IRONY

Claire Colebrook

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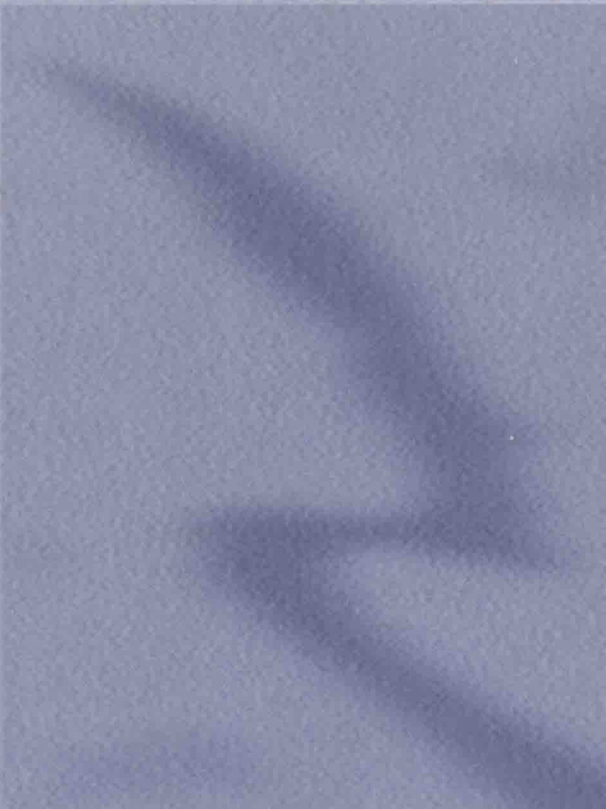

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary structures.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

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1

THE CONCEPT OF IRONY

Despite its unwieldy complexity, irony has a frequent and common definition: saying what is contrary to what is meant (Quintilian 1995–98 [9.2.44], 401), a definition that is usually attributed to the first-century Roman orator Quintilian who was already looking back to Socrates and Ancient Greek literature. But this definition is so simple that it covers everything from simple figures of speech to entire historical epochs. Irony can mean as little as saying, 'Another day in paradise', when the weather is appalling. It can also refer to the huge problems of postmodernity; our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony. Irony, then, by the very simplicity of its definition becomes curiously indefinable.

THE HISTORY OF IRONY: FROM *EIRONEIA* TO *IRONIA*

In the comic plays of Aristophanes (257–180 BC) *eironeia* referred to lying rather than complex dissimulation. When *eironeia*, not much later than Aristophanes, came to refer to a dissimulation that was not deceitful but clearly recognisable, and intended to be recognised, irony intersected with the political problem of human meaning. The problem of irony is at one with the problem of politics: how do we know what others really mean, and on what basis can we secure the sincerity and authenticity of speech? The word *eironeia* was first used to refer to artful double meaning in the Socratic dialogues of Plato, where the word is used both as pejorative – in the sense of lying – and affirmatively, to refer to Socrates' capacity to conceal what he really means. It was this practice of concealment that opened the Western political/philosophical tradition, for it is through the art of playing with meaning that the interlocutors of a dialogue are compelled to question the fundamental concepts of our language.

Plato's Socrates has, from Quintilian to the present, been identified with the practice of irony. Socrates often spoke as though he were ignorant or respectful, precisely when he wished to expose his interlocutor's ignorance. He would ask someone for the definition of friendship or justice and then allow the confident and ready definitions of everyday speech to be exposed in all their contradictory incompleteness. By demanding a definition from those who presented themselves as masters of wisdom, Socrates showed how some terms were less self-evident and definitive than everyday meaning would seem to suggest. It is no accident that Socrates used irony to challenge received knowledge and wisdom at a historical moment when the comfort and security of small communities were being threatened by political expansion and the inclusion of other cultures. The tribal cultures of Ancient Greece were opening out to imperial expansion and the inclusion of others. It is at this moment of cultural insecurity – in the transition from the closed community to a polis of competing viewpoints – that the concept of irony is formed. *Eironeia* is no longer lying or deceit but a complex rhetorical practice whereby one can say one thing – such as Socrates' claim to be ignorant – but mean quite another, as when Socrates' exposes the supposedly wise as lacking in all insight. Socrates tried to show that it is always possible that what we take to be the self-evident sense of a context or culture is far from obvious; it may be that what is being said is *not meant*.

