



Does Irony Exist?

At one point in the film *Reality Bites*, a newspaper editor attempts to expose the shortcomings of a wanna-be journalist (Winona Ryder) by challenging her, out of the blue, to define irony. The younger woman hems and haws but is unable to come up with an intelligible answer. The editor marches triumphantly off without another word, feeling she's proved her point; Ryder screws up her doe-eyed face in discomfort, and everyone in the audience laughs.

The unintended irony of this brief scene lies in the fact that irony is *not* an easy thing to define. In any case, irony is a quality that seldom appears in newspapers.

I have been intrigued by the concept of irony for a long time. The first time I came across it was in a Superman comic—I may have been seven or eight at the time. Superman was cowering amid the trashcans in a grimy alley, looking up at an ersatz-Superman who was streaking across the sunlit sky. “How ironic,” the real Superman was thinking, “Here I am hiding in an alley, while Lex Luther is...” Through some twist of fate, the details of which I no longer remember, the two had switched identities, and now the diabolical villain was masquerading as a champion of justice and virtue!!

I can still remember the *frisson* I experienced as I stared at that word. *Irony*. Complicated? Yes. I had an inkling of what it meant. And yet?

Since that time I have been attentive to the use of the word irony, and I am confident that I now have a pretty good idea of what it means. In fact, I seldom come across it without pausing to ask myself whether the situation being described is actually ironic or not. I have come to the conclusion that irony is not

well understood nowadays, and frequently mistaken for other things that it only superficially resembles. Yet genuine irony can be a beautiful thing. I think it would be worth our while to explore both the use and the mis-use of the concept, which can refer both to a condition of affairs, and also to an attitude we sometimes adopt as a means of describing or coming to terms with such a situation.

As the last remark may suggest, one source of confusion lies in the fact that the word “irony” refers to two different things. On the one hand, it is a condition in the circumstances of life—for example, the one Superman finds himself in. On the other hand, it refers to a habit of speech, or a posture we *chose* to adopt with respect to events. It might even be said that this form of irony is something we *apply* to events, like a layer of shellac.

The authors of Webster's dictionary make the distinction clear. They describe irony as a condition:

—*incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result.*

and also as a way of describing things:

—*a : the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning. b : a usually humorous or sardonic literary style or form characterized by irony.*

These two meanings are sometimes connected, of course. The irony in a novelist's prose is often based on an incongruity between the narrator's long-cherished expectations and the actual outcome of the events being describing. The literature of romantic disillusionment is full of such stuff, and Gustav Flaubert is its high priest. But an ironic turn of phrase doesn't *necessarily* describe an ironic situation. In fact, the first definition provided by Webster's dictionary suggests no such thing.

...*the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning.*

This definition makes no reference to *what* is being described. When we speak ironically we may well be attempting to expose the irony in a situation by

cleverly underscoring a disparity between expectation and reality. Then again, maybe not. In any case, the connection between the situation at hand and the turn of phrase used to describe it is far from clear.

As early as Republican Roman times, it was pointed out by Cicero that some types of irony do not involve saying “the exact reverse of what you mean” but only saying something “different” from what you mean. Damning with faint praise, under this rubric, might be considered an exercise in irony. “The discourse was *so* lofty...” meaning, of course, that it was commonplace. And so on.

Yet this habit of speech, sometimes referred to as “dramatic irony,” usually results in something other than irony pure and simple. If the intent is good-natured or humorous, we would be better off describing the remark as *facetious*. If the remark is unusually acidic and pointed, and directed at a specific audience with intent to belittle or injure, then we really ought to call it *sarcastic*. And if such a habit of speech becomes habitual, to the point that we feel it reflects more of the speaker’s frame of mind than anything genuinely unexpected in life, then we ought to describe it as merely *cynical*.

In any case, it seems to me that the notion of irony as a manner of speaking holds far less interest than the same concept when used in reference to a genuine incongruity between expectation and result. Yet here too we can easily lose our way. We ought to differentiate at the outset between an ironic turn of events and one that is merely *fortuitous*. For example, we may consider it ironic when a fitness specialist dies of a heart attack at an early age, but if the autopsy later reveals a congenital heart defect, then the irony is more apparent than real.

