting change of character. The world no longer looks the same (Suzuki, 1956, p. 84). In Zen, koans (deliberately provocative and paradoxical riddles) are sometimes used to precipitate the *satori*—they uproot thought and by virtue of their apparent insolubility encourage shifts of understanding—but as a stimulant, really anything will do. In fact, *satori* generally comes totally unexpectedly. It "strikes at the primary fact of existence, and its attainment marks a turning point in one's life" (Suzuki, 1956, p. 97). Suzuki summarizes *satori*'s qualities in terms resembling those James proposed for conversion. It is (a) nonintellectual, unwilled, and conative; (b) irrefutably authoritative or doubtless; (c) impersonal in nature; (d) a feeling of exaltation; and (e) sudden or abrupt.

That such qualities can be observed in Wilde's account of his epiphany seems self-evident. As summarized already, Wilde's turning point assumes the form of an *irrefutably interior and inevitable seeing into the essence of things that defies all intellectual determination and that gradually evolves into a moment of unmistakable discovery*. Wilde notably was not unfamiliar with Eastern ideas. Early in his career he reviewed a work by the Chinese sage Chuang-tzu, so he may have made use of such knowledge when it came time to construct his transformation. Whatever the case, one thing seems clear—Wilde's favored analogy for change is religious in nature. His turning point is best understood as a conversion or *satori*, a profound self-discovery precipitating a brand new way of looking at the world. There is no process of induction, no effort to piece together an alternative model for reality such that the data of life assume a different shape or form. In other words, in this instance the paradigm shift template does not seem apt. More so, a new view incubated and burst forth, just as James described. Or did it? James and Suzuki both highlight the abruptness of conversion/*satori*. In fact, Suzuki goes so far as to declare, "If it is not abrupt and momentary, it is not *satori*" (1956, p. 108). This returns us to a question posed earlier. Was Wilde's turning point a gradual unfolding, or was it a "mental catastrophe," striking suddenly at the very heart of existence?

The Suddenness of the Turning Point

If turning point experiences can be said to vary phenomenologically—and it seems like they must, because they emerge from an ongoing life-story—then one form they might assume, maybe even a preeminent form, is conversion or *satori*. In some ways these structures seem like turning points *par excellence*. As such, they might come quickly to mind whenever subjects cast about in pursuit of narrative strategies with which to construct tumultuous change. They simply fit the bill like nothing else does. But they do impose on the change narrative one particular demand: It must be imagined as a sudden explosion of identity. This gives rise to a certain ontological–epistemological quandary. Is the turning point *really* sudden, or is it just convenient to depict it that way? Or to put the question a little differently: Does abruptness make for a more effective change narrative?

Wilde seems to have struggled with this very question, because as we have seen he alludes to both possibilities—gradualness and abruptness. The same struggle can be found in James and Zen. Conversion's volitional type, which James has a hard time taking too seriously, suggests an effortful, willed process, an evolution toward awakening. Some Zen thinkers, unpersuaded by Suzuki's insistence on the momentary nature of *satori*, speak of a gradual unfolding of consciousness. It would appear, then, that this kind of question recurrently arises whenever attempts are made to conceptualize personality upheaval. On one hand, the difficulty has a lot to do with what Bruner (1999) calls the "qualia" of selfhood, and with how those qualia reflectively cohere. Qualia indicators signal the feel of a life, its mood, pace, zest, weariness, and so forth. They express subjectivity—what we experience inside—and because they tend to be unsituated with respect to external events, "they are notoriously subject to contextual interpretation" (Bruner, 1999, p. 311). We look "outside" as a way of explaining what we feel to ourselves and to others. Coherence indicators "reveal the internal structure of a larger self-concept and are presumed to indicate how the particulars of various endeavors cohere into life as a whole" (p. 311). So there is the subjective feel of a turning point, on one hand, and there is, on the other, the attempt to narrate it, to construct coherence through reflective activity.

This would suggest a number of possibilities. The qualia of a turning point might include a feeling of abruptness, but on reflection, one might construct a continuity rather than a discontinuity. Of course, the opposite might be true too, and in fact seems more likely, especially if sudden upheaval in the form of conversion–*satori* makes for a more compelling narrative structure, a better turning point tale. Or the qualia may match the narrative: The feel of abruptness gets told as abruptness, for instance. In addition, to complicate things still more, it seems possible to reflect ourselves into the

memory of a subjective feel that never existed to begin with. After all, turning points are always retrospectively adduced, "the embodiment of wisdom in hindsight," as Wheaton and Gotlib pointed out (1997, p. 3). If we do not necessarily recall the feeling of epiphany, we might simply talk ourselves into it, convince ourselves that it must have been there whether we recall it or not. Some events almost require at least hypothetical personality change—trauma, divorce, death, crisis, loss. When external circumstances call for it, we may feel obliged to imagine that we profited from them in some way by becoming different and, more important, better people—or that we learned something useful, at least, or acquired a slightly changed perspective. It is not hard to imagine the inclination to invent a turning point, in other words, even when the requisite experience seems to be missing.

