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Vol. 7

MARCH 27, 1905.

Aberdeen Journal.

OSCAR WILDE'S LAST WORK.

De Profundis. By Oscar Wilde. London. Methuen and Co. 5s nett.

If we except the terrible "Ballad of Reading Gaol" by the same author, we cannot call to mind the name of any book the perusal of which has filled us with such profound melancholy as has this. Something like five years have elapsed since the author's death, and we would fain have applied to this posthumous work the charitable maxim "De mortuis nil nisi bonum," and have left it unnoticed. Unfortunately, however, our duty to our readers makes it impossible for us to avail ourselves of this apparently simple method of shirking what we confess is a distasteful task. Rightly or wrongly, the book has been published; it has been read by many, and will be read by many more; it has already, although it only appeared a few weeks ago, entered upon a third edition. Mr Robert Ross, who is understood to be Mr Oscar Wilde's literary executor, and who edits the book and writes a short preface to it, is probably the person who knows best why it has been published, and we naturally look to him for light on the subject. In vain. All we get is the expression of a hope that a book "which renders so vividly, and so painfully, the effect of social 'debacle' and imprisonment on a highly intellectual and artificial nature, will give many readers a different impression of the witty and delightful writer." This is vague enough, and we are not assisted by the account of a recent interview with Mr Ross, in the course of which he is reported to have said that his hope in publishing the book was that the author "might come to be regarded as a factor in English literature along with his distinguished contemporaries," and that "if there was another object" in the publication, it was to remove a general but false impression that the manuscript entrusted to him by Mr Wilde on the day of his release from prison contained something of a scandalous nature. The greater part of the short preface is occupied by Wilde's own instructions regarding the publication, and from these we may quote a few words. "I don't defend my conduct. I explain it," he says; "I want you and others . . . to know exactly in what mood and manner I hope to face the world. . . . I do see a sort of possible goal towards which, through art, I may progress. . . . Whether or not the letter" (he means the book) "does good to narrow natures and hectic brains, to me it has done good. I have 'cleansed my bosom of much perilous stuff.' . . . For nearly two years I have had within a growing burden of bitterness, of much of which I have now got rid."

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The book itself is not a whit more satisfactory than the introduction to it. If the reviewer could consider it merely as a piece of literary work without reference to the conditions under which it was written or the circumstances which led to the author's imprisonment, he might, according to his humour, extract from it passages of undoubted beauty, or seriously criticise the writer's pretentious utterances, or laugh at his wonderful self-satisfaction and his egregious vanity. But the author himself makes it impossible for the reviewer to ignore what he would only too gladly forget. He refers to his disgrace in language which is the strangest mixture of shame and apparent self-complacency. "I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgraces," he cries in one place; but in another he writes—"I do not regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure," etc. And again—"If one is ashamed of having been punished, one might just as well never have been punished at all." Or again—"People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life and to have found pleasure in their company. But then, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approached them, they were delightfully suggestive and stimulating." Elsewhere he says—"Neither religion, morality, nor reason can help me at all . while I see that there is nothing wrong in what one does, I see that there is something wrong in what one becomes. It is well to have learned that." Let us earnestly hope there are not many readers, even among the youngest, who are likely to be led astray by such a doctrine.

He professes to have found salvation in humility, and there is a good deal of talk of repentance; but we must confess all this strikes us as artificial and insincere in the highest degree. We find it utterly impossible to believe that his heart has been really softened or touched, and some of his laboriously paradoxical utterances would be amusing if they were not so appalling and, in places, blasphemous. His idea of repentance is that it has the effect of making all his previous wicked actions "beautiful and holy moments in his life." Not only is there no idea of reformation: any such notion is deliberately rejected. "I need not tell you" (he says) "that to me reformations in morals are as meaningless and vulgar as Reformations in theology . to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant." What he chiefly repents of and regrets is, so far as we can understand him, the manner in which his collapse came. "Certainly no man ever fell so ignobly, and by such ignoble instruments, as I did." "The one disgraceful, unpardonable, and to all time contemptible action of my life was to allow myself to appeal to society for help and protection."

