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## Vanity Fea

José Ángel García Landa

**A retropost from 2011**

## Hegel on Wilde

The avatars of mind in Hegel's 'Phenomenology of Spirit' include some paragraphs on the witty spirit—as a mode of reaction of the individual subject in the face of the dominance of money interests as a criterion of value. One cannot but feel that in the following account Hegel is referring to Oscar Wilde 'avant la lettre'.

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The avatars of mind in Hegel's monumental *Phenomenology of Spirit* include some paragraphs on the witty spirit—as a mode of reaction of the individual subject in the face of the dominance of money interests as a criterion of value. A picture on the deep signification of verbal irony in the age of high accumulation, or perhaps a portrait of a skeptical flâneur in the age of mechanical capitalism, exposing its contradictions in polished pellets of expression. One cannot but feel that in the following account Hegel is referring to Oscar Wilde—not in 1807, but now.

**§520.** Just as self-consciousness had its own language with state power, in other words, just as Spirit emerged as actively mediating between these extremes, so also has self-consciousness its own language in dealing with wealth; but still more so when it rebels. The language that gives wealth a sense of its essential significance, and thereby gains possession of it, is likewise the language of flattery, but of base flattery; for what it pronounces to be an essence, it knows to be expendable, to be without any *intrinsic* being. The language of flattery, however, as we have already observed, is Spirit that is still one-sided. For although its moments are indeed the *self* which has been refined by the discipline of service into a pure existence, and the *intrinsic being* of power, yet the pure Notion in which the simple, unitary *self* and the *in-itself*, the former a pure 'I' and the latter this pure essence or thought, are the same—this unity of the two sides which are in reciprocal relation is not present in the consciousness that uses this language. The object is still for consciousness an *intrinsic* being in contrast to the self, that is, the *object* is not for consciousness at the same time consciousness's own *self* as such. The language of the disrupted consciousness is, however, the perfect language and the authentic existent Spirit of this entire world of culture. This self-consciousness which rebels against this rejection of itself is *eo ipso* absolutely self-identical in its absolute disruption, the pure mediation of pure self-consciousness with itself. It is the sameness of the identical

judgement in which one and the same personality is both subject and predicate. But this identical judgement is at the same time the infinite judgement; for this personality is absolutely dirempted, and subject and predicate are utterly indifferent, immediate beings which have nothing to do with one another, which have no necessary unity, so much so that each is the power of a separate independent personality. The being-for-self [of this consciousness] has its own being-for-self for object as an out-and-out 'other'; not as if this had a different content, for the content is the same self in the form of an absolute antithesis and a completely indifferent existence of its own. Here, then, we have the Spirit of this real world of culture, Spirit that is *conscious* of itself in its truth and in its Notion.

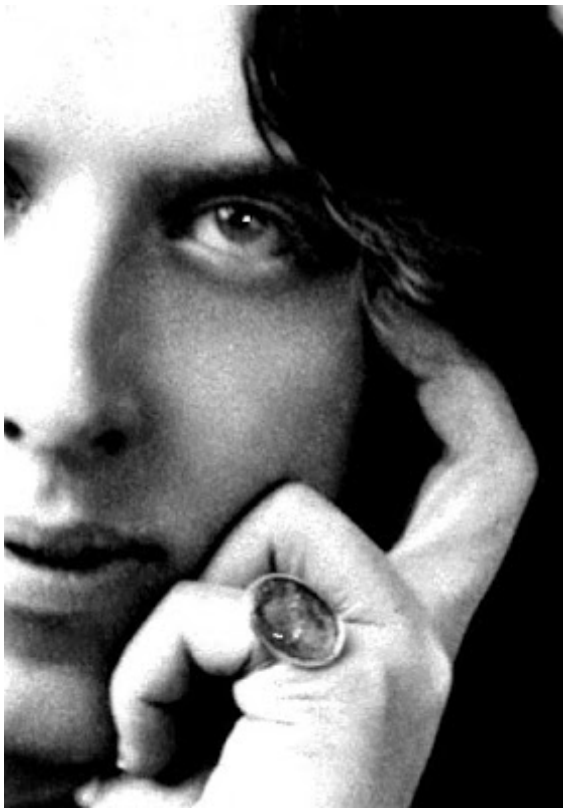
**§521.** It is this absolute and universal inversion of the actual world of thought: it is *pure culture*. What is learnt in this world is that neither the *actuality* of power and wealth, nor their specific Notions, 'good' and 'bad', or the consciousness of 'good' and 'bad' (the noble and the ignoble consciousness), possess truth; on the contrary, all these moments become inverted, one changing into the other, and each is the opposite of itself. The universal power, which is the *Substance*, when it acquires a spiritual nature of its own through the principle of individuality, receives its own self merely as a name, and though it is the *actuality* of power, is really the powerless being that sacrifices its own self. But this expendable, self-less being, or the self that has become a Thing, is rather the return of that being into itself; it is being-for-self that is explicitly for itself, the concrete existence of Spirit. The *thoughts* of these two essences, of 'good' and 'bad', are similarly inverted in this movement; what is characterized as good is bad, and vice-versa. The consciousness of each of these moments, the consciousness judged as noble and ignoble, are rather, in their truth just as much the reverse of what these characterizations are supposed to be; the noble consciousness is ignoble and repudiated, just as the repudiated consciousness changes round into the nobility which characterizes the most highly developed freedom

