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Christopher Selater Millard.

SIR OLIVER LODGE ON HAECKEL 755

We shall need stronger philosophic considerations than these to break down the massive (and legitimate) scientific presumption of the necessary connection between mind and brain. Undoubtedly it is an error for any scientific man to cling too narrowly to actual experience. We experience a thousand things that our fathers never knew; our children will assuredly do the same. I can just conceive that the ponderable and visible structure of the brain may have a counterpart in ether. Who will say positively that this must decay when the visible brain does? The attitude of many scientific men towards psychical research is regrettable; but it is not unintelligible when one realises the solidity of the inductive proof of the connection of mind with ponderable nerve-structure, and when one appreciates the potencies of such a force as telepathy and the repellent story of fraud and hallucination unfolded by Mr Podmore.

As a plea for candour and willingness to learn Sir Oliver Lodge's paper is entitled to respect. We cannot but remind him, however, that it does not bring us nearer the final peace to speak of the system of a sincere and proved humanitarian as a "miserable and degraded Monism," to dissipate attention with a score of petty criticisms instead of bringing it to a focus on the only serious issues for cultured people, and to exaggerate the differences between Haeckel and his colleagues. Haeckel's onslaught was upon the official creeds of the Churches and the popular beliefs they reflect. His language is at times harsh and sarcastic, because he knows that the cultured thought of the world has gone far beyond those creeds. Would Sir Oliver Lodge subscribe *literally* to a single article of the simplest of the official creeds? Every student of his admirable essays and speeches knows that he could not. He is really separated from Haeckel only by a teleological view of the world-process and an empirical conviction of the persistence of mind. He is separated from the Churches by a mountain-range of obsolete dogmas.

JOSEPH M^cCABE.

LONDON.

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THE BIRTH OF A SOUL.

(*Oscar Wilde : the Closing Phase.*)

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FORTY years ago Robert Browning declared that, besides "the incidents in the development of a soul," there was little that was worth study; and all his poetry proves that he not only said it with his lips but believed it in his heart. If he was right, how supereminent must be the interest of an incident, or a group of incidents, the effect of which is so great that it is best described, not as the development of a soul, but as its re-birth! Such is the supreme interest which belongs to the two books, *De Profundis* and *A Ballad of Reading Gaol*, written by Oscar Wilde after the awful overthrow of his disgrace, condemnation and imprisonment. Whoever compares these books with any of Wilde's earlier writings, whether in prose or in verse, must surely be driven to the conclusion that their author was the child of a second birth in a sense far deeper than that which is usually attached to the glibly-repeated phrases of traditional theology. He may even be led to question the propriety of speaking about the "ruin" of Wilde, though Wilde applies the word to himself. "I must," he says, "say to myself that I ruined myself, and that nobody great or small can be ruined except by his own hand." Yet the question suggested by the two books above named is whether the apparent ruin was not in reality salvation; and whether, in the eye of infinite wisdom, the whole

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process of sin, and degradation, and suffering, might not be just the process most to be desired for such a man as Wilde. His condemnation smirched Wilde for ever with the "bar sinister" of the prison, made his name a name of reproach, and himself an outcast from society; but it led to the production of two works which, in their moral depth and permanent significance, dwarf all he had before written, all that he gave promise of writing. The tree is known by its fruit. Could such a tree have borne such fruit unless it had been watered by the bloody sweat of those appalling sufferings? Would anything but the utter disgrace and infamy of the sentence have wrung from Wilde the indispensable bloody sweat? But if the sufferings were necessary, then the sins from which they sprang were necessary too; and in that case it would seem that we must modify the ordinary conception of the nature of sin and suffering. Carlyle in a noble figure reminds us that the rose is none the less a rose although it springs from a dunghill. The metaphor is flung at that realism which belittles the higher elements of humanity because they are inseparably associated with the animal part. We accept it as a fine expression of the truth; but we probably shrink from asking ourselves what may be the components of that heap from which the rose draws its life. Neither, fortunately, is there the least necessity of descending to details; but *De Profundis* irresistibly impels us to ask the question whether there is any form of evil which is absolutely, irredeemably and immutably evil. We are accustomed to think of certain forms of evil as being capable of transformation into good. The suffering which is brought upon us by the action of others, or that which is due to our own inadvertent transgression, may be matter for thanksgiving. The baser passions are, we know, no more identical with the family affections, which are the glory of humanity, than is the festering corruption at the roots identical with the beautiful flower. Both have undergone a transformation "into something rich and strange." But dare we apply this same conception to the

sins which we are conscious of committing against our own higher nature, which we feel have degraded us? Is there any moral alchemy which can alter the character of lying, and slander, and covetousness, and the thousand forms of impurity? This is the question which *De Profundis* forces us to raise. Wilde was neither the first to ask it nor the first to answer it; but probably no one else has so vividly illustrated the answer by his own life and work.

We need not lift the curtain from Wilde's history farther than he has lifted it himself in *De Profundis*. There he tells us, sufficiently for the purpose, what he was before his life was cleft in twain by the closing of the prison doors behind him. "The gods had given me almost everything," he says. "But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a *flâneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller and the meaner minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation." . . . "It was always springtime once in my heart. My temperament was akin to joy. I filled my life to the very brim with pleasure, as one might fill a cup to the very brim with wine." Nor must it be supposed that Wilde ever, even doing his imprisonment, turned his back completely upon his old life, or wholly renounced the principles which governed it. The new conception which filled his mind in prison was that they were, not so much false, as partial and one-sided. "I don't," he says, "regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does. There was no pleasure I did not experience. I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine. I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But to have continued the same life would have been wrong, because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on."

