Living at the Turning Point of the World: Stoppard and Wilde

Wilhelm Emilsson
Douglas College

Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love* (1997) begins with the poet and classical scholar A. E. Housman standing on the bank of the Styx, watching the dreaded ferryman, Charon, coming towards him. Housman says: "I'm dead, then. Good. And this is the Stygian gloom one has heard so much about" (1). But nothing is ever quite what it seems in the uncertain, slippery world of Stoppard. The audience gradually discovers that Housman is not quite dead yet. The 77-year-old Housman is in a nursing home, in a bed which he may, or may not, have wet. It is night. He is "[n]either dead nor dreaming, then, but in between," as he puts it towards the end of the play (101). The entire work represents the bewildering weaving and unweaving of a mind that is fading away. But before Housman fades out completely, he meets the debonair ghost of Oscar Wilde on the bank of the Styx in the strange play of his dying brain. Wilde tells the repressed closet-homosexual Housman:

> I awoke the imagination of the century. I banged Ruskin's and Pater's heads together, and from the moral severity of one and the aesthetic soul of the other I made art a philosophy that can look the twentieth century in the eye. I had genius, brilliancy, daring, I took charge of my own myth.… I lived at the turning

ESC 29.1-2 (March/June 2003): 131–148

> point of the world where everything was waking up new—the New Drama, the New Novel, New Journalism, New Hedonism, New Paganism, even the New Woman. Where were you when all this was happening? (96–97)

This is not the first time Stoppard has celebrated Wilde's daring brand of aestheticism. Until now the most obvious example of Stoppard's kinship with Wilde has been his 1974 play *Travesties,* whose themes and structures are a playfully affectionate variation on *The Importance of Being Earnest* (see Sammells, "Earning Liberties" 376). This essay examines the subtle cultural resonance between Stoppard's postmodernist poetics and Wilde's turn-of-the-century explorations of aesthetic surfaces. Lady Bracknell's famous line from *The Importance of Being Earnest* seems even more apt today than when the play was performed in 1895: "We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces" (3: 164–65). As we enter a new century, a time in which the whole world often appears like one continual turning point, it seems particularly fitting to study writers like Wilde and Stoppard. Both authors explore what Michel Foucault calls an "aesthetics of existence" (*Use of Pleasure* 12), which is a crucial aspect of the relevance of their work to our time, for at the same time that they acknowledge the problems of modern life, they show how nimble aesthetic strategies can be used to face the flux of the world with insouciant style rather than dour angst.

While some might acknowledge certain links between the playful dramas of Wilde and Stoppard, they may be uneasy about the claim that Stoppard's postmodernist poetics has much in common with nineteenth-century aestheticism with its doctrine of art for art's sake. This is an understandable concern. For instance, Steven Connor writes that certain shifts in attitude from modernism to postmodernism "constitute an assault on the ways in which the realm of the aesthetic has been defined since Kant."[1] Hence, he continues, "postmodernism may be said to be defined, at least in part, as a

Wilhelm Emilsson specializes in 19th- and 20th-century literature and culture, especially aestheticism, decadence, postmodernism, and popular culture. He has published on Iain Sinclair for *Critique* (2002), in addition to publishing creative writing in *Critical Quarterly* (1991) and *Prairie Fire* (2000). He has an essay coming out in a book titled *Culture and Transnationalism: Film, Literature and Society* and is currently working on a book called *Epicurean Aestheticism: De Quincey, Pater, Wilde, Stoppard.*

1 It is an intriguing historical irony that the groundwork for the flamboyant aestheticism of the nineteenth century was laid by the earnest bachelor from Königsberg, Immanuel Kant, for the notion of art for art's sake, despite significant differences from it, can be traced to the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), especially its paradoxical theory that aesthetic objects have "purposiveness without purpose" (84). (What Kant means by this paradox is that in the perception of beauty the perceiver becomes aware of an internal purpose in an object, without this purpose in any way complying with standards outside the object itself.) The connection between aestheticism and Kantian aesthetics has been clearly demonstrated by literary critics and philosophers of art. For instance, in *A Companion to Aesthetics,* David Whewell defines aestheticism as the "doctrine that art should be valued for itself alone and not for any purpose or function it may happen to serve, and thus opposed to all instrumentalist theories of art." He continues: "Historically,