of self-consciousness. From a formal standpoint, everything is *outwardly* the reverse of what it is *for itself*; and again, it is not in truth what it is for itself, but something else than it wants to be; being-for-self is rather the loss of itself, and its self-alienation rather the preservation of itself. What we have here, then, is that all the moments execute a universal justice on one another, each just as much alienates its own self, as it forms itself into its opposite and in this way inverts it. True Spirit, however, is just this unity of the absolutely separate moments, and, indeed, it is just through the free actuality of these selfless extremes that, as their middle term, it achieves a concrete existence. It exists in the universal talk and destructive judgement which strips of their significance all those moments which are supposed to count as the true being and as actual members of the whole, and is equally this nihilistic game which it plays with itself. This judging and talking is, therefore, what is true and invincible, while *it* overpowers everything; it is solely with this alone that one has truly to do with in this actual world. In this world, the Spirit of each part finds expression, or is wittily talked about, and finds said about it what it is. The honest individual takes each moment to be an abiding essentiality, and is the uneducated thoughtlessness of not knowing that it is equally doing the reverse. The disrupted consciousness, however, is consciousness of the perversion, and, moreover, of the absolute perversion. What prevails in it is the Notion, which brings together in a unity the thoughts which, in the honest individual, lie far apart, and its language is therefore clever and witty.

**§522.** The content of what Spirit says about itself is thus the perversion of every Notion and reality, the universal deception of oneself and others; and the shamelessness which gives utterance to this deception is just for that reason the greatest truth. This kind of talk is the madness of the musician 'who heaped up and mixed together thirty arias, Italian, French,

tragic, comic, of every sort; now with a deep bass he descended into hell, then, contracting his throat, he rent the vaults of heaven with a falsetto tone, frantic and soothed, imperios and mocking, by turns' (Diderot, *Nephew of Rameau*). To the tranquil consciousness which, in its honest way, takes the melody of the Good and the True to consist in the evenness of the notes, i.e. in unison, this talk appears as a 'rigmarole of wisdom and folly, as a medley of as much skill as baseness, of as many correct as false ideas, a mixture compounded of a complete perversion of sentiment, of absolute

shamefulness, and of perfect frankness and truth. It will be unable to refrain from entering into all these tones and running up and down the entire scale of feelings from the profoundest contempt and dejection to the highest pitch of admiration and emotion; but blended with the latter will be a tinge of ridicule which spoils them' (*ibid.*). The former, however, will find in their subversive depths the all-powerful note which restores Spirit to itself.



J. N. Findlay's account of the following paragraphs is as follows:

**§523.** Plain sense and sound morality can teach this

disintegrated brilliance nothing that it does not know. It can merely utter some of the syllables the latter weaves into its piebald discourse. In conceding that the bad and the good are mixed in life, it merely substitutes dull platitude for witty brilliance.

**§524.** The disintegrated consciousness can be noble and edifying but this is for it only one note among others. To ask it to forsake its disintegration is merely, from its own point of view, to preach a new eccentricity, that of Diogenes in his tub.

**§525.** The disintegrated consciousness is, however, on the way to transcending its disintegration. It sees the vanity of treating all things as vain, and so becomes serious.

**§526.** Wit really emancipates the disintegrated consciousness from finite material aim and gives it true spiritual freedom. In knowing itself as disintegrated it also rises above this, and achieves a truly positive self-consciousness.

