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Limits of Irony: Freedom and Responsibility in Culture

The idea of my paper is to test the rule which is the guiding light of this conference, *Freiheit und Verantwortung*¹ - namely, that freedom usually goes together with responsibility - in the domain of culture. Is the so called cultural freedom - a freedom to create, to interpret, to experience cultural artifacts - a purely negative liberty, or does it imply also a positive element: a certain involvement in culture as a whole, in the totality of cultural enterprise? And if the second is true, as I indeed think it is, can this involvement be called a responsibility, that is, an obligation to maintain and preserve the cultural context in which free creation takes place? In answering these two questions positively, I will try to oppose a stereotype of free creation as an exercise of limitless negative invention which takes no responsibility for the cultural world to which it contributes. For the sake of informing brevity, I chose to call this nowadays well-established cliché postmodern and to contrast it with late modern culturalism: a position which I favour and find far more superior to the former (to make my bias clear at the very start...). There will be few authors mentioned in my presentation, but two of them are crucial for they personify these two rival approaches: the first, the postmodern one will be represented by Richard Rorty, the second, the culturalist will be represented by Harold Bloom.

The key concept around which my argumentation is organized is the concept of irony. Why is irony so important nowadays? There are few reasons which explain the modern career of this concept. First of all, there is the waning of the category of necessity in all its premodern and modern disguises, as „ontological necessity“ or „historical necessity“. In the world where nothing appears necessary any longer, and everything seems equally contingent - things being deprived of their well-defined essences, history turned into chaotic stream of events - irony rules: a softer, indeterminate attitude which naturally avoids all rigid identifications, contending itself with the shady sphere of „maybe“. It is therefore not by accident that both greatest theorists of late modern irony - Paul de Man and Harold Bloom - define it as a „trope of tropes“, or, rather, a trope per se, a trope which names itself as such; for „trope“ means a turn, deviation or, declension. Irony is like a *clinamen* in a strictly determined order of things: a spiteful irregularity introduced by Lucretius to limit the omnipotence of the category of necessity. Second, irony becomes a natural attitude in the world which promotes individuality: this is a major discovery of Kierkegaard in his famous „Concept of Irony“. The individual with his, as Kierkegaard says, „singular truth“, has no other chance to exist than to resort himself to the trope of tropes, the *clinamen*, which will negotiate with the overwhelming power of - here Kierkegaard quotes Hegel - the objective spirit.

Bloom, who takes on Kierkegaard's line explicitly in his *Anxiety of Influence* and in all later books devoted to the theory of „poetic revisionism“, situates his concept of irony in the middle of what he calls a „cultural agon“: a constant struggle between individual, who wants to break through his singularity to the arena of cultural expression, but is challenged by culture which already exists, by innumerable forms of creativity which make feel the individual as if he came too late, as if already everything had been said and done, leaving no space for his „singular truth“ and „singular invention“. Irony, says Bloom, is therefore the *trope of life*: it is a

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rebellion of a living being, here and now, against the „terrifying splendor“ of culture bequeathed by dead writers - dead but nevertheless seeming more alive, more present than the individual himself. This is precisely this paradox of life and death - dead writers appearing thanks to the splendor of culture more alive than the individual who lives here and now but is forced to speak the language of dead people - which triggers the whole process of initiation into the world of cultural creation Bloom calls an agon. An adept - as Bloom names the individual who wants to challenge the culture as it is - first avails himself of irony: a soft, tentative, both defensive and daring, trope which will allow him to deviate a little from the languages his culture offers him as legitimate options. It gives him a chance of irregularity, a soft unpredictable *clinamen* from the necessity of culture; the adept still speaks the language of his mighty precursor but introduces into it a slight variation which at the very beginning manifests itself in a merely negative form of disruption.² Bloom's favourite example here is the ironic way in which Blake negotiates his difference from Milton, still not being able to speak a poetic language fully of his own; or the way Kierkegaard „ironizes“ Hegel in order to communicate wholly un-Hegelian message, but gives up a development of an autonomous means of expression.

