

LYING THROUGH THEIR TEETH: THE FIERCE AESTHETIC OF GARRISON KEILLOR AND OSCAR WILDE

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Believe me, my dear Cyril, modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter are entirely and absolutely wrong. We have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture of the Muses, and spend our days in the sordid streets and hideous suburbs of our vile cities when we should be out on the hillside with Apollo. Certainly we are a degraded race, and have sold our birthright for a mess of facts.

— Oscar Wilde
(Vivian, from “The Decay of Lying”)

In his monologues on the fictitious “Lake Wobegon,” Garrison Keillor lies and he lies big (“Prophet”). In his spoken fervor, he seems as if he really believes his stories. So what? He only takes his place with some of the greatest aesthetes of all time, like Oscar Wilde, who not only readily admitted that lying was the base of his art but argued that by necessity art could never be anything other than utter falsehood (“The Decay of Lying,” 179). When Vivian claims in Wilde’s dialogue “The Decay of Lying” that “lying and poetry are arts — arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other — and that they require the most careful study, the most disinterested devotion,” we sense this to be Wilde speaking to us directly (171). It is, after all, what he seems to claim over and over in this dialogue, in his famous and numerous aphorisms, and through characters such as the infamous Jack and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, who survive, excel, and eventually triumph by way of continuous deceit (466). But then, how can we tell what Wilde believed about lying? He was always lying.

One feature that makes Keillor intriguing is that he admits the overt falsehood of his narrative art with moments of meta-narrative that Wilde

was not perhaps permitted because of the nature of the difference in their venues. One was late-Victorian dramatic and poetic, the other a part of a modern-day oral tradition of radio broadcasters. The aesthetic theory of both of these artists raises a host of questions and offers some answers about the ethics of aesthetics in narrative, drama, and poetry. But perhaps more interesting still, the commentary of both these writers' works emerges with much sharper teeth than many audiences have believed in their times.¹ Sometimes the only way to tell the truth to deaf audiences is to lie.

Despite the seemingly superficial and innocuous content of their work, both writers have offered stinging criticisms of their contemporary culture, and it seems the only way either could do so was by lying about the state of things. Whether we choose to hear their sharp rebukes is largely contingent on whether or not we are willing to understand the complex ethics of aesthetic representation or, more properly, misrepresentation in their work.

Keillor not only continually calls attention to his lying, he almost celebrates it. According to him, insofar as any one particular attribute of his narrative skill may be said to have led to his success, it is his ability to take everyday events (facts, we might say) and transform them through deliberate misrepresentation into something that never happened:

. . . And tell the truth, what can I do that's the opposite of that? And so I got into this line of work, telling lies. And I've never regretted it, which is a terrible thing to say in front of children, to say that you've spent your life telling lies, but I have. . . . There's a story that I told a long time ago that so many children liked so much. It was a story about throwing a tomato at my sister when I was a little kid and we were out in the garden. . . . Hundreds of little kids have come up to me after shows and they've looked up and they've said, "That, uh, that Tomato Butt story that you told, is that true? Is that a true story?" And I look down at them and I say, "Yeah! That's true." And I've never had the heart to look down at a child and to admit that the story happened exactly the opposite way. And that she threw the tomato at me. . . . It took me 30 years to be able to lie well enough so that that tomato could reverse course and go in the opposite direction. ("Prophet")

He has most of America believing in a skewed Arcadian Minnesota that he acknowledges never really existed:

. . . and now it's all gone like so much of that life that I saw a little bit of when I was a kid, a life in which people made do, and which people made their own, lived off the land. They were independent on that account, and lived between the ground and God. And you know, it's lost not only to this world but also lost to memory. Because I can't bring it back, even in words. My memory is faulty as everyone's is. And I think back to that life that's gone and those people and I think about it as the olden days, the good old days when life was simple. And it's not true. It's a terrible disservice to them. Life was simple for me then because I was a child and my happiness was looked after by other people, but it was not simple for the others. Never. And if I think, I can think of people who were terribly angry and people who were terribly hurt back on the farm. . . . Back home they'd rather I didn't talk about this. They'd rather I presented a picture of Lake Wobegon as a sweet, simple place where people are kind and good to each other. But if I said that, a lot of people would want to go live there, and they wouldn't like that. And the people who'd go live there would be disappointed because it's not true. ("Hog Slaughter")

