

The Status of Irony

MARIANNE SHAPIRO

Mercury being very desirous to know what credit he had obtained in the world, and how he was esteemed among mankind, disguised himself, and went to the shop of a famous Statuary, where images were to be sold. He saw Jupiter, Juno, and himself, and most of the other gods and goddesses: so, pretending that he wanted to buy, he asked the prices of several, and at length pointing to Jupiter, What, says he, is the lowest price you will take for that? A crown, says the other; and what for that? pointing to Juno: I must have something more for that. Mercury then, casting his eye upon the figure of himself, with all his symbols about it, Here am I, said he to himself, in quality of Jupiter's messenger, and the patron of artisans, with all my trades about me; and then smiling with self-sufficient air, and pointing to the image, and pray friend, what is the price of this elegant figure? Oh, replied the Statuary, if you will buy Jupiter and Juno, I will throw that into the bargain.¹

This assessment of irony and of its place in literary debate begins with a retelling of a very old story: that of a perennial contempt for interpretation. The fabulist and the hermeneutician contemplates Hermes, the bringer of messages, on several ironic levels. First of all is the overarching skepticism that attacks not only the vanity of

¹ *The Fables of Aesop*, intr. Michael Marqusee (1818; rpt. New York: Paddington Press, 1975), pp. 233-34.

the god in the fable but also that of any comparison of hermeneutic experience with the pristine experience of strength and beauty. There is a second aspect, too, which focuses more sharply on the subject of irony and ironic discourse. Mercury, or Hermes, serves here as an *alazon* or “boaster” who is in Greek comedy the stock foil for an *eiron*, the clever though seemingly naive character who undoes the foolishness of his target. On both levels it is of crucial importance that irony denotes an entire *Weltanschauung* and a performative stance that is very closely associated with it. Irony describes a whole gamut of behavior tending toward connotations of misrepresented meaning, deceptiveness, and dissimulation. With Aristotle, *eironeia* came to mean “pretended modesty” and a form of understatement that guides the ironist’s social actions:² hence the deceptive use by the ironist of words, including the representation of ironic stances as figures of speech.

Now although classical drama provided evidence of a highly developed sense of what we today, from a modern perspective, perceive as irony, that is, a clear recognition of the power of irony understood in terms of incongruous situations and events, actually it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the word irony was applied to them together with “literary” examples of other kinds.³ Not until 1833 did situational irony become distinct in literary terminology as a categorical concept. Fictional writing at that time manifested this category in abundance, as in the work of the German romantics, notably Tieck and Heine, who exploit irony as a means of expressing the paradoxical nature of reality.⁴ As in the long distant Greek case, though, the pose of innocence or simplicity—that assumed in more boastful terms by the *alazon*—was a prerequisite for the ironic stance and the debunking work of the ironist.

It can be argued that (particularly in Germany) the academic study of literature towards the end of the nineteenth century takes on a coloration which is ultimately compatible with the romanticist viewpoint regarding irony. For the emergence of “literary science” (as a

² *Nicomachean Ethics* 2, 7, 12: “Pretending when it goes too far is boastfulness... If it takes the form of understatement the pretense is called irony and the man Who shows it ironical.”

³ “...these uses of ‘mock’ and ‘banter’ were not really accepted for ‘irony’ until after [Connop] Thirlwall’s essay *On the Irony of Sophocles* in 1833” (D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* [London: Methuen, 1969], p. 50).

⁴ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) surveys the alliance of irony and the grotesque, esp. pp. 48-104, stressing the unrelatability of elements combined in the grotesque.

Geisteswissenschaft) contained a fundamentally ironic incongruity in its formation.⁵ One may discern a fundamental divergence and even a contradiction between the methods and goals which the academic discipline borrowed from ready models such as philology or folklore studies, on one hand; and on the other, the prevailing desire to capture the quality of an author's spirit. What might be described as a conflict between "letter" and "spirit," implicit in the very term applied to such studies, lends itself intrinsically and points to an ironic understanding of literary study itself. As soon as literature of any sort was abstracted from its historical and cultural matrix, that very process predisposed thought about fictions in an ironic direction, etching upon the face of writing the basic lines of contradiction that have prevailed and deepened to the present day in the Anglo-American and Continental traditions. Irony has grown and deepened as a fundamental "literary" outlook, whose last articulable refuge is textualism.

In the rough, this situation is the legacy of the Romantic period, when the man of letters began to define himself and his aims in explicit opposition to the new industrial and commercial order.⁶ Independence from that order was purchased at the price of alienation and the dissolution of a generally acknowledged bond between literature and a posited reality. The aesthetic of a self-contained, autonomous text could already be seen as symptomatic of a more general voiding of intelligibility from the world. Furthermore, the Romantic conception of an autonomous, creative imagination as the guiding aspect of fictional writing detached the product of that imagination from extraliterary reality. On that view, the making of fictions does not arise from and in turn has no bearing on change in the external world. It is important to the consideration of irony as a concomitant of literary study that the conceptions of the autonomous subject and of "the text itself" as autonomous object cooperate indispensably in its development. It is no accident, then, that the rise of Formalism as a school of critical theory occurs at the beginning of the

⁵ An emergent "science of literature" in the course of the nineteenth century influenced the humanities in the direction of philological precision while aesthetics became a separate branch of philosophy (hence of knowledge) and "academic taste mirrored the prevailing impressionistic concern for the quality of the author's spirit." I refer to the article "Literature" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1980), 10.1039.