refusal of the aesthetic as such. Characteristic of much postmodernist art and theory is an impatience with the separation of art and its effects from the social and political world which is effected in modernism" (292). But is postmodernism as anti-aesthetic as this suggests? This leads us to the paradoxical ways in which postmodernism is viewed. While those who view it favourably, like Linda Hutcheon and Jean-François Lyotard, praise it for undermining the very notion of the aesthetic, critics of postmodernism, such as Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, berate it for being too aesthetic, for seeing history, identity, and truth as nothing but arbitrary fictions, aesthetic surfaces, and glittering simulacra to be experimented with, reconstructed, and deconstructed at the amoral postmodernist's whim (see Hutcheon 15–21). These opposing views demonstrate the complexity of the multi-layered field of intellectual and artistic activity we label postmodernism, but it is clear that at least the critics of postmodernism see it as a species of aestheticism. In addition, some postmodernists theorize the links between their position and aestheticism. (See, for instance, Jonathan Loesberg's book *Aestheticism and Deconstruction,* where he discusses the parallels between the thought of the founder of British aestheticism, Walter Pater, and the writings of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man.) In fact, Connor comes to the conclusion that many postmodernists draw "critical and theoretical speculation on the social effects and functions of art and cultural representation into their work, in an attempt not so much to undermine or dissolve the category of the aesthetic, as to make art the occasion for ironic reflection on its own inescapably social and historical nature" (292). In my view, it seems undeniable that the features characterizing postmodernist poetics, i.e. metafiction, textual play, intertextuality, performativity, self-reflexivity, etc., have more to do with form than content. So even though many postmodernists have subjected the category of the aesthetic to scrutiny and insisted on linking it to the social and the historical, they cannot dissolve the category without simultaneously obliterating the structures of their own theories. Hence, my linking of Stoppard's type of postmodernist aesthetics and art for art's sake should not seem as far-fetched now as it may initially have appeared to some readers.

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the idea of art for art's sake is associated with the cult of beauty, which had its roots in Kantian aesthetics and the Romantic movement, although its potential application is wider than that" (6). (See also Ellmann 85, Honour 365, and Wilcox 361). How the sensualist formalism of aesthetes like Wilde differs from the idealist formalism of Kant is an important topic, but it is outside the scope of this essay.

What is it about Wilde's art that makes it relevant to the postmodern age?

Wilde is the most recognizable and dazzling figure of aestheticism and by featuring him and Pater in *The Invention of Love,* Stoppard is openly acknowledging an affinity with the notion of art for art's sake that has been present in his writings from the beginning. Wilde is famous for his elegant flaunting of art's non-pragmatic nature—"*All art is quite useless,*" he writes in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (4)—and, like Wilde, Stoppard is fond of flaunting his non-pragmatic view of art. For instance, in responding to Paul Johnson's criticism of his work as lacking in moral fibre, he refuses to make amends: "Now the most widespread misapprehension about playwrights (apart from the misapprehension that they have access to unlimited free tickets to their plays) is that they set out to say something and then say it, in short that a play is the end product of an idea" ("But for the Middle Classes" 677). When attacked for flippancy, Stoppard responds in a defiantly flippant manner to assert that as a dramatist aesthetic play means more to him than the conveying of a moral.

Both Wilde and Stoppard flaunt the triviality and artificiality of their plays (although it is important to note that both writers celebrate "triviality" for its potential to be more vital and life-affirming than "seriousness"). For instance, Wilde characterized *The Importance of Being Earnest* as "exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy" (*More Letters* 196), while Stoppard says of his play *The Real Inspector Hound* that it is "an entertainment, just like a mechanical toy. It waves a flag, squeaks and turns a turtle and carries on.… There's no *reason* to write a play like that. It's an enjoyment" (Delaney *Stoppard in Conversation* 258). Similarly, when an interviewer suggested to Stoppard that for the average playgoer his 1993 play *Arcadia* "goes about as far as one could get away with," Stoppard adds with a laugh, "Well, even further …" (Delaney 267). Many Stoppard scholars consider *Arcadia* his finest play (e.g., Delaney 11), yet its author refuses to take it, or himself, too seriously.

