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Oscar Wilde Scrapbook

Vol. 7

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

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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

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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

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"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

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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

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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.

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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

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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 Gnomic 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

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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

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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

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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

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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?

HUGH WALKER.

St David's College, Lampeter.

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Mirror USA

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De Profundis

NOT less than twenty letters have I received asking for an expression of opinion upon "De Profundis," the little book in which Oscar Wilde has explained his strangely beautiful and infernally soiled spirit. It is a terrible confession for the very super-effiminate beauty of its artificial note, even in the utterance of his agony. The man deals even in his despair in paradoxes. His analysis of Christ is that of a connoisseur in spiritual *bijouterie*. He says many heart-wringing things in quite an inimitable mincing way. He regards Christ as if He were a work of art, and yet there is powerful evidence that his strange soul did catch a gleam of salvatory efficacy from the Crucified. Wilde's book is intelligible, I should say, only to those who are temperamentally supersensitive to the witchery of whim in its most extreme manifestations. Wilde's cry "from the depths" is an odd, weird pæan of Beauty turned to Horror from over-worship. His ego was a veritable "imp of the perverse," and he luxuriates in his own misery. His book has a piteous power and a grotesque pathos. Its beauties are numerous, but they are artificial, and most artificant when they spring most truly from the man's strange heart. His piety even takes on perverse forms of artistry. His humility is as much a pose as was his *Bunthorne* pose in life. Christ is not a Saviour to him, but an exquisite romanticist in the real. The book is sincere, in that it shows that Wilde was essentially the incarnation of insincerity. Not even his stupendous disgrace could unmask him to himself. This book "De Profundis" is Wilde at his best in paradoxical beauty. It is not Wilde at any spiritual best, for his spirit never escaped artificiality. He does not repent. He studies himself and joys in the vivisection. He is a supreme egoist, and even the rottenness of his spirit has a beauty to him. His sorrow has a romantic art value. There may be those who will take "De Profundis" for the real cry of a penitent. I do not. It is false in its fineness of workmanship. It is a pose. That it is so I know from another book, "Oscar Wilde: The Record of an Unhappy Friendship," written by Robert Harborough Sherard, in which it is shown that after writing his "De Profundis," in Reading Gaol, and gaining his liberty, he deliberately turned from friends who would have saved him and resumed his relations with Lord Alfred Douglas, to his intimacy with whom Wilde's downfall was attributable. Wilde had but one likeness in history—the Emperor Heliogabalus. There is nothing like him in fiction. He was a fiction himself—a weird perverted genius, who never laid hold on reality, but lived in a mad world of glamorous, opalescent exhalations from a soul corrupted by some ante-natal impression of diseased beauty. Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy* is a type of the artificial soul that only a few of the illuminate understood. Oscar Wilde was a *Sentimental Tommy*, touched with a Neronian madness of morbid poetry and art. His explanation of himself explains nothing except that his soul was solely in his sensuousness, and that the blend produced the colossally egoistic hedonist, even as in the fable of Apuleius in the romance of "The Golden Ass," the child of Cupid and Psyche was Voluptas. And the ascetic-æsthetic story, "Marius the Epicurean," was the progenitor of the *macabre* "Picture of Dorian Gray." Yet "De Profundis," read by the right light, may save many a one from the greater death, even as Renan's infidel, "Life of Christ," has converted its readers to orthodox Christianity. It is a truer confession, in its artificiality, than any I recall, not excepting that of Rousseau or Augustine, the son of Monica. It is the perfect mirror of, to use his own phrase, a "slim gilt soul." It is a terrible book, and the reviewers who are afraid will ignore it, or, noticing it, profess not to understand it.

See also p. 236

Mirror USA

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See also p. 2436

Mirror U.S.A. 1905

Oscar Wilde's Atonement

By Michael Monahan

IT hardly seems a decade since the disgrace, the trial and sentence of Oscar Wilde. His death followed so close upon his punishment as to give the deepest tragic value to the lesson of his fall. There was, in truth, nothing left him to do but die, after he had penned the most poignantly pathetic poem and the most strangely loving confession (which is yet a subtle vindication) that have been given to the world since the noon of Byron's fame.

Until the present hour the world has withheld its pity from that tragedy, as complete in all its features as the Greek conscience would have exacted,—and Oscar Wilde has stood beyond the pale of human sympathy. Only seemed to stand, however, for there are many signs of the reaction, the better judgment which never delays long behind the severest condemnation of the public voice, when, as in this case, the circumstances justify an appe[illegible]o the higher mercy and humanity.

