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Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

No living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate. It is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel"

Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunbury. I want to tell you the rules.

—Algy to Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

I

A VAMPIRE'S IS NOT THE ONLY KISS to initiate a transformation in being. Consider the influential kiss both "suffered" and enjoyed by "H. C., American, aged 28, of independent means, unmarried, the elder of two children." As case history 27 in Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*, H. C.'s autobiographical narrative tells the story of what H. C. calls "my developing inversion," a process whose early stages witness his puzzlement before the dawning recognition that women are to him "as likable as ever, but no longer desirable." H. C.'s equivocation here is historically poised:

Soon after this the Oscar Wilde case was bruited about. The newspaper accounts of it, while illuminating, flashed upon me no light of self-revelation; they only amended some idle conjectures as to certain mystic vices I had heard whispered of. Here and there a newspaper allusion still too recondite was painstakingly clarified by an effeminate fellow-student, who, I fancy now, would have shown no reluctance had I begged him to adduce practical illustration. I purchased, too, photographs of Oscar Wilde, scrutinizing them under the unctuous auspices of this same emasculate and blandiloquent mentor. If my interest in Oscar Wilde arose from any other emotion than the rather morbid curiosity then almost universal, I was not conscious of it.

Erotic dreams, precluded hitherto by coition, came now to beset me. The persons of these dreams were (and still are) invariably women, with this one remembered exception: I dreamed that Oscar Wilde, one of my photographs of him incarnate, approached me with a buffoon languishment and perpetrated *fellatio*, an act verbally expounded shortly before my oracle. For a month or more, recalling this dream disgusted me.¹

Oscar Wilde comes to this dreamer, as to his readers, neither as “himself” nor even quite as his “own” simulacrum. Situated from the beginning within (indeed, as) an oscillating exchange of representations, *Oscar Wilde* surfaces in H. C.’s narrative as a precariously overdetermined signifier. He emerges either as the dominated subject of “the Oscar Wilde case,” the very public object of political subjugation, his body disciplined and his name appropriated as a new alias for those nameless “mystic vices I had heard whispered of”; or else he emerges as the volatilizing subject of those uncannily “clarifying” photographs, themselves the object of a bewildered “scrutiny” whose dreaming eye finally discloses an *agent provocateur* bringing liminal homosexual recognition to oracular crisis. In either case, each the palpable obverse or complement of the other, the signifier *Wilde* encodes not homosexual desire per se but rather a whole history of tendentious citation: “newspaper accounts,” anonymous whisperings, “idle conjectures,” “unctuous” explications by that “emasculate and blandiloquent mentor,” those fetishized photographs. Caught in an enthralling reciprocation of repudiation and identification, desire and disgust, ignorance and “self-revelation,” Wilde’s discursively appropriated body circulates in H. C.’s text as (in Michel Foucault’s idiom) “the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas)” and “the locus of a dissociated self.”² Thus the scene of fellation, as a kind of flickering homosexual *anagnorisis*, marks H. C.’s assumption of, and insertion into, his culture’s available narrative of “self”-disclosure. In “falling heir to inversion,” H. C. inherits not so much the occulted truth of homosexual being (the “incubation,” as he calls it, “of my perverse instinct”) as he does access to a historically specific narrative trajectory. Soon after his dream,

The antipodes of the sexual sphere turned more and more toward the light of my tolerance. Inversion, till now stained with a slight repugnance, became esthetically colorless at last, and then delicately retinted, at first solely with pity for its victims, but finally, the color deepening, with half-conscious inclination to attach it to myself as a remote contingency. This revolution, however, was not without external impetus. The prejudiced tone of a book I was reading, Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, by prompting resentment, led me on to sympathy. My championing, purely abstract though it was to begin with, none the less involved my looking at things with eyes hypothetically inverted—an orientation for the sake of argument. After a while, insensibly and at no one moment, hypothesis merged into reality: I myself was inverted. That occasional and fictitious inversion had never, I believe, superposed this true inversion; rather a true inversion, those many years dormant, had simply responded finally to a stimulus strong and prolonged enough, as a man awakens when he is loudly called.³

This passage is remarkable for its ambivalent appeal to rhetoric and nature as modes of identification; indeed, the work of the passage, as of the inversion metaphor generally, is to subsume the former under the latter. First a revisionist or “reverse” reading of dominant discourse yields a rhetorical or tropological “inversion” that subjects “the antipodes of the sexual sphere” to a chromatic slide, a cognitive unanchoring motivated by reason, reading, “pity,” “sympathy.” This

political inversion, or “revolution,” implicitly figures sexual identity as tropologically grounded—and, therefore, as abstractable, manipulable, traversable: “It involved my looking at things with eyes hypothetically inverted—an orientation for the sake of argument.” But the remainder of the paragraph then dismantles its own prior emphasis upon tropological inversion, displacing it with a counter-fiction of authentic origination. Imperceptibly and “at no one moment,” H.C. claims, “that occasional and fictitious inversion” miraculously opens onto a deeper ontological ground, an occulted or closeted “reality”: his “true inversion, these many years dormant, had simply responded . . . as a man awakens when he is loudly called.” In this essentializing transition, the motility of tropological sexuality submits to the transfixing call of a new name and a singular identity: “I myself was inverted.” In his analytic commentary, Ellis quickly affirms this interpretation: “A critical reading of this history suggests that the apparent control over the sexual impulse by reason is merely a superficial phenomenon. Here, as ever, reason is but a tool in the hands of the passions. The apparent causes are really the result; we are witnessing here the gradual emergence of a retarded homosexual impulse.”⁴

Wilde of course did not live long enough to savor the inadvertent splendor of that “tool in the hands of the [‘retarded’] passions.” Had he survived to read *Sexual Inversion*, he would no doubt have rejected the dehistoricizing move that Ellis and H.C. find so reassuring, so necessary to the stabilization of inverted identity. He would have recalled to H.C. the same displacement that H.C. had stressed in his scene of fellation: the displacement that “grounds” experience and identity neither in nature, nor in the disclosure of absolute origin, but rather in the dizzying oscillation of persons and representations, as when, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, baby Jack is “quite literally exchanged for writing in the cloak-room of Victoria Station, his absent-minded governess having substituted for his person a three-volume novel which is described as being ‘of more than usually repulsive sentimentality.’”⁵ In this farcical exchange of self and writing, the authority of the origin is punningly abrogated, preposterously reversed, as the sober Lady Bracknell makes deliriously clear: “Until yesterday,” she says as she pauses before the scandal of Jack’s nonoriginary origins, “I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus.” Like a deconstructionist before her time, a proper Derrida in late Victorian drag, Lady Bracknell exposes the irreducible secondariness of an origin that, in coming first, should but cannot authorize all that comes after. Here, as in Derrida, the nonorigin is originary: “The origin did not even disappear. . . . It was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin.”⁶

Lady Bracknell’s joke (which is, as we shall see, cognate with the pun motivating the play’s title) delegitimizes any claim of ontological authority or natural reference: first because it punningly installs a death or termination at the origin

of male subjectivity, as when, for instance, Oedipus murders his father at a cross-roads or terminus in order thereby to inherit his plagued adulthood; and second because it insinuates into the origin neither datum nor “truth” but rather the self-conscious play of terms and terminologies, texts and palpable fictions, of which Miss Prism’s triple-decker is the appropriately farcical instance. Once the origin has been terminated in this way, its grave solemnities mockingly redistributed as the “trivial” pleasure traversing a pun on death and writing, no “serious” appeal can be made to natural reference or natural ground.⁷ The very possibility of a “true inversion” grounded not in trope but in nature is thus punningly dismissed by a play whose deepest insistence is that individual and collective identities are based upon, and secured by, the most arbitrary of constructs: terms, terminations, termini, terminologies.

Unlike H. C., Wilde writes against all essentialist notions of being, inverted or otherwise, and refuses to identify subjectivity and sexuality, insisting instead on the irreducible difference between. That difference is the object of Wildean desire. For what Wilde seeks in desire is not the earnest disclosure of a single and singular identity, the deep truth of sex, but rather something less and something more: the vertigo of substitution and repetition. “The Creeds are believed,” he writes in “The Critic as Artist,” “not because they are rational, but because they are repeated. . . . Do you wish to love? Use Love’s Litany, and the words will create the yearning from which the world fancies that they spring.”⁸ Nor would Wilde curtail this plastic power of language and repetition; he actively recommended the modification of the flesh. “I do not like your lips,” he told a youthful André Gide. “They are quite straight, like the lips of a man who has never told a lie. I want you to learn to lie so that your lips may become beautiful and curved like the lips of an antique mask.”⁹ With such false beautiful lips, Wilde explores the erotic velleities of “the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style.”¹⁰ Hence, I suggest, Wilde would have been thrilled to find that H. C. should experience his first flash of homosexual recognition in a dream that directly thematizes repetition, a dream in which H. C. is fellated by a labile representation—by, we might say, the picture of Dorian Gray gone Wilde, “one of my photographs of him incarnate.” Whatever the annunciatory energy of this watershed experience, the fellation itself arrives as a “buffoon” enactment of a prior description. It arrives “originally” as a figure of repetition, as a re-presentation—“an act expounded shortly before by my oracle.” Years before H. C. wrote, Wilde had explicated the erotics of repetition; in the first of his letters to thematize directly “the love of things impossible,” he writes: “Sometime you will find, even as I have found, that there is no such thing as romantic experience; there are romantic memories, and there is the desire of romance—that is all. Our most fiery moments of ecstasy are merely shadows of what somewhere else we have felt, or of what we long someday to feel. So at least it seems to me.”¹¹ Thus, *pace* Walter Pater, even the most immediate shocks of sensation arrive in and as the wake of

their own nativity, arrive already mediate, caught indis severably in the dreamy interstices of power, discourse, repetition.

