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P A P E R S O N I R O N Y

by

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C O N T E N T S

1. The Communication of Verbal Irony

2. Images of Irony

S U M M A R Y

"The Communication of Verbal Irony" sets out the factors involved in the successful and the unsuccessful communication of verbal irony. Verbal irony is defined as belonging to the class of communicative acts that have ironical intent. This ironical intent is not always signalled by characteristic linguistic or paralinguistic markers but may be and often is dependent upon sociolinguistic factors.

This paper was read to the Twelfth Congress of the Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes at Cambridge in 1972 and is to be published in its present revised form in The Journal of Literary Semantics.

"Images of Irony" is an attempt to establish the existence and the symbolical and psychological features of the "archetypal images" of irony as manifested in both ironical fictions and writings about irony. It is suggested that there is a "horizontal" and a "vertical" image of irony. The more complex "vertical image" reveals, through its characteristic features, affinities with the "images" of knowledge and power and particularly with two abuses of knowledge and power, namely voyeurism and sadism.

This paper was read to a Plenary Session of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association conference in Dunedin, New Zealand, in 1972 and, in its present revised form, has been accepted for publication in a collection of essays.

Neither these papers nor the two published works submitted contain any material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree of diploma in any university. To the best of my belief none contains any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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THE COMMUNICATION OF VERBAL IRONY

The questions I shall address myself to* are these:

1) How does an ironist communicate his real meaning?
2) On what basis do we infer that what we are reading or hearing is ironical?
3) What has gone wrong when we assume that an ironical message is not ironical?
4) What has gone wrong when we infer that a non-ironical message _is_ ironical?

These questions arise from the nature of irony itself. No ironist tells us explicitly that he is being ironical; this is something we infer or assume and consequently something we may incorrectly infer or wrongly assume. Many ironists, indeed, aim at minimizing the evidence that enables us to make a correct inference. Some, like Ariosto, set out to make their irony too subtle for part of their audience. Others, like Nabokov, aim at leaving us in doubt whether they are being ironical or not. This

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being the case, it follows that irony often goes unperceived; but since the failure to detect irony is regarded as reflecting upon one's intelligence, those of us who have a horror of being thought unintelligent tend to overcompensate and claim to perceive ironies in what was not meant to be ironical at all.

At this point I need to draw a distinction between the two basic classes of irony: the intentionally ironical and the unintentionally ironic. I distinguish, that is, the irony of an ironist (whose intention to be ironical is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the presence of irony in a communication) from the irony of an ironic situation or event (where unintentionality, that is, the confident unawareness of the victim of the irony, is a necessary but again not sufficient condition for the existence of irony in that situation or event).

The most familiar variety of the first class is verbal irony, but behaviour of any kind if it is intended to convey an ironical meaning belongs to this first class. The second class, which includes dramatic irony, cosmic irony, and the irony of fate, is irony that is observed, and, although on occasion it may manifest itself in acts of communication, we cannot say that irony is being communicated, since the element of intention is wanting; we can say only that it is observable. It will not, therefore, figure in this paper.

This distinction is not, I should add, always easy to make when we are dealing with literature. We may often be uncertain whether an author is, in his own person, ironically praising something that should be blamed, or whether he is being ironical by creating a persona or character whose foolish but confidently expressed praise constitutes (on a separate, fictional level) an unconscious and hence ironic self-betrayal of his folly. When we read the description of the Manciple in The Canterbury Tales do we suppose the following lines to be simply a piece of irony coming directly from Chaucer or do we interpret them as being spoken in wondering innocence by a fictional Chaucer the pilgrim?

> Now is not that of God a ful fair grace
> That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace
> The wisdom of an heep of lerned men?

This sort of difficulty, I am happy to say, also falls outside the scope of this paper.

The naïve concept of verbal irony assumes the existence of a characteristic ironical tone or style, supposedly recognizable and therefore reproducible. But it can easily be shown that at least some instances of verbal irony lack this ironical tone or style: for example, I could write the words "Very neatly expressed" in the margin of an undergraduate's essay and defy anybody to tell from these words alone whether I wrote them ironically. In Ivy Compton-Burnett's Elders and Betters[1] we find the following passage:

> "Well, my daughter", said Mr.Donne, embracing Anna in a conventional but ironic manner, and introducing these qualities into his speech; "so we are united once again. A family roof will continue to hold us together."

Let us suppose that a film is being made of Elders and Betters. How must the actor playing Mr Donne act so as to make it quite clear that his manner of embracing and speaking is not simply conventional but also ironical? Is he to be blandly or awkwardly or casually or exaggeratedly conventional? The choice itself implies that the word "ironic" is insufficiently informative; what we need to know, and what the author has told us in the next paragraph, is that Mr Donne "was a man at war with himself", that he was both "harsh and forbidding" and "a man of natural, if suppressed affections", and that his expression was "rendered enigmatic both by nature and himself". If the actor can now interpret his stage-direction "in a conventional but ironic manner" it must be stressed that his knowledge of what an ironic manner means in respect of Mr Donne will not necessarily help him in any other role.

We have yet to answer the question of how the audience could know Mr Donne was expressing himself ironically. Let us have a simpler example, this one from Shaw's Major Barbara:

> UNDERSHAFT (to the foreman) Anything wrong, Bilton?
>
> BILTON (with ironic calm). Gentleman walked into the

shed and lit a cigaret, sir: thats all.

The stage-direction here seems to imply that there exists a variety of calm recognizable as ironic calm but Peter Sellers himself, were he to try every variety of calm known to science, could not make Bilton's line ironical if, like me, he left out before "shed" the words "high explosives". What is ironical is not the calm but the planned incongruity of the calm tone with the explosive situation. We must conclude that, sometimes at least, we cannot tell whether an expression is or is not ironical unless we know how it is related to its context in reality. And this implies, of course, that we need to know what that context is, and whether it contains any high explosive.

