INTRODUCTION

Irony and Illness—Recognition and Refusal

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> Frasier: Until you got here, things were going fine.
> Bulldog: Yeah, well things seem to have changed. What do you
>   eggheads call that—irony?

Proponents of irony can hardly propose a definite theory or even a definitive introduction to their subject. Here we intend merely to review the impetus for our volume and the suggestions we gave our bemused contributors.[1]

   This project began when one of us chanced upon the brilliant discussion of Socratic and Platonic irony by Alexander Nehamas in his book *The Art of Living* (1998). Nehamas invokes Thomas Mann's portrait of illness in *The Magic Mountain* (1995 [1924]) but without developing a general discussion of the relationship between illness and irony. As anthropologists who have spent considerable time thinking about issues of illness, selfhood, and agency in their relationship both to local practices and to dominant theories—in short, to culture—it seemed that here was rich terrain to explore. Our interest increased as we came to realize that were we forced to sum up the aim of the book we had previously edited together, *Tense Past* (Antze and Lambek 1996), we would call it an exposition of the overliteralization of memory in certain contemporary discourses. That is to say, *Tense Past* explores accounts and practices of memory that appear to be characterized by an absence of irony. In this new volume we want to restore irony to its place. We do so by turning not to memory per se (though it is hardly irrelevant to our subject) but rather to illness and therapy, broadly conceived.

   We begin with two hunches: first, that there is often something in the situation of illness that resembles irony or that brings the recognition of irony to the fore; and, second, that therapeutic practices and discourses can be described and distinguished according to the degree to which they recognize or refuse irony. Irony might be an inevitable part of encounters that get classified as therapeutic or forensic. But it might equally well be threatening to the kind of expert professionalism that is a significant feature of these domains at present, especially in the United States where there is a bias toward literalism in both the

church and the law (Crapanzano 2000). Neither scientific expertise nor bureaucratic or legalistic rationalization will find in irony a happy bedfellow.

Since Freud, theories of illness and therapy have included the possibility that sufferers are complicit in their conditions. This "idealism of the pathological, if not to say pathological idealism," to paraphrase Thomas Mann (1995 [1924]: 645), is replete with the possibilities of irony—irony of both (Sophoclean) tragic inevitability and (Socratic) self-recognition. Irony is more characteristic of psychoanalytic thought (at its best) and possibly of certain non-Western or counterhegemonic therapeutic and discursive forms than it is of biomedicine, which takes pathology literally. Indeed, one way to phrase the distinction between 'illness' and 'disease', so fruitfully explored by Arthur Kleinman and his associates (Hahn 1995; Kleinman 1980; Kleinman, Eisenberg, and Good 1978), would be to suggest that 'disease' refers to a literalization of phenomena whose experience is always culturally, socially, and psychologically mediated and hence open to interpretation ('illness'). The contributors to this collection explore some of the ways in which illness and therapy may be characterized by irony (or ironically) as sites at which ironies of the human condition are produced, encountered, acknowledged, and possibly recognized, clarified, understood, and deployed—or conversely discounted and overlooked in favor of more literal readings. How might such sites offer privileged access for exploring questions of human agency, dignity, and accountability more generally? What might we learn from illness and therapy about the place for irony in theory?

The Scope of Irony

We hesitate either to define irony or to offer an extended review of available definitions and discussions. Irony can be located in many ways—as a feature of the world, as a rhetorical trope, as a kind of attitude. Moreover, the objects of irony are infinite—knowledge, truth, and Enlightenment reason being among the most notable. Anthropologists wishing an overview of the place of irony in their subject and discipline can turn to *Irony in Action*, a set of smart and engaging essays edited by Fernandez and Huber (2001) that appeared while our collection was in gestation. That volume also provides extensive bibliography.

We begin by making a rough distinction between irony of commission and irony of recognition. The former is rhetorical irony—intentional and 'made'; the latter is situational—interpreted and 'found'. We recognize that the two are complementary and often indistinguishable in practice, but we draw the distinction precisely in order to offset the assumption—evident in many studies of irony and in early responses by colleagues to our work—that irony is properly to be consigned to the rhetorical, as an intentional mode of presentation.

As a prototypical instance of the former, we can think of the wink that accompanies an ostensibly straightforward utterance and intimates that the performer means something else and is playing with the audience. Such coyness stands in contrast to tragic irony, in which people say or do things that actually reverse their

intentions. In trying to escape his fate, Oedipus moves toward it. The audience realizes the irony, but the character does not. Here, to be sure, the playwright is deliberately portraying irony (though that is different, perhaps, from *being* ironic). However, the larger point is that psychic and social life are composed of multiple dramatic situations (of small and large scale) that are not pre-scripted by a playwright (though local theodicies may ascribe events to such a hand) and in which the irony of the protagonists' situation slowly dawns on them.

Hegel's irony of history draws from the tragic form and gets refracted in Freudian and Marxist versions. Indeed, the unconscious in psychoanalysis can be understood more like the second kind of irony—less as an explanation for ostensibly unintentional acts or utterances than as paradigmatic of fate itself, of the partial and gradual recognition of how, at the moment we think we are acting most as ourselves or being most agentive, we are actually caught up by something else. Irony, in our usage, centers on such recognition of the fundamental undecidability of agency and intention in (internal) psychological and (external) historico-material contexts.