The role played by expectation in all of this would seem to suggest that the irony latent in a situation depends on one’s point of view. And in fact, it does. Consider, for example, the classic Hank Cochran tune, *She’s Got You*, made famous by Patsy Cline. The first stanza runs as follows:

*I’ve got your picture, that you gave to me,
and its signed with love, just like it used to be.
The only thing different, the only thing new—
I’ve got your picture...she’s got you.*

What an ironic turn of events!

The new girlfriend would probably see no irony in the situation, however. After all, her expectations have not been disappointed. The guy met *her*, fell in love (well, of course) and the rest is history. It may seem pathetic to her that the jilted rival is mooning on about worthless love trinkets from the distant past, but she sees no irony in the situation.

The lyrics of “Everything Happens to Me” describe an entirely different response—resignation—to a similarly disappointing situation. After enumerating a long string of mishaps—rain on a golf outing, a bridge partner who trumps the Ace, etc. The narrator ends his lament with the lines

*I fell in love but once
and it had to be with you....
Everything happens to me.*

Differing perspectives certainly underlie the phrase we hear from time to time, “The irony of the situation was lost on him.” When a politician begins to advocate a position he or she has spent decades denouncing, or when an aging libertine begins to counsel moral probity, we may see the situation in an ironic light, though the irony is shallow. It seems to me, in fact, that in order for irony to carry much weight or interest, an element of fate must be involved. It may be ironic that a fitness expert dies of a heart attack at an early age. On the other hand, the case of an individual who exercises seriously and faithfully for years on end, yet never becomes more fit, contains little irony. It’s merely an accident of physiology, the result of a slow metabolism perhaps, and not a sudden twist of fate. Life’s little ironies are dealt out to us at unexpected times and places.

In order for irony to be present, it is also necessary for someone to draw our attention to it. There cannot be a clash between expectation and reality, without someone to have that expectation. Irony is a perception of a curious and unexpected turn of fate—and, I would add, it also entails an acceptance of that fate. Irony is a polish we add to the realization that things have gone awry.

It is on this basis that we can differentiate between irony and *satire*. Irony is for artists—if they can pull it off. If they can’t it becomes self-pity, or sheer bit-

terness, which interests no one. On the other hand, satire is for social critics. We satirize those who have gained power over us, impishly lampooning them until such time as we can regain power over *them*. Satire gives us pleasure because it's demeaning and humorous and somehow truer than true. But unlike irony, satire is willful and forward-looking—which is to say, it's political rather than aesthetic. Though it's a rather poor substitute for genuine political activity, satire carries the implicit question, Why must things be like this? Satire seldom answers that question, however, or contributes much to political change, because it usually rests on our previous acceptance of a cartoonish vision of the state of affairs, which it then proceeds to exaggerate further for comic effect.

Irony, on the other hand, does not ask the question, Why must things be this way? Irony is rooted in the acceptance of a *fait accompli*.

Among the poems of Thomas Hardy there is a selection of very short pieces first published in 1911, and collectively titled "Satires of Circumstance." The poems are not satires, however. Rather, they are bristling with ironic detachment:

At Tea

*The kettle descants in a cosy drone,
And the young wife looks in her husband's face,
And then at her guest's, and shows in her own
her sense that she fills an envied place;
And the visiting lady is all abloom,
And says there was never so sweet a room.
And the happy young housewife does not know
That the woman beside her was his first choice,
Till the fates ordained it could not be so...
Betraying nothing in look or voice
The guest sits smiling and sips her tea,
And he throws her a stray glance yearningly.*

How, then, we might ask ourselves, does irony differ from "mordant humor?" Perhaps very little. Yet it seems to me that mordant humor often runs deeper than irony. Its acceptance of things—of an unfair or at least a continually unpredictable universe—is more complete. In irony there is always a stray yearning glance toward what might have been or ought

to have been. This is what gives it its edge, its pain, its beauty. In mordant humor the reconciliation between reality and the cherished but disappointed ideal is complete.

