

Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*: Victorian Background

Oscar Wilde's play sets itself up, from the title onwards, as a disarmingly trivial critique of Victorian "earnestness"--that is, of the term that underlies the moral values of mid-to-late nineteenth-century England. Let us now be theoretical unspeakables in full pursuit of the undefinable: Victorianism. (One problem with trying to define an historical "period," we should keep in mind, is that one thereby constitutes an objectified field of knowledge *a priori* and then determines the quality of events and persons on the basis of that field of knowledge. Any good scientist would be happy to tell us that such a maneuver resembles bad observational technique, the kind whereby a researcher assumes the very thing he is supposed to be establishing.) This warning notwithstanding, how should we describe the Victorianism that Wilde exposes in his play? Let us just say this:

From the early 1830's onwards to Wilde's own time, British culture had much need for "earnestness." The high seriousness, the prophet-like moralism and sense of mission that characterize the work of so many great Victorian authors, was a response to a deepening sense of crisis and breakdown in Western Europe. Advances in textual scholarship and in science generally, among other things, shook the faith of many Victorian Christians. Nor were politics any safer than religion; the Industrial Revolution led to a constantly increasing gap between rich and poor, and this disparity made the upper and middle classes fear the violence of desperate factory workers and of landless country-dwellers who couldn't find employment at all. Wilde's Lady Bracknell wasn't the only Victorian who fretted earnestly about the possibility of "acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." The European continent was being rocked by political upheaval and revolution, and the British were afraid that it would hit them, too. That fear is the reason for the enactment of various "reforms" from the 1830's onward. Why, indeed, should the violence *not* come to British shores? After all, Marx got most of his ammunition for *Das Kapital* straight from the fine statistical archives of the British National Library. Henry Mayhew and other early sociologists had already done some of his work for him, whether they knew it or not.

However, large institutions like "religion" and "government" were not the only things under attack--the "individual" was in danger, too. Only a stable society in which religion, the state, culture, education, etc. are all functional could endow the individual with a stable identity. But Britain was *not* a well-ordered society; the same dynamic, raw capitalism that made those fine British Gentlemen possible could break them just as easily. Fear of bankruptcy, and of the public and even private humiliation it could bring, was never far from the consciousness of a respectable Victorian. Accumulation of wealth at the broad societal level, as these industrialists and their investors and officers well knew, offers no guaranty of stability to the *individual* who owns the factory or has his money in the stock market. Capitalism, for all its emphasis on "private property" and "individual liberty," is no great respecter of *persons*.

Well, the most perceptive of the Victorian writers understood this just as thoroughly as did the businessmen, and instead of merely feeling anxious, they tried to come up with viable solutions to their society's problems. Thomas Carlyle's work offers a fine paradigm for the way in which Victorian thinkers wrestled with anxiety. Carlyle rejected what he saw as the Romantics' program of cultural renewal: an almost religious exaltation of the self (*ego*) as a means of preserving human dignity in the face of war, industrialism, and the English Church's decreasing hold (both intellectual and spiritual) on the British people. "Close thy Byron!" thundered Carlyle's Doctor Teufelsdröckh, and however grotesquely Carlyle (along with other Victorians) *misread* those poor Romantics Blake, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, Keats, and, to some extent, Coleridge (though the last-mentioned author's relation to later thinkers is quite complex), he was forced to come up with his own strategy for containing the worsening dehumanization of industrial Britain. In essence, Carlyle promotes **work** as the great bestower of human dignity. One is expected to reduce one's expectations for happiness to zero. The

common man must work with a mission, and since he needs someone to lead him, all selfish aristocrats and/or factory owners had better get busy supervising this work--they must become Captains of Industry. If the Scottish author's prescription is followed, all may yet be well. This is truly a Victorian strategy: Carlyle looks around, sees that Britain's institutions (religion, the aristocracy, industry, etc.) are in bad shape, even untenable, and rather than abandoning them, he *insists* that they can all be made to serve as vehicles for cultural renewal and for yet another Victorian obsession--progress. Perhaps that is the most characteristic tendency of the Victorians: the insistence that their peers should adhere at least to the *name* of concepts in which, strictly speaking, they no longer believe. Then, too, there are other strategies of containment to ponder: the paternalistic, semi-medieval and biblical socialism of John Ruskin, the promotion of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" of the Utilitarians Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and the exclusivist "religion of art" of the aesthete Walter Pater and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and others).