II

The text is (or should be) that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the Political Father.

—Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

If it goes without saying that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is straight farce, then conversely it has never been said that the object of the play's derision is heterosexual representation itself, which Wilde subjects to a fierce, irrecoverable, but almost invisible transvaluation. Positioned at the latter end of a great tradition and written (1894–95) on the precipice of what W. B. Yeats called “the catastrophe,” *Earnest* is a self-consciously belated text in which the venerable topoi of comedy—the dispersion of lovers and their ultimate distribution into cross-gender couples, the confusion and then the restoration of identities, the confrontation with and the expulsion of errant desire, the closural wedding sponsored by the Name of the Father (here, specifically, Ernest John Moncrieff)—are repeated, inverted, finely perverted, set finally to spin. In the ensuing delirium, Wilde exposes these topoi as culturally empowered cyphers whose particular distribution enforces heterosexual narrative. As Wilde stages it, this narrative entails not just points of departure (a “social indiscretion” in “a cloak-room at a railway station”) and termination (heterosexual conjunction under the paternal signifier) but also sidelines of pseudonymous desire, here called, preposterously, “serious Bunburyism.” Bunbury, to be sure, will be “quite exploded” by play's end, but this “revolutionary outrage,” as Lady Bracknell calls it, will have already ensured his fragmented dissemination throughout the text. In a parodic submission to heterosexual teleology, Wilde *does* dismiss his lovers to the presumptive closure of marital bliss, but not until he has insinuated what should, by law and convention, have been exiled as *non nominandum*: a jubilant celebration of male homosexual desire, a trenchant dissection of the supposedly “legitimate” male heterosexual subject, and a withering critique of the political idea, exigent in the 1890s, that sexuality, inverted or otherwise, could be natural or unnatural at all.

That Wilde achieves these critical effects without the slightest breach in heterosexual decorum is not the least measure of a genius whose wile it was to broadcast homosexual critique into the gay interspace of a pun. Here the play of occultation and display, slippage and spillage, could be conveniently housed, as is Ernest John, in two oppositional domiciles—or, as in a bedroom farce, two closets—between which a great deal of shuttling would be required. Transcoding the emergent, dissymmetrical binarism heterosexual/homosexual into verbal play, Wilde instantiates homosexual desire as the secondary, punning other of a

dominant signification, thereby simultaneously affirming and subverting the authority of the norm. The inescapable duplicity of this procedure is historical in at least two senses: first because it plays with and against the tradition of interdiction by which celebration of the homosexual possibility had been silenced; and second because, as we shall see, it redeploys contemporaneous discourses on (as H. C. puts it) “true inversion,” which repeatedly formulated homosexual desire as heterosexual desire manqué: in the case of the male, *anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa*.

Recent work by Ed Cohen and Jonathan Dollimore has made it possible to discern the homosexual countervalences in Wilde’s transparently heterosexual texts. In a crucial essay on *Dorian Gray*, Cohen explores the ways in which Wilde produced “new discursive strategies to express concerns unvoiced within the dominant culture.” Examining “Wilde’s novel [as it] moves both with and athwart late Victorian ideological practices that naturalized male heterosexuality,” Cohen indicates just how an ambidextrous Wilde maintains a protective heterosexual patina even as he also “inscribes the male body within the circuits of male desire.”¹² And in a parallel essay on Wilde’s anti-essentialism, Dollimore explicates the transgressive power of the Wildean text, which, he asserts, operates *within* the structures of legitimation and domination in order to release deviant vectors of desire, transverse lines of critique: “Deviant desire reacts against, disrupts and displaces from within; rather than seeking to escape the repressive ordering of the sexual, Wilde reinscribes himself within and relentlessly inverts the binaries upon which that ordering depends. Inversion . . . defines Wilde’s transgressive aesthetic.”¹³ As Dollimore suggests, Wilde deploys inversion not as an occulted sexual truth disclosing effeminated being but rather as a tropological strategy whose primary devices, reversal and repetition, could bring the most upright of heterosexual norms to posterous conclusion.

Hence the extreme formalism of heterosexual desire in *Earnest*, its inspired submission to the rigor of the signifier. As the effect of prior performances, heterosexuality for Wilde was both the a priori and the sine qua non of dramatic representation; he could neither stage nor publish an uncloseted gay play. In *Earnest* Wilde transforms this delegitimation into a mode of enablement; for if the heterosexual alignment of desires and bodies were prerequisite to representation, then Wilde would foreground and expose it as such, as a convention whose arbitrariness excited earnest celebration. The heterosexualizing machinery of Wilde’s plot is too familiar to need much diagramming; clipped synopsis will do. The play opens on two exuberant bachelors, John Worthing (the eponymous hero of the play’s eponymous pun) and Algernon Moncrieff, each living a “double life” of undefined specificity. (“I hope,” says Cecily to Algy, “you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.”) John is Jack in the country (where he is respectable)

and his own dissolute brother, Ernest, in the city (where he is not), and Algy takes curious pleasure cruises to the country to visit Bunbury, about whom we know nothing except that his “permanent invalid[ism]” elicits from Algy an heroic succoring. Our heroes are schematically aligned with respective heroines: Jack with Gwendolen, who believes him to be Ernest and will only marry a man so named, and Algy with Cecily who likewise will only marry an Ernest. “There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence,” as Cecily explains to a bewildered Algy. And Gwendolen’s explication suggests access to a more than nominal rapture: “It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations.” The sheer arbitrariness of this “feminine” desire for Ernest-ness underscores the formality of the play’s manifest heterosexuality; it requires not so much that the heroes seek women as that they seek access to women, legitimacy, and wealth through the assumption of an overdetermined signifier, a magical term whose power lies in its capacity to trigger fetishistic “vibrations.”

The plot works conventionally first to obstruct and then to facilitate the two impending marriages, and the securing of the marriages turns upon the elimination of two impediments. The first is Lady Bracknell’s objection to the “romantic story” of Jack’s origins and to the consequent illegibility of the Name of the Father, and the second is John Worthing’s (very patriarchal, very hypocritical) insistence that Algy relinquish the incomparable pleasures of “serious Bunburyism.” Wilde’s great third act farcically achieves both conditions: in an offstage parody of tragic *sparagmos* Bunbury is “quite exploded” (“I killed Bunbury this afternoon,” says Algy murderously and casually), and the dispersions of Jack’s identity are “properly” integrated within the (splayed) unity of the paternal signifier. When Jack discovers that indeed he “naturally is Ernest,” this is a nature whose authority is grounded entirely in letters, terms, texts: in a genealogical appeal to writing, and not just any writing, but “the Army lists of the last forty years”—the book, very simply, of the Names of the Fathers. Consulting this august text, and reading there for the first time both his own and his father’s name, Jack discovers his denatured nature as repetition, quotation, division:

JACK: The Army Lists of the last forty years are here. These delightful records should have been my constant study. (*Rushes to bookcase and tears the books out.*) M. Generals . . . Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley—what ghastly names they have—Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General 1869, Christian names, Ernest John. (*Puts book very quietly down and speaks quite calmly.*) I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn’t I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.

In these lines Jack “naturally” inherits the very same pair of signifiers that all along had structured the oscillation of his “double life.” As if in reward for his earnest lying, Jack discovers himself to be, as indeed he had always been, both

himself and his own fictive (br)other. No longer split between “Jack” and “Ernest,” the split “Ernest/John” now installed as the law of his being, Jack inherits himself “after all” as his “own” difference from himself. (“But what own are you?” Gwen astutely queries.) In thus assuming what Joel Fineman has aptly called “the unity of his duplicity,”¹⁴ Jack’s now “natural” being is introjected with the same oscillation that the play had just ritually expelled by “quite explod[ing]” Bunbury. Condensing these figures, and stressing their more than casual relation, we may say that the murder of Bunbury enables the pseudo-integration of an irreducibly divided male subject.

