

The Complex Functions of Irony

La ironía es uno de los tropos más comentados desde Cicerón hasta nuestros días pero, a través de los años, en vez de afinarse, las definiciones han ido extendiéndose. En el siglo veinte para algunos comentaristas la ironía ha llegado a ser sinónimo con el arte mismo.

Este ensayo es un intento de estudiar las complejas funciones de la ironía. Mi suposición básica es que el análisis de la función del tropo ofrece el acercamiento más útil para la crítica y la teoría literaria y nos permite además reconocer los cambios históricos del concepto del término.

From Cicero and Quintilian's day to our own, the word "irony" has come to mean far more than just "saying one thing and meaning another." Its field of reference has expanded to include wit, humour, and the comic, as well as what we now call dramatic and tragic irony, situational irony, and the irony of fate. And then there is Socratic irony - with its broad range of associations - plus the influential reflexive mode labelled Romantic Irony. In the twentieth century, in some critics' views, irony has even come to stand for all that is complex and thus positive about art itself. With postmodernism we have witnessed a further expansion, one that is perhaps really a reverting to a more simple sense of irony as a semantic balancing act, as a fence-sitting, bet-hedging middle ground where evasion and complicity sit - not totally comfortably - with commitment and critique.

Throughout the years, most definitions of irony in dictionaries and rhetorical manuals have been antiphrastic ones, defining the trope in oppositional semantic terms as the substitution of an (opposite) intended or "ironic" meaning for a literal one. This same definition can be found in most literary, linguistic, psychological, sociological, and anthropological work on irony. Yet, as one critic has put it: "Irony is an act, not simply a significance" (Muecke, *Irony* 100).

Instead of seeing irony as setting up a literal meaning which is to be discarded in favour of what is called the "ironic" one, what would happen if we thought of irony in terms of a dynamic relationship, a communicative process? What if we saw irony as the interaction not only between ironist and interpreter but between different meanings, where both the said and the unsaid must play off against each other (and with some critical edge) in order for such a process even to be recognized as ironic? Irony would then be a mixture of the pragmatic (in semiotic terms) and the semantic, where the semantic space is a space "in between," comprising both the spoken *and* the unspoken. Such a space, however, would always be affectively charged; it would never be without its evaluative "edge." In other words, in spite of certain structural similarities, irony would not be the same as metaphor, allegory, or even lying, and one major difference would lie in this critical edge.

I would like to use this revised definition of irony to look at the different functions of irony in discourse, an area of inquiry where there seems to be no consensus in the critical literature in any field. By "function" here, I mean what I can only rather awkwardly express as *inferred operative motivation*: *inferred* because irony is not necessarily a matter of intention or implication (though it may be both) and because I want to put the emphasis on the interpreter as much as on the ironist; *operative* because I want to look at how irony "works"; *motivation* in the straightforward sense of a purposeful attitude toward the act of ironizing. My premise is a simple one: that different attitudes generate different reasons for seeing (interpreting) irony or using (encoding) it, and that the lack of distinction between these different functions is one of the causes of the confusion and disagreement about the appropriateness and even the value of the trope. It may well be true, as Henri Morier (558) argues, that the range of irony depends on the ironist's temperament - from oppositional to conciliatory - but it seems to me that it takes *two* to ironize (even if ironists are the only ones to get their own ironies).¹ For this reason, I have chosen to take a different pragmatic tack from that of most other work in this area: given that I have defined "function" as *inferred operative motivation*, irony's functions would have to be theorized primarily from the point of view of the decoding and inferring interpreter of irony, not from the more usual perspective of the ironist. In other words, any assumptions about intention and even shared knowledge would be seen as inferences by the interpreter.

These inferences are of various kinds, however. When one critic sees Fielding's irony as functioning in straightforwardly consolidating and reassuring ways, but infers that Gay's irony (in *The Beggar's Opera*)

is an important "means of articulating and organizing his knowledge of life" (Preston 269), he is making value judgments as much as statements about the functionings of irony in two writers' works. Every way of regarding how irony works, in fact, can be judged in this double way, as a positive or a negative, depending on your taste, habits, training, politics, or whatever. In what follows, these dual possibilities (of a positive or negative evaluation of each function) are reflected both in the double consideration of "affect" given to each function and thus also in the double vocabulary needed to describe them.

