ABEI Journal – The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v. 27, n. 2, 2025, pp. 125-139.

The Christ as Man: The Secular Jesus of Oscar Wilde's De Profundis *and Richard Bruce Nugent's "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit"*

O Cristo como Homem: O Jesus secular de De Profundis*, de Oscar Wilde, e "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", de Richard Bruce Nugent*

Ana Carolina Vilalta Caetano

Abstract: *This article aims at comparatively analyzing Oscar Wilde's epistle De Profundis and Richard Bruce Nugent's short story "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", exposing the way in which Wilde's aesthetic philosophy and humanized version of Christ echo in the work of the Harlemite. Through a brief contextualization of the aestheticist and the decadent movements, the analysis introduces the prevailing theme of religion, elucidating the different modes of representation within Catholicism and Protestantism. Wilde's depiction of Jesus is examined with both faiths in mind, as well as his interest in Hellenism. His Christ is a poet, an artist creating Himself and reshaping humanity with the power of his imagination. Additionally, by grounding Jesus' miracles in reality and negating Catholic transubstantiation, Wilde is able to further secularize him. Nugent's fictionalized depiction of Jesus is highly indebted to Wilde, who is cited and referenced in his oeuvre. In the short story, Christ is a poet, telling the story of his own myth and commissioning the apostles. His most devout follower is Judas, who aids in the narrativization of their lives by accepting the role of the betrayer. Thus, De Profundis and "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" are analyzed as decadent texts that represent the Lord as a man and artist.*

Keywords: *Religion; Harlem Renaissance; Decadence; Homoeroticism; Aestheticism.*

ISSN1518-0581 | eISSN2595-8127 | DOI 10.11606/vvv65750

Resumo: *Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar comparativamente a carta De Profundis, de Oscar Wilde, e o conto "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", de Richard Bruce Nugent, expondo a maneira como a filosofia estética de Wilde e sua versão humanizada de Cristo ecoam na obra do harlemita. Por meio de uma breve contextualização dos movimentos esteticista e decadente, a análise introduz a recorrente temática religiosa, e elucida os diferentes modos de representação dentro do catolicismo e do protestantismo. A maneira como Wilde retrata Jesus é examinada tendo em mente ambas as crenças, assim como seu interesse pelo helenismo. O Cristo wildeano é um poeta, um artista que cria a si mesmo e recria a humanidade com o poder de sua imaginação. Ao pautar os milagres de Jesus na realidade e negar a transubstanciação católica, Wilde consegue secularizá-lo de modo mais incisivo. A representação ficcional de Jesus por Nugent deve muito a Wilde, que é citado e referenciado em sua obra. No conto, Cristo é um poeta, contando a história de seu próprio mito e nomeando os apóstolos. Seu seguidor mais devoto é Judas, que auxilia na narrativização de suas vidas ao aceitar o papel de traidor. Assim, De Profundis e "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" são analisados como textos decadentes que representam o Cristo como homem e artista.*

Palavras-Chaves: *Religião; Renascimento do Harlem; Decadência; Homoerotismo; Esteticismo.*

Oscar Wilde was interested in antithesis: satirizing it, turning it into a plot device, and using it as a starting point for critique. It is no surprise, then, that, throughout the end of the nineteenth century, his art engaged with two contrarian — and complementary — movements, aestheticism and decadence. If the aesthetes aimed "to be counter-cultural, to oppose the imperative to belong to what is mainstream and established" (Evangelista 49) through the assertion that art did not need to be bound by morals and didacticism, the decadents sought to pervert what was established and embrace what was considered immoral. In turn, Harlem Renaissance author Richard Bruce Nugent was interested in Wilde. In *Infants of the Spring* (1932), a *roman à clef* written by fellow Harlemite Wallace Thurman during the height of the New Negro movement, a fictionalized version of Nugent unabashedly tells his friends, "I think that Oscar Wilde is the greatest man that ever lived" (13). Throughout his life, Nugent would cite Wilde in short-stories and borrow his philosophy of aesthetics for his fiction. In view of this dialogic relationship, the following article aims at analyzing how Wilde's decadent perspective on Christianity, more importantly on the figure of Jesus Christ, present in the

epistle *De Profundis* (1909) finds its way into Nugent's homoerotic biblical tale, "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit".

