Irony, Misogyny and Interpretation

Irony, Misogyny and Interpretation: Ambiguous Authority in Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

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INTRODUCTION

IRONY, MISOGYNY, INTERPRETATION

The topic of this book arises from several relatively straightforward questions. What is it to claim that "misogyny" might be "ironic"? Why is it that, in the works of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, the possibility of irony constantly interferes with a conclusive ethical judgement over the meaning of their misogyny? How do we hold our interpretations of such ambiguous texts ethically accountable? Can we read ironically, without rendering interpretation "non-serious"?

The problem with such questions is that, too often, their concerns are delineated into their respective fields of interest: philosophical hermeneutics, feminist theory, literary studies and so on. But in doing so, we often find them unbalanced, over-simplifying their subject matter. Frequently, irony is not explained, but explained *away*. To address these straightforward questions, then, leads to more complex undertakings: to ask whether a philosophical text is misogynistic or ironic (or both, or neither), we need an approach which is informed not only by the history of philosophy and feminist theory, but by interpretation theory as well. Likewise, to form anything more than an overly-general hermeneutic argument over the status of irony requires us to attend to the sophistication of the techniques of "authority" within different texts. Yet, existing analyses tend to focus on one aspect of this triangular issue—irony, misogyny, interpretation—at the expense of the others. While there is a wealth of material in and around all of the separate issues, much of it remains to be "joined up". There is a need to bring together these different driving concerns within the "problem of irony" in a constructive dialogue, in order to reconsider the role of irony as an interpretative method.

One of the major obstacles to an in-depth dialogue between these three issues is that misogynistic texts carry with them a violence that the interpreter is pressed to deal with almost immediately. We need only review the multitude of inconsistent reasoning translators and commentators have used to render insignificant the misogyny in, for example, the work of Schopenhauer, to realise that there is a crucial relationship between misogynistic statement and accountable (or "ethical") interpretation. It is

not surprising, then, that where misogyny seems apparent in a philosophical text, ironic interpretation is readily seen as either a) an *amplifying* of this violence by the author (women aren't worth taking seriously, in effect); or b) an *avoidance* of this violence by the interpreter (misogyny isn't worth taking seriously). This is precisely the view that this book intends to counter. We have to take irony seriously—which is to say, we need to re-assess what makes an interpretation "serious" in the first place.

To facilitate this dialogue, a two-stranded approach is necessary. On the one hand, this book outlines a theory of "ironic interpretation", through a theoretical discussion of interpretation and the problems of irony. On the other hand, this theory is applied to three key sites of controversy over the relationship between irony and misogyny: the work of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. The goal of this book is not to "rescue" these misogynistic texts by appealing to irony, however. Rather, each of these authors provides case studies where misogyny and irony are ambiguously connected. More significantly, they do so through three distinct *styles* of authorship. While the voice of Schopenhauer argues in his essays with what we might term the traditional "singular" voice, Kierkegaard expands this author function by writing through pseudonyms, introducing a "double voice" to his argument. Nietzsche, meanwhile, writes in fluid and multiple voices, in an effort to overcome the shackles of convention that he seeks to overcome. In the case of both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, this has led to widespread disagreement over whether the misogynist expressions in their texts can be taken as meaningful or not; whether, in other words, it is the "real" Kierkegaard or Nietzsche expressing this, or a parodied or ironic voice. But because irony is so intrinsically linked to the authority of the text, it is impossible to take the irony of these texts seriously without attending to these different authorial styles.

The theoretical argument put forward in this book takes issue with the notion that determining whether a text can be read ironically or not is simply a case of knowing which voice is more "real" than the others. Rather, the book argues that to take irony seriously as an interpretative approach entails investigating how these different authorial styles establish a sense of meaning. The aim of the book, then, is to bring together the significant overlapping themes arising in the discourses of irony, misogyny and interpretation, in order to investigate the way in which authority and value are assigned to ambiguous texts. The theoretical account of irony as a method of interpretation is informed by its practical implementation on three texts traditionally demarcated as "misogynist". In turn, each of these individual philosophical works poses two specific problems for the theory of irony: first, whether such a reading is taking

seriously the ethical problems posed by the surface "misogyny" of the texts, and second, how the different styles of authorship affect the possibilities of meaning available to the interpreter. In doing so, the book argues for a theory of "ironic interpretation" which is both accountable and informative, focusing on the productive intersection between hermeneutics, deconstruction and feminist exegesis. In putting forward my theory of irony, I draw on different theoretical perspectives as tools for making sense of the issues being raised. The book identifies broad thematic recurrences in the discourse of irony, and analyse these in terms of selective readings of interpretative approaches. In this sense, it follows an approach to theory similar to what Manuel Castells has termed a "toolbox" approach: using what is useful, and not considering what is not directly relevant to the issue at hand. It is not an exercise in fidelity to one or another theorist, as arguments over the philosophy of interpretation can (too often) become.

The need for this study has certainly not arisen from a shortage of studies on irony and its role in philosophical discourse. Everybody knows what irony is; but pinning it down as a concept has always been trickier than it first appears; and this inevitably leads to the term being used in all sorts of "inappropriate" places. Reflecting on this overuse of irony, D.C. Muecke laments of the misuse of irony: "[t]here is little to be done about this. Most people will continue to use a word like "irony" without knowing or caring to know precisely how it has been used before or whether there is not a more suitable word already in use" (Muecke 1982: 7). But if Muecke's words suggest the traditional approach to irony—that is, reducing it to a true form, and condemning all other uses as simply false—then my approach begins from the reverse of this approach. Irony, I would argue, does not gain its widespread use simply from the carelessness of its users. Rather, there is something *intrinsic* to irony itself which renders it excessive, and resistant to classification. Irony does not rest happy within typologies; not because of the typological distinctions, but because irony as an operation of language resists objectification. There are always new ironies, and new possibilities of reading ironically. This is reflected, indeed, by the excess of literature attempting to define "irony" as a concept.

