Towards the end of the previous chapter we mentioned that the most potent of modern myths of Wilde was that which understood him as a tragic victim. It is easy to see how the general outline of this myth came about. We have to imagine a man at the height of his creative powers and the toast of London’s West End theatre suddenly finding himself incarcerated for a two-year sentence in a number of dingy Victorian prisons, principally at Holloway (in London) and at Reading. He had been imprisoned for practices that he did not consider to be criminal; he was deprived (as he saw matters, unfairly) of contact with Lord Alfred Douglas, the person he most wanted to hear from; he learned of the death of his mother well after the event; he was tortured by the knowledge that he could not see his two sons; he was denied access (until well into 1896) to the reading and writing materials that had hitherto been central to his life; and finally he was forced to spend most of his time alone or in silence, forbidden to converse with other prisoners except in furtive whispers which if discovered could be punished by solitary confinement.

Given all this Wilde could all too easily appear to himself as the central player in an absurd comedy, and to outsiders as a deeply tragic figure for whom imprisonment was the appropriate nemesis for overweening hubris. At some point in late 1896, by now provided with pen and paper through the good offices of the prison authorities, Wilde commenced, as he put it, to “show his life to the world,” to write “of the past and of the future, of sweet things changed to bitterness and of bitter things that may be turned into joy” (Complete Works, II: 141, 37). The resulting manuscript, which is addressed to “Dear Bosie” (that is, Wilde’s lover, Douglas), has passed into literary history. It has come to be known—rather deceptively, as it turns out—as De Profundis, or “from the depths” (the title that translates into that phrase, one taken from the Psalms, was Robert Ross’s and not Wilde’s).
Uniquely among Wilde’s works *De Profundis* appears to have been composed in isolation from all of the usual institutions of literary production, and thus seems to possess an expressive immediacy absent from the other more self-consciously fashioned works in the *oeuvre*. More particularly, it seems to exist beyond the reach of those commercial interests that recent historians have seen as central to late-nineteenth-century authorship. The popular history of *De Profundis* hints at a dynamic connecting expression, authentic experience, and emotional intensity. The image of Wilde conjured up by the work’s title, that of the lonely agonized prisoner pouring out his soul in a work of cathartic emotional and spiritual release, invites us to read the resulting document as a frank and sincere exploration of the self. It should thus come as little surprise to discover that of all Wilde’s works it is *De Profundis* that has been most consistently appropriated for biographical readings—Isobel Murray suggests it can be seen as “partial autobiography” (Murray, xiii)—and as a consequence, it is *De Profundis* that has probably held the greatest sway over the manner in which Wilde’s life, and in particular his character and his creativity, have been conceptualized. In the light of all this, it is strange to find that while *De Profundis* may be the most infamous of Wilde’s works, it is also the least analysed.

Murray’s label prompts a number of questions. First, how accurate or how useful an account of Wilde’s life is *De Profundis* if we do consider it to be “partial autobiography”; in other words, what kind of “life” of himself does Wilde give to us? Second: would there be many readers of *De Profundis* if it were not so intimately tied to such a famous (or notorious) historical person? We could pose these questions in a rather different way. Do we value *De Profundis* principally for the insights it gives us into Wilde the man, either directly (in terms of

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**Myths About Literary Creativity** The stories that have accumulated to explain the creation of *De Profundis* have elements in common with myths about the creation of a number of other literary works, such as Coleridge’s claim that “Kubla Khan” was composed in an opium-induced hallucination, or Lloyd Osbourne’s explanation of the composition of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by his stepfather, Robert Louis Stevenson. Osbourne reported that it was the direct transcript of a dream, drafted out in a frenzied burst of activity over a mere three days only for the manuscript to be burned (a result of the objections of Stevenson’s wife, Fanny) and entirely rewritten in a subsequent three-day period: “an astounding feat,” Osbourne wrote, “sixty-four thousand words in six days” (Stevenson, *Works*, V: vii, xi). Accounts such as these marginalize the element of calculation and contrivance in literary creativity. In them the author is so closely identified with the work that he appears almost to be possessed by it, and as a consequence is unable to censor his thoughts. That lack of control in turn allows him to disown full responsibility for his writing—as Douglas was to report Wilde later doing apropos of *De Profundis*. 
informing us of events in his private life) or indirectly (in exhibiting aspects of his personality)? And if so, then how secure are those insights? Or, is the work valuable in and of itself, as a piece of what modern critics have termed life-writing, and therefore as a meditation on the nature of suffering and redemption? If we follow this second path, then we also need to ask why the piece is so rarely considered as a whole, and why some of its most obvious literary shortcomings—such as its repetitions, its rambling structure, its frequent contradictions—have been so rarely commented upon? Here it is worth stressing that it is an emphasis on the privacy and intimacy of the document that typically permits these kinds of limitations to be explained away. As Richard Ellmann ably put it: “as an apologia De Profundis suffers from the adulteration of simplicity by eloquence, by an arrogance lurking in its humility and by its disjointed structure. But as a love letter it has all the consistency it needs” (Ellmann, 484).

*De Profundis: Its Texts & Its Identity*

What difference does it make if we replace the label of “partial autobiography” with that of “love letter”? Is Ellmann’s label any more appropriate than Murray’s or, for that matter, than that of Robert Ross? Oddly enough, if we take the time to look at the evidence closely, it turns out that it is not at all clear whether the manuscript even represents a single document, let alone possesses a single identity: that is to say, although the folio bearing the number “1” begins with “Dear Bosie” and the folio bearing the number “40” concludes with “Your affectionate friend, Oscar Wilde,” the folios in between are so varied in character—in the amount and kind of corrections, the style of the handwriting, the sort of material discussed—that it is possible that initially they derived from quite separate documents.¹ Moreover, even if we do assume that the manuscript constitutes a single letter, it was one which was never actually received in that form by its addressee, Alfred Douglas. According to Robert Ross (the most significant player in the entire textual history of the work), Douglas was only sent a “typed copy” of the manuscript, and whether or not he actually received that typed copy, and what relation it bore to the manuscript itself, are vexed issues.²

The vast majority of readers will not normally concern themselves with these questions about the textual integrity and social status of Wilde’s prison manuscript. Moreover, they are details that are routinely overlooked in the romanticized mythology of its composition to which we alluded earlier. So recently, for example, Julia Prewitt Brown has written of *De Profundis* as being composed “in an exalted state of mind,” an observation that could only be made by someone who had never looked at the manuscript itself (Brown, 105). Yet, as we shall try to show, these questions of integrity and status are particularly significant when we think about the manuscript’s autobiographical functions—that is, about both its expressive honesty and its role in forming myths about the “tragic” Wilde.
In assigning such a vital role to names, it is obviously important that we are as clear as possible about our own labels. So in the discussion that follows we will distinguish between what we term Wilde’s “prison manuscript,” that heavily revised handwritten document of 55,000 words written on both sides of forty often barely legible folios, which he put together in his prison cell (it is currently held in the British Library), and the subsequent printings of it, or parts of it, by various hands. These include the portions of the manuscript that Ross published under the title of De Profundis in 1905 and 1908, and the text which Hart-Davis produced in his 1962 edition of Wilde’s correspondence (reprinted in Merlin Holland’s and Hart-Davis’s enlarged edition of the correspondence in 2000, and reprinted too at the hands of several other editors). We shall refer

_Swallows and Amazons & the “Missing” Typescript of De Profundis_  It will come as a surprise to some readers to learn that a key (if unwitting) player in the textual transmission of Wilde’s prison manuscript was a writer who is best known today as the author of a sequence of children’s stories, beginning with the famous _Swallows and Amazons_ (published in 1930). Some years before this work, however, Arthur Ransome (1884–1967) had also published a book on Wilde entitled _Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study_ (1912). In that work he suggested that the versions of De Profundis that Ross had published in 1905 and 1908 had derived from a letter addressed not to Ross (as a reader might have justifiably concluded from those editions) but rather to Alfred Douglas. The very fact that Ransome had dedicated _Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study_ to Ross made it clear to Douglas that Ross must have been the source of this information. Douglas, aware of how damaging this revelation could be to his reputation, immediately wrote to Ross demanding an explanation. Ross defended Ransome by arguing that Douglas, having received a typed copy of Wilde’s prison manuscript, must have always known the origins of the published editions of De Profundis. Douglas furiously denied this and issued writs for libel against author, publisher, printer, and bookseller. Publisher and printer apologized and withdrew but Ransome and the Times Book Club went to court. The action was heard in the High Court of Justice, King’s Bench Division, on 17 and 18 April 1913. Ransome and the Times Book Club defended themselves by producing Wilde’s manuscript (which had been lodged by Ross in the British Library some years earlier), which proved that Ransome’s account was true.