Wilde’s farce thus discloses heterosexual closure as the function of two fatally interlocked figures: on the one hand, the formal expulsion of Bunbury and whatever unspeakable pleasures “serious Bunburyism” may entail and, on the other, the “integration” of the “heterosexual” male subject under the Name of the Father. At once crucial *and* arbitrary, these predicates enable the heterosexual order; they alone secure the marriages that will presumably close the otherwise open circuits of desire. (Algy, we should remember, refutes this dream of closure: “You don’t seem to realize,” he tells Jack, “that in married life three is company and two is none.”) And yet these predicates have always seemed ridiculous or, in Wilde’s preferred term, “trivial.” What, we now need to ask, is the meaning of this overdetermined triviality, itself finally indistinguishable from the equivocal pleasure of the play’s titular pun? Who is “Bunbury” and what are his filiations—familial, erotic, conceptual—with “Ernest John”? Why must desire submit to such arbitrary terms and terminations? To begin answering these questions, we must now confront the play’s phantom self, itself actually no self but rather a gnomic signifier—a name, that is, without a being. I mean of course the nonexistent but omnipresent Mr. Bunbury, upon whom (but there is no whom) so much so curiously depends.

III

Like all works of art, [The Importance of Being Earnest] drew its sustenance from life, and, speaking for myself, whenever I see or read the play I always wish I did not know what I do about Wilde’s life at the time he was writing it—that when, for instance, John Worthing talks of going Bunburying, I did not immediately visualize Alfred Taylor’s establishment. On rereading it after his release, Wilde said, “It was extraordinary reading the play over. How I used to toy with that tiger Life.” At its conclusion, I find myself imagining a sort of nightmare Pantomime Transformation Scene in which, at the touch of the magician’s wand, instead of the workday world’s turning into fairyland, the country house in a never-never Hertfordshire turns into the Old Bailey, the features of Lady Bracknell into those of Mr. Justice Wills. Still, it is a masterpiece, and on account of it Wilde will always enjoy the impersonal fame of an artist as well as the notoriety of his personal legend.

—W. H. Auden, “An Improbable Life”¹⁵

As a character “always somewhere else at present,” as a figure thus *sans figure*, Bunbury had been devised by Wilde to inhabit the erotic interstices of the double bind here represented by Auden’s *volonté d’oublier*, his drive to forget: “I always wish I did not know what I do.” The subtle instruction of such a double bind is not so much that knowledge be voided as that knowledge perform its work along self-blinded paths of “ignorance,” nonrecognition, and misidentification. “In this light,” as D. A. Miller writes, “it becomes clear that the social function of secrecy”—and Bunbury is the secret subject of an open secret—“is not to conceal knowledge so much as to conceal knowledge of the knowledge. . . . Secrecy would thus be the subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object are established, and the sanctity of their first term kept inviolate.”¹⁶ As Wilde’s sly figure for this regime of knowing and unknowing, of knowing through unknowing, Bunbury remains a being or subject always otherwise and elsewhere; he appears nowhere on stage, and wherever his name is present he is not. Appeals to Bunbury yield only his absence: “Bunbury doesn’t live here. Bunbury is somewhere else at present.” But if Bunbury has been banished from the precincts of heterosexual representation, the need to frequent his secrecy has not, as Algy explains to Jack: “Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.” Bunbury thus operates within the heterosexual order as its hidden but irreducible supplement, the fictive and pseudonymous brother whose erotic “excesses” will be manifested only by continual allusion to their absence.

Of course the gay specificity of such allusiveness was technically unspeakable: *non nominandum inter Christianos*. Refusing to chafe under this proscription, Wilde inverts it by inserting Bunbury into the text behind the ostentatious materiality of an empty signifier, a punning alias whose strategic equivocation between allusion and elision had already announced, a century before Foucault’s formulation, “that the world of speech and desires has known invasions, struggles, plunderings, disguises, ploys.”¹⁷ Speaking strictly, *Earnest* cannot admit or acknowledge the erotic force of the gay male body, which must therefore be staged as an atopic body, a body constitutively “somewhere else at present.” Hence the flickering present-absence of the play’s homosexual desire, as the materiality of the flesh is retracted into the sumptuousness of the signifier, whether in the “labial phonemics” of Bunbury,¹⁸ all asmack with death and kisses, or in the duplicitous precincts of the play’s most proper and improper name, *Earnest*: a name at once splayed by a pun and doubly referential, pointing with one hand to the open secret of the double life and with the other to the brittle posturings of the Name of the Father—a figure whose delicate transmissibility has always required the strictest of heterosexual propaedeutics.

What then, more specifically, are the disguises and ploys of “serious Bunbury-

ism”? Or, in Jack’s more exasperated intonation: “Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?” But the hermeneutical rage of a Jack must be a little undone by the interpretive insouciance of an Algy: “Now produce your explanation, and pray make it remarkable. The bore about most explanations is that they are never half so remarkable as the things they try to explain.” In this spirit, I offer some explanations. Bunbury represents or disseminates the following: 1) an actual person of no historical importance, Henry Shirley Bunbury, a hypochondriacal acquaintance of Wilde’s Dublin youth;¹⁹ 2) a village in Cheshire that, appropriately enough, “does not even appear on most maps”;²⁰ 3) a tongue-in-cheek allusion to Wilde’s illegal “sodomitical” practices—“not only,” as Fineman puts it, “British slang for a male brothel, but . . . also a collection of signifiers that straightforwardly express their desire to bury in the bun”;²¹ 4) a parody of the contemporaneous medicalization of homosexual desire (“Nor do I,” says Lady Bracknell of Algy’s visits to Bunbury, “in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life”); 5) a sly, even chipper, allusion to the thanatopolitics of homophobia, whose severest directives against disclosure ensure that what finally gets disclosed will be, as in *Dorian Gray*, a corpse, homicide or suicide, upon whose cold or cooling flesh the now obvious text is for the first time made legible; 6) a pragmatics of gay misrepresentation, a nuanced and motile doublespeak, driven both by pleasure and, as Gide put it, “by the need of self-protection”;²² and, as we shall see before we end, 7) a pseudonym or alias for the erotic oscillation within the male subject, his fundamental waffling between Jack and Ernest.

But more crucially than any of these, Bunbury insists upon his “own” difference from himself and from whatever signification (as above) he may, by caprice or compulsion, assume. From his prone position just offstage (to know Bunbury is “to sit by a bed of pain”), *Bunbury* performs enormous representational work, but only by way of a disseminal passage whose first effect is to expel the referent from the neighborhood of the sign: where *Bunbury* is, Bunbury is not. It is typical of Wilde’s inverting wit that he should stage this expulsion as an act of ingestion, as a buttered and material pun on Bunbury’s cryptographic name. I mean the “luxurious and indolent” gluttony that, by axiomatically transposing sexual and gustatory pleasures (cucumber sandwiches, muffins, breads: buns—Banbury or Bunbury—everywhere),²³ operates as a screen metaphor for otherwise unspeakable pleasures: “There can be little good in any young man who eats so much, or so often.”²⁴ In this displacement, the obscene becomes the scenic, as that which must not be spoken is consumed, before an audience, with incomparable relish and finesse. “Well, I can’t eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.” The fastidious allusion to Wilde’s sexual practice here is

exact—from hand to mouth: as H. Montgomery Hyde reports, fondling “would be followed by some form of mutual masturbation or intercrural intercourse. . . . Finally, oral copulation would be practiced, with Wilde as the active agent [*sic*], though this role was occasionally reversed. It gave him inspiration, he said.”²⁵ Inspired by “reversed” practices and reversible tropes, Wilde adopts a polite decorum (no danger to Algy’s cuffs) in order to display and displace a desire to bury in the bun. In this way, serious Bunburyism releases a polytropic sexuality so mobile, so evanescent in speed and turn, that it traverses, Ariel-like, a fugitive path through oral, genital, and anal ports until it expends itself in and as the displacements of language. It was Wilde’s extraordinary gift to return this vertigo of substitution and repetition to his audience. The inspiration he derived from fellatio he then redisseminated, usually *sotto voce*, through the actor’s mouth. “The ejaculation,” says Lady Bracknell in a line that did not survive the revisor’s knife, “has reached my ears more than once.”²⁶

Oscillating between verbal and seminal emissions, Lady Bracknell’s pun enacts the rhetorical equivocation essential to serious Bunburyism: an “illicit” signification is broadcast into the text even as it is also withdrawn under the cover of a licit one. In this way, Wilde duplicitously introduced into *Earnest* a parodic account of his own double life (the public thumbing of a private nose) as well as a trenchant critique of the heterosexist presumption requiring, here statutorily, that such a life be both double and duplicitous. And that *Earnest* is a text sliding deviously between exposé and critique, a text saturating its reader/viewer with blinding disseminal effusions, is simply a fact whose closeting or imprisonment we must tolerate no longer. To substantiate this claim, I adduce below a brief series of discrete indiscretions in which *Earnest* “goes Bunburying”—in which, that is, Wilde lifts to liminality his subcultural knowledge of “the terrible pleasures of double life.”²⁷ In providing these few examples (others are adduced in a longer version of the present essay), I have drawn freely from both the three- and four-act versions of the play.²⁸

1) “It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case” (act 1, in both three- and four-act versions). In the trials of April–May 1895, Wilde would be compelled to submit again and again to “ungentlemanly” exegesis. Cigarette cases, usually silver ones purchased in Bond Street, were part (along with cash, other jewelry, food, and drink) of Wilde’s payment to the male prostitutes he frequented. As the most durable material trace of Wilde’s illegal sexual practice, these cigarette cases (replete with inscriptions such as “To X from O. W.”) would be repeatedly introduced into evidence by the prosecution throughout the second and third trials. Consider the following exchange between Solicitor General Frank Lockwood, prosecutor at the third trial, and the defendant:

Did you ever give one [a cigarette case] to Charles Parker also? —Yes, but I am afraid it cost only £1.