The mistake, then, in Wilde's opinion, was, not in living

for pleasure, but in living for that *alone*. He had been unfaithful to his own resolution, "to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world": he had confined himself to those which grew on "the sunlit side of the garden." Richly endowed with genius, and with that charm which does not always accompany genius, even in his youth the apostle of a school, master of epigram and paradox, "the glass of fashion," he could say with truth that the gods had given him almost everything; and his friends might well think that he had but to go on with the same almost god-like ease, in order to make his life one triumphal procession. Yet they were certainly wrong. Wilde stood in a false relation to life. The elegancies would have palled, the pleasures would have cloyed, one ray of nature's sun would have revealed the theatrical falsity of the light. Artistically, even,—the one thing which Wilde cared for—he would have become intolerable. The phrase-monger speedily wears himself out, the man who is always in a pose ends by becoming ridiculous. When he spoke condescendingly of the Atlantic Ocean, Wilde revealed to the discerning the goal towards which he was travelling. He had to learn something which was yet concealed from him.

Wilde learnt the indispensable lesson not voluntarily, but by the sternest of necessities. He had been told the truth, but he refused to believe it. "My mother," he says, "who knew life as a whole, used often to quote to me Goethe's lines, written by Carlyle in a book he had given her years ago, and translated by him, I fancy, also:—

'Who never ate his bread in sorrow,
Who never spent the midnight hours
Weeping and waiting for the morrow,—
He knows you not, ye heavenly powers.'

Wilde "absolutely declined to accept or admit the enormous truth hidden" in these lines. He "could not understand it." That his eyes might be opened, he had to pass within the prison doors,—to stand at Clapham Junction, manacled, in a

garb of shame, the loadstone of all eyes as if he were some cynosure of the nether pit,—to think the dreadful thoughts of “the man who had to swing,” and to realise the horror of the doom with a vividness far beyond the reach of the criminal’s own mind. What such experiences must have meant to a bundle of nerves like Wilde, even his own words can but very imperfectly tell: no one else can attempt to tell it at all. Not often have such experiences been narrated by the man to whom they have come; where, except in these books, are they to be found narrated by such a “lord of language” as Wilde? No words can exaggerate, few minds can comprehend, the intensity of the mental sufferings of such a man in such a position. *De Profundis* and the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* show, as perhaps no other books have ever shown, the immensity of the difference which may divide punishments nominally the same. They illustrate in a startling fashion the crudity of human justice. And yet perhaps their effect upon Wilde may be the best vindication of its methods. The stolid criminal would certainly not have suffered as Wilde did; but neither would he have found Wilde’s redemption.

It is the revelation of the effect of such a discipline of sin and punishment and suffering that gives Wilde’s last two books their unique value; and it is herein too that we find their deepest agreement. In more ways than one *De Profundis* is widely different from the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The fact that the former is in prose and the latter in verse is not important; for in conception both are poetical and tragic. But the spirit is different, as the circumstances of composition were different. *De Profundis*, written in prison, is more submissive. It does indeed condemn the system of punishment: “The prison style is absolutely and entirely wrong.” But Wilde adds that “the spirit of the Christ who is not in the churches, may make it, if not right, at least possible to be borne without too much bitterness of heart.” *Reading Gaol*, written after the prisoner’s release, indicates a reaction. The picture of the warders “strutting up and down,” keeping

“their herd of brutes,” and of their mockery of “the swollen purple throat,” is full charged with bitterness; and it is doubtful whether anyone would infer from the ballad that sense of obligation to the prison officials, or at least to the Governor, which Wilde expresses in the letter prefixed to *De Profundis*. The reader perceives that, notwithstanding his condemnation of the prison system, the author of the ballad was profoundly indebted to that system; but he does not perceive that the poet himself was conscious of the debt. The chief purpose of *De Profundis*, on the other hand, is to proclaim it. Society is wrong in its treatment of the offender, the prison system is wrong,—yet in spite of the wrong there comes to him, through the treatment and through the system, the boon of a deeper and a larger life.

In some ways, therefore, the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* seems to show that Wilde was reverting towards something less alien from his former self than were his thoughts in prison; and on that account it may be held to justify the suspicion that the change in his character was less complete and profound than it would be judged from *De Profundis* to be. In at least one respect, however, and that the most vital, the *Ballad* shows continued progress along the same line. It is the most sincere of all Wilde’s writings. *De Profundis* is incomparably more sincere than any of his earlier works; but the greatest flaw in it is the suggestion conveyed by some passages that perhaps after all the writer is only posing. That this is so is no matter for wonder; it would be marvellous, rather, if even such a tremendous catastrophe as his had all at once revolutionised the inborn disposition or the acquired character of the man. Wilde had breathed the breath of artifice and affectation; and even the prison could not all at once sweep it away and replace it with an atmosphere of simple truth and sincerity. But in the ballad every line bears its own guarantee of sincerity. The thoughts which the author expresses or suggests may be wrong; but it is impossible to doubt that they are the thoughts of a man

deeply in earnest. Here, then, *De Profundis* is inferior; yet not so inferior as to be tainted in its essence. As the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* carries a guarantee in its tone, so does *De Profundis* in its substance. The thoughts in it are beyond, immeasurably beyond, Wilde's former range; the reader is forced to believe in their sincerity, because he feels certain that they would never have occurred to such a man by the mere exercise of imagination. He had to die to society, and almost to himself, in order that he might live again with alien powers and with thoughts hitherto inconceivable by him. It is significant that he believed his central conception to have been expressed only once before, and even then to have been misunderstood; yet he must have read it in one of the great poets of his own day. He read it; but only the prison experience gave him the key to its meaning.

