

The Figure in the Watchtower: books and surveillance in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)

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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,
Ay! 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.

Is it not said that many years ago,
In a far Eastern town, some soldiers ran
With torches through the midnight, and began
To wrangle for mean raiment, and to throw
Dice for the garments of a wretched man,
Not knowing the God's wonder, or His woe?¹

i

In an intertext borrowed from Keats himself, the first line of Oscar Wilde's sonnet 'On the Recent Sale by Auction of Keats's Love Letters' (1886) recasts the dead poet in the guise of the mythical 'Endymion', whose curse is to be consigned to eternal slumber, whilst at the same time remaining young and beautiful. The implications of using this name from mythology to refer to the dead Keats are manifold. It transforms the author into a symbol of eternal beauty that remains, as in

¹ 'On the [Recent] sale by Auction of Keats' Love Letters' [1886], *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland, 5th edn (London: Harper Collins, 2003), pp.870-1. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Wilde's works are to this edition and are included within the body of the text. The sonnet was originally published in *Dramatic Review* under the title 'Sonnet. On the Recent Sale by Auction of Keats's Love Letters' on 23rd January 1886.

the opening words of Keats's poem *Endymion*, 'a joy forever'. Unchanging, the figure of the writer becomes his own legacy, immediately conflating him with the literary legacy of the works he has left behind. Such a move objectifies the dead writer. To view him through the filter of mythological precedent at once elides biographical details and renders the historical Keats voiceless – as an eternal slumber is bound to do. *Endymion* is a façade for the silenced poet, whose biography and personality are supplanted for a literary legacy whose beauty speaks not only for itself but for the poet whom it replaces.

This elision of the author's proper name constitutes a refusal to recognise the poet as a historical entity and a decision to focus instead upon the writing that remains. It invites a reading of the sonnet alongside Michel Foucault's essay, 'What is an Author?' (1970). In that essay, Foucault argues that texts present their authors not as real historical personages pre-dating the works ascribed to them, but rather as a function within discourse. This works in conjunction with a Foucauldian idea of writing as 'a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears' – and from which he is perpetually reconstructed.² The substitution in the sonnet's first line similarly emphasises that the historical Keats is, in every sense, no longer with us. To speak of Keats's letters as those which 'Endymion wrote' is to underline the *historical* Keats's absence.

Such a distinction (between the mythical façade of 'Endymion' and the historical reality of 'Keats') recalls Foucault's insistence that the link 'between the proper name and the individual named and between the author's name and what it names [...] do not function in the same way' ('What is an Author?' 284). The author's name, he argues, 'performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others':

[T]he author's name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. [...] As a result, we could say that in a civilization like our own there are a certain number of discourses that are endowed with the 'author function', while others are deprived of it. A private

² Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *The Book History Reader*, 2nd Edition, ed. by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 281-91 (281); all references are to this edition and are included within the body of the text.

letter may well have a signer – it does not have an author [...] ('What is an Author?' 284).

In Wilde's sonnet, the situation is made more complex because a name other than the author's is nevertheless employed to refer to the authorship of certain letters which, we know from the poem's title, Keats wrote. In fact, while Wilde's speaker seems to adhere to Foucault's recognition of 'the author' as a function in discourse that 'marks off' a particular corpus of texts, his marking off is more inclusive than Foucault's, taking in not only the poetical works, but also the letters – all are 'Endymion's' and all are marked by the exquisite beauty of the mythical youth whose name is adopted to refer to that corpus. If the author can be defined as the function by which a certain corpus of works is taxonomised, its edges 'marked off', then the sonnet's refusal to name Keats as the writer of the letters also marks off a different, more inclusive idea of the 'author function' than the one theorised by Foucault – it speaks of a refusal to 'mark off' the corpus in certain ways. The letters' status as 'poor blotted note[s]' might suggest an unfinished, unpolished piece unfit for public consumption – but it does not prevent the speaker proclaiming them as, categorically, the product of a genius capable of producing beauty of 'Endymic' stature and longevity.