Irony is thus a parasitic, non-sovereign trope: it has to rely on a well-established cultural substance which will not perish under its „ironizing“ impact; it doesn't want to destroy its host, otherwise it would be self-destructive. But irony is also a truly paradoxical, illogical trope (as is, as Hegel taught us, life itself) for it assumes two contradictory things at the same time: on the one hand, it concedes an unsurpassable greatness to culture which it parasitically „ironizes“, on the other hand however, it usurps an even greater power for itself. It is a foolish daring without any back-up, a pure folly of rebelling against the authority of dead writers without any other argument - if this *is* argument at all - that one is alive and singular. It is therefore, Bloom continues, a narcissistic trope, based on the power of subjective *hybris* which fantasizes about its superiority for no obvious reasons. The „negative capability“ - to use Keats's famous expression - of irony is thus an equivalent of original sin in the domain of culture: it triggers expulsion from the paradise of perfect, definite cultural forms and simple identifications into the desert of individuation, a process which is propelled by a wish to return to the cultural pleroma, but only on one's own individual terms.

Thus, irony is just a beginning, a first deviation, not an alpha and omega of the whole process of cultural initiation: it triggers the movement of individuation but doesn't govern it till the end. The purpose of the agon is not to destroy the splendor of culture it challenges but to return to it as a fully legitimate member: to overcome the belated condition of a „son“ and, by reversing the flow of time, to take one's place among Founding Fathers. In Kierkegaard's paradoxical, ironic words, its final goal is to „beget one's own father“, to become truly equal with one's precursor. Thus in the end, what initially appears as a destructive rebellion against the „objective spirit“ of culture, turns out to be its positive, creative rejuvenation: the individual finds his place in the cultural heritage without losing in the process his „singular truth“, and the culture as a whole becomes affirmed as the proper arena of individual creation. Irony becomes reconciled with responsibility and affirmation; the adept fights for his right to speak his own language, but does it in a spirit of, as Hannah Arendt puts it, „agonistic respect“ for the context in which his struggle occurs.

Here, irony is a dangerous, ambivalent concept - but never fully negative. In fact, as another scholar of irony, Wayne Booth, suggests, the only way to limit the danger which is incipient to irony, always potentially disruptive and destabilizing, is to make it *finite*: to encircle

² In Bloom's own words: „*Clinamen* is a poetic misreading or misprision proper; I take the word from Lucretius, where it means a 'swerve' of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe. A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.“ (1997, 14)

it by a context of actuality, of something positive that already exists, which won't let irony proceed infinitely. The real knowledge about the use of irony, says Booth, is „where to stop“. If we evoke again the imagery of *clinamen* - irony finding a secret roundabout in the monolith of culture - this knowledge refers to the moment in which irony makes a turn back, and thus *returns*, a kind of a proud prodigal son, to the cultural heritage to establish its own form of expression. To know „where to stop“ amounts to knowing how to time the moment of return, which is absolutely necessary for the creative individual - lest he wants to escape, evade, disrupt and uncreate forever. Irony is thus a true pharmakon of cultural creation, a kind of Hölderlinian remedy which is just hair-close from the ultimate danger: too little of it results in no creation at all, merely in subdued reproduction of already existing cultural forms - too much leads to equally fruitless subversion, an eternal *clinamen*, a petrified gesture of deviation.

This is precisely this ambiguous combination of chance and danger that constitutes the gist of Kierkegaard's definition of irony, which is a starting point for Bloom's analysis. Kierkegaard is highly aware of the fact that the individual as such does not exist: it doesn't have its „actuality“ which yet has to become in confrontation with „every given actuality“, everything which exists already and as such poses a threat to the individual's uniqueness. This individual-to-be suffers from an enormous „anxiety of influence“ and only irony is capable of softening this predicament. It goes beyond „every given actuality“, but not in order to „set something good in its place“; quite to the contrary, says Kierkegaard, „its actuality always remains a sheer possibility“, that is, it refuses to become finite, it wants to transcend everything *ad infinitum*. Thus, he continues, „in order for the acting individual to be able to fulfill his task in realizing actuality, he must feel himself assimilated into a larger context, must feel the seriousness of responsibility, must feel and respect every rational consequence.“ But is it possible that irony itself will turn towards actuality, towards assimilation into the context of culture, that it will give up its freedom to enter the chain of consequences: the order of cultural heritage, the inner logic of tradition? Unlikely: “irony, says Kierkegaard, is free from all this... Irony is free, to be sure, free from all the cares of actuality, but free from its joys as well, free from its blessings. For it has nothing higher than itself...”³