⁶ The link between Romanticism and literary alienation is extensively treated by Gerald Graff, *Literature against Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

twentieth century.⁷ It was toward the end of the preceding century, especially in Germany, England, and the United States, that literature became an academic discipline "at the doctoral level."⁸

The question that deserves attention now has to do with the nature of the relationship between the idea of "literature" and the use of irony. The development of diverse formalistic strains has made it evident that any attempt to define literature as a thing in itself will abut in formalism of some kind; and that formalism in turn gives rise to irony, or the impossibility of reconciling the contradictions that inhere in modern literary theory. The situation differs from the aesthetic formalism affecting other arts in that it deals inescapably and directly with language as a medium of meaning and of reference. To put it another way: does circumscribing the area of study labeled Literature presuppose some variety of formalism that isolates the text from everything but its own epistemological problematics?

Any investigation of the status of irony needs to ask why an ironic mode of argumentation or critical stance that raises a *purely negative* condition on interpretation to a superordinate value has gained the ascendant in contemporary academic discourse. From a historical standpoint it must be noted that early warnings abound against pushing irony to the utmost. The Romantic belief in the autonomous imagination and even in the fundamental incongruities underlying artistic production was controlled by certain factors: first, by the awareness that the imagination is a subjective construct, hence does not create rules;⁹ second, that the private ego is less at issue (against posited societal norms) than a kind of transcendental subjectivity.¹⁰ Thus, for Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* "a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth" according to "the unchangeable forms

⁷ Victor Ehrlich, *Russian Formalism*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), offers a useful survey of the history of early Formalism against the background of German as well as Russian forebears. For a Formalist effort to apply scientific approaches to literary study, see B. Yarkho, "A Methodology for a Precise Science of Literature: Outline," in L.M. O'Toole and Ann Shukman, eds., *Russian Poetics in Translation* (Oxford: Holdan Books, 1977), IV, 52-70.

⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 8.1177.

⁹ Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 180-83, deals effectively with this argument, supporting it with textual evidence; see also Graff, 50-65 *et passim*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-83.

of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds."¹¹ Friedrich Schlegel recognized well before Bergson that the ironist is potentially trapped by an infinite regress. The body of his work problematizes the simple statement "Ironie ist Pflicht [Irony is a duty]." Irony was seen as ultimately reducing reality to the dubious self-consciousness of a completely bored ironist.¹²

But the New Critics reaffirmed irony as the defining principle of literary analysis. In Cleanth Brooks's words, "irony is the most general term we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context."¹³ This extremely influential view contains both a sound definition of irony and what I take to be an overvaluation of it. Still understood as a totalizing, all-encompassing attitude, irony becomes a prescription for critical practice. Again it appears at a still higher level of concentration on "literariness" and exclusive scrutiny of "the text itself." Nor can this escalation of formalism be attributed to any parallel movement with fictional writing in America. The rise to prominence of the New Criticism did not correspond with any marked increase in the ironic content of American fictional composition, although it may have developed in concert with a heightened awareness on the part of *littérateurs* that their position was in no way central to the chief movements animating American society in the first half of our century.

Just as the exclusive concentration on the letter of a text and the attempt to isolate it from supposedly naive terms of external reference leads naturally to a fully ironic perspective, so may the impatient search to recover the consciousness of the author. A focus on consciousness moves in the direction of subjectivity, thereby undermining the ground on which any literary work can be comprehended in its general significance. The enterprise concludes in the same way whether it is the author's or the reader's consciousness that is scrutinized: a reader-

¹¹ Cited from Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 502.

¹² Friedrich Schlegel, *Literary Notebooks, 1797-1801*, ed. & tr. Hans Eichner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), pp. 114, 162.

¹³ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947), pp. 209-10.

response criticism, for example, which substitutes the interpreter for the author will still conclude, if only in its own defense, on a solipsistic note if its logic is entirely carried out.¹⁴

It seems that neither letter nor spirit can be the exclusive orientation of a nonironic criticism. Why such a criticism would be a desirable goal is the substance of the argument presented here. In order to assess the conceptual status of irony one needs first to examine its basic aspect as a characteristic of discourse, in other words as a figure, in the sense adopted by rhetoricians.

The essential trait of irony is its negative force. That understanding was already comprised in the dramatic positioning of the boastful *alazon* and the debunking *iron*. Vico's definition in the *New Science* reflects the classical view: verbal irony is defined as "composed of falsehood by means of a reflection which wears the mask of truth,"¹⁵ echoing the prior awareness of it as a negative mark on discourse (and behavior). Irony is here understood as a form of deception which asserts a falsehood while relying on an implied prior knowledge of truth. This negativity could apply to the smallest unit of discourse. Ironic terms can be declared merely by a tone of voice, as Quintilian noted.¹⁶ Bede and others mention the ability of sheer gesture to convey irony in an oration.¹⁷ In writing, diacritic signs such as quotation marks are sufficient. These paralinguistic strategies exemplify irony as something that is fundamentally of an accessory character, a nonlinguistic phenomenon that most simply signifies that something is *not* what it seems to be without telling what it is.