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Humility is even less in evidence than repentance. The personal pronoun occurs so frequently that we had the curiosity to count the "I's" in the first forty pages of the book, and found two hundred of them, or an average of an "I" every fourth line; on several pages the letter occurs, on an average, every second line. Mr Wilde repeatedly quotes bits of his own former works, always with much approval; he knows "better than Wordsworth himself" "what Wordsworth meant when he said" something or other. And so on. Everywhere he poses, and he cannot even mention the death of his mother and his wife's visit to him in gaol to save him the pain of hearing the news from indifferent lips without a little eulogy of himself. "Her death was terrible to me; but I, once a lord of language, have no words," etc. Most ordinarily constituted people will think it would have been better not to try to speak about such matters at all in a book or letter intended for publication.

We have acknowledged that there are many beautiful literary passages in the volume, and we may quote, as among the finest of them, the last words of the book—

> Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.

This, like many other passages, strikes us as affected, artificial, theatrical; and these are the qualities of the whole book. It ought never to have been published. There is no reality in it except the ever-present reality of the author's vanity. Its title is a fraud, for there is nothing whatever in it of the spirit of the fine Psalm, the first two words of which give it its name. The most charitable thing that can be said of the author is that he remained to the end, as he was at the time of his collapse, "insane."

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MARCH 28, 1905.

Pall Mall Gazette.

Reviews.

THE HEART OF MAN.*

In answer to a correspondent who wrote to inquire the meaning of the expression, "Kiss of Caiaphas" in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," and whether it was founded on some legend, the author replied: "No; so far as I know, there is no legend. I expect the expression will create one." The consummate self-confidence that was then so strong in Oscar Wilde, is, at first reading, the chief characteristic of this book, written during his second year of imprisonment. The effect of the monotonous drudgery of prison-life on a character so full of experience, good and evil, so dependent on the artificial and the unessential things of life, could not fail to be of extreme interest; one might expect changes terrible, or pathetic; but, in effect, as the author acknowledges, he emerges from his cell a greater individualist than ever. All the change that he recognises is that he now understands the place sorrow and misery have in the scheme of life; that they are necessary for the development of the soul, and that their existence is proof of the Love of God. "Now it seems to me," he writes, "that love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world." This conviction gives the whole book a glow of ambition that makes sad reading when one remembers what actually happened after the author's release in the May following the writing of "De Profundis." He talks then of writing beautiful books; of beginning again; of a life lived with Nature, the stars, and the winds, and the waters. In reality we had one achievement, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"; then Paris and the night.

The greater part of "De Profundis" is an expansion of what the author had hinted at in "The Soul of Man," a series of notes on the personality of Christ. His Christ was rather the Christ of Renan's "Vie de Jésus"—"the gospel according to St. Thomas," as he calls it—a Figure whose character is only reached by elimination, rather than explanation, of features in the authentic portrait that scarcely fit with the theory. In Christ's perpetual precept that the things of the body are *adiaphora*, Oscar Wilde saw an injunction to develop personality to its utmost; not to allow character to be clogged by possession and circumstance. Surely, however, the young man with great possessions is put forward as an exception, not an example; the true ideal is rather that of the man who finds external things so unimportant that even their possession does not embarrass or hinder him. Some readers will be angered at the easy familiarity, strongly reminiscent of Renan, with which sacred things are handled; but we have little doubt that, compared with his other books, this story of his emotional and intellectual development is as sincere as anything could be coming from Wilde's essentially theatrical temperament. No one, at any rate, can refuse the tribute of admiration to the frankness with which he takes the blame for his fall upon himself. "I must say to myself that I ruined myself, and that nobody great or small can be ruined except by his own hand. . . . Terrible as was what the world did to me, what I did to myself was far more terrible still"; or again, "Of course once I had put into motion the forces of society, society turned on me and said, 'Have you been living all this time in defiance of my laws, and do you now appeal to those laws for protection? You shall have those laws exercised to the full. You shall abide by what you have appealed to.' The result is I am in gaol. Certainly no man ever fell so ignobly, and by such ignoble instruments, as I did." Along with this self-condemnation there is, however, an equally frank confidence of renewal. We have already referred to this hope of the author's to express in Art what he had learnt in suffering. In the early part of the book he boasts how independent, how self-

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sufficient he would be, if, on his emergence from prison, he had no friends in the world, and not a single house open to him in pity. We are almost inclined to believe that the consummate pride of his intellect would have won for him a position as an artist that he failed to achieve, when helped along the path by his friends.

