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The Language of the *Logos*: The Religiosity of Western Irony

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The Language of the *Logos*: The Religiosity of Western Irony

There is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and many would hold to the romantic claim. . . that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it. For both its devotees and for those who fear it, irony is usually seen as something that undermines clarities, opens up vistas of chaos, and either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroys by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation.¹

This thesis examines theories of irony in historical contexts and presents my own theory of the relation between these instances of irony and the theological. This is primarily achieved through the illustration of the connectivity that irony attempts to create between language and meaning. By examining several primary "schools" of irony, from Socratic to postmodern irony, I will demonstrate that irony, through all of the interpretations of it and changes in its linguistic status has maintained a single function. This purpose of irony is to acknowledge the incompatibility between the world and what I will be calling the ineffable. Often this ineffable is the mind, and, as I will further explicate, the unconscious. More than simply pointing out the disconnection that occurs between language and the ineffable, irony attempts to move past this division and to give meaning back to language. In brief, by making language mean something other than what it *says*, irony can make language mean more than what can be expressed with words. Irony thus becomes theological. I will introduce irony in general as well as the ironic schools that I will be using to illustrate my thesis. Next, I will give a more in depth examination of these various schools. In my analysis of irony, I demonstrate problems of language affecting both irony and madness. Finally, I will focus on the meaning that

¹ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974) ix.

irony often attempts to create, and thus demonstrate a religiosity or theology that I claim is present in most significant irony.

Though irony has historically taken on multiple meanings and multiple forms, from Socratic to so-called postmodern conceptions and interpretations of irony, one significant characteristic has remained: irony articulates what cannot be described in the world. Furthermore, irony completes this task through a *lack*. With words, the ironist builds meaning beneath the words; the ironist shows that words are not enough, that words are incomplete. The completeness of meaning, therefore, comes with the lack of words to describe it. We could go so far as to say that all language has this degree of incompleteness: certainly many postmodern views would support this reading. In Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and other Mimetic Structures, Eric Gans writes, "No mere figure of speech, irony is central to all thought, for the use of language as such is essentially ironic."²

Often the *interpretations* of ironic statements and situations create this undercurrent of meaning. In the upcoming section concerning Socrates and Aristotle, I demonstrate that what Socrates actually *meant* when he professed that he only knew that he did not know, whether he was being serious or being a modest dissembler, is not important. Rather, the interpretations of Socrates' classic ironic statement are what provide the meaning. The importance of interpretation of the irony in a statement or a person who is ironic often far overshadows any intentional meaning. That irony is interpreted, that an observer notes meaning behind and often opposed to what is being

² Eric Gans, Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) 64.

said, frequently demonstrates a degree of un-intention by the so-called ironist to be ironic.

Systems of meaning are present in religions as well as linguistic thought. The religiosity of irony comes from the *meaning* that is latent in ironic statements and situations. Meaning is what creates the sense of religion or religiosity that seems to pervade most significant instances of irony. The meaning of irony is often present in what is not said. With irony, words mean other than what they are saying. I argue throughout this thesis that irony functions as a way to connect the expressible and the inexpressible, the tangible and the ineffable. This connection that irony is trying to create is what religions often express: a connection between the world and the ineffable, or, at the very least, an attempted explanation of the ineffable. This is religion in the broadest sense: religion as what is beyond the world and therefore inexpressible, and likewise what is in the world and is inexplicable. Here, I will give a brief overview of the historic theories of irony that will be examined in greater detail in the body of this paper.

If we take Socrates' statement that he does not know anything except his ignorance as an honest statement, we are left with two primary interpretations. Either Socrates thinks that he does not know anything at all, or, as Babbitt puts it, "[T]hough his [Socrates'] knowledge may be as light in comparison with that of the ordinary Athenian, he sees that in comparison with true and perfect knowledge it is only darkness."³ This true, perfect knowledge can be what Socrates is striving towards; and it is this aspiration that makes him dangerous to the ordinary Athenian. The search for this knowledge causes him to reject the gods, and to follow his own path to knowledge.

³ Irving Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919) 244.

In the Romantic ironists we see a similar presence of religion. In a short survey of Romantic irony, Eric Gans writes, "Romantic irony plays on the contrast between material triviality and spiritual importance: the individual is powerless, ignored, yet a possessor of the whole through the intermediary of the sign. This is Pascal's *roseau pensant* in a secular world; irony is as close as the late romantic will come to belief in divine providence."⁴ This "contrast between material triviality and spiritual importance" is what the irony points out. The contrast is a contrast stressed by irony in order to examine differences of meaning between these two distinct features of life. Northrop Frye writes that

What I see first of all in Romanticism is the effect of a profound change, not primarily in belief, but in the spatial projection of reality. This in turn leads to a different localizing of the various levels of that reality. Such a change in the localizing of the various levels of images is bound to be accompanied by, or even cause, changes in belief and attitude, and changes of this latter sort are exhibited by the Romantic poets. But the change itself is not in belief or attitude, and may be found in, or at least affecting, poets of a great variety of beliefs.⁵

With our broader view of religion, the Romantic ironist is *being religious*. A change in this "spatial projection of reality" is more than enough to constitute a significant change in meaning and understanding, though this change may affect "poets of a great variety of beliefs." The change in the perception of the world, and this near change in its construction, creates a space in which irony becomes the definer of reality. And irony, for the Romantic, defines reality in such a way that connections between the dichotomized elements of reality are left undefined, but acknowledged.

⁴ Gans, 70.

⁵ Northrop Frye, "The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism," Romanticism Reconsidered, Ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) 11.

Soren Kierkegaard connects irony, and this is primarily his interpretation of the irony of Socrates, with the religious. In The Concept of Irony, Kierkegaard establishes a connection between religion and irony. Though he is careful not to equate religious devotion and irony, he does find a connection between irony and religion on a more ephemeral level.⁶ Analyses of Kierkegaard note this "meditative" quality present in Kierkegaard's study and in studies inspired by it.⁷ Kierkegaard primarily notes the linguistic problems faced with irony. He writes

Already here we have a quality that permeates all irony--namely, that the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence. When I am speaking, the thought, the meaning, is the essence, and the word is the phenomenon. . . Now, truth demands identity, for if I had the thought without the word, then I would not have had the thought; and if I had the word without the thought, then I would not have the word either.⁸

Language is necessary for thought, but language is not complete. Language cannot speak certain concepts, it cannot speak the ineffable. Thought cannot, with words, conceptualize the ineffable. The use of irony is an attempt to fill this void created by the separateness of language and the ineffable. For Kierkegaard, irony still creates a separation, however, the "nothing" that irony demonstrates can often be full of meaning. This, I argue, is the meaning that irony strives toward.