Ironic meaning in itself is never lexically derived. It has everything to do with attitudinizing and with language use, and nothing to do with language structure. The fact that irony is grafted onto language, that it can never fill things out alone may have helped to determine its traditional classification as a figure of thought (*figura sententiae*) rather than of words (*verborum*). That same accessory character is what allows misunderstanding about whether a given text is a "spoof" (or wholly

¹⁴ To be sure, reader-response theories vary in their recognition of widespread historical factors in the creation of reader response. The spectrum of phenomenological theories includes that of Wolfgang Iser, in which the text has a partially determinate force.

¹⁵ Giambattista Vico, *La scienza nuova* (Torino: Editrice torinese, 1962), p. 408; translation is mine, as are all unattributed translations.

¹⁶ Quintilian, *Institutiones oratoriae* 8, 6, 54.

¹⁷ *Bedaee Venerabilis liber de schematibus et tropis*, cit. Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (Munich: Max Hueber, 1960), p. 303.

ironic) or not, and allows for perfectly divergent opinion on the question. An ironic utterance cannot be interpreted as such without the foreknowledge that it is one, but since that foreknowledge is not to be found within linguistic structure, it does not have to produce an ontological basis. As a diacritic sign and a qualifier, irony does not even have to affirm its opposite implicitly. This certified, ratified ambiguity can make irony a rallying point for confusion and chaos screening themselves from value judgment. It may afford the user a chance to become a "temporary sophisticate," as Wayne Booth put it.¹⁸

This permanently temporary status correctly led to the classification of irony as an essentially metonymic mode of discourse.¹⁹ The process of negativity is obviously also one of displacement. For the negative entails, or includes, the positive term of an opposition, but not vice versa. This state is mirrored in linguistic structure itself, as by the addition of negative prefixes to positive terms.

The negative term necessarily and overtly makes reference to the positive term, but the positive term only implies or makes covert reference at best to its negative opposite. This necessary, overt inclusion of the positive in the negative is what makes the negative a metonymy of the positive. In fact, Nietzsche's assertion of the linguistic nature of all knowledge and of the superiority of poetic insight over all other forms of comprehension has been aptly termed an effort to transcend irony "by freeing consciousness from all metonymical apprehensions of the world."²⁰ Insofar as poetry militates against the reification of language into permanent, frozen concepts, it may be thought of, indeed, as an attempt to arrest the "life-cycle" of tropes, which proceeds from metonymy to lexicalization. To put it another way, the original imaging of the world in terms of primitive Good and Bad gives way, for instance, to different modes of conceptualizing it in terms of Good and Evil (or Right and Wrong), which undergo further fission into other categories. The continuous destruction of self-delusion must be accomplished by what may later prove to be an instrument of further self-delusion, so that the path of irony continually displaces its object, thereby constituting a quintessentially metonymical situation. At the same time, like other metonymies and

¹⁸ Wayne Booth, "Irony and Pity Once Again: *Thais* Revisited," *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1975), 337. See also *The Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹⁹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

in agreement with Brooks's definition, irony is entirely bound by its context. Because it negates on the figurative level what is positively affirmed on the literal level, irony has been comparatively paired with allegory.²¹

It is the differences between irony and allegory that need to be clarified, since recent critical attention has been focused on the similarities. It might otherwise be deceptively simple to elide all instances of saying one thing and meaning another or both. To begin with, the proportional relation of allegory to irony is crucially opposed to its converse. Allegorical discourse, like that in Dante's *Comedia*, can include irony among its rhetorical means (as in invectives to the city of Florence). But ironic discourse cannot include allegory without transforming it into irony. The omnivorous compass of irony is built into its nature as an attitude. Second, whereas allegory is an indirect assertion of a positive, irony is only an indirect commentary upon a purported, probably alazonic truth, a diacritical negative, a glancing allusion which might or might not lead to further meditation. The position of the interpreter is opposite to that in allegory, where every word is to be taken absolutely literally, the problem being to locate the world or the situation in which such literalness is possible. Irony, in order to be perceived as such, has only to betray its presence materially, while allegory calls for an interpretative gloss. Finally, taken as small units of discourse, allegories have two or more linguistic signifieds for one signifier, but ironies only one: an utterance commenting upon itself.

Whereas the complete meaning of an extended ironic discourse directly opposes the literal meaning, it can never merely accompany that meaning as allegory can. The single utterance transforms itself by qualifying itself as ironic. Yet as a condition on interpretation, irony is able to make reference only to a *part* of a literal meaning, that is, to one of the range of values associated with that meaning. That is why irony (in this particular respect, like allegory) requires previous contextual experience on the part of the interpreter. For instance, the speech of a character in a novel may suggest a psychic depth in his nature that is masked by other features such as limited vocabulary or dialectal traits. An example would be Benjy's

²¹ This pairing is notably exploited in Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), but is already apparent in his early essay, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in Charles S. Singleton, ed., *Interpretation: Theory and Practice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), pp. 173-209.

monologues in Faulkner's Snopes novels. The interpreter would have to be able to recognize these features and their common evaluation in order to perceive the irony of the play. But ironic interpretation does not have to declare its ground, although at the same time it is entirely contextual, and therefore possesses an external focus and a dependence upon that which it negates.