The Christ as Artist

De Profundis, Wilde's solemn letter to former lover Lord Alfred Douglas, was written during his incarceration in Reading Gaol, between January and March 1897. In the epistle, he recounts pivotal events of his life, such as his years reading classics at Oxford, his mother's passing and his tumultuous relationship with Douglas. The introspective and philosophical tone turns the author into a penitent seeking absolution, as he wrestles with feelings of guilt and shame. The letter is primarily concerned with a "fresh mode of self-realization" (52), a topic intricately connected to the themes of forgiveness, acceptance and honesty. According to Buckler, "the creative imagination upon which his salvation depended could not, he knew, exist and have a constructive result unless he accepted and felt genuine sympathy for himself, his world, and his correspondent as in themselves they actually were" (96). In 1905, after almost a decade since its conception, the edited and abridged manuscript was published by Robert Ross, Wilde's closest friend and literary executor, and titled *De Profundis*.

At Reading Gaol, the author had been deprived of "the oral culture he thrived in and on. In prison, speech itself was punished, and Wilde was found to be in frequent violation of such rules, and was punished accordingly", the constant abuse leaving him dependent on the printed word — more specifically, on the King James Bible, the only book available to him for some time (Killeen 165). His newfound proximity to Protestant theological texts is echoed in *De Profundis*' aesthetic outlook, as "facing up to Reality rather than Romance is the dominating tone of the prison letter, including the depiction of Jesus" (165). Buckler emphasizes that "his betrayal of the imagination and thus of his most gifted and authentic — his Apollonian-self — is also the issue on which the protagonist stands unequivocally self-indicted. On a question so central to his identity only he can assume blame" (101). It is possible, then, to argue that the Wilde represented in the epistle is at a crossroads, divided between the realist text he so harshly criticized throughout his life and the artificial prose that he perfected but ultimately disgraced him.

While aestheticism was shaped by Hellenism and its systematization within the Oxford *Literae Humaniores* course, decadence was largely shaped by Christianity — its dichotomies,

and its lavish art. The depiction of sinful behavior depended on the existence of a fixed moral code, and the decadent writers found in Catholicism's articulation of sin, forgiveness and punishment the ideal framework for their characters' actions. In *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism*, Martin Lockerd contends that,

> The term "Catholicism" itself contains multitudes. If we define it in relation to discourse, it embraces not only all discursive acts associated with the institutional Church (the seven sacraments, the liturgy, the various prayers and feast days) but also, to a lesser extent, the cultural products of Catholics (Dante's *Commedia*, Guido Reni's *Saint Sebastian*, Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*). In its most expansive sense, then, decadent Catholicism delineates an imaginative space in which the discursive acts of decadence and Catholicism engage, interact, overlap, or simply breathe the same air... Whatever the particulars, this imaginative space is invariably concerned with sin as a real transgression of a divine order. (14)

In Ellis Hanson's seminal book *Decadence and Catholicism*, Wilde's relationship with Christian dogma is analyzed through its representation in his works. Hanson remarks that his early poems showed his allegiance both to Ancient Greece and the Vatican (230), and it is known that Wilde seriously considered converting to Catholicism while at Oxford in 1875, his sophomore year reading Classics (235). To Hanson, the Catholic Church provided Wilde "with an ideal stage. For his dandyism and his aestheticism, there was beautiful ritual and passionate faith. For his taste for scandal, there was a discourse of sin. And for his aesthetic and sexual martyrdom, there was the language of penitence and hagiography" (231). His attraction to Christianity and the Bible was also discursive, "as the most beautiful lie ever told" and as a text similar to an improbable literary theory in its dependence on faith and skilled deceit to convince the skeptics of its truthfulness (234).