Can we now elaborate these conclusions through a series of hypothetical situations? Let us suppose that S addresses R on the topic T. What factors would make it impossible or highly unlikely that S would express himself ironically? First, S might belong to a community that never practises irony. If this is not the case, it may be that S, for one reason or another, is personally incapable of being ironical, as Tasso is said to have been. Or, thirdly, S might believe that it would be quite improper ever to criticize or to be ironical about the topic T. Or, fourthly, he might believe that it would be quite improper to be ironical, or ironical about T, at some particular time, or place, or when addressing certain people, or when employing some particular type of discourse--he might be saying

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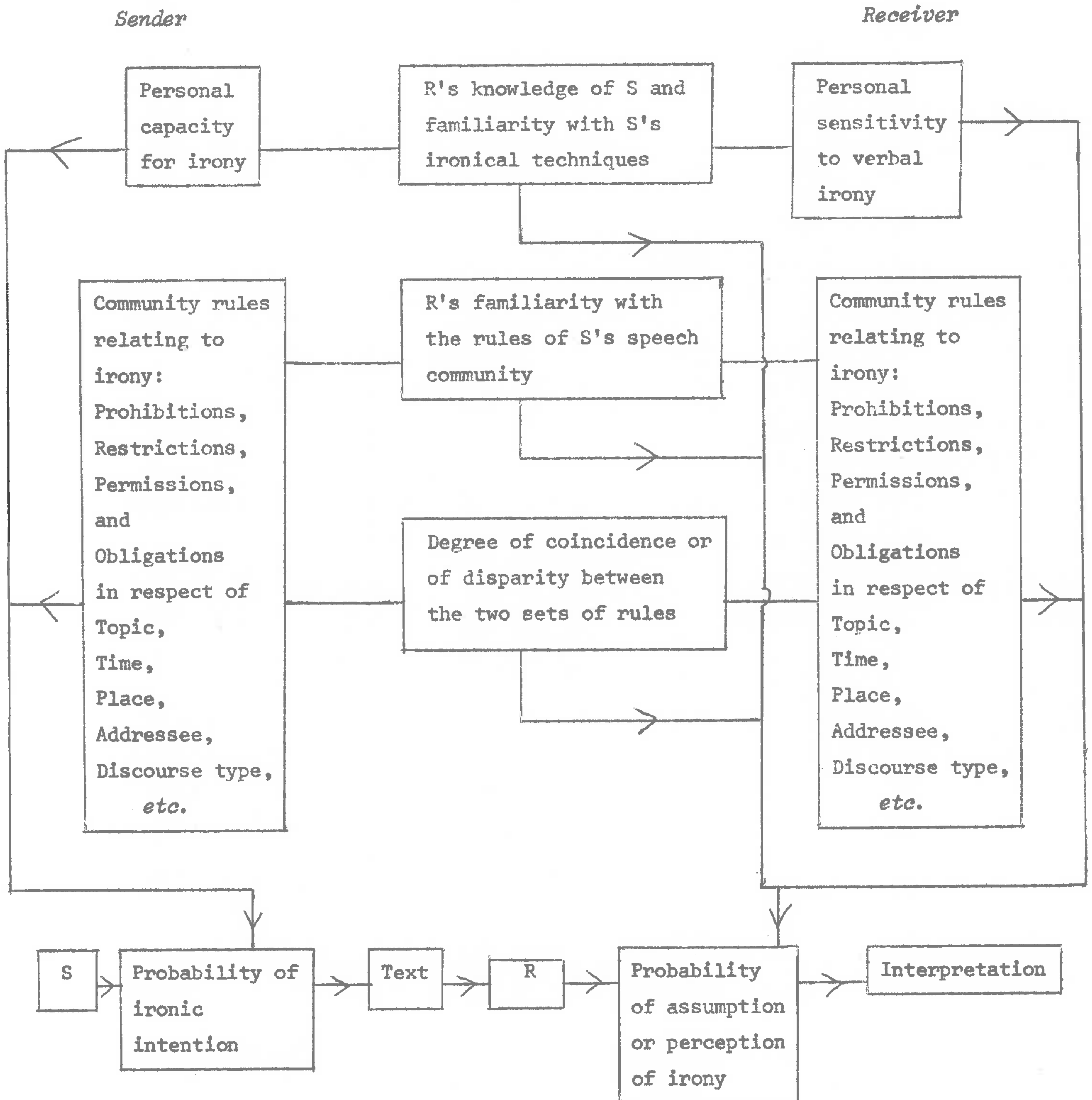

his prayers, for example, or writing a business letter.

Suppose, however, that none of these restraints applies and that S has expressed himself ironically. We can now ask, What would prevent R from realizing that S was being ironical? The answer can be given in the same terms. If R knows nothing of S and the rules that restrict or permit irony in S's community and if, at the same time, R himself is subject to one of these restraints, he is likely to assume that S will be similarly restricted. But even if there were no restraints upon R such as would interfere with his ability to interpret S correctly, and even if he knew enough about S and S's community to know that irony was permitted, there might still be other factors that would conceal the irony from him. He might simply be unfamiliar with the particular ironical techniques employed by S or he might not be quick-witted enough or sufficiently sensitive to linguistic or stylistic features. See diagram.

We can use these same factors to explain how the non-ironical might be seen as ironical: if R belonged to an irony-practising community, or thought that S did, or felt that the occasion invited irony, or believed T to be as wide open to irony as Mr Nixon's politics, or was hypersensitive to linguistic or stylistic features, he might suppose S to be ironical when he was not. It is along these lines that we should explain why certain critics believe Defoe's Moll Flanders and Tennyson's Ulysses to have been written ironically.

