1 | Irony as a "Master Trope"

> A yak is a prehistoric cabbage; of that, at least, we may be sure.
> John Ashbery, *Notes from the Air*

> Let this not fall imputed to our native obdurate credulities.
> Geoffrey Hill, *Mysticism and Democracy*

We can make a distinction between the word "irony" as we might normally use it in everyday speech or even scholarly writing, and what is signified by the naming of irony as one of four "master tropes" in the tradition of Giambattista Vico and its latter day representatives, including Kenneth Burke.[1] To do this, let's consider four different scenarios. 1. I've made a mess of things and someone derisively says, "Good job." 2. I've long placed my trust in someone as a treasured friend, and it turns out that they actually despised me all along. 3. Two people, having a bitter argument, talk past one another for lack of common ground. 4. It is the early morning of September 11, 2001, in New York City a gorgeous fall day – then two planes, first one and then another, fly into the Twin Towers.

At first glance the four situations might seem to have nothing in common; in everyday speech we would use different words to describe them: sarcasm, betrayal and duplicity, misunderstanding and anger, and finally, horror, devastation, mayhem, and chaos. There is, however, an underlying commonality: all four scenarios involve what Kenneth Burke called "a perspective of perspectives."[2] In the first situation, there is a disparity between what is meant and what is literally said: what is said comprises one perspective, what is meant is another, and the irony encompasses both. In the second, the disparity is between assumptions and subsequent realizations: I earlier thought they were my friend, now I know they are my enemy, the irony results from the opposition of friend/enemy. In the third, the argument assumes that both persons are addressing the same situation, but their lack of common ground indicates that they are each seeing a different "reality": we are arguing the same point, we are arguing two, non-congruent points, the irony juxtaposes same/different. In the fourth situation, the juxtaposition is between the

beauty of a perfect fall day in New York and the events that ensue, the disparity is between tranquility and despair: the day is tranquil, the day is horrible and full of despair, the irony opposes tranquility/despair.

Irony usually involves a sense of distancing, if not detachment. We figuratively "step back" to encompass a synoptic perspective that includes the opposition within it. Humor often works this way, as the humorist exposes incongruities of expectation and realization, words mistaken, and the like. The children's joke about a chicken crossing the road depends on mistaking the questioning "why," looking for a more probing question about the nature of chickens as opposed to a pragmatic getting across to the other side. Such play on words is typical for children's humor – "Did you hear about the magician who was driving down the road and turned into his driveway?" – and becomes a training ground for more sophisticated humor based on the same principle. In a similar way, the comic incongruities of the spinning out section of the children's song "Three Blind Mice" – *they all ran after the farmer's wife, she cut off their tails with a carving knife, did you ever see such a sight in your life* – can prepare children for the more sophisticated humor of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, whose plays on musical syntax extend and develop the same principle.[3]

Of course, a figurative stepping back need not entail a comic perspective. For example, multiple perspectives on how we perceive passing time, how we define a sense of self, and how we use language to express who we are, are all basic to the pervasive ironies of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and those ironies range from comedy to pathos. Ironic distancing can also take on a horrific guise, as exemplified in some of the novels of Cormac McCarthy, such as *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* in particular. *Blood Meridian* takes place in the American southwest sometime during the mid-nineteenth century. The novel is relentlessly violent from beginning to end, but it is as though all is seen through a scrim. We gaze on the violence but remain somehow detached; like watching an old, silent film, the novel conveys its ironic detachment with uncanny effect. *The Road*, a novel that takes place in the context of a nuclear winter, works with similar effect. The strange, horrifying world seen through the veil of perpetually falling ash remains ironically distanced.

