

Of Life and Art

FPG and the Writing of Oscar Wilde
into Settlers of the Marsh

"[L]IKE THE FACE OF EUROPE my memory is a palimpsest on which writing has overlaid writing."¹ So Frederick Philip Grove famously described his intellectual formation and simultaneously excused his all too frequent lapses of memory in his autobiography, *In Search of Myself*. Despite the self-justificatory quality of this comment, there is undoubtedly, as with so many of Grove's statements, something of truth here. A tramp, a salesman and a farmer, but also a translator, poet, novelist and essayist, Frederick Philip Grove was intimately familiar with, and formed by, a whole range of writers from the ancients of his adolescent studies in the classics to the moderns of his own contemporary age, many of whom he translated. In this essay, I distinguish the remnants of one layer of writing from the palimpsest of Grove's intellectual bibliography, that of Oscar Wilde, one of the central influences in FPG's writing and life. Although the aesthete Wilde and the taciturn Grove seem at first glance mismatched, the similarities between Wilde and Grove may be quickly enumerated. Both were social outsiders who sought by means of intelligence to attain a place at the centre of the cultural worlds they inhabited; both distinguished themselves in their knowledge of the classics; both were devotees of the cult of art who nonetheless purposefully used art as a vehicle with which to acquire social prestige and financial gain; both adopted poetry and drama in the early stages of their respective careers; both were capable of tremendous artistic output even while burdened with intense emotional strain; both were subjected to social ostracism and legal sanction in the form of prison sentences; and,

finally, both were ultimately silenced, driven indebted from their preferred cultural milieus—Wilde to France and an impoverished death in Paris, Greve via faked suicide to the tentative prospects of a new writing career in Canada. Beyond these external biographical similarities, however, is the far more extensive influence Wilde's life and writing exerted on the young German translator and writer. To investigate this influence, I focus on Greve's understanding of Wilde, as derived from his translation of Wilde's volume of essays *Fingerzeige (Intentions)*² and the critical assessment of Wilde contained in three of his most representative studies of Wilde.³ In developing the thesis that Greve's reading of Wilde was influential to his later writing, published under the name of Frederick Philip Grove, I offer an interpretation of FPG's first Canadian novel, *Settlers of the Marsh*. On the basis of these texts, I indicate how several of Wilde's ideals provided Greve with key concepts that he later modified and employed in his own writing, while the example of Wilde's life, and Greve's criticism of it, offer an indication of the cultural and aesthetic ideals that led Greve to the aesthetic he adopted in Canada. Although fully aware that the attempt to demonstrate formative influence on the basis of textual criticism is fraught with danger, I believe that attention to Wilde brings us a step closer to seeing the literary contributions of Greve and Grove as a single entity.

That Wilde was of importance to Greve may be briefly demonstrated at several levels. As a model of personal behaviour, for instance, it is now known that in playful moments, Greve occasionally styled himself according to Wilde's model, adopting the mask, so to speak, of an English dandy, even going so far in Gardone, Italy in 1902 as suggesting to a fellow vacationer that he was Wilde.⁴ More substantially, Greve chose Wilde's writings as those amongst the first of what would become an astounding range of translated texts, introducing himself into Germany's translation culture as a literary figure to be taken seriously both as a poet and dramatist in his own right and as a translator of world literature. Still further, apart from translating Wilde and attempting to use productions of Wilde's dramas as a vehicle to advance his own literary career, Greve devoted several critical studies to Wilde. Indeed, the final critical work to appear under Greve's name in Germany was the article "Oskar Wilde" reprinted in a collection of literary portraits edited by Adalbert Luntowski in 1911. As a writer in Germany, Felix Paul Greve's works were, to a certain extent, contained within Wildean bookends.

Given this verifiable presence of Wilde in Greve's literary life, it seems possible that significant features of the aesthetic Grove developed in his Canadian works may be sought in Wilde's writings and in Greve's critical articles concerning Wilde. Of immediate relevance here is the need to recognise that Greve did not simply adopt Wilde's celebration of the "truth of masks," and that he did not uncritically celebrate Wilde's veneration of the lie and pose as ideals of artistic creation. Nor did the Canadian Grove attempt to out-Wilde Wilde in the "decadent attempt to subordinate the real world to an artistic concept" in his Canadian literature.⁵ Although such an approach would certainly have its appeal in explaining Grove's fictionalising of his past, his own adorning of masks in the autobiographical tellings of his life-story, Greve's relation to Wilde was far more nuanced and Wilde's influence far more complex. In point of fact, Greve was almost exclusively critical of the artistic worth of the English "decadents" and of Wilde the artist, going so far in "Oskar Wilde und das Drama" as to suggest that "Von Wilde kann der Dramatiker nur lernen, wenn er ihn als Gescheiterten betrachtet" (8).⁶ Still further, Greve linked Wilde's artistic failure, at least in part, to precisely his adoption of masks and poses:

...was Wilde schuf, ist selten ersten Ranges und sein Leben blieb Fragment. [...] Wilde war ein Poseur im großen Stil, und als solcher hat er Momente von grandioser Kraft. Wo bei ihm die Pose aushört, ist er ein Mensch von merkwürdiger Schwäche und seltsamen Widersprüchen. Sein Intellekt ist souverän, wo es herrscht, aber das Gebiet seiner Herrschaft ist begrenzt: daher jene Widersprüche. ("Oskar Wilde" 14–15)⁷