In trying to assess Wilde's epiphany, one inescapable fact presents immediate complications: The subjective feel is embedded within the narrative construction of the event. What we know about the qualia indicator is what Wilde tells us about it. As a consequence, any effort to pass judgment on its "reality" seems problematic from the start. Was it really abrupt or was it really gradual? Wilde tells both types of stories, although he favors the former. But does he favor it because the change truly was abrupt, or does he favor it because suddenness makes for a better story? There would appear to be two answers to such a question. First, if who we are is what we say we are, then the question assumes a false division—self is story (McAdams, 1993). Second, if who we are differs from what we say we are, then the question is probably unanswerable because its solution can only be sought in the narrative Wilde himself proposes.

Bruner covered the same ground, wondering about his research participants: "Did the people involved actually *experience* their lives in this way, or is this just in the telling?" (1993, p. 47). Clearly the story form affects the organization of experience just as surely as it affects memory recall. We impose meaning postdictively. We hone and mitigate as required. "Adventures happen to people who know how to tell it that way," as Henry James once put it (quoted in Bruner, 1993, p. 48). Bruner offered a sensible conclusion. "Rather than regarding [turning points] simply as 'true reports' about 'what happened,' we [would] do better to consider them as preternaturally clear instances of narrative construction that have the function of helping the teller clarify his or her Self-concept. They are prototype narrative episodes whose construction results in increasing the realism and drama of the Self" (1993, p. 50). They are real because they have real effects on self-understanding, which often translate into real effects on behavior. Indeed, all analyses of turning point experiences, including those of James and Suzuki, stress the turning point's durability. Durability may even represent

the one true hallmark of a legitimate turning point event, because if the turning point produces no lasting behavioral outcome, then it probably did not happen. Something has to “turn.” We need to ask of Wilde, then, whether or not he “turned.” Did the epiphany really lead to a *vita nuova*, like Wilde says it did? Answering this question requires looking into Wilde’s life after his release.

The Durability of the Turning Point

It is not at all uncommon to wonder about those who proclaim sincere change. It is one thing to *say* it, yet another to *show* it. We tend, I think, to be on the lookout for signs of hypocrisy. Having been a dramatist and having celebrated the artistry of the well-fashioned “pose,” Wilde certainly leaves himself open to just such charges. How to know when the faker is not faking? Is the liar telling the truth when he declaims his lies?

No one doubts that Wilde emerged from prison a broken man. He had a great deal of trouble writing. He worried about money, and he relied on friends for loans. “His hat was no longer so glossy. His collar had the same shape, but it was no longer so clean. The sleeves of his frock coat were slightly frayed,” Gide related (1949, p. 31). Wilde perceives a clean break. “My life before prison was as successful as possible. Now it’s something that’s over” (quoted in Gide, 1949, p. 21). Moreover, “One should never go back to the same existence. My life is a work of art. An artist never starts the same thing twice” (pp. 20–21).

Gide, for his part, remains brutally unconvinced. He observed not a “spiritualisation of the soul,” but delusion and decay. “His will had been broken. The first months [out of prison], he could still delude himself, but he very soon gave way. It was like an abdication. Nothing remained in his shattered life but the mournful musty odor of what he had once been, a need every now and then to prove that he was still thinking—wit, but artificial, forced, crumpled” (1949, p. 30). To Gide, Wilde’s artistic silence was not the pious silence of a Racine, just as his humility was “only a pompous name that he gave to his impotence” (p. 38). In his very depths the “bursts of his former pride” (p. 38) remain.

Richard Ellmann (1988), too, though he considered the writing of *De Profundis* to have been “regenerative,” nonetheless questioned Wilde’s sincerity. “Humility is a slippery term in the letter” (1988, p. 514), implying that Wilde’s insights were more rhetorical than real.