In *The Invention of Love,* Stoppard has Wilde say that he "made art a philosophy that can look the twentieth century in the eye." This is clearly one of the reasons why Stoppard is drawn towards Wilde's aesthetic. But what is it about Wilde's art that makes it relevant to the postmodern age? At least three things: playfulness, perspectivism, and relativism. A classic example of all three is the ending of the essay "The Truth of Masks: A Note on Illusion," where Wilde surprises the reader by playfully turning his text against itself. He writes: "Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in æsthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth" (*The Artist as Critic* 432).

In his book *Sexual Dissidence* (1991), Jonathan Dollimore argues that what he calls Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic" relates to contemporary theoretical debates in a number of ways, among them the debate about postmodernism and one of its more controversial features "the so-called disappearance of the depth model, especially the model of a deep human subjectivity, and the cultural and political ramifications of this" (64). An example of Wilde's insouciant surface aesthetics can be found in lines such as the following from *The Picture of Dorian Gray:* Dorian Gray "used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence" (111). Here the language of essentialism and the depth model of human subjectivity is turned against itself, as those who believe in depth are presented as shallow. To Wilde, only those who accept that they have no essential self have gained self-knowledge, or as he puts it in "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young": "Only the shallow know themselves" (*The Artist as Critic* 434). Dollimore shows how Wilde's aesthetic anticipates the postmodern "culture of the surface" (73), writing that "there are those today who are advancing as criteria of the postmodern what Wilde was using to scandalize his contemporaries in the 1890s" (72). In Wilde's art, just as in postmodernist art, attitude and nuance are everything.

It is now time to turn again to *The Invention of Love.* Since the play takes place in Housman's head, it can be said to represent a dialogue between various facets of his dying brain. Although the work is filled with Stoppard's characteristic wit, the audience's awareness of the fact that these are the last thoughts of a brilliant but repressed man gives the performance the type of poignancy that is becoming more and more noticeable in Stoppard's writing. Until recently, it has been easy to overlook this touch of grief in the general hilarity of his work.[2] However, in a speech Stoppard gave in 1999, he said:

> *Look Back in Anger, Waiting for Godot,* and *The Birthday Party,* for different reasons, stopped me from writing a play of my own. But a little later in 1962 or 1963, I saw *Next Time I'll Sing to You* and I thought "Yes—that's the one. I think I can do that." I wanted to do that. I didn't and couldn't but the illusion was enough. ("Pragmatic Theater" 10)

He then quotes a speech from James Saunders' play *Next Time I'll Sing to You:*

2 Much of the recent scholarship on Stoppard addresses the difference between his early and later work, as Katherine E. Kelly notes in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard* (2001) (10).

> There lies behind everything, and you can believe this or not as you wish, a certain quality which we may call grief. It's always there, just under the surface, just behind the façade, sometimes very nearly exposed, so that you can see dimly the shape of it as you can see sometimes through the surface of an ornamental pond on a still day, the dark, gross, inhuman outline of a carp gliding slowly past; when you realize suddenly that the carp were always there, below the surface, even while the water sparkled in the sunshine, and while you patronized the quaint ducks and the supercilious swans, the carp were down there, unseen. It bides its time, this quality. And if you do catch a glimpse of it, you may pretend not to notice or you may turn suddenly away and romp with your children on the grass, laughing for no reason. The name of this quality is grief. (Qtd. in Stoppard, "Pragmatic Theater" 10)[3]

Housman is a figure haunted by grief, grief resulting from his hopeless love for his athletic friend, Moses Jackson—according to Stoppard's play the suppression of his love is responsible for the melancholy that marked his life. However, Housman's friend Chamberlain tells him that if it had not been for his grief he probably would not have written his poetry. "This is true," Housman responds. Chamberlain begins quoting from Housman's work: "So it's an ill wind from yon far country blows through holt and hanger."

