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Oscar Wilde Scrapbook

Vol. 7

LOOKING BACK ON "DE PROFUNDIS"

By YORKIST

In much of the criticism of which Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis" has been the subject, one sees clearly that, after a first performance, no single book by any author is ever judged entirely without prejudice. We get a certain impression of the author from one book, and we sit down to the next expecting it to confirm that first impression.

* * *

But to appreciate "De Profundis" it is necessary to forget completely, or ignore, the particular offence against the law which sent the author to prison. It is true that no man is viewed by society after he comes out of prison, quite as he was viewed before he entered its walls; but there are few who would, in the case of an ordinary criminal, especially one convicted for a first offence, declare that any document he had composed in prison was bound to be artificial. Yet this is the very charge by which many critics condemned the author of this book.

* * *

Because he was a *poseur* when he moved in the world of men they argued that he must have posed in prison as well, and even such a respectable organ as the "Times," in its review, found in the whole book nothing of sincerity nor of reality.

* * *

Although I remembered the Wilde scandal I read the book without prejudice, and judged it by its claim to be a human document. Reading it again to-day, I confess it astonishes me that anyone should have missed the note of sincerity that characterises it as a whole. It is true that the book is affected, but with nothing more than the affectation characterising every man who has felt the magic of words, or seen the wondrously beautiful edifice which a certain collocation of words can raise.

* * *

No man who has responded to a simple emotion, in speech or in writing, and felt the dignity of the emotion calling forth the instinctively beautiful word, is ever quite unconscious of it.

* * *

But there may be artificiality of speech with perfect sincerity of soul, and if there is not sincerity of soul in this book of Oscar Wilde's then I know not where to look for it.

Some of the phrases in "De Profundis" take one back to the "Confessions" of St. Augustine, and there is as much evidence of sincerity in the one book as in the other. Whatever Wilde's experience was after he came out of prison, his spiritual insight was clear in Reading gaol. "I have got," he says, "to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard rope shredded into oakum till one's finger-tips go dull with pain . . . the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame—each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience."

I do not envy those who can read passages like this and find in them nothing but a "new pose."

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There are many passages of haunting beauty, many subtle, unforgettable phrases, but these do not make the chief appeal of "De Profundis." Its appeal is that of a man in prison, becoming the subject of a spiritualising influence, which gradually detached him from hateful, degrading surroundings, enveloped him in a white light, which by contrast made him understand the blackness of his former state.

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Viewed in this way, the philosophic calm with which he talks of his past life has a special significance. It does not mean that he is blind to the hatefulness of his offence; it means that he sees his former state as a step, humiliating but necessary, in the finding of himself. So supreme is the joy of that finding, that he reprehends the old sins with a calm which might, to some, seem moral blindness. But, after all, although Wilde to the end did not call himself a Christian, this experience of his was not unlike the experience of some of the famous saints. They also rose to higher things, and learnt to be thankful even for the "dead selves" by which they ascended.

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The Wonder of Wilde.

Poor splendid wings so frayed and soiled and torn!
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THERE has been a distinct revival of interest in the works of Oscar Wilde, and, doubtless, this circumstance is largely owing to the issue of a dainty pocket edition of his writings at a modest price by the house of Methuen. Curiously, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a most characteristic book, is issued separately, although it appears uniform with the rest of the series.

Wilde incorporated the most unusual side of his talent in *Dorian Gray*. Walter Pater, in his review, observed that it was the work of a clever talker. The truth is that Wilde's literary outfit was not large, but he displayed all his goods in the window. He was neither an original writer nor a deep thinker, but he had unusual gifts of freshness of expression, and he absorbed other men's thoughts like a sponge. The device of all his plays is actually common-place, and it is the brilliant and witty conversations which help so materially their success. Wilde owed a great debt to his predecessors, from Sheridan to Sardou. An exception must be made, however, in the case of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is a little masterpiece; and in *Salome* Wilde was fortunate enough to add a play to the repertoire of Europe, an achievement far beyond the reach of most dramatists.

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one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy.

This pathos is almost unexpected from a writer whose earlier language was a craft as much as an art, and related to carpets and wall-papers, and not to life itself with its burdens of sorrow and death. The great river of life had flowed quietly past the poet while he languidly watched its ripples, and repeated: "Experience, the name we give to our mistakes," or, "Sleep, like all wholesome things, is a habit," or, "Merely to look at the world will always be lovely." How little did he then realize that one day he would be struggling for existence in the same river, and that art and æsthetics are but sorry substitutes for human love and sympathy. He was like poor Heinrich Heine, who dragged his paralysed limbs to the Louvre to see once more the Venus de Milo before sinking helpless on his mattress-grave, and, falling at her feet, seemed to hear her say that she could not lift him up because she had no arms.

