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978-1-107-42659-7 - The Element of Irony in English Literature: An Essay

F. McD. C. Turner

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF IRONY

Scientific methods are at once the friend and the tormentor of the essay-writer; they allow him too little and too much. They will, for instance, forbid him to enlarge himself upon the subject of Romance, until he has defined the meaning of that elusive word; but, so soon as he bows to their will, their relentlessness is vanished away; they permit him a complete liberty of definition, for they are concerned with consistency rather than with the truth in words. Indeed, to the scientific mind such an expression as 'the truth in words' may well seem a manifest symptom of disordered thought, for words are no more knowledge than a milestone is distance. And yet the man of letters, the artist in words, will continue to wonder whether the matter is so easily resolved. He is for many reasons provoked by the scientist; in the first place, the methods of the latter remind him too much of Humpty-Dumpty. But whereas Humpty-Dumpty tells us 'when I make a word do a lot of work like that, I always pay it extra,' the scientist says nothing of the sort; indeed, he would laugh at the idea, and his style shows no sign of any such reasonable generosity; his poor words are tired and overwrought. The irritation which the scientist causes is a very just one, for he is condemned not for his science, but for his lack of science. When in the past he cried in alarm that thought was becoming enslaved by speech and that man must show his independence by making words his servants and assigning to each a strict meaning, he was

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giving voice to a fear and to a sentiment that the literary artist is ever ready to proclaim. But at this point the scientist forgot himself: he omitted to add, and in practice ignored the fact, that this cry of independence was a call for concerted action, and not a declaration of individual licence. He forgot, too, that words have emerged chastened and clarified by the mental strife and unerring taste of great men, that to a single word, thus purified, can become attached something of the illumination with which genius has converted adventurous intuition into demonstrable conviction, and that the elect amongst words cannot be deprived of the meaning they held in the day of victory, without grievous loss to the language to which they belong.

These things escaped the scientist when, in the swiftness of his progress, it seemed a convenience to be an individualist in language; but confusion descended upon his heedlessness and he long since resolved to set his house in order and to clear the ways of knowledge by the redemption of violated words. Our business is not to examine the effects of this laudable conversion, but to turn from these speculations to matters more closely connected with our subject. The connection is not obscure; for if ever a word has suffered, and suffers, abuse in common speech, it is 'irony.' It is a word which has never had the good fortune to become one of the elect in spite of the fact that it is indispensable. And this ill luck it owes to its meaning, which, although exact in essence, is in practice composite, belonging to several phenomena, united only by a single common tie. The

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essential nature of irony is to be found in this common factor, but here again circumstances are adverse to exact definitions. For irony has an emotional element which it is so hard to mistake, that attention is diverted to the dramatic setting wherein the ironic spirit seems most at home, and it escapes notice that a thing emotionally clear is often intellectually abstruse. Thus for lack of analysis the word suffers abuse, and even where it is saved this degradation, it has no option but to be escorted by a variety of qualifying adjectives to denote the different phenomena wherein it resides, and so we hear of 'dramatic irony,' 'the irony of Fate,' 'Socratic irony,' quite apart from the simple but elusive thing that we denote when we use the word without qualification.

Irony in human experience is roughly of three kinds: there is, in the first place, 'the irony of Fate,' so called because the perceiver of the irony possesses powers of correlating human affairs and of knowing the future beyond the capabilities of man, except when he is assisted by particular circumstances; there is 'simple irony,' wherein one man speaks ironically to another, and he, the victim, even if he does not perceive an exact double meaning, is conscious of a sly assault upon him; finally, there is 'dramatic irony,' which must be subdivided. In its simplest form, dramatic irony is a matter for two people who have no connection with each other: one person, the onlooker, perceives another acting in a manner which is the result of ignorance, on the part of the actor, of certain facts known to the onlooker. But

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more often dramatic irony assumes a more complex form: *A* speaks to, or acts towards, *B* in such fashion as to convey an outer and superficial meaning to *B*, but an inner and more fundamental meaning to *C*, an onlooker; and this, again, assumes a different nature, according to whether *A* is the conscious perpetrator of the irony, or the tool of circumstances, or of some fourth person, *D*: the one essential which unites these various kinds of dramatic irony, is the presence of a disinterested spectator, whose knowledge of the affair embraces that of all the actors. But when this spectator, the perceiver of the irony, is in no way responsible for the ironic forces at work, he bears witness to that irony of Fate which human agencies have encouraged.