We are dealing here not only with individual qualities--rhetorical skill, sensitivity to style, familiarity with varieties of irony, and things of that sort--but also with what the sociolinguists call communicative competence--a knowledge of the rules determining when to speak and when to be silent, and when and where and by what means and in what form, tone, and code who may say what to whom.[2] We are, moreover, also dealing with the degree to which these qualities and competences are common to S and R and the degree to which, when they are not common, they interfere with effective communication. In practice most ironists anticipate the decoding difficulties resulting from interference or a lack of common ground and speak or write accordingly. Some ironists, however, set out on occasion to conceal their irony from part of their audience or to render all of their audience not quite certain if they are being ironical or not. In such cases they will, of course, exploit any lack of common ground or will invite or encourage interference.

Let us imagine, however, a simpler and quite representative case, one in which there is no material interference or lack of common ground, and where, in particular, S can safely assume that R believes that no one could conceivably write seriously in praise of T. In such a case as this, S (and here S could stand for Swift writing his <u>Directions to Servants</u>) has no need to employ any linguistic, paralinguistic, or stylistic indications that he is being ironical. On the contrary, his praise, incompatible as it is with the common opinion of T, is a

perfectly adequate indication of irony, and S, if he has any feeling for the art of verbal irony, will rather strive to suppress any stylistic or linguistic traits that might too obviously indicate that he is not absolutely sincere in his praise. It is possible, of course, that ironies of this kind, as clear as day to the original addressees, will in time come to be read by others who will be culturally remote from S; and if these later readers cannot imagine anyone not disposed to praise T, they will have no reason to suspect that S's praise could be ironical.

Let us imagine now a different case but an equally representative one. We shall suppose this time that the topic T is just as likely to be praised as blamed and that R's knowledge of S and of the rules governing the use of irony in S's community do not allow him to presuppose that S will or will not be ironical. In other words, we have a text but no context that has interpretative value: the text could be a poem by a new poet; it could be a letter to a newspaper advocating easier divorce and signed "Disgusted"; it could be an early eighteenth century pamphlet entitled "The Shortest Way with Dissenters". If, in such a case as this, S anticipates R's decoding difficulties, that is, if he realizes that without a context there can be no incongruity between text and reference or text and situation that will act as an alarm signal, then he will see that he must create a perceptible incongruity within his text. There are many ways in which this can be done.

The easiest and most obvious method is that of the sarcast and the heavy ironist. These will introduce a sharp contrast between various elements of the linguistic and the paralinguistic systems or between prosodic and other linguistic features. But an ironist who winks or nudges or who fills his page with quotation marks, underlinings, and exclamation marks, or whose voice expresses an indignation not revealed in his lexical and syntactic choices, will not be thought especially subtle. Another method, a rather more elegant one, is to present the missing context of reality alongside the incongruous language in which it is spoken of. So Pitt refused to palliate or deny "the atrocious crime of being a young man", and Gibbon reported of John the Twenty-third that "the most scandalous charges [against him] were suppressed; the vicar of Christ was only accused of piracy, murder, rape, sodomy, and incest". A third method, similar to this, is to introduce contradictory propositions or propositions with contrary implications. So in Anatole France's _Penguin Island_ we read that "The Penguins had the best army in the world. So had the Porpoises". An ironist can also deliberately commit logical errors or can simply show the obviously absurd conclusion that must inevitably follow from the supposedly reasonable premise. David Hume, among others, practised the ironical _reductio ad absurdum_.

Another, not particularly subtle, method of signalling to your interlocutor that he is not to take you seriously is to deviate perceptibly from what would be the expected or appropriate linguistic

form. Educated Australians, for example, can switch sociolects, changing to either Broad Australian or some approximation to "county English", and with much the same effect, since all that is needed is a warning signal. The range of possibilities here is probably co-extensive with the range of perceptible linguistic features. As well as switching entirely to an inappropriate or unexpected variety of language, whether dialect, sociolect, or register, an ironist can inappropriately insert into one language variety lexical items belonging to another--for example, learned, genteel, slang, archaic, or occupational terms--or he can employ syntactical usages peculiar to some other language variety.

Another method is that of exploiting connotations. Gibbon used the phrase "vicar of Christ" instead of "pontiff" or "Pope John" because, presumably, the connotations of "vicar of Christ" made a sharper contrast with the crimes the Pope was charged with. Similar to this is the use of allusion and quotation: Swift, in his _Modest Proposal_, mentions "a grave Author, an eminent _French_ physician", meaning that not very grave author, Rabelais. Here we have crossed the borderline, if there still is one, between language and style. And in this area I need only say that what has been said of linguistic deviation applies also to stylistic deviation. Perhaps the most commonly employed stylistic marker of irony is exaggeration. In the following brief passage we find Kierkegaard (or his translator) employing no fewer than eight qualifiers: "I wonder if you may not

sometimes have felt inclined to doubt a little the correctness of [that] familiar philosophic maxim".[3]

Two final remarks--of a somewhat contradictory tendency. It is true that some ironists develop a special way of talking or writing which their audience can therefore learn to recognize as an ironical tone or style. But when irony becomes an art the more skilful will strive, like other artists, to avoid mannerisms. For this reason we should resist the view that irony is a linguistic or stylistic category subject to rules or constraints and should rather stress its freedom from these. And, in spite of my earlier remarks, this applies equally in the sociolinguistic sphere. The true ironist will be the man who can be ironical in ways not permitted by the rules, values, and norms of his speech community. The reason is obvious: the less likely the occurrence of irony the more impact it can have. Imagine the effect upon Plato's Socrates if someone had asked *him* an ironical question!