Socially Oscar Wilde was exec[illegible]ed, and for a brief time it seemed as if his name would stand only in the calendar of the infamous. But men presently remembered that he was a genius, a literary artist of almost unique distinction among English writers, a wit whose talent for paradox and delicately perverse fancy had yielded the world a pure treasure of delight. In the first hue and cry of his disgrace the British public—and, to a large extent, the American public also—had taken up moral cudgels not merely against the man himself, but against the writer,—a piece of ingratitude for which God will surely punish the stupid English. His plays were withdrawn from the theaters, his writings from the libraries and bookstalls, and his name was anathema wherever British respectability wields its leaden mace. But though you can pass sentence of social death upon a man, you cannot execute a book!—you cannot lay your hangman's hands upon an Idea, and all the edicts of Philistia are powerless against it. For true genius is the rarest and most precious thing in the world, and God has wisely ordained that the malice or stupidity of men shall not destroy it. And this the world sees to be just, when it has had time to weigh the matter, as in the present instance.

Oscar Wilde went to his prison with the burden of such shame and reprobation as has never been laid upon a literary man of equal eminence. Not a voice was raised for him—the potency of his guilt silenced even his closest friends and warmest admirers. The world at large approved his punishment. That small portion of the world which is loth to see the suffering of any sinner, [illegible] revolted by the nature of his offense, and turned away without a word: the sin of Oscar Wilde claimed no charity and permitted of no discussion. Had his crime been murder itself, his fame and genius would have raised up defenders on every hand. As it was, all mouths were stopped and the man went broken-hearted to his doom.

But while his body lay in prison the children of his mind pleaded for him, and such is the invincible appeal of genius, the heart of the world began to be troubled in despite of itself. His books came forth slowly from their hiding-places; his name was restored here and there to a catalogue; a little emotion of pity was wakened in his favor. Then from his prison cell rose a cry of soul-anguish, of utter pathos, of supreme expiation, which stirred the heart of pity to its depths. The feigner was at last believed when the world had made sure of the accents of his agony and had put its finger in each of his wounds. Society had sentenced this poet: the poet both sentenced and forgave society, in the "Ballad of Reading Gaol," thus achieving the most original paradox of his fantastic genius and throwing about his shame something of the halo of martyrdom. He did more than this, in the judgment of his fellow artists—he purchased his redemption and snatched his name from the mire of infamy into which it had been cast. Strange how the world applauded the triumphant genius which, only a little while before, it had condemned to ignominy and silence!

The utter and incredible completeness of Wilde's disgrace satisfies the artistic sense, which is never content with half-results. We know that it afforded this kind of satisfaction to the victim himself, exigent of artistic effects, even in his catastrophe—and the proof of it is "De Profundis."

I may remark here that the virtuous publishers both in England and America who are quick to take their cue from the many-headed beast, are now making amends to the memory of poor Wilde in their fashion; that is, they are turning a pretty penny by the sale of his books, most of which cost them nothing. The rage of contumely is changed into a furore of admiration and a crescendo of regret. To some of us the pawing over of Wilde's literary remains by the vulgar mob and the present indecent enterprise of the publishers are not less disgusting than the conduct of both parties in the hour of the man's calamity.

"De Profundis" will take rank with the really memorable human documents. It is a true cry of the heart, a sincere utterance of the spiritual depths of this man's nature, when the angels of sorrow had troubled the pool. The only thing that seems to militate against its acceptance as such is the unfailing presence of that consummate literary art too conscious of itself, which, as in all the author's work save the "Ballad of Reading Gaol," draws us constantly from the substance to the form. Many persons of critical acumen say they cannot see the penitent for the artist. The texture of the sackcloth is too exquisitely wrought, and is too manifestly of the loom that gave us "Dorian Gray," "Salome," and the rest. How could a man stricken unto death with grief and shame so occupy himself with the vanity of style, a dilettante even in the hour when fate was crushing him with its heaviest blows? Does not this wonderful piece of work, lambent with all the rays of his lawless genius, show the artificial core of the man as nothing that even he ever did before? And what is the spiritual value of a "confession" which is so obviously a literary *tour de force;* in which the plain and simple are avoided with the anxious care of the prince of decadents?