The association of 'Endymic' beauty with 'poor blotted note[s]' demonstrates, therefore, the speaker's willingness to bring the letters into an arena in which they might (like Keats's poems) be considered incipient artworks of similarly enduring beauty. Yet, the sonnet also points to an act of 'marking off' on the part of the auction attendees, which is in opposition to the speaker's own inclusive recognition of the letters as part of the body of Endymion's 'work'. Seeing the advent of Keats's letters in the public domain as an excuse to turn from 'art' to 'glare and gloat' at the figure of the author, the 'brawlers of the auction mart' unconsciously and unthinkingly equate the letters with an *historical* Keats whom, they imagine, these writings will reveal. For the 'brawlers', it is Keats himself whom the letters define or 'mark off' from an art they 'love not'. The comparison with Christ is especially resonant here. Both Christ and Keats are, in this poem, not mentioned by name; both are absent centres whose meanings are generated by the 'wonders' and 'woes' of which they are the authors. The purchasers, however, ignore the enduring beauty of that which these figures have written in favour of a focus on the physical relics of their existence as historical personages – turning not to Christ's genius, but to his 'mean raiment', not to

the beauty of Keats's poetry, but to what his 'poor blotted notes' might reveal about the human being that wrote them.

Like Foucault, therefore, Wilde's speaker sees the ability to ascribe an author function as a sinister one, whose insistent tracing of textual meaning back to the figure of the author from whence it originally derived, facilitates a means of surveillance – a means to 'glare and gloat' not only at the writing itself but at the author whom it definitely expresses in discourse. By this means, the 'ascription of discourse to an individual' becomes a way of classifying not just texts, but also the individual named as their author, who becomes 'a projection [...] of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice' ('What is an Author?' 286).

By eschewing the use of Keats's name and citing instead the letters written by 'Endymion', the speaker reveals the writings' *distance* from the historical or biographical Keats: the way they have become subject to a Foucauldian vision of writing in which 'the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence' ('What is an Author?' 282). To emphasise the way in which Keats is now only present in and through the letters 'which Endymion wrote' is to provide a reminder that these are still the work of an author function ('Endymion'), rather than of a writer (Keats). It announces that the historical 'author' is now only present as a discursive product of the writings left behind – which is, paradoxically, no presence at all. Thus, the elision of 'Keats' for Endymion eschews biography and offers the letters as autonomous expression: it eschews the author 'function', one might say, because it eschews the author. Ultimately, Endymion, standing in for Keats, stands also for a corpus of writing that speaks only of itself. Like the Foucauldian notion of the author function, the sonnet 'depriv[es] the subject [...] of its role as originator, and analyz[es] the subject as a variable and complex function in discourse' ('What is an Author?' 290). It turns away from the idea of an author as a 'free subject' who 'penetrate[s] the substance of things and give[s] it meaning' and points instead towards the ways in which publication can lead to that subject becoming enmeshed in already extant discourses at the hands of those determined to 'glare and gloat'.

The way in which the poem bewails the enforced conscription of literary texts into a project of documenting and recording its *author* foreshadows Foucault's theory

of ‘disciplinary mechanisms’ that fashion the individual self as the effect of the particular power structure within which it is situated. For Foucault, the individual self can exist only in and through the dominant systems that govern the production of knowledge *about* the self. The purpose of the present essay is to provide a Foucauldian reading of Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), in order to demonstrate the play’s preoccupation with ‘the progressive objectification and ever more subtle partitioning of human behaviour’ through which, in Foucault’s figuration, power over the individual is exerted.³ It is my contention that the play presents not only biographical and autobiographical documents, but books of all kinds, as instruments of disciplinary surveillance. Dramatising the way in which not only taxonomic description, but also narrative fiction enables written texts to function as a means of exerting power over the individual self through writing, the play portrays a world in which the self is all too often the effect of someone else’s publishing venture. In *Earnest*, concerns about the reductive effect of biographical interpretation upon the subject – present in Wilde’s earlier writings on Keats – are developed, giving way to an idea of the subject as non-existent outside its representation as text. At the same time, the play’s figuring of textuality as a mode of disciplinary surveillance foreshadows the fate of ‘Wilde’ as a textual subject at the hands of early reviewers of the autobiographical *De Profundis* (1897) – a fate his own letters correctly predict – suggests the socio-political significance of the surveillance which, in *Earnest*, is exploited for comic effect.