It follows that although we have contrasted irony with literalness, we do not view irony as necessarily opposed to either sincerity or seriousness. The human subjects described in our essays are both sincere and serious, and so are the authors of the essays. Irony may be playful,[2] but in our approach we do not consider it to be cynical, detached, or frivolous. We connect irony to something more deeply felt, some inner recognition about the contingency of truth. We think of irony as a stance that gives ambiguity, perspective, plurality, contradiction, and uncertainty their due.

We do not wish to claim that irony is an exclusively postmodern phenomenon nor even to make a particular association between irony and the present historical situation. As Hutcheon remarks of the twentieth century, "ours joins just about every other century in wanting to call itself the 'age of irony,' and the recurrence of that historical claim in itself might well support the contention of contemporary theorists from Jacques Derrida to Kenneth Burke that irony is inherent in signification, in its deferrals and in its negations" (1994: 9). We would broaden the implicitly Occidental reference to argue that irony is characteristic of cultural production in the entire range of societies with which anthropologists have worked. Indeed, if modernity is sometimes characterized by overly literal and earnest discursivity, there is much (so-called) premodern or extramodern irony around. Far from being exclusively postmodern and cynical, irony is highlighted in the religions (or 'worldviews') of many small-scale and non-Western societies.[3] Irony speaks to, of, and from the human condition. One might even argue that it is a feature intrinsic to consciousness—inherent in signification, as Hutcheon suggests—and that humans are continuously reminded of it.[4] This is partly a matter that the said is always accompanied by the unsaid (Tyler 1978), but more deeply that consciousness so often entails a recognition of its own limits.

Such limits have to do, in part, with the vehicles of consciousness, namely, culture. Thus, Rorty proposes that irony in a general sense entails the recognition

and acceptance of contingency, of our historical and cultural situatedness: "I use 'ironist' to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (1989: xv).

By this count, irony is superior to most theoretical enthusiasms and metaphysical presumptions—more cautious, reserved, distant, wise. And by this count, most anthropologists would be ironists, at least in their public professions. But if anthropologists are ironists to a degree, they have sometimes distinguished themselves from their subjects by implying that the latter are not. We anthropologists often portray our subjects as earnestly committed to specific ways of life, to realizing and affirming certain truths that they 'hold self-evident'. If the search for universal truth, and hence the absence of irony in Rorty's sense, has been characteristic of philosophy from Plato to Kant, so too does the commitment to local truths appear in the classic portraits of ethnography, from Malinowski's passionate Trobrianders, and Evans-Pritchard's rational Azande through most recent work. It has been a deep assumption of anthropologists that the people we study hold nonrelativist commitments to the worlds they live in. Most exceptions to this have been people depicted as living through situations of rapid change, especially those generated by colonial and postcolonial encounters.

As Rorty compellingly remarks—and it is interesting that no anthropologist has been able to put it so strongly:

> Ironism … results from awareness of the power of redescription. But most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms—taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless. Consider what happens when a child's precious possessions—the little things around which he weaves fantasies that make him a little different from all other children—are redescribed as 'trash,' and thrown away. Or consider what happens when these possessions are made to look ridiculous alongside the possessions of another, richer child. Something like that presumably happens to a primitive culture when it is conquered by a more advanced one. The same sort of thing sometimes happens to nonintellectuals in the presence of intellectuals … The redescribing ironist, by threatening one's final vocabulary, and thus one's ability to make sense of oneself in one's own terms rather than hers, suggests that one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, *powerless*. Redescription often humiliates. (Rorty 1989: 89–90)

Of course, Rorty's analogy with children is suspect, as is his use of evolutionary terminology. Our ethnographic subjects (whoever they are) are generally not portrayed as being in doubt, as undecided, watchful, disinterested, and so forth. But it *is* to be doubted that they really are so different from ourselves

(or so similar to one another) on this score. It is to be doubted that they do not venture their own redescriptions. It would be equally problematic were we to portray our subjects entirely in our own image, to mistake a specifically anthropological ironical stance for a generally human one.

Irony, we venture, is not pervasive, nor is it discrete—a virtue, or vice, restricted to ourselves. Instead, it is likely to be among the philosophical or existential stances available everywhere, part of the human repertoire. It is also something that is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain all of the time. Common sense, certainty, assurance must intervene. We think that there are certain moments in life and certain experiences that are likely to be more demanding or more enabling of irony than others. Among these is illness. Illness provides a condition (or set of conditions) in which irony rises readily to the surface. It does so in the experience of sufferers, in the theories of those attempting to understand illness, and in the practices of those attempting to alleviate it, whether by prevention or cure.

Voice, Text, and Agency

The term 'irony' comes to us from the classical Greeks. Indeed, there are at least two quite distinct forms in Greek thought and literature. First is the irony of Sophoclean drama. This is tragic irony in which fate creeps inevitably upon its protagonists despite their earnest endeavors to avoid it. The spectators know what must happen, but the characters refuse to acknowledge or accept it, and in that space is irony. Second is Socratic irony. This is Socrates' rhetorical stance with his students and interlocutors, turning questions back upon the questioners and forcing people to think for themselves and recognize how poorly they can rationalize their assumptions about how the world works.