Irony cannot then be comprehended as a unit but as a context, a condition on interpretation, comparable perhaps to a kind of neurophysiological fact that puts a constraint on how objects are physically apprehended. Ironic perspectives can be conveyed without declaring their terms. At the same time, the external, contextual, and metonymic orientation of irony prevents it from coming to grips with the core of meaning.

The fact that a work is ironic can never contribute to its real substance as distinct from the works or other things upon which it ironizes. That aspect can be viewed only as *commentary upon* those things. As a nonpresence, irony can never address directly the system of values of a work. The ironic aspects of *Don Quixote*, for instance, are established by counterpositions both between his delusions and external fact and between the book and other, prior books, such as romances and chivalric poems. But the quest of Don Quixote goes beyond these aspects toward interpretation of a wider range of value. It is tempting to suggest that Cervantes is reducing everything to literature or textuality, thereby dissolving the connection between text and world, especially in part 2, in which Don Quixote nearly runs into himself in a spurious version. It is tempting to stop at the easy dualism of sheer recognition and retrospection. But even to the extent that a work like *Don Quixote* elicits an emotional response, it has already entered the realm of the "emotional interpretant," as Charles Sanders Peirce termed it, which gives verbal art an immediacy not unlike that of music in its aesthetic impact.²²

Even a book so concerned with textuality does not segregate a world composed entirely of text. Nor does it shortcircuit interpretation by mere recognition of a rhetorical strategy, or dissolve the connection between text and world that subsists precisely upon their difference. If texts could not point beyond themselves or each other, that would

²² Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss & A. Brooks, 2nd printing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965-1966), 5.475 (all Peirce references to this work are by volume and paragraph).

justify the ironic position. Once we begin to speak of grounds for interpretation, however, we have departed from it. The abandonment of interpretation, on the other hand, gives license to the same formulaic paradoxes to struggle in the same prison house of formalism, no matter what the text in question.

This is not to allege that a predominantly ironic work cannot offer aesthetic pleasure and insight into human behavior. In the novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, a libertine, Valmont, and his friend and accomplice, Madame de Merteuil, conspire in the seduction by Valmont of their most gullible and prudish acquaintance, Madame de Tourvel. The contrasts of power and personality that are readily apparent in the plot are further ironized by the epistolary form of the book, which encourages everyone to produce words at complicated crosspurposes and to define his or her fallibilities against those of others. The *eirons* Valmont and Merteuil qualify their every action as play. The rules of the game eliminate any but negative values, including practically all other characters, eliding them without obvious rejection. The novel's hothouse atmosphere does not involve overt or even identifiable satire or the indictment of a society. The uses of irony in this novel confirm it as a restrictive phenomenon and a qualifying stamp on behavior. The main reasons why it confounds interpretation in this instance is that the good alignment of ironic form and content, so much a source of aesthetic delight, moves the work close to reflexivity or iconicity—close, indeed, to the auto-referentiality of irony itself.

That iconic propensity makes irony often substitute images for concepts, again by way of indirect address. The single image, or signified, is presented with the understanding that it is not to be taken at face value. At the instant when the image seems to convince by summoning a fictive presence, it simultaneously suspends logic in the apprehended context. Castiglione framed and reframed such images in his *Book of the Courtier*, and used them to cut off discussion at logically crucial spots in the arguments of the courtiers. As in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the plot denotes isolation and closure. In addition it contains ironic play between the group of courtiers as they reveal themselves and the ideal courtier they attempt to fashion. But unlike *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, this work subsumes ironic elements within a work that is ultimately nonironic, and therefore invites reinterpretation over the course of some four hundred and fifty years.

The cognition of internal incongruities can lead to either of the two main ironic strategies. One dictates that a text is a bundle of arbitrary linguistic signs that can be joined together only on the basis of internal principles of coherence, and proceeds to uncover the flaws in that coherence. The other reduces everything to text, exorcising the presence of world. Both make omnivorous claims for literariness. Both rhetorically point to a single meaning unit (or series of such units) with the addition of a negative stamp or qualifier that is supposed to displace or disorient the receiver of the message. This kind of procedure allies irony and the grotesque in literature. In the grotesque one element is estranged from a certain posited norm and/or seen to contain unrelatable elements.²³ That much already characterizes the earliest conceptions of the grotesque. The Renaissance art historian, Lomazzo, understood *grottesco* as something ominous and sinister in the face of a world different from the familiar one but closely modelled upon it.²⁴ Montaigne called his own essays grotesque because "pieced together of the most diverse members."²⁵ The outstanding period of grotesque literature returns us to the consideration of German romanticism and postromanticism, in which irony, together with the estranged world, became a matter of wide discussion. In the close aftermath of European cataclysm, it pleased Romantic critics to view as grotesque or ironic works like Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, whose interpretation is a good barometer of critical and rhetorical pressure since the outset of the high Renaissance. Today some of the most recent criticism again regards that work ironically, as a web of pure intertextuality.²⁶

Orlando Furioso is indeed a text so crowded with literary allusion and citation and so closely aware of previous epics such as Virgil's that piecing it together is like reconstructing a language. And even the madness of the title ensues upon a moment of textual revelation:

²³ The principle is discussed in Kayser, chapters 4 and 5, on nineteenth- and twentieth-century grotesque. See also Muecke, p. 29. In both cases "The mind which seeks to relate and synthesize is affronted. The terms of the grotesque remain disturbingly irrelatable."