In a letter to Ross of 1912 (now housed in the Ross Deposition in the Clark Library, and reproduced by Douglas Murray), Douglas explained matters as follows: “As you must be perfectly well aware, I have never, until I saw it stated in Ransome’s book, had the slightest inkling that the MS of De Profundis was a letter addressed to me by Wilde or that there was any connection between the letter you sent me in 1897 (which I destroyed after reading the first half dozen lines) and the book” (Douglas Murray, 171). Some years later, in his _Autobiography_, Douglas gave a fuller, though different, version of events:
to these last items as Wilde’s “prison letter” in order to distinguish them from Ross’s editions. If we look in more detail at Wilde’s prison manuscript, and try to ascertain what sort of a document it is, *textually speaking*, what do we find?

As we have noted, much of the biographical importance that attaches to Wilde’s prison manuscript comes from the fact that it was never published in his lifetime. It is a commonplace assumption that manuscripts are documents which in some way represent more “authentic” expressions of a writer’s thoughts. This assumption in turn rests on a further and apparently equally commonplace observation, that a manuscript somehow embodies the “aura” (to adapt Walter Benjamin’s phrase) of a historically real figure. Consequently it is seen as a tangible physical connection with the past and so seems to be the closest possible wit-

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I did not know of the existence of the *De Profundis* MS till years after Wilde’s death. … All I can say with certainty is that on one occasion after I met Oscar again, after his release from prison, I reproached him about something or other in the course of a discussion we had, and he said words to the following effect: “Surely you are not bringing up against me what I wrote in prison when I was starving and half mad. You must know that I didn’t really mean a word of what I said.” It immediately and naturally occurred to me that he was referring to this letter of Ross’s which was supposed to have contained extracts of things he had said or written against me in prison, and I replied to the effect that I had really not done more than glance at the letter, and that as soon as I saw what it was about I tore it in pieces and threw the pieces away. (Douglas, 135)

Although Douglas did admit to receiving from Ross some form of typescript with comments by Wilde about him in 1897, he consistently denied having taken proper notice of it, and therefore denied, too, being able to connect it with the text of Wilde’s prison manuscript (in fact Douglas also persisted in claiming that the typescript he received must have been completed before Wilde left prison). It is impossible to know whose version of these events—that of Ross or Douglas—is true. Ross may have sent Douglas an edited transcript of the prison manuscript (though it is hard to see why he would have gone to the bother of doing so). Douglas may have read much more of the typescript which he received than he was prepared to admit, and may also have believed that in burning it he had destroyed the only copy, and therefore any evidence that Ransome could use to defend himself. What may be more significant, however, is the fact that during the action against Ransome the manuscript was read out in court and therefore further transcripts of it were made by reporters. These were subsequently published in part in many newspapers. Inaccurate and incomplete as these were, this was the first time that the material that Ross had omitted in his editions came into the public domain, and therefore in some ways they represent the first publication of those parts of Wilde’s prison manuscript.
ness to a writer’s creative intentions. Such familiar views of manuscripts have in turn received powerful intellectual reinforcement from some long-established traditions of academic text editing. Theorists such as W.W. Greg argue that any movement away from the manuscript towards a printed text inevitably involves a process of textual corruption because the mechanisms of printing always require the agency of other hands. It was this conviction that gave the rationale to the production of modern variorum editions; it was (and is) assumed that such a process of excavation gets us back to some indefinable “essence” of a work, and thus closer to a writer’s mind in the throes of creation.

The Prison Manuscript

Given this fetishization of manuscript evidence, it may come as something of a surprise to realize that the text printed in all editions of the *Letters* is in fact a mediation of Wilde’s prison manuscript. Textual scholars know well that the transposition of handwriting into type inevitably involves any number of editorial interventions and compromises. In the case of the prison manuscript these are numerous and include the following: a standardization of accidentals, principally punctuation, spelling, and paragraphing; the omission of Wilde’s many deletions of passages; and the rendering invisible of his frequent reordering of material and his insertion of new thoughts. In the *Letters* there are also no indications of those places where Wilde’s handwriting is so cramped or blotted as to be difficult to read, and thus no sense that there are plausible alternative readings for certain words and phrases. There are also occasions where Wilde’s

Manuscript Evidence & Editorial Practice

There are four ways in which modern textual editors can treat the evidence which manuscripts provide (technically, documents such as manuscripts have been known as “witnesses” to a text or, more recently, as “versions”). They may, as W. W. Greg and Fredson Bowers have argued, view a manuscript as the primary and most authoritative witness to a writer’s creative intentions. It follows from this that any copy made from the manuscript entails the possibility (and with early manuscripts, the likelihood) of textual corruption. When they are faced with multiple manuscript copies of a work—frequently the case with Wilde’s oeuvre—these editors still have to decide which one has priority and why. Second, an editor may see publication as a necessary part of the creative process, one in which the writer is given the opportunity to revise and refine first thoughts. In this view, the editor may grant authority to the first published edition of a work, or to the last edition which the writer oversaw before he died, or—hypothetically—to any one in between. Here manuscripts are of interest insofar as they represent an early stage in the creative process. In contrast to the Greg-Bowers line of argument, publication *per se* is not seen as a censoring, coercive, or corrupting activity, although in the case of Wilde it is certainly true that some periodical publishers (and theatre managers) were more controlling than others.
hand is clear, but where his text has been silently “corrected” by the modern editor. In other words, a manuscript which is extremely unfinished, and in places barely legible, is re-presented in type as a coherent and assured narrative. As a consequence, the experience of reading the text in print and the account of its composition which we hypothesize from that reading are profoundly altered. Where the manuscript is chaotic, full of false starts and cancellations, the printed text gives the appearance of order, polish, and fluency.

Even more surprising perhaps is that the physical appearance of the manuscript—in particular the ways in which the pages are numbered and the fact that only some of the folios are revised—does not correspond to the view that it was the product of a single set of intentions. Some folios are obviously fair (or “top”) copy, with Wilde writing in a tiny hand both on and between the lines of the paper. Elsewhere the writing is larger, more spaced, the corrections more numerous, and the frequency of Wilde’s deletions and false starts much more striking. With this second sort of folio we do indeed seem to be closer to a mind in the throes of composition. Interestingly, though, there is no sense of sequence in the relation of “rough drafts” to fair copy. So it is not the case that we have, say, the first third of the document in fair copy, and the rest in draft because the writer ran out of time or paper: rather fair copy and draft are mixed throughout the manuscript. Moreover there is clear evidence that the last and first sentences on certain folios have been corrected to fit one page to the next, with the numbering of the folios themselves adjusted accordingly (so we find

continued  The third option for an editor is to give authority to what has been termed a “social” text—that is, a text that has had wide social currency and influence, but which does not necessarily have the full authority of the writer. A good example is to be found in a famous line in Act I of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where Lady Bracknell comments on Jack’s dead parents. The best-known form of this line, the one most often heard in performance, was in fact the result of a revision made by Robert Ross when he published the play in his 1908 *Collected Edition*: “To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.” The authority for this revision is not known. Wilde’s final (i.e., 1899) version of this line is more concise: “Both?—that seems like carelessness.” Finally, some editors may construct what they consider the best possible version of a work by combining elements of some or all surviving witnesses. Such texts are referred to as “eclectic” texts, and are best known from the editorial practice employed in some editions of Shakespeare’s plays. The complex textual condition of *De Profundis* has made eclectic editing the best way of reconciling the competing claims to authority among the surviving witnesses (which include Wilde’s prison manuscript and various extant, and often undated, typescripts which derive from it).
folios 3 and 3A following folio 2 and preceding folio 4). The nearest modern analogy would be to the digital process of cutting and pasting in a word processor. In other words, most of the physical evidence, together with the few references we have in Wilde’s other correspondence, point to the manuscript being a kind of *cento*, a composite document made up of several different pieces of work, some of them false starts, which may have been written at different times during those long and interminably dull prison days, and with quite different purposes in mind.

Only part of the prison manuscript seems to have started life as a letter to Douglas. The first known reference to such a letter occurs in Wilde’s correspondence with his friend More Adey, in a letter of 18 February 1897. There Wilde talks of working “on the most important letter of my life,” one which will “deal ultimately … with the way in which I desire to meet the world again.” But he also complains about needing to finish it in a few days’ time so that he can send it to Ross to “copy … out carefully,” so that Adey can check that copying; then and only then can the letter itself be forwarded on to “A.D.” (*Complete Letters*, 678). This sense of urgency seems to have been induced by Wilde’s desire to receive some sort of reply from Douglas before he left prison (Wilde’s expected release date was three months hence). Significantly, the end of the manuscript does indeed contain instructions to Douglas as to the form his response should take. “Write to me,” Wilde implores, “write to me with full frankness about yourself: about your life: your friends: your occupations: your books” (*Complete Works*, II: 154).