To expect in Wilde an ordinary reformation, even as the result of such an experience, would be to misunderstand the man; and he leaves us in no doubt about the futility of such an expectation. "I need not tell you," he says, "that to me reformations in morals are as meaningless and vulgar as Reformations in theology. But while to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered. And such I think I have become." Such, indeed, he had become. The worshipper of beauty who had turned away from sorrow and suffering of all kinds as modes of imperfection, now declares that pain is the indispensable condition of the highest beauty of all. He who had said that there was "enough suffering in one narrow London lane to show that God did not love man," now writes: "It seems to me that love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world. I cannot conceive of any other explanation. I am convinced that there is no other, and that if the world has indeed, as I have said, been built of sorrow, it has been built by the hands of love, because in no other way could the soul of man, for whom the

world was made, reach the full stature of its perfection. Pleasure for the beautiful body, but pain for the beautiful soul."

Part of Wilde's doctrine is, as has been already said, commonly accepted; and he himself was, in the earlier part of his life, exceptional in denying it. Theologians would have no difficulty in accepting Wilde's words in the passage quoted above: they would consider them admirably orthodox. They have taught the moral value of suffering, and their recognition of it is the most vital difference between their ethical teaching and that of the Greek philosophers. It is likewise the most vital difference between the teaching of Christianity and that of Judaism: "prosperity," says Bacon, "is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New." But while they have taught this, theologians have, at the same time, drawn the broadest of lines between suffering and sin. They conceive of the former as something which is, somehow, necessary for the moral good of humanity, though they cannot understand it. "Clergymen," says Wilde, "and people who use phrases without wisdom sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation." But while they regard suffering as, though mysterious, necessary, and in some uncomprehended way right, towards sin their attitude is altogether negative. It would be right to court suffering for a good cause; but many have taught that to commit the most venial sin, were it even to secure the most transcendent good, would be to deserve damnation. And probably many more, who are unable to banish all sense of proportion in face of the word "sin," would feel themselves holier men if they only could do so. To them sin is evil, absolute and immitigable. The ecclesiastical conception of saintship rests almost wholly on the conviction that it is a higher thing to have committed no sin than, in achieving great results, to have gathered also the spots and stains of a world where evil is plentifully mingled with good. The view is negative rather than positive; innocence is set above a life of strenuous but not immaculate virtue.

Now, it is important to notice that Wilde recognises no such absolute distinction between, on the one hand, a form of evil called sin, which is always and incurably evil, and which has to be simply blotted out by a special act of divine grace; and, on the other hand, forms of evil called pain and suffering, which are even essential to the highest good. Not only so, but he justifies his own view by a reference to the teaching of Christ. "The world had always loved the saint as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of God. Christ, through some divine instinct in him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man. His primary desire was not to reform people, any more than his primary desire was to relieve suffering. To turn an interesting thief into a tedious honest man was not his aim. . . . In a manner not yet understood of the world, he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful holy things and modes of perfection."

There is a suggestion of phrase-making in the sentence about the interesting thief and the tedious honest man. There can be no doubt that Christ did aim at turning the thief, although he might be interesting, into an honest man, even if in the process he became tedious; and Wilde must have been perfectly well aware of the fact. The sentence is one of the lingering traces of insincerity which mar the book. But the main thought expressed was deeply and seriously felt. Wilde had indeed come to regard "sin and suffering as being . . . beautiful holy things and modes of perfection"; and he believed that Christ so regarded them.

"It seems a very dangerous idea," he goes on. "It is—all great ideas are dangerous. That it was Christ's creed admits of no doubt. That it is the true creed I do not doubt myself."

"Of course the sinner must repent. But why? Simply because otherwise he would be unable to realise what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of

initiation. More than that: it is the means by which one alters one's past. The Greeks thought that impossible. They often say in their Gnostic aphorisms, 'Even the Gods cannot alter the past.' Christ showed that the commonest sinner could do it, that it was the one thing he could do. Christ, had he been asked, would have said—I feel quite certain about it—that the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept, he made his having wasted his substance on harlots, his swine-herding and hungering for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy moments in his life. It is difficult for most people to grasp the idea. I daresay one has to go to prison to understand it. If so, it may be worth while going to prison."

It should be noticed that there is in the former of these passages an apparent oversight of expression. Wilde speaks of Christ as having regarded "sin and suffering as being *in themselves* beautiful and holy things." When he comes to illustrate, what he says is that when the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept, he made his sins beautiful and holy moments in his life. The difference is important: the sins are no longer beautiful and holy *in themselves*, but in their results. The repentant prodigal is a better man—or, if Wilde prefers it, a deeper man—than many just men which need no repentance; but his sins alone, without the repentance, would not make him better or deeper.

These paragraphs are the core of *De Profundis*. Out of the depths to which he had sunk, or from the heights towards which he was rising, Wilde proclaimed this startling gospel, that sin and suffering are beautiful holy things and modes of perfection. That is what one of the most appalling of all imaginable experiences had taught him. He appears to have believed that this doctrine was original with him, or rather that it was original with Christ, and that he was the first who had taken it from the teaching of Christ. He was not altogether right: it was not absolutely necessary—for all men, though probably it was for him—to go to prison in order to learn it. The doctrine is closely akin to that of

Hegel, who likewise taught that good is evolved out of evil; and though Wilde, who tells us that metaphysics interested him very little and morality not at all, may well have neglected the philosopher, it is more strange that he had not detected the same teaching in the verse of Browning. One of the most frequently recurrent thoughts in Browning's poetry is that of the necessity of evil to progress. It runs through his work from beginning to end, appearing at least as early as *Sordello*, and finding perhaps its clearest and fullest expression in the last volume he ever published. It is the whole meaning of the poem *Rephan*, where the sentence pronounced upon the aspiring soul is, "Thou art past Rephan, thy place be Earth." And Browning as well as Wilde refuses to take shelter behind the distinction between suffering and sin. Both are necessary. The soul must be "by hate taught love." The Earth to which the growing spirit is sent is earth with all her innumerable forms of evil:—

"Diseased in the body, sick in soul,
Pinched poverty, satiate wealth,—your whole
Array of despairs."