So, despite its definition as the most daring, hybristic and narcissistic of all tropes, irony must nevertheless be made *subordinate*; otherwise it threatens to become infinite and destroy all actuality. For Kierkegaard, this superior trope stopping irony from overblowing its „negative capability“ was a kind of meta-irony, a trope verging on silence, a mystical ellipsis: he advocated return to culture but only as an imperfect transmission of a more direct, more lively source of revelation.⁴ For Bloom, however, who is less a religious and more a culturalist type of thinker, this superior trope is *metalepsis*, also a meta-trope: a rhetorical operation that allows to transume a whole cultural idiom into a new one; this newness, however, is never absolute for it is clearly derived from the old idiom which still remains its matrix. Bloom himself would probably prefer to talk here about *apophrades*, which is his synonym of the trope of transumption: a „return of the dead“, the term he takes from ancient Greek mourning

³ The whole passage runs as follows: „But actuality for the individual is also a task to be realized. In this connection one would think that irony would show itself to the advantage, for since it had gone beyond every given actuality, surely it must have something good to set in its place. But this is not the case. As irony contrives to overcome historical actuality by making it hover, so irony itself has in turn become hovering. Its actuality is sheer possibility. In order for the acting individual to be able to fulfill his task in realizing actuality, he must feel himself assimilated into a larger context, must feel the seriousness of responsibility, must feel and respect every rational consequence. But irony is free from all this... Irony is free, to be sure, free from all the cares of actuality, but free from its joys as well, free from its blessings. For it has nothing higher than itself...” (1965, 296)

⁴ This is why he says: „... irony is healthiness in so far as it rescues the soul from the snares of relativity; it is a sickness in so far as it is unable to tolerate the absolute except in the form of nothingness, and yet this sickness is an endemic fever which but few individuals contract, and even fewer overcome.“ (ibid)

rites.⁵ This return of the dead writers, an original, individual regeneration of their language, is also, from the adept's perspective, a return *to* the dead, back to the lineage of culture but with a distinctive singular signature.⁶

I allowed myself this prolonged exposition of the concept of irony as understood by Harold Bloom, the representative of the culturalist approach, to contrast it with the use which is made of this category by writers of somewhat more postmodern, more deconstructive, confession. The first and most prominent difference is the role which is assigned to irony: irony becomes the superior trope, unstoppable and infinite. Second, irony is no more a part of the cultural initiation, but becomes a self-sufficient *pars pro toto* of the whole process: it is no more a component of the complex ritual of participation in the cultural heritage, but becomes its straightforward, aggressive negation. Third, irony is no more regarded as a parasitic trope, but, to remind de Man again, as a royal trope of tropes which has its own power to destroy and to create; no more is it limited by the dependence on something solid which it can only „ironize“. And fourth, irony becomes the only instrument of individual expression: the individual feels free to abuse irony *ad infinitum* in order to weaken the objectively existing culture, that threatens his originality, and thus he feels no obligation towards the cultural whole in which his ironic creative efforts take place. The omnipotent and all-pervasive irony promotes thus a notion of creative freedom which is unlimited by any responsibility for what Kierkegaard would call „a larger context“.

This postmodern use of the concept of irony is best represented by Richard Rorty: a writer of whom I won't speak too much, assuming that most of my listeners know him better than Harold Bloom - a fact which is both significant and unfortunate. Let me once again point at the crucial differences.

Both, Rorty and Bloom, turn irony into their favourite trope but for different reasons. Rorty takes on irony in order to soften modern liberal attitude: a liberal ironist is a person who lives in a private world of self-creation and refrains from any imposition of her own fantasies on others and their public sphere. Irony is here a trope of *withdrawal*: culture becomes privatized, reduced to the private dimension of a self-creative individual. While for Bloom, irony's purpose is just the opposite. A young adept of culture uses irony in order to strengthen himself against its, as Bloom says, „terrifying splendor“; he finds his own ironic ways to set himself on the same footing with his culture's Founding Fathers. Here, irony is the trope of *daring*: culture is out there, in the public world, and the ironic act, being the first act of creativity, tears the adept out of his privacy, out of his anonymous insignificance. For Rorty,

⁵ *Apophrades*, the last royal trope which crowns the process of six revisionary ratios starting from initial irony, is „the return of the dead“; I - Bloom explains - take the word from the Athenian dismal and unlucky days upon which the dead returned to reinhabit the houses in which they have lived. The later poet, in his own final phase, already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios. But the poem is now *held* open to the precursor, where once it *was* open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work.“ (1997, 15-16)