I would like to begin with what seem to be the most benign functions of irony – benign in the sense that the affective charge, the critical edge is minimal – and proceed to those functions where it seems to be maximal. This is a progression (on the positively coded side) from the *emphatic* to the *inclusumary* and (on the negatively coded one) from the *decorative* to the *exclusionary* and *elitist*. Figure 1 offers a schematic image of these functions and their respective positions.

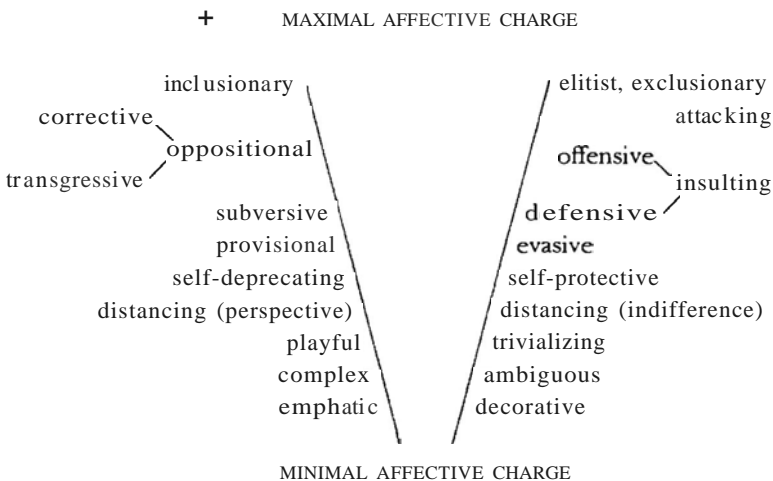


Figure 1

To begin with the most simple and basic rhetorical function of irony is already to see the possibility of different evaluations, despite relatively little sense of a critical edge. This is the use we all make of

irony in conversation from time to time, and to some people it has a positive function: it is deemed necessary for *emphasis* in, and perhaps even for precision of communication - of an attitude and sometimes also of a meaning - or we would not bother using it at all. It would not function emphatically, in other words. There certainly exist speech communities in which irony plays a very important role in proving communicative competence, and by "speech communities" here, I mean everything from groups of friends to professions: literature departments in universities are prime examples, in my experience.

The negative evaluation of this same function would be that such rhetorical irony is purely *decorative*, subsidiary, non-essential - and maybe even a hindrance to clear speech. When people talk about this kind of irony, the ambivalence inherent in these opposite evaluations can often be detected. Thomas Mann, for instance, once wrote of that irony which "glances at both sides, which plays slyly and irresponsibly - yet not without benevolence - among opposites, and is in no great haste to take sides and come to decisions" (173). Even in its least problematic form, then, irony appears to be open to doubt and to conflicting evaluations and interpretations of its functioning. Most discussions of the rhetorical function of irony suggest that there is little or no evaluative force involved here, short of a kind of approval of the cleverness of the ironist. But that too is an affective response of sorts, and it may be impossible to eliminate some sort of evaluative judgment from even the most benign functionings of irony.

The same is true of another way irony operates, one that involves its role as a signal (or even cause) of verbal or structural complexity or ambiguity. In some critics' eyes, irony is typical of the *complexity* of all art, a form of controlled ambiguity, that "*reservoir of irony*" that Roland Barthes (147) saw as the basis of *all* aesthetic language. In his early work on Flaubert, Jonathan Culler also took this stand, arguing that irony issues a "call to interpretation" and its "delights" (211), while noting that as a trope it is both "affirming and negating" (25). The negative side lies not only in that negating possibility, but in the notion that unnecessary complexity and certainly *ambiguity*, lead to misunderstanding, confusion, or simply lack of clarity in communication.