The New Critics, a name for scholars of a certain school of literary studies, attempt to make interpretation the root of the irony itself. In an analysis of Cleanth Brooks' irony, Joseph Dane demonstrates that for Brooks, irony is what he finds

⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, Trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 257.

⁷ See for example, Joseph A. Dane, The Critical Mythology of Irony (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991) 9.

⁸ Kierkegaard, 247.

interesting and *worthy of interpretation*.⁹ Irony is what needs to be interpreted, what needs to be understood. Irony is what lies behind all of the words and desires of the already present meaning. Analyzing Brooks' New Critical view of irony further, Dane writes:

[I]n reading poems, Brooks rewrites them. A poem in Brooks's hands acquires a new content, one presumably freed of (past) historical associations and interpretive constraints. This new content, based on Brooks's own sensitivity is called irony. It has its origins in the sensitivity of the critic, a sensitivity that is projected onto the text of the poem. The New Critics' emphasis on the text is equally an emphasis on their own reading of that text.¹⁰

Here, the emphasis is not necessarily on a style of writing as ironic, but rather is shifted from the poet to the poetic interpreter. In terms of understandings of irony and where it exists, this moves a step beyond the Romantic movement that shifted the emphasis from poem to poet. New Criticism takes this farther and emphasizes the interpreter and interpretation, and even more, the power of the interpreter. The interpreter's reading of a text is thus almost given status above the original text itself. The critic is able to describe the text in a way that the text or author may not have originally planned. This emphasis on interpretation paves the way for postmodern ideas of irony. With postmodernism, the reader gains power over the author, as well as traditional interpretations.

Postmodernism prescribes tropes. In a postmodern view, language is immediately recognized as problematic though necessary method of communication. Tropes allow the speaker or writer to demonstrate this difficulty of language as well as attempting to move beyond it. With postmodernism, language is a difficult and "slippery" tool. Emphasis is

⁹ Dane, 152

¹⁰ Dane, 152.

placed on readers, on multiple interpretations.¹¹ Mark C. Taylor writes, "In the course of rereading the word by writing about writing, form becomes content, and content form. . . this rereading and rewriting always take place within the web I am trying to unravel. This situation creates a double bind, which repeatedly forces me to turn to tropes. Irony, humor, metaphor, paradox, pun, and parable are not mere rhetorical embellishments but are necessary to the act of writing."¹² The importance of multiple interpretations and readings of texts requires the use of what Lyotard and Wittgenstein before him call language games. Lyotard writes, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives."¹³ This "incredulity toward metanarratives" places value on multiple narratives, rather than one narrative. Lyotard writes further, "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to *tolerate the incommensurable*. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy [emphasis mine]."¹⁴ "To tolerate the incommensurable" is to focus on what postmodernism strives for: in more sociological scholarship, this is manifests itself in a desire and need to make space for the "Other." With irony, these differences are often theological in nature: like the Romantic contrast between material triviality and spiritual importance, postmodernist irony strives to create a meaning between differences in the material world and what is inexpressible because of abstractness and ineffability.

¹¹ See for example, Pauline Marie Rosenau, Postmodernism and the Social Science: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) Chapter 2.

¹² Mark C. Taylor, Erring: A Postmodern A/theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 17.

¹³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) xxiv.

¹⁴ Lyotard, xxv.

What is found with all of these ironies is that words supply meaning both in themselves and in their lack. With irony, language becomes symbolic; it becomes more like an image and less like a system. The lack of words, or the meaning present behind the words demonstrates the ability for ironic language to point to something other than linguistic thought. Irony enables language to have meaning behind words. This meaning is the ineffable. I argue that irony is often religious because it points to the inexpressibility of the religious, whether this religious meaning is ultimate truth, as for Socrates, or the truth of the limitations of language expressed by postmodernists. With words, irony is able to create meaning. This meaning is not present in the words themselves, but rather in the spaces between and behind the words. And these spaces create a meaning that can be imagistic rather than linguistic. Without words, the meaning demonstrates itself. Without ever being translated into words, the ephemeral is acknowledged.

As I have argued in an unpublished paper, traditionally theories of madness or, more recently, insanity and mental disorders have focused on the problem of insanity primarily as a problem of reason. The mad or insane person is separated from the rest of society because the mad person is seen to be lacking or having deficient reason. What follows from this is that the problem with the insane is a problem of language. Though enormous changes in the treatment and understandings of mental disorders have occurred from the 1600s to the current time, those perceived as mad or mentally deficient have had the same effect on society: they serve to divide. The mad cannot speak the language of the sane, or vice versa. The insane are, perhaps, not speaking a language at all. This can be seen in both positive and negative lights, and, as I argued in my earlier work, in

scholarship this lack of language is seen as a negative, since it cannot be spoken in itself.¹⁵ It can only be spoken about.

Irony is not madness, defined in these terms. Irony does speak; irony is expressed with language, with the spaces between words. But what irony tries to express is never spoken. Irony speaks what it never says. Like insanity, the inexpressibility of what irony tries to express is not achieved through words. It is achieved through language that is complex, language that allows for meaning beneath and between the words. At base, all language does this. Irony's intention and the overt need for interpretation of this meaning is what makes irony of interest.

In Rhetoric of Religion, Kenneth Burke writes, "Language, to be used properly, must be 'discounted.' We must remind ourselves that, whatever *correspondence* there is between a *word* and the *thing* it names, the word is *not* the thing. The *word* 'tree' is *not* a tree."¹⁶ The word "tree," then, is not the same as an actual tree. Though this seems obvious, when taken farther, objections may arise among those who want language to mean something concrete or referential. This means that all language is not only incomplete, it is almost false. The word "tree," no matter how many adjectives may be used to modify that word, is not the same as an actual tree in the world, even if I have a very specific tree in mind. The tree I have in mind is precisely that: in my mind. This is not to say that language is not useful. This is only to say that language has limits, and very clear ones.

¹⁵ For example see Julia Kristeva, Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) Chapter 2. Though depression and mental illnesses are treated by Kristeva with a greater sympathy than by earlier philosophers like Descartes, Kristeva still notes the problem of language. "[T]he melancholy person appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos."

¹⁶ Kenneth Burke, The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970) 18, italics in the original.

Irony, and other tropes, can demonstrate the limitations of language and can leave room for the interpretation that is necessary with the use of language. Burke continues, "The paradox of the negative, then, is simply this: Quite as the *word* "tree" is verbal and the *thing* tree is non-verbal, so all words for the non-verbal must, by the very nature of the case, discuss the realm of the non-verbal in terms of *what it is not*. Hence, to use words properly, we must spontaneously have a feeling for the *principle of the negative*."¹⁷ Finally, Burke discusses irony in relation to this problem language: "The most obvious formal instance of this feeling for the negative discount is irony, a figure which, at its simplest, states A in terms of non-A (as when, on a bad day of weather, we might say, 'What a beautiful day it is!'). And all metaphor involves a similar feeling for the discount."¹⁸ This principle of the negative demonstrates the ability of language to carry meaning only in terms of non-words. Words themselves have no meanings: context, tone, and even what is not said gives language its meaning.