Silver? —Well, yes. I have a great fancy for giving cigarette cases.

To young men? —Yes.

How many have you given? —I might have given seven or eight in 1892 or 1893.²⁹

These cigarette cases are remarkably rich metonyms of Wilde's sexual practice. Literally inscribed with the condescension implicit in Wilde's cross-class and cross-generational sexual activity, they suggest his ambivalent relation to the prostitution he repeatedly enjoyed: he preferred to think of the cases as "gifts" not necessarily related to the sexual services they nonetheless purchased. As evidentiary deposits purchased and distributed by a "first-class misdemeanor," as Jack describes Ernest, they also bespeak a contradictory emotionality compounded of defiance, foolhardiness, and, it would seem, a certain desire to be caught. And finally, they insistently point to the orality that was both Wilde's sexual preference and *Earnest's* primary trope of displacement. Henry Wotton, after all, had already explicated for Dorian Gray the evanescent perfection of a good smoke ("You must have a cigarette. A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?"); and Edward Shelley, one of Wilde's lovers, testified that he "had received a letter from Mr. Wilde inviting him to 'come smoke a cigarette' with him."³⁰ Furthermore, while reporting the events of the first (that is, the libel) trial, the London daily *Evening News* (5 April 1895) printed the following:

The Old Bailey recoiled with loathing from the long ordeal of terrible suggestions that occupied the whole of yesterday when the cross-examination left the literary plane and penetrated the dim-lit perfumed rooms where the poet of the beautiful joined with valets and grooms *in the bond of silver cigarette cases*. (Italics added)³¹

As the affective verso to the recto of *Earnest's* gay gaming with cigarette cases, the "recoil[ing]" and "loathing" specified in these lines indicate the precarious volatility of the Victorian male bonds so deftly manipulated by Wilde on "the literary plane." A gentleman might offer his peer, or even his inferior in age or class, the benefit of a good smoke or the gratuity of a cigarette case, but only so long as the gift did not suggest a bond more intimate than "proper" gentlemanly relation or condescension. The performative success of *Earnest's* oral insouciance lay in its capacity to tease the limit of the proper without seeming to violate it seriously. Prosecutor Lockwood's "very ungentlemanly" reading of private cigarette cases reversed this rhetorical strategy by transforming the *glissando* of Wildean wit into that "long ordeal of terrible suggestion."

2) "Fathers are certainly not popular just at present. . . . At present fathers are at a terrible discount. They are like those chaps, the minor poets. They are never even quoted" (act 1 in the four-act versions). Spoken by Algy, these lines point underhandedly to the escalating filial warfare between the Marquess of Queensberry and Lord Alfred Douglas. This triangular narrative is too familiar

to require recapitulation here, except to say that the battle was being engaged even as Wilde was composing *Earnest* and that Wilde's failure to manage the situation adroitly precipitated the debacle of the trials, during which Queensberry's charge that Wilde had been "posing as a sodomite [*sic*]" would find a decisive institutional context in which to be "quoted," at length and in detail. At the conclusion of the libel trial, the jury determined the Queensberry's charge of sodomitical "posing" had been proved and that his "Plea of Justification" elaborating this charge had been "published for the public benefit."

3) Canon Chasuble in response to Jack's concern that he is "a little too old now" to be rechristened as Ernest:

Oh, I am not by any means a bigoted Paedobaptist. . . . You need have no apprehensions [about immersion]. . . . Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed, I think, advisable. . . . I have two similar ceremonies to perform. . . . A case of twins that occurred recently in one of the outlying cottages on your estate . . . I don't know, however, if you would care to join them at the Font. Personally I do not approve myself of the obliteration of class-distinctions. (Act 2 in the four-act versions; a truncated version of these lines, without "Paedobaptist" and "the obliteration of class-distinctions," appears in the three-act version)

The always serious Canon Chasuble repeatedly falls into oblique and unwilling licentious allusion, as in these lines, which insinuate an outrageous chain of gay metonyms: "Paedobaptist," "sprinkling is all that is necessary," "in one of the outlying cottages," "if you would care to join them at the Font," "the obliteration of class-distinctions." If "Paedobaptist" (or "sprinkler of boys") was too blatantly obscene to survive revision, then the more subtly insinuated "outlying cottages" was not: only an elite audience would have known that by the late nineteenth century *cottage* had currency as a camp signifier for a trysting site, usually a public urinal. The word also had a more personal reference; Queensberry's Plea of Justification claimed that Oscar Wilde "in the year of our Lord One thousand eight hundred and ninety-three [a year before the composition of *Earnest*] at a house called 'The Cottage' at Goring . . . did solicit and incite . . . the said . . . acts of gross indecency."³² Once these Bunburied significations are allowed to resonate through the passage, once we recognize with Canon Chasuble that "corrupt readings seem to have crept into the text," the references to "sprinkling" and "join[ing] them at the Font" assume an "obscene" valence. Similarly with "the obliteration of class-distinctions," which boisterously points to the almost pederastic, cross-class prostitution Wilde enjoyed. Just a few lines earlier, Jack had the effrontery to say, "I am very fond of children," a sentence definitely courting the bourgeois outrage of the thus "discounted" fathers who pursued Wilde through the court and into prison.

4) "The next time I see you I hope you will be Parker" (act 3 in the four-act versions). As has been "public knowledge" (however inert) for some thirty years, the most substantial revision of *Earnest* was the deletion (demanded by George Alexander, who produced the play, and unhappily submitted to by Wilde) of an

entire scene in which Algy, Bunburying as Ernest, is almost arrested for dining expenses incurred by Jack, or rather Ernest, at the Savoy Hotel, the site of both Jack/Ernest's "grossly materialistic" gluttony and some of Wilde's sexual encounters. Jack, delighted that Algy should suffer for extravagances that can only be correctly charged to Ernest, counsels his younger brother "that incarceration would do you a great deal of good." Algy understandably protests: "Well, I really am not going to be imprisoned in the suburbs for having dined in the West End. It is perfectly ridiculous." Ridiculous or not, Wilde would very soon suffer an analogous imprisonment, but in "never-never Hertfordshire" (as Auden called it) this end is happily remitted when Jack, his "generosity misplaced," "pay[s] this monstrous bill for my brother."

Two aspects of this scene merit emphasis. First, Algy's pseudo-arrest for serious overeating strengthens my argument that in *Earnest* "luxurious and indolent" gluttony operates as a jubilant screen metaphor for otherwise unrepresentable pleasures. This cathexis of extravagant dining and sexual transgression refers directly to Wilde's double life; it was his regular practice to dine luxuriously with his lovers prior to sex, thereby enjoying *in camera* the same metaphor he would display on stage in *Earnest*. Often meeting his assignations in the private chambers of public restaurants (Willis's or the Solferino or elsewhere), he would dazzle them with opulence, language, and alcohol. Here is the testimony of one prostitute:

He [i.e., Alfred Taylor, Wilde's procurer] took us to a restaurant in Rupert Street. I think it was the Solferino. We were shown upstairs to a private room, in which there was a dinner-table laid for four. After a while Wilde came in. I had never seen him before, but I had heard of him. We dined about eight o'clock. We all four sat down to dinner, Wilde sitting on my left.

Was the dinner a good dinner?—Yes. The table was lighted with red-shaded candles. We had champagne with our dinner, and brandy and coffee afterwards. Wilde paid for the dinner. Subsequently Wilde said to me, "This is the boy for me—will you go to the Savoy Hotel with me?" I consented, and Wilde drove me in a cab to the hotel. He took me first into a sitting-room on the second floor, where he ordered some more drink—whiskey and soda. Wilde then asked me to go into his bedroom with him.

Witness here described certain acts of indecency which he alleged took place in the bedroom.³³

The witness in this exchange is Charles Parker, a sometime valet, whose testimony against Wilde seems alternately to have been purchased and coerced. It is the name *Parker* that brings us to the last point regarding the deleted arrest scene. The scene commences with the delivery of a calling card, which Algy reads: "'Parker and Gribbsby, Solicitors.' I don't know anything about them. Who are they?" After taking and reading the card, Jack facetiously speculates: "I wonder who they can be. I expect, Ernest, they have come about some business for your friend Bunbury. Perhaps Bunbury wants to make his will, and wishes you to be

executor.” With these intimations of Algy’s forthcoming execution of Bunbury lingering in the air, Messrs. Parker and Gribbsby are shown in by Merriman, the butler. But “they,” it turns out, are not exactly a they but a he (“There is only one gentleman in the hall, sir,” Merriman informs Jack), and the one gentleman is Gribbsby “himself,” come either to collect the debt or “remove” Ernest to Holloway Prison, one of those “suburb[an]” facilities through which Wilde would be funneled on his way to ignominy: “The surroundings, I admit, are middle class; but the gaol itself is fashionable and well-aired.” (From the other side of the bars Wilde would not find it so.) As these threats of incarceration and death are being ventilated in the text, Jack first teases Algy for his (that is, Jack’s) profligacy and then “generously” pays Ernest’s debt, thereby forestalling the correction that would, Jack says, have done Algy “a great deal of good.” Having dispatched his serious problem, Jack then luxuriates in a little trivial banter:

JACK: You are Gribbsby, aren’t you? What is Parker like?