Contrary to Greve's ideal, Wilde's adoption of masks and poses, rather than revealing the truth, drew attention away from the work of art—the source of truth—and centred it upon the secondary element of the artist's life (*Randarabesken* 8–9). In a still more critical gesture, Greve recounted Wilde's fatal turning away from life, a tendency that affected more than his public persona, but rather his very ability to produce art:

Alles, was er im Leben fand, erschien ihm als nachte, brutale Tatsache, die den Sinn, den er nicht fand, nicht hatte. So kam er schließlich

dazu, das Leben nicht mehr sehen zu wollen. Und seine Schaffenskraft ebbt ab. Er fand in sich selber das einzig Interessante. Die Analysis, die er vielleicht von D'Annunzio lernte, zeigte ihm die sinnvollen Fäden, die durch das geheimnisvolle Wirrsal des eigenen Innern führten. Und er lernte das Leben verachten. Nur noch, so weit es in ihm Emotionen auslöste, ging es ihn an. ("Oskar Wilde" 18–19)⁸

It is this same destructive movement from life to emotion charted here by Greve in Wilde that we will follow below in Niels Lindstedt's brush with near total disaster in *Settlers of the Marsh*.

Despite these criticisms, however, Greve was nonetheless intensely interested in Wilde, precisely because Wilde raised in his art, life and criticism the issue central to FPG's aesthetic—the proportioned co-joining of life and fiction in art of lasting value. Greve saw in Wilde the tragedy of a writer who was destroyed because he confused life with dream, the dream he had advanced in *Intentions*. As Greve would express it, Wilde's oeuvre was "...die Hieroglyphenschrift einer großen Tragödie im Leben eines modernen Menschen, eines Menschen, der Künstler sein wollte und es nicht konnte, weil er das Leben mit dem Traum verwechselt" ("Oskar Wilde" 51).⁹

But what did Greve suggest as a related, although alternative, aesthetic, and to what extent may it be read into Grove's writing? Like the Wilde of *Intentions*, Greve was intensely interested in establishing for art a place at the very forefront of human life. For both Wilde and Greve, art was the ultimate expression of human endeavour. Unlike Wilde, however, Greve did not see the work of art as a product of the submission of life to art. In Greve's aesthetic, life was not to be placed subordinate to art. Indeed, using a highly suggestive metaphor, given both Wilde's and Greve's experiences with debts, Greve suggested that life was the primary element in the constellation life/art. According to Greve, Wilde had misunderstood this and suffered accordingly: "Alle Taten machen uns zu Schuldnern, und die Schulden, die wir durchs Handeln auf uns nehmen, müssen wir eines Tages zahlen: das Leben ist der unerbittlichste Gläubiger. Weh dem, der vergisst, seine Taten als Debet ins Hauptbuch des Lebens zu schreiben: seine Schulden wachsen ins Ungeheuerliche an, und am Tage der Abrechnung ist er bankrott. [...] Wilde zahlte die Schulden seines Lebens mit dem Bankrott" (*Randarabesken* 40, 47).¹⁰

Greve went beyond simply using Wilde as an example of the perilous risks involved in denying life a role in art, however. And in articulating his vision of the relationship between art and life, we see the rudiments of an aesthetic that would be adopted in Canada by Grove. In essence, Greve adopted a Platonic understanding of artistic representation whereby the ultimate object of representation was the "ideal" or essence of life; this was the ultimate "goal" behind the striving of all things to perfection and the motor for life's eternal process of change, the essential condition of life. As Greve put it in "Oscar Wilde und das Drama": "alles Leben ist Streben nach Vollkommenheit" (22–23).¹¹ For Greve, this Platonic abstraction, this "ideal," was expressed in concrete terms through the individual and the eternal process of change each individual experienced and exemplified. The function of art was to mediate between the "ideal" and the "real," to represent the "eternal" nature of life and the real experience of the individual, but without emphasising one at the expense of the other. The following is Greve's expression of this concept:

Nun haben wir also gewissermaßen zwei Welten gefunden: die Welt der Ziele und die Welt der Individuen [...] Die Welt der Individuen wird mehr und mehr zum Objekt der Wissenschaft, die täglich mehr von ihrem abstrakten Charakter fallen läßt, um ganz konkret zu werden. Die Welt der Ziele steht in großer Ferne rein abstrakt vor unsrem Geiste, als Objekt der reinen Spekulation. Und wo steht nun die Kunst? Sie bildet eine Brücke zwischen beiden; sie ist nicht Spiegel des einen noch des andern; sie gibt nicht Bilder der Wirklichkeit und auch nicht Bilder der Ideen. Und je nach dem Streben der geistigen Welten einer Zeit tritt sie der realen Welt der Individuen näher oder fliegt sie empor zu jener Welt der reinen Begriffe. Wenn sie zwischen beiden den Kunst des Gleichgewichts fand, schuf sie von je ihre ewigsten Werke. ("O.W. und das Drama" 24–25)¹²