MIMNERMUS.

It is a toxic idea, a septic conception, that is liable at any time to throw the whole mind into fever. Sometimes it produces a panic of the reasoning faculties, which may be called paralysis of the intelligence (p. 50).

Dr. Crane is wholly mistaken, however, when he declares that the connection between superstition and religion is only apparent and not real. In our judgment, on the contrary, the two terms are synonymous. The belief in the supernatural is essentially superstitious. The American divine is fully

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MIMNERMUS.

THE SUPPRESSED PORTION

OF

"DE PROFUNDIS"

By OSCAR WILDE

NOW FOR THE FIRST TIME PUBLISHED
BY HIS LITERARY EXECUTOR
ROBERT ROSS

PAUL R. REYNOLDS
NEW YORK
1913.

Cutting from the Star

Dated June 12 1913.

"DE PROFUNDIS."

Lord Alfred Doug as Claims the MS.

Lord Alfred Douglas, in the course of his public examination in bankruptcy today, laid claim to the unpublished manuscrip of "De Profundis," parts of which were read in court in the course of the hearing of his recent libel action against Mr. Ransome and the "Times" Book Club.

He based his claim on the ground that the manuscript was addressed to him as "Dear Bosey," and he valued the MS., which is now in the British Museum, at £5,000.

The proceedings in the Bankruptcy Court opened with Lord Alfred's examination by the Official Receiver (Mr. Williams).

Lord Alfred said that up to 1907 he was not engaged in any business or profession.

In that year he became editor of "The Academy and Literature," which was owned by his cousin, Sir Edward Tennant (now Lord Glenconner), who turned it into a company—the Welsford Press, Ltd.—and assigned to him, for a nominal consideration, practically all the shares.

The other director was Mr. Crosland, the sub-editor. One of the causes of his present insolvency was the non-success of this company. His personal and household expenditure had exceeded his income.

Lord Alfred denied that a liability of £1,100 to Messrs Cox and Company, the bankers (guaranteed by the late Mr. George Wyndham, who was also, he said, a cousin) was in any way connected with the Welsford Press.

He estimated that he had lost about £3,000 by his association with "The Academy and Literature."

The paper was running at a loss when he took it over, and he reduced the loss, but had not succeeded in making the paper pay.

"I was let in for the whole of the expenses," he said. "I am not making any reflections on Lord Glenconner."

Questioned about the value of the copyright of his books, "The Duke of Berwick," "The City of the Soul," and "A Book of Sonnets," Lord Alfred said he placed no value upon them now.

"I daresay they will be valuable when I am dead," he observed, "but they are not worth £5 now—the whole lot of them."

He was receiving a voluntary allowance of £500 a year from his mother and had had gifts from friends.

Made £800 by Betting.

Last year he made £800 by betting. He had had dealings with moneylenders, from whom he had borrowed money at extravagant rates of interest.

He had paid, he said, practically nothing to his solicitors on account of costs in his libel action gainst Mr. Ransome and the "Times" Book Club, and had paid no costs in the criminal proceedings against himself at the Old Bailey.

Those actions had not contributed to his bankruptcy. He had no remaining interest under the will of his father, who had left him £16,600 or £17,000.

As to his marriage settlement, Lord Alfred told the Official Receiver that if he survived his wife and his father-in-law he would receive £1,000 a year.

"That is not worth anything," he explained. "It is revocable at discretion. It was made in that way on purpose."

"Is the discretion vested in your father-in-law?" asked the Official Receiver.

"No. My wife and father-in-law can revoke the provision together. If it had been vested in my father-in-law it would have been revoked long ago. I am reconciled to my wife now, and it is not likely to be revoked."

Mr. Harold Menjamin (for Lord Alfred) elicted the statement that the solicitors' costs in his libel action were found by a friend of his.

Mr. Benjamin then asked about the unpublished part of "De Profundis," and Lord Alfred said that he valued it at £5,000.

"To whom was it sent?" Mr. Benjamin asked.

Lord Alfred: I did not know it before, but as a result of the action against Mr. Ransome, it appears that the manuscript was entrusted to a friend to give to me. I never received it, and it now appears that it is in the possession of the British Museum, but I am advised that if it is a letter addressed to me, it is my property. I think there is no question that it is my property.