This leaves us in a difficult situation. On the one hand, we can identify that irony does something which is specific enough to be termed "ironic". On the other hand, the doing of this very something challenges any fixed definition of what irony "is". The solution that this book follows is to approach from a thematic angle. Given that there is a body of literature—a discourse—attempting, and perhaps failing, to define irony, we can

identify certain themes that characterise this discourse and the work of irony within it. We can follow the patterns that interpretation theories produce when trying to talk about irony. We can see the effects of irony, not just on the primary texts under consideration (Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche), but also on the interpretative discourses these texts produce, and the manoeuvres taken to tackle the problem of irony.

A thematic approach, based on characteristics of particular discourses, allows us to highlight certain concerns with the use of irony within hermeneutics. First, there is a widespread ambiguity over the process and implications of applying "irony" as an interpretative tool, and its legitimacy (its "seriousness", in effect) next to other interpretative strategies which dismiss irony as something worth dwelling upon. The issue here, then, is the *accountability* of an ironic interpretation; which is to say, whether such an interpretation can be considered a "legitimate" entry in to the interpretative discourse of the text in question. Second, in attempting to classify ironic meaning, many interpretative approaches simply resolve the ambiguity for the purpose of clarity, and thus effectively remove irony from the communicative structure of the text. The concerns over the accountability of ironic interpretation thus reflect a wider concern with the productive meaning of textual ambiguity.

Resolving these concerns leads to a third, more central issue at stake when thinking about the prospect of irony in the interpretation of a text. Accountability and legitimacy both invoke an idea of "authority". As Chapter One argues, one constant of every analysis of irony is that it holds an intrinsic relationship to the "authority" of the text. If this is the case, then the *condition* of that authority must relate, in turn, to the condition of ironic possibility. It is this condition which distinguishes irony from other forms of possible meaning. Ironic ambiguity does not equate to the kind of "undecidability" that Jacques Derrida claims renders any sense of completion or "fulfilment" of communication impossible (1988b: 116). While this is not to say that irony and deconstruction do not coincide (the work of both Derrida and, in particular, Paul De Man suggests otherwise), the themes which enable us to discuss irony suggest the persistence of authority, propriety, and sovereignty. As Claire Colebrook notes, we can "only read texts ironically… if we commit ourselves to a *sense of truth* towards which speech and language strive." (2002: 177) The concern of this book is how interpretation is organised around such a commitment, in terms of irony's excess meaning.

This commitment is largely dependent, of course, on how the interpreter reconstructs the argument of the text, and more specifically, the authorial "voice" or "position" that effectively puts forward the argument.

In the three philosophical texts under discussion in this book—Schopenhauer's "On Women", Kierkegaard's "In Vino Veritas", and Nietzsche's "Woman and Child"—each employs fundamentally different *styles* of assertion. In turn, we must account for the shifting possibilities of irony within each text as they change in relation to its style. In doing so, the book puts forward the following general argument:

1. Irony is a concept in excess of itself, which is fundamentally productive and accountable as an interpretative strategy.

2. The question of a text's misogyny serves as a privileged case example of how ironic interpretation can be held accountable. In the case of the three texts under consideration, the representation of ironic possibility is fundamental to the understanding of the construction of such misogyny.

3. The ways in which the author expresses their own authority on the subject of "women" has a direct effect on the possibilities of interpreting their texts as ironic. In the three case studies looked at, this "subject position" is enlarged from singular (Schopenhauer), to double (Kierkegaard), to multiple (Nietzsche), and that this has a corresponding effect on the accountability of reading their texts as ironic, misogynist, both or neither.

These theses are presented through two interlinking lines of enquiry, running alongside each other. On the one hand (Chapters One, Three, and Five), the methodological question of the relationship between irony, interpretation and accountability; on the other hand (Chapters Two, Four and Six), specific readings of misogyny within the works of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche which provide us with case material.

Chapter One argues that the "problems" which irony poses for interpretation can be seen as symptomatic of irony's identification: that irony is, *essentially*, problematic. Rather than attempt to reduce or simplify irony to a restricted definition, we explore instead the thematic features of the discourses that attempt to fit irony into a method of interpretation. The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer is particularly illustrative, here. Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutics appear to initially offer us a way to counter the heavy emphasis on a speaker's "intention" as the source of ironic meaning. However, Gadamer appears to (ironically) remove the dialogism from his method precisely at the point he encounters the prospect of irony. We argue from this that the account of irony as a negation of meaning is intrinsically tied to an idea of an intentional "authority"; but, crucially, that this is an authority constructed in response to, rather than preceding, the excesses of ironic possibility. As a result, to focus solely on this authority

is inevitably to ignore the initial ironic possibilities. In Chapter Two, Schopenhauer's infamous essay "On Women" allows us to explore the ways in which this kind of responsive authority is constructed. In particular, "On Women" maps out its own authority in relation to the excess and competing positions of "woman". The chapter argues that the enforcing of Schopenhauer's singular subject position comes only at the expense of an ironic removal of the subject position from his otherwise systematic essay. This analysis, however, leaves the whole notion of authority in question. Chapter Three thus deals with the problem of how "authority" should then be constructed in relation to the identification of irony. It argues that irony is inherently grounded on a trope of intention, but that such a trope is utilised metaphorically as well as structurally. The chapter examines two approaches to intention: one structural (aligned with the "intentionalism" of E.D. Hirsch Jr.) and the other implicitly metaphorical (the hermeneutic, semiotic or rhetorical models). It argues that in both cases the stability of such an "intention" is grounded in features that are always "beyond" the immediacy of the text. Such a use of authority from "beyond" is developed in the work of both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, which is how they are able to utilise a different style of authority to that of Schopenhauer.