So it seems that Wilde did not really want a short or unconsidered response; perhaps he hoped for something nearer the length of his own letter. More particularly, Wilde appeared to want some sort of response to his

**Wilde’s Habits of Composition** Fortunately there are a number of Wilde’s works—particularly the society comedies—for which virtually complete sequences of manuscript and typescript drafts have survived and these help us put together a picture of how he typically composed. In the case of the plays, Wilde began by sketching out a rough scenario, and this was followed by the composition of discrete and freestanding blocks of dialogue. This is to say that in the earliest stages of writing, lines are not generally assigned to particular characters, and in subsequent drafts, when characters’ names had been filled in, Wilde frequently distributed and redistributed speeches among them, with apparently little regard to how this affected characterization of minor roles. It seems that the jokes were developed first (several notebooks have survived that contain lists of epigrams), and Wilde then tried to shape dramatic exchanges around them. Of more significance, perhaps, is the fact that his revisions do not develop in a simple linear fashion: lines, speeches, and sometimes act endings deleted from early drafts reappear in later ones. From this we can deduce that Wilde probably worked with several different drafts in front of him at the same time, and that the movement between first and final thoughts was therefore relatively fluid.
objections (which we describe more fully later) about an article Douglas had written on him for the Mercure de France, and a dedication that Douglas planned to include in an edition of his own Poems.

Whatever document Wilde was working on when he wrote to Adey he did not manage to finish it, and we may surmise that his intentions towards it changed. A full six weeks later, in a letter dated 1 April 1897, and this time addressed to Ross, Wilde writes again about his “letter to Alfred Douglas,” informing Ross that it is now finished, and Ross is to expect it shortly. (In fact Ross did not receive the letter because the prison authorities refused permission for it to be sent.) In that letter of 1 April Wilde also repeated his instructions about copying, although this time they were more complex: Wilde asked for two typed copies of the whole manuscript to be made, one for himself “on good paper such as is used for plays … [and with] a wide rubricated margin,” and one for Ross, his newly appointed literary executor; and he also requested two further typed copies of specific passages “welded together” with anything else that Ross might judge “good and nice in intention”; these were to be sent to some close friends so that they might know something of “what is happening to my soul” (Complete Letters, 781–82). Such instructions seem to refer to a rather different document from the letter Wilde had conceived when he had written to Adey on 18 February.

How Should We Read the Manuscript?

The manuscript Wilde had to hand on 1 April was apparently much longer, and also in places rather less personal in that there were now passages that were suited to eyes other than those of Douglas, Adey, and Ross. More important-

continued Of course the very fact that so many early drafts of Wilde’s works have survived at all is strong evidence of the value that he placed on them. He seems to have been reluctant to discard any of the material he wrote, and was always alert to the possibility that lines composed for, and then deleted from, one work could at a future date be transposed into another. Interestingly this pattern of dramatic composition is confirmed by the surviving manuscripts of Wilde’s prose writing, particularly the essays collected in Intentions. There too, we find evidence that the manuscripts submitted as printer’s copy to the periodicals in which the essays were first published were also composite documents made up of corrected fair-copy pages, corrected fair-copy interleaved pages (numbered, as in the prison manuscript, 2a, 13a, 23a, 34a, and so forth) as well as corrected pages retained from earlier drafts. There is also evidence that Wilde was willing to reuse manuscript material from other works: so an early fragmentary manuscript of “The Decay of Lying” contains in it a renumbered manuscript page from one of Wilde’s reviews for the Pall Mall Gazette. Likewise, some passages deleted from drafts of An Ideal Husband were later used in The Importance of Being Earnest.
ly, though, it would surely have been much too lengthy for Ross to have had copied twice (and in two different ways), sent to Douglas, and Douglas to have replied, before Wilde was released from prison, as those instructions at the end of the manuscript indicate. Put another way, it seems very unlikely that Wilde’s injunction to Douglas on the last folio—“Write to me with full frankness”—was actually the last part of the manuscript to be composed. It is much more probable that they belonged to an earlier piece (the letter Wilde had hoped to have finished within a few days when he wrote to Adey in February) which he had subsequently expanded by rewriting some passages and interpolating material from other documents.

This sequence would explain why some folios are much more heavily corrected than others. It would also explain why some of the passages, such as those on Hamlet or on the life of Christ, read as if they had their origins in a different kind of intellectual activity from recriminations against Douglas. In all likelihood they were a reaction to Wilde’s prison reading (which included the Gospels in Greek and Ernest Renan’s Vie de Jésus, as well as Shakespeare) and were only later, to use Wilde’s own term, “welded” to try and form a whole (presumably during that six-week period from February to April). We seem then to have a composite document, made of different pieces composed at different moments; interestingly and importantly, such a description explains the confusing repetitions and shifts in time in the prison manuscript.

These repetitions and shifts are more troublesome than most critics have hitherto acknowledged. For example, Wilde’s friendly soliciting at the end of the manuscript for further information about Douglas’s proposed article on him seems flatly to contradict an earlier comment in which he talks of the “ridiculous Mercure … with its absurd affectation” and of his own “orders” for “the thing [i.e., Douglas’s article] to be stopped at once” (Complete Works, II: 76). This angry report brooks of no negotiation. Why then (apparently later) represent himself as undecided, to the extent of asking Douglas to “quote” from the article, as it is “set up in type” (Complete Works, II: 154)? We will return to these sorts of contradictions later, but our main point for the moment is that by the time the 1 April letter was written, the manuscript which Wilde had before him no longer seemed to be just a letter to Douglas; it now had a more public dimension, to the extent that Wilde seems to have envisaged revising it at a future date, perhaps with publication in mind. Why else might Wilde have specified a copy of his manuscript for his literary executor, if he did not intend it, at some point and in some form, to be made public? (Significantly in his instructions in the February letter Wilde mentions only one copy “for me,” whereas the later instructions specify one for Ross and one for himself.) This sense that the “letter” was by now no longer simply a letter, and looked like something more public and
intended for fuller publication, might well have been why the authorities in Reading Prison decided to withhold the manuscript until Wilde’s release.

What conclusions can we draw from these details about the composition and physical appearance of the manuscript? They do not in any simple way underwrite assumptions about its expressive authenticity. If anything they point us in the opposite direction, for they remind us that it is a contrived document, parts of which, as we have already said, were in all likelihood conceived with publication in mind. For example, in one of the most frequently quoted passages, occurring near the beginning of the manuscript, Wilde compares himself to Byron, a figure also publicly feted and vilified:

I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age…. Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime, and have it so acknowledged…. Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more wonderful / more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of wider / larger scope. (Complete Works, II: 94–95)

Wilde’s summation of his life here does not seem to be addressed only to Douglas; it feels more as if Wilde is self-consciously fashioning a version of his life for posterity, and perhaps attempting to control the shape of subsequent narratives about him. Of course Wilde’s narrative hardly lives up to his advertising of it, in that the personality that emerges from it is frequently some way short of being “noble.” So passages like the one above coexist with those of petty recrimination (in the obsessive recounting of arguments), hubristic self-assertion (in Wilde’s comparison of his own suffering with the agony of Christ), and lachrymose self-pity. The personality that Wilde presents in the whole manuscript is a bundle of contradictions. However the tendency to see the manuscript as the product of a single and consistent creative act has led critics to try to reconcile these disparate modes and moods, and the trope that best allows such an accommodation is that of tragedy—or more particularly, a tragedy born of an overwhelming love affair. So the story of Wilde’s personal life, revealed through and exemplified by the emotional twists and turns of the prison manuscript, becomes that of a prodigiously talented man, in his own words, “brought low” through his desires; those desires in turn metamorphose into an intoxication and obsession with a life of “sensual ease” that culminates in his nemesis, in which he describes himself staggering “as an ox into the shambles” (Complete Works, II: 95, 43). The power of this self-dramatization can be seen in its closeness to the life mapped out in Ellmann’s biography; it has also informed the work of those many critics and historians who wish to see the trials and his imprisonment as the defining moment of Wilde’s life.

