

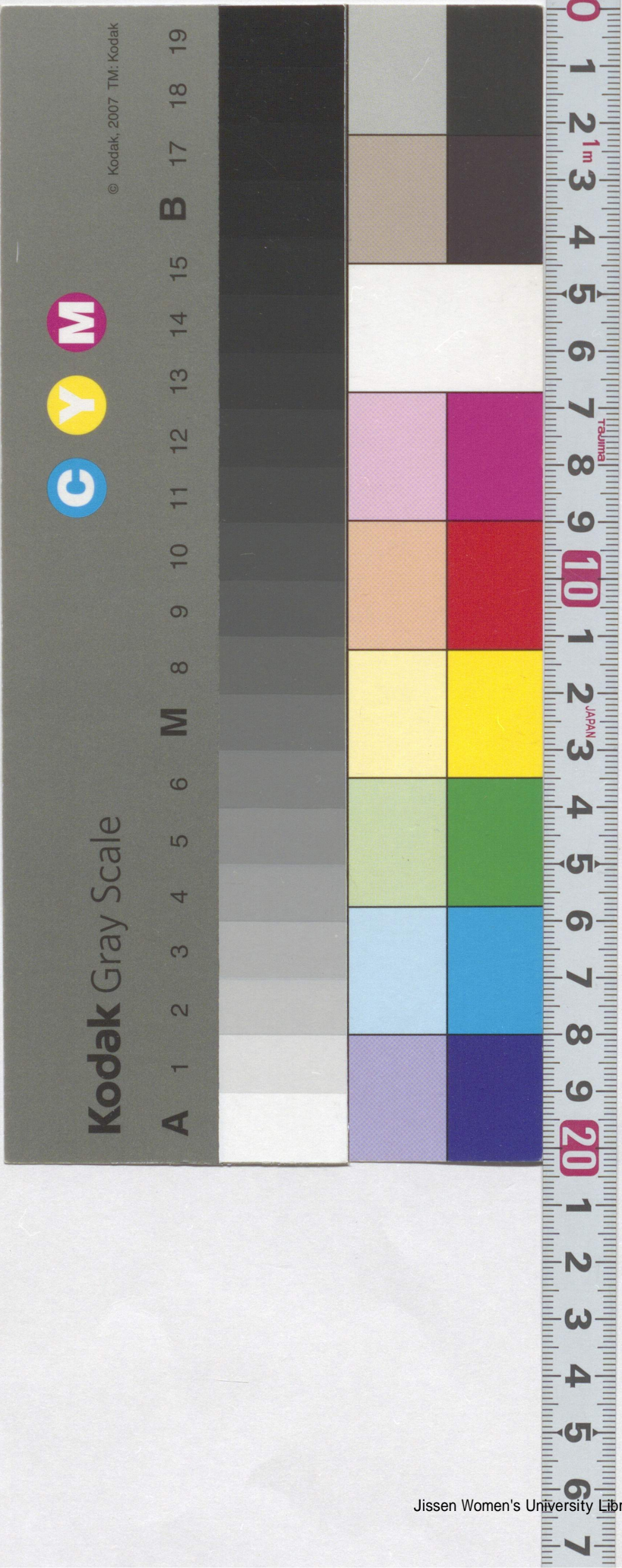


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Christopher
Millard



Christopher Selater Millard.

"DE PROFUNDIS"

P R E S S N O T I C E S

VOLUME TWO



M D C C C C V

DE PROFUNDIS

BY
OSCAR WILDE

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press
1905

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36, ESSEX STREET, LONDON, W.C.

IMPORTANT NOTICE.

On February 23rd will be published one of the most interesting books, if not the most interesting book of 1905.

"DE PROFUNDIS"

is OSCAR WILDE'S last book, and it was written by him in tragic conditions and surroundings. It may be regarded as the final word of its brilliant and unhappy author on those questions on which he made himself a master, and it contains a pathetic description of the mental and moral state to which prison had reduced him. Brilliant in its style and perfect in its feeling, the book will appeal to thousands of readers, and it will have a success which will be not only sensational but genuine.

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36 ESSEX STREET, LONDON, W.C.

Free Lance,

MARCH 11, 1905.

TALK OF THE HOUR.

By M. C. S.

Margaret Clement Scott

OSCAR WILDE'S "LAST CONFESSION."

