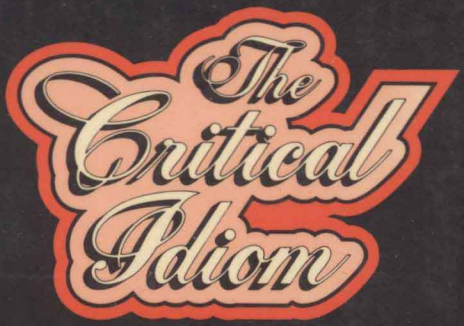
# Irony and the Ironic

D. C. Muecke



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*D. C. Muecke*

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To
Barbara Wall
fellow student

# *Preface to the second edition*

The change of title is designed solely to mark the fact that, with the exceptions of the section entitled 'Early concepts of irony' and a few paragraphs here and there, the present work constitutes less a revision of my earlier work in this series than a complete rewriting.

D.C.M.

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# 1
# *Introduction*

## Orientation

'When all else fails, read the directions.' These words, printed on a can of paint, show that irony plays a part in everyday living, a relatively small part, perhaps, though many other instances could be cited. Such 'folk irony' generally offers no great challenge; something more sly or covert like 'The directions may be ignored' might only have proved puzzling, though the message is much the same. In this work, more attention will be paid to irony in literature than to the simpler ironies practised or observed in life at large. Not that a sociological approach to irony need be uninteresting: one would like to know what parts both Verbal Irony and the shared recognition of ironical situations and happenings play in the daily life of different social groupings, and whether people are more likely or less likely to be ironical, more alert or less alert to irony, according to social class and status, degree of urbanization, strength of religious or political convictions, occupation, sex, education, IQ rating or personality type. The hero of Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno* remarks that 'Accountants are by nature a race of animals much inclined to irony.' Since, however, Svevo, not to mention his hero, had had a career in commerce, the statement if true may be ironical – but if ironical may be true.

'I had long been hearing, in the English colony at Tokyo, that no Japanese can understand irony (whereas the Chinese, of course, use it all the time).' So William Empson, who taught in both Japanese and Chinese universities in the 1930s (*New York Review of Books*, 12 June 1975, p. 37). On the other hand, a desultory

reading in anthologies of Chinese and Japanese classics (admittedly in English translations) might easily give a contrary impression: that the Chinese are straightforward and practical with a robust sense of humour, that the Japanese are involuted, introspective and sophisticated. The way in which the *tanka* was used in the tenth-century *Kagerō Nikki*, for example, for politely conveying reproach or disagreement through the indirectness of metaphor and innuendo, seems very close to irony, but obviously only someone at home in both Japanese and Western culture could say how close. The *Goncourt Journal* (20 March 1884) infers from the conversation of a single Japanese visitor that 'les Japonais ont une aimable ironie, une ironie un peu à la française'. In his *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago, 1965), Donald Levine tells us of the Amharic people who practise a form of verse not unlike the *tanka*, in that it has a literal and a hidden meaning often at odds with one another. And the more one comes to know of oral cultures, the more one is inclined to suspect that irony, or something like it, is a widespread phenomenon, though only the co-operation of many could provide what would nevertheless be desirable, a global survey showing which cultures practise irony, or something like it, most extensively, intensively and variously, which are most alert to ironic situations and events, and which have independently evolved concepts of irony.

This work draws only upon Western culture – from Moscow to Melbourne, via Madrid and Manhattan – and even then much is excluded. Specifically it excludes any detailed considerations of irony in the non-verbal arts, partly because of the expense of illustration, partly for want of expertise, and partly – this will perhaps confirm the lack of expertise – on the grounds that there seem to be no ways of being ironical that are specific to music, painting, landscape gardening, kinetic art, patisserie and so on. Non-representative art can be ironical in perhaps only two ways: incongruities of formal properties and parodies of the clichés, mannerisms, styles, conventions, ideologies and theories of earlier

artists, schools or periods: 'The hedgehog collection of solar panels on the roof makes mockery of the seriousness with which some diehard low-energy architects treat these symbols of our new energy source' (*The* [Melbourne] *Age*). The musical parodies described in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* are more complex than this, but it is the programmatic nature of much of the music that makes the greater complexity possible. As for representative art, the ironic painter, who paints his own studio with himself in it painting a self-portrait is not in principle different from the novelist whose novel is about himself writing an autobiographical novel. Or imagine this ironic picture: the subject, a religious hypocrite, is placed in an attitude of devotion; on one wall hangs a Magdalen that manages to be both pious and pornographic; and opposite, so placed within the window curtains (of penitential purple) as to suggest it has been overlooked or forgotten, is a lady's garter. But could this, however well done, achieve as much as Molière does in the speeches he gives Tartuffe?