There remains the important question of whether a verbal ironist really can suppress all linguistic or stylistic indications of irony. The work of the Hungarian Ivan Fónagy indicates that spoken irony would normally have an unconscious symptomatic or symbolic vocal accompaniment congruous with the ironist's real meaning and subliminally perceived by the listener, and I should suppose that it might well be impossible entirely to suppress it.[4] I am not sure, however, that

Fónagy has examined ironical utterances where the speaker had tried to sound unironical. With written irony the case would be very different. Where the irony is adequately indicated by a contrasting extra-linguistic context, there need be neither conscious linguistic signals nor unconscious linguistic symptoms. Where the irony is consciously signalled through the content or the expression of the ironical text, or through both content and expression, stylo-statistical investigation might well reveal unconscious symptomatic or symbolic accompaniments. But, although I have seen some work in this area, so far as I know systematic research has yet to be undertaken.

NOTES

1. London, 1944, 20.

2. For assistance in this area I wish to acknowlådge å debt of gratitude to my colleague, Dr Michael Clyne of the Department of German at Monash University.

3. _Either/Or_, translated David and Lillian Swenson, New York, 1959, 3.

4. Ivan Fónagy and K. Magdics, "Emotional Patterns in Speech and Music," _Zeitschrift für Phonetik_, XVI (1963), 293-326 and Ivan Fónagy, "The Functions of Vocal Style," _Literary Style: A Symposium_, ed. Seymour Chapman, London, 1971, 159-174.

IMAGES OF IRONY

Thomas Mann said of the problem of irony that it was "without exception the profoundest and most fascinating in the world".[1] The importance of irony as an element in the *Weltanschauung* of modern Western civilization and for Western literature especially was first recognized very much earlier, by Friedrich Schlegel, in fact, as long ago as the end of the eighteenth century.[2]

One of the fascinating things Schlegel and others noticed about irony is its ambivalence. They were not thinking here merely of the fact that irony involves or employs deceptive appearances; it is rather that irony itself contains both positive and negative qualities which have, moreover, a tendency to change places. The victim of irony is a victim because he is guilty — of being an innocent. An ironist is truly an ironist only if he is aware that he himself may at any moment become a victim of further ironies. Again, we associate irony with intelligence, which is surely a positive; not so surely, however, when intelligence connotes, as it may, detached, unfeeling, sterile criticism or when we see it as leading to power and thence corruption.

Admittedly, this sort of ambivalence is not confined to irony. Art itself, as Thomas Mann never grew tired of saying, is ambivalent, questionable, disturbing, even subversive. He is not the only one to have said so; there is, for example, Edgar Wind in his Art and Anarchy (London, 1963). Wind, in turn, takes us back to Plato. But our awareness of these wider ambivalences of art and intelligence can hardly escape being an ironical awareness and hence relevant to any broad theoretical consideration of irony.

What I propose doing here is to exhibit and reflect upon some of the ways in which ironists and others have expressed, consciously or unconsciously, their sense of the nature of irony, I shall not, however, dwell for long upon the no doubt valuable but no doubt less fascinating observations of literary theorists.

A literary theorist might well begin by saying that basic to all irony is a contrast of appearance and reality. He could add that if we look at this contrast as manifested in actual instances of irony we see it to be accompanied by related contrasts of ignorance and knowledge, simplicity and sophistication, stupidity and intelligence. The victim of irony, for example, mistakes appearance for reality and is therefore to be seen as ignorant, simple or stupid, and this not only when he falsely assumes he is in the right but also when he falsely believes he is in the wrong.

The ironist pretends to mistake appearance for reality and therefore seems, but is not, ignorant, simple or stupid. The man with a sense of irony, the ironic observer, sees the victim's error or the ironist's pretence and is therefore, relative to the victim or to the ironist as pseudo-victim, aware, sophisticated or intelligent, even though a further irony may cast him in the role of its ignorant, simple or stupid victim.

Nonetheless, the theorist might continue, although this contrast of appearance and reality is basic to all irony, it may not always be the most salient feature. From the point of view of those who know they have been or could be victims, irony is perhaps more likely to present itself as a situation in which one cannot be certain which is the appearance and which the reality: irony is equivocation, dilemma, ambiguity, doubt. And to render this distinction more vivid, the theorist might contrast irony in its "vertical" and its "horizontal" aspects, the former exhibiting the superiority of the ironist over his victim, of reality over appearance, and of intelligence over stupidity, the latter exhibiting the deceptiveness of ironical language or of ironic situations both of which "palter with us in a double sense"; "handy-dandy, which is the thief, which is the justice?".

It is with the introduction of these metaphors of "vertical" and "horizontal" that I should wish to take over from the theorist

and begin asking certain questions. In what ways does irony as such present itself to the imagination? Is there a set of metaphors, images or situations that tends to appear and reappear whenever ironists, or other people talking about irony, give concrete expression to their concept of its nature? Is there, in short, anything we might venture to call an archetypal image representing what is felt to be the fundamental nature of irony? And if there is, what are its affinities, to what other phenomena does it show irony to be related? I hope to demonstrate first that there is such an archetypal image and subsequently that at the symbolic, and therefore psychological, level irony is related to such very questionable phenomena as power, sadism, and voyeurism.

On a priori grounds we would expect to find two distinct sets of images, one corresponding to the "vertical", one to the "horizontal", aspect of irony. But although this is what we do find, the "horizontal" picture of irony, the victim's or potential victim's picture, seems much less developed and coherent than the "vertical" picture. I do not report this as a matter of surprise. The victims of irony are, by definition almost, the last to learn of their victimization and the least likely to develop images of irony; whereas ironists emerge cackling from every hedge.