Christ is repeatedly mentioned in *De Profundis*. He is categorized as a poet, and his life is declared an idyll. Wilde claims that "it is the imaginative quality of Christ's own nature that makes him this palpitating centre of romance. The strange figures of poetic drama and ballad are made by the imagination of others, but out of his own imagination entirely did Jesus of Nazareth create himself" (69). Christ, the artist, creates himself, his ultimate work of art. In an effort of approximation, Christ also becomes an aesthete, a devotee to beauty, having "the power of not merely saying beautiful things himself, but of making other people say beautiful things to him" (71). Wilde's ideas in *De Profundis* are syncretic. He Hellenizes Christian rituals, such as the Mass,

arguing that it is in the communal answers to the priest that one finds the "survival of the Greek chorus, lost elsewhere to art" (65). His Christ is always figured next to Greek references — from Plato and Sophocles to Thebes and Pelops. *De Profundis* marks Wilde's maturity and his coming into his own version of Catholic faith, but his interest in the subject was perceptible even in earlier works. *Salomé* (1891) is his most memorable religious retelling, but "Wilde also planned to write a play entitled 'Ahab and Isabel', as well as another work that he called the 'Epic of the Cross'" (Hanson 236).

More than a testament to artificiality and a framework for sin, however, decadent Catholicism represents an union between the carnal and the spiritual. According to Lockerd,

> As a religion founded on the literal incarnation of God, the most radical example of spiritual and physical unity in any major religion, Catholicism is actually suited to, if not always vocally in favor of, the poetic-mystic conflation of spiritual and sexual desires. Such theological suitability for the artistic expression of decadent sexuality suggests the extent to which the fin-de-siècle aesthetic can subvert stereotypes of Catholicism as a religion especially opposed to the body in general and to sexuality in particular. (17)

In Catholic iconography, sadomasochistic yearning and devotion are, at times, linked to holiness. Depictions of the suffering and ecstasy of the saints usually combine erotic desire and rapture — Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Sebastian being the most notorious examples, their bodies repeatedly penetrated by arrows, a phallic symbol. Thus, Catholicism offers the language and the aesthetics for the articulation of deviant desires. Lockerd posits that even the celibacy of monasteries and convents became a Decadent obsession, as the seclusion of these spaces facilitated same-sex sexual entanglements (18). Additionally, by utilizing religious imagery to place the expression of sexuality in a scale of morality and remove it from the realm of cultural normativity, the artists of the movement could approach the topic from an even playing field in which homoeroticism and candid heterossexuality were *both* sinful.

Protestantism, on the other hand, offers Wilde the tools to completely humanize — and, to a certain extent, to secularize — Christ. According to Jarlath Killeen, "he grounds his picture of Jesus in theological naturalism, dismissing the issue of miracles magisterially: there are no genuine miracles, no violations of the laws of nature" (165). In *De Profundis*, the author tells his correspondent that he sees

> no difficulty at all in believing that such was the charm of his personality that his mere presence could bring peace to souls in anguish, and that those who touched his garments or his hands forgot their pain; or that as he passed by on the highway of life people who had seen nothing of life's mystery, saw it clearly, and others who had been deaf to every voice but that of pleasure heard for the first time the voice of love and found it as 'musical as Apollo's lute'; or that evil passions fled at his approach, and men whose dull unimaginative lives had been but a mode of death rose as it were from the grave when he called them; or that when he taught on the hillside the multitude forgot their hunger and thirst and the cares of this world, and that to his friends who listened to him as he sat at meat the coarse food seemed delicate, and the water had the taste of good wine, and the whole house became full of the odour and sweetness of nard. (65)

Because Wilde reads the Gospels as literary texts imbued with artistic vision, he is able "to explain the literal through the metaphorical" (Killeen 166). Therefore, it is Christ's personality that brings peace to the sickly, and his mere presence that causes those in agony to forget their pain. In terms of the miracles, the water was not turned into wine, but simply had the taste of it. Further analysis of Wilde's interpretation reveals it to implicitly negate Catholic transubstantiation, as to him the substance itself is never transformed, only the impression of it — the very opposite of the notion of transubstantiation.

To Killeen, the paradoxical nature of the Wildean style manifests itself in the combination of the aforementioned Catholic motifs and the Protestant depiction of Christ. In *De Profundis*,

> Wilde, deprived of the imaginative instruments through which he had constructed his life of the spirit, does allow his visionary imagination to falter and be brought down to earth in the form of the secular Jesus. Yet, he never manages to make this transition fully, and the work is saturated with suggestions of an alternative means of interpretation. Wilde's putative title transforms it into an always already Catholic document, a papal encyclical. (172)

