

The Compass of Irony ^{2/8/76}

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PREFACE

The first part of this work consists of a general account of the formal qualities of irony and a classification, in detail and with examples, of the more familiar kinds. The second part is designed both to introduce the less familiar, because more recently developed, kinds and to relate their emergence to the gradual dislodgement of the old 'closed world' view of life by the new 'open universe' view. The two parts are not discontinuous, but the second is necessarily at a different level since it deals less with the forms of irony and more with its functions, its topics, and its cultural significance.

While some (still employed) forms of irony are as old as Western civilization – to be able to be ironical is perhaps part of the definition of our civilization – we shall see that in the Romantic and post-Romantic period irony becomes the expression of an attitude to life or more accurately a way of organizing one's response to and coming to terms with a world that seems to be fundamentally at odds with mankind. I shall try to show that this increasingly 'philosophical' use of irony is intimately related to the development of European thought, more specifically to the growth of scepticism, relativism, liberalism, and positivism and to the emergence of the scientific attitude and its (in part) complementary opposite, romanticism. Nor is it by chance or out of mere personal interest that religion and the question of free will are recurrent topics in this work. Any similar work, any representative history of irony, would find itself obliged to give them as much attention.

Chapter I begins in a cloud of unknowing, with the acknowledged conceptual vagueness of irony, continues with a sketch of the present state of 'ironological' studies, and illustrates the need

for further work even beyond what is attempted here. The reader will find in Chapter II a general analysis of irony into its essential elements, and in Chapters III-V a classification of the principal forms, grades, and modes. Up to this point at least, he will be on quite familiar ground. I have, however, tried to introduce more order and argument into the classification than one readily finds elsewhere. Relatively little, considering its importance, has been said here about Dramatic Irony, but this is because it is the one form of irony which has been adequately treated in English.

Chapter VI opens Part II with a distinction between 'Specific Irony' and 'General Irony', the former signifying the class of ironies of which any of us may be so uncircumspect as to become a victim, the latter the class of ironies of which we are all inevitably victims, the ironies based upon apparently fundamental and inescapable contradictions of the human condition. What is called Cosmic Irony is a form of General Irony.

In Chapter VII I try to present a more sympathetic account of Romantic Irony than is commonly found in English or American works. The principal theorist of Romantic Irony, Friedrich Schlegel, is attracting more and more attention; his anticipations of Thomas Mann's explicit and implicit 'ironology' and of the New Critics' theory of irony have been pointed out by Erich Heller and René Wellek respectively; some of Alain Robbe-Grillet's views on the novelist's need to be in his novels a theorist of the novel may be found in Schlegel; a recent lecture of Michel Butor's (Melbourne, 1968) seemed to me to be pure Romantic Irony both in theory and in practice. What is needed, of course, is an English translation of Schlegel's earlier works.

The contemporary importance of irony as a literary and cultural phenomenon necessarily attracts attention to the position of the ironist himself. My last chapter discusses the complementary relationship between the ironist and the victims of irony and the questions this raises as to the morality of irony.

I take the opportunity formally to thank Professor Ivan Barko, Mr Dennis Douglas, Mr Tony Hassall, Professor A. King, and Mr John Radvansky, who read the work in manuscript, and especially Professor Brian Medlin, whose very critical reading of Part I did it a lot of good, and Professor Leslie Bodi, without whose

constant advice, criticism, and encouragement this work would have been another *Key to All the Mythologies*.

I should like also to express my gratitude to the French Embassy in Australia for procuring a grant from the French Government that enabled me to work for some months in Paris.

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General Editor's Preface

This volume is one of a series of short studies, each dealing with a single key item, or a group of two or three key items, in our critical vocabulary. The purpose of the series differs from that served by the standard glossaries of literary terms. Many terms are adequately defined for the needs of students by the brief entries in these glossaries, and such terms will not be the subjects of studies in the present series. But there are other terms which cannot be made familiar by means of compact definitions. Students need to grow accustomed to them through simple and straightforward but reasonably full discussions of them. The purpose of this series is to provide such discussions.

Some of the terms in question refer to literary movements (e.g. 'Romanticism', 'Aestheticism', etc.), others to literary kinds (e.g. 'Comedy', 'Epic', etc.), and still others to stylistic features (e.g. 'Irony', 'The Conceit', etc.). Because of this diversity of subject-matter, no attempt has been made to impose a uniform pattern upon the studies. But all authors have tried to provide as full illustrative quotation as possible, to make reference whenever appropriate to more than one literature, and to compose their studies in such a way as to guide readers towards the short bibliographies in which they have made suggestions for further reading.

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

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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.