Given the ideal expressed here, it is relatively easy to understand why Greve censured Wilde for drawing too much emphasis to his actual life in his fictional writing. According to Greve's aesthetic principles, Wilde was upsetting art's balancing act between "idea" and "individual." At the same time, however, it is equally understandable why Greve was attracted to

certain ideas expressed by Wilde. In "The Truth of Masks" for instance, Wilde made a bipartite distinction between "truth" and "facts" that is similar to Greve's "ideas" and "individuals." The following statement by Wilde from "The Truth of Masks," here in reference to Shakespeare, is representative: "Of course the aesthetic value of Shakespeare's plays does not, in the slightest degree, depend on their facts, but on their Truth, and Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure."¹³ Greve also saw art's goal as a striving for truth between the eternal abstraction of life and the random facts of actual human experience. Literature was to be verisimilitudinous, but its "truth" was not to be measured according to adherence to random empirical fact, but rather in its ability to represent "pure concepts" in living form. Approximately forty-five years later, as the Canadian author of *In Search of Myself*, Grove described the functioning of this same set of aesthetic principles in the creation of such characters as Abe Spalding and Niels Lindstedt. In the instance of Abe Spalding, while travelling across the western prairies, Grove once happened upon a man whose very presence bespoke the truth of the pioneer environment he inhabited. In terms of Grove's novel *Fruits of the Earth*, however, the importance of this figure was not his physical actuality but the larger truth he seemed to embody for Grove:

...somehow he bodied forth for me the essence of the pioneering spirit which has settled the vast western plains.... This man, a giant in body, if not in mind and spirit, had furnished the physical features for a vision which had, so far, been incomplete because it had been abstract.

If I had seen the entirely casual occasion—that is all I can call him; he was not the prototype—of this figure again, if I had heard him speak as no doubt he had been used to speak, without relevance to my creation, that mental vision of mine would have been profoundly disturbed. A perfectly irrelevant actuality would have been superimposed upon my conception of a man who, as I saw him, had perhaps never lived; for he lacked that infusion of myself which makes him what he has become. From a type and a symbol, he would have become an individual; he would have been drained of the truth that lived in him; he would have become a mere fact. (ISM 260–61)

The "real" Abe Spalding was not important for Grove as an actual individual but as the specific, living embodiment of an abstraction. It is in the same context and with the same conceptual vocabulary derived from Greve's Platonic aesthetic that we read Grove's statement concerning his mixing of fact and fiction in his autobiographical writings:

Imaginative literature is not primarily concerned with facts; it is concerned with truth. It sees fact only within the web of life, coloured and made vital by what preceded it, coloured and made significant by what followed. In its highest flights, imaginative literature, which is one and indivisible, places within a single fact the history of the universe from its inception as well as the history of its future to the moment of its final extinction.¹⁴

This is art finding a balancing point between the universal and the specific, representing in works of art at once the "ideal" and the "fact," the very features from Wilde's example that were of interest to Greve.

With these still crudely outlined generalizations, then, it is possible to trace the trajectory of Greve's response to Wilde's writing into his aesthetic as the Canadian author Grove. But what of the figure of the artist in Greve's understanding of artistic production? Here, too, Wilde is of importance for both Greve and Grove; for, apart from exemplifying the fundamental error of disregarding "life" in art, Wilde furnished Greve with the highly suggestive figure of the "uprooted" artist. Adopting Gide's concept of the *déraciné* or, in Greve's German, the *entwurzelt*, Greve developed his understanding of an essentially existential condition whereby the individual is uprooted from one cultural environment and placed in another.¹⁵ This uprooted individual, no longer at home in either his native or adopted environment, is ultimately fit to be either a criminal or an artist: "Er taugt zum—Verbrecher oder zum Künstler!" (Randarabesken 29). As an artist, the *entwurzelt* individual—who in being uprooted has been made radically aware of the relativity of life—becomes the eternal observer, the existential traveller through the journey of life, both at home in and foreign to all environments:

Aber jener Entwurzelte, [...] der wird ein Schilderer sein: nach zwei Seiten wird er blicken; er steht an einer Wendung des Weges, wo er

die Strasse nach Nordosten und nach Nordwesten überschaut: er ist unweigerlich Künstler! Ein Künstler im Keim: weil er die Dinge als unterschieden sieht; er sieht plastisch. Darin liegt die Begnadung, darin auch die Tragik seines Loses. Er zieht zwei Strassen, und zieht sie beide als Fremder und ist doch auf beiden heimisch. Und ist nicht der Künstler immer der Fremde, trägt er nicht stets das Ahasveruszeichen an der Stirn? Alle Künstler sind dekadent, wenn Dekadenz die Folge der Entwurzelung ist: Nur gibt es Grade! Und man könnte sich einen Künstler denken, der vermöge seiner Abstammung—geistiger wie leiblicher—in allen Kulturen und Rassen und Sitten und Religionen der Welt fremd zu Hause wäre: ein Schweifender über der Erde Gewachsen, fremd und zu Hause im Christentum, fremd und zu Hause unter Brahminen am Ganges, fremd und zu Hause beim grossen Erlöser Buddha, fremd und zu Hause im Geist eines Nietzsche wie Augustins—zugleich ein Deutscher, ein Brite, ein Römer, ein Grieche, ein Italiener, Franzose und Schwede und Russe. Ein solcher wäre ganz “entwurzelt” das heisst, er hätte seine Wurzeln überall, er wäre vielwurzlig [...]. (Randarabesken 30–31)¹⁶

