By way of an Introduction: These pages contain individual chapters from my 1990 book, Postmodern Sophistications. I have obtained the rights to the essays am making them available separately. The entire text of the book is also available on Research Gate.

The underlying aim of this collection of essays was to question the opposition between the Sophists and Plato. That classic dispute has been the model for many discussions of tensions within our society:: on the one hand you have the clever manipulative salesmen who care nothing about truth. On the other hand the rigorous scientific investigation that never quite makes contact with politics. Rootless nihilism vs. naturally grounded values. Anarchy vs. Rules.

In this book I developed a pragmatic middleground, using themes from Heidegger and Dewey; in later writings I rely more on Hegel. But the point remains the same: don't listen to the Straussians and others who try to force on our politics or art or philosophy a simple opposition between truth-loving traditionalists (Socrates) and flaky relativistic postmoderns (the Sophists). It was not so simple in Greece and it's not so simple today.

Part of the book deals with postmodern critiques of rational knowledge, with Lyotard and Habermas on center stage. Their opposition between postmodern and modern views remains relevant, although post-1990 developments in deconstruction and critical theory have widened and deepened the debate. The points made in these essays remain useful, if not complete.

The second part of the book deals with architecture. The word postmodern has gone out of fashion in architecture. But the earlier use of the term for an attempt to bring substantive content into formal modernity retains important.

My conclusions about postmodern architecture's failute to escape modern distance from history also remain true, as does my argument that that proclaimed modern distance from history is itself an illusion, that we are more embedded in history than the moderns wanted to think, although

that embodiment is not as total and restrictive as we have imagined true of our ancestors.

If you find any of these ideas useful, true, provocative, let me know. If you find them absurd or useless airy nothings, I'd still be delighted to learn from your reactions.

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This chapter tries to find a mode of irony that does not involve haughty distance.

11. Haughty and Humble Ironies

Irony has become a buzzword in postmodern circles; nowadays even buildings are ironic. Whom can you trust?

The word *irony* comes from the Greek noun *eiron* which describes a sly dissembler, a person with smooth way of taking people in by hiding his strengths. Aristotle speaks of a quality he calls *eironeia* that consists in understating one's own good qualities. He considers this the vice at the other extreme from boastfulness. The virtue of straightforwardness stands between these two. Irony in Aristotle has more to do with a trait of character than with a literary turn. Maybe in the end it still does.

Classical rhetoric defines irony as calling something by an opposed name, for instance in blaming someone through praising them, as Socrates praises his opponent while deprecating himself. After a long history in commentaries and books on rhetoric, during which the word was used to discuss a wide variety of attitudes and tropes, irony moved into discussions of art, especially in the nineteenth century with the Schlegels, Solger, Kierkegaard, and others.(For earlier uses of the word, cf. Knox 1989.) Most recently Charles Jencks calls "ironies or complexities of reference . . . the defining characteristic of postmodernism" (Jencks 1987, 196, also 330-350).

My concern in this essay is to understand some varieties of postmodern irony. Much of what goes under the name postmodern irony still presupposes something like the superior distanced selfhood typical of modernity, though some deconstructive irony escapes this connection. However, the irony we find so far in postmodern architecture is not as subtle as the irony in postmodern literature and critical theory.

I will start by discussing the everyday notion of irony and some conditions for the success of irony as a speech act. Features of the everyday notion extend quite far into the refined philosophical and artistic meanings. I will be following two such features: the need of a firm platform from which to be ironic, and an act of superior judgment. Later we will come to types or irony that try to question this approach.

Judgmental Irony

One popular dictionary describes irony as occurring when the literal meaning of a statement is the opposite of the intended meaning, especially when this understates the intended meaning. (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, Unabridged edition (New York: Random House, 1967), s.v. "irony.")

The dictionary goes on to speak of irony as, "especially in contemporary writing, a manner of organizing a work so as to give full expression to contradictory or complementary impulses, attitudes, etc., especially as a means of indicating detachment from a subject, theme, or emotion." It is also described as an indirect presentation of a contradiction between an action or expression and the context in which it occurs. Irony is linked with distance and detachment. Typical thesaurus entries relating to irony include "sarcasm, satire, sardonicism, ambiguity, equivocation, doubletalk, sophistry, casuistry, double entendre," and the thesaurus suggests related notions can be found under such headings as "confusion, misinterpretation, uncertainty, contempt, detraction, disrespect, insult."(*Roget's Thesaurus in Dictionary Form*, edited by Norman Lewis (New York: Berkeley, 1966), s.v. "irony.")