Another relatively benign function of irony is what we could call, in positive terms, the ludic or *playful*. This is related to humour and wit, of course, and therefore can be seen as a positive characteristic of language usage, close to punning or perhaps even metaphor. But it can also be seen as trivial, empty, superficial, even silly. As one critic put it: "In an age of few or shifting values irony becomes, very often,

a tone of urbane amusement, assuming the right to be amused, but offering no very precise positives behind the right. It can degenerate into a mere gesture of superiority, superficially polished and civilised, but too morally irresponsible to be really so" (Dyson 1). Even without this moral dimension (to which we shall return), irony can be seen as a sign of the *trivializing* of the essential seriousness of art. To risk simplification: this was a position bred in European romanticism and intensified through later nineteenth-century moralism and certain facets of twentieth-century modernism - and it lives on in much academic discourse generally, I fear. The "significant" in art (and criticism) is often seen as the highly serious. In his essay, "Romanticism and Classicism," T.E. Hulme wanted to reinstate classical notions of wit and irony as a means of combatting precisely this over-seriousness, not to say solemnity, and his influence can perhaps be seen in the revaluation of irony by T.S. Eliot, LA Richards, and the American New Critics in general.

The affective charge associated with irony begins to increase, however, with the use of words like "trivializing." The same occurs when the notion of irony functioning as a *distancing* mechanism is considered, despite the fact that it is by now a commonplace to say that irony is the trope of the detached and the witnessing. As one writer put it: "the knowledge of irony is usually reserved for observers rather than participants" (Niebuhr 153).² But even observers are not exempt from experiencing affective responses. As Bishop Connop Thirwall described such an experience in 1833: "In respect to opinion it [irony] implies a conviction so deep, as to disdain a direct refutation of the opposite party; with respect to feeling, it implies an emotion so strong, as to be able to command itself, and to suppress its natural tone, in order to vent itself with greater force" (484).

Since distance can suggest a refusal of engagement and involvement or can act as a means of control, it is often negatively associated with Olympian disdain, superiority, or more commonly, *indifference* on the part of the ironist and with irritation at being so treated on the part of the target. But distancing reserve can also be interpreted as (or inferred as) a sign of a new *perspective* from which things can be shown and seen differently: "From whatever angle Irony is approached, the habit of making or perceiving incongruities has an impressive tendency to broaden the view, leading to the perception of incongruities on a wider and wider scale" (Chevalier 44). Another positive way of reading the distancing function of irony would be to see it as a refusal of the tyranny of explicit judgements³ at a time when such judgments might not be appropriate or desirable.

We begin, however, to tread on trickier terrain here, and the terms used to describe the negative evaluation of irony's functions begin to become more "loaded". To call irony an *evasive* trope is to associate it with equivocation, hypocrisy, deception and duplicity. To many commentators on irony, the dissembling Greek *eirōn* figure, from whom the trope derives its name, is a cynical and hypocritical one (see Worcester 93; Knox, *The Word* 38-42). The Greek root of *eirōnia* means dissimulation or deception, and evidently the common denominator of all definitions of irony in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a view of irony as "a deliberately deceptive act which suggests a conclusion opposite to the real one" (Hutchens 353). LA Richards once noted that "simple readers" (as he called them) often mistake irony for insincerity (264), but even very adept and complex readers sometimes see irony as a form of evasion of committed speech (Smith 254). It is said that irony allows "a speaker to address remarks to a recipient which the latter will understand quite well, be known to understand, know that he is known to understand; and yet neither participant will be able to hold the other responsible for what has been understood" (Goffman 515). Irony, then, can be seen as a deliberate evasion of responsibility. Such is one critic's evaluation of Anatole France's irony as "the product of certain radical insufficiencies of character and a mode of escape from the fundamental problems and responsibilities of life" (Chevalier 12). France is inferred to be "brilliant and irresolute, gifted and sterile, unwilling and unable to make a final choice" (80). This single case is theorized from a general view of irony as characterizing "the attitude of one who, when confronted with the choice of two things that are mutually exclusive, chooses both. Which is but another way of saying that he chooses neither. He cannot bring himself to give up one for the other, and he gives up both. But he reserves the right to derive from each the greatest possible passive enjoyment. And this enjoyment is Irony" (79). There are, in fact, many such statements about the evasive and escapist functions of irony (see Dyson 1), though some commentators do note that perhaps there are things that at times require escaping from. As one put it: "Irony offers an escape from mental pain as morphine offers an escape from physical pain" (Worcester 142). He then rather moralistically added: "To adopt either one as a fixed and permanent habit leads to disintegration of the personality." Like a drug habit, irony is said to dry up the "springs of action" and cause a "paralysis of the will" (142).

