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OSCAR WILDE'S SOCIALISM

In conversation with Granville Barker, George Bernard Shaw once bragged that the comedy of his plays was the sugar that he employed to disguise the bitter socialist pill. How clever of the audience, replied Barker, to lick off the sugar and leave the bitter pill unswallowed. Of no play in the whole repertory of well-loved drama could this be more truly said than Oscar Wilde's masterpiece in three acts, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. First performed in 1895, to applause that has never died away, it coincided with Wilde's challenge to the infamous Marquess of Queensberry and with his decision to face his tormentors in court. That drama, which also fell into three acts (Wilde's suit; Queensberry's counter-attack; the prosecution of Wilde himself for immorality on the evidence of the first two trials) marked his utter eclipse and decline. In this centennial of Wilde's triumph and ignominy, what can be done to honor his play as it should be honored?

The Importance is so diverting and witty and fast-moving, and so replete with imperishable characters and *mots*, that it has been a staple of Anglo-American drawing-room comedy for generations. And, despite the cloud under which its author languished for so long (a cloud, as someone once observed, hardly bigger than a man's hand) the play has been deemed fit for even the most demure school productions and amateur fiestas. It is a safe bet that Wilde would have appreciated the joke, because we know that he concealed at least one and—I would argue—probably two subtexts in his brittle dialogue.

The first subtext is of course a homosexual one. To be "earnest" in Victorian London was to be gay in the slang of the underworld and the *demi-monde* ("I hear he's frightfully earnest") so that one of the coded laughs at least was up in lights in the middle of the most ostensibly moral and bourgeois capital in history. But the game is deeper than that. The two young men who feature as the play's central rivals, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieffe, are both portrayed as leading double lives, and as adopting alter egos, in order to pursue their true desires. The name Bloxam is used for a minor character, but those in the know would have recognized Jack Bloxam, editor of a high-risk homosexual aesthetic magazine to whom Wilde had promised *Phrases and Philosophies For the Use of the Young* ("The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered"). The magazine, which ran to exactly one edition, was suggestively entitled *The Chameleon*.

Other private or encoded jokes in the play range from the risqué and the nearly obvious (such as the tragedy of young men not turning out to resemble their mothers) to the argot of homosexual tradecraft. The practice of leading a secret life under a pseudonym, known as "Bunburying," would have had some members of the audience biting on their umbrella handles. "Cecily," the name given to one of the weightless and vapid society girls, was also gay vernacular for transvestite rent-boys. Looked at in the right way, or played to the knowing ear, even the cloakroom at Victoria Station—scene of the loss of the famous handbag—takes on the charged association of a cruising spot or pick-up joint.

There was originally a fourth act to the play, in which Algernon was taken to Holloway Prison for failing to pay his bills at the Savoy. If that

denouement had been retained, the coincidence between art and life would have been almost unbearable. Even as it is, the banter of *The Importance* does throw one shadow forward into the future. When Jack Worthing tells Canon Chasuble that his invented brother has died, and "seems to have expressed a desire to be buried in Paris," the worthy Canon shakes his head and says: "In Paris! I fear that hardly points to any very serious state at the last."

The second of the two subtexts—the socialist one—is less fraught with ironies, and less apparent to superficial reviewers, but is in fact what gives the play its muscle and nerve. In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (which had to be published for a time as *The Soul of Man* in order to avoid objections from publishers and distributors) Wilde had subjected the bourgeois order to a merciless critique. In particular, he had shown the Victorian attitude toward marriage as an exercise in the mean-spirited preservation of private property, as well as a manifestation of sexual repression and hypocritical continence. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the same polemical objective is pursued, but by satirical means. Absurd and hilarious dialogues about betrothal, inheritance, marriage settlements, and financial dispositions are the very energy of the play. Everybody is supposed to marry for money and give up liberty; everybody is constrained to pretend that they are marrying for love or romance. "When I married Lord Bracknell," says Lady Bracknell, "I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way." It is, indeed, dear Lady Bracknell who continually gives the game away. When she hears that Cecily will inherit a hundred and thirty thousand pounds she declares, "Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any of the really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time."

Her instinctive class consciousness makes her the arbiter of every scene. Inquiring of Jack the suitor whether he has any politics, and receiving the answer that "I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist," she ripostes, "Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening at any rate." Pressing him further on his eligibility and inquiring as to whether his money is in land or investments, she is told, "Investments, chiefly," and muses aloud:

> That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up.