I do not believe there is any thinking man or woman in this world to-day who will not be profoundly impressed with the extraordinary beauty of the posthumous work of that "great-poor" man Oscar Wilde, so realistically named "De Profundis." Personally, when reading this absorbing book, I felt at moments just as a priest might when, in the sacred confines of the confessional, he was listening to the agonised cries of a man struggling and wrestling wildly with—what shall I call it?—an "incorporated darkness" as impenetrable and unfathomable as the grey depths of the ocean, laden with sullen storm.

Distorted with hate—resentment—and tortured mentally by all that is most demoralising, the man's soul suddenly becomes choked with an entirely new and overpowering emotion. For the first time he discovers beauty through sorrow. He sees the holy light of love through suffering. One by one the poisonous, noxious weeds drop slowly away—they are dead, and crumbled with decay. The fleshless bones of Life as he once knew it are revealed to him in all their degrading ghastliness. Humility, prayer, and Love creep gradually into his heart, and Oscar Wilde, the Society butterfly, this man who scoffed at and flouted the German poet Goethe's lines, translated and written by Carlyle in a book given by the great author and essayist to Wilde's mother—

"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,"

writes thus:—

"For this reason there is no Truth comparable to Sorrow. There are times when Sorrow seems to me to be the only Truth. Other things may be the illusions of the eye and appetite, made to blind the one or cloy the other, but out of Sorrow have the worlds been built, and at the birth of a child or a star, there is pain. Where there is Sorrow there is holy ground. Some day people will realise what that means. *They will know nothing of Life till they do.*

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"I have lain in prison for nearly two years. Out of my nature has come wild despair; an abandonment to grief that was piteous even to look at; terrible and impotent rage; bitterness and scorn; anguish that wept aloud; misery that could find no voice; sorrow that was dumb. I have passed through every possible mood of suffering. Better than Wordsworth himself I know what Wordsworth meant when he said—

"Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark,
And has the nature of infinity."

What a tragedy is contained here! But then, again, in other passages, exquisite as Oscar Wilde's prose undoubtedly is, and therefore the more misleading, you feel the old lawless, egotistical nature of the man in almost every line he writes, and somehow get the firm and uncomfortable conviction that, as usual, he is laughing at you in his sleeve. If ever there was an example illustrative of Nesbit's "Insanity of Genius," it was expressed in the extraordinary being of Oscar Wilde. Turn over another page, and once more your heart-strings tighten with pity as you continue the grim romance of this man's blighted career.

"But while there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning. Now I find hidden away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless—and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is HUMILITY. *It is the last thing left in me, and the best.*

"The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one's finger-tips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame—each and all of these I have to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try to make into a spiritualising of the soul."

It is at moments such as these that our eyes must see his sorrow through a veil of tears, our hearts ache at his garb of sackcloth and ashes. The most callous being alive could not fail to be touched by the infinite pathos and appeal in such passages of Oscar Wilde's "Last Confession," for as such I shall always regard the contents of this little volume "De Profundis." Out of Sorrow then let us hope there was really born to Oscar Wilde—Humility; and with Humility—the beginning of a "Vita Nuova." It is a subject for the clergyman and his pulpit—a lesson to be sent forth weeping to the world—its tears would moisten earth where many precious seeds lie hidden and unknown, only waiting for the touch of Nature's chastening rod to start them into Life.

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WEEK'S SURVEY .

NEW BOOKS.

DE PROFUNDIS. By OSCAR WILDE.
(Methuen and Co. 5s. net.)

Most readers of this book will approach it with a prejudice. It is several years since the trial and conviction of its author furnished Society with one of those unwholesome sensations that from time to time outweigh all its lesser interests, and keep alive in the mind of the plain man and the poor the idea that the world of fashion and leisure is rotten to the core. One of the most conspicuous figures in that world was suddenly snatched out of it and hurried away into an oblivion of shame and penal silence.

He was variously regarded, this man. To some he was a brilliant butterfly, to others a preacher of extravagant follies and new departures, to yet others the apostle of a sorely needed renaissance in the arts which concern themselves with what we may call the trappings of our social life. The *Æsthetic Movement*, of which he was the chief exponent, was derided and burlesqued out of existence, but its influence for good has remained, and the immense development in our national sense of colour and design is traceable largely to the teachings around which gathered the excesses that drew down the scorn and ridicule of press and stage.