Wilde’s essay ‘The Critic as Artist’ (1890) consolidated the ideas suggested in the sonnet on Keats, arguing that textual meaning is always mitigated by reader-response. The essay takes issue with a dictum of Matthew Arnold’s, which insists that literary interpretation involves detecting the essence of what in itself the text’s meaning ‘really is’.⁴ Against this essentialist aesthetic, Wilde’s essay insists that textual meaning should be considered not as a truth already present, to be excavated by the attentive reader, but as an absence to be occupied temporarily by that reader’s own impressions. No longer a means of ascertaining the truth that lies indelibly within the object of study, criticism is instead represented as ‘the purest form of personal

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 173; all further references are to this edition and are given within the body of the text.

⁴ Matthew Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (1864) in *Matthew Arnold’s Essays*, Everyman’s Library (London: Dent & Sons, 1964), pp. 9-34, (p. 9).

impression', which is 'in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself' (*Works*, 1125). The critic can never see the object as it 'really is', because the 'real' is, inevitably, an externally imposed product of the critical gaze. Consequently, it is imperative that the critic should recognise that his project inevitably involves not the discovery of what the object really 'is', but rather the creation of a new impression of the object – in effect, an account of what it 'really is not' (*Works*, 1128).⁵

In the sonnet on Keats's letters, however, the brawlers' insistence upon their ability to discover an already-determined Keats through the perusal of his letters belies an ingrained belief in authorship as the direct expression of 'truth', which attentive reading can reconstitute. Thus, by recasting autobiographical documents as art, Wilde's sonnet addresses a situation in which the indeterminate textual space of the art object's 'true meaning' is mistaken for a direct account of what, in himself, its author 'really' was. The tangible, yet fragile, 'crystal' representing the affairs of Keats's 'heart' reflects both the delicacy of the subject matter and the dangerously brittle nature of the 'truth' contained in the missives. That this crystal was once whole implies the validity (not to mention the beauty) of the experiences (re)presented in the letters. The brawlers' inability to reclaim the *truth* of the experience in any definitive, coherent form is evoked in the shattering of the delicate surface, which is 'broken' to reveal the *absence* of a kernel – Keats as a fixed historical entity – it does not, in fact, possess.

Wilde made explicit his distress at the reading public's apparent determination to view autobiographical writing as an unproblematic mirror upon the subject's soul in a review of two biographies of Keats (*Works*, 967).⁶ Arguing against the idea that a diligent researcher could pin down a 'real' Keats lurking beneath the surface even of an apparently autobiographical text, Wilde takes issue with a letter written by Keats's friend, Benjamin Bailey:

⁵ 'The Critic as Artist' was initially published in *The Nineteenth Century* in July and September 1890 under the title 'The True Function and Value of Criticism'. In opposing Arnold's realism, Wilde is, of course, indebted to Walter Pater and Charles Baudelaire, both of whom posit representation as an extension not of the world directly apprehended, but of the impressions left upon the mind of the artist. The theory is expounded as an aesthetic method in Baudelaire's 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863) and developed, in Pater's 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance* (1873), as a way of life.

⁶ 'Two Biographies of Keats' (*Pall Mall Gazette* 27 September 1887); the biographies in question were Sidney Colvin's *Keats* (1887) in Macmillan's 'English Men of Letters' series and William Michael Rossetti's *Life of John Keats* (1887) in the Walter Scott Press's 'Great Writers' series.

We do not doubt that when Bailey wrote to Lord Houghton that common sense and gentleness were Keats's two special characteristics the worthy Archdeacon meant extremely well, but we prefer the real Keats, with his passionate wilfulness, his fantastic moods and his fine incompleteness. We do not want him reduced to a sand-paper smoothness or made perfect by the addition of popular virtues (*Works*, 967).

As Wilde states, Keats is 'made perfect' by the biographer, who nevertheless writes as if he had unproblematically found – was, indeed, unproblematically able to find – his subject intrinsically to be so. Bailey has, in Wilde's phrase, 'sand-paper[ed]' the author into something he simply never was. The real Keats, we are told, was a more complex individual, whose 'fine incompleteness' is at odds with Bailey's reductive account. Questioning whether these 'two special characteristics' might really amount to the determining truth about the subject in question, Wilde attacks the alarming ease with which the poet is brutally 'reduced'. This metaphor for the biographer's gaze invokes a painful process of literal dismemberment, as the poet is forced violently into a discursive mould for which his character is too complex to fit. The extract does not – as Wilde's later writings would – go so far as to suggest the non-existence of a historical Keats transcending textual representation. Indeed, the review asserts a preference for a 'real' Keats whom Bailey 'reduces'. Nevertheless, the extract illustrates the concern displayed in Wilde's sonnet – that biographical writing could be used as a way of reducing not only the text but also its *author* to a 'sand-paper smoothness' ready for incorporation into the 'popular virtues' of a dominant grand-narrative.