Though words are removed from reality, and irony is one clear demonstration in which words are not speaking the truth, irony is not only negative. Irony is not always defined as A in terms of non-A. Irony may just not be A, not necessarily the opposite of A as Burke posited. The meaning of irony is not always as clear as simply the opposite of the words, because here again words become explicit. And irony denies this explicitness.

Irony not only demonstrates the limitations of language, it also provides a way to overcome these limitations. Though what is ironic is essentially what is not said (and in the case of more situational ironies, does not have to be spoken at all), irony still makes

¹⁷ Burke, 18, italics in the original.

¹⁸ Burke, 18-19.

use of language to demonstrate this limitation in the first place. Language is thus used to make a place in which irony is understood as a method of getting around the limitations of language. I can say something ironic with words, but the irony generally lies behind the words, or in the situation in which the words are said. However, the words that are said are often essential in understanding or grasping the irony.

Irony is a way to demonstrate the unconscious or un-speakable elements of the world. And irony is a method employed by some writers and interpreters and speakers to demonstrate this. In other cases, irony is unintentionally used and, the text is later interpreted as having possessed this type of unspoken meaning. In nearly all cases, however, irony tends to demonstrate the presence of something "extrawordly." As Angus Fletcher writes, "The ironic method allows us to live with the discrepancy between appearances and truth, since we are able to analyze our situation dialectically, thereby freeing ourselves of misconception. The ironies remain; the conflicts of *nous* and *nomos* are not resolved in this world; but they do not remain unobserved, and perhaps even, in little everyday situations, they can now be dealt with."¹⁹ The "discrepanc[ies] between appearances and truth" are religious problems precisely because "truth," however it is defined, creates an internal view of the world by a human. This internal view looks out into the external world and does not recognize itself in this world. With irony, the internal world, the "truth," allows itself to be known. This "truth" seeks recognition and finds it with the use of irony. It is acknowledged by the external world, though not aptly understood or described. However, this acknowledgement is enough to constitute a religiosity of language. So here, I will deal with irony in an attempt to

¹⁹ Angus Fletcher, Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964) 232.

observe the "discrepancy between appearance and truth." and to observe that this discrepancy is what irony serves to both acknowledge and to attempt to solve.

My argument of an ironic acknowledgement of ineffable truths begins with the Greek *eirōn*, particularly as this conception relates to Socrates and his profession of ignorance.

Socrates

Socrates, and his denial of his knowledge, is certainly one of the earliest examples of irony that can be noted in the West. Indeed in the most basic of philosophical textbooks, Socrates' claim to ignorance takes precedence only behind his other often quoted statement: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Perhaps his claims of ignorance can be seen as a response to the educational system of the time, a method for getting his students to question. This is pure speculation. However, Plato's accounts of Socrates do include this lack of boasting on the part of Socrates; this lack of boasting is usually portrayed at the extreme, in the profession of his ignorance. Even with this profession, Socrates certainly knows enough to run circles around most of the Greek intelligentsia; however, he does this by constant questioning, thus often limiting the full expression of his own knowledge. Examining Socratic irony Irving Babbitt writes,

The irony of Socrates, to take the most important example of Greek irony, is not of the centrifugal character. Socrates professes ignorance, and this profession seems very ironical, for it turns out that his ignorance is more enlightened, that is, more central than other men's swelling conceit of knowledge.²⁰

²⁰ Babbitt, 243-4.

Aristotle's view of irony in the Nicomachean Ethics seems to stem in part from this view of Socrates. *Eiron*, irony, is the opposite of *alazon*, boasting. Both terms contain an explicit element of untruth, and though Aristotle refers to Socrates as a dissembler, he values irony over boasting.²¹ D.C. Muecke focuses on this dichotomy of *eironeia* and *alazoneia* and posits why *eironeia* may be more highly regarded:

Aristotle. . . possibly because he had Socrates in mind, had rated 'eironeia', in the sense of self-depreciative dissimulation, rather higher than its opposite, 'alazoneia' or boastful dissimulation; modesty, though only pretended, at least seems better bred than ostentation. At about the same time the word which at first denoted a mode of behaviour came also to be applied to a deceptive use of language; 'eironeia' is now a figure in rhetoric: to blame by ironical praise or praise by ironical blame.²²

Irony, then, is, for Aristotle not a virtue in itself, it is the lesser of two evils. The use of ironical dissembling rather than boastful dissembling is a matter of breeding, a matter of proper manners.

Irony, in the Aristotelian sense, invoked a negative connotation. Telling the truth was better having false modesty. Though irony was better than boastfulness, ideally, one should tell the truth concerning one's talents, particularly one's intellectual talents. If we see Socrates' alleged statement that he knew nothing as ironic, irony, becomes, at its root, a lie, an untruth. And speaking or writing this untruth, as Socrates allegedly did in Plato's works, seems at first examination illogical to one seeking the truth or wisdom.

For Socrates, the irony is not what he does himself. It is what other people label actions as. One does not have to be consciously ironic. Irony can be noted by the observer; this does not necessitate the awareness of the ironist. John Haiman makes the

²¹ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Trans. J.A.K. Thomson (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) Book IV, Section vii.

²² D.C. Muecke, Irony (Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1970) 15.

following distinctions between sarcasm and irony: "First, situations may be ironic, but only people can be sarcastic. Second, people may be unintentionally ironic, but sarcasm requires intention. What is essential to sarcasm is that it is overt irony intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression."²³ This lack of intention is essential in an understanding of Socratic irony.

Though Socrates may seem a dissembler to Aristotle and other Athenians, he may not be modest, but he may be honest. "It does not follow that Socrates is insincere in his profession of ignorance; for though his knowledge may be as light in comparison with that of the ordinary Athenian, he sees that in comparison with true and perfect knowledge it is only darkness."²⁴ What is so interesting about Socrates, or speculation about Socrates, is the lack of intentional irony that seems evident in the profession of ignorance, the classic ironical statement.

Irony is a concept noted about Socrates without the intention of Socrates to be ironic; though he is called a dissembler by others, he does not consider himself such in admitting his ignorance. For Socrates, he is presumably doing just that, admitting his ignorance. If Socrates is being honest in his confession, then he is not trying to deceive. But to outside observers, Socrates is acting ridiculously, he is trying to dissemble, he is acting ironically in one classical sense.

In contradistinction, for Aristotle, irony does have an essential element of intention. If one can make the choice to be honest, or to be a dissembler, the better *choice* is the truth. Here, he makes Socrates' irony something that is planned, an element

²³ John Haiman, Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 20.