Similarly, when analyzing the complex relationship between Harlem Renaissance artists and religious dogma, Pinkerton argues that "not that many of the writers, artists and architects of the movement were themselves actively Christian; few of them were. But most of them wrestled, nonetheless, with the Christian faith in various ways, often arrogating its abiding

aesthetic and emotional power into their works" (82). This convergence of Catholicism and Protestantism, of organized religion and secularization, of sacred and profane, and of aestheticism and decadence finds its way to Richard Bruce Nugent's *oeuvre* mostly through Wildean texts. *Salomé*, for instance, is referenced numerous times and quoted in his short-story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926), later inspiring two series of drawings, *Salome Dancing* (1925-1930) and *Salome* (1930). In "Slender Length of Beauty" (1920-1930), he rewrites the play as a problematic of doubles and reimagines the princess herself, "the interpolated material" purposefully reinforcing "the Decadent preoccupation with vivid color in Wilde's play" (Mahoney 168). Mahoney describes *Salomé* as crucial and central to "Nugent's later modes of theorizing kinship" and in developing the themes that would permeate his work (165, 168).

Other references to Wilde are scattered throughout his texts — "The Critic as Artist" (1891) appears directly quoted in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade", Wilde himself is mentioned in Nugent's posthumous novel *Gentleman Jigger* (1928-1933; 2008), and in "Pope Pius the Only" (1937) the ironic dandy narrating the story is likely called Algernon in allusion to *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). This makes Wilde a foundational part of Nugent scholarship. He was "a bohemian and decadent aesthete in the tradition of Wilde" (Glick 417), followed Wilde in combining "art and the leisure class, in opposition to middle-class, philistine, masculine practicality" (Schwarz 138), and aspired to "excessive notoriety à la Wilde" (Thurman 31). To Wirth, late executor of Nugent's estate and responsible for the publication of most of his work in the collection *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* (2002), "Nugent began squarely in what might be characterized as the tradition of perfumed decadence" and Wilde's influence is "clear" (41). It is undeniable, then, that Nugent was incredibly well-versed in and inspired by Wildean text, and it makes sense that when creating his fictionalized version of Christ he would turn to *De Profundis*.

The Christ as Man

In 1925, when nineteen-year-old aspiring author Richard Bruce Nugent arrived in Harlem, he encountered a cultural movement of unprecedented proportions. Because of the waves of migration of the southern black population following the end of World War I and thanks to the "astute, economic aggressiveness of black businessmen that had snatched Harlem's newly developed real estate from white middle-class hands", the neighborhood became "the biggest and most elegant

black community in the Western world" (Huggins 14). It was also in 1925 that *The New Negro*, curated and edited by philosopher Alain Locke, was published, documenting the emergence of the 'New Negro' — a direct product of American urbanization and the popularization of Pan-Africanism. According to Locke, what would characterize this new historical moment would be the agency of the African-American to define himself before society, as "so far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the negro speak for himself" (Locke, 1997, xxv). Nugent was part of the anthology, and, in the following years, his work continued to appear in notable publications. By 1926, he had joined a team of influential young black artists to create *Fire!!*, a modernist literary magazine that opposed the political and aesthetic ideals of the previous generation of Harlemites, namely W.E.B. Dubois and Locke. Nugent had no interest in the good morals and values of the Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia, as he wanted to experiment with art and life. It is important to note, however, that his "brand of aestheticism is often conspicuously racialised and depoliticised at once" (Pinkerton 95), meaning that characters of color permeate his writings, but that raciality is rarely explored at length.

"Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" is part of an unpublished collection now known as *Bible Stories*, and one of five narratives believed to have been written between the late 1920s and early 1930s (Wirth 45). The four surviving[1] stories of Nugent's biblical collection adhere to a loose chronological order and feature some recurring characters. "Beyond Where the Star Stood Still" recounts the journey of the Magi, following Caspar, the king of Ethiopia, Melchior, the Shah of Persia, and Balthasar, the king of Sheba, as they venture out into the desert towards Bethlehem to visit the infant Jesus. Once they reach Herod's palace, Carus, the Tetrarch's prepubescent male lover, leaves his royal position to accompany them after becoming infatuated with Caspar. "The Now Discordant Song of Bells" is narrated from Carus' perspective. Due to the arrival of the Magi and to the force of his blossoming love for Caspar, he exchanges his hedonistic lifestyle for the tenets of Christianity. Back in Ethiopia, years after the birth of the Messiah, Carus realizes that Caspar will only ever see him as a brother, and leaves for Cyrene to tutor one of Caspar's cousins, Simon. "Slender Length of Beauty" recounts the night of Herod's banquet and John the Baptist's death, reimagining Wilde's French play *Salomé*, as previously stated. "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" portrays Jesus' commissioning of the Twelve Apostles, the Last Supper, the crucifixion and Judas Iscariot's suicide.