There is, however, a further consideration. This century has

seen, along with the abandoning of the concept of supernatural agents, a widespread growth of the feeling that we are all inescapably victims of different sorts of cosmic irony, or world irony, or general irony, as it is variously called. Since it is no longer necessary to postulate a Divine Ironist behind these ironies, since the ironic observer who perceives them is also among their victims and knows that he is, and since we are all together in the same ironic predicaments we can expect them increasingly to become objects of attention and the "horizontal" picture of irony to become more detailed, coherent and recognizable. But at present nothing like a clear archetypal image seems yet to have emerged.

I should perhaps say that the field of optical illusion has provided metaphors for illustrating both the difficulty of distinguishing appearance and reality in some equivocal ironies and the tendency for one irony to generate another in an endless series. For the former we have recently had the metaphor of the drawing of a solid cube that suddenly transforms itself into the drawing of a hollow box; for the latter Schlegel has employed the metaphor of the hall of mirrors that multiplies reflections to infinity.[8] In default of much else I must fall back upon a not very recent but at least a very notable ironist, Samuel Clemens who, as "Mark Twain", furnishes some significant images of irony.

If I concede that Mark Twain is more likely to be thought of as a notable humourist than as a notable ironist I do so in order to make the point that his being a humourist will tell us something both about the quality of his irony and about the way he thinks of irony. The word "humour" as now understood is notoriously difficult to unpack but there is general agreement, I think, that one of its ingredients is a fellow-feeling with what one is amused by. This fellow-feeling does not exclude irony but gives it a special quality.

To avoid a possible misunderstanding here, I should add that irony may lack humour , as it sometimes does even in Mark Twain, but it cannot lack comedy. This element, no easier to define than humour, is essential to irony and seems to be closely related to another equally essential element, that of distance or detachment. It is partly by varying distances that the ironist increases or decreases the element of the comic. This will come out more clearly when we deal with the vertical picture of irony. Meanwhile I need only say that whatever is ironical is comical, however tragic or pathetic it may also be; what happens to Lear is not comical to him, but it is to us who see it through Shakespeare's ironic gaze. Of course, it is not tragic to Lear eihher though it is to us.

Two words, "innocence" and "deception", seem indispensable

when talking about Mark Twain's irony. The innocence is, first, that of those characters of his, like Jim and Huck, who without in the least suspecting it betray their ignorance or foolishness in the very act of demonstrating, as they think, their knowledge or cleverness. But sometimes Mark Twain uses these innocent characters to betray the confident ignorance or foolishness of other characters or of the reader himself. And thirdly, there is the deliberately deceptive innocence of the ironist himself. Mark Twain was clearly fascinated by the possibilities for ironic fiction inherent in the difficulties we have in distinguishing between real and deceptive innocence.

This is apparent in two related motifs that have long been recognized as characteristic of his work. One of these is the changeling/identical twins motif as in Huckleberry Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson, The Prince and the Pauper, and many a short story and sketch. Changelings and identical twins enable a writer to exploit ironies of indistinguishable distinctions where the same person may be different people. The other motif is that of the bland surface that might or might not conceal a treacherous or unexpected depth. The resemblance of this motif to the other is easily seen.

When Mark Twain was writing up his experience as an apprentice pilot on the Mississippi, he recalled one occasion on which he nearly ran his ship ashore trying to dodge what he thought was a

bluff-reef, which is a solid sandbar just under the water and indicated by a long, slanting line on the surface. But it was only a wind-reef, that is, an identical long, slanting line on the surface caused by nothing more than a stray breeze. He is told that only intuition born of long experience can distinguish a bluff-reef from a wind-reef. He then goes on to speak of "a peculiar sort of faint dimple" on the surface of the river, "the faintest and simplest expression the water ever makes, and the most hideous to a pilot's eye" since it signifies the hidden presence of a rock or wreck. Shortly after, he draws the following parallel:

> What does the lovely flush in a beauty's cheek mean to a doctor but a "break" that ripples above some deadly disease? Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what are to him the signs and symbols of decay? [4]

What is significant here is that Mark Twain concludes that doctors are more to be pitied for having lost the innocent eye than to be envied for their increased perceptive powers. It is, he believes, and this is a point we shall have to return to, better to have the illusion of health than the knowledge of corruption. Here we have the rather unusual spectacle of an ironist whose sympathies are with the victims of ironic deceptions.

The motif of the bland, inexpressive surface and the changeling/identical twins motif can both be illustrated in Mark Twain's Celebrated Jumping Frog story. The story is supposed to be told by one Simon Wheeler of whom we read this:

> All through [his] interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed . . . plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter.[5]

Significantly, this is precisely the way Mark Twain believed funny stories should be told: "The teller [of a humorous story] does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it".[6] Real and deceptive innocence are indistinguishable. And in fact the whole story can be seen in these terms. Concerning Dan'l Webster, the educated jumping frog, Simon Wheeler says: "You never see a frog so modest and straightfor'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted". Dan'l's deceptive appearance is maintained throughout: the wily stranger claims that he "don't see no p'ints about that frog that's any better'n any other frog", saying this twice, once before and once after the jumping contest which Dan'l loses because the stranger has surreptitiously filled him to the chin with quail-shot. Dan'l

is thus apparently identical with other frogs, though also different, and apparently identical with himself in his two different states. The wily stranger seems to be an innocent but is not. Jim Smiley, the gambler who educated Dan'l, seems not to be an innocent but is.

The image that may emerge as basic to the "horizontal" picture of irony might be that of the impenetrable surface: identical twins (or frogs) are superficially identical; the word 'mirror-image' implies an identity of appearance; the complexion of a girl or a body of water may hide a danger or nothing at all; an affirmation and its ironical negation may be identically expressed; a solid cube can be seen as a hollow box only in a drawing, that is, on a plane surface. The unsuspecting innocence that fails to penetrate the superficies of things and the pretended innocence that so successfully conceals its pretence, it is these that characterize Mark Twain's irony and relate it, incidentally, so closely to the hoax to which he was scarcely less addicted.