> **AEH** If I might give you a piece of advice, Chamberlain, mangling a chap's poems isn't the way to show you've read them.
>
> **CHAMBERLAIN** I'm word perfect. "Oh were he and I together, shipmates on the fleeted main, sailing through the summer weather …" What happened to Jackson?
>
> **AEH** He retired, settled in British Columbia, died of cancer.
>
> **CHAMBERLAIN** Well, early though the laurel grows, it withers quicker than the rose.
>
> **AEH** This is a revolting habit, Chamberlain—I forbid you. (88)

Later, when Housman encounters Wilde in his night thoughts he is filled with grief. He tells Wilde: "I'm very sorry. Your life is a terrible thing. A chronological error. The choice was not always between renunciation and folly" (96). He is, of course, referring to their society's intolerance towards homosexuality and his own renunciation of his homosexual love and what he sees as the folly of Wilde's life. But Wilde, or rather a part of Housman's mind, responds: "Better a fallen rocket than never a burst of light. Dante

3 For the original source of the quotation, see Saunders 64–65.

reserved a place in his Inferno for those who wilfully live in sadness" (96). A little later, Wilde adds: "You didn't mention your poems. How can you be unhappy when you know you wrote them? They are all that will still matter" (97).

Wilde was no stranger to grief, however. Recognizing this, Stoppard shows him breaking down and weeping, but he also shows Wilde transforming his sorrow into energy for his sparkling talk. A clear example of the dynamic between sorrow and creation in Wilde's work is his prose poem "The Artist" (1894), in which a sculptor melts down an old statue of his called *The Sorrow that endureth for Ever* to create an image of *The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment* (253). In his representation of Wilde, Stoppard shows his insight into and affinity with his poetics, because grief plays an important, although sometimes overlooked, role in the poetics of art for art's sake. In one of the key documents of British aestheticism, the conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873), Pater quotes Victor Hugo's words: "we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve" (190). Pater adds: "we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more" (190). The aestheticism of Pater and Wilde is a response to both their sense of the brevity of life and the flux and fragmentation of late Victorian culture. "[T]he late Victorian world," one critic writes, "seemed infinitely complex, fragmented into mutually hostile nations with their separate empires to protect, suspicious classes and political factions, sciences and arts beyond the grasp of the common man, with human beings alone in a post-Darwinian universe" (Stonyk 205). It is not hard to see why Stoppard feels that the world of the late Victorians is not too far removed from our own and why the art Wilde fashioned to deal with it has relevance today.

Grief plays an important, although sometimes overlooked, role in the poetics of art for art's sake.

The uncertain, fragmented nature of life and the contingency of the categories we use to deal with it is a key theme in *The Invention of Love.* The play's title clearly points towards the constructivist worldview that plays such a big part in both Stoppard's and Wilde's art. It is comforting to believe that love is a constant in history, but Stoppard's title problematizes this assumption. Housman and his friend Pollard agree that Catullus invented the love poem, and the implication is that by inventing the love poem, he invented romantic love. Pollard holds forth:

> Like everything else, like clocks and trousers and algebra, the love poem had to be invented. After millenniums of sex and centuries of poetry, the love poem as understood by Shakespeare and Donne, and by Oxford undergraduates—the true-life confessions of the poet in love, immortalizing the mistress, who

> is actually *the cause of the poem—that* was invented in Rome in the first century before Christ. (13)

"Gosh," is the response of their less literary friend, and the object of Housman's love, Jackson. Stoppard's strategy of combining the theoretical with the flippant, the intellectual with the comic, is another point of contact between his and Wilde's poetics.

The notion of invention reverberates throughout Stoppard's play. One of the topics it explores is the invention of the New Journalism and the way it capitalized on the increase in readership that followed in the wake of the Forster Education Act of 1870. One of the results of this legislation, which made elementary education mandatory in Britain (Hughes 35), was that the general public could now be influenced by words and images like never before. The New Journalism created a new world—the world of mass entertainment in which armies of editors and journalists clashed to provide their readers with news, gossip, scandals, and assorted tit-bits from the lives of the famous and infamous. The readership of the New Journalism was the type George Gissing dubs "the quarter-educated" (479) in his supremely cynical portrayal of the publishing industry, *New Grub Street.*[4] Not surprisingly, in the effort to sell papers the boundary between reporting and inventing is likely to become blurred, for by simply talking enough about someone the press can turn a person into that darling of the media, the celebrity. Not only are celebrities good copy, they are also shining symbols of the media's power to create something out of nothing, or, as Daniel J. Boorstin puts it: "*The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness*" (57). In Stoppard's play, the MP and journalist Henry Labouchere boasts to his fellow journalists Frank Harris and W. T. Stead about their "invention of Wilde," as they relax in a London club one night in 1885. (Stoppard invites the audience to savour the irony of the name of Labouchere's newspaper, *Truth.*) Labouchere tells his colleagues:

> We invented Oscar, we bodied him forth. Then we floated him. Then we kited the stock. When D'Oyly Carte took [Gilbert and Sullivan's] *Patience* to New York, he had the idea of bringing Oscar to America and exhibiting him as the original aesthetic article for purposes of publicity, and Oscar did him proud before he was off the boat—"Mr Wilde Disappointed by Atlantic"—remember that, Stead?, you gave it space in the *Gazette,* and I printed the Atlantic's reply in *Truth*—"Atlantic

4 For a discussion of Gissing's phrase and the late Victorian reading public, see Keating 398–401.

> Disappointed by Mr Wilde". I wrote him up nicely, and Oscar, who didn't know it was all a ramp, told people over there, "Henry Labouchere is one of my heroes" … all in all, most satisfactory, a job well done. (57)

Stoppard knows full well, of course, that Wilde was not as naive as he makes Labouchere assume he is. Since his Oxford days, Wilde had been busy inventing and re-inventing himself. As a young man he was able to create a legend about himself among his fellow students, and his phrase "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china" reverberated first round Oxford and then round the country (Ellmann 42–43). His participation in D'Oyly Carte's tour of America was just one more strategic move in the elaborate art of self-promotion, for the tour offered him the opportunity to rise from a national to an international celebrity. Wilde was not a mere puppet of the media, as Labouchere contends. He was an active collaborator in the invention of himself.

In addition to dealing with the invention of love and the invention of Wilde, Stoppard dramatizes the invention of crime, especially the "crime" that brought about Wilde's downfall. Labouchere may take too much credit for inventing Wilde, but he can take full credit for inventing the crime that destroyed him. The so-called Labouchere Amendment, which constitutes the eleventh clause of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, reads as follows:

> Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour. (Qtd. in Smith, "Labouchere's Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill" 165)

Labouchere's amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill plays an important role in *The Invention of Love.* Stoppard has clearly studied the subject in detail, and it is necessary to look at the history of the amendment in order to fully understand his sophisticated handling of this peculiar event in British jurisprudence and its effect on Wilde and Housman.[5] As the his-

5 The care that obviously went into the making of *The Invention of Love* is most likely the reason for Stoppard's uncharacteristically angry response to Daniel Mendelsohn's harsh and rather simplistic review of the play in *The New York Review of Books* on August 10, 2000. In his letter to the editors, Stoppard writes: "Mr Mendelsohn makes room for some pleasant remarks about my play, for which

torian F.B. Smith notes, Labouchere's amendment was actually unrelated to the original Bill, which was titled "An Act to make further provision for the Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and other purposes" (165). Smith writes that the "vague catch-all provision" of the eleventh clause "by-passed the Offenses against the Person Act of 1861 … forbidding buggery and other abominable crimes, although this was unremarked at the time." Smith continues:

> The old Act appears to have been invoked rarely, and successful prosecutions under it seem to have been infrequent. Now, by contrast with the severe punishments the 1861 Act inherited from its 16th century precursors, a more lenient "acceptable" penalty was created. But within the decade there developed in the British public a rabid detestation of male homosexuality. In this context Labouchere's amendment, with its weak provisions about evidence, and exposure of "consent" and "procuring" to expansive judicial interpretation, became a terrible instrument. While the clause did not precipitate the change in the public hierarchy of evils, it did become the ready device for retributing those evils and for perpetuating fear and hatred of them. Oscar Wilde was to become the most famous of clause XI's many victims. Few provisions in modern British legislation can have caused so much misery. (165)