Mr. Benjamin: Is it addressed, "Dear Bosie," and does it conclude, "Your affectionate friend, Oscar Wilde"?

"Yes."

The public examination was then closed. The statement o faffairs shows liabilities amounting to £2,076, and no available assets.

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The Times. 13.JUN.13

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PUBLIC EXAMINATION.

Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas, of Church-row, Hampstead, who was adjudged bankrupt on January 29 last, attended for public examination, his amended statement of affairs showing liabilities £2,119 4s. 8d., of which £2,076 4s. 8d. are unsecured, and assets of no presently realizable value.

Mr. Daniel Williams attended as Assistant Official Receiver, and Mr. F. S. Salaman as trustee in the bankruptcy; Mr. Harold Benjamin appeared for the bankrupt.

In answer to the ASSISTANT OFFICIAL RECEIVER, the bankrupt stated that before 1907 he was not engaged in any business or profession. In that year he became editor of a weekly paper known as the *Academy and Literature*.

The OFFICIAL RECEIVER.—Was that owned by a company called the Wilsford Press (Limited)?—No; when I joined the paper it was the property of Sir Edward Tennant, now Lord Glenconner, but it was afterwards turned into a limited company.

Lord Glenconner assigned to him for a nominal consideration practically all the shares in the Wilsford Press (Limited), and he (the bankrupt) then became a director of that company. The other director was Mr. T. W. H. Crosland, the sub-editor of the paper.

By 1908 had the capital of the company become exhausted?—Yes; as a matter of fact I found all the capital myself.

Continuing, the bankrupt said that from start to finish he found as working capital for the company about £4,000. He supposed that the non-success of the company was one of the causes of his present position, although at the time he left the company he was solvent. A liability (payment of which was guaranteed by other persons) of £1,100 returned in his statement of affairs as being due to Cox and Co., bankers, was in respect of an overdraft on his private account. It had nothing whatever to do with the Wilsford Press (Limited). In June, 1910, the company went into voluntary liquidation, he and Mr. Crosland becoming liquidators. The paper was sold for a sum that was not nearly sufficient to pay the claims of debenture-holders and creditors. He had received a nominal salary from the company, but he calculated that on the balance he lost £3,000 in the venture. He did not look upon his connexion with the *Academy* as a speculation, but simply as a literary venture. He was without previous experience of running a newspaper company, but while not succeeding in making the publication pay he considerably reduced the loss.

Didn't you look upon this venture as being somewhat rash and hazardous on your part?—Well, perhaps; but I consider that I was rather let in for it without realizing what it meant at the time. I make no allegation against any one.

The bankrupt was questioned by the ASSISTANT OFFICIAL RECEIVER regarding five books of which he was the author—namely, "The Duke of Berwick," "The Placid Pug," "The City of the Soul," "Tales with a Twist," and "A Book of Sonnets." He said he did not suppose there was any value in the copyrights of those books for the purposes of his bankruptcy, adding, "I dare say they will become valuable when I am dead."

In further examination the bankrupt said he had received a voluntary allowance of £300 a year from his mother, and during the past three years gifts amounting to £380 had been made to him by friends. In the same period he made on the balance about £800 by successful betting, and a commission of £400 on the sale of two pictures for a relation. His total income in the three years preceding his bankruptcy was £3,050, against an expenditure of £3,571. He had had dealings extending over more than seven years with professional moneylenders, three of whom were now creditors.

He had paid practically nothing to his solicitors for the costs of the action for libel which he recently brought against Ransome and others. The proceedings against himself for criminal libel were commenced after the bankruptcy, and neither of these actions had in the slightest degree contributed to his failure.

In 1899 he received between £16,000 and £17,000 under the will of his late father, and there was nothing further to come to him from that source. He also received £2,000 on the death in 1904 of his paternal grandmother. In 1909 his mother appointed to him, under discretionary powers, a sum of about £4,000. He mortgaged his interest in that sum and subsequently sold the equity of redemption, using the proceeds for the purpose of the Wilsford Press (Limited).

Under a settlement executed after his marriage by his father-in-law he was entitled, in the event of his surviving his wife and father-in-law, to an annuity of £1,000. The annuity was subject to a power of revocation, and the payment of it was in the discretion of trustees. There was no chance, however, of its being revoked, as he had now become reconciled to his wife.

In answer to Mr. Benjamin, the bankrupt said that his solicitors' costs in the recent litigation were provided by his family.

THE MANUSCRIPT OF "DE PROFUNDIS."