Far more common, as I have already indicated, is the "vertical" picture of irony. Here we have so much material from so many centuries that I think we really can speak in terms of an archetypal image. This image, however, seems to be a variant of a similar image of much more general import.

For this to be demonstrated, we shall have to begin with

something as basic as the emergence of human language or of conscious human thought, and with the language we use when we stop to think about thinking. To use language referentially, to substitute words for things, is to escape from an immanent to a transcendent sphere. The spatial metaphor of "emergence", which I have just used, similarly suggests a rising up into the light of something distinct out of a dark, undifferentiated mass. And the metaphor of "stopping to think" suggests that we can somehow arrest the flow of time and escape from the merely sequential chain of sensations, feelings, and instinctive behaviour. Think what it would be like not to be able to think! Both metaphors--of emergence and of stopping to think-- imply a duality of opposed states, one superior to the other.

Already we can see the outline and even something of the substance of what we might be tempted to call the mythology of conscious thought. Its basic feature is a vertical opposition: conscious subject above and non-conscious or less conscious object below. This spatial image seems to function as a centre of attraction towards which gravitates a number of other images--most of them in the form of further oppositions. These images, as we would expect, are accompanied by varying emotional qualities.

What these images are, we need only a few examples to show. We can begin with Plato's myth of the cave which contrasts the

knowledge of the philosopher with the ignorance of the unphilosophical. The philosopher, released from imprisonment in the shadowy cave, climbs up to where he can look upon the light of day and see the sun as it really is. Here in this myth, besides the vertical contrast of above and below, we have five further symbolical oppositions: light/darkness; freedom/bondage; mobility/immobility; one/many; and reality/illusion (Plato's image here is of things versus their shadows). In addition there are the oppositions of meaning and absurdity and of happiness and misery which accompany the primary opposition of knowledge and ignorance.

Moving on to Lucretius we find the following:

> But this is the greatest joy of all: to stand aloof in a quiet citadel, stoutly fortified by the teaching of the wise, and to gaze down from that elevation on others wandering aimlessly in a vain search for the way of life, . . . O joyless hearts of men! O minds without vision! How dark and dangerous the life in which this tiny span is lived away![7]

Here we find repeated several of the oppositions already noticed (above/below; light/darkness; one/many; meaning/absurdity; happiness/misery) together with several additional ones (safety/

danger; steadfast/wandering; wisdom/futility). We notice also the image of a great distance between observer and observed implied by the words "aloof" and "tiny".

This opposition of knowledge and ignorance, intelligence and stupidity, is also, a point I made at the beginning, a constant feature of irony. Lucretius was not writing ironically: nonetheless, there is only a single step from one's awareness of another's ignorance to one's ironic awareness of that other's ignorance of his ignorance. This is my justification for saying a page or so earlier that the archetypal image of irony is a variant of this archetypal image of conscious thought that I've been presenting.

Three or four additional passages will I hope bear this out. Northrop Frye, in his <u>Anatomy of Criticism</u>, speaking of the heroes of those fictions that are "in the ironic mode", as he calls it, says that they are "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity".[8] The similarity of this situation to that in Lucretius does not need elaboration. But notice Frye's alternative, "power <u>or</u> intelligence", which enables us to make the point that knowledge, being a kind of power, manifests itself in a similar archetypal image, that of physical elevation. Irony, in turn, relates to both power <u>and</u> knowledge.

Speaking of the epic novel as essentially ironical, Thomas

Mann writes:

> Its greatness is mild, restful, serene, wise--"objective". It keeps its distance from things, has by its very nature distance from them; it hovers over them and smiles down upon them. . . . The art of the epic is "Apollonian" art as the aesthetic term would have it; because Apollo, distant marksman, is the god of distance, of objectivity, the god of irony. Objectivity is irony and the spirit of epic art is the spirit of irony.[9]

Here, as in all our examples, we have the basic vertical orientation with the superior looking down upon the inferior. Of the other elements in this passage, some we have met already; others we meet for the first time.

The elementmof calmness and serenity is in the Lucretius passage and its contrary, frustration, in Northrop Frye. The element of distance, basic to any definition of irony, is also in Lucretius. We can interpret it as detachment, with connotations of the dispassionate, the contemplative, the intellectual or the critical, as against the emotional and involved, the cold as against the fevered. The element of the comic, also basic to any definition of irony, is implicit here, though rather faintly, in the image of "smiling down". It is related to the Lucretian pleasure derived

from the aloof contemplation of misery.

As for the element of objectivity, this is largely implicit in the element of distance, but we should note the additional factor of objectification, the tendency to transform what one looks down upon into a mere thing or a creature of a lower species. The ironic relationship is not, in Martin Buber's terms, an I-Thou but an I-It relationship. In this passage the disparity is presented as even greater since the ironic novel has become godlike--Apollo exercising his divine marksmanship that transforms the living into the dead. Finally, there is the element of concealed action. The phrase "Apollo, distant marksman" invited us to entertain the image of a sniper, concealed from his unsuspecting victim but pinning him down (fixing him to one place) or picking him off with deadly accuracy.[10] There are besides suggestions of a supreme economy of effort, which is very relevant to irony as an art, and of power held in reserve as against the victim's total vulnerability and helplessness.

Another example: in Lesage's novel Le Diable boiteux the hero is elevated above Madrid by the devil Asmodeus who has power to remove the roofs of the houses they visit so that, without being seen, they can look down at the comic spectacle of life spread out before them. Here, besides the familiar vertical orientation, we have the opposition of unseen observer and unseeing observed. The sense of freedom that this sort of observation generates takes the

form of physical mobility--flying through the air--which contrasts with the fixed position of those observed.[11] That an ironic observer should be a devil is something we shall have to take up later.