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23; also Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, tr. Joseph J.S. Peake (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1960), p. 238n.

²⁵ Montaigne, *Essays*, ed. Albert Thibaudet (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 28.

²⁶ Patricia A. Parker, *Inescapable Romance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) is one of the best studies of this kind; see especially the comparisons with the *Aeneid*.

Orlando's translation of a little poem which informs him that his beloved, Angelica, has chosen another man and entwined his name with her own. But two things should be kept in mind when deciding the status of irony in this work: first, that it is not parasitic upon previous works, being susceptible of reading and comprehension without any of them; second, that it does not promote or exemplify any idea of a deception inherent in language as such. Rather, it displays the flexibility of language while erasing doubt about its authority in the world. Ariosto usually pays strict literal attention to the prior works which he evokes, citing their specific words or carefully following their verbal configurations. What ensues is an amalgam of the older and the new text. A reader, even one as perspicacious as Voltaire, could stop at this novel combination and pronounce the result grotesque.²⁷ But interpretation over centuries has shown, in itself, that the two were long ago joined as a new, mediating symbol. In an inversion of the hierarchy that made mimesis the precondition of textuality, Ariosto transformed textuality into mimesis. By reexamining their literal sense he reactivated old literary tropes. The new creation contains its own check on irony. It represents a world of signs, diversely graded. For the characters in the poem, the strawmen of naive mimesis joust with the counterclaims of irony in a no-win exhibition. But for readers the possibility of seeing through that apparent opacity of reified texts and reified relations exists as an end-point, and such a reader may feel as well rewarded as an Estense might have done, albeit less gratified by the encomia that represent the practical endpoint.

Diverse interpretations of works that present a strong ironic component collectively raise the question of what sort of knowledge is attainable by means of an ironic stance. Nietzsche, whose writings are often adduced and emulated to justify ironic postures, connects irony with mechanically causal apprehensions of the world, from which the heroic element has disappeared. This state ensued upon a "fall" out of an "original state of poetry and poetic truth into the dry world of religion, science and philosophy which duly succeed and ironize upon each other."²⁸ This succession is delineated by a millennial historical progress of demythification and displacement. But Nietzsche denies

²⁷ Of the modern critics who considered Ariosto grotesque the most notable is Voltaire, in the preface to his own epic poem *La Pucelle d'Orléans*, in his *Oeuvres complètes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Baudouin, 1825-28), also in "Epopée," *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (Paris: 1875-1878), p. 573.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy* (1886), cit. White, p. 256 *et passim*.

that irony is evidence of a higher, sadder wisdom, stressing rather its negativity. While his statements in the Preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* depend on a posited original presence and lost paradise of poetic understanding, at the same time Nietzsche's assertions of the linguistic nature of knowledge help to demote irony to a mechanical cue, signal, or strategy, although he includes the enjoyment of it in what he calls a "philosophical sense of humor" in *Beyond Good or Evil*.²⁹

In this and more recent statements regarding irony, it is metaphysical longing for presence that underwrites the ironic part of the diptych. Positing the essential irony of an original loss of wholeness, negative cues may easily come to the fore as seeming interpretants. The fact that irony can never address a system of values directly does not appear a relevant sort of warning in an interpretative situation which assumes that same lack in all language. The concept of a severed original bond lends itself readily to the understanding of language as a system of fundamentally conventional signs, which provides a main access for the ironic view. For the focus of conventions is always external, as if to say that language structure and language use are simply tacit agreements which do not inhere in the signs themselves or in the relations among them. But even this kind of conclusion is, of necessity, apodeictically derived. Now texts come to speak with all the authority that can be imagined about their impotence to speak with traditional authority. The conceptual impasse of any theory founded on the impossibility of truth becomes obvious: radical indeterminacy is oxymoronic to any discourse that can be taken as "literary," and if critical discourse is "literary" (just like all other discourse), it too must fall under the penumbra of radical suspicion. To the extent that rhetorically based schools of Deconstruction produce readings of texts, they contradict their own theoretical statements. The resolution of the antithesis between a fiction of "bad faith" and a putatively inaccessible reality (!) is an irony reducible to fear of deception which ends in deceiving itself and others. For a fiction can never be (as I hope to have indicated) essentially negative.

The prevalence of irony as a rhetorical strategy of theorists is intimately bound up with invective against deception, bad faith, and naive ideologism, and it is worth noting that the rhetorical temperature of literary theory tends to rise or fall with the intensity of ideology

²⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. Helen Zimmern (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), p. 260; "Gods are fond of ridicule..."

in the external world. Total discontinuity or randomness taken as an article of faith would disavow or even disallow any history, branding all fabricated continuities as fallacious. Responses to naive theories of truth are rife, some of the most recent constituted as attacks on speech-act theory, which extrapolates propositional language from performance on the basis of presupposition.³⁰ Again, the nominalist arguments directed against the reliability of “performative” aspects of language open an abyss of intertextuality: texts are conceived as so utterly determined as to destroy the commitment to “context” that has been dear to ironists content with incongruity. It is no longer a slippage of the signified but a completely detached signifier that licenses the eschewal of the referent.