A change in the legal system invents a category of crime known as "gross indecency with another male person" for which Wilde was convicted. Stoppard's work lets the reader reflect on the constructedness of crime and the irony that in British society certain sexual acts passed more or less unnoticed until 1885, when a legal Act turned them into an abominable crime overnight. Although Smith argues that Labouchere's amendment did not "precipitate the change in the public hierarchy of evils," he does acknowledge that it made it easier to punish and perpetuate fear and hatred of those "evils." From a constructivist point of view the intense focus on certain evils magnifies them, changes them and therefore contributes to their making. Given the constructivist mood of *The Invention of Love,* it is useful to set beside Smith's account Foucault's well-known comment from *The History of Sexuality* on the power of the medical and legal discourses of the late nineteenth century: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a

which I thank him, but gratitude wears thin. His way of proceeding is to (a) tell me, wrongly, what I think, and (b) lecture me about things I already know" (103).

species" (1: 43). (For discussions and qualifications of Foucault's impressive but sweeping generalization, see Dollimore 67 and Sinfield 13–14.)

The Criminal Law Amendment Act is a testament to another rising power of the period, the press, for the creation of the Act gives some credence to Stead's boast that the "editorial pen is a sceptre of power, compared with which the sceptre of many a monarch is but a gilded lath" (qtd. in Arata 55; Stoppard refers to the line in *The Invention of Love* [58]). The Act was a reaction to what Barbara W. Tuchman calls Stead's "most notorious effort" (246). With his registered telegraph address of "Vatican, London," Stead was the self-estimated pope of journalism (Tuchman 245). In 1885 he was the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette,* where he published "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," a series of articles describing his purchase of a thirteen-year-old girl for £5 to prove his claim about the trade in child virgins for prostitution. The exposé created a moral outcry and led directly to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen (Tuchman 246; Arata 55).

The intense focus on certain evils magnifies them, changes them and therefore contributes to their making.

In *The Invention of Love,* Stead tells Labouchere and Harris: "The *Pall Mall Gazette* is testament enough that the Lord is at my elbow, and was there today when I—yes, I!—forced Parliament to pass the Criminal Law Amendment Act" (58). Harris, remarks: "You know, Stead, most people think you're mad" (58). (In his stage directions Stoppard specifies that Stead should have "*a full beard and the fanatical gleam of a prophet*" [57].) Harris continues:

> They thought so even before you bought a thirteen-year-old virgin for £5 to prove a point. A wonderful stunt, I wouldn't deny—I doff my hat. When I took over the *Evening News* I edited the paper with the best in me at twenty-eight. The circulation wouldn't budge. So, I edited the paper as a boy of fourteen. The circulation started to rise and never looked back. (58)

The readers' sense of constructedness, contingency, and irony is deepened when Stoppard presents them with Labouchere's motives for his Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill. In the play, Labouchere tells Stead and Harris what happened when the Bill was being debated in Parliament:

> Anybody with any sense on the backbenches was pitch-forking Amendments in to get the government to admit it had a pig's breakfast on its hands and withdraw it. I forced a division on raising the age of consent to twenty-one!, and two people voted for it. My final effort was the Amendment on indecency

> between male persons, and God help me, it went through on the nod—(it had) nothing to do with the Bill we were supposed to be debating; normally it would have been ruled out of order, but everyone wanted to be shot of the business, prorogue Parliament, and get on to the General Election. (61)

Stead is stunned: "But—but surely—you *intended* the Bill to address a contemporary evil—?" Labouchere responds:

> Nothing of the sort. I intended to make the Bill absurd to any sensible person left in what by then was a pretty thin House … but that one got away, so now a French kiss and what-you-fancy between two chaps safe at home with the door shut is good for two years with or without hard labour. It's a funny old world. (61)

In *The Invention of Love,* Stead's "mad" act leads to an earnest legal Act, and Labouchere's flippant way of trying to stop the Act leads to the severe Amendment that bears his name. One man's journalistic stunt and another man's joke result in the invention of a harsh new reality that crushes Wilde, represses Housman, and affects countless other lesser known figures.

