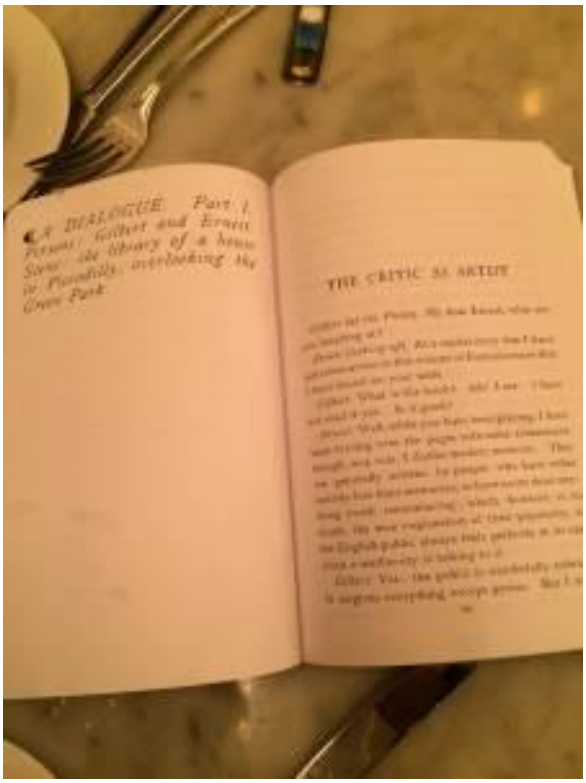
Forgotten Books



William Eaton

Zeteo is Reading, December 2014

I fear this post will seem, or indeed be, advertising for a particular company: Forgotten Books and its Classic Reprint Series. They do seem to provide a useful service: selling on-demand copies of old books. My particular interest here, however, is in the look of these books, and hence this post's inclusion in our nascent "Zeteo is Looking and Listening" series.

The company states that it "utilizes the latest technology to regenerate facsimiles of the historically important writings." At least in the case of the book I am reading—Oscar Wilde's *Intentions* (a collection of dialogues and essays)—the result is glorious. It would seem that Forgotten has somewhat magnified the type, as published by Brentano's in 1905. So not only does one have something like a large-print book, but there is a bit of a grave-rubbing quality to the lettering. Magnified, the lines are not as solid as they must have been in the original.

I cannot put my finger on the feeling of opening this book, reading these pages. Certainly—and notwithstanding the use of the latest technology to produce this feeling—there is something outdated, perhaps primitive in the result. And this is a delight.

As for Wilde's prose and ideas, . . . My *Zeteo* colleague Catherine Vigier has recently quoted a beautiful passage from *De Profundis*. I bought *Intentions* in order to read—in print, rather than electronic form—the dialogue "The Critic as Artist." From the opening:

> EARNEST: . . . as a rule, I dislike modern memoirs. They are generally written by people who have either entirely lost their memories, or have never done anything worth remembering; which, however, is, no doubt, the true explanation of their popularity, as the English public always feels perfectly at its ease when a mediocrity is talking to it.
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> GILBERT: Yes: the public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius.

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Before reading that piece, however, I got waylaid by "Pen, Pencil and Poison," from which I will quote this from near the end:

> The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose. The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art, though they may serve as an excellent advertisement for second-rate artists. . . .
>
> It is impossible not to feel a strong prejudice against a man who might have poisoned Lord Tennyson, or Mr. Gladstone, or the Master of Balliol. But had the man worn a costume and spoken a language different from our own, had he lived in imperial Rome, or at the time of the Italian Renaissance, or in Spain in the seventeenth century, or in any land or any century but this century and this land, we would be quite able to arrive at a perfectly unprejudiced estimate of his position and value. I know that there are many historians, or at least writers on historical subjects, who still think it necessary to apply moral judgments to history, and who distribute their praise or blame with the solemn complacency of a successful schoolmaster. This, however, is a foolish habit, and merely shows that the moral instinct can be brought to such a pitch of perfection that it will make its appearance wherever it is not required. Nobody with the true historical sense ever dreams of blaming Nero, or scolding Tiberius, or censuring Caesar Borgia. These personages have become like the puppets of a play. They may fill us with terror, or horror, or wonder, but they do not harm us. They are not in immediate relation to us. We have nothing to fear from them. They have passed into the sphere of art and science, and neither art nor science knows anything of moral approval or disapproval.