For our own times, the notion of sheer arbitrariness as characteristic of the language-sign is identified (within the great compass of the Cratylitic debate) with Saussure and the *Cours de linguistique générale* compiled by his students from lecture notes. Saussure declared the bond linking signifier and signified in the linguistic sign to be arbitrary, and after the publication of the *Cours* this principle (although often mitigated) became a staple of thinking about language. And it is this principle which has come to validate, against competing conceptions of progressive determination, the notion of a permanent indeterminacy of the linguistic sign, hence of the literary one. A focus on the signifier, greatly engorged by the influence of recent linguistics, has served again to force the conflict between letter and spirit in literary study.

The second tenet of Saussurean doctrine which is diffused in present-day attitudes toward verbal art has to do with his concept of opposition as the basis for the entire mechanism of language. Saussure’s interpretation of sign-structure, particularly of the linguistic sign, stressed the indissoluble linkage of signifier and signified and emphasized the dyadic nature of the sign, its dichotomous character as an entity. This conception promotes the detachment or bifurcation of the two components, the material and nonmaterial portions of the sign, which means that in practice each easily becomes a matter of separate inquiry, or (like “literature”) a thing in itself. It is then the material portion that tends to be considered independently or even to the exclusion of its counterpart. The notion of literariness is ineluctably bound up with a fixation on the signifier, whether or not all discourse is taken

³⁰ For a good and challenging attempt to apply speech-act theory to the reading of fictions, see Charles Altieri, *Act and Quality* (Amherst: University Press of Massachusetts, 1981).

to be literary, because the autonomy of the signifier can be achieved only at the price of isolation, ultimately of solipsism. On the other side, the concomitant impatience for presence or a transcendental signified ironically awaits the blows of an enemy stationed immovably within the gates.

In either case—or either aspect of the same case—the repudiation of the possibility of meaning leads to a concentration on some kind of external. Irony is itself such an external, and even as a stylistic marker (as noted) can perform the function of short-circuiting interpretation. The irony of supposing conventions to be ready-made everywhere and of expressing them in irretrievably oppositional terms only leads to the next stage of irony rather than to the next stage of explanatory understanding. The extreme degree of this position is expressed in a collection of Deconstructionist essays: “Nothing, whether deed, word, thought or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence.”³¹

Few statements could so effectively illustrate the existence of the chasm between *Wissenschaft* and *Geist* that cuts through their junction in a literary science. This is to define a stubbornly literary world, one in which the least degree of interpretative effort compounded with the least degree of human confidence amounts to hubris, a world in which the application of even so fruitful a scientific discovery as the germ theory of disease would not help to cure (or even define) the illness. The extreme-nominalist position reappears regardless of pragmatic or realist objections, as the extreme degree of irony.

Whether or not irony tries to carry the freight of an existentialist metaphysics, the ironic position subsists on a narrow model of reference and on empiricist versions of denotation that have to remain content

³¹ Paul de Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 69. This and similar statements are derived from Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1951), p. 201: “There is no set of maxims more important for an historian than this: that the actual causes of a thing’s origins and its eventual uses, the manner of its incorporation into a system of purposes, are worlds apart; that everything that exists, no matter what its origin, is periodically reinterpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions; that all processes in the organic world are processes of outstripping and overcoming and that in turn, all outstripping and overcoming means reinterpretation, rearrangement, in the course of which the earlier meaning and purpose are necessarily either obscured or lost.”

with manipulating externals. The expulsion of criticism from the world of pedagogical responsibility appears in some quarters as occasion for joy ("the progression of criticism beyond pedagogical functions toward a separate literary-philosophical realm of its own")³² and part of a general takeover of linguistic priority already discussed by progenitors of structuralism as it is known at present.³³ But structuralism has not seriously addressed the task of dealing with ironic regress, simply keeping distant from interpretation behind the defense lines of a Saussurean conventionality; which is what remains of the cease-fire between naive mimetics and metaphysics.

The aestheticist refuge into the luxury of textuality leads to statements to the effect that, since all readings are misreadings, "good" misreadings are texts which engender additional texts. The boredom and confusion attending this view are imaged forth as good news, perhaps not least of all because notions like this one would be rejected out of hand in nonliterary communities (such as a medical one, in which a proliferation of deaths is regarded as a medical failure, and the common aspiration might be to root out the offending text).³⁴ Whatever the empirical correlatives of absurdist isolation might be, they are not to be found in an ultimately philosophical stance or defense.

In the most recent versions of Saussurean dualism, heirs to the New Critics, now imbued with a newer, postwar sense of alienation, think of irony as "a rhetorical or structural limit that prevents the dissolution of art into positive or exploitable truth."³⁵ The implicit ideology rejected by such statements varies according to the speaker. But due to its pure negativity, irony rises to a more prominent place in critical practice wherever political ideology is muted. That is a pragmatic, or rather performative, use of irony to which few critics to date have

³² Graff, p. 117.

³³ Lacan, notably, has been interpreted as a forerunner of both Structuralism and post-Structuralism. See Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), esp. Chapter 2, which is a summary of structuralist forbears of deconstruction.

³⁴ Petrarch, one of the earliest moderns to give voice to fundamental divergences of attitude between "humanists" and "professionals," practically sets out the program for this antagonism in the treatise *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, ed. and tr. Paul Oskar Kristeller, in Ernst Cassirer and P.O. Kristeller, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1945), pp. 47-133, especially the anti-Aristotelian arguments concentrated in pp. 77-112.