Wilde presents his ideology of aesthetics and decadence most clearly in "The Decay of Lying," borrowing heavily from Gautier, Baudelaire and Whistler, as Karl Beckson notes, with Whistler being "annoyed at Wilde's borrowings and parody" (167). From an article he has written, Vivian reads the following instruction to his friend Cyril: "Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent" (179). Such a claim is followed by other claims like, "Art itself is really a form of exaggeration; and selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of over-emphasis" (180). All this is rather unremarkable, only going so far as to place Wilde centrally in the circle of followers/borrowers of Theophile Gautier, who, Beckson points out, above all other nineteenth century figures "had publicized the idea of 'art for art's sake' — *l'art pour l'art* — and who had developed shocking as a fine art" (xxiii). Where Wilde may be more interesting is in those locations where his parody of shock turns quickly, albeit briefly, toward lucid social critique, as in an earlier passage in which Vivian claims the following: "Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world, and people die of it just as they die of any other disease." He deftly turns such hyperbole into a scandalous claim as he continues: "Fortunately, in England at any rate, thought is not

catching” (169). To understand this quote as more than simply incidental or convenient satire, one only need consider its direct parallel in Lady Bracknell’s brief commentary on education that appears in the middle of Act 1 in *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it, and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. (414)

Here the jab moves beyond a simple critique of his culture’s limitation in thought to become a more developed (while still brief and satirical) acknowledgment of the radical socio-political possibilities some education might offer at the same time indicating no true prospect for such radicalism or even real education in a Victorian culture driven by tight aristocratic control and the growing bourgeoisie aspirations of a middle class.

Wilde is not alone in slipping such social criticisms blithely into his parody. Keillor follows up his determined defense of his own career of lying with the following extended passage:

No, it’s not that I don’t know what a prophet would say, you see. I do. It’s not for lack of a message. I’m not interested in saying it. If there were a prophet, of course, a prophet would tell us that America is a country that God has blessed so much, we have not suffered as other people have. We don’t know what suffering is like. We have not known war in our country since 1865. That experience of war in 1865 was so horrible in this country, the Civil War, that we did not lift our hand against anybody for years and years after that. But over the years we’ve become so prosperous and we have developed technology that allows us to deliver war to other people, and it never falls on us. We have no idea what war is like in this country. Our soldiers know, but when they come back to tell us, we don’t know what they’re talking about. We don’t know what war is like in this country and so it behooves us to be careful. And to rain down death on people and then to gloat over it is not becoming in God’s eyes. This is not good. To rain down destruction from this country, which knows so little suffering that our own

navels become the source of our suffering is not pleasant or good in God's eyes. We should be very careful, very careful. This is what a prophet would say, I think. ("Prophet")

The lie becomes prophetic commentary; it transforms itself as we listen to it. The outrageousness of both Wilde's and Keillor's claims often becomes most acute just before the hammer of their final social-satire falls. This happens so consistently in both their work that one might measure the depth of the commentary to come by the breadth of the lying that directly precedes and belies such serious social critique. Keillor takes the tomato, turns it around, and aims it on a meandering path toward a final unlikely espousal of prophecy about the self-destructive consequences of American Imperialism. Wilde maintains that "thinking is most unhealthy" and defends this, only then adding that "Fortunately, in England at any rate, thought is not catching." The social critique is not absent, not even buried, just delayed. In this sense of the deliberate delay of their critiques, Keillor and Wilde form their closest bond. Both writers hold their criticism at bay behind a veil of amusing and harmless narrative that reveals its true intent only at the tail end and consequently with quite a sharp thrust.

One of the greatest passages of social satire in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* takes place early on in the play near the close of Act I as Lady Bracknell interrogates the cavalier gentleman Jack over his worth as a suitor to her daughter. A series of exchanges in this extended passage expresses the content and form of the satire:

Lady B. [makes a note in her book]:

Is [your income] in land, or investments?

