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The Significance of Literature: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

JOEL FINEMAN

Man, poor, awkward, reliable, necessary man belongs to a sex that has been rational for millions and millions of years. He can't help himself. It is in his race. The History of Women is very different. We have always been picturesque protests against the mere existence of common sense. We saw its dangers from the first.

—A Woman of No Importance

What I am outlining here summarizes portions of a longer essay I have been writing on Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. For the most part, I will forego discussion of the play and focus on the way in which Wilde's farce precisely figures the problem of "The Self in Writing."¹ You will perhaps recall that Jack-Ernest, the hero of the play, discovers the unity of his duplicity when he learns that as an infant he was quite literally exchanged for writing in the cloak-room of Victoria Station, his absent-minded governess having substituted for his person the manuscript of a three-volume novel which is described as being "of more than usually repulsive sentimentality." As a result, because Jack-Ernest is in this way so uniquely and definitively committed to literature, with literature thus registered as his alter-ego, he is one of those few selfs or subjects whose very existence, as it is given to us, is specifically literary, an ego-ideal of literature, as it were, whose form is so intimately immanent in his content as to collapse the distinction between a name and that which it bespeaks, and whose temporal destiny is so harmoniously organic a whole as to make it a matter of natural fact that his end be in his beginning—for Ernest is indeed, as Lady Bracknell puts it,

1. This paper was delivered at the 1979 convention of the Modern Language Association, at one of the several panels associated with the forum on "The Self in Writing." The essay on *The Importance of Being Earnest* has now grown into a chapter on Wilde which will take its place in a projected book on literary names. The notes have been added for this publication.

paraphrasing traditional definitions of allegory, one whose origins are in a terminus.

Yet if Jack-Ernest is thus an ideal image of the relation of the self to writing, he is nevertheless himself a piece of literature, and therefore but a literary representation of the self's relation to literature, a fiction, therefore, if not necessarily a farce, and for this reason not to be trusted. This is the difficulty, I take it, that our forum has been established to address, recognizing that while the self and writing are surely implicated each in the other, perhaps even reciprocally constitutive each of the other, they are so in a way that at the same time undermines the integrity and the stability of both. This we can see even in the delicate phrasing of our forum's title, where the vagueness of the preposition, the problematic and diffusive metaphoricity of its innocuous "in"—"The Self *in* Writing"—testifies to the fact that the Self *and* Writing, as literal categories with their own propriety, can only be linked together in a figural discourse, which, even as it is spoken, calls the specificity and the literality of its terms into question. Strictly speaking, of course, "The Self in Writing" is an impossible locution, for in writing we do not find the self but, at best, only its representation, and it is only because *in* literature, in a literary mode, we characteristically, if illegitimately, rush to collate a word both with its sense and with its referent that we are, even momentarily, tempted to forget or to suspend the originary and intrinsic difference between, on the one hand, the self who reads, and, on the other, the literary revision of that self who is read.

This is to insist upon the fact that the self's relation to literature is not itself a literary relation, and that only a sentimental and literary reading will obsessively identify a thing with its word, a signified with its signifier, or the self with its literary image. This is also to avoid simplistic dialectical accounts of the act of reading—either identificatory or implicative—whose mechanical symmetries programmatically reduce the self to its idealization: the so-called "ideal reader" of whom we hear a great deal of late. Instead, this is to recognize that if we are to speak of the relation of the self to the writing in which it finds itself written, or, stylizing this familiar topos, if we are to speak of the relation of the self to the language in which it finds itself bespoken, then we must do so in terms of a critical discourse that registers the disjunction and the discrepancy between being and meaning, thing and word, and which therefore locates the self who is committed to language in its experience of the slippage between its immediate presence to itself and its mediated representation of itself in a symbolic system. Moreover, since Being, to be thought, must be thought as Meaning, even this self-presence of the self to itself will emerge only in retrospect as loss, with the self discovering itself in its own meaningful aftermath, just as Being can only be spoken in its own effacement, as Heidegger—not Derrida—has taught us.²

2. See, for example, *The Question of Being*, or "The Temporality of Discourse" in

As is well known, it is thanks to the patient, painstaking, and rigorous labors of the tradition of psychoanalysis—a tradition that begins with Freud and which probably concludes with Lacan—that we possess a theoretical vocabulary sufficiently supple to capture this subject born in the split between self-presence and the representation of self. The insights of this tradition, however perfunctorily and schematically I refer to them here, are what enable us to situate the self of “The Self in Writing” in the metaphorical *in* whose very figurality is what allows us to articulate the problem in the first place, which is to say, in the same displacing place that Wilde—whose play will thematize this very problem of the place of the subject—places *Being*, midway between the import of *Importance* and a specifically literary pun on *Earnest*—the importance of *being Earnest*—as though the indeterminacy of meaning in turn determined *Being* as its own rueful double entendre.