As a work of art, it is a little difficult to judge "De Profundis." It bears signs of editing and expurgation, which, while no doubt necessary, tend to mar its unity; or, possibly, we have it as it left the author's hands, in which case we can only say that he left it a sketch. It is written, as a rule, with a commendable restraint and a felicity of phrase that would be expected from the author of "Intentions." There is not, however, much mere phrase-making; and none of that brilliant, superficial wit that sparkles in the dialogue of the plays. It has not, however, got the magistral security that marks "The Soul of Man"; a great deal of the argument as to ethics and religion is word-play of a not very high kind. As a disclosure in personality, "De Profundis" must occupy a position all its own; more intensely personal than Verlaine's "Mes Prisons," and greater than that in that it records a fall from loftier heights to greater depths. Pride such as is manifested in page after page could only be borne from the extremity of shame. Out of the heart of the man, "deceitful and desperately wicked," has come this book of self-condemnation; can we dismiss it with anything save the divine sentence of St. John? "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things."

* "De Profundis." By Oscar Wilde. 5s. net. (London: Methuen.)

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MARCH 30, 1905.
Hearth and Home,

A GOSSIP ABOUT BOOKS.

By CHARBON.

THE MOST HUMAN OF DOCUMENTS.

De Profundis. Methuen, 5s. net.

THOUGH incomes have perceptibly narrowed during the last years, minds have shown some signs of broadening, and I am half in hopes that no reader may feel offended at my choosing for special notice a book by that lamentable genius, Oscar Wilde. For when a great book, destined to be a classic, is published, what else can the critic do? The truth is that we in England, educated perhaps by such sheets as *M.A.P.*, connect the artist's life too closely with his work. As Wilde himself, in one of his wayward truisms, remarked, "The domestic virtues are not the true basis of Art." It is, perhaps, better to follow the prudes and to speak never of Oscar Wilde, always of "The Author of *Lady Windermere's Fan.*"

But if there are any who can still turn in rancour from this tragedy of a wasted life, it is these in particular who for their soul's good should read Oscar Wilde's prison journal, *De Profundis.* After reading this, nobody can ever think in quite the same way of its writer. From Pain he learnt what Pleasure failed to teach him, Humility, not perhaps the Humility of ordinary mortals—for such genius as Wilde's can not escape from its self-centre—but still a true humility, found in his "new world" of sorrow. Somewhat typically, he regards all that has come to him as part of that self-realisation so essential to the perfect artist. This prison-learnt secret was not mere reformation; that Wilde found "meaningless"; it is summed best, perhaps, in one stray remark. He says that if after his release, a friend gave a dinner and did not ask him, he should not mind. Then,

"But if after I am free, a friend of mine had a sorrow and refused to allow me to share it, I should feel it most bitterly. . . If he thought me unworthy, unfit to weep with him, I should feel it as the most poignant humiliation. . . . But that could not be. I have a right to share in sorrow, and he who can look at the loveliness of the world and share its sorrow, and realise something of the wonder of both, is in immediate contact with divine things, and has got as near to God's secret as any man can get."

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Many critics have taken on themselves to say that Wilde, always a poseur, had struck an attitude both here and elsewhere. But even if the opinion of those who knew him had been lacking, one could not doubt his sincerity. It shouts at one (except in a few lines) throughout. He has not adopted "the purple pall and mask of noble sorrow," which he used to mention as the proper mien of tragedy. That would have been a pose. He tells us: "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." There is the ring of truth in that. Instead of the poser's mask he has found humility, "the starting point for a fresh development. It has come to me right out of myself. . . . Had it been brought to me I would have refused it. As I found it, I want to keep it."

Wilde had realised, and makes us realise as never before, the meaning of suffering. In a beautiful passage he tells us that he recalls how, talking to a woman of whose virtue he writes a fine panegyric, he "said that there was enough suffering in one narrow London lane to show that God did not love man. . . . I was entirely wrong. She told me so, but I could not believe her. 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. . . . 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."