Evan S. Connell must be numbered among the great modern masters of mordant humor. A vein of it shows itself repeatedly throughout his work, from *Mrs. Bridge* (1956) to *Son of the Morning Star* (1984) to *Deus Lo Volt* (2000). The best way to convey the tone he adopts in a few words, however, might be to examine a few of the aphorisms contained in his book-length poem *Points for a Compass Rose* (1973). Written at the height of the Vietnam War, this long amalgam of sayings and observations is filled with arcane facts, pointed but oblique comments about current affairs in Southeast Asia, and bits of sage advice, all of which are delivered in the fragmentary style of a madman.

*Between the strata of two great civilizations in
Tarsus archeologists came upon a bed of earth
five feet thick undisturbed by any trace of hu-
man activity.*

*Tell me, which would you prefer: a sharp bronze
knife or a peck of gold? Before answering, my
friend, it might be wise to reflect that values
change.*

*Philipp Mainlander held us to be fragments of
a God who long ago destroyed himself. Don't
forget.*

*Why is it, I have asked myself,
that I persist in setting myself
against the things that are?
I know life and earth to be wind,
that we are alive and swift,
yet done at the flip of a hand.*

*Saint Jerome thinks that every creature loves
something, and nothing has been discovered that
does not—down to the very rocks.*

*Some avow that we spring from mushrooms,
and keep our wits in jars. I think so, as I watch
what happens.*

I heard our President's latest address to the nation and thought of the inquisition's fundamental philosophy holding that error has no rights. Tell me, friend, what century is this?

And so on—for 240 pages.

Connell has moved beyond simple irony here, I think, into a world that combines moral concern, erudition, and a familiarity with both the cruelty and the inevitability of history. These elements come together to buoy the text in a persistent current of mordant humor.

The danger in adopting such a tone is this: What begins as mordant humor may end up being mere sadism. Yes, history is senseless, history is cruel. Yes, the world is full of confusion and error. But we ought not to take *too* much pleasure in filling others in on the details. Connell's poem strikes a marvelous balance between quiet rage and celebration, I think. In other words, though the matters at stake are serious and real, the writing remains genuinely poetic.

Some expressions that are commonly described as ironic are, in fact, merely *hyperbolic*. Take, for example, the first sentence in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

Now, Austen knows that this remark is not true. She knows also that the reader knows it. She is exaggerating—saying something other than what she means—for the purpose of bringing us with startling immediacy into the mindset that will animate the behavior of several of the characters in the drama that's about to unfold. Austen makes all of this crystal clear in the next line, which reveals that we don't *really* know the man's feelings about matrimony at all, and that the truth is nevertheless *fixed* in the minds of the neighboring women with marriable daughters.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the sur-

rounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

This is a funny and effective way to start a book. We might even go so far as to call it “brilliant.” But there is not a shred of irony in it.

The word *spleen* is sometimes used to describe irony that's drifted off toward sadism or self-pity. In Greek times the spleen was considered the seat of the emotions. In common talk nowadays we hear the word most often in the expression “vent your spleen,” which means to give free reign to those negative emotions you've been repressing for so long. (This is a more serious and unpleasant undertaking than the gentler process of “letting it all hang out,” which means nothing more than to relax, let your hair down, put your feet up on the coffee table, and “be yourself.”)

Charles Baudelaire is the godfather of spleen. Open *Flowers of Evil* at any point and you're likely to come upon a passage like this one:

*When skies are low and heavy as a lid
over the mind tormented by disgust,
and hidden in the gloom the sun pours down
on us a daylight dingier than the dark;*

*when earth becomes a trickling dungeon where
Trust like a bat keeps lunging through the air,
beating tentative wings along the walls
and bumping its head against the broken beams;*

*when rain falls straight from unrelenting clouds,
forging the bars of some enormous jail,
and silent hordes of obscene spiders spin
their webs across the basements of our brains;*

*then all at once the raging bells break loose,
hurling to heaven their awful caterwauling,
like homeless ghosts with no one left to haunt.....*

And so on. It's clear that the narrator is not a happy fellow. But this doesn't seem to be a poem about the weather, or about spelunking, either. In fact, it's loaded with images drawn from the stock of familiar Halloween evils. Though the poem is well-fashioned and even musical, there's nothing very real about any of it. We don't

know what it is that torments the mind, or from whence comes the disgust. Even though the rendering of inner torment is powerful, the poem remains vague and self-indulgent—it exhibits an excess of *spleen*. Baudelaire makes no bones about the fact—the title of the poem is “Spleen.”