In Chapter Four, we find that Kierkegaard's text is rendered ironically meaningful by a *double* authority, which utilises the metaphorical intonations of the notion of "authority" discussed in Chapters One and Three. In this sense, the Kierkegaardian text plays around the effects of irony, but in formalising a response to the image of "woman", relies on a paradoxical conclusion which both depends on, and discounts, the ironic references throughout the text. The chapter suggests that, in this case, looking backwards to an original meaning does nothing but create new layers of ambiguity on top of those already in the text. As such, our attention is turned from the role of the intentional author, to the possibilities open to the interpreter. Chapter Five asks how a theory of ironic interpretation should deal with the "space of possibility" opened by the suggestion of irony. It argues that this space of future meaning is key to the accountability of any ironic reading. "Ironic distance" is thus key to the construction of the authority of Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard's texts, but most notably in Nietzsche's. This seeks to re-engage with the problem of irony detailed both here and in the first chapter: that is, as a political and ethical problem that is approachable only through careful hermeneutic and rhetorical negotiation. It addresses how the ideas raised in this book contribute to an accountable method of interpretation. This issue of accountability is explored in more detail in the reading of Chapter Six,

Nietzsche's "Woman and Child", where the authorial position is "established" as a *multiplicity*, thus calling for a different interpretative response from the singular and double authorial positions of the earlier readings. In accounting for Nietzsche's misogynistic argument whilst maintaining the heterogeneity of the text, the interpretation points to the construction of an immanent "future" subject that operates as a guarantor of meaning within Nietzsche's argument.

A key consideration to any study of "irony" is the disciplinary framing of the question. The study of irony problematises such an immediate disciplinary commitment. Indeed, one of irony's aspects—one of the defining elements that renders it so rhetorically appealing and so theoretically frustrating—is the open-ness of its use across a wide range of subject areas. Our approach is concerned with the value of irony within interpretation, and, as such, is placed under the broad category of hermeneutics as the "methodology of interpretation of texts" (Hoy 1982: 1). However, our aim is not to compare and contrast approaches to the interpretation of irony within different schools of thought. While it would perhaps be more fitting to use the term "philosophical hermeneutics," or "an interpretation of interpretation" (Davey 2006: 1), this term has difficulty in escaping its problematic loading towards the work of Gadamer (at least in Davey's use), which renders it inappropriate to the general method employed here. Rather, the specific interest in this book is how the authorial presence within the text asserts meaning on the text through, and in doing so, resists irony, even when such assertions take place under the guise of an "ironic authority." Thus, we are seeking to account for the representative role of irony within a given interpretation. Here lies the difference between interpreting irony and an ironic interpretation: we are not considering whether the object of interpretation should be classified as "ironic", but rather how the possibility of ironic intervention effects the construction of an "object" within the interpretative process. In accounting for ironic possibility, we are effectively accounting for our interpretative *representation* of such possibility.

In order to do this we must attempt some distinction between the various "subjects" of the text, a somewhat distracting task given the range of literary disagreement on the exact terms of any such distinction. In brief: here, the "subject position" describes an active and accountable agent within the narrative structure of the text. The "authorial subject position" describes the subject position which stakes a claim to authority within the text, and thus is represented within the interpretative text as the "sovereign term" of the interpretation of the position. The authorial subject

position is often used in philosophical secondary literature in straightforward correspondence to the "author".

Our focus on the hermeneutic reconstruction of such positions means that our analysis is situated, to use Spivak's rather grand words, around "the graphic of iterability rather than the logic of repetition." (1980: 36) By affirming the role of interpretative organisation in the production of ironic readings (as we are, by investigating the construction of irony within the interpretative process), we are bringing attention to the impossibility of transparent interpretative "repetition." Instead, we refer to iterability as the positive condition of the possibility of identification (Spivak 1980: 37), thus employing the notion of iterability which arrives from the general point at which Derrida brings it to in *Limited Inc*.: the point at which the critical reproduction of a text is the ground on which *both* the unity of hermeneutic dialectic *and* the impossibility of such a unity is stood (Derrida 1988b: 91-2). Thus, our concern with the representation of a text is not limited to the straightforward fact that ironic "meaning" can depend (in many of its formulations) on the repeatability of discourse beyond its original context, but also the more general principle that to be repeatable is to be alterable (see Derrida 1988b: 40). It is this notion of iterability which leads us to question the organisation of a text's authority within the construction of an interpretation: especially when the very reproduction of an "ironic text" lends itself to the end of some ironies, and the birth of new ones. However, it also requires a reflexive approach to the notion of an "original" or "primary" text that we must employ in our close readings, for which I shall be employing the notion of 'discourse'. I suggest in Chapter One that, rather than follow the path of many other studies of irony and attempt a rigorous description of what irony "is", we refer instead to a "discourse of irony" that encompasses the disputation between such rigorous descriptions. We do this for two main reasons. First, the fact that irony produces such excessive problems with definition suggests that, owing to the fundamental workings of the concept, any definition of irony will not fulfil its own conditions: there is always the possibility of ironizing the defining term. Second, we signal with this move our aim of sidestepping the diachronic question of irony's development as a concept, and re-focusing the question on to the application of ironic possibility within the interpretative act.

