

Parody and Self-parody: Oscar Wilde's Paradox

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Oscar Wilde's brilliant phrases are broadly circulating today. They are assembled in, say, the quotation books or cited in daily magazines or newspapers. Even if one has never read his works, one is likely to have heard some phrases and be able to represent them. This phenomenon indicates one of the crucial aspects of Wilde's language: in the form of just one or two brief sentences, it can function without any further references. Does this mean that his so-called paradoxes or epigrams are universal, detachable from the Victorian milieu against which they were first presented? Or rather are they just the trivial wordplays one can use anywhere whose purpose is merely to shock others, just as do most of the dialogues of the dandies in Wilde's plays? When Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* says "if there was less sympathy in the world, there would be less trouble in the world," his rather straight father replies, "That is a paradox, sir. I hate paradoxes." Then Goring continues the perplexing statements: "So do I, father. Everybody one meets is a paradox nowadays. It is a great bore. It makes society so obvious" (556). As his father's response reasonably points out, the first remark seems to be an orthodox paradox, inverting or confusing the conventional order concerning sympathy, trouble and the world. Goring's next utterances, it seems, also have the possibility to be taken as paradoxes, again subverting the ordinary logic. However, these phrases contain self-references mentioning the very position of the paradox so that they deconstruct themselves and make it difficult to know whether they put forth the inverted truth or are verbal plays. If paradox in the ordinary sense functions, it should assume some convention against which its inverted reason is testified: it can be what it is by the difference from the opponents. In the case of Goring's utterances,

however, they evoke the sameness or continuity with the very enemy they attempt to subvert. As a consequence, they can both be paradoxes or not. In addition, Wilde's excessive use or abuse of paradoxes causes the problems as to their true standing. Indeed when one comes upon Wilde's brilliant yet perverse remarks, one is fascinated and enticed to decipher them, while one is always made uncertain whether they have any meanings. Paradox is the linguistic manipulation which most suitably characterises his art, yet in this way it is fundamentally difficult to illuminate it. Furthermore, there is another difficulty in defining it, because his language can be called in other ways such as epigrams, wits, perversions, or inversions, all of which are related with one another. Paradox in general is born of inversions or perversions, and epigrams and wits would be similar to paradoxes in that all of them communicate some new knowledge, though the adequacy for its content each is bestowed upon is never the same. This interrelation or crossover of Wilde's salient language, however, is not an accident. As I shall argue, the difficulty in legitimating and defining his paradox is exactly what features his paradox and it indeed serves as means of the radical displacement of the linguistic system, this elusiveness becoming one of the most forceful critical measures.

Wilde says in *De Profundis* that "[w]hat the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion" (1018). Paradox having its own materiality is closely intermingled with his sexual perversion, which is explicitly or implicitly directed towards the border and power relation between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Thus to disentangle his language is to perceive his sexual politics, too. As to his paradox, then, the questions to be discussed are what it is that it really subverts, and moreover how it works effectively to achieve the end. I will investigate these points, focusing on the functions of his paradoxical language.

To begin with, I will quote some remarks on his language. These three explanations seem to shed a curious light on its nature. The first is by *Athenaeum* when it reviewed *Intentions*, the second by Ernest Newman, and the third by Terry Eagleton.

His method is this: he takes some well-established truth, something in which the wisdom of centuries and the wit of the greatest men have concurred, and asserts the contrary. (92)

A paradox is the truth of the minority, just as a commonplace is the truth of the majority. The function of paradox is to illuminate right places, to explain just those things that everyone understands. . . . [H]e [a thinker] can see round corners and the other side of things. Nay, he can do more than this; he can give to ordinary things a quality that they have not, and place them in worlds that never existed. (203)

[T]he epigram is the mind's momentary triumph over the dead matter of conventional wisdom, a piece of linguistic deviancy, a sagacious saying gone suddenly awry. . . . The epigram inverts, deconstructs, turns inside out, displays that capacity of the mind to dismantle and transmute the actual which we know as wit. (334)

As is usual with the explanations of Wilde's paradox, these three comments all refer to its inverted nature against some conventional thought: what it does is to make the unusual, perverse statement. Then the difference arises as to the estimation of the content: for some it is merely the products of the mechanical word-shuffling, the inversion of truth, without any serious meanings, whereas for others it is the supreme linguistic enactment to open the genuine insight and the hidden truth. Thus whether it is truly insightful or not is never decisive, depending upon how one accepts its inversion. According to these three views, what is recognised for certain is only that paradox, whether Wilde's or not, is opposed to some conventional wisdom.