The irony within irony here is the way the legal system's ability to create reality can be said to be in tune with Wilde's constructivist worldview. In his dialogue "The Decay of Lying" (1891), which features Wilde's mouthpiece Vivian and his friend Cyril, the former says: "It is style that makes us believe in a thing—nothing but style" (*The Critic as Artist* 316). The reason for the essay's playful lamenting over the decay of lying is that the liar is the "very basis of civilized society," for "the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure." Art will kiss the liar's "false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style" (305). For Wilde, the mode of viewing, the point of view, is crucial in the mind's construction of the real. This has a radical metaphysical effect, leading to such playful claims as the following: "The nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac" (309). In "The Decay of Lying," such statements have their theoretical underpinnings in Wilde's relativistic epistemology. In the dialogue, Vivian claims that the Impressionists changed the climate of London. Cyril is not quite convinced, but Vivian encourages his friend to consider the matter from a "scientific or a metaphysical point of view": "For what is nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have

influenced us" (312). It is important to note that Wilde is not suggesting that art creates things out of nothing. Or as Vivian observes:

> At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. (312)

It is by drawing our attention to the raw material of nature and by exaggerating and selecting that art can be said to invent things. The facts do not change, but our view of them does. To be aware of the facts people must experience them, and since the empirical is the realm of the possible rather than the necessary, reality can never be fully within our grasp. Wilde saw himself as a master of constructing reality. However, *The Invention of Love* suggests that in spite of the British legal system's earnest appearance it out-Wilded Wilde in the end by its invention of the crime that destroyed him.

The final twist in Stoppard's account of Wilde's trouble with the law is introduced when we meet Labouchere, Harris, and Stead ten years after the scene in which they first appear. The year is 1895. The three men are sitting with open newspapers, reading about the conviction of Wilde under the Labouchere Amendment clause. Now Labouchere has changed his tune, because we hear him say to Stead that a sentence of two years is "totally inadequate," that when he had proposed his amendment in 1885 he had wanted a maximum of seven years as a punishment for homosexual activity but that the Attorney General had advised him that two years was more likely to secure a conviction from a hesitant jury (82–83). At this stage Harris says: "You did it to scupper the Bill—that's what you told me." Labouchere retorts: "Who's going to believe *you*?" (83). This is an extremely clever twist. We have heard Harris lie throughout the two scenes in which he appears. At one point in the earlier scene Labouchere asks: "Harris, do you *ever* tell the truth?" (62). But the fact that Harris does not always tell the truth does not mean he always lies. The reader who traces Stoppard's research for his play will discover that the view that Labouchere intended to make the Criminal Law Amendment Bill ridiculous originally comes from a book Harris wrote on Wilde (Harris 144). In his essay on Labouchere's amendment, which Stoppard has almost certainly read, Smith comes to the conclusion that in spite of Harris's reputation as being less than trustworthy, the evidence suggests that Harris's view of Labouchere's original motivation is the most plausible one. While Smith stresses that the lack of conclusive evidence makes it impossible to fully settle the question of Labouchere's motives, it

is clear that by 1895 Labouchere had decided to stand by his amendment as if he had proposed it in earnest (Smith 166–67, 173).

The conclusion that the question of Labouchere's original motive can never be settled obviously appeals to Stoppard's postmodernist sensibility, for his work is haunted by epistemological doubt. "My plays," he has said, "are a lot to do with the fact that *I just don't know*" ("Ambushes for the Audience" 13). He describes the writing of his dramas as follows: "What I'm always trying to say is 'Firstly, A. Secondly, minus A.'" That is the "architectural thing" he is after, as he puts it (Hayman, "First Interview" 10). The twists and turns of Stoppard's highly complex artifices reflect a relativistic, contingent world, and a key theme of his writing is the difficulty of living in the modern and postmodern periods. *The Invention of Love* continues his significant contributions to the articulation of the social, cultural, and political condition of postmodernity, postmodernity "as a form of life, a form of reflection upon and a response to the accumulating signs of the limits and limitations of modernity," as one sociologist has put it, postmodernity "as a way of living with the doubts, uncertainties and anxieties which seem increasingly to be a corollary of modernity, the inescapable price to be paid for the gains, the benefits and pleasures, associated with modernity" (Smart 12). Stoppard is keenly aware of the emotional and intellectual pains of modern life, but like Wilde he is also excited by the pleasures it may yield if it is approached in a skilful, aesthetic manner.