²⁴ Babbitt, 244.

of speech that Socrates intended. But if we accept that Socrates believed in his lack of knowledge, when compared to “true and perfect knowledge,” Socrates is not a dissembler. Outside observers interpret him as such.

Outside observers include those observers throughout history. Joseph Dane argues that the irony ascribed to Socrates, and general ideas of irony itself change as the reception of Socrates changes. And Socratic irony does not necessarily have any connection with Socrates himself.

From the point of view of this study, Socratic irony is not something exemplified by the Socrates of Plato (or the somewhat different Socrates of Aristophanes or Xenophon); it is rather something Socrates is said to have exemplified. Socratic irony, in this sense, does not exist for Plato (or his Socrates) at all, since there is no term for such a phenomenon in Plato. Socratic irony is a later phenomenon; in the rhetorical tradition, it is what in Latin comes to be known as *urbana dissimulatio*--that irony²⁵ [attributed] to Socrates, or to a particular version of Socrates.

Socrates, to the extent as he is understood as a historical character, slips from importance. Instead, it is the understanding of what Socrates, the historical person, was said to have embodied. This may be said of all historical people: that it is only later interpretations and memories that constitute a person's cultural and historical significance. But what is different in the case of Socrates is that these interpretations are essential to an understanding of a term, of a literary device, of what becomes essential in language: irony.

Socratic irony, then, and irony in general, have changed as receptions of Socrates have changed. With Aristotle and Plato's contemporaries, a positive reception to Socrates, the primary exemplar of irony, resulted in a more positive reception of irony. Aristotle, for example, is rather lenient in his interpretation of irony. Socrates, as a

²⁵ Dane, 4.

scholar and teacher, could not be entirely dismissed as a dissembler. Rather, irony, though again not a virtue, was perceived as better breeding than its counterpart of boastfulness. Detractors of Socrates, however, most likely meant *ieron* as “dissembler.” as an insult to Socrates and what they perceived as his ridiculous statement.

What seems intentional for Socrates in the dialogues of Plato is the desire to communicate his lack when compared to pure knowledge as seen by his pedagogical method. And his irony is intentional in this way: in an effort to communicate what cannot be communicated, to think what can not be thought, Socrates does not know anything, Socrates is not wise. In recognizing that he cannot communicate or think these things, however, he becomes the wisest of Athenians, and his statement becomes ironic. Socrates does not have to be conscious of his own irony for it to be ironic. The interpretations given to Socrates, including this one, ascribe a certain degree of valor to his statement. In recognizing his lack, he is recognizing truth, and the impossibility of grasping truth.

Socrates often fell into fits, when he said that he was communicating with his daimon. Looking back from a modern scientific view, these fits are generally ascribed to epilepsy. In early psychology, epilepsy was viewed as a psychological disorder. The people having epileptic fits were mad. And madness usually inferred some sort of split with reason (after Descartes) or with one's intellect (both before and after Descartes). This split between the mind and the body often displayed itself through the difficulty of speaking to or with the mad, and the difficulty the mad had and still have when communicating with the sane. Whether Socrates was talking with his daimon or having epileptic fits or some other type of neurological or psychological disorder, the fact

remains that those languages (if I may use the term) did not fit with the language of the time, the language of reason, the language of the logos, the language of consciousness and sanity. Socrates could not speak those languages, in his waking times; he could not understand them. Thus he becomes consciousness of knowing nothing. It is more than modesty, more than false modesty; it becomes the experience of what can not be spoken, what cannot be thought. It is irony. Connections between madness and irony will be more completely explored in a later section, but that Socrates was perhaps trying to express the ineffable, whether ultimate truth or the type of consciousness as might be experienced when "speaking with his daimon," seems believable.

From classical irony, I now move to Romantic Irony. Though this is a significant temporal jump of nearly two thousand years, irony disappears from use with very few exceptions. Until the Romantic period irony, if used at all, is primarily based on classical conceptions of irony, rather than new formulations.

Romantic Irony

In the introduction, I noted the religiosity of Romantic poets through a shift in meaning and understanding of the world. Romantic irony tends to try to bring together and speak about what is ineffable and what is tangibly understood in the world. Romantic irony demonstrates a shift in the place in which irony is occurring or being recognized. Emphasis is placed on the author, rather than on the words. Intent becomes significant, even primary. I would argue that the Romantics are trying to demonstrate the ineffable in the world. Eric Gans writes,

The romantic subject's worldly role of hapless victim hides a divine self-consciousness for which the worldly separation between form and content,

sign and thing is an illusion. This is not yet an ironic position. Because the romantic recognizes that qua human subject he contains within himself the totality of the scene, the center as well as the periphery, he is content to smile down from above on the follies of human praxis, without considering that these follies include his own since he too is forced to live in the world.²⁶

The Romantics are trying to elucidate a connection between the ineffable and the tangible. This connection is impossible to express with direct language, since language is limited by its structure and its place in the world of. Language subscribes to the worldly dichotomy that the Romantics try to move beyond through the use of irony. The reason why this attempt is futile with the use of explicit language is because the ineffable is *ineffable*. It *cannot* be spoken *of*, but it *can* be spoken *around*. This is the connection that, I argue, the Romantics try to make.

The Romantic poets emphasize what is not of the world. This position places them in a strangely ironic position. Gans writes, "The romantic ironist knows that his extrawordly stance makes him complicit in the worldly iniquities he denounces. He more than anyone is aware of the fragility of ontological hierarchies, which all begin from the hierarchy of signs and things. Thus the Olympian posture of the romantic ironist is itself ironized--which does not mean that it is abolished."²⁷ In the attempt to connect what is in the world and what is not in the world, Romantic poets are both connected to, yet see themselves above the world, since they are trying to elucidate the ineffable. They are in a position of irony: being able to speak around the connection between the world and the other-worldly but never being able to speak the connection itself.

²⁶ Gans, 69.

²⁷ Gans, 69.

With Romantic poets, the focus is on creating a sense of the ineffable. Their power as authors comes with a power to create a link between the tangible world and what was intangible but recognized. This task is accomplished in one sense through the use of irony. With irony, the ineffable could be recognized by showing the contrast between it and the world. In a commentary on Romanticism Northrop Frye writes:

[I]n Romantic poetry the emphasis is not on what we have called sense, but on the constructive power of the mind, where reality is brought into being by experience. There is a contrast in popular speech between the romantic and the realist, where the word "romantic" implies a sentimentalized or rose-colored view of reality. This vulgar sense of the word may throw some light on the intensity with which the Romantic poets sought to defy external reality by creating a uniformity of tone and mood. The establishing of this uniformity, and the careful excluding of anything that would dispel it, is one of the constant and typical features of the best Romantic poetry, though we may call it a dissociation of sensibility if we happen not to like it. Such a poetic technique is, psychologically, akin to magic, which also aims at bringing spiritual forces into reality through concentration on a certain type of experience. Such words as "charm" or "spell" suggest a uniformity of mood as well as a magician's repertoire.²⁸

With the Romantic poets, irony is necessary. The "self-consistent idealized world" is impossible to speak about without the use of irony. It does not tangibly exist, thus using language to describe it becomes difficult at best. But with the use of irony, that world can be united with the tangible world; their connection can be shown through the lack of referentiality that irony performs.