In his discussion of the four master tropes, Burke suggests a substitute for each classical term:

For *metaphor* we could substitute *perspective*;
For *metonymy* we could substitute *reduction*;
For *synecdoche* we could substitute *representation*;
For *irony* we could substitute *dialectic*.[4]

When we think metaphorically, we understand something through the *perspective* of something else: if "you are my sunshine," you make me happy, just like a sunny day. Metonyms *reduce* something intangible to something tangible, as in saying someone has "lots of heart."[5] With synecdoche we *represent* a whole by a part, a photo of oil-covered pelican represents the horrors of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The *dialectic* that is inherent in irony comes from the tension between opposing perspectives, hence Burke's "perspective of perspectives," the disparity between what is said and what is meant, what is expected and what is realized, what someone thinks is so and what actually is so, and the like. Burke's central insight is that irony always entails perspectives that are dialectically unresolved; this despite that one side of the opposition is usually taken as true (what is meant, what is realized, what is actually so). Among its other means of expression, musical counterpoint is a medium that is perfectly suited to portray such opposed perspectives, and so it should come as no surprise that contrapuntal music becomes an important locus for the expression of irony. As we shall see, music has direct analogues to saying one thing and meaning another, expecting one thing and getting another, and ironically juxtaposing different "realities."

In his 1973 study, *Metahistory*: *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, the historiographer Hayden White applies Burke's master tropes toward understanding the writing of historical narratives. Like Burke, White offers a list of substitutes for the classical terms. At variance with Burke's substitutes, White proposes that the essence of irony is its *negational* aspect – what is meant negates what is literally said, what happens negates what was expected, a subsequent perception negates a previous one.[6] The idea of irony as negational goes at least as far back as the Roman rhetorician Quintilian who understood irony (his term was *illusio*) as a species of allegory (*alegoria*): allegory shows one thing in words and another in its sense. When the sense is contrary, then it is irony, as in his example of blame by apparent praise.[7] In a more recent treatment, the literary critic Wayne Booth develops the term "stable irony," where the competent reader (or listener) is meant to understand the irony as involving negation. To explain, Booth gives two often-cited examples from literature: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, where Mr. Bennet refers to Wickham, who has been depicted as a duplicitous scoundrel, as his "favorite" son-in-law, and Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, where Dickens (or the narrator) comments on Mr. Pecksniff, the personification of ostentation and hypocrisy, as having "great wisdom

meriting all praise."[8] Both examples are of the type where there is a disparity between what is said and what is meant.

To be sure, negation is involved in most types of irony, but it is the dialectical tension between perspectives that is most essential to irony: other types of negation, for example, the number -2 or a "Don't Walk" signal, have no irony implied (unless the person reading the "Don't Walk" sign is consigned to a wheelchair). Linda Hutcheon citing Michel Foucault makes a similar point in her book *Irony's Edge*: *The Theory and Politics of Irony*: "Irony needs *both* the stated *and* the unstated, for it is a form of what has been called 'polysemia . . . this unsaid that is nevertheless said.'"[9] Moreover, as we shall see, Burke's *dialectic* comprising a perspective of perspectives, because it is more dynamic and synoptic, will be more useful for our purposes in describing varieties of musical irony. Having said that, music too can express ironic negation: a famous example is the opening of the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, where we hear truncated fragments of the earlier movements. The fragments are musical synecdoches: parts that recollect their wholes. Each fragment is aborted midstream, interrupted by the instrumental recitative that then is given words in the opening of the Baritone solo – "O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!" ("Oh friends, not these sounds!") The listener, having taken in the first three movements, is now told that they are to be rejected. In this instance, Beethoven uses a pile-up of musical synecdoches to create a larger musical irony.

A more complex kind of negation takes place when irony involves undecidability, where the dialectically opposed perspectives vie with each other, each eating away at the validity of the other. A radical deconstructionist attitude would emphasize the undecidability of many (most? all?) examples of discourse. My approach will be more circumscribed, applied to authors and composers who are known for their ironic stance, but where it is not always clear if irony is intended – where a non-ironic reading or hearing is as compelling as an ironic one, and where either perspective, ironic or not ironic, is eroded by the demands of its alternative, each perspective negating the other. Alexander Nehamas finds this kind of irony in his reading of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. The novel's protagonist, Hans Castorp, arrives at a sanitarium near the beginning of the novel, purportedly to visit his cousin who is under care for tuberculosis. Over the course of the novel, Castorp is diagnosed with tuberculosis himself. Has he had it all along? Is his illness psychological or physiological? The novel "undercuts every effort to determine once and for all."[10] The same kind of

undecidability is pervasive in the writings of the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and the poet Heinrich Heine. Anyone who has struggled with Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* or *Either/Or* will recognize what I mean. In a similar way, much of Heine's love poetry, for example, can be read as straightforward love poetry, no irony intended. On the other hand, the same poems can be convincingly read ironically, as mocking the sentiments that they proclaim. A reading based on undecidability would emphasize the reader's inability to settle on either side. Susan Youens finds precisely this kind of irony in Schubert's setting of Heine's "Das Fischermädchen," a song that we will return to in Chapter 5.[11] Among composers, I single out Gustav Mahler for preeminence in developing this kind of complex irony.

