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by

Charles Stewart III

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**“And one lucky bastard who’s the artist”: V. I. Lenin and Oscar Wilde’s
Ideologico-Aesthetic Debate in Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties***

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

James Loehlin, Supervisor

David Kornhaber

“And one lucky bastard who’s the artist”: V. I. Lenin and Oscar Wilde’s

Ideologico-Aesthetic Debate in Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties*

by

Charles Stewart III, B.A.

Report

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JACK That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

ALGERNON The truth is very rarely pure and simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

JACK That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.

ALGERNON Literary criticism is not your forte, dear fellow. Don't try it.

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

“And one lucky bastard who’s the artist”: V. I. Lenin and Oscar Wilde’s Ideologico-Aesthetic Debate in Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties*

Charles Stewart III, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

SUPERVISOR: James Loehlin

Tom Stoppard’s play *Travesties* was revised considerably between its first edition of 1975 and the new edition of 1994, with the parts pertaining to V. I. Lenin and Marxism bearing the brunt of the cuts. The political fall of Marxism is not sufficient to account for these cuts since the play occurs in 1974 via the erratic memory of Henry Carr, a minor official at the British consulate in Zurich in 1917. The published textual history of *Travesties* is also insufficient to account for Lenin’s diminishment. The archive of the play’s composition at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin provides a more detailed history of the play’s debate over whether or not an artist can also be a revolutionary, suggesting that the debate can be reduced to two sides, one representing the subversive wit of Oscar Wilde via the intertext *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the other Leninist-Marxist functional-revolutionary aesthetics. The genius of Wilde functions like an ideologico-aesthetic edifice, manipulating the action to maintain

its hegemonic position via theatrical devices in three main ways. Joyce, Tzara, and Carr are pitted against each other in order to split the Wildean aesthetic that makes a claim to the inextricable linkage of freedom and subversion in a sort of aesthetic Bunburyism, which displaces the terms of the debate from an ontology of the artist to the ethics of art. The 'time slip' device simultaneously lets us enjoy and neutralizes the obscene underside of Wildean subversive wit by allowing the play to go "off the rails" (12) and quickly rebound to a state of normalcy. These previous two features represent an effort to demonize Lenin by denying the subversive creativity he shows in the pursuit of his goals. *Travesties*, in its valorization of detached subversive wit, answers the question of whether an artist can simultaneously be a revolutionary with a dizzying 'no.'

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Approaching Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* as a student or teacher of drama presents an immediate question: which edition ought be read? On the one hand, there is the 1975 edition released after its premiere in 1974; on the other hand, there is the 1994 edition, which "incorporates revisions made by the author" for the 1993 revival.¹ Among the changes, none is more obvious or significant than the substantial changes made to the second act regarding Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, his wife Nadya, their escape from Zurich, and the exposition to Marxist and Leninist philosophy and history afforded by Lenin's devotee, Cecily. Shortened and brought into closer contact with the Wildean caprice of the first act, Lenin's part of the play and the Marxist history and functional aesthetic for which he stands in the debate *Travesties* stages suffer a significant diminishment. And why not? In the 1960s, the Soviet Union, Lenin's progeny, was engaged in a highly visible, global power struggle with the United States and its allies in which thermonuclear weapons were pawns and the future was far from certain; Bertolt Brecht's influence was pervasive in the theatre; and mass protest, much of it left-leaning, was on the rise.² By 1974, though, 'détente,' not 'mutually assured destruction,' was the word. By the time we get to 1993, the capitalist west's triumph was complete and politics changed forever after the Reagan/Thatcher years; so to stultify an audience with a ten-minute lecture on the finer points of Marxist-Leninist political history and theory loses any immediate political urgency, and only functions as a dull, ironic pause before the antics resume. And indeed, the play almost certainly improves insofar as its aim is to provide an entertaining and stimulating night in the theatre. Over those twenty years, Stoppard must have ultimately decided that only the minimum amount of stultification is necessary to achieve his

intended effect; the ethical imperative of confronting and understanding Marxism in Russia had vanished.

However, *Travesties* is set in 1917 via the erratic memory of one who was there, now an old man in 1974. What happens after 1974 should not, from a strict perspective, affect the play at all; and moreover, considering the changes in the play from a more textual point of view opens up a more productive field of questioning of the play as a highly theatrical staging of an authentic debate, not a mimesis of the cultural status of Leninism. One way, of course, to better understand how a debate has evolved is to look at its history, and the history of *Travesties* as it appears in print is largely gathered from interviews with the playwright himself. Chief among these is the account from Mel Gussow's *Conversations with Stoppard*. When Stoppard learned that the Dada artist Tristan Tzara and the Marxist revolutionary Vladimir Ilyich Lenin were living in Zurich, Switzerland during the First World War, he envisioned a two-act play, "with one act a Dadaist play on Communist ideology and the other an ideological functional drama about Dadaists."³ Pursuing this lead, Stoppard learned that James Joyce also lived in Zurich at the same time, writing *Ulysses*, which changed the idea for the play to a question of whether or not one can be simultaneously an artist and a revolutionary, deemphasizing Dada as the sole representative of art-for-art's-sake. Stoppard later learned from Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce* that Joyce had mounted a production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in Zurich featuring a minor official of the British consulate. The official, Henry Carr, later became embroiled in a petty lawsuit with Joyce over unsold tickets and the cost of a pair of trousers, which resulted in his inclusion among the