The power that the artist or the author gains with Romantic irony is that art is no longer seen as imitation. Rather, as M.H. Abrams notes in his analysis of Romantic poetry and poets there is a shift from the art to the artist.²⁹ Intention is taken into account.

²⁸ Frye, 11.

²⁹ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953) 3.

and this intention generally involves a new understanding of the world, a desire to try to connect the ineffable with the tangible, a desire to try to describe the intangible. In The Philosophy of History Friedrich Schlegel, one of the founders of the German Romantic movement,³⁰ writes, "The most important subject, and the first problem of philosophy, is the restoration in man of the lost image of God: so far as this relates to science. Should this restoration in the internal consciousness be fully understood and really brought about, the object of pure philosophy is attained."³¹ Schlegel's concern is with the "restoration in man of the lost image of God" or "the internal consciousness." As we shall see, this task may be completed, or at least improved, with the use of irony.

With Romantic irony, imagination becomes increasingly important. Babbitt writes, "The Schlegelian irony in particular merely pushes to an extreme the doctrine that nothing must interfere with the imagination in its creative play."³² In a way, imagination can be seen as the artist's ability to change his or her perception of the world. It is the capability of the artist to portray the connectivity of what is tangible in the world with what is intangible.

From a traditionally rational perspective, this imaginative stance seems to move away from reality. For the Romantics, however, reality is connected by imagination, and imagination can move one towards reality, towards a more ultimate reality. Babbitt writes, "[T]o be always moving away from centrality is to be paradoxical, and romantic irony is, as Friedrich Schlegel says, identical with paradox.

³⁰ In The Concept of Irony, Søren Kierkegaard notes that Schlegel's novel *Lucinde* is considered "the gospel of Young Germany." See Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, Trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 286.

³¹ Friedrich Von Schlegel, The History of Philosophy in a Course of Lectures (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1841) 77.

³² Babbitt, 241.

Irony, paradox and the idea of the infinite have as a matter of fact so many points of contact in romanticism that they may profitably be treated together."³³ Imagination may be used to understand paradoxes and ideas of the infinite. And irony is a primary method employed to accomplish this. Imagination can aid the understanding of the world, in a Romantic view, and, as was noted above, Schlegelian irony prescribes imagination for this understanding.

In the wake of Romanticism, Soren Kierkegaard attempted a more historical and systematic study of irony resulting in The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates, his dissertation for the University of Copenhagen. While both the Romantics and Kierkegaard devalue the phenomenological, for the Romantics it is an aesthetic stance, but for Kierkegaard it is a dialectical theology.

Kierkegaard and The Concept of Irony

Kierkegaard's view of irony is not only focused on the linguistic functioning of irony. His theory in The Concept of Irony is heavily steeped in the theological. In the introduction I noted that while he is careful not to equate religious devotion and irony, he makes irony distinctly religious. Irony is equated with the ephemeral, with nothing. In this way, one is both able to avoid idolatry, since nothing is really being said, and to demonstrate the fullness of "nothing." He writes,

In irony. . . since everything is shown to be vanity, the subject becomes free. The more vain everything becomes, all the lighter, emptier, and volatilized the subject becomes. And while everything is in the process of becoming vanity, the ironic subject does not become vain in his own eyes but rescues his own vanity. For irony, everything becomes nothing, but nothing can be taken in several ways. The speculative nothing is the vanishing at every moment with regard to the concretion, since it is itself

³³ Babbitt, 242

the craving of the concrete, its *nisus formativus* [formative impulse]; the mystic nothing is a nothing with regard to representation, a nothing that nevertheless is just as full of content as the silence of the night is full of sounds for someone who has ears to hear. Finally, the ironic nothing is the dead silence in which irony walks again and haunts (the latter word taken altogether ambiguously).³⁴

The fullness of content present in the "mystic" nothingness of irony is what interests me here. The sounds of the silence are the ephemeral. Irony is significant because it performs this paradox; irony needs interpretation, or, better still, it needs "someone who has ears to hear." Irony requires interpretation. However, the interpretation of irony is rarely complete. This is the "dead silence" described by Kierkegaard. Even with a degree of interpretation and "listening," irony contains something that will not be understood, something that will not be heard.

The ephemeral nature of irony is again stressed by Kierkegaard when he terms irony as "infinite absolute negativity." He writes, "It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that is still not. The irony establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it."³⁵ In this sense, Kierkegaard refers to the ironist as, in a manner, "prophetic." He writes,

For the ironic subject, the given actuality has lost its validity entirely; it has become for him an imperfect form that is a hindrance everywhere. But on the other hand, he does not possess the new. He knows only that the present does not match the idea. He is the one who must pass judgement. In one sense the ironist is certainly prophetic, because he is continually pointing to something impending, but what it is he does not know. He is prophetic, but his position and situation are the reverse of the prophet's. The prophet . . . is lost to his generation, but essentially that is the case only because he is preoccupied with his visions. The ironist, however, has stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it.³⁶

³⁴ Kierkegaard, 258.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

The ironist is the prophet then, who does not know his prophecy. He knows only that he has one. This prophecy is a prophecy that acknowledges that the world and the mind are ineffable, "the given actuality has lost its validity entirely," it is "an imperfect form."

The role of "actuality" in the irony of Kierkegaard additionally demonstrates the religious meaning that I argue irony provides. He writes,

Irony as a controlled element manifests itself in its truth precisely by teaching how to actualize actuality, by placing the appropriate emphasis on actuality. . . life's content must become a genuine and meaningful element in the higher actuality whose fullness the soul craves. Actuality hereby acquires its validity, not as a purgatory. . . but as a history in which consciousness successively matures, yet in such a way that salvation consists not in forgetting all this but becoming present in it.³⁷

Actuality is truth for Kierkegaard. Irony provides a method for living in this truth.

Though understanding of this truth will never be complete, with irony, "consciousness successively matures" and allows a person to become present in this actuality.

Kierkegaard writes, "When irony is controlled, it no longer believes, as do certain shrewd people, that there is always more than meets the eye."³⁸ For Kierkegaard, what "meets the eye" is understood with irony. Irony allows everything to meet the eye. Those who recognize irony are capable of hearing the silence described above that is both audible and silent.