This anti-convention is the commonest nature of paradox, so what should be inspected is how such an aversion to convention works in Wilde's politics. To do this, I will briefly examine one of his most well-known paradoxes, "Nature imitates Art," by putting it back into the context it is presented.

In an ordinary sense, art is thought to imitate nature, so the inversion of this axiom qualifies his phrase as paradox. As to the content, this phrase

conveys not so deviant thought, at least in the poststructuralist view today. Vivian, Wilde's mouthpiece, explains: "Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is 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" (1086). Although Wilde here uses the word art, it can be changed with language in general as the medium of representation, as he makes Vivian say "Art is always presenting various forms through which the expression can be attained" (1085). In short, the signifiers precede the signifieds for him. Taking into account this underlying concept, the seemingly deviant statement gains the fairly reasonable meaning: "Nature imitates Art" signifies that nature is never natural in itself but is produced through some linguistic events with the ideological enforcement. His insight into this working develops into his antagonism against conventional dead language without change, which in turn engenders his excessive drives of making paradoxes.

If the passage "Nature imitates Art" is qualified as truly paradox, then paradox is defined as an inverted or perverse phrase which turns out to be the truth which had been denied or hidden by the opposing conventional wisdom so far. This would be the most general definition, and *OED* gives one of this sort: "A statement or proposition which on the face of it seems self-contradictory, absurd, or at variance with common sense, though, on investigation or when explained, it may prove to be well-founded (or, according to some, though it is essentially true)" (2. a.). However, according to *OED*, paradox is also "applied to a proposition or statement that is actually self-contradictory, or contradictory to reason or ascertained truth, and so, essentially absurd and false" (2. b.). Etymologically, para- meaning beyond and doxa opinion constitute the word paradox.¹ Paradox thus merely tells the movement, beyond. This suggests that it does not always contain the other side of the conventional truth but is nothing but an inverted or perverse statement. It is this duplicate nature that Wilde's paradox takes on, as the antagonistic reviews to him often observe that his method is to say the contrary only in a mechanical way. The more or less elaborate analysis of the paradoxical statements as I have attempted seem to disclose the hidden truth

they contain whereas a large number of his paradoxes reject such an analytical effort as they often seem to fall only into wordplays. Wilde's paradox registers the movement against others but nothing more than that. For instance, "A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated" and "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" are filled with paradoxical and epigrammatic phrases of this sort: "Public opinion exists only where there are no ideas"; "One should never listen. To listen is a sign of indifference to one's hearers"; "Dullness is the coming of age of seriousness"; "Only the shallow know themselves"; "To be premature is to be perfect"; "The condition of perfection is idleness: the aim of perfection is youth." Although these are fascinating and induce one to examine their truth, they entail the question whether they are really paradoxes in the most usual sense. Perhaps. Yet the most appropriate answer would be deconstructive yes and no, as no one would be sure that all of them hold the new ingenious truth. This is because their exaggeratedly flaunting mechanical manners with self-referentiality, and also their brevity which make them detached from any fixed contexts, cause indeterminacy, posing the very question as to what exactly paradox is. The fact that his language has sometimes been called wit is in this respect suggestive, for it means his paradox becomes wit, when it is considered more or less intellectual and ingenious, whose etymology is knowledge or intelligence. Wilde's language moves about on the borders amongst tropes, and it really goes beyond paradox to catachresis or anacoluthon in that it casts doubt on its own credibility by means of the disturbance of the meanings within the conventional grammar. Catachresis in the light of the words and anacoluthon in the light of the sentences are both the floating signs which are not properly placed in the view of the conventional economics, wandering on the border between the grammatical and the ungrammatical, where they can have no fixed meaning except as anti-conventional or perverse.² As I have suggested, this nature in his language has caused the condemnations, yet this impossibility is the very strategy for him to deconstruct the conventional system from its basis. As de Man says, anacoluthon is also the "permanent parabasis" and as such it always interrupts, disrupts, and undoes the coherent narrative line. Then with Wilde's

anacoluthic performances, any consistency against them is rendered haunted by its own possibility of deviation. Taking the form of the apparent perversion and at the same time foregrounding the fact that they have both possibilities to become perverse and reasonable, Wilde's language discloses the continuity with the conventional grammar. If his phrase becomes deviant, the wisdom endorsed by conventions is also in danger of degenerating into the perversion as it is authorised on the same linguistic act. The border between legitimacy and illegitimacy is drastically put into question, leaving uncanny dissonance in the status quo.