The term "interpretative act" is not without its ambiguities, of course. One of the fundamental complications concerning the engagement of hermeneutics and irony has been the fact that an interpretation constitutes both an extension of the interpreted text, and an interpretative text in itself. Here, I use the term "interpretative act" to refer to the general process of

reading, organising, and re-representing the text in question in order to produce an understanding. This act, of course, does not happen in isolation. Interpretative practice is always part of a discourse, with its own regulatory practices (see Foucault 2003). We cannot approach the texts in question under some kind of pretence that it has never been read before, just as we cannot pretend any interpretation is not informed (in some way) by those that have gone before it. As Davey points out, "the all-encompassing ontological horizon of language means that no thinker can step aside from the conceptual stock that enables his or her thinking in the first place." (2006: 155) Indeed, the central tenet of this thesis—that irony is a concept in excess of itself, and as such can be utilised as an accountable interpretative tool—is itself formed from the flood of histories, analyses, and theories on the subject of 'irony'. As such, the existing interpretative discourses—the "secondary literature," so to speak—are not only *about* the text in question ("On Women", "In Vino Veritas" and "Woman and Child"), but in many ways *inseparable* from the text as an object of interpretation. These two senses of discourse—of irony, and of the text in question—have a similar function. They enable us to posit a term in order to analyse the very iteration or reproduction of the concept (be it irony, woman, Schopenhauer etc.). In this sense, we are not aiming for an exhaustive account of every possible feature of such discourses, but to analyse those discursive *themes* which surround the problem which gives rise to the question: irony, ambiguity, strategic productivity.[1]

It may well be objected that there would seem to be a problem with using the "discourse of irony" as a referential term in place of irony itself. If we are using the idea of a discourse because the concept of irony resists or exceeds the very notion of conceptualising, then why does this not also apply to discourse as well? To this end, the discourse of irony is, of course, a slightly forced notion. On the one hand, there is obviously a need to posit some kind of object for discussion, otherwise the argument would not get far off the ground. However, there is also a sense in which irony does exhibit a sense of identity, despite all of its activities to the contrary. This is, arguably, what makes it such an interesting and infuriating topic. There is at thematic notion of "propriety" which distinguishes irony from other forms of possible meaning per se; that is to say, the representation of irony within interpretation takes place in relation to a sovereign authority. What concerns us in this book is how interpretation is organised around such a relation, in terms of the excess of ironic meaning. In this sense, the object of study is not irony as a definitive term, but the *containment* of irony within the terms of sovereignty, propriety, and authority which

enable ironic meaning to be identified. To this extent, we are presuming a field of containment in order to question the operation of such a limit; in exactly the same way that in each of our readings we presume a coherent authorial entity ("Schopenhauer", "Kierkegaard", "Nietzsche") in order to question the grounds upon which such a coherence is recognised.

Given all of this, why should we privilege "misogyny" in these readings? Many feminist theorists have questioned the legitimacy of interpretations which apply irony to what might be considered the more "serious" aspects of a text. This is, of course, a reason in itself to re-examine the relationship between irony, authority and "seriousness". The (possible) misogyny within the texts examined here provide examples of, not only arguments concerned with the limits of the authorial subject (how the author describes and negotiates the figure of woman), but also arguments which involve a sense of "force" that directly contrasts to the play of ironic possibility. It must be noted, though, that this investigation into the misogyny of the texts at hand is specifically in terms of the operations of irony, and not the other way around. I make this clear here to avoid the charges of mishandling or "over-textualising" the interpretation at the expense of feminist methodological considerations. The notion of misogyny is employed here as a case example of a particular element of the text's meaning which allows us to investigate the accountability of ironic interpretation. That is to say, the texts under analysis are concerned with the figuring of "woman" as a subject position in relation to the sovereign term. Subsequently, the presumption of each reading that the texts present misogynistic arguments is made in order to analyse the possibilities of representing such arguments ironically. Such presumptions are derived from the themes of each text's interpretative discourse. Thus, we are not concerned here with any analysis of such misogyny exterior to the problem of ironic interpretation identified. Of course, there is a particular relevance in recent engagements between feminist theory and the history of philosophy which touches on many of the issues this thesis wishes to investigate—for example, the establishment of the philosophical subject within the text, the possibilities of a counter-subject, and the problem of "legitimate" reading—thus providing us with a range of material in terms of secondary literature and debate that might not be so readily available for other elements of the text. So there is a certain practical element within the chosen subject matter. But perhaps more importantly, in terms of interpretation itself, the misogynistic text carries with it a violence of inscription that the interpreter is pressed to deal with: one need only review the multitude of inconsistent reasoning translators and commentators have used to "explain away" the misogyny in, for

example, the work of Schopenhauer, to realise that there is something crucial in the relationship of misogynistic statement to the terms of interpretation. Clearly, these texts are cases where the traditional view of irony as an admittance of relativism will not succeed if it is to term itself ethically accountable. Irony cannot be what Linda Alcoff terms a "resort", in this case (2000: 849); it must justify itself.

The representation of woman as an image historically offers a particular collusion of the terms of engagement—authority, figurality, possibility—at work in this book. Lévesque writes that "the all-powerful weapon of the impotent, the inalienable stroke of woman is irony. Woman, 'internal enemy of the community,' can always burst out laughing at the last moment." (Lévesque; in Derrida 1988a: 75) Hence, in Kierkegaard's work, the use of the woman image as a "framing" figure inscribes in that image the suggestion of a subjectivity outside of the dominant subject forms. In this sense, the image of woman ironizes the male subject position within the text: the image of woman as an inversion of the male subject simultaneously threatens the inscription with, on the one hand, alternative meaning, and on the other, meaninglessness. We must be careful, of course, not to merely employ the object of textual representations of "woman" as an *allegorical* trope, or indeed an allegory for "ironic meaning", *to the extent* that we reduce the excess of ironic possibility to the circumscription of allegory. That is to say, we must be wary of that kind of allegorical inquiry which Foucault identifies within histories of thought (2003: 30), which involve the reconstitution of a separable discourse of "intention," or "meaning" beyond the re-iteration of the term in question "behind" that which we have already identified. As Chapter Three argues, such an imposition of referential distance is key to the interpretative value of irony. However, the referential interplay produced by a figural term means that there is a sense in which allegory is inescapable. As Derrida argues, "Woman" stands as "*the* major allegory of truth in Western discourse" (Derrida 1988a: 170, my emphasis). So in approaching a text such as Nietzsche's, for example, the invocation of a figure, "woman" is *already* invoking a rhetorical investment in allegory, which cannot be ignored when considering the ironic possibilities of the text. But this is because such an investment is not (necessarily) at the expense of the ironic; whether inscribed as "truth" or "non-truth," the image of "woman" has a direct role within these texts of substantiating the sovereignty of the authorial subject. Thus, a distinction must be drawn between the use of allegory as a rhetorical trope embedded within the inscription of the text and the interpretative account of that text.