The word *irony* is ultimately derived from the ancient Greek word *eironeia*, meaning dissimulation, or ignorance purposely affected. According to Alexander Nehamas, the word first appears in the works of Aristophanes, carrying "the sense of dissembling, shaming, and deceiving."[12] When Aristophanes applies the word toward describing Socrates in *The Clouds* it is a pejorative. Plato radically changes the meaning of the word when he uses it to describe Socrates in two of his dialogues, the *Republic* and the *Symposium*. Nehamas characterizes the change nicely:

> The *eiron* – the person who uses *eironeia* – is no longer simply a cunning, dissembling hypocrite, an outright deceiver who intends and needs to escape completely undetected. The *eiron* is now transformed into a much more subtle character who lets part of his audience know that . . . he does not always mean what he says, and who does not mind if some people know he is dissembling.[13]

Søren Kierkegaard's first book, *The Concept of Irony*, is most essentially a prolonged study of Socratic irony: Kierkegaard describing how Socrates used dialogic questions as a means toward emptying out the meaning and so deflating the arguments of the Sophists. It is through Socratic irony that their claims to knowing are undercut, their left arguments empty.[14] Socratic argumentation most often involves revealing incongruities among Sophistic assumptions or assertions. Socrates sees those incongruities by figuratively stepping back; the ability to step outside of a presumed perspective on "how things really are" remains at the heart of Socratic irony.

If we think of Socratic irony as emptying out (false) meaning rather than as feigning simplicity, its musical analogue would be in the ways that "new music" can question the fundamental assumptions of the music

that preceded it.[15] For example, in abandoning the necessity for tonal resolution, Schoenberg challenged the idea that music must conclude with a perfect cadence. On the contrary, in his musical world, a final resolution is no longer possible, just as a final state of the universe (the universe resolved into its perfected form) is no longer possible in modern physics. If we think of Schoenberg as challenging what was considered fundamental and necessary (musical "perfection"), then something like Socratic irony exists in the ways that Schoenberg questions the assumptions of his precursors. Yet even here, the application for Socratic irony in music must be circumspect. While later music is in dialogue with its precursors, it does not empty out meaning in the earlier music in ways analogous to the ways that Socrates makes empty the claims of the sophists. Just as Beethoven's music does not invalidate Mozart, Schoenberg's post-tonal language does not invalidate (prove false) tonal music. Although the application of something like Socratic irony to music is not quite as far-fetched as it might seem at first, its application to the interpretation of music must be done with care at best. In Schoenberg's case, the ways his music affirms and connects with his precursors is at least as significant as the ways it negates their assumptions. Indeed, this sense of being apart and connected at the same time is at the heart of Schoenbergian irony.

Ironic wit is another aspect of Socratic irony already recognized in antiquity. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, approaches irony from several perspectives: as a way of showing contempt, a form of dangerous deception, as characteristic of contrasting or conflicting points of view, and as characteristic of the form of humor befitting a "free man," opposed to humor as vulgar buffoonery.[16] Aristotle's distinction between types of humor is later found in the Roman philosopher Cicero's *De Officiis*, where he distinguishes between two types of jokes, vulgar and refined, the latter associated with irony and specifically Socratic irony.[17] Closer to the modern era, ironic wit found a golden age in English literature during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, with Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift topping the list. Harold Bloom's brilliant commentary on Pope's *Rape of the Lock* brings poetic and musical values into coincidence.[18] Inspired by an actual incident, Pope composed a mock-epic about cutting off a lock of a girl's hair, mock-tragically without proper permission. Bloom's commentary shows how the comic imagery of the scissor that cuts off the lock of hair parodies imagery in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the Angel Michael uses a sword from God to cut Satan asunder. Here is the apposite passage from Milton.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book Six, 320–353