De Profundis is a slight volume, but so full of suggestion, and also so baffling is it, that one might write to ten times its bulk and yet fail to explain it. I have touched only on one point, Wilde's finding of Humility; but from a human view, it is the most important point. But there are others no less noticeable, especially the light thrown upon our cruel system of transporting convicts and on the deadening effect of prison life. But the most part of the book is given to a study of the Christ as the essence of the romantic movement, an essay which, while it must jar on many for its substance and its manner, must yet appeal to all by its originality, its sincerity, and above all its beauty. For beauty is by no means lacking in this volume, for all its traces of the prison atmosphere. Again and again we light on exhilarating passages:

". . . Spring always seeming to one as if the flowers had been in hiding, and only came out into the sun because they were afraid that grown-up people would grow tired of looking for them and give up the search; and the life of a child being no more than an April day on which there is both rain and sun for the narcissus."

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Many critics have taken on themselves to say that Wilde, always a poseur, had struck an attitude both here and elsewhere. But even if the opinion of those who knew him had been lacking, one could not doubt his sincerity. It shouts at one (except in a few lines) throughout. He has not adopted "the purple pall and mask of noble sorrow," which he used to mention as the proper mien of tragedy. That would have been a pose. He tells us: "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." There is the ring of truth in that. Instead of the poser's mask he has found humility, "the starting point for a fresh development. It has come to me right out of myself. . . . Had it been brought to me I would have refused it. As I found it, I want to keep it."

Wilde had realised, and makes us realise as never before, the meaning of suffering. In a beautiful passage he tells us that he recalls how, talking to a woman of whose virtue he writes a fine panegyric, he "said that there was enough suffering in one narrow London lane to show that God did not love man. . . . I was entirely wrong. She told me so, but I could not believe her. 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. . . . 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."

De Profundis is a slight volume, but so full of suggestion, and also so baffling is it, that one might write to ten times its bulk and yet fail to explain it. I have touched only on one point, Wilde's finding of Humility; but from a human view, it is the most important point. But there are others no less noticeable, especially the light thrown upon our cruel system of transporting convicts and on the deadening effect of prison life. But the most part of the book is given to a study of the Christ as the essence of the romantic movement, an essay which, while it must jar on many for its substance and its manner, must yet appeal to all by its originality, its sincerity, and above all its beauty. For beauty is by no means lacking in this volume, for all its traces of the prison atmosphere. Again and again we light on exhilarating passages:

". . . Spring always seeming to one as if the flowers had been in hiding, and only came out into the sun because they were afraid that grown-up people would grow tired of looking for them and give up the search; and the life of a child being no more than an April day on which there is both rain and sun for the narcissus."

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"Love is a sacrament that should be taken kneeling, and *Domine non sum dignus* should be on the lips and in the hearts of those who receive it."

"Once at least in his life each man walks with Christ to Emmaus."

De Profundis, in fact, is instinct with poetry. One need only turn to its last page, which, for pure beauty of form, can perhaps stand with anything in English literature. And when it is finished, one can hardly say whether one is cheered or saddened. It is a book upon which no two critics can be expected to agree, for it is not fiction—it is a self-revelation. But it will take its place—and no humble place—among the literature of sorrow, and as a classic of rare grace nobody can afford to pass it by.

Reading of Wilde's "New Life," and his plans for its pursuance, one is certainly inclined to sadness, remembering the stories of his sordid last days in Paris; but it is cheering to be assured, on good authority in a well informed journal that those stories, like so much connected with this unhappy genius, owe more to fiction than to fact. And for the rest, as one reads this record of a soul's suffering and abasement, one's mind turns with comfort to the words written by Oscar Wilde, after release, in his beautiful, if lurid, *Ballad of Reading Gaol:*

"Ah! happy they whose hearts can break
  And peace and pardon win!
How else may man make straight his plan
  And cleanse his soul from sin?
How else but through a broken heart
  May Lord Christ enter in?

And he of the swollen purple throat,
  And the stark and staring eyes,
Waits for the holy hands that took
  The Thief to Paradise;
And a broken and a contrite heart
  The Lord will not despise."

* * *

Hearth and Home

"Love is a sacrament that should be taken kneeling, and *Domine non sum dignus* should be on the lips and in the hearts of those who receive it."

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MARCH 31, 1905.

THE CHURCH TIMES.

THE WAYFARER.

Et tu, Brute.—CÆSAR.