many characters in *Ulysses* that Joyce modeled on his enemies large and small as Private Carr, a lout of an English soldier who terrorizes a severely inebriated Stephen Dedalus in Dublin's red light district.⁴ With Carr and *Earnest*, then, Stoppard had a main character and a plot for the play.⁵ Besides the confirmation of the stakes of the play as revolving around the question of the artist and the revolutionary, in terms of usefulness for a critical readings of *Travesties*, this account via Gussow is fairly weak. Foremost, this story begins in 1960, a full thirteen years before the play began to take shape, an interval during which he wrote, among many other things, the novel *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon*, the plays *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*, as well as many radio and television plays.⁶ In short, Stoppard was struck with the idea for *Travesties* both well before he developed into a mature artist and the actual writing of the play. This account only really tells us about some things that Stoppard learned and nothing about how those things were put together to make *Travesties*. The accounts at hand in the critical literature on the play are slight and make no reference to the actual writing process, rendering this account insufficient as a genesis for the play insofar as one is interested in how the play gained its dizzying formal features and mode of travesty which supplies its title. Essentially, this account serves no use beyond a back-cover blurb documenting Stoppard's gradual awareness of the interesting historical coincidence that leads him to write—and indeed, the reverse of the 1994 Grove Press edition faithfully presents this genesis.

Gussow's interview is from 1995, thirty-five years after this historical situation came to Stoppard's attention, and on the heels of the major revision in 1993. However, in

an interview with Ronald Hayman in 1974 during the play's opening run, Stoppard characterizes the relationship between Lenin and *Travesties* in the second act as two distinct voices:

The Lenin section comes in and says, 'Life is too important. We can't afford the luxury of this artificial frivolity....' Then he says, 'Right. That's what I've got to say,' and he sits down. Then the play stands up and says, 'You thought that was frivolous? You ain't seen nothin' yet.'⁷

In the 1975 edition, this demarcation between 'Lenin' and 'the play' is much more clear than it is in 1994, as Lenin and Nadya's discourse is very significantly cut—perhaps eight or ten pages worth of historical background on Lenin's escape—and rearranged so that Old Carr can fade in and out, reading from Lenin's writing and more explicitly projecting his memory in this scene. Stoppard even goes so far as to have Lenin and Nadya come out in a clerical collar and bonnet as Dr. Chasuble and Ms. Prism, only to remove those items immediately and resume their narrative. This even brief involvement with *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a significant change, as not involving the Lenins in the *Earnest* scheme was quite important to Stoppard in that 1974 interview.

Stoppard's characterization of the second act in this interview points to how the continual diminishment of Lenin's importance and independence throughout the textual history of *Travesties* is more than a reflection of the waning of Marxist-Leninist thought as a philosophy to be taken seriously by the West. Rather, it provides an avenue to uncovering a fundamental feature of the play's debate: there are not four positions in the debate—Joyce, Carr, Tzara, and Lenin—but two—Lenin and 'the play.' The subversive frivolity of *Travesties* renders Lenin ridiculous in his separation from (and after the 1994

edition, explicit disavowal of) the *Importance of Being Earnest* scheme. The antimony between the Wildean and the Leninist is *the* fundamental debate of the play, a consequence of the play's eponymous engagement with travesty, or the aesthetics of subversion, evident from an examination of the archive of the play's composition. The crux of the debate is in the engagement with subversion that results from the differing ontologies of the artist posited by Wilde and Lenin. What the Wildean impulse in the play fails to recognize is that the subversion it enjoys for its own sake, in the position of the artist as set apart from the social order, can easily be instrumentalized and deployed to subvert the social order with the intention of replacing it with a new one. The effort to exclude Lenin is an effort to keep artists separate from the real social consequences of the art they create, which runs counter to the Marxist-Leninist artist whose concern is solely with the social impact of art. What the Wildean parts of the play reject in Lenin is the enforcement of subversion via revolutionary politics; however, they submit to their own enforcer, the time slip, in order to maintain the position from which capricious and liberated subversion can be practiced. This strange similarity between what appear to be enemies is theorized by Slavoj Žižek, whose philosophy is deeply concerned with the enforcement of ideology from "its own disavowed underside," suggesting that an ideology depends on precisely what it despises in order to maintain itself.⁸ In this way, the genius of Wilde functions like an ideologico-aesthetic edifice, requiring a forceful ordering the action via the use of theatricality to maintain its hegemonic position of freely subversive wit in three main ways. First, Joyce, Tzara, and Carr are pitted against each other in order to split the Wildean aesthetic that makes a claim to the inextricable linkage

of freedom and subversion in a sort of aesthetic Bunburyism, which displaces the terms of the debate from an ontology of the artist to the ethics of art. Next, the ‘time slip’ device simultaneously lets us enjoy and neutralizes the obscene underside of Wildean subversive wit by allowing the play to go “off the rails” (12) and quickly rebound to a state of normalcy. Finally, these previous two features represent an effort to demonize the play’s most intellectually honest character, Lenin, by denying the subversive creativity he shows in the pursuit of his goals in the real world. *Travesties*, in its valorization of detached subversive wit, answers the question of whether an artist can simultaneously be a revolutionary with the sort of ‘no’ that nevertheless is presented as the preferable option, and the history and manner of this presentation is key to the aesthetic politics the play advances.