In this way, Wilde's strategy persists in language so that his anti-convention clearly figures as the subversion of not only the Victorian convention but logocentrism in general. This is one of the reasons his paradoxes having subversive move are attractive and effective even today. His paradox as catachresis or anacoluthon is indeed the duplicate parody with self-parody of the prevailing system from within.³ Jonathan Dollimore argues:

That which society forbids, Wilde reinstates *through* and *within* some of its most cherished and central cultural categories — art, the aesthetic, art criticism, individualism. At the same time as he appropriates those categories he also transvalues them through perversion and inversion, thus making them now signify those binary exclusions . . . by which the dominant culture knows itself. (15)

Wilde's language consists not of the neologism but of the ordinary terms altered by perversions and inversions. Seeing "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" as the article against the journalists, Regenia Gagnier observes that in it "Wilde employs wit to subvert their bourgeois meanings, using the language he is criticizing" (33). The famous phrase, "All art is quite useless," for instance, turns over the position of the word "useless" which the press applied to some art as the stigma. By means of the inverted assertion, "useless" no longer designates the inferiority but now it gets the superior position in the related binary, "useful" becoming the subordinate. This is

clearly what Jacques Derrida calls the phase of overturning in deconstruction, which makes it possible to intervene in the hierarchical fields. Wilde's linguistic manipulation is to invert the binary opposition whereby it discloses what is regarded as superior is merely a result of an interpretation. Instead of saying that art is useful, he transvalues the socially established meaning of the word "useless." At the same time, the superiority given by the transvaluation is not authentic either, so that that position itself is never fixed. As transvaluation brings about the disturbance of the meanings, even the phrase "All art is quite useless" cannot escape the effect of its own displacement. Thus this phrase itself is positively rendered unintelligible: it is uncertain whether it means all art is really useless in an ordinary sense or it is useful in the view of some other linguistic world. Therefore on the one hand, Wilde uses the ordinary terms to reappropriate them by inversions and perversions, making the straight attack against the convention. On the other hand, this reappropriation affects its own language to the extent that it loses the authentic standpoint from which the authorial and authoritative voice is emitted. Thus, as I have mentioned, his paradoxical language is not only the parody of logocentrism but importantly the self-parody.⁴

His self-parody with ironic effects is also discerned in the way his various paradoxes go around in a practical sense. The anti-convention his perverse language basically holds is closely related with his aversion to repetition, and his making paradox is motivated by the avoidance of such boring operations. However, strictly speaking, as regards the signs or the marks, they are not original but always dependent on what Derrida calls iterability. Wilde's language inevitably takes on this nature, too, so his inversions and perversions are in a sense quasi-anti-repetition. His language seems to recognise this duplicity, as it uses the ordinary words even if it is always anacoluthic. In addition, while it rejects the clichés, it takes the concise form, as it has also been called epigram, a "pointed or antithetical saying" (*OED* 3.). The shortness of his paradoxical statements in his entire works entices and facilitates the replication. In fact, they have been repeated in the various editions in the various ways, eliciting diverse interpretations. This iterability Wilde's phrases performatively foreground goes beyond a

casual explanation. As Derrida argues, the iterable nature of the marks implies that every mark or sign “can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion” (320). To break with the contexts is to displace and parody the fixed meanings upon which the logocentric linguistic system is established. As Camille A. Paglia argues, “as an aphoristic phrase form and conversation stopper, the epigram thwarts real dialogue, cutting itself off from a past and a future in its immediate social context and glorying in its aristocratic solitude” (95). Although this view cannot be fully maintained,⁵ the possibility of the break with the contexts seen in Wilde’s brief phrases is significant as the subversive aspect his paradoxes make use of. Flaunting their autonomous nature, detachable from any fixed contexts, they parody again the linguistic system. Linda Dowling suggests that the “sense of language as possessing an independent life is everywhere in the fin de siècle literature” (160). In Wilde’s language, this notion is directed also towards itself so that it becomes self-parody through its precision and as it were auto-eroticism, enabling it to approximate the centre from within. Logocentrism and the conventional knowledge endorsed by it is disclosed as no more than the linguistic illusion. Relating this linguistic manipulation with the discursive fields of sexuality, Wilde displaces the social meaning those discourses try to maintain by reducing its plurality to singularity. His language is creative and reproductive in a devious way, and it develops into transsexual: it circulates on the border between homosexuality and heterosexuality, transgressing and reinscribing those two seemingly fixed categories. Wilde opens up a new field, which in turn accepts another infinite regeneration.