but the sword
Of Michael from the Armorie of God
Was giv'n him temperd so, that neither keen
Nor solid might resist that edge: it met
The sword of Satan with steep force to smite
Descending, and in half cut sheere, nor staid,
But with swift wheele reverse, deep entering shar'd [sheared, completely severed]
All his right side; then Satan first knew pain,
And writh'd him to and fro convolv'd; so sore
The griding [cutting] sword with discontinuous [open] wound
Passd through him, but th' Ethereal substance clos'd
Not long divisible, and from the gash
A stream of Nectarous humor issuing flow'd
Sanguin, such as Celestial Spirits may bleed,
And all his Armour staind ere while so bright.
Forthwith on all sides to his aide was run
By Angels many and strong, who interpos'd
Defence, while others bore him on thir Shields
Back to his Chariot; where it stood retir'd
From off the files of warr; there they him laid
Gnashing for anguish and despite and shame
To find himself not matchless, and his pride
Humbl'd by such rebuke, so farr beneath
His confidence to equal God in power.
Yet soon he heal'd; for Spirits that live throughout
Vital in every part, not as frail man
In Entrailes, Heart or Head, Liver or Reines; [Reines = kidneys or loins]
Cannot but by annihilating die;
Nor in thir liquid texture mortal wound
Receive, no more then can the fluid Aire:
All Heart they live, all Head, all Eye, all Eare,
All Intellect, all Sense, and as they please,
They Limb themselves, and colour, shape or size
Assume, as likes them best, condense or rare.

The passage from Pope and an excerpt from Bloom's commentary are so apt that I will cite both verbatim. First Pope:

The *Peer* now spreads the glittering *Forfex* wide,
T' inclose the Lock; now joins it, to divide.

Ev'n then, before the fatal Engine clos'd,
A wretched *Sylph* too fondly interpos'd;
Fate urged the Sheers, and cut the *Sylph* in twain,
(But Airy Substance soon unites again)
The meeting Points the sacred Hair dissever
From the fair Head, for ever and for ever!

Now Bloom:

> Pope rather wickedly overgoes Milton by turning the entire cumbersome Satanic passage into one airy, parenthetical line, the superb throwaway of "(But Airy Substance soon unites again)," strikingly contrasted to the Ovidian mock-pathos of the couplet following. The fond Sylph and proud Satan soon heal, but Belinda's lock and Belinda's fair head are forever separated:
>
> The meeting Points the sacred Hair dissever
> From the fair Head, for ever and for ever!
>
> Outrageously moved as we are by "for ever and for ever," we are compelled to award the palm to Pope over Milton in this instance. The greatness of *The Rape of the Lock* is that it may be the only poem that seems to demand Mozartean comparisons, because it too is infinitely nuanced, absolutely controlled, and yet finally poignant in the highest degree.[19]

As with literature, ironic wit in music too must reach back to antiquity, represented in musical works beyond the confines of this study (and beyond the expertise of this author). The age of Viennese classicism – the music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven – was a golden age for ironic wit, and its influence, transformed by the vicissitudes of musical style, continued through the twentieth century into our times.

Irony in spoken language is often expressed through inflection. You can tell if I actually mean "good job" or its opposite not only by context but by the way I say the words. The now famous words of George W. Bush during the Hurricane Katrina fiasco, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job," were a perfect opportunity for irony lost upon the hapless president. This aspect of spoken irony, which includes irony in literature that was meant to be read aloud, was recognized as early as late antiquity in the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville.[20] Musical expressions of irony can also depend on performance. A wonderful example is found in the remarkable recording of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, Bruno Walter conducting the Vienna Philharmonic, with Julius Patzak singing the songs for tenor.[21] Of all the recordings that I have heard, Patzak's rendition best captures the biting irony of the work's first song, *Das Trinklied von Jammer der Erde*

(Drinking Song of Earth's Misery). Irony is written into the score, but its proper expression is dependent on an understanding and capable performer.