***Travesties* in the archive**

The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin holds the major collection of Tom Stoppard’s papers, including a very substantial archive of *Travesties*. Particularly appealing are the early holograph planning sketches for the play that largely focus on the particularly difficult task of structuring this play. It is in the contours of the struggle to properly structure the play that the antimony between Wilde and Lenin emerges. Stoppard seems to begin the process of writing by imagining the as-yet unnamed character to be played by John Wood, signified by his initials, JW, entertaining the main historical characters, particularly Lenin. It is clear from early on that this scene is what becomes “the drawing room of Henry Carr’s apartment (‘THE ROOM’)” (1). From the beginning, John Wood is as clear a center for the play as is The Room. Stoppard

began to work in earnest on the play in June 1973, and by the end of the month, he had articulated his first basic thematic structure: “1st act: construct statement — being an artist / 2nd act: dismantle statement — Joyce.” While this ‘plan’ is somewhat inscrutable (not to mention never intended to be read by anyone by Stoppard himself), there is nevertheless a clearly recognizable correspondence to the play’s final form. The debates of Act One are more concerned with what it means to be an artist; framed by the limerick scene on one end and Joyce’s interrogation of Tzara in double imitation of the catechism style of the ‘Ithaca’ episode of *Ulysses* and Lady Bracknell’s interview of Jack Worthing, a great deal of debate (and some shouting) about art and the artist ensues. Those of Act Two involve more political and economic ideas, with Marxist-Leninist theory and history featuring in Cecily’s opening lecture, Carr’s triply-iterated seduction of and debate with Cecily, Lenin’s speeches, and even Joyce’s demand for Carr to pay for the tickets he fails to sell. A later basic outline, somewhat more intelligible than the previous one, also suggests features of the play’s final form. The first act features Lenin and JW and ends with Lenin escaping Zurich on the sealed train, with Joyce and Dadaists as minor characters. The second act, contrarily, features “Joyce + trousers + JW” with small parts for Lenin and the Dadaists, ending with an “Absurd Accident” in which Lenin misses the train out of Zurich. Perhaps the key aspect of this scheme is that the two major historical figures are Joyce and Lenin, which already deviates from the first idea for the play as recounted in the Gussow interview, a Dadaist play on Communist ideology, and then vice-versa. Most of the early sketches before a structure that clearly resembles the finished play emerges have Joyce and Lenin as the two primary historical figures

mediated by a character that is clearly Carr, albeit more often simply labelled JW. The way the play appears at this early point is really quite foreign to both the *Travesties* we know and the original idea Stoppard expressed that features Dada and Marxism exclusively. The most striking aspect of this phase is Stoppard's clear desire to have Lenin be a part of the debate, as he is the only 'major' historical character who is able to maintain his place as an essential part of the play from that initial concept through to this point. Furthermore, I would suggest that the first inkling of the 'time slip' device is in his plan, for if Lenin is to miss his train in the second act after catching it in the first, the play's chronology must reset somehow. In any event, the characterizing move of *Travesties*, wherein the same scene is played over and over but takes a different direction each time is present here in this outline early on in the planning structure.

Shortly after these two plans are described, Stoppard begins to add the *Earnest* layer to the play. It is possible that JW could as much stand for John Wood as Jack Worthing, which would indicate that Stoppard was attempting to integrate Wilde's play from the beginning; nevertheless, he does not explicitly deal with its plot until this point, and the JW function is so closely associated with Carr that it makes no matter. One interesting page from July 10, 1973, works out in sketch form the final scene of *Earnest*, although perhaps not to end *Travesties*, as a note on the page says, "Act One ends in Ernest's flat—a travesty of Wilde," with 'travesty' circled. In this rewriting, JW comes in with a handbag, Lenin identifies it as *the* handbag, and JW replies: "More is restored than you think—there was something in the bag. You are my leader." Lenin denies this, and Joyce explains that JW is Algernon's lost older brother. Anna Bloom (a precursor to

Gwendolen who seems to be fictional, perhaps a combination of Joyce's two famous women characters, Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* and Anna Livia or ALP in *Finnegans Wake*) asserts that she can not love JW if he is not Ernest, and the rest goes like the ending of *Earnest*: JW asks Joyce where his name could be found, Joyce suggests a book, JW gets the book, finds that his name is Earnest, Anna is satisfied, and Algernon and Lenin embrace Cecily and Prism respectively. Finally, Joyce is to echo Bracknell's line that Ernest is "displaying signs of triviality"⁹ and JW modifies its final line slightly, beginning "[o]n the contrary, James Augusta" and finishing with his realization of the importance of being earnest. Clearly, JW is aligned with Jack, Joyce with Bracknell, Lenin with Prism, and Anna Bloom with Gwendolen. However, there are some significant holes here: Algernon has a question mark in parentheses by his name, and Lenin, clearly in Prism's place, nevertheless embraces Prism as if he has suddenly become Chasuble. A stray note on the page suggests that Lenin may have disguises — which he loses by the 1975 edition of the play, but regains in the form of a clerical collar in the 1994 edition. Nevertheless, this is the end of Act I and yet features the finale of *Earnest*, which reinforces that from early on, Stoppard was playing with a notion that the play will repeat its action with a difference so as to perpetrate travesties on his subject matter.

Four days later, still working on how exactly to layer *The Importance of Being Earnest* on top of the Joyce-Lenin plan, Stoppard wrote: "The play is about Art (Joyce) anti-Art (Dada) and social responsibility." This statement is written in black ink and then underlined in red, presumably at a later date. This statement of theme marks an important turning point: Lenin is no longer explicitly present in this thematic constellation, but

Dada is. The structure of the first act appears below this statement in a recognizable form for the first time:

1. Prologue. Tristan. Lenin + Cecily?? Joyce and Gwendlin [sic] ??
2. Old Mrs. (Old woman?) Monologue.
3. He must be Algy. Dandy.
 He has a servant
 He is visited by a Dadaist, Tristan. Tristan [illegible] —lie.
 " " " " Joyce and Gwendolin [sic].