⁶ This choice of governing trope sets Bloom in an interesting opposition to de Man, his most obvious Yale antagonist, also a magnificent scholar of rhetorics. Metalepsis is the trope of actuality *per se*, whereas irony, especially in its infinite version chosen by de Man, is the trope of pure negativity which, by definition, once it becomes infinite cannot be stopped by anything. In de Man's approach irony steals the whole scene, devours everything already established, and - here comes de Man's original contribution - begins its own creative work thanks to the power of catechesis, a trope of hybris, whose purpose is creation by pure imposition. And this is precisely what Bloom wants to avoid, for he sees such scenario as simply too nihilistic: the „catechretic“ creation of irony, which sets its own forms once it destroyed all already existing ones, is barren, capricious and unstable. It is nothing miraculously turned into something by the power of persuasive imposition, but it is not creation proper, able to raise a new „cultural reality“. It is thus merely a substitute of creation which is ultimately as destructive as the whole process of initial subversion. (See de Man 1996)

irony is passive and receptive: it mollifies and privatizes; it introjects culture into subjective domain of the individual. It doesn't necessarily strengthen the individual, but it certainly weakens the culture. For Bloom, irony is the reverse: active and creative, it throws the individual into the publicness of „cultural reality“ which can never be reduced to just a private affair. It leads towards the agon which, in the end, enforces both parts: the individual together with his cultural tradition.

Someone could say that such comparison makes no sense since both thinkers talk about different things. Rorty's irony is addressed towards *users* of culture whose function is rather to receive than to create; whereas Bloom's irony is a rare gift of „strong poets“, the chosen ones who are destined for cultural creation. It may seem so on the surface, but it isn't true. In fact, Rorty's interest is not limited to a passive use of cultural artifacts; he also has his own vision of creation which is always synonymous with self-creation. Moreover, he bases this privatized theory of creativity on Harold Bloom's conception of the „strong poet“. He claims that he has found a pragmatic paraphrase of Bloom's late romantic variations and that he is thus indebted to Bloom. This, however, is a sheer usurpation. There are hardly two other thinkers as alien to one another as Richard Rorty and Harold Bloom.⁷

But, in fact, what Rorty does to Bloom, when he paraphrases him according to his own mould, is a precise illustration of how the postmodern, infinite irony works; how it devours everything, how it turns all solid meanings into its own, infinitely free play of signification. Rorty's case shows also how self-destructive such infinite irony is; it has to take on other meanings in order to „ironize“ them (Rorty boasts - rightly, I think - that he never invented anything, that he only ironically reread other authors), but, in the end, it has to distort them to the point of their disintegration.

No wonder, then, that there are many cultural critics today who find the concept of irony so overrated that they would like to get rid of it altogether (e.g. the followers of T.S. Eliot or Northrop Frye's critical school, the so called cultural conservatives). But this is a deeply wrong move. As I've already said, irony is the trope of life, it is the life of culture itself without which it would age and wither within just one generation. Irony is the true cultural pharmakon: too much (like in the case of de Man or Rorty), and too little of it (like in the case of cultural traditionalists) equals death; only the right measure, the secret balance, the proper limit gives life. We therefore cannot dispose of irony - but we have to do everything to find its right limits in order to save both, freedom and responsibility, and not just freedom - or just responsibility. We need them both, together, at the same time.

⁷ This illegitimate usurpation is made especially clear in the interpretation of Rorty given by one of his Polish commentators, Andrzej Szahaj. Notice how careful he is to *soften* the ambivalent impact of irony and how selectively he reads the romantic tradition from which this concept derives: „The concept of irony which is promoted by Rorty“ - writes Szahaj - „has little to do with its colloquial understanding. The liberal ironist doesn't mock or deride; she doesn't want to offend or hurt anybody; irony doesn't lead her to cynicism. Quite to the contrary: we can speak here about certain „gravity of irony“, about explicit reluctance Rorty feels towards hurting people by the use of irony. Irony doesn't serve him as a means of defense against the world; it is rather an instrument of developing a moral sensitivity. All it defends against is dogmatism: it makes the ironist immune against seduction by a finite vocabulary. Thus it defends against fundamentalism of Knowledge and Faith, and fosters her attempts of redefinition in confrontation with others and their vocabularies. Her ultimate goal is self-creation which proceeds on the basis of freely chosen values about which she knows that they are not absolute. Such model of good life is Rorty's romantic heritage. The content of good life remains a private matter. All that counts is the freedom to choose one's own way of living, choice of certain values and self-created vocabularies... These are the virtues of the positive, Nietzschean hero of Rorty's narrative; of someone who was called by Harold Bloom a 'strong poet', i.e. someone 'who finds out new words and invents new languages as a leader of his species.'" (1999, 88) We know that Bloom wasn't particularly pleased with this Darwinian misreading of his ideas.

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