A close look at Wilde’s postprison letters suggests a different conclusion. Although he is reeling from the experience—he complains of terrible loneliness, and because of his infamy must use a pseudonym when checking into hotels or receiving mail—still much of what he says and does seems

like a clear departure. After prison Wilde published just three pieces of work. All three express deep feelings about the horror of imprisonment, and all three are filled with sympathy for the downtrodden, a sentiment not at all met with in preprison Wilde. The poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," recounts a prisoner's execution for the murder of his wife. As he awaits his sentence he maintains a Christ-like equanimity and fearlessness. Apart from this, Wilde managed just two published letters—on the subject of children, the insane, and prison reform. Such concern, sincerely expressed, would have seemed uncharacteristic of Wilde before the turning point. The letters therefore mark what I consider an obvious change of priority.

Along similar lines, though Wilde was often virtually penniless, he committed himself to sharing the small loans he received with a number of men from his prison gallery. One note reads in part, "My dear Friend, I send you a line to show you that I haven't forgotten you. . . . Don't, like a good little chap, get into trouble again. You would get a terrible sentence. I send you 2 pounds just for luck. I am quite poor myself now, but I know you will accept it just as a remembrance" (1962a, p. 580). Another fellow prisoner he devotes time to helping reenter business. These actions also speak to Wilde's heightened sense of humanity. They seem in keeping with the insights contained in *De Profundis*.

In self-reflective letters to friends, too, Wilde takes pains to assess his change and to clarify its precise nature. "Perhaps I will be a better fellow after it all," he says (1962a, p. 567). He insists he is not at all embittered; he alludes to having learned the importance of gratitude, humility, and friendship, which he sees "with changed eyes" (p. 596). He says he does not require riches or wild profligacy anymore. "I want peace, and have found it" (p. 595). Again he rejects his previous life. "My reckless pursuit of mundane pleasure, my extravagance, my senseless ease, my love of fashion, my whole attitude towards life, all these were wrong. . . ." (p. 595). To Will Rothenstein he wrote, "I was all wrong, my dear boy, in my life . . . [But] in many ways I have gained much. I am not really ashamed of having been in prison. I often was in more shameful places. But I am really ashamed of having led a life unworthy of an artist" (p. 604).

Wilde especially emphasizes gratitude, saying "I learned in prison to be grateful. . . . For *me* to use such a word shows an enormous development in my nature. Two years ago I did not know the feeling the word denotes. Now I know it, and I am thankful that I have learnt that much, at any rate, by having been in prison. But I must say again that I no longer make *roulades* of phrases about the things I feel. . . . Violin variations don't interest me" (1962a, p. 607). Moreover, "To think of the feelings and happiness of others is not an entirely new emotion in my nature. . . . But I think of those things far more than I used to do" (p. 607). Now Wilde determines he

needs rest, quiet, and solitude. He looks "to a simple mode of existence" (p. 607). He even grows bored with himself, and notes how "it is pleasanter to me, now, to write about others" (p. 609). All things considered, Wilde says, "I am in many respects a much better fellow than I was, and I now make no more exorbitant claims on life. I accept everything. I am sure it is all right" (p. 621).

Some friends detect subtle differences, too. Robbie Ross's comments are representative. They speak to something of a new viewpoint. "He enjoyed the trees and the grass and the country scents and sounds in a way I had never known him to do before. . . . It was natural to Wilde to be artificial as I have often said and that is why he was suspected of insincerity. I mean when he wrote of serious things, of art, ethics, or religion, of pain or of pleasure. [But] Wilde in love of the beautiful was perfectly, perhaps too, sincere. . . ." (Wilde, 1962a, p. 565). This can be read as a comment on Gide. While raising doubts about Wilde's change may be understandable, it still seems unkind and unfair to rule out the possibility altogether. Even the habitually insincere must be granted the opportunity to express sincere thoughts and feelings.

Before concluding, one last fact needs addressing. A year or so after his release Wilde did reunite with Douglas, much to the consternation of friends and of his ex-wife, Constance, who responded with a threatening letter promising always to keep him from his sons and to withhold money. Wilde refused to budge. He needs companionship, he says, and he says he truly loves Douglas. Some felt that this revealed an absence of true insight, for why else would Wilde reconcile with the object of his ruin? The trouble is, in the final pages of *De Profundis*, Wilde alludes to just such a possibility. He preaches forgiveness and love as opposed to retaliation and hate. "To humility," he writes, "There is nothing that is impossible. . . . No one can possibly shut the doors against love forever" (1905/1996, p. 91). Bearing these kinds of remarks in mind, Wilde's willingness to stand by Douglas, despite all the obstacles, suggests that he *did* live his new truth, not that he exposed its falsity.

On balance, then, it appears Wilde's epiphany endured. The narrative translated into real effects on behavior. There may have been occasional backslidings and relapses, but to focus on those alone "misses the point of serious interest," as James explained. What is truly important in conversion, according to James, "is not so much the duration as the nature of these shiftings of character to higher levels. Men lapse from every level—we need no statistics to tell us that. . . . So with the conversion experience—that it should for even a short time show a human being what the high-water mark of his spiritual capacity is, this is what constitutes its importance—an importance which backsliding cannot diminish" (1961, p. 209).