Today, despite its major differences, 'postmodern' irony also has this distancing function: we wear 1980s disco clothing or listen to 1970s country and western music, not because we are committed to particular styles or senses but because we have started to question sincerity and commitment in general; everything is as kitsch and dated as everything else, so all we can do is quote and dissimulate. But even in a world of postmodern irony, the very sense that everything is somehow quoted or simulated relies on a lost sense of the truly valuable or original. Both Socrates' questions and the contemporary use of parody and quotation rely on distinguishing between those statements and actions that we genuinely intend and those that we repeat or mime only to expose their emptiness. How do we acquire the sort of insider knowledge that allows us to interpret a text or context and distinguish the ironic from the non-ironic? How do we know when a speaker is *not* sincere? This chapter provides a history and overview of competing approaches to irony but in doing so it is already within the problem of irony. For the very practice of charting and explaining a series of epochs and cultures relies on being able to identify and understand each writer's specific culture or context. In many ways, then, we have to be ironic: capable of maintaining a distance from any single definition or context, quoting and repeating various voices from the past. But we also have to be wary of irony; we have to be sure that the past we grasp means what it seems to mean.

It is a peculiarly modern gesture to think of differing epochs, each with their own standard of truth. In order to think of the relative truth and difference of historical contexts or epochs we have to imagine that certain contexts may be meaningful and coherent and yet no longer be held as true. We read the sense of past texts and contexts without belief or commitment, seeing and recognising the 'truths' of the past but not holding to those truths. Only with some concept of irony is it possible to range across literary history. The idea of past contexts that are meaningful in themselves but which are no longer 'ours' requires the ironic viewpoint of detachment. Through irony we can discern the meaning or sense of a context without participating in, or being committed to, that context.

Hayden White (1973, 375) argues that the very notion of modern history is essentially ironic: for the historian must *read* the past as if there were some meaning of the past not apparent to the past itself. The past always means more than it explicitly 'says'. The historian must not take the past at its word but always be other than the worlds she surveys. Furthermore, once we become aware of, and sensitive to, the notion of irony and specific historical contexts it becomes possible to read irony back into earlier texts. Irony destroys the immediacy and sincerity of life; through irony we do not just live the meanings of our world, we can ask what these meanings are *really* saying. Not only, then, does irony share the fluidity and context-dependency of all general concepts; it is the very notion of irony that allows us to think of competing and discontinuous contexts. Reading ironically means, in complex ways, not taking things at their word; it means looking beyond standard use and exchange to what this or that might *really mean*. This can be simple. If I say, 'This is paradise!' and our context – the weather outside – is clearly not blissful, then you know I am being ironic. But what happens in literature where, precisely because texts circulate from other contexts, we have no obvious context to refer to? Irony therefore raises the question of literary interpretation: if we know what a word means according to its context, how do we know or secure a proper context?

Shakespearean drama, for example, was once read and received as a sincere defence and representation of the well-ordered, pre-modern cosmos (Bradley 1905). Such a reading was possible only because of a (then) widely shared notion about historical context: the Elizabethan world-view was one of unquestioning belief and obedience to ordained law (Lovejoy 1936). Today, however, Shakespeare is often read ironically: not as a writer who represented the standard world-view, but as a dramatist who displayed and invented that world-view as a position to be questioned (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985; Drakakis 1995). Such new readings are possible because critics have recreated the supposedly original context. According to the new historicist criticism that was dominant in the 1980s, contexts are not passive backgrounds to the texts we read; contexts are created by texts, with each text also presenting the instabilities and insecurities of context. A text is never just what it says; it also displays the production and force of different ways of speaking. According to Stephen Greenblatt, the Renaissance was an era of competing and contested representations (Greenblatt 1988). Texts were anything but sincere; they presented standard Elizabethan myths of power *as* myths. The very practice of re-reading the past and of suspecting that all those texts that were once read as sincere might actually be critical of the power they describe depends upon the structure of irony. It is always possible, particularly if we question or re-invent a context, that a text can be read as having a meaning *other than* what it says. The twentieth-century writer Jorge Luis Borges gives a stunning example of how even the most sacred texts can be exposed to irony. In 'Pierre