In Hegel's words—here's where he comments on Wilde, and on the self-transcending vanity of wit:

**§525.** But in point of fact, Spirit has already accomplished this in principle [i.e. its own dissolution, winning for itself a still higher consciousness]. The consciousness that is aware of its disruption and openly declares it, derides existence and the universal confusion, and derides its own self as well; it is at the same time the fading, but still audible, sound of all this confusion. This vanity of all reality and every definite Notion, vanity which knows itself to be such, is the double reflection of the real world into itself: once in *this particular self* of consciousness *qua* particular, and again in the pure *universality* of consciousness, or in thought. In the first case, Spirit that has come to itself has directed its gaze to the world of actuality and still has there its purpose and immediate content; but, in the other case, its gaze is in part turned only inward and negatively

against it, and in part is turned away from that world towards heaven, and its object is the beyond of this world.

**§526.** In that aspect of the return into the self, the vanity of all *things* is its *own* vanity, it is *itself* vain. It is the self-centred self that knows, not only how to pass judgement on and chatter about everything, but how to give witty expression to the *contradiction* that is present in the solid elements of the *actual* world, as also in the fixed determinations posited by judgement; and this contradiction is their truth. Looked at from the point of view of form, it knows everything to be self-alienated, being-for-self is separated from being-in-itself; what is meant, and purpose, are separated from truth; and from both again, the being-for-another, the ostensible meaning from the real meaning, from the true thing and intention. Thus it knows how to give correct expression to each moment in relation to its opposite, in general, how to express accurately the perversion of everything; it knows better than each what each is, no matter what its specific nature is. Since it knows the substantial from the side of the disunion and conflict which are united within the substantial itself, but not from the side of this union, it understands very well how to pass judgement on it, but has lost the ability to *comprehend* it. This vanity at the same time needs the vanity of all things in order to get from them the consciousness of self; it therefore creates this vanity itself and is the soul that supports it. Power and wealth are the supreme ends of its exertions, it knows that through renunciation and sacrifice it forms itself into the universal, attains to the possession of it, and in this possession is universally recognized and accepted: state power and wealth are the real and acknowledged powers. However, this recognition and acceptance is itself vain; and just by taking possession of power and wealth it knows them to be without a self of their own, knows rather that *it* is the power over them, while they are vain things. The fact that in possessing them it is itself apart from and beyond them, is exhibited in its witty talk which is, therefore, its supreme interest and the truth of the whole



relationship. In such talk, this particular self, *qua* this pure self, determined neither by reality nor by thought, develops into a spiritual self that is of truly universal worth. It is the self-disruptive nature of all relationships and the conscious disruption of them; but only as self-consciousness in revolt is it aware of its own disrupted state, and in thus knowing [it has immediately risen above it](#). In that vanity, all content is turned into something negative which can no longer be grasped as having a positive significance. The positive object is merely *the pure 'I' itself*, and the disrupted consciousness *in itself* this pure self-identity of self-consciousness that has returned to itself.

Hegel's account of the self-transcendence of wit probably owes something to Friedrich Schlegel's notion of the reflexive and self-critical "romantic irony" in *Athenäum*. However, it might be argued that its main inspiration comes [from the future](#)—from the as yet imperfectly realized odyssey of the spirit in the work and personality of Oscar Wilde.

—oOo—

—And as a reminder, here follow [some examples](#) of paradoxical brilliance from the Wilde side:

People fashion their God after their own understanding. They make their God first and worship him afterwards.

There is only one thing in the world that is worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.

The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.



Work is the curse of the drinking classes.

Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.

The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast.

Alas, I am dying beyond my means.

I never put off till tomorrow what I can do the day after.

In examinations the foolish ask questions that the wise cannot answer.

One should always be in love; that is the reason one should never marry.

A man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing.

America is the only country that went from barbarism to decadence without civilization in between.

All art is quite useless.

Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.

I sometimes think that God in creating man somewhat overestimated his ability.

Some cause happiness wherever they go; others, whenever they go.

A cynic is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months.

The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything.

Marriage is the triumph of imagination over intelligence. Second marriage is the triumph of hope over experience.

To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.

Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.

To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.

I am not young enough to know everything.

I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their good intellects.

A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies. I have not got one who is a fool. They are all men of some intellectual power, and consequently they all appreciate me.

-Henry Wotton, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Laughter is not at all a bad beginning to a friendship, and it is far the best ending to one.

-Henry Wotton, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for.

-Henry Wotton, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

People say sometimes that Beauty is only superficial. That may be so. But at least it is not so superficial as Thought is. To me,

Beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.

-Henry Wotton, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Science is the record of dead religions.

Only the shallow know themselves.

[\(A Truth of Masks\)](#)

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