This was precisely the threat that underlay the fears, expressed in Wilde's letters, concerning the fate of Wilde's own correspondence after his incarceration in 1895 on charges of 'gross indecency'. When his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, proposed to print, in the French journal *Mercure de France*, some letters that Wilde had written him from Holloway prison, Wilde was outraged. Such letters, he expressed, 'should have been to you things sacred and secret beyond anything in the whole world'.⁷ Bidding Douglas recall 'the sonnet he wrote who saw with such sorrow and scorn the

⁷ *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2000), p. 717; all further references to Wilde's letters are to this edition and are given in the body of the text.

letters of John Keats sold by public auction in London', the letter argues that, far from being able straightforwardly to demonstrate how matters between himself and Douglas 'really' stood, their appearance in print would simply constitute an open invitation to his enemies to confer their own meanings on what had been intended for Douglas's eyes alone. Wilde was concerned that the public, armed with attitudes such as those displayed by the truth-seeking mob at the auction of Keats's letters, would be similarly keen to discover in his own writings 'truths' entirely of their own making – truths which, characterised as inimical to 'popular virtues', could be used to vindicate that moral edifice. His concerns were not unfounded. As an ostensibly autobiographical work, *De Profundis* was itself to suffer the same fate at the hands of reviewers as Keats's letters had done at the hands of his biographers.⁸ Wilde's words would be wilfully misinterpreted in an attempt to reduce him to a 'sand-paper smoothness', by the application, if not the 'addition', of 'popular virtues'.

In 1905, when Wilde's friend and literary executor, Robert Ross, first published the letter in an edited version, the tendency amongst some critics was to read the work as an indication that the man who wrote the volume under discussion was finally presenting himself in his 'true' form. In an unsigned item in the *Review of Reviews*, for example, W.T. Stead noted that the work represented 'the cry of the heart *de profundis*'.⁹ Stead also wrote to Ross, praising him for 'having permitted us to see the man he really was'.¹⁰ Stead's misguided attempts to view the letter as a window directly onto Oscar Wilde's soul can be partly attributed to a title given the work not by Wilde, but by Ross himself – *De Profundis*: 'From the Depths'. Moreover, the description of the volume's contents which occupies the front cover of the original edition of the work could hardly be said to have helped matters, proclaiming the volume to be 'probably the most sincere and personal expression of his peculiarly artificial and sensitive nature'. The description goes on to announce that '[a]s a human document this work possesses unique value and interest, and the beauty of its style

⁸ The letter was written between January - March 1897. A heavily edited version of the letter was published in 1905, under the title *De Profundis*. The complete text of the manuscript did not appear until 2000. For an account of the work's complicated publication history, as well as a detailed description of the manuscript, see *Letters*, p. 683, n. 1.

⁹ [W.T. Stead], 'Oscar Wilde's Prison Meditations', *The Review of Reviews* (London), 31 (March 1905), 314 (314).

¹⁰ Quoted in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 242.

entitles it to a high place in the literature of the time'.¹¹ Both the title and the description work to perpetuate the idea that the work provided an account that was somehow definitively 'true', a slipping of Wilde's stylistic mask to reveal the real Wilde underneath. It is not conceded that the very fact of its 'beautiful style' might facilitate a space for doubt regarding the legitimacy of the text as an infallible 'human document' and reviewers could not resist categorising the work as a definitive statement of the 'narrative' of Oscar Wilde – one which vindicated the status quo as far as Wilde's crimes were concerned. In *The Month*, for example, M.D. Petre paints the author as a tragic figure, whose actions delivered him 'from a world which he could fashion to his likings, inspired by his artistic and creative instincts, to a world in which he had simply to take his place and endure the inevitable'.¹² As sympathetic as this might sound, it nevertheless constructs Wilde's narrative as a cathartic tragedy in which the ability to 'fashion' one's own self-image is 'inevitably' overtaken by state-sanctioned control.