"Dramatic irony" is another basic type of irony with roots in ancient Greece. It occurs in drama when the audience knows something that the protagonist on stage does not, for example, that Oedipus has killed his father, wed his mother, and brought the anger of the gods against his native Thebes. Surprisingly, dramatic irony was not described in scholarly literature until the nineteenth century.[22] Nonetheless, its significance was surely recognized by audiences going back to antiquity. Needless to say, dramatic irony becomes highly important in the history of opera.

The paired terms *anagnorisis* (recognition) and *peripeteia* (a sudden reversal of fortune), key terms in Aristotle's discussions of Greek tragedy and epic, form a powerful means of creating irony, usually tragic, but not necessarily so.[23] Aristotle applies the term *anagnorisis* to the moment when Oedipus realizes who he is, murderer of his father, participant in an incestuous relationship with his mother, and the cause of Thebe's misfortunes. *Peripeteia* describes the terrible reversal of fortune that immediately follows, his fall from power, self-inflicted blindness, and exile.

In our subsequent treatment of musical ironies based on *anagnorisis-peripeteia*, I will generally use the term *peripeteia* as a short hand for the pair, recognizing that irony ensues from both revisionary recognition and reversal of fortune. Within tragedy, a bitter irony exists at the moment of revision, juxtaposing the world as it has been perceived up until that moment with the way things now are recognized. Among Shakespeare's tragedies, I would single out *Othello* for its focused *peripeteia*, the moment shortly after stabbing Desdemona, that Othello realizes Desdemona's innocence, and that he has been duped and betrayed by Iago. The potential for a musical portrayal of this heightened moment of irony was not lost to Giuseppe Verdi. There is also comic potential for revisionary recognition and reversal of fortune. We find a wonderful example in the turn of events in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, when Marcellina and Bartolo suddenly realize that they are Figaro's mother and father, immediately changing their alliances from sympathies with the Count to supporters of Figaro and Susanna.[24]

The German Romantics were the first to recognize Shakespeare's detachment from his characters as a kind of irony, and this sense of detachment became a characteristic of what was eventually known as "romantic irony," a conception of irony that dominated German and German-influenced scholarship from Friedrich Schlegel through

Kierkegaard.[25] As Joseph A. Dane argues, romantic irony is a vexing term, exemplified by a wide range of definitions: the self-conscious attitude of the artist; the dialectical process of the artist; the destruction of the illusion of art; the open-endedness of art and its subsequent sense of indeterminacy, a factor congenial to deconstruction inherent in romanticism itself.[26] Emphasizing romantic irony's sense of distancing, D. C. Muecke cites Thomas Mann's essay "The Art of the Novel."[27]

> It keeps its distance from things, *has* by its very nature distance from them; it hovers over them and smiles down upon them regardless of how much, at the same time it involves the hear or reader in them by a process of weblike entanglement. 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.

An Apollonian sense of ironic detachment, a variant of the irony's fundamental "stepping back," is a quality particularly associated with French music. It becomes central to the aesthetic of neoclassical music in the twentieth century, Stravinsky and Ravel in particular.[28] Within Chapter 3, we will consider romantic irony applied to Mozart as the ironic "dance master" behind the scenes in *Figaro*.

Another characteristic of distancing in romantic irony is the artist's ability to step outside of the fictional space of their creation and address the reader or audience directly. The technical term for this is *parabasis*; its antecedents are in ancient Greek comedy when the chorus would address the audience.[29] Although relatively rare in music there are some striking examples of this technique. We have already cited the opening of the Baritone solo in the finale to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, "O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!" With these words it is as though the soloist steps outside of the piece, and talks (sings!) directly to us. Igor Stravinsky, master of many types of musical irony, uses *parabasis* at three junctures within his opera *The Rake's Progress*. In the first act, having told Tom Rakewell of his inherited fortune, Nick Shadow turns to the audience singing "The Progress of a Rake begins." Shadow addresses the audience directly once again during the card game in the third act in which he bets against Rakewell's soul. The final and extended *parabasis* comprises the opera's epilogue, where the principal players stand before the curtain with the house lights up, and sing the morals of the story that we have just seen and heard enacted.

Another way of stepping outside of the space of enactment in a musical context is by using a narrator to address the audience directly. As a result,