Mr. Benjamin.—I want to call your attention to the manuscript from which the book "De Profundis" was extracted. That, I believe, is of considerable value?—I should think it is of great value—probably £5,000.

The manuscript was a letter written by the late Oscar Wilde and addressed to him (the bankrupt). He never received it, and heard nothing about it until quite recently. It appeared to be now in the possession of the British Museum, and he had not attempted to obtain possession of it. There was no question that it was his property, and it should be available for his creditors.

The examination was ordered to be concluded.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1919.

READING GAOL TO BE CLOSED.

SOME NOTORIOUS PRISONERS.

Reading Gaol is to be closed in about a month's time and the staff will be transferred to Chelmsford. At present only five prisoners—aliens—are interned in the building, which has accommodation for 224. No criminals have been housed there since the war; they have been sent to Oxford Gaol instead.

The present building is about 70 years old. It was here that Oscar Wilde wrote the "Ballad of Reading Gaol" and part of "De Profundis." Mrs. Dyer, the notorious baby farmer, was another prisoner. During the war four dangerous aliens escaped from the gaol and one of them took refuge in the Spanish Embassy in London. Other occupants have been well-known Sinn Fein leaders.

The Times. 13.JUN.13

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"Next morning I receive, in Tite-street, a telegram, of some ten or eleven pages in length, from you. You stated in it that, no matter what you had done to me, you could not believe that I would absolutely decline to see you. You reminded me that, for the sake of seeing me, even for one hour, you had travelled six days and nights across Europe, without stopping once on the way. You made what I must admit was a most pathetic appeal, and ended with what seemed to me a threat of suicide and one not thinly veiled.

"You had yourself often told me how many of your race there had been who had stained their hands in their own blood—your uncle certainly, your grandfather possibly, among others in the mad, bad line from which you came. Pity my old affection for you; regard for your mother, to whom your death under such dreadful circumstances would have been a blow almost too great for her to bear; the horror of the idea that so young a life, and one that, amidst all its early faults, had still promise of beauty in it, should come to so revolting an end; humanity itself; all these, if excuses be necessary, must serve as my excuse for consenting to accord you one last interview.

"When I arrived in Paris your tears break out again and again all through the evening, and fall over your cheeks like rain as we sit at dinner at Voisin's, at supper at Paillard's. The unfeigned joy you evince at seeing me, holding my hand whenever you could, as though you were a gentle and penitent child, your contrition so simple and sincere at the moment, made me consent to renew our friendship. Two days after we had returned to London your father saw you having lunch with me at the Café Royal, and joined my table, drank of my wine, and that afternoon, through a letter addressed to you, began his first attack on me. . . .

FRUIT, FLOWERS, AND PRESENTS.

"Bored with Worthing, and still more, I have no doubt, with my fruitless efforts to concentrate my attention on my play, you insist on being taken to the Grand Hotel at Brighton. The night we arrive you fall ill of that dreadful low fever that is foolishly called influenza. I need not remind you how I waited on you, and tended you, not merely with every luxury of fruit, flowers, presents, books, and the like that money can procure, but with that affection, tenderness, and love that, whatever you may think, is not to be procured for money. Except for an hour's walk in the morning, an hour's drive in the afternoon, I never left the hotel. I got special grapes from London for you, invented things to please you, remained there with you or in the room next to yours, sat with you every evening to quiet or amuse you.

"After four or five days you recover, and I take lodgings in order to try and finish my play, you, of course, accompanying me. The morning after the day on which we were installed I feel extremely ill. The doctor finds I have caught the influenza from you. There is no manservant to wait on me, not even to send out on a message or to get what the doctor orders. But you are there: I feel no alarm. The next two days you leave me entirely alone, without care, without attendance, without anything. It was not a question of grapes, flowers, and charming gifts, it was a question of mere necessities. And when I was left all day without anything to read, you calmly tell me that you bought me the book and that they promised to send it down, a statement which I found out, by chance, afterwards, to be entirely untrue from beginning to end.

"All the while you are, of course, living at my expense, driving about, dining at the Grand Hotel, and, indeed, only appearing in my room for money. On the Saturday night, you having completely left me unattended and alone since the morning, I asked you to come back after dinner and stay with me for a little. With inimitable voice, and ungracious manner, you promised to do so.

"I wait until eleven, and you never appear. At three in the morning, unable to sleep, and tortured with thirst, I make my way in the dark and cold down to the sitting-room in the hope of finding some water there. I found you. You fell on me with every hideous word an intemperate mood, an undis-

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"The froth and folly of our life grew even very wearisome to me."