What do these two forms have in common? In both instances irony realizes the limitations and ambiguity of praxis. Thought and agency run up against constraints, external ones of fate and circumstance and internal ones of ignorance, confusion, and contradiction. External and internal constraints on knowledge force us to speak with an assurance we do not have. Irony is a recognition of this fact.

As Paul Antze describes in his chapter, Freud is indebted to both versions of classical irony. Freud's Oedipus complex and his understanding of psychic conflict draw from the Sophoclean sense of fate. Neurosis offers a challenge to the idea of free agency. And one could say that the form of psychoanalytic therapy Freud originated—with its emphasis on patients learning to listen to themselves—is a particular development of the Socratic method.

In this volume we think of irony as a function of the recognition of the inherent incompleteness of any particular form of knowledge or segment of discourse. Irony thus bears an interesting relationship to heteroglossia, the juxtaposition of multiple voices. Kenneth Burke famously saw irony as the outcome of a dramatic, multivoiced situation in which each character offers a perspective and

comments on the others: "The dialectic of this participation produces (in the observer who considers the whole from the standpoint of the participation of all the terms rather than from the standpoint of any one participant) a 'resultant certainty' of a different quality, necessarily ironic, since it requires that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but *contributory*" (1945: 513). In other words, for Burke, every drama contains a Rashomon quality.[5] But most heteroglossic situations are not explicitly constructed as drama or literature. Irony here is the recognition that some of the potentially participatory voices or meanings are silent, missing, unheard, or not fully articulate, and that voices or utterances appearing to speak for totality or truth offer only single perspectives. Hence, irony understands that the 'whole' of which Burke speaks is grasped at best only partially and, as Burke suggests, only ever as the emergent dialectical product of multiple voices that are each, taken individually, neither true nor false per se.[6]

Where literary critics speak to the irony of texts, their insights can be expanded to situations and to "meaningful action considered as a text" (Ricoeur 1971). The text metaphor has been brilliantly developed in anthropology, notably by Geertz (1973b), but also, of course, by means of structuralism, thus enabling the discovery or application of diverse literary devices and rhetorical tropes, including irony, in a variety of places. These range from religion to bureaucracy (Fernandez 1982; Herzfeld 1997) and include forms of therapy (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1949]) and our very conceptualizations of specific illnesses (Sontag 1977). Indeed, notwithstanding Sontag's passionate argument against metaphor, many medical anthropologists would contend that it is impossible to think of illness except by means of tropes. Progress occurs by merely replacing one metaphor with a less inadequate one, in a kind of trajectory that Rorty (1989), for one, would apply to human history more generally. History, he argues, is the replacement of dead metaphors (turned literal) with fresh ones. Yet much human thought is characterized by "the disposition to use the language of our ancestors, to worship the corpses of their metaphors" (ibid.: 21). Rorty is, by his own admission, an ironist.

Critics of the interpretive approach to culture and action have incorrectly attributed to its method a misplaced concreteness, as though 'text' itself had become a dead metaphor and as though 'texts' and their interpretations were fixed in their frames for all time. But interpretivists themselves are generally not so literal-minded; they have been aware both of the irony inherent in any invocation or structuring of text[7] and of processes of framing, structuration, composition, entextualization, and their converse—that is, of the ways in which ideas, conversations, and actions coalesce as texts and the ways texts dissolve. They have been concerned, as well, with the multiple kinds of relations texts can have with what is conceptualized as lying outside of them—with authors, readers, other texts, modes of transmission, and so forth (e.g., Becker 1979). As the partiality of various kinds of relations increases, so the possibilities for irony multiply.

If we can move from attending to multiple voices inside the text—literarily or literally conceived—to the broader world of action, so can we turn these

insights inward, applying them to the mind. Here, Freud, with his notions of internal conflict, ambivalence, and contradiction, has been essential. In one line of development, irony has come to do with the implicit recognition of the limits of moral agency, a reminder of the lurking presence of the unpredictable and the unpredicatable unconscious, of what Jonathan Lear (2000) calls the "remainder of life." As such, irony is not only a way of interpreting others or a rhetorical means of representing oneself to others, but also a dimension of how one understands oneself and the larger existential situation.

What, then, is the relationship of irony to agency and to responsibility? Both Freud and Foucault challenge the idea of autonomous agency and demonstrate its limits, thereby pointing to an ironic view of the world in which persons are understood primarily as subjects. But what if we turn this back and start with the subject as knowing ironist? Self-irony implies both a more knowing person and a more naive one. Is being knowledgeable about one's own ignorance—being cognizant of one's own limitations, subjection, and uncertainty—itself not a kind of agency? Or a first step in constituting such agency? What are the limits of (literalist) naiveté and enthusiasm on the one side and (ironic) detachment on the other?