In the light of such indictment, could there even be a positive version of what is negatively coded as an evasive function of irony?⁴ Perhaps there could, if the trope's doubleness were seen as a way of

counteracting the tendency to assume a dogmatic position of "Truth" through the acknowledgement of *provisionality*. Its laconic reticence might then be seen as a positive alternative to authoritative pronouncements (Jankelevitch 89-91). There can exist a kind of irony which "doesn't reject or refute or turn upside-down: not evasiveness or lack of courage or conviction, but an admission that there are times when we cannot be sure, not so much because we don't know enough as because uncertainty is intrinsic, of the essence" (Enright 6). Irony is certainly a form of fence-sitting: it sits between meanings and evaluations, and sits there unstably. Sometimes we value this positively - as has tended to be the case in postmodern writing. Patricia Waugh sees Beckett and Calvino as using irony to "provide themselves with escape routes from the endless permutations of systems which might continually change their surface forms but which retain their inherent structures" (47).⁵

To move on now to a still more hotly debated - and thus affectively charged - function of irony: its role in self-deprecation is a familiar one to Canadians, it is said, as if, in the face of British and French past and American present cultural power, Canadians have resorted to *self-deprecating* irony as a way of signalling their self-positioning (as marginal and marginalized), their self-doubts, and maybe even their rejection of the need to presume or assume superiority - especially against such overwhelming odds. Sometimes, as Plato's Socrates showed us, self-deprecation can be both a trick and a form of indirect boast, even though Aristotle argued in his *Ethics* (iv.7.1-17) that the Greek *eiron* was the opposite of the *alazon* or boaster. The *eiron* was a self-deprecating figure, appearing less than he or she was, and sometimes this was done in an attempt to make oneself invulnerable. In this sense, then, self-deprecation and *self-protection* are the two sides of the same coin, and perhaps the positive and negative evaluations are more difficult to sort out here. For one thing, as Nancy Walker argues, self-deprecation can act self-protectively in quite a positive sense: "Self-deprecation is ingratiating rather than aggressive; it acknowledges the opinion of the dominant culture - even appears to confirm it - and allows the speaker or writer to participate in the humorous process without alienating the members of the majority" (123). Similarly irony could be deployed in a self-protective manner in the sense that it might act to attenuate the effect of, say, an order or a question, a boast, or even a declaration of love (see Mizzau 82). You can protect yourself because you can always say: I was only being ironic. You can even make an error into a joke with that same line; you can certainly use it to get out of embarrassing situations. In some ways, though, such self-protective irony isolates as effectively as it

guards. One critic calls the modern hero's sense of irony "a manner worn as a protective garment by a dissociated and neurotic personality" (Worcester 107), adding: "No condemnation is intended. To the extent that the modern world has destroyed our sources of sublimation and reduced us all to dissociated personalities, we are happy to grasp at irony in order to preserve our sanity" (107). He published those words in 1940.

Moving up the affective scale, measuring the increasing degree of critical edge to irony, the next, related function would likely be one that is negatively coded as *defensive*, as a defense mechanism (see Knox, "Irony" 634) and can be viewed as either warranted or as aggressively cautious. The more positive coding of this function would be in terms of *subversion*; of undermining from within. This is the irony of the passive aggressive, to be sure, but also that of the politically repressed - as the early work of Milan Kundera showed so well.⁶

Not far from such a function on this scale would be what today we positively code as *oppositional* ironies. This is where what could be called the "transideological" nature of irony is clearest, for, while these are the most easily politicizable functions of irony, they can cut in any direction: "Both conformers and rebels use irony at each other, and both suffer from it" (Wright 524). This may be seen as polemical, *transgressive* irony; it can also at times be *insulting* and contemptuous. But then we have moved from *oppositional* to *offensive* functions, perhaps. When invective and *attack* are the ends of irony, then the coding has definitely been negativized at the same time as the affective charge has been increased considerably. The positive version of this last function would likely be the *corrective* use of irony in satire, for at least it suggests a positive set of values that one is correcting towards. Arguably all irony has some corrective function (Muecke, *Irony* 4), and since satire is usually corrective or ameliorative in intent (see Highet 56), it frequently turns to irony as one way of ridiculing and implicitly correcting the vices and follies of humankind. Clearly there is a wide tonal range possible within this corrective function, as in all the other - from the scorning and disdainful to the playfully teasing. The classic example of the former is Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, a political pamphlet whose dispassionate, business-like, grave tone is played off against the utterly immodest proposal that the situation of famine and poverty in eighteenth-century Ireland would be solved if people bred and marketed babies for food. To give but one brief example of how this irony functions, the pamphlet claims that if babies became a marketable commodity, then there would be changes in social interactions at the level of the married couple, as it would then be in their economic