What I should like to do here, however, recognizing, with some regret, that both the theory and the vocabulary of this psychoanalytic tradition are for many people both irritating and opaque, is translate its discourse into the more accessible and familiar terms of what today we will parochially call the Anglo-American speculative tradition. To that end, in an effort to sketch out the necessary contours of any psychoanalysis of what we can now identify as the “subject of literature,” I would like to rehearse a rather well known paradox of logical reference, first formulated in 1908 by Kurt Grelling, but of interest to philosophy from Russell at least through Quine.

Being and Time (IV,68,d). Derrida’s project is effectively to apply Heidegger’s critique of Western metaphysics to Heidegger himself (e.g., “Ousia and Grammè: A Note to a Footnote in *Being and Time*,” in *Phenomenology in Perspective*, ed. F. J. Smith, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1970; also, “The Ends of Man,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 30, No. 1 (1969), also in *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Minuit, 1972), so as to show that even Heidegger repeats, rather than revises, traditional metaphysical assumptions. For this reason, Derrida argues, even Heidegger’s being must be put under further erasure as part of an ongoing, ever-vigilant, vaguely messianic, deconstructive Puritanism. There is no doubt that Derrida makes this point persuasively; the question is whether this measures a blindness or an insight on Heidegger’s part, for what is important to Heidegger is the specificity of his history of Western philosophical speculation. What for Derrida is the mark of Heidegger’s failure is also a measure, or so Heidegger would no doubt respond, of *necessary* metaphysical limits, a determination of the way it is and is not, or, more modestly and historically, the way it has always been and seems still to be. I am here assuming, following Derrida himself, that it is one of Western metaphysics’ special and perennial pleasures to have itself deconstructed, and that for this reason we must register Derrida’s always already predetermined *différance* within the horizon of its always eventual determinate recuperation. This is not a static balance: it has a direction, from pre-beginning to end, and this directionality also has its obvious metaphysical—not to mention its more obvious psychological—consequences.

The paradox itself is relatively straightforward. Let us say, says the paradox, that there is a set of words that describe themselves. For example, *polysyllabic*, the word, is itself polysyllabic, *short* is itself short, and *English* is itself English, an English word. Let us call such self-descriptive words autological, because they speak about themselves. In addition, let us further say that there is another set of words that do not describe themselves. For example, *monosyllabic*, the word, is not itself monosyllabic, *long* is not itself long, *French* is not itself French. Let us now agree to call this second set of words heterological, because these are words that speak about things besides themselves—allegorical words, because they speak about the Other (*allos*, other; *agoreuein*, to speak), a *logos* of the *heteros*, or, in Lacan's phrase, a discourse of the Other. Having stipulated these two sets, the autological and the heterological, the question then emerges: is the word *heterological* itself autological or heterological? And here we discover the paradox, for simply asking the question forces upon us the odd conclusion that if *heterological*, the word, is itself heterological, then it is autological, whereas, in some kind of contrast, if it is autological, then it is heterological. That is to say, given the definitions and a classical system of logic, the heterological can only be what it is on condition that it is what it is not, and it can only be what it is not on condition that it is what it is.

Thus formulated, the paradox possesses both an elegance and a banality, and in proportions that rather directly correspond to the brittle yet mandarin tenor and texture we associate with Wilde's farce. So too, the paradox very neatly summarizes the plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, since Ernest will himself be earnest only when he isn't, just as he will not be earnest only when he is. This paradoxical alternation and oscillation of the subject, a phenomenon to which the play gives the general label Bunburyism, but which Lacan would call *auto-différence*, is resolved at the end of the play when Ernest consults the book of the name of the fathers and discovers that his name "naturally is Ernest," and that therefore to his surprise, "all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth."³ Were there time, we would want at this point to conduct both a phonological and a phenomenological analysis so as to explain why all the names of the fathers in the list that Ernest reads begin with the name of the mother, "Ma"—Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff—and we would want also to know why this enumeration of nasal consonants not only spells an end to the labial phonemics of *Bunbury*, but also marks the moment when denomination lapses into description, when use turns into mention, and when Truth itself arrives after the fact to validate what it succeeds.⁴ Even putting these important

3. See "Le clivage du sujet et son identification," *Scilicet*, Nos. 2,3, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1970, p. 127. Note that the fracture is imaginary, not symbolic.