Kierkegaard takes on the role of the ironist himself in his works. The melancholy he is renowned for may be a result of this negative prophecy that he carries as an ironist. He knows that something is "impending," but he does not know what it is. In "Diapsalmata" in Either/Or, Kierkegaard writes,

³⁷ Kierkegaard, 328-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

It is cause for alarm to note with what hypochondriac profundity Englishmen of an earlier generation have spotted the ambiguity basic to laughter. Thus Dr. Hartley has observed. . . that when laughter first makes its appearance in the child, it is a nascent cry that is excited by pain or a suddenly arrested feeling of pain repeated at very short intervals. What if everything in the world were a misunderstanding; what if laughter really were weeping!³⁹

This irony noted by Kierkegaard, that everything in the world may be a misunderstanding is an apt expression of his view of the ironic. As the ironic author, he can only say that a misunderstanding has occurred. What exactly this misunderstanding is he cannot say.

"[W]hat if laughter were really weeping!" Kierkegaard is not illustrating the evidence of a minor misunderstanding; he is demonstrating that laughter may be weeping, that emotions may be completely misunderstood. And this is his irony: that Kierkegaard cannot grasp what is wrong with actuality, he can only recognize that a problem exists. This problem is negativity; this is what Kierkegaard calls infinite because it does not negate a particular phenomenon. And this problem "is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that is still not." Having laughter really be a misunderstanding of weeping references weeping, something that is "still not" referential.

The next significant historical theory of irony I will discuss is New Critical irony in which the religious meaning of the irony is found within the internal context of the poet and the critic. Both Kierkegaard and the New Critics are subjective but for different ends: New Critics move back to an aesthetic . but it is an aesthetic of criticism.

³⁹ Soren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Part I, Trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton University Press, 1987) 21.

New Critical Irony

New Criticism takes Romanticism one step further. Instead of the author possessing a creative element, in New Criticism it is the critic who possesses the creative element through interpretations of a text. Cleanth Brooks is one of the primary figures of the New Critical school of thought. In Modern Poetry and the Tradition, Brooks outlines what he refers to as “the all-important chapter” of A. Richards’ *Principles of Literary Criticism*. Brooks writes, “Richards distinguishes between two general types of poetry: first, poetry which leaves out the opposite and discordant qualities of an experience, excluding them from the poem; and second, poetry in which the imagination includes them, resolving the apparent discords, and thus gaining a larger unity.”⁴⁰ This second type of poetry is clearly a “higher” type for Brooks. The poem is able to achieve a “larger unity.” I argue that this unity is a unity between what is unspeakable and what is speakable; the ineffable and the tangible. Brooks quotes the following from Richards’ chapter: “The difference comes out clearly if we consider how comparatively unstable poems of the first kind are. The will not bear an ironical contemplation. . . Irony in this sense consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses; that is why poetry [of the first type] exposed to it is not of the highest order, and why irony itself is so constantly a characteristic of poetry which is.”⁴¹ The poetry of the second type, which is able to resolve apparent discords is also able to withstand an “ironical contemplation” and to use irony itself.

In The Well Wrought Urn, Brooks writes.

⁴⁰ Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1965) 41.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

If the structure of poetry is a structure of the order described, that fact may explain (if not justify) the frequency with which I have had to have recourse, in the foregoing chapters, to terms like "irony" and "paradox." By using the term irony, one risks, of course, making the poem seem arch and self-conscious, since irony, for most readers of poetry, is associated with satire, *vers de société*, and other "intellectual" poetries. Yet, the necessity for some such term ought to be apparent; and irony is the most general term that we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context. This kind of qualification, as we have seen, is of tremendous importance in any poem. Moreover, irony is our most general term for indicating that recognition of incongruities--which, again, pervades all poetry to a degree far beyond what our conventional criticism has been heretofore willing to allow.⁴²

His interpretations require the use of irony and the presence of irony in a text so that the poem can be interpreted at all. The context that the poem is written in, the contexts of the words present in the poetry influence the poems, the poets, and finally the critic himself. Paul Bove notes that "In 'Irony and 'Ironic' poetry,' Brooks defines irony as the 'obvious warping or modification of a statement by the context.'"⁴³ When the context is able to shape the poem, the ineffable touches language; with critic being likewise influenced by a context, the critic is ironic, and the criticism adds irony to an already ironic piece.

Critiques of New Critics are often removed from the methods that the New Critics use to analyze poetry. However, these examinations of New Criticism can serve to both demonstrate how the New Critics are currently understood as well as providing an interpretations that are helpful in this argument. In the introduction, Joseph Dane interprets Brooks' reading of poems as creating a power of the critic.⁴⁴ Dane refers to the power of Brooks to rewrite poems. Dane turns Brooks into an author; Brooks's own "sensitivity" becomes written through his critique of a certain poem. He is, essentially,

⁴² Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (Cornwall, NY: The Cornwall Press, Inc., 1947) 191-2.

⁴³ Paul A. Bove, *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 100.

⁴⁴ Dane, 152.

writing himself. Through a reading that is "sensitive," the poem becomes sensitive. What is brought out by Brooks becomes what is important, what is worthy of attention. And what Brooks draws out of a poem is ironic, it is what desires or requires interpretation by him.

Paul Bove writes of Brooks' New Critical brand of irony that

By creating a complexity which results from the ironic qualifications of context, the ironic poem not only supercedes the limitations of a logical order of perceptions but also goes beyond a vision of actuality defined solely by casual science. Only poetry which is contextual, that is, ironic, is able to deal completely with and "represent" the manifold complexity of human experience. In place of the simplifying scientific worldview, the poet puts the complex analogic version of a pervasive ironist.⁴⁵

In Bove's apt interpretation of Brooks' stance on irony, what is essential in New Critical irony is both the critical stance and the critical interpretation of contexts. These critical interpretations can again be seen to be ironic in a New Critical view through the response to the world and to "apparent discords" in the world, and these New Critical contexts primarily refer to the in the internal world. The contextuality of a poem through the use of irony thus enables the poem to "deal completely with. . . the manifold complexity of human experience."

With a connection between the words expressed first by the poet and then by the critic about the poem and the contexts, words again try to describe the world. These words are ironic, in my sense of the term, by attempting to connect the tangible and the intangible, words with the unspeakable. The "complexity of human experience" is, I argue, another type of the ineffable. The division between the mind and the world.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

between thoughts, which make use of words, and emotions, which are not adequately expressed by words, is again a matter of the ineffability of human experience.