interest to breed fat babies. The result, we are dryly told, would be that "Men would become as *fond* of their Wives, during the Time of their Pregnancy, as they now are of their *Mares* in Foal, their *Cows* in Calf, or *Sows* when they are ready to farrow; nor offer to beat or kick them (as is too *frequent* a Practice) for fear of a Miscarriage" (Swift 493-94). F.R. Leavis argues that this is an example of Swift's superior, self-asserting delight in savage destruction (371), but I would infer instead a corrective aim to this ironic inversion - and the norms he is both promoting and attacking are not hard to see. Indeed, most critics agree that Swift is a moralist in his satiric use of corrective ironies. Irony need not function in quite this strong and oven fashion to be called corrective. Laurence Sterne's ability to put the reader of *Tristram Shandy* in a double bind is a good example of the lighter end of the tonal range. The text encourages us to laugh at Tristram's sexual *double entendres*, but we are then made to be rather embarrassed by our own laughter. This has been called a gentle and subtle mode of moral correction that was put into operation by Sterne the clergyman, offering us "salutary lessons in humility" (Richter 143) and subverting any confidence we might wish to retain in our own moral innocence.

Satire is historically the genre which has most obviously deployed this kind of corrective irony. For some critics it is clearly a positive to have a firm perspective from which to correct the vices and follies of the world, to have "real standards" in which to ground moral outrage (see Furst 8-9). But today, others are increasingly suspicious of a stand like this: to presume such a position of authority and Truth, they argue, might well be itself a folly, if not a vice. What both poles are responding to here is what Frye calls the militancy of corrective irony: "its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured" (223) and found wanting. For obvious reasons, satire has long been associated with a conservative impulse, a desire to "shore up the foundations of the established order" (Elliott 273), but commentators appear to disagree today as to whether the satiric is now as important a function of irony as it was in, say, eighteenth-century England. They argue either that there is certainly a lot around today for corrective irony to correct or that the very idea of correctable folly or error has given way to a skepticism about the very possibility of change (Wilde 28, 55). Perhaps both are true. Or perhaps we need new terms in which to think this function. Maybe the "moral" categories in which we have usually thought of irony have been recoded, in our postmodern times, into "political" ones. This was made possible by the "neutralizing" of irony, so to speak, by American New Criticism: that is, the removing

of the moral implications from the usage of the word by distancing it from precisely its satiric meaning. As Wimsatt and Brooks wrote in the mid 1960s: "One apparently needs to insist nowadays that the term 'irony' need not always be taken with a strongly emotive and moral accent" but can be, instead, a more neutral, "cognitive principle which shades off through paradox into the general principle of metaphor and metaphoric structure" (747). But I also think there can still be a strong affective - or emotive - accent to irony, and that corrective irony still exists today.

So too does the more corrosive, aggressive mode of *attack*, of course. Sigmund Freud, in his analysis of humour in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, argued that ironic modes such as parody, travesty, and caricature are always, despite their seemingly innocent humour, actually "directed against people and objects which lay claim to authority and respect" (200). So when Colombian painter Fernando Botero paints his version of Marie Antoinette - as a "bloated" woman - he is attacking both a traditionally romanticized figure of history and the kind of (here literalized) "inflation" historical reputation brings about. He is also ironizing an entire tradition of idealized high art portraiture, of course. In other words, no matter how playful, such irony is still tendentious; it contains a real potential for aggression - offensive and defensive (Freud 97).⁷ The offensive function of irony is that corrosive, cutting, derisive mode of attack or insult, usually destructive in inferred intent and effect, though often in strange ways. In his preface to his 1965 anthology of *Post-War Polish Poetry*, Czeslaw Milosz called irony "an ambivalent and sometimes dangerous weapon, often corroding the hand which wields it" (cited in Enright 20).