Jack:

In investments, chiefly.

Lady B:

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

Lady B. [sternly]:

What are your politics?

Jack:

Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a liberal Unionist.

Lady B:

Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

Jack:

I have lost both my parents.

Lady B:

To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father? . . .

Jack:

I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me. . . . I was . . . well, I was found.

Lady B:

Found!

Jack:

The late Mr. Thomas Cardew . . . found me . . . and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. . . .

Lady B:

Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first-class ticket for this seaside resort find you?

Jack. [gravely]:

In a handbag.

Lady B:

A handbag?

Jack. [very seriously]:

Yes, Lady Bracknell. It was in a handbag — a somewhat large, black leather handbag, with handles to it — an ordinary handbag in fact.

Lady B:

In what locality did this . . . Thomas Cardew come across this ordinary handbag?

Jack:

In the cloakroom at Victoria Station. It was given to him in mistake for his own.

Lady B:

The cloakroom at Victoria Station?

Jack:

Yes. The Brighton line.

Lady B:

The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. . . . (414-16)

It is with such satire that Wilde's reputation as a harmless dandy was established, and it is with such parody that Wilde took aim squarely at the Victorian culture's pretensions and shallowness. Lady Bracknell, the cornerstone of aristocracy in the play, lampoons in succession all the central keys to social enfranchisement in her culture. Finally she adds that Jack should "try and acquire some relations as soon as possible" (416), while she has at least been pleased earlier to learn he smokes, having asserted, "I am glad to hear it. A man should have an occupation of some kind" (413). To have one of the aristocracy deliver the very undoing of such sacred determiners of social status as parentage and landed wealth is to demonstrate the power of the lie, of the aesthetic imagination.

Of course, one must reconcile this overt social critique with Wilde's own established assertions such as those that follow Vivian's assertion that "Art begins with abstract decoration," which he claims is a first stage. He continues as follows:

Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable

barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering. (179)

Nothing appears more appalling to Vivian's (and Wilde's suspected) sympathies than the corruption of the purely decorative — the absolutely useless and thus absolutely aesthetic — by reality and nature. Wilde insists fashion and art, freed from all content (including social commentary, of course), are his total interest over and over again: art for art's sake. As Richard Ellmann notes, "Eventually all the conventions seem to fit the characters' needs, and the needs the conventions. Jack really is Ernest. The liars were telling the truth. Imagination conquers reality" (xviii). Such analysis seems to suggest, though, that this "conquering" of reality is in fact submission to reality, a performance that becomes complicit with reality. In this perspective, the seeming satire of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is ultimately fluff, never subversive, always safe. But this conclusion only remains solid if we do not listen carefully to further qualification by Ellmann: "A truth in Art,' said Wilde in one of his essays, 'is that whose contrary also is true.' Reality is not always conquered" (xviii). The key may be that reality can only be challenged temporarily, not conquered, and art is the only lie that may do so, whether or not reality reasserts itself finally again, in safe condition, which, of course, it always will.

This train of thinking may tell us, finally, what we must do with the overt allegory of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* that asserts above all that *reality is life* and *artifice death*, the converse of everything Wilde seemed continually to espouse. The following passage appears as Dorian realizes he has bartered away truth and love for beauty:

Ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became clear to him now for that very reason. Ugliness was the one reality. The coarse brawl, the loathsome den, the crude violence of a disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious shapes of Art, the dreamy shadows of Song. (160-1)

"How could he," we might ask in exasperation, "write this, and seem finally to believe it, in one of his most regarded works?" It is not too difficult to use Wilde's own words against him, of course. We may simply invoke the muse of his poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol":

And all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword! (265)

We can say that regardless of his famous biography (the way his life destroyed itself through his love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and his strident claims that he was not a homosexual; his exile and death in France) his texts certainly deconstruct themselves inter-textually. We can rest easy in the resolution of the paradox that he destroyed his life of art by killing the thing he loved best: the aesthetic, even within himself.