So say, or seem to say, the critics. For myself I can accept as authentic Wilde's testament of sorrow, even though it be written in a style which often dazzles with beauty, surprises with paradox, and sometimes intoxicates with the rapture of the inevitable artist. He could not teach his hand to unlearn its cunning, strive as he might. Like Narcissus wondering at his own beauty in the fountain, no sooner had he begun to tell the tale of his sorrow than the loveliness of his words seized upon him, and the sorrow that found such expression seemed a thing almost to be desired.

So when Oscar Wilde took up the pen in his prison solitude to make men weep, he did that indeed, but too soon he delighted them as of yore. Art, his adored mistress, whispered her thrilling consolations to the poor castaway—they had taken all from him, liberty, honor, wealth, fame, mother, wife, children, and shut him up in an iron hell, but by God! they should not take *her.* With this little pen in hand they were all under his feet,—solemn judge, stolid jury, the beast of many heads and the whited British Philistia. Let them come now!—but soft, the poet's anger is gone in a moment, for beauty, faithful to one who had loved her on t'other side o' madness, comes and fills his narrow cell with her adorable presence, bringing the glory of the sweet world he had lost, the breath of dawn, the scented hush of summer nights, the peace of April rains, the pageant of the autumn lands, the changeful wonder of the sea. Imagination brushes away his bounds of stone and steel to give him all her largess of the past; gracious figures of poesy and romance known and loved from his sinless youth (the man is always an artist, but see you! he can weep); the elect company of classic ages to whom his soul does reverence and who seem not to scorn him; the fair heroines of immortal story who in the old days, as his dreams so often told him, had deemed him worthy of their love—he would kneel at their white feet now, but their sweet glances carry no rebuke; the kind poets, his beloved masters in Apollo, who bend upon him no alienated gaze; the heroes, the sages who had inspired his boyish heart, the sceptred and mighty sons of genius who had roused in him a passion for fame, —all come thronging at the summons of memory and fancy—a far dearer and better world than that which had denied, cursed and condemned him, and which he was to know no more.

Then last of all, when these fair and noble guests were gone and the glow of their visitation had died out into the old bitter loneliness and sorrow, there came One whose smile had the brightness of the sun and the seven stars. And the poor prisoner of sin cast himself down at the feet of the Presence as unworthy to look upon that divine radiancy, and the fountains of his heart were broken up as never before. Yet in his weeping he heard a Voice which said, "Thy sin and sorrow are equal, and thou hast still but a little way to go. Come!"

Then rose up the sinner and fared forth of the spirit with Christ to Emmaus.

And men will yet say that the words which the sinner wrote of that Vision have saved his soul (that soon thereafter was demanded of him), and sweetened his fame forever. But the critics who forget the adjuration, "Judge not lest ye be judged," cry out that the sinner is never to be trusted in these matters, because he writes so well. God, however, is kinder than men or critics: He will forgive the poor poet in spite of his beautiful style.

LETTERS FROM THE PEOPLE

OSCAR WILDE AGAIN.

New York, June 18th, 1905.

To the Editor of the MIRROR:

Under your own signature you gave us a review of Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis" in which, while praising the sheer literature of the work, you condemned its pose and said that its value was destroyed by the fact that Wilde, after his lyric repentance went back to his old courses. You were sane and sound on that as on most other matters.

About three weeks ago you allowed space to Mr. Michael Monahan to maunder and pule—gracefully enough done, I grant you—on Wilde's "Atonement." Mr. Monahan's article was beautiful, but not true. Therefore it was "rot." Atonement—phew. His course after release from prison was a return to his old habits and associations.

I commend to your perusal Mr. Shan Bullock's defense of himself against the charge that he was unjust to Wilde's book and to Wilde himself in a review of "De Profundis." Shan Bullock, who is as Irish as either Wilde or Monahan, says:

I wish to say a few words more about Wilde's book "De Profundis," being tempted thereto by the comment of a good friend on what I wrote in a former letter. Then I called Wilde's book "a pollution." To this judgment my friend takes exception. Let me explain.