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Menard, Author of Don Quixote', Borges describes the project of a twentieth-century author who sets himself the task of rewriting Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Simply transcribing the novel would be too facile a task, so Pierre Menard decides to project himself into the position of the original Cervantes. Eventually, he produces one identical paragraph of the 'original' text. Of course this completely identical paragraph is stunningly ironic, for the very circumstance of its new context gives it an entirely transformed sense. Borges then suggests that all the texts of Western culture could benefit from this imaginative device. What if we were to imagine *The Imitation of Christ* as authored by James Joyce (Borges 1965, 51)?

This process of ironic re-reading, where we dare to imagine a text as somehow meaning something other than what it explicitly says, characterises much of what counts as literary criticism. Indeed, one could argue – as many twentieth-century critics were to do – that literature is characterised by its potential for irony, its capacity to mean something other than a common-sense or everyday use of language. To see Shakespeare as ironic is not just to see him, as a playwright, as distanced from the world he presents. It is also a recognition of our capacity as readers to question whether a literary text is at one with what it 'says'; for a text can always be read as if it were presenting or 'mentioning' a world-view, rather than intending that world-view. This is one mode of irony: a writer uses all the figures and conventions of a context while refraining from belief or commitment. We can imagine an author behind the work who presents certain positions but does not really intend or mean what is said. It is possible to read Shakespeare ironically, not because we are secure about context, but because the very idea of what counted as *the* Elizabethan context is, and was, up for question. Shakespeare would be read as sincere and non-ironic if we simply believed in the Renaissance past as a time of unquestioned duty and belief; he would be ironic, however, if we felt that his drama, as art, displayed that belief in order to show its limits and fragility.

Nowadays there are countless books and articles referring to the irony of medieval, Renaissance and even biblical texts. Such forays into the past are justified by the continual use of the word *ironia* throughout the Middle Ages. Authors as early as Bede (672/3–735) and Erasmus found *ironia* in the bible (Knox 1989, 29). Their cited examples were those of explicit mockery, such as the taunt made by the chief priests and elders to Christ: 'Prophesy to us, O Christ, who he is that smote you' (Matthew xxvi 68). Today, though, the analysis of irony in biblical and ancient texts extends beyond such isolated and explicit examples to an irony that pervades the text as a whole (Camery-Hoggatt 1992; Duke 1985; Good 1965; Plank 1987). What needs to be understood in any history of irony is the complex and ironic process of 'reading back'. Once we have the concept and theory of irony it is possible to discern ironic strands in literature that did not, itself, use or theorise the concept of irony.

Before the explicit and extended theorisation of irony in the nineteenth century, irony was a recognised but minor and subordinate figure of speech. The first significant instances of the Greek word *eironeia* occur in the dialogues of Plato (428–347 BC), with reference to Socrates. It is here that *eironeia* no longer meant straightforward lying, as it did for Aristophanes, but an intended simulation which the audience or hearer was meant to recognise. As we will see in the next chapter, Socratic irony was defined not just as the use of irony in conversation but also as an entire personality. Aristotle (384–322 BC) also referred to irony, most notably in his *Ethics* and *Rhetoric*, but it was the Platonic and Socratic use that became definitive for later thought. Aristotle's ironist was, like Plato's Socrates, one who played down or concealed his virtues and intelligence (Aristotle 1934 [*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.7.3–5], 241). Aristotle regarded such an ironic personality as neither pernicious nor ideal. Irony was not a vice but it was far from being a virtue. The truly virtuous citizen would be neither boastful, nor ironic, but sincere in his self-presentation.

It would seem to make sense, then, to look at Socrates as the very beginning of irony. For it was in Plato's Socratic dialogues that irony referred to both a complex figure of speech and the creation of an enigmatic personality. Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers have done just this, and placed Socrates at the centre of the concept of irony (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989; Nehamas 1988 and 1999).* Some go so far as to say that Socrates' ironic personality inaugurated a peculiarly

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*Dates in square brackets are those of first publication. Dates in curved brackets are those of modern editions listed in the references, and page numbers refer to these.