4. I have elsewhere argued that the first phonemes, labial /papa/ or /baba/ and nasal /mama/, are acquired in accordance with a structure that determines specific literary themes. See "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," *October*, 12 (Spring 1980), 47-66. This

questions to the side, however, we can see that the intention of the farce is to resolve the paradox of autology and heterology by enacting it through to its absurd reduction, to the point, that is, where Ernest becomes, literally becomes, his name.

Again, we might want to take this revival of the tradition of Paracelsian signatures, this coordination of signifier and signified, as indicative of the literary *per se*. But we can do so only if we recognize the specific twist or trope that literature gives to this semiotics of correspondence. For Ernest only becomes earnest when he recognizes in the heterology of words the paradoxical representationality of language, and thus discovers *in* the difference between a name and its thing the paradoxical difference *between* himself and his name. Ernest therefore inherits his name only to the extent that its significance is restricted or promoted to its nominality, only to the extent, that is to say, that it becomes a signifier of itself *as* a signifier, not a signified. This is indeed a paradigm of literary language, of language that calls attention to itself as language, just as the pun on *Earnest* in the title possesses its literary effect precisely because it *doesn't* mean its double-meaning and thereby forces us to register the word as just a word, significant of just itself, with no meaning beyond its palpability as a signifier. This is also why Wilde's play or farce on names is itself so important, for we may say that the special propriety of a proper name with respect to common nouns corresponds precisely to the specialized charge of literature with respect to so-called ordinary language—"so-called" because there could no more be an ordinary language without its fictive complement than there could be a natural language bereft of its fantasy of the propriety of proper names.⁵

"Pa/Ma" model phonologically instantiates what Heidegger describes more generally in terms of the question whose asking renders metaphysics possible: "In the service of thought we are trying precisely to penetrate the source from which the essence of thinking is determined, namely *alētheia* and *physis*, being as unconcealment, the very thing that has been lost by 'logic'" (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Manheim, New York, Anchor Books, 1961, p. 102). In the same way that Heidegger's *alētheia* is forsworn by *logos*, the babbling /papa/ through which speech is thought is irrevocably lost at the first moment of its meaningful articulation. So too, as Heidegger predicts, the hidden unconcealment of truth always reemerges in literature as death, farcically so in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "Bunbury is dead. . . . The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean—so Bunbury died." This has ramifications for the metaphors of literary sexuality, a point to which I refer briefly above.

5. I am assuming here Jakobson's "structuralist" definition of the literary function as that message which stresses itself as merely message, and I am assimilating this, for reasons discussed in the next footnote, to proper names, for these are nominal only because they stress their nominality. The opposition of meaningful words to meaningless proper nouns is therefore one instance of a more general system of opposition in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that manages consistently to juxtapose the serious against the trivial in such

Yet if this is a small-scale model, however general, of the literary, of language which stresses its literality, its letters, it is of course profoundly unlike the kind of ordinary language that philosophy, as opposed to literature, would instead prefer to speak—which is why where literature depends upon the paradox of heterology—philosophy instead prohibits it, with the notion of “metalan-guage,” which keeps the orders of reference in their hierarchical place. Logicians are of course entitled to introduce whatever constraints might be required to

a way as to destabilize the integrity of meaningful binary antithesis. This is an obvious theme of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which Wilde subtitled *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* so as to make the very fact of farce a problem for whatever might be understood to be its opposite. In this way, by mentioning itself, Wilde's theme defends its own expression by referring the formal force of farce to an ongoing repetition internal to itself. This is, as it were, the asymptotic height of farce, which, because it is the genre that, as Marx suggested, imitates or repeats tragedy, is therefore the genre whose literary self-consciousness is formally most acute because thematically most empty.