Unlike "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," which was penned by the same writer after his release, "De Profundis" was written in prison. It has remained in manuscript form till now, in the hands of a friend, and no reasons are given for the delay in publication. Probably it was judged wise to allow an interval of time to soften the harshness of criticism. Harshness has, however, taken a form which is more damaging than personal bias. It is already being urged that this last book of one who confesses how he drifted into being a fashionable lounge and *poseur* is itself an insincere piece of posing. From such a verdict the present reviewer wholly dissents. If ever a document was stamped with the impress of genuine human feeling, the subdued passion of a man who had passed through too much pain to be capable of artificiality, and had realised too fully the meaning and end of suffering to harbour bitterness, it is this pathetic document.

The whole book bears out this contention, but certain passages speak louder than others. No attitudiniser would have written sentences like these:

"There is no error more common than that of thinking that those who are the causes or occasions of great tragedies share in the feelings suitable to the tragic mood; no error more fatal than expecting it of them."

"I want 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. I will not say that prison is the best thing that could have happened to me; for that phrase would savour of too great bitterness towards myself. I would sooner say, or hear it said of me, that I was so typical a child of my age that in my perversity, and for that perversity's sake, I turned the good things of my life to evil, and the evil things of my life to good."

And the same note of sincerity rings through the letter which is printed in the Preface.

But if anyone doubts the genuineness of the feeling which has prompted and which pervades the book, none will doubt the genuineness of the suffering, the poignancy of the mental anguish on which its writer could look back. He must be strangely callous who can read certain of these pages and refuse pity.

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But if anyone doubts the genuineness of the feeling which has prompted and which pervades the book, none will doubt the genuineness of the suffering, the poignancy of the mental anguish on which it is based. It is a pity that so many of the callous who can read certain of these pages and refuse pity.

"The very sun and moon seem taken from us. Outside, the day may be blue and gold, but the light that creeps down through the thickly muffled glass of the small iron-barred window beneath which one sits is grey and niggard. It is always twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart."

And the passage where he speaks of the repulsive hideousness of the convict's dress, and how thus attired and handcuffed he stood for half an hour at a London railway station, the butt of derisive crowds who had learned his identity, is heartrending to any one with imagination enough to realise what it must have meant to such a man.

Out of the very core of all this misery and sense of utter humiliation, the writer tells us—and we cannot refuse a testimony presented as this is—a strange new peace was born. It was not the resignation of the Christian. It was not the endurance of the stoic. It was, in essence, humility. He had realised to what depths he had fallen—the brilliant career ruined, the honourable name dragged through the mire, the felon's cell—and after the storm of "wild despair . . . of terrible and impotent rage" had passed into sullen silence, he sought for and he found the meaning of suffering:

"It has come to me right out of myself. . . . Had any one told me of it, I would have rejected it. . . . It is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life. . . . It is only when one has lost all things that one knows that one possesses it."

He did not blink the facts. "It is only," he says,

"by realising what I am that I have found comfort of any kind." And he adds succinctly: "To regret one's own experiences is to arrest one's own development. . . . If one is ashamed of having been punished, one might just as well never have been punished at all."

Then he faced the duty of being cheerful—for the sake of his friends and visitors, for his own sake. He is helped by the realisation that suffering is a teacher, a revealer of self and of things as they really are; that it is the great dignifier of life. And in words that come strangely from one whose attitude was agnostic and antinomian, he tells how he used to say that "there was enough suffering in one narrow London lane to show that God did not love man," but that

"now 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; . . . 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."

Here and there the old perversity breaks out, though it speaks with more deliberateness: "I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does." He is still a law unto himself. There is no "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not," except what his own nature utters. Hence it is not surprising that he regards the Christian religion with the artist's temperament, and from the artist's standpoint. The beauty of Jesus Christ's life and spirit touches him profoundly, and he unconsciously paraphrases Tennyson when he says: "Christ ranks with the poets . . . but His entire life also is the most wonderful of poems." Yet elsewhere he can say:

"That is the charm about Christ when all is said: He is just like a work of art. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into His presence one becomes something."

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Thus far and no farther the artist spirit brought Oscar Wilde, even when he had passed through the cleansing fires of extremest misery and humiliation. Insight he had into very much of what Matthew Arnold called "the secret of Jesus," and keen appreciation of all that is gracious and lovely in the Gospel story; but the strength which he drew from within himself was, as his brief remaining years too sadly proved, incapable of carrying him forward along the path of light whereto he had set his feet.