If irony recognizes constraint, it does not negate the idea of agency. Rhetorical irony contextualizes, placing both the author and recipient at a certain distance from the utterance—not so far removed that they stand at the Archimedean point, not so close that they are oblivious, but at reasonable arm's length. Irony thereby offers room for maneuver, interrogating or putting into quotation predictable categories and distinctions.

Theodicy and Irony

Attending to irony directs us to the large questions that Weber placed under the term 'theodicy' and that have formed a leitmotif in anthropological classics, such as those by Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, and Geertz. In *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937), Evans-Pritchard argued that the diagnosis of witchcraft served to answer the 'why me?' existential questions that science and medicine evade. Although Evans-Pritchard did not quite say so, perhaps we can imagine the Azande of central Africa accepting witchcraft with a kind of ironic shrug. One cannot know who is the witch, or where and when a witch will strike next. One cannot even know whether one is a witch oneself, or whether one may be accused of being one. Witchcraft, in Evans-Pritchard's argument, is supposed to remove uncertainty. It does so with respect to specific events, for example, why *this* granary fell while *my* mother was sitting under it. But it raises a good deal of uncertainty more generally: Who are the witches among us? Why, really, do they act as they do? What, actually, am *I* capable of doing?

In his aptly titled and brilliantly conceived essay *Oedipus and Job in West Africa*, Fortes (1983; cf. 1987) explores how the Tallensi of northern Ghana address the uncertainties of existence and, most compellingly, how they understand

the reality of 'spoiled lives'. He thus provides an ethnopsychological account of agency and its tribulations. In many West African societies, the personal experience of having a number of offspring die in infancy or early childhood is explained in terms of mischievous or troublesome spirits who continue deliberately to die quickly and to be reborn in order to vex their parents. This is an example of what Fortes refers to as prenatal destiny or fate. How can one be sure that one has such a child, or that it may choose to stay on this time? How do such children understand themselves? Such anguish and puzzlement are evoked, ironically, by a number of West African writers, for example, by Achebe in his classic novel of precolonial Iboland, *Things Fall Apart* (1959).[8]

Geertz (1966) summed up the question of theodicy by suggesting that any religion worthy of the name ought to be able to address the fundamental human questions of perplexity, suffering, and injustice. But as he pointed out, religion must do so without succumbing to the thought that these are fundamentally characteristic of the world as a whole. Thus, while Geertz goes on to suggest, in the manner of Ruth Benedict, that each religion will have its particular emotional tone or style—one quiescent, another activist, and so forth—implicitly he is arguing that all must recognize an ironic sense in which between the surface events of life and the depths of causation there is some kind of slippage or gap, one that escapes both our direct knowledge and our control.

One of the ways to keep understandings from collapsing in on themselves is through irony, through the uncertainty of holding things in a double vision, and through keeping what is said and what is unsaid in some uneasy but lively tension with one another. In many smaller-scale societies this is done through a play with secrecy, as in masking, initiation, and the like; here, ambiguity resists reduction, and representation is never limited to reference.[9] Knowing or suspecting that there is something beneath the surface of things, while recognizing, equally, that one cannot know fully what that something is, epitomizes an ironic attitude. We go on living our lives and enacting our dramas even though we are aware that fate may be leading us in an entirely different direction. And we assume the superficiality of perplexity, suffering, and injustice even though we cannot directly perceive their contraries. As Mary Scoggin puts it: "Irony is a reflection of the imperfection of the human world, the practical recognition of contradiction between, as Kierkegaard would have it, essence and phenomenon, and irony can even be prized as a path to reflection, demonstrating the human capacity for learning virtue" (2001: 147). Indeed, Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" begins from irony.

The tension produced by irony is a dynamic one, especially when there is no strong cultural impatience with ambiguity and when truth is seen not as what lies beneath the mask (or outside the cave and beyond the fire) so much as what is produced by means of it. The point about irony that is often forgotten is that it need not invite a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion, a peeling back of the surface of the 'said' to discover what is really meant underneath, so much as an expression or recognition of the fact that meaning is not so simply divided into discrete levels.

We may conceal these discrepancies—and indeed we must, through most of our waking, commonsense lives[10]—but certain events, such as medical emergencies, throw them into sharp relief. Indeed, for middle-class Westerners, at least, medical events are likely to be major provocations of uncertainty and existential challenge. For Virginia Woolf, the condition of being ill provided a kind of privileged perspective. Illness offers rich new forms of experience, but it also reveals the hollowness of the everyday world:

> There is, let us confess it (and illness is the great confessional), a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals … in health the general pretense must be kept up and the effort renewed—to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases … we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright. (Woolf 2002 [1930, 1926]: 11–12)

Attributing Irony

Modernity itself is sometimes characterized by its literalism, its will to truth, and the earnest pursuit of its meta-narratives. But as Woolf illustrates, irony, too, is found in high modernism. A famous example is Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, a novel replete with irony about illness and therapy, suffering and recovery. Mann's "perfectly ordinary" protagonist arrives at the sanatorium ostensibly healthy—or is he?—and ends up succumbing lethargically to the regime, staying seven years, only to leave it for the real site of death and suffering that Europe becomes during World War I. Among his companions at the sanatorium is a man who is unequivocally ill with tuberculosis but passionate about life and politics. Yet this man, Settembrini, does not escape Mann's irony either. He is engaged in contributing to a vast scholarly project "which is to bear the title *The Sociology of Suffering* … an encyclopedia of some twenty or so volumes that will list and discuss all conceivable instances of human suffering, from the most personal and intimate to the large-scale conflicts of groups that arise out of class hostility and international strife" (Mann 1995 [1924]: 242). This is an ambition that might give pause to driven academics, especially perhaps to some of those who participate in the medical anthropology of social distress characteristic of certain inhabitants of that Magic Mountain located on the banks of the Charles.[11]

That was meant ironically, of course.