As supplement to this Romantic theory of the artist as eternal wanderer, Greve added an important individual feature of his own. Greve suggested that although the artist was uprooted and hence potentially many-rooted, he nonetheless had one root that was stronger than the others, a root from which he drew his life’s energy and which, if he remained true to it, would provide him with the stability to produce great works of art. Those artists who did not have one root stronger than the others—in Greve’s discussion, a figure like Wilde—such artists were prone to works of art on a smaller scale, decadent art based on paradoxes, aphorisms, and *aperçus* that could not rank with the great works of art, although they revealed the artist himself as interesting (Randarabesken 31). For Greve, Wilde was insufficiently rooted in life, and as a result, he sacrificed his abilities to the shallow tastes of the masses in the very process of confusing dream and reality: “Aber die Pose wurde ihm Wirklichkeit, und die Wirklichkeit verblasste daneben, und wo sie nicht bloss war, da verwechselte er den Traum und die Dinge, und dafür rächte das Leben sich” (Randarabesken 36).¹⁷

Transferred to the writings of Frederick Philip Grove—recalling in passing that Greve’s volume of poetry was entitled *Wanderings*—this understanding of the artist as existential traveller speaks directly to the plot structure and theme of his autobiographical writings, *A Search for America* and *In Search of Myself*. In both works the narrative format is similar: the narrator is uprooted in youth and set out on the road of life as the eternal observer. Although initially uncertain of the telos of his life, successive experiences gradually reveal the direction life has allotted him to take. At home and foreign everywhere, he follows his life’s direction to arrive not at a specific place but at an existential calling—that of an artist—a calling that was not to be denied regardless of the material tribulations it entailed. Combined with Greve’s aesthetic as I have characterized it, this plot structure could perhaps explain the presence in Grove’s autobiography of journeys and locations that seem beyond plausible verification. For Grove, it is not the concrete actuality of these travels which matter, for this is all so much fact, archaeological detail, in Wilde’s use of that term. What is important is the “truth” of Grove’s life and travels, for he certainly was a traveller who wandered the road of life certain that it was his duty not to squander the viaticum presented to him on life’s journey, but to fashion of it a work of art:

But, unless I was willing, when I came to die, to accept the fact that I had wasted what gifts I had received—the viaticum as I have called it; plus all that had been added to it by my life and by what experience had brought me—I must continue on my path; I must go on striving after my aim.

What was that aim? Briefly, it was to set down, in one comprehensive picture, all that had crystallized out, in my mind, in reaction all I had seen, heard, and felt. That picture I must at least aim at fashioning in a form which would stand forever. (ISM 229–30, Grove’s italics)

Another dimension of FPG’s relatedness to Wilde and Greve’s critical response to Wilde may be evinced when the particular mask of autobiography is replaced with that of fiction, here in the instance of *Settlers of the Marsh*. In this novel, Grove’s first published in Canada, he develops in fictional form several of the aesthetic and ethical principles articulated in

his criticism of Wilde. Like *A Search for America* and *In Search of Myself*, *Settlers of the Marsh* recounts the existential journey of a man struggling to find his way along life's path. In this instance it is the young Swedish immigrant, Niels Lindstedt, who, although initially aware of the correct course in his life and possessed of the will and vision to follow it, is seduced by vaguely articulated sexual urges to follow a false path. Robbed by degrees of his will-power and subsequently punished for deceiving "life" and his vision of an ideal existence, Lindstedt is chastened and redeemed by sorrow and ultimately returned to his (patriarchal) vision of personal, familial and communal well-being. In keeping with the aesthetic ideals outlined, *Settlers of the Marsh*, although verisimilitudinous insofar as it is written with attention to realistic descriptions of pioneer life and natural settings, does not exhibit the realist's concern for depicting the causal importance of socio-historical forces in the lives of characters, who are in turn identified by their connection to a specific time and place. Similarly Grove's novel exhibits but limited naturalist interest in the formative powers of heredity and environment on the development of character. The events played out in the marsh are all but unimpinged upon by historical time and circumstance. The characters interact in an environment untouched—and seemingly untouchable—by forces external to those created in their own isolated, pioneer environment. More than fifteen years pass seamlessly with reference to nothing but the seasons; no cities are named; neither historical events nor personages are alluded to; likewise neither governmental policy nor social or economic developments are allowed incursion into the world of the Big Marsh. In short, although "truthful," Greve's novel is relatively unmoved by depictions of world-historical "facts." Rather, it would seem as if Grove were attempting to narrate something of eternal worth through his representation of a man functioning within the web of a life depicted as simultaneously particular and universal. Hence, Grove's narrative is characterized by attention both to the minutia of pioneer life and the exclusion of events of transitory historical importance. In *Settlers of the Marsh*, Grove dramatized in fictional form the ideals expressed in his criticism of Wilde. In a manner intended to suggest universal themes rather than particular experience, Grove's novel enacts the fortunes of an *entwurzelt* man who, in seeking to establish new roots, is confronted by life with a choice between dream and reality.

Settlers of the Marsh begins with the sole reference to a human settlement, Minor, external to the particular geography of the Big Marsh—a setting itself to be located not on any map of geo-political reality but rather according to the co-ordinates of universal human motivation. The opening paragraphs also introduce Niels Lindstedt as he struggles against the elements in his bid to end the physical journey of immigration from Sweden to the Big Marsh while simultaneously beginning the existential journey entailed in establishing himself and setting down roots in the farming community. Although one journey has ended, another more important one is poised to begin. Lindstedt is identified as an immigrant, a pioneer who by virtue of having left his native Sweden is accorded the advantages of a specific form of life experience. In Greve's account of Wilde, the uprooted individual is presented as one made forcibly aware of the relativity of life, a potential boon for the artist, though fraught also with danger. In *Settlers of the Marsh*, Niels Lindstedt is accorded the same consciousness of life's variability and mysteries and hence is an artist of sorts, although he is possessed of a form of vision appropriate to a pioneer:

How chance played into life!

