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I FEEL YOUR PAIN… *or, Reimagining Irony*

> *To a person who hasn't got it, irony will remain an enigma even after it is openly confessed. It is meant to deceive no one except those who consider it a deception and who either take pleasure in the delightful roguery of making fools of the whole world or else become angry when they get an inkling they themselves might be included. In this sort of irony, everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden…*
>
> —Friedrich Schlegel*, Lyceum, Fragment 108, (1796)*

1. New Definition-ish

The oversimplified binary of authenticity vs. irony has been complicated by artistic responses to contemporary culture where the lines between *embrace* and *critical distance* have been blurred.

As an example, a critique of Warhol's *32 Campbell's Soup Cans* as "ironic" might be accurate but it would also be naïve and reductive, so as to lessen the work as "inauthentic". Critically, we have moved beyond a point where irony, as a defining characteristic, stands alone to describe poetry and art works.

Especially in post-industrial societies, poets and artists have looked to mirror how we have been increasingly shaped by industries of entertainment, information, and new media technologies. Many contemporary poets create works that address these manipulations by choosing material that directly reflects our culture through both embrace and distance, sometimes simultaneously. Irony embodies this blur.

Irony aims to dissemble, muck up, or re-evaluate systems of language, communication, and even ethics. The word "irony" originates from the Greek character *Eiron*, *dissembler,* who spoke in understatements or false lack of intelligence to the effect of enabling the reader.

Schlegel locates irony in the contradiction between "enthusiasm (possessed by gods)" and "chaos". This collision of enthusiasm and chaos, Schlegel posits, can be self-canceling and irrational. And yet: "…after all the transformations, its original character and creative energy are still dimly visible where the naive profundity permits the semblance of the absurd and of madness, of simplicity and foolishness, to shimmer through."

From *Webster*: "Irony is a language device in which the real intent is concealed or contradicted by the literal meaning of words or a situation. Verbal irony, either spoken

or written, arises from an awareness of contrast between *what is* and *what ought to be.*"

This feature of "what is and what ought to be" or *the said* and *the unsaid* is a duality particular to irony. In contemporary poetry, this contrast between *said/unsaid* is often highlighted in strategies of quotation or explicit use of new technologies. One on level we have *the said*, for example "Spongebob Drinking Hats", and on another level we have *the unsaid*, a social commentary via the "Hats" reframed in art, taken up (or not) by the receiver as an open question.

This *unsaid* open-endedness is risky because the originator has no control over how it will be interpreted.

Irony, as such, can be risky, unresolvable, unreliable, out of control.

2. The Social & The Sincere

Irony is social—it reinforces a community of writer and reader; it requires it. This duality of the *said/unsaid* is negotiated (made) by the reader and it may be different from what the originator had in mind.

Irony doesn't *create* community or in-groups, but it occurs *because* these communities already exist, and they provide the context for the attribution of irony. Art-making communities enable irony to happen *in the reception* of the work.

Irony, then, is part of a social frame that critiques culture by quoting culture directly—as such, it is a communal construct.

The title of this essay, for example, easily slips out of my control. Bill Clinton's over-used phrase, "I feel your pain", was felt by many as disingenuous, cynical, or ironic given the fact that his policies led to so much suffering at home and around the world. Anyone quoting that phrase today would do so ironically, and my using it in this context double downs on that. Yet, even though a reader might easily identify the irony, I have no control over how the phrase is received beyond that. My intention *might* be more sincere than Clinton's in that I'm discussing how one *feels* when receiving irony. Or, for sure, one could take the phrase as literal and not ironic at all, and be insulted by the presumption that "I" could "feel" anyone else's feelings. Another reader might pause at how ironic the claim is, but find if refreshing to draw attention to the complex problems of empathy in this context. Another reader might take it straight, without irony, and appreciate my empathy. This is where irony becomes slippery, risky, dizzying.

Irony, as it is received in this unstable space of the *unsaid*, highlights the complex problem of how our feelings might be both instinctual *and* mediated, organic *and* engineered.

Of course we could say that *all* literature is unpredictably received by readers, but the ironist expects this unpredictability, depends on it, intentionally writes into a relationship with the unknown, *the unsaid*.