But then, perhaps, so is this.

Here we get to the rub of irony, to some of the ways it irritates. I mention only two. The scope of Mann's irony embraces scholars no less than sufferers or the projects of therapy. Epistemologically, irony subverts encyclopedic projects.[12] Ethically, it resists easy attributions of accountability. Did I just make fun of someone or did I not? Was it malicious or was it not? Was that really 'me' speaking anyway? Was it a mere rhetorical tactic, a staged voice? And, notoriously, is

there a continuous and consistent 'I' speaking in every instance? Since writing the above, I have discovered the remark by Arthur Kleinman that "to create a universal science of human suffering … would be archly ironic" (1995: 118).[13]

Irony blurs or complicates easy distinctions—between truth and falsity, sense and reference, objectification and empathy, the literal and the allegorical. Irony thereby foregrounds undecidability, ambiguity, indeterminacy, though as Hutcheon points out, it cannot be reduced to them because it always has an 'edge' (1994: 33) and is weighted in favor of the unsaid (ibid.: 37). It thus confounds determinism and reduction and offers a resistance against both overly literal and, we suppose, overly metaphorized or overly allegorized readings. Determinism and reductionism may be the products of monologic voices, of hegemonic ideologies and practices, bureaucratic rationalizations, overly objectifying intellectual schemes, or overly naturalizing discursive processes. But irony also undercuts the determinacy and reductionism inherent in ideas of autonomous agency, free will, subjectivity, and rational choice. It cuts both ways.

This is perhaps where irony becomes most interesting or most attractive in the present political and cultural climate. Sophoclean irony underlines the fallibility of the individual human struggle against fate; Socratic irony points to the limitations of assumed self-knowledge. In both forms, irony contextualizes and compromises naive notions of agency. Yet in neither the tragic nor the philosophical form is agency, struggle, or the quest for knowledge renounced.

"True irony," Kenneth Burke succinctly remarks (1945: 514), "is not 'superior to the enemy.'" Indeed, it is characterized by humility, "based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him."

Such consubstantiality becomes particularly salient when we think about illness. However, it is hardly what comes to mind when we think of postmodern irony today. We might clarify the difference by reference to Linda Hutcheon's admirable book *Irony's Edge*. Hutcheon (1994: 2) begins with the following questions: "Why should anyone want to use this strange mode of discourse where you say something you don't actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you actually do mean but also your attitude toward it? How do you decide if an utterance is ironic?" These questions are not equivalent. We suggest that *what irony frequently throws into question is intentionality itself*. It is not so obvious either that all ironies are intentional or that there is a clear separation between what you actually mean and what you don't actually mean, or that you have a clear and single attitude toward it or know yourself what it means. All this makes an answer to the second question concerning the interpretation of irony even more problematic than Hutcheon suggests. If irony is not always an intentional 'discursive strategy', its reception cannot be interpreted in straightforward terms of successful comprehension or misfire (ibid.: 3).

Whether grasping a given utterance or text as ironic requires inference on the part of the interpreter, as Hutcheon argues, the weight placed on the intentionality

of the ironist can be exaggerated. This may be especially the case when utterances or acts are formed within particular cultural modes, idioms, discursive practices, or genres that are already constituted by means of irony or in which irony is already embedded. In his essay in this volume, Lambek argues that spirit possession is such a mode. Andrew Lakoff suggests in his contribution that attributions of mind under various forms of psychiatric practice or pharmaceutical regimes may be another.

Hutcheon rightly gives great weight to the reception of irony and to the intentionality of the interpreter or community of interpreters. Post-Freudian and post-Marxian hermeneutics can hardly operate without suspicion that there is more than meets the eye, more than one message being offered, though of course this is true of any act of communication and not simply irony. To interpret a message as ironic may be to say something about the agency or consciousness of the speaker or performer. But perhaps we need to ask as well where and how such intentions and interpretations get suppressed, as they may in spirit possession or in psychiatry (or, for that matter, in politics). Moreover, reception can itself adopt an implicit or proto-ironic mode in which the listener is hearing two messages without necessarily being fully aware of it. One thinks here of Bateson's (1972) double bind in which the meta-message contradicts or overrides the message, but not all such situations need be pathological.

An anthropological study must give as much weight to the irony or literalism of interpretation as it does to that of the original production. For example, however the authors of the Bible intended their texts to be understood, the question is how literally generations of Jews and Christians have read them. The possibility for disjuncture raises some fascinating questions. If it were established that certain biblical passages were meant metaphorically by their authors, would a literal reading now have to accept that? Would it be more 'literal' to remain faithful to an author's ironic intentions or to disregard them in favor of a literal reading of the text itself? Would the latter reading be a special form of irony despite itself? These questions may not be quite so hypothetical when we move from biblical exegesis to medical diagnosis.