He had emigrated; and the mere fact that he was uprooted and transplanted had given him a second sight, had awakened powers of vision and sympathy in him which were far beyond his education and upbringing.¹⁸

With this consciousness, this "second sight," Niels is made acutely aware of his limited, transitory position in the greater scheme of existence, as a result of which he is frequently occupied by deliberations on matters of existential import, thoughts in turn recorded in the narrative in the form of interior monologues. As a portion of his psycho-philosophical concerns, Niels is soon possessed of a vision that will guarantee meaning to his life. This vision, described as "eternal," is one of familial security and incorporates spousal love and the presence of children. Essentially, Lindstedt's vision is the civilising one of creating life, family and community. Significantly, the first formulation of this vision is made in the context of a conversation Niels has with his friend and fellow immigrant Lars Nelson, who forcefully expresses the unarticulated feelings Niels has about the liberatory value of

work as an independent pioneer. The exercise and expression of one's will through labour in the pioneer creation of life and community out of nothing is identified in Niels's vision as an ideal:

'I'll tell you, I like the work. I'd pay to be allowed to do it. Land I've cleared is more my own than land I've bought.' [...] The last few words had filled them with the exhilaration of a confession of faith. High above, far ahead stood an ideal; towards that ideal they walked.

Suddenly, as they were entering the bush, where the moon light filtered down through the meshes of leafless boughs over head, a vision took hold of Niels: of himself and a woman, sitting of a mid-winter night by the light of a lamp and in front of a fire, with the pitter-patter of children's feet sounding down from above: the eternal vision that has moved the world and that was to direct his fate. He tried to see the face of the woman but it entirely evaded him.... (Settlers 36)

For Niels, the presence of children was in no way merely incidental to his vision, his ideal. Children would be the guarantors of his fixedness as immigrant in a new land: "But if he had children, they would be rooted here....He might become rooted himself, through them...." (Settlers 45). Furthermore, the presence of loved ones is all that humans have as response to the terrible finality of death, as Niels came to realise upon the demise of Sigurdsen, a father-like figure whose death causes him to think of his own dead mother. Children were to offer a kind of existential consolation, without which humans would be left "to shiver in an utter void" (Settlers 102). There is, then, a kind of existential urgency in Niels's desire to start a family, first in surrogate form with Sigurdsen, Bobby and Mrs Lund, and then later with Ellen. In the terms of the aesthetic and ethic established in Greve's Wilde criticism, then, Niels Lindstedt has been established in *Settlers of the Marsh* as an uprooted pioneer/artist, immigrant/wanderer who, in seeking to realise his dream, is responding to the eternal call of "life" while setting down the "root" that will be the source and proof of his strength and creativity.

In fulfilling the ideal presented to him by life, however, Niels requires a mate, a wife to fulfil his incomplete vision of domestic and communal stability. And here, *Settlers of the Marsh* reveals further dimensions of FPG's

familiarity with Wilde. It is in Niels Lindstedt's choosing of a wife that Greve dramatises the choice Greve saw Wilde presented with—between dream and reality. Upon ultimately choosing Clara Vogel rather than Ellen Amundsen, Lindstedt was punished by life, as was Wilde. It is at this juncture, in Lindstedt's choice between life or dream, as expressed in the figures Ellen and Clara, that Greve's novel exhibits in greater detail Greve's critical assessment of Wilde and his familiarity with Wilde's fiction.

If Ellen represents the potential of life as the female correspondent to Lindstedt's male embodiment of the pioneering spirit and is, as such, the perfect mate and concluding figure in the configuration of Lindstedt's "eternal vision," then Clara Vogel acts as a force inimical to that vision. In the system of binary opposites proposed by Greve in his discussion of Wilde, Clara is dream and decadence opposed to the reality and life of Ellen. This reading of "the gay widow of the settlement" (Settlers 30) is supported with reference to the aura of oppressively sweet decay and prettified death that seems ever to surround her. Time and again throughout the novel, Clara Vogel is associated with decay and lassitude via narrative reference to a set of characteristics emblematic of decadence and putrefaction. Repeated reference is made to her "silvery, falsetto laugh" (Settlers 51), to "the sweetish scents" (Settlers 127) and "enervating aura of scents" (Settlers 147) surrounding her, to the "mockery in her eyes" (Settlers 52), to the extravagance of her toilette, to the sexually charged ostentation of her dress, to her refusal to work, and to her emotional and physical distance from the pioneer community. And while Niels and the other characters are identified with the pioneer labours of the Big Marsh, Clara is the sole character associated with the nameless local town, which is far removed from the geography and concerns of the rural pioneers. It is in the town where Clara previously worked in the "art' department of a large store" (Settlers 128) and it is in the town, displaced from the land where "he was master" (Settlers 89), that Niels deceives his "eternal vision" and succumbs to his desire for Clara.