What irony is and how it works; what it's for and what it's worth; what it's made from and how it's made up; how we know it when we see it; where the concept came from and where it's going: these questions and some others it will be the endeavour of this work to answer, at greater or lesser length and within the limitations already indicated.

## The ironical and the non-ironical

The importance of irony in literature is beyond question. One need not accept the view, put forward at least twice on different grounds, that all art, or all literature, is essentially ironic – or the view that all good literature must be ironic. One need only list the major writers in whose work irony is significantly present: Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Thucydides, Plato, Cicero, Horace, Catullus, Juvenal, Tacitus, Lucian, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Villon, Ariosto, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Pascal, Molière, Racine, Swift, Pope, Voltaire, Johnson, Gibbon,

Diderot, Goethe, Stendhal, Jane Austen, Byron, Heine, Baudelaire, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Mark Twain, Henry James, Chekhov, Shaw, Pirandello, Proust, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Musil and Brecht. What comparable list could be drawn up of writers whose work is not ironical at all or only occasionally, minimally or doubtfully ironical? Such a list implies the impossibility of separating an interest in irony as an art from an interest in great literature; one leads directly to the other.

The importance of being ironical, however, cannot be established without at the same time establishing the importance of being earnest. The golden eggs of irony could not be laid so abundantly if we were not knee-deep in geese. As scepticism presupposes credulity, so irony needs 'alazony', which is Greek for braggartism but in works on irony is shorthand for any form of self-assurance or naïvety. To say that history is the record of human fallibility and that the history of thought is the record of the recurrent discovery that what we assured ourselves was the truth, was in truth only a seeming truth is to say that literature has always had an endless field in which to observe and practise irony. This suggests that irony has basically a corrective function. It is like a gyroscope that keeps life on an even keel or straight course, restoring the balance when life is being taken too seriously or, as some tragedies show, not seriously enough, stabilizing the unstable but also destabilizing the excessively stable. Or we might think of it as a *sine qua non* of life and repeat what Thomas Mann quotes Goethe as saying, 'Irony is that little grain of salt that alone renders the dish palatable', or agree with Kierkegaard that 'as philosophers claim that no true philosophy is possible without doubt, so by the same token one may claim that no authentic human life is possible without irony' (*The Concept of Irony*, trans. Lee M. Capel, 1966, p. 338).

This should not be taken as advocating an ironic presence in every work of art, still less in all human behaviour, where in any case it would not be possible, since, as noted, eggs need geese. Moreover, the non-ironic is not necessarily alazonic; that is to say,

there are occasions in life and art, let us hope, when irony is not called for. We can say this without accepting Kierkegaard's firm subordination of the ironic to the ethic sphere: when Goethe in Italy offered himself a gorgeous Italian peach did he always add a '*Körnchen Salz*'?

What then are these occasions from which we would hope to exclude irony, if only to preserve some variety in life and art? In 1945 Auden wrote:

> Can I learn to suffer
> Without saying something ironic or funny
> On suffering?
>
> ('The Sea and the Mirror')

I expect in the end he did learn. I expect life can be relied upon to provide everyone with crises of passion from which irony retreats, in which there is no room for reflection, detachment or balance. Art too can be single-minded, that is, unironic; and if this is more likely to be true of the non-verbal arts it might be explained by the difference of the media. The non-verbal arts – music, dance, architecture, for example – appeal in the first instance to and through the senses. Literature, with language as its medium, is inescapably ideational. Of course we must qualify such bald statements. The informed gallery visitor or concert-goer knows how much in a still life or a sonata may be art or music criticism and therefore may be ironic. Conversely, language has its phonetic or sensuous element that in literature becomes 'music' and may, therefore, be single-minded. Nevertheless, the distinction remains, and it is precisely the exceptions and the qualifications that prove the rule. For it is when literature is most musical, in lyric poetry, that it is, by and large, least ironical. And it is when a painting is 'intellectual' or 'literary', whether in 'making a statement' or 'conveying a message', that it can be ironic. But when it is intent upon formal perfection or technical innovation or absolute expression, then irony may be felt as distracting or intrusive.

Art then is acceptably non-ironic when the appeal is simplest, most immediate and most absorbing, whether by approaching the aesthetic opacity of pure sensuousness or pure form, or by approaching the aesthetic transparency of the purely sublime, where intensity of feeling carries us swiftly through and beyond all consciousness of the medium. Combined, these two ways are summed up in what Milton says of poetry, that it is, compared with rhetoric, 'more simple, sensuous and passionate'.