There certainly exists a kind of bitter irony that has no desire to correct, that is merely contemptuous and scornful. But, surprisingly perhaps, it is harder to code this in a positive or negative way because of the "transideological" nature of the trope: those in all political positions have been known to indulge in it. Yet, the label of "offensive" is frequently the negative way of referring to ironies which are aimed at things we support; "oppositional" is the positive label we tend to use when we ironize things of which we disapprove. In this way, post-colonial or feminist ironists might be considered oppositional by those sharing their politics and offensive by those who do not. In discussing nineteenth-century French writing, Richard Terdiman uses the word "counter-discourse" to describe irony as a way of contesting dominant habits of mind and expression (12). This is the transgressive end of oppositional irony's functioning, but it may not be any less affectively charged than the insulting or attacking function.

The sharpest critical edge seems to be reserved not so much for such invective but for that *elitist, exclusumary* functioning of irony that every discussion of the trope invokes. Irony clearly differentiates and thus potentially excludes: some people are going to "get" it and some are not. Paul de Man claimed that the superiority/inferiority dualism was implied in any ironic distancing (195). Like many others, he looks back to Kierkegaard's famous and much cited statement (from probably the most widely read and quoted M.A. thesis in the world), that irony is not understood by all because it "travels in an exclusive incognito, as it were, and looks down from its exalted station with compassion on ordinary pedestrian speech" (265). Irony has been called an intellectual attitude, an aristocratic, even anti-social one (Palante 158-59). Others talk of the verticality of its "axis of power" and knowledge (Muecke, "Images" 402) and of the rhetoric of hierarchy associated with it (Dane 48, 51, 54, 57, 60). The ironist is always seen as on top, and the comprehending audience is not far below, be it in rhetorical or in Romantic irony. To use Schlegel's theatre-architecture image (which provoked Hegel's ire): there are ironies for the "Parterre" or ground, and those for the "Logen" or boxes (see Dane 114). Images of voyeurism and sadism also proliferate in these discussions of the ironist as a kind of omniscient, omnipotent, god-figure, smiling down - with irony - on the rest of us.⁸ This idea of irony functioning in an elitist way obviously involves an inference about the ironist as feeling superior and about the audience who might "get" the irony and so feel part of a "small, select, secret society" (Worcester 77). This latter point suggests, however, that irony includes as much as it excludes, that it involves the pleasure of collaboration, even collusion, with the ironist, creating what Wayne Booth calls "amiable communities" (28).⁹ Kenneth Burke relates irony to dialectic and to what he calls the dramatic "which aims to give us a representation by the use of mutually related or interacting perspectives" (503) and which results in "[t]rue irony, humble irony...based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him" (514), like Flaubert with his Madame Bovary.

These two perspectives on the *exclusionary/inclusionary* potential of irony are based on the same notion of audience. The first sees irony as implying an assumption of superiority and sophistication on the pan of both the ironist and the intended (that is, comprehending) audience - at the expense of the uncomprehending, excluded audience. In a way, it is a form of flattery: Gibbon, for example, is said to invite his reader to "join him on terms of true equality for the

re-enactment of manners, beliefs and customs inferior to our own" (Dyson 49). This is the function of irony that plays into arrogance and insensitivity, or as Booth puts it, "offers special temptations to our weaknesses, especially our pride" (44). Its most extreme form is what he amusingly calls "The Snotty Sublime." The issues of power and authority are clearly involved in this function of irony and this is why I have, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, placed it at the top of the affective scale.

In a related sense, irony is also said to create in-groups: Clone study has even demonstrated a substantial increase in the use of the definite article in the ironic mode, a use said to be linked with the implicit sense of an initiated group, aware of a real meaning behind an ironically baffled exterior" (Frye 61). Definite articles are not the only way of creating what Erving Goffman, in his work on framing, has called "collusive communication," wherein there are "those in on it [who] constitute a collusive net and those the net operates against, the excolluded" - to coin a punning term (84). To see how people can react with anger and irritation at being "excolluded" we need only read the newspaper following any ironic political speech or follow the political history of the use of irony in public exhibitions such as the Royal Ontario Museum's 1990 "Into the Heart of Africa" in Toronto. To know how important the community-enhancing function of irony might be we need only watch and listen to the seductive ironies of a rock star like Madonna and note their effect on her fans. However, it may well be that it is less that irony creates communities than that communities make irony possible. If irony is seen as a communicative strategy, in other words, it is something that can be learned; it is accessible to anyone (as ironist or interpreter). Irony is perhaps best seen, therefore, as a trope dependent on context and on what I would like to call discursive communities. We all belong simultaneously to many such communities of discourse, and each one has its own restrictive (and enabling) communication conventions. I can at one and the same time belong to communities constituted by the fact that I am a woman, a teacher, a writer, a consumer, a Canadian. Those who share the basic understanding that irony can exist (that is, that saying one thing and meaning another isn't necessarily a lie) and of how it works already belong to a community based on the knowledge of the possibility and nature of this trope. In other words, irony doesn't *create* communities; communities *make irony possible*. The more the shared context, the fewer the textual markers needed to signal - or comprehend - irony. The multiple communities to which we all belong involve class, race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, profession, religion, neighbourhood, and so on. They encompass