Writing hurriedly one often has little time to weigh words and phrases. I agree that to call "De Profundis" a pollution is to err on the side of violence. Nevertheless, I think that my friend, and some other critics, have taken too lenient a view of the book. No one can deny its exceeding beauty of phrase and sentiment; but in a book of its kind one must not be led astray by false glitter. Its kind is uncommon. It cannot be judged by ordinary standards and canons of criticism. It is a confession, a humiliation, a plea for mercy and pardon, a beautiful wail of repentance for things past and of promises for things to come. The whole book is personal. Reading it you must look beyond the

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The utter and incredible completeness of Wilde's disgrace satisfies the artistic sense, which is never content with half-results. We know that it afforded this kind of satisfaction to the victim himself, exigent of artistic effects, even in his catastrophe—and the proof of it is "De Profundis."

I may remark here that the virtuous publishers both in England and America who are quick to take their cue from the many-headed beast, are now making amends to the memory of poor Wilde in their fashion; that is, they are turning a pretty penny by the sale of his books, most of which cost them nothing. The rage of contumely is changed into a furore of admiration and a crescendo of regret. To some of us the pawing over of Wilde's literary remains by the vulgar mob and the present indecent enterprise of the publishers are not less disgusting than the conduct of both parties in the hour of the man's calamity.

"De Profundis" will take rank with the really memorable human documents. It is a true cry of the heart, a sincere utterance of the spiritual depths of this man's nature, when the angels of sorrow had troubled the pool. The only thing that seems to militate against its acceptance as such is the unfailing presence of that consummate literary art too conscious of itself, which, as in all the author's work save the "Ballad of Reading Gaol," draws us constantly from the substance to the form. Many persons of critical acumen say they cannot see the penitent for the artist. The texture of the sackcloth is too exquisitely wrought, and is too manifestly of the loom that gave us "Dorian Gray," "Salome," and the rest. How could a man stricken unto death with grief and shame so occupy himself with the vanity of style, a dilettante even in the hour when fate was crushing him with its heaviest blows? Does not this wonderful piece of work, lambent with all the rays of his lawless genius, show the artificial core of the man as nothing that even he ever did before? And what is the spiritual value of a "confession" which is so obviously a literary *tour de force;* in which the plain and simple are avoided with the anxious care of the prince of decadents?

So say, or seem to say, the critics. For myself I can accept as authentic Wilde's testament of sorrow, even though it be written in a style which often dazzles with beauty, surprises with paradox, and sometimes intoxicates with the rapture of the inevitable artist. He could not teach his hand to unlearn its cunning, strive as he might. Like Narcissus wondering at his own beauty in the fountain, no sooner had he begun to tell the tale of his sorrow than the loveliness of his words seized upon him, and the sorrow that found such expression seemed a thing almost to be desired.

So when Oscar Wilde took up the pen in his prison solitude to make men weep, he did that indeed, but too soon he delighted them as of yore. Art, his adored mistress, whispered her thrilling consolations to the poor castaway—they had taken all from him, liberty, honor, wealth, fame, mother, wife, children, and shut him up in an iron hell, but by God! they should not take *her*. With this little pen in hand they were all under his feet,—solemn judge, stolid jury, the beast of many heads and the whited British Philistia. Let them come now!—but soft, the poet's anger is gone in a moment, for beauty, faithful to one who had loved her on t'other side o' madness, comes and fills his narrow cell with her adorable presence, bringing the glory of the sweet world he had lost, the breath of dawn, the scented hush of summer nights, the peace of April rains, the pageant of the autumn lands, the changeful wonder of the sea. Imagination brushes away his bounds of stone and steel to give him all her largess of the past; gracious figures of poesy and romance known and loved from his sinless youth (the man is always an artist, but see you! he can weep); the elect company of classic ages to whom his soul does reverence and who seem not to scorn him; the fair heroines of immortal story who in the old days, as his dreams so often told him, had deemed him worthy of their love—he would kneel at their white feet now, but their sweet glances carry no rebuke; the kind poets, his beloved masters in Apollo, who bend upon him no alienated gaze; the heroes, the sages who had inspired his boyish heart, the sceptred and mighty sons of genius who had roused in him a passion for fame, —all come thronging at the summons of memory and fancy—a far dearer and better world than that which had denied, cursed and condemned him, and which he was to know no more.

Then last of all, when these fair and noble guests were gone and the glow of their visitation had died out into the old bitter loneliness and sorrow, there came One whose smile had the brightness of the sun and the seven stars. And the poor prisoner of sin cast himself down at the feet of the Presence as unworthy to look upon that divine radiancy, and the fountains of his heart were broken up as never before. Yet in his weeping he heard a Voice which said, "Thy sin and sorrow are equal, and thou hast still but a little way to go. Come!"