If the reaction to *De Profundis* is significant, therefore, it is so because it illustrates the power conferred upon reviewers by the appearance of the letter in book form, illustrating the power of publication to transform a life merely by presenting it for public perusal. Their idea of the book as a purveyor of truths about a biographical or autobiographical subject enabled commentators to transform reading into an activity by which subversive elements could be reabsorbed into a dominant social narrative – in which reading ascribes meaning to the individual subject about whom an account has been written. As with the biographical Keats, Stead's substitution of the textual entity 'Wilde' for the man as he 'really was' depends on the appearance and interpretation of certain documents – so much so that *De Profundis's* publication allowed Wilde to be replaced, in the eyes of many reviewers, by a book. The event betrays the reviewers' alarming amenability to the possibility of such a substitution – their willingness to accept not only the truth of the statements made within the text, but also the inherent validity of the assertions they consequently make about the kind of person Wilde 'really' was. It betrays a naïve faith in a mimetic model of textuality

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* [ed. by Robert Ross] (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), front cover.

¹² M.D. Petre, 'De Profundis' in *The Month*, CV (April 1905), 385-7 (385).

in which texts represent the subject directly, along with an endorsement of the concomitant view – that texts allow the subject to be directly apprehended.

The episode is thus of paramount importance in demonstrating the socio-political significance of Wilde's insistence upon the dialogic nature of art and reality – that literary interpretation, even of autobiographical materials, always involved the creation of a new 'truth' as much as it had to do with the discovery of an innate one. Even those, like M.D. Petre, who saw *De Profundis* as a moving account of a great man brought down by a tragic weakness, never questioned whether this was an interpretation they brought *to* the text (in order to consolidate existing constraints upon what was and what was not a 'weakness'), preferring to see it as a reading not only *inevitably* invited, but also validated, by the text's position as an infallible, unambiguous expression of its author's soul.

It is all the more ironic because the surveillance thus enacted is one that Wilde's writings constantly seek to expose – and often, as in his social comedies, expose with levity. Yet, it is a levity undermined by the serious consequences such surveillance could have when enacted upon the self as an object within the dominant discourses governing the society that Wilde himself inhabited. Throughout his writings, written texts are figured as a means of revealing and fixing allegedly innate 'truths', which they are at least partly responsible for manufacturing. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in particular, constitutes a sustained exposé of the practice, moving beyond the retrospective genre of literary biography and autobiography to present a world in which living individuals are nothing if not the 'biographical' subjects of the state and society that write and read about them.

ii

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 'meaning' appears not as a series of universal truths detectable *within* a given subject, but as a set of communal fictions through whose application the subject is forcibly (re)directed into the conduits of social ritual. Lady Bracknell's untroubled acceptance of Jack's claim to be a Liberal Unionist is an example – for her, Liberal Unionists 'count as Tories' simply because

‘[t]hey dine with us’.¹³ Identity is evolved here from and through performance – hence Liberal Unionists are defined by what they do rather than what they profess to believe. This verdict, it would seem, supports Ruth Robbins’s argument that *Earnest* prefigures poststructuralist conceptions of identity by evading ‘the notion that character is a deep structure that goes right through a person, where action is essence’.¹⁴ Lady Bracknell appears unconscious of the arbitrary basis of the conventions to which she insists upon enslaving other characters. The episode is thus an example of the way in which action, in *Earnest*, is constantly interrogated as the sign of a corresponding essence. This in turn enables the play’s farcical project, which debunks the arbitrary process by which the conventional becomes the definitive by holding up to ridicule the way in which the definitive has become conventional

In defining the nature of the self as the result of a series of performative roles – whether self-consciously adopted or otherwise – within a (re)writable narrative, books become a vital and central element of *Earnest*’s iconography. Throughout the play, a mistaken belief in the ability of printed materials to enshrine objectively perceivable truths allows books to function as tools that allow characters an interpretative hold over individual subjects, enabling them to proclaim a particular configuration of ‘reality’ as truth. *Earnest* is especially concerned with examining the socio-political consequences for identity in a world where life not only resembles but, on occasion, actually *is* an open book. By focusing upon episodes in which the definitive status of certain normative elements depends, quite literally, upon their being published, the play can be read as an analysis of the way in which the book itself can become a brutally effective means of social surveillance, creating the norms it purports objectively to record. The book is thus the hinge that links Wilde’s play to the Foucauldian notion of the individual as not only the object, but also the result of the disciplinary apparatus responsible for the production of knowledge. In *Earnest*, the book is just such an apparatus – a means by which characters are transformed into ‘the fictitious atom of an “ideological” representation of society; [...] a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power [...] called “discipline”’ (*Discipline and Punish*, 194).