GRIBSBY: I am both, sir. Gribbsby when I am on unpleasant business, Parker on occasions of a less serious kind.

JACK: The next time I see you I hope you will be Parker.

(“After all,” Wilde writes in a letter, “the only proper intoxication is conversation.”)³⁴ Unfortunately, the next time Wilde saw “Parker,” Parker would be “on [the] unpleasant business” of a reverse, or disciplinary, Bunbury. Appearing in the Central Criminal Court under the guise of *Gribbsby*, appearing, that is, as an agent of the law, Parker would testify to “acts of gross indecency” committed with Wilde in 1893 while Gribbsby, apparently, was otherwise and elsewhere engaged.

It could have come as no surprise to the creator of “Parker and Gribbsby, Solicitors” that he should find himself prosecuted for the same sexual practices he had been (con)celebrating just beneath the lovely pellucid “heterosexual” skin of *Ernest*. That, quite literally, his dirty linen should be “well-aired” in court he had already anticipated in this deleted arrest scene, which I have only begun to discuss here. Conversely and symmetrically, the extensive newspaper coverage of April–May 1895 would guarantee the dissemination of Lady Bracknell’s also deleted line: a (somewhat expurgated) narrative of his “ejaculation[s]” would indeed reach respectable English “ears more than once.” But there is nothing uncanny in any of this. No mere prognosticator foretelling the doom that was about to settle around him, Wilde was instead a prevaricator of genius, a polymath of the pleasurable lie. As a person committed to homosexual practice, he was compelled *by law* to inhabit the oscillating and nonidentical identity structure of “Parker and Gribbsby, Solicitors”: a structure in which transgression and law, homosexual delight and its arrest, are produced and reproduced as interlocked versions and inversions of each other.

Writing from this ambivalent and endangered position, Wilde stated with a parodist’s clarity and a criminal’s obscurity that the importance of being was nei-

ther X nor Y, male nor female, homosexual nor heterosexual, Parker nor Gribbsby, Jack nor Ernest. Being will not be disclosed by the descent of an apt and singular signifier, a proper name naturally congruent with the object it seeks to denominate. In contrast to H. C.'s essentialist move, Wilde never heralds "a true inversion" that "respond[s] finally to a stimulus strong and prolonged enough, as a man awakens when he is loudly called." Belying such notions of true being, Wilde suggests instead that identity has always already been mislaid somewhere between such culturally "productive" binarisms as those listed above. Homosexual or heterosexual? Parker or Gribbsby? Jack or Ernest? Which name should be "loudly called"? "I am both, sir." (Both indeed, and therefore not quite either: Wilde emphatically does *not* imply recourse to the compromise formation of bisexuality or, in Ellis's telling contemporaneous phrase, "psychosexual hermaphroditism"; for this formation leaves undisturbed the conveniently bifurcated gender assumptions that it only seemingly fuses. The component desires that, when added together, comprise the "bi" remain after all quite distinct: shot with the masculine *or* feminine through and through.) Wildean doubling indicates instead a strategy of lexical or nominal traversal, a skidding within the code and between its semantic poles. In this vertiginous shuttle, being itself must slip on a name, or two. "But what own are you?" Gwen astutely asks of Jack just as he is about to become Ernest John. "What is your Christian name, now that you have become someone else?"

IV

I love the last words of anything: the end of art is the beginning.
—Oscar Wilde

Child! You seem to me to use words without understanding their proper meaning.
—Jack to Cecily in the four-act *Earnest*

In lieu of "serious" closure, and as if to deride even the possibility of formal solution to the fugitivity of Bunburying desire, Wilde terminates his play, farcically and famously, with an impudent iteration of his farce's "trivial" but crucial pun; here, finally, "the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment."³⁵ For *Earnest* may close only when Jack, in a sly parody of tragic *anagnorisis*, "realizes for the first time in [his] life the vital Importance of Being Earnest." At this moment, as the last words of the play swallow the first words of its title, its origin therefore dutifully assimilated to its terminus, Jack "realizes" himself in and as his "own" *double entendre*: in and as, that is, the difference between 1) himself and himself and 2) himself and the symbolic system that seeks to determine his "proper" name. Jack's punning "being," such as it is, is thus located and dislo-

cated—located *as* dislocated—in an experience of radical *méconnaissance*, of verbal and ontological slippage, that in turn fortifies his already supercharged “perception of the extravagance of the signifier.”³⁶ As he celebrates the “vital importance” of being his own pun, so does Jack embrace, even as he is embraced by, the signifier’s power of perverse subsumption—by the delight it gives and takes as it incorporates “deviant” vectors under its nominally proper head.

This extravagance constitutes both the subject and the subjectivity of the play, their very sound and sense; the plot is so devised that the play closes only when Jack’s “being” is absurdly assimilated to his, or rather his father’s, name, a requirement that enables Wilde both to acknowledge and to deride the oedipal force of prior inscriptions. In response to the pseudo-urgent question of Jack’s identity (“Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?”), the play dutifully answers with the Name of the Father, but in doing so also insistently repeats its insistence upon the letter; in its expiring breath *Earnest* resounds with Jack’s other double name and so closes with an openness to what Jonathan Culler calls “the call of the phoneme.” Invoking the materiality of sound and its powers of startling conjunction, the pun’s “echoes tell of wild realms beyond the [semantic] code and suggest new configurations of meaning.”³⁷ In such wild realms, the pleasures of the homophone arrive just as the differentiae of the hetero dissolve into sound and same. Culler continues:

Puns, like portmanteaux, limn for us a model of language where the word is derived rather than primary and combinations of letters suggest meanings while at the same time illustrating the instability of meanings, their as yet ungrasped or undefined relations to one another, relations which further discourse (further play of similarity and difference) can produce. When one thinks of how puns characteristically demonstrate the applicability of a single signifying sequence to two different contexts, with quite different meanings, one can see how puns both evoke prior formulations, with the meanings they have deployed, and demonstrate their instability, the mutability of meaning, the production of meaning by linguistic motivation. Puns present us with a model of language as phonemes or letters combining in various ways to evoke prior meaning and to produce effects of meaning—with a looseness, unpredictability, excessiveness, shall we say, that cannot but disrupt the model of language as nomenclature.³⁸

Culler here efficiently formulates the duplicitous operations by which the pun opens in language a counterhegemonic or revisionary space, a plastic site in which received meanings (“language as nomenclature”) may be perversely turned, strangely combined, or even emptied out. Because they “both evoke prior formulations, with the meanings they have deployed, and demonstrate their instability, the mutability of meaning,” puns discover in prior formulations the horizon of a fresh possibility. As a figure that itself limns the liminal, sporting on the hazy border where tongues of sound and sense intermingle as in a kiss, the pun broadcasts a faintly scandalous erotic power, a power of phonemic blending

and semantic bending, whose feinting extensions Reason always does its best to reign in; as when, for instance, Samuel Johnson famously quibbles with punning Shakespeare:

A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason, propriety, and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it.³⁹

Wilde's genius implicitly submits Johnson's critique to a dizzying inversion. Earnestly "sacrific[ing] reason, propriety, and truth," Wilde works his trade, transcoding golden apples into cucumber sandwiches and fatal Cleopatra into vital Ernest. (Indeed, gender transposition of the objects of male desire was Wilde's characteristic mode of gay figuration: "I do not interest myself in that British view of morals that sets Messalina above Sporus.")⁴⁰

But it was not against just any gendered signifier that Wilde directed the splaying call of the phoneme. He expressly targets the most overdetermined of such signifiers—the Name of the Father, here Ernest John Moncrieff—upon whose lips (if we may borrow a figure from the good Canon Chasuble) a whole cultural disposition is hung: the distribution of women and (as) property, the heterosexist configuration of eros, the genealogy of the "legitimate" male subject, and so on. Closing with a farcical pun on the father's name, Wilde discloses, in a single double stroke, the ironic cathexis (and the sometimes murderous double binding) by which the homosexual possibility is formally terminated or "exploded" ("Oh," says Algy "airily," "I killed Bunbury this afternoon") in order that a familiar heterosexualizing machinery may be installed, axiomatically and absurdly, "at last." So decisive is the descent of the father's name, so swift its powers of compulsion and organization, that (at least seemingly) it subdues the oscillations of identity, straightens the byways of desire, and completes—*voilà!*—the marital teleology of the comic text. All three couples, "after all," are swept away ("At last!" "At last!") in the heady and "natural" rush toward presumptive conjugal bliss: a rush so heady that it peremptorily dismisses, for instance, both Cecily's exigent desire for an "Ernest" and Algy's own earlier caution against the exclusionary erotics of heterosexist integration: "Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you [i.e., Jack] ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it." Forgetting this brief dissertation on interminable Bunburyism, Algy fairly leaps toward marriage, thereby fulfilling, as if by amnesia, the comic topos which dictates that marital conjunction, or its proleptic image, shall close the otherwise open circuits of desire.