That Niels's liaison with Clara is a surrender to dream and a form of infidelity to life is made abundantly clear in the scenes before their marriage where Niels is confronted by Clara. In the first lengthy exchange with Clara at Nelson's and Olga's marriage, Niels instinctively feels that association with Clara Vogel could mean nothing but disaster for a man destined by life for other things:

[...] as he went over and sat down by her [Clara's] side, he felt as if he were being entrapped: he felt what was almost a foreboding of disaster. Never in his life had he felt like that; and the memory of this feeling was to come back to him, many years later, when his terrible destiny had overtaken him. Had he obeyed a hardly articulate impulse, he would at once have got up again and gone out. (*Settlers* 51)

In leaving Clara's company shortly thereafter, Niels comes to his senses, feeling "as if he were waking up from a terrible dream" (*Settlers* 53). More explicitly and troubling, moreover, his associations with Clara have a stupefying effect, causing him to resist the essential demands of pioneer life:

But to-night something had happened which he did not understand: he was a leaf borne along the wind, a prey to things beyond his control, a fragment swept away by torrents. [...] A lassitude came over him: a desire to escape life's issues....(*Settlers* 55)

And indeed, even before the disastrous conclusion to Niels's turning away from his ideal of a prosperous pioneer family, the negative, previously intuited effects of marriage to Clara are indicated in Niels's weakened demeanour. The decadence Clara's whole being seems to suggest is felt by Niels in the form of reduced will-power: " [...] the decay in Niels consisted more in a gradual disintegration of will and purpose" (*Settlers* 175).

It is apparent that Grove established in *Settlers of the Marsh* a fictional counterpart to the ethical and aesthetic principles set forth in his criticism of Wilde, whereby an uprooted individual is offered the choice between dream and reality. In choosing dream and decadence, this figure is weakened and ultimately punished by life. In *Settlers of the Marsh*, it is Clara Vogel who embodies the sensual temptations of a dream existence. It is not surprising, then, that representations of her should be traceable back to Greve's interest in Wilde not only at the level of criticism but also in her similarity to an illustrative motif from Wilde's fiction—the corrupted face of decadence.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde created his famous parable of the terrible honesty and telling power of art. Basil Hallward paints a portrait of his friend Dorian Gray capturing not only the external appearance of Gray but the essence of his being as well. Gray, enamoured of his own beauty and

seduced by the example and hedonism of Basil Hallward, sinks into a life of moral turpitude. Rather than his physical body bearing the sign of his soul's corruption, however, it is the face in Gray's portrait that minutely records his descent into decadence. It is the face of the portrait that reveals the putrefaction of Gray's soul. The following is an account of Gray's first discovery of the changes to his face in his portrait:

As he was turning the handle of the door, his eye fell upon the portrait Basil Hallward had painted of him. He started back as if in surprise. [...] In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-coloured silk blinds, the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. [...] The quivering, ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing. (*Dorian Gray* 77)

Likewise in *Settlers of the Marsh*, Clara Vogel's face is to be depicted in language and image reminiscent of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* as a means of signalling the depth of her corruption, even behind the mask of transient physical beauty. Clara Vogel is never accorded the philosophical depth and self-awareness of Dorian Gray's hedonism, although she does partake of several features of his life, especially his appearances.

Before marriage to Clara, Niels has but limited occasion to see behind her deceptive mask of gay jollity and half mocking curiosity. For Niels, Clara Vogel, in her unpioneer-like extravagance, is an object of both interest and vaguely intuited fear. It is not until his first meeting with her in town, whereupon he offers to drive her back to the Big Marsh, that Niels has the opportunity to glimpse the essence behind her carefully constructed appearances. Sleeping in the box of his wagon, Clara Vogel's mask slips, allowing Niels to see and describe her with the language of decadence: "Somehow her artificiality was half stripped away; she looked like a relic of ancient temptations...." (*Settlers* 91). After their marriage, however, when Clara has ensconced herself in a boudoir as secluded and devoted to physical luxury as Dorian Gray's chamber, Niels perceives the moral corruption that he is still unable to rationalize. The following lengthy passage describing Niels's

observation of his sleeping wife is worthy of extended citation because of the Wildean emphasis it places on sensual richness and moral decay, and the suggestion that the face acts as a kind of mirror to the soul. Similar to Wilde's description in *Dorian Gray*, Niels is startled by the vision that confronts him in the half-light of morning:

There, as he looked at her in the pale light of a wind-torn dawn, he stood arrested.

From behind the mask which still half concealed her face, another face looked out at him, like a death's-head: the coarse, aged face of a coarse, aged woman, aged before her time: [...] aged, not from work but from...what?

For a moment Niels stared. Something like aversion and disgust came over him. Then carefully, almost fastidiously, he lifted a corner of the satin coverlet, baring the shoulder and part of the breast which were still half hidden under the filmy veil of a lacy nightgown. There, the flesh was still smooth and firm: but the face was the face of decay....(Settlers 133)

Accorded this vision of Clara's decadent essence, Niels is fascinated minutes later during breakfast preparations with contemplation of the hidden presence of Clara's true being:

He scanned her face: he reproached himself for doing so: but there was an irresistible fascination about it. The mask was repaired; but it was an imperfect piece of work, betraying hurry. Since he knew it was there, he could detect the true face under the mask. (Settlers 133)

As married life between Clara and Niels progresses, Niels weakens spiritually as a consequence of having allowed himself to be attached to a way of living inimical to the demands of pioneer existence. At the same time, moreover, Clara's moral degradation continues. Niels's attention is repeatedly drawn to the face that is corrupted not by age but, like *Dorian Gray*, by her betrayal of life. Grove fictionalises Clara's and Niels's descent not only in the narrative representation of such specific events as Niels's distancing of himself from the community and in Clara's refusal to work, but also in

the metaphoric depiction of Clara's facial appearance.¹⁹ In using Clara's disfigured face as metonymic representation of her corrupted soul, Grove seems explicitly to have been drawing on Greve's intimate familiarity with Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the changing features of Gray's face "showed him the real degradation of his life" (*Dorian Gray* 111).