With this background, we can see the climate of opinion within which and against which the decadent--yet socialist--Oscar Wilde had to write. Thanks to the cultural force of "earnestness," Wilde's contemporary audiences generally saw *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a frivolous, harmless farce and enjoyed it as such. Perhaps not seeing that the play was "not altogether fool," the partially upper-class audiences laughed at the shallow farce and at the preposterous dandy who had written it. Thus, when Lady Bracknell, with a perfectly straight face, uttered her sententious absurdities, Wilde had the malicious pleasure of seeing the less perspicuous members of his audiences laugh at their own absurdity without realizing that they were doing so. Wilde's play challenges all of the things that straight(forward) Victorians rabidly upheld: respectability, religion, seriousness, education, work, friendship, marriage, love, female modesty, and anything else we would care to add. Wilde constantly exposes these concepts, indicting them for being just as artificial and preposterous as the gaudy clothes that he himself wore Bunburying all over London.

In sum, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with all its elegant witticisms and superficialities, is the perfect reflecting mirror for what Lady Bracknell unselfconsciously calls, "an age of surfaces." Indeed, its author always said that "one goes beneath the surface at one's peril," and he seems to have been determined to spare both his actors and his audiences the bothersome task of doing so. In the immaculately polished world of Wilde's comedy, there simply *is* nothing below the surface. Everything either functions smoothly in accordance with its "nominal" status, or it can be made so to function with the help of some other nominal idea. The point of the play seems to be that the aristocratic class glides along on the slick surface of commodified British life. Everything--names, reputation, sincerity, modesty, and so on--is a creation of fashion magazines and rules created with fashion-magazine-like arbitrariness; everything is a commodity to be exchanged in transactions that benefit the wealthy idlers whom Wilde uses to represent the British aristocracy. Everything is for sale at the right price. With the help of that fairy-tale-like agent of metamorphosis or alchemy, anything (and anyone) can be changed into anything else. All upper-class wishes come true, thanks to the always great, and now well-dressed and cultivated, God Mammon. In the end, all the trials and tribulations through which the characters have been put turn out to have been almost frivolous. Jack, that is, was *always* Ernest; once he gets the vital information he needs from Miss Prism and then Lady Bracknell, he simply finds his father's name in a book ready to hand. In a Shakespearian comedy, the hero at least has to go through some *real* trials before we get the silly ending that brings everyone together again and effects the social harmony and continuity promised by the genre itself, but Jack has only to look up his nominal identity in the Army Lists. No peril or fighting here--Jack just lets his fingers do the walking.

The Importance of Being Earnest had quite a long run at the fashionable theaters in London, and was in fact still running until Wilde's conviction on charges involving homosexual acts performed with young men put an abrupt end to his popularity. Perhaps most troublesome to the public and to the law was not so much Wilde's

homosexual acts but the fact that he had performed them with youths from both the upper and the lower classes--to neither of which closed circles he belonged. It seems that until this conviction was handed down (on the basis of a "morality" law that had only been on the books for a decade or so), Oscar Wilde had been doing a fine job of maintaining his status as an artist-cum-businessman; he had, that is, been succeeding brilliantly in maintaining a delicate balance between mocking the public that patronized him and gratifying its tastes. In 1900, his always-ambivalent public having long since turned against him, the broken and impoverished Irish exile died of cephalic meningitis, a disease that one of my former students says may well have been caused by the unhealthy sanitary conditions of his Continental lodgings. At least, Wilde might have quipped, his death showed that he had not entirely lost his old touch: he died of a very *popular* disease.