This more or less precisely describes the dilemma of the English aristocracy when faced with the Industrial Revolution, and captures it more neatly than Engels ever managed to. Indeed, one expert on this period, Frances Banks, has argued convincingly that much of the play is also a satire on the Cecil dynasty, whose scion, Robert Marquess of Salisbury, was three times a Tory prime minister in the late Victorian epoch. His biographer was his daughter, Lady Gwendolen Cecil. The two girls in the play are named Gwendolen and Cecily. The Salisbury family motto, just for good measure, is *Sero Sed Serio*: "Late but in earnest." And the great family estates were linked to London by a network of those railways in which the landed classes took such an early and profitable interest. In every scene of *The Importance of Being Earnest* there is at least one joke about the railways, with a repeated play on words that depends for its effect on the echoes of "line" and "lineage."

There is little if any strain involved in making these conjectures, because we know that Wilde read the literature of socialism, attended meetings, and kept company with leading socialists such as Shaw (who didn't like *The Importance,* typically regarding it as frothy). Wilde was the only public figure in London to sign Shaw's petition about the Haymarket martyrs. He took an active interest in the rising labor movement, and in the work of William Morris and other leading critics of capitalist utilitarianism. The kernel of his credo, however, is to be found in the offhand remark made by Algernon Moncrieffe at the opening of *The Importance*, where he reflects, "Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility." Here, in a well-turned aside, is the cruelty and thoughtlessness of all theorizing about the deserving rather than the undeserving poor. Wilde never lost his revulsion

against sermonizing of this kind, and maintained that it was finer to steal rather than to beg; just as it was morally deaf to preach strict dieting to those suffering from malnutrition. It was for guessing at the secret hatred and coldness, which at all times underlay the English profession of charity and moral hygiene, that he made the enemies who rejoiced in his abjection.

Britain was at the time engaged in a grim, self-righteous attempt to hold onto its oldest colony in Ireland. British secret police circles were later to use the weapons of blackmail and moral exposure to destroy two of the bravest spokesmen for Irish independence—Charles Stewart Parnell and Sir Roger Casement. It's unlikely that Wilde's mordant observations about the empire's treatment of his homeland would have escaped the attention of the prurient. In a tremendously prescient review in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1889, he saw precisely why England's hold on Ireland would weaken:

> If in the last century she tried to govern Ireland with an insolence that was intensified by race hatred and religious prejudice, she has sought to rule her in this century with a stupidity that is aggravated by good intentions. . . . An entirely new factor has appeared in the social development of the country, and this factor is the Irish-American and his influence. To mature its power, to concentrate its actions, to learn the secrets of its own strength and of England's weakness, the Celtic intellect has had to cross the Atlantic. At home it had but learned the pathetic weakness of nationality; in a strange land it realized what indomitable forces nationality possesses. What captivity was to the Jews, exile has been to the Irish. America and American influence has educated them.

Though this review, too, contained some instances of Wilde at his most aphoristic ("That the government should enforce iniquity and the governed submit to it, seems to Mr. Froude, as it certainly is to many others, the true ideal of political science. Like most penmen he overrates the power of the sword"), it demonstrates that he could dispose also of a solid and grounded political intelligence. Within a few years of Wilde's death, the American citizen Eamon de Valera had in effect out-generaled the British empire. Only this year came yells of anguish from the British Tories as a Republican guerrilla was greeted on the White House lawn, and London (which believed itself to have an exclusive "special relationship" with the American Empire) gnashed impotently at this reminder of blood debts incurred decades before.

In a similar vein, Wilde reviewed the poems that Wilfred Scawen Blunt published from prison, and announced that the self-righteous Tory "intellectual" Arthur Balfour had, if nothing else, improved Blunt's style and address as a poet by committing him to jail for his agitation upon the Irish question. Wilde's banter at Balfour's expense was exactly designed to be of the sort that would land him in trouble—Blunt himself noticed the same tendency at a lunch for Herbert and Margot Asquith, when Wilde teased the entire assembly of the Establishment and won every round—but at least this serves to correct the later picture of Wilde as an epicene dandy whose sallies were confined to the lounge. "Literature is not much indebted to Mr. Balfour for his sophistical *Defence of Philosophic Doubt*, which is one of the dullest books we know, but it must be admitted that by sending Mr. Blunt to jail he has converted a clever rhymer into an earnest and deep-thinking poet." The intention of Balfour and his class, by committing Wilde to jail, was to achieve something like the opposite effect. (Just to increase the *frisson*, it's worth noting that Blunt's volume of poems was entitled *In Vinculis*, later to be the subtitle of Wilde's own prison testimony *De Profundis*.)