In addition to creating a new view of irony on its own, the New Critical view of irony seems to lead into postmodernism: with postmodernism the reader will be given the power over the text, much like the power of the critic over the text in New Criticism. Ideas of context also carry over: that a written word is affected by the world *inside* the writer and the expression of this world through the use of irony will be seen in the postmodern views of the limitations of language and perspectives of authors being considered as subjective rather than objective. With postmodern irony, an emphasis is placed on the use of tropes as technique to acknowledge and avoid some of the problems of language.

Postmodern Irony

In a general sense, postmodernism has established a new way of looking at language: language's limitations are immediately recognized. Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives."⁴⁶ Language is seen as being incapable of producing an absolute narrative, even perhaps a truthful narrative. However, language is still necessary. The postmodernists, even with all their incredulity, still write. Their writing is aided and can be justified by both an awareness of language and the use of literary devices and tropes that extends from that awareness. Mark C. Taylor writes, "Irony [along with a string of other rhetorical tools] [is] necessary to the act of writing."⁴⁷ The use of irony is primarily deployed because of the meaning that irony is able to create

⁴⁶ Lyotard, xxiv.

⁴⁷ Taylor, 17.

beneath and around words. The use of tropes extends language so that it no longer is as limited as without the use of tropes.

The use of tropes such as irony can create meaning in language for the postmodernist since otherwise the language is seen as limited. With irony, however, language is able to function in more abstract ways; it is able to describe the abstract by creating meaning beyond the words themselves. Irony allows the critic to understand reality in a way that the use of more structured language cannot. Roland Barthes writes,

Irony is nothing other than the question which language puts to language. The habit we have adopted of giving a religious or poetic horizon to the symbol prevents us from seeing that there is an irony of symbols, a way of calling language into question by apparent, declared excesses of language. Confronted with the poverty of Voltairean irony, the narcissistic product of a language with too much confidence in itself, one can imagine another irony which, for want of a better word, we shall call *baroque*, because it makes play with forms and not with beings, because it opens out language instead of shrinking it. Why should irony be forbidden to criticism? It is perhaps the only serious form of discourse which remains available to criticism so long as the status of science and language is not clearly established--which seems to be still the case today. Irony is therefore what is immediately given to the critic: not to see the truth, in Kafka's phrase, but to be it, so that we are entitled to ask him, not *make me believe what you are saying*, but even more, *make me believe in your decision to say it*.⁴⁸

Irony can thus "open out language instead of shrinking it" which enables irony, and language as a result to be capable of more, to be expressive of more. "Opening out language" allows irony to primarily be expressive of more of the abstract, or of the connection between the tangible and the abstract. Irony tries to make language function in more ways; it tries to push language to its already acknowledged limits.

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, Criticism and Truth, Trans. Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 89-90.

In the above, Barthes is not only concerned with the linguistic function of irony: he is interested in what irony can describe as well. That "irony is the only serious form of discourse which remains available to criticism" is clear with the postmodern view of language as limited, and even as constantly lying. An element of the ineffable invades Barthes' writing as well: the critic must be encouraged to use irony, to not only demonstrate or see the truth, but to be the truth. When Barthes writes, "[W]e are entitled to ask [the critic], not make me believe what you are saying, but make me, but even more, make me believe in your decision to say it," he is demonstrating the importance of intention on the part of the ironist. For the postmodernist there is always this reflexivity: since language is limited, what the postmodernist says is not as important why the postmodernist says it. And it is this intention and purpose of thought that is the ineffable, that is the supplier of meaning for postmodernism.

For the postmodernist, if irony and other similar uses of language are necessary, they seem to be inherently questioning language, and pushing language out as Barthes suggests. In his book Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Richard Rorty notes this questioning of language as primarily a questioning of one's personal vocabulary. He defines an ironist

as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary [what Rorty defines as the personal "set of words" that "all human beings carry around" and uses in life] she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal

metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.⁴⁹

Certainly the first of these conditions sounds like a generally postmodern position concerning language. Through the changing of one's "final vocabulary" or through a person's recognition that his or her final vocabulary may be lacking, comes a recognition of the limitations of language. And the ability and the desire to move beyond these limitations seems likely to end in the use of irony. Irony, as a device used to express the inexpressible, becomes the postmodernist's primary method of language. To speak without words, to express without the limitations of language, to, in a sense, "beat" language: these are the goals of postmodernists when focused on language.

With Julia Kristeva, an understanding of irony as expressive of the ineffable is explicit. In her book Desire in Language she writes,

Implicating himself, therefore, in the negative operation that is language, through the intermediary of the other, the critic retains from scriptural negativity a weakened, but persistent, effect. The *death drive* of the writer becomes *irony* in the critic, because there is irony each time an ephemeral meaning crystallizes for such a reader. Freud demonstrated precisely this economy of laughter in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious: it is a discharge with two meanings between sense and nonsense. In order for this to happen, a semblance of meaning must appear at a fugitive moment. It is the critic's task, and there is hardly a more comical one, to coagulate an island of meaning upon a sea of negativity. Thus, for Barthes, the critic may "develop what is precisely lacking in science and could be summed up in one word: irony"; 'Irony is nothing more than a question put to language by language' (*Critique et verité*, p. 74). This irony, by which the critic, sure of his *I* and without abandoning it, participates in the scriptural operation, constitutes only *one* moment (among others) of the operation. For Rabelais, Swift, Lautreamont, and Joyce are ironic only when we posit them (or when they posit themselves) as subjects tapping a meaning that is always already old, always already out of date, as funny as it is ephemeral.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 73.

⁵⁰ Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 109.

Kristeva's echo of Barthes' statement demonstrates how language can be reflexive. Language can ask itself a question. Essentially this means that language can recognize its own limits. Certainly the critic recognizes the limits of language. That "there is irony each time an ephemeral meaning crystallizes for. . . a reader" demonstrates what I have been showing throughout this survey of ironies. The ephemeral, the ineffable, the unconscious are, by their natures, unable to be spoken directly about. Irony creates a space in which these untouchable and even unthinkable things can be acknowledged.

Kristeva's thoughts on irony also help me lead into a discussion of madness or insanity and its relations to irony. Her observation that Freud "demonstrated this economy of laughter" by showing that it occurs as a "discharge with two meanings between sense and nonsense." Here it is helpful to break down these words: sense and non-sense. What happens between sense and non-sense is precisely what has been happening with the use of irony throughout this paper. The place between sense and non-sense is what I am arguing is ineffable, and is unable to be described with words. The place between sense and non-sense is what language tries to describe. Language without tropes, and specifically irony, cannot complete this description. The use of irony opens up language so that meaning is present despite the words. Meaning lies at the nexus of sense and non-sense.

Irony and Madness

Similarities between what seems to be a literary device and madness or insanity may not be readily apparent. However, the connections between the two are based

primarily in their language or, more correctly, in their lack of language. The implications of the unsaid present in irony led me to consider other instances of signifying without language. What is unsaid, what is unable to be spoken brings me to a correlation between irony and madness.