Paradox in the most ordinary sense is an inverted, perverse passage which brings about the hidden truth, putting on the antithetical appearance to received wisdom. Wilde’s famous phrase “Nature imitates Art” might be a paradox of this sort when it is decoded in its original context. However, it remains nothing more than a speculation. This is a general principle of signification especially when the phrases in question are perverse, yet his language reinforces this nature as it is transmitted in the self-referentially

exaggerated way. As a consequence, it engenders the impossibility to ascertain whether it is a paradox or not, and as catachresis or anacoluthon, it parodies the workings of the logocentric linguistic system. If parody holds the paradoxical possibility to enforce the convention, as Hutcheon says it remains “authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert” (75), Wilde’s language moves to evade this complicity by means of self-referentiality: attempting not to establish the alternative authority which keeps the binary oppositions unsettled, it foregrounds the continuity with some accidental difference between them. As Lawrence Danson argues, Wilde’s paradoxes “shift from the measure of the many to the measure of the remarkable one, but they also call in question the stability and authority of that One” (4). This self-parody also exposes the principle that, to use Jonathan Culler’s formula, “meaning is context-bound but context is boundless” (128), upholding its own regeneration in an infinite way. Thus his language, easily detachable from given contexts, puts itself into so-called intertextuality and becomes quotations without inverted commas.

In its appearance, too, Wilde’s paradox is really paradoxical with antithetical poses, and this is subtly transmuted into his sexual politics. On the one hand, his paradox seems to exist for its own sake without any other end as the claim of “art for art’s sake”; on the other hand, as the titles such as “A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated” and “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young” suggest, it seems to be more or less didactic conveying some deep insights into the banal thoughts. The former implies the pleasure of auto-eroticism and homosexuality without any reproductive end, while the latter approaches to heterosexuality in its creation of legitimate child if it is as illegitimate and perverted. These antithetical perspectives function again as problematising the borders. Just as the art for art’s sake doctrine does have behind its surface the critical drives to transform the society through imaginative acts, his paradox opens the occasion for transgression in a devious way, oscillating the border between intelligibility and unintelligibility. The border is in Wilde mainly related with the one between homosexuality and heterosexuality, which can be detected in his entire texts. For instance, Salome, an attractive seducer and rebel inside and

outside as well as for and against the heterosexual or phallogocentric world, vacillates on the sexual border, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* are the narratives in which the trios respectively undergo the complicated border making about male sexuality. Then true to his retrospective utterance in *De Profundis* I have quoted, his paradox, thought, perversity and passion are all mingled together, as their dynamics are always transgression beyond norms. In this sense, his paradox just registers the movements the etymological meaning of the word has. It is a desperate and passionate longing to go beyond to see other worlds. It is a transgressive pleasure with transformative motives.

Through parody and self-parody, his paradox thus displaces received ideas by means of inversions and perversions, and it pulls down the otherness upon which the conventional system depends for its existence. This reappropriation is performative and as such it promises other worlds where some seemingly fixed borders are radically changed. His language at present subverts our linguistic hence political systems. It is circulating all over the world making us aware that borders are always changeable for the better.

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Notes

- (1) All etymologies in this paper are taken from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992).
- (2) Catachresis here has a rather broad meaning and is similar to Spivak's usage: "a metaphor without an adequate literal referent, in the last instance a model for all metaphors, all names" (279).
- (3) Etymologically parody derives from para meaning subsidiary to and *ōidē* song. Therefore, as Hutcheon puts it, in the word "there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast" and it "in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and

inversion, is repetition with difference" (32). This is suggestive, for parody as well as paradox designates first of all the movement whatever is its critical distance towards the text parodied. My usage of the word in this paper contains this crucial aspect.

- (4) Parody itself, as Hutcheon says, "is one of the techniques of self-referentiality by which art reveals its awareness of the context-dependent nature of meaning" (85), which applies to Wilde's language, too. What should be noted is that in his case this self-referential nature is overtly emphasised by his obsessive self-parody.
- (5) As Derrida continues to argue, this linguistic nature "does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring" (320). Wilde's paradox can never function without contexts. Significance here lies in his language's literal and figurative foregrounding of the relations between signs and contexts.

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