So, in the dictionary and thesaurus irony is a negative attitude on the part of a haughty ironist who looks down on those who are the butt of the ironical gesture. These "ordinary" reference works portray irony as a surprisingly negative and judgmental act, considering the positive tone the word has in academic circles. (Cf., for instance, Booth 1974, Wilde 1981, and Muecke 1969 and 1985.)] These ordinary references also

emphasize the contrast between the literal and the intended meaning of a statement, and between appearance and reality. In the more refined concepts of irony that descend from the nineteenth century these features become problematic, but they do not entirely disappear.

Irony as a speech act depends on intended meaning. I say one thing and intend that you (or some bystanders) understand another. This contrast calls attention to itself. By some signal I convey the intention that I want you to know I am being ironic--or at least I want someone to know, not necessarily you. Undetectable irony would fail; a hoax is not irony (Muecke 1985, 36).

Booth (1974) discusses such signals in literature; analogies to many of his categories could be found in architecture. Could there be noncommunicable irony, something that one can't convey but only feel? With relation to a particular audience there might be irony that they could not detect, but this would make no sense in relation to all audiences; like a private language, if it could not be a shared attitude, there is a question whether it would be an attitude at all.]

Notice that since successful irony demands that I signal to you the intention that my words be taken ironically, the signal itself must be non-ironic, on pain of an infinite regress. There must be the possibility that the audience can compare the literal meaning to the ironic meaning. If all acts of communication are ironic, then none are.

This does not preclude my being ironic about the *platform* from which I am passing my ironic judgment; it precludes that the *act* of communicating irony can be endlessly doubled on itself. Irony in the ordinary sense requires that the ironist have some higher place to stand. Such a platform must be a set of beliefs or a practice which is not taken ironically. The later developments of irony try to abolish this requirement; I will discuss later to what degree they succeed in doing so. My point here is that no matter how recondite the self-irony may become, there still must be some signal that irony is going on, and that signal cannot itself be ironical.

Irony also demands the possibility of being misunderstood by being taken literally. Part of the experience of irony is the realization that I could have understood it too simply and missed the point. If that possibility is not acknowledged, then there would be only a one-level communication, which is sarcasm, not irony.

Irony fails if it is not understood as irony; when the context required to recognize the double communication is no longer available, the irony disappears. That context might be restricted to a select few (as are the meanings of the ironic names of characters in Plato's dialogues) or no longer available (as we might lack the context to decide whether some statement in the epic of Gilgamesh was meant ironically).

Irony can also fail by excess. Ordinary factual reports and requests are undermined if they are done with too much ironic comment. If I sense irony in your request to open the door I will be unsure whether I should open the door. Performatives, too, cannot be overly ironic. How ironically could I say "I do" and still get married? There is a limit to how far I could engage in self-parody of the act and still accomplish it. At some point I would cease being a groom and become someone putting on the role of a groom, and so fail to promise or marry. Yet works of art are more resilient, and can comment ironically on their own happening to almost unlimited degrees without vitiating their performance.

Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1981) can overload and multiply self-referential narrative in a manner that can be called ironic, without ceasing to be a novel. Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans can ironically overload and multiply references to its own assertions of Italian identity and festive character, and still be a successful public space. A text that consisted entirely of random words might still succeed as a text. But there are some limits: a house will not succeed as a house if its roof makes ironic and self-referential gestures about shelter that do not actually keep out the rain. Such a structure might, I suppose, become a piece of performance art.(Cf., however, the discussion of how architecture ought to relate to its traditional *telos* (Norris 1988 and Benjamin 1988).) The new spaciousness they describe is not a case of irony.

Irony can also fail through repetition, as the ironic gesture becomes standardized. What is the irony equivalent of dead metaphor? Some metaphors are living, some have grown stale, some have disappeared and become only another "literal" meaning of the word. As Ricoeur says, in the dictionary there are no metaphors, only multiple meanings (1977, 97). Can there be ironies in the dictionary? A dead irony would be one that has become sarcasm. In sarcasm there is no intended possibility of missing the meaning. So it loses "the curious special feeling of paradox, of the ambivalent and the ambiguous, of the impossible made actual, of a double contradictory reality" (Muecke 1985, 45). It ceases to be irony and becomes direct attack. Ironic gestures degrade with time; they need to be

renewed; hence ironic art is driven to extremes.

Irony in the judgmental sense demands distance and double reference. The ironist refuses to be simply identified with a straightforward meaning. "There is more to me and to what I say than the literal meaning of my words. I use this code and know it as a code. I see further; I am not just blindly following rules that are immediately one with my consciousness. I know this and you know it too." There is detachment, and a putdown. Other types of irony keep the distance but are less judgmental.