The fact remains that in all these situations there seems to be a spirit at work which we agree in calling ironical; the only difference between the irony of Fate and any other irony being that in the irony of Fate we are attributing events, the correlation of which seems to betray an ironical spirit outside and controlling human and natural behaviour, to the agency of that mysterious being. The irony that is the conscious product of the human mind has been called 'simple' irony where one man 'ironises' another through the direct medium of speech, and 'dramatic' where one man makes use of circumstances to entertain or represent ironical notions of the behaviour of another, either by speech or action, or the conscious or unconscious agency of a third person. It will be clear that of these types 'simple' irony can alone be considered an element in literature, for it alone

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of them is exclusively concerned with the conveyance of thought in speech. Both dramatic irony and the irony of Fate are elemental in drama, but in literature they are only topics, for literature is not *per se* related to the idea of drama, but only to the expression of this idea, as of all other ideas, in speech.

The scope of this essay, then, will not extend beyond the consideration of those utterances which contain in themselves the full extent of the ironic idea they convey: for, given suitable circumstances, almost any remark could be made the agent of irony. There are cases where such circumstances are entirely literary, and from which would arise such ironies as may be contained in parody for instance. But for the sake of simplicity, and also because the subject is a large one, we shall confine ourselves here to direct and simple irony. In fiction and history the situation is slightly more complex, because the author sometimes uses his *dramatis personae* to give voice to his own irony; but this should not prove a very dangerous stumbling block, for to confuse this with dramatic irony would be to assume the relations between an author and the characters of his pen to be the same as those existing between one living person and another.

It must now become our task to examine the mental attitude of the ironist, to discover what is the outlook, what are the purposes, and what the emotions, that result in ironical utterance. What the ironist in fact achieves is the sudden projection of something vividly before us, and we are precipitated into passing judgment

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upon it not so much intellectually as immediately by the value-sense that is within us. And when the thing so projected is a thought or an argument, what we are called upon to examine is the inherent *worthiness* of that thought. We must satisfy ourselves, for instance, that it does not disclose a mind restricted by prejudice or agitated by pride, but one that moves, for the most part, freely, and is sustained by the saving grace of a sense of proportion, which is, perhaps, none other than this same value-sense that irony prompts us to exercise. Thus Plato, in the beginning of the *Republic*, does not seek directly to ironise the idea that justice is the right of the stronger over the weaker, for strength can mean many things, and the idea is not unworthy of our consideration; what he is very ready to ironise is the mental attitude of a man like Thrasymachus.

Such considerations raise the vexed question of the relation of irony with that 'enmity complex' which in literature at any rate appears so frequently and so openly to accompany it. The appeal that the ironist makes to our judgment owes its efficacy to its suddenness; we are surprised into it and cannot escape to take thought. Now a sudden assessment of thought or behaviour will be primarily moral; intuitive evaluation is concerned with fundamentals, with beauty, with goodness, and with truth. Of course the immediateness of this appeal varies greatly with the irony employed; but even in his most playful mood the ironist is, whether consciously or not, making such an appeal. When we say that a thing is absurd, that stricture is seldom a

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purely rational one; but it need not be the less true for that reason. The ironist is always asking us to observe the absurdity of things; his methods are not suitable for the revelation of what is admirable. The process of ironic exposure is an unpleasant one, and fortunately admirable qualities do not require it. Hence it follows that irony is employed as an engine of destructive criticism, and as such has been dragged into the worst regions of personal strife in literature, and has become connected with too much that is spiteful and vindictive. Yet it should be remembered, in the first place, that irony should be employed against thoughts and actions rather than against particular individuals who indulge in such thoughts and actions; and, secondly, that direct irony is a means and not an end; it is a method of criticism, and not an experience of critical thought.

