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CONTRA IRONICOS
The Postmodern, a Wasted Opportunity

Conference

Critical Conjunctions: Latin American and Latino Intellectuals at the New Millennium,
 HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY (NY) – 22 April, 2004

When Roger Rosenblatt reminds us that “the ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything,” he is putting his finger on the deep wound, indeed malaise of modern society. Irony is serious business, though. With the loss of belief in any form of supreme good, certain classical processes of relating to society, certain values or images which for better or for worse represented a regulatory ideal, have been brought to exhaustion, to numbness, the true edge of Modernity. I have argued that irony ought not to be considered the dominant trope of postmodernity because with irony we can only deconstruct, cut down to size, satirize about any ideal or counterposition, illustrate the underlying tragic sense of life. Especially in the twentieth century. Although a claim that the tragic age is over has been made right in the heart of the avant-gardes,¹ it took some time for the phenomenon to really hit the street.

As for the question of irony, the study by Linda Hutcheon, ***Irony's edge*** (1995) proves, if more proof was needed after 2500 years, that with the ironic mode one does not construct, one dismantles. It is the favorite rhetorical tool of intellectuals because they can thus maneuver their language to say basically anything they want without being held accountable for it. Hutcheon takes great pains to work up a model in order to get a handle on its incredible flexibility. Irony can be Reinforcing, Complicating, Ludic, Distancing, Self-protective, Provisional, Oppositional, Assailing and even Aggregative (47). Having seemingly read all books that deal this trope, she charts lines of force which demonstrate that in each case we are dealing with linear oppositions, and though I grant that when we explain, in a pedagogic context, we must simplify, the critic falls under the ingrained habit of thinking dualistically: So for example when irony's function is Reinforcing, it can go toward being “emphatically precise” or “decorative and subsidiary;” when its primary function can be identified as Distancing, it can veer toward the pole of “indifferent & non-committal” or its opposite, “offering a new perspective;” when it is Assailing, it can be either “corrective & satirical” or “destructive and aggressive;” and so on. The issue is very complex, especially when you bring in the in-between space of unintended effects between author's intentions and the work's excessive propensity to trigger yet unpremeditated interpretations. But in the end, it rests on the postmodernists' nearly maniacal acceptance of undecidability, of uncertainty, of ever-slippery signification. These latter concepts were all discovered (not just ‘invented’ or ‘constructed’) by various people during the last two centuries, from Heisenberg to Einstein to Godel to Feyerabend and others.

¹ See also Karl Jaspers

But acknowledging the great effort of the critic to guide us through the intricacies of its many functions, which intellectuals have not hesitated to deploy as they saw fit, I would like to remind the reader/listener of the more general sense which undergirds all these functions.

Perhaps there's something else next to the ironic, a tragic ethos which seeks the reason for its destruction and cannot find it any longer: justice is become a chimerical pursuit, the self is volatile, prisoner of its desire, the state a pellucid hoax. Bearing in mind the rhetorical difference between irony, mimic, sarcasm, the grotesque, and parody, all of which have been exploited ad nauseum by postmodernists as if the avantgardists had not already exploded them all, a couple of passages from Italian linguist and Iranist Antonino Pagliaro will allow us to circumvent a major hurdle:

To define irony is quite difficult...since we cannot gather what its opposite might be...it's not easy to see the positive pole because we lack the negative: what's non-irony?...The abstract "irony," from the Greek *eironeia*...is acknowledged as being *eiro*, "to speak" or *eiromai*, "to question," as if ironic were he who speaks too much, or who proceeds by means of a questioning that creates difficulty for the interlocutor...in Plato (*Apol* 38A) the denominative *eironeuomai* appears to mean "to have other aims in mind"...irony is condemned in the *Sophist* (268A-C)... In the *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle counterfoists irony to "vainglorious" ...

And, further down:

Theophrastus makes of the ironic person one of his *Characters*, after having defined irony as "affected humility in word and deed," from which we gather that the ironic is he who dissimulates his own thoughts and feelings, assuming an attitude and a language which means the *opposite* [my emphasis] of what he thinks...The ironic attitude is, therefore, a sophistic attitude which, incapable of a precise position among discordant opinions, takes on the detached demeanour preventing him from taking sides. (Pagliaro 11-13)

We do not have to go back back to Vico, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on the subject, for, despite the dense and passionate pages of Jenkélévitch, who makes of the ironic mode the highest achievement possible to philosophic mind (we do after all know that Socrates was the first and perhaps greatest of all ironists), even in the very heart of American deconstruction the intractable self-defeating pneuma or soul of irony had been made patent. Paul de Man wrote that irony is ingrained with a doubleness which represents a split ego or two selves that though related, *are not* in "an intersubjective relationship." (de Man 212). The ironic mode is marked by a lack of temporality, by an intrinsic incapacity to say exactly what it means to say, and by a constant need to differentiate oneself from the non-human world:

The ironic, twofold self that the writer or philosopher constitutes by his language seems able to come into being only at the expense of his empirical self, falling (or rising) from a stage of mystified adjustment into the knowledge of his mystification. The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of

inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic. (214)

The problem with irony, in short, is that it is paralyzed from acting out in the empirical world what it understands so well at the level of consciousness. In this predicament, the *ego cogito* is a necessarily "unhappy consciousness," as F. Schlegel and Baudelaire understood so well, and it will tend to mystify the past to the same degree as it will falsify the future. Bound as it is to a temporality of the present, to *the instancing of the sign without its referent*, irony is useful to dismantle theories of analogical correspondence and of mimetic representation, but it will forever conserve the tendency toward self-complacency, and self-effacement, a powerful, synchronic language mode that knows no figuration and bears no memory.²

Most recently, Richard Rorty, after having demolished rationalism and epistemology and brilliantly demonstrated that even scientific readings of the world are at bottom hermeneutic (in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*), throws in the gauntlet (in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*) in favor of contingency, describing the ironist as a "nominalist and a historicist" (74) who believes that there is "no reason to think that Socratic inquiry into the essence of justice or science or rationality will take one much beyond the language games of one's time." In fact, the ironist lives in a foundationless universe fraught with suspicion and perhaps even a bit of paranoia:

"The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness." (75)

Reducing everything to a language game is dangerous. Other theorists, for instance Lyotard, have shown (cf *Le Différend*) that there is a point when, what in his metalanguage are called "family of phrases" (regime des frases), the non commutability, the clash between the signifieds beneath the signifiers, resolves itself not merely in not communicating, and no longer in not-understanding, but in an act of power, say, going to jail, as when one speaker (a judge, a general) can have a dramatic impact on the immediate reality of the interlocutor (the accused, a supposed enemy civilian) because one speaks according to *de jure* legitimation (the Law says, or: We want to free your people), which warrants action, while the other according to *de facto* evidence not necessarily translatable, for instance, if you have no witnesses (or other 'weapons') to

² By contrast, allegory is constitutively temporal, figural, contains the memory of a past (story or history), is directed toward an Other not in agonistic terms (irony responds critically to a situation/utterance) but in dialogical, indeed pedagogical terms. Allegories may make use of ironical twists of phrase (together they are an invincible duo, as in the *Don Quixote*), but their narrative and exemplary tone cannot sustain the threat of inauthenticity or hyper-conscious discursive paralysis. What irony cannot do but allegory can is build on *time* and memory, requiring ab initio that a community be given, be there.

mount a defense (and have that same judge or general exercise *phronesis*; cf Carravetta 1991 and 1996).

And I also disagree with Rorty when he states that “the ironist’s preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is redescription rather than inference.” (78) Well, this is not dialectics, not at least of the Hegelian kind, which however misapplied by his successors did at least provide for a resolution into something else, another point to argue about, a dynamic and inter-connected discourse. The oppositional connection between yes and no is not dialectical, it is an arithmetic negation of one term by another, and one is forced to be either here or there, there is only room for One, typically a Me or an Us, and the You or the Other cast outside, negated, ignored or whatever. It is a bad hermeneutic at work:

I have defined “dialectic” as the attempt to play off the vocabularies against one another, rather than merely to infer propositions from one another, and thus as the partial substitution of redescription for inference. I used Hegel’s word because I think of Hegel’s Phenomenology both as the beginning of the end of the Plato-Kant tradition and as a paradigm of the ironist’s ability to exploit the possibilities of massive redescription. In this view, Hegel’s so-called dialectical method is not an argumentative procedure or a way of unifying subject to object, but simply a literary skill...” (78)

Philosophy as pure textualité, heralded by Derrida, as become literally “philosophy as a kind of narration.” Well, let’s talk, all is contingent, nothing is for sure, and let the rulers rule while the learned just trod to their desks, a latter day service-society shlep, a recast of Fritz’ Lang subterranean assembly line proletarians. Having reiterated that “irony seems inherently a private matter,” and therefore part and parcel of that “Me too” generation which Richard Hughes lambasted in his *The Culture of Complaint* (1992), Rorty presents us with a dangerous paradigm: the problems which a metaphysically informed social criticism sees as failures during our time are “caused by a set of historical circumstances. These contingencies are making it easy to see the last few hundred years of European and American history – centuries of increasing public hope and private ironism – as an island in time, surrounded by misery, tyranny, and chaos.” AS Orwell out, “The democratic vistas seem to end in barbed wire.”