"Beyond Where the Star Stood Still", "The Now Discordant Song of Bells" and "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" are thematically interconnected. The three stories explore the friction

between the love for a perfect God and the love for a flawed person, as well as the inherent tragedy of unrequited feelings. Nugent's retellings of the Gospels question the limits of faith and the meaning of devotion, the ethos of his narratives evident in Carus' insistence that "Love is God" (Nugent 127, 130). In "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", Judas betrays Jesus because he knows that the other apostles will not, and that the Messiah will be accused of charlatanism if his prophecy proves untrue (145). To protect the legacy of the preachings of Jesus, Judas goes to Pontius Pilate. His last words, as he hangs himself from an olive tree, are "I did but love thee" (146). The idea of sacrificing oneself for love is also present in "The Now Discordant Song of Bells", when Carus unwillingly leaves Ethiopia in order to please Caspar, who wishes him to be his cousin's teacher.

However, more than thematically centralizing sacrifice, "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit" exposes the power of the word and, in Wildean fashion, secularizes Jesus Christ. The narrative begins with John discussing the beauty of a stranger with Simon. Mockingly, they agree that prophets and poets are the same, and Simon speculates that John's interest in the stranger is due to homoerotic attraction. He denies it, claiming to have never indulged in "the Greek refinement", and reiterates his interest in the stranger's words, as "he speaks a poet's tongue" (139). In Nugent's tale, Andrew — known in the Gospels as the first apostle — is never properly introduced, and, instead, the reader is invited to witness John's conversion, the episode that starts the fictionalized commissioning. Days later, John tells Simon the stranger is named Jesus.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde argues that "Christ's place indeed is with the poets. His whole conception of Humanity sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realised by it" (63). In "Tree with Kerioth Fruit", Jesus is represented as "a man inspired — a poet, mad with weighty declamations, who was preparing for martyrdom with majestic gestures. For his power had grown, and his divine madness had inspired the six who loved him and had gained him even more adherents" (142). It is Jesus' ability to create a new conception of humanity and community through imagination that unifies the apostles. Thus, their belief is in the words of the prophet-poet, their faith is in a story.

Judas of Kerioth is the last apostle commissioned, and he becomes the closest to Christ because of his profound understanding of the story being told.

> Judas had heard of the miracles of Jesus, listened to his word repeated, apprehended the beginning of this fantasy, and realized its possible end

> — Judas was a student and knew how a landslide could grow from the journey of one polished pebble. And Judas knew the laws of Moses and the prophecies and the people's need for impetus to keep alive the religion of their fathers... But Judas also knew that poets die giving birth to beauty... (143)

This profound understanding of the function of the word in crafting a reality is the foundation for their love. Jesus sees Judas as his twin, "so alike in thought and desire were they. And in appearance also, for the exact curve of Jesus's eyebrow shaded with deeper brown the darker eyes of Judas, so like Jesus's amber ones" (143). In this context, their twinhood is associated not with the familial bond, but with the concept of complementary halves that also appears in "Slender Length of Beauty". The recurring motif of their undeniable similarity hints at Aristophanes' theory of love in Plato's *Symposium*, which posits that love is a quest to be reunited with one's lost half, as people were divided into two bodies as a punishment from the gods.

> ... Judas was Jesus sculptured on a larger scale and painted more sensuous and passionate. And always Judas stood by Jesus as though to protect him. And was jealous of the affection bestowed on John. For John was the beloved whom Jesus loved as a mother loves her first-born child. But Judas, Jesus knew. ... Through Judas, Jesus could understand the forces he had loosed and, with prophetic poet's eyes, saw also his own end. He read in each happening the event ahead — the event which love blurred for Judas. ...Judas made true Jesus's every saying through understanding. As a parent reads a child's first speech. As a believer explains a prophet. As a man explains a poet. It was a duty of love. (143)

The language emphasizes the complex homoerotic nature of their relationship, characterized simultaneously by jealousy and preternatural comprehension. Moreover, although they are separate, discontinuous beings, there is a peculiar sense of unification. In many ways, Judas and Jesus are narrated as doubles, as if they are the same person divided.