A final passage from an important early article - Connop Thirlwall's "On the Irony of Sophocles":

> The dramatic poet is the creator of a little world, in which he rules with absolute sway, and may shape the destinies of the imaginary beings to whom he gives life and breath according to any plan he may choose.[12]

This passage quite clearly implies oppositions of creator versus created (a difference of species); power versus impotence; freedom versus fixed destiny.

Further examples could be presented ad libitum both from ironical literature and from works about irony. And they would all have a family resemblance, the implication of this being that the way in which the archetypal image of irony is built up has some sort of logical and/or psychological plausibility. If, for example, we imagine the ironist to begin from his awareness of the ironic victim's confident unawareness, then the inevitable images, all signifying an opposition of stupidity and intelligence or ignorance and knowledge, will be those of blindness versus keensightedness,

darkness versus light, or the dreaming versus the waking stage. So, from the last of these, we get the common ironic theme of life as a dream, whether with or without a reference to a transcendent dreamer: _The Tempest_, Calderon's _La vida es sueño_, _Alice Through the Looking Glass_, Hardy's _Dynasts_, Mark Twain's _Mysterious Stranger_, Unamuno's _Niebla_.

The superiority of the ironist to his victim manifests itself in several related images or situations. The ironic dramatist may be presented, or the ironic novelist may even present himself, as the god or tyrant of his little world, creating or destroying at will, or at the very least manipulating the lives of his characters. Ironist and victim will also tend to be imagined as belonging to different species: gods as against mortals, men as against puppets or animals. Or the contrast may take the form of mobility as against immobility--metaphors of spiritual freedom and agility and their opposites. Hence all those ironic spies and travellers from China, Persia, or Turkey, free to roam the world and comment upon the stay-at-homes.

The most favoured images, with which the others are very frequently combined, are those of physical elevation, whether it is a giant looking down on a pygmy, or a contrast of mountains and lowlands as in Ibsen as well as _The Magic Mountain_, or a bird's-eye view as in _Le Diable boiteux_. The consequent notion of distance operates to absolve the ironic observer from any obligation to

sympathize, as also does the image of a difference of species. Or inversely, the wish not to sympathize manifests itself in images of distance or difference of species. Distance may be replaced by an image drawn from the effect of distance, namely a diminishing of the victim's size; this diminished size then implying insignificance. In the words of Jean Paul:

> If man, like ancient theology, glances down from the world beyond on the terrestrial world, the latter looks small and vain.[13]

Smallness in itself seems to be sufficient reason for denying the presence of a soul, as we can see in Voltaire's *Micromégas*; smallness together with ignorance of the true state of affairs leads the observer to impute to the victim such qualities as aimlessness, misery, ignorance, stupidity, naivety, frustration, impotence, meaninglessness, and absence of freewill.

By a contrary reaction the ironic observer feels calm, serene, liberated. Elevation in particular seems to induce joy or laughter, as we may see in Lucan, Lucretius, Cicero, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Bacon, Heine, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Amiel, Meredith, and Tennyson. Nor is Scriptural authority wanting: "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision."

One might well conclude in fact that God is the archetypal ironist and man the archetypal victim: man because he may easily be seen as trapped and submerged in time and matter, blind, contingent, limited, unfree, the slave of heredity, environment, historical conditioning, instincts, feelings, and conscience, while all the time behaving as if he were none of these; God because he is omniscient, omnipotent, transcendent, absolute, infinite, and free. A German of the early nineteenth century, Karl Solger, wrote:

> Supreme Irony reigns in the conduct of God as he creates men and the life of men. In earthly art Irony has this meaning--conduct similar to God's.[14]

Such a God as this implies has long been recognized as strongly resembling Satan the adversary. The little game that God and Satan joined in playing with Job is only an early example of something that has a way of turning up again and again. Thomas Mann, for example, in Lotte in Weimar explains artistic genius and specifically the ironic genius of Goethe as approaching a combination of the divine and the diabolic.[15] Mark Twain in The Mysterious Stranger has an angel called Satan whose deeds are what insurance companies call Acts of God.[16] Samuel Butler fancifully suggested that God and the Devil evolved from a common ancestor through a form of specialization or division of labour.[17]

If God the Ironist has evident marks of the diabolic, so has knowledge itself. Knowledge is always likely to be forbidden knowledge as it was in the beginning, and the serpent who tempts Eve with knowledge must of course turn out to be Satan. Faust, too, had an appetite for knowledge as well as for sensual delights: Goethe's "Geist ist Teufel" underlines this aspect of the legend as well as voicing the Establishment's view of intellectual activity as subversive.[18] Even the word 'knowing' has acquired negative connotations; a knowing child is not generally thought of as improved by what he knows. So here we have another link between the way we think about knowledge and the way we think about irony.

Looking now at the motives and pleasures of irony, we can surely see other questionable facets. No-one would wish to deny irony its innocent delights: seeing something as ironic is an intellectual process that involves the pleasure of recognizing hidden resemblances and hidden disparities; being ironical is an art, and there is therefore the pleasure that accompanies successful artistic endeavour, the pleasure in this case of having been able to say something without actually having said it, the pleasure of achieving a maximum effect with a minimum of means. It may be, however, that there are pleasures in irony that are less innocent. The ironist who devises, with loving care, a form of words that, taken seriously, will make his interlocutor a laughing stock, what is he but a kind of sadist drawing pleasure from pain? The

ironic observer who takes a keen delight in seeing someone confidently running towards what he thinks he has succeeded in escaping, what is he but a kind of sadistic voyeur?