¹³ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. by Russell Jackson, New Mermaids (London: A & C Black, 1980), I. 535; all further references are to this edition.

¹⁴ Ruth Robbins, *Pater to Forster, 1873 – 1924* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 111.

Lady Bracknell's notebook is an example of the many texts which allow the play's characters to find themselves measured against assumptions which are, quite literally, pre-written. It contains a list of eligible young men, to which Lady Bracknell is ready to admit Jack's name, should his answers to her enquiries be 'what a really affectionate mother requires' (I. 481). Her interrogation conjoins the notion of 'micro-penalty' with the normalising effect of the examination – the means by which the 'rule' is established by condemning 'that which [...] departs from it', so that the exposure of that which 'does not measure up' becomes the very method that makes measurement possible at all (*Discipline and Punish*, 178). Her book is where the results of Lady Bracknell's own examinations are enshrined. This documentary project, maintained by inscribing as definitive the result of interrogations designed only to enshrine her own social agenda, enables the maintenance of the 'individual [...] in his own aptitudes and abilities, under the gaze of a 'permanent corpus of knowledge'. The use of the book in this episode demonstrates how 'the deployment of force and the establishment of truth' (*Discipline and Punish*, 184) are not separate aims, but imbricate with each other in the 'constitution of the individual as a describable, analysable object'. So long as an idea of the book as the embodiment of 'a permanent corpus of knowledge' is upheld, Lady Bracknell can preside over 'a comparative system that [makes] possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts' (*Discipline and Punish*, 190). By means of rigorous examination the suitors in the book are not recorded but produced as the embodiment of a body of quantifiable knowledge; their eligibility becomes '[the] effect and object of power', by also constituting them as the 'effect and object of knowledge' (*Discipline and Punish*, 192):

The case is no longer [...] a set of circumstances defining an act and capable of modifying the application of a rule; it is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained, corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.

In making the book the means by which is brought about 'the entry of the individual [...] into the field of knowledge', the play also makes it the symbol of the power enabled by this enforced 'entry' (*Discipline and Punish*, 191). Lady Bracknell's book, responsible for creating the social rules which it purports to maintain as 'true', textualises society by prescribing the 'truths' by which its narratives are, in turn, to be

recognised and categorised. Her insistence on the definitive status of the process that has given rise to the notion of ‘eligibility’ it enshrines, enables her use of the book as the instigator of an examination that modulates the society it purports merely to document – an unsettling move in which ‘society’ is figured as the manifestation of a series of reference works maintained by a horde of Lady Bracknells.

In some ways, of course, Lady Bracknell is simply putting into practice the arguments put forth by Wilde himself in ‘The Decay of Lying’ (1889). Its selection of society’s most eligible young men render her book a consummate example of the way in which life is nothing if not the mirror of already-available aesthetic models. In producing the book, therefore, Lady Bracknell resembles the definition of a ‘great artist’ provided in Wilde’s essay – a figure who ‘invents a type’ so enticing that ‘[l]ife tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher’ (*Works*, 1083). Such a definition of great art banishes teleological meaning by making truth ‘entirely and absolutely a matter of style’ – the domain of art, behind which life can only follow meekly (*Works*, 1081).¹⁵ Having appreciated a certain kind of young man, Lady Bracknell extrapolates a type, which she then uses as the basis for creating (rather than reflecting) the truth of ‘what a really affectionate mother requires’. In this, she resembles not only a ‘great artist’, but also an ‘enterprising publisher’, who retains the stereotype necessary to reproduce a popular text.

As Wilde made clear in ‘The Decay of Lying’, however, the tendency of life to imitate art (even more than art imitates life) became potentially problematic only due to a widespread insistence that only the reverse was true – that art not only could, but also *should* and *did*, unfailingly imitate life. Rejecting this idea, Wilde’s essay argues that the process is actually an inescapably circular one – that art only enshrines ideas and attitudes which society either creates for itself or has already copied from art’s own originals. If the episode of Lady Bracknell’s notebook illustrates this circularity, then it also illustrates the problems that arise when the rigid but false dichotomy of original ‘life’ and imitative ‘art’ is insisted upon. Lady Bracknell has no