TABLET

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A book written in prison by one who bore a name for brilliant paradox has come to recall the world to the figure of the Man of Sorrows as the Friend of Sinners. Thus out of evil may and does come good. It has given rise also to a needless contentious correspondence about the death-bed religion of the writer of the book. He was reconciled to the Church, says his nearest friend; but an anonymous correspondent declares that the dying man had already been some hours unconscious when the Passionist Father was summoned to his side. The dead man's friend, who is also the writer of the Preface to "De Profundis," seems to carry the matter as far as may be when he says, in a letter to last Wednesday's *St. James's Gazette*: "It was in fulfilment of an old promise that I brought a priest to his death-bed. On two former occasions he had contemplated being received—once as a young man, and again on his release from Reading. If Father Cuthbert Dunn, of the Passionists, was perfectly satisfied, I think your Catholic correspondent may feel reassured."

Land & Water

Land and Water Illustrated.

Out of the Depths.

"De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. (Methuen. 5s.)

THE pity of it all! That must be the feeling which this most pathetic of books must inspire in every reader. Whatever may be one's preconceived notions with reference to the writer, no one, surely, can read this volume without being touched by the note of humility, of self-abasement, struck therein. It is—as was about all he wrote—coloured by the inevitable splendour of genius. What he has to say he says perfectly. Written originally to a friend with no view, it would seem, of publication, there is no striving after effect. It is the cry of a man of genius from the very depths of his nature.

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2019-03-18 Jissen Women's University Library

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Glasgow Herald,
WORDS AS EMOTIONAL
DRUGS.

Glasgow Herald 155

(2nd. notice).

Much interest of an almost personal kind has been aroused by the publication of the late Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis," and it certainly differs from Mrs Ward's story in this, that it is an utterance direct from the writer and not the creation of his fancy or his historical conscience. And one is certainly reminded of Byron and of the other notable personal or self-conscious writers when one reads such a passage as this:—

"I remember when I was at Oxford saying to one of my friends as we were strolling round Magdalen's narrow bird-haunted walks one morning in the year before I took my degree that I wanted to eat of all the trees in the garden of the world, and that I was going out into the world with that passion in my soul. And so, indeed, I went out and so I lived. My only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sunlit side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom. Failure, disgrace, sorrow, poverty, despair, suffering even, the broken words that come from lips in pain, remorse that makes one walk on thorns, conscience that condemns, self-abasement that punishes, the misery that puts ashes on its head, the agony that chooses sackcloth for its raiment, and into its own lip puts gall: all these were things of which I was afraid. And as I had determined to know nothing of them I was forced to taste of each of them in turn, to feed on them, to have for a season indeed no other food at all."

This and very much else that is no less beautiful from the literary standpoint have been objected to on the ground of their insincerity. Wilde, it is pointed out, did not really act like a penitent—although he never professed to be one—when he came out from the prison to which by his own acts he had consigned himself. But many a man is quite sincere in repentance and yet is unable, from moral or it may even be from physical reasons, to translate it into action. This was almost certainly the case with Wilde. He had enervated himself by a life of luxury which was none the less deteriorating that it was—at first, at least—quite as much of a conscientious creed as of a consistent practice, and being played out, he was totally unfitted for the rôle of the reformer, either of others or of himself. What puzzles one is the lack of simplicity about Wilde's story. Why should he not say directly what he suffered, mentally or otherwise? Why should he disguise himself and his story in Biblical or half-Biblical phraseology? At the same time, it is worth noting that Wilde does not stand alone among literary men of the present day in smothering emotion in phrases which are perhaps none the better that they are of the kind popularly known as felicitous. Mr Arthur Symonds is a writer of whom lately a good deal has been heard. He is both a poet and a critic of no mean capacity and promise: it is probably in criticism rather than in verse that he will distinguish himself. Yet he hides himself, if not in shallows and in miseries, certainly in metaphors, as in

"I have lived in vain, I have loved in vain, I have lost
In the game of Fate, and silent, I retire;
I watch the moon rise over the sea, a ghost
Of burning noontides, pallid with spent desire."

WORDS AS EMOTIONAL
DRUGS.

(2nd.notice).

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"I have lived in vain, I have loved in vain, I have lost
In the game of life, I have lost
I watch the night, the moon, the stars, and know
Of burning noontides, pallid with spent desire."

STUDY AND STAGE. (2nd. notice).

"MEMOIRES D'OUTRE-TOMBE."

By William Archer.

Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis" is a document the significance of which cannot be distilled in a single article, even by so accomplished a writer as Mrs. Craigie. It is not the wonder of a week nor even the topic of a season. Psychologists will study it centuries hence, and so, I have little doubt, will lovers of literature. (Perhaps by that time, the two classes will have melted into one.) I make no apology, then, for following in Mrs. Craigie's footsteps, and jotting down a few—a very few—of the reflections suggested by these "Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe." An adequate criticism of the book would be nothing less than an exhaustive treatise on ethics, æsthetics, sociology, theology, psychology. It would be a soul-searching, and an anatomy of the body politic. I have neither the power nor the will—and least of all the space—to attempt anything of the sort. All I can do is to throw into relief for a moment one or two of the characteristic features, as they seem to me, of the extraordinary mind which is, consciously and unconsciously, laid bare in these pages.

One cannot read far, I think, without feeling that the title, "De Profundis," is a misnomer. Literally interpreted, it is correct enough: no doubt the book was written "Out of the Deepes." But the phrase has acquired a significance beyond its literal meaning. It conveys to us, not merely the idea "Out of the Deepes," but "Out of the deepest Deepes." Now, the one thing the book makes evident is that Oscar Wilde never sounded the deepest deeps—that he had it not in him to plumb the abyss of anguish. And why? Because—as it seems to me—he was pre-eminently endowed with that duality of consciousness which is the secret of half the stoicism, and half the heroism, in the world. Stoicism, of course, may arise from sheer insensibility; but in this case to talk of insensibility would be absurd. Oscar Wilde was sensitive in every nerve. That he suffered acutely there can be no doubt whatever. But all the time there was a second self standing by, intensely interested in the spectacle—observing, applauding, even enjoying it. This is no indictment of his sincerity. Both selves were perfectly sincere. The second self, indeed, was far too good a critic to tolerate anything so inartistic as hypocrisy in the first self. But

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through all his physical suffering, his humiliation, his self-reproach, he was manifestly sustained by the consciousness of being the protagonist in a strange tragedy, the victim of an almost unexampled peripeteia or reverse of fortune, the leading performer in a unique and thrilling episode of the great mundane Mystery-Play. I do not mean for a moment that the vulgar notoriety which is said to console the heroes of the "Police News" had for him any attraction. The conspicuousness of his disaster he quite genuinely felt to be the sharpest of the many things with which Destiny scourged him. Nevertheless, it gave artistic satisfaction to the second, the contemplative, self. In an already famous passage, he writes:

I remember that I used to say that I thought I could bear a real tragedy if it came to me with purple pall and a mask of noble sorrow, but that the dreadful thing about modernity was that it put a tragedy into the raiment of comedy, so that the great realities seemed commonplace or grotesque or lacking in style.

But then he goes on to say: "It has probably always been true about actual life. It is said that all martyrdoms seemed mean to the looker-on." He realised that the purple trappings were a convention or a myth, but that the essence of tragic dignity lay in the height from which the hero fell. Consequently he exaggerated (still in all sincerity) the pinnacle on which he had stood. "I have come," he wrote, "not from obscurity into the momentary notoriety of crime, but from a sort of eternity of fame to a sort of eternity of infamy." Who cannot feel, in such a passage, that the writer is seeking, and finding, solace in the very awfulness of his catastrophe? He is sounding the whole gamut of human experience, and he feels that had he never

 eaten his bread in sorrow,
And never spent the midnight hours
 Weeping and waiting for the morrow,

he would never have realised what a prodigiously interesting thing is the life in which such extremes of fate are possible. This is no imaginary, no verbal and unreal consolation. The excitement, the stimulation, of the contemplative self is a partial, no doubt, but quite substantial set-off against the worst that the suffering self may have to endure; so that he in whom the contemplative self is alert and highly-developed can never sink into the deepest depths.