The above points deal with why the "surface" misogyny of the texts is taken here as a given theme and not placed under question, in order that the conditions on which such a representation is based are accounted for (i.e. the possibilities of irony within such conditions). The texts examined here are grouped by a general underlying theme of the denial of an active subject position to "woman" (Nietzsche is slightly more complex in this respect because, whereas Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard posit a referential sovereignty, Nietzsche employs a future subject specifically beyond the parameters of the text as the dominant site of meaning, which woman is excluded from, rather than a more straightforward rejection of woman's own sovereignty). However, rhetorically, the arguments under analysis do not assert an outright exclusion, but rather structure themselves on the (necessarily) speculative idea of what woman's subject position 'might' be. This involves writing of woman's negation of the subject as a double reference: on the one hand, as a negation (woman is not-man), and on the other, as a double possibility of the subject (the subject in lack, and the subject in excess). This means that the misogyny in question is not as simple as the classical misogyny, such as is found in the Ancient Greek philosophies (see Lovibond 2000), even though this discourse is regularly utilised in studies of woman's role in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Frances Nesbitt Oppel, for example, claims in her preface to *Nietzsche on Gender* that misogyny, or more simply "woman-hating, depends on woman's existence in relation to man's; it stems from a clear sense of gender dichotomy." (Oppel 2005: x) The danger of such an exclusionist theme is developed within a discourse of dyadic opposites (state/family, public/private, man/woman, etc.). Oppel uses the dyadic discourse in order to argue that Nietzsche's style obscures such clear dichotomies. In response to Oppel, I would argue that the history of philosophy will bear out that misogyny exists, not within a clear cut dichotomy of "man" and "woman," but as a violent and forceful rendering of these concepts to yield to such a dichotomy (see, for example, Le Doeuff 1989; Deutscher 1997). It is, in fact, by attending to the rhetorical structure of such rendering that reveals the operational qualities of the woman-image. This is, in turn, why an analysis of the more "obvious" misogyny, such as Schopenhauer's, is of as much importance for the understanding of the philosophical and rhetorical nature of misogyny as the more ambiguous manifestations in the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM OF IRONY: A THEMATIC APPROACH

The Death of Irony

The *Time* columnist Roger Rosenblatt famously declared, after 9/11, that if one good thing would come out of such an event, it would be the bringing about of the "end of the age of irony" (Rosenblatt 2001). In many ways, such a statement encapsulates the enduring fascination, and inherent problems, of irony to the philosophy of interpretation. Rosenblatt implies that the end of the age of irony is, fundamentally, a "good" thing. It is a good thing because irony—or, perhaps more specifically, ironic *interpretation*—cannot constitute a practical or moral standpoint.

This implication is not new to the history of philosophy. It is noticeable how literature regarding irony is often dressed with terms such as "unstable", "dangerous", and "risky". The danger being referred to is, broadly speaking, that when we acknowledge an event or text *could* be considered ironically, we are opening ourselves to the possibility that *every* event or text might be ironic. In terms of the philosophy of interpretation, this risk echoes a specific debate between postmodern deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics that has been prominent, on and off, since the 1960's. The peril of resorting to irony is "too easy to forget," as Linda Hutcheon puts it, amid the valorisation of ironic subversion (1994: 204).

The valorisation in question refers, of course, to "postmodernism" and its frequent turn to irony. In this sense, Rosenblatt's political polemic echoes a more general academic suspicion that the place of irony in the academy has simply run its course. The logic to this response is fairly straightforward. For all of the complex deconstruction of power structures in European thought from the late '60's to the early '90's, we are left only with sophistry. In place of the subversive politics and progressive movements towards alternative futures that Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler et al. seemed to promise, the reasoning would go, is *Team America: World*

Police, a film that mercilessly mocked every position on global politics, and sneered at the need to offer any moral position itself. In spite of its dazzling capacity to show the many ways in which meaning can be manipulated, irony has nothing actually useful to say. But this is only an expression of what philosophy has long suspected: that not only is irony unable to make a "point" that is accountable, but that its political uses are thus severely limited. Irony here is aligned with a particular backward-looking and parasitic reading of the world. To declare "for" irony is, in effect, to surrender to the loss of hope in any "new" future, resigning oneself instead with a cynical recycling of former novelties (see Fisher 2009: 3). Irony merely repeats, or else renders meaning so multiple, it will fail to have anything to say the serious issues of truth or morality. The suspicion that irony produces nothing is often accompanied by a wide berth that only contributes to the ambiguity over what it is: "Irony, it seems, at least for the *properly philosophical* discourse, is a temptation to be resisted, and is best written about when it is neither 'named' nor 'defined'." (Newmark 1992: 908, my emphasis)

This may be a fairly extreme caricature, of course, and it is not the only scene in which irony has been set against "proper" philosophy. Generally speaking, it is precisely the extreme threat of nothingness and annihilation of meaning that has guided the vast majority of philosophical studies on irony. This is why it is often possible to discern a kind of strategic "damage limitation" at work in such studies. This pulls the concept of irony, however much it resists, into some form of system which might limit on the plethora of ironic possibilities. Perhaps the exemplar of such a study would be Kierkegaard's thesis *The Concept of Irony*. Here, after documenting the slipperiness and seductiveness of irony as an existential idea, Kierkegaard puts forward the need for "controlled irony": a form of communication that is both open to multiple readings, but maintains the requirement of such readings arriving at a meaningful conclusion. This would manifest itself as a philosophical position which, by undermining the over-serious and abstract prescriptions of the likes of Hegel and Kant, would allow its reader to arrive at an existential viewpoint that they (though perhaps only they) could live by.