In any case, we must always question reflexively whether there is any irony in our own interpretations of the acts and utterances of other people as ironic or as unironic. And this includes, recursively, our interpretations of the interpretations of the local interpreters and pronouncers of irony.

Hutcheon makes the disclaimer that her concern "is simply with verbal and structural ironies, rather than situational irony, cosmic irony, the irony of fate, and so on" (op. cit.: 3). That makes good heuristic sense for a literary critic, but it is not certain that these various forms of irony can be so easily distinguished. One reason that Hutcheon, along with many other cultural critics and theorists, can do this is that they are working primarily with 'high culture', or at least with highly framed texts and performances. Even when their subject slips into popular production or reception, they are concerned with deliberate works of art or representation, whereas anthropologists are plunged in the thick of life and in arenas where art, praxis, and judgment are not so easily distinguished.

In sum, it may be that the overdose of postmodern irony itself needs to be 'ironized'. To the extent that postmodern irony has served as a form of conceit—of *knowing* conceit, of knowing both sides, of superiority to the enemy—it needs to be balanced with the irony that admits of not knowing, or rather, of not knowing definitively. Of course, we need to be aware of the conceit of ignorance as well.

Refractions of Agency: Illness and Irony

One arena where distinctions of text and practice, of verbal and situational ironies, are blurred is that of illness and the social responses it generates. Thus, we add to Hutcheon's exposition and elaboration of the political dimension of irony in art, literature, and museum display the medical arena and the field of self-irony or ironic self-recognition, as well as the recognition of being caught in situations that themselves might be described by either protagonists or outsiders as 'ironic'.[14] Irony comes to the fore in illness, and one of the arenas in which it is frequently uncovered, invoked, or displayed is therapy (healing). Therapy here is understood as a kind of performance or sequence of performances, but performances that, as Victor Turner (1967) so effectively showed, are always situationally located. Addressing illness requires objectified theories, established modes of performance, and sustained situational judgment on the part of ill people and their families and therapists, as well as their professional and institutional communities, and, increasingly, the public as mediated by the media, the judicial system, bioethics, and various other forms of discursive and disciplinary practices. One of the critical questions is the balance of literalism and irony in these theories, performances, interpretations, mediations, and judgments.

Non-Western therapy often offers its patient an ironic perspective, or at least draws upon the resources and richness of irony. Such a positive reminder of the value of uncertainty stands in striking opposition to the central goals of Western medicine and many of its clients, who demand certainty and satisfaction. An appreciation for the limits of what we can know and say and do and expect is sometimes suppressed or refused in biomedicine and its social institutionalization. One could almost say that the demand for certainty is the pathology or limit of biomedicine.

Is psychoanalysis an antidote? Well, sometimes, and especially when linked to art or surrealism, or simply in the double relationship—transferential and empathic—between analyst and patient (assuming it does not stray exclusively to one side). But psychoanalysis also strains toward certainty, and there is probably nothing sillier than psychoanalytic literalism. Especially in North America, psychoanalysis has been subsumed by the dominant cultural expectations of certainty, monologic explanation, complete knowledge, and fully effective and efficient intervention. Lakoff's essay indicates some of the problems in quite a different cultural milieu. Both inside and outside psychoanalysis, the irony inherent in fantasy can be refused and fantasy taken too literally.[15]

A sense of irony may also undercut the highly idealized Western notion of individuated agency as freedom. Contributors examine agency with reference to lived practice and cultural constructs in a variety of settings, attending to the ways in which both inner and outer constraints come to the fore and are variously acknowledged and transcended. Thus, they address cases in which illness or moral engagements and commitments point up the possibly paradoxical character of individuated agency and hence the importance of irony as a neglected element in anthropological theories of the person. Some of the essays also suggest that the attribution of agency is relative and that it may be understood relationally rather than as the product or expression of an autonomous (possessive) individual.

However, we do not emphasize here the role of irony as justification for either a detached, apolitical stance or an interested, political one. From the perspective of sufferers, the point of irony is less to conceal suffering or to displace it than simply to recognize things as they are. We think there is often a fine line between tragic and comic interpretations of the recognition of the limits of moral agency. Irony can serve as a transfer point between tragedy and comedy. One question that we suggested contributors might consider—a challenge taken up by Anne Meneley—is what turns irony in one direction or the other? When does the despair of Job give way to what Laura Bohannan (Bowen 1964) memorably called a "return to laughter"? With respect to illness, one can abhor or appreciate the Rabelaisian effects of bodily or mental breakdown and the collapse of personal agency. Why not celebrate the carnivalesque or grasp the comic dimension of suffering? When is the situation seen as one of tragic linear inevitability and when of comic indeterminacy? What possibilities do forms of therapy provide for recognizing or moving between these alternatives? What contexts enable the presence of multiple and incomplete interpretations?

