If you have ever been infatuated with someone, or want to understand infatuation, there is one work of literature that you should read. It is ‘De Profundis’ (or ‘From the Depths’) by Oscar Wilde. Wilde wrote it in Reading Gaol, where he had been imprisoned for his homosexuality. ‘De Profundis’ takes the form of a hundred page letter to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, known universally as Bosie. Wilde always intended it for publication, although it was over sixty years before an uncensored version appeared in print. In unsparing detail, Wilde recounts the emotional fluctuations of his relationship with Bosie: idealization, adoration, abasement, disappointment, fury, violent arguments, bitterness, disgust and—against all the odds and all the evidence—a recurrent, compulsive return to desire and to hope. It scarcely matters that the lovers here are a distinguished male writer and a stunning aristocratic youth. Wilde’s confessions could equally well describe a man’s destructive obsession with a woman, or vice versa.

Wilde’s narrative is lacerating, both of Bosie and of himself. ‘I blame myself for the entire ethical degradation that I allowed you to bring on me,’ he admits. ‘The basis of character is will power, and my will power became absolutely subject to yours.’ He gives a scathing account of Bosie’s narcissistic and hysterical behaviour. In a typical passage, Wilde recalls nursing Bosie tenderly through an episode of influenza. As soon as Bosie recovered, Wilde himself fell ill, and discovered that Bosie’s style of nursing was rather different: apathy and impatience, followed by abandonment and sexual adventures elsewhere. When Wilde taxed him with neglect, Bosie flew into one of his tantrums. ‘By the terrible alchemy of egotism’, Wilde wrote, ‘you converted your remorse into rage’. According to Wilde, Bosie possibly threatened to murder him. The two men stopped seeing each other, but soon afterwards, Bosie’s brother Francis Douglas committed suicide. In the circumstances, Wilde felt impelled to rush to Bosie’s side and to offer his sympathy and love once more.

As Wilde describes, the culmination of these desperate events came soon afterwards. Bosie goaded his father—the virulently homophobic Marquess of Queensberry—into a terrible battle of wills. Queensberry accused Wilde in writing of being a ‘posing sodomite’. Wilde took action against him for criminal libel. It was a catastrophic decision, and in his letter Wilde explicitly blames Bosie for talking him into it. As the libel trial unfolded, it became clear that Wilde regularly had sex not only with Bosie but with a legion of lovers and rent boys, some of whom were willing to testify in exchange for bribes and pardons. Wilde soon found himself in the dock, in Queensberry’s place. He was sentenced to two years’ hard labour for gross indecency. He was lucky not to receive life imprisonment for sodomy, as some newspapers had urged.

From a plain reading of ‘De Profundis’, it is easy to conclude that Bosie was a shallow and scheming monster, and Wilde simply a vain and sentimental weakling. But as Wilde wrote elsewhere, the truth is rarely plain and never simple. Between the lines, Wilde comes over as a man who was prone to all the vices he ascribes to Bosie, including indifference to others—especially his wife Constance and their two sons. We also know from other sources, including some excellent biographies and the trial transcripts, that many of the circumstances were not exactly as Wilde paints them. It was Wilde’s bravado that led him to sue Queensberry, as much as Bosie’s hatred of his father. Queensberry, for his part, may have been involved in a tacit plot to sacrifice the nation’s greatest living playwright, in exchange for sparing one of its leading statesmen. As Queensberry knew, his other son Francis—a homosexual—had been a lover of the Earl of Rosebery at the time of his suicide. Rosebery was a foreign secretary, and about to become prime minister.
Wilde protests repeatedly in ‘De Profundis’ that Bosie abandoned him, although we know that Bosie made several attempts to contact him in prison but was rebuffed. Wilde’s account of events may have been affected by his degraded mental state in prison, and also by literary embellishment. Shortly after his release, he and Bosie were reconciled yet again, and the two men set up house together in Posilippo in southern Italy. The arrangement did not last. Constance was still supporting him financially, and made it a legal condition that he would lose his allowance if he ever lived with Bosie again. Wilde moved to Paris, where he continued to pursue a life of extravagance, drunkenness and promiscuity alongside scores of lovers, old and new, including Bosie. By the time of his death in 1900, it is unlikely that he would have cared whether posterity would believe what he had written in Reading Gaol. As he had boasted in ‘De Profundis’: ‘I showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence. I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction.’ In life, as in love, he believed that the illusion was superior to the truth.

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References