Whether this mode of communication is possible at all is, of course, another thing. But perhaps a more pressing issue at this stage is whether we should presume that Kierkegaard's stated intentions are serious at all. Is his dream of controlled irony itself un-ironic? I will argue in more detail later in this book that such a presumption is wrong. For now, I will say that such a presumption only makes sense if we accept the general idea put

forward so far that irony is a negation of meaning, if not nihilistic sophistry. But this is not the full picture.

The Problem of Defining Irony

It is important to see that even a negative statements such as Rosenblatt's produces what can readily be described as an ironic effect. His pronouncement of irony's death does not yield so much of an "end" to irony, but rather a rebirth of ironies. It was not just that the event of 9/11 remains fraught with situational ironies (when placed in conjunction with the context of America's funding of al-Qaida, or the American strategy of "raining bombs and peanut butter on Afghanistan" (Williams 2003)). But from a theoretical perspective, the significance is also that Rosenblatt's effort to produce the utterly un-ironic claim over the death of irony becomes ironic at precisely the point it is taken seriously as a political claim. Despite its parasitical representation in hermeneutic discourse, irony has proved a remarkably productive concept, in the sense that the suppression of irony very readily opens up different ironic situations or events. This is particularly the case when the interpreter—be it an hermeneuticist, social commentator, stand-up comedian, or somebody else—actively employs irony as an exegetical tool, without the constraints of a overly-simplistic intentionalist model of understanding (i.e. "an event is ironic if the author of the event intended it to be").

The difficulty remains in *accounting* for such an interpretative employment of irony, and without this accountability, the initial caricature we began with would seem to stand. If the effect of irony can be productive, the prospect of irony still remains vague and unsettling.

An obvious solution to this would be to find a precise definition of the term. What actually happens when we call something "ironic"? However, perhaps the most dominant problem facing an interpretative account of irony is the problem of definition. As Paul de Man, in one of the most insightful essays on the topic, points out: "Defintioinal language seems to be in trouble when irony is concerned." (De Man 1996: 165) There is something intrinsically problematic—or perhaps ironic—about any attempt to produce a rigorous definition of what irony "is". One could describe irony as an "elusive" concept, if it were not so ever-present. Basic formulations offered—"to say something and mean another", "one code containing two messages", etc.—can leave an unhelpfully wide scope for interpretation. Saying something and meaning another is not just irony; it also applies to entirely different forms of communication, such as poetry, secret codes, or the simple lie. A pertinent example of this can be found

with the title of Hans-Georg Gadamer's work *Truth and Method.* The title is often described as "ironic", because the thesis it presents claims there is no ultimate truth and methods of interpretation are flexible. But if this is an ironic title, there must be something at work which makes this title *ironic* rather than simply *misleading*. In fact, Gadamer's response to irony is similarly revealing, and we will look in more detail at this later on in the chapter. Because Gadamer is interested in providing a theory of interpretation that does not locate the "meaning" of a text entirely with the author or reader, he offers one site of a possible theoretical account of ironic interpretation. But while his response goes well beyond this rather crude account of his title, it his *failure* to account for irony which is ultimately most interesting.

For now, it is worth noting that irony often commands a general response from interpretation theorists of various approaches and methods. For example, Gadamer's general response is not a world away from H.P. Grice's analytic explanation of what irony is, despite their many and obvious methodological differences. Grice's explanation is significant precisely because it does not, in fact, specify irony in tangible terms at all:

> A says *'X is a fine friend'*. …It is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A know that this is obvious to audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. (Grice 1975: 53)

Irony here is loosely equated with an "in-joke" between speaker and audience. The problem for this account seems to be that, if the audience knows the speaker is being ironic, and the speaker knows that the audience knows, then it is not entirely clear where any philosophical examination is necessary. It may well be true that people can have intuitions and instincts regarding what irony is and what it is not. But intuitions do not get us too far with understanding what makes irony so difficult to define, what arrangement it depends upon between author and audience, and what standards we have for assessing it. Grice's account amounts to saying "What's irony? Well, we just know." For our purposes, at least, this is not very helpful.

An account such as Grice's is not irrelevant, though. It does alert us to the fact that irony is, in Linda Hutcheon's words, "the mode of the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen" (Hutcheon 1994: 9). But relying on the idea that it's just "there", and we all know it, tends to sidestep the problems that arise from imposing a definitive limit on the characteristics of irony. The

problem here is that the more rigorous definitions supplied often risk ignoring or purposefully excluding particular vital elements of the ironic in the name of methodological tidiness. One might soon come to the conclusion that there is something inherent to irony which resists just such a limit, and quoting Muecke at length should illustrate this point:

> One has only to reflect for a moment upon the various names that have been given to 'kinds' of irony – tragic irony, comic irony, irony of manner, irony of situation, philosophical irony, practical irony, dramatic irony, verbal irony, ingénue irony, double irony, rhetorical irony, self-irony, Socratic Irony, Romantic Irony, cosmic irony, sentimental irony, irony of Fate, irony of chance, irony of character, etc. – to see that some have been named from the effect, others from the medium, others again from the technique, or the function, or the object, or the practitioner, or the tone, or the attitude. Clearly, there could be several mutually independent (and separately inadequate) classifications of the 'kinds' of irony, each based upon a different point of view; but merely to go on inventing and using as occasion requires such a scatter of terms as I have listed will ensure that one never sees any ordered relationship between the kinds and consequently never gets a clear picture of the whole range or compass of irony. (Muecke 1969: 4)

In other words, defining irony is not a clearly demarcated problem of categorisation, but rather a constant and shifting discussion which produces in itself a number of further problems and discursive themes. As Grice notes, there is something that "happens", which we want to call irony—the kind of "event" which situates this issue as a hermeneutic concern—and there is an interpretative discourse which tries to represent that event. Indeed, the whole task of defining irony might be viewed as an element of a *discourse* of irony, which any writing on irony takes place in relation to. But, as Muecke's quote shows us, this problem of representation is clearly not something solved by producing more clearly delineated definitions: it is a thematic issue.