I might suggest that spleen is an emotion, pure and simple, whereas irony is a tone or a slant we *adopt* with regard to experience. And yet, in so far as it rests on an unrealized expectation, can it not be said that irony, too, is simply an emotion? I don’t think so. Irony serves as a means of coming to grips with a course of events that has taken us—or the narrator—by surprise. The emotion involved can range from humor to disappointment to regret, but the ironic light within which we view the situation is a source of aesthetic pleasure. The petulant and spleenetic character of the verses quoted above is a reflection of the fact that the narrator has not been able to rise to a point of ironic detachment with respect to his troubles.

The use of the word “rise” suggests that irony is of greater value aesthetically than spleen, and that, I think, is true. Is there, then, an attitude that stands higher than irony on the totem poll of aesthetic modes? Perhaps. In any case, it seems to me that irony is worthwhile and satisfying to the degree that it incorporates the pain of a given situation or event within a more broadly based appreciation of that event’s beauty.

There are many works of art that allow us to see and relish things as they are, without the slightest indication that anyone had hoped they would be different, and better. There is very little irony in Homer’s work, it seems to me. And though it’s been a long time since I read it, I seem to recall that Isaak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa* is bathed in a clear and delicate light of utter sincerity. Hamsun is not much of an ironist—his characters build farms, catch fish, and fell trees with the stolid simplicity of archaic Greek statues.

Don Quixote presents us with a complex case, more worthy of an essay than a paragraph. Cervantes has imbued his famous character with an unshakable belief in the importance of his “mission.” The Don may be mad, but the strength of that belief ennobles his repeatedly foolhardy and disastrous endeavors and strips them of irony.

We come upon irony of an altogether gentler sort in the writings of Anton Chekhov. In the story “The Little Trick,” for example (chosen at random from countless possibilities) the narrator stands on the top of a snowy hill with his girlfriend of the moment. After considerable effort he convinces her to go down the hill with him on a toboggan. During the descent, with wind and snow whirling all around them, he whispers, “I love you,” in her ear. Once they’ve arrived at the bottom, however, he acts as if nothing had happened, and because she is unsure of what she heard, and too shy to ask, she suggests they go down the hill again, even though the descent itself terrifies her. He agrees. They descend. He whispers again. And so on. On another day he returns to the hill and sees her going down alone—just to see if the wind could have made such a sound. Weeks pass, he leaves for the city. Years pass. She marries well. Has three children. But he is confident that the most touching and beautiful moments of her life were those in which the wind carried to her the expression, “I love you, Nadyenka.” As for the narrator himself, he brings his story to a conclusion with the following words: “But now, when I am older, I no longer understand why I said those words, nor why I played the trick.....”

On the face of things, the irony of this story lies in the fact that the callous trickster is at a loss to explain his behavior, and almost goes so far as to intimate that he wishes he had taken the young woman more seriously. Meanwhile, the innocent victim of his prank appears to have filled her life in nicely, and she also has a pleasant, if perhaps strange and bitter-sweet, memory of romance.

Well, not much can happen in a seven-page story. But this one takes on a degree of added interest when we stop to consider that the narrator’s expectations have not been undermined or disappointed. He was simply being cruel, right from the first. And the young woman never determines if the man had actually whispered anything to her. Yet she seems to be content with the conclusion that it was the wind that had whispered “I love you” to her.

It’s interesting to note that Chekhov published this tale early in his career under the pseudonym *A Man Without Spleen*. In its original version, however, the narrator eventually reveals his trick to the young woman, they marry and live happily ever after. Much

later in life, before adding the story to his *Collected Stories*, Chekhov gave it a more ironic and melancholy twist by removing the happy ending. The new version is more satisfying than the old one. Yet it seems to me that if the story has any enduring value, it lies not in its irony, which is common enough, but in the fact that both characters have moved beyond expectancy into a stranger and more mysterious world—the narrator into a troubling world of forgotten emotions, the young woman into a world where being truly loved can be a satisfying experience, even if it's only by the wind.