Assuming that JW/Carr is the ‘he’ discussed under number three, we see that the Earnest correspondences present in *Travesties* are beginning to emerge—Carr as Algy, Tristan as Jack, Joyce as Bracknell, and old versions of characters. Earlier sketches of the opening of the first act have JW/Carr entertaining Lenin, yet on another *Earnest* planning sheet, Stoppard writes, “Why does Lenin visit Carr?”, a question left unanswered, as Lenin never visits Carr. Ultimately, it is Wilde, not Lenin, who visits Carr, as the rise of Tzara coincides with the introduction of the *Earnest* layer, to the detriment of Lenin’s place in the play, which continually diminishes from this point to the published versions. In particular, Lenin—who at the outset was included in the play’s capricious theatricality with his repeating escapes with different endings, visiting Carr and thus being subject to his time slips, and playing a role in the travesty of *Earnest*—has become largely excluded from the highly theatrical whimsy that makes *Travesties* so enjoyable. Indeed, by July 17, 1973, Stoppard has more or less worked out the entire *Earnest*-based romantic plot of *Travesties*, with Lenin only vestigially present in the concluding scene to clear up the confusion of the accidentally-switched folders, permitting the final union of Carr and Tristan with Cecily and Gwendolen respectively, a role he ultimately loses as well.

Around this time, Stoppard appears to be struggling with just how to manage this intertext, even flirting with a three-act structure to mirror Wilde's play more closely. On more than a few pages, Stoppard makes notes to himself such as: "Don't follow plot" and "one must not pursue parallels too far." The next day, July 18, Stoppard worked out an outline for the entire play. This is around the same time that he began to draft the play on a separate set of sheets, also dated, and they suggest that Stoppard wrote more or less linearly. The effect of this method of writing appears to be that Stoppard adjusts his plan more and more the farther he gets into the writing process, making the first act privileged when it comes to writing the second: what was earlier an act focused largely on Lenin is brought into harmony with the first in its focus on Carr, Joyce, Tzara, and *Earnest*. Tzara being integral to the first act solidifies for him a major part throughout the remainder of the play. Lenin, serious and only interested in art insofar as it is social critique, suffers further marginalization at the hands of Wildean flippancy.

At this point, the structural planning gives way to Stoppard working out the content as he writes the first draft, marking a transition from the genesis of the play in theory to the practical task of readying it for production. At this point, a more comprehensive view of the development of *Travesties* emerges. With the historical coincidence of Joyce, Tzara, and Lenin living in Zurich during the First World War in mind, Stoppard begins to conceive of a play involving these three figures around a leading character to be played by John Wood. Initially, Joyce and Lenin feature as the main ideological anchors of the play's debate, with Lenin's escape from Zurich providing a narrative structure, successful in the first act and then unsuccessful in the second. At

this point, Stoppard begins to layer on top of this debate aspects of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, initially assigning JW, later to become Henry Carr, to the title role. Stoppard attempts to fit Lenin into this structure trying him out variously as Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism before assigning Bracknell to Joyce. The question of Algernon is solved by switching Carr to that role, and introducing Tzara, up to this point only a minor character, by linking him to Jack Worthing. Cecily becomes Lenin's disciple, and Gwendolen Joyce's. Their desire for a man with the name Ernest in the Wilde is replaced with a desire for a man who appreciates their respective figures' ideology. Lenin moves outside of the *Earnest* structure as Carr's receiving of guests, perhaps the earliest idea of the planning stages to make it all the way through to the published text, becomes more and more a travesty of Wilde's play. Until Stoppard began to write the first full draft, Lenin played a part in the resolution of the accidental folder-switch which impedes the *Earnest*-romance plot from concluding; the difficulty of finding a plausible motivation for Lenin to visit Carr solidifies Lenin's place outside of the Wildean scheme. After considering a three-act structure to bring the play even closer to *Earnest*, Stoppard shifts away from fidelity to Wilde's form, using only what is effective and dispensing with the rest. Tzara becomes the main historical figure placed against Joyce, the first-act structure crystallizes, and the writing process shifts to working out the finer details of the play that ultimately becomes *Travesties*.

The diminishment of Lenin, then, is not at the hands of any one character, but rather due to the constellation of characters whose diegetic roles are as defined by their correspondence to a character in *Earnest* than they are to anything else. Joyce, Tzara, and

Carr all circulate among each other via their engagement with Wilde. One critical perspective on *Travesties* that recognizes the thematic significance of Wilde as a structuring principle comes from Neil Sammells' book *Tom Stoppard: The Artist as Critic*. Sammells argues against both the notion that *Travesties* is a serious debate between historical figures and Henry Carr merely hung on the structure of *Earnest*, and the suggestion that Joyce is Stoppard's mouthpiece, positions advanced by critics including David Rod, Michael Coveney, Kenneth Tynan, and Michael Billington. For Sammells, *Travesties* demonstrates "evidence of a critical engagement with Wilde's play. The manner of that engagement is its own statement about what art can and cannot do," and that the play's authorial voice is located in the form itself, which is characterized by a movement between the poles of "conformism and delinquency."¹⁰ Sammells' perspective on the play is supported by the archival evidence we have seen. Stoppard in applying *Earnest* to his play often reminded himself not to be beholden to the parallels, providing the freedom to conform where it suits him and to suddenly change when it no longer does. One of the main formal devices that allows Stoppard this freedom is Old Carr's unreliable memory and the time skip that emanates from it, and the archive suggests that this is a synthesis of two different formal elements present from the earliest stages of the composition of *Travesties*. The first element is a mediating part for John Wood which becomes Henry Carr, evidenced by the initials JW appearing on the earliest pages at the center of scenarios that resemble those in which Carr appears. Carr appears to be as much a structural element as a character; in the early sketches, the major historical figures are to visit and circulate around John Wood's character. The centrality of his room as a space for

debate and confrontation is perhaps truly the kernel of the play's structure. The second element is a sense of action repeating but playing out differently, attested at multiple stages. Old Carr and his unreliable memory puts both of these features at the heart of the play's essence. What this structure allows, moreover, is for Stoppard to include as much material as possible within the necessarily compact space of an evening at the theatre. The second half of the first act, beginning with Tzara's entrance, is the exemplary beneficiary of this device. It repeats four times, and in the space of twenty-seven pages, Stoppard presents a scene entirely done in limericks; a sophisticated debate about traditional art, avant-garde anti-art, and politics; and the gist of the first act of *Earnest*—all with the same four characters. Through this theatrical device, Stoppard can conform to the dialogue and format of *Earnest* when it suits him, and then turn delinquent, barreling headlong into a heated debate, being able to double-back effortlessly to reset the scene.