ideologies and unspoken understandings as much as openly avowed beliefs and affiliations. This way of looking at the *inclusionary* aspect of irony might help us understand why it is that young students who can speak the language of irony outside the classroom, who comprehend its subtleties in popular culture, might fail to see it in a text like Swift's. It may be, at least to some extent, a question of different discursive communities, not a question of the competence to understand the workings of irony itself. From this theoretical vantage point it might be possible to reconsider that "transideological" nature and usage of irony: how it functions in the service of a broad range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests, offering affective extremes of pleasure and pain, delight and irritation, perhaps at the same time.

We have seemingly come far from the simple rhetorical use of irony which with we began, but both the critical evaluative edge and the possibility of negative or positive codings are constants in all the different functions of irony. One function for which I have not made room in my schema is one that I cannot place easily, one that we might call the *liminal*, operating in the open space Victor Turner once described as the place where "novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (97). This would be a constructive rather than a deconstructive function for irony. For some it is the paradoxical space of making meaning between meanings that constitutes postmodernism or maybe women's writing within a patriarchal society. However we define it, its very presence underlines the limitations of any attempt - including this one - to schematize the complexities of the trope that has been linked to both provocation and conservation, intimacy and detachment, heterogeneity and conformity, communication and evasion. To return to where I began, irony is not simply a matter of "disambiguating", that is, of substituting a figurative for a literal meaning. When viewed as an evaluative process or as a communicative act going on in the space of difference, the space "in between" meanings, irony is, if anything, "complexifying" - and the awkwardness of those terms is nothing compared to the awkwardness of the trope they attempt to describe.

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NOTES

- 1 Sociologist Edmond Wright (540-41) has even developed an Irony Model for sociology based on the idea that all interactive behaviour involves irony -

because no agent can be aware of everything about the intention of other social partners.

- 2 Williams suggests that there are both detached and participant ironies. The images used for this distanced perspective are various, but one that is curious is that used by Eleanor Hutchens (358, 363) of irony as a sport, from whence she claims that detachment is therefore necessary to it. Sport, to me, suggests a more involved observer, however. But perhaps that is precisely the paradox of ironic distancing.
- 3 A version of this might be Northrop Frye's definition of irony as "the attitude of the poet as such, a dispassionate construction of a literary form, with all assertive elements, implied or expressed eliminated" (40-41). For an attack on this view, see Booth x.
- 4 John Vignaux Smyth codes irony as deceptive evasion positively in order to link it with play and the erotic in cognition and aesthetics. To do justice to his complex argument would require more space than is here possible.
- 5 Some critics even see equivocation as the essence of "true" art and thus irony becomes a kind of divine protectress of it (Almansi 81); for a refutation of this stand, see Decottignies (25).
- 6 One critic (Berrendonner 239) goes so far as to call irony the last refuge of human freedom. See too Almansi 37.
- 7 To add to the confusion, however, even Freud admitted that there was a positive side even to this negative view: irony could work to lift inhibitions and repressions (119, 129, 148-58) and even release pleasure (134).
- 8 Anderson and Sharrock (568-69) argue that this figure describes the stance of sociologists toward the rest of us ordinary mortals and our understanding of our society: according to the experts, we are naive, gullible, and ignorant, while the sociologists see and understand how things *really* are, and thus use ironic condescending modes to refer to the rest of us.
- 9 Another version of this is Gary Handwerk's argument that irony is a way of dealing with the problem of the subject in language and its apparent communicative isolation. For him, irony is a necessarily intersubjective act of confrontation with and mediation through another subject.

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