Correspondences between *Settlers of the Marsh* and Wilde's life and fiction go further than *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, however. The coda to Grove's novel, the final chapter "Ellen Again," offers a description of Niels's return to Ellen and the "eternal vision" life has allotted him. In this chapter Niels is shown chastened by life, tempered by sorrow to a fuller understanding of his purpose in life. The summarising message of this chapter seems almost a fictionalisation of the thought expressed in Wilde's *De Profundis*. In this work, Wilde accords suffering a central role in uniting the two features so important to Greve's aesthetic—life and art. For the Wilde of *De Profundis*, suffering offered the purest means of fusing "essential idea" and "accidental existence" into one quintessential expression of life:

...but Sorrow is the ultimate type both in Life and Art.

Behind Joy and Laughter there may be a temperament, coarse, hard and callous. But behind Sorrow there is always Sorrow. Pain, unlike Pleasure, wears no mask. Truth in Art is not any correspondence between the *essential idea* and the *accidental existence*; it is not the resemblance of shape to shadow, or of the form mirrored in the crystal to the form itself: it is no Echo coming from a hollow hill, any more than it is the well of silver water in the valley that shows the Moon to the Moon and Narcissus to Narcissus. Truth in Art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit. For this reason there is no truth comparable to Sorrow. (*De Profundis* 920; italics mine)

The terms "essential idea" and "accidental existence" immediately recall Greve's vocabulary from "Oscar Wilde und das Drama" where he proposed that art built bridges between the world of "ideas" and the world of "individuals." And like Wilde, Grove suggests through Niels that the transgressions of life have to be acknowledged with full awareness of individual responsi-

bility and that suffering in human life plays a role of existential primacy. Furthermore, and also analogous to Wilde, *Settlers of the Marsh* seems to indicate that the artistry available to a pioneer—the living out of life’s “eternal vision”—is made possible not despite suffering, but because of it. *Settlers of the Marsh* offers the following description of the generative power of suffering and the immediacy of suffering to life. Shortly thereafter, Ellen and Niels take up their now shared dream and begin the artistic project of pioneer life and the establishment of family and community:

These two have been parted; and parting has opened their eyes. They have suffered; suffering has made them sweet, not made them bitter. Life has involved them in guilt; regret and repentance have led them together; they know that never again must they part. It is not passion that will unite them; what will unite them is love. (*Settlers* 216)

The comedic ending Grove provided *Settlers of the Marsh*, with its symbolic reference to spring and Ellen’s desire to emerge from the bush to “wide, open, level, spaces” (*Settlers* 215) is not particularly Wildean. It is, however, for all its inherent conservatism and tentativeness,²⁰ consistent with the aesthetic FPG indicated in his criticism of Wilde and which he seems resolutely to have attempted to realise in his life and works. In Oscar Wilde, FPG identified an artist failed in the imperative of seeking equilibrium between life and art. FPG’s criticism of Wilde’s life and art, and the themes and form of such fictions as *Settlers of the Marsh*, suggest that he wished to offer in his art an example of literature that found a balance between “the world of ideas and the world of individuals.” That Grove should take up this attempt in his Canadian writing seems at least in part to have resulted from Greve’s reading of, and response to, Oscar Wilde.

NOTES

- 1 Frederick P. Grove, *In Search of Myself* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974) 147. All future references to this work will be cited in the text as *ISM*.