Doubtless Wilde read Browning at a time when such teaching was wholly alien from his mind, and for that reason missed the poet's meaning. He is less original than he believed himself to be; but he is even more interesting than he knew. For in one respect he is unique. He not only taught this doctrine, but he affords in his own person the most striking illustration of it. To him it came, not from books, but fresh stamped with the impress of truth from the mint of experience. From him it passes to the reader, not a mere theory, but a life. There, on the one hand, is Oscar Wilde, *flâneur* and dandy, treading the primrose path to the sound of flutes, sporting upon the surface of life, beautiful as a floating bubble played upon by the sunlight, and almost as evanescent,—here, on the other, is a new Oscar Wilde, branded with infamy, worn with suffering, but forced by that very infamy and suffering to work down towards the depths, where he finds

and makes his own, as no one else had ever done, the thought of the greatest European philosopher and the most philosophic English poet of the nineteenth century. By that achievement he has probably made his fame permanent; and he has certainly made it impossible for any contemporary to ignore him.

A catastrophe more utter and apparently irretrievable than Wilde's can hardly be conceived. His very fame made it the more hopeless. Other prisoners might retire into obscurity, they could easily hide themselves from the few who knew them. But for him the whole earth was "shrivelled to a handsbreadth," and he must wear the brand of infamy in the face of day. It was just from the completeness of the ruin, in the worldly sense, that the new soul took its birth. With penetrating insight Wilde perceived that he must not attempt to deny his imprisonment, or to pretend that such an incident had never occurred in his life. Not only would the pretence in his case have been hopeless, but it would have been a blunder even if he could have succeeded in deceiving men. "I want," he says, "to get to the point when I shall be able to say quite simply, and without affectation, that the two great turning-points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison." . . . "To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less than a denial of the soul."

It is pathetic to observe this pleasure-loving spirit bent by an iron necessity to a fate as hard as the worst which mediæval asceticism ever contrived for itself. But the justification of the suffering comes from the extraordinary change which it produced. "Most people," says he, "are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation." It is profoundly true; and, though to the end he did not suspect the fact, it is true of Wilde himself till the period of his imprisonment. He was, indeed, the leader of a fashion; but the fashion itself was an unconscious plagiarism from a highly artificial society. Until his terrible disaster Wilde had never been forced to dive into

the depths of his own spirit ; he had delighted to play on the surface. By compulsion he learnt wisdom.

The change worked in Wilde is so enormous that it may fairly be described as the birth of a soul. The new soul was begotten by sin and born of agony. Its life was short ; and there is sad reason to fear that even before the close Wilde had slid far back towards the gulf from which he had emerged. Probably he had by his early career too completely sapped and undermined his own character to be capable of standing firm upon the height which he had gained. Yet even so the change was sufficient reward for the throes of birth ; it was worth while to have trodden even such a wine-press of the wrath of God. The prodigal had fallen on his knees and wept, his soul had had one glimpse of the immortal sea, he had stood for a moment upon the peak in Darien ; and however long had been his life, however stained with errors, weaknesses and vices, it must have been influenced by that transmuting experience. It had changed Wilde's whole view of life ; and though he might have sinned deeply against himself, he could never have forgotten the "revelation" of suffering.

The most momentous question suggested by the amazing result is : Could the reformation have been brought about at a cheaper price ? Could the new soul have been born of any other parentage ? Would anything but that terrible suffering have given the apostle of æstheticism the depth and the earnestness necessary to conceive the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis* ? If not, for him it may have been worth while, not only to go to prison, but even to sin as deeply as he did. The idea may be, as he says, a dangerous one ; but what if it be true ? Have all the churches, in nineteen centuries, thrown such light upon the problem of evil as is shed by these two books in contrast with their author's earlier writings ?

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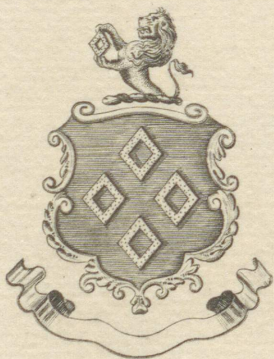
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(*Oscar Wilde: the Closing Phase.*)

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FORTY years ago Robert Browning declared that, besides "the incidents in the development of a soul," there was little that was worth study; and all his poetry proves that he not only said it with his lips but believed it in his heart. If he was right, how supereminent must be the interest of an incident, or a group of incidents, the effect of which is so great that it is best described, not as the development of a soul, but as its re-birth! Such is the supreme interest which belongs to the two books, *De Profundis* and *A Ballad of Reading Gaol*, written by Oscar Wilde after the awful overthrow of his disgrace, condemnation and imprisonment. Whoever compares these books with any of Wilde's earlier writings, whether in prose or in verse, must surely be driven to the conclusion that their author was the child of a second birth in a sense far deeper than that which is usually attached to the glibly-repeated phrases of traditional theology. He may even be led to question the propriety of speaking about the "ruin" of Wilde, though Wilde applies the word to himself. "I must," he says, "say to myself that I ruined myself, and that nobody great or small can be ruined except by his own hand." Yet the question suggested by the two books above named is whether the apparent ruin was not in reality salvation; and whether, in the eye of infinite wisdom, the whole