³⁵ Geoffrey Hartman, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. viii.

paid sufficient attention. One such critic has remarked that "deconstruction is the death drive at the level of theory."³⁶ I am more inclined to see it as a kind of last-ditch effort at preserving the autonomy, in varying degrees and kinds, of text, or author, or critic, in an enterprise that remains hermetically sealed off from the depredations of anything else. In the same interest, an encompassing textuality shields texts from reference, or interpretation, or value judgment.

Since irony is linguistically self-referential, even as a figure it is the rhetorical procedure whereby texts can best be made indifferent to verification by anything outside themselves. Another rhetorical ploy, the pun, contains *in nuce* the terms incorporated by irony in the large. Puns are icons of spurious sense. Rather than defining words they establish an apparent power for them while playing with specious equivalence relations. These in turn are the result of a random juxtaposition of sounds. The only assertion contained in a pun is that one word can at random sound exactly like another one, allowing words to seem like images of each other — iconic rather than symbolic. Due to its final emphasis, by analogy, on the fact that signifiers in literary fictions do not assert anything, the "iconic" syllogism based on punning could contain the following premises: 1) literature does not assert anything; 2) icons do not assert anything; therefore literature is predominantly iconic. Because the pun and the iconic fallacy are both essentially rhetorical, a hermeneutic approach to a literary work can displease a confirmed ironist in the same way as the tedious explanation of a pun would spoil the punster's fun: as a disruption of style. (In fact, a performatively oriented view of deconstruction might be that it has its purpose in keeping the daily business of "literary" study going as stylishly as possible in difficult times. That view would cohere with the sense of irony as it was first interpreted: as a totalizing rhetorical mode of behavior which is by nature antagonistic to hermeneutics and interpretation.) In practical terms, ironic style allows everything not covered by dualism and oxymoron to be smuggled into discourse through the back door of implication.

Saussurean dogmas of arbitrariness have led by tortuous routes into a critical and epistemological impasse where literary theory is concerned. It is tempting to speculate about what course the history of theory might have taken had Saussure been aware of the seminal writings of Charles Sanders Peirce and of his triadic conception of

³⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: NLB, 1981), p. 136.

the sign. The areas of their agreement only make the fundamental differences more striking. Whereas Saussure barely exceeds the confines of linguistics proper, Peirce does not formally enter within them. Most important to the possible supervision of irony by semiotic is Peirce's acceptance of mediation — as, in general terms, the third part of the sign — and, hence, of the mental element or interpretant. It is a conception that abandons the hope of immediacy (and the concomitant distress due to the lack of it), acknowledges that the possibility of error is unavoidable and that the escape from skepticism is distant but possible. It is paradoxically the *discounting* of sheer intuition that helps to dispel its mystery and, with it, the reverse: the mechanical chains of causality implied by binary models.

In its most general form the triadic relation is described in terms of three categories. Peirce defines these as follows: "Firstness is the mode of being of that which is, such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else."³⁷ This category is further definable as the *possibility* that some quality may be abstracted or isolated in the future. "Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third." The here-and-now character of a concrete trait, for example, the color or hardness of a given mineral, is an instance of Secondness. The spatial and temporal placement of anything under consideration belong to Secondness. The main idea of Secondness is opposition and raw existence, set off from other ideas by contrast. The hard facts of experience (such as is meant by "experience that teaches") are examples of Secondness, as is mere contiguity such as that of something pointing to an object. Proximity between objects without any clarification accompanying the act or state manifests Secondness. Most prominent among Seconds are kinds of limit, boundary, or confine — where something confronts its negation.

"In its essence anything is what it is, while its secondness is that of which it is another," wrote Peirce. "The secondness, therefore, is an accidental circumstance. It is that a blind reaction takes place between the two subjects... Imagine a magenta color to feel itself and nothing else. Now while it slumbers in its magentanness let it be suddenly metamorphosed into pea green. Its experience at the moment

³⁷ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 8.328. This citation includes the definitions of Secondness and Thirdness.

of transformation will be secondness.³⁸ When Dante says in the *Vita nuova* that love is not a substance but an accident in a substance, he is saying at that juncture that love is a Second.³⁹ Much of his further development, including that of the *Comedia*, can be thought of in terms of his revision and enlargement of that idea.

Secondness is inadequate to describe the status of two things when they are combined or mediated by some third. The role in sign function of this binding element is stressed by Peirce's semiotic in a wide variety of ways and accorded crucial importance: "Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is in bringing a second and a third in relation to each other."

This drastically brief exposé of the Categories should have yielded up the implied conclusion that Irony is a Second. To amplify this statement somewhat, it should be noted that for Peirce the object of a sign is a Second and its interpretant a Third. Since the object of a sign is its Second, the relation between them is a Secondness. But the medium of their relatability, or the interpretant—that in which a sign is or would be interpreted—is a Third. A genuine triadic sign relation is not susceptible of reduction to dyadic relations. Every relation involving mind, cognition, or intelligence is genuinely triadic.

As regards the most general level of ironic argument about literature and the division of literary study between purportedly "subjective" and "objective" goals, or between synchronic and diachronic investigation, it is of potential usefulness to take into account the demotion of the (writing) or (reading) Subject that could ensue from the application of Peircean semiotic. For Peirce, human mind is a special case of semiosis, rather than semiosis being a special case of mind, or subjectivity.