And yet the closural efficacy of this compulsory heterosexual sweep, especially any gesture it might make in the direction of the "natural" ("I mean it nat-

urally is Ernest,” as Jack assures Gwen), is rendered instantly absurd—or, as Algy puts it, “extremely problematic”—by, first, its hypertrophic textuality and, second, by Wilde’s insistence upon both the sovereignty of the signifier over its signified and the signifier’s “liability” to indiscreet slippage, its exorbitant appetite for signifieds. Not only must Jack seek his “natural” or “proper” identity in an antic succession of texts (he “*rushes to bookcase and tears the books out*,” reads the stage direction), but in an earlier version this scene of frantic reading had included, besides “the Army Lists of the last forty years,” an allusion to Robert Hichens’s *The Green Carnation* (1894), a contemporaneous parody of Wilde’s affair with Douglas.⁴¹ Perusing this text from her unimpeachable altitude, Lady Bracknell emits an evaluation: “This treatise, the ‘Green Carnation,’ as I see it is called, seems to be a book about the culture of exotics. It contains no reference to Generals in it. It seems a morbid and middle-class affair.”⁴² After this and other preposterous citations (Canon Chasuble, for instance, is handed a Bradshaw railway guide “of 1869, I observe”), it is of course the book with the “reference to Generals in it” that brings home the prize and so surprises Jack with his now naturally punning self.

In any case, the paternally sanctioned “being” that Jack’s reading hereby secures entails a literal reinscription of the same pseudo-opposition (*Jack* versus *Ernest* or *Ernest John*) under which his double life had all along been conducted, except that the order of the terms has been inverted: where cognomen was, there pseudonym shall be. In this inversion, the closural move that would repair Jack’s splayed identity and terminate the shuttle and slide of Bunburying desire discloses again, discloses “at last,” neither the deep truth of essential being nor the foundational monad of a “real” sexuality. In contrast, for instance, to the memoirs of H. C., whose sexual identity is definitively secured once he is “loudly called” by his “true inversion,” *Earnest* deploys inversion as a tropological machine, as a mode of erotic mobility, evasion, play. Hence Wilde terminates his farce with terminological play on the terms-in-us: with a punning recognition of, on the one hand, the determinative force of prior inscriptions and, on the other, the transvaluing power of substitution. Thus *Earnest* does not terminate at all but insistently relays and repeats the irreducible oscillations, back and forth, froth and buck, of very much the same erotic binarism that would soon be definitely consolidated in the violent counterframing of homo- and heterosexualities (two terms that, by the way, appear nowhere in Wilde’s lexicon).

But Wilde’s is a crucial, a crux-making, repetition—crucial not merely because he deploys repetition to *make* a difference, but also because the difference he makes he then *makes audible* in and as the disseminal excess with which he laves his pun, and through his pun, his audience, his readers. At once titular and closural, originary and terminal, Wilde’s pun practices the erotics of repetition that Barthes, collating Sade and Freud, would later theorize so compactly: “Repetition itself creates bliss . . . to repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the

signified.”⁴³ Because in *Earnest* the object of this zero targeting, the site of this obsessional emptying, is nothing less than the marriageable male subject (let us say, anachronistically, the integral and heterosexual male subject) whose strength and legitimacy are sanctioned by the frail transmissibility of his father’s empowering names, Wilde effectively empties both name and subject of their natural content and naturalizing force. In doing so he reopens *within both* an erotic space that had been prematurely closed—foreclosed, precisely, as *non nominandum*.

Wilde opens this space through a subtle dilation upon the irreducibly ambivalent erotics of the pun. On the semantic level, puns work precisely because they presuppose and reaffirm a *received difference* between (at least) two objects, concepts, or meanings; “evok[ing] prior formulations, with the meanings they have deployed” (Culler), puns operate as the semantic conservators of the hetero; in this sense, they police the borders of difference. (It is, for instance, only because *ejaculation* may mean abruptly emitted speech that Lady Bracknell may properly ejaculate on the subject of ejaculations.) But on the phonemic level this work of differentiation is quite undone. When referred to the ear, to the waiting body of the reader/listener, punning becomes homoerotic because homophonic. Aurally enacting a drive toward the same, the pun’s sound cunningly erases, or momentarily suspends, the semantic differences by which the hetero is both made to appear and made to appear natural, lucid, self-evident. Difference is repeated until difference vanishes in the ear. (The ejaculation, Lady Bracknell is right to insist, “*has* reached [our] ears more than once”; repetition guarantees a certain saturation.) And when difference vanishes the result is a correlative plosion at the mouth, the peal of laughter marking precisely the vanishing point at which good sense collapses into melting pleasure, or even bliss. This explains in part the distaste with which a homophobic critical tradition has regarded puns, an affect usually attributed to the “cheapness” of the thrills they so dearly provide. (In and out of school, it seems, serious pleasure requires still harder exactions.) No surprise, then, that heterocentric culture should disdain the linguistic process by which the very power of the hetero—the power to differentiate among signifieds, objects, beings—is, on the phonemic level at least, so laughingly disdained.

Understanding all of this precisely, Wilde harnessed the erotic ambivalence of the pun for the affined purposes of pleasure, transvaluation, critique. “I am sending you, of course, a copy of my book,” Wilde wrote to a friend in 1899 after Sebastian Melmoth had received copies of *Earnest*’s first pressings. “How I used to toy with that tiger Life! I hope you will find a place for me amongst your nicest books. . . . I should like it to be within speaking distance of *Dorian Gray*.”⁴⁴ “Amongst your nicest books” but still “within speaking distance of *Dorian Gray*”: this ironic juxtaposition very nicely glosses the urbane duplicity with which Wilde insinuated the revisionary discourse of an “Urning”—the term of gay self-reference devised by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs some thirty years before, a term of

which Wilde was very well aware—into his critical pun on Earnest, and through this pun, into the “nicest” of his texts. The intrinsic cross-switching within the pun of hetero- and homosexualizing impulses provided Wilde with the perfect instrument for negotiating an impossibly difficult discursive situation. Writing “at large” for a respectably straight (not to say heterosexist) audience whose sensibilities he could afford to tease but not transgress, Wilde necessarily penned to a double measure. While mimicking the dramatic conventions of heterosexual triumph, he inserted within them the “unspeakable” traces of homosexual delight: inserted them where they would be least welcome—in the vocables of the paternal signifier, itself the guarantor of heterophallic order. The *Urning*, to put it wildly, would hide in *Ernest*, thereby pun-burying and Bunburying at the same time. (“Everything,” Derrida says, “comes down to the ear you hear me with.”)⁴⁵

Of course, as Wilde insisted, his titular pun is “trivial,” and it is so in the technical, etymological—and punning—sense of the word. *Trivial* not only marks what is “common,” “ordinary,” and “of small account” but indicates as well a cross-roads or terminus “placed where three roads meet” (*OED*).⁴⁶ Etymologically speaking, the trivial is the locus of a common or everyday convergence: a site where paths (of meaning, of motion, of identity) cross and switch, a pivot in which vectors (and babies) enter in one direction and exit in another. The text represents this notion in two ways: materially and mechanically, in Victoria Station, the terminus where the “romantic story of [Jack’s] origins” begins, where with a little help from Miss Prism (whose name, by the way, refracts an ocular version of the same idea) baby Jack enters as Ernest and exits as John; and, audibly and obsessively, in the pun on *e(a)rnest*, which operates exactly in the manner of a railway terminal. There should now be no difficulty in specifying the three paths that cross and merge here to such preposterous effect: 1) a plain and proper name (ultimately disclosed as the Name of the Father) that, for obscure reasons, “produces vibrations”; 2) the esteemed high Victorian quality of moral earnestness, of serious fidelity to truth, an attribute specifically gendered as “manly” and repeatedly derided by Wilde; 3) a pun-buried and coded allusion (and here two tongues, German and English, mingle) to a specifically homosexual thematics, to the practices and discourses of the “Urning” and of “Uranian love.” (That Wilde was familiar with the specialized vocabulary of the “Urning” is beyond dispute: “A patriot put in prison for loving his country loves his country, and a poet put in prison for loving boys loves boys. To have altered my life would have been to have admitted that Uranian love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble—more noble than other forms.”)⁴⁷ In this laughing inversion of propriety and authority, Wilde puts the intrinsically homophilic impulsion of the pun (its drive, at the phonemic level, toward the erasure of difference) to historically specific uses; not until the 1890s would the term *Urning* have been sufficiently diffused into English to operate within Wilde’s punning trivium.⁴⁸