CONCLUSION

We are now in a position to gather what we have learned from Wilde's case. It has its distinctive qualities yet at the same time seems representative—it may typify a generalization. In response to catastrophic loss, Wilde made use of traditional dramatic formula to script a new identity. Casting himself in a tragic role, as one neither irredeemably wicked nor thoroughly good, he virtually ensured himself the required epiphany. In Wilde's instance, as in many others apparently, the spur was jeopardy and—something possibly unique—perceived blame and the consequent need to profit from self-engineered disaster. Bruner noted how some turning points function as second chances. This holds true for Wilde. Trouble, loss, and culpability in combination can be mobilizing. They call for metacognitive self-awareness and narrative. Why? Because we need to interpret them. We need either to assimilate them into preexisting models of self or to reimagine them reflectively and creatively as a means of fashioning a new self-story, as did Wilde. It seems Wilde really had two choices. He could either deny blame by blaming others and in so doing remain the same as he always was, or he could accept blame and profit from ruin by becoming a different person. Clearly he chose the latter option. In some ways it was the more creative and the more courageous. It required that he jettison his former views and leave himself open to charges of hypocrisy or insincerity.

To the extent that Wilde's case is prototypical, then, he (a) engaged in a clear act of self reorientation and metacognitive self-reflection which was (b) spurred by a sense of jeopardy, loss, self-blame, and an absence of "softening" psychosocial resources and (c) fashioned through the use of conventional dramatic formulas. He also (d) achieved his insights via self-surrender, and (e) recounted his experience in terms closely resembling conversion-satori. This set of features, not strikingly unusual in any way, may surface in other turning point narratives. That is, lessons learned from examining Wilde's realization might prove useful when there comes a time to inspect similarly epiphanous experiences.

What may make Wilde unique is his tendency to stress the interior, impersonal, and nonintellectual nature of his realization. As he said, it simply unfolded itself. It followed its own timetable. It was, so to speak, fated. This fact seems significant. In choosing a change narrative, appeals to destiny may be somewhat expectable. Trauma lends itself to the identification of omens, signs of some force at work in the universe. Wilde posits what might be called a natural law of self-correction. His wasteful, heedless life predetermined a reckoning. It came, as he said he knew it would. He had counted on it. There is the sense that things could not have been otherwise. In more general terms, those who experience turning points may emphasize the struggle, the difficult effort of coming-to-terms, of reviewing

the life and reaching hard-fought conclusions. One thinks, for instance, of the psychotherapeutic process and the battle against resistance and self-deception. Wilde paints a different picture. His was a visitation, a flash, a sudden knowing. It was, as might be expected, far more dramatic.

With respect to qualities of suddenness and durability in the turning point narrative, Wilde's case raises various immensely important questions. The forms a turning point may assume must be multitudinous. At the same time, not everything counts as a legitimate turning point event. In my view, Wilde represents one particularly recognizable type, a type marked by sudden explosion and catastrophic change. One might even call this the "dramatic" type, to distinguish it from types marked by a slow unfolding. Why do some prefer dramatic narratives? In Wilde's case the answer is clear. He was a dramatist. He was peculiarly aware of story form. He knew how to tell his tale this way, and he possessed the requisite gifts. In addition Wilde may have had more of an impetus for change—and not just any change but one that would leave him an entirely different person. One way to rectify our mistakes is to metamorphize into a person utterly unlike the one who made those mistakes in the first place. Wilde's turning point tale may have functioned as something of a confession. He revealed his sins, and in so doing folded them into a new vision. His was a guilty *mea culpa*. His ruin required that he profit from it, and spectacularly.

As for durability, it does seem like a necessary accompaniment. But at the same time, James is right in recognizing the possibility of occasional relapse. Insisting too strictly on colossal and consistent alterations of self risks the commission of a "Type II" error—some true turning points might be written off as insufficiently lasting. Life is complex. There will be slippage. Even when change is relatively modest or fitful, the turning point concept may apply. It seems important to acknowledge that some turns might be more momentous than others, more sustaining.

In jeopardy, suffering from loss, guilty of weakness and temptation, virtually friendless, Wilde marshaled all his skills in an act of supreme artistry—he remade a self in both prototypical and somewhat atypical fashion. Apart from all his other accomplishments, Wilde still is best known as a playwright. But his most compelling script may have been his last. In the end, his life was his play.

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