However, a recognition of the manuscript’s artifactual nature should alert us to the possibility that the complex and conflicting personality we find in it might be the result of rather more prosaic circumstances, of Wilde’s inexpert
(or unfinished) “welding” together of documents initially composed separately and with different audiences in mind: that is, that the “personality” he chose to exhibit in a private remonstration with Douglas was very different from the more elevated sufferer he wished to construct for posterity. Moreover, both of these personas may have had an element of artifice to them and should not necessarily be taken as indications of the “real” Wilde. We should acknowledge that Wilde’s copying instructions to Ross and Adye indicate that he wrote (at least at times) with a sense of an audience in mind; that this audience was always more numerous and complex than the manuscript’s ostensible recipient, Alfred Douglas; and that some aspects of the personality that Wilde exhibits in the manuscript have a performative element to them.

Where do these observations take us? They should make us much more cautious about interpreting the prison manuscript, in its entirety, either as a “love letter” or as “partial autobiography.” And this in turn suggests that self-disclosure may be neither the most secure nor the most appropriate ground for evaluating it. Certainly we should be aware that in those parts of the manuscript in which Wilde does examine his personal life with Douglas, his version of events may not be particularly reliable. His construction of himself as an aggrieved victim may have more to do with rhetoric than reality, and thus Wilde’s tragic persona may also be largely a fiction. In this scenario what we learn about Wilde from the prison manuscript is not so much who the “real” man was as the facility and inventiveness of his “self-fashioning.” Likewise if, as we have suggested, some of the details of its composition entitle us to treat the prison manuscript as a semipublic document, then we need to confront head-on the problems of its structure and tone. That is, it will no longer be sufficient to explain away the repetitions and stylistic inconsistencies as aspects of (or evidence for) Wilde’s volatile emotional state.

In the remainder of this chapter we will pursue these two possibilities in more detail, beginning by reconsidering Robert Ross’s abridged editions of the manuscript; these represent the first attempt to place before the public a literary work. As we will explain, Ross’s use of Wilde’s manuscript has been controversial; but it still has much to tell us about the document’s textual integrity and its identity.

**Robert Ross’s *De Profundis***

It is worth reminding ourselves that Ross was able to produce his editions of *De Profundis* because rather than sending the prison manuscript to Douglas, he kept it himself, apparently sending Douglas one of the typed copies instead. It is not clear whether Ross took this course of action on his own initiative, or whether it had been suggested to him by Wilde. When the two men were together in Dieppe after Wilde’s release they would have had plenty of time to discuss the manuscript, and it is difficult to believe that it would not have been
the focus of a great deal of their conversation. The consequence of Ross’s decision was effectively to transfer “ownership” of the manuscript from Douglas to Ross; with this move its identity as a “love letter” was immediately compromised. In his preface to his 1905 edition of De Profundis, Ross refers to Wilde’s manuscript simply as “the last work in prose he ever wrote” (Complete Works, II: 311). (We might note that private letters are rarely given the status of “works.” Ross seems to be making a distinction between the manuscript as “letter” and as literary work.) Then, in order to establish authority for his volume, he quotes some sections of Wilde’s 1 April 1897 letter to him, describing them as Wilde’s “instructions” for the “publication” of De Profundis. Ross carefully edited the excerpts from Wilde’s letter in order to remove all reference to Douglas, as well as any sense that De Profundis had ever been intended as a private document. For example, Wilde’s comment—“Whether or not the letter does good to his narrow nature and hectic brain, to me it has done great good”—was reproduced by Ross as the more generalized: “Whether or not the letter does good to narrow natures and hectic brains, to me it has done great good” (Complete Works, II: 311). The implication is that Wilde, from the outset, had thought of his manuscript (or parts of it) as having some form of public life; he had, according to Ross, “mentioned its existence to many other friends.” This erasure of Douglas by Ross has usually been interpreted as a form of censorship, one motivated by Ross’s personal animosity, his fear of libel, as well as his attempt to restore some of Wilde’s damaged reputation. Ross’s excisions from the manuscript itself—he omits all the passages in which Wilde speaks directly of his relationship with Douglas—have also been seen in the same light, and as a result both his 1905 and 1908 editions have tended to be overlooked by both critics and literary historians.

What has not been realized is that the text of Ross’s 1905 edition in fact corresponds closely to those parts of the manuscript which Wilde himself specified as making up a version which he considered safe for the eyes of his friends. Moreover, on the manuscript itself these passages are marked off in blue pencil. In his preface to the 1905 edition Ross did not quote Wilde’s instructions in his 1 April letter about the passages that were “good and nice in intention,” presumably because he did not, at that time, wish to give readers the impression that the manuscript had been heavily edited. However, Ross was considerably more open in the preface to his 1908 edition, declaring his intention to issue only “portions” of the manuscript, though describing this decision as being “in accordance with the writer’s wishes.” He then explained what those portions amounted to:

_I need only say here that De Profundis is a manuscript … cast in the form of a letter to a friend not myself; that it was written at intervals during the last six months of the author’s imprisonment on blue stamped prison foolscap paper. Reference to it and directions in regard to it occur in letters addressed to myself.… With the exception of Major Nelson [i.e., the governor at Reading_
... myself, and a confidential typewriter, no one has read the whole of it. Contrary to a general impression, it contains nothing scandalous. There is no definite scheme or plan in the work; as he proceeded the writer's intention obviously and constantly changed; it is desultory; a portion of it is taken up with business and private matters of no interest whatever. (Complete Works, II: 314–15; Ross's italics)

There are several ways of reading this passage. For critics disposed to be hostile to Ross, it may look like evidence of duplicity: having hinted in 1905 at the manuscript’s public existence, Ross is now forced to acknowledge that virtually “no one has read the whole of it,” though he quickly glosses over this discrepancy by commenting that the passages he excised are mere “business and private matters of no interest whatever.” To focus on Ross as a censor, however, is to overlook other important details in his statement, such as his description of the manuscript as having been composed over “six months” with “constantly” changing intentions. We know that Wilde often composed rapidly; the implication here is that he wrote in fits and starts over a relatively long period of time, a suggestion that is confirmed by the physical state of the manuscript. We are emphasizing this point about the manuscript’s composition because it is important to acknowledge that Ross’s editing is really doing no more than formalizing existing transitions in the manuscript’s argument and style to which Wilde had drawn attention in his 1 April letter. The question that is begged, then, is not so much to do with where Ross “disjoints” the text, but whether or not the material that he leaves out compromises the manuscript’s literary (as opposed to its biographical) value. To put this another way: we might ask whether, as Wilde’s literary executor, Ross did a good job.

Ross’s 1905 edition in fact printed approximately one-fifth of the text of the manuscript. As one might expect, the “business and private matters” that he omitted include all references to the day-to-day details of Wilde’s life with Douglas which are dwelt on so obsessively and repetitively in the full manuscript—that is, the meals and the arguments they had together, Douglas’s (homosexual) “trouble” at Oxford, his forced trips to Egypt, the reconciliation between Douglas and Wilde in Paris, Wilde’s interviews with Douglas’s mother, Lady Queensberry, the tensions over the article in the Mercure de France, and so on. Ross also suppressed personal names: so Douglas becomes —— and Ross himself R——. What remained to Ross, after these excisions, were two long, abstract digressions (as we have noted, on Hamlet and on the life of Christ) as well as numerous shorter asides almost certainly suggested by the books to which Wilde had access in prison (so comments on Dante, Goethe, and the Old Testament are frequent). The effect of this editing is to take away much of the particularity, and some of the pettiness, of Wilde’s emotional responses. The personality of Wilde is still in evidence on every page of Ross’s edition, but now it is defined largely in relation to literary and biblical tropes. In other words, the Wilde of Ross’s text suffers in a recognizable literary tradition. So his first
explicit allusion is a strategy to clothe himself in the garb of the most famous suffering poet of the nineteenth century. Like Tennyson, Wilde is a “lord of language” and like Tennyson in *In Memoriam*, Wilde too testifies to the poverty of mere “words” to convey the depth of his suffering.

One or two examples will make this distinction between the tormented artistic type (which Ross’s editing exhibited) and the recriminating individual (which he excluded) a little clearer. Ross chooses to open his text with a self-conscious literary and biblical re-creation of a suffering persona. The generalizing “we” is inclusive, and the power of the rhetoric does not require for its effect a knowledge of the particularity of Wilde’s case. Ross edits Wilde into a figure of suffering humanity; the emotions described are exactly those which answer to Wilde’s own account of his life as “something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope”:

… Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle around one centre of pain. The paralysing immobility of a life every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern … this immobile quality, that makes each dreadful day in the very minutest detail like its brother, seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless change. Of seed-time or harvest, of the reapers bending over the corn, or the grape gatherers threading through the vines, of the grass in the orchard made white with broken blossoms or strewn with fallen fruit: of these we know nothing and can know nothing.