¹⁵ In this sense, the essay appropriates and develops Baudelaire’s attack on the notion of nature as ‘source and type of all possible Good and Beauty’ (‘The Painter of Modern Life’ [1863], in Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), pp. 1-40 (p. 31)). Baudelaire argues against this, stating that while evil ‘happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art’ (Baudelaire, 32). Fashion, is thus simultaneously ‘a sublime deformation of Nature’ and ‘a permanent and repeated attempt at her *reformation*’ (Baudelaire, 33).

problem believing that her attitudes to that which ‘really’ affectionate mothers require are ‘really’ valid, or that her list of men in whom these qualities have been detected might stand as a reliable metonym for those very qualities. By publishing their names, she makes them available as a standard by which others (such as Jack) can be judged – his place on the list would assure his ‘eligibility’ by proving his ability to ‘measure up’ to a certain process of examination. The book is thus a record of Lady Bracknell’s faith in her ability to taxonomise society and its inhabitants according to certain categories that define what they ‘really’ are (or, in Jack’s case, are not). It is an example of the way in which *Earnest* points to the tyranny that obtains when the subject – indeed, the world itself – is viewed as ‘really’ representable.

The result is a situation in which truth is not discovered but enforced – in which a presumed ability to uncover and maintain an intrinsically legitimate status quo becomes the ability definitively to impose the boundaries of what is and is not legitimate. What is presented in ‘The Decay of Lying’ as the means to self-expression gives way, in *Earnest*, to an insidious surveillance. Social identity is recast as an open book, there to be written by anyone who wishes to take up the pen. Indeed, in one of the most celebrated of the play’s comic episodes, the infant Jack Worthing describes how he was discovered in a handbag, his place in the perambulator having been usurped by a three-volume novel. Having been replaced at birth by a novel – presented here as the most conventional embodiment of Victorian fiction, in terms both of form and of production methods – Jack is subjected, as a marriageable adult, to comparison with Lady Bracknell’s notebook. His whole life is lived, not just by the book, but also *as* a book – one that he has not written himself. By pointing to the way in which books enshrine ideas of the ‘normal’ and the ‘natural’, which are then used as the means by which other characters are judged, the play undermines the book’s symbolic currency as the means by which truths about society are recorded as already valid – the results of an examination already undertaken, there to be consulted as the measure of what can be legitimately expected of its subjects.

Lady Bracknell’s notebook is one example of this surveillance in action; Miss Prism’s respect for the rigid conventions of the three-volume novel is another. The artificial and limited nature of these conventions is neatly summated in Miss Prism’s assertion of what fiction definitely and unequivocally ‘means’: ‘[t]he good ended happily, and the bad unhappily’ (II. 54). Though presented in comic terms, her approach has disquieting implications, driven home by her reaction to the ‘death’ of

Jack's younger brother, Ernest – a fictional character who, in her eyes is conventionally 'bad'. Upon learning of his 'demise', she comments, 'What a lesson to him! I trust he will profit by it' (II. 223). Of course, had Ernest ever been real, he is unlikely to have gleaned any 'profit' from such a 'lesson' – despite having been assigned the unhappy ending which is the requisite fate of the 'bad' fictional character. The episode illustrates the way in which reality and fiction, far from being separate, actually imbricate with each other; reality, in Miss Prism's formulation, is fundamentally allusive, drawing its inspiration from the books it writes about itself. It is a potent and concise demonstration of the way in which books can act as tools by which individual identities are lent a 'sand-paper smoothness' – forcibly written back into the social narrative contained within the prescriptive volumes that document established definitions of what is 'good', 'true' and 'natural'.

For Miss Prism, fiction not only strives for, but also achieves, a direct mimesis of a social reality that already operates according to a set of obvious 'meanings', which fiction has only to recover. Ultimately, what fiction 'means' for Miss Prism is also, disturbingly, what society 'means'. Such a claim itself depends on the acceptance not only of fiction, but also of 'the real' it represents, as always already normal and natural. In suggesting that 'good' and 'bad' are not copied from an originary definition, but are defined according to the way in which 'the real' plays out as narrative, the episode underlines the dangers that characterise a world in which a determination to separate fiction and reality only leads to an even more determined belief in a new set of fictions.