We can therefore situate Wilde firmly in the company of the Victorian socialist aristocracy; a radical elite, contemporary with Marx himself, which wrote and acted with great distinction. Its contribution has largely been forgotten, because as George Dangerfield so hauntingly records in his book *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, it was overwhelmed by the First World War that it tried so hard to prevent. I've already mentioned William Morris, who is remembered still as a Pre-Raphaelite and aesthete rather than as an orator and polemicist. Wilde's set also included Blunt, who probably did more than any other single author for the emancipation of the colonies, and who is an honored figure today in Egypt, India, Ireland, and other former precincts of the Empire on which the sun never set (and on which, as the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor once remarked, the blood never dried).

One might also mention R.B. Cunninghame-Graham, the friend and inspiration to Joseph Conrad, who rounded off a whole career of travel and writing and anti-imperialist adventure by getting himself elected as the first explicitly socialist member of the House of Commons. In the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, men like this fought to build up an educated labor movement, to win independence for Ireland, and to advance and guarantee the rights of women. The terrible year of 1914, and the attendant capitulation of the Socialist International, put an end to what had been one of the most revolutionary and democratic periods in modern history. From then on, the choice would be made between official and routine Laborism and the disciplined apparatus of Leninism and its mutations. Imperialist war—the outcome of an ostensibly "liberal" imperium—had very nearly returned civilized Europe to a barbaric state. This does not entitle us to forget a more noble and defeated tradition, in which Wilde, among others, took an honorable place.

I am not employing the terms "aristocracy" or "noble" by accident. In all of Wilde's radical writing there is an unashamed belief that those who suffer or dare for freedom are a kind of elect—not the insipid and overbred aristocracy of wealth and property that he lampooned, but an elect nonetheless. Though he was skeptical of organized religion and in most conscious moments considered himself a Hellenist, he employed biblical and prophetic imagery to mark off martyr from mob. Richard Ellmann points out very deftly the ambivalence of his *Sonnet to Liberty*, in which he expressed distaste for those whose anger arose from mere resentment:

> Not that I love thy children, whose dull eyes
> See nothing save their own unlovely woe,
> Whose minds know nothing, nothing care to know—

Yet at the close of the poem, Wilde also distinguishes himself from the Lady Bracknell types who talked selfishly about the "worst excesses of the French Revolution" and predicted that education for the poor would "lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square":

> ...and yet, and yet,
> those Christs that die upon the barricades,
> God knows it I am with them, in some things.

Elements of this tension are apparent in Wilde's play *Vera or, The Nihilists*, in which he foreshadowed the coming Russian revolution. He was always to be upset and disillusioned by the failure of this play, which was based upon the true story of Vera Zasulich, a proto-Bolshevik woman who assassinated the St. Petersburg chief of police in January 1878. (This action led to a feverish discussion among the anti-czarist forces about the morality and efficacy of "individual terrorism," partly because the assassination proved both popular and effective.) And Wilde was a personal friend of another Russian revolutionary, Sergei Kravchinski, who had also shot a czarist torturer and who lived as a well-liked emigré in London circles. Drawing on Bakunin and Nechayev's *Revolutionary Catechism*, and on his reading of Dostoyevsky and Turgenev, Wilde fashioned a play about propaganda by deed. The hero is beyond doubt Prince Paul Maraloffski, who falls out with the czar and joins the revolutionary conspirators. "In a good democracy," opines this prince at one crucial moment, "every man should be an aristocrat."