For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The very sun and moon seem taken from us…. It is always twilight in one’s cell, as it is always twilight in one’s heart. (*Complete Works*, II: 159)

The contrast with the beginning of the full manuscript could not be starker. Its tone results from a personal mixture of admonition, anger, and self-pity. Wilde’s sense of outrage and grievance (evidenced in the insistent repetition of first-person singular verbs) is the dominant note, and is particular to the circumstances which occasioned it, his life with Douglas:

Dear Bosie,—

After long and fruitless waiting I have determined to write to you myself, as much for your sake as for mine…. Our ill-fated and 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, <illeg. word> /bitterness\ and contempt should forever 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 or passion,
of remorse or indifference you may choose to send as your answer or your appeal. (Complete Works, II: 37)

Where Ross’s *De Profundis* is strikingly lyrical, the manuscript rebukes; where Ross’s Wilde attempts to encompass the totality of human suffering within a larger temporal scheme, the manuscript articulates a series of incidents which demonstrate only the petty power politics between the older, famous writer and the careless disciple and lover trading on that fame.

Taken as a whole, Ross’s *De Profundis* possesses a thematic and tonal coherence; as a meditation on suffering articulated via a literary canon that includes Dante, Wordsworth, Goethe, Augustine, and Shakespeare, it is reminiscent of the dense allusiveness of Wilde’s earlier (and published) critical essays. The following passage, for example, would not look at all out of place in *Intentions*:

> Art has made us myriad-minded. Those who have the artistic temperament go into exile with Dante and learn how salt is the bread of others, and how steep their stairs; they catch for a moment the serenity and calm of Goethe, and yet know but too well that Baudelaire cried to God—
>
> O Seigneur, donnez-moi la force et le courage
> De contempler mon corps et mon coeur sans dégoût.

> Out of Shakespeare’s sonnets they draw, to their own hurt it may be, the secret of his love and make it their own; they look with new eyes on modern life, because they have listened to one of Chopin’s nocturnes, or handled Greek things, or read the story of the passion of some dead man for some dead woman whose hair was like threads of fine gold, and whose mouth was as a pomegranate. (Complete Works, II: 177)

Is it helpful to call this simply a letter? Such a passage demands to be read explicitly in literary terms, for its intertextuality and for its abstract (as opposed to personal) account of integrity. This is not to deny that Ross’s text gains much poignancy and power from the knowledge that the intellectual abstractions for which Wilde gropes have arisen from a need to revalue or to give meaning to his own particular experiences. But the logic of his argument does not depend on that particularity; moreover, the rhetoric is constantly pulling the reader towards what is seen as a truth about human lives in general. For example, Wilde’s allusion in the following passage (in Ross’s 1905 edition) to his loss of access to his children is utilized not so much to evoke pity for his own plight, but as an opportunity to make a more abstract comment about the nature of self-knowledge:

> Suddenly they [my children] were taken away from me by the law. It was a blow so appalling that I did not know what to do, so I flung myself on my knees, and bowed my head, and wept, and said, “The body of a child is the body of the Lord: I am not worthy of either.” That moment seemed to save me. I saw then that the only thing was for me to accept everything. Since then—curious though it may sound—I have been
happier. It was of course my soul in its ultimate essence that I had reached. (Complete Works, II: 176)

Here Wilde registers his emotions in a highly stylized, almost theatrical manner: and this is because it is not so much the “reality” of his own grieving with which he is concerned, but a theological intellectualization of the meaning of loss. Moreover, the rhetoric directs us to dwell on the value of that abstract meaning rather than the intensity of Wilde’s own particular emotions. We are invited to understand, as Wilde does, that the only appropriate response to the vulnerability that loss induces is an acceptance of our fate which returns us to a childlike state of innocent simplicity. This sort of writing, then, works very differently from the recriminations against Douglas with which the manuscript begins; there Wilde’s emotional responses are only ever particular. The power of that writing arises from a visceral, but fundamentally private, reliving of specific past events. Take for example the following passage (omitted from Ross’s edition) in which Wilde admonishes Douglas over his extravagance:

But your surrender of your little allowance did not mean that you /were ready to\ 
\give up <3 illeg. words> /even one of your most\ superfluous luxuries, or /most\ unnecessary extravagances.… My expenses for eight days in Paris for myself, you, and your Italian servant were nearly £150: Paillard alone absorbing £85. (Complete Works, II: 63)

It is the nature of the details, the meticulousness of Wilde’s accounting, that is striking here. At the same time, though, there is no meaning to the amounts of money specified apart from some private quarrel between Wilde and Douglas. The bitterness of Wilde’s tone may allow us to make some inferences about his state of mind; but we do not move beyond the specifics of a particular personality. Here it is worth recalling two of Wilde’s artistic injunctions in the Preface to Dorian Gray: “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s name” and “From the point of view of feeling, the artist’s craft is the type.” Nothing could be more foreign to Wilde’s literary aesthetic than the idea of self-revelation so commonly attributed to the prison manuscript when it is considered solely as a letter: a tortured replaying of the intimacies of his life with Douglas may have been important—at some moments of his imprisonment—for Wilde’s own mental well-being (and possibly, in his eyes, necessary for any future reconciliation with his lover), but this was not such stuff that art was made on. Ross’s editing of the prison manuscript—undertaken at Wilde’s direction—could thus be seen as an attempt to do honour to these precepts: in omitting what he deemed “private,” Ross was simply excising that material which lacked artistic value as Wilde himself had defined art.
De Profundis & Autobiography

Of course, for modern readers it is the self-revelatory aspects of the life Wilde chose to “show to the world” which are of most interest. As we have said, this preference has been largely due to the way the prison manuscript has been represented to them—as a private letter which was locked up in the British Museum for half a century. The public literary work, which Ross tried to excavate, is very much submerged in that letter, existing among details of Wilde’s relationship with Douglas. At first sight the reader of the manuscript is often overwhelmed by the sheer abundance of those details, and this reinforces the impression that Wilde is revealing a great deal. But first impressions can be deceptive. Although Wilde’s story of his life covers around four to five years from 1892–1897, it is not arranged chronologically. Rather Wilde dwells obsessively on a surprisingly small number of what he saw as the key events in his life with Douglas. They include Douglas’s attempt to publish some of his own poetry and his correspondence with Wilde in the Mercure de France; the role Wilde played in “rescuing” Douglas from the clutches of blackmailers; Douglas’s trip to Egypt; and Douglas’s alleged neglect of Wilde when the latter was ill in Brighton in 1894. Wilde’s recounting of these events is repetitive; and because they are often not dated, and are described in different ways, many readers will not realize that the same memories are being rehearsed again and again. If we wish to value the manuscript for its self-disclosure, we certainly need to look much more carefully at these events and the consistency with which they are retailed.

A good example of the complexities we encounter is to be found in Wilde’s accounts of Douglas’s “trouble” in Oxford; it was probably blackmail following a homosexual scandal, which if made public would have threatened his family with disgrace, and possibly Douglas himself with imprisonment. Wilde alludes to it in a passage near the beginning of the manuscript: “The gutter and the things that live in it had begun to fascinate you. That was the origin of the trouble in which you sought my aid, and I … out of pity and kindness gave it to you” (Complete Works, II: 38). Some pages later, Wilde returns to the same incident, but is more expansive:

Our friendship really begins with your begging me in a most pathetic and charming letter to <come to you 2 illeg. words> /assist you in a position appalling to any one, doubly so to <an undergraduate> /a young man at Oxford: I do so, and ultimately through your using my name as your friend with Sir George Lewis, I began to lose his esteem and friendship, a friendship of fifteen years standing. When I <lost> /was deprived of his advice and help and regard I <lost> /was deprived of the one great safeguard of my life. (Complete Works, II: 58–59)

The obvious point to note here is that only a careful reader would gather that Wilde is referring to the same event—that is, having apparently dealt with his first meeting with Douglas, he is now returning to it. However, this chronolog-
ical complexity is the least interesting part of the repetition, although one needs to be alert to the fact that the passages refer to the same event to see what is at issue. In the first passage Wilde characterizes his willingness to help Douglas as a morally admirable decision, one inspired by “pity and kindness.” By contrast, in the second rehearsing of the incident Wilde presents himself as being importuned by Douglas and later regretting his generosity. More precisely he uses this incident to blame Douglas for his (Wilde’s) estrangement from his legal adviser, George Lewis, and this in turn, in Wilde’s view, becomes central to his later downfall. How near is this to the truth? It certainly is the case that Lewis could not act for Wilde during the trials, but that inability was not, directly at least, Douglas’s doing. Lewis had already been engaged by Queensberry, and when Lewis realized that Wilde wished to secure his services, he assured Wilde that “although I cannot act against him [Queensberry] I should not act against you”; and following the committal proceedings for Queensberry, Lewis passed the case to Charles Russell and never appeared in court afterwards either acting for or against Wilde (Holland, 300). So Wilde, far from losing Lewis’s “esteem and friendship,” was rather the recipient of his enduring loyalty.