Does irony exist? It does indeed. In fact, it might almost be said to be endemic to living, in so far as things seldom turn out the way we expect them to. We make use of irony to shield us from, and elevate us above, unexpected and disappointing quirks of fate. A subtle ironist can hold our interest by inflicting repeated minor injuries to our (usually romantic) expectations. This is what gives modern literature much of its edge. Yet those who see *everything* in the wan light of irony can easily become tiresome, it seems to me. In the end they come across merely as complainers, nihilists, cynics, and sentimental fools who *don't know what life is like*. Irony, like salt, is a wonderful condiment—but it isn't a meal.

II

Socratic Irony

In this analysis of irony I have intentionally avoided contact with that zone of thought from whence the concept arose. The word irony is Greek in origin. Evidently Eiron was a stock character in Greek comedies who, though the underdog, repeatedly triumphed over his boastful adversary Alazon by force of wit and wile. The word eiron came to mean “dissembler.”

Socrates was the most famous ironist of ancient times. Or so we are often told. Socrates made use of irony to bring out the ignorance of others, by feigning ignorance while drawing his interlocutors along a path of logical inference that led them to the realization that it was they who were ignorant—everything they had held to be true was false!

The trouble with incorporating this tradition into our discussion lies in the fact that Socrates, though he may be “playing the fool” in order to bring out the ignorance of others, does not really seem to be speaking ironically. He seems to be seriously engaged in uncovering the truth. In fact, those parts of his conversation in which he is merely bringing out the ignorance of others tend to be tedious, and certainly the irony involved, if there is any, is closer to ridicule and humiliation than it is to illumination. Socrates may have taken a certain pleasure in exposing vanity and presumption, but he does not seem to be engaging in what we now call “dramatic irony.” To argue as much would be to imply that we, along with Socrates, are “in on the joke,” whereas in reality we are just as ignorant as the men whom Socrates is cross-examining. In any case, the most interesting side of Socrates's conversation is to be found at those points where the questions remain unanswered. That's why, 2500 years after the fact, we continue to read Plato's reports of the man's conversations. We're tantalized by what Socrates has said—and also, reading between the lines, by what Plato himself might have missed in his teacher's lines of reasoning.

The figure of Socrates was extremely influential during the formation of the “modern” sensibility that first gathered a head of steam with the German Romantics. Kierkegaard wrote his PhD thesis on the subject of Socratic irony, and went on to make a career of sorts exploring the back-streets of subjectivity.

But it was Karl Frederic von Schlegel, writing a generation earlier, who drew attention most emphatically to irony as a lynchpin, not only of aesthetics, but of life itself. He famously defined personal culture as “antithetical synthesis and perfection to the point of irony,” and argued that “character” itself, in its ironic imperfection, is essentially poetic.

For a man who has achieved a certain height and universality of cultivation, his inner being is an ongoing chain of the most enormous revolutions... Irony is the impossibility of arriving at the end of this process—i.e. the impossibility of being cultured. For just this reason, it is cultivation's antithetical condition of possibility.

Schlegel takes the notion of irony beyond the conventional meaning by suggesting that it is never

really out of place. On the one hand, we yearn for a fulfillment or perfection which we find it impossible to attain through our personal endeavours. On the other hand, we no sooner commit to something than we withdraw a part of ourselves from it, fearful of being absorbed and misunderstood in the complexity of our individuality. Thus irony becomes an orientation of personality that is not only appropriate to any life condition, but essential to the purpose of embracing our dualness fully. Intense reflection on the state of being always of two minds about everything, leads us eventually into a realm in which irony itself comes to be viewed ironically—a fate from which (in Schlegel's view) no history can escape.

Hegel disparaged Schlegel's view of irony, referring to it as "mere frivolity, the act of a mind that never means what it seems to mean." Yet in point of fact Schlegel's formulation offered a more accurate depiction of the poetic form of the Concrete Universal than anything Hegel himself could come up with.