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process of sin, and degradation, and suffering, might not be just the process most to be desired for such a man as Wilde. His condemnation smirched Wilde for ever with the "bar sinister" of the prison, made his name a name of reproach, and himself an outcast from society; but it led to the production of two works which, in their moral depth and permanent significance, dwarf all he had before written, all that he gave promise of writing. The tree is known by its fruit. Could such a tree have borne such fruit unless it had been watered by the bloody sweat of those appalling sufferings? Would anything but the utter disgrace and infamy of the sentence have wrung from Wilde the indispensable bloody sweat? But if the sufferings were necessary, then the sins from which they sprang were necessary too; and in that case it would seem that we must modify the ordinary conception of the nature of sin and suffering. Carlyle in a noble figure reminds us that the rose is none the less a rose although it springs from a dunghill. The metaphor is flung at that realism which belittles the higher elements of humanity because they are inseparably associated with the animal part. We accept it as a fine expression of the truth; but we probably shrink from asking ourselves what may be the components of that heap from which the rose draws its life. Neither, fortunately, is there the least necessity of descending to details; but *De Profundis* irresistibly impels us to ask the question whether there is any form of evil which is absolutely, irredeemably and immutably evil. We are accustomed to think of certain forms of evil as being capable of transformation into good. The suffering which is brought upon us by the action of others, or that which is due to our own inadvertent transgression, may be matter for thanksgiving. The baser passions are, we know, no more identical with the family affections, which are the glory of humanity, than is the festering corruption at the roots identical with the beautiful flower. Both have undergone a transformation "into something rich and strange." But dare we apply this same conception to the

sins which we are conscious of committing against our own higher nature, which we feel have degraded us? Is there any moral alchemy which can alter the character of lying, and slander, and covetousness, and the thousand forms of impurity? This is the question which *De Profundis* forces us to raise. Wilde was neither the first to ask it nor the first to answer it; but probably no one else has so vividly illustrated the answer by his own life and work.

We need not lift the curtain from Wilde's history farther than he has lifted it himself in *De Profundis*. There he tells us, sufficiently for the purpose, what he was before his life was cleft in twain by the closing of the prison doors behind him. "The gods had given me almost everything," he says. "But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a *flâneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller and the meaner minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation." . . . "It was always springtime once in my heart. My temperament was akin to joy. I filled my life to the very brim with pleasure, as one might fill a cup to the very brim with wine." Nor must it be supposed that Wilde ever, even doing his imprisonment, turned his back completely upon his old life, or wholly renounced the principles which governed it. The new conception which filled his mind in prison was that they were, not so much false, as partial and one-sided. "I don't," he says, "regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does. There was no pleasure I did not experience. I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine. I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But to have continued the same life would have been wrong, because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on."

The mistake, then, in Wilde's opinion, was, not in living

for pleasure, but in living for that *alone*. He had been unfaithful to his own resolution, "to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world": he had confined himself to those which grew on "the sunlit side of the garden." Richly endowed with genius, and with that charm which does not always accompany genius, even in his youth the apostle of a school, master of epigram and paradox, "the glass of fashion," he could say with truth that the gods had given him almost everything; and his friends might well think that he had but to go on with the same almost god-like ease, in order to make his life one triumphal procession. Yet they were certainly wrong. Wilde stood in a false relation to life. The elegancies would have palled, the pleasures would have cloyed, one ray of nature's sun would have revealed the theatrical falsity of the light. Artistically, even,—the one thing which Wilde cared for—he would have become intolerable. The phrase-monger speedily wears himself out, the man who is always in a pose ends by becoming ridiculous. When he spoke condescendingly of the Atlantic Ocean, Wilde revealed to the discerning the goal towards which he was travelling. He had to learn something which was yet concealed from him.

Wilde learnt the indispensable lesson not voluntarily, but by the sternest of necessities. He had been told the truth, but he refused to believe it. "My mother," he says, "who knew life as a whole, used often to quote to me Goethe's lines, written by Carlyle in a book he had given her years ago, and translated by him, I fancy, also:—

'Who never ate his bread in sorrow,
Who never spent the midnight hours
Weeping and waiting for the morrow,—
He knows you not, ye heavenly powers.'

Wilde "absolutely declined to accept or admit the enormous truth hidden" in these lines. He "could not understand it." That his eyes might be opened, he had to pass within the prison doors,—to stand at Clapham Junction, manacled, in a

garb of shame, the loadstone of all eyes as if he were some cynosure of the nether pit,—to think the dreadful thoughts of “the man who had to swing,” and to realise the horror of the doom with a vividness far beyond the reach of the criminal’s own mind. What such experiences must have meant to a bundle of nerves like Wilde, even his own words can but very imperfectly tell: no one else can attempt to tell it at all. Not often have such experiences been narrated by the man to whom they have come; where, except in these books, are they to be found narrated by such a “lord of language” as Wilde? No words can exaggerate, few minds can comprehend, the intensity of the mental sufferings of such a man in such a position. *De Profundis* and the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* show, as perhaps no other books have ever shown, the immensity of the difference which may divide punishments nominally the same. They illustrate in a startling fashion the crudity of human justice. And yet perhaps their effect upon Wilde may be the best vindication of its methods. The stolid criminal would certainly not have suffered as Wilde did; but neither would he have found Wilde’s redemption.