I don’t think so.

There is contingency, but of the Sartrean kind. There is an Ab-grund, but there is also an Ur-grund. There are falling idols every other day, but there are constantly new ones that emerge from places we either did not know or wish we did not know. And being ironized about, laughed at, ridiculed, censored, suppressed or excluded for not speaking the same language (that is, for not having mastered the dominant vocabulary or language game) is no justification for transforming Pragmatism into an instrumental philosophy of power, a utilitarian approach which is shorn of any broader application beyond what meets the material exigencies of a privileged group. In a recent essay, Djelal Kadir analyzes how a “national philosophy” can be turned into a “patriotic” or “nationalist discourse,” by focusing on Richard Rorty’s *Achieving America* (1998). It is appropriate in this setting that philosophy is interpreted historically, that is, in terms of its genesis, of its emergence

at a specific time and place, and subsequently brought to bear upon a set of emblematic beliefs and practices. First, the rules of the language game:

In terms of philosophical discourse, pragmatism emanates from a predicative language, whose logic easily shades from mere predication into willful preconditioning of its operative arena. As such, it is not difficult to see how the predicative can easily turn into the preemptive, with the predetermined outcomes of practical action justifying the practical reason which set action in motion in the first place. (MS, p. 2)

Second, the relationship between language games one hundred years apart:

a plausible narrative could be constructed that would have pragmatism very much in consonance with the moment of national self-assertiveness that gave the United State of America its Gilded Age, and effectively limited Spain and Spanish culture to a self-circumscribed silver age, La Edad de Plata, that lasted between 1898 and 1936 and was presided over by Spain's Generación del '98. Whether the Spanish intelligentsia of that era referred to itself by the lesser metal in contradistinction to Spain's Siglo de Oro, or whether it was doing so in counterpoint to America's self-defining Gilded Age, is incidental in the alchemy of history that is alembicated as a philosophy. What qualitatively does differentiate the USA from Spain in relation to the pivotal year of 1898 is that for the first it marks the historical watershed as an *annus mirabilis*. For the latter, as defined by Azorín, Pio Barroja, and Maeztú, it is the *annus terribilis* and the bathos of a national culture. The brazen emergence of one empire, whose apogee we may well be experiencing today, one hundred years later, spells the sunset of an imperial era of another (ib.)³

There is nothing really funny about this hypothesis, nothing that one can smirk at or deflate by ironical distancing, by parody, by collaging texts or images or ideologies. The postmodern had at its disposal all the theories and metalanguages ever invented by Western man, and had an opportunity to construct narratives which could have reached out among the populace, among concrete (not virtual) networks, which could have sought dialogue and mediation, which could have abstained, once we realized that ideologies are intrinsically rhetorical constructs, from standing on the sidelines (*theoros* in Greek means also spectator) and chosen to intervene, educate (in a Gramscian sense), raise a consciousness (in a Sartrian sense) among their own very constituents, in their own midsts, and make the public aware that, yes, there is a problem with race gender and equal opportunity politics, but that beneath or around or above these redefined localized

³ Further down, tracing the genealogy of pragmatism to eschew its potentially aggressive legitimated practices, Kadir writes: "Pragmatically speaking, Holmes claimed, the pillars of justice are three. These elements are experience, consensus, and economy—experience over logical principle, consensus over sovereign dictum, and economy over morality. We have suggested the rush of the unprincipled into the lacuna of the non-principle already. Consensus, we now know, after Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, could be manufactured, as hegemony, in the lexicon of the Gramsci, as regimes of truth in the discourse of Foucault. And as for the language of economy over the language of morality, Holmes himself is most suggestive in the potential for the pervertability of the desiderata in this hierarchy." (ib. 4)

concerns there is the concrete, not abstract, reality of power and class, of political economies whose interest is not in redistribution but in accumulation, not in extending empowerment, but in making instrumental in some way and typically by reducing some other value or asset or prerogative or necessity. In the age of the play of language, someone was playing with social agents, with actually-existing humans, *el hombre de carne y hueso*, as Unamuno calls them, the hombre intrahistorico who seems to bear the brunt of these power games without as much as having a chance to speak out and, not even wanting to claim to take anything from the banquet of the powerful few, could not even enter the courts to pick up the crumbs.

To conclude, as Vico had so proleptically observed, when reason loses all relevance or connection, semantically, ideologically, ethically, to the world of actually-existing people, when the same Enlightenment project that gave us the Declaration of the Rights of Man turns into what Horkheimer called “Instrumental Reason,” and Rorty the “contingency of language games,” when national and international leaders of powerful states can speak to millions and lie with impunity, the ironic mode can be no more than the prelude to the discourse of violence, to a ricorso of the age of barbarism.

Irony anyone?