Yet, such easy resolution misses entirely the consistent and determined social critique of art that all his works offer as the only virtuous way out of a crumbling façade of Victorian pretensions and the true decadence of a culture given over to falsity in its self-righteous privileging of the supposed *real*. Wilde's critique of the worst kind of Imperial and fashionable excess is not very different from Keillor's aesthetic critique — always a lie, offered up only as preferable to the more real lie we live daily by way of a corrupt culture of power in which we are all at once implicated. The aesthetic lie remains simply a less noxious one. Keillor's narrative of the "Hog Slaughter," for instance, finally delivers what he promises, a tale of "people who were terribly angry and people who were terribly hurt back on the farm":

I think about Elizabeth June who lived back in Lake Wobegon on the farm with her parents. . . . Elizabeth June was in her forties. She was "not quite right," as they said. She was a little slow. She was also immense. "Elizabeth June the Human Balloon" we called her. She was a woman of such loneliness that it hurt to look at her. So people didn't. And they didn't talk to her. And so she invented friends for herself out of the pages of the Sears Roebuck catalog, where she saw them dressed in their fine clothes. And she put on parties with her friends out in the woods, her Sears Roebuck Pals, gracious parties [for] which they dressed up and they drank "Day Queeries," probably the only fancy drink she'd ever read about. And she'd talk to them, out in the woods and then at home, and then in church. One Sunday morning, when they were just about to pass the sacra-

ments, she was heard to speak up. And she said, “Well, Roger, maybe I will buy that car!” It was a part of a conversation that had begun somewhere else and was heading in another direction. Her mother shushed her up. But every Sunday she’d speak out, talking to her imaginary friends during church. We kids loved it, got a big kick out of her. We loved to see the Christian faith of our parents tested and tried before our eyes. They didn’t kick her out. Nobody said she shouldn’t come. She stayed there for years providing entertainment for us, until one day her rope came loose. And her balloon drifted up to heaven, where I’m sure she sits today on the right hand of the throne of God and has forgiven us all a long time ago. People would rather I didn’t talk about that, back home, because there are some things you are not supposed to talk about to strangers, secrets you’re supposed to keep within the family. . . . I keep expecting to see her, maybe in Chicago. She’d be old now. I look for her on the streets even though I know she’s dead. An old woman, she’d be coming down the street pushing a grocery cart full of old clothes and Sears Roebuck catalogs. If I ever see her I mean to give her some money, say a blessing, put my arm around her. (“Hog Slaughter”)

Keillor, as Wilde does in *Dorian Gray*, offers up an ornate and decorous lie whose aesthetic at once shields and eventually reveals a harsher truth than any we popularly accept in our real world of lived experience. This passage works on many levels, not the least of which is as an overt critique of how we treat our disenfranchised, our marginalized, those who are so lonely “it hurt[s] to look at [them].” It contains hope, hope that in a small rural town, at least civility might prevail and they would not kick the dispossessed out of the house of God. But ultimately this hope is overcome with a type of mournful stoicism as it asserts that we know where, in reality, she would be today: on the streets of Chicago, pushing a shopping cart with only her imaginary friends to keep her company. It would be the company of the aesthetic realm of her imagination, a lie, the catalogs of friends, that would provide her with the only salve she could receive in an ugly and vicious world. Wilde’s and Keillor’s work represents that of two social critics living at a time when no one would listen to critique, when each of their Imperialist nations had perhaps reached the height of their wealth, their materialist violence and shallowness, their political dominance signifying the pinnacle of their self-righteous arrogance.

A Final Thought on the Ethics of Aesthetics and Teaching

Beyond the implications this perspective of Wilde's and Keillor's work has for understanding how the aesthetic functions and speaks to the closed ears of cultures convinced of their own imperviousness, what has it to do with us? I would add that one essential point of relevance speaks to what we do as educators. The fields of scholarship and pedagogy seem paradoxically slow to learn from the arts, but they can of course still learn if they are willing. In the August 22, 2005, issue of *The New Yorker*, Jim Holt writes a review of Harry G. Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* in which the issue of intellectual posturing and play are debated and in which it is noted that Frankfurt sees "bullshit" as more dangerous than outright lying for the primary reason that bullshit is confused or does not care about its own authenticity, as opposed to lying, which knows itself and cares enough to operate against the truth for a reason (69-70). In it, Holt claims, "Anyone familiar with the varieties of 'theory' that have made their way from the Left Bank of Paris into American English departments will be able to multiply examples of the higher bull-shit ad libitum" (70). The discussion turns to questions of how one would "defend philosophers like Hegel or Heidegger from the charge that their writings are bull-shit" (70). The answer comes that not only did they "[care] about the truth," but that it would be possible to "try to show that their writings actually made some sense."