The sadist proper is perhaps explicable only by the psycho-pathologist. But the literature of prisons, concentration-camps and police-states enables us to specify in what circumstances ordinary men become perfectly willing to torture their fellow-beings: the victim must be completely at the mercy of the torturer; the torturer must believe that he is on the side of right and that his victim not only is on the side of wrong but also belongs to an alien or lower class of beings; and the torturer must further believe that he cannot, actually or morally, be called to account for what he does.

We can see from this not only that sadism is an abuse of power but also that the archetypal image we have uncovered of the relationship between the ironist and his victim significantly overlaps with this literal description of the relationship between the torturer and his. The torturer, moreover, is in some sense an artis . Because he cannot be called to account and because his victim has no rights, the torturer has the same freedom as the artist to indulge his imagination and specifically to devise ingenious and fantastic tortures. Those instruments of torture exhibited in museums and concealed in political prisons have not

only a certain ingenuity but also quite often a grim ironic humour: the Jungfrau's iron-spiked embrace is less than voluptuous; the various forms of water-torture resemble verbal irony in transforming the apparently innocuous into the deadly. The devils and torturers of fiction, moreover, are not infrequently presented as ironical.

Samuel Butler tells the story, in his Notebooks, of his staying in an hotel with a man and

> an ugly disagreeable woman who I supposed was his wife. I did not care about him, but he began to make up to me in the smoking-room.
>
> "This divorce case", said he, referring to one that was being reported in the papers, "doesn't seem to move very fast."
>
> I put on my sweetest smile and said: "I have not observed it. I am not married myself, and naturally take less interest in divorce."[19]

Butler was not only being ironical; he was being malicious and enjoying it. And that is well on the way to sadism. If we imagine the man to have been so obtuse as not to have felt the barb at all, then our interpretation would be that Butler, having delivered the barb, was enjoying the spectacle of a man who was utterly unconscious of the fact that he had become a spectacle. This pleasure is close

to that of the voyeur whose victims are equally unconscious of the fact that they have become a spectacle. If sadism is an abuse of superior power, voyeurism is an abuse of superior awareness or knowledge.

When we turn from fact to fiction the position in relation to irony, sadism and voyeurism <u>seems</u> to be substantially the same. Jane Austen, for example, has to a very high degree, the ability to create characters--Mrs Ferrars, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Aunt Norris, Mrs Elton, Sir Walter Elliott--whom we love to hate; and loving to hate is specifically a sadistic feeling. Such characters are, so to speak, at the complete mercy of Jane Austen, the supreme authority over the little world of her creation, and they are not, we might say, given a chance. Mrs Elton, for instance, is presented as a complete outsider, as quite beyond the pale: she belongs to a different and lower social class, and we see her trying, without the remotest hope of success, to intrude and to climb. Each time this personification of "pert pretension and under-bred finery" boasts of her sister's barouche-landau or her own cultural resources she unconsciously betrays herself to our gleeful laughter and contempt.

It is the theatre, however, rather than the novel which provides the best link between irony on the one hand and sadism and voyeurism on the other. The theatre has always been a theatre

of cruelty, an arena. The dramatist has absolute power over his characters and can indulge himself in the pleasures of playing God, secretly manipulating other people's lives and placing them in cruel predicaments of which they are unaware or which they cannot escape. I have argued elsewhere that this absolute power is frequently internalized in the figure of the plotter or manipulator of which Iago is the most notable example.[20] At the same time, the audience in the theatre are indulged in the pleasures of the peepshow. Like the voyeur they enjoy the spectacle of someone who is not only unaware of being seen but also in a disadvantageous position so that he wouldn't want to be seen. The best example I know of is Genet's _Le Balcon_: there we find dressing-up and stripping-off, exhibitionism and voyeurism, sadism and masochism, and all of these at both the physical and the spiritual level; the brothel (a French synonym is _maison d'illusions_) is a metaphor for the stage, the stage for the brothel, and both for that private stage upon which the audience's own fantasies are enacted.

But we are getting on a little too fast. We cannot say that Jane Austen is really a sadist in her treatment of Sir Walter Elliot because Sir Walter is not, after all, a real person. Even Samuel Butler's _report_ of his hotel-encounter, which is all we have, is at one (aesthetic) remove from actuality. Although the ironist and his readers enjoy the idea of cruelty and the idea of peeping,

no one is tortured and no one's privacy is invaded; we cannot equate the actual and the fictional. But it is precisely because Sir Walter is not a man but an idea disguised as a man that he can be rendered perfectly hateful and we can hate him _de bon coeur_. Jane Austen does herself and us a valuable service in arousing, directing and finally satisfying her and our sadistic and voyeuristic impulses.

We can go back now to Mark Twain's doctor who could not look upon the flush of a pretty face without seeing the disease behind it. In losing his ignorance he lost also the innocence of ignorance; in acquiring knowledge he found it to include a knowledge of corruption. This is an old story, the oldest of stories, but we seem to have found that it applies also to irony. Ignorance and innocence are linked in the figure of the victim of irony; and if sadism and voyeurism may count as corruptions then there are at least some indications that knowledge, or knowingness, and corruption are linked in the figure of the ironist.

Since we began by drawing attention to the ambivalent nature of irony we need to guard against giving the impression that irony, even though it may be linked to some very questionable phenomena, is essentially and only negative, essentially aggressive towards and destructive of the innocent and helpless victim. In the first place, we need to recognize that innocence itself is a questionable

phenomenon when associated, as it is in ironical situations, with the naive, the unreflective, and the ignorant. There is not much to be said for stupidity as opposed to intelligence, or for those who condemned Socrates out of ignorance. Though irony did not protect Socrates, it has frequently been more defensive than aggressive. In the second place, the true ironist is necessarily an ironologist: by virtue of his sense of irony he is well aware of the ambivalence of irony and knows that such superior sapience as he may show in one instance of irony is only relative and no protection against his being victimized by a further irony.

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