The understanding of irony as a Second in Peircean terms facilitates our placement of it outside of the scheme of genuine interpretants, which are Thirds. Since in ironic discourse the sign and its object are exactly the same, it would be tempting to regard it as a complete interpretant—whereas it is at best a stimulus to interpretation: a spur, a context, and an impetus. That is why irony belongs to another fundamental Peircean grouping that clearly displays its Secondness: that of indexes, as distinct from icons and symbols. The relation between

³⁸ Peirce, *The New Elements of Mathematics*, ed. Carolyn Eisele (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), IV, 332-33.

³⁹ Dante, *Vita nuova*, 25: "...amore non è sustanzia, ma accidente in sustanzia."

sign and object is indexical when it is defined by a spatial, temporal, factual, or existential contiguity between them. A sign is an index if related to its object through its dynamic action upon it. A proposition and its ironical superstructure instantiate that relation. Among Peirce's examples are weathervanes and the legends to be found under portraits.

In his *New Elements of Mathematics*, Peirce makes it clear that the essential function of a sign is best fulfilled by the symbol. While icons and indices remain "fitted to be signs" even if they go uninterpreted, "a symbol is defined as a sign which becomes such by virtue of the fact that it is interpreted as such."⁴⁰ A symbol depends for its being on becoming determinate through interpretation. The crucial connection between the symbol as a species of sign and the interpretant is thus established. The interpretant is not only the determinant of the symbol, it is also that part of the semiotic triad (of sign, object, and interpretant) that allows symbolic representation to occur. The relevance of interpretants to literary theory emerges first of all in the incorporation of the third, or mental element, as not only intrinsic but of primary importance. By that principle the very difficulties encountered in interpreting nondiscursive fictions—such as certain contemporary lyrics—can themselves be seen as part of the symbolic process.

Peirce makes a further characterization of icon and index that helps to explain their contemporary prevalence as stopping points in literary theory. "An icon has such being as belongs to past experience. It exists only as an image in the mind. An index has the being of present experience."⁴¹ Irony, which is a Second and an Index, of necessity acts upon a preexistent work or proposition. We do not analyze works that do not yet exist, or potential works or statements. The symbol, by distinction, has its being in the future: "A symbol is essentially a purpose, that is to say, a representation that seeks to make itself definite or seeks to produce an interpretant more definite than itself."⁴² But irony, which focuses upon the material part of the literary sign and imposes a negative upon its propositional value, could be termed a special kind of index in a Peircean typology: it is "an index which

⁴⁰ Peirce, *New Elements of Mathematics*, IV, 254.

⁴¹ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 4.447.

⁴² Peirce, *New Elements of Mathematics*, IV, 261.

forces something to be an icon," and in so doing, "does make an assertion, and forms a proposition."⁴³ To stop here at irony as a condition on interpretation: that is exactly what it does, turning a work toward its iconic aspect and making the new assertion of the negative.

We know of centuries of writing which is currently labeled "literary" but was once considered across the broad fields of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Perhaps those devoted to the study of written fictions as such have now to search for other ways in which textual inquiry could supersede the notion of literary study as a thing in itself. Within this framework irony would be considered as generally episodic and accidental, not essential. Such a criticism would strive again to relate writing to other forms of sign and would read with a justified hermeneutic energy. The renewal of such an enterprise is already evident in a contemporary revival of hermeneutics. Theory will then cease to contradict blatantly what so many kinds of readers actually do and what is borne out in partial ways everywhere. Diachronic and synchronic perspectives would have to answer to each other: the most effective alternative to choosing one's own road to irony, or like the carver in the fable that began this study, one's own petrified image, be it Jupiter, Juno, or Mercury. They were all just statues anyhow, *not* experiences, *not* gods, *not* ideas.

In this connection we recall that the necessary external, collateral experience brought to bear by an interpreter of irony is not in the interpretant itself, but in its object. Whereas in a genuine linguistic trope there would be the necessary presence of an interpretant, in irony there is only a pragmatic strategy on how to deal with a single meaning unit or series of such units. This lack coheres with the external focus of irony, including its purely rhetorical elements which signal attitudes (however inclusive) toward message, content, or addressee.

This is not to undermine the fact that irony is an essential rhetorical strategy, one that conceptualizes relations as things so as to "make them present" (in just the sense that Deconstructive critics have attempted ultimately to subvert). Like other basically indexical signs, irony tends to direct exclusive attention to its object or isolate it instead of merely exhibiting it (as icons do). This kind of sectioning

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

off is an inevitable concomitant of literary analysis, and its hierarchical position in such inquiry is chiefly determined by the degree of formalistic enclosure undergone by the text. Rhetorical strategies are essentially confined to this subsidiary role. But irony alone points to an absence on both levels: from the standpoint of language use and from that of interpretation. It can mask either the judgmental nature of what is being paraded as fact or the inefficacy of an effete judgment. The elevation of rhetorical strategies, cues, and signals restricted to the negativizing of propositions to the status of genuine interpretants is what ultimately robs ironic deconstruction (understood programmatically) of power either as interpretation of literary history or as prescription for critical practice. What it does finally produce is the convenient rhetorical fiction of a critique that allows you not to deal with value at all.