One explanation for these different interpretations of the same event might relate to Wilde’s changing moods, not so much about Douglas as about himself. Thus in the first passage the incident allows him to fashion a version of his life in terms that hint at a generosity of spirit; but in the second case he sees himself merely as a victim. What is important is that we actually gain very little insight into the nature of the “trouble” at Oxford, nor how, nor why, it was Wilde who came to Douglas’s assistance. Little, then, has been revealed.

Another example of this confusing repetition of the same event concerns an incident which took place in the middle of April 1895—before Wilde’s conviction, that is. Douglas had seen fit to publish in the Star a letter which in his view defended Wilde’s conduct. Wilde recalls the event as follows: “I remember <you sent me> /your producing\ with /absolute\ pride a letter you had <addressed to> /published in\ one of the halfpenny newspapers about me…. You appealed to the ‘English sense of fair play,’ or something very dreary of that kind, on behalf of ‘a man who was down’” (Complete Works, II: 71). This passage occurs at a point about a third of the way through the prison manuscript. Towards the end of the manuscript, Wilde returns to that letter, indeed to the exact phrases he had used to describe Douglas’s actions there, but with no signal that he has already discussed the event: “You must remember that a patronising and Philistine letter about ‘fair play’ for a ‘man who is down,’ is all right for an English newspaper. It carries on the old traditions of English journalism in regard to their attitude towards artists” (Complete Works, II: 173). We can explain such a repetition in terms of a simple lapse of memory, understandable in a long document. But there is a much more disconcerting unsignalled repe-
tition of material in Wilde’s manuscript which also concerns Douglas’s attempts to publish material on Wilde.

On this occasion Douglas wanted to include some of Wilde’s letters to him to accompany an essay he had written for the *Mercure de France*. The memory of it is for Wilde like an open wound. So barely one hundred words into his manuscript, he alludes to that attempted publication as he reveals his hopes that his words will cause Douglas to “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” (*Complete Works*, II: 37). Some sixteen thousand words further on Wilde revisits the same event, describing the role of another friend, Robert Harborough Sherard, in thwarting Douglas’s plans:

Robert Sherard … comes to see me, and amongst other things tells me that in that ridiculous ‘Mercure de France,’ with its absurd affectation of being the /true\ centre of literary corruption, you are about to publish an article on me with specimens of my letters. He asks <was> me /if it really was\ by my wish. I was greatly taken aback, and much annoyed, and gave orders that the thing was to be stopped at once. (*Complete Works*, II: 76)

Scarcey a few hundred words later, the hurt surfaces again, and Wilde describes a visit he is required to make to the prison governor at Wandsworth to hear a request made by Douglas. The governor

“*Trafficking with Merchants for His Soul*: Douglas’s Attempts to Publish Wilde’s Correspondence” Wilde’s objections to Douglas’s desire to publish some of their private correspondence were not made just on personal grounds, that he feared his privacy might be further invaded. His opposition was also a matter of principle; it derived from a long-held view that the public’s appetite for details about artists’ biographies was degrading for all parties, and that an appreciation of an artist’s personality should derive from an appreciation of his art, and therefore had nothing at all to do with knowledge of his private life. On learning that Keats’s love letters to Fanny Brawne were to be sold at auction at Sotheby’s in March 1885 Wilde composed a sonnet (published the following year) lamenting the exposure of the personal details of their relationship. It begins: “These are the letters which *Endymion* wrote | To one he loved in secret, and apart. | And now the brawlers of the auction mart | Bargain and bid for each poor blotted note, | Ah! For each separate pulse of passion quote | The merchant’s price: I think they love not art, | Who break the crystal of a poet’s heart | That small and sickly eyes may glare and gloat!” (*Complete Works*, I: 165–66). Wilde expressed similar sentiments throughout his career, in the Preface to *Dorian Gray*, and in *Intentions* where he wrote: “The private lives of men and women should not be told to the public. The public have nothing to do with them at all.” (Ross, ed., *Intentions*, 313)
reads me out a letter you had sent to him to say addressed to him in which you stated that you proposed to publish an article “on the case of Mr Oscar Wilde,” in the Mercure de France … and were anxious to obtain my permission to publish extracts and selections from … what letters? The letters I had written to you from Holloway Prison: the letters that should have been to you things sacred and secret beyond anything in the whole world! These actually were the letters you proposed to publish for the jaded décadent to wonder at, for the greedy feuilletoniste to chronicle. (Complete Works, II: 78)

A mere couple of hundred or so words further on still we find Wilde returning to the theme, apparently unaware of the fact that the topic has already been broached three times before:

What did interest them [i.e., the French] was how an artist of my distinction … could … have brought such an action. Had you proposed for your article to publish the letters, endless I fear in number, in which I had spoken to you of the ruin you were bringing on my life, of the madness of moods of rage that you were allowing to master you to your own hurt as well as to mine, and of my desire, nay my determination to end a friendship so fatal to me in every way, I could have understood it, though I would not have allowed such letters to be published. (Complete Works, II: 81)

A little later, Wilde goes back to the interview with the prison governor, once again apparently unmindful of the fact that he has mentioned the details of the episode very recently:

You could write to the Governor of Wandsworth Prison to ask my permission to publish my letters in the “Mercure de France.”… Why not have written to the Governor of the Prison at Reading to ask my permission to dedicate your poems to me, whatever /fantastic/ description you may have chosen to give them? Was it because in the one case the magazine in question had been prohibited by me from publishing /any/ /letters/, the /legal/ copyright of which, as you are of course perfectly well aware, was and is vested entirely in me? (Complete Works, II: 84)

Even if we accept the proposition that the manuscript is a kind of cento, this fourfold repetition of the same incident in the space of so short a stretch of text is not easy to understand, except in terms of an obsessive mind working out its demons. Four-fifths of the way through the letter—in other words, some twenty thousand words later—Wilde once more calls to mind Sherard’s role as a censor, this time to make explicit the contrast between those friends who had stayed loyal to him, and kept his interests at heart, and those (like Douglas) who had (apparently) acted thoughtlessly and selfishly:

When Robert Sherard heard from me that I did not wish you to publish any article on me in the Mercure de France, with or without letters, you should have been grateful to him for having ascertained my wishes on the point, and /for/ having saved you from without intending it, inflicting more pain on me than you had /done already/. (Complete Works, II: 132)
Finally and almost incomprehensibly, Wilde concludes the prison manuscript by making solicitous enquiries about the state of the article that he had bitterly deprecated so many times before:

[| Let me know all about your article on me for the “Mercure de France.” I know something of it. You <illeg.word> had better quote from it. It is set up in type. Also, let me know the exact terms of your Dedication of your poems. If it is in prose, quote the prose; if in verse, quote the verse. I have no doubt that there will be beauty in it\ … /Tell me about your volume and its reception\. (Complete Works, II: 154)

It is very difficult to see how this comment could have been written by Wilde after he had learned of Sherard’s intervention: here Wilde implies that he knows relatively little of the content of the Mercure essay; he is also uncharacteristically optimistic about Douglas’s other proposal, anticipating that the dedication in the volume of poems (also to be published by the Mercure) will have “beauty in it.” The attitude to Douglas’s actions is so inconsistent that it is difficult to make sense of Wilde’s constant rehearsing of it except in terms of a simple loss of narrative or structural control.

On other occasions the reliability of the manuscript seems to be compromised by an opposite quality, an overzealous control that amounts to a form of deception. So Wilde refers to a trip to Egypt made by Douglas in 1893, and in so doing he relates conversations he had with Douglas’s mother, Lady Queensberry, over his apparent concern with Douglas’s health:

I had myself, with your knowledge and concurrence, begged your mother to send you to Egypt away from England, as you were wrecking your life in London. I knew that if you did not go it would be a terrible disappointment to her, and for her sake I did meet you, and /under the influence of great emotion, which even you cannot have forgotten/, I forgave the past. (Complete Works, II: 48)

A letter by Wilde dated 8 November 1893 helps to explain what is going on here. Wilde had written to Lady Queensberry expressing concerns about Douglas’s well-being and advising that she “send him abroad to better surroundings”—“to the Cromers in Egypt if that could be managed, where he would have new surroundings, proper friends, and a different atmosphere” (Complete Letters, 575).