It is for this reason that, while there are clear philosophical and social contexts for irony to be an important topic, this book is not is a documentary history of irony in all of its various forms. While tracing the genesis, implementation and development of different "types" of irony (e.g. from Socrates to Cicero, Hobbes to Hegel and so on) is no doubt of interest, there are certain issues with taking an historical approach. First of all, it seems to begin outside of the problem—that is, the remarkable persistence of ironic ambiguity—and in doing so, risks rendering the problem a whole lot more "manageable" than, in the applied practice of interpretation, it actually is. Second, an historical approach can often

assume a pre-established typology—i.e. that there *is* a difference between Socrates and Cicero's use of irony, or Hobbes and Hegel, and so on—in order to proceed. While some typologies are useful, or at least well established, I will argue in the next section that there is something about the prospect of irony that inherently resists easy classification. Third, all too often the historical approach depends upon coherent ideas of who the author in question *is*: in other words, it shifts the focus away from the act of interpretation towards a more clearly identifiable figure of authority from the annals of the history of philosophy. But, as I argue throughout this book, what possibilities lie open to ironic interpretation are dependent upon how this figure is constructed *as part of* the act of interpretation. Overall, I'm simply not convinced that the problem of interpreting irony can be "solved" by tracing it back to its constituent parts. If this were the case, then we could rest happy with the excellent works already written (see Knox 1961; Muecke 1969, 1982; Dane 1991 and Colebrook 2002, 2004). Rather, the problem of irony we are dealing with – and its specific relationship to the ethics of interpretation – emerges from a network of concerns regarding authority, style, argument and interpretative possibility.

Rather than follow the path of many other studies of irony and attempt a rigorous description of what irony "is", I would suggest that a serious account of hermeneutic irony refers instead to this "discourse of irony", that encompasses the disputation between such rigorous descriptions. As a result, while this approach may risk casting a wide net, it is nevertheless beneficial for two main reasons. First, the fact that irony produces such excessive problems with definition suggests that any definition of irony will not fulfil its own conditions: there is always the possibility of ironizing the defining term. Second, this move sidesteps the historical question of irony's development as a concept, and re-focuses the question on to the application of "ironic possibility" within the interpretative act.

The Discourse of Irony: General Themes

By thinking in terms of a discourse of irony, one can establish certain themes that occupy the identification of irony without committing initially to one definition over another. In turn, by specifying the definition of irony as a discourse in itself, one can trace the development of an effect *on* interpretation, rather than being held up from the start with the problem of what irony "is". Such an approach establishes that irony as a form of communication cannot be separated from the context of its iteration. We cannot talk about "irony" outside of a context; but it is the ambiguity or multiplicity of such a context which prompts the irony in the first place

(saying one thing and meaning another involves rupturing the expectation of context). In this sense, the identification of irony is essentially a strategic interpretation of such a context. By detailing the ways in which irony is identified, and what happens to this identification in relation to the interpretative discourse of an event, the grounds for an "accountable" ironic intervention will become clearer.

The first thing we can note about this discourse of irony, then, is that it is *essentially* problematic. Finding a clear definition of irony is problematic because, constitutively, irony is a problem for communication. It is problematic not only in terms of the multitude of definitions on offer, but also because the term "irony" within philosophy can be readily supplemented by "the problem of irony". Because the subject of irony commands such a huge amount of literature, any text dealing solely with "irony" is immediately confronted with a multitude of differing definitions of its subject matter. Indeed, in his book *The Alluring Problem* (1986), D.J. Enright admits to struggling so much with an initial definition that he abandons his attempts at the end of his first chapter. Nevertheless, certain common themes can be found when ironology searches for its most "basic" definition: "saying what is contrary to what is meant", (see Colebrook 2004: 1; Green 1979: 4); "the double (or more) meaning of a statement or assertion", (see Rose 1993: 87; Empson 2004: 103); "the contrast between appearance and reality", (see Muecke 1970: 35); "a challenging of the ready-made rigidity of common-sense" (see Colebrook 2002: 207).

All of these classificatory statements are broad, and in one sense, much *too* broad if one considers a definition to provide some type of limitation on a term. However, the scope of these themes points to the fact that a common feature of irony is its broad application. There is a distinct difference in structure and form between, for example, Socratic irony as a form of teaching and romanticist irony as an ontological form, or between D.H. Green's five category model of irony and Richard Rorty's (1989) model of social contingency; yet all are termed "ironic". Furthermore, the relationship between these uses of "irony" are multiple and various, yet do not initially seem to conform to one overriding principle—or, at least, a principle that in overriding others does not reduce the other definitional themes.

This is not to deny the possibility that one or the other interpreter might have misjudged their definitional claims (although one might note the difficulty in making such a case, given that the act of assigning a "proper" use of irony often only repeats the original problem). Rather, this brief look at the basic themes of defining irony reveals two fundamental

points about the nature of the term. First, all of these basic definitions propose that the identification of "irony" is based upon the double or multiple meaning of a statement. The possibility of meaning exceeds what we might call the "normal" of "given" context. Second, the definitions themselves leave a noticeable excess of meaning within the discourse, by the fact that, as definitions, they do not close the term, and leave the discursive field open to different formulations of a definition.