The presence of doubles in literary texts was popularized during the Romantic movement, after the coinage of the term *doppelgänger* by the novelist Jean-Paul Richter in 1796. From the German, it literally translates to "walking companion" or "double walker", but Richter defines it as "those who see themselves" (Bravo 343). Thus, the double is a problematic of identity and vision, and its materialisation is commonly symbolic of imminent death, literal

or metaphorical. The acceptance of the double marks growth, change, and an embrace of the many sides of human subjectivity, but its rejection is usually fatal.

> When the feeling of a genuine otherness, a Romantic vision of the self, finally emerged, it was influenced by political and historical factors (notably the French Revolution) and by idealistic philosophy (Fichte, Über den Bergriffder Wissenschaftslehre, 1794). In a period of political turmoil when established hierarchies were under attack and the authority of the State and the Church were being questioned, the problems of personal identity became of crucial importance, and, against this background, philosophical idealism acted as a metaphysical prop for the theory of the double self. (355)

Doubles can take many forms. In Paul Coates' *The Double and the Other*, he argues that "in love, the other is one's double" (1), a notion that can be easily applied to Judas and Jesus' relationship in Nugent's story. Their understanding makes it possible for Judas to explain the poem-prophecies, and, consequently, to realize them. It is Judas' interpretation — or impression — of the story of Jesus that creates his divinity. To his followers, Christ says "I am the son of God", but to his beloved he confesses that he is the "son of man" (144).

Within the narrative, the proof of Jesus' humanity is also offered through a refutation of miracles. Echoing Wilde's words, Nugent writes that "his quiet tongue could pierce the coma of death inspired by weariness and pain — soothe the invalid and smooth away the fears until the will to live was resurrected. All this Jesus could do with a look, a sound and a caress, so ineluctable was his will and so inspired his being and speech" (144). Here, the events seen as literal are actually metaphors. Just as in *De Profundis*, it is Christ's presence and poetic tongue that heal those in need, his words that resurrect. There is no transubstantiation or feats that defy the possible, his divinity is one of realism. Pinkerton emphasizes that Protestantism was the most practiced strain of Christianity during the Harlem Renaissance (84, 85) and that what led Nugent to biblical subjects were his "decadent sensibilities", further linking him to Wilde (91).

In "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", Jesus goes mad with his own notion of divinity. By the end of the short story, he problematizes the intrinsic relation between the word and faith, embodying the paradox of religion. He says to Judas,

> "... Knowledge is greater than belief."
> "But thou thyself preachest different, Jesus. Thou sayest, 'Believe and thou shalt dwell in the house of the Lord forever.' "
> And Jesus asked: "Is that not one way of saying that belief leads to knowledge?" He quoted: "Believe and thou shalt know heaven," and after a pause continued, "For as I have said, Judas: I am no more a child, and now I know. I only speak so others may learn to know. First they must believe."
> And Judas lay awake and wept. For he knew. (Nugent 145)

The passage elucidates the supposed irreconcilability of knowledge and belief, since once one knows, there is no need for belief. However, Jesus offers an alternative outlook, positing, instead, that because one believes, one knows. This is how his disciples would be able to "dwell in the house of the Lord forever": their belief in his word would make concrete the metaphysical, his words are not necessarily teachings but inspire knowledge and imagination — that, in its essence, is faith. Similarly, in *De Profundis*, Wilde concludes that "indeed, that is the charm about Christ, when all is said: he is just like a work of art. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one becomes something." (74).

As previously stated, Judas' understanding of Jesus is a fundamental constitutive element of his faith. He knows the story being told and, once Christ announces that one of the apostles will betray him, accepts the role he will have to forcibly play. When, in a moment of clarity, Jesus realizes the price his lover has to pay for the concretization of his preachings, he weeps, as "*he* had betrayed *Judas*" too by breaking his heart (145).