Thus submitting his play to the delirium of the signifier, Wilde manages to achieve what Barthes would later call *subtle subversion*, by which he means that which “is not directly concerned with destruction, evades the paradigm, and seeks some *other* term: a third term, which is not, however, a synthesizing term but an eccentric, extraordinary term.”⁴⁹ In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I am arguing, Wilde invents just such an extraordinary term: a third, ternary, and trivial term in which oppositional meanings are not synthesized or sublated so much as they are exchanged, accelerated, derailed, terminated, cross-switched. Indeed, he invents this term twice over, invents it in duplicate, so that it emerges only under alias, submitted to an originary masquerade of two farcical pseudonyms. The first of these is Bunbury, the second is Ernest John. The interchangeability of these two terms (in exile Wilde even referred to *Earnest* as *Bunbury*) suggests an irreducible isomorphism between the technically unspeakable homoerotics of interminable Bunburyism and the structural bifurcation of the nominally heterosexual male subject, a point upon which Algy exuberantly insists when he explains to Jack why “I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist”: “You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable.” In the four-act version Algy is even more concise; responding to Cecily’s claim that Uncle Jack “has got such strict principles about everything. He is not like you,” Algy disagrees: “Oh. I am bound to say that I think Jack and I are very like each other. I really do not see much difference between us.”⁵⁰ Given this invincible parallelism, and the obviously reversible erotics of “coming up” and “going down,” Jack fully qualifies as “one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.”

And yet we recall that the hetero-closure of the plot is predicated upon the formal expulsion of Bunbury, who is consequently “quite exploded” at play’s end. But even as Bunbury is eliminated from the text, his (non)being thereby formally remanded to the closet from which at least his name had emerged, so also is he posthumously disseminated into the redoubled being of Wilde’s earnest hero, in whose equivocal name Bunbury may be said to succeed his own surcease. Passing away only to be passed on, Bunbury is buried, and buried alive, within the duplicitous precincts of the titularly “natural” male subject. With this irreducibly ambivalent movement—partly homicidal, partly carceral, partly liberatory—Wilde closes his great farce, submitting to the heterocentric conventions that his pun thereafter continues to exceed and deride. That pun, with its gay shuttling, constitutes Wilde’s bequest to a posterity that is only now learning how to receive so rare a gift: one whose power of posthumous critique is conveyed in and as an excess of signification, pleasure, even bliss. In *Earnest*, this excess is never laid to rest. Not every explosion, however terminal, implies a death. In Bunbury’s end is Ernest John’s beginning.

None of us survive[s] culture.
—Oscar Wilde⁵¹

It is one of the bleaker ironies of English literary history that even as *Earnest* was brashly delighting audiences at the St. James' Theatre, where it had opened on 14 February 1895, its author would be subjected to a fierce and dogged institutional "correction," the prosecution and persecution of the famous trials of 1895. For a brief time (from 5 April when Wilde was arrested for "acts of gross indecency with another male person," until 8 May when George Alexander was compelled by public opinion to remove *Earnest* from the boards), the two spectacles ran concurrently: the one all blithe insouciance, the other pure bourgeois retribution; the one a triumph of evanescent, if not quite indeterminate, signification, the other a brutal travesty in which the author would be nailed to his "acts." So juxtaposed, the two spectacles compose an almost too ready diptych of crime and punishment, as in Auden's "nightmare Pantomime Transformation Scene in which . . . the country house in never-never Hertfordshire turns into the Old Bailey, the features of Lady Bracknell into those of Mr. Justice Wills." The very facility of these transpositions—Auden's and my own—suggests the volatile reversibility of the sexual and verbal inversions that Wilde delighted in practicing and perfecting. Precariously ambivalent, Wildean pleasure had always flirted with its own disciplinary relapse, a danger that no doubt honeyed the already honed edge of Wilde's enjoyment. The advent of the trials marked an implacable shift to an institutional context in which the warm lubricities of interminable Bunburyism would be frozen less by the cold face of Gradgrindian fact than by the chilling implementation of a legal, a statutory, homophobia. This defines the difference between Wildean courage and the ease of a critic who may with impunity celebrate Bunbury at the cool distance of a hundred years. Wilde *took chances*, and Wilde paid. Neither the least nor the last of his humiliations came in his second year of incarceration, when his wife Constance successfully petitioned to deprive him of guardianship of his sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, and to change their surnames (along with her own) to her maiden name of Holland.⁵² This irony bites. As if to chastise Wilde for trifling with the patronym in *Earnest*, the state rescinded his right to propagate the Name of the Father.

Notes

I am happy to acknowledge the influence and assistance of the following persons who helped along the way: Stephen Booth, Ed Cohen, Joel Fineman, Catherine Gallagher, Wayne Koestenbaum, D. A. Miller, and Alex Zwerdling. This essay is dedicated to the

memory of Joel Fineman, in whose work I discovered the baffled origins of my own thinking on Wilde.

1. Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia, 1931), 175. H. C.'s narrative offers further evidence of the power of Wilde's fictions to determine the real. One evening H. C. is escorted by a fellow reader of *Psychopathia Sexualis* to "several of the cafes where inverts are accustomed to foregather." At one of these "trysting places," he meets a youth who answers some of his "book-begotten queries": "The boy-prostitutes gracing these halls, he apprised us, bore fanciful names, some of well-known actresses, others of heroes in fiction, his own being Dorian Gray. Rivals, he complained, had assumed the same appellation, but he was the original Dorian; the others were jealous imposters" (177).
2. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), 83.
3. Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 175–76. 4. Ibid., 179.
5. Joel Fineman, "The Significance of Literature: *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *October* 15 (1980): 79.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), 61.
7. The pseudo-opposition between "trivial" and "serious," with which I play repeatedly in this essay, is Wilde's own; the subtitle of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." That Wilde intended a pseudo-binarism subject to parodic reversal is emphatically indicated by the subtitle of an earlier draft: "A Serious Play for Trivial People."
8. Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Intentions* (London, 1891); reprinted in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago, 1969), 399.
9. André Gide, *Oscar Wilde: A Study*, trans. Stuart Mason (Oxford, 1905), 30.
10. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions*; reprinted in *Artist as Critic*, 305.
11. Oscar Wilde, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York, 1962), 185.
12. Ed Cohen, "Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation," *PMLA* 102, no. 5 (October 1987): 801–13. During the writing and revising of this essay I benefited enormously from Cohen's generous conversation regarding Wilde, the trials of 1895, and the history of homosexuality.
13. Jonathan Dollimore, "Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide," *Textual Practice* 1, no. 1 (1987): 56; reprinted in *Genders* 2 (Summer 1988): 24–41.
14. Fineman, "Significance of Literature," 79.
15. W. H. Auden, "An Improbable Life," in *Forewords and Afterwords* (New York, 1973), 323. This essay, a review of Hart-Davis's edition of Wilde's letters, appeared originally in the *New Yorker*, 9 March 1963; it is also available in Richard Ellmann, ed., *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969), 116–37.
16. D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, 1988), 207. Miller's landmark essay "Secret Subjects, Open Secrets," from which I quote here, has informed my thinking throughout these pages.
17. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 76.
18. Fineman, "Significance of Literature," 83.
19. For more on Henry Shirley Bunbury, see William Green, "Oscar Wilde and the Bunburys," *Modern Drama* 21, no. 1 (1978): 67–80. I disagree with Green emphatically on the importance and function of Bunbury, to wit: "Even allowing for the possibility that the term may have existed in the form of a private joke, Wilde had ample opportunity

to avoid using it in the play if he suspected it had any homosexual connotations which might have drawn attention to him. . . . Wilde could have substituted another name for Bunbury.”