On the other hand, there are kinds of distance and complexities of reference that are not irony. For instance, *play* suggests a motion that is freed from strictures or rules but is not standing off and putting them down. Play has no other place to stand. *Self-reflection* involves a double awareness, but not necessarily the distance that brings criticism. Self-reflective persons recognize their codes and languages, but self-reflection has no particular tone; it makes possible a variety of attitudes and judgments. One such attitude would be *self-consciousness* in the sense of an uneasy awareness of one's own actions that gets in the way of their successful performance. This disquieted self-consciousness need not be ironic.

The most prominent of irony's cousins is *parody*. Parody demands some shared community understanding to begin with, as well as some signal that parody is being performed. But parody can take that community in at least two directions. As a kind of bitter satire, parody can be a weapon used by one group against another to create divisions within a community. Or it can be a playful affirmation of community. Consider, for example, the parody of medieval liturgy and theology in the Carmina Burana drinking song "In taberna quando sumus," or the political parody of Saturday Night Live. In this situation we stand together as members of a community; a distance is created so that we can look at ourselves, but it does not create a superior position for some of us to occupy.

There is a further question whether all parody makes reference to some fixed community ideals and standards. It is the failure of postmodern parody to do so which leads Fredric Jameson to label it pastiche rather than parody (1983). Linda Hutcheon replies to this charge in the article discussed below (1986).

Much of what goes by the name of postmodern irony tries to be parody of this latter sort, though often it remains on the level of judgmental irony. In particular,

postmodern architectural irony often ends up reaffirming the dexterous superiority of the distanced architect who has dropped by to learn a bit of the natives' language.

There are many kinds of double reference and self-awareness. Too many critics and philosophers class every kind of doubling as irony. This collapses a wide variety of attitudes and stances into one opposition between simple inhabitation and ironic distance. The result in architectural criticism has been to run together wit, humor, parody, playfulness, self-awareness, self-consciousness, irony, and the like.

But then, to the extent that irony carries connotations of superior judgment, conflating all modes of double reference with irony may lead to begging major questions about the ways of living and building in our multiple world. If by definition we must be either simple-minded or ironic, the choice is obvious, but not very helpful. Are there other forms of irony which are not caught in the blunt opposition between pre-modern enclosure and modern distance?

Romantic Irony

Muecke (1985) distinguishes two types of irony, closed and open. Closed irony comes about when the ironist stands within one set of beliefs and pretends ironically to hold a rival set. For example, members of one religion or political party might make ironic use of the beliefs of another. The politician may also state his own beliefs ironically, but this will be done on the basis of still other, perhaps more general beliefs that are not ironized. In contrast, what Muecke calls open irony occurs when the ironist has no particular beliefs at all to share, but wishes to be ironical about simple believers of any stripe. This irony attacks not so much the content as the act of believing. Does it still presuppose a superior position?

Renan called irony "the act of the master by which the human spirit establishes its superiority over the world." (Quoted in the *Larousse Universelle*, s.v. "ironie.") That superiority can be established in many ways, and there has been a steady growth in the abstractness of the platform from which irony can be exercised. Consider Voltaire, who in *Candide* and elsewhere used irony as a weapon. He had fairly straightforward beliefs of his own, but there was something about his beliefs that made them particularly apt for ironic moves. The Enlightenment critical intellect could look down on religious and political fundamentalisms from a position of relative universality; he stood by an

allegiance to reason that did not involve any particular substantive commitments to tradition except those demanded by reason and the law of nature. This gave him room to maneuver in ironic ways, pillorying the simple faith of those dogmatists who had not attained his more universal point of view.

In the next century the same maneuver would be performed on Voltaire's own beliefs, first by Kant's refinement of the Enlightenment that reduced the natural law to the formal demands of practical reason, and then by a series of modern ironists who saw the Enlightenment (and also Kant) as involving simple-minded commitments that could be ironically transcended by developing even more refined and formal theories of the self and its relation to the world.

The usual authority cited for this more general irony is Friedrich Schlegel. His is often called "romantic irony," but Schlegel never used that term except in personal notes. He sought for an ironic attitude embodied in an art that expressed the contradictions of our situation. A commitment to reason is only one aspect that needs to be put in ironic contrast with its opposite, the boundless energy of the universe.

> It is equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two.

> Everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden, . . . perfectly instinctive and perfectly conscious. . . . [Art should] contain and arouse a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. (Friedrich Schlegel, Fragments 108, 24, quoted in Muecke 1985. Cf. Schlegel 1968.)

It is not true that this kind of irony avoids basing itself on a particular set of beliefs. Schlegel's work involves an explicit metaphysics and epistemology drawn from the philosophy of his day. According to this view we are finite beings faced with an infinite universe where nature is overflowing with forms in an infinite process of creation and destruction. Our concepts try to fix the flow because we cannot live without creating fixed objects, but we are never completely successful. We cannot reconcile subject and object, feeling and form, art and life. So Schlegel relies on a non-ironic metaphysical description of the world and of the process of having beliefs.

Hegel pointed out that romantic irony takes its stand on self-consciousness as a process that is aware of its own form and of its movement beyond all definite content. Such irony affirms the value (or at least the inevitability) of this formally described movement of transcending whatever is given in experience. Hegel finds many problems with this view, not least with its immediate separation of form and content. But what is important for our purposes is his point that the romantic ironist does have a place to stand, a place described by straightforward philosophy of nature and subjectivity. (Useful examples of Hegel's scattered remarks on irony can be found at the end of the Conscience section of the *Philosophy of Right* (1967), in the treatment of romantic art in his *Aesthetics* (1975), and in his essay "Über Solger's nachgelassene Schriften" (1968, 202-252).)

Deconstructive Irony

In our century we go the romantics one better by finding an ironic stance from which the romantic theories of nature and knowledge can themselves be seen as simple beliefs subject to ironic qualification. Romantic irony depended on oppositions between the boundlessness of feeling and the restrictive necessity of form, between the ideal of communication and its inevitable frustration, and so on. Twentieth century irony has tried to add another dimension: the ideals of perfection and communication implicit at the positive poles of those oppositions must themselves be held ironically. It is not merely their frustration that we must live with, but an inherent rot at the core of the ideals themselves. We move here into deconstructive attacks on the elements constitutive of the theory of romantic irony.

This latest ironic mode does not depend on a theory about the world or about the relation between subject and object. But does this irony manage to avoid having a platform from which to judge? In many cases this is provided by a theory of the relations of signifier and signified, or of the conditions for identity and meaning.

The problem faced by deconstructive thinkers who emphasize irony is that they attack distinctions that seem constitutive of the notion of irony. We have already seen how dependent everyday irony is on the notion of intended meaning, which is a frequent target of the newest criticism. Similarly, that irony enacts some version of the distinction between appearance and reality. One thing appears to be meant, another is really meant. Romantic irony also depends on this distinction. The beliefs that seem so firm to the simple consciousness reveal their real status to the ironist.

This suggests that if we take seriously deconstructionist doubts about the distinction between appearance and reality, or about the notion of intended meaning, or about the possibility of complete self-reflection, or of literal meaning, we should be careful if we use "irony" to name the result, especially if that result is declared to be universal, since irony in the ordinary sense only exists by contrast with un-ironic communication.

There is a way to make the platform from which deconstructive irony is performed *almost* disappear, but doing so demands a complex strategy. If we are to be ironic about all simple beliefs and all straightforward identities, without ourselves professing some simple meta-beliefs, we must give up metaphysical and psychological platforms. Even semiotics must go. If there are universal claims that allow our irony, they must be quasi-transcendental ones. They cease to be particular beliefs, if they can be shown to be conditions for the possibility of any belief whatsoever. Inescapable and necessary, they would provide a universally applicable but formally defined place to stand.

But these are not to be the formal and synthesizing conditions one might find in Kant. They will be Derrida's *differance* and its cousins. Because of their peculiar character these conditions cannot really be taken as forming a unified position. They qualify their own enunciation. They involve and enact difference, deferring, the lack of center or whole. Taken in themselves they make no whole, they form no immediate or mediated totality; as the conditions for grasping anything as unified and for relying on anything as a place to stand, they cannot be so grasped or used as a foundation. They provide no first or last word, but they do still provide something the ironist knows and the ordinary mortal does not. (Cf. the discussion of Derrida by Rodolphe Gasché (1988) and Christopher Norris (1988).)

Richard Rorty argues that Gasché's interpretation, while it may apply to the earlier writings of Derrida, fails when applied to the later writings in which Derrida gives up lingering transcendental ambitions and works his irony by stylistic innovations and private associations that provide no general theory at all (Rorty 1989, chapter 6). The later Derrida seem to me to show many kinds of doubling and spaciousness for which the word "irony" is not a very helpful description.