It is the revelation of the effect of such a discipline of sin and punishment and suffering that gives Wilde’s last two books their unique value; and it is herein too that we find their deepest agreement. In more ways than one *De Profundis* is widely different from the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The fact that the former is in prose and the latter in verse is not important; for in conception both are poetical and tragic. But the spirit is different, as the circumstances of composition were different. *De Profundis*, written in prison, is more submissive. It does indeed condemn the system of punishment: “The prison style is absolutely and entirely wrong.” But Wilde adds that “the spirit of the Christ who is not in the churches, may make it, if not right, at least possible to be borne without too much bitterness of heart.” *Reading Gaol*, written after the prisoner’s release, indicates a reaction. The picture of the warders “strutting up and down,” keeping

“their herd of brutes,” and of their mockery of “the swollen purple throat,” is full charged with bitterness; and it is doubtful whether anyone would infer from the ballad that sense of obligation to the prison officials, or at least to the Governor, which Wilde expresses in the letter prefixed to *De Profundis*. The reader perceives that, notwithstanding his condemnation of the prison system, the author of the ballad was profoundly indebted to that system; but he does not perceive that the poet himself was conscious of the debt. The chief purpose of *De Profundis*, on the other hand, is to proclaim it. Society is wrong in its treatment of the offender, the prison system is wrong,—yet in spite of the wrong there comes to him, through the treatment and through the system, the boon of a deeper and a larger life.

In some ways, therefore, the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* seems to show that Wilde was reverting towards something less alien from his former self than were his thoughts in prison; and on that account it may be held to justify the suspicion that the change in his character was less complete and profound than it would be judged from *De Profundis* to be. In at least one respect, however, and that the most vital, the *Ballad* shows continued progress along the same line. It is the most sincere of all Wilde’s writings. *De Profundis* is incomparably more sincere than any of his earlier works; but the greatest flaw in it is the suggestion conveyed by some passages that perhaps after all the writer is only posing. That this is so is no matter for wonder; it would be marvellous, rather, if even such a tremendous catastrophe as his had all at once revolutionised the inborn disposition or the acquired character of the man. Wilde had breathed the breath of artifice and affectation; and even the prison could not all at once sweep it away and replace it with an atmosphere of simple truth and sincerity. But in the ballad every line bears its own guarantee of sincerity. The thoughts which the author expresses or suggests may be wrong; but it is impossible to doubt that they are the thoughts of a man

deeply in earnest. Here, then, *De Profundis* is inferior; yet not so inferior as to be tainted in its essence. As the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* carries a guarantee in its tone, so does *De Profundis* in its substance. The thoughts in it are beyond, immeasurably beyond, Wilde's former range; the reader is forced to believe in their sincerity, because he feels certain that they would never have occurred to such a man by the mere exercise of imagination. He had to die to society, and almost to himself, in order that he might live again with alien powers and with thoughts hitherto inconceivable by him. It is significant that he believed his central conception to have been expressed only once before, and even then to have been misunderstood; yet he must have read it in one of the great poets of his own day. He read it; but only the prison experience gave him the key to its meaning.

To expect in Wilde an ordinary reformation, even as the result of such an experience, would be to misunderstand the man; and he leaves us in no doubt about the futility of such an expectation. "I need not tell you," he says, "that to me reformations in morals are as meaningless and vulgar as Reformations in theology. But while to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered. And such I think I have become." Such, indeed, he had become. The worshipper of beauty who had turned away from sorrow and suffering of all kinds as modes of imperfection, now declares that pain is the indispensable condition of the highest beauty of all. He who had said that there was "enough suffering in one narrow London lane to show that God did not love man," now writes: "It seems to me that love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world. I cannot conceive of any other explanation. I am convinced that there is no other, and that if the world has indeed, as I have said, been built of sorrow, it has been built by the hands of love, because in no other way could the soul of man, for whom the

world was made, reach the full stature of its perfection. Pleasure for the beautiful body, but pain for the beautiful soul."

Part of Wilde's doctrine is, as has been already said, commonly accepted; and he himself was, in the earlier part of his life, exceptional in denying it. Theologians would have no difficulty in accepting Wilde's words in the passage quoted above: they would consider them admirably orthodox. They have taught the moral value of suffering, and their recognition of it is the most vital difference between their ethical teaching and that of the Greek philosophers. It is likewise the most vital difference between the teaching of Christianity and that of Judaism: "prosperity," says Bacon, "is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New." But while they have taught this, theologians have, at the same time, drawn the broadest of lines between suffering and sin. They conceive of the former as something which is, somehow, necessary for the moral good of humanity, though they cannot understand it. "Clergymen," says Wilde, "and people who use phrases without wisdom sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation." But while they regard suffering as, though mysterious, necessary, and in some uncomprehended way right, towards sin their attitude is altogether negative. It would be right to court suffering for a good cause; but many have taught that to commit the most venial sin, were it even to secure the most transcendent good, would be to deserve damnation. And probably many more, who are unable to banish all sense of proportion in face of the word "sin," would feel themselves holier men if they only could do so. To them sin is evil, absolute and immitigable. The ecclesiastical conception of saintship rests almost wholly on the conviction that it is a higher thing to have committed no sin than, in achieving great results, to have gathered also the spots and stains of a world where evil is plentifully mingled with good. The view is negative rather than positive; innocence is set above a life of strenuous but not immaculate virtue.