An ill-informed reader would not be aware of the fact that a trip to Egypt to work with the British ambassador, Lord Cromer, was a convenience that suited many parties. It allowed Douglas to escape from a possible scandal at home which had threatened to embroil him, Ross, and Wilde. Although precise details are now lost, the broad outline of that affair can be summarized as follows. Robert Ross had met a sixteen-year-old youth, subsequently identified as either Philip Danney or Alfred Lambart. Ross invited the youth, at that time a pupil of a school in Bruges, to stay with him in London, where Ross seduced him. Ross later introduced Danney/Lambart to Douglas. Depending upon which source
we go to, Douglas fell in love with the youth or seduced him (or both), and took him back to Goring to spend a weekend there—to sleep first with himself and then with Wilde. The youth returned to Bruges, where his headmaster Briscoe Wortham found out the details of the incident. Wortham was convinced that Wilde (as well as Ross and Douglas) was involved sexually with his pupil. The youth’s father informed the police, but refused to press charges against either Ross or Douglas because, as Ross’s solicitor—again Sir George Lewis—pointed out, a successful prosecution by the father would also have involved the prosecution of his own son.

In outline these are the details omitted from Wilde’s account. One reason for Wilde’s lack of candour may be explained by the fact that other eyes, especially those of the prison authorities, would have been a party to compromising information. But of course there was no need for candour, for Douglas would have known exactly what Wilde was alluding to. However this issue of what we can call “partial disclosure” forces us to confront our temptation to treat the manuscript autobiographically. What appear to be the most authentically private moments—in that they answer best to the title of a personal letter—paradoxically tell us least; or, rather, what they do tell us is misleading, for not only do they withhold what is for the modern reader vital information, they also allow Wilde to present himself in a not wholly truthful light.

A second example of this absence of candour concerns the reconciliation of Douglas and Wilde in Paris. Immediately after the Egyptian exile, Wilde describes himself as being reluctantly persuaded to meet Douglas for one last time in the French capital; he also describes Douglas eagerly travelling solidly for a week to that rendezvous. The problem is that both parties disagree absolutely about what actually happened in Paris. Here is Wilde’s account of that meeting, and his reasons for consenting to it:

You had yourself often told me how many of your race there had been who had stained their hands in their own blood…. Pity, my old affection for you, regard for your mother … the horror of the idea that so young a life, and one that amidst all /its ugly/ faults had /still/ promise of beauty in it, /should come to so revolting an end/, mere humanity itself—all these … must serve as my excuse for consenting to <3 illeg. words> accord you one /last/ interview <at any rate>. When I arrived in Paris, your tears, breaking out again and again all through the evening, and falling over your cheeks like rain as we sat, at dinner first at Voisin’s, at supper at Paillard’s afterwards: <your joy at> /the unfeigned joy you evinced at\ seeing me <again> … your contrition, so simple and sincere, at the moment: made me consent to renew our friendship. (Complete Works, II: 50)

As a piece of rhetoric, Wilde’s “recollection” of Douglas’s tear-stained face and his own succumbing to it is powerfully moving. However, and quite characteristically, Douglas’s recall of the same events was different, and he later dismissed Wilde’s version as those “purely imaginary scenes at Voisin’s and Paillard’s” (Douglas, 41). Here Douglas uses “imaginary” in a derogatory sense because
he is contesting the truth of Wilde’s statements. Ironically, however, the term “imaginary” does seem apposite, but only if we see the writing as a self-fashioning, as an act of the imagination.

Intertextuality & Self-Fashioning

Most readers of Wilde’s prison manuscript will probably not notice his repetitions nor be able to detect the misrepresentations that we have described. Taken in its entirety, the document is exceptionally difficult to summarize or to paraphrase, or even to recall in detail. This is partly a result, as we have noted earlier, of its lack of an organizational structure and its consequently meager paragraphing, far more noticeable in the manuscript than in any printed version. The experience of reading it tends therefore to be impressionistic; we come away from it with a sense of Wilde’s moods, rather than of his argument. Does it matter, then, if the events that generate those moods turn out to be rather limited in number, and that Wilde’s recall of them can be demonstrated to be unreliable or biased?

The answers to these questions depend a great deal on what we initially decide to “do” with the document. Those who are still inclined to treat the prison manuscript as partial autobiography might argue that its inconsistencies and lack of polish merely demonstrate its authenticity as a witness to Wilde’s emotions. But even if we follow this path, we still encounter problems which have to do with the way emotions are registered. Sometimes they are highly stylized, almost theatrical in tone (as in a passage that we quoted, in which Wilde describes himself on his knees, head bowed, and weeping); but on other occasions, they seem extraordinarily raw, the venomous contempt for Douglas scarcely controlled. On these occasions one can almost feel Wilde working himself up as he writes, and the emotion on display may have more to do with his mood at the moment of composition than at the time of the events that are being recalled—the emotions are, as it were, being “cooked up.” It is interesting that in his prison manuscript Wilde often repeats lines he had given to Mrs. Arbuthnot in the last act of A Woman of No Importance, especially at those moments when she self-righteously dramatizes herself as a casualty of Lord Illingworth’s sexual predation and duplicity. About halfway through his manuscript Wilde imagines what his life will be after his release from prison: “The external things of life seem to me now of no importance at all. You can see to what intensity of individualism I have arrived, or am arriving rather, for the journey is long, and ‘where I walk there are thorns’” (Complete Works, II: 97). Wilde’s quotation and figuring of himself as an outcast are very reminiscent of a speech he had given to Mrs. Arbuthnot in Act IV: “For me the world is shrivelled to a palm’s breadth, and where I walk there are thorns” (Ross, ed., A Woman of No Importance, 170). A little later, as if to confirm that the play was indeed uppermost in his mind, Wilde uses the first part of Mrs. Arbuthnot’s line:
“for me 'the world is shrivelled to a handsbreadth,' and everywhere I turn <I see> my name is written on the rocks in lead” (Complete Works, II: 101). It is as if Wilde, in his own mind, has temporarily morphed into a character from one of his own plays, but as the melodramatic victim and not in the role we would most expect, the dandy.

What if we set aside the idea of self-disclosure, and instead consider the manuscript for its literary merit—that is, as a work the main ambition of which is to describe in generalized terms the nature of suffering and redemption? Here we also encounter difficulties. We need to acknowledge that the manuscript is uneven to the point of inconsistency, and that Ross's editing of it should be revalued. In literary terms, Ross's De Profundis is a much “tighter” work; moreover, it is not necessarily any less authentic than the text printed by Hart-Davis. Both, after all, are mediations of Wilde's prison manuscript; it is just that each was undertaken with a different purpose in mind, and with a different sense of the manuscript’s identity and of Wilde’s intentions towards it.

Considering Wilde’s manuscript as a literary work should also make us pay more attention to the origins of the tropes through which he presents his suffering. The tendency to see Wilde’s manuscript as originating in his own experience has done no great justice to Wilde’s reputation as a writer, for it has tended to obscure the richly layered literary allusiveness by which he “constructs” himself. At its best the prison manuscript contains wonderfully moving prose, which exhibits Wilde’s skill in synthesizing different sources and traditions into a coherent and wholly new voice, so much so that the modern reader can no longer easily perceive the elements of that synthesis. To explore this aspect of Wilde’s work, we need to be fully aware of those traditions which inform his depiction of suffering. In brief they include: a use of biblical language and biblical tropes; a reading of suffering in the work of previous writers, particularly Dante and Spinoza; and a use of classical allusions. Such a study might allow us to evaluate the prison manuscript in a way removed from the specificities of biography, particularly Wilde’s relationship with Douglas.

Early on in the prison manuscript, sandwiched between his repeated indictments of Douglas’s treatment of him in Brighton, Wilde offers the following generalized comment on the life of the prisoner:

[W]e who live in prison, and in whose lives there is no event but sorrow, have to measure time by throbs of pain, and the <memory> /record\ of bitter moments. We have nothing else to think of. Suffering … is the means by which we exist, because it is the only means by which we become conscious of existing; and the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the warrant, the evidence of our continued identity. Between myself and the memory of joy lies a gulf no less deep than that between myself and joy in its actuality … each day I have to <pass> /realise\ … [that] my life, whatever it had seemed to myself and /to\ others, had all the while been a real symphony of sorrow. (Complete Works, II: 51)
This contrast between an identity formed from “sorrow,” as opposed to one defined by “joy,” is central to Wilde’s intellectualization of suffering. Moreover the insight seems to derive directly from his own experience—seems, that is, to be a perfect example of the link between expressive authenticity and emotional intensity. Yet the proposition does not originate with Wilde at all; rather it comes in the first instance from Spinoza. Moreover, it was an idea with which Wilde was well acquainted long before his imprisonment. For example, in Part II of “The Critic as Artist” we find the following comment made apropos of Ernest’s discussion of the value of the emotions evoked by works of art: “We weep, but we are not wounded. We grieve, but our grief is not bitter. In the actual life of man, sorrow, as Spinoza says somewhere, is a passage to a lesser perfection” (Ross, ed., _Intentions_, 174).