After the crucifixion, grieving, Judas climbs the mountain to the crosses during a storm, and whispers to his beloved, "Thou knowest, Jesus, that had I saved thy life, thou wouldst be even more dead. Even as now in death thou livest to torment me" (146) — these two sentences revealing the sacrifice made in order to preserve Jesus' poems and his reputation as the Messiah. Judas hangs himself from an olive tree, saying "with the poet's tongue he finally had been given: 'I did but love thee'" (146). In the Gospels, Jesus is raised from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion, marking his consolidation as the Lord. The bodily resurrection of Christ is one of the foundational mysteries of Christian faith, and marks the beginning of the Great Commission — the diffusion of the Gospels by the remaining apostles. By having Judas speak "with the poet's tongue", Nugent allows him to finish the narrative Jesus had begun. Judas' actions and choice of words conclude the process of mythmaking and turn Jesus

into a martyr who died for humanity's sins. Judas, who knows and accepts the story, effectively creates Jesus the Lord through his love.

Circling back to Pinkerton's assertion that Nugent's brand of aestheticism was not politicized, it is important to note that, in "Tree with Kerioth-Fruit", even if Jesus and Judas' skin color is never described, there is a parallel to be drawn between Judas' hanging, Jesus' crucifixion and lynching, — especially when taking into consideration that they are doubles that die similarly. The motif was common among Harlemites, and writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude Mckay and Countee Cullen often employed religious imagery and the death of Christ to criticize racial violence. For example, in Hughes' acclaimed poem "Christ in Alabama", which mimics a litany, "Christ is a nigger/Beaten and black" who perishes "on the cross of the South". Only in his aforementioned short story "Pope Pius the Only", published by the literary magazine *Challenge* in 1937, does Nugent explicitly utilize the motif with clear political intent.

The influence of Wilde's *De Profundis* on Nugent's version of Christ is undeniable. By transforming Jesus into a poet, refuting the miracles and centralizing the power of the word in the construction of mythologized narratives, Nugent borrows the Wildean religious philosophy and expands it. He shows Jesus, the artist, creating Himself, his most perfect work of art, and the sacrifices necessary to the desired conclusion. Judas' homoerotic relationship with Jesus, based on their profound understanding of each other as doubles, and his acceptance of the role of the betrayer are fundamental in proving that this Christ is, indeed, the son of man.

Acknowledgements

This study was financed, in part, by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), Brasil. Process Number 2024/01760-3.

Notes

1 Steve Pinkerton asserts the existence of a fifth story part of the collection, titled "Tunic with a Thousand Pleats" (94-95). The manuscript is available exclusively at the Yale Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The other four stories were published by Thomas Wirth in the book *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance.*

Works Cited

Bravo, Nicole Fernandez. "Doubles and Counterparts". In: *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*. Ed. Pierre Brunel. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Buckler, William E. "Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic of the Self: Art as Imaginative Self-Realization in De Profundis". In: *Biography*, Spring 1989, Vol. 12, No. 2. University of Hawai'i Press, Center for Biographical Research.

Coates, Paul. *The Double and the Other: Identity as Ideology in Post-Romantic Fiction*. Hampshire & London: Macmillan Press, 1988.

Evangelista, Stefano. *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile*. Hampshire and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Glick, Elisa F. "Harlem's Queer Dandy: African-American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness". In: *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Fall 2003, Vol. 49, No. 3. John Hopkins University Press.

Hanson, Ellis. *Decadence and Catholicism*. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance*. Nova York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hughes, Langston. *Christ in Alabama*. Available: <genius.com/Langston-hughes-christ-in-alabama-annotated>. Accessed Aug. 2025.

Killeen, Jarlath. *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore and Ireland*. Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Locke, Alain. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.

Lockerd, Martin. *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism*. New York & London: Bloomsday Academic, 2020.

Mahoney, Kristin. *Queer Kinship after Wilde*. Michigan State University, 2022.

Nugent, Richard Bruce. "Tree With Kerioth-Fruit". In: *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002.

Schwarz, Christa A.B. *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003.

Pinkerton, Steve. "Harlem's Bible Stories: Christianity and the New Negro Movement". In: *The Edinburgh Companion to Modernism, Myth and Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.

Thurman, Wallace. *Infants of the Spring*. New York: Dover Publication Inc., ePub, 2013.

Wirth, Thomas. *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002.

Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis*. New York: The Modern Library, ePub, 2000.