Now, it is important to notice that Wilde recognises no such absolute distinction between, on the one hand, a form of evil called sin, which is always and incurably evil, and which has to be simply blotted out by a special act of divine grace; and, on the other hand, forms of evil called pain and suffering, which are even essential to the highest good. Not only so, but he justifies his own view by a reference to the teaching of Christ. "The world had always loved the saint as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of God. Christ, through some divine instinct in him, seems to have always loved the sinner as being the nearest possible approach to the perfection of man. His primary desire was not to reform people, any more than his primary desire was to relieve suffering. To turn an interesting thief into a tedious honest man was not his aim. . . . In a manner not yet understood of the world, he regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful holy things and modes of perfection."

There is a suggestion of phrase-making in the sentence about the interesting thief and the tedious honest man. There can be no doubt that Christ did aim at turning the thief, although he might be interesting, into an honest man, even if in the process he became tedious; and Wilde must have been perfectly well aware of the fact. The sentence is one of the lingering traces of insincerity which mar the book. But the main thought expressed was deeply and seriously felt. Wilde had indeed come to regard "sin and suffering as being . . . beautiful holy things and modes of perfection"; and he believed that Christ so regarded them.

"It seems a very dangerous idea," he goes on. "It is—all great ideas are dangerous. That it was Christ's creed admits of no doubt. That it is the true creed I do not doubt myself."

"Of course the sinner must repent. But why? Simply because otherwise he would be unable to realise what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of

initiation. More than that: it is the means by which one alters one's past. The Greeks thought that impossible. They often say in their Gnostic aphorisms, 'Even the Gods cannot alter the past.' Christ showed that the commonest sinner could do it, that it was the one thing he could do. Christ, had he been asked, would have said—I feel quite certain about it—that the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept, he made his having wasted his substance on harlots, his swine-herding and hungering for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy moments in his life. It is difficult for most people to grasp the idea. I daresay one has to go to prison to understand it. If so, it may be worth while going to prison."

It should be noticed that there is in the former of these passages an apparent oversight of expression. Wilde speaks of Christ as having regarded "sin and suffering as being *in themselves* beautiful and holy things." When he comes to illustrate, what he says is that when the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept, he made his sins beautiful and holy moments in his life. The difference is important: the sins are no longer beautiful and holy *in themselves*, but in their results. The repentant prodigal is a better man—or, if Wilde prefers it, a deeper man—than many just men which need no repentance; but his sins alone, without the repentance, would not make him better or deeper.

These paragraphs are the core of *De Profundis*. Out of the depths to which he had sunk, or from the heights towards which he was rising, Wilde proclaimed this startling gospel, that sin and suffering are beautiful holy things and modes of perfection. That is what one of the most appalling of all imaginable experiences had taught him. He appears to have believed that this doctrine was original with him, or rather that it was original with Christ, and that he was the first who had taken it from the teaching of Christ. He was not altogether right: it was not absolutely necessary—for all men, though probably it was for him—to go to prison in order to learn it. The doctrine is closely akin to that of

Hegel, who likewise taught that good is evolved out of evil; and though Wilde, who tells us that metaphysics interested him very little and morality not at all, may well have neglected the philosopher, it is more strange that he had not detected the same teaching in the verse of Browning. One of the most frequently recurrent thoughts in Browning's poetry is that of the necessity of evil to progress. It runs through his work from beginning to end, appearing at least as early as *Sordello*, and finding perhaps its clearest and fullest expression in the last volume he ever published. It is the whole meaning of the poem *Rephan*, where the sentence pronounced upon the aspiring soul is, "Thou art past Rephan, thy place be Earth." And Browning as well as Wilde refuses to take shelter behind the distinction between suffering and sin. Both are necessary. The soul must be "by hate taught love." The Earth to which the growing spirit is sent is earth with all her innumerable forms of evil:—

"Diseased in the body, sick in soul,
Pinched poverty, satiate wealth,—your whole
Array of despairs."

Doubtless Wilde read Browning at a time when such teaching was wholly alien from his mind, and for that reason missed the poet's meaning. He is less original than he believed himself to be; but he is even more interesting than he knew. For in one respect he is unique. He not only taught this doctrine, but he affords in his own person the most striking illustration of it. To him it came, not from books, but fresh stamped with the impress of truth from the mint of experience. From him it passes to the reader, not a mere theory, but a life. There, on the one hand, is Oscar Wilde, *flâneur* and dandy, treading the primrose path to the sound of flutes, sporting upon the surface of life, beautiful as a floating bubble played upon by the sunlight, and almost as evanescent,—here, on the other, is a new Oscar Wilde, branded with infamy, worn with suffering, but forced by that very infamy and suffering to work down towards the depths, where he finds

and makes his own, as no one else had ever done, the thought of the greatest European philosopher and the most philosophic English poet of the nineteenth century. By that achievement he has probably made his fame permanent; and he has certainly made it impossible for any contemporary to ignore him.

A catastrophe more utter and apparently irretrievable than Wilde's can hardly be conceived. His very fame made it the more hopeless. Other prisoners might retire into obscurity, they could easily hide themselves from the few who knew them. But for him the whole earth was "shrivelled to a handsbreadth," and he must wear the brand of infamy in the face of day. It was just from the completeness of the ruin, in the worldly sense, that the new soul took its birth. With penetrating insight Wilde perceived that he must not attempt to deny his imprisonment, or to pretend that such an incident had never occurred in his life. Not only would the pretence in his case have been hopeless, but it would have been a blunder even if he could have succeeded in deceiving men. "I want," he says, "to get to the point when I shall be able to say quite simply, and without affectation, that the two great turning-points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison." . . . "To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less than a denial of the soul."