Elsewhere, referring to his trial, Oscar Wilde wrote:

"The sins of another were being placed to my account. Had I so chosen I could on either trial have saved myself at his expense. Had I cared to show that the Crown witnesses—the three most important—had been carefully coached . . . . not in reticence merely, but in assertions, in the absolute transparence, deliberate plotting and rehearsing of the actions and doings of someone else, I could have had each one of them dismissed from the box by the judge. . . . I could have walked out of court with my tongue in my cheek and my hands in my pockets, a free man. The strongest pressure was put upon me to do so. I was earnestly advised, begged, entreated to do so by people whose sole interest was my welfare and the welfare of my house. But I refused. I did not chose to do so. I have never regretted my decision for a single moment, even in the most bitter periods of my imprisonment.

"Such a course of action would have been beneath me. . . . Sins of the flesh are nothing. They are maladies for physicians to cure, if they should be cured. Sins of the soul alone are shameful. To have secured my acquittal by such means would have been a lifelong torture to me. . . . But do you really think that you were worthy of the love I was showing you then, or that for a single moment I thought you were? The aim of love is to love, no more and no less. You were my enemy, such an enemy as no man ever had."

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Dear Bosie,—After long and fruitless waiting, I have determined to write to you myself as much for your sake as for mine, but I would not think that I had passed through two long years of imprisonment without ever having received a single line from you or any news or message even except such as give me pain. Our most lamentable friendship has ended in ruin and public infamy for me, yet the memory of our ancient affection is often with me, and the thought that loathing bitterness and contempt should for ever take that place in my heart once held by love is very sad to me. And you yourself will, I think, feel in your heart that to write to me as I lie in the loneliness of prison life is better than to publish my letters without my permission or to dedicate poems to me unasked, though the world will know nothing of whatever words of grief, of passion, of remorse or indifference you may choose to send as your answer or your appeal. . . . In the very heart of our friendship while you were with me, you were the absolute ruin of my heart. I should have forbidden you my house and chambers, except that I specially invited you. . . . I blame myself for having allowed you to bring me into utter discreditable financial ruin. . . . When I tell you that between the autumn of 1892 and the date of my imprisonment I spent with you and on you a sum of £5000 in actual money, irrespective of the bills I incurred, you will have some sort of idea of the life in which you existed. . . . My expenses for an ordinary day in London, luncheon, dinner, supper, amusements—and the rest of it—ranged from £12 to £20, and the week's expenses were naturally in proportion, ranging from £80 to £130. . . . Step by step with the bankruptcy receiver, I had to

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"I have given you my life, and to gratify the lowest and most contemptible of all human passions—hatred and vanity and greed. In less than three years you had entirely ruined me from every point of view."

Mr. Justice Darling at this point said that it was unnecessary to read the whole letter. He picked out one or two passages, one of which ran:—

"Our friendship really begins with your begging me in a most pathetic and charming letter to assist you in a position appalling to any one; doubly so to a young man at Oxford. I do so, and ultimately, through

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Dec. 2.

THE AMERICAN TARIFF.

(To the Editor.)

Sir,—I recently sent to a publisher in America rough roofs of three half-tone illustrations, which will appear in a forthcoming book of mine. I have received from my correspondent a letter in which he says:

> The proofs that you sent me are held up in the Custom House, as they seem to be afraid there is something coming over on which I have not paid ten or fifteen cents. This would be a serious matter to Uncle Sam, who needs all he can make us disgorge. I hope things will change for the better now we have a Democratic President.

In a catalogue issued by the same publisher it is stated that "owing to a general advance in printing and all material that goes to the making of these volumes, the following changes in price went into effect on October 1st, 1912." The advance appears to average about 25 per cent.

This may be of interest to some of our Tariff "Reform" friends over here.

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Sir,—I recently sent to a publisher in America rough roofs of three half-tone illustrations, which will appear in a forthcoming book of mine. I have received from my correspondent a letter in which he says:

> The proofs that you sent me are held up in the Custom House, as they seem to be afraid there is something coming over on which I have not paid ten or fifteen cents. This would be a serious matter to Uncle Sam, who needs all he can make us disgorge. I hope things will change for the better now we have a Democratic President.

In a catalogue issued by the same publisher it is stated that "owing to a general advance in printing and all material that goes to the making of these volumes, the following changes in price went into effect on October 1st, 1912." The advance appears to average about 25 per cent.

This may be of interest to some of our Tariff "Reform" friends over here.

STUART MASON.

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