Variations along this line have appeared at intervals ever since Schlegel's time, and by the opening years of the twentieth century critics were complaining of the tyranny of irony in literary life. In recent times, to take one example from among many, Paul de Man remarked that "absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself." Which is neither absolute irony, nor absolute madness, but absolute nonsense.

The problem with many theories of irony is that they take it to be a faculty we apply to our experience when and wherever we chose—the more often the better. Yet irony is not a tone for all times and places. Rather, it is a recognition that, by a quirk of fate, a particular *state of affairs* has arisen that flies in the face of norms and expectations. Perhaps we may be disappointed, or even shattered by such a turn of events. On the other hand, adopting a slightly more "mature" and disinterested posture, we may come to view it in an ironic light. The irony is ours, but it comes to us in response to the situation at hand.

Perhaps it would be useful to remind ourselves that other situations will, or ought to, elicit other responses. For example, a turn of events may *astonish* us. Then again, it may *delight* us. An event may *appall* us, *disgust* us, *enrage* us, *bore* us, *bemuse* us, *fascinate* us,

or *intrigue* us. The elevation of irony to the position of supreme response has been a mistake from the beginning. The further argument that irony is the product of sheer imagination, rather than a means of coming to grips with things that fly in the face of expectation, undermines the value of the concept even further.

And yet. Though irony is found in events, it nevertheless remains a personal thing, and this explains why it has far greater value as a literary device than a historiographic tool. In the writing of history, irony very easily descends into polemic. A case in point—Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

One scholar has observed that "the use of suspense and irony is Gibbon's dramatic forte." One of his standard rhetorical devices is to attribute two qualities to a given character or event that stand at odds with one another.

*Till the reign of Severus, the virtue and even the good sense of the emperors had been distinguished by their **real or affected** reverence for the senate.*

*From **the love, or the ostentation**, of learning, [George of Cappadocia] collected a valuable library of history, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology.*

***Ignorant, or careless**, of the impending danger, Chrysostom indulged his zeal, or perhaps his resentment.*

The implication in each case is that the less attractive quality is the real one, with the more attractive one being merely the veneer. But it is the historian's task to determine the nature and value of events, as well as he can. By stooping to such blatant exercises in *inuendo*, Gibbon disappoints his readers and undermines his considerable authority as a Medieval scholar.

Another case in point—Albert Sorel's history of the French Revolution. Sorel delights in exposing the ironies of Napoleon's efforts to ingratiate himself with the ruling elite in Europe, and his habit of conducting foreign policy very similar to that of the

ancien regime which he has just laid low. *Le plus se change....* Well, so what?

In our time any number of “people’s histories” have been written that shed new and important light on hitherto neglected aspects of the past. Too often, however, they operate under the assumption that, for example, the United States is a land of freedom and individualism, and proceed to describe how “ironically” repressive its institutions have often actually been. It would be more worthwhile for such investigators to forego that rhetorically appealing but almost invariably shallow ironic *edge*, and get on with the task of determining what the precise values and limitations of America’s institutions *are*. After all, nothing in history ever really works out all that well. Why should the United States be any different?

In history, irony is cheap.

III

The End of Irony?

Following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, it was widely suggested that irony had finally had shot its wad, and was no longer appropriate to the times. The historian Taylor Branch, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, talked about “a turning point against a generation of cynicism for all of us,” and Roger Rosenblatt, in an essay in *Time* magazine, suggested that “one good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony.”

One thought that ran through my head more than once in those dark times was, “I wonder how long it will be before the *New Yorker* runs a cartoon about the World Trade Center disaster.” The first one I saw—it probably wasn’t the first to appear—ran a month or two later. A man is yelling at a cab driver as he leaps into the open door of the cab, “Get me to the airport quick! My plane leaves in six hours!”