The allusion is to a passage in Spinoza’s _Ethics_ (from Part III, Definitions of the Emotions): “Tristitia est hominis transitio ad minorem perfectionem.” Two entries on Spinoza in Wilde’s _Commonplace Book_, a document from the 1870s, suggest that he may have studied, or at least read, the _Ethics_ as an undergraduate. What may be more significant in tracing the origins of this allusion is Matthew Arnold’s essay “A Word More About Spinoza,” which first appeared in _Macmillan’s Magazine_ in 1863, and was reprinted as “Spinoza” in the first edition of _Essays in Criticism_. Arnold quoted this very line from the _Ethics_ and translated it literally as “Sorrow is man’s passage to a lesser perfection” (Arnold, ed. Super, III: 177). Walter Pater, too, had alluded to the lines in his _Imaginary Portraits_ (1887) when he described the upbringing of the young Sebastian van Storck: “‘Joy,’ he

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**Wilde & the Question of Intertextuality**  Few issues have divided critics as much as Wilde’s use of sources. The central difficulty derives from the complex way in which he registers those sources. In his prose fiction he occasionally uses direct quotation and sometimes paraphrase. Only rarely does he give an author’s name or a work’s title. In the plays and in _Intentions_ quoted material is hardly ever signalled textually (by, say, the use of quotation marks), and frequently Wilde reuses passages from his own (earlier) work. So _Lady Windermere’s Fan_ and _A Woman of No Importance_ borrow aphorisms and jokes from _Dorian Gray_.

The very terms critics use to describe these varied practices are fraught with difficulty because they impose judgments on Wilde in advance. So whether a critic uses verbs such as “copied,” “repeated,” “quoted,” or “plagiarized” presupposes a particular intention towards a compositional practice. Along with this attribution of intention goes a judgment about the integrity of that practice (so the notion of plagiarism usually carries with it an association of deception or bad faith). In this respect one of the most intriguing of Wilde’s manuscripts is his lecture on the poet Thomas Chatterton, given in December 1886 in Birkbeck College, London. In the following January the _Century Guild Hobby Horse_ advertised its forthcoming publication, but the lecture never appeared. Wilde’s seventy-page “manuscript” is part of the Clark collection, where it remained unexamined for many years.
said, anticipating Spinoza … ‘is but the name of a passion in which the mind
passes to a greater perfection or power of thinking; as grief is the name of the
passion in which it passes to a less’” (Pater, 105). Most significantly of all, in his
review of Imaginary Portraits for the Pall Mall Gazette in June 1887, Wilde had
singled out precisely this narrative moment, and had commented on how Pat-
er’s hero Sebastian “[e]arly in youth is stirred by a fine saying of Spinoza” (Ross,

Whatever the origins of Wilde’s knowledge of Spinoza, he clearly liked the
passage from the Ethics, and it seems to have lodged firmly in his mind, for it
was recalled some years later in a moment of considerable stress and tension.
In the Queensberry criminal libel trial Wilde was asked the following question
in relation to one of his “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young,” a
work which, in Queensberry’s Plea of Justification, had been cited as evidence
that Wilde, in his writing, was “posing” as a “sodomite”:

CARSON: Listen to this: “Pleasure is the only thing one should live for, nothing ages like
happiness.” Do you think pleasure is the only thing that one should live for?

WILDE: I think self-realisation—realisation of one’s self—is the primal aim of life.
I think that to realise one’s self through pleasure is finer than to realise one’s self
through pain. (Holland, 75)

It seems that Spinoza’s proposition had become so assimilated to Wilde’s own
mental repertoire that it had virtually become his own (certainly the allusion is
no longer signalled as an allusion). As a result, we can easily fail to recognize the

continued It turned out to be “composed” of large passages physically cut out from the
pages of what were in the 1880s the two most recent biographies of Chatterton, Daniel Wil-
son’s Chatterton: A Biography (1869) and David Masson’s Chatterton: A Story of the Year
1770 (1874). The cut passages were pasted onto folio sheets with a few linking passages
composed by Wilde. The lecture ends with an unacknowledged quotation of a sonnet on
Chatterton by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Of course we do not now know how Wilde delivered
his lecture and whether those debts were acknowledged, but the fact that it was apparently
withdrawn from publication suggests that on this occasion Wilde was being disingenuous.
Significantly one of the critical essays in Intentions, “Pen, Pencil, and Poison,” contains sim-
ilar sorts and amounts of textual borrowings. On this occasion they are taken from the in-
troduction to W. Carew Hazlitt’s 1880 edition of Essays and Criticisms by Thomas Griffiths
Wainewright; most of them are unacknowledged. No manuscript of “Pen, Pencil, and Poi-
son” survives, and as a consequence it is tempting to conclude that Wilde composed it in
the same cut-and-paste manner as he used in his Chatterton lecture.
extent to which Wilde’s experience is being “constructed” through a literary commonplace, one certainly well known to some of Wilde’s contemporaries.

The same observation might be made about Wilde’s use of biblical allusions. There are in fact two quite distinct ways in which Wilde’s reading of the Bible informed his prison manuscript. The easiest to decipher concerns overt allusions to biblical stories or characters: for example, the following represents one such clearly signalled quotation: “The song of Isaiah, ‘He is despised and rejected of men: a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him,’ had seemed to him to be prefiguring of himself, and <was fulfilled> /in him\ the prophecy /was fulfilled” (Complete Works, II: 115). But there are many other, less obvious references; for example, the following passage seems to draw on a wide range of embedded biblical verses from Ezra 5:7 (the “prison-house”), Psalms 45:8 (“myrrh and cassia”), Genesis 18:27 and Job 30:19 (both of which mention “dust and ashes”), Isaiah 12:3 (the “wells of salvation”), and Isaiah 31:1 (where the desert blossoms “like a rose”):

> It is not a thing for which one can render /formal\ thanks in /formal words\. I store it in the treasure-house of my heart. I keep it there as a /secret\ debt that I am glad to think I can never possibly repay. It is embalmed and kept sweet by the myrrh and cassia of many tears. When Wisdom has been <bitter> /profitless\ to me, Philosophy barren, and the <words> /proverbs\ and phrases of those who /have\ sought to give me consolation <have been> as dust and ashes in my mouth, the memory of that little, lovely, silent act of Love has <has been so beautiful to me that it seems to me to have> unsealed for me all the wells of pity: <has> made the desert blossom like a rose, and <3 illeg. words> /brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into <illeg.word> /<something like>\ harmony with the wounded, <and> broken <heart of the great> /and great heart of the world\. (Complete Works, II: 85)

On an initial encounter, the preponderance of first-person pronouns (in contrast to the inclusive “we” in the passage from Isaiah) gives a sense of the immediacy of Wilde’s emotions. However, a closer inspection shows us that the whole cadence of the passage is informed by an intimate knowledge of the King James Bible, one that would have been shared by all late-nineteenth-century British Protestant (and therefore in Ireland, Unionist) readers.

The important lesson to take from this is that the effectiveness of Wilde’s prose is dependent not upon its “truth,” but upon its artifice, its self-conscious manipulation of certain sorts of discourse. Then the most important question becomes whether that manipulation is appropriate to Wilde’s purposes. And this is not a question which can be answered by appealing to biography, but by making literary-critical judgments.
Notes

1. A more detailed description of Wilde’s prison manuscript, and of the different phases of composition which it appears to exhibit, can be found in Ian Small, ed., The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde. Volume II. De Profundis. “Epistola: In Carceere et Vinculis” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6–11. The text of Ross’s 1905 edition (collated with his 1908 edition) and the pref- aces to both works are all reprinted in that volume.


3. There are similarities here with some of Wilde’s other works published only after his death. Most notable is his Oxford essay “The Rise of Historical Criticism”; the manuscript of that essay (which takes the form of three notebooks currently held at the Clark Library) was significantly tidied up by Ross when he published it in his Collected Edition. We discuss “The Rise of Historical Criticism” in more detail in chapter four.

4. For the sake of consistency all quotations from the prison manuscript are tied to the Complete Works, II. It should be noted, however, that Small does not print the prison manuscript as copy-text, although it can be fully reconstructed from information in his textual notes. In our quotations we give the text as it appears in Wilde’s manuscript, and as a consequence include indications of Wilde’s deletions, crossings out, insertions, and so forth, using the following sigla: < > indicates material that is scored through; / \ indicates material that has been inserted, either above or below the line; the abbreviation illeg. words indicates illegible words.

Works Cited & Consulted