The generic point is important because it shows us in what sense Wilde took his play seriously. For Aristotle, as for the serious literary tradition that succeeds him, tragedy is the imitation of a logically unified action, with the result that the hero of tragedy, his character subjected to his destiny, becomes a subjectivity as unified as the action he enacts. Hence Oedipus, whether Sophocles' or Aristotle's or Freud's, and the necessity historically attaching to the coherence of his person. It is this unity that makes tragedy, for Aristotle, the most important (and therefore the most “philosophical,” see *Poetics*, chs. 9 and 26) of literary genres, just as this unity explains why, for Aristotle, Oedipus is both the perfect tragic object and the perfect tragic subject. In contrast, farce presents itself as the imitation of tragic imitation, as the action of imitation rather than an imitation of action, and the result of this double doubling is that the unifying logic of tragedy, which depends on imitation, is put into question by its own duplication. This sounds paradoxical, but it simply characterizes (1) the literary function as Jakobson describes it theoretically, i.e., the essential structural feature of literature, its recursive reflexivity, (2) the actual historical practice of a literary tradition that unfolds towards increasingly self-conscious forms and themes, i.e., the mocking mechanism, usually mimetic, by means of which literature regularly revives itself by calling attention to its conventions, for example, the way *The Importance of Being Earnest* (as do most of Wilde's plays) parodies what were in Wilde's theater established proprieties of stock and pointed melodrama (the crossed lovers, the bastard child, the discovery of origins that predetermine ends). On the one hand, this explains why farce is, again according to the tradition, of all poetic genres least important, for where tragedy is serious because it imitates something, farce is trivial because it imitates imitation (literature or literariness), which is nothing. (This is the case even if another principle of aesthetic meaning is substituted for imitation, for any notion of importance will be undone when it remarks itself.) But this is also why, on the other hand, because his play makes fun of tragedy, the farcically divided Jack-Ernest constitutes the most serious possible critique of Aristotle's tragically unified Oedipus, which explains why a critical tradition dominated by Aristotle and by Oedipus finds nothing funny in the play's humor—Shaw, for example, who hated the play because he thought its wit was unimportant, or,

maintain the coherence of their artificial systems, but this remains a merely logical, not a psychological, necessity, which is why Lacan, recognizing the fact that a subject of discourse might at any moment stumble into heterology, says that there is no such thing as “metalanguage.”⁶ This is not the place to make the point in any detail, but I would want to argue that philosophy of language has always been autological, and that this can be precisely documented by tracing its attitude towards proper names, from *The Cratylus*, where a name will imitate its thing,

more generally, the way the play is labeled marginal *because* the perfect farce.

As serious tragedy to trivial farce, so philosophy to literature, and for the same reasons. We know that this is historically the case if we recall that Plato condemns sophistic rhetoric for the way it mimes philosophy, or the way Plato objects to literature for being but an imitation of a more substantial truth. Again the same problem: if any given tragedy might be a perfect farce, how does philosophy defend itself from what would be its perfect imitation, for example Gorgias's parody of Parmenides, which “proves” through nominal negative existentials that “nothing exists.” In this paper, therefore, I am not simply assuming that Wilde's farce reenacts, or represents within a literary mode, the traditional quarrel of literature with philosophy. More specifically, I am arguing, first, that Wilde's play on names, the play's thematic matter, is the objectification of its parodic manner; second, that it is by a commitment to the propriety of names that philosophy has historically defended itself against the possibility that it is its own dissimulation—a weak defense, given the historical failure, to this day, of the philosophy of proper names. Gorgias's onto-logical name-play is what makes rhetoric a *necessary* mockery of philosophy (as Gorgias describes it in one of the few surviving fragments)—“to destroy an opponent's seriousness by laughter and his laughter by seriousness”—just as it is the earnestness of “Earnest” that makes Wilde's “philosophy of the trivial” serious (as Wilde described it in an interview just prior to the play's premiere):

What sort of play are we to expect?

It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy and it has its philosophy.

Its philosophy?

That we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.

The relevant contemporary example is Derrida's parody, iteration, citation, quotation of Searle's defense of Austin (see “Limited Inc,” *Glyph*, 2, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Derrida not only makes fun of Searle's speech act theory and its notion of “copyrightable” proper names (for naively supposing some innocent principle of difference with which to distinguish a serious legitimate utterance from its nonserious illegitimate repetition); he also “proves” the point by making fun—a serious joke about corporeal anonymity—of “Searle-Sarl's” name itself.