* *

And are we not here at the very secret of all optimism which is not founded on crass stupidity? In the indomitable much-suffering man—the Ulysses, the Columbus, the Robert Louis Stevenson—the primary, striving and agonising self is actually less real than the observing, apprehending, appreciating self, to which the pageant-drama of destiny is a continual joy, and the right to take active part in it an inestimable privilege. We can observe the same phenomenon on a smaller scale in the "sporting" appetite for hardship and danger. Extremes of

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heat and cold, of hunger and thirst, of bodily exhaustion, are, in themselves, exceedingly painful; yet men face them gaily every day (with the possibility of a horrible death in the background), not for any victory or reward, still less from any sense of duty, but simply because the secondary self revels in the direst toils and trepidations of the primary self. In the majority of people this secondary self is little developed or not at all. They either worry through life by the help of stupidity and good-luck; or, if they are sensitive and unlucky, they fall into despondency, hypochondria, melancholia, the madhouse or the grave. But there is certainly a considerable, and perhaps a growing, number of people to whom the sheer interest of existence, with its exultations and its agonies, is a rich indemnity for the worst that can befall them, except, indeed, such crushing physical anguish as shall paralyse the secondary self. The classic instance of this sort of optimism is none other than Milton's Satan; and it is in no damnatory or derogatory but in a purely scientific sense, that I say that the opening books of "Paradise Lost" are again and again recalled in "De Profundis."

It is true that Milton's fallen seraph makes no attempt to persuade himself that he has "found something hidden away in his nature, like a treasure in a field," and that that something is—of all things in the world—Humility. This discovery is surely the great paradox-monger's supreme and final paradox. For if there is one thing that breathes in every line of these confessions it is a colossal, inexpugnable pride. He calls it by other names—the favorite, perhaps, is "individualism"—but no alias can disguise the ruling passion. Strange indeed is the humility of such a passage as this:

I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure . . . 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.

He could look back on the devastation he had wrought, and say calmly, "I had to pass on." The universe existed for his self-development. I am not judging the point at issue between him and society. I will assume for the sake of argument that, in the eyes of a supernal intelligence, he was right and society wrong. The one thing certain is that, whether as malefactor or as martyr, he had been the occasion of a horror of suffering in others which no dual consciousness could mitigate, and had dealt a cruel blow to all the intellectual and artistic ideals which he professed to have at heart. But without this experience his soul would have been incomplete. He "had to pass on." The phrase is superb—and heart-breaking.

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OSCAR WILDE'S "DE PROFUNDIS."

In one of those moods of idle gloomy introspection which form so large a part of that almost interminable human document, "Mémoires d'outre-tombe," Chateaubriand says let a blow, a fall, a moral suffering descend on genius, instead of exciting profound pity and regret, it provokes only a smile. This is hardly a fair statement of the case. A catastrophe of that kind, proving at a stroke that no man born of woman stands aloof from the follies and chances of life, does undoubtedly for the moment create in most men a temporary exultation, springing from the baser side of his nature. But unless he be a very narrow and inhuman sort of creature at best his higher instincts rise up on the instant, and protest against such a cowardly thought. The fall of a great genius is, of course, always tragic in the real and full sense of the word. If, as happened in the case of Oscar Wilde, the achievements of a brilliant intellect are suddenly clouded by the public revelation of an unspeakably disordered private life, the name of the man becomes a synonym for baseness, and henceforth he can make no appeal even though he write with the pen of an angel. The feeling towards the man and his misfortunes is one only of contempt.

The author of "The Importance of Being Earnest" realised the certainty of this truth in his prison cell. One of the sincerest and most touching passages in the posthumous work "De Profundis" (Methuen, 5s.), just published, is that in which he writes in broken, yet not unkindly, tones of the cruel, unfeeling jeers that met him on his way through the streets to gaol:—

"When they saw me," he writes, "I was not on my pedestal; I was in the pillory. But it is a very unimaginative nature that only cares for people on their pedestals. A pedestal may be a very unreal thing. A pillory is a terrific reality."

One reason we have for quoting this passage lies in the conviction, from which we find it impossible to escape, that even in the depths of his suffering Wilde could still mount his pedestal. This wonderfully fascinating book, so full of imagination and charm, bedecked with rich and rare flowers of speech, fails to leave on the mind a sense of naturalness and sincerity. It is the artist who speaks and not the man, the sufferer humiliated and broken. "Of course," he writes, "I need not remind you how fluid a thing thought is with me—with us all—and of what an evanescent substance are our emotions made." In a man of Wilde's temperament all emotions pass through the crucible of his genius, and by the time they are set down on paper are no longer the real thing. He embroiders and decorates them until the veneer of artificiality almost offends. It would be untrue, perhaps, to say that there are not parts of this very poignant and beautiful work perfectly spontaneous and true. We do not think that any man could depict so vividly the mental torture of the first year in prison who had not plumbed the depths of sorrow. The note of charity, of goodwill, almost loving-kindness to a world that had been so unfeeling towards the writer, we take to be an example of affectation.

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