"HERE is the *Guardian* at you," said Harvey, handing me the sheet. "And what has the steady-goer to say?" I asked indifferently. "Some wholesome truths about your essay on Oscar Wilde," he answered, showing the passage.

"Nonsense," I replied, when I had read; "he might call me 'a clever writer'—it is one of the nastiest things you can say of a man—but he can't be referring to me. 'Two columns and a half of enthusiastic eulogy both of the man and of his book.' I don't recognize the description. He must be speaking of someone else." "Find someone whom it fits better," he said, "and I will agree. He is not the only one who has complained, you know."

"I am beginning to think," I said, "that there are some stupid people about." "And your business," he replied quickly, "is to make yourself intelligible to them, or else to give up writing." "Do you always make your sermons intelligible," I sneered, "to your ironmongers and drapers?" "I do my best," he answered; "at all events, I do not go out of my way to puzzle them. Look at your Russian anarchist again. Yes, I know what you meant, and agree with you; but how many would understand? And why should you want to advertise your connexion with a disreputable affair like the Cosmopolitan? I don't know how you can stand it yourself."

This was startling, for Harvey is no pharisee in respect of the company he keeps. I did not, however, try a retort. "But remember," I pleaded lazily, "that I am a professed wayfarer. I go through the world studying men and their cities." "And their *mores*," he added bitterly; "that, I suppose, is why you study Oscar Wilde, if he could be called a man."

I know my friend's feeling on the subject, and I respect it. Therefore I said nothing, and he returned to his theme with a less caustic manner. "I really don't know how you could write about him at all without strong condemnation. Of course, what this man says about 'enthusiastic eulogy' is nonsense. But how could you deal so gently with the man and the book?" I broke in: "How would you treat a notorious bully if you found him lying in the street with a shattered limb? Would you show respect for his splintered bones and torn tissue? Or would you toss him roughly into a cart, with a special twist of the broken leg?"

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Church Times (II)

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"The parable is beside the mark," he said; "your man was not lying wounded and helpless; he was rather cock-a-hoop, riding the high horse." "O that is your grievance, is it?" I replied; "You agree with those who say that he was not in the deep at all." "He was once in the deep, I grant you," answered Harvey; "but the man you dealt with was not the poor wretch eating his heart in prison; was the author, dead of course, but still the author of an impertinent, impenitent book, which is rushing through edition after edition." "Oh, that is your grievance, is it?" I repeated; "The facts do beget envy. My books struggle painfully through one edition." "I don't write books," he retorted, "and so I am not stirred by envious comparisons; but it does stir my gall to see such a man treated as the hero of a tragedy."

"Ah! that looks like the real grievance," I protested; "and do you agree with the critic who thought that I was treating an artist as superior to ordinary morality?" "I don't make that blunder," he replied more gently, "but I ask myself why you, with your austere code of ethics—yes, you are austere—dealt so tenderly with a man who flouted all morality." "And is it not possible," I argued, "that my austerity, on which you insist, would make me deal more sternly with a solemn pretender to morality than with a frothy artist who scouts morality?" "Possibly," he agreed, "but what about the frothy artist as a hero of tragedy?"

"Wait a moment," I pleaded; "You say that he was impertinent. That is what I called him. You say that he was impenitent. That is what I said. You allow that he was once in the deep; how do you conceive that he got out of it?" "By a balloon filled with his own gas," suggested Harvey. "Which burst and let him down again," I continued; "there may be something in that; and I believe Icarus has been made a subject of tragedy. But I would rather say that he was never out of the deep at all. He lighted up the abyss with fairy lamps, and told himself that he was walking in sunshine. Now for the tragedy." "It sounds more like a pantomime," said Harvey.

"Oh," I cried, "you must have a high-souled, stainless hero, entangled in the chain of destiny. That may be good Greek poetics, especially if you leave out Euripides, but it seems to me not very Christian. Or would you say that there is no tragedy in Macbeth, or in the dismal failure of a certain frothy artist named Hamlet, or in the ruin of Lear,