As Sammells argues, this doubling-back enables *Travesties* and its characters to argue with and even contradict themselves in a small space without leaving the audience unable to understand what is going on, as Old Carr's unreliable memory explains it all without having to explain it. In this way, the play's action resembles an ideology in Marx's simplest formation: "[t]hey do this without being aware of it."¹¹ Indeed, Sammells' most convincing example of how this critical engagement works, the appropriation of Bracknell and Chasuble's contradictory accounts of Miss Prism by Joyce and Carr to describe the 'Oxen of the Sun' manuscript, is also a clear example of how Wilde's play acts like an ideology:

BRACKNELL: Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?

CHASUBLE: She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.

BRACKNELL: It is obviously the same person.¹²

—

CARR: And is it a chapter, inordinate in length and erratic in style, remotely connected with midwifery?

JOYCE: It is a chapter which by a miracle of compression, uses the gamut of English literature from Chaucer to Carlyle to describe events taking place in a lying-in hospital in Dublin.

CARR: It is obviously the same work. (70)

All of a sudden, Carr takes up Bracknell, heretofore played by Joyce, putting him on defense as the ridiculous Chasuble. Wilde's dialogue is taken as a model but the roles to which those lines have been assigned are delinquently abandoned, and in so doing Joyce is deprived of Bracknell's imperious wit in defense of his own work in a way that is on the one hand somewhat of a jolt to the audience, but on the other hand invisible to the characters. This subversive mode is how *Travesties* stages "an argument with itself, constantly doubling-back to contradict and deny those shapes it has given to the past."¹³ Sammells is absolutely correct when he says that "[t]he design of *Travesties* is the design of denial; self-inspection and self-contradiction are combined in self-criticism as the play continually examines its own conventions and terms of existence."¹⁴ However, in anointing Wilde as the "presiding genius" of the play whose aesthetics "championed a literature which, by contradicting its own claims to tell the truth, could tell a truth of sorts," he fails to recognize that Wilde's play only governs that which it can fold into its continual self-subversion for its own sake.

Aesthetic Bunburying

This tendency of the Wildean parts of *Travesties* to constantly travesty themselves disguises the ontological position of the artist as a set apart genius on which they so critically depend through the technique of deception known as Bunburying. This “incomparable expression” is explained in the opening scene of *Earnest*: Algernon Moncrieff learns that his friend, whom he knows as Ernest Worthing, goes by the name of “Ernest in town and Jack in the country,” the reason being that Worthing’s adoptive father entrusted to him the guardianship of his granddaughter Cecily, making him feel obligated to adopt “a high moral tone” for her benefit when in the country. However, as Jack (his ‘real’ name) justifies it, “as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who...gets in the most dreadful scrapes.”¹⁵ Similarly, Algernon has, as he says, “invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose,” also largely to escape familial obligations.¹⁶ Each has invented an unfortunate soul to whom he can feign devotion in order to get some social breathing room. In a general sense, Bunburying is a means by which an ontological position can be maintained —morally upright guardian for Jack and good unmarried nephew for Algernon— through the deployment of a false ethical urgency which on its face comports with the position to be maintained; the irony being that the ontological position was always already inauthentic. When Wildean aesthetics of subversion participate in Bunburying— what I am calling aesthetic Bunburying—the ontological position of the artist as set apart, on

which these aesthetics depend, is maintained by instead pursuing ethical questions of art which hold at bay the reflexive application of subversion to the position of the artist, a precondition for Wildean subversion that is exempted from travesty. Sammells has made it clear that “the true spirit of Oscar Wilde” suffuses the play, with the Wildean parts making the assertion “that art can embody a freedom that is inseparable from criticism.”¹⁷ This claim depends on a privileged vantage point, separate from social impact, from which the artist can freely make subversive art. By maintaining a universal of the set apart artist, the Wildean subversive artist can participate in travesty without having to submit to it.

All of the characters that circulate via Wilde make references to some kind of separation that is characteristic of the artist. The most fundamental of these assertions may be a pair of statements by Carr in his first fully fledged conversation with Tzara, after the limerick scene, that “to be an artist at all is like living in Switzerland during a world war” (20) and that “[a]n artist is someone who is gifted in some way that enables him to do something more or less well which can only be done badly or not at all by someone who is not thus gifted” (21). For Carr, an artist is a special talent removed from the world. Tzara’s disagreement with Carr does not trouble the established status of the artist, as Tzara says that “it is the duty of the artist to jeer and howl and belch at the delusion that infinite generations of real effects can be inferred from the gross expression of apparent cause” (20). Later, he adds: “Doing the things by which is meant Art is no longer considered the proper concern of the artist. Nowadays, an artist is someone who makes art mean the things he does” (21). Tzara is attempting to change the meaning of

art, not the artist; that category goes unchallenged. Tzara holds the same ontological status of the artist as does Carr, but Tzara shifts the discussion to the ethics of art, which for him is to subvert the bourgeois norms of what art is; hence, “anti-art is the art of our time” (22), not the anti-artist is the artist of our time. This is the Bunburying of the aesthetics of subversion, using ethical concerns to distract from ontological status. Even in the second version of this scene, which ends with a very contentious discussion about the privileged status of the artist, the discussion is not about whether or not the artist is set apart, but whether this setting apart is right or wrong. Carr resents the “one lucky bastard who’s the artist” (28), and puts the blame on art for “the idea of the artist as a special kind of human being” (29). At this provocation, Tzara launches on an invective defense of the artist as “priest-guardian of the magic that conjured the intelligence out of the appetites” (29), lamenting the decline of such a revered place. Arguing at cross purposes and with different conceptions of what art ought to do, Carr and Tzara nevertheless can not manage to dislodge their common ontology of the artist’s exception.