This identification of irony as an excess of meaning is obviously at some odds with the language, images and metaphors of the wider discourse of irony, which has traditionally focused on irony as a negation of meaning. It could be admitted that the first point made above might not be, and indeed in many cases is not, considered a mark of excess. A "contrast between appearance and reality", after all, still proposes a distinction between the value of the "real" meaning and the immediate appearance which is to be discarded, thus leaving only one sovereign meaning. However, such a distinction of value nevertheless requires the initial excess of meaning caused by the contrast; otherwise, there would not be a case for calling it an ironic ambiguity.

Ironic ambiguity does not stop within the concept, though; it multiplies as discourse attempts to represent it. This is often seen clearly in the more rigorous compartmentalising of different ironic forms (and related modes such as allegory, satire etc.) which the broad nature of these basic definitions inevitably calls for. Such categorising cannot escape the sense of ambiguity that accompanies the effect of the ironic mode. For example, Margaret Rose's alignment of irony's "double message" with a knowing audience and an unknowing audience appears to offer a clear differentiation between ironic and sovereign meaning, but instead goes on to point out that the "cryptic" nature of irony does not distinguish *in itself* which audience is which (1993: 87,88). This necessary admission of irony's ambiguous qualities immediately complicates the straightforward terms of definition. D.H. Green's introductory definition of irony (1979: 4-10) proceeds by finding that every *limitation* imposed on the definitional statement merely *widens* its applicability: each model he provides for defining irony omits particular elements, prompting him to draw out seven different models. Yet in the end, his eventual working definition does not entirely free itself from the problems of his first definition. The result is that the very act of categorising irony seems to produce in itself a form of irony.

Meaning, Proper and Improper

The productivity of this point is often overlooked, however, because of the obvious problems it poses for any meaningful interpretative discourse. Quite simply, one must have *something* to talk about, and, consequently, one must place some limit at which one can say "here is irony". There is, then, alongside this theme of excessive meaning, a further thematic notion of "propriety" specific to the discourse of irony. That is to say, the representation of irony within interpretation takes place in relation to a sovereign authority. We might quote from a host of varied examples to support this: for example, Clyde Lee Miller notes that "[w]hat is distinctive of ironic situations is that the inappropriate outcomes, while they run contrary to the hopes and efforts of those involved, display a particular *propriety* as well." (1976: 310, my emphasis) This is not to say that irony operates within a limited field of meaning, but rather that the themes which enable us to discuss irony—the thematic characteristics of the discourse of irony—suggest the persistence of authority, and propriety (see Colebrook 2002).

Situating irony on this boundary between the proper and improper is not an easy balancing act, however. Muecke makes a useful distinction between *verbal* irony and *situational* irony (1970: 63). Verbal irony is an ironic assertion made by an ironist; situational irony is a state of affairs given ironic meaning by a separate observer. Broadly speaking, the caricature we began with seems Muecke admits that situation irony has been relatively unexplored in hermeneutic thinking. This is something of a large omission, though, especially when we consider that Muecke's distinction utilises an underlying hierarchy. The assertive quality of verbal irony renders it capable of moral rhetoric (Muecke 1970: 63), whilst situational irony is constructed by virtue of the observer's detachment from what he observes. It is, as a result, not only distinctly weaker in terms of conveying a meaning beyond the individual standpoint, but also detached from the moral concerns of the more involved verbal ironist (Muecke 1970: 49). Consequently, the value of the distinction is that an ironic element of a text or event guided and contained by the figure of the ironist holds more accountable meaning than the uncontained possibility that every situation might be considered ironic by someone, somewhere. The problem is that, while focused on verbal or intentional irony, the interpretation of irony seems to be primarily concerned with getting to the (un-ironic) "meaning", which the ironic gives us passage to, rather than, or at the expense of, the value of the ironic meaning itself.

The issue here is not the differentiation of verbal and situational ironies – Muecke's distinction is based upon a duality that many other accounts of irony do not accept – but rather the structure by which irony's value is attributed to the authority of, or within, the text or event. Here, the boundaries between concept and discourse are often rendered unclear, in terms of what is qualified about the defined ironic form, and what is not. For example, in Richard Whately's nineteenth century treatise on rhetoric, rooted firmly in the Aristotelian tradition, the trope of irony is *only* included as a categorical form of refutation: the speaker asserts a counter-claim as though it were valid, in order to demonstrate its weakness (Whately 1963: 152-3). Whately opposes this to the hypothetical form of refutation, which maintains the authorial subject's truth at all times whilst proposing the counter-claim through the voice of an other, and is not considered to be ironic. The operation of irony is thus clearly demarcated by Whately as the *negation of the sovereign meaning* of the assertion. In her study of Kierkegaard's writing, Sylviane Agacinski goes further by suggesting that irony is a *withdrawal* of the subject; but a withdrawal so "vain and disquieting that it immediately calls for some kind of positivity—perhaps philosophy—to… manifest itself." (1988: 33) While Agacinski takes irony "by itself" to signify an irreconcilable distance within the interpretation of meaning, (she asks whether it is possible "to *place* irony, which is perhaps displacement 'itself'?"), the *discursive* value of irony is then only properly asserted by a re-attachment to "a subject". In other words, this account of irony negates the subject position, but only by virtue of the subject's original assertion.

> The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play: "*this* affirmation must be rejected," leaving the possibility, and in infinite ironies the clear implication, that since the universe (or at least the universe of discourse) is inherently absurd, all statements are subject to ironic undermining. No statement can really "mean what it says". (Booth 1974: 240-1)

On this account, the only *affirmable* aspect of irony is *negation* (indeed, this paradox might even suggest creates irony's underlying ambiguity). Consequently, Booth argues that a certain state of non-ambiguous meaning is a necessary element of the "practical task of reading ironies"; "pursued to the end, an ironic temper can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of solvents. It is not irony but the desire to understand irony that brings such a chain to a stop." (Booth 1974: 59, n. 14) What Booth terms here the "desire to understand irony" correlates with what I have termed the discourse of irony: both affirm, in their