Earnest thus presents the triple-decker as an agent of 'panopticism', as Foucault describes it. Just as Jeremy Bentham's envisaged configuration of the ideal prison 'arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately' (*Discipline and Punish*, 200), so the novel arranges social unities. So long as fiction is upheld as a valid reflection of what really constitutes 'good' and 'bad' characters, it has the panoptic function of performing, on the reader's behalf, the work of taxonomising the society it represents. Foucault's phrasing is significant. It is not that spatial unities are arranged in a way that enables an existing meaning to be apprehended and recognized – rather, the panopticon 'arranges spatial unities' which, having been arranged, 'make it possible to see constantly' and *thus* 'to recognize immediately' who is 'good' and who is 'bad', a recognition which, ultimately, seals their fate. Similarly, in Miss Prism's conception of fiction, knowledge of what makes

a subject 'good' or 'bad' is not apprehended, but *created* via the mechanisms through which they are described – the archetypal plot, style and characters that define the triple-decker as a literary institution.

Thus, what D.A. Miller has noted of panoptic discipline is also true in novelistic discourse as it is characterised in *Earnest*: both are 'interested in putting in place a perceptual grid in which a division between the normal and the deviant inherently imposes itself'.¹⁶ Miller's study of the nineteenth-century novel draws attention to the way that even those novels which, like George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1873), contain an 'explicitly thematized *censure* of discipline', are complicit in a project of 'social regulation and standardization' (Miller, p. 19).

To illustrate his point, Miller offers a reading of Balzac's *Une ténébreuse affaire* (1841). Among the characters of that novel are two agents of the secret police, Peyrade and Corentin. While Peyrade 'could decapitate someone with his own hands', Corentin's methods are more insidious; he is 'capable of entangling innocence, beauty, virtue in networks of calumny and intrigue, of coolly drowning or poisoning them' (Miller, 22). Like the omniscient narrator in a novel, Corentin's mode of policing functions on the basis of a total surveillance that allows him to take charge of individuals precisely by involving them in 'a "world" and a "plot"' (Miller, 22-3). Corentin himself, whose task is 'conceived as a penetration of social surfaces', possesses "'impenetrable" powers of vision' that 'have already been penetrated by the narration that renders him'. Thus, with the excuse of being '[o]n the side of perspicacity, Balzac's narration assumes a fully panoptic view of the world it places under surveillance [...] and its complete knowledge includes the knowledge that it is always right' (Miller, 23). Ultimately, in fact, it is 'hard to distinguish omniscience from the social control it parallels, since the latter too is often a matter of 'mere' knowledge' (Miller, 27).

Yet, for all that it resembles those recording impulses that produce the individual subject as both the object and effect of knowledge – impulses exemplified in the power wielded by Lady Bracknell through her notebook – the omniscient narration of the triple-decker remains a stylistic device that offers only the illusion of omniscience. It is not, by itself, a total representation of reality, nor do its characters actually cover all available spectrums of definition. To empower the book as

¹⁶ D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 18.

panopticon – as the location of ‘unities’ that anatomise individuals in society, enabling the reader, like the figure in the watchtower, ‘to recognize immediately’ – takes more than an implied omniscience of representation; it also requires a reader who, like Miss Prism, harbours an assumption that the novel not only should, but apparently often *does*, offer ‘a permanent corpus of knowledge’ about the world. It requires a readership that views what fictional characters do and the manner in which they do it as less important than what they can thus be ‘recognized immediately’ as *being*. Betraying a naïve determination to seek out the moral import of that which she reads, even as she insists upon the fictionality of the events to which that import is attached, Miss Prism is just such a reader – determined to weave back into society the morality gleaned from its representation in fiction. It is a state of affairs slyly implied in the naming of this arch novel-reader – despite an unwavering belief in the novel’s ability to reflect the world as it is, Miss Prism also suggests that the reader’s gaze is ultimately, like her crystalline namesake, more refractive than reflective.

Concerns about the use of written texts as the instigator of a panoptic system of surveillance that forcibly determines the individual by instigating a structure for the production of knowledge, suggested in Wilde’s writings on Keats, are fully dramatised in *Earnest* – and actually enacted in the response to Wilde’s prison letters. Bound up not only in a particular mode of representation, but in a particular attitude that sees books as a means by which individuals can be ‘recognized immediately’, the play presents a world in which power functions ‘in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught’ (*Discipline and Punish*, 207) – in which ‘anyone may come and exercise in the central tower the functions of surveillance’ (*Discipline and Punish*, 202). The play’s world is thus one in which a presumed ability to read the individual like a book takes on a dangerously literal quality. It is a world in which the individual’s autonomy has been dethroned by the autonomy of the text.

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