So, the argument goes, such rational clarity sheds light on the issue of aesthetic dissembling. Holt asserts the formula of Frankfurt to be that lying can sometimes be in the service of truth. Such a formula provides the basis for the defense of Hegel or Heidegger against a charge of "their writings" being "bull-shit" (70). This seems clear enough because Holt claims "pernicious forms of nonsense" are Frankfurt's enemy as they were Wittgenstein's (69). This is an important step and qualification. While the review of Frankfurt seems content to stop here, such logic and assertions should give the careful thinker, critic, or teacher pause: at what point do we become sure that something is indeed pernicious? For example, how do we determine whether or not humorists like Wilde and Keillor are engaged in lying to find the truth?

The whole thrust of my comparison of these satirists has been to assert their masterful use of "pernicious forms of nonsense" in order to offer some critique greater than the truth would provide. But, how do we become sure they are doing so and not just manufacturing pernicious nonsense for the sake of blind diversion, a charge very often leveled at Wilde throughout most of the twentieth century and one leveled at Keil-

lor quite frequently by his contemporaries? Such a question may be more difficult to answer than we first think, and I would suggest the very proffering of it leads this analysis of two aesthetes toward an intersection with teaching practices, especially playful ones, of which one prime example would be those informed by the oft-denigrated influence in American English departments by “the Left Bank of Paris” (Holt 70), which is still very much prevalent in the contemporary classroom.

I would propose that a significant danger lies in dismissing even what appears to be clearly *nonsense* as necessarily worthless. It brings to mind the value of Jean-Michel Rabaté’s interpretation of Derrida’s contribution to theory when he argues that “the ‘playful’ or ‘negative’ element of [Derrida’s] textual practices” may be considered as secondary to “the fundamentally affirmative nature of [his] thought and writing” (197). If the post-structuralists have taught us anything, it is that we do not always have to begin interrogation in the comfortable seat of Platonic ideals. Not knowing where one is going and still going there may be termed “bullshit,” but then this term must work for a type of intellectual discovery that is done through reaching out, not just for post-structuralists wanting to be published but for students wanting to try their hands with texts, wanting to play with undecided meaning and to test the boundaries.

If some amount of bullshit allows for this, teachers of ethics may be all for it. Shoshana Felman deftly analyzes the value of Jacques Lacan for understanding the duplicity of texts and their roles, arguing “. . . that to situate in a text the analytical as such — to situate the object of analysis or the textual point of its implication — is not necessarily to recognize a *known*, to find an answer, but also, and perhaps more challengingly to locate an *unknown*, to find a question” (188). Such unknowns and such questions may, in fact, turn out to be the only true currency of exchange with the aesthetic, especially when the aesthetic must always remain in the domain of the imagined, a lie.

If any methodology underlies what often opens up difficult texts to inquiry in the undergraduate classroom, it is the theory that teachers and students must have the freedom to play with ideas, to espouse “pernicious nonsense” before they might understand it as pernicious. It may be nonsense. And nonsense may be more fruitful and more critical than all the realism of virtuous academic examination and certainty in the world. Lacan and Derrida fostered such a possibility for critical and pedagogical playfulness that does not fall that far from the ethics of aesthetics I have described in Wilde and Keillor. Those who wish to teach the complexity

of social critique may benefit equally and greatly from the nonsense of certain Left Bank theory and the nonsense of certain aesthetic performances. Only if we encourage the play of exploration in the classroom can we emerge as more than Vivian's "degraded race [who has] sold our birthright for a mess of facts." In such a way, the tightrope act of classroom social critique and interrogation become the difficult aesthetic of teaching, the art of lying in order to search out with one's students, if not *the truth* finally, then at least the lies we all forget are lies.

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