Of course not all art and poetry is interested in a critique of contemporary culture—direct or otherwise—and not all readers are interested in that engagement with the *unsaid*. The terms "authentic" or "sincere" or "original" are often meant to stand-in for the opposite of ironic.

But irony is not the opposite of authenticity or sincerity. For example, the poet who represents an ironized self, through a range of splintered or borrowed selves, can be just as sincere or authentic as an "original" voice might be in representing a more singular personal experience.

It's worth noting, too, that "authentic language" is also mediated. The poet who wishes to express "direct" feelings must also translate those feelings into language, and the rhetoric chosen is also a trope (a turn), a device, or strategy. In this case, the poet chooses the strategy of poetic "authentic language" to carry meaning.

Irony tends to highlight and demystify this "natural" process of authentic feeling-to-authentic language.

For the poet working in quoted materials, the plane is horizontal, not vertical. Poets can and do move freely between many voices, including "their own" to affect their readers in a variety ways—the duality of the *said/unsaid* characteristic of irony might stretch across several perspectives—some borrowed, some not.

Irony underlines the mistrust of representation.

3. Affect

Because these communities of reception differ but overlap—as poetry communities so often do—this shared irony might be unwelcomed or inappropriate. This "sharing" might make us feel angry, frustrated, excluded… or, on the contrary, connected, pleased, inspired by a new perspective.

In the reach between the *said/unsaid*, readers have a wide range of feelings—those feelings are further complicated when poets appropriate from popular culture because

we all have a stake in how that culture has been constructed and processed. Readers have feelings about inclusion, ownership, frivolousness, etc. that cannot be predicted by the poet's use of irony.

This makes for lots of slippage and lots of feelings.

The tired dismissal of irony is that it engages only the intellect and not emotion (ethics of emotions?)—it is detached—but the degrees of unease, anger, or, on the contrary excitement, pleasure, it provokes might suggest the opposite.

In poetry discourse, the term "emotion" is often reduced to the domain of sentimental feeling.

Irony promotes opposite feelings from readers: one person's transgressive or subversive is another person's insulting or offensive.

Feelings of elitism have to be paralleled with feelings of consensus; feelings of condescension with feelings of social critique.

Suspicion of deceit or mockery makes for unease in the reader, especially when the poet unleashes a social or political commentary implicit in the *unsaid* of irony.

4. Use

This use of the *said*/*unsaid*—for social commentary, or to generate new perspectives— is often dismissed as obtuse or noncommittal. But this angry response from the reader still points to a response outside of the poet's private experience. As such, there is something in the unease of the reader that is public, social, or a catalyst to a more political response.

As an example, in contemporary poetry of the last decade or so, literally thousands of pages of Internet language have been reframed in poetry. A lot of it borrows from anonymous online writers, and some readers of this poetry find mockery and condescension in the reframed voices. I have rarely heard, however, of anyone who felt insulted by having his or her online writing borrowed and reframed in contemporary poetry. The poetry readers, though, may feel offended because they might be sensitive to these individuals who they feel have been wronged. For other poetry readers, the feeling is a positive reinforcement of a critique of social injustices or societal norms.

Irony cannot be separated from its emotional charge in the reader—this has political use.

Irony requires a self-conscious relationship of the poet to one's own work and the destroying of artistic illusions—it demonstrates the assumption of a contradiction, an inadequacy, an open question. It makes the author's worldview specific, not universal.

Irony, like ambiguity, runs the risk of confusion, lack of clarity, and provokes irritation in those who feel they have "missed the point." But the ironist might be critiquing that very thing—a way of reading that demands a more singular comprehension of "the point." So where is the feeling of frustration located? In the poet? In the receiver? In the institutional way of reading? Irony often aims to uncover contradictions in systems—especially systems of reading, communicating, and sharing knowledge.

Irony, as such, can be used as a tool to dismantle grand universal claims about truth, ethics, and fundamentals.

Irony offers a way to speak *to* or *with* contemporary culture by using contemporary culture directly. Where allegory might point outward to the past; irony points outward to the present.