6. See “D'une question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose,” in *Écrits*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1966, p. 538. See also, Jacques-Alain Miller, “U ou ‘Il n'y a pas de meta-langage,’” *Ornicar?*, 5 (1975–1976), 67–72.

through the epoch of representation, where a name will uncomplicatedly point to its thing, through Russell and Frege, where the immediate relation of a word to its referent is replaced by the equally immediate relation of a word to its sense, through to speech act theory, where a word uncomplicatedly reflects its speaker's intention. Of late, there are signs that this realism of nominalism has begun to lose its philosophical prestige, for example, Saul Kripke's devastating critique of Searle's theory of nominality, a critique whose account of reference constitutes the exact inverse of Derrida's equally devastating critique of Searle's hypothesis of expressible intention. On the assumption that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, it seems possible that continental and Anglo-American philosophy might eventually meet in the course of these complementary examinations of the propriety or impropriety of names. Leaving these relatively recent indications to the side, however, we may say that the perennial philosophical dream of true language, of language that always means what it says, stands in marked contrast to literary language which can never mean what it says because it never means anything except the fact that it is saying something that it does not mean.⁷

This traditional difference is worth developing, for it allows us to define the

7. Gwendolen and Cecily both give voice to this philosophical-philological, idealist dream of a true word: "My ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence." Or, "You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence." Here we can only briefly allude to the complications that make this confidence problematic. The traditional account of names—as formulated, for example, in Mill—is that a proper name has a denotation but not a connotation, in contrast to common nouns which have both. This is a muted version of Socrates' original philosophical desire for a language, whose words would necessarily metaphysically correspond with things, a language, as it were, where words literally *are* the things they speak, for example the way *R*, as Socrates says in *The Cratylus*, is the letter of motion. The history of philosophy of names—from Aristotle's *Categories* on, through Stoic grammar, through medieval sign theory (via the incipient nominalism of Abelard, the modified realism of Aquinas, the straightforward nominalism of Ockham)—is a continual attempt somehow to nourish and to satisfy this initial philosophical desire for true language (for a truth *of* language, an *etymos* of *logos*) by lowering the ontological stakes to something merely nominal, for example, Mill's denotation theory where names merely indicate the things that formerly they were. The covert metaphysical assumptions embedded even in so modest a claim as Mill's were brought out by Frege and Russell in their well-known criticisms of denotation theory, first, with the instance of negative existentials, where there is no referent to which a name might point (Odysseus, golden mountains, etc.), second, with the instance of identity propositions, which give off information even though the names they contain share the same referent (e.g., "The Morning Star is the Evening Star," "Cicero is Tully"—these being the traditional examples, as though philosophy can only think the problem under the aegis of the queen of desire, Venus, and the king of rhetoric, Cicero). For these reasons, lest language call things into being simply by denominating them, Frege and Russell, in

self of "The Self in Writing" as both the cause and the consequence of the paradox subtending the autological and the heterological. That is to say, the self becomes the difference between a discourse of things and a discourse of words, a subject situated midway between the subject of philosophy and the subject of literature, between ordinary and extraordinary language, in short, again, between *Importance* and *Earnest*. Where philosophy self-importantly commits itself to autology so as to make of language a transparent vehicle for the signifieds of which it speaks, literature, in contrast, "Earnestly" forswears signifieds altogether for the sake of the heterological materiality of its signifiers. The self between them constitutes the necessity of their difference, so that the ancient quarrel between philosophy and literature thus takes place over the body of the self in writing, with philosophy wanting to do with its signifieds what literature wants to do with its signifiers, and with the self in writing testifying to the fact that neither can do either. A signifier, says Lacan, is what represents a subject to another signifier. Literature and philosophy are thus the signifiers of each other, names, in this sense, whose "sense," or let us say significance, is what their readers are.

Situated thus, as both elision and bar between these two equally inhuman

somewhat different ways, introduced between a name and its referent a third term which is its "sense," arguing that while a name must have a sense in order to refer, it need not have a referent in order to make sense. As a result, no longer the essence of things, names now will merely mean them; they are truncated definite descriptions, to use Russell's phrase, and so not really names at all, but abbreviated bundles of meaning which are only contingently related to a referent.