Moreover, if enmity, or at any rate a disapproval that has amounted to irritation, be too often an incentive to ironical utterance, this disapproval, however hostile, must be mixed with a more admirable desire to expose the truth, to ridicule the ridiculous, and, if necessary, abominate the abominable. Irony may spring from a lust of conquest, but the enemy is to be convicted by Truth. She declares judgment and is the real conqueror; the achievement and delight of the human combatant is to force the enemy before that solemn arbiter, to expose him there suddenly, unready and unexpectant. To ignore this fact and to define irony as malicious ambiguity of speech is entirely misleading. For irony is an engine of destructive criticism in only a very

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limited sense; the ironist himself does not pass judgment but appeals to our sense of truth and justice to do so. If truth be judge when irony prosecutes, it follows that nothing that is excellent can in this way be hurt; on the contrary, just because the method is a harsh one, our indignation will go forth against the ironist himself, if it shall appear that his victim is unjustly arraigned and undeserving of our summary jurisdiction.

The ambiguity of ironical speech is a topic which demands a little consideration. Many people have been misled into a belief that this ambiguity is a vehicle of bitterness and nothing more. Thus, in his essay on comedy, Meredith writes: 'If instead of falling foul of the ridiculous person with a satiric rod to make him writhe and shriek aloud, you prefer to sting him under a semi-caress, by which he shall in his anguish be rendered dubious whether indeed anything has hurt him, you are an engine of irony.' But the bitterness of this ambiguity is purely incidental; the ambiguity itself is a method of criticism. Indeed, the word 'ambiguity' is highly misleading, since it adopts the point of view of the victim only. The ironist is concerned far more with incongruity than with ambiguity. He places ridiculous things amongst the dignified, bad amongst good, and false amongst true, so that their ridiculousness, badness and falseness may become obvious to all sensible people. But he does not explain that this is what he is doing; it is not necessary, and it might spoil the sudden clarity that he hopes to awaken in our minds by means of these juxtapositions. And if it happens that certain people

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who had believed the ridiculous to be dignified or the bad to be good begin to have misgivings and find his language bitterly ambiguous, that is their fault. Yet the ironist should deal with them as gently as he can, for without them there would be no need for irony. It is a poor achievement to expose what everyone despises. These things the ironist not infrequently forgets.

Thus, while a hasty appeal to experience might tempt one to define an ironical utterance as a veiled attack wherein the sting dependent on truth for its efficacy is enwrapped in a superficial and insincere sympathy, a more detached observer might be content to declare that *irony in speech is a form of destructive criticism that enforces an immediate judgment upon something by placing it without comment in a position to which it should not aspire*, but to which we may add, it probably has been aspiring. In other words, the ironist attempts to convict the foolish of their folly by appearing to accept the logical deductions arising from it, and by solemnly parading absurdities before our eyes.

Perhaps we have been considering irony too exclusively in its most primitive form; we have thought of it as a weapon confined to the execution of relentless hostilities. Although in actual life, as in the history of literature, irony not infrequently experiences some difficulty in entirely freeing itself from the gloomy atmosphere of war, like most other forms of criticism, while unpleasant in its most personal aspect, it becomes less offensive and far more versatile when it is used with detachment and its personal venom is reduced to a

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minimum. Nor need it only be exercised against such follies as are contemptible and spring from disagreeable people; there are many amiable weaknesses and laughable errors in human life that invite the mockery of a gentle and a playful irony. Thus irony can grow almost benign, becoming, as Meredith said, the humour of satire. Yet its laughter is never the laughter of true humour; it can cast off fierce ill-will, but it can never assume the positive charity that humour demands. It remains like a soldier playing at war with a child, allowing no quarter even in the game of pretence, and in these homely regions irony is apt to move with a tread that is somewhat stiff and heavy. But soldiers not infrequently learn docility, and so, let us hope, may irony. We walk, however, on a smooth and polished floor supported by the goodwill which is the first necessity of civilised life: through this, irony may at any time break, slipping clumsily, and drag us with it on a compulsory visit to the dingy caverns of 'the state of Nature.'

Thus it will appear that the history of irony in polite literature is a hazardous one and the perils that beset an intruder attend upon it. The god of irony, as might be expected, is a jealous god: he causes his votaries, be they ever so little imprudent, to appear odious in the sight of man. The ironist has no alternative between success and such failure as will invest him before the public eye with the insignificance of meanness. It is this fact which gives our subject its especial interest, for the successful use of irony is always an artistic victory: triumphant intrusion is a very great achievement. So