The effect is a position that affirms and denies itself as a "position." Through doubling and deferred self-reference this enacts a gesture that comes close to what

Muecke calls open irony, though it still depends on some universal gambits, qualified and undercut as these may be.

However, some writing labelled deconstructive also promotes immersion in the flux of life beyond stable identities and fixed oppositions; this brings back a metaphysics similar to that of the romantic ironists. Such writing is caught in the same tension as was Nietzsche, between the critique of knowledge and the desire to give us knowledge about a life that escapes concepts and critique. And, like Nietzsche, the solution can only be in indirect communication. But is all indirect communication to be called irony?

Still, even if so far successful, deconstructive irony runs up against a problem that also infected romantic irony. As theories these do not do justice to the *location* of the ironical move. All sets of contrast that produce meaning have the slipperiness and self-undermining that deconstruction can show. It makes no difference where we start. Hegel pointed out that the theory of romantic irony treats of our finitude in general but does not look at our finite location in particular.

Since all particular and determined forms of belief or life express the same ironic impossibility of their achieving the fixity and definitiveness they claim, any belief or way of life can be treated as ironic. But this can be turned around: no account can be provided for the appropriateness of the choice of certain beliefs or ways of life over others. In so far as the irony relies upon general claims about the nature of language and truth, its point can be made from anywhere.

Thus the ironic move risks becoming a gesture that neutralizes itself by its very ubiquitousness. All texts and all forms have the same irony. Demonstrations of this self-transgressing quality of all texts, using any present text as an example, can become as repetitious as appeals to original sin, and as unhelpful in dealing with particular cases in their particularity.

There is one more step to take. Can irony be removed from a mode of discussion that depends on notions such as intended meaning and the distinction between appearance and reality? To do so would be to arrive at irony as indeterminacy and undecidability. "The old definition of irony--saying one thing and meaning another--is superseded; irony is saying something in a way that activates not one but an endless series of subversive interpretations" (Muecke 1985, 100).

I am inclined to agree with Muecke that this undecidability should not be labelled irony, but the word is already so stretched that more will do little harm. Muecke continues, "[This] rules out irony as I have defined it. . . . Of writing that is designed to prevent interpretation in terms of intent one could use the word 'irony' only, it seems, as a synonym for 'uncertainty,' that is, as a word without any additional content and therefore redundant." (1985, 100-1).

I am sceptical of extreme claims about undecidability, because our social practices do fix accepted meaning. We stop at the red light, understand the directions for the microwave oven, recognize the entrance to the building, gather the general point of the classical columns on the courthouse, and so on. What our practices cannot do is *limit* meaning to these accepted contours, either now or in the future. We can live with the awareness of this lack of security. Such a life can be conveyed only by indirect communication (or in the act of metaphoric innovation). If we call this indirect communication irony, it can indeed be quite different from judgmental irony.

The deconstructive thought that emphasizes undecidability finds irony not in the contrast of two fixed meanings, but in the contrast between the attempt to fix meaning and the impossibility of that attempt. But even this irony can be haughty or humble. It can preen itself on a platform from which it looks down on those who do not understand or who fear the openness of all systems of meaning. Or it can acknowledge that we are all in it together, in a spaciousness which, while it is no longer dominated by the old unities, does not set itself up against them.

What often gets lost is the quiet spaciousness involved in belonging somewhere. There is a way of not taking our beliefs and location too simply that is not itself the result of another level of meta-theory providing yet one more place to stand. I am not speaking of a doctrine but of an awareness of how we inhabit doctrines, a wry acknowledgment of our fragilities that affirms togetherness rather than superiority. This comes from that motion and spacing which is a condition of our inhabiting any system of meaning or practice. In philosophic and critical discourse this keeps getting twisted into something else, something that embodies hierarchy and superiority.

The is not an exercise of cognitive or valuational mastery. It offers no solid critique, except to surround any claims to solidity. Perhaps it ought not be called by the name of irony, for it is a species of compassion. But if we will use the term, perhaps we should

qualify it as humble irony. The accomplishment here is one Nietzsche demanded but seldom achieved: to purge ourselves of resentment. Can we purge irony of resentment and the desire for a higher point of view than the naive simple believer? What would irony be like if it was more play than judgment?

Alan Wilde (1981) finds something like this humble irony at work in some postmodern literature. He works at describing what he calls an ironical perception or tone of experience, rather than an ironical act or expression. In Wilde's typology, the early modernists perceive the world as split and fragmented and react by seeking unity by penetrating down to a truth unavailable to those who stay on the surface of life. Late moderns give up depth, and attempt to find the truth by perceiving the surface aright. Not superficiality but a kind of dyslexia hides the truth from us.