It is pathetic to observe this pleasure-loving spirit bent by an iron necessity to a fate as hard as the worst which mediæval asceticism ever contrived for itself. But the justification of the suffering comes from the extraordinary change which it produced. "Most people," says he, "are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation." It is profoundly true; and, though to the end he did not suspect the fact, it is true of Wilde himself till the period of his imprisonment. He was, indeed, the leader of a fashion; but the fashion itself was an unconscious plagiarism from a highly artificial society. Until his terrible disaster Wilde had never been forced to dive into

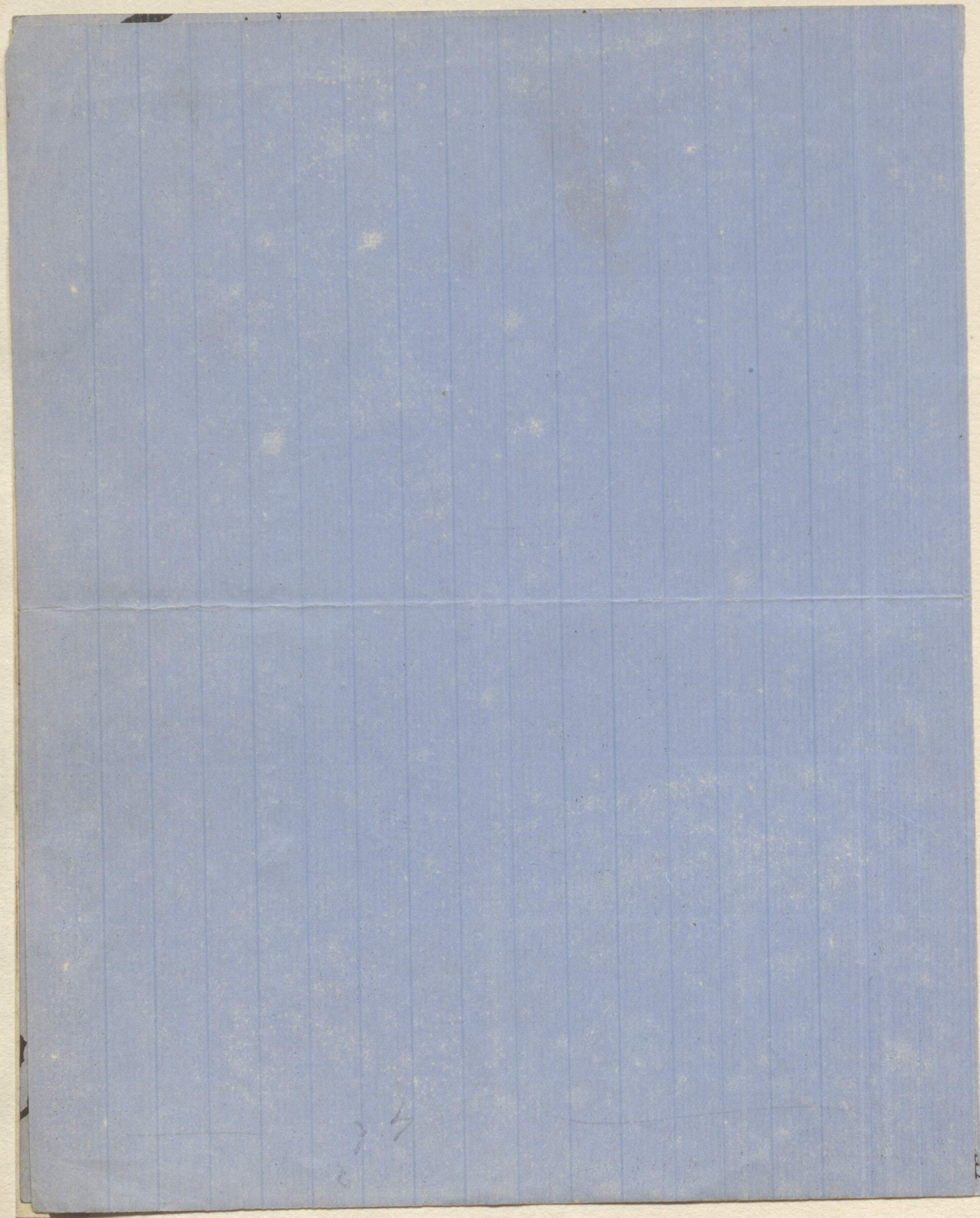
the depths of his own spirit ; he had delighted to play on the surface. By compulsion he learnt wisdom.

The change worked in Wilde is so enormous that it may fairly be described as the birth of a soul. The new soul was begotten by sin and born of agony. Its life was short ; and there is sad reason to fear that even before the close Wilde had slid far back towards the gulf from which he had emerged. Probably he had by his early career too completely sapped and undermined his own character to be capable of standing firm upon the height which he had gained. Yet even so the change was sufficient reward for the throes of birth ; it was worth while to have trodden even such a wine-press of the wrath of God. The prodigal had fallen on his knees and wept, his soul had had one glimpse of the immortal sea, he had stood for a moment upon the peak in Darien ; and however long had been his life, however stained with errors, weaknesses and vices, it must have been influenced by that transmuting experience. It had changed Wilde's whole view of life ; and though he might have sinned deeply against himself, he could never have forgotten the "revelation" of suffering.

The most momentous question suggested by the amazing result is : Could the reformation have been brought about at a cheaper price ? Could the new soul have been born of any other parentage ? Would anything but that terrible suffering have given the apostle of æstheticism the depth and the earnestness necessary to conceive the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis* ? If not, for him it may have been worth while, not only to go to prison, but even to sin as deeply as he did. The idea may be, as he says, a dangerous one ; but what if it be true ? Have all the churches, in nineteen centuries, thrown such light upon the problem of evil as is shed by these two books in contrast with their author's earlier writings ?

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The same.

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