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the ill-tempered, exacting old fool? Perhaps you do not believe that of our pleasant vices we make whips to scourge us, or do not think such scourging the stuff of tragedy. I am content with what the great masters have chosen. But I see in Oscar Wilde's book a deeper tragedy than any they have written, for none of them dare go very far into the secret of spirit. If ever God spoke to a human soul in our days He spoke to this Oscar Wilde in Reading Gaol. Some readers of the book may be furious at the idea; but you should not be; you are no pharisee. If ever the gospel of the glory of Christ dawned on a man, it dawned on that crushed, remorseful, impenitent, despairing sinner, when he discovered the grace of humility and the beauty of suffering. And having received this gift, what did he make of it? I have told the damning truth about the man, that he had tried to make his own life—all muck and emptiness—a work of art. Other men have sinned as deeply as he, and have hated their sin, treading it in anger, and trampling it in fury. For him it was a thing to be delicately tasted: not to be allowed to master him, of course, but to be touched lightly as one of many sensations. The habit was formed, and it prevailed. When the heavenly vision came, what did he make of it? He seized it eagerly as new material for artistic work. Is not that a sufficiently tragic failure? His place in hell is not among the sensuous, but rather in the company of him who made *il gran rifiuto*. Do you remember your complaint of John Inglesant, that Shorthouse had not the courage to make him pay the full price for his refusal of the divine call? I did not agree with you, because comedy is as true to life as tragedy, and as divine. But you can make no comedy out of Oscar Wilde. He caught a glimpse of the catastrophe himself: it would be a horrible tragedy, he said, if he did not live to do the new artistic work that was become possible for him. But he put the thought away: he would do this work. The catastrophe came swiftly. 'Ring down the curtain,' I said, 'and let us go home in silence.' You do not wish always to show the end of the catastrophe on the stage—the murders, the desolation. At least you do not show the victims going down to the pit. I had no wish, and no need, to enlarge on those last sordid months at Paris, or the poor farce of a death-bed reconciliation to the Church. Others have done this with unction. To my mind, the failure was complete before he left his prison; the harvest of tragedy was gathered when he made his choice. The rest was but gleaning."

I did not say all this to Harvey exactly as it is here set down. Our conversation is more vernacular, and I reached my end through many interruptions. But I give the substance. We parted, as we seldom do, in disagreement.

VIATOR.

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APRIL 1, 1905.

Athenæum,

De Profundis. By Oscar Wilde. (Methuen & Co.)—In the publication of this book Mr. Ross has not only rendered an essential service to his dead friend's memory—he has added to our literature a work which from its intrinsic value is sure to command the attention of thinking men, from its style the admiration of literary artists, from the tragedy of which it records a part the pity of human hearts.

The attempt to delineate the feelings of a prisoner, innocent or guilty, is no new thing; the situation is one which attracts writers from its simplicity and effect. Books have been written by prisoners in their captivity, and some of them rank among the great things of the world's literature. But none of them has exactly the quality of the work before us. The writer is sustained by no feeling of injustice in his punishment, of revolt against his fate. No circumstance was wanting to make his disgrace terrible. Society, which makes artists its playthings and puppets for a space of time, turned in a moment into his executioner. Yet after enduring it all he set himself to a mental balance sheet, to put down what his disgrace and punishment had made of him, to describe himself to his friend with all the skill of which he was capable.

It is this skill, indeed, which raises the question, "How far is all this true?" It is not alone "narrow natures and hectic brains" who have been forced to hesitate before this fine piece of work. All the old characteristics of the writer's style are here with a new one superadded. He had always been a writer of surface impressions; his art cherished the mud-bank for the iridescence of its slime; his wit struck a subject, and glanced off in a shower of dazzling sparks; his genius was original in treatment, but derivative as to subject-matter, and, to the day of his fall, he had never, perhaps, met a criticism which he had not provoked and expected. He was a voluptuary of the moment, an experimentalist in sensations, an artist of impressions, and his true bent was as much hidden from himself as from the world. But that underneath it all lay a true man the writing of this book is an indubitable proof to any reader of imagination.