This addiction to paradox, which was always his most penetrating method in any case, led Wilde to state at the opening of *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* that socialism's great benefit would be the abolition of that "sordid necessity of living for *others*" that was everywhere so oppressive. The effect of this rather flippant-seeming introduction was to peel the whiskers from the face of Church and State, which had bound every citizen into a nexus of obligation and guilt. For Wilde, all talk of "the masses" and "the people" was suspect, because these categories were made up of individuals and it was the free development of each individual that counted. He occupied a position somewhere between Karl Marx and William Morris; between the idea that labor was something to be transcended and the idea that it was something to be made artistic and enjoyable. Under no circumstances should socialism become the brute collectivization of existing drudgeries. In an 1889 review of Edward Carpenter's socialist songbook *Chants of Labour*, Wilde wrote that

> Socialism is not going to allow herself to be trammeled by any hard and fast creed or to be stereo-

> typed into an iron formula. She welcomes many and multiform natures. She rejects none and has room for all. She has the attraction of a wonderful personality and touches the heart of one and the brain of another, and draws this man by his hatred of injustice, and his neighbour by his faith in the future, and a third, it may be, by his love of art or by his wild worship of a lost and buried past. And all of this is well. For to make men Socialists is nothing, but to make Socialism human is a great thing.

This was written a hundred years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Much of it was a statement of desire rather than belief in any case, and later sections of the review betray some misgivings. Of many of the proletarian anthems, Wilde wrote that "almost any mob could warble them with ease." Approving Edward Carpenter's sentiment, which was common in those brave radical days, that the masses did indeed have an appreciation of beauty and finesse, he closed by saying:

> The Reformation gained much from the use of popular hymn-tunes, and the Socialists seem determined to gain by similar means a similar hold upon the people. However, they must not be too sanguine about the result. The walls of Thebes rose up to the sound of music, and Thebes was a very dull city indeed.

It cannot be mistaken to see in this and other Wildean observations a coded plea for the right to live as a sexual outlaw, an eternal dissident and an enemy of the regimented, the "healthy," and the "natural." It was this set of affinities, indeed, which involved Wilde in almost his last polemical battle; one that was to reverberate long after his death.

In 1892 the German author Max Nordau published his book *Entartung*, which translates either as "Degeneracy" or "Degeneration." It was a stern and somewhat dirty-minded philippic against those who led unwholesome lives or who professed admiration for unnatural philosophies. The volume was dedicated to Cesare Lombroso, pioneer of racist phrenology and coiner of the pseudo-science of the "criminal type." It exuded admiration for racial strength, nature-worship, orthodox manliness, and artistic convention. In identifying the sources of that degeneracy that was sapping the vital fluids of civilization, Nordau made a prime exhibit of Wilde. Claims of genius were merely neurotic, said Nordau, and homosexuality was the greatest degeneracy of all. Wilde, who was by this time being hideously maltreated in an English prison, attempted a feeble defense by pleading that if homosexuality was an illness it should not be punishable but treatable—a sad hostage to fortune. Recovering a little of his old form after his release, he said, "I quite agree with Dr. Nordau's assertion that all men of genius are insane, but Dr. Nordau forgets that all sane people are idiots." Bernard Shaw wrote a riposte to Nordau, staunchly maintaining that here in a new and more virulent form was the traditional superstition that the stock was weakening and civilization going to the dogs. (Given Shaw's own interest in eugenics, that was quite a strong reply.)

Two historical ironies arise from this little-remembered combat. Max Nordau was, with Theodor Herzl, one of the founders of political Zionism. To this day, the supporters of the ultra-Orthodox and ultranationalist forces in Israel refer to assimilated or secular Jews as "Hellenized"—the worst insult in their lexicon, and one that might have called forth a sympathetic smile from Wilde. Second, Nordau's Jewishness and Zionism did not prevent the resuscitation of his book by the Nazis after Germanys defeat in the First World War. "Degeneration" became the summary word for everything—cosmopolitan, Mediterranean, skeptical—that the New Order regarded as weak or treacherous in the German character. Those who have visited the exhibitions of *Entartete Kunst* ("Degenerate Art") put on by the Nazis will see the force of the campaign that listed "pacifism" and antimilitarism along with mental illness, physical deformity, and the mockery of religion as enemies of the state. A parallel exhibition, entitled *Entartete Musik*, had as its poster and advertisement a thick-lipped Negro blowing into a saxophone and displaying a star of David on his lapel.

Wilde's misgivings about socialism—that it would prove humorless, uniform, and hostile to the untamed and the emotional and aesthetic were to be fully materialized in National Socialism. He might have wished to protest that this was taking the business of paradox too far. □