Western sensibility (Lefebvre 1995, 12; Vlastos 1991, 29, 44). His irony, or his capacity *not* to accept everyday values and concepts but live in a state of perpetual question, is the birth of philosophy, ethics and consciousness. The problem with seeing Socrates as the origin of irony, and irony as the essence of Western consciousness, is that the awareness of Socrates and Socratic irony was virtually absent from medieval and Renaissance works on irony and rhetoric. Although Quintilian referred to Socrates, it was his distinction between verbal irony, as a figure of speech, and irony as an extended figure of thought that led to a strictly rhetorical tradition of defining irony. Irony was explained by isolated literary examples, such as those Quintilian himself drew from Homer and Virgil, and not by the complexity of the Socratic personality. The Latin manuals on rhetoric written up until the Renaissance knew the Greek sources primarily through what was available of Cicero and Quintilian. Even in the Renaissance, when the Socratic dialogues and the fuller works of Cicero became available, *ironia* was not considered to be the full-scale mode of Socratic existence that it was for nineteenth-century writers. *Ironia* was a trope or figure of speech, an artful way of using language.

Until the Renaissance, irony was theorised within rhetoric and was often listed as a type of allegory: as one way among others for saying one thing and meaning another. When the Greek and Latin descriptions of Socrates became available to Renaissance writers, irony was still not what it was to become for the Romantics (an attitude to existence). Irony was a rhetorical method. The Latin rhetorical manuals known in the Middle Ages had their origin in juridical and manifestly political situations; they instructed how best to construct speeches for the purposes of defence, praise or public persuasion. There was very little that was 'literary' or creative in such uses of rhetoric. *Ironia*, as defined by those who followed Cicero and Quintilian, had little to do with creating an artful mode of self and consciousness. *Ironia* was a way of making what one said and meant more effective; it was not a way of abstaining from belief or commitment. Later, in the Middle Ages, the prime purpose of rhetorical treatises was instruction for religious sermons and writing, although the models used were still the original Latin contexts of juridical defence and persuasion (Kennedy 1980, 24). Again, *ironia* was a limited technique, part of the method of effective speaking. It was ultimately in the service of getting one's point across. It did not constitute an entire style or mode of delivery, but could be used within speeches and writings to serve the overall effect. One could not have said that a text or person was 'ironic' any more than it would have made sense to refer to someone as 'metaphorical'; irony was a specific device, not a sensibility or attitude.

When the Renaissance became aware of the original Greek and extended Latin references to Socrates as an ironist the concept of irony was expanded from being one figure of speech among others to being a figure that could characterise an entire personality. Socrates' irony was habitual or extended: he tended to use irony frequently and as a mode of argument. But even here Socrates was certainly not celebrated as the epitome of Western consciousness, nor was irony granted a fundamental role in the definition of literature or literary awareness. If Socrates, today, is the beginning of irony and Western consciousness, he is so in a quite modern sense. Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian all defined irony in reference to Socrates, but they did not see irony as a radically transformative political position; Socrates' irony was one technique among others for political discussion. Since the nineteenth century, however, Socratic irony has come to mean more than just a figure of speech and refers to a capacity to remain distant and different from what is said in general. If there has always been irony, both in practice and in name, it has not always taken the same form. This historical problem places us in an ironic predicament: how justified are we in reading past texts as ironic; do they mean what they seem to be saying?

So, in thinking about irony historically we have to try to separate the sources for the definition of irony (which range from Ancient Greece to the present) from the past texts to which we can now apply the idea of irony. On the one hand, there are uses of the word 'irony' throughout literary history to name varying levels of linguistic complexity. On the other, there are instances of language that we can now identify as ironic, even if they were not explicitly labelled as such. In addition to specific references to irony and uses of irony throughout history there is also a historical shift in the status of irony. At a certain point in history, particularly with the self-conscious recognition of being modern in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, irony was seen to characterise life as a whole. Once irony was expanded to this degree it was then possible to look back, not just at Socrates but at Shakespeare or Chaucer, and see their writing as subtly ironic.

MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE IRONY

As noted above, the most recognised definitions of irony came from Cicero and Quintilian. Medieval and Renaissance authors who did not have access to these texts directly were nevertheless aware of the tradition of Ciceronian rhetoric through later sources. The most important of these later sources were the widely used grammars by Aelius Donatus (AD 4), and Isidore of Seville (*c.*570–636), whose *Origines* or *Etymologiae* served as rhetorical encyclopedia throughout the Middle Ages. Both these sources continue the idea of irony as saying the opposite or contrary of what is meant and make no reference to a broader irony that would characterise an entire personality or even an entire text. Donatus, in his monumental *Ars Grammatica*, defined irony as a trope where the real meaning is the opposite of the apparent meaning: *tropus per contrarium quod conatur ostendens* (Donatus 1864, 401). Irony was employed within texts and speeches for clearly intended and recognisable reasons. Like Quintilian, Isidore of Seville defined irony as a figure of speech and as a figure of thought – with the figure of speech, or clearly substituted word, being the primary example. The figure of thought occurs when irony extends across a whole idea, and does not just involve the substitution of one word for its opposite. So, 'Tony Blair is a saint' is a figure of speech or verbal irony if we really think that Blair is a devil; the word 'saint' substitutes for its opposite. 'I must remember to invite you here more often' would be a figure of thought, if I really meant to express my displeasure at your company. Here, the figure does not lie in the substitution of a word, but in the expression of an opposite sentiment or idea. When medieval and Renaissance writers were ironic, it was this local and rhetorical mode of irony that was employed: an irony that could be explained either through the substitution of a word for its opposite or as adopting, say, an expression of praise when derision is really implied.

When later writers have looked back at pre-modern examples of irony they have argued that writers from Bede to Chaucer were aware of the concept of irony (Knox 1989, 8–9), and they have also been able to identify cases of irony. They have done so by appealing either to the context of the literary work as a whole, or to the social context in which such works were written. D.H. Green (1979) has not only argued that cases of simple and complex irony can be found in medieval literature and that medieval writers were aware of the rhetoric of irony; he has also described specific reasons for irony in the medieval romance tradition. We can discern irony in medieval literature, Green argues, because works are no longer circulated anonymously and orally but are attributed to specific authors (Green 1979, 6). So, we can ask, 'Is this meant ironically?' and refer not just to the odd word, but to entire speeches within a work. We can question an overall intent. Also, Green argues, the writer of romances would have occupied a distanced and critical position in relation to the courts and would have used irony to say implicitly what it might not have been politic to say outright. This is, of course, a crucial feature and possibility of irony in any age, but as Green notes, the conditions of court and patronage would have been particularly constraining on expression and would have been conducive to using indirect modes of expression such as irony (Green 1979, 359). Furthermore, at the time of the writing of romances there were remnants of the social ideal of the ironic citizen – going back to Socrates – as an elevated and urbane individual; such an ideal is perfectly in keeping with the values of courtly life (ibid. 341). Most of the examples cited by Green, however, are cases of simple irony, clearly identified by being incongruous with their context. When Gawain, prior to having his head chopped off, is greeted with, 'Now, Sir swete', the politeness is clearly *not* intended (ibid. 206).

Green, arguing for irony in medieval romances, gives a wealth of extended examples of irony. His analyses are typical of many arguments in literary criticism that identify irony across the range of literature in English, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Austen and Eliot. Here the irony can either lie in the situation, where what the character says is undermined by what they do or say elsewhere; or, the irony can lie in the speech itself where the rhetoric is so excessive or clichéd that we suspect the author of ironising the character's own limited imagination. The opening of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* offers two modes of extended irony. To begin with, the irony is a typical example of excessive praise signalling irony. We read the celebration of marriage ironically because the merchant has already expressed his dissatisfaction with his wife ('I have a wyf, the worste that may be' [1218]), so the context signals that the character cannot mean what he says. However, as in all literature, we are challenged as to where the irony lies: does the character intend the irony, by wanting to be understood as not praising marriage, or does

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