In the next scene, Joyce approaches this separation of the artist from the social impact of his work in a much different register:

JOYCE: As an artist, naturally I attach no importance to the swings and roundabout of political history. But I come here not as an artist but as James A. Joyce. I am an Irishman. The proudest boast of an Irishman is — I paid back my way. . .
CARR: So it is money. (32)

Joyce here splits himself into two different kinds of subject: artist, above the fray, and Irishman, mired in debt. This splitting gets played out dramatically in the finale of Act I: first, Joyce interrogates Tzara simultaneously both as Lady Bracknell interrogating Jack

Worthing in *Earnest* and as the catechism's questioner used in the 'Ithaca' episode of *Ulysses*; then, Carr recounts the real-historical lawsuit in which he and Joyce became embroiled in the aftermath of his production of *Earnest*. At the end of the Tzara-Joyce exchange, Tzara gets fed up with the religiosity of Joyce's art, calling for "vandals and desecrators...to reconcile the shame and the necessity of being an artist! Dada! Dada! Dada!!!" (41). At this point, with the two main artists facing each other down about the use of art and the role of the artist, one might expect a fundamental divergence in the role of the artist to emerge; but *Travesties* proceeds carefully. Joyce's reply turns Tzara's desecrating artist on its head by proposing that "an artist is the magician put among men to gratify—capriciously—their urge for immortality" (41). The question is one of the valence of the artist's relation to society, not the relation as such, and with this philosophical feint, Joyce then shifts his speech away from the artist and towards the work of art, saying of *Ulysses* that "*there's a corpse that will dance for some time yet and leave the world precisely as it finds it*" (42). Making sacred and desecration, reanimation and destruction: both of these pairs represent movement across a boundary otherwise impermeable to mortal men. Thus for both Joyce and Tzara, the artist has the freedom and ability to create and to categorize experience independent from it, whether by "smash[ing] whatever crockery is to hand," as Tzara does at the end of his speech, or by pulling a rabbit out of a hat, as Joyce does at the end of his. Both the desecrator and the magician are subversives, manipulating and violating the order of things— making a travesty of it. Joyce and Tzara's debate is much more concerned with the ethics of art, what it does in the world, precisely because their shared position as artist makes it

possible in the first place to make that art without having to engage, as Carr says, “in the mud and blood” (20) of history—“to be an artist at all is like living in Switzerland during a world war” indeed.

“What is *really* going on, underneath!”

None of this debate is really properly considered, however, if examined as if it were a diegetically continuous symposium with a clear subordination of ideas. Every segment of conversation “*jumps the rails and has to be restarted at the point where it goes wild*” due to Old Carr’s unreliable memory and “*his various prejudices and delusions,*” as the stage directions inform us when the ‘time slip’ device, which corrects the digression, is introduced (11). The play relies on this device heavily in three scenes: the proper beginning of Act I, after Old Carr’s introductory monologue wherein Bennett continually puts “the newspapers and telegrams on the sideboard” and narrates the development of the war, Tzara’s call, and the revolution in Russia, on all of which Carr comments in various modes; the next scene in Act I, containing the bulk of the aesthetic debates between Carr, Tzara, and Joyce; and the beginning of the action in Act II, where Carr, pretending to be Tristan Tzara in the Library in the same way that Algernon in *Earnest* pretends to be Ernest Worthing at Jack’s country house, attempts to woo Cecily. More than anything, the time slip is the agent of the travesties this play announces itself to be. Some sort of contradiction, corruption, or confrontation emerges that serves as the punchline of an exchange and from which there is no readily apparent diegetic route back to normalcy, and so the action must be forced back to a reasonable starting point. By relegating the primary structuring agent of the play to an outside authority, the subversive

capriciousness of the action can function without recourse to a structuring narrative, independent of its own history. The time slip enforces the Wildean aesthetic of travesty; without it, the action would collapse under the weight of its compulsion to subvert, constantly digressing into unintelligibility.

Slavoj Žižek has a name for this enforcing transgression: *superego*. For him, “[s]uperego is the obscene ‘nightly’ law that necessarily redoubles and accompanies, as its shadow, the ‘public’ Law.”¹⁸ By ‘obscene law’ Žižek is referring to an unspoken shadow law that is repugnant to the positive law that necessarily depends on this underside for its survival. What holds *Travesties* together is not *The Importance of Being Earnest* but the continual transgression of *Earnest*. For Žižek, this transgression is “a specific form of *enjoyment*,” and indeed the moments in *Travesties* that result in the triggering of a time slip are among the most satisfying, for, by and large, they are punchlines.¹⁹ The very first reset exemplifies this movement:

CARR: Ah—yes. . . the war! Poor devils! How I wish I could get back to the trenches!—to my comrades in arms—the wonderful spirit out there in the mud and wire—the brave days and fearful nights. Bliss it was to see the dawn! To be alive was very heaven! Never in the whole history of human conflict was there anything to match the carnage—God’s blood!, the shot and shell!—graveyard stench!—Christ Jesu!—deserted by simpletons, they damn us to hell—ora pro nobis—quick! no, *get me out!* **[reset]**—I think to match the carnation, oxblood shot-silk cravat, starched, creased just so, asserted by a simple pin, the damask lapels—or a brown, no a biscuit—no—get me out the straight cut trouser with the blue satin stripe and the silk cutaway. I’ll wear the opal studs. (10)

The *esprit de corps* for which Carr initially longs with nostalgia is revealed to be held up by the perverse bliss of making through the night, hunkered down against attack, literally immersed the stinking carnage of the fighting. If audiences were made to face this horror

for more than a moment, the delightful travesties they have come to see would be travestied by the real travesty of 'human conflict' that is trench warfare. This traumatic digression on the part of Carr can only be sustained by a wholehearted embrace of theatricality. Only by extra-diegetically marking off this descent into horror as a sort of accident "by using an extraneous sound or a light effect" (11) can such a thing be made into a punchline. The gruesome is thus transformed into the sartorial: 'to match the carnage' becomes 'to match the carnation,' 'God's blood!' becomes 'oxblood,' and so on. While Stoppard's stage directions locate these slips as a consequence of Old Carr's unreliable memory, it would be going too far to reduce all of the theatrical elements of the play to Carr's metapsychology, locating the time slip particularly in Carr's superego. Rather, it would be better to conceive of *Travesties*, in its critical engagement with Wilde, as a theatrical exploration of travesty or subversion as the basis for, if not a social order, than an aesthetic one. That is, travesty in the action is positively identified with *Earnest*, but a full engagement with travesty requires a mockery to be made of Wilde and his play. The travesty mode of engagement with Wilde's play is *Travesties*' Žižekian superego, located in the travesty of theatricality, the time slip, that makes all of the travesties possible. This is the obscene supplement to an aesthetics of travesty: on its own, subversion of norms can not produce a coherent code of its own, so it necessarily needs for itself to be regularly subverted to keep the subversives in line so that they can always subvert.

Which brings us to the question of Lenin, who is the ultimate subversive figure out of all of the historical figures, and yet the one subject neither to time slips nor to

Earnest. At times, it can feel like the only reason he is in this play at all is because he was a part of the conception of the play from the beginning, a sort of vestigial character. He is utterly unimportant to the *Earnest* scheme; his one representative there, Cecily, could have just as easily been devoted to any other ideology, since the mix-up with the folders does not really get resolved with Carr coming out as a Leninist— because it never happened, of course, as Old Cecily informs us at the very end. As we have seen, Lenin’s only substantial time on stage in the second act was significantly revised between the 1975 edition and the 1994 edition, reflecting changes made to productions over the intervening two decades. The Lenin section, which I define as from the opening of Act II to Cecily and Gwen’s rendition of ‘Mr. Gallagher and Mr. Shean,’ covers twenty-four of the 1975 edition’s eighty-two pages— 30%— but only seventeen of the 1994 edition’s seventy-one pages— 24%.²⁰ The change is essentially that the narration of Lenin and Nadya’s escape from Zurich is cut back nearly to the bone, and more tightly integrated with the reappearance of Old Carr, who is now onstage reading about Lenin, making his oration and dialogue with Nadya more sensible within the controlling premise of Carr’s erratic memory. Also, the meeting between Carr-as-Tristan-Tzara and Tzara-as-Jack-Tzara, which interrupts the chronicle of Lenin and Nadya’s escape, is extended into a further parody of the conversation between Jack and Algernon in the garden over muffins at the end of Act II of *Earnest*. Indeed, Nadya and Lenin’s first entrances in the act in 1994 are as Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism, and they “*look at each other and despair*” before removing the clerical collar and bonnet that mark them as their Wildean counterparts, seemingly become aware of the abuse to which their roles have been

subjected (53). In contrast, in 1975, “NADYA *enters and comes down to address the audience, undramatically.*” The revisions also dramatically reduce Cecily’s lecture as well as her exposition of Leninist aesthetics and politics in her conversation with Carr that climaxes in Cecily’s Marxist strip-tease. Not only, then, has both the raw and relative amount of time spent on Lenin decreased between the two editions, but the remaining time has been encroached on further by a more prominent place for Carr and *Earnest*.

The textual history of *Travesties* shows quite clearly that Lenin has always been a problem for Stoppard, never finding a home in any of the structures of the play, be it the forum of Carr’s room or the parody of *Earnest*. The most useful perspective in *Travesties* on Lenin as a subversive, and indeed a genuinely inspired and transformative figure, is encapsulated in the double perspective Carr has on Lenin: on the one hand is Old Carr’s exasperated hedging on why he never stopped Lenin as young Carr: “And, don’t forget, *he wasn’t Lenin then!* I mean, *who was he?*, as it were” (58). The other, of course, is that Carr’s memory comes from 1974, not 1917, and so the Lenin we get is the one whose policies left open a space for Stalin’s brutal totalitarianism, not the political philosopher attempting to understand how to traverse the space opened by the moment of “revolution *qua* the imaginary explosion of freedom in sublime enthusiasm,” certainly a space for a subversive mode, a travesty of the old order, to “the hard *work* of social reconstruction which is to be performed if this enthusiastic explosion is to leave its traces in the inertia of the social edifice itself.”²¹ Lenin himself was as much engaged with the mode of subversion as anyone else in the history of subversion. He *actually* led a successful revolution to the implementation of a new social order, and it is for precisely this reason

that the Wildean subversiveness that controls *Travesties* attempts to render him ludicrous. The reason the 1974 edition treats Lenin at greater length, more seriously, and more separately from the theatrical devices that govern the play than the 1993 version is a testament to the resentment an actually successful revolutionary can foster in those who only wish to play in the free, creative space that a subversive ethic opens up. In political terms, Žižek suggests that Lenin recognized that “revolution must strike twice,” for the ‘first’ revolution depends on the maintenance of the old “ideologico-political form” even as it rejects its content; the second replaces that form entirely.²²