In an unpublished paper, entitled "'On Having No Head': Madness in Modern and Postmodern Theory," I argue that madness has primarily been conceived as a problem of a lack of rational thought. In more postmodern views, such as Foucault's work, Madness and Civilization, and Shoshana Felman's book, Writing and Madness, this lack of reason is manifested in theories which view the problem of madness as primarily a lack of language. Felman writes: "What does it mean to talk about madness? Since the publication of Michel Foucault's provocative *History of Madness*, many French intellectuals have repeated Foucault's claim: madness is, primarily, a lack of language, an 'absence of production,' the silence of a stifled, repressed language."⁵¹ What we have, then, is a lack of language, an inability to talk about madness, and to talk madness itself. Though the postmodern views move towards a different understanding, this different understanding is still, even to those constructing it, not fully understood. Postmodernism strives toward an acknowledgement of the limitations of knowledge. It likewise looks for ways in which language can function better and be more accurately expressive of reality. As I argued in the previous section, postmodernism uses tropes to accomplish this. However, even with an acknowledgement of the limitations of language, and the pervasiveness of this limiting language, language is still necessary. And, at bottom, the mad still are not speaking.

⁵¹ Shoshana Felman, Writing and Madness: (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis) (Ithaca: Cornell, University Press, 1987) 14.

Though Cartesian rationalism and the Cogito are certainly critiqued by postmodernists, the *thought* that is required by all philosophy requires the mad to be placed at a different and often lower status. Felman writes, "A man can still be mad; but thought cannot. Thought is, by definition, the accomplishment of reason, an exercise of sovereignty of a subject capable of truth. I think, therefore I am not mad; I am not mad, therefore I am. The being of philosophy is thenceforth located in non-madness, whereas madness is relegated to the status of non-being."⁵² All philosophy requires thought. The impossibility of thought for the mad places them in a place that cannot be spoken of, a place that cannot be thought of with language. With the advent of psychoanalysis, we find people like Freud trying to describe madness, trying to interpret madness with language. They are in a realm of non-sense, and indeed nonsense. The language of madness, if it can be considered a language, is a language that is unable to be understood by those who have language as it is generally known.

The mad may have something that the sane do not. Perhaps they have the connection. Norman O. Brown noted the connectivity of schizophrenics in Love's Body. He writes, "Definitions are boundaries; schizophrenics pass beyond the reality-principle into a world of symbolic connections. . . Schizophrenics pass beyond ordinary language (the language of the reality-principle) into a truer, more symbolic language. . . The mad truth: the boundary between language is a false one."⁵³ According to Brown, schizophrenics have a connection to their unconsciousness that the sane are lacking. However, they, like irony, cannot show this connectivity to the ineffable or to the non-

⁵² Felman, 39.

⁵³ Norman O. Brown, Love's Body (New York: Vintage Books, 1966) 160.

sense, they can only experience it. To recall Barthes, they are not showing us the truth, they are being it.

This is not to say that irony and madness function in the same way; they do not. But they share certain obvious (non)linguistic characteristics. A problem with language and the limits of language comes into view when there is a problem with expressing what cannot be understood in the world. In the world of reason, the unconscious cannot be accessible, because those trying to think about the unconscious think with language. Language does not allow for the meaning that exists with irony. When irony becomes intentional or is unintentional yet easily interpreted from a situation or statement, it is because a meaning is trying to get out. The meaning can be of varying degrees, however, I would argue that the use of irony often designates an attempt to connect the unconscious with the conscious or the ineffable with the tangible.

Irony, while not being madness, certainly shares characteristics with madness. Unspoken meanings are prevalent in each, though articulated by neither. For irony this lack of articulation is a choice; irony does not wish to fall prey to the limitations of language it acknowledges. Therefore irony does not articulate meaning through words as they are generally understood. Words, used as such, do not work for the ironist. Meaning cannot be articulated with words. Instead of articulation with words, irony prescribes meanings between and beneath words. With madness, the lack of articulation is not a choice; it is a condition. Language of any sort is not possible. The limitations of language are readily seen when the sane try to speak to the mad; however, the mad themselves do not acknowledge these limitations. Without a language at all, the mad are not subject to these limitations. The mad can likewise not use irony as a way to

overcome language. In some senses, the mad have perhaps already overcome language. No articulation of this is possible. With irony, though, the desire to de-limit language is present, and the limitations of language may be *demonstrated* though not articulated by the ironist. Meaning for the ironist therefore becomes possible *through* language.

Irony as Religious

Irony is inextricably linked with questions of meaning. The unspoken meaning present in all of the historical theories of irony that I have examined implicates irony as religious. Though this religiosity changes, from Socrates' search for ultimate truth to postmodern acknowledgement of the limitations of language and the need for irony to overcome these limitations, the religiosity remains. All of these examples of irony demonstrate that irony helps acknowledge the ineffable. And this task of irony is religious. The ineffable truths sought or recognized by each of these schools of irony change how the world is perceived. These perceptions are religious because they seek to connect what is verbal and tangible with what is unspeakable and ineffable.

In Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Freud quotes the following aphorism from Lessing: "Not all are free who mock their chains."⁵⁴ This is an apt criticism of my thesis that irony provides a method both for acknowledging the limitations of language and for moving past these limitations. Verbal irony still uses language. Even situational ironies are explained with the use of language. However, irony is not simply "mocking its chains." It is making use of them. Irony does not

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VIII. Trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1960) 92.

attempt to move completely beyond language. Rather, in Kierkegaardian terms, it makes language silent. And it does this with language. This silence is full of meaning, yet is negative. It refers to nothing, but for Kierkegaard, this nothing is “full.” I argue that the other types of irony work in similar ways. What is not spoken has meaning for all of types of irony examined. Postmodern irony indicates, as Rorty puts it, a sense of vocabulary as limiting. Rorty’s ironist looks for new vocabularies, and recognizes the limits of her own. He writes “[S]he does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that is in touch with a power not herself.”⁵⁵ For the postmodernist, there is not a “higher” power, rather the powers exist in the world. Through attempts to make discursive space for “Others,” postmodernists recognize their “truth,” though it would not be phrased using that term. The postmodern truth is that there are many truths. The acknowledgement of the presence of multiple vocabularies demonstrates this. Irony is one method to unite these multiple vocabularies, both by recognizing the limits of one’s personal vocabulary and of vocabularies in general.

Irony, though traditionally a difficult term to pin down, has, I argue, a unifying characteristic throughout the history of the term and concept. The expression of meanings, impossible with a normal use of language, is achieved through the use of irony. These meanings, in the significant instances of irony explored above, are religious meanings. These meanings express the connectivity between the ineffable and the tangible.

⁵⁵ Rorty, 73.

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