The non-ironic, therefore, need not be restricted to what the ironic corrects or redeems or authenticates. We may agree with Anatole France in his essay on Rabelais that 'the world without irony would be like a forest without birds' but we need not wish every tree more bird than leaf. We might instead see the ironic and the non-ironic as, in part, complementary opposites, as reason and emotion are, each desirable and necessary but neither sufficient for all our needs. Thomas Mann, in the following, went some way towards this view:

> Irony and radicalism – this is an alternative and an Either-Or. An intelligent man has the choice (*if* he has it) to be either ironical or radical. There is, in all decency, no third possibility. Which he is depends on the argument that he accepts as ultimately and absolutely valid: life or spirit. . . . For the radical man life is no argument. *Fiat spiritus, pereat vita!* But the words of irony are: 'Can truth be an argument if it is a matter of life?'
>
> (*Meditations of a Non-Political Man*, quoted from Erich Heller, *The Ironic German*, London, 1958, pp. 236–7)

The 'third possibility' is the impossible but none the less obligatory (hence ironical!) injunction to be both ironical *and* radical. Thomas Mann was later to say, 'Irony always aims at both sides, at life as well as at the spirit' (ibid.). But this, as we shall see, implies a higher irony, definable as a serene, detached acceptance of the eternal opposition of life and spirit, the ironical (in a more sceptical sense) and the radical.

## Getting to grips with irony

'Only that which has no history can be defined' (Nietzsche). For this and other reasons the concept of irony is vague, unstable and multiform. The word 'irony' does not now mean only what it meant in earlier centuries, it does not mean in one country all it may mean in another, nor in the street what it may mean in the study, nor to one scholar what it may mean to another. The different phenomena the word is applied to may seem very tenuously related. The semantic evolution of the word has been haphazard; historically, our concept of irony is the cumulative result of our having, from time to time over the centuries, applied the term sometimes intuitively, sometimes heedlessly, sometimes deliberately, to such phenomena as seemed, perhaps mistakenly, to bear a sufficient resemblance to certain other phenomena to which we had already been applying the term. So the concept of irony at any one time may be likened to a ship at anchor when both wind and current, variable and constant forces, are dragging it slowly from its anchorage. It is only very recently that the word has achieved full colloquial status, together with a certain modishness that has led 'How ironical!' to oust 'What a coincidence!' and even 'How odd!' Example: 'The irony of the dismissal [of Gooch by Hughes for 99 in the Third Test] was that Hughes was dismissed for 99 in the first Test' (*The Australian*, 2–3 February 1980).

There is little to be done about this. Most people will continue to use a word like 'irony' without knowing or caring to know precisely how it has been used before or whether there is not a more suitable word already in use. As for ironologists, they will convince themselves very easily that any proposed restriction or extension of the meaning of the word, their own excepted, must be ruled out. So A. R. Thompson (*The Dry Mock*, 1948, p. 15) will argue in vain that irony is only irony when the effect is one of mingled pain and amusement; Guido Almansi (*L'Ironie de l'ironie*, Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e di Linguistica, Urbino,

1979) that the truly ironic is the ambiguously ironic; and Empson (op. cit.) that the 'basic situation for the trope of irony' is what, forty odd years ago, 'everyone assumed' it to be – A, speaking ironically, is correctly understood, as intended, by B but misunderstood, as intended, by C, a 'censor' or 'stupid tyrant'. Empson admits his 'pure form' of irony is seldom found, but seems, like the others, willing to deprive us of a word for the more frequently occurring phenomena that his definition excludes. When Cleanth Brooks (*The Well-Wrought Urn*, 1949, p. 191) wishes to extend the semantic range of the word 'irony' on the grounds that it is 'the most general term that we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context' he seems content to leave us without words to distinguish between the irony (in his new sense) of Tennyson's 'Tears, Idle Tears' and the irony (in an older sense) of Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.

In the matter of definition then, I shall not insist (except when I forget) that everyone set his watch by mine. I shall say what the time is according to me, since that is the only time I can be sure of. My attempts at definition and analysis beginning in the next chapter will, however, be prefaced by a sketch of the history of the concept of irony so that the reader can check his own watch.

Here, in the meantime, is a set of examples illustrating something of the range of what I expect most people with an 'English' literary education would regard as irony. The names are descriptive or conventional; no taxonomic aspiration should be inferred. The reader is invited to identify what the examples may have in common.

1 *Irony as rhetorical enforcement*

> The Government has made small slips before, of course. It has made minor errors of economic policy. It has occasionally deported the wrong people. It has gambled on the wrong defence system. It invaded the wrong country. All these peccadilloes