There are several difficulties with this account of names which understands them to refer by means of what and how they mean. (Neither does such an account eliminate metaphysics by transferring its claims to the register of meaning. Cf. Quine: "Meaning is what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and married to the word," in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1961, p. 21.) First of all, it must be decided which aspects of nominal sense will be essential in determining a name's referent, for two people might well have entirely different senses of "Aristotle" and yet surely refer to the same person when they use his name (my "Aristotle" may only have written the *Poetics* whereas yours may have only tutored Alexander, and the real Aristotle might in fact have done neither). So too, there is an intuitive difficulty that comes of thinking names like *John* or *X* in fact possess a sense; this is to truncate description to a grotesque degree. These difficulties are not resolved even when the Russell-Frege account is "loosened up," as it is by Searle when, following Wittgenstein, he collates description and identification in a speech act theory of names. (See J. Searle, "Proper Names," *Mind*, 67 [1958]; see also the criticism of this in S. Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," in *Semantics of Natural Language*, eds., D. Davidson and G. Harman, Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1972; also K. Donellan, "Speaking of Nothing," *The Philosophical Review*, 83 [1974]. Searle's essay should be read so as to notice the continuity subtending speculation about names in philosophy's *démarche* or retreat from ontology to psychology: first, names are the things to which they refer, then they imitate them, then they point to them, then they mean them, and then, in speech act theory, they "intend" them.) These difficulties, and others associated with them, have been much discussed in recent

desires, the self in writing finds his own human desire strictly circumscribed, a desire that we might characterize as a lusting of the autological for the heterological, a desire that leaves something to be desired. "My ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest," but "Bunbury is dead." In psychoanalytic terms this would correspond to the transition from narcissistic to anaclitic object choice, or to the difference between the self before and after what psychoanalysis thematizes as his accession to speech. If we recall, though, that desire too is an effect of the language, that Eros is the consequence of Logos, then our paradox will produce the appropriate Freudian paradigm without recourse to the Freudian lexicon. For now, remembering their etymology, we may rechristen the autological as the autosexual, or rather, the homosexual, and we may equally revalue the

Anglo-American philosophy of language, by, amongst others, Donellan, Putnam, and, most influentially, Kripke. There is a good introduction to the topic, with bibliography, in *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds*, ed. S. Schwartz, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977. We cannot here discuss the technical issues involved, which begin, primarily with the way names rigidly designate the same thing in all possible worlds (e.g., "The author of the *Iliad* might not have been born and might not have been the author of the *Iliad*" makes sense, but, substituting a name for the description, as in "Homer might not have been born and might not have been Homer" does not), but the force of this recent theory is to oblige philosophy, for the most part, to give up a strong sense theory of nominal reference. Instead, as a possible alternative, Kripke proposes to explain nominal reference by appealing to history, relating every use of every name to a series of hypothetical causal chains which reach back to every name's original moment of ostensive baptism. The consequences of Kripke's novel account are subtle and far-reaching, and they remain important even though, still more recently, their argument has itself run into difficulties. Here we must be content simply to allude to the problem, and to mention these two points relevant to our discussion above.

First, though Kripke can demonstrate that a name cannot have a sense in a strong way such that it determines its referent, he must still account for the information we receive in identity propositions. Here, as N. Salmon suggests, the only sense a name conveys is of itself as a name. See Salmon's review of L. Linsky's *Names and Descriptions*, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 76, No. 8 (1979). This is why I feel justified in assimilating proper names to Jakobson's account of literariness.

Second, Kripke has recently discovered a paradox built into his theory of causal chains, for he imagines a situation in which a single origin legitimately produces a divided name. See "A Puzzle about Belief," in *Meaning and Use*, ed. A. Margalit, Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1979. Kripke confesses himself unable to resolve the paradox even though it calls his entire account of proper names into question (and, as Putnam points out, the paradox also infects a theory of natural kinds; see Putnam's "Comment" on Kripke's puzzle, also in *Meaning and Use*). Kripke's puzzle is an inversion of Derrida's differentiated, reiterated origin, which is why I suggest in this paper that the two philosophers, though neither speaks to or of the other, share a common criticism of Searle, and also why I say that Anglo-American philosophy of language and continental phenomenology are now drawing together in their discovery of the impropriety of proper names. This is also why they both share an interest in the ontological status of the fictive. This is a point to be developed

heterological as the heterosexual. This leaves us with the psychoanalytic conclusion that the fundamental desire of the reader of literature is the desire of the homosexual for the heterosexual, or rather, substituting the appropriate figurative embodiments of these abstractions, the desire of the man to be sodomized by the woman. This is a specifically obsessional desire, but it is one that Freud luridly locates at the center of his three major case histories: Ratman, Wolfman, Schreber. This would also explain why the only word that ends up being naturally motivated in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not *Earnest* but *Bunbury* itself, which was not only British slang for a male brothel, but is also a collection of signifiers that straightforwardly express their desire to bury in the bun.⁸