The postmoderns, in contrast, give up the search for truth, deny any final or privileged meaning either in the depth or on the surface, accept our inevitable distances, accept contingency and chaos, and, most importantly, view all this from within rather than above. Postmodern irony can involve an acceptance of contingency and multiple interpretations, without nostalgia for the one deep or total truth. While this too can be haughty or humble, it allows more room for our native spaciousness than the fixed distances of modernity could ever permit.

Architectural Irony

Postmodern architecture does not usually succeed at these refined forms of irony considered in the last section. But then, buildings have not usually been thought of as ironic at all. Even now we do not find much irony in the earnest buildings of masters like Frank Lloyd Wright or Mies van der Rohe. Ironic distance or play is the last thing Wright has in mind; he wants to convert us. Much of the history of architecture is about public buildings, and buildings meant to celebrate community values are seldom intentionally ironic; think, for example, of courthouses, and the ubiquitous memorials of the American Civil War dead.

Architecture may seem less equipped for irony than the other arts. Muecke, for instance, takes a dim view of the possibilities of irony in the non-representational arts (1985, 2-6). It is probably true that architecture has the greatest proportion of masterpieces that contain little or no irony. But this overlooks that there are many kinds of doubling that

are not ironical. Buildings can avoid single-mindedness in their presentation and still be non-ironic in the sense that they do not stand detached from their world and announce self-consciously "we are not wholly involved in this game we play." A pyramid may be simple, but Chartres is not, even though neither is outstandingly ironic. Chartres takes up and extends current conceptions and values in the direction valued by the Chartres school of medieval theology; the building does not simply ratify what is already current.

What is important is not the immediacy of architectural form but the relation of the building to its world. That relation does not have to be the straight affirmation typical of American Civil War monuments. Think about some recent Viet Nam War memorials; they are not ironic, but neither are they simply affirmative.

But incongruity and parody are alive in postmodern architecture. And they are fragile; parody and self-parody have little staying power. As the context changes, buildings outlive the irony they were meant to have. A building may be carefully designed with ironic references, perhaps in a way that subtly undercuts the authority that ordered the building for its own glory. As time passes the building gathers its own immediate identity. Parody depends on shared reference to the style or action being parodied. With its intended contrast forgotten or ignored, today's intentional parody can be tomorrow's dull design, or, worse, it may end up as an example of that which it parodies. Parody and irony can be as frail as architectural citations, which are often not lived as such by the ordinary users of the building.

It is also possible for a text or a building to become ironic even if it was not "intended" that way. Such ironical rereading still demands a double level with reference to context. We cannot deal with the Classical orders as if they stood only in the set of contrasts described by Vitruvius. In the case of this rereading no signal may be given by the work itself, but something happens in a changed context that allows the irony.

No text or building possesses its form all to itself; as context changes, the form of the work changes; the possibility of irony cannot be blocked any more than can the possibility of new metaphors and multiple readings. In this sense irony is a permanent possibility, but it is not permanently available, since it depends on contrasts which can never be completely held within the work itself. To imagine that irony is always waiting to be revealed is fall into modernist illusions about the completeness and independence of the aesthetic object (cf. Harries 1980).

As they proclaim an irony of play and ambiguity, most postmodern architects stand on non-ironic theories about the nature of architectural communication and meaning. Jencks speaks of our strong eclecticism as based on a knowledge of semiotics. Moore and Graves discourse on the way architecture means. In so doing they rejoin the modern movement, which also claimed to work from universal theories about architectural meaning. Except in some recent deconstructivist projects, we do not see in architecture much of the self-undermining irony to be found in recent literature and criticism.

The postmoderns stand with the moderns against the presumed simple inhabitation of our ancestors. What modern and postmodern share is a distance due to self-awareness. We are told that our eyes have been opened and it is impossible to live within one style or vocabulary. When we use a style we need to signal this awareness by an ironic move.

Vitruvius certainly was aware of the rules for classical architecture, and he could contrast it with other modes of building used, say, in Egypt. What he did not do was refer to it as a *style*. Styles come in the plural; the notion indicates that there are many styles available compared to one we choose or are given. Theories of appropriate and natural styles are designed to overcome the distance created by the very use of the notion of style (cf. Crook 1987).