That the terrorist disaster put the citizens of the United States in a somber mood was to be expected. The initial shock and horror elicited by the incident was natural and appropriate. On the other hand, the months of jingoistic posturing that followed exposed the naïveté of many Americans with regard to how the world works. After all, millions of

men and women throughout the world die less dramatic but no less senseless deaths each year, due to political impulses over which they have no control, and which have nothing to do with them personally. The “Why us?” mentality, the indignation and outrage, that followed upon the attacks of September 11, 2001, brought to light a deficiency of both historical awareness and cultural decorum on the part of many Americans. It did not, of course, spell the end of irony. What it may have done is to underscore the fact that irony may be a sophisticated response to unexpected quirks of fate, but it is not appropriate for all times and places. It is only with a degree of distance and detachment that irony becomes an effective interpretive trope. It is pretty well beside the point during periods of hysteria, when everyone is still wondering whether the next devastating attack might be right around the corner.

It might be described as ironic that men with boxcutters brought down two of the world’s tallest buildings, but there is little satisfaction to be gleaned from such an observation. For whatever else it may be, irony is a form of levity, and levity, by definition, brings a healthy “lightness” to things. The terrorists tried to blow up the Pentagon. Fifty years ago peace activists tried to levitate it. Which do you prefer?

IV

Cosmic Buffoonery

In this perhaps over-long ramble through the briar patch of irony, I hope that I have at least made it clear that irony is a slippery concept, subject to conflicting definitions and uses. It’s meanings have also changed over the centuries—so much so, in fact, that it is surprising that the word continued to be so popular. Many describe as ironic remarks which are actually splanetic, facetious, cynical, sarcastic, or satiric. Innuendo, *double entende*, and other witty habits of speech are also frequently mistaken for irony.

The key to understanding irony, I have suggested, lies in reminding ourselves that it represents a specific response to a specific type of event—one that surprises us by turning out altogether differently from what we expected. Irony is a bemused and detached, but far from dis-interested response to such a

turn of events. It can be shallow or grim, but it must in any case retain elements of both acceptance and levity. Because irony *does* exist, however, in specific events—though certainly not in all events—the use of irony as a personal posture, an attitude toward every event regardless of the form it takes, is not only inappropriate, it very soon becomes a bore. Those who spend their lives in a supercilious mire of disappointment and disillusionment have obviously failed to develop a sensitivity to life’s charms and mysteries. They have failed, furthermore, to take a good look at themselves. The detachment that allows us to see things in a wry and ironic light from time to time is a manifestation of spirit no less remarkable than the creation of the universe. I am not exaggerating here. This is what Friedrich Schlegel was trying to get at when he sought to ennoble the power possessed by us all to assume a detached and ironic attitude toward experience, to fashion a creative response to the foibles and frustrations of living, and ultimately, to live a life that he described as one of cosmic buffoonery.

I like that phrase, though I was raised in a somewhat more dire intellectual environment—largely the product of Western Europe’s collapse during the world wars—under which it was fashionable to observe that “Life is absurd.” When, occasionally, this did, indeed, seem to me to be the case, I always found it useful to ask myself, “Absurd? Compared to what?”

More recent generations have labored under the even more vacuous presumption that life is merely the interpretation of a discourse. Everything is signs, signs are arbitrary, and etc. Such an attitude fails to recognize that things actually change. Events take place. You can interpret the situation however you chose; still the fact remains, and must be dealt with—*things* will never be the same.

In comparison with the existentialists and the deconstructionists, the ironists of an earlier time were titans of intellectual penetration.



People often express the feeling, when looking up at the stars at night, that they feel infinitely small and insignificant. I have never had that feeling. Though perhaps I shouldn’t admit it, the night

sky fills me with the opposite feeling—of a vastness which I not only embrace but almost encompass. It’s sometimes observed—I don’t know if it’s true—that there are more synapses in a single human brain than there are stars in the universe. Well this is just numbers. In any case, it seems obvious to me that whereas I can see and enjoy the remarkable splendor of bright stars on a winter night, the stars I’m looking at, though filled with incredible heat and light, can’t *see* anything at all. But this, too, is simply an “argument,” and not the basis of the feeling I’m attempting to describe. There is something about the night sky—its brightness, its depth, its mystery and wonder—which is far more than merely a metaphor for the human soul. That link is genuine, and as far as I can see, there is absolutely nothing ironic about it.