Both illness and the cultivation of moral discipline provide sites at which agency and its limits are addressed by human subjects and hence become explicit for anthropologists. Indeed, often it is their intersection that is critical. This is evident in our first contribution, Meneley's ethnographically rich interpretation of fright illness among Muslim women of Zabid, Yemen. Here, the ability to laugh at one's distraught behavior—to turn trauma into comedy—indicates a return to the sense of shame that is such a positively valued and necessary attribute of selfhood. Meneley shows clearly how virtuous behavior entails being neither too removed and stoic nor too passionate in one's responses to illness, death, and other forms of suffering. To take fright at the afflictions of others is a sign of love but possibly also of dependence or weakness. Drawing on the work of psychoanalyst Roy Schafer, Meneley shows how exemplary Zabidi women move beyond tragedy and comedy and achieve an 'ironic' acceptance of fate.

Michael Lambek follows a similar trajectory to Meneley insofar as he examines the creative and ethical potential of cultural idioms. Thinking back on years of work on spirit possession among Malagasy speakers of Mayotte, an island in the western Indian Ocean, and reflecting in particular on the case of

a young man from Mayotte who was struck with rheumatism by a spirit while serving as a recruit in the French army, Lambek argues that spirit possession is "intrinsically ironic." The scenario is one in which the irony is deeply embodied, symptomatically more than discursively expressed, and neither deliberate nor explicitly self-conscious. Lambek relates the case to theories of self-deception and agency and suggests that other forms of illness, such as hysteria—as expressed by the patients of Freud and Breuer—might be redescribed as ironic, as being sick in an ironic mode.

Janice Boddy turns her eye to colonial practices, specifically the attempt of the British to eradicate extreme forms of female circumcision in the Sudan during the 1920s and 1930s. Boddy illustrates the ironies that inevitably arise in the encounter of cultural difference inflected by strongly unequal power relations, as well as the historical ironies of the consequences of intervention and 're-description'. She charts the story of Mabel Wolff, first matron at the Midwives Training School in Omdurman, whose attempts (along with those of her sister) to reduce the harm of circumcision had the effect of partially medicalizing it. As Boddy notes: "Expressing scientific ideas in vernacular terms is no transparent business." Moreover, colonial motives were themselves complex and contradictory; not only was the Wolffs' pragmatism heavily inflected by cultural biases, but they had to struggle for professional legitimation with both their Sudanese clientele and the British government itself.

Andrew Lakoff takes us to the heart of the paradoxes of psychiatric attributions of selfhood as psychoanalysis is confronted by recent advances in psychopharmacology. Drawing on his ethnographic research in a pair of psychiatric wards in a hospital in Buenos Aires, Lakoff demonstrates how the debate within psychiatry—recently captured for the United States in Tanya Luhrmann's aptly titled *Of 2 Minds* (2000)—plays out in Argentina. There are multiple ironies here. Lakoff describes the extraordinary situation in which the men's ward of the hospital is run by biomedically oriented psychiatrists while the women's ward is staffed by Lacanian psychoanalysts. He explores the ensuing debates and contradictions, seeing their roots in the sociopolitical context no less than in the distinctive epistemologies and in the nature of mind itself. Whereas the Lacanians are able to come to an accommodation in practice, for many doctors the two approaches are incommensurable in theory. For the Lacanians, pharmacology simply cannot address questions of subjectivity. And in certain instances, resolutions that work for the Lacanian practitioners not only deny the insights of their patients but appear to have iatrogenic consequences.

In his chapter, Paul Antze takes up several issues raised provisionally in this introduction, providing a deep appreciation of the depth of irony in psychoanalysis as Freud developed it over the length of his career. In particular, Antze is able to clarify distinct but complementary models or interpretive strategies within Freud, according to the form of irony on which they draw. Antze traces a conceptual distinction between rhetorical (or strategic) and dramatic irony from the Greeks and then shows the shift in the weight they provide to Freud's interpretations as he moves from the cases reported in *Studies on Hysteria*

(Freud and Breuer 1895) through *Dora* (Freud 1905) to the mature case histories (Freud 1909, 1918).[16] Among other things, then, Antze takes up the question raised in Lambek's chapter concerning the sense in which hysteria might be redescribed as irony and illuminates both the manner in which Freud saw it at the time of his original studies and how it could be viewed by means of his later work.

Finally, in a rich and wide-ranging series of reflections, Lawrence Cohen asks how irony, especially in its Socratic form, might enable us to move beyond simplistic answers to the troubling questions that senility poses for culture. Here he draws on Nehamas's understanding of Socratic irony as a signifying practice in which overt meanings point not to their opposites but rather to an unknown "something else," which nonetheless engenders an ethical life. Cohen considers the possibility that such an attitude might offer a way beyond the exclusionary logic that characterizes most responses, both lay and expert, to senile dementia. He argues that a Socratic refusal of certainty might support more open-ended ways of listening to dementia while still taking its biology seriously. He concludes with a highly suggestive discussion of Socrates as a figure whose old age raises doubts about the meaning of old age itself.

In the chapters that follow we will see several senses in which the 'I' of irony and the 'I' of illness may be compared.