Then rose up the sinner and fared forth of the spirit with Christ to Emmaus.

And men will yet say that the words which the sinner wrote of that Vision have saved his soul (that soon thereafter was demanded of him), and sweetened his fame forever. But the critics who forget the adjuration, "Judge not lest ye be judged," cry out that the sinner is never to be trusted in these matters, because he writes so well. God, however, is kinder than men or critics: He will forgive the poor poet in spite of his beautiful style.

LETTERS FROM THE PEOPLE

OSCAR WILDE AGAIN.

New York, June 18th, 1905.

To the Editor of the MIRROR:

Under your own signature you gave us a review of Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis" in which, while praising the sheer literature of the work, you condemned its pose and said that its value was destroyed by the fact that Wilde, after his lyric repentance went back to his old courses. You were sane and sound on that as on most other matters.

About three weeks ago you allowed space to Mr. Michael Monahan to maunder and pule—gracefully enough done, I grant you—on Wilde's "Atonement." Mr. Monahan's article was beautiful, but not true. Therefore it was "rot." Atonement—phew. His course after release from prison was a return to his old habits and associations.

I commend to your perusal Mr. Shan Bullock's defense of himself against the charge that he was unjust to Wilde's book and to Wilde himself in a review of "De Profundis." Shan Bullock, who is as Irish as either Wilde or Monahan, says:

I wish to say a few words more about Wilde's book "De Profundis," being tempted thereto by the comment of a good friend on what I wrote in a former letter. Then I called Wilde's book "a pollution." To this judgment my friend takes exception. Let me explain.

Writing hurriedly one often has little time to weigh words and phrases. I agree that to call "De Profundis" a pollution is to err on the side of violence. Nevertheless, I think that my friend, and some other critics, have taken too lenient a view of the book. No one can deny its exceeding beauty of phrase and sentiment; but in a book of its kind one must not be led astray by false glitter. Its kind is uncommon. It cannot be judged by ordinary standards and canons of criticism. It is a confession, a humiliation, a plea for mercy and pardon, a beautiful wail of repentance for things past and of promises for things to come. The whole book is personal. Reading it you must look beyond the

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It seems to me that this should be printed to reach the readers of Mr. Monahan's drool, to offset the art-for-art's-sake plea, too, for Wilde's book.

Of course, Mr. Monahan didn't know of Wilde's last days. He didn't know that Wilde did not even become a Roman Catholic, as he asserts in his *Papyrus*. Wilde never recanted. "De Profundis" doesn't recant. He died as he lived. Let us not be maudlin about him, just because he was Irish. His conduct more than that of any other man, is part of his literature. Therefore, both should be condemned. Truly, E. F. G.

LETTERS FROM THE PEOPLE

OSCAR WILDE ONCE MORE.

New York, April 24, 1905.

To the Editor of THE MIRROR:

Dear Sir:—As you are once about it, also permit me to say a few words about Oscar Wilde. If it be true, as your correspondent E. F. G. asserts—and I believe it to be true—that Oscar Wilde, after release from prison, returned to his old habits and associations, so much better for the world's final estimate of him. He was a hypocrite in his books, but not in his life. A great virtue! All that is expected of a man is to be true to himself. Oscar Wilde was born a sinner, and had to remain one, if his life was of any value at all. The Marv Magdalen type is not a sympathetic one, it betrays weakness, and often mental derangement. A man of character (good or bad), sticks to what he intrinsically *is;* he may change, grow and develop, but without indulging in somersaults and becoming an antipode of his former self.

What we need in this pale age are men of strong characteristics, individualities. Oscar Wilde was an individuality, and his morbid vagrom life will still fascinate us when his books are forgotten. "De Profundis" was a money-making venture, quite in keeping with the moral code of the esthete and ex-convict. It is tiresome and superficial, like most of his writings (with the exception of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"). His books do not belong to literature, but his life does.

Sincerely yours,

SADAKICHI HARTMANN.

The Truth About Oscar Wilde

By Ernest McGaffey

OSCAR FINGALL O'FLAHERTIE WYLLYS WILDE, Irish born and educated both in Ireland and England, came naturally by the great mental gifts he possessed. His mother was a writer of distinction, and her brilliant son was poet, dramatist, wit, and maker of polished epigrams. As a novelist he did indifferently well. But it is as a poet that he will be remembered, when his prose is forgotten and his dramas have disappeared.