Lenin is not only diminished but enveloped by the theatricality that we have seen stand as the twin forces that promote a Wildean aesthetic of subversion and wit: *Earnest* and Carr’s erratic memory. These both serve to hold up an ontology of the artist as set apart from the world. The passage held up as the most important statement by Lenin about his politico-aesthetic philosophy that the Wildean part of the play so decisively despises is that “[e]veryone is free to write and say whatever he likes, without any restrictions. *But* every voluntary association, including the party, is free to expel members who use the name of the party to advocate anti-party views” (59). This is certainly the clearest statement of how Leninist politics treats the artist in a one-party state. However, the passage that really represents the essential intellectual *drama* of *Travesties* comes in Carr’s wooing of Cecily, just as Carr brings up the opening of the production of *Earnest*:

CECILY: But I’ve heard of [Wilde] and I don’t like him. The life is the art, as Vladimir Ilyich always says.

CARR: Ars longa, vita brevis, Cecily.

CECILY: Let us leave his proclivities in the decent obscurity of a learned tongue, Mr Tzara. I was referring to the fact that Oscar Wilde was a bourgeois individualist and, so I hear, overdressed from habit to boot.

....

CARR: He may occasionally have been a little over-dressed but he made up for it by being immensely uncommitted.

CECILY: The sole duty and justification for art is social criticism. (49)

Because for Lenin the artist is immersed in the world, “a cog in the Social democratic mechanism” (58), the artist is directly responsible for his art, unlike the bourgeoisie individualist who may appear to be exceeding the norm of content—a little overdressed—but can only do so in the ontology of the set apart artist—immensely uncommitted. Lenin’s understanding of the responsibility that subversion thrusts upon the subversive puts Western audiences, and indeed the play itself, at dis-ease with the effervescent irrelevance on stage. For Lenin, true subversion in the world is to break with tradition, not for the pleasure of breaking it, but to replace it with a better one. The encroachment of the theatrical devices that so elevate our enjoyment of *Travesties* onto Lenin, who is politically more immune from them in 1975 as he is in 1994, is symptomatic of the obscene regulation that the Wildean ontology of the artist requires to maintain the ethics of subversion. The Leninist communal ontology of the artist emerges from and in service of subversion, but an aimed subversion, not subversion as such, and thus implicates the artist in the art he makes. The sheer visibility and enjoyment gained from this regulation, not so much the actual historical status of Lenin and Marxism, is ultimately what is responsible for Lenin’s diminishment. The 1994 version of *Travesties* is plainly better fun, which makes perfect sense: by embracing its superego-like theatrical devices, it obeys the essential command of the superego in late capitalism: enjoy!²³

Travesties, then, in its very structure and history champions its denial that one can simultaneously be an artist and a revolutionary. The archive of the planning and drafting of the play shows through Stoppard's failed struggle to incorporate Lenin (the revolutionary) into the scheme governed by *The Importance of Being Earnest*, written by Oscar Wilde (the artist) that these two have few, if any, reasons to cross paths, even in the same imaginative fiction where the dialogue can be entirely in limericks and the same character can be a Romanian nonsense and then a decadent Victorian bachelor in the space of a few pages. The manner of the play's deep engagement with Wilde attempts to distract us from even considering the nature of a revolutionary artist by staging a false debate in which the social use of art is contested, not the social place of the artist, which is revealed to be a symptom of the bourgeois individualism that any revolution must deeply question. And finally, the sheer pleasure of the travesty of the things we hold dear —and what intellectual twentieth century playgoer does not hold Oscar Wilde dear?— simply overrules Lenin's insistence on changing the social order once the period for free subversion has grown stale. No, for *Travesties* and the aesthetics of subversion it valorizes, to make artists truly responsible for any social change their art causes in the world is to clamp down on the situation that makes that kind of art possible at all. Carr is right, after all: with that "chit from Matron" letting him stand apart from the rest, the artist is, for sure, "one lucky bastard" (28).

¹ Tom Stoppard, *Travesties* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), vi-vii. I will cite *Travesties* with parenthetical references to this edition unless otherwise indicated.

² Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 144; 167.

³ Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Stoppard* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1995), 8, qtd. in John Fleming, *Stoppard's Theatre: Finding Order Amid Chaos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 102.

⁴ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler et. al., (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 352ff.

⁵ Gussow, *Conversations*, qtd. in Fleming, *Stoppard's Theatre*, 102.

⁶ Fleming, *Stoppard's Theatre*, 303.

⁷ Ronald Hayman, *Contemporary Playwrights: Tom Stoppard* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 10.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 365.

⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, 8th ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 2263.

¹⁰ Neil Sammells, *Tom Stoppard: The Artist as Critic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 73-75.

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One in Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 234.

¹² Wilde, *Importance*, 2260.

¹³ Sammells, *Artist as Critic*, 82.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁵ Wilde, *Importance*, 2225-26.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2227.

¹⁷ Sammells, *Artist as Critic*, 86.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (New York: Verso, 1994), 54.

¹⁹ Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 55.

²⁰ The pages have the same number of lines and appear to be the same size.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, introduction to *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, by V. I. Lenin (New York: Verso, 2002), 7.

²² Žižek, introduction to *Revolution*, 7-8.

²³ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 182.

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