People have always known that others built differently, but we are told that they did not always see these different ways as a palette of styles from which they might choose. They just built the way people did in their community. We tell ourselves that from the Renaissance on builders developed a more open attitude that led to a swifter pace of change, culminating in the eclecticism of the nineteenth century, which seems to have returned today. This story neglects the mutual influences and metaphorical combinations that have gone on at a slow pace throughout history. But whether or not it is a new phenomenon, the distance implicit in the notion of style is not the same as irony.

To make irony out of that distance, one way is to add some platform from which the ironist can pass judgments. Another way is what I have called humble irony. Humble irony qualifies the inhabitation of particular places. It is not an affirmation of a universal theory, though we recognize in it a universal condition. We can enact our inhabitation in ways that convey our awareness of its fragility. For example, if we create or find new meanings and let work *as* new, the sidelong awareness of contingency and fragility is signalled by the act of changing or blending the vocabulary. This is not done from some

distanced survey but on the spot, extending the field as we walk over the old borders. That act is enough to remind us of our finitude; we do not need signs with day-glo colors. (For some of the ideas in this section I am indebted to conversations with Eugene Gendlin.)

In architecture, traditional vocabularies might be used and metaphorically changed in ways that affirm a solidarity that is not that of shared immediate belief, a solidarity that remains comfortable with future reinterpretation. There is room for buildings that are neither naive celebrations nor elitist games. Often, though, ironic use of traditional motifs becomes a doubly coded way of indicating how much more the architect knows. Postmodern buildings may avoid the modern movement's antagonism for the past, but they have a harder time avoiding the avant-garde's resentment at the bourgeoisie.

Parody, Irony, and Politics

Irony has often been used as a weapon, because of its overtones of judgment and its reference to a presumably wider scheme of belief. What I am calling humble irony puts no directed pressure on beliefs or practices. A wry acknowledgment of the contingency and fragility of our world does not challenge it in any particular way. It does, however, make easier those impertinent moves which extend and change our language and practices.

Linda Hutcheon argues that in postmodernism, irony is part of a larger parodic gesture with political intent. Her aim is to defend the postmodern use of history as more than nostalgia; postmodern works are "resolutely historical and inescapably political precisely because they are parodic" (Hutcheon 1986, 1980; cf. also Hutcheon 1985). Frederic Jameson had argued that postmodernism degenerates into pastiche because of the loss of norms against which parody could play (Jameson 1983). In response, Hutcheon argues that postmodern art forms "use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past;" such art "contests uniformity by parodically asserting ironic difference" (Hutcheon 1986, 180). Her aim is to show that postmodernism provides a public discourse that avoids the hermeticism associated with aesthetic modernism.

Hutcheon claims that in postmodern works "the past as referent is not bracketed or effaced, as Jameson would like to believe; it is incorporated and modified, given new and

different life and meaning" (182). Postmodern architecture can offer "both a homage and a kind of ironic thumbed nose" to the past (194, the phrase is from John Fowles). She cites examples from the work of Portoghesi, Moore, and others, where the parodic use of past themes is supposed to provide a way for the community to be involved in a process of signification that the pure forms of modernism had closed off. However, it is one thing to overcome modernist hermeticism, another to activate political discourse in the sense Jameson seeks, and I am not persuaded that her examples succeed in this latter task, which remains more a goal than a reality for postmodern architecture.

Nonetheless Hutcheon usefully distinguishes parody as "ridiculing imitation" from the more complex gesture she finds in postmodern art. This distinction parallels to some extent that between haughty and humble irony which I have been developing. The differences lie in the fact that as a feature of human inhabitation of any scheme of meaning, humble irony is possible at any time and is not a specifically postmodern gesture. So it does not further any particular political agenda.

Only if one thinks that our essential danger is complete immersion in a hegemonic discourse will one think that any distance is automatically political. If we always have spaciousness about us as part of our inhabitation anywhere, then although the potential for contestation is always present, more than a distancing act is needed to mobilize it.

Hutcheon's concern about total domination by hegemonic discourse is the modern version of the fear of the Sophist's rhetoric. As I indicated earlier, I am sceptical of this fear, as of the existence of singular weapons to ward it off.

Parody too can be haughty or humble, distancing or connecting, Johnny Carson or Garrison Keillor. Parody, however, does have a community potential which irony lacks. Haughty irony depends on distance and breaks solidarity. A parodic gesture might reaffirm solidarity while it teases us about some feature of our lives. We can stand together enjoying the parodic distance within our community rather than standing at opposite ends of ironic distance from above it.