Conclusion

"Most people either value irony too much or fear it too much," observes Lionel Trilling. "Both the excessive valuation and the excessive fear of irony lead us to misconceive the part it can play in the intellectual and moral life" (2000: 292). This collection does not simply either value or fear irony but asks what the recognition of irony suggests for a deeper theoretical (and not *simply* ironic) understanding of the human social condition and being in the world. We ask: How does irony coalesce into illness? How does illness expose the ironies of human agency and self-realization?

Insofar as our own stance is one of irony, we would like to think that it shares an affinity with the irony of Jane Austen, which Trilling describes as

> a method of comprehension. It perceives the world through an awareness of its contradictions, paradoxes, and anomalies. It is by no means detached. It is partisan with generosity of spirit—it is on the side of 'life', of 'affirmation'. But it is preoccupied not only with the charm of the expansive virtues but also with the cost at which they are to be gained and exercised. This cost is regarded as being at once ridiculously high and perfectly fair. (Trilling 2000 [1954]: 293)

Having explored in *Tense Past* some of the consequences of taking memory literally, we now consider whether a distinction between the literal and the ironic offers a purchase for distinguishing certain non-Western discursive forms

from biomedicine as well as for distinguishing positions and movements within the latter. Conversely, we turn to irony less to celebrate its 'edginess' than to explore the ways in which illness and treatment open up or foreclose spaces for the recognition of irony or the irony of recognition. Of course, we cannot take the distinction between literalism and irony itself fully literally. We understand irony in both its Socratic form as the recognition of the inability to reach full knowledge and its Sophoclean form of not knowing where we are heading. Irony is thus both an element of self-knowledge and a perspective on it. Illness and treatment sometimes either ignore or objectify and exaggerate the will and agency of sufferers. But in other contexts they 'ironize' agency, offering up recognition of the extent to which we both are and are not the authors of our own dilemmas, and can and cannot reach understanding or do something about our condition. We ask additionally how such different positions are reached and evaluated.

We do not wish simply to celebrate irony but advocate maintaining a balance between perspectivism and a working stability of language and meaning. Philosophers of irony interpret it with respect to their own domains and hence, while they see it challenging grandiose abstractions such as Truth, risk giving it a certain grandiosity and abstraction of its own. But irony need not be all or nothing; it need not challenge every truth or reject every resting place. It, too, may be perspectival.

In sum, we are reaching toward an ethics of irony.

NOTES

1. Although Lambek is listed as the author of this introduction, the ideas were developed in close conversation with co-editor, Paul Antze, to whom Lambek is much indebted for intellectual and psychological support. Hence, the pronoun "we" is used throughout, though at times the reference expands to include the other contributors and at times the implied readers. Unlike the case in Malagasy, English does not distinguish between the inclusive and exclusive first person plural—thereby perhaps gaining a vehicle for irony.
2. We venture that not all irony is playful. However, it may well be, depending on definitions, that all play is, in part or at some level, ironic.
3. Of course the difficulty in recognizing irony is only enhanced for the anthropologist working in a foreign culture. Just as many early anthropologists often interpreted the representations of non-Western religions too literally, so the reverse is also possible.
4. Think of the use by Geertz (after Ryle) of the wink to illustrate signification.
5. We refer to the famous Japanese film *Rashomon* (directed by Akira Kurosawa) in which the same 'event' is played from the view of several protagonists. Another famous literary example of perspectivism is Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* (1977), in which each of the first three volumes offers a picture of events as seen by three distinct narrators. Bakhtin (1981) argues that all novels, however many the narrators, are polyphonic insofar as one can distinguish author, narrator, and the distinctive voices of each character. Each of these functions can, in turn be further broken down.

6. Lambek (2002) has applied this Burkean perspective to the polyphonic construction of history by means of the spirits and spirit mediums of a set of distinct ancestors among Sakalava of Madagascar.

7. Rowe refers to the 1949 essay "Irony as a Principle of Structure" in which Cleanth Brooks argued that irony was a principle of literary structure insofar as a text had "to distinguish its own special language from that of ordinary experience" (Rowe 1995: 32).

8. Comparison might be made to the irony invoked in narratives of pregnancy loss in North America (Layne 1996).

9. See, among many other instances, Losche (2001).

10. For Rorty, "The opposite of irony is common sense" (1989: 74).

11. See Das et al. (2000, 2001); Kleinman et al. (1997).

12. But it does not necessarily decide between such projects and either of the two alternative forms of moral inquiry (genealogy and tradition) identified by MacIntyre (1990).

13. This may be interpreted as an ironic appreciation of the Harvard project by its chief architect, although it is unclear from the typesetting whether it is to be attributed to one voice or two, namely, Arthur and Joan Kleinman. I believe that Kleinman's view of irony approximates the one advocated here insofar as he cites Max Scheler to the effect that irony stands with endurance, aspiration, and humor as one of the "transcendent responses" to the resistances humans face in the course of their lives (Kleinman 1995: 119).

14. We note that illness recurs as a kind of leitmotif through Burke's primarily literary examples.

15. A striking example is the current epidemic of witchcraft accusations against children in Kinshasa, as reported and analyzed by De Boeck (2000, 2003).

16. For the full references to these works, see the list following Antze's chapter.

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