The truth is (and any one who cares to analyze Wilde's work may prove it readily) that his mental processes were in great measure unconscious. As he himself says, expression is the only mode of life to the artist. It must be remembered that the book, though dealing with the whole two years, was written in the last few weeks. The long weary months dragged on, outwardly turning him to stone, holding him still and lifeless, but inwardly

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each day worked its effect, till when opportunity occurred and he sat down in his cell to take account of himself he found it difficult to come to close quarters with the new man he met. The early part of the book has been called artificial; it is not, but it is written from the outside: the emotions of the writer—

> "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"—

have ceased for him, they are past and gone. Unravelling his thoughts, he sees one by one the lessons he has learnt: Humility, the Beauty of Sorrow, something of the inner meaning of life—"the Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature,"—and these he seeks to express in something of their relation to himself, and what they have made of him. His suffering was great and heartbreaking: that cannot be doubted. But when the depths were reached and fathomed, a new hope came to him, a hope that, sustained by friendship, he could extract from his sorrow the sympathy necessary for the highest artistic creation:—

> "For the last seven or eight months, in spite of a succession of great troubles reaching me from the outside world almost without intermission, I have been placed in direct contact with a new spirit working in this prison through man and things, that has helped me beyond any possibility of expression in words: so that while for the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else, and can remember doing nothing else, but wring my hands in impotent despair, and say, 'What an ending, what an appalling ending!' now I try to say to myself, and sometimes when I am not torturing myself do really and sincerely say, 'What a beginning, what a wonderful beginning!'"

No other hope could have sustained him, conscious as he was of high powers misapplied and wasted. He had to bring his projected essay, 'The Artistic Life considered in its Relation to Conduct,' to a triumphant close.

It will be observed that up to the present we have considered only the psychological side of this work, for on this depends its permanent value. It matters little that from the point of view of style the writer is at his best, and that the incongruous ornament which every now and then used to disfigure his finest writing is here reduced to a minimum. If the writer was able to fulfil his intention, and tell the truth about himself and his mental processes during those dark months, his work will endure. If he deceived himself and us, it will still be a document studied by criminologists, like the *graffiti* of prisoners on their cell walls. But it seems to us that the book is true. Prison and reflection had wrought a marvel on him. And this, again, is part of the tragedy. Every thinking man has entertained grave doubts of the efficiency of our prison system as a means of bringing about its ostensible aims. Here it was to all appearance justified—and what was the outcome?

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Athenaeum

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We have already said that this book represents the author at his best. When he had rid his bosom of the gnawing burden of bitterness which had harboured there so long, the repressed imagination burst into one of the most delightful improvisations he has ever written, 'Christ as the Precursor of the Romantic Movement in Life.' Too long to quote, too delicate to dismember, it is as near perfection as such an essay could be. With it we may mention a passage dealing with "Christ as a poet," full of tender writing and beautiful simplicity. But it is useless to single out in detail the merits of this book. It appeals to the artist, the moralist, the psychologist, the student of social science. Our only regret is that it did not appear in the lifetime of its author. He has passed away, but this cry from the depths to his faithful friend remains, an enduring monument to his best qualities.

Athenaeum

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APRIL 2, 1905.

THE PEOPLE,

THE BOOKMAN.

"DE PROFUNDIS."

There was a time when I was inclined to think in regard to the late Oscar Wilde that it would have been better for everybody—one might say the world in general—if his works and all memory of him could have been wiped out and forgotten. The taint of his unnatural crimes seems still to linger about his finest inspirations. A hundred years hence it would be different, and I believe there are works and thoughts of Oscar Wilde which will be living and elevating influences a hundred years hence, and longer.

One is all the more indignant when a man of great culture and endowed with poetic imagination, owing a duty to the reputation of his family and to the honour and distinction of his country, descends to the gutter, and, as Wilde did, even degrades the gutter. "De Profundis" (Metheun), his last contribution to the literature of his time, however, softens one to the unhappy man's memory and prompts something like a generous forgiveness on the ground that he was a lunatic, with lucid intervals in which he was another being altogether, sane, and scholarly in the highest sense of the term.

"De Profundis" is the revelation of a great soul that has escaped from a devilish influence that for a time controlled it. If it were possible to believe in a man being at intervals literally possessed of a devil it would be easy to account for the strange contrasts of ugliness and beauty, of devil and angel, alternately controlling the impulses and the actions of Oscar Wilde. "De Profundis" is a heart-breaking confession, and at the same time such a penitential acceptance of a terrible punishment that it is impossible not to experience a genuine sympathy for the writer, and to feel that to some great extent the penitent atoned for his sin against himself and his genius and against society, his family, and the men who were his friends. His genius could hardly have had a more convincing exemplar than his latest and his most human volume—a prose poem that will rank among our noblest legacies of prison literature.

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