With this cryptographic reference to the death that we always find buried in

elsewhere. The history of philosophy of names should, however, be of special interest to students of literature, for in many ways the progressive and increasingly dogmatic subordination by philosophy of nominal reference, first to extension, then to expression, then to intention, and finally to a historicity that postpones its temporality, in many ways parallels the development and eventual demise of an aesthetics of representation. That is to say, the perennial awkwardness philosophy discloses in the collation of word and thing is closely related to the uneasy relation our literary tradition regularly discovers when it connects literal to figurative literary meaning. So too, there is an obvious affinity between what are the topoi of a long philosophical meditation on names—e.g., the integrity of a clear-cut distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, or the possibility of an overlap between *de dictu* intensional meanings and *de re* extensional truth values—and what are the corresponding chestnuts of hermeneutic concern—e.g., the relation of an autonomous text to its external context, or the imbrication of form with content, or medium with message. In this paper, however, I am more concerned with the difference, rather than the similarity, between philosophical and literary names, for this difference possesses a specificity of its own, and it can be identified, as I say above, with the significance (which is to be distinguished from the meaning) of literature. We assume (with De Man) that all literary texts share the same indeterminate meaning, but we further argue (with Lacan) that this indeterminacy of meaning in turn determines a specific literary significance.

8. Again we cannot develop the point adequately, but we would begin our psychoanalytic account with Freud's essay on "The Uncanny" (which concludes, by the way, with a reference to Wilde), and we would conclude it with Lacan's discovery that there is no such thing as woman. See "Aristotle et Freud: L'autre satisfaction," also "Dieu et la jouissance de la femme," in *Le Séminaire, Livre XX, Encore: 1972-1973*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1975. We thus assume, in traditional psychoanalytic fashion, that the subject of Western literature is male, that its object, which exists only as an effect which puts existence into question (in the same way that Wilde gives us *Being* flanked by punning), is female, and that its project is therefore the representation of desire. We deal here with the metaphors of literary sexuality, with the way the male is historically a subject undone by its female sub-version. Hence our epigraph, or the way Wilde's farce repeats the erotic melodrama through which it is thought: "It is called *Lady Lancing* on the cover: but the real title is *The Importance of Being Earnest*," letter to George Alexander, October 1894, printed in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. R. Hart-Davis, New York, Harcourt, Brace, and World,

the logos of desire we are very close to the impulse to death that Freud assimilated to the wanderings of Eros. There is no time to pursue this connection further, but I would like in conclusion at least to draw the moral. In our literature the heterological is the trope of the autological, just as the heterosexual is the trope of the homosexual, just as woman is the trope of man. This accounts, respectively, for the semiotics, the syntax, and the semantics of our literature. So too does it account for its ethics. Asked to summarize her novel, the novel whose loss is responsible for the subject of the play, Miss Prism, the governess, says, "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." So it does, but this embedding of the moral in a necessarily fictive register equally measures the cost of what we must therefore call the fiction of meaning, at least for so long as both the Self and Writing are accorded an authority that even Wilde's farce thus fails to deconstruct.⁹

1962, pp. 375-376. For a summary of the proposed *Lady Lancing*, a cuckoldry plot which Wilde describes as "A sheer flame of love between a man and a woman," see the letter to Alexander, August 1894, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 360-362.

9. Because the moral is imaginary it has that much more force. This speaks to an old psychoanalytic ambiguity, that the precursor of the super-ego is the ego-ideal. This raises a problem for Lacan's psychoanalytic topography, suggesting the possibility that Lacan's "Symbolic" is itself "Imaginary," the last lure of the "Imaginary." To discuss this problem properly we would necessarily consider a different literary genre: romance, which is not tragedy and is not farce, neither Oedipus nor his courtly derision.