It has been the fashion, since the man's downfall, to exalt the work he has produced since his imprisonment as something for which the world should be very thankful. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," the most powerful poem written in the past twenty-five years or more, and "De Profundis," his personal autopsy of himself, are instanced as what mankind should be glad to possess.

Nothing could be more erroneous. They are both built from the ruins of a gifted and highly attuned nature; and nothing is more melancholy than the moonlight of fame shining down on a ruined character. Oscar Wilde had given to man beautiful and imperishable poetry before his life became blighted, and that his days, ended in banishment as they were, should be considered a fair price for such work is a monstrous injustice to the man's memory.

To some who arrogate to themselves the right to judge, Wilde's poem "Theocritus" is the most perfect example of word-music in the language. The cloying sweetness of portions of the poetry of John Keats, the liquid numbers of Tennyson's most mellifluous verse are far trascended in any single instance by this matchless lyric. It breathes the very essence of the fields; the voice of the winds is within its lines, and all the haunting melody of regret haloes it with a dying glow. That the man who wrote this poem, were it even his only achievement, should go to the grave with the bar sinister across his brow is a lasting and irremediable pity.

And those who would glorify the author of "Reading Goal" and "De Profundis" as having after all triumphed over Fate by these high accomplishments in literature must surely forget his own lines in the former,

"And all the woe that moved him so
That he gave that bitter cry,
And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,
None knew so well as I;
For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die."

The ordinary man is prone to sin. The man to be avoided is the man who has no petty vices. To be immoral, to drink, to gamble, and in various ways to transgress the laws of the land and the so-called moral laws has been part of men's programme since the flood. But there are well-defined limits, both by the laws of man and the laws of nature,—"let the mark of the plague be set upon the door, and then let him that enters it die."

Byron and Burns had no more claims to morality than rabbits, but their immorality was frankly and naturally human. They stand in history and in men's memories as manly men both, with the failings found in men of all classes and kinds. They had no taint in their blood, no subtle curse of degeneracy to contend with, probably. And in this, both were fortunate.

With Oscar Wilde the morbid tendency showed from the first. In his book of poems, published in 1881, appears a poem of a young Greek who falls in love with a marble statue in the temple. He comes back at night and breaks into the temple to lavish his caresses on the passive stone. Typical of the love of beauty, you say? Possibly! But a most unhealthy and forbidding fancy. In "The Picture of Dorian Grey," published in 1888, the festering process goes on.

Now the facts are that Wilde undoubtedly knew of this poison in his brain. "De Profundis" tells of his playing with this insidious fire in his veins until a species of insanity had hm in its clutch. Keen and strong as his mind was at first, he knew as well as he knew of the sunlight and the cesspool that there was dreadful danger in his mental state. And that he did not fight this tendency, with all the strength of his being, and that he did not combat any possibility of his own degradation by every means within his power is where the blame rests with him.

Let it be admittedly said that grievously as he transgressed most grievously has he answered for it. No man more fully; no man more honestly, no man more terribly. His mother died in a year from his disgrace; he lost wife, children, position, eminence, fame, fortune, the praise of friends and the envy of enemies, pride, self-respect, liberty.

"Since he, mis-called the morning star,
Nor man nor fiend hath fallen so far."

It is a mistake to imagine that "De Profundis" is his greatest expression of contrition. "The Ballad of Reading Goal," written when the burden was heaviest on his heart, is Wilde's true "De Profundis." Out of the depths of despair; out of the fullness of the heart. That in both of these remarkable books he should be governed even in the throes of anguish by a sense of the beautiful in language is entirely in

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actual narrative to the life of the narrator. He assumes that you know for what he confesses; he tells you why he is humiliated; he gives you distinctly to understand that he writes as a new creature, with new views of life, new hopes, new aims, and that he lives for the time when he shall be rehabilitated in sight of the world. Therefore I say that in judging this book you must look before and after, must remember what the man was before he wrote and must take into consideration what he became after writing; must judge of the moral (not the literary) value of the book chiefly by the truth of it as measured by the life of its author. Well, then, Wilde, we know, was ten times a greater pollution after writing his book than he was before writing it. So utterly inhuman did he become that the doctor who attended him in his last illness had for him the feelings he might have in presence of a monster. What then becomes of all that beautiful talk? I ask my friend one question: What value should we give to the "Confessions of St Augustine" had its author, having written it, gone back to the depths.

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