Parodic gestures are not distinctively postmodern; traditional societies are filled with them; earlier I mentioned a medieval example the Carmina Burana. At its best postmodern architecture can accomplish this kind of generous parody that affirms our solidarity while refusing any simple definition of our community. But parody in this sense

is not the contestatory gesture Hutcheon demands; it can reinforce the status quo. Nor is parody the only tool we might have; many kinds of doubling could allow us "to speak *to* a discourse from *within* it, but without being totally recuperated by it" (Hutcheon 1986, 206).

At the other extreme from Hutcheon, who argues that irony and parody are automatically political, Richard Rorty argues that ironic gestures are politically useless and fit only for private self-creation. Rorty speaks of irony as a sense of the contingency of the particular "final vocabulary" that happens to shape one's world; this sense can include painful doubts as well.

> I shall define an 'ironist' as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies . . . (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) . . . she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others. . . . I call people of this sort 'ironists' because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between rival vocabularies, puts them . . . never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves. (Rorty 1989, 73-74)

> The ironist -- the person who has doubts about his own final vocabulary, his own moral identity, and perhaps his own sanity -- desperately needs to talk to other people, needs this with the same urgency as people need to make love. He needs to do so because only conversation enables him to handle these doubts, to keep himself together to keep his web of beliefs and desires coherent enough to enable him to act. He has these doubts and these needs because, for one reason or another, socialization did not entirely take. (Rorty 1989, 186).

Rorty sees the sense of contingency as motivating us in two ways. In public, it helps us accept (but does not ground) a liberal tolerance which sees cruelty to others as the

worst thing we can do. In private the public liberal is Harold Bloom's "strong poet" who overcomes contingency and the fear of death by reworking his cultural parents and creating himself anew. The ironic recognition of the contingency of our world combines with the Nietzschean ideal of overcoming the past by redescribing the influences that have made us what we are, so that we become our own self-authored story.

As does Lyotard, Rorty seems to run together different levels of language and practice. Under his general rubric of a "final vocabulary" we can find scientific theories, terms used in literary criticism, metaphysical and epistemological principles, hierarchies of values, social roles and self-images, language games such as promising and arguing, and the stories that might result from psychoanalysis or autobiography. These are not systems of meaning in the same sense, nor are they all contingent and changeable in the same way; some are much more easily changed by reflection and retelling, others demand the kind of habituation Aristotle speaks of, and still others would require unforeseeable social changes.

Rorty has few disagreements with Habermas about practical political issues, but he argues against the latter's attempt to put liberal democracy on a philosophical foundation. Rather than see unconstrained dialogue as a self-critical method for arriving at truth, Rorty is content to call true whatever results within our dialogue, and to deny that there can be criteria for decisions among "final vocabularies." Rorty's problem is how to defend Kierkegaard's aesthetic life without also defending the Marquis de Sade. Rorty's liberalism has less public drive towards self-criticism. I indicated earlier my distrust of the idea of a unified self-critical project such as Habermas urges, but Rorty's divorce of private irony from public tolerance could deny opportunities for internal and dialogic criticism that might exist even without a unified critical project.

Although Rorty's is not a haughty irony of distance and judgment, it hinges on the modern distinction between those who are simply bound into tradition, and those whose self-awareness puts them above all tradition. Rorty's innovation is to argue that ironic awareness need not inhibit commitment and human feeling. He seems to me entirely correct in this, though his discussion of contingency in terms of "doubt" remains too much within the vocabulary of grounds and certainty that he is attacking.

However, the rhetorical strategy Rorty uses in all his recent writings drives the positions he discusses into two extreme camps between which we are told to choose.

Middle grounds get lost, and all positions are defined by one or two leading oppositions. Thus, while his characterization of irony is close to what I have been calling humble irony, the balance ends up very different. Rorty's strategy still involves the modernist opposition between total self-immersion and total self-creation. The Nietzschean ideal of becoming one's own cause, of transforming the past into a "thus I willed it," is yet another modern refusal of history. Rorty admits that our self-creation will always be "parasitical" on established practices and languages, but for him this is an unfortunate limitation rather than a hopeful opportunity.

Humble irony does not refer to any particular double level, and it cannot by itself produce new structures for life. It may, however, unite us in the feeling that we are all in this together, in our confusion and fragility and mortality, and make us more ready to experiment. Kenneth Frampton speaks of the "semiotic cynicism" of some recent works by Charles Moore. Opposed to that might be what the architect Steven Moore calls "generous references" to context and traditional vocabularies that allow us to participate in a local code while extending and criticizing it. Such generosity comes when we are aware of our shared poverty, not when we possess a rich theory that allows ironic manipulations.