- 2 Greve translated this volume with the help of Herman F.C. Kilian, who contributed a translation of “The Critic as Artist.” See K. Martens, *Felix Paul Greves Karriere: Frederick Philip Grove in Deutschland* (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1997) 145–47.
- 3 The three articles by Greve on Wilde to be referred to throughout this essay are as follows: *Randarabesken zu Oscar Wilde* (Minden: J.C.C. Bruns, 1903), hereafter cited as *Randarabesken*. [*Randarabesken* is identical to the “Preface” in *Oscar Wilde: Das Bildnis des Mr. W.H., Lord Arthur Saviles Verbrechen*, translated F.P. Greve (Minden: J.C.C. Bruns, 1904)]; “Oscar Wilde und das Drama,” in *Oscar Wildes Sämtliche Werke in deutscher Sprache*, Vol. 7, *Vera oder die Nihilisten* (Wien und Leipzig: Wiener Verlag, 1908), hereafter cited as “O.W. und das Drama”; and “Oskar Wilde,” in *Porträts*, ed. Adalbert Luntowski (Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben Wilhelm Borngräber, 1911), hereafter to be cited as “Oskar Wilde.” [“Oskar Wilde” is identical to Greve’s earlier *Oscar Wilde* (Berlin: Gose & Tetzlaff, 1903)]. All cited translations are my own. [Editorial note: the first article, *Randarabesken zu Oscar Wilde*, is reprinted and translated in this volume with the title, “Oscar Wilde: Marginalia in Arabesque.”]
- 4 See K. Martens, *Felix Paul Greves Karriere: Frederick Philip Grove in Deutschland* 169.
- 5 Walter Pache, “The Dilettante in Exile: Grove at the Centenary of His Birth,” *Canadian Literature* 90 (1981): 190.
- 6 “A dramatist may learn from Wilde only insofar as he considers him as failed.”
- 7 “...that which Wilde created was rarely of the first order and his life remained a fragment. [...] Wilde was a poseur of the highest order, and as such he had moments of great strength. Where the pose ends with him, he is a person of odd weakness and unusual contradictions. His intellect is sovereign, where it reigns, but the breadth of its reign is limited and thus the contradictions.”
- 8 “Everything that he found in life seemed to him naked, brutal fact that lacked the sense he did not find in it. Thus he came to the point where he no longer wished to see life. And his creative abilities ebbed. The only thing of interest, he found in himself. Analysis, which he perhaps learned from D’Annunzio, revealed to him the common thread of sense that led through the secretive chaos of one’s own inner being. And he learned to despise life. He concerned himself with it only insofar as it released emotions in him.”
- 9 “...the hieroglyphics of a great tragedy in the life of a modern man, a man who wanted to be an artist but could not because he confused life with dream.”
- 10 “Every deed makes of us a debtor, and the debts that we take upon ourselves in the course of our actions must one day be repaid. Life is the most relentless creditor. Woe to him who forgets to register his acts as debits in the ledger of life; his debts grow to monstrous proportions and on the day of reckoning he is bankrupt. [...] Wilde paid for the debts of his life with bankruptcy.”
- 11 “Life is a striving for perfection.”
- 12 “Thus to a certain extent we have found two worlds: the world of ideas and the world of individuals [...] The world of individuals is becoming ever more the subject of scholarship, daily shedding its abstract character to become more concrete. The

world of ideas stands at a great distance, purely abstract before our spirits as an object of pure speculation. And what of art? It builds a bridge between the two; it mirrors neither one nor the other; it provides images neither of reality nor of ideas. And depending upon the spiritual strivings of an age, it approaches closer to the actual world of the individual or flies upward to the world of pure concepts. Where it has found its point of balance between the two, there it has created its most eternal works."

- 13 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) 1071. All future references to Wilde are drawn from this edition and cited in the text.
- 14 Frederick Philip Grove, "Author's Note to the Fourth Edition (1939)," *A Search for America* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991) 459.
- 15 Interestingly, Greve's description of the *entwurzelt* is framed in examples highly suggestive of his own experience as a man who in his youth in Europe travelled widely between identities and cultural interests and locations, becoming, as Gide seems to have recognised, an artist of life "fremd und zu Hause" in a variety of contexts. Similarly, it is the formation of the artist in physical and experiential travel that forms the core of Grove's subsequent autobiographical writing. See Klaus Martens, *Felix Paul Greves Karriere* for an account of Greve's European transformations and peregrinations and Grove's *In Search of Myself* and *A Search for America* for descriptions of his North American development.
- 16 "But the uprooted individual [...] is a portrayer. He looks in two directions simultaneously; he stands at a fork in the path overlooking the way to the north-east and north-west: he is inevitably an artist! A budding artist because he sees the variance of things; his vision is plastic. Therein lies the consolation and the tragedy of his fate. He sees two paths and follows both as a foreigner and is nonetheless at home on both of them. And is not the artist always a foreigner, does he not always carry the mark of Cain on his forehead? All artists are decadent, if decadence is the result of uprooting. And yet there are degrees! And one could well imagine an artist who would be, thanks to his origins—spiritual and physical—both foreign to and at home in all of the cultures, races, customs and religions of the world: a wanderer over the earth, foreign to and at home in Christianity, foreign and at home amongst Brahmins along the Ganges, foreign and at home with the great redeemer Buddha, foreign and at home in the spirit of a Nietzsche and an Augustin—at once a German, a Briton, a Roman, a Greek, an Italian, a Frenchman, a Swede and a Russian. Such an individual would be completely "uprooted," in other words he would have his roots everywhere; he would be many rooted [...]."
- 17 "But the pose became real to him and reality paled beside it and where it was not pale he mistook dream for reality and for this life took its revenge."
- 18 Frederick P. Grove, *Settlers of the Marsh* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974) 60. Further references to this novel cited in the text as *Settlers*.
- 19 The extent to which Grove used depictions of Clara's face as a kind of Wildean leit-motif may be seen with reference to pages 88, 91, 133, 151, 152, 157, 163, 169 and 170 in *Settlers*.

- 20 In this paper I have been concerned with tracing Wilde's presence in Grove's aesthetic, and its realisation in *Settlers of the Marsh*. I have not addressed the artistic or ideological nature of that aesthetic. The vision of pioneer life represented by Niels Lindstedt is certainly conservative, even patriarchal. For a reading more attentive to ideological dimensions of Greve's writing see Irene Gammel, *Sexualising Power in Naturalism: Theodore Dreiser and Frederick Philip Grove* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994), with reference to *Settlers of the Marsh* and the representations of Ellen and Clara, particularly chapter 12, "The Father's Seduction and the Daughter's Rebellion," 207–31.