20. Ibid., 71. The English colloquialism for buttocks is of course not *bun* but *bum*, but the frail consonantal difference distinguishing the two terms remains always liable to elision, especially in performance, whether in a slip of the actor's tongue or in the labyrinth of the auditor's ear. *Bun*, as I argue above, points immediately to Algy's serious overeating and mediately to Wilde's sexual practice, which, his biographers agree, was primarily oral. In this regard we should remember that Wilde was not, as is often assumed, convicted of sodomy; rather he was prosecuted and convicted under section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which criminalized all “acts of gross indecency” committed between males, whether in public or private. For an analysis of the conceptual shifts entailed by this legislation, see Ed Cohen, “From Sodomy to Gross Indecency,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 181–217.
21. Fineman, “Significance of Literature,” 89.
22. André Gide, *The Journals of André Gide*, trans. Justin O'Brien, 3 vols. (New York, 1948), 2:410.
23. The *OED* citation for *Banbury* reads: “A town in Oxfordshire, England, formerly noted for the number and zeal of its Puritan inhabitants, still for its cakes.” Cf. also the Mother Goose nursery rhyme, “Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross.” The phonemic and imagistic affinities between *Bunbury* and *Banbury* proved too much for at least one of the typists working from Wilde's handwritten manuscripts. In a typescript of the play dated “19 Sep. 94” by Mrs. Marshall's Type Writing Office, *Bunbury* repeatedly appears as *Banbury*. Wilde, whose careless, looping handwriting no doubt encouraged the error, patiently restored the *us*.
24. This line, spoken by Miss Prism about Ernest (whom, of course, she has not met), does not appear in the three-act *Earnest* with which most readers are familiar, but can be found in the various manuscript and typescript drafts of the so-called “original” four-act version. A brief explanation of the textual confusion surrounding *Earnest* is in order. When in 1898, *après le déluge*, M. Melmoth sought to publish Mr. Wilde's farce, his only recourse to “the play itself” was to a truncated copy text, George Alexander's prompt copy, that had provided the basis for the short-lived 1895 production. Since Wilde's own drafts and copies of *Earnest* had been auctioned off in the bankruptcy proceedings following his imprisonment, “Alexander's manuscript,” as Wilde called it, was for all purposes the only extant text upon which to base the published version of 1899. The problem with Alexander's typescript is that it contained substantial cuts, some authorial and some not, including, most famously, the excision of an entire scene in which Algy is almost arrested for Ernest's outstanding debts; this cut was essential to the structural reorganization of four acts into three. That Alexander's emendations were significant there can be no doubt; upon seeing the play on opening night, Wilde (whom Alexander had dismissed from rehearsals) is reported to have remarked: “My dear Aleck, it was charming, quite charming. And, do you know, from time to time I was reminded of a play I once wrote myself, called THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST”; quoted in A. E. W. Mason, *Sir George Alexander and the St. James Theatre* (New York, 1969), 79. Not until the 1950s would the various working manuscripts and typescripts of the “original” four-act versions begin to surface, so that, by way of a temporal inversion that Wilde surely would have delectated, *Earnest* is a work whose lost origins *postdate* its publication by some fifty years. Throughout this essay I refer both to the familiar three-act

version and to the antecedent four-act versions without worrying the issue of textual authority. Unless otherwise specified all references here to the four-act version are to *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People in Four Acts as Originally Written by Oscar Wilde*, ed. Sarah Augusta Dickson, 2 vols. (New York, 1955); Miss Prism's line as quoted above can be found in Dickson, *Earnest*, 1:77. See also *The Definitive Four-Act Version of The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. Ruth Berggren (New York, 1987), 23–41.

25. H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1975), 187.
26. Dickson, *Earnest*, 1:146. This line occurs during a wonderful bit of stage business in which, while Jack and Lady Brancaster (as she is called in the four-act versions) are discussing "the painful circumstances of [Jack's] origin," Algy and Cecily are hiding "behind [a] screen . . . whispering and laughing." As the good lady speaks, Algy's attempts to silence or "hush" Cecily interrupt her discourse; annoyed by these intrusions, Lady Brancaster complains: "It is clear that there is someone who says 'Hush' concealed in this apartment. The ejaculation has reached my ears more than once. It is not at any time a very refined expression, and its use, when I am talking, is extremely vulgar, and indeed insolent. I suspect it to have proceeded from the lips of someone who is of more than usually low origin." In this sadly excised tableau, Wilde compactly stages the sociopolitical operations of Bunburying representation, in which a discourse of social rectitude is interrupted by an "ejaculation" that can be heard but not seen. As the screen behind which Cecily and Algy are sporting very nicely materializes the strategy of visual occlusion, so does the transposition of "hush" and "ejaculation" make audible, as laughter, the Bunburying operations by which a secret erotics may be mouthed but not quite bespoken. We should note in passing, too, that Wilde here anticipates the more-than-audible ejaculation with which Roland Barthes closes *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1975). Cinema, Barthes writes, "succeed[s] in shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss" (67).
27. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford, 1981), 79.
28. See note 24 above.
29. Anonymous, *Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried*, 2 vols. ("Paris," n.d.), 389 (the two volumes are consecutively paginated). This text, which appears to be a pirated edition of another book issued anonymously under the same title by the Ferrestone Press (London, 1912), claims to be the most "complete and accurate account of this long and complicated case. Special care, it will be seen, has been devoted to the elucidation of abstruse legal points. . . . The evidence of witnesses, together with the prolonged cross-examination of Wilde in each of the three trials, is given as fully as possible, with due regard to discretion."
30. *Three Times Tried*, 355.
31. I encountered this passage while reading Ed Cohen's *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of the Discourse on Male Sexuality* (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1988), to which I remain indebted. I quote with permission of the author.
32. Queensberry's "Plea of Justification" is reprinted as appendix A in H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1962), 323–27. The 1843 Criminal Libel Act, the statute under which Wilde sued Queensberry for accusing him of "posing as a sodomite [*sic*]," permitted the defendant (i.e., Queensberry) to place before the court a document, or "Plea of Justification," supporting the allegation for which the libel suit was being prosecuted.
33. *Three Times Tried*, 191.

34. Wilde, *Letters*, 749. *Conversation* is itself a pun, referring doubly to interlocution and intercourse.
35. Barthes, *Pleasure*, 4. 36. *Ibid.*, 65.
37. Jonathan Culler, "The Call of the Phoneme," in Culler, ed., *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (New York, 1988), 3.
38. *Ibid.*, 14.
39. Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare," in *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mona Wilson (London, 1970), 500; quoted in Culler, "Call of the Phoneme," 6–7.
40. Wilde, *Letters*, 594.
41. Robert Hichens's travesty of the Wilde-Douglas affair was originally published anonymously (London, 1894); for Wilde's bemused response to *The Green Carnation*, see *Letters*, 373.
42. Dickson, *Earnest*, vol. 2, facsimile typescript of act 4, p. 34; also Berggren, *Earnest*, 190.
43. Barthes, *Pleasure*, 41.
44. Wilde, *Letters*, 778.
45. Jacques Derrida, "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," in *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie McDonald (Lincoln, Neb., 1988), 4.
46. The pun thus also slyly alludes to our culture's paradigmatic instance of "trivial" meeting: the terminal convergence of father and son at the crossroads called Phokis, where Oedipus meets his father and his fate. "If I understand you," says a darkening Oedipus to his mother Jocasta, "Laios was killed / At a place where three roads meet." Trivial indeed. Against the background of these tragic resonances, we may read Wilde's earnest *and* trivial pun as a gay countersign to the murderous seriousness of oedipal heterosexuality; Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1969), 37.
47. Wilde, *Letters*, 705.
48. It is crucial to note here that the *Ernest/Earnest/Urning* pun did not originate with Wilde; it made its literary debut two years before Wilde began work on *Earnest*, and Wilde stole—or, as literary critics like to say, "appropriated"—the pun for the trans-valuing purposes of his own genius. More than a merely private joke, the wordplay first appeared in a volume of poetry called *Love in Earnest* (London, 1892) by the Uranian writer John Gambriel Nicholson. A collection of sonnets, ballads, and lyrics, *Love in Earnest* included a poem of pederastic devotion entitled "Of Boys' Names":

Old memories of the Table Round
 In Percival and Lancelot dwell,
 Clement and Bernard bring the sound
 Of anthems in the cloister-cell,
 And Leonard vies with Lionel
 In stately step and kingly frame,
 And Kenneth speaks of field and fell,
 And Ernest sets my heart a-flame.
 One name can make my pulses bound,
 No peer it owns, nor parallel,
 By it is Vivian's sweetness drowned,
 And Roland, full as organ-swell;
 Though Frank may ring like silver bell,
 And Cecil softer music claim,
 They cannot work the miracle, —
 'Tis Ernest sets my heart a-flame.

Cyril is lordly, Stephen crowned
 With deathless wreaths of asphodel,
 Oliver whispers peace profound,
 Herbert takes arms his foes to quell,
 Eustace with sheaves is laden well,
 Christopher has a nobler fame,
 And Michael storms the gates of Hell,
 But Ernest sets my heart a-flame.

ENVOY.

My little Prince, Love's mystic spell
 Lights all the letters of your name,
 And you, if no one else, can tell
 Why Ernest sets my heart a-flame.

Quoted from Timothy d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest* (London, 1970), xviii; Smith's book, a study of the Uranian poets, derives its title from Nicholson's.

Nicholson's book did not go unnoticed among gay readers and interlocutors. I think it self-evident that Wilde knew of it; the joke quoted above about "those chaps, the minor poets [who] are never even quoted" is likely Wilde's oblique acknowledgement of Nicholson's priority, although no doubt Wilde would have happily expatiated upon the (merely belated) originality of his own deployment of the pun. And certainly John Addington Symonds, who died a year *before* Wilde began composing his farce, caught the pun's gay valence. In a letter of 2 July 1892 Symonds wrote to a friend: "Have you read a volume of sonnets called 'Love in Earnest'? It is written by a School-master in love with a boy called Ernest." That "Wilde's" pun predates his own use of it would thus seem incontrovertible.

49. Barthes, *Pleasure*, 51.
50. Dickson, *Earnest*, 1:111.
51. Wilde, *Letters*, 774.
52. H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1975), 333.