In the last scene of *The Invention of Love,* Charon is dimly seen ferrying Wilde across the Styx. The last words we hear Wilde say are prime examples of his constructivist aesthetics and the playfully defiant attitude they engender towards life:

> Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.
>
> One should always be a little improbable.
>
> Nothing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance. (102)[6]

In *Sexual Dissidence,* Dollimore evaluates the consequences of Wilde's surface aesthetics and his criticism of the model of deep human subjectivity. In spite of its postmodern chic, anti-essentialism can be a recipe for unglamourous anxiety, but Dollimore argues that Wilde's "critique of the depth model is accompanied not by *Angst* but something utterly different

6 For the original source of these epigrams, see Wilde, *The Artist as Critic* 433–34.

and reminiscent of Barthes's *jouissance,* or what Borges has perceptively called Wilde's 'negligent glee … the fundamental spirit of his work [being] joy'" (73).[7] But I believe that what needs to be added to these references to joy in Wilde's work is how the pleasure of his texts is the complex product of a post-Darwinian awareness of the grief and brevity of life. In his biography of Wilde, Richard Ellmann reminds the reader that even though Wilde "offered himself as the apostle of pleasure, his created work contains much pain" (xiv). Stoppard's perceptiveness of this aspect of Wilde's life and work is demonstrated by the way he shows Wilde struggling with his sadness. Wilde's aestheticism is to a large extent a survival strategy to deal with a world in which "[a]ll that is solid melts into air" to quote Marx's famous phrase which Marshall Berman uses as the title and key metaphor for his well-known study on the challenges of modernity (Berman 15).[8]

Wilde's aestheticism is to a large extent a survival strategy.

At the end of Stoppard's play, Wilde sails out of Housman's mind, but the defiant cheerfulness of his parting epigrams allows the dying Housman to distance himself from his own sorrow and gain an aesthetic perspective on his life. Housman's last words, and the last words of the play, are: "But now I really do have to go. How lucky to find myself standing on this empty shore, with the indifferent waters at my feet" (102). Housman's peculiarly graceful indifference to his own death represents the victory of a disappointed man over his own sorrow and timidity. Housman's curious detachment towards his death has been foreshadowed in a previous passage in which he is talking about something that mattered very much to him, classical scholarship. His friend Pollard feels he is being too flippant about his field of study. Pollard cannot help laughing, but says: "Oh … Housman, what will become of you?" Housman responds: "You're my only friend who might understand, don't let me down. If I'm disrespectful it's because it's important and not a game anyone can play" (71). He then extends the art for art's sake dictum to scholarship: "Useless knowledge for its own sake. Useful knowledge is good, too, but it's for the faint-hearted, an elaboration of the real thing, which is only to shine some light, it doesn't matter where on what, it's the light itself, against the darkness, it's what's left of God's purpose when you take away God" (71). Stoppard is not the only postmodernist who sees the relevance of the aesthetic attitude to our own time. It plays a crucial role, for instance, in Foucault's later work. In the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality, The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self,* he theorizes an "aesthetics of existence" (2: 12), an "art of existence" (3: 43), and "a stylistics

7 For the original source of the quotation, see Borges 172–74.

8 For the original source of the quotation, see Marx and Engels 469–500.

of living" (3: 149). In one of his interviews, Foucault says: "We have hardly any remnant of the idea in our society, that the principal work of art which one has to take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one's life, one's existence" ("Genealogy of Ethics" 362). It is also significant that by "the self" he means the type of non-essentialist self that Wilde theorized. Furthermore, Foucault recognizes that nineteenth-century dandyism marked an episode in the kind of relation of the subject to itself that he explored towards the end of his life ("Genealogy of Ethics" 362). Stoppard's play is about the importance of facing the insignificance of ourselves and of what we care about in a world that lacks convincing meta-narratives—without giving in to despair. What allows Housman to move from arid melancholy to his final sense of calm is the attitude he learns from Wilde, the technique of taking an aesthetic attitude towards the strange flux of oneself and the world.

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