

THE 90s : BEGINNING OF THE 20th CENTURY : AN INTRODUC- TION TO ANY FURTHER STUDY OF WILDE

by Arturo Silva

The points I wish to make are simple enough. Their value, I believe, is intrinsic because novel: they are meant as an introduction to *any* further study of Wilde.

The major point is this: Wilde is the most neglected, least understood, and yet, most significant member of that small group of late nineteenth century prophets of the twentieth. In other words, Marx (Political Economy), Nietzsche (Philosophy), and Freud (Psychoanalysis).

The myopia of the age is that it has taken these three Ps as if they came before the most important: Poetics. To the aesthetic mind, Politics, Philosophy, and Psychology derive from, and are dependent upon, Poetics.

No Further Study

- until we have a dependable, scholarly, and *complete* text. Recently, and thankfully, some of the work has been done. (Mermaids for the major plays, Oxford for the fiction.) But much remains to be done. For example, we need to know where Wilde began and ended each of the sheets of "De Profundis", so as to have a better idea of how he *constructed* that letter.

- until we have a more thorough and speculative biography. (Some points: Wilde's forebears: Do his aphorisms derive from his classical studies or from Pope's couplets? Is there anything to the fact that his father was the first man to deny the rumor -now proven false- of Swift's madness? And, speaking of Swift: Italy has criminals; Spain saints; France has Rabelais and Sade; England has Swift, Byron, and Wilde: monsters: personalities larger than nature normally allows.)

- Until we learn how to read Wilde. Here, the usual modern complications arise, because, to read him seriously (within all the seriousness of his wit) we can only do so on his own terms. This is to say, we must both distance ourselves from, and involve ourselves in, the slippery play of his thought. No further study then, until we raise ourselves to the level of his *taste*. (Not only an aesthetic act, but ethical too.)

Preliminary Study

- requires sober study on the early plays and on the poetry (which are, at least, biog-

raphically interesting).

- requires investigation of his "feminism" and the real extent of his work on "Woman's World". (Who he published, what, and why, etc.)

Later Study

- will reveal "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" to be an interesting failure, silly really; but as an example of an AUTHOR'S strategy, brilliant: Wilde getting his de luxe edition out of his publisher finally, and meanwhile having his say in the poem.

- will show the plays that precede "Earnest" to be Wilde's working out of his Oedipal Complex.

- must find a new approach to dealing with "Salomé".

Intense, artificial, is it a Symbolist, a Religious, or an archaic drama? The sexuality which suffuses the impenetrable "Salomé" flies in every direction, and thereby makes this Wilde's most disturbing piece. (It goes without saying that an approach to Wilde's sexuality -in his life and his art- must be found too.)

- should prove most fecund when dealing with "Earnest": as one of our most *contemporary* works for its crucial play of language and identity, the generosity and the violence of its language, all of it excessive to the point of defeating all understanding and achieving a Delirium of Being; as being a happy version of "Les Liaisons Dangereuses"; and as being on a spiritual par with "The Golden Bowl" and "The Tempest" (here is an *other* plane, a world populated by artists where, despite threats of "violence" ((bad taste, foul play)), joy always reigns supreme.) In "Earnest" Wilde is a man freed of society, though not yet of himself.

- must deal more thoroughly with "De Profundis", along with "Earnest" and "Intentions", one of Wilde's three masterpieces, because the psychology and ethics it proposes derive from aesthetic assumptions. It's remarkable how this work has been neglected.

- will destroy the notion of Wilde's last years as the decadent fall of a broken man, but rather, as his triumph. What happier letters are there than those written in exile? Having



lost everything, he had found his freedom, and could now create the world anew. Having risen above Society in "Earnest", and above himself in "De Profundis", he could now fall wherever he would: the repetition of the same: why write, when there were young boys arms a-plenty to fall into ?

Suggestions for Study

The most difficult task will be in trying to define Wilde's semiotic. Where -if anywhere- does he locate meaning ? The key "textule" here is the "paradox" (that is no paradox) from the "Preface" of "Dorian Gray": "All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril."

In other words, *any* search for meaning -including this one, or any reading of Wilde ?- is dangerous. (And perhaps the seeking itself is the real peril; seek delight, yes, but not satisfaction.) *And*, the division (and value) between surface and symbol (appearance and reality, body and soul, etc.) is false. (And what is the "difference between "beneath" and "read" ? Do surfaces in fact have "beneaths" ? Are symbols in fact "read" ?) There is then no "between" "between" surface and symbol. The failure to understand this and to develop a theory of the superficial is ours. (Can this only be understood in sublunary Japan ?) Surface and symbol are both states of exaltation that exclude impossible, intolerable (unimaginative) "Reality".

This play with meaning -seducing and frustrating the reader- can be found throughout Wilde's work in the use of similar pairs of "paradoxical" terms: talent/genius, style/sincerity, manners/morals, truth/masks. (Other possibilities ((my own)): The "bon mot" is preferable to the "mot juste", as is the conceit to the conception. Wilde's work is a symbolization without metaphorization. Symbols work best when they appeal, not to the soul, but to the eye.